

Los Angeles Artists Reinvent Their Roles in Gentrifying Communities

CARRIBEAN FRAGOZA JULY 4, 2018

Poor and working-class neighborhoods often view new art galleries as heralds of gentrification—but some artists have joined with residents to fight displacements and other disruptions.



John Tapia Urquiza/sin turistas

Arturo Romo and members of Northeast Los Angeles Alliance at local train station after an anti-gentrification march

In March, artist Laura Owens surprised the Los Angeles art world, announcing that she would be shutting down her gallery 356 Mission in Boyle Heights on L.A.'s rapidly gentrifying Eastside, after more than a year of protests by local activists. Since Owens's announcement, three more galleries have moved out. Boyle Heights, a predominantly poor and working-class Latino neighborhood, first gained attention in 2016 with its very public fight against an LGBTQ-centered art space called PSSST that closed its doors last year.

In the escalating battle against gentrification in Los Angeles, artists and activists appear to stand on opposite sides. As Los Angeles extends its reach as a global art center, its economic disparities have spread as well. The city's current housing crisis has uprooted thousands of families and accelerated homelessness. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, homelessness rose by a whopping **75 percent** in the last six years.

However, a closer look reveals that while some artists build lucrative careers, others walk away from their aspirations to support L.A.'s most vulnerable communities. In the process, they are re-inventing their roles as artists as well as their approaches to art-making as they challenge profit-driven arts establishments and exploitative real-estate and housing markets.

L.A.'s Eastside has emerged as a prime battleground as anti-gentrification activists and community members clash head-on with artists. Local residents and activists have learned to regard art galleries—along with coffee shops and boutiques—as heralds of gentrification. Concentrations of poor and working-class Latino families, primarily renters, have been displaced by new, affluent spillover from a revitalized downtown Los Angeles and the encroaching artists' district.

Though hard evidence for this correlation remains elusive and **studies** are inconclusive, artists have come under scrutiny for being complicit, whether intentionally or not, with neighborhood redevelopment that displaces people who have lived in the community for years.

In the Eastside neighborhood of Lincoln Heights, concentrated family networks, both deeply-rooted and newly-arrived, live in dense proximity to one another as well as to small mom-and-pop businesses, churches, and schools. Broadway Boulevard bustles with pedestrian energy as residents stroll by barber shops, **botánicas**, and discount stores. You can buy your sweetheart a teddy bear or consult with a tarot card reader and perhaps cast a mild spell on said lover all in one swoop.

Lincoln Heights, which is also experiencing the vigorous redevelopment and displacement of gentrification, is where you'll find Arturo Romo. Instead of installing work in a gallery or museum or attending art fairs, the visual artist is part of an expansive, fluid, and overlapping network of artists in Los Angeles that are redefining art as they fight to keep neighborhoods from being overwhelmed by development. For Romo, making art in a community is akin to watering a garden. "It's a way to belong to a place, not to own it," he says.

Early in his career Romo exhibited in solo and group shows, earning the attention of curators and critics with his esoteric installations and performances featuring clay masks, cryptic writings in manifestos and propaganda brochures, and questionable photographs of self-proclaimed gurus seemingly on the verge of levitation.

Though his work was included in landmark shows such as "Phantom Sightings" at Los Angeles County Museum of Art, known locally as LACMA, he's all but checked out of mainstream art circuits. Instead, Romo focuses on continuing to make art privately in his studio, as well as collectively with the people who live in his community.

"The market has done harm to us as humans by reducing arts to a profession," he says. "The role of artists in society is misconceived because it separates artists from any community and sets them into a category of their own."

Romo, who doubles as a high school art teacher, likens education to art: In his screen-printing class, a good day is when students learn that creating art can forge unique bonds between people. "When it feels free and safe, students work together, teach one another, experiment and share," he says.

Romo also sees his work with the North East Los Angeles Alliance (NELAA) in Highland Park as important way to engage in arts-centered community activism. The neighborhood-based arts group first gained attention in 2014 when it placed eviction notices on gentrifying businesses in Highland Park, sparking anti-gentrification protests similar to movements in Boyle Heights and other areas.



Sandra de la Loza

Artist Sandra de la Loza (left) with artist Eduardo Molinari

Though the group is committed to responding to growing displacement, primarily in Highland Park, it refrains from flash mob tactics and spontaneous protests featuring posters or banners emblazoned with sharp-witted slogans or characters that can be branded for mass circulation, like a Shepard Fairey poster or a pink pussy hat that protestors in other gentrifying communities have used.

Currently, NELAA is monitoring two major development projects that will transform a large swath of the Eastside

from a tightly knit working class cluster of neighborhoods into a high-end playground for tech and creative professionals. In the past decade, an onslaught of upscale housing developments and businesses along the restored and rebranded Los Angeles River has steadily driven up property values—and pushed out the people who have lived near the river for generations when the waterway was unsightly and dangerous.

Further east, the developers of a new **Bioscience Hub project** have been quickly purchasing cheap properties to develop a new corridor for technology businesses. The Bioscience Hub is already busy with revitalization plans for what investors have identified as “underused industrial land.”

