Resisting the Stigmas of Social Housing
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In this article, I will argue that the territorial stigma of social housing estates has resulted in a condition of hyper(in)visibility, whereby estate residents are visibly caricatured and yet are rendered invisible from representations of urban change. I will specifically explore the site-specific photographic portrait project I am Here, of a British estate undergoing redevelopment, which aims to critique and reverse this hyper(in)visibility and reconfigure the place identity of the estate and its residents in the midst of spatial transformation. Although the genre of social documentary has been heavily criticised for sentimentalising subjects of poverty and turning them into spectacles for entertainment, I use Ariella Azoulay’s notion of photography as a ‘civil encounter’ to argue that as a site of multiple gazes, photography potentially empowers estate residents to affirm a sense of belonging and attachment to urban space. Furthermore, by foregrounding questions of visibility and invisibility, photography visually helps to construct an alternative understanding of citizenship not predicated on neoliberal ideologies of consumerism so inherent to urban development.

To understand the visual politics of urban redevelopment, this article aims to provide a discussion of how spatial identities in areas marked for ‘regeneration’ are constructed and resisted through public art. Through analysing the (visually produced) spatial identities of regenerated social housing estates and their residents, I will seek to address the following questions: how has social housing come to occupy the realm of spatial dystopia over the past three decades, and how has this imagery been used to disenfranchise the poorest in society with respect to housing issues? And how can imagery in turn be activated to reframe discussions of who has a right to urban space? The notion of social housing as ‘home’, with all the emotional attachment and significance this concept implies, has rarely been given credence in the public sphere. Increasingly, however, in the midst of large-scale displacements of the poor from valuable inner-city housing estates, I see attempts by residents, artists and concerned academics to do just that: to make social housing estates visible in ways which resist their recent stigmatisation and in doing so, to reinvigorate the nostalgic imaginary of housing equality for all.

One strategy for resisting this stigmatisation has become increasingly prevalent in recent years: the staging of artistic interventions on social housing estates. This includes performance art, documentary, poetry readings and photography among other art forms. Portrait photography has become an especially potent tool with which to document the transitional landscape of urban regeneration projects, suggesting that social housing is being activated as an important site of public memory in the context of the current housing crisis. Through these photographic traces, the heritage of social housing—both its tangible built form and its intangible communities—is being counter-narrated, its identity reconfigured. By engaging with
a specific example of one such project, this paper will seek to examine how social housing estates acquire stigmatised identities in relation to neoliberal discourses of regeneration, and how these discourses are potentially disrupted through art. It will then go on to discuss the potentials of art to create political common ground despite the risks of ‘artwashing’, or amplifying otherness through artistic spectacle, before analysing these theoretical discussions in light of the Haggerston Estate photography installation *I am Here*. Created in 2009, this site-specific portrait project of the estate’s residents was created by the artists’ collective Fugitive Images (members of whom are residents of the estate) as ‘a direct response to the experience of living in an estate in the process of being regenerated’. Before delving into the project itself, however, it is useful to understand the relationship between place and stigma. I shall therefore begin with a brief discussion of the sociological literature on spatial imaginaries, exploring how neoliberal concepts of privatisation have constructed the social housing estate and those who inhabit it as a space of ‘social abjection’.

**Spatial imaginaries and sink estate stigma**

Sociologist Rob Shields, in his influential work *Places on the Margin*, argues that social divisions are often communicated as ‘imaginary geographies’, in which spaces take on a powerfully emotive significance and ‘function as frameworks of cultural order’. Cultural codes which identify certain spaces as good and others as bad are part of the hegemonic machinery in which ‘a cultural edifice of perceptions and prejudices’ ‘provides... the necessary social coordination to ground hegemonic systems of ideology and practice’. Negative place images are often the result of stereotyping, oversimplification and labelling, despite the actual nature of the place in reality. Places become negatively transposed to the ‘symbolic realm’ and as a result, suffer real material consequences.

