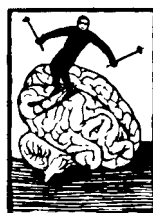


# DER PALAST



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Alexander Verlag Berlin

**DER  
PALAST**  
**CONSTANZA MACRAS**  
**TOM HUNTER**

**and**  
**THOMAS AURIN**

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# PROLOGUE

by Constanza Macras

I moved to Berlin in the middle of the nineties, semi-casually following a former boyfriend who wanted to make an art project about ghost monuments of the GDR (German Democratic Republic). I was living in Amsterdam at the time, arriving from Buenos Aires. He lived in Frankfurt, arriving from New York. We missed the 24 hour days, the schemes of the megalopolis, the noise, the dirt and everything unexpected and unplanned. Within 10 days in Berlin, we cruised the city inside a Trabant with a municipal list of monuments and their street addresses. Many of the street names had already been changed. What we found when we arrived at most of them was empty ground. The monuments had already been removed as will follow big part of its history.

What we did find was dirt, authentic underground culture, bullet holes in our bedroom walls from the Second World War. We found flexible (even unpredictable) opening hours for restaurants and shops that made us both feel at home. At the same time though, the city's future was an enigma. Potsdamer Platz was the biggest construction site in Europe, and even if we knew that one day there would be buildings to replace the forest of cranes, we preferred to live in denial. We pretended the city would always be under the same construction, always the same.

Berlin Mitte, after the fall of the Wall, was a colorless landscape of dilapidated buildings that was quickly populated as the city absorbed creatives and ravers. Fast forwarding a few decades, this was absorbed into a broader cultural „flattening“, made smooth by the taste of an affluent global middle class. Meanwhile, neighborhoods evolved, shops closed and people were evicted from their longstanding homes. Berlin suffered the fate of most every other global metropolis. The city where artists had chosen to live (attracted by cheap rents and deep culture) became a pricey theme park around the narrative of its own history.

“The result of all of this is that the social time available for withdrawing from work and immersing oneself in cultural production drastically declined. If there's one factor above all else which contributes to cultural conservatism, it is the vast inflation in the cost of rent and mortgages. It's no accident that the efflorescence of cultural invention in London and New York in the late 1970s and early 80s (in the punk and postpunk scenes) coincided with the availability of squatted and cheap property in those cities.“ (*Fisher, Mark. Ghosts of My Life*)

Parallel to the early years of the global gentrification crisis, the raise of syndicated global television formats began to fill the space of entertainment television. Reality TV formats dominated the place of fiction, TV contests like „The voice“ became mass culture merchandising in which supposedly real characters could be formatted and copied over and over around the globe, urban planning followed suit. The buildings that emerged in New York, Belgrade and Shanghai were broadly interchangeable.

I created the theater show *Der Palast* in and for this context; the global gentrification not only of cities, but of entertainment and culture itself. Hitting close to the bone, even dance styles themselves became commodified through global TV formats dance reality shows.

*Der Palast* investigates the impact of this gentrification and its social upheaval, by focusing on the contested architecture, which has stories about the history of the city and its citizens, as well as ideas about the future.

*Der Palast* translates to 'The Palace' in English; in this context, it refers to the socialist ideal of the People's Palace. The piece was developed for the Volksbühne, a theater that has been at the heart of Berlin during the GDR, and that still now holds some of the last remnants of that time and spirit. Decades prior, my first work at the Volksbühne was actually outside of it: in 2001, the *Rolling Road Show*, created by Bert Neumann and Hannah Hurtzig. It was a caravan that brought the theater to wildly different corners of the city, including Marzahn and Neukölln. Those neighborhoods, at that time, wouldn't recognize or socialize with the same neighborhoods today.

I got in contact with Tom Hunter's work through his book "The Way Home". He made a series of photographic works modeled on old masters paintings to draw relationships between the gentrification and squat evictions in Hackney London. We were inspired to invite him to create a new series of photos for *Der Palast*.

