The Aesthetics of Dissent and Engagement: Art Out in the Real World

THESIS

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By

Mona Gazala

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Master's Examination Committee:

Professor Carmel Buckley, Advisor

Professor Todd Slaughter

Associate Professor Karen Hutzel

Abstract

Columbus city schools are shut down for three days in October 2019 due to a lack of air conditioning in poorly-maintained school buildings. At the same time, it is revealed that millions in city funds may have been misappropriated to build a new soccer stadium. How can we as a city re-imagine civic priorities? How can social justice be locally organized? And what part do artists play in supporting change and justice; or conversely, in perpetuating the status quo?

This paper reviews some of my work and observations over the past several years as an artist/activist and as a social practice artist, with the more recent events surrounding the "Save the Crew" soccer stadium campaign being the focus of my thesis exhibition artwork. In conjunction with this recent project, I will be presenting the 2017-2018 "As Seen in Franklinton" community photography campaign. In both of these projects, a marketing campaign or phrase was subverted to draw attention to the people who are not being served by Columbus's neoliberal politics. I will explore the intersections of art and real life issues, in what ways the creative class has either helped draw attention to inequities in Columbus, or conversely, reaped the benefits of that inequity.

What obligations do artists, academics, and culture-makers have to recognize and counter systemic oppression, racism, classism, and inequality? How can we lower barriers to participation in both art and social justice movements? And does political art - does anything we do as artists - even make a difference, in the real world?

For Henry Green, 1993-2016.

For Tyre King, 2003-2016.

For Julius Tate, 2002-2019.

Vita

1983.....North Olmsted High School

1988.....B.F.A Painting, The Ohio State University

1999-2016 .....Single mother and low-wage laborer

2017 to present .....Graduate Fellow, Department of Art,
The Ohio State University

Fields of Study

Major Field: Art

Minor Field: City and Regional Planning

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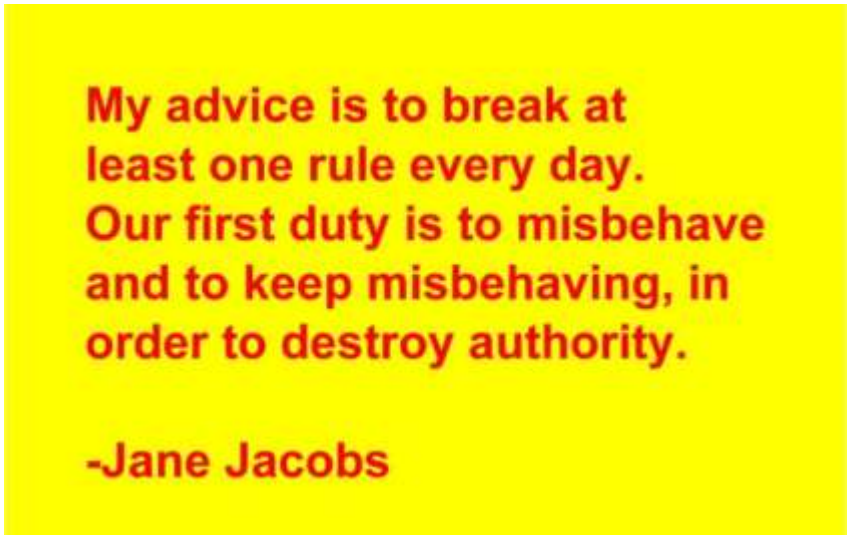

Engagement

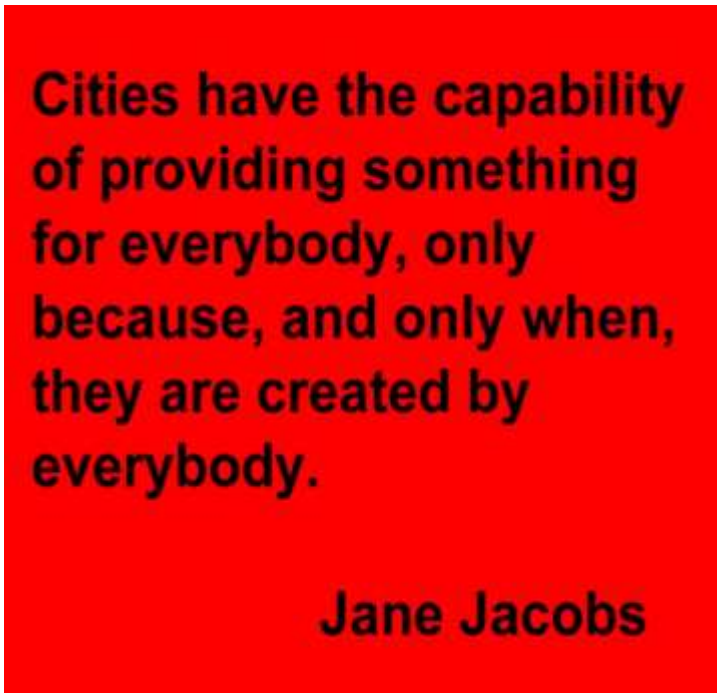

Fig. 1 Text art by author. *Text Source: Alexiou, Alice S., Jane Jacobs: Urban Visionary, Harper Collins Publishers, Ontario, 2006*

Introduction : The Columbus Way

In the year 1908, a planning commission, hired by a group of local businessmen, presented the city of Columbus, Ohio with its first comprehensive city plan. Published in the era of the "City Beautiful" movement, various strategies within the plan, including a formal park system and a grand civic mall extending from the state capital building to the Scioto River, were proposed to attract wealthy people to the city's core where they would spend or invest money. These improvements were likewise meant to benefit the poor: through the beauty and grandeur of the new city environs, a sense of civic pride and decorum would grow. The idea that one could "elevate" the ideals or behavior of the poor through the built environment became known as "physical determinism" (Conroy, 2019). This is possibly one of the first formal examples of social control to be found in the nascent profession of urban planning.

Other darker examples of social control would follow, in Columbus and elsewhere. But before leaving the 1908 Columbus city plan, I would have you turn to page 52, where a photograph documents an alley or street in a lower-income neighborhood near the banks of the Scioto River (Lord et al, 1908). Four neighborhood children stop to pose for the picture. They smile. "THE PROPOSED MALL," reads the caption in all caps, "WILL WIPE OUT THIS SQUALID NEIGHBORHOOD AND IN ITS PLACE PROVIDE A PARK AND SOME OF THE BEST BUILDING SITES IN THE CITY."

This was "the Columbus Way."

THE PROPOSED MALL WILL WIPE OUT THIS SQUALID NEIGHBORHOOD, AND IN ITS PLACE PROVIDE A PARK AND SOME OF THE BEST BUILDING SITES IN THE CITY

Fig 2. *Source: Lord, Austin W, et al. "Report of the Plan Commission for the City of Columbus." Document Library for the City of Columbus Planning Division. Feb. 1908*

Fast forward 111 years.

