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Artists in Residence: Community Activism and Neighborhood Redevelopment
in Socially Engaged Art

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of
Philosophy

in

Art History, Theory & Criticism

by Noni Brynjolson

Committee in charge:

Professor Grant Kester, Chair
Professor Teddy Cruz
Professor John C. Welchman
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Professor Elana Zilberg

2019

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Chair

University of California San Diego

2019

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Signature Page.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
Vita.....	vi
Abstract of the Dissertation.....	vii
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: Home Repair and Renovation in Socially Engaged Art.....	38
Chapter Two: Houses on the Move: Public Art, Aesthetic Value and Social Mobility in Detroit.....	89
Chapter Three: Disrupting Displacement: Mapping Evictions and Intervening in the Sharing Economy.....	126
Chapter Four: Artwashing and Activism in Boyle Heights.....	154
Chapter Five: Community Art, Community Organizing: Translation as Cultural Platform in Vickery Meadow.....	179
Conclusion.....	216
Bibliography.....	223

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During my final year in the program, I had the opportunity to take part in the Sawyer Seminar on campus, which focused on the theme of ‘Reclaiming the City,’ and hosted visiting speakers from different disciplines whose work touched on themes related to urbanism, public space and political activism. Being part of this group of scholars helped me develop my own research questions and think deeply about the interdisciplinary nature of socially engaged art and its relationships with cities.

I first began to think about socially engaged art while taking an art history course at the University of Winnipeg, and Professor Claudine Majzels provided an unforgettable introduction to the possibilities of art as a form of social activism. I continued to think about the political role of art while writing my Master’s thesis at Concordia University in Montreal, under the supervision of Cynthia Hammond, who offered kind words and a wealth of knowledge.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Artists in Residence: Community Activism and Neighborhood Redevelopment in Socially Engaged Art

by

Noni Brynjolson

Doctor of Philosophy in Art History, Theory & Criticism

University of California San Diego, 2019

Professor Grant Kester, Chair

Artists in Residence explores a number of contemporary socially engaged art projects in cities across the United States, and looks at issues related to race, urban transformation and aesthetic theory. I focus on long-term, site-specific, collaborative projects in which artists have attempted to create social change in economically disadvantaged and racially segregated neighborhoods through a variety of aesthetic forms, including home renovations, participatory design, online mapping, and the organization of cultural spaces for people of color. What these various practices share in common is an interest in working in a specific site over a long period of time to respond to social inequalities, and to instigate changes that will benefit existing members of a community or neighborhood through forms of cultural production or cultural organizing. These practices demonstrate that alongside twentieth century

modernism and its emphasis on individual creativity and genius, there has been an alternate current focused on the social production of art. This is not a study of what is typically understood by the term ‘artist residency,’ although residencies are featured in many of the projects in question. Instead, I am interested in the broader implications of what it means to be an artist in residence—why artists choose to reside in particular neighborhoods, how they interact with the communities that exist there, and what they contribute over extended periods of time. Artists who live in low-income neighborhoods have often been portrayed as gentrifiers, and many studies have demonstrated that their arrival in a particular place signifies imminent redevelopment. I draw from that body of research here, and demonstrate how art has contributed to an increasing rate of gentrification and displacement in the past several decades. However, I also look at how artists have attempted to transform neighborhoods in a manner that benefits residents, rather than contributing to displacement, and examine how their work challenges conventional understandings of art, its producers and its audiences. *Artists in Residence* explores how socially engaged art engages in reparative practices, by breaking with traditions associated with the critical distance and autonomy of the avant-garde, by engaging with existing civic structures and institutions, and by building houses, cultural spaces and social movements.

Introduction

In many cities across the United States, artists have developed long-term, site-specific public art projects that involve experiments with home renovation, neighborhood development, and community activism. These initiatives have grown in number since the 1990s, and are typically found in economically disadvantaged and racially segregated neighborhoods. Some began as community-based projects, while others were initiated by museums. This type of practice, often referred to as socially engaged art, differs from other forms of activist art that maintain a commitment to political and aesthetic autonomy. I suggest in this dissertation that socially engaged art is defined by this tension between autonomy and engagement. I examine how a number of projects have broken with traditions associated with the critical distance of the avant-garde, by engaging with existing civic structures and institutions, and by building houses, cultural spaces and social movements. The title, *Artists in Residence*, refers to the embedded nature of these practices, and my focus is on the role of artists in shaping the spaces in which they live and make their work, as well as their interactions with communities more broadly. This is not a study of what is typically understood by the term ‘artist residency,’ although residencies are featured in many of the projects in question. Instead, I am interested in the broader implications of artists in residence—why artists choose to reside in particular neighborhoods, how they interact with the communities there, and what they contribute over extended periods of time. Artists who live in low-income neighborhoods have often been portrayed as gentrifiers, and many studies have demonstrated that their arrival in a particular place signifies imminent development—which often results in artists eventually having to leave and begin the cycle anew elsewhere.

I draw from that body of research here, and demonstrate how art has contributed to an increasing rate of gentrification and displacement in the past two decades. However, I also look at how artists have responded to this cycle by attempting to position their work as a form of resistance against neoliberal urban development. Can artists contribute to the transformation of neighborhoods in a manner that benefits residents, rather than contributing to displacement? And how does their work challenge conventional understandings of art, its producers, and its audiences? This introduction begins with a discussion of some of the key components and critiques of socially engaged art that I address throughout

the dissertation. I provide a brief review of literature on art and gentrification to offer a historical background on artists who have sought to work actively against displacement. Then, I consider the theme of the house more broadly in contemporary art, and contrast socially engaged art with more radical activist initiatives, considering how different projects have cooperated with, or resisted, institutions and government organizations. I look at key texts related to aesthetic autonomy that have shaped contemporary writing on socially engaged art, and then trace an alternative lineage focused on building the commons in the United States, which connects with some aspects of the black radical tradition from the 1960s onwards. From there, I outline my methodology and positionality in relation to the projects in question, and then provide brief chapter summaries.

Much of the writing on art and gentrification since the 1960s has focused on New York City, which makes sense, since it is both the art capital and the financial capital of the US. Patterns might look similar in other cities, but there are also local factors that are worth exploring further—for example, Houston’s unique zoning laws, Detroit’s bankruptcy, or Los Angeles’s Skid Row neighborhood. San Francisco is now the most unaffordable US city to live in, surpassing Manhattan in 2014,¹ and rents continue to increase in major cities, while arts districts continue to be built to attract investment in urban areas. The cities that I focus on here are Los Angeles, Oakland, Chicago, Detroit, Houston and Dallas. They feature different planning policies, cultural practices, demographics and histories, but they share similar patterns of development in which art is connected to the symbolic economy (discussed below). I focus on these cities to offer a broader picture of the relationship between art and gentrification outside of New York, and because they are home to art projects focused on home repair and neighborhood development.

Writing about houses and home renovations seemed like somewhat of a natural choice for me: I grew up in a big, drafty, hundred-year old house in Winnipeg that my parents bought cheaply and renovated continuously, fixing up bedrooms and bathrooms, maintaining protective barriers against -40 C winters, and once discovering an entire new room boarded up behind a closet on the third floor. A few years after I moved to San Diego, my parents sold the house and moved to a place in the woods, which

¹ Tanguy Le Louarn, “Introducing – Zumper Monthly Rent Report: August 2014,” zumper.com, September 16, 2014, accessed October 1, 2018.

they have also worked on constantly. One summer, I was sitting in their living room writing about home repairs on my computer, and took a break to help raise the plywood walls of the garage they were building—which is about the extent of my experience with building construction. In Winnipeg, many of my friends bought their own homes, while for friends living in California, this seemed much less possible, considering that the average home price there was more than half a million dollars. Living in the US, I also noticed more exaggerated divisions between rich and poor, white and black, and the effects of fewer safety nets to support low-income people. While these divisions certainly exist in Canada, they were more extreme in the US, and more rooted in an ideology of individual responsibility that is a defining feature of American identity.

When I traveled to different cities to research the projects discussed in this dissertation, I paid attention to how social inequities were visible spatially. Sometimes this was evident even from the plane as I landed in a city I was visiting, like Detroit, where forest and grassland has grown in vacant lots, making areas of abandonment greener. But these spatial divisions are not natural. As Richard Rothstein points out, segregation in American cities must be viewed as *de jure* rather than *de facto*—meaning that it has occurred through deliberate laws and policies, rather than through individual choices. He writes: “Today’s residential segregation in the North, South, Midwest, and West is not the unintended consequence of individual choices and of otherwise well-meaning law or regulation but of unhidden public policy that explicitly segregated every metropolitan area in the United States.”² For example, the practice of redlining prevented low-income people of color from purchasing homes throughout the twentieth century, which resulted in decreased chances to build wealth. Real estate racism has morphed into other forms: during the 2008 recession, for example, those who were the most affected by foreclosures were poor people of color, many of whom were targeted by predatory loan companies, a practice that has been referred to as ‘reverse redlining.’³

Rothstein points out that home equity has been the main source of wealth for white middle-class Americans over the past century, while exclusion from the “equity-accumulating boom” of the 1950s and

² Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2017), p. VII.

³ Rothstein, p. 113.

60s has meant that people of color “have great difficulty catching up now.”⁴ The issue is not only that people of color were prevented from accumulating wealth—but that often when they did, they were violently persecuted. Homes were a frequent target. When I visited Dallas in 2016, I learned about the history of bombings in black neighborhoods in the 1950s, when black residents would wake up to find a bomb sitting on their front lawn. And in Greenwood, a suburb of Tulsa, Oklahoma, one of the most affluent black neighborhoods in the US emerged in the 1920s, benefitting immensely from the oil boom that took place early in the decade and becoming known as Black Wall Street. The neighborhood was made up of many black professionals and hundreds of black homeowners. But in 1921, a race riot erupted in the city, and white mobs attacked Greenwood and its symbolic structures of black wealth, killing 36 people and burning 35 city blocks down to the ground.

This is one of the reasons why homes are prevalent within socially engaged art—they are one of the clearest determinants of wealth and white privilege in the United States, and they have played an important historical role in shaping inequality. Many of the artists discussed in this dissertation work within neighborhoods that are predominantly African American or Latinx, and they attempt to ground their practices in discussions of racial justice, in order to redress historical practices of housing inequality that have resulted in segregation and unequal access to resources and public services. This has worked through developing groups focused on self-determination, sometimes drawing from histories associated with the civil rights movement, and connecting this with more recent discussions around Black Lives Matter.

Beginnings

It was during a visit to Project Row Houses in Houston’s Third Ward in 2016 that I first became interested in the prevalence of homes and neighborhood projects in socially engaged art. Beginning in the 1990s, artist Rick Lowe began to renovate abandoned row houses, turning them into spaces for artist residencies and low-income residences, including units specifically set aside for young mothers. The project focused on the neighborhood’s African American cultural heritage and sought to support artists

⁴ Ibid., p. 185.

and create economic opportunities for residents. Since its beginnings, it has grown in scale, and now takes up numerous city blocks. While residents still make up much of its audience, it now attracts many observers like myself: white, middle-class, not from the neighborhood, and interested in art. During my visit, I walked around the neighborhood and noticed numerous abandoned houses next to large, well maintained homes. There were other signs of change associated with gentrification, including new condos and the revitalization of Emancipation Park, which was established in 1872 by former slaves as a site to hold Juneteenth celebrations, and was being revitalized through a multi-million dollar grant. Some residents welcomed the changes, while others feared that living near an upgraded park would result in higher rents. Project Row Houses has had to face similar issues in its mission to improve the neighborhood: how to attract more resources, services, and improve the quality of life in the Third Ward, without pushing out existing residents? And how can a nonprofit articulate its demands and get a seat at the table of local government without making compromises that affect its programming and its relationships with residents?

In promotional materials for Project Row Houses, Rick Lowe is shown with long hair and a youthful grin. He describes his initial interest in the project, stating that “as a group we felt that our presence as artists was not being felt and that our art was not available for the enrichment of the lives of people in our own community.”⁵ Looking at some of the project’s early planning documents in the University of Houston archives, I came across a description of what it could become, in a proposal addressed to the Bruner Foundation. The proposal was for funding to create ‘The Listening Place’ at Project Row Houses, which would collect and share neighborhood stories. In articulating their vision for the community, one of the project coordinators described the aim of Project Row Houses as being to provide a “third place,” situated between the home and the workplace: “like the bistros of Paris, English pubs, Arabian coffee houses, or even the bar in the TV series *Cheers*, the third place is a neutral ground, a home away from home.”⁶ This quote, in addition to describing the appeal of places like Project Row Houses, suggests the paradox that is at the heart of many of these projects. In attempting to create spaces

⁵ Rick Lowe, “Art Moves In, Springs from Roots of Third Ward,” *The Bimonthly Newsletter of the Cultural Arts Council of Houston* (April/May 1994), University of Houston archives.

⁶ Letter from Virginia Prescott, Project Row Houses TLP Project Coordinator, addressed to the Bruner Foundation, June 21, 2002. University of Houston archives.

of autonomy by carving out their own neutral ground in the world, they have had to rely on gifts from private foundations, governments, corporations and wealthy individual donors, whom they often disagree with politically, and whose very existence challenges the ideals of radical social equality that many of the projects support artistically. Many of the issues I investigate here are related to this dynamic—is it worth engaging in artistic projects that support communities if you must rely upon funding from corporations whose work has done damage to those very same communities? On the other hand, is it preferable to remain underground—to say no to a seat at the table—in order to avoid complicity with the structural powers you denounce?

Project Row Houses is just one of the examples considered here, many of which resemble community-based art practices that became common in the US in the 1960s (which I discuss in several chapters). While the term ‘community-based art’ is still frequently used, the terms ‘social practice’ and ‘socially engaged art’ have become more common in contemporary discourse. I use all of them in this dissertation. Although social practice has perhaps become the more commonly used term, the term socially engaged art is preferable in some instances because it emphasizes the fact that these projects are art—and also serves to underscore the cooptation of this type of practice by art institutions. The term socially engaged art is frustratingly vague, since art is always engaged with social life in some way. However, the broadness of the term is also appealing, since it allows different practices to be gathered under the same umbrella. What these various practices share in common is an interest in working in a specific site over a long period of time to respond to social inequalities, and to instigate changes that will benefit existing members of a community or neighborhood through forms of cultural production or cultural organizing. These practices demonstrate that alongside twentieth century modernism and its emphasis on the individual, there has been an alternate current more focused on the social production of art. For John Dewey, art possessed the ability to nurture democratic politics and public life. In *Art as Experience*, published in 1934, he argued that artists should reject creating commodities for the wealthy, and move their work outside of the studio and into the community or the public sphere. Artists involved in these projects often use whatever material is available, and prioritize participation, dialogue, collaboration and community building, rather than the elevation of individual interests or achievement. These tendencies are visible in a number of different movements throughout the twentieth century, from

community-based art of the 1960s, to new genre public art in the 90s, to more recent contemporary practices. However, as I will demonstrate in the chapters that follow, these ideals of democracy and the public good are often difficult to square with existing forms and structures that focus on the individual. This includes the contemporary art world, which remains as fixated as ever on recognizing individual genius (including star social practice artists such as Rick Lowe and Theaster Gates), as well as political and economic structures in the US that obstruct meaningful social change (for example, through tax reform that would prevent individuals and corporations from accumulating vast sums of money).

Many of these projects have placed housing and neighborhood development at the forefront of their concerns. Recognizing that housing is a social issue that both reflects and produces inequality and intensifies racism, they have sought to confront these issues head on—not just by creating art that critiques these issues, but by attempting to build their own alternatives through art. Audre Lorde famously said: “the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.”⁷ This statement raises the question: can artists use political and aesthetic tools of their own making to build something different from what already exists? Some of the projects I consider here propose operating with new tools and building different kinds of houses, away from the master’s gaze, while others are stubbornly engaged in attempts to reshape existing structures. Others have found that genuine change is only possible in incremental steps, with whatever tools are available.

Art, Gentrification and Urban Redevelopment

To better understand the dynamics that contemporary socially engaged art is responding to in cities, it is necessary to provide a brief review of literature on art, gentrification and urban development that outlines how art has been linked to displacement. This background helps to shed light on the effects that artists have on particular places over time, and makes it clearer why some have sought to directly address links between art, gentrification and displacement. For David Harvey, gentrification is connected to the broader process of accumulation by dispossession that defines neoliberal capitalism, whereby

⁷ Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” in Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1983), p. 27.

wealth moves towards a small group of elite individuals and away from public benefit. Urban redevelopment, which encompasses a range of practices that change the use of buildings or neighborhoods, for example from warehouses to new condos, is a way to meet perpetual need within capitalism “to find profitable terrains for capital surplus production and absorption.”⁸ Analyses of gentrification began in the 1960s, when sociologist Ruth Glass first used the term to describe urban development in London:

One by one, many of the working-class quarters of London have been invaded by the middle classes—upper and lower. Shabby, modest mews and cottages—two rooms up and two down—have been taken over, when their leases have expired, and have become elegant, expensive residences. Larger Victorian houses, downgraded in an earlier or recent period—which were used as lodging houses or were otherwise in multiple occupation—have been upgraded once again.... Once this process of ‘gentrification’ starts in a district it goes on rapidly until all or most of the original working-class occupiers are displaced and the whole social character of the district is changed.⁹

Numerous scholars have discussed the role that art plays in paving the way for redeveloping inner-city neighborhoods, many of which deteriorated through decades of disinvestment linked to deindustrialization and white flight. Artists were often on the front lines of gentrification in emptied out urban centers, seeking out studio space and cheap rent. Neil Smith has argued that artists have the effect of taming seemingly dangerous neighborhoods for the real estate industry, giving a particular area character and allowing it to be packaged as a commodity. He notes the pioneering mentality behind the movements of both artists and developers: “They ‘pioneer’ first on the gold coast between safe neighborhoods on one side where property values are high and the disinvested slums on the other side where opportunity is higher. Successive beachheads and defensible borders are established on the frontier. In this way economic geography charts the strategy of urban pioneering.”¹⁰ Sharon Zukin made similar observations in *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change*. She noted the many artists who lived in former manufacturing spaces in New York in the 1970s, attracted by the square footage, abundant light and low rent. But then, “as the bare, polished wood floors, exposed red brick walls, and cast-iron facades

⁸ David Harvey, “The Right to the City,” *New Left Review* 53 (September-October 2008): p. 2.

⁹ Ruth Glass, *London: Aspects of Change* (London: Centre for Urban Studies, 1964), p. xviii.

¹⁰ Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 21.

of these ‘artists’ quarters’ gained increasing public notice, the economic and aesthetic virtues of ‘loft living’ were transformed into bourgeois chic.”¹¹

Zukin connected gentrification to the symbolic economy of cities, which became increasingly important in the 1970s and 80s, as developers and city planners sought ways to attract investment and capital following decades of urban decline. The symbolic economy, according to Zukin, has to do with the “look and feel of cities,” and reflects “decisions about what—and who—should be visible.”¹² Two decades later, Richard Florida became notorious for uncritically promoting this concept through the development of arts districts and other amenities designed to appeal to the creative class.¹³ In “The Fine Art of Gentrification” (1984), Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan also focus on the Lower East Side, pointing out that initial portrayals of the neighborhood depicted it as a wild, danger-filled area: “a unique blend of poverty, punk rock, drugs, arson, Hell’s Angels, winos, prostitutes and dilapidated housing that adds up to an adventurous avant-garde setting of considerable cachet.”¹⁴ They argued that despite countercultural intentions, artists and art institutions were ultimately complicit in reproducing dominant culture. Zukin was similarly pessimistic about the potential for producers of the symbolic economy to resist gentrification, writing, “In general, community mobilization cannot do battle with ‘the abstract logic of the private market.’”¹⁵

Yet despite this pessimistic outlook, many artists have attempted to bring improvements and services to their neighborhoods, often working in a manner that embodies Dewey’s emphasis on culture and democratic public life, and relying on provisional practices and informal networks in the absence of adequate state services. Many artists have become increasingly aware of the links between cultural capital and gentrification, and have attempted to experiment with alternative forms of urban development. In doing so, some have attempted to work outside of institutions, or have tried to build their own. These forms of experimental urbanism share the belief that the ‘abstract logic of the market’ view offered by

¹¹ Sharon Zukin, *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989), p. 2.

¹² Sharon Zukin, *The Culture of Cities* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1995), p. 7.

¹³ Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It’s Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

¹⁴ Walter Robinson and Carlo McCormick, quoted in Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan, “The Fine Art of Gentrification,” *October* 31 (Winter 1984): p. 93.

¹⁵ Sharon Zukin “Gentrification: Culture and Capital in the Urban Core,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 13 (August 1987): p. 133

Zukin is overly deterministic, since it forecloses possibilities for community resistance or mobilization. The writing of Henri Lefebvre offers alternatives, through his ideas on agency and practice. His famous ‘right to the city’ concept resembles Dewey’s ideas in some ways, in calling for a “transformed and renewed *right to urban life*.”¹⁶ For Lefebvre, it was possible to rebuild and remake the city in a manner that challenged market logic: “Between the sub-systems and the structures consolidated by various means (compulsion, terror, and ideological persuasion), there are holes and chasms. These voids are not there due to chance. They are the places of the possible.”¹⁷ Lefebvre describes the city as an *oeuvre*—an incomplete work of art in progress. It is precisely these ‘places of the possible,’ that provide opportunities for artists today, to unmake and remake cities in ways that are more equitable and just.

Other scholars have suggested possible forms that a renewed right to urban life might take, often drawing from histories of utopian design. Murray Bookchin described a system of libertarian municipalism in which small units would be bound together through mutual interests:

It is an effort to work from latent or incipient democratic possibilities toward a radically new configuration of society itself—a communitarian society oriented toward meeting human needs, responding to ecological imperatives, and developing a new ethics based on sharing and cooperation. More important, it involves a redefinition of politics, a return to the word’s original Greek meaning as the management of the community or polis by means of direct face-to-face assemblies of the people in the formulation of public policy and based on an ethics of complementarity and solidarity.¹⁸

In *Commonwealth*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri examine existing practices that have engaged in building the commons, speaking about processes in formation that could replace the current capitalist economic system. They write, “we can already recognize—in the autonomy of biopolitical production, the centrality of the common, and their growing separation from capitalist exploitation and command—the makings of a new society within the shell of the old.”¹⁹ Hardt and Negri recognize the importance of creating something new, separately from the state. Their theory of social transformation differs from the cutting gesture associated with revolution, and the slow transition associated with socialism. Instead, it

¹⁶ Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, translated by Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), p. 158.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

¹⁸ Murray Bookchin, “Libertarian Municipalism: An Overview,” 1991, available at <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/murray-bookchin-libertarian-municipalism-an-overview>

¹⁹ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 311.

requires the growing detachment of the multitude from private and public control, forming its own sphere. They describe “a progressive accumulation of the common” and “the metamorphosis of social subjects through education and training in cooperation, communication, and organizing social encounters,”²⁰ and argue that “this is how capital creates its own gravediggers: pursuing its own interests and trying to preserve its own survival, it must foster the increasing power and autonomy of the productive multitude. And when that accumulation of powers crosses a certain threshold, the multitude will emerge with the ability autonomously to rule common wealth.”²¹ Hardt and Negri view the city as the space where this will happen, having replaced the factory of earlier communist movements, and they consider the role of conflict and conviviality within social encounters:

The politics of the metropolis is the organization of encounters. Its task is to promote joyful encounters, make them repeat, and minimize infelicitous encounters. This requires, first, an openness to alterity and the capacity to form relationships with others, to generate joyful encounters and thus create social bodies with ever greater capacities. Second, and perhaps more important, it requires learning how to withdraw from conflictive, destructive relationships and to decompose the pernicious social bodies that result from them. Finally, since so many of the spontaneous encounters are not immediately joyful, this politics of the metropolis requires discovering how to transform conflictive encounters, as much as possible, into joyful and productive ones.²²

There are parallels to be found in James Holston’s writing on convivial relations in cities. Holston has written about the growing strength of urban citizenship movements in cities around the world as a response to weakened nation-states, and the necessity of building forms of solidarity in resistance to neoliberal urbanization. He critiques Jacques Rancière’s argument that politics is defined, above all, by dissensus. While acknowledging the centrality of conflict in shaping democratic public life, he argues that the “concept of caring is as vital to political engagement as that of disagreement” and that “the political emerges as people make something in common.”²³ Holston’s work is part of a growing discourse on alternative forms of urban development focused on building community and the commons, and these ideas provide a background for thinking about socially engaged art projects that attempt to critique redevelopment-as-usual and build places of the possible.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., p. 311.

²² Ibid., p. 255.

²³ James Holston, “Metropolitan Rebellions and the Politics of Commoning the City,” *Anthropology Theory*, forthcoming.

Reconstructing Houses in Art

I have looked at some of the historical and political issues related to art and urban development, and suggested some of the reasons why artists have sought to build alternatives. These might be looked at as ‘places of the possible,’ in the words of Lefebvre, or to use a term associated with Project Row Houses, ‘third places.’ In this section, I look at the form of the house in several examples of modern and contemporary art, placing these in conversation with contemporary socially engaged art and its fixation on houses and neighborhood development. There are many projects that could be discussed here, that have focused on artists working in public housing sites in cities around the world. For example, beginning in the 1960s, Stephen Willats worked on collaborative projects with residents of public housing in London, often using audio recordings and photographic documentation in his work to tell stories about their lives. Informal artist collectives and communal living spaces were common in many European cities from the 1960s through the 2000s, but have recently become more formalized and regulated.²⁴ And in 2015, the British collective Assemble won the Turner Prize for their architectural and design work focused on rehabilitating homes in Liverpool through collaborative processes. While this dissertation considers some of these examples, the projects that I focus my attention on raise questions about aesthetic autonomy, deconstruction and community building, and also speak to issues related to race and segregation in American cities. In considering the acts of repairing and renovating urban centers more fully, I turn now to the theme of the house, to look in more detail at how places of the possible might take form in socially engaged art.

Gordon Matta-Clark is one of the most widely recognized artists to have worked with the form of the house, through his building cuts beginning in the 1970s. For example, in *Splitting* (1974), a vertical slice runs through a house in Englewood, New Jersey that was going to be demolished. In a film that accompanies the work, Matta-Clark is shown engaged in the physically demanding labor necessary to produce the cut, which may be viewed as a defunctionalizing gesture in line with an avant-garde interest in thwarting utility. Mary Jane Jacob writes that his work “called for an anarchistic approach to

²⁴ See, for example, Gloria G. Durán and Alan W. Moore, “La Tabacalera of Lavapiés: A Social Experiment or a Work of Art?” *FIELD: A Journal of Socially Engaged Art Criticism* 2 (Fall 2015), available at <http://field-journal.com/issue-2/duran-moore>.

architecture, marked physically by a breaking of convention through a process of ‘undoing’ or ‘destructuring,’ rather than creating a structure—and philosophically by a revolutionary approach that sought to reveal and later alleviate societal problems through art.”²⁵ The point was to produce negative space and critique the architectural language of utilitarian modernism, and Matta-Clark used the term ‘anarchitecture’ to suggest processes of subtraction and deconstruction.

While Matta-Clark used abandoned houses as raw materials to produce an aesthetic gesture of subtraction, Rick Lowe, and other artists discussed here, took abandoned houses and fixed them up, making them useful, and thereby going against the deconstructive tradition. This relates more generally to how socially engaged art positions itself in relation to other contemporary art: as additive rather than subtractive, and interested in building rather than taking apart. Matta-Clark’s cutting gestures have sometimes been viewed as a form of masculine violence—through their attack on a symbol of feminized domestic space. In contrast, socially engaged art works through gestures of reparative practice, which I discuss in more detail in chapter one. What is especially interesting about Matta-Clark in the context of this dissertation is that in addition to his sculptural house projects, he was also involved in performance and happenings in the 1970s focused on developing common social spaces in cities—including the well-known artist-run restaurant, FOOD. In 1976, he worked with other artists to create a community garden space in the Lower East Side, La Plaza Cultural, and constructed an amphitheater using reclaimed material from abandoned buildings. And near the end of his life, Matta-Clark had plans to design two community art centers in New York: one in the South Bronx that was never realized, and a Resource Center and Environmental Youth Program in the Lower East Side that he began to work on with neighborhood residents in 1977, helping them clean up an empty lot and build a few concrete columns, before he died of pancreatic cancer at the age of 35.

Matta-Clark’s projects, especially FOOD, were influential for other artists interested in creating spaces for community and neighborhood social life, and this became a familiar form within relational aesthetics in the 1990s. Nicolas Bourriaud defined relational aesthetics as “work which takes as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an

²⁵ Mary Jane Jacob, *Gordon Matta-Clark: A Retrospective* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1985), p. 8.

independent and private symbolic space.”²⁶ While one might view such art as extensions of participatory work of the 1960s (happenings, situationism, fluxus, etc.), Bourriaud considered relational aesthetics to be an entirely new development, commensurate with postindustrial economic restructuring that favored the exchange of services over goods. It was grounded in a critical rethinking of modernism, including the separation of art from life, the valorization of the individual artist and utopian notions of progress. Bourriaud argued that human relations were standardized through mass media, the virtual reality of the internet and processes of globalization, and that artists engaged in relational aesthetics were creating alternate forms of human sociability capable of resisting the dominance of global capitalism. For Bourriaud, art should no longer be seen as a utopian model existing outside of reality, but should actually demonstrate ways of living, for example, by orchestrating convivial encounters in gallery spaces. He described a range of practices that attempted to create alternate models of sociability. Yet while the social was emphasized, politics was rejected, since he believed that “any stance that is ‘directly’ critical of society is futile, if based on the illusion of a marginality that nowadays is impossible, not to say regressive.”²⁷ For Bourriaud, overtly political artwork is not only propagandistic and utopian, but it risks replicating the grand political narratives of past modernist movements.

Pierre Huyghe is one of the artists favored by Bourriaud, and his work can be seen to embody some of these characteristics. In 2003, Huyghe planned a celebration for a new housing development in the Hudson Valley in upstate New York, near the village of Fishkill, about 70 miles north of New York City. The project, funded by the Dia, would involve a large-scale public art work produced by the artist. Like many non-urban developments, Streamside Knolls was designed to appeal to those seeking to escape the city, and like the surrounding suburban areas, it is predominantly white. Individual lots in the development lack fences or clear borders, adding to the park-like setting of the development. In an interview with George Baker published in *October*, Huyghe stated that he “wanted to create a fiction that would lead to a fête, a celebration, an event that could be repeated... if we take up the metaphor of theater, we can call my intervention the creation of a script, after which comes the play—and even, a few years later, the possibility for the reinterpretation of this same play.”²⁸ The event that he designed was

²⁶ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les presses réél, 2002), p. 14.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

²⁸ George Baker, “An Interview with Pierre Huyghe,” *October* 110 (2004): p. 84.

called Streamside Day, and it featured a parade with floats, city service vehicles, music, food and welcome speeches from the mayor of the town. Huyghe's plans for the project also involved creating a community center, to be designed by French architect Francois Roche. It was ultimately not built, however, for several possible reasons, including one suggested by art historian Amelia Barikin. In her book *Parallel Presents*, she writes that "In Huyghe's work, both freed time and utopia are kept in a state of continuous construction ... it is not prescriptive. It is about preserving a sense of potential."²⁹ For Barikin, continuous construction suggests both the building of platforms, and a resistance to filling them in.

This embrace of irresolution, and the preservation of potential, is worth exploring further. While Matta-Clark's houses involved a cutting gesture, Huyghe suggested the possibility of building, through the concept of continuous construction. Both artists conceptualized community centers that were never built. In contrast, Thomas Hirschhorn (also associated with relational aesthetics) has built numerous monuments and altars in public spaces. His work frequently focuses on housing and neighborhood development. Many of his projects are dedicated to philosophers, and are often located in front of large housing developments. They are constructed out of low-budget materials such as packing tape and cardboard, printed out signs and graffitied slogans. For the Gramsci Monument, also commissioned by the Dia, Hirschhorn set up an installation in the courtyard of Forest Houses in the Bronx. He dedicated the monument to Antonio Gramsci, set up a library filled with his writings, and hired local residents to run art classes, a newspaper, a radio station, a computer lab and a grill. Art critic Whitney Kimball spoke to Forest Houses residents afterwards to hear their thoughts on the project. The majority expressed positive feelings about the experience but wished that it could have lasted longer. In response to this sentiment, Dia curator Yasmil Raymond pointed out that the institution did not have the resources to sustain a more permanent manifestation of the monument. Hirschhorn added that permanence was never the intention, stating, "I am an artist, not a social worker."³⁰ For him, the project was intended to demonstrate the importance of form and the autonomy of art.

²⁹ Amelia Barikin, *Parallel Presents: The Art of Pierre Huyghe* (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 2012), p. 160.

³⁰ Thomas Hirschhorn, quoted in Laurie Rojas, "Beuys' Concept of Social Sculpture and Relational Art Practices Today," *Chicago Art Magazine*, November 29, 2010, <http://chicagoartmagazine.com/2010/11/beuys%E2%80%99-concept-of-social-sculpture-and-relational-art-practices-today/>.

It is worth noting that community art projects have been going on in US cities for decades—it is only recently that contemporary artists have expressed an interest in them, and that they have come to be affiliated with mainstream art institutions. And while Matta-Clark never realized his community center project, there were many others that were taking place in New York, Los Angeles and other cities in the 1960s and 70s. In Watts, for example, African American artists engaged in arts programming in the 1960s following the rebellion, and their work was largely ignored by the mainly white art world showing work in galleries and museums at the time. So then, why mention the examples of Matta-Clark, Huyghe, Hirschhorn and other white artists whose work has, in some ways, fetishized community building projects, when these have been taking place in communities of color for decades? As I demonstrate in this dissertation, socially engaged art may be understood as the merging of several different traditions. This includes community art practices that operate in communities of color, building their own institutions and offering services to neighborhood residents. It also includes traditions associated with the mainstream art world, including institutions that have attempted to ‘reach out’ to communities during the past several decades in order to diversify their collections and their audiences.

Aesthetic Autonomy

House-focused art projects by Matta-Clark, Huyghe and Hirschhorn demonstrate a commitment to aesthetic autonomy that has been questioned within socially engaged art. While Hirschhorn ultimately maintained detachment from Forest Houses, many socially engaged artists have taken responsibility for specific sites or neighborhoods—often taking on many of the roles associated with social workers in areas that are lacking services. Some contemporary critics see this as evidence of art’s dissolution into the everyday spaces of capitalist exchange, and have attempted to theorize a refashioned avant-garde to critique this notion of political art. These lines of theoretical investigation connect with the tradition of critique associated with the Frankfurt School, and especially Theodor Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* (1970). Adorno argued that art must maintain critical distance from political and economic institutions to preserve a critical space of autonomy. Adorno wrote his text after experiencing fascism in Europe and witnessing the totalitarian aftermath of the Russian Revolution, and he viewed art as a realm that must always remain separate from a totally administered society. In his view, art that created actual social change in the world

risked complicity with the instrumentalizing powers of growing state bureaucracies. He argued that a strong defense of aesthetic autonomy was the only way to preserve art's political powers of negation. Modern art must exist solely for itself and must resist bourgeois cravings for "a sort of use-value modeled on sensual pleasure."³¹ Viewing the modern world as dominated by utility, he believed that the utopian function of art should be to resist the objectification, commodification and alienation associated with capitalist reproduction.

These ideas have become important references for contemporary scholars interested in redefining political art through an updated version of the avant-garde. His arguments have been incredibly influential to contemporary art theory, which was heavily influenced by the poststructural tradition. Peter Bürger has described a sense of failure associated with the aftermath of May 1968 and the transfer of practice into theory, which for him at the time "seemed to be the key that could keep open the door to the future that I imagined...as a finally livable world."³² Contemporary understandings of the avant-garde have roots in the utopianism of events such as the Paris Commune, Russian Revolution and May 1968, and these events are important historical markers for recent theorists of aesthetic autonomy, for whom the concept is a defense against the constant threat of corruption and co-optation within neoliberalism. John Roberts argues that an updated avant-garde must stand in advance of bourgeois culture, meaning and values—it must be an art "in advance of capitalism."³³ This argument highlights some of the main features of the historic avant-garde, including the notion that art possesses a unique potential premised on critical distance from everyday life. The gap or space that is implied here also emphasizes the experimental nature of the avant-garde and its ability to test out new ideas in a zone free from compromise and bias. 'In advance' implies distance as well as externality, two characteristics that enable avant-garde artists to supposedly see past the confines of everyday life under capitalism, expose the untruths of neoliberalism and create revolutionary change. It is important to Roberts that art is understood as a distinct form of labor set apart from the practices it represents or comments upon and as not subject to the alienating, reifying tendencies of work under capitalism (so, for example, artists might mimic the actions of social

³¹ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 14.

³² Peter Bürger, "Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde: An Attempt to Answer Certain Critics of Theory of the Avant-Garde," *New Literary History* 2010 (41): p. 698.

³³ John Roberts, *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 2015), p. 31.

workers, but should not actually become social workers). For Roberts, art must operate within the everyday, but maintain its outsider status “in order for autonomy to do its work of revision, extraction, subjection, subtraction, negation, etc.”³⁴

He points to the activist group Chto Delat, a collective of artists and writers based in Moscow and St. Petersburg, which formed in 2003 in the context of increasing privatization of the Russian economy. Roberts considers their work to be influenced by relational art in France but sees it as shifting away from the neo-avant-garde associated with Bourriaud and moving towards a revolutionary mode rooted in the historic Soviet avant-garde. Drawing from Hal Foster’s critique of Bürger in *Return of the Real* (1996), Roberts refers to their practice as exemplifying a ‘belatedness,’ which involves reworking an original idea in a different time and context. One of the projects organized by the group is the collectively written ‘Newspaper of the Engaged Platform, Chto Delat/What is to be Done?’ They aim to take up the unfinished project of the historic avant-garde, much of which passed into the realm of a depoliticized national culture. In addition to the printed newspaper, their work has included videos, installations and performative interventions in public spaces, influenced by the practices of Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal. Roberts argues that their work draws on the eroded, yet still embedded histories of the Russian avant-garde and describes its potential to “expose the impostures and political weaknesses of global neoliberal power.”³⁵ He discusses the staged nature of their performances and interventions, which demonstrate “a key aspect of what they do not want the political agency of the avant-garde to be seen to be doing: to embed itself completely in the heteronomous particulars of the everyday as form of post-autonomous, instrumentalized practice.”³⁶

Roberts does not include details on specific performances or discuss the audience reception of Chto Delat’s work, nor does he consider what they might have produced in terms of actual social transformation. Instead, the expository, performative gesture is valued on its own. To him, their work suggests a ‘suspensive’ avant-garde, which possesses the quality “of being both in the world and athwart it” and is therefore able to avoid the “instrumental-activist shift” associated with post-relational aesthetics,

³⁴ Ibid., p. 110.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 176.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 177.

including various forms of social practice.³⁷ For Roberts, socially engaged art would be viewed as disintegrating into life: by becoming part of the indefensible zone of social welfare work associated with non-profits, benefitting creative entrepreneurs, or generally working within rather than in advance of capital. The problem with this position is that many ‘heteronomous’ practices move in and out of the spheres of art and everyday life. This poses a problem for contemporary art theory devoted to defending the political potential of the avant-garde, in which critics focus on weeding out vulgar, non-art or activist art practices that are seen as compromised and corrupted as soon as they leave the protected world of aesthetic autonomy.

In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno laid out a vision of aesthetic autonomy that strengthened art as a form of critical theory, but defanged it as practice. In drawing upon these sources, Roberts theorizes a refunctioned avant-garde that stands in advance of capitalism but lacks the ability to act in the present moment. Other critics have drawn from the writing of Rancière, on dissensus, and Chantal Mouffe, on agonism, to make similar points. In many of these discussions, the purpose is to highlight the role that conflict plays in shaping democratic exchange and discourse—which as Holston has argued in relation to cities and social movements, is only part of the equation. These theories have influenced the writing of art historians who focus on notions of democracy in site-specific public art. For example, in Rosalyn Deutsche’s *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*, she draws upon Mouffe repeatedly to argue that “urban space is the product of conflict.”³⁸ Mouffe’s concept of agonism also influenced Claire Bishop’s well-known critique of relational aesthetics. She viewed some of these practices (including Rirkrit Tiravanija’s work) as obscuring conflict and promoting uncritical, feel-good positions. On the other hand, she praised Hirschhorn’s work, because it “acknowledges the limitations of what is possible as art.”³⁹ Arguments related to autonomy, dissensus and negativity also shaped Miwon Kwon’s discussion of site-specific public art that intervenes, rather than integrates, into its surroundings.⁴⁰

³⁷ Ibid., p. 178.

³⁸ Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), p. 278.

³⁹ Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” *October* 110 (2004): p. 79.

⁴⁰ Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).

An Alternative Lineage

Writing that draws from the tradition of aesthetic autonomy, and negative social critique, is prevalent in contemporary art discourse—especially when it comes to questions regarding the political nature of art. Yet there are other histories and practices that can be considered as part of an alternative lineage, in which artists and activists have sought to do more than just expose power or demonstrate the limitations of art. Some of these theories are built on ideas related to the commons, drawing parallels with Hardt and Negri’s writings, as well as notions of solidarity and mutual interest found in the work of Bookchin and Holston. While their vision of a new metropolitan politics based on joyful encounters provides an antidote to earlier, one-sided theories of politics focused solely on conflict, it is difficult to envision what concrete forms might emerge out of these visions. However, their writing suggests an interest in building the commons that is visible in many post-autonomous socially engaged art projects.

Gregory Sholette has commented on the issues that these practices must deal with, pointing out that “if art has finally merged with life as the early 20th Century avant-garde once enthusiastically anticipated, it has done so not at a moment of triumphant communal utopia, but at a time when life, at least for the 99.1%, sucks.”⁴¹ In his book *Delirium and Resistance* he describes a “bare art world” in which art has been totally subsumed into capitalist exchange. For Sholette, political art necessitates a commitment to operating underground. He uses the metaphor of dark matter—activist and other non-professional art that attempts to stay under the radar and resist cooptation or alignment with institutions. I suggest here that if dark matter is associated with activist art, then socially engaged art might be understood as dark matter that has been unearthed or exposed to the light—or to institutional oversight. The practices that I focus on throughout this dissertation take place above ground, but they maintain a connection to their dark matter roots. This tension between underground and above ground practices comes up repeatedly here (and literally, in my discussion of Mike Kelley’s Mobile Homestead in chapter two). One of the major issues with the concept of dark matter is that fascism and extremism take hold when institutions and networks break down, and the groups that have benefitted the most from institutional weakness, exacerbated under Trump, are right-wing groups, not progressive activists. This

⁴¹ Gregory Sholette, “Delirium and Resistance after the Social Turn,” *FIELD: A Journal of Socially Engaged Art Criticism*, Spring 2015, <http://field-journal.com/issue-1/sholette>.

raises broader questions about whether to collaborate with existing institutions of civil society, or as Hardt and Negri suggest, to build the commons autonomously from the state. Activist art associated with dark matter works from this viewpoint, and resists collaborating with institutions, preferring spaces of liminality and irresolution (thereby drawing connections with elements of the avant-garde already discussed).

There are a number of authors who have been involved in tracing an alternate historical and theoretical framework for socially engaged art. Lucy Lippard wrote about moments of overlap between cultural organizing and activist politics in the 1970s.⁴² In the 1990s, Suzanne Lacy coined the term ‘new genre public art’ to describe work that focused on social issues and community engagement, while Arlene Raven used the phrase ‘art in the public interest’ to describe a shift away from modernist individualism and toward collaborative practices.⁴³ Grant Kester wrote about this type of work in his book *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (2004), in which he used the term ‘dialogical aesthetics’ to describe practices that emphasize communicative action. Kester situated this kind of work in relation to community-based art, and examined how it related to modernist art history and criticism, which emphasized the importance of the aesthetic shock or moment of epiphany. In contrast, he described a number of different art practices that unfold over time through dialogue and exchange. Kester points out that these projects do not fit into the traditional frame of art history, since they are not object based, and emphasize the community rather than individual production. While these projects may not look like art, they are still involved in producing an aesthetic experience. He points out that for Kant, aesthetic experience was not to be found solely in art objects, but in “the very process of communication that the art object catalyzes.”⁴⁴

In *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*, Kester looks at a range of site-specific and collaborative projects around the world, focusing on themes of aesthetic autonomy, epistemology and the hermeneutics of collaboration.⁴⁵ He critiques the notion of aesthetic

⁴² Lucy Lippard, *Get the Message?: A Decade of Art for Social Change* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1984).

⁴³ Arlene Raven, *Art in the Public Interest* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989).

⁴⁴ Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Conversation in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), p. 90.

⁴⁵ Grant Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 9.

autonomy put forth by Bishop, arguing that it produces “poetic withdrawal and allegorical distanciation.”⁴⁶ He contrasts work that remains symbolic and scripted, including that of Francis Alys, with works in which “the experience of collaborative labour is seen as generative.”⁴⁷ For example, the art collective Ala Plastica worked with a community outside of Buenos Aires to resist further development of the riverbed area, which was the site of a massive dam that displaced thousands of residents, but they cooperated with existing NGOs, community groups and scientists in carrying out their work, demonstrating “a pragmatic openness to site and situation, a willingness to engage with specific cultures and communities in a creative and improvisational manner, a concern with non-hierarchical and participatory processes, and a critical and self-reflexive relationship to practice itself.”⁴⁸ The conceptual framework outlined by Kester challenges both the modernist notion of aesthetic autonomy and the contemporary desire for a refashioned avant-garde, suggesting an alternate approach to evaluating socially engaged art that is grounded in the local, incomplete, situated nature of practice.

Tracing an alternate historical lineage for socially engaged art also involves examining attempts to repair, strengthen, or maintain existing institutions. Shannon Jackson has written about aesthetic autonomy in a manner that contrasts with the detached position of Roberts. In her book *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* she asks, “what if we remember the contingency of any dividing line between autonomy and heteronomy, noticing the dependency of each on the definition of the other, watching as the division between these two terms morphs between projects and perspectives?”⁴⁹ She discusses the work of Mierle Laderman Ukeles, who has been the official artist in residence at the New York Sanitation Department since the 1960s. Jackson argues that Ukeles’ work is guided by a belief in the role that public institutions might play in managing social welfare. Ukeles has discussed maintenance as a guiding principle in her work, which involves supporting what already exists, and contrasts with the originality associated with the avant-garde. In this dissertation, I consider maintenance art as a form of feminist practice, using Ukeles’ work as an influence. Many of the socially engaged art projects I focus on are associated with a well-known male artist, and are supported by teams of lesser-known women artists. I

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 71.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 76.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 125.

⁴⁹ Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 29.

explore this dynamic, arguing that it has to do both with the association between large-scale socially engaged art and real-estate development, as well as ideals of horizontal organizing and collaboration held by some of the women who work within these projects.

In its engagement with existing bureaucratic social structures, and its emphasis on maintenance, Ukeles' work contrasts with work that exists autonomously or expresses a sense of antagonism toward social systems characterized as totalizing or oppressive. In her "Maintenance Art Manifesto" (1969) she described dueling tendencies of development and maintenance in art: "Development: pure individual creation; the new; change; progress; advance; excitement; flight or fleeing. Maintenance: keep the dust off the pure individual creation; preserve the new; sustain the change; protect progress; defend and prolong the advance; renew the excitement; repeat the flight."⁵⁰ Blake Stimson has also written about art practices that collaborate with existing structures of power, arguing that the achievement of real political effect necessitates "direct engagement with politics and politicians proper and thus with the administrative and juridical apparatus of the state."⁵¹ Citing Theaster Gates' work, he writes about how artists have inserted themselves into existing structures of governance in order to achieve real political power, and to ask, in the words of Gates: "Where does real power come from? What does one do with power? And who's really the poor race, and who really won?"⁵²

Black Nihilism, Black Marxism, Black Capitalism

Questions of autonomy and engagement relate directly to political discussions of racial inequality in the United States. While Hardt and Negri are interested in theorizing an autonomous position outside of capitalism due to its corruptive influence on institutions, a number of theorists have made similar arguments about the repercussions of slavery in the United States, arguing that it has damaged the institutions of civil society beyond repair. This is a common thread in Afropessimist thought. Frank Wilderson would agree with some of the positions of Hardt and Negri. He argues that slavery built a foundation of inequality in American society that is virtually impossible to escape. This connects back to

⁵⁰ Mierle Laderman Ukeles, "Maintenance Art Manifesto," 1969.

⁵¹ Blake Stimson, "Art and Social Death," *A Blade of Grass*, January 29, 2018 <http://www.abladeofgrass.org/fertile-ground/art-social-death/> accessed September 30, 2018.

⁵² Theaster Gates, quoted in Stimson.

the words of Audre Lorde: for Wilderson, the moment you pick up one of the master's tools, you become complicit in replicating the foundations of racial inequality, violence and death. In an essay focused on critiquing the relevance of Gramscian Marxism for the black radical tradition, Wilderson notes the absence of the black subject in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*. He describes this as problematic because Gramsci's writing lays claim to universal applicability through a "structural consistency which elaborates all organic intellectuals and undergirds all resistance."⁵³ Wilderson denies the possibility of the white and black working classes finding common cause because of different historical processes related to capital and labor: blacks were subjugated into slavery through direct relations of force, while whites were compelled to sell their labor to capitalists for wages. Historically, he argues, this has meant that the worker demands that work be fair, while the slave demands that work stop. He writes that "the hegemonic advances within civil society by the Left hold out no more possibility for black life than the coercive backlash of political society. What many political theorists have either missed or ignored is that a crisis of authority that might take place by way of a Left expansion of civil society, further instantiates, rather than dismantles, the authority of whiteness."⁵⁴ What is missing from Wilderson's critique, however, is a consideration of moments throughout history when black activists have adopted Marxist ideas, or moments when working-class activists have foregrounded race and white supremacy. For example, he makes no mention of Soviet propaganda in the 1920s that attempted to win over African-Americans. For Wilderson, only the destruction of the state—the burning down of many masters' houses, using tools that have yet to be found—can undo the damage of white supremacy.

In an essay that predates Wilderson's text, Stuart Hall put forth a different argument in considering Gramsci's relevance for discussions of race. He argued that although Gramsci did not write specifically about racism, his concepts can still be useful in thinking about it, and in fact, Gramsci actually offers a key for thinking about how to theorize race and class together. He discusses economic determinism within classical Marxism, arguing that this denies the power of other social formations, including race, ethnicity, nationality and gender. He points out that Gramsci was opposed to a reductive economism and aimed for a more complex and differentiated type of analysis. For Gramsci, Hall writes,

⁵³ Frank B. Wilderson, III "Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?" *Social Identities*, 9.2 (2003): p. 226.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 229.

the state was “not a *thing* to be seized, overthrown or ‘smashed’ with a single blow, but a complex *formation* in modern societies which must become the focus of a number of different strategies and struggles because it is an arena of different social contestations.”⁵⁵

Other scholars working in the black radical tradition have incorporated Marxist ideas into their theories, including Cedric J. Robinson, who published *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* in 1983. The scholars associated with these perspectives are more inclined to recognize the significance of black social movements, including the contributions of community activists in US cities. Robin Kelley has looked at moments of friction between race and class in American history. He discusses the Harlem Renaissance poet Claude McKay, who traveled to the Soviet Union in 1922, meeting with Comintern officials and asking them to support black self-determination, which they did in 1928, passing a resolution that recognized black Americans as an oppressed nation.⁵⁶ Kelley has written about his experiences as a student and educator, noting that Robinson’s *Black Marxism* encouraged him to get involved with a range of different activist groups. In contrast to Wilderson, he emphasizes the importance of knowing not just what you’re fighting against—but what you’re fighting for: “The kind of politics to which I’ve been drawn has more to do with imagining a different future than being pissed off about the present. Not that I haven’t been angry, frustrated, and critical of the misery created by race, gender, and class oppression—past and present. That goes without saying. But my dream of a new world was the catalyst for my political engagement.”⁵⁷ Kelley discusses the interlinked nature of different anti-oppression struggles, for example, social movements like Black Women for Wages for Housework, that challenged understandings of who makes up the working class. Echoing Gramsci, he argues that the best activists are knowledge workers—and he uses classic examples from the civil rights movement to demonstrate how knowledge and action transform each other. Wilderson has referred to theory and action as separate—“two trains running”—and characterizes the “reformist measures” of activist groups like Black Lives Matter as puny in relation to the work of theory and philosophy.⁵⁸ In contrast, for Kelley,

⁵⁵ Stuart Hall, “Gramsci’s Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10.5 (1986): p. 19.

⁵⁶ Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), p. 47.

⁵⁷ Robin D.G. Kelley, “Beyond the ‘Real World,’ or Why Black Radicals Need to Wake Up and Start Dreaming,” *Souls* 4.2 (2002): p. 53.

⁵⁸ Frank B. Wilderson, III, Samira Spatzek, and Paula von Gleich, “‘The Inside-Outside of Civil Society’: An Interview with Frank B. Wilderson, III,” *Black Studies Papers* 2.1 (2016): p. 18.

movements like Black Lives Matter are not separate, but interconnected, since “social movements generate new knowledge, new theories, new questions.”⁵⁹

Kelley analyzes the structural effects of slavery and their lasting repercussions, but he refuses the passivity and inaction associated with Wilderson’s writing. Instead, he focuses on the affective bonds that draw people together and encourage them to build and create: “What sustained enslaved African people was a memory of freedom, dreams of seizing it, and conspiracies to enact it—fugitive planning, if you will. If we reduce the enslaved to mere fungible bodies, we cannot possibly understand how they created families, communities, sociality; how they fled and loved and worshiped and defended themselves; how they created the world’s first social democracy.”⁶⁰ In using the terms ‘fugitive planning’ and ‘sociality’ Kelley references the writings of Stefano Harney and Fred Moten. In their writing on the undercommons, they critique the university as an enlightened institution and theorize a space of autonomy and subversive radicalism. While Afropessimist authors such as Orlando Patterson and Jared Sexton have argued that black life is defined by social death, Moten argues, in response, that black life is irreducibly social.⁶¹ Moten has cited the importance of Marx’s early humanist writings on his own work, including the idea that, as Marx writes, “the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations.”⁶² For Harney and Moten, the undercommons was viewed as an intensely social space that opened up opportunities to learn and study with others in a non-disciplined setting, thereby providing a different conception of black sociality than that offered through Afropessimism.

In some ways, the undercommons resembles Sholette’s discussion of dark matter. Both offer an escape from the bright light of scrutiny, surveillance, and institutional oversight—as well as the Enlightenment values of universalism and objectivity. As I have noted, socially engaged art might be viewed as shining a light on this darkness—through acts of framing, making visible, revealing, exposing, or bringing attention to specific practices that might otherwise remain underground. Socially engaged art

⁵⁹ Kelley, “Beyond the ‘Real World,’” p. 54.

⁶⁰ Robin D.G. Kelley, “Black Study, Black Struggle,” *Boston Review*, March 7, 2016.

⁶¹ Fred Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh),” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112.4 (Fall 2013): p.739.

⁶² Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” (1845), available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm>.

takes place above ground, under existing political and economic conditions, and for many cities and neighborhoods, development projects intended to make improvements have looked more like black capitalism than black Marxism. What would Wilderson make of the attempts to merge black cultural radicalism with small-scale entrepreneurship and the promotion of black-owned businesses in Houston's Third Ward? Project Row Houses may be looked at as an example in which artists and activists sought to respond to social inequality perpetrated by slavery, segregation and racism, and attempted to make improvements by cooperating with the state and with existing institutions. In this sense, it corresponds more with histories of black capitalism than black Marxism (this is discussed in more detail in chapter one), and despite Rick Lowe's emphasis on collaboration and participation, it often prioritizes individual success and achievement.

Three miles away from Project Row Houses, in an area of the Third Ward that was historically home to black upper-middle class families, is a landmark that speaks to the increasingly popular narrative of black American capitalism: Beyoncé's childhood home, two stories, Georgian-style, with columns and a curving driveway—now inhabited by owners who sometimes let visitors take photos of themselves on their lawn next to a Beyoncé cutout.⁶³ Beyoncé often references the Third Ward in her songs, as well as her own success in rising to the top of the entertainment world. In lyrics like, "I just might be a black Bill Gates in the making," and "my great-great-grandchildren already rich, that's a lot of brown children on your Forbes list," she celebrates the American dream of individual achievement, and the dream of black empowerment. She has donated millions of dollars to charity, as has her sister, Solange Knowles, who in 2016 released the album *A Seat at the Table*—the title seeming to offer a position of power to those without it, and a chance to make decisions and participate in discussion. In 2018, Solange donated a large sum of money to Project Row Houses, so that they could send twelve students from the Third Ward to the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. While having a seat at the table is celebrated by Beyoncé, Solange and other successful black celebrities, this is the very thing that Wilderson would resist, since he denies that African Americans can be 'junior partners' in building institutions of civil society. Yet Project Row Houses, and many of the other projects discussed here, are

⁶³ Kim Turner, "A Tour Through Beyoncé and Jay-Z's Real Estate Empire," *Street Easy*, July 27, 2018, <https://streeteasy.com/blog/beyonce-jay-z-real-estate/>, accessed October 30, 2018.

interested in a seat at the table: whether this means gaining influence over neighborhood development, or participating in tenants unions, or speaking out about issues that matter to local businesses—and while this results in opportunities to gain political power, it also frequently reproduces models of entrepreneurship and individualism that are prevalent in American culture.

