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Close to the Field: The Artistic Portrayal of Seasonal Workers in Germany

Abstract

This article examines contemporary artistic engagement with the theme of Eastern European seasonal migration in German agriculture. Seasonal labor of Eastern European workers in agriculture has been an integral part of German history since at least the 19th century. Migrant workers from what is now Poland in particular have provided seasonal help during harvest times. The advantage for the farms was (and remains today) that the workers did not have to be employed permanently, especially not in winter, but were hired and paid specifically for the harvest season. It was not until the current pandemic that the public became aware of the situation of temporarily migrating harvest workers, due to the high numbers of infections on asparagus farms, for example. This article enquires into art's specific approaches to the subject: recent works by the artist Andrea Büttner and the photographer Irina Ruppert, who have dealt with harvest workers and their work in recent years, were selected. In this essay, the social and historical contexts are put into perspective as are the artistic and photographic traditions within which Büttner and Ruppert operate. The guiding question is how artistic means are used to make visible a practice that is socially invisible or marginalized, such as seasonal labor migration.

Keywords:

harvest, seasonal work, migration, art, photography

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Dicht am Feld: Saisonarbeiter*innen in Deutschland im Blick zeitgenössischer Kunst und Fotografie

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag untersucht zeitgenössische künstlerische Auseinandersetzungen mit dem Thema der osteuropäischen saisonalen Migration in der deutschen Landwirtschaft. Die Saisonarbeit osteuropäischer Arbeitskräfte ist mindestens seit dem 19. Jahrhundert ein fester Bestandteil der deutschen Geschichte. Vor allem Arbeitsmigrant*innen aus dem heutigen Polen halfen in der Erntezeit aus. Der Vorteil für die Betriebe war (und ist auch heute noch), dass die Arbeiter*innen nicht dauerhaft, vor allem nicht im Winter, beschäftigt werden mussten, sondern gezielt für die Erntezeit eingestellt und bezahlt wurden. Erst im Zuge der aktuellen Pandemie wurde die Öffentlichkeit durch die hohen Infektionszahlen, z.B. auf Spargelhöfen, auf die Situation der temporär migrierenden Erntehelfer*innen aufmerksam. Der Beitrag fragt nach den spezifischen Zugängen der Kunst zu diesem Thema: Ausgewählt wurden aktuelle Arbeiten der Künstlerin Andrea Büttner und der Fotografin Irina Ruppert, die sich in den letzten Jahren mit Erntehelfer*innen und ihrer Arbeit auseinandersetzen. In diesem Essay werden die sozialen und historischen Kontexte ebenso diskutiert wie die künstlerischen und fotografischen Traditionen, in denen sich Büttner und Ruppert bewegen. Zentral ist dabei die Frage, wie mit künstlerischen Mitteln eine gesellschaftlich unsichtbare oder marginalisierte Praxis wie die saisonale Arbeitsmigration sichtbar gemacht wird.

Schlagwörter

Ernte, Erntehelfer*innen, Saisonarbeit, Migration, Kunst, Fotografie

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On 3 May 2021, the portal *agrار.heute* reported a COVID-19 outbreak on an asparagus farm in the state of Lower Saxony, Germany, with over 100 employees testing positive. This led to a tightening of the protection regulations and further testing among the 1,200 employees on the farm (Krenn 2021).¹

¹ This contribution was written as part of the academic project ›The Borderland as Transition Space. Artistic and curatorial strategies on the Polish-German border in the context of foreign cultural policies and border art (1989–2019)‹, financed by the National Science Center Poland (OPUS 2018/31/B/HS2/00553) and conducted with Prof. Dr. Marta Smolińska (The University of the Arts, Poznań) in the time period 2019–2022.

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany in March 2020, similar massive infection situations have repeatedly occurred on asparagus farms and in slaughterhouses. In this context, the precarious living and working conditions of Eastern European seasonal workers – here mainly Polish and Romanian – who have been working in agriculture and meat-processing plants (as well as in construction) for decades, have become visible: the high infection rates and, on the asparagus farms, the threat of harvest losses have led to media attention. In March 2020, the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* published an article on the COVID-19 policy of the German government. Although contact restrictions to control the pandemic would be maintained until May 2020, the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Agriculture approved the entry of 80,000 Romanian harvest workers by special permit to secure the asparagus harvest. The article mentioned the unhygienic accommodations in mass shelters and the poor sanitary facilities (Jacobs 2020).

