REALTY
Beyond the Traditional Blueprints of Art & Gentrification

A Reader

Ed. Tirdad Zolghadr

HATJE CANTZ

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Preface

How to get the better of gentrification, even by means of—of all things—contemporary art (CA)? This book contains a collection of texts that emerged from REALTY, an ongoing, long-term curatorial effort featuring public events, commissioned artworks, university seminars, and multiple research groups, both formal and informal in nature. Curated by Tirdad Zolghadr, the program focuses on strategies to overcome CA's complicity in processes of renewal and displacement within inner cities as well as the countryside. Within the field, the search for a response to this complicity has increasingly met with frustration and cynicism. Instead of theorizing our failures yet again, REALTY moves from the spleen of melancholia to the vulgarity of suggestion, however embarrassing. It aims to understand how the growing traction of CA can be used to maximum effect in the here and now.

The topic is all the more relevant in the midst of the pandemic. If ever there was an opportunity to rethink CA's relationship to land and location, it is now. The commodification of land and housing is at the heart of our most pressing concerns—concerns that are both ecological and sociopolitical in nature. Moreover, the latter-day strictures imposed by the pandemic on international mobility amount to a historic opportunity. Rarely has criticism of the artworld's extractive logic of one-place-after-another been louder. And rarely has the valorization of local context been as promising as it is today.

To deconstruct the dumb logic of fly in/fly out is not enough. Critique and catharsis are great, but they only really bear fruit when positioned as the first step of a larger process. Hence, the insistence in this book on workable

responses, imaginative scenarios, and blue-sky thinking that goes for conditions of production within CA itself. At this point, our appetite for change still needs to be formalized by means of new support systems, protocols, and educational templates. Resistance to capitalism will remain a trite slogan so long as artists see no other choice but to do capitalism's bidding—as smoke screens, cheap labor, or small-time developers.

Since 2017, REALTY has been supported in many ways by the KW Institute for Contemporary Art Berlin. It also received support from the Dutch Art Institute and Sommerakademie Paul Klee Bern. Recent writing and editorial work has been made possible by the Foundation for Arts Initiatives (FfAI). (Another upshot of the REALTY program is my third novel, *HEADBANGER*, which explores this book's contents from an autofictional vantage point.) The focus on Berlin and its surroundings as a case study in this book is due both to KW and to my having lived and worked here for much of my adult life. To counterbalance this quasi-Prussian perspective, about half the contributions are from further afield.

Though interdisciplinary in spirit, the book's onus is unapologetically to art and the purchase it offers—one advantage of CA discourse being that it is informed by practicalities and theoretical research alike, and thus more sweeping in its mapping of references than journalistic or academic discourse often is. The challenge is to then steer this momentum toward a dialectic of falsifiable positions. By this I mean that this is a book that tries, rather loudly, to convince; and not just anyone. (The very fact that you're reading this book suggests your membership in the privileged niche audience we had in mind.)

The book's first editorial essay plots key features of CA at large. KW and the urban developments which have made the venue what it is today figure as a case study. The text also offers a working definition of the term "gentrification,"

describing the role of local and national governance within it. It concludes by explaining the role CA has played in creating this mess. My second contribution, however, is a taxonomy of possible road maps out of said mess, an antithetical position to the doom and gloom with which the book commences. This second editorial essay focuses on methods of redistribution, democratization, and decommodification, both as government policy and within the purview of CA itself.

The book's other contributions range from recent scholarship to firsthand accounts of artistic agency. Suhail Malik's essay[1] contrasts a public mandate for "anti-gentrification development" with an anti-development stance found among creative workers that he suggests is self-serving and ultimately "uses the urban poor as collateral." Malik's perspective sheds a helpful light on the laissez-faire liberalism that marks CA, while also helping to contextualize the growing eco-political stance currently found among cultural workers. The contributions of de-growth and other comparable movements have been groundbreaking, but at the hands of CA's incessant hunt for ramshackle real estate they can serve as smoke screens for a decidedly less egalitarian agenda.

Meanwhile, Laura Calbet Elias's essay offers an analysis of the financialization processes that currently undergird the workings of real estate development, using a small slice of Berlin Mitte as a forensic case study to demonstrate their mechanisms. Calbet Elias also maintains that critical analysis tends to focus on art's effect on the financialization of other sectors: she argues that we must foreground the impact on art itself, as an object of financialization in its own right.

Sabine Horlitz's contribution points to community land trusts as a tried and tested form of collective ownership—one safely beyond the reach of market speculation. This

mechanism is being deployed within a wide range of settings as we speak. Her essay also heralds the foundation of a municipal land trust in Berlin itself.

Marco Clausen shifts the discussion to a rural setting, tracing the different histories that have contributed to shaping present-day Berlin's environs, from the land practices of the Prussian aristocracy to the impact of international finance. He ends by pointing to other genealogies lying further afield, making a claim for a "stewardship" of natural resources rather than an ideology of property ownership.

