

VILLEGGIATURA

**Rural gentrification,
contemporary art,
and other options,
old and new**

**Online conference
7–8 November 20**

VILLEGGIATURA discusses patterns of rural gentrification and the role of contemporary art within them. Histories of displacement differ from city to city, countryside to countryside. But for all the specificities, the common traits of latter-day land grabs may help plot a common way forward. If art and culture have a contribution to make—what can it be in terms of business as usual, and as a best-case scenario? VILLEGGIATURA addresses historical developments, as well as strategies of visualization that might make better models possible—technologically, ideologically, financially speaking.

Despite the colossal challenges at stake, most city types are more familiar with rent levels in Kreuzberg than with the wholesale commodification of Brandenburg. Since time immemorial, the pastoral has served the urban as a metaphor to gain a sense of self. Over the Renaissance, villeggiatura represented a summer retreat in the style of Ancient Rome, a country estate as arcadia incarnate. This imperial nonchalance lives on, in some parts, and VILLEGGIATURA addresses both these time-honored abstractions, and the infrastructures that enable them.

Importantly, we will move beyond (self-)criticism, and aim for viable future scenarios. How to see the city as part of a larger biosphere, and not an island in a sea of beautiful or boring landscapes. The urban has an advantage over rural areas inasmuch as displacement patterns are a hot topic that regularly makes headlines. This is thanks to the networks that turn Berlin and other metropolises into battlegrounds for the “Right to the City.” Meanwhile, the absence of rural gentrification within mainstream debates has a complicated effect on Identity crises, and on Heimat sentiments that come with it. Is there any chance of turning political contrasts between city and countryside into tactical coalitions?

Participants: Marwa Arsanios, Grace Blakeley, Marco Clausen, Simone Hain, Maria Hetzer, Wolfgang Kil, Suhail Malik, Jumana Manna, Bahar Noorzadeh, RIWAQ, Christopher Roth, Katya Sander, terra0, Axel Vogel, Marion von Osten, and others more

Curator: Tirdad Zolghadr in collaboration with Marion von Osten
Curatorial Assistance: Sabrina Herrmann

Program

Saturday 7 November 20

10–10.45 am

Introduction Tirdad Zolghadr and Marion von Osten

Marion von Osten

Land Grabbing

The Unification Treaty of 1990 between the Federal Republic of Germany (BRD) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) gave the BRD the right to sell the GDR's public property. Since its foundation in 1992, the Bodenverwertungs und -verwaltungs GmbH (BVVG)—a successor institution to the Treuhandanstalt originally entrusted with this task of “property management”—has fulfilled the legal mandate to privatize publicly owned agricultural and forestry land in the States of Brandenburg, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, and Thuringia. As a result of this sell-off, two million hectares of fields and forests—almost one-fifth of the total surface area of the new federal states—have already ended up in a portfolio aimed at private investors and large companies. By 2017, 861,400 hectares of agricultural land and 594,700 hectares of forestry land had been sold, and some 81,100 hectares repurposed. The profit flowed into state coffers. But to whom does the land belong? Brandenburg in particular has suffered a long history of land grabs, colonization, and various land reforms. The nobility's growing power and influence in this region was an outcome of the colonization of the so-called Eastern Elbe region and attendant displacement of the Slavic population to the (now Polish) areas beyond the Oder, which began in the early Middle Ages. Colonization and Christianization were accompanied by the expropriation of land by an ascendant feudal class. This created the basis for serfdom, for the large estates that predominated until 1945, and for questions we still ask today.

Marion von Osten is an exhibition maker, researcher, and artist. She is founding member of the following three collectives; Center for Postcolonial Knowledge and Culture (CPKC), kleines postfordistisches Drama (kpD) in Berlin, and the design collective Labor k3000 Zürich (CH). She curated exhibition and research projects such as *bauhaus imaginista* (2016–2020) with Grant

Watson; *Viet Nam Discourse* (2016–2018) with Peter Spillmann; *Aesthetics of Decolonization* with CPKC (2014–2016); and others more. Von Osten received her PHD in Fine Arts at the Malmö Art Academy (SE) with Prof. Sarat Maharaj.

