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## Abstract

*It is by now common knowledge that the arts are complicit in projects of urban redevelopment, dispossession and gentrification. Where accounts of this process in the United States and the United Kingdom have often focused on artists' occupations of studios and gallery spaces in low-income areas, or on the public art commissioning process, more recent trends extend the artists' role in gentrification more directly. Artists are now commissioned to engage in community visioning and engagement activities, efforts to naturalize the development narrative, and art projects that support the policing of bodies seen to be unruly or undesirable to the process of gentrification (itself re-branded as 'regeneration'). This article looks at the multifaceted role that artists and arts organizations play in the development and dispossession process, describing them as having produced a 'diplomatic condition', in which artists and arts organizations are used to massage and assuage conflicts, while a systematic war is waged on poor and working-class communities. Far from innocent, artists and arts organizations have increasingly been called upon to leave the comfort of what Tariq Ali describes as the 'extreme centre' to more actively take sides. This article draws from a situated ethnography of my work at the Centre for Possible Studies, an arts and research space in London's Edgware Road neighbourhood, and readings from a number of recent struggles aligning artists and residents differently, including Los Angeles' Boyle Heights Community, and the Southwark Notes Campaign in London's Elephant and Castle Community. It questions what role artists and arts organizations could play to counter such a diplomatic condition.*

## **'a strong curatorial vision for the neighbourhood': Countering the diplomatic condition of the arts in urban neighbourhoods**

It is an autumn evening in LA. Outside a large glass window a scene unfolds that is so familiar as to border on caricature. People in trendy outfits – 'hipsters' in contemporary parlance, clad in dark-framed glasses with strangely sculpted facial hair – can be seen sipping wine, talking intently, heads cocked, moving slowly, looking at walls. Without any mediation one can read what has become one of global capital's universal signs: contemporary art, gallery opening, white cube, creative class, and one of its universal stories – art gallery sets up in a poor neighbourhood, one where rents are cheap, where communities are active, where artist studios are viable; art gallery attracts artists and middle- and upper-class clientele; 'good' coffee is sought; new shops open up in the name of small businesses, stimulating 'local economy'; real estate developers begin to speculate (if not already involved in said galleries), rents increase, the neighbourhood 'turns', residents are displaced, in comes Starbucks, etc.

This scene, however, is somewhat different. As the camera zooms out we realize that we are not bearing witness to a sequence from an art-house film or an episode of *Girls*, but rather the making visible of a threshold, between this world and the one that exists beyond its doors. The soundtrack of an experimental DJ set is replaced by shouts of local residents, 'Hey hey, ho, ho, these gentrifiers have got to go!' and the refrain,

'Get out!' is our message to you. out! Get out! Get out, Get out! Fuera, Fuera, Fuera!

The scene is one of many that have erupted since the summer of 2016 in the East Los Angeles neighbourhood of Boyle Heights, highlighting the well known, though often unseen, conflict between the arts and the residents of low-income neighbourhoods. Boyle Heights residents, many of whom have been actively working to protect the rights of social housing tenants for upwards of twenty years, with such notable successes as winning back social housing for 36 families facing demolition and socializing the provision of water to the area's residents (BHAAAD 2016), are protesting a group of galleries, both private and non-profit, that have moved into the area to create an 'arts district'. The newly formed affinity group Boyle Heights Against Art-Washing and Displacement (BHAAAD) – which aligns long-term residents, including artists, with wider city initiatives such as the newly formed LA Tenant's Union – refuses the story of manifest destiny in which artists and residents are often portrayed as victims of the same fate. Rather, they question both the 'role of culture in gentrification' and the 'narrative of inevitability', which it often supports, aiming to 'stop displacement in its tracks' (BHAAAD 2016). They are clear in their request that artists and arts organizations defect from the veneer of good intentions and pseudo-neutrality, and admit – in the appropriated phrase – that 'no one is innocent in the fine art of gentrification' (Deutsche and Ryan 1984: 91).



Figure 1: Pico Aliso residents hold a public gathering to speak to the galleries. 7 December 2016, photographic documentation. Courtesy of BHAAAD. Source: [http://alianzacontraartwashing.org/en/press/the-women-of-pico-aliso-20-years-of-housing-activism/2\\_pa\\_residents\\_7-12-16\\_action/](http://alianzacontraartwashing.org/en/press/the-women-of-pico-aliso-20-years-of-housing-activism/2_pa_residents_7-12-16_action/).

