

# BEFORE AND AFTER:

## THE LIVEABLE CITY

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*While graffiti was once a prominent justification for broken-windows policing, it now serves as a key marker for neighbourhoods that may generate astronomical profits from the processes of gentrification and human displacement. In the context of urban planning that privileges the exchange value of the built environment over its use value, this article compares two fundamentally different examples: 1) a direct action undertaken via tagging in 2019, and 2) a two-channel projection of film stills by New York-based artist Peter Scott exhibited in 2016. This comparison serves to negotiate how nostalgia may be understood in relation to the continuous struggle for dignified housing. The examples cited here are discussed to consider whether nostalgia can function as a tool for reading the past, and to develop strategies for the present. Within the realm of cultural production, there is still much to be said about how one may appropriate from the past without fetishizing losses, especially while the larger culture industry works in tandem with state and corporate powers to make such losses palatable. How do forms of resistance or cultural production operate long after they have been recuperated? How do such strategies work when they reappear, or are reused, as part of a collective cultural language?*

*As revolutionary critique engages in battle on the very terrain of the cinematic spectacle, it must thus turn the language of that medium against itself and give itself a form that is itself revolutionary.*

– Guy Debord, Original Announcement for his film *Society of the Spectacle*, 1974

*A lot of trains, a lot of fun, a lot of art. Art that's gonna be part of New York City's history forever.*

– Iz the Wiz, *Style Wars*, 1983

*Nobody is going to rebuild your community. If they do, when they finish, it won't be your community anymore.*

– Zellie Imani, Twitter Post, 2019

## 1. THE BEAUTIFICATION OF THE STREET: FROM STREET ART TO ADVERTISEMENT

There is no shortage of documentation of street art on image heaps such as Instagram or Pinterest that consolidate tagged spectacles into algorithmic sinkholes. Pictures<sup>1</sup> that come to mind: celebrities on the New York City subway in the 1970s; large murals in European cities maintaining the aesthetic of 'influence' of the moment, a watered-down commodity critique for example; before and after images of urban blight and its sterilised neoliberal maturation after having been 'flipped' and 'greened'; advertisements masquerading as street art gracing the sides of luxury condos – publicity flattened onto the neighbourhood.<sup>2</sup> Contemporaneous with the early years of neoliberalism and its incumbent austerity and dissolution of class composition, graffiti was a central justification for broken-windows policing. Some decades later, under the regimes of creative, surveillance capitalism, neighbourhoods decorated with street art – particularly in North America and Western Europe<sup>3</sup> – are the most prone to be somewhere in the process of either investment, disinvestment, or reinvestment to ensure rising land value and luxury development – the urbanist component of what Neil Smith refers to as 'global urban strategy' (2002). The violence of human displacement is the continuous given to the stages of this process throughout. As has been discussed recently, this crucial component of urban planning is at times understated in literature on gentrification, which some argue may have become 'gentrified itself'.<sup>4</sup>

Among the many approaches to gentrification, a particularly elegant formulation is provided by geographer Ipsita Chatterjee (2014, cited in Stein: 41), namely 'the theft of space from labor and its conversion into spaces of profit'. Integral to this process is the eradication of public space and its expropriation by the private sector into 'public-private partnerships': from the ubiquitous and ostensibly invisibilised privatisation of public parks and public housing, to the more visible examples such as the Google's takeover of swaths of Toronto to build a 'smart city' and New York's LINKNYC Wi-Fi-booths that acted as unregulated data mines.<sup>5</sup> The heavily state-subsidised luxury development and techno-surveillance apparatus at Hudson Yards is another odious example.<sup>6</sup>

Among the more recent literature on gentrification and displacement, Samuel Stein's new book, *Capital City: Gentrification and the Real Estate State* discusses urban planning and the incumbent contradictions inherent in its efforts to ensure social reproduction while remaining beholden to increasing land value and defending private property. Taking NYC – where there are three times as many empty apartments as unhoused people<sup>7</sup> – as an example, Stein discusses displacement and gentrification as key tools in the urban planner's toolkit.

It is in this wider context that I propose to compare two fundamentally different examples: 1) a direct action undertaken via tagging in 2019, and 2) a two-channel projection of film stills by New York-based artist Peter Scott exhibited in 2016 to negotiate how nostalgia may be understood in relation to the continuous struggle for dignified housing. This text is neither an attempt to analyse the struggles for housing justice, nor is it a study of street art's operations in such struggles. Rather, in placing these two examples next to one another, among others, this text seeks to examine whether nostalgia can function as a tool for adequately reading the past, to develop strategy for the present, or otherwise as a conceptual posture. Clearly, age-old tools, both successful and not, remain useful;

forming tenants' unions, for example, is still crucial to organising rent strikes and fighting against displacement. But within the realm of cultural production, there is still much to be said about how one may appropriate from the past without fetishising losses, especially when the larger culture industry works in tandem with the ruling class to make such losses palatable, or even desired. With regard to the latter case, consider the way US city governments got tangled up in a humiliating fight to win Amazon's bid for its second headquarters: a wolf of hyper-gentrification and brand-takeover in the sheep's clothing of 'mutually beneficial development' and 'jobs'. In NYC, municipal and corporate propaganda promoting the city's exalted creative capital cultivated major support for the deal, which was ultimately defeated because of popular resistance and sustained protest.

