

Is it Art's Fault We're in This Mess?

Catherine Wells

As director of a small, non-profit art school in a Montreal neighbourhood “in transition”, I often hear a version of this question: *Do artists resist or inadvertently participate in gentrification?* There is a prevalent notion that artists contribute to gentrification by moving into poor neighbourhoods and making them desirable to the upwardly mobile.

John Kenneth Galbraith predicted in the 1950's that increasing consumption of luxury products would lead to economic inequality as the private sector enriches itself at society's expense. He and other humanist economists have more recently called for an economic solution to the world's ills and the creation of a *Good Society* through humane economic policy.

Many, if not most, artists have little access to our present “affluent society”, and as a result, have had to look for studios and living quarters in areas with cheap rent. For most artists, making meaningful art is not a way to participate in our market-driven economy. Once the art market made *certain* artworks “luxury goods” and at the same time investments, it became even harder for artists to survive, let alone thrive, without looking at poor neighbourhoods in which to live and work.

However, gentrification is not the “fault” of the artists. Art neither resists *nor* participates in gentrification in any significant measure. Artists do, as we can see, *facilitate* gentrification making the neighbourhood “attractive” to the upwardly mobile, but it is the economic and supporting political systems that perpetuate it by allowing a profit-driven and under-regulated housing market, which eventually increases poverty. The failure of political will to protect the most vulnerable, and that of the popular will to consume and have less caused this problem, *not* the artists.

Having said that, I do believe that artists can be the vanguard of social change. To show what life can be; to show us who we can be when we access our creativity; to show what art does for humanity even in an unjust and often cruel world. Without art as a foil for our diversion culture (which generates a fortune), it could be a lot worse. (So in this way art does resist by just being what it is.)

Rather than castigating artists or politicizing them, we ought to be encouraging them. Virginia Woolf, in *The Artist and Politics*, takes the position that in difficult and polarized times, the artist loses the support of society if they don't take a political position. Artists are asked to give up the brush or chisel and take up a gun or a placard to “survive”, are told that only art which preaches the aims of politics, whether of the rulers or of the revolution, will be permitted and supported. Are artists losing the support of society now? Where can an artist set up a studio? There are fewer and fewer cheap rents.

During the 1940s and through the 1960s New York City produced one of the most exciting periods in art largely *because* of cheap rent. Who could imagine setting up a studio on Ninth Street or in Greenwich Village these days? One might even say that cheap rent is a hallmark of a healthy and vibrant art scene in any city. Now in Montreal, certainly in Pointe-Saint-Charles, decent studio space - not to mention affordable living space - is fast disappearing.

As for social justice, art's role is primal. In its pure form (that it, not art as advertising or preaching), it does not resist or enable political or corporate power: art sustains the human spirit. Even if, in an ideal world, enlightened consumers would be able to prevail upon our political leaders to improve society, to implement the concepts of the humanist economists and recalibrate the present equation by valuing humanity over corporatism, individual needs over the institution's, it will still be the role of art to help us manage the complex emotional experience of being alive in a world in which we will always be having to push back against villainy and greed. Art helps us manage the violence and fears (and ensuing injustice) inherent in our species and has done so since the first mark was made by an inspired ancestor in a cave.

Art does not create a perfect world. Art is made of the mess of life, literally with oil, sand, dirt, clay, manure, water, charcoal. But in creating something sublime from all this, it shows us that the struggle for existence, the darkness of our psyches, and fear of life and death can be transcended and that there exists a higher, safer, more beautiful destiny than the fear mongers of the material world provide for us. T. J. Clark in *Heaven on Earth*, puts forward the idea that the benefits of heaven are available on earth. Clark suggests that certain artists through time have subversively shown that we do not need to suffer here on earth, enriching the rich while suffering in poverty, by painting not unobtainable heavenly pleasures but the potential beautiful life our world can offer.

Ian Parker and David Pavón-Cuéllar assert that political transformation will remove psychological disorders and the need for their cure. That much if not all of mental illness is caused by an unjust society. I recently read that Republican men are the poorest white males with the shortest life span in the US and that this causes them to be afraid, which of course has been exploited by the self-serving. The existential fear resulting from poverty and powerlessness makes a population an easy target for power hungry politicians and mendacious marketers. This is not art's fault. In fact, artists are among the first to suffer when there is societal chaos. And so as gentrification and rampant, profit-driven development remain part of our present reality, particularly in our neighbourhood of Pointe-Saint-Charles, our communities need access to the advantages of art more than ever.

At the Pointe-Saint-Charles Art school, we have had a number of local, long-time residents of Pointe- Saint-Charles in our classes, and they have good and bad stories to tell about the past. The poverty, the drinking, the crime, biker gangs, etc are not missed. But the community is.

It is important to note that the Point which is disappearing now was created by another political, economic failure. The poverty of the mid to late twentieth century was a result of local industry

closing down and the local people losing the livelihoods that supported family and small business.

My grandfather recalled to me the Point of the early 1910s with great fondness - lovely like a small English town, he said. There were wonderful artists from the Point: Emily Coonan, Ross Hal Perrigard and Stanley Cosgrove among them. Although working class and far from rich, it seemed to be a warm, lively, productive neighbourhood.

Pointe-Saint-Charles didn't have to become among the poorest communities in the country. And it doesn't need to become one of the richest...

As for the school, we are doing our bit to offer accessibility to the benefits of art: to provide space to gather and make art so the creative spirit can thrive among us as individuals and in our local and larger society.

We human beings, in our peculiar capacity to project our inner world onto the outer, may one day be able to humanize the world with the best of what we find within and imagine it into "something like a materialized soul".

(José Ortega y Gasset)