

VISUAL CULTURE RESEARCH PROJECT - 20 CREDITS



Fig 1.

An enquiry into the gentrification of London and the role that the arts and culture industry plays in its causation and perpetuation.

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INTRODUCTION:

The process of gentrification has been taking place in London for decades; this phenomenon is often attributed to artists who, due to their cultural value, prove efficient in trendifying areas and triggering the inflation of local markets. In recent years, gentrification has become a much more regular occurrence, with regeneration projects constantly being scheduled across the city. This rapid increase is due to a shift in causation; gentrification no longer being triggered by working artists, but by government bodies as well as large institutions, including those that comprise the upper echelons of the art world: galleries, museums, magazines, etc. In the following essay I explain why we should be diverting our blame from the everyday artist and pointing it in the direction of those higher up.

Artist involvement in gentrification is commonly attributed to their need for authentic locations and hatred of suburbs (Ley, 2003) as opposed to their need for affordable housing like other working-class people. In thinking that working artists ever choose to bring regeneration upon their own neighbourhoods, one is ignorant to the concept that working-class artists cannot afford to live elsewhere. It is unjust to vilify these individuals for living within their means.

The links between the arts and gentrification, in London's current climate, can more obviously be seen within the inequitable distribution of arts funding, galleries lobbying for the demolition of working-class housing, and institutions ultimately prioritising profit over working-class lives. Institutions like Tate, magazines like Frieze, and commissioning bodies like Artangel are all huge contributors to London's ever growing class disparity. Their hoarding of funds have a direct impact on grassroots arts organisations who work to keep communities intact, and their performative activism in funding/producing/talking about gentrification while actively contributing to it is a hypocritical practice that is in need of an intervention in order to halt the cycle of regenerative projects.

The following pages look into the current state of London's gentrification problem, explaining how it has reached this point and providing examples as to how it has impacted communities, focussing on the complicity of the art world within this wider issue.

CHAPTER ONE: GENTRIFICATION AND LONDON

Gentrification is a term first coined in the 1960s by Ruth Glass, a German-British sociologist and city planner, to describe the process of people of higher wealth moving into working-class neighbourhoods and displacing “all or most of the original working-class occupiers” altering “the whole social character of the district.” (Glass, 1964: xvii) Glass’ definition was founded from her observation of the changing state of mid-century London, and though it is definitely still applicable to the regenerative happenings taking place in London right now, the process certainly isn’t so linear as it perhaps once was. In the six decades since its coinage, gentrification has come to be a term used to represent the ways in which class disparities are systemically introduced via the neglect and marginalisation of the working-class. Particularly in the past 20-30 years wherein we have seen a rapid increase in gentrification and regeneration projects in London, as well as across the Western world. The gentrification process is no longer something so simple as being caused by artists bringing cultural appeal to low-income areas, in turn attracting middle class buyers and triggering the transformation of a neighbourhood. This concept omits the larger figures at play; gentrification is a phenomenon ingrained into contemporary London’s societal structure and is perpetuated by ruling figures - be that the government itself or other wealthy and powerful institutions. Being a hub of capital and culture, the priority for the city is first and foremost capitalist growth - something that run down working-class areas don’t necessarily contribute massively to. Thus, an incentive is provided to the government and local councils - should they want to thrive financially - to restructure London’s socioeconomic mapping to cater to the recently emerged cornucopia of luxury in the city’s centre.

This 20-30 year period has been branded “third wave” gentrification (Smith, 2002: 440) by Neil Smith - a geographer and anthropologist, well recognised for his work on the topic of gentrification - who distinguished that this change in pace and process of regeneration was due to “a new amalgam of corporate and state powers and practices” that produced “a much more ambitious effort to gentrify the city”, wherein gentrification was “a vehicle for transforming whole areas into new landscape complexes that pioneer a comprehensive class-inflicted urban remake.”