Katya Sander's "Landscape Study," meanwhile, maps the material traces of rural property regimes in Scotland and Denmark over time, culminating in a similarly poignant appeal for land stewardship as opposed to the extractive logic of ownership. Her comparative study of ante-modern agrarian models of property usage suggests new modes of custodianship and what-if scenarios.

Simone Hain's seminal report on the draining of the rivers Oder, Netze, and Warthe places the construction of the Prussian landscape we now take for granted within a broader historical context. (Berlin itself was largely wetlands until the eighteenth century.) Hain describes the human toll of what was at once a monumental engineering experiment and a disastrous state-led land grab. But she also offers a narrative of how a form of modernization based on enlightened technocracy emerged from the very muck of this eighteenth century catastrophe.

This reader also features Maria Hetzer's captivating description of communist land reform in the GDR, undertaken in the immediate aftermath of World War II. Although Hetzer's account does not wish to offer a blueprint for the here and now (as she herself insists), it does remind us of the political possibilities a state of exception can contain—especially today, when the regime of neoliberal

intimidation appears, perhaps momentarily, to be on the wane.

A comparably dizzying sense of Red possibility marks Bahar Noorizadeh's research on planning experiments in the early Soviet Union. Her contribution addresses the short-lived school of Disurbanism, which sought to overcome the rural-urban divide by devising radically new lines of settlement. An unabridged version of the essay published here, accessible on www.realtynow.online, also features the correspondence between Le Corbusier and the disurbanist visionary Moisei Ginzburg. This exchange epitomizes the ideological and geopolitical rifts running through the heart of the modernist movement.

In terms of a critical engagement with the legacy of modernism as we know it, Marion Von Osten's contribution is altogether less forgiving and more entangled.[2] While von Osten's practice as a curator, theorist, and artist unapologetically stood on modernism's shoulders (see her formal embrace of the grid in her work, her monumental engagement with the Bauhaus, or her work on architecture and colonialism in the Maghreb and Sub-Saharan Africa), the scope and rigor of her plea for an "interspecies" approach, as well as a post-anthropocentric rethink of present-day urban planning, makes the titanic blind spots at the heart of the modernist project all too painfully obvious.

Khaldun Bshara ties the urbanization of rural Palestine to the commodification of land in the post-Oslo era. In a sense, his contribution picks up where Von Osten leaves off, placing a Palestinian history of modernization squarely within a history of both Ottoman and European colonialism. At our KW conference in 2020, Bshara's wry eloquence and charm allowed him to explain the Israel/Palestine conflict as directly colonial, without any Germans in the audience falling off their seats in a dead faint.

For her part, Marwa Arsanios offers a snapshot of her persistent research in both Colombia and Kurdistan, based on the testimonies of women who have reinvented theories and practices of agriculture within militarized environments. It is in the rural heartlands of Palestine, Colombia, and Kurdistan that land grabs, in all their violent disregard for nature and human dignity alike, can be most clearly understood as instances of clear-cut colonial dispossession.

terra0 represents the most ambitious artist project in this publication, in terms of experimental rigor and potential impact alike. The collective offers a scenario for a fully autonomous forestscape that can be released from human intervention to tend to its own interests and growth via smart contracts alone. Although the terra0 blueprint began as a student project and will remain under development for a long time to come, once this young artist trio realized the staggering implications of their project, they decided to devote their long-term professional trajectories to addressing its technical, ecological, and financial challenges. They have begun with small-scale experiments intended as precursors to scaling up to whole ecosystems.

The two remaining contributions address the chronic lack of support structures within CA, and the part this plays in the saga of art and gentrification. To imagine a life beyond residential capitalism, we do need more than a sheepish sense of being passively part of the problem. By means of her Tuleva initiative, curator Kristel Raesaar explains how you can ensure a pension as a freelancer, even within a fiercely challenging economic environment. Her contribution answers the question of how to develop support systems built by and for their users, with technology no more demanding than an Excel file. For her part, and in the very same spirit of redistribution, writer Penny Rafferty points to recent, ambitious experiments in redistribution within CA, particularly via quadratic voting methods and blockchain technology.