Here we witness in concrete terms the demand for the art world to break with its claim to what Tariq Ali has referred to as the 'extreme centre' (2015a), in which, since the nineties, centre-left and centre-right have colluded to preserve narratives of inevitability 'through a 'dictatorship of capital'. Though art has played a role in gentrification for much longer than the onset of this 'extreme centre', in its context the contemporary art world has played a significant role in the veiling of conflict and the masking of contradictions of this dictatorship. In this current wave of right-wing leaders and supporters and an increasingly polarized political sphere what the protesters are demanding is what Simon Sheikh suggests as arts organizers' need to no longer 'hide behind abstract humanist values of great art transcending borders, categories, and history itself', and decide 'which way to turn' (Sheikh 2016).

In this article, I will chart some of the mechanisms through which the art world has used this 'extreme centre' to claim positions of neutrality while participating actively in the context of neighbourhood redevelopment, what I describe as a 'diplomatic condition' of the arts in gentrification. I will note how the actions of BHAAAD and of other anti-gentrification groups expose the limits of an arts imaginary that protects the rhetoric of the centre by perpetuating practices that legitimize neo-liberal post-democracies. Finally I will indicate how such groups articulate concrete practices of deciding 'which way to turn'.

I enter into this conversation without any innocence on my part, having been involved in the collective efforts responsible for a neighbourhood arts research and education project in London's Edgware Road neighbourhood, a neighbourhood that, in the period of my intensive association with it from 2008 to 2014, was undergoing three separate projects of redevelopment. The project, called the Centre for Possible Studies, was funded by heritage lottery money and given empty spaces to occupy in the area by the neighbourhood's largest landholder, Portman Estate. It was also initiated by one of London's most quintessentially neo-liberal arts institutions, the Serpentine Gallery. In our alignment explicitly and implicitly with groups who were targeted for dispossession by the development process – sex workers, the homeless and housing-precarious groups, young people, and migrant small business owners – but supported by those purportedly on the 'other side' we sat at the heart of this claim to centrality, and felt regularly the pull between our position of solidarity and a global empire of art world expansions deeply complicit in the expropriation of land, housing and common social resources. Elsewhere I have written about the para-sitic relationship between the Centre for Possible Studies, the people who used it and our 'host', the Serpentine, in terms of both its enabling conditions and its profound limits (Graham 2014). Here I would like to analyse what this experience revealed about the expected complicity of the arts with the development apparatus in light of the concrete practices of choosing sides proposed by groups like BHAAAD.

### Curatorial Visions and Diplomatic Conditions

To preface these thoughts it is important to say that throughout our time developing projects with artists and resident groups on the Edgware Road, it was the expectation of developers, pro-development (namely all) local politicians and post-development occupants that our affiliation with the Serpentine and the broader artistic community meant that we were 'on side' with the development project. In its earliest stages, we, and the artists we worked with, were invited into secret conversations held by local governments and developers in high buildings overlooking the neighbourhood from above, to discuss the cleansing of the area of 'undesirable' entities including beggars, sex workers, 'Kurdish youth gangs' and business owners who used Arabic signage, all of whom were described using a variety of blatantly racist vocabulary. One resident on this committee, working towards its 'improvement', who is now a local government representative, went so far as to demonstratively call the police on a group of Roma women asking for change, as she gave us an introductory tour of the area. Here the intricate relationships between aristocratic land ownership, private developers, local government, newer wealthy residents and fascistic pre-occupation with cleanliness, class and racial superiority were in regular, unfiltered and unmitigated display, exposing the other side of the rationalized language of city planning, feasibility studies, safer streets, 'reducing crime by design' and Business Improvement Districts.

In these meetings, hand-picked representatives of migrant businesses and 'the community' were told in no uncertain terms that their role was not, as was outwardly expressed by the council who employed them, to solicit input from renters, business owners and workers in the area, but rather to convince small business owners to stay in

line with the development narrative and to inform on those who did not, so that they could be excluded or negatively targeted by the process of 'improvement' and its barbed allies: the police and immigration control. From here we had a front-row seat from which to witness regeneration as the intersection between racism and the violent expropriation of common resources in the name of private property and to understand where the arts fit in. Our role, in their minds, though this was not always clear, was to engage with the 'right' kind of people on the road (we were regularly asked who we were 'talking to'), businesses and groups that had been deemed to be 'on side', and to create the general perception that 'good things' were *now* happening in the area. We were rarely scrutinized for this by these officials, such was their unfaltering faith that artists and the arts more generally were either too self-absorbed, too desperate for resources or too closely aligned with the interests of the development process – as was the Serpentine's Board of Trustees and donor base – to cause any trouble whatsoever.

