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Art in the Age of Gentrification

Ama Birch · Wednesday, November 16th, 2016



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Gentrification hits cities hard, and culture tends to move from the bottom up. The food, music, fashion, dance, and language comes from the asphalt and concrete below and lands at a 5-star restaurant, a museum, or a symphony hall. When one thinks about Los Angeles, one will often think about the dry riverbeds, the traffic on the 101 Freeway, and the Hollywood sign as seen from a corner on Sunset Boulevard. Some people might think more about the joy of being on the Santa Monica pier looking out over the ocean with the surfers in front of you and the Ferris wheel at your side. A bicycle ride offers a quick way to get to Venice: the smell of the ocean, medicinal cannabis, perspiration, tanning oil and people pumping iron. If you head east on Venice Boulevard, you will pass Culver City where the galleries are white walled and the streets are clean. If you keep going southeast on Venice Boulevard, you will end up in Downtown Los Angeles. DTLA is the kind of urban place that gentrification destroyed in the 1960s when the art schools, cultural institutions, and middle-class families left for the Westside, the Valley, or Orange County. The streets are filled with artists, film executives, homeless and mentally ill people during the day. At night, there are places to sit outdoors at cafes and bars on Spring Street.

If you head just a few blocks south and east the streets are either ghostly empty with a few homeless people who are mostly men. Some of them are rummaging through the trash looking for boxes to sleep on that night. A homeless woman pushes a shopping cart filled with her belongings while the sidewalk is lined with a row of tents and people sleeping in boxes while five stories above a \$150 per night AirBnB rental in a 6,000 square foot loft that hosts a party for fraternity brothers in Los Angeles for a wild weekend. The stench from the streets is sometimes overwhelming. The homeless people in DTLA are black, white, Asian, Latino, mixed-race, gay, straight, educated, and illiterate. At times, they are sleeping next to their own feces as the piss of another person runs down the sidewalk. The police patrol the area in cars, helicopters, and on motorcycles. LAPD often flashes their lights and other times they turn on the sirens and slowly approach a person driving behind them until they notice that they are being watched and followed. The police frequently speed up when they ascertain that everything is fine and make an abrupt turn to the right or a u-turn and speed out of sight.

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Tompkins Square Park in the Lower East Side of New York City was in a similar state as DTLA in the 1970s till after the riots in August of 1988. Overridden with artists, drugs, crime and homeless people the streets of Alphabet City in Manhattan was an easy choice for bohemian types looking for a community of like-minded people in New York City during the 1970's. The artists who live and work in DTLA right now are like that generation of artists coming out of the LES in the 1970s. LA-based artists are on the frontline in the battle of gentrification occurring right now. The artists are riding bicycles and walking side by side with the homeless people that live on the streets of DTLA. The artists create art out of lumber, glass, paint, paper and plaster walking past the warehouses and wholesale purveyors of audio systems, t-shirts, homeopathic remedies, craft supplies, and lights.

During the day, the street is bustling with activity. Sidewalks being sprayed and hosed down. Streets being swept. Construction is happening all around while the fine art happens in the studios in lofts and apartments above and galleries in storefronts in the DTLA neighborhoods of Skid Row, Chinatown, the Toy District, and Little Tokyo. At night the residents of DTLA, many of them artists, step over the homeless people who have set up camp for the night to return to an amazing view of the LA skyline from the roof of their building or the picture window in their apartment. The artists are not poor. The artists are not rich. The artists are people who live in many worlds and vacillate between the upper-class and the lower-class while making objects or creating concepts that document the history of humanity.

Historically, artists have are part of the first wave of gentrification that occurs during in urban renewal. The artists are the gatekeepers of culture who frequently live below the radar. They pave the way for the venture capitalists, the stock brokers, and the CEOs who will move to DTLA as soon as it is inhabitable and not overrun with the stench of urine, the sight of poverty and the reality of mental illness that lives on the streets of DTLA. When these wealthy young professionals decide that DTLA is habitable, they will force the cost of living beyond the means of many of the struggling and emerging artists living and working in these studio lofts. Where will the artists go when this happens? What will the artists do when there are more art galleries and boutiques in DTLA than artists who live in there? Where will these homeless men and women who live in the Los Angeles Mission be pushed to? Will the building that houses the Mission become a set of condos with an art gallery inside of it? Who wins and who loses in this type of gentrification? The struggling, emerging artists will lose inevitably. Because of the rising cost of living, they will work in DTLA today and be forced to move tomorrow. Some will be forced to the streets, and some will find studios in more affordable locations in places that resemble Marfa, Texas before Donald Judd arrived there.



