8. **In Residence: Witnessing and Gentrification in Susan Silton’s Los Angeles**

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**Abstract**

Los Angeles artist Susan Silton has created a type of performance practice based on the ethical imperative of reparative witnessing. Orchestrating deeply researched opportunities for participants to engage in elective communities, her art helps individuals see their roles in historic forms of crisis accountably. Several recent pieces reflect not only on global crises perpetuated by neoliberalism and US political fallout, but on a more specific, if tricky crisis: gentrification. Tracing Silton’s own biographical relation to urban change, as well as the modes in which key works select specific sites of change as text or subtext, this article discusses the roles artists play in gentrification, as well as their potential for attending to its reparative aesthetics.

**Keywords:** arts district, reparative practice, real estate, Los Angeles, adaptive reuse

Los Angeles has been a flashpoint for conversations on art, race, ethnicity, and social justice for over forty years, and since that time artists have been positioned as strategic agents of urban change. In the city’s Downtown those conversations have boiled over as the after-effects of gentrification – public policy aimed at economic development on a municipal scale – take hold. A former railroad complex became the Arts District in 2002. Bars and restaurants now spill east across Downtown’s Alameda Street into Skid Row. Art galleries populate the industrial flats abutting historically working-class, immigrant Boyle Heights in what many residents see as
a sign of coming change (Miranda 2018). The politics and aesthetics of Los Angeles gentrification are front and centre, pitting artists, activists, gallerists, and municipal politicians against one another as complicit or active agents of change (Shaked 2017). Wild real estate speculation brings with it charges of urban whitewashing, anti-Latinx racism, and art elitism while simultaneously worsening a homelessness crisis that sees, according to some estimates, nearly 5,000 people spending nights on downtown streets (Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority 2019).

This wave of gentrification and displacement is not new. Rather, what is seen today in Downtown LA is the result of over thirty years of urban policy planning and legislation aimed at recapitalizing the city centre. That artists play a part in this dynamic is also not new. In fact, artists are often singled-out as bearers of gentrifications in ways both generative (they escalate rental prices in their search for ‘affordable’ space and bring overpriced coffee bars in their wake) and regulative (they are awarded preferential housing status as a first step in a longer real estate development cycle). But what is often missing as these issues are debated in media and public – and the arts public is no exception – is a historical understanding of how this came to be. While artists can form part of an opposition to the economic restructuring of urban space (Deutsche 1996), they just as often go unaware of their active participation in this process – their self-placement within a complex web of transactions implicating and affecting this change (Peterson 2011). This apparent lack of awareness on the part of both existing residents and artists seeking affordable rents, has produced the caricature pitting the self-interest of the gentrifier against the collective (and often ill-fated) resistance of the neighbourhood. It’s a caricature that leaves little room for interpretation.

One counter-example can be found in the work of Susan Silton, an LA artist who has made work that investigates the politics, aesthetics, and sites of artists’ studios and movements as historical cycles of collectivity, belonging, and displacement. Her practice consists of conceptual projects that gather collaborators and audience members as co-authors for durational, site- and temporally-responsive performances. Typically organized in response to urgent political crisis, each performance is conceived in historical terms, a reprisal of earlier specific moments betraying similar symptoms in the present. Each performance, action, or object is absorbed into a constellation of texts, events, exhibitions, and publications orchestrated by Silton to create a profoundly intertextual experience of exploring meaning in the context of change. Within the past decade, she has focused on economic crises affecting cities and citizens in the United States and elsewhere. On the surface, the
activities they join are elegiac and aesthetic. A group of women whistlers converged on a gallery in Culver City and a museum in Santa Fe, NM, their tunes re-telling the famous soundtracks of hypermasculine movies, like the *Godfather* (*The Whistling Project*, 2010–present). Eleven writers (I was one of them) researched short biographies of 118 artists, half living, half of whom committed suicide, compiled in an artist's book *Who's in a Name?* (2013) that remembers the overlooked. The dead artists' names had previously played on a scrolling marquee on Sydney's Australia Museum – Silton had entered them into *Your Name in Lights*, a 2011 participatory work by the artist John Baldessari that invited the anonymous submission of names to appear on the marquee in random order, a chance to literally see one’s own name in lights. By squatting the piece, Silton gave each deceased artist the opposite chance – a renewed visibility in the afterlife in the name of remembrance rather than self-interest. The book, *Who's In a Name?* was illustrated with screen grabs of each name Silton assigned for submission, taken from the marquee's live-feed (Harren 2013). Her strategy of accompanying performance with other parts – borrowed texts, new essays, live lectures, video documentation, as well as the creation of new objects, seek to enact a different, discursive aspect of art production, one that makes explicit the complex contexts in which it unfolds.