Hunter set up photographic tableaux in 10 different urban settings around Berlin, using old master paintings from the Gemäldegalerie as templates to construct new visions of a rapidly changing contemporary city. In these photographic tableaux, Hunter worked with local residents from different housing projects who were facing eviction due to urban redevelopment. Each photograph set the scene and mood for the theatre piece as it developed its narrative and themes of urban flight and regeneration. By referencing old master classics from Berlin's Gemäldegalerie, and reframing them through a contemporary context of social housing and gentrification, it offered Berlin audiences a way to reflect not only on the past, but the present situation and their future possibilities. The imagination and the management of the urban environment should be somewhere in the hearts and minds of everyone who lives in one.

From this collaboration emerged many things, including this book. Somewhere between an art book and a theater book, it is ultimately our research on a Berlin that always changes, always damned, and always full of possibility.

Ira von Schöppenthau, Jörn Scheele,  
Ilja Sutkoff, Almut Zilcher  
*Der Winter* – Lucas van Valckenborch  
Tom Hunter, 2019











# BERLIN VIGNETTES

by Tom Hunter

Berlin has always been a place resonating with energy and vibrancy for me. My first experience of the city was in 1996 when I arrived there in my double decker bus 'Le Crowbar'. I was travelling around Europe at the time with other people from the UK who had fled there after the suppression of free festivals in the UK. We went from place to place putting on parties, events and festivals. It was at one of these events that we were invited to Berlin to run a bar from the bus for a show taking place in the Arena. It was a mind-blowing experience, visiting Berlin in full transformation from a divided city to a cultural explosion of arts and creativity. The underground scene was brimming with life on a scale I have never seen anywhere else in the world.

Fast forward to 2015 and I'm invited back to Berlin by Constanza Macras and DorkyPark to work on a dance-theatre performance investigating the changing face of Berlin and its rapid gentrification since the heady days of the 1990's and the fall of the Berlin wall. Following mass destruction of Berlin during the second World War the city was divided. East Berlin became part of the communist German Democratic Republic (GDR) whilst West Berlin became part of capitalist West Germany; an isolated island amongst the sea of the GDR. Under the GDR, East Berlin became a showcase for the socialist aspirations and communist utopia, this vision manifested itself in the housing projects that were built for the workers of the GDR. The architecture of these developments stands out as a monument to the utopian dream of socialism though they are now the battlegrounds of commercial developers who are cherry picking the best of them to make huge profits and change the social order of Berlin citizens. The dance piece *Der Palast* sets out to challenge this by giving their communities a voice before they are lost forever. Over the course of three years different resident groups were contacted and stories of the impact of gentrification were collected and written into the narrative of *Der Palast*.

My photographs are architectural studies of 'the palaces' that house the people of Berlin. By staging tableaux images in real life locations, such as the extreme modernist architecture of Marzahn district in East Berlin and the neo-classical architecture of Karl Marx Allee, or the postmodern formations of Kottbusser Tor, I used different styles of architecture and periods of the Soviet post-war utopian dream as a backdrop to highlight the social struggles of its people within these settings. The residents from these developments were arranged to reflect the art historical paintings in the Gemäldegalerie. By combining the architecture, the actual residents of the palaces and the art historical paintings I wanted to encourage the people of Berlin to engage with their city's historical culture in terms of the past, present and future. In this respect it was of vital importance to use the real people from the housing projects, the real locations of their homes and project them back to the people of Berlin. My portraits present social topics in the style of the old masters. They were developed into a series of large-scale photographs that were projected as 40 by 50 foot backgrounds, setting the scene for the performance of *Der Palast*. The staging of *Der Palast* in the Volksbühne (meaning the People's theatre) is also of importance as it is situated within the centre of the old East Berlin and is the main theatre for the East of the city.

