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VISUAL ESSAY

Visibilising gentrification-induced displacement: a visual essay on the role of a socially and politically engaged photographic practice in housing activism

ANITA STRASSER

This visual essay has two aims. On the one hand, it is intended as a visual exploration of gentrification-induced displacement. It focuses on photographic material generated for Deptford is Changing, a research project which exposed and politicised the emotional upheaval caused by contemporary state-led gentrification in Deptford, south-east London. On the other hand, the essay presents socially and politically engaged photography as a crucial part of housing activism. Working in dialogue with housing campaigners for a shared political goal, I photographed radical interventions taking art into the streets to enact people's emotional responses to gentrification-induced displacement. The images thus bear the traces of collective affect. I also photographed residents in their homes, with the aim of visibilising their affective connection to place and thereby evoking the emotional upheaval displacement causes. Publishing these images together with texts, making visible and audible gentrification narratives representative of residents' struggles, exposed and politicised the shared experience of displacement, putting pressure on the council and developer to implement change. This essay argues that a socially and politically engaged image-making practice generates alternative histories, which can disrupt dominant narratives and contribute to valuable change.

INTRODUCTION

This essay focuses on the role of photography in housing activism. It explores the potential of a critical image-making practice that works in dialogue with residents and campaigners to visibilise gentrification-induced displacement. The work focuses on some of the photographic material created for *Deptford is Changing: a creative exploration of the impact of gentrification* (Strasser 2020), a PhD-research project which studied, exposed and politicised the effects of displacement. Deptford is a post-industrial multi-ethnic working-class

area in south-east London which has experienced rapid gentrification in recent decades. This has already displaced many estate residents from their homes (see Boughton 2015; Davidson and Lees 2010; Estate Watch 2020; Lees, Slater, and Wyly 2010). With more council blocks under threat of demolition, more estate residents are facing displacement from their homes and potentially the area. Residents are also facing displacement from community centres and green spaces standing on public land to make way for predominantly private housing.

My research utilised a creative and participatory methodology to understand the effects of gentrification-induced displacement.¹ Handing direction of the project over to participants, it was collectively decided that the research should also be utilised as a tool for local housing struggles. Stating lack of time and interest to participate in workshops and take their own photographs, residents and campaigners requested that I, a local community photographer, document campaign activities and photograph (and interview) residents to be evicted. They emphasised an urgent need for 'good' photographs to reach wider audiences, requesting that I make visible their lived and shared experiences of gentrification and displacement and amplify oppositional voices through publishing photo-essays. The overall aim was to expose flaws in housing policy, counter stigmatising representations of council estates and residents, and effect change.

This gave birth to the *Deptford is Changing* blog (deptfordischanging.wordpress.com), where photo-essays were posted on a regular basis and shared widely on campaigners' social media.² Upon request by participants, the material was later published as a book with the same name to ensure a longer-lasting and accessible platform. The book is available as a paperback and can be read for free online (see Strasser 2020). All

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participants and local community spaces received a free hardcopy.

This visual essay explores how a socially and politically engaged image-making practice can visibilise experiences of gentrification-induced displacement. It proposes that a critical image-making practice that works in dialogue with participants can create images which offer alternative gentrification narratives and work towards change.

