

Boyle Heights Alliance Against Artwashing and Displacement

<http://alianzacontraartwashing.org/en/coalition-statements/bhaaad-the-short-history-of-a-long-struggle>

BHAAAD: The Short History of A Long Struggle

“They need to see what they’re displacing. We here, we’ve worked really hard to create this community. We’ve done marches, masses, protests, meetings after meetings after meetings with our neighborhood, with the city council, with the police. There are families who have lost their children. We’ve fought to create the community as it is now today. We’ve given the best years of our life to this fight. And this is what it’s cost us.”

– **Boyle Heights Resident for 30+ years**

The Boyle Heights Alliance Against Artwashing and Displacement is a coalition born from the complex specificities of Los Angeles. We are new and old friends who find ourselves at the intersection of multiple overlapping struggles. We have come together to confront the current crisis of evictions and abusive real estate practices in L.A., to question the role of culture in gentrification and the narrative of ‘inevitability,’ and to push to stop displacement in its tracks.

WHO WE ARE:

We are: **Union de Vecinos** – tenants, homeowners, immigrants, working class families, seniors, youth, and Boyle Heights movement veterans who have spent the last 30 years of our lives struggling to fend off multiple forms of violence and displacement in the Pico Aliso Projects and in all the surrounding neighborhoods of Boyle Heights.

We are: **Defend Boyle Heights** – the next generation of Angelenos who grew up in, or migrated to Boyle Heights who have joined all our autonomous crews together in the historic struggle for community-defense and collective self-determination in greater East L.A.

We are: **Multiple Affinity Groups of Artists**, from all over Los Angeles, who acknowledge the active role of art in gentrification and have committed solidarity with those fighting for dignified housing and community self-determination in Boyle Heights. We reject the use of our diverse identities, including our queer and trans identities, to wash over the realities of racial and economic violence.

We are: **School of Echoes Los Angeles**, who operate as an open listening process of community-based research, popular education, and organizing to generate experiments in political

action. We are a space for critical reflection on the conditions in working class and poor communities, including (but not limited to) struggles against gentrification and for the human right to housing.

We are: ***The Eastside Local of the Los Angeles Tenants Union*** – part of the city-wide organization formed by renters and residents who do not control their access to shelter. We have come together to defend ourselves against the manipulative development and weak rent control policies, tenant harassment and the unjust evictions which are driving displacement in our city.

The Boyle Heights Alliance Against Artwashing and Displacement asks you to consider:

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE GALLERIES WIN THE CULTURE WAR BY PROMOTING DIVERSE & VIBRANT CHICANO ART – BUT DIRECTLY CONTRIBUTE TO THE DESTRUCTION OF A DIVERSE & VIBRANT NEIGHBORHOOD ?

WILL WE JUST WRING OUR HANDS AND SAY, “WELL, I GUESS GENTRIFICATION INEVITABLE?” WILL WE FEIGN SURPRISE AND PASS THE BLAME?

WHAT WILL WE DO TO STOP THE “INEVITABLE” FROM OCCURRING IN BOYLE HEIGHTS ?

As a collective alliance, we see the flashpoint around PSSST and the other galleries in Boyle Heights as a historic turning point in the political culture of Los Angeles. Across our city, neighbors are beginning to forge ties across traditional race/class and geographic boundaries to confront this shared crisis of evictions and speculative development.

Every day, at least three families are pushed out of Boyle Heights. Art and artists are paving the way for investors to accelerate this process, and as a collective alliance, we see the galleries in Boyle Heights as profiting from that process. For years the people of Boyle Heights have been fighting for their right to stay in their homes and today we ask the galleries to leave our neighborhood immediately.

In this text we've brought together our perspectives on the Fine Art of Gentrification, and we've collected some important histories from the 30 year struggle of Union De Vecinos. These histories ground us in the knowledge of what transpired before there were fancy galleries in the Flats.

“The galleries need to communicate and talk with the community about how they are going to help fight displacement. If they drive our rents up, we're not going to be able to be here. It's not fair. Having struggled so long, we don't deserve to be ignored, nor to be driven out of our community.”