Boundaries between the theatre stage and the audience have previously been explored by Bertolt Brecht (1898 – 1956). Using visual devices such as stripping the stage of backdrops whilst breaking the illusion of familiar reality, Brecht makes the viewer question the role of theatre and its relationship to the here and now of social and material subsistence. *Der Palast* follows in Brecht's path but rather than baring the stage - my large scale projected images are used to set the scenes and achieve the effect of completely immersing the audience, transporting them to real life locations within their city – and only then - abruptly breaking that illusion by pulling the viewer back into the theatre distancing them from the experience. A Brechtian toolkit is thus put to work in the very core of this piece.

Whereas my previous work involved incorporating classical paintings inside contemporary photo-montage, this project takes them out and beyond the art gallery context altogether and delivers latent Berlin vignettes to modern theatre audiences that will have an opportunity to perceive them within an immersive multimedia milieu.









Andreas Speichert, Frank Mittmann  
Jörg Wilkendorf, Ann Christin Müller  
Konrad Walkow  
*The Healing of Tobias* – Caravaggio  
Tom Hunter, 2019









Eli Cohen, Anne Ratte-Polle  
Ulrike Köhler, Eleonore Carrière  
Alisa Golomzina, Almog Kidron  
*Leda mit dem Schwan*  
– Antonio Allegri  
Tom Hunter, 2019









Manuel Osterholt  
Sanni Marie Cabral da Silva Neto  
*Venus mit dem Orgelspieler*  
– Tiziano Vecellio  
Tom Hunter, 2019





Leander Dörr, Eric Kyun Woong Kim Garcia,  
Sebastian Bark, Niklas Draeger, Bruno Mathes  
*Die Fußwaschung Christi* – Dirck van Baburen  
Tom Hunter, 2019









Thomas Schuller, Roland Naumann,  
Elias Geissler, Eike Grögel  
*Das Abendmahl* – Leonardo da Vinci  
Tom Hunter, 2019









Thulani Lord Mgidi , Margherita Kefler  
*Pyramus und Thisbe* – Hans Baldung  
Tom Hunter, 2019













Adaya Berkovich, Luc Guiol, Santiago Blaum  
*Mars und Venus von Vulkan überrascht*  
– Paris Bordon  
Tom Hunter, 2019



# GRAPPLING WITH GENTRIFICATION

by Polygonal

Christian Haid and Lukas Staudinger from Polygonal in conversation with  
Laura Calbet Elias, Nihad El-Kayed and Sandra Oehy.  
*Excerpts from interviews and e-mail correspondences, October 2022*

The term gentrification was coined by the British sociologist Ruth Glass in the 1960s to describe a particular process of transformation in inner-city neighbourhoods: the displacement of low-income residents by a higher-status clientele with more income. Gentry, the term used to describe the lower aristocracy, was given its name because Glass drew parallels between the transformation of London in the 1960s and the city's developments in the 18th century, when the aristocracy moved from the countryside into the city and displaced the less well-off urban population. Since the 1960s, the meaning of the term has evolved with the increasing complexity of urban transformation processes, and the long-held narrative of a process that turns low-income areas into affluent trendy neighbourhoods has largely become obsolete because it falls short. What is needed is a differentiated view that takes into account a multitude of local and global actors and their interests and that replaces the linearity of earlier explanatory models. Gentrification processes are multicausal and multilocal. They have to be seen in the context of global neo-liberalisation, migration, financialisation of the housing market and the dissolution of the binary urban-rural logic. Thus, the discussion about gentrification is a conflictual debate that should be discussed across disciplines and leads to the question of which understanding of gentrification is germane in 2022. How do these processes affect the everyday lives of residents? How can urban policy counteract them?

We asked three experts: *Laura Calbet Elias* (LCE), an urban researcher working on the financialisation of the housing market; *Nihad El-Kayed* (NEK), an urban sociologist with a research focus on the changes of neighbourhoods through migration since 2015; and *Sandra Oehy* (SO), an architectural theorist, art scholar and exhibition maker.

