

Conclusion: Refugees and representation

When the present reactivates the past, it is possible to see both in a new light. This understanding of the significance of historical reflection and narrative was at the heart of the art project *In the Past We Made History* by Tina Enghoff and Kent Klich, in collaboration with the artist and writer Anastasiya (Nastija) Kiake and a group of 22 Danes with refugee experience.¹ This collaborative project focused on strategies of remembering and bearing witness to refugee histories that are often left out of official history writing and archives. In 2025, this project assumed the shape of a major archival installation comprising photography, photogrammetry and video installations exhibited as a comprehensive integrated whole at an eponymously named exhibition at Copenhagen's Fotografisk Center ('Centre of Photography').

It is appropriate to end this book with a closer look at *In the Past We Made History*, as this project is basically concerned with individual and collective processes of storytelling and worlding – the leitmotifs of this study. As an archival project focusing on refugee reception in Denmark since 2015, it spotlights 'the paradigm shift' in Danish refugee policies, from welcoming refugees to pursuing the restrictive asylum policies that many of the artworks and projects discussed in the previous chapters have responded to. *In the Past We Made History* also summarizes key themes of the art on refugeedom emerging from the Danish art scene: the articulation and transcultural transmission of memories of refugeedom; the critique of refugees' waithood and the Danish asylum system; the preservation of histories of refugee worldmaking; and crucially, the usage of collaborative artistic practices to bring recently displaced people together with citizens to collaborate on giving voice to refugees as a key component of their claim to cultural citizenship.

In *In the Past We Made History*, Enghoff and Klich explored photography's potential as a method for creating a space for narrating or documenting the collective history of asylum seekers of different origins. Relying mostly on visual

1 The 22 participants with refugee experience, with their invaluable knowledge and input, also contributed to selecting images for the project. As some participants preferred that surnames were omitted, it was decided to do so for all; they are named as Abiel, Abood, Adnan, Ahmad, Fili, Eden, Ghazanfar, Ibrahim, Katja, Khaled, Mazen, Moutaz, Rahima, Rohin, Ruta, Sahl, Shoukrullah, Senait, Senait, Shewit, Yasin and Yousef.

material and only a little on textual testimony, this project could be said to be more about preserving place-based knowledge in a poetic and evocative way than recording testimonies, yet oral storytelling was nonetheless central to its creation.

The project interweaves photographic ‘memory fragments’ of 89 locations in Denmark serving as asylum and aid centres for forcibly displaced people arriving in Denmark in the years 2015–2018. In 2022, Enghoff and Klich began the laborious two-year long process of documenting this architecture that had provided an everyday environment for newcomers. They took thousands of photographs of buildings, rooms, worn surface textures and old furniture, along with other traces of life in the former centres before they were demolished or repurposed. In doing so, they sought to preserve the traces of refugee presence before it is completely erased from local and public memory. From Klich and Enghoff’s photographs, the participants with refugee experience selected images that somehow resonated with their memories of living within the confines of the asylum system, thus making a contribution themselves to deciding what is worth preserving. How much of their individual experience and knowledge they have invested in making this recent refugee history a part of Danish collective history is suggested by the comments in languages other than Danish scribbled on to some of them as material traces of the oral storytelling that was integral to the process of co-creating *In the Past We Made History*. By focusing on the living spaces, the project avoids the common tropes of humanitarian photography and the pitfall of positioning refugees as victims and figures of crisis.

The visually generous and complex exhibition at Fotografisk Center had four aesthetic layers or visual strands. They comprised, firstly, *The Memory of Salt*, a series of 35 large, framed black and white photographs documenting spaces in asylum centres. Secondly, there were two video works: the fifteen-channel video installation *Second Place*, documenting the disappearance of buildings of former centres due to demolition or repurposing, and the single-channel film *Rohin*, recalling visually the memory of a twelve-year-old, unaccompanied asylum seeker of being given a set of domestic objects upon her arrival at a refugee centre for children. Thirdly, the photogrammetry-based film *Earth, Soil and Stone* showed 3D renderings of the contours of the sites where the eighty-nine centres were located. Anastasija (Nastija) Kiake was responsible for the 3D modelling for *Earth, Soil and Stone* and edited all the videos. Finally, the exhibition’s most spectacular and monumental component was an installation of twelve, six-metre-long textile banners onto which approximately 1500 photos had been carefully sown by Ulla Enghoff to create the impression of a collective stream of consciousness flowing through these photographic tapestries. Long, winding threads hanging from each photograph enhanced the impression of a meandering stream of memory fragments and countless little timelines that bent the past and the present in different ways, often tangling together, touching one

another. Everything in this collaborative work was treated with great care: the places of the past, the materials, the memories, and, crucially, the people involved.