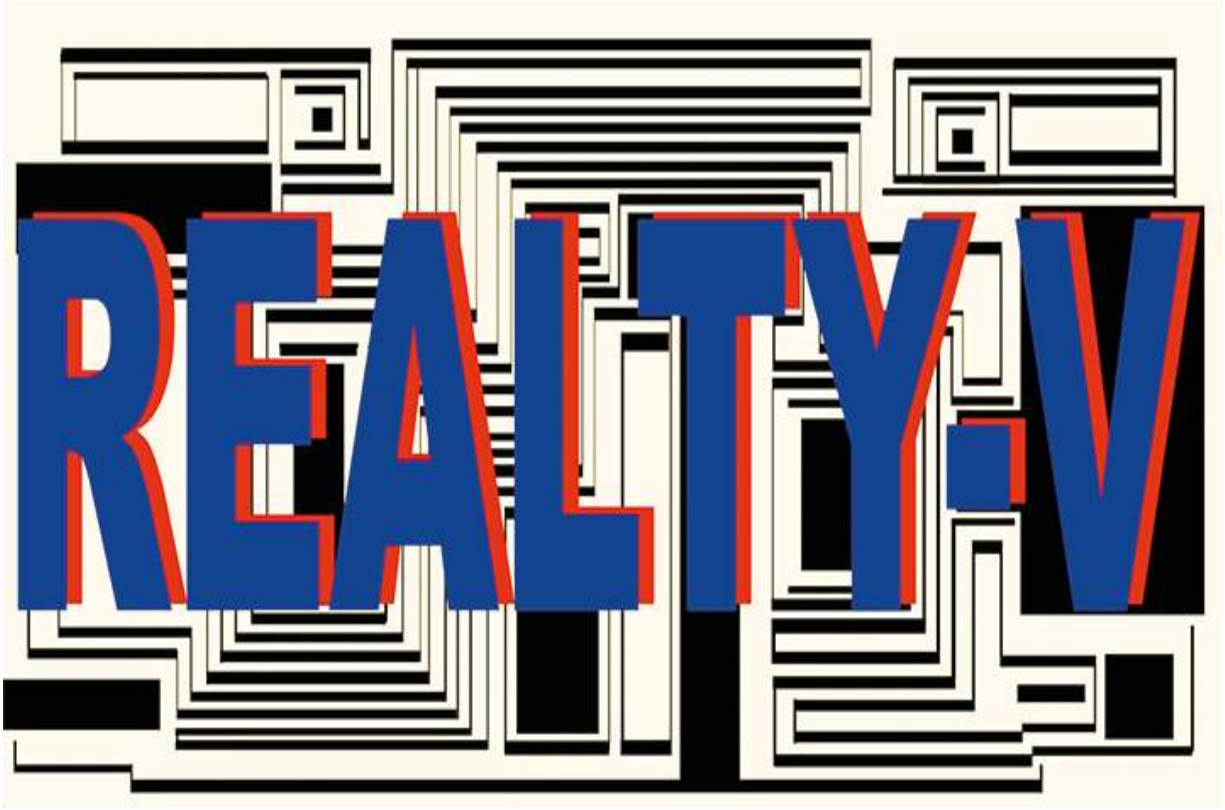
The political economy of art and urban development is a complicated and well-trodden path and soon after embarking on it I found myself indebted to a vast number of conversation partners—kindly experts, activists, and colleagues—who all humored me along this journey. Some encounters were a give and take, others less so. The dazzling Anh Linh, editor of ARCH+, sadly examined me like a fly in his *Karottensuppe*. To the likes of him, this book revisits many well-known topics (1990s Berlin, Henry George, etc.); to others it might provide a valuable introduction. Personally speaking, it is exactly the kind of book I would have wished for when starting out on my research . . . a manual for the art professional to build upon. To say the least, it would have spared me many, many moments of uncertainty and exasperation, over *Karrottensuppe* or otherwise.

Above all, it is to the late Marion von Osten to who I am indebted. She not only organized exhibitions in the 1990s that first drew me to CA, but it is thanks to her that I eventually understood gentrification as a dynamic process that encompasses both the urban and rural, the representational and ecological. Although the book perhaps retains a metrocentric bias, it does zoom out to contemplate the city as one fragment of a much larger biosphere. That it strives to do so at all is entirely Marion's doing.

I would also like to express my thanks to the following individuals, for their part in the long chain of events that led to this book. I would like to thank Tom Eccles, who introduced me to the character-building experience of full-time teaching, and my friend and colleague Suhail Malik, to whom I owe many, many things. I am equally grateful to my collaborators at Riwaq, Ramallah, although I could never bring our project fully to fruition, unfortunately. But the lessons learned are not forgotten. More recently, I owe much to Krist Gruijthuijsen, whose trust and support have been decisive. He took my 2016 polemic *TRACTION* at face

value, offering me four years under his auspices at KW to put the book's premises to the test. This is how the lion's share of *REALTY*'s contents came together. I should also mention other KW colleagues who went out of their way to make the REALTY program happen; Duygu Örs, Katja Zeidler, Maurin Dietrich, Mason Leaver-Yap, and especially Sabrina Herrmann.