As if under a microscope, COVID-19 has revealed substandard living and working conditions worldwide, particularly among the most vulnerable, the low-income workers who cannot work in a home office and who live in cramped conditions. Research from the pandemic period has confirmed this inequality. In February 2021, the Robert Koch Institute published a report on *Social differences in COVID-19 mortality during the second wave of infection in Germany*, stating that mortality in socially highly disadvantaged regions was 50–70% higher than in regions with low social disadvantages. The basis for the analysis was the reporting data of the German Index of Socioeconomic Deprivation (GISD) for 401 districts and cities (Robert Koch Institut 2021). Although this study cannot be directly correlated with seasonal work, the ›Corona Special Instructions for Farms with Seasonal Workers‹ distributed on the pages of German agricultural associations, with reference to the entry and quarantine obligation of Polish seasonal workers, points to a correlation between the work situation and the infection situation.²

These observations of the media, social, and political attention paid to seasonal workers during the COVID-19 pandemic are a starting point for me to reflect on the visibility and invisibility of agricultural workers and temporary labor migrants in German agriculture – the majority of whom come from Poland, with a smaller number from Romania and Bulgaria (Wagner et al. 2013, pp. 10–11). Although art and photography have engaged for some time with seasonal work, this congruence only recently came into the public eye in

² See, for example, the information provided by the Rheinischer Landwirtschafts-Verband (RLV), <https://www.rlv.de/der-rlv/corona-aktuell/saison-aks/> (accessed 8.5.2021), or by the website of Landwirtschaft, Forsten und Gartenbau (SVLFG), <https://www.svlfg.de/corona-saisonarbeit> (accessed 8.3.2022).

a dramatic way as a result of the pandemic. Media reports rarely look at the actual people who become infected, criticizing only the companies, the subcontracting practices, and the collective accommodations (Verschwele and Wernicke 2020).

I am interested in the artistic and photographic perspectives on the topic of seasonal work and seasonal workers, their working and living conditions, and how these debates are formulated in media-specific terms. What are the approaches and methods chosen, and what is the relationship between artists/photographers and the observed actors?

Image History of Bending Down: Andrea Büttner on Harvesting

In the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the artist Andrea Büttner traveled from Berlin to various asparagus farms in Beelitz in Brandenburg, where mainly harvest workers from Poland (but also from Romania and Spain) are employed. Beelitz is about 125 kilometers and 75 minutes by car from the Polish border near Frankfurt/Oder, making it a popular destination for seasonal migration.

Seasonal labor involving Eastern European agricultural workers has been an integral part of German history since at least the 19th century (Weber-Kellermann 1988, p. 317). Migrant workers from what is now Poland in particular used to help out seasonally during harvest times. The advantage for the farms was that the workers did not have to be employed permanently, particularly not in winter, but were hired and paid specifically for the harvest season (Weber-Kellermann 1988, p. 377). As early as the 19th century, the placement of seasonal workers was carried out professionally by agents, most of whom came from the harvest workers' home countries. Having a go-between also increased the depersonalization of the employment relationship between employer and employee. A relationship could hardly be built up since the contact person was primarily the agent, the intermediary to the landowner, who at the same time served as the workers' foreman. The seasonal workers often had to sign strict contracts, and the agents sometimes enriched themselves with supplies and food, while the conditions in the accommodations provided were pitiful (Weber-Kellermann 1988, pp. 377–379; Herbert 2003, p. 38). This history of foreign labor and its consequences up to the present is not actively negotiated by the artist Andrea Büttner, but it forms an invisible context for her examination of the asparagus harvest in Beelitz.



Fig. 1: Andrea Büttner, *Skizzenbuch Spargelernte in Beelitz* (sketchbook asparagus harvest in Beelitz), 2020, pencil on paper, 30.2 x 21.5 x 2.3 cm, Photo: Roman März, © Andrea Büttner / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2022.

