

REVIEW | THE SOCIAL LIFE OF ARTISTIC PROPERTY

**AUTHORS | PABLO HELGUERA, MICHAEL MANDIBERG, WILLIAM POWHIDA, AMY WHITAKER, CAROLINE WOOLARD**

Review by Mia Candy

*The Social Life of Artistic Property*, a collaborative project between five authors, explores creating productive and sustainable creative communities. Artistic property here refers both to art itself and to the physical spaces where art is made. The authors speak as artists who are also educators, organizers, scholars, and core members of creative collectives. They ask the reader to consider the value of three social experiments, and the plausibility of some potential social and financial interventions in the field of artistic production. Readers interested in the relationship between the art world and economic development will find this book flawed and disjointed while also novel and thought-provoking.

Part One, titled “Learning,” presents three case studies of historic and existing intentional communities. The communities in question are the Sullivan Institute and the 135 Rivington Urban Homestead, both in Manhattan, and the Ganas Institute on Staten Island. Pablo Helguera’s study of the Sullivan Institute provides a number of lessons for contemporary intentional communities. He argues that the art world must participate in robust engagement with a broad social context. When artists’ communities function outside of society, they risk becoming insular and egoist, to the detriment of their own survival.

In contrast, Caroline Woolard’s exploration of the economically self-sufficient Ganas community fails to offer conclusions or recommendations: she provides little analysis of the transcribed conversations, tasking the reader with the mental work of filtering the meandering dialogue for relevant lessons. Michael Mandiberg transcribes an interview with the artists, creators, builders, and owners of 135 Rivington. Here, too, the author leaves the analysis to his interlocutors.

Their advice: idealism, romanticism and impracticality are necessary for the creation of such a space, but sustainability

lies in practical engagement with the market and the law.

In the second half of the book, “Action,” the authors present three proposals for how artists might gain some control over their intellectual property and their living and studio spaces. First, Amy Whitaker proposes the art market to mimic more closely other financial investment processes. She also proposes more robust legislation on resale rights and improved royalty provision. Whitaker advocates for the establishment of art funds that adhere to mainstream investment principles. These interventions, she argues, would ensure that artistic production is appropriately valued, which would mitigate some of the economic difficulties of being an artist, and, in turn, generate a more vibrant and meaningful cultural life.

In “Property Groups,” William Powhida proposes a model of property management in which artists create long-term, rent-stabilized studio spaces. The model requires purchasing commercial property as a trust or corporation and holding the building in perpetuity as studio space. Powhida frames this as a stewardship model that moves away from individual, profit-driven real estate practices while working within the capitalist market. These buildings have the potential to provide community space and generate rental income from commercial uses on the ground floor. Additionally, Powhida sees this model as a way for artists to participate in broader community work, like resisting displacement and advocating for collective property ownership.

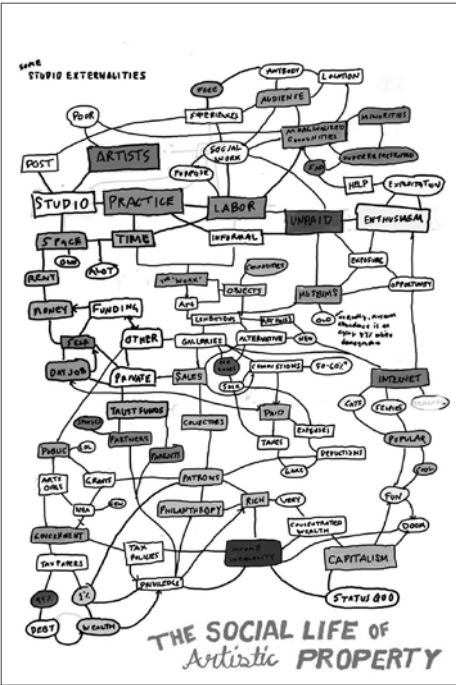
Finally, Woolard advocates for artist cooperation with existing community and economic development groups, like the New York City Community Land Initiative (NYCCLI), an alliance of affordable housing groups that

supports community land trusts. In doing so, artists have the potential to spearhead urban redevelopment producing affordable spaces that serve communities beyond the art world.

*The Social Life of Artistic Property* is a record of conversations among a group of artists about value and power in the art world. In piecing together essays and stories on the subject, the authors present their preliminary findings about the relationship between art, space, and property. Unfortunately, this approach results in text with little cohesive narrative. In the first part, the intellectual work of assessing the often disjointed dialogue is left entirely to the reader with little editorial guidance. However, newcomers to the field of planning for creativity will find the book a good source of ideas to explore further. The second part of the book is useful as it provides a more robust critical analysis of the challenges faced by artists and compelling arguments for intervention at various levels of the market.

Readers interested in the relationship between artists, real estate, gentrification, and displacement will find a frustrating lack of discussion on the subject. While some of the authors advocate for collaboration between artists and other low-income communities, the conversation is minimal. This is a text interested in the survival of the artistic community, and it should be read as such.

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