This, I argue, is precisely what we see with many contemporary urban redevelopment or ‘regeneration’ programmes in which social housing estates are being demolished on a large scale: the displacement of real, local, lived knowledge to the realm of spectacular media and cultural narratives which highlight excessive levels of violence, poverty, and what Imogen Tyler has called ‘social abjection’.

Sociologist Tom Slater, who has written extensively of the ideological assault on social housing, argues that ‘there are certain stories that people hear and ultimately believe in respect of housing issues’ which are often ‘truncations and distortions of social realities’. A prime example, Slater argues, is the use of the phrase ‘sink estate’ to describe problem social housing estates. A sink, he explains, is a sewage storage device, a storage tank

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2 Shields, p. 46.
3 Shields, p. 54.
for waste products, and also evokes ideas of sinking, even drowning. This etymology in connection with social housing, he argues, ‘turns a receptacle that collects and stores effluent into a place that collects and stores the refuse of society’. Estates have, therefore, largely been seen and constructed as places into which entire generations are trapped into self-inflicted deprivation, a result of ‘the dead weight of low expectations’. This is the process by which social housing estates have ‘become widely renowned and reviled as epicentres of self-inflicted and self-perpetuating destitution and depravity’.  

Slater’s analysis of this rhetoric demonstrates the neoliberal logic of estate regeneration as follows: sink estates cause crime and poverty, and furthermore, ‘are an expensive, troublesome burden to ‘taxpayers’…; therefore, to eliminate these social problems, estates should be demolished. As Slater articulates it, 

Activating and amplifying the ‘sink estate’—repeatedly condemning social housing estates as precipitates that collect and incubate all the social ills of the world—makes it considerably easier to justify bulldozing those estates to the ground and displacing their residents… The symbolic erasure of homes and entire communities thus paves the way for their literal erasure.

Once symbolically degraded, the actual erasure of homes becomes much more difficult to challenge: a clear example of how cultural prejudices towards ‘bad’ spaces can result in real material impacts for the people who live there.

Numerous scholars including Slater have linked this spatial stigma to neoliberal policies of deregulation and the privatization of the housing market. Both Tyler and Giroux, for example, argue that neoliberalism privatises collective problems such as poverty and homelessness, laying them at the door of individuals and making it easier to blame them for their own predicament. Furthermore, while neoliberalism rewards consumers with the protections of citizenship, those who cannot afford such protections are simply relegated to a life of precarity. This is precisely what can be seen in the discourse of social housing in the UK, which went from an assumed state provision to the realm of undeserving ‘benefit cheats’—a group which are cut off from mainstream society and cultivated by caricatures in the media and popular culture. In a society where market values come to overtake human values, there is no place for collective undertakings such as affordable housing for all; housing comes to be seen as an individual problem with a private, market-based solution. Giroux describes this shift:

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7 Ibid, p. 881.
9 Slater, p.16.
10 Ibid, p.15.
11 Ibid, p.16.
As the welfare state came apart… a market ideology and morality emerged that narrowed not only the meaning of freedom but also the very nature of the public good… and with these transitions, so the more abstract concepts of individual agency and citizenship… Freedom was now decoupled from any vestige of the social and most welfare provisions were seen as benefitting those deemed immoral and lazy, if not utterly unworthy.¹³

This dismantling of the public realm under the guise of market ideology is what Giroux calls neoliberal ‘pedagogy’.¹⁴ What makes neoliberalism so powerful and pervasive, he argues, is that it is not just a set of economic policies but

an educational project… that is reproduced daily through a regime of common sense and that now serves as a powerful pedagogical force, shaping our lives, memories and daily experiences while attempting to erase everything critical and emancipatory about history, justice, solidarity, freedom and the meaning of democracy.¹⁵

