Is Gentrification Anti-Sprawl? Documenting and Interpreting through Signage and Cityscapes

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> …[S]patial changes of the city…resulted in a
> dominant style of urban photography. In their
> depictions and interpretations of the new urban
> fringes, the edgy style of street photography was
> exchanged for a more topographical approach, often
> reminiscent of nineteenth-century urban and
> landscape photography. Where downtowns made
> room for peripheral areas; hectic street life and
> density were exchanged for emptiness and
> openness; small-format cameras for large view
> cameras; physical proximity for distance and
> detachment; spontaneity for calculated framings;
> speed for slowness; a hot aesthetics for one of
> aloofness; the here and now of the decisive moment
> and of the unique encounter for repetition and
> interchangeability.[1]

This shift art historian Steven Jacobs writes about bookends my

photographic work on the concurrent change happening in American cities,

from suburbanization to rapid urbanization. I'm interested in pointing out

the impact building booms and bust have on communities. In her essay on

Native and Latin American women's art, Phoebe Farris[2] finds that these

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[1] Steven Jacobs, "Photographing Posturban Space; The Demise of Street Photography and the Rise of the Spectacular", in <u>Spectacular City: Photographing the Future</u>, ed. Emiliano Gandolfi (Rotterdam : NAI Publishers, 2006), 170.

[2] Phoebe Farris, "The Syncretism of Native American, Latin American, and African American Women's Art : Visual Expressions of Feminism, the Environment, Spirituality, and Identity", in <u>Unmaking Race, Remaking Soul: Transformative Aesthetics and the Practice of Freedom</u>, ed. Christa Davis

artists, like myself, share a common aspect in the intertwining of feminism, the environment, identity, social criticism and activism. In my thesis project I have been using digital photo imaging to produce visual narratives combining these themes.

With my series, *The Open City*, I ask: Is gentrification anti-sprawl? I will analyze the issues leading me to this question, covering how this topic touched me personally and motivates me to create this work. I will also discuss the aesthetic and theoretical influences related to this project. I begin with my first conscious identification as an artist, cover my creative development, and which led to *The Open City*, and conclude with how the series fits into the discussion of related urbanist theories and contemporary art.

Sprawl

As a teenager, I lived in Miami sprawl, what Suburban Nation[3] describes as an "invention… an idealized, artificial system for living". The book describes sprawl as unsustainable and self-destructive because it produces insurmountable traffic problems and exacerbates social inequity and isolation.

Acampora and Angela L. Cotton Albany : State University of New York Press, 2007.

[3] Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck, Suburban Nation : The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream, (New York : North Point Press, 2000), 4.

In a photo at the Historical Museum of Southern Florida's Miami sprawl exhibit, a single house stands in a field. It is not the last standing home after a disaster. This was most likely the model home for a housing development. At the edge of Miami Dade County, farmlands

Historical Museum of Southern Florida Display

and wetlands were converted to lots for suburban housing tracks. As a result, the coral bedrock underneath was blown up to create landfills, man-made lakes, and canals. These types of changes, such as dynamite blasts shaking the house, affected my experience growing up there.

Field of Dreams, 88-91

The view from my window was endless miles of flat agricultural fields at the edge of the Kendall neighborhood. Every so often, masses of migrant workers would appear to work the fields. Suburban Nation calls sprawl a strict separation of housing types. This separation "hints at a more insidious cause of sprawl [such as] economic discrimination or sometimes simple racism. In the words of FJ Popper: 'The

basic purpose of zoning was to keep Them where They belonged - OUT.'"[4] This brief appearance of Haitian and Latino workers in a mostly white part of town emphasized this division of people to me. Because of this isolating landscape, I felt I was growing up in "Ken-*dull*". Making art was my response to my surreal surroundings.