A POLITICALLY AND SOCIALLY ENGAGED PHOTOGRAPHIC PRACTICE

In the UK, there is a long history of photographers working with ordinary people to ‘create *and distribute* an iconography of self-representation by which to counteract the dominant representations’ (Braden 1983, 87; original emphasis). Tired of (mis)representations of marginalised people in popular media channels and traditional photojournalism, photography collectives and community photographers of the 1970s intended to highlight *and change* bad working and living conditions (Stacey 2020). Whether the work was participant or photographer-authored, it was produced collaboratively for a political purpose, valuing the voices, knowledges and perspectives of ordinary people not only to disrupt dominant narratives but also to create a space for social justice. This tradition somewhat continues today under the rubric of socially-engaged photography (and participatory arts), but this covers a much wider range of practices, intentions and outcomes, making it difficult to define (Luvera 2019). Recognising photography’s ability to redress power relations, counter misrepresentations and generate sociological knowledge (Chaplin 1994; Knowles and Sweetman 2004; Pink 2007; Rose 2007), socially-engaged photography has also been adopted as a research method by visual sociologists, with researchers either acting as photographers (e.g. Harper [1982] 2016), working with photographers (e.g. Duneier 1999; Knowles 2000), or placing the cameras in the hands of people (e.g. Mizen 2005; Packard 2008). Although my project deployed all three methods, this essay focuses on the images I created.

Visual quality seems of lesser importance when images ‘merely’ serve the purpose of data collection or when the production of images is focused on methodological and social merits. However, when doing public sociology and trying to engage ‘multiple publics’

(Burawoy 2005) in critical dialogues, visual quality does play a role. The importance of a visual aesthetic when publishing work was already pointed out by community photographers in the 1970s (e.g. Braden 1983; Stacey 2020). Positioned against the ‘objective’ photographer in traditional photojournalism, the aim was to create a visual aesthetic following traditional conventions of photography while also reflecting the experiences of and social relationship with the communities depicted. Images should also reflect the (political) intention with which they were taken, and the production technologies used (Braden 1983; Kelly 1984; Stacey 2020). In other words, both process and outcome mattered politically, with well (re)produced images in publications seen as necessary to attract attention and reach wider audiences. This resonated with my participants’ request to produce ‘good’ photographs for a political intervention.

In response, I developed a political image-making practice akin to the radical tradition of community photography, working in dialogue with ordinary people to create images representative of participants’ experiences and perspectives and used to effect change. It was a participative practice concerned with ethics and aesthetics for a political intervention. It built on Azoulay’s new political ontology of photography, which involves a ‘human being-with-others in which the camera [is] implicated’ (Azoulay 2008, 18). This ontology conceives of photography as an encounter with multiple participants involved in collaborative and political action, creating a dialogical aesthetic that reflects those human relationships (ibid.). However, alongside a dialogical aesthetic, my practice also stresses the importance of visual aesthetics. Participants themselves expressed the need for ‘good’ images to communicate political messages effectively and reach wider audiences, agreeing with Gillian Rose when she says, ‘the photos used need to be – well, good’ (Rose 2007, 324). Whilst it is hard to define what constitutes a good image, the images chosen by participants for distribution were those adhering to certain formal qualities (straight compositions, sharpness, well-exposed, clear framing) while being representative of the people depicted and the messages they wanted to convey. To achieve this, I used my photographic skills as part of my ongoing dialogues and political actions with collaborators, discussing the images to be taken and their intention, the intended audiences, image choice, intended use and distribution. It is through this dialogical practice and the shared political goals that the images in this essay were produced.

COUNTERNARRATIVES THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHING RADICAL ART PRACTICES

Many housing campaigners in Deptford are radical community artists who have been involved in local activism for years. As part of their struggles, they utilise critical art practices to enact political confrontations in the public sphere. With both politics and art in the domain of the aesthetic in that they determine who and what is visible, audible and effectual, radical art lends itself well to creating counternarratives, giving visibility and audibility to alternative voices (Mouffe 2007; Rancière 2004). This was particularly relevant at Tidemill Garden, a socially-autonomous green space which provided opportunities for social justice among those experiencing displacement and ‘accumulative dispossession’ (Lees and White 2020) through austerity politics. The loss of this space and the displacement of hundreds of garden users and supporters was strongly felt, leading to a series of protests, interventions and an occupation. Campaigners deployed political art to express the emotional upheaval caused by displacement and disrupt dominant gentrification narratives.