Writing About Socially Engaged Art

Exploring the idea of ‘artists in residence’ in relation to socially engaged art has meant looking at projects in which artists spend long periods of time in a particular place, becoming intimately familiar with the political and social dynamics of specific sites. In constructing a methodology for this dissertation, I thought about a possible doubling act: in studying artist-ethnographers, should I become an art historian-ethnographer? There were certain ethnographic tools that seemed appealing, such as participant-observation, interviews, and the detailed analyses of conversations and everyday practices that are common within anthropology. Ultimately, I decided to incorporate certain aspects of ethnographic methodology into my analysis, but to remain firmly within the field of art history. For example, my discussion of *Trans.lation: Vickery Meadow in Dallas* (chapter five) involved multiple visits to meet participants and observe daily practices at the organization. This is clearly not the same as the long-term studies carried out by ethnographers, or the long-term projects carried out by socially engaged artists—but it did allow me to test out these methods.

Ethnographic methodology brings up important critiques and challenges for socially engaged art. On a pragmatic level, one basic challenge of writing about this kind of work is its durational nature, since so many projects occur over many months or years. Another challenge is how to write about projects that involve large numbers of people, who come from different backgrounds and have different levels of investment in the project. The immateriality of the work can also present a challenge for art critics, since so much of this work revolves around conversation and social interaction. Aside from practical concerns, there are also more theoretical questions that revolve around the aesthetic nature of this type of work, and the avant-garde traditions that affect how art is made, viewed and written about. Grant Kester noted the inadequacy of current art theory for considerations of socially engaged art in the first issue of *FIELD: A Journal of Socially Engaged Art Criticism*, writing that criticism of this kind of work requires a new

“trans-disciplinary approach that moves beyond the traditions of existing art theory and criticism and opens out to other disciplines, including those which possess a more robust model of field research and a greater sensitivity to the complex function of social interaction at both the micro- and macro-political level.”⁶⁴

Suzanne Lacy also sought a new critical model for collaborative, participatory, community-based art practices. In the final chapter of *Mapping the Terrain* (1995), she discussed criticism of new genre public art, pointing out that it involves a different relationship between the artist and the audience. How the work relates to its audience is a central concern of socially engaged art, and many artists and critics have envisioned and theorized this type of art as less about a material product or a representation, and more about the space of communication between the artist and audience. It follows from this that critics writing about this type of work would likely be much more involved in listening to conversations, attending workshops, talking to people and interviewing participants to get a sense of their experiences. The issue of the artist’s intentions often comes up in relation to socially engaged art criticism, particularly around art practices that claim to be ‘doing good’ in a particular community. Many critics of socially engaged art have pointed out that this type of art is impossible to evaluate since it requires judging an artist’s intentions, rather than the final product. Additionally, socially engaged art operates in a quasi-sociological manner, which seems to call for an analysis of concrete results. Lacy proposes that critics employ a partisan approach in discussing this type of art, and that they “must inevitably enter the discussion personally and philosophically when approaching work that intends toward social meaning.”⁶⁵ This position conflicts with the disinterested approach to art criticism favored within modern aesthetics, but it relates in many ways to discussions of reflexivity and positionality that are prevalent within contemporary ethnographic discourse.

Hal Foster wrote about the risks involved in artists acting as anthropologists and potentially becoming cultural colonizers. His essay “The Artist as Ethnographer” was a response to new forms of collaborative, community-based art that emerged in the 1990s. Foster suggested that contemporary artists working with communities sought to identify with cultural ‘others’ whose experiences were considered to

⁶⁴ Grant Kester, “Editorial,” *FIELD: A Journal of Socially Engaged Art Criticism* (Spring 2015), <http://field-journal.com/issue-1/kester>.

⁶⁵ Suzanne Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), p. 182.

be somehow more real or authentic, and characterized these practices as new forms of primitivism. He criticized the belief that the other was assumed to have special access to “primary psychic and social processes from which the white subject is somehow blocked.”⁶⁶ He looked at several examples in which artists entered communities with the intent of working alongside them, but ended up speaking for them. Foster opened up an important discussion about the new anthropological role that many artists were playing when they worked in residence with communities, and his critique pointed to the ways in which the primitivizing tendencies of the avant-garde lived on in contemporary art. However, his arguments rely upon a fixed conception of anthropology that has since been challenged by both artists and ethnographers who have sought out models that are more reflexive and collaborative.

For example, Anthony Downey has acknowledged the affinities between ethnography and collaborative art, writing that “they both reify a reality that has an impact upon the viewer/reader (however unquantifiable); they involve experience and its interpretation (which, in turn, implicates the conditions of reception); and they are both apparently concerned with self-reflexive practices and aesthetic merit.”⁶⁷ Downey calls for the formation of new anthropological models in which an aesthetics of commitment is prioritized (relating to Lacy’s interest in a partisan approach to criticism), which would move past the audience reception model of shock and alienation associated with avant-garde aesthetics. Joanne Rappaport has discussed the notion of ‘collaborative ethnography,’ and the potential for anthropologists to act as ‘activist-scholars’ whose work is relevant both within academia and for the communities they represent. This is a useful model with which to understand the role of many of the artists discussed here. Rappaport writes that collaborative anthropology “is mirrored by a call for a “public anthropology” attentive to pressing public issues and written in a language accessible to an educated general public, and by a turn toward a politically engaged “activist anthropology.”⁶⁸ In the examples she cites, activist-anthropologists oriented their research towards a broad, general public, but also worked alongside grassroots organizations, viewing their work as co-conceptualization with the

⁶⁶ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), p. 175.

⁶⁷ Anthony Downey, “An Ethics of Engagement: Collaborative Art Practices and the Return of the Ethnographer,” *Third Text* 23.5 (2009): p. 597.

⁶⁸ Joanne Rappaport, “Beyond Participant Observation: Collaborative Ethnography as Theoretical Innovation,” *Collaborative Anthropologies*, Volume 1 (2008): p. 1.

community during all stages of the project. This is similar to the ways in which socially engaged artists work with neighborhood residents to address particular issues, and use art to build audiences and communicate ideas to the public.

Writing by Foster and Rappaport has been helpful in thinking about the positionality of the artists I am writing about here, while arguments by Lacy and Downey regarding commitment and partisanship have helped me to think about my own position as an art historian. Throughout this dissertation, I have sought to emphasize the experiences of participants involved in socially engaged art projects, through interviews and observations—these experiences are frequently invisible in public presentations that accompany these projects, and writing about them often assumes that artists’ intentions and participants’ experiences correspond with each other—which is not always the case. A final influence for constructing my research methodology has been Mikhail Bakhtin’s writing on dialogue and the shared spaces of interaction that surround speech acts. A word never exists on its own for Bakhtin, but instead, is “a bridge thrown between myself and another.”⁶⁹ Themes of intersubjectivity are important to address in observing these projects, and some of the questions I have asked myself include: how did artists attempt to build community, and spaces of the commons, through these projects? How were the aesthetics of the project connected to the social and political formations that emerged? And finally, what did participants actually gain from the experience of working on these projects?

Chapter summaries

I look further at Project Row Houses in chapter one, and consider the ways in which this model of socially engaged art spread to other US cities, in part through Rick Lowe’s influence. This includes Watts House Project in Los Angeles, which Lowe was involved with in planning in its early stages, and Dorchester Projects in Chicago, which Theaster Gates has described as influenced by Lowe’s work. I look at the home as a foundational mythology within American identity and culture, and consider how its representations in art reflect specific views of liberty, freedom and individualism. In this way, looking at homes in art opens out onto discussions of race, gender and class—as well as questions about who gets to

⁶⁹ V.I. Volosinov/Mikhail Bakhtin, “Language as Dialogic Interaction” in *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev and Volosinov*, edited by Pam Morris (London: Arnold, 1994), p. 58.

own a home, and profit from ownership. The chapter includes a further look at black capitalism and entrepreneurship within socially engaged art, and I connect this discussion with the charisma possessed by many socially engaged artists who are able to secure the large grants required for projects that take up so much space and public attention. I look at these projects in the context of repair and reparations: repair in the sense of material repairs to homes; and reparations, in terms of responses to the lasting trauma and inequality caused by slavery. Many socially engaged art projects have hosted explicit discussions of reparations. More broadly, however, these projects also raise questions about cultural versus material reparations—and whether projects focused on promoting black culture in impoverished neighborhoods are occurring at the expense of initiatives with a more materially redistributive focus (for example, by implying that cultural initiatives that celebrate black culture are enough).

Chapter two focuses on what happens when artists engage with institutions, further illuminating the notion that socially engaged art is a form of institutionalized aesthetic activism. Over the past two decades, many art institutions have responded enthusiastically to work that involves community outreach and social engagement. Some museums have organized major exhibitions and collected work by socially engaged artists, while others have established satellite institutions or community projects in neighborhoods viewed as marginalized or underserved. This chapter explores some of the issues that have emerged due to the increasing embrace of socially engaged art by museums. I focus on Mike Kelley's *Mobile Homestead*, an artwork installed on the grounds of the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit. Completed in 2013, the work is a replica of the artist's childhood home in the suburb of Westland, Michigan, and it thereby connects quite literally with the theme of 'artists in residence' discussed here. Kelley intended the homestead to be used for community programs and social services, and it has hosted events including needle exchanges, quilting bees, alcoholics anonymous meetings and amateur art exhibitions. While the work is an expression of memory and nostalgia, it also bears witness to the recent redevelopment of Detroit. *Mobile Homestead* brings up important questions about race, class and gentrification in a city that has become known for both its aesthetics of abandonment, and the recent growth of a creative class attracted to cheap real estate.

In 2014, the homestead traveled to Los Angeles for the Mike Kelley Retrospective at the Geffen Contemporary. While there, it hosted several community art exhibitions, including artwork produced at a

Skid Row homeless shelter. Looking at Mobile Homestead and its institutional framing in both Detroit and Los Angeles provokes broader questions about museums and their embrace of socially engaged art: does this signal a commitment to cultural democratization, and the willingness to interrogate institutional structures and hierarchies? Can it be viewed as a radical redistribution of resources and cultural capital? Or does this gesture of embrace by museums stand in for, and thereby foreclose, more radical forms of self-criticism and community engagement—by obscuring the role of museums in exacerbating gentrification, and appropriating the practices of non-professional artists? These questions emanate outwards from the interior of Mobile Homestead, a replicated living space that now hosts community events on the front lawn of a major museum, inviting critical reflection upon the institutional embrace of socially engaged art.

Chapter three highlights some of the tensions that emerge within socially engaged art, when artists debate whether to engage with existing forms of power, including city government and funding organizations, or to pursue a more radical, autonomous route. I consider these questions by focusing on the Oakland-based Anti-Eviction Mapping Project, a collective of artists and activists who have produced dozens of interactive, online maps that visualize evictions and displacement. I look at the project in the context of the Bay Area, where histories of countercultural collectivism and entrepreneurial cyberculture are intertwined. This is visible in the aesthetic forms and relational practices of the sharing economy, in which companies like Airbnb have become extremely profitable by promising community and social connection. The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project mimics the networked aesthetics of sharing economy platforms, but repurposes their designs in order to critique their promises of collectivism and their material impact on neighborhoods. The project also involves collecting oral histories, which tend to follow a similar narrative: they are about growing up in San Francisco neighborhoods, living there for decades, witnessing changes, and then being evicted. Many of the storytellers express feelings of loss, not just of their home, but of their community as well. I look at the reasons behind storytellers' decisions to share their stories, how audiences are interpellated through this work, and the possibilities of storytelling as an impetus for action. I examine the project in the context of institutional critique and tactical media, as well as the concept of the intervention in public art, which relates to discussions of activist art in which disengagement and autonomy are favored approaches. I argue that the maps and stories produced by the

Anti-Eviction Mapping Project produce visibility, but that they also do something more than this. They have been used by community organizations to advocate for rent control and affordable housing, and in this way, the project suggests possibilities for art to work as a community-building tool against displacement.

In chapter four I focus on debates in Boyle Heights, Los Angeles, where anti-gentrification protestors worried about rising rents and evictions have demanded that art galleries leave. ‘Artists in residence’ are viewed as the enemies by these groups. While many of the artists considered in other chapters believe in the possibilities for art to work against gentrification or displacement, the artists and activists discussed in chapter four hold the opposing viewpoint, and instead emphasize the ways in which art contributes to these processes. I look at the history of activism in Boyle Heights and how it connects with more recent struggles, and focus on two art spaces that were targeted by protestors. Self Help Graphics emerged through the Chicano movement and was committed to community empowerment and self-determination, focusing its efforts on hosting printmaking workshops for neighborhood residents. Over time, it grew in scale and influence in the neighborhood, becoming more affiliated with corporate interests, which has made it a target of contemporary protests. I also look at the boycott and closure of 356 Mission, an art space that was initially protested following a meeting held by artists to coordinate an action plan following Trump’s election. I connect the protests of these two spaces to previous forms of activism in Boyle Heights, and look at how the nature of debate surrounding the presence of art galleries in the neighborhood has flattened complexities and portrayed individuals and groups as homogeneous. I look at how these debates relate to political discussions on the left, and the issues that have arisen surrounding solidarity, identity and coalition building. I also consider the implications of these protests for discussions of socially engaged art, and attempts by artists to gain a seat at the table of local power struggles.

Chapter five focuses on Trans.lation: Vickery Meadow in Dallas—another project initiated by Rick Lowe. Trans.lation was originally commissioned by the Nasher Sculpture Center in 2013, to celebrate its ten year anniversary. Lowe proposed a project for Vickery Meadow, a neighborhood that is home to the largest concentration of refugees and immigrants in Dallas. Initially the project was focused around pop-up white cube gallery spaces, conceived as a way to showcase artwork made by neighborhood

residents. Lowe hired a series of artists in residence to direct Trans.lation and organize public events there, including Carol Zou. Trans.lation sought to become a neighborhood art center and support ongoing cultural practices in the neighborhood according to the demands of residents, and it hosted language classes, painting and drawing, sewing, dance classes, a zine club, a radio program, a public art workshop, and a community garden, among other workshops and classes. Communal gatherings played a central role in bringing people together at Trans.lation, from the very first community barbecue to the frequent events and celebrations that it hosted, including Ethiopian New Year, Mexican Day of the Dead and Eid festivities. This chapter focuses on Trans.lation as a form of maintenance art, looking at it in the context of Ukeles' work, and outlining the ways in which the project moved away from a museum-sponsored public art work to a community-oriented space organized by and for neighborhood residents. I look at the issues that emerged through this transition, including questions regarding funding and freedom of expression for radical viewpoints. This chapter involves a more self-reflexive account of socially engaged art, and an exploration of ethnographic methodology, as an attempt to test out models of writing about this type of work. I visited Trans.lation three times, including a month-long period when I went nearly every day, got to know participants, and learned more about how the organization functioned in relation to the neighborhood and the city.

Places of the Possible

As I argue throughout this dissertation, socially engaged art differs from previous forms of community-based art, and from contemporary art focused on representing houses and neighborhoods. While work by Matta-Clark, Hirschhorn and Huyghe proposed anarchistic gestures, irresolution, or the concept of continuous construction as an end point, projects like Trans.lation begin with these concepts—and build on them. What happened at Trans.lation was a move away from the singular aesthetic gesture, and towards the idea that aesthetic experience takes place between people, and between ourselves and the world, through a range of everyday cultural practices. As Trans.lation's main audience shifted away from the general public, and towards the residents who lived nearby, it became embedded in what John Roberts describes as the heteronomous particulars of the everyday. This implies that instead of the sense of potentiality that comes through irresolution, associated with Huyghe's work, what distinguishes

Trans.lation and other socially engaged art is the concreteness of situated practice—a point of differentiation that is central to current debates about the possibilities and limitations of art’s social responsibilities. Instead of the metaphor of continuous construction, I argue that these projects are places of the possible in the sense used by Lefebvre—but with the added responsibility of actualization that this entails. What is clear in work by Matta-Clark, Huyghe and Hirschhorn is an interest in experimenting with the form of the house, neighborhood, and community center, but without engaging in the messy complications of social relations and actual durational practice. In contrast, in Trans.lation, and other practices associated with maintenance art, we see the forms filled in—not just the platform, but what the platform is used for.

I visited Dallas in 2016 for a symposium at the Nasher Sculpture Center, and presented a paper that focused on several of the examples discussed here: Huyghe, Hirschhorn, and Trans.lation, in front of an audience that included Bourriaud, Huyghe, and Zou. Following my talk, Zou put up her hand and asked if I could help her reconcile the fact that the Nasher had given roughly the same amount of money to award a prize to Huyghe (who came to Dallas for a couple of nights to give a talk) as they had given to Trans.lation to support programming for four years. I could not answer her in a satisfactory way, because it did not make sense to me either. For me, this raised broader questions about socially engaged art and institutional support, about the ways in which artists committed their time and energy to specific sites, neighborhoods and cities, and about the social responsibility of art and the role of ‘artists in residence.’ The following year, I was not surprised to learn that Theaster Gates had won the Nasher Prize—as an artist who has successfully bridged the worlds of socially engaged art and mainstream contemporary art (which now seem to be one and the same). These questions seemed to be even more important to consider when I learned that Trans.lation would be closing in 2018, just like the Gramsci Monument, even though everyone involved wanted it to stay open.

I began to write this dissertation in Spring 2016, and continued to work on it following the election of Donald Trump. During this time, there has been a drastic increase in explicit racism, white nationalism, misogyny and xenophobia in the United States and around the world. At the same, there has also been a resurgence in organizing and radicalism on the left, which has taken on a greater sense of urgency and purpose. The projects discussed here have attempted to grapple with these issues while

continuing the work they have been doing for many years (sometimes decades). My aim here is to investigate these attempts by artists to build places of the possible in existing political and economic conditions, to communicate a sense of the tensions that emerge between autonomy and engagement, and to examine the decisions that are made along the way.

Chapter One — Home Repair and Renovation in Socially Engaged Art

On Holman Street in Houston’s Third Ward, a set of row houses are transformed into a rotating series of artist residencies and low-income housing. In Watts, Los Angeles, a series of home repairs are made as part of a placemaking project intended to revitalize the neighborhood, while in Chicago’s South Side, salvaged building materials from an abandoned house shift in value and meaning as they circulate between a dusty lot filled with debris, a series of renovated community cultural spaces, and a blue-chip art gallery. As these examples make clear, home repair has become a central theme within contemporary socially engaged art. Homes also reference broader themes in art history, bringing up a diverse set of cultural and historical signifiers, from traditions associated with design and architecture, issues related to domesticity and gender, divisions between public and private spaces, and histories of racial segregation. Recent economic research has emphasized that patterns related to housing and home ownership are not just symptoms of social inequality, but active drivers. For example, in a response to Thomas Piketty’s landmark study of income inequality, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Matthew Rognlie argued that housing played a much larger role in creating economic inequality than Piketty had accounted for, pointing out that that real estate speculation and development have been the most reliable sectors for investors throughout the twentieth century.¹ In recent years, the politics of housing has become a highly visible issue, as rising rents and new luxury condo developments in cities across the US have forced low-income residents to move increasingly further away from city centers and public services. Federal government spending on low-income housing has declined since the 1980s, and continues to be cut at the state and federal levels across the country. Meanwhile, many critics have observed the growing political and ideological divisions between cities and rural areas—a 2017 article in *The Atlantic* noted that “American cities seem to be cleaving from the rest of the country,”² and this division has left municipal governments struggling with how to pay for services that state and federal governments are often not willing or able to provide.

¹ See Matthew Rognlie, “Deciphering the Fall and Rise in the Net Capital Share: Accumulation or Scarcity?” *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity* 46.1 (Spring 2015): pp. 1-69, and Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014).

² David A. Graham, “Red State, Blue City,” *The Atlantic*, March 2017 (<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/03/red-state-blue-city/513857/>).

The work that I examine in this chapter focuses on acts of repair and construction: physically, in terms of renovating houses and redeveloping neighborhoods, and socially, in the form of reparative processes that involve collective labor and community building initiatives. Project Row Houses in Houston, Dorchester Projects in Chicago, and Watts House Project in Los Angeles have focused their efforts on renovating homes—in order to create more affordable housing, or to create artist-run spaces for local cultural production in the neighborhood. There are notable parallels to be found outside of, or adjacent to art: for example, in house-building projects carried out by non-profits, as well as in the field of architecture. Habitat for Humanity is the largest charitable organization focused on home building in the country. Its roots lie in Koinonia Farm, a Christian intentional community founded in Georgia in the 1940s that was subjected to KKK terrorism because of its interracial composition. In the 1960s, community members Millard and Linda Fuller created Koinonia Partnership Housing, which built homes for low-income families near the farm. This became the model for Habitat for Humanity, founded by the Fullers in 1976, which has since built thousands of homes in dozens of countries. The success of Habitat for Humanity has come in part from its model of sweat equity—inhabitants are required to contribute a certain amount of labor (alongside volunteers), and can therefore be seen as helping themselves rather than getting a handout. In contrast, the non-profit Mad Housers builds temporary shelters for homeless people free from obligation or the requirement to supply labor. Founded in 1987, also in Georgia, Mad Housers caters to those without the ability to help themselves, while Habitat for Humanity serves the poor who are deemed to be deserving. Other notable parallels include Samuel Mockbee's Rural Studio, founded in 1993 at Auburn University, which builds homes for poor rural communities in Alabama and has become a touchstone for participatory design in architecture.

Project Row Houses, Dorchester Projects and Watts House Project share certain features with this type of non-profit, design-based practice, but they also operate within the field of art. Rick Lowe, Theaster Gates, Edgar Arceneaux, and the other artists involved in these projects have consciously framed their work as art, by situating it within an art historical context, collaborating with local artists, and emphasizing existing neighborhood cultural practices. They view their work towards social change as differing from the work of other non-profits, and from redevelopment-as-usual—a term that I use in this chapter to describe how urban spaces are typically developed with an interest in maximizing profit, rather

than in maximizing public benefit or use. In this chapter I examine the aesthetics of each of these projects, looking at the relationship between art and redevelopment, and the decisions made by artists regarding scale, visibility and influence. I look at the significance of repair and renovation within these projects, and how they have attempted to engage with existing urban revitalization efforts. Analyzing these examples brings up important questions regarding the connections between repair and gentrification, as well as the historical and political roots of urban transformation.

Home ownership is a powerful symbol of wealth and class privilege, and its history in the United States is tied to racial exclusion and economic exploitation. This includes tactics such as redlining, which prevented people of color from buying homes in cities across the US from the 1930s until the 1960s, as well as more recent predatory lending practices that led to the foreclosure crisis of 2008-10, which disproportionately affected low-income people of color.³ The projects described in this chapter may therefore be understood as specifically American forms of art practice: in terms of how they deal with histories of racial segregation and housing discrimination, in terms of historical patterns of urban disinvestment that led to the widespread presence of abandoned homes in city centers, and in terms of the massive vacuum of governmental support for housing that such projects have attempted to grapple with.

In addition to these considerations, the home must also be understood as a foundational mythology structuring American identity and consciousness: from the homestead of the frontier, to the suburban home with attached garage and well-manicured lawn, the single-family home is part of the American dream of freedom, independence and self-sufficiency. It is precisely this emphasis on self-sufficiency that has historically suppressed more collective or communal visions of housing. As Clare Cooper writes, “America is the home of the self-made man, and if the house is seen (even unconsciously) as the symbol of self, then it is small wonder that there is a resistance to subsidized housing.”⁴

In looking at the projects described in this chapter there are several other common threads that emerge. This includes the prominence of black male artists in the field of socially engaged art, including Rick Lowe, Theaster Gates and Edgar Arceneaux, and the charisma that has played an important role in propelling them to the forefront of the contemporary art world. It may seem problematic to foreground

³ Reference the Color of Law book

⁴ Clare Cooper, “The House as Symbol of the Self,” in *Designing for Human Behavior: Architecture and the Behavioral Sciences*, edited by Jon Lang (Stroudsburg: Dowden, Hutchinson & Ross), p. 130.

three male artists in a chapter focused on homes, considering that domestic space is often thought of as feminine (a problematic assumption in itself). I have two comments about this. While these projects are associated with the leadership of male artists, each has involved significant contributions from women artists, and each has drawn upon traditions of black feminist activism that has emphasized the importance of the home. bell hooks has commented on the concept of ‘homeplace,’ and the role that black women play in making home a space of healing and repair. To the degree that these practices are engaged in building community, supporting social networks of neighbors and highlighting the important role of the home in linking private and public spaces, these projects may be seen as drawing from feminist practice. However, the prominent role of each male artist (regardless of how much they have welcomed or resisted this role) cannot be ignored—and in my opinion, this is not because of domestic associations, but because of associations with real-estate, an area largely dominated by men.

Another question that must be asked of each of the projects produced by these artists is, how do they relate to, conflict with, or build upon already existing models of urban redevelopment? Do they align with redevelopment-as-usual—in the form of neoliberal urban planning practices that prioritize efficiency, privatization and profitability? Or do they engage in alternative practices of urban transformation that prioritize the needs of residents? Each of these projects possesses a certain monumental quality—they involve artists thinking on a grand scale that is beyond the typical bounds of art, but common in real estate. Seeking an influence beyond the art world requires charisma, and the qualities of both charisma and monumentality bring up important questions about socially engaged art and the tensions that often emerge between individual success and collaborative goals. Finally, central to this chapter is the concept of repair. I consider repair in relation to the material act of renovating homes, and connect this to the concept of reparative practice, which emphasizes collective action as a means of addressing trauma. Related to this is the idea of reparations, which has been put forward by numerous scholars and activists as a way of addressing structural inequalities that emerged through slavery and the systematic undermining of black wealth that formed the basis of white privilege and power in the US. With these ideas in mind, this chapter investigates attempts made by socially engaged art projects to redress contemporary disparities through acts of home repair, and aims to provoke broader questions about the possibilities and limitations of socially engaged art as a reparative practice.

Project Row Houses

Project Row Houses began in 1993, when Rick Lowe became interested in shifting his work away from the studio and into the public space of Houston’s Third Ward, a predominantly African American neighborhood. In numerous interviews, Lowe has told the story of how the project began: he was initially making politically charged paintings of daily life in the Third Ward. But in 1990, a group of high school students visited his studio, and one student “wanted to know why, rather than making work that represented the daily reality of the inhabitants of the Third Ward, Lowe didn’t try to instead affect that reality.”⁵ He decided to take the student up on the challenge in order to see if he could use his skills as an artist to produce meaningful change, and together with a group of artists, community activists and friends, including James Bettison, Jesse Lott, Bert Samples and George Smith, began to work on renovating twenty-two abandoned row houses on Holman Street. The houses were built in the 1930s, and were initially owned by Frank and Katie Trombatore, Italian immigrants who owned a grocery store on the block and used the houses for rental income.⁶ The architectural design of the row houses, sometimes referred to as a shotgun house, may have its roots in African culture, as Sheryl G. Tucker has argued: “the shotgun [house] was introduced to the U.S. by free Haitians who settled in New Orleans after the Haitian slave rebellion against the French in the early nineteenth century. The Haitians, in essence reconnected African Americans with the socially intimate housing space that many historians believe evolved from the narrow, one-room units of the Yoruba compound in West Africa—where most slaves brought to America were captured.”⁷ Other critics have suggested that the design of the row house might have originated in New Orleans in the nineteenth century as a response to small, narrow urban lots, and that the form of the houses originated as a way to efficiently house the expanding populations moving to cities from rural areas following the Civil War.⁸ While the African-Creole origins of the row house’s design may be debated, it is clear that the houses played an important role in expanding cities in the nineteenth century. They became a cheap and efficient way to house working class populations, and they spread from New

⁵ Nikil Saval, “Three Artists Who Think Outside the Box,” *New York Times Magazine*, December 3, 2015.

⁶ Sheryl G. Tucker, “Reinnovating the African-American Shotgun House,” *Places* 10.1 (1995): p. 65.

⁷ *Ibid.* 66.

⁸ Jay D. Edwards, “The Most Contested House in America,” *Buildings & Landscapes: Journal of the Vernacular Architecture Forum* 16.1 (Spring 2009): pp. 62.

Orleans to other cities in the South, including Houston. Tucker points out that the form of the houses contributed to their social qualities, through front porches that opened up to the public space of the street, outdoor living spaces prioritizing community gathering, and high density created by the packing together of many small, narrow row houses. Houston artist John Biggers was inspired by the form of the row houses and they featured prominently in his paintings and murals of the Third Ward, which in turn influenced Lowe, who sought to draw upon this sense of community and self-determination when he began to think about repairing abandoned homes as a form of socially engaged art by and for residents of the Third Ward.

In a booklet produced by Project Row Houses for their opening, the project is described in the following way: “The idea for Project Row Houses originated in a series of discussions among some of Houston’s African-American artists who wanted to establish a positive creative presence in the black community. Working together in the neighborhood, artists and individual volunteers first opened the doors of Project Row Houses. With the financial and material resources of Houston’s corporations, foundations, and art organizations, volunteers have since been able to renovate the site of 2500 Holman and the twenty-two shotgun houses that sit upon it.”⁹ Lowe and his collaborators received their first grant, for \$25,000, from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1992, with help from DiverseWorks, a Houston alternative arts organization. The group continued to buy land and houses in the neighborhood. Lowe recalls, “We spent the first 15 years doing something I wouldn’t have thought was so important: acquiring land.”¹⁰ By 1994, the group had secured a long list of funders, including in-kind donations from Home Depot, Southwestern Paint and Wallpaper, Benjamin Moore, U.S. Home and Southwestern Pipe, program funding from Amoco, the City of Houston, the Texas Commission on the Arts, the NEA, Chevron, AT&T and Texas Commerce Bank, among other organizations and corporations. They initiated a “House Challenge” which involved “renovations of one house each for artist’s installations,” sponsored by DiverseWorks, the Menil Collection, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Trinity United Methodist Church and others.¹¹ By offering artist residencies and social programs (such as a teen mom’s program),

⁹ Project Row Houses, “Our Doors Are Open,” exhibition booklet, 1994. University of Houston Archives, Project Row Houses.

¹⁰ Rick Lowe, quoted in Molly Glentzer, “Project Row Houses fights to keep Third Ward culture alive,” *Houston Chronicle*, January 18, 2014.

¹¹ Project Row Houses, “Our Doors Are Open.”

Lowe was able to apply to a broad pool of grants and sponsorship opportunities. Lowe, who supported himself as an artist in part through carpentry, worked on many of the initial renovations himself.¹² Project Row Houses emerged as socially engaged art was becoming a more recognizable and institutionalized artistic genre,¹³ and it was initially described as a “public art project involving artists in issues of neighborhood revitalization, historic preservation, community service and youth education.”¹⁴ It was only one of a number of other community initiatives in the Third Ward at the time. This included SHAPE: Self-Help for African People through Education, which offers classes, workshops, and regular drop-in hours, and has organized around issues such as police brutality in the neighborhood for several decades.¹⁵

It was important to Lowe that the renovation project would be a way to nurture African American culture in the neighborhood, and support its history of black cultural production and self-determination. In the 1800s, the Third Ward was home to many of the white elites of Houston, who built and lived in the Victorian-era brick homes. African Americans were segregated in the northern area of the Ward. A train station was built in 1910, followed by bars and hotels that catered to travelers, all of which contributed to white flight. After World War II, white families moved to the suburbs in increasing numbers, spurred on by blockbusting,¹⁶ among other practices that contributed to segregation, and the area became mostly black. In the 1970s, the 288 freeway was built, cutting a swath right through the Third Ward and displacing nearly 300 families.¹⁷ Discrimination and segregation had a major impact on housing in the Third Ward: “Decades of discrimination kept many families from getting the loans needed to fix up their properties and their homes fell into disrepair. People who had moved out of the neighborhood often didn’t keep up with the property taxes of their grandparents’ or parents’ homes back in Third Ward. For renters,

¹² Tucker, p. 67.

¹³ For example, Suzanne Lacy published *Mapping the Terrain* in 1994, discussing work that was produced during the 1980s and early 90s.

¹⁴ Project Row Houses, “Our Doors Are Open.”

¹⁵ Claudia Feldman, “Houston artist Rick Lowe wins MacArthur Fellowship,” *Houston Chronicle*, September 17, 2014.

¹⁶ Blockbusting describes the practice in which real estate agents and developers persuaded white home owners that people of color were moving into their neighborhood, and that they should sell their homes quickly and cheaply. These home were later resold at a higher price to people of color.

¹⁷ Kyle Shelton, *Power Moves: Transportation, Politics, and Development in Houston* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017). p. 219.

absentee landlords had little incentive to maintain their units. The housing stock suffered.”¹⁸ Although the neighborhood was shaped by racist policies and developments, it was also shaped by a strong spirit of black activism and self-determination. The Third Ward was home to the People’s Party II headquarters, a Houston offshoot of the Black Panther Party. Carl Hampton, a member of the People’s Party, was a charismatic resident of the Third Ward who spoke out against police brutality and helped to organize free childcare, healthcare initiatives, food donations, home fumigations and support for elderly residents. This aligned with one of the major initiatives of the Black Panther Party—to create soft power programs that in addition to supporting black people, would convince them to join the Party. In 1970, Hampton, who was 21 at the time, was shot and killed following a police stake-out of the headquarters of the People’s Party. After weeks of tension following police killings of black men in the Third Ward, several police officers “outfitted with military surplus night vision scopes for their rifles” had surrounded the building and assassinated Hampton, after identifying him with the help of a reporter.¹⁹

The People’s Party headquarters is no longer standing, and there are no official statues, plaques or memorials that communicate this history. To address this absence, one of the missions of Project Row Houses has been to commemorate the histories of important individuals in the neighborhood, including Hampton. When I visited Project Row Houses in Spring 2015, I walked around the surrounding Third Ward neighborhood, and came across a memorial site created for several neighborhood residents: including Hampton, Ayanna Ade, who was a midwife and member of the People’s Party, and Cleveland “Flower Man” Turner, a local artist known for having decorated his home with discarded objects including toys, appliances, tools, and an abundance of real and fake flowers. Project Row Houses organized the building of a garden on the former site of the People’s Party headquarters for the three individuals, and held a memorial ceremony. This is one example of the many activities and events that have emerged from the desires and interests of neighborhood residents, which often involve a reshaping of public spaces through collaborative practices.

¹⁸ Theola Petteway, quoted in Leah Binkovitz, “Third Ward Looks to Shift the Gentrification Conversation,” *The Urban Edge*, May 25, 2016, <https://urbanedge.blogs.rice.edu/2016/05/25/third-ward-looks-to-shift-the-gentrification-conversation/#.WgjbRLA-dE4>

¹⁹ Alex Wukman, “The sad, strange death of Carl Hampton,” *Houston Free Press*, October 19, 2015.

Many of the artist residencies that have taken place at Project Row Houses have focused on the existing culture of the Third Ward, and its histories of black activism. This is visible in the ‘Rounds,’ or rotating artist residency exhibitions that take place twice a year. The very first set of Rounds included mainly local African-American artists: Steven Bernard Jones, Annette Lawrence, Jesse Lott, David McGee, Vicki Meek, Tierney Malone, Floyd Newsum, Colette Veasey, and ran from October 15, 1994 – March 12, 1995. Meek’s contribution was a project that spoke about the house itself, and she reflected upon memory and myth-making by interviewing residents who lived on the block and displaying their stories alongside photographs and memorabilia.²⁰ Other artists have explored themes related to domesticity by inviting residents of the Third Ward to explore the memories and material histories of the houses. Whitfield Lovell participated in Round 3 (October 1995 to March 1996), and was interested in working with the many anonymous photographs of African Americans he had collected. He found that “the sense of history within the house was ideal for trying new ideas related to my interest in old photographs.”²¹ He drew figures on the walls of the houses, and deposited some of the crumbled wallpaper near the base of the drawings. Writing about Lovell’s work, Lucy Lippard noted the way he had merged his drawings with the interior of the house, evoking connections between the past and the present: “The empty rooms, resonant with the lives once lived within them, awaited these new/old inhabitants, who seemed ready to step off the walls and reoccupy their home.”²² Lippard points out that this installation was the first in which the artist had moved from a two dimensional to a three dimensional space, and he was inspired to do so by the connection between the image and the actual living history of the structure in which his portraits were made. It is worth noting that during the first few artist residency Rounds, many of the original features of the houses’ interiors remained—these were left intentionally unfinished so that artists could experiment with the remnants left behind by former residents and by other artists, with the idea that structural improvements would gradually take place as artists installed and de-installed their work.²³ This meant that traces of inhabitants, and palimpsests of past art projects, were left

²⁰ Project Row Houses, “Our Doors Are Open,” exhibition booklet, 1994. University of Houston Archives, Project Row Houses.

²¹ Whitfield Lovell, quoted in Lucy Lippard, *The Art of Whitfield Lovell: Whispers from the Walls* (San Francisco: Pomegranate Press, 2003), p. 16.

²² Lippard, *The Art of Whitfield Lovell*, p. 16.

²³ Tucker, p. 68.

behind and became part of new works—for example, during Fred Wilson’s artist residency in 1996, he incorporated some of the drawings that Lovell had left behind into his own project, adding a sound piece that created the effects of a storm. For one reviewer, this provoked a powerful sense of nostalgia for his own childhood: “I could even smell the air that filled those homes in my grandmother’s neighborhood.”²⁴

In addition to explorations of memory and the traces of former inhabitants, another common theme has been the exploration of African American culture, history and identity. In Round 2, George Smith, an artist and professor at Rice University, turned one of the houses into an ancestral shrine, inspired by the burial practices of the Ibo people of Nigeria. He built an altar around a chimney inside the house, which would serve as a social focal point and place of warmth. Smith then invited Third Ward residents to bring offerings to the altar throughout the six month duration of the exhibition. This exploration of black culture is still at the heart of many exhibitions, including a memorial to black men killed by police (part of Project Row Houses’ Summer Studios 2015 program, in which university art students were invited to make work in between the official Rounds). After a trip to Africa, Houston artist Shaun Parker returned with cloth that he incorporated into a textile piece and embroidered with names: Freddie Gray, Frank Shephard, Jeremy Lett. Thomas Allen, Sam Dubose, Dewayne Carr. The project echoed the memorial to Hampton, Ade and Turner, and suggested possibilities for the collective healing of trauma. These were themes that also emerged in Round 46: Black Women Artists for Black Lives Matter (March—June 2017), organized by artist Simone Leigh. The round focused on installations and video work inviting community members to engage in discussions inside the houses focused on healing, care and action. It also involved setting up a local chapter of Black Lives Matter, and hosting conversations with chapters of the organization in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago and London.

While there are many thematic connections throughout the various Rounds that have taken place at Project Row Houses, there have also been major shifts in the organization and framework of the artist residencies: during the first few years, the interiors of the houses existed in different states of completion—for the first decade, it was possible to engage with the material culture of previous owners, referencing the items they left behind, like Lovell, or the work of previous artists, like Wilson. Over time, the interiors

²⁴ Fletcher Mackey, *Art Lies*, 10 (April-June 1996): p. 36.

of the houses became more polished, and now look more like gallery spaces. Although one enters what looks like a domestic house, the insides are now quite sterile, with clean, freshly painted white interiors that are returned to the same uniform state before a new artist takes them over. And while it was initially mostly local artists that were invited to take part, by the early 2000s a mix of professional and self-taught artists had participated. More recently, the Rounds have featured numerous artists or groups associated with social practice art—The Natural History Museum, The People’s Paper Co-op, Andrea Bowers—although there are also still many local artists, Third Ward residents and other regular contributors (including Jesse Lott and Vicki Meek) who continue to be invited for residencies.

The Rounds at Project Row Houses may have shifted towards including more international artists, and artists who explicitly define their work as socially engaged. Yet the focus still remains on the history, present and future of black culture in the Third Ward. George Lipsitz has written about the racialization of space in American cities, and the policies that contributed to neighborhood segregation and structurally enforced racism, which is helpful for understanding the present moment of transformation in the neighborhood and how this connects with the initiatives of Project Row Houses. Lipsitz describes a ‘white spatial imaginary’ linked to the protection of private property and the maximization of exchange value, and notes that white wealth has been supported through numerous public and private initiatives throughout the history of the United States, including through home ownership. In contrast, blacks and other minority groups were systematically excluded from accumulating wealth through discriminatory real estate practices, including redlining. He refers to a ‘black spatial imaginary’ that emerged as a means of coping with these restraints—and instead of exchange value, he views as relying upon use value. He writes: “Ghetto and barrio residents turn segregation into congregation. They augment the use value of their neighborhoods by relying on each other for bartered services and goods; by mobilizing collectively for better city services; by establishing businesses geared to a local ethnic clientele; and by using the commonalities of race and class as a basis for building pan-neighborhood alliances with residents of similar neighborhoods to increase the responsibility, power, and accountability of local government.”²⁵

²⁵ George Lipsitz, “The Racialization of Space and the Spatialization of Race: Theorizing the Hidden Architecture of Landscape,” *Landscape Journal* 26.1 (2007): p. 14.

In highlighting congregation and use value, Lipsitz risks outlining an overly positive vision of segregated urban spaces, which for many dwellers of ‘ghettos and barrios’ is often characterized more by the isolated daily grind of poverty than by acts of congregation. Although the description above outlines an idealized set of tactics that might be adopted to deal with negative circumstances, it is also true that many of the practices he outlines have been adopted by the projects discussed in this chapter: from the exchange of goods and services between neighbors, to lobbying the city for better services, to the promotion of locally owned businesses. Lipsitz has written about Project Row Houses, and views the project as a way of concentrating use values in the Third Ward: by challenging the market logic associated with white spatial imaginaries, working to prevent the displacement of Third Ward residents from their homes, and strengthening the social safety net in the neighborhood.²⁶ He emphasizes the ways in which marginalized urban dwellers might improve their living situations by relying on social networks and sharing resources and services amongst neighbors. According to Lipsitz, making the best of segregation through acts of congregation is perhaps the most common form that a black spatial imaginary might take. His use of the term ‘congregation’ has religious connotations, and suggests the importance of spiritual gatherings in relation to the concept of the black spatial imaginary—this is certainly the case in the Third Ward. As Ezell Wilson notes, black churches in the Third Ward played an active role in the Civil Rights movement, getting involved in efforts such as voter registration drives.²⁷

While the black spatial imaginary may work through congregation as a way of compensating for segregation, a more extreme version might consist of autonomy and refusal, as exemplified by separatist or intentional communities. Despite its grand scale and its visions of urban development and self-determination, Project Row Houses is not often written about in relation to utopian or planned communities. While there are specific reasons for this (including the project’s squarely realist mission and its merging with certain aspects of existing city development schemes), there are also certain elements that suggest comparisons with places like Drop City in rural Colorado (a tight-knit community of artists making work in the same place and investigating networks of sustainability), or the Farm in Tennessee (where land is held communally in order to support its members). Both of these examples involved

²⁶ George Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), p. 163.

²⁷ Ezell Wilson, “Third Ward, Steeped in Tradition of Self-reliance and Achievement,” *Houston History* 8.2 (2011): p. 34.

experiments in living that took place outside of the mainstream, and involved the sharing of labor and resources. Those who were involved in designing these planned communities saw themselves as building prototypes or models that could be replicated and scaled up elsewhere, in order to achieve a more just or equitable form of social organization. In her 1976 study of utopian communities in the United States, Dolores Hayden notes that many of the planners “believed that social change could best be stimulated through the organization and construction of a single ideal community, a model which could be duplicated throughout the country.”²⁸ There are other echoes of the language that is now often used by contemporary socially engaged artists throughout Hayden’s book—for example, she points out that “some communards called themselves ‘social architects’” and that “most of them intended to create what might be called an ‘architecture of social change.’”²⁹

All of the utopian communities considered by Hayden were white, which is not surprising, considering that African Americans have not been in the position to experiment with ideal living situations throughout most of the history of the United States, to say the least.³⁰ Yet, there are some historical precedents for black spaces—planned black spatial imaginaries, to adapt Lipsitz’s term—involving practices of self-determination, that are worth mentioning. Historical precedents include the Nation of Islam, and other black separatists movements, that call for a black state inside the US. Similarly to the People’s Party assassination in Houston, some of these black spaces were attacked by authorities: for example, the communal residence occupied by the black liberation group Project MOVE in Philadelphia was firebombed by police in 1985, killing 11 members—an example that demonstrates the violent repression that often occurs when black space is viewed as intruding upon white space. Another example in particular highlights the ways in which visions of independence and sustainability clashed when they confronted the reality of the existing political and economic system. Soul City, designed by Floyd McKissick in the 1960s, was intended to be a majority black utopian community in North Carolina. As a lawyer, McKissick had defended sit-in protestors and families integrating schools during the Civil

²⁸ Dolores Hayden, *Seven American Utopias: The Architecture of Communitarian Socialism, 1790-1975* (Cambridge, Ma.: MIT Press, 1976), p. 9.

²⁹ Hayden, p. 33.

³⁰ Many of the black intentional communities created in the 19th century are located in the northern United States and Canada, including Elgin, Ontario (now North Buxton), established in 1849 by freed slaves who escaped using the Underground Railroad.

Rights Movement, and he was interested in finding a way to support black people seeking to escape racial and economic oppression in cities in the South. He decided that rather than struggling with intransigent city governments, he would build his own city and invite black-owned businesses and industries to move there. The project received funding from HUD in 1970 as part of the Model Cities program, which was itself part of the Urban Growth and New Community Development Act.³¹ Building began on 5,000 acres of land near Norlina, North Carolina, about 50 miles northeast of Durham. Yet it struggled to attract residents and industry, each depending upon the other to move to Soul City first. Although McKissick believed that the town would eventually grow to around 20,000 inhabitants, it numbered less than 100 by the mid-1970s.³² Although his plans never came to fruition, it is an example that offers insight into how utopian visions of self-sufficiency often become constrained by conceding to existing forms of power.

Although McKissick's plans for Soul City emerged from his frustrations with how black people had been racially and economically subjugated in cities, he began to frame the project more as a form of black capitalism, in order to win the favor of politicians and policy makers at the time. As he put it, "coexistence between whites and blacks ... depends on the development of black economic power ... If we are to exist together, it will be as equals."³³ This type of rhetoric was appealing to Richard Nixon and other government officials who believed that Soul City might "provide a safety valve for America's riot-plagued, socially turbulent northern cities,"³⁴ a belief that shares common sentiments with certain creative

³¹ In 1964, Lyndon B. Johnson launched a series of domestic programs under the umbrella title of The Great Society. This included a number of programs and acts focused on cities and communities, including the Housing and Urban Development Act of 1965, which expanded funding for federal housing, and added rent subsidy programs for low-income families, the elderly, disabled and military veterans. Johnson also passed the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 as part of his War on Poverty, which provided funding for urban redevelopment. The Model Cities Program was also part of the Great Society. Launched in 1966, it sought to reform partnerships between cities and the government. The idea was that increased federal funding for community development would be awarded to cities, on the condition that development would focus on neighborhoods afflicted by poverty, and would include social services and citizen participation in designing and managing each project. The program was beset by tension between community groups and city planners. As D. Bradford Hunt notes, mayors often ignored citizen input in order to use the funds as they saw fit. The program ended in 1974. See D. Bradford Hunt, "Model Cities," *Encyclopedia of Chicago*, <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/832.html> (accessed September 17, 2018).

³² Will Schultz, "Soul City," North Carolina History Project, <http://northcarolinahistory.org/encyclopedia/soul-city/>. Accessed November 1, 2017.

³³ Devin Fergus, "Black Power, Soft Power: Floyd McKissick, Soul City, and the Death of Moderate Black Republicanism," *The Journal of Policy History* 22.2 (2010): p. 150.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

placemaking projects that have adopted the CPTED model (Crime Prevention Through Urban Design).³⁵ Writing about Soul City, Devin Fergus states that “Liberals from Nelson Rockefeller to the editorial board of the *New York Times* put aside initial concerns that black capitalism promoted black segregation and endorsed Nixon’s contention that federal aid be given to minority enterprises as a means of growing the black middle class.”³⁶ McKissick joined the Republican Party in the late 1960s, becoming head of the Congress of Racial Equality, and continued to promote black capitalism. His endorsement of this approach meant that government officials could support an idea that remained less threatening than other more radical ideas, such as reparations. Reparations were called for by more radical individuals and political organizations at this time, including James Forman, head of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, who argued that American churches and synagogues should pay \$500 million for their role in perpetuating slavery in his 1969 “Black Manifesto,”³⁷ and the Black Panther Party, which demanded an “an end to the robbery by the capitalists of our black community” in their *Ten-Point Program*.³⁸

Soul City was designed with the intention of creating sustainable wealth by and for black people, but this narrative was taken up by conservative politicians seeking a quick fix for issues revolving around racial segregation and inequality. The development plan that emerged was reworked to fit an existing model of business as usual and simplified into ‘black capitalism.’ This process bears resemblance to many of the projects discussed in this dissertation, including Project Row Houses. Similar tensions have emerged between self-determination and the communal redistribution of profit, on the one hand, and narratives of black capitalism and self-improvement, on the other hand. Both of these tendencies are visible within the project, which relies upon corporate funding, promotes creative entrepreneurship and

³⁵ The CPTED model suggests that the design of the built environment can affect crime rates. For example, a park with well-spaced trees and clear sight lines would provide more opportunities for surveillance, and therefore less crime (according to CPTED logic). The model also emphasizes responsibility and ownership of public spaces as a means of cutting down on crime. The model was inspired by Oscar Newman’s defensible space theory. According to Newman, defensible space is “a residential environment whose physical characteristics—building layout and site plan—function to allow inhabitants themselves to become key agents in ensuring their security.” See Oscar Newman, *Defensible Space: Crime Prevention Through Urban Design* (New York: Macmillan, 1972).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

³⁷ James Forman, “Black Manifesto,” *The Black National Economic Conference*, 1969. Available at <http://www.perno.com/amer/docs/James%20Forman%20Black%20Manifesto.htm>.

³⁸ Huey P. Newton, “The Ten-Point Program,” *War Against the Panthers: A Study of Repression in America* (Santa Cruz: University of California, 1980).

small business ownership in the Third Ward, but also supports black culture, works to resist displacement, and provides a public platform for the discussion of social issues.

These contradictions are visible in one of the most frequent events that takes place at Project Row Houses: community markets, often held during the opening of a new Round. During the markets, local artisans are invited to bring their goods to the market and sell them. Recent markets have featured a diverse array of products, including beaded jewelry, metalwork, woodwork, printed t-shirts, soaps, lotions, dolls, purses, paintings, woven scarves, hats and gloves, and palm readings. The markets are intended to offer exposure and a secondary revenue stream to local artisans. ‘Round 43: Small Business/Big Change: Economic Perspectives from Artists and Artpreneurs’ ran from October 2015 to February 2016, and focused on the relationship between art and local economies. The Round was organized by Ryan Dennis, Public Art Director at Project Row Houses. In a catalogue accompanying the exhibition, she writes that the markets offer residents a sense of community, an opportunity to meet one’s neighbors, and a chance to support local artisans. She reflects upon the term ‘black capitalism,’ going back even further back than the debates of the 1960s to cite the exchange that took place between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois in the early 1900s (Washington created the Negro Business League and sought to build a black capitalist class, while Du Bois focused on civil rights and founded the Niagara Movement in 1905, which was later absorbed into the NAACP).³⁹ Dennis argues that contemporary attempts to promote black-owned small businesses in the Third Ward, when combined with housing and cultural activism, can be a powerful way to “stimulate a healthy local economy,” and she sees the initiative as raising important questions: “How are strategies for economic sustainability played out from the individual to the collective? How, within a neighborhood being gentrified, do we push against big-business models that so easily find their way into small neighborhoods without supplying any forms of support to small businesses? Historically, what successful economic models and values (throughout the diaspora) have been used that might lay the foundations for future development?”⁴⁰ These questions demonstrate the

³⁹ See Earl Ofari Hutchinson, “The Continuing Myth of Black Capitalism,” *The Black Scholar* 23.1 (Winter/Spring 1993): pp. 16-21.

⁴⁰ Ryan Dennis, “Round 43: Small Business/Big Change: Economic Perspectives from Artists and Artpreneurs,” October 24, 2015—February 28, 2016, exhibition catalogue, PDF available at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/55832a9de4b0920b55b16891/t/562e3f07e4b0fb6ab2a92464/1445871367561/round+43-booklet-web.pdf>, accessed January 1, 2018.

interrogative nature of Project Row Houses and its collaborators, as they seek out a path beyond redevelopment-as-usual.

Although many critics, including George Lipsitz, have argued that the project defies “the market logic of competitive individualism through its emphasis on mutuality and solidarity,”⁴¹ it also seems to be the case that many of its recent activities have embraced the entrepreneurial spirit of black capitalism, and the community markets are a good example of this. While they might not exemplify the same type of “market logic” noted by Lipsitz, they do promote ‘artrepreneurship,’ and emphasize creative branding and individual empowerment. They also encourage tourism—during the markets, many non-Third Ward residents visit the row houses to purchase unique handmade goods. In this sense, Project Row Houses may be seen as aligning with many of the aims of local community development agencies, which emphasize the growth of small businesses and creative capital as measures of success. According to this model, those who have prior training, education or skills will benefit more than those who do not. The community markets bring up contradictions and complicated questions surrounding Project Row Houses, since on the one hand, they emphasize individual empowerment, but on the other hand, they draw participants into the community-directed activities of Project Row Houses, which focus on critiquing structural inequalities of race and class in the Third Ward.

In addition to the Rounds, Project Row Houses has developed a “Social Safety Net” program, made up of affordable housing and a young mothers program. Assata Richards (who now works as a sociologist and directs the Sankofa Research Institute in Houston) was one of the young mothers who entered the program in 1996. She struggled to pay for tuition and housing while enrolled at the University of Houston, and became homeless at one point.⁴² In an interview with Tom Finkelpearl, she described the “strict” requirements of living in the houses, including volunteer work and “behavior requirements,” as well as the feeling of being “gawked at.” However, she also appreciated the energy and resources that had been invested in her, which led to her desire to reciprocate and become more involved in the project.⁴³ It seems that little has changed since then in terms of the specifications and behavior requirements for living in Project Row Houses’ affordable housing—the Row Houses Community Development Corporation lists

⁴¹ Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place*, p. 163.

⁴² Kelly Montana, “Civics Lessons: An Interview with Assata Richards,” *Glasstire*, October 5, 2013.

⁴³ Tom Finkelpearl, *Dialogues in Public Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), p. 267.

a strict set of guidelines on their rental application, that conform to public housing guidelines in Houston. They do not accept applicants who have issues with drugs or alcohol, felony convictions or evictions, and they state that applicants who are able to volunteer their time working on community art projects will be given preference. Only US citizens or eligible non-citizens can apply, due to Section 8 policy guidelines.⁴⁴ The rental application explains the reasons for the restrictions, stating that it would threaten “the health, safety, or right to peaceful enjoyment of the premises by other residents.”⁴⁵ While this may be true, it seems problematic that an organization devoted to helping people who have had difficulties accessing housing in the Third Ward does not allow applications from individuals who have previously been evicted. The strict requirements are also surprising considering the fact that ‘housing first’ policies have become common in many low-income, affordable and public housing initiatives.⁴⁶ These examples seem to be at odds with some of the rhetoric of the project—instead of recognizing the importance of housing for the most vulnerable people in the community, it is available only to those who have made the right choices in life, or who have been through rehabilitation to deal with individual problems. As many critics of socially engaged art have pointed out, this approach places the blame on individuals, instead of developing a broader critique of societal structures and cultural beliefs that have turned neighborhood disinvestment into a patchwork of individual problems.⁴⁷

The strict requirements of the Row House CDC are particularly surprising considering Lowe’s framing of Project Row Houses as a social sculpture, which for Joseph Beuys, involved a systematic and widespread critique of institutions and social norms, along with the belief that collective action could transform social structures. One might think that as a social sculpture, Project Row Houses would operate differently from existing models structuring housing eligibility, and invite more, not less flexibility. Lowe states: “I frame Project Row Houses and other projects that I work on within a context of social sculpture. Joseph Beuys coined that term and defined it as the ways in which we shape and mold the world around

⁴⁴ “Tenant Selection Policy: Row House Community Development Corporation Resident Selection and Screening Plan,” Project Row Houses, website, <http://www.rowhousecdc.org/our-properties/#application>, accessed November 1, 2017.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Susan E. Collins, Daniel K. Malone and Seema L. Clifasefi, “Housing Retention in Single-Site Housing First for Chronically Homeless Individuals With Severe Alcohol Problems,” *American Journal of Public Health* 2.103 (2013): pp. 269–274.

