

Making Room: Domestic Spaces as Exhibition Spaces
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The following text has been produced to accompany the Friday Salon discussion *Making Room: Domestic Spaces as Exhibition Places*.

Introduction

The spaces represented at *Making Room: Domestic Spaces as Exhibition Spaces* exist in a city where space is scarce. The situation is unlikely to improve: a recent report commissioned by the Greater London Authority projects that in the next five years 28 per cent of artist studios will be under threat of closure because of increasing land values and residential development. The problem may soon be compounded by government plans to permanently extend permitted development rights that will make it easier for landowners to convert commercial property to residential. The legislation is designed to create additional housing but in a city with a housing market as perverse as London, where the value of residential property is far higher than that of business property, it could lead to a huge loss of commercial space. By speeding up the planning process it could also close down the interstitial crack between developed and undeveloped, which so many studios and artist-run spaces inhabit.

Gentrification

Artists have long been approved by city authorities as a lever for regeneration, but as 'shock troops of gentrification' they find themselves in a double bind as both victims of, and contributors to, gentrification. To quote from the GLA report:

“artists are the victims of their own success, moving into affordable areas, contributing to gentrification and then being forced out with rising prices”

The figure of the artist as victim suggests a lack of agency to respond to issues around gentrification as any such action can be used to increase the cultural value of an area, paving the way for the cultural classes, price rises and another displacement of people who are unable to afford the change.

A dispute in Hamburg in 2009 illustrates the point. The city had long been trying to attract what Richard Florida describes as the 'creative class' and was facing bitter resistance from artists and activists protesting the gentrification of the Gängeviertel area in the city. As part of the protest 200 artists from the Right to the City movement occupied buildings, long associated with the city's squat scene, that been identified for conversion into private residential developments. Rather than evict the artists, the city's authorities recognised that the squatters represented valuable cultural capital and allowed them to stay, asking them to sign tenancy agreements. This containment and sanitisation of the protest subsumes it into the gentrification process, making it complicit in the very thing it is fighting against. By presenting a city that is edgy, creative, a little bit dangerous (although safe providing you remain in set boundaries), the city can attract the young, upwardly mobile, professionals it desires.

Artists using their homes as spaces in which to exhibit or collaborate find autonomy from institutional or market structures without needing the resources, or desire, to rent an additional property. Because such artist-led domestic spaces are often, by their nature, situated in residential areas (rather than the industrial or central zones of traditional galleries) they are particularly relevant to issues around gentrification. For example, initially this type of space is often contained within a close network of friends, growing over time into part of a cultural landscape available to a wider audience. The locations they reside in, once little known territory are now mapped (often literally) and ready for consumption. It would be absurd to say that such spaces shouldn't promote exhibitions, but there could be a question about how, and who, they interact with beyond their immediate networks.

Resourcefulness

Artists have historically been resourceful in finding ways to exhibit on their own terms and the domestic exhibition is not a new phenomenon. For example, the Apt Art movement that developed in Moscow in the early 80's used apartments for clandestine exhibitions, partly in response to restrictions to public space in the Soviet Union.

Today we see artists exhibiting in their homes partly in response to the scarcity and expense of space in the city. This flexible approach is echoed in the post-Fordist workplace. The gap between public and private space is collapsing as employees take work into their homes to free up much needed space in offices. A hot-desking culture produces workstations that are interchangeable and flexible, kept blank so that anyone can 'touch down' at any time. Free from any sense of individuality, the working environment has shifted from the personalised base of the fixed desk to the 'roaming profile' of the workers desk-top.

In using their own domestic space artists have, like companies that employ immaterial labour, discovered resourceful ways to operate within the spatial restrictions of the city. This gives them control of how and when they do things, without having to use the financial or critical success of an exhibition to account for an investment in a space separate to their own home. But again, artists are in danger of becoming victims of their own resourcefulness; by adapting to the constraints set by neoliberalism we become its perfect model. By simply coping we deny forms of resistance and lessen the need for space away from home – space that is dangerous, disorderly and dirty.

Ross Jardine, November 2014

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