– BHAAAD & Union de Vecinos Member

ART & DISPLACEMENT: THE TURNING POINT

If you trace the steps of the gentrification process — the conversion of a neighborhood of working class communities into one designed for and populated by wealthier classes, you will find a distinct pattern: development and real estate speculators have their eyes trained on the arrival of artists as the moment to start accumulating property. A 2007 article in Bloomberg gives this advice to real estate investors: “Want to know where a great place to invest in real estate will be five or 10 years from now? Look at where artists are living now.”

Artists are not a singular class economically. In the neoliberal world we live in, many artists have become willing pawns. Some are even investing in the displacement of their neighbors by moving resources and capital into disinvested spaces and widely publicizing the virtues of the “transformation,” “pioneering,” or “revitalization” they are leading.

However, many artists and cultural workers in Los Angeles are sick and tired of being used in the process of gentrification and are seeking meaningful ways to refuse their participation in the cultural economy of displacement. We see the rancor around PSSST as a turning point, as the housing crisis and the intensifying neoliberal squeeze confront every aspect of our lives with vastly differing urgencies depending on our race, gender, and class.

We are fighting for the diversity of our neighborhoods and the dignity of our neighbors. We are sick of our friends and neighbors and own families getting harassed and evicted. We are also fighting to reclaim our own creativity from the jaws of complicity. We are tired of our art practices being coopted to prop up other people’s speculative development interests. We want to take this crucial moment to redefine which artistic solidarities and critical social movements are needed in Los Angeles today. To contextualize what is so threatening about this influx of galleries; to really understand why their placement in our community is so detrimental, we must also look at their entry within the broader context of development in the Boyle Heights community. We need to recognize the multiple processes of gentrification that have already occurred here over the last few decades; and to mark the demolition of the Pico Aliso public housing as a significant moment which signaled the loss of the largest concentration of public housing west of the Mississippi.

In 1996, Pico Gardens and Aliso Village lost over 900 units from the Aliso Village and Pico Gardens public housing projects. Later in 1999, Boyle Heights lost more than 250 families in rent-controlled units, along with local businesses and a supermarket, for the construction of the Metropolitan Transit Authority Goldline. In 2005, we lost another 60 rent controlled homes for the expansion of the Hollenbeck Police Station. There are plans to demolish 1,175 rent controlled units in Wyvernwood and to displace those families to build 4,150 market rate units.

Across the street on the SEARS lot, another 1,000 units of market rate housing is being built a few steps from the soon-to-be rebuilt 6th Street bridge, adjacent to the new galleries entering our community. The presence of international art-world capital, in the context of these public and private developments will contribute, on an exponential level, to the displacement of Boyle Heights community members.

IF THERE ARE OTHER GALLERIES IN BOYLE HEIGHTS, WHY WAS PSSST SINGLED OUT?

PSSST is just one part of a larger effort to impose an “Arts District” on the post-industrial neighborhood, sometimes known as “The Flats”. There have already been several protests against other galleries here, long before the PSSST space opened its doors.

One of the red flags about PSSST was the deep contradiction between the language used to promote the space, and the actual impact that such a space can have on the housing market and on the life of a very low-income community living in constant resistance against displacement; a community which

is consistently ignored every time someone plans “improvements” for them, or desires to impose cultural “relevance”.

PSSST is a modern, white-walled venue that caters to an upscale vision of the art world. But it’s also a PR-savvy organization which has marshalled the rhetorics of “diversity” and “inclusion” to carefully frame itself as a progressive “queer/feminist” space with the intention to support ‘underrepresented artists’.

CREATIVITY AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY MAY BE DRIVING CAPITALISM ON THE REPRESENTATIONAL LEVEL, BUT THEY ARE NOT AMELIORATING THE EFFECTS OF ITS VIOLENCE.

The PSSST Programming looks worthwhile, thoughtful, and interesting. It has all the surface-level qualities of “serving the community” that one might want in an art gallery. But only a block away from PSSST, the Boyle Heights residents have been fighting displacement and multiple forms of violence for decades. The eviction notices are already being posted.

The “PSSST Gallery” was purchased in 2014 by an undisclosed investor who dropped over a million dollars into the purchase and architectural renovation of the former warehouse building. The investor has given the PSSST gallerists a twenty-year, rent-free lease to do artistic programming. Concerns had been raised that the building could very easily be flipped and resold again to the highest bidder. In PSSST we see, once again, the convergence of real estate investment and art.

