Don't Make Everything Boring

On Artists and Affordable Housing

In the last week of June, we drove to a town outside of Lisbon to look at real estate, because houses were cheaper there than in any major city. We thought, maybe, if we could manage to invest in a few buildings, it could become a gathering place and a source of stability for an international group of artists who didn't have that. The town, on a hill, was old, charming, and full of centuries-old vacant homes butting up against beautifully cared-for, inhabited ones. At the town theater's second-floor coffee shop, we asked some of the older ladies gathered there if they knew of anyone selling. My friend spoke Portuguese well enough to do this; I stood by. One more enthusiastic woman waved us up the street. Hours later, a home owner who toured us through the house she wanted to sell—which led up to a garden with an apricot tree—assured me that even if I didn't speak the language, my new neighbors would be patient as I learned. She made it all sound too easy, moving in on someone else's home and history.

A few days after, on a run, I had a vision of some travel magazine story about artists moving into a small historic village—I'd seen something recently on *Thrillist* about small towns to move to before they get popular—and wanted to hurl. Speculators and developers inhale such stories before swooping in to make everything boring, and expensive: how to never participate in that crass creative class narrative?

Catherine Wagley

Living in an experimental way tends to require lower overhead and, often, hustle. Unless you have family money, the hustle takes over without low-cost living space—art critic Lucy Lippard, a lifelong freelancer, once wrote a note to herself saying "if you spread yourself any thinner you'll vanish"[1]—and the work starts becoming strategic and homogenous (sameness sells). But if we can learn to secure affordable space without jeopardizing affordability for others, perhaps we can learn how to live and experiment in diverse, accessible environments over time, with long-term residents (rather than newly-arrived yuppies) as neighbors.

Laid over in London on my way back to L.A., I saw Julie Becker's survey at the ICA there, titled *I must create a Master Piece to pay the Rent*. The downstairs galleries featured *Researchers, Residents, a Place to Rest* (1993–1996), the work the late L.A. artist began when still a student at CalArts and finished a few years after. The installation included miniature rooms installed maze-like on two low-to-the ground plinths—a billiard room, weird detritus on sawhorses against wallpaper, goldfish on a metal shelf next to a cardboard partition, a studio with a brown couch and papers on floor and walls. These rooms looked forlorn and tasteful at once. Chris Kraus, in writing about this installation, compared them to single-room occupancy (SRO) hotels, which hold the downtrodden as they move from or toward homelessness. Becker's never-ending series *Whole* occupied the upstairs galleries. She began this series of drawings, photographs, and video while living in a bank-owned home in Echo Park that changed hands multiple times as she leased it. In one C-print, a projector screen in a carpeted basement shows the same wood paneling that covers the wall behind it—an elegant close study of home before it's gone.

1. Lucy Lippard, "Changing: On Not Being an Art Critic" (lecture, Vera List Center for Arts and Politics, The New School, New York City, Oct. 30, 2013).

Julie Becker, *I must create a Master Piece to pay the Rent* (2018) (detail). Image courtesy of the artist and the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London. Photo: Mark Blower.

Carmen Argote, *Mothermold* (2018). Wood, acrylic, paper mache, Bondo, foam, resin, approx. 59 ½ x 84 × 64 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth and Council. Photo: Ruben Diaz.

Carmen Argote, *Cover (for another island)* (2018). Acrylic on muslin, cotton rope, 104 × 108 × 27 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth and Council. Photo: Ruben Diaz.

Back in L.A., Carmen Argote's show at Commonwealth & Council, *The Artist, having used all her money to make the work, lives in the mother-mold of her sculpture*, dealt with home anxiety slightly differently. A cocoon-like wooden arc—part of the mold Argote used for the resource-intensive mound-shaped sculpture she recently finisehd for the Hammer's *Made in L.A. 2018*—sat on the gallery's wooden floor, draped in sheets printed with photos of Argote's cat, the leftovers of her process reimagined as a shelter. The work mirrored the unease of so many artists living in major cities: how to continue to live and make as affordable space keeps slipping away?

