

# Not Here, Right Now/Right Here, Not Now: Unfolding the context in Alana Jelinek's 'This is Not Art'.

## ABSTRACT

In this paper I am aiming at an unfolding of the main argument in Alana Jelinek's *This is Not Art* into contiguous territories, located within the contemporary reality of urban development and the post-Olympic cultural landscape in London.

Faced with the emergence and increasing production of artistic activities known as '*creative placemaking*', and the enmeshed relationships between the continuing evacuation of social housing estates and the presence of artists as temporary occupants/practitioners in these interim spaces, a stark but necessary question is suggested: '*What is Art doing in London at this moment in time?*'

In asking this question, I am mindful of the precious distinction recently drawn by Angela Dimitrakaki, who suggests we should *differentiate between 'the artwork', as the output of artistic production, and the outcome of 'art' as a way of production* (Dimitrakaki, 2013: 6)

The production relations as 'outcomes' that we are aiming to examine in this paper are those of the forces engaged in the production of physical and social urban space in London today in which *Art as outcome* is a central component.

I identify this as the '*aesthetic dividend*', understood as the added value to privileged narratives of urban development inscribed both into planning authorities scenarios and private developers marketing strategies, and served by an array of specific artistic activities and their perception as '*creative placemaking*'.

Dimitrakaki's propositions will also be precious to us in the central section of the paper, when they will be drawn as important resources into the analysis of Mike Nelson/Artangel unrealised artwork for the decanted Heygate Estate in Elephant and Castle, South London.

## KEYWORDS

'Heygate Estate', 'Artangel', 'creative placemaking', 'Mike Nelson', 'Futurecity', 'aesthetic dividend'

## MAIN TEXT

### **Not Here, Right Now/Right Here, Not Now: Unfolding the context in Alana Jelinek's 'This is Not Art'.**

Everything can be made up, can be made over again, and the absolute singularity of human experience – the source of both its tragedy and its beauty – is thus dissipated in the trivializing nobility of a redemption through art.

(Bersani 1990: 22)

...art reflects rather than challenge the dominant social relations; politics mirrors rather than challenges the predominant relations of production (...) art's effectiveness no longer depends on art just as politics is related to a free-floating idea of power and the artist seems concerned with both and neither at the same time.

(Leger 2013: 37)

There are many cultural synchronicities, –predictable and unexpected, echoes and delay, above and below– that emerge when responding to Alana Jelinek's *This is not Art*, perhaps signifying above all, the importance and timeliness of her intervention as 'a story of art told for this time, this contemporary moment, in recognition of the preoccupations and history of radical art practice' (Jelinek, 2013: 4), and the contingencies of time and place that accompany its publication.

The sense of epiphany described by Jelinek in the introduction of *This is Not Art* might exclusively belong to her own trajectory of personal development, but the circumstances she describes have a very specific history, punctuated by passages which many of us might have recognized as contradictory crossings between art and life in our own practices in the art world and beyond.

As an artist and a London citizen since 1990, I will be drawing on several of these contemporary instances in keeping with the 'doggedly London perspective' (Jelinek, 2013: 4) of its source with the intention of dropping some of the abstractions at the core of *This is not Art* into an operative milieu and locate its philosophical propositions into a series of fragmented, local contexts that will revisit and review many of Jelinek's point of analysis, questions and conclusions.

By forcing a return to specific narratives, rather than providing a pointless exegesis of her story, I am aiming at an unfolding of Jelinek's argument into contiguous territories, located within the contemporary reality of urban development in London, intended as the primary condition that affects its cultural production at present and the global dimension that subtends to its production and reproduction.

I am going to draw this condition further and deeper into its bearing on the story as told by *This is Not Art* as one of my main points in this paper, casting Jelinek's preoccupations into actual London-based events that will help to reveal some aspects of this externalized mutual relationship between contemporary city and contemporary art unfolding at the intersection between art, urban planning, capital investment, public bodies and activism.

If –as declared at the outset–, *This is Not Art* is a hope and an attempt 'to inspire others to consider art and art's social role in a new, more generative, light' (Jelinek 2013: 3), we might do well by starting to see more clearly the actual role of art in the contemporary production of the cultural imaginary of urban space in London and begin by posing a stark but necessary

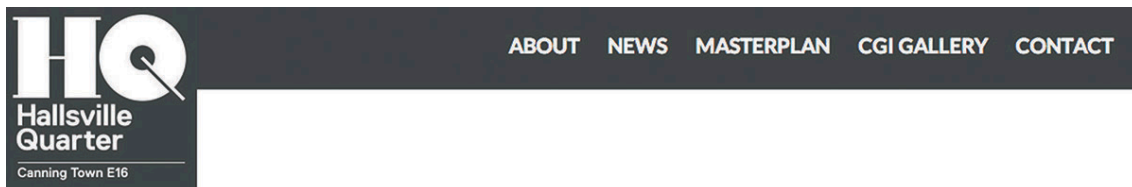
question: 'What is Art *doing* in London at this moment in time'?

In asking this question, I am mindful of the precious distinction recently drawn by Angela Dimitrakaki, who suggests we should *differentiate between 'the artwork', as the output of artistic production, and the outcome of 'art' as a way of production* (Dimitrakaki, 2013: 6) so that we can better understand *how art stands in relations of production* (Dimitrakaki, 2013: 5).

The production relations we are aiming to examine in this paper are those of the forces engaged in the production of physical and social urban space in London today in which *Art as outcome* is a central component. Dimitrakaki's propositions will also be precious to us in the last section of the paper, when they will be drawn as important resources into the analysis of Mike Nelson/Artangel proposed artwork for the Heygate Estate in Elephant and Castle, South London.

## 2. Art as aesthetic dividend in the production of contemporary urban space.

The urban is no longer an arena where value is created so much as extracted, gouged out of the common coffers, appropriated as monopoly rents and merchants' profits, as shareholder dividends and interest payments; the urban, nowadays, is itself exchange value.  
(Merrifield, 2014)



## FLYTHROUGH



fig.1: screenshot from the flythrough video of the forthcoming Hallsville Quarter development, Canning Town.

There could hardly be a more carefully constructed academic argument than the image above, to impart to the reader the connections I am intending to draw between art and urban development in London today, particularly because its visual language is in itself a product and an argument of the primacy of the visual in the current urban regime in London.

This single image, extracted from one of the now-customary flythrough videos as selling pitch for worlds yet-to-exist, functions as marketing material, a glimpse into the future urban spaces produced through the local regeneration programme actively re-making the area of Canning Town, East London.

In this role, it is hardly an informative evidence of the future spatial qualities that awaits new dwellers, but more importantly, it is painfully revealing of the spatial unconscious in which the 'ghosts in reverse' inhabiting the future Canning Town have been programmed to live their aspirational lives in advance of their real counterparts.

What this image also fails to tell us, is that this specific public-private development at the core of the regeneration partnership between the London Borough of Newham and French developers Bouygues, sits in the middle of the so-called '*Arc of Opportunity*' (Newham/LDA/GLC, 2010), drawn by 'Newham London' (as the Borough rebrands itself for outside investors) in 2010 as a packaging of investment opportunities available in the Borough when they offered Newham as '*London's Regeneration Supernova*' at the Shanghai Expo 2010 (Hancox, 2014).

Perhaps also because of this initial pitch to Far Eastern markets both as investors and ultimate buyers of many of those flats, the image above presents us with a new public space in which the future as dreamt by the developers –and virtually imaged by the 'creative economy' of CGI service industry labourers freshly graduated from Art & Design departments of UK Universities- is signified by the presence of a fictitious 'Newham Biennale', a virtually reaffirming index of the re-imagined East London as a mix between Shoreditch and Canary Wharf seen from afar, where real historical, social and spatial differences are digitally remastered into a city marketing mantra as win-win situation.

