The Village People
by Pablo Larios

Culture is being decentered, amid a flight from major cities. Demographic patterns show that the global mobility we took for granted in the last decade has shifted in the pandemic era: the dominant narrative is no longer gentrification, but decentering and dispersion. In the second of a three-part essay, following "Anywhere, Out of the World: Ruralism and Escape in the New Roaring Twenties," Pablo Larios speaks to artists about ruralism, self-sustenance, and the Great Decentering.

I

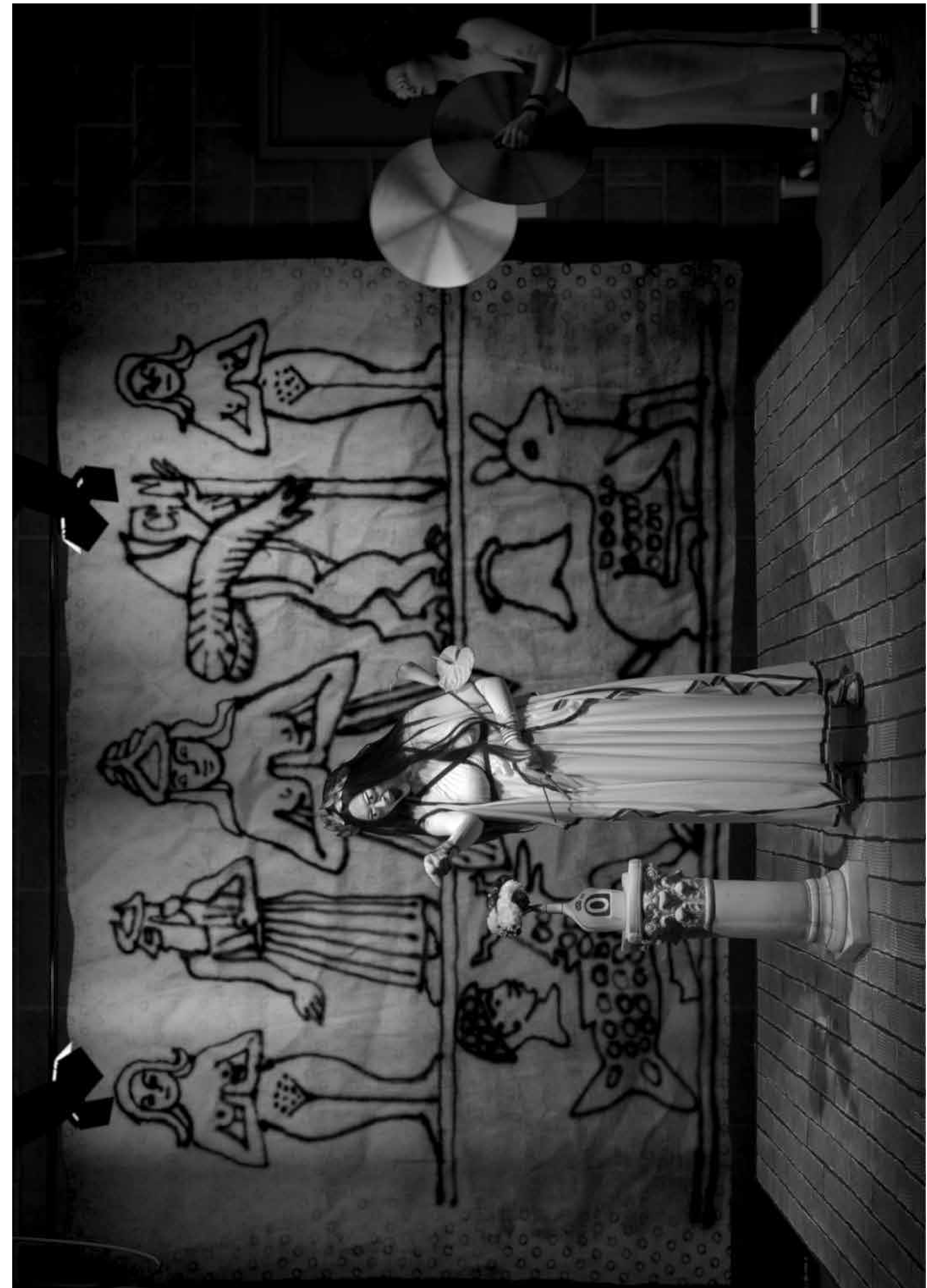
From my window in Berlin, the city looks more or less the way it did before the pandemic. On a Sunday, the shops are closed; few people are on the streets; bars are sleepy, darkened. Even prior to the social-distancing era, the city was slowing down. The face, the *look* of gentrification, had actually eased despite factorially-increasing rents. Artist friends from Lisbon, Oslo, or Shanghai went back to Portugal, Norway, China. The city felt more fractured and less international, and the conversation did, too.[1] Whereas just a few years ago, a night out at a Berlin gallery meant a hundred people speaking expat English, packed into a well-lit, *bel étage* art space, that's not the place I recognize today. We are now light years away from Isabelle Graw's 2009 scoffing quip that, for some, "a Friday night marathon tour of exhibition openings in Berlin was about the most interesting thing to happen to a person."[2]

