



## The Happy Few and The Unhappy Many: Endangered Artists in Global Cities

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*Translated from the French by John Barrett*

*While participating or having participated in reshaping urban spaces, artists seem to be increasingly driven away from city centers due to steep rents and are forced move farther and farther from the heart of metropolises. Will the global contemporary city, like the mythical figure Cronus devouring his own children, exclude its artists? Boris Grésillon examines the dynamics at work in four metropolitan centers: New York, London, Tokyo, and Paris.*

The global city (Sassen 1991) is predominantly defined by economic criteria as a metropolis in which all financial command functions are concentrated at an international level. However, cultural criteria are being progressively integrated into this definition. Analysts have been taking into consideration historical heritage, the ability to attract “cultural tourists,” and, with the emergence of the burgeoning contemporary art scene, the presence of a thriving art market and large-scale contemporary art showcases as features that set a global city apart.

At the turn of the millennium, the key innovative concept, which was to become a mantra for the authors of American and European urban policies, was “creative classes” and “creative cities.” Their leading advocate Richard Florida<sup>1</sup> believes that artists and intellectuals form the core of the creative class (Florida 2002).

This growing convergence between the artistic sphere and the economic sector is anything but incidental. As Florida was publishing his polemical works on social and economic theory, geographer and critical economist Ann Markusen wrote several articles on the concept of “artistic dividend” (Markusen and King 2003), in which she argues that artists in their own right are economic actors, whose concentration in urban areas hugely benefits metropolitan and regional development.

The figure of the “creator” and/or “artist” thus occupies a prominent position.<sup>2</sup> One expects to encounter the creative classes in the geographical heart of a city. What is the reality *in situ*? What does Sassen’s analysis of recent developments in the four global cities of New York, London, Tokyo, and Paris reveal?<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I am not going to rake over the controversy aroused by the theories and the criticism of some members of the scientific community.

<sup>2</sup> To be precise, I am referring exclusively to visual artists, (painters, sculptors, photographers, video- and filmmakers, etc.) and those in the performing arts (musicians, dancers, actors, choreographers, stage directors, etc.), for both these broad categories of artists are among those most vulnerable to gentrification and exclusion. By “artist,” I mean artists who are professionals and officially registered with the “chamber of artists” or an equivalent structure (as in the case of Paris mentioned below).

<sup>3</sup> Given the twofold movement of globalization and metropolization, there are now more global cities than in the early 1990s. Los Angeles, Hong Kong, and Singapore—and, according to certain authors, Beijing, Shanghai, and São Paulo—can all be added to the list as emerging global cities. For the purpose of this article, we will limit ourselves to the four main global centers, but an extended analysis of the phenomenon would be advisable to comprehend the true extent of the trend.

## New York—micro-havens

New York’s artistic imagination is associated with the 1960s, with Andy Warhol’s Factory and its renowned house band the Velvet Underground, with the East Village folk music scene and Bob Dylan, and the New York School in the visual arts and literature. These eminent artists, all based in Manhattan at one stage or another in their careers, forged the legend of a “city that never sleeps.”

Today, the situation on the ground is scarcely comparable; unprecedented increases in rents over the past decade have made it nearly impossible for ordinary New Yorkers, let alone emerging artists, to find affordable accommodation or working space in Manhattan. For example, rent for a 400-square-foot (37-square-meter) retail space on the Lower East Side or in Chinatown can cost currently up to \$5,000 per month. Gentrification (Zukin 1982) has also banished artists from much of Brooklyn and Queens. Artists—as well as other fragile populations—have all been driven from Manhattan, and condemned to live even further out beyond the bridges on the subway network. Referring to the Bushwick neighborhood in Brooklyn, a recent article by sociologist Mary Kosut (2016) lays bare the prevailing frustration: “New York artists are among the evicted and displaced. [...] Even employed artists cannot afford to live and work here.”

