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The Doomed Pursuit of Dignity: Artists as Property Guardians in and Against Artwashing

Abstract: This paper discusses the role of artists engaged in live-work property guardian schemes and their potentials to act in a dignifying way at sites of struggle over the regeneration of council housing in London. To gain this understanding, I will describe how artists are embedded in this context by looking at the interaction between artists and property guardian enterprises working on housing estates in London. I will critically examine the artist role through the lance of artwashing critical method, namely allyship of the art world with the real estate industry in the process of social cleansing of housing estates in the UK. Following this, I will discuss the potential of artists to act in a dignified way, drawing on interviews with artists that have lived as property guardians. I will talk about the frustration of artists that stems from their circumstances, namely torn between the necessity to survive within an unaffordable housing market in London and the wish to make art in an uncompromised way. Studying the instrumentalization of artists employed by real-estate industry property guardian enterprises and the artists' attempts to resist this instrumentalization is vital for any understanding of the recent mutations in the capitalist management of housing and art and vital for the attempt to establish new sites of artistic urban struggle for housing justice.

Keywords: artwashing; housing; regeneration; property guardianship; London.

Introduction

Property guardianship enterprises have recently been researched and conceptualized as a relatively new precarious housing provider inhabited not by tenants but by guardians.[1] Thanks to their proven precarious position, artist have, more often than others, been living as guardians in residence. Furthermore, specialized organizations focusing only or mostly on artists, creatives, and community activist have emerged.

During the last decade, many have written about how social housing

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[1] Mara Ferreri, Gloria Dawson, and Alexander Vasudevan, "Living precariously: Property Guardianship and the Flexible City," *Transactions* 42, 2 (2017): 246–59; Mara Ferreri, Gloria Dawson, "Self Precarization and the Spatial Imaginaries of Property Guardianship," *Cultural Geographies* 25, 3 (2018): 425–40; London Assembly Housing Committee, *Protecting London's Property Guardians* (February 2018): 1–45.

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regeneration in the UK has been nothing more than social cleansing of working-class tenants and homeowners from profitable parts of the city.[2] These tenants, activists, journalist, writers, and researchers have also revealed how artists have been partaking in these processes, becoming both accomplices with power structures and their victims. In their thinking and writing, this complicated situation has been named *artwashing*; art utilized by real-estate capital implicated in the process of social cleansing. Their precarious position has compromised artists' position in society, and the sheer need to survive to a certen extend might explain their willingness to adapt. They have been drawn into a process of depoliticization in order to become agents of artwashing. This has been a profoundly undignifying experience or artists expressing critical opinions about artwashing. "Estates with artistic-guardians are deeply undignified sights. Together with the loss of dignity of tenants, we have been losing ours, by complying to silence."[3] Artists have also been resisting against the superimposed role of an accomplice in the demographic transformation at council estates in transition. Together with the position(s) of their general sense of powerlessness and indignity artist have been responding by learning an anti-artwashing language beyond the political pointlessness of engaging in art without political tools and goals.

This article is the result of research conducted from 2016 to 2018 in London. The data was collected through ethnographic fieldwork. The reported material is based on participant observation of numerous discussions organized in art, university, and activist spaces, numerous conversations with artists, tenants, and housing activists in the neighborhoods, and 10 semi-structured interviews with artists residing or working on the estates expressing critical views about artwashing, including media reports and policy analyses.

This research is theoretically framed by the current debate on social housing regeneration in the UK, housing precarity, artwashing and art, and housing struggles. The study tackles contradictions of artistic property guardianship at housing estates undergoing so-called regeneration in London. This article will contribute to scholarship on property guardianship, artistic urban resistance, and artwashing in Europe, with empirical knowledge about the lives of art property guardians and their relationship towards artwashing.

In their article "Vacancy at the edge of the Precarious City", Mara Ferreri and Alexander Vasudevan, define urban vacancy as an 'edge' – 'conceptually subterranean trends' that are usually left invisible. The focus of this article is even more modest and marginal. However, it makes claims about the role of art in housing struggles at the intersection of dispossession of the 'municipal dream' of council housing[4] and relatively privileged use of temporary vacant homes with an artistic touch.

