

# **Shit House To Penthouse:**

**An Autoethnographic Investigation into the  
Interface Between Artists and East London.**

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This thesis consists of three films, each around 35 minutes long, and a written submission in three parts.

The films are fictional but are shot in a DIY documentary style. Based on extensive research, they collectively examine urban change and the role of the creative class in East London (two are set in Tower Hamlets and one in Dagenham). As video essays in the mockumentary form the 'documentary maker' is also a scripted character - a partially fictionalised version of myself. This flawed narrator becomes a vehicle to critique a particular class, gender and race perspective. In each film the supposed thematic stalls as power relations between this fictional filmmaker and his subjects are reversed or hijacked calling into question the artist's own pretensions, presumptions and ideology. Through this methodology the films are able to examine a host of characters in East London whilst simultaneously critiquing the documentary format itself and the ethics of ethnography.

The written submission is similarly pseudo-autobiographical though less fictional or satirical. Fluctuating between dialogue, anecdote and more formal academic writing, the three essays weave together research on gentrification, class antagonisms, the psychology of space and architecture, the role of the creative class in London and the enigmatic notion of authenticity both personally and with regard to urban space. Like the films, two of the essays are set in Tower Hamlets and one in Dagenham.

The submission is autoethnographic in two senses: firstly it foregrounds the identity of the author whilst presenting the research; secondly it is partially a study of a class and culture of which I myself am a member. Inverting the position of the aloof cultural critic, the writing and films wrestle with the complexities of commitment, personal and political integrity, and what it means to make artwork in the city.

## **ARTWORK SUBMISSION**

Bellow are the web links for the three films that make up the original artwork component of this DPhil submission. Additionally each film comes with a series of photographs of their installation environments taken from their original public exhibition.

### **Greater Fool Theory**

HD video file > 34'00" > 2015  
[www.patrickgoddard.co.uk/fooltheory.html](http://www.patrickgoddard.co.uk/fooltheory.html)

Written, filmed, edited and produced by Patrick Goddard.  
Featuring: Sam Solnick and Patrick Goddard.  
Documentation of exhibition taken from *Seventeen Gallery*, London, May 2017.

### **Looking for the Ocean Estate**

SD video file > 34'00" > 2016  
[www.patrickgoddard.co.uk/oceanestate.html](http://www.patrickgoddard.co.uk/oceanestate.html)

Written, filmed, edited and produced by Patrick Goddard.  
Featuring: Lisa Selby, Amar Bains, Simon Morley, Jennie Lathan, Angels Miralda Tena and Patrick Goddard.  
Documentation of exhibition taken from *Almanac Gallery*, London, January 2017.

### **Tune into Sanity FM!**

HD video file > 32'00" > 2017  
[www.patrickgoddard.co.uk/sanityfm.html](http://www.patrickgoddard.co.uk/sanityfm.html)

Written, filmed, edited and produced by Patrick Goddard. Script consultation by Ravinder Atwal.  
Featuring: Ravinder Atwal, Manaia Atwal, Karum Atwal, Chad McCail and Patrick Goddard.  
Documentation of exhibition taken from *Seventeen Gallery*, London, May 2017.

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## CHAPTER 1.

### Warehouse I, Avantgarde Place.

#### **Open Plan**

The alarm clock's red digitized numbers glow 03:21. A body next to me rhythmically sighs under the duvet as her whole torso heaves.

We're sleeping in my work/live (as opposed to 'live/work') studio in Hackney Wick in the north-east corner of, not Hackney, but Tower Hamlets. Whilst certainly an ex-industrial space it has a far lower ceiling and less sunlight than the artist's warehouse studio of popular imagination. At one time this would have been the office section at the back of the corrugated roof hangar next door (now a club on the weekends). Illegally, unknown to landlords and councils, we're sleeping here on a kind of precarious looking mattress shaped wooden mezzanine that I've built. It's more like an oversized version of my childhood bunk-bed than any loft living split level design feature. Beneath us is my studio detritus and artwork storage interwoven with more personal debris: books, underpants and dirty plates mingle with paints, tools and cameras. It's cosier than it sounds because I've got a rug, a gum-treed sofa and an atmospheric light bulb or two in the corners. But it's just as cold. No matter how much you blast the electric heater the concrete floor still sucks the heat right out from your feet.

The psychology of the repurposed open plan industrial space is one of possibility and self-determination. You can build your own mezzanine, refashion and reposition furnishings in a thousand different combinations and change things whenever the need or boredom dictates. The terraced house or the council block have prefabricated designation of rooms: This is the bedroom, the

box room, the sitting room where only one wall is quite long enough for a sofa, the kitchen where there is only ever one place a fridge could possibly live. All soft furnishings fall into their predesigned space and the architecture of traditional dwellings tends towards the reductive calculation of human needs.

Built in a time when there was less stigma attached to uniformity, the ergonomics of the rooms left all inhabitants to move in sync. Conversely the high ceilings of the ex-industrial warehouse allow its occupants to literally stare into space. The psychology of expansive ceilings and flexible space creates new existential horizons and compliments the cult of creative living. Adorno was already heralding the death of the traditional house back in 1949 in *Minima Moralia*:

The traditional residences we grew up in have grown intolerable: each trait of comfort in them is paid for with the betrayal of knowledge, each vestige of shelter with the musty pact of family interests. The functional modern habitation designed from a tabula rasa, are living-cases manufactured by experts for philistines...the house is past... the best mode of conduct, in face of all this, still seems an uncommitted, suspended one.<sup>1</sup>

Today everyone from artists to bankers to my mum wants to live the open-plan life style, the irony being that these spaces become, at least in London, increasingly unaffordable to anyone who might actually use them creatively. The industrial identity and the onetime transgressive and creative thrill of repurposing derelict warehouses is castrated by legality, wealth and middle-class mores.

Hackney Wick has, or had, the highest concentration of artists in Europe. Its dense and one-time-isolated swathes of vacant warehouses were conducive to tight knit community building and its lack of pre-existing residential inhabitants allowed for a quicker and fuller uptake. The area used to be hidden being caught between two motorways, a canal and the vast toxic brownfield plains of Stratford; on the way to nowhere, visited by no one except fly-tippers, people learning to drive and those in the know. In 2012 the Stratford brownfield was rebranded as the pseudo-public Olympic Development Park, Hackney Wick falling under its 'Legacy Development' planning authority.

It's 2017. We've just been told that the rent for this place is about to be doubled. It's essentially an eviction notice. In the last fifteen years the area has had a lot of warehouse parties, legal and

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<sup>1</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections of a damaged life*, trans E.Jephcott. (London: Verso, 2005), p38

otherwise. It's become a hot spot for graffiti aficionados. It is or was an artistic and hedonistic cul-de-sac of the city. Today it's more of a parody of its own past. Bars, clubs and cafes have bred like a yeast infection, each in their own way incorporating and feeding off the local image. Now licensed nightclubs imitate the aesthetic of bygone squat raves. Coca-Cola sponsored murals merge with real 'wild-styles', the sponsored graffiti a semblance of an urban wilderness for all the weekend revellers.

The aesthetic is recuperated still further into the graphic design of estate agents capitalising on an area that had already done their job of branding itself. Creative, edgy, vibrant. A local organic culture that was probably only ever an imitation of rebellion, further chewed up and spat out as pure image, a spectacle that smothers its own referent. The art historian Thomas Crow relates that under capitalist logic this is the destiny of anything distinctive:

...because its ultimate logic is the strictly rational and utilitarian one of profit maximization, it is not able to invent the desires and sensibilities it exploits. In fact, the emphasis on continual novelty basic to that industry runs counter to the need of every large enterprise for product standardization and economies of scale. This difficulty is solved by the very defensive and resistant subcultures that come into being as negotiated breathing spaces on the margins of controlled social life.<sup>2</sup>

Capital accumulation, in this case property speculation, is dependent on the unique. Products must have special qualities in order to command monopoly rents. They must be like nothing else, a unique taste, an exclusive signature or the urban planners much sought after 'sense of place'. David Harvey in *Rebel Cities* reiterates the key contradiction: "the more easily marketable such items become, the less unique and special they appear..."<sup>3</sup> 'Loft style' apartment blocks (having run dry of actual warehouses to convert) have popped up overnight – most recently on the site of the freshly demolished bagel factory. The new development, in need of a heritage piggyback, has called itself after the very thing it destroyed: 'The Bagel Factory'. It's an ironic-not-really-ironic choice and the go to branding for gentrifying establishments all over East London that seek to appropriate local history in the very same act as breaking with it. The ironic-not-really-ironic tendency (or as some have called it 'post-ironic'<sup>4</sup>) is to

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Crow, *Modern Art in the Common Culture*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), p34

<sup>3</sup> David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*. (London: Verso, 2013), p92

<sup>4</sup> Matthew Collins, "Post Irony is Real and So What?" *The Georgetown Voice*, 03/04/2010. (Accessed 27/07/2018) <https://georgetownvoice.com/2010/03/04/post-irony-is-real-and-so-what/>

blur what is meant ironically with sincerity, or to alternate between levels of detachment depending on the audience. As far as I'm aware *Jaguar Shoes*, Shoreditch's original hipster bar started it off by taking their name from the wholesale footwear business that used to occupy the premises. More recently a bar on Hackney's Mare Street called *The Advisory* because it used to be *The Asian Woman's Advisory Service*. A bar down in Deptford takes the biscuit however, calling itself the *Job Centre*. Gentrifying areas that sell themselves on their authenticity cannibalize themselves from the inside out. The only trajectory left for capitalist expansion is inward. Repetition, renovation, regeneration, regeneration, regeneration ad nauseum.

Capital is not the rival of the unique but its vampiric captor. It quickly kills that which it depends on to survive. Capital needs organic culture, it needs small businesses, it needs rebels, it needs artists, it needs the anti-capitalist vitality, it needs the special, the spontaneous, the sacred, the local, the autonomous, the authentic. This is one of the contradictions that as artists, or the wider left, we must grapple with: "the spaces for transformational politics are there because capital can never afford to close them down."<sup>5</sup> The capitalistic city needs - as Richard Florida might put it - a level of controlled bohemianism.

## **Artful Dodger**

I can't sleep because my feet are too cold. I have two electric fan heaters on so the air is really dry and stuffy which means I have constant desert mouth, I'm constantly drinking water and I'm constantly getting up to piss. As I lie awake I watch the light show projected through the curtainless window onto the flaking eggshell paint above our bodies. Cars pass on the street beneath this first floor window and a sepia disco ball light show takes over on the ceiling. Headlights move slowly across from right to left and fade out and repeat and overlap in different directions but always eclipsed into rectangles by the shape of the window, skewed into rhombuses. When no cars are passing, other numerous, stationary soft edged parallelograms reveal themselves above my head emanating from

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<sup>5</sup> Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, p111

lampposts, moons, and the artificial gloaming of the city's light pollution, some of which, surely coming from the ever lit Canary Wharf a kilometre or so to the south. Every soft light source boasts its own unique off-white hue: amber, moon white, nicotine enamel, diazepam blue.

The violent blue and red flashes of police or ambulances beneath occasionally shatter the stillness, though at this time of the night they drive siren-less and it's just their lights that warn of crime, drama, fire, disaster, injury, accident, death or merely fear. They turn a corner and melt back into the city, returning the ceiling to its slow paced celestial peace.

Where are the lights going? Who has called them? My mind drifts to the outside world and the neighbourhood, danger, adrenaline, emergency services. I once read a descriptive distinction between the middle and working classes is their reaction to police presence – one demographic seeing them as a safe refuge, the other as threatening.<sup>6</sup> This is obviously a generalization, although the origins of the police in the UK and the USA do have their roots in the control and management of the working class and protection of private property.<sup>7</sup>

Either way I find myself recapping my own encounters with police: the numerous times I had been caught shop lifting, the several handcuffings, evictions and evasions in the course of my now past days of squatting around East London. In my inverted snobbery and desire to distance myself from my own familial demographic I almost start believing my own myths.

On the shoplifting occasions when I was younger, accosted by security guards, embarrassingly escorted through the shop with police on their way, I managed to evade arrest every time by apologising emphatically in my best middle-class voice; mistakes had been made, errors of judgement, this-isn't-me-s and never-before-s. Inevitably to be let go with slaps on the wrist and life time bannings from Crouch End Budgens etcetera.

One of the few times I had actually been arrested was on suspicion of burglary in the course of trying to break into a large red bricked and seemingly derelict warehouse in order to squat it, on the Shoreditch end of Bethnal Green Road.

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<sup>6</sup> Dante Barry, "Police don't make everyone feel safe – not when you're seen as the enemy." *The Guardian*, 21/11/2015. (Accessed 27/07/2018) <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/nov/21/police-surveillance-safety-seen-as-the-enemy>

<sup>7</sup> Anon, "Slave Patrols and Civil Servants: A History of Policing in Two Modes." *CrimethInc*. 15/03/2017, (Accessed 27/07/2018) <https://crimethinc.com/2017/03/15/slave-patrols-and-civil-servants-a-history-of-policing-in-two-modes>

For squatters, scouting out and breaking into potential new properties is a constant task: not working is hard work. I estimate that we used to break into at least five places for every one that was deemed habitable. Most were either too far gone with no working water, no 'lecky', irredeemably pigeon/rat/cockroach infested or the ultimate fuck-you to squatters of poured concrete down the toilets. This was back in 2006, squatting (though not breaking and entering) was still lawful and Shoreditch was in the full swing of gentrification. Gentrification can perversely leave a lot of empty buildings as landlords seek redevelopment permits, change of use certificates or simply invest in so called ghost homes and 'buy-to-leave' properties, left to accrue value in an area with accelerating prices.

It was the witching hour and a squatting friend and I were at the back entrance of the redbrick warehouse. Halfway through crowbarring off the security door the police were suddenly on us. We ran in different directions and I flung the crowbar over the wooden hoarding of a building site as I rounded a corner. Moments later I was being wrenched off a fence by an ankle-holding policeman as I tried to make my botched get away.

Handcuffed at the station I tried the middle-class accent trick – met with threats of incarceration; swearing innocent drunken antics – prints were taken; swearing youthful hijinks – left to sweat for hours with no information; spouting imploring lies to any passing policeman – the usual. None of which worked until they pulled out my old university student card from my wallet (which I still carried in order to wangle the odd student discount). *Patrick Goddard, BA(hons) Fine Art*. A slightly deriding comment was made, a glance given. Words like *criminal, lawyer, CCTV, record*; morphed into *student, stupid, plonker, banter*. Artists, it seems, fall into the naïve idiot rather than professional criminal category.

One of the arresting officers who moments earlier had been swearing he saw a crowbar and insisting on a search of the area perks up and asked me *have you heard of Banksy?* (it's 2006 remember – Banksy is still pretty niche with a bit of underground credibility left – cultural capital that was, in hindsight, entirely spent in Shoreditch). *Funny*, he said, *I'll give him that*, as they took me to an adjoining room. *Just procedure* I'm told. Instructions were given for the bent over, hands against the wall, pants

round ankles posture, ready for torch examination and a gloved finger. “Please cough” said one of the two officers almost courteously. This was the first time I had ever really noticed the involuntary but inducible push of my sphincter.

With no drugs, knives, bombs or what ever else they were looking for up there I was free to go. *A record would be kept at the station for five years of course... prints will be destroyed.* The briefest of parting conversations was had as I was buzzed through to the outside world. The Banksy fan has noticed an increase of arty types to the area in the last few years, galleries and so on. He asks me *what's the attraction?* I mumble cheaper housing prices, ex industrial, fit for repurposing, an interesting area and so on as I walked out of the station, only allowing myself to smile a hundred meters down the road.

In my subsequent years of squatting we changed tactics entirely and would dress in high viz jackets and break into places at 7am dressed as builders, making as much noise as possible. Today that derelict redbrick building in Shoreditch has been converted and expanded into an apartment block and tower. 1.7 million pounds for a three bedroom flat.<sup>8</sup>

It's called 'Avantgarde Place'.

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<sup>8</sup> As advertised by Savills estate agent: £1.7million guide price and under offer. (Accessed 27/07/2018) <https://search.savills.com/property-detail/gbsxrssrs180007>

## CHAPTER 2.

### Dagenham, The Becontree Estate.

#### **A White House**

I am sitting in a first floor room about 5 meters wide by 4 meters. The wooden floor has been sanded down and waxed. Three walls are made up of exposed, presumably original brickwork, parts of which are crumbling away. New copper water pipes, somewhere between functional infrastructure and design feature, are visibly affixed to the brickwork lead along the wall and into a Victorian butler-style porcelain sink. The fourth wall is all glass, with a glass door in it, making the whole room something between an exhibit, a vitrine and a stage. On the other side of the glass is a small landing with wooden stairs leading down and across the landing is another room the mirror of this one.

The space is at once ‘unfinished’, a gutted house and also architecturally chic. This is an 18<sup>th</sup> century farm house that has been converted by the architect duo Apparata (Nicholas Lobo Brennan/Astrid Smitham) on behalf of Create, an East London orientated arts funding body in partnership with Barking and Dagenham council. Converted into a ‘new public space for art and social activity’,<sup>9</sup> the building now hosts two artist residencies on the first floor, of which I am the joint first participant/resident/subject, and a more flexible social arts space on the ground floor with an almost open-door policy.

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<sup>9</sup> Create London, “The White House”. (Accessed 12/10/2017)  
<http://createlondon.org/event/the-white-house/>

I am sitting in this room, on a beach wood Scandinavian-ish designy chair, behind a desk of the same ilk. On the desk is my own desktop computer, bits and bobs of recording equipment, papers, piles of books and other studio detritus. I've curated it to look clean but busy. Usually there would be half drunk cups of tea orbited by their spent bags, empty cans of Irn-Bru and beer, a cigarette butt extinguished in a bottle top, maybe a toenail or something equally repellent. The desk is up against the glass wall next to the door as if I were a receptionist at the entrance. On the other side of the room is a small table that has four slightly out-dated mac desktop computers, all turned off and missing their keyboards and mice (we'll get back to these computers later).

I am 'acting natural' behind my computer pretending to work. In the corner of the room next to the unused computers is a cameraman setting up his kit, and in front of my desk there are two suited middle aged men. One is talking hurriedly and holds a clipboard, the other seems more lethargic. Both wear lanyards. The guy on the left, I deduce, is part of the Barking and Dagenham council entourage that are kicking about the house today, the other more relaxed guy on the right I think must be part of the Mayor's team. They are debating who should get to say the line on camera 'don't go to Berlin, go to Barking!' – Sadiq Khan, the mayor of London, who is about to visit the house, or Daren Rodwell, the councillor for Barking and Dagenham, who is acting as the mayor's tour guide. This is the press opening for the borough's new arts initiative and the emphasis is on tempting artists to stay in the capital.

I suddenly start fiddling with some sound equipment in earnestness to try to record this conversation worthy of 'Yes Minister' or 'The Thick of it'. I also think about pointing out to these two that we're in Dagenham and not Barking, but keep silent, not wanting to be pedantic. I'm also half way through trying to unknot the wire to a lapel mic – the most discreet microphone I own.

I realise it's not just the alliteration of the *Berlin-Barking* slogan that makes it more appealing to say than *Berlin-Dagenham*, but the reality that whilst some arty types may well be coaxed into migrating out as far as Barking (being priced out of London's inner suburbs), it seems rather unrealistic that they would come to Dagenham. Many London neighbourhoods are of course no strangers to poverty, but

unlike other traditionally working class neighbourhoods, I suspect Dagenham lacks the ‘grit’ or overt urban decay that can be commodified and aestheticised to become the next fashionable area.

## Subtopia Stigma

The farm house that we’re in dates from a time when Dagenham was marsh-pocked fields. Now it finds itself simultaneously one of the oldest and most contemporary buildings at the heart of the Becontree housing estate, at one time the largest municipal housing development in the world.<sup>10</sup> It takes up almost the entirety of Dagenham, except the mostly abandoned dock area.

Unless you’re from Dagenham you’ve probably never been to the Becontree estate, despite its record-breaking size. Excuse my presumption, but this simply isn’t a visited place: Cambridge University research shows that the borough’s wealth to social diversity ratio is the highest of all London boroughs. It is, in their analysis both the poorest and least visited, with the lowest visitor diversity - making it, in their opinion, the least likely to see ‘economic improvement from without’ in the near future (i.e. to be gentrified).<sup>11</sup> Yet the estate is almost the size of the London borough of Kensington and Chelsea, over 10 km<sup>2</sup> and with a population of 100,000+ residents.

It’s a housing estate made up of streets upon streets upon streets of almost, but not quite identical semidetached, 2 storey Lego-brick-esque interwar housing.<sup>12</sup> This one pebble dashed, that one stone-clad, the occasional mock-Tudor façade etc. Almost a century of incremental modifications; attempts to differentiate these mass produced machines for living and escape the dead hand of 20<sup>th</sup> century top-down town planning. Abutting the houses are small front gardens, some well kept – others might as well be a fly tipping spots. Beyond these is a strip of pavement, telegraph poles and their spider web wires, the odd half hearted tree, then a strip of grass (booby-trapped with dog poo), then the parked car-lined but proportionally wide road.

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<sup>10</sup> John Rennie, “The Becontree Estate”, *East End Life*, 12/7/2010, p15

Accounts vary as to the Becontree’s claim to be the worlds largest, as the notion of a council estate has a slippery definition. Regardless it remains the largest of its kind in the UK.

<sup>11</sup> D.Hristova et al., “Urban Social Diversity Using Interconnected Geo-Social Networks”, *International World Wide Web Conference (WWW)*, (Montréal, 2016). See fig.8. (Accessed 12/06/2017).

doi:10.1145/2872427.2883065

<sup>12</sup> There was actually 91 different house types built between 1925 and 1935, when the bulk of the estate was built, for the precise reason of introducing variety, but to be frank they all look near identical.

So far – so suburban, but what differentiates the Becontree and makes it hard to navigate is its flatness, its purgatorial scale and its lack of anything else. There is no town centre, no particular high street, no iconic buildings (or at least hidden), no visible landmarks. An early resident Mrs Adams recalled what it was like in the 1920s: “I went out for a walk and, when I came back, all the houses looked alike to me. I was in a terrible state, in tears. The workmen said: 'What's the matter ducks?' I said: 'I can't find my house'.”<sup>13</sup> There is even a distinct lack of pubs. The puritanical founders of the estate, the London County Council, desired to discourage the working classes from drinking.<sup>14</sup> The Becontree estate collapses out into the great flat floodplains of the Thames estuary without ever seeming to go anywhere.

The estate, conceived of in 1919 with families moving in by 1921, was one of the first and by far biggest developments in the national housing programme nicknamed “Homes fit for Heroes”.<sup>15</sup> The fear that returning First World War soldiers might be seduced by Bolshevism saw even a Tory government implement a programme of slum clearances and house building.<sup>16</sup>

Many of Becontree’s original inhabitants had come from the recently cleared slums of Poplar nine miles to the west and the new development was comparatively calm and luxurious: private gardens front and back, indoor toilets, running water, up to three separate bedrooms; for the first thirty years surveys of the residents show a vastly positive impression of the estate.<sup>17</sup>

The Becontree was very much an outcome of the modernist ideology of its day, or what Zygmunt Bauman might call “solid modernity”: that is a stage in modernity that emphasised hierarchical bureaucracy, top down organisation and grand schematics with regards to social organisation.<sup>18</sup> Elsewhere in the world around this time, and perhaps more famously, Le Corbusier was inciting the architect to ‘to realise an order that is a pure creation of his spirit ... a well-mapped-out (housing)

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<sup>13</sup> See Peter Willmott, “The Evolution of a Community: A Study of Dagenham after Forty Years.” *Reports of the Institute of Community Studies*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1963), p37

<sup>14</sup> Chris Waters, “Progressives, Puritans and the Cultural Politics of the Council, 1889-1914”, *Politics and the People of London*, ed. Andrew Saint (London, Hambledon, 1989), pp49-70

<sup>15</sup> Robert Home, *A Township Complete in Itself: a Planning History of the Becontree/Dagenham Estate*, (London: Libraries Department, London Borough of Barking & Dagenham and School of Surveying, University of East London, 1997)

<sup>16</sup> Anon, “Becontree Estate”, *Municipal Dreams Blog*, 08/01/2013. (Accessed: 5/3/2017) <https://municipaldreams.wordpress.com/2013/01/08/the-becontree-estate-built-in-england-where-the-most-revolutionary-social-changes-can-take-place-and-people-in-general-do-not-realise-that-they-have-occurred/>

<sup>17</sup> Home, *A Township Complete in Itself*. pp5-9

<sup>18</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, (New Jersey: Wiley, 2000)

scheme, constructed on a mass-produced basis, can give a feeling of calm, order and neatness and inevitably *imposes* discipline on the inhabitants' [author's italics].<sup>19</sup> But whilst Corbusier dreamt of high-density towers, the British manifestation of this vision was suburban sprawl.

By the standards of the 1920s, and even more by today's, the project was progressive and, despite its surface modesty, revolutionary. A 1934 report commissioned by the Pilgrim Trust put it succinctly:

If the Becontree Estate were situated in the United States, articles and newsreels would have been circulated containing references to the speed at which a new town of 120,000 people had been built. The work of the firm of contractors would have been shown as an excellent example of the American business ideal of Service to the Community. If it had happened in Vienna, the Labour and left Liberal Press would have boosted it as an example of what municipal socialism could accomplish...If it had been built in Russia, Soviet propaganda would have emphasised the planning aspect... but Becontree was planned and built in England where the most revolutionary social changes can take place, and people in general do not realise that they have occurred.<sup>20</sup>

The Becontree and the wider Homes fit for Heroes scheme was the first large British infrastructural investment of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, effectively inaugurating the welfare state and another sixty years of British council housing investment. However, despite its progressive ambition, by 1956 an architectural critic with an aptitude for sneering, Ian Nairn, was calling this type of architecture and urban planning 'subtopia':

the whole land surface is becoming covered by the creeping mildew that already circumscribes all of our towns ... Subtopia is the annihilation of the site, the steamrolling of all individuality of place to one uniform and mediocre pattern.<sup>21</sup>

With Nairn as its lead writer, *Outrage*, a special edition of the magazine *Architectural Review* (later expanded into a book of the same name) was one of the first and loudest voices to launch a war on suburban sprawl. There is much to agree with in Nairn's criticisms of the misapplication of modernist architecture in the interwar and post war years: an architectural era of bureaucratic procedures, one-size-fits-all vapidities, and ultimately underfunded and unimaginative centralist planning. Like other grand schematics for new towns, the Becontree's totalising design left little room for personalisation and adaptation, and ultimately disempowered its residents. Furthermore the blanket architecture became quickly out-dated and was unable to morph, as other neighbourhoods do, with the changing demands and lifestyles of its users.