**Figure 1. A street scene in the Bushwick neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, with boarded-up shops and mini-galleries.**



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When artists attempt to resist gentrification, as they did in Bushwick, which still hosts about sixty small galleries, they are only pushing back the inevitable. Moreover, they are at a remove from Manhattan’s official network of galleries and the art market. Given steep rents and the impossibility of renting work studios, some artists have transformed their small apartments into micro-galleries. Others exhibit ephemeral works behind a simple window, or even on the sidewalk. We are witnessing an increasingly distinct spatial separation between Manhattan’s official cultural institutions (*inter alia*, the Metropolitan Museum, Broadway, major commercial galleries) and New York’s volatile artists’ community, who somehow manage to survive by scraping along in the suburbs in circumstances that are scarcely conducive to creative ventures, all while continuing to frequent the artistic milieu downtown.

## London—an artistic metropolis devoid of artists?

London also enjoyed a reputation as a volcanic cultural metropolis in the 1960s and 1970s, beginning with bands like the Rolling Stones, the Who, the Kinks, and Pink Floyd, and later a burgeoning punk culture spearheaded by the Sex Pistols and the Clash. Like New York, London

today remains associated with these two prodigiously creative decades, when artists lived and worked in inner-city districts.

London has seen dramatic changes, however. While contemporary art is hailed even in the city's most established cultural temples (Tate Modern, the Whitechapel Gallery, the Barbican Art Gallery), visual artists, musicians, actors, and dancers are no longer able to live in the heart of London. As in New York, the culprit is rampant rent increases in the city center.

Over the last five years, numerous small-scale cultural sites have been forced to close their doors, unable to keep pace with rising rents; recently, even the legendary club Fabric has suffered the same fate. Artists, whose income is substantially lower than the national average wage, are forced either to simply abandon their profession or to acquiesce to working part-time so as to scrape by. The choice is stark: to group together to find accommodation in abandoned industrial premises with little comfort, or to settle ever further out in suburbia, isolated from the throbbing center (London's public transport costs being exceedingly prohibitive)—or to move away from the capital altogether. The phenomenon has become so acute that newly elected mayor Sadiq Khan and Justine Simons, deputy mayor for Culture and the Creative Industries, have decided to take action. They have acquired land in southwest London to build work studios and rehearsal spaces with protected rents, which should form the basis for “new creative ventures.” But this does not resolve the fundamental problem.

### **Tokyo—the Olympian specter of 2020**

Browsing through the world map of contemporary art in the recently published *Atlas global* (Grataloup and Fumey 2016), it comes as a surprise to find no mention of Tokyo, capital of the planet's third largest economic power. Not only is the Japanese capital notably lacking in a dynamic network of global galleries, it also lacks a significant art market and a major international art fair. In sharp contrast to recent cultural policy developments observed in other global powerhouses, the administration in Tokyo has constantly favored traditional arts over the contemporary. While the private sector is gradually beginning to take an interest in contemporary art, it is not yet ready to replace the state in supporting a sector that is (quite rightly) highly speculative and risky. The same holds true for the performing arts. Here, too, it is the traditional theatrical forms, such as *kabuki*, *noh*, and *bunraku*, as well as traditional music and dance, that benefit from state subsidies, not contemporary performing arts such as *butoh* or techno.

Artists mainly cluster in Tokyo's metropolitan area and in its neighboring port city Yokohama.. Here again, rocketing rents have meant that the city's downtown districts have been emptied of their artists. The initial wave of gentrification took place in the 1980s, when entire downtown districts were razed to be replaced by skyscrapers. A second wave followed in the 1990s, spurred by population growth and the financial bubble. A third phase of gentrification unleashed itself in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis, from which Japan is recovering at a snail's pace (Saito 2015). Inner-city neighborhoods such as Shimokitazawa, San'ya, Toyosu, and Kachidoki, previously industrial or working-class districts, are today becoming gentrified. Other downtown districts will soon follow.

With the upcoming 2020 Olympics, Tokyo is getting a new look. In poorer neighborhoods composed mostly of one-storied houses, such as the Musashi-Koyama district, we can witness a brutal “clean-up” to similar that which took place prior to the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Luxury housing is also being constructed. Against such a backdrop, local city councilors have turned a deaf ear to artists' pleas for affordable housing and workplaces; instead, the Tokyo metropolitan government is focusing on coordinating the Games, with the hope of reaping profits for the city.

