

CHICANX ARTISTS ON THE POVERTY OF



ASCO
First Supper (After a Major Riot), 1974

EL CHAVO

ABOUT HATING ART



Ben Vautier
Total Art Match-Box, 1965

ASMODEUS



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About Hating Art

by Asmodeus

If the artist is not the most hated member of the Chicana community it is certain that a very healthy disgust towards the artist is felt by many in the barrio. In the artists attempt to express themselves, speak for La Raza, or to raise their consciousness, they come short of the mark. The inherent poverty of the art scene is its inability to understand and change society, its refusal to see itself as a market place for one more commodity. This is what we detest. From cholos to viejitas, to mocosos and their relatives, everyone hates the false notion of the artist as a representative of our needs or as a spokesperson for change.

All the novelty rappers, uninspired singers, hack writers, crayola painters, pretentious poets, and the hardly-funny cartoonists and comedians that make up the Chicana And Chicana Artist (CACA) cultural scene imagine themselves to be that which they are not: for some reason they believe that they are a challenge or an opposition to the dominant culture. The truth is that they are merely another aspect of the same society or as some would accurately call it, they are part of the spectacle of negation. When a persons life lacks in meaning, pleasure, and they have no control over how to run their own lives, they look outside of themselves for salvation. The artist finds his calling in "self-expression", creating art pieces in which she can live out a dull reflection of what has not been possible in real life. That's not beautiful; it's pathetic.

In a world that runs on a heavy dose of alienation the reverence for art serves only to strengthen that society. The emergence of the Chicano Art scene is a movement of the forgotten commodity back into the flow of the marketplace; the desire to belong within the world of separation; to be bought and sold like everyone else. The artist has no vision. She fails to see what is truly beautiful, just as they failed to see the poetry in the streets during the rioting in '92. Can their little doodles ever top the critique of daily life that the looters offered in their festive events? Of course not.

So what happens to La Raza once the artist sells his piece, gets her grant, or has that special gallery showing? Nothing. All the people that you aim to represent on your canvases or in your poems, we still have to exist in the same ghettoes, we still have to work in the same stupid jobs, or wait in the same welfare lines. We will never see you there. You will never mean anything to us.

We laugh at you and the society you reinforce.

Give it up.

You're headed nowhere.



(there is probably no whiter industry in existence). The victories are small and partial, though. Teargas tycoon Warren Kandors was forced off the board of the Whitney Museum of American Art... but the Whitney board, like every other museum board in America, is still packed with millionaires and billionaires. The Instagram page Change the Museum has been exposing some of the straight-up racism that is so common in art spaces, but it does so in the individualistic form of anonymous callout posts. It's not clear how or if it's possible to move from this to collective action against oppression in the art world, which ultimately isn't very different from what goes on in *any* workplace under *any* boss. The only big difference is that museums increasingly base their whole reason for existing on a claim to represent "progressive" values, which makes it a little easier to call them out on hypocrisy in comparison with employers who more obviously don't give a shit.

All of this still might make it sound like what we need is *better politics WITHIN the art world*. That's wrong. What we need is *better politics AGAINST the art world, as long as the art world is part of capitalist society* (which it will be to the bitter end: in a free world, what we call "art" wouldn't be an activity separated from the rest of life, it wouldn't be a profession monopolized by people called "artists," and it wouldn't be an industry designed to sell luxury commodities). There's a phrase I like, although I didn't come up with it: "The point isn't to ask what art can do for communism, but rather the other way around." "Communism" just means a way to survive in the 21st century, because capitalism is killing us. In the long run there's no way around this. There are no half-measures, no social democratic "a little bit of capitalism plus a little bit of socialism" that will be adequate as a response to planetary catastrophe. Antagonism against the art world only makes any sense if it's part of an antagonism against *the* world, as a whole, as it currently exists. So, if you're an artist, the question is not: How can my art contribute to "progressive" politics? The question is: What does our collective struggle for survival (our struggle for communism) do to my idea of "art"? Can my idea of "art" survive capitalism? Should it?

