Creative placemaking is no longer a friendly foil in the soft power arsenal of private property developers. It has been successfully institutionalised at every possible level from national governments to NGOs. Loosely threaded utopian hopes of democratic community building have been quickly woven into pretty bunting for insidious gentrification; winners’ pennants for the agents of systemic social cleansing. Some artists working in the field of social practice – once as instinctually opposed to free market economics and state instrumentalism – swallowed meagre scraps as bait for complete annexation to neoliberal agendas. Social practice has, in some cases, become ‘regeneration’s muse’ or at Balfron Tower, London, recruited artists as ‘foot soldiers’ whose arrival signals impending regeneration-by-social-cleansing. Even ‘poster boy for socially engaged art’ Theaster Gates concedes that gentrification is the inevitable (and profitable) end game for social practice as creative placemaking.

But some (perhaps many) socially engaged artists do not wish to engage in creative placemaking’s global dystopian ‘dreamscapes’ nor in falsely democratic community ‘re-imaginings’ where state/developer always get their way. Artists in the US, UK and other countries are beginning to question why should ‘we’ want to ‘make’ a place for ‘them’. Don’t places already exist; already have communities? Who are ‘we’ to become embroiled in the sinister depths of urban planning, some artists wonder. Increasingly, socially engaged artists are, true to their roots, standing in support of those threatened with rehousing - against vested interests; taking direct action with people against place-makers; guarding complex community cultures and their existing ways of living.
In Britain today, as elsewhere, culture is the wonder stuff that gives more away than it takes. Like some fantastical oil in a Grimm fairytale, this magical substance gives and gives, generating and enhancing value, for state and private men alike. Culture is posited as a mode of value production: for its economy-boosting and wealth-generating effects; its talent for regeneration, through raising house prices and introducing new business, which is largely service based; and its benefits as a type of moral rearmament or emotional trainer, a perspective that lies behind the “social inclusion” model, whereby culture must speak to – or down to – disenfranchised groups (Leslie, 2011, p. 183).

The art world is increasingly ‘entrenched within cycles of urban change’ (Mathews, 2010, p. 460). The innocuous sounding practice of creative placemaking is promoted by its growing legion of advocates as ‘a fulcrum for the creative transformation of American cities’ (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010 (b), p. 6). For community artists and others with ‘commitments to historically marginalized communities, “placemaking” is nothing new’ (Wilbur, 2015, p. 96) – a means of cooperative artistic production, although usually without the clear outcome-driven motives attached to creative placemaking. For many artists and arts organisations, creative placemaking can be an essential, even lucrative, form of income¹. For others (including community members affected by creative placemaking), the arrival of artists signals impending regeneration-by-social-cleansing, or gentrification. Rebecca Solnit describes gentrification as ‘the fin above water’ (Solnit, 2000, p. 13) revealing a shark eager to lay waste to ‘cultural diversity’ and ‘creative activity, artistic and political’ (Solnit, 2000, p. 18). I would suggest, it is more common for gentrification (often dressed as creative placemaking) to present itself as a happy cupcake or subtle ‘pacification by cappuccino’, in the words of Sharon Zukin (Zukin, 1995, p. 28).

¹ Although some argue that this form of work reinforces a role that ‘art and the artist has played a part in both of the main long-established theories of gentrification, looking respectively at “culture” and “capital” as the key driver of process’ (Cameron & Coaffee, 2005, p. 39).
I would like to argue that creative placemaking cannot but lead to gentrification because it is a practice steeped in neoliberalism, including a form of sometimes divisive, sometimes unconscious ‘urban neocolonialism’ (Hancox, 2016). I wonder why artists should be encouraged to (re)make ‘places’ for ‘them’? Don’t places already exist? Aren’t people living there already? Haven’t they already formed (often strong) communities? The very inner-city sink estates and slums where the state side lined these (primarily working-class, homeless, and ‘non-white’) people are now ‘brown field sites’ brimming with ‘new investment potential’; run-down streets and markets are crying out for a little cultural (re)vitalisation – at least in the eyes of governments, local councils, investors and developers. Hipsters, artists, others are queuing up to colonise these places (ibid.) - once they’ve been pacified a little, of course: not too much – these places must remain ‘authentic’ and ‘edgy’ yet ‘playful’ and ‘fun’ (at least for a while), invoking a spirit of the (new) ‘urban pastoral’.