## Paris—the *banlieue* as an alternative?

As Sassen pointed out in the 1990s, Paris occupies an exceptional place among global cities. Unlike New York, London, and Tokyo, the French capital is not a prominent financial hub *per se*, yet it offsets this by dint of its dominant cultural role in the global arena, and by the concentration of world-famous cultural sites that attract millions of tourists each year.

Nevertheless, successive waves of gentrification have spared neither Paris nor its artists, who unwittingly have played the ambiguous role of pioneers, before themselves becoming victims of the gentrification they engendered, following the now well-known cycle (Ley 2003). And yet, in 2016, 50% of visual artists still lived and worked in central Paris,<sup>4</sup> as did an equivalent proportion of performing artists. Gentrification prevails in Paris, but with less brutal consequences than in the other three cities studied. While Parisian rents have risen sharply over the last decade, they have not done so to the same extent as in New York, London, and Tokyo.

**Figure 2. A view of the exhibition *Odarek* at the gallery Les Instants Chavirés in the Parisian suburb of Montreuil, 2015**



Photo: Aurélien Mole. Courtesy of the artists. All rights reserved.

The trend is clear, however: some 15 years ago, Parisian artists would never have envisaged settling in the *banlieues*,<sup>5</sup> but now they are increasingly moving out beyond the city's ring road in the hope of finding larger creative spaces and more affordable accommodation. Parisian suburbs such as Montreuil, Pantin, Bagnolet, and Montrouge are gaining concentrations of artists. These

<sup>4</sup> Source: Maison des Artistes, 2016 results.

<sup>5</sup> Parisian artists are by no means the exception in this regard. For example, in an interview with David Ley, a sculptor living in Vancouver commented: "Artists need authentic locations. You know how the artists hate the suburbs. They're too confining" (Ley 2004). This quote is revealing, for one should understand that artists do not move out to the suburbs willingly, but rather because they are forced to. This negative choice weighs on them, because in relinquishing urban centers they are also forgoing all the urban amenities that are to be found there, and they are effectively isolating themselves from that which they actually need to develop as artists.

new “creative hubs” (Boichot 2010) are also attracting intellectual professionals—managers and engineers—at the risk of upsetting the social structure of these suburbs.

### **The happy few versus the unhappy many?**

New York, London, Tokyo, and Paris each retain their specific characteristics. Paris distinguishes itself from the others thanks to the existence of mechanisms through which the city authorities support artists, enabling them to remain in the city center. Artists in New York and London have little recourse to such public schemes, but thanks in great part to efforts by private foundations, local patrons, and prominent art collectors, these cities are able to subsidize some emerging artists. Those benefiting, however, are mostly visual artists, for there are considerably fewer support mechanisms in place for theater and dance companies.

Beyond contextual differences, the four global cities studied have been following a similar evolution, each characterized by unbridled capitalism generating a fresh rise in real-estate prices and consequently new socio-spatial divisions where artists, alongside other vulnerable categories of city residents, have become victims. Everywhere, we witness the same level of negative impact, the same inability of public authorities to regulate a real-estate market that has gotten out of control; everywhere, free rein is now given to investors and speculators operating on a global level. The ramifications are staring us in the face: city centers streamlined from above, losing their diversity, losing their soul through the loss of their unconventional artists. The city of the super-rich admits only the “happy few,” the artists hailed by critics and the institutionalized art world.

Can art, whose function is to bring people together, resist this and continue to play its consciousness-awakening role? Does the global city make sense if it transforms itself into an instrument of exclusion rather than inclusion? Finally, is the global geography of artistic creativity undergoing an overhaul? Even if London, New York, Paris, and Tokyo retain their major cultural institutions and burgeoning art markets, we are now heading towards a multipolar world. At one alternate pole are culturally emerging metropolises such as Shanghai, Beijing, and Moscow; at another, bastions of the avant-garde such as Berlin, Brussels, and Barcelona. In these places, unknown artists can still enjoy the right to citizenship, or even a “right of urban centrality” which they have lost elsewhere. But for how much longer?

*Dedicated to the memory of Matthieu Giroud, geographer and activist for the right to the city for all, who tragically died in the terrorist attack on the Bataclan music hall in Paris on November 13, 2015.*

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