(Ibid: 443) In short, third wave gentrification is so visible in today's London due to the backing it has from financial powers and the scope it has to not only target housing, but communities as a whole (in the form of new chain/luxury businesses arising, the closing of community hubs etc.). Malcolm Miles, a writer and critical theorist on contemporary culture and urbanism, comments further on the visibility of gentrification in 21st Century London, stating that "since the crash, what has emerged as a distinct redevelopment sector has allowed the cultural mask to slip; schemes are overtly seen as urban clearances designed to move the poor and unproductive to the geographical as well as social and economic margins." (Miles, 2015: 1-2) This highlights how government involvement - i.e. dedicating a whole sector to redevelopment - and the use of chirpy terms like "revitalisation, renewal, redevelopment, reurbanisation, [and] renaissance" (Wyly and Hammel 2008: 2644) generate more acceptance of drastic neighbourhood changes.

With this method of gentrification in mind, when evaluating instances of low-income residents being displaced from their homes it is important to ask: "What made the 'original' neighbourhood look the way it did? Why was the land undervalued and the housing more affordable? What economic and political structures have historically neglected or harmed that neighbourhood while pouring resources into others? Why do many legacy residents face limited economic mobility? Why is the neighbourhood receiving investment - whether public or private - now? Who are those investments meant to serve?" (Gentrification, 2020) The answers to these questions, raised in a teaching document by The University of Michigan, can help us to distinguish if regeneration is taking place in an area because it is necessary for the bettering of a local community, or whether there is an ulterior motive at play.

In recent years, East London has been popular recipient of regeneration projects and has succumb to the accompanying gentrification in the process. East London was historically a working-class area, home to various factories fuelling the manufacturing industry. It was hard hit during the war, suffering a lot from bomb damage, and later became home to many post-war council estates - some of which were poorly built and some of which merely needed more care and investment. Many long standing residents face limited economic mobility as they worked locally, but as suburbs sprung up around them and the city's financial sector boomed with

the insertion of Canary Wharf in 1991, residents found themselves very centrally located, with the only similarly priced areas now right on the outskirts of Greater London.

An example of this is Hackney, a borough which saw the largest increase in average housing prices in London in the last decade (Chant, 2021). Hackney has seen a vast change to its physical and social landscape in recent years - the borough once branded the worst place to live in Britain (The Best and Worst Places to Live in Britain, 2006) is now publicised as a “cool” and “hip” area with the gentrified Victoria Park ranking as The Times’ best place to live in London in 2020 (The Sunday Times, 2020). East End Film Festival's 2017 Selection, *Perceptions on Chaos: Hackney* explores how these changes came about. Most poignantly noted in the documentary is how quickly Hackney has been transformed, how unpopular many of the changes are amongst locals, and how much history and culture has been destroyed in the making. One of such regenerative projects took place at Dalston Junction on South Dalston Lane in 2007: a “poorly conceived ... ravine of high end housing” was erected around Dalston Junction overground station, destroying a “historic theatre” - which was later home to The Four Aces Club, a pioneering venue for black music - in the process. The demolition was part of the making of the Dalston Square development, in line with regeneration plans in the lead up to the London 2012 olympics. This is a prime example of urban cleansing in which long standing figures of working-class and minority history are demolished without any form of commemoration, in order to make way for “cold and clinical” (Hart in Luxem, 2017) luxury housing that doesn’t cater to the impacted community. The destruction of cultural heritage sites in Hackney can further be seen in the closing of longstanding bookshops and community cultural centres such as Centerprise, which shut in 2012.

The South London borough of Southwark has also been hard hit with regeneration projects in recent years, perhaps most notoriously with the demolition of Elephant & Castle’s Heygate Estate. The borough rapidly increased in value at the turn of the century thanks to “Tate insertion” (Miles, 2015: 15), wherein the opening of the Tate Modern “remarkably moved the cultural hub of London ... to the South side of the Thames” doing so via the construction “a new axis between Tate and the financial