In other encounters, with more seemingly plurally minded city planners – who were nevertheless 'planning' the privatization of the neighbourhood's public housing blocks – our role and that of other arts organizations was much clearer. As one government official suggested in response to our questions about why only we and a few other medium- to large-scale cultural organizations – some of which were not even based in the area – were invited to meetings on the making of the local cultural plan, our role was to bring a 'strong curatorial vision to neighbourhood'. This demand for a 'strong curatorial vision' was two-fold, signalling both a particular aesthetic – i.e. white cubes, coffee shops and biennial-worthy public artists – as well as what is by now perceived to be a well-honed skill possessed by artists and arts organizations: to maintain the appearance of engagement while at the same time keeping others – i.e. the long-time generators and custodians of neighbourhood culture, its working-class residents, market traders, self-organized cultural clubs, cafe owners – away from a genuine role in the process. As arts organizations it was assumed without question that we would relish the opportunity to define the culture of the neighbourhood (as if such a thing were possible) and from there to engage residents in the process of realizing it. That is, we could be counted on, as we were in our own institution, to deliver the soft side of engagement, without altering any of the hierarchies (or plans) of production, and without addressing any of the contradictions of our dual occupations with the least and most privileged of society.

On this basis it was relatively easy for us, in the guise of the Centre for Possible Studies, to work with those who were the targets of various dispossession attempts, to redistribute both information and financial and spatial resources. The sex worker-led group *x:talk* used our space as a base; students learnt the ins and outs of the development process so as to contest their and their families' exclusion; meetings were held and documents issued to ensure that the local businesses were aware of the plans for the area discussed in the secret meetings; and funds were diverted to support migrants whose circumstances had been made precarious by the increasing integration of regeneration and border control. Though the distance between our conversations at the Serpentine and those on the Road were vast, our presence was in no doubt part of the way in which such an institution could make a claim to the centre in spite of a donor base that drew from the wealth of the 1 per cent. And for us who managed this distance, who were clear

about whose side we were on, we engaged in practices of re-distribution, but always with a sinking feeling that what was created could never be truly owned by ourselves, the neighbourhood people who used it, unless we parted ways with our host. After a time we were no longer invited to the secret meetings and, longer still, no longer funded; even later, we were told by our superiors at the Serpentine that we needed to develop 'new' programmes in new areas: not a direct set of conflicts but a revelation of the art world's quieter mechanisms for exercising what Bourdieu describes as its 'interest in dis-interest'.

In all of these circumstances – one overtly racist, another overtly exclusionary, another still, disinterested – the arts were seen to deliver what might be described as a *diplomatic condition*, a function that could mediate and neutralize the sensible and interrelational aspects of the development process, while masking its violent apparatus, the brutal force behind the non-consensual



Figure 2: Counter-propaganda by Southwark Notes, Graphic. Courtesy of Southwark Notes.

removal of the area's migrant and working-class cultural agents. This diplomatic condition relies on a set of narratives and mechanics that I will elaborate upon in the following sections but generally includes the perception of its goodness, its role in the making better of things, its neutrality, its autonomy and its distance from the worlds of poor and working-class people

### Manifest Destiny

What was pivotal to the operation of the diplomatic condition was that we be seen to be on the side of the 'good', an assumption addressed directly by Boyle Heights residents in

their dual questioning of 'role of culture in gentrification' and its alignment with the 'narrative of inevitability'.

These two narratives – of art's goodness and the inevitability of a path towards this good – can be read in recent statements in Boyle Heights, just as they could in the notion of the strong curatorial vision through which we were enlisted as neighbourhood diplomats on Edgware Road. They conform with colonial narrative forms such as Manifest Destiny – an unstoppable progressive movement towards betterment, civilization, 'the light', transforming all its wild, untamed and crime-ridden path. Statements made by Geoff Anenberg, a partner at Creative Space who provides studios for artists in the Boyle Heights area, with links to developers, suggest this clearly in his description of his work, '[w]hat I do shines a light, and that light has a wake and that wake is spilling into the neighbourhood' (Miranda 2016). Here the 'light' of the neighbourhood's manifest destiny meets the structural adjustment policies of the IMF to suggest that a trickle-down effect will take place once the arts have moved into the area. This 'light' meets the narrative of unstopability in the statements of other galleries. Eva Chimento, for example, says in response to the critique of Boyle Heights residents that 'the idea of "get out" is unrealistic' (Miranda 2016).

Less obvious allies of such positions also perpetuate the manifest destiny narrative in another way, using the language of equality. Advocates of the recently closed PSSST Gallery (closed due to funder divestment in response to protests by the residents), set up as a not-for-profit to engage with queer artists and issues in Boyle Heights. They suggest that white cube gallery spaces should be in the neighbourhood in the name of access, stating that PSSST can offer Boyle Heights residents and local artists access to a 'cutting-edge arts and gallery space'. As Adrian Rivas, a PSSST Board member describes, 'I've always heard, "Why can't we have these spaces? Why can't we show our work in spaces like that? We love our rasquache spaces too, but why shouldn't we have a space like this? Why can't we show our work in spaces like that?"' The white cube here is another such glimmering light on the horizon.