Many other people are referenced in my two editorial essays. Others not mentioned there include: Deadline Architects Berlin, Rival Strategy London, Esra Akcan, Michael Baers, Diann Bauer, Carl Berthold, Anya Bitkina, Mathieu Blond, Stephan Blumenschein, Erik Bordeleau, Johanna Brückner, Crystal Z. Campbell, Luca Carboni, Sara Cattin, Luiza Crosman, Tashy Endres, Shahab Fotouhi, Felix Hartenstein, Jörg Heiser, Martin Heller, Dirk Herzog, Andreas Krüger, Alexandros Kyriakatos, Friederike Landau, Stephan Lanz, Maria Lind, Azar Mahmoudian, Luke Mason, Samantha McCulloch, Doreen Mende, Alexis Mitchell, Dina Mohamad, Katharina Morawek, Heather M. O'Brien, Rachel O'Reilly, Sarah Pierce, Hans Rudolf Reust, Kristien Ring, Hannah Rocchi, Rachel Rosenfelt, Natascha Sadr Haghighian, Gabrielle Schleijpen, Shirana Shahbazi, Solmaz Shahbazi, Jörg Stollmann, Eric Golo Stone, Niloufar Tajeri, Jonathan Takahashi, Leonardo Vilchis, Andreas Vogel, Ingrid Wagner, and the inimitable Oraib Toukan.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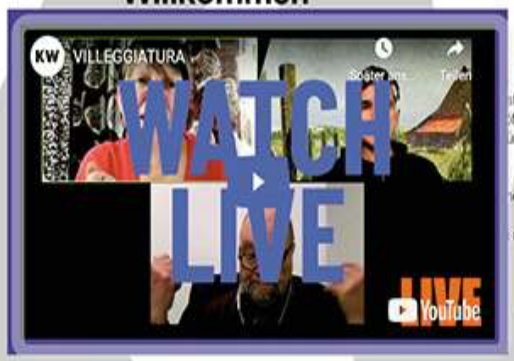

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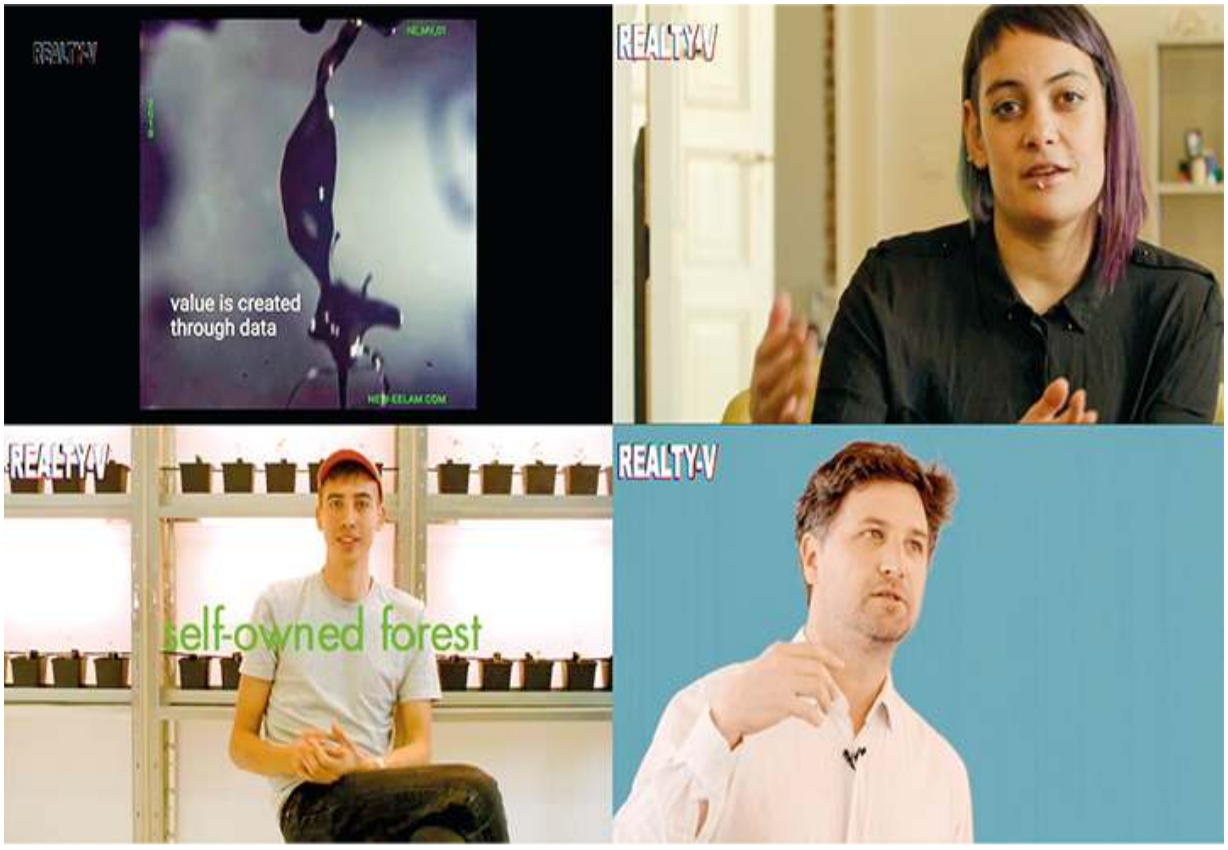