The openings are smaller, the conversation splintered. It's rare that I catch what I am terming "the conversation," and it isn't because of the language we speak or the size of the space. That doesn't mean it's not on the other side of town or in another city, in Paris or Seoul. Yet I wonder: Where is the pulse of things today?

I see two mutually exclusive narratives to account for this decentering. The first theory is that the herd has simply moved on to another, cheaper place. But a second theory, more complex and plausible, is as follows. The formula of visibility and economic access that allowed for cities to be metonymies for connectivity and artistic externalization is decoupling. In other words, increasingly, I think the conversation simply isn't happening in (or *about*) cities, at least not with the concentration I experienced before.

The 2010s were a peak of global mobility for workers. In this time, the metaphor for this pulse was "the cloud," a superstructure expanding rashly across the world, albeit with the human capital of insecure gig workers and tech infrastructure. The cloud's material, on-the-ground operator was the face-lifting mechanism of an ever-gentrified, ever-connected, ever-"shareable" city. But in the 2020s, the pulse feels to me subterranean, more of a subtle tremor, decentralized. Just as content becomes algorithmically generated and experienced and culture becomes microcultural, these tremors become smaller, more individualized, radial, and thus experienced less as a collective. It's a conversation with one. The space of the conversation is now domestic, *hygge*, its drug marijuana rather than speed or ecstasy, its activity cooking rather than *flaneuring* across capital cities.[3]

This fracturing of the conversation mirrors what sociologists and health experts tell us: namely, that people are more atomized, and lonelier.[4] If the city in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was the space of art, this was because it proffered spaces of bourgeois visibility and because urban agglomerations, East and West,



Mary Reid Kelley and Patrick Kelley, *The Rape of Europa* (still), 2021. Courtesy: the artists

were sites where capitalism asserted its primacy, fueled by colonial and territorial conquest, though also enabling a materialism of culture.[5] Consider the astonishing echo in 2021 of John Maynard Keynes's widely cited 1919 statement that, previous to World War I, "The inhabitant of London could order by telephone, sipping his morning tea in bed, the various products of the whole earth, in such quantity as he might see fit, and reasonably expect their early delivery upon his doorstep." World War I put a cork on economic globalization, coinciding with a pandemic comparable to ours in scope and duration. Today it's shortages, soaring gas prices, and trade wars.

This is not to say there is no exchange of culture today, or that cities do not provide a relatively even measure of concentrated activity, but rather that the currents run rather in the tributaries below and around, not in any main stream. If the 2020s are in any way roaring, it's due more to climate change than parties *à la* Babylon Berlin. An image comes to mind: it is no longer about the space of the club, on a former industrial site such as a power plant, regenerated and prized for its exposed piping. Now young people are dancing in parks or fields, self-organizing, like dropouts, reliving some imagined 1990s rave. Berghain hosts art shows; Netflix peddles tearjerkers about nomads and precarious housekeepers. If the vehicle of material culture in the 2010s was gentrification—with its promise of upward and outward movement, its reifying and refinishing of the look of the means of production (factories, warehouses, industrial sites)—then in the new decade something more diffuse has replaced this.