district via the Millennium Bridge in front of St Paul's Cathedral" and ultimately causing massive hikes in the property market and the emergence of "new apartments, boutiques and bars" (ibid) to suit the incoming "creative class" (Ibid: 2) it was targeted towards. The Heygate itself had been both neglected by the council and demonised by the press in this same time period, gaining a rough and thuggish reputation for its appearances in films like *Harry Brown* (2009) - it is then no surprise that the estate was a target for urban regeneration. It is true that the estate was in a state of disrepair, however the bones of the building were some of the best for this period of architecture and it, ultimately, was home for the 3000 living there - "conditions were good: three- and four-bedroom flats with better space and specifications than in most new-build projects today; good public transport; a short distance from work in central London" (Ibid: 129). In spite of all protests demolition began in 2011, forcing residents to sell their homes for way under the local value with the promise that affordable properties would be available in after the block's refurbishment. However, a mere 82 of the 2704 homes in the Heygate's replacement, South Gardens, would be listed as social housing. The intentions for the South Gardens, in hindsight, were very clear: it is recorded that the Tate Modern supported property managers LendLease in their regeneration of the Heygate Estate, having even "submitted comments to the planning documents." The Tate "noted the potential for including public art in the project that would replace the homes; it would become a new luxury retail and housing space." (Sackur, 2020) The term *luxury* is often used when discussing plans for regeneration projects. It connotes ideas of improvement and is fitting for a capital city, which aids in disguising the process of "retaking the city for the middle classes" (Smith, 2002: 443) via selling to super rich offshore buyers for use as investment properties¹, who then rent to the wealthy middle and young professional 'creative' classes for prices much higher than is affordable for the Heygate's previous residents.

¹ All of the 51 listed South Gardens properties have been sold to nameless offshore investors (Transparency International UK, 2017: 43) and were marketed in Singapore with rental income listed as a selling-point years before they were available to purchase in the UK.

From the above examples, what we can see taking place throughout London in the last few decades is an eradication of working-class cultural histories via the loss of significant buildings and community hubs; a decline in working-class prospects in the city of London through an increase in property prices and displacement via regeneration projects; and a restructuring of the city that - in a The Hunger Games-esque attempt - marginalises the poor, minorities, and working-class, while placing the richest members of society at the very centre (note: über central and expensive areas like Knightsbridge sit largely unoccupied for this very reason - their super rich property owners are mostly based internationally).



Fig 2.



Fig 3.

CHAPTER TWO: THE COMPLICITY OF THE ART WORLD

The role that artistic powers - be that funding providers like Arts Council England (ACE), institutions like Tate, or publications like Frieze - play in the causation and perpetuation of gentrification has been briefly alluded to in the previous chapter and is further explored in the following pages.

Since the coinage of the term, artists have been linked to gentrification due to their ability to generate a cultural buzz and make areas 'trendy'. In previous waves of gentrification artists themselves definitely played a key role in transforming neighbourhoods, though they didn't necessarily reap the benefits for long. Miles cites "Beck Road in Hackney, for instance, [which] consists of terraces built for the working-class which fell into partial dereliction in the post-war years, [and] were adopted by an arts organisation for live-in artists' studios, then improved and bought out by many of the artists, sold on, and now house as many professionals in financial services as in the arts." (Miles, 2015: 40) Those who sold their studios were then to move to a new run-down working-class area to repeat the cycle. However, since the third wave of gentrification began in the 1990s and legislation like the Housing and Regeneration Act passed in 2008, voting to "maximise the potential for brownfield development" (Housing and Regeneration Act, 2008) therefore providing reason enough for constant urban (re)construction; working artists are no longer the drivers of gentrification. This role is instead held by governmental and institutional powers while artists are to succumb to the same marginalisation as other working-class individuals.

The complicity these powers have in gentrifying London is varied. There are some cases of direct involvement of institutions in displacing working-class residents for their own commercial benefit - see the interaction between Tate and LendLease re. The Heygate in Chapter 1. However, there are more indirect ways in which big art world names contribute to the changing landscape of London too; for instance depriving grassroots arts and culture projects from funding by registering as charities when they could easily fund themselves, or jumping on the bandwagon of regeneration via establishing elitist feeling galleries in neglected communities, or utilising the derelict homes of displaced communities as an exhibition space / basis for a site artwork. Lastly, albeit not steering the gentrification process themselves,

many artists are complicit in supporting regeneration for their own gain, making art about the issue without making any form of monetary contribution or taking any public stand to make actual change. Examples of how contemporary artists have tackled this topic are explored in Case Studies (p17-23)

