Rooted

The white rose is the favourite flower of Meriam from Aleppo. It's hard to get roses to bloom here in the Beqaa Valley, she says. Four are blossoming on her plant. In Syria there would be at least twelve. There's nothing in the photo of the roses to show that it was taken in the Bar Elias refugee camp in Lebanon. Refugee camps are usually depicted as places of despair, of helplessness and dependency. The NGOs that commission photographers to take pictures of Zaatari in Jordan, Choucha in Tunisia, or Calais in France have an interest in portraying refugees as defenceless victims, to corroborate the stories they tell.[1] Journalists often have little time to go in search of other stories, so the same tune is played time and again. And the picture they paint is, of course, not surprising because it is undoubtedly a reality. Only not the whole reality. It's true that there are many problems in the camps concerning food shortages, overcrowding, hygiene, boredom, tensions between ethnic groups and all kinds of traumas, but stories of creativity, adaptability and resilience can be found too, and they emerge strongly in the work of Dutch photographer Henk Wildschut.

Since 2005 Wildschut has photographed refugee camps all over the world, with a particular focus on the Middle East and on Calais in France (just four hours' drive from his home in Amsterdam). Henk Wildschut's work is documentary in nature, but also poetic and evocative. Unlike most photographers, he doesn't consciously set out to depict harrowing personal stories of refugees with intrusive close-up portrait photography. In his migration trilogy, refugees are present indirectly, but all the more revealingly for that. His photos show the marks made by migrants who are endeavouring to create a home and to find ingenious means of survival.

In 2011 Wildschut published his book *Shelter*, for which he photographed the improvised huts constructed by refugees in places hidden from sight. The photographer returned regularly and saw that as soon as they moved on, nature took over again. Mere traces remained of their presence, vague phantoms of people who were already invisible. In 2017, shortly after his Foam Museum exhibition *Calais—From Jungle to City*, his voluminous book *Ville de Calais* was published, an almost typological view of the emergence of an informal city full of improvised houses, restaurants, hammams, churches, mosques and libraries, all built by refugees in the dunes near Calais. If the hut in *Shelter* functions as a portrait of an invisible individual, then in *Ville de Calais* temporary structures serve as portraits of a growing mass of people who are completely invisible to the eyes of the world but nevertheless systematically marginalised. In 2019 Wildschut's book *Rooted* was published, another collaboration with graphic designer Robin Uleman, this time about the miniature gardens laid out around their shelters by people living in refugee camps.

After an earthquake in the Kashmir region of northern Pakistan in 2005, Wildschut travelled to a refugee camp there and spotted gardening activities for the first time. 'Amongst the chaos of the camps people planted little gardens alongside the tents as a way of marking their private territory and manifesting their individuality.' He had yet to realise that informal gardens were a common phenomenon in refugee camps. On his many visits to camps he continued to look in fascination through the lens of the cam-

era at the tiny patches of green. It became clear to him that the creation and maintenance of a garden was a way for uprooted camp residents to grow roots again, to settle into new surroundings, a way to stress their individuality and maintain a sense of being human. The potted plants or laboriously cultivated little plots are also a living reminder of home. As the plants grow, the spirit is invigorated.

In *Rooted*, designed by Robin Uleman like *Shelter* and *Ville de Calais*, Wildschut includes short texts describing where the plants in the photos originated and how they came to be distributed all over the world. Take the red geranium in a pot in front of a brown floral-patterned curtain in Bar Elias in the Beqaa Valley in Lebanon. It is originally from South Africa; Dutch botanists brought the plant to Europe in the 17th century. It needs relatively little care and symbolises endurance. Along with the photos, the encyclopaedic entries tell us about the circumstances in which life goes on in the camp, about how fragile new life can be kindled and how it can be stifled again—when the camp floods, for example, as seen in the book's bleak ending.

Rooted is filled with compassion. Once again, Wildschut portrays refugees without directly photographing them. With his photos of plants and gardens, he tells a metaphorical and many-layered story about the camp dwellers. This artistic choice, consistent throughout the migration trilogy, does justice to the complexity of the problems surrounding the current refugee crisis, which are all about visibility and invisibility, acknowledgement and denial, the temporary and the structural, the restrained and the uncontrolled, and the often complex tension between political and social realities. The photographer's respect for the ingenuity, creativity and adaptability of the people he meets in refugee camps runs through the entire trilogy, forming an antidote to the exclusion and indifference growing rampant all around us.

— Text by Kim Knoppers

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Calais has never been an official refugee camp. Time and again, measures were introduced to prevent a camp from springing up. Three years have passed since the last large-scale eviction. Migrants continue coming to Calais and Dunkirk in the hope of making the crossing to the UK. Choucha was an official refugee camp until it was closed by the UNHCR in 2015. Refugees who had nowhere else to go remained behind. See also Kim Knoppers, 'Empire—Samuel Gratacap', Foam Magazine #45, 2016.

All images from the series *Rooted* © Henk Wildschut, courtesy of the artist

HENK WILDSCHUT is a socially engaged photographer who studies and shares socio-political events in exhibition and book format. His projects are broadly about uprooting and alienation; about people who through misfortune or other inescapable circumstances find themselves forced to improvise in order to survive. Henk studied at the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague and lives and works in Amsterdam.

KIM KNOPPERS is an art historian graduated from University of Amsterdam, and curator at Foam. Since 2011, she has worked on group and solo exhibitions, most recently Lorenzo Vitturi's *Materia Impura*, *Morpher III* by Kévin Bray and *Extendable Ears* by Sheng-Wen Lo. She has contributed to various magazines including Foam Magazine, Unseen and Aperture and has written catalogue texts for Jaya Pelupessy and Sylvain Couzinet-Jacques, amongst others. She is also a lecturer on the MA Photography at ECAL in Lausanne where she initiated and developed the course Do Not Disturb — Curating in Progress.