An extra-urban precariat, as nomadic as pollen, feels permanently locked out of the upward, salaried world of middle management and "career" progress. Amid the death of retail, cities become sites of a new feudalism of inheritance, tourism, and investment. Culturally, the operant metaphor shifts outward, from the repurposed industrial site to the garden, the field, the terrain. The rave happens outdoors. We can call the old regime the WeWork era. In the art sector, we once tracked visibility through the itinerary of galleries and the topography of important, tastemaking shows. Now neither seems as important or as tastemaking. The canon's rope is frayed, and the big galleries show the same things, hanging above the big couch at a SoHo house sprayed in Le Labo. The actual tastemakers are numerous, and you probably haven't heard of them. KAWS shows at the Brooklyn Museum. Culture is a sneaker collaboration. Activity is not concentrated in one place; it's on TikTok.

After a decade of peak globalization in which the swarm traveled from New York or London or Milan via Basel and Miami, the visibility of art is so dispersed as to be in every corner of the world, albeit spread thinly, like a gel. It's not that nothing is happening—inclusion here, market figuration there, the hard fist of institutional critique, a big collector opens a foundation, another record-breaking auction—but that culture is too splintered for any individual to get a sense of the bigger picture. The same logic that locks out a would-be aspirant class from the earlier forums of status and recognition personalizes and profits from their individuated habits, ever algorithmically. Yet by that same logic of dispersion, the same mechanisms that foreclose collective experience, there is no center, no art capital or even capitals. The field, exposed to the elements, might have replaced the city, with its moats of insularity and extraction. And this is the new conversation.

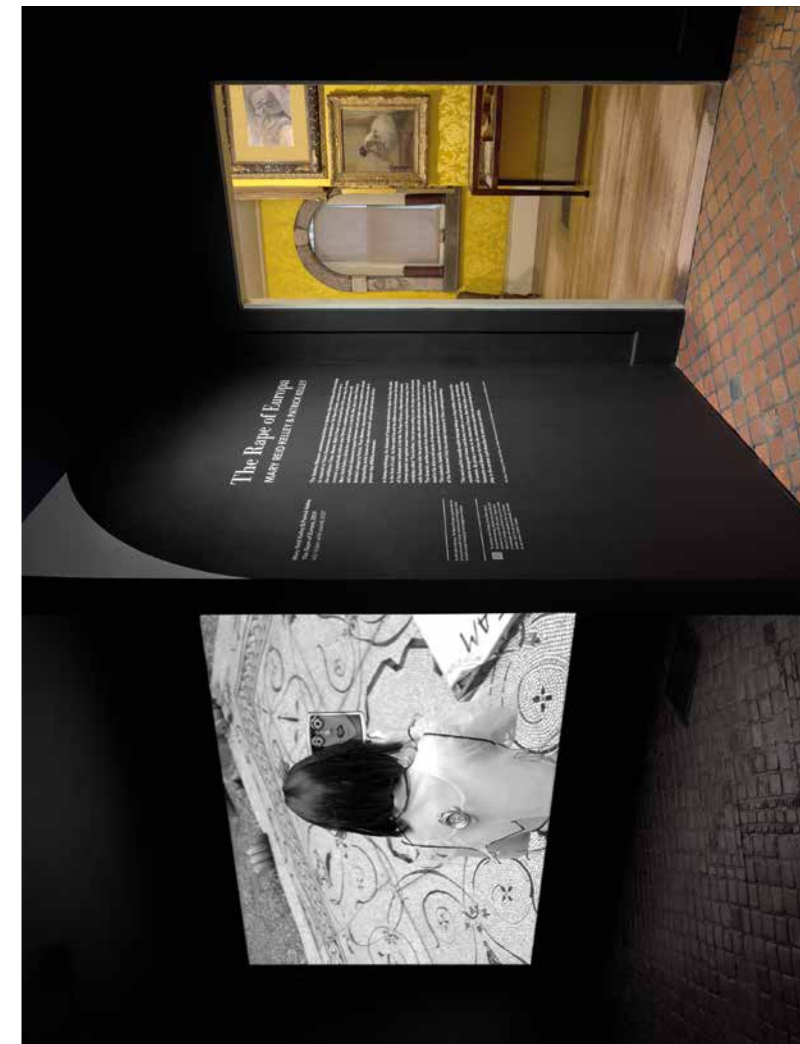
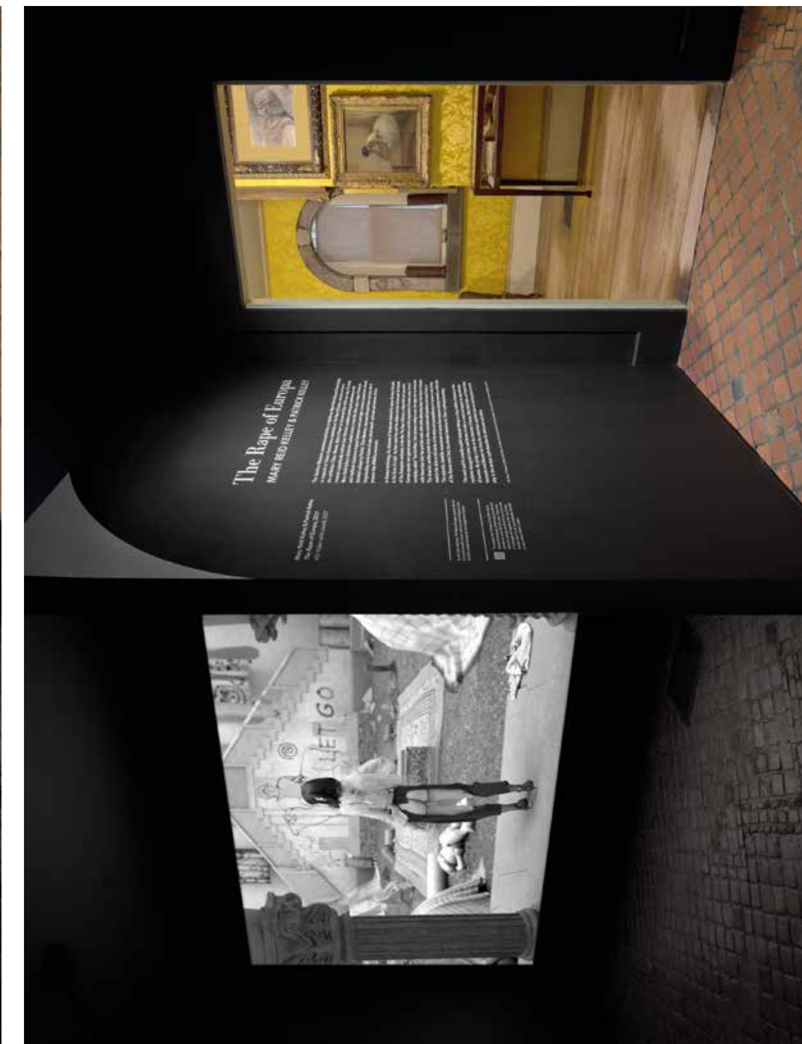
II

