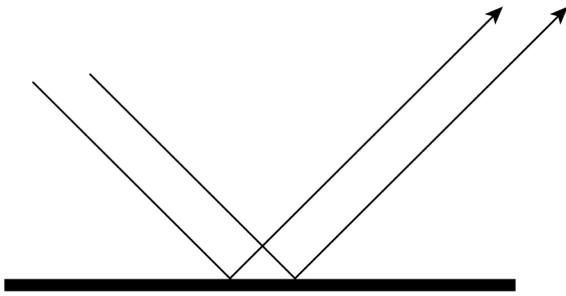


SPATIAL ALCHEMY

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For ancient alchemists, the transmutation of base metals into gold was not merely a chemical procedure, but a pseudo-science and spiritual belief-system. Attempts to convert lead into precious metals—*chrysopoeia*—aimed at a purifying conversion in value of base matter into one of the most rare and sacred of resources. Alchemy’s fiction might yet be realized under free-market forces through a process of collective magic wherein, as Marx observed, “everything, commodity or not, is convertible into money”. In the transmutation of capital, “circulation” writes Marx, “becomes the great social retort into which everything is thrown, to come out again as the money crystal”¹. Yet even

Marx could not have foreseen the contemporary conditions of capital. The total subsumption of life to the mystical forces of value in its many forms results in a logic where not only land, but also water, air, and sunlight, may be converted into precious commodities. Now space itself is often subjected to alchemical procedures, whose conversion into fictitious value is more commonly practiced by the speculative sorcery of property developers and mayors. Had Pierre Bourdieu extended his axiological analysis of culture² to its effects on a physical place he might have called it *spatial alchemy*. A violent conversion in value, spatial alchemy is a process that occurs through the transmutation of place into symbolic capital under the guise of urban revitalization. The alchemical “gold” of symbolic capital as space is not a lasting resource but a short term burst and less visible deferred or distributed effect. Indeed, forms of art and culture often help lubricate this transformation to the exclusion of an area’s original inhabitants. Displacement is one result of spatial alchemy, a process in which the transmutation and purifying conversion of value carries a series of social combustions, destructive effects, and less visible forms of violence.

In April 2015, following a surge of rent increases and forced expulsions, thousands of people gathered in solidarity with Reclaim Brixton to protest the gentrification of South London. In what has become an almost predictable act of real and symbolic violence, one protestor separated from the otherwise peaceful demonstration to shatter the glass storefront window of a Brixton branch of Foxtons, and spray paint the words ‘NO EVICTIONS’ across a photographic display of luxury properties. It’s easy to imagine this sort of protest recurring in any number of global cities where the financialization of place has become an increasingly repeatable condition, from Zucotti Park to Gezi Park, Kreuzberg to Boyle Heights. In recent years, Brixton has experienced what some have referred to as a ‘Shoreditch-effect’³ to describe the radiating force of luxury development on a neighborhood, as evidenced by its predecessor. The ‘Shoreditch-effect’ joins the ranks of a growing number of monikers of spatial alchemy, such as the Guggenheim’s ‘Bilbao effect’, the High Line’s ‘Halo effect’ or what geographer David Harvey has called ‘externality effects’³—each describing the impact of aesthetic and cultural development on surrounding properties and resources within an urban system. Equal parts contagion and speculation, these revitalization schemes act like aggregators, attracting similar projects that transform entire areas while yielding third-party effects, such as privatizations, displacement, policing, and surveillance in their wake. While the Foxtons protest rehearses a familiar scene of urban dissent, it is also compelling for a number of spatial reasons, signaling a complex ecology of social, economic, and ideological forces at work.

The dark arts of speculative development and exclusionary urbanism produce real material effects. Indeed, there is nothing magical or enchanting about the brutal displacement of families by police. While the global city is shaped by policies that privilege economic growth over sustainable life—from New Deal Era redlining to neoliberal incentivized luxury development—violence ensues at different speeds. Yet, systems which power the engine of spatial alchemy often exceed the concrete metrics of policy and law. Perhaps above all, its force thrives on cultural capital, the slippery measure of value, which as Bourdieu himself acknowledged, is governed by its own laws⁵. Speculative property developers, particularly skilled at recognizing this exploitable trait have become adept at following art and culture’s trailing scent. However, this is not to say that artists and culture workers always benefit from this process. Indeed, they are often trapped within a system that not all benefit from, and under which they are also exploited—as adjuncts, as art handlers, as freelancers, as interns—producing value, with little economic return.

A reflexive analysis of spatial alchemy, and the ways in which artists, architects, and culture workers are implicated in this matrix might constitute what Bourdieu termed *participant objectivation*, or “the objectivation [...] of the researcher herself.”⁶ For Bourdieu, the objectivation of the analyzing subject is only truly effective if practiced alongside an examination of the field and their participation within it. Indeed, as advanced by institutional critique, a continual interrogation into the ever expanding field of art as well as our active position inside it, might help add nuance to the simple equation of [*art = development*]. Rather, a more sophisticated formula might call for variables that measure the kind of art being produced and valued in the first place.

