

Title: Artists, gentrification and resistance: The example of London's East End

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Creativity is Capitalism's New War Cry: New Labours neoliberal project of Young British Art is de-and renationalized, melting with the Creative City hype, where real estate developers, art venues and the so- called 'creative class' are supposed to embrace each other in the global rat race for competitive cityscapes. Creativity is re- coded into some unpolitical problem solving capacity, that enters the stage with a post- religious aura and the promise of unbureaucratic but passionate and unconditional DIY- commitment to... actually what? Everybody is kewl, the coffee is for free and there is no paid overtime: the artist as a neoliberal role model? Somebody is laughing and the target is moving. Reload and run!

Dolce & Afghaner Artists

Introduction

London's East End has historically been London's territory of the industrial working-class and immigrants. In the contemporary context of London's urban regeneration and financial exploitation by the developers, it appears that East End is nowadays attracting a new class of inhabitants, the artists who belong to the so- called 'creative class'. Their location in formerly working- class areas such East London brings along certain transformations to the urban setting in spatial, social and financial terms. The artists are fascinated by the area's constructed mythology and the aesthetics of ruined industry and slums, which is merely the aesthetics of the poor who they now displace. My intention is to investigate the role of the artistic class in the gentrification process and clarify the steps this phenomenon occurs, focusing on the issue of how contemporary art practices, being a tool of neoliberal market, relate to the transformations of social and spatial environment. Moreover, on the opposite side, being interested to the relationship between art, economy and politics, I am exploring the potential of artistic practices to express a form of resistance against the capitalistic exploitation of space. For that reason I will refer to certain examples of artists that use their production to raise criticism against urban transformations occurring in East End today.

1. Some key points for the role of Art in the contemporary condition.

a. The rise of the creative class

Richard Florida in his essay "*The Rise of the creative class*" refers to a new type of a rising working force that is now located in the dominant urban environments, directly influencing the economy: "*Members of the creative class do a wide variety of work in a wide variety of industries---from technology to entertainment, journalism to finance, high-end manufacturing to the arts. They do not consciously think of themselves as a class. Yet they share a common ethos that values creativity, individuality, difference, and merit.*"¹ What Florida emphasizes the most as the characteristic to obtain important value is the one of creativity. He argues that creativity is nowadays becoming increasingly valued. For companies creativity is important for the results it can produce and for individuals it is the way to self- expression and job satisfaction, and the more valued the creativity, the more

¹ Florida, R. *The Rise of the Creative Class: Why cities without gays and rock bands are losing the economic development race*

grows the creative class². Florida thoroughly summarizes the relationship between creativity and production as crucial:

*"The distinguishing characteristic of the creative class is that its members engage in work whose function is to "create meaningful new forms." The super-creative core of this new class includes scientists and engineers, university professors, poets and novelists, artists, entertainers, actors, designers, and architects, as well as the "thought leadership" of modern society: nonfiction writers, editors, cultural figures, think-tank researchers, analysts, and other opinion-makers. Members of this super-creative core produce new forms or designs that are readily transferable and broadly useful---such as designing a product that can be widely made, sold and used; coming up with a theorem or strategy that can be applied in many cases; or composing music that can be performed again and again."*³

The appearance of this new working force in a place, is remarkably contributing to the development of its economy. Florida notes that regions that have large numbers of creative class members are noted to be some of the most affluent and growing.⁴

Coming to define more specifically the term 'artist', Vanessa Mathews attributes to it the characteristics of creativity and aesthetics: "The term artist refers to an individual who professes a skilled art and who produces creative works of aesthetic value (such as photographers, painters, dancers, and writers)."⁵ Apparently, the artists as a creative part of the production force, belong to the creative- class mentioned, therefore they have a direct influence on the economy of the cities they settle.

b. The commercialization of Art. Economics, politics and artistic practices.

For understanding the role and position of art in the contemporary condition, it is important to describe the machinery through which the artistic creativity is being transformed into economic value. Pierre Bourdieu, in his essay "*The production of belief: contribution to an economy of symbolic goods*", dealing with the relation between artistic production and economy, describes the social and economic mechanisms through which art is becoming a commodity today. He argues on what lies underneath the constructed belief that the value of the artistic artifact is attributed to its physical creator. He refers to it as '*the charisma ideology*' that directs attention to the apparent producer of the piece of art- the painter, the writer- and conceals the real production mechanism that validates the work of art as such, suppresses the question of '*what authorizes the author*':

"It is all too obvious that the price of a picture is not determined by the sum of the production costs-the raw material and the painter's labour time... The question can be asked in its most concrete form (which it sometimes assumes in the eyes of the agents):

² Florida, R. *The Rise of the Creative Class: Why cities without gays and rock bands are losing the economic development race*

³ Florida, R. *The Rise of the Creative Class: Why cities without gays and rock bands are losing the economic development race*

⁴ Florida, R. *The Rise of the Creative Class: Why cities without gays and rock bands are losing the economic development race*

⁵ Mathews Vanessa, *Aestheticizing Space: Art, Gentrification and the City*

who is the true producer of the value of the work-the painter or the dealer, the writer or the publisher, the playwright or the theatre manager? “⁶

According to Bourdieu, *the ‘ideology of creation’*, constructed to establish the artist as the first and last source of the value of his work, is a pretext to conceal the fact that the cultural businessman (art dealer, publisher, etc.) is at one and the same time the person who exploits the labour of the ‘creator’ by putting it on the market, by exhibiting, publishing or staging it. In that way the art businessman consecrates a product which he has ‘discovered’ and which would otherwise remain a mere natural resource.⁷ To sum up, Bourdieu refers to a whole mediatory business industry which becomes the agent of supporting, advertising and selling the product of art and has the power to determine its aesthetic and economic value. Art and economics are closely linked as art is being transformed into commodity for achieving financial profit. Supporting the argument that artistic success in terms of money requires the construction of a certain ‘reputation’ for the artist, Bourdieu describes the whole procedure of establishing this reputation as a complicated system of interrelations between the parts of art promotion industry, the critics, the editors, the art traders, the big institutions.