Most recently, she has turned to Los Angeles, her home town, to focus on artists and their own responses to contemporary crisis events. While they vary from national politics to local issues, all can be grouped under fallout from the extreme forms of inequality produced under neoliberalism. With this perspective, migration, housing insecurity, and living conditions are all subjects that could be extracted from her work. But rather than making art that charts the visual look of such topics or seeks directly to intervene in imbalances of power neoliberalism produces, her work lies in a different, almost lyrical practice of calling attention and, in turn, beholding. Silton's framework of convening groups as witness to crisis generates a social praxis: a means of behaving ethically in complex relation to one another and to the outside world. One could think of her work as reparative in the sense recently proposed by literary critic Jess Row: staging a collective confrontation of a shared past in order to lay bare participants' complicity in allowing such dynamics of harm to continue into the present (Row 2019). Works like *In everything there is the trace* (2013), *A Sublime Madness in the Soul* (2015), and *Quartet for the End of Time* (2017) address themes of dispossession and remembrance in present-day Los Angeles by referring to displacements in time, particularly the economic depression and political totalitarianism of the 1930s and 1940s.
Though never explicitly named, the contemporary context such antecedents refer to is urban gentrification. Since 2013, many of her works have been designated site-specific, a discursive formation the art historian Miwon Kwon has defined as not just a functional location, but a “fragmentary sequence of events and actions through spaces,” a conceptual as well as physical “vector” in which space produces meaning (Kwon 2004: 29-30). Silton sites her performances within this specific context – as both location and text for inquiry. In choosing to stage such events, recently, in charged spaces of divestment and recapitalization – South LA, Boyle Heights, the Arts District – her work complicates the intertwined relationship of art and urban redevelopment (Newbury 2021). But rather than passively accepting and perpetuating this state of affairs, Silton builds self-criticism into her work, gathering participants as a means of rejecting the normative complicity of artists in cycles of gentrification, and in its place enacting a rigorous examination of self-accountability as an ethical process of making.

In order to understand this, we must begin with a history of gentrification as a form of public policy. It is a slow process, twinned with large-scale economic restructuring, and can take both prosaic and virulent forms. Rezoning, historic preservation, and live-work conversion ordinances are all examples of components in a longer gentrification cycle. Most often, differences of race and class become polarized and antithetical positions in this cycle, particularly in cities where decades-long restrictive mortgage lending practices (redlining), racialized policing, and gang injunctions bind working-class communities of colour in geographic isolation. In a city like Los Angeles, which saw an overwhelming wave of post-World War II residential and commercial development that created suburban affluence and urban divestment as racialized opposites, gentrification poses the potential of a second phase of violence enacted on the working poor and people of colour, recapitalizing the city not for its standing residents, but for a new and wealthier population considered more ideal (Avila 2004). Of course, this project is not unique to cities of the twenty-first centuries, nor as racially binary as it may seem. Historian Daniel Widener, for example, has written of intermediate stages of urban gentrification during World War II as an enactment of anti-Japanese American policy, chronicling how Japanese-American owned properties in Los Angeles’ Little Tokyo were appropriated by the city, leased to new landlords, and rented largely to the city’s swelling population of African Americans following the Great Migration out of the US South (Widener 2003). Art Historian Kellie Jones has researched that African American population’s geospatial imagining of home as the genesis of the distinct visual aesthetics of Black Art in LA’s
the post-war era, itself framed by racist, restrictive housing policies aligned with municipal attempts at urban economic restructuring euphemistically known as urban renewal (Jones 2017).