Tirdad Zolghadr is a curator and writer. Together with Marion von Osten, he curated VILLEGGIATURA in his capacity as associate curator at KW Institute for Contemporary Art. Since 2016 he has been artistic director of the Sommerakademie Paul Klee, Bern. Curatorial work includes biennial settings as well as long-term, research-driven efforts, and the program *REALTY*. Writing includes *Traction: an Applied and Polemical Attempt to Locate Contemporary Art* (2016). Ongoing work on Zolghadr's third novel, *Headbanger*, is made possible thanks to generous support from the Foundation for Arts Initiatives.

11–11.45 am

Marco Clausen

The Countryside—Between Pastoral Idyll and Sacrificial Zone

Respondent: Wolfgang Kil

A run on arable land has been underway for years, especially in the formerly East German states; and has only become more extreme since the global financial crisis, in parallel to the explosion of rents and property prices in cities—and the displacement this provokes. Yet despite the far-reaching consequences for ecosystems, social structures, and the success of populist right-wing parties, these land grabs go largely unnoticed by the public. Since launching its post-1989-turnaround privatization of what had been “people-owned” property in the GDR, the German state has persistently favored the concentration of land and property in ever fewer hands. Ownership structures and speculatively fueled prices have made small-scale, ecological, seasonal, and regional agriculture—of the sort that is necessary for sustainable consumption in the inner cities—impossible in the foreseeable future. Today, those who “drive out to the countryside” to enjoy fresh air and sweeping views usually find themselves among corn monocultures cultivated by wage laborers. Any demand for good food that is not accompanied by the demand for land reform, fair working conditions, and job opportunities—beyond those available in an agriculture running on fossil fuels, pesticide use, and land subsidies—will echo unheard in the uniform spruce plantations in Berlin's “Hinterland”.

Marco Clausen co-founded a community garden in Berlin-Kreuzberg, the Prinzessinnengärten, and a neighborhood academy, the Nachbarschaftsakademie. In cooperation with initiatives, activists, educators, and artists, he works on self-organized forms of political education, fostering a local and global perspective on topics such as the right to the city, urban-rural relations, food sovereignty, sustainable urban development, resilience, communal ownership, and socio-ecological transformation. To this end, he co-launched *kollektives lernen*, a collective learning project, in 2020. In parallel, Clausen works with a community project in Karnitz, Mecklenburg (DE), on political and cultural programs in rural areas.

Wolfgang Kil is an architecture critic and publicist. After studying architecture in Weimar (DE), he worked as an architect on the staff of the former VEB Wohnungsbaukombinat of East Berlin and as editor of the trade journal *Farbe und Raum*. After 1990, he worked with the journal *Bauwelt*. In addition to East bloc modernism and the legacy of functionalist urban planning, his primary research interests are the effects of globalization on cities (shrinkage) and on landscapes (social change, energy transition).

12.30 am–1.15 pm

Simone Hain

A province conquered in peace? How the Seizure of Land on the Rivers Oder, Netze, and Warthe Drove a State into an Abyss

Respondent: Wolfgang Kil

This lecture draws on a prominent historical example to trace social struggles and existential conflicts of interest in the Prussian land reclamation process in the Central European “Amazon regions” between the Oder and the Vistula. That which is celebrated, to this day, in royalist German historiography, as a peaceful colonization and repopulation campaign in the wake of the Silesian War, actually came very close to triggering a monumentally destructive popular revolt. Drawing on a source found at Kulturhaus Rathenow (DE), Simone Hain examines—in light of the term “interest”—the extraordinarily violent capitalization of a primeval landscape, its Wendish villages, and sustainably operating monastic estates, along with the many victims it claimed. In the universal history of the landscape, this process represents one of the most memorable chapters, because in the revolutionary ferment of the 1760s and 70s, the concept of the state as a

guarantor of the common interest, with a responsibility to society, was, ultimately, the state's salvation. As a result of the crisis, the baccalaureate was introduced, and scholarship rose to become the supreme paradigm of political culture. And there emerged an aesthetics and an architectural style which the advocates of Neues Bauen later came to regard as "our most beautiful tradition"—and a first step into modernity. The much-vaunted school of architecture "Around 1800" (period of transition from historicism to modernism) was, strictly speaking, a cautious architecture—one that foregrounded the stuff and needs of rural space. The Huguenot David Gilly of Schwedt will be the focus here.

