

# At Home, Together

## KUNSTASYL at the Museum of European Cultures

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### Introduction

¶1 The main structure of the sculpture *ZELT*, created by Musaab Alawad in 2016, consists of bed frames draped in decorative bedding. The two objects are artifacts of migration, emblematic of the standardized belongings provided to countless residents when they are assigned and re-assigned places of temporary accommodation in Germany.<sup>1</sup> But they are more than just emblematic. The bed frames are from a refugee accommodation center in Tempelhof, while the bedding is from another in Spandau, and each item was once in a single individual's room. Alawad's choice, silent in the sculpture itself, highlights the intimacy of spaces in which these two people found rest and privacy.

¶2 The makeshift tent is complemented by other objects: a plastic chair carried by a Syrian family on their journey through the Balkan Route; numerous watercolors and pencil sketches of floorplans, and elements of homes left behind or destroyed; and diary entries written across fabric and papers. These components of *ZELT* were collected from other contributors, many of whom were residents of the Spandau refugee accommodation center mentioned above.<sup>2</sup> In this

sense, *ZELT* amalgamates reference points from different visions of belonging, and suggests that the relationship between the individual and the collective over time is central to the question of what it means to find a home. Of course, *ZELT* is not exactly a model of permanent or sufficient housing; in many ways it exists as the opposite. Yet, the piece reflects a broader orientation towards community building: when people share resources, ideas, and memories with one another they bring about the possibility to work towards something—a community, home, or world—that grows and stabilizes with time.

¶3 Alawad, a member of the Berlin-based artists' collective KUNSTASYL, created this sculpture in the context of the temporary art exhibition *daHEIM – Einsichten in flüchtige Leben* (*daHEIM – Glances into Fugitive Lives*; referred to as *daHEIM* going forward) which ran from 2016 to 2017 at the Museum of European Cultures (Museum Europäischer Kulturen, henceforth MEK) in Dahlem, Berlin. These pieces, which, like Alawad's, had been created by other members of KUNSTASYL specifically for the exhibition, ranged over categories—drawing, painting, sculpture, textile works, and photography, as well as multimedia art incorporating audio and video recordings.<sup>3</sup> In addition to the curated art exhibition, *daHEIM* also incorpo-

1— Repurposed bed frames emerged in several installation pieces shown in the exhibition.

2— Contributors include Ina Sado, Amer Muhamed, Moustafa Al Batsh, Jasmin Gull, Ahsan Gul, Yousif Bhnam, and Mr. Amir.

3— English title as given by the museum.

rated a wide array of paramuseal elements, such as performances pieces and events, a garden, and a digital archive available to visitors during the exhibition, but which has also been maintained since.

¶4 I begin with *ZELT* because its composition reflects a key question of the exhibition: what is the difference between being at home and being accommodated? Following this question, this article shows how complex depictions of community, collectivity, and authorship in temporary exhibitions on migration from the mid-2000s to the late 2010s, have managed to dislodge certain tropes—arrival, foreignness, violence, tokenization—endemic to exhibitions about migration in Germany as early as the 1980s. I examine *daHEIM* by focusing on two examples from the exhibition, the sculpture *ZELT* mentioned above, and a performance series titled *DIE KÖNIGE*.

¶5 At the outset, I would like to make it clear that I am engaging with *daHEIM* through a wide array of archived photographs and videos of its performances and exhibits, as well as the creative texts written to accompany the pieces. Moreover, I am interested in the discourse around the exhibition, and therefore explore also how it was refracted in the contemporary press and artist interviews. My retrospective reading of *ZELT* and *DIE KÖNIGE* demonstrates the generative intersection of participation, performance, and collective action, whereby a form of translocal community-building translates art into agency, and redefines how audiences align migration with belonging. As a case study, I argue *daHEIM* allows us to understand KUNSTASYL's transformative methodologies; to reorient the role of the individual in a community; and to consider how museums serve as spaces to imagine alternative possibilities for the future from within a seemingly constrained present moment. While the details remain open, KUNSTASYL consistently emphasizes two key,

non-negotiable qualities of these alternative possibilities: they must be participatory—that is, involving the collaboration of multiple actors, including museum visitors— and they must be translocal.

¶6 In my reading, the framework of translocality aptly characterizes KUNSTASYL's methods of cross-referencing, translating, community building, and curation—all of which prove entangled in each other. The concept of the translocal (rather than transnational, international, or migratory, for example) characterizes how people relate to each other through and across numerous local contexts, centering the multiple ways people carry associations, images, and ideas from different places, and how these associations collectively shape local communities.<sup>4</sup> Crucially, the translocal does not endorse national claims to authority over borders, boundaries, or definitions of belonging; in contrast, the translocal accounts for multiple scales of belonging and identification and leaves space for these relations to unfold simultaneously. Tracing the contours of *daHEIM* reveals a mode of translocal community building rooted in principles of participation and collectivity which imagines—if not enacts—what it means to be 'at home' in contemporary Germany rather than simply housed or accommodated.