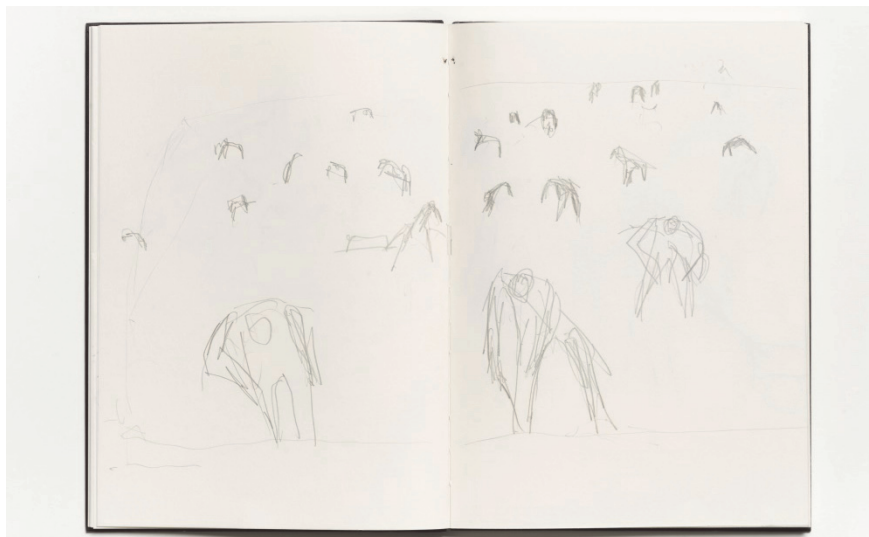


Fig. 2: Andrea Büttner, *Skizzenbuch Spargelernte in Beelitz* (sketchbook asparagus harvest in Beelitz), 2020, pencil on paper, 30.2 x 21.5 x 2.3 cm, Photo: Roman März, © Andrea Büttner / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2022.

In her sketchbook, Büttner drew contour lines with a pencil (Fig. 1) of the harvesters bending down to pick asparagus. Sometimes only the rear of the head and the rounded back can be seen, sometimes the outstretched arms or hands are visible. The drawing, reduced to a few lines, accentuates the posture, which is a condition for harvesting. In her sketchbook, the perspective opens up on two double pages and reveals the view of the field. Here, the seasonal workers each work separately, their bodies distributed across the field at regular intervals, forming a pattern (Fig. 2).



Fig. 3: Andrea Büttner, *Erntende* (harvester), 2021, woodcut, 188 x 113 cm, Photo: Andy Keate, © Andrea Büttner / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2022.

Andrea Büttner translates the act of harvesting by drawing the seasonal workers without markings of individuality, reducing them only to body outlines and gestures. In her drawings, the artist explores the essence of physical labor, which is a prerequisite for the consumption of asparagus. While the drawings stand at the beginning of the work, Büttner continues in different techniques: in red, blue or green woodcuts (Fig. 3), the pencil strokes become white contours that stand out against the colored background. The large format – 188 x 113 cm – lifts the harvesters life-size into the picture, and yet they remain flat, faceless bodies. In her etchings (Fig. 4), Andrea Büttner isolates the hands, which stretch out towards the asparagus. The content of the picture shows a symbiotic relationship between hands and working tools, between tools and asparagus. The woodcut and etching are, as David Khalat writes, »craft printmaking techniques that are often considered inferior art forms in contemporary art« (Khalat 2021). This alludes to the value of what is produced, that of the art as well as the value of the vegetables. What is the relationship between the physical labor of harvesting and the economic return on the sale of asparagus? How does the value of the harvested produce relate to that of the physical labor?



Fig. 4: Andrea Büttner, *Asparagus Harvest*, 2021, etching, 70 x 100 cm, Photo: Eva Herzog, © Andrea Büttner / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2022.

For the 2020 *Studio Berlin* exhibition at Berlin's Club Berghain, Büttner contributed the double projection *Kunstgeschichte des Bückens* (Art History of Bending), which also derived from her artistic exploration of seasonal agricultural work and had its point of departure in the images of asparagus harvesting. The history of bending down juxtaposes each of two images from art history that show activities for which bending down is a prerequisite – harvesting, gathering wood – activities that are formulated, for example, in works by the Impressionists. Work in the fields and the physical labor connected with it are thus important points of reference for premodern and modern art and a focal point of artistic seeing and working *en plein air*.

Andrea Büttner writes:

»But I was also confronted with the question – and I tried to pursue this in the historical work – of how we at the contemporary time look differently at graphic representations of the harvest, at representations of the work of others, of the bending down of others, as portrayed by artists who do not proceed in a documentary or activist way. And I wanted to look at and cross-check my own approach, so to speak, within the horizon of historical representations, also to reflect or critique current representational regimes«. (Büttner 2022; author's translation of German original).

In Büttner's work, the spheres of the drawing and the drawn remain separate, referring to the practice of those artists in history who drew on location but lived at a (social) distance from their models.

