



On Art and Gentrification

Vince Carducci

With all the buzz over the last few years regarding Detroit as an emerging artist's mecca, the question of the role of art in the process of gentrification has been raised with increasing frequency.¹ There has been much justifiable concern over the prospects of long-time, overwhelmingly lower-income black residents in the city being displaced by an influx of more affluent, primarily white newcomers. However, the role artists play in specifically raising the risk of displacement is not so obvious.

A recent article by Matt Bolton in *The Guardian* questioned the leading role of art in gentrification.² Instead, he proposed that gentrification is really more about economics than aesthetics or culture, a function of capital's search for profit by reclaiming territory once abandoned, which, from an investment perspective, has nowhere to go but up in value when compared to the alternatives. The basis of Bolton's argument is Marxist geographer Neil Smith's "rent gap theory" of gentrification, which holds that a combination of suburbanization, deindustrialization and subsequent changes in the rates of profit, demographics and consumption patterns in the urban environment opens the door for speculation on the part of developers and other vested interests.³ The rent gap theory is also cited in what is one of the very best reflections on gentrification in Detroit, Ryan Harte's "*Détroit, très Brooklyn!*" in the May 2014 issue of ∞ mile.⁴

While acknowledging Smith's fundamentally economic perspective, both Bolton and Harte expand upon it in terms of the role of culture, and, in particular, art, in facilitating the movement of capital back into the otherwise forsaken ground of the urban core. For one thing, it is not just any fallow inner-city neighborhood that gets gentrified, as can be witnessed in the desolate nether reaches of Queens or the Bronx in New York City or Brightmoor, Ravendale or Westwood Park in Detroit. It is areas that can somehow become imbued with a certain "authenticity"—a kind of environmental *je ne sais quoi*, which can be based on distinctive architecture, as in the cast-iron loft buildings of SoHo and the rehabbed brownstones of Brooklyn Heights and Park Slope; historical legacy, as in the bohemian haunts of Greenwich Village and the Lower East Side; or location, such as Greenpoint and Williamsburg and their proximity to Lower Manhattan via the MTA L train line. A good example in Detroit is Corktown, the former nineteenth-century Irish-immigrant enclave now home to trendy restaurants, bars and coffee shops teeming with hipster habitues, including a few artists.

The connection between art and gentrification in the American experience stems primarily from the case of SoHo starting in the early 1960s. Harte recounts SoHo's history in detail that I reference in this text by also adding sociologist Sharon Zukin's groundbreaking work on the subject, presented in her book *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change*, (John Hopkins University Press, 1982).⁵ Zukin develops the important concept of the "artistic mode of production," the live/work lifestyle of loft spaces whereby vacant, light-manufacturing sweatshops were converted into postindustrial studio-residences, soon accompanied by increasing rents. Zukin also makes the point, reinforcing the rent-gap theory, that investment capital, both on the decline of real estate

values with the outsourcing of manufacturing and on the incline with transition of the area to the service economy, played a leading role in the process.

As rents in SoHo rose, artists and other creative workers sought less-expensive alternatives. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the northern tip of the Lower East Side was rebranded the East Village and the process repeated. Artists and other cultural producers learned their lesson from SoHo and tried to resist the forces of gentrification, spawning artist/activist groups such as Political Art Documentation/Distribution (PAD/D) and ABC No Rio. Those efforts failed, of course, and artists soon began making the trek over the East River into the badlands of Brooklyn, settling at first in Greenpoint and Williamsburg and now extending to the L train in Bushwick. Rising rents even there have most recently fueled an "escape from New York" movement with Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and Detroit taking turns standing in as the city's sixth borough.

An important point Zukin makes that tends to get overlooked in discussing art and gentrification is the relationship of the artistic mode of production to the market. The influx of artists into New York throughout the postwar period was in no small measure a factor of the city's position as a growing global center for art production, distribution, and consumption.⁶ The galleries, magazines, museums, auction houses, and other supporting institutions and personnel based in New York City constitute what is usually meant by "the art world," as anyone in the arts west of the Hudson River can attest. (Even artists in L.A. and Chicago complain about the hegemonic influence of New York over the field of cultural production.) Yet, as Zukin further notes, artists and others engaged in the artistic mode of production, such as writers and musicians, tend to be highly skilled but lowly compensated, with very few exceptions. It's this ironic condition that in part has fueled the quest for affordable real estate among artists and other creative types in New York City.⁷

Without the centripetal pull of the art market, the connection between art and gentrification becomes less clear. In Detroit, a distinction from New York's artist-led gentrification model is seen particularly in the areas surrounding the central business district that have become collectively known as the "7.2." The serious efforts at gentrification have been driven more by speculative financial interests, in keeping with the rent-gap theory, and embraced by more upscale lifestyle consumers rather than working artists. If the artist-led gentrification model were true, Hamtramck would have moved upmarket years ago. Indeed, even in SoHo and other parts of Lower Manhattan and now Brooklyn, the drive toward escalating real estate has been fueled by affluent residents who want the effect of the loft-living lifestyle, minus the starving artist part. This is part of a broader shift in American society whereby counterculture has been transformed into postmodern consumer culture.⁸

Thus noted, the artistic form of production becomes a prototype of the postmodern economy and its need for a flexible workforce. In particular, the artistic form of production is part and parcel of what Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello term "the new spirit of capitalism."⁹ Autonomous, self-motivated, focused on individual expression rather than material reward and continually reinventing herself, the artist is the perfect persona for inhabiting the casualized workplace of neoliberal capitalism.