Stein begins his historicisation of urban planning and displacement with the early twentieth-century planning movement 'City Beautiful', which he remarks was likely the first such movement in the US. Organised in 1909, 'before all else, however, City Beautiful was a real estate program that sought to attract investment by building massive, Beaux Arts-inspired municipal buildings, tree-lined boulevards and carefully manicured open spaces' (2019: 19). The normalisation and incorporation of this strategy is of course by now intuitive to most inhabitants of urban environments. An obvious continuation of City Beautiful is 'greening', which by many is understood as a form of justifying the displacement of people of colour and working class communities under the guise of making improvements to their neighbourhoods by way of introducing parks, 'sustainable' architecture, new infrastructure, and the like. Exemplary is a conversation Stein cites between preservationist Michael Henry Adams and young people in Harlem which points to the growing consciousness that these ostensibly publicly-beneficial schemes are in fact tools of the developer class. Adams recounts that when speaking with the children about the greening of their block, one of them remarked: 'You see, I told you they didn't plant those trees for us' (Adams, cited in Stein, 2019: 40).

There are parallels to be drawn between the beautification methods used a century ago to explicitly segregate communities by race and class, and the implicit and slightly more invisibilised forms this takes today, including 'Disneyfication' (Times Square in New York is the prime example); the eradication of public space; and the brutal criminalisation of unhoused people.<sup>8</sup> Returning to the intimate connections between planners and this violence, Stein summarises:

But it is not only owners who inflict this pain. Just as gentrification's violence is no metaphor, neither is planners' 'police power'. [...] With increased resources, police are mirroring planners by speaking the language of data-informed decision-making and adopting the tools of geographic information systems to target their activities. (2019: 76)

Much discussed in recent years is another method of beautification: artwashing. Whether taking the form of studio space subsidised by developers or real estate-sponsored commissions for previously criminalised street artists, artwashing is a key tool in reproducing creative capitalism's sites of 'play'. The recent arrest of Sheezy McFly in Detroit is a telling example. McFly had been commissioned to paint ten murals as part of the 2017 'City Walls' programme, which had been organised to pay artists

stipends to create 'public art in vandalism-prone areas in an effort to help deter graffiti' (Edwards, 2019). While working on the first of the ten murals, he was arrested for not having his permit. McFly described the altercation as, 'an oxymoron – doing something for the city and being arrested by the city' (cited in Hooper, 2019). On the contrary, this contradiction is in fact integral to such forms of artwashing. In many such programmes artists are asked to beautify their communities so that they may be evicted at a fast-approaching later date. As Sharon Zukin describes:

Since the 1960s, the expansion of cultural patronage among middle class social strata has shown that investment in culture may augment limited means. Therefore, the accumulation strategies of large investors in central city real estate are supported by smaller investors' patterns of cultural and social reproduction. (1987)

A particularly abhorrent instance, thoughtfully analysed by Shellyne Rodriguez in her recent essay 'How the Bronx was Branded', is an art commission that comprises an instance of a larger greening initiative called NYC 'Anchor Parks' in the Mott Haven section of the Bronx. In addition to thirty million dollars allocated for the development of a park, the upgrade will be accompanied by 'a new \$50 million state-of-the-art architecturally avant-garde police station' (Rodriguez, 2018). To placate the neighbourhood – long ravaged by the racist violence of a brutal police force – Rodriguez describes the proposed community meeting room to be situated within the station. This room will feature a community-engaged art installation:

Borinquen Gallo, one of the artists selected to create the installation, contributed a project informed by interviews she conducted with NYPD officers at the 40th precinct and neighboring Bronx residents. Her research culminated in the production of a pair of neon signs. An interior sign, facing the space where officers will hold briefings, will read 'Black Lives Matter,' and an exterior neon sign, facing the community room, will read 'Blue Lives Matter.' The work is intended to be an equalizer, an effort to bring the police and the community together, but Gallo's effort collapses under her false assumption that the many generations of people who have lived under the authority of the NYPD, and who are routinely harassed, beaten, and arrested by police, can access equal power in a space located inside a police station. She assumes that the NYPD will not exercise its authority and just unplug the interior sign, leaving the Blue Lives Matter sign blazing and asserting the truth about the power dynamic Gallo glosses over. (Rodriguez, 2018)

Both the invitation of artists to decorate the offices of the police force that brutalise them, and the arrest of McFly while working on behalf of the city government to raise land value, are but two of innumerable examples of how the state can use cultural production to wash over its asymmetrical use of force and power.