*“What ‘makes reputations’ is not this or that ‘influential’ person, this or that institution, review, magazine, academy, coterie, dealer or publisher; it is not even the whole set of what are sometimes called ‘personalities of the world of arts and letters’ ; it is the field of production, understood as the system of objective relations between these agents or institutions and as the site of the struggles for the monopoly of the power to consecrate, in which the value of works of art and belief in that value are continuously generated”.*⁸

Close to Bourdieu’s arguments concerning the connection between art and economy, Michael Hardt refers to the phenomenon of commercialization of art and to the rising role of the ‘creative class’ but also extends these thoughts to the effect of this procedure to the branding of the city itself, in other words art as a factor of establishing an ‘international prestige’ of the city. He repeats Florida’s observation of rising creative production through the ‘city branding’ angle: *“City and regional governments throughout Europe, for example, and to a lesser extent elsewhere, recognizing the decline of their industrial base and the increasing dominance of biopolitical production, are seeking to brand themselves as ‘creative cities’ and court artists as key elements to constructing a ‘creative class.’”*⁹ The impact of art promotion to an area will be analyzed further in relation to the spatial transformations, but it is of importance to emphasize art as a means of constructing a city’s image by relation to its economy.

Except of linking art with economics, Michael Hardt introduces a third parameter: the one of the politics in the sense of linking artistic production with the social sphere.

⁶ Bourdieu P, and Nice R., *The production of belief: contribution to an economy of symbolic goods*, p.263-265

⁷ Bourdieu P, and Nice R., *The production of belief: contribution to an economy of symbolic goods*, p.263-265

⁸ Bourdieu P, and Nice R., *The production of belief: contribution to an economy of symbolic goods*, p.263-265

⁹ Hardt Michael, *Production and distribution for the common. A few questions for the Artist*

Commenting on contemporary production relations, Hardt introduces some new terms to describe it. He argues that today's dominant production mode is merely immaterial therefore easily distributed and available to anyone.¹⁰ It is this production the one dominating the economy nowadays and art constitutes an important part of it. Being easily reproducible and shared, therefore widely accessible, it belongs to the *common* and has further consequences to the forms of social life. In that sense the *common* is a new social condition, that generates potential: *"The common is dynamic and artificial, produced through a wide variety of social circuits and encounters... There we can recognize how the production of the common is emerging today as the dominant economic mode."*¹¹ Williams shares the same concerns. He considers art as a collective good and argues against its elitism. He claims that art is closely connected to culture, which is part of a national inheritance of each place, therefore should be by nature available to everyone.¹²

Back to Hardt, if art and politics are part of this *biopolitical* production of the *common* as they both deal with *immaterial* creative concepts that belong to everyone, artists possess potentially the skills to engage themselves with political action.

*"Our brief analysis suggests that the talents and skills generated and employed in biopolitical economic production tend to be the same as those required for political action. This does not mean, of course, that those engaged in biopolitical production are immediately acting politically but rather that they can act politically, that they have the necessary capacities."*¹³

Therefore art, politics and economics are linked via the common and oriented towards the production of social relations and forms of life.¹⁴

In other words, art is by nature linked with the social realm as a whole. However, the constructed belief of the creator- according to Bourdieu- has distorted this perception. Williams argues that art is by no means a privilege of a certain class, and he criticizes the ones who believe the opposite, as they are being part of the dominant system:

*"A great part of the English way of life, and of its arts and learning, is not bourgeois in any discoverable sense. There are institutions and common meanings which are in no sense the sole product of the commercial middle class; and there are art and learning, a common English inheritance, produced by many kinds of men, including many who hated the very class and system which now take pride in consuming it."*¹⁵.

Bourdieu himself, supports the fact that the mechanism of artistic production is a mirror of the dominant class as- through the commercialization process- it follows the rules this

¹⁰ Hardt argues on the fact that nowadays industrial production no longer determines the economic and social relations. Together with Toni Negri, he introduces a new form of production that appears to affect the social conditions today: what he calls *immaterial* or *biopolitical*. By immaterial he means any kind of ideas and creative concepts that derive from the collective process: *"By immaterial and biopolitical we try to grasp together the production of ideas, information, images, knowledges, code, languages, social relationships, affects, and the like."*¹⁰, Hardt M., *The Common in Communism*, 2009

¹¹ Hardt Michael, *Production and distribution for the common. A few questions for the Artist.*, Open magazine

¹² Williams Raymond, *Culture is Ordinary*

¹³ Hardt, M.I., *Production and distribution for the common. A few questions for the Artist*

¹⁴ Hardt, M.I., *Production and distribution for the common. A few questions for the Artist*

¹⁵ Williams Raymond, *Culture is Ordinary*

class has imposed. He claims that institutions producing and marketing cultural goods- in all forms of art- are organized into structurally and functionally homologous systems in a relation of structural homology with the fractions of the dominant class.¹⁶ However linked with the social stratification, it appears that in several cases the artists are trapped by the constructed belief their role is distant from this of the dominant class, they for themselves obtain the role of the 'intellectual'. This is one of *the most enduring, self serving myths in bourgeois thought*, as Deutche and Ryan put it, the myth that the intellectuals form a category that is autonomous and independent from the dominant social group¹⁷, to which myth, as already seen, Hardt and Williams strongly oppose.