From 1946 through to this day, Los Angeles as a municipal entity has taken pains to represent white citizens’ economic exodus from the city centre as rationale for redevelopment. To make the city ‘vibrant’ has meant attracting new forms of capital investment that would appeal to a proper class of new urban residents, marked in common by consumer affluence. Early in this process, art and artists were identified for their potential to lure such consumers back to the city – a theory so influential it has itself produced a literature on the stimulating power of the so-called ‘creative classes’ (Florida 2002, 2018). In LA, this attempt began downtown. After levelling the multi-ethnic working class neighbourhood of Bunker Hill in the 1960s under the auspices of the Community Redevelopment Agency, the city spent over sixty years designing and redesigning the area in a hubristic attempt to usher in LA’s new image as a powerhouse on the global stage (Davis 1990). Throughout it all, civic leaders imagined Bunker Hill evolving into a corridor for high culture. Implementation has been slow: the 1960s saw the construction of the Mark Taper Forum and Ahmanson Pavilion theatre and music complexes, the 1980s the founding of the Museum of Contemporary Art’s main campus, the early 2000s the completion of the Disney Concert Hall, and with each phase came an initial bounce of enthusiasm quickly followed by inertia; the area is too disconnected from the rest of downtown, too corporate, inauthentic, and not sufficiently pedestrian friendly. Today, the neighbourhood conversion is now in its final, speculative phase. Currently known as the Grand Avenue Corridor, it is lined with big-name cultural institutions backed by big-name funders. A last piece, the $1bn+ Frank Gehry-designed Grand Avenue Project, is under construction and, when completed, will form a luxury mixed-use residential tower complex whose proponents and detractors both already compare it to New York City’s Hudson Yards (Lubell 2019). In this case, as in many, gentrification bypassed resettlement, funnelling private investment into multibillion-dollar projects now reading as showpieces of global capital more than they do the image of a thriving city (Peterson 2011).

But there was another enactment of gentrification started by the City of Los Angeles that pivoted not on large-scale renewal, but on residential real estate. Since 1981, such policy has been tested and implemented in an area of Downtown south and east of Bunker Hill, known today as the Arts District, previously the centre of LA’s manufacturing economy since the early twentieth century. Laid along freight rail lines shadowing the Los Angeles
River, the area consists of warehouses and factories, anchored by the Santa Fe Freight Depot. In the early twentieth century, it served as a distribution centre for the Inland Empire’s citrus industry. After World War II, small manufacturers moved in, and a second wave of industry, this time focused on garment, tool, and cold storage for the Produce Market along Alameda Street. As trucking surged as a preferred means of conveyance between Downtown and the Ports of Los Angeles and San Pedro – a straight 20-mile shot south – many of the railyard’s support structures went without tenants.

By the mid-1970s, offshoring and the outmigration of manufacturing in the United States rendered many such districts tenantless. Both state and local governments began responding by passing series of legislation aimed at shoring up the physical assets of such neighbourhoods – typically through live-work conversion ordinances that allowed for temporary adaptive reuse before any formal process of rezoning and private redevelopment could occur. Artists were identified as key agents of change as officials noticed their peremptory moves into such disused spaces and organized to legitimate their living arrangements (Zukin 1982). California passed laws allowing such conversions to bring properties up to contemporary health and building codes in 1979, and the City of Los Angeles followed up with an Artist in Residence Ordinance in 1982 that specified artists as a protected class of individuals charged with doing so (California Senate, 1979; LA City ord. 156279).
In fact, such changes to law were spearheaded by artists themselves who had begun moving into the upper floors of disused manufacturing properties throughout the 1970s in search of cheaper rents, and organized to lobby both state and local governments for the changes (Peterson 2011). A temporary Museum of Contemporary Art founded in part by artists, today’s Geffen Contemporary branch of MOCA, was opened at the area’s northern edge, its buildings adapted from garage and warehouse into the raw aesthetics of studio spaces that today collectively signify the look of creativity (Newbury 2021). In subsequent decades, artists themselves pushed to formalize adaptive reuse ordinances following enactments of various property tax breaks for developers working in historic districts (Peterson 2011). A 1999 adaptive reuse ordinance put into place redevelopment incentives for individuals occupying Downtown buildings constructed before 1974 (LA City ord. 172571). And, in 2002, such adaptive reuse benefit designation was given to the Arts District (LA City ord. 17459, 174978). Today, many cities use such arts-forward legislation to jump-start economic development. A common result, however immediate or delayed, is broad-scale gentrification, the state-sponsored set of strategic policies directed at recapitalizing and privatizing urban space.