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<sup>19</sup> Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, trans. Frederick Etchells (New York: Dover Publications, 1986) pp224-225

<sup>20</sup> Terence Young, *Becontree and Dagenham: A Report Made for the Pilgrim Trust*, (London: Sidders & Son, Ltd. 1934) p23

<sup>21</sup> Ian Nairn, "Outrage", *Architectural Review* (special number), Iss.117, December 1955. p3

By the 1960's, having become a television personality, Nairn's venomous disgust was adding to, consciously or not, a wider negative cultural portrayal of the suburbs in general and the people who lived there. His alibi of aesthetic criticism disguised an ignorance of the state of inner-city slums that the new developments had replaced.

The cynicism of Nairn and his heirs had far-reaching impact on the post-war reconstruction debate and the welfare state more generally.<sup>22</sup> Again and again to this day we see the often just aesthetic and pragmatic criticisms of dated social housing design used to attack the concept of the welfare state more generally and stigmatise its users.<sup>23</sup>

And yet it remains true that Corbusier's vision of calm, orderly and disciplined inhabitants of the well-planned city has not worked out in Dagenham's case. Bad press abounds. I feel unscrupulous compiling the following list of its goings-on for fear that I'm just adding to the area's already entrenched stigma, but today the Becontree and wider borough holds other records beyond its size. None of them are good: The third most burgled postcode in Britain;<sup>24</sup> in the top ten most deprived local authorities in England;<sup>25</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> highest unemployment in the capital;<sup>26</sup> the biggest increase in unemployment in the entire UK;<sup>27</sup> the capital's poorest educated population;<sup>28</sup> the highest infant mortality rate;<sup>29</sup> and voted worst place to live in the UK.<sup>30</sup> Nationally, it is known for only two things: the BNP winning a record twelve seats on the council in 2006 and the slow, public death of its car industry upon which the area used to rely heavily.

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<sup>22</sup> See: Lorenza Pavesi, "Ian Nairn, Townscape and the Campaign Against Subtopia," *Focus*, Vol.10: Iss.1: Article 28. (Accessed 07/07/2017) doi:10.15368/focus.2013v10n1.17

<sup>23</sup> See: Ben Campkin, *Remaking London* (London: I.B.Tauris &Co.Ltd., 2013), p93

<sup>24</sup> "Burglary Hotspots Calculator", *Money Supermarket*. (Accessed: 12/10/2017) <https://www.moneysupermarket.com/home-insurance/burglary-hotspots/>

<sup>25</sup> These stats are for the borough as a whole. As Dagenham is considered much more deprived than Barking, it can be assumed that the stats for Dagenham are far lower: DCLG. "The English Indices of Deprivation 2015, Statistical Release" (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2015), p13 (Accessed: 10/08/2017) [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/465791/English\\_Indices\\_of\\_Deprivation\\_2015\\_-\\_Statistical\\_Release.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/465791/English_Indices_of_Deprivation_2015_-_Statistical_Release.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> Trust for London, "Unemployment ratio by Borough", London's Poverty Profile 2018. (Accessed: 04/05/2018), <https://www.trustforlondon.org.uk/data/unemployment-rate-borough/>

Adam Tinson et al, "London's Poverty Profile 2017", *New Policy Institute and Trust for London*, (London 2017), p84, 112 (Accessed: 12/10/2017) [http://www.npi.org.uk/files/2915/0754/2603/Londons\\_Poverty\\_Profile\\_2017\\_report.pdf](http://www.npi.org.uk/files/2915/0754/2603/Londons_Poverty_Profile_2017_report.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> Danny Dorling, *People and Places: A 21-century atlas of the UK*. (Bristol: Polity Press, 2016), p121

<sup>28</sup> Adam Tinson et al, "London's Poverty Profile 2017", p84, 112

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p138

<sup>30</sup> Based on a 2015 *Rightmove* survey, reported by Kashmira Gander, "Worst Places to Live in the UK," *The Independent*, 6/08/2015. (Accessed: 19/7/2017) <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/worst-places-to-live-in-the-uk-barking-and-dagenham-come-first-in-top-ten-list-dominated-by-nine-10442606.html>

These patronizing articles seem to be churned out by the press regularly, alternating between naming some forlorn seaside town and some outer suburb like Dagenham. However this article in *The Independent* seems to have gotten more airtime than most, prompting Darren Rodwell, the councillor for the borough, to publicly refute it numerous times (ironically blowing life into it every time he did so).

A ‘mining town without the mine’, Dagenham has as much in common with many Northern municipalities as it does with the rest of London; it still struggles to adjust to de-industrialisation. The slow closure of the Ford Dagenham car plant and satellite industries as well as the May and Baker pharmaceutical company has left almost no other source of employment in the 10 square miles consisting purely of housing.<sup>31</sup>

### The Wrong Type of Authentic

There is not much to romanticise in the amorphous conurbation and its ‘authenticity’ is simply the wrong type of authentic for the arty types that some have argued are the vanguard of gentrification.<sup>32</sup> However Dagenham’s distinctive position makes it a paradigm of many of the battles being fought in Britain today. It is at the geographic front line of the disconnect between the emerald city megalopolis a mere broomstick’s ride away and the disenfranchised ex-industrial areas of the UK, hidden away like embarrassing relatives after a ruthless bourgeois reinvention.

The debates around gentrification have tended in the past to be disproportionately skewed towards examining singular sites of action. However gentrification is a process involving three different types of locale. Firstly, the much documented ‘gentrified’ neighbourhood itself: one that sees poorer inhabitants priced out by an influx of newer residents that are simply prepared to pay more. This site of gentrification patently isn’t Dagenham.

Secondly, the many sites that these gentrifiers *come* from: the brain-drained provinces. Gentrifiers aren’t unanimously from other bourgeois neighbourhoods, which would surely all be empty by now. Many of the debates on gentrification seem to take as a given some secret middle-class reserve army waiting in the wings of existence to swoop into the action *ex nihilo*. Whereas, whilst not denying the role that class plays, so called gentrifiers tend to be the young, usually educated, often aspirational;

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<sup>31</sup> Detroit, another quintessentially Fordist industrial conurbation dealing with deindustrialisation has the fastest shrinking metropolis in the United States, Dagenham – due to its proximity to (or part of) Greater London, has a housing shortage.

See: Martha Rosler, “Culture Class: Art, Creativity, Urbanism, Part III”. *E-flux journal*, #25, 2011. (Accessed: 20/10/2017) <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/25/67898/culture-class-art-creativity-urbanism-part-iii/>

<sup>32</sup> See: Daniel Makagon, “Bring on the Shock Troops: Artists and Gentrification in the Popular Press.” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies Journal*, 2010, Vol.7: Iss.1, pp26-55 (Accessed: 22/10/2017) doi:10.1080/14791420903527772 and: Carl Grodach, Nicole Foster, James Murdoch, “Gentrification, Displacement and the Arts: Untangling the Relationship Between Arts Industries and Place Change”, *Urban Studies*, 2016, Vol.55: Iss.4, pp807-825 (Accessed: 22/10/2017) doi:10.1177/0042098016680169

and: David Ley, “Artists, Aestheticisation and the Field of Gentrification”, *Urban Studies*, 2003, Vol.40: Iss.12, pp2527-2544 (Accessed: 22/10/2017) doi:10.1080/0042098032000136192

immigrating from an array of places within the UK and internationally, many of which wouldn't be seen as homogeneously middle class areas themselves. Superstar cities such as London become a brain drain on the rest of the country (if not world): both educationally and aspirationally. Just as young actors flock to Hollywood, whether from a working class or middle class background, if you're young and ambitious and want a place in the knowledge economy you will leave your hometown or village to go to the centre of the action. This may well price out working-class families in these magnetic creative neighbourhoods, not always because the newcomers are richer than them, but because they are younger and more zealous. Markus Moos suggests that interwoven with what we call gentrification is "youthification" and details the trend for millennials to migrate due to general employment precarity as well as a wider understanding of the knowledge economy and its nodes of activity.<sup>33</sup> In this sense Dagenham, like countless other locations, is most likely losing many of its 'aspiring' (more on this later), educated or just richer younger residents to London, which only compounds its problems. Opportunities breed opportunities, the urban crisis of the knowledge economy is cumulative.

The third site of gentrification, and one that Dagenham would more poignantly and specifically classify as, is the knock on victim further down the ladder: the suburban overspill. This is the destination of all the poor that get pushed out from the gentrified neighbourhoods. As well as the recipient of ripple effects on housing prices, the further straining of social services and welfare resources in these often already under resourced boroughs.<sup>34</sup> Next time you're sauntering through one of London's regenerated neighbourhoods, or get served a canapé from a dustpan in a converted carpark (as I did the other day) or you're looking aghast at prices through a Foxtons window and you ponder: where did they all go? - the previous demographic with their orbiting possessions, cultures, accents and eateries; the residents that get decanted, priced out and exiled once house prices and rents go through the roof? Keep in mind Spinoza's famous dictum, *all determination is negation*. Dagenham: semi detached, London's hidden leftover.

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<sup>33</sup> Markus Moos, "From Gentrification to Youthification: The Increasing Importance of Young Age in Delineating High-Density Living". *Urban Studies*, 2016, Vol. 53: Iss. 14, pp2903-2920. (Accessed: 22/10/2017)  
doi:10.1177/0042098015603292

<sup>34</sup> Tom MacInnes, "Is London's Poverty Shifting to the Suburbs?" *New Policy Institute Blog*, 2013. (Accessed: 18/09/2017)  
<http://www.npi.org.uk/blog/income-and-poverty/londons-poverty-shifting-suburbs/>

It would be wrong to totally blame the architecture and layout of the Becontree for all of its problems, and yet issues of housing (and a distinct lack of anything else) never seem to be far away.

The global superrich, in a process of - to borrow Simon Kupers's word - "plutocratization", have priced out London's middle class into the inner suburbs: Hackney, Peckham, Hammersmith etcetera. Like a ripple effect poorer residents flood the capital's outer areas, with Dagenham being one of the cheapest property markets in Greater London.<sup>35</sup> "So you've seen the housing market in one small borough disproportionately take the strain in terms of broader patterns of migration into and within the borough", says Dagenham's Labour MP Jon Cruddas as he tries to explain the racial tensions stemming from an increased competition for resources in the already strapped constituency.<sup>36</sup> (In the last decade and a half Dagenham has disproportionately become the capital's resting place for waves of needier immigrants, which may go some way towards the popularity of the BNP, UKIP and Brexit in the area). The area, which only has houses, doesn't have enough housing, and whilst still the cheapest in London it also saw the biggest percentage increase in property prices and rent in the capital between 2015-2017.<sup>37</sup>

Since 1980 and Margret Thatcher's right to buy scheme, over half of the Becontree properties are now in private hands and the borough has one of the longest council housing waiting lists. It is this last fact, and the associated BBC2 documentary *No Place to Call Home* focusing on Dagenham's housing crisis that makes me especially uncomfortable.<sup>38</sup> Teary, recently redundant teachers sleeping in their cars, suicide-watch applicants interrogated, teen mothers turned away. I'm sitting in the new White House art centre, a council owned property leased for free to Create; an overeducated middle class artist shipped in from trendy Hackney Wick. To do what?

Benevolent funding of the arts does not seem to be a luxury the borough can afford...

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> See: Owen Jones, *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*, (London: Verso, 2016), p229

<sup>37</sup> Barking and Dagenham has seen the 4th highest percentage rise in rent over the last two years and yet is still the third lowest rent in the capital overall due to it being such a low rent area to begin with. Dagenham itself remains the cheapest housing prices in the capital.

See: Adam Tinson et al, "London's Poverty Profile 2017", p56

<sup>38</sup> Luke Sewell, "No Place to Call Home", BBC2, originally aired on 19/10/2016 half way into my three-month residency in Dagenham.

## The Peanut Crunching Crowd

I know Dagenham seems monotonous to people from outside, but when you've been living here for a while, the roads develop their own personalities – there are landmarks you get to recognise in different turnings. Anyway, it's not the outside of the houses that matter, it's what's inside them. I've got a number of good friends here. Lots of the people round here know me... My roots are here now. I'm very happy indeed.

Mr Brooks, Becontree resident<sup>39</sup>

To reside in an area temporarily - in my case three months - is unfortunately to experience its world as representation, remaining detached as a tourist. Wandering the streets of Becontree, like a lost colonial ethnographer, scribbling down passages of patronising descriptions – as I have found myself doing – reduces the stories and lived experiences of its residents to tabloid descriptions that implicitly point to generalised geographic tendencies or simply serve an argument's telos. To pass through as a voyeur is to direct a totalizing gaze, to see a homogenous neighbourhood and possibly, as I have just done, retell it in cherry picked statistics and blanket descriptions.

That is, up until the moment that you realise your own unwitting role, like the policeman in *The Wicker Man*, or maybe like the gormless Brian (as in *The Life of...*): the curtains go up to reveal the peanut crunching crowd...

Sadiq Kahn walks in with Darren Rodwell (whom I had the chance to interview the week before). There are lots of others too: Press, the people from Create, camera folk, clipboarded PAs and PR personnel. Everyone is making a show of smiling like when you get introduced to your partner's parents for the first time.

Sadiq is nice. He sees Owen Jones' book *Chavs, the demonization of the working class* on my desk and we talk a bit about it. He's read it; he thinks it's good. I do too. I make a nervous joke about something, the people from Create laugh a bit too fast, - *he's joking* – one of them says, the others laugh. Sadiq asks about my project and I deliver my best elevator pitch and throw in another joke for good measure.

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<sup>39</sup> Willmott, *The Evolution of a Community*, p110

It's all over quickly, the herd migrate to other sights on the new creative Barking and Dagenham tour and my cynical mind is left to postulate two possible reasons for the council to fund this new arts initiative and therefore me.

### **Reason 1: Urban Development from *Without*.**

Maybe they've been reading Richard Florida's work. This guy's early books, particularly *Rise of the Creative Class* (2002) became a kind of rust belt mayor's bible of hope in the last decade and *seemed* to provide, if I were to summarise it crudely (which I will), a recipe for turning your municipality in wherevers-ville into a thriving post-industrial city. Here in the UK his work was avidly taken up, with Florida being invited to address policy and strategy groups at Number 10 under two separate administrations.<sup>40</sup> His general thesis describes the transition in the West away from the industry-orientated city, along with the associated social and ideological shifts of its citizens, the implications for its economy and how best to work with, rather than against this change. Florida, amongst other creativity-driven-regenerationists,<sup>41</sup> was very influential for New Labour and his line of thinking can still be seen to influence urban regenerationist task forces throughout the UK.

His core argument was that the new(ish) 'creative class' are the ascendant economic force, as opposed to the working class or service class, and that they spur regional growth through innovation. Furthermore, as opposed to the working class who would traditionally migrate for employment, in this new(ish) creative economy it is the companies that relocate to where the creative class settle (think Hollywood, Silicon Valley, London). Cities and districts are, or at least should, argued Florida, be in competition to attract these unwitting regeneration wizards. *Rise of the Creative Class* and many of his subsequent books attempted to define this class - their ideology, lifestyle, work patterns etcetera - as well as describing the types of urban areas that will draw them in.

The 'creative class' is defined primarily by the professions of its members, but the term also describes the ideology of a Western economy-shaping, post-industrial generation, the defining

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<sup>40</sup> See: Richard Florida, *The New Urban Crisis: Gentrification, Housing Bubbles, Growing Inequality, and what we can do about it.*, (London: Oneworld Publications, 2017) p.xxii

<sup>41</sup> See: Francois Matarasso, *Use or Ornament? The Social Impact of Participation in the Arts*, (Stroud: Comedia, 1997) Published the same month that New Labour came to power, prefiguring some of Florida's creative-class theory, the paper gained traction with the new government's Policy Action Team 10 and fed into the Blairite PR campaign 'cool Britannia'

characteristic of which is individualist and, as you may have guessed, creative. On a professional level the class includes everyone from scientists to tech entrepreneurs, bankers to artists.

Despite Florida's original optimism, this urban demographic now appears as a plague to be tamed rather than urban messiahs. Turning cultural hubs into superstar cities and eventually threatening to become effectively gated communities where the poor can no longer afford to live.<sup>42</sup> Rather than saving the urban economy it appears that the creative class, at least in more central London, have colonised it. Either way it's a party that Dagenham and its siblings are struggling to gatecrash.

Over the last decade 'the third industrial revolution' has accelerated the project of digitising manufacturing, agriculture and chunks of the service sector.<sup>43</sup> Accordingly an increase in skilled, creative and higher-paid employment has been matched by a de-skilled, de-creativised, precarious and poorly paid jobs sector at the other end. Worse still, for those who lack the training, opportunities or education to adapt to the new economic realities become stigmatised as an economic inconvenience, accused of being 'un-aspirational'.<sup>44</sup> 'Creativity' orientated urban policy has been linked by its critics to a wider neoliberal ideology with an ad nauseam emphasis on the 'entrepreneurial' and a form of wealth creation or clustering that pretty much only benefits the already-rich.<sup>45</sup>

Classically the bourgeoisie have been defined as the owners of the means of production. This remains essentially true, however what constitutes 'the means of production' has developed since Marx's time. Pierre Bourdieu identifies three categories of capital: Economic (money/assets etc), Social (both

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<sup>42</sup> For details of how the arts and the creative industries feed into the snowballing logic and economic exclusivity of what Richard Florida calls 'Super star cities' (ie. New York, London, San Francisco) see: Elizabeth Currid, *The Warhol Economy: How Fashion, Art & Music Drive New York City*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007). Sharon Zukin was already remarking on this pattern as early as 1982: Sharon Zukin, *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982)

<sup>43</sup> Jeremy Rifkin, *The Third Industrial Revolution: How Lateral Power is Transforming Energy, the Economy and the World*. (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

<sup>44</sup> A caveat here being that this rhetoric has dropped slightly in post-Brexit, Teresa May led Britain, the blame game finding new targets for old systemic problems. However when I interviewed Darren Rodwell (Labour councillor) for a film that I ended up not making he spoke at length about the aspirational working-class and the need to change working-class attitudes to bring them inline with an entrepreneurial economic realities.

<sup>45</sup> See: Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. trans. Gregory Elliott (London, Verso, 2007) For specific criticisms of Florida's creative class theories see: Chris Gibson and Lily Kong, "Cultural Economy: A Critical Review." *Progress in Human Geography*, 2005, Vol.29: Iss.5, pp541-561. (Accessed: 27/07/2017). doi:10.1191/0309132505ph567oa

Also: Jamie Peck, "Creative moments, Working Culture, Through Municipal Socialism and Neoliberal Urbanism." In E.J. McCann and K.Ward (eds.), *Mobile Urbanism: Cities and Policymaking in the Global Age*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011) pp41-71

utilised and potential social networks and nepotistic relations) and Cultural (education, taste etc).<sup>46</sup> For the creative class in the knowledge-based economy, it is their cultural capital that is their productive force and like other forms of capital it is not simply something one can choose to have.

Furthermore since the latter quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as material security became taken for granted and survival a given by many in the West, a larger and larger demographic has become dissatisfied with mere security. “Most (creative workers) are not very worried about meeting the basic needs of subsistence; they’re already on the upper rungs of the ladder, where intrinsic rewards such as esteem and self-actualization are sought.”<sup>47</sup> The goal for creatives, Florida posits, is not simply to accrue wealth but to recognise oneself in other productive and expressive outpourings. Creative orientation loosely correlates with educational attainment and tends to be a luxury afforded to the more materially secure – both due to a basic level of wealth (or access to wealth) but more acutely on an existential level – then it stands to reason that whilst not identical, there will be a vast overlap between the creative class and the middle class.

This interpretation of Florida’s thesis however doesn’t necessarily equate to the ground breaking proposition for urban rejuvenation with which he has in the past been credited, reducing it to the tautological maxim: *to improve the economy of your city - attract richer people*.<sup>48</sup> What perhaps his books do rather well is document and theorise the changing job market, life-style preferences and ideology of a new middle-class milieu. It is also true to say that today many within this creative class, despite its ‘cultural capital’ are also beginning to struggle financially, albeit not to the degree of Dagenham’s current demographic. In today’s London even the middle class are feeling the pinch.

While globally savvy, the creative class are also drawn to what Florida calls “organic and indigenous street-level culture” - that is multiuse urban areas: pokey cafés, hidden bistros, a vintage store, an underground club... an art gallery rather than shopping malls, stadiums and big museums. An amount

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<sup>46</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital”, in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John C. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press 1986) pp241-258

<sup>47</sup> Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, p101

<sup>48</sup> I am loath however to completely join the bandwagon of criticism of Richard Florida’s early works. His studies contain a lot of novel research and are persuasively written. A more favourable summary of his recommendations could be reduced to recommending investment in organic or street level culture rather than iconic architectural projects such as stadiums and convention centres – that urban economies are built by appealing to people, not just business.

of measured bohemianism is, he argues, a vital component within a successful modern city's fabric. The creative class enjoy aesthetic diversity while also wanting to be around fellow members of their class. They want 'active' participation in their local culture and prioritise 'experiences' over orthodox commodities. Remember that the White House art centre aims at being a public space for art and social activity – not merely an introverted location for artist residencies.

Of course Florida understands that artists, poets, academics and their ilk aren't themselves, in general, raking in the big bucks and paying the related tax level, but they do foster an urban ambiance attractive to the wider creative class and beyond. In fact it's essential that the lower earners within the creative class be the vanguard of its wider immigration. Fred Manson, an 'urban renewal expert' put it succinctly:

Artists have a transportable infrastructure... They are a natural first group to come into an area which will then seed the bars and other support systems for the creative industries.<sup>49</sup>

As artists are priced out of the inner suburbs, and like rats off a sinking ship threaten to migrate wholesale to Berlin/Lisbon/LA or wherever, Barking and Dagenham council see their opportunity to tap a fraction of inner London's creative exodus. Could they be the cultural carrot on a stick to tantalise a better calibre of taxpayer to the borough?

Individuality, self-expression and openness to difference are favoured over the homogeneity, conformity and "fitting in" that defined the organizational age.<sup>50</sup>

Florida's 'organisational age' is akin to Zygmunt Bauman's 'solid modernity': the age of blue and white collars, top down forms of organisation, hierarchy, centralisation, economies of scale over adaptability, stability over autonomy, standardisation over creativity. Unfortunately The Becontree Estate is inextricably the organisational age tattooed onto the flat plains of Dagenham. Its architecture embodies the age's obdurate order. At its worst *Rise of the Creative Class* is, if I were to dollop out the cynical sauce once again, a gentrification cookbook. Either way however, Dagenham doesn't have any of the ingredients.

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<sup>49</sup> Fred Mason, quoted by The London Particular, "Special Project: Fear Death By Water (The Regeneration Siege In Central Hackney)", *Metamute*, 04/07/2003, (Accessed: 12/08/2017) <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/artists-projects/special-project-fear-death-water-regeneration-siege-central-hackney>

<sup>50</sup> Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, p9

“Don't move to Berlin, move to Barking!” - It's Darren Rodwell, the borough's councillor, who finally gets to say the contested line to camera. You can see him (and awkwardly me too!) in the borough's promo campaign video, *Ich bin ein Barkingier!* – part of their campaign to attract the arts and creative community.<sup>51</sup>

It's important to note that many in Florida's 'super creative core' (artists, musicians et al) remain precariously employed and often poorly paid themselves, though it is this fraction of the creative class that lends aesthetic cachet to the areas that they move to, while often not being the ones to reap the benefits. Creative class led urban regeneration schemes call for urban development from *without*: essentially attracting a different class of resident via culture, who will simply bring their own wealth and education with them. My criticism of this is that these attributes don't seem to affect a wider and underprivileged population; the inner suburb of Tower Hamlets, which will be discussed later, being a prime example of this disconnect.

## Reason 2: Urban Development from *Within*.

When you've got 70% on some form of benefit, you've got to get greater diversity. Without it, you get seen as a dumping ground of London. That's not good for the residents here, or those who are placed here. But we still need to support people here that want to progress. You've got to make sure that we can still build homes for the aspirational working class.<sup>52</sup>

Darren Rodwell, the elected councillor for Barking and Dagenham, wants 'diversification' - attracting some members of different classes, cultures and income brackets - tempered by a “transformative force from within”: fostering a space for what he and many others call “the aspirational working class”. The borough's burgeoning support for the arts (still minor compared to other London

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<sup>51</sup> Barking and Dagenham Council, “Ich bin ein Barkingier!” 08/11/2016. (Accessed 12/08/2017).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vo-9OCFXB18>

It seems ironic that whilst Berlin has been a European magnet for the creative class for over a decade this has not (arguably) translated into a strong economy for the city. However this case is unique with many other factors contributing to its comparative economic shortfalls.

See: Doreen Jakob, “Constructing the Creative Neighbourhood: Hopes and Limitations of Creative City Policies in Berlin”, *City, Culture, and Society*, 2010, Vol.1: Iss.4, pp193-87 (Accessed: 24/10/2017)

doi:10.1016/j.ccs.2011.01.005

<sup>52</sup> Darren Rodwell, quoted by David Hill, “Barking and Dagenham: Darren Rodwell's 'aspirational working class” *The Guardian*, 04/12/2016. (Accessed on 16/08/2017)

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/davehillblog/2016/dec/04/barking-and-dagenham-darren-rodwells-aspirational-working-class>

constituencies) can also be seen as part of an ideological infrastructure for his aspirational working class.

For 80 years, high art was a Saturday night down the working men's club... But we have to be individuals. We have to stretch the mindset of what we can achieve and where we can go...<sup>53</sup>

So, despite the overt drive to seduce flighty arty types to the borough (and their speculative tax paying cultural groupies) there is perhaps a more benign reason why a famously cash-strapped council might help fund an art space or two: that the arts might actually enrich the lives of those that engage with them, and ultimately perhaps that this may translate into wider social and even economic benefits. There are however a few presumptions, policies and notions that Darren Rodwell invokes that I would like to pick at.

Firstly the concept of the *aspiring working class* and other moments of Rodwell's rhetoric risk being contentiously individualistic.<sup>54</sup> As Owen Jones notes: "'Aspiration' has been redefined to mean individual self-enrichment: to scramble up the social ladder and become middle class."<sup>55</sup> As a political concept it assumes meritocracy: a system in which the most talented and hardest workers will de facto be rewarded, in which there is always more room at the top for the talented. According to meritocratic ideology, the poor and unemployed are un-aspirational, simply failing to cut the mustard, or worse are idlers. A meritocratic worldview implies that your actuality and your destiny are yours alone, not woven into the fabric and lives of other people, not dependent on a wider social infrastructure and not constructed by the architecture of class.