Those are questions, not answers, and that's how it should be. The answers can't be answered in theory but only in practice. But what about this little essay about hating art? Are there things I'd change if I were writing it now? Yes, of course. The "abstract" conclusion, in particular, seems more cryptic than it needs to be. Plus a lot has happened over the past four years. But, unfortunately, at the level of what (if anything) is important in this piece, a lot less has changed than the super-politicized art world would like to believe. Every issue of *Artforum* these days is a woke-fest. Every issue is still more than half ads for blue-chip galleries. So, apart from a few minor edits, this is the same text that appeared in 2017. Let's hope it becomes obsolete soon.

- 2021

Basically the art world exists to make money for a small number of people and to make a larger number of people feel like they're cool. The first purpose is just capitalism. The second is an effect of capitalism, because only in a world as ridiculous as ours would standing around in mostly empty white rooms be considered a valid form of community. This probably sounds cynical, and in a way it is. But if you think about it, the fact that lots of people have nothing better to do with their "free" time than to stand around in mostly empty white rooms, rooms that make a huge amount of money for other people, is a good reason to destroy pretty much everything.

Hatred of art, in the best and truest sense, has always really been disappointment that art can't keep its own promises. The German philosopher Theodor Adorno once said: "*The bourgeois want art voluptuous and life ascetic; the reverse would be better.*" Hatred of art isn't hatred of beauty. In fact it's closer to the opposite. It's hatred of capitalism for trying to make us accept the fact that we can only find beauty in art. Or in some other commodity, or some commodified experience. (On Instagram everyone lives in paradise.) Of course it's also hatred of the people who buy and sell and talk about art, because they're mostly rich assholes. Nothing mysterious about that. For academics, though, it's a lot easier to come up with elaborate theories about iconoclasm than it is to admit that iconoclasm is usually quite easy to explain.

Hatred of art, or at least this kind of it, has nothing to do with hatred of pleasure. Or even hatred of artworks, exactly. You can enjoy looking at art at the same time as you hate the art world and its institutions, in the same way you can shop at a store in the daytime and then loot it at night, if you get the chance. Communism means nice shit for everybody, as some other people have pointed out.¹ You can even make your own art if you want to. That's fine. You can also be a revolutionary – better still. (Much better.) But don't try to do your revolution through your art. That's not how it works. If you feel the need to argue against this more or less self-evident point, there's a good chance that you're an art world asshole.

There are few things more depressing than the idea that art is the last zone of freedom in a capitalist world. If this were true, it would be yet another reason to destroy everything. (Don't worry, we're not running out of reasons.) But it's not true, anyway. The art world is part of capitalism, just like everything else, which means that it's built on a set of antagonisms. Class antagonisms, racial antagonisms, antagonisms around sexuality and gender. Of course this isn't any secret. The problem with a lot of art world people, though – aside from the other, obvious problems – is that they want their participation in the art world to function as a complete package. In other words you can get your aesthetics, your ethics, and your politics in the same place, by doing the same stuff. Your art is your resistance, or your academic research is your resistance, or whatever. Conveniently enough, you can sell art, and you can also sell your labor as a radical academic. Maybe not

1 Nice Shit For Everybody by Julio (<https://ediciones-ineditos.com/2017/01/12/nice-shit-for-everybody/>)

for much, but somebody has to do it, right? Walk into any gallery these days and there's a good chance the art will be "political." You have to wonder exactly when the market is going to peak.

The package deal only works so well because the art world absorbs and mediates conflict in order to fuel its own reproduction. Where else would constant scandals over racist behavior turn out to be good for business, for example? An angel gets its wings every time some art world drone writes a think-piece about the latest racist shit in the latest biennial. Or rather, somebody or other gets to accumulate a little more (political, academic, aesthetic) cred. What this means, perversely enough, is that nearly everyone in the art world has a vested interest in yet more racist shit happening in the future. Otherwise there wouldn't be anything to talk about.

Buying into the "*complete package*" means that when you do your politics, you do it through and in the art world. You want to make the art world a better place, so that everybody gets a seat at the table. You make sure that museum collections, biennials, and gallery rosters have the right demographics (they never do and probably never will). You make sure that everybody knows that you do not like Donald Trump, nope, not one bit! Or else, your activism boils down to mobilizing art for some other political purpose, as a tool or a weapon. That's usually even worse. (Did you hear about the 2017 #J20 Art Strike? I'm guessing either you didn't or you already forgot.)