But in the process, artists become canaries in the coal mines. City ordinances are frequently updated as gentrification takes effect, and with them come redefinitions of who count as artists. Beyond independent workers utilizing their homes for the direct production of studio or conceptual projects, since 1999 those qualifying for artist status need only show employment related to the arts or its production, broadly defined, or employment in a variety of occupations ranging from architect, designer, and photographer to accountant, attorney, software engineer, and real estate agent (LA City ord. 172792). As the definition of artist shifts to include professional classes, income levels eligible for rental units reserved for artists increase, creating a market where rents may be raised beyond the affordable designation many artists work within. In other words, artists, too, get gentrified out.

Susan Silton is one of those artists. An LA native, her first studio building had been, in fact, downtown, near the corner of East 8th Street and San Julian Street bordering today’s Flower and Fashion Districts. The building had been leased by her father – a 1930s Austrian Jewish émigré and Los Angeles clothing manufacturer – following the enactment of the 1982 Artist in Residence Ordinance. Silton purchased the property with two others, converted it into rented live-work lofts, and managed it between 1983-1987. In her early career, Silton worked as a graphic designer for the Los Angeles Theatre Company and other non-profit arts institutions, commuting daily
in the heart of the area. She was a member of a group of queer artists integrating conceptual and performance art with discursive approaches to identity and belonging, centred on a sense of place. She frequented artist-run gallery LACE (founded downtown in 1978), local 24-hour watering hole Gorky’s Café, owned and operated by Judith Markoff, a former librarian at South LA’s Manual Arts High School, Al’s Bar (begun by Allen Ruppersberg in Skid Row’s American Hotel), and the lofts and studios of other artists who had moved to the area (Silton 2019). In the long-observed pattern discussed above, she formed part of a wave of artist gentrification in the area (Zukin 1982).

As much as this period of her life mirrored the generic pattern of a first-wave gentrifier, Silton had a deeper connection to downtown: it was where her father first landed in Los Angeles in the early 1940s, opening a clothing business on Santee Alley. He soon moved the factory to Main and Jefferson, then to 35th and Broadway, a few miles south and just blocks across the Harbor Freeway from the University of Southern California. As a teenager Susan worked at the factory filing in the office, visiting the shop floor, and taking a front-row seat to the everyday life of industrial commerce. And she was witness, too, to the decline of the manufacturing business in the 1970s and early 1980s as a consequence of industrial consolidation and globalization, when the family largely switched over to managing rental properties on LA’s Westside. Her own history with Los Angeles’s changing urban space, therefore, extends through many iterations and communities across decades.

Forming community is a hallmark of her contemporary work, which, as previously noted, tends toward the performative. As often, those performances are keyed, directly or indirectly, to contemporary politics. They are also keyed to important periods and places from the past. In 2013’s performance _In everything there is the trace_, for example, Silton staged bi-weekly typing sessions, inviting participants to collectively rewrite John Steinbeck’s 1939 classic _The Grapes of Wrath_ on ten typewriters set with archival rag paper during an exhibition at the University of Southern California’s Fisher Museum. Over a three-month period, two hundred people – some of whom knew each other, most of whom didn’t – signed up for and participated in the re-typing project, reading and inscribing Steinbeck’s accounts of migration, labour, and economic marginality in collective sessions. But the typewriters were set without ribbons, generating only impressed copies of the texts in which the words, like the history of those dispossessed, are merely a trace of experience. The result is neither reproduction nor representation of Steinbeck’s work. Rather, it evidences an
act of collective labour, articulated in the phantom strokes of keys leaving blank impressions as the only proof of existence.

We can also understand *In everything* as site-specific, in Kwon’s discursive use of the term (Kwon 2004). USC is a major US university, a site committed to learning and knowledge, and a place where the past is investigated as history. It is also, famously, an agent of rapid urban change in its main campus South LA neighbourhood, in the early twentieth century home to the mansions of the city’s elite, and since then a locus of an under-resourced population of African American and Latinx working poor, and in Boyle Heights, the location of the University’s Keck Medical School. While Silton did not have control over the choice of site for this piece – she was invited to make the work as part of the Fisher Museum’s 2013 exhibition *Drawn to Language* – the themes of her chosen topic nonetheless resonate there. In 2013, South LA was, like other communities of colour across the nation, reeling from the after-effects of the 2008 credit crisis, and experiencing extremely high rates of residential housing foreclosure due to predatory subprime mortgage lending. This dynamic spurred another intense forced migration, this time of people from their homes (Gottesdiener 2013). Though formal, the connection between Steinbeck’s 1930s epic of deprivation and the area’s 2010s epic dispossession was specific and poetic. A community gathered to bear witness to collective displacement within an art institution but generated nothing permanent.