In 2012, then Prime Minister David Cameron heralded Britain as an "aspiration nation": "aspiration; people rising from the bottom to the top"<sup>56</sup>. Whilst certainly some, if few, working class members of an area such as Dagenham will achieve their aspirations they will most likely leave the area rather than pull their neighbours up with them. The self-regarding aspirational entrepreneur that

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> To Darren Rodwell's credit his politics do not revolve solely around aspiration. Rodwell has implemented several original policies to protect the current residents of the borough against the double edged sword of regeneration. For example his novel tempering of the right-to-buy inflicted dwindling council property stock via introducing a 'right to invest' scheme, where upon the council get first refusal to buy back any ex-council property at the same proportional market rate they sold it for, as well as his investment and efforts to rejuvenate the old dock area with new industries (notably film studios).

<sup>55</sup> Jones, *Chavs*, p10

<sup>56</sup> David Cameron, "Conservative Party conference, Leader's speech, Birmingham 2012" (Accessed: 21/07/2018) <http://www.britishpoliticalspeech.org/speech-archive.htm?speech=324>

seeks to maximise personal advantage is as likely to do so at the cost of their neighbours as to their benefit. Rogue banker Jordan Belfort, the real-world ‘Wolf of Wall street’ summarised the ethos: “Successful people are 100% convinced that they are masters of their own destiny, they’re not creatures of circumstance, they create circumstance. If the circumstances around them suck they move.”<sup>57</sup> In reality communities either shine together or rust together, destinies for the majority are interwoven.

Secondly Rodwell’s admirable support for the arts in the borough does, at times equate to instrumentalisation. Under the New Labour government ‘The Arts’ were transformed into the ‘Cultural and Creative Industries’. Though better funded than under the preceding Tory government, they were expected to earn their keep one way or another. The chronicler of British cultural policy Robert Hewison describes how under Tony Blair “social inclusion, once considered a new departure for the Arts Council, had become a core concern.”<sup>58</sup> This involved reformatting in funding policy terms the debate between accessibility and excellence, between populism and elitism, and between intrinsic and instrumental value.

In later years, with a cutting of many social services and wider arts budgets under the successive coalition and Tory governments, the temptation for various funding bodies to plug the sorely under-supported social sector with what remained of the arts budget is understandable. If the same pot of money can support the arts whilst simultaneously creating unofficial day centres, educational supplements and social cohesion facilities, all the better. However a very real danger is, as Larne Abse Gogarty writes in *Art Monthly*:

We need to recognise that the further retrenchment of state provision and deepening recession since 2008 have pushed frequently well-meaning socially engaged artists towards plugging the gap in providing social services where they risk endorsing the logic of austerity.<sup>59</sup>

And even whilst it may be a respectable goal for art to improve the lot of ‘ordinary’ citizens, for the most part humble artists are a poor substitute for trained community workers and actual educational

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<sup>57</sup> Jordan Belfort, quote found on “Success Resources” 28/05/2014, (Accessed 17/08/2017) <http://www.success-resources.com.au/blog/top-10-jordan-belfort-quotes-for-success/>

<sup>58</sup> Robert Hewison, *Cultural Capital; The Rise and Fall of Creative Britain*. (London: Verso 2014) p86

<sup>59</sup> Larne Abse Gogarty. “Art and Gentrification,” *Art Monthly*, Iss:373: February 2014. p7 (Accessed: 14/10/2018) [http://www.academia.edu/11969060/Art\\_and\\_Gentrification\\_The\\_uses\\_and\\_abuses\\_of\\_social\\_practice](http://www.academia.edu/11969060/Art_and_Gentrification_The_uses_and_abuses_of_social_practice)

infrastructure. Any ‘impact’ these types of projects may have are difficult to demonstrate even when successful and the targets themselves risk distorting the activities of those on which they are imposed by forcing quantitative rather than qualitative aims. This logic can result at worse in tokenistic empty gestures of socially engaged practices, neither truly socially engaged whilst being artistically compromised.

## **Embedded**

There are, of course, notable exceptions with regards to socially engaged art practices that do not fall foul of these moments of bad faith. For example, elsewhere in Barking and Dagenham is Verity-Jane Keefe, whose multi-stranded art project *The Mobile Museum* toured around all eleven council estates in the borough from 2014 to 2017. The Ford Iveco Mobile Library van, renovated to facilitate a range of artistic projects, was an evolving interactive archive of the area. Making, collecting and cataloguing material; it started off empty on the Becontree Estate, accruing its content through collaborative workshops at each of its eleven stops, as well as via Keefe’s film and zine practice.

Keefe designed workshops to engage with each estate’s context, primarily involving local residents but also a non-local art-going public (not that Dagenham locals are *de facto* non-art-going). A particularly striking example was the orchestration of an archaeological dig at the demolition site within the partially flattened Leys Estate involving council workers, residents and a professional archaeologist. The project uncovered artefacts and keepsakes – what Keefe calls ‘speculative ruins’ – that were then placed in the van’s evolving archive. This particular workshop on the journey, at once playful and full of pathos, saw participants dig through the area’s immediate architectural past, in some cases through their own ex-domicile, uncovering distinctive scraps of the building and its inhabitants: recognised linoleum patches to debris plastered with the remains a child’s wallpaper.

Similarly, there was a rubble life-drawing class at the partially demolished Gasgoin Estate. The wreckage becoming precious artefact, giving clues of the past and by extension the here and now. A borough wide project saw participants surveying and pressing flowering weeds that had embedded themselves in the crevices of the resistant concrete. ‘Weeds’ are unwanted or unintended plants. The

act of recording, preserving and thereby celebrating these anarchic flora becomes a subtle way of reevaluating what is considered beautiful, who's and what's history is deemed worthy of recording and questioning the ethics at play in totalised urban design.

By creating taxonomies of the seemingly mundane and generic, these activities, further echoed by Keefe's filmic instalments, reveal specificity. The act of labelling is also the act of remembering; to preserve is to treasure. Not unlike a brick-and-mortar museum's conservancy of other usually more 'historic' ruins, (Pompeii, the Berlin Wall...) the mobile museum's preservation of rubble in carefully identified jars makes them into urns of an immediate urban past, their dumb dust no less sacred than the ashes of a relative kept on the mantle piece. The social element of this process unearths and logs not just spent concrete but the personal narratives that are imbedded in the apparent anonymity of 20<sup>th</sup> century mass-produced housing.

The workshops, archive and other artwork derivations from the Mobile Museum were far more than an educational tool for a culturally marginalised or non-art-going demographic. Rather, they operated as a multifarious piece of relational aesthetics based around acts of collective remembering. Bourriaud described this tendency as "a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space."<sup>60</sup> The artist is catalyst rather than sole progenitor and the artwork is networked rather than autonomous.

The Mobile Museum was developed out of an initial commission and promise of funding by Barking and Dagenham council in 2011, a pledge then matched by the Arts Council England (ACE). A year later Keefe was informed that the borough's funding was no longer available and with this ACE's match funding was withdrawn. Having already spent a year in development, the project sought alternative support, finding minor amounts from Barking and Dagenham's Museums and Heritage division as well as the borough's Regeneration Department. The bulk of the funding however was

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<sup>60</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods. (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002) p113

finally achieved through Keefe's 'Kick Starter' campaign to essentially crowd-fund the ambitious project.<sup>61</sup>

In 2017 the van was unfortunately broken into for the second time and vandalised beyond repair after completing 10.5 of its 11 estate tour. With no more funding available the sabotage was decisive and the van-based manifestation of the project now only exists in memory and online documentation. Despite Keefe's earnest desire to create a lasting archive perhaps the Mobile Museum was principally an alibi to stimulate conversations, remembrance and a sense of community; the act of creation being as much the artwork as its completion, a completion that in retrospect signified its death.

Post-vandalism, phoenix-like, Keefe has built a Mobile Museum trolley with the aim of this becoming a bookable resource. Furthermore, despite the original van being beyond redemption, she expresses how the project has morphed and grown: "I'm not sure the work will ever be finished as it's turned into something much bigger." She writes "The work as double agent: the project as it was conceived as an artwork and then the process/politics of (its) production."<sup>62</sup> She remains imbedded within the borough, relational art practices being far harder to sabotage.

In the inner East London borough of Hackney operates the artist Andrea Luka Zimmerman and her collective Fugitive Images. I first became aware of Zimmerman's work in 2009, though only associated her name with the project many years later. At the time I was squatting in a mostly boarded up council block, Laburnum Court in Hackney, capitalising on the council's inefficiently slow process of decanting the residents elsewhere (2004-2014) in order to demolish the buildings and sell the land to developers. This was a typical transition of land from public to private hands taking place under the aegis of 'regeneration'; the sound reasoning of replacing often out-dated or dilapidated architecture becoming the alibi to exercise a neoliberal logic of land financialisation.

The council, or rather their proxy private company – the ironically named Hackney Homes Ltd. to whom the management of evictions and demolitions was outsourced – would board up the windows

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<sup>61</sup> Verity-Jane Keefe, "Kickstarter: The Mobile Museum." 2014 (Accessed 11/03/2019) <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1114774854/the-mobile-museum>

<sup>62</sup> Verity-Jane Keefe, personal email to author. 30/03/2019

of empty flats with ugly orange hoarding. In retrospect these garish boards seem iconic, synonymous with Hackney's changing landscape of the time. The naïve attempt to deter break-ins with these gaudy security shutters only ended up advertising their vacancy to any passing squatter as well as further underlining the dereliction of the area, unnecessarily showcasing its decay. This managed decline of the estate ran in contrast to (and arguably because of) wider Hackney's accelerating land prices. In these years the borough was at the national forefront of gentrification, seeing the nation's biggest percentage increase in housing costs between the censuses of 2001 and 2011.<sup>63</sup>

Had it been possible to see through the boarded up windows of our otherwise cosy council flat, we would have looked out over Regent's Canal and across it the Haggerston Estate, made up of similar five story rusty-bricked blocks. This neighbouring estate was going through the exact same orange erasure of windows that signified the Hackney Homes evictions, each carrot rectangle an ejected resident. It was in this context that I first became aware of the Fugitive Images project *I Am Here*. One week in 2009 each orange board on Samuel House (the road/canal facing block of the Haggerston Estate) was replaced by huge portraiture headshots of the residents that still resided in the half-deserted canal-side properties.

The portraits, shot on a clean white background, depicted a range of ages and races, some with mischievous eyes or big grins, others a calm passivity. All stare at the camera and therefore out of the picture at the viewer on the street or the canal's footpath. The impression was one of dignity if not cheerful defiance. The crisp simplicity of the composition, colour and pose ensured that the subjects were not made into fetishized victims, preventing the project from inhabiting the discourse of "deprivation". They are 67 portraits of very ordinary people, unpretentious but not unflattering. Zimmerman herself was one of the faces, having been a resident of the block since 1997. She was also the chair of the residents committee and active in trying to save the long threatened estate for many years. From 2009-2014 Zimmerman also made the film 'Estate, a Reverie' (released 2015) which again involved a level of local participation and intimate portrayals of residents that would have been both difficult if not intrusive were she not part of and imbedded within the community herself.

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<sup>63</sup> See: "Booming London Property Prices by Borough", *Occupy London*, 2014. (Accessed 06/05/2018), <https://occupylondon.org.uk/43513/>

Site-specific projects (and their arty audience) injected into locales and communities that are not usually associated with The Arts can go one of two ways. Despite often invoking anti-elitist politics, they risk a cultural capital associated with an educated class being forced onto an uninitiated populace, potentially becoming invasive or patronising. They inadvertently risk being part of a top-down cultural hegemony, a quasi-colonial agenda of cultural betterment via their own bourgeoisie vision of enlightenment.

*I Am Here* was not and probably could not have been guilty of this. As opposed to a presumed binary between artist and the ‘community’, the project stemmed from locals who were themselves embedded artists. *Embedded* from *em(in)+bed*; they literally sleep there. No ‘engagement’ needed. Whilst artist initiated, the project became a collective statement by the residents affirming their presence in a city that might rather forget them. *I Am Here* wasn’t commissioned, it didn’t access pots of pre-existing funding for the arts, nor was it born from a call for proposals or an artist brief. The bulk of funding came from in-kind support from local businesses and residents, and a smaller amount from the previously unknown community growth fund. Finally, they squeezed permission out of Hackney Council after arguing that they were going to have to re-do many of the boards anyway. With 98% of the residents signing a petition in support of the project they couldn’t say no.<sup>64</sup>

I was evicted by high court bailiffs a short while after the portraits went up, however both estates and the *I am Here* pictures stayed up until 2014 when the entire area underwent its architectural reboot.

There are several similarities between Keefe’s *Mobile Museum* and Fugitive Images’ *I Am Here*. Both projects were at once contemporary art, yet operated ambivalently with regards to this status: They functioned in independent contexts and without relying on the reverence that fine art usually demands and the exclusivity this can entail. Simultaneously they also managed to transcend the specificity of their circumstances and immediate public existing, if only in memory, as contemporary art.

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<sup>64</sup> Indicated by Andrea Zimmerman in personal email to author, 18/03/2019.

The Mobile Museum offered arts engagement at doorsteps rather than as a centre to be visited. In Keefe's words it: "engage(s) with residents from across the borough, not just those who already actively seek out cultural activities... The mountain will not come to Mohamed."<sup>65</sup> These projects did not need to be couched in the terms and presumptions of contemporary art in order to be successful.

*Fugitive Images* expound their interest in the dangers and potentials inherent in artworks that operate outside their usual socio-cultural network:

When practicing in the public domain, the interpretation of the artwork as art is not assured. Consequently the work may be appropriated and used by any of the stakeholders having vested interests in the context within which the artwork is located...(however) we see instrumentality as a possibility rather than a problem. Whereas the gallery and museum perform the important role of guaranteeing works to be interpreted as art and therefore allowing a highly specialized and precise discourse to exist, one may also see it as limiting artworks to be nothing but art. Placed in a wider social context artworks will inevitably be exposed to instrumental use but it also allows them to expand, participate in and address a much wider range of discourses.<sup>66</sup>

So for *Fugitive Images* the possibility of 'co-option', rather than being something to be avoided, is in fact an inevitable part of operating beyond the 'safe' confines of the white-walled gallery. The context for the work's reception itself becomes an artist material to be moulded, though "one that never, unlike clay, will give itself up completely to the hands of the artist."<sup>67</sup> The ontological difference between these projects as pieces of art or 'ordinary' things is neither easy nor important to determine. They can operate both within and without the restrictive social universe that confers on them the status of 'legitimate culture' and thereby retain an agency that pushes them beyond art's traditional standing as candidate for detached aesthetic appreciation.

Another point of similarity between the two projects is the artist's long-standing engagement with their respective areas and the communities within. Keefe has worked on similar projects throughout the borough for almost a decade before the Mobile Museum, and Zimmerman lived on the Haggerston Estate herself for over a decade while being very active in the community. Being imbedded within and a-part-of their subject, these artists have not been parachuted in from elsewhere, nor are their projects fleeting, rather taking and lasting years.

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<sup>65</sup> Verity-Jane Keefe, "Kickstarter: The Mobile Museum." 2014 (Accessed 11/03/2019)  
<https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1114774854/the-mobile-museum>

<sup>66</sup> Andrea Zimmerman, Lasse Johansson, Tristan Fennell. "I AM HERE: some thoughts on site-specificity and instrumentality." *Site Specific Art*, 2009. (accessed: 18/03/2019)  
<http://sitespecificart.org.uk/7.html>

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

A third point of similarity is that both projects operated principally without state or local funding, or at least to the degree that they were not beholden to any external requirements.<sup>68</sup> Keefe, speaking at a conference at the London Transport Museum, said there is a danger that “we inherit institutional habits and outlooks... I actually saw the fact I lost the local authority funding as a bit of a release, that I could use this to totally retain autonomy in the project and make work that was neutral... outside of a council agenda or an institutional framework.”<sup>69</sup> I do not mean to celebrate these projects’ lack of funding, rather notice the freedom and integrity that can flourish more organically when projects shed the agendas and quotas that are often attached to grants.

Whilst certainly there are many long term funded organisations that are embedded within communities and that work over extended time frames, many funding bodies are in danger of being inclined to support quick fixes, short-term projects that are aligned with their own aims and with clearly statistical objectives and outcomes. Pre-existent pots of funding tending not to suit individual artist’s imbedded practices; attracting instead ‘proposals’ rather than nurturing the organic, and can be prone to parachuting artists in to ‘engage’ with localities and communities that they are not a part of.

The White House, a “public space for art and social activity”, is a well-intentioned symptom of this arts funding milieu. Its public engagement, whilst bureaucratically demonstrable, risks being artificial in its funding dependant figures.

For example Chad McCail’s project, the other artist in residence during my stay at the White House, had statistically great public participation involving two groups of locals to collaboratively make a pantomime.<sup>70</sup> One was an older set charged with prop and costume making for the production and consisted primarily of about six retirees who would participate almost daily, as well as four or five other local participants taking part less frequently.<sup>71</sup> During my three months of living at the house and getting to know this group I learnt that these core six had previously been volunteering at

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<sup>68</sup> Indicated by Andrea Zimmerman and Verity-Jan Keefe in personal emails to author, 18/03/2019 and 31/03/2019 respectively.

<sup>69</sup> Verity-Jane Keef, “The Mobile Museum.” Presentation at *London Transport Museum*, 13/03/2016. Video published 2017. (Accessed: 18/03/2019) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lxixQt9bho74>

<sup>70</sup> Create London, “Chad McCail: Jack, Jill and the Beanstalk.” 2016, (Accessed: 18/03/2019) <http://createlondon.org/event/chad-mccail/>

<sup>71</sup> This core group went on to start ‘All hands on Deck’ – making themselves a permanent fixture at The White House and supporting the production of future projects. Ibid.

Valence House down the road. This is Dagenham's only heritage site and small museum; the participants had left to 'volunteer' here at the White House, possibly leaving the museum understaffed. In retrospect the retirees were an already established informal community group who, from talking to them, considered their contribution and engagement at the White House as charity work, or at least as 'helping out' rather than viewing themselves as the benefactors of a 'public engagement' project (though of course volunteer work can be self-beneficial). So rather than widening local participation among the socially alienated or initiating the young-artistically-naïve into the 'creative industries', the project had unintentionally syphoned off much needed volunteer workers from the museum sector.

The second group were supposed to be budding young local actors who were to star in the production, and yet with no initial local uptake participants all ended up being from Barking and Dagenham College, brought to the project by their teacher. In a revelatory incident halfway through rehearsals, with a couple of the teenage boys being particularly disruptive, McCail grudgingly morphed into the authoritarian that he despises. Upon his partial failure, or rather reluctance to perform this crowd control he finally enquired why, if they so clearly didn't want to be here, had they volunteered in the first place. To his surprise it emerged that their involvement had become a compulsory part of their drama module: McCail's project being used to subsidise an underfunded school drama department, or feasibly rather covering for a skiving teacher.

Whilst the final production may well have been superior to your average school drama it risked condoning the austerity logic of current secondary school arts education.<sup>72</sup> Furthermore – unlike Keefe and Zimmerman's projects – McCail's pantomime was unsuccessful in occupying that fruitfully ambivalent status of being both 'contemporary art' *and* public cultural production; only managing in the end to be the latter. After months of work and buckets of good intentions the final piece was essentially an outsourced school play, though one funded by a contemporary arts organisation.

There are and were positive community outcomes to this and other White House projects, though during my stay at the centre many of these seemed organic experiences and ones that might not count

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<sup>72</sup> See: Jonathan Neelands et al., "Enriching Britain: Culture, Creativity and Growth." *The Warwick Commission on the Future of Cultural Values*. (Coventry: The University of Warwick, 2015) (Accessed 03/03/2019)

towards the funding targets anyway. Experiences that may be qualitatively valuable to certain individuals without particularly adding to the numerical aims of inclusion. Friendships, employment and a 'sense of community' hopefully were and are still being built, however the contractual 'engagement' agreements that we as artists were yoked to risked discounting actual emotional connections, distorting their own aims of inclusivity, and seriously jeopardising the quality and integrity of final art works (whether 'networked' in the sense of relational aesthetics or autonomous in more fixed forms).

In 1999 John Tusa, then head of the Barbican centre gave a concise rebuttal to the increasing instrumentalisation of the arts:

Mozart is Mozart because of his music and not because he created a tourist industry in Salzburg or gave his name to decadent chocolate and marzipan Salzburger kugel. Picasso is important because he taught a century new ways of looking at objects and not because his painting in the Bilbao Guggenheim Museum are regenerating an otherwise derelict northern Spanish port... Absolute quality is paramount in attempting a valuation of the arts; all other factors are interesting, useful but secondary.<sup>73</sup>

There is a case for the transformative power of experiencing art, but this would be impossible to quantify and the ramifications immeasurable. Despite my cynicism that nibbles at the hand that feeds me, I do believe in the inherent worth of the arts: to enrich the present, make sense of the past, to speculate on the future, to be thoughtful of the world and community around us and ultimately, attempting to understand ourselves. However the problem that almost all publicly funded arts institutions have is getting the public to attend. Furthermore the push for a working-class public engagement with the arts seems duplicitous or insincere as Conservative government simultaneously strips comprehensive schools of arts funding, further entrenching the middle-class monopoly over the arts for another generation.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> John Tusa, *Art Matters: Reflecting on Culture*, (London: Methuen, 1999) p103

<sup>74</sup> see Jonothan Neelands et al., "Enriching Britain: Culture, Creativity and Growth." *The Warwick Commission on the Future of Cultural Values*. (Coventry: The University of Warwick, 2015) (Accessed 23/09/2017)  
[https://www2.warwick.ac.uk/research/warwickcommission/futureculture/finalreport/warwick\\_commission\\_report\\_2015.pdf](https://www2.warwick.ac.uk/research/warwickcommission/futureculture/finalreport/warwick_commission_report_2015.pdf)

## Engagement

Part of my residency at the house contractually includes two primary public engagement stipulations: to make a new artwork working with local people and secondly to conceive a minimum of 6 public events at the space. For the latter I proposed an introductory filmmaking course: a free weekly session over two months where the participants would learn to write, film and edit their own short films, for which we bought, borrowed and had donated to us all the equipment needed, particularly the six computers in the corner of my studio mentioned earlier. We promoted the film course at the local college, youth groups, job centre, the local newspaper and several online bulletins and mail outs. No one came. (Actually 2 people came on the 3<sup>rd</sup> week but I ended up just teaching them some basic Photoshop skills). It was pretty embarrassing. I suspect that this was a PR problem – despite our endeavours people simply didn't know about it. I also suspect however that mentioning fine-art-filmmaking, that I was an artist and that the course was in an art space didn't help.

There is a strong statistical correlation between engagement in the arts and social class, but to presume that causation runs from the arts would be like confusing a light bulb for an electrical generator. A 2008 Arts Council statistical study finds “two of the most important factors in determining whether somebody attends the arts are education and social status”.<sup>75</sup> The study hypothesises that “the process of education and the level of exposure to the arts education provides, particularly at degree level, results in an increased ability to interpret and understand arts experiences, which increases a person's motivation to engage.”<sup>76</sup> Accordingly Hewison suggests that it is not necessarily within the capabilities of the arts to correct this demographic imbalance: “the culture sector is an integrated system that requires feeder routes to ensure a two-way traffic between the centre and the periphery”.<sup>77</sup> Young people need to be encouraged to gain cultural capabilities in order to, as Rodwell said, “stretch mind-sets”, to think critically and creatively, but this becomes far harder to achieve once they have left full time education.

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<sup>75</sup> Catherine Bunting et al., *From Indifference to Enthusiasm: Patterns of Arts Attendance in England* (London: Arts Council England, 2008) p63

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p63

<sup>77</sup> Hewison, *Cultural Capital*, p231

The Arts Council study also suggests that engagement is in relation to what it ambiguously calls ‘social status’:

Arts attendance is driven less by how much money a person earns, or by their general economic circumstances, and more by the types of people they are likely to have as friends or to socialise with. In other words, arts attendance seems to be driven by some concept of identity – who we think we are, the type of people we perceive to be our social status equals and the kind of lifestyle we deem appropriate and relevant for ‘people like us’.<sup>78</sup>

The Arts Council findings are corroborated, though couched in more overtly class orientated terms, in the study *Culture, Class, Distinction*.<sup>79</sup> This further finds that not only is artistic engagement closely correlated to the upper middle class (they use the Bourdieusian term the “professional-executive class”) but unlike Bourdieu’s earlier observations in his work *Distinction*, that this is based not on deliberate exclusion but voluntary detachment. Their study shows that the professional-executive class actively engaged in the arts/high culture tend not to use this as a form of social distinction to differentiate themselves from the working class. In fact within this demographic there is at least a professed politics of anti-elitism.

Nevertheless the thorn in the side of publicly funded art spaces is that, statistically speaking, the working class are simply uninterested in the arts or ‘legitimate’ culture more generally. Both studies also agree however that being middle class is neither a guarantee of engagement, but rather that voracious consumers of the arts is a sub-bracket within the middle class that unsurprisingly correlates to Richard Florida’s ‘creative class’, specifically his ‘super-creative core’. Robert Hewison summarises the dichotomy:

The purpose of publically funded culture is not to continue ‘the reproduction of the privilege of the professional-executive class’... but to open it up to as wide a public as possible – a public that so far declines the access it has been offered.<sup>80</sup>

Whilst this is a gross generalisation, the working class do remain under represented and under engaged in the culture that they help publically fund.

More than just bringing contemporary art to a borough that is, for the most part, indifferent to it, The White House residency programme also, and perhaps more successfully, gives artists such as myself

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<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p64

<sup>79</sup> Tony Bennett et al. *Culture, Class, Distinction*. (London: Routledge, 2009) p.201-205.

<sup>80</sup> Hewison, *Cultural Capital*, p215

the opportunity to escape the standard geographical creative-class bubble and the class and cultural hegemony that this takes as a given. Representations of the borough and its residents via art works may transpose issues of class, housing, and London's forgotten overflow back into the centre of urban and creative consciousness if, that is, the artworks produced here manage to transcend their immediate specificity, having lives and exhibitions beyond the borough and its poor audience attendance. Outposts such as The White House expand the London art world's borders – both cognitively, geographically and culturally – and it may well turn out that the art world benefits from experiencing a bit of Dagenham more than Dagenham immediately benefits from a new art centre directly.