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[2] Loretta Lees and Hannah White, "The Social Cleansing of London Council Estates," *Housing Studies* 35, 10 (2020): 1–22.

[3] Interview with artistic-PG, 2018.

[4] John Boughton, *Municipal Dreams: The Rise and Fall of Council Housing* (London: Verso, 2019), 1.

Artistic Property Guardianship

Property guardianship has been already studied as precarization of housing in austerity urbanism[5] and as a practice of self-precarization on the background of 'nomadic' urban dwelling and 'adventurous' housing imaginaries in metropolitan areas[6]. Most recently, it has been studied in the context of production of urban vacancy by privatization with a focus on the building whose previous function was social and public.[7] Understanding artistic property guardianship as both issues of the explosion of urban housing precarity, self-precarization and production of urban vacancy is crucial for explaining the role of art-property guardianship at UK council estates in 'transition'[8].

Artists' short-term live-work arrangements are not a new phenomenon in London. The first such arrangement emerged as an effect of the movement of capital which created a rent-gap in inner parts of London in the 1960s and 1970s as a result of a violent economical and social transition from an industrial to a post-industrial society, which also featured the slum clearances.[9] During this phase, while artists were also squatting in empty properties, the Greater London Council provided short-life housing and workspaces for artists through artist-run housing associations and not-for-profits. In contrast to what we are facing today, these processes were initially not yet fully integrated into the capitalist market, but more of an organic, grassroots initiative which evolved over time rather than through top-down processes.[10] Contemporary artistic live-work Property Guardian schemes follow a very different path.

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[5] Ferreri, Dawson and Vasudevan, "Living precariously," 246–59.

[6] Ferreri and Dawson, "Self Precarization and the Spatial Imaginaries of Property Guardianship," 425–40.

[7] Mara Ferreri and Alexander Vasudevan, "Vacancy at the Edges of the Precarious City," *Geoforum* 101 (2019): 165–73.

[8] London's council estates occupy central zones of the city. i.e. the most valuable land and are therefore desirable sites for property investment. Many estates in transition face full demolition so that profitable land for new developments can be released. Some of the more modernist and brutalist estates are refurbished to serve as housing for creative professionals asserting their own class status. This process of space consumption produces new geographies of class (i.e. the middle classes increasingly occupying council estates in the inner cities). Class status, now more than ever, is closely entwined with the housing market. Transition includes the displacement of working-class communities, with people uprooted from their neighbourhoods and their support networks. Since 1997, approximately 51,000 council units have been decanted, affecting over 200,000 residents. The transition taking place on council estates has very much to do with the processes of financialization of the real estate market, which resulted in housing becoming subject to rent-seeking speculative investment. In this process, social housing has largely been replaced by expensive market-price flats and so-called 'affordable' housing (up to 80% of market rent or shared ownership homes), 'affordability' here bearing no relation to what most people in the UK could reasonably afford. During this process, a large number of flats on the market have lost their social function as housing and became safe vaults for the capital of the international 1% or savvy investments for global corporate landlords. See: Paul Watt and Peer Smets, *Social Housing and Urban Renewal. A Cross-National Perspective* (Bingley: Emeral Publishing, 2017): 1–500; Anna Minton, *Big Capital: Who's London for?* (London: Penguin, 2017): 1–160; Boughton, *Municipal Dreams*, 1–319.

[9] Nick Green, "The Space of Change: Artists in the East End 1968–1980," *Rising East* 3, 2 (1999): 20–37.

[10] Ibid.

Property guardianship itself is a relatively new phenomenon and not intended to house only artists.[11] It emerged in the Netherlands and spread in the UK in the last two decades following the neoliberalization of housing provision, the mixed economy of policing[12] and the introduction of anti-squatting measures. Property guardian firms have spotted a gap in the market, created by a large number of vacant properties. Ferreri, Dawson, and Vasudevan define PG as "a new form of vacant property inhabitation that operates at the intersection between housing and security provision"[13]. Property guardians are increasingly used as security guards for vacant residential and commercial properties by a wide range of property owners: local authorities, developers, investment funds, and charities. The arrangement allows landlords to secure their temporarily empty property at a fraction of the cost of traditional protection, such as boarding up windows or employing security guards; for those in desperate need of housing, it provides a cheaper deal. PGs are not paid for their guardian services; they have to pay a fee (not rent), in order to temporarily use the space which is often dilapidated and unsuitable for housing, but usually larger and located centrally.[14] The temporary licences on the bases of which the property guardians use the space can be terminated at 2 weeks' notice, which is the major drawback of this kind of arrangement. Property guardian intermediaries operate as national or multinational for-profit businesses or social enterprises, including registered charities and social business.

