

First written by Kathrin and Wapke from Myvillages in November 2023, and revised in January 2024, with input from Inez Dekker and Indra Gleizde, reflecting on questions and suggestions discussed during a Rural School of Economics gathering of friends, collaborators and comrades during the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary weekend in Rotterdam in November 2023: "Looking back to the future we want".

## As if it was a farm\*

We started Myvillages with the wish to have a field, and now after 20 years we want to prepare to pass it on – *as if it was a farm*.

Is art urban? With this fundamental question we self-organised as Myvillages, to address the ubiquity of the urban in contemporary art, through our collective practice and direct action. By the mid 90ies "globalisation" and "urbanisation" had become dominant cultural and economic terms, and as artists we experienced an astonishing lack of interest to work with the rural - or even mentioning the word. We used our longing and critique to stretch the spaces we were in, to nurture and grow a trans-local practice that addresses the relationship between the rural and the urban.

The Myvillages initiative was an emancipatory step to undermine preconceptions of the rural, looking at forms of cultural production and power relationships. Our collective start directly relates to the fact that all three Myvillages founders left their home-villages at some point to become artists. With Myvillages, we wanted the rural that we knew through our lived experience to be part of how we work and think and operate as artists, not as an exclusive territory, but as a shareable cultural ground.

So in 2003 we started with what was available to us. We started by stretching a field that we as artists could claim and use: the field of our work, and spaces we could access without institutional permission: our home villages, opportunities within commissions, possibilities within networks. We nurtured soil, planted seeds, enjoyed many harvests. Over the years we added infrastructures and routes to other fields. We now have shared places to stay, friend's houses, our barn and the barns of others, a library, storage here and there, an archive, tools and a large social space. Collective fields and connected fields, fields where we are guests and fields with rotational crop and art corners. We could call it an intentional farm.

\* We are using the word "farm" as a temporary substitute to think about Myvillages' future. "Farm" is associated with positive practices and attributes such as self-sustenance, autonomy and stewardship of the land, whilst acknowledging its possible oppressive nature as in settler colonialism, ownership-based economies and patrilineal legacies.

We use "farm" as a relatively concrete word to describe this metaphorical farm, and to talk about the spatial, conceptual and socio-cultural conditions we have assembled as Myvillages. As an intentional collectivity, as a place for collaboration and complementation, a base with resources to share and use, in order to sustain ideas, values, practices and economic and conceptual livelihoods into the future. A farm is always a commitment, it is more than a project, and we want to honour the ecosystem and future possibilities and imaginaries that are held by a farm.

“Having a farm” or “being from a village” sounds like feeling safe. The certainty of having something and being from somewhere: close-knit relations and communality, closeness to the land, in interdependence, and with independence. Knowing how to maintain something together. And immediately we have to snap ourselves outside of this longing, this romantic feeling of being ok as long as you have a farm, the nostalgia connected to the village you come from. We always proclaimed that we didn’t want to be nostalgic – using an unsharp word for not romanticising a past. We now prefer the term “de-colonising” – a more precise word, and in awareness of white privilege and dominant European central thinking.

It still feels like we have a farm. It is still tangible, and precious and fruitful. And we want to be careful how we describe it, how we picture it for ourselves. And be careful about how we talk about passing on. The question has always been inter-generational, now it is inter-sectional. A place to gather and make and grow, organised around interests and ethics, which are the rural as a place of cultural production, and co-production as a given. The farm came into being by stretching from the edges, not towards. The stretching was more like curbing and mending holes to have space, rather than rolling out a dough. Stretching by talking. Stretching by not saying. Stretching by following the others their fields, by watching the cows, by sometimes not moving. Stretching without bright lights. Stretching like weaving.

We kept – and still are – stretching, taking in new technologies and possibilities and urgencies. Stretching out of care and interest and stubbornness, out of curiosity and sometimes obligation, with money and without money. Sometimes with our fingers and by sliding down hills together. Sometimes with words and demands, or with tractors and knives, and often with art. We hacked institutional art spaces to de-urbanise them. To enable and not predict. Always aware that we don’t want to take more than we bring.

## As if it was a farm

Myvillages means to us a home with structures, fields, a farmyard with no gates and no fear. It means a workplace and livelihood (sometimes). It’s time for us to ask ourselves some assuring and some uncomfortable questions. If we don’t make time, we risk that the farm was only there to feed us. As with any farm, the question after one generation becomes generational. As with any topic, it is intersectional.

Should the farm continue? With and for whom? What’s the price? What’s the benefit. Is it for the sake of the soil or for the sake of art? To sustain or to emancipate? To learn and to share and to make together? How to farm without exhausting and exploiting the people involved and the fields?

Does it need us? Do we want to stay?

Who wants to and might use and run the farm in the future?

Who has access and usership, and who has the keys? Where is ownership hiding?

How to make it sustain-able and regenerative/re-generational? Make it part of an ecological system.

As what we want to keep and what to leave behind? Can shade cast by the founders prevent from too much sun, but also hinder to move when needed?

Questions collected during the gathering extend the list:

What was it 20 years ago?  
How many (trans-local) relationships can be maintained? Can they be passed on?  
How do you make real connections?  
Why long-term? (What even is that?)  
Who is running the rural? Acknowledge the place where you talk from.  
Who are your elders?  
What are the ancestral lineages you draw on?  
What is the continuum?  
What is the need to connect to some people and some others not?  
What commitments do you want to set?  
Decolonising as a process and not as immediate answers.  
Decolonisation as a practice related to land.  
What is a decolonial farm?  
How does it relate to ancestral land practices?  
How to combine artistic practice with changes in the politics?  
Is the practice on of rehearsing? Rehearsing togetherness?  
Isn't stretching also precarious – towards tearing, damaging? Stretching without breaking.  
Paying attention to the palette not the painting.  
Is the work extra-disciplinary?  
Holding vernacular knowledge.  
Does it connect to the concept of "homestead"? Where annual meetings of elders and custodians are practiced.  
How is the quality of our soil? What is understood as soil? That what you work on (eg. the art?), your local community, that what you pass on/what you got passed on?  
How to not feel overwhelmed?  
The binary of staying and leaving as a generative quality. Redirecting without an ending.  
What are the traces of our work?  
What are the traces of land-art? Where is the criticality being kept?  
Can you have a dormant farm? When does it become derelict?  
What happens if you don't continue?  
Why? How? And who with? Instead of what? (from Arts Collaboratory meeting)  
Where is the archive? And what is it?  
Archiving (keeping alive) seeds through growing them (instead of storing).  
Asking each other about something you don't know.

We are asking now, because it might take a while to find a workable way, and we don't want to rush it. We want to reflect and plan the next steps with you: to look back to the future we want. We want to discuss and discover our position as part of a creative process, and not as a projected legacy.

We would like to grow the collective farm as a resilient and lasting commons, have hacked and de-urbanised more art spaces, and remain in clear solidarity with and support of non-binary cultures. And for it to be strong and resilient and joyful and resourceful enough for the future we want.