Sometimes, as in the case of *In everything there is the trace*, Silton literalizes that movement as fodder for the work itself, even if it is also a consequence of her own life’s contingency. A working artist, she often picks up camp and moves. After leaving her converted building on 8th and San Julian in 1987 following a post-earthquake condemnation, Silton moved through several studio spaces across the city. In 2005 she relocated downtown once again, just under a mile away to Anderson Street, just north of the Sixth Street Bridge on the east side of the Los Angeles River. In the grand scheme of things, Silton’s path was like any other person’s engaged in the daily life of a rapidly globalized city: having helped establish the very arts community marketing the neighbourhood as desirable, the private market moved in, and she moved out (Hackworth and Smith 2001). But within her own history, and within her art practice, these geographic movements take on a different resonance both personal and professional. Her work often centralizes her own person and history as a producer into the subject of larger cultural investigation. And part of that investigation was into her own circumstances as an artist, one imbricated within the politics of residence.
What does it mean for an artist to be ‘in residence’? For many, it is a category of labour, a professional context in which to develop in exception. At the turn of the last century, to be ‘in residence’ was in fact to depart home for isolation in the countryside. In more contemporary terms, an artist ‘in residence’ may still involve a physical decamping from home, but most often results in placement within (often provisional) community. The political and practical implications of artists residencies mean that rather than holding in place, artists donate personality to institutions and agencies as much as the latter return the former with creative space to develop (Badham, 2017). In the United States, for an artist to be ‘in residence’ also has a juridical dimension, such as in the example of Artist in Residence ordinances that allow professional-class housing advantages, and in some case secure their housing stabilities under so-called ‘Loft Laws.’ It can even imply self-institutionalization for purposes of access (as in the case of Los Angeles’ Woman’s Building) or as aesthetic practice with social aims for a community in place (Chicago’s Dorchester Projects serves as only one such example).

But in a sense, to be in residence implies a different politics of location: a rooting. And with that comes an ethics – a set of moral principles governing one’s behaviour. Recent projects by Silton have more directly addressed the ethics of being in residence as an artist in the changing city. Two serve as examples of this reparative witnessing. *A Sublime Madness in the Soul* and *Quartet for the End of Time*, a double, one-night performance conceived and executed in 2015 and 2017, respectively, consist of carefully choreographed collaborative performances keyed to strategic development sites in contemporary Los Angeles, staged, crucially, at the moment of their physical destruction. The first took the form of an open-air mini-opera performed at the (now demolished) 6th Street Bridge connecting Downtown LA and Boyle Heights. The second was a public performance of Olivier Messiaen's well known 1941 musical piece of the same name, *Quartet for the End of Time*, at an emptied Arts District warehouse about to come on the market for commercial/mixed use redevelopment.

Planning for *A Sublime Madness in the Soul* began in 2015, as Silton prepared to face the news that her Anderson Street studio building might be sold in tandem with an adjacent infrastructure redevelopment project to demolish the historic 1932 Sixth Street Bridge, a famous backdrop for film and television shoots. Like art, film and television packages a neighbourhood for the real estate industry, forming an essential part of long-tail gentrification by ‘donating personality’ in the form of a media profile (Smith 1996). In the case of the bridge, the personality it donated to films was that of a dystopian viaduct to city life, and throughout much of the past thirty years, the life
symbolized by it was deteriorating. As was the bridge itself, designated unsound in 2004 and slated for demolition in 2016 (Fact Sheet, 2019). As part of an environmental impact study, the city had determined the long-planned demolition of the bridge would render her 1933 brick studio-warehouse building unsound, and she and the other artist-renters were at risk of being evicted after the building’s proposed seizure by eminent domain (Impact Study 2011; LA City ord. 182958; LA AIN 5171-012-902). The cultural writing had been on the wall for several years, as new galleries began to move in up the street and other buildings went up for sale, anticipating the windfall of cultural rezoning and transit redevelopment on the area (Miranda 2016). Increasingly cognizant of the structural role artists played in this process, and of their own precarity as a consequence, Silton devised a farewell for the two structures, and for the neighbourhood as an artists’ space.