Elliott-Cooper, Hubbard, and Lees (2020) define the violence of displacement as an emotional rupture of the connection between people and place, resonating with Fullilove’s concept of “root shock” – the traumatic stress reaction to the loss of all or part of one’s emotional ecosystem’ (Fullilove 2014, 142). This affective dimension of displacement is vividly communicated through radical arts practices. Creative, collective and political activities often trigger emotional responses that delve deeper into human consciousness, producing

outcomes that reflect these emotions and communicate differently with the audience than do textual descriptions. Mouffe (2005) and Berlant (2011) argue that the aesthetic and sensory experiences of collective activities in the public sphere have an affectual impact, creating a more supportive, intimate sociality that makes life in an unjust world more liveable (Berlant 2011, 226–227).

Among many art forms, performance art, musical protests and impromptu installations were used at Tidemill to express how people experience root shock. However, with live enactments seen only by those present and with installations often removed by authorities shortly after being put in place, their documentation and subsequent distribution (with accompanying texts) was necessary to amplify these critical voices. Working alongside artists and campaigners during their creative and political activities, and photographing their emotional enactments for political uses, the images I produced bear the traces of collective affect. They visibilise the shared experiences of displacement which artists conveyed through their artworks (see Figures 1–5). For original publications, see Strasser (2020).

COUNTERING THE STIGMATISING REPRESENTATIONS OF COUNCIL ESTATES AND RESIDENTS

Residents and campaigners were keen to counter stigmatising representations of council estates and residents. The language of the ‘sink estate’ (Slater 2018)

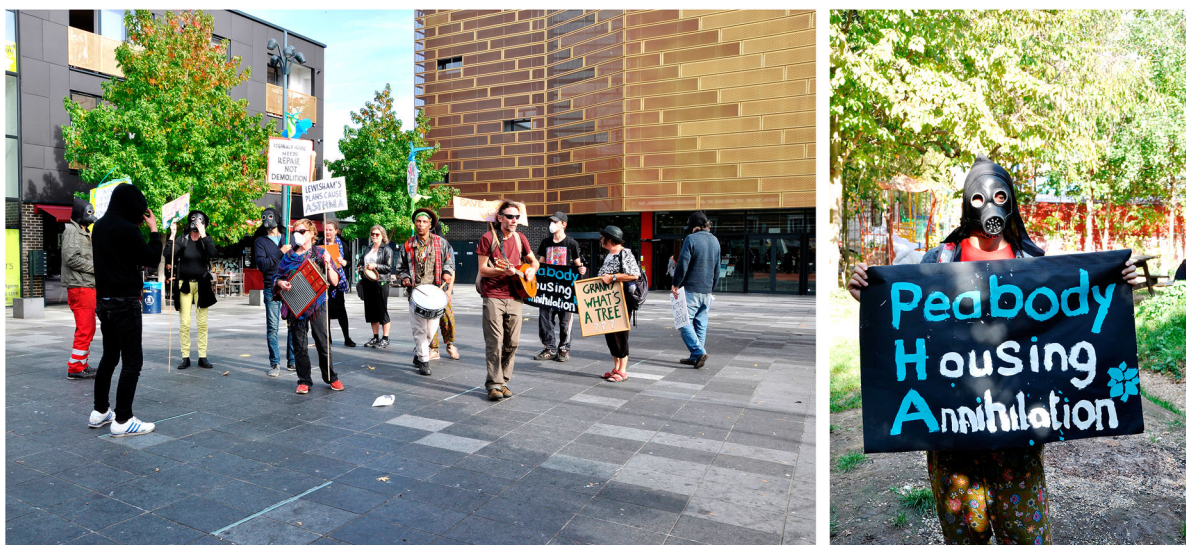


FIGURE 1. A protest using musical improvisation and self-made banners to express opposition to the destruction of Tidemill Garden and structurally sound council housing, and to the displacement of people from homes and community spaces. The gas masks were an important aspect of protests as Tidemill Garden was found to mitigate air pollution by half (Smith 2017) in an area which has dangerous pollution levels. It also had the first death registered to be caused by air pollution (Laville 2020). Photos: Anita Strasser, 2018.



FIGURE 2. David Aylward performing *Hands Off*, a silent protest through Deptford, leaving red footprints between regeneration sites and ending in Tidemill Garden. David says non-verbal communication is the best way for him to communicate his feelings, with silence creating 'a viscerally connective affective atmosphere' ... to indicate ... a potential social world now lived as collective affect, or a revitalised political one' (Berlant 2011, 231). This performance was to indicate how David and others feel about the gentrification of Deptford. Photos: Anita Strasser, 2018.



FIGURE 3. Protesting the eviction of Tidemill Garden with banners and poetry. The campaign group had collectively prepared for this day, including banners and artistic interventions intended to demonstrate the emotional and material impact of losing this space. They requested that I document everything to have images for subsequent resistance online. Photos: Anita Strasser, 2018.

is experienced as particularly hurtful, with estate regeneration (the demolition of municipal estates to make way for largely private developments) perceived as a deliberate effort to 'cleanse' poorer areas of 'undesirable' people (e.g. Elmer and Dening 2016; Lees and White 2020; Slater 2006; 2017; Watt 2021). Although estate regeneration is justified as housing people on the council waiting list, if this 'necessitates' the displacement of other not well-off people while building predominantly private homes, it raises questions about who regeneration is for. While the lives of some poorer people, particularly those currently in temporary,

overcrowded or substandard accommodation, will be improved by moving into a new development, we know from other regeneration schemes in London that the number of those people is small while a significant number of existing residents are displaced (Boughton 2015; Davidson and Lees 2010; Lees 2016; Southwark Notes 2014).

I worked in dialogue with residents facing displacement from much-loved homes and potentially the area to create images (and texts) for publication. Residents directed their portraits and what to photograph in and of



FIGURE 4. Manuela Benini's *Red Dress Performance* on the day of the Tidemill eviction. This performance is an international dance project which Benini performs at contested sites. Performing this dance provided her with the emotional strength to resist and expose her unprotected body to officers at extremely close proximity. The deafening noise of this silent dance, of a performance symbolising collective and connective affect during a moment when political speech had been silenced, momentarily unsettled bailiffs, creating an affective atmosphere of hope and fostering renewed strength to continue fighting. Photos: Anita Strasser, 2018.



FIGURE 5. 74 white crosses – installation on a protest camp next to Tidemill Garden to commemorate the 74 trees destroyed on the day the local council announced a climate emergency. Lewisham Council claimed it did not have the £50,000 required to redraw the plans according to a design drawn up by an activist architect which would have built the same number of housing units while keeping the garden and a council block. Instead, the council spent £1,400,000 on securing the garden before its destruction. The loss of the garden, a socially-autonomous space for artists, families and 'marginal characters', triggered root shock in many, expressed through this installation mirroring a war cemetery. Photos: Anita Strasser, 2018.

their homes. They often placed themselves in favourite corners or chose meaningful activities and items as motifs. Residents wanted to counter the stigmatising representations of council estates and residents and enact their emotional attachment to home and place. The intention was to humanise displacement through visual (and textual) portraits that tell of residents' at-

homeness in place from which they will be evicted. This has the potential to evoke the root shock dislocation will cause. The published images were accompanied by texts co-written or co-edited with participants, but with texts much too long to include here, I have added short quotes to the captions of Figures 6–10. For full photo-essays, please see *Deptford is Changing* (Strasser 2020).



FIGURE 6. Diann's favourite corner with her fairy collection (left); and Diann in her favourite chair (right). When I took these photos, Diann had been living in uncertainty for 10 years. She says: 'The planned demolition of your home has so many repercussions. It turns your and your kids' life upside down. The council don't understand how it tears you up. I've actually developed agoraphobia. I'm so tense because we don't know, is it another 6 months? 9 months or a few years?' Photos: Anita Strasser, 2018.



FIGURE 7. Bernard in his living room playing the guitar (left); and Bernard's favourite items (right). He says: 'We need better regeneration and think about all people. I agree we need to house the homeless, but will they really be housed in the new development? I don't think it's progress if community centres and council homes are being knocked down. The council need to think about how it will affect us. We tenants, we're not going to win, but please treat us fairly!' Photos: Anita Strasser, 2018.

CONCLUSION: EFFECTING CHANGE THROUGH ALTERNATIVE VISUAL NARRATIVES

The aim of the images was to visibilise gentrification-induced displacement. Adopting a socially and politically engaged photographic practice, working closely in dialogue with residents and campaigners throughout their housing struggles, the generated images offer not only insight into the affective experience of gentrification-induced displacement,

thus contributing to sociological knowledge, but also counternarratives to gentrification from the perspectives of those experiencing displacement. Publishing these with accompanying texts on the *Deptford is Changing* blog (and book), and the photo-essays being shared widely on social media during pivotal moments, enacted a political intervention in the public sphere, disrupting the narrative distributed by the council and developers and generating solidarity and support for the campaigns. This amplification of



FIGURE 8. Nancy's living room (left); and Nancy showing me plants in her garden (right). Gardening gives Nancy emotional strength, particularly now in a life of uncertainty. She says: 'My home, this home, is where my happiness is. Here is where I feel safe, where I feel happy. I feel safe here because I know all my neighbours. I'm afraid to move into a new place. I want to stay here and die here.' Photos: Anita Strasser, 2019.



FIGURE 9. Seph's living room and record collection (left); and Seph in her favourite corner (right). Seph had bought this home thinking it was for life and when I took these photos, she was on the verge of moving out to keep some control over her life. She says: 'How can you call this flat uninhabitable and ready for demolition? Yes, we have some mice and damp in the building but so do lovely Victorian houses. These issues could be resolved easily. And I can't bear the label of the 'sink estate' and the stigma that comes with living on a council estate. The council treat us like we're all stupid and problem tenants.' Photos: Anita Strasser, 2018.

alternative histories and critical voices contributed to exposing housing injustices, politicising the lived experience of gentrification-induced displacement and countering stigmatising representations of council estates and residents. The negative publicity for the council and developer from this arguably contributed to achieving increased percentages of social housing at

two sites (Tidemill and Achilles), better relocation offers for some tenants, the saving of some green space and other 'small' victories.³ This suggests that a socially and politically engaged photographic practice has an important role to play in housing activism and that research which gets actively involved in housing struggles can effect change.



FIGURE 10. Chris looking out over the area from his balcony (left); the view from Chris' front door: the estate which is under threat of demolition (right). He says: 'At first, I didn't buy into the idea of social cleansing. But noticing the changing demographic in the area and experiencing the threat of displacement myself, I do believe it's social cleansing. This is our home! This is where some of our greatest memories happened, and where we feel a strong sense of belonging. I want to live here for the rest of my life!' Photos: Anita Strasser, 2019.

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NOTES

- [1] The whole project involved a mix of social and creative research methods, including interviewing, participant observation, discussion groups and workshops (photography walks, photo-elicitation, model-building, drawing, poetry and others). Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at Goldsmiths, University of London.
- [2] This publishing platform included all material generated through this research including workshop reports and outcomes, personal essays, song lyrics, poetry and other artworks created with or by participants. All participants were keen on having their views published. They wanted decision-makers to know how they experience gentrification and displacement.
- [3] For more information, please see Strasser (2020); Achilles Street Stop and Listen Campaign (www.achillesstreetstopandlisten.wordpress.com); Save Reginald! Save Tidemill! Campaign (www.facebook.com/savetidemill); Estate Watch (www.estatwatch.london).

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