The question of where and by whom such desires are articulated is here dis-located to a general notion of the 'Chicano' artist, rather than something suggested by the voices of the residents of Boyle Heights – who have decidedly and repeatedly stated that they want the galleries to leave – revealing the unstoppable force of the 'good' brought to bear on neighbourhoods by the arts.

Equally, responses to the protests of Boyle Heights residents against the art gallery occupations of their area in the mainstream press reveal how important the alignment of narratives of inevitability, the light and the good is to the discussion of improvement that underpins the rhetorics surrounding neighbourhood development. Jonathon Jones, art critic for *The Guardian*, many miles away, for example, highlights the role of art as the beacon of light and the provider of 'civilization' in his statement:

[a]rt, culture and, yes, cafes are not weapons of corporate capital. And even if they do add value to property, that is not all they do. There is such a thing as civilisation – and it has a way of looking a bit like ‘gentrification’. (Jones 2016)

He suggests that protests against gentrification in Boyle Heights and in London are ‘nonsensical rejection of things that actually do make urban living better, not just for “elites”, but for everyone: culture’ (Jones 2016). This statement makes clear that ‘culture’ in this line of progression must be equated with ‘new culture’, ‘elite privileged culture’, not working-class, migrant cultures, existing cultures, which are in both narrative and material terms erased by such a drive towards ‘betterment’.

What these arguments – whether made in policy, in the rhetoric of inevitability or in the notion of the ‘trickle-down effect’ of unquestionable amelioration – wash over is the degree to which the ‘making better’ of things already exists as a practice of poor and working-class people, as in the case of Boyle Heights residents.

In an interview, Delmira Gonzalez, who has lived in Boyle Heights for 35 years, discusses the time spent by community members, particularly Latina women, in improving the area through acts of municipal housekeeping:

[w]omen in this case, organised to create safe passages to escort children to school and back home and occupied known drug-dealing spots by setting up impromptu barbeque grills and serving free food. She remembers that dealers, when interrupted, accepted plates of hot food before scurrying away to eat. Their hustle would not take place under the watch of mothers.

‘A strong curatorial vision for the neighbourhood’

When street deaths were not dealt with by councils, women in the community ‘formed human chains, capturing the mayor’s attention’. Neighbourhood artists have painted murals in alleyways to turn unsafe spaces into spaces of art (Fragoza 2016). Arts and culture exist and are practised daily without the incursion of white cubes and curatorial visions, nor of the stop-and-search tactics of police.

Here, the *tabula rasa* or the trickle-down effects of the ‘light’ brought to bear by the arts reveal themselves as the first step in the process of dispossession: the attempted erasure of the voices of residents, their right to narrate their process of struggle, and their practices of culture-making. It is for this reason that the arts are widely acknowledged in research commissioned by organizations as mainstream as the National Endowment for the Arts as playing a role in the ‘colonizing arm’ of the process of gentrification (Grodach et al. 2014: 4).

Vanishing Residents

A corollary of the Manifest Destiny narrative addresses vanishing people. Here, those who exist on the path of this necessary and unstoppable improvement towards the light are relegated to the cultures of the failed, the past, the shadow figure or the disappearing.

Artists, poets and other cultural workers have always played a role in upholding this second dimension. In the colonial Canadian context, the expropriation of land and resources from indigenous people required that narratives of inevitability, non-survival, and the always already 'doomed' be in place to 'vanish' the people upon whose land colonial governments and settler corporations hoped to profit. In his reading of work by colonial artists and poets, Daniel Francis has described the circumstances through which nineteenth- and early twentieth-century painters such as Paul Kane, Frederick Verner and Edmund Morris, and photographers like Edward Curtis, all presented 'vanishing' people, often – to their minds – as a way of showing respect for their soon-to-be lost cultures. They were, at the same time, solidifying the naturalization of the notion of 'disappearance' that was at play in the violence of the dispossession processes. As colonial governments knew at the time (hence their commissioning of many such projects), the participation of artists was essential to the expropriation project: it rendered the violent process of extraction taking place sympathetic, natural and even beautiful in its tragedy. Artists would be seen merely as innocent observers in the process, supportive but not *involved*. The function of this 'disappearing' was multi-fold, aiming to de-stabilize the image of local residents as those who could fight back or resist, to erase the process of conflict and struggle that was already taking place, and to convince incoming occupants that they were neither complicit nor culpable in the process of displacement and, in many cases, of murder (Francis 1997: 16–20).

While circumstantially different on multiple levels, artistic involvement in the cultivation in this sense (or common sense) of the unstoppable disappearance of people and circumstances, whether through depictions of or through engagement with 'disappearing' residents, is equally commonplace in the context of contemporary urban development.

The first brand of such narratives is that surrounding the necessary disappearance. The London-based group Southwark Notes, composed of local people using research and creative processes (graphics, direct action) in their struggles against the gentrification of the Elephant and Castle neighbourhood.

