

In a Matter of Time

By Ultra-red

“We come from your future.” This joker’s refrain has echoed throughout the history of our collective. It has taunted us and challenged our grip on what it means to make art, particularly political art, and speaks to the continual movement of an analysis derived from the experience of one context to another. With each iteration the refrain has carried new resonances, new assignments of the “we” and of the “you.”^[1]

Although we have described Ultra-red as a sound art collective, many of our members conduct cultural research as organizers and popular educators. Our research mainly investigates listening processes that dismantle participation in its value-form and bring a future of justice closer at hand. The reflections that follow set the stage for a lengthier study and are a preface for what may come.

FIRE follies

Ruins have long stimulated the imagination of aristocrats—and bankers. In the eighteenth-century landed-gentry employed craftsmen to build fake Roman ruins called follies that often sat on a hill at a distance from the main house. Or they rose from the center of a garden with mock stoicism. These designed-to-be-decrepit towers marked the landed lord’s proximity to the enlightened values of an ancient past. Signifiers of the moral supremacy of property ownership.

As a form of seeing the future, *speculation* refers to looking ahead from a position of advantage. As a visual strategy, speculation requires architecture of its own, a watchtower, or *specula* in Latin. If we think of the tower as made from ivory—the remains of living creatures seen only as raw material for speculation—then we begin to understand speculation as an activity whose conditions of existence leave hard work and mortal risk to those closer to the ground.

The ruinous aesthetics of speculation persist today in the illustrated renderings of new development. Postmodern landscapes envision a world predicated on the erasure of the homeless, the poor, the immigrant worker, and of resistance. The vacant stare of towers that were never intended for occupants then appear when the renderings become concrete. Wrapped in eco-glass, the new towers house nothing but cash from global investors. For the rest of us, there is a housing shortage.^[2]

In economics, speculation refers to the drive to circulate surplus—an exponentially growing surplus that swells from the yawning gap between productivity and wages. It demands new frontiers for capital investment. When those frontiers fail to appear, as is inevitable in a finite system, speculative capital cannibalizes “under-performing” property. When we look at the maps of Los Angeles that show booms in new luxury development, we notice a startling parallel.

The hot spots correspond to two historical processes: “redlining” communities of color and the relocation to the global south of manufacturing where Los Angeles’ working class once eked out a degree of economic security. ^[3]

In 1999, the elimination of the Glass-Steagall Act, pursued by Republicans and Wall Street Democrats and then signed into law by Clinton, removed the firewall separating commercial and investment banking and real estate. The reform triggered a chain reaction of corporate mergers. The integration of finance and real estate ushered in accelerated speculation to diverse sectors of the economy. Real estate and development exploded. Economists refer to our current phase of capitalism as a F.I.R.E. economy—the global monopoly of finance, insurance, and real estate. These spectral towers that populate the skyline, FIRE Follies.

Housing activists and anti-gentrification activists around the world argue that the global housing crisis is not a crisis driven by shortage but by real estate speculation. The needs of financial circulation drive ownership and development, not the need to house people. In a finite system, development necessitates displacement and demolition. The crisis is no more natural than the FIRE follies that crowd around the Staples Center.

The crisis has been made. Therefore, it can be unmade.

Raising the flats

Municipal governments across the country have used infrastructural support, zoning, and public relations investment campaigns (such as the designation of arts districts) to incentivize speculation in de-industrialized areas and in neighborhoods where 'under-performing' real estate once provided affordable housing for the poor and low-income communities. In 2012, community members living in Boyle Heights learned of the city’s plan to designate the flats neighborhood an arts district. The area sits to the east of downtown sandwiched between the Los Angeles River and the 101 Freeway. The proposed designation builds upon decades of government intervention attempting to integrate the flats into the speculative economy of downtown real estate. This has been a long process.

In the early part of the 20th century, the flats were one of the few areas in the city where immigrants and people of color could find housing. Before the Army Corp of Engineers channeled the Los Angeles River in the 1940s, the flats were periodically subjected to flooding as water would pour into the neighborhood, streaming industrial waste through the streets. After the channel was built, city officials took advantage of the 1949 Housing Act to replace large areas of the barrio with public housing. Slum clearance provided the first step in remaking the flats into a proper “Gateway to Los Angeles.”

With federal housing funds, the city constructed 1,262 units in four public housing clusters in the flats: Pico Gardens, Pico Extension, Aliso Village, and Aliso Extension. Elsewhere in East Los Angeles, the city built the housing projects Estrada Courts, Ramona Gardens, and Rose Hills. Learning from the mistakes of public housing projects in the eastern United States, Pico-Aliso featured two and three-story structures, eschewing massive towers and spine-blocks. Bands of green space between buildings gave the projects an open feel without adopting the Corbusier model of towers isolated on massive green lawns. Pico-Aliso was designed as a human-scale

urban village.