Can art, as Gittlitz asks, ‘resist gentrification’ rather than ‘mask the violence of displacement’ (Gittlitz, 2015)? Is there a way that communities and artists can avoid becoming complicit in the rush to accumulate capital and grab state power (Pinder, 2015 [2013], p. 41)? Can interruptions such as Lefebvre’s ‘moments of presence within everyday life’ offer transformative visions: ‘spaces of desire, resistance, struggle and possibility’ – new potentialities (ibid., p. 36)? If the art world is ‘part of “business as usual”’ and ‘the universal grease relied upon to make the cogs of business turn better and the joints of society mesh smoother’ (Leslie, 2011, p. 187), can, as David Holmes enquires, ‘cultural practices become political acts’ (Holmes, 2012, p. 81)? Can artists, activists and creative placemaking

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2 Hancox states that ‘[g]entrification is becoming one of the defining issues of our age’ (Hancox, 2016): a sentiment I would strongly agree with.

3 Loretta Lees et al. point out that ‘[i]n the 1970s and 1980s […] the changes in [working class] areas were not led by individual “gentrifiers” but by property developers and local governments working together. Today, by demolishing council estates, local councils are able to sell valuable public land to developers, who then build new and more expensive housing targeted at wealthier buyers and renters. This is sometimes called state-led gentrification’ (Lees, et al., 2014, p. 6).

4 ‘As the hugely telling “place-making” videos make abundantly clear, for the money-men, a proliferation of art galleries, hipsters and small independent businesses are a great sign. Indeed, for the sharper investors, by the time Starbucks arrives, you’re already too late’ (Hancox, 2016).

5 Julian Stallabrass, wrote of the urban pastoral: ‘A little edge, just the right amount is energising, and is necessary to spark off pastoral fantasy: simple rural folk enjoying rustic pleasures have become replaced by the characters of the inner city, similarly devoted in middle-class fantasy to the joys of politically incorrect humour, the circulation of obscenities, the joys of violence, crime and vandalism, carefree sexual encounters and drug-taking’ (Stallabrass, 1999, p. 246). He went on to suggest that gentrification is ‘closely connected’ with this ‘cultural celebration of urban debasement’ (Stallabrass, 1999, p. 247). Of course, this is not to suggest that all forms of creative placemaking practice celebrate this particular form of new idealisation of the urban frontier.
participants find effective ways to avoid or ‘deal with their complicity in the production and marketing of the city’ (Hornung, 2014)? Finally, can communities resist gentrification by embracing outsider-perceived poverty and the notions of self-sufficiency, real democracy and the commons (BAVO, 2006)? I argue that it is perhaps time to think about ‘place guarding’ rather than ‘place making’ (creative or otherwise); to directly resist the machinations of gentrification instead of following a hopefully misguided urban (re)map – a simulacrum in which all roads lead to capitalist complicity.

It is important to first define my understandings of some of the key terms. Vanessa Mathews’s description of gentrification clearly defines it as ‘a process of inner-city transition, where low property investment spurs a process of reinvestment and an accompanying shift in social demographics and built form’ (Mathews, 2010, pp. 460-461). She also describes its recent ‘makeover of sorts’ and its erasure from ‘policy and planning discourses, alongside the class relations and displacement issues that typically accompany the process’; replaced by positive terms such as “renaissance,” “regeneration,” and “revitalization” (ibid., pp. 461-462). Cultural activism is nicely (if necessarily indeterminately) summarised by Jennifer Verson as the point ‘where art, activism, performance and politics meet, mingle and interact’; a bridge between art and activism that links the ‘shared desire to create the reality that you see in your mind’s eye and believe in your capacity to build that world with your own hands’ (Verson, 2007, p. 172). Importantly, she sees cultural activism as a form of:

campaigning and direct action that seeks to take back control of how our webs of meaning, value systems, beliefs, art and literature, everything, are created and disseminated. It is an important way to question the dominant ways of seeing things and present alternative views of the world (ibid., p. 173).