4— The analytic framework of translocality emerged from geography and geographic studies in the early 2000s. However, as geographers Katherine Brickell and Ayona Datta point out, it became codified largely as a "grounded transnationalism," that is as a subfield of transnationalism which, while productively more attuned to migrant agency in social encounters, still subsumed the idea under the rubric of transnational migration. More recent conceptions, including my own, stage the translocal as being in conversation with more than just the trans/national, preferring to leave room for different scales of overlapping and intersecting places. See: Katherine Brickell and Ayona Datta, eds., *Translocal Geographies: Spaces, Places, Connections* (Routledge, 2016).

¶7 *daHEIM* is a productive case study in part because it is in some respects ‘typical’: the theme of migration was far from uncommon at the Museum of European Cultures by 2016, and the exhibition was a time-limited project bringing together the museum, KUNSTASYL, and a refugee accommodation center on Staakener Straße in Spandau.<sup>5</sup> Yet the timing of the exhibition remains notable. *daHEIM* opened for one year in July 2016—the year that featured the largest annual percent increase in granted asylum cases since 1985, and the highest number of applications for asylum overall in the 2000s in Germany.<sup>6</sup> The ideas and themes referenced in the exhibition predate the so-called 2015 Refugee Crisis by decades, and many of the artists involved were situated in Germany prior to that year. KUNSTASYL nonetheless managed to develop the exhibition to reflect a socio-political issue in an active moment of unfolding.

¶8 However, I want to be very clear on one point: *daHEIM* and similar concurrent exhibitions do

5— The overwhelming majority of exhibitions on migration since the 1970s have been temporary exhibitions and collaborations between multiple institutions. For example, three influential exhibitions include: *Fremde Heimat. Eine Geschichte der Einwanderung aus der Türkei. Yaban, Silan olur. Türkiye’den Almanya’ya Göçün Tarihi* (1998, *Foreign Homeland: a History of Immigration from Turkey*); *Fremde in Deutschland — Deutsche in der Fremde: Schlaglichter der frühen Neuzeit bis in die Gegenwart* (1999, *Foreigners in Germany — Germans in the Foreign: Highlights from the Early Modern Period to the Present*); *Projekt Migration* (2004/5, *Project Migration*). Since its founding in 1990 and in lieu of having a permanent museum space (a status that is currently changing), *DOMiD – Dokumentationszentrum und Museum über die Migration in Deutschland* has co-produced a substantial volume of temporary exhibitions utilizing its archival collections and shown all over Germany.

6— Note that Ukrainian refugees utilize a different process and are therefore excluded from these statistics. The numbers of Ukrainian refugees entering Germany have been higher (following the Russian invasion of Ukraine) than these asylum applications reported in 2016.

not mark a distinct moment in which migration ‘arrived’ in museum spaces. On the contrary, the thematics of *daHEIM* continue a through line from decades of previous exhibitions on migration in Germany.<sup>7</sup> Rather than marking an arrival of a new subject, *daHEIM* is a generative case study in how it embraced participatory methodologies and leveraged the heightened visibility of migrants in Germany during the mid-2010s to reclaim narrative, and potentially political, agency. In this sense, the exhibition dovetails with questions raised by Sharon Macdonald’s articulation of “diversity max\*” in Berlin museums or Katrin Sieg’s examination of experiments to decolonize European history museums.<sup>8</sup>

¶9 For both scholars, museums continue to serve as powerful sites of activism, worth fighting for as public spaces that shape new polities as much as they reinforce existing ones—a perspective maintained by KUNSTASYL. In Sieg’s words: “Artists have become partners in museums’ efforts to decolonize the institution by reframing collections and instigating ‘new ways of seeing’ objects in the exhibitions.”<sup>9</sup> The forms of participation dis-

7— This article sadly does not have space to go into much depth. For select overviews of this exhibition history see: Mareike König and Rainer Ohliger, eds., *Enlarging European Memory: Migration Movements in Historical Perspective*, Beihefte zu *Francia*; Bd. 62 (Ostfildern: Thorbecke, 2006); Tim Wolfgarten, *Zur Repräsentation Des Anderen: Eine Untersuchung von Bildern in Themenausstellungen Zu Migration Zeit 1974* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2019); and Whitehead, Christopher, et al, eds. *Museums, Migration and Identity in Europe: Peoples, Places and Identities* (Ashgate Publishing Company, 2015).

8— Sharon Macdonald, “Diversity Max\* Multiple Differences in Exhibition-Making in *Berlin Global* in the Humboldt Forum,” in *Doing Diversity in Museums and Heritage: A Berlin Ethnography*, ed. Sharon Macdonald, *Cultural Heritage Studies 1* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2022); Katrin Sieg, *Decolonizing German and European History at the Museum* (University of Michigan Press, 2021), 10.