Morgan Quaintance's E-flux essay *The New Conservatism: Complicity and the UK Art World's Performance of Progression* covers a lot of what I have previously deemed to be indirect complicity in the gentrification process. Quaintance raises points around profitable companies claiming ACE funding for their non-profit subsidiaries in spite of the amount of income they make each year. He focusses in on Frieze, a company that listed "its income for 2014 ... at £2,132,674" (Quaintance, 2017) yet still claimed a further £15,000 to lessen expenditure on their Page and Screen project that year. Quaintance asks if ACE funds are such a minimal contribution in comparison to the "profits of half a million at the magazine" why not "just pay for Frieze projects yourself"? (Ibid) This is particularly poignant when one of the aforementioned Page and Screen works entitled *There Goes the Neighbourhood* (Watts, 2015) focusses on artists' experiences of London's gentrification throughout the past 50 years. The film features curator and co-founder of The Woodmill Art Studios and Gallery, Naomi Pearce, who talks about gentrification making "bad art" due to the homogenisation of what was once a "dynamic mix" (Pearce in Watts, 2015) of people; and Rozsa Farkas, co-founder and director of Arcadia Missa gallery, who emphasises how "if [she's] going to have a conversation about gentrification ... [she wants] to talk about the families that get moved out and have to change schools and get separated from their communities and their relatives." (Farkas in Watts, 2015) Surely then, the £15,000 that went towards making the documentary, that Frieze were well enough equipped to have paid out of pocket, could have instead been allocated to a grassroots arts organisation that would help to keep this diversity in art, and would help to prevent such neglect from coming to a community that regenerative projects begin to take place. Quaintance summarises: "there is a political tendency to present progression whilst enacting the very opposite, and this political tendency is mirrored by something similar within the UK art world." (Quaintance, 2017) Frieze's actions are exemplary of this performative nature, having merely added more discourse to the topic of art and gentrification instead of making any real change.

This hypocrisy can further be seen through Frieze hosting a panel entitled ‘Can artists still afford to live in London?’ at their 2015 Frieze Week - an event that cost £36 to enter (Gibbs, 2015). The irony of Frieze directly profiting from discourse on housing inflation in London, an issue they play an active role in perpetuating, is glaring. One would imagine the discussion itself to be sanitised and deflecting of any blame pointed towards its hosts.² Additionally, the discussion of artists being unable to afford to live in London is part of the wider issue of *working-class* people being unable to afford to live in London; minimising the discussion to just artists is ignorant of a much greater problem and would be unlikely to grapple with the systemic changes that need to take place in order to stem the spread of gentrification and allow for more affordable living spaces in the city. It is all the more ironic to think of the number of super rich art collectors, visiting Frieze week to spend their millions, tuning in to this discussion. I cannot help but to feel that, though perhaps well intentioned, this choice of topic in such a context is tone-deaf and mis-targeted at best or virtue signalling at worst.

I should note, it is equally important to question why ACE are opting to distribute their funds in such a way. Quaintance points out that “ACE used to penalise organisations who had too much private support by reducing their grants, a dynamic that seems to run in reverse these days.” (Quaintance, 2017) This, when paired with the intentional neglect of working-class estates and communities by local councils in order to set regeneration projects in motion, again links back to the “political tendency to present progression whilst enacting the very opposite” (Ibid) - presenting charitable grants and community improvement projects as a progressive move while in fact putting money straight into the hands of the government’s rich friends and building them luxury houses to spend it on.

A further example of complicity can be seen in London-based arts organisation, Artangel, a commissioning body renowned for funding the production of large scale and site-specific artworks. Also known to be a serial commissioner for artworks in derelict working-class housing - most notably Rachel Whiteread’s Turner Prize winning *House*, and Roger Hiorns’ Turner Prize nominated *Seizure*, but also

² I cannot confirm nor deny this supposition, as despite Frieze claiming that the entire panel discussion is available “online for free” (Lange, 2015), at present, it is inaccessible without encountering yet another paywall.

