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Combatting Arts-Led Gentrification: A Case Study of Slanguage Studio

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On February 12, 2017, a gathering of the arts-organized Artists Political Action Network (APAN) at 356 Mission gallery in the Boyle Heights neighborhood of Los Angeles was confronted with a group of protestors demanding that APAN members do not enter the gallery.¹ The demonstrators, known as the Boyle Heights Alliance Against Artwashing and Displacement (BHAAAD), assembled to protest galleries and artists moving into the community and contributing to the gentrification and displacement of Boyle Heights residents. However, not all members of APAN or the arts community agree with the stance of BHAAAD. One individual, artist Charles Gaines, involved with APAN and the protested event, responded in an essay “Unpacking the Binary: The Politics of Gentrification” in which he argues that residents of color in lower-income neighborhoods want to become “socially and economically mainstreamed,” but poses the question “how do you bring in these goods and services without raising rent and displacing the inhabitants?”² What Gaines asks is a common question in the conversation about the role of artists and galleries in gentrification and the communities they impact. Is it possible to develop arts resources in a community without contributing to the migration of outsiders into the community, raised rents, and displacement of lower-income residents? I explore this issue through an examination of the history of arts-involved gentrification in New York City, as well as the current gentrification occurring in Boyle Heights. Based on this foundational understanding of art institutions’ involvement in gentrification, I argue that there have been instances in which art spaces have enriched their communities, consequently not contributing to gentrification. Specifically, this discussion will focus on the community-oriented art space Slanguage Studio in Wilmington, California.

To preface this discussion, it is critical to examine the complicated process of gentrification. Gentrification occurs in lower-income communities and generally impacts lower-income residents of color. In this essay, my use of the term “community” refers to the residents that occupied a neighborhood before gentrification, and who become victims of displacement as a result of gentrification. Though gentrification is complex and can take many forms, it usually follows a similar pattern: businesses move into lower-income neighborhoods because these neighborhoods have cheaper rent. Oftentimes, this phenomenon is paired with local governments hoping to develop the neighborhood for economic growth. As more businesses relocate to the area, rents rise and force lower-income residents to move out or be evicted. Meanwhile, more affluent (most often white) individuals move into the neighborhood. This

¹ Catherine Wagley, “Case Study: Catherine G. Wagley on Boyle Heights,” *Artforum*, May 2019, 3.

² Charles Gaines, “Unpacking the Binary: The Politics of Gentrification,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History*, 2017, 3.

simplified pattern illustrates how lower-income residents become displaced by gentrification.³ However, gentrification does not always follow this straightforward path, as countless factors may be involved in the promotion of gentrification. In this essay, I specifically focus on the relationships between art institutions and gentrification.

New York City is frequently referenced as the preeminent example of arts-initiated gentrification. New York City's notoriety centers on two neighborhoods: the Lower East Side and SoHo. Though gentrification can be defined by many of its stages, the art world's relationship to the issue is unique: often, it is considered one of the first steps in a transformation of the neighborhood. Accordingly, the Lower East Side and Soho epitomize this process.

In the early 1980s, the Lower East side began to be regarded by the art world as a promising artistic community. Galleries such as Fun Gallery and Gracie Mansion began to open, gaining media attention and praise as the new alternative art neighborhood, likened to Paris' Montmartre.⁴ Despite the glowing reviews written by the press, the opening of these galleries sparked great controversy in Lower East Side communities. From the late 19th century up until the 1980s, the Lower East Side was primarily inhabited by working-class immigrants from the Caribbean, Asia, and Eastern Europe, and the neighborhood was known as one of the poorest areas in New York City.⁵ Nonetheless, the area's low rent attracted many artists and gallerists who saw an opportunity for massive success and growth with new gallery spaces. Additionally, the city encouraged this arts migration by evicting tenants and selling abandoned properties to gallerists.⁶ For the gallerists, the primary goal was economic success in a newly developing arts district, while for the city, the objective was to redevelop the area to cater to income-generating businesses and affluent residents. Ultimately, the city supported the opportunity for gallerists to move in, and the art community complied.