BROKEN WINDOWS

The breaking of the Foxtons window qualifies as one form of protest against the violence of gentrification, an act of physical aggression that upset many fellow protesters for delegitimizing the consciousness-raising efforts of Reclaim Brixton. Yet as Jack Dean of Housing Action Southwark and Lambeth told reporters, “[i]f that level of disruption and damage incenses you then what about the eviction of hundreds of people from their homes, which can often be quite violent?”⁷ Defacing the storefront display with the crudely scrawled words ‘NO EVICTIONS’ in some ways intensifies the callousness of the legal eviction notice often anonymously affixed to the doors of residents—more commonly working class, people of color—displaced under the force of ‘urban renewal.’ In this light, window breaking becomes a form of mimesis, a way of representing the punctuated violence of the experience and threat of eviction.



Drawing immediate attention to Foxtons as one cause of these expulsive effects, the demonstrative breaking of private property perhaps occludes the ways in which the propagation of gentrification may work at different intervals of time—different speeds of what Rob Nixon might call ‘slow violence’. For Nixon, this notion is rooted in an effort to shift “conventional perceptions of violence as a highly visible act that is newsworthy because it is focused around an event, bounded by

time, and aimed at a specific body or bodies.”⁸ While Nixon’s model of slow violence is grounded within climate change, “whose calamitous repercussions are postponed for years or decades or centuries,”⁹ it seems reasonable to consider gentrification as a similar processes of violence made upon the urban built environment and the bodies who occupy it. “To confront slow violence” writes Nixon “is to take up, in all its temporal complexity, the politics of the visible and the invisible”¹⁰. For every new glass storefront and luxury tower might also include less visible forms of expulsions such as the removal of social ecologies, and local economies made possible by rezoning. The breaking of the window may be just one node in the resistance of spatial alchemy, whose visual effects might also include a gradual upspring of contemporary art galleries, a fleet of white joggers, nitrogen infused caffeine or the pseudo-science of mixology. Rather than understanding the luxury tower as the apex of gentrification, understanding these external alterations as part of a *process* might illuminate the different intervals of time that shape the rhythms of the global city. As Nixon writes, “[e]mphasizing the temporal dispersion of slow violence might “change the way we perceive and respond to a variety of social crises.”¹¹ If consideration is given to gentrification through the hyper-slow-motion of bullet time, what tools might prevent a shot from being fired in the first place?

LIGHT & AIR

Natural elements are among spatial alchemy's central ingredients. Indeed gentrification -- and speculative development -- often constitute the control of an urban environmental commons, such as land, water, light, and air, under the auspice of conjuring urban revitalization. For instance, the invisible and speculative asset, "air rights" are a legal form of property under New York law that endow their owner with a right to develop, to build and to grow upwards. More than a legal entitlement to air, however, air rights have become a powerful tool in the privatization and exchange of the space above a plot of land that more often serves the interests of a small class of real estate developers, against the interests of the city's inhabitants. An essential force in shaping the contour of New York's skyline, "air rights" entail the seizure of a commons similar to the historical enclosure of land and water. Air, however, is an immaterial commodity -- an effervescent and abstract form of property that perhaps only becomes concrete through legal transactions and physical construction. The buying and selling of "air rights" operates like a Hasbro board game: purchasing the "air rights" of a neighboring property increases a developer's buildable rights, which in turn, will increase a property's value. With an insatiable real estate market, the cost of these rights has, in recent years, soared to incredible heights: a 2016 sale of New York City air rights was priced at \$800 per buildable square foot, a total sale of \$3.92M. Pass go!

In this light, air rights may be compared—and are directly linked—to the privatization of sunlight. An early form of property sunlight can be seen in the Window Tax of 1696, a form of property taxation in Great Britain determined by the number of windows in a house. In an effort to avoid this tax, many houses boarded up windows with bricks—still visible today—which as a result, restricted access to light and air. In 1746, the Glass Tax produced similar health consequences. The London Medical Journal *The Lancet* condemned the tax, writing that from "a hygienic point of view, the enormous tax on glass [...] is one of the most cruel which a Government could possibly inflict on the nation. [...] Any impost on light is a direct encouragement to disease, and must tend to deteriorate the health of the population generally. The deficiency of light in town habitations, is universally admitted to be one of the principal causes of the unhealthiness of cities."¹² Indeed access to light and proper ventilation—now generally unquestioned as rights—has historically been determined by one's class position. Following the slum conditions best documented by Jacob Riis, who cast photographic light on interiors of destitution, the Tenement House Act of 1867 and the subsequent "New Law" of 1901 required all new New York City buildings to include outward facing windows to allow for proper ventilation and illumination. Many years later as part of the 1961 Zoning Resolution, air rights (or easement rights) were originally implemented to control over-building and further prevent the occlusion of light and proper ventilation. Today air rights have, in many ways, become a lucrative legal-hack for developers: the transfer of development rights from multiple neighboring properties can allow a single development project to grow exponentially. In this sense, certain buildings technically have more rights than others, creating a vertical politics in which some buildings have unrestricted access to daylight, leaving other parts of the city in shadows. As evidenced by the shimmering glass curtain walls of luxury towers that increasingly populate the global city, windows still signify a class position.