Bending down is an ambiguous posture; it can be read as a moment of submission or subordination, but it is also a typical bodily movement of gathering. Here and in her interest in art historical iconography, parallels can be found between Andrea Büttner's work and *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse* (2000) by director Agnès Varda. This film is dedicated to the agricultural tradition of allowing strangers to pick up fruits and vegetables left over from the harvest (Fig. 5). The filmmaker closely follows the movements of gleaners – both in the countryside and at food-and-vegetable markets and at supermarket dump sites – who pick up what has been discarded. In an almost ethnographical style, the film also addresses the legal aspects of these forms of collecting leftovers. While traditionally this practice is tacitly tolerated and legalized in the countryside (Bonner 2013, p. 494), gleaners in the cities can be prosecuted if they pick up vegetables that have been left lying around in dismantled markets or search through bins for expired and discarded food. Varda's film repeatedly brings the posture and gestures of the pickers into the picture: the stooped posture when something is picked up from the ground with outstretched arms. Varda also finds this body language in 19th-century paintings by Jean-François Millet and Jules Breton dedicated to agricultural harvesters (Cruikshank 2007).



Fig. 5: *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse* (F 2000), 82 min., director: Agnès Varda, still, <https://www.filmwerkstatt-duesseldorf.de/les-glaneurs-et-la-glaneuse/>. Accessed 10.3.2022.

Varda refers to an art history of the harvest, which is often also a history of stooping. In her film, the images and sounds have an equal relationship. The cinematic gaze is mitigated by the intimacy she achieves by putting herself and her interaction with gleaners into the frame, becoming a gleaner («la glaneuse» in the title) herself of images, food and objects, listening very carefully to what her subjects have to say. The soundtrack in particular gives the visited collectors an opportunity to speak about their backgrounds and motivations (need, hunger, rebellion, activism) for collecting (cf. Bonner 2013, p. 494). The sound overcomes the limits imposed by the camera as a detached observer. As for the gleaners Varda encounters in the course of her journey through France, they cannot film back as they have no cameras, but they respond and interact with their words. At the same time, the visual argumentation creates the possibility to understand gleaning not only as a peripheral activity of the marginalized, but against a larger (art) historical and social context.

Photographic practice in the field: Irina Ruppert's *Erz. 7139*

Erz. 7139 is a photographic project featuring seasonal farm workers in Dannstadt-Schauernheim (Rhineland-Palatinate) by photographer Irina Ruppert. A six-month stay in this rural region as part of the itinerant art and culture project *Matchbox* raised Ruppert's awareness of the question of who harvests the vegetables for the supermarkets and of the links that can be established between consumers and harvest workers who are otherwise little discussed and hardly visible in public. For her project, Ruppert sought contact with

seasonal workers who had come from Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria to do physically demanding work for which it is almost impossible to find domestic harvest workers. Ruppert herself took a job as a harvest helper for one of the local farming families and was thus able to make contact with other farmers, from whom she asked permission to take photographs.

Ruppert's models pose directly at the edge of the field in their work clothes (Fig. 6). A woman stands upright with her head turned to the side in front of the photographer. There is soil on the tanned arms and hands, the trousers and the rubber boots, and thus the traces of the work just done. Another harvester (Fig. 7) has bared his upper body; he, too, is looking out of the picture. Another is holding a knife. She is looking into the camera. Those photographed pose in front of cloths showing various rural and nature motifs in black and white and fastened with clips.

For her project, Ruppert worked with historical photographs from the region that she found through appeals to the local population and that show a time when the farmers still worked in the fields themselves. She enlarged these photographs and printed them on fabric to use as backgrounds for her *Erz. 7139* series. In this way, Ruppert works in the tradition of historical studio and itinerant photographers who isolated their models from their respective everyday context and captured them against an imagined, often idealized, backdrop. This historical practice was continued from the middle of the 20th century by the German photographer Stefan Moses, who placed his models for his photo series in front of a monochrome/gray cloth and thus created a neutral background that was always the same, whether he was, for example, portraying dying professions or an entire nation (for his series dedicated to the neighbors/Germans, see Dogramaci 2016, pp. 47–60).

Ruppert's reference to a wandering historical photography connects the migratory practice of camera art with the status of those photographed as temporary migrants. The theme of mobility and migration has been inherent in photography from the time of its introduction in 1839. Travel photography, even with cameras that were heavy at the time, was one of the popular genres of early photography. The mobile, portable studio expanded the professional field of the photographer by making portrait photography possible even where no photographic studios existed, for example, in rural areas or on the war front. By locating herself in the history of photography, Ruppert makes it clear that mobility is not a special case in history, but a widespread phenomenon that affects people as well as professions, practices, and objects.