Boltanski and Chiapello trace this new condition through modernity's dialectic of what they term "the social" vs. "the artistic" critiques. Throughout the rise of mass industrial society from the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries, the social critique was aimed at righting the inequities of the capitalist system, finding its adherents in social democratic movements such as labor, welfare, and civil rights, broadly understood. Moving alongside the social critique, the artistic critique was aimed at the complacency of bourgeois culture, the aesthetic avant-garde being its most robust strain. The social critique was the basis for the bureaucratic welfare state; the artistic critique stepped in to take its place when that system of capital accumulation, also known as Fordism, began to fail in the 1960s. The new form of capitalism, termed post-Fordist in contrast to its predecessor, traded in the conformity and security of the Fordist technocrat for the supposed freedom and self-actualization of the "creative entrepreneur," a persona steeped in Romantic ideals of individualism and authenticity.¹⁰

Thus it is the *ideology* of the artistic mode of production that has been used to promote gentrification of the postmodern variety, not to mention the neoliberal economy at large, as opposed to art practice per se. This ideology is embodied most obviously in the "creative class" theses of entrepreneurial gurus such as Richard Florida and Daniel Pink. A more empirical foundation of research informs economist Ann Markusen's notion of "creative placemaking," although, as Steve Panton contends, there are valid questions raised about the application of the theory in philanthropy-driven development.^{11 12}

However, as Bolton states in the above-mentioned *Guardian* article, the temptation to abandon art practice as a mode of critique against the process of gentrification, or the broader currents of neoliberal capital for that matter, needs resistance. Certainly as Bolton further notes, art practice needs self-reflection to gain awareness of the political economies of space and cultural (amongst different) contexts. It must extend beyond symbolic critique; it must directly engage its conditions. It's the distinction between critical art as historically understood, i.e., the artistic critique of modernity as described by Boltanski and Chiapelle, and an activist art that reunites aesthetic practice with the social dimension in what I have come to term the "art of the common," an art that explores the interstitial zone between public and private, a physical and cultural space revealed most dramatically in Detroit where conventional property relationships and governance have effectively dissolved in broad swaths of the city.¹³ For me, the exemplar of this practice is the network of cultural producers living and working in the section of Detroit known as Banglatown and along the Hamtramck border area being termed "the Northwest Territories."

Certainly, the art of the common risks becoming a form of what Lauren Berlant terms "cruel optimism," i.e., an object of utopian desire especially as it relates to human flourishing—defined as the multidimensional horizon of well-being potentially available to all, socially, politically, economically, etc.—that is actually an obstacle to it.¹⁴ The new spirit of capitalism, which promises personal liberation and self-actualization through the acceptance of risk but, in fact, effectively represses it in the unequal playing field of the so-called free market, is one example. What's more, the interstitial condition, literally "the state of existing in between," in this case in the urban areas on the edge of total abandonment and recuperation by the rent gap, is likely unsustainable over the long-term should the pattern of rising property values currently underway in the 7.2 radiate out into the neighborhoods. In the meantime, the art of the common proposes alternatives for inhabiting and nurturing the urban landscape by using values other than those based on the logic of pure economic exchange, such as concern for environmental sustainability, social equity and respect for community as a site of human interaction, i.e., the location of everyday routines, the central node of diverse social networks, the phenomenological field of identity, both personal and communal, and their complex interrelations. It is therefore worth pursuing.

footnotes

¹ As late as 2005, gentrification in Detroit by artists' communities or other means was not really considered a problem. See for example this quote from John Norquist, at the time CEO of the Congress for New Urbanism: "Gentrification is no threat to Detroit. ...Rent is low and the demolition business is bigger than the home repair business. How much harm could some gentry do?" (*Planetizen*. 6 June 2005. <http://www.planetizen.com/node/147>). The question of the role of artists in the gentrification of Detroit really starts to emerge in 2009 with Toby Barlow's *New York Times* Op-Ed piece "For Sale: The \$100 House," on the purchase by artists Sarah Wagner and Jon Brumit of the structure that now houses DFLUX (7 March 2009. http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/08/opinion/08barlow.html?_r=3&). The article also notes the role of Mitch Cope and Gina Reichert of Design 99 in promoting the relocation of artists to Detroit. It should be noted that the artists working in the area north of Hamtramck known as Banglatown have always maintained a circumspect view, to say the least, of their role in gentrification, stressing their

collaborations with local communities, for example. See Linda Yablonsky, "Remix Detroit: Artists in Residence." (*New York Times T Magazine*. 22 September 2010. http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/26/t-magazine/26remix-detroit-t.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0). The issue also gained traction in the wake of the 2010 project, coordinated by Cope and Reichert and commissioned by Juxtapoz magazine, to create art installations in four houses their non-profit organization Power House Productions owned in their neighborhood. See Jacob Jaworsky, "Mitch and Gina of Power House Productions and the Story Behind Juxtapoz in Detroit." (*Juxtapoz*, 19 January 2011.