When Fluxus artist George Maciunas endeavored to solve this problem of precarity in Manhattan half a century ago, he did so through an ingenious feat of collective organizing. He wrote a manifesto calling for affordable housing in New York in 1963, and established the Fluxhouse Cooperative II in 1967 by soliciting enough small deposits ($2,000-5,000) to hold buildings on Wooster and Grand Streets. Maciunas negotiated—usually with owners eager to offload big industrial buildings—purchase mortgages (the owner would take payments with interest until the building was paid off). Within two years, he managed to fill 17 buildings with artists this way, renovating them himself for an unrealistically low fee, because he underpaid his work force, cut corners on supplies, and often left residents with plumbing problems or unpaid bills.[2] The artist cooperatives, members of which owned their own lofts but shared responsibility for the building as a whole, had to make financial and legal decisions collectively, sometimes giving grace periods when one resident couldn't pay the mortgage or calling in favors from wealthier friends of friends. Maciunas himself spent much of his last decade alive (he died young, of cancer, in 1978) dealing with legalities, or evading them, given the innumerable illegal moves he'd made in his real estate dealings. He booby-trapped his own basement apartment—sharp blades lining a front door—and built an escape tunnel.[3]

Richard Kostelanetz, who lived in one of Maciunas' co-ops and has published two books on SoHo, speculates that 1970s Artists' SoHo led to "the subsequent boom in Manhattan and then Brooklyn real estate," but that artists' lack of prominence kept them from claiming credit.[4] It's not clear that artists would want credit, however, as the SoHo story became something of a warning.

Certain artist-owners chose not to profit exorbitantly from the real estate boom. When Simone Forti left her SoHo loft, she sold it to her friend, dancer Cathy Weis, for what Weis could afford and Weis kept the front room a project space. If all had done this, SoHo might now have a slightly different shape. How too would it differ if Maciunas' co-ops, and others started in the neighborhoods, hadn't been exclusively for artists? Kostelanetz describes committees the New York Department of Cultural Affairs set up in the 1970s, after it zoned certain buildings as live-work, meeting to determine whether an applicant qualified for certification. Young and under-recognized artists often did not. Spouses of deceased artists risked eviction. And so SoHo became exclusive even before it became expensive.[5]

Watching the L.A. Arts District gradually expel so many of its working artists as anti-artwashing protests played out in nearby Boyle Heights over the past two years brought these issues into sharp local relief. Art itself is never really the problem. But art organizations fast-track an area's turn toward moneyed homogeneity when they fail to treat the sustenance of their programs as inextricably linked to the sustenance of existing residents. What if, before opening in downtown L.A., Hauser & Wirth had, for instance, bought the building on Traction that for decades housed a number of (now-evicted) Japanese American

2. See Charles R. Simpson, *SoHo: The Artist in the City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Roslyn Bernstein and Shael Shapiro, *Illegal Living: 80 Wooster Street and the Evolution of SoHo* (Jonas Mekas Foundation, 2010).

3. Anthony Haden-Guest, *True Colors: The Real Life of the Art World* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1996), 56.

artists, keeping the artists' studios alongside units for low-income downtowners? Or what if Boyle Heights gallerists, villainized as gentrifiers by protesters, had from the start banded together to give their neighbors some desirable amenities—a laundromat, affordable childcare center with arts programming—and agreed not to relinquish their leases for a set number of years, thus keeping at bay the wave of tech companies and other businesses eager to enter the increasingly-attractive area? It's too bad if our faith in capitalism's self-interest makes these possibilities seem like fairytales.

Artist Sara Daleiden hypothesizes that inverting some of the same techniques that led to segregated, exclusionary real estate markets could lead to more integration and accessibility. I met with Daleiden a few days after returning from Portugal, because she has thought deeply about real estate and art for a number of years, and collaborates on projects related to affordable housing in Milwaukee and Los Angeles. Researching real estate's racially-biased history is, she suggests, the first step in understanding how—at least in the U.S.—artists can own without participating in displacement.

The Fair Housing Act, passed by Congress in 1968, purportedly prohibited redlining, a process by which surveyors color-coded certain areas "red" (meaning hazardous or in decline). Lenders then refused to loan, or offered exorbitant rates, to anyone living in those areas, often predominately occupied by people of color (and often colored red because of the color of inhabitants—"a change in social or racial occupancy generally leads to instability" read a 1935 Federal Housing Authority manual[6]). The act did too little, though, and this process had already become self-fulfilling prophecy; residents of redlined areas, unable secure loans to start new businesses or own land, got caught in cycles of poverty. Before redlining were land covenants included in home buyers' deeds, specifying that a property could not be sold to a person of color. Their legacy lingers too. "Undoing the effects of de jure segregation will be incomparably difficult," wrote historian Richard Rothstein in 2017, "[W]e will first have to contemplate what we have collectively done and, on the behalf of our government, accept responsibility."[7]