Unless you're extremely edgy, art activism doesn't mean questioning whether there should be museums or biennials at all. The tendency to circle the wagons (the settler-colonialist metaphor isn't totally accidental) has become much worse since Trump's election, which had the effect of resurrecting a bunch of liberal-humanist clichés about the goodness of art that seemed like they'd been deconstructed out of existence decades ago. Whose team do you want to be on, after all: the nice, progressive, intelligent, well-dressed art people, or the right-wing philistines? The fact that the alternative is false, that other options exist, doesn't make it less attractive. The art world is so used to being on the right side that it's almost impossible for them to grasp that maybe it isn't.

In LA over the past few years we've had the pleasure of witnessing some of the art world's contradictions unravel in real time. Militants in Boyle Heights and elsewhere have been very good at explaining what they're doing and why, so I won't even try to summarize the issues at stake. Instead, I recommend that you just read the statements from the involved groups, such as Defend Boyle Heights, Boyle Heights Alianza Anti Artwashing y Desplazamiento / Boyle Heights Alliance Against Artwashing and Displacement (BHAAAD), Union de Vecinos, the Los Angeles Tenants Union, and Ultra-Red. Some of the press coverage has been decent, too. (That being said, let me put in an extra special fuck you to LA Times reporter Ruben Vives for threatening to write a negative story if he wasn't given an interview with a member of this coalition.)

nalist etc. was able to acknowledge that gentrification is real, that art contributes to it, even that the entire model of seeking out "undiscovered" land for creatives to colonize serves as an advance wing of capitalist development. What the art world absolutely couldn't understand was a refusal to negotiate. This resulted from their failure to think about politics in terms of structures rather than individual good intentions. The certifiably Good People of (now closed!) Boyle Heights galleries like 356 Mission and PSSST had all the right liberal beliefs, but that wasn't the problem. The problem was their presence and the unequal power (unequal wealth and unequal state/police/media support) that came with it. This made the idea of dialog a joke from the start. The assassinated Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani called this sort of thing "the conversation between the sword and the neck."

Nasty as the Boyle Heights stuff got, it was instructive, even inspiring. The art world thrives on superficial controversies. In reality it's built on a massive self-congratulatory consensus in order to keep business going. The appearance of an antagonism that the lefty art establishment couldn't immediately recuperate through panel discussions and special journal issues was a shock to the system. The responses were frequently hilarious. A lot of oblivious LA art people got into the habit of calling the protesters Nazis, as if that made any sense. To a surprising degree the actions worked, though, at least temporarily and in a limited zone of operations. Some of the galleries backed off and either moved or closed down entirely. The very fact that the antagonism was *articulated* as such was extraordinary, considering how often gentrification tends to be naturalized as an unstoppable economic force, even though it requires a huge amount of conscious decision-making on the part of local politicians, developers, petty bourgeois entrepreneurs, "community leaders," Business Improvement Districts, and so on. All of this was a positive development that gave anti-capitalists much to learn from, even if it was messy and ended some friendships.

The *bad* bad blood came later, when certain factions in the Boyle Heights alliance started waving copies of Mao's Little Red Book. It's not a surprise that promoting Stalinist politics that haven't been relevant for the past fifty years is a good way to alienate most people. It's also not a surprise that the authoritarians quickly turned out to be violent and anti-feminist. Of course the class struggle that these groups tried and failed to represent goes on, as always. But this self-appointed "revolutionary vanguard" has little to offer proletarians except a cult-like obsession with the worst moments in the history of communism. Nobody wants to follow your Shining Path.

Thankfully most of this is ancient history by now. The 2020 uprising for Black lives reached a level of mass insurrection that overshadows anything else in recent years. It also produced new kinds of recuperation—not least in the art world. Museums and galleries have never been more woke, even as nothing has really changed.

Recently there have been hints of a more total antagonism against the capitalist art world, and in particular against its feel-good brand of liberal white supremacy

between those who might profit from abjection, exactly by claiming to represent it, and those from whom this profit is made.

