

The Artist as Citizen... Now More Than Ever

november 2016

by john ros

New York City, NY, US

Versions of this piece have appeared on galleryELL.com and Sluice__ Magazine

Where artists create workspaces depends on several variables: affordability, community, proximity. All worthwhile questions when deciding where to create a sustainable and nurturing creative-space. Some choose to work from home for ease, value or necessity. Others travel great distances because they have found a hub of vitality or more likely, cheap rent. The daunting task of finding a suitable studio often pervades our thoughts, as it helps create our identity to ourselves, and perhaps more importantly, makes more tangible the professional artistic identity we wish to portray to others. I say time and time again to my students, "A studio is about time and space. It is wherever you happen to make time for yourself. If you devote 4 hours a week to your bathroom to your studio practice, then it is your studio. Furthermore, you should never feel embarrassed, or feel the need to apologize for this fact, for any space where you dedicate time to your practice is your studio."

Now that you have space, what is next? Besides the obvious tasks of creating a suitable schedule, networking with artists and industry professionals, and having fun exploring in your space, a less obvious action may be getting to know our local neighborhood. It is hard to sometimes not feel as though we are in a bubble, making work in the studio and moving too and from various different demands of life. But one of the most important aspects of being an artist is that we must get out of our studios and get to know our communities. We must also have discussions with people from all walks of life. We must be able to discuss visual culture and our participation in it, as well as the needs all members of the community with the average community member, the non-art-goer. Though conversation with the like-minded, art-speak types is encouraging, the continued back-patting and propping-up will only continue to separate our voices, as if encouraging the refinement of a foreign language only available to those well-off, or worthy. We do this without knowing, we also neuter our own language, rendering it irrelevant and unnecessary.

What is important here is realizing, though difficult, that we do not exist in our little bubbles, from the individual studio to the New York City or London; from a graduating class to an art organization. We are facing tough questions in our communities today, everything from sustainable incomes and our economies to human rights, the environment, perpetual war, inequality, et al. The only way we are going to develop new ways of dealing with the constant demand of democracy is to come together, to forge new relationships with our fellow citizens, in order to create a lasting and sustainable future for all.

Public Art Work, But for Whom?



Tilting listlessly on the Q train over the Manhattan Bridge, the newly developed (and developing) skyline of Brooklyn seems to encroach upon the magnificent metal structure built more than a century ago. This structure, like its counterpart to the south, says Brooklyn and Manhattan like no other can.

The drastically changing landscape of Brooklyn is in part due to the development of Two Trees Development, LLC. Their website boasts, "Fueled by a frothy economy and unrelenting demand, developers hit the gas on residential projects over the past 18 months. Overall, Brooklyn development topped 41.6 million square feet ... spanning nearly 600 projects and 45,359 apartments..."

A DUMBO one-bedroom loft from Two Trees is a steal at their 65 Washington location which goes for a mere \$3,225, compared to their 60 Water location where a slightly smaller studio lists for \$3,336. The only thing frothy here is the mouths of these investors, offering out-of-reach housing for most Brooklynites. Worse, these actions are displacing them farther and farther in-borough or out-of-borough because so many cannot compete with the so-called rising market values. Granted these prices may not be all that shocking for the DUMBO area, but with recent expansion throughout Brooklyn and Queens, where does it stop? And when did it begin?

It seems fitting that Two Trees commissioned the new Deborah Kass sculpture in Brooklyn Bridge Park. OY/YO measures 8 x 17 x 5 ft., a reappropriated piece from a much smaller scale sculptural edition from 2011 bearing the same name. The seeming gesture of largess, in the shadows of the aforementioned East River crossings, competes with the sculpture's luxury surrounds. The soft "review" by The New York Times fails to get into the meat of the piece; the article's overly obvious stance adds to the constant dilemma of "plop art" with little more purpose than giving the elite lurking in the towers above something to discuss. If we regurgitate the same press release over and over, perhaps we too will believe. The more important questions are being ignored. "Do we really need more giant, expensive, out-of-reach sculpture?" If the answer is yes, "Who is it serving?"

The Two Trees website attempts to compare OY/YO to familiar road signs on the Williamsburg Bridge and BQE, "Leaving Brooklyn: Oy Vey!" and "Leaving Brooklyn: Fuhgeddaboudit" respectively, stating, "OY/YO references Brooklyn's ethnic communities with whimsy and warmth."