Simone Hain is an art historian specializing in urban history, planning, and development. As head of the Department of Theory and History at the Bauakademie (Academy of Architecture) of the GDR, she played a major role in reestablishing the Leibniz Institute for Research on Society and Space in Erkner (DE), in particular the "Scientific Collections" there pertaining to the history of building and planning in the GDR. Together with Hartmut Frank, she curated the first pan-German architectural-historical retrospective *Two German Architectures 1949–1989*, a traveling exhibition of the Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen (ifa), which has remained on tour since 2003. Hain has taught at the Berlin-Weißensee Art Academy and the HfBK University of the Arts, Hamburg (DE), held the Gropius Professorship for the History of Modern Architecture at the Bauhaus University Weimar (DE), and from 2006–2016 headed the Institute for Urban and Building History at the TU Graz (AT). She lives in Berlin as a freelance author.

1.30–2.15 pm

Maria Hetzer

Utopia and Infrastructure—Historical Plans and Current Developments in Rural Brandenburg

Respondent: Wolfgang Kil

Downsizing, co-working, endless space—and weak broadband; yet from the rural local authorities' perspectives, these novelties represent the horn of cornucopia, perhaps even a land of milk and honey. Still, media discourse on the (Berliners') dream of a better way of living and working in the countryside (in nearby Brandenburg) goes hand in hand with dire warnings: rural areas are being bought up and sold down the river. The issues are land grabs, species extinction, and landscapes cleared for a mono-

cultural rampage that has natural resources fueling the dream of a digitalized society. The village meets at rush hour on the road to Berlin. Nevertheless: space pioneers continue to hone their reinvention of the post-socialist ruins of an oversized rural infrastructure. Agricultural managers fear for their subsidies for swine fever-contaminated arable land that has long grown barren. The effects of a socialist land reform, which in 1945 handed the land of the ruling "noble" barons over to the dispossessed, are now clearly an obstacle to the small organic farms dreaming of solidarity-based agriculture and biodiversity. No one speaks any longer about achieving parity between living conditions in the city and the countryside. Civil society's ranks of volunteers are supposed to assure justice in the future. Concrete utopias stand alongside real dystopias. In the light of current examples from Brandenburg, discussion focuses on the entanglement of historically grown infrastructures of thought and action, and rural areas' prospects today.

Maria Hetzer is a performance researcher and cultural anthropologist. She gained a PhD from the University of Warwick (GB) with a thesis on everyday life in the context of 1989 and the possibilities of transcultural translation of experience of crisis. Her primary research interests are rural anthropology, everyday life in times of social upheaval, and the (post-) socialist "East," even if it happens to be located in specific parts of the African continent. She lives wherever her research takes her.

2.30–3.15 pm

Khaldun Bshara

RIWAQ Center for Architectural Conservation

Respondent: Tirdad Zolghadr

Today, it is not easy to distinguish rural Palestine from urban Palestine, because of the rapid changes that continuously shape the built and un-built environments. This is not unique to Palestine; it is a modern dilemma that occurs at vastly different scales in the universe; peasants are being "urbanized" and moved off of their lands. Present-day rural areas are an alienating landscape; inhabitants exchange their labor for wages in the emerging urban centers of Palestine (such as Ramallah), weakening their relationships with their land. The colonial dispossession coupled with a passive, yet encouraging Palestinian authority stance towards the role of agriculture in the national income, has been a factor in adopting a free market economy that neither protects

crops nor encourages investment in the sector. In this intervention, I will highlight the role of civil society and local communities in proposing alternatives and new possibilities to develop rural areas as part of an integrated approach that takes into account the rural areas potentials and possibilities.