This delirious fragment of social life in the forthcoming Hallsville Quarter is a joyful blend of artworld venues and brand outlets as 'destination tourism' where artists, shoppers and residents –presumably many of them temporary occupants of the nearby Fizzy Living<sup>1</sup> apartments in the Vermilion Tower- happily mingle together in the post-regeneration Canning Town where apparently any form of social conflict is merely translated into a library of homogenized royalty-free citizens moving into prescribed and managed routes.

The 2010 World Expo in Shanghai (...) suggested that the horizon of politics lies in the development of progressively smarter solutions by an alliance of business, science, and authoritarian state and city governments. The global-urban problematic, from this perspective, is above all a question of efficiency and proper management, where political contentiousness, like pollution, is one more problem to be solved.  
(Madden, 2012: 782)

Whilst often easily dismissed at face-value as nothing but marketing trivia, these 'visions' of harmonious new quarters in East London –part creative quarter, part entrepreneur enclave, part shopping nirvana- are crucial entry points to develop a reading of *Art as aesthetic dividend* in the production of contemporary urban space in London today and the various levels of cross-over (as synergy) and screen-off (as differentiation) that constitute the architecture of this co-productive relationship between art and new urban spaces.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.fizzyliving.com/>

Indeed, the points of connections and frictions between artistic discourse, cultural production and urban development in London today, function as the critical joints in which the infectious double-bind conduit between *endogenous* and *non-endogenous* values described by Jelinek are at their most discernible and laid-bare in their contradicting and exploitative relationship.

This is not simply a correlation between art activities and urban space under a shared economic regime, but an enmeshed causality that is produced and reproduced in an auratic realm of marketing urbanism, where art functions as the aesthetic dividend central to the financial value of urban development, providing intangible currency as the value-added financial assets of 'uniqueness' and 'authenticity' that multiply the overall equity of the city/quarter/housing development.

Cue to the *Newham Biennale* yet to be conceived, funded or curated.

Hallsville Quarter is not the only place in Canning Town where obsessive creative placemaking is at work; two neighbouring developments' brochures are describing similarly passionate synergies between art and housing developments:

An arts centre and gallery, together with shops, restaurants and cafés will help to give London City Island the feel of an authentic and creative riverside community, bursting with ideas and vitality. (Ballymore 2013)

At Cathedral we are consumed with a passion for creating new, thriving and sustainable places. Our friends at the House of Fairytales are *a group of extraordinary people who exist to change hearts and minds*...led by artist Deborah Curtis and Gavin Turk...their presence on-site has led to more companies starting to take an interest in the area and there is a buzz of excitement and expectation. (Cathedral, 2014. Italic by the author)

In this environment, the one-way umbilical cord of Clement Greenberg's autonomous disciplinarity turns into a two-way wireless connection between urban actors, trading their disciplinary values on the marketplace as the narrative hoardings of land value bubbles.

This productive relationship at work in the material and immaterial production of contemporary marketing urbanism in London, shows its incessant deployment of images of art, artists, art activities as well as the presence of a whole industry of actual service provision to cultural masterplanners and developers in search of these narrative elements for their products.

This ever-growing cottage industry emerged during the last 10 years from a blend of discredited public art agencies looking for rebranding their services, creative consultancies quick in capturing place branding techniques, new cultural institutions driving the pre and post-Olympic refashioning of East London<sup>2</sup>, eager art curators opening new markets for their work and erstwhile city boosters and PR agencies<sup>3</sup>, always intent at pre-designing the city, shaping its future desires and colonizing its future opportunities.

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<sup>2</sup> For the most significant emerging entity in this field, see [CREATE](#), who has been recently awarded Arts Council funding as part of their National Portfolio Organization and develops cultural engagement strategies for private-public housing developments, often in collaboration with the Barbican. See [here](#) in Walthamstow with Hill Residential Ltd and LB Waltham Forest and [here](#) in Hackney with Mahattan Loft Corporations and LB of Hackney.

<sup>3</sup> One of the most awe-inspiring in its field is called 'Citizen Relations' (formerly Citizen Brando). On its blog, we read: 'we know how to get people talking. We believe we understand conversation better than any other consumer

The productive spectrum of this broad service industry might be looking different in *output*, but it turns out to be rather similar in *outcome*. The dead old crass bronze sculpture plomped in the concierge of a luxury block of flats *as Art* and the high-end bespoke 'community engagement' service provision *as Art* might occupy diverse positions in terms of art historical development and aesthetic perception, separated by different clientele, budgets and target audience, but as far as their social role and service provision –*what they do as Art*– hardly any difference is registered.

The activities of 'leading culture and placemaking agency', Futurecity can be a telling evidence of these operative realms of instrumental exchange:

We believe culture can add commercial value to new developments, offer purchasers investment opportunities and provide real stories for marketing, branding and communication (...) culture should be seen as an essential ingredient in the creation of unique places, offering authenticity to new places and value. (Futurecity, 2013).

The fact that the symbolic cultural economy of capital investment at the border between the City of London and Shoreditch has recently assumed the architectural form of a residential high-rise named 'Avant-Garde' (Telford Homes, 2013), should leave no doubts as to where we might be in the frantic exchanges between art and capital mutually cannibalistic relationship and self-recognition, all the while posing as worlds apart in the same place.

In between many other consulting project that can single out their unique contribution in having shaped London's public and private realm for what it is today, Futurecity also wrote the City of London cultural strategy in 2011; this is 'a 200-page report exploring creative ideas and frameworks for the promotion of London as the world's leading cultural city. The document is a tool to attract inward investment for the ancient walled city from current square mile occupants' (City of London, 2013).

Sculpture in the City 2013 –a free exhibition of temporary public art that provides a changing programme of outstanding public art in an area that is changing rapidly (City of London, 2013)–is one of the main initiatives derived from that document.

This tired but recently revived practice sees the art object intended as a 'gift' to the generic urban public, ranging from the transient passer-by to the inhabiting community member, is given a new sense of purpose by the current cultural climate, perfectly spelled out by the recent Keynote speech address by the now departed Minister of Culture, Maria Miller: 'Our reputation for cultural excellence enhances the way in which the world sees us. (...) That reputation, with culture at its heart, is great for business. (Miller, 2014)

Its return as a strategic tool in the London of 2013, renders explicit the symbiotic axis between the only models of urban growth that the current marketing urbanism has to offer: those of the financial city and the creative city. Financial enclave and creative quarters that borders each other (Shoreditch and Square Mile) are overlapped here, as the sculptures of renowned 'edgy, contemporary' (Sculpture in the City, 2013) artists extend their semi-autonomous status in the core of the world's financial centre.<sup>4</sup>

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*PR agency around. And, if you understand conversation, you understand how to change opinions, influence decisions and, ultimately, sell.'*

[http://uk.citizenrelations.com/creating-people-powered-conversations/#.U9tkNeN\\_sTY](http://uk.citizenrelations.com/creating-people-powered-conversations/#.U9tkNeN_sTY)

in its previous company name, Citizen Brando was also one of the partners in the failed interim space 'Industrious', ceremoniously opened in Canning Town on the site of the future Hallsville Quarter in 2012 through the London Mayor's Meanwhile Spaces and uncerimoniously closed –read unofficially bankrupt– in 2013.