Perhaps this partially resulted in my attraction to Surrealism and Dada, such as Rene Magritte's paintings. Despite unconventional and unexpected groupings of objects, his paintings are realistically executed, creating a sense of mystery. As seen in his images, Magritte drew from his advertising experience to redefine words and objects[5]. At times I would co-opt a surrealist way of dealing with the fantastical but real landscapes and scenarios of the extremely isolated housing developments. Surrealism eventually evolved in my work as I

René Magritte, Belgian
La condition humaine

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[4] FJ Popper, quoted in Duany, Suburban Nation, 10.
[5] Anneke E. Wijnbeek, Magritte, Rene in Oxford Art Online, Oxford University Press, 2007 — 2008, http://www.oxfordartonline.com, http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T053159?q=Magritte&hbutton_search.x=44&hbutton_search.y=11&hbutton_search=search&source=oao_gao&source=oao_t118&source=oao_t234&source=oao_t4&search=quick&pos=1&_start=1#firsthit, October 2008.

looked to create confrontation through juxtaposition of unexpected elements in my images.

Several creative movements, which influenced suburban kids like me in the 80's, were part of the DIY (Do-It-Yourself) culture. 'Zine publishers and independent musicians used what resources were available to them to create and distribute their creative projects. DIY empowered "anyone, however amateur [to] produce something which could be valued as a finished product" writes Amy Spencer, DIY historian[6]. This sensibility was also present in the work of the Dada self-published journals. Spencer explains that Dada artists "had little choice but to use the method of underground publishing to make controversial statements, to get their ideas heard and to shake the bourgeois sensibilities of the art world."[7]. These artists used collage and appropriation to adapt and subvert elements from mainstream culture into their designs. Similarly, Punk graphic designers in the late 70's England used handmade techniques to create posters and album covers for bands like The Clash. Author Zoe Ryan explains that these "[l]ow-tech processes enabled them to create inventive graphic solutions with limited resources. [It] was also a response to the social and political unrest in Britain."[8] My dissatisfaction with suburban culture attracted me to DIY music and art.

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[6] Amy Spencer, <u>DIY : The Rise of Lo-Fi Culture</u>, (London; New York: Marion Boyars, 2005) 11.
[7] Spencer, 123.
[8] Zoë Ryan, <u>Graphic Thought Facility</u>, (New Haven, Conn. ; London : Yale University Press, 2008) 11,12.

I expanded my interest in making art through a photography class in high school. I was largely influenced by street photographers such as Swiss-born Robert Frank, who traveled the United States on a Guggenheim fellowship and captured a unique view of the 1950's in his book *The Americans.* He created the content of his images by acting as an outside observer instead of pushing a particular agenda as a photojournalist. His personal, unguarded view of the country at the time of segregation drew strong criticism[9]. Instead of accepting racism, he brought it to the foreground. I've taken the same approach in photography, looking at the often-ignored aspects of the urban US and it's culture.

Another socially proactive photographer who inspired my development as an artist was Walker Evans. He took photos of architecture and signs for the FSA as part of his documentation of the "plight of the rural poor during the depression…photographing everybody and everything."[10] According to photography historian Robert Hirsh, Evans captured the "ignored scenes from a fading regional American culture."[11] Curator Christian Peterson reasons: "Evans saw himself as a historian, capturing and preserving the

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[9] Constance W. Glenn, <u>Frank, Robert in Oxford Art Online</u>, http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T029714?q=robert+frank&search=quick&pos=1&_sta rt=1#firsthit, <u>http://www.oxfordartonline.com</u>, October 2008.

[10] Christian A. Peterson, <u>Walker Evans</u>, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) 7.

[11] Robert Hirsch, <u>Seizing the light : A History of Photography</u>, (Boston : McGraw-Hill, 2000), 288.

values and objects of American culture".[12] This concept of using the camera as a tool to capture not only events, but also scenes and objects as historical records, has played a large role in the creation of my series.