I suggest, following Giroux, that the discourse of the ‘sink estate’ and the subsequent erasure of social housing under the common-sense narrative of ‘regeneration’ can also be seen as a pedagogical component of neoliberal urban development programmes. Such initiatives render the urban poor as excess and disposable: first, by constructing estates as fundamentally ‘disorderly’ spaces; and then, when those estates have been developed, tidied up and reincarnated as ‘vibrant’ and ‘hip’ middle class enclaves, removed altogether. I suggest that this pedagogy of urban development prevents individuals from conceiving of housing as a collective undertaking, weakening democratic identities and fostering a conception of citizenship based purely on purchasing power. This neoliberal conception of citizenship siphons off citizens into consumers (who can afford to stake a claim to urban space) and non-consumers, who are relegated to the margins. Meanwhile, the material and symbolic violence of ‘regeneration’ is never presented as such; those who bear the brunt of it, who lose their homes, are often rendered utterly invisible from images of urban development. This is the condition of hyper(in)visibility: where visibility is granted for the purposes of dehumanisation and denied to those who seek inclusion in political processes—excluding them from the scopic regime of regeneration and place-making.

¹³ Giroux, Against the Terror of Neoliberalism, p.152
¹⁴ Giroux, On Critical Pedagogy, p.12
Symbolic resistance through critical pedagogy

Although such stigmatised representations can have disastrous material consequences in the physical world, it is precisely representation which can begin to challenge and undermine those narratives. This challenge occurs in the realm of what Henri Lefebvre describes as ‘spaces of representation’, in which aesthetics can offer a form of symbolic resistance and in doing so, propose alternative understandings of space.16 Art is a crucial means of articulating and contesting place and identity and has ‘the potential to activate spaces in which [it is] situated’ acting ‘as a trigger point for new ways of seeing, relating and experiencing’ the world.17 Visual symbols of place act as powerful emotive triggers (and point to what is or is not culturally valorised, to the extent that visual symbols ‘can be ‘read’ as narratives of identity, politics and power’ 18 As Baker argues:

The images, landmarks and symbols of a neighbourhood function as ‘identity space’... Shared knowledge of streets, landmarks and the material landscape, and the sensory impacts this materiality has on the body, can act as binding forces, which connect people to place and...imaginatively to each other.19

Symbolic landscapes can therefore operate as spaces of resistance and performances of political action, disrupting the ideas a group has about a place and generating new place myths. For Giroux, this potential for resistance is what makes cultural artefacts essential ‘spheres of public pedagogy’ which demands the ‘contesting [of] various forms of symbolic production that secure individuals to the affective and ideological investments that produce the neoliberal subject’ and tries to foster and emphasise public bonds, subverting the usual dominance of consumer identities in favour of democratic identities.20 Cultural artefacts can interrogate the relations between culture and power; they can potentially, though not necessarily, demand us to take on the role of witness.21 If neoliberal hegemony relies on a series of rhetorical, including visual, devices and public images that signal the normal and desirable, then photography could be seen as a prime example of a critical pedagogy—literally and figuratively attempting to ‘forge new democratic visions’ and produce alternative readings of urban space.22

21 Ibid.
22 Ibid, p. 180
Critical Pedagogies in Practice: I am Here/ From Heroin to Heroines: Fugitive Images, Haggerston Estate (2009-2014)

If neoliberal regeneration policies and the rhetoric of social housing relies on its own pedagogical practices to ‘normalize its modes of governance’, then how might photography work to undermine those pedagogies? The portrait project under discussion here is one of many recent examples, and arguably poses a challenge to neoliberal understandings of urban development by making visible those who bear the burden of such policies and encouraging us to question what we see. The project specifically appears to question the seamless workings of the ‘free’ market, in which housing is posed as a problem or opportunity to be solved by individual consumption instead of bestowed as a right and a matter of human dignity. Displays on condemned housing estates can be seen as a way of drawing attention to what people do not know about regeneration projects: that they entail the displacement of existing communities—what Giroux would term the ‘collateral damage’ of such initiatives—and that these spaces are lived spaces of affective attachments and not ‘sinks’. If ‘community identity is revealed in the fabric of the city’ and exclusion is often spatialised, then these portraits can be seen both as a claim to belonging and a resistance of that exclusion.