Using this false perception as an pretext, either the artists operate as mere capitalists, - *"One soon learns from conversations with these middle-men that, with a few illustrious exceptions, seemingly designed to recall the ideal, painters and writers are deeply self interested, calculating, obsessed with money and ready to do anything to succeed"*¹⁸ - or are being found in a situation of unconscious exploitation, disoriented from the social concern of their work, neutralized, the 'victims'. As seen, the increasing economic centrality of art and the encouraging of its production by the supporting businesses and the central power- e.g. the cities, the states, etc.- are of course beneficial to artists but at the same time it involves them in unintended ways in capitalist development projects.¹⁹

Bourdieu refers thoroughly to this idea of contradiction between the bourgeois and the intellectuals and the power of the system to neutralize, alienate art from social, and consequently from politics. He claims that this contradiction leads to the aestheticization of appearance- arguing about the 'youth' profile of the artists- as an agent leading to neutralization. He gives an eloquent example how the system can reduce an agent of resistance against it, to a mere image:

"It is clear that the primacy the field of cultural production gives to youth can, once again, be traced back to the basis of the field in the rejection of power and of the 'economy'... The reason why 'intellectuals' and artists always tend to align themselves with 'youth' in their manner of dress and in their whole bodily hexis is that, in representations as in reality, the opposition between the 'old' and the 'young' is homologous with the opposition between power and 'bourgeois' seriousness on the one hand, and indifference to power or money and the 'intellectual' refusal of the 'spirit of seriousness', on the other hand. But the priority given to 'youth' and to the associated values of change and originality cannot be understood solely in terms of the relationship between 'artists' and 'bourgeois'. It also expresses the specific law of change in the field of production, i.e. the dialectic of distinction whereby institutions, schools, artists and works which are inevitably associated with a moment in the history of art, which have 'marked a date' or which 'become dated', are condemned to fall into the past and to become classic or out-dated, to drop into the 'dustbin' of history or become part of history, in the eternal present of culture, where schools and tendencies that were totally

¹⁶ Bourdieu P, and Nice R., *The production of belief: contribution to an economy of symbolic goods*, p.270

¹⁷ Deutche and Ryan, *The Fine Art of Gentrification*

¹⁸ Bourdieu P, and Nice R., *The production of belief: contribution to an economy of symbolic goods*, p.266

¹⁹ Hardt, M.I., *Production and distribution for the common. A few questions for the Artist*

incompatible 'in their time' can peacefully coexist because they have been canonized, academicized and neutralized."²⁰

What is understood from the several arguments is the indisputable power of the transformation of art into commodity to neutralize, that is, alienate the artistic class from the potential of political action. However, art and politics have been closely connected through history and as becoming more and more encouraged, art production also generates new social forms but also ways of thought. It is important to explore the other side, to what extend and by which means the artistic class- which for Hardt has the potential to become the vanguard of criticism- expresses a form of political action today.

2. Artists and gentrification process.

a. A gradual transition in spatial and economic terms.

Deutche and Ryan, in their article 'The fine Art of gentrification', analyzing the example of Lower East Side in New York, directly link the appearance of the artistic class on the area with the economic, social and spatial transformation occurred. *"A working- class neighbourhood for 160 years the area of Lower East Side has become in 1980s the scene of a new art 'phenomenon'... New York's two-billion-dollar art business has invaded one of the city's poorest neighborhoods"*.²¹ They refer to the fact that the location of the artists to Lower East Side directly caused the dislocation of the lower income working class inhabitants by raising the prices of land and therefore made the area subject to private developers. In other words, the phenomenon facilitated the *gentrification* process. Chris Hamnett gives a quite accurate definition of the word:

"Gentrification, generally defined as the (re)colonisation of previously working class areas by the middle classes, is seen to result in the displacement or replacement of working class residents, a rapid shift in housing tenure from renting to ownership and/or an increase in rents. It is also linked to developers trying to make profit by buying cheap unrenovated property and selling renovated property to the new middle class or yuppie inmigrants".²²

Analyzing the phenomenon, Vanessa Mathews explains how the invasion of the artists in an area takes place gradually: *"Art galleries legitimate art works and, dependent on their typology -experiential, commercial, international- they enter into the process of gentrification at different stages."*²³ Commenting on what is the role of the artist in the gentrification process, in other words if they are causing displacement or being displaced, Amanda Wasielewski daims that it is difficult to define because artists usually find themselves at the transition point of neighborhood change, playing the part of both the

²⁰ Bourdieu P, and Nice R., *The production of belief: contribution to an economy of symbolic goods*,p.288

²¹ Deutsche and Ryan, *The Fine Art of Gentrification*

²² Hamnett Chris, *Gentrification, suburbanisation and social mix: contradictions in urban theory*

²³ Mathews Vanessa, *Aestheticizing Space: Art, Gentrification and the City*

vanguard of change and the victims of it.²⁴ By referring to 'vanguards' or 'victims' she clarifies exactly the transition from the small- scale art production in an area- that is the case of low- middle class artists that occupy cheap studios in a working- class neighbourhood and small galleries- to the point that the art production is being the tool of the market to attract investments by promoting it and creating big art institutions. Again aesthetics, the creation of an 'image', a 'reputation', is of crucial importance for the economic upgrade of an area- as mentioned already by Hardt and Bourdieu, and this characteristic is merely used in gentrification projects. Small scale art is the first stage of the process, altering the image of an area by demonstrating an 'alternative' lifestyle towards an attractive environment for the middle class: *"Vegan cafes and 'alternative' music outlets represent particular interests and predominantly middle class desires. These commercial concerns have helped in the 'yuppification' of working class districts, where non-guerrilla squatters have been the first wave followed by artists and the liberal professionals."*²⁵ Therefore, the economic status of the area gradually changes until it arrives to the point that even the small- scale artists cannot afford and are forced to dislocation. Vanessa Mathews clearly describes the procedure of how the financial interests in a certain area exploit the artistic practices. Obviously, this is a case where a lifestyle that was supposed to be linked with unconventional and anti-capitalistic practices, here becomes a tool of the capitalistic exploitation machine by aestheticising it. Mathews refers to this role of the aesthetics and successfully characterized the artists as the 'colonizing arm' of the middle class:

*"Artists work as a 'colonizing arm' for the middle class, opening up new spaces of the inner city through the image and identity attached to their lifestyle and productions. The ability for artists to alter space in symbolic and physical ways (including renovations using their own labor, a process labeled sweat equity) makes them an attractive ingredient in revival initiatives... While experiential art galleries, arts organizations, and small collectives may also be present in the early stages of the process, commercial art galleries often enter into art spaces when consumer demand is high. In this way, commercial art galleries often work as successors to artists, forcing rents to increase, and displacement to occur...The mass-market popularity of industrial chic allowed transference of the image value from industrial spaces to contemporary apartments and condominiums which advertise 'loft living' for middle class tastes. Consequently, the mass-market appeal of 'loft living' is rarely affordable or popular amongst artists from whom this aesthetic was originally derived."*²⁶

Mathews not only clarifies the procedure but also emphasizes to the strategy of neo- liberal market to smoothen the consequences of gentrification by using artistic practices to advertise the place [a tactic that was already mentioned in the first part by Hardt]. She characterizes art as one of the leading place-making devices in the sense of structuring the urban image, building social cohesion -quality of life and livability- and diversifying the economy. She mentions that over the past decades, the arts have been placed in a position of privilege by city officials, development agencies, and private investors

²⁴ Wasielewski Amanda, *Exploration of Changing Urban Space: Gentrification and Contemporary Art Practices*

²⁵ Franks Ben, *New Right/New Left*

²⁶ Mathews Vanessa, *Aestheticizing Space: Art, Gentrification and the City*

for their ability to catalyze and naturalize reinvestment in declining or underdeveloped areas of the inner city. This has stimulated the acceleration of gentrification and at the same time has minimized the reactions. In other words, concerning the socio-spatial transformations of a place, art is becoming the catalyst for the capital's plan, instead of its obstacle. The commercialization machinery of Bourdieu has been strongly established: *"Flagship architecture, cultural quarters, festivals, and public art displays are used to promote a 'livable' and 'beautified' urban core, aspects that are highly valued in attracting the middle and upper-middle classes. Under this spatial restructuring for mobile tastes, the arts are valued for their ability to 'smooth the flow of capital'"*²⁷.

Consequently, to repeat the argumentation of the first part now referring to urban transformations, the agents of gentrification 'use' the artists but also the artistic events to achieve their financial targets with minimum social resistance. This negotiation is characterized as a 'tacit understanding' where encouraging artists provides a seedbed for staged gentrification. *"Art has emerged as an important element in the urban economy, a tool through which to build and expand the image and representation of place using a neoliberal urban agenda."*²⁸

b. Poles of attraction for the creative class.

Coming to analyze the example of London's East End in the phenomena of the 'artistic invasion in a gentrification area', it is interesting to understand why a specific area attracts the members of the 'creative class'. Richard Florida, is describing the urban environments attractive to them by claiming that talented people seek an environment open to differences. *"Many highly creative people, regardless of ethnic background or sexual orientation, grew up feeling like outsiders, different in some way from most of their schoolmates. When they are sizing up a new company and community, acceptance of diversity and of gays in particular is a sign that reads "non-standard people welcome here."*²⁹

Vanessa Mathews also emphasizes in the characteristics of marginal spaces of downtown that usually attract the artists for their central location, social tolerance, aesthetic, and monetary appeal. *"Artist locations are typically described as 'edgy', 'run-down,' and 'experimental.' In rejecting contrived and overly planned spaces one observes that artists are attracted to 'authentic' spaces of the urban. "*³⁰ Authenticity and originality is an important issue. Authenticity derives from several aspects of the place---historic buildings, established neighborhoods, an underground music scene, or specific cultural elements. It comes from the mixing of the opposites---the urban grid alongside renovated buildings, the young and old, long-time neighborhood characters and yuppies, fashion models and "bag ladies." It is generally acknowledged that an authentic place offers unique and original experiences and becomes starting point of inspiration.³¹ The notion of 'authenticity' of a place is directly linked with the characteristic of openness and diversity, as

²⁷ Mathews Vanessa, *Aestheticizing Space: Art, Gentrification and the City*

²⁸ Mathews Vanessa, *Aestheticizing Space: Art, Gentrification and the City*

²⁹ Florida, R. *The Rise of the Creative Class: Why cities without gays and rock bands are losing the economic development race*

³⁰ Mathews Vanessa, *Aestheticizing Space: Art, Gentrification and the City*

³¹ Florida, R. *The Rise of the Creative Class: Why cities without gays and rock bands are losing the economic development race*

well as with the aesthetics and connotations that derive from the 'myth' of a place. All these characteristics make an urban place attractive to the artist's class who – as mentioned above- become the 'pioneers' to occupy a place in the first place not attractive to conventional middle class." At the same time, these characterized 'authentic places', the society and culture of working-class neighbourhoods, originally repel the conventional middle class, due to their usually 'bad' reputation- therefore it becomes the artists' task to alter this 'bad' image. Artists believe the choice of these places has positive impact on their work. *As one sculptor suggests 'Every artist is an anthropologist, unveiling culture. It helps to get some distance on that culture in an environment which does not share all of its presuppositions, an old area, socially diverse, including poverty groups'.*³²

c. The example of London's East End.

i. The constructed mythology

If we have to claim that East End is a place of artist's colonization, it should comply with the characteristics mentioned above: openness, diversity, decadence aesthetics, authenticity, in other words a constructed mythology. Paul Newland, in his book *The Cultural Construction of London's East End* is attempting to describe exactly this uniqueness London's East End represents for the whole Britain. Through several examples from literature and film texts, he presents what he calls the 'mythology' of East End formed through time. That is of a place of mystery, otherness and symbolism of the transformations of the British society.