## CHAPTER 3.

### Warehouse II, The Bow Quarter.

#### **Hamlets in the East**

My girlfriend Polly and I have been invited round for dinner by an old friend from art school Suze and her boyfriend whom I've not yet met. They live in Bow, not far from me in Hackney Wick; both areas are in the East London borough of Tower Hamlets.<sup>81</sup> It's a warm early evening in May and we decide to walk the 25 minutes.

The borough's name refers to the now swallowed up hamlets that once sat to the east of the Tower of London. Fittingly then, I suggest that it would be more useful to think of the borough as multiple townships, demographically, economically and culturally. Tower Hamlets has a much-vaunted urban diversity whilst paradoxically not being particularly mixed. Classes and cultures sit each one on top of, but somehow oblivious to the others: different hangouts, hairdressers, rituals, languages, different pantheons of gods and commuter routes. A diverse but cliquy corner of the city, the borough has the highest wealth inequality in the capital: by far the largest pay gap between the top 20% and bottom 20%.<sup>82</sup> Tower Hamlets saw the biggest increase in proportion of top end qualifications in the whole of the UK between the last two censuses (2001-2011) indicative of

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<sup>81</sup> Only part of Hackney Wick is in Hackney, the majority of the ex-industrial parts are in Tower Hamlets.

<sup>82</sup> See: "Tower Hamlets: Poverty and inequality data for Tower Hamlets." *London Poverty Profile 2018*, (London: Trust for London, 2018), (accessed 27/07/2018), <https://www.trustforlondon.org.uk/data/boroughs/tower-hamlets-poverty-and-inequality-indicators/>

changing demographics and the influx of the university educated to its gritty streets.<sup>83</sup> Simultaneously the borough's rate of unemployment remains the highest in London and one of the highest nationally.<sup>84</sup>

We are walking from graffitied Hackney Wick and Fish Island in the northeast of the borough, which serve (as well as Shoreditch straddling its south-west border) as Tower Hamlets' primary nightlife tourist attractions. As cultural and social destinations for increasingly non-locals they provide precarious service industry employment for some, while unpicking actual local cohesion. Trading on their bygone cultural capital, the businesses profiting from their unique appeals ironically homogenises them in the process. My friend Anne, who will also be at tonight's dinner, works in the bar-club next to where I live. (It's actually the same building: my bedroom/studio is a breeze block away from behind the bar area. On weekends, when the music is unsleepably loud, I fantasise about getting an extra thin and long drill bit to covertly bore teeny tiny holes through to the other side and then – as if by magic – pushing their most expensive bottles off their top shelves using some kind of poking stick. I imagine bottles of coffee Patron and single malts smashing down, nudged by the poltergeist spirits of disgruntled ex-residents.)

It's not yet dark on a Friday night in May and already there are throngs of lads drinking plastic-pinted lager on the streets, ladies larking and huddles of chit chatters. The club itself will only get going later however, turning on their sub-woofers just as we arrive back home.

We wander out of the Wick and along the cleaned up canal complete with swans. This side the footpath comes with designer graffiti, barge boats and the sort of poo that probably belongs to a pug or some other type of inbred miniature dog. Gone are the heydays of floating bodies and human faeces. Across the water is the Olympic Park: greenery and footpaths circumambulating designer arenas. Leering over the main stadium is Anish Kapoor's steel sculpture – somewhere between useless rollercoaster and mangled red crane.

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<sup>83</sup> See: Dorling, *People and Places: A 21<sup>st</sup>-century atlas of the UK*, p134

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p121

Crossing the canal, we enter the tumultuous land-grab of the also ex-industrial Fish Island, often erroneously considered part of Hackney Wick. New-build flats lap up the canal-side real estate, wooden cladding and climbing plants differentiating them from their strictly manmade siblings elsewhere in the borough. Set back from the water are warehouses and building sites. We pass where my friend Stef used to live, we pass where my friend Zoe used to live, we pass where my friend Marianna used to live, we pass where my friend Obi used to live. The area, once pregnant with possibilities and the luxury of space uncapitalised on, is now haunted by aborted futures.

Finally, we reach what I suspect may be the last meadow of municipal wasteland in the entire borough. I point this out to Polly like some kind of inverted estate agent and we take turns peering through a gap in the battered wooden hoarding.

“It used to have mounds and mounds of fly tipped mattresses and fridges and stuff... mountains of urban detritus!” I say excitedly. I’ve jumped the fence a few times; taken friends, taken photographs, taken the odd souvenir to incorporate into a sculpture (in turn aborted, abandoned, fly tipped). Now the plot is barren apart from a security van parked right in the middle: a sign of intention.

“I like the funny security van in the middle! It looks lost,” says Polly after she peers through.

“You’re not supposed to like the van. The van’s the bad bit.” I retort in a joking voice. “There’s nowhere in this city left to bury a body anymore. Or go dogging, or...”

“Just when you think you know a guy...” she winks and smiles.

We take a right and climb the footbridge over the massive A12 that is sunken into the land beneath us. Lining the demi-motorway are some of the few warehouses in the borough still being used commercially. Windowless, yellow, self-storage sarsens for all the excess furniture of couples forced to downsize. Screwfixes and Toolstations. Lumber yards and garden centres. Looming beyond them all to the south is an ominous staccato of skyscrapers.

Tower Hamlets sits between London's two banking sectors: to the west the older 'City' (Bank, Monument, Liverpool Street) and within its own borders to the south-east, the younger, brasher Canary Wharf that is what we are now looking at (or is it looking at us?). At a spitting distance from Bow, built on the docks and what would have been the old slums of Poplar, sits this coagulation of wealth. The Wharf is perhaps the primary reason for the borough's discrepancies of affluence.

An island of sorts, the development is bounded by water. The Thames snakes around to the east, south and west. Canals to the north, dug for the now dried-up trade of the old docks, double as pleasing watery walkways for lunch-broken workers and, more subtly, as a series of moats. Guarded bridges with the potential for pop-up barricades break these waterways, marking the threshold of what is designated as an 'urban enterprise zone': a private island that offers tax concessions, infrastructure incentives and relaxed monetary regulations.

The architecture's corporate body language – like most banks – is assertive: proud visibility connoting permanence and stability. Like any other non-democratic system – the Church, the monarchy – the banking sector's power benefits from being ostentatious. The expression of power is a self-fulfilling prophecy. The area therefore is a vigilantly controlled and curated space. Birds of prey (guided by their leather gloved handlers) chase pigeons and sea gulls between the naff glass monoliths, persuading them that they would lead more fruitful lives elsewhere in the borough. On the ground walkie-talkied security guards ensure the area is kept free of undesirables (I've been politely escorted out several times for filming).

This is also the highest concentration in the borough of art in the (arguably) public realm. Outdoor artworks here, primarily sculpture, tend towards total abstraction; Platonic forms conjured out of metals (Keith Rand, *Original Form*, 1999; Charles Hadcock, *Torsion II*, 2011), placed in non-illusionistic space, combined into non-representational compositions. In their simplicity the mathematical forms negate the need for interpretation. Their dehumanised purity is oblivious to the messy complexities of the living (Suresh Dutt, *Drawing Cube (blue)*, 2010). The few humanoid statues that are here seem to sit outside of time (or at least in the mythos of ancient Greece backslash Rome backslash whenever), wearing tunics and with geometric shapes for heads and faces (Lynn Chadwick, *Couple on Seat*, 1984).

Geometric abstraction has often been associated with the metaphysical – transcending the dirt of this earth. In art-historical terms geometric abstraction is virtually synonymous with concrete art. The artist summons up the purely abstract and makes it live a concrete existence – creation *ex nihilo*! Much like banking. The whole area is an exercise in impression management.

Thankfully, from the safe distance of this motorway crossing we are spared the full punch in the eye of Canary Wharf's 90's architectural crimes. Here, as from most places in East London, it is content to stay in the corner of our vision like a dreadful reminder of inaccessible overlords. At the centre of this glass gravy train is the tower originally nicknamed *Thatcher's Cock*.<sup>85</sup> At its peak sits an obelisk, a light blinking from its apex makes the structure into an inland lighthouse, flashing out its warning.

Across this footbridge, as throughout the wider borough and beyond, spreads a Barclay's blue, bank-sponsored, cycle super highway.<sup>86</sup> Local estate agents have started to speak in terms of cycle-distance-to-The-City and walking-distance-to-Canary-Wharf.

## Real Estates

Dipping down from the crossing we come onto Old Ford Road. To the left are pale bricked 1990's low-rise cheap builds, on the right are a few blitz surviving Victorian terrace housing, originally built for an industrial proletariat and now some of the most desirable properties for the area's burgeoning middle class. On the corner an old pub makes for a very spacious domestic conversion as does the old chapel a few paces later. Its repurposing into flats betrayed by superfluous pot-plants in its upper windows. Polly and I agree that the vintage green tiles along the wall of the pub-turned-house are a really attractive authentic detail and hard to find should one want to buy some.

We have now entered Bow, an area that perhaps better represents Tower Hamlets as a whole. A hodgepodge of 20<sup>th</sup> century housing peppered with Victorian terrace remnants. Above and behind and all around us sit clusters of council-made blocks and towers. Many of these both Tony Blair and

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<sup>85</sup> See: Owen Hathaway, "The Myth that Canary Wharf did East London Any Good", *The Guardian*, 15/05/2012. (Accessed 05/05/2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/may/15/canary-wharf-east-london-myth>

<sup>86</sup> The bikes themselves are now sponsored by the bank Santander, however London cycle lane's originally were changed from green to blue to match the color of the bike's original sponsor – Barkley's Bank.

David Cameron described as “so-called sink estates”;<sup>87</sup> a turn of phrase that conjures images of the depths of deprivation whilst simultaneously distancing its speaker from accusations of stigmatisation. It utilises the violence of names whilst disavowing responsibility for their usage (as yes, I have just done but with a double removal of accountability). The area appears to have scrubbed-up in the ten years since I moved here and yet child poverty in the borough is at 53%, the highest in the country!<sup>88</sup> Unemployment is the highest in London, followed closely by Barking and Dagenham.<sup>89</sup> You wouldn’t know it from our casual walk through – it doesn’t look like urban poverty anymore.

A curry simmering behind closed doors is revealed by its scent through a window. 85-90% of Indian restaurants are run by Bangladeshis and street signs written in Bengali indicate Tower Hamlets’ largest demographic.<sup>90</sup> Making up 32% of the population, they are the most prevalent ethnicity within the borough and have been since the 1970s.<sup>91</sup> They also remain by far the most deprived ethnic group in Britain according to the government’s last census in 2011.<sup>92</sup> Late-night cafés and chicken shops serve as hangouts for those who aren’t supposed to drink alcohol, though small groups of Bangladeshi youths can be spotted on the canal at night hiding contraband booze.

At midmorning and again at lunch the high pitch white noise and rodent squeaks of school playgrounds spring up in pockets of sound, scattered throughout the streets. Five o’clock, the cackling of teenage girls discovering their own spectacle. Right now it’s early evening in early summer and the sound of a young moped roars for attention, we hear the whoop-whoop of an ambulance and the grumble of a bus. Underground trains can be felt by subterranean flat dwellers – the Central line passes underneath here somewhere, its rumble a strange comfort of amniotic-sac-familiarity for those brought up listening to its reverberations through brickwork at bedtime.

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<sup>87</sup> David Cameron, “Estate Regeneration”, *The Sunday Times*, 10/01/2016

<sup>88</sup> See: End Child Poverty Campaign. “Poverty in Your Area, 2018”. *Child Poverty Action Group*, 2018, (Accessed: 04/05/2018), <http://www.endchildpoverty.org.uk/poverty-in-your-area-2018/>

<sup>89</sup> Trust for London, “Unemployment ratio by Borough”, *London’s Poverty Profile 2018*. (Accessed: 04/05/2018), <https://www.trustforlondon.org.uk/data/unemployment-rate-borough/>

<sup>90</sup> Homa Khaleeli, “The Curry Crisis”, *The Guardian*, 08/01/2012. (Accessed: 25/9/2017), <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2012/jan/08/britains-curry-crisis-chefs-immigration>

<sup>91</sup> Tower Hamlets, “Ethnicity in Tower Hamlets: Analysis of 2011 Census data”. (2013), (Accessed: 05/05/2018), [https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Borough\\_statistics/Ward\\_profiles/Census-2011/RB-Census2011-Ethnicity-2013-01.pdf](https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Borough_statistics/Ward_profiles/Census-2011/RB-Census2011-Ethnicity-2013-01.pdf)

<sup>92</sup> Lucinda Platt, “Inequality within ethnic groups”, *Joseph Rowntree Foundation*, 2011, (Accessed: 25/09/2017), <https://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/jrf/migrated/files/inequality-ethnicity-poverty-full.pdf>

Sub-bass beats leak out of a third floor window as we turn off Old Ford Road. The council estates of Tower Hamlets, specifically Bow, were the birthplace of Grime music in the early 2000s. Despite being one of the few new genres of music to emerge from Britain in the last two decades (another being dubstep, itself spawned from grime), for years it was the wrong type of urban creativity for New Labour. The grime scene became a victim of a policing strategy that seemed openly racially biased. *Form 696* was a 2003 piece of licensing act legislation that both asked for the genre of music that would be played at a given event and the expected ethnicity of those in attendance. Grime nights found that they were systematically denied licences. The form being only recently amended, perhaps due to grime's second wave of success and international recognition with acts such as Stormzy (an artist who went onto use his platform at the Brit Awards to perform a song critiquing the government's handling of the Grenfell tragedy: another crisis of contemporary urban planning in London and a consequence of neglect premised on class and race).<sup>93</sup>

An amalgamation of garage, jungle, dancehall and hip hop, its syncopated 140bpm breakbeats feature abrasive snares that sound like they've been bashed out from the inside of a cage. Impossibly low, guttural bass lines reverberate through your torso whilst for the most part young black youths rap at twice the pace of traditional hip-hop. The quick-fire lyrical content focuses on gritty depictions of urban life, council estates, crime, violence and, in their own way, aspiration. Grime is dirt ingrained into the surface. Whilst it may be covered or masked, grime remains embedded in the substrate.

Despite surface-level appearances, for many residents of the borough things haven't changed a great deal from how it was reported in the early days of grime. In the concrete still festers a foreboding boredom interrupted by moments of heady violence. Against phone boxes, lampposts or railings remain outcrops of dying cellophane-wrapped flowers, laminated photos, cuddly toys and rain-dribbled hand written poems decrying death, waste and violence. Despite the rising knife and gun statistics, neither Polly nor I feel threatened in this area. In Tower Hamlets communities of people sit on top of one another reminding me of China Miéville's weird fiction *The City and the City*; a novel set in two cities that share the same geographical space but remain invisible to one another via the

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<sup>93</sup> See: "Form 696: 'Racist police form' to be scrapped in London" *BBC News*, 10/11/2017 (Accessed 05/05/2018), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-41946915>

volition of their citizens. The denizens of one city must dutifully ‘unsee’ those people, architectures and events happening that belong to its invisible twin. Mine and Polly’s demographic walks unaccosted through what may otherwise be no-go postcodes for non-native youths.

As we zigzag through the streets I give her the rundown of who is going to be there tonight. They’re my friends and being my new-ish girlfriend she’s not met any of them yet.

“Suze, tonight’s hostess, is an old Goldsmiths mate of mine, she was doing curating and now she works at Hauser [and Wirth Gallery] doing, basically it sounds like admin. Her boyfriend William – I’ve not met but it’s his place we’re going to, she moved in a few months ago I think.”

“Uh-huh.” Polly is happy to stroll and let her mind wander in what feels like the first evening of summer.

“Ross described him as ‘slick’ which I’m not sure if that’s supposed to be a good thing or a bad thing.” I’m talking fast. “Anne will be there.” I say hopefully met by a vacant look. “You’ve met... works at the bloody Yard.” [The club next door to my house].

“Nope” she replies.

“Canadian” I say.

“Hmm” she replies.

“Hair” I say. “she’s got pink hair.” I gesticulate.

“Oh yea, with the hair. Gotcha.” Polly smiles. Our energy levels are out of sync.

“She’s super funny. I think you’ll really get on.”

“Just say pink hair next time,”

“She’s ex-Goldsmiths too...”

“You lot are like mice – if you see one then you’ve probably already got an infestation,”

“Suspected lib-dem voter though. She’ll be with her boyfriend Jake who makes terrible paintings,”

“Mice are incontinent you know,” Polly says, “they just dribble piss everywhere they go.”

“Terrible terrible paintings,” I emphasise.

“Painter,” Polly responds with the subtlest of nodding head movements.

“We only know him via Anne.”

“With the pink hair,” Polly affirms to prove her attentiveness.

“Then there will be Joao, super lovely Portuguese guy, ex-Goldsmiths artist – now emigrated to fashion, although I’m unsure of what exactly he does – he could work in a shoe shop for all I know. Perpetually single, probably because he only ever fancies straight guys.”

We pass the two council-made towers on Candy Street (sound sweet – they’re not), instantly recognisable at night due to the red LED halo lights on their roofs – presumably a budget attempt at jazzing them up. Looking towards Roman Road to our right are a further half-dozen grey 1960s tower blocks that rise into view like concrete stalagmites. I’ve been to a house party in the nearest one – a cameraman’s who worked on my friend Marianna’s film. (He worked commercially but would shoot the odd artist film *gratis*.) Despite grim exteriors, unfriendly entrances and pissy lifts, once inside I’ve always felt these flats to be oases of calm, concealed from the city but with panoramic views. His was towards the top; from its windows could be seen the many more similar blocks that spring like gregarious outcrops of gravestones throughout the wider borough. Formed in 1963, I had mistakenly thought that it was from these tower blocks that this East London borough took its naïvely utopic name: *Tower Hamlets*. To my mind it evoked Corbusian modernist dreams of small villages in the sky, quaint bungalows in some kind of community Jenga.

A decade ago I squatted for a year or so in a block called Bengal House on the Ocean Estate in Stepney Green, 2km to the south-west of where we are now. At the time it was a pigeon paradise with junkies in the stairwells, half abandoned as the council tried to slowly ‘decant’ tenants to other buildings and even other boroughs over a four-year period. I remember the pungent smell of damp concrete and pigeons masked by bleach; a smell that even today when I catch it in an underpass or stairwell reminds me not just of that building but that time of my life. (As a squatter I was part of the *other* city, or rather straddled the boundary.)

Much of the blocks and other lower-rise council-made estates have however been refurbished, regenerated or totally erased since the birth of grime at the beginning of the century. Crossways Estate, The Balfour Tower, Robin Hood gardens et al. Bengal House and most of the Ocean Estate was finally torn down in 2010. Public/private redevelopment partnerships have seen many sold off to the private sector, leaving others as unaffordable government-subsidised ‘affordable’ homes.<sup>94</sup> The borough’s mayor, John Biggs, laments that “with soaring prices, the fastest growing population in the country and around 20,000 people on our council housing waiting list, we are the front line of the housing crisis.”<sup>95</sup> Groves of primary coloured cranes on every horizon show the area’s indecisive topography as it constantly remodels and reinvents itself, cannibalizing itself from the inside out. Hypocritically the public/private new builds with their ubiquitous coloured balconies seem even more cheaply and hastily made as the stigmatised concrete blocks they replace, but now in private hands. Triangles of grass break the paving between them as if they were the last vestiges of the commons, as if they had fallen between the cracks of various privatisation waves. Now they are unused by all except children, animals and vagrants; to whom private property remains an obtuse construct.

Tower Hamlets is caught and fluctuates between two competing visions of the city. On the one hand is Henri Lefebvre’s street as “informative function, the symbolic function, the ludic function. The street is a place to play and learn. The street is disorder... This disorder is alive. It informs. It surprises.”<sup>96</sup> For Lefebvre the city, specifically the street, was a site of creative chaos, play and the necessary nexus of community; anarchic, organic and therefore the site of any future political mobilisation. Tonight is a pleasant evening, people are out milling around, drinking, laughing, bickering. Polly says she can smell weed. I can’t, but then I do have a poor sense of smell.

On the other side is Corbusier’s ordered, “geometrical” and ultimately homogenising city: “The result of a true geometrical lay-out is repetition. The result of repetition is a standard. The perfect

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<sup>94</sup> Tower Hamlets, “Tower Hamlets Housing Strategy” 2016. (Accessed: 05/05/2018), [http://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/ign/council\\_and\\_democracy/consultations/past\\_consultations/Housing\\_strategy\\_consultation\\_second\\_stage.aspx](http://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/ign/council_and_democracy/consultations/past_consultations/Housing_strategy_consultation_second_stage.aspx)

<sup>95</sup> Mayor John Biggs speaking at a Tower Hamlets public housing event (09/12/2016), Reported by *The Bangla Mirror*, “Tower Hamlets leads the way in building new affordable homes” 10/12/2016. (Accessed: 05/05/2018), <https://banglamirrornews.com/2016/10/12/tower-hamlets-leads-the-way-in-building-new-affordable-homes/>

<sup>96</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*, trans. Robert Bononno, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota press, 2003), pp18-19

form.”<sup>97</sup> The horizontal street, a waste of space, is reformulated as the vertical tower. The simplified ordered city is an authoritarian model and for Le Corbusier uniformity is paramount. His totalitarian urban topography is strictly zonal.

The contemporary neo-liberal synthesis of these tries to harness the vitality of Lefebvre’s city to essentially decorate Corbusier’s manageable one. However unlike Corbusier’s modernist vision of urban harmony, the new synthesis has only the less idealistic objective of private profit.

At the corner of Roman road – a *Percy Ingle* bakery on one side, their arch nemesis *Greggs* bakery on the other – I pop into an off licence to pick up the customary dinner party offerings. All I know about wine is that most people don’t like Chardonnay and that bringing Rosé to a dinner party is a social faux pas. “RED!” shouts Polly stranded outside as she smokes a roll-up. I study the shelves for a while and make my choice based on the label’s graphic design in favourable relation to price tag, finally picking two bottles that look fancy but are cheap.

## **A Middle-Class Civil War**

The ‘middle class’ has never been homogenous and the term has become so vague or reductive it is unhelpful for describing all but the broadest of generalities. It is a nexus of related, but not necessarily interdependent groups of attributes: education, culture, taste, wealth, social ties and, here in Britain at least, accent and geography. Every biography is an endless number of combinations and contradictions of class; today this isn’t even a sliding scale of posh to prole but competing notions of taste that can’t necessarily be reduced to a hierarchy of upper to lower. Together with the apparent disappearance of the industrial worker this blurring of boundaries is perhaps what prompted Tony Blair in 1997 to have proclaimed “we are all middle class now!”<sup>98</sup> He was and is patently wrong. Class in Britain, London, Tower Hamlets, remains palpable; inscribed on faces, etched into CVs, revealed

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<sup>97</sup> Le Corbusier, *A Contemporary City: from The City of Tomorrow and its Planning*, trans. Frederick Etchells, (New York: Dover Publications, 1987), p342

<sup>98</sup> As reported by Matthew Taylor, one time advisor to Tony Blair. Quoted by: Jones. *Chavs*, p139

by the length of a tie, the size of a watch, inflections, pronunciations, postcodes. A thousand micro cues that express or betray our origins and, increasingly, our destination as social fluidity dries up.<sup>99</sup>

I queue to pay for the bottles of wine behind a young woman with pushchair buying a scratchcard. Behind the counter is a stubbled and lumbering man in his middle age perched on a high stool. Barely glancing at me as I touch my debit card to the reader, his eyes are stuck on the small monitor playing Turkish TV above the Monster Munch to the right. In London 80% of convenience store owners are Asian or Asian British.<sup>100</sup> Counter-intuitively, recent increases in minimum wage have meant that convenience store owners are working for longer hours themselves rather than take on employees, often paying themselves beneath minimum wage. Self-employment, self-exploitation. 20% of owners work more than 70 hours per week, 19% never take a holiday.<sup>101</sup> Furthermore, The Association of Convenience Stores most recent survey reveals that the majority of independent corner shops rely on family members for staffing, regularly under informal employment arrangements making minimum wage unenforceable.<sup>102</sup> He reaches for a plastic bag whilst still looking at the screen.

“No bag thanks mate,” I say. His movements are automatic and he doesn’t register my request, continuing to bag up the wine.

“I said I don’t want a bag thank you very much thanks cheers,” I take the bottles back out of the bag with a cheery smile and leave the shop. Bags are bad for the environment.

Today’s middle class in London culturally ranges from the conservative bourgeois to the almost bohemian. The majority however fall somewhere on the scale between the two, being akin to the conservative journalist David Brook’s bourgeois-bohemian or ‘bobo’. I however will be using the term post-bohemian (hereafter ‘post-bohem’) for two reasons: The ‘bobo’ term itself has become

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<sup>99</sup> The Organization for Economic Development (OECD), rates the UK as having the lowest social mobility out of its 34 member countries. See: OECD, “Income inequality, social mobility and economic growth”, *NERO Conference Paris*, 22/6/2015 (Accessed: 05/05/2018),

<https://www.oecd.org/eco/growth/NERO-22-June-2015-income-inequality-social-mobility-and-economic-growth.pdf>

<sup>100</sup> “The Local Shop Report 2017”, *Association of Convenience Stores*, p14 (Accessed 27/07/2018),

[https://www.acs.org.uk/sites/default/files/local\\_shop\\_report\\_17\\_low\\_res.pdf](https://www.acs.org.uk/sites/default/files/local_shop_report_17_low_res.pdf)

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid*, p14

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid*, p4

synonymous in popular usage (via France though coined by Brooks)<sup>103</sup> with a younger urban ‘hipster’ which is reductive of the concept, and secondly because, unlike Brooks, I think that the bohemian tends to be a sub category of the bourgeoisie rather than its antithesis – no portmanteau needed. (There have of course been bohemians originating from less privileged backgrounds however the tendency has been one of middle and upper class backgrounds.) Accordingly I see the conservative bourgeoisie and the bohemian as two concepts on a sliding scale rather than a dialectic, the scale being a civil war of middle-class mores.

On the conservative bourgeois side are those that prioritise income and ostensive displays of wealth, order, custom and productivity. They are the yuppies from the 80’s and the suburban social climbers along with the more upper class red-trousered Etonian types (not that all Etonians are the red-trousered Etonian type). These groups tend to have or prize economic capital. Wealth should be shown off and one’s social standing is perceived to be in relation to this. In this sense they tend towards unashamed elitism. Whilst they will also value a type of cultural capital, it will most likely be of a type that is expensive to express, own or pursue.