In a recent essay, Daisy Alito comments on the dilemma of street art's newly-found acceptance with regards to the now-infamous destruction of Five Pointz by building owner Gerald 'Jerry' Wolkoff, and a court settlement that found him liable to pay almost seven million dollars in damages to artists whose work he had painted over. Alito

(2019) writes that the settlement 'signaled a strange new chapter in the history of graffiti. In the early days, by creed, a graffiti artist would ask neither for permission nor compensation. Now, after courting the former, artists at 5Pointz were receiving the latter.' She cites a salient point made by Meres One, lead plaintiff in the suit against Wolkoff: 'Graffiti *can* ruin a neighborhood, it turns out – just not the way the city expected'. Consider the logo of the condos to go up over the corpse of the once Mecca of street art: a stylised tag reading '5 Pointz'. In a 2017 statement, Mojo Stumer, the architectural firm designing the building, described this process clearly: 'The client requested that graffiti artwork be incorporated throughout the interiors to reflect back on the history of the 5 Pointz neighborhood' (Kinsella, 2017).

Clearly a critical question emerges here: how do forms of resistance or cultural production operate long after they have been recuperated? A further, and perhaps more productive question to consider: how do such strategies work when they reappear, or are reused, as part of a collective cultural language? Tagging, for example, can at times function as a form of direct action – partly via nostalgia, partly as (re)generative shared memory – as well as serving many different socio-cultural functions.<sup>9</sup>

Art press, as well as mass media, is no stranger to reading street art as a form of political intervention. Most recently, an article in *Frieze* referred to a campaign by residents in Hong Kong's New Territories as a way to 'preserve rural areas by painting murals throughout the village of Ping Yeung San Tsuen' (Jilani, 2019). The same article states that 'artistic expressions of defiance have also been widespread as part of the recent Hong Kong protests [...] The largest demonstration in the nation's history harnessed the impact of political graffiti.' A second defining example that made headlines some years ago was rather an intervention in the painted urban environment by way of erasure. In 2014, Lutz Henke and Blu painted over their famous Kreuzberg mural (one that depicted the 'so-called golden handcuffs of bourgeois existence') to protest, or rather nullify, their mural's use as a profit-creating image for Kreuzberg's real estate market (La Berge, 2019: 2).

The example I would like to briefly discuss here is neither an act of (self-)erasure, nor necessarily a form of propaganda used collectively for political purposes as was the case during the American Civil Rights Movement, to mention but one historical instance – or as it is seemingly employed in Hong Kong today. It could instead be described as an autonomous intervention into one's history and built environment, and more contentiously perhaps, as a form of reterritorialisation. In early 2019, a video of the act in question began circulating online.<sup>10</sup> Documented is a man, face covered with a bandana, who walks towards a scaffold on a Brooklyn sidewalk. Behind him are buildings, likely gut renovated and already turned into apartments way over the actual median income of locals. He approaches a wall which features a semi-completed hand-painted advertisement (seemingly for Adidas), which he refers to as a 'mural'. He tells the spectator that he, and a friend who has since died, had tags on that wall that have been covered up by the painted decoration as advertisement.

Today, as Brooklyn remains under siege by a rapacious developer class quickly reformulating the use value of the neighbourhood (graffiti-writing included), this man's tagging over of the mural-as-advertisement is a way of asserting his displacement, past and present. To complicate the blurry distinctions between murals, street art, and graffiti, he tells the commissioned street artist: 'I had a tag here

and my dead friend had a tag here too [...] Going over real graffiti with your street art bullshit.' In regard to the gray areas between terms such as mural, graffiti, bombing, aerosol art, and so on, and the attempt by scholars to standardise it for the sake of academic discourse, Alifo contextualises these terms in the history of graffiti:

As police chased graffiti artists from their canvasses of choice in the city's subway depots, tunnels, and bridges, they began to take refuge in arrangements that relied on the kindness of more lenient and enlightened property owners. The art form metamorphosed, with graffiti, once known for its hurried, look-over-your-shoulder 'throw ups', merging with a nascent genre of street art: the less nefarious 'mural'. That change was reflected at a recent panel presented by the Center for Art Law at Fordham Law School titled 'International Perspectives on Street Art'. In a sheet of key terms, graffiti was defined as 'unauthorized artworks that are word-based', while murals are 'works typically authorized, if not commissioned. (2019)

This example of direct action might be said to operate as a type of radical nostalgia – nostalgia for the resistance a community can foster when under duress, without embracing or valorising the conditions that produce the duress. In some sense, this nostalgia might even stand as a shared code of militant strategy. Bringing this up here is not meant to co-opt this Brooklyn graffiti writer's action for the sake of historicising him or the struggle he wages, but rather to as an instance of how various forms of intervention onto the walls of an urban space can describe different modes of resistance. This example demonstrates that already recuperated modes of production may necessarily be recycled, and that one can use historically-constructed dialectics to track the city's social reproduction of itself in its own image.