"The East End of London is both a fluid geographical region and a mythical, cultural construct that has persisted as a potent idea since the late 1800s. As Paul Newland argues, this myth turns on the East End as an 'Othered' space, a locus for marginalized persons and practices that has been set in opposition to a larger conception of London".
*"The East End... has become a mythic space, a spatial metaphor, a socio- cultural and historical referent and a symbolic territory. It has been depicted as a terra incognita, as an ill-favoured, stigmatized social space... long associated with evil, darkness, the primitive and the uncivilized. It has been marked as a space populated by faceless, voiceless, homogeneous figures. It has been seen to be home to stereotypical East Enders- individuals who together form a proud urban working class. But it has also been marked as a space of exotic, alien ethnicity... No area in Britain has been more written about, more exploited as a source and site for the projection of public anxieties about the proletarian combination of sexual promiscuity, the state of the nation or the degeneration of the race".*³³

Newland extensively refers to the area's social composition:

"The real social life of east London has played a significant role in this project of spatialisation. Indeed, individuals who have mobilized around the identity of the East End have not just been sociologists or other outside observers, but also the proud urban working class, political groups and immigrant communities... 'an almost instinctive non-

³² Mathews Vanessa, *Aestheticizing Space: Art, Gentrification and the City*

³³ Newland, P. *The Cultural Construction of London's East End: Urban Iconography, Modernity and the Spatialisation of Englishness*

*conformity, attracted to the eccentric, idealistic, populist, and anti- rational has been associated with the area”.*³⁴

Newland mentions that this ‘otherness’ of East End is functioning as a magnet for the middle- class, arguing towards Florida’s view of openness, the place of one ‘to see aspect of himself’. He argues that for the English middle class the East End of London has become a space of the unknown, they are lured into it by its exotic ‘otherness’. As Newland nostalgic puts it, *“a spatial idea of the East End has come to function as a metaphorical mirror in which a vast number of people- usually not resident in east London or without an acknowledged east London family history- have come to see aspects of themselves, or their ‘other’.*”³⁵

To conclude with, it appears that East End complies with the requirements of appeal to the creative- class, by possessing all the historical, symbolical, social but also financial characteristics to become a pole of attraction for the first- steps of the gentrification process.

ii. East End’s artists and spatial transformations.

East End has undergone several spatial transformations merely during the last decades of the 20th century, that slowly transformed the character of the former working- class, industrial area. These shifts took place gradually in certain parts of East End, while at others more drastically. The Isle of Dogs was an example of drastic urban regeneration where the industrial area of the Docklands was completely transformed to a business district, extending London’s financial activities outside the City. At the same moment, areas like Hackney, Stepney and Poplar on the one hand preserved their diverse character, one the other they started to bear the effects of ‘urban regeneration’.

*“The old privately rented stock which existed up until the 1960s has largely disappeared to be replaced by, on the one hand, large areas of local authority social housing redevelopment or the improvement of some areas for social housing, and on the other hand, conversion into some form of higher income owner occupation. Some boroughs of inner London are therefore now characterized by very sharp levels of local social segregation between areas of expensive gentrified owner occupied housing and, just a few blocks away or even on the other side of the street, social housing developments containing relatively high proportions of the unemployed, the less skilled, low income groups and various ethnic and other minority groups.”*³⁶

Although such sharp contradictions became obvious merely during the 80’s and 90’s, the artistic activity had been related with the area earlier. Together with the constructed myth of ‘mystery’ described above, it was an area traditionally linked with political activism, multicultural influences, underground music scene and street art expressions already from the 60’s. Along with the financial opportunities it offered, it became an excellent scenery for the low- income artists to start moving East during the 80’s. *“The cheap rents for accommodation and studios that encouraged artists in the past twenty years to move to*

³⁴ Newland, P. *The Cultural Construction of London’s East End: Urban Iconography, Modernity and the Spatialisation of Englishness*

³⁵ Newland, P. *The Cultural Construction of London’s East End: Urban Iconography, Modernity and the Spatialisation of Englishness*

³⁶ Hamnett Chris, *Gentrification, suburbanisation and social mix: contradictions in urban theory*

Hackney are now as much a fashion as a convenience ³⁷. Together with Hackney, Spitalfields and Whitechapel High street became the areas that attracted the largest concentration of art galleries and ateliers, but also cafes, clubs, restaurants, a certain set of economic activity that artists brought along. This phenomenon has shifted the scenery of the former poor industrial neighborhood, gradually leading to the developers' exploitation of urban land.

Today we observe the crucial point of the area's constructed cultural image and lifestyle related to the art- East End already becoming an aestheticised space. The advertisement of artistic events taking place in East End today fluently describe the commercial and aesthetic aspects of the artistic practices, the new economy of arts rising in the area:

*"This month's event will take place in the former industrial heartland of East London at a disused asphalt factory. And if you've got some time for shopping in amongst all that, don't forget to pop down to Hackney Wick Flea Market on Saturday and pick up something exciting"*³⁸

*"Nineteen galleries and seventeen open studios are taking part to produce the main festival as well as 17 additional special events, including a live music stage in the Main Yard, Prince Edward Road, and Graffiti Jam... The buildings of the former Percy Dalton Peanut Factory in Smeed Road and Dace Road are offering open studios from award winning artists and some of the East End's finest emerging creative talent."*³⁹

A fact that is expected to cause even bigger shifts in East End, is for sure the massive project of London's Olympics in 2012, affecting mainly Lea Valley, on the north- east part of the borough of Tower Hamlets. *"It is already clear that the London Olympics in 2012 will grease the wheels of urban regeneration, entirely as intended, and facilitate the gentrification of significant parts of the city, especially in the East End."* ⁴⁰This change is going to crucially affect the existing urban condition, as it is expected to be drastic, 'cleaning' multiple layers of the city's palimpsest. Amanda Wasielewsky argues that this scenario is even more threatening for the social balance than the gradual 'yuppification': *"Additionally, the evocation of the 2012 Olympics, a government mandated, large-scale project of 'creative destruction', is noteworthy, as it represents an even more ominous threat for anti-gentrification advocates than the markedly more gradual transition of the East End into a middle class neighborhood. Using this grand international event to justify rapid change, layers of the city are permanently erased in the blink of an eye."* ⁴¹In the prospect of such a drastic shift to happen in spatial and consequently in socio- political terms, it is of importance to explore artistic classes concern to the issue. In other words, how the artistic community reacts to the Olympic gentrification process.