9— Sieg, *Decolonizing German*, 246.

cussed in this article certainly could be said to be part of a “decolonizing” toolkit if we take decolonization to mean the disruption of hegemonic narratives or pre-given norms. Yet despite being housed in the Museum of European Cultures, the exhibition *daHEIM* maintains a fundamentally different relationship to objects, museum collections, and acts of collecting from that of Sieg’s principal case studies, which focus primarily on representations of colonialism and the exhibition of historical artifacts related to Germany’s colonial era. One of Sieg’s guiding questions gestures towards the relevance, but also limitations, of applying such a framework in this case: “By underscoring the ethical and legal responsibilities resulting from colonial dispossession, could museums make Europeans entertain terms of cohabitation beyond the humanitarian ones extended in exceptional circumstances?”<sup>10</sup> Even acknowledging that colonization, migration, and racialization are fundamentally linked, *daHEIM*’s near complete avoidance of engagement with existing collections, object provenance, or the imperial legacies of museums lead me away from an explicit framework of decolonization. Rather than approaching *daHEIM* as a decolonial project focused on illuminating how history is narrated in the present, KUNSTASYL takes a different approach: it leverages museums as spaces of social change through representational activism. The group tackles the question of cohabitation by modeling a decentralized path forward, one that renders the museum a blank slate, a space rife with lingering cultural capital up for grabs. This constitutes a turn away from a historical practice of defining a citizenry in opposition to an elsewhere, via the showcasing of plundered objects. Rather, KUNSTASYL uses *daHEIM* to stage possible worlds emerging from the often whimsical visions and atemporal dreams of those present. It

10— Sieg, *Decolonizing German*, 249.

thus shares goals with many cases from Macdonald’s and Sieg’s studies, while pursuing a different approach to constructing an exhibition.

### A “freundliche Übernahme”: from Conceptual Experiment to Participatory art

<sup>11</sup>In February 2015, six artists founded KUNSTASYL: barbara caveng, Aymen Montasser, therry kornath, Till Rimmele, Dachil Sado, and Maxim Neroda.<sup>11</sup> Since its founding, the collective’s aspirations have focused primarily on political agency and personal autonomy. In their own words: “Wir setzen uns dafür ein, dass jedem Menschen die Rechte zuteil werden, sich uneingeschränkt bewegen zu können, zu bleiben, zu arbeiten und die Gesellschaft mitzugestalten.”<sup>12</sup> KUNSTASYL’s works situate geopolitical, interpersonal, and individual boundaries as firmly interwoven. In so doing, they shift participants’ relationships to public space and themselves, and promote trans-local communities. Their chosen medium: participatory, multimedia art projects. Since earning non-profit status in 2016, the group has primarily collaborated on art projects with residents of the refugee accommodation center on Staakener Straße in Berlin-Spandau.<sup>13</sup> For example, in addition to KUNSTASYL’s six founders, approximately 120 people from 21 nations living at the Staakener Str. accommodation center collaborated to curate and create pieces for *daHEIM*.

11— barbara caveng and therry kornath write their names in lowercase. This article follows their orthographic preferences. Maxim Neroda, “Kunstasyl,” Maxim Neroda, accessed July 2024, [maximneroda.com/project/kunstasyl/](http://maximneroda.com/project/kunstasyl/).

12— “KUNSTASYL 2.0 – über uns,” KUNSTASYL, accessed February 2024, [ka.kunstasyl.net/ueber-uns/](http://ka.kunstasyl.net/ueber-uns/). “We take the stand that everyone has the right to move, stay, work, and shape society without restriction.” (All German to English translations are my own except where otherwise noted.)

13— Full address of the accommodations center: Staakener Str. 79, 13583 Berlin, Germany.

¶11 The directors of MEK, Elisabeth Tietmeyer and Léontine Meijer-van Mensch, characterized the curatorial approach of *daHEIM* as a “freundliche Übernahme,” and identified their role as moderators, emphasizing across interviews that the museum’s mission was not to speak about people but to provide spaces in which people represent themselves—a model very much aligned with diversity trends in Berlin museums and a turn “towards a more self-reflective memory culture.”<sup>14</sup> Divorcing their current praxis from that of its historical *modus operandi* as a *Heimatmuseum*, Tietmeyer clarified the role of participation in the museum’s mission: “Europa lässt sich aus verschiedenen Perspektiven definieren, und dem wollen wir eben Rechnung tragen, indem wir verschiedene Kulturen vorstellen beziehungsweise Menschen einladen, sich selbst auch vorzustellen... Wir legen sehr viel Wert auf Partizipation, die Menschen sollen sich selbst repräsentieren, indem wir eben auch verschiedene Geschichten erzählen.”<sup>15</sup> Tietmeyer recognizes conceptions of Europe as neither permanent nor always congruous. As a result, participation presents one of the only viable approaches for dealing with anything

14— Quote from Sieg, *Decolonizing German*, 248, for examples of diversity work at non-ethnographic museums see also: Macdonald, *Doing Diversity in Museums and Heritage: A Berlin Ethnography*.