This ‘myriad of forms’ exists ‘not only in physical space but also in cultural or idea space’ (ibid.).

So how is creative placemaking characterised and do these characteristics offer people and communities emancipation or routes to neoliberalism and even, sometimes, gentrification? Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa wrote the seminal Creative Placemaking report for the

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6 David Harvey, for example, argues that urbanisation ‘has played a crucial role in the absorption of capital surpluses and has done so at every increasing geographical scales but at the price of burgeoning processes of creative destruction that entail the dispossession of the urban masses of any right to the city whatsoever’ (Harvey, 2008).

7 ‘Cultural activism is difficult to define’ (Verson, 2007, p. 173).
In creative placemaking, partners from public, private, non-profit, and community sectors strategically shape the physical and social character of a neighborhood, town, city, or region around arts and cultural activities. Creative placemaking animates public and private spaces, rejuvenates structures and streetscapes, improves local business viability and public safety, and brings diverse people together to celebrate, inspire, and be inspired (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010 (b), pp. 3, emphasis added).

Whilst this statement suggests an air of positivity and celebration, it is apparent that strategy, economics, structural development and safety underwrite this feel-good factor. The positive business-like phraseology continues throughout, for example, link ‘the potential to radically change the future of American towns and cities’ to ‘creative locales’ that ‘foster entrepreneurs and cultural industries that generate jobs and income, spin off new products and services, and attract and retain unrelated businesses and skilled workers’ (ibid.). It is unsurprising that the report also acknowledges how ‘[l]arge cultural institutions, often inspired by their smaller counterparts, are increasingly engaging in active placemaking’ (ibid.). The language becomes increasingly dominated by economics as the report progresses. The authors do, however, take a little time to advise readers of the need to avoid ‘displacement and gentrification’ (ibid., p. 5) because, sometimes, ‘they may be too successful’ (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010 (a), p. 17), putting ‘[l]ow income and minority residents […] at risk from creative revitalization’ (ibid.). Nonetheless, the report clearly believes artists garner significant economic potential. For example, it states:

Artists and designers are an entrepreneurial asset ripe for development, and in creative places, they find business skills and access to each other that improves their work and earnings. Cultural industries cluster and thrive where creative workers reside. Arts anchored revitalization encourages nonarts [sic] firms and families to commit to place and to participate actively in remaking where they live and work. Confirming the investment payoff, seniors, families with children, and young working people are moving back into central cities and arts rich small towns (ibid., p. 3).

8 Martha Rosler argues that, ‘[f]or the business and urban planning communities, culture is not a social good but an instrumentalized “strategic cultural asset”’ (Rosler, 2011).
Another key proponent of a perhaps more ethical strand of creative placemaking, Roberto Bedoya, acknowledges the process should include an ‘aesthetic of belonging’ because a ‘blind love of Creative Placemaking that is tied to the allure of speculation culture and its economic thinking of “build it and they will come” is suffocating and unethical, and supports a politics of dis-belonging employed to manufacture a “place”’ (Bedoya, 2013).

Nevertheless, following Steve Panton, I argue that economics and enterprise underpin all forms of creative placemaking to one extent or another by using art ‘to attract (wealthier) people and investment into a neighborhood’, even when the ‘social impact of Creative Placemaking is debatable’ (Panton, 2014). This often leads, as Abigail Satinsky suggests, to ‘a startling shift in the field where socially engaged artist initiatives […] are walking the walk and talking the talk of community arts, without necessarily the community investment or social change mission’ (Satinsky, 2013).

Grant H. Kester argues that ‘culture and the arts have played a central role in framing urban renewal as a creative or ameliorative process’ but that ‘[i]n each case, the destructive component of urban redevelopment, the often-coerced displacement of poor and working-class populations, is elided’⁹ (Kester, 2011, p. 197). This echoes Martha Rosler’s concerns that whilst ‘artists look for the messianic or the merely helpful moment, aiming for [often impossible or impractical] “social change,” the institutional production is centered on various trendy formulas¹⁰ for the “future city”’ (Rosler, 2011). It is therefore unsurprising that David Harvey argues that a coherent oppositional movement must involve ‘a global struggle predominately with finance capital for that is the scale at which urbanization processes are now working’; a ‘class struggle […] between the accumulation by dispossession being visited upon the slums and the developmental drive that seeks to colonize more and more urban spaces for the affluent to take their urbane and cosmopolitan pleasures’ (Harvey, 2008). Hence, it is not uncommon for artists in these situations to be portrayed as ‘the expeditionary force for the inner-city gentrifiers’¹¹; their ‘colonising arm’ (Ley, 1996, p. 191).