As artists moved into the Lower East Side, local residents were effectively forced to move out, unable to afford rising rents. However, many artists and gallerists refused to acknowledge their impact on gentrification. Some, like Gracie Mansion, accepted that the Lower East Side was experiencing gentrification, but believed that this would be the situation regardless of gallery presence, stating

³ In addition, gentrification often leads to the increased policing and criminalization of lower-income residents of color.

⁴ Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan, "The Fine Art of Gentrification," *October* 31 (1984): 91–93, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778358>.

⁵ Neil Smith and James DeFilippis, "The Reassertion of Economics: 1990s Gentrification in the Lower East Side," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 23, no. 4 (1999): 640, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.00220>.

⁶ Deutsche and Ryan, "The Fine Art of Gentrification," 96.

that, “if all galleries got up and moved, it would not stop gentrification.”⁷ Others, such as art critic Craig Owens, argued that artists were not the agents of gentrification, but rather the victims, as they could not afford the rising rent prices after migrating to transforming neighborhoods.⁸ Both mindsets deflected responsibility from the artists and gallerists, instead blaming the city for what they believed to be inevitable. Even more, these attitudes deny accountability for any contribution to gentrification and excuse the arts community from actively organizing to address and prevent gentrification.

Similarly, the neighborhood of SoHo experienced a transformation from industrial center, to artistic hub, to luxury neighborhood. According to urban historian Aaron Shkuda, “artist-led urban development is not a natural process; it was created in SoHo.”⁹ Preceding the Lower East Side’s gentrification, SoHo experienced its transformation in the 1950s and 1960s. Unique to SoHo was its industrial beginnings: SoHo was the home to many factories and warehouses that had been largely abandoned in the late 1800s due to their outdated and inefficient structures.¹⁰ Though most buildings were deserted, some industries, such as garment-producing factories, remained in business and largely employed lower-income Black and Latinx workers.¹¹ Despite this, the many massive, vacated complexes in SoHo appealed to artists seeking cheaper rents. For example, artists such as Chuck Close and Alex Katz moved into SoHo warehouses and repurposed them as studios and residential lofts.¹² As artists relocated to SoHo, they inspired a chain of other businesses to move into the neighborhood. In fact, the artists’ migration most notably contributed to the opening of over one hundred galleries in the area.¹³ Naturally, the influx of businesses in SoHo led to rising rents. When building owners in SoHo realized the potential economic gain of renting their properties to incoming businesses and galleries, they terminated all industrial work. With the closing of remaining factories in SoHo, many lower-income factory workers of color lost their jobs and would be forced to seek employment elsewhere. Similarly to the Lower East Side, the artists that moved into SoHo were not discussed in terms of their negative impact on SoHo’s lower-income workers, but rather their successful instigation of economic growth in New York City. In fact, the arts-led development of SoHo is

⁷ Cited in Deutsche and Ryan, “The Fine Art of Gentrification,” 103.

⁸ Cited in Deutsche and Ryan, “The Fine Art of Gentrification,” 104.

⁹ Aaron Shkuda, “Introduction: Art, Artists, and Gentrification,” in *The Lofts of SoHo: Gentrification, Art, and Industry in New York, 1950–1980* (Chicago, IL, UNITED STATES: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 3, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/pepperdine/detail.action?docID=4437824>.

¹⁰ Shkuda, “Introduction: Art, Artists, and Gentrification,” 6.

¹¹ Shkuda, “Introduction: Art, Artists, and Gentrification,” 8.

¹² Shkuda, “Introduction: Art, Artists, and Gentrification,” 6.

¹³ Shkuda, “Introduction: Art, Artists, and Gentrification,” 8.

often framed as a revitalization of the neighborhood, cementing artists' roles as "urban actors" imperative in cultural development of cities.¹⁴ Again, this perception ignores the active position that art can play in displacing working-class residents.