<sup>4</sup>For a more sober look at the City of London, I would suggest you book your place in the next Occupy Tours; these are uniquely revealing guided walks organised by Occupy London. Places are free. <http://occupytours.org> (last accessed on

There is little merit in having a financial district with no culture in it -- nor, possibly, a cultural district with no economic value. The two often go hand in hand (...) Today many investors, policy makers, and others are sophisticated enough to agree that art helps boost the economy by attracting tourists, increasing productivity, and making cities more liveable.  
(Townsend, 2013)

At the heart of these artificially normalized relationships between apparently diverging mythologies and value systems, today's art output and capital investments are engineered to coexist in a mutually exploitative strategy of urban development where overlapping value propositions of intrinsic nature and instrumental motive --and vice versa-- are carefully administered to maintain an orchestrated distance from each other, resulting in 'an ever-widening gap between the material conditions of art and its symbolic systems: between what the vast majority of artworks are today (socially and economically) and what artists, curators, critics, and historians say that artworks— especially their own work or work they support—do and mean.' (Fraser, 2012: 190)

In these hybrid environments, the emblematic division between endogenous and non-endogenous values as outlined by Jelinek's *This is Not Art*, produces effects akin to a two-way mirror, an overlap of identities that renders clear-cut separations more troublesome, if not somewhat more crucial.

Dimitrakaki's focused attention on the slippage of art's *outcomes* through the critical privileging of art's *outputs*, speaks of the same necessary shift of attention:

Moving therefore from a critique focused on outputs to one focused on outcomes is neither simple nor desirable under the aegis of capitalist reason at present. But it is surely ideologically charged: *outcomes cannot always be mapped with precision. It is outcomes, rather than outputs, which often exceed measure.*  
(Dimitrakaki, 2013: 6)

The issue of differentiation that preoccupies Jelinek and the subsequent problems she is trying to address when calling for an urgently needed *endogenous discourse of validation* emerging from the Arts, is indeed a problem that relates to the developed capacity of both art and capital to externalize their inherent basic contradictions by foregrounding legitimizing narratives of their own operations.

Whilst this specific narrative of exclusion and negation is historically narrated in art as its 'autonomous' status and its subsequent critical development, capital also deals with mechanism of distancing its own contradictions by displacing them as externalities outside of monetizing logic or by simply 'moving them around' geographically.

Art institutions nowadays are existing in between confirming their own historically grounded legitimacy as the place for freedom, indeterminacy, plurality and individual agency, and the capturing of this symbolic function by material conditions inscribed in their core relationship with corporations and transnational capitalist class whose main interest is in artworks as 'tangible safe havens for capital in times of stock market uncertainty and as high-end status symbols' (Kenning and Kern, 2013: 3) all the while sustaining the narrative of artistic autonomy as the preserve of unfettered creativity and unbridled innovation as an example of liberal, democratic values, and their redemptive agency.

What I am hoping to show with the next section of this paper, is that the base conditions for

Jelinek's set of propositions, –if intended as a plan for revitalizing art discourse and practice out of its current state of proximity and subconscious symbiosis with the post-crisis neoliberal regime and its contemporary terminal horizon–, are already active but deliberately segregated within the unseen folds of the stories we tell ourselves as art practitioners and educators and the social and economic relationship we choose to forget in these roles.

At the very least, a clear look into these folds as they become visible might instigate a process of anamnesia that can 'help us to think of art (...) and teach us to want an art, unavailable for any such legitimizing plot' (Bersani, 1990: 4).

The signs that some reawakening of this way of looking at art is taking hold are still largely symbolic, incomplete, morally insecure and more than often forced upon us by accidental events, but in the face of the received modes of *'business as usual'* and the cheap responses of *'it's always been like this'*, they assume particular significance.

## 2. Social Housing as Ready-Made: Anamnesia in the Heygate Estate

*'As Goetzmann et. al. note, art prices, like real estate prices in desirable cities, rise with income inequality as the wealthy outbid each other for rarefied properties. Steeply increasing top incomes set off an equally steep inflation in the goods and services associated with affluence resulting in a downclassing of formerly affluent income levels.'*  
(Fraser, 2012: 186)

In the early summer of 2005, I was invited to make a proposal for a temporary public intervention within a festival of events in Walthamstow under the title 'News from Nowhere; Visions of Utopia'.

The site I choose, previously a post office centre, had already been earmarked for the development of a public library designed by Will Alsop, presumably intended to replicate the effect achieved by the newly opened Peckham Library in south London, an award-winning building and the centre of another regeneration project for London, but the opportunity apparently floundered for economic reasons.

The model of culture that had already been promoted for several years was –it largely still is, give or take its hardening in the post-crisis austerity regime– that of art seen as an 'economic avant-garde' (Groys, 2011), a tool for social inclusion and employment opportunity, and a model for creative, self-motivated, flexible and resilient workforce and citizenry.

The previous years had seen unprecedented mushrooming of museums, cultural buildings and public art all over UK, supposedly spearheading the economic development of areas considered 'deprived' or in other terms, still resisting the assimilation to the type of spatial standards and social spaces conducive for the establishment of the consumption patterns of late capitalism.

There was not yet gold dust in the air in Walthamstow; indeed the William Morris Museum at the back of which we held the opening night's party was still threatened of closure and in a rather drab state. In the week that followed, London would have been announced as the host of the 2012 Olympic Games. On the very next day, July 7<sup>th</sup> 2005, London would experience the first ever coordinated suicide bombing terrorist attack on a large scale, claiming 52 of its citizens' lives.

Earlier on in June, what I came up with was the hoax project 'Guggenheim Walthamstow' described back then as:



...an hyperbole of such plans, an hoax presenting us with the possibility that the Bilbao effect might visit Walthamstow and work out its tainted magic (...) a large poster placed on the hoarding around the empty site at the heart of the district presents the passing public with the coming of the Guggenheim, including a sketched out vignette of the forthcoming building, a reminder of the overrated architectural gestures which so often today are the oversized logos of large capital expansion (Duman, 2005).

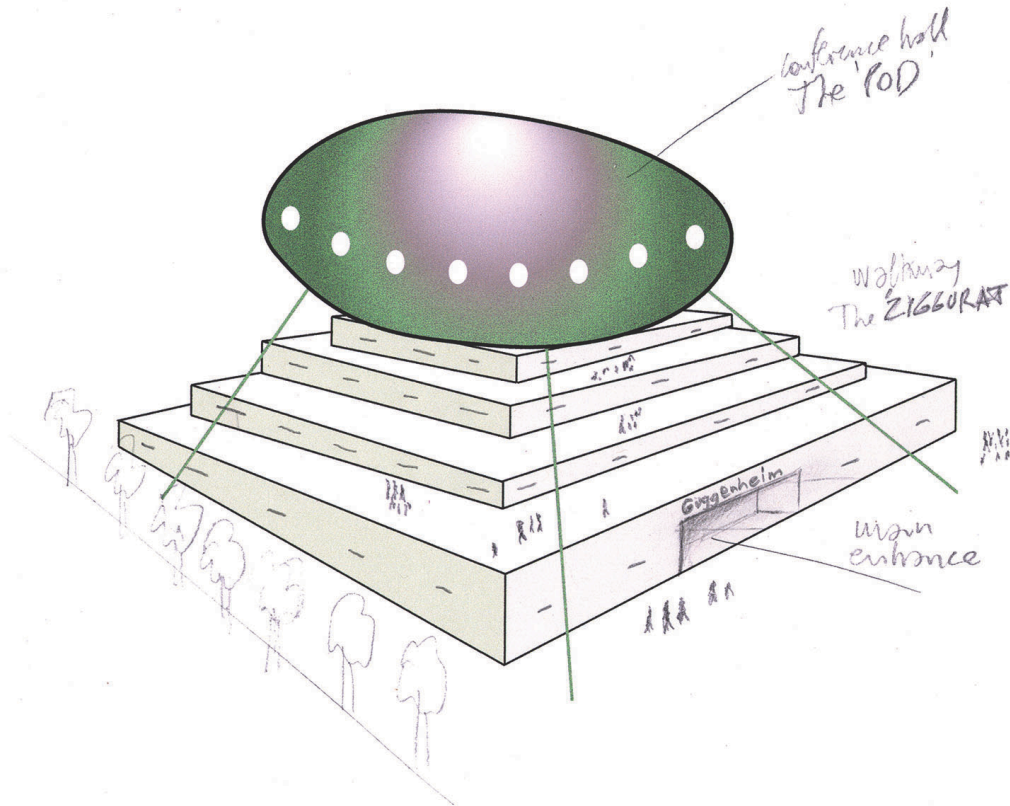


fig. 2 image of the speculative Guggenheim Walthamstow proposal, Alberto Duman © 2005

As I am working on this paper, the amount of press writing on an impending burst of the 'London's housing bubble' is increasing and the voices of discontent of its becoming a dumping ground for the accumulated fortunes of global billionaires –many of them also active art collectors and players in the London Art World– are becoming louder (Conway, 2014 and Moore, 2014).