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⁹ A position that Nato Thompson suggests is directly linked with ‘pro-arts, pro-real estate development advocate, [Richard] Florida’s quick fix to economic woes explicitly draws a connection between the arts and the global urban concern of gentrification’ (Thompson, 2012, p. 31).

¹⁰ Martha Rosler later argued that “[r]eal-estate concessions have long been extended to artists and small nonprofits in the hopes of improving the attractiveness of “up-and-coming” neighborhoods and bringing them back onto the high-end rent rolls. The prominence of art and “artiness” allows museums and architecture groups, as well as artists’ groups, artists, and arts administrators of small nonprofits, to insert themselves into the conversation on civic trendiness” (Rosler, 2014, p. 191).

¹¹ Ley argues that this positioning of artists as a sort of urbanising vanguard leads ‘the surfeit of meaning in places frequented by artists becomes a valued resource for the entrepreneur’ (Ley, 2003, p. 2535).
It is little wonder that, in response, some artists are committed to reorganising ‘socially and theoretically’ to create ‘art and revolution simultaneously, never content with just one or the other’ (Gittlitz, 2015). Following David Harvey, I argue that artists (and communities) must:

exercise […] a collective power over the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake ourselves and our cities is […] one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights (Harvey, 2008).

Reclaiming ‘the right to the city’ also repossesses some ‘power over the processes of urbanization, over the ways in which our cities are made and re-made […] in a fundamental and radical way’ (ibid.). This act, as Michael Gardiner explains, is underpinned by Adorno’s and Lefebvre’s use of “negative dialectics” to develop an ‘understanding of modernity by focussing on “the way the negative is at work in present reality”’ (Gardiner, 2004, p. 245).

Another critical aspect is the fusing of ‘Art into life’ (Holmes, 2012, p. 73) because, as David Holmes contends:

What has to be grasped, if we want to renew our democratic culture, is the convergence of art, theory, media and politics into a mobile force that oversteps the limits of any professional sphere or disciplinary field, while still drawing on their knowledge and technical capacities (ibid., p. 74).

Holmes is calling for an exploration of ‘how we act, and what role art, theory, media and self-organization can have in effective forms of intervention’ (ibid.), because this form of activist practice ‘is the making-common of a desire and a resolve to change the forms of living, under certain conditions, without any guarantees’ (ibid., p. 79). This challenging perspective derives from Henri Lefebvre’s assertion that:

everyday life, the social territory and place of controlled consumption, of terror-enforced passivity, is established and programmed; as a social territory it is easily identified, and under analysis it reveals its latent irrationality beneath an apparent

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12 Similarly, Rosler believes that ‘the cultural sphere, despite relentless co-optation by marketing, is a perpetual site of resistance and critique. Bohemian/romantic rejectionism, withdrawal into exile, utopianism, and ideals of reform are endemic to middle-class students, forming the basis of anti-bourgeois commitments – and not everyone grows out of it, despite the rise of fashion-driven (i.e. taste-driven) hipsterism’ (Rosler, 2011).

13 To which Holmes asks: ‘Is there any more persistent utopia in the history of vanguard expressions’ (Holmes, 2012, p. 73)?
rationality, incoherence beneath an ideology of coherence, and sub-systems or
disconnected territories linked together only by speech (Lefebvre, 2000, pp. 196-197).