If it is true that popular culture comes from the bottom and rises through institutions, then the art we see on the street says a lot about the current state of DTLA: The music of cars and dragging metal, the music of sirens and squeaky brakes, the music of the shopping cart being pushed down the street. The music of the rumble of trucks. The place where poetry, painting, and graphic design meet in street art is in graffiti and murals. DTLA has an assortment tags, murals, and text art pieces on walls, sidewalks, and the sides of livery trucks. If you walk past the LAPD headquarters, there is text on the sidewalk written in chalk where people utilize their 1st Amendment right to freedom of speech. The messages they write address the history of police brutality and harassment in interactions with people of color in Los Angeles. The text reads, "Stop Killing People" and "RIP Victims Of The Police". This non-violent act of protest resonates in DTLA where a large percentage of the homeless people are black, brown and male. These streets have blood on them in DTLA. LAPD officers and the community have both had casualties during the gentrifying of DTLA. Recently, a group of police officers shot a homeless man named Africa after an interaction

near of a Metro station in DTLA on Skid Row, which lead to a series of protests calling for police accountability and the end of the LAPD policies that have lead to the death of numerous people of color in Los Angeles. The protesters who marched to protest the shooting shouted, “You can’t kill Africa.” The bottom line is that according to one message in chalk in front of the LAPD headquarters ” 82% OF PEOPLE KILLED BY LAPD WERE BLACK OR BROWN.” DTLA is a microcosm for studying race, class, gender, and gentrification in America, and the street art of these activists forces pedestrians to confront the world of DTLA and the interconnection between poverty and oppression that is apparent when an area is gentrified and the poor have no discourse except to go the streets in order to be seen and heard.

At a place where Skid Row meets the Toy District in an alley, there is a mural that is both sublime and eerie behind a gate. The gate is locked, but once opened one can see the mural quite clearly. On a white brick wall with the occasional painted yellow brick, a pink neon shape resembles a wolf with lime green eyes and teeth. A cloud the color of periwinkle becomes blue and transitions into a turquoise. A cartoonish character with the body of a glass pipe is wearing boots and sticking out a white Mr.Potato Head-esque arm and hand making a peace sign. The unsettling figure in the mural can be missed at first glance. However if you look at the right bottom corner there is a black figure with red under-paint surrounded with blue Egyptian stars. Are these a Dada series of random images or is there metaphorical narrative behind mural? Is the black figure the homeless in DTLA or perhaps it represents the artists in DTLA who will soon be displaced due to gentrification?



The future of Downtown Los Angeles is not hard to imagine when you walk down the street and see a homeless person folding up their tent at 6:30 in the morning or waiting until businesses close to set up their tent for the night. Gentrification is in its final stages in DTLA. The homeless people who use crutches and wheelchairs are becoming more and more obsolete. The conversation that is in the process of developing is: How can the community and law enforcement create a safer DTLA that is available for the entire Los Angeles community including the middle-class and artists? The writing is on the wall: The artists will be the next group to be forced to leave DTLA when the buildings are sold or the rents become too unaffordable.

There was a recent Craigslist rental post titled, “One bedroom in fully-gentrified arts district (United States).” The first line of the post sums up the state of gentrification in DTLA and in most inner-cities in the United States of America today, “Come be a pioneer in a new neighborhood. New York style one-bedroom for rent, centrally located in downtown arts district. Don’t worry, it’s gentrified now, so bring your girlfriend with you!” The listing goes on to say that one of the perks of living in their rental is that you can, “Live with artists without having to live like them.” As DTLA changes into a place where the upper-middle class and wealthy feel more comfortable and the community changes to cater to their tastes, the artists who live and work here need to prepare because most of the Los Angeles-based artists will not be able to afford to live in DTLA as the rents rise and the neighborhood changes.

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