The nexus between art and capital that haunts the conscience of art world practitioners - once perhaps a spectral presence, nowadays a brazen and blatant assertion of power with a kind of arrogant 'so what?' attached to it- brings in its wake several alienating after effects. One is the rather comedic sense of disgust towards the vulgar image of art that is reflected back onto those who have done much to create it, disseminate it and enjoying its benefits, as Julian Stallabrass recently wrote in *The Art Newspaper* (Stallabrass, 2012).

Another is a provocation for many of those embracing a different logic of art and its direct associations with power and a yearning for action; one of the consequences is that of demanding a demarcation of clear boundaries recently expressed in the direct and challenging political language of 'Which Side is Art On?' (Kenning and Kern, 2013).

In this feverish climate of engineered housing market frenzy and increased polarity in housing condition and expectation, it is no surprise that a coalition of academics, independent researchers, tenants group and housing activists have recently teamed up to co-author the pamphlet '*Staying Put: an anti-gentrification booklet for Council Estates in London*'<sup>5</sup>, which:

'explains why the regeneration of council estates often results in established communities being broken up and moved away, and housing becoming more expensive. It is designed to help local communities learn about gentrification and the alternatives they can fight for. Through the experiences of council tenants, leaseholders and the wider community in London, it contains ideas, stories, tools and resources' (Lees, L., Ferreri M, Just Space, Southwark Notes and the London Tenants Federation, 2014).

The booming housing economy into which many Londoners don't have access to –or don't want to partake in its obscene speculative character- is cleaving harsh lines that lead in different directions at once.

One of these has been the increased amount of artistic activities into social housing as site of artistic practice, participatory research and temporary accommodation.

Given the increased marginalization and retreating territory of social housing estates in London, -often substituted by the kind of housing developments that heavily employ the imaginary of art such as Hallsville Quarter/Newham Biennale- the settings of a receding urban frontier have captured the attention of artists, art institutions, curators, and researchers. Some of these activities –always underwritten by the unshaken belief that all art is good for people and it drives positive changes to their lives, but strangely aligned with council planning plans and developers' fantasies<sup>6</sup>- have already been critically noticed at various levels (Christie, 2014).

The story I'm about to tell you takes one single case in this wide variety, complicating in some ways and facilitating in others an operative understanding of the active –not necessarily activist– deliberative role spoken for in *This is Not Art*, and in particular, the point in which these pronouncements might be effectively uttered.

The fact that this specific confrontation occurred between a well-known art production agency and a collective of activist voices in the context of one of the largest urban regeneration projects in London provides a rich context to see some of Jelinek's themes unfolding in real time and space, hence recapturing the political aspect of her narrative of *disciplinary boundary policing* right at the boundary of the art/activist fault line that originated her heady proposition.

In early December 2013, the Guardian Newspaper, reported of a proposal by Artangel to engage the sculptor Mike Nelson to produce a temporary public art project within the recently decanted Heygate Estate in Elephant & Castle, South London, bringing to wider public attention events already known through blogs by local activists groups historically linked to the long and painful narrative of the Elephant & Castle regeneration; they were actually the

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<sup>5</sup> The pamphlet 'Staying Put' can be downloaded from 3 different sites; here is one of them , Just Space: <http://justspace.org.uk/2014/06/19/staying-put-an-anti-gentrification-handbook-for-council-estates-in-london/>

<sup>6</sup> CREATE mission for example is stated as: 'Create exists to explore the ways artists can contribute to the lives of people in cities. We help artists to connect more closely with communities through an ambitious programme of projects'. This mission is however predicated by direct alliances and alignment with regeneration plans such as the Fashion Hub in Hackney Central, discussed later on in this paper. Who is Community in these cases and how existing communities actively antagonizing the Council plans are 'connected with', remains to be seen.

sources of the article<sup>7</sup>.

Southwark Notes and the other associated sites specifically set up to protect and counter-inform residents and monitor the development of the Council regeneration in the area, has accumulated a huge wealth of reports, testimonials, evidences and relevant reading lists over the last 10 years of activity; particularly valuable is the mapping of the actual displacement of its former residents (Heygate was Home, 2013), an independent research project central to the argumentation of a state-led 'gentrification' in Elephant & Castle. Tapping 'Heygate Estate' in Google search engine, returns Southwark Notes in the first 4 sites on the list, just below the Wikipedia entry and the Council's own page.

Unsurprisingly, the developers (Lend Lease) are now largely missing from this search return; the words Heygate Estate have been purged and plunged into urban amnesia, an attempt to demolish its cultural as well as his physical history out of existence and substitute it with new rebranded images, sadly provided by 'artists' at work.<sup>8</sup>

The project was described in these terms in the planning application submitted by Artangel to Southwark Council in late October 2013: 'Nelson has conceived an idea to carefully deconstruct one of the low-rise four storey-blocks on the Heygate Estate, taking apart prefabricated panels and reusing them to construct a monumental form resembling a pyramid' (Artangel, 2013).

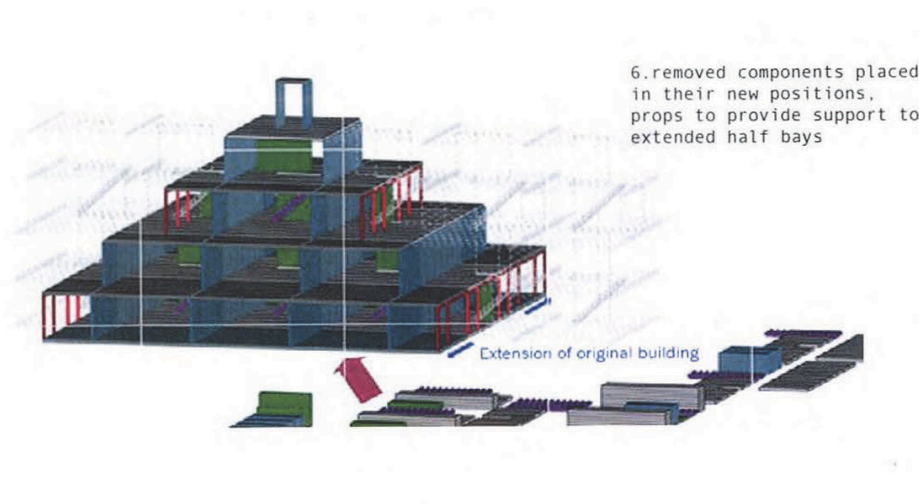


fig. 3: image from the planning application for the Artangel/Mike Nelson temporary art installation.

