

DAILYSERVING

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#Hashtags: Divide//Conquer: Artists Confront the Gentrification of Urban Space

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#gentrification #displacement #race #class #technology #industry #neo-colonialism

Any conversation among artists these days is bound to turn to the question of gentrification—the process of urban renewal by private developers that ultimately displaces poor residents in favor of the upwardly mobile. Modernism in art has always accompanied displacement of poor citizens from city centers, from the time of the Impressionists when Georges-Eugène Haussmann refashioned Paris, to the remaking of Manhattan as a banker's playground under committed arts philanthropist Michael Bloomberg. As the present-day wealth gap spreads and assets are increasingly concentrated in the hands of the wealthiest Americans, artists and activists find themselves on the front lines of a battle to preserve the characteristics of ethnic and bohemian neighborhoods nationwide from the homogenizing forces of corporate culture.

Activists engaged in political struggles defined along economic, racial, and sociological lines have an established part to play in defending against this onslaught, and a clear justification for their involvement in protest actions and legal challenges. Artists, on the other hand, have a more ambivalent relationship to these trends. They are often implicated as both the perpetrators and the victims of gentrification. Many believe that their role is not to speak out about social issues, but to communicate self-expression. They are experts in neither legal nor civic arenas. Given these truths, how and why should artists engage in the fight to save urban communities from eviction and displacement?



Mail Order Brides/M.O.B. (Jenifer Wofford, Reanne Estrada, Eliza Barrios). Manananggoogle, 2013. Multimedia installation including website and photographs. Commissioned by the San Jose Museum of Art with support from The James Irvine Foundation and MetLife Foundation.

To understand why artists are compelled to participate in these struggles, first consider how gentrification occurs. An area subject to prolonged neglect is often the only affordable location for recent immigrants, the working poor, and other marginalized groups to reside. Their presence fosters further civic neglect, as these are groups with minimal political clout who remain invisible to many politicians and business leaders. Many artists of note have emerged from within these ostracized communities, informed by their vernacular traditions, and inspired to create positive images and messages to counter the symptoms of neglect. In recent history, these have included founders of graffiti art, mural art, performance art, and interventionist art movements that have transformed mainstream art discourse. Other artists move into these areas because they too have limited means, and find not only cheap rents but a sense of safety in community to guard against the hardships of urban poverty. Eventually, the energizing force of artistic creation helps to revive these atrophied regions despite the lack of civic or capital investment, at which point developers take notice and begin to snatch up the remaining inexpensive or abandoned properties. Those newly renovated properties are marketed to the professional class with the vibrant local culture as a major selling point. As upscale residents move in, the creators whose works helped create interest in these areas often find themselves priced out along with their less affluent neighbors.

Despite their involvement in all aspects of this process, artists are generally on the side of the displaced in the gentrification debate. This has been the case in San Francisco, where the long-standing creative denizens of the Mission District are particularly vocal opponents of urban development in its current form. Recently the impending eviction of artists René Yañez and Yolanda Lopez has made headlines, prompting artists around the Bay Area to rally for these two doyens of the Chicano Movement. In an open letter to Yañez distributed via social media networks, internationally-recognized performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña used his considerable influence to draw broader attention to the plight of Latino residents in the Mission and around San Francisco who have of late been subjected to unprecedented numbers of Ellis Act evictions. Outrage is high among the city's established and visible creators, as articulated by iconic Bay Area author Rebecca Solnit. Nonetheless, the rhetoric coming from developers is that the incoming affluent types are in fact themselves "creative" workers who will contribute to, rather than detract from, the vitality of these remade neighborhoods. The redefinition of "creativity" along corporate lines contributes to the vast cultural divide between the Bay Area's haves and have-nots.



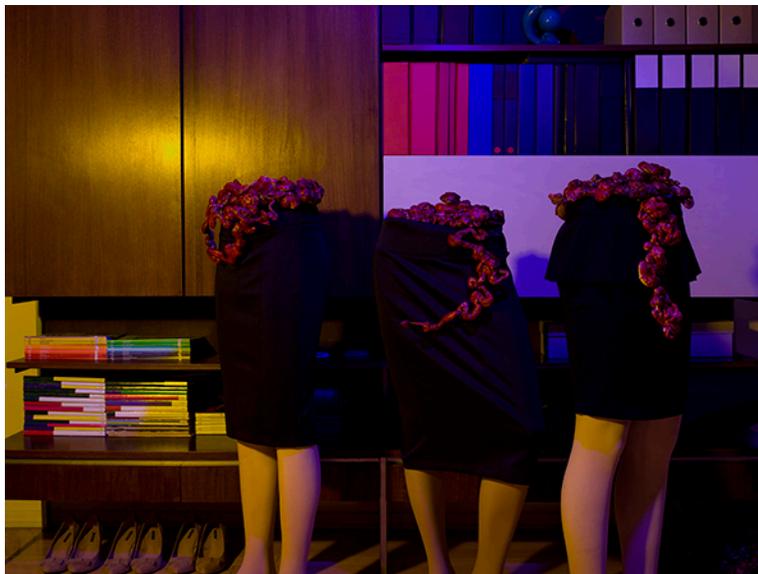
Mail Order Brides/M.O.B. (Jenifer Wofford, Reanne Estrada, Eliza Barrios). Mananangoogle, 2013. Multimedia installation including website and photographs. Commissioned by the San Jose Museum of Art with support from The James Irvine Foundation and MetLife Foundation.