But how do strategies of *détournement* operate once their forms of destabilisation become strategies of the ruling class? Or for that matter, once these strategies have entered into the logic of the wage contract and of independent contracting endemic to post-Fordism as in the case of the graffiti-artists commissioned by city programmes?<sup>11</sup> In many ways, the way the term 'appropriation' was used by critics to describe much European and American art of the late '70s and '80s, resembles the strategies of *détournement* defined by Guy Debord (1959) as 'the re-use of pre-existing artistic elements in a new ensemble' – if the former is less necessarily committed to a politics of undoing the logics of the culture industry, and power broadly speaking, than the latter. Clearly, we shouldn't disregard the potential of critique to be reworked into glorification, or of the certainty of reification in both the case of critique and its co-optation. The facility with which the strategy can be flipped, likely has to do with what Debord considered one of its key advantages: its practicality, 'because it is so easy to use and because of its inexhaustible potential for re-use'. Though, as Asger Jorn noted in 1955, 'détournement is a game made possible by the capacity of devaluation' (Jorn, cited in Debord). My contention is that even while this 'devaluation' may in fact valorise its desired target, there is still potency in its discrediting, even, or perhaps, especially on local scales.

## 2. ARCHIVING THE 'DYNAMIC CITY'

*Someday a rain will come and wipe this scum off the streets.*

– Travis Bickle, *Taxi Driver*

*That's another reason I love New York. Just like that, it can go from bad to cute.*

– Carrie Bradshaw, *Sex and the City*<sup>12</sup>

There is no shortage of art about the violent processes of displacement and gentrification, especially as the double-bind of complicity and victimhood prescribed to the artist's role in gentrification becomes better understood. Much of this work, however, carries opaque understandings of the term that popular and academic discourses maintain. Much of this discourse – particularly its ubiquity in conversations from the dinner party to the rally, in mainstream media, and among recent-college graduates who move into 'up and coming' neighborhoods – ignores the *managed* and *systematic* procedures of this change, and rather tend to perversely naturalise it. As Stein describes:

Gentrification [...] is a *political process* as well as an economic and social one; it is planned by the state as much as it is produced by developers and consumer by the condo crowd. [Urban p]lanners did not invent gentrification, but they helped foster its development and transform it from a local phenomenon into a global business model. (2009: 43 & 49).

This follows from David Harvey's much earlier description of gentrification as a 'spatial fix' for capitalism's urban crisis, or Zukin's (1987) formulation 'a process of spatial and social differentiation'. Consider legacies of the abandonment of the urban centre by industry and manufacturing, a decision made by the ruling classes to racially segregate communities and to target austerity measures on sectors of the city populated by the working class, especially workers of colour. A key point made by Robert Fitch in his *The Assassination of New York*, is that as the urban centre was cleared of markers of poverty, 'more city space was produced and coded for urban real estate investment and development' (1996: 46). While generally understood as a Western post-war phenomenon accompanying the shift to 'non-productive' forms of capital accumulation (i.e. financialisation), one of the key take-aways from Fitch's book, and much other literature, is that deindustrialisation began long before the larger national shift to the service economy, and not just in the wealthy Global North. We can see this process has long been spreading into peripheries and ex-urban sites, as well as in cities of the Global South. The breakdown of public space under the aegis of 'public-private' partnerships, the vast influence of the real estate lobby, and the pressure to increase land value placed on urban planners are just some of the key characteristics of the alignment between municipal and corporate interests.

It is not an accident that much art (or the work of anti-gentrification and anti-displacement organisers for that matter) that *does* appreciate the complementarity of austerity and luxury development, often seems like a web sketched by artist Mark Lombardi that tracks the conspiratorial nature of urban planning and municipal



*Untitled (Go Away)*, inkjet print on enhanced matte synthetic paper. Peter Scott, 2018.  
Photograph ©Peter Scott.



*Untitled (High Line Billboard)*, Installation View: *Picture City I*. Peter Scott, 2013.  
Photograph ©Peter Scott.

Installation View: *Picture City I*. Peter Scott, 2013.  
Photograph ©Peter Scott.



governments. Others take a factographic approach, in the way of some post-conceptual photography, that of Martha Rosler for example. Others still, such as the above-cited Shellyne Rodriguez, track the double-bind of artists with regards to gentrification – e.g. they are both the victims and the instruments of displacement.<sup>13</sup> After the creative and cultural capital produced by artists are fully appraised and drained, they are similarly priced out.

Following the thread between appropriation and détournement that I proposed above, there remains analysis to be gleaned from the appropriation and dissociation of mass culture by reappropriating recuperated strategies 'back'.<sup>14</sup> The work of artist and curator Peter Scott – though this distinction is blurred in his work – has long investigated the crucial dilemma of how the dynamic, creative city develops and for whom. He has done so through archival research, the appropriation and investigation of popular culture (television programmes in particular), and the creation of a hybrid not-for-profit gallery as a gathering space.<sup>15</sup> At times the gallery, carriage trade, has offered its space to cultural workers and community groups as a place to meet and organise. To be clear, I am not proposing that Scott's work, nor any conceptualist art for that matter, can *alone* allow for the development of strategy and resistance against the myriad assaults on the potential for dignified living described here. However, the type of models of analysis and presentation (not to mention pedagogy) contained therein can be highly generative in their spectatorship.