Many nearby families are extremely low-income, including some who get by on as little as \$12,000 a year. These families have been able to thrive and to take care of each other in Boyle Heights for generations. But if their rent begins to increase, even slightly, towards that which is now occurring in other eastside “Artistic Districts,” those families are justifiably concerned that **THEY WILL BECOME HOMELESS.**

All the progressive intentions in the world cannot stop the blunt mechanisms of urban real estate speculation. Because of this, The “PSSST Gallery” should be seen primarily for what it is: an investment vehicle, which should be seen only secondarily as a “Cultural Institution”. The primary effects of the space, regardless of artistic programming, will be to drive up property values and directly contribute to raising rents in the surrounding residential neighborhoods.

The galleries need to know about Boyle Heights history, but we also want to put our history out there for ourselves, for all of us to record our own sense of place. If the galleries care about acting against displacement, then they need to understand the depth of the contradictions between the things we’ve been promised by non-profits and the lies they continue to sell us.

The ongoing whitewashing of our history is now being clearly fueled by corporate green-washing, “transit”-washing, pink-washing, and “affordable housing”-washing. The constant advertisements for a “safe, progressive, walkable, livable” city full of “art,” often turn out to be another set of fluffy promises that are just used to “wash” over these uglier processes of economic injustice.

We need to reject the triumph of superficial identity politics without a consideration for class. The question of whether the gallery is “for-profit” or “non-profit” also does not make a difference to us. Serious damage has been done in the community by non-profit institutions, foundations, public agencies, and private/public investment – causing the displacement of over 2000 families from Boyle Heights, the loss of three supermarkets, and the disempowerment of local communities over the last 20 years.

Since 1996, over 3 billion public dollars have been invested in Boyle Heights to expand “Transit Oriented Development” along and around 1st Street, and at Sears and Wyvernwood, to grow the Gold Line, and to build new market rate housing; none of which has guaranteed a right of return for any of the low-income families that have been displaced from the neighborhood.

“This all started with the master plans in downtown and the River Redevelopment, and there has already been plenty of displacement in Little Tokyo. We went to Council meetings about the new 6th Street Bridge which is bringing the downtown “Arts District” right across the river. We are fighting against the displacement of old businesses on 1st Street and on Whittier, and even though we do want new jobs, we don’t want to see any more displacement. Low-income renters & small businesses are being served evictions all around the galleries. We are already up to our necks fighting this.”

– East Side L.A. Tenants Union member

Just as an example, close to 900 families were displaced between 1996 and 1999 from the neighborhood adjacent to the gallery. All of this happened with the blessing of a church, the endorsement of the local non-profits, and the celebration of politicians. The beneficiaries were a for-profit corporation, several non-profit organizations and a developer. 320 of the displaced very low-income families lived right next door to where the PSSST gallery is now located. Their buildings were replaced by 46 houses that were sold to people making 10 times the income of the families that used to live there. So the issue for us is less a question of Who is doing the damage, but What damage is being done.

WE DIDN’T CREATE A BINARY SITUATION, CAPITALISM DID.

In raising a critique around PSSST and the rest of the so-called Arts District, the coalition of dissenting voices have been accused of creating a “binary situation”, and an “us vs. them” environment. The truth is, polarization is exactly what we are trying to fight.

This is a polarization that was here long before us. Unfortunately, it’s the basic geometry of capitalism. The uneven development of urban wealth and opportunity is as central to the brand of Los Angeles™, as it is central to the engine which drives the neoliberal economy.

“If we find ourselves forced to choose which of our friends to offer solidarity to, in the middle of an economic war-zone, well then we are being forced, against social tranquility, to give solidarity to our friends who are poor, who are facing violence, to our friends on the front-lines of eviction who have asked for our support. We also have friends who may profit from the gentrification of Boyle Heights. No-one ever wants to be stuck in the middle – but when you

find yourself there, you gotta prioritize the friend who is more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. It's basic."

– Artist, Tenants Union Member, born & raised in L.A.

Our social system has clearly adapted to pit us all against each other in a war of desperate speculation. But here we are living through the mess. Ignoring the binaries that this harsh system imposes disregards the fact that an eviction notice is often a matter of life and death in Los Angeles. To dismiss the call to act in refusal as “binary” reveals the pervasive discomfort of those with resources and relative security regarding their housing, job opportunities, and access to health care. The structural realities of low-income Angelenos may seem utterly invisible to many in the L.A. art world and to new residents in Los Angeles.