Working with the singer and performance artist Juliana Snapper, Silton prepared a mini-opera libretto of found dialogue, taken from screenplays addressing money, power, and greed. Snapper composed an improvisational score for four singers, each to be positioned in the two windows of Silton’s studio and the two windows of the adjacent studio looking out over the bridge. The work, which Silton designed to be performed in the darkness of night, relied on each window lighting up at the moment its inhabitant began

Figure 8.2: Sixth Street Bridge showing railroad tracks in the foreground, June 1933. California Historical Society Collection at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA. CHS-35367. USC Digital Library.
to sing, exposing the interior of the building in flashes. As in a formal opera house, the libretto lines were projected in white text onto the pop-up roof annex above, creating a parallel experience of sonic presence and textual protest. Amplified out the windows of the functionally vacant building, music and lyrics pounded into the night sky, interrupting the flow of auto traffic across the bridge, the sounds of trains ambling toward nearby Union Station, mixing with barking dogs and the tinny alarm bells of the light rail approaching an intersection. The building, otherwise silent, for a last moment reordered the sensorial life of the neighbourhood.

*A Sublime Madness* was not performed in a vacuum – Silton invited an audience via Facebook (Silton 2018), word of mouth, and printed flyers. The work could be seen from a variety of spatial positions within a visual sightline of the building near the eastern anchorage of the Sixth Street Bridge, edged in narrow sidewalks with occasional extended pockets gathered around streetlights. At the appointed start time, a set of two musicians approached each other from either side, playing songs all having in some way to do with capital and community. The instrumental overture announced the work to the crowds that gathered as dusk fell, watching and listening as *Sublime Madness* played out against one of LA's outrageous purple-orange sunsets. During one of the two performances, traffic slowed as a vintage car club, tracing its usual Saturday route over the Bridge from downtown back to East LA, came to a halt, listening as their radios mixed into the scene. They did so on a piece of physical infrastructure that provided a soon-to-be-impossible view. Demolition began on the bridge in 2016 to make way for a highly-landscaped park on the site of the former anchorage, which will be absorbed into Frank Gehry's proposed LA River Redevelopment, the material legacy of a 1930s public works project demolished for 2020s public experience – itself belonging to the aesthetics of gentrification. Silton's night in 2015 vanished as well as a memory.

The work's title, however, recalls another memory. 'Sublime madness in the soul' comes from the final pages of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, originally published in 1932, coincidentally the year of the Sixth Street Bridge's construction (Niebuhr 1932: 275). In the book, Niebuhr reflects on unchecked global inequality, the increasing prominence of a politics of hate, and the possibility of social justice in a world where an individual's capacity for love, in the religious sense, is threatened by a culture of self-interest. His argument rests on an understanding of a sharp distinction between moral and social behaviours of individuals and defined groups (national, racial, economic) of which they form part. Reflecting on cases from the American enslavement of peoples
of African descent to Spanish colonialism in Latin America, and fallout in European politics from the first World War, Niebuhr concludes that it is possible for individuals to behave morally, even if the groups in which they participate do not. As a consequence, individuals may not recognize when collective power exploits weakness, and the acts of justification an
individual may go through to reconcile immoral group behaviour is “one of the tragedies of the human spirit,” an “inability to conform collective life to individual ideas. As individuals, men believe they ought to love and serve each other and establish justice between each other. As racial, economic, and national groups they take for themselves whatever their power can command” (Niebuhr 1932: 9). The only response to the overwhelming grip self-interest has on individual behaviour, he writes, is for an equivalent power to eradicate it.