Despite growing attention on the displacement of lower-income residents of color in the Lower East Side and SoHo, arts-led gentrification is not solely an issue of the past. Presently, many other communities are facing arts-initiated gentrification, including Boyle Heights in Los Angeles. As previously described, some residents of Boyle Heights have organized in groups such as BHAAAD to combat the opening of art galleries in their neighborhood, including the case involving 356 Mission. This strong opposition to artists and gallerists seeking cheap rent in Boyle Heights is a direct result of anti-gentrification advocates having witnessed the histories of the Lower East Side and SoHo. Similarly to the examples in New York City, Boyle Heights has been characterized by the media as void of artistic and cultural value, the *New York Times* even regarding the area as lacking in "cultural density" and emanating a "dangerous quality."¹⁵ Additionally, akin to SoHo, Boyle Heights is adjacent to a largely industrial area. The abandoned factories and urban landscape further promote the notion that Boyle Heights is a desolate area waiting to be claimed by the arts world. As a result, the development of Boyle Heights as an arts district has been celebrated by the press as bringing cultural value and arts resources to the community. This deceptive advertising exists as part of a greater trend that Boyle Heights activists have termed "artwashing." Simply, artwashing is the tendency of the press to champion the benefits of arts institutions in lower-income communities while ignoring the consequences of arts-led gentrification.¹⁶ To anti-gentrification activists in the community, the commercial galleries opening in Boyle Heights serve outsiders: they do not provide residents with jobs or true access to the arts, but rather threaten the preservation of their community.

Again paralleling the circumstances of New York City, many in the arts community who have relocated to Boyle Heights have neglected to confront their impact on gentrification. In the BHAAAD protest on APAN, Boyle Heights activists drew a picket line, asking those attending the APAN meeting to reconsider their engagement with gentrifying galleries. However, many attendees

¹⁴ Shkuda, "Introduction: Art, Artists, and Gentrification," 10.

¹⁵ Melena Ryzik, "New Art Galleries Enjoy a Los Angeles Advantage: Space," *The New York Times*, September 16, 2015, sec. Arts, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/17/arts/design/new-art-galleries-enjoy-a-los-angeles-advantage-space.html>.

¹⁶ Kean O'Brien, Leonardo Vilchis, and Corina Maritescu, "Boyle Heights and the Fight against Gentrification as State Violence," *American Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (July 6, 2019): 393, <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2019.0033>.

crossed the picket line.¹⁷ Furthermore, this protest sparked the letter by Charles Gaines, in which he ultimately criticizes Boyle Heights activists for “keeping out resources” that art galleries can bring.¹⁸ Despite some APAN members refusing to enter 356 Mission and cross the picket line or support other galleries that have been identified as agents of gentrification, an overwhelming number of politically-minded APAN members did not. Perhaps some APAN artists who entered 356 Mission on February 12, 2017 experienced guilt or a personal dilemma when crossing the picket line. However, by rationalizing their engagement with 356 Mission and Boyle Heights galleries, they mirror the dismissive attitude that New York gallerists demonstrated during the mid to late twentieth century.

Altogether, these past instances of gentrification emphasize the significant effects that art spaces can initiate in lower-income neighborhoods. The situations in the Lower East Side, SoHo, and Boyle Heights illustrate repeated patterns of action within these art spaces: a migration into the community by outsiders, a prioritization of economic success, and a refusal to acknowledge their complicity in gentrification. Though there are many factors in the process of urban development, these three key actions will frame our discussion of arts-led gentrification. With these as our criteria, we can better understand how some art spaces have challenged such gentrifying practices and demonstrated that it is possible to lessen the impact of arts-led gentrification.

Despite Wilmington’s many similarities to the Lower East Side, SoHo, and Boyle Heights, Wilmington’s flourishing art scene defies the aforementioned gentrifying criteria. The Los Angeles neighborhood of Wilmington shares many of the characteristics that defined the Lower East Side, SoHo, and Boyle Heights before they were targeted by gentrification. Geographically, Wilmington is situated along the coast and in between the cities of Long Beach and Carson. Due to its advantageous coastal location, the Port of Los Angeles is based in Wilmington and serves as one of the largest providers of jobs in the area.¹⁹ Similarly to SoHo and Boyle Heights, Wilmington is considered industrial due to the presence of the port as well as two major oil refineries.²⁰ Finally, Wilmington’s residents are predominantly Latinx and lower-income, consistent

¹⁷ Nizan Shaked, “How to Draw a (Picket) Line: Activists Protest Event at Boyle Heights Gallery,” February 12, 2017, <https://hyperallergic.com/358652/how-to-draw-a-picket-line-activists-protest-event-at-boyle-heights-gallery/>.