The cultural concept of the bohemian stems from 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris where artists and writers created a community for themselves in an area of the city populated by the stigmatised Romani gypsy people (erroneously believed to have originated from Bohemia). Henri Murger, author of *La Vie de Bohème*, wrote in 1863 for the Westminster Review:

The term “bohemian” has come to mean... a certain kind of literary gipsy... an artist or litterateur who, consciously or unconsciously, seceded from conventionality in life or in art. In its essence, bohemia is or was, a protest against the subjection of human life to money-making, and of human intellect to conventional rule.<sup>104</sup>

Bohemians defined themselves via their creativity, liberalism and aesthetic spirituality, prioritising experiences, novelty and rebellion. Ultimately however they defined themselves negatively, in opposition to what they saw as the religious conservatism of their day – a frigid culture of uniformity and authoritarianism. In the 1960’s César Graña set up the dichotomy between bohemia and the

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<sup>103</sup> Scott Gunther, “How and Why “Bobos” Became French”, *French Politics, Culture and Society*, 01/12/2016, pp105-125. (accessed 27/08/2018) DOI: doi.org/10.3167/fpcs.2016.340306

<sup>104</sup> Henri Murger, “The Literature of Bohemia”, *The Westminster Review*, London, January and April 1863. p32

wider bourgeois.<sup>105</sup> In 1971 Jock Young transposed Graña's Parisian orientated bohemian hypotheses to the USA, asserting that bohemians exist in a separate world to what he was calling in an American context the traditional 'Protestant ethic' of capitalism.<sup>106</sup>

What comes through these studies on Bohemia is that hedonism, in the 19<sup>th</sup> and much of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was political and revolutionary. The classical bohemian was the archetypal artist of the popular imagination: the artist as lifestyle deviant, but perhaps a licenced one.<sup>107</sup>

Once the wider bourgeoisie, particularly the educated class and urban elites, assimilated the liberated culture of the 1960s there was not much left (aesthetically speaking) to rebel against. Simultaneously, as Western countries have de-industrialised over the last 50 years moving towards a knowledge economy the creativity and individualism, once the preserves of the non-conformist bohemian, became not just accepted but economically desirable. Creativity is not antithetical to the pursuit of big profit as the hippy's had thought and later themselves disproved.

The sociologist Richard Lloyd recounts in his book *Neo-Bohemia: Art and Commerce in the Postindustrial City* that "in this period of neoliberal capitalism, it may be the bohemian ethic, not the Protestant ethic, that is best adapted to new realities."<sup>108</sup> Today businesses talk about vision and creation as if they're artists. 'Self expression' is the entrepreneur's alibi for capitalist dreams. Companies portray themselves as social movements. Corporations relax their dress codes and introduce flexible working hours. Employees are reformatted as sole-trading contractees. Self-employment (the ultimate zero-hours contract) is the dream for many and it is encouraged for you to see your job as your passion.<sup>109</sup>

It is not possible to be a bohemian today. The ideology has lost its point of contrast and struggles to differentiate itself; it turns out that post-Fordist capitalism can't get enough of bohemia. David

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<sup>105</sup> César Graña, *Bohemian Versus Bourgeois: French Society and the French Man of Letters in the Nineteenth Century*. (New York: Basic Books, 1964).

<sup>106</sup> Jock Young, "The Subterranean World of Play" (1971),. In *The Subcultures Reader*, ed. Ken Gelder. (London: Routledge, 1997), pp148-157

<sup>107</sup> See: George Levitine, *The Dawn of Bohemianism: The Barbu Rebellion and Primitivism in Neoclassical France*. (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1978).

<sup>108</sup> Richard Lloyd, *Neo-Bohemia: Art and Commerce in the Postindustrial City*. (New York: Routledge, 2010), p240

<sup>109</sup> See: Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*.

Harvey points out that from the point of view of capital the two were never as opposed as the bohemians liked to think:

It is one thing to be transgressive about sexuality, religion, social mores, and artistic and architectural conventions, but quite another to be transgressive in relation to the institutions and practices of capitalist domination that actually penetrate deeply into cultural institutions.<sup>110</sup>

The original bohemians being a highly educated and cultural lot were, despite themselves, mostly middle class after all, only a middle class with competing conceptions of capital. Tweaking this idea, Lloyd's research suggests that it was declining aristocrats that chiefly carried the strand of bohemianism that ran throughout the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>111</sup>

Whether middle class or declined aristocrat the freedom to identify or qualify as a bohemian was not necessarily open to the wider proletariat (though there were exceptions). The artist bohemians of Paris were never truly their gypsy neighbours, often coming from wealth and education, still striving for some element of success or recognition, and ultimately when they had had enough – leaving.

The post-bohem is the bohemian ideology reabsorbed, in part, into the greater middle-class milieu. Post-bohemia – and I reluctantly count myself and most of the guests who are going to be at this evening's dinner as members – is perhaps best described via a series of interconnected contradictions:

Firstly, myths of meritocracy. The post-bohem are an elite, in terms of cultural capital and education that are allegedly anti-elitist. They understate the gap between themselves and the rest – particularly the working class – rather than overtly preserve it. Social status and self-worth tend to be based on achievement, making them on some level meritocratic (even though few believe that we live in an actual meritocracy). As opposed to the traditional bourgeoisie, the types of capital with the *least* prestige are inherited wealth, private education and familial nepotism. Despite for the most part being university educated and working in creative or managerial jobs many will, when possible, choose to identify as working class. Privileges therefore are played down.

Secondly, attempts at authenticity. They want freedom but whilst also wanting 'roots' and a sense of belonging. Freedom means the ability to keep options open which means never fully investing.

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<sup>110</sup> Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, p110

<sup>111</sup> Lloyd, *Neo-Bohemia*, p46

They want the freedom to move wherever they want in the world whilst valuing community and the geographically authentic. As 'global citizens' then, they will abandon any place that threatens to stop working for them rather than staying and working to change it, whilst paying lip service to the local. They want unlimited consumer choice but are nostalgic for a seemingly simpler past. Authenticity is prized whilst they reserve the right to adopt any class or cultural signifiers they like.

Thirdly, buying into anti-consumerism: Because cultural capital is valued over economic capital they find conspicuous consumption vulgar. Yet as Bourdieu notes "consumption need not be conspicuous to be symbolic".<sup>112</sup> To be a post-bohem is to "reject status symbols in order to raise your status with your equally cultivated peers."<sup>113</sup> Ironically this can lead to a prejudice against an often working-class materialist taste. To compliment an item is to receive back in faux modesty the fact it was cheap or better yet free, the best things have been picked up at a charity shop or recycled from a grandmother's farmhouse. Consumption must be incidental ("I found this" rather than "I bought this"), or 'merely' practical (expensive running shoes), or experiential rather than material ("traveling" rather than holidaying, immersive theatre, unusual exercise classes). They, like the bygone bohemians, are against both standardised production and standardised consumption but in a cruel twist anti-standardisation is the standard of the day. Uniqueness is pursued by all. The convention is to decry conventionality. Ostensibly anti-consumerist in a world where consumerism is the only thing on the menu.

Like all classes, the post-bohem class remains inharmonious, with these internal contradictions reified differently by each member or group. Some are far more on the conservative bourgeois side, others position themselves towards the bohemian. The archetypal artist of popular imagination, real or imaginary, serves as one pole from which to navigate the contemporary urban middle-class world.

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<sup>112</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1984), p483

<sup>113</sup> David Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), p93

I am holding the two bottles of wine upside-down around their necks, one in each hand pretending they are clubs whilst walking backwards in front of Polly waving them about and making what I think are kung-fu sounds. I'm in a leather jacket and boots, a shaved head, long stubble, I have put in effort into not putting in effort. I'm showing off, or at least trying to make her laugh as I scamper up and down the curb. My jokes are self-deprecating, my performances are ironic. Polly is in a denim jacket, paint splattered shoes and a ripped t-shirt that looks like it's been reclaimed from my mum's bag of rags that she keeps under the stairs. She still looks effortlessly elegant and fashionable; her hair is clean, her skin is clear, her teeth are white, her hair is blondy-brown, her laughter is healthy.

We met back in February at a Serpentine gallery fundraising party. Select young artists getting in free, patrons paying a premium price for the canapés and cocktail event. Us tokenistic artists were conspicuously inconspicuous: Wearing black, downing free drinks, chain smoking roll-ups huddled for the most part outside or content to gawk from the shadows at the super wealthy and their vulgarity. I was introduced to Polly and at first I couldn't tell which world she came from. Was she one of us? Or... one of *them!*? She'd just moved back to London after living in New York for a few years, a photographer operating on the cusp of the art world.

Competing ideologies and social mores come attached to the different forms of capital, specifically economic and cultural. Although there is a certain type of ideological competitiveness between these Bourdieusian spheres of capital they inform and spawn each other. They are (though sometimes difficultly) exchangeable. Money can buy an education, though usually only for your children and not yourself. Cultural capital can earn you money, but not always, often being parasitically mined by others. Social capital can get you a job or educate you and vice versa. The result being that, in all likelihood, the possessor of one type of capital will either have some of the other types or at least be related to or friends with people who do. The middle-class subsets are interconnected, even if rivals. They come together on Christmas day to fight their annual civil war, and as it happens, on the occasional event such as tonight's dinner.

## The Complex

We turn onto Fairfield road, we walk past 1990's low-rise council made housing, we walk past a newer development – with the ubiquitous coloured micro balconies, past a lone Victorian on the corner – another pub made into a house, a small car park, more low-rises and then on our left surfaces a giant redbrick-gothic-compound.

“Flippin-eck,” remarks Polly, “is this where you’re taking me?”

Walking on the pavement we follow its gigantic 12-foot red wall punctuated by equally tall spiked railings on our left until we reach the entrance and porters cabin. The apartment we are visiting is one of 714 that comprise *The Bow Quarter*, a gated community in the old Bryant and May match factory in Bow, Tower Hamlets, London's old cockney heartland.<sup>114</sup> The development itself is a series of grand and slightly gothic looking red brick towers, hangers and out buildings. A Victorian industrial estate repurposed as a fortified urban hamlet, its architecture is set between serene, shrubbed communal gardens with cobble-stoned paths. It's Hogwarts meets Borstal, regenerated like a fancy hotel.

After waiting a few minutes for the security guard to call up to William's flat to ensure that we are guests of the expected nature, access is granted. An ostentatious circular fountain lined with palms greets us as we come through the garrisoned main gates. Bush-hidden lighting and this evening's sunset means the gardens are being enjoyed by some of the residents and romantic couples meander the grounds, arms linked and chit-chatting softly. A scent of lavender that even I can smell. Polly says the whole thing feels like we're in an advert. “Come on then fancy pants,” she says as she links my arm huddling in close; less as a romantic gesture and more as performed discomfort. Inadvertently making us look all the more the part.

For me the broadest description of the middle class and all its various and vague factions is a surplus existential freedom. Not only the ability to self-determine one's life, but also the social expectation to do so. It is having the freedom to choose what profession to follow, where in the world you want to live and ultimately whom you want to be and be seen as. Whilst the working class and upper class may

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<sup>114</sup> The Bow Quarter's literature at no point refers to itself as a 'gated community' perhaps due to the stigma and naughtiness of the term, preferring instead to describe itself simply as a residential community within a very secure environment.

also invent and reinvent themselves, for the most part they are expected to follow the trajectory of their previous generation. The middle class has the freedom to choose plus the expectation that one can and must exercise it. As the sociologist Anthony Giddens has written they “are forced to do so – having no choice but to choose.”<sup>115</sup>

In this sense the modern middle class veers towards being post-traditional.<sup>116</sup> ‘Traditions’ are picked and chosen, they (or *we*, depending on you, the reader’s own identification) can rummage around jettisoning anything they don’t like and can even take some that aren’t theirs – which means that they’re not traditions at all but consumer life-style choices. Real tradition gives us a sense of where we have come from and where we are going, of who we are and our place within a community. Freedom and its fluidity then, though a luxury that many don’t have, comes with uncertainty and existential angst around one’s identity politics. Despite my critical tone, these remain freedoms to be extended to others rather than viewed as indulgences to be withdrawn.

The post-bohem reify this anxiety in their own way: nostalgia, fetishisation of the ‘authentic’ and a semi-sincere attraction towards the ‘simpler’ things in life whilst naturally defending the freedoms to which one is accustomed. Cognitive dissonance and irony are utilised to reconcile certain existential contradictions in one’s self and outwards toward society.

Behind the Bow Quarter’s walls, along with the 714 apartments and 19 ‘town houses’, are exclusive shops, a restaurant, a gym, pool, postal services and more. It stands, as is the appeal, in stark contrast to the grey council estates that surround it, the bustle of the borough, its smells, grime, clamour and ultimately its people. “Set in one of London’s largest communal gardens, within a very secure environment, the Bow Quarter offers modern urban living”<sup>117</sup>. Beyond the protection of the wall, their PR rhetoric implies, jobs will throw bottles from a bridge at your son’s coxless four, staffy mongrels will inseminate your labradoodle to make a god-knows-what, and drugged-up youths are itching to stab your grandma with rusty smack needles.

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<sup>115</sup> Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p81

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid*, p145

<sup>117</sup> “What is the Bow Quarter”. *The Bow Quarter*. (Website run by the estate management), (Accessed: 06/05/2018), <http://www.thebowquarter.co.uk/pages/bowquarter.htm>

Their website boasts “living here means becoming part of a vibrant community, with all the facilities you need right on your doorstep.”<sup>118</sup> The lament of the left is that community tends to define itself negatively; it is, more often than not, exclusionary. The Bow Quarter is this exclusivity made architecturally manifest. The more fixed the perimeter the tighter so it would seem is the sense of community. Although attracting a ‘diverse’ group of residents from around the world, it is a group unified by a certain income bracket and aesthetic or cultural appeal towards urban ‘loft’ style living.

Our proximity to Canary Wharf and the City brings us many residents from the financial and professional world, whilst our unusual setting and vibrant community spirit brings us a wide range of creative and artistic residents.<sup>119</sup>

Community in itself does not exist; it is only ever a sense of community, an inter-subjective sentiment. The social psychologists David McMillan and David Chavis describe in their influential work *Sense of Community: A definition and theory*, the five elements that create this ‘sense’: boundaries, emotional safety, a sense of belonging and identification, personal investment and a common symbol system.<sup>120</sup> Furthermore a sense of shared history and a shared fate that collectivises and incentivises membership.

“*Goldsmiths massive!! HaHAbaaarr!*” pink-haired Anne hollers from behind us as she, painter boyfriend in tow, clears security and catches up with us. Nose ring, jangly bracelets, ox-blood Dr.Martens, curvaceous, emphasis on eye makeup, always smiling. To my ears she has a generic North American accent but she’s proudly told me in the past that after fifteen years in Britain her friends back home think she sounds English. He’s your bog standard cardigan wearing floppy haired painter: handsome, slight, perhaps from the Home Counties although I’ve never asked. Exuding a bookish air but then that’s probably just because of the book that conspicuously pokes out from his cardigan pocket, a designer label for the educated class. He has a reserved demeanour that I can’t work out whether it’s arrogance or shyness – not that the two are mutually exclusive.

Exaggerated hugs and introductions are given all round. Anne has always been a ball of fast-talking energy and she enthusiastically breaks the serenity of the ‘communal’ garden. Our presence here

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> “Welcome” *The Bow Quarter* (Residents), (Accessed: 06/05/2018), <http://thebowquarter.com>

<sup>120</sup> David McMillan and David Chavis, “Sense of community: A definition and theory”, *Journal of Community Psychology*, Vol:14, Iss:1 (1986), pp6-23 (Accessed: 06/05/2018), doi: 10.1002/1520-6629(198601),14:1<6::AID-JCOP2290140103>3.0.CO;2-I

however should by no means be seen as a rupture to the estate's idealised self-image, quite the opposite. Some colourful, scruffy, arty, but crucially Caucasian types are probably just the right level of controlled bohemianism the compound's PR department would approve of.

The urban sociologist Sharon Zukin wrote a book on warehouse conversion way back in 1982 called *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change*. ('Loft living' being synonymous in the US with any type of habitation in an ex-industrial space.) What's uncanny about the book is how contemporary it feels with regard to not just urban architectural usage but to the ideologies and attitudes of selfhood that these changes reflect:

Loft living is part of a larger modern quest for authenticity. ... they create a sense of "place" instead of "space"... Because they are here today and tomorrow, they provide landmarks of the mind as well as the senses. In a world that changes moment by moment, anchoring the self to old places is a way of coping with the "continuous past"... Living in a loft is an attempt to replace modernism's mass production of the individual with an individualization of mass productions.<sup>121</sup>

'Loft living' rejects Corbusian mass-produced functionalist urban planning, ironically replacing it by repurposing the very sites of mass production. Surviving architecture from the industrial or 'organisational' age (unlike the Becontree estate), the brick warehouse has proved itself to be not only adaptable but preferable to the needs of the creative class and their cultural groupies. Industry can be romanticised only once it has vanished.

One thing The Bow Quarter does have is claim to an authentic local history and it zealously markets this as part of its sales pitch (in the old Bryand and May match factory). The developers have however undermined this slightly, or rather lifted the veil of its own spectacle by calling its various buildings, wings and zones after places in New York rather than London: *Manhattan*, *Staten Island*, *Madison\*s* (Bar/Restaurant), *5<sup>th</sup> Avenue* (supermarket). A roving security guard points us in the right direction, to a building called *Park Central*. As the guard walks away our foursome giggle at the estate's naff naming theme.

The Bow Quarter's mostly non-native residents (via the estate managers) have hijacked local history only to hark back to a past that was doubly never theirs. At this level of simulacrum I suppose

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<sup>121</sup> Zukin, *Loft Living*, p68

it doesn't even matter. We can pretend we're in New York. This is after all the neoliberal heir to Warhol's loft-style living. Conversely, perhaps I've judged the estate's designers as being too naïve. It would be just as in keeping for them to revel in their own irony, the misnaming a self-knowing joke.

We are buzzed into Park Central. Their apartment is on the third floor and we opt to take the extra wide staircase, its long windows overlooking a portion of the compound's gardens. I bound up the first half flight, painter Jake morosely pulling up the rear of the pack. Pink Anne has pulled out two bottles of Prosecco from a tote bag and explains to Polly:

“We're in a celebratory mood! he-he!.. Jake just sold three big paintings to some Swiss collectors,” she's the type of person who can speak fast whilst laughing between words.

“Congrats Jake!” Polly says turning round, met with Jake's coy smile.

“Yea, nice one matey,” I call back down the stairs trying desperately to sound both genuine in my cheer whilst not overly fussed.

Reaching the third floor we follow signs down broad corridors past other apartments, their pot plants overrunning the hall. Some have even put paintings on the walls opposite their front doors – a testament to neighbourly trust whilst aggressively asserting the resident's creative capital. We pass a grey 'new abstraction' painting, basically a 4yr old has been given a bucket of pigeon droppings and splashed it over a canvas; we pass a framed, etched line drawing of a nude, tasteful if conservative; we pass what looks to be a framed Banksy stencilled canvas of a policeman being frisked by a little girl.

As we approach our destination Suze's head pops out of a door and smiles at us as if our presence was a pleasant surprise. After a moment her body follows, then her boyfriend and in theory co-host William. Salutations, hugs, comic cries, handshakes, white-toothed smiles. In her early thirties, Suze is a petite American lady with dominant body language and thick-rimmed spectacles. She wears the curator's uniform of all black, sophisticated but simple, splashes of silver jewellery, a severe fringe that asks people not to mess with her. Her boyfriend slick-William I'm told to call “just Will.” It's a Friday evening and he is still wearing a baby pink shirt and suit trousers, though he now goes barefoot and tie-less. He's a little older than our cohort. Early forties, tall, almost gangling, receding hairline, signet

ring on pinky, the trace of a European accent that sounds like it has been filtered through a British boarding school. His baritone voice commands us “Welcome” and we enter the open plan apartment bathed in the last light of sundown.

## **Lofty Ideals**

The home is a psychic state. It is not just a physical domicile but denotes the type of person who is ‘at home’ in such settings, or the type of person they wish to be seen as.

We enter a large raw floorboarded apartment that’s like a pirate ship inspired art gallery. Its ceiling height is almost double that of a regular terraced house except for a mezzanine area covering a quarter of the space, accessed by a designer cum nautical staircase. The back and sidewalls are painted white and who, for God’s sake, would dare to have a warehouse-apartment wall in another colour, much less wallpaper? Clean and aspirationally unpretentious, the hegemony of the white wall nods to gallery space orthodoxy, making objects into artefacts, life detritus into combines, furnishings to ready-mades. Beyond an aesthetic of monastic minimalism, the white wall in the gallery and ex-industrial home is a practical design decision allowing for maximum adaptability, quick-fire reshuffles and a creative blank canvas.

The exception to the white-paint rule is the front wall of exposed 19th century red brickwork. Set into this is two enormous original steel crittall windows – though now housing contemporary double-glazed glass and boasting a sunset. Somewhere between functional infrastructure and design feature, various service pipes visibly affixed to the brickwork lead along the wall towards a Victorian butler style porcelain sink in a kitchen area bespeckled by growing things. Spider plants drip off chains from the ceiling, cacti line a breakfast bar, there is a set of shelves dedicated to spilling vegetation. They even have – I kid you not – a decent sized tree growing out of a wooden half barrel of grog.

The space is at once raw, a repurposed factory, and also architecturally chic. It’s curated to look clean but busy: publications left out and underlined are the modern equivalent of the old bourgeois coffee table book. Vintage is the new antique, raw is the new refined (I say ‘new’ but actually this aesthetic has been growing in popularity for the last 20 years). A long iroko dining table already laid

dominates the centre, to its right is the soft seating area: sofas, coffee table, record player, wooden book shelves, vintage looking curiosities and knickknacks – probably a brass ships compass if I looked hard enough. On a desk in the opposite corner is a vigilant looking MacBook Pro, not yet asleep. A smattering of books and additional detritus of ‘creative living’ bleed out into the other open plan zones signalling – presumably Suze’s – work/life balance. It’s a familiar layout and the subject of thousands of pins on Pinterest. A design style that urbanist and architectural historian Ben Campkin notes “celebrates the informal and aesthetically diverse city even while participating in its elimination.”<sup>122</sup> This is aspirational urban living.

Despite my cynicism it’s a nice apartment. It’s big, it’s airy and it’s ‘tasteful’ – or more specifically it (almost) appeals to my own tastes: a bias that, rather than being a subjective attribute, is culturally proscribed, ultimately designating my socioeconomic group.

Taste classifies and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed.<sup>123</sup>

Taste in this sense is neither subjective nor objective but an inter-subjective system of values. It is networked. My place within this network, its accessibility to me and the influence that I may impose on the wider network is my cultural capital. Cultural capital is the myth of objective or natural ‘tastefulness’. Bourdieu expands:

Aesthetic disposition participate(s) in the perpetuation of social differences to the extent that they are taken to be natural talents available to all on an equal basis and thus not recognized as the result of a specific process of cultural transmission and training which is in fact not available to all.<sup>124</sup>

Post-bohem taste is hegemonic and we as a class have been the nationally approved taste-setters for over two decades now. (Many suburban houses have now knocked through their ground floor walls in emulation of this open plan living, many of the super wealthy imitate the faux simple rusticism of post-bohem interior design, Ikea sells mock fruit-crates to be used as bookshelves). Cultural capital, as opposed to just culture, is a cultural knowledge that can be traded upon in an upwardly mobile or influential way.

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<sup>122</sup> Campkin, *Remaking London*, p148

<sup>123</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction*, pp6-7

<sup>124</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, ed. Randal Johnson. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), p24

Straight off the bat William expresses mild embarrassment about the development's exclusivity. Apologetic jokes excuse the tight security control that kept us waiting at the porters lodge on our way in. The dominance of post-bohem taste means that often the rich maintain a feigned embarrassment about their own wealth, or at least know enough to enact shame dependant on their company.

I waste no time in mentioning that my grandmother worked in this very match factory back in the thirties. It's a lie of sorts. Whilst she was from Bow and I dimly remember my mum saying she worked in a factory before the Second World War, I have no idea what factory. It's a small lie, or what the behavioural economist Dan Ariely calls the 'fudge factor':

On one hand, we want to view ourselves as honest, honourable people. We want to be able to look at ourselves in the mirror and feel good about ourselves (psychologist call this ego motivation). On the other hand, we want to benefit from cheating... This is where our amazing cognitive flexibility comes into play... as long as we cheat by only a little bit, we can benefit from cheating and still view ourselves as marvellous human beings...the "fudge factor theory".<sup>125</sup>

What is the benefit of this fudged fact? It's a micro dig at the apartments owner. It is a small attempt, and the first of many by myself and some of the other guests to cast ourselves as meritocratic heroes. By hinting that my family, and by extension I, have come from poverty it allows me to evade the sense of guilt or complicity in being a guest in this gated community. "There is a gentrification that happens to buildings and neighbourhoods and there is a gentrification that happens to ideas,"<sup>126</sup> proclaimed the New York artist Penny Arcade in her performance *Longing Lasts Longer*. Gentrification of the psyche involves the cognitive dissonance of meritocracy myths.

I of course don't mention my grandparents from my dad's side who were pretty wealthy, or the fact that my mum had ruthlessly reinvented herself well before my birth as a middle-class subject (and who is more zealously middle class than the person that needs to prove it?).

My moment of bad faith can be seen as the first point scored of tonight's unofficial dinner party game: to cherry pick true or almost true facts about one's own biography to present a life as a struggle against the odds. The aim is to emphasise hardships over privileges. This is also an unconscious game

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<sup>125</sup> Dan Ariely, *The (Honest) Truth about Dishonesty: How we lie to everyone – especially ourselves*. (New York: Harper Collins, 2012), p27

<sup>126</sup> Penny Arcade, "New York Values" (performance piece), 1996. Quoted by Sarah Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination*. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013), p29

as for the most part people don't admit to themselves that they are playing it. As with the fudge factor's rationale, people want to believe the best about themselves, only fudging reality. If the game were a conscious one I would call it *Hey, Who You Callin' Middle Class?*

Beyond meritocracy myths, it is painful to think that I might be the beneficiary of the world's injustices; that my happiness and success is in some ways dependent on other people's misery or poverty. That I may be the receiver of stolen goods. One of the privileges of being 'privileged' is the potential to be unaware of your own advantage and how it has been constructed. Or as Sarah Schulman put it in *The Gentrification of the Mind*: "non-existent excuses that the powerful invoke to feel weak in order to avoid accountability. Gentrification is a process that hides the apparatus of domination from the dominant themselves."<sup>127</sup>

We each place our vineyard offerings on the counter. Anne's prosecco is instantly relocated to the fridge by William as she retells Jake's painting sales whilst he visibly squirms. I hope Polly will become my proxy show-off at some point, doing the boasting and leaving my humility intact. She doesn't.