Fig. 36: Tina Enghoff and Kent Klich, Untitled, from the series The Memory of Salt, 2025. C-print, 90 x 90 cm. The series is part of the project and exhibition In the Past We Made History, 2025. Fotografisk Center, Copenhagen. Courtesy: the artists.



Most of the photographs on the tapestries were snapshots of details from the interiors of the former centres of such things as kitchen utensils, empty cupboards, old mattresses, signs, heaters and other fixtures and fittings that had been left behind; but there were also stairways that seemed to lead nowhere, dust on the floor and paint peeling off walls as well as nearby bus stops – significant markers of the connection to the civil society outside the centres. As already mentioned, the participants with refugee experience had added personal comments on some of the pictures in their native language, suggesting that the image had stirred a memory.

Furthermore, Enghoff and Klich's pictures were juxtaposed with older photographs from local archives from across the country where a broader history of migration had been documented. Most of this material related to German refugees in the Second World War, Vietnamese boat refugees in the 1970s and the Bosnian refugees of the 1990s.² On their visits to local archives, Enghoff and Klich discovered that there was virtually no material for the preservation of the contemporary history of forcibly displaced people in Denmark. The artists decided, therefore, to try to remedy this neglect by creating an archive for the hitherto undocumented history, including in it the memories of some of those who have sought safety through the Danish asylum system since 2015. They then sought to inscribe it all into Danish history by using the art institution as a platform for making the archival material publicly visible and accessible.

Because asylum and aid centres were found in all regions of the country in 2015–2018, they could be seen as a 'national heritage' fading into oblivion with their closure. In her speech at the exhibition opening at Fotografisk Center, the Danish writer Kirsten Thorup described this recent refugee history as 'a black hole in Danish storytelling' because hardly any documentation or images have been collected by local and national archives, in contrast with refugee reception in earlier times. Here, it is tempting to interpret this institutional negligence as a temporal extension of the policy of isolating asylum seekers outside urban areas, thereby 'preventing public interest in their existence', as Nermin Duraković has put it (Duraković 2020, 2; see also Chapter 5). Enghoff and Klich tasked themselves with arousing public interest by filling this 'black hole' in national memory and preserving fragments of a shared 'cultural heritage' in collaboration with the people who had lived experience of the centres and who had become part of Danish society as denizens with refugee experience.

The title *In the Past We Made History* does not give a straightforward answer as to who 'we' are but activates the speculative power of doubt: Should 'we' be interpreted as a reference to the creators, in particular the people with refugee experience who 'made (Danish) history'? Or should it, rather, be understood as the co-creative 'we' of civil society: the asylum seekers, refugees and Danish citizens and politicians making the thorny history of refugee reception *together*?

2 Kent Klich in conversation with the author on February 27, 2025.

Fig. 37: Tina Enghoff and Kent Klich, installation of textile banners (Klötzel) with photographs, 90 x 600 cm, part of the project and exhibition In the Past We Made History, 2025. Fotografisk Center, Copenhagen. Photo: Enghoff/Klich/Kiake. Courtesy: the artists.



Fig. 38: Tina Enghoff and Kent Klich, installation of textile banners (*Klötzel*) with photographs (detail), 90 x 600 cm, part of the project and exhibition *In the Past We Made History*, 2025. Fotografisk Center, Copenhagen. Photo: Enghoff/Klich/Kiake. Courtesy: the artists.



The project also raises the question of how the audience was positioned. I would like to suggest that the archival material not only positioned visitors to the exhibition as virtual witnesses,³ but also positioned most viewers as what Michael Rothberg has termed *implicated subjects* who – in their capacity as citizens, voters and taxpayers – bear a responsibility for their country's policies (see the Introduction and Rothberg 2019). When positioned *physically* within the exhibition environment, in the midst of the archive, visitors were at the same time positioned *ethically* within a framework of political implication that urged them to engage with the archive's representation of refugee experience, in the spirit of what Christine Ross calls re-

