

***Wir Müssen Bleiben.* Artworks and Visual Expressions Against Gentrification. The Case of Rigaer Straße Walls in Berlin**

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Abstract

The article proposes an analysis of the visual artworks present in the Rigaer Straße area in Berlin. The artworks located in this city area are expressions of dissent against gentrification, real estate groups and other social actors, such as police. With reference to the scientific literature on urban art, the paper proposes visual artworks in Rigaer Straße as a useful element in interpreting actions of social groups in the German capital. In addition, the article proposes visual sociology as a field for analysing urban change and interpreting the city's visual emergencies, consistently with the sociological tradition of Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer.

Keywords: visual sociology, gentrification, graffiti.

1. Introduction to Rigaer Straße

Visual sociology has established itself as a lens to study changes of cities from multiple points of view: architecture, city planning and sociology (Simmel 1903; 1908; Park & Burgess 1921; Margolis & Pauwels 2011). For example, through the analysis of the visual dimensions of social phenomena, it is possible to identify evidence and “indicators” of facts ranging from criminality, deviance, to control (Collins, 2009; Losacco, 2012; Harper, 2012; De Cataldo & Russo, 2022). In this perspective, visual sociology also seems to be particularly useful for gentrification analysis. Gentrification is understood as the expulsion of members of the weaker classes from some urban areas, especially the central ones and those that are destinations for tourism and housing flows.

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Received: 13 September 2022
Accepted: 28 November 2022
Published: 31 January 2023



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Gentrification studies analyze social phenomena from multiple points of view. Economic dynamics of rent increase and real estate cost increase are considered (Carrera, 2020; Semi, 2015): growth and development of European big cities like Berlin, London, Rome, Paris or Milan, attract international financial investments in real estate field.

At the same time, gentrification causes improvement and redevelopment initiatives for many urban areas and forced moving of those who can no longer afford increasing costs of renting. Streets and roads get a transformation, pedestrian areas increase, speed limits are introduced, bikes get some space, clubs and restaurants increase. Buildings get to be remodeled or built and apartments are designed with environmental sustainability criteria. At the same time retirees, lonely elderly, unemployed young people, precarious workers, migrants and low-income families are forced to move to more accessible areas. Gentrification is, also, studied from sociological perspective: it focuses on changes in weaker social groups who are compared to emerging groups heading to the changing neighborhoods: global managers, tourists, wealthy young people, directors from the finance, marketing and communication fields give shape to city areas which, although they are not central, acquire value and visibility (Semi, 2015). Particular attention is paid to social conflicts that come from gentrification: if in some cases, like Milan, they are absent (Semi, 2015), in others, like Berlin or Paris, some social actors have tried to hinder the real estate transformation. In Berlin for example, squatters of the Rigaer Straße occupied buildings were the protagonists of the most famous episodes (Schärf, 2004; Vasudevan, 2015). Moreover, anthropological and ethnographic analyses focused on contexts of resistance to gentrification from an immersive point of view (Holm & Kuhn, 2011; Schärf, 2004). In a sympathetic way, they analyze behavior rules, cultures, daily practices of the squatters (Muñoz, 2019; Vasudevan, 2015), as also behaviors of the new residents of gentrified areas.

In this perspective, it seems useful to give also space and attention to the visual dimension (Harper, 2012; Margolis & Pauwels 2011) through the analysis of urban artworks and visual expressions about gentrification. The question is if gentrification also appears as a visible element in the city, beyond architectural changes and new buildings.

Studies on urban wall art lead to the origins of language and human history (Harper, 2012; Hughes, 2009), but, in relation to the contemporary society, there are four main references. A first important tradition of visual studies is dedicated to graffiti and to urban art. Since the seventies, in the United States first and then in Europe, many scholars have considered graffiti and tags on the walls and in the city subways as empirical evidence of social and cultural transformations. Before this artistic and expressive form conquered the art markets and prestigious art galleries, as happened for example with Keith

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Haring, the visual manifestations that appeared in American cities caught the attention of sociologists and social researchers. From the seventies to today, the artistic and expressive form of graffiti has undergone changes. For example, urban art established itself worldwide through new forms like the stencil and the installations. They combine sculpture, painting and performance (Hughes, 2009; Margolis & Pauwels, 2011).