The practice of regenerating council estates, since the early 2010s, opened a new market for the property security industry and attracted this new solution with a 'human face' by producing temporary housing vacancies that brought new opportunity for profit-making. The data obtained through Freedom of Information requests show that 24 out of 33 London's local governments have used or use property guardians[15] – Poplar Harca's Brownfield Estate and Thamesmead being just some of the examples. Local authorities reported to the GLA (2018) that their interest in PG solutions stems from the opportunity to save money by cutting the marginal cost of boarding up properties and hiring professional security. At the same time, they

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[11] There is no precise data on how many people live in this kind of arrangement but it is estimated that between 5,000 and 7,000 guardians live in these precarious conditions (**London Assembly Housing Committee, "Protecting London's Property Guardians,"** 11). A Freedom of information request from 2016 has shown that twenty-four of the 33 London local authorities protected at least one property through PG in 2016 (ibid.). Research has shown that the number of agencies in the country has increased by between 40 and 50 percent in the last four years (Fererri, Dawson and Vasudevan, "Living precariously," 246–59).

[12] PG contributes to the mixed economy of policing as a member of the "extended police family" (Johnston, "From 'pluralisation' to 'the police extended family,'" 185–204). It is part of the neoliberal restructuring of policing in the UK and other European countries, which includes the privatisation of policing and new hybrid forms of providing internal and external security. An extended 'police family' is an important part of the 'revanchist city' (Smith, *The New Urban Frontier*), heavily policed by state police, rent-a-cop and new phenomena of quasi-police recruited from the precarious city population (Kendra Bricken and Eich Volker, *Urban (In)Security: Policing in Neoliberal Crises* /Ottawa: Red Quill Books, 2013/).

[13] Ferreri, Dawson and Vasudevan, "Living precariously," 251.

[14] Ferreri and Dawson, "Self Precarization and the Spatial Imaginaries of Property Guardianship," 426.

[15] London Assembly Housing Committee, "Protecting London's Property Guardians," 11.

reported guardians in occupation to be a more 'sensitive solution' during the process of 'decanting' – a euphemism for evictions.

This need for sensitivity went hand in hand with the increasing resistance put up by affected tenants and leaseholders, who started to get organized all over London.[16] As the cracks and pitfalls of this anti-social process became increasingly visible, additional 'sensitive' solutions with aspects of healing and mediation had to be invented. These solutions took the appearance of art and community activism and were believed to be able to maintain a sense of community, create stability, provide reassurance for longer-term residents, create an 'authentic place', steer social networks and the opportunities they brought, resolve conflicts, and create a basis for community stability and growth.[17] Unlike commercial agencies that offer relatively straight-forward services based on merging housing with so-called 'guard labour', artistic enterprises introduced another novelty into the industry – 'cultural touch'. It is not only that these schemes promise to protect properties and house those left behind by the housing market, but they also want to employ the creative and moral potential of guardians. This mutation promised to give a new 'human face' to the PG business already in place.

Artistic Property Guardianship through the lance of Artwashing

The concept of artwashing as a method of critique[18] in the context of urban struggles stands for utilizing art, creativity, and aesthetics in social cleansing existing mostly in working-class and urban poor communities. The use of this concept has been disputed, with journalists, artists, theorists, and activists debates and comments showing difficulties in working with complexities and contradictions at the place where the real estate industry meets artists' everyday life and struggles of the old communities.[19] Bringing artists into the process of council estates *decanting* between the interests of developers and local communities has been recognized as artwashing by activists, artists, and theoreticians.[20] In this section, I want to question how this approach could be extended to artistic property guardianship.

