



The palm tree is a powerful symbol, evoking desirable cities with favorable climates and waterfronts. It is an inexorable feature of urban wealth and leisure landscapes. But it is also a symbol of remote wilderness, of countryside, of agricultural production—of global peripheries that have been virtually forgotten. In recent years, the palm has started to represent a crucial, if less visible, dynamic—the growth and globalization of agro-industrial production that is increasingly consuming land and landscapes around the globe, redefining traditional meanings of the rural.

Moving beyond the traditional notion of the rural is necessary for understanding agro-industrial production landscapes. The expanding agro-industrial hinterlands, such as oil-palm plantations, need to be subsumed into our conception of the urban as essential territories that provide vital resources to the cities in which we live. Architecture, design, and the visual arts play an important role in researching, describing, and making visible the ongoing industrial reorganization of the rural. These territories can no longer be seen as remote, residual, or anachronistic: they are crucial spaces of global capitalism and of urbanization processes. A new ethics of visibility that extends from urban to rural is required.

#### Geography of Paradise

As a cultural symbol, the palm tree has always occupied the Western imagination. Many believe that in the Book of Genesis, the tree of life, the sacred tree of fertility and longevity, a symbol of spiritual victory over flesh and of peace in the aftermath of conflict was in fact a palm tree. In the Age of Discovery and the colonial era, the palm was taken from the tropics to European capitals as a symbol of the exotic and of control over remote territories. In the mid-19th century, the popular palm houses in Victorian England and elsewhere in Europe, such as the one designed by Decimus Burton and Richard Turner at Kew Gardens (1844–1848), staged miniature palm jungles for eager audiences, announcing the ambitions and prestige of prosperous collectors and colonial elites. By the end of the 19th century, the palm escaped the glass and iron conservatories to conquer coastal holiday resorts from the English Channel to the Mediterranean, Torquay to Nice.

Though the palm family is extensive and diverse, comprising more than 2,500 known species,<sup>1</sup> only a few types fit within our collective seaside idylls. Among these are the ones Henri Matisse saw through the window of his Côte d'Azur villa and painted in works such as *Interior with Egyptian Curtain* (1948), the ones David Hockney painted in *A Bigger Splash* (1967), those Edward Ruscha photographed for *A Few Palm Trees* (1971), and those John Baldessari tirelessly replicated in works such as *Brain/Cloud (With Seascape and Palm Tree)* (2009).

As a construct of European colonial modernity, the palm has been a modern archetype that stands at the intersection of wealth and leisure, marking our increasingly universal desire for tropicality. Synonymous with affluence and power, the palm is embroidered on both luxury bathrobes and military uniforms, while artificial “palm islands” cast an emblem for satellite photography, transforming specific landscapes into common images. It provides an identity to the “Generic City,” which, in the words of Rem Koolhaas, depends on the vegetal “Edenic Residue” and its “immoral lushness,” to supply the myth of the organic to a supremely inorganic urbanism.<sup>2</sup> Palms are the markers of the contemporary geography of Paradise. But there are other types of palm trees.

OPENING SPREAD  
Bas Princen, Palm Oil Factory, Johor,  
Malaysia, 2015.

THIS PAGE  
John Baldessari, *Brain/Cloud (With  
Seascape and Palm Tree)*, 2009.



## Geography of Production

If classified according not to plant taxonomy but to their place in the uneven geographies of urbanization, then a wide variety of other types of palms can be distinguished from the above-mentioned urban palm. Among them are the palm species inhabiting “the wild,” the palms of rural countrysides, as well as the displaced, migrant species of production forests—the oil palm, *Elaeis guineensis*, native to West Africa.

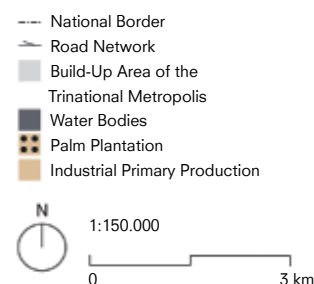
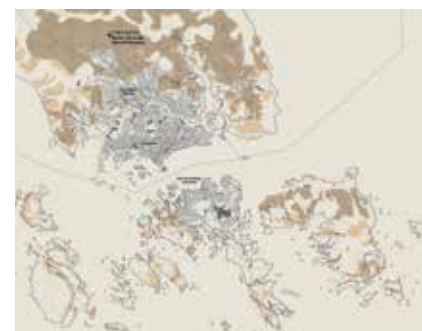
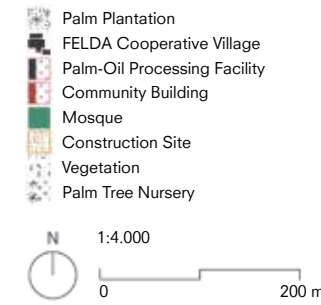
According to the United Nations and other sources, the territory harvested for palm oil has more than doubled since 1990 and continues to grow exponentially.<sup>3</sup> This territory currently covers an area the size of England and Wales combined, most of it located in Malaysia and Indonesia.<sup>4</sup> Major expansion is ongoing in South Asia (Papua New Guinea and Thailand), in West Africa (Nigeria and the Congo basin), and even in the Amazon, where it will replace rainforest and rural smallholdings, facilitated by local governments and the military.<sup>5</sup> Palm oil’s exceptional “cleanliness”—a high yield with very little waste—makes it an ideal generic commodity and, together with corn syrup, sugar, and soy, a universal ingredient found in a myriad of food products, soaps, detergents, and biofuels. Consequently, 90 percent of its global production is controlled by multinational corporations and traded on financial markets.<sup>6</sup>