Fig. 6: Irina Ruppert, *Erz. 7139*, 2018.



Fig. 7: Irina Ruppert, *Erz.* 7139, 2018.

The choice of historical backgrounds from local photographic history for the contemporary portraits of the seasonal workers also creates an embeddedness in the region. The interrelationships between historical image production and agricultural work, contemporary work and photography are revealed. This approach works with the foreignness of the local workers: acculturation of the seasonal workers can rarely take place, as they live in their own domestic communities and their everyday life is determined by work in the fields and residence in collective accommodations. Participation in local everyday life can hardly take place due to the regular exchange of workers, who therefore almost never live on-site for an extended period.

Irina Ruppert overcomes this isolation, at least iconographically, by integrating the workers into a history of agricultural work in the Dannstadt-Schauernheim region. Incidentally, the title of the series *Erz. 7139* refers to the number of a local producer (thus, *Erz.* for *Erzeuger*, meaning ›producer‹), the Jotterts family, where Ruppert herself first worked as a harvest worker (Gerschwitz 2018). The photographer set up the background for the photographs at the edge of the fields she herself worked in. Any of the seasonal workers who were interested could come to the setup and have their picture taken. Ruppert's language skills – she speaks a little Romanian, Bulgarian, Russian and Polish – helped her to make contact with the workers.



Fig. 8: Irina Ruppert, *Erz. 7139*, field exhibition, Dannstadt-Schauernheim 2018.

The local embedding is once again the background for the special exhibition of the portraits created, which took place in situ, on site, in the field (Fig. 8).³ The larger-than-life prints were exhibited at the place where they were taken, on a field in Dannstadt-Schauernheim, and were thus accessible to the local population. The large format of the photographs emphasized the heroic appearance of the models, their self-confidence and presence in ›their‹ fields, and drew attention through their size for those who are otherwise hardly noticed, or who are only looked at in problem-laden contexts (for example, in connection with a virus and its spread).

This exhibition in the field also addresses a problem related to the social orientation of photography: what happens to the photographs of seasonal workers when they are transferred to the art context and shown in the museum or gallery? Who then looks at these people, and to what extent do they become objects that are seen by an audience that possibly or probably comes from other social contexts?

With this exhibition practice, Irina Ruppert takes into account the boundary lines between photographer, photographed, and audience that are inscribed in photography in the field. The exhibition at the field does not abolish this boundary, but it creates a different accessibility outside the art institution. Ruppert says: »The seasonal workers were very proud and took a lot of selfies. I don't think they would have come to a gallery« (Ruppert 2021; author's translation of the German original).

The (Artistic) Yield of the Harvest

In a subsequent series, *Vegetabilien Fotogramme* (Vegetable Photograms), Ruppert worked with the vegetables harvested in the fields. When she worked in the fields herself during her project *Erz. 7139*, Ruppert was told that the outer leaves of the lettuce, herbs and cabbage had to be removed so that the vegetables would sell better in the supermarket (Zimmermann 2020). Ruppert collected about 100 of these leaves, which were considered unappealing, dried them and then exposed them on photographic paper in the darkroom. The results show finely branched herb and vegetable leaves whose outlines and shape stand out in their difference in an extremely artistic way (Fig. 9). The photographs, produced solely by the special shape and impression of the leaves, the incidence of light, and the light-sensitive paper, lend their subject a special presence. The waste product is loaded with an aura, appearing special and precious.

³ <https://www.matchbox-rhein-neckar.de/vergangene-projekte/detail/veranstaltung/feld-ausstellung-erz-7139/>. Accessed 10.3.2022.



Fig. 9: Irina Ruppert, *Vegetabilien Fotogramme*, Lollo Rosso, 2020.

The photogram as a camera-less image production was a technique already widespread in the 19th century, when the vegetable was also a valued subject (Steidl 2019, pp. 189–259). Just as photography was read as a »pencil of nature«⁴ – that is, as painting with light – the photogrammed natural object can also be interpreted as ›made‹ by nature. The artistic production is thus attributed to nature.

⁴ See the book *The Pencil of Nature* by William Fox Talbot, published in 1844, which introduced his photographic process called calotype.