15— Beatrix Novy, “Identitätsstiftung: ‘Im Heimatmuseum wird Vergangenheit oft verklärt,’” *Deutschlandfunk*, August 4, 2016, [deutschlandfunk.de/identitaetsstiftung-im-heimatmuseum-wird-vergangenheit-oft-100.html](http://deutschlandfunk.de/identitaetsstiftung-im-heimatmuseum-wird-vergangenheit-oft-100.html). “Europe allows itself to be defined from different perspectives, and we take this into account by presenting different cultures and inviting people to present themselves... We place great value on participation, people should represent themselves, through which we are also able to tell different stories.” A *Heimatmuseum* is a type of local history museum; due to space limitations and the relationship of this specific exhibition to objects, this article only explores the museum’s modern history from 2000 onward. Examining its longer history and permanent collections would return us to Sieg and questions of decolonization.

as nebulous as European cultures. The museum has demonstrated this by exploring themes of migration, as well as experimenting with participation, since the early 2000s.<sup>16</sup> *daHEIM* is therefore not singular in centering participation in general, rather, it stands out for its scale and the avenues for participation that it explores. Tietmeyer and Meijer-van Mensch also acknowledge this: they consider *daHEIM* to have pushed the institution further in its “partizipativen Ausrichtung. [participatory orientation]”<sup>17</sup> The multifaceted appropriations of participation within *daHEIM* gesture to a broader trend in exhibitions, but push it towards an outer limit, challenging existent power dynamics, and showcasing the creative agency of visitors, KUNSTASYL, and the MEK all at once.

¶12 Exactly what constitutes participation in a museum varies widely across museums, curators and practitioners. In *The Participatory Museum*, practitioner Nina Simon codifies four types of participation in museums, including contributory, collaborative, co-creative, and hosted projects.<sup>18</sup> Simon does not argue that any one type is more effective or more participatory than another; rather, she identifies how institutions productively align institutional and visitor goals for

16— Two early examples are *Heimat Berlin? Fotografische Impressionen* (July 12, 2002–November 11, 2002) and the event series *Kulturkontakte in Europa* run from 1999 through 2005.

17— Elisabeth Tietmeyer and Dagmar Neuland-Kitzerow, “Warum dieses Buch?” in *Einsichten in flüchtige Leben* (Berlin: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 2016), 7.

18— Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum* (Museum 2.0, 2010), ch. 1 (accessed online). For more on participation in museums, see: Susanne Gesser et al., eds., *Das Partizipative Museum Zwischen Teilhabe Und User Generated Content. Neue Anforderungen an Kulturhistorische Ausstellungen* (Transcript Verlag, 2012); Hanne-Lovise Skartveit and Katherine Goodnow, eds., *Changes in Museum Practice: New Media, Refugees and Participation* (London: Berghahn Books, 2010); and Leo von Stieglitz and Thomas Brune, eds., *Hin und her: Dialoge in Museen zur Alltagskultur*, 1st ed., vol. 9, Edition Museum (Transcript Verlag, 2014).

mutual benefit. The boundaries between forms of participation are somewhat porous, and institutions often draw from different modes for different projects, depending on resources, desired outcomes, and levels of trust between participants and the institution. Whereas contributory and collaborative projects rely on inviting community members to engage with discrete institutionally-driven projects, *daHEIM*'s ecology of participation rests somewhere between co-creative and hosted, though specific exhibition components encouraged visitors to contribute and collaborate in further ways.<sup>19</sup>

¶13 This balance moves the exhibition away from an integrationist model of participation towards one that maintains space for heterogeneity within a collective. If an integrationist model of participation assumes that a migrant from a stable monolithic culture moves to a new place and 'integrates' or participates within a second monolithic culture, then what migration scholars Sten Pultz Moslund and Anne Ring Petersen describe as a postmigrant perspective on participation, "substitutes the ideal of integrationist participation with a pluralist understanding of participation as involving sometimes conflictual and difficult negotiation across cultural and political differences."<sup>20</sup> In this sense, participation does not inherently lead to consensus or serve as a mechanism

19— Co-creative participation "challenge[s] institutional perceptions of ownership and control of content" and places equal emphasis on community or participant values as it does on institutional values, goals, or needs. (Simon, *The Participatory Museum*, ch. 8 (accessed online).) Hosted participation demonstrates a similar level of participant autonomy but typically features guest curators or events planned by external groups for which the museum exclusively provides facilities or material resources. (Simon, ch. 9 (accessed online).)

20— Moritz Schramm et al., *Reframing Migration, Diversity and the Arts: The Postmigrant Condition* (Routledge, 2019), 73.

of homogenization, rather it is a methodology, which certainly coheres around a shared goal (e.g. an art project) or political orientation (e.g. borders should be open). Yet, in pursuing that goal, it maintains space for disagreement and heterogeneity. Participation mirrors a willful solidarity; both the creation of the spaces for participation and the acts of participation themselves embody an intentional orientation towards alliance and community building.<sup>21</sup>

¶14 By generating an assemblage of opportunities for anyone to participate, KUNSTASYL critiques restrictive nation-building mechanisms within contemporary Germany in favor of differently imagined, translocal ways of relating to each other. The name KUNSTASYL itself sutures *art* and *asylum*, prompting associations between the political dimensions of art and the sociocultural dimensions of asylum. In this sense, art cannot be separated from asylum; the conditions and circumstances of asylum are actively created. This differentiates it from a compound word like *Asylkunst* [the art of exile], which would denote a category of art: instead, the group's name evokes a space, framing the itself as a refuge or sanctuary itself.<sup>22</sup> Within its name, then, KUNSTASYL enacts not a genre of art, but a genre of space that demands reinterpretations of its constituent parts and their interconnectedness. Taken together, KUNSTASYL is where members of the group explore the human, embodied impact of geopolit-

21— In fact, Zwart documented how differences in museum experiences and expectations led to mild conflict between MEK workers and KUNSTASYL members, for example around eating, drinking, and wearing shoes in exhibition spaces. (Inge Zwart, *Beyond the Participatory Project: Practices of Organizing, Planning and Doing Participation in Museums* (Skrifter utgivna vid institutionen för ABM vid Uppsala universitet, 2023), 173).