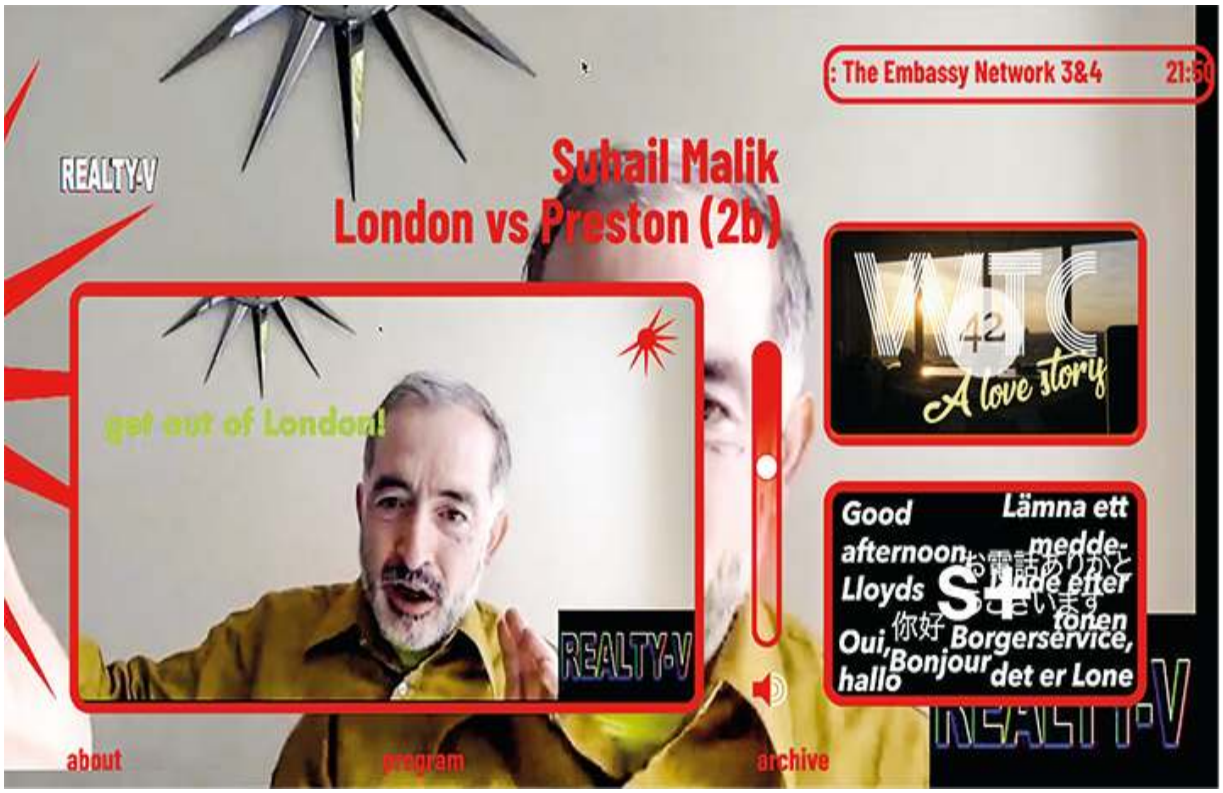
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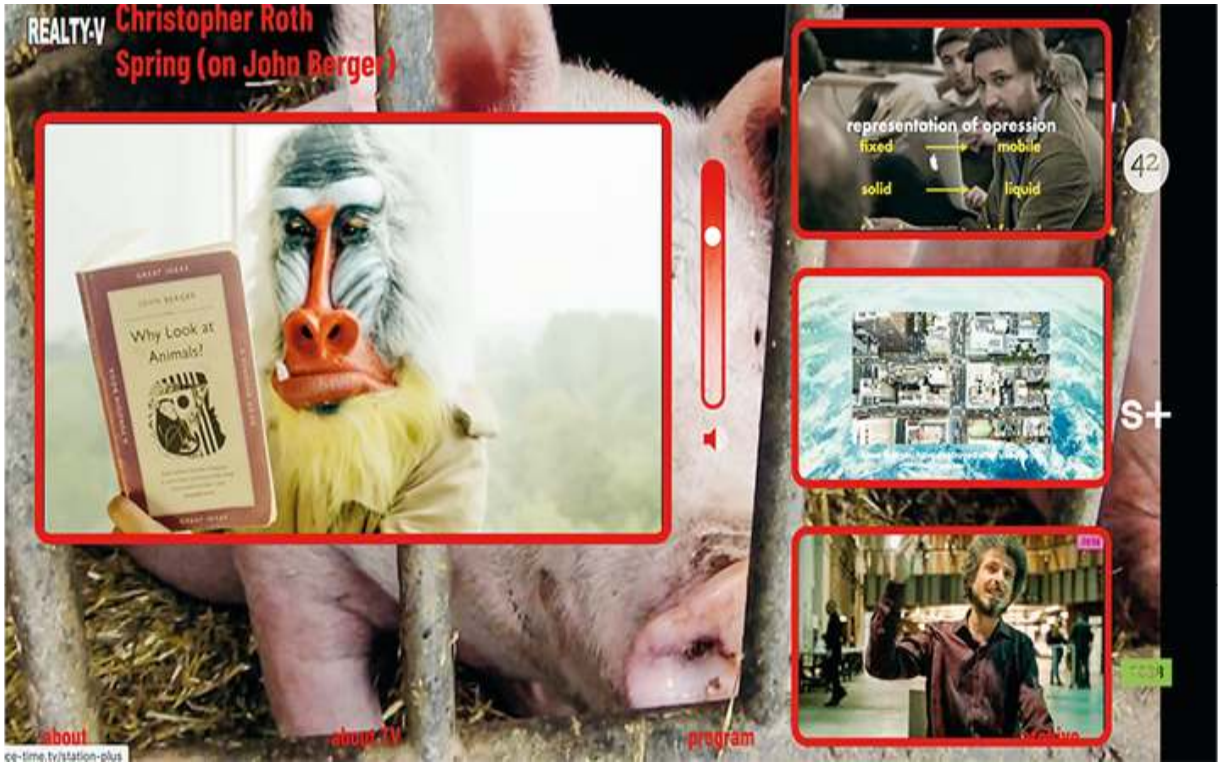
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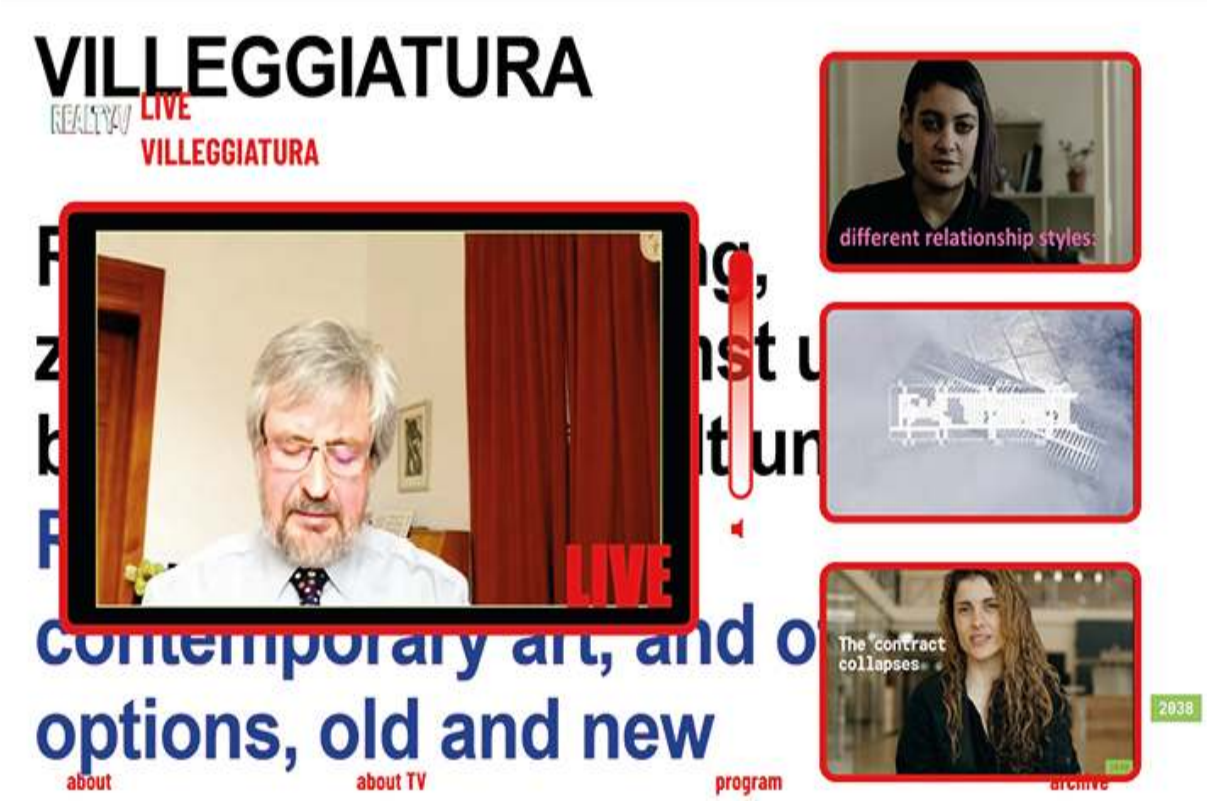