3. Resistance to spatial exploitation through artistic practices.

a. The possibility of resistance by nature of art.

³⁷ Wasielewski Amanda, *Exploration of Changing Urban Space: Gentrification and Contemporary Art Practices*

³⁸ freeartlondon.wordpress.com

³⁹ <http://www.hackneycitizen.co.uk>

⁴⁰ Franks Ben, *New Right/New Left*

⁴¹ Wasielewski Amanda, *Exploration of Changing Urban Space: Gentrification and Contemporary Art Practices*

It appears that capitalism has found its way to exploit art as a means for gaining profit but most important it has found the way to alienate art from social by neutralizing and aestheticising. But having proven at the past that art is a tool of free expression, and if artists claim not to be part of the system but putting themselves on the edge of normality, one cannot help but wonder what is the possibility for art to become a tool of resistance. And moreover, if these characteristics of attraction to the creative class, openness, diversity, equality, cultural mixing could generate forms of political activism, in the sense of linking back art with the social concern.

Back to Hardt's argumentation of relation between art and politics, he poses two crucial questions that I consider as starting point of just pointing out the importance of artistic practice as a tool of resistance, by bringing along once more the notion of the *common*. *"What possibilities are opened in the biopolitical context by the recognition that artistic practice and political action are both engaged in the production and distribution of the common? Does this relation provide a means for artists to participate, through their artistic practice, in the many contemporary political struggles around the world in defence of the common, for an equitable distribution of the common, and for autonomy in the production of the common?"*⁴² It appears that Hardt strongly believes in the potential of art practice as means of resistance. Without digging deep into artistic activism it is worth to mention there is always another side of the coin than the division between art and politics mentioned earlier. When commenting on his locating to the downgraded, derelict but at the same time diverse and 'other' space of East End, an artist supported that for him this was the only background able to generate resistance, so for once the choice of space is indicated as a parameter that allows the artist to involve with the social: *"I am located in the margin. I make a definite distinction between that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as a site of resistance- as location of radical openness and possibility."*⁴³

b. The heritage of criticizing spatial exploitation.

Coming to the gentrification as a spatial capitalistic project and the reactions this exploitation could generate one should mention that the issue of artistically resisting the financially and authoritative driven decisions concerning urban space, is not new. Michel de Certeau in his *Practice of Everyday life*, already grasps this concept. In his text *Walking in the City*, de Certeau poetically juxtaposes two entirely different perceptions of urbanism. The first- against which he stands critically- is the operational project of modernity to use representation systems as a means to dominate and homogenize urban space:

*"The creation of a universal and anonymous subject which is the city itself. Administration is combined with a process of elimination in this place organized by 'speculative' and classificatory operations... This is the way in which the Concept- city functions, a place of transformations and appropriations, the object of various kinds of interference but also a subject that is constantly enriched by new attributes, it is simultaneously the machinery and the hero of modernity."*⁴⁴

⁴² Hardt, M.I., *Production and distribution for the common. A few questions for the Artist*

⁴³ Newland, P. *The Cultural Construction of London's East End: Urban Iconography, Modernity and the Spatialisation of Englishness*

⁴⁴ De Certeau M., *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p.91- 110

The second is the experience of urban space based on the events of everyday life. De Certeau claims that the urban condition is completely the opposite of the one-dimensional, looking-from-distance authoritative object. On the contrary, it is about an exclusively personal and unprecedented experience of time and space that cannot be grasped by any means of exploitation. He emphasizes to the alienation between the city as an 'anonymous subject' and its everyday life as a spatial perception. In order to achieve the first, one must zoom-out and refuse the second.

Paul Newland, commending on the forthcoming transformation of 2012 Olympics, refers to de Certeau's contradiction as matching the East End's case:

*"De Certeau pointed to two methods of imagining the city. The first is the 'concept city' of rational urban discourse- the view of those who wish to hold power over the city's inhabitants: rational organization must thus repress all the physical, mental and political pollutions that could compromise it'. This is, of course, the view of the east London that has primarily been adopted by the planners of the 2012 Olympics. But for de Certeau, the second, potentially subversive method of imagining the city is like the dreamlike approach to spatial practices adopted by those on the streets who, through what he terms 'pedestrian speech acts', can reclaim urban space: 'In short, space is a practiced place'."*⁴⁵

What is important to acknowledge for supporting art as resistance is that De Certeau himself sees the emancipator potential of this alternative approach to the city and recognizes its possibilities for local resistance to hegemonic forces, suggesting that 'the concept city is decaying'.⁴⁶ He points out a different angle to the 'reading' of the city, opposing to the suppressive, authoritarian concept of organization and rationalization and he strongly believes his 'bottom-up' approach could be a way to react.

Situationists in their *derives* and psychogeographic maps, attempted to make similar comments against the exploitation of space. What is an important connecting point is the use of walking as the way to 'read' the city and the emphasis on the choice of the individual that determine the final map result: "A particularly important aspect of mapping in this regard is the acknowledgement of the maker's own participation and engagement with the cartographic process"⁴⁷. The Situationists' wandered aimlessly in the city, led by spatio-temporal impulses and afterwards tried to depict the different situations they experienced, in other words map their unique readings of the city. The importance of this mapping technique of the drift lies on its deliberate notion of resistance to the society of control. The Situationists were a politically active group and in this context the *drift* became an expression of social concern. They emphasized on the everyday life as a field to promote public consciousness and participation. One can claim that the drift could be perceived as the political manifesto of De Certeau's concerns. De Certeau's texts and Situationists' drift are acknowledged methods of expressing opposition to spatial exploitation and, as we will observe in the following part, can be used as inspiration.