In 2016, Scott presented the second in a series of three exhibitions titled *Picture City*. The first two were solo shows of his own work, and the third in 2018 was a curated group show of other artists. All three document how the mediatization of NYC is employed as a psycho-architectural blueprint to continually reproduce the city in a 'livable' and profitable image of itself. Following Debord's explication of the conditions for the society of the spectacle as the accumulation of capital to such a magnitude that it becomes an image, and that, per his famous words: 'the Spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images,' (Debord, 1995 [1967]: 12), Peter Scott's work takes the changing reality and the valorised 'image' of New York as macro-examples of how the spectacle is a planning model for urban growth. To repeat, this is undergirded by racist policing and housing policies, the profitability of eviction, and the construction of a luxury playground maintained by a wide service industry staffed by displaced and precarious commuters.<sup>16</sup> Taking archival material from sitcoms and critically-acclaimed films, to destabilising images of the legally mandated windows into construction sites of steel-and-glass towers on the Brooklyn waterfront, Scott's practice gleans snapshots of the city from all the sites of its reproduction and (re-) presentation.<sup>17</sup> *Picture City I* took five TV shows set in New York as sources, while *Picture City III* positioned work by other artists alongside archival materials attributed to carriage trade.<sup>18</sup>

*Picture City II* (2016) sources material images from two films intimately bound into the images of New York: *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *Sex and the City* (2008). A single-work exhibition at the Emily Harvey Foundation in the centre of SoHo, the two-channel projection interweaves film stills from both movies to create composite images that offer transhistorical portraits of different imaged cities. They are before-and-after comparisons, 'dialectical montages' between the gritty New York of lore, and the post-9/11 and post-Mayor Michael Bloomberg New York of today, main-

tained in social media feeds and the advertisements gracing the sides of waterfront high-rises.<sup>19</sup> The latter representation employs the former to produce a profitable simulacrum.

On a translucent screen, a double-projection presents a cycle of images. From either side the screen facilitates some portion of the simultaneously projected pictures to bleed through one another, fostering a ghostly collapsing of the past and (recent) present. Among the dozens of composite pictures, a landscape emanating from a bygone 42<sup>nd</sup> street permeates into the glamorised sites of contemporary consumption in Meat Market night life. Scott weaves together: dingy diner coffee over/under sushi; Travis Bickle's shirtless and depraved gun-wielding mirror monologue toward/against an opulently dressed Carrie Bradshaw preparing for her wedding; his army surplus cot in a gritty shoebox, projected inside her townhouse decorated in proto-Pinterest glitz.<sup>20</sup> Two different stories of alienation: the former from his self-proclaimed city of 'scum', the latter a prodigal consumer alienated from a 'real' void of its mediated copy.

In one of the composite images, Travis drops a young-professional couple off at their home, and looks up at the montaged-in contemporary building as they depart his taxi. (Today he might drive for Uber, detaching him from material reality ever more given the regimes of surveillance capitalism that allows users to track and rate workers, while they are alienated and managed by algorithms – a techno-Taylorism). The neo-Corbusian glass tower before him seems to signal a forgotten 'limitless progress', a leftover of modern utopianism rooted in its contradictions.

In *Taxi Driver*, Travis is shoved into the underground (underworld), trapped in pathological and systemically-instilled delusions, unaware of how 'normal' people behave, celebrate, or date. Travis is clearly a victim of the period's economic and political crises stemming from decades of class decomposition and militarism. In many studies of urban geography and displacement, as in Fitch's above-referenced book, the history of wealthy land-owning figures, who purposefully dismantled the city's industrial sectors beginning in the 1920s, is clearly outlined. Those elites who owned the land and buildings of Manhattan deemed it more profitable to deindustrialise, evict working class laborers,<sup>21</sup> and to create the vast seas of office space we are familiar with.<sup>22</sup> Later in the 1970s, the developers instituted a policy of 'urban disaster capitalism' blaming the unemployed for draining the city's resources. Austerity in the form of cuts to the gamut of the New Deal welfare state's social services are thus the foundation for Travis's New York, and its continued disintegration remains our reality today. The analog that Scott sketches today is to be found in the forms of alienation and atomisation from the relegation of our identities to consumption in the visible urban space.

Summoning the history of the austerity of the '70s, Scott produced a handout to accompany *Picture City II* that emulated a thin newspaper. On the back page is a reproduction of a 1975 *Daily News* cover with the sensational text: 'FORD TO CITY: DROP DEAD'. Another bleeding of the past into the present. He addresses this shift to nostalgia – clearly recognisable in the art system as well – which fuels the design and sale of an image of 'grit'. As Scott makes perfectly clear in the faux newspaper: 'the appeal of an angst ridden past now asserts itself within the consumer-oriented present'. Neil Smith points to this moment as a breakdown of twentieth century liberal urban policy, writing:

In the US, President Ford's refusal to bail out New York City amidst a deep fiscal crisis (immortalized

in the famous *Daily News* headline: "Ford to City: Drop Dead"), followed by the failure of President Carter's attempted urban plan in 1978, gave the first intimation of a national economy increasingly delinked from and independent of its cities. The wholesale demise of liberal urban policy followed in fits and starts, working toward Clinton's cynical slashing of the social welfare system in 1996. (2002)

Typically, the story of a changing New York – in the art historical context – begins with artists occupying vacant industrial spaces in the '60s, jump-starting a cycle of gentrification. The scope of the process, however, should be extended back to the late nineteenth-century. Scott's curatorial work at carriage trade demonstrates just such a historical perspective. It was initially based in SoHo, but has since moved to the Lower East Side.<sup>23</sup> Long before SoHo followed the traditional processes of change, the area had already been a high-end shopping district in the mid-1800s, during America's first Gilded Age. Upper class shoppers would travel by carriage in between the main avenues, where street merchants would approach them; 'carriage trade' began to signify high-end retail.<sup>24</sup>

As such, *Picture City II* engages (geographic) space as much as it does time. It responds phenomenologically to the Emily Harvey Foundation: a still-active testament to SoHo's '60s and '70s DIY art spaces. It was the former home of George Maciunas, who organised the neighbourhood's first artist cooperatives after he founded Fluxus in 1962. Scott pits the spectacular nature of our current picture-perfect city for *using/buying* against an (idealised) older city of *making/creating*, but also, presents the two as inseparable, overlapping worlds, unsettling any *ahistorical* nostalgia. If a dialectic between before and after pictures can be productive, it is only through the tension produced by comparisons that assert their simultaneity. Adopting a veneer of the livable city while social and economic tensions reverberate beneath the surface, *Picture City II* articulates the contemporary city's often-unacknowledged tensions, perpetually veiled by lifestyle culture's ongoing celebration across the urban landscape.

Scott's work is a recycling of images to understand how they create the city in their image. The man who tagged over the mural-as-advertisement, repurposes modes of cultural production that had been used, at least in part, to resist an earlier form of the politics of displacement that still reign today. He resists its co-optation, while also offering a reason for its resurgence after being co-opted. Nostalgia for old utopianisms, as well as for forms of resistance, can help devise models of breaking through the veneer of spectacle, through its flatness, if only as an accompaniment to the work of organising in our communities, across the divides of class and occupation, and in forming collective power. This collective power won't emerge (solely) from the gallery space, nor from a particularly engaging work of art. Art, and culture broadly considered, however, are key spaces of action within which struggle must also be waged. In the fights for dignified housing, we may be nostalgic for a time when the city was cheaper and social services may have afforded some a decent quality of life.<sup>25</sup> However, this nostalgia must be tempered by the consciousness that the injustices of today's housing market build off those of the past. In summoning ourselves to take back lost strategies, or deciding whether they have a place in contemporary toolkits, this historical specificity is imperative. Foregoing historicity is just as ubiquitous as it is profitable; consider a 2015 exhibition of street artists in rapidly gentrifying Brooklyn neighborhood Bushwick, preposterously titled 'Brooklyn is the Future'. As Lizzie Crocker remarks in a review: 'The exhibition title feels a decade too late – Brooklyn *was* the future, now it's the present' (2015). Though, perhaps this title isn't so out of left field after all. Brooklyn has been, and continues to be the future for developers, for a transplanted techno-financial elite. So long as our understanding of the past is constrained only to the spectacularised image of itself, it will be sold as a way to fund the new, rather than used as a primer to organise for a future un beholden to ever-more entrenched forms of injustice.