Half of everyday supermarket products use palm oil, according to Amnesty International, from Colgate oral care and Pantene hair products to Vaseline, from Nestlé cereal to Ben and Jerry’s ice cream to Nutella. The ingredient lists on product labels mention a variety of different names—vegetable oil, vegetable fat, glyceryl, palmitate, stearate, stearic acid, sodium kernelate, and many more—all of which can mean palm oil.<sup>7</sup> The available data adds that the production of a single oil-palm tree typically averages 6.5 gallons per year, and that per capita annual consumption of palm oil in the European Union is nearly 13 gallons.

In the past two decades, through critical journalism, NGO work, and wide-ranging public discussion, individual as well as governmental corporate responsibility around oil-palm cultivation has been frequently invoked. At the level of corporate responsibility, organizations and instruments such as the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) and the “certified sustainable palm oil” label have been launched. The criticism of such measures by Greenpeace and other organizations points to the jargon of corporate promises, which maintains only the appearance of corporate responsibility. For example, even in the most optimistic estimates presented by palm-oil producers and members of the RSPO, only 20 percent of actual palm-oil production is certified “sustainable”; however, according to stricter social and environmental criteria, a sustainable palm-oil substance has never been produced.<sup>8</sup> At the level of governmental responsibility, comprehensive approaches to “sustainability” are not readily available either. The sustainability agenda of public institutions is often simplified to the “clean and green” message, which focuses on cities and their proximate environment, as they have neither the interest nor the instruments to reduce the massive, seemingly remote social and ecological consequences of consumption patterns.

With corporations and institutions failing to tackle the issues of sustainable production and consumption, political risks are mitigated by responsibility transfer onto the individual. In a neoliberal market democracy, consumers are expected to “vote with their purchase,” thereby providing corrective feedback that drives production choices. Critics of capitalism, including Marxist scholar Slavoj Žižek, have pointed out that in this manner, our culture tends to place responsibility for the environmental mishaps of the late capitalist economy on the individual citizen-consumer. In actuality, consumers have neither proper information nor choice, making their “dollar votes” largely random and ineffective. What is left, according to Žižek, are symbolic but ultimately futile practices of so-called ethical consumption—individual symbolic acts such as purchasing “sustainable” palm oil only amount to the “delusion of green capitalism.”<sup>9</sup>

In the West, palm-oil production is still often perceived as distant, “as if none of us are complicit, as if we are simply the recipients and not also the donors to this madness.”<sup>10</sup> While the remote consequences of oil-palm cultivation are framed in



relation to rainforest and biodiversity loss and carbon emissions, the lived realities of oil-palm plantations are largely unseen and inevitably blurred through a torrent of information—journalism, academic papers, NGO reports, and corporate pamphlets. Recent works by practitioners looking at plantation economies and their attendant landscapes and everyday struggles, such as artist Simryn Gill’s series *Vegetation* (1999/2016) or activist geographer Radjawali Irendra/Akademi Drone Indonesia’s *Excerpts from Field and Sky* (2016–2017), or artist Ho Tzu Nyen’s *The Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia (“F”)* (2017), are efforts to make visible the otherwise obscure realities of the oil-palm landscape—namely, the loss of forest and the living world, pollution, violence, and peril for the communities. These works contemplate the new industrial state of nature, the vast areas under extreme monoculture, and plantation-deserts. Despite the gradually increasing knowledge and awareness of the effects of palm-oil production, systemic change has been slow, almost nonexistent.

Only an occasional disaster has been capable of bringing the desolate situation into the public eye and under scrutiny. “Your cooking oil may be contributing to the haze,” reads a billboard in Singapore, hinting at the annual burning of jungle and plantations due for replanting some 125 miles to the east on Sumatra. Each year the plantation fires generate a cloud of toxic haze that sometimes reaches geopolitical proportions: the hazardous fumes are able to cover the region from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur and from Medan to Brunei, triggering an international diplomatic





blame game and producing staggering amounts of carbon emissions that feed climate change. The haze's reliable yearly recurrence reveals the difficult entanglement of capitalist production, geopolitics, and environment: instead of working toward a solution, governments and the financial sector incentivize palm-oil companies and turn a blind eye to practices on the ground. In other words, only through fundamental structural change of the entire industry will change be possible.