The portrait project I will discuss below was created by the artists’ collective Fugitive Images, made up of estate residents from East London’s Haggerston Estate. I am Here, which was installed on the walls of the estate between 2009-2014, is described by the creators (who are themselves residents of the estate) as ‘a direct response to the experience of living in an estate in the process of being regenerated’. The Haggerston Estate, located in the rapidly gentrifying ward of Hackney, had in 2007 undergone a change in ownership from the local borough council to the private developers L&Q. Before demolition began, the new landlords erected orange boards on the estate’s windows, without consulting the residents—an act that was described by the artists as one of ‘symbolic violence’. The artists describe how they wanted to create an alternative façade to the vacant, boarded up windows of the soon to be demolished estate, which promoted an image of the estate as threatening and hostile, pre-empting the notion of the estate as dilapidated, dangerous and devoid of community:

Living in a flat facing the canal we could, from our open windows, overhear the stream of comments from pedestrians along the canal; and we experienced first-hand how the estate had been turned into a bizarre tourist attraction of decline, evidence of the contemporary fetish for modern ruins, a local Detroitification that was visible and could be ‘enjoyed’, without threat, between latte stops. Suddenly people photographed the estate, not for its beauty, but for its abject quality. Orange

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23 Watson and Waterton, ‘Reading the Visual’; Giroux, Against the Terror of Neoliberalism, introduction, no page.
as it was, the estate had turned into a projection screen for fears and prejudices about housing estates, and perhaps even more, about those living in them.\footnote{26 A. L. Zimmerman, The Future’s Bright, The Future’s Orange… Or Homeland (In)securities: Telling Forms of Belonging in Committed Documentary Practice’. In Pierce, G. et al. (eds) Truth, Dare or Promise: Art and Documentary Re-visited, (2013), p. 38 (pp. 35-51). Ebook available from Proquest Ebook Central, (accessed 13/6/2019).}

In an attempt to combat these ‘fears and prejudices’, they replaced the ugly orange boards with sixty-seven resident portraits which looked out onto passersby in the street below. The portraits were produced in one of the empty apartments on the estate after consultation with local residents, who overwhelmingly supported the project.\footnote{27 From private correspondence with artists.} The artists did not select their subjects—instead, they allowed the residents to approach them on a voluntary basis until all sixty-seven slots had been filled. The images are varied, depicting a range of ages, socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds, and differ widely in tone. While all portraits are passport-style, facing the camera head-on, some are smiling, light-hearted and humorous while others are sombre, straight faced and harder to read. Contrast the following two portraits, for example. The first conjures up a tone of pride: the subject is smartly dressed, with a twinkle in his eye, challenging us to view the estate in a softer, friendlier light. This is a place of laughter, joy: a home, not a ‘sink’. This is a ‘respectable’ place to live. The second is dramatically different in mood. The man appears indifferent, perhaps even angry, willing us to look despite our discomfort. Perhaps he has come from difficult circumstances, or perhaps his anger is more immediate: anger at his possible displacement. The two images could hardly be any more different from one another, prompting us to wonder what, if anything, the two people who live on this estate have in common other than their address. In this sense, the portraits are ambivalent, resisting naive optimism or nostalgic narratives of ‘community’. For while the smiling face of figures 1 and 5 seem to convey notions of togetherness, each image is ultimately singular, hinting at yet not quite coalescing into a whole. Though framed as a collection, these images are scattered fragments, reminding us that this (imagined?) community is fragile, transitory. Community is not imposed by the artists, but (potentially) constructed in the process of making the photographs—hence the singular title \textit{I am Here}. 
This lack of narrative uniformity is also evident in the lack of biographical information provided for the sixty-seven subjects. None of the images tell us a great deal—indeed, the only information to be found is located on the project’s dedicated website, in which each subject features along with their flat and window numbers. We do not know their names, their professional backgrounds, their ages. Such lack of narrative coherence prompts a list of possible questions: who are they? What are their stories? Are they rather more like ‘us’ than we had expected? Did we even think anyone occupied this building? If not, why not? Who will the new inhabitants be? What will happen to these people once they are gone? What will become of the building? Thus, a chain of enquiries is sparked from the simple (visual) statement: I am Here.

Comments from passersby reflect this tendency to construct alternative narratives of the building and its inhabitants. One viewer wrote on the project website

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**Figure 1:** Third floor, window 7. Reproduced with permission from Fugitive Images.