⁴⁷ See Grant Kester, “Aesthetic Evangelists: Conversion and Empowerment in Contemporary Community Art,” *Afterimage* 22 (January 1995): pp. 5-11.

us... at its core, it's really just about thinking the social environment as a sculptural form so that we understand some of the everyday, mundane things that happen—from transitional housing for single mothers or education programs or real-estate development—not only from the standpoint of the practical outcomes from these services but also the poetic elements that can be layered into them.”⁴⁸ Lowe’s reference to social sculpture is problematic because of how the concept clashes with the actual practices of the Row House CDC, which is more restrictive than many non-art-affiliated development projects through its requirements of behavior, US citizenship, and a commitment to devoting time and labor to the artistic aspects of the project. While the connection to social sculpture suggests operating outside of the bounds of currently existing institutional policies, behavioral requirements evoke an understanding of individual transformation consistent with more conservative approaches to community revitalization. The connection to social sculpture suggests other parallels between Lowe and Beuys—a charismatic figure who described himself as a shaman and entertained a cult-like following. As Jan Verwoert writes, Beuys claimed to deconstruct the traditions of modern art while at the same time, projecting an image of himself as “a visionary, spiritual authority or healer in full agreement with the modern myth of the artist as a messianic figure.”⁴⁹ While Beuys intentionally portrayed himself as a messianic figure, Lowe has made attempts to give others credit for their work, and to back away from the spotlight. Yet Project Row Houses is still most often associated with him, and in recent years, he has been granted a MacArthur Genius Award, and recently participated in Documenta in Athens/Kassel.

Another issue with the framing of the project as social sculpture is that, while it connects with the relational nature of Beuys’ practice, it also has the effect of downplaying the origins of the project in the already existing African American community and cultural organizing of the Third Ward, instead relying upon the legitimacy of Beuys as a well-established figure within the canon of European art history. This relates to the problem of monumentality—the framing of Project Row Houses as a form of social sculpture suggests singularity, and risks overshadowing the work that comes out of the artist residencies during the Rounds. In considering the project as a singular form of art, Lowe has reflected upon the

⁴⁸ “Interview with Rick Lowe,” *Bad At Sports*, April 23, 2015. <http://www.artpractical.com/column/interview-with-rick-low/>.

⁴⁹ Jan Verwoert, “The Boss: On the Unresolved Question of Authority in Joseph Beuys’ Oeuvre and Public Image,” *e-flux*, December 2008, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/01/68485/the-boss-on-the-unresolved-question-of-authority-in-joseph-beuys-oeuvre-and-public-image/>.

growing popularity of social practice as a genre and some of the issues that have emerged, stating that “there are people who understand that framing Project Row Houses as an art project gives it a different kind of leverage in the broader context of the city that a lot of the community development folks haven’t been able to access. And there’s a lot of respect for that. But there are also people that warn you that that is a very privileged place to occupy, and you have to be careful to not utilize that to propel yourself beyond the ecology of leadership in the neighborhood structure.”⁵⁰

Monumentalizing the project by framing it as a singular artwork (either as social sculpture or social practice) risks overshadowing some of the individual practices that contribute to its diverse, collaborative nature. However, the grand scale of the project is also one of its most fascinating and unique features. It now encompasses fifty-five buildings across ten city blocks, and its monumentality has brought up questions about influence and visibility, as well as the degree to which it has contributed to gentrification. The Third Ward is a gentrifying neighborhood in Houston, and this is driven mainly by its proximity to downtown and the University of Houston. In a 1930 redlining map, the current location of Project Row Houses is inside one of the red zones labeled as hazardous (meaning that banks and insurance companies would not offer federally backed mortgages or insurance, as they did for predominantly white neighborhoods), yet it is directly next to a green zone (marked as ‘best’ on the map) which was more affluent and predominantly white. According to Neil Smith, investors capitalize upon long periods of disinvestment and decline by seeking out rent-gaps—property being rented for lower than market rate—and then raising rents to make a profit. Using this theory, one could have predicted that the current location of Project Row Houses would one day become ripe for revitalization, simply because of its proximity to a wealthy green zone in the redlining map.⁵¹ Smith’s theory would suggest that Project Row Houses actually plays a fairly minimal role in driving gentrification. This is supported by a 2016 MIT study of Houston’s Third Ward, which concluded that the biggest causes were major transit projects and a \$33 million renovation of nearby Emancipation Park, which many residents fear will bring new, higher-priced condo developments to the Third Ward.⁵²

⁵⁰ “Interview with Rick Lowe,” *Bad at Sports*, April 23, 2015.

⁵¹ Neil Smith, “Toward a Theory of Gentrification: A Back to the City Movement by Capital, not People,” *Journal of the American Planning Association* 45.4 (1979): pp. 538-548.

⁵² *Emancipation Park Neighborhood: Strategies for Community-Led Regeneration in the Third Ward*, Report by MIT CoLab, May 2016. p. 8.

Regardless of how much it actually contributes to gentrification, Project Row Houses has attempted to play an active role in resisting the tide of displacement that seems to inevitably accompany such large-scale urban revitalization, and has sought out solutions to preserve the history and culture of the neighborhood. In relation to this, I have already discussed the significance of the architectural design of the row houses, as well as the political and cultural history of the Third Ward. A third factor that has shaped patterns of development is the policies of the City of Houston, which is often described as having no zoning.⁵³ It is a city that is relatively affordable, at least compared to New York and Los Angeles (the site of Watts House Project, discussed in the next section of this chapter). This has meant that experiments with home repair and affordable housing are more feasible, and this is perhaps one of the main reasons behind Project Row Houses' success and longevity. According to Lowe, "Houston is one of the great places for social practice because of the relatively low cost of living and because neighborhoods shift [...] unlike Boston or Chicago, it also has a fluid power structure and freewheeling, no-zoning development."⁵⁴

Lowe and his collaborators have adopted the position that it is possible for artists to work against gentrification. This could be considered a contentious viewpoint, especially in relation to recent debates in Boyle Heights, Los Angeles, regarding the relationship between art and gentrification (see chapter four). Yet for Lowe and others, Project Row Houses does something very different from blue chip galleries that act as pioneers on urban frontiers: they argue that it supports already existing cultural practices in the neighborhood, and publicizes the continued need for low-income housing. This takes place through the artist residencies, exhibitions and events hosted at Project Row Houses, but also through specific initiatives and advocacy projects, including recent lobbying for the development of a community land trust that would counter market-driven forces of economic growth. Project Row Houses, along with partnering churches and non-profits who share similar values, own approximately one quarter of the land in the northern area of the Third Ward. The MIT study points out that the first modern community land trust was established in 1969 in South Georgia "to steward Black-owned agricultural land in an area

⁵³ Although Houston doesn't officially have zoning laws, there are still land-use regulations that are equivalent to zoning laws in other cities. See "Development Regulations," City of Houston website, <http://www.houstontx.gov/planning/DevelopRegs/>.

⁵⁴ Molly Glentzer, "Project Row Houses fights to keep Third Ward culture alive," *Houston Chronicle*, January 18, 2014.

wrought by the history of slavery and sharecropping.”⁵⁵ This connects back to McKissick’s failed Soul City and suggests that an alternate possibility for his vision of black capitalism might have followed more along the lines of Lipsitz’s black spatial imaginaries premised on the sharing of profit and maximization of use value. A community land trust in the Third Ward would allow homes to be sold for about half the price of market value.⁵⁶ This would also mean that the owner of that home would not gain as much of a profit from its resale, but that that money would revert back to the land trust as “community wealth.”⁵⁷

While Project Row Houses connects with Lipsitz’s vision of a black spatial imaginary in many ways, there are several noteworthy contradictions. It promotes community wealth, yet also seeks to foster a spirit of creative entrepreneurship—in other words, market-based competition—in the neighborhood. It claims to provide a social safety net for residents, but imposes strict behavior requirements on its affordable housing application. The funding that it receives from large corporations also results in contradictions between rhetoric and practice, and this is visible in several examples. A 2016 artist residency by the Natural History Museum collective focused on the hypocrisy of corporate sponsorship. The collective is made up of scientists, museum curators and artists, including Naomi Klein and Mark Dion, who program pop-up exhibitions in existing museum spaces. Their exhibition at Project Row Houses was titled *Mining the HMNS*, and in an accompanying text they asked: “Is the Houston Museum of Natural Sciences a museum, or a PR front for the fossil fuel industry? This is the central question of ‘Mining the HMNS,’ an exhibition by The Natural History Museum that interrogates the symbiotic relationship between the Houston Museum of Natural Sciences and its corporate sponsors.”⁵⁸ The exhibition focused on corporate sponsorship, environmental destruction and institutional hypocrisy, yet the artists did not interrogate the corporate sponsorship of Project Row Houses by Chevron, a company that has committed acts of environmental damage around the world.⁵⁹ Another example that raises

⁵⁵ *Emancipation Park Neighborhood: Strategies for Community-Led Regeneration in the Third Ward*, p. 21.

⁵⁶ Community land trusts are nonprofit corporations that provide housing at below-market rates. The trust holds land and the structures on it in common, and retains an option to buy houses from owners if they choose to sell, according to a predetermined resale formula. This means that owners do not make much of a profit from the resale of their home, but it also ensures affordability for future owners.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ “Mining The HMNS: An Investigation by The Natural History Museum,” Texas Environmental Justice Advocacy Services website, <http://tejasbarrios.org/mining-the-hmns/>, accessed January 1, 2018.

⁵⁹ Joanna Zelman, “Chevron Accused Of ‘World’s Worst Oil-Related Disaster’ In Ecuador: Alleged Evidence Submitted In Lawsuit,” *Huffington Post*, January 24, 2011. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/01/24/chevron-accused-by-ecuado_n_813117.html, accessed January 1, 2018.

questions is Row House CDC's sponsorship by Bank of America, which seems particularly problematic given the corporation's role in the 2010 foreclosure crisis (it was fined \$16.65 billion dollars for selling toxic mortgages to investors).⁶⁰

These examples clash directly with the programming initiatives and broader rhetoric of the project, leading one to wonder: are these forms of sponsorship ways to 'game the system' by taking money from corporations and redirecting it to people in need? Or, in the manner of Soul City, do they signify a compromise that undermines the mission and politics of the organization? These questions provoke broader questions regarding the political efficacy of socially engaged art, which some critics view as too ethically compromised to produce meaningful social change. In this line of thinking, Ben Davis argues that Project Row Houses has received undue accolades for the amount of low-income housing it has actually created, and that during its existence, the housing problem in Houston actually got worse.⁶¹ He writes, "it is vulnerable to all the weaknesses of non-profit focused activism: Having to lower one's rhetoric in order to please donors, mopping up the symptoms of social problems instead of going after the disease itself, and, ultimately, reducing the vital work of political organizing to a symbolic gesture."⁶² Davis sees the project as smoothly aligning itself with the interests of the neoliberal state, by offloading public services to well-meaning volunteers or private charities. He considers it to be a failure because of its cooptation by market forces, as well as its inability to solve social problems on a meaningful scale. Although his discussion of corporate sponsorship brings up serious issues related to the ethical decisions made by Lowe and his collaborators, Davis' critique also simplifies the collective and creative labor that have contributed to the cultural practices at Project Row Houses for the past several decades.

Grant Kester gives more weight to the generative possibilities of practice within socially engaged art, pointing out that "the PRH team can only work with the cultural conditions that exist in the Third Ward at this historical moment," and that it is important to consider the issue of how the project challenges existing forms of urban development in Houston. He writes: "By this standard, PRH's capacity

⁶⁰ Nash Jenkins, "Bank of America To Pay Record \$16.65 Billion Fine," *TIME Magazine*, August 21, 2014.

⁶¹ Ben Davis, "A critique of social practice art," *International Socialist Review*, 90 (July 2013), <https://isreview.org/issue/90/critique-social-practice-art>.

⁶² *Ibid.*

to resist both the economic and cultural movement of the gentrification process is significant. . . . PRH seeks to remain open to the creative potential of practice—its capacity to disclose new possibilities, new modes of political and cultural transformation—while at the same time coming to terms with the existing forces and historical preconditions in place at a given site.”⁶³ Davis’ account of the failure of Project Row Houses does not consider the importance of practice, and focuses solely on the outcomes of the project. He views art as a distracting add-on to social protest, instead of considering the social potential of aesthetic production, through the collective expression of meaning and the articulation of shared beliefs and goals. This results in a devaluation of daily practices that take place within the project, such as conversations between neighbors, the formation of new relationships and social groups, and public discussions of policy.

Davis’ critique rests upon a binary between symbolic gesture and political organizing, which is perplexing, since social movements almost always involve both of these elements—and are often most successful when form and content merge together in novel ways. As James C. Scott noted in his discussion of ‘hidden transcripts,’ “material and symbolic resistance [are] part of the same set of mutually sustaining practices.”⁶⁴ The kind of resistance that Project Row Houses offers is based upon combining these types of practices, and it therefore does something different from other processes of redevelopment in the Third Ward. For Larne Abse Gogarty, it offers an important example of resistance, which she outlined in calling upon social practice artists to be more transparent in their political commitments: “I suggest we strive for a critical agenda which emphasizes the importance of works that hold a negation of the presently existing world at their core without merely offering a mimesis of exploitation and alienation. This might be by virtue of just existing in the world as a tentative contradiction to all that surrounds it—PRH would fit that bill—or through being more directly confrontational with the processes that produce the necessity for art that attempts to better social relations.”⁶⁵ Whether Project Row Houses exists as a “tentative contradiction,” or something more or less powerful than that, it is true that it offers something different from redevelopment-as-usual. While Gogarty sees its value in simply existing in the world, I

⁶³ Grant Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 221.

⁶⁴ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 184.

⁶⁵ Larne Abse Gogarty, “Art and Gentrification,” *Art Monthly* (February 2014), p. 373.

would argue that its existence is more complicated, and premised on a series of decisions and compromises made throughout its history that have prioritized scale, visibility and local influence over ideological or political purity—for example, by taking money from corporate donors that appear to be at odds with its social justice mission, or restricting its affordable housing to certain deserving tenants despite its claims to support those in the Third Ward who are the most needy. The value of the project is less in its singular negation of the world, and more in its complex, durational practices, which have resulted in cycles of refusal (of existing forms of urban development that prioritize economic growth) and compromise (accepting corporate donations, restricting its affordable housing, promoting forms of black capitalism, working with the city to address social issues instead of adhering to a more separatist approach). In looking at these cycles of refusal and compromise, it is the crucial linking of time and practice, built upon a commitment to community growth that differs from redevelopment-as-usual, that deserves to be examined more closely. Lowe has recently become interested in exploring other ways in which Project Row Houses might play a role in neighborhood development, including focusing more on influencing city housing and community development policies. He has been able to acquire a certain amount of authority in his interactions with the city, which could lead to more concrete changes for neighborhood residents. It is precisely because of the project's scale, its long-term presence, and Lowe's increasingly influential role in city politics that it raises such interesting questions: it originated as a community-driven organization and still receives strong neighborhood support, but has increased its scale and its visibility in the art world. With that have come opportunities, challenges and contradictions: playing an increasingly important role in neighborhood development, but doing so at the expense of accepting corporate sponsorship, and having to restrict its programming to supporting members of the community who are willing and able to follow certain moral requirements. While it may be small-scale in terms of urban development, Project Row Houses functions on a level that is unprecedented in recent art practice, bringing to mind histories of intentional and utopian communities—yet it is also a realist project. What it has managed to achieve in terms of scale may be seen as coming at the expense of more radical visions of redevelopment and social change, yet it is the combination of symbolic gesture and material practice that makes the project compelling for both its participants and its audience.

Watts House Project

Project Row Houses was a direct influence on the two other home renovation projects I analyze in this chapter. Considering the Los Angeles-based Watts House Project also offers an early example of the adoption of socially engaged art by art institutions, which began in the 1990s and grew in the early 2000s. During this time, more and more museums began to exhibit, commission and even collect this type of work. The example of Watts House Project, which began as part of the exhibition *Uncommon Sense* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, is notable since it provided a model of curatorial promotion and support for such projects that other institutions would later follow. The curators of the exhibition, Julie Lazar and Tom Finkelppearl, performed different roles than those involved in curating a more conventional art exhibition, in part by engaging in activities that would be more typically associated with education or outreach—like connecting artists with community organizations. In the exhibition catalogue for the show, they ask “How can a museum, which produces (one-way) transmissions of curatorial theses, become engaged in sympathetic dialogues or debates with artists and audiences? How can the systems of exchanging ideas be made more apparent?”⁶⁶ In February 1995, Rick Lowe was invited to Los Angeles by Lazar and Finkelppearl, along with a number of other artists (including Karen Finley, Mel Chin and Mierle Laderman Ukeles). The group took part in a series of conversations and planning meetings, in which the artists were asked what they were interested in working on, who they wanted to work with and how the museum could help them develop their project. Finkelppearl described the kind of work the museum was interested in supporting:

Artists who have created very ambitious projects, but who have been on non-traditional paths. They’re not highly successful in the commercial gallery world, but they are highly respected within their communities. [What is important] is their level of commitment and achievement... They are people who have exceptional capacities for creating public interaction... For this sort of artist, a lot of their effect is not what they do, but what they allow or inspire others to do... there are ‘geniuses’ of this sort in many different fields from teachers, to secretaries, to public bureaucrats. These are people with uncommon sense.⁶⁷

Lowe produced an installation for the exhibition that he titled *Watts House Project*. It was the first time that he had collaborated with a museum to produce and display work, which was described in the

⁶⁶ Julie Lazar, “Is it Uncommon Sense ‘to stoP the estrangement between us’?”, in *Uncommon Sense* (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1997), p. 40.

⁶⁷ Tom Finkelppearl, quoted in Lazar, *Uncommon Sense*, p. 41.

catalogue as “community-based public art.” In planning for the exhibition, Lowe first met with residents of Watts, including leaders of neighborhood organizations, to determine if there was interest in a community art project involving home repair. As an outsider to the neighborhood, this was a crucial step. Although he had the experience of launching Project Row Houses, the neighborhood of Watts differed from the Third Ward in its history, its social dynamics and its level of economic prosperity.

In order to familiarize himself with Watts, Lowe spent some time getting to know residents who were involved in community-organizing and art making. It is worth discussing a few of these examples in order to provide a brief sketch of the neighborhood’s history, since they provide insight into how the Watts House Project was perceived by neighborhood residents. A number of community organizations emerged in Watts during the mid-1960s, and they parallel contemporary socially engaged art in some ways. The Watts Labor Community Action Committee was formed by Ted Watkins in 1965, a few months before the riots, as a community self-help agency. Inspired by the War on Poverty declared by Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964, the organization developed with support from the United Automobile Workers, and aimed to provide Watts residents with employment training and social services. Watkins had been a UAW representative while employed by the Ford Motor Company and also belonged to the Watts chapter of the NAACP. Another organization, the Watts Writers Workshop, was established by screenwriter and novelist Budd Schulberg following the 1965 riots with support from the NEA, and involved seminars and public readings. Some of the members of the workshop lived in a commune in Watts that they called the House of Respect, which hosted an artist residency and featured screenings and performance. In 1973, the organization’s headquarters was burned down by an FBI informant named Darthard Perry, a former army intelligence officer who used the alias Ed Riggs. Before burning down the building he had spent several years sabotaging the organization (and other black-controlled spaces in Los Angeles) by stealing equipment, canceling insurance and erasing the names of donors from mailing lists.⁶⁸

Another community organization, the Watts Community Housing Corporation, shares several commonalities with Project Row Houses (and Dorchester Projects in Chicago, discussed in the next section): it grew out of the Studio Watts Workshop, formed in 1964 by James Woods, who believed that

⁶⁸ George Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place*, p. 132.

“the arts could be a tool for social change,”⁶⁹ and described himself as a “cultural developer” interested in promoting cultural democracy.⁷⁰ He organized art workshops for youth in the neighborhood, including an annual public art ‘chalk-in’ on a sidewalk on 103rd street, and in 1971 he received a \$75,000 grant from the Ford Foundation to study ways in which art and low-income housing could be linked together. It was at this point that the Studio Watts Workshop became the Watts Community Housing Corporation, and with the Ford Foundation grant, as well as several other grants (including one from HUD), Woods built an apartment block with 144 units of affordable housing. When it opened, there were spaces set aside for a gallery, art workshops and art studios. Donations poured in during the late 1960s, when many saw the project as a way to prevent violence associated with the riots and provide opportunities for young people to receive training and develop skills for employment (similar to the ‘safety valve’ theory discussed in relation to Soul City’s vision of black capitalism). However, private donations dried up during the 1970s, and federal funding for public housing was drastically reduced during the Reagan and Bush eras. Woods scaled back arts programming in order to maintain subsidized housing for low-income people.⁷¹

The Watts Towers Art Center is the longest lived community arts organization in the neighborhood and its story begins with Sabato Rodia, an Italian immigrant who began to build the towers in 1921. Over the next 33 years he created seven towering structures covered in colored glass, shells, ceramic tiles and other found objects. In 1954, he decided that the towers were complete, handed them over to a neighbor, and moved to San Francisco. The city of Los Angeles tried to demolish the towers, claiming that they were unsafe and unsightly, but in 1959, actor Nicholas King and film editor William Cartwright purchased them and created a preservation committee, arranging for an engineering test to prove they were structurally sound. They passed the test, and the committee managed the towers until 1975, when they transferred ownership to the City, which then partnered with the State of California in 1978. The Towers are now managed by the City of Los Angeles along with the Watts Towers Art Center. The Watts Towers Art Center was established in 1961 by educator and activist Judson Powell and artist Noah Purifoy, who was the first African American student to enroll in art classes at Chouinard College

⁶⁹ James Woods, quoted in David Colker and Mark Lacey, “From Watts Riot Ashes: Bright Hopes, Heartaches,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 10, 1992.

⁷⁰ Don Snowden, “Maverick Visions: Artist-activist Woods: ‘Be Bold . . . And Achieve’,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 26, 1986.

⁷¹ Colker and Lacey.

(now CalArts). Like James Woods, Powell and Purifoy viewed art as a tool for social change and wanted to make work that would address violence and unrest in Watts.⁷²

The aim of the center was to provide workshops and cultural programming for young people in Watts, and to connect the singular vision of Rodia's lifelong act of creation with a model of community engagement. This became an even more pressing issue for Judson and Purifoy after the riots. In August 1965 a fight broke out between police and a black motorist, and the altercation sparked massive unrest in a neighborhood that was already troubled by poverty and violence. Six days of rioting ensued, resulting in 34 deaths, thousands of injuries and millions of dollars of property damage. As many historians have argued, the riots were a result of structural racism and economic inequality exacerbated by racist housing restriction laws. Shana Bernstein points out that in the 1940s, 95% of housing in Los Angeles was off-limits to people of color, which meant that African Americans and other minority groups were restricted to the eastern and southern neighborhoods of the city, places in which there were fewer economic opportunities and public services.⁷³ The violence of the Watts Riots may have been sparked by police brutality, but it emerged because of the racism of segregated housing that was enforced through explicit regulations such as racial covenants and blockbusting. After the riots, the neighborhood was left covered with ashes, charred ruins and abandoned lots. Despite feelings of pessimism, several community leaders decided to pick up the pieces and try to rebuild. Daniel Widener has described the sense of regeneration that took place following the riots, writing that they “spawned almost a decade of local black radical activity, symbolized equally by the presence of large chapters of national groupings such as the Black Panther Party and by dozens of local projects.”⁷⁴ The Watts Towers Art Center was spared during the riots—Purifoy was there at the time, and the fires were four blocks away. Afterwards, he walked around with a wagon and collected scraps: pieces of metal, signs and charred personal belongings. He said, “things had calmed down, and so we took our wagon into the streets and looked for things that looked beautiful: the signs of neon, the signs that had melted and broken and pieces that were infused with glass. They looked

⁷² Daniel Widener, *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 7.

⁷³ Shana Bernstein, *Bridges of Reform: Interracial Civil Rights Activism in Twentieth-Century Los Angeles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁷⁴ Widener, p. 93.

like beautiful jewels in the sunshine.”⁷⁵ In 1966 he displayed these collected assemblage works as *66 Signs of Neon*, which was initially displayed at Markham Junior High School in Watts and then travelled to several other exhibition venues, including art galleries at UCLA and UC Berkeley.

There were some links between black artists in Watts and the mainstream art scene emerging in Los Angeles in the 1960s, including a friendship between Purifoy and curator Walter Hopps. For the most part though, black artists were left out of museum exhibitions, art criticism and other cultural movements developing in the city, and this was true of both gallery-based art and more politically engaged projects. Kristine McKenna discusses this point in relation to the Vietnam War protests that took place in Los Angeles in 1965. A number of artists decided to contribute to the protests by creating the Peace Tower, which was designed by Mark di Suvero, built by Lloyd Hamrol, Mel Edwards, Ed Boreal, Judy Chicago and others, and installed on the corner of Sunset and La Cienega Boulevards. McKenna points out that “the Artists Protest Committee was gearing up for action at exactly the same time Purifoy was in Watts creating his landmark exhibition, *66 Signs of Neon*. However, based on the available evidence, the denizens of the La Cienega art world weren’t even aware of it.”⁷⁶ The lack of awareness of Purifoy’s work by the white art world at the time is particularly interesting considering the formal similarities between *66 Signs* and the makeshift, collaboratively built Peace Tower (some critics have noted that di Suvero was influenced by the form of the Watts Towers).⁷⁷ The artists who built the Peace Tower shared the belief that art could be a tool for social change—yet they were unaware that similar experiments in merging art and activism were taking place across town.

Like Project Row Houses, the Watts Towers Art Center began as a small community directed organization, and took on an increasingly formalized relationship with the city, which affected its politics. Widener notes that in the 1980s the Watts Towers Art Center shifted its focus to providing children’s classes and began to cooperate with the city in managing programming and funding, and he argues that “The dual effect of these shifts was a transformation of black cultural politics from revolution to

⁷⁵ Judson Powell, quoted in Carolina A. Miranda, “Noah Purifoy, an artist forged by fire,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 13, 2015.

⁷⁶ Kristine McKenna, “Noah’s Arc: Noah Purifoy and the Other Los Angeles,” in *Noah Purifoy: Junk Dada*, edited by Franklin Sirmans and Yael Lipschutz (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2015), p. 91.

⁷⁷ Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, *Rebels in Paradise: The Los Angeles Art Scene and the 1960s* (New York: Henry Holt, 2011), p. 146.

affirmation, a difference that tended to move the focus of artistic activity to celebration from change.”⁷⁸ Widener sees this shift as having had the effect of diminishing a “previous politics of community wide activity generated by independent radical organizations,” in favor of a less threatening version of black creativity sanctioned by the city government.⁷⁹

Stories about the Watts Towers Art Center, the Watts Community Housing Corporation, and other black cultural organizations in Watts demonstrate the long history of art making and cultural production in the neighborhood. Each of these examples offers parallels with contemporary socially engaged art, including the projects discussed in this chapter, and it is worth noting how each of these organizations transformed throughout their lifespans because of shifting local politics, individual beliefs and community values: from models that demonstrated a thriving black community-driven culture, to sabotage and decline in the example of the Watts Writers Workshop, the prioritizing of affordable housing over art in the example of the Watts Community Housing Corporation, and the de-radicalization of art making at the Watts Towers Art Center.

Lowie made conscious efforts to learn about the history of Watts, and to get to know community leaders, including John Outterbridge, director of the Watts Towers Art Center from 1975 to 1992. Yet one of the reasons behind the Watts House Project’s eventual failure had to do with the strong presence of existing community organizations, including the Watts Towers Art Center, and its desire to celebrate and prioritize black culture at the same time that neighborhood demographics were shifting. In the 1990s, growing numbers of Latinos moved to Watts, and increasingly sought to have a voice in the neighborhood and contribute to decisions being made about politics and development. Watts, which was almost completely black in the 1960s, is now 70% Latino. Yet as some residents have argued, most of the leadership roles in the community are held by black people. Manuel Pastor notes that “Black political influence was hard won and became part of a legacy,” and that among the influx of Latinos are “many immigrants who aren't eligible to vote and are relatively new to local politics.”⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Widener, p. 234.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Manuel Pastor quoted in Esmeralda Bermudez and Paloma Esquivel, “Latinos Now Dominate Watts, But Some Feel Blacks Still Hold Power,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 10, 2015.

Although Lowe sought to build ties between Watts House Project and the existing community, the project was met with feelings of distrust towards an artist coming in and placing a spotlight on Watts. Art historian Marita Sturken spent time observing the initial planning stages of Watts House Project as part of *Uncommon Sense* and she wrote about some of the interactions between Lowe and the community organizations he met with. She pointed out, for example, that one group “perceives Rick as a means to create a bridge with a museum that has as yet been absent in their neighborhood, but they do not do so without suspicion. One of their primary concerns is what happens to the long-term project when the museum show is over.”⁸¹ As I have discussed in relation to numerous examples in this dissertation, these concerns are prevalent within socially engaged art, and they bring up important questions about commitment and exploitation. Sturken also noted: “This is the first time that Rick has produced a project with a museum as a collaborator, and the process has changed in many ways his customary mode of working. When he goes to meetings in Watts with museum staff in tow, the tenor of the encounter is always more formal than his solo forays. His negotiation of museum space and community space is always a complicated dance.”⁸² Seeing himself as an outsider, Lowe invited Edgar Arceneaux to work on the project with him. At the time, Arceneaux was finishing his last semester at Art Center College of Art and Design in Pasadena. Arceneaux met Lowe while visiting Outterbridge’s studio, and both would go on to participate in artist residencies at Project Row Houses in Round 9 (Fall 1998-Spring 1999). After this meeting, Lowe asked Arceneaux to collaborate on the project, since he needed someone with ties to LA and the neighborhood of Watts. After *Uncommon Sense*, Watts House Project did not initially take off, perhaps confirming some of the suspicions of community members regarding the intentions of museums. However, in 2008, Arceneaux established a non-profit organization along with a group of artists, architects and designers. While the project was going to focus on home renovations, these would be made to inhabited homes in cooperation with homeowners, unlike Project Row Houses. While this offered the chance to form a collaborative model of participatory design, it also led to many complicated issues: from zoning and permitting, to interpersonal conflicts between neighbors, all underscored by the distrust of the

⁸¹ Marita Sturken, “Negotiating Art: The Artist and the Museum,” *Uncommon Sense*, p. 63.

⁸² *Ibid.*

Watts Towers Art Center, which continued to view Watts House Project as an intrusion into their neighborhood.

In 2009, Watts House Project received a \$125,000 gift from the Warhol Foundation, and in 2011, it was awarded a creative placemaking grant for \$370,000 from ArtPlace, a program led by the NEA that funds projects proposing to merge art and neighborhood redevelopment. The initial plan was incredibly ambitious—Lynell George wrote that Arceneaux “hope[d] to get to all 20 structures on 107th Street—refurbishing four a year for the next five years—and expand to create exhibition spaces, cafes, gardens and artists residences.”⁸³ Perhaps inspired by Lowe’s references to Beuys, Arceneaux similarly portrayed Watts House Project as a form of social sculpture, stating that “Instead of using clay, we’re using time and space to sculpt a neighborhood and relationships.”⁸⁴ The first house to receive renovations belonged to Felix and Maria Madrigal on 107th Street, right across from the towers, and the plan was to begin by installing a new front walk and light fixture, and then to build an addition onto the porch to give the family more space.⁸⁵ However, later in 2011, an article by Jori Finkel came out in the *Los Angeles Times* in which several residents expressed frustration about the project, and said that they had been promised certain renovations and improvements but that these had been minimal: “despite years of discussions and a flurry of architectural plans featuring new bedrooms, bathrooms and space-saving solutions for the multigenerational families living in these single-story homes, only minor or cosmetic improvements like painting and landscaping have been completed.”⁸⁶ The Madrigals were one of the families to express discontent with the repairs, complaining about the extremely slow pace. In the end, what they got out of the project was a new shed, a walkway, a new fence, and a lamp on their front porch. Jose and Maria Garcia also complained about the repairs that had been promised to them. In 2009, Arceneaux formed a partnership with Mario Ybarra Jr., Karla Diaz and the architecture firm Escher GuneWardena to work on the Garcia’s house, and plans included adding several rooms, remodeling the kitchen and bathroom, and replacing plumbing. When Finkel interviewed the Garcias, they told her that three years of planning and

⁸³ Lynell George, “Revitalizing Watts, one home at a time,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 2, 2008.

⁸⁴ Edgar Arceneaux, quoted in George.

⁸⁵ Jori Finkel, “Watts House Project Under Fire,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 8, 2012.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

discussions had resulted in about three days of actual work: “They did paint the outside of the house, and they did the stucco around the back. But originally the plans were much bigger.”⁸⁷

What were the main issues affecting Watts House Project, and why did its vision of participatory design fail when put into practice? Reflecting on the dissatisfaction expressed by residents, Lowe said, “I applaud Edgar for his ability to develop the cultural capital . . . If it comes to communication with funders and the art world about the project, I'd give him an A+ . . . But when it comes to internal stuff, how he's been able to use the project as a way to access the potential of the existing community, that's a different story.”⁸⁸ Although Sue Bell Yank considered many of Finkel’s criticisms to be unfair, she acknowledged that the project may have suffered from its initial outsized ambition: “I think we ended up shooting ourselves in the foot in the beginning by having big, bold ambitious plans, but it was like a Catch 22, because that’s what allows you to raise money, and then get placemaking grants that allow you to do big things.”⁸⁹ She also mentioned numerous problems involving zoning and land-use regulations that affected the pace and scale of renovations: “There was a structure on [the Garcia’s] property that a couple of their family members lived in that was never permitted, and to do any changes to the property or to that structure you would need to get it permitted, and you would run into the possibility that the city might want you to tear the whole thing down. So there were certain risks like that, that we came up against that were really difficult to resolve.”⁹⁰ Trinidad Ruiz, who worked on the project with Arceneaux and Bell Yank, pinpointed another issue with the project that had to do with public-private tax issues. Initially, Arceneaux told homeowners that the renovations they received would be gifts. However, it was later discovered that the repairs would have to be considered loans in perpetuity, since some of the money came from publicly funded organizations and couldn’t be used to benefit private individuals. This meant that if homeowners sold their houses, they would have to pay back the amount gifted to them through the repairs.⁹¹ In addition to discussing public-private funding, both Ruiz and Bell Yank cited another issue as being the palpable animosity of the Watts Towers Art Center, which viewed Watts House Project as

⁸⁷ Jose Garcia, quoted in Finkel.

⁸⁸ Lowe, quoted in Finkel.

⁸⁹ Sue Bell Yank interview, September 29, 2016.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Trinidad Ruiz interview, October 31, 2017.

intruding on its territory.⁹² This took on many different forms—for example, the Garcia’s house had received a colorful mosaic made by artist Augustine Aguirre, who was an artist-in-residence at the Watts Towers Art Center. The mosaic was often included in promotional materials for Watts House Project without credit being given to Watts Towers Art Center or Aguirre, who complained and ask for the photos to be taken down from their website.⁹³

Both Bell Yank and Ruiz wish that the project had started smaller and scaled up gradually, and had been more organized in the beginning in terms of its awareness of local zoning policies, as well as legal issues related to funding. Ruiz described the project as a learning moment for socially engaged art practices that called for more transparent interactions with resident-participants. However, both he and Bell Yank also emphasized the redemptive qualities of the project, which they felt were missing from Finkel’s *Times* article. Ruiz pointed out that there were numerous renovations that were indeed successful, even if they took longer than expected. He also noted that the project resulted in neighbors sharing resources, tools and skills, forming a network of relationships that either were not initially there, or became stronger because of the project.⁹⁴ Criticisms of Watts House Project demonstrate that a wide range of issues can emerge when large-scale public art projects become intertwined with economic development and revitalization. While the project sought to reimagine the neighborhood through the repair of houses on a single block, it failed to make meaningful connections with residents. Its plans were overly ambitious, and unlike Project Row Houses, Arceneaux had to accommodate the interests and demands of homeowners. It suffered from poor planning and an outsized conception of scale and possibility in addition to having to deal with unexpected legal issues related to taxation and zoning. It was also viewed by some residents and existing community organizations as an intrusion by the art world, which related to the neighborhood’s history of African American political activism and more recent conflicts amongst a growing Latino population. While this example illuminates some of the complexities involved in producing large-scale socially engaged art, it also highlights issues related to design, and questions the idea that physical repairs alone can produce social change. Without an understanding of complicated legal and economic issues affecting neighborhoods, and without a broad base of support

⁹² Ruiz and Bell Yank interviews.

⁹³ Finkel.

⁹⁴ Ruiz interview.

from residents, such projects are just as likely to reproduce, or even exacerbate, existing inequalities and social tensions than to repair them.

Dorchester Projects

Theaster Gates' Dorchester Projects in Chicago demonstrates a different relationship with the art world from the previous two projects I have discussed, although it also employs the language of neighborhood revitalization through art and focuses on renovating and repairing houses. Project Row Houses grew out of the interests of a group of local artists and activists, while Watts House Project emerged out of a curatorial premise within an art exhibition (which played a role in its failure to gain the trust of residents in Watts, since it was perceived by some residents and by the Watts Towers Art Center as coming from outside the community). Dorchester Projects is a large-scale, long-term effort to renovate houses in South Side, Chicago, primarily in the Grand Crossing and South Shore neighborhoods, both of which are more than 90% African American. These neighborhoods, like many in Chicago, were shaped by the Great Migration of black southerners who settled in northern cities throughout the twentieth century, attracted by expanding industrialization and the promise of employment. The black population of Chicago grew from approximately 4,000 in 1870 to 15,000 by 1890, and from 278,000 to 813,000 between 1940 and 1960.⁹⁵ The majority settled in the South Side, because of discriminatory real estate practices as well as the hostility and violence experienced in white neighborhoods. Chicago is now roughly split in thirds demographically, between white, black and Latino populations. Theaster Gates grew up in East Garfield Park, a neighborhood on the West Side of Chicago. He attended Iowa State University, where he studied urban planning and ceramics, and he began his artistic career by referring to himself as a potter. He now holds a faculty position at the University of Chicago, an institution that has played a major development role in the South Side. Gates has become well known as a 'real-estate artist' and has risen to fame in the art world, in part by linking social practice to gallery sales. Dorchester Projects relates to Project Row Houses and Watts House Project in terms of house repair and neighborhood redevelopment, but overlaps much more directly with the art market. This is visible in the artistic influences that Gates references:

⁹⁵ Christopher Manning, "African Americans," *Encyclopedia of Chicago*, <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/27.html>, accessed January 1, 2018.

while Lowe cites Joseph Beuys' social sculpture and his interest in democratizing culture, Gates' work is often discussed in relation to Duchamp's readymades and their recirculation of value.

In 2009, Gates began buying abandoned buildings in the South Side, one of Chicago's poorest neighborhoods, and began a large-scale, long-term effort to renovate and repurpose them. He now owns more than a dozen properties in the neighborhood and has organized a non-profit called the Rebuild Foundation to manage programming and activities at the houses. The Listening House is a space for community meetings and workshops, while the Archive House hosts a library, slide collection and record collection. Another building hosts the Black Cinema House, which regularly screens films and holds neighborhood classes. Gates did not experience the same moment described by Lowe, who felt compelled to abandon his art studio and painting practice in order to engage with the community. He sold out his first solo show at Kavi Gupta Gallery in Chicago in 2011 (sculptures made from the detritus of abandoned houses), and reinvested the money in renovating another house on Dorchester Street, creating what has been referred to by numerous critics as a "circular economy."⁹⁶ Gates has described Dorchester Projects as offering the chance to think about 'black space' in Chicago, and views the project as a way of supporting art and cultural production in the neighborhood. He has drawn connections between his material practice and the work that he does building community, which may also be seen as Beuysian in its sculpting or manipulation of value, as it circulates from one context to another. Tying these approaches together is the way he sees his role as an urban planner—for Gates, urban spaces may be understood as material to be sculpted.⁹⁷ Gates bought his first property with a sub-prime mortgage loan in 2008 for \$130,000. The building on South Dorchester Avenue was formerly a candy store, and he initially planned to use the space as a pottery studio. He then began to collect items from the neighborhood, including books, records, and glass slides from the University of Chicago's art history department that were going to be thrown away. He bought a second house next to the candy store for \$16,000, which became the Archive House, and was also home to a soul-food kitchen where dinner parties are often hosted. Gates continued his circular process: buy houses, strip materials from them, use these materials as part of his private studio practice, sell work in galleries, and then reinvest, beginning the process anew. In 2014, he

⁹⁶ Ben Austen, "Chicago's Opportunity Artist," *New York Times*, December 20, 2013.

⁹⁷ John Owens, "Shuttered CHA complex gets new life as artists' home," *Chicago Tribune*, November 11, 2014.

opened the Dorchester Art + Housing Collaborative, which is split three ways between units that are market rate, affordable, and public housing. Five of the units are reserved for artists.⁹⁸ The project is a collaboration with the Chicago Housing Authority and a private developer, Brinshore, which is responsible for property management. Like the affordable housing of Project Row Houses, eligibility requires a drug screening and criminal background check.

Gates' practice has received accolades from the art world, and he has been lauded as an artist who has successfully integrated community engagement and urban redevelopment into his practice. Yet there have also been critiques of his work that question who it is really for—suggesting that its true home is the art world. While many of the narratives surrounding the project emphasize its concrete achievements, such as the creation of low-income housing, it is important to question how this has been used by Gates as a way to bolster his art sales, and also to question the broader role that his projects have played in furthering economic redevelopment and gentrification in Chicago. He has become a prolific developer, operating on a large scale and accessing private and public funding. While this would lead one to define his projects as successful in terms of scale and impact, it is worth examining the degree to which these projects operate differently from existing forms of development.

One way of doing this is to look at organizational politics and labor practices, and to analyze connections between the material and immaterial that inform Gates' understanding of the transformation of value. The Soul Manufacturing Corporation was a project that Gates began to conceptualize around 2006, and that provides early insight into labor as understood by the artist. The project developed around Gates' investigations into the materiality of clay, which were inspired by the traditions of Japanese pottery-making. He invented a character named Yamaguchi, a Japanese master-potter who, in Gates' fictional narrative, visits Mississippi in search of a legendary type of black clay. This story allowed him to explore “ways that African American culture rubs gently against the East.”⁹⁹ He was looking for ways to make his practice relevant to the community in which he was working in Chicago, and to explore ways in which labor, race and economic inequality were connected. He asked himself, “if I am to be engaged in

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Theaster Gates, “The End of Clay Fiction: Yamaguchi and the Soul Manufacturing Corporation,” *Studio Potter* 40.2 (2012): p. 30.

production, why not have it grow in neighborhoods that have real need and interest?”¹⁰⁰ Out of this inquiry came the Soul Manufacturing Corporation: “an attempt to think about the production of ceramic objects as a way of creating new and innovative arts-based economies.”¹⁰¹ It has been exhibited in three different cities, and in each site, galleries were transformed into workshop spaces in which skilled-makers (artisans specializing in a particular technique or material) produced clay, wood and textile objects by hand. At Locust Projects in Miami in 2012, a yoga instructor, DJ and various readers were invited to participate, and their role was to care for the makers as they worked. Readings included Moby Dick, Howl and an essay on Asian-American experiences of the Civil Rights movement. Matthew Dercole, one of the skilled-makers, made clay bricks by hand throughout the duration of the project, each one taking about twenty minutes. He described the experience as intensely physically demanding, since it involved heavy lifting and repetitive movements day after day. When Soul Manufacturing Corporation was exhibited at the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia in 2013, the makers gathered each afternoon to eat lunch together and discuss art. The museum organized apprenticeships during the exhibition, and the makers had the opportunity to share their knowledge and skills with others. The third iteration of the project took place in 2013 at Whitechapel Gallery in London, when it was performed as part of *The Spirit of Utopia*, an exhibition that looked at the ability of art to construct alternate visions of the world. London poet Zena Edwards performed in the gallery space while skilled-makers produced clay pots and bricks.

Of the many objects produced by the Soul Manufacturing Corporation, some were functional, others were not. Dercole described the bricks he made as “objects with potential,” and noted that some would become part of Gates’ sculptural work while others may be used by the Rebuild Foundation. Soul Manufacturing Corporation emphasized the importance of making things by hand. These were “objects with potential” in the sense that they embodied the activity of their production, and in the case of the bricks, were quite literally, buildings blocks. Soul Manufacturing Corporation emphasized the production of art as an unalienated practice within the utopian space of the art gallery, connecting skill, agency and the handmade with references to pre-industrial artisanal practices associated with the Arts and Crafts

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 31.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 30.

movement—although William Morris also engaged in parallel work at the level of radical political organizing through the Socialist League. The project complicated notions of essentialism in relation to Gates’ identity through the fictionalized narrative of his background as a potter with roots in both the South and the Far East. Workers who were employed by Gates as part of the project appreciated the experience: for Matthew Dercole, the project “was a way to breathe life into the production of objects by hand,” and he felt the desire to “make these things really beautifully and put myself into them, because of the environment and the way we were being treated and cared for in that space.”¹⁰² He described the attachment he felt to the handmade bricks he produced, noting that each one was curved or pressed in a slightly different way and felt unique to him. Pei-Hsuan Wang, another skilled-maker employed by Gates, worked on slip casting during the exhibition using molds weighing anywhere from five to twenty pounds. She also commented on the “resting and relaxation of the body” offered by yoga and readings, which for her, seemed like a necessary respite from the physical exertion involved in making the objects.¹⁰³ The circulation and distribution of these objects is worth noting: as objects with potential, the handmade bricks and pots produced during these three exhibitions might have been used in Rebuild’s community-based projects in Chicago, functioning as bricks are typically meant to function. Or they might have become part of Gates’ fine art practice—in the gallery space of Regen Projects in Los Angeles, for example, they evoked the minimalist work of Carl Andre. These bricks have the potential to sell for large sums of money, which may then be reinvested in Rebuild. Brick money might then finance an initiative such as a renovation project in St. Louis, Missouri, where bricks are being used to build a pizza oven that will be the centerpiece of a community culinary training program.

In these experiments with manipulating value in the South Side, is Gates gaming the system? Has he created a new kind of development—a city-building with soul, of the sort that proved so elusive to Floyd McKissick and others who sought alternatives to racial segregation and marginalization? The name ‘Soul Manufacturing Corporation’ suggested a rethinking of the corporation, in which makers might derive meaning through the fruits of their labor. Yet it is important to point out that the utopian vision of labor created through the Soul Manufacturing Corporation took place inside art galleries as temporary

¹⁰² Matthew Dercole interview, October 21, 2015.

¹⁰³ Pei-Hsuan Wang interview, October 24, 2015.

experiments. And these experiments have not necessarily translated to labor practices within the Rebuild organization. Like many non-profit organizations, Rebuild has been the site of internal conflicts between staff members. In 2016, several employees initiated their own union, the Black Arts and Artisans Labor Coalition, which published a list of critiques of the organization and calls for action:

Programmatic and staffing decisions have created a toxic and hostile work environment disproportionately affecting Black workers [...] there is an increased or imbalanced supervision or monitoring of vulnerable staff especially Black staff via the hiring of a white managerial class to oversee black laborers [...] there exists a culture and practice of a racialized hierarchy that disproportionately isolates and makes front-line Black staff unable to attain more equitable positions within the organization [...] this hostile working environment forces a culture of selective accountability targeting Black staff for disciplinary actions, firings and intimidation.¹⁰⁴

These criticisms suggest that while Gates portrays his work as community-directed and engaged, he may be more concerned with manipulating systems of power inside and outside the art world—and more interested in representing idealized visions of labor than promoting fair labor practices within his own arts organization.

Greg Sholette has noted how close Gates' practice has come to conventional forms of development, and that while it demonstrates "The capacity to toggle back and forth between a market-based art practice and not-for-profit social entrepreneurship," much of the artist's tricksterism seems to be intended mainly for the stage of the art world audience.¹⁰⁵ Sholette also points out Gates' connections to the art market boom post-2008. The recession benefitted his gallery practice, in addition to helping him cash in on the subprime crisis through his initial purchase of cheap houses. And for the world of mostly white art collectors, wealthy supporters of Gates' work get to feel like they are doing a good deed, and also have the opportunity to take home a souvenir in the form of an artwork. Along these lines, Larne Abse Gogarty argues that the project may be seen as a "kind of feel-good money laundering facility for the commercial art world and corporate developers."¹⁰⁶ However, other critics disagree with the view that Gates' work aligns seamlessly with existing forms of redevelopment. Bill Brown considers it to be a form

¹⁰⁴ "Black Artists and Artisans Labor Coalition Demands," Black and Brown Workers Collective, February 2017, available at <https://www.docdroid.net/74GoS2c/black-artists-and-artisans-labor-coalition-demands.pdf>, accessed January 1, 2018.

¹⁰⁵ Gregory Sholette, *Delirium and Resistance: Activist Art and the Crisis of Capitalism* (London: Pluto Press, 2017), p. 138.

¹⁰⁶ Gogarty, 373.

of ‘redemptive reification,’ writing: “Redeeming a neighbourhood...promises something other than revitalisation-as-usual: not simply turning the valueless into some-thing valuable, but sharing a transvaluation of values, some recognition of the ignored yet integral worth, and the congealed history, that inheres—right there—on this corner, in these bricks, in that strangely stained concrete.”¹⁰⁷ Brown suggests that Gates’ reframing of objects such as fire hoses, tar, bricks and concrete is a crucial aspect of his interruption of redevelopment-as-usual, and that on a broader scale, this translates to an interruption of conventional urban development plans.

However, it remains unclear how this actually functions in practice. What is evident is that Gates’ tactics are reliant upon the kind of framing and pointing mechanism associated with Duchamp and the readymade, as well as an understanding of objects that views them as mutable—“objects with potential,” as Dercole put it. They are objects that travel between different contexts and histories, echoing the objects collected by Noah Purifoy in Watts after the 1965 riots—firehoses suggest institutional violence against black protest, while other objects suggest personal connections to home, or the building materials complicit in the housing schemes that furthered structural racism. Movements between the material and immaterial in Gates’ work are discussed by Fred Moten, who reflects on its “corporate entanglements and mercantile impurities,” arguing that it demonstrates a pursuit of the bounties of capitalism after centuries of black exclusion. Moten wonders, “is Gates’s work productive of precisely that rich insistent, anti-racist, common, communist meditation on the ‘interpretive significance of slaves having themselves once been commodities?’”¹⁰⁸ This tension recalls the example of Soul City once again, and the conflict between its vision of social equality and its adoption of black capitalism. While Moten’s discussion of entanglements and impurities is convincing, these notions are troubled when one looks beyond the public presentations, lectures and art world staging of Gates’ work, to explore its organizational politics and its relevance within the community. From this perspective, it often seems as if Gates is more focused on playing games than questioning redevelopment-as-usual. He has spoken of Duchamp and Warhol as influences—artists affiliated with a similar trickster position, and in aligning himself with them, Gates has found a successful

¹⁰⁷ Bill Brown, “Redemptive Reification (Theaster Gates, Gathering),” in *My Labour is My Protest*, edited by Honey Luard (London: White Cube, 2012), p. 5.

¹⁰⁸ Fred Moten, “Nowhere, Everywhere,” *My Labor is My Protest*, p. 76.

formula for claiming relevance within the contemporary art world while continuing to closely replicate existing models of development in Chicago.

In contrast, while Lowe has taken money from private donors and corporations, this exchange was never intended to play a central role in Project Row Houses as part of the artwork itself. There are similar movements of capital and revaluation going on, but for Gates, these have become a crucial aspect of his aesthetic production. Although this process involves self-reflexive transparency, and like Warhol's practice, becomes part of the work itself, it has also had the effect of aligning him closely with philanthropists, art collectors and real-estate developers in Chicago (often the same people). Kavi Gupta discussed the appeal of Gates' work to the art collecting class: "I remember taking, one by one, every affluent philanthropist in Chicago down to Dorchester, and the minute they saw Theaster they were, like, 'How can we help?'"¹⁰⁹ While this results in supporting black space in the South Side and subsidizing low-income housing, it also means that Gates takes on a role that is virtually indistinguishable from the private charities, developers, gallerists and city officials he works with. While Project Row Houses does something different in the Third Ward that might not have otherwise been accomplished by city redevelopment agencies, Dorchester Projects replicates existing forms in the worlds of real estate and art, although it does this consciously, placing a reflexive spotlight on its actions.

Reparative practices or redevelopment-as-usual?

While each of the projects discussed in this chapter brings up problematic issues related to economic development, they also demonstrate a belief in the continued importance of practical action, and the belief that it is not acceptable to think nothing can be done to improve local economic conditions. This is a position driving contemporary socially engaged art that works from a reparative rather than deconstructive model, and it is in part the tension between these two approaches that has led to many of the complications within these projects—acts of repair can only go so far before aspirations of social transformation are met with disappointing limitations. Project Row Houses, Watts House Project and Dorchester Projects share the belief that community can be created by addressing common concerns

¹⁰⁹ John Colapinto, "The Real-Estate Artist," *The New Yorker*, January 20, 2014.

among neighborhood residents, and by working together to build shared visions of place that are not imaginable by other means. In Houston's Third Ward, an understanding of place connects past histories of activism with the present moment, emphasizes the importance of supporting African American culture, and involves people in the neighborhood working together to prevent displacement. In Watts there was a similar coming together of neighbors with different skill-sets and an emphasis on the role that art and design could play in creating practical solutions to social issues, although the project suffered because of its initial lack of organization, its inability to align scale with ambition, and the tensions that emerged between neighbors and other community organizations. In Chicago, Dorchester Projects focuses on supporting black culture in the South Side, yet remains dependent on the legitimizing forces of the commercial art world. Gates' emphasis on practice and skilled work echoes connections to labor in Watts and the Third Ward—Lowe's background as a carpenter, for example, or the exchange of labor between roofers and plumbers in Watts. Each of these projects takes practice and action as their starting points. This has meant that they engage concretely with existing social structures, but also that they become mired in "mercantile impurities," to use Moten's phrase—which could also apply to Project Row Houses' corporate sponsorships and Watts House Project's attempts at navigating public-private partnerships.

Related to this emphasis on practice is the question of how practical action connects with symbolic gesture. Gates believes strongly in the power of symbolic gesture: "There's a way in which artists might have the power to conjure the symbolic, to do things in the world that other folks couldn't imagine... there's nothing special about rehabbing a building. But then to call it something like the 'Archive House' and to make a small residential building public—that does something."¹¹⁰ There are many symbolic features visible within Project Row Houses as well: the commemorative installations for important community members, the exhibitions that have featured items donated by neighbors, the form of the houses themselves. Lowe has rethought scale in recent years, partly in response to critiques such as that of Ben Davis, whose essay raised the question: if you can't actually fix the housing crisis in Houston, what can you do differently? Yet Davis unfairly characterized the relationship between political change and symbolic action, seeing the two as conflicting rather than intertwined—a notion supported by many

¹¹⁰ Carol Becker, "Carol Becker in conversation with Theaster Gates," *Theaster Gates* (London: Phaidon, 2015), p. 8.

authors who have studied social movements. For example, James C. Scott views material and symbolic resistance as “part of the same set of mutually sustaining practices,”¹¹¹ while Sherry Ortner believes that symbols are “operators in the social process, things that, when put together in certain arrangements in certain contexts...produce essentially *social* transformations.”¹¹² Davis argued that aesthetics were a distraction from real activism—yet this leaves out the important ways in which social movements become publicly legible, attract newcomers and create social bonds amongst them, and articulate political demands. The symbolic form of a house can become a powerful tool for building community, especially within a framework that emphasizes the importance of rethinking existing forms of urban transformation. What these projects demonstrate is an attention to practice, and a merging of the symbolic and the concrete in specific sites. The sociological definition of ‘social practice’ is worth noting here—the term was used in the social sciences for several decades before being adopted by artists and art institutions in the early 2000s. Addressing this concept (in 1984), Ortner emphasized the central role that it has played within social transformation, which she characterizes as “failed reproduction.”¹¹³ She also cautions that social transformation does not typically occur in ways that might be predicted or hoped for: examples of this include the conflicts that emerged among employees of Rebuild that led to the formation of a labor coalition, and the emergence of a network of skill-sharing among neighborhood residents in Watts.