On the first three days of October 2019, Columbus experienced a heat wave, with temperatures soaring into the nineties. Columbus City Schools were closed "due to extreme heat," and parents had to scramble for day care and transportation. Heat was not the actual reason for the closures; they could more accurately be attributed to the sealed windows and lack of air conditioning in inadequately-maintained school buildings.

In the fourteenth-largest city in the nation.

In 2019.

All manner of questions were raised by the public as to why the Columbus City Schools could not afford to properly repair and update buildings, while school board

members were jetting off to conferences in Miami on taxpayer money. What moneys had not been given away through 30-year tax abatements to wealthy developers were apparently being mis-spent by the school board on anything but the city's children.

Days later, on Sunday, October 6, the Columbus Dispatch printed a searing and detailed account of City Council's expenditures on a new Crew soccer stadium and infrastructure, all to entice the new soccer team owners to keep the sports franchise in Columbus. The original agreement of $50 million dollars of taxpayer money to accomplish this deed had ballooned, behind closed doors, to nearly twice that amount, with the overages being hidden under other city expenditure headings. (Bush, 10/6/2019).

These two pictures - the school closures, followed by this revelation of runaway expenditures for a soccer stadium - were the quintessential diptych of the city of Columbus. On one side a picture of the disinvestment in our children, on the other a picture of our reckless pursuit of glamour projects. The city's entire value system was summarized during that single week in October.

But seemingly unfazed by the public furor, Columbus City Council members went on to officially pass a motion declaring October 12, 2019 to be "Saved the Crew Day," commending the "Save the Crew Movement" for its successful efforts in retaining the sports franchise (Nelson, 2019).

This too, is "the Columbus Way."

"Well, my crew is young black boys and men that are being murdered all over this city," said northeast-side community activist Tasha Marie Jones in an angry social media comment, *"We can celebrate when city officials SAVE THAT CREW."* (S.Woods, 2019)

I am a graduate art student here at the Ohio State University, who is also pursuing a minor in city and regional planning. Not so much because I feel I can change the world through the planning profession, but to gain a better understanding of how it functions and why the systems of a city consistently fail the people who need them the most. It is written into the code of ethics of the American Institute of Certified Planners that people working in this profession shall aspire to "seek social justice by working to expand choice and opportunity for all persons, recognizing a special responsibility to plan for the needs of the disadvantaged and to promote racial and economic integration" (AICP, 2016). Yet, here we are in the second most economically-segregated city in the nation. Black babies are dying at three times the rate of white babies because of racial trauma (Roach, 2018). And our collective eye is still firmly on luxury condos, capitalism and a "market driven" economy.

So I respond through artwork to what I see as city narrative with major blind spots, and I make visible the parts of Columbus that the city would rather not see. I consider myself a social irritant and a student of hard realities on the ground.

My studies are driven by a desire to understand the dynamics of power and how they affect people of color and marginalized communities, particularly with regard to spatial justice issues – that is, social justice issues that are intrinsically tied to "place." As a daughter of indigenous Palestinians, I am well aware of spatial injustices and the attempts to silence certain place-based narratives in order to further others. I am thankful that my time in this graduate program has allowed me to further study the mechanisms of

the humanitarian crisis currently facing indigenous Palestinians in the Middle East. But beyond this specific crisis tied to my ancestry, abuses of colonial and economic power have implications for what is happening elsewhere and indeed everywhere. Certainly for what is happening right here in Columbus, Ohio. The same power dynamics that ethnically cleanse Palestinians from their ancestral homes and deny their very existence, are the same ones that push low-income people from gentrifying neighborhoods. The same power dynamics that created an apartheid state in Israel are the very ones under which our communities of color are redlined, denied good schools, and extra-judiciously murdered by police.

I question why there is not a greater sense of urgency attached to what is happening in Columbus, in our own backyards (for me, quite literally). Within my own census tract in Franklinton, the median annual income is $10,000. People are living in tents. People are writhing on the sidewalk, overdosed on flakka. Things here are dire. The city's answer seems to be to relocate or ignore the problem. Let's talk about what can be done.

1. Saving the Crew that Matters

The public initially learned about former Columbus Crew owner Anthony Precourt's intention to move the Crew to Austin in October of 2017. A grass-roots "save the crew" campaign to keep the team in Columbus began almost immediately thereafter with a hashtag and plenty of homemade front yard signs (McCauley, 2018). Somewhere along the way the "saving of the Crew" became conditional on building a brand new

stadium despite there being no major deficiencies with the old one. And on October 10, 2019 – just two short years later - the new Columbus Crew owners and city officials were attending a ground-breaking ceremony of the new Crew Stadium (Fahmi, 2019).

Now, even the author of a feel-good article on the Crew's fan-base website had to admit that "a fan organization was never going to have the money or legal power to keep a team from moving" (McCauley, 2018). She goes on to explain that the Crew was saved largely by the Columbus Partnership and the Ohio Attorney General's office. What is not mentioned in her article is that Columbus taxpayer money was thrown in to sweeten the pot. A lot of taxpayer money, to the tune of an estimated $100 million as of October 2019. Meanwhile cities like Austin, Texas were welcoming a new soccer franchise and stadium to their city with zero outlay of city dollars (Bush, 12/10/2019).

At the same time, several Columbus city school buildings remain without air conditioning. A 2016 voter-approved tax increase to fund the $125 million dollar "Operation Fix It," was meant to outfit 65 of the district's 100 buildings with improvements like air-conditioning for the first time ever. But even after this operation concludes in 2021, 13 buildings will still not have air conditioning. (Neese, 2018).

I could go on about this situation in further detail, but the question is, how do I react to this situation as an artist, and as an artist invested in social justice for Columbus's most vulnerable populations? My peers and I were outraged by what appeared to be a lack of moral compass, for city leaders to be allocating funds to the non-essential pet projects of millionaires, while sporting empty pockets and crying broke when it came to serving our less affluent families who depend on public education.

My reactions were both visceral and intellectual, and they came out in the form of text art. This is how the project “Saving the Crew that Matters” was conceived.

Saving the Crew That Matters is a time-based and engaged campaign that began in October 2019 and will still be in progress during the course of the thesis exhibition and beyond. But my first reaction artistically was an outburst in illuminated text. This seven foot tall illuminated sign was my visceral reaction to city hall’s reckless behavior. In large lettering, the sign reads “Look how quickly you mobilized for something that didn’t matter” (Fig.3). Is THIS, a soccer team, to be the one dire emergency we as a city need to address and fix right away? I didn’t think so.

