The framework for the following discussion is based on my artistic practice and certain ideas about trauma and the uncanny. I look at the concept of artistic practice as dwelling, which here is understood as synonymous with both a making of place and feeling at home. What I want to problematize is not the notion of artistic practice as a way of being in place, but rather that this implies housing oneself or feeling at home. I will consider artistic practice and the viewing of artwork as a possible instance of losing oneself, of becoming what I would like to call unaccommodated. The term “dwelling” has most closely been associated with the writings of Martin Heidegger.1 Like many philosophical models it has migrated to the realm of the arts where the concept of artistic practice as dwelling is often understood as synonymous with being in place or as a making of place and even feeling at home. In my own artistic practice, which revolves around film, video and photography, largely in the context of installation, I have extensively explored this notion of a making of place. For me, this was, and still is, largely about ideas of “home” in general and “belonging” in particular; with both concepts referencing Judaic teachings about memory, redemption and individual responsibility and belonging in community, rather than territorial conditions or national affiliations. It is from here that the following ideas about feeling at home in the context of art making, and by extension, the viewing of it, have emerged.

In popular parlance, being at home is often associated or conflated with feeling good, feeling safe and comfortable. Yet, to feel at home could signify a simple being used to something, having become familiar. That this familiarity is not necessarily also a comfortable one may well be known to many of us who have tried to shift out of habitual circumstances or patterns of behaviour. If unsuccessful, we often end up feeling uncomfortably comfortable. In an ironic turn, Edmond Jabès inverts this to what could be called feeling comfortably uncomfortable. For him, existence after the Holocaust is a placeless one, and it is this placelessness that provides the condition from which to write: “It [this absence of place] confirms that the book is my only habitat,
the first and also the final. Place of a vaster non-place where I live.” (“Jewish Writing” 26) For him, there are no certainties, except maybe that there are none, that “every question [is answered] with another question” (Book of Questions 116). Jabès, one could say, talks about being at home in homelessness.² He proposes, in line with Jewish tradition, that a Jew is at home only in the text. Words, or more specifically, the book, provide the place that is home.³ Others have extended such a construction beyond the confines of this grouping to encompass everyone under the so-called post-modern condition of fragmented decentredness. Unlike them, I am not proposing we all have become wandering, questioning Jews. For me, the term Jew is a complex one, too closely associated with a set of historical circumstances and my individual experiences, especially of anti-Semitism, to use it as a metaphor for a generalised sense of displacement, up-rootedness or marginalisation.⁴ Jabès’ writings speak to me about the impossibility of answers in a world filled with questions. He asserts that there is: “no place for the question which is not also a question of place” (“Jewish Writing” 30). Such questions may then relate to (the creation of) a specific place, or to an experience of placelessness, or to the notion of being at home as a version of being in place. They may also point to an unmaking of sorts.

Given my own experience of growing up in Germany as the daughter of non-German Jewish Holocaust survivors, and as someone who has migrated subsequently to another country and culture, thinking about artistic practice as a version of being in place has for a long time provided, along with many other historical and post-structuralist arguments, a persuasive and adequate structure from which to think about questions of place and space, belonging and identity in general. Feeling much like a “wandering Jew,” I have thought of a work of art, and even artistic practice, as a place to dwell. For me, this has always been in the first instance an opportunity to engage in speculations about the conditions of and possibilities for being.⁵ Furthermore, I understood art and artistic practice as a temporary construction of place that could answer, if not to a wish for a certain belonging or at-homeness, then at least to a sense of housing oneself. In this context, I have come to the phrase “housing oneself” in an attempt to find an adequate translation for the German wohnen, which has been variably translated as dwelling, living, residing or inhabiting. In German, it suggests both an at-homeness and a feeling comfortable. In what follows, I have deliberately stayed clear of using the word dwelling so as to differentiate the concept of housing oneself from being, or being in place. What I want to problematize here is not the notion of artistic practice as a way of being in place, but rather, the notion that this implies housing oneself. Or, to return to Jabès for a moment, that it offers “a refuge” (Book of Questions 13).⁶

Having come to make a distinction between dwelling and housing oneself as a direct outcome of my own artistic and critically reflexive practice, I now consider art-making and viewing as an activity that is neither bound to a specific geography, nor