Since the 1990s, has analysed this in great detail, suggesting that the role of artists is in keeping with terms like 'regeneration' and broader tactics of 'hygienic governmentality' (Berlant 1997: 175) directed at the displacement of working-class communities. They describe the mythic representations of both council tenants and social housing that precede and continue throughout the development process through which governments and developers cultivate the 'unlovable modern demons of the underclass – fatty single mothers of three, skinny junkies lurking on the landings, professional claimants living it up so that the Council may displace its own brutality onto a supposed demand from a mythical general public to "sort it out"', what Southwark Notes describe as the double helix of justification 'suggesting that estates and other council housing areas are a failure, full of crime and anti-social behaviour; necessitating "revitalisation"' (2014).

A second brand of vanishing is more sympathetic. On Edgware Road, we were frequently encouraged to work with the 'vanishing' cultures of older and working-class people to

memorialize the area, to make portraits of migrant and working-class residents, to video-record and document them and their landmarks as though their disappearance were part of a story that had already been told. And while history and documentation projects were also critical to resistance movements in the area – shop owners, for example, felt that the lack of representation in local archives and imaginaries of their contribution to making Edgware Road made their displacement easier – developers and local governments, as did colonial rulers in the day of Paul Kane and Edward Curtis, also understood its power. On Edgware Road's Church Street 'renewal' scheme, for example, recourse to memory work was a first response to conflict. After months of our work at the Centre for Possible Studies with local young people to investigate and publicize the ways in which the neighbourhood plan had actively excluded them and their families, a council-hired community engagement company called 'Vital Regeneration' immediately enlisted young people in a video project to 'hear hear the stories of local residents'. Portraits of residents on the sides of destroyed buildings or on the billboards of new developments are now a common feature of many development processes, though in some cases emerging from a call from residents to resist their displacement, they are more often than not a commissioned and premature celebration of the 'lost' cultures of development undertaken by artists who are not engaged. Telling the difference between the two requires a situated and embedded political analysis.

A third type of vanishing extends beyond the people who must disappear, to the lost and vanishing buildings, themselves depicted as part of a past of social support and utopian architecture that can no longer be. Southwark Notes describes a proposed project by the artist Mike Nelson and the commissioner Artangel that was slated to stage a monumental pyramid with the scraps of the torn-down Heygate Estate in Elephant and Castle, as part of a highly contested 'regeneration' scheme that expelled hundreds of families falsely told they would be re-housed in a new development. Artangel, a commissioning agency with strong links to the arts, real estate developers and hedge funds, as well as to artists and the arts council, has a long history of such 'monumental' and memorializing projects, which, though heralded as foundational to the history of social and public art in the United Kingdom, frequently ignore the deeper political contexts in which they are situated. In the case of the proposed Pyramid (or Ziggurat) at Elephant and Castle, local residents and Southwark Notes made a number of appeals asking Artangel to step away from the Heygate and to acknowledge it as a terrain of active struggle against gentrification, and not as



Figure 3: Counter-propaganda by Southwark Notes. Courtesy of Southwark Notes. Source: <https://southwarknotes.files.wordpress.com/2012/03/i-you-we-participatebluelec.jpg>.

rubble upon which to erect a monument or memorial. In response to Heygate resident John Colfer's suggestion in a letter to Artangel that,

[...] My father made the home a home, fitted new floors, everything. My parents never planned to leave the estate. So when you're talking about using those same materials to make a pyramid, you just think: what is there to show that this was a well-loved home? These are our memories being turned into an artwork.

and other accusations that the piece would be viewed by victims of social cleansing as symbolically problematic, Artangel suggested, '[w]e [...] don't believe that Mike Nelson's project, if and when it materialises on the Heygate Estate, will be inappropriate or disrespectful [...]', that 'connections' will be made once a planning application is able to be developed, and, later that 'Nelson's project will activate a field of possible meanings rather than assert one in particular [...]'(Jones 2014).

These statements suggest that Artangel, and Nelson by association, possesses an outside position from which to assert and 'believe' in particular practices of reception. In so doing they reveal that their intended audiences are not those who live or have stakes in the struggles over the area but them- selves, their benefactors and audiences, who can remain at a distance even if they are deeply implicated in the broader spectrum of property development. Elephant and Castle residents were successful in defeating the plans for this public sculpture, but the incident suggests the twofold nature of art's role in the vanishing process: as a propagator of a romantic aesthetics of memoriali- zation, and

as those whose 'beliefs' about art overwrite the analysis of gentri- fication made by local residents. In this second instance the vanishing takes place in the outright avoidance of the demands of the struggle, ignoring what is a crucial aspect of anti-gentrification work: that it produces, as Southwark

Notes suggests, 'a counter-narrative can be maintained by residents against the spin and soundbites' of councils and developers (2014).