By the 1980s, state disinvestment had undone the idealism behind Pico-Aliso's planning, and in the 1990s, the Democrats in the Clinton Administration acted upon decades of stigmatization. Funding for maintaining public housing was made contingent upon its demolition and reduced re-development, and Pico-Aliso was awarded such a grant under the Federal HOPE VI program. From the city's perspective, the re-development of Pico-Aliso, along with the Gold Line construction, served its long-term development goals.

Defending making community

In its public rhetoric at the time, the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles (HACLA) promoted the re-generation of Pico-Aliso as bringing improvements to the flats and Boyle Heights in general. With New Urbanism all the rage in planning circles, HACLA boasted that the re-generation would adopt an urban village plan, despite the fact that the new plan turned the existing green spaces into parking lots and driveways. In press statements and city council testimony, HACLA promised that demolishing the projects (while permanently displacing the youth and their families) would eliminate the gangs.

The announced demolition followed years of community organizing by the neighborhood church nonprofit, Proyecto Pastoral. The nonprofit's organizing model had taken inspiration from Liberation Theology and popular education—both of which were articulated in Latin America in resistance to developmentalist ideology, *desarrollismo*. By organizing multiple Bible reading groups, Proyecto Pastoral staff facilitated a weekly dialogue among community members about their living conditions. These dialogues led to the analysis of the forces at work in the neighborhood: the church, the underground drug economy, the police, and the residents. Community members—all of whom were Latinas—then tested their understandings through collective action.

As the learning process continued over the years, the practice of reflecting and taking collective action empowered the women to develop leadership, to organize themselves, and to manage the conflicts in the neighborhood. Since one of the primary motivations for the women in the Bible groups was learning how to deal with the gangs in Pico-Aliso, direct action included facing down threats of gun violence. It also entailed learning how to manage the gangs without relying on the police. By the time HACLA made the claim that demolition would solve the crime problem in the flats, the community had already resolved ways to live with the gangs' members, many of whom were the children and grandchildren of the women who attended Proyecto Pastoral's home Bible groups.

In seeking legitimation for the re-development, the Housing Authority contracted with Proyecto Pastoral to endorse the plan. Proyecto Pastoral's staff rationalized Pico-Aliso's demolition by claiming that God never intended for poor people to live on top of each other, but church members involved in the community process reminded the church staff that, according to its own message of liberation, the community belonged to the residents; after all, no one ever complains about the rich living in luxury towers.

Following the town hall meeting hosted by the church that rolled out the Housing Authority's

plans, residents began mounting their resistance. Forming their own community-based organization, Union de Vecinos (“United Neighbors”), the residents militantly wielded the power to say “no” to the re-development from 1996 to 2001. That absolutist stance gave them the political authority to eventually negotiate for the guaranteed right of return to the projects after the re-development was completed. Out of the 1,262 housing units demolished in Pico-Aliso, HACLA constructed 296 replacement units. Nearly all the units went to the residents who fought collectively to save their housing.^[4]

Winning the guaranteed right of return for every household who stayed unified affirmed for the residents their own power to organize. Throughout the five long years of the struggle, the residents also witnessed the stark contrast between the city’s focus on demolition and displacement as the basis for speculation versus the aspirations of the residents. HACLA officials repeatedly made statements dismissing the community—adhering to the official line that public housing exists only as a temporary housing solution for the poor. The Pico-Aliso residents reminded the city that the community did in fact exist and that it existed in its capacity to resist displacement.

Unlearning fear

Not everyone forgets. One does not forget the sound of a bulldozer having engine failure while it unsuccessfully tries to knock down the public housing buildings that the Housing Authority had condemned as crumbling. One does not forget the sound of the massive wrecking ball used to do the job. Neither does one forget the experience of learning how to make a community by defending it. Memory is a weapon for those whose struggle passes from generation to generation and from one context to another.

Over the years there have been multiple battles. After the fight against the demolition, the residents protested a round of new city fees. That was followed by HACLA’s attempts to privatize management. More recently, the residents have fought the beginnings of a process to dispose of all remaining public housing in Los Angeles. HACLA intends to accomplish this within the next 25 years, thus making way for further speculation with the land underneath Pico-Aliso and every other public housing community. Each of these struggles reminds the residents that any immediate conjuncture of social, political, and economic forces exists in relation to underlying property relations, what Gramsci termed the “organic movement” of capital.^[5]

For long-term public housing residents and members of Union de Vecinos, Delmira Gonzalez, Ana Hernandez, Manuela Lomeli, and Edith Lopez, one battle resonates through another. Taking the time to attend to those resonances has become a crucial listening practice. The residents recall past confrontations in a slow and long-term practice that constructs collective resolve in the present. The women remember how in the 1990s HACLA contracted with the church in a bid to legitimize the plans to displace people. Twenty years later the city is leveraging arts organizations to legitimize plans for an arts district that will usher in the next cycle of speculative real estate. The residents' confrontation with the church twenty years ago emerged out of a process facilitated by that same institution. Likewise, the legacy of Chicano and immigrant resistance embodied in the community arts organization Self Help Graphics empowers the residents today in their resistance to gentrification and displacement.

The parallels between the complicity of the church in the destruction of public housing in the 1990s with today's situation regarding artwashing deeply resonate with the Pico-Aliso residents. The parallels are especially acute with regards to Self-Help Graphics—like Proyecto Pastoral, an institution with tremendous influence in supporting generations of community empowerment. Having relocated to the flats in 2011, blocks away from the Pico-Aliso projects, Self Help Graphics today has a board of directors largely made up of individuals from finance and real estate, some of whom have direct financial stakes in the gentrification of Boyle Heights. Most of the board has no historic connection to the community and to its popular struggle. Consequently, instead of standing with the community to resist skyrocketing rents and mass displacement, Self Help Graphics has endorsed the arts district plan.

For the Pico-Aliso residents, the memory of standing up to the church and divine authority has emboldened them to critique a nonprofit with the cultural legacy of Self Help Graphics due to its support for the arts district. If residents can fearlessly challenge the contradictions between expressed Church values and its practices, they can then make similar critiques of art organizations. The difference is that where the struggle in the 1990s focused on the fate of public housing in the flats, the current impact of gentrification raises rents, evicts tenants, and displaces community members and small businesses across Boyle Heights.

In any community fighting for the right to exist, politics and the cultural practices that embody those politics means conflict. If artists, including radical, anti-capitalist, and anti-racist artists, find it difficult to accept the conflictual nature of this struggle, particularly the struggles of the poor, then we as artists should listen to that difficulty as an invitation to challenge our understanding of the role of art in today's world. Only until those living under threat have the power to say no can fair dialogue take place. Only until "no means no" can the community's dignity be met with respect—*especially* in situations of profound socio-economic, as well as gendered and racialized, inequality.

Análisis de coyuntura

The practice of popular education that is used today by the women in Pico-Aliso has its roots in the 1970s. The liberation church and Latin American movements of armed national liberation adopted tools initially used in literacy campaigns where reading and naming the world acted as a prelude to changing it. Networks of popular education centers across Latin America studied and circulated the theory and participatory practice of *análisis de coyuntura*, or conjunctural analysis. The point of the analysis was not to ignore complexity but to see complexity as the context for action as opposed to serving as an alibi for inaction.^[6]

In Pico-Aliso, the arrival of conjunctural analysis had multiple routes, including a direct one from Latin America through networks within the church. The staff at Proyecto Pastoral, both clergy and laity, attended trainings in Bolivia, Colombia, Peru and most significantly, El Salvador. The church also benefited from the experiences of activists who came to Los Angeles having participated in national liberation and anti-imperialist movements in El Salvador and Mexico.

For the residents, the task of critically reflecting on the moment would come to be embedded in the social practice of the community. The residents further took ownership over the praxis of popular education when three-dozen households protested HACLA's church-endorsed plans to

demolish Pico-Aliso. The Pico-Aliso residents drew upon this tradition of *análisis de coyuntura*, their analysis of the moment, to empower themselves in the face of oblivion.

Today, the city's aggressive backing of speculation has drawn a larger and more diverse population of tenants into crisis. What began as isolated to public housing would eventually devour the city. From Boyle Heights to Venice, South LA to Pacoima, developers and real estate owners would take away housing from the poor and working people. Owners would either rent directly to wealthier tenants or demolish entire buildings to develop luxury towers with no guaranteed right of return for the displaced tenants.

The conditions have emerged for a larger political movement opposing gentrification. The earliest groups to self-organize have been grounded in communities of color. Crenshaw Subway Coalition was organized first followed by Chinatown Community for Equitable Development, North East Los Angeles Alliance, El Sereno Against Gentrification, and Defend Boyle Heights. Largely autonomous from the nonprofit corporate complex, these groups have targeted transit development, corporate chains, boutique shops, art galleries, and other businesses designed to trigger gentrification in working class, people of color neighborhoods.