"Especially after the pandemic," the artist duo Mary Reid Kelley and Patrick Kelley tell me via Zoom from their home and studio near Kingston in the Catskill Mountains, "a place upstate became a must-have accessory."[6] And it's not just in upstate New York. In London, the *Financial Times* reports, the highest property price boom has occurred outside of London, which reflects demand.[7] If you agree that the space of art matters—the places where it is made and shown—then to talk about this we must also discuss the ugly truth of real estate because, in what Thomas Piketty has called the new "patrimonial class," it is no longer a CV, a degree, a job, or individual talent that can provide a sinecure. Increasingly, heritage is simply, brutally, inheritance, most visibly "real estate," as opposed to merit or talent or hard work or gallery representation. Whether they bought up former schools (as did Kai Althoff) or radio factories (like Ryan Gander did), last generation's success stories have become real estate entrepreneurs.

My interest, though, is less in the successful artist-become-impresario and more in asking how good (if not world-famous) artists make, and make do, today, and thereby tracing the new song lines of what I term "the conversation." Who can blame them for leaving Paris or New York or London? For artists who do not already have mega-galleries backing their work, the reasonable appeal of space and time now has to be weighed against the failed promise of visibility. Perhaps you didn't have visibility to begin with, or never expected to have it.

Artist Grace Ndiritu is the organizer of her own summits, drawing as much from ecological activism as from spiritualism. Her work draws productively, she says, from a combined working-class and immigrant background in combination with ongoing interests in shamanism, activism, and what she terms "non-rational methodologies."[8] She tells me that rural life was always a component of her upbringing, which was partly in rural Kenya and partly in working-class Birmingham. Since 2012, after deciding there must be a "better way than just me in Brixton, alone," she has lived in communities such as Buddhist centers, monasteries, forest communities and Indigenous ones, each with their own pressures, histories, and relationship to urban and rural life. But the new space is not about escapism. Ndiritu speaks about the necessity of hybridity between urban and rural life, which for an artist is key: "This connection, urban-rural, became more important. You couldn't just escape to the rural, you had to remember that there are people in the city." The new way of working resembles a hybrid, peri- or suburbanism, which still benefits from proximity to the old way, the way of cities. Yet, clearly, the previous functioning of artistic life in the city—get a gallery, studio space, assistant, full package—has lapsed. "Artists are generally fed up with the pressure of living in cities—expensive rent, low-quality food, pollution, COVID-19. People need a mental and energetic break."