This distinction becomes the stuff out of which careers are built. It turns out that the maintenance of aesthetic appearances (I'm thinking of the German word Schein, which also means "*illusion*") is one of the more convenient ways of putting the abject into circulation. Convenient, but not necessarily final. Not decisive. Much less so, anyway, than other forms of Schein that are less recognizable as such – for example race, which is an abstraction infinitely more violent than either the zombie formalism everyone in the art world was talking about a few years ago, or zombie protest. Art attracts conflict in part because the stakes are so low, because the battles are so purely spectacular, even as art also serves an absolutely real function in preserving the status quo. Antagonisms play out in art when they can't (yet) be resolved in the rest of the world. The shittiness of the present moment is how impossible it seems to advance from the front lines to the citadels. Art tends to function as a border guard, here, asking for papers that reduce every real conflict into a problem of checking off the right boxes, which these days are usually a set of commodified forms of identity. Can you sell your abjection? Yes. Of course. You can also sell your politics. Your "*resistance*." At this exact moment it's probably the smartest thing you can do.

The worst participants in recent art world debates, hollow as these debates have been, are those who presume to understand everything best. Which in practice often means confessing your perplexity, but doing so as a technique, a move on the chessboard, a way to strengthen your own authority (not by actually knowing anything, perhaps, but by at least asserting your right to weigh in – your right to join the dialog). When in fact it's the bleeding suture between one world and its negation that art world bureaucrats always try to sew up. They have their mission. The rest of us need sharper scalpels.

- 2017

EPILOGUE

It's the oldest story in the book: a process of mass radicalization gets hijacked by authoritarian clowns and descends into self-destruction. When this piece was written in 2017, there was a lot of excitement over what was happening in Boyle Heights, a neighborhood on the Los Angeles Eastside where people were finally standing against the supposed inevitability of art-led gentrification. There was also a lot of bad blood. But at the time, it was the *good* kind of bad blood... if that makes sense. Drawing a line in the sand was easy, thanks to an unusually precise geographic frontier. On one side of the LA River there's the ever-more insufferable Arts District. And on the other side of the river there's a working-class community of about 80,000 people, including large public housing complexes a stone's throw from the kind of postindustrial warehouse space that makes gallerists salivate. On one level the LA art world got it. Every artist, gallery owner, jour-

In general terms, the conflict has to do with art's complicity in the process that we call gentrification – a term that gets thrown around a bit carelessly, it's true. Often, saying "*gentrification*" is a way to avoid saying "*capitalism*." Clowning white hipsters is cool (also – they aren't always white, or hip), but it shouldn't distract from the fact that the bigger enemy is the real estate industry, not to mention employers who don't pay workers enough to make rent. Some extremely violent forms of gentrification won't necessarily look like the stereotypical "*artists with fixies and cold brew moving into the hood*" narrative. What if we talked about new Chinese money pushing out poorer people of Asian descent in the San Gabriel Valley at the same time as we talk about Boyle Heights, for example? In economic terms the phenomenon might not be that different. There's a danger of reinforcing existing forms of oppression and exploitation in the name of a preexisting community that supposedly overrides class divisions. That said, gentrification often does look like artists with fixies and cold brew moving into the hood, which is why these events east of the LA River have a meaning that goes far beyond the local context.

What is important about the struggle in Boyle Heights, and what makes it different from any other anti-gentrification conflict I know of, is that it's developed into a direct confrontation between the "*radical*" art world and a local opposition that won't back down, even when offered the chance for dialog. This is how you win. For example: a huge victory for the anti-gentrification campaign was the closure of the gallery PSSST in February of this year. Representatives of PSSST described their project as queer, feminist, politically engaged, and largely POC. All of which are perfectly good things in themselves, of course. A space for queer, feminist, politically engaged POC artists and their friends only becomes a problem when it contributes to a colonial, gentrifying dynamic. Which will inevitably happen as soon as well-connected art world people move into a historically working class neighborhood, regardless of their color or credentials.

This isn't a matter of intentions or consciousness. No doubt PSSST thought they were doing good. It's a matter of economics – in other words, stuff that happens whether you want it to or not, because there's money to be made. Real estate developers don't give a shit about your MFA in social practice art. PSSST never understood this. People in Boyle Heights did. PSSST was all about "*dialog*." So is every gentrifier. Refusing dialog was the best (in fact the only) strategic decision the neighborhood's defenders could have made. There's no such thing as dialog when one side is pushing you out of your home. The fact that groups like Defend Boyle Heights have been so willing to engage with their enemies is the shocking thing, not their supposedly aggressive tactics. These tactics could be generalized. In fact in some places militant resistance to gentrification goes back decades, which is why cities like Berlin, for example, are so much more livable and fun than otherwise similar areas. Resistance won't stop real estate from destroying livable communities – nothing except the end of capitalism will do that – but it can slow the process down and make life better for a lot of people.