This brings us to a fourth and final form of 'vanishing' that in turn takes us back to Boyle Heights, where even purportedly critical artists buffer them- selves from the proximity and the mess of anti-gentrification struggle. In February of this year, the not-for-profit gallery 365 Mission, located in the new arts district in Boyle Heights, hosted an event initiated and attended by prom- inent artists such as Andrea Fraser, Barbara Kruger and others belonging to the newly formed Artists' Political Action Network (APAN). The meeting was for artists to resist the turn to the right after the election of Donald Trump and 'the increasingly alarming executive actions, policy proposals', and 'the culture of fear, hatred, and exclusion' they had unleashed. Local residents and organ- izers working with Defend Boyle Heights and BHAAAD took the opportunity to picket the event, asking the politically engaged artists at the APAN meeting to boycott the gallery and its role in the increasing rent and property prices in the area. BHAAAD called for attendees to do as the publicity surround- ing the meeting suggested and 'affirm that art is not neutral'. Crucially, they asked that those attending to address the intersectional violence of racism and displacement (the 'culture of fear, hatred, and exclusion') in the very place they had assembled and in which the arts were complicit. While a number of artists joined the picket line, many others, including prominent spokespeople within the critical art scene, crossed it and in some cases expressed anger at the disruption of the group. Here, the generic 'outside' of the art world and its direction towards the more abstractly posited aims like 'rejecting institutional entanglements' could not place themselves in a struggle that addressed the very set of issues their meeting was planned to respond to (Shaked 2017). Trump's 'alarming' policies of racism and exclusions were surely honed well in his role as a property developer.

Here, even within the recent wave of artists condemning the turn to the right, Trump, Brexit and the rise of fascism, artistic distance, its *diplomacy*, justifies non-action in the name of 'complexity' or a wider cause. Beyond the direct complicity of artists in the process of 'vanishing' residents through the depiction of their disappearance *avant la lettre*, here the actions of both Artangel and of artists organizing at 365 mission suggest that the demand for and freedom to artistic distance, to claim 'complexity' to neither address nor account for the political contexts in which artists are situated, is superior to the demands of those struggling against gentrification. As such, whether or not intricately embedded with developers and councils, and whether or not with intention, they can be seen as being a part of the project of 'vanishing' these struggles. In denying their accountability to those into whose struggle they have walked, one also denies the significance of these struggles. Artists are in this sense aligning themselves with the process of 'necessary' and 'inevitable' erasure that is at the heart of the narrative of manifest destiny, as protectors of the extreme centre. As the authors of the 1989 text

*Occupation and the Art of Gentrification* suggest, '[a]rtists often get away with appearing to be "outside" class relations; they and their products are seen as an expression of "every-man" or human essence'. This, they argue, gives them unique access to poor neighbourhoods as 'the vanguard of a social fragmentation created by gentrification' (Anon. 2015: n.pag).

What is exposed about the diplomatic condition in these examples, and the claim to the 'extreme centre' made by the arts more broadly, is that this centre is no centre at all. Arguments for the 'light', equality, diversity,



Figure 4: 'I participate, You participate, We Participate They Profit' projection used by BHAAAD campaign, Boyle Heights Lost Angelos. Copyright BHAAAD. Source: <http://alianzacontraartwashing.org/en/bhaaad/>.

open-ness and distance of the arts are used to legitimize the disregard for the will and practices of poor and working people. Well intentioned or not, the ultimate outcome is the same as that of the developers, the practice of erasure: one culture is to be replaced with another, one group of people replaced by another, and always the most marginalized silenced in the process.

What Would it Take to Listen? taking sides and organizing beyond the centre

As we approach the widening of such divisions, we begin to feel both the centre and its diplomacies fall apart. We begin to see what the rhetorics of inevitability and the practices of vanishing seek to protect: the ability of limits to manifest themselves, to assert themselves, to protagonize, antagonize and struggle. In the case of Boyle Heights this limit is a threshold between the arts and residents relentlessly inhabited, made visible through the act of making demands:

'Listen,' says the gallery owner, 'You listen!' shout the crowd, 'Step back and listen!'

Here, the discourse of inevitability falls apart; a conflict is named in the register of listening. The protesters suggest that there is only one way by which this conflict can be resolved, and that is for them to be heard. By this they do not mean being involved in 'sounding' exercises or pseudo-consultations, visioning activities or engagement projects or being told to 'listen'. They demand to be heard in such a way that the inevitable story of gentrification can be altered.

For Delmira González, who has lived in Pico Aliso (now called Pico Gardens) for 35 years, Ana Hernández (25 years), Manuela Lomeli (40 years)

and Maria Quintana (24 years), the only way in which galleries in Boyle Heights can effectively respond to the resident's demands is by leaving the area.