In urban research, we distinguish between two types of transformation processes that condition gentrification: cultural processes and economic processes. Cultural processes mean changes on the demand side, while economic processes influence the supply side. Society has changed culturally: People have more flexible working hours, and for many the detached house on the outskirts of town is no longer desirable. Living models are therefore increasingly city-centre oriented: this leads to increasing demand in the inner cities and thus to the gentrification of these areas. – LCE

Gentrification often begins with the search for the „authentic“. So-called „gentrifiers“, often from different subcultures and intellectual, cultural milieus, seek and find this in urban spaces that are still little commercialised. Through their arrival and, to a certain extent, their violent cultural appropriation of the existing context, they change these spaces. When the subsequent commercialisation eventually leads to the McDonaldisation of neighbourhoods once characterised by, for example, traditional Arabic snack bars, this is usually rejected by the gentrifiers in their search for folkloric authenticity. A well-known example is the McDonalds in Berlin's Wrangelkiez, which opened to great protest. – SO

On the economic side, on the other hand, we see devaluation and appreciation mechanisms on the real estate market as gentrification drivers and speak of a discrepancy between yield expectations and what one actually gets for a property. According to Neil Smith, one of the pioneers of gentrification research, gentrification and the associated displacement occur when owners upgrade the building fabric or the use of a property in order to achieve higher profits. In the German discussion, culturalist explanatory models have dominated for a long time. However, gentrification is increasingly understood as multicausal - i.e. the joint consideration of economic and cultural factors. – LCE

It can be seen that gentrification processes particularly affect marginalised groups. In migrant neighbourhoods, there are many clubs, shops, restaurants and institutions that offer multilingual

services. Such neighbourhoods are often places where information about jobs or vacant flats is informally exchanged and contacts are made. Former residents who have moved away from these neighbourhoods, either voluntarily or by force, often like to come back to visit friends, shop or eat out. In the process of gentrification, the price of housing rises, as do commercial rents. If at some point the rents for these shops, restaurants, associations and initiatives become too high, these places lose their function as urban resource pools and as hubs for networks, exchange and as places of arrival for new migrants. Refugees who have come to Berlin since 2015 have often been housed in migrant neighbourhoods where they would usually find good connections. However, due to the gentrification of recent years, there is hardly any chance of finding a flat there. Many only find one on the outskirts of the city (if they do at all), where racist discrimination is unfortunately more common. – NEK

With the arrival of financially stronger clientele, the use of the urban outdoor space often changes. The newly arrived residents' desired sense of security moves to the fore. This is expressed, for example, in the increased use of hostile architecture, which, for example, makes it impossible for homeless people to spend the night on park benches and similar structures, and often also in an expansion of street and park lighting and the disappearance of dark niches. Various existing uses of public space are thus prevented, and the socially weaker are pushed out of the urban space. The priority of a neighborhood's public space is for clean and quiet use so as not to reduce property values. Extremely gentrified neighbourhoods often also appear increasingly generic and sterile in aesthetic terms. – SO

The critique of gentrification is not about preventing upgrading but about regulating housing policy and decommodifying the housing infrastructure. However, this approach does not come from politics but mostly from social and civil society movements:

Examples are the rent referendum, the referendum on the development of the Tempelhofer Feld in Berlin and the Initiative Deutsche Wohnen und Co enteignen, as well as also initiatives for a new real estate policy and a new tenancy law at the state level. At the political level, the term gentrification has only recently become very widespread. City governments and administrative apparatuses have questioned gentrification as a concept for a long time and only belatedly realised that there is an acute need for action. Recognised researchers like Andrej Holm have been warning about the gentrification spreading like a snail throughout the centre of Berlin for about 20 years. However, urban policy has still taken time to acknowledge these developments and discuss measures. In 2022, however, we are at a point where political forces have changed again, and the old housing policy is resurgent, demanding liberalisation at all levels and thus marking a turn from a progressive and fairer housing policy. But the last word has not been spoken: There is still a lot of potential for political movement. – LCE