The Kelleys live two hours from New York but haven't been there in two years. They make films involving time-intensively crafted settings, costumes, and sound, while acting in them too, with results that are humorous, slapstick, cerebral, and virtuosic. "We do it all here," they tell me. Their densely allusive videos feature exquisitely detailed props (hand drawn and painted) and maximalist imagery, with music or poetry (written by Mary) referencing highbrow, folk, and popular sources, from *The Song of Hiawatha*

Mary Reid Kelley and Patrick Kelley, *The Rape of Europa*, 2021, *The Rape of Europa* installation views at Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston. Courtesy: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston. Photo: Julia Featheringill

The Temple, 2021 installation designed by Grace Ndiritu featuring works by Armando D. Cosmos, *Kon Tiki*, 2021; *Sheltering the Future*, 2019; *Tuareg*, 2021; Vivian Lynn, *Caryatid*, 1986; Charlotte Johannesson, *Each Is a Universe*, 2018; Unknown maker, *Knight Jug, 1250–1300*; Unknown maker, *Bear Jug*, 1740–60; Anni Albers, *Enmeshed I*, 1963. *Our Silver City: 2094* installation view at Nottingham Contemporary, 2021–22. Courtesy: the artist and Nottingham Contemporary. Photo: Stuart Whipps

The Temple, 2021 installation designed by Grace Ndiritu featuring works by Charlotte Johannesson, *Each Is a Universe*, 2018; Unknown maker, *Knight Jug*, 1250–1300; Anni Albers, *Enmeshed I*, 1963; Anni Albers, *Orchestra*, 1979. *Our Silver City: 2094* installation view at Nottingham Contemporary, 2021–22. Courtesy: the artist and Nottingham Contemporary. Photo: Stuart Whipps

(1855) to Gwyneth Paltrow's wellness trends. Their latest work, shown at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, is an allegorical response to Titian's *The Rape of Europa* (ca. 1560–62).

The Kelleys have lived in the Catskills for some years, building a studio for the focused production of their exquisite films, which would be difficult amid pressures of urban life. (Try having a sound studio with an over-ground subway in the near proximity and you'll understand why.) "When you are trapped in urbanity, you forget what is possible outside of that," Patrick tells me. The work has always reflected their interest in sites of pilgrimage, medieval monasteries, even the histories of westward expansion. While their immediate context is a particular, deliberate imbrication of landscape, emptiness, and monasticism, the result is a frenetic maximalism bridging DIY technique, literary references, and eclectic art historical collisions, from Cubism to Expressionism. It's hard to consider their way of working as halfway functional in a fast-paced environment, shrouded by Deliveroo and Amazon Prime.

It's always a question of perspective. For the Kelleys, whose work is smartly aware of its own craftedness, it seems to be that time-intensive labor is only possible with a relative degree of isolation. Yet they are keen to distinguish themselves from the "second-home" commuters now arriving upstate. They speak articulately of the "artificiality" of the situation they are in. Wisely, they do not reduce their rural life or DIY ethos to a dogma of authenticity, but seem to embrace the space itself as a new form to tackle. Not only did the Kelleys precede the trendiness of rural life as early adopters; their working conditions are formatted by the limitations, productive and unproductive, of where they are.

Artists need form and scale, and Mary mentions that it's a question of embracing a standard scale of working: "If you have every resource imaginable" (as you might in a service-oriented city), "that changes the problem. It's a standard scale that we problem-solve within." What they gain in space and in control over environment, they lose in immediate convenience, but their scaled-down way of working generates new intimacies, since constraints can produce unexpected freedoms, which befits a team (a "mom and pop shop") that does everything itself, from acting to writing to postproduction. Still, they are not naive about their place as artists among other artists in a rural community.