The global value chains of palm oil, and the plantation landscapes themselves, have evolved over the past century into inert, even ossified structures. In actuality, the advantages for producers and traders of modifying their practices are hard to identify. In Malaysia, for example, the expansion of the palm-oil industry since the mid-1950s (boosted by the Federal Land Development Authority, FELDA, which oversaw schemes meant to alleviate rural poverty) involved massive resettlement programs that have benefited more than 110,000 "settlers" and their families through the establishment of small holdings and cooperatives—a de-facto creation of a palm-oil middle class.<sup>11</sup> The FELDA village cooperatives are planned, colorful oases amid the sea of palm; by contrast, the life of the migrant worker employed by the cooperatives is precarious. The process of oil-palm cultivation is less labor intensive than any type of traditional fruit cultivation, requiring only about 25 workers for less than half a square mile.

Plantations in Malaysia were always run on migrant labor: in earlier times migrations of Chinese and Indian laborers were orchestrated from London; today, the production relies mainly on transnational migrant workers from Southeast Asia, especially people from Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. Palm oil contributes around 5 to 6 percent to the Malaysian GDP; in 2016, oil palm occupied more than 22,000 square miles, nearly one-fifth of the total land area.<sup>12</sup> For more than a century, plantations have encircled Malaysian towns and villages, and memories of the landscape before the plantations have faded. In many places, older rubber, pepper, and gambier "estates," installed by the British, were replaced by oil palm in the 20th century—most people have never known the landscape without plantations. In the words of Simryn Gill, "The oil palm is the nation, and we are its cradle. It's our mother and our father, our milk, our fried chicken, our beauty, and our fuel. We consume the beast into being. Sometimes you can find yourself thinking it is not so much that the oil is there to satisfy our needs; rather, we are here to give the palm a reason."<sup>13</sup>

### (Invisible) Industrialization of the Rural

The palm-oil hinterlands and other industrial production landscapes are the modern-day terra incognita of industrial primary production, hidden from view, away from big cities, in clandestine spaces of exception such as free-trade or export-processing zones operated under "special rules" and "flexible labor" regimes. Seen from a distance, from self-declared "postindustrial" and "post-working-class" societies in the West, and mediated through the lenses of popular techno-scientific representations, these production territories seem homogenized and undifferentiated, lacking both social and natural characteristics. They appear as Cartesian, technical landscapes without geographic aberrations, without specificities: a uniform pattern on a map, a grainy texture on Google Earth.

However, it is precisely this ostensibly unspecific geography that is the crucial terrain of the global economy. Tied into infrastructures of processing, logistics, and trade, its economic utilization seems to be helped by abstraction from concrete realities. This geography is easily mystified as a space of "deterritorialized" and "reterritorialized" production, a part of the technological "space of flows" and "weightless economy" of trade. Through such elaborately distorted representations—peddled by corporate economic gurus and public policymakers alike—production spaces are conceptually neutralized from the meanings of locality, place, and ground. They become spaces reduced to economic transactions.

The oil-palm plantations can no longer be understood as "rural" in the traditional sense—these territories neither display the continuity of settlement and land ownership with the rural areas they came to replace, nor do they provide any degree of social and economic autonomy (or self-sufficiency) for their residents and workers. They are territories where traditional rural socioeconomic relations have been reorganized in the form of industrial exploitation of the land, whose management and production are positioned within global supply chains. Palm-oil territories should be understood as global agro-industrial hinterlands, a concomitant of the global capitalist economy and urbanization processes. The rural is becoming completely industrialized and urbanized; the "frontiers" are disappearing.

### Representing and Designing Production Landscapes

A precondition for any design—and for change through design—is that the matter of design concern is socially recognized, conceptualized, made visible. However, the case here is not only that palm-oil landscapes are remote and unknown to the West, but that (industrial) labor and production in the West are also generally removed and hidden from view. In fact, the removal of labor and production as central social and political preoccupations, and their disappearance from the standard repertoire of artistic themes, constitutes a widespread cultural symptom of the "postindustrial" world.<sup>14</sup>

There is no doubt that production landscapes are no longer the "absolute spaces" of nature they once were. They are socially produced spaces, a "second nature" shaped by human activity, conceptualized and inscribed into contemporary forms of representation. We tend to believe that production landscapes are known to us, rendering curiosity itself superfluous. In 1973, the photographer Luigi Ghirri pointed to this lack of curiosity: "By now, all the paradise islands dear to literature and to our hopes have already been described, and the only possible discovery or journey seems to be that of discovering the discovery already made."<sup>15</sup> He countered this statement, however, with the opposite: "even within the most codified world" of the "already-lived and seemingly totalising experience," "infinite readings . . . are always possible."<sup>16</sup> Production landscapes should therefore be seen as a new frontier launching, in Hans Ulrich Obrist's words, "a second age of exploration,"<sup>17</sup> provoking a new kind exploration of the landscapes of our planet.