The gallerists currently targeting Boyle Heights may think their economy is benign for now, but they are banking on that Flip of the Coin that will grow careers and cash from the flipping of disinvested warehouses and low-income apartment complexes in Boyle Heights. There is no doubt that the galleries are speculating on the likelihood of gentrification as the inevitable return on their financial investments.

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE LONG STRUGGLE IN “THE FLATS”

The Boyle Heights warehouse district which is currently being land-banked by investors like Vera Campbell towards the creation of a future “Arts District”, has already seen decades of militant neighborhood struggles over jobs, police abuse and gang violence, environmental racism and institutional disinvestment. The families in Union de Vecinos have marched in this area for years seeking peace and justice for their neighborhood. Before capital fled the flats, the women in Union de Vecinos gave the best years of their lives to fight against bulldozers, institutional neglect, gang violence, and police occupation. They saved their homes against all odds, they fought for better education for their children, they created safer streets, and they started one of the first copwatch programs to defend their children against racist policing. Their struggle and their labor is the reason that this neighborhood is now seen as a “safe” place for investment and blue chip galleries today.

“The community has done a lot of work and has sacrificed a lot in order to get to where we are. Many people have offered their sweat, their labor, and their energies to create this community that we’ve been able to enjoy. Now all these new developments are coming and erasing all the hard work we’ve devoted to our community.”

– Boyle Heights Resident for 30+ years

Boyle Heights in general is a community built and rebuilt upon past dispossessions, which has always welcomed strangers from elsewhere with generosity. In 1905 the Russian community which was fleeing conscription and religious persecution moved into the Flats, followed by a large Jewish community in the 1910s. In the 1920s, with the expansion of the railroad yards, the neighborhood saw the development of the warehousing and industrial district along the tracks. Racist restrictive housing covenants compelled a very diverse community, including African-Americans, Mexican-Americans, and European-Americans, to settle in Boyle Heights, accompanied by successive waves of Mexican immigration to Los Angeles.

All of these communities came together and negotiated the creation of what we now understand to be “Boyle Heights.” In a 1939 Federal Housing report, Boyle Heights was described as “hopelessly heterogeneous with diverse and subversive racial elements on almost every single block.” The first wave of internal displacements occurred in the 1930s with the Public Works Administration slum tenement clearance in the areas of Pico Gardens, Aliso Village, and Ramona Gardens. This displacement was a precursor of the Chavez Ravine struggle in the 1950s and 60s. The displacement in the 30s was followed in the 40s by Japanese internment, which also pushed hundreds of people from their homes in the neighborhood.

In the 1940s Aliso Village, Pico Gardens, Estrada Courts, and Ramona Gardens were systematically repopulated through the development of housing as part of the “War Effort.” The original families who lived in those areas never came back. The residents of Pico Gardens and Aliso Village are part of a long struggle for the preservation of their homes. Since that time, the families in these developments and their nearby neighbors have been engaged in a fight to stay in their homes. They have dealt with the police as an occupational force, with political prosecution, and with the dangers of environmental racism and segregation which threaten their lives and stability on a constant basis.

“Boyle Heights has been so vulnerable in terms of cancer, allergies, asthma and environmental racism. During the demolition of Pico Gardens soil samplings taken by residents showed high levels of lead that were hazardous to the residents’ health. People are already getting sick from the noise and contaminants from the freeway and the new dust coming from the destruction of the 6th St Bridge. We fought to put up that wall against the freeway. And Exide and Farmer John continue to pollute the area. In Pico Gardens they are reducing the water now and there is a new, mysterious bad smell all around the neighborhood.” – Boyle Heights Resident

After the self-determination movements and the urban uprisings in the 1960s and 70s, the federal government devised an urban policy known as ‘spatial deconcentration’ – meant to scatter and break up the power of militant, self-organized people of color by pushing them outside of the core of America’s inner cities. That policy was primarily implemented by Community Redevelopment Agencies and Housing and Urban Development (HUD), not to mention the overincarceration of the “War on Drugs”. While it has taken 40 years to bear its full fruit, the effects of this policy are now clearly visible, as red-lining, predatory lending, and the systematic dismantling of public housing has taken a major toll on our neighborhood.