3 The phrase 'virtual witnessing' was first employed by Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer in 1986 to describe the 'literary technology' by which early modern experimental philosophers convinced readers of the reality they sought to describe, as if they, too, had been present when the experiment was performed. In Enghoff and Klich's project, photography, with its generally acknowledged reality effects and truth-claims, provided the testimonies and the 'visual technology' for constituting matters of fact by serving as 'a technology of trust and assurance' (Shapin and Schaffer 2011 [1986], 60; see also 61–65).

sponsible empathy, founded in historical understanding.⁴ However, *In the Past We Made History* could also make visitors aware of their privileged position in relation to the precarious lives whose history (or histories) Enghoff and Klich's alternative archive sought to preserve. The archive confronted Danish citizens in particular with the question of how they themselves were implicated in the way refugees have been received in the country since 2015, and if (and if so, how) the closure of the 89 asylum centres was connected with the paradigm shift in Danish asylum policies and the surge of anti-immigration sentiment in most European countries. As the Introduction to this book emphasizes, Denmark's immigration and asylum policies are among the strictest in Europe, but they reflect broader political changes in Europe and beyond, as evidenced, for example, by the European Commission's 2025 proposal for the establishment of 'return hubs' for rejected asylum claimants outside the EU, and the deportation threats and stricter immigration policies in the US under Donald Trump's second presidency.

In the Past We Made History invites everyone to reflect on migration history, and how forced uprooting can remake local histories when displaced people with translocal connections resettle and become part of the asylum centre community as well as the local area. Newcomers develop a place-based sense of belonging to the community and the surroundings, which may be short-term or long-term, positive or negative, depending on the duration and character of their stay, and whether they are moved around between centres. Even if they are treated as outsiders by some locals, they still share the reality of local life, and this, in turn, allows for a broader understanding of migratory patterns as a normal way of being connected and of living interconnected with many places (Hallesleben 2023, 2).

As this book has shown, Tina Enghoff and Kent Klich are not the only artists in Denmark who have contributed to telling the stories and documenting or facilitating the early worldmaking endeavours of asylum-seekers and refugees. This book has examined works and projects emerging from the Danish art scene in light of the wider historical shift in the European border and migration regime, as well as the transformation of its Danish counterpart. Based on in-depth analyses of key art projects and works, the book has given a set of answers to the questions of how

4 See Chapter 6 in this book and Ross 2022, 157. Fotografisk Center's exhibition leaflet gave basic information on the history of the asylum centres from 2015 to 2018 and the project's objective. Further insight into the historical background was provided by a string of panel discussions held in the exhibition space and featuring project participants, scholars and intellectuals who discussed the historical, political and artistic issues addressed by the archive. While this exhibition was still on, the artists also initiated the publication of a photo book about the project. In addition to images from the project, the book will include essays by Michelle Pace, Mohamed Al-Zaqzoq and Anastasija (Nastija) Kiake: Tina Enghoff and Kent Klich, *In the Past We Made History*, edited by Anastasija (Nastija) Kiake, published by Dogwalk Books (Sweden) and RSS Press (Denmark), forthcoming.

artists and curators active in the country have responded to the predicament of refugees, and how they have contributed to easing the unresolved tensions between refugees and hosting communities. My overarching point is that the majority of these artists and curators have been directly or indirectly motivated to engage with refugeedom by the increasing political hostility to asylum seekers, refugees and irregular migrants. Yet, by ensuring a scope for ambivalence, tensions and a plurality of voices to enter their work, and by upholding the ethical principle that not everything can or should be revealed about people who share their experience of forced displacement, the artworks and projects discussed here also show that there are no easy or unambiguous answers to such displacement, or to the question of how to 'represent' refugees.

Worlding and Storying Forced Displacement: Contemporary Art and Refugee Experience in Denmark has explored how artists, curators and other cultural workers have stood in solidarity with refugees and displaced peoples and helped to push back against stigmatization and social injustice. The multilayered term *representation* has been used to encapsulate the versatile contributions of artists to the development of civic coexistence in the 21st century. I have contended that representation – as in invisibilizing and giving voice – is crucial to the formation of cultural citizenship among refugees and asylum seekers. I have also argued that, by activating art's capacity for creating worlds and stories, the artists and curators under study have transformed art into a powerful tool for deepening the understanding of refugeehood in the receiving country and for transforming unimagined communities and subjectivities into imagined ones. In doing so, they have enhanced the potential of contemporary art to provide meaningful, cross-cultural conversations in a space where we may imagine ourselves as fellow human beings who discard with the fixed categories (such as the other, the asylum seeker, the refugee) and open ourselves to listening to the stories of others and rethinking our beliefs.