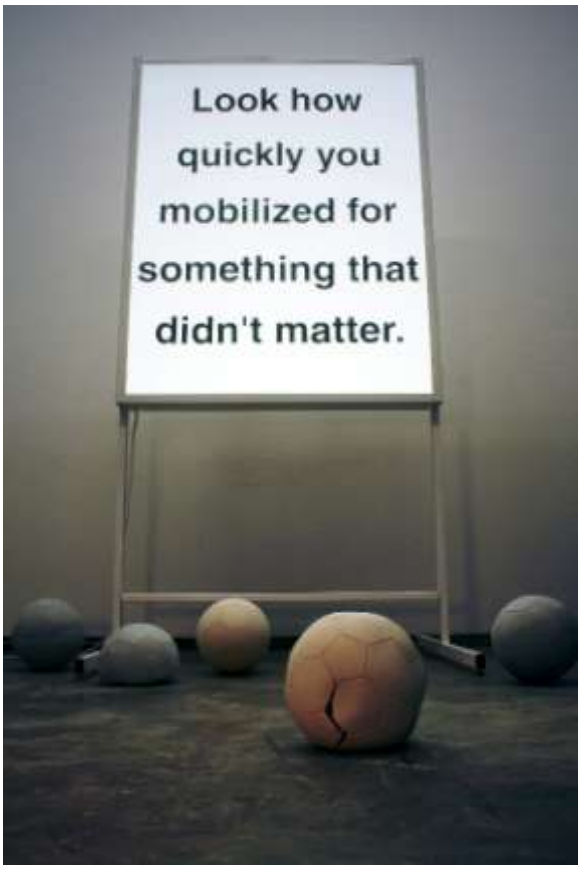

Fig. 3 Illuminated Sign

The soccer balls at the foot of the sign are unfired slip-cast ceramic; they will eventually disintegrate back into clay. This alludes to the transitory nature of our city leaders' fleeting desires and priorities for sports franchises and corporate tax abatements, and a seeming unwillingness to embrace something with more significance and permanence, like multi-generational investments in children and families, racial justice, or stabilizing communities.

This artwork by itself is a billboard of dissent, but it was meant to work together with other, more interactive components of a broader project. In early December 2019, I had plastic yard signs printed that read "Save THIS Crew," that I have been distributing to people wanting to air their grievances on the Crew funding issue (Fig.4). I have also printed out Save the Crew postcards as part of this campaign. Rather than featuring the soccer stadium or team, "Save the Crew" has been subverted here, referring to the children from my own neighborhood, their faces staring out from behind the bold yellow lettering (Fig.5). These postcards, like the signs, are publicly available. The accompanying instructions in the gallery are to address a postcard to Mayor Ginther or to one of our seven city council members, and let our city leaders know what people think. Where should our civic priorities lie?

Fig. 4 Save this Crew Signs

Fig. 5 Save the Crew Postcard

Even before the inception of this art as an engaged project, I asked for ideas and input from other people. I am grateful to have gotten the opportunity to discuss the issues directly with Columbus area high school students in the Mosaic Education Program, with the approval of their instructor Kim Leddy. And I am pleased that local photographer

John Thorne offered some of his images of Franklinton youth to be used as part of the project. From these interchanges, I was able to put together this parameter of printed material. But these signs and postcards, as an art form, are still incomplete without the engagement of other people (Fisher, 2014). There is an element of unpredictability in doing a project such as this one. Will people respond to a prompt, and how will they respond? At this point, the artist relinquishes control, and the art becomes a tool for other voices.

Urban theorist Jane Jacobs had something to say about loosening the grip of control, not in art but in relation to the growth of American cities. It is in that area of chaos, in that lack of control, she theorizes, where thinking and ingenuity happen (Alexiou, 2006). To desire complete order is to desire stagnation; chaos is where the growth happens. What transpires when the art is completed by other voices, and other minds? What is the possibility that the art then becomes a tool of empowerment more so than an object of passive consumption?

One final component of the "Saving the Crew that Matters" campaign is dependent entirely on other peoples' voices, and that is the Human Library (Fig. 6). This portion of the project is a discussion area in the center of the gallery. Three discussions occured during the course of the thesis show, with five speakers participating as live, human sources of knowledge and opinion on the topic of stadium and school funding. Visitors had a chance to hear real people giving input, answering questions, and possibly debating their stance on Columbus civic priorities. This was an opportunity to present the issues in a non-didactic-format. Among the participants in the Human Library are Scott

Woods, a poet/columnist/political commentator; Joe Motil, a 2019 council candidate, Melody McDowell-Reed, a mother of four children in Columbus city schools, and Laura Recchie and Michael Skelton, 2 community organizers connected to Franklinton but at different socio-economic levels. How the events transpire is left up to these guests and the people coming to the gallery to interact with them. My job as the artist is merely to set up a parameter and step aside. A link to the first 20 minutes of Scott Woods' talk, with an introductory excerpt from an interview with me (Elder, 2020) is available via this link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H9735YKe9tI&feature=youtu.be

Fig. 6 The Human Library

2. What's in a Sign: Text Art in a Personal and a Public Context

My relationship to language, especially written language, is special. As a youth I wrote well in class, and I read books voraciously. I did not speak very much, except when asked to speak.

I have always had a greater comfort level in the written word over spoken word, preferring email to phone, letters to conversation. In an atmosphere of academia where verbal, spoken knowledge – even in a visual arts program! - is prioritized far and above the nonverbal, and tenured professors are heavily reliant on protracted conversations in real time, my non-neurotypical, nonverbal behavior might be considered problematic. Be that as it may, I am drawn to text, to written language and signage. Text is visual. It can be visually processed, and a response formulated, at a pace with which I am comfortable. When I take the time to question language and word choices as experienced in my world, the response manifests most often in text art and signage.

Art in the form of signage, postcards and banners are also low-barrier media, immediately recognizable and immediately engaging to a wide audience. When one passes a sign on the street, one immediately knows it is a sign. There's no hidden agenda, there's no attempt at cultural elitism. Look at John Baldassari's use of text art as a type of "screw you" to the tenets of what art "should be" (Jones, 2012). Signage communicates to all people. Its appreciation is not predicated upon an art degree, and its use is not limited to gallery spaces. The Contemporary Art Center in Cincinnati embarked upon a sign and billboard project in 2016, expressly for the reason that this was a way to make art live in places unfettered by gallery walls or preconceptions, in the context of real life, and open to interpretation by a far more diverse audience (Featherstone, 2016). "A lot of public art isn't immediately recognizable as public art," CAC co-curator Ann Thompson said of "The I-71 Project." The project erected billboard and lighted roadway signs along I-71 around Cincinnati that were text art and enigmatic messages. They played with a

medium not usually associated with "art" in the academic sense and in doing so, reached an audience that normally would not visit a formal art space.