⁴⁵ Newland, P. *The Cultural Construction of London's East End: Urban Iconography, Modernity and the Spatialisation of Englishness*

⁴⁶ Newland, P. *The Cultural Construction of London's East End: Urban Iconography, Modernity and the Spatialisation of Englishness*

⁴⁷ Corner J., *The Agency of Mapping: Speculation, Critique and Invention*, p.226

Although we already observed the artist's role in the gentrification process maybe complicated as well as his critical position towards it, there are certain groups of artists who have extensively directed their work towards criticizing this phenomenon. Their success becomes questionable as they often fall for aestheticism and do not hold a critical position towards the role of the artist himself. But what is important is the fact that these projects maintain a discourse on anti-gentrification that could be used as a generator of further social interaction by addressing the *common*. According to Wasielewski, there are certain successful examples of artworks criticizing gentrification: *"As well as acknowledging artists' role, many successful artworks dealing with gentrification avoid nostalgia for derelict buildings and post-industrial wasteland. Instead, they approach regeneration from a more contemplative, documentary-style distance, incorporating the complex political factors underlying its processes rather than taking a simplistic adversarial point of view."*⁴⁸

c. Against 2012 Olympics: Laura Oldfield Ford and Ian Sinclair.

As examples, I would like to refer more specifically to the work of two artists for the gentrification project expected to occur in East End. What I consider as an interesting common background between the two approaches is that they both deal with Situationists' notion of *psychogeography* for an alternative way to describe the city and at the same time an acknowledged tactic of resistance at its time.

i. Laura Oldfield aestheticism on Savage Messiah

Laura Oldfield Ford in her work is dealing with the issue on the edge of aestheticism but loyal to the poetics of the area. *"Drifting Through the Ruins, Ford teeters between nostalgia for the rapidly changing East London and a more considered reflection on the process of gentrification. In her drawings, Ford depicts the East End after the 2012 Olympics with vacant lots, Brutalist council estates, and the reoccurring caravan parked among the rubble"*⁴⁹.

She is praised for not presenting a 'dear' image but a contrasting one that reflects the real character of East End. She presents an honest image of the area's character and at the same time comments on the eradication and homogenization the project is going to impose. She also refers again to the aestheticisation of space, wondering if after the Olympics all that remains is these images of post-industrial attraction:

*"Ford sets one version of urban poetics – in which brutalism co-exists with dereliction – against the hygienic, hyper-bright spaces projected by late-capitalist development, where the future contracts into the short term, and all history is PhotoShopped into a manicured 'heritage'. Ford illustrates how this invented official version of heritage and history will be all that's left in the wake of widespread erasure of the social history of the East End. She suggests that the only authentic experience left to us, free from consumer impulse, is in the wasteland of yards, rubble and rubbish heaps."*⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Wasielewski Amanda, *Exploration of Changing Urban Space: Gentrification and Contemporary Art Practices*

⁴⁹ Wasielewski Amanda, *Exploration of Changing Urban Space: Gentrification and Contemporary Art Practices*

⁵⁰ Wasielewski Amanda, *Exploration of Changing Urban Space: Gentrification and Contemporary Art Practices*

Ford is attempting to document a city in risk of being lost, using the drift as a tool: *“The drawings form a broken narrative, focusing on part of east London currently being cleared for the 2012 Olympic site and document the city as palimpsest, a site of perpetual writing and over-writing.”* She notes: *“The London I conjure up in these drawings is imbued with a sense of mourning. These are the liminal zones where the free party rave scene once illuminated the bleak swathes of marshland and industrial estates.”*⁵¹

At the same time she is being criticized for mere aestheticism but more importantly for not including the role of the artists in her work, especially concerning her Savage Messiah posters, that resemble a punk cut-and-paste aesthetics. In that way, she seems to criticize gentrification, but from the distance of the intellectual:

*“Leaving out the role of the artist presents a particular problem because of the polemical nature of the work and its overt political stance. In light of the un-nuanced, emotionally charged commentary against yuppies and estate agent’s encroachment in areas such as Hackney, the lack of creative professionals and artists in the mix seems a glaring omission and relegates much of the work to a bland ‘us versus them’ over-simplification of urban change.”*⁵²

ii. Ian Sinclair’s psychogeography of the postmodern East End.

Writer and filmmaker Ian Sinclair has produced several writings and videos concerning the East End and its spatial transformations, always from the scope of resisting to it and in connection with psychogeography, whereas the Situationist heritage pops up again as a tool. Paul Newland notes for Sinclair’s work: *“In order to reposition the writing of Sinclair, alongside the Situationist practice of derive, as a possible form of resistance to modernity’s hegemonic urban planning schemes: ‘in Sinclair’s work the East End can be seen to regain its mythical identity as a subversive, transgressive space that sits in radical opposition to the rational city’.”*⁵³ To Sinclair, the relationship between space and time is crucial. He often argues that the most dangerous part of the operative project has to do with altering the perception of time for a space, by altering the common memory of a space.

Sinclair has earlier referred to the phenomenon of Isle of Dogs regeneration, characterizing it as ‘the Venice of modern era’:

“In response to the redevelopment of Docklands, Ian Sinclair makes the same connection: ‘This deregulated isthmus of Enterprise was a new Venice, slimy with canals, barnacled palazzo, pillaged art, lagoons, leper hulks: a Venice overwhelmed by Gotham city, a raked grid of canyons and stuttering aerial railways. For Sinclair, Docklands- a doomed, sinking city like Venice- has come to be defined through the impact of corporate architecture and the privatization of new social spaces. He is intrigued by the ways in which these new spaces pastiche older, established urban spaces... For Sinclair, the ‘real’ Docklands skyscrapers recall the ‘imagined’ buildings in Tim Burton’s neo- Gothic film, Batman... Sinclair again mobilizes the strategies of psychogeography here in order to resist the colonization of this space by multi-

⁵¹ www.halesgallery.com

⁵² Wasielewski Amanda, *Exploration of Changing Urban Space: Gentrification and Contemporary Art Practices*