Connecting these ideas to repair or renovation is the notion of using one’s hands to make skilled material improvements. Loïc Wacquant has written about skill in relation to embodied knowledge, and defines it as a competency we gain through experience and training, which allows us to make adjustments in the world as social agents. His research focuses mainly on social inequalities and how they relate to race and violence in urban spaces—he lived in Chicago’s South Side while attending graduate school at the University of Chicago, and while living there, began to attend a local boxing gym. This experience changed his approach to research, and he became interested in writing about the social space of the gym as a microcosm of violence in the South Side. Wacquant describes the approach he developed as one of “enactive ethnography,” in which one learns about something through “practical knowledge acquired and

¹¹¹ James C. Scott, p. 184.

¹¹² Sherry Ortner, “Theory in Anthropology Since the Sixties,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26.1 (January 1984): p. 131.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

manifested in concrete deeds.”¹¹⁴ Yet despite his emphasis on the power and force of social structures, his work leaves open the possibility for individuals to shape the world around them through social practices, including those that involve making skilled adjustments to the world around them.

The projects discussed here engage in social practice under existing economic conditions and attempt to come up with solutions that will concretely benefit the everyday lives of residents. They act as gathering places and operate through an emphasis on processes of collective production—making things by hand in a workshop or studio requires time, effort and skill, it requires a space conducive to cooperation and conversation, in which residents share experiences of daily life. By grounding their approach in notions of practice, repair may be understood within these projects as a continuous process of testing out ideas and forms. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has proposed a form of reparative practice revolving around relational stances, in which knowledge is built around pleasure gleaned through affect, sincerity and constructive impulses rather than deconstruction. She asks, “What does knowledge *do*—the pursuit of it, the having and exposing of it, the receiving-again of knowledge of what one already knows? How, in short, is knowledge performative, and how best does one move among its causes and effects?”¹¹⁵ Seth Moglen has also discussed reparative practices by black modernist authors who responded to racial inequality through practices of mourning and melancholia. Freud wrote that one response to loss was that of mourning, which involves the subject gradually severing ties with the lost object, coming to terms with that loss, and once again being able to invest psychic energies in other objects. In contrast, melancholia involves loss of the object and subsequent ambivalence followed by regression of the libido into the ego, causing feelings of self-hatred. Melancholia can occur for a much longer time (perhaps indefinitely), and results in the subject’s inability to sustain loving interactions with the world. Moglen views melancholia as associated with apathy and political despair, while mourning can lead to political hope as individuals collectively deal with loss by actively resisting the structures contributing to their oppression. He names Langston Hughes as an example who connected his poetics with politics and sought to critique power structures of white oppression in both his writing and his activism—he identified as a communist in the 1930s and was affiliated with organizations focused on racial politics such as the League of Struggle for

¹¹⁴ Loïc Wacquant, “For a Sociology of Flesh and Blood,” *Qualitative Sociology* 38.1 (2015): p. 4.

¹¹⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 124.

Negro Rights and the National Negro Congress. Moglen describes the act of mourning in his work as fused with his interests in revolutionary struggle: “Revolution is imagined here as a process of retrieving that which has been plundered, of enabling the exploited to realize capacities in themselves that have been denied and disappointed.”¹¹⁶

In this quote, it is worth noting the link between revolutionary struggle and retrieval—an important connection that introduces the concept of reparations into the frame of this discussion as a form of practice that directly critiques the reproduction of inequality through existing social structures. Recently, numerous critics and scholars have called for reparations in order to address the trauma and inequality produced by slavery in the United States. Wacquant points to the white dependence on black labor in the early twentieth century, connecting this with mass incarceration in the second half of the century as a means of further control and separation:

Soon the black ghetto, converted into an instrument of naked exclusion by the concurrent retrenchment of wage labour and social protection, and further destabilized by the increasing penetration of the penal arm of the state, became bound to the jail and prison system by a triple relationship of functional equivalency, structural homology and cultural syncretism, such that they now constitute a single *carceral continuum* which entraps a redundant population of younger black men (and increasingly women) who circulate in closed circuit between its two poles in a self-perpetuating cycle of social and legal marginality with devastating personal and social consequences.¹¹⁷

The historical roots that produced current racial inequalities are discussed in Ta-Nehisi Coates’ essay “The Case for Reparations,” in which he focuses on federal housing policies and how they allowed whites to accumulate wealth over generations, while blacks were prevented from doing this through explicit and implicit laws and policies—redlining, restrictive covenants, blockbusting and in many cities, bombings. Coates writes that “in Chicago and across the country, whites looking to achieve the American dream could rely on a legitimate credit system backed by the government. Blacks were herded into the sights of unscrupulous lenders who took them for money and for sport.”¹¹⁸ Blacks were systematically denied loans or insurance through redlining policies that deemed black neighborhoods undesirable or hazardous,

¹¹⁶ Seth Moglen, *Mourning Modernity: Literary Modernism and the Injuries of American Capitalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 74.

¹¹⁷ Loïc Wacquant, “From Slavery to Mass Incarceration,” *New Left Review* 13 (2002). <https://newleftreview.org/II/13/loic-wacquant-from-slavery-to-mass-incarceration>.

¹¹⁸ Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *The Atlantic*, June 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>.

further preventing the possibility of creating wealth, and were only able to purchase homes through exploitative contracts. Houston's Third Ward, Chicago's South Side and Los Angeles' Watts were all within red zones on maps put out by the Home Owners Loan Corporation, a federal program created in 1933 under the New Deal that along with the Federal Housing Administration, was responsible for subsidizing white homeowners and insuring mortgages in the suburbs, thereby magnifying patterns of white flight from city centers and leading to the acceleration of white wealth accumulation. Coates connects these policies to the more recent foreclosure crisis, pointing out that "Black home buyers—even after controlling for factors like creditworthiness—were still more likely than white home buyers to be steered toward subprime loans." Banks were accused of directing black customers towards predatory loans, which as Coates points out, was a form of reified racism: "affidavits found loan officers referring to their black customers as "mud people" and to their subprime products as "ghetto loans."¹¹⁹ Bank of America and Wells Fargo were later fined by the Justice Department for hundreds of millions of dollars.

Coates believes that reparations would initiate a crucial public debate: "Perhaps the number is so large that it can't be imagined, let alone calculated and dispensed. But I believe that wrestling publicly with these questions matters as much as—if not more than—the specific answers that might be produced."¹²⁰ This is a notable statement in light of the tension between symbolic gestures versus practical actions that has encompassed all of the projects in this chapter (and in this dissertation). Coates' statement gives weight to Ortner's notion that symbols perform work. With this in mind, it is worth paying close attention to how symbolic power functions in practice. Coates mentions several historical examples of resistance in his essay, including the Contract Buyers League, a group of black homeowners in Chicago who joined together to fight unfair contract sales. Denied mortgages from banks, blacks were forced to buy mortgages from contract sellers at exorbitant prices, often being overcharged for homes. They didn't own the home until they had made all of the payments to the contract seller, and didn't earn equity in the mean time, as with a conventional mortgage. Thousands of contract holders formed the League during the 1960s, aided by Jack Macnamara, a Jesuit who had been trained by an affiliate of Saul Alinsky's in Chicago. Macnamara followed Alinsky's rules of community organizing, including the

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

notions that “the people...know better what their situation is than anyone,” and “the people have to be involved in solving their own problems.”¹²¹ Some of the group’s tactics involved visiting the suburbs where white contract sellers lived and going door to door to inform their neighbors about what they were doing—hoping to shame and embarrass them. They also engaged in collective actions such as a payment strike in 1969, which resulted in 105 out of 552 families being able to renegotiate the terms of their contract (hundreds of other families were forced to leave the neighborhood).¹²² And in 1968, they filed a lawsuit against contract sellers, accusing them of unfair profit-making practices. Although they lost the lawsuit, Coates views these actions as setting a precedent for reparations: “They wanted the crime’s executors declared to be offensive to society. And they wanted restitution for the great injury brought upon them by said offenders. In 1968, Clyde Ross and the Contract Buyers League were no longer simply seeking the protection of the law. They were seeking reparations.”¹²³ Following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. and widespread rioting in the mid-1960s, the tide turned towards a more conciliatory approach: a 1968 editorial in the *Sun-Times* argued that contract sellers should renegotiate terms with the Contract Buyers League because it would “encourage black capitalism, home ownership and economic self-sufficiency in black communities.”¹²⁴ As with the debate that emerged around Soul City, black radical activism and the concept of reparations were suppressed through compromise, which was sold as a way to produce black self-sufficiency—but which originated in white self interest.

Reparations relate to the concept of reparative practice, and to the material act of repair discussed in this chapter in relation to socially engaged art. For Project Row Houses, a Community Land Trust is viewed as a way to redress historical inequalities and make it easier for Third Ward residents to buy a home, while artist residencies focus on black activism and culture in the community and their importance in addressing historical trauma. In Watts House Project, home repairs took on a mainly cosmetic form. While homeowners received minor improvements, the projects’ practice was not necessarily reparative—while there were resource-sharing relationships that emerged through the project, it also exacerbated tensions between neighbors and existing community organizations. In Dorchester Projects, the concept of

¹²¹ Beryl Satter, *Family Properties: Race, Real Estate, and the Exploitation of Black Urban America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009), p. 369.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ Coates.

¹²⁴ “End Home-Contract Gouge,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, November 23, 1968.

reparations further complicates Gates' trickster role, perhaps adding more weight to Moten's argument about corporate impurities and the bounties of mercantile capitalism—as the accumulation of black wealth becomes a more believably subversive practice that distinguishes Gates' work from that of other developers and creative entrepreneurs.

House art projects bring up larger questions about the concept of repair as it relates to hope and the resolution of conflict, and the seeming naivety this suggests—especially during a time when it is hard to have any political hope at all, and when economic neoliberalism and white privilege continue to reproduce current systems of inequality. Yet it is worth noting the attempts that have been made by artists to engage in practices that stand outside the desire to extract profit, and that act in a manner that is focused on supporting existing cultural practices, or resisting displacement—and crucially, noticing when and why these projects are successful, as well as why they fail. The complications and grey zones inherent within these types of projects point to the complications of practice that exist outside the zone of aesthetic autonomy. Repair as it has been framed in community-based house art projects may be understood as situated along a spectrum. On one end are the quick design-based fixes that seek to provide aesthetic improvements to neighborhoods and that do not involve addressing larger structural issues or histories, often reproducing existing systematic tensions. On the other end are ongoing reparative practices initiated by artists and community organizers that allow for more complicated, open-ended questions to be proposed and investigated, and in which the possibility of something different from redevelopment-as-usual emerges. In thinking about repair, Rebecca Solnit's writing about 'hope in the dark,' is noteworthy, as an approach that offers "broad perspectives with specific possibilities, ones that invite or demand that we act," and that offers "an account of complexities and uncertainties, with openings."¹²⁵ To work from this kind of reparative mindset might mean adopting a certain amount of 'hope in the dark.' The works discussed in this chapter were initiated by artists who insisted upon action, and grasped onto the openings they could find to do so. Despite the complexities, contradictions and occasional failures that emerged through the practices outlined within these projects, they may be seen as embodying this concept of 'hope in the dark' by engaging in reparative practice—in a moment that for

¹²⁵ Rebecca Solnit, "Hope is an embrace of the unknown," *The Guardian*, July 15, 2016.

many Americans is characterized by political and economic despair. This is a perspective that is visible in recent art and cultural theory that acknowledges melancholia and the weight of the present, but sees the only option for dealing with it as being through more active forms of mourning—through building alternative spaces and social networks, and grasping onto even the most tentative of contradictions in the belief that they might lead somewhere.

Chapter Two — Houses on the Move: Public Art, Aesthetic Value and Social Mobility in Detroit

In downtown Detroit, a single story white house with an attached garage sits in front of a sky blue wall next to the Museum of Contemporary Art, surrounded by a green lawn. What appears to be a typical ranch-style suburban home is in fact not a living space, but a public art work. Mobile Homestead is a replica of Mike Kelley's childhood home in the suburb of Westland, Michigan, twenty-four miles west of the museum. Kelley, who grew up in Westland and moved to Los Angeles in 1976, wanted the homestead to be used as a community art space, and since it opened in 2013, it has hosted needle exchanges, quilting bees, alcoholics anonymous meetings, art exhibitions, and other programs and events. On one level, Mobile Homestead appears to be an examination of personal history and memory, and it was the last project Kelley worked on before committing suicide in January 2012. While it may be viewed as an intensely personal project, it also bears witness to the recent redevelopment of Detroit, bringing up questions about public space, gentrification and race in a city that has become known for its many abandoned houses, as well as the recent growth of a creative class attracted to cheap real estate.

In this chapter, I explore the forms of mobility that the project references or employs, and argue that the homestead's material and formal appearance, and community uses, connect the theme of mobility to Detroit's history of economic inequality, racial segregation and contemporary revitalization efforts. During various community outreach initiatives, the homestead has physically travelled the streets of Detroit, passing by flourishing suburbs, blocks that are decaying or abandoned, and neighborhoods that are in the process of revitalization. Clearly related to spatial difference, mobility is also suggested in the design of the homestead which has the "normal" above ground features of a suburban house, but is also supplied with two hatches that lead down to secret basement and subbasement spaces excavated directly under the home. Those who are allowed to enter must climb down a ladder, literally moving underground into spaces envisioned by Kelley as being reserved for "private rites of an aesthetic nature."¹

¹ Mike Kelley, "Mobile Homestead," *Whitney Biennial 2012*, edited by Elisabeth Sussman and Jay Sanders (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2012), p. 161.

I begin by situating Mobile Homestead within the broader context of Kelley's art practice, focusing on his interest in examining forms of aesthetic and institutional legitimation and framing. This theme was explored in depth in his 1995 work *Educational Complex*, in which the first image of his childhood home appeared (along with incomplete models of all the schools he attended). I look at Mobile Homestead as an extension of Kelley's investigation of institutions and their power to grant legitimacy to practices that might otherwise remain underground, and I relate this to his interest in architecture as well as his ambivalence towards public art. I also look at it as a vehicle for gestures of social repair, and explore its documentation of neighborhoods in Detroit in several films made by Kelley. Mobile Homestead was completed and opened at MOCAD in 2013, the same year that Detroit went bankrupt. Published images of the city at that time, and in the period following the 2008 recession, often fixate on its abandonment from a romantic perspective. Photographers traveled from all over the world to capture images of deserted factories or nature reclaiming urban spaces. Artists began to move to Detroit in increasing numbers, leading some to refer to the city as the new Brooklyn or Berlin.² Many were attracted by the incredibly cheap houses that were for sale, and some began to experiment with forms of home improvement or neighborhood development on a small scale. Some critics portrayed these artists as pioneers, emphasizing their bravery and resourcefulness. This raises questions about the connection between pioneering and colonization—especially given the fact that the types of artisanal practice that characterized early modern pioneer life have been reinvented by entrepreneurial hipsters in some Detroit neighborhoods, which have simultaneously become whiter and less affordable.

The homestead is situated in a city that was profoundly shaped by mobility in the form of the automobile industry, and by Henry Ford, in the early twentieth century. The building of suburbs was part of an escape from the city that Ford himself advocated for. Kelley's replicated home might be interpreted, then, as a symbol of white flight, a form of upward mobility consisting of movements of white middle class people to the suburbs during the 1960s to escape what was perceived as racial violence, crime and disorder, spurred by the Detroit riot of 1967. The homestead, as a symbol of suburbia, looks out of place

² See Martina Guzmán, "The Creative Class: How Detroit and Berlin Have Drawn Revitalizing Artists," WNYC, October 8, 2011, <https://www.wnyc.org/story/165726-creative-class-how-detroit-and-berlin-have-drawn-revitalizing-artists/>; Kathy Hughes, "Is Detroit the new Brooklyn?" KPBS, July 7, 2011, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/need-to-know/the-daily-need/is-detroit-the-new-brooklyn/10290/>.

in its downtown location, as if it had dropped down out of the sky. As a simulacrum of private property, it also contrasts with the liberal ideal of democratic public space represented by the museum next door. This takes on added significance in Detroit's downtown, where the failure of city services and the rise of private development is highly visible—and MOCAD's presence must be looked at in relation to the numerous condos and new businesses that have recently emerged in the area. Speaking in Detroit in 2015 (on a panel titled 'Super-Star Entrepreneurs: High-Potential Revitalization') Richard Florida emphasized the importance of creativity in revitalizing the city, drawing upon his well-known and frequently critiqued concept of creative-class led urban development.³ As Peter Moskowitz points out, however, while "Downtown and Midtown Detroit are the crown jewels of Florida-led new-age urban revitalization models," the rest of the city has not fared as well, and continues to face growing inequality and a shrinking population.⁴

Mobility is a key issue in Detroit, as are the various ways in which mobility may be obstructed. This was apparent to me when I visited the city in 2017. While there, a debate that had taken place repeatedly over the past decade emerged once again. I was staying in the Indian Village neighborhood, which seemed to be doing better than other parts of the city even though there were abandoned houses on many of the nearby blocks. A few miles to the east was the wealthy, almost exclusively white suburb of Grosse Pointe. The suburb had tried repeatedly to block off access from the west by closing some of the roads and occasionally erecting makeshift barriers on the busiest streets leading into the neighborhood using a variety of methods: farmer's markets in the street, giant planter pots, a snow bank and Christmas trees in the winter.⁵ The differences between Grosse Pointe and Detroit are visible when looking at Google Maps: in an aerial view, Detroit looks much greener because of the missing houses and vacant lots, while Grosse Pointe looks like a typical suburban area with nice homes and pools in many of the backyards. Schools in the neighboring areas are the most economically segregated in the US, according to

³ Create: Detroit, event website, 2015. Accessed March 13, 2019.

⁴ Peter Moskowitz, *How to Kill a City: Gentrification, Inequality, and the Fight for the Neighborhood* (New York: Nation Books, 2018), p. 77.

⁵ See Rebecca Golden, "Grosse Pointe Park Fortifies Detroit Border with Massive Pots," *Curbed Detroit*, July 17, 2015, <https://detroit.curbed.com/2015/7/17/9939494/grosse-pointe-park-barrier-planters>.

a 2016 report.⁶ The divide between these two neighborhoods may be seen as a microcosm of inequality in the United States: extreme wealth is often right next door to crushing poverty. It is not surprising that redlining maps from the 1930s characterized Grosse Pointe as a good investment, marked as ‘best’, with the neighborhood immediately to the west labeled as ‘definitely declining,’ and a little further to the west, expanses of red marked as ‘hazardous.’⁷ As I discussed in chapter one, racist housing policies in the twentieth century prevented black people from investing in property and accumulating wealth, at the same time that white families received loans and insurance to buy houses and move to the suburbs. These policies played a major role in shaping the geography of Detroit, influencing its current patterns of mobility and access to resources. The fact that one street acts as the dividing line between wealth and poverty demonstrates the reality of upward mobility for upper and middle class whites, and the relative immobility of blacks and low-income people, for many of whom owning a white ranch-style suburban home would be an unattainable fantasy.

The concept of “value in motion” was used by Marx to describe the mobile nature of capital, and to acknowledge its existence as a process rather than a thing. David Harvey has discussed this definition and has connected it to urban development and gentrification, in which certain neighborhoods become temporary destinations for capital—stopping points along the route of speculation and investment.⁸ In the case of Detroit, as in other cities, this has meant that some neighborhoods have seen a rapid influx of money, people and ideas, while others remain more defined by social immobility (literally the case in some areas of the city where public bus services were discontinued or cut back following the recession).⁹ The ebbs and flows of capital in Detroit may be seen as movements tied to the city’s history, including the role played by the automobile industry, and patterns of white flight and racial segregation that shaped its urban spaces. Looking at Mobile Homestead in relation to the concept of value in motion is a way of

⁶ Shawn D. Lewis, “Detroit, G.P. schools’ economic divide listed as worst,” *Detroit News*, August 22, 2016, <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/detroit-city/2016/08/22/detroit-grosse-pointe-schools-economic-divide/89131386/>.

⁷ “Detroit Redlining Map, 1939,” *Detroitography*, <https://detroitography.com/2014/12/10/detroit-redlining-map-1939/>, accessed May 31, 2018.

⁸ David Harvey, “Marx’s Refusal of the Labour Theory of Value,” *Reading Marx’s Capital with David Harvey*, <http://davidharvey.org/2018/03/marxs-refusal-of-the-labour-theory-of-value-by-david-harvey/>, accessed June 9, 2018.

⁹ Quinn Klinefelter, “Commuters Suffer As Detroit Cuts Bus Service,” *NPR*, March 8, 2012, <https://www.npr.org/2012/03/08/148225070/commuters-suffer-as-detroit-cuts-bus-service>.

examining both social and aesthetic mobility. In terms of social mobility, I analyze the project's attempts to provide useful social services in a city that lacks them, due to the uneven ways in which value has circulated through its public spheres. I also situate the project within the context of Kelley's work. Aesthetic capital may also be seen as a process rather than a thing, and I examine how Mobile Homestead, and Kelley's work more broadly, correspond with the concept of value in motion, in which degraded cultural objects and practices are moved between aesthetic categories.

During the same period of time when Detroit experienced intense decline and abandonment, socially engaged art practices gained increasing visibility and legitimacy within museums. This is not a coincidence, but instead, may be understood as an attempt by cultural institutions to deal with the effects of intensified austerity measures in post-industrial cities, including increasing racial segregation and economic disparity. Many major museums now collect and exhibit work by social practice artists, or regularly incorporate forms of community outreach into their education departments, while others have established satellite institutions or community projects in neighborhoods viewed as marginalized or underserved. Mobile Homestead may be seen as part of this movement, and it was described to me by numerous museum staff as MOCAD's social practice initiative. I have discussed the increasing embrace of socially engaged art by institutions, including the Nasher Sculpture Center and its support of Translation in Dallas, and the relationship between MOCA and the Watts House Project in Los Angeles. These relationships may also be understood as related to mobility, and to explore this connection I examine the homestead's longest journey: to Los Angeles in 2014, for the Mike Kelley retrospective at MOCA. While there, it hosted several community art exhibitions, including artwork produced at a Skid Row homeless shelter. The metaphor of mobility became visible in a different way, as work made by non-artists was granted aesthetic legitimacy through its association with a famous artist and an established institution—becoming legible within the narrative of socially engaged art. Looking at Mobile Homestead and its institutional framing in both Detroit and Los Angeles provokes broader questions about museums and their embrace of socially engaged art: does this signal a commitment to cultural democratization and a willingness to interrogate institutional structures and hierarchies? Can it be viewed as a radical redistribution of resources and cultural capital? Or does this gesture of embrace by museums stand in for, and thereby foreclose, more radical forms of self-criticism and community engagement—by obscuring

the role of museums in exacerbating gentrification, or appropriating the practices of non-professional artists? And, returning to mobility, how can Mobile Homestead help us trace the movement of cultural forms between different sites and contexts, as they transform in meaning and value?

Homes and institutions

In the 1990s, Kelley and his friend Cary Loren, an artist and musician, came up with the idea of purchasing property to create an artist's refuge in Detroit.¹⁰ Kelley and Loren had collaborated on numerous projects together, including the band Destroy All Monsters, which also included Jim Shaw and other artists. Kelley thought about trying to buy his childhood home in Westland to use for this purpose, and fantasized about digging a secret network of tunnels underground. He wrote:

Mobile Homestead grew out of my initial desire to buy the actual house that I was raised in. The plan was to empty the house of furnishings and turn it into a neighborhood art gallery while, at the same time, I would secretly dig an underground tunnel system that would, in a haphazard manner, weave under the adjacent properties. This plan was unworkable for a number of reasons, the foremost being that the current owner of the house does not wish to move at this time, and the tunneling activity would be dangerous and illegal. In this initial version of the project there was a very direct clash between the public nature of the house-turned-community center versus the antisocial activity of my secret burrowing into other peoples' private space.¹¹

Kelley tried numerous times to buy the house from its owner, John Dobozy, a 78-year old retired barber who has lived there for thirty years, and who knew Kelley's parents from attending the same Catholic church.¹² According to Loren, whenever Kelley visited Detroit "we'd stop by his house and he'd go up there with a checkbook and try to buy it from the owner, who never wanted to sell."¹³ Since Dobozy wasn't interested in selling the home, Kelley decided to build a replica instead. He received funding from Artangel in London for the project, and MOCAD expressed an interest in partnering with him when it opened in 2006.¹⁴ Artangel is known for funding large-scale, site-specific public art works, including Jeremy Deller's *The Battle of Orgreave* and Rachel Whiteread's *House*. It was established in 1985, with

¹⁰ M.H. Miller, "Mike Kelley's Underground Afterlife," *New York Times Magazine*, March 8, 2017.

¹¹ "Mike Kelley's Mobile Homestead," booklet produced by MOCAD and the Mike Kelley Foundation, available at <http://mocatdetroit.org/mobile-homestead/>, accessed May 31, 2018.

¹² Julie Hinds, "Westland Home is a Work of Art," *Detroit Free Press*, May 5, 2013.

¹³ Cary Loren, quoted in M.H. Miller, "Mike Kelley's Underground Afterlife."

¹⁴ Mobile Homestead was funded by Artangel's 'International Circle,' which includes wealth investors, Goldman Sachs bankers, private equity financiers and property developers. See "Artangel International Circle," Artangel website, accessed March 13, 2019, https://www.artangel.org.uk/be_an_angel/thank-you/#international-circle.

the aim of compensating for funding cuts to the arts under the Thatcher government, and initially relied upon donations from private individuals and corporations. Charlotte Gould has written about the organization in the context of shifting models of patronage for the arts in the 1980s, and notes an increasing reliance on private sponsorship during this time. In this context, she writes that Artangel's aims "were to respond to new circumstances, to make up for lost resources, to champion contemporary practices when the Tory government was focusing its efforts on heritage and when the tabloids were playing the philistine card by ridiculing contemporary works, as well as to invent a new funding model for a new era."¹⁵ This shift in funding, and an increasing reliance on corporate funding, is worthy of attention considering that Artangel-funded projects most often take place in public, urban spaces. Many of the same individuals who have donated money to the organization have been involved in real estate speculation or massive urban redevelopment projects (for example, Poju Zabłudowicz, who owns millions of square feet of real estate, including 40% of the land in downtown Las Vegas). Artangel's beginnings, and its search for new models of funding to compensate for neoliberal cutbacks, also draws parallels with the rise of socially engaged art practices in the 1980s, which often involved artists offering useful public services once provided by the state.

In Detroit, Kelley and the Artangel team spent a month measuring and taking photos of the original house, and then began to build the replica. It was designed in two sections: a foundation and garage section that stays in one place, and then a detachable section that can be transported. Once the mobile portion of the structure was completed, Kelley took it on a journey from the museum site to its original location in Westland, and back again, filming the homestead's journey and interviewing residents and small business owners along the way. Kelley committed suicide shortly after completing the film, and the homestead opened to the public after his death, in 2013.

Mobile Homestead might be considered in relation to the tradition of artist's houses that commemorate and preserve the living spaces of important individuals, from Vincent van Gogh, to Frida Kahlo, to Cézanne's studio in Aix-en-Provence. While the homestead may resemble these memorials from the outside, the major difference was that Kelley did not want the space to exhibit his own work, nor

¹⁵ Charlotte Gould, *Artangel and Financing British Art: Adapting to Social and Economic Change* (New York: Routledge: 2019), p. 13.

did he want it to be seen as a tribute to himself—which would prove to be difficult to avoid, considering his stature in the art world. Instead, his intention was to create space for a neighborhood art gallery. He expressed an ambivalence towards public art, referring to it as “a pleasure that is forced upon a public that, in most cases, finds no pleasure in it.”¹⁶ Yet, in creating Mobile Homestead, he provided a space for the public that could theoretically be programmed according to their desires—although in practice, this role has been performed by curators, not the public. The design of the homestead reflects its somewhat split personality. This includes the divide between the immobile foundation and the mobile structure, as well as the divide between the public, above-ground portion of the homestead and the ‘secret lair’ underground. Kelley wanted the homestead to be useful to the public, but he also wanted to create a space for private, anti-social uses, and in the project’s formal structure, these intentions become dichotomized. While the initial idea was to dig tunnels beneath his original childhood home, the project at MOCAD involved digging a basement beneath the homestead, which was reserved by the artist for “private rites of an aesthetic nature.”¹⁷ Only close friends of Kelley’s are allowed into the basement, including Loren and Shaw, and Loren has described the space as “a confusion of claustrophobic tunnels, dead ends and wrong turns—windowless and doorless chambers accessible only by submarine ladders and hatches two stories deep.”¹⁸

This was not the first time that Kelley had depicted his childhood home. He included a replica of it in *Educational Complex*, a 1995 work that also included models of all of the schools he had attended throughout his lifetime, from kindergarten all the way to CalArts. The home sits in front of the other buildings, all painted a ghostly white. The models were constructed according to his memory of the spaces. He omitted parts of the buildings that he had forgotten and combined them together, forming a massive institution that resembled modernist utopian architecture. In particular, Kelley noted parallels with Rudolf Steiner’s 1913 Goetheanum near Bern, Switzerland, which housed the Anthroposophical Society and was designed as a Gesamtkunstwerk: “an architectural complex that functioned as a

¹⁶ Randy Kennedy, “This Ranch in Detroit Is Not for Sale. It’s Art,” *New York Times*, April 16, 2013.

¹⁷ Mike Kelley, quoted in “Mike Kelley’s Mobile Homestead,” booklet produced by MOCAD and the Mike Kelley Foundation.

¹⁸ Cary Loren, “Mobile Homestead sublevel communiqué #1,” Book Beat website, <http://www.thebookbeat.com/backroom/2013/07/13/mobile-homestead-communique-1/>, accessed May 31, 2018.

macrocosm mirroring the aesthetic laws of the individual artistic productions held within it.”¹⁹ Kelley was interested in examining associations between memory, repression and trauma through the work, and he explored these associations in relation to the moral panic surrounding sexual abuse and satanic worship that gripped the public beginning in the 1980s, driven by the McMartin daycare sexual abuse scandal.²⁰ This included the idea that the absence of memory could be a sign of repressed trauma. Since Kelley couldn’t remember the details of most of the institutions he had spent time in, his suggestion was that these spaces were potential sites of trauma. As with *Mobile Homestead*, Kelley created a sub-level of *Educational Complex*, which represented the basement of CalArts. He had almost no memory of this space, and according to the work’s logic, “The sublevel must have been an incredibly torturous arena to engender such a wide blanket of forgetfulness.”²¹ A mattress was placed on the floor underneath the model, displayed on a table, to allow viewers to look up at the sublevel through an invisible floor. In the context of Kelley’s work, it is worth considering movements between the unconscious and conscious mind, which relate to his interest in repressed memories and the domestic space of the home. He described reading Gaston Bachelard’s *Poetics of Space* and being struck by the parallels between domesticity and perversion: “I found that many of the architectural spaces he defines as homey and intimate were also sites associated with the horrific. The nesting space of the cubbyhole becomes the ominous shuttered room of the inbred sibling, Dad’s bottom-drawer porn collection, or Mom’s enema tool cabinet.”²²

As John Miller notes, Kelley’s interest in examining institutions was provoked in part by his success as an artist in the 1990s (he had recently had a retrospective at the Whitney), and may be seen as a self-reflexive investigation into how this had been made possible through education. In his discussion of *Educational Complex*, Miller looks at the work through an Althusserian lens, seeing it as an attempt to examine how subjects are interpellated by certain ideological apparatuses, including educational

¹⁹ John C. Welchman, *Mike Kelley: Minor Histories — Statements, Conversations, Proposals* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004), p. 328.

²⁰ One example is the McMartin daycare sexual abuse case in the 1980s, when employees were accused of sodomy, rape, devil worship and ritual sacrifice. Some of these acts allegedly took place in secret tunnels underneath the daycare. After six years of trials, none of the employees were convicted, and all charges were dropped. See Robert Reinhold, “The Longest Trial - A Post-Mortem; Collapse of Child-Abuse Case: So Much Agony for So Little,” *New York Times*, January 24, 1990.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 322.

institutions, and how this functions in the reproduction of social hierarchies. Kelley came to see his education as a kind of interpellation dictated by certain aesthetic paradigms, even suggesting melodramatically that “My education must have been a form of mental abuse, of brainwashing.”²³ Miller writes that CalArts was the space in which he learned that making “a legitimated artwork requires reproduction of the submission to the rules of the established order.”²⁴

Kelley maintained an interest in how indoctrination and legitimation worked within institutions throughout his career, and *Educational Complex* was one of the first projects of his that explored these ideas in depth, and looked at the relationship between identity and social structures. Kelley grew up in a working class family—his father was in charge of maintenance for a public school system, and his mother was a cook in the executive dining room at Ford Motor Company. Like his father, he spent time working as a janitor, and revisited aspects of this identity in later performative works. Miller suggests that beginning in the 1990s, Kelley’s work may be seen as an attempt by the artist to deal with his commercial and critical success, and figure out how his working class identity had been transformed. Issues related to race also played a role in Kelley’s work, including the influence of the White Panther Party and a focus on the banality of white suburban culture. However, these explorations figure less prominently in his own explorations of identity. In relation to considerations of identity, it is worth noting the prominent place of his childhood home in the architectural model—it sits in front of the other educational institutions as a kind of welcome center, suggesting that this was where ideological and social structures first began to shape him. Arranged in this way, the suburban home also appears to be spatially positioned as a gateway to the other institutions, opening the door to further educational pursuits and suggesting the social mobility that was within reach of many white, working class families at the time.

Visiting Mobile Homestead

When I visited the homestead in 2017, there was an exhibition inside titled *Home*, featuring work by the Detroit Society of Women Painters and Sculptors. The group formed in 1903, making it one of the oldest self-sustaining women’s art organizations in the United States. It was founded by Lillian Burk

²³ John Miller, *Educational Complex* (London: Afterall Books, 2015), p. 31.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

Meeser, who hosted salons in her home along with other women artists who would critique each other's work. The group was once characterized by the affiliation of its members with professional societies and art academies, including Meeser, who studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, the Art Students League in New York, and the Worcester Art Museum in Massachusetts. Now, the work produced by DSWPS looks very different from the 'professional' art that gets shown in major museums, and an interest in professionalism and technical proficiency could be seen as the precise reason for this distinction. The paintings on display inside the homestead were representational, concerned with mundane subject matter, and not connected to any broader conceptual interest in art. They would never be exhibited inside MOCAD on their own. Some of the works had ribbons pinned to the frames, including a still life that had been awarded a first place prize. It appeared amateurish and hobbyist, and was therefore completely in line with Kelley's interest in degraded aesthetic practices. The works also draw parallels with Jim Shaw's collection of thrift store paintings, many of which look like somewhat offbeat Norman Rockwells or Thomas Kinkades. This was evident in one painting in particular, which had a particularly Kelley-esque quality to it: a lurid green house covered in fluffy white snow, decorated with Christmas wreaths that looked strangely like faces peering out of the windows, and surrounded by barren trees with jagged branches.

The DSWPS exhibition corresponds with Kelley's interest in marginal figures, and highlights the emphasis on deprofessionalization in contemporary art. While these works would most likely not be shown in the main space of MOCAD, the aesthetic they are associated with has been given a new life in the context of another artist's project. This draws parallels with my discussion of reclamation in relation to Project Row Houses, in which the act of reclaiming was focused on abandoned homes that were fixed up and turned into art spaces. Like Project Row Houses, Mobile Homestead hosts both artists from the community who receive little recognition for their work, and artists who are consciously affiliated with socially engaged art. Both projects also feature a similar split between inside and outside—maintaining the external features of homes, but looking like art galleries inside. Walking inside the homestead was like walking inside one of the row houses: the space looked bare and institutional rather than home-like. Kelley has discussed the interior of his original home, saying that "My parents' house was decorated in a fake early-American style. I grew up, basically, in a stage set that symbolized some invented pre-modern

idyllic time.”²⁵ The homestead is now literally a kind of stage set, absent of personal and familial associations, and designed to host a range of productions by others. One might be able to guess which rooms were originally the living room, kitchen or bedrooms, but overall the interior design exemplifies an institutional aesthetic associated with public use: white walls, fluorescent lighting, a water fountain, fire alarms.

During one exhibition, however, the interior of the homestead was transformed into a different home—artist Carlos Rolón’s childhood home in South Side, Chicago in the 1970s. His exhibition inside the homestead is worth noting for how it represented the collision of two different economic, ethnic and familial backgrounds: on the outside, white working-class suburbia, and on the inside, the living space of Rolón’s Puerto Rican family in Chicago. Rolón included interior design features such as shag carpeting, a beaded chandelier, and psychedelic looking wallpaper, recreating the lived space of his childhood. He also recreated the informal nail salon that his mother ran out of their home, and invited the public to visit the homestead and get their nails done over the course of the exhibition—fulfilling the emphasis within socially engaged art on offering services and reaching out to communities who are less likely to visit museums.

Amy Corle, MOCAD’s Curator of Education and Public Engagement, told me that the museum’s curators had tried to best align the programming of the homestead with what they thought Kelley would have been interested in. Suggestions have also come from Loren, Shaw, and other friends of Kelley. He didn’t leave behind a list of curatorial ideas (as Noah Davis did for the Underground Museum in Los Angeles before he died of cancer in 2015). According to Corle, the main priority was to show work in the homestead that would not be shown in the main museum space, and to focus whenever possible on local artists. She looks for clues in Kelley’s work, in his writing, and in comments he made to friends and colleagues. The DSWPS seemed like serendipity, she told me, because Kelley had mentioned the example of a ladies watercolor society as the kind of thing he wanted to see in the space, perhaps because it was similar to the kind of banal interior decoration of his childhood home.²⁶ In addition to looking for art to show in the homestead that matches Kelley’s stated and unstated interests, Corle programs other

²⁵ John C. Welchman, *On the Beyond: A Conversation between Mike Kelley, Jim Shaw, and John C. Welchman* (Wein; New York: Springer-Verlag, 2011), p. 43.

²⁶ Amy Corle interview, March 28, 2017.

community uses of the space. One of the very first events was a community garage sale (conveniently held inside the homestead's attached garage). The museum has promoted the homestead as a site that may be used for community meetings, and some groups have taken up the offer, including a children's philosophy club, a chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous, and a quilting circle. Museum programmers have also tried to use the space for community events that seem more directly aligned with forms typical of socially engaged art. When the homestead opened, one of the first exhibitions was Homestead Depot, which attempted to create an experimental gift economy. Another exhibition involved University of Michigan design students teaching youth from Brightmoor, a neighborhood in northwest Detroit, how to build and maintain 'utility tricycles,' and use them for a range of purposes, from recycling to transporting sound systems. One initiative involved exhibiting several little free libraries inside the homestead, and was accompanied by a panel discussion involving artists and community leaders who spoke about the decline of public services, including city libraries, and how to improve literacy in Detroit. In 2014, as part of this focus on literacy, the homestead toured various sites across the city, giving away free books. In its excursions to parts of the city that are lacking in resources, the mobility employed by the homestead as a public art project may be compared with art historical precedents such as Soviet agit-prop trains, which traveled the Russian countryside carrying books, political pamphlets and printing presses in the years following the revolution.

However, while it has made the occasional journey around the city, most of the events and programs described above actually take place within an immobile homestead—the space has become a kind of granny flat in MOCAD's back yard. The initial idea for the project was rooted in the concept of mobility working in two directions—going to the community and inviting the community in. However, according to Corle, this was more difficult to carry out in practice than was expected: “getting this thing apart is an ordeal. It's very expensive and it doesn't just pop off.”²⁷ This difficulty reflects an interesting tensions between Kelley's sophisticated conceptualization of the project as an artwork, and relatively limited understanding of how art functions, tactically and logistically, as a form of social engagement. Corle argues that the homestead maintains a mission separate from the museum, which is “to serve the

²⁷ Ibid.

community and do good,” and in programming the space, one of her main considerations is “what would the community like to see, what needs can we fill.”²⁸ She was conscious of how this approach might create divisions between whose work was shown in the homestead, and whose work was shown in MOCAD, and that it could potentially be difficult to find the right tone between inclusion and separation, telling me that “we don’t want to diminish artists who do show their work here, in any way.”²⁹ In her opinion, one of the projects that worked best was when the homestead was turned into a quilting studio, and quilters from around Detroit came and used the space. She pointed out that “It was a big tie-in with Mike Kelley, since quilts are in many of his works. And they were really serious artists in their own right, but not necessarily the kind of artists whose work you would show in the museum.”³⁰

Mobile Homestead has also hosted exhibitions that were explicitly aligned with radical politics. This includes an exhibition celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the Fifth Estate, an anarchist newspaper established in Detroit in 1965 that describes itself as “an anarchist, anti-capitalist, and anti-authoritarian, anti-profit project published cooperatively by a volunteer collective of friends and comrades.”³¹ The show featured cover art, editorial cartoons, archival photographs, posters, pamphlets and other items that explored the newspaper’s history, and was accompanied by a zine making workshop. Another exhibition, curated by Cary Loren and John Sinclair, celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the Detroit Artists Workshop, established in 1964 as “a totally cooperative organization designed and structured to draw upon the resources of every participating individual in order to perpetuate itself—and to promote community thinking on an artistic and personal level.”³² The exhibition featured a collection of political posters, photographs and buttons created by the cooperative. Sinclair was a poet and activist, and in addition to founding the Detroit Artists Workshop, he was the founder of the anti-racist White Panther Party. Both had an influence on Kelley in the 70s: “I was interested in hippie anarchist culture—in Detroit and Ann Arbor, that meant the White Panther Party. They put on concerts and poetry readings; they wrote

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Fifth Estate website, <https://www.fifthestate.org/about/>, accessed May 31, 2018.

³² Detroit Artists Workshop website, <http://www.detroitartistsworkshop.com/the-new-daw-website/>, accessed June 8, 2018.

manifestos about how *bad* capitalism was. I read John Sinclair’s writings, and I said to myself, these people are like me! I’m not crazy!”³³

What strikes me when contemplating the programs and exhibitions that take place at the homestead is that there are two noticeable tendencies, and these might be considered as fundamental features of socially engaged art: one relates to populism and an interest in the democratization of culture, and is characterized by the DSWPS exhibition and its representations of home, or the quilting circle get together. Through these practices, amateur artists, craft workers and the general public are brought into the fold of the art institution, which claims to extend its borders to make room for them. The second tendency has to do with an interest in radical or underground politics, and is characterized by exhibitions focused on the Fifth Estate and the Detroit Artists Workshop. Parallels with socially engaged art include an interest in collective organization and the reimagining of oppressive social structures.

During my tour of the homestead, the hatch doors leading underground were a major attraction to other visitors, and the fact that access was not permitted to the general public seemed to make the presence of this secret lair even more mysterious and alluring. Loren, one of the overseers of the space, has tried to keep the activities that take place underground secret, although he has posted a handful of photos on his blog. Some show small, dim rooms with posters on the wall, or instruments arranged in a cramped space, including one in which Jim Shaw sits in a corner, bathed in an eerie green light.³⁴ Spatially, the presence of this restricted underground level seemed to articulate the idea that artists are different from the rest of us—they have access to the private realm of the aesthetic, through a part of the psyche inaccessible to the general public. We are allowed to see the entrance to this realm, but we encounter it as a closed off space, separate from the bright light of above ground, everyday social practices. This was perplexing to me, since the concept of the homestead, and the work displayed inside it, seemed to suggest that everyone was, or could be, an artist. Instead, the spatial arrangement of the homestead suggests an allocated space in which amorphous or degraded art practices can be viewed through a framing device that grants institutional legitimacy.

³³ Mike Kelley, quoted in Tulsa Kinney, “Mike Kelley: Straight Outta Detroit,” *Artillery*, March 28, 2011, <https://artillerymag.com/mike-kelley-straight-outta-detroit/>.

³⁴ Cary Loren, “Mobile Homestead sublevel communiqué #1.”

Mobile Homestead's travels on film

I have looked at some examples of Mobile Homestead's programming, and focused on its mainly immobile presence at MOCAD, as the institution's designated space for art practices that are community-based or socially engaged. This has raised questions about aesthetic mobility, in relation to both the museum and Kelley's work. The individuals and groups who have been invited to make use of the homestead's space might be seen as indicative of the source material that Kelley drew from in making art—practices that are considered to be aesthetically degraded, either because of their banality, or their radicality. These ideas are further explored in a film trilogy made by Kelley to accompany Mobile Homestead, in which the homestead tours the city on a flatbed truck. The three films are: *Going West on Michigan Avenue from Downtown Detroit to Westland*, *Going East on Michigan Avenue from Westland to Downtown Detroit*, and *Mobile Homestead Christening Ceremony and Launch*. It is worth exploring these further, first because they elaborate on the idea of source material drawn upon by Kelley for his own work, and second, because they explore the notion of social mobility, or lack thereof, in Detroit.

In the first two films, the camera records its journey, and the viewer's perspective is from inside the homestead, as if we were looking out through one of its windows. In a few scenes, an image of the homestead is reflected back to the viewer through shop windows. One of the remarkable aspects of the films is how much one street changes, as the homestead travels from downtown to the suburbs. While Kelley is mostly absent from the film, his presence is felt in the places he chooses to stop, and the work references the acts of selection and framing that were important aspects of his art practice. We see Kelley's version of the city, a place that he expressed ambivalence towards, once saying that his work was "based on his rejection of Detroit, the declining automobile city where he was born."³⁵ There is a definite beginning and end referenced within the film, and the homestead represents both: the space of his childhood, and the last project he worked on before his death. Noting this, Jim Shaw referred to the homestead as Kelley's tomb.³⁶ Along the way, the places where he chooses to stop draw parallels with his art practice. Some may be seen as the seedy underbelly of the city: including a strip club, cheap motel, and the headquarters of a motorcycle gang. Others demonstrate utter banality, or conceal bizarre inner

³⁵ David Marsh, "Mike Kelley and Detroit," in *Catholic Tastes*, edited by Elisabeth Sussman (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993), p. 39.

³⁶ Cary Loren, "Mobile Homestead sublevel communiqué #1."

workings behind an exterior of normality. One of the most fascinating aspects of the two films is that they allow viewers the opportunity to look inside buildings that one might not visit in person. Private spaces, including homes, also become publicly accessible. This satisfies the desire of those of us who, every once in a while, wish for the front facade of a house to dissolve so that we could see inside. A similar desire was visible in Dan Graham's *Alteration to a Suburban House* (1978), a model of a home in which the facade is replaced by glass, blurring the distinction between the private space of the family and the public space of the street. In the *Going West* and *Going East* films, Mobile Homestead carries out a journey that explores public and private spaces in the city. The inhabitants of these spaces give us a glimpse inside their private world, and offer a wide range of stories about Detroit's ongoing transformation. There are noteworthy parallels with Dziga Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929), which focused on daily life in a number of different Soviet cities. Like other 'cine-race' films by Vertov, the scenes are fast moving and make use of the systems of transport that characterized the modern city—including shots from a moving train and the back of a truck.

Man With a Movie Camera is often described as a self-reflexive approach to representing the city,³⁷ since we see urban space as selected, shot and edited by Vertov. Mobile Homestead's film trilogy is a similarly self-reflexive portrayal of Detroit. In visiting each of these sites, we learn more about Kelley's interests, but we also learn about the city that shaped his work, and its influences on him, however much he claimed to have rejected it. We pass by the MGM Grand Casino, a White Castle, the Gaelic League clubhouse of Detroit, a deli called Mike's Famous Ham Place, a Puerto Rican pentecostal church, and Green Brain Comics. In each of these places, Kelley talks to owners, managers or employees about their business and about how the city or neighborhood has changed. Moving further westward, we are now in Dearborn, which since the 1970s has become home to one of the largest middle eastern communities in the US. The owner of a Tae Kwon Do gym speaks about moving to Dearborn from Lebanon, and how he has accommodated women who wear headscarves in his classes. The homestead passes by the Ford World Headquarters, where the administrative center of the company is located, and the Pine Grove Mobile Home Park in Inkster, a mostly white, working-class suburb. Next to the Mobile Home Park, the

³⁷ For example, see Oksana Sarkisova, "Across One Sixth of the World: Dziga Vertov, Travel Cinema, and Soviet Patriotism," *October* 121 (Summer 2007): pp. 19-40.

homestead looks both at home and out of place—a strange suburban house on wheels. While there, we meet a man named Jerry who says, “we're right in the middle of hell here,” and speaks about the number of times he has been mugged. He hates living here, he says, but it was the cheapest place he could find after getting laid off and not being able to afford his house anymore. We meet the priests at the New Hope Baptist Church, mostly black, and the St. Mary Catholic Church, mostly white. The Catholic priest speaks about his congregation, noting that most people have struggled with economic hardship in the past decade. Many were auto workers and had recently lost their jobs. In one scene, the priest gives a blessing to the vehicles parked in the church parking lot, saying “you have empowered us to produce great and powerful works and we pray that the people who use these vehicles find Christ to be the companion on their journey,” splashing the American-made cars with holy water. At the end of the film, the homestead passes by Kelley’s original house in Westland, coming face to face with its double.

In the second part of the trilogy, *Going East*, the homestead travels back downtown. I notice Tim Horton’s, a ubiquitous Canadian fast-food chain. A librarian from the Wayne County Regional Library for the Blind gives us a tour of the archives and talks about mailing books on cassette to its blind users. At the Flight Club, we hear from a stripper, who talks about working there to pay for her RN education, and how “no one in Michigan really has money right now.” Then, back in Inkster, we meet an elderly African American woman named Lillie, who has lived in her home for decades, taking care of men with addictions and mental illnesses, including Aretha Franklin’s son. We visit Kelly’s Used Cars, a YWCA, and a dog pound. Back in Dearborn, we hear from the owner of the Del Rio Motel, who moved here from India in 1989 and speaks about the increasing number of people who treat the hotel like a home, living there for years at a time. At the Henry Ford Museum, we hear a brief history of Ford from a tour guide, who speaks about his role in shaping the automotive landscape. The homestead passes by an increasing number of empty lots and boarded up buildings. Then, we visit the headquarters of the Highwaymen motorcycle club, where a group of very tough looking older white men speak to the camera about the good work they do in the community, not mentioning the fact that in 2007, forty members of the club were arrested for racketeering, conspiracy to commit murder, theft, and possession of controlled substances (four police officers were also indicted for conspiring with the club). The homestead then passes by Michigan Central Train Station. Once an architectural icon, it became a symbol of

postindustrial ruin. More recently, it was purchased by the Ford company, which plans to renovate the building and use it as a center for research on autonomous vehicles.³⁸ The homestead passes by Comerica Park, built in 1997. Not included in the film, but worth noting, is that when the ballpark was built, the historic Gem Theatre was in the way, and instead of demolishing the building it was moved to a new location five blocks away, on wheels—one of the furthest relocations of a large building in history. Close to the end of the film, a panned-out shot of the homestead shows it entering downtown Detroit, where it returns to its home base at MOCAD.

Motor City

Among the themes brought up within the films is that of mobility, as well as the importance of the automobile industry in shaping Detroit. It is worth considering this history briefly, and specifically the role played by Henry Ford, since Kelley referenced Ford's Greenfield Village as an influence on Mobile Homestead—and even entertained the idea of leaving the homestead there to add to Ford's collection of historic buildings. In addition to the broad concept of mobility exemplified through the automobile, and the presence of mobile buildings in both examples, looking at Greenfield Village also brings up issues related to the creation of a personal narrative, or legacy, through the act of collecting, that are also relevant to consider in relation to Mobile Homestead.

Ford created his first motorized vehicle, the Quadricycle, in 1896. In 1903 he opened the Ford Motor Company on Mack Avenue in Detroit. He quickly became famous for his cars, as well as for the capitalist labor processes he developed—including the forty hour work week and the five dollar day, which contributed to the growth of a middle class of consumers able to buy his automobiles and use them in their leisure time. Fordism became synonymous with assembly lines, standardization and the imposition of a moral code upon workers, all in the interest of increased productivity and efficiency. The Ford Motor Company was followed by the establishment of General Motors in 1908 and Chrysler in 1925 and together, the Big Three have played a major role in the American economy on local, national and global scales. In Detroit, entire neighborhoods were composed of automobile factory workers. The first

³⁸ JC Reindl and Phoebe Wall Howard, "What's next, now that Ford owns the long-abandoned Michigan Central Station?," *Detroit Free Press*, June 11, 2018.

stretch of concrete paved highway in the country was laid down in Detroit in 1909, on Woodward Avenue between Six and Seven Mile Road. Cars provided freedom, mobility, and the opportunity to escape the city's chaos and filth. Ford was highly critical of the city, and favored the more bucolic life of the growing suburbs, writing: "We shall solve the city problem by leaving the city."³⁹ This is exactly what happened. Population demographics highlight patterns of white flight beginning in the 1950s, when white people moved to the suburbs in increasing numbers, driven by fears of crime and violence and enticed by the federally approved loans available to them and not to people of color—a perfect example of the racially unequal nature of social mobility.

In the 1920s, Ford began to work on a museum that would celebrate his vision of American invention and industry. In addition to the museum, he created Greenfield Village, an outdoor exhibit of historic buildings. The village was completed in 1929 and opened in 1933, along with the museum. It was the first living outdoor history museum of its kind, and included dozens of relocated or replicated homes and buildings that belonged to famous or representative Americans. As one critic wrote in 1928, this was intended to be a "permanent pageant of America."⁴⁰ Ford continued to add to his collection of buildings until 1945, two years before his death. Greenfield Village includes a replica of Thomas Edison's laboratory in New Jersey, the home and bicycle shop of the Wright brothers, relocated from Dayton, Ohio, and Noah Webster's home, relocated from Connecticut. Surprisingly, Ford included two slave cabins in his village. He purchased a plantation in Georgia, and then deconstructed the cabins and restored them in Michigan. Jesse Swigger notes that the buildings were reconstructed in a much more pristine condition than the originals. He also points out that they were inhabited at the time—Ford's team evicted the black families living there, taking away their homes brick by brick to illustrate a story about the American past in a different part of the country.⁴¹ Automobiles were excluded from the village, since Ford wanted to preserve a certain moment in time, a golden era of the past, and he was critical of the modern city despite having shaped it. Ford hoped that Greenfield Village "would communicate values he feared were

³⁹ Henry Ford, quoted in Amy Maria Kenyon, *Dreaming Suburbia: Detroit and the Production of Postwar Space and Culture* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), p. 20.

⁴⁰ Samuel Crowther, quoted in Jessie Swigger, *'History is Bunk': Assembling the Past at Henry Ford's Greenfield Village* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014), p. 38.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

disappearing from American life—in many cases by his own hand.”⁴² Swigger points out that “There were no bars, no pool halls, no gambling centers, and a very limited government in this world; instead, Ford’s small town was populated with inventors, small business owners, and writers and artists who depicted Americans as folksy, traditional and conservative.”⁴³

Not surprisingly, Ford included his childhood home in his collection of buildings. The home was actually moved twice. In 1919, it was in the way of a planned road, and so he moved it two hundred feet. Following this initial move, he began to restore it to the condition it was in when his mother died in 1876. He tried to find original objects to furnish the home from that time period, and when those weren’t available, he had a team search for replicas according to his descriptions. The restoration was completed in the 1920s, and his family began to use the home. Then, in October 1929, the stock market crashed. Detroit’s economy was hit particularly hard. More than fifty percent of the city’s workforce was laid off, and many became homeless. Ford initially believed he was impervious to the effects of the depression that followed—his company was not publicly traded at the time, and he did not lose much of his personal fortune. He pledged to keep production levels at the same pace, and even to raise minimum wage from \$6 to \$7 a day. However, demand began to slow down, and production decreased drastically, and he began to cut wage and lay off workers. Workers began to protest regularly at Ford plants during the early 1930s, and in 1932, Ford’s ‘service men’ opened fire on them during one of the marches, killing five and injuring dozens more, in what became known as the ‘Dearborn massacre.’ Greg Grandin notes that during the early 30s Ford began to welcome the “cleansing destruction” of the depression.⁴⁴ This was in line with statements made by other leading industrialists and politicians at the time, for example, Andrew Mellon, who argued that the proper response to the depression should be to “liquidate labor, liquidate stocks, liquidate the farmers, liquidate real estate,” so that the “rottenness [will be purged] out of the system... people will live a more moral life... and enterprising people will pick up the wrecks from less competent people.”⁴⁵ By this time, Ford had become more of a villain than a hero in public portrayals, and it is

⁴² Ibid., p. 14.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 46.

⁴⁴ Greg Grandin, *Fordlandia: The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford’s Forgotten Jungle City* (New York: Picador, 2009), p. 241.

⁴⁵ Andrew Mellon, quoted in Mark Davidson and Kevin Ward, editors, *Cities Under Austerity: Restructuring the US Metropolis* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018), p. 9.

perhaps no surprise then that he pursued the creation of a museum dedicated to himself, both as an attempt to control the narrative about his place in history, and as an attempt to return to a more agreeable past. In 1944, he moved his refurbished childhood home a short distance into Greenfield Village, by cutting it in two and transporting the pieces on a truck.⁴⁶ He spent much of his remaining time there before his death in 1947, shielded from the modern world and immersed in his fantasies of a simpler time.