We have been telling PSSST and the other galleries what the community needs instead of galleries all along: Authentic affordable housing for low-income people, emergency housing for homeless people and people displaced by gentrification, a laundromat, a needle exchange or harm reduction centre, an affordable grocery store, etc.

They question,

[w]hy was there funding for a 501(c)3 to run a gallery to attract new people to Boyle Heights, but not for services for the existing community? Because the forces that backed PSSST never had any interest in Boyle Heights, except as a real estate investment opportunity. This is the tragedy of artwashing: it channels philanthropy into destroying neighborhoods.

(BHAAAD 2017)

And propose desires like,

[m]y wish for the community is that we have more public housing for families. I know people who have three families living in the same apartment just to make rent. With all these vacant spaces they are using, there could be more public housing. No more demolition. No more displacement of families. We want improvements, but for US, those of us who have struggled for so long [...]

(BHAAAD 2017)

Listening to and acting upon these demands would define a marked contrast to what is proposed by mediators of the LAPD who support 'both sides' of Boyle Heights: '[o]bviously we're concerned for the people's safety, the artists and the people who have a stake in the area in terms of their businesses [...]', says Jose Ortega. Here it is notable that 'the people' are understood to be those in possession of arts properties.

It would also contrast with the kind of 'listening' described by Southwark Notes in their experiences of consultation at the hands of groups like Soundings, artists who develop

visioning and engagement activities that gather thoughts, ideas and responses of local residents in development schemes, but have no role in decision-making processes. Such 'listening processes' work to build 'consensus around dispossession and powerlessness, and to diffuse existing if often invisible dissent with the fanfare and spectacle of consultation'. But as Southwark Notes organizers suggest, "[p]articipatory consultation" without participatory decision-making is not only pointless, but harmful to democratic planning processes. It offers neither space, training nor support necessary for local people to be genuinely and actively involved in the heavily technical issues of local planning' (Southwark Notes 2013).

What these pseudo-listening processes reveal is the degree to which the police apparatus, the 'distancing' practices of artists and organizations, and the principles of groups like Soundings (who suggest they can '[w]ork bottom up and top town', 'be impartial', 'make sense of multiple voices') claim the centre or neutral position while silencing, ignoring and re-directing the conflicts generated by those who have the most to lose by the redevelopment process.