There are many definitions of artwashing that have been circulating in discussions and academic writing. This section draws on discussions around class violence

[16] Anna Minton and Paul Watt, "London's Housing Crisis and Its Activisms: Introduction," *City* 20, 2 (2016): 204–21.

[17] Chiara Courage, *Arts in Place: The Arts, the Urban and Social Practice* (London: Routledge, 2017): 17, etc.

[18] Ruck, "Artwashing Education?" *International Journal of Art & Design Education* 39, 2 (2020): 405.

[19] Jan Dalley "Why artwashing is a dirty word," *Financial Times* (2018): nn; Anna Francis, "Artwashing gentrification is a problem – but vilifying the artists involved is not an answer," *The Conversations* (2017): nn; Stephen Prichard, "Artwashing: Social Capital & Anti-Gentrification Activism," (2017), nn; Rab Harling, "Balfron Tower: The Artwash of an Icon," *Urban Transcripts Journal* 1, 3 (2017): nn; Hannah Nicklin, "Teviot Tales – Artwashing?" (2016): nn; etc.

[20] Prichard, "Artwashing: Social Capital & Anti-Gentrification Activism," nn; Nicklin, "Teviot Tales – Artwashing?," nn; Harling, "Balfron Tower: The Artwash of an Icon," nn; etc.

in Boyle Heights in LA and the social cleansing of housing estates in London. The collective School of Echoes that has been involved in the struggles in Boyle Heights in LA in their writing underline an important fact: gentrification is purposefully produced and not a moral problem to be solved by changing individual behavior (The School of Echoes forthcoming). Art is brought into the process of gentrification/social cleansing process by state actors, developers, art institutions, or organizations such as property guardian companies, and it is not a gesture of the individual artist. Artists are summoned by other actors in the real-estate (transitional) industry to serve a particular purpose; that's why their acts sometimes seem both critical of (if the artist has such intentions) and in compliance with anti-social transition (if they already accepted the invitation). In the UK, New Labour was the first party to embrace artwashing as a strategy and tactic in urban development. Culture-led urban regeneration was kickstarted with a public art commissioning program in the UK from 1997–2009.[21] During this period, many artists started moving into neglected communities and social housing estates. During the last two decades, official sponsorship of socially engaged art became a way to include the so-called 'socially excluded'[22]. Art is believed to be a means to help people transition to a new reality by energizing communities and giving hope to local people affected by regeneration.

In a brutally exploited coincidence, various forms of artwashing of urban developments meet with a 'social turn in art' which enforces and enables art to act as an aspect of social inclusion in to ultimately gentrifying regeneration policies. One of the results of this is that art is now almost expected to produce social and economic outcomes, pick up the pieces of a broken welfare system[23] and revive and regenerate the hollowed-out economies of post-industrial cities. Never mind the absence of any evidence for art's ability to actually perform these tasks.[24]

Artistic property guardianship follows the logic of artwashing by emerging as a new, improved, cheaper, and more cultural version of something that we should recognize as policing against both squatting and public housing. Keeping in mind that squatting in empty residential properties is now illegal, PG-schemes with a 'human face' are there to culturally enforce this spatial regulation by introducing a legal, controlled, and apolitical form of vacant property occupancy with the addition of artistic aura.[25]

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[21] Josephine Berry, "Everyone Is Not an Artist: Autonomous Art Meets the Neoliberal City," *New Formations 84* 84/85 (2015): 20–39.

[22] Helen Jermyn, "Art and social exclusion: a review prepared for Art Council of England," (2001): 1–43.

[23] Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing art, supporting publics* (London: Routledge, 2011): 27.

[24] Peter Campbell, Tamsin Cox and Dave O'Brian, "The social life of measurement: How methods have shaped the idea of culture in urban regeneration," *Journal of Cultural Economy* 10, 1 (2016): 50.

[25] The culturalized version of PG-ship works hand-in-hand with an emerging fear towards empty properties because of their supposed potential to generate anti-social behaviour. Anti-social behaviour became a headline issue in Britain around 2004. In terms of housing, squatting was identified as the main problem blocking 'vital funds' for London. Under Section 144 of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, squatting in residential property became a criminal offence on 1 September 2012 in the UK. We can see here how the system integrates (un)profitable housing practices like squatting by rendering their ideo-political concept unusable.