**Figure 2:** Second Floor, Window 18. Reproduced with permission from Fugitive Images.
that ‘I love your work I am Here… every time we walk past it we stop and look and make up stories about the residents’. Other comments are similarly positive. The following are a representative example: ‘Suddenly the walls were covered with smiles and humanity instead of blankness’; and another comment, by a former resident, appeared to find the project especially moving: ‘I am delighted by your work and memory of this place and people I have fond memories of… People have said it’s a dangerous place and a hopeless place but it made me feel alive’.

![Figure 4 - I am Here. Reproduced with permission from Fugitive Images.](image1)

![Figure 5: Resident posing with child. Reproduced with permission from Fugitive Images.](image2)

![Figure 6: Reversing the gaze?](image3)

These comments, in combination with the portraits, show the estate in a markedly different light to its media stereotype. Like many of its predecessors, the

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28 Caroline, quoted on project website.
30 Lowther House Resident, quoted on project website.
Haggerston estate, which began demolition in 2009, has been described as ‘one of the area’s most run down’; a ‘problem estate’ and even ‘the heroin capital of Europe’.

It had undergone years of underinvestment and what has been called ‘managed decline’, resulting in a lack of new tenants and a poorly maintained environment. This is despite the fact that, like on so many other estates, residents had long campaigned for improvements to be made. Perhaps anticipating that their requests for maintenance would never be met, when residents were balloted on the demolition and regeneration of their estate, they voted overwhelmingly in favour.

In comparison, the rhetoric used by property developers and estate agents to describe the newly regenerated area is extremely revealing. Described as ‘vibrant’ ‘a buzzing hub’, ‘now a recognised and established address in Haggerston’, an ‘up-and-coming area’ with an ‘energetic urban vibe’, boasting ‘architecturally striking buildings’, and competing to become ‘London’s trendiest address’, the rhetoric of regeneration is one of glamour, prestige and marked improvement. This leads Andrea Luka Zimmerman of Fugitive Images to ask, ‘Why are these communities never seen that way before the developers come in?’ Indeed, the property developers behind the project, L&Q, echo this idea that Haggerston was invisible before the regeneration initiative, a non-place, when they write: ‘A few years ago, the standard reaction to “Haggerston” was probably “where?”’ Now, we are told, the area has newly been christened ‘the Haggerston Riviera’. The brochure marketing the new development also makes use of its industrial heritage, Regent’s Canal, which is also being regenerated, and shows photos of exclusively white shoppers strolling down the street, enjoying a drink at the local pub. Smart men in suits stroll past the tube station, while a mother and child (again, white) are the sole inhabitants strolling through a perfectly manicured garden. This is in stark contrast to the portraits of current residents, who represent an extremely mixed racial demographic. Though L&Q, one of London’s largest landlords, argue that community partnerships and consultation are at the heart of all their projects, it is striking that the vision of community promoted

36 L&Q property developers, Marketing Brochure, p. 9.
37 L&Q property developers, Marketing Brochure, p. 9.
38 L&Q property developers, Marketing Brochure images.
by their brochure is so homogenous. The new development, which offers two bedroom apartments starting at £380,000 and three bedrooms for over £1,000,000, has also given up its old name: the building is now known as City Mills, denying the former existence of an estate on this piece of land at all.39 Most tellingly perhaps, the sub-headings of the brochure—‘Made for Living’ and ‘Creating Places Where People Want to Live’—emphasise the painful fact that already existing residents were inhabiting a place unfit for living and rendered undesirable through long-term underinvestment.