The problem is, the very ethnic communities they are talking about are being displaced by their market-driven actions. Soon all that will remain are these inane tokens — sad gestures, or worse, slaps-in-the-face, to the many who build these neighborhoods, who are being forced out because of the slash-and-burn strategies of such vultures.

Timing seems ever important here. If it was twenty years ago, with DUMBO's waxing art prominence beating the walls of the now-defunct artists' lofts, there might be good reason for OY/YO's inclusive message to be reverberated throughout an active community. Had that community and our elected representatives taken care to maintain a cultural livelihood, while also encouraging progress for all, perhaps this would have a much different effect. But with the current gentrifying trends, seemingly unavoidable, as we shrug our shoulders in inevitable defeat, has this sculpture and this park already become a token of our loss?

These questions come at another fitting crossroads, the Real Estate Summit hosted by the Brooklyn Museum. Ben Davis of ArtNet News put it best:

"On November 17, people will be protesting outside the Brooklyn Museum. ... That's the day that the museum will be playing host to the all-day Brooklyn Real Estate Summit, where, for \$500 a ticket, over 800 developers will converge to hobnob and plan new ways to jack up your rent. ... The agenda advertises that it will help you learn how 'to find overlooked neighborhoods to invest in,' teach you, 'what you need to know about the latest batch of newcomers'; and provide tips on attracting sources of 'international and institutional capital' to fuel the gentrification machine."

17 November 2015 is the date. Starting @ 7.30am, there is a protest organized by the Brooklyn Anti-Gentrification Network to fight back against the mouth-frothing investors looking to take over your neighborhood. We deserve better as artists, but more importantly we all deserve better as citizens. If we do not come together to stand up against this continuous greed, there will be nothing left for all the New Yorkers that do not fit into these slick, smooth-boxed towers built in the name of progress. This is not progress. This is blatant disregard. All we will have left to ourselves is a bunch of forgotten, meaningless tokens, allotted to us by the elites, happy with themselves for "supporting culture," as the native community members, artists and poor all fight among each other for the crumbs the wealthy have thrown out of their multiplying glass towers.

A Closer Look: From the Point-of-View of a Protestor.



Cities have always changed. Immigrants move in and become active members of a community — in part, because there is opportunity, and in part, to assimilate into their new cultural surroundings — their new home. These actions in the past happened more naturally and contributed to lively and changing neighborhoods throughout the city. These changes were largely controlled by the local community. Landlords and homeowners lived locally, and community leaders and neighbors alike cared for each other and the well-being of their neighborhood.

Today's practice of development and displacement is something entirely different and is happening at an accelerated rate with overseas investors and non-local real estate speculators taking advantage of government loopholes, lax rules, and little to no oversight. These changes are not organic, they are a calculated and deliberate assault destroying the foundations of neighborhoods and the sanctity of life for vulnerable and marginalized communities. They take our rich and vibrant neighborhoods and rather than investing in them responsibly, with community

involvement; they create cultural dead zones, taking advantage of the desperate for the benefit of the few. In their wake, communities become broken, divided, displaced, and completely turned upside down, cloaked in the facade of revitalization and promise of a new day.

"[Gentrification] was first coined in 1964 by Marxist planner sociologist Ruth Glass, for whom the rescue of Notting Hill and Islington streets by 'pioneering' London bohemians with the cash to do up attractive old houses that banks wouldn't lend on went hand-in-hand with the displacement of longstanding, blue-collar communities who could no longer afford to live there. . . . By 1988, rioters in New York's Tompkins Square Park were carrying placards reading 'Gentrification is class war.'" (Robert Bevan, *The Guardian*)

"Changing neighborhoods may be a class issue, but in America, it also means it's a race one." (Gillian White, *The Atlantic*)

Today, in New York City, the term has broadly come to define white people displacing overwhelmingly black communities. Though this definition is fairly accurate on face value, the overly simplistic explanation to the much more complex problem is trite and does not begin to deal with the multitude of issues at play.

New renters displacing the most recent native communities are scapegoated. They are the face of the faceless developers and elected officials reaping the benefits of such complicated and deep-rooted problems. This is not to whitewash the role of the newcomer tenant to the community. Affordable neighborhoods are desirable to many who simply cannot afford the rising rents that surround them. Some new tenants move into their new neighborhood with little to no respect of the historical or current political structures that lie within. Then again, some are active and concerned members that make up the diverse structure of communities that represent so much of New York City. Polar opposites on the spectrum fill these newly vacant spaces. Should we fault all newcomers who come in the true name of community involvement?