Although my text artworks can reside in many places including galleries, they normally reside in the spaces that frame their context. Often I obtain "found words" or quotes out in the real world of Columbus and examine their underlying meaning or subtext. I may point out the inconsistencies in a phrase or statement that were glossed over and generally accepted when they first made a public appearance. Such was the case with the 2017 artwork "Remainder." This piece is text transfer-printed on an architectural remnant (Fig.7). When the former director of the Franklinton Development Association made a stunningly inaccurate statement to a national publication, the Atlantic, in 2014, claiming that gentrification in Franklinton came with no negatives and no displacement issues because the residents "are gone, they left decades ago" (Von Baldegg, 2014), my response was to pull those words out and examine them through text art, in this piece. The work itself was a prominent fixture in the front room of my home on Sullivant Avenue, in the middle of a heavily-populated section of Franklinton, which seems fitting. At the time that Jim Sweeney was quoted, he was lauded for bringing arts and maker-spaces to east Franklinton and could presumably do no wrong; he was a very popular and beloved public figure. The general public did not seem to question his statement on Franklinton's non-existent population. Did he assume that none of the 11,000 residents of Franklinton would ever read or take issue with his statement? I don't know. He has since stepped down from the position of director for undisclosed reasons (Evans, 2016).

Fig. 7 Remainder

Many of my text works address the issue of Franklinton's gentrification. When proponents of new developments like the River and Rich apartments in Franklinton claimed – as Sweeney had - that no one was being displaced – pointing out that the new build was going up in an "empty field," - I again responded with signage that re-examined that narrative. In "Gentrification Sucks" (2017) (Fig.8), my own van became a mobile artwork. I would drive and park next to the Rich Street construction site, with my vehicle bearing informational signs refuting the claim of the "empty field." That alleged empty field had been the site of over 300 units of public housing, the last of which had been demolished only 3 years prior. It was leveled to make way for more moneyed Franklinton newcomers. I was combating the collective amnesia of this past event through mobile art.

Fig. 8 Gentrification Sucks, view 1

More recently in 2019, I extracted the words of Kaufman Development's Mike Schott from a videotaped interview, again examining the way in which these words supported erasure. Kaufman Development is the company responsible for building the Gravity luxury apartments on West Broad Street in Franklinton. As quoted from the Franklinton documentary "Flooded Again," (LOOSE Films, 2017) Mike Schott describes Gravity with conviction, "If we build the right assets, the right people will come." Perhaps his was just a poor choice of words, but they seem to imply that the people who already live here in Franklinton are not the "right" people. His quote, and a large question mark, became the composition of street art for the "Right People" project (Fig. 9). These project posters went up on multiple lamp posts surrounding the Gravity apartment complex. Later, with help from a collaborating street artist (who wishes to remain

anonymous), a larger poster was wheat-pasted to an electrical box directly in front of the Gravity building.

Fig. 9 Right People, view 1

Signs are cheap, often diminutive, part of the typical urban landscape. Despite the normalization of commercially-available lettering and signage by such artists as Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer, critics still infer that such signage does not go far enough as form, that they do not stand out as monumental, significant, or artistic. I counter that this is a low-barrier artform both to me as the maker and to the general public that encounters it. This art form does not need to be monumental, cerebral, or academic. That is not its purpose. It lives in the world to which it responds, and the form reflects that context. It is responding to real issues of real people, in real time, on a human scale. The message, nonetheless, makes its impression (Fig. 10).

Fig. 10

3. Artists and Communities: Three Levels of Engagement.

Because my art does reside so much in the context of the real world, and often in the context of my own neighborhood, it is important that this paper expand on the relationships between artists and communities.

It has become common knowledge, even to people with no links to the art world, that the introduction of artist spaces into a distressed or blighted neighborhood is usually followed by investment by more moneyed individuals and businesses, eventually leading to the economic rejuvenation of that area. To the long-time residents of these predominantly low-income neighborhoods and communities of color, this is not always a welcome development. In Boyle Heights, Los Angeles, for instance, residents actively protested the introduction of galleries to their neighborhood with picket lines, tagging, vandalism and placing mock eviction notices on gallery doors. They anticipated, and therefore actively resisted, the gentrification and displacement that was known to follow the introduction of artist spaces (Auge, 2017).

So, too, the term Creative Placemaking - which once professed the power of art and artists to transform and improve neglected places, has taken on a negative connotation as it has been appropriated more and more by real estate speculators or city governments to hasten gentrification (Wilson, 2014).

In this section I will explore the various roles that artists play in marginalized communities, whether consciously or not. A higher level of consciousness of their role to potentially harm or help an existent population, one would hope, would lead to a greater desire for artist engagement with the surrounding community.

This section will also have at its focal point the neighborhood of Franklinton in Columbus, Ohio, where I live and work; but supporting examples from many other areas of the United States will also be discussed.

In the study of city and regional planning history, one will encounter a progression from the era when planners were the "experts" who exerted all authority on building, infrastructure and city policy. For better and (often) for worse, this top-down model of planning assumed that the planner knew what was best and his knowledge superseded any considerations from those affected by his decisions. Over time, particularly around the time of the civil rights movement, there grew more concern with equity planning and advocacy planning; acknowledgements that planning decisions needed to consider the affects of city policy on vulnerable populations. Eventually, more engaged planning models became the norm, so that the community members themselves can have greater access to involvement and decision-making (Gawinek-Dagargulia / Zimmermann, 2017).

Below is Sherry Arnstein's 1969 "Ladder of Engagement" (Fig. 11), which illustrates the evolution from the earlier forms of planning that did not engage the public in decision-making, to ever-increasingly engaged versions of planning that further empowered citizens.

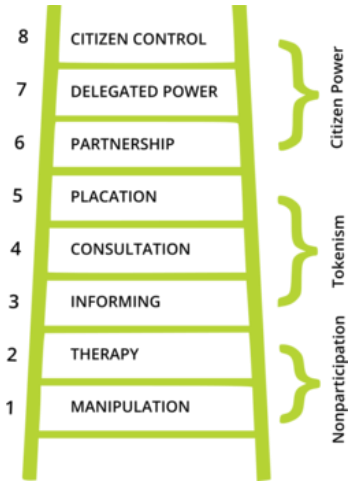

Fig. 11 *Source: M. Gawinek-Dagargulia / N. Zimmermann, "Participation," Competendo Community website, http://competendo.net/en/Participation*

Applying the same planning principles of engagement to art and artists, I have developed the following simple three-part classification system, and have found it helpful in discussing artists and gentrification with student audiences. I would characterize this as the artist ladder of engagement, with artists at the lowest level having little or no communication with a community (**complicity**), to creating work on behalf of community/gentrification concerns (**dissent**) to the upper level at involving community members themselves in the creation and execution of artwork (**engagement**).

3A. Complicity

Artists who are complicit in the gentrification of a formerly disinvested neighborhood, are those that take advantage of studios, galleries, or commissions in that area without considering the consequences of their actions when taken as a whole. Artists who are complicit either openly approve of neighborhood development while remaining silent on issues of social inequity, or claim to have no knowledge of inequitable situations. There is normally little to no familiarity or interaction between these artists and people living in the area.

Complicit artists will reap the benefits of galleries, new studios, public or private commissions in the area, without reciprocity. They typically do not live in the area, do not advocate for local politics, and don't engage in neighborhood meetings or community outreach. These artists are generally coming into a gentrifying situation from a standpoint of seeking economic and professional gain for themselves without regard to how arts activities or businesses might affect others.