In the urban United States, certain noteworthy art and affordable housing initiatives occupy neighborhoods inhabited largely by people of color. Project Row Houses, the Houston initiative started by artist Rick Lowe, partners with an affordable housing complex built near artists' studios and exhibition spaces in the city's Third Ward. Artist Theaster Gates' new Dorchester Art + Housing Collaborative, his partnership with Chicago's Housing Authority, opened in late 2014 in Grand Crossing, the neighborhood in which Gates' Rebuild Foundation and multiple social art projects live. The Collaborative includes 11 market rate units, 10 public housing units, and 10 artist units, all surrounding an arts center. While coverage of Gates and his projects trends overwhelmingly positive, criticism of the effort bites. In an *Art Monthly* essay on art and gentrification, Larne Abse Gogarty describes Gates's Rebuild Foundation "acting as a kind of feel-good money laundering facility for the commercial art world and corporate developers [...]. Furthermore," she adds, "Gates's description of his practice as 'real-estate art' signals the artist as property speculator."[8] He purchases, repurposes, and invites neighbors in, but plays primary arbiter while his foundation serves as developer—even if good comes of this, the property still belongs to a few.

The NYC Real Estate Investment Cooperative (NYC REIC), co-founded by artists, curators, a finance attorney, and neighborhood activists, takes another approach. Few, if any, of the 300 current members could buy a building independently. They are pooling money and seeking promised investments for cultural

4. Richard Kostelanetz, *Artists SoHo: 49 Episodes of Intimate History* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).

5. Kostelanetz, 27.

6. In Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law* (New York: Liveright, 2017), 66.

7. Rothstein, 194.

8. Larne Abse Gogarty, "Art and Gentrification," *Art Monthly*, Feb. 2014.

spaces and small businesses, though they own no property yet. Preliminary criteria, according to member artist Caroline Woolard, includes that "programming in the property benefits populations that have traditionally had barriers to accessing stable places" and the "property acquired is restricted from being transferred as a market commodity in the future through legal mechanisms in its deed [...]."[9]

In essence, the cooperative proposes to reverse the historic use of land covenants, establishing new ones to work toward diversity, accessibility, and sustainability. This is in increasingly stark contrast to how real estate works in big cities: the developer Ben Shaoul, who bought 17 West Village apartments and systematically, illegally eroded protections for rent-stabilized tenants, told the *New York Times* earlier this year: "The idea was to increase rents. That was the business plan. That was the intent. It's America."[10] (He later sold the building to companies controlled by Jared Kushner.) That America sounds classist and homogenous. Imagine all urban buildings designed by Atelier and featured on sterility-celebrating apartmenttherapy.com. In *Harper*'s July issue, Kevin Baker called New York "boring," "increasingly devoid of the idiosyncrasy, the complexity" that once made it fertile, thanks largely to growing wealth gaps. He connected this current "urban crisis of affluence" with a more pervasive crisis, one in which "we believe that we no longer have any ability to control the systems we live under."[11]

Back in Lisbon, after our house-hunting, we considered options: perhaps, if we found two or three investors willing to let others pay purchase mortgages on a few buildings, other residents could make payments over time with no banks involved. We could draw up contracts specifying no flipping and requiring that any leases be kept at an affordable rate, market surges aside. Would this encourage a paradigm shift, at least on a small scale, away from displacement, accumulation, and self-promotion? We can hope so, but the shift requires preparation and then maintenance: learning about neighborhoods, their histories and who lives there; seeking out investors; studying zoning laws; managing money; learning to own together. Counteracting the usual concessions to capitalism and power requires an intimidating amount of work—work many of us don't yet know how to do—but a sustainable future among diverse peers, in space that allows for more probing and exploring than climbing, isn't a dream worth dismissing.

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9. Caroline Woolard, "NYC Real Estate Investment Cooperative," http://carolinewoolard.com/system/nyc-real-estate-investment-cooperative/.

10. Kim Barker, "Behind New York's Housing Crisis: Weakened Laws and Fragmented Regulation," *The New York Times*, May 20, 2018.

11. Kevin Baker, "The Death of a Once Great City," *Harper*'s, July 2018.