We are all the face of gentrification — the overprivileged newcomers, not-so privileged newcomers, and the native middle-class and poor community members. Those in power divide us so that their deals can be had behind closed doors, land-grabbed, and in five or ten years, we will all be none the wiser and we will all have no place to live or shop.

The use of the word gentrification also does not enter into the discussion of increasing income inequality, or why the topic is being ignored in general. Gentrification often becomes a means to an end. We see it as unstoppable as either the victim or the culprit. But the issues are so much broader than that. We must face these issues head-on and bring to light all of the harder, messier conversations and actions. We must not fall into the power elites' hands, fighting among each other, dealing with symptoms as opposed to causes and solutions. We must fight for a more equal playing field for all. This is not utopian, this is democratic.

The easiest thing to do is to pretend that all of this doesn't affect you. Whoever we are and wherever we live, we have a role to play. We have to start by playing a more active role in our own local communities. Get to know our neighbors, have discussions, especially with people with whom we disagree. We must accept that we will never fully understand where a person comes from, what they have been through, and how those sum experiences determine their standing. We also have to be careful not to push our own experiences and expectations on each other. This goes for prejudging someone based on their external or internal, stereotypical characteristics. Empathy and compassion for one another will allow us to find strength in our differences and work together as one community built by the diversity and individuality of all of its citizens. Momentum must come in the form of solidarity.

If we are going to get anything done we have to realize a few things:

01. Gentrification is not inevitable.

People power comes in numbers. We must be aware. We must show up.

02. We must fight this as a united front.

We all work in different ways and have different strengths and weaknesses. Rather than allow this to work against us, we must work together. We must remember that at the end of the day, we have to want the same thing: Strong communities that can support every member. How we get there and who gets the credit will be immaterial in the end.

03. Civic action will look different for every neighborhood.

Communities must decide for themselves how to move forward. This is not a one-size-fits-all struggle; however, we can learn from each other and work together. There is obviously strength in numbers.

04. Our global problems must and will be solved locally first.

Join a community group. Attend Community Board and City Council meetings. Write your City Council member, your New York Assembly and Senate representatives, as well as your federal representatives. Have your voice heard. You are not only speaking for yourself, but for your community members that cannot be in attendance, or whose voices have been marginalized. We must also be present and hold our elected officials to the highest standard. Ralph Nader said recently that we should ask those seeking elected office, "Since the people are sovereign under our Constitution, how do you specifically propose to restore power to the people in their various roles as voters, taxpayers, workers and consumers?". We must hold all of our elected officials accountable.

The accelerated rate at which we receive seemingly infinite information is not only making it impossible to keep up, it is creating a cacophony of visual, written and audible noise that becomes indecipherable. It often seems our only hope is to retreat into the growing digital sanctuaries of distraction that have been so carefully curated for us. The constant clamoring of our devices gives us the illusion of being more connected, when in reality, it only keeps us distracted. A recent study by PNAS found that algorithms associated with News Feeds such as Facebook actually makes us more narrow readers of information as it gives us news that we find favorable. Decisions are more regularly made for us and we welcome this in our seemingly more complicated lives. The speed of technology along with the insatiable corporate takeover of our globe is interconnected in a way that is destroying the foundations of neighborhoods and the sanctity of life for the vulnerable: those deemed expendable.

So what can we do to start to change things? I have spoken before about ways of supporting the Occupy Movement. These actions pertain to being an active member of our community and seeking less comfort in seemingly unavoidable corporate mechanisms. BAN also has a great list of demands pertaining directly to displacement that you should become familiar with. To these demands, I would add suspending the EB-5 Visa Program in New York City, which, in theory, works well in depressed cities. Its continued use is fueling the hyper-development by giving

developers easy access to low-interest loans with no oversight and should no longer be allowed in this city.

American capitalism and the global corporate expansion is destroying our democracy (along with our environment). As long as we still live in a democratic society we must act as democratic citizens and be active and passionate about the policies that are being made that affect us every day. Failure to do so will not only destroy our democratic system but will ensure our continued slip into the oligarchic global corporate capitalistic culture. Make no mistake, corporations do not only have more clout than people (from actions such as Citizens United); unlike people, they are unbound by a nation-state, increasingly so if the TPP passes. They have no loyalty except to unfettered capitalism, which has become their religion and form of government.