One of the worst forms of social injustice he identifies is economic power’s grip on political life. Niebuhr sees this as the cause of the most intractable forms of injustice. To him, the solution is revolution powered by the insanity such inhuman behaviour generates:

The discovery of elements of common human frailty in the foe and, concomitantly, the appreciation of all human life as possessing transcendent worth, creates attitudes which transcend social conflict and thus mitigate its cruelties. It binds human beings together by reminding them of the common roots and similar character of both their vices and their virtues. These attitudes of repentance which recognize that the evil in the foe is also in the self, and these impulses of love which claim kinship with all men in spite of social conflict, are the peculiar gifts of religion to the human spirit. Secular imagination is not capable of producing them; for they require a sublime madness which disregards immediate appearances and emphasizes profound and ultimate unities. (Niebuhr 1932: 275)

Gentrification is one such form of economics gripping political life in an era of self-interest. Its effects of displacement disaggregate individuals who might share common experience, and places them into groups where more prominent affinities (race, class, education, and so on) separate and antagonize, perhaps to the extent that they no longer see beyond appearances. An artist’s angry eulogy for her residence, her studio, is at the same time lament for one group and sign of impending crisis for another. By gathering groups to witness not destruction but the textural palimpsest of mediations on greed, A Sublime Madness created, if only temporarily, a reordered community defined by temporal coexistence rather than by social position. The ‘sublime madness’ the performance expressed was, in a sense, a reparative one. Artists reframed creative celebrations and condemnations of greed identified in the works of others, and reframed them as pretext to eviction. In so doing, those same artists and friends who attended had to face, in some way, their own complicity in that process – their ability to be
present, to witness and participate in the making of art prepared the area for their own future exclusion. Furthermore, they were then coincidentally joined by Latinx residents of Boyle Heights, East LA, and neighbourhoods beyond made newly visible as future sites of economic displacement. At least in theory, such collectivities force the parties to consider their mutual implication in and oppression by the dynamics of gentrification that brought Silton to Anderson Street in the first place: the intersection of capital development, de facto ethnic cleansing, and pursuit of creativity that masquerades as the market.

Today, art, like real estate, becomes an expedient tool of capital formation, and Silton’s recent work like Sublime identifies and illustrates that expediency as a condition worth scrutiny. She continued exploring these themes in her 2017 work Quartet for the End of Time, conceived shortly after the 2016 US presidential election as rage and lament. Staged on the cleaned-out ground floor of a pre-market Arts District warehouse, Silton directed two live concerts of the work, originally composed and performed by and for World War II POWs and their guards in a German Stalag (Ross 2007: 358-359). Silton’s version was accompanied by an original dance score prepared by the choreographer Flora Weigmann, who formed part of the all-women cast of performers on both nights. As the musicians played on a spot-lit section of the sparse floor, level with and surrounded by the audience, a quartet of four dancers entered the light, moving around them, their gestures and facial expressions peering out, around, and over the audience, searching, like a blind chorus, for recognition in the darkness that appeared not to
come. Its 2017 performance seems like a sombre elegy for a vanishing era, and a warning of things to come, almost as if the two did not belong to the same continuity of time.

Silton’s purpose was clear: to stage an historical work created at a time of deep political turmoil. But her staging of the work as a specific experience of site is also canny, if tongue-in-cheek, given the Arts District location and some of the transformations of sites as aesthetic consequences of gentrification, in which artists like Silton take part. In this sense, the warehouse site should be taken seriously as both audience and participant, as if the dancers peering into the darkness wanted some recognition for their spatial surroundings, too. The warehouse’s location was purposeful: she wanted a non-professional space in a neighbourhood whose original function as waystation for the transfer of persons and goods now serves that purpose for the creative class, commuting daily to jobs in marketing, advertising, and architecture rather than in manufacturing or art making (Silton 2018). And, that intent bears out today as well as it did on the warehouse’s construction in 1890 (LA AIN 5164-002-011). What was a railyard storage house is now a filming site as it awaits sale next to the new Los Angeles headquarters for Spotify (Jay Luchs Real Estate Brochure 2019). Part of Silton’s inquiry, then, is into the overlooked backdrop for this change: the financialized real estate market that takes artists as its first-stage developers and sometimes unwitting collaborators in social transformation. Her Quartet asked its audience to observe their role in easing that transition, or, even, making it viable in the first place, gathered as they were – gallerists, artists, curators, and others – to witness and instantiate a moment of cultural capital in an empty building up for sale.