Secondly, Mexican and Latin American muralism are points of reference represented by famous Diego Rivera (1886-1957) who dedicated himself to murals related to work, society, natives topics. He extended his own expressive form also to the United States and he has inspired, at the same time, many artists throughout South America.

Thirdly, the mural art was considered important and noteworthy when it expressed political contents (Grimaldi & Gallina, 2020). For example, the soviet Agitprop department, through the action of groups of artists linked to the Communist Party, was in charge of representing the party's characters and ideological points of reference on trains, city walls, buildings and ships (Reclaim Your City, 2022). At last, situationism and groups of the so-called situationist international between the Fifties and the Sixties. Referring to the thought of Lefebvre and highlighting the link between art, politics and everyday life, situationist artworks mocked the duties and the dominant rules of everyday life (Biagi & Lefebvre, 2019). In addition to political and ideological aspects, they were dedicated to immediate *détournements* related to work, family, imagination and time. Artworks included music, artwork installations and sit-ins, manifestations, street theater (Hughes, 2009; Sheringham, 2006).

1.1. Why Rigaer Straße

According to the state of art, it is important to pay attention to visual dimension of gentrification. In this sense, looking at contexts where a type of opposition to it clearly emerges, the case of Rigaer Straße, in Berlin district of Friedrichshain, seems particularly significant. In June 2021, it became famous for the clashes that happened between police, demonstrators and squatters from the nearby area. Tens of wounded officers and arrests: barricades set on fire, actions with armored vehicles and violent clashes have defined, even symbolically, the identity of a part of the city, which has remained, till now, a reference point for anarchist groups and for the radical left. Eviction actions continued until the first months of 2022, outlining an urban situation of strong social conflict and change.

The paper analyzes, beyond the legal events of occupants and properties, the mural visual expressions of the occupants, between residents and

frequenters of the many clubs and café of Rigaer Straße. This allows for a broader reflection on gentrification in the German capital.

The situation of Rigaer Straße, however peculiar, is or has been common to other towns, as it happened in Oranienburger Straße: the Kunsthaus Tacheles artistic residence was occupied from the Nineties until 2012, when it was closed and destined for a redevelopment still in progress. It well represents the transition of occupied, common and free areas to private spaces. Such spaces are usually expensive but, they can be free and open only when publicity is functional to the enhancement of nearby commercial and living real estate areas. The current change – from the Mitte district to Prenzlauer Berg and Friedrichshain – already clearly shows its characteristics: remodeled buildings, new and eco-sustainable apartments, the usage of home automation, clubs, café and restaurants, elegant shops appear more and more forcefully alongside occupied houses, old buildings in East Berlin, abandoned shops and stores, disused spaces and courtyards (Schärf, 2004).

Figure 1. An artwork that mentions real estate groups ZBI, Aelius and Vonovia, followed by “Wir bleiben alle” (we are all staying).



All the photographs are made by Uliano Conti.

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Profit goes to few real estate groups (such as Akelius, Vonovia and ZBI, Fig. 1). Buyers and newcomers are wealthy actors who support increasing costs while disadvantaged social actors are moving towards other areas of the city. Looking at gentrification from different disciplines, it emerges as a complex phenomenon caused by increasing in demand for apartments and houses for sale or rent in some city areas. That happened following an urban growth due to different factors, ranging from tourism to international investments. The first consequence affects the weaker social classes, such as retirees, the lonely elderly, precarious young people, the unemployed, migrants who are forced to move towards inexpensive city areas.

In this way, through the observation and complete reproduction of artworks in Rigaer Straße and in the nearby streets like Samariterstraße, Silvio-Meier Straße and Liebigstraße, it is possible to analyze artworks, graffiti, tags and all visual representations. Such analysis requires to distinguish between those works attributable to occupations and fight against gentrification and those one referring to “simple” graffiti.

It took about three days to observe and capture all the required photographs. The analysis was later conducted by examining the photographs. From a methodological point of view, visual sociology was the main reference, especially in documenting representations in the analyzed area: photographic research in the field is paying the price of an objectivist posture that tends to separate the observer from the context and to place it in a different position than what surrounds him. Instead, the observer himself is part of the studied context.

