

# Addressing Migration Politics through Art

Nermin Duraković

## Abstract

The question of art and migration politics is widely discussed nowadays, but too often based on artworks of a depoliticising nature. In this text Nermin Duraković critiques the approach of most major art institutions to migration, and the tendency to curate artworks that focus on the emotional side of human suffering. By drawing both on his own experiences in the asylum system in the 1990s, and his own art praxis, he points at an alternative approach. The question of migration politics is profoundly political and should be addressed as such. The spaces—locations, buildings, rooms, furniture, aesthetics, and so on—and the system that society creates for asylum seekers to live in, the Asylum Centres, are a result of xenophobia; they are permeated by it, and as such can be seen as a mirror of society. But art should not be content with showing the suffering of these places, instead it must address them politically and insist on the responsibility of our political system in creating this suffering.

In the following text, I will present some perspectives on art and migration politics, mostly based on the Danish context, by using some examples of my own artistic work, arguments and experiences I have gained through twenty years spent working as an artist. My projects have dealt with, related to and presented many of the following issues in the form of spatial installations or conceptual artworks. The following visual material should therefore be seen as documentation of already exhibited work.

My interest in the topic started around the year 2000, when I was still a student at the art academy. As a young man who had entered the country in the early 1990s and lived four years within the Danish asylum system, I started to reflect on and study the relation between the public story told about the asylum system and the reality that I had witnessed and experienced. The discrepancy between reality and the public narrative and its constructed logics, which are in most cases contradictory, made me want to counteract and became a backdrop for a large number of my projects.

In Denmark Asylum Centres commonly refer to temporary and total housing solutions for people who seek asylum in the country. Currently there are two different types of centres within the Danish immigration and asylum system; ordinary Asylum Centres (including reception centres) for the asylum seekers who are waiting for their case to be solved, and deportation centres (including detention and deportation centres) for those who will be deported after a judicial decision, or have the status of a so-called temporary tolerated stay. Under the authority of the Danish Immigration Service, deportation centres are managed by the Danish Prison and Probation Service, while Asylum Centres are operated by the Danish Red Cross, a humanitarian aid organisation, which provides asylum seekers with accommodation, food, clothes and medication while waiting for their asylum

case to reach a decision. Asylum Centres can be described as zones in which human life is reduced to an uncertain wait for either a residency permit or deportation. They are places where the experience of time is different from wider society, as this uncertain waiting can in some cases take up to ten years. The status of the asylum seeker is reduced to a “number in line” without any right to participate in society. Almost all Asylum Centres in Denmark are placed outside of urban areas, ensuring absence of asylum seekers within Danish towns and cities’ public places, and by extension preventing public interest in their existence.

The existence of Asylum Centres is in my eyes a mirror of our society, reflecting the political climate and our general moral standard as a sociality. Public and individual goodwill, acceptance, ignorance and justification of the existence of the modern prisons that are called Asylum Centres, their physical conditions, placement and the underlying political and bureaucratic machinery that maintain such isolated zones, which serve as a framework for the life of people who have fled and are in need, were for me a solid reason to start dealing with this topic and the logics surrounding it.

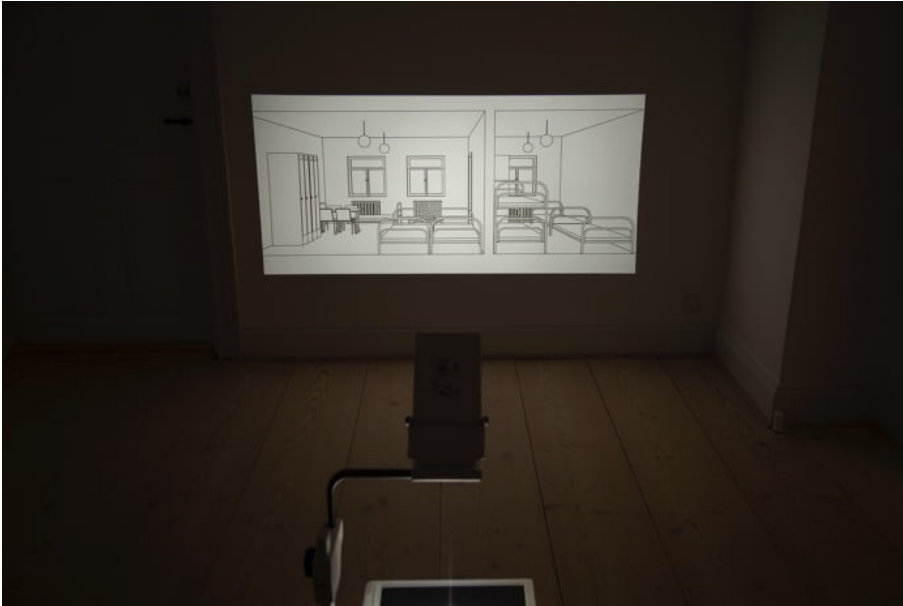


One of the first projects was the booklet called *Danish Asylum Guidebook* (2002). The publication presents an overview of all Danish Asylum Centres present in the year 2002. The information collected was the only publicly available information about the centres at the time, presented on the website of the Danish Red Cross. The content was targeted towards ordinary Danish people, who had never visited Asylum Centres and all information was only available in Danish. It can be considered promotional material that describes the Asylum Centres through categories such as: local area, transport, activities and education—in short, information of no relevance to the residents of the centres. I presented it in the booklet with a similar layout as that of the *Danish Camping Guide* from the same year.