“First we fought demolitions and displacements and gangs and police violence, now we are fighting public housing privatization and the gallery district. We’ve fought to get out the vote and create leaders in the community. We fought for speed bumps, for day care and community security programs. We fought for parks and for the Community Tech Center on 4th St. We fixed the broken streets, we brought our school system up from substandard to a much higher level of education and we brought in grants and scholarships for after school programs so our children could go to college. 20 years ago, we had these community forums where we discussed what we wanted, and what we really wanted was jobs, safety, accessible dignified housing, and better education... We never just “stay inside the house”, we come out and fight. We want to know what these new developments are going to bring us other than displacement.”

– BHAAAD & Union de Vecinos Member, Boyle Heights Resident for 30+ years

These conditions of demolition, displacement, and continued privatization have also been exacerbated in Boyle Heights by attacks on immigrant families. The resident activists in this community defied the I.N.S. and committed to fight against the deportation and division of their families created by the Immigration Reform and Control Act; an act which initially promised amnesty to thousand of immigrants but actually threatened workers with deportation and families with separation and poverty. On December 14th 1986, the Dolores Mission in Boyle Heights declared itself a Sanctuary for all immigrants escaping the war in El Salvador and poverty in Mexico. It was one of the first churches in the US to declare itself a sanctuary for all immigrants.

Around the same time, the LAPD's "Operation Hammer" become an occupying force in the community, harassing and abusing youth in the projects, with promises of a reduction of crime and violence. Then and now, an arrest or an encounter with the police meant a threat to a family's housing and the destruction of a youth's future.

“Between 1988 and 1992 were the worst years, so many deaths and shootings and stabbings in those years. Those were years of ducking down in the middle of the street, holding our babies to avoid drive-bys. And at night the gangs would shoot from the rooftops, so much that it was almost like shooting stars. The police used to plant drugs on the kids, and the cops would take the kids and make them fight near the factories. The violence was so intense, there were no jobs, and there was so much tension. Before we didn't even sleep in our beds – we'd sleep on the floor – back when the drive-bys used to happen. Almost every day there were deaths. “

– Boyle Heights Resident, 25+ years

The women who lived in the projects organized themselves as “Comité Pro Paz en el Barrio” to monitor the police and its activities in the neighborhood; to stop false arrests, harassment and violence. Also concerned about the youth violence, the women in the projects, with the help of Dolores Mission, looked for alternative response to jails as a form of solving crime. They launched a preemptive strike against the notion that the neighborhood was a war zone, as the police described it, and they kicked the police out of the projects entirely. In 1988 an alternative school for youth-at-risk was created in Dolores Mission and a “March for Jobs” was organized around the factories that now are being populated by the galleries.

This jobs campaign planted the seeds and built the community support for the now famous Homeboy Industries. These same factories are the place where the phrase “Nothing Stops a Bullet Like a Job” was born.

Yet the efforts of the residents of this neighborhood to stop abuse and reduce violence were rewarded with more demolition and displacement. While the community had begun to take control and transform the violence problem, H.U.D. decided to dismantle public housing, by claiming that “this is a blighted, weak and terrified community”. In 1993, through HOPE VI, the Federal Government authorized the demolition of over 1200 units of public housing, hidden behind their false promises of “a better life”. The local non-profits, their political representatives, their church, and many community leaders supported this demolition, but nobody asked the people what they wanted. The women in the projects

fought to change the plan, they continued fighting, and eventually they won the right to stay in their development.

“First we were ignored by the city and occupied by the police. We’ve spent 25 years fighting to save rent stabilized apartments and affordable public housing. Many non-profits have come and proposed things for us. Mostly they’ve just offered us promises in support of lies. In the Union de Vecinos, we’ve learned that the people who choose to fight are those that are able to stay. In Aliso Village, the women were beaten up by the police, and they were terrorized, but they continued their struggle. 685 families were eventually pushed out. But south of First Street, 250 Pico Gardens and Las Casitas families stayed and fought, and we are still here today.”