22— There is a substantial precedent for defining such a category or genre of art (rather than a category of space as I take KUNSTASYL to be doing).

ical events, in addition to the ways governments instrumentalize sociocultural identities.

¶15 KUNSTASYL invited individuals to consider these themes beginning with a five-month curation phase for *daHEIM*. On March 4, 2016, members of KUNSTASYL and other residents of the area gathered outside the *MEK*. The group hoisted a large vertical banner with the collective's name over the façade of the building; they then entered the museum and claimed space and authorship by chalking their names on the otherwise blank temporary exhibition walls.<sup>23</sup> From the very start, KUNSTASYL eschewed a distanced, 'objective,' or singular curatorial voice and deferred to a noticeable level of amateur do-it-yourself aesthetics.<sup>24</sup> While the official vernissage was not until July 22, 2016 (it remained on view until July 2, 2017), the five months between the initial wall-chalking action and the official opening—a phase described as a “werkstattartiger Prozess [workshop-like process]”—proved as memorable for the KUNSTASYL participants and press as the exhibition itself.<sup>25</sup> One critic with the *Berliner Zeitung* underscores how the workshop phase of the exhibition inverted typical associations, quoting participant Diwali Hasskan's remark that “Die Ausstellungsöffnung wird für mich die Aus-

23— “‘Freundliche Übernahme’ Des Museums Europäischer Kulturen,” *Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz*, March 22, 2016, [preussischer-kulturbesitz.de/en/news-detail-page/article/2016/03/22/freundliche-uebernahme-des-museums-europaeischer-kulturen.html](http://preussischer-kulturbesitz.de/en/news-detail-page/article/2016/03/22/freundliche-uebernahme-des-museums-europaeischer-kulturen.html).

24— The exhibition did not receive much academic or critical attention; future research might explore the question of why and consider if this is related to the DIY nature and how the exhibition embraced amateur aesthetics.

25— Christiane Habermalz, “Darstellung eines Schwebezustands,” *Deutschlandfunk*, July 22, 2016, [deutschlandfunkkultur.de/ausstellung-darstellung-eines-schwebezustands-100.html](http://deutschlandfunkkultur.de/ausstellung-darstellung-eines-schwebezustands-100.html).

tellungsschließung sein.”<sup>26</sup> For Hasskan, the creative processes and social dynamics throughout *daHEIM*'s development and production in themselves enact an exhibition. Thus, the moment when the exhibition officially ‘opened’ as a static production is when he marks the true end.

¶16 In this case, the very notion of an ‘exhibition opening’ was additionally troubled by the fact that the curation phase was by no means a closed affair. Not only did dozens of individuals come together to work on art pieces, exhibits, and the overall curation in these five months, but the museum was open for visitors to spectate the work(ing) in progress.<sup>27</sup> In a comparative study on participatory curation projects in Sweden and Germany, in which *daHEIM* also features briefly, memory studies scholar Inge Zwart identified how process and end-product were complementary and shared equal importance: “the process through which [*daHEIM*] was created is used to give meaning to the exhibition.”<sup>28</sup> Indeed, reviews often led with this element; for example, in the opening paragraph of a second *Berliner Zeitung* review, journalist Susanne Lenz set the scene as follows:

“...was hat [ein Bett] in einer Ausstellung zu suchen, die den Titel „Einsichten ins flüchtige Leben“ trägt? Doch ein Berg aus Teilen von Betten aus Metall türmt sich hier bis unter die Decke. Auf einer Leiter steht Dachil Sado in kurzer Hose und türkisfarbenem T-Shirt mit einer Bohrmaschine in der Hand. Er bringt

26— Diwali Hasskan quoted in “Flüchtlinge Gestalten Ausstellung im Museum Europäischer Kulturen in Berlin,” *Berliner Zeitung*, July 18, 2016, [berliner-zeitung.de/kultur-vergnuegen/fluechtlinge-gestalten-ausstellung-im-museum-europaeischer-kulturen-in-berlin-li.10823](http://berliner-zeitung.de/kultur-vergnuegen/fluechtlinge-gestalten-ausstellung-im-museum-europaeischer-kulturen-in-berlin-li.10823). “The exhibition opening will be the exhibition closing for me.”

27— Ulrike Martin, “Flüchtlinge stellen Installationen im Museum Europäischer Kulturen aus,” August 4, 2016, [berliner-woche.de/dahlem/c-kultur/fluechtlinge-stellen-installationen-im-museum-europaeischer-kulturen-aus\\_a105953](http://berliner-woche.de/dahlem/c-kultur/fluechtlinge-stellen-installationen-im-museum-europaeischer-kulturen-aus_a105953).

28— Zwart, *Beyond the Participatory Project*, 197.

einen Bildschirm an. Darauf sollen Bilder aus der Heimat derjenigen zu sehen sein, die an dieser Ausstellung beteiligt sind.”<sup>29</sup>

¶17 The review opens with two images: one of a piece of installation art and one of Dachil Sado as a working artist. The simultaneous co-presence of working artists and their art figure inseparably in much of the exhibition’s reception.

¶18 But the nature of the curation process as a form of public ‘performance’ is complicated. In contrast to performance art pieces staged alongside the opened exhibition, spectating the artist-at-work muddles the boundaries between staged performance, performed character, and identity as performance. Theater and performance scholar Silvija Jestrović characterizes the position in which something is both performed and assumed to be connected to a real, lived experience as “hyper-authentic,” noting that this genre of performance relies on the use of actual asylum seekers to play out “the ambiguity between the performativity of the staged and the theatricality of the authentic.”<sup>30</sup> According to Jestrović, this requires asylum seekers and refugees to both be as well as potentially perform specific position-  
alities.<sup>31</sup> The exhibition phase further compli-

29—Susanne Lenz, “Flüchtlinge Gestalten Ausstellung Im Museum Europäischer Kulturen in Berlin,” *Berliner Zeitung*, July 18, 2016, [berliner-zeitung.de/kultur-vergnuegen/fluechtlinge-gestalten-ausstellung-im-museum-europaeischer-kulturen-in-berlin-li.10823](http://berliner-zeitung.de/kultur-vergnuegen/fluechtlinge-gestalten-ausstellung-im-museum-europaeischer-kulturen-in-berlin-li.10823). “what is [a bed] doing in an exhibition that carries the title “Glimpses into Fugitive Lives”? Yet here a mountain made of metal beds towers up to the ceiling. Dachil Sado stands on a ladder in short pants and a turquoise t-shirt with a drill in his hand. He’s attaching a monitor which will feature pictures from the homelands of those taking part in this exhibition.”

30—Silvija Jestrović, “Performing Like an Asylum Seeker,” in *Double Agent*, ed. Claire Bishop, Silvia Jestrović, and Nicholas Ridout (Institute of the Contemporary Arts, 2009), 57–58.

31—Discussing *Völkerschauen*—a form of ‘human zoos’ from the turn of the century—Barbara Kirshen-

blat similarly argues that staged anthropological exhibitions required that performers pretend they were not performing, semiotically becoming signs of themselves. (Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Objects of Ethnography,” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Smithsonian Press, 1991), 415.)

¶19 What differentiates the opening chalk strokes in March 2016, the completed exhibition opening of July 2016, and the finissage in July 2017? While KUNSTASYL had creative control over the space, the context within an established museum shaped its reception. Reviewer Giacomo Maihofer wrote for the *Tagesspiegel*: “In den fünf Monaten des Malens, Hämmerns und Zeichnens haben sie die geisterhafte Leere in ein pulsierendes Archiv ihrer Erinnerungen und Erlebnisse verwandelt, einen Ort, in dem sich Religionen, Fluchtgeschichten und Kunstformen gleichermaßen begegnen.”<sup>32</sup> Maihofer’s comment reflects a more normative perspective wherein the workshop phase figures primarily as a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. The comments above, by contrast, present the physical presence of artists working in the museum as that which enacts the pulsating, living space bridging memory and experience. While the workshop phase was certainly an important

blatt-Gimblett similarly argues that staged anthropological exhibitions required that performers pretend they were not performing, semiotically becoming signs of themselves. (Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Objects of Ethnography,” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Smithsonian Press, 1991), 415.)

32—Giacomo Maihofer, “Kunst von Geflüchteten im Museum Europäischer Kulturen: Heimat Bauen,” *Tagesspiegel*, August 2, 2016, [tagesspiegel.de/kultur/heimat-bauen-3744550.html](http://tagesspiegel.de/kultur/heimat-bauen-3744550.html). “In the five months of painting, hammering, and drawing, they have transformed the ghostly void into a pulsating archive of their memories and experiences; a place where religions, stories of flight, and art forms meet in equal measure.”

element that centered broad participation in the creation of the exhibition, the opened exhibition generated additional avenues for people to join in and shape it further.

### **DIE KÖNIGE: Performing Alternative Future-Pasts**

¶<sub>20</sub> One performance series, *DIE KÖNIGE* (literally The Kings, also referred to as the Gathering of Kings and Queens), is emblematic of the performance opportunities afforded by the opened exhibition. *DIE KÖNIGE* spanned multiple events, beginning with a royal reception on March 12, 2017, and culminating in a seven-hour performance on July 1, 2017.<sup>33</sup> On this day in July, a group of self-proclaimed regents convened outside of the museum decked in homemade crowns, iconic gold mylar emergency blankets and various handmade accessories cut from foam mattresses. Their prerogative was to define a better future for themselves, for Germany, and for broader worlds. Throughout the performance, the regents embraced two types of reclamation. One was aesthetic: take, for example, how the scene was captured afterwards in their own narrative retelling: “Golden bläht sich die Rettungsfolie im Wind.”<sup>34</sup> The group literally and metaphorically repurposed the silver and gold rescue blankets handed to refugees in need of emergency services into a symbol of prestige, an aesthetic marker of majestic power.<sup>35</sup> Cinematic, reflective, and refractory, the regalia generated new aesthetic associations

33— The performance and rehearsals were open to anyone, calls to join were distributed via the paper crowns in German, English, Arabic, and Albanian.

34— “Golden, the rescue blanket billows in the wind.” “Die Könige – UTC 7 Hours Parallel Performances,” *KUNSTASYL*, accessed September 2023, [kunstasyl.net/www.kunstasyl.net/2-og/201-die-koenige.html](http://kunstasyl.net/www.kunstasyl.net/2-og/201-die-koenige.html).

35— The foam mattresses and mylar blankets were recurring props throughout most of the performances associated with the exhibition. The use of these objects also calls to mind Ai Weiwei’s *Soleil Levant* (2017),

with certain visual markers. The second reclamation was political: without naming any specific governed polity, this group of regents simply authorized itself to—as we will see later—collectively draft new legal codes and policies. Their performance relied on anachronistically performing power, drawing participants into a distinct and collectively-imagined future.

¶<sub>21</sub> While I am writing about these performances with a certain seriousness, they are also decidedly silly. Following Sara Ahmed, I take this silliness as instructive: “We learn much from how the very idea of alternatives to global capitalism comes across as silliness...The silly or ridiculous nature of alternatives teaches us not about the nature of those alternatives but about just how threatening it can be to imagine alternatives to a system that survives by grounding itself in inevitability.”<sup>36</sup> Indeed, a key assumption of this article relies on taking seriously the impulse to imagine something different for one’s future, even if the proposed alternative presents as ridiculous. I read *daHEIM* as proposing alternatives—even ones that appear silly or profoundly non-serious—as a conscious political orientation toward shaping the future world differently. While neither *DIE KÖNIG* in particular, nor *daHEIM* more generally, constitute a political movement *per se*, they are a movement towards the political; an articulation of possibilities that attempt to conceptualize alternatives to what exists now. Indeed, these projects were ones of whimsy and parody; they borrowed unpredictably from the past while resisting strictly teleological thinking; and, I argue, they created spaces for spontaneous connections that disrupt our impressions of the inevitability of current systems.

though the two artistic reclamations have decidedly different tones.

36— Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Duke University Press, 2010), 165.

¶22 In some ways, then, *DIE KÖNIGE* presents as a backwards-looking thought experiment. In a press release promoting its first event, it was described as follows: “Die Installationen und Zeichnungen der Ausstellung [*daHEIM*], die von verlorenem Alltag und zerstörten Länder sprechen, bildeten das Fundament für die Auferstehung eines Königreiches, dessen Paläste in der Gedankenwelt angesiedelt sind.”<sup>37</sup> Within this framing, the exhibition provides the foundations for a kingdom that has left the physical realm and migrated into the world of thought. It’s a curious move that appears, at first, doubly retrospective: not only do destroyed countries lie lost in the past but, additionally, a previous governing model of kingdoms stands to be resurrected. Yet, I want to consider how this performance provides an orientation towards futurity that functions as a form of translocal world-making.

¶23 In the absence of a consistent mechanism for adequate political representation or the ability to return to places where they may have faced more severe political or social persecution, the individuals performing in *DIE KÖNIGE* have had multiple possibilities and potential futures revoked. This revocation is not exclusively an end: the “verlorener Alltag und zerstörte Länder” rather sow the seeds for a new “Auferstehung.” Returning to Ahmed again, negations can function as openings and lead to a new mode of affirmation: “In imagining what is possible, in imagining what does not yet exist, we say yes to the future. In this yes, the future is not given content: it is not that the future is imagined as the overcoming of misery; nor is the future imagined as being happy. The future is what is kept open as the possibility

of things not staying as they are...”<sup>38</sup> *DIE KÖNIGE* in no way scripts a strictly happy future—in fact it is difficult to imagine any happy future centered around something resembling a monarchy, no less one whose monarchs are swathed in mylar blankets. But it does open the possibility that things need not remain as they are.<sup>39</sup> This opening of possibilities is what I invoke with the idea of world-making.

¶24 Rather than admitting individuals based on lineage or wealth, the performance consisted of people simply choosing to define their own living parameters in community with one another. *DIE KÖNIGE* proposes that art can open the door to social change, starting with our imagination.

¶25 Throughout *daHEIM* there are countless stagings of what *could be* if we conceptualize belonging differently. I propose that the alternative worlds presented through *daHEIM*, even the ones that may seem to exist primarily in the “Paläste der Gedankenwelt” of the KUNSTASYL members, offer visions from the vantage point of the present moment. The open-ended performances of *DIE KÖNIGE* critiqued contemporary public policy and leveraged the space of the museum to theorize new guiding principles for community. The participants did so first by reflecting on their personal aspirations and, second, by articulating their collective perspective in a new “Charter of Human Rights.”

¶26 In this part of the performance, any newly-minted regent could respond to the prompt “If I were a king...” and add their own personal aspiration via a handwritten card to one installation, which showcased the aspirations collectively pinned on an interconnected web of yarn. One participant,

37— “Die Könige – UTC 7 Hours Parallel Performances,” “The exhibition’s installations and drawings, which speak of loss of everyday life and destroyed countries, formed the foundation for the resurrection of a kingdom whose palaces have settled in the world of thought.”

38— Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 197.

39— The fantasy of a *positive* monarchy might be particularly difficult for current American readers, with the disruptions to traditional governance and the attendant “No Kings” protests that have emerged across the country.

Fedaa, expressed a goal across three languages: “Wenn ich fedaa / ein König wäre / سواق تاكسي / Driver Taxi.”<sup>40</sup> Omar, writing in English, said: “I, King Omar, I would create a new economy system that thread all the in the same way. All people in the world would be individuals in one unit. Just let me free”; and Ladar, a third participant, proclaimed: “I don’t want to be a queen, I want to be a Journalist.”<sup>41</sup> These three examples are telling: whereas Fedaa just wants to be able to make a living driving taxis, Omar expresses his needs as that which would be resolved through equal treatment under the economic system. Ladar, in contrast, uses her space to not only express her writing ambitions but also to critique the framework; she rejects both the class and gender connotations of the prompt: she has no interest in being a king or queen.

¶27 In the second instance, the group’s new “Charter of Human Rights” distills discussions conducted throughout the performance series into 31 final declarations. While some are reminiscent of the UN’s Declaration of Human Rights in tone and scope, a handful approach problems acutely experienced by participants, including statelessness and houselessness in a grander fashion reminiscent of scathing manifestoes. See, for example, the contrast in Articles 11 and 19, both of which address having access to a safe place to live:

11: “Jeder Mensch hat das Recht auf einen Ort zum Leben im Sinne einer Behausung.”

19: “Das Konstrukt Geld soll abgeschafft werden und durch andere Wertssysteme ersetzt oder ergänzt werden. Man hilft sich

40— “If I Fedaa / were a king / taxi driver / driver taxi.”

41— Quoted directly (including syntactic errors) from photographs of postcards affixed to the yarn web. “Die Könige – UTC 7 Hours Parallel Performances,” KUNSTASYL, accessed September 2023, [kunstasyl.net/www.kunstasyl.net/2-og/201-die-koenige.html](http://kunstasyl.net/www.kunstasyl.net/2-og/201-die-koenige.html).

gegenseitig und es muss Normalität sein, ein Haus und Nahrung zu haben.”<sup>42</sup>

¶28 The articles waver between the proscriptive and prescriptive, and demonstrate the level of entanglement that restricts the participants’ daily autonomy under normal circumstances. The desire for permanent housing and a sense of being at-home figure as the dominant through lines for *daHEIM*, which KUNSTASYL wove throughout the exhibition to imagine alternative modes of collective governance and community building.<sup>43</sup>

### Conclusion

¶29 Staged at different scales, ranging from a performance of new intergovernmental structures, to the display of a chair carried with someone across borders, representations of creating a home permeate *daHEIM*. Taken summarily, the exhibition encouraged participants to embrace their roles in building community and social structures at multiple scales, and provided playful avenues for imagining different ways of conceiving of community. Indeed, the sculptural piece *ZELT* embodies this scalar and translocal approach in one piece: as discussed, it features a material composition that accumulates elements from different moments of temporary housing and from different individuals moving through these accommodations, including reproped bed frames, linens, drawings, and more. The assemblage highlights how, though described as temporary, the materi-

42— “Resolution der Versammlung der Königinnen und Könige Allgemeine Erklärung der Menschenrechte,” KUNSTASYL, 2017, [kunstasyl.net/www.kunstasyl.net/eg/lager-konzept.html](http://kunstasyl.net/www.kunstasyl.net/eg/lager-konzept.html).

43— One concurrent KUNSTASYL project is particularly noteworthy: “AGEDO: [K]ein Dach überm Kopf,” also referred to as the KUNSTASYL flat agency, served as an online forum where refugees could post housing needs in a standardized application. People with spare rooms were encouraged to offer housing to listed applicants. The platform was retired in 2017. Currently, I have no documentation of how many, or if, people successfully found housing.

al and experiential circumstances carry a lasting effect and sediment over time. One after another, the series of former temporary housing situations create a consolidated structure. *ZELT* argues a sense of being at home is necessarily communal and multiperspectival; it requires collective input—the coming together of community members’ thoughts, memories, and ideas—and a recognition of the material and emotional influence of past experiences and geographies upon the present. *DIE KÖNIGE*, too, staged a multi-step process to call into being something different in response to the inadequacies of the present. In this sense, *ZELT* and *DIE KÖNIGE* redirect participants and viewers to consider the collectivity involved in being at home and the way past experiences shape the present.

¶30 While these two examples proved exemplary, through the entire exhibition, KUNSTASYL staged a vibrant archive of acts and artworks centered on collective, translocal world-making across linguistic, ethnic, or social differences to decentralize memory culture and museum methodologies. Through this approach, the exhibition highlights modes of belonging that foreground shared goals emerging from communal experiences. Put otherwise, KUNSTASYL enacts a translocal support network and models the participatory work required to nurture community. KUNSTASYL perhaps even prompts group members and audiences alike to claim other representational spaces to collectively and generatively challenge the status quo.

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