Ford's preservation of his childhood home demonstrates a desire to return to a comfortable, nurturing past. He was interested in replicating his home for nostalgic reasons, but his decision to move it to the village was also an attempt to preserve his legacy and control the narrative surrounding his importance in American history. Mobile Homestead works in an inverse manner: in contrast to the buildings belonging to famous individuals in Greenfield Village, Kelley described it as "an every man's home," stating that "it will not be designated as the Kelley family home. It is simply a typical house of the area."⁴⁷ Kelley denied that nostalgia played a role in his work, writing that "I am more interested in the themes of reexamination and reuse than in the production of nostalgia."⁴⁸ However, it is important to point out that the homestead has had a life of its own aside from Kelley's death, and while it may have been his stated intention to create an "everyman's home," it has been impossible to separate from his stature as a famous artist (which relates to my discussion of charisma in relation to work by Rick Lowe and Theaster Gates in chapter one). Parallels between Greenfield Village and Mobile Homestead are visible in the relocation or replication of homes, as well as in the idea of assembling a collection of significant buildings, which emerges in the film trilogy as well. But while there are certain parallels, the examples illustrate two different visions of a 'permanent pageant of America': Greenfield Village celebrates the ingenuity of American entrepreneurialism, independence and individualism, while the sites featured in the Mobile Homestead film trilogy exhibit the effects of post-Fordism, including urban decline and abandonment, as well as the strange characters who engage in their own creative pursuits and forms of invention.

⁴⁶ Swigger, p. 64.

⁴⁷ "Mike Kelley's Mobile Homestead," booklet produced by MOCAD and the Mike Kelley Foundation.

⁴⁸ Mike Kelley, "Memory Ware," in *Minor Histories*, p. 153.

Public art in a changing city

The slave cabins in Greenfield Village seem jarringly out of place, dropped right next to the homes of white inventors, scientists and teachers as if all were part of the same celebratory narrative of American progress. It is similarly jarring to see a white, suburban ranch-style home in the middle of a predominantly black city. Reporter Julie Hinds commented on this Wizard of Oz quality, writing that “It’s almost as if a tornado had lifted a faraway slice of suburbia and, in a reversal of white flight, dropped it into Midtown Detroit.”⁴⁹ Kelley also commented on the sense of dislocation made visible by the homestead, stating in his plan for the project that “it is a typical house of the suburbs, and will look quite out of place in downtown Detroit. This fact, itself, points toward the complex racial and class-based issues that are representative of the Detroit area.”⁵⁰ Racial segregation has played a major role in shaping Detroit’s urban geography. The city reached its peak population-wise in 1950, when it was the fourth largest American city and was home to 1.8 million people. The estimated population in 2016 was 672,000, less than half of that. Approximately 80% of the city is black, compared with 17% in 1950.⁵¹ While the suburbs began to grow in the early twentieth century, race riots in 1943 and 1967 hastened this process. The 1967 riot occurred after a police raid on a predominantly black downtown bar. Angry at being arrested (by a police force that was 95% white), several men smashed the windows of a neighboring store. Violence quickly escalated, turning into a full-scale riot that lasted five days and took over the city, resulting in 43 deaths, 467 injuries and 2,000 destroyed buildings.

In *Race and Redevelopment*, June Manning Thomas emphasizes the ties between race and urban development, criticizing the profit-driven manner in which cities like Detroit have historically been planned. In describing Detroit’s postwar economy, Thomas emphasizes the connection between race and the automobile industry: “A wide range of social and economic problems arose because the shrinking industrial economy had formed the financial backbone for the Black community. Its members often found suburban jobs inaccessible because of housing and job discrimination, lack of public transportation, or

⁴⁹ Hinds, “Westland Home is a Work of Art.”

⁵⁰ “Mike Kelley’s Mobile Homestead,” booklet produced by MOCAD and the Mike Kelley Foundation.

⁵¹ “Michigan - Race and Hispanic Origin for Selected Large Cities and Other Places: Earliest Census to 1990,” United States Census Bureau, available at <https://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0076/MItab.pdf>, accessed May 31, 2018.

higher educational requirements than inner-city schools prepared them to meet.”⁵² Detroit entered a period of decline in the 1970s, with many manufacturing jobs leaving the area. Black workers were hit particularly hard, and as Thomas makes clear, had fewer opportunities for upward mobility than their white counterparts. A similar dynamic emerged following the foreclosure crisis in 2008, when thousands of people lost their homes, the majority of them black. The city continues to have a high rate of eviction, with families in one out of five rentals experiencing eviction every year (according to a study that looked at data from 2009-2017).⁵³ Many homes are now for sale under terms that resemble those discussed in chapter one in Chicago, by contract sellers offering exploitative terms to buyers.⁵⁴

From the 1970s onwards, Detroit began to look increasingly like a kind of postindustrial apocalypse, with large empty factories, dusty lots, and vacant houses. These are often visible in the *Mobile Homestead* film trilogy, although they are not lingered over or fixated upon, as is the case with more romantic portrayals of the city’s decline. Suburbanization and deindustrialization, combined with the effects of the recession, resulted in large-scale abandonment of buildings, including houses, factories, office buildings and skyscrapers. Detroit became well known for its aesthetic of abandonment, and many artists traveled to the city to document spectacular images of ruin. Trees grew inside derelict factories and office buildings and dense green foliage overtook thousands of abandoned houses in residential neighborhoods. Pheasants colonized newly formed groves and thickets. While similar patterns occurred in other cities, the extent to which economic decline reshaped the geography of Detroit during this time was extreme, and prompted comparisons by some writers and artists to the falls of Ancient Rome and the Mayan Empire. There are parallels with the landscapes that were created, and some of the scenes described in Alan Weisman’s book, *The World Without Us*, in which he considers what would happen to the city of New York if humans were to suddenly vanish: he speculates that within several years, subway tunnels would flood, pipes would burst, buildings would burn, and roofs would cave in. Weeds would take over and bio-diversity would increase exponentially. Native species would fight back against human engineered exotics and ornamentals. Overall, he argues, “the time it would take nature to rid itself of what

⁵² June Manning Thomas, *Race and Redevelopment: Planning a Finer City in Postwar Detroit* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 6.

⁵³ Christine MacDonald, “Persistent evictions threaten Detroit neighborhoods,” *The Detroit News*, October 5, 2017.

⁵⁴ Matthew Goldstein and Alexandra Stevenson, “Market for Fixer-Uppers Traps Low-Income Buyers,” *New York Times*, February 20, 2016.

urbanity has wrought may be less than we might suspect.”⁵⁵ Rebecca Solnit wrote about the explosion of nature in Detroit, referring not to a post-apocalyptic landscape, but to one that is “post-American,” and which defies our expectations of an urban environment:

Sometimes the rectilinear nature of city planning was barely perceptible, just the slightest traces of a grid fading into grassy fields accented with the occasional fire hydrant. One day after a brief thunderstorm, when the rain had cleared away and chunky white clouds dotted the sky, I wandered into a neighborhood, or rather a former neighborhood, of at least a dozen square blocks where trees of heaven waved their branches in the balmy air. Approximately one tattered charred house still stood per block. I could hear the buzzing of crickets or cicadas, and I felt as if I had traveled a thousand years into the future.⁵⁶

Other artists have portrayed Detroit as an emerging tabula rasa, terrain vague or blank slate. New York-based photographer Camilo Vergara made a series of works focused on Detroit in the 90s, in which nature is depicted as an overpowering force to which the fruits of capitalist production were being returned. He visited the same site over a period of several years, documenting the reclamation of architecture by nature. This is visible in his photographs of the former Packard Plant in Detroit, a sprawling 3.5 million square foot building in which automobiles were manufactured from 1903-1958. Vergara’s photograph of the site in 1993 shows a building that while already abandoned, is fairly intact. Three walkways are visible, and connect two wings of the building overtop of an alley. Several cars are parked in the distance, suggesting human presence. The symmetry of the scene, as well as the rigid geometry of the industrial architecture, conveys a sense of order. In the second image, the walkways and the entire right side of the building have disappeared. The facade of the building has deteriorated, showing stains, dirt and the effects of weather. In the third photograph, taken in 2008, blue sky takes up about a third of the image. Trees have grown on both sides of the road, which now looks like a country lane rather than a city street. Most of the windows in the building are broken and graffiti covers the facade. These photographs document the decay of large-scale industry, and they function as visual expressions of entropy: the gradual decline into disorder experienced by all materials, whether natural or human-made.

Vergara believed that his photographs might awaken Americans to the social and political issues affecting cities. Like Henry Ford and Mike Kelley, he had his own fantasy of collecting buildings, and he

⁵⁵ Alan Weisman, *The World Without Us* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books/St. Martin's Press, 2007), p. 21.

⁵⁶ Rebecca Solnit, “Detroit Arcadia: Exploring the Post-American Landscape,” *Harper’s Magazine*, July 2007, p. 67.

sparked a public controversy among city residents when he suggested that rather than demolish a twelve block stretch of abandoned buildings in downtown Detroit, city authorities should instead preserve the site as an “American Acropolis” that would illustrate both the failures of capitalism and the power of nature: “We could transform the nearly 100 troubled buildings into a grand national historic park of play and wonder, an urban Monument Valley.... Midwestern prairie would be allowed to invade from the north. Trees, vines, and wildflowers would grow on roofs and out of windows; goats and wild animals—squirrels, possum, bats, owls, ravens, snakes and insects—would live in the empty behemoths, adding their calls, hoots and screeches to the smell of rotten leaves and animal droppings.”⁵⁷ Vergara’s proposal, like Kelley’s, might be seen as a negative image of Greenfield Village: two sides of the same coin of industrial capitalism, one representing progress, the other representing decline. However, Vergara’s ‘Monument Valley’ is imbued with a romantic desire to preserve a fixed moment in the past. In contrast, the collection of places featured in the *Mobile Homestead* trilogy depicts both past and present, showing how lives continue to be lived. Vergara and numerous other photographers have employed documentary-style photography to create images of romantic ruin in Detroit, drawing upon art historical tropes commonly found throughout the history of landscape painting. While this kind of image may draw attention to the economic and social problems the city faces, it works by invoking a sense of loss and nostalgia, suggesting the futility of attempts to change the city for the better. Vergara’s proposal was criticized by many citizens of Detroit. For example, writer Jerry Herron positioned him in relation to other artists who visited the city seeking out landscapes of ruin, writing that “a ruin is not a ruin to native inhabitants”—a statement that the inhabitants of the slave cabin appropriated by Ford would undoubtedly have agreed with.⁵⁸

Herron’s point is crucial, yet the question remains, what is to be done with vacant lots and abandoned houses in Detroit? The city demolishes thousands of houses every year, but tens of thousands remain empty. Between 1970 and 2000, 161,000 dwellings were demolished, many of them burnt to the ground. Many more abandoned structures have simply been left alone, since it would cost the city more to

⁵⁷ Camilo Vergara, “Downtown Detroit,” *Metropolis*, April 1995, p. 33.

⁵⁸ Jerry Herron, “Three Meditations on the Ruins of Detroit,” in Georgia Daskalakis, Charles Waldheim and Jason Young, eds., *Stalking Detroit* (Barcelona: Actar, 2002), p. 34.

destroy them than they are financially worth.⁵⁹ Residents complain about the presence of abandoned buildings in their neighborhoods, since they are frequently targets of crime. As Kimberley Kinder notes, some residents even adopt abandoned homes, fixing them up and maintaining them so that they look lived in, in order to prevent arson, theft, squatting or drug dealing. She points out that this is part of a broader trend of ‘self-provisioning’ carried out by residents in Detroit, where city services remain extremely underfunded. For Kinder, this is part of a broader trend of neoliberal cutbacks to public services that results in individuals shouldering more of the burden in maintaining public spaces, and volunteerism being substituted for formerly paid positions. Other cities experienced the effects of postindustrialism beginning in the 1970s, and as Kinder points out, communities of color in segregated neighborhoods were often the first to adopt self-provisioning practices. Residents in these neighborhoods had fewer expectations of state support, and organized networks of exchange involving child care, food exchanges, car rides, community cleanups, safety walks and especially in the case of Detroit, maintenance of abandoned homes.⁶⁰ She describes meeting residents who boarded up windows of homes, watched over them and mowed lawns. One man chained his guard dog to the porch of a neighboring abandoned house every night to frighten away drug dealers after finding needles on the property.⁶¹ Kinder argues that while Detroit may be unique in the scale of its decline, and the degree to which residents have adopted informal urban practices, it demonstrates processes underway in all major American cities. Furthermore, she argues that the provisional nature of these practices “challenges political ideologies that favor individual solutions to structural problems.”⁶² Detroit’s postindustrial landscapes have attracted artists who have portrayed the city as a romantic ruin, or as a tabula rasa, and as Kinder argues, this DIY spirit is connected to the withdrawal of municipal services. Tabula rasas need taking care of, and many residents have taken it upon themselves to compensate for the public services once provided by the state.

The presence of tabula rasas and DIY self-provisioning contributed to a growing number of house art projects in Detroit, beginning in the early 2000s, when it was possible to purchase a house for under \$1000. Some houses were developed into elaborate stage sets, including the Ice House, an abandoned

⁵⁹ Jeff Byles, *Rubble: Unearthing the History of Demolition* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006), p. 228.

⁶⁰ Kimberley Kinder, *DIY Detroit: Making Do in a City Without Services* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), p. 26.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 24.

house encased in ice by two artists, which was then photographed and shown at ArtPrize in Grand Rapids.⁶³ Another artist filled an abandoned house with flowers and invited visitors to take photos, quickly turning the site into a popular destination for selfies and wedding photographs.⁶⁴ These experiments with houses have sometimes provoked controversy, in a manner recalling the criticism of Vergara's monument proposal. For example, artist Ryan Mendoza disassembled an abandoned house and then reconstructed it at Art Rotterdam. He spoke about the project in a manner that echoes Ford's nostalgic vision of Greenfield Village: "I will be one lucky artist indeed to freeze in time a piece of my country's history, and freeze in time myself along with it... I will give people from all over Europe the chance not only to walk into one man's memories, but to walk also into one country's collective aspirations and unanticipated shortcomings."⁶⁵ Other examples relate less to an interest in romantic abandonment, and more to an emphasis on DIY experimentation. In 2000, Olayami Dabls started a bead museum and sculpture garden, amassing a huge collection of African-imported beads, while decorating nearby houses and buildings with pieces of mirror and junk. Power House Productions was established in 2007, as a non-profit that renovates houses and creates public spaces for community use, in a manner similar to Project Row Houses or Dorchester Projects. The Heidelberg Project, started by artist Tyree Guyton in 1988, has involved decorating houses and outdoor lots with found materials and painted polka dots. While the project looks like the work of a self-taught artist, Guyton took art classes at Detroit's College for Creative Studies and Marygrove College, and was inspired by the work of Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence and Robert Blackwell. It is interesting to note that the project's trajectory mirrors that of Project Row Houses in some ways, with an increasingly formal administrative structure, growing budget, and destination as a tourist landmark. Another similarity is the increasing prominence of Guyton, who had a solo exhibition at MOCAD in September 2018.

Considering Mobile Homestead alongside a history of moving houses and house art experiments highlights the theme of mobility within a changing city. The homestead shares certain features with the works described above, including references to the city's postindustrial landscape. While it represents a

⁶³ Ice House Detroit, <http://icehousedetroit.blogspot.com/>, accessed May 31, 2018.

⁶⁴ Kate Abbey-Lambertz, "A Flower Farm Blooms From An Abandoned House In Detroit," *Huffington Post*, October 19, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/flower-house-detroit_us_56255134e4b02f6a900d5b43.

⁶⁵ Ryan Mendoza, Art Rotterdam, <http://www.artrotterdam.com/users/128/content/Home/EN-2016%20Ryan.html>, accessed May 31, 2018.

moment in the past, it was not intended to ‘freeze in time’ the artist or his childhood, but instead, to represent a home typical of white, working-class suburbia. As a symbol, it is sometimes at home, sometimes out of place in Detroit, depending on how the city transforms through decline or revitalization, and how it changes in racial and class composition—changes that were visible through the windows of the passing homestead in the film trilogy. *Mobile Homestead* is also unique in the degree to which Kelley sought to erase his presence from the work. This may have been an impossible task considering his fame as an artist, but it is one that he attempted to carry out nonetheless: by denying that the homestead was the ‘Kelley family home,’ by erasing his presence from the film, and by filling the homestead with work by lesser known artists. This might be looked at as a gesture of payback, or reparative practice, through which Kelley attempted to acknowledge his appropriation of degraded cultural materials and their makers. Concepts related to debt and payback had come up in earlier work, for example, with *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid* (1987), which explored expectations of love associated with gifts, in the form of stuffed animals. The piece *Pay for Your Pleasure* (1988) consisted of an artwork made by serial killers (including John Wayne Gacy) and a collection box for donations to victims’ rights organizations. John C. Welchman writes that this gesture may be understood as a “reparational payment by the art-going public for its voyeuristic pleasures.”⁶⁶ In terms of reparative practice, it is also worth considering the Mike Kelley Foundation, established in 2007, which has granted large sums of money to arts organizations in Los Angeles, including many that engage with issues of social inequality through art (among them the Underground Museum, the Los Angeles Poverty Department and Self Help Graphics).⁶⁷ In the context of the homestead’s associations with white flight, its provision of public services may be seen as a small offering, an acknowledgment of the dispossession that shaped urban inequality in Detroit. This attempt to make space for the voices and practices of others is a complicated gesture, however, which deserves to be explored in more depth.

⁶⁶ John C. Welchman, “Gift Vouchers and ‘The Wages of Sin’: Giving and Rebates in the Age of Appropriation,” in *Who Runs the Art World?: Money, Power, Ethics*, eds. Brad Buckley and John Conomos (London: Libri, 2017), p. 3.

⁶⁷ See the Mike Kelley Foundation website, <http://www.mikekelleyfoundation.org/#!/grants/grants-awarded>, accessed March 14, 2019.

Going Further West: Mobile Homestead in Los Angeles

It is possible to view Mobile Homestead as both an act of self-negation, through which a successful white male artist attempted to make space for others left out of the frame of institutional legitimation, and as an act of cooptation, in which the artworks and social practices that it hosts become valuable and worthy of attention solely through their association with Kelley. Both of these perspectives are worth exploring further, and I do this by focusing on the homestead's journey to Los Angeles. As I discussed in relation to Rick Lowe and *Trans.lation*, it is difficult to separate artists from their work, even when they have consciously attempted to give up control or authorship. Mobile Homestead traveled to Los Angeles in 2014 for a retrospective of Kelley's work held at the Geffen Contemporary at MOCA. It took a long time to get there—a month just to get the mobile section of the homestead detached from the rest of the “mothership,” as Amy Corle put it, and the truck blew four tires before leaving Michigan.⁶⁸ Once it arrived at MOCA, it was programmed by John Malpede of the Los Angeles Poverty Department, a community performance group that has worked in the Skid Row neighborhood for thirty years and includes homeless and formerly homeless people. At MOCA, the homestead exhibited material that illustrated the history of LA's skid row. It hosted several workshops, including lunch-making for the homeless, a donation drive for Schools on Wheels, a blood drive event, and a meeting hosted by a tenants' rights organization to discuss rent control. It also exhibited work made by homeless people who were part of the Lamp Arts Program, a community art space inside a homeless shelter in Skid Row that offers studio space to produce art, music and creative writing.⁶⁹ Established in 1998 by artist Rory White, the program has been directed by Hayk Makhmuryan since 2008. It serves up to 100 people a month, and has seen increased demand in the past few years as the city's homeless population has risen. When I visited the studio space in 2017, I found myself thinking like a curator of Mobile Homestead and noting thematic parallels with Kelley's work. On the walls, works were hung salon style, and sculptures and assemblage pieces were stacked in every corner. There were aesthetic similarities to the work produced at *Trans.lation*: portraits, domestic spaces, landscapes, a drawing of cats in kimonos that reminded me of Louis Wain, a pinata with the words “I hate America” on it, and a lobster in BDSM gear.

⁶⁸ Amy Corle interview.

⁶⁹ Rebranded as Studio 526 in January 2018, and now administered by The People Concern, an LA non-profit: <http://thepeopleconcern.org/studio-526.php>, accessed May 31, 2018.

Makhmuryan spoke to me about his attempts to foster a sense of community in the neighborhood, as well as his concern that programs like Lamp Arts ran the risk of normalizing homelessness. He emphasized the importance of encouraging the homeless people he worked with, and other non-profit workers, to ask bigger questions about the underlying factors that produce inequality: “it’s important to emphasize the positive aspects of community, but to not forget the need for drastic improvement as well.”⁷⁰ Makhmuryan did not see himself as a social practice artist, or even an artist, although he attended art school. Instead, he told me:

As a creative person, I don’t think it is possible to see yourself as neutral, because then you’re deliberately avoiding talking about how you are implicated in increasing class inequality. For myself, I love what it means to be an ally, and I see my position as being to advocate for community strengthening through arts. I know it’s a mouthful. But I have been here for a while so I feel more and more confident talking about Skid Row, and to some degree, representing Skid Row, while trying to make the point that there is an acute lack of actual representation here—it is a place that gets discussed without residents having a say.⁷¹

For the exhibition inside Mobile Homestead at MOCA, Makhmuryan worked with 20-30 of the artists who regularly attended the program to choose one work that would be shown inside the space over a period of four weeks. He considered this to be a subversive move: “Now they can say they had work at MOCA.”⁷² He told me that the artists were excited to participate, and especially enjoyed the interactive workshops that were part of the exhibition, when members of the public would mingle with homeless artists inside the homestead.⁷³

Inside the museum, the exhibition included many of Kelley’s works, including *Educational Complex*, that highlighted his interest in interrogating systems of artistic legitimation surrounding institutions. It also included work that visually paralleled the kind of untrained, uneducated creativity that was on display inside Mobile Homestead, in work made by homeless people, children, or other members of the general public during workshops. Some of Kelley’s work inside the main space of the museum demonstrated a similar aesthetic, including cartoon-like drawings, stuffed animals and textiles, references to the punk music scene that he was a part of in Detroit and Los Angeles. It is worth considering the

⁷⁰ Hayk Makhmuryan interview, December 22, 2016.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

degree to which exhibiting these objects would have posed a threat to Kelley's cultural capital during the height of his career, as an artist known for appropriating so-called degraded, or outsider practices. Another example of this was evident in his *Memory Ware* works inside MOCA, which referenced a style of folk art that involved pressing everyday items (shells, beads, tiles, glass, jewelry, buttons, beads) onto the surface of an object or flat surface (similar to Simon Rodia's Watts Towers, discussed in chapter one). Kelley was interested in exploring the disciplinary boundaries around folk art, and examining its relationship with contemporary consumer culture. In his essay "On Folk Art" he wrote that while it has traditionally been conceived of as "timeless art supposedly representing traditionally shared values," it should instead be thought of simply as "the mass culture we live in at the moment."⁷⁴ Ralph Rugoff elaborated on this point in an essay on Kelley's *Memory Ware*, pointing out that in their references to both abstract painting and kitsch, they may be seen as "an artistic offensive against idealist types of cultural production, particularly those that supposedly incarnate eternal or transcendental values."⁷⁵

Kelley's interest in folk art related to his interest in artistic legitimation more broadly, and he discussed the importance of a critical position underlying his approach to appropriation: "that's art, I think—for me, at least. That's what separates it from the folk art that I'm going to. I think the social function of art is that kind of negative aesthetic."⁷⁶ For Kelley, appropriation involved negative social critique, and this is evident in his *Memory Ware* pieces as well as the work *Framed and Frame*, also included in the MOCA exhibition. *Framed and Frame* reproduced a popular wishing well in LA's Chinatown. The original was designed by artist and professor Liu Hong Kay in 1939, and consists of rough blobs of concrete meant to represent the Seven Star Cave, a well-known natural landmark in China. Kelley's version was composed of two parts: *Framed*, a reproduction of the wishing well, and *Frame*, an enclosure made of brick, fencing and barbed wire, that surrounds the original well in Chinatown. With its papier maché aesthetic and bright patches of color, the wishing well also resembles Salvation Mountain in Niland, California—another large-scale monument associated with a folk art aesthetic. The title of Kelley's work points to his interest in context and systems of legitimation, and the way that seemingly

⁷⁴ Mike Kelley, "On Folk Art," in *Minor Histories*, p. 148.

⁷⁵ Ralph Rugoff, "Mister Memory," in *Mike Kelley: Memory Ware* (New York: Hauser & Wirth Publishers, 2017), p. 23.

⁷⁶ Mike Kelley, "On Folk Art," in *Minor Histories*, p. 148.

amorphous or incoherent content takes on new meaning through a framing device, which could be either a physical structure or an institution.

In *Modern Art in the Common Culture*, Thomas Crow discusses the issue of aesthetic legitimation in relation to Jim Shaw's thrift store paintings. The artist began to collect them in the 1970s and they have been exhibited numerous times as a collection. As an art work, the piece functions similarly to Kelley's incorporation of kitsch and low-culture into his art practice. Crow argues that Duchamp's readymades laid the foundation for conceptual art and its emphasis on selection and recontextualization. He also comments on the attempts at naturalism and self-expression in the paintings collected by Shaw, including sentimental paintings of young children with bizarre proportions, or scenes with garish colors that might belong in a coffee shop or hotel room. Sincere attempts at naturalism became outmoded even before Duchamp, but Shaw's work demonstrates that this type of aesthetic has found its way back in to contemporary art—as long as it is framed in a conscious way. In relation to Kelley's interest in the subject of repression, his work may be seen as similarly interested in the forbidden impulse to express oneself sincerely, visible through his practice of framing and collecting. Dave Beech and John Roberts have written about the movements of value between high and low culture that characterizes the avant-garde, and they argue that within contemporary art, movement happens in one direction: the low is absorbed by the high. There is no friction, rupture or discontinuity, with the result being that, as they argue, “politicization is held off.”⁷⁷ They write that “Art remains culturally universal throughout, and impurities are incorporated into its universality without a chance that the universal might speak through the impure as symptom.”⁷⁸

Bourdieu considered the aesthetic production of those lacking in cultural capital, and argued that their work should not be equated with an absence of taste, but instead, that it demonstrates the presence of different tastes, determined by class. Kelley's work aligns with this position, through his interest in the tastes of the working class, the repressed, children, criminals, punks and other misfits. His work may be seen as a comment on degraded tastes and their negative power of social critique, since their exclusion from the category of fine art makes visible the means by which tastes are formed according to social

⁷⁷ Dave Beech and John Roberts, eds., *The Philistine Controversy* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 289.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

capital and class positionality. As Beech and Roberts have argued, the return of the previously excluded is foundational to modern art, and has historically functioned by creating extra space rather than troubling boundaries: “inclusion merely expands, broadens and extends the boundaries of the accepted order.”⁷⁹ In relation to Mobile Homestead, this critique applies to the exhibition at MOCA, in which art made by homeless people was seamlessly integrated into the homestead in a manner consistent with Kelley’s art practice, and that in no way troubled institutional or aesthetic categories; it applies to MOCAD’s use of Mobile Homestead as a space for community programs and events that complements its offerings inside the museum; and it also applies to the homestead itself, as a gesture that encapsulates Kelley’s attempts to engage in a form of paying back, or reparative practice, but that remains tied to his own authorship.

In terms of mobility, Kelley was fascinated with subcultures outside the mainstream, and his work can be seen as an exploration of what happens to their meaning and value when they are *moved*—for example, when they are collected or framed by institutions. His work brings up the question of how appropriation changes, as a form of artistic practice, when the artist uses it to explore the structures of power and legitimation that shape the production and consumption of art. This brings up important points about framing and social practice in relation to Mobile Homestead, and the community-based programming it has supported at both MOCA and MOCAD. For example, the homeless artists who exhibited work inside the homestead were excited to show their work at a museum, and were not put on display or advertised as homeless in any way. Yet, they were still brought into the museum through their association with Kelley, and contextualized in relation to his work, becoming part of his collection or archive.

It may be impossible to make art that would truly violate the established order. However, a different moment involving the homestead is worth noting in this discussion: before arriving at MOCA, it participated in a parade through Skid Row, as part of Walk the Talk, an event organized by the Los Angeles Poverty Department. A video of the parade made by LAPD shows a strange procession: a large group of homeless people, artists and community organizers marching in the street, carrying instruments and signs. The homestead follows along at the back of the procession, sitting on the flatbed of a large

⁷⁹ Ibid.

truck.⁸⁰ Part of the strangeness of this procession is that the group appeared to be followed by the very thing lacking most in their lives, and that defines them to the rest of society—the absence and unattainability of a home. The homestead was incorporated into the broader narrative of the parade, temporarily losing its association with Kelley and signaling a brief reversal of power, evoking Bakhtin’s descriptions of the carnivalesque. It did not enfold the narrative of the marchers into its own. Instead, it trailed behind them as a symbolic weight. While this may have been a short term move from high to low, it was a moment in which high art was appropriated by representatives of so-called ‘low culture’ on their terms.

Going Back Home

As I have discussed throughout this chapter, *Mobile Homestead* employs and references the theme of mobility in numerous ways. This is evident in Kelley’s work more broadly, in relation to the movement of images, objects and meaning from one aesthetic category to another, through appropriation and recontextualization. In relation to *Mobile Homestead*, this raises the question: should we celebrate the example of a successful, white male artist who has made space for lesser known artists, in part by offering a platform to marginalized individuals who might not even consider themselves to be artists? Or should we view *Mobile Homestead* as more aligned with a collecting impulse, and the desire to acquire the narratives of others and incorporate them into its own? It is worth noting that Kelley’s intentions were very different from the other collectors noted in this chapter (Ford’s Greenfield Village, Vergara’s Monument Valley). Ford intended to position himself alongside both the greatest Americans, and the humble everyday men who make the country productive and further its progress. There is a similar interest in returning home in *Mobile Homestead*, yet it lacks the type of nostalgia exhibited by Ford. The duplicated home is empty inside, devoid of personal meaning or significance. Instead, it suggests that returning home might actually be impossible. In the film, the homestead passes by the original house in Westland, now occupied by a retired barber—signaling that an authentic return is not an option. Similarly, a return to past forms of art making, outside of institutional frames, is not possible, according to Kelley.

⁸⁰ “Walk the Talk,” Los Angeles Poverty Department, <http://www.lapovertydept.org/projects/walk-the-talk/walk-the-talk-2014-3/>, accessed May 31, 2018.

While a temporary reversal of dynamics occurred during the parade in Los Angeles, and during other moments in which the homestead has been framed by other narratives, it will always return to its home base at MOCAD—its master framer. The evacuation of personal significance from the interior of the homestead may be seen as a denial of authorship, or as an attempt by the artist to make space for others. It may also be seen as a kind of offering—as Kelley giving away his childhood home to other uses, and turning over a symbol connected to both personal memory and the upward mobility of his own class position, perhaps with the belief that it might be taken up by someone else and given new meaning. This act of giving away takes on added significance considering that the homestead was the last project Kelley worked on before his death. In the film trilogy, melancholy guitar chords play in the background, and a deep voice sings repeatedly, “I want to go home.” Watching the films, I understood the gesture of return as related to both movement and giving back: returning to the innocence of childhood by traveling backwards in time, and returning ideas and meaning through an act of self-negation.

Mobile Homestead references the theme of mobility in Detroit, a city shaped by the automobile and by white flight. It now exists as a community-oriented space, consciously defined as social practice art by the museum’s curatorial and educational staff. By using this label, they can promote the space as providing useful services to the community, while it remains aesthetically distinct from the rest of the museum. The community-based work produced in the workshops held in the homestead is always appropriately framed, otherwise, it would lose its coherence and its ability to be seen as meaningful, or as art. In this sense, it is worth noting the curious immobility that defines Mobile Homestead, and that is also central to considerations of movement and transformation in Detroit. As I have noted, the piece remains mostly immobile, on the grounds of MOCAD, which means that uses of the homestead are almost always associated with the museum—always a movement of low to high. Interestingly, typical mobile homes are not actually that mobile. Most only make one journey: from the manufacturing site to their resting place in a mobile home community or trailer park. This is because it costs thousands of dollars to move them—these are not RVs, but prefabricated affordable homes. Mobile Homestead may have accumulated more mileage than most mobile homes through its trip to LA, but it remains mostly in one place, at MOCAD, a strange suburban symbol of wealth and whiteness in the midst of a downtown that is mostly low-income and black. And while some parts of Detroit are now revitalizing, one must remember that the white

middle class has historically benefitted the most from urban redevelopment and its associations with upward mobility. Yet the myth that a rising tide raises all boats persists.

Chapter Three — Disrupting Displacement: Mapping Evictions and Intervening in the Sharing Economy

In the previous two chapters, I looked at the central role of the home within socially engaged art, and connected this to questions about race, reparative practices and reparations. In this chapter, my focus turns to dispossession in the form of eviction and homelessness. I look at the increasing number of evictions in American cities, which spiked during and after the 2008 recession, and build upon several of the themes considered up to this point in relation to art. Throughout this dissertation I have focused on the home as a symbol of American individualism and freedom, which has historically been connected with ideals of hard work and personal responsibility. Underneath this, however, lies a history of structural racism that has affected the ability of people of color to buy homes, and continues to do so, despite attempts to introduce reforms and regulations. This chapter focuses on displacement in the Bay Area, which over the past decade has become a site of intense conflict and debate regarding affordable housing policy and its connections to the tech industry. It is home to numerous Silicon Valley startups that have promised to change the way we live, work, travel, entertain ourselves and socialize, in part through the emergence of the sharing economy. Many of the CEOs and entrepreneurs behind these companies see themselves as part of a liberal, enlightened class of visionary thinkers leading the way toward a more equitable society. Sharing economy companies like Airbnb and Uber have become enormously profitable, earning their shareholders billions of dollars. And while the ideas driving the technological development of such companies might have once been visionary, the reality is very different. One of the major consequences of the growth of the sharing economy has been widespread displacement in the Bay Area. As many critics have noted, tech workers who can pay large sums of money drive up rents and home prices, and the incentives created by renting out one's place on Airbnb encourage more conversions of apartments into short term rental units. This has turned San Francisco, and more recently Oakland, into an unaffordable place to live for the non-wealthy. Complicating matters is the fact that many of those who are wealthy enough to live there are tech industry employees, many of whom subscribe to liberal ideologies that place them in loose political alignment with those being displaced. A 2017 study of 600

tech entrepreneurs demonstrated that in terms of political views and attitudes, Silicon Valley is one of the most left-leaning areas of the country, despite massive personal wealth and glaring income inequality.¹

I consider these issues by focusing on a project that has attempted to push back against displacement in the Bay Area by using some of the tools that built the sharing economy, thereby working in the spirit of interventionist tactical media. The term ‘disrupt’ is worth noting in this context, and I use it in a tongue-in-cheek manner here. Many of the biggest sharing economy companies initially defined themselves as ‘disruptors’ of some sort, and in large part, gained their success by claiming to revolutionize the industry in which they were working. ‘Disrupt’ and ‘intervene’ are words commonly used within activist art as well, and I argue that this tactic follows a similar logic characterized by ephemerality and the frequent use of singular, often spectacular gestures. The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project may also be looked at in relation to examples of institutional critique, including Hans Haacke’s *Manhattan Real Estate as a Real Time Social System*, which featured a similar investigatory process and database-like aesthetic. The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project was created by a collective of artists and activists, and over several years it has produced a website consisting of dozens of maps visualizing evictions and gentrification in the Bay Area. The collective has also conducted hundreds of interviews with residents that are available on its website. I situate the project in the context of the sharing economy and discuss its aesthetic and political responses to urban displacement. I argue that it seeks to disrupt, on one level, but also moves beyond this initial interventionist tactic through its community organizing efforts.

Gentrification in the Bay Area

In San Francisco, the average rent for a one bedroom apartment in January 2017 was around \$3500, and in Oakland it was \$2500. Gentrification has rapidly expanded in Oakland and continues to push residents further and further away from the city center. It is the same process that is happening in cities across the United States and around the world, yet it is particularly visible in the Bay Area because of the extreme wealth associated with the tech industry, combined with the desirability and cultural capital

¹ David E. Broockman, Gregory Ferenstein, and Neil Malhotra, “Wealthy Elites’ Policy Preferences and Economic Inequality: The Case of Technology Entrepreneurs,” Stanford Business Working Papers, September 5, 2017, available at <https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/gsb-cmis/gsb-cmis-download-auth/441556>, accessed March 13, 2019.

offered by the region's amenities. The Bay Area is a fascinating place in which to consider activist movements focused on displacement. Many of its most prominent residents and politicians have participated in efforts to position the city as a liberal enclave in opposition to Trump, for example, by defending its status as a Sanctuary City through legal battles with the federal government.² Yet both San Francisco and Oakland face extreme income inequality, largely driven by the rapid growth of Silicon Valley tech industries since the 1990s. It is now the most expensive city in the US to rent an apartment in, surpassing Manhattan in 2014.³ There are specific symbols of displacement that make the process of gentrification unique in this region, including shuttle buses that transport well-paid tech employees from San Francisco to their campuses in Silicon Valley, which many see as a symbol of the privatization of formerly public services. The consequences of the housing crisis are widespread: displaced individuals and families who are pushed further and further away from jobs, services and communities, increased homelessness, and housing instability—dramatically illustrated by the 2016 fire that destroyed the Ghost Ship warehouse in Oakland, killing 36 people. Many were artists, and some were living in the warehouse because of its low rents, affordable because of the building's lack of proper safety features.

The Bay Area's gentrification is unique in the liberal beliefs shared by many tech workers and anti-gentrification activists. While they may differ on certain political and economic policy issues, they share many broader social values, including support for the rights of immigrant and refugees, environmentalism and even housing reform: a 2015 bill intended to curb evictions was supported by the tech industry (and defeated by real estate lobbying groups). However, while there may be a shared zone of mutual values, it is important to note different priorities and emphases: tech workers may have progressive values and support liberal candidates for office, but they also contribute to the maintenance and growth of economic structures that privilege those who are mainly white and upper-middle class (there are numerous exceptions to this, including the tech company CEOs who were at one time part of Trump's business advisory board, as well as the increasing libertarian undercurrents tied to the development of cryptocurrencies). Many tech industry employees also support a different vision of

² "Court rules Trump's sanctuary executive order is unconstitutional," City Attorney of San Francisco, Nov. 20, 2017, <https://www.sfcityattorney.org/2017/11/20/court-rules-trumps-sanctuary-executive-order-unconstitutional/>

³ Lamar Anderson, "SF's Median Asking Rent for a One-Bedroom Tops Manhattan's," *Curbed San Francisco*, July 2, 2015, <https://sf.curbed.com/2015/7/2/9943726/sfs-median-asking-rent-for-a-one-bedroom-tops-manhattans>.

development from affordable housing groups, favoring high-density development around transit areas that would encourage sustainable living. Some of these groups, including California Yimby, argue that the main issue behind the housing crisis is a lack of housing, and have called for laws that would make it easier to build. On the other hand, tenants organizations have criticized this idea, arguing that building more housing will increase displacement and gentrification unless laws are put in place to ensure that a certain portion of new development is dedicated to low-income housing.⁴

While Bay Area gentrification looks unique in some ways, it also shares features with gentrification in other American cities, including its disproportionate impact on communities of color. This is highly visible in The Mission, a neighborhood that was historically home to a large Mexican and Central American population, many of whom moved there in the 1950s and 60s. The area became known as a center for Latino culture, featuring taquerias, bodegas and colorful murals. However, the Latino population began to decline during the 70s, when the area was targeted by property speculators. After decades of disinvestment exacerbated by redlining, apartment buildings could be purchased very cheaply, renovated, and resold for large profits, and middle class white people began to move in. An increasing number of well-educated and well-paid tech workers arrived during the tech boom of the 90s. Some critics have compared this to the Gold Rush in 1848-49, when the city's population grew from 1,000 to 25,000. 140 years later, new prospectors arrived seeking dot-com startup riches, and many settled in the Mission. The neighborhood's white population steadily grew, spiking in 2010. A study by the *San Francisco Chronicle* found that while it was 65% Latino in the 1970s, it lost more than 2,400 Latino residents since 2000.⁵ Rebecca Solnit has commented on this displacement, and who is causing it: “[Residents are] being pushed out by evictions, by unaffordable housing, by the destruction of churches and businesses, bookstores, social services, nonprofits, etc., making way for...enterprises that serve a new incoming population of young, mostly white, mostly male tech workers. So you're really having the wholesale replacement of one culture by another. And in the Mission, which is a really culturally rich place with really deep roots...this destruction is particularly painful. People are losing something, a sense

⁴ Liam Dillon, “A major California housing bill failed after opposition from the low-income residents it aimed to help. Here's how it went wrong,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 2, 2018.

⁵ Joe Garofoli and Carolyn Said, “A Changing Mission: To Whom Does San Francisco's Oldest Neighborhood Belong?,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 2015.

of connection, a sense of community, a sense of memory and history.”⁶ Gentrification in the Bay Area disproportionately affects people of color, as with other cities, and many neighborhoods in San Francisco and Oakland have grown increasingly white in the past several decades. This displacement means that communities are broken apart, one result being the loss of informal networks of neighbors—an informal sharing economy—in which use value is relied upon in the absence of exchange value (as noted in relation to Project Row Houses in chapter one). During the same time that these informal networks of exchange broke down (or were disrupted) the official sharing economy began to grow, powered by Silicon Valley technology and money, and while it promised the disruption of traditional ways of living, it has more often resulted in the reproduction of existing patterns of inequality.

Privatizing the Sharing Economy

*Think big. Like, the first home microwave oven to hit the markets. The first call made on a Motorola cell phone. The Apple1 computer release date by the popular tech giant we all know today. The Sony Walkman, Microsoft Windows 95, Amazon Echo....the list goes on. Yes, these are all common tech gadgets shaping the way we go about our normal routines that help make our lives just a little bit easier. But what if someone told you something bigger was in the works. And no, it's not the next bot designed to be your own personal assistant, but much more of a necessity than that. At Bungalow we're reimagining what it means to live, to share, to explore.*⁷

The services that make up the sharing economy have shaped the way we live, work and socialize in profound ways. They offer new forms of convenience for users and consumers, along with the promise of increasing our social capital and building our social networks. They provide appealing design, easy to navigate interfaces, and quick transactions. However, they also provoke important questions about privacy and surveillance, and contribute to rising levels of employment precarity through the growth of the gig economy. Many sharing economy companies claim that their services will produce positive social change, often through ‘disruption’ of some sort: Airbnb disrupts the traditional housing market. Uber disrupts the taxi industry. WeWork disrupts the commercial real estate industry. Tinder disrupts the norms of dating and romance. Bungalow, a relatively small startup, wants to disrupt residential real estate by

⁶ Amy Goodman, “Death by Gentrification in SF: Part 2 with Rebecca Solnit & Adriana Camarena”, Democracy Now, April 12, 2016, https://www.democracynow.org/2016/4/12/death_by_gentrification_in_sf_part, accessed January 12, 2017.

⁷ “How Bungalow Is Disrupting Residential Real Estate,” Bungalow website, November 29, 2017.

“reimagining what it means to live, to share, to explore,” as noted in the quote above. Users of Bungalow can rent an apartment in several cities through the service, which offers furnished, stylish apartments that appeal to millennial design sensibilities, and which promises to connect its users with a community “made up of people just like you.”⁸

These services are appealing in many ways. They offer consumers abundant, often cheaper, options. They allow quick payment through one’s phone. They also offer the promise of reliability and trusted exchange through peer-to-peer networks that allow users to view a seller’s ratings before making a purchase. Many of these platforms use the language of community-building, and an emphasis on social capital is prominent in examples throughout the sharing economy. Yet some critics have pointed out that while companies such as Uber and Airbnb sell the appeal of personalized transactions, sociability and sharing, they are actually not sharing services at all. Giana M. Eckhardt and Fleura Bardhi argue that we should use the term ‘access economy’ instead of ‘sharing economy,’ writing that “consumers are paying to access someone else’s goods or services for a particular period of time. It is an economic exchange, and consumers are after utilitarian, rather than social, value.”⁹ Interest in the sharing aspect of these platforms is often overruled by the opportunity to make extra money—especially appealing in expensive cities like San Francisco where average incomes are often not enough to afford rent. The notion that these companies can change society reveals the technological determinism behind sharing economy idealism, revealing the lack of a broader interest in redistribution or social change. Considering these points, Hito Steyerl writes that in the context of the sharing economy, “to expect any kind of progressive transformation to happen by itself—just because the infrastructure or technology exists—would be like expecting the internet to create socialism or automation to evenly benefit all humankind. The internet spawned Uber and Amazon, not the Paris Commune.”¹⁰

The contradictions visible within the sharing economy may be traced further back than the past decade: back to the emergence of movements for free open-source software in the 1980s and 90s, and even further back, to the development of the internet itself. Stewart Brand’s *Whole Earth Catalog*,

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Giana M. Eckhardt and Fleura Bardhi, “The Sharing Economy Isn’t About Sharing at All,” *Harvard Business Review*, January 28, 2015.

¹⁰ Hito Steyerl, “If You Don’t Have Bread, Eat Art!: Contemporary Art and Derivative Fascisms,” *e-flux* 76, October 2016.

published in 1968, provides a valuable example of how the development of the internet became intertwined with the counterculture of the 1960s, and was linked to ideas about living in harmony within a global village, to use Marshall McLuhan's term. The *Whole Earth Catalog* was inspired by back-to-the-land movements and an interest in communal living. It provided "access to tools," in the form of goods for sale that might be useful to those living communally, and how-to instructions on how to build things. Its visual design has been described as a prototype for a web page, and it was described by Steve Jobs as "sort of like Google in paperback form."¹¹ It may be seen as an original blueprint for the sharing economy in many ways: it encapsulated a DIY spirit, connecting people interested in communal living, and becoming a staple of the counterculture. Fred Turner discusses these connections in *From Cyberculture to Counterculture*, and traces the growing appeal of technological entrepreneurship for the counterculturalists of the 1960s. Happenings were a major influence on Brand, and he was drawn to work by Allan Kaprow, John Cage and Robert Rauschenberg. He was particularly interested in the multimedia aspects of their work, as well as a collaborative approach to art making that brought artists together with audiences in a process of shared creation. Turner writes that for Brand, "happenings offered a picture of a world where hierarchies had dissolved, where each moment might be as wonderful as the last, and where every person could turn her or his life into art."¹² Brand belonged to an art collective called USCO (the 'US Company') that organized psychedelic light and sound shows involving technology, mysticism and LSD. One of the group's main goals was to build community, and its members sought to do this by "returning to a more traditional mode of tribal living and collective craftsmanship."¹³ Members of USCO read texts by eastern mystics as well as by writers on cybernetics and emerging communication technology, including McLuhan and Norbert Wiener, that promised to create new forms of togetherness.

In the 1980s, Brand's focus shifted toward the evolving technology of personal computers. He founded the Whole Earth Software Catalog, which was similar to the Whole Earth Catalog, since it was meant to address a particular community—personal computer users—and recommend tools they might need. A *New York Times* critic reviewing the book in 1984 wrote, "I believe a novice could learn from

¹¹ Steve Jobs, "You've got to find what you love," commencement speech at Stanford University, June 14, 2015, <https://news.stanford.edu/news/2005/june15/jobs-061505.html>.

¹² Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 48.

¹³ Turner, p. 49.

these pages what a computer is,” and goes on to list the new tools introduced to catalog readers, including spreadsheets, databases and Computer-Assisted Design programs.¹⁴ Brand was paid \$1.3 million for the book, and he continued to find lucrative deals in merging computing with communalism. He co-founded the Global Business Network in 1987, a consulting firm that sought to capitalize on the growing interest in networking technologies. Turner notes that “GBN drew on the organizational structure and forecasting tools of cold war-era research culture and blended them with the countercultural turn toward business and social networks as sites of social change.”¹⁵ This example demonstrates the strong link between cyberculture and counterculture that emerged in the Bay Area in the 1970s. Brand helped to shape the business ethos of Silicon Valley in numerous ways, and the linking of countercultural rhetoric with networking technologies is still apparent in the rhetoric of many companies who claim an interest in changing the way we live, work and interact with others.

Turner viewed these companies as part of a “New Economy” emerging in the 1990s, revolving around networked entrepreneurship and characterized by the breakdown of traditional relationships between employers and the work force. During this time, it became increasingly necessary to become an entrepreneur—to constantly update one’s skills and personal brand, as unemployment became increasingly precarious and piecemeal. He made these observations in 2006, the same year that Facebook began to allow users to create a public profile. Since then, networked entrepreneurship has greatly expanded through the use of social media, which gives new meaning to the concept of a global village, and seems to offer many of the promises of community and connection that appealed to Brand. The sharing economy may be seen as an expanded form of the “New Economy” described by Turner, and many of the same conundrums are visible in contemporary examples that have promised to change our lives, bring us closer together and disrupt tradition, but which often produce issues associated with the “Old Economy”, including labor disputes (at WeWork, for example) and huge economic inequalities between owners and users. Turner’s discussion of Brand makes it clear that an interest in art and creativity was central to his thinking, and this accords with theories of the cultural economy, in which art has become a model of post-Fordist economic production defying conventional understandings of labor and

¹⁴ Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, “Books of the Times,” *New York Times*, October 3, 1984.

¹⁵ Turner, p. 184.

value, employer and employee. Sven Lutticken has discussed the connections between art world experts who add value to an artwork, and other non-art positions, including fashion bloggers, YouTube gurus and Facebook users, who engage in similar value-adding practices. Lutticken's broader point is that art no longer fits into a category of exceptionalism—it is similar to other forms of economic production in which there has been a breakdown of work and leisure.¹⁶ As Boltanski and Chiapello noted in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, the 1970s saw the breakdown of hierarchical relationships between workers and employers in the US and western Europe, in favor of looser, networked relations, in which workers became more autonomous and employment became less secure, necessitating creativity, reinvention, and self-branding in the increasing absence of job security.¹⁷ Sharing economy companies have become profitable by realizing this—in many of these companies, workers are referred to as contractors rather than employees.

There are also many paradoxical connections between countercultural histories and the defense industry visible in Silicon Valley, in the form of tech startups that engage in surveillance and data mining, and that count both the federal government and private corporations among their clients. Our presence on and offline is increasingly being tracked and monetized, and used to predict future behavior. In *Weapons of Math Destruction*, Cathy O’Neil discusses other issues that have emerged with the rise of big data, including the use of algorithms that allow companies to make decisions about who consumers are and what they might do. She notes that using algorithms to make decisions about consumer risk might be considered a positive change, in some ways, since it appears to remove the possibility of discrimination. However, she argues that while this may be true, we are instead categorized according to what others like us have done in the past—we become members of a tribe.¹⁸ Other ratings systems have emerged: O’Neil writes that in 2015, Facebook patented a tool that would allow online lenders to assess an individual’s chance of repaying a loan based on their social network. They might have very little money and no job, but receive a high score if they were friends with educated people, or had family members with good

¹⁶ Sven Lutticken, “The Coming Exception: Art and the Crisis of Value,” *New Left Review* 99 (May-June 2016): pp. 111-136.

¹⁷ Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2007).

¹⁸ Cathy O’Neil, *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy* (New York: Crown Books, 2016).

jobs.¹⁹ In response to criticism about privacy, the company decided to limit information available to third-party services in the United States. However, a similar tool is already in use in China: Zhima Credit creates consumer credit scores based on users' activity within a payment app, Alipay, used by hundreds of millions of people to pay for everything from groceries to health care bills. This is part of a bigger experiment being performed by the Chinese government, which in 2014 announced a plan to develop a system of 'social credit' by 2020 by using big data analysis. Individuals will be rated based on their social networks—meaning that you might lose points if you interact with the 'wrong' people, including political activists critical of the government.²⁰

There are many other examples of sharing economy companies that demonstrate the hypocrisy behind this term, and that highlight how the relationship between counterculture and entrepreneurial cyberculture has evolved. Airbnb is an interesting example to consider in the context of this dissertation because of its focus on homes and living spaces, and because of the role it has played in urban development and gentrification. Despite this, it offers many undeniably attractive features: in addition to paying less than you would for a hotel, you have the conveniences of a home in a new city, and the opportunity to meet new people. The kernel of the counterculture still exists within Airbnb, even though it has become more and more difficult to see. The company was founded by Joe Gebbia and Brian Chesky in San Francisco in 2007, and its origin story shares certain qualities with Brand's story: Gebbia and Chesky met at the Rhode Island School of Design, where they studied art and industrial design. Gebbia has described his influences as Jean Prouvé, Charles and Ray Eames, and the Bauhaus movement, which he says helped him learn "the art of designing for the human experience,"²¹ while Chesky has said that attending RISD allowed him to think more creatively and succeed as an entrepreneur (a claim now made in the promotional materials of art schools across the country).²² They moved to San Francisco after they graduated, and as unemployed art school grads, struggled to pay their rent. One day they noticed that all of the hotel rooms in the city were booked because of a big design conference, so they rented out three

¹⁹ Laura Lorenzetti, "Lenders Are Dropping Plans to Judge You by Your Facebook Friends," *Fortune*, February 24, 2016.

²⁰ Mara Hvistendahl, "Inside China's Vast New Experiment in Social Ranking," *Wired*, December 14, 2017.

²¹ Joe Gebbia, personal website, <http://joegebbia.com/about/>.

²² Austin Carr, "Watch Airbnb CEO Brian Chesky Salute RISD, Whip Off His Robe, Dance Like Michael Jackson," *Fast Company*, February 17, 2012.

airbeds on the living room floor of their apartment, and offered guests pop tarts for breakfast. This wasn't such an original idea, since it followed the same model as Couchsurfing. But what Gebbia and Chesky came up with was how to make the platform's design more appealing, and how to make it profitable. They launched their website in 2008, targeting the Democratic National Convention in Denver—Obama was speaking, and there would again be a shortage of hotel rooms. The company quickly became popular and is now worth \$31 billion. The connections between its founders and Brand are noteworthy, including the influence of art, the desire to encourage social connections, and the realization that there was a lot of money to be made in the business of sharing. Chesky wrote about these interests in a short text titled “Shared City”:

Imagine if you could build a city that is shared. Where people become micro-entrepreneurs, and local mom and pops flourish once again. Imagine a city that fosters community, where space isn't wasted, but shared with others. A city that produces more, but without more waste. While this may seem radical, it's not a new idea. Cities are the original sharing platforms. They formed at ancient crossroads of trade, and grew through collaboration and sharing resources. But over time they began to feel mass produced. We lived closer but drifted further apart. But sharing in cities is back, and we want to help build this future. We are committed to helping make cities stronger socially, economically, and environmentally.²³

Sharing is undeniably a major appeal of Airbnb. Regardless of its worldwide reach, and its multi-billion dollar value, it does offer intimate, personal experiences to its customers, who have the opportunity to meet new people, and who are encouraged to feel that a transaction is more than just a transaction. It also offers the chance to see how other people live without ever meeting them face to face—by staying in their homes, seeing their choice of decor, even sleeping in their beds. I stayed in a renovated schoolhouse in Belgrade, Montana, and got tips on hiking in Yellowstone from a retired couple, who “enjoy nothing more than a good book and a bowl of popcorn,” according to their profile. I stayed in the home of a white conservative Christian man in Utah who was employed by the Air Force, and who had hundreds of mugs lining his walls—and not a single book in the entire house. And I stayed with an elderly African American woman in San Francisco whose bathroom walls were covered with articles from *Ebony* magazine dating back to the 1950s, and who told me that she needed the income from Airbnb to continue paying her mortgage. I wrote parts of this dissertation while staying in these homes, and thought about the hypocrisy

²³ Brian Chesky, “Shared City,” *Medium*, March 26, 2014.

of writing critically about Airbnb while actively using it. Although most of the homes that I have stayed in felt lived in by their hosts, and were not taking housing away from someone else, I was aware that I was playing a small role in contributing to the growth of a company that has been involved in reducing the number of affordable living spaces in large cities.

However, I was also aware of the importance of asking critical questions about sharing economy platforms and services that have become part of our everyday lives, and looking critically at what they offer. This includes questioning the degree to which they provide new forms of convenience and social experience, as well as the degree to which they exacerbate existing forms of social and economic inequality. Airbnb has been criticized for how unequally wealth is distributed amongst its hosts: a 2014 study found that 10% of hosts earned 48% of all revenue. In addition, while 87% of hosts own a single listing, the 13% of hosts who own multiple properties rent out 40% of the listings.²⁴ According to critic Tom Slee, this means that while “The company presents its business as one of informal, personal exchange,” those who benefit the most are “people who are using the site as a way to build a business by avoiding the rules around bed & breakfasts and short-term rentals.”²⁵ Slee notes that Airbnb’s success has come in part because of its ability to avoid traditional rules and regulations, as with other sharing economy companies. He writes, “despite its talk of community, the only logic it seems to understand is that of the free market: the right of property owners to do what they want with their property.”²⁶ Airbnb has also been criticized for failing to prevent discrimination against guests and hosts of color. This may be seen as an updated form of redlining, in which the problems associated with peer-to-peer exchanges of goods and services become evident. Face-to-face interactions allow for racial discrimination, and it has been well documented that Airbnb guests of color often have their reservations cancelled, and that hosts of color receive lower ratings than white hosts for comparable accommodations.²⁷ These issues speak to some of the internal contradictions apparent within Airbnb, and the hypocrisies within the sharing economy more broadly, which have existed for decades in Silicon Valley with the interconnected growth of cyberculture and counterculture.