In *Vegetabilien Fotogramme* and the *Erz. 7139* series, in particular, it becomes clear that marginalized labor, marginalized bodies and actors, as well as what is declared to be waste and rejected, experience a different visibility and ennoblement in photographic form. The vegetable photograms, which show the harvested vegetables as precious, also lead to a revaluation of the work done in the field, which produces something valuable.

Büttner's artistic practice is the result of her on-site visits to the Brandenburg asparagus farms frequented by Polish harvest workers. She drew what she saw at the fields. Irina Ruppert could presumably develop a different proximity through her own labor in the fields. Perhaps Ruppert's work could also be described as ethnographic research or fieldwork in the broadest sense, as it is less a matter of covert participant observation, i.e. working undercover (Wagner et al. 2013, pp. 12–13), but rather of a clear positioning as an external photographer who observes the work in the fields for a limited period of time and with a concept, photographs it and communicates with the actors in the form of conversations and interviews. Ruppert's series *Erz. 7139* also refers to the tradition of traveling photography – that is, to a migrant or mobile medium itself, designed for exposure and exhibition. In other words, the exhibition in the field is a genuine component of the project, and the showing of the resulting images is conceptually planned from the outset in Ruppert's work.

Andrea Büttner's work is in turn closely linked to an art or pictorial history of agriculture and field work, to which Jean-François Millet's farmers belong, much as Agnès Varda's film *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse*, which in turn locates itself within French painting. In his essay ›Millet and the Peasant‹, the art theorist and philosopher John Berger describes what motivated the French painter to create his images of agricultural labor, a central theme of his work. Millet introduced the peasant in the mid-19th century as an individual subject and a new object in the tradition of oil painting, »to introduce previously unpainted experience« (Berger 2009, p. 77) and to paint for urban viewers in particular the hardships of everyday peasant labor: »Most of the public who went to look at paintings in the Salon were ignorant of the penury which existed in the countryside, and one of Millet's conscious aims was ›to disturb them in their contentment and leisure‹« (Berger 2009, p. 78).

Millet's pictorial repertoire also includes potato harvesting, another one of those activities that require a stooped posture. So when Andrea Büttner works in awareness of this art history – and this is how the double projection of the art history of bending down that she has put together can be understood – she locates herself in a history of drawn or painted work. Her drawings and prints condense what numerous artists before her also practiced: the transfer of the observed work, for which the eye scanned not only landscapes

but also movements and had to find a form for them, onto paper or canvas, with one's own hand. This is how John Berger describes Millet's search for new artistic formulas and attempted solutions for his new subject of hard peasant work in the fields (Berger 2009, p. 83–84). In Andrea Büttner's work, the subject is greatly reduced, landscape or narrative approaches are eliminated, so that only artistically translated physical labor is present – as if a substrate of a visual history of farm labor were being formulated here.

In the art context, Andrea Büttner and Irina Ruppert have contributed significantly to the visibility of marginalized work that is neither socially acceptable nor visible; that is, the conditions of this value creation are hardly thematized, and in the process the economically positive contribution of seasonal workers is not appreciated.

At the same time, the dividing line between the models and their photographer or artist seems to remain intact. I formulate this with a view to the question of agency that should be posed, especially in the context of marginalized actors: How clearly can the seasonal workers formulate their concerns? Can the medium of photography or drawing succeed at all in actually making them visible? Unlike audiovisual, or even purely auditory projects, in which the voices of the actors become audible, or participatory projects, which could give the participants themselves the opportunity to express themselves artistically or photographically, the objectification of the subjects is not suspended in the works presented. Nevertheless, an analogy is formulated. For example, in the practice of drawing and the practice of harvesting, both are manual labor, both require a tool that is directly connected to the hand. These parallels between the handwork of artists and the handwork of harvesters also lead to questions of material and nonmaterial value and of appreciation.

Andrea Büttner and Irina Ruppert do not show the social conditions and living conditions of the workers, nor do they explore their poorly equipped accommodations. In their artistic and photographic practices, there is no focus on a specific (for example, Polish or Romanian) ethnic or cultural origin. Rather, the focus is on the physical labor in the field and those who perform it. While Irina Ruppert photographs her actors as individuals in front of a historical backdrop during a break from work, Andrea Büttner distills the typical gestures and postures from what she sees. Both artistic processes of appropriation allow a story to emerge behind the vegetables, one that is inherent in every product but remains invisible to the consumer. In their artistic production, they refer to the processes that turn harvested produce into consumable food. Consumption is therefore revealed to be conditional upon the back-bending labor of the unseen harvesters.

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