<sup>7</sup> For a much more specific, first-hand and extensive account of these events, you can read Christopher Jones' article 'Pyramid Dead – The Artangel of History' on Mute magazine online: [http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/pyramid-dead-artangel-history - sdfootnote11sym](http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/pyramid-dead-artangel-history-sdfootnote11sym) (Last accessed on 18<sup>th</sup> April 2014). Also of notice, is the ample space given on Southwark Notes website to the literature describing crucial moments in the well documented history of [Art and Gentrification](#), brought about by direct involvement of artists at the core of the Heygate Estate activities of resistance and militant research. Christopher Jones is a member of the Ultra-Red collective: <http://www.ultrared.org/mission.html> (last accessed on 29th July 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Particularly instructive and revealing in the last few weeks have been the cringingly humorous stories related to the re-imaging of the Elephant and Castle through a new sculptural commission apparently approved by the Council: <http://southwarknotes.wordpress.com/>. Sadly, the trite and dumb tendency of producing iconic works cueing the name place with cheap sculptural embodiments of that same name, is a rich vein for the crass and populist area of creative placemaking. The Bull Ring in Birmingham has a Bull, the Elephant and Castle has a rebranded Elephant on top of the Castle. Whatever might be planned for Barking I fear the most...

With the project proposal now going public on the press, the confrontation was set between the dismay of long-term activists incensed at seeing the remnants of their homes quickly recycled on-site as art material and the swift moves of Artangel's production machine making sure that the gap between decanting, demolition and take over by the developer Lend Lease could be timely exploited before vanishing.

This rushed pace was complicated by the fact that the last decanted residents from the estate were considering an appeal to the CPO (Compulsory Purchase Order), enacted against them by Southwark Council to finally evacuate the estate, delaying the process of transition from council to developers and therefore the possible implementation of Artangel/Nelson's project.

The boundaries were very clear according to institutional criteria, Artangel being a certified art producer with a proven track-record, and Mike Nelson described as a 'Turner Prize nominee, Venice Biennale UK representative, leading British Artist', but another type of economy participating in the legitimacy of art, punctured such brand values to the extent that only a week after the Guardian article, the application was refused by Southwark Council, bringing to an end the confrontation just begun.

Apparently Artangel had been seeking a suitable site for this project by Mike Nelson for the past three years, at least confirming that the pyramid reference was not specifically initiated by the events of the Heygate Estate, but equally validating that evidently the basic requirements of 'a housing estate before demolition' were met by the Heygate Estate as much as any other around London from the same period of construction techniques specifically mentioned by James Lingwood, one of two Artangel's directors:

The ziggurat form makes direct reference to the Jespersen system used to construct the Heygate Estate, as can be seen from the attached photograph taken during construction in 1973 (Lingwood, 2013).

But presumably, it wasn't the disregard to the specific recent history of the Heygate Estate shown by the sketchy research work done by Artangel production team that caused its refusal by the local authority; indeed there are still perplexities as to whose intervention or what events might have caused the summary refusal and volte-face that eventually run the project aground<sup>9</sup>. The then forthcoming local elections in the borough might have also contributed to the refusal of the Council, seeking to avoid the negative press profile such controversy might have caused.

When the proposal was swiftly rejected by Southwark Council on the 20<sup>th</sup> of December, the press release immediately issued by Artangel, read:

Artangel's proposal for a major new artwork by Turner Prize nominee Mike Nelson on the Heygate Estate is a thoughtfully conceived project that would have created a powerful and challenging free public artwork... London is one of the world's great cultural centres with a long history of presenting elegaic [sic] and thought-provoking public sculptures – from Edwin Lutyens' Cenotaph to Rachel Whiteread's House, produced by Artangel 20 years ago. (Artangel, 2013)

In the mid/late 90s, when public art activities started to be recognized as a manifestation of unseen social forces of uneven urban development or simply as 'bad art', the film *Fight Club*

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<sup>9</sup> Christopher Jones, of [56a Infoshop](#) and author of the article 'Artangel of history' on Mute Magazine previously cited here, has now sent for the third time specific FOI requests related to these events to Southwark Council, all of which have so far failed to produce any answer.

captured this urban knowledge by showing a large spherical sculpture part of a gated shopping complex in LA being unhinged by the militia at the core of the book's narrative, crushing into a Starbucks branch, conveying in a cinematic instant an alliance between 'plop art' and a sterile urbanism of corporate imagination.<sup>10</sup>

The temporary nature of Artangel's productions sheltered their work from the association with more vulgar imagery blatantly connecting public art and urban development speculative activities and in the gap created by this increasing rejection, their sophisticated and fleeting spatial interventions started to acquire critical praise and audience accolades for their time-limited experiences as events not to be missed. After clinching a deal with Beck's Beer<sup>11</sup> – the Bloomberg of the 90s in London – that allowed them to produce Rachel Whiteread's 'House', their brokerage acquired an unrivalled status as producers of work that 'would otherwise not be made'.

Increasingly, as London's artworld started to become more conscious of its increasing cultural capital and its attractiveness for business, they also became the evidence of another type of pioneering in the soft association between art destinations and urban investments, cultural events and urban development.

In many ways Artangel, in their constant search for London properties in a state of transition, became the high-end precursors of 'interim-use' as value-incubator for developments to come, all of which perhaps explain Richard Wentworth's jokey reference to their specific brand as 'the art world's estate agents'<sup>12</sup>.

For anyone interested in contemporary London urban politics, the name Heygate Estate is a highly contested signifier, or more precisely, a very clear signifier of contestation for urban activists and researchers, and a crucial object of contemporary study for urban sociologists, telling in clearer terms than most, the story of top down urban regeneration as the most aggressive grounding of neoliberal form of capital in its assault on the last remnants of public welfare structures.

The amount of activities countering the dominant narrative of the Heygate Estate destiny and its place in the wider Elephant & Castle regeneration have been widely documented both in academic circles and the wider press (Montgomery, 2011 / Sebregondi, 2012 / Cummins, 2012 ), covering the long decade in between the early re-housing promises and affordable housing quota, until the late decanting, demolition and unfulfilled re-housing opportunities.

For some of these academics and militant researchers, the Heygate Estate story provides the clearest argument for an understanding of "the "regeneration" of council estates in London as nothing more than a state-led gentrification strategy disguised by a liberal policy

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<sup>10</sup> The real location for the footage of Fight Club 'anti public-art action' was a mix between the Water Court at California Plaza, 350 S. Grand Ave (where the fountain exists but no spherical public art does) blended in the film's imaginary with the distinctive work 'North, East, South and West' a series of geometric sculptures by Michael Heizer located in Downtown Los Angeles, at 444 S. Flower St.

<sup>11</sup> There is a relevant cultural narrative to be noticed here. Foreign mainstream lager beer brands, started to penetrate the UK drinking market in London in the 80s through acquisitions by main drinking giants keen to broaden the UK market. This was done with a young audience in mind clearly to dislodge the traditional drinking habits of ale and bitter and at the same time to project a more sanguine and popular image than the class pretensions of 'wine bars'. The success of its presence in the 80s and 90s was largely due to their awashing the Artworld with Beck's Bier to the point of image overlap. Beck's became the Art beer of the 90s and the backbone of the YBA and others including Artangel. Nowadays, lager is mainstream fodder in large supermarket and corner shops alike, and the cultural association between art and drinking cultures is that of local micro-breweries producing pale ales, bitters and other traditional brews. In the process, the 'lager lout image' of the 90s has been exorcised through a class shift and the young sophisticated drinker/art audience recognizes local provision of this expensive habit as a sign of cultural distinction and by inference, gentrification. Double the pint cost and they will come.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Wentworth in conversation with James Lingwood and Michael Morris, Artangel director's as part of the events organised in conjunction with his commission Black Maria, 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2013.

rhetoric of mixed communities' (Lees et al, 2013: 6)<sup>13</sup>.