¹⁸ Gaines, “Unpacking the Binary: The Politics of Gentrification,” 5.

¹⁹ Scott Garner, “Neighborhood Spotlight: Oil and the Sea Built Wilmington’s Future,” Los Angeles Times, December 14, 2018, <https://www.latimes.com/business/realestate/hot-property/la-fi-hp-neighborhood-spotlight-wilmington-20181215-story.html>.

²⁰ Garner, “Neighborhood Spotlight.”

with the community of Boyle Heights. Altogether, Wilmington reflects the type of neighborhood that Charles Gaines discusses in his essay: a community that Gaines believes would require urban development in order to achieve artistic and cultural importance.

Considering these conditions, Slanguage Studio in Wilmington serves as an exceptional example of an artistic space that works for the interests of the local community, rather than against them. Founded by artists Karla Diaz and Mario Ybarra Jr. in 2001, the storefront in Wilmington that would become Slanguage was initially intended to be used as the couple's personal art studio.²¹ However, unlike the situation in Boyle Heights, Diaz and Ybarra were lifelong residents of Wilmington, not outsiders. As Ybarra explained in an interview with the Hammer, "We're not coming from, as a kind of an outside, missionary group to save the children. Like, this is my community, this is where I grew up. I'm interested in an internal building of leadership from the kids and the people here."²² Consequently, Slanguage Studio's community involvement has developed organically. As Diaz and Ybarra worked in their studio, curious Wilmington residents who walked by would stop to observe, some even asking if they could join in and create art as well.²³ Community interest and involvement grew naturally, and the artists working in Slanguage were local to Wilmington and the surrounding Los Angeles area.

Correspondingly, Slanguage defies the first criterion of arts-led gentrification. Its creation by residents of the community combats the claims that culture and arts resources are absent from working-class neighborhoods. Instead, Slanguage exemplifies that art spaces can be established and maintained within communities regardless of their perceived social status. Additionally, as exemplified by Slanguage, these community spaces are not restricted to solely local recognition. Diaz and Ybarra note that "artists who worked with communities were seen as not being 'real' artists," which they hoped to combat by creating an "alternative, a space in between these artistic worlds" of community arts and institutional arts.²⁴ Since its inception, Slanguage has been recognized by various institutions as developing many successful and relevant artists including Aydinaneth Ortiz, Abel Alejandro, and Gloria Sanchez. Diaz and Ybarra have worked to build relationships with other institutions and have

²¹ Mario Ybarra Jr and Karla Diaz, "Art and Community: Creating a Space for Facilitation, Identity, and Culture at Slanguage Studio in Los Angeles," *Guggenheim* (blog), November 9, 2015,

<https://www.guggenheim.org/blogs/map/art-and-community-creating-a-space-for-facilitation-identity-and-culture-at-slanguage-studio-in-los-angeles>.

²² Hammer Museum, *Made in L.A. 2012- Welcome to Slanguage Studio*, Vimeo, 1:43, 2014, <https://vimeo.com/93316728>.

²³ Hammer Museum, *Made in L.A. 2012- Welcome to Slanguage Studio*, 2:05.

²⁴ Ybarra and Diaz, "Art and Community."

collaborated with Slanguage artists to curate and exhibit in museums such as the Hammer’s “Made in L.A.” Biennial (2012), LACMA’s “Possible Worlds: Mario Ybarra, Jr., Karla Diaz, and Slanguage Studio Select from the Permanent Collections” (2011), and Cal State Long Beach University Art Museum’s “Call and Response, When We Say... You Say” exhibit (2019). In these instances, Slanguage artists are represented outside of their Wilmington community, providing them with a larger platform. Ultimately, Slanguage is both successful in developing local artists and presenting them to a larger audience.

Furthermore, Slanguage’s roots as a studio space and artist collective deviate from the gallery presence seen in New York City and Boyle Heights. While one of the primary goals of a commercial gallery is to sell art, Slanguage instead emphasizes its role as a site of artistic creation and freedom. In this way, Slanguage does not need to cater to the demands of the art market. As described by Diaz and Ybarra, the studio instead found purpose in showing “alternative or marginalized histories and narratives, contemporary social and political issues, and street culture. We asked the community and artists what they wanted to do or see in the space, then did it.”²⁵ Slanguage’s many artistic projects reflect this mission and the freedom permitted to the studio’s artists. In the past, Slanguage has hosted DJ events, art shows, workshops, dinners, and breakdancing shows, in addition to providing studio space to local artists.²⁶ The many voices of Slanguage represent and serve issues relevant to the artists and their Wilmington community.