Catherine Yass' Glasgow located *High Wire*, and, had it come to fruition, Mike Nelson's Heygate Estate located *Pyramid* (proposed to be an arrangement of empty Heygate flats stacked into a pyramid formation). Christopher Jones, writing for Mute Magazine, describes the aforementioned works as having "very little to get your teeth into" (Jones, 2015) when it comes to learning about and engaging with the abundant working-class histories that the sites hold, with Hiorns' work in particular not only being unengaged with its setting but Hiorns' himself being "ignorant" (Ibid, 2015) in his description of the Harper Road flats that formed the basis of his famous piece, stating "in the great social experiment these buildings inferred, they provided no room for movement, zero mobility to move further, they are completely static materially and emotionally." (Hiorns in Perry, 2013: 160) Hiorns' comment conveys as base and ill-informed in his understanding of working-class living, reducing the complex and vibrant lives of the people who once resided there to something with no cause, ability or feeling. Art criticism duo, The White Pube, discuss this hands off approach to public arts creation in an article about the allocation of arts funding: "it can get quite violent or extractive, when you satellite in and just disappear when the project is done'. The funding [...] doesn't require [...] any particular meaning or sincerity, and so it's rare that education/outreach/participation work is ever done in a way that is impactful." (Muhammad, 2020) Community engagement can have a major impact on local residents, and this is noticeably missing when funding opportunities are granted to those who elect to "speak over or for people" (Ibid) instead of providing a platform for people to speak for themselves.



Fig 4.



Fig 5.

Jones highlights that ArtAngel at this time received “an annual Arts Council grant of roughly £750,000” as well as donations from patrons, their “wealthy ‘International Circle of Friends’”, and “Artangel America” who were enabled to make “tax-efficient” (Jones, 2015) contributions. The Artangel trustee board cited “artists and curators as well as property developers, fund managers and private equity company founders” amongst its members - “the latter happy to reproduce the fine art of dispossession and displacement globally.” (Ibid, 2015) This huge amount of private and public funding going towards unethical organisations only helps to further an ever growing economic disparity between classes. Ben Davis, in *9.5 Theses on Art and Class*, states “growing inequality [is] the key driver of the art market”³ (Davis, 2013: 78-79) and in this sense it is easy to see how producing artworks in spots due to be regenerated is a wildly beneficial process for those at the top.

³ “...A one percentage point increase in the share of total income earned by the top 0.1 percent triggers an increase in art prices of about 14 percent . . . It is indeed the money of the wealthy that drives art prices. This implies that we can expect art booms whenever income inequality rises quickly.” (Davis, 2013: 79)

What is notable about both Artangel and the artists they elect to work with is a clear lack of communication with working-class locals in the formation of their projects. Former Heygate resident, John Colfer, was critical of Nelson’s plans to utilise his home in *Pyramid*, stating:

“We were the first people in, at the start of 1974 [...] My father made the home a home, fitted new floors, everything. My parents never planned to leave the estate. So when you're talking about using those same materials to make a pyramid, you just think: what is there to show that this was a well-loved home? These are our memories being turned into an artwork.” (Colfer in Jones, 2015)

Yet upon a bombardment of criticism akin to Colfer’s, Artangel’s response was cold and non-empathetic, imploring that they “don’t believe that Mike Nelson’s project, if and when it materialises on the Heygate Estate, will be inappropriate or disrespectful, and want to reassure [that the work] is not intended to erase or aestheticise a particular political agenda, nor as a branding device for local regeneration.” (Jones, 2015)