For Romo, the sheer size of this project presents activists and artists with new challenges. “There’s the issue of scale,” says Romo, noting that in this case, private and public entities work together with no individual person or business to rally against—so artists and art-activist collectives like NELAA must invent new ways of organizing and making artwork that responds to this community crisis.

Meanwhile, just east of the L.A. River, in a former Southern Pacific train yard, the foundations of industrial buildings give way to lush, wild plants and colorful graffiti brighten slivers of crumbling walls. Artist Sandra de la Loza’s voice narrates the history of this area in a video carta (**video letter**) as an offering to her collaborator Argentinean artist Eduardo Molinari: “Eduardo, I leave you with a rare open space left in the city.” This video carta like many of her projects, mines L.A.’s forgotten landscapes for untold stories.

Over the years, de la Loza has learned that the art marketplace provides little professional security. Following her first solo show at LACMA’s “Mural Re-Mix” in 2011, de la Loza became increasingly aware that few select art stars continue to advance in a world that exploited nearly everyone else. “The more I professionalized, the more I began to see the economies of art. Artists have little power. In the end, they receive crumbs. I got tired of operating show to show, commission to commission,” she says.

At the same time that de la Loza grew disenchanted with art world, she started noticing the early onset of gentrification, well before anyone knew to call it that. In the early 2000s, she saw how the accelerating housing market had begun to displace largely working-class communities of color in Echo Park where she lived. Not exempt from this massive transformation, artists and small gay establishments, like bars and clubs were also displaced by a wave of new, upscale housing and business developments. She'd already witnessed how artist friends in San Francisco's Mission District were pushed out by high rents in the 1990s.

De la Loza eventually left her apartment in Echo Park after a battle with her landlord who had threatened to evict her (on what turned out to be illegal grounds.) She followed other artists to Highland Park, where yet another wave of gentrification would follow.



Sandra de la Loza

Sandra de la Loza's installation

She knew that there had to be another way to be an artist and actively belong to a neighborhood. “I was wrestling with how do we not also become complicit in displacement,” says de la Loza. So she joined several groups that were not necessarily centered on the arts, such as Olivia Chumacero’s Everything is Medicine, in which activists, urban planners, educators (and some artists), learned about LA’s native plant and spiritual life.

De la Loza has since collaborated with several community-based groups including NELAA and has worked with

Romo and other Eastside residents. In 2016, NELAA teamed with the LA Tenants Union and other anti-gentrification groups to support the tenants of Marmion Royal, an apartment complex where the owners, Skya Ventures, raised monthly rent by at least 50 percent.

The NELAA artists organized community workshops and curated an exhibition at a local art gallery, which they eventually dismantled and reconstructed into a giant serpent puppet that they danced through Highland Park streets to the Marmion Royal complex. This demonstration helped launch weeks of protests by the tenants, who eventually took their case to court. Though the judge rejected the tenants' claims of discrimination by the complex's owners, this multi-pronged action would provide creative fuel for tenant organizers and artists in future tenants' rights fights throughout Los Angeles neighborhoods.

In February, the tenants of a Boyle Heights apartment building celebrated a major win in negotiations with owner Frank "BJ" Turner after a months-long rent strike and nearly a year of organizing. The strike came to be known as the "Mariachi Strike" for the one-third of tenants who are mariachi musicians. This victory also served as a model for other tenants fighting rent hikes and evictions. The residents of the complex had the support of a network of organizations including the L.A. Tenants Union and Defend Boyle Heights, both members of Boyle Heights Alliance Against Artwashing and Displacement (BHAAAD), a coalition of groups that support anti-gentrification efforts.

The L.A. Tenants Union, the tenants' rights advocacy group that has spearheaded L.A.'s quickly growing housing rights movement, was founded largely by artists. Members of School of Echoes and Ultra-Red, two **sound arts collectives** with deep roots in Boyle Heights and Echo Park, joined with local organizations and residents to establish the LATU in 2015. It has since grown to eight chapters citywide. Riding on the momentum of this year's Mariachi Strike, and, in direct response to the escalating housing crisis, the number of rent strikes has also grown across Los Angeles.

Since its inception, the LATU has also included a group of poets and translators who run a language-justice component called **Antena Los Angeles** that provides multi-lingual translations at all meetings and actions. Currently, residents, artists, writers, and activists are pushing to repeal the Costa Hawkins Act, which prevents California cities from applying rent control to buildings constructed after 1978. Activists around the state have gathered enough support to get the repeal on **the November ballot**.

Artists are learning new ways to extend themselves well beyond typical art circles to confront the politics of gentrification and take direct, grassroots action. “Now there are so many types of artists working in a lot of directions,” says de la Loza. “There’s a growing body of people questioning what is an artist and what [do] we produce.”

Solving the housing crisis is not a fight that one that a single person, let alone an artist who takes refuge in a gallery, museum, or studio, can wage. The path forward to address the disruptions that gentrification creates is one that requires the collective imagination and labor of neighborhood residents, local leaders—and artists.

*This article was supported by the **Economic Hardship Reporting Project**.*