The process of industrial and urban reorganization of former rural and natural areas, as in the case of palm-oil production, has completely transformed the meaning that notions of the rural and the countryside used to hold. The rural has disappeared: it has become a conceptual black box and an unfamiliar geography, quietly transformed through less familiar forces of urbanization working away from the large centers. The characteristics of these territories—social, cultural, morphological, and typological—are yet to be discovered, described, and named. Architects and designers have yet to join visual artists and other researchers and activists in representing connections to the unseen and unacknowledged. Against indifference and moral "blindness," visibility is an ethics and an aesthetic strategy that has the potential to mobilize a wider social commitment and will to change. The new concepts and representations that will substitute the exhausted notion of the rural will have to show that industrial landscapes such as palm-oil plantations are essential parts of our cities—they are the city. This will require thinking, imagining, designing, and governing at a larger, transnational, and planetary scale, which will be reflected in the locality.

<sup>1</sup> "Introduction," Virtual Palm Encyclopedia, Palm & Cycad Societies of Florida, Inc., [http://www.plantapalm.com/vpe/introduction/vpe\\_introduction.htm](http://www.plantapalm.com/vpe/introduction/vpe_introduction.htm).

<sup>2</sup> Rem Koolhaas, "Generic City," in *S,M,L,XL* (New York: Monacelli Press: 1995), 1,252–53; italics in original.

<sup>3</sup> UNEP Global Environmental Alert Service, "Oil Palm Plantations: Threats and Opportunities for Tropical Ecosystems," December 2011, [http://www.grid.unep.ch/products/3\\_Reports/Dec\\_11\\_Palm\\_Plantations.pdf](http://www.grid.unep.ch/products/3_Reports/Dec_11_Palm_Plantations.pdf); and World Rainforest Movement, *Oil Palm: From Cosmetics to Biodiesel, Colonization Lives On* (Montevideo: World Rainforest Movement, 2006), <http://wrm.org.uy/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Palm2.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations online statistical service, data for 2013, <http://faostat.fao.org/site/567/default.aspx#ancor>.

<sup>5</sup> World Rainforest Movement, *Oil Palm*; and Tom Levitt and Heriberto Araujo, "The Palm Oil Debate: The Amazon's New Danger: Brazil Sets Sights on Palm Oil," *Guardian*, June 29, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2017/jun/29/brazil-palm-oil-amazon-rainforest-deforestation-temer-farming-para-cerrado>.

<sup>6</sup> UNEP Global Environmental Alert Service, "Oil Palm Plantations."

<sup>7</sup> "About Us," Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil, <http://www.rspo.org/about>.

<sup>8</sup> Amnesty International, "Palm Oil and Human Rights: What You Need to Know," November 30, 2016, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/11/key-facts-about-palm-oil/>.

<sup>9</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "Slavoj Žižek: The Delusion of Green Capitalism," video, 4:05, from the lecture "The Situation Is Catastrophic, but Not Serious," Graduate Center, City University of New York, April 4, 2011, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yzcfq1\\_bt8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yzcfq1_bt8).

<sup>10</sup> Simryn Gill in Simryn Gill and Michael Taussig, *Becoming Palm* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017), 8.

<sup>11</sup> See Milica Topalovic, Martin Knüsel, and Marcel Jäggi, eds., *Architecture of Territory: Hinterland, Singapore, Johor, Riau* (Singapore: Architecture of Territory/ETH Zurich, 2013), 64–77.

<sup>12</sup> Malaysian Palm Oil Board, <http://www.palmoilworld.org/sustainability.html>, and "Oil Palm Estates, January–December 2016," [http://bepi.mpob.gov.my/images/area/2016/Area\\_summary.pdf](http://bepi.mpob.gov.my/images/area/2016/Area_summary.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> Gill and Taussig, *Becoming Palm*, 28.

<sup>14</sup> Bill Roberts, "Production in View: Allan Sekula's *Fish Story* and the Thawing of Postmodernism," *Tate Papers* 18 (Autumn 2012), <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/production-view-allan-sekulas-fish-story-and-thawing-postmodernism>.

<sup>15</sup> Luigi Ghirri, *Atlante* (Milan: Charta, 2000), back cover.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Interview" by Paul Holdengräber, *Surface*, December/January 2013, 132.