<http://www.juxtapoz.com/current/featuremitch-and-gina-of-powerhouse-productions-and-the-story-behind-juxtapoz-in-detroit>). Recently, the issue has become more pressing as real estate values have begun to dramatically rise in the central business district and surrounding neighborhoods, as well as up Woodward Avenue to Grand Boulevard, displacing longtime lower-income residents in their wake. In April 2014, the *Michigan Citizen* convened a panel to discuss gentrification in Detroit. See the *Metro Times* coverage of the event, featuring among other participants gallery owner George N'Namdi: <http://www.metrotimes.com/detroit/panel-convenes-to-talk-detroit-gentrification/Content?oid=2202039>

² Bolton, Matt. "Is art to blame for gentrification?" The Guardian openDemocracy digital commons. 29 August 2013. http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/aug/30/art-blame-gentrification-peckham?CMP=share_btn_link

³ Smith, Neil. "Gentrification and the Rent Gap" *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*. Vol. 77, No. 3. September 1987. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2563279>

⁴ Harte, Ryan. "Détroit, très Brooklyn!" ∞ *mile*. issue 06: May 2014. http://infinitemiledetroit.com/Detroit_tres_Brooklyn_examining_gentrification_and_Detroit.html

⁵ In fact, I highly recommend all of Zukin's work for anyone interested in role of culture in effecting social change, urban or otherwise.

⁶ That in turn was tied to New York's emergence as a command center for global capitalism coming out of the Cold War. For an economic account, see Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton University Press, 2001). Serge Guilbaut's *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (University of Chicago Press, 1985) is generally accepted as the standard account as it relates to visual art. The story of the broader field of cultural production during the period is contained in Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (The New Press, 2001).

⁷ For a rather pessimistic interpretation of the high skill/low-wage model of the artistic form of production in the gentrification of Chicago's Wicker Park, see Richard Lloyd's *Neo-Bohemia: Art and Commerce in the Postindustrial City* (Routledge, 2006).

⁸ For more on this thesis, see Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter, *Nation of Rebels: How Counterculture Became Consumer Culture* (Harper Business, 2004).

⁹ Boltanski, Luc and Eve Chiapello. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. Verso 2005. Translated by Gregory Elliott.

¹⁰ A product of Romanticism, the artistic mode of production embraces individual imagination, free expression, and originality. Its key concept is "natural genius," which Immanuel Kant defines as "a *talent* for producing something for which no determinate rule can be given: and not an aptitude in the way of cleverness for what can be learned according to some rule; and consequently *originality* must be its primary property." (*The Critique of Judgment*. Oxford University Press, 2007, originally published 1790): §46, p. 137 (emphasis original). The artistic

mode of production emerges first in the literary field in the latter part of the eighteenth century, in part, as a result of the low barriers to entry in the publishing markets vs. the more academically controlled disciplines of music and visual art and their top-down forms of patronage. See Cesar Graña, *Bohemian vs. Bourgeois* (Basic Books, 1964). The Kantian ideal of the natural genius is central to the avant-garde and its manifestation through the artistic critique of modernity. With the rise of post-Fordism beginning in the late 1960s, the artistic mode of production as an ideology becomes mainstreamed with the embrace of countercultural ideals in reaction to the apparent disintegration of the modern bureaucratic organizational system. For a good history of the recuperation of the artistic mode of production by post-Fordist American capitalism and its repercussions in consumer culture, see Sam Binkley, *Getting Loose: Lifestyle Consumption in the 1970s* (Duke University Press, 2007), as well as Heath and Potter, op. cit.

¹¹ Markusen, Ann and Anne Gadwa. "Creative Placemaking" Markusen Economic Research Services and Metris Arts Consulting, 2010. <http://arts.gov/sites/default/files/CreativePlacemaking-Paper.pdf>

¹² Panton, Steve. "Art that knows its place" ∞ *mile*. issue 12: December 2014. http://www.infinitemiledetroit.com/Art_that_knows_its_place.html

¹³ Carducci, Vince. "Envisioning Real Utopias in Detroit" Motown Review of Art. 1 February 2012. <http://motownreviewofart.blogspot.com/2012/02/envisioning-real-utopias-in-detroit.html>

¹⁴ Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Duke University Press, 2011.

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