⁵³ Newland, P. *The Cultural Construction of London’s East End: Urban Iconography, Modernity and the Spatialisation of Englishness*

*national corporations operating within an increasingly global economy.- Venice for the modern era.*⁵⁴

Sindair together with the artist Emily Richardson produced a film referring to East End's transformation in prospect of 2012 Olympics, an attempt to depict all these spatial values that are in danger of being lost: *"This redevelopment has necessarily erased seemingly unsightly blemishes from the face of the city. But rather than celebrating the eradication of these dark urban spots and post- industrial scars, they have suggested that 'value' might instead be found in these sites.*"⁵⁵ Ian Sinclair states clearly the dangers of this eradication expected, in an area with such strong identity as East End:

*"There are soon going to be no blanks at all, which means there's no room for your imagination to move, which is why we are enduring such a loss in East London, by losing this mysterious and grungy corridor which combined landscape with ghosts of industry with water you can navigate...The razing of the land and architecture of London's industrial past is, in essence, the erasure of layers of struggle experienced by the countless 'outsiders' who have passed through the East End."*⁵⁶

d. By means of conclusion

To conclude, although it became obvious that the capitalistic machinery is using the artistic practices to achieve its purposes successfully, at the same time the nature of art as a collective good, a part of the *common*, is still generating possibilities for criticism and resistance that address the social sphere. Concerning spatial transformations, examples as these of the artists of East End arguing on an anti- gentrification discourse, if not remaining into the 'intellectual distance', can generate further social reaction.

⁵⁴ Newland, P. *The Cultural Construction of London's East End: Urban Iconography, Modernity and the Spatialisation of Englishness*

⁵⁵ Newland, P. *The Cultural Construction of London's East End: Urban Iconography, Modernity and the Spatialisation of Englishness*

⁵⁶ Wasielewski Amanda, *Exploration of Changing Urban Space: Gentrification and Contemporary Art Practices*

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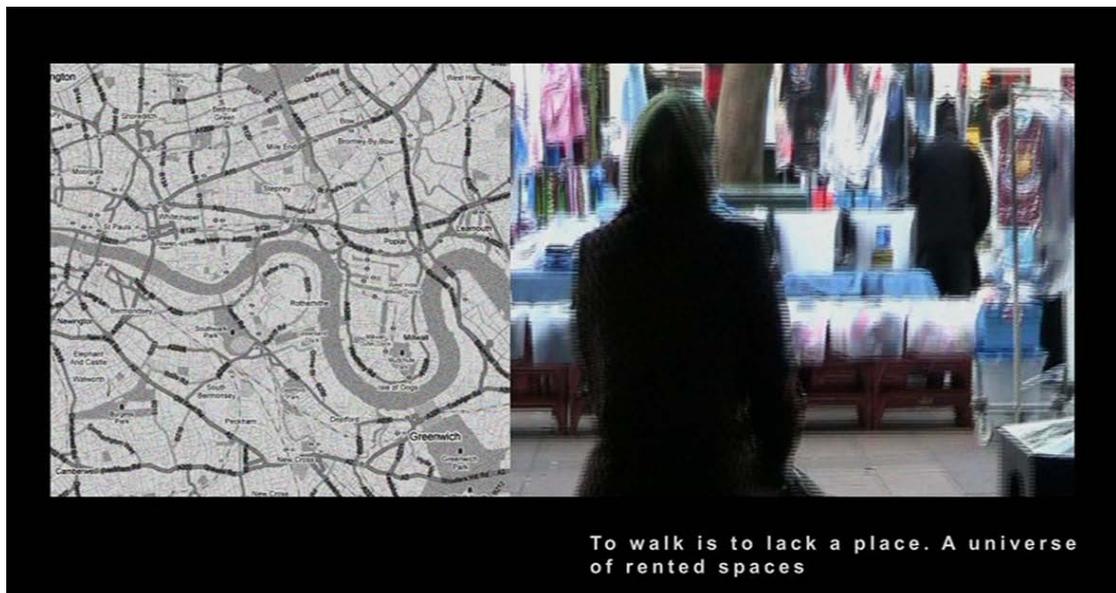
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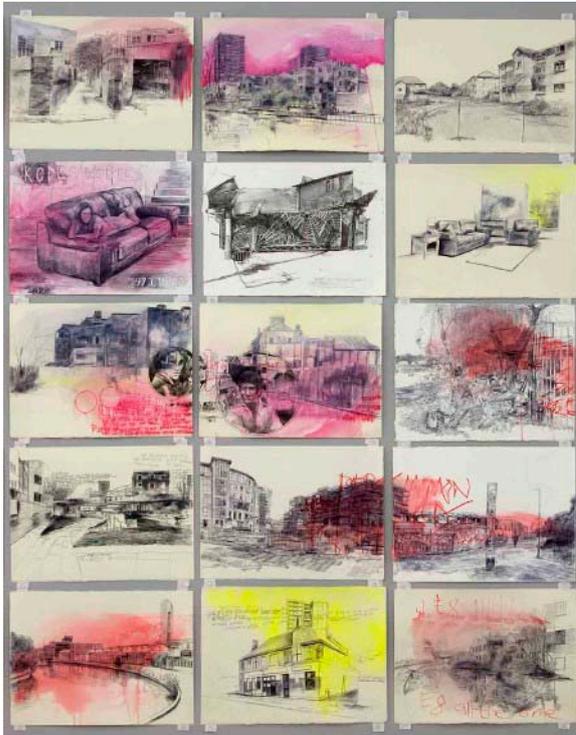
IMAGE INDEX



East End and its constructed mythology. [Wolf Suschitzky: London East End, 1934]



De Certeau's juxtaposition of two perceptions of urbanism



Laura Oldfield Ford and the dreamy landscapes of East Ends industrial ruins.



The punk aesthetics of Savage Messiah



Isle of Dogs is Sinclair's contemporary capitalistic Venice.



Transit: Ian Sinclair's and Emily Richardson *psychogeography* in East End.