And yet, as Jennifer Verson explains activist art ‘isn’t just about making things pretty, fluffy
or fun’, it’s also about ‘taking direct action’; a ‘full spectrum resistance’ (op. cit., p. 171).
For her, ‘an insurrectionary imagination is at the heart of cultural activism’ (ibid., p. 174)
because:

[t]his living practice addresses complicated questions about how we build the world
that we want to live in. Insurrectionary imaginations evoke a type of activism that is
rooted in the blueprints and patterns of political movements of the past but is driven
by its hunger for new processes of art and protest\(^{14}\) (ibid.).

This form of activist art ‘in pursuit of an engagement with the possibility of real social
change’ always seeks ‘to work in ways that break with the dominant paradigms and
established institutions of modern art’ (Bradley, 2007, p. 10).

So how do artists resist gentrification? Is this a new phenomenon? In short: no. I will
briefly sketch out some of the artists and collectives I feel reflect attempts to guard places and
people\(^{15}\). Back in the 1980s, the activist art collective Political Art
Documentation/Distribution staged a series of ephemeral poster projects and protests against
the gentrification of Lower East Side, New York\(^{16}\). At the same time, community artists
Loraine Leeson and Peter Dunn worked with local people to oppose gentrification with the
Docklands Community Poster Project\(^{17}\). However, as the pace of ‘urban renewal’ quickened,
it became impossible for artists involved in supporting the work of developers to claim they
were but ‘innocent pawns in these processes’ (Hornung, 2014). So, by 1994, the group of
artists, musicians and local people who became known as Park Fiction were prepared to use
self-organised activism to go beyond earlier, more representational approaches to contesting
gentrification in the then rundown dockland area of St. Pauli, Hamburg. Using a wide range

\(^{14}\) Similarly, for Marina Vishmidt, clarifies these forms of “[c]onstituent practices” as being capable of
traversing ‘art and community activism without […] proposing that art can improve lives (“social engagement”)
or that mediation of knowledge in a research-based practice implies political consequences (“field work”)

\(^{15}\) This is a very short and completely superficial discussion on what is a very large and very disparate field of
practice that ranges from the ‘soft’ activism of ‘craftivism’ to the ‘hard’ activism of Class War and others.

\(^{16}\) For more about PAD/D’s actions, see, for example, http://www.sholetteseminars.com/home/the-lower-east-
side-is-not-for-sale-with-greg-sholette/

\(^{17}\) For more about the Docklands Community Poster Project, see, for example, http://www.arte-
ofchange.com/content/docklands-community-poster-project-1981-8
of techniques, the collective’s ‘strategy of tension’ deployed militancy and play and games and art ‘to multiply its fronts of engagement’, ‘neutralise’ the threat posed by the administrators of the area’s proposed redevelopment and expose the limitations of ‘consensus management and soft control’ (Vishmidt, 2007, pp. 457–458). Their efforts led to the developers’ plans being rejected and the physical installation of Park Fiction in its place in 2005. Although, it is worth noting that today the park is a popular location in Hamburg and may, as Viola Rühse argues, have increased property values and supported the area’s ongoing gentrification (Rühse, 2014, p. 44). However, one of Park Fiction’s founders, Christoph Schäfer, went on to instigate the anti-gentrification urban activist network It’s raining Caviar in 2008 which developed the ‘Degeneration Kit’ and seeks to defend neighbourhoods around Hamburg threatened by demolition by a range of tactics including performative gentrification tours and a permanent protest picnic in Park Fiction (Richter, 2010, p. 467). Also, in 2008, Schäfer was instrumental in setting up Hamburg’s Right to the City movement which later produced an important manifesto *Not in Our Name!* that opposed the corporate branding of the city by gentrifiers (Oehmke, 2010). The manifesto begins with the statement: ‘A spectre has been haunting Europe since US economist Richard Florida predicted that the future belongs to cities in which the “creative class” feels at home’ (NION, 2009). *Not in Our Name!* ends as follows:

We say: A city is not a brand. A city is not a corporation. A city is a community. We ask the social question which, in cities today, is also about a battle for territory. This is about taking over and defending places that make life worth living in this city, which don't belong to the target group of the “growing city”. We claim our right to the city together with all the residents of Hamburg who refuse to be a location factor (ibid.).