Overall, it is clear that Slanguage seeks to serve its community. Diaz and Ybarra’s careful consideration of community perspectives and their presence in Wilmington challenge Charles Gaines’ argument that art resources come with the consequence of gentrification. Instead, Slanguage is able to provide arts education, artistic platforms, and mentorships to local artists. As stated by the founders, Slanguage has been an “artist-run community space since the very beginning,” seeking to uplift the community’s voices.²⁷ Even more, Slanguage has engaged in projects to provide resources that directly impact their community. For example, in the Spanish and English language video “Slanguage Superheroes” produced in 2013, Diaz and Ybarra dress as fictional superheroes to educate and entertain bilingual elementary school children. In “Slanguage Superheroes,” the pair identifies heroes within their Wilmington community, including a father who carefully tends to his garden, a high school photography teacher, and a longshoreman from the Port of Los Angeles.²⁸ “Slanguage Superheroes” highlights the achievements and work of Wilmington residents and additionally

²⁵ Ybarra and Diaz, “Art and Community.”

²⁶ Hammer Museum, *Made in L.A. 2012- Welcome to Slanguage Studio*, 2:30.

²⁷ Betty Marín, “Slanguage Speaks Slanguage,” KCET, June 23, 2015, <https://www.kcet.org/shows/artbound/slanguage-speaks-slanguage>.

²⁸ Christopher Reynolds, *Slanguage Superheroes*, 2013, <https://vimeo.com/68888578>.

serves the bilingual demographic in the area. As an educational resource produced specifically for Wilmington school children, “Slanguage Superheroes” showcases the diverse initiatives of the studio and their efforts to contribute resources to their community.

Ultimately, Slanguage serves as an invaluable example of an art institution that provides resources, platforms, and opportunities for those in its community. Though Slanguage is centered in this discussion, it is certainly not the only art space defying arts-led gentrification. Art spaces such as KAOS Network in Leimert Park and Mandujano/Cell in Inglewood share the community-based values demonstrated in Slanguage. Further exploration of these art spaces may illuminate different approaches to community-centered arts, as it is important to note that Slanguage’s model cannot be used as a blanket-solution for all art spaces. There are many factors that facilitate gentrification, and each community has unique needs, being built of members that represent a multiplicity of voices and experiences. Regardless, what sets Slanguage apart from art spaces complicit in gentrification is Diaz’s and Ybarra’s careful consideration of the interests of their community. Slanguage Studio demonstrates core principles which should be considered and prioritized by all art spaces.

In response to Charles Gaines’ initial question, I argue that as exemplified through Slanguage Studio, arts resources can be available to working-class communities without contributing to their gentrification. Like Slanguage, art institutions can prevent contribution to gentrification through development from within the community, an objective to serve their local artists as opposed to the art market, and sensitivity to their role as resource-providers. Additionally, art spaces like Slanguage support the abundance of artistic talent and production that exists within lower-income communities, ultimately supporting that arts-initiated gentrification is not only harmful, it is unnecessary. To quote the anti-gentrification activists of BHAAAD, “Artists and gentrifiers should ask how they can join and support the *ongoing* struggles in our neighborhood. That means understanding who and what was here before you arrived.”²⁹ Ultimately, the discussion of arts-initiated gentrification is not about art at all. Art spaces, artists, and anti-gentrification advocates alike must center the communities they occupy and actively uplift the needs of residents in the fight against gentrification.

²⁹ Boyle Heights Alliance Against Artwashing and Displacement, “A Boyle Heights Alliance Challenges Charles Gaines and Other Artists for Ignoring Local Voices,” Hyperallergic, June 1, 2017, <https://hyperallergic.com/382283/a-boyle-heights-alliance-challenges-charles-gaines-and-other-artists-for-ignoring-local-voices/>.

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