Drawn Plans: Build sequence

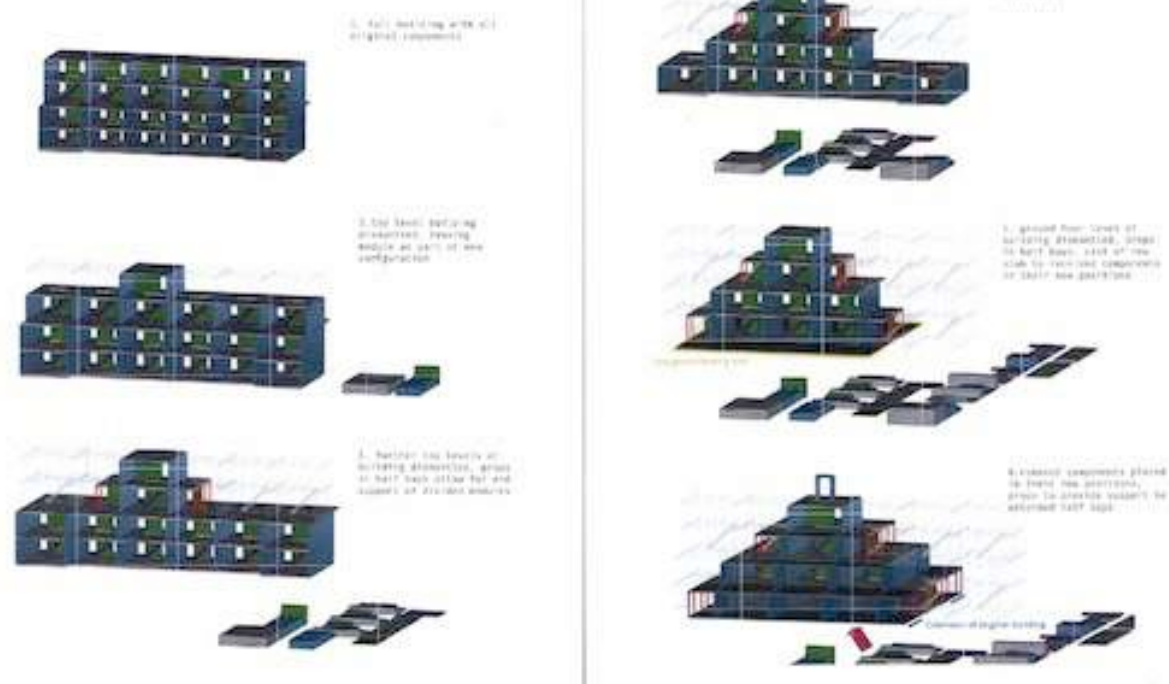


Fig 6.

There are two elements of complicity in this situation that should be highlighted:

1. Artangel as a charitable-presenting commissioning body utilising ACE funds to effectively push regeneration into areas that would eventually profit the rich investors of their Trustee board. Coincidentally, they later partnered with Tate who have been seen to do the same thing.
2. Artists accepting the opportunity to profit from the demise of working-class people, often not acknowledging their struggle, standing for any form of change, putting any of the money earned from their work into bettering the community they drew from.

Quaintance's point about presenting as a do-gooder while carrying out a detrimental practice is key to summarising the art world's complicity in London's gentrification at all levels. Whether the artists in question here intentionally chose to brush over the effects of their art on working-class people, or whether they were simply ignorant to their actions one cannot be sure. In either case, the steps to making a positive change are the same: transparency, self-awareness, and advocacy for the voices one is drawing inspiration from.

In the following case studies I showcase an example of a work that I believe is complicit in the perpetuation of gentrification, and a work I believe demonstrates how art can be used to educate and encourage change.

CASE STUDIES:

Rachel Whiteread: *House*

“There is no physical monument to what generations of decent working-class East Enders have created and given and made and suffered.” (Miles, 2015: 10)



Fig 7.

Rachel Whiteread's *House* - a concrete relief cast of a Victorian terraced house in Mile End, Tower Hamlets - was completed and unveiled to the public in October 1993, after 4 months of construction, and stood on site until its demolition in January 1994. *House* inhabited the space where longtime resident of the area, Sidney Gale, had lived for 50 years prior to his relocation by the Tower Hamlets council. Thacker, writing for Roman Road LDN an East London news and culture magazine, documents Gale's story, writing how his house was the last of its kind in the area, others having been damaged during the Blitz or recently demolished so as to make way for "a Green Corridor, unifying the broken line of parkland between the Isle of Dogs and the established lung of Victoria Park" (Thacker, 2015). Gale had resisted council attempts to displace him from his home for several years through

acts of protest such as “displaying banners which read ‘THIS IS MY HOME, I LIVE HERE’” (Sinclair, 1995: 18) until all objection to his relocation proved futile. With the support of commissioning body Artangel, Whiteread was able to secure use of the property in the months leading up to its demolition and produce her £50,000 sculpture - a work that would spark debates around the topics of “ownership, demolition and eviction.” (Perry, 2013: 43-44) both through the physical entity of her sculpture, as well as the words left unsaid.