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Spatial alchemy's violence also constitutes a process of standardization and economic homogenization. For instance, if consideration is given to Foxtons, or any number of luxury estate agents and developers as dealers and advertisements of hegemonic ideals, or Western standards, then certain spatial typologies—the storefront window, the luxury tower—may be understood as carriers of such standards. As architectural theorist Nader Vossoughian has observed, “conventions that govern the dimensions of bricks also shape understandings of the body politic.”¹³ Indeed, standardization is a process that produces not only objects, but subjects—both docile and resistant. What if the brick might be mobilized as a weapon against such symbols of standardization? Straddling the physical and the symbolic, the lone Brixton protester's window breaking is compelling on a radically formal level, signalling an act of resistance and performance of dissent *of architecture against architecture*.

The built environment is perhaps one of the most evident examples of how capitalist ideology is given physical form, making it a recurrent target of protest. One such example might be located in the storefront window, which throughout modern history—from the Watts Rebellion, and G20 protests, to the inauguration of President Donald J. Trump—has repeatedly been one of the more visible sites of political unrest. Mediating the crystalline boundaries between public and private space, its shattering indicates social resistance against capitalist consumption and hegemonic social norms¹⁴

The products in Foxtons' window display—photographic advertisements of upmarket homes—became a second site of protest. Yet more than senseless vandalization, the defacing of these images might be read as rejections of the ways in which luxury homes function not only as commodities, but as ideologically loaded symbols of bourgeois nuclear family values, lifestyles, and sites of extreme wealth. Indeed, these images constitute a form of advertising that produce what political theorist Chantal Mouffe has called “fantasy worlds,”—imaginary communities created through consumption. However, in order for advertising to “maintain its hegemony,” writes Mouffe, “the current capitalist system needs to constantly mobilize people's desires and shape their identity, and it is the construction of the very identity of the buyer that is at stake in the techniques of advertising.”¹⁵ Mouffe's call for an *engagement with* the terrain of aesthetic production suggests a call to produce other forms of identification that might assist in achieving a counter-hegemonic politics.

INDIRECT ACTION

Violence begets violence. Indeed, sometimes the pragmatic is a necessary form of activist struggle against the direct violence of structures of economic inequality. Action oriented community groups and collectives like Reclaim Brixton, Decolonize this Place, Union de Vecinos and the Boyle Heights Alliance Against Artwashing and Displacement—to name but a few—have highlighted the ways in which displacement is often braided with racism and xenophobia. While these groups

are essential in calling for practical tactics, perhaps there are other structural forms of resistance that might be practiced as well. For instance, what if air rights were divided like shares of stock amongst a community? Using their collective powers of ownership, residents might create a legal force-field to effectively block luxury development. Learning from the dark arts of slow violence, and spatial alchemy, what if there were ways of using symbolic value against itself?

When resistance is met head on it is often confronted with opposition. Indeed not all bricks successfully shatter windows. An object thrown with blunt force might be confronted by a resilient material—tempered, and armed with impact resistance, shock absorption, or coated in polytetrafluoroethylene. However, there are other ways of enacting dissent. For instance, when light bounces across a reflective surface it carries the potential to produce an indirect sun glare, blinding vision even when out of the sun’s reach. A photographer’s flash is doubled in the reflective surface of a glass window, yet if they shift their position, they might not only control the angle of refraction, but also avoid their own capture. Or consider the 15th century art of anamorphosis, a distorted system of representation only perceptible from an indirect angle used to disguise scenes of death and sex. Indeed, when resistance is oblique, or askew, it might produce something outside of the conventional mode of binary opposition. The practice of art itself may be a viable form of dissent. Yet as much as art can frame it can also feed these issues. How might art’s capacity for approaching these questions be valued differently—through an oblique angle—as a way of framing systemic violence? A form of collusion or reflexive complicity, a *radical formalism*¹⁶, for instance, might mobilize questions that in turn provoke an interrogation of the field itself. How can art be produced in order to mobilize art against itself as art, architecture against itself as architecture—that is, symbolic value against itself as symbolic value?



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