Different painters have also contributed to my growth as an artist, especially José Antonio Velásquez, a self-taught painter who started out as a barber and telegrapher, but eventually became the Master Primitivist Painter of Honduras. The subject matter of his work was the traditional character of Honduran cities, surrounded by mountainous landscapes and dotted with people about the streets. His style became a national movement, producing a school of painting that was visible when I grew up there.[13] In fact, my first independent art project was a *naïf* style drawing done of a Honduran city with typical characters walking about the streets. I consider outsider art and the *naïf* style used in hand painted signs that I will discuss later as extensions of the Do It Yourself movement.

Jose Antonio Velasquez
Francisco Morazan

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[12] Peterson, <u>Walker Evans</u>, 8.

[13] Leticia de Oyuela, <u>El Naif en Honduras</u>, (Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Secretaria de Cultura, Artes y Deportes, UNESCO, Agencia Espanola de Cooperacion Internacional), 77-81.

Anselm Keifer
Germany's Spiritual Heroes, 1973

I found Anselm Kiefer fascinating as well because he combines

photographs and drawings in his paintings of German history. His technique

involves layering of materials and symbols to mirror the layers of history. For

example, he might combine paint, straw, sand, wood, and photos to comment

on the epic Germanic sagas.[14] His art seems to recreate the feelings of the

Germans during the Nazi's reign to understand that period. In "Archaic

Architectures," Katherina Schmidt[15] observes that "Keifer creates a

superimposition of ancient, mythic images, archaic vestiges and new

historical experience." By using specific architectural imagery, he's able to

manifest certain political ideology in his paintings. He achieves even greater

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[14] Stephan Mann, <u>Kiefer, Anselm in Oxford Art Online</u>,
http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T046494?q=ansel
m&hbutton_search.x=0&hbutton_search.y=0&hbutton_search=search&sourc
e=oao_gao&source=oao_t118&source=oao_t234&source=oao_t4&search=quic
k&pos=1&_start=1#firsthit, http://www.oxfordartonline.com, October 2008.
[15] Katherina Schmidt, "Archaic Architectures," in <u>Anselm Kiefer: The Seven</u>
<u>Heavenly Palaces 1973-2001</u>, ed. Markus Bruderlin (Hatje Cantz Publishers,
2001), 66.

Suburban Jail, 88-91

effect through the use of perspective to augment the sense of vastness in large-scale work. His hand drawn figures bring a sense of human intervention to offset certain pieces' monumental authority. I refer to them to understand compositions with figures against large backdrops and thematically large myths. According to Roberta Smith, his work "evokes a universal sense of human folly, suffering and disillusionment without depicting a single soul or traditionally narrative event… [but emphasizing] myth … and authoritarian architecture."[16] I find it interesting that, in their own ways, Keifer and Velasquez utilize architecture to represent a specific time and place, to exorcize the past or to preserve nostalgia. The architecture in sprawl, however, evoked neither in me, so I gave it my own meaning.

Perhaps because I belonged to neither a community nor a culture, I was sensitive to the social inequity and the

Vecino Campesino, 88-91

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[16] Roberta Smith, <u>Provocative Paintings From Anselm Kiefer</u>, October 14, 1988, The New York Times.

isolation of the suburbs. This motivated me to create art with this content. For instance, in the photo *Field of Dreams,* the silhouette of a window, with the factory sticker still on it, frames the view of an expansive and empty agricultural field. Another photo, *Suburban Jail*, also uses a window for juxtaposition. On the inside of it, the thin profiles of the window blinds resemble bars. Lastly, I feature sprawl architecture in images about migrant workers in the fields across my neighborhood. In *Vecino Campesino*, a smiling man carries vegetables in his arms as he walks through rows of plowed earth, track-style houses bordering the field.

Gentrification

In 1999, I moved to Washington, DC and for the first time ever I was living in an urban metropolis. Slowly my neighborhood started to become gentrified, with homes boarded up and remaining empty for years. But in time, the ceaseless construction of million dollar townhouses disrupted us, the old residents. My original neighbors, mostly immigrants, were forced to leave their apartments, which they had called home for decades. The atmosphere of the neighborhood was transformed; families with children moved away, parks became empty and an entire way of life was rapidly changing.