²⁴ Ginia Bellafante, “What the Sharing Economy Really Delivers: Entitlement,” *New York Times*, January 26, 2018.

²⁵ Tom Slee, *What’s Yours is Mine: Against the Sharing Economy* (New York: OR Books, 2016), p. 37.

²⁶ Slee, p. 41.

²⁷ Elaine Glusac, “As Airbnb Grows, So Do Claims of Discrimination,” *New York Times*, June 21, 2016.

One of the biggest critiques of Airbnb has focused on its effects on cities and housing patterns, and the role that it has played in driving up median rents. This is highly visible in San Francisco. It is common to hear stories of landlords evicting tenants or raising rents to get them to leave, and then putting units on Airbnb. This has become so common, in fact, that some tenants unions have started to use private investigators to find out where this is taking place, in order to file lawsuits against developers.²⁸ A quick search of Airbnb listings in San Francisco proves how profitable they have become: searching for listings under \$50 a night turned up three results, the cheapest being a \$30 couch in a shared living room. A search for properties over \$200 a night resulted in hundreds of listings, including a “Designer Flat” for \$835 a night owned by a woman who offers a luxury experience to guests, including “a brand new Range Rover Sport that could be negotiated in, for trips to Napa and Tahoe, for the right people,” as well as an art collection in which a Modigliani painting is visible. In her bio, the owner writes that she has worked at a technology company in Silicon Valley for seven years, and that she is renting her place out while she goes on Safari in Africa. She embodies Airbnb’s spirit of sharing, writing “I believe in karma and have actually become friends with a couple that recently stayed in my home while they were looking for a place to be near their daughter and new grandchild.” She has also included a note about having taken Airbnb’s ‘Living Wage Pledge’—a pledge that she will pay her cleaners at least \$15 an hour. Looking at Airbnb’s online design, and its physical presence in San Francisco, one is struck by the patterns of spatial data evident in its maps, as well as the stories and personal testimonials that offer a sense of trust and familiarity. These are some of the reasons why it has become so popular, and why new listings continue to spring up. While cities across the country have attempted to regulate Airbnb, including San Francisco, it has proven difficult to stem the flow of conversions of housing units into lucrative short-term rental units.

In discussing Airbnb and other sharing economy companies, I have pointed out the ways in which these companies profit by selling an idea of community. A genuine emphasis on community and sharing may have existed in the beginning for many of these companies, but as Brand’s GBN and numerous other examples demonstrate, an interest in maximizing profit for individual shareholders wins out. Houses are incredibly valuable commodities in the Bay Area, and Airbnb has allowed owners and landlords to profit

²⁸ David M. Levitt, “Prying Eyes Are Watching Airbnb Users as Tenants Fight Back,” *Bloomberg*, December 27, 2016.

from them at the expense of low-income renters. Activist groups have targeted Airbnb because of its hypocritical rhetoric regarding sharing, and because of the direct impact it has had on housing prices and average monthly rents. In what follows, I discuss how one of these groups has addressed the issue, by mimicking Airbnb's online aesthetic through maps and collected data, by appealing to users' desires for personal stories, and by connecting these efforts to political lobbying for affordable housing that critiques the notion of housing as a commodity.

The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project

The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project has confronted the myths of the sharing economy through maps, stories and organized protests that make displacement visible, and that connect spatial patterns of data to Airbnb as well as other agents of gentrification. The project may be seen as a form of intervention or disruption, drawing parallels with institutional critique and tactical media, and using tech tools against themselves to investigate the material and symbolic effects of the sharing economy's entrepreneurial cyberculture. However, I argue that the project also engages in forms of activism that align it with other projects discussed in this dissertation that have involved longer-term commitments to movement building and an engagement with existing civic institutions. As a social structure, gentrification can seem inevitable, unstoppable, and totalizing—it has followed similar patterns in major cities for the past several decades. It often seems like the moment a few trendy coffee shops or art galleries move into an area, affordable housing is doomed. And yet, there are many individuals and groups who have devoted significant amounts of their time, energy and creativity to engage in acts of resistance against displacement. The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project began in the fall of 2013 and was initiated by artist and housing activist Erin McElroy, along with a collective of others. McElroy started the project as a way to address the increasing number of evictions and foreclosures in the Bay Area after the 2008 recession. She was interested in finding ways to push back against the tech industry in Silicon Valley and the encroachment of its white collar workers into city spaces that were once affordable for the middle classes. Around this time, anti-gentrification activists began to target the presence of big tech companies in city spaces, including Google shuttle buses, which were seen by many as symptoms of tech-industry driven class divides. McElroy described the idea for the mapping project as emerging from the wake of the

Occupy Movement in the Bay Area: “We had been doing a lot of work around the foreclosure crisis and suddenly a lot of people that I knew were getting eviction notices, so the project really started as a collaborative effort to figure out where these evictions were happening, why they were happening, who we could protest if we were going to protest.”²⁹ Along with a group of other artists and activists, she began working to collect data on evictions, and make it visible through a series of interactive maps that could be accessed through the project’s website.

Data on evictions was collected through public records, court documents and online database searches for property listings, in order to figure out where they were taking place, why they were increasingly common and who was responsible. This may be seen as a form of data mining, albeit on a much smaller scale than is used by major tech companies, but according to the same logic: sorting through information to discern underlying patterns. Another major part of the project involves the visualization of this data through maps. There are maps on evictions, homelessness, gentrification, policing and race, lost art spaces, the proliferation of short term vacation rentals, and dozens of other subjects. The maps are made using sophisticated cartographic software. They are incredibly detailed, easy to navigate, and often positioned next to a histogram that allows users to navigate through the map using certain filters. They are interactive, they can be added to, and they are frequently updated by the collective and by website users with new data. One map shows “All SF Evictions, 1997-2017,” and includes info on the type of eviction, how eviction rates compare across different neighborhoods, and info on property owners. It is possible to zoom in and search by neighborhood, or block by block. There are dots on most blocks that indicate different reasons for the evictions, including Ellis Act evictions, unapproved subtenants, condo conversions and non-payment of rent. Ellis Act evictions, red dots, are by far the most common. This refers to a California law stating that landlords have the right to evict tenants in order to “go out of business,” and then must either sell the building or change its use, for example, from rent-controlled units to condos. As many critics have argued, it is highly abused in California cities. The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project carried out research using rent board statistics to collect info on Ellis Act Evictions and found that speculators and developers were buying multiple buildings and repeatedly

²⁹ Erin McElroy interview, January 10, 2017.

claiming the Ellis Act to clear them out and flip them into condos.³⁰ As the statistics on the website make clear, this is often to turn them into short-term vacation rentals. One of the maps on the website, “Airbnb — SF and Oakland”, was produced by compiling data collected from Airbnb. According to the map, there are nearly 10,000 listings in San Francisco, 56% of which are full-time vacation rentals, shown as purple dots.³¹ Data also shows that many of the Airbnb listings are available more than 300 days of the year. The map allows users to overlay data on evictions as black dots, and what is produced is a map that is completely saturated with black and purple. Zooming in on the Mission, one can see that purple and black dots are often right next to each other.

The work done by the collective may be looked at in the context of Institutional Critique, and in particular, Hans Haacke’s *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971*, a work that famously resulted in the cancellation of an exhibition by the artist at the Guggenheim. Museum director Thomas Messer refused to include the piece in the show, writing that museum policies “exclude active engagement towards social and political ends.”³² Haacke’s piece involved an investigation of the holdings of real-estate developer Harry J. Shapolsky, who owned more than 200 tenement buildings in Harlem and the Lower East Side. Shapolsky’s identity became public through the work of the artist, as did the fact that he was making huge profits by renting out substandard housing units, primarily to poor people of color. Haacke collected information by searching through public records, similar to the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project, and displayed photos of building alongside short texts providing data on the building (address, size of the lot, date of acquisition), producing an aesthetic that now looks very much like a website or database.

The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project uses the tools of big tech and big data against themselves, and in this way, draws parallels with aspects of institutional critique as an art practice. It may also be looked at as a form of tactical media, which worked in a similarly subversive manner, by exposing previously obscured power structures and hierarchies, often by using forms of mimicry and satirical reproduction. In their text “ABC of Tactical Media,” David Garcia and Geert Lovink define tactical media as a way of

³⁰ Larry Gross, “L.A.’s Eviction Game,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 9, 2015.

³¹ “Airbnb—SF and Oakland,” The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project, <https://www.antievictionmap.com/evictions#/airbnb-sf-and-oakland-2-1/>

³² Michael Brenson, “Art: In Political Tone, Works by Hans Haacke,” *New York Times*, December 19, 1986.

using the texts and artifacts of everyday life in a rebellious manner. Informed by Michel de Certeau's writing on tactics and use value, they argue that tactical media practitioners similarly use what is available within popular culture, but in ways that subvert the original intentions of a particular cultural form, to produce "an aesthetic of poaching, tricking, reading, speaking, strolling, shopping, desiring. Clever tricks, the hunter's cunning, maneuvers, polymorphic situations, joyful discoveries, poetic as well as warlike."³³ They view tactical media as a "qualified form of humanism," that involves "an antidote to newly emerging forms of technocratic scientism which under the banner of post-humanism tend to restrict discussions of human use and social reception."³⁴

The maps produced by the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project demonstrate aspects of tactical media as outlined by Garcia and Lovink. As McElroy told me, "we've been written about as anti-tech a lot, and what I always say is, no we actually are tech, tech has many lives and iterations and it's possible to utilize digital technology with an anti-capitalist agenda even if you're immersed in a capitalist system."³⁵ In addition to using high-tech cartographic software, the collective has employed techniques such as crowdsourcing to produce their maps—mimicking the supposedly democratizing aspects of sharing economy companies. There is a pledge button on the website, similar to the Airbnb pledge button, yet this one asks users to "Take a pledge to boycott those who profit off of dispossession."³⁶ In its mimicry, the project may be seen as attempt to duplicate and repurpose existing forms of the capitalist sharing economy, including an aesthetic associated with high tech data visualization.

The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project has raised questions about patterns of property ownership and urban development through their work, and they have gained attention from politicians and developers. The collective uses the tools of big data, and design features commonly associated with sharing economy companies, to comment on displacement driven in large part by Silicon Valley tech companies and the white collar workers who have colonized the Bay Area. The maps it produces are not meant to be ends in themselves. While they may be contemplated for their complex representations of spatial politics and shifting demographics, they are also meant to be used, in order to start broader conversations, provide

³³ David Garcia and Geert Lovink, "The ABC of Tactical Media," 1997, available at <http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-9705/msg00096.html>.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ McElroy interview.

³⁶ Anti-Eviction Mapping Project website, www.antievictionmap.com.

info and aid other organizations. Like the other projects discussed in this dissertation, they have dual lives as both art and as useful tools. The project was exhibited in the exhibition *Take This Hammer: Art + Media Activism* at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in March 2016. Curator Christian L. Frock wrote that the title for the show referenced a 1963 documentary film featuring James Baldwin that focused on the lives of African Americans in San Francisco. It was also meant to reference the notion that “art is not a mirror held up to reality but a hammer with which to shape it” (a quote from Leon Trotsky’s 1924 *Literature and Revolution*). Frock’s statement notes the way that digital technologies, smartphones and social media have been used as activist tools, becoming “powerful assets in generating dialogue and, often, spurring real action.”³⁷

This is the case with the maps produced by the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project: they have been used in the context of political organizing, including city council meetings and local hearings. Some were commissioned by tenants organizations or other nonprofits, and several have been used by lawyers to sue landlords or to push for housing policy amendments. In a 2014 study, the group investigated the holdings of several developers, some of whom had hundreds of properties, and investigated how much money they made, and how they were able to get around local laws. They situated this within a broader critique of the sharing economy, writing “We do not believe the sharing economy, when it comes to affording housing costs, is anything innovative or cooperative; Airbnb, Flipkey and VRBO are individual profit-seeking companies couched in claims of pseudo-collectivism.”³⁸ Another report by the group, “The Speculator Loophole: Ellis Act Evictions in San Francisco”, was produced in collaboration with the organization Tenants Together, and was used by Senator Mark Leno in a bill he introduced in the state legislature. However, the group’s efforts were no match for the lobbying power of developers, and organizations like the San Francisco Association of Realtors lobbied together and raised millions of dollars to fight the bill, which failed to pass. While the bill might have ultimately failed, it succeeded in sparking public outrage, and received a lot of press, thereby opening up broader debate about the rising number of evictions in the city and the role played by both speculators and short-term rental companies. Interestingly, the bill

³⁷ Christian L. Frock, “The Fierce Urgency of Now,” curatorial essay for *Take This Hammer: Art + Media Activism* (San Francisco: Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 2016), available at <https://www.christianlfrock.com/work/#/takethishammer/>.

³⁸ “The Commodification of Everyday Life: This Bed’s For Sale,” report by the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project, July 2014, available at <http://antievictionmappingproject.net/airbnbreport.html>.

received support from many Silicon Valley tech companies, which is perhaps not surprising given the region's history of supporting liberal causes at the same time that it contributes to material inequality.

In their production of visibility, the maps created by the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project have informed public conversations and contributed to local and state-wide political advocacy. The group has offered their maps and collected data to other organizations and worked with them on lobbying campaigns, including Tenants Together, the San Francisco Tenants Union, and California Reinvestment Coalition. They have worked on numerous reports that outline specific policy goals that would help to alleviate the housing crisis in the Bay Area, including repealing Costa-Hawkins—a state law that places limits on municipal rent control. Through their work, they have provided evidence and raised important questions about displacement, and have contributed to a broader social movement against displacement in the Bay Area. Yet the maps are not just fixated on data. They also seek to tell stories and offer humanizing connections to the effects of displacement. In this way, the quantitative and qualitative are brought together—a design quality that once again parallels Airbnb: both platforms offer a bird's eye view of the city, allowing users to easily comprehend certain patterns on a neighborhood or city-wide level. Both also offer a related feature: an inside look at what goes on behind closed doors—Airbnb in the form of host's personal stories and guests' experiences, as well as photos that provide details of decor, taste and furnishing, and the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project in the form of oral histories from individuals who have experienced displacement.

Telling Stories about Eviction

Evictions involve traumatic acts of visibility through exposure, in which furniture and personal possessions are dumped on the curb for all to see. Yet the systemic nature of eviction is often hidden or obscured. What these maps make visible is the degree to which eviction is a social problem, not the result of individual failure. They also provide a collected body of evidence and individual stories that have been used to press governments for action. What we see through the maps is that evictions have become a widespread public health issue, caused by the failure of governments to regulate housing markets and close loopholes that encourage property speculation. In addition to the maps, the project also involves collecting oral histories from people who have been displaced. McElroy told me that the collective “felt

uneasy about reducing complex geopolitical worlds to dots on a map, and they wanted to add more nuance.”³⁹ To do this, the group began to interview people who had been evicted, through their work with tenants unions and other non-profit groups. Hundreds of these interviews are now available on their website. The stories tend to follow a similar narrative: they are about growing up in San Francisco neighborhoods, living there for decades, witnessing changes, and then being evicted. Many of the storytellers express feelings of loss, not just of their home, but of their community as well.

One woman speaks about moving to New York from Chile, and then to the Mission in San Francisco, where she lived for ten years and owned a small empanada shop before being evicted. A disabled senior discusses his battle with AIDS and how he felt about receiving an Ellis Act eviction notice after living in the Castro for nineteen years. He decided to fight the eviction with the help of Eviction Free SF and the Tenderloin Housing Clinic. There are numerous artists and cultural workers who have been evicted and have shared their stories on the website. One man, a photographer, describes making his own camera lenses out of the bottoms of wine glasses. He lived in a rent-controlled apartment for 34 years before being served an eviction notice by the Harshawat family. Additional information about the property owners is included alongside the man’s story, in a manner that recalls Haacke’s investigation of real-estate developers: the sons of the Harshawat family are tech entrepreneurs, and one is married to a curator who works at the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco.⁴⁰ Another woman describes living in Section 8 housing in the Tenderloin with her family for 13 years, and then receiving an eviction notice along with other families in the building, who joined together and successfully fought the eviction. Since most tenants in the building speak Cantonese or Vietnamese, she took on the role of translating during their appeal. She also took it upon herself to do research online, finding out that the owner was planning to convert the building into condos. What do interviewees get out of telling their stories? When I asked McElroy this, she told me that many of the people she speaks with were “outraged about what’s happening and think that their story is part of the greater picture and want to share it...and there are a lot of people who are wanting to document these things as they happen because they’re happening so quickly.”⁴¹ Storytellers on the website express frustration and anger at being evicted, and in some cases,

³⁹ McElroy interview.

⁴⁰ “The Harshawats,” <https://www.antievictionmap.com/harshawats/>.

⁴¹ Erin McElroy interview.

explain how they fought back. Together, these stories are a powerful tool of protest, linking together disparate individuals who have experienced the same thing, and who might learn from each other's actions.

The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project mimics many of the features of sharing economy platforms, and it engages in social media storytelling on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Its design allows it to share visual parallels with the personalized testimonials of Airbnb, and the sense of trust and authenticity they provide. Its oral history interviews are uploaded to its website via Sound Cloud, making them easily accessible. This feature of the website shares an aesthetic with online fundraising platforms such as GoFundMe, in which personal stories play a key role. GoFundMe was founded in San Diego in 2010, and now has its headquarters in Silicon Valley. It has been described as a form of “free market philanthropy” in which fundraising becomes a competition or popularity contest. More than \$5 billion has been raised through GoFundMe since it was established, and the company became incredibly profitable after its founders started charging a fee for each campaign. Nearly half of the campaigns are intended to help individuals pay their medical bills. In fact, as some critics have noted, this is precisely why GoFundMe was able to grow so quickly—it made a fortune off of Americans who do not have health insurance. Health-related campaigns on the site are most popular in states that opted out of the medicaid expansion under the Affordable Care Act.⁴² Evictions are a common type of fundraising campaign as well—when I searched for ‘eviction’ on GoFundMe, it turned up 16,714 results.⁴³

At first glance, the narratives sound similar to the oral histories of the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project. Yet, in looking in more depth at the stories and photos presented in GoFundMe campaigns, a different approach to storytelling becomes evident. Expressions of anger, outrage or blame are rare. Instead, fundraisers portray themselves as decent, deserving people who worked hard and tried their best, but suffered from unavoidable circumstances, and need a helping hand to get back on track. Many provide specific details related to their employment history to emphasize that they are hard workers and are not just asking for a handout. One man describes falling behind on rent because of a roommate who gambled

⁴² Jordan Weissmann, “Crowdfunding Sites Are Booming Thanks to People Who Need Help With Crushing Medical Bills,” *Slate*, June 13, 2017, http://www.slate.com/blogs/moneybox/2017/06/13/crowdfunding_sites_are_booming_thanks_to_people_who_need_help_with_medical.html.

⁴³ Search for ‘eviction’ performed on GoFundMe, March 28, 2018.

away all of his money. He says, “As many know I am not one to ask for help. I was raised to be the giver. The supporter. The helper. I was raised to work hard for the things I want and need. To be self sufficient and strong.” Another man in Los Angeles expresses shame for being evicted: “Yes I am COMPLETELY embarrassed and humiliated to have to post this, but honestly I don’t know what else to do... I’m sorry to put this out there I really am, but I guarantee that I will pay this back when I receive my retirement funds.”⁴⁴

There are thousands of similar stories. Yet while the personal narratives on GoFundMe are just as poignant as those told by participants in the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project, there is no attempt to connect stories to a broader narrative or political analysis, or use them as a starting point for action. Instead, individuals make appeals to other individuals. In this way, GoFundMe promotes a sense of personal responsibility and freedom that is prevalent in American culture, in which charity is valued while taxes are denigrated, and some are held up as the ‘deserving poor’ while others suffer due to supposedly personal failures and poor decision making. The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project similarly appeals to users’ desire for individual stories and personal insights, by positioning faces and testimonials alongside its map data—we learn that an eviction took place, and we learn the reasons why. However, evictions are not portrayed as individual failures, but as political and social failures caused by the inability of governments to take action and stand up against powerful real estate lobbying. We are invited by the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project to contribute money to support an individual’s eviction defense, or help someone pay rent, as with GoFundMe, but we are also invited to learn more about who is doing the evicting, and join coordinated actions to protest the continued ability of developers to profit from dispossession.

The power of storytelling, and its potential to aid in activism, has been considered by numerous authors. Matthew Desmond’s book *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* is based on two years of ethnographic research in Milwaukee. The author lived with eight families, four white and four black, to study eviction and its social impact. The book is full of data gleaned from tenant surveys and public records, showing that while evictions were once rare enough to draw crowds, they have become

⁴⁴ Posting on GoFundMe, accessed March 25, 2018.

commonplace—millions of Americans are evicted each year.⁴⁵ While arguments about the increasing prevalence of eviction are a valuable aspect of the book, its value also comes from its stories. Like some of the tech-based projects and services I have discussed in this chapter, the stories told in the book offer readers the chance to see behind closed doors. Desmond writes about how he gained the trust of residents and spent time getting to know them before he thought about how to construct a narrative, and how to position that narrative. He tells the story of Arleen Beale, who had been evicted 22 times, and who was facing eviction because one of her children had broken the door of her rented home. Desmond writes:

The day Arleen and her boys had to be out was cold. But if she waited any longer, the landlord would summon the sheriff, who would arrive with a gun, a team of boot-footed movers, and a folded judge's order saying that her house was no longer hers. She would be given two options: truck or curb. "Truck" would mean that her things would be loaded into an eighteen-footer and later checked into bonded storage. She could get everything back after paying \$350. Arleen didn't have \$350, so she would have opted for "curb," which would mean watching the movers pile everything onto the sidewalk. Her mattresses. A floor-model television. her copy of *Don't Be Afraid to Discipline*. Her nice glass dining table and the lace table cloth that fit just-so. Silk plants. Bibles. The meat cuts in the freezer. The shower curtain. Jafari's asthma machine.⁴⁶

The stories told by Desmond take readers inside homes, making visible the conditions that lead to evictions, which are often considered to be the result of poor decision making. He writes that his intention was not to focus solely on the lives of poor people, but to analyze relationships between the poor and the rich that are responsible for evictions. The detailed narratives bring the characters to life in the book, making them seem like protagonists in a novel. This is an important quality of ethnographic writing: allowing readers to identify with others and imagine what it is like to live someone else's life. However, Desmond's approach to storytelling also raises questions regarding the impact and intentions of ethnographic writing about the poor. How are studies like these used? Do they provoke policy changes? And should ethnographers even be involved in political advocacy, or does their work end with telling a story, and making it visible, so that someone else might take action?

This brings up another one of the major reasons why individuals share personal stories about eviction, according to McElroy: they tell their stories because they believe they might produce action. This connection between storytelling and activism informs many of the art projects discussed in this

⁴⁵ Matthew Desmond, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* (New York: Crown Books, 2016).

⁴⁶ Desmond, p. 1.

dissertation, including stories about racism and police violence told in exhibitions at Project Row Houses, and the feminist zines about body issues and cultural appropriation made by young women at Trans.lation. Francesca Polletta has written about the political power of storytelling, arguing that “where authorities are unyielding, storytelling sustains groups as they fight for reform, helping them build new collective identities, link current actions to heroic pasts and glorious futures, and restyle setbacks as way stations to victory. Even before movements emerge, the stories that circulate within subaltern communities provide a counterpoint to the myths promoted by the powerful.”⁴⁷ While Polletta sees storytelling as an important tool within social movements, she also points out that storytelling comes with risks: the meaning of a story can change depending on who is telling it, and the context in which it is told. She cautions readers that “dominant epistemologies of narrative have imposed constraints on how effectively people can use stories to press for change.”⁴⁸ Polletta believes that the appeal of storytelling is in part due to the skepticism towards professional expertise in American culture. Personal stories supposedly offer more authenticity and a less institutional perspective. This explains part of the appeal of personal narratives such as those found on sites such GoFundMe, as well as the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project, which feature similar stories but different modes of contextualization.

Personal stories have taken on an increasingly visible role since Trump’s election, with the rise of culture wars and fake news circulating on Twitter and other social media sites. Stories have become incredibly important tools within social movements, from #MeToo to #NeverAgain. Personal stories have fueled these movements and have attracted supporters by the thousands, but they have also resulted in heated attacks regarding the authenticity of personal stories. Polletta argued that one of the main ways for social movements to have an impact was their ability to gain “institutional purchase for new distributions of storytelling authority.”⁴⁹ Yet what has taken place recently is the growth of social movements that lack institutional purchase, and often maintain a fairly horizontal organizational form, spurred by individuals and groups who have little in the way of traditional authority. Marjory Stoneman Douglas high school students gained millions of social media followers after the shooting at their school in Parkland, Florida,

⁴⁷ Francesca Polletta, *It Was Like A Fever: Storytelling in Protest and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 3.

⁴⁸ Polletta, p. 27.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

when they helped to organize the March for Our Lives, which brought millions of Americans into the streets to call for legislative action on gun control. Students helped to start a political movement by telling personal stories about surviving the shooting, losing classmates and enduring trauma. They have been victims of attacks from conservative pundits and right-wing conspiracy theorists, who have accused them of lying, and who have fabricated their own bizarre stories about the activists. These claims may be seen as part of an emerging understanding of the role played by storytelling in relation to contemporary social media, in which the public sphere has been reshaped into a battleground of personal attacks and clashing political ideologies, which obscure rational thinking. This has been reinforced by Trump's undermining of institutional authority and the many stories he tells, which become truth to his followers once they are tweeted.

Zeynep Tufekci has commented on the anti-institutional nature of recent social movements, which have been characterized by forms of online networking that sparked protests, for example, during the occupation of Gezi Park in Istanbul in 2013. She writes that while digital technology allows large numbers of people to convene quickly, and social movements to arise seemingly overnight, there are certain tradeoffs that must be considered. Social movements during the civil rights era grew more slowly and therefore developed internal mechanisms to aid in decision making and self-governance. Tufekci refers to these processes as 'network internalities.' She writes: "The benefits and collective capabilities attained during the process of forming durable networks which occur regardless of what the task is, or how trivial it may seem, as long as it poses challenges that must be overcome collectively and require decision making, building of trust, and delegation among a semidurable network of people who interact over time."⁵⁰ Tufekci argues that digital technology enables a "participatory leaderlessness and horizontalism" that can be a source of strength, since large protests can take place quickly and easily, but that they often lack a means of resolving disagreements. When social movements arise quickly through hashtag activism, they are at risk of 'tactical freeze,' since they lack the decision making capabilities and organizational structures of more solidified movements, and are unable to adapt to new situations, resolve conflicts, or move past initial tactics of occupation in order to make long lasting political demands.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), p. 75.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

Producing Visibility, Disrupting Displacement

Many of the projects that I have discussed in this dissertation share the belief that art might be able to rework social relations in a manner that affects this concept of tactical freeze—and that experimenting with forms of collective practice, decision making and organizational structure might thaw that which is frozen. For Tufekci, the issue revolves around an inability to produce new forms of social organization, because of a lack of trust in leadership and institutional authority within activist movements that emerge online. There are noteworthy similarities between spontaneous protests and artistic interventions: both involve gestures that bring visibility to a particular issue. Debates surrounding activist art and tactical media bring up similar questions about hierarchies, leadership and whether or not to collaborate with institutions. In reflecting on the emergence and development of tactical media practices, Gene Ray and Gregory Sholette consider its emphasis on ephemerality and subversion, writing that for tactical media practitioners, “the art of everyday resistance seemed preferable to the methodical work of building sustained opposition only to wind up with a new boss, the same as the old boss.”⁵² Ray and Sholette go on to consider why this might be the case: “it is far easier to recognise shared opposition to militarism, social injustice, ecological ruin and patriarchy, than it is to find agreement about what a ‘better world’ would be like, how we should struggle to get there, and just who we ‘opponents’ of these forces are, collectively or individually.”⁵³ In their text on tactical media, Garcia and Lovink describe Krzysztof Wodiczko’s work as emblematic of the genre—existing as a short term disruption, moving fast, becoming centerless and nomadic, rather than attempting to build something.⁵⁴

Arguments about tactical media relate to discussions surrounding art as a form of urban intervention. In her book *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*, Rosalyn Deutsche outlined a fundamental transformation of the urban sphere corresponding to global economic restructuring of the late twentieth century. Manhattan was at the epicenter of this shift, and gentrification accelerated rapidly there during the 1980s. A similar transformation of urban space has taken place in the past decade, with the Bay Area now at the center, symbolizing the capital of the sharing economy and technological entrepreneurialism.

⁵² Gene Ray and Gregory Sholette, “Introduction: Whither Tactical Media?” *Third Text* 22.5 (2008): p. 520.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 521.

⁵⁴ Garcia and Lovink, “The ABC of Tactical Media.”

The work described in Deutsche's book may be seen as representative of its moment of production, in terms of activist art—it emerged out of the tradition of deconstruction and postmodernism, and sought to make certain hidden truths more visible about the exclusions taking place in public spaces. One of Deutsche's chapters focuses on the expulsion of homeless people from public parks in New York, which was carried out under the guise of safety. She argued that the city's removal policies sprung from a belief that public spaces were being restored to their "rightful" owners, and discusses several art projects that acted as interventions, visualizing the idea that "urban space is the product of conflict."⁵⁵ The work she discusses functions primarily by highlighting or make conflict more visible, or by exposing hidden tensions in public spaces that might otherwise go unnoticed. Wodiczko's work comes up in Deutsche's book as well—she discusses his *Homeless Projection*, in which the artist projected images of homeless people onto neoclassical statues in Union Square, in a neighborhood that was undergoing rapid revitalization and development. In projects such as this one, the main action is one of revelation. Deutsche writes: "Mapping these images onto the monuments in a public square, Wodiczko forces architecture to reveal its role as an actor in New York's real-estate market. Wodiczko's intervention in the space of Union Square revitalization thus addresses the single issue most consistently ignored by the city throughout the long and complicated course of redevelopment: displacement."⁵⁶ Deutsche describes Wodiczko's work as an intervention that makes certain contradictions visible. This is an approach shared by many activist artists: expose hypocrisy and produce visibility for marginalized individuals and groups. Her discussion of the projections revolves around their iconographic provocations, and she argues that they question the traditional associations between public space and its rightful owners by subverting the "formal relationships between image and architecture."⁵⁷ She argues that the work may be seen as "a symbolic declaration of new rights—for homeless people."⁵⁸

Conflict is also a part of what becomes visible in the work of the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project. We see that those who are displaced are much more likely to be low-income, and people of color, and that displacement results in the breaking up of communities and longer travel times to places of employment.

⁵⁵ Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), p. 278.

⁵⁶ Deutsche, p. 43.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

However, the contexts for both urban development and activist art have shifted since the emergence of tactical media. This raises the question: how might we reconsider the concept of disruption that is so important within tactical media, artistic interventions, and activist art more broadly, to take these different contexts into account? And what might it mean to ‘disrupt displacement’, especially considering how the concept of disruption has been used to promote new sharing economy platforms? While the work described by Deutsche focused on revelation, seeking to produce visibility and expose the presence of urban conflict, gentrification has become so prevalent in American cities that it hardly needs to be made visible. In addition, while Deutsche described Wodiczko’s work as granting symbolic rights to the homeless, many artists working to address social issues now seek to do more than this, and have become interested in merging their work with forms of community organizing and social movement building, in attempts to grant actual rights to individuals who have been evicted. The maps and stories produced by the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project exemplify how disruption has evolved as a form of artistic intervention. They share Deutsche’s focus on exposure and revelation, making evictions visible, and publicizing the names of developers who are responsible. They also play with iconography as forms of tactical media, mimicking the design features of websites associated with the sharing economy, but subverting their narratives of individualism, profit and private property. However, they do something different as well: in their open-ended nature, their usability, and their emphasis on storytelling, their initial intervention is positioned as a starting point rather than the end goal. Like other work discussed in this dissertation, the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project is focused on exploring the impact of artists working in neighborhoods for long periods of time, who have positioned their work against displacement, but who have also engaged with existing civic institutions in order to build social movements. The production of visibility may be seen as a foundation, upon which advocacy for affordable housing takes place, as well as the building of a community of people on and offline who want to turn stories into action.

Chapter Four — Artwashing and Activism in Boyle Heights

On July 2, 2016, a community meeting held inside Self Help Graphics, an art space that has supported Chicano art in Los Angeles for 45 years, was disrupted by a group of anti-gentrification protestors. They marched into the room and shut down the meeting, which was meant to be a dialogue focused on the relationship between art and development in Boyle Heights, but which protestors accused of being a one-sided lecture. Following the event, Self Help Graphics was added to the activists' boycott list. Then, on February 12, 2017, protestors surrounded the art space 356 Mission, where a political action meeting was being held by artists to discuss how to respond to Trump's divisive politics following his inauguration. The protestors, affiliated with Defend Boyle Heights (DBH), Boyle Heights Alliance Against Artwashing and Displacement (BHAAAD) and other organizations, set up a picket line to protest 356 Mission's role in gentrification, demanding that the art space turn over its keys to them and leave the neighborhood for good.¹ These are just a few of the many actions that have been carried out by anti-gentrification protestors in Boyle Heights, which raise broader questions about the relationship between art, activism and urban development. Since 2015, DBH and BHAAAD have protested private galleries like Chimento Contemporary, Nicodim and Maccarone, as well as art spaces that have made more of an attempt to engage with the community, including PSST, Self Help Graphics and 356 Mission. Protestors have portrayed these art spaces as equally complicit in exacerbating gentrification, viewing art as inextricably connected to market speculation, rising rents, and ultimately, the displacement of the neighborhood's predominantly Latinx population in favor of whiter, wealthier residents.

In this chapter I examine some of the tactics used by activists in Boyle Heights, from organizing boycotts and picket lines, to occupying galleries and using forms of online activism, such as facebook debates, doxxing and fake websites. I am interested in examining these tactics in relation to 356 Mission and Self Help Graphics in particular, since the two art spaces seem to be the most naturally aligned with community interests due to their political affiliations and their interest in public programming. In this

¹ Defend Boyle Heights is a coalition made up of the following groups: Undeportables, The OVAS (formerly Ovarian Psychos), Unión de Vecinos, Serve the People - Los Angeles. They are supported by a number of other organizations, including East LA Brown Berets, LACCLA, BHAAAD, Los Angeles Tenants Union, Eviction Defense Network, Immigrant Youth Coalition, Ice Out of LA and others. See <http://defendboyleheights.blogspot.com/p/frequently-asked-questions.html>, accessed July 30, 2018.

sense, the two organizations share certain features with other art projects discussed in this dissertation, in which art is positioned as a tool for community building and alternative development that challenges market-driven revitalization efforts.

I argue that while activists' commitment to refusal has produced a number of what they would view as successes (including the closure of several art galleries), it has also obscured the complexity of identities and affiliations that exist in Boyle Heights. For example, many of the organizers in DBH and BHAAAD are artists themselves. This includes several of the founding members of Union de Vecinos, a tenants rights group, who are part of the art collective Ultra-red, and a large contingent of students and professors from CalArts, many of whom are white and middle-class. There are also a number of Latinx artists in Boyle Heights who see their work as connected to the neighborhood's history, but who are now being confronted with the message that making art is harmful to their community. Additionally, the closure of the queer art space PSSST in 2017 brought up questions about whose identities deserved representation and support in the community. Another complication was that many of the artists and cultural workers who moved into Boyle Heights had been pushed out of other neighborhoods, including the Arts District—a pattern that has become familiar in stories of arts-driven gentrification in which artists move in, development follows, and then artists, along with other low-income residents, are forced to move once again.

Examining these complications brings up broader questions surrounding complicity and compromise in socially engaged art projects—including whether artists should work within or outside formal political organizations. I look at how the actions of DBH and BHAAAD complicate understandings of socially engaged art through their members' belief that art and gentrification are inextricably connected. The conflict between artists affiliated with either 356 Mission or Self Help, and activist artists involved in DBH and BHAAAD, points to different understandings of cultural production and community organizing: the former group holds the view that it is possible to work within the current economic and political system to achieve meaningful social change, while the latter group demonstrates a commitment to autonomous organizing and the belief that activists compromise their ideals when they work with politicians and developers. This points to a broader fracture within leftist political movements that corresponds with the conflicts I have discussed throughout this dissertation: between socially

engaged art and its willingness to cooperate with the state in order to grow in scale and influence, and activist art, characterized by a commitment to stay underground and remain autonomous from institutions.

What do these moments of conflict between activists and artists tell us about the role of dialogue within social movements, and how does this relate to the apparent fragmentation of civil discourse in contemporary politics? Claims are often made by practitioners of socially engaged art to resolve conflict or build coalitions through dialogical aesthetics (including by Ultra-red, who cite dialogue and listening-based practices as a central component of their work). Yet at the same time, debates about art and gentrification in Boyle Heights have been characterized by their intensity, their divisive nature, and the unwillingness of both protestors and developers to compromise, or even listen to each other. I argue that conflicts about artwashing are representative of a larger breakdown in US political discourse driven by online rhetoric and fueled by intense debates about identity and authenticity, and that they are connected to a moment of growing tribalism on and offline, in which coalition building among the left has become increasingly difficult at the same time that right wing populism and xenophobia have exploded.

I begin the chapter by providing a brief history of Boyle Heights. Then I look at the struggle around housing rights in the 1990s, and the role played by Ultra-red and Union de Vecinos, which were instrumental in sparking contemporary anti-gentrification activism. Following that, I focus on Self Help Graphics and 356 Mission, and how they came to be protested by DBH, BHAAAD and other groups. Activists in Boyle Heights have been successful in many ways: by focusing public attention on the issue of displacement in the neighborhood, and by directly or indirectly forcing the closure of several art galleries.² However, there are several large-scale, non-art related development projects that are moving forward—and that threaten their desire for self-determination in the neighborhood.

² PSSST closed in February 2017, listing the protests as their reason for closing, including online trolling and harassment. 356 Mission closed in May 2018, stating that their lease was up and it was the right time for them to close. Chimento Contemporary moved to a new location in June 2018. MaRS has stated its intentions to close, volunteering to perform a “symbolic and actual closure,” to which DBH responded that the only act they cared about was its actual closure, and not a performance. UTA Artist Space closed in April 2018. See Abe Ahn, “More Galleries Are Leaving the Contested Los Angeles Neighborhood of Boyle Heights,” *Hyperallergic*, May 4, 2018, <https://hyperallergic.com/440967/mars-chimento-uta-artist-space-leaving-boyle-heights/>.

Boyle Heights: “Hopelessly Heterogeneous”?

Boyle Heights is a six-mile-square neighborhood located east of Downtown LA, and adjacent to the LA River, right next door to the trendy Arts District. Historically, it was one of the most diverse neighborhoods in Los Angeles, and it has seen successive waves of immigrants since the early twentieth century. In the 1880s, the neighborhood was an affluent suburb of LA named after Andrew Boyle, a wealthy Irish immigrant and city council member who lived on 22 acres of land that he called ‘White Bluffs.’ During WWI, Jewish workers moved to Boyle Heights in increasing numbers, attracted by growing industries offering jobs, and by the pleasant climate. George J. Sanchez notes that they brought with them “a tradition of radical politics and enthusiastic trade unionism,” and that they established a strong presence of trade unions in the neighborhood, including local chapters of hatters’, carpenters’ and garment workers’ unions.³ By the 1930s, Boyle Heights had become a working-class neighborhood made up primarily of Jewish residents, with smaller numbers of black, Asian and Latinx inhabitants. Mexican workers were among the first to settle in the ‘flats,’ as they were known then—an area next to the river and the train tracks. Many worked in the garment industry as well as food packing plants that grew along the tracks. A second Mexican community emerged on the eastern border of Boyle Heights, next to Belvedere, which by 1930 was the fifth largest Mexican settlement in the US. This part of Boyle Heights also became home to a growing number of African Americans. While it may be tempting to see this mix of cultures and identities as a harmonious melting pot, Sanchez points out that in reality, most of the residential blocks were fairly homogeneous.⁴

Following WWII, the numbers of Jewish and Japanese residents decreased⁵ and the Latinx population increased, and is now around 95%. As Sanchez notes, this occurred for a number of different reasons. One reason had to do with the upward mobility of Jewish and Japanese residents in the decades following the war, many of whom moved to the suburbs in the 1950s and 60s. He argues that government policies surrounding housing, policing and transportation also played an important role in shifting neighborhood demographics. In the early twentieth century, Boyle Heights was demarcated as a non-

³ George J. Sanchez, “Race and Immigration in Changing Communities: The Case of Boyle Heights,” in *Boyle Heights Oral History Project* (Los Angeles: Japanese American National Museum, 2002), p. 15.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Japanese residents of Boyle Heights were forced into internment camps during WWII, and were forced to sell their homes quickly at very low prices or abandon them altogether.

white space in maps produced by the Home Owners' Loan Corporation. Redlining practices characterized the neighborhood as dangerous, meaning that it was nearly impossible to purchase or insure a home there. This kept many residents in the position of renters, preventing them from building wealth through home ownership. A report by the Home Owners Loan Corporation stated: "This is a 'melting pot' area and is literally honey-combed with diverse and subversive racial elements. It is seriously doubted whether there is a single block in the area which does not contain detrimental racial elements and there are very few districts which are not hopelessly heterogeneous."⁶

West LA became whiter and wealthier at the beginning of the twentieth century through zoning ordinances that made it exclusively residential. There were no restrictions on industrial development in the East and South, leading to a booming number of immigrants settling nearby for work opportunities. As Sanchez notes, the internment of Japanese people during WWII also played a role in shifting neighborhood demographics, since many Japanese were forced to abandon their homes and possessions. Historically, Boyle Heights may be seen as a 'classic' immigrant neighborhood: some scholars have described a common pattern in US cities in which immigrants arrive, become assimilated, gain economic capital and then leave for the suburbs.⁷ However, Sanchez argues that this way of looking at historical urban transformation is problematic, and that rather than demonstrating ethnic succession, the example of Boyle Heights shows that it was a "polyglot community made up of Mexicans, Jews, Japanese, African Americans, Armenians, Italians and scattered native whites for most of its history well into the 1950s."⁸ By the 1960s, Boyle Heights had become majority Latinx, following a wave of migration from Central America. The housing situation was volatile and inadequate, and displacement was common. While several public housing projects were built in the 1940s to address the situation (including Aliso Village and Pico-Aliso), government support was short-lived, and the buildings suffered deterioration and disinvestment for several decades until they were torn down in the 1990s. Displacement also took place in the form of freeway expansion: as with many low-income communities of color, residents had less

⁶ Home Owners Loan Corporation City Survey Files, Area D-53, Los Angeles, 1939, quoted in Sanchez.

⁷ Quoted in Sanchez.

⁸ Sanchez, p. 13.

political clout to resist the imposition of freeways through their neighborhoods, and more than 10,000 people were displaced to make room for the I-10, the 101 and the 5.⁹

DBH has pointed to the connection between itself as an organization, and the history of the neighborhood, including members of the Jewish working classes who organized unions and cooperatives in the neighborhood in the 1920s, handed out free food during the Great Depression, and organized an annual May Day celebration. In 2018, the group protested the opening of a Jewish bakery in the neighborhood, because the owner had publicly supported Trump and expressed anti-immigrant views on social media and on Fox News. The bakery owner attempted to legitimate his presence and political views by arguing that the neighborhood was originally Jewish. In response, DBH pointed to the radical socialist origins of the neighborhood's Jewish inhabitants, suggesting that the protestors (including many low-income people of color) were in fact the rightful heirs of this history: "Reflecting on our neighborhood's ancestors, including the many socialist Jewish leaders that built community so fiercely, we acknowledge them as our comrades."¹⁰

Organizing in the 90s

As this history makes clear, political radicalism in Boyle Heights is nothing new. There was a long tradition of activism carried out by the Jewish working classes in the neighborhood. Recent protests share much in common with radical unions of the 1930s, as well as the Chicano movement in the 60s and 70s (discussed in more detail below). While the emergence of groups like DBH and BHAAAD may be seen as drawing on these histories, its roots lie more directly in protests that took place in the 90s over the closure of the Pico Aliso housing project in Boyle Heights. It was built in 1942, and plans were made to demolish it in 1996 under the HOPE VI act, intended to remove distressed public housing units and replace them with mixed-income housing. This ultimately resulted in a complex that had fewer units, and

⁹ Gilbert Estrada, "The Historical Roots of Gentrification in Boyle Heights," *KCET*, September 13, 2017, <https://www.kcet.org/shows/city-rising/the-historical-roots-of-gentrification-in-boyle-heights>

¹⁰ Gustavo Arellano, "When the Jewish Bakers of Boyle Heights were Radical Socialists Instead of Trump Supporters," *L.A. Taco*, July 30, 2018, <http://www.lataco.com/when-the-jewish-bakers-of-boyle-heights-were-radical-socialists-instead-of-trump-supporters/>.

of those, half as many were subsidized for low-income people.¹¹ Beginning in 1996, tenants of Pico Aliso received eviction notices, and in response, they formed Union de Vecinos to organize collectively and defend what they considered to be their right to housing.

Some of the founding members of Union de Vecinos were artists who were part of the collective Ultra-red, established in 1994 by Dont Rhine and Marco Larsen, members of ACT UP who were involved in AIDS activism in LA. They have described their work as combining conceptual art, social engagement and activism. While activist art often focuses on bold graphics and high visibility, Ultra-red's work focuses on sound: rather than producing visibility, it seeks to produce audibility and amplify voices. The collective structures many of their projects around bringing groups of people together and asking them questions about sound, such as, "What is the sound of housing for all?" or "What is the sound of anti-racism?" In a booklet outlining the thinking behind their pedagogical practice, they quote Detroit-based activist Grace Lee Boggs, who wrote about the importance of listening in her autobiography: "over the years I have always kept my ears close to the ground, testing ideas in practice and listening closely to the grass roots for new questions that require new paradigms."¹² In addition to their listening sessions, Ultra-red has released numerous experimental sound recordings, often featuring ambient sounds collected at community meetings or protests.

As part of the Pico Aliso protests, members of Ultra-red and Union de Vecinos created art installations and performances in the condemned buildings. In one installation, two videos were screened in a courtyard facing each other to set up a dialogue between the community and the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles. Recordings of sound collected from the neighborhood were played: bells ringing at a nearby church, the tune of a passing ice cream truck. Another performance brought residents together to say goodbye to their homes, and they rearranged abandoned furniture, played videos on tv screens, and spray painted messages on the walls, such as "We like living here," "we were happy here" and "I want to

¹¹ The HOPE VI act originated in 1992. It was a federal program intended to revitalize public housing in US cities, and functioned according to the principles of New Urbanism and defensible space. However, critics have pointed out that rather than improving the lives of existing residents, revitalized living spaces were offered at unaffordable prices, leading to displacement. See Jacqueline Leavitt, "More Than Design: Injustice and Hope VI," *arcCA* 1.2 (2001): np. Available at <http://www.aiacc.org/2018/02/21/design-injustice-hope-vi/>, accessed July 30, 2018.

¹² Grace Lee Boggs, *Living for Change: An Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 46.

return.”¹³ Ultra-red and Union de Vecinos also organized a bus tour that provided a history of public housing projects in LA (worth noting, since this seems to be the very sort of thing they now oppose). Five hundred families were displaced following the demolition. Some were eventually able to return to the new building that was constructed, but many ended up having to move out of the area.

Ultra-red has spoken about the influence of liberation theology on their work, brought to Los Angeles by migrants from Central America, including Salvadorans who had witnessed revolutionary struggles and civil war in their country. As sociologist John Hammond has noted, the ideas of Paulo Freire were important within these revolutionary movements, including the notion that popular education was a way of preparing for political action.¹⁴ These ideas influenced the community organizing tactics of Ultra-red in Boyle Heights in the 1990s. In an essay in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Protest*, they outlined the importance of Freire to their approach, and stated: “The poor have the power to act as protagonists in their own struggle for liberation. Not only can the poor author their own actions but also the political analysis tested in those actions. The organizer serves that protagonism by providing procedures for the poor to reflect on lived experience, author an analysis of that reflection, test that analysis in direct action, and then reflect on the new experience of that action.”¹⁵ Ultra-red has been at the center of recent struggles against gentrification in Boyle Heights, and their members have been part of the boycotts, strikes and sit-ins discussed above. Yet they have also maintained an affiliation with the art world, and have exhibited their work in numerous galleries and museums. In *Talking to Action: Art, Pedagogy, and Activism in the Americas* at the Ben Maltz Gallery at Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles in 2018, they exhibited the Los Angeles Anti-Gentrification Library, a collection of information on developers and tenants unions in Boyle Heights. Like the maps made by the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project, the work is designed to be used and the emphasis is similarly on making stories of displacement visible as a widespread social issue, in order to counter narratives of individual failure.

¹³ Jacqueline Leavitt, “Art and the Politics of Public Housing,” *Planners Network*, October 2005, <http://www.plannersnetwork.org/2005/10/art-and-the-politics-of-public-housing/>, accessed September 20, 2018.

¹⁴ See John L. Hammond, “Popular Education as Community Organizing in El Salvador,” *Latin American Perspectives* 26.4 (July 1999): pp. 69-94.

¹⁵ Ultra-red, “Andante Politics: Popular Education in the Organizing of Unión de Vecinos,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Protest* (Issue 8, Winter 2011): <https://www.joaap.org/issue8/ultrared.htm>, accessed September 30, 2018.

Consisting of brochures, posters and videos, the library draws certain visual parallels with Soviet agitprop, including designs for workers clubs and readings rooms by Aleksandr Rodchenko in the 1920s. In Ultra-red's work, there is a similar attempt to place popular education at the center of their aesthetic and political organizing. However, as with other exhibitions of activist art, questions arise regarding the relationship between artist and audience. When projects like the Anti-Gentrification Library, or the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project, are shown in art spaces, the audience is presumably there to look at art rather than engage in political action. This was the case with Rodchenko's reading room, too—its primary purpose was not actually to serve as a space for proletarian socialization or education, but instead, to communicate ideas about communism to an educated, bourgeois public in Paris, where it was exhibited during the 1925 International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts.¹⁶ The case of Rodchenko is interesting to consider in this context, since he is often positioned as an example of how constructivist artists took on new roles in society and designed useful items for the working classes—yet his design remained geared towards display and aesthetic contemplation rather than use.¹⁷

Activist art displayed in galleries often performs the concept of usefulness, more than actually being useful—and as the constructivist example demonstrates, this tension is visible in earlier examples of politically engaged art. However, while the use value of pamphlets and brochures displayed in an art gallery may be questionable, the archival value of these objects is worth considering. Gregory Sholette has written about this in relation to his work with Political Art Documentation and Distribution. Commenting on how strange it is that the group's archive is now in the collection of MoMA, he stresses the role that this collection of documents might play in building upon knowledge gained from past social movements—which often seek to reinvent the wheel when they could incorporate lessons learned from previous struggles.¹⁸

This example speaks to some of the challenges faced by activist artists in articulating the purpose of their work and displaying it within an artistic context. In the case of Ultra-red, much of their political

¹⁶ There were other workers clubs that existed in the Soviet Union at the time, and that were intended to replace traditional gathering spaces associated with the church and state, but that were not framed as art.

¹⁷ Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 2005), p. 236.

¹⁸ Gregory Sholette, *Delirium and Resistance: Activist Art and the Crisis of Capitalism* (London: Pluto Press, 2017), p. 29.

work takes place outside of a gallery or museum context: its members are affiliated with Union de Vecinos, BHAAAD, DBH, or the LA Tenants Union. These affiliations were on display at the exhibition at Ben Maltz Gallery, but the political purpose of displaying this work inside the gallery space seemed unclear. A similar tension arises in thinking about the role of activist art more broadly: is the purpose to create art with and for marginalized, working class communities, or to create art that raises awareness about specific issues, but is targeted to a broader audience? Ultra-red continues to work with members of Union de Vecinos, and also helped to establish the LA Tenants Union, which now has chapters across the city. This kind of circularity and movement between art and political organizing informs much of their work, raising questions about the place and purpose of activist art. Their work also calls attention to earlier activist struggles in Boyle Heights surrounding the Chicano movement, and I turn now to a discussion of Self Help Graphics that provokes further questions about the decisions and compromises that have been made in the name of self-determination and neighborhood revitalization in Boyle Heights.

Self Help Graphics

Self Help Graphics was formed in the early 1970s by Sister Karen Boccalero and a group of artists that included Carlos Bueno, Antonio Ibáñez and Frank Hernández. Its first home was a garage in Boyle Heights on Soto Street and Brooklyn Avenue (now Cesar E. Chavez Avenue). The group was inspired by the Chicano movement that emerged in the late 60s, which was focused on farmworker's struggles, anti-war activism, anti-racism, police brutality and demands for housing equality, among other issues. Sister Karen studied at Immaculate Heart College in Los Angeles with Sister Corita Kent, who became well known for her pop-art inspired silkscreened posters focused on messages of peace and love. After studying printmaking techniques with Kent, Boccalero decided to bring them to Boyle Heights. Her goal was to provide studio space and training for artists in the neighborhood and to “offer the surrounding community, including families and children, cultural experiences that would instill a sense of cultural pride.”¹⁹ The story of a white, Catholic woman deciding to offer cultural opportunities to an impoverished neighborhood sounds like many problematic tales of colonization. Yet it is important to consider

¹⁹ Kristen Guzmán, “Art in the Heart of East Los Angeles,” in Colin Gunckel, ed., *Self Help Graphics & Art: Art in the Heart of East Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, 2014), p. 6.

Boccalero's intentions and background, as well as her embrace by the neighborhood's Latinx residents, the majority of whom were Catholic. Boccalero believed that art could produce social change and build community, and this led her to open a printmaking studio.²⁰ Chon Noriega writes that "rather than subordinate art to politics, form to content, Sister Karen understood art itself as a social practice that could build and sustain community—through the active making, buying, and experiencing of art within the community."²¹ This accords with the radical beliefs held by many of the women who attended Immaculate Heart College, who were vocal in their critiques of patriarchy and the Catholic church's hierarchy. Many of them eventually left the sisterhood, including Corita Kent.

Boccalero, however, joined the Order of the Sisters of St. Francis, and in 1973 they provided her with funding to establish a non-profit, which she and her artist collaborators called Self Help Graphics & Art. The group structured the studio according to the *taller* model, which had a long tradition in Mexico, and began to offer workshops on silkscreening to neighborhood residents. In addition to offering workshops and exhibiting work by local artists, they established the Barrio Mobile Art Studio, converting a van into a traveling art studio that visited schools and neighborhoods and offered art classes to kids and young adults in a wide range of media, including silkscreen printing, painting, puppetry, photography and filmmaking.²² Self Help also initiated an annual Dia de los Muertos celebration in Boyle Heights in 1972, offering workshops on building altars, offerings and decorated sculptures, and organizing a procession through the neighborhood.

Self Help began to grow and receive more funding. As Kristen Guzmán points out, this was not just the case with Self Help, but with other Chicano organizations that emerged in the 1970s and became successful by gaining access to an increasing number of grants and funding opportunities. She argues that "one of the paradoxes of the Chicano art movement is that as it was creating its personal vision and political statement of Chicano cultural independence, it was at the same time becoming increasingly dependent on dominant institutions for support."²³ Self Help initially received most of its funding from

²⁰ Sister Karen, quoted in Guzmán, p. 6.

²¹ Chon Noriega, "Self-Help Graphics: Tomás Benitez Talks to Harry Gamboa Jr.," in *The Sons and Daughters of Los: Culture and Community in L.A.*, edited by David E. James (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), p. 196.

²² Guzmán, p. 10.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

the church. However, Sister Karen began to attend grant writing workshops, and started to apply to national funding agencies for support. In 1978, Self Help received a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. In the 90s, it received funding from the California Community Foundation, and began to work with research centers and art museums to preserve and document its collection, including the Getty and the California Ethnic and Multicultural Archives.