In early 2015, tenants organizing to fight evictions in different Los Angeles neighborhoods formed an informal network of mutual support. Then in the summer of 2015, the popular education collective School of Echoes brought together tenants from a number of buildings across the city to launch the L.A. Tenants Union. The women in Pico-Aliso are members of the Union's Eastside chapter.^[1]

An analysis grounded in the reality of the most poor and marginalized will always be ahead of its time. In the history of the *análisis de coyuntura*, Latin American militants turned a method of reading the world into collective action. Movements of poor and working people scrutinized their material conditions in order to understand their present moment in relation to the past. Then they took action. Locally, groups like L.A. Tenants Union have taken up *Naming the Moment* as part of their own analysis and strategy process. The public housing residents of Pico-Aliso come from L.A. Tenants Union's future. In that future tenants groups and anti-gentrification groups across Los Angeles weave their conjunctural analysis into the daily practice of building community through defending their community.

[1] For an early articulation of these ideas, see Ellen Bareis and Manuela Bojadžijev, "We Come From Your Future," *Fantômas* 1 (Summer 2002): 61–64.

The thesis was later used as the title for a 2008 sound investigation into the then-current conjunctures of racism in the UK: "We Come From Your Future," Tate Media, London, Curator: Kelli Dipple. For more information, go to: <http://www2.tate.org.uk/intermediaart/ultra-red.shtm>.

[2] By some estimates the apartment vacancy rate in downtown Los Angeles is at 12%—three times higher than the rest of the city. Developers admit that new housing developed for downtown is not intended for the majority of tenants affected by the housing crisis. The fact that new development downtown is largely aimed for investment and not for lived occupancy, resulting in housing vacancy even when units are leased, underscores the basic contradictions between housing speculation and housing scarcity. See Huang, Josie (2017). "As DTLA

vacancies rise, landlords increase breaks on rent, parking.” KPCC online. September 15: <https://www.scpr.org/news/2017/09/15/75615/in-high-vacancy-dtla-landlords-offer-move-in-speci/>.

For an account of the speculative boom driving development in Los Angeles see Vincent, Roger (2017). “Los Angeles ranks as the top choice in the U.S. for international real estate investors.” *LA Times* online. March 21: <http://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-global-investors-20170317-story.html>.

And for a more national perspective on the speculation boom see Gibson, Carl (2018). “There Are 2 Vacant Investor-Owned Homes for Every Homeless Person in America.” GritPost online. January 10. See: <https://gritpost.com/vacant-properties-homelessness/>.

For an analysis of the impact of housing speculation and the call for decommodifying housing, see Marcuse, Peter and Madden, David (2016). *In Defense of Housing: The Politics of Crisis*. NY: Verso.

[3] For a history of “redlining” and the racist practices of housing segregation in Los Angeles see Reft, Ryan (2017). “Segregation in the City of Angels: A 1939 Map of Housing Inequality in L.A.” KCET online. November 14. <https://www.kcet.org/shows/lost-la/segregation-in-the-city-of-angels-a-1939-map-of-housing-inequality-in-la>.

[4] Union de Vecinos can be reached online at <http://www.uniondevecinos.org>.

[5] Gramsci, Antonio (1971). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. New York: International Publishers. Page 177.

[6] The tools of *análisis de coyuntura* came to English-speakers in North America in no small part through the efforts of Canadian artist, Deborah Barndt. In 1986, Barndt launched a five-year initiative in Toronto called The Naming Project. Modeled after the ALFORJA popular education network in Costa Rica, The Naming Project brought together Canadian grassroots groups to experiment with “naming the moment,” analyzing the immediate arrangement of social and political forces for taking strategic action. The initiative culminated in the publication of the *Naming the Moment* manual in 1989. For resources on *análisis de coyuntura* including digital copies of *Naming the Moment*, go to the Convivial Research & Insurgent Learning online archive at <http://cril.mitotedigital.org/>.

[7] All the groups mentioned can be reached online through the following links: Crenshaw Subway Coalition (<http://www.crenshawsubway.org>), Chinatown Community for Equitable Development (<https://www.facebook.com/ccedla>), North East Los Angeles Alliance (<https://www.facebook.com/NELAAAlliance>), El Sereno Against Gentrification (<https://www.facebook.com/antigentrification>), Defend Boyle Heights (<http://defendboyleheights.blogspot.com>), L.A. Tenants Union (<https://latenantsunion.org>), Eastside Local L.A. Tenants Union (<https://www.facebook.com/latenantseastidelocal>).