screenshots on previous pages: Christopher Roth, *space-time.tv: REALTY-V,* online TV channels (2018-ongoing)

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1 First published in *STATISTA: Towards a Statecraft of the Future* (Zurich: Park Books, 2019).
2 Also first published in *STATISTA.*

Provisional Global Snapshots

Tirdad Zolghadr

CA 101

A quick comparison of archetypes is sometimes helpful. When Leonardo da Vinci settled in Renaissance Venice, he worked as a military engineer, designing canal systems with a lock mechanism that is still in use today. Centuries later, deep in the asphyxiating mass of the industrial city, the historical avant-gardes were less hands-on than Da Vinci but all the more confident in theory and vision. They reimagined their towns with an arrogant hubris that Benjamin later described as a "destructive character," one that would have appeared equally preposterous to Da Vinci as to ourselves. Though the cabin fever pathos did simmer down a bit, the hubris remained until the 1970s. Creative visitors to faraway locations were both preposterous and hands-on enough to try their hand at agriculture, infrastructure development, sniper training, literacy campaigns, and propaganda. Take those late-modern icons—the Situationist flaneurs with their *dérives* and *New Babylons*, or the 1970s cool cats lounging in the cast iron lofts of a deindustrialized lower Manhattan. Even they are far removed from contemporary art's take on its urban environs.