In 1993, Self Help organized the exhibition *Chicano Expressions*, which featured work by a number of artists affiliated with the organization and traveled to different countries including South Africa, Colombia, Honduras, Germany, France and Spain. The exhibition was sponsored by the United States Information Agency (USIA), an organization created during the Cold War to further American interests and engage in cultural diplomacy around the world.²⁴ This example is particularly problematic considering the extent to which the USIA operated in collaboration with the CIA in Latin America, with the intention of discrediting communist regimes in favor of free-market capitalism (similarly, organizations affiliated with the CIA have been linked to touring exhibitions of abstract expressionism in Europe in the 1950s, as a form of Cold War propaganda that emphasized American freedom and individuality). Self Help continued to grow in the 2000s, with funding from Toyota and Nissan. In 2012, it partnered with Lexus for a car painting event featuring a well-known graffiti artist. Currently, it is supported by a number of partnerships and sponsorships, among them, AARP, Bank of America, the City of Los Angeles, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

How did Self Help's growth affect its commitment to Chicano culture and self-determination? On the one hand, Self Help has continued to support the production of overtly political graphics. For example, following Trump's decisions regarding DACA, Self Help staff set up printing presses on the sidewalk, and encouraged the public to make posters protesting xenophobia and racism.²⁵ Self Help has helped make posters for a number of recent protests, including a March for Our Lives event held in LA. Yet a certain degree of acquiescence to its wealthy donors has become visible: for example, the Barrio

²⁴ Ibid., p. 22.

²⁵ Carolina A. Miranda, "In wake of Trump's DACA decision, L.A.'s Self-Help Graphics sets up poster pop-up for tips for immigrants," *Los Angeles Times*, September 6, 2017.

Mobile Art Studio, relaunched in 2014, is now available for “corporate team building exercises,” according to Self Help’s website.²⁶

In this sense, there are notable parallels between Self Help and Project Row Houses, especially in relation to the roots of the two organizations in ideals of self-determination for communities of color. In both cases, decisions to accept funding from large companies and powerful individuals led to growing scale and influence, as well as an increasing number of connections with powerful patrons, developers and the mainstream art world. Within both organizations, there are also examples of local, community-based practices that became representative of American culture more broadly. This was evident in the *Chicano Expressions* show, sponsored by the USIA. It was also evident when a permanent display on Project Row Houses was incorporated into the National Museum of African American History and Culture in 2016.

But the increased scale and influence of Self Help perhaps became most visible when it was able to raise enough funds to avoid displacement, at the same time that many Boyle Heights residents (including artists affiliated with Self Help) were experiencing eviction or rent increases. In 2011, Self Help was forced to move, after its building was sold by the archdiocese. It relocated to the Ocean Queen building, a former fish factory, and rented the space for several years. Like many in Boyle Heights, it experienced rent increases and had trouble paying the bills. Due to its history and its visibility in the community, however, it was able to stay afloat by negotiating a funding deal with city council member José Huizar in 2014. Huizar also helped Self Help find and secure new sources of funding. With his help, along with the California Community Foundation, the County Board of Supervisors, the Weingart Foundation, and \$825,000 from the City, Self Help was able to purchase the building it was renting in December 2017 for \$3.625 million, thereby ensuring its long-term presence in Boyle Heights.

While this may be seen as a victory for a Chicano art center that began as a grassroots organization dedicated to art and social justice, the purchase of the building was not celebrated by anti-gentrification protestors. Instead, they added Self Help to their boycott list, posting the following response on facebook: “Respect the boycott against now-millionaire Self-Help Graphics & Art and all the new art

²⁶ “Barrio Mobile Art Studio,” Self Help Graphics website, <https://www.selfhelpgraphics.com/bmas/>, accessed September 30, 2018.

galleries! That's cool y'all got a permanent home. Sucks the majority of the renters in Boyle Heights can't say the same. Wish the City and County felt the same way about evictions and displacement as they do about arts nonprofits.”²⁷ DBH has laid out a number of accusations against Self Help that go beyond the building purchase. In detailed postings on their website, they have pointed out connections between members of Self Help’s board and real estate developers responsible for evictions in the neighborhood.²⁸ They provide numerous documents, photos and screenshots showing that certain individuals and groups work together or support each other. By publicizing these relationships, DBH demonstrates concrete evidence regarding the links between art and displacement in Boyle Heights, proving that the same people who publicly claim to be acting in the community’s best interests are, in fact, responsible for evicting low-income residents. This interest in expository research was evident during a public meeting I attended in 2017, organized by DBH, that focused on the relationship between developers and gallerists in the neighborhood.

During the meeting, the individuals discussed included José Huizar, whom DBH accused of being an apologist for gentrification, Alfred Fraijo, Jr., a board member of Self Help and a lawyer who has been linked to evictions in Boyle Heights, and Vera Campbell, who owns numerous buildings in the neighborhood, including 356 Mission. Protestors believe she is buying property in a speculative manner in order to sell it for a profit in the future. They also point to Self Help director Joel Garcia’s wife, Felicia Montes, who works for a PR firm hired to promote redevelopment projects in Boyle Heights, including the Sixth Street Bridge and the proposed demolition of Wyvernwood Apartments. Through a series of screenshots, Garcia and Self Help were linked to the Hopscotch Opera, a multimedia performance that took place in different public spaces in LA, including Hollenbeck Park in Boyle Heights, and that brought a wealthy, white audience along with it.²⁹ In addition, activists cited a general suspicion of Self Help’s status as a non-profit, its willingness to work with the city, and its connections to art and artists from outside Boyle Heights. This is concerning to some given the proximity of the neighborhood to the Arts District—which increases the likelihood of attracting more interest from outside, and thereby contributing

²⁷ Defend Boyle Heights, facebook post, December 20th, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/defendboyleheights/posts/respect-the-boycott-against-now-millionaire-self-help-graphics-art-and-all-the-n/149010027773628/>, accessed September 30, 2018.

²⁸ <http://defendboyleheights.blogspot.com/>, accessed September 30, 2018.

²⁹ Ibid.

to displacement. In this vein, members of BHAAAD criticized its Dia de los Muertos celebration, one of the oldest and most popular celebrations of its kind in the US. In 2017, Self Help's Dia de Los Muertos celebration was featured as part of the Getty's Pacific Standard Time exhibition, which brought in even more people, money and attention from the outside.

This background helps to explain the antagonism between activists and Self Help. To consider this conflict further, I return now to the scene described at the beginning of this chapter: in July 2017, DBH led a group of protestors into a meeting, organized by Self Help to discuss gentrification. Several dozen protestors walked into the space, some carrying signs, some wearing masks or scarves over their faces. They surrounded the audience and took over the microphone to speak about how the community needed affordable housing and jobs, not more art galleries. Following the action, DBH posted about what had happened on its blog:

We read our demands, which state that all new art galleries must immediately leave Boyle Heights and that those buildings should be utilized by our community members the ways we best see fit, which may be converting them into emergency housing, shelters or centers for job training. As we left the building, we chanted 'We don't need more galleries; We need higher salaries!' That is to say, Boyle Heights is a low-income renter community. Get the fuck outta here with that argument that we need more art galleries. Boyle Heights has always been a cultural and artistic icon, with or without galleries. That is not a genuine and immediate need of the vast majority of community members.³⁰

As I have noted, the boycott against Self Help was imposed for a number of different reasons, including its connections to developers and its ability to sustain itself by purchasing a building through connections with powerful individuals and organizations. With these accusations in mind, DBH's accusations against Self Help may be seen as part of a broader class-based critique of identity politics. While DBH and BHAAAD have spoken out against the whitewashing of Boyle Heights in the form of art galleries, hipster coffee shops and residential gentrification, they have also targeted upwardly mobile, educated Chicanos who open small businesses in the neighborhood. They use terms such as chipsters (Chicano hipsters), gente-fiers, or coconut (brown on the outside, white on the inside) to insult these young, hip Latinxs, including Fraijo, Jr., referred to by Defend Boyle Heights as the "shiniest of the bald coconuts."³¹

³⁰ Defend Boyle Heights, "Defend Boyle Heights Statement About The Self Help Graphics Accountability Session and Beyond," July 6, 2017, <http://defendboyleheights.blogspot.com/>, accessed September 30, 2018.

³¹ Defend Boyle Heights, "We don't need breweries, bars or sellouts: we need control over our community!" <https://defendboyleheights.blogspot.com>, February 6, 2018, accessed September 30, 2018.

Self Help, which began as an organization dedicated to revolutionary social change through art, became a target of anti-gentrification protestors due to its perceived complicity with development projects in Boyle Heights. The organization emerged out of an interest in self-determination for Chicanos in Boyle Heights, and a belief that art could play a role in social transformation. Self Help moved from operating out of a garage and advocating for the expression of Chicano culture as a political practice, to scaling up, and making decisions to take on a higher degree of power and influence in the neighborhood. While this might be characterized as a success story by many, protest groups have argued that Self Help's success has come about because of its willingness to work with developers, including the same developers who are responsible for displacing residents. By boycotting Self Help, DBH and BHAAAD performatively demonstrate their autonomy from capitalist development, and their resistance to build coalitions. Unwilling to go down the same path as Self Help, they have instead sought to maintain their independence from formal political organizations, in favor of direct action—with the protests of Ultra-red and Union de Vecinos as an example.

The closure of 356 Mission

Along with Self Help, a major target of DBH and BHAAAD was the art space 356 Mission. In January 2017, following Trump's inauguration, a group of artists calling themselves the Artists Political Action Network planned to meet at the art space to discuss ways to “organize arts communities to engage in effective political action against racist, misogynist, ecocidal, corrupt, plutocratic, nationalist and authoritarian agendas and to mobilize the cultural and social capital of contemporary art in the fight for free expression, progressive social change and justice.”³² The day that the political action meeting took place, activists from DBH set up a picket line outside the gallery, and asked attendees not to cross it—356 Mission was on their boycott list, along with other galleries nearby. Video was live-streamed on facebook by DBH activists, and some users commented online about seeing well known LA-based artists crossing the picket line. In an article published by Nizan Shaked, she discussed her decision to respect the picket line:

³² “Our Mission,” Artists Political Action Network website, accessed September 20, 2018.

In many ways, I am a member of that ‘inside,’ part of the Los Angeles intellectual and academic art world. I identify with the organizers and participants. On Sunday afternoon, I longed to join what promised to be a productive discussion about art and activism, organized by a group called the Artists’ Political Action Network. I nevertheless found myself at a threshold where I had to make a decision, and I decided not to enter—because, with all due respect, what possible art world event would merit crossing a picket line? Unless you strongly disagree with the position of the picketer, you just do not cross a picket line. That is activism 101.³³

Others saw the issue differently, and were hoping that the meeting at 356 Mission would be an opportunity for discussion and dialogue—including a discussion of how to approach the issue of gentrification. In a letter circulated online, artist Charles Gaines, one of APAN’s founders, wrote:

We knew that 356 Mission was one of the sites targeted by the Boyle Heights boycott, but we thought that gentrification could be one of the issues that we can address together with the activists. However, none of the Boyle Heights activists responded to our invitation, but they did show up to protest the APAN meeting itself. [...] The confrontation had a benefit; it revealed the hyper simplified politics at the bottom of the movement that has forced a binary where artists, depending on their views are either on the side of the powerful (galleries, museums, real estate investors, neoliberal economics in general) or the powerless (those whose survival are threatened, neighborhood autonomy and anti capitalist resistance).³⁴

In his letter, Gaines described the challenges of trying to encourage small-scale development and the provision of services in Boyle Heights desired by residents, without contributing to an increase in rents. He called for protest groups to differentiate between “galleries that can enrich a community,” and “wealthy neoliberal galleries” that exploit communities.³⁵ However, for Union de Vecinos’ co-founder and Ultra-red member Leonardo Vilchis, private galleries and non-profit cultural spaces are involved in the same dynamics of gentrification, regardless of their mission—all that matters is the presence of art. He writes, “The question of whether the gallery is for profit or nonprofit does not make a difference to us. Serious damage has been done in the community by nonprofit institutions, foundations, public agencies, and private/public investment [...] The issue for us is less a question of who is doing the damage, but what damage is being done.”³⁶

³³ Nizan Shaked, “How to Draw a (Picket) Line: Activists Protest Event at Boyle Heights Gallery,” *Hyperallergic*, February 14, 2017.

³⁴ Charles Gaines, “Unpacking the Binary: The Politics of Gentrification,” available at <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B8LcdfCW9ALFMIVInkZ1X2IKVEE/view>, accessed July 30, 2018.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Leonardo Vilchis, quoted in Matt Stromberg, “Boyle Heights Art Space Closes, Blaming Anti-Gentrification Activists,” *Hyperallergic*, February 22, 2017.

Following this event, DBH ramped up its efforts to get 356 Mission to close down. Their arguments focused on the connections between artist Laura Owens, the director of the space, and Vera Campbell, the landlord. They believed that Campbell was allowing artists to temporarily inhabit the space, while speculating that it would become more profitable in the future. Protestors followed Owens to a retrospective of her work at the Whitney Museum in New York in November 2017, occupying the gallery and arguing that she and Gavin Brown (Owens' New York-based gallerist) were "colonizing POC neighborhoods to benefit both their public image and their enterprises."³⁷ The boycott continued, and activists succeeded in getting a book launch by Chris Kraus canceled that had been scheduled to take place at 356 Mission. In March 2018, Owens announced that she would close the space, writing: "Some took issue with our impact on the neighborhood—although we don't agree with their perspective, we respected it, and attempted to bridge that divide while working toward proactive solutions to the best of our abilities. For both personal and practical reasons, we have decided that 356 Mission is no longer sustainable, but we will continue to support open access to arts programming and the health of existing local economies."³⁸ It remains to be seen what will happen to the building, and whether the absence of 356 Mission, and other galleries that have moved, will have a noticeable effect on gentrification. However, the media attention generated by the closure of art galleries in Boyle Heights points to one of the reasons why DBH and BHAAAD targeted them in their fight against displacement, as opposed to other development projects in the neighborhood operating on a much larger scale. Protesting art galleries gets more attention than protesting non-arts related development, in part because they are public spaces towards which certain communities feel a sense of allegiance. Art galleries in Boyle Heights may have special relationships with wealthy collectors, but they are also open to the general public, and have become part of the broader arts community in Los Angeles. Thousands of people attend exhibitions, follow galleries on social media, and attend openings, and thereby feel personally implicated when reading about or watching the protests unfold. And despite the antagonistic rhetoric, activists' focus on protesting art galleries may be seen as having to do more with the recognition of political affiliations:

³⁷ Benjamin Sutton, "Anti-Gentrification Activists Protest Laura Owens Exhibition at the Whitney Museum," *Hyperallergic*, November 10, 2017.

³⁸ "356 Mission will end its 5-year run in May 2018," 356 Mission website, <http://356mission.com/356-mission-will-end-its-5-year-run-in-may-2018/>, accessed October 15, 2018.

although many of the galleries have been accused of bringing gentrification to Boyle Heights, and working in alignment with real-estate developers, the gallery workers, artists, curators and critics who frequent these spaces are generally more sympathetic to the demands and political beliefs of protestors, compared to real-estate developers and private business owners, and are more willing to grant them the physical and discursive space to air their grievances.

For groups like DBH and BHAAAD, fixating on art galleries was a tactic chosen specifically to get attention—because of the built in audience and public platform. Targeting artists and art galleries had the effect of creating a public divide between supporters of the arts and supporters of social justice—which had the effect of alienating individuals with multiple allegiances. This tactic gained the group certain successes, on their terms, including the closure of a number of art galleries. Art galleries were protested because of the cultural capital they represented, and the fact that many of them had ties to real estate developers. However, there are much bigger development plans in the neighborhood that are currently underway, suggesting that gentrification is going to occur in Boyle Heights with or without the presence of artists and galleries. This includes the Sixth Street Bridge reconstruction project, redevelopment of the iconic Sears Tower building into hundreds of luxury condos, the LA River Revitalization project, and a Biotech Startup corridor being planned.³⁹ As these projects have gained steam, BHAAAD and DBH have maintained their commitment to direct action and to working autonomously from formal political organizations. While this allows them to maintain ideological purity and avoid corruptive influences, it also means that they lack a seat at the table when it comes to making decisions that have a tangible impact on development in Boyle Heights.

Debate, dialogue and bridge building

As I have discussed throughout this chapter, groups such as DBH and BHAAAD have maintained their commitment to autonomy and self-determination, drawing from Union de Vecinos’s organizing tactics around housing activism in the 90s. What is perhaps most striking about these protests is the refusal of activists to negotiate—their steadfast ability to continue saying no. Individuals affiliated with

³⁹ Carolina A. Miranda, “Zoning Boyle Heights: What an 'Innovation District' Could Mean for the Neighborhood,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 8, 2018.

these groups have protested art spaces in Boyle Heights regardless of their mission, history, or the kind of art they show. While the closure of several art galleries may be seen as a victory for protest groups, it has come at the expense of building coalitions and solidarity with organizations such as Self Help, 356 Mission, and PSSST, that shared a commitment to resisting the spread of fascism and xenophobia associated with Trumpism (for example, through Self Help's support of political graphics and Chicano culture, 356 Mission's support of APAN, and PSSST's interest in queer identity and intersectionality). Instead of finding common cause, activist groups focused on the lack of a class-based self-analysis within these cultural organizations. This relates to a broader theme discussed within this dissertation: many activist groups are able to articulate their critiques of capitalist urban development very well, but when it comes to actually figuring out how to use space in a neighborhood, and build new institutions, aesthetic forms and social formations, they are at an impasse. And while activist groups may have won several victories in the closure of art galleries, these were sites that were uniquely sympathetic to their views—in contrast, DBH and BHAAAD have been less successful in convincing small businesses, developers, or politicians to change their plans.

Many of the debates about art and gentrification in Boyle Heights have taken place on social media and on blogs maintained by BHAAAD and DBH, with frequent arguments breaking out over who has the right to represent the community. The conversations demonstrate a remarkable amount of anger and divisiveness, and differences are repeatedly emphasized over common ground. For example, in 2018 DBH wrote on their blog: “There are two camps: the people and the enemy. The gentrifiers and the anti-gentrification movement. As one side escalates, so too will the other. As we've escalated, the enemy has as well. The police, the community snitches, outside investors, the vendidos and porkchop nationalist reactionaries, have also been stepping up their attacks on our coalition and our allies.”⁴⁰ As some critics have argued, social media has had the effect of exacerbating existing divisions in public discourse, and the term ‘digital tribalism’ became increasingly common following the election of Trump. In Boyle Heights, activists have used social media to publicize their cause, organize protests and research relationships between artists and developers. However, the discussions that take place on the pages of

⁴⁰ Defend Boyle Heights blog, “Destroy the Boyle Heights arts district one gallery at a time, one landlord at a time,” defendboyleheights.blogspot.com, April 6, 2018, accessed October 15, 2018.

DBH and BHAAAD are not typically spaces of dialogue—they are more frequently spaces of agreement, in which like-minded thinkers affirm each other’s opinions and join together to confront (and sometimes harass) those with differing opinions. At times, this has descended into doxxing, public shaming, and trolling. These tactics are carried out by activists as well as groups satirizing them—such as the short-lived facebook group ‘Defend Boyle Heights From Defend Boyle Heights,’ which argued that activists such as Ultra-red were hypocritical for protesting art while also participating in the art world.⁴¹ Social media appears to have driven a wedge into an already divisive issue, obscuring underlying complexities surrounding identity and representation by encouraging partisanship and line drawing.

For Shaked, drawing lines has been an important tactic for members of DBH and BHAAAD, and has strengthened their movement. She writes: “One of the few points of agency that the residents of Boyle Heights actually have is the capacity for refusal. Refusal will lose its thrust if a compromise is made. History tells us that when the disenfranchised come to the table they get a percentage of their demands that correlates to their lack of leverage. In other words, they lose.”⁴² The tactic of refusal has been at the forefront of debates about activism in Boyle Heights. Protestors are often framed by the media as making unreasonable demands and refusing to negotiate, while those associated with non-profit spaces such as 356 Mission have been portrayed as seeking common ground. When Owens and other artists and culture workers reached out to activists in the name of dialogue and compromise, they were met with resistance. Noting this, Shaked writes, “When requesting conversation, the galleries and art world are in effect asking the residents to disarm themselves of a primary negotiating tactic.”⁴³ She argues that their stated interest in dialogue masks self-interest, and that the right thing for galleries to do is to leave “before they become monuments to the damage they have done.”⁴⁴ In response to Shaked, however, Travis Diehl argued that “art is dialogue. This is why the activists are targeting galleries, among other places—not because they can hurt their bottom line (as may be the case with coffee shops and boutiques) but because, as Dr. Shaked herself has stated, the galleries are open to talking things out, and thus might change their minds.

⁴¹ See Rory Carroll, “Are white hipsters hijacking an anti-gentrification fight in Los Angeles?” *The Guardian*, October 18, 2017.

⁴² Nizan Shaked, “A Response to ‘Op-Ed: An Ultra-red Line,’” *X-tra*, October 17, 2017.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

This is why the present exchange of letters takes place within, and for, the so-called art world.”⁴⁵

This exchange, and Diehl’s suggestion that art is dialogue, relates to what Grant Kester has referred to as dialogical aesthetics. In his book *Conversation Pieces*, Kester argued that aesthetic experience may be understood as “the very process of communication that the art object catalyzes,” rather than as moments of revelation associated with the visual paradigms of the avant-garde.⁴⁶ This is visible in the work of Ultra-red, for example, through their listening sessions that are focused on asking questions and generating conversation. However, Kester argues that dialogue cannot always achieve resolution or result in harmonious coalition building. An emphasis on dialogue in and of itself, without paying attention to the presence of unequal power dynamics, results in “dialogical determinism,” described as the “naive belief that all social conflicts can be resolved through the utopian power of free and open exchange.”⁴⁷ This critique applies to many of the debates in Boyle Heights, in which opportunities for debate and dialogue (both online and offline) have resulted in the fracturing of social relations rather than the building of bridges.

Related to the issue of dialogue is that of the activists’ relationship to formal political structures. DBH and BHAAAD are committed to a radical autonomous politics marked by distrust towards politicians and a refusal to engage in negotiations. As I discussed in the Introduction, this aligns with a refusal to engage with institutions of civil society as discussed by theorists such as Hardt and Negri, and Frank Wilderson, among others. In their view, institutions of civil society cannot be improved upon or used to create meaningful social transformation, because of the corrupt foundations upon which they were built (capitalism, in the case of Hardt and Negri, and slavery, in the case of Wilderson). For critics subscribing to this position, any attempt to influence civil society is ultimately a form of complicity that ends up reproducing the existing forms and social relations of dominant society.⁴⁸ As I have noted, this view is at odds with many of the projects discussed throughout this dissertation, in which artists have worked within structures of power to elicit changes in their neighborhoods—for example, Theaster Gates

⁴⁵ Travis Diehl, “Op-Ed: An Ultra-red Line,” *X-tra*, October 12, 2017.

⁴⁶ Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), p. 90.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

⁴⁸ See Frank Wilderson, “Gramsci’s Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?” *Social Identities* 9.2 (2003): pp. 225-240.

working with the city of Chicago to develop the Stony Island Arts Bank, or Rick Lowe gaining an influence over policy decisions in Houston's Third Ward.

In Boyle Heights, protestors have argued that artists do not have anything to offer to marginalized neighborhoods, because of their connections to the privilege and power of the art world. This relates back to the history of Self Help Graphics, which started out as a radical arts organization committed to the Chicano movement and to working with the community to address its basic needs, but that grew in scale, now operating with a multi-million dollar budget, in part thanks to its ties to local politicians and developers. In its early days, Self Help resembled projects like Trans.lation, with its DIY approach to art production and its focus on pairing up artists from the community with anyone who lived nearby who was interested in making art. This still happens at Self Help, but now in a much more structured way. However, it is important to point out that although the organization has grown in scale and influence, and developed a more formalized structure, it continues to play an important role in the community in Boyle Heights. It supports local artists, encourages neighborhood residents to make art as a social and political activity, and connects narratives about Boyle Heights' present day cultural identity with its Chicana history.

Unlike Self Help, DBH and BHAAAD have resisted dialogue—preferring the power of negative social critique and the possibilities of direct action over the ability to gain formal political influence. This means that to a certain degree, they remain within a political bubble, not willing to be associated with the corruption of capitalist development of any type. Groups like DBH and BHAAAD may be seen as working from the position of critique rather than construction. Although they have called for more useful services and shops in the neighborhood, such as grocery stores and laundromats, as Charles Gaines pointed out, it is difficult to invite services into a marginalized neighborhood without also inviting in gentrification. Paradoxically, in calling for such services, activists seem to propose a vision of the neighborhood that aligns with many of the other projects discussed in this dissertation, for example, the promotion of small business development in the Third Ward that is supported by Project Row Houses. These projects, Self Help among them, have sought to engage with the vertical structures of power, such as city government and local development organizations. They have argued for a seat at the table of local politics, and for a certain amount of control over the forms of development in their neighborhoods. In

contrast, DBH and BHAAAD refuse to work with city council members or organizations, arguing: “Only one thing has stopped gentrifiers: direct action. Not the courts. Not policy change. Not petitioning City Hall or Sacramento. Not progressive candidates (sorry Bernie-ites, ‘left’ Democrats, Democratic Socialists of America, Green Party, etc.). Not convincing arguments or robust dialogue.”⁴⁹ When it comes to the conflict between art galleries and gentrification, there is no easy compromise to be found. Some critics have stressed the importance of choosing sides and drawing lines, including Shaked, who wrote about her choice to support activists picketing 356 Mission. Others, including Diehl, have argued that dialogue is the only way to move forward in Boyle Heights. In my opinion, dialogue has been portrayed in a problematic manner within these debates, and critics like Diehl have not fully considered how it may be affected by the unequal power dynamics between residents facing displacement and many of the gallerists who have recently moved into the neighborhood. However, I would also argue that the issue is more complicated than drawing lines or taking sides, and that while doing so might be politically efficacious, it obscures much of the complexity behind these debates, such as the fact that many of the individuals involved in these protests have allegiances to both sides. This was reinforced to me during the public meeting I attended to discuss gentrification in Boyle Heights: when DBH organizers asked the crowd how many of us were artists, roughly 3/4 of attendees raised their hands.

Throughout this chapter, I have tried to outline the complicated tangle of identities and allegiances that exist under the surface of these debates, and to argue against reducing the conflict to a black and white issue. Instead, I have argued that anti-gentrification activism in Boyle Heights has involved complicated decisions made by artists and activists attempting to define themselves and the spaces in which they live and work. In the case of DBH and BHAAAD, they believe that a commitment to refusal will ultimately get them what they want in terms of capitalist development leaving Boyle Heights. In the case of other projects discussed here, including Self Help Graphics, decisions were made to accept money and partnerships that would allow them to have more influence and formal political power. This resulted in something different from redevelopment-as-usual, but came with its own tradeoffs. Like the other projects discussed in this dissertation, these examples demonstrate that there is

⁴⁹ Defend Boyle Heights, “We don’t need breweries, bars or sellouts: we need control over our community!” <https://defendboyleheights.blogspot.com>, February 6, 2018, accessed September 30, 2018.

no perfect solution when it comes to artists negotiating with developers or deciding how to engage politically—there are decisions that have consequences, which are weighed against other possibilities and then acted upon.

Chapter Five — Community Art, Community Organizing: Trans.lation as Cultural Platform in Vickery Meadow

In this chapter I focus on the inner workings of a community arts organization, Trans.lation, located in the neighborhood of Vickery Meadow in northeast Dallas, Texas. The anecdotes discussed here are drawn from numerous site visits that ranged in length from a few days at a time to a month long visit in June 2016. During this time, I visited Trans.lation daily, attended classes, and got to know many of the participants. The purpose of spending an extended period of time visiting Trans.lation, and employing ethnographic methods such as participant-observation, interviews and field note-taking, was to gain a richer and more detailed understanding of the daily interactions between residents and how these relate to cultural production and cultural organizing in Vickery Meadow—and, importantly, to analyze a socially engaged art project from the perspective of situated practice, which is often missing from more theoretically grounded approaches. As an art project, Trans.lation took inspiration from Project Row Houses (discussed in chapter one), and was also established by Rick Lowe. However, it ultimately moved in a different direction—while Project Row Houses began as a community-based initiative and has become associated with public art and social practice, Trans.lation began as a public art project and has gradually come to look more and more like a community center. While Project Row Houses and Watts House Project focused their efforts on home ownership, Trans.lation is situated in a neighborhood that is largely composed of renters, and this must be taken into account in considering the dynamics of place and community. After describing my visits to Trans.lation in detail, I analyze the project’s attempts to produce social change through the provision of social services to neighborhood residents, its advocacy for affordable housing, and its building of a network of resistance to gentrification. I came to see the project as a platform upon which a wide range of social practices have emerged, making it difficult to conceptualize under one umbrella term (socially engaged art, for example).

I provide detailed accounts of some of the activities and conversations that took place during my visits, in order to offer a more detailed and textured account of community-based artists attempting to instigate social change through their work, and the kinds of issues that come up when they meet the

resistance of abstract social structures. There is a doubling effect here that is worth pointing out: since my focus is on artists in residence—artists embedded in communities who engage in durational and collaborative practices, and projects that live on past the life cycle of an exhibition—it seems fitting in this chapter to explore the concept of the art historian as ethnographer as well, first because of the long-term nature of these projects, which naturally calls for repeated observations, and also because of how these projects produce social practices that involve numerous people, relationships and conversations. My visits to Trans.lation took place between 2015-17, at a time of increasing xenophobia towards immigrants in the United States, and my last visit took place after Trump had been elected. With this in mind, part of my aim was to explore the ways in which Trans.lation supported cultural practices as a form of political resistance to xenophobia and racism, and to examine how it became a platform for local activist initiatives.

Trans.lation is a space that supports cultural production, social and political advocacy, and educational efforts, through language workshops, gardening, art classes, craft making, playing and socializing. It also incubates multiple forms of community organizing that are woven together with these practices. These include working as an advocate for affordable housing in the area and addressing policies that affect the largely immigrant and refugee community living nearby. In addition to seeing Trans.lation as an open-ended platform, I also see it as a social hub, connecting many lives and ways of living, and bringing together individuals and families who might not otherwise meet each other. Vickery Meadow is one of the most diverse neighborhoods in Dallas—*D Magazine* journalist Zac Crain described it as “Dallas’s own United Nations.”¹ Stories and cultural practices from around the world are knotted together at Trans.lation, a place that has become a part of daily life for some Vickery Meadow residents, and a place that is used for socializing and making things as well as accessing services and resources. While on the surface Trans.lation resembles a fairly straightforward non-profit neighborhood organization, it also resembles other socially engaged artworks, including Project Row Houses and Immigrant Movement International. There are other connections worth noting, including art practices throughout the twentieth century that sought to merge art with everyday life, from the productivist turn of the Russian avant-garde

¹ Zac Crain, “How Vickery Meadow Became Dallas’ Own United Nations,” *D Magazine*, May 2011.

to the feminist activism that influenced the development of new genre public art in the 1990s. What many of these projects have in common is the way that they conceptualize the role of the artist in society. Looking at Trans.lation is a way to delve into some of the complexities that emerge when an art project moves into the spaces of everyday life and takes on social responsibilities not typically affiliated with cultural practices—and becomes less and less recognizable as art.

Questions regarding scale and limits become important here: how much of a difference does it actually make to offer social services to a relatively small number of people? How might the project's connections to art and cultural organizing open up opportunities in terms of scale and symbolic power, that are less visible within other non-profits? And, as some critics have suggested, are projects like Trans.lation actually complicit with neoliberalism, because of their focus on helping individuals better integrate themselves into a system that remains ultimately unchanged? I address these questions by focusing on the specific example of Trans.lation, to illustrate the way that a broad, abstract concept like social change has been addressed from a specific, situated perspective, and to frame this situated perspective as forming the basis of concrete practice within socially engaged art.

Beginnings

Trans.lation began as part of a city-wide public art exhibition organized by the Nasher Sculpture Center in 2013. In this sense, its origins are more like Watts House Project than Project Row Houses, since it was developed through an institutional context rather than emerging more organically within the community. The Nasher Sculpture Center grew out of the collection of Raymond and Patsy Nasher. Raymond Nasher was a real-estate developer and banker, and together they built an impressive collection of modern and contemporary art, which was given a permanent home at the Nasher Sculpture Center in 2003. To celebrate its tenth anniversary, the Nasher commissioned ten public artworks across the city of Dallas, which culminated in the public art exhibition, Nasher XChange.² One piece, *Fountainhead*, by artist Charles Long, was located inside the NorthPark Mall (the mall was developed by Raymond Nasher in the 1960s, and features luxury shops such as Gucci and Louis Vuitton alongside art by Andy Warhol,

² The artists included in Nasher XChange were Lara Almarcegui, Rachel Harrison, Alfredo Jaar, Charles Long, Liz Larner, Rick Lowe, Vicki Meek, Ruben Ochoa, Ugo Rondinone, and Good/Bad Art Collective.

Frank Stella, Jim Dine and others). Long's piece consisted of dollar bills projected onto a plaster fountain sculpture, with iPads installed nearby, which shoppers could use to donate money to Dallas charities. Another piece titled *Music (Everything I know I learned the day my son was born)* was created by Alfredo Jaar in collaboration with several Dallas hospitals. He installed a pavilion lined with green glass tiles in the Nasher Sculpture Center Garden, where visitors could sit and listen to the recorded sounds of newborn babies. Ugo Rondinone painted a pier at Fish Trap Lake in West Dallas in rainbow colors, and Rachel Harrison created a giant pink arrow pointing to a Henry Moore sculpture at City Hall. Other works looked much less like sculpture: Dallas artist Vicki Meek collected stories about Bishop College, an important center of black cultural production in Dallas in the 1960s. Rick Lowe proposed a project that would draw attention to overlooked and marginalized spaces and stories, through the creation of a series of pop-up community markets in Vickery Meadow (which is less than a mile away from the NorthPark Mall, although it feels a world apart). He described his initial inspiration for Trans.lation as coming out of a series of community events in Vickery Meadow meant to bring together recently resettled immigrants and refugees from different countries:

It was amazing. It was like a theater piece. You had these women all speaking different languages with translators and everything. It was just the most beautiful experience to hear the depth of issues that they were dealing with. I realized that there needed to be a platform for people from different cultures to get together in that same kind of way. Then I started noticing people on the street selling their wares, women sitting around from all different countries. Most were from Nepal, Bhutan, and Iraq, and some from other countries, too. It was like a poetic, theatrical performance. I saw them on the ground trying to sell their stuff and saw the opportunity for them to have a market. I gathered a team, and we ended up creating these markets where folks from all parts of the world could come and share their work.³

In this description of Trans.lation's beginnings, it is worth noting Lowe's attempt to reach out to women in Vickery Meadow who were already meeting regularly, and his framing of their activities as poetic and theatrical. Trans.lation continues to be composed mainly of women—all of its instructors are women of color, which differs from the more balanced gender dynamics of the staff at Project Row Houses. Lowe mentions the already existing "diverse richness" of the community, the interactions between people from different cultures, the attempts to find common ground through translation, and then relates these

³ Nicole Audrey Spector, "Rick Lowe: Heart of the City," *Guernica*, September 25, 2014.

interactions to a theater performance. Although this introduces a somewhat romantic narrative of discovery, he does not claim that the project will bring culture to a community that lacks it, or suggest that it will make a blighted neighborhood into a vibrant attraction (methods that are typically associated with the term ‘placemaking’). Instead, according to Lowe, his role as an artist is to pay special attention to already existing cultural production, and build a platform upon which these practices might develop and be supported. This suggests a self-reflexive awareness of the cultural capital he brought to Houston’s Third Ward through Project Row Houses (discussed in chapter one), and an awareness that any project he is involved with now will receive increased attention and funding.

Peter Simek discussed the beginnings of Trans.lation in October 2013 in a *D Magazine* article, describing the months of planning and organizing that went into the project, the opening events, and the weeks afterwards. Simek attended a planning meeting with several of the project organizers in two apartment units on Ridgcrest Road, the original sites of Trans.lation, which were set up as a community workshop space and artist residence. Abdul Ameer Alwan, who came to Dallas from Iraq, was one of the first teachers hired as part of the project, to teach painting and drawing to interested residents of Vickery Meadow. According to Simek, Alwan had high hopes for the project, thinking that he might be able to secure a private studio space, or that his work might gain attention, which would lead to sales. For Lowe, the purpose of developing a community art project was precisely to bring attention to these kinds of already existing cultural practices. To make this happen, he had the idea of installing several white cube structures on a few blocks in Vickery Meadow, in which monthly markets would be organized and local residents would be able to exhibit their artwork or sell crafted goods or produce. Three white cube structures opened in December 2013, featuring installations by artists Jonathan Harris, Sarah Jay and Scott Lumley. Harris, who is homeless, is known in the neighborhood as The Plant Man, and several of his plants were installed inside and outside the white cube in front of Gatewood Apartments during the XChange exhibition.

The artwork that was part of Trans.lation during its first year exemplifies some of the broader tensions that exist within community-based art. In the case of Alwan, Harris and other local artists who make work outside of the professional or institutionalized art world, Trans.lation offered opportunities, recognition and resources, but at the expense of their authorship being subsumed by the larger narrative of

the project. They were artists, but only because of their affiliations with Lowe and the broader framing of Trans.lation as a socially engaged art project. Projects like Trans.lation therefore offer the proposition of a radical redefinition of art, authorship and collaboration, but they do so within a currently existing model that labels them as social practice, and paradoxically celebrates collaboration and artistic authorship at the same time. These tensions, some of which were discussed by Simek in his discussion of Trans.lation's beginnings, continue to define the dynamic of the project and its relationship to the residents of Vickery Meadow, as well as the broader art world. Simek praised the multicultural vibrancy captured by the project in its first few weeks, perhaps most visibly at the community potluck during its opening night. But he also brought up some thorny questions, which are worth asking not just of Trans.lation but of socially engaged art projects in general: "Stepping away from the crowd and looking at its odd mix of art-world elite, artists, and social workers—volunteers, migrants, refugees—something strikes me as strange about the orchestration of activity. What is it doing? Preaching or presenting? Is it engaging or exposing? And who is it all for? The people of Vickery Meadow or the art patrons?"⁴ While Simek's article was written just as the project began, his questions continue to be relevant, although Trans.lation evolved and changed after its first year. The white cubes became less prominent, and what began as a public art project began to look more and more like a community center. While Lowe remained involved in the project, he attempted to cede control to other artists—a challenging task, considering his visibility in the art world. Darryl Ratcliff was the inaugural artist in residence, and Sara Mokuria was the first project manager. Carol Zou began to work there in Spring 2015, after graduating with an MFA in Public Practice from Otis College of Art Design.⁵ Her work up to that point had involved yarn bombing projects in Los Angeles, as well as Michelada Think Tank, a collective of artists of color who advocate for cultural equity in the art world. After spending time as an artist in residence at Project Row Houses, she was hired by Lowe as the project manager at Trans.lation, during its second year.

⁴ Peter Simek, "Can Art Transform Vickery Meadow," *D Magazine*, October 2013.

⁵ Suzanne Lacy was the Director of the Public Practice Program at Otis at the time.

From public art to community center

I first visited Trans.lation in September 2015. When I arrived, I noticed the modest nature of the space, located in a strip mall alongside several Ethiopian shops and a café. Inside, it looked like many community drop-in centers: slightly run-down, worn couches, an ongoing problem with the air conditioning, an abundance of colorful, crafted objects tucked into corners, and stacks of Rubbermaid containers packed with coloring books, fabrics, paints, stuffed animals and other supplies. Carol struck me as open and thoughtful—someone who might have enough energy and motivation to enliven the space and make it into something more than first met the eye. She talked to me about the makeup of the neighborhood and some of the most pressing issues facing its residents, including neglectful landlords who don't take care of their properties. One of her goals has been to work with other community organizations to address these issues:

One of the underlying things we focus on is affordable housing. Also community health and policing. We collaborate with other non-profits in the area, and we see ourselves as one more connector or advocate. We see the work that happens here as a form of developing relationships—the more relationships that are developed, the more these issues come to our attention. There are so many landlord abuses here, code violations, raising rent before a lease is up. Most people do not feel empowered enough to speak up, but the connections built here empower them to report them to us, or work together with non-profits in the area to address them.⁶

Carol also discussed the way that the project had evolved since it began, telling me that the focus had shifted away from the white cubes and towards the community center model: “Rick expressed concern that the markets were playing into gentrification of the neighborhood, because they were bringing in a lot of outside interest. So right now we're a lot more internally focused. My philosophy has been to invest much more in the people who live here. Other feedback was that a lot of growth happened through workshops, where you can get to know someone in a more intimate way, so the strategy shifted in the second year to renting this as a workshop space and having people from the community program it.”⁷ Through Carol's leadership, Trans.lation moved away from a model of public art in which its publicness came from being physically sited in public space, and towards what artist and theorist Suzanne Lacy defined as new genre public art in the 1990s: “art that uses both traditional and nontraditional media to

⁶ Carol Zou interview, September 17, 2015.

⁷ Ibid.

communicate and interact with a broad and diversified audience about issues directly relevant to their lives.”⁸ The publicness of new genre public art is rooted in its ability to elicit debate and discussion around a specific issue. Art historian Arlene Raven referred to such work as “art in the public interest,” outlining a historical trajectory that moved away from the individualist emphasis within modern art towards practices that she viewed as collaborative and feminist.⁹ These definitions offer a useful starting point for thinking about the kind of aesthetic and social model employed by Trans.lation in shifting from a publicly sited work that emerged within the context of a city-wide exhibition of sculpture, to a socially engaged art project that acts in the public interest. ‘The public’ as defined by Raven needs qualification however, since the general public has become less of a primary audience for Trans.lation. Instead, it has become more ‘internally focused,’ as Carol put it, around residents in Vickery Meadow—a small constituency that makes up most of the actors and audience, although the general public also plays a secondary role. While Trans.lation is physically situated in a public space and is free and open to anyone who wishes to attend classes, it is not frequently stumbled upon by random passersby—very few walk-in visitors entered the space during my visits.

When I returned to Trans.lation the day after my first visit, there were Arabic classes going on, and five students sat around a table, while a few people worked in the community garden in the back lot. I met a few Vickery Meadow residents, including Ahmed,¹⁰ who had been in the United States for one year. He and his family moved to Dallas from Malaysia, where they worked as rice farmers. He told me that he came to Trans.lation via the Dallas Hospital, after his case worker recommended it to him.¹¹ I also met Nesreen, who is employed at Trans.lation as an Arabic teacher. She moved to Dallas from Iraq three years ago, and also works at the International Rescue Committee nearby. Teaching Arabic at Trans.lation provides her with an additional source of income. When I asked her what she liked about the space she told me that she found herself here, and that she considers the neighborhood of Vickery Meadow to be “rich,” despite being economically disadvantaged—culturally rich, because so many people from different backgrounds live here. While she waited for the Arabic class to begin, she and Carol discussed

⁸ Suzanne Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), p. 19.

⁹ Arlene Raven, *Art in the Public Interest* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989).

¹⁰ The names of participants have been changed in some cases, since some were undocumented immigrants, and others discussed sensitive or personal information with me.

¹¹ He may have been referred to Trans.lation as a form of art therapy, or possibly to attend language classes.

plans for a driving workshop for women who recently moved to Dallas from the middle East and have no prior driving experience. She offered to volunteer her time over the next few months to teach them to drive and prepare them to take the test. I spoke to Ome Acatl while she finished painting some jewelry display stands. She works at Trans.lation as the Aztec dance instructor and Nahuatl teacher. Acatl had been coming to Trans.lation for about two years now, and also works at a Mexican restaurant nearby. I asked her what she thought about Trans.lation, and what it meant to her, and she told me that she viewed it as a place where people from different religions, cultures, and levels of education could meet face to face and get to know each other, and that she thought this might play a role in how people relate to each other on the street. I asked her about the jewelry she made, and she told me that she sells her work at two different prices: a lower price for people who live in Vickery Meadow, and a higher price for outsiders from wealthier neighborhoods.¹²

Spending two days at Trans.lation gave me a glimpse into the kinds of activities that occur there, but it felt inadequate. I had gotten some sense of Carol's multifaceted role, and the way she seemed to juggle responsibilities and switch between different contexts, and it seemed worth following up on the nuances of this role. But while I had spoken to a few participants, it was not enough time to get a sense of the rhythm or momentum of the project, the crossover between different activities, or the interactions of participants; in short, what exactly it was that made a project like this worthwhile and engaging for them, and how these concrete practices might contribute to the project's goal of producing localized social change. Although I was there for a short time, I felt that what was worth exploring further was the sense of ambivalence enfolding Trans.lation—its merging of art with everyday life, public art with community center, and its claim to engage in grassroots activism while at the same time having to make the types of concessions and negotiations that characterize many non-profit organizations.¹³

¹² This strategy of “dynamic pricing” has been used in other contexts—from the sale of hotel rooms, to Uber rides, to restaurants that adjust their prices based on the perceived ability of their customer base to pay. Yet while corporations and private investors have made much use of this model, it is not one that has been translated efficiently to the provision of public services.

¹³ Trans.lation does not have non-profit status yet, but this was one of Carol's goals during my June 2016 visit.

One month in Dallas

I returned to Dallas in June 2016 and visited Trans.lation over the course of a month. While I was there I seemed to play many roles, none of which felt satisfactory on its own: art critic, historian, anthropologist, journalist. As an art historian, I was there to learn about the project as a form of socially engaged art, and I was curious to see for myself how methods from other disciplines could help provide a more detailed, nuanced picture. I was interested in learning more about how the big picture—the aesthetics and politics of Trans.lation as a unified project—fit together with concrete, everyday details and daily practices—and so I took field notes, participated in activities, and observed conversations and interactions among Carol and participants.¹⁴ I attended several meetings between Carol and other community leaders, where I learned more about the role that Trans.lation played in Vickery Meadow and in Dallas. In conversations with Carol, I got a better sense of how she understood Trans.lation, and when I spoke with participants, I heard stories and perspectives that sometimes confirmed, sometimes diverged from the public narrative of the project.

On my second day of driving from San Diego to Dallas, I stopped at a gas station in West Texas. The reporters on CNN were talking about a shooting that had just occurred in Orlando. A man claiming allegiance to ISIS had killed 49 people and wounded dozens of others at a gay nightclub, making it the biggest mass shooting in US history. I thought about the number of guns in Texas—couldn't this easily happen again, where I was going? I wanted to keep driving until I reached the Canadian border. I thought about the inevitable backlash towards Muslims that would emerge, which had been the case after the terrorist attacks in San Bernardino. I drove hundreds of miles through Texas and passed by dusty looking ranches and small towns, signs for gun shows, signs for Chevron and McDonald's, signs for Trump.

I arrived in Dallas after two long days of driving, and visited Trans.lation the next day. Carol sat on the couch inside waiting for me and we talked about what had been going on there recently. It looked much the same as it did in 2015, the same colorful paintings on the walls, the same Aztec calendar, the same checkered linoleum floor. In the back, a girl named Nan was cleaning up and arranging supplies and

¹⁴ 'Participants' is a problematic word in this context, since many of those who came to Trans.lation would have described themselves in other terms, such as students or language-learners. 'Residents' or 'users' were possibilities, but presented their own difficulties. I have stuck with 'participants,' which despite its imperfections, acknowledges the roots of Trans.lation in socially engaged, participatory public art practice.

rolls of paper. Carol told me about the programming that had continued since my last visit: many of the classes were still going on, including the language classes, sewing class, painting and drawing, and Aztec dance. The driving club had been a success and five women had gotten their licenses. There was a new zine club that had started up, made up of young women, many of whom had attended other classes at some point. There was a theater class being run by Teatro Dallas. A radio program was in production, which would tell stories of refugees who had recently settled in Vickery Meadow. Carol told me that she had been working on developing partnerships with other non-profit organizations in the neighborhood, while past partnerships continued, including with the International Rescue Committee, which hosted regular classes in Trans.lation's storefront space.

During the first few days I spent at Trans.lation, I began to notice two thematic undercurrents that would come up repeatedly the rest of the month. The first was the literal importance of translation. Every day I would find myself trying to understand someone, speaking the limited Spanish and French I have and using google translate, hand gestures or facial expressions. At one point a six-year old boy tried to give me a Spanish lesson but became frustrated when I couldn't roll my Rs. Language classes are organized at Trans.lation according to the demands and interest of local residents, and instructors are hired from the community or from the International Rescue Committee. During my second day there, deaf and hard-of-hearing adults used the space for an ASL class. Most of them were Bhutanese refugees from Nepal¹⁵ and used various forms of sign language, including Nepali, village sign and home sign.¹⁶ Learning ASL is an urgent task for participants in the class who have been in the United States for almost five years, since at this point they are required to take a citizenship test, and must communicate with the testing official using ASL. It was interesting to observe and listen to these classes: there were long silences, then a few students would start sounding out words, then silence, then words spoken on a new subject. While the class was going on, a man walked in carrying the book *Green Eggs and Ham*, and started to speak French with one of the instructors, who initially spoke French with him but then began to

¹⁵ In the 1990s, Bhutan expelled the Lhotshampa people from the country—an ethnic group making up nearly one-sixth of its population that was spread out across southern Bhutan. While many Lhotshampa have been resettled as refugees in other countries, thousands still remain in refugee camps in Nepal. See Vidhyapati Mishra, “Bhutan is No Shangri-La,” *New York Times*, June 28, 2013.

¹⁶ Home sign is a system of idiosyncratic communicative gestures used by deaf individuals who are not taught a conventional model of sign language from birth. It is a common experience for those who grow up deaf in isolated communities.

instruct him in English. I heard: “If I was little, if I were little.” Silence. “Je voudrais,” “si j’etais medecin.” Silence. On the other side of the room: “How do you sign Kentucky.” Silence. “If I had one hundred dollars I would go shopping.”

After the ASL class finished, I talked to the French-speaking man, Komi, who had recently come to Dallas from Togo and works as an overnight stocker at the nearby Walmart. He often attends painting and drawing classes at Trans.lation, and sometimes the English class, because he wants to find a better job. He has painted landscapes, sunsets, and scenes of everyday life, many of which are hanging on the walls of Trans.lation. In one painting, musical instruments sit in front of a colorful African mask. Another piece is more surreal and features a mouth with bright green lips floating in a red and yellow circle. There are daubs of red, yellow and green paint on the outer edge of the circle that seem to vibrate outwards. There is a deftly painted black shadow around the circle that suggests motion, spinning, something like a wheel of fortune. The floating lips, slightly parted, seem to be speaking, or singing. It is an image that seems to capture the emphasis on speech and language at Trans.lation—and gives visual form to the idea that meaning can be shared across different platforms or contexts through the act of translation. Looking at Komi’s work on the wall of Trans.lation, along with the other paintings, drawings and photographs, I thought about the broader meanings and narratives that become entangled within these material productions because of the context in which they were produced. If I had limited my visit to Trans.lation to one or two visits, and based my analysis on considering a few examples or public presentations, I would miss out on knowing more about the relationships and social networks that develop around these practices, and the art produced in these spaces by community residents and program participants.

The second theme that I think about frequently while here is what it means for an art project to take on the role of social service provider. During my visits, I felt myself continuously moving between skepticism and enthusiasm regarding this dual role—at times it seemed organic and productive, while at other times it seemed as if the demands and needs of residents were too overwhelming. The second day that I was there, Carol met with a woman who worked as the Director of Development for Texas Health Resources, a faith-based non-profit that operates the largest network of health care facilities and hospitals in North Texas. Carol gave her a tour of Trans.lation, and then they discussed their concerns regarding the neighborhood, particularly the high crime rate, 30% of which is domestic violence-related. They talk

about the need for an educational campaign to raise awareness of this issue, which is particularly difficult to address in Vickery Meadow because of cultural and language barriers. Many residents endured significant trauma in their home countries before moving here, and most now have limited access to health services. In addition, Vickery Meadow is composed mainly of renters, who have less of a voice in public discourse on these issues. This discussion was continued a few days later when Carol met with a woman from another non-profit, Mosaic Family Services, which provides counseling, legal advice and language services to refugees and immigrants. They talked about how to address domestic violence in the community, and Carol suggested that art might offer an entry point to an issue that can be difficult to discuss in public. The woman from Mosaic tells Carol that her clients don't have many creative or expressive outlets, and that a partnership with Trans.lation could provide opportunities for community outreach and education. They agree that it makes sense to hold meetings in the Trans.lation space, where a diverse group of residents already gathered regularly.

These kinds of advocacy and public awareness initiatives seemed to me to be the most effective way for Trans.lation to engage in community activism. It was during other types of exchanges that more complicated issues emerged regarding the provision of social services, and it was interesting to observe the degree to which Carol became involved in problem solving with residents. On my first day there, Ahmed stopped by. He showed me the garden beds in the back lot as well as photos of his garden at home a few blocks away. A few minutes later, he began to speak to Carol about issues with medical bills he had received, and about problems he was having with two men he worked with. His house had been recently broken into and he was assaulted by one of these men; his employer told him to contact the police. Carol told him to apply for a restraining order and explained what evidence he needed to provide: the names of the men, their addresses, all of the specific incidents that occurred, photos of his injuries. There were some difficulties in explaining this to him, but luckily Nan spoke Burmese and acted as a translator. Following this conversation, Ahmed told me about his experiences living in Burma as a Rohingya Muslim—one of the most persecuted ethnic groups in the world.¹⁷ Many of his family members are

¹⁷ Rohingyas have lived in western Myanmar (Burma) for generations, but have not been granted citizenship, nor are they recognized as an official ethnic group by the government. Nationalist groups in Myanmar have repeatedly engaged in ethnic cleansing of Rohingya, including in 2012 and 2015. See "Myanmar's Shame," *The Economist*, May 23, 2015.

refugees around the world, in the US, Canada and Australia. When I told him that I was Canadian, he said that he wished he lived there instead of in Dallas because of the health care system. He said that he just wanted to lead a peaceful life but that he barely receives enough financial support to get by, and finds it impossible to afford rent, medical bills and food. For him, visiting Trans.lation has meant a few specific things: first of all, it's a place where he can share his gardening skills. He has a much larger garden in the backyard of the apartment where he lives, so he doesn't come here to harvest vegetables, but to supervise the planting and adjust the soil composition. This is also a place where there will usually be someone to talk to, and where he can come to ask questions, translate documents, or find help navigating labyrinthine social structures like medical insurance and the law. My conversations with Ahmed were a reminder of the complexities that arise when a small art center adopts the role of a social service provider.¹⁸ Carol and the instructors who work at Trans.lation are well meaning and devoted, and they do all they can to help, yet there is only so much they can do without more resources, training and funding. I began to see this conundrum as a kind of translation as well—the project moved between different systems and contexts, and meant different things to different people. For some, it was simply the place they came to learn a different language or skill, while others saw the space as a creative outlet. For some, it was a place to socialize and meet neighbors, while for others, these activities were fused together with political advocacy and activism. While there was a diverse range of uses and understandings of the project, the meaning that was shared in common was the space itself, and the sense of community that developed through the overlapping interests of participants and neighborhood residents.

ZineX

One of the classes that I observed regularly at Trans.lation was ZineX, a girls' zine club that met twice a week. During my visits, the young women of color who were part of the group made zines about body issues, sexuality and racism. The first time I met the group was after one of the ASL classes. Carol rearranged tables and chairs in the middle of the space, opened a bag of Takis, and pulled out the materials they had been working on over the past few weeks, including designs for a t-shirt that will spell

¹⁸ Ahmed is one of a few Trans.lation participants with whom I have kept in touch, and he occasionally sends me text messages, videos, or photos of him and his family.

out “Cultural Appropriation” in Tibetan lettering. Carol gave the group \$300 of seed money from the Translation budget, and they have been thinking about business plans, brand names and shirt ideas for a clothing line. Most of the ZineX girls were part of a group called Eagle Scholars, a college readiness program geared towards Vickery Meadow youth. While I was there, they discussed their zines, their clothing designs, and the book *Bad Feminist* by Roxane Gay, which Carol had recommended to them. They talked about their eyebrows and where they got them done. However, the main subject of conversation was definitely Susan¹⁹—how miserable she was making all of them, how controlling she was, and how little she understood about them and their lives. Susan was the director of the Eagle Scholars program, and was the subject of a never-ending stream of complaints. According to them, she had a very strict understanding of the purpose of Eagle Scholars, and was not willing to deviate from its goals to allow for input or suggestions. Susan would come up almost every time I met with the ZineX girls. Their complaints were sometimes very specific: for example, they were asked to make a collage of what they might wear in the year 2020. One student began to design a dress made of vegetables, but Susan intervened to tell her that she wasn’t doing the assignment correctly. They also complain about not being allowed to speak their minds—Susan doesn’t want them to talk about feminism, or anything controversial, especially in public, since they are representatives of the Eagle Scholars program and have to put their best foot forward. During this conversation, Carol attempted to moderate the discussion by acknowledging their frustrations, while trying to suggest productive ways to deal with Susan. But later, she told me that she sympathizes with their frustrations, and that it speaks to broader issues with non-profits. In Carol’s opinion, the problem isn’t necessarily Susan herself—Susan could be any authority figure, and is probably one of many white middle-class adults in their lives attempting to give them guidance. For Carol, Susan’s authority over the ZineX girls has become problematic because of the institutionalized non-profit structure that exists around programs like Eagle Scholars, in which certain policies and objectives must be met, and individual personalities or conflicting modes of expression are discouraged. Carol thinks that part of the frustration for the ZineX girls has to do with feeling like they have been reduced to a statistic.