III

When I speak to artists who live and work in villages or farms, the same touchstones come up: DIY, illusions of independence, the alternating impulses toward visibility and freedom from representation. What is palpable is a shared sense that the established structures are dysfunctional: the small commercial gallery (ever more affronted by the market), the biennial (which guarantees only brief visibility), even the now-remedially-reforming-itself museum (for many artists, still injurious to its bones). Despite a new era of inclusion on the basis of identity, even those benefiting are skeptical that this will last. The artists I speak to are haunted by experiences of discrimination or bureaucratic incompetence even at prestigious museums. The more constructive ones, such as Ndiritu, opt to set up their own structures entirely. This set of patterns, for me, contributes to a diffuse wish toward autonomy, and this makes up the conversation today.

We can call this new conversation the Great Decentering. The Great Decentering means that instead of locating the next great city for artistic activity, the next movement, the next prestigious gallery or museum show, artists will seek out media for decentralized attention, perhaps local and not global in purview. The pulse of things is even more decentralized than we thought, and reliant less on established signifiers. At its most acute, the vanguard of this movement occurs not in London's Peckham neighborhood or Warsaw's gentrifying Praga, but outside of cities altogether. People will say, "What do you mean? Cities are thriving again!" But according to this slightly heretical theory of a big bland now, where only the patrimonial class keeps the spoils, the conversation is not even in the city as a metaphorical and geographical space; and, as this idea struck me, the pandemic hit. Suddenly, everyone I knew wanted to leave. Cue the neo-hippies in wide-leg pants, the raves in parks in suburbs, natural wines, trends to take up baking and gardening. Cities might be back, but the conversation isn't there. Or maybe the conversation is mobile, algorithmic, and relatively quiet.

IV

Already the conversation is being colonized, from fashion spreads set in farmhouses to the look of "heritage" culture. Ours was already an age on the move; it's just that, accelerated by the pandemic, the patterns are changing. In 2021, the commercial real estate giant CBRE combed through US postal service data such as address change requests, and the figures corroborate what many of us have experienced or heard anecdotally: the COVID-19 pandemic hastened outward relocation of residents in high-cost coastal cities such as San Francisco, Seattle, and New York to isolated rural or semi-rural areas.[9] As usual, the artists beat them to it.

It's worth considering the demographics of these patterns, even as seen in a relatively small window of time. The data show that people are leaving cities, but in the United States most transplants are affluent, educated, and childless. Less likely to relocate are Gen-Xers with families, the elderly, and those living in ethnic enclaves, as well as the urban poor. But among a particular (mostly) white, moneyed, and mobile segment, moves to the country are a dime a dozen. This is what allowed novelist Gary Shteyngart to pen a successful satire called *Our Country Friends* (2021), set among artistic urbanites in the country just as Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* was set in London.

For years the Kelleys were on their own path out there; now, they sense a shift. "When you move to the Hudson Valley, the question is: Are you here full time?" (They are there full time.) Yet the influx of wealthy urbanites—there are newcomers for whom this is their second or third house—leads to an odd sort of feeling, making the artists neither locals nor gentrifiers. Will they, too, be priced out?

What's changed? "Fences," they tell me. When people from cities buy houses, they have a habit of putting up fences where there previously were none—ugly yellow fences, erected to seal themselves off from possible passersby. Ironic, since they are in the forest. They tell me that they recently heard a real estate developer point to their house and say: "They're artists." A marketing term, then. Their next move might be to an even more remote property in rural Ireland.

Grace Ndiritu, *Plant Theatre for Plant People*, 2021. © Grace Ndiritu. Part of *British Art Show 9*, 2021–22, Aberdeen Art Gallery. A Hayward Gallery Touring exhibition organized in collaboration with galleries across the cities of Aberdeen, Wolverhampton, Manchester and Plymouth. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Steve Smith

V

The stable museum of Groß Fredenwalde is a protected, nineteenth-century edifice located in the Uckermark, an hour's drive from Berlin. From 2012 the sculptor Inge Mahn, who has lived there since the 1990s, has run a kind of local museum out of it, with rotating shows (such as by Hans-Peter Feldmann), or simply showing objects proposed or given by other town residents. In a recent public television report, Mahn speaks about the project and her work in Joseph Beuys's class in Düsseldorf, leading to her project for documenta in 1972.[10] We can see her riding her bike in the wilderness near her home, a town of one hundred people (Groß Fredenwalde is on the other side of the Uckermark from Danh Vo's farm, Güldenhof). If Rachel Cusk is any example, it is now trendy to write stories about elderly artists in rural outposts, and the Berlin author and filmmaker Lola Randl, who moved to Uckermark, is no exception. In her recent fiction *Der Grosse Garten* (2019), she describes an artist going swimming, for instance, which used to be done naked "until so many excursionists started coming" (that is, out from the city).[11] In the book, which is a fictional paean to rural life, Randl briefly portrays someone who could be Mahn as somewhat curmudgeonly, even as the author is self-aware as an urbanite living out in the sticks, the kind of person who drives rents up.

