

CRITICS' PICKS

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View of "Ellen Rothenberg: ISO 6346: ineluctable immigrant," 2019.

Ellen Rothenberg

THE JAMES GALLERY, CUNY GRADUATE CENTER
 365 Fifth Avenue The City University of New York
 February 6–April 13

The construction of inhumane “tent cities” for migrant children along the US–Mexico border made international news last fall. One might think that Germany, which took in more than

one million refugees in 2015 at the peak of the migrant crisis, would have devised a more benevolent solution. Alas, according to [Ellen Rothenberg's](#) installation *ISO 6346: ineluctable immigrant*, 2018, that wasn't the case. The artist conceived this work to mimic the shipping-container settlements for refugees—the so-called Tempohomes built by a state agency—at Berlin's Tempelhof Airport, which was never finished by the Nazis, and sits adjacent to a former concentration camp. The installation's numerical title is derived from the international standard for labeling freight shipping containers, yet it recalls the callous systems bureaucracies use to organize and categorize foreign bodies.

Initially displayed last year at the Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership in Chicago, *ISO 6346: ineluctable immigrant* triangulates a relationship between different cities in this presentation. Rather than moving a Tempohome from Berlin to New York, for instance, Rothenberg re-creates the alienating ambience of these provisional structures by erecting plywood barricades. Plastered to these walls are prints that depict lockers full of Tempohome residents' belongings. There is also a 1956 *Li'l Abner* comic in which a hillbilly brood objects to the arrival of the “Square-Eyes Family.” “Le's git a mob together!! An' run 'em outa town!” one character remarks with deplorable zeal. Tape markings on the wooden floor, evoking the demarcations of airport runways, illustrate a Tempohome housing plan. Elsewhere, Rothenberg shows us detailed photographs of the Tempelhof's infrastructure, along with artifacts from the Spertus's collection—including an Israeli coin commemorating illegal immigration.

The sculpture *Carrier* underscores the exhibition's visceral impact, as it displays the personal effects of anonymous displaced persons—shoes, pillows, and plaid polyester laundry bags—buckled like trapped detainees to a freestanding wall with bungee cords and ratchet straps.

— [Wendy Vogel](#)