House was divisive amongst both the art world and East End locals, with Whiteread winning the £20,000 Turner Prize in November 1993 and the rebel K foundation’s £40,000 *worst artist of the year* award shortly after. Akin to her earlier Turner Prize nominated work, *Ghost*, Whiteread utilises negative space in *House* to evoke emotion. The concrete remains of what was once somebody’s livelihood connotes ideas of a headstone, a memorial to the working-class East End streets that are continually being demolished, gentrified, and having their histories forgotten. Art historian and broadcaster, Andrew Graham-Dixon argues that the lack of knowledge gifted to the viewer about the house’s history is an intentional comment on the “unrecoverability of the past” (Graham-Dixon, 1993); without further research one may never know about Sidney Gale and his fight to remain housed at 193 Grove Road, nor of the countless similar stories of forced relocation and regeneration of working-class areas in London - *House* mourns these lost histories. Dixon declared *House* to be “one of the most extraordinary and imaginative public sculptures created by an English artist this century.” (Ibid) From sheer aesthetic value alone, one can see how Dixon may have come to this conclusion. The work is both accessible and inaccessible; not raised on a platform as other memorials are, instead standing at the level of the working-class locals who may stumble upon the work. Nonetheless, the materiality of the sculpture and the fence that surrounds the work introduce a level of detachment from the spectator. *House* is not furnished, despite occupying the interior of 193 Grove Road, we cannot see what used to be there. This is not a voyeuristic view into the life of a stranger, this is merely an encapsulation of the air that used to dwell inside a home - still warm and heavy with traces of life.

In spite of its art world acclamation, *House* also garnered a lot of criticism. The Bow Neighbourhood Council were among many to voice their distain for the work - branding it a “monstrosity” (Thacker, 2015). This is likely due to the “political dimension” (Whiteread in Searle, 1994) of *House*, which, even if unintentional by Whiteread herself (she notes “I don’t think I’m political in that sense” (Ibid)), brings attention to gentrification in working-class areas of London and sparks debate over the reasoning for the demolition of homes like Sidney Gale’s. The recently erected Canary Wharf and high rise developments nearby were a main priority for the council; their views over *House*’s site were not deemed acceptable, councillor Eric Flounders asserting that “what people who live in tower blocks want is parkland” (Thacker, 2015) - not eyesore Victorian terraces, in any form. In this sense, I believe *House* has an important function: allowing the voices of those silenced through these regeneration projects to be heard. Despite not telling the stories itself, *House* brought a lot of media attention to the area; without the sculpture, the story of Sidney Gale and others in his situation would not have been so publicised.

However, criticism of Whiteread’s work did not only come from the council, but from locals. In spite of the profound meaning one could read from the work, its presence among other working-class residences understandably irked a few neighbours - “there was some resentment from locals towards *House* as they perceived it to be adding insult to injury over the demolition of such homes in the area, and a crassness in exposing working-class abode for the ‘arty’ leisure classes.” (Ibid) The sculpture itself even fell victim to such comments as it was defaced with the question “WOT FOR?” (Gallagher, 2017: 9). When considering that Whiteread is a self-professed “middle-class” (Sanai, 2019) artist who was paid to make this work on a matter she herself had not experienced, it is easy to see how the intent of the work may be misconstrued as a futile attempt at activism that brings more attention to Whiteread’s name than the gentrification problem at hand. This begs the question, if the intent is to aid the working-class displacement crisis, would one be better off telling the stories of working-class people? Or better again, giving working-class artists the platform to tell their own story? By focussing in on the space and not the person who inhabited it, *House* can either be read to be speaking for the masses, or disregarding them completely as if the loss is merely architectural.



Fig 8.

Be it the best artwork of the century or a concrete disaster, *House* has its pros and cons; its 80 day stint in a park in Bow brought copious amounts of attention to a topic in dire need of resolution. However, what change did the work really make? Marquis references Martha Rosler in his essay 'Disjointed Days': Contemporary Art and the Human Right to Housing': "Art does not change society; social movements change society. Art can be a megaphone and a condenser of a symbolic field, a matchmaker and a concentrator of public attention. To ask more of it is to have an idealist attachment to symbolic activity over political activity, which is difficult to maintain." (Phillips and Erdemci 2012: 177–78) (Marquis, 2016)