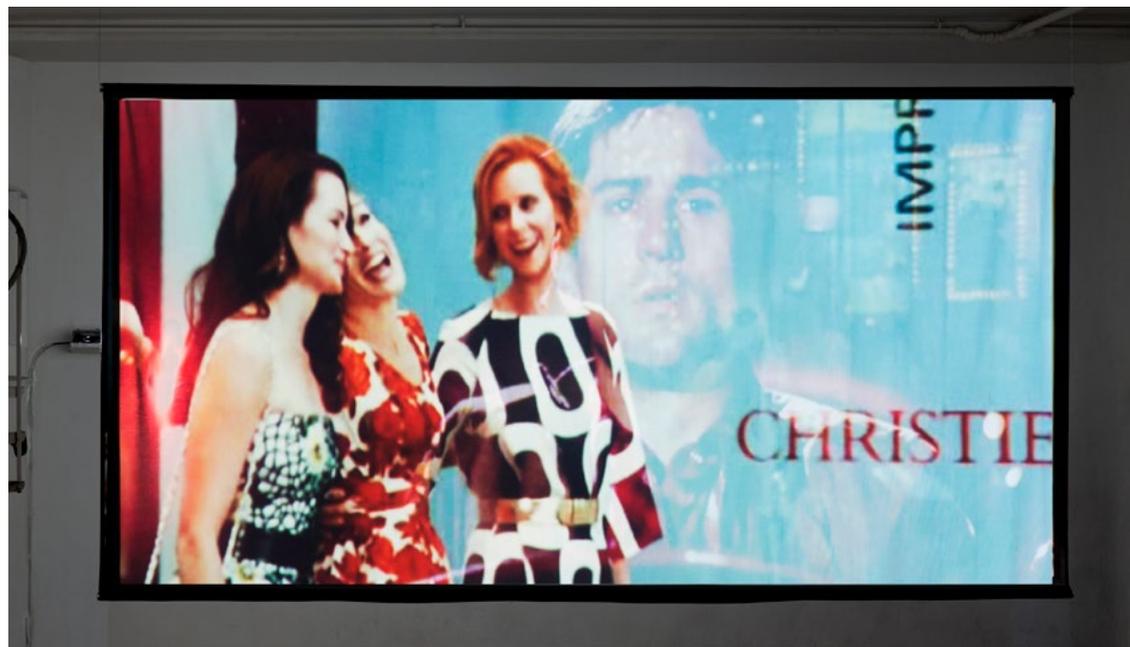


Installation View: *Picture City II*,  
two-channel video still projection,  
translucent screen.  
Peter Scott. Emily Harvey Foundation,  
New York, USA, 2016.  
Photograph ©Peter Scott.

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Foundation, New York, USA, 2016.  
Photograph ©Peter Scott.