¹⁹ Not her real name.

For me, listening to these conversations helped to think through the ways in which Trans.lation differed from the work that other non-profits were doing in Dallas. It was a parallel space to Eagle Scholars in many ways—but while the girls were asked to make scrapbooks focused on success in Eagle Scholars, they were encouraged to make zines on feminism, body issues, and vegetable dresses at Trans.lation. Success was not being measured by quantitative data such as an improvement in grades or a decline in drop-out rates at Trans.lation, but instead, by qualitative criteria focused on critical thinking and analysis. The ZineX girls may have spent a lot of time complaining about Susan, but they also discussed spectrums of sexuality, Roxane Gay’s definition of feminism, the poetry of Rupi Kaur, Nicki Minaj, and what exactly constitutes cultural appropriation (for example, what does it mean to draw animé when you’re Asian, when you’re white, or when you’re black?). Listening to these conversations made me think about how a project like Trans.lation could appear to be similar to other non-profits, but that what produced its fundamental difference was its flexibility—as well as its recognition that young people of color might not have the same idea of success as older white mentors. This hybrid status has meant that Trans.lation has always had to negotiate its place at the interstices of art, social service and community organizing project, and it is this reflexive, self-critical position that allows it to operate differently from other organizations.

The next time I attended a ZineX meeting, the girls were on the quieter side. They talked about how Eagle Scholars was tiring them out and they continued to feel frustrated by Susan’s demands. They drew on their own and didn’t discuss the clothing line that they had been so excited about last time they met. Later, Carol told everyone that KERA (the local NPR radio station) was going to be airing a story on gentrification in Vickery Meadow, featuring stories from Trans.lation participants. She played it live for us. The reporter, Stephanie Kuo, talked about the diversity of Vickery Meadow, how there were over thirty languages spoken here and that it was home to refugees and immigrants from all over the world.²⁰ She contrasted average incomes with other neighborhoods—in nearby Lakewood, the average income is \$140,000, compared to around \$20,000 here. She spoke to Carol, Nesreen and other Trans.lation participants. She also spoke to Barry Annino, head of the local Public Improvement District, who has

²⁰ Stephanie Kuo, “As Vickery Meadow Changes, Refugees And Immigrants Worry They’ll Be Pushed Out,” *KERA News*, July 19, 2016.

been trying to rebrand Vickery Meadow as just ‘Vickery.’ His ideas for improvement have included getting rid of all the stray shopping carts in the neighborhood, and he outlined a familiar narrative about wanting to make the area more livable, walkable and safe. Previously, he worked for a similar group that ‘improved’ the Deep Ellum neighborhood, now known for its bars and coffee shops—there is concern among some Vickery Meadow residents that a similar plan enacted here would raise rents and push some out of their homes. Annino’s plans seem limited to cosmetic improvements—the shopping carts—as well as his desire to restrict the hours when establishments can sell liquor.²¹ After the broadcast, Carol asked the ZineX girls what they thought. They expressed concern that it would soon be unaffordable to live in Vickery Meadow, and what they could do about it. The story touched a nerve with one of the girls in particular, whose family was dealing with unmanageable home repairs and an absentee landlord. One of them said, “yeah it’s true, there really were a lot of shopping carts around when I moved here, and now they’re all gone,” and they all laughed. Listening to this conversation provided insight into the ways that Trans.lation has become a platform for broader discussions about gentrification and displacement, and has allowed participants to think together about alternatives for neighborhood development.

Feminist activism at Trans.lation

The ZineX girls were encouraged by Carol to explore their interests in feminism—specifically an intersectional, pop-culture friendly form of feminism that some critics might refer to as fourth wave: “The emerging fourth wavers are not just reincarnations of their second wave grandmothers; they bring to the discussion important perspectives taught by third wave feminism. They speak in terms of intersectionality whereby women’s suppression can only fully be understood in a context of the marginalization of other groups and genders—feminism is part of a larger consciousness of oppression along with racism, ageism, classism, ableism, and sexual orientation (no “ism” to go with that).”²² It was instructive to gain insight on what the future of feminism might look like, and the ways in which it was perceived by the ZineX girls to be lacking or restrictive. They were conscious of the power structures of white privilege, however implicitly or explicitly, and were developing their own groups and support networks to resist the many

²¹ Dianne Solis, “Finding a recipe to preserve Vickery Meadow’s unique flavor,” *Dallas Morning News*, July 2015.

²² Martha Rampton, “Four Waves of Feminism,” *Pacific Magazine* (Fall 2008), available at <https://www.pacificu.edu/about/media/four-waves-feminism>.

Susans of the world. They were well-versed in discussions of hybrid sexuality and body-positive discourse, but they did not have the same reactionary response to pop-culture, makeup or self-care that characterized the second and third waves. They were keen to share their experiences and stories, establish their own clothing lines, and develop other creative projects: Rooha Hagar, a frequent ZineX'er, began to document people in the community under the label "Humans of Vickery Meadow," referencing the popular Humans of New York photo blog that began in 2010. Her aim was to tell some of the stories of her friends and neighbors. In one of the photos, a woman wearing a black hijab is featured and the caption reads: "I was born in Somalia and came to the United States in 2013. We came here because in my country there is this war going on and my mom was really afraid that if we stayed there longer, we might lose our education." Another photo features Alexa Tomala, the drawing and painting instructor at Trans.lation, who says:

I was born in Ecuador, and came to Dallas 14 years ago. I started work at a housekeeper at the Hyatt Hotel. After a while, my back began to hurt, and a doctor advised me to stay home and rest. While I was resting, I asked my husband if he could buy me paint or a notebook to draw. I started drawing the trees I saw until my back started feeling better. Because of those drawings, I began to be recognized for my work. Today, I have been teaching painting and drawing at Trans.lation for 3 years. Dreams do come true, because when I was little, I didn't have the opportunity to go to school, but years later, my dream to teach art came true.

Other stories come from individuals who have moved from Bhutan, Gambia and Burma, as well as a man known as 'Goodman' in Vickery Meadow, who has lived in the neighborhood for 40 years. The project was exhibited at the Dallas Love Field Airport in May 2017 with the title "Welcome to America," alongside paintings and drawings produced during classes at Trans.lation taught by Tomala. The photos taken by Hagar, who is Baha'i Iranian (a persecuted minority group within Iran), demonstrate an interest in highlighting stories similar to her own, even if the subjects of the photos come from different places. Rooha and Nandin Dandar also put together an exhibition that took place at Trans.lation, titled *The Female Gaze*, featuring photographs of themselves, friends and family members. In one striking photograph, two women sit back to back and face either side of the frame, their long black hair merging into one form in the center of the image. Some feature women wearing headscarves, including a self-portrait by Rooha in which she is shown in black and white with one scarf draped across her hair, and

another around her mouth. During the opening for the exhibition, the ZineX girls (the group includes Rooha and Nandin) sold the “Cultural Appropriation” t-shirts they had made through their clothing line.

In a related conversation with Carol, we discussed authorship of Trans.lation, and how this related to her feminist politics. She discussed Trans.lation’s retreat from associations with public art as a conscious strategy, and told me that she felt less and less comfortable referring to the project as art. For Carol, Trans.lation was more of a platform for other projects than a unified project in and of itself, and this came directly out of how she thought about feminism, collaboration and authorship. This is especially important because Trans.lation continued to be associated with Rick Lowe even after other artists took charge of daily operations and project management. Carol told me that she was fine with this, and that she happily used Rick’s name in situations that would benefit the project (funding proposals, for example). She also felt uncomfortable asserting her own authorship over the project. As she put it to me: “I don’t like calling working with people my art.”²³ For her, the approach that she was taking to authorship at Trans.lation exemplified a feminist ethos through its emphasis on collaboration: “I’m going to do this for my community, not for myself, and I’m going to acknowledge everyone who works on this.”²⁴ This relates to a divide in understandings of feminism and identity politics—women climbing ladders, shattering glass ceilings, and taking authorship and control may be important signs of feminist achievement, but individual achievements have little effect on larger power structures, and Carol’s approach to authorship emphasizes a different understanding of success and achievement grounded in collaboration and horizontal organization. Compared to Lowe, Carol’s approach to organizing social interactions through art was less concerned with naming and framing, and more interested in establishing and maintaining platforms to support a diverse range of practices.

From the outside

Over the course of the month, there were times when I felt discouraged, and when it seemed like the storefront space was not enlivened in any way—when it seemed to be nothing more than a small storefront in a run-down strip mall. I came to think of this as a key aspect of engaging in fieldwork—

²³ Carol Zou interview, March 29, 2017.

²⁴ Ibid.

staying with the banality of everyday life, as opposed to focusing on a singular artwork or exhibition. During the second week I was there, I arrived earlier than Nan one morning, unlocked the door and went inside, leaving the lights off while I mopped the floors. Nan arrived a few minutes later, and it turned out that I had taken away her only task for that day. She wasn't sure what else to do, so we sat talking for a while and watched videos online until her father was able to come pick her up. Later, the sewing teacher arrived, and we tried to communicate, but it seemed too difficult given my lack of Spanish and her lack of English. A few others entered for the class, but it was uneventful. There were other moments like this when things didn't function smoothly—moments when it looked like the participants in the theater class, run by Teatro Dallas, weren't committed enough to learn their lines or musical cues, or when the theater teacher seemed to forget that the participants were mostly children and demanded more professionalism from them, even telling one girl that she would not be able to read her story in front of the audience during the final performance. Other times, I would watch the storefront from the outside, and notice all of the people passing by, mostly young Ethiopian men, who would occasionally peer in and look confused. Or they would simply walk by, or hang around outside, immersed in their own conversations. There was the fact that while I was there, a camp of homeless people right outside the back fence grew larger. Some of them occasionally slept in the white cube structures in the back lot, close to where the Aztec dance troupe regularly practiced. I wondered what they thought about Trans.lation.

I also wondered about plans for the future. Carol was constantly applying for grants, researching new potential donors, and trying to make connections with people who might be interested in supporting Trans.lation. While this seemed to be a natural gift for her, it also struck me that she was just one person, engaged in an endless game of pitches, dependent on the whims of Dallas's wealthy elites. Why should they give their money to a largely immigrant and refugee community center offering very little in the way of prestige or cultural capital? As Dallas hedge fund manager and art collector Howard Rachofsky said, "after you've bought three homes, two yachts and a plane, the most visible manifestation of affluence is what's hanging on your walls."²⁵ Trans.lation offers no such visible manifestations of affluence to potential donors. It received funding from Project Row Houses, Southern Methodist University, and

²⁵ Howard Rachofsky, quoted in "Now's Best Time to Buy Art, Collector Rachofsky Says," *Bloomberg News*, June 16, 2013.

several community organizations and non-profits, but its biggest source of funding continued to be the Nasher—meaning that Trans.lation maintained connections to, and validation by, the formal art world. Carol told me that she while she attended a lot of meetings and interacted with a lot of potential donors, she was not willing to stay quiet when it came to attacking structures of inequality in the city, and that her lack of acquiescence might be one of the reasons why Trans.lation lacked stable sources of funding. She told me about her feelings of frustration regarding local governments: “power can seem so impermeable here.”²⁶

From the outside, Trans.lation is unassuming—just a small storefront in a strip mall, one among many different shops. If you were looking for conversation, there might be more going on at the convenience store next door. If you were looking for generosity, hospitality, warmth, or food, that could also be found at the Arif Cafe, where I ate delicious Ethiopian food many times. The International Rescue Committee also offered language classes to recent refugees and immigrants, and they hosted many more students than Trans.lation did. Also, while the purpose of the project was to allow residents to propose courses and activities based on their own interests and needs, it seemed to me that the diversity of options threatened to put the project at risk of spreading itself thin, in terms of resources.

There were also many times when I felt like I was paying an intense amount of attention to practices or activities that were fairly prosaic, and this was illuminating in itself. When walking into Trans.lation, one is immediately struck by the assortment of objects and materials, and impressed by the scope of the project as a whole, but when you focus on any one particular drawing, or item of clothing, or theatrical performance, the individual works feel much more mundane. At times it was difficult to see the project as Rick Lowe initially described it—through the lens of colorful, rich, diversity; when sometimes what was going on seemed unremarkable, even to those involved. I also felt a disconnection between Vickery Meadow and the rest of Dallas—downtown seemed sterile and impersonal, with the usual business and condo developments and an arts district designed to attract urban professionals, creative entrepreneurs and tourists. Some areas had been gentrified, including Deep Ellum and the Bishop Arts District, both home to hipsters, coffee shops and craft breweries. When I visited other parts of Dallas, I

²⁶ Carol Zou interview, March 29, 2017.

felt a world away from Trans.lation, and wondered what impact a project of its size could have in relation to the larger city. This made me think about the tension surrounding issues of scale and influence in socially engaged art. Trans.lation was meaningful to residents of Vickery Meadow in part because of its small scale. It offered personal connections to residents, and the ability to shift its programming towards their needs. But this more internal focus had, perhaps, weakened its ability to have an impact on larger discussions regarding race and economic development in Dallas.

From the inside

There were other times that I saw Trans.lation from the inside and my feelings of doubt were pushed aside. I was pulled inwards and felt my anonymity and objectivity dissolve. Some would argue that giving in to those moments undermined my ability to think and act critically. In those moments, I was attracted to the feeling of being part of the action—this space in which I felt connected to others, and felt a shared sense of mission and purpose. Often, the energy seemed to originate from Carol, and had to do with her ability to listen, tell stories and relate to participants. It was Ramadan during my second visit, which meant that Arabic classes were not happening as usual and Muslim participants did not attend classes. Carol was fasting even though she is not Muslim, which I read as an act of solidarity. The shooting that had taken place in Orlando the day before my arrival in Dallas had resulted in numerous incidents of Islamophobia in the city and across the country. A general atmosphere of xenophobia was apparent across Dallas as well, and had been for many years. The suburb of Farmer’s Branch in 2007 enacted a law barring landlords from renting to undocumented immigrants, which was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 2014 after they refused to hear the case.²⁷ Just a little further to the west is Irving, where in December 2015 the KKK staged a rally at the Irving Islamic Center, specifically to protest the influx of Syrian refugees into Texas.²⁸ Irving was also home to “clock boy,” the high school student who was arrested for building a clock that was thought by school and law

²⁷ Dianne Solis, “Supreme Court refuses Farmers Branch immigration ordinance,” *Dallas Morning News*, March 3, 2014.

²⁸ Avi Selk, “The KKK and Rallies 'Round the Christmas Tree: Countercultures Clash Over Islam in Irving,” *Dallas Morning News*, December 2, 2015.

enforcement officials to be a bomb because of the student's Muslim identity.²⁹ Also nearby is Garland, the site of a shooting that took place during an event intended to caricature the Prophet Muhammed (featuring Dutch far-right politician Geert Wilders). Two religiously inspired gunmen drove from Arizona and opened fire in the parking lot of the convention center, injuring a security guard, and were then killed by local police.³⁰ These incidents, and many others, demonstrate the extent to which the suburbs of Dallas have become sites of political and racial tension. They have become home to many new immigrants and refugees (including some who move from Vickery Meadow after living there for a few years), and there are constantly erupting tensions between newcomers and white, xenophobic conservatives.

I assumed that it was with this background context in mind that Carol decided to fast for Ramadan. Since Muslim residents weren't coming to Trans.lation during that month, Carol went to them, visiting frequently in the evenings for Iftar—the meal that breaks the daily fast. I accompanied her to a few of these dinners in other people's homes. A woman named Afrah invited us over one night to her apartment in Richardson, an area in North East Dallas, in a large residential complex. Afrah is originally from Yemen, and recently produced a radio documentary at Trans.lation, narrating stories from her life, including the birth of her daughter: “The first day I felt your teeth and discovered the beginning of their growth...it was a joyous feeling of responsibility and motherhood. And your sixth month was a distinctive month in which you first uttered the word Baba, and learned to crawl, and you started growing bigger and bigger, and I saw something new in you. Every day you teach me something new, and life still has in store for us a lot of joy that is born from the rigors of life.”³¹

Carol and I arrived at Afrah's apartment, holding matching containers of tabbouli. Afrah's place was two stories, with sparse furnishings, and cushions and pillows on the floor. I played with Afrah's one-year old daughter until the sun went down, and we ate rice and chicken, beef and noodles, tabbouli, cheese and fruit, followed by tea and Twinkies. A week later, I was invited to another Iftar hosted by Nesreen's sister (Nesreen is the Arabic instructor who started the women's driving club at Trans.lation). I

²⁹ Jon Schuppe, “‘Clock Boy’ Ahmed Mohamed Sues Texas City for Accusing Him of Making Bomb,” *NBC News*, August 18, 2016. <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/clock-boy-ahmed-mohamed-sues-texas-city-accusing-him-making-n625401>, accessed December 7, 2016.

³⁰ Chris Siron, “Police kill 2 men who opened fire outside Muhammad art show in Garland,” *Dallas Morning News*, May 3, 2015.

³¹ Afrah Alakhali, “Child of Light,” February 15, 2016, <https://translationvickerymeadow.wordpress.com/2016/02/15/child-of-light/>, accessed September 1, 2017.

drove to her place, also in Richardson, a small apartment with an Iraqi flag in one corner, large television, embroideries on the wall, and a curtained-off bedroom area. Since the sun had already set, we sat down to eat right away: soup, smoky baba ghanoush, chicken and rice, salad, a delicious creamy keffir drink, grapes for dessert. Nesreen wore a hijab but her sister did not cover her hair, nor did her niece.

These dinners might seem unconnected to the other activities that happen at Trans.lation, but for Carol they seemed to be an important means of accommodation—visiting participants and instructors, socializing and keeping in touch when they could not visit the space themselves. They were also a sign that the community center was connected to other spaces, and the private lives of individuals and families, in Vickery Meadow and other parts of Dallas. I was glad to be invited, but the dinners also raised questions about the boundaries of my research. These visits could conceivably be considered part of Trans.lation, yet it felt odd to pay close attention to an activity as normal as eating dinner—an activity that was not being performed in a gallery, but in a private home, to which I had been invited to celebrate a religious event. Away from the inner circle of warmth, food and conversation, my doubts would start to return. I felt like I needed to think more about lines and boundaries, and how I understood them in relation to the many practices I had observed at Trans.lation.

Eid

On the last day of my second visit to Trans.lation, I was freed from any doubts—partly because I had been asked to play a small role in the theater production and I was nervous about screwing up. For the past week, the theater classes had taken on a more frenzied tone, with Erica trying to learn her lines, and the instructor trying to make sure the two children got the timing of their sound effects just right. Carol was making plans, picking up supplies, calling people to remind them to come. The idea was to combine several different events into one day: the theater performance, an Eid celebration (for the end of Ramadan), and the launch of the radio program that had been in the works for the past month. Although I was looking forward to the celebration, I was also feeling disturbed by the events of the previous night: I began to receive text messages from friends asking if I'd seen the news, if I was still in Dallas and if I was ok, and I read that there was an active shooter at the Black Lives Matter protest downtown, which was being held in response to two recent police killings of black men in Baton Rouge, Louisiana and St. Paul,

Minnesota. Throughout the past couple of weeks there had been a lot of anger about these two murders, both of which were recorded on video. In Dallas, it was initially unclear what was going on—videos posted on social media showed both protestors and police officers running for cover on the streets. Five police officers were killed and nine others were injured by Micah Xavier Johnson, a 25 year-old African-American man. He was killed by police that night, after they detonated a bomb attached to a robot in the parking garage where he was hiding. The day after the shooting, it felt strange to be going to a celebration. Downtown Dallas was shut down and traffic was backed up everywhere. I drove by a police station with flowers piled up on the front lawn, and on the radio the commentators talk about this being Dallas's darkest day since the JFK assassination.

At Trans.lation, we discussed the events, and how strange it all seemed, but then everyone got caught up in the cleaning and arranging that had to happen before everyone starts to arrive. Guests filtered in around 1pm. Kayli arrived with her mom and the rest of her family, her mom brought a cart full of food: tamales, tacos, chips and guacamole, watermelon and guava juice. Erica arrived with Omar and Cora. Some people from the IRC arrived, as well as Afrah, her daughter and her sister. The theater performance began with Cora leading everyone in a series of improv games. Then Kayli recited her story about the witch. Following that, Erica's monologue began; I was sitting backstage and had to yell "breakfast is ready" at one point. After the performance, everyone got a plate of food and visited, talking about the night before, how terrifying it sounded, who the gunman was. It felt good to be on the inside, surrounded by kids playing and people eating together. Carol started to play the radio program that Afrah had produced, and at the same time, Afrah's sister set up henna supplies and started giving tattoos. This was the first time that I saw participants from different workshops together: the theater class, language classes, sewing class, Arabic, zine club, and I was surprised to see that many of them already knew each other.

At home later, I thought about Trans.lation's attempts to address racial and economic inequality. I also thought about how my visit to Dallas was bookended by acts of violence in American cities, first in Orlando, now here. I left Dallas feeling alternately buoyed and weighted down, both inspired and impressed by what I had experienced, but also confused, with the feeling that there was an endless amount of work still to be done. This deepened with the election of Donald Trump in November 2016,

and with the ushering in of a new period of even more aggressive xenophobia and racism that took many forms, including the Muslim travel ban in early 2017. During my third visit to Trans.lation, in March 2017, the mood had shifted considerably, provoking further questions for me about the efficacy of socially engaged art as a response to the violence caused by Trump’s political and economic policies.

Post-Trump visit

I visited Trans.lation again in March 2017. A few weeks before I arrived, a Sudanese refugee who had been evicted from housing in Vickery Meadow died while sleeping inside one of the white cubes. Mohammad Adam suffered from mental health issues and a head injury. Although he had not been affiliated with Trans.lation, his use of the white cube structures for shelter seemed symbolic, especially considering the claims that socially engaged art projects make to offer useful social services. In a Facebook post after his death, Carol wrote, “In my work I am tasked to hold space for great joy and also great suffering. These past two weeks have been the worst two weeks of recent memory as I watched a federal administration rescind its welcome to immigrants and witnessed a death in the community that results when we only welcome people in airports, and not in our homes, or our workplaces, or our streets.”³² Trans.lation raised money for a memorial for Adam, and an event was held to commemorate his life in front of the white cubes, on which messages were written: “America is great because of refugees,” and “Black Lives Matter.” Adam’s death drew attention to the lack of affordable housing in Dallas—a journalist pointed out that rent increases in the neighborhood had left him homeless and led to his death.³³ These deficiencies underscore the violence, suffering and tragedy that lie beneath the policies and profit-motives that result in evictions and unstable housing, similar to the Ghost Ship fire in Oakland discussed in chapter three.

The fact that Adam died within one of the white cubes originally meant to serve as community art spaces further emphasizes the limitations of socially engaged art projects as providers of social services. I asked Carol about this, and if it had caused her to rethink the limitations of projects like Trans.lation. Her

³² Carol Zou, facebook post, March 2017.

³³ Julieta Chiquillo, “From Darfur to Dallas, refugee found dead in outdoor gallery couldn't escape tragedy,” *Dallas Morning News*, 10 February 2017.

response was, “no, not at all—I just wish there were more of us!”³⁴ She went on to tell me that while recent protests of Trump’s anti-immigration policies were helpful, like the airport protests that arose out of the Muslim Ban, what was neglected was ongoing, day to day support for recently resettled immigrants and refugees, like Adam. Social programs were being cut and scaled back at state and federal levels, including housing subsidies, mental health programs and language classes, that all provided crucial support for recently arrived refugees, making it more likely that something like this would happen again. Visiting Trans.lation in light of Trump’s election, after the attacks on refugees and immigrants and people of color in general, was a reminder of the scale and power of conservatism. In the face of this immensity, small actions can appear hopeless, or naive. But at the same time, returning to Trans.lation was also a reminder that there is resistance, in the form of pockets of people who are working together, supporting each other, and building coalitions and networks of support.

Reflection on visiting Trans.lation

As I have noted throughout this dissertation, socially engaged art is frequently criticized for its complicity with neoliberalism, for not addressing structural change, or for articulating an abstract, fuzzy definition of change. While these arguments hold certain truths, they also often overlook the actual practices that occur in durational projects, writing them off as insignificant, or as not contributing anything, instead of seeing them as the sites in which alternative political ideas and practices are incubating. My commitment to the latter position emerged through spending time at Trans.lation. Part of the purpose of this chapter has been to test out ethnographic methods (participant-observation, field notes, interviews) as an alternate form of writing about community-based art, and it is worth reflecting on this as a strategy in more depth.

Recently, there have been discussions about some of the commonalities between anthropology and collaborative art. Anthony Downey acknowledges the affinities between ethnography and collaborative art, and has called for the formation of new anthropological models based on an aesthetics of commitment.³⁵ George E. Marcus also writes about the possibilities of a new model of ethnography for

³⁴ Carol Zou interview, March 29, 2017.

³⁵ Anthony Downey, “An Ethics of Engagement: Collaborative Art Practices and the Return of the Ethnographer,” *Third Text* 23.5 (2009): p. 597.

contemporary collaborative art, and states that “any critical anthropology worthy of the name not only tries to speak truth to power...but also tries to understand power and its agencies in the same ethnographically committed terms and in the same boundaries of fieldwork in which the subaltern is included.”³⁶ This point is crucial for my approach to visiting and writing about Translation, in which I have tried to pay careful attention to the points at which boundaries between myself and those involved are visible, or when they begin to dissolve—I have tried to maintain distance, while working from a position of acknowledged interest and complicity with the projects I observe. This approach has been a hallmark of anthropology since the ‘reflexive-turn’ in the 1980s, and similar discussions have taken place in relation to socially engaged art.

The practice of ethnography has been debated in anthropology during the past several decades, because of its colonialist histories and its associations with western hegemony and power. In the 1980s, some anthropologists turned to archival work, textual analyses, or forms of experimental writing—inspired by a rethinking of the discipline that came out of James Clifford and George Marcus’s book *Writing Culture* (1986), among other texts. *Writing Culture* did not advocate giving up ethnography, but instead, becoming attentive to the politics of its practice and its forms of representation. This may be understood as a poststructural turn in anthropology, that was characterized by an emphasis on reflexivity, and suggested that the trope of ‘being there’ required critical reflection in terms of the type of knowledge that was produced. This period marked an important moment in rethinking ethnography and its claims to produce truth—which often involved western academics observing non-western societies and recording their experiences and observations, in a manner meant to produce scientific, objective knowledge about that culture. It also marked an important breakdown between western and non-western traditions.

However, despite these criticism of ethnography, and the suspicion towards physical presence, observation and interaction that characterize fieldwork, there are insights that come from spending time in a particular place, meeting with people face to face, and having conversations, that differ from reading about a project or analyzing its from a purely textual basis. In *Being There: The Fieldwork Encounter and the Making of Truth* (2009), John Borneman and Abdellah Hammoudi argue for the continued importance

³⁶ Ibid.

of fieldwork, pointing out the complicated relations and exchanges that unfold through ethnographic encounters. They point out that while encounters with cultural difference are always structured by power relations, assuming that these relationships are static or totalizing misses out on important details. They suggest that “If the ethnographer invests in a long-term relationship with others, and over time manages to bridge some of the cultural differences and achieve a level of trust, then the relations between power and the depictions of reality are likely to be highly nuanced and contradictory.”³⁷ Borneman and Hammoudi suggest a rethinking of fieldwork that emphasizes the importance of being there, which pays close attention to interactions, conversations and exchanges, but that is also informed by recent debates about the role of the ethnographer in producing truth based on their own positionality in relation to the site in which they are working.

These insights have significant implications for writing about socially engaged art practices, which are durational and collaborative, and involve artists in residence making work in, about, and with the communities in which they live. As I have noted throughout this dissertation, there is a growing body of writing about how to frame criticism of this type of work, which parallels debates in anthropology in some ways—there are similar discussions regarding the production of truth, and the importance of a situated or embodied perspective versus a more textual approach. Like Borneman and Hammoudi, and other ethnographers who emphasize the continued importance of fieldwork, this approach emphasizes the importance of being there—and suggests that arguments drawn solely from a theoretical or textual viewpoint are lacking in ambiguity. It is worth noting that at the same time that many artists have engaged with ethnographic practices, anthropology has taken on a new emphasis on collaboration, activism and intervention that in many ways mirrors the turn towards socially engaged art.³⁸

The fact that these debates have been taken up with regard to contemporary art practices also highlights tensions regarding the kind of knowledge that ethnographic observations are intended to produce—humanistic or scientific? These tensions have worked their way into many critiques of socially engaged art, in which suspicion of sociological approaches is connected to a broader defense of artistic

³⁷ John Borneman and Abdellah Hammoudi, editors, *Being There: The Fieldwork Encounter and the Making of Truth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), p. 6.

³⁸ For example, see George E. Marcus, “The Green Room: Off-Stage in Site-Specific Performance Art and Ethnographic Encounters,” *FIELD: A Journal of Socially Engaged Art Criticism*, Issue 11 (Fall 2018), <http://field-journal.com/issue-11/the-green-room-off-stage-in-site-specific-performance-art-and-ethnographic-encounters>.

autonomy. An example can be found in Claire Bishop's writing. Bishop has also called for a more nuanced approach to writing about collaborative, durational artwork, centered around the experiences of participants in such projects. Writing about Thomas Hirschhorn's Bijlmer-Spinoza Festival, which took place in Amsterdam in 2009, she interviewed six of the participants, writing that "the interviews clearly evidence the fact that people felt a deep engagement with the project: they wanted a similar festival to be organized every year, they felt motivated and appreciated by participating in the event, they kept going back to the same site to socialize months after the project had stopped."³⁹ Yet she cautions against placing too much emphasis on their experiences or viewing them as representative. She also expresses concern about the possibility for their responses to be quantified and used as data in future sociological research: "the kind of responses given in my interviews could easily be misused by local governments and cultural policy advisors to instrumentalize art as a cheap (and attractive) substitute for more substantive, structural changes in society."⁴⁰ While Bishop acknowledges the potential for meaningful experience to develop within these types of projects, she criticizes the focus on concrete change in socially engaged art, and writes that while new evaluative criteria are necessary, "instead of such integrated analyses, we find a recurrent focus on concrete achievements and the fulfillment of social goals. In turn, these are elided into a hazy territory of assumptions not so much 'practical and political' as entirely ethical."⁴¹ Bishop's concerns are that in using ethnographic approaches in studying public, durational art projects, the focus turns to their social impact and ethical effects, rather than highlighting their aesthetic value—which is never clearly defined. She also argues that abstractions cannot be made from individual responses. But while her argument focuses on the limitations and risks of using this methodology, it is important to remember that a focus on individual stories does not necessarily signal a focus on individual transformation rather than structural social change. Additionally, the value of art projects, and anthropological research, is not necessarily to produce abstract data, theory or models, but to tell stories or express meaning—to offer insight into daily practices and ways of living.

Reflecting on the situated nature of Trans.lation, and my visits there, the conversations, interactions and practices that I observed seem valuable on their own, but they also became points and

³⁹ Claire Bishop, *Thomas Hirschhorn: Establishing a Critical Corpus* (Zurich: JRP|Ringier, 2011), p. 51.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Bishop, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents," *Artforum* (February 2006): p. 182.

lines through which to trace social relations in a particular place. The project became a platform upon which other practices were made possible. Visiting for an extended period of time (lengthy for an art historian, relatively brief for an ethnographer) was a way to get a better sense of these practices and what they meant to participants, and also provoked questions about being inside and outside—foundational questions within anthropology and for ethnographic methodology—as well as the kinds of lines I was drawing, and sometimes crossing.

Background: usefulness and aesthetic theory

Bishop and other critics shun sociological methods, including ethnography, in favor of aesthetic autonomy, and this is a tradition in art history that comes out of the Frankfurt School, most notably, Theodor Adorno. Usefulness in art, including the provision of social services within a socially engaged art project, are anathema to this critical position. Those who prioritize use value are defined by Adorno as philistines in *Aesthetic Theory*: they derive gratuitous pleasure from artworks instead of perceiving their complexity or the suffering from which they emerged. While the philistine “concretely enjoys” artworks, the disinterested subject of high art renounces happiness “for the sake of happiness.”⁴² In relation to these ideas, Adorno made it clear that modern art exists for itself, and should be without any kind of use value—instead, the function of art was to reserve a space of utopian potential, and to resist the commodification and instrumentalization associated with capitalism.

Adorno’s writings on aesthetic autonomy have been influential to contemporary critics attempting to theorize a refashioned avant-garde. In *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde* (2015), John Roberts argues that an updated avant-garde must stand in advance of bourgeois culture, meaning and values—it must be an art “in advance of capitalism.”⁴³ The idea that art possesses an innate criticality that is capable of posing a challenge to the capitalist domination of society is worth defending. But it is also worth thinking through the extent to which, in laying the groundwork for such a challenge, Roberts and other current theorists of the avant-garde structure their arguments around autonomy and negation drawn primarily from the critical theory of Adorno and other Frankfurt School theorists. Roberts critiques

⁴² Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 13.

⁴³ John Roberts, *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 2015), p. 43.

socially engaged art projects that appear to dissolve art into society, arguing that “a premature escape into politics and instrumental reason—irrespective of art’s alignment with political praxis, or with the ‘end of art’, or with art’s embrace of non-artistic practices and disciplines)—dissolves its non-identitary functions and ambitions.”⁴⁴ The notion that political or activist art is somehow ‘premature’ is often espoused by contemporary theorists of the avant-garde who rely on concepts of Hegelian negation in which practice is construed as impatient or misguided, while theory remains privileged and untarnished. Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* is a key reference point for Roberts’ notion of a refashioned avant-garde. In Roberts’ view, much socially engaged art is guilty of ‘instrumental-activism.’ He believes that without a well defined sense of aesthetic autonomy, such work is fated to disintegrate into life: it becomes part of the indefensible zone of social welfare work associated with non-profits, benefits creative entrepreneurs, or generally works alongside rather than in advance of capital. What Roberts makes clear is that art’s dissolution into life and the social is not an inherently political gesture—hence, his argument that an updated avant-garde must stand in advance of capitalism.

The use value of socially engaged art—common threads

Discussions regarding use value and dissolution are worth considering in relation to Translation and other socially engaged art projects. What do they offer that differs from other non-profit organizations? How do they prevent their narrative and their mission from being coopted by larger, less politicized movements? Translation does not employ the rhetoric of self-improvement and responsibility visible in some socially engaged art projects. Instead, its self-narrative takes aim at structural policies. Yet while it defines itself in this manner, its influence is relatively small, and although it pressures developers, lobbies local politicians, and mobilizes residents around immigration issues, Carol spent much of her time reacting to the problems brought up by residents, seemingly on a daily basis. Like many community non-profits, it is resource poor, yet engages in programming activities that seem to be never ending and often thankless. In this sense, it shares much in common with what Mierle Laderman Ukeles termed ‘maintenance art.’ Ukeles is perhaps best known for being the artist in residence at the New York

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 15.

Department of Sanitation since the 1960s, as well as for associated performances that included shaking hands with all of the sanitation workers in New York, creating a large mirrored garbage truck, and ‘work ballets’ involving choreographed barges, trucks and tractors. Shannon Jackson has argued that Ukeles’ work is guided by a belief in public institutions, and is “not only about engagement with materials, or engagement with people but about engagement with bureaucracies that she is less disposed to critique than many who are suspicious of the aesthetics of administration.”⁴⁵ Ukeles has discussed the maintenance of life as a guiding principle in her work, which comes out of her feminist politics as well as her experiences of being a mother. Maintenance suggests the kind of behind-the-scenes dirty work that goes into supporting what already exists—it is therefore very different from the kind of newness, originality or separateness associated with avant-garde theory and practice. In its engagement with existing bureaucratic social structures, and its emphasis on maintenance, Ukeles’ work contrasts with work that exists in an autonomous aesthetic sphere, or expresses a sense of antagonism toward social systems perceived to be totalizing or oppressive. *Trans.lation* may also be seen as a form of maintenance art—it does not attempt to solve all of the social problems faced by participants who visit regularly, and Carol frequently acknowledged the limitations of the project. However, she also refused to accept that nothing could be done. From its beginning as a public art project, to its evolution over the course of three years, *Trans.lation* shifted from a public art project with a high degree of visibility to a project that functions more like maintenance art—trading some of its symbolic value and art world legitimacy for the chance to offer more meaningful day to day experiences to residents of Vickery Meadow. This corresponds with the aims of maintenance art: slow, thankless and prosaic. Carol shifted *Trans.lation*’s mandate towards what was described by Peter Simek as a “tireless torrent” of activities.⁴⁶

The example of Ukeles highlights an art project in which an artist elected to work within a bureaucratic structure, and endure the “aesthetics of administration,” as Jackson phrased it. Another example of an artist embedded within local government is Tania Bruguera, who brought the concept of usefulness into the frame of socially engaged art by coining the term *Arte Útil* (useful art). She began to formulate the idea of *Arte Útil* around 2003, and developed it further during her work on *Immigrant*

⁴⁵ Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 78.

⁴⁶ Peter Simek, “Evicted Refugee Dies in Outdoor Gallery,” *D Magazine*, February 7, 2017.

Movement International. Reflecting on how it began, she writes that the purpose of Arte Útil was “to imagine, create, develop and implement something that, produced in artistic practice, offers the people a clearly beneficial result.”⁴⁷ Arte Útil exists as a concept as well as an online archive of projects. It also took the form of an exhibition at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Netherlands in 2013. Both the website and the museum exhibition included an archive of case studies that demonstrate aspects of Arte Útil. Most are collaborative, focus on ‘marginalized’ communities in some way, and attempt to create concrete social change. The criteria for Arte Útil are listed on the website: “1) Propose new uses for art within society; 2) Challenge the field within which it operates (civic, legislative, pedagogical, scientific, economic, etc); 3) Be ‘timing specific’, responding to current urgencies; 4) Be implemented and function in real situations; 5) Replace authors with initiators and spectators with users; 6) Have practical, beneficial outcomes for its users; 7) Pursue sustainability whilst adapting to changing conditions; 8) Re-establish aesthetics as a system of transformation.”⁴⁸ The archive on the website features hundreds of examples of projects from the 19th century to the present moment. The earliest entries were not intended to be art, but were perhaps included as models that might inspire contemporary Arte Útil. For example, Melusina Fay Peirce’s book *Cooperative Housekeeping* (entry no. 275), written in 1870, was created “to reduce the burden of housework for women in order that they could pursue other interests.”⁴⁹ In addition to historical examples, the archive includes several broader, all-encompassing entries, such as the Bauhaus (entry no. 464), and Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed* (entry no. 285). These entries provide a counter-narrative to histories of art that privilege formalism or aesthetic autonomy, and the texts that accompany them emphasize that the projects or movements brought art closer to daily life and produced beneficial outcomes for those involved. While historical examples are included in the archive, the majority of the entries are for contemporary socially engaged art, including Project Row Houses and other examples discussed in this dissertation.

Carol told me that she viewed Tania Bruguera’s work as an inspiration for her own, and that she often thought about Immigrant Movement International as a kind of sister project. Immigrant Movement

⁴⁷ Tania Bruguera, “Reflexions on Arte Útil (Useful Art),” November 2012, www.taniabruquera.com, accessed September 1, 2017.

⁴⁸ Museum of Arte Útil, <http://museumarteutil.net/>, accessed September 1, 2017

⁴⁹ “Melusina Fay Peirce, *Cooperative Housekeeping*,” Museum of Arte Útil, <http://museumarteutil.net/>, accessed September 1, 2017

International began in 2011 through a partnership with the Queens Museum of Art. The space offered free educational programming, health, and legal services, a wide range of language and art classes and counseling for victims of domestic violence. A look at IMI's current calendar could just as easily be Trans.lation's: classes in Ecuadorian dance, photography, ballet classes in Spanish, screen-printing and music practice for kids. There are other similarities—IMI recently adopted the policy that workshop attendees can propose their own workshops, like Trans.lation.⁵⁰

In the summer of 2015, Tania Bruguera was named the first artist in residence at the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs. The idea was that she would connect with the city's undocumented immigrant community with the intention of promoting the city's municipal identification program, IDNYC, in order to access local benefits and city services (the card offers museum admission, library access, prescription drug discounts, and allows you to open a bank account, making it attractive to undocumented immigrants, homeless people and other vulnerable populations). Bruguera continued her work as an artist in residence at the Mayor's Office, and in May 2017 launched an initiative called CycleNews: "The project seeks, among other things, to build trust between government agencies and new and undocumented immigrants, and to connect immigrant populations to critical services MOIA provides: IDNYC, ActionNYC legal services, English conversation classes, and know your rights materials."⁵¹ The aims of IMI, and the "International" in its title, suggest an interest in wide-ranging, large-scale societal change, yet the visible manifestations of the project have been a community cultural center and the promotion of an identification card that will enable immigrants to better access services. This is more like dirty work than revolutionary work. Bruguera and Zou must both negotiate within bureaucratic structures to make things happen within their projects, and they look to local organizing as a means of creating social change by building communities of resistance within neighborhoods. Both projects conceptualize usefulness in a very different manner from contemporary avant-garde theories of art and politics, in which socially engaged art is viewed as complicit with neoliberalism. Spending time visiting one of these

⁵⁰ Alex Kershaw, "An Interview with Tania Bruguera," *FIELD: A Journal of Socially Engaged Art Criticism*, Issue 1, Spring 2015.

⁵¹ New York City Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, "NYC Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, Department of Cultural Affairs' Public Artist in Residence Tania Bruguera Launches 'CycleNews,'" Tuesday May 30, 2017, press release, available at <http://www1.nyc.gov/assets/immigrants/downloads/pdf/Cycle-News-release.pdf>, accessed September 1, 2017.

projects has been a way to develop a more nuanced perspective focused on practice, to better understand the role played by artists embedded in communities.

Back to Dallas

In previous chapters, I touched upon notions of monumentality and charisma within socially engaged art, including Project Row Houses, Dorchester Projects and Mobile Homestead, which seem to be necessary qualities in the production of large-scale projects. Although it may not necessarily be their intention, the art world desire for genius still exists; regardless of Rick Lowe's intentions, he won a MacArthur Genius award, and he was named to the National Council on the Arts by President Obama in 2014. Trans.lation functioned differently under the direction of Carol Zou, who was largely responsible for moving the project away from its associations with public art and towards a community center offering social services to residents of Vickery Meadow. The result was a project that was messy and complicated, and often pointed to the limitations of socially engaged art in the face of seemingly intractable social issues. However, it also became a platform for practices—for the merging of cultural production and activism, and activism and social service, that for many residents of Vickery Meadow seemed to hold great significance and meaning. The work done at Trans.lation involved connecting energy and momentum from cultural production to work being done in the spheres of everyday political activism.

Some critics argue that without a well defined sense of aesthetic autonomy, projects such as Trans.lation dissolve into everyday life, becoming indistinguishable from the social welfare work of non-profits, or aligning with creative entrepreneurship—generally working alongside rather than in advance of capitalism. This may be true in many cases, but it is also important to point out alternative models of community-based cultural organizing that do not replicate existing power structures, and instead seek to nurture platforms of resistance against oppressive power structures. The concept of maintenance art adds a new layer to understanding the work that unfolds at Trans.lation, suggesting a different understanding of monumental work, and challenging the notion that such work dissolves into everyday life or becomes indistinguishable from the work done by other non-profits or community organizations. Trans.lation was a

place where important work around cultural organizing was going on, and where residents of Vickery Meadow conversed about structures of power experienced in a local, specific context. The practices and platforms that I have discussed in this chapter may be small in scale, but they are nonetheless meaningful to those involved. This is the advantage offered by spending time with these projects—getting glimpses of the inside (even though they may be fleeting and partial), that offer a sense of the commitment that drives this kind of work.

Conclusion

In *Artists in Residence*, I have looked at socially engaged art projects focused on housing and neighborhood development, in which artists spend significant periods of time living and working in a particular place. These projects have sought to imagine, and build, in a manner that is different from what currently exists. They are characterized by the belief that artists can have a positive impact on that place —by addressing issues related to gentrification, a lack of affordable housing, or other social issues related to economic and racial inequalities. In looking at these projects, I have discussed some of the common issues that are associated with socially engaged art, including the tradeoffs that many artists have made when they attempt to operate within institutions or government organizations. In doing so, artists risk replicating existing systemic tensions and inequalities. There are a number of other common themes across the different projects I have discussed, which bring up important issues for artists, critics and curators to consider, especially as socially engaged art continues to grow in popularity. These include issues related to scale, autonomy, the role of individual artists, and the tension between practical considerations and symbolic meaning.

The question of how to move from a small, well-functioning model, to a large scale project, has been one that has continually occupied artists making this kind of work. In some ways, what makes these projects unique is their small scale, since this allows them to test out ideas, try out innovative forms, and adapt quickly if necessary. In remaining small, however, these projects remain limited in their capacity to concretely address structural inequalities in neighborhoods, which by their very nature, operate on a large scale. Many of the artists I spoke to wanted to have an impact beyond just a small gesture or intervention, and create work that would produce meaningful change in a particular place, by offering services, spaces, or resources to large numbers of people. Issues and tensions related to scale are visible at Project Row Houses, which has grown into a strong presence in the Third Ward, taking up a large amount of space, bringing in large crowds to its openings, events and community markets, and becoming a familiar presence in the neighborhood. As it has grown, it has taken on an increasingly active role in neighborhood development, and has purchased buildings, advocated for a community land trust, and partnered with like-minded organizations to support black culture and resist displacement. However, to do this, it has had to

raise large amounts of money through corporate sponsorships, and its programming has increasingly reflected an interest in promoting individual entrepreneurship and the development of practical skills that are appealing to private donors interested in tangible results. This is also the case with Dorchester Projects in Chicago. Theaster Gates has become a well known real-estate artist, and he has undertaken large renovation projects intended for community use, such as the Stony Island Arts Bank, at the same time that he has catapulted to success in the commercial art world. While ideas around communalism and collectivity drive much of the rhetoric around his art, in practice it seems that an emphasis on individual entrepreneurship also plays a very large role, and this is evident in the arts incubator that he initiated with funding from JPMorgan Chase.

At Trans.lation, scaling up became an aspiration that proved difficult, in part because the project moved from a public-facing art project associated with Rick Lowe, to a more internally-focused, community-directed project. As Lowe moved further into the background, and Carol Zou increasingly emphasized collaborative production, the project became more successful as a community gathering place, but less able to raise funds and grow in scale. For Watts House Project, scaling up also proved to be difficult, and was a major reason behind the project's downfall. As some of the artists I spoke to pointed out, the project was unable to align scale with ambition. If it had started smaller, made fewer promises, and gradually tried to improve relations with existing organizations in the neighborhood, it might have been more successful. In Oakland, questions regarding scale have also come up in relation to the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project, which continues to grow as users add more data to the maps. Through the project, the scale of eviction and displacement in the Bay Area becomes visible as a social, not individual problem, and the maps become increasingly useful as tools of protest. Yet the maps also point to the power of individual stories—listening to someone discuss their experience with eviction is a more emotionally impactful experience than looking at thousands of dots. Together, the maps and the stories demonstrate the political and aesthetic impact of placing the small-scale and the large-scale in dialogue.

Some of the projects I have discussed have made conscious efforts to grow in scale, and this has involved working with existing institutions and governmental organizations, operating with large budgets, and increasingly replicating existing forms of capitalist development. I have suggested throughout *Artists in Residence* that socially engaged art projects may be situated along a spectrum according to how they

engage with these existing structures, or how much they resist them in an effort to remain autonomous. On one end are projects that ground themselves in notions of aesthetic autonomy associated with the avant-garde. An example of this is the underground space of Mobile Homestead, which is reserved for close friends of Mike Kelley who wish to engage in “private rites of an aesthetic nature,” while the above-ground level is open to the public and to community uses. There are also numerous examples I have discussed in which artists value political and economic autonomy, in attempts to remain as distanced as possible from the impurities associated with capitalism and neoliberal urban development. This aligns with what Gregory Sholette has referred to as ‘dark matter.’ Examples include the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project and its emphasis on exposing and critiquing landlords responsible for eviction, and its tactical media subversions of high-tech software to highlight the economic inequalities and hypocrisies associated with Bay Area techno-capitalism. Attempts to remain autonomous are also visible in anti-gentrification organizing carried out in Boyle Heights, where activists have portrayed art galleries as inescapably linked to gentrification and capitalist corruption. While these actions have achieved some concrete results, they have also resulted in polarization and fragmentation in Boyle Heights, as well as harassment and shaming of individuals and groups who are viewed as not politically pure because of their associations with blacklisted galleries or local businesses.

Activist practices might be looked at as a type of ‘dark matter,’ operating underground and attempting to remain politically and economically autonomous. In contrast, I have discussed another tendency within socially engaged art, which is to engage in practice under current political and economic conditions. Drawing from the spatial arrangement of Mobile Homestead, I characterized an alternate approach as operating above ground, and involving the bright light of everyday social practices. This involves transparent collaborations with institutions, organizations and corporations—for example, Mobile Homestead’s affiliations with MOCAD in Detroit, or Self Help Graphics’ attempts to work with local political officials in Boyle Heights. Artists have taken different approaches to justifying these partnerships. While Rick Lowe has discussed his use of corporate funds as a tradeoff to increase the impact of Project Row Houses in the Third Ward, Theaster Gates has portrayed himself as a kind of ‘trickster’ who games the system, and has made the circulation of value a central element of his aesthetic practice. As I have argued, this tension between remaining autonomous and engaging with existing

structures runs throughout socially engaged art, and can be seen as one of the central issues that artists and community organizers must negotiate.

As projects grow in scale, and make efforts to build partnerships with organizations that can provide them with funding and exposure, a related issue that comes up has to do with the role played by individuals, versus the importance of collectivity or communalism. Many of the projects I have discussed are associated with a charismatic individual who has received accolades in the art world—including Rick Lowe, Theaster Gates and Mike Kelley. One of the issues I discussed in relation to their work was the way in which some of these artists attempt to use their fame and success to make space for others, but in doing so, risk appropriating them into the narrative of their own practice. This is evident with Mobile Homestead, for example, which shows work that would not typically be exhibited at MOCAD. This gesture could be read as a successful white male artist attempting to pay back a debt owed to those he borrowed from, by handing over a symbol of his identity and privilege to lesser known artists and cultural producers, including non-professional women artists, artists of color, homeless people, and radical political organizations. However, while Mobile Homestead involves expanding the boundaries of what is considered art, it does not trouble those categories, but incorporates unconventional practices seamlessly into its own narrative as a space set apart from MOCAD and designated as its social practice initiative.

Lowe and Gates have both been recognized for their achievements in socially engaged art through various arts awards and prizes. This has allowed them to increase the scale of their projects, reach more people, and grow more ambitious in terms of their impact on redevelopment in the neighborhoods they work in. Their projects have placed an emphasis on black culture, and ‘black space,’ according to Gates, and highlighted black activism and cultural production. But the spotlight placed on them as individuals has at times overshadowed the artistic labor and cultural practices associated with their community-based projects. Furthermore, their success suggests a model of ascendancy and individual achievement that celebrates black culture, but often lacks a deeper reflexive analysis of economic implications. In contrast, Translation sought to move away from the spotlight of individual attention. While Carol Zou continued to use Rick Lowe’s name strategically when it helped her get funding, she consciously shifted the project away from the context of the broader art world, and towards residents of Vickery Meadow. She also employed practices associated with feminist horizontal organizing, and unlike Lowe, was hesitant to refer

to what she did as an art practice in the style of Beuys' social sculpture. Instead of playing the role of a manipulator, or an orchestrator of social relations, she acted as an artist in residence, working alongside other creative practitioners who came to Trans.lation to make things, socialize, and access services and resources.

Many of the projects I have discussed see themselves as operating beyond the boundaries of the art world as it is traditionally understood. As I noted, some of the artists involved in these practices have articulated origin stories about their work, in which they felt called to leave their private studio behind in order to have a more direct or concrete impact on the world. Lowe described moving from making politically charged paintings in his studio to working on renovating houses after a visit to his studio by local high school students, who asked him why he didn't try to affect the reality around him, instead of representing it. Similarly, Mobile Homestead was created out of an interest by Mike Kelley in offering a community art space, and providing practical, public services in Detroit. Other projects I discussed are engaged in thinking about practical services that emphasized use value: Trans.lation offered a range of workshops and classes to residents of Vickery Meadow, and the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project can be used as a research tool to gain information on displacement and eviction in the Bay Area. In Boyle Heights, the symbolic economy associated with art galleries was denigrated as a capitalist luxury, and protestors demanded that Laura Owens hand over the keys to 356 Mission. Activists have argued that the community needs grocery stores and other essential amenities, not art. But these arguments were complicated by the targets they chose: 356 Mission and Self Help Graphics were among the more socially and politically engaged art spaces in the neighborhood. To further complicate matters, some critics pointed out that many of the activists were in fact artists themselves.

While use value and practical concerns have been the stated interest of many of the projects discussed here, they also rely upon their role in the art world, and their status as art, to gain attention, support and funding. Without this designation, many would seem to be no different from other community organizations or non-profits—for example, Habitat for Humanity obviously renovates many more houses than any of the projects I have discussed, and the International Rescue Committee offered more services to immigrants and refugees in Vickery Meadow than Trans.lation. But what these projects did offer was the ability to move in and out of the boundaries of what is typically associated with, and

expected of art—to make us think about places of the possible in a radically reimagined world. This is not the case with existing organizations and bureaucratic structures that offer useful services, but that operate in a fixed, stable, and predictable manner. The projects discussed here were all involved in the acts of framing particular experiences, debates or issues and presenting them for public attention. They intensify the experiences of these things for participants and for audiences, and invite a response. The act of framing, the connection to the audience, and the deepening of sensation all constitute the aesthetic power of these works. Representation is one part of the picture, but there is a broader attempt to link it to action—to point out that individual experiences may be shared by others who have experienced similar things. So while these projects emphasize use value and practical concerns, their power cannot be separated from their ability to communicate aesthetic meaning and significance.

Despite what some critics have argued, these projects do not dissolve into the heteronomy of daily life, even when they replicate existing forms of urban redevelopment. Leaving the art world completely has proved to be an impossible task for artists who have attempted it, from Marcel Duchamp to Lee Lozano. Their attempts to leave are frequently read as artistic gestures in and of themselves. Some of the artists I have discussed here were uneasy with referring to themselves as artists—for example, Zou did not want to be viewed as a social sculptor in the manner of Beuys or Lowe. And in Boyle Heights, one could not simultaneously be an artist and activist without having their allegiances questioned, or being suspected of secretly being complicit with the enemy. Other artists have sought to redefine their roles, for example, by defining themselves as tricksters playing games with the flows of capitalism (Gates), or by investigating how artists might address the conundrum of art and gentrification head on (Lowe). One of the most valuable aspects of these projects is their ability to foreground public debates and conversations, and this might be seen as a productive meeting of the symbolic and the practical. For example, discussions centering around black culture in the Third Ward and the South Side connect with broader discussions about racial inequality and reparations. These discussions have the potential to reach a wide audience, and to produce an experience for participants and audiences that goes beyond reading an essay about these issues. Importantly, these public conversations are often accompanied by practical concerns and opportunities for action, including information on how to get involved in activism in one's own neighborhood.

In the projects that I have discussed, one common theme is a long-term investment in place. The artists who are involved in these projects are committed to the neighborhoods in which they live and work, and as artists, they have consciously sought to address the assumption that art is inescapably linked to gentrification and displacement. They can be seen as ethnographers in some ways, since they have become familiar with their surroundings through close observation and study, and because they are engaged in acts of representing a particular site by communicating this knowledge to a broader public. This knowledge includes histories of the neighborhood, an understanding of social relations and key actors, who gets along, who doesn't, and current threats facing residents. But their role may be understood as what some critics have referred to as the 'activist ethnographer,' since they seek to do more than represent their experience and knowledge of a particular site. They care deeply about what happens to the people who live there, and attempt to insert themselves into the action when possible, to prevent displacement, offer services, resources, or advice, or provide a platform for neighborhood cultural production that did not previously exist. An investment in place is at the heart of the reparative practices associated with socially engaged art, in which artists in residence have imagined and constructed alternative forms of urban redevelopment, through meaningful practices that resonate beyond their site of origin. By doing this, they connect with broader social movements that are grounded in the idea that making the future a better place begins by taking action at home.

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