Visibility and recognition

*I am Here* clearly attempts to respond to the symbolic and material marginalisation of the estate by critiquing notions of visibility and invisibility. The artist-residents who remained behind before demolition describe how they often overheard passersby speculating on the reasons for its decline, and decided they wanted to turn what had become an object of ‘interrogation’ and spectacle back on the onlookers themselves: ‘…onlookers no longer stand unchallenged, as their gaze is met and returned by a multitude of faces’.40 This interrogation goes both ways: estate residents implicate us, as spectators, in this decline, forcing us to reckon with our own culpability as potential urban residents and/or as spectators. Why has this decline been allowed to go unchecked for so long? What stigmas and invisibilities or other scopic regimes might be responsible? How does the spatial imaginary produced by numerous cultural texts inform our ideas of who, where and what is deserving of public investment? And how do the visual politics of regeneration campaigns exclude certain people from the debate altogether? In an area in which the average house price has increased by 111% in a decade, these are urgent questions to be asked.41

Through their siting on the condemned building, the faces of estate residents, who are frequently made into abject spectacles, are able to reverse this gaze, confronting us as spectators and claiming ownership of space they are so often excluded from. Regeneration initiatives, after all, are frequently marketed to, and made affordable for, a very different type of audience; what Giroux would call ‘citizens-as-consumers’.42 If visual framing determines who is visible and therefore understood as a subject and who is not, then perhaps this project, and many others like it, confers a kind of political visibility, refuting the notion that only those with adequate purchasing power count as citizens with a claim to urban space.43 Those who have lived in the area and formed a set of attachments over many years are seen as deserving a similar level of recognition as well. Finally, the estate, though a private,

domestic space, comes to represent notions of shared, social responsibility to one another: a classic example of Giroux’s public pedagogy.

‘Art washing’ and the critique of documentary as spectacle

These images can also be problematised on the basis that the public display of social housing residents simply serves to other them all over again. Martha Rosler, for example, argues that social documentary photography works not to promote any kind of political change but to distance viewers from its subjects. By operating as seemingly objective pieces of visual evidence of ‘enforced social marginality’, documentary photographs support a conservative world view by providing evidence that somehow the poor deserve their poverty through ‘lack of merit’. Historically, argues Rosler, this has worked to promote a pacifying charitable response from the privileged classes, which has enabled them to preserve their wealth: ‘... liberal documentary assuages any stirrings of conscience in its viewers the way scratching relieves an itch and simultaneously reassures them about their relative wealth and social position’. Echoing the claims of Susan Sontag, she characterises these subjects as passive ‘victims of the camera’, objects of ‘exoticism’ and ‘trophy hunting’ in which individuals are on display like a ‘freak show’. In this perspective, poverty is turned into an aesthetic commodity—what Rosler terms ‘snoop sociology’—to be consumed by the privileged. Rosler’s criticisms of documentary photography have much in common with the arguments of John Tagg, Michel Foucault, and Homi Bhabha, which centre on the gaze as a hierarchical instrument of power Looking is an act which grants some degree of control to spectators, and has long been used as an instrument of surveillance. As John Tagg argues,

To face the camera is... to permit close examination of the photographic subject... it sets the stage for either critique or celebration—but in either case evaluation—of the person as a type.

Frontality, as Tagg reminds us, has historically been associated with socially inferior classes. Do these photographs turn a social ‘type’—the council estate resident—into an object of passive entertainment masquerading under the veil of empathy?

46 Ibid, p. 263.
Secondly, scholars have recently argued that visions of ‘community’ are often invoked by developers themselves to veil the gentrification process.\textsuperscript{30} It is particularly interesting to note, for example, that the portrait project \textit{I am Here} was actually quoted in L&Q’s impact assessment. They claim that ‘Arts and culture have been successfully employed in mediating the development process’ and that ‘The participatory nature of the artwork \textit{I am Here} has meant that art has been an effective community engagement tool for existing residents.’\textsuperscript{51} Yet which ‘community’ is this regeneration for? Do the claims above suggest a slightly too cosy, instrumental relationship between the public artwork and the corporation responsible for residents’ displacement, in which by acknowledging the importance of ‘community engagement’ the traumas of displacement are neatly smoothed over? Is this another example of art-washing, in which ‘the community’ is utilised to offer an appearance of consent by public display, and what kind of consent even exists in a context of displacement? Stephen Pritchard, who has heavily criticised what he calls ‘developer-led artwashing’ argues that