We stand around for a bit being fed hamster nibbles, offered drinks, shedding jackets. William and Polly being 'the new people' give a run down of their basic bio's and life CVs in response to the generic but perhaps contextually important 'so what do you do?' question. I scan the bookshelf to try to determine William's actual and specific type of cultural capital. It's ambiguous as some of the books are clearly Suze's standard art school offerings: unread tomes of Deleuze, some Susan Sontag (of whom I'm a fan), a Nicolas Bourriaud (of whom I'm not), that type of thing. Before I get a chance to go full literary detective I'm brought back into the conversation to do my how-I-met-Polly spiel, Suze having just confessed to meeting William on Guardian Soulmates (the classier version of Tinder for – presumably – *Guardian* readers).

"We met the old fashioned way... at a party. I chatted her up!"

"I chatted you up more like!" Polly playfully retorts. "I said *lets go for a cigarette* and you pretended to be a smoker."

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<sup>127</sup> Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind*, p27

The sunset dips behind the neighbouring building and I am made aware of the apartment's lights. Throughout 'raw' and retro oversized light bulbs hang nakedly down exuding several soft light pockets. As mock industrial heirlooms they simulate a sense of heritage and a historical continuity. They are anachronistic. Along with several other retro or rough design features they try to escape homogenized urban design, supposedly imitating the gritty simplicity of traditional East London/Brooklyn/Berlin (it doesn't seem to matter exactly what history is invoked). The problem is that everyone else had exactly the same idea about ten years ago. Now this aesthetic is even emulated by McDonalds and 70% of bars, cafés and clubs in every Western city in the world. It's so cliché that it's even cliché to critique it.

Ben Campkin notes that "in the self-conscious lifestyle consumerism of loft living, residents happily buy into the fictional authenticity of 'rugged' materials, whose narrative may either enhance or distort the building's or location's actual history."<sup>128</sup> These outdated bits of technology (the bulbs are hugely energy inefficient) are being used to align the interior and thus its owner stylistically to the past, or at least what they have romanticised the past as being. Penny Arcade says that "nostalgia protects us from the reality of who we actually grew up to be".<sup>129</sup> Vintage reveals the guilty conscience of those for whom excess consumer choice has left existentially uncertain, lost or compromised. Old-fashioned stuff makes you look more authentic. Authentic of what, we seem to have forgotten.

Ultimately, these are just light bulbs. They do their job, even if not in an ecological way (though my problem is, to be honest, stylistic and not environmental). Despite my criticism I'm not sure what type of interior design I think is appropriate – or sincere. As if sincerity is something that can be ascribed to design decisions. In the middle-class realm of multiple choices there is no default setting. Theodor Adorno critiques the modern world's preoccupied false hood:

Authenticity itself becomes a lie the moment it becomes authentic, that is, in reflecting on itself, in postulating itself as genuine, in which it already oversteps the identity that it lays claim to in the same breath.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Campkin, *Remaking London*, p143

<sup>129</sup> Penny Arcade, "Longing Lasts Longer", (performance), *The Big Cupcake Poetry Project 2016*, New York. Can be seen: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yvf4XwdW-KA> (00:00:52), (Accessed: 26/9/2017),

<sup>130</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p154

The authentic is a phantom. The inauthentic is its shadow and is, perhaps, what we identify more readily.

A prerequisite for a sense of selfhood is the concept of how we became and of where we are headed – of a biographical continuity. This is true for an individual, a demographic and geographically: for Bow, Tower Hamlets and Britain. But feelings of self-identity are fragile because the memoir we write for ourselves is only ever one narrative amongst many other potential ones that we have chosen to edit out.<sup>131</sup> Especially I suspect for the choice-spoilt children of the middle class. We pick and choose what we want to think of as our defining moments to craft our own mythos. Once we invest in ownership of an idea (a sports team, a political stance, a persona, a backstory) we guard it far more zealously than we do our ownership of objects.

What may transpire to you the reader throughout this essay is that my own over the top criticisms of the post-bohem moments of bad faith reveal in their turn my own bad conscience. Echoing Penny Arcade's denouncement, it may be just as true to say that *criticism* protects us from the reality of who we are. When we insist on being a detective in the department of problematics we distance ourselves from the subject, absolving us from responsibility regarding it. However, to borrow an unattributed phrase "In theory, theory and practice are the same thing, in practice they're not." *Saying* is a part of *doing* but not its totality.

We hate most fervently that which is in some way similar to ourselves. The people and styles that reflect a part of ourselves that we would really rather hide, that step on our toes in regards to our idealised self-image. As artists we are often the most venomous critics of the works that some people might compare to our own. In our music tastes we might hate an act that we deem an inferior version of a favourite far more than a genre that we simply don't like. The reason that I get so annoyed with the zealous uptake by the conservative bourgeois of bohemian pretensions is, probably, that their lazy consumer led claim to rustic authenticity devalues my own. I have 'raw' unshaded bulbs myself at home, though not the 'retro' ones. Ruthlessly practical, in their apparent raw simplicity they are again

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<sup>131</sup> See: Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p55

an example of the pretentiously unpretentious. This duplicity is realised by myself when I see people getting it ‘wrong’ by using retro bulbs or other conspicuous affectations.

Consumerist recuperation of the countercultural anti-aesthetic leads to what Žizek calls a “decline in symbolic efficiency”.<sup>132</sup> The unconvincing performance of the symbolic threatens my own act’s believability; an act that I of course convince myself, at least emotionally, is real. Off-the-shelf cultural signifiers force me to confront my disowned self: I too am just a collection of pre-fab cultural signifiers increasingly divorced from their referent.

### **The Guests Assume Their Positions.**

“You’re there, you’re there, you’re over there and you’re here next to me lovely Polly!” Suze commands, pointing between guests and dining position with an oven-mitted hand before taking a sizzling terracotta dish out of the oven. Smiles are plastered to all our faces – especially Polly’s – as the chat hasn’t as yet passed small talk and the event is so far socially cumbersome. Her frozen beam reminds me of a child being forced to smile for a camera. I don’t see this discontinuity as insincere, as the micro-sociologist Erving Goffman explains:

Everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role... It is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves.<sup>133</sup>

As social animals then our personality is defined in how we interact with other people. *Persona* comes from the Greek for *mask*. To be a person, is to be constituted as a social being, to be seen and ultimately to become the mask that you choose. Our deliberate social act is our personality more than the flux of our internal mood. You would be a rude moron to behave exactly how you felt at all times: a truth that calls into difficulty notions of the genuine.

The buzzer goes off just as Suze joins the table with the last bowl, a pomegranate salad; she jumps back up towards the internal telecom. It’s Joao at the main gate, barely late and just in time for dinners. Painter Jake makes a basic joke about Mediterranean time keeping and we dutifully titter in

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<sup>132</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: the absent centre of political ontology*, (London: Verso, 1999)

<sup>133</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, (London: Penguin Books 1990), p30

response, though only a little bit. Is it ok to laugh at crude stereotyping if it is of a rival Caucasian subgroup and not a distinct non-white ethnicity, especially as he is only arriving about 20 minutes after us?

He finally bursts through the door another 10 minutes later having gotten lost somewhere near ‘Manhattan’ and we collectively laugh, sincerely this time (have I not just rubbished the notion of ‘sincerity’? oh well). Joao’s another extrovert. His mood surrounds him like some sort of aura or smell, inflicting itself unceremoniously into any room he occupies, like a certain hue of light or pheromone cloud or invisible electro plasma pervading every corner of the physical and mental space available. Thankfully today’s mood is joviality and his camp exuberance lightens the atmosphere for everybody. Greetings exchanged, a seat offered, plate given, small talk is dispensed with and the room relaxes.

There is a point when informal talk shifts to a position where it would no longer be polite to continue being diligently polite. In the long run overt politeness shows an unease with one’s company which could, in its extreme form be taken as an insult. The ex-Goldsmiths art-world natives of us around the table shift gear beyond pleasantries and catch-up into low level bitching.

“I heard Arcadia Missa is moving from Peckham to Soho,” I say. “They actually put out a statement saying that they were moving because of gentrification! – not being priced out but because they feel ‘conflicted’. How disingenuous is that!”<sup>134</sup>

“Who’s that?” says William.

“It’s an art gallery babe,” says Suze.

“As if Soho isn’t also being gentrified!” says Joao.<sup>135</sup>

“As if Arcadia Missa wasn’t instrumental in making Peckham trendy!” says Jake.

“As if they’re not just doing it to be more accessible to collectors!” says Anne.

“Co-opting anti-gentrification sentiment to get some cultural cool points! For-fuck’s sake,” I say.

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<sup>134</sup> “Gentrification prompts London’s Arcadia Missa Gallery to Relocate.” *Artforum*, 26/02/2018. (Accessed: 01/08/2018) <https://www.artforum.com/news/gentrification-prompts-london-s-arcadia-missa-gallery-to-relocate-74440>

<sup>135</sup> Tim Palmer, “Soho: on the front line of London gentrification, but would you live there?” *The Times*, 21/05/2017. (Accessed: 01/08/2018) <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/soho-property-market-london-gentrification-vtttd3d66v>

Secret denigration being more common behind closed doors than praise. ‘Bitching’ serves to solidify the boundaries of the team, implying mutual respect at the expense of those absent.

“Did you see the V22 *Young London* show?” I ask.

“Oh my God if I see another giant sculpture of a butt plug I might scream! It was plagued by Paul Mc-bloody-Carthy knock offs!” says Joao.

“*Knock-offs!* \*Tee-hee,” titters Anne.

“As if referencing kinky sexual practices was still edgy or interesting,” says Joao.

“Did you see Jenny Saville’s giant phallic gold zucchini sculpture on the street at the soulless new Nine Elms development?” says Suze.

“Oh God I know! Is it supposed to be ironic?” says Joao.

“It’s post-ironic!” says Suze.

“Oh God!” says Joao.

“It operates ironically for the critic and sincerely for the majority of its viewers, the artist can have it both ways and keep both audiences happy!” says Suze.

“It’s terrible,” says Joao.

“It is terrible,” says Suze.

In a field such as Fine Art ‘quality’ (and ultimately price tag) is socially constructed via loose group consensuses of elected gate-keepers (and lesser gate maintenance minions such as ourselves). It is in informal settings that art shows the first signs of canonisation.<sup>136</sup>

Balding William is in the kitchen area and I notice Brylcreemed Joao giving Herbal-Essences Polly a nod and a wink. He is surreptitiously and somewhat mockingly pointing him out to her, causing me to look over too. Having selecting a bottle of wine from the impressive wine rack underneath an aspidistra, William is conspicuously-inconspicuously doing that thing that waiters do in restaurants where they pour a tiny bit of the wine into the glass first and offer it to the eldest looking male for testing, except of course he tests it himself after holding the glace up and giving it a stern look. Joao’s

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<sup>136</sup> See: Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, p74

glance was a bonding gesture of friendship towards Polly whom he had not previously met at the expense of William. She glances back at Joao with the tiniest hint of a smirk at the corner of her lips, enough to politely acknowledge his point whilst instantly turning her head.

“I heard your last show went phenomenally well,” she says to Jake, deftly sidestepping Joao’s invitation to mock one of our hosts.

“It was really strong work,” concurs Suze.

“Yea, I particularly liked the er. the blue one that you had in the corner, of the yellow hat!” I say, accidentally complimenting one of Jake’s terrible paintings.

Art-world chitchat exemplifies the fungibility of cultural and social capital. An exchange that in these instances excludes non-art-world Will, and to a lesser degree semi-art-world Polly. Our host does however try to clumsily crowbar his way into the art conversation at various points, getting increasingly confrontational each time he’s overruled or ignored. Finally:

“What is it? I mean why are all artists so left wing?” he says as he pours wine for Jake but looking at me.

“Tracey Emin votes conservative,” Suze objects, a little embarrassed of William’s gauche accusation.

“I mean, right?” his eyes then going clockwise around the table looking at each of us in turn, taking back control of his domicile. His smile denotes that his accusation is essentially jovial; joviality an alibi for chippy indictment.

I take the bait: “I think the whole left-wing right-wing visualisation is increasingly un-useful for thinking about politics, we should be thinking more on an X/Y chart with...”

William (speaking over me to the table): “don’t get me wrong, I’m essentially loosely on the left myself.”

Me: “It’s more useful to. to... think of an... er X/Y chart with a with left and right wing forms of er both anarchy and totalitarianism as the other axis end points.”

William (speaking over me): “But you’re collective zealots of a contemporary left wing homogeneity, like it’s a competition!”

Me (speaking a little bit louder over William): “So *you* might, for example, be left leaning but also in favour of a more centralised social order with an emphasis on, erm well order. Where as I...”

William (speaking still louder over me as my sentence trails off into a concessionary mumble): “Are you sent your political opinions via a gigantic WhatsApp group message from central artist head quarters, that is currently being run by.. er...erm.”

I shout quickly this time: “*BY HITO STEYERL?!?*”

William echoes: “By erm, hee-tow style...”

The table all laugh, even home-counties Jake, and I’m happy to have stolen William’s punch line.

“What is hee-tow style?” Will says meekly now, smiling though left out of the joke.

Double laughter! Joao roars. Suze is mid malbec pour into Anne’s glass, merriment inducing her stretched arm to wobble and momentarily miss. William jumps up to get a cloth from the kitchen, unimpressed. The wooden table won’t enjoy the red wine. He is less laissez-faire when it comes to cleanliness. It’s all very well and good having a ‘raw’ space and reclaimed furnishings as long as it is clean – he’s told Suze in the past.

She shouts out “sorry babe!” the sudden rupture in joviality calling a halt to the laughter. She performs a naughty-apologetic clenched tooth smile to the table following it up with an off-the-shelf wise crack: “I don’t know if he’s more worried about the table or spilling good wine!”

Polly, quoting the cult TV comedy *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, mocks: “You don’t respect wood!” A cultural reference recognised by Anne and Jake, missed by Suze and Joao.

A sense of community can only be developed when we take down our defensive walls; a lowering of barriers fomenting the amalgamation of individuals into teams.<sup>137</sup> Simultaneously it works on a level of exclusion to designate the *us* from *them*: those-in-the-know are defined against those who are kept at arm’s length. Similarly to gossip and praise, friends will also share confessional and often

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<sup>137</sup> Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, p200

embarrassing anecdotes, things they would usually try and keep secret: Anne tells the table about her haemorrhoids, Joao boasts about his clumsy seduction attempt of his boss and Suze divulges an incident when she farted in the Hauser and Wirth office – later blaming it on the intern over lunch. For my part I have developed an entire persona based on humorous self-deprecation. Perhaps, as Goffman notes, in this “cult of confession...teams trade secrets so that they can start at the beginning to collect a new set of skeletons for a newly shared closet.”<sup>138</sup> Perhaps admitting our minor character flaws is an attempt to imply that we have no major ones? Perhaps hamming-up our own modesty in the assurance that it will be sufficiently counteracted by the praise of others is an egotistical act?

Whilst these observations are or seem inherently critical, the processes of laying bare the crude mechanics of social interactions is always an ugly business. Any dialogue, especially civil or social, can be picked apart to show its generic structure and subconscious agendas. All cultures and languages have their own conversational conventions, rules of civility and ultimately ways of deducing who is an ally, competitor, potential lover, idiot, enemy or friend; and, just as importantly, which of these you are viewed as.

### **Middle Class by the Glass**

“Oooh delicious wine Will!” Polly rescues us from a momentary silence, holding up her glass and inclining her head. She knows as little about wine as I do. Joao beams.

“Willy’s a wine buff!” Suze exclaims with a performed pride. Anne stifles a laugh – I think at him being called Willy.

“We went on a tasting trip around Argentina in February, I even feel I know a thing or two about it now!” Suze humbly explains.

Knowing about wine and how to appreciate it is a form of cultural capital traditionally indicative of class. It is not a type of cultural capital that I possess and in its extreme form is perhaps viewed as more elitist from a post-bohem point of view. In many ways however fine wine is like fine art: after breaching the high-street level, prices quickly stop correlating to quality. At the upper levels both are

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., p200

sold on their supposed aesthetic values and yet there is plenty of terrible wine and terrible art that's expense seems unconcerned by qualitative attributes. The paper "Wine as a Cultural Product" states:

...even experts are not able to differentiate between wines based on objective sensory characteristics and cannot rank wines in blind tastings according to their price. Assessed quality differences cannot be explained by the sensual qualities of the wine. Instead, we explain variations in valuation by social processes in which quality is constructed and contested... the orientation of consumers towards different segments of the field is based on class hierarchy.<sup>139</sup>

Fine wine then is sold on hype, scarcity, and prestige; sold on its label and what it means, canonised by unseen gatekeepers and elite vendors. I'm told that stupidly priced wine – being very old – is often too old. It might even taste a little vinegary. Knowing-about-wine may be knowing-about-which-wine-you're-supposed-to-like. Wine, like art, might paradoxically be expensive simply because it is expensive – purchased purely to express the customer's wealth. Furthermore, a coding of their wealth that can only be de-coded by those with the requisite type of cultural capital, affording a talking point – contributing perhaps to social capital, exposing the nouveau riche, the parvenu and the pretender – if that's what you're into – in other words Bourdieu's much vaunted 'distinction'.

Wineries trade on the unique, on the attributes that make them inimitable – even if they are only labelling. They protect their monopoly value. Only wines from Burgundy can be called a Burgundy, a wine that tastes like a Burgundy but is from Essex isn't a Burgundy. A painting that looks like a Jackson Pollock but is by a 19-year-old BA student at Bristol UWE isn't a Jackson Pollock painting. Appreciation is given to the canonised and it is a matter of class distinction to be able to spot the difference.

Despite the fact that I've been gulping it down I think the wine we're drinking tastes like crap, but I hold my glass up like a good guest, swill it around a little and concur with the group. "It is *very* distinctive," I say (the Bourdieusian pun not intended here but welcome).

"You've er, actually gotten the wine that you brought," William observes gesturing with his chin to the fact that there is a second bottle open on the table. I've been rustled: despite the pretence of expensive wines, when you get below five pounds a bottle it's always going to be acrid. I know that he

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<sup>139</sup> Jens Beckert, Jörg Rössel and Patrick Schenk, "Wine as a Cultural Product: Symbolic Capital and Price Formation in the Wine Field", piii, *New Developments in Sociological Theory*, 2017, Vol:60, Iss:1, pp205-222 (Accessed: 10/10/2018) <https://doi.org/10.1177/0731121416629994>

knows that we both know that this is cheap wine so I flip it into a joke. “It is very distinctively shit,” I say, this time comically exaggerating the shape of my lips as I enunciate the words.

William’s eyebrows (or should I say mono-brow?) raise higher on his receding-hairlined, reptilian-egg cranium. Only then do teeth now stained by red wine (or is it blood?) flash into a smile. A fraction of a pause. And then... *Ku-ha-ha-ha-ha!* Like he had to remember how to do it or something. His lower jaw momentarily gurning out as he performs joviality, cheekbones rising ominously. Until this point his skin seemed to fit his skeleton but laughing, it stretches or bunches up like a badly tailored suit in odd places. I’m not saying he stole another man’s skin and now wears it as a gimp suit, it’s just that’s the impression it gives.

The table follows suit and heartily laugh in unison. Not so much at my joke but at William’s calling me out as a pretender and my acceptance of it. They laugh at the release of tension. They laugh because this is the first time William has seemed to genuinely enjoy himself. They laugh at their own relief.

“*It is shit!*” bare-foot William bellows, banging the table, fighting back sobs of laughter. After my self-deprecating joke he’s now deemed it acceptable to mock my wine offering, in doing so revealing that he already knew it was rubbish and electing to serve it only to me.

*Allodoxia* is a Bordusean concept for cultural misinterpretation, misapprehension, or misidentification, specifically with the petit-bourgeois relation to high culture:

Allodoxia, the heterodoxy experienced as if it were orthodoxy that is engendered by this undifferentiated reverence, in which avidity combines with anxiety, leads the petit bourgeois to take light opera for ‘serious music’, popularization for science, an ‘imitation’ for the genuine article, and to find in this at once worried and over-assured false recognition the source of a satisfaction which still owes something to the sense of distinction.<sup>140</sup>

For Bourdieu allodoxia, misidentifying imitation goods, reveals sham cultural capital. However, and this is where Bourdieu runs out of usefulness, the distinctions he maintains between high culture and the petit-bourgeoisie seem dated. Especially with the post-bohem turn of the last twenty years it is no longer universally desirable to break into the ‘upper classes’. The affectations of the day are to seem

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<sup>140</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction*, p323

more streetwise, worldlier; classical snobbery is inverted. Niche subcultural knowledge is esteemed: comics not classics, sub-cultural obscurity not opera, video art not Bach. Upper class rituals and cultures can seem rather naff to the cultural sensibilities of the middle-class post-bohem.

Cultural capital is more important than ever – however it no longer flows in a simplistic way from high culture to low. In a reversal of hierarchical cultural signifiers, and especially in the company of scruffy but over educated artists, attaching importance to ‘knowing about wine’ is itself a case of allodoxia. From a post-bohem perspective William has put effort into acquiring an out-dated form of cultural capital.

The majority of the time people will speak from some sort of predefined and accepted social identity, one that we’ve either chosen or felt required to adopt: tough guy, cynic, rebel, class clown, left wing intellectual... devil may care artist.<sup>141</sup> I had arrived in a leather jacket. In this setting I am absolutely fine with knowing nothing about wine and am not embarrassed one bit by being caught out, William has mistaken my momentary pretence for posturing rather than politeness. The societal role I am currently performing requires different knowledge and perhaps a different sorts of pretence. Furthermore I am safe in the knowledge that the more he teases me for this, the more he alienates himself rather than me from the others present. Admittedly I would, I’m sure, be embarrassed should this interchange have happened in the company of his banking friends, despite my professed nonchalance.

## The Main Course

“How’s the PhD going?” Suze asks me serving up plates of lamb tagine, William passing them round.

“It’s erm, actually a ‘DPhil,’” I reply. “They don’t do PhDs at Oxford, but yea it’s the same thing.” I furtively shoot a glance over at Will who had earlier muttered that he was a financial lawyer or something. He might be impressed that I’m at Oxford. He’s not, or at least doesn’t show it.

“Yea, I’m still doing it I can tell you that much. Ha!” I follow up.

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<sup>141</sup> Zygmunt Bauman and Rein Raud, *Practices of Selfhood*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), p32

“Gotta title yet?” chimes in Anne.

“Er - no not as yet, I thought I’d come up with one at the end.”

“A very basic description then? Imagine you’re explaining it to a child or some type of household pet like a golden retriever!” Anne quips getting the laugh she deserves.

“It’s kind of on like, erm.” I’ve still not gotten my elevator pitch down yet. “It’s about the interface between artists and the fabric of East London. Erm, architecture, class politics, gentrification – that sort of stuff.” I go on with my doctoral descriptions, finding my flow as I shift my brain out of banter mode.

“It’s a search amongst the ruins for an authentic city and an authentic self!” I say half remembering a line I’d already written, realising it sounds kind of corny only after it had left my mouth.

It was pointed out to me long ago that my accent and lexicon changes depending on whom I’m addressing and what is being discussed.<sup>142</sup> In this instance, as I put effort into my own articulation, my voice becomes instantly posher. (My mother’s Birkenhead upbringing means that I have a northern twang flattening my /A’s when I talk to her; the hint of ‘multicultural London English’ when I’m on the street or talking informally; shameful baby talk when I’m alone with Polly). Adorno has told me to not be overly concerned with imitation:

Genuineness is nothing other than a defiant and obstinate insistence on the monadological form which social oppression imposes on man. Anything that does not wish to wither should rather take on itself the stigma of the inauthentic. For it lives on the mimetic heritage.<sup>143</sup>

There is no default setting for me accent-wise, I am authentically inauthentic in this regard, or at least I hope I am. However, social convention requires a more consistent performance and I certainly don’t want to be guilty of ‘class dress-up’, a profoundly irritating post-bohem’ vice that by no means actually erodes real class snobbery. I hope I’m not doing this but also don’t want to think about it too much. Trying to be authentic is a contradiction in terms. We play roles, roles change, we wear different masks for different audiences.

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<sup>142</sup> See: Morgan Sonderegger, Max Bane, Peter Graff. “The Medium-term Dynamics of Accents on Reality Television”, *Language*, Vol:93, Iss:3, September 2017, pp598-640 (Accessed: 10/10/2018) doi: 10.1353/lan.2017.0038

<sup>143</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p154

Joao had once explained to me that in Portuguese there is no ‘gay accent’ – as he put it. The camp inflection that we have in English does not exist and so his Portuguese friends visiting him during his Goldsmith’s Anglicisation were surprised to discover a new queer performativity in him that was somehow licenced by the language switch up.

“Gentrification? Hey!” pink-shirted Will perks up, happy to re-join the conversation after art world exclusion. By now I’ve worked out that he’s Danish. Unprompted he goes on a tirade against ‘hipsters’. Jake joins in spewing venom at The Cereal Killer Café that only serves cereal on Brick Lane. It’s run by identical twins with matching gigantic beards and tattoos. The conversation shifts onto fixed gear bikes or ‘fixies’, touching on all of the easily ridiculed hipster cliché’s. It seems that William believes that he is not a gentrifier whilst implying that, as artists or ‘trendy’ people, *we* are. Dr Martens wearers - the scapegoats of gentrification. As the cultural theorist Joe Kennedy writes:

These characterisations are produced to an industrial scale and are perpetuated by a class of more secure, well-paid and in some cases slightly older professionals, those who genuinely are advantaged by gentrification and who need to find an easy satirically fecund alibi for their economic privilege... an attempt to explain gentrification with a straw-man, a straw-man whose predominant foible is a lack of (usually poorly defined) “authenticity”.<sup>144</sup>

Decades of articles in *The Guardian* and other nominally left-wing publications,<sup>145</sup> having filtered and simplified (as newspapers do) the overproduction of academic texts equating art with gentrification,<sup>146</sup> have seeped into the popular imagination to provide another get out clause for the wider urban privileged. Although I do, as previously argued, see relations between an area’s cultural capital and a vampiric capturing and conversion of this by financial interests, I also think that it is counterproductive to lay the blame for this at the feet of individual consumption choices. And so, being a contrarian and a bit drunk I decide to totally disagree with pink-shirt Willie and cardigan Jake’s

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<sup>144</sup> Joe Kennedy, *Games Without Frontiers*, (London: Duncan Baird Publishers, 2016), p137

<sup>145</sup> See: Matt Bolton, “Is art to blame for gentrification”, *The Guardian* 30/08/2013 (Accessed 01/08/2018)

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/aug/30/art-blame-gentrification-peckham>

Mandy Richards, “Gentrification: how was it for you?” *The Guardian* 20/04/2005 (Accessed 01/08/2018)

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2005/apr/20/communities.guardiansocietysupplement>

Stephen Prichard, “Hipsters and artist are the gentrifying foot soldiers of capitalism”, *The Guardian* 13/09/2016 (Accessed 01/08/2018)

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/sep/13/hipsters-artists-gentrifying-capitalism>

<sup>146</sup> See: Daniel Makagon, “Bring on the Shock Troops: Artists and Gentrification in the Popular Press.” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies Journal*, 2010, Vol:7, Iss:1. (Accessed: 22/10/2017), doi:10.1080/14791420903527772

and: Carl Grodach, Nicole Foster, James Murdoch, “Gentrification, Displacement and the Arts: Untangling the Relationship Between Arts Industries and Place Change”, *Urban Studies*, 2016, Vol:55, Iss:4, pp807-825

(Accessed: 22/10/2017) doi:10.1177/0042098016680169

and: David Ley, “Artists, Aestheticisation and the Field of Gentrification”, *Urban Studies*, 2003, Vol:40, Iss:12, pp2527-2544.