As the booming tech industry displaces scores of longtime residents, it is tempting to direct ire at the corporations who attract and generate all of this new money. Filipina performance art collective Mail Order Brides/M.O.B. have satirized the winner-take-all mentality of Silicon Valley with *Mananangoogle*, a work commissioned by the San

S O U T H E R N E X P O S U R E

Jose Museum of Art in which the three portray high-powered female executives in the mode of Sheryl Sandberg and Marissa Mayer. “J. Baby Wofford,” “E. Neneng Barrios,” and “R. Immaculata Estrada” performed *Divide//Conquer: The Manananggoogle Onboarding Experience* as part of *The Long Conversation*, an exhibition commemorating long-standing alternative art space Southern Exposure’s impending 39th anniversary. This occasion is made more monumental by the truth of how few spaces founded in that germinating moment of the 1970s are still around and fiscally sustainable. Incorporating found video, text, live performance, and social intervention, M.O.B. applies a mode of cannibalistic appropriation derived from Latin American Modernist precedents to a contemporary milieu in which the primitive and the futuristic are both intertwined and interchangeable.

M.O.B.’s characters are funhouse distortions who give the lie to common multinational rhetoric in which all of the world’s problems are anticipated to be solved by the Westernization and capitalization of women and people of color. The slogan, “Divide Conquer,” applies equally to the neo-colonial aspirations of American tech multinationals as to the *manananggal* herself, a Filipino folk demon that splits her top half from her human bottom to manifest as a Harpy-like vampire. Wofford, Barrios, and Estrada comically marry the mythos of the *manananggal* with the team-building management rhetoric of corporate America to demonstrate that it is the system and not the participants who bears the blame for widespread rapacity. That point was driven home at the event hosted by Global Fund for Women, in which audience members were divided by gender. Women were humorously encouraged to take up space and express power while men were mock-trained to be servile and obsequious in a reversal of the traditional gender hierarchy. Despite everyone being in on the joke, it was notable how the tone of the crowd shifted from one of community-art collegiality toward raw competition with just a little encouragement. The result fell somewhere between the Dunder Mifflin Office Olympics and a low-stakes Stanford Prison Experiment. The parody was maintained through hilarious commentary from Wofford (the Bay Area’s Pinay Lucille Ball), Estrada (playing a CEO-cum-dominatrix), and Barrios (in a fright wig nearly as scary as the *manananggal*). Jokes aside, the point was well-made that neo-colonialism is as much in evidence in the transformation of our own communities as in the actions of multinationals abroad.



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Despite such clear objections from artists to the ongoing development of our cities at any cost, it is by no means certain that contemporary art as a culture industry is opposed to gentrification. Property development is the order of the day for any museum wishing to establish itself as worthy of national and international attention. Many boards of art institutions are manned by developers and captains of industry, while affluent and homogenous urban populations are more likely to share the nineteenth-century world views of many high-profile curators (as I have

S O U T H E R N E X P O S U R E

addressed in this space before). Meanwhile, the alternative and community-driven spaces that indigenous and immigrant communities (as well as socially marginalized groups) have historically created to support themselves financially and as proponents of free expression are shuttering at an alarming rate. Gentrification affects not only individuals and families, but cultural institutions as well. Particularly vulnerable are those that came about in the 1970s and 1980s thanks to NEA funding that is no longer available, to serve populations which have since been dispersed. The great tragedy of gentrification which its proponents appear not to recognize is that groups that are displaced can never be reunited in another, more affordable location. Instead, the critical mass that drove cultural innovation and fostered community is lost permanently, and with it, the collective energy that drives our most essential artistic developments.

The Long Conversation is on view at Southern Exposure through October 26, 2013.

#Hashtags is a series exploring the intersection of art, social issues, and global politics.