Between other stories of abuse and fraud, documented through the unintended release of politically sensitive documents previously redacted by Southwark Council, what has also distinguished the Heygate Estate was that in order to finally evacuate the last remaining tenants in the Estate a CPO (compulsory purchase order) had to be issued (Heygate Was Home, 2013).

It's hard to see how Artangel could position themselves in a direct collision with such body of knowledge and still refrain from meaningfully attribute it a central place, continuing instead their production efforts without any direct and frank engagement with the local activists. It's equally unsettling to notice that the main absentee in all this story, at any level, was the artist himself, Mike Nelson. Not one single statement on the subject has been released during or since the events in late 2013 from the artist whose name was the bearer of the art in question.

The removal of the artist's figure at production stage is a clear indication of how the autonomous character of the artist is actually heavily dependent and constructed through relations of production in which the artist is deliberately not involved; it wasn't art yet in the sense of output. It was brokerage for the art to happen, the art of production if you wish.

This brokerage as management of distance between practitioner and context has distinguished Artangel's modus operandi as an amplifying device for artists: all artists whose projects have been funded by an agency such as *Artangel* in London have greater access to autonomy than those whose projects haven't (Dimitrakaki, 2013: 8)

Perhaps there was even an element of calculated 'frisson' of social reality in the staging of Nelson's pyramid in a recently evacuated social housing estate, an added value of prayed social capital brought by the activists confrontation and the hard work of building up counter-discourses that brought them into view to many observers aware and engaged in issues of social justice in London, all of which were foregrounded in previous artistic activities in the Heygate in its interim pre-demolition state.

But none of those previous interventions could command the kind of 'autonomy', logistic efforts and funding largesse that the production machine of Artangel could provide to Mike Nelson's sculptural work. It was a case of 'Nice work boys, but now step out of the way and let the pros take the stage', enacted at the most dramatically melancholic moment of this long narrative.

It's clear to see how the battle pitch was set: it was a case of Proper Art vs Proper Activism, or if you wish, Art vs Life. The question was hardly whether the proposed work of Mike Nelson was art or not, but whether *this artwork* in *this place* at *this moment* should exist on a 'scandalous site of social cleansing' (Lees et al, 2013: 7) bringing all the power of contingency against ideas of autonomy of art practice, its value, its legitimacy.

For many of those directly involved, the proposal of Artangel/Nelson constituted an abuse of such autonomous condition, or worst, a continuation of the narrative of displacement enacted by the sell-out and decanting of the Estate to make way for that 'wealthier breed of

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<sup>13</sup> Also see 'Staying Put: an anti-gentrification booklet for Council Estates in London':

<http://justspace.org.uk/2014/06/19/staying-put-an-anti-gentrification-handbook-for-council-estates-in-london/>

Loretta Lees has also co-authored with Claire Melhuish of UCL Urban Lab, one of the most authoritative and comprehensive papers on Arts-led Regeneration in UK: Lees, L & Melhuish, C 2013, 'Arts-led regeneration in the UK: the rhetoric and the evidence on urban social inclusion', *EUROPEAN URBAN AND REGIONAL STUDIES*.

pioneering urbanauts' (Londonist, 2011) at the expense of the sitting tenants and the association of the wealthier breed with the artworld that follows suit.

Equally, given the deep knowledge of the situation that transpires from the communication between Artangel production team and Southwark Council and the fact that Artangel worked in that neighborhood for a previous project, a narrative of the autonomous art project as 'innocent bystander' caught in the political crossfire of local spatial politics, seems untenable.

What is more plausible is that the pragmatic position of Artangel in their broker role deliberately screened off all the local spatial politics in the pursuit of their project above all other considerations.

The enduring innocence of art discourse proposes itself as the ultimate value shelter for an autonomous sphere of art, a useless and redemptive field of action with a purposeless purpose, and as such, the perceived antithesis of specific and partial interests.

Within this 'sacred' discourse of legitimacy, even the slightest concession that contingency might have a bearing in the negotiation of usage of this 'powers of exception' might usher a domino effect of collapse, as if one single bullet could ricochet an entire edifice of negation into ruins.

In the ruins of the Heygate Estate, Artangel attempted to uphold this conceptual edifice by screening off the necessarily political engineering work to make such claim. This is exactly where the root of this non-event and its relevance to the subject of this article lies, and where the *art* is made despite the *artwork* not being made.

When discussing the idea of disciplinary boundaries as framed by Jelinek, those limits must not just be assessed in terms of answering the rhetorical question of 'What is art' and its policing from within, but also –crucially– *What is Art doing* with its disciplinary checked, autonomously accredited, cultural capital asset management?

The neoliberal urban regime of contemporary London produces its own narratives about art and artists; at the same time, various forms of public cultural production in the city pretend to remain discreet to their direct involvement in such social production, preferring to deal with still smoldering ruins, evacuated of their social history like a 'ready-made', but turned into a 'free, public artwork'.

But when institutionalized neutrality is an impasse to actual and real freedom and access to rights for others, this deliberate segregation turns art discourse into sterile negation and reveals a malicious social positioning that art institutions and operators are increasingly at pains to deny of entertaining.

As artists we must be able to challenge and negotiate exactly the institutional autonomy granted to us in operational circumstances when the evidence points towards a specific case in which the use of such autonomous rhetoric would impact more negatively than its temporary waiving.

Within these practical as well as ethical wrangling, the complete absence of the figure of the artist from public discourse during, and after the Artangel Heygate project proposal debacle is deeply troubling; even throughout this article, the reference to an 'Artangel project' rather than a 'Mike Nelson project' sends forth a signal that the brokerage of Artangel remains the namesake front-end of the project until the actual project begins and a switchover of emphasis brings back the artist into the foreground.

The removal (partly strategic, partly sanctioned by necessities) of the artist during the

negotiation phase outlines a psychological distance to places and events that counter Artangel's view of their projects and their values as well as producing some confusion as to where the 'autonomous' work of art begins and ends.

The first aspect of this distancing effect concerns Artangel's production values and main curatorial spectrum; indeed, housing, memory and dwelling have been central to their history as art institution. The second, brings back the idea of endogenous or non-endogenous values and their possible separation and containment particularly in works of art within the social context; in other terms: to what extent *non-endogenous values are implicated to produce work of seemingly 'endogenous' value?* Equally and in reverse, *to what extent 'endogenous' values are implicated in producing 'non-endogenous' values?*

As the press release that appeared on their website following the rejection of the Heygate project's planning application tells us, Artangel has a proven track record of delivering '*thought-provoking sculptures*' in which previously inhabited private and public spaces have been at the core of enviable record of artist's projects under their brand, from Rachel Whiteread's House (1994), up to Mike Kelley's Mobile Homestead, their first production in the US.

In this project, a near-sacredness is attributed to a private, lived space by its owner/occupant -the artist- and is given a unique status by being re-enacted into a full-scale replica, therefore both an evacuation of the real thing and a monument to it.

Artangel's own production ethos strongly emphasizes the memory of the *artist's dwelling as a work of art*, regardless of its material status, but no particular care is granted to a present and live history of evicted social tenants whose house was their own only weeks before the arrival of Artangel on the Heygate Estate site.

On their website, Kelley's project is described as a 'full-scale replica of the 1950s Westland suburban home where he grew up, relocated to the city centre in a reversal of the "white flight" following the uprisings known as the "12th Street riot" in 1967"' (Artangel, 2014).

In a dizzying set of rich association, we remember the parabola of Detroit as it progressively descended into its unique current spatial and economic condition, leaving the economic value of much of its housing stock as nil or just worth their insurance policy, which in turn led to extended phenomena of arsoning as a one-way out of misery (Chanan and Steinmetz, 2005).