(Accessed: 22/10/2017) doi:10.1080/0042098032000136192

synopsis of the great urban problem. I'm not a bad person. But there is a malevolent old man in my subconscious that goads me on to play the didactic devil's advocate and to assert myself even at the expense of my own more nuanced opinion. I take one large breath and launch into an extended single-sentence high-speed rebuttal:

“Attributing gentrification to artists or perceived hipsters equates gentrification with lifestyle choices and consumer habits rather than the erosion of rental rights, the selling off of council homes, shrinkage of the welfare state and a totally unregulated housing market,” Suze excuses herself and goes to the toilet, I continue “– and as with the rest of neo-liberalism, you seem to be holding individuals to account whilst offering no legitimate means by which they can stop being part of the problem,” Jake glances at something on his phone, I continue “I mean it's not consumption patterns that price out working-class families – although they may be symptomatic of changing demographics – and whilst artists seem to be repeatedly vaunted as the vanguard of gentrification there simply aren't enough of us to explain the type of blanket increase in house prices, rents and living costs throughout London,” William pours himself more wine, I continue “and sure, whilst Shoreditch, Hoxton or Hackney Wick were certainly home to artists before they became trendy,” Anne nods attentively “...there really isn't a huge price difference between fashionable Hackney and tedious Hammersmith, there isn't a pricing correlation with ‘hipster’ or artist areas – other than perhaps literally a few roads out of London's thousands!”<sup>147</sup>

I catch my breath and finish up with “it's not cappuccinos, it's capitalism dum-dums!” I sit back with an air of self-satisfaction. Technically I should have said ‘flat-whites’ which are probably the gentrification coffee cliché however I've always had the amateur poet's penchant for alliteration. Additionally I have just started Joe Kennedy's new book *Authentocrats* wherein he observes the metropolitan middle class's misidentification of the cappuccino as being a middle class thing, having not realised that Italian styles of coffee have been widely available in working-class neighbourhoods

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<sup>147</sup> See London borough property prices here:

<https://www.thelondoneconomic.com/property/londons-post-brexite-property-market-what-we-know-so-far/06/12/>

This is a chart of London borough prices, where as ‘artist led gentrified neighbourhoods’, would only constitute a small percentage – perhaps not showing up on a borough based survey.

throughout Britain for decades.<sup>148</sup> Also, and more significantly than caffeinated paradigms, I've been somewhat disingenuous here as I know full well that Hackney (Tower Hamlets' neighbour to the north-west), which is probably overall the trendiest place to live for artists and hipsters for the last 20 years has also seen the biggest *percentage* rise in house price as well as the having the sharpest ratio between mean house price and mean household income – although still only catching up to West London prices.<sup>149</sup>

## Creative Clustering

I finish my mini rant and the table's eyes instinctively look towards Will like it's a game of tennis. He switches into a slightly more measured tone. "Ok erm, whilst yes, I agree that ultimately the housing crisis falls to the government to solve, and I don't want to blame the individual, no matter how ridiculous [sic] they may be," he says as a smirk flits across his face, "but I also think that the creative sector – that these workers coalesce in certain super-cities around the world.<sup>150</sup> And there is a slight irony in that the immaterial output that these workers produce – and I include myself and you guys in this group – could be done anywhere. Our market is global not regional, and furthermore we're not limited to specific places because of raw materials or something. You can do your paintings anywhere in the world right?"

"Video art, - but sure," I murmur.

"Sure, videos, you can make art anywhere, and banking can be done anywhere, and designing and music and so on. If you make a film you sell it to the rest of the world not just to people in the vicinity of its production, right?"

"Sure" I say, whilst internally writhing over the fact that I have never sold one of my films. Never.

"And yet..." Will holds the pause, inviting an interruption like a prompting schoolteacher.

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<sup>148</sup> Joe Kennedy, *Authentocrats*, (London: Repeater, 2018) p19

In this Kennedy seems to disagree or at least complicate the argument of Sharon Zukin in her description of "Pacification by cappuccino" (*Naked City*), and by extension the quoting of her by David Harvey in *The Rights to the City*.

<sup>149</sup> See: "Booming London Property Prices by Borough", *Occupy London*, 2014. (Accessed 06/05/2018), <https://occupylondon.org.uk/43513/>

<sup>150</sup> There is an ambiguity in the definition of the 'creative sector/economy/class. I am essentially using Richard Florida's understanding of the term previously discussed: a subsection of knowledge workers whose work is primarily creative rather than administrative. ie. tech workers, cultural workers, entertainment, advertising, some sectors of banking etc.

Allen Scott refers to this as 'Cognitive-Cultural Capitalism' in "Beyond the Creative City: Cognitive-Cultural Capitalism and the New Urbanism", *Regional Studies*, 2014, Vol:48, Iss:4, pp565-578, (Accessed: 10/10/2018) doi: 10.1080/00343404.2014.891010

“Hollywood!?” interjects Polly.

“Exactly. Hollywood for film, Silicon Valley for tech, New York for finance... Industries that could be done anywhere in the world and yet they seem to coalesce in certain cities. Same with art, right? You guys have all come to London to do art.”

“I’m born and bred in London.” I reply, denying my own culpability whilst otherwise not contesting the point. Around this table sits an American, a Canadian, three Brits (although Polly has probably spent most of her life elsewhere), a Portuguese, and a Dane. Despite us artists’ discomfort with being hosted in a gated community, our demographic makeup is pretty in keeping with the other residents of the Bow Quarter: international but mostly Caucasian, denizens of a global, liberal and essentially privileged milieu.

The creative class have a tendency to swarm – the more members the more attractive it is to new members. Each node of the network multiplies rather than simply adds to the overall creative nepotism, thus forming a few, what Richard Florida calls in his new book, ‘Superstar Cities’.<sup>151</sup> He writes that economic progress today depends upon “the ability of cities to cluster and concentrate talented people, enabling them to combine and recombine their ideas and efforts.”<sup>152</sup> As the marketplace for their output is global they are not adversely affected by the physical proximity of their rivals, but rather benefit from interconnected networks between cultural, social and financial capital. Florida usefully suggests we “refer to contemporary capitalism as *urbanized* knowledge capitalism as opposed to knowledge-based capitalism or just the knowledge economy.”<sup>153</sup> This is one reason why this class are so appalled and confused by Brexit and the recent lurch towards nationalism (rightly condemned, wrongly surprising). We are globally cosmopolitan, part of an extra-territorial community and don’t understand localised employment or cultural threats.

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<sup>151</sup> Florida, *The New Urban Crisis*.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, p9

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, p10 (italics authors own).

“So what are you saying Will?” asks Canadian Anne, seemingly annoyed.

“Whilst it was wrong of me to reduce the issue down to a few bearded hipsters, it is also true that the broadly defined creative industries are increasingly the only economy in town.<sup>154</sup> In terms of the UK, London doesn’t just have an unfairly big slice of this pie, it has the pie. Do you like pie?” He asks the silent table. “Of course you like pie!”

“Ok ok. Gentrification is the government’s inability or reluctance to adjust to the economic, demographic and employment changes of the last thirty years. But what’s that got to do with artists?” says Anne, “I mean, I like pie but I’m not getting any!”

“Who ate all the pie?” chimes in Joao beaming; I’m not sure if he realises that this is usually an English expression to allude to fat people. Anne is relatively curvaceous and we all politely pretend Joao hasn’t accidentally made a fat joke.

“So what makes London the financial or tech or art capital of Europe, over say, Frankfurt, is that it’s a fun place to live. It’s big, it’s diverse, it’s vibrant, and yes, artists – which I guess has become a byword for young trendy people – contribute in their small way to that. The city attracts the talent and the employers follow. It’s the opposite of the classical industrial worker-employer geographical dynamic – although of course this then reinforces the localities status. In this sense artists are both part of the invading hoard of mostly privileged cultural workers but you also perhaps make the horde a fun place to be for losers like me,” says Will, sounding like a *Guardian* think-piece.

“He comes here *for the women!*” Suze winks to the table.

“I do! I do!” he says in earnest looking at her fondly, she reaches across the table to hold his hand.

I internally cringe.

Richard Lloyd writes in *Neo-Bohemia: Art and Commerce in the Postindustrial City*:

The willingness of educated professionals to eagerly take consumption cues from urban artists does appear more widespread, in part because such professionals have become a much larger share of metropolitan populations... gentrification, but also a bohemian-themed entertainment district where patrons are not starving artists but rather affluent professionals.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>154</sup>See: Manufacturing vs. employment chart, Elena Holodny “China isn’t the only reason Americans are losing manufacturing jobs” *Business Insider UK*, 2016. (accessed 06/05/2018), <http://uk.businessinsider.com/manufacturing-output-versus-employment-chart-2016-12>

<sup>155</sup>Lloyd, *Neo-Bohemia*, p71

I'm still trying to move the debate away from artists and so counter, more softly this time: "But an area's supposed fashionability is only one possible ingredient that makes a neighbourhood desirable to live and push up prices. – The same could be said for good transport links or a good park. Whilst sure, cultural capital can be commodified – buildings and land always are!"

Polly gets on side: "No one ever blamed Transport for London for gentrifying an area – but that's exactly what any amenity does – lower crime rate, better schools, better infrastructure... in an unregulated housing market every neighbourhood improvement simply pushes up rents. I mean Hackney Wick has been an artist's enclave for almost two decades but it was only after the Overground station re-opened and they spent all that money on Victoria Park as part of the Olympics makeover of the area that it became increasingly a 'destination'." She makes air quotes with her index fingers and says the word 'destination' in a slightly funny mock-posh voice.

Anne has a lot to say about Hackney Wick and counters that it is now a location for domestic tourists from various class backgrounds which upsets the classical understanding of gentrification.

"We get Essex lads and hen parties down on the weekend, and with the Olympic stadium just on the other side of the canal being the new West Ham soccer grounds. Puke-ups and punch-ups!" Anne's right – the area does attract a class cross section although I can't help detecting an undercurrent of classism due to her disgust implying facial expression.

"You also get the braying accents of the.." I glance at William's trousers to check "...of the red trouser brigade. I was genuinely woken up by the retching and splatter of a toff shouting soup against the wall bellow my bedroom window the other weekend." I try to bring the narrative back to the class-war version of gentrification rather than the more nuanced change-of-land-use gentrification causes.

"Disgusting!" says Suze. Her fringe and rimmed spectacles hide her eyebrows giving her a constant sense of severity (which is the same reason that police hats cover their eyebrows).

## Serving Drinks.

“On that note who would like a digestif?” Suze says, standing and making to clear the table. Jake and I jump to help at least carry and dump the dirty dishes in the kitchen area as Polly asks Anne about working at *The Yard*, the bar-club next door to me in Hackney Wick.

The lives and jobs, incomes and labour of young artists make it hard to locate our group in a conventional class framework. Despite our (according to Florida&co.) inclusion and importance to the wider creative class, the majority of artists don’t make an income from making art. Many of us have or continue to work in the service economy well beyond our youth, a trend beyond the art world with many young hopefuls of ‘cognitive-cultural capitalism’.<sup>156</sup> The bars of Dalston, Hackney Wick and Peckham are staffed by over-educated graduates with creative degrees: Fine Art, Photography, Illustration, Fashion, Creative Writing. I have worked in a fair few bars myself – one on Brick Lane in Shoreditch from 2006-2008, and from 2010-2012 at *The Haggerston* one of the first hipster bars in Dalston. In both establishments I would estimate that 80% of my co-workers had a creative degree, the vast majority being in Fine Art.

For the post-bohem there is a cultural (though definitely not financial) capital in being somewhat poor by choice in the pursuit of loftier cultural goals. Being just poor (with low/no cultural capital) remains indicative of a lower social standing. For post-bohems straddling the creative and service class, status privilege can be upheld with poverty even being a badge of honour. In this sense their poverty is a less vulnerable one than other sections of the urban poor, tending not to face the worries or social stigma attached to entrenched poverty. Starving artists never really starve and often have social and cultural lives richer than their income implies.

It is perhaps at this level – that of the bohemian-esque artist service worker – that artists most fluidly spill their creative capital or cultural cool out into the wider city. Unlike regular service industry or manual labour jobs:

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<sup>156</sup> Scott, “Beyond the Creative City”

Though labour...is often physically gruelling, it also requires varying degrees of performative competence, that is, the mastery of hip social codes....Neo-bohemia nurtures both the aesthetic competence and the subjective dispositions required by these jobs.<sup>157</sup>

At first, these employment roles manifest for the – usually young – artist’s own community but morph into an accessible bohemia for higher-net-worth individuals to peruse, engage and consume. It is perhaps at the point of the service economy rather than gallery that the presence of young artists is most felt by the wider city.

There is for each worker however a limit, a personal cut-off point where it is no longer worth it to swim against the urban current for a creative pay-off that never comes. For each worker this trade-off has a shelf life and neo-bohem artists don’t want to work in a bar forever. It is only a stop on the way to creative actualisation that has been legitimised by off-the-shelf clichés from Orwell, Kerouac and other undergraduate faves. These are rights of passage that connote an elusive authenticity; roughing it on the way to celebrity. But at what point does the anti-materialist trade off between creativity and a more comfortable financial situation morph into the “proletarianisation” of the young middle classes?

There can be little doubt that, for some, the self-designation of artist amounts mostly to a self-legitimization strategy through which the children of the middle class can experience servile labour as something other than downward social mobility....(but) the odds are stacked against any given artistic career taking off financially, the question of what these jobs are a stop on the way to begins to loom larger.<sup>158</sup>

As is becoming apparent, millennials (b.1980-2000) have become the first generation since the 1800s to earn less than our parents.<sup>159</sup> The creative class in general, but especially service-working creatives, forestall life commitments such as parenthood, mortgages and savings: living instead in a state of suspended adolescence. The putting-off of parenthood being a contributing factor of our willingness to pay more rent and for longer before either ‘succeeding’ or decamping to the suburbs like everyone else. It transpires that what might have seemed a blip in personal finances is a trend across the board – even as young contenders flood the ‘superstar cities’ in an urbanized gamble for a meaningful and creative profession, becoming reluctant players in the gentrification process not simply due to income

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<sup>157</sup> Lloyd, *Neo-Bohemia*, p186

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.* p186

<sup>159</sup> Stephen Clarke and Conor D’Arcy, “The Kids aren’t Alright: A new approach to tackle the challenges face by young people in the UK labour market”. *Intergenerational Commission Report*, (Resolution Foundation, 2018), (Accessed 07/05/2018). <https://www.intergencommission.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/IC-labour-market-policy.pdf>

– but life-style choices and compromises. This is the core social antagonism that does not map neatly onto simple income based understanding of gentrification and class difference.

Anne is thirty-four. She's tired she tells Polly. Suze serves up a round of the ultra-bitter Italian liqueur *Fernet Branca* as Anne glances over to check that dish-clearing Jake is out of earshot: "I'm thinking about Berlin or Lisbon, somewhere that isn't a constant battle to keep my fucking head above water," she says in a conspiratorial whisper. "What about Barking?" I interrupt with a wry smile and her face flashes with either annoyance or surprise that I've snuck into the conversation.

She's thinking about her future and about children and about this winner-takes-all city. She's thinking about moving back home to Edmonton for Christ's sake.

"A free spirit that has somehow gotten bogged down in waged drudgery disguised as hedonism," she says. "Besides, Hackney Wick is a dead duck. It's not the same."

The art world is a globalised community. London is losing its artists fast and the more that bleed out into the rest of Europe the easier it is for others to follow. Anne now knows half of Kreuzberg and has a solid social-foothold in Glasgow. She takes a sip of the bitter digestif and pulls a face.

## **Positions are Swapped**

By the time everyone is sitting back at the table, chairs have been swapped, positions moved in social realignments. Suze sits supportively next to Will after being abandoned by Polly, who now natters with Anne, having taken Jake's seat and in the process forcing him to sit between myself and Joao, both of whom ignore him. Along with the changed seating some of us begin to assume different characters – legitimised by alcohol, informality, boredom or familiarity. Social roles are blurred or are allowed to morph as pretensions reveal themselves or breakdown of their own accord.

Throughout my twenties I used to think that I was some type of radical – an anarchist of one stripe or another, maybe a socialist on a more sober day. In the last few years I've realised I'm your bog standard Corbynista who likes parties (who doesn't apart from Jeremy himself?). What once felt like political radicalism is now reconstituted as mainstream. This is, of course, what radicals want, and

yet it is bittersweet. Fringe radicality and oppositional politics afford their holder a certain rugged identity. Corbynism has taken this from me.

When we like someone we intuitively presume that they share the same basic opinions as us, especially political. When we've taken a dislike we presume the opposite. I am disgruntled to discover signet-ringed Willy is a Jeremy Corbyn supporter too and is furthermore in agreement with me on basic ideas about the economy, if not culture. I'm irritated because I feel he is aesthetically unqualified to have socialist economic values, and even more pissed when it is implied by Suze that he lives out his political views in a way that my ironic, navel-gazing art practice could never allow.

William, it transpires, is a *prosecuting* financial lawyer, which she tells us essentially means he gets paid less than defence lawyers but with the perk of actually playing an important ethical, political and economic role of holding financial institutions to account. But this is Suze's elaboration of his profession: fudge factors, exaggerations and selective truths operate beyond the presentation of self and can apply to allies talking on our behalf. Despite being, from an artist's perspective at least, wealthy, from a financial lawyer's perspective he's (apparently) "positively a peasant". (I'm reminded of Boris Johnson's dismissal of his £250,000-a-year Daily Telegraph columnist 'second job' salary as "chicken feed". Levels of income and equality being so often erroneously judged by comparison to one's peers.)<sup>160</sup>

Whilst I remain a cynic, perhaps what seems to the artists present as naffness – living in a gated community, signet rings, excessive wine knowledge – is his attempt to display the same cultural capital as his better-paid peers, an anxiety to impress on them his likeness. Us arty types are simply not the intended audience for these moments of this particular codified cultural capital. As Suze conveys all this, I am left wandering if she is a bit embarrassed of us in front of him, or of him in front of us. Simultaneously of course, he remains essentially on the post-bohem scale – he's still barefoot in a loft conversion with a bloody tree growing out of a wooden barrel. The blending of these cultural capitals reminding us that they were never opposites in the first place.

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<sup>160</sup> Boris Johnson, "HARDtalk interview", *BBC News*. (Broadcast 14/06/2009)

## Have Your Cake and Eat it

Suze encourages us to help ourselves to a pot of sorbet as she dishes out sickly sweet servings of pecan pie. The table's conversation reunifies via cake based compliments and then discussion of the Italian liquor we're consuming, culminating in a parable by Anne:

"When we were in Italy the other week we'd left the kitchen in this Air BnB place a bit..."

"We'd let it get a bit on the messy side," Jake jumps in.

"...and inevitably by midweek we'd gotten ourselves an ant infestation. This line of ants stretched from a crack in a window in the bathroom, snaking down the stairs through two other rooms to the kitchen. Like a never-ending trail of wagons off on the latest gold rush."

Jake: "I hoovered them all up."

Anne: "Jake hoovered them up. But anyway, elsewhere in the house there was obviously the odd lone ant, not following anything and to our eyes just lost in the bedroom or something. Right? I started thinking – and this kind of brings us back to what Will asked earlier about artists all being left wing – ants just seem identical to the human eye but something makes some follow and others wander. They must have different psychological make up. Ant colonies seem super well organized but we can't imagine they're bureaucratic, there are no orders being given."

"I can't believe you hoovered them up!" Suze says to Jake, her face looking like it has unexpectedly won a prize. She's missing the parabolic nature of the anecdote so Anne continues ignoring here:

"A relatively small number meander off individually in different directions, maybe looking for food or just curious, we don't know. Lots of these little guys probably die a lonely death before finding food or returning to the greater colony. The few that do find their way home bring news and a scent based trail or whatever. In theory the army then follows and finds that cake crumb that missed the bin. Great. Except they don't always follow."

"Where is this going?" says Joao,

"It's a meandering point!" I pun, getting a polite but silent laugh from Suze.

Anne: “Free wanderers are forever returning to the colony attempting to convince the rest to join them in some, like, new discovery. You could see these as individualistic in a way, but they’re always trying to come home. They’re still socially motivated, they want to introduce the greater population to whatever they’ve discovered. And the masses being the masses are always reluctant to follow, but when a significant number of these wandering ants come back with the same discovery there’s like a critical sea change in opinion or something. The army finally abandon their orthodox thinking,”

“Quickly moving to make the new discovery into the new orthodoxy,” interrupts floppy hair Jake who only seems to speak by finishing Anne’s sentences.

Anne: “We can understand the evolutionary function of a few wandering ants right? And we can also see why every ant doesn’t act in such an individualistic way?”

“So artists are wandering searching ant people?” William deliberately misses the point.

Polly joins in to spell out Anne’s parable to the congregation: “Evolutionarily we can see the function of this physis split, right? A small number of the population are the risk takers, disposed to using themselves as human guinea pigs, craving novelty, originality, intrigue, the unknown. Because of this they open themselves up to more risk!”

Anne, slightly defensively summarises: “I mean, I’m not an evolutionary biologist, it’s just a metaphor to reconcile an element of individualism with a socialist morality. Maybe being an artist is somewhere between aimless curious wandering and active searching? Instinctively unconventional, but not in defiance of communal bonds.”

William says “But who today wants to be conventional? Today conventionality is a byword for a lack of dynamism, to be unimaginative and stuck in your ways. Every company wants to be unconventional these days. And besides, let’s face it: Artists are very conventionally unconventional right? ...Today’s business leader has more in common with an artist than with the old fashioned idea of the ‘organization man’ (“or woman!” says Anne) with their set work schedules, overt hierarchies and routinized tasks.”

A glance from ripped t-shirt Polly infers a growing conversational weariness; a secondary glance down at her imaginary watch implying a ripeness for wrapping things up here.

“The discrediting of bureaucracy,” continues actual watch-wearing Will, his wine stained teeth at full saturation, his skull perspiring, “the increasing need for hyper-specialisation means that top-down management systems simply can’t work as bosses literally don’t understand what it is that their employees do exactly, employees therefore working more on personal projects – like your wandering ant – rather than on corporate rungs, dress codes are relaxed, payments are project- or goal-centred over time...So I agree with you that classical conservatism– although not post-Fordist neo-liberalism – discourages deviation, and we’re in neo-liberalism-two-point-oh now, and you wouldn’t call neo-liberalism left wing!!!?? Am I right?”

Whilst this may be a vague trend (especially in tech) I think that William is exaggerating. Even in ‘forward-thinking’ corporations the idea of the *unconventional* would not be privileged as much as buzzwords such as *innovation*, *creativity* and even *revolutionise* (which, to my mind, conjures images of head on sticks). *Unconventional* is more like code for creativity that hasn’t paid off.

Certainly a new generation of corporations have, at least internally, incorporated some of the dynamism of traditionally anarchic organisational forms: horizontalism, volunteerism, a level of autonomy (within certain parameters), outcome-orientated rather than work hour contracted. (Moderately) empowered workers work harder.

In their tome *The New Spirit of Capitalism* Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello suggest that historic critiques of capitalism loosely fall into four groups.<sup>161</sup> 1: Capitalism as disenchantment and inauthenticity of people, objects, relations and existence. 2: Capitalism as oppression of creativity, autonomy, existential freedoms both in terms of employment and the consecration by the market of only select forms of value. 3: Capitalism as poverty and inequality of the workers. 4: Capitalism as a force for egoism, individualism, opportunism, destructive to collective consciousness and communal relations.

They divide these categories into the *artistic critique* and the *social critique*.<sup>162</sup> The social critique is concerned with the latter two points and falls roughly into a socialist or Marxist critique of the

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<sup>161</sup> Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, p37

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, p38

economic-organisational form of capitalism. The ‘artistic critique’, which we are dealing with here, encompasses the first two groups: overt concerns with the *authentic* and general creative-existential-aesthetic freedoms. The artistic critique celebrates the unique as value as opposed to the homogenising standardisation of commodification. Traditionally, the proponents of this critique, from the early bohemians to the May ‘68ers support an imagined ‘freedom of the artist’: a rejection of regimented work forms, conformist aesthetics and herd ethics. This archetypal, and ultimately mythologised and fictionalised artist made economic precarity into a virtue and paradoxically combined anti-materialist sentiments with the flamboyance of wanton consumptive excesses (as opposed to the frugality, and morose obsession with reinvestment that was seen in the character of the classical bourgeoisie). But capitalism has changed. It is involved in multiple dialectics simultaneously. As Boltanski and Chiapello state:

Is it enough today to continue, as if nothing had changed, with the critique of the ‘bourgeois mentality’ and ‘bourgeois morality’ closely associated with the critique of capitalism since the mid-nineteenth century, in order to extend the project of emancipation inherent in it? Must we not ask... if the forms of capitalism which have developed over the last thirty years, while incorporating whole sections of the artistic critique and subordinating it to profit-making, have not emptied the demands of liberation and authenticity of what gave them substance?<sup>163</sup>

Can the ‘artist critique’ of capitalism, with its emphasis on life style, really still be considered ‘left wing’? Has it not been subsumed? Has the critique been processed dialectically, its synthesis having no bearing on the social critique i.e. inequality, poverty, and the accumulation of capital.