Example: In the spring and summer of 2017, CASTO commissioned several Columbus artists to create murals on fabric banners that were used to screen their River and Rich construction area (Brouillette, 2017). This is a rather direct example of complicity, where artists accepted commissions from a construction company to make the company's presence in the neighborhood appear more palatable. This was, by the way, the construction erected on the former Riverside-Bradley public housing site. Some forms of complicity are subtle and lie in a gray area of the cause-and-effect of an artist's presence in the neighborhood. But these commissioned paintings were very explicit in

meaning: CASTO's intent is to profit from the construction of apartments on this erased public-housing site. The creative community put their stamp of approval on it via these banners. It can be argued that artists need to make a living and a commission is a commission. But artists, like any other entrepreneurs or employees, make the ethical choices in the course of their dealings regarding from whom they will accept money (Tianga, 2017).

Artists who do enter into business relations that are complicit in harming a marginalized neighborhood tend to skirt the issue or feign ignorance. Every once in a while, though, a complicit artist will take a bolder stance and claim victimhood. Columbus muralist Mandi Caskey found her artwork at the focal point of a 2019 Columbus Dispatch piece written on Gravity luxury apartments and gentrification called "True Grit Isn't Defined by a $1965 a month apartment" (Decker). Caskey's multi-story mural gracing the interior of Gravity was the feature image of the article. Taking exception to having her work illustrating an article on gentrification (but not – and I'm assuming here- not having taken exception to the mural commission money) she "called out" the Dispatch for using her artwork, and the Dispatch relented and chose another picture of Gravity's interior. This not being enough for the allegedly-victimized artist, she then agreed to an interview feature with Columbus Underground (Moorman, 2019) to share her distress on the association of her artwork with gentrification. Writes Moorman in the article, "the insinuated connection between (Caskey's mural and Gravity's affordability) gives public art a negative connotation." I could digress here into a whole other paper on art-washing, but I will try to stay on point.

Some artists may become aware of their complicity only after entering into an agreement with a corporation or development association. In a highly-publicized 2016 case, two artists, Brooklyn-based Ed Woodham and Samantha Hill from Chicago, were fired from an artist residency in Macon, Georgia, following claims by the two that Macon Arts Alliance was using "art-washing" to displace Mill Hill community residents (Dunlap, 2016). Woodham and Hill had been invited to a two-year paid residency by the Macon County Arts Alliance. Ostensibly, this was to be a residency in which the artists worked with community members on a creative enterprise or enterprises. But following their arrival, the artists began to feel increasingly uncomfortable, as they were not housed in the actual neighborhood of Mill Hill as intended, and spent more time speaking with press people than with community members. Their own personal interviews with the residents led them to conclude that several Mill Hill people felt excluded from the development, and saw it as a way to push low-income black residents from the neighborhood (Terrell, 2016).

In my own experience, I can say that I was not fully cognizant of the dynamics of the situation I was entering into in 2012, when I first moved to Franklinton and also rented studio space at 400 West Rich. At that time, I fully believed in the utopian ideal of the formation of an affordable creative community here. It was only after this "creative community" concept was publicly linked to the proposed development of $200,000 condos that I began to understand how my presence here was being brokered. My practice has been drastically changed and shaped since then by my growing awareness of

the underlying issues of social inequity, and the intentional injection of artists into previously disinvested neighborhoods.

3B. Resistance (Dissent)

Resistance to the threat of encroaching development can take the form of direct protest by community members, as in the case of the Hispanic community in Boyle Heights, Los Angeles. Sometimes artists align with the existing population in a neighborhood and will create "protest art" on behalf of a vulnerable community. This art of resistance can be an idea or action engendered by one artist or a collective of artists who may have lived in or grown up in the neighborhood. It can also simply be artists who have strong ties or sympathies with the community.

After Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans in 2005, many neighborhoods, especially those that were occupied by people of color, were left damaged and disinvested, without sufficient support to bring residents back or to help rebuild. Outside investors saw this as an opportunity to move in and take advantage of the void left by the exodus of residents, to acquire property cheaply and flip houses for profit. Artist Imani Brown of New Orleans' 6th Ward created a collective called "Blights Out," that challenges predatory real estate practices through art and performance. In one striking example of this collective's work, Blights Out took advantage of the timing of a mayoral election to run a "Blights Out for Mayor" campaign on local billboards. While not a genuine mayoral run, the billboards did feature text and graphics challenging the incumbent mayor's stance on "Disaster Capitalism," or allowing outside investors to

capitalize on the damage left by Hurricane Katrina, while offering no aid to the displaced, predominantly black residents. (I. Brown, 2017).

Los Angeles artist Lauren Halsey dubs herself an Afro-futurist by celebrating black culture and projecting it into a future time (Doris, 2019). Her protest art in one Los Angeles neighborhood was comprised of day-glo street signs on telephone poles asking, "What if WE owned businesses in the hood?" clearly challenging the brokering of black and brown neighborhoods to outside investors, while simultaneously picturing a more equitable answer (Fig.12).

Fig. 12 *Source: Doris, Jesse, "Artist Lauren Halsey Injects Afrofuturism Into The Los Angeles Art World," Elle, November 13, 2019*

Likewise in my own artistic practice, I have used the tools typical of commercial advertising to creatively display non-commercial messages that protest the effects of gentrification in Franklinton. One example would be the "Gentrification Sucks" mobile

signs, mentioned earlier in this paper (Fig.13). This art action was, as stated earlier, a response to some of the online dialogue surrounding the CASTO construction site, soon to be the River and Rich mixed-use development in Franklinton. It was argued that the anticipated development would not displace anyone, because it was going up in "an empty field." The flaw in that argument, besides its short-sidedness, is that in fact by 2015 over 300 public housing units at Riverside Bradley and Sunshine Terrace Senior High-Rise had already been razed so that this luxury development could be facilitated. The public housing tenants who were still living there between 2011 and 2015 had indeed already been displaced. It was not conjecture. (Price, 2009/ J. Woods, 2011).

"Gentrification Sucks" pushed back against collective amnesia and erasure, paying homage to the demolished buildings and displaced people whose existence had apparently already been forgotten by some (Fig. 13).

Fig. 13 Gentrification Sucks, view 2

The second and more recent guerilla signage project already mentioned in this paper was “Right People,” in the vicinity of the Gravity luxury apartments and again pushing back against language that erases (Fig. 14). When Mike Schott of Kaufman Development is quoted saying “If we build the right assets, the right people will come,” it prioritizes one people over another. It brings to mind the classic definition of gentrification given by Catherine Green of Arts East NY, that gentrification is “the bringing in of resources to a community, but packaging them in a way that lets existing residents know that those resources are not for them” (Tianga 2017). Who are the right people?

These artworks of dissent are meant to call into question our supposed ignorance of how the words and actions of planners, builders, and policy makers affect others, particularly vulnerable communities.