Ironically, while some Latino immigrants were employed to build the new luxury condos, many others were forced out of their affordable housing.

Suburban Nation refers to gentrification as an "improvement" because it "revitalizes downtowns"[17]. However, according to Gentrification of the City, the poor are the ones that pay the highest price for these improvements[18]. Changes in city zoning favoring higher priced properties displace working

The Help, 2005

families. They can't afford to live in their own neighborhoods, and neither can artists who often favor these diverse communities.

As a result, marginalization in architecture surfaced in my work. Along with seeing my neighborhood disappear, I was noticing how the division of labor translated into actual separations in daily space for instance, separating immigrants and blue-collar workers from white-collar workers. I illustrated my concerns about this segregating effect of urban architecture in a series of watercolors. Painted in the style of architectural blueprints, I

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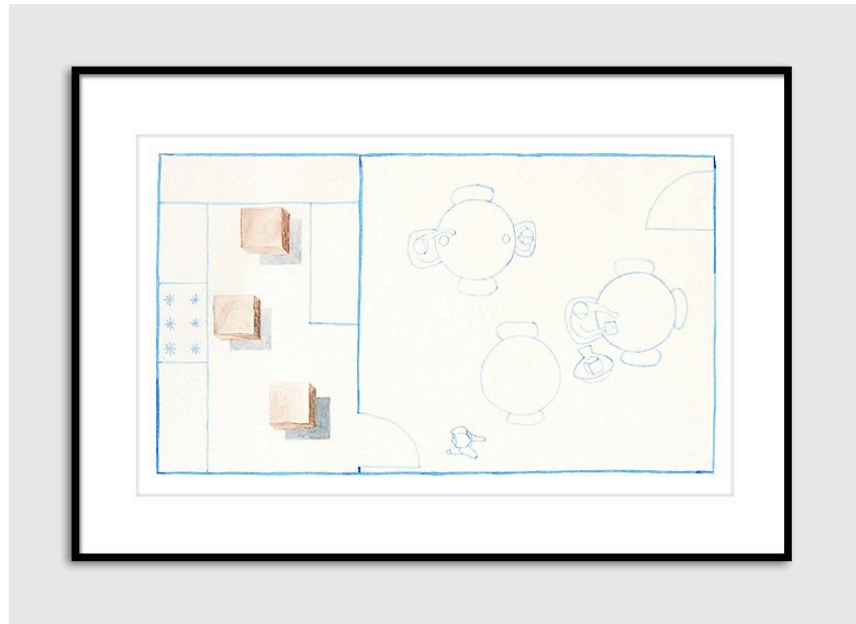
[17] Duany, Suburban Nation, 172-173.
[18] Neil Smith and Peter Williams, Gentrification of the City, (Boston : Allen & Unwin, 1986).

outlined the divisions within restaurants and office spaces. Service workers are depicted as brown cubes, like units without identities, while others such as patrons and professionals are clearly delineated. By showing the organized social segregation in buildings, I was able to emphasize the spaces different workers were confined to based on their specific job. It was very important for me to capture these effects because those who consider urbanization as solely improvements may easily overlook them. This part of my work retells the narratives of people whose lives were impacted negatively by it.

While many were displaced by the social segregation in the workplace, advertisers and marketers excluded no one. It was especially common to see ads and billboards directed at minorities who at the same time were most affected by the ongoing changes in the city. Images in these advertisements were not representative of the community. Instead smaller businesses used affordable hand painted signs to advertise locally.

I believed the people represented in these signs were visually symbolic of the true identity of the community, so I started photographing theses signs in Miami as part of my graduate work. As their own audience for these DIY ads, they were mirroring themselves. Unfortunately, their 'billboards', the walls of their neighborhoods, were being demolished. Rising out of these ruined streets was a new urban landscape and aesthetic. Signs for global companies and condo developments were marking the turf for gentrification. The camera became, once again, my weapon to photograph another wave of

development in Miami. I used these photos to create a series of visual

narratives about gentrification and its impact.