2. Müssen

Analysing what it is represented on the walls and buildings of the Rigaer Straße area some problems emerge, recurring semantic *topoi*, thanks to the visual representations. In the first place, texts of the artworks accentuate the verbs *müssen* and *bleiben*, that is *must*, *stay*, *remain* (Fig. 2). This emphasis clearly appears and it refers to the meaning attributed to occupations and staying in the neighbourhood: it is not just an economic and housing convenience, but a subjective interpretation of living and cohabiting. Perseverance and constancy can describe the position of those who refuse to leave their homes. They don't say *we want* or *we can* (*wollen*, *können*), but *müssen*, that is *must* in a prescriptive way.

Living in the buildings and insisting on staying there are interpreted as a moral duty, in the meaning that Juvalta (1945) attributes to the word. In this perspective, these are messages that suggest and thematize permanence in buildings as a pure duty (Juvalta, 1945, p. 14; Viroli, 1987): ‘the “pure

responsibility” arises, as an inner need, independently of external sanctions. In other words, conscience of responsibility that accompanies recognition of the right even when it is affirmed in open antithesis with the sanctions and with the opinions and dominant sentiments. However, Juvalta specifies that the conscience of responsibility that arises from the recognition of the right does not arise until after the experience of the constant connection existing between right conduct and mandatory conduct and between violation of the obligation and sanction’ (Viroli, 1987, p. 548).

Figure 2. “Rigaer 94 muss stay”. Occupying is intended as a moral duty.



Hence, responsibility is a truly intimate element “of the conscience of duty that has nothing to do with the possibility of sanctions. It is instead the consequence of the rational approval of the rule” (Viroli, 1987, p. 548). In this perspective they see permanence as a moral duty (Viroli, 1987, p. 543). In a general way and collecting different meanings of the word: “Duty is what humanity has contrasted with right awareness to its own fragility. Duty is the truth which is known to all prominent individuals, and which they point out to us with a prophetic spirit. Duty is the result of centuries of experience and of the far-sighted eye of the elects. But duty is also what the simplest man knows

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well in his intimate self, as long as he lives with serenity” (R. Musil, *L'uomo senza qualità*, in Violi, 1986, p. 543).

Figure 3. “Berlin must burn”; “ACAB”. The lettering is simple and minimal, but very large in size.



Figure 4. Visual expressions and writing against the police.



It is a civic conscience (Borghini, 2017; Pendenza, 2018) and radically democratic. It suggests an interpretation of duties of the State towards the citizens. Ensuring a shelter is one of these: the mutual link between the State actors and citizens is interpreted by recognizing to the State the power to guarantee minimum conditions for a dignified life. In this sense, the relationship between the State and citizens has a moral foundation: it is not necessary to consider to be illegal the occupation of buildings, but to underline that this occupation presupposes and asks the right to inhabit as a good that the State is able to guarantee its citizens. Therefore, it is a recognition not a conflict founded a priori (Paulson, 1992).

Figure 5. "Fick Juppies": aversion against newcomers to the neighbourhood.



The obligation to occupy is interpreted as a right in a moral way rather than a political one. It doesn't come from a rational awareness, nor it is shown in a rationally justifiable way, but, even better, it leads to another rationality. This values the moral principle in the relationship between the State and citizens. It is a perception of duty in a clear and absolute sense, with no room for misunderstandings or second thoughts: a clear separation between your own

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group and the others, between your own homes and those of the wealthier neighbours.

Figure 6. “Kein Starletten”: aversion against newcomers to the neighbourhood.



In fact, most of buildings on Rigaer Straße have been remodelled and transformed to be attractive to the wealthier classes. The rightness of permanence, and the conflict against those who discourage or hinder, it is intended as an absolute decision, linked to other moral issues, such as feminism, environmentalism, gender issues and tolerance.

Secondly, aversion and hostility towards the police emerge: it is a traditional reference, summarized in the acronym ACAB (all cops are bastard) and repeated many times on the walls of the area (Figures 3-4). Moreover, here the police must face problems and difficulties: *Bullen raus aus den Unis* and *All cops are target* represent the agency directed towards the police considered, precisely, a target when it interferes with the purpose to stay.