For the past two decades we have in Denmark witnessed a rise in politically openly expressed xenophobia. The rise of the political xenophobic right wing, among which the Danish People Party that in 2015 became the country's second largest party with 21.1% of the national votes, and several other parties, is a good indicator of this movement. We are of course not alone in this development. A great number of European countries have witnessed a similar shift. Xenophobic rhetoric has had a huge impact on the domestic so-called “strict immigration policy”, and the legislation does not only have impact on the (worsening) conditions for the asylum seekers, but has over time become a dominant accepted logic, adopted by the media and the wider population, uncritically reproducing these xenophobic logics and justifications.

How this xenophobic rhetoric plays out, I remember even from back in the 1990s. It was in the Asylum Centre Domhusgade No. 22 in the town of Kolding, where the staff initiated a project called “satellite families”. The programme was supposed to make the relationship between the local community and the asylum seekers closer. The centre was placed just across from the local police station and the local prison. Guided tours were made for carefully selected refugee families and local Danish guests. On a first visit to the centre, our Danish neighbours were guided through the four-floor building where approximately 300 people were living in rooms and facilities that were way too small and cramped. Overwhelmed with emotions and deep empathy, many of the visiting guests agreed that the conditions were very bad, but also added that this would still be better than a war zone. The majority felt empathy, expressed through a grieving narrative about the conditions. It was clear, in their eyes, that such a political institution as the Asylum Centre was not considered part of their own political responsibility, even though the building was placed physically in their “backyard”. It is important to add that Asylum Centre Domhusgade No. 22 was one of the few centres that was placed in an urban area.





*Asylum Residency* is a project made in 2005 that shows the interior design of Danish asylum centres from the 1990s, before asylum seekers moved into this space. This project comprises a number of 3D models, categorised via the hierarchy that asylum seekers typically move through as time passes: starting with “living rooms” for 50 to 25 to 16 people, moving to family rooms for 6 to 8 people, with the same number of beds. In addition, I modelled “common areas”, such as the kitchen, laundry room, toilets, a TV hall, youth club, sewing repair room, bike repair room, kindergarten and the love room (a special place for making love, since the other rooms did not offer any privacy). The project has been shown on different occasions in different exhibition contexts and in different formats (for practical reasons), but the installation is originally designed to be shown on overhead projectors, like it was in 2019 at the Silkeborg Bad art centre.

We are all familiar with the imagery of personal or collective suffering of immigrants. This is one of the most common approaches to depicting the subject of migration, which we so often see in mass media, the cinema and visual art. This methodology of using suffering and victimisation is also widely used by artists of non-Danish origins to evoke and draw emotional attention and empathy from the viewer. This is not without reason, as this approach is a highly efficient instrument in visual communication. It is at the same time worth mentioning that there is a demand for such narratives and emotional storytelling from the domestic culture market, in movies, documentaries, art exhibitions, theatres, etc. I understand this emotional approach as a very simple and (at best) harmless legitimisation of the status quo. However, in my opinion this approach turns into an actual problem when such methods become the *only* way in which we understand and relate to the question of migration. Especially because such an approach does not require us to deal with the seriousness that migration politics requires, and in many cases it does not include and confront our own position as part of the problem. It is, however, much easier for a viewer to have empathy for suffering than to contemplate and take an active position on why the suffering is present within their context in the first place.



*(Re)arranging* (2009), is an installation of approximately 14 m<sup>2</sup> composed of furniture from 1990s Danish Asylum Centres. This art installation for me points at three important aspects. The first one is connected to its physical dimension: the measurements of the furniture are real, and the shape is a real historical representation of this type of space and aesthetics. The paradox of re-arranging this kind of space, is that no matter how you re-arrange the furniture, the aesthetics will remain almost the same. The second aspect may not be noticeable for visitors, but it certainly is for anyone who has spent time living in those spaces, and relates to the mental space that the red, blue and grey coloured furniture creates. To me this simplified and uniform aesthetics signals the unequal power relations, since other options for accommodation are not present for the people living here. The final and third aspect is connected to the size of the living space (in square metres) provided to the asylum seekers to live in. This may be more of symbolic value (since the actual rooms are different and can be bigger in size), but to me it represents a strong statement. The fact is that we do not lack space in Denmark to provide more humane living conditions for anyone who wants to live or stay in the country. The installation shown in the above images is from an exhibition named *Camp Life* from 2015—CAMP being short for Center for Art on Migration Politics.