I have only sketched out a few examples. But I will quickly skip through some other notable projects such as BAVO’s *Plea for an uncreative city*, Rotterdam (BAVO, 2006); the collectively ‘indignant’, sometimes confrontational activist ‘performances’ of the PAH

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18 Indeed, Christoph Schäfer later reflected that ‘it was our most radical gestures that could best be made use of – to increase the value of real estate, to construct new neighbourhood identities. As soon as there was an illegal club somewhere, a cappuccino bar would open next door, followed by a new media agency […] [W]e were management consultants’ (Schäfer, 2010, p. 132).

19 For more information about *Not in Our Name!* see [http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/squatters-take-on-the-creative-class-who-has-the-right-to-shape-the-city-a-670600-3.html](http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/squatters-take-on-the-creative-class-who-has-the-right-to-shape-the-city-a-670600-3.html)

(Mortgage-Affected Citizens Platform) in Madrid, Barcelona and elsewhere21 and their embodiment of Lefebvre’s ‘notions of “rights to the city” in their radical potential to resist urban neoliberalism’ (Micu, n.d.); Balfron Social Club’s demand for fifty percent social housing in Ernő Goldfinger’s Brutalist icon, the now gentrified Balfron Tower, London, and their sharp critique of the role of socially engaged artists as ‘place-makers’22 (Balfron Social Club, 2015); London is Changing23: a billboard project that told ‘the story of those Londoners that have fled the city after being priced out’ (Perry, 2015); Bushwick, New York City: the Mi Casa No Es Su Casa: Illumination Against Gentrification project24 produced in conjunction with NYC Light Brigade and local residents (Voon, 2015); the incredible Illuminator 99%25; the resolute acts of resistance by Focus E1526 – a group of young London mothers whose motto is ‘Social Housing not Social Cleansing’ (Focus E15, 2016); and London’s recent Brockley ‘Fat Cat’ sand sculpture27, created by a local artist ‘as a critique of gentrification’ (Mann, 2016).

Clearly, there are many examples of activist and radical social art practices that fuse performance and visual representation with direct action against the gentrifiers and place-makers in attempts to guard complex community structures and rights and to protect existing ways of living. They, like Lefebvre, Harvey et al., believe it is time for ‘the dispossessed to take back control of the city from which they have for so long been excluded’ (Harvey, 2008). To some, this may seem utopian, to others ‘[d]emanding the impossible may be […] as realistic as it is necessary’ (Pinder, 2015 [2013]). I argue, as does David Madden, that ‘the narrative of “urban renaissance”’ is as insidious as it is ‘a condescending and often racist fantasy’ (Madden, 2013). We must acknowledge that the right to the city is, in Harvey’s

21 Andreea Micu described the ‘indignant performances’ as follows: ‘[Their] radical political potential lies precisely in the possibility to transform affect into specific gesture and action. These gatherings have the very concrete goal of stopping evictions and more broadly, specific housing rights agendas that depend on the local context. However, insofar as performance is mobilized to do so, the energy released in these gatherings may unleash affective potentialities that then might transform participants and carry into the everyday. These outcomes are notable in their pedagogical potential to signal possibilities of collective action; in the fact that they modify participants and observers; and in the fact that they leave traces of the utopian that remain long after the performance is over’ (Micu, n.d.).


23 See the London is Changing website here: http://www.londonischanging.org/

24 Read more about Mi Casa No Es Su Casa here: http://hyperallergic.com/265264/activists-and-residents-light-up-bushwick-with-anti-gentrification-signs/

25 For more about Illuminator 99%, see: http://theilluminator.org/

26 For more about Focus E15, see: http://focuse15.org/

words, ‘an empty signifier’ that can be claimed by ‘financers and developers’ but, equally, by ‘the homeless and the sans papiers’ (Harvey, 2012, p. xv). Following Marina Vishmidt, I contest, then, that the instrumentalisation of art as a salve for social ills produced by ‘pro-business policies’ can only lead, via the ‘re-imaginings’ of the authorities, developers and ‘bold lifestyle visionaries’ and via ‘the production of difference’ to the reproduction of surplus: of profit (Vishmidt, 2007, p. 459). I end by suggesting that now is not the time for creative placemaking. Now is the time for direct action to guard our places against the forces of creeping capitalism, against gentrification.
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