On the topic of housing policy, it is worth looking at other European cities. A very common and successful model in Vienna and Zurich is that of social housing and cooperative housing. Planning by housing cooperatives often manages to counteract some of the negative effects of gentrification. These projects are mostly created from the beginning for a mix of different social and socio-economic classes and family models. In some cases, parts of the private space are also made public, which adds value for the residents of the surrounding neighbourhood. The problem with this model is that capital must already be contributed at the beginning. So despite the inclusive approach, not everyone can afford this. It would therefore be desirable to push for public urban housing that follows a cooperative mixed model. Policymakers could encourage this by setting a quota for cooperative and social housing, as is already the case in Zurich, for example, through a referendum. – SO

In addition to the major rent policy initiatives from Berlin civil society such as Initiative Deutsche Wohnen & Co enteignen, there are approaches in the thematic field of migration and housing that attempt to support marginalised groups in their search for housing. These include, for example, counselling centres that explain how to look for a flat and give tips on what documents are needed and how best to put them together. Discrimination against people with names that do not sound German is also on the rise in an increasingly competitive housing market. In this regard, more and more approaches are being developed to help reduce discrimination (e.g. by the Berliner Fachstelle gegen Diskriminierung auf dem Wohnungsmarkt). These are important developments, but given that rents are rising rapidly - and thus housing market discrimination is becoming easier for landlords - they are effectively a drop in the ocean. – NEK

We should also reflect on whether gentrification is still the appropriate term: It can be argued that the effects of gentrification do not only mean displacement in the housing market, but also lead to lower purchasing power. In connection with inflation and rising energy costs, the question therefore arises: How much can people from lower social classes actually continue to restrict themselves? Someone who has already been watching every penny for the last few years has no further possibilities to save. The number of those who depend on food banks and free food distribution points is increasing rapidly. We are heading towards a situation where, because of the high costs of housing and energy, it is also a question of whether people can still afford food. So if the housing issue in one of the richest countries in the world is really linked to the hunger issue, then we have to think about what kind of society we live in and how much of the welfare state is actually left. In the current energy-saving linked to the war in the Ukraine, political ideas are also coming to the table that, interestingly enough, we know from the debate about housing. Maybe the difficult situation in 2022 will finally open our eyes as a society that regulating vital infrastructures like housing is not the wrong thing to do. – LCE



# TESTIMONIALS

## Portraits

I have been living in a Wagenplatz (trailer park) for several years. Since I became a father, my life changed and I couldn't spend so much money on living in an apartment. There are about 20 of us living in this Wagenplatz community. Many of my neighbors have been leading this lifestyle for a long time, some of them were even born here. Everyone owns a trailer but we have an additional communal car, as well. Once a month we have a plenum where we discuss neighborhood issues.

Life at a Wagenplatz is quite nice: simple but cheap and still central. You only win with it! Of course, apartments are nice and comfortable, but this lifestyle also means high rental costs and you have to somehow obtain the money. This causes lots of struggle. Wagenplatz's way of life enables you to take a break from time to time, to say „I worked a lot last month, now I can take some time off“. Here you have a great combination of quietness and urban life. On the one hand, it is very quiet here, on the other hand you can reach Kreuzberg in 10 minutes by bike. It is not very far, a few U-Bahn stations and you are at Kottbusser Tor.

Unfortunately, already since the start of this year we have no lease, because the owner refuses to renew it. We asked for an extension until the end of this year, and have only recently gotten a provisional six month extension.

We do not know what exactly the plans are with this real estate. Rumors indicate that there is a housing development in the works, but we know neither its precise status nor whether investors have a building permit and financing. We suspect that we just have to go preemptively. The property is simply worth a lot more and attracts more buyers without residents – I mean, without us.

What will happen? It is impossible to know. But I am sure of one thing at least: the city is changing a lot. I was born here, Berlin has always felt very easy. Finding an apartment wasn't a particular problem. Finding a job wasn't particularly problematic either. It might not have been a large sum of money, but you didn't need that much either. That sort of lifestyle completely vanished in the last ten years: everything is subjected to commercialism. And the social structure that represented many of us, the places we liked, the affordable Kneipen, all these are disappearing, step by step.

– Daniel



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