Something shifted over the last decades of the twentieth century. In its self-image, the bohemian virtue of art may live on, but in real life, contemporary art (CA) went from being an upshot of wealth to a source of wealth in its own right. Today, CA is a capillary network of formal and self-run venues which together embody a highly specialized skill set, a fiercely competitive job market, a distinct "moral

economy" of indeterminacy,[1] and an asset in the ongoing race between competing metropolitan "engines of growth."[2]

In terms of its politics, CA embodies a strong sense of "ontological liberalism" (I owe this term to Victoria Ivanova)—a liturgy of individual aspiration on all levels; cultural, sexual, intellectual, economic. In terms of habitus, CA no longer occupies a niche where the critical intelligentsia consort with wealthy patrons, but is comprised, rather, of a sprawling cosmopolitan constituency mirroring the deterritorialization of art production itself. Despite these commonalities, and others besides, what is all-important to the field is its insistence that CA is not a field at all so much as a fluid assemblage of incommensurate communities of thought and action, beyond ideology or categorization.

Unnoticed values do tend to be the more tenacious ones. Wishful thinking aside, what are the really existing effects of our artscape within the cycles described in these pages? The metaphors are many. Artists are variously described as pioneers, parasites, a type of magical ointment, stalking horses, foot soldiers, shock troops, kamikaze pilots of urban renewal, revelers enjoying a last hurrah on the deck of the *Titanic*. Luckily, not all the terms for artists are quite as melodramatic. "Gentrification and the Artistic Dividend," a 2014 study published in the *Journal of the American Planning Association* (issue no. 80), describes the impact of the fine arts as "benign" in comparison to film and advertising. As argued by Marco Clausen, to overstate the impact of CA would indeed "culturalize" what is mainly the doing of policymakers and international finance.

Concrete examples of the effective role of CA within a specific redevelopment cycle are discussed extensively in this reader, but CA has a problem not related to net effect. Like the housing market, it is conceptually, psychologically, and economically premised on private ownership, as Andrea Phillips has noted. The race for individual achievement and

reputational value is hard-wired into CA's DNA, and its selection processes are administered by a steep hierarchy of gifted individuals. The conditions of production within this skewed meritocracy amount to a "permanence of ongoing necessity." Thus the very idea of "social housing as a long-term commitment to equal access to democratically decided amenities," says Phillips, runs counter to "the psychic, cultural, and, in the end, economically organized needs of artists."[3]

Surely enough, as a field, we have learned to extract what is of interest—a topic, a story, a resource—and head for the next opportunity. Fly in, fly out (FIFO). As others have pointed out before me, once a "project" is completed, the expert moves on, whether they be artists, scholars, or investors. Which is why people mistrust the expert, and look to right-wing rootsiness instead.[4] Time will tell whether the pandemic can introduce a lasting sense of restraint, but prior to COVID-19, this rampant extractivism allowed for a worldwide expansion of the art field at breathtaking speed—in the name of no other agenda than an expansion of the self-evident value CA putatively possesses.

The upshot of CA's regimented wanderlust is a poverty of aspiration. It's hard to go beyond gestures when you always have one eye on the exit. After so many blueprint opacities, is it possible to appreciate a clear-cut meat-and-potatoes position? Hardly. To invest in more grounded parameters is to risk being rooted, thus commensurable, thus predictable. Who in our field would ever want to risk cliché.

By way of example, let's take a hypothetical biennial commission. The artist, working from afar, might request, say, a primary school—preferably in a demographically mixed neighborhood—to serve as both film set and exhibition site. Depending on the school, international attention can do more harm than good, so this type of thing would ideally be a careful, time-consuming affair. But

regrettably, time is short. Incidentally, the biennial's outreach team may have built a relationship over time with a nearby school. But its advice may not count for much. A principle aim of biennials, after all, is realizing the exchange value of found material. Rather than community welfare, what counts is the school's architecture, iconography, history, ambiance—its ability to fuel the work's spatial resonance and political narrative, whether "Marxist," "decolonialist," or otherwise.

Take, for instance, curator Kate Brehme's doctoral research, which traces the increasing level of abstraction that marks the Berlin Biennale's (BB) relationship to the city.[5] At an early point in BB history, she says, off-site spaces were merely exciting "platforms." Over time, they became "laboratories" for exhibition formats that aestheticized the spaces that hosted them. By 2014, the Berlin Biennale's spectacle of transformation was cogent enough to redefine the very meaning and temporality of the locations it occupied, and to crown them sites of contemporaneity in and of themselves: opaque, ambivalent, indeterminate.