Khaldun Bshara is an architect, restorer and holds a PhD in socio-cultural anthropology. He is currently the Director of Riwaq Centre, Ramallah (PS), where he has worked since 1994 in documenting, protecting, and restoring built Palestinian heritage. His design approach uses architecture and architectural processes as medium to investigate and test the architecture possibilities of negotiating tensions and power between different actors in the field.

3.30–4.15 pm

Marwa Arsanios

Who's Afraid of Ideology

Respondent: Tirdad Zolghadr

In her presentation, Marwa Arsanios will attempt to address the research she has been conducting since 2017, which took her to different geographies, including Northern Syria and Colombia, and to the encounter of women's communes and feminist cooperatives that are directly resisting the dispossession of their land and resources. She will try to articulate her position as an artist and researcher in relation to their struggles—particularly when it comes to their theoretical and political paradigms.

Marwa Arsanios is an artist, filmmaker and researcher who reconsiders politics of the mid-twentieth century from a contemporary perspective, with a particular focus on gender relations, urbanism and industrialization. She approaches research collaboratively and seeks to work across disciplines.

5 pm

Screening Jumana Manna

***Wild Relatives*, 2018, 64 min.**

Deep in the earth beneath the Arctic permafrost, seeds from all over the world are stored in the Svalbard Global Seed Vault to provide a backup should disaster strike. The film *Wild Relatives* starts from an event that has sparked media interest worldwide: in 2012 an international agricultural research center was forced to

relocate from Aleppo to Lebanon due to the Syrian Revolution turned war, and began a laborious process of planting their seed collection from the Svalbard back-ups. Following the path of this transaction of seeds between the Arctic and Lebanon, a series of encounters unfold a matrix of human and non-human lives between these two distant spots of the earth. It captures the articulation between this large-scale international initiative and its local implementation in the Bekaa Valley of Lebanon, carried out primarily by young migrant women. The meditative pace patiently teases out tensions between state and individual, industrial and organic approaches to seed saving, climate change and biodiversity, witnessed through the journey of these seeds.

Jumana Manna is a visual artist working primarily with film and sculpture. Her work explores how power is articulated through relationships, often focusing on the body and materiality in relation to narratives of nationalism, and histories of place.

Sunday

8 November 20

10–10.10 am

Introduction Tirdad Zolghadr

10.10–11 am

Axel Vogel

Brandenburg—More Than Just Berlin's Backyard?

Respondent: Wolfgang Kil

“A villa in the countryside, with a large terrace, the Baltic Sea out front, and Friedrichstraße out back,” mused Kurt Tucholsky in his 1927 poem *The Ideal*. Many urban dwellers share his view of the State of Brandenburg as “the capital’s backyard,” what with its excellent leisure opportunities, locally grown produce for inner-city “farmers’ markets” and, increasingly, even cultural attractions. Rather less known is the fact that Brandenburg’s agricultural infrastructure is subject to massive concentration in the hands of a few, with the rural neighbors struggling to survive the negative impact of this on their culture, environment, and social fabric. Since the “financial crisis” of 2008, and subsequent policies of low interest rates, arable land has been in demand as a financial investment. Non-agricultural investors’ run on land drives up lease prices, and accelerates the shift towards ever larger operators and heavily industrialized agriculture. Land grabs are therefore not only an issue in countries of the global south, but are taking place here and now—on Berlin’s doorstep.

Axel Vogel is presently Minister of Agriculture, Environment, and Climate Protection of the State of Brandenburg (DE). He is a founding member of Die Grünen (German Green Party), which he represented in the Bundestag (German Federal Parliament) from 1985 to 1987, and in the Landtag (State Parliament) of Brandenburg from 2009 to 2020. In the latter, he was also Chair of Die Grünen parliamentary group.