This historical reference to the riots, drawn as contextual material in the construction of the art project's value, reminds us also of the racial discontent that brought about the dramatic events in Detroit in 1967, as well as many events in the blazing season of US urban riots, 'caused by the almost only white repressive police forces and the housing conditions of black communities in equal measure, segregated as they were in poorly provided for public housing projects' (Fine, 2007).

When a bar located in a predominantly black neighbourhood was raided in the middle of the night whilst hosting a party for several veterans, -including two servicemen recently returning from Vietnam- for not adhering to drinking laws, the area erupted into riots 'characterized by the same shocking and indiscriminate violence as the Newark Riot, which had ended less than a week before the Detroit Riot began' (Fine, 2007).

Riots have also recently come back to London and other UK cities in 2011, a year before the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games, in circumstances frightfully similar. Following the shooting of Mark Duggan by the police and the subsequent unrest and follow-up local protests against this event, relations between the local black community and the



police spiralled out of control, spreading across the city and turning into a politically polymorphous rampage unseen since the Brixton Riots 30 years before.

The spark that ignited in Tottenham moved into other parts of Hackney and then further beyond to other cities in UK, showing the pattern of seemingly indiscriminate violence that made urban history in Watts, Newark and Detroit in the late 60's US.

After 3 days, the situation returned under control and in the days that followed, London's Mayor Boris Johnson publicly pledged a £50 million capital fund for post-riot regeneration town centres damaged by the riots. In January 2014, a highly unpopular verdict into the case that ignited the Riot events back in 2011, deliberated the killing of Duggan as 'lawful' by the police force (BBC, 2014).

In urban planning terms, one of the controversial outcomes of this public fund in Hackney is the Hackney Fashion Hub, which won planning approval by Hackney Council in October 2013 and received £1.5 millions of post-riot public funds.

Described in its website 'as a major regeneration project on the edge of Hackney Central town centre that will create a new focal point for UK fashion in the heart of London's East End' (Hackney Fashion Hub, 2014) this is the centrepiece of Hackney council response to the Riots that started in Tottenham in 2011, another boutique shopping district as an ailment for social ills, that has immediately spurred its own parody: '...a throbbing art scene and some of the most thrilling drama of the recent riots, this sexy ghetto is fast becoming the beating heart of London style (...) This is an opportunity for the most daring brands in fashion to build on the area's anti-social capital' (Hackney Haute Quarter, 2013).

But rather than the project per se, it is the diversion of public funds specifically earmarked to repair the affected areas in the post-riot damages, or the fact that once again in London a private development is written off as 'urban regeneration', that arouses suspicions:

It seems strange that a pot of public money, set aside specifically for areas affected by the riots, should be spent on lubricating the path for a wealthy private developer to transform one of the most deprived parts of London into something very much like a duty-free shopping lounge (Wainwright, 2013).

The wealthy private developer mentioned in The Guardian article is Harry Handelsman, director of the Manhattan Loft Corporation and a member of the board of Artangel. His profile from Artangel's website, reads: 'This honour reflects Manhattan Loft Corporation's ethos to create outstanding buildings that leave lasting legacies for the communities living in and around them' (Artangel, 2014).<sup>14</sup>

In an open letter to Artangel published on his blog International Times on the 17<sup>th</sup> December as the Artangel planning application was awaiting a response from the council, Niall McDervitt wrote:

To object to a work of art must be a carefully considered act, as otherwise one may be allying oneself with a long line of philistines, ignoramuses and spoilsports. However, to create a work of art — especially a public work of art that is to be associated in the public mind with such an important issue as Heygate — one really has to know what's

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<sup>14</sup> It is significant to notice that the latest project of Manhattan Loft Corporation is the Manhattan Loft Gardens, a 42 storey tower in the middle of the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park. In the fly-through CGI for this development, the tagline '*sculpting a community*' appears as one of the guiding principles of designing the building. Perhaps the long-lasting association of Handelsman with Artangel has produced a transfer of skills between his business and artistic qualities of 'sculpture', associated with the rather unsavory idea of a community created by a single-handed artistic action. See the Manhattan Loft Gardens CGI video [HERE](#).

at stake (McDervitt, 2013).

The ultimately deliberate sense of misrecognition between the symbolic and the real in Artangel's position might be forgiven to those not professionally trained or involved in the subtleties of modes of artistic representations in social contexts but not to those whose cultural capital rests on such expertise; Artangel couldn't possibly miss the charged context into which it was deeply engaged in working when preparing for Mike Nelson's Heygate Estate 'Pyramid'.

Still, in this case, the deliberate capacity of not knowing, the negation inherent in the understanding of the autonomous agency as the withdrawal from the urgent conditions specific of the Heygate estate produced a reversed effect. The non-expert actor in terms of its professional role (the activists in Elephant & Castle), sees what the expert (Artangel and Mike Nelson) decides not to see in order to maintain its capacity to articulate its own expertise as professional.

The asynchronous relationship between art and social context is leveraged by Artangel as a specific signifier of freedom from political conniving –*we're not biased!*–, but here it is reduced to a bankrupted rhetoric of crossed purposes to externalize evidences that were clearly laid out all over the site proposed for the Ziggurat of Mike Nelson.

The technique of 'un-seeing' at the heart of the characters in the narrative of 'The City and the City' (Mieville, 2009) applies to the citizens of two overlapping cities in mutual social agreements not to recognize each other, unless in specific areas of 'crosshatching' where the two layered realities collapse into one.

Acts of deliberate externalization are now proprietary to both art and capital and the mutual recognition of such powers of segregation of social and economic contradictions contained within their acts, seems to have become the essence of their double bind.

The politics of artistic phenomena, then, may lie less in which structures and relations are reproduced and enacted or transformed in art than in which of these relations, and our investments in them, we are led to recognize and reflect on, and which we are led to ignore and efface, split off, externalize, or negate.  
(Fraser, 2012: 194)

Understanding art practice as a knowledge-forming discipline helps us to articulate what is art and what is not in a way that is open and honest, as well as describing what is good art in endogenous disciplinary terms instead of, as is now the case, through neoliberal and market values.  
(Jelinek 2013: 120)

If Jelinek's proposition of art as 'knowledge-forming discipline' has value and practical implications, then the question remains as to what kind of knowledge art located within specific social realities produces in relation to those very same realities and to what ends, other than acquiring precious cultural capital at the expense of existing social capital under threat of dispossession.

What is certain is that the Artangel/Mike Nelson proposal, if screened according to this criteria would have difficulties in squaring up its own knowledge-forming with the knowledge already in place around the Heygate Estate, a vast body of work put together by activists and academics alike but most of all built on the lived experience of the tenants of the Heygate Estate and their fate.

Whether the sculpture once realised might have indeed contributed to this body of

knowledge as 'a powerful and challenging free public artwork', rather than constructing a segregated narrative of its presence in the evacuated site of the Heygate Estate, nobody will be able to tell.

I have dreamt of an impossible secret alliance between the Heygate activists and Mike Nelson, through which the decoy of neutrality that granted the planning application is then turned into a Trojan Horse unleashing an occupation festival, a bacchanalia of true intervention that would totally subverts the Council, Artangel and Developer's expectations of the ziggurat's role. A true pop-up from below hijacking the funds of Arts Council and the Artangels towards a carnivalesque show of joy, impossible to repress.

But if we are to stand by the line of defence provided by Lingwood in his reply to McDervitt's Open Letter to Artangel, its deliberately intended indeterminate meaning –thoughtful or thoughtless (Lingwood, 2013)– would have more than likely position it as a local attraction for the same crowds that flocked to see their production of Roger Hiorns' Seizure in 2008 (Artangel/Hiorns, 2008).