Artistic PG schemes operating on council estates during decanting processes are thus a form of first aid on the crack in society cohesion. This crack embodies three scandalous facts: 1) that a large percentage of people living in London have difficulty finding affordable housing, 2) that 200,000 registered properties were left empty for six months and more in England[26] and 3) that 'decanting' social tenants and leaseholders in the process of regeneration stands for discriminatory displacement and social cleansing[27]. This crack represents in a symbolic and very material way the impossibility of solving the unsolvable conflict between the interests of people and the interests of capital. Hence, it is not some irregular crack, it is a structural gap. The function of artistic PG-schemes is to be an impossible adapter in the conflictual socio-economic and political spaces of the production of housing and social cleansing members of social categories regarded as undesirable and disposable. They aim to make urban transformation conform to ethical standards with the 'aesthetical dividend'[28]. PG-ship embraces the aspects of so-called housing crises and turns them into its advantage by becoming an acceptable alternative to more politically responsible forms of housing. Bestowing an artistic aura to processes that endanger and deprive people of fundamental human rights, parasiting skilfully in vacancy while at the same time hiding the social costs of regeneration by creating a smoke-screen made of art, this is their utmost function and mission.

At the very end, it is important to say that artwashing works only if we keep quiet about it. During my research, I was told by several artist guardians that they were called in by the guardian company and threatened with eviction after using social media to talk about what was going on at the estates undergoing regeneration where they lived. "They intimidated us. They called us to come to their office and threatened that if we speak to the media, we will be evicted." These threats came true in at least two cases that I came across. This becomes evidence of the fact that refusing loyalty means exclusion. PG companies with a 'human face' disguised as promoters of 'community spirit' actively discouraged their 'tenants' from organizing with worried and frightened residents who were in the process of being evicted. By discouraging their 'guardians' to self-organize with tenants, PG companies police their guardians' individual lives and deny any critical artistic and social function to their residence in those buildings. In silence and compliance, the buildings once supposed to house communities gradually became empty real-estate structures, with something like an artistic aura hanging above the silenced battlefield.

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[26] Phillip Inman, "Housing crisis: more than 200,000 homes in England lie empty," *Guardian* (April 20, 2017): nn.

[27] Southwark Notes Archive Group etc., *Staying Put: Anti-Gentrification Handbook for Council Estates in London*. (London: Self-published, 2014):8; Luna Glucksberg, "The blue bit, that was my bedroom: Rubble, displacement and regeneration in inner-city London," in *Social Housing and Urban Renewal: A Cross-National Perspective*, ed. by Paul Watt, and Peer Smets (Beingley: Emeral Publishing, 2017): 79–90.

[28] Alberto Duman, "Not Here, Right Now/Right Here, Not Now: Unfolding the context in Alana Jelinek's 'This is Not Art," *Journal of Visual Art Practice* 13, 3 (2014): 193–203.

The Futility of Dignity: Critical artists at art-guarded Estates acting against artwashing

Sites of artwashing are deeply uncomfortable places. Testimonies of my respondents point to a feeling of discomfort due to their position as guardians in occupation, additional obligations, and the lack of capacity to act autonomously. This is how some of them described their frustration:

> I am occupying a council flat. This is a huge problem. Someone had to leave so I could move in. It is about the dispossession of tenants and leaseholders. I am complicit in that process, I am a foot soldier to capitalism, I really feel that.[29]

It is not only the knowledge or intuition of the constitutive essence of anti-social transition that creates these feelings but also the understanding that they help create, through their own participation, a reality which in turn increasingly enslaves them. A politically aware PG-artist has to forgo her dignity. The opportunity to live and work affordably in London comes with demands. Artists are expected to perform their assigned role or else deal with the fact that there is always somebody more desperate to take their place. In order to overcome the indignity of such instrumentalization, artists have tried to reclaim their agency in different ways, including moral gestures to acknowledge and highlight the disappearing life on the estates, doing things 'on their own terms' as well as campaigning publicly.