Fig. 14 Right People, view 2

3C. Engagement (and Creative Place-Keeping)

While guerilla art and protest art on behalf of local residents has its place, as equity planning similarly has a place in city policy, the direct involvement of local residents in creation and decision-making is a higher form of empowerment in art-making. Engaged art is art that centers on a community's voice, giving access and sometimes decision-making control to people other than the artist.

In 2014 Jenny Lee and Roberto Bedoya were the first people to coin the phrase "creative place-keeping," which means utilizing the arts to support and sustain existent communities (Bedoya, 2014). This is in contrast to creative placemaking, which is often practiced by key planners or financial stakeholders who may not have ties within the actual community, and may not be working in their best interests. As stated earlier, creative placemaking has taken on negative connotations as it becomes increasingly appropriated by real estate speculators or government agencies to "art-wash" or to promote gentrification. Creative place-keeping, unlike protest art, is not necessarily done in direct opposition to gentrifying agents per se, but it is a form of strengthening the identity and solidarity of the community from within, which can effectively challenge unhealthy changes or displacement of low-income and brown/black communities by outside forces.

Subversive or "protest" art, as examined in the previous section, is directed at or against gentrification. And while protest art is often necessary or desirable in situations of intervention to disrupt current power dynamics and spark discourse, it is often art that is

done on behalf of residents, and not with them. Therefore, while it champions community residents, it still does not allow them their own voice or opportunity to participate. This is why creative place-keeping is at a higher rung on the ladder of artist engagement with neighborhoods.

Creative place-keeping is socially engaged: hands-on and participatory. It is often facilitated by a lead artist or artists. But the art or function of the art itself is powered by local residents, giving them agency in shaping their collective ideas and identity. This type of socially-engaged art has two audiences: one, the residents themselves, who are creating art within and about their own community, strengthening cultural and social cohesion, And two, the people from outside of the immediate community, who are now encountering art that makes the neighborhood residents more visible and more "real." Community-engaged art both strengthens community agency, and asserts a presence to those from outside the community.

Creative place-keeping can be the most effective combatant against gentrification for both those reasons. Not only are residents finding their voice in important issues through art, but the greater metropolitan area becomes more aware of those issues, and public opinion can be swayed against "urban renewal" that is not inclusive of marginalized community members affected by change.

We can turn to the Pilsen neighborhood of Chicago for a clear example of art as place-keeping over a period of decades. Pilsen is a largely Mexican-American neighborhood. In the late 1960's, student/ muralist Mari Castillo began painting murals celebrating the Mexican-American identity of the place, which he felt at the time was

being erased. From these beginnings came a culture of mural-painting in the neighborhood that celebrates Chicano history, community and life. (Scannell, 2017).

Muralists from the neighborhood began the movement, which was then built upon by organizations and neighborhood groups like the J-Def Peace Project, and the Chicago Public Art Group, organizing collaboratively-created art by neighbors and student groups. Some of the murals are highly political, like the "Declaration of Immigration" by Sal Jiminez, and most of them exhibit the bold color and historic symbolism of Aztec and Mexican culture. It is impossible in this case to separate the art from the neighborhood's identity. So strong is the link that the National Museum of Mexican Art was founded in this area in 1982. Despite the recent encroachment of development on some of the art (Serrato, 2017), these murals send a clear message of cohesive culture to both residents and visitors.

The merging of art and neighborhood identity is also clear in Project Row Houses in Houston Texas.(Glentzer, 2014). Artist Rick Lowe and a group of other artists came together in the mid-1990's to save a city block of iconic shotgun-style houses in Houston's Third Ward from demolition. Thus Project Rowe Houses was born, a "social sculpture," as Lowe calls it, that pays homage through its shotgun-style architecture, a recognizable vernacular style in African American culture, to the life and community of the Third Ward's mostly black residents (Fig. 15). Some of the rejuvenated houses currently serve as studios for visiting artists, most of whom explore African American history and identity. But several of the salvaged houses also serve a direct social service through a Young Mothers Program. Here, single mothers may apply to live for one to two

years and are supported socially and through education programs to help their families succeed (Asgarian, 2018). Some of these mothers come to understand they themselves are part of the "art" here, as Project Row Houses invests in their transformations.

Fig. 15 *Source: Glentzer, Molly, "How Project Rowe Houses is fighting to keep Third Ward culture alive," Houston Chronicle, January 22, 2014*

On a much humbler scale but in the same spirit, I have worked at running a residency program and community-based arts organization called the Second Sight Project in Franklinton. The vision here is to bring artists and neighbors together, and to find ways to involve neighbors in participatory art that highlights community-centered narratives. Much of the art being made or commissioned in Franklinton is currently done by artists from outside the neighborhood, and not, as is equally if not more important, by or about the people in the neighborhood. Part of the Second Sight Project's vision is to correct that lack of local narrative.

In 2016, I launched the first of these community art projects called the Faces of Franklinton. During the course of the summer of 2016, my volunteers and I set up work tables both outside our project house on Sullivant Avenue and at neighborhood festivals such as the August National Night Out. We asked neighbors both young and old to paint their self-portraits on 12" x 12" panels. After amassing close to 40 of these panels, we then assembled them as a single mural on the façade of Sign House, our brick project house on Sullivant Avenue. Together, these 40 faces make up a powerful group portrait of a diverse neighborhood (Fig. 16). Faces of Franklinton not only re-energized a house in the neighborhood that had fallen into severe disrepair, but became a symbol of community identity to neighbors on the block, and to people visiting from the greater Columbus area (Fischer, 2016).

Fig. 16 Faces of Franklinton

Why is understanding this community engagement dynamic important? Introducing a strong artist or gallery presence into a disinvested or low-income community can have a powerful, transformative affect. It is up to us as the artists, planners, or designers involved to be aware that those affects can be either incredibly positive or very negative, especially for low-income residents or communities of color who already inhabit these spaces.

Artists work with a unique visual vocabulary and tool set, and often do have the ability to work cooperatively across class lines. Being mindful of the needs of different people, and working towards inclusion and amplifying the voices of those who may not be getting their stories told, is a socially just goal for artists within communities. Because public engagement is the coming together of many people and ideas, these projects can get messy. They are rarely perfect. But the effort is important.

Fig 17. #asseeeninfranklinton banners

4. As Seen in Franklinton

The "As Seen in Franklinton" community photography campaign was facilitated through the Second Sight Project from 2017 to 2018 (Fig. 17). This is a significant project that took place during my MFA trajectory, and therefore I felt it was important to include the documentation of it as part of my thesis show along with "Saving the Crew that Matters."

"As Seen in Franklinton" encouraged the sharing of photography generated by Franklinton neighbors - photographs that helped document Franklinton's innate identity. The project lived both in the ether world of social media and in the real world of neighborhood streets. It began with a photographer colleague of mine, Will Arnold, who in 2017 was a Second Sight resident artist. He was shooting a street art photography series in Franklinton during his residency. Arnold would tag the photos he uploaded to Instagram with the hashtag #asseeninfranklinton.