Also within the Elephant & Castle regeneration area, Seizure was a crowd pleaser as it proposed art as a moment to reflect on urban living conditions, on architectural form and its significance, but in its optical and sensorial experience, it was equally removed from the real knowledge of the social reality that rendered that experience possible.

The evacuated building complex that hosted its grotto of blue crystals, was one of those intending to accommodate the overflow of residents in the Heygate Estate as their temporary accommodation, whilst the new houses were built through the regeneration project.

Back then that installation was described as a 'site of pilgrimage. Every day hundreds of people made their way across the capital to this anonymous council flat near the Elephant & Castle.' (Artangel, 2013)

A specific reference to the Hiorn's piece was actually made in the text of the planning application as lodged by Artangel on the 29<sup>th</sup> October 2013, and used as a bona fide leverage of the success equally awaiting Nelson's pyramid:

This strongly demonstrates our success at using Southwark Council owned buildings, scheduled for demolition, to create interim art projects accessible to all of the community. (Artangel, 2013)

Indeed, even today many people remember and think about Hiorn's piece –although I am sure the Heygate Residents already started to build up resentment towards the Artangel brand back then–.

Like many others for all kind of reasons, I also joined the queues to see the spectacle of crystallization taking place on the inside of the anonymous council flat, once a home, now an artwork.

But many years after, the piece has produced an altogether different knowledge that its host would have granted; Hiorn's installation now exists as a deterritorialised artwork in the Yorkshire Sculpture Park where its narrative has achieved an autonomous status thanks to its transferable architecture.

Right from the beginning, the structure on which the crystalline aggregates had chemically developed was not that of the actual flat walls, but of panels that covered the actual walls of the flat, which acted as a blighted and gritty –but seductive in its evoking of living conditions well below the standards of most of its visitors– urban container to Hiorn's mesmerizing

surfaces, an otherworldly frisson of post-evacuation 'sink estates' mixed with the kind of crystalline 'fourth dimension' that Robert Smithson described in his text 'Entropy and the New Monuments' as *such*:

The order and disorder of the fourth dimension could be set between laughter and crystal-structural, as a device for unlimited speculation.  
(Smithson, 1996: 21)

Perhaps the suggestion is that artworks also exist in a fourth dimension in regards to their historical contingencies, a problem that Smithson's fascination with crystals and mirrors laboured in his practice as a possible escape from the constraints of historical temporality (Roberts, 2004).

Art history remembers Robert Smithson's practice and relegates in the folds of insignificant footnotes his conflicts with environmental activists over some of his projects, leaving to his statement 'Friends of the Earth, Enemy of Art' (Smithson, 1996: 163) the ultimate categorization of those opposing his practice as anonymous philistines.

However, the synchronicity of Artangel and Mike Nelson's proposed sculpture with its contemporary London context could not be easily escaped in their attempted foray in the Heygate Estate and it is likely that the decision by Southwark Council was simply due to fear of adverse publicity once the voices of activists started to intersect Artangel plans.

I started this section of the article on a personal angle, to contextualise my particular interest in Mike Nelson's architectural references and urban settings. In 2005 my project *Guggenheim Walthamstow* posited as a hoax the arrival of an institutional ziggurat in an empty site in the centre of an area defined 'deprived', its role being that of the tainted saviour of the community.

The grossly unfit for purpose projected landmark, in its speculative character stood as a symbol of all I thought we were doing ridiculously wrong in art, whilst thinking of doing good. It was enough to instigate the community response that eventually made it disappear, after a local newspaper article had to declare that the hoardings were in fact, a 'work of art' and that the Guggenheim Museum juggernaut was never going to come to Walthamstow to 'regenerate' its deprived, culturally 'degenerate' citizens.

In the Walthamstow of 2005, the *work* (output) did its *job* (outcome) because it wasn't art until it was made so by default, once its initially deceptive function was discovered and the expected reaction of the community started to function. In short, I had used the autonomous tradition of art against itself to reassert its inherited power.

In Elephant & Castle, the unintentional disappearance of the planned ziggurat of Mike Nelson and Artangel has also done a *job* of its planned *work* even if not the one intended; its projected image was also shut down by community reaction at the news of its arrival in an unexpected turn of events, exactly because the real hoax of neutrality and promise of redemptive value of art, was seen as such by other parties.

Regardless of what caused the refusal of planning permission, the entropic double of the unmade pyramid by Mike Nelson in the Heygate Estate stands as a moment of anamnesia for contemporary art practice in London.

The missing spectacle of its absence has produced a radical moment of visibility into the mist of art production and urban development and their enmeshed current relationship and has revealed something that Angela Dimitrakaki's distinction between output and outcome forces us to encounter:

...if we shift attention from output to outcome in art, we encounter a certain ideology at work: the ideology of upward class mobility – an ideology that used to be known as that motivating the petit bourgeoisie but that is now extended to the terrain of radical art as well. (Dimitrakaki, 2013: 10)

If the question posed by Kenning and Kern was '*whose side is art on*', the answer emerging from the events at the Heygate Estate is historically rooted in the autonomous tradition of negation: at the level of Artangel productions '*art is still on its own side*', a side benignly liberal, pluralistic and pragmatic, but also a side not so benignly neoliberal in the sense that its relativism is what the rule of the market requires. (Leger, 2012: 97)

The '*unlimited speculation*' that curiously appear in Smithson's quote, in today's parlance is that of London in the grip of a speculative housing bubble, fomented by an auratic marketing urbanism which propels the monetization of its material assets and immaterial cultural production as an engine of wishfully limitless capitalization for the benefit of large investors, all the while relegating the beauty and necessity of everyday, ordinary cosmopolitanism into a world apart as a reductive –and increasingly reduced– backdrop to the strategic operations of developers, local authorities and in this case art practice.

It is not unlikely to think that had the Nelson's project turned into a real event, it would have easily featured into the brochures of the future development standing in its place as a value-added aesthetic dividend to the market value of overpriced, delusionally aspirational flats, perhaps in lieu of a still forthcoming Elephant & Castle Biennale.

One of these flats in the Strata Tower was recently temporarily 'occupied' as a site of protest by a group of activists and ex-Heygate tenants posing as prospective buyers and therefore allowed to visit one of the flats in the tower, only to then stage photographs of themselves holding placards with signs saying 'Do I look like the wealthier breed of pioneer urbanaut now?' (Southwark Tenants, 2014), returning the language of gentrification back to its sender.

Alberto Duman  
31<sup>st</sup> July 2014.

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## BIOGRAPHY

Alberto Duman is an artist, lecturer and independent researcher whose core interests are located in the urban and the everyday.

He has had exhibitions and taught in UK and abroad, published in book, journals and magazines and presented events and he's currently running the BA Fine Art module '*Art Practice in the Community*' at Middlesex University.

In 2012 he contributed to the publication 'Art of Dissent' co-edited by Hilary Powell and Isaac Marrero-Guillamon, with the photo essay 'AdiZones: rewriting the 2012 Olympic legacy as permanent branding', and led the event 'Regeneration Games' at the FreeWord Centre in London.

Between 2012 and 2014 he published papers and articles in: 'The Wick' Newspaper, The Occupied Times, City: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action, [the UCL Urban Lab Pamphleteer n.2](#), Architectural Review.

In 2013 and 2014 he led the Bartlett DPU [Summerlab 'Localising Legacies'](#). A publication from the whole series of UCL Summerlab 2013 containing an article on East London can be read [here](#).

He is currently working with the [DIG Collective](#) in a space in Hackney awaiting demolition.

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