The sites of Sublime Madness and Quartet trace between them a geography of displacement: the line they connect describes the movement of arts-based development out of the central city and into its historically immigrant, working class residential neighbourhoods. Hovering over this discussion of Silton’s practice is the rise of community protest over the expansion of arts district space and programming into the same areas; the conflict over the gallery-backed spaces and their assumed collateral impact on resident populations’ ability to remain in community there. Silton’s work, however embroiled in and constituent of gentrification in municipal play since the early 1980s, also serves a reflexive purpose: to lay bare the workings of such practices within comparative historical politics. The 1930s construction of the Sixth Street Bridge, for example, facilitated the growth of Boyle Heights and its connectivity to labour markets, just as its redevelopment will for different populations in the 2020s. Whereas A Sublime Madness in the Soul was a late-stage opportunity for gathering, Quartet for the End of Time offered
a temporary yet interruptive moment to recognize how the operations of a given site silently reorganize the anonymous daily life of urban users.

‘Bearing witness’ is the perfect phrase for Silton’s work. In insisting on the conceptual-performative framework of duration and engagement, *Sublime and Quartet* depend on a collective beholding of choices enacted or observed in a given situation. The situation is always the same: art at the brink of social vanishing becomes the vantage for self-reflection. This idea of witnessing also has profound moral and ethical implications when we consider the social, cultural, and economic sea changes underpinning the work in the first place: art’s increasing role as a financial instrument of global economic speculation. Artists have a choice to be present for their own convenient positioning as agents of economic change. The recognition of that power is something Silton herself is concerned with as an ethical imperative, and which she conceptually integrates into each level of her work, even the linguistic. If Niebuhr's philosophy revolved around a requirement that use of power serve justice rather than profit, the role of the artist in such situations of injustice should be rooted in strength of community versus the individual, and the necessity of scrutinizing and critiquing the contemporary world in light of that moral imperative (Niebuhr 1932).

This echoes an impulse in Silton’s earlier work to explore the boundaries of self and other, mediated through her queer body personally experienced or received. It’s a different way of being public – thinking about the repercussions of a person or their activity beyond the boundaries of their own experience. At a very basic definition, perhaps that’s what a public is: an awareness of a multiplicity that doesn’t just reframe the individual, but rather establishes an intimacy between otherwise disinterested parties brought together to bear witness to each other’s presence. Silton’s work positions artists among these responsible groups for witnessing and action. In a 2018 interview, she explained:

> The money changing hands within our field is responsible for the economic boom changing downtown in this particular iteration, and it is displacing many communities made up of both long-term residents and working artists. That demands more attention and discussion on our part because without anything to stabilize it, this will mean the displacement – and therefore, the invisibility – of most artists I know. The only artists that will continue to have visibility in that world will be those in the 1%.

This prioritization of profit above all [...] in an unregulated way, contributes to the conditions that [isolate artists’ zero-sum] mindset. That’s
where our primary attention should be at this moment: how can we have a conversation that’s really transparent. I feel those with privilege in the art world at the highest levels have an opportunity to guide that conversation. (Silton 2018)

In other words, for Silton, there is an existential imperative for artists to investigate and understand how economic and political power coalesce within a very small, privileged community. As a corollary to that, there is an imperative for artists to understand how speculation is an operative mechanism of our time, and how artists themselves are heavily implicated in it.

Literary critic Jess Row proposes sadness and acknowledgement of the infliction of hurt as a reparative position: a way of addressing the root of sadness the subject herself is involved in inflicting on others (Row 2019). The idea fits in well with Niebuhr’s study of the dynamics of morality and immorality between individual and group. The question posed by protesters, as well as Silton herself, is less about the politics of art than it is about the issue of artists’ complicity in urban redevelopment at a moment for the potential erasure of historic communities. In this sense, a reparative witnessing would involve addressing that complicity, integrating it into a structural understanding of their existence in the first place. The politics of observation in view of history are precisely the point. With *In everything*
there is the trace, revivifying Steinbeck’s epic of displacement and migration sheds light on contemporary versions taking place mere blocks from the site of a university art museum, itself partaking in cultural erasure as it simultaneously provides a space for its ethical identification. In Sublime, Silton models the site-responsive artwork as a space of exception: a place temporarily institutionally reorganized for the production and export of a specific product, in this case, performance-based art that temporarily reorganizes perception of how art and development go together. Quartet manages to become both elegy and warning, a nod to the extreme politics of ethnic cleansing gentrification staged at a ground zero for the erasure of community in the name of profit. Her work is responsive to change in a way that doesn’t necessarily seek to alter its course, but to lay bare the politics of its occurrence. Counteracting complicity requires and insists on an awareness of its consequences as they play out in real time and disappear, and Silton’s work is no exception.

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