Our Danish art institutions have occasionally, over the past couple of decades, addressed migration politics in both its narrow or extended version by dedicating exhibitions and public events to the issue. Simultaneously, the interest in this topic has also increased among artists, and a large number of domestic and international artists have participated in Danish exhibitions focusing on the topic. The way I experience this increasing trend, especially when talking about displays of large museums and exhibition spaces, is that artists and institutions are contributing to a cultivation of a very serious political issue. By cultivation I refer to the way they—or the vast majority—are presenting artworks with a detached relation to politics, which in many ways does not leave much space for any potential of politically critical art. It seems that the focus is much more on the volume, number of visitors and media coverage that so-called popular artists can attract for events and exhibitions. A recent example of such a large exhibition is a solo show by the famous Chinese artist Ai Weiwei at Kunsthall Charlottenborg (Copenhagen), presented under the title *Soleil Levant*, made of 3,500 salvaged life jackets collected from refugees arriving at the Greek island of Lesbos, placed on the facade of the exhibition space. Another example is an exhibition that took place in 2016 at the Danish National Gallery, by the Danish artist group Superflex, who re-installed their art installation *Foreigners please don't leave us alone with the Danes* (2002).

There are a number of well-established exhibition spaces that welcome such artistic “plays” on the topic of migration and immigrants. When displayed on the walls of large museums, the severity of this political issue can easily become undermined by the transformation of the artwork into a cultural object, a celebrated art piece that does not necessarily critically engage its viewers. In these cases, the artist behind the work will always be in danger of the accusation of exploitation of their own position and looking after their own benefit. When talking about large museums, it is hard to tell from my own position as an artist, whether or not there is a wish to protect the museum’s audience from being confronted with the brutal reality of domestic migration politics and its effects. However, on the other end of the spectrum, there are a number of initiatives by grass-roots movements, artists, activists and independent initiatives in Denmark—including The Trampoline House, Refugees Welcome, The Bridge Radio, CAMP, visAvis, etc.—which deal more directly with this topic by providing physical settings, legal counselling, social activities and giving the people waiting for asylum a platform for speaking out.<sup>1</sup>

They take a more direct approach, which at the same time is much more demanding and time-consuming. It is exactly in such environment that we are able to find greater criticality in the methodology of dealing with the topic of not only migration, but migration *politics*. Despite the fact that there is no perfect “solution” on how to deal with art and migration politics, because every solution is based on its own setting and context, I see these Copenhagen-based initiatives as a very important environments that reflects the issues of our time.



*Tent unit, Danish refugee housing (2016)* is an installation of approximately 17 m<sup>2</sup>, composed of a tent frame and a Power Moon Lamp that represents a single unit of a large (tent) housing concept. The installation's proportions are as close as possible to its original version. Tent camps were erected in different parts of Denmark in 2016 and served as housing for Syrian asylum seekers. This concept of tent housing was proposed and initiated by the anti-migration government of the time and served as a symbol of Danish general politics, indicating that asylum seekers are unwanted in the country. The Power Moon lamp (used in the tent camps) is normally used for the lighting of large areas for work such as repairs of highways, large constructions etc. and gives a strong, intense and cold light. The installation was exhibited in 2017 outside of Centre of Photography in Copenhagen as a part of the exhibition *Nordic Delights*.

One of the reasons why, for me, dealing with people in need is one of the most difficult artistic subjects to work with, is connected to the fact that as an artist I am placed in a privileged position that is not shared by the subject of my work. If there is one thing that I can draw from my own experience of having been in the position of asylum seeker, it is that being locked in the imprisoned limbo of the asylum system without significant legal

rights, is absolutely a political issue. Asylum politics is a kind of politics that creates a holistic structure, which consists of legislation that is supported by the architectural landscape of asylum centres that serve the idea of isolation of the people who seek asylum in the country. Any attempt to subjectify this political issue through focusing on the individual or group suffering and the grieving of people in need, like a number of popular artworks do, is, however, a contribution to the depoliticisation of the problem. If the artists, humanists and institutions that work on this topic really want to contribute to changes for the better, they need to take a more active position and ask the following: “What creates such rigorous conditions in our domestic context in the first place?” Such an approach demands a re-evaluation on both a personal and societal level.

## Footnotes

1. For more information on these projects, see <https://www.trampolinehouse.dk>; <http://www.thebridgeradio.dk>; <https://refugeeswelcome.dk>; <http://www.visavis.dk>; and <http://campcph.org> (all Accessed 2019-12-02.)