- 1 My use of picture here is in the colloquial sense of a digital image shared online, but also in the way this term was used by the late critic and art historian Douglas Crimp. His formulation, canonical for the historicisation of what was historicised as postmodern art and in line with theory by those such as Baudrillard and Debord: 'While it once seemed that pictures had the function of interpreting reality, it now seems that they have usurped it' (Crimp, 1977). In a longer elaboration on the essay for *October* two years later, he noted in the preface: 'Picture, used colloquially, is also nonspecific: a picture book might be a book of drawings or photographs, and in common speech a painting, drawing, or print is often called, simply, a picture. Equally important for my purposes, picture, in its verb form, can refer to a mental process as well as the production of an aesthetic object' (Crimp, 1979).
- 2 Regarding the last example, one could formulate an analysis that considers modern formalist aesthetics alongside radical urban geography to read the flattening of promotion onto the walls of living space to describe an ultimate enmeshing of infrastructure, advertisement, and visual culture onto a singular plane.
- 3 While not referenced here, there is, of course, a wide history concerning street art in the Global South as it concerns decolonial discourse, anti-colonial struggle, and the neoliberalisation of the world market. That being said, this paper is concerned specifically with an analysis of nostalgia and collective memory relating to examples of cultural production and resistance in New York City. Further analysis would, firstly, expand the scope of references, and secondly, acknowledge the colonial registers embedded in urban policy.
- 4 I thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing this point to my attention, and wording it in this way.
- 5 On Google's use of Toronto as a techno-surveillance experiment, see: <https://www.commondreams.org/news/2019/06/06/warning-surveillance-capitalism-nightmare-big-tech-investor-turned-critic-pushes>. On the LINKNYC WiFi kiosks, see: <https://therealdeal.com/2019/03/15/hudson-yards-smart-city-or-surveillance-city/>.
- 6 See Capps (2019) on how 'mega-luxury of this mini-Dubai was financed in part through a program that was supposed to help alleviate urban poverty. Hudson Yards ate Harlem's lunch.'
- 7 For the raw data, see: 'Selected Initial Findings of the 2017 New York City Housing and Vacancy Survey' on page 17: <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/hpd/downloads/pdf/about/2017-hvs-initial-findings.pdf#page=17> and [https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/operations/downloads/pdf/temporary\\_housing\\_report.pdf](https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/operations/downloads/pdf/temporary_housing_report.pdf).
- 8 On the last point, see Currier (2019).
- 9 Although not particularly germane to the matter at hand, Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of the term 'minor literatures' can be valuable to consider with regards to tagging. '[...] a minor literature', they write 'doesn't come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a minor language. But the first characterization of minor literature in any case is that in it language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization [...] Minor literature[']s cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics.' Another characteristic that they include: 'in it, everything takes on a collective value.' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986: 16-17).
- 10 I've chosen not to link to the video in this academic context in an attempt to minimise the inevitable reification of a political action into something closer to a 'performance'.
- 11 It should be said, that even though both art and maintenance labour are typically unpaid, this is not to draw an equivalency between the forms of working (creative or reproductive), nor to flatten the levels of precarity between them, but to say that all 'creative' labour under neoliberal Post-Fordism, including that of social reproduction, is subject to the logic of the wage. On this latter point, see the discussion of 'decommodified labour' by La Berge in the introduction to his 2009 book *Wages Against Artwork*.
- 12 These quotes were brought to my attention by Peter Scott.
- 13 On this note, an important history to consider is how lofts were used by artists; the key historical text on this point is Zukin (1989). On artwashing, see the incredibly salient and thorough connections presented by Rodriguez in her analysis of the rebranding of the Port Morris and Mott Haven sections of the Bronx as 'the Piano District' by a ruthless developer, referenced in this article. Describing a billboard mounted by Keith Rubinstein, she writes: 'As suggested by the slogan of the billboard, an appeal to 'art' would be crucial in transforming the image of the South Bronx from a marginal working-class zone to one of the most hyped-up frontiers of property speculation in the city – a process led by developers that would unfold with the full support of local and city government. Each of these entities – developers, local elected officials, and the city administration – weaponized the arts to move this initiative further along. It reveals an unnerving intersection of power that positions real-estate developers, the art world, and city government in an alliance to advance gentrification further into poor and working-class communities as a process of systematic repopulation.'
- 14 Here, my argument is inspired by the Coalition to Protect Chinatown and the Lower East Side's planning initiative called the Chinatown Group Rezoning Plan, which was developed by members of the Pratt Center for Community Development and community members from the neighbourhood to protect the area from impending hyper-development. See <https://peoplefirstnyc.org/people-first-rezoning-plan/>. In the words of an organiser who first introduced the plan to me, it was a way of taking the tools of the state (in this case zoning policy) which was first instituted by Herbert Hoover a century ago to help real estate speculators make safer and more informed investments) and repurposing them to defend their communities. In many ways, this is the good example of how to develop what Rodriguez asks for here: 'How would an artistic practice that aims to disrupt alienation appear in our hallways, elevators, and all the spaces we share in our communities? What if these considerations were practiced outside of the art world, without foundation grants or institutional support as just an act toward freedom? Rather than only thinking about the aesthetic qualities of space, artists can aim to topple the neoliberal scaffold that holds capitalism steady above us, like a firmament.'
- 15 See Petrossians & Scott (2017).
- 16 A particularly fitting, and distressing example, is the work of cleaners and domestic care workers under the neoliberal paradigms of subcontracting or sub-subcontracting labour to eliminate worker protections, and the relegation of service workers commuting from the sub- and exurban neighbourhoods they have been relegated to. For two recent examples, see Vergès (2019) and Aguiar & Andrew Herod (2006). See also, the incredible work of the 'Ain't I a Woman Campaign' in New York comprised of domestic care workers who are organising in response to having half their wages for 24-hour shifts withheld: <https://antiwomancampaign.wordpress.com/>.
- 17 Stein also describes how the 21<sup>st</sup> century has 'given rise to new and peculiar forms of gentrification', for example: 'Rich neighborhoods that never truly experienced disinvestment have become 'super-gentrified', with homes in places like New York's Greenwich Village and Brooklyn Heights selling for astronomical figures to finance titans, and unregulated rents pricing out even relatively wealthy households' (2019: 51).
- 18 *Picture City III* included the work of: Arnon Ben-David, Morgan Blair, Jennifer Bolande, Andre Kertesz, Stanley Kubrick, Diane Nerwen, John Schabel, Cindy Sherman, Robert Smithson, and Philip Vanderhyden. See <https://carriagetrade.org/Picture-City-III>.
- 19 See Eisenstein (1977: 45). Here, one also finds his oft-quoted phrase: '[M]ontage is an idea that arises from the collision of independent shots – shots even opposite to one another' (49).
- 20 Included among the archival materials exhibited in *Picture City III* at Carriage Trade was a collection of selfies/portraits taken in front of Carrie Bradshaw's home in the West Village that were posted on Instagram and geotagged. From afar the almost monochromatic images seem like the pixels of a grid, a 'conceptual matrix' meticulously documenting the cult of celebrity and the mediation of the urban landscape as playscape.
- 21 Another key reference made by Stein: 'In New York, following the fiscal crisis of 1975, planners – informed by studies produced by the RAND Corporation – instituted a harsh program known as 'planned shrinkage', in which city services (such as fire houses and public hospitals) were shuttered in order to encourage poor people of color to exit the city. Former Trotskyite-turned-neoconservative planning commissioner Roger Starr defended the policies as an attempt to 'stop the Puerto Ricans and the rural Blacks from living in the city. [...] Our urban system is based on the theory of taking the peasant and turning him into an industrial worker. Now there are no industrial jobs. Why not keep him a peasant?'" (2019: 25).
- 22 'From the 1950s to the 1990s, the city lost 750,000 manufacturing jobs while its land values soared from \$20 billion to \$4000 billion' (Stein, 2019: 45).
- 23 On the Lower East Side's shift to an 'art district', see Deutsche & Gendal Ryan (1987).
- 24 A crucial citation in Zukin's *Loft Living*, reproduced by Stein, is a remark made by a SoHo resident remembering a public hearing on loft in SoHo: '[T]here were lots of other groups giving testimony on other matters. Poor people from the South Bronx and Bed-Stuy [neighborhoods ravaged by segregationist policies, but also where there are actually communities of home-owners of color] complaining about rats, rent control, and things like that. The board just shelved those matters and moved right along. They didn't know how to proceed. Then they came to us [artists]. All the press secretaries were there, and the journalists. The klieg lights went on, and the cameras started to roll. And all these guys started making speeches about the importance of art to New York City.' (1989: 117–118).
- 25 See Cooper (2017).

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