One day in spring 2017, Will said he wanted me to see something. When he reviewed all the photos using the hashtag #asseeninfranklin on Instagram, under " recent" photos, his new posts all appeared. But under the heading "top posts," the photos all depicted glamorous wedding receptions, fancy cocktails, and gourmet dinner plates – in other words, the prevalent use of this hashtag was to market a high-end dining establishment in east Franklinton. The contrast between Arnold's work and the other photos was astonishingly stark, and probably the most fitting illustration of the economic divide between Franklinton's current residents and the new gentrifying demographic.

Months later, I struck on the idea of using this observation to launch a community-based social media project, encouraging more people in Franklinton to start documenting their neighborhood experience on Instagram using the #asseeninfranklinton hashtag. The project's aim was to counter the glamorous posts with other photos, ones with which people living in the neighborhood could genuinely identify. The campaign began with social media invitations to spread the word, followed by a photo booth at the 2017 Franklinton National Night Out community festival, where my volunteers and I passed out cards and information on the project to at least 200 people (Figs.18-20).

The project slowly caught on. Neighbors who got involved began to post photos of abandoned houses as well as beautiful street scenes, volunteers cleaning up litter and friends protesting gentrification. These photos captured the spirit of the neighborhood in all its positive and negative variations, giving a truer version of #asseeninfranklinton.

Fig. 18 #asseeninfranklinton launch

Fig 19 #asseeninfranklinton launch

Fig. 20 #asseeninfranklinton launch

After a period of about 4 months, I curated about 50 different Instagram posts of the most representative images of our neighborhood, and I invited people in Franklinton to vote for their favorite images - the ones they identified with the most. Voting took place through meetings with young people at local schools and churches, through an in-person voting event at Second Sight Project, and through online polling on a neighborhood social media group. Ten of the most popular images were then printed into large 4' x 4' vinyl banners, and installed publicly around the neighborhood.

For a span of several months in 2018, this project managed to "hijack" the contested hashtag. The majority of "top" Instagram posts under #asseeninfranklinton were now community-generated photos. But even more long-lasting was the public art; the all-weather banners remained up for almost 2 years, a source of pride and interest both to the photographers and to their neighbors. Many of the banner photos were taken by people in the neighborhood who do not identify themselves as artists; but for this project, the power of their art was recognized; and it helped define a neighborhood.

5. "Saving the Crew that Matters" and "As Seen in Franklinton:" Why these projects are representative of my overall practice.

Although I create a myriad of artworks in many forms of media, some more personal than others, some devoid of any participatory aspect, I felt it was important for the purposes of my thesis study to emphasize the engaged processes that embody both dissent and collaboration in my work.

Both “Saving the Crew that Matters” and “As Seen in Franklinton” were ideas that generated between 2017 and 2019 during the duration of my MFA candidacy, and generated in response to unequal power dynamics and the words and phrases used to sell or glamorize that inequity. Both of these projects subverted a marketing or campaign phrase, pointing those self-same phrases to a whole other issue and making a Columbus audience step back and reconsider the original narrative and its underlying intent. Text and the examination of text were integral to these works. Both of these works asked for input from people whose voices are not given adequate consideration in planning and policy – if, that is, we are aspiring to an equitable Columbus. In “As Seen in Franklinton,” I created the premise for the project, and then the reigns were given over to whoever decided to participate. People who had little to no connection with government or corporate power were allowed to formulate their own neighborhood definition - through photography, through the Instagram platform, and through participation in the public art selection process.

In “Saving the Crew that Matters,” again, the premise is created by me, but the content of the project is generated by those who choose to participate. There are different levels of participation in this project. Nominal participation could happen through filling out postcards to be mailed to the mayor and city council members. A more involved person may choose to fill out a “Save this Crew” sign and post it online, share it with gallery audiences, or display it publicly.

Those persons wanting to be involved in a deeper level took part in the Human Library, which is the live, “performative” aspect of the project. After a few trials

and errors of seeking out the ways in which people wished to engage in this campaign, I found that the Human Library was the concept people found most intriguing. Five people offered to lead short discussions on the topics of the Crew Stadium funding controversy and school funding. "Users" of the library get an opportunity to gather live, first-person data and opinions, and can ask questions of the library humans. What does Crew stadium funding look like to a key leader in African American arts and culture? To a mother of four children in Columbus city schools? To a retired construction worker running for a council seat against established incumbents? This artwork's intent is to elevate the voices that are not being heard by city council, and are not part of the status quo. Although the Human Library is open to people who actually want to argue for tax dollar being spent on sports arenas, it is far more important to my practice that we hear from people representing the unheard side of the power dynamic. The Human Library especially gives the reigns of the artwork to participants other than myself as the artist, creating space and time for the work to unfold. I am especially gratified that this aspect of the project helps inform visitors to the art about the nature of these civic conflicts from a viewpoint other than my own.

Text and words. Narratives and power dynamics. Dissent and engagement. These are the descriptions that characterize my two thesis projects.

6. Politics in Art, Social Practice in Advocacy – Lowering the Barriers

Some of the existential questions surrounding my practice are: why bother? Why make art about social justice? Am I screaming into a void? Does anything an artist creates make any real difference in the world?

The answer, to some degree, is that it makes a difference to me. That to deliberately ignore what is happening in my world is dishonest, to me. I cannot unsee what I have already seen. And my art is, inevitably, a response to what I see.

Peter Rodis once questioned singer Nina Simone's involvement in politics, saying to her, "I don't think that an artist should be involved in these kinds of things."

Her response in 1971 still resonates with me today. "An artist's duty, as far as I'm concerned, is to reflect the times. And that is true of painters, sculptors, poets, musicians… As far as I'm concerned it's their choice. But I choose to reflect the times and the situations in which I find myself. That, to me, is my duty. And at this crucial time in our lives, when everything is so desperate, when every day is a matter of survival, I don't think we can help but be involved. Young people, black and white, know this, that why they're so involved in politics. We will shape and mold this country or it will not be molded and shaped at all anymore. So I don't think you have a choice. How can you be an artist and NOT reflect the times? That to me is the definition of an artist." (Rodis, 1969)

Art is never divorced from the context in which it is made. Even art that claims to be purely formal and divorced from worldly concerns, can only be so because of the political circumstances or privilege of the artist. And this in itself is a political statement.

In September 2018, filmmaker/activist Josh Fox brought his one-man performance, "The Truth has Changed" to Wexner Center audiences on the OSU campus. "I would argue that art is always political." he said in an interview with Erica Thompson, Columbus Alive co-editor (September 12, 2018). "To anesthetize your work is, in fact, a political statement. And in this day and age, that means you're affirming the status quo. ... And so much of what we see in cinema and on stage today is just that. It's window dressing on the tyranny."