The Boyle Heights conflict is racialized. Obviously. “**Fuck White Art**” is an excellent slogan. However, the adjective “*White*” is unnecessary, for reasons that I hope are clear by now. But then again, it is necessary, too, a bit in the way it’s necessary to say “*Black Lives Matter*” instead of “*All Lives Matter*.” In effect, the slogan points out that the default setting for all art is “*white art*.” This isn’t to say that there aren’t any non-white artists, or that their work is somehow marginal or inauthentic. Rather, it’s to point out that the art world as such, which really means the art industry, is fundamentally connected to capitalism, which is white supremacist even when there happen to be non-white people running things. Real estate works by fine-tuning the racial composition of neighborhoods so that it’s possible to sell property to more “*desirable*” (wealthier) buyers, who happen to be white people most of the time, coincidentally or not. Galleries, as well as fancy cafes, record stores, etc., are the smart bombs of gentrification. Land one in just the right place and you can take out the whole barrio. It was perfectly logical when another Boyle Heights gallery, Museum As Retail Space, called the cops on a picket line at one of their openings.

Of course smart gentrifiers prefer to avoid calling in (uniformed) pigs, if they can. Nothing works better than getting a few “*diverse art spaces*” to help out with your development scheme. That’s pretty much expected now. And it probably would have worked in the case of PSSST if nobody in Boyle Heights had tried those supposedly alienating tactics.

After these events it almost seems unnecessary to present a critique of the non-white artist as representative of something called “*the community*.” (What community? Whose community? Is your landlord part of your community? How about your boss?) PSSST did a program focused on Latinx party crews in the 90s. It didn’t save them. It just pointed out how the phenomenon that some people have started calling gentefication – gentrification with a brown face – can be just as much bullshit as the idea that galleries “enrich” the neighborhood (as if Boyle

Heights doesn’t have any culture of its own). Instead of trying to say something new about the topic I’ll just recommend this short text, which is already a classic: *The Poverty of Chicano Artists* by El Chavo²

The one thing that has possibly changed since those words were written **over 20 years ago** is that the art scene, in its role as advance scout for capitalist development, has become much better at providing an apparent space for disagreement and even resistance – as long as nothing goes beyond empty talk.

The way places like PSSST and 356 operated is through a technique that you could name “*The Conversation*.” The ideology of *The Conversation* works by taking a conflict that’s pretty clear from the start and then insisting that there’s more to talk about. *The Conversation* is always “*more productive*” when the people getting fucked over avoid actually doing anything about it. *The Conversation* feeds on panel discussions. Often, *The Conversation* takes its cue from somebody or some group of people who have the right credentials to represent *The Community*, or who happen to be “**activists**.” (They hate Trump! Don’t you hate Trump, too?) Usually these activists have a long record of doing lefty stuff. They never understand that the left is the enemy, too.

There is no purer expression of *The Conversation* than members of the Artists’ Political Action Network (a post-election group of lefty artists) crossing a picket line to hold a meeting at a Boyle Heights gallery, then sending a letter that reads: “*In deciding to stage the event at 356 Mission, we hoped that, rather than ignoring or attempting to avoid the conflicts in the area, the choice of location would create an opportunity for engagement and dialogue.*” Funny logic: it works for every invasion. I bet the Aztecs loved it when Cortés gave them such a great opportunity for engagement and dialogue.

Here’s a more abstract way to express what I’ve been saying:

There is no such thing as a public dialog and hence art does not contribute to it. There is rather an antagonism between those who would like to continue pretending that such a dialog exists and those who want to demolish that pretense – not in theory, but in practice. (Leonard Cohen understood this, or at least he came up with a good phrase: “*There is a war between the ones who say there is a war / And the ones who say there isn’t.*”) The antagonism cuts across race, class, and gender, although it’s certainly weighted. Those who have nothing to lose but their chains, or their abjection, or their social death, obviously have greater clarity about it. But it might be that the edge of the antagonism runs not so much between those who are comfortable in their fiction versus those who have no such luxury, but rather between those who might, in however precarious a way, benefit exactly from the boundary’s mediation, and those who have no interest in anything of the sort:

2 This text is included on the other side of this zine