One of the most common approaches used by the artists I met who are involved with artwashing sites, is artistic ethnography. Artists use ethnographic methods to collect specific, out-of-the-public-eye information and memories of people about to lose their homes, their communities and their life. Artists document stories about life on the Estates and make photos and videos of those who are waiting to be moved out. In this way, traces of a disappearing life are collected in the form of audio work, photo stories, video games, (self-made) archives, art books, gallery and museum installations, films, and theatre performances. These projects try to somehow 'dignify' life on estates by giving a face to those being treated like numbers and giving a voice to those who are systematically silenced. The intention is to convince the audience about 'the real values': needs not market, people not products, narratives not numbers. Such art work frequently carries with it a nostalgic sentiment and melancholic feeling emerging from the immanent fact of destruction.

On the other hand, I encountered micro-resistant practices that materialized in refusing bureaucratic demands coming from 'social' PG companies. After a period of struggle to respond to a demand for 16 hours of volunteering per week, an artist that I talked to merged obligatory charity work with an ongoing art project in order to counter compulsory volunteering and dignify her own position. Already underpaid,

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[29] Interview with artistic-PG 2, 2018.

these artists could not afford to take on an additional workload. Even though the artist felt that the company was not happy with volunteering work being undertaken away from the local community, they never said anything. Such practice merges pragmatism with micro rebellion in order to restore a minimum of autonomy regarding the decision of where to do one's own work and under what conditions. This polymorphic spatial practice appears as a response to the 'neoliberal dilemma' resulting in a compromise between conflicting forces. In that respect, the art that is taken into consideration here is caught up in a much broader web of living, working, and acting conditions, namely in the hegemonic ideological frames that designate, denominate and articulate positioning and meaning.

In the most politically articulated cases where undignifying experience turned into open anger, artistic expression took the form of anti-gentrification and anti-artwashing campaigning. Nevertheless, the involvement in campaigning and speaking out about the situation on transitional sites never manifested during the time of residency in guardianship arrangements. This was because of pressures and intimidations coming from 'social' PG enterprises. Still, this micro spectacular ethics intertwined with the aesthetics of artistic activism ended up hitting the wall of the artist's own impossible expectations to change the situation through art criticism and engagement. Driven by a strong artistic identity, these artists were not equipped to work in a horizontal and collaborative way with housing activist networks in London, which left them pretty much isolated, peculiar figures coming from the art world.

In Marx's critique, human dignity is represented as a denial of dignity by the forms of capital embodied in the perverted forms of human social relations. Nevertheless, as Werner Bonefeld has shown in his text "Social Form, Critique and Human Dignity", dignity works also as a power that makes history.[30] In this regard, we should read the attempts of the artist to find a way to use art in order to address this situation, as expressions of the need to exist as a purpose and not only as a resource. Artists that I encountered during my research have been practicing their purposefulness along with three different plots, presupposing specific principles of cause and effect: an aesthetical, ethical, and existential plot. The aesthetical plot is based on revealing hidden truths by means of aesthetic representation in order to change the minds of the mostly artworld audience and make a difference in how a specific situation is represented; the ethical plot includes the activist campaigning and exerting public pressure in order to create conflicts in the public realm that are supposed to change the behavior of the actors, whilst the pragmatic approach includes doing things on one's own terms by making a compromise.

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[30] Werner Bonefeld, "Social Form, Critique and Human Dignity," *libcom* (2015).

Conclusion

Actors of estate regeneration work with seemingly 'soft' strategies in order to produce smokescreens to hide the cracks. In this process, guardians in the occupation are expected to bring in the 'regenerative potential' of art, community agency and survive unaffordable London's housing market. As artists making critical judgments about artwashing have shared with me, this position is deeply un-dignifying. Most of the artists trapped in this structural position do not believe in the urban utopia preached by mainstream regeneration actors. Their answers are a consequence of un-resolved personal conflictual interests which originate from still undefined political answers and their daily struggle for survival. For most of them, it is clear that there has to be more to life than an endless struggle for survival and in that light, their attempts have to be seen as a pursuit of a social common denominator, however (un)successful they are.

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