Increasingly encouraged by the state into public-private-third sector “partnerships”, many arts organisations and artists have discovered new value in the intangible worlds of “community development” and “community engagement”. Socially engaged art has become a catch-all banner for state and corporate instrumentalism, embracing the rhetoric of inclusion, wellbeing, social impact and social capital [and as a result]… artists are increasingly being instrumentalised by the state, local authorities, corporate interests and financial investors, and third sector organisations eager to promote urban renewal and narrow notions of ‘the civic’.\textsuperscript{52}

The artists themselves acknowledge this risk when they argue that

Placed in a wider social context artworks will inevitably be exposed to instrumental use but it also allows them to expand, participate in and address a much wider range of discourses. This, we believe, allows for artists a bit more freedom to directly engage with social situations and the people populating them and not just be reduced to comment on them from the safe space of the gallery.\textsuperscript{53}

In other words, allowing the work to interact in unexpected ways with wider social contexts entails the risk of appropriation and should not in and of itself be a reason to confine the work to the gallery. I agree with this, and argue that while co-option is a definite risk, it is not always possible to predict how public artworks will impact those who ‘participate’ in them (whatever the extent) or those who view or discuss them. As Ariella Azoulay argues, we must not preclude the possibility of civic

\textsuperscript{52} Pritchard, ‘Artwashing’, no page.
\textsuperscript{53} Fugitive Images, [website], \url{http://sitespecificart.org.uk/7.html} (accessed 10/7/2018).
engagement by claiming to understand exactly how participants and spectators will be affected, or how images will circulate in public spaces and consciousness. To characterise any kind of ‘community engagement’ as inherently instrumental and therefore without value seems reductive and unhelpful; and, I argue, neglects the rigorous analysis of documentary images on their own terms. We can accept the dangers of spectacle, gaze and instrumentality and nevertheless concede that the gaze is complex; that images act in unexpected ways; and that visibility needs to be reckoned with and not excluded from the debate.

The ethical potential of looking

These arguments can be nuanced by the perspective of Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins, who argue that documentary photography can be seen ‘as a dynamic site at which many gazes or viewpoints intersect’, allowing ‘viewers of the photo to negotiate a number of different identities both for themselves and for those pictured’. Rather than assuming a negative stance from the outset, Lutz and Collins advocate a more fragmented approach in which specific instances of documentary are interrogated. It is important, they argue, to analyse how the subject looks back; are they smiling in consent? Or angry? Does the gaze unsettle us? Or are we simply given the illusion of consent and approachability? The authors reject the idea of the ‘singular or monolithic’ gaze, reminding us that identity, like photographic interpretation itself, is fragmentary and multilayered. Furthermore, as Barthes argues, the photograph is ‘not only perceived… it is read, connected… by the public that consumes it to a traditional stock of signs’ inviting the reader to imagine the world the picture is about. These fantasies are informed by learned cultural knowledge and the context in which the image is read.

Crucially, on the subject of voyeurism, Lutz & Collins argue that there can be no peeping where the other meets our gaze… The gaze can be confrontational… it can say, ‘I see you looking at me, so you cannot steal that look.

Les Back similarly reminds us that ‘The figures in… portraits look back’ and that often, these figures are precisely those to whom recognition—visibility—is not usually extended. These claims remind us that a less dominating gaze is possible and that attention to the image’s dynamic nature and multiple gazes render it less vulnerable to charges of symbolic violence. As Jacques Rancière argues, spectators are active readers of images, not passive, unthinking.

58 Ibid., p. 139  
Consumers of them.\textsuperscript{60} Photographs are fundamentally communicative, inviting us to engage with them in dialogue, to project ourselves into their world.\textsuperscript{61} The collaborative act of portraiture in particular allows us to ‘listen with our eyes’, with images acting as a way of creating ‘a space of exchange and… reciprocity’.\textsuperscript{62} Describing how street documentary portraits can act as a valuable means of recording urban change by ‘taking notice’, Les Back argues that photography is not always about power and control; on the contrary, the look is not always stolen or manipulated, but can be seen as ‘a gift in which existence is performed and presented to the camera’s lens’.\textsuperscript{63} The face-to-face encounter of a portrait sitting gives people a sense of being experienced by others.\textsuperscript{64} Susie Linfield (2010) argues for a similar openness to the ethical and political potential of the photograph, making a plea for critics to reclaim the role of emotions in their responses. While images can be painful to contemplate, critics are too quick to write off the very act of looking as complicit in the suffering of others—increasing the danger that we stop looking altogether.\textsuperscript{65}