Other artists who appropriated imagery influenced the initial

development of my work. Once such artist was Barbara Kruger, whose

graphic design background in commercial women's magazines influenced her

examination of women's imagery in advertisement[19]. Combining photos with

ironic copy, she creates new 'advertisements' about the roles of power and

women. Similarly, John Heartfield used his graphic design skills to create

art about power. Drawing on his own experience in World War I, he used

photo collage to satirize post-war, middle-class Europe. By appropriating

photographs from newspapers and advertisements, he reinterpreted their

visual information to express his view of current events. Photography, as a

pictorially realistic medium, emphasized the relevance of his message. The

Berlin Dada movement particularly favored this technique of collaging

appropriated images to communicate social issues. An exhibit catalogue on

Heartfield explains: "He called upon his training in advertising…[d]ramatic

photographs, unusual spatial compositions…became the signatures of his

work…[M]ost of his montages used the photograph not for its immediate

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[19] Kruger, Barbara in Oxford Art Online,
http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T048097?q=kruge
r&search=quick&pos=2&_start=1#firsthit, http://www.oxfordartonline.com,
October 2008.

intention but for the unexpected message revealed through juxtaposition."[20] By recycling imagery from mass media, his message may have been easily recognized and interpreted by his audience.

Andy Warhol, trained as a designer, started his career by manually reproducing advertisements as paintings. He influentially appropriated popular images and brand designs to decontextualize their original meaning[21]. Warhol, Heartfield, and Kruger used appropriation to comment on the power of advertising images to carry messages. While Warhol emptied the meaning out of the ads, Kruger and Heartfield used them to comment on power. As I appropriate figures from hand painted ads, I invest in them iconic meaning, as embodiments of their community to comment on the change of the neighborhoods the images come from.

As an undergraduate, I briefly assisted Guillermo Gómez-Peña, whose artwork spans across multidisciplinary fields and audiences. Titles of his work, such as "Warrior for Gringostroika", "La Pocha Nostra", and "Border Brujo," give a glimpse of his multicultural perspective. His work addresses borders of all kinds, including cultural, national, and racial. Through this experience, I realized how Latino artists blur and integrate the concept of

[20] Andrés Mario Zervigón, <u>Agitated Images: John Heartfield and German Photomontage, 1920–1938</u> exh. cat. Los Angeles, The Getty Center, 2006.
[21] Marco Livingstone, <u>Warhol, Andy in Oxford Art Online</u>, http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T090699?q=warhol&search=quick&pos=1&_start=1#firsthit, http://www.oxfordartonline.com, October 2008.

borders in contemporary art as a result of their immigrant experience.

Author Mike Davis explains Gómez-Peña's work:

> *"Indeed, some of the most influential avantegardists(sic), like
> … Guillermo Gómez-Peña, have embraced the 'Border' –
> everything that represents the interpenetration of social
> formations and stands between simple choices of national
> identity-as a distinctively Latino and dialectical epistemology
> ('We de-Mexicanized ourselves to Maxi-understand ourselves,
> some without wanting to, others on purpose. And one day, the
> border became our house, laboratory, and ministry of
> culture.')".[22]*

To that discussion I add that the city itself has become the border because I
see gentrification creating very distinct territories.

Unlike a flaneur, who just wanders the city, I wanted to intervene,
using photos to point out change in the city. The phrase for manipulated
photography in Spanish is "fotografía intervenida", which literally translated
is intervened photography and implies action. Gabriel Orozco exemplifies this
as he "walks through the city making small altercations to found situations...
leaving… 'interventions' in the city landscape." [23]

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[22] Mike Davis, Magical Urbanism : Latinos Reinvent the US City, (London ;
New York, NY : Verso, 2001), 18 -19.
[23] Phyllis Rosenzweig and Mia Fineman, Gabriel Orozco : Photographs,
(Göttingen : