

RIGHT TO ARRIVE

Topographies of genocide, flight, and hospitality —
then and now



Vanessa Agnew, 'Refugee Coins' 2016

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with Annette An-Jen Liu

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One hundred years ago, Syria was a destination for Armenians driven out of Ottoman Turkey, where as many as a million and a half people died. Those who survived the genocide headed for Aleppo and places further east, where they sought sanctuary. Today, there is a mass movement of people in the reverse direction, as refugees flee conflict and repression in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

Conditions leading to the genocide differed from those driving conflict in the Middle East today. Unchanged, however, are the large numbers of people displaced by conflict and persecution. Many of the displaced are stuck in limbo in Turkey; others attempt to cross the Aegean and the Mediterranean to reach Western Europe, with its own histories of genocide, flight, and hospitality. Yet others die along the way.

The movement of refugees across this broad topography—from the Middle East to Western Europe—reminds us of the historically-unstable identities of hosts and strangers, persecutors and persecuted. We are reminded that we may once have been hosted; we may have been denied refuge or denied it to others; we may be denying it now.

The exhibition draws on Kant's ideas about the rights of strangers in order to explore the promise of arrival and the implications of refusing refuge. It juxtaposes Armin T. Wegner's historical photographs documenting the flight and genocide of Ottoman Armenians with Vanessa Agnew's installations that meditate on contemporary refugeehood.