It's a given to the vast majority of my colleagues that we should stick to this kind of art, regardless of the consequences. Why exactly should this particular pursuit of happiness be so self-evident? The success rate within CA is hardly enough to explain our sense of conviction. Career benefits are meager at best, especially in Berlin—the only capital city in the EU poorer than the national average.

At Berlin dinner parties or panel discussions where artists deplore that they are made to compete for scant resources with schoolchildren and refugees, I shut my mouth. I prefer not to mess with angry Berliners. But I do wonder where the sense of entitlement comes from. In German parlance, you will find a clue in the untiring reference to *Zweckfreiheit der Kunst*, art's freedom from purpose. The continuance of the

Euro-humanist tradition valorizes culture beyond use and function, even as we make our claims for decolonization, even as we scoff at Kant & Co. In practice, we uphold this tradition worldwide, almost without reserve. It frees us from the need to explain ourselves—beyond occasional lip service to the occasional populist, whom we privately consider a bigot. As more and more policy-makers ditch the autonomy of art in favor of service to urban development and other things, we need more than *arrière-garde* positions to see us through.

And CA does have more to offer. Thanks to the persistence of critique as our default attitude of choice, our recent inclusion within the corridors of power remains difficult to accept (whether in the context of international diplomacy, educational policy, city development, or otherwise). But CA is now in a better position than it likes to acknowledge. To this day, CA's empowerment remains largely under-theorized. Throughout the recent creative city debates, I was surprised to find common ground between artists and architects. Despite the latter's machismo, both professions like to identify both with the heroic trickster prototype, on the one hand, and the melancholic slave to capital, on the other.[6] Neither of which imply a sense of accountability, let alone change. Fortunately, there are architects, artists, curators, and venues out there that do insist on the difference between what is suave and what is important: practices where the culture of systematic (self-)critique is demystified and carefully put in its place: once critique becomes a catalyst, it can be a ground that proposals can proceed from. (Proceed *from*—not dwell *within*.) As this book will argue, art does not necessarily need to be overtly critical, durational, or experimental in order to be more than CA for CA's sake. It can be as quietist or commodified as you like. What it does need is a stated

agenda, grounded over time, in really existing conditions and necessities.

Gentrification 101

“Art and gentrification? I can tap-dance that argument on your forehead.” The script is now a familiar one. Since the day sociologist Ruth Glass coined the term “gentrification” in 1964, CA has even learned to preempt it whenever needed. Take the Al Quoz arts district of Dubai, which leapfrogged the whole process of urban decline and renewal by building old-school “postindustrial” warehouses from scratch. No need for manufacturing to come and go; art need not wait its turn.

And yet, you would be surprised by the misunderstandings—starting with the eagerness to evacuate social cleansing from the term and instead discuss gentrification as a quality of life issue,[7] as if it were a matter of bike lanes or flirting with the barista. To be clear, not every displacement is a case of gentrification, but every form of gentrification does, by definition, involve displacement. The very point of using the g-word is to pinpoint cases of both regeneration and displacement occurring in tandem, as a coherent two-step process of spatial transformation.

At the outset of the whole process lies the spotting of a “rent gap,” a theory developed in 1979 by geographer Neil Smith to describe the disparity between the current rental income of a property and its potentially achievable income. An economic explanation for the process of gentrification: at its end lies an “upgrade” in demographic, material, and symbolic terms. The particular shade of upgrade discussed in this book—one that is prominent if far from universal—involves the transformation of cultural capital into real capital. To use Sharon Zukin’s formula: Real Estate + Cultural Capital = Real Cultural Capital.[8]

Even within a single gentrification cycle, the "improvement" of the local population can reoccur several times, including the displacement of its earliest enablers. For their part, those departing, whether hipsters or salaried working-class families, may eventually wind up pumping up housing prices anew in the neighborhoods where they are displaced to. Recent analyses of European and US housing markets emphasize how the lower middle strata of a population becomes displaced by the upper middle ones. One can also refer to Christophe Guilluy's work on the "politics of resentment" in France, which casts the Front National as a party of suburban commuters displaced by inner-city *bourgeois bohèmes* (*bobos*).[9]

Setting aside the cost of rent, if you see old friends leaving, old stores going bust, and new ones not catering to you; if at that point you still won't budge it is probably due to a lack of options. Displacement comes in many shapes and forms. Consider that the Berlin municipality has counted approximately 5,000 homeless but guesstimates that ten times as many lack a regular living space of their own.

Finally, we reach a point in the cycle when a good address is established. Much has been written about metrophobic urban villages (within the city, but not of it). According to Matthew Soules, such "ruralist" agendas in the US coincide with the economic, cultural, and political ascendancy of the military. Niklas Maak refers to this moment as "zombification": immigration as a restaurant, urbanity as a vernissage. Even neoliberalism itself can be zombified when risk and volatility are contained by watertight inheritance rights, which are making a strong comeback these days.[10]

Cycles of this kind—from rent gap to displacement to zombification—can take decades. Proprietors often "go long," leaving areas untouched for many years on end so as to eventually maximize return on investment. Samar