Other social actors represented as hostile are those who arrive in Rigaer Straße as new tenants of luxury apartments or as customers of trendy café and clubs in the area. In fact, there are several hostile references to the newcomers: people belonging to the wealthier classes who buy and rent new apartments or

people who, more simply, frequent trendy clubs and cafes. The motto *Fick Juppies* or *Kein Starletten*, which recalls hostility towards the new wealthy residents, is close to the names of the most active real estate companies in the neighbourhood and in the city. They are punctually quoted, and as opposing actors, they are therefore added to the police and to the *juppies* (Figures 5-6). Some occupied buildings of Rigaer Straße host migrant families and in particular Muslim women with children. Therefore, the migrant social actor is considered an interlocutor who needs to be helped and supported. Even some residents of the area express their solidarity with the occupants through billboards and posters on the windows (Figures 10-11).

Figure 7. “Acab” (all cops are bastard) on Liebigstraße 34 building front door.



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Figure 8. A big artwork by Mr. Woodland in Liebigstraße.



Furthermore, dimensions and bright colour of artworks help a solid visual and perceptual experience. That involves, not only in a rational way referring to

the position of each person relative to the requests of the occupants, but also emotionally. The big artworks on the facades of the buildings affect and impress; they contribute to a new experience of the city as a space to visit and to look at (Simmel, 1903). The landscape has not only an aesthetic dimension, but also a political-moral one. The visual expressions on walls of Rigaer Straße area privilege the contents, at the expense of the artistic skill and aesthetic care: in this they radically differentiate from the traditional graffiti. They expressed the name of the author or the crew paying maximum attention to the technical skill of creating (Figures 7-8).

Figure 9. Migrant families in Rigaer Straße. Many migrant women and families live in the building in Liebidstraße 34.



The visual analysis allows to focus on the perceptual dimension: it is a perspective that puts together Simmel's sociological lesson (Simmel, 1903) and Kracauer's gaze (1982) focused on transformations in the experience (*Erfahrung*) of social actor in the city. In the first decades of the twentieth century, billboard advertising, shopping galleries, city traffic, new industrial work timing, cinema and radio transform the ways of experiencing the world, contributing to a sensory disorientation and to a new need for orientation.

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Figure 10. Support to the occupants of Liebidstraße 34 ("L34") on windows of the buildings of the area.



According to Kracauer (1982) they find a compensation and an answer to the regimentation and order imposed by the propaganda and by the communication of fascism. New social movements respond to bewilderment with a suggestion of order and discipline. After a century, it is still fruitful observing transformations of the city in a perceptual and visual dimension, since new expressions (stencils, large-scale artworks...) appear in the urban landscape, as in Rigaer Straße. They also characterize some social actors such as migrants, law enforcement and real estate groups.

Figure 11. Support to the occupants of Liebidstraße 34 on windows of the buildings of the area.



3. Smash the State

Traditions of visual studies mentioned (Grimaldi & Gallina 2020; Hughes, 2009; Margolis & Pauwels, 2011; Reclaim Your City, 2022) are, more or less knowingly, taken up by the works and visual expressions in the Rigaer Straße area. Here occupants of several buildings and their supporters show their issues not only through urban protests, but also and mostly thanks to the walls and facades of the buildings which become like canvases to write on. At the same time, these are political and moral issues, represented through great artworks that have an immediate impact on observers. In summary, in Rigaer Straße area it is possible to observe the following elements: visual expressions that exalt duty (*müssen*) to stay inhabiting and to occupying the area; hostility towards the police and towards the new residents of the neighborhood; solidarity with weak groups such as migrant women; differences between these visual expressions and “traditional” graffiti.

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Figure 12. Occupied buildings in Rigaer Straße.



These elements feature the kind of contrast to gentrification that distinguishes Berlin district of Friedrichshain and that, also, allows us to reflect, more generally, on the opposition to gentrification and on its visual

manifestations. They are perceivable with the eye and interpretable through the conceptual tools of sociology.

Figure 13. Occupied buildings in Liebidstraße 34.



In the analyzed city, the violent urban riots are accompanied by art forms that recall moral rules and identify opposing social actors. All this, together with the perceptual impact of the artworks, supports a peculiar experience (*Erfahrung*) of the city that transmits ideas and concepts. These types of artworks are commonly used: business and companies use them for advertising goods and services. In this way, a dialogue between original forms and commercial forms of expression settles down, thanks to the fact that the second one cites styles and graphic characteristics of the first one: in this perspective, the city is a place of public symbolic discourses and private re-appropriations which, consequently, generate kinds of opposition and militancy.

4. Conclusions. Visual sociology and the new aura

In conclusion, two areas of reflection emerge. The first area shows a methodological character, the second is characterized by interpretative considerations. From a methodological point of view, visual sociology allows to deeply investigate urban phenomena such as gentrification, tourism and expression of dissent. Thanks to photography, attention is focused on the elements that can be perceived by the eyes, such as artworks of Rigaer Straße, and on the action of these visual evidences on the experience (*Erfahrung*) of social actors.

Visual sociology allows a form of knowledge that pays attention to perceptual elements. Thanks to tools such as camera, scholars can investigate the relationship between the city's visual emergencies and social actor. Thus, techniques using photographic images can enrich the knowledge of social phenomena: in Berlin, this possibility of research is deeply linked with the history of sociological thought. Indeed, the perceptual element in cities has been developed by the tradition of social research, and has been understood as a cognitive path capable of leading to a specific form of knowledge (Margolis & Pauwels 201; Simmel 1903; 1908).

In this sense, an important role is played by the thought of the Berliner Walter Benjamin. In the first decades of the twentieth century, photography and cinema spread as media for a large section of European population. With the twentieth century, the aura – for Benjamin the unique, distinctive and “distant” character of art and, more generally, of culture – declined. Photography, cinema – the possibility of mechanically reproducing artworks (Benjamin, 1936) – contribute to a radical socio-cultural change, expanding the arena of debate and the public as a social actor.

The mechanical reproduction (Benjamin, 1936) of artworks, possible thanks to the innovations of photography and cinema, and the transformation of the aura of art and culture, imply a social change: a new visual culture emerges and it is capable of shocking (Benjamin, 1968) Gaze and perception are annihilated, due to the impact of mechanically reproducible images. The state of shock, for Benjamin (1968), induces numbness and annihilation. To react to these consequences of media, social actors look for other stimuli, further solicitations capable of awakening from torpor, creating a vicious circle between shock and numbness.

In this perspective, colorful and large-scale artworks in Rigaer Straße configure a particular perceptual experience: these artworks are addressed to everyone who passes through Berlin's streets, from tourists to inhabitants. These images are a medium of meaning capable of constituting a temporary audience, that exists only in the moment of the artwork's fruition. A large,

urban, mobile and distracted audience. The presence in the streets of large, colorful and provocative writings is related to the desire to shock the viewer, to attract attention and to originate new *Erfahrungen*. The attempt is to engage, to make people participate, and to make them aware of housing problems.

Another early twentieth-century German intellectual, Siegfried Kracauer, allows further insight: visual emergencies (cinema, glossy magazines, city advertisements, variety shows, billboards, urban lighting), coeval with Kracauer, possess a revelatory power; they are “indicators” of social change, rooted in industrial rationalization.

In fact, capitalist rationalization based on the Tayloristic production process was reflected not only in the industrial sphere, but also in the aesthetic representations of early twentieth-century society. For example, Kracauer finds a formal principle of aesthetic union to industrial rationalization in advertisements, boxing matches, and Tiller Girls (shows in which dancers were symmetrically side-by-side and raising their legs at the same time, offering a symmetrical and regular impression) (Kracauer, 1982). Symmetry, regularity, and calculability are elements that characterize both industrial work and new performances (such as the Tiller Girls) for the masses. For Kracauer (1982) advertising, cinema and billboards are all new forms of visual representation connected to industrial rationalization. In this interpretive perspective, the urban artworks of Rigaer Straße can be accepted as “indicators” of the existence of another, non-instrumental, but gratuitous and altruistic rationality, that cannot be translated into a relationship between means and ends (Schärf, 2004; Vasudevan, 2015). Such alternative form of rationality involves sphere of housing and real estate in a particular way (Schärf, 2004; Semi, 2015): free housing and free residence may be conceivable in buildings and establishments that are not in use. Instrumental rationality degraded into pure financial market is countered by the proposal (Fig. 8) of works characterized by dissent and nonsense.

Visual sociology shows, thus, its double meaning. On the one hand, rooted in the tradition of Benjamin and Kracauer studies, it offers a field of theoretical reflection on the relationship between socioeconomic change and observable emergence; consistent with this tradition, it also deals with the field of actors’ perceptions as an informative field for research. At the same time, from a methodological point of view, photographs of the characteristics of urban areas and social contexts provide precious evidence for sociological analysis.

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