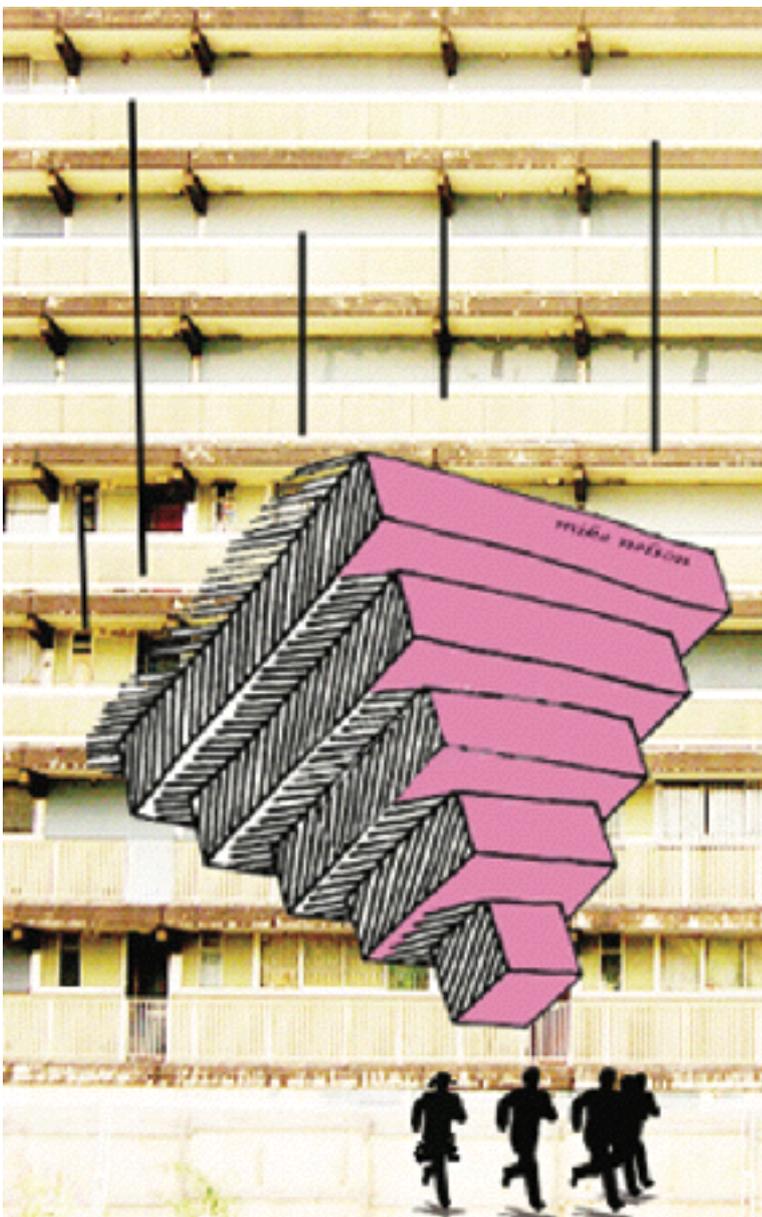


Figure 5: Counter-propaganda by Southwark Notes. Courtesy of Southwark Notes.  
Source: <https://southwarknotes.files.wordpress.com/2012/03/i-you-we-participatebluelec.jpg>.

Their claims to the centre, to distance, to 'the good' of the arts in this light can be seen as attempts to protect the interests that lie behind the falsification and hollowing out of democratic forms, by resurrecting shields, buffers and diplomacies.

To not take sides here is to obfuscate but not rid us of their existence. Though powerful, we know that the narratives and actions that uphold artistic affiliations to simply 'the good' or to social betterment are false. In the United Kingdom, Third Way cultural policy has shown us the degree to which notions such as cultural democracy (bringing greater 'access'), economic stimulation (bringing 'light' of property development) and social amelioration (or 'culture' in Jones words, defined from above) entangle themselves to produce what Andy Hewitt describes as the 'impression of positive social change' while actually 'driving further privatization of the state sector, diminishing the transparency of governance, and producing further social division' (Hewitt 2011: 25). The notion of the arts as the negotiator, mediator, diplomat, 'the light', as democratic, or as occupying a central position that can accommodate 'a field' of possible meanings and actions that includes both developers and residents under threat of eviction, is a distorted one. The notion operates to create the illusion of an even playing field, when the stakes are lined up consistently against those displaced by the development process. The claim to the centre is then a claim to what Colin Crouch has described as a 'formal shell', one that makes use of the institutions of democracy in an increasingly post-democratic society (Carrigan 2017).

What is also revealed by the moments in which residents say 'no', when they refuse to participate and ask us to take a side, is that the myth of the centre can no longer hold. As the broader context turns to the right, as artists are compelled to choose and align, the centre that could hold these tensions, that gave artists and arts organizers a role within it, is pulling at the edges and producing the necessity for other imaginaries and other actions.

As an art attendee-turned-protester at the 365 mission picket asks:

[w]hat if the panel and whole group had just stood up and stepped out? How is it possible that, in a room full of artists, not one idea emerged for how to approach the situation differently and more creatively? I had to choose a side. Now I am writing in the hopes that my colleagues will recognise that they could, and still can, redraw the line. (Shaked 2017)

The consequences of drawing the line are not always light. Artists Samantha Hill and Ed Woodham while working on a 'social practice' residency under the auspices of the Macon Arts Alliance recently attempted to form a solidarity relationship with residents by working with them to investigate 'the possibility of displacement', '[...] the history of how East

Macon was originally destroyed under the guise of urban renewal' and how East Macon residents and Macon's African American community genuinely felt that they were not selected by the Macon Arts Alliance that has commissioned them. Shortly thereafter, they were fired from the project. They nonetheless suggest that artists can change practices to avoid the traps of art-washing, posing questions such as:

- What kind of art spaces are possible and what kind of art institutions do we need to not only refuse complicity but resist gentrification?
- What kind of art practices can thrive and magically transform everyday life while refusing and resisting being a tool for growth by dispossession?
- What political movements can art contribute to that expose the lie of gentrification inevitability? (Hill and Woodham 2016).

They join BHAAAD, Southwark Notes and groups such as WOW Project and Chinatown Artist Brigade in New York to contest the inevitability of the 'inevitable' story of arts and gentrification. What these struggles reveal are not only important tactics – refusal, solidarity, setting up tenants' unions, joining the picket even if it means giving up an afternoon of interesting discussion – but also other roles for artists: practices that are less visible (hardly any artists names appear with these groups) but more effective, less politically frustrated and more politically engaged, less fleeting and more accountable, less individual and more communal, less perpetually educated and more schooled by struggle, less aligned with those they claim to detest and more proximate to those creating common worlds without the detestable ones. In the art world the idea of taking sides is often portrayed as though crude, naive, un-nuanced, simplistic – that is to say, *interested*. Leaving the fictional centre means getting comfortable with this, addressing the complexity without denying a position within it. The affinities and alignments of such movements show us glimmers of what a different kind of cultural practice, and therefore a different cultural politics might look like.

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