The answers ahead will be difficult, most certainly because we cannot rely on anything that has worked in the past. This is a new time that will require new solutions. Our local communities are where the answers lie. They will be unique to each community and will require the involvement of all. We can come together as a binding force, but we must take that energy to our own communities and make them work for us specifically. Together, not only can we fight it, we can support each other and bring back our local vitality – the essence that has always made New York City, New York City.

What Else Can I Do?

In light of the fifth year of the Occupy Movement, I wanted to remind everyone of the role we play everyday. These ideas, though specific, run through the general idea of everyday protest. We make a difference in the decisions we make. Below are practical ways to support and sustain the Occupy Movement.

These are not all easy and they are certainly not necessarily always doable, but we have to remember that every little bit adds up. Tolerance, education and community support will continue to allow the movement to thrive. There is much to discuss and many new ideas that we need to come up with. Be fair to yourself and also understand that it is OK to not have the answer to something. It is also OK to change your mind. We must come together in support. Remember, everything we do is political. Question everything and be aware!



This is a starting point...

01. Purchase only what you need. We are urged to buy more to save more. Many times if we just did with what we actually needed we would spend less. Buy less, save more, waste less.

There are those that would say this is a very over-privileged way of viewing the situation. If you accept the current system as it is, I might agree with you. We have to turn everything on its head and start fresh. We have to come up with new solutions and begin to change the culture of celebrity and over-abundance that is propagated on every corner we turn and on every screen in front of us.

02a. Shop at locally owned businesses. Consider alternatives to big-box, corporate mega-stores, or mega online retailers. Small local business owners will NEVER be able to compete with large corporate buying power. Spending a little more on a product at a local store puts more money directly into your local community.

Again, this is difficult when there are few options for some of us, especially when we are over-worked and under-paid. We must begin to change our culture of consumption and start to discuss alternatives of fulfillment, success and need that exist — for all of us, not just the few. We also must understand how businesses and corporations work — do they support their employees?, pay their fair share in taxes?, etc.

02b. You vote every day with every dollar you spend. Be a wise consumer. Do research. Learn about a company's practices, worker-relations and political leaning. Seek out ethical companies that invest in their employees and promote sustainable environmental practices. Make sure your hard-earned money is going to companies that support your values.

03. Stay informed. Resource multiple and various news sources and be sure you are learning the whole story. The more you know about something the more able you are to make your own opinion about it. Be sure to resource factual, unbiased information. Too much of our "news" is emotion-based, targeted sound-bites; press-releases cloaked as news; and corporate-touting propaganda meant to coerce the public into abiding citizenry.

Talk to people that disagree with you and have substantive discussions about life and the issues that are affecting your community. Wedge issues are placed in the ether of discourse as a way to divide. We are not all going to agree, nor should we. We must come together in acceptance of our differences as opposed to living in fear of them.

04. Vote, especially in local elections. Your local, city and state governments control most of the policy that affects you everyday. Contact your state senators and legislators and local elected and appointed officials. Let them know what is important to you and your community.

05. Stay connected with your local happenings. Attend city hall meetings and community advisory committee hearings. An active community is an informed community.

06. Use open-source and non-proprietary software.

07. Support the creative commons and share your knowledge. It is also OK to consider other financial structures and options. Just because there is no viable alternative to capitalism being discussed does not mean one does not exist.
08. Avoid corporate banks. Bank at your community savings bank or credit union. These banks invest directly into your community and are often owned by community members who want to see it thrive.
09. Avoid debt. Giant banks and the corporate credit companies rely on the over-spending of the population. Avoid paying interest and fees to these companies.
10. Take action, follow the movement, show support, spread the word, start a movement of your own — be a community leader.

Siren Call.

Being an artist is about so much more than being a maker-of-things. Even when it comes to the vocation of being an artist, ideas do not fall simply in line. It is a messy and personal journey. Artists must remember that they are the voice for the voiceless. We are the leaders of culture. We are the makers of trends, not the followers of them. We must strive to make art accessible to all, especially the weak and under-privileged. We must be critical thinkers beyond our studios and invite inclusive discussion about civic action through art. We must compel other artists to question how art is exhibited and how it can be disseminated for the benefit of all. We are a growing, evolving entity and look to each other and our communities to challenge our ideas.

We are artists, but we are citizens first. We must take the power we have and apply it every aspect of every day. We must speak for justice in our search for truth.

note: all photos courtesy the author; except: Michael Fleshman 99%, 2011