This quote epitomises the emotions I have towards politically charged works that are not formed from personal experience. One can infer from Rosler's words that artistic statements on politics are nothing but statements unless combined with a form of activism that, hand in hand, lead to change being made. Whiteread is not an isolated case of an artist making a political work in a working-class area once it is already being regenerated. Would such an infamous piece of art have been made here years earlier when residents were fighting to keep roofs above their heads? Likely not. Although Whiteread donated £20,000 of her rebel K foundation prize money to Shelter, a homeless charity, the political action taken appears to be an

afterthought considering Whiteread made no statement expressing her disagreement with the displacement caused by gentrification, nor did she donate any of her Turner Prize winnings - it is only when she was forced to acknowledge criticism was any charitable act shown. Sidney Gale commented that the cast of his former home is “taking the wee-wee” (Thacker, 2015) asking ‘how can they get grants for arts projects when we can’t get grants for homes? I could have bought a new home for my family with this money.’ (Ibid) When it comes down to it, I believe that the fundamental right to housing is far more important than any artwork, and although it is not the responsibility of artists to keep a roof over everyone’s heads; those that comment on the struggles of displacement and gentrification should have the self-awareness to know that they are in an incredibly privileged position to profit off of the struggle of others, and should be expected to pay for the working-class stories that they draw from in more than just publicity.

Ayo Akingbade: *Dear Babylon*



Fig 9.

Ayo Akingbade is a London based filmmaker whose work sparks “conversation on urbanism, gentrification, power and resilience” (The Whitechapel Gallery, 2021). Her 2019 short film *Dear Babylon* was shown alongside commissioned work *Fire in my Belly* (Akingbade, 2021) in her solo exhibition *A Glittering City* at The Whitechapel Gallery.

In a meta approach, *Dear Babylon* follows a group of three young artists as they create a documentary in response to the fictional AC30 Housing Bill that threatens the future of social housing. The trio interview real residents of the local Dorset Estate in Bethnal Green, wherein the interviewees play themselves and share their lived experience from their time in the estate. One subject talks of how displaced community members were “relocated in other parts of the city, and sometimes beyond London [...] to Stoke on Trent, Slough, Sidcup. None were rehoused in zone 1 or 2” and “were given pennies compared to what [...] guide prices suggested.” (*Dear Babylon*, 2019) ultimately highlighting the fundamental changes in the demographic of London's inner zones.

The docufiction film doesn't necessarily share any information that you could not find elsewhere online, however hearing the stories directly from the people impacted by gentrification had a much greater impact than reading them reported in a news article. Additionally, Akingbade's work is an important step to having discussions about gentrification in an institutional arts setting. As seen through previous examples of Frieze panel debates, the discussion of London's living situation etc. in art settings usually focusses on artists themselves and how they can benefit, not the impact that the sector is having on others. Through her work Akingbade is able to highlight the worries that many young artists have about entering the industry and opens up the discussion as to how we can make change instead of being complicit in the wrongdoings of the art world. This is something that Alisha Morenike Fisher, co-founder and director of Migrant's Bureau, comments on in the Whitechapel Gallery's podcast, *Hear, Now*: “I think [...] that's when it becomes that whole discussion about being complicit. And I think even as you're talking [...] it's so nice to be in conversation with someone who is really going through that understanding of integrity. Like, what does it mean to be integral to your artistry, to your work, to your actual practice? And I think so many people at the moment [...]

just do things because of money and do things [...] trying to please people. But actually at the end of the day, what is actually art if that's all that is?" (Whitechapel Gallery, 2021) In contrast to Whiteread, Akingbade is choosing to emphasise working-class struggles, not plaster over them, and is pursuing a practice that is authentic to her but not at the cost of others. It is this integrity and transparency, along with a redistribution of power higher up the chain - "creating avenues for funding separate from exploitative networks, organising gallery spaces with a sense of civic responsibility, and devising opportunities for new critical voices invisible in a staid sector" (Quaintance, 2017) - that will allow us to achieve a much more self-sustained art scene where profiting off of gentrification isn't necessary.

CONCLUSION:

London's gentrification problem is intrinsically tied to institutions who profit from its perpetuation, breaking apart working-class communities whilst keeping the rich wealthy. Arts institutions are integral to said perpetuation, sapping funding from grassroots charities, lobbying for the demolition of housing estates in order to attract more affluent demographics in replacement, and utilising the emptied homes as materials for artworks in order to further profit from working-class demise without paying any dues to the people they helped to displace. The systemic implementation of gentrification masked as regenerative projects is a mighty problem to tackle in its entirety, however, artists themselves can make a difference. Through giving those affected a voice, instead of speaking on their behalf and profiting from it, change can begin to be made.

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