We can laugh at the spectacle of affluent urbanites reading up on leaf identification and painting *en plein air*, but it's worth considering why this back-to-nature, out-of-the-cities movement matters. I mention the specific demographics of the outward drift, the now awkwardly affluent inflections, the coupling of technology and DIY, because of what they tell us about where culture seems to be going, where and how it is made and shown. But it's also because you may believe, like I do, that the major axis of political and cultural divisions maps onto urban-rural divides. And the possibility of fundamentally different people entering into contact, away from the filter bubble that the city has become, means something, politically, for the life of our age.

In this sense, there's something at stake today in observing what it means, say, for an artist to build a studio in the Hudson Valley, a stone's throw away from a stockbroker who can afford to buy their work, who lives across the field from someone without a high school diploma who fixes their plumbing or delivers Amazon Prime to them. If you are Mahn, who preceded this trend of Berliners to buy up old houses in fallen villages, only to be portrayed by one of them, you might have reason to be flummoxed. Or do you rather mind the AfD strongholds next door?

There are extremes. A century ago in India it was in rural, agrarian villages that anti-colonial movements secured a foothold against British-ruled cities under the Raj. We are nothing close to that now, nor is it clear who the oppressor is. But if our political morass is the product of broad isolationist tendencies, forms of intersected, corporate neocolonialisms, and a cancerous nativism, then it's crucial to observe the spaces of interaction, intersection, and even friction. This is the reality of politics, and this is village life, which may now be the new, old space of the conversation.

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1 The Federal Statistical Office in Germany reported on October 14, 2021, an all-time low of arrivals to cities with populations of more than 100,000 from abroad; and between 2019 and 2020, the number of people living in cities in Germany decreased slightly on the previous year.
2 Isabelle Graw, *High Price: Art between the Market and Celebrity Culture* (London and New York: Sternberg, 2010), 108.
3 In 2019 the blog Ribbonfarm coined the phrase "domestic cozy" as indicative of Generation Z and its combination of privacy and comfort: "[Domestic cozy] finds its best expression in privacy, among friends, rather than in public, among strangers." Venkatesh Rao, "Domestic Cozy," *Ribbonfarm*, March 4, 2019, https://www.ribbonfarm.com/series/domestic-cozy/. See also Jack Self, "The Big Flat Now," *032c*, December 16, 2018, https://032c.com/the-big-flat-now-power-flatness-and-nowness-in-the-third-millennium.
4 In 2020, the former US surgeon general under Barack Obama published a best-selling book on the epidemic of loneliness: Vivek H. Murthy, *Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World* (New York: Harper Wave, 2020). See also Reed Abelson, "Social Isolation in the U.S. Rose Even as the COVID Crisis Began to Subside, New Research Shows," *New York Times*, July 8, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/08/health/coronavirus-pandemic-recovery-social-isolation.html.
5 John Maynard Keynes, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 50.
6 Mary Reid Kelley and Patrick Kelley quotes come from a conversation with the author on August 16, 2021.
7 Valentina Romei, "Homeworking Drives House Price Boom outside UK Cities," *Financial Times*, August 28, 2021, https://www.ft.com/content/5968d25e-f2d8-4e1d-900e-18067459c7a0.
8 Grace Ndiritu quotes come from a conversation with the author on November 14, 2021.
9 See https://www.cbre.us/research-and-reports/COVID-19-Impact-on-Resident-Migration-Patterns.
10 See the 2021 documentary by German public broadcaster ARD at https://bit.ly/3GuTLg9.
11 Lola Randl, *Der Grosse Garten* (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2019).

Inge Mahn, *4 Parkbänke mit 4 Papierkörben*, 1973, *Inge Mahn* installation view at Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin, 2021. © Inge Mahn by SIAE, Rome, 2022. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin / Paris / London. Photo: def image