11.15–12 am

Grace Blakeley

Financialization—an introduction

Respondent: Suhail Malik

The financialization of real estate has become a highly salient feature of many wealthy economies since the 1980s. Under the regime of privatized Keynesianism catalyzed by the deregulation of financial markets that took place throughout the world in the 1980s, an increasing share of aggregate demand has come to rely on the availability of easy credit to households—particularly mortgage lending. The costs of propping up spending through an easing of credit have come in the forms of growing financial instability, an increase in debt distress, and growing wealth inequality. The financialization of real estate has also facilitated gentrification and transformed city landscapes throughout the world, especially in cities like London and New York, where real estate has become “just another asset class”—but since the financial crisis this model has also become increasingly prevalent across regions and rural areas that had previously been insulated from these trends. How will Covid-19 affect these trends? And how can the financialization of real estate, and the consequent domination of land by wealthy elites, be resisted?

Grace Blakeley is a staff writer at *Tribune* magazine and the author of *Stolen: How to Save the World from Financialisation* (2019). She previously worked as a research fellow for the Institute for Public Policy Research in London and as the *New Statesman*’s economic commentator. She regularly appears in the media as a political and economic commentator, inter alia on the BBC programs *Question Time*, *This Week*, and *Breakfast*.

Suhail Malik is Co-Director of the MFA Fine Art, Goldsmiths, London, where he holds a Readership in Critical Studies. Recent and forthcoming publications include, as author, *ContraContemporary: Modernity’s Unknown Future* (2021) and *The Ontology of Finance in Collapse 8: Casino Real* (2014). Malik is co-editor of *The Flood of Rights* (2017), a special issue of the journal *Finance and Society on Art and Finance* (2016), *The Time-Complex. Postcontemporary* (2016), and *Realism Materialism Art* (2015).

12.45 am–1.30 pm

Katya Sander

Forms of Ownership—a landscape study

Respondent: Suhail Malik

Urban gentrification is dwarfed by the changes in the countryside around us over the last two decades. Brandenburg land prices, for example, have exploded, sometimes up to 500 percent, and farms are no longer run by farmer families, as many of us imagine. Today, investment companies are acquiring vast tracts of land—some with state support—as they buy up what were once East German farms, collectively run, and thus larger. As Europe undergoes enormous changes in farmland ownership, more city dwellers become interested in the political implications of food production. Concentrations of land ownership among investment firms are being contested. Older forms of ownership are being re-discovered, and new forms explored. What are the structures and applications of these forms, what landscapes do they produce, and what difference do they make? What are the signs and traces of the ways in which farmland economies are changing? For the purposes of *Villeggiatura I* I will present research for a landscape study, focusing on the visibility of ownership modalities in rural areas today.

Katya Sander is a conceptually-based artist. Her work is about production and circulation of social imaginaries: structures, models and images through which we imagine ourselves and what we can do. For Sander, the imaginary is not only a realm of subjective ideas, but also shared, collective articulations and projections of what is possible, i.e. modes of operation, formats or institutions in which we imagine ourselves as collective bodies, and the things we do to sustain (or escape) these. Sander has published widely, edited magazines and books, and is Professor at Nordland Art and Film College (NO). Sander has shown at venues such as Documenta 12, Kassel (DE); Tate Modern, London; Museum of Modern Art, New York; REDCAT, Los Angeles (US), and others. She lives and works in Berlin.

1.45–2.30 pm

Bahar Noorizadeh

The Red City of the Planet of Capitalism

Respondent: Suhail Malik

As part of the artist's long-term research around material genealogies of network design, this paper revisits proposals for a communist sprawl in the Soviet Union of 1929. Originally developed by Mikhail Okhitovich and Moisei Ginzburg, urban planners and members of the Constructivist architectural group OSA, Disurbanism set out to eliminate the difference between city and countryside by proposing a radical critique of urbanization. For Disurbanists, the sickness of the modern city and its inevitable centralized hegemony could be resolved only by the city's destruction and dissemination across the Soviet landscape. In its place, they envisioned an energy and communication grid: a network of highways, infrastructure, mobile homes, natural resources, and public services on the scale of the USSR. Disurbanism would counter modernism's attempts to resolve the internal contradictions of the urban setting by bringing the rural into the confines of the city.