The importance of art contextualized by life is why 1) social practice needs to be more widely embraced in art and academia. 2) traditional aesthetic hierarchies need to be discarded in favor of the entry of diverse representation in art-making. Rather than being merely "window dressing,"- focusing on formal qualities of art or technical proficiency in craft - we need to prioritize social interaction, community impact, and political relevance. This would have to involve a willingness on the part of academics to re-think the rubrics with which they evaluate art.

6A. Acknowledging and Evaluating Social Practice

"We continue to talk about 'new forms' because the new has been the fertilizing fetish of the avant-garde since it detached itself from the infantry. But it may be that these new forms are only to be found buried in social energies not yet recognized as art." —Lucy R. Lippard (1984)

(Sholette et al., 2018)

Deborah Fisher, Executive Director of A Blade of Grass, has identified several possible measures in the effectiveness or success of a social practice artwork: participation is prioritized over finished product, new social relationships are formed or strengthened, overt recognition of marginalized stories, new roles assumed by key players or partners, subtle shifts in power, and involvement of the next circle of artists or community partners who can spark subsequent engagements (Fisher, 2012).

The value of social practice is that it prioritizes "other" voices. In a classroom setting, the "expertise" is not the professor's tenure but the lived experience of everyone in the room (Bass, 2018).

An example of an evaluation strategy in this setting is to look at three factors: collaboration, participation, and reflection (Lennon et al, 2018). When reviewing a social practice work academically, how successfully did the work engage a target group and encourage collaboration? What was an individual's level of involvement or participation in the project? And in student reflection on the project, what successes or opportunities for growth were indicated? Note that social practice art may sometimes indeed involve the making of physical artworks, but the rubric does not focus on those physical aspects. Academics will need to make way for these new rubrics in order to fully educate the next generation of artists on how to have a measurable impact on the world in which they live.

6B. The Politics ARE the Aesthetics; Who Gets to Participate?

Academic art standards traditionally demand and value rarification: technically complex procedures, expensive materials, high-end equipment, monumental size. The

more commodified, the more expensive/exclusive, and the more removed from physical and intellectual access by the "masses," the better. This aesthetic hierarchy is problematic in that it inherently excludes people on the bottom of the socio-economic scale from entry into the "art world." And those at the bottom of the socio-economic scale are also disproportionately black, brown, indigenous and oppressed peoples because of the very nature of structural oppression. The act of aesthetic exclusion in academia is, therefore, inherently enforcing a racial and economic status quo (Steyerl, 2009) and working in direct opposition to diversity. Academia is silencing the artistic voices of the marginalized.

So in answer to the question, again, of whether art has the power to make any impact on real-world issues: the power of art to exact any meaningful impact towards social justice in this world is entirely dependent on WHO GETS TO PARTICIPATE, in the viewing of art, in the making of art, in the evaluation of art, and in the very direction of the art world.

7. Conclusions: Neighborhoods and Cities, and How They are Visually Shaped

"There's this kind of upheaval that's happening, and that's happening across the board; and I think that one of the great places to look for the ways in which we manage it are through the visual arts.

– Carrie Mae Weems

(Reddington, 2018)

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In 1961, famed author of "Death and Life of Great American Cities," Jane Jacobs, was fighting alongside her neighbors to save the West Village from the wrecking ball of Urban Renewal. These were citizens with very few resources except their own persistence. They had already fought and won against Robert Moses cutting an expressway straight through their neighborhood and decimating it. And they were fighting once more against slum designation by city officials. West Village citizens showed up to the protest wearing cheap eyeglasses with white x's taped across them (Fig. 19), signifying the xed-out windows of buildings that city hall intended to condemn and demolish. This humble visual made it to all the AP news outlets on March 27, 1961 (Alexiou, 2006).

Fig. 21 *Source: Gratz, R.B., How New York is Zoning Out the Human Scale City, NY Review Daily, Dec 30, 2019. Link: https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2019/12/30/how-new-york-is-zoning-out-the-human-scale-city/*

Decolonize this Place in Brooklyn was named one of the top 100 influential artists of 2019 (K.Brown, 2019). This artist collective was largely responsible for ousting Warren Kanders from the board of the Whitney and for striking fear into the hearts of moneyed individuals with ethically questionable businesses who try to validate their social status through art board positions. Decolonize This Place prints out stickers with their logo on it; these are ordinary paper stickers, no more than more than 2" x 3" in size. Yet these stickers have become emblematic, through their use on social media, of rebellion against gentrification, colonial violence, police brutality, and corrupt powers. (Decolonize This Place, 2019). The scale of this work cannot be measured in square

inches, but in social impact. The value of the work again cannot be measured by aesthetic hierarchies in color and font choices, but in social impact.

Fig 22 *Source: Decolonize This Place, Instagram, 2019*

These are just two examples of the ways in which popular thought, and indeed, civic leadership and policy, are swayed by visual culture. It is possible for art to couple with social justice causes, for visual strategies to become recognizable emblems for political movements and, in this way, to move those causes into the mainstream of public consciousness.

But we cannot build populist movements through art or empower ordinary people to make their voices heard by remaining narrow in our definitions of art; or by demanding big budgets and technical perfection, the latest camera, the highest resolution, the finest printing (Steyerl, 2009). These are the demands of an oppressive power dynamic that discourages expression in those without financial and technical resources; leaving the "power" of art in the hands of those already holding power, maintaining the

status quo. If the art remains in the hands of only moneyed individuals and corporations, then so does control over the message of the art. And if the art and academic worlds are serious about diversity and inclusion, it needs to end. We have much to learn from the field of social practice, where the goal and the rubric is inclusion.

As in academia, so in our own neighborhoods and our cities. When we allow the imperfect, the home-spun, the grass-roots art to enter the community landscape, we allow people to see themselves as empowered (Johnson, 2017). This is where process needs to be valued over product. Corporate art or highly-finished artwork, such as the mural on the Broad Street wall of Gravity made by international muralist Kobra (Fig. 23), invite only admiration and consumerism; a passive consumption of art. But when people see their neighbors making art on boarded-up windows with leftover paint, when they pass Cecily King's bedsheet banners, spray-painted with inspirational messages and hanging on Columbus highway overpasses (Fig 24); we the viewers become aware of ourselves as potential artists. The barrier has been lowered. The onus is then on the People to become active creators. (Johnson, 2017)

Fig 23 *Source: Peter Sutton, Trover, 2019*

Fig. 24 *Source: Cecily King, Instagram, 2020*

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Does anything we do as artists, make a difference and bring us closer to social equity and justice? We can never gauge numerically the impact of a singular artwork, yet visual culture invariably wields a certain amount of power in shaping public opinion. As artists in academia, neighborhoods, and organizations, we have to be aware of our power. Not just in our individual visual practices but in the small choices we make daily to empower others, and to move the needle closer to justice. As Joseph Bueys theorized (Tate, 2019), life itself is social sculpture. We have the power to shape it. And this is our finest creative contribution.

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