In this perspective, accusations of exploitation and voyeurism do spectators, subjects and photographers a grave disservice by ‘negat[ing] the presence of the persons photographed and the relations of reciprocity that exist between them and the photographer’. Ultimately, this works to dispossess people of their own knowledge and feelings about appearing in photographs and assumes the superiority of (western) art discourse on the dangers of the ‘gaze’.\textsuperscript{66} Instead, according to Azoulay, we should view the image as a trace of an encounter in which the spectator works to establish the ‘truth… at stake between those who share the space of the photographed image and the world within which such an image has been made possible’.\textsuperscript{67} In this perspective, there is nothing passive about viewing or the object of viewing. The gaze (facilitated by the photograph) becomes a powerful tool in creating what Azoulay terms a ‘political space of relations’:

Photography institutes a new relation to the visible that emerges between the many, in public… photography invites the gaze to wander beyond what the photograph frames, and for individuals to display interest in, responsibility and concern for, what they see, in the

\textsuperscript{61} Back, ‘Listening with our Eyes’.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid, p. 132.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid, p. 138.
\textsuperscript{66} A. Azoulay, \textit{Civil Imagination}, p. 53.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid, p. 117.
recognition that each is in turn exposed to a gaze that sees what they cannot or do not want to see.\textsuperscript{68}

The mere presence of people who usually go unseen enables us to exercise what Azoulay calls ‘the civil imagination’ in which ‘we display a ‘concern for shared worlds’ and ‘obligation to all the governed’ through ‘exercising imagination in areas blocked to the gaze’ and suspending ‘the perspective of governmental power’.\textsuperscript{69} In the case of \textit{I am Here}, this civil imagination creates a reciprocal relationship between photographer and subject, subject and viewer, enabling us to contemplate the human cost of regeneration and the exclusionary workings of urban capitalism. Although the installation was removed in 2014, the questioning of spatial justice it provokes arguably lives on in the digital archive, as well as in the minds of all those spectators who saw the images. There is nothing voyeuristic about such contemplation; indeed, it is the precondition for the ‘emotional response’ described by Linfield (2010) and echoed by references to ‘concern’ by Azoulay above. For if we do not look, how can we care? How can we read the changes in the rapidly shifting landscape of redevelopment? How can we conceive of ‘public space’ if we cannot conceive of a ‘public’? The blanket assumption that documentary visibility equals passive, manipulative and selfish voyeurism is simply unhelpful; rather, we should be interrogating the different contexts in which visibility is used to critique and subvert notions of who is seen, where and in what ways, and instead of falling back on the monolithic concepts of spectacle and the gaze, analyse specific instances of how visibility works to reconfigure notions of identity, belonging, and the public itself. In an age of neoliberal conceptions of the citizen-as-consumer, perhaps these images reject a vision of urban space as limited to those with the ability to consume it, and refuse a regime of urban development dependent upon a dismantling of the public realm of social housing. While it would be wise to remember the cautionary arguments of Sontag and all those critics who warn against the risks of photographic manipulation, \textit{I am Here} contains the potential for a genuinely critical stance both towards the production of urban space and the role of imagery within it. It is acutely self-conscious of the ways in which images are used to manipulate our ideas of space and identity, and eschews utopianism in favour of simple presence. Alive to the possibility that art can only take us part of the way on the journey to spatial inclusion, \textit{I am Here} nevertheless seeks to reclaim, through a bold statement of visibility, a sense of the city as a truly shared world. With all the scholarly suspicion of the image and the many debates on the risks of voyeurism, it is important to emphasise that it is visibility, after all, that confers

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid, p. 107.

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid, p. 111.
self-awareness, respect and recognition. As Helmut Plessner remarks, ‘The soul suffers from nothing so much as being ignored.’\textsuperscript{70}