“Anne’s point,” counters Polly trying and failing to hide her frustration, “was trying to blend ideas of being existentially both inside and outside society, it had a moral dimension about how artists live our lives and the communities we’re a part of. Not about how some tech company astro-turfed their office space or how Burning Man is overrun by bankers on LSD.”

With a full glass of wine lifted to her lips and curiously frozen there whilst she talks, Suze mitigates: “I think it’s important to note the difference between *taking risks* and *being at risk*. ‘Taking risks’ is usually the rich gambling with their money in order to make more, ‘Being at risk’ – the poor’s material precarity.”

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid., pp419-420

“The artist of popular imagination is perhaps a merging of the two though right?” I say, re-joining the conversation: “A model neo-liberal worker and consumer! Think about it: Artists must be resourceful. We must be simultaneously specialists whilst being flexible and adaptable. We must be prepared to self-exploit – we are the educated end of the precariat. We must be prepared to be very poor and work very hard. ‘Adult’ commitments like family, home ownership, stability are deferred in the pursuit of our career. We must have creative solutions. We must have creative questions! We must all be innovators and entrepreneurs, *strivers not skivers!* We must be individualistic whilst paying lip service to community. We must express ourselves in everything we do. Narcissism helps – and I should know.” That gets a laugh.

“No jobs for life, no safety net. I mean even my anarchist-inspired do-it-yourself ethos equates to entrepreneurial neoliberal imperatives! The big society! Aspiration nation! The solo striving artist. Un-unionizable. Fantasies of spectacular success, faces on magazines, winner-takes-all economy. Be authentic, be original be individual and then mass market it! Be your own brand. Curate your Instagram for maximum social capital. Poppups, start-ups, kick-starters. Be your own boss, shoulder all of the risk. The petit-bourgeois dream is dissolved into the knowledge economy, filtered through narcissism, bashed back into shape by networked creative capital.”

The pitch and volume of my monologue increases throughout. I’m practically shouting as I reach a macho-didactic climax worthy of *Fight Club*: “We must all be original and think outside of the box. We must be *on the edge!*”

“Outside the box that is on the edge! Ha!” bawls Joao

“No no, the box isn’t on the edge, it’s set back from the edge... but like I say – we’re not in the box - we’re on the edge!”

“Abseiling down the edge!” Shouts Polly.

“Abseiling down with no ropes. LOL!” shouts Suze.

“No Suze.” I say, “abseiling without ropes is just falling.”

“*THAT’S ME!!*” shouts Anne and we all laugh. Anne’s laughter is bitter sweet.

Never before has individual creativity been as important as it is today... But never before have working people, irrespective of their talents and educational achievements, been as dependent and vulnerable as they are today, working in individualized situations without countervailing collective powers, and within flexible networks whose meaning and rules are impossible for most of them to fathom.<sup>164</sup>

Ulrich Beck, *Brave New World of Work*,

Young artists, the so-called vanguard of gentrification, are also then the advance troops of the risk society. That is until the risks don't pay off and they migrate or change profession. With our dated 'artist critique' of bureaucratic Fordist capitalism we have perhaps involuntarily become the spiritual leaders of the growing precarisation of even previously stable forms of 'middle-class' labour.

Max Weber clarifies the need and function of a 'spirit of capitalism' as that which justifies engagement in capitalism beyond mere materialistic incentives.<sup>165</sup> To seduce the majority of people to vote for and take part in a system that is not in their economic interest more existential, ethical and psychological prizes must be promised, most recently: creative fulfilment, excitement, hedonistic freedom and fame. These attributes, best captured in the archetype of the artist, are invoked (if undelivered) in order to ferment wider profit seeking activity on the one hand, and the acceptance of poverty on the other.

It's past midnight and Joao suddenly makes an early-start-in-the-morning comment. Anne yawns as if to concur, although knowing her she probably wants to leave so she can go to some house party and get high. There is no way that Polly and I are going to be left here without the other guests – it'd be like some weird antagonistic double date – and so I stand up, perhaps a bit prematurely. This causes an almost instantaneous exiting consensus that ripples around the table with all guests making movements to leave almost in sync. William stands up quickly to indicate acceptance and support of the sudden exodus. Suze sticks out her bottom lip in a clown like sad face. Polly scrabbles for a bag, Jake pats the pockets of his cardigan for his literary affectation, Anne fiddles with her nose ring as she reads a message on her phone, Joao downs his drink whilst William pours himself another big glass.

"*Willie's a wine buff?*" I mockingly say in my own head as I consider taking back the second and unopened bottle that I'd brought.

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<sup>164</sup> Ulrich Beck, *Brave New World of Work*, trans. Patrick Camiller, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), pp85-86

<sup>165</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Stephen Kalberg, (Chicago and London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001)

## The Return Home

Bohemia is always already over because it always already falls short of its adherents' fantasies of social autonomy, expressed in the vaunted ideology of art pour l'art.

Ricahrd Lloyd, *Neo-Bohemia*.<sup>166</sup>

*Nostalgia*, from the Greek roots *nostos* "return home" + *algos* "pain", is a pseudo-Greek or nostalgically Greek word since it was only coined in 1688.<sup>167</sup> The late 17<sup>th</sup> century was also approaching the peak of the enclosures that seized land collectively operated by the peasantry and privatised it. Enclosure being seen as the first systemically capitalist act, the first wrench from agrarianism towards urbanisation, the baby steps of a modernity characterised by a new found temporal teleology, a belief in progress and a celebration of change. Nostalgia means homesickness.

Perhaps only children are afforded the idea of a fixed home. Nostalgia implies a view of a static past, one that was not itself in a state of flux. Not fraught with internal contradictions, debates, hopes, troubles. It directs its gaze to a style (Greek: *stylus* – instrument used to scratch the surface), disproportionately politicising the aesthetic, not how things were but how things looked. The nostalgic urge is a longing for authenticity (Greek: *autos* "self" + *hentes* "doer, being": sole progenitor, author), a self or place which is existentially free whilst, paradoxically, not being in a state of flux and which is (impossibly) not determined by its relation to the world. To paraphrase a postmodern take on Heraclitus: Not only is the river changing but the 'I' that steps into it.<sup>168</sup>

Polly and I start the walk back to Hackney Wick in a silence broken by my epigrammatical drunken muttering.

"Ah, it's changing so fast - too fast!" I say as we pass another scaffolding wrapped development waiting like a present for Christmas.

"Faster than before?" Polly replies before she realises I'm talking to myself, sauntering hand in hand in different worlds.

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<sup>166</sup> Lloyd, *Neo-Bohemia*, p242

<sup>167</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p1

<sup>168</sup> See: Derek Mahon's poem "Heraclitus on Rivers", in *Poems 1962-1978* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979)

She persists: “isn’t moaning about a changing landscape just the bitterness of getting older? The longing not for how it used to be but for how you used to be, before cynicism and boredom took away the mystique of your precious London?”

When I was first here, taking in the streets in thick hot gulps, I didn’t even think that its ‘authenticity’ was already a point of contention for the older set. There were no good old days; good old days are different days depending on your generation.

“Sure, London is epitomised by change” I eventually reply, having left such a big pause that my answer seems no longer particularly linked to her question. It’s still warm as it approaches 1am and as we walk slowed by booze and food I revel in my own melancholia, and then:

“The cranes on the horizon are just landmarks of our own mortality.” I say, instantly flinching from the words’ pomposity. Quickly I repeat the phrase this time with a comic French accent and eyebrow intonation to let Polly know that I know my own affectations. Albert Camus via Monty Python: “Ze cranes on ze ‘orizon arr jus ze landmarks of ar onn mor-tal-e-té!”

Is it more pretentious to affect a performance to deliberately make it seem less pretentious?

New memories will be formed by (and indeed inform) new landscapes. For the most part, more of the same: the same old drunken fumbles in some backstreet shadows, old homeless in the doorways of refurbished restaurants. Something like life will continue as it always has; all incongruity, all temporary sexual entanglements, all anxiety, all junk mail and electricity bills and box sets, detergent jingles, and nights out at that new/old place have you heard of it? The old advertising trick of relabeling something as *NEW!* The fluctuations of the economy inscribed on the metropolitan landscape. Yes, the borough has its ghosts, shards of memories, settings for anecdotes, but with each newcomer there is an old-departer. Hauntings and exorcisms.

I’m aware of the post-bohem falling for the psychogeographer’s trap of fetishizing destitution and a mythic salt-of-the-earth past: urban pastoralism. My mind drifts off to my own art practice and writing in waves of reproach for peddling clichés about city. The concrete is imbued with memories.

\*yawn. The urban morphology a pin board of remembrances. \*yawn. The trauma of demolished buildings? \*yawn. The poetry of the pavement? *wretch*. As if from nowhere I unleash this stream of insecurities at Polly:

“I’m worried that I’ve fetishized urban degradation as being somehow more [I throw up scare quotes with my fingers] ‘real’. I’m worried that I’ve affected my accent. I’m worried that I’m just pretending! I’m worried that I’m preoccupied by cognitive introspection. I’m worried that I’m a liar!”

I don’t even know if this torrent of anxiety is real anxiety or an attempt to undermine any negative opinions of myself that Polly might be formulating, a plea for forgiveness, fishing for compliments, a desire for absolution. It’s not as if I lie awake worrying about these things.

Polly: “If you don’t think you’re a liar then you’re not lying.”

Me: “They’re the best liars!”

Polly: “Are you a liar?”

Me: “How the fuck should I know.”

Polly: “Just try to be sincere,”

Me: “That’s a paradox!”

Polly: “Ok, just try not to be a dick then, the rest will look after itself.”

We walk on in silence rounding the corner onto Parnell road, passing a small road I’d never noticed called Lefevre Walk. I miss read it as *Lefebvre* and think of the sociologist’s ideas on the right to the city, urban revolution and the political potentials of play.

“I think London is becoming inhospitable.” I pontificate as if I was the first person to make the observation.

“We can leave if you like. We could go to Berlin. You’re always saying how much you like Berlin,” says Polly.

Of course I won’t leave, by now I’ve constructed an art practice not to mention a doctoral thesis around moaning about London, besides I’m a Londoner. My entire family lives here. Sure, artists and any other precarious residents will be chased around the boroughs, decanted to the suburbs or other

cities, chased back in as trends change.<sup>169</sup> Artists and the creative class however tend to have the privilege of migration whilst the general poor are subjected to displacement and squalor. Regeneration ad nauseam.

It seems naïve and historically arrogant to somehow think that our current epoch is the urban watershed moment. The poor have always been herded, squeezed, further impoverished (not that I wish to naturalise this). And yet, is there something happening, something permanent? A threshold moment? We will only know in retrospect and by then it will be too late.

For the urban sociologist Sharon Zukin the authentic city, and by extension authenticity itself, has paradoxical connotations of both the very old and the very new and original. The ‘soul of the city’, she argues, is the small shops, the long-time residents, the bespoke and the locally specific, the organic and the spontaneous.<sup>170</sup> It seems counterintuitive to then accuse new independent cafes or autonomous petit-bourgeois enterprises as being geographically inauthentic simply because they cater to seemingly middle-class tastes – as if only the poor can be authentic, as if only the middle class likes coffee. Rather, the fight for authenticity is against standardisation and mass-production of houses, culture and people, the co-option of culture for profit-seeking and rent inflation. But is the valorisation or even identification of the authentic akin to the tourist’s desperate quest for the last bit of beach without tourists? An unquenchable thirst that destroys its object.

Theodor Adorno denounces and defines the notion of the ‘authentic’ as antithesis of the commodity form and yet, as its dialectical opposite, it is from this that commodities draw their power:

Only when countless standardized commodities project, for the sake of profit, the illusion of being unique, does the idea take shape, as their antithesis yet in keeping with the same criteria, that the non-reproducible is the truly genuine.<sup>171</sup>

Post-bohem values inflate the cultural capital of obscurism (my niche 80’s band t-shirt). Similarly, as Joe Kennedy observes, they value a quasi-back-to-the-land localism of artisanal food, farmers markets

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<sup>169</sup> See: Campkin, *Remaking London*. Particularly Chapter 3: “Regeneration ad nauseam”

<sup>170</sup> Sharon Zukin, *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>171</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p155

and craft beers, tastes that reflect reasonable if temporary and exclusionary desires to escape the total commercialisation at play in ‘superstar cities’.<sup>172</sup>

“I just didn’t like the Bow Quarter. It creped me out. And I didn’t like it that I fitted in there.” I say, trying to moan about London without committing to the emigration that I know she’s been fishing for.

“Of course you hate the gated compound; it’s a stark reminder of a divided city. But that is all it is: an unabashed reminder. You’re kidding yourself to think that the only kind of gated community is one with gates!” she says as we approach the off-license next to Greggs. It’s still open and with the same man still working, still staring at the tiny TV above the crisps. I run in to grab us two beers and have the identical interchange with him about the blue plastic bag.

“It’s the unashamed elitism. It’s naff, is just naff!” I say handing her a tin, once again collapsing the political into the aesthetic.

The reality is that it doesn’t matter about the ‘Artist Critique’ of capitalism anymore; in many ways this critique has already won. But for the majority of service workers and urban poor it will change nothing. Hedonism is no longer political, the aesthetic is no longer political, all the lifestyle choices in the world won’t threaten the neoliberal profit extraction from land or stop the parasitical rentier class squatting on top of the lives of anyone not fortunate enough to own their own home.

The war against the poor (and, increasingly, sections of the middle class) is partially derived from and mapped back onto the modern city and its organisational forms. A key point of struggle beyond the work place, especially in London, is the ludicrous housing market and its associated forbidding and poorly regulated rental system; the interrelated explanations for this going beyond a mere consumer led demand for geographically limited accommodation:

The treatment of land (and, by extension, buildings) principally as a financial asset, especially by the state, and the subsequent privatisation of resources for the purpose of profit entails exchange value

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<sup>172</sup> Kennedy, *Games Without Frontiers*, p137

being privileged over use value, otherwise expressed as the “financialisation” of land.<sup>173</sup> This process privileges both rent-yield and accelerating or at least stable market value over the social, cultural or simply humanitarian function that land plays.

Accordingly, the flood of foreign capital from the world’s super rich into the London property market that accelerated after the 2008 banking crisis saw investors (somewhat ironically considering the genesis of the crash in the US property bubble) parking excess capital in ‘safe’ London property. Subsequently, the city’s central real estate has become a global reserve currency, only exasperating excesses throughout the housing market and creating a price-tag ripple effect out into the suburbs.<sup>174</sup>

Manuel Aalbers has described the most recent trend of accelerated land financialisation as the fifth wave of gentrification.<sup>175</sup> On a macro scale we have seen huge developers and corporate landlords backed by international capital markets in ‘partnership’ with the state, administering actual city planning and neighbourhood construction (e.g. *The Olympic Delivery Authority*, Stratford or *Nine Elms London*, Vauxhall.) Simultaneously, on a micro level ‘platform capitalism’, in this case notably Airbnb, provides the infrastructure for individual citizens to financialise their own assets no matter how minor, even on a partial or temporary basis. Market-led urban public policies ensure the commodification of urban space on an unprecedented level.

The solutions to these problems are beyond the scope of this study to fully explore, however they would surely rely on state curtailment rather than facilitation. For example, Berlin is currently considering banning landlords with more than 3000 homes in their portfolio from operating in the city, thereby forcibly expropriating the surplus properties, incorporating them into social housing stock.<sup>176</sup> Meanwhile, many cities from LA to Amsterdam are bringing in ever-tougher regulations on

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<sup>173</sup> Brett Christophers, “The State and Financialization of Public Land in the United Kingdom”, *Antipode*, 2017, Vol:49, No:1. pp62-85, (Accessed: 07/03/2019) doi: 10.1111/anti.12267

<sup>174</sup> Rowland Atkinson et al. “International Capital Flows into London Property.” *SPERI Global Political Economy Brief No.2*. Sheffield Political Economy Research Institute, The University of Sheffield. (Accessed: 07/03/2019)

<http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Global-Brief-2-International-Capital-Flows-into-London-Property.pdf>

<sup>175</sup> Manuel Aalbers. “Revisiting ‘The Changing State of Gentrification’ - Introduction to the Forum: From Third-to Fifth-Wave Gentrification” *Journal of Economic and Social Geography*, 2019, Vol:110, Iss:1, pp1-11, (Accessed 08/03/2019) doi:10.1111/tesg.12332

<sup>176</sup> Jon Stone, “Berlin Set to Hold Referendum on Banning Big Landlords and nationalizing private rented housing” *Independent*, 25/02/2019, (Accessed: 10/03/2019) <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/berlin-landlords-ban-germany-private-rent-housing-referendum-vote-a8796471.html>

Airbnb and other rental arrangements.<sup>177</sup> The problems are of course much deeper; the measures needed to solve them involving systemic changes to the way we think about and administer land and private property.

However, even a reinstatement of the welfare state, an egalitarian reformatting of housing rights or the much-needed curbing of general corporate financialisation of the urban landscape will not address the creative-clustering trend that underpins urbanised-knowledge-capitalism. Without wanting to over-emphasise the role of Dr. Martens wearers and art gallery goers, the better-paid specialised jobs in the knowledge economy do have the tendency to coagulate together at certain nodes of activity and this could continue to exacerbate exclusionary urbanism.

Zukin refuses Richard Florida's earlier championing of the creative class as urban saviours – "it's silly to say that a city will survive on the basis of the creative class. A city only survives on the basis of diversity and different classes of people, all working".<sup>178</sup> The diverse city – different incomes and classes, different cultures and professions all getting along, interconnected in a municipal ecosystem and, as Zukin emphasises, all working, all employed. However, I worry that developments in automation, technology and the economy will mean that there will increasingly be a large section of society who are simply economically inconvenient while the creative class will geographically bunch together and monopolise the jobs that can't be automated (with perhaps an underpaid and un-unionised service economy to prop up their corporal needs).

Tower Hamlets with its inequalities is the archetypal example of an urban area that can simultaneously prosper whilst failing miserably.

Me: "The accelerationist in me thinks that maybe London should be allowed to fail. That maybe it'd be a good thing. Let the artists leave, give it over to the banking Borg, eventually even the parasites will starve in the carcass of culture!"

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<sup>177</sup> Steven Poole, "Airbnb can't go on unregulated – it does too much damage to cities" *The Guardian*, 24/10/2018. (Accessed: 10/03/2019)

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/oct/24/airbnb-unregulated-damage-cities-barcelona-law-locals>

<sup>178</sup> Sharon Zukin, "Big Think Interview with Sharon Zukin", *Big Think* 2012, (Accessed 22/03/2018), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Z8RCXbZx58>

Polly: “Except of course, as always with things that are too big to fail. It’ll most likely be the poor who bear the brunt of the cost. But yea, we can simply move onto the next urban hub, it doesn’t have to be our problem.”

Me: “That’s if the brexiteers don’t all seize our passports first!”

Immaterial labour needs no fixed locale.

Me (now pontificating, gesturing to the air): “Solutions need to be addressed at the economic and political level rather than via finger pointing and individualising the problem. Serious debates need to be had about universal basic income or severely raising the minimum wage or, or... a left-Keynsian economic model or something,” I swig my Polish larger.

*\*Psssstt*, she cracks the ringpull of hers, giving me an enquiring look whist taking the first sip.

“Prioritising employment over GDP and urm...” I say, out of my economic depth.

Polly gives an expectant look, seeking clarification or expansion.

“Or synthesising Marxist and anarchist thoughts on what is to be done with the lumpenproletariat!?” I say, doggy paddling to more familiar waters and taking another, deeper swig of Tysky.

Polly’s look doesn’t change, as if she is employing the therapist’s technique of allowing the silence, forcing me to fill the void, a void that I am unqualified to satiate.

“Well, these systemic economic possibilities are unfortunately beyond the scope of my self-absorbed middle-class guilt specialities.” I flash an abashed smirk.

The grim Candy Street towers loom into view as we pass the converted pub. I have grown to suspect that actual neighbourhood gentrification is a drop in the ocean compared to greater urban wealth disparity problems.

The New York-based writer Sarah Schulman notes in *The Gentrification of the Mind* “Gentrification replaces most people’s experiences with the perceptions of the privileged and calls that reality.”<sup>179</sup> I

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<sup>179</sup> Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind*, p161

think I agree with her but only paradoxically: whilst there is a gentrification of ideas, of which I agree with, actual neighbourhood gentrification is perhaps a red herring, a debate that is ironically given a disproportionate amount of weight by the privileged. The left-wing media, intelligentsia, artists and cultural theorists write and think too much amount about gentrification when compared to other urban-class problems. The majority of literature and studies on the subject that I have found have uncoincidentally been about those places that the majority of people who would be inclined to talk about the topic live: New York, London et al. It is not of course that neighbourhood gentrification doesn't exist but rather that the real urban problem is so much bigger and more diffused.

What the gentrification-of-a-neighbourhood debate overshadows is discussions and studies of the other two sites in the gentrification process (discussed in Chapter 2, Dagenham): 1. The global areas that are brain-drained of their educated, aspirational or cultural workers by the gentrified municipalities, left to stagnate, their names erased. (2). The peripheral neighbourhoods taking receipt of the urban poor exodus, putting strain on already stressed services, supporting an underpaid and commuting service class. Preoccupation therefore with the tiny proportion of gentrified neighbourhoods may actually be the self-absorption of the educated class at the expense of other marginalised wards that are never graced by the habitation of cultural workers and their critique. A level of analysis akin to looking for your dropped keys underneath the lamppost because that is where the light is.

“I thought you were all revolution and class war?” says Polly.

“I am! I was, I mean doesn't that all seem a bit teenage?”

“Come on Mr sexy punk man show me your revolutionary gusto!” she mocks. Running ahead of me, turning around, walking backwards to taunt me at a better angle.

“I'll show you gusto! When I'm putting you with your back against the wall!” I jump forward to grab her, dodged like a cuddle-shy cat.

“Ooh, against the wall, I like the sound of that!!...You'd be shot first of course though.”

“I don't know if I put much stock in a mob-led revolution.”

“Where does direct action come in? What does accountability really mean? Does the ‘propaganda of the deed’ still carry weight???” She takes out her keys and without hesitating scratches a gigantic thunderbolt down the side of a parked Mercedes.

*“WHAAAT!!? What the fuck are you doing?!”*

“No more of this cool-kid sobriety of yours! We should be pissed, in both the English and American sense of the word.”

“That was almost certainly not even the car of some toff! Working-class people often erm might often get a car like that – y’ know and...” I shout as she playfully skips off in front of me. I scan the surroundings for witnesses before running down the street after her. I catch up on the footbridge that arches high above the sunken motorway. “I go on demonstrations, I... erm shop ethically...kind of.”

“It’s an enshrined right of liberalism for people to politely demonstrate and for the government to politely not listen,” she retorts.

“So what is political action then these days in your eyes?”

“Maybe just a bit more mischief, a bit more play... sure it will probably have no major effect but you might have fun doing it.”

“Playful, mischievous politics sound mightily enticing, and I’ve done my share, but that’s exactly what I’m trying to reevaluate here. They have a poetic appeal but the romance of spontaneity and authenticity are just some Situationist 68’er hangover watered down into lifestyle anarchy that leads nowhere. So yea, I’m just worried about getting bogged down in niche leftist debates that lead nowhere on the one hand, and over simplified narratives of what constitutes rebellion on the other. And I just think punky acts of defiance don’t cut the mustard these days. Not in London at least.”

The fight perhaps should not be for the city and its ‘authenticity’, but rather for the tangible rights of the poor – even if this means tearing down all the Hackney Wicks.

Despite myself, I think that from this distance and at this time of night the ever-lit Canary Wharf skyscrapers look kind of beautiful and we stop on the bridge to take in the view that it affords. Cars

relentlessly zoom beneath us. Culture can't really be killed – it morphs and migrates – it's self-generating. However, the rights of the most vulnerable citizens can be.

We continue past the brownfield site and its navy blue hoardings, I pop behind a big bin to take a piss, Polly deciding to follow suit and crouches in the shadows. Despite the glut of bankers and artists in Tower Hamlets, the only thing that 'trickles down' seems to be acrid smells of exclusion – culturally, socially and financially.

We snake through the backstreets of Fish Island with its new 'warehouse style apartments'. Crossing the canal, we re-enter Hackney Wick, an area that is either dying or thriving depending on who you talk to. Its commissioned graffiti is a semblance of a mythical wilderness for all the weekend revellers. Rather than nostalgically politicising the look of a bohemian heyday, or for that matter 20<sup>th</sup> century social democracy, Mark Fisher's interpretation of Derrida's 'hauntology' mourns the unfinished and abandoned modernist telos:

What is being longed for in hauntology is not a particular period, but the resumption of the processes of democratisation and pluralism... social democracy has only become a resolved totality in retrospect... What should haunt us is not the no longer of actually existing social democracy, but the not yet of the futures that popular modernism trained us to expect, but which never materialised.<sup>180</sup>

What is haunting the city is the truncated thought forms of emancipatory progress, not the pseudo-politicised aesthetics of a bygone bohemia. I fumble for my keys as we approach my place. Next door *The Yard* – or as we have nicknamed it *Ze Club* – is relentlessly grunting insufferably loud basslines. Smashing glass, cackles and chatter cut through in the higher audio ranges. A troop of Australians shoutily pass by at the beginning their night out.

Five kids who must surely be underage loiter on the pavement next to my door, sitting on the curb and leaning against the wall. They're drinking from bottles and inhaling laughing gas from balloons. Polly tells me that this Nitrous Oxide pastime is called 'hippy crack', a semi-illegal semi-drug that is bizarrely exempt from the very law that was designed to ban it. The kids breath in and out, in and out, in and out of the balloons, essentially hyperventilating themselves to produce a very short lived but intense head-rush and sense of the absurd resulting in the occasional giggle; quasi-transgressive

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<sup>180</sup> Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of my Life*, (Winchester (UK): Zero Books, 2014), p27 (italics authors own)

hedonism that threatens nothing. “In my day” I quip, “we did proper drugs.” “Bloody kids!” replies Polly on cue.

On the ceiling of my studio-bedroom the headlights of uber drivers, eclipsed by the window, skew slowly from rectangles to rhombuses as they pass outside. The sepia-disco-ball light show now lacking the potential for urban pastoral romanticism as sub-base from Ze Clüb next door penetrates our skeletons. A glass of water visibly pulsates as if auditioning for another Jurassic Park sequel. Polly says that we should accept it and go and join the party ourselves, although she has to say it twice, the second time much louder. Whatever we decide to do we can’t stay here.

I get out my drill and extra-long drill bit.

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End

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