Bahar Noorizadeh is a filmmaker, writer, and platform designer. She works on the reformulation of hegemonic time narratives—philosophical, financial, legal, futural, etc.—as they collapse in the face of speculation. Her work has appeared in the Artists' Cinema Program of Tate Modern, London; DIS Art platform; transmediale, Berlin; and Berlinale Forum Expanded, among others. Noorizadeh is a founding member of BLOCC (Building Leverage over Creative Capitalism), a research platform that proposes pedagogy as a strategy to alter the relationship between contemporary art and urban renewal. Her current research examines the intersections of finance, contemporary art, and emerging technology, building on the notion of "Weird Economies" to precipitate a cross-disciplinary approach to economic futurism and post-financialization imaginaries. She is pursuing this as a PhD candidate in Art at Goldsmiths, University of London, where she holds a SSHRC Doctoral Fellowship.

2.45–3.30 pm

Paul Seidler

terra0—an introduction

Respondent: Suhail Malik

The terra0 project has always orbited around themes of autonomy, sovereignty and property. Much of the initial impetus stemmed from early Smart Contracts, imagined as autonomous agents. Another main theme of terra0 is the European forest as a post-enlightenment cultural landscape, designed as a manifestation of fixed capital. Bearing in mind this historical backdrop, our long-term artistic experiments will be presented in the light of forestry utilitarianism, extended personhood and legal entities.

Paul Seidler is an artist and programmer living and working in Berlin. He is one of the three co-founders of terra0 and currently working on bootstrapping Nascent, an EXIT tech production studio, consulting cultural institutions. His projects and papers have been presented at Schinkel Pavillon, Berlin; MAK—Museum of Applied Arts, Vienna; Ars Electronica, Linz (AT); CTM Festival and Transmediale, Berlin; Dutch Design Week (NL), Furtherfield Gallery; London, and ecocore. His work has been discussed by *Wired*, *Forbes* and *Moneylab*.

3.45–4.30 pm

Concluding discussion

5 pm

Screening by Christopher Roth

REALTY-V

Via the TV station [REALTY-V](#), Christopher Roth will broadcast live from the conference, adding background content, backstage footage and material from his own body of work, addressing the histories, aesthetics, and politics of modern-day land grabs. By means of this “friendly hack”, the livestream will be available on the website of KW. Until late November 2020, REALTY-V will continue to provide us with excerpts, summaries, and statements from conference participants.

Christopher Roth is a filmmaker and artist. He is co-curator of the German Pavilion at the 17th Architecture Biennale Venice (IT). His films *Legislating Architecture* (2016) and *The Property Drama* (2017), in collaboration with architect Arno Brandhuber, featured at

the Venice (2016) and Chicago (2017) architecture biennales. Part three—*Architecting after Politics*—followed in 2019. His feature film *Baader* won the Alfred Bauer Prize at the Berlin Film Festival 2002. Roth is represented by Esther Schipper and is a lecturer at the ETH Zurich (CH). In March 2018, he co-launched three collaborative web TV channels as *space-time.tv*, featuring *REALTY-V* (with Tirdad Zolghadr, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin), *S+* (with Arno Brandhuber’s chair at the ETH), and *42* with *Fahrbereitschaft*, Berlin-Lichtenberg.



VILLEGGIATURA is funded by the Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (Federal Agency for Civic Education).

VILLEGGIATURA is part of the [REALTY](#) program, which examines the role of contemporary art in processes of development, gentrification and displacement—and emphasizes how art can be put to better use in this context. Launched in August 2017, the program comprises a series of public events, a research scholarship, the online TV channel [REALTY-V](#), as well as university seminars, internal working groups, and several commissioned artworks. REALTY is curated by Tirdad Zolghadr and supported by KW Institute for Contemporary Art.