

HYPERALLERGIC

Artists and Gallerists Grapple with Ways to Slow Gentrification in Manhattan's Chinatown

During the panel discussion "Chinatown Is Not For Sale," members of the Chinatown Art Brigade presented an eight-point pledge of resistance for artists and gallery owners.

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Installation view of *Decolonize This Place* at Artists Space during the "Chinatown Is Not for Sale" event (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic unless indicated otherwise)

For Liz Moy, a Chinatown native, artist, and member of Chinatown Art Brigade, 2012's Black Foliage group show in the Chinatown Arcade was a small but uneasy signal that the art world had its eyes, and real estate dollars, on Chinatown. The press release described the exhibition space as a former "cell phone dispensary within the alley at 48 Bowery ... a truly unique space recently uncovered by some of New York's most adventurous curators," as if the alley, which connects the Bowery and Elizabeth Street was waiting to be discovered, and not already home

to longstanding businesses.

"I rationalized to myself that it was just a pop-up," just like any number of group shows she'd been to or participated in, Moy told the 200 people who crammed into Artists Space Saturday night for *Decolonize This Place*, Artists Space, and the Chinatown Art Brigade's event, "Chinatown Is Not For Sale." At the panel discussion and town hall event, artists, gallery owners, and community members discussed the role of galleries in Chinatown's gentrification, and whether they can be a part of preventing it.

Peter Kwong, Hunter College Distinguished Professor of Urban Planning and Policy, began the night with a brief but illuminating presentation that placed economic changes in Chinatown in the context of larger market forces in New York City that have fueled large-scale neighborhood change everywhere from the East Village to Harlem. He explained that Chinatown, is "under attack ... guided by aggressive corporate strategy with real estate development whenever possible," particularly since September 11 and with the gradual disappearance of the garment industry, a key economic engine for the neighborhood. Landlords, are "trying to sell an exotic brand," but in doing so are pushing longtime tenants out of their homes. He also noted that the presence of art galleries is often the first sign that large-scale development will follow. The audience for the panel — a mix of residents, activists, artists, and gallery owners — was surprisingly in agreement over many of Kwong's and other speakers' points, differing mainly on the question of whether City Council Member Margaret Chin is a friend of the cause or an activist who had sold out to developers.

Given that galleries are often a harbinger of gentrification, the million-dollar ques-



Attendees of "Chinatown Is Not For Sale" panel at Artists Space (photo by and courtesy Chinatown Art Brigade)

tion of the night was: can artists and galleries play a role in preventing the displacement of longtime residents and the businesses and organizations that serve them while also preserving their own artistic practices and businesses? Going by the responses of the enthusiastic, engaged audience and the panelists, the answer is a resounding yes.

Or more specifically, yes, but as long as gallery owners and artists take responsibility for their roles in displacement. This includes learning about any tenants and businesses they may have displaced in order to live in the neighborhood and open galleries, and becoming active members in big and small ways, in both local organizing efforts to protect existing tenants (like the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence's Organizing Asian Communities initiative) and in citywide efforts to fight for zoning laws and housing policy that support Chinatown's existing economy and tenants, and preserve buildings and businesses for the future.

Betty Yu, a co-founder of the Chinatown Art Brigade, is both an artist and a native New Yorker, and drew on both experiences to present the Brigade's eight-point pledge of resistance for artists and gallery owners. The document includes a map, designed by Moy, showing the new galleries that have arrived in Chinatown and highlighting sites of displacement. The pledge begins with what Yu calls "the lowest hanging fruit" of simply getting to know a gallery's neighbors and finding which tenants and businesses the gallery might have displaced, all the way to assisting in organizing efforts started by existing advocacy groups, and pressuring elected officials to support the Chinatown Working Group's Rezoning Plan and other policies that support affordable housing.



Installation view of *Decolonize This Place* at Artists Space

“Artists can decide where they belong,” Yu said. “When long-term tenants get displaced, they’re cut off from vital services.” Her comments echoed a point made earlier in the evening, that even the most modest of artists’ apartments or gallery spaces are still “a slap in the face to longtime residents.” She reiterated that artists need to see themselves as organizers to effect tangible change and prevent displacement.

Juan Puentes, the founder and artistic director of White Box Gallery, began his presentation admitting that, after listening to the previous speakers, he felt “a ton of guilt” over his relocation from West 26th Street to Broome Street in 2008 — something he hadn’t experienced after opening in West Chelsea in 1998, when the neighborhood still consisted mostly of empty industrial spaces. Still, he drew on his past as a social worker and developed programs that brought high school students in the neighborhood into the gallery. On Saturday he discussed wanting to do the same in Chinatown and bring in Chinese artists for future shows.

During the question and answer portion of the event, one attendee asked whether showing Chinese artists — either from Mainland China or the local community — would be merely a cosmetic nod to inclusion. Both Puentes and Margaret Lee, the other gallery owner on the panel (she is a co-founder and partner at 47 Canal), mentioned that showing Chinese artists was merely one of many potential outreach efforts. Lee in particular emphasized that, as an Asian American artist and daughter of immigrants, she’s extremely conscious of not displacing existing tenants and their communities. She said she is eager to work with community orga-



Installation view of *Decolonize This Place* at Artists Space

nizations to support greater collaboration and understanding between both sides of this issue.

It is also crucial, as the entire panel and a few audience members cautioned, to understand that there is already a strong history of artistic practice and culture in Chinatown, citing examples like the Basement Workshop, a political and arts organization active in the 1970s and '80s, and the New York Chinatown History Project, which became the Museum of Chinese in America, now located in a Maya Lin-designed space on Centre Street. Reality is always more complicated than the simplistic narrative pitting artists against locals. "Gallerists are small business owners too," Lee said, and just as vulnerable to the economic changes they help to usher in.

The large audience in attendance, as well as the presence of multiple gallery owners and artists on the panel, were heartening signs that perhaps the eight-point pledge is just the beginning and that the concrete work is already in progress. A second event at Artists Space, scheduled for October 29, will bring together groups of artists and activists to discuss strategies for art and activism across the city.

Chatting with Hyperallergic after the event, Yu was thrilled at the audience's response, but cautioned that there's work to do make sure the enthusiasm produces concrete changes. "I hope it's not a one-off," she said, emphasizing that the community groups are "doing this to lift the voices of tenants" — so that people who, like her family, have depended on Chinatown for their homes and livelihoods, can remain there. Common immigrant narratives suggest that first generation children of immigrants should work hard and study so they can leave their original neighborhood. In Yu's mind however, "It's our job to not just leave." As multiple speakers echoed throughout the night, "We're not going to disappear without a fight."

Decolonize This Place's next event examines citywide gentrification and takes place on October 29 at 7pm. Decolonize This Place continues at Artists Space (55 Walker Street, Tribeca, Manhattan) through December 17.