– U.D.V. Member, Pico Gardens Resident for 30+ years

Boyle Heights was the first part of the city that fought violence and changed our situation through self-determination. When the the ‘92 rebellion happened, Boyle Heights was already organized. This is one of the first communities that said that the police are not essential. Ironically, this community was one of the first ones that experienced the attempts of public housing dismantling and neoliberal privatization – and later gentrification.

“In 2013, H.A.C.L.A (The Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles) wanted to once again privatize the public housing in Pico Gardens and Las Casitas, but the community fought back. We won the initial fights, but we are still facing this continued threat. H.A.C.L.A.’s budget is constantly being reduced by the federal government and their solution is to move our publicly funded homes into the private sector. The neighborhood is attractive and near downtown, plus this new “Arts District” will add tons of market pressure for them to continue pushing their agenda. How can we defend public housing and rent stabilized housing in Boyle Heights, if we’re forced to fight the government in addition to non-profits who are in the “affordable” development game?”

– Union de Vecinos Member, Boyle Heights Resident for 30+ years

BEFORE THE GALLERIES CAME, WE EXPERIENCED 30 YEARS OF PROMISES THAT TURNED OUT TO BE LIES:

LA has been facing gentrification and neoliberal restructuring for many decades now. San Francisco, Seattle, New York, and much of rural America are now sending waves of economic migrants to the ever-so-slightly cheaper shores of Southern California. Poor people are being pushed out of Los Angeles in droves. As with all “global” cities, the Los Angeles city government explicitly sees itself as an entrepreneurial corporation with a development mission of promoting an economy of unfettered growth, promoted by tourism, culture and “world class” architecture.

The wealth that was stripped from poor homeowners during the 2008 foreclosure crisis has now been put to work in a financial industry awash in cash, and a new monied class is profiting from the safe investments of real estate and occasionally of Fine Art. The increasing class polarization has also led to an entrenched explosion of poverty, and a growing class of super rich investors who have sought out real estate as a safe haven to hide and to circulate capital. City governments provide investors with tax write-offs which incentivize speculation and contribute to skylines full of empty luxury towers.

No Angeleno could plausibly deny the obvious crisis of homelessness in our city. However there is a massive eviction crisis which is driving it which remains largely invisible. Just down the block from the Boyle Heights “Arts District”, the eviction notices are popping up fast. Low-income families and long-standing community businesses are being kicked to the curb by new owners who see the opportunity to flip their properties to a new class of renter.

Boyle Heights has sheltered dispossessed families pushed out of places like San Francisco’s Mission district and from Central American war zones. Now it is beginning to shelter precarious cultural workers with higher incomes. The big warehouses and cheap housing looks ripe for the taking, and for those who’ve been pushed here from elsewhere, many see this new settlement as perhaps unfortunate, but unavoidable and yes, “inevitable”.

As a coalition made up of people from many different backgrounds, we reject the narrative of “inevitability”, and we have unity in our demand that all the art galleries in the industrial section of Boyle Heights immediately leave. The nature of our demand has to do with the knowledge of the abusive history of promises and lies waged on the people of Boyle Heights by the nonprofits, the state and those who capitalize on notions of beautification and revitalization while extracting value from the labor of the community.

Many long-term neighbors have made it clear that they do not see a possibility for reform at PSSST, nor do they have a need for diverse programming of “underrepresented artists” which would occur in the Gallery.

Boyle Heights is full of organized autonomous movements, not only the Defend Boyle Heights crews, Union de Vecinos, and the Eastside L.A. Tenants’ Union, but also the Street Vendors, the Mariachis, the Ovarian Psycos-cycles, the Immigrant Youth Coalition, and the Day Laborers who have all organized autonomously and who stand in solidarity with our call for community self-determination of land and space in the neighborhood.

We see this as an historic moment for forging forms of urban resistance and transformative justice. Gentrification is never inevitable. It is the result of actions and policies that can be changed through collective direct action. We challenge everyone, but especially non-profit developers, land-bankers and gallerists to reconsider their collective role in the future of Los Angeles.

NEIGHBORS SEE THE NEW GALLERIES AS A DIRECT ECONOMIC THREAT TO THEIR SURVIVAL. THEREFORE, THE COALITION MEMBERS OF BHAAAD DEMAND THAT THE GALLERIES LEAVE BOYLE HEIGHTS IMMEDIATELY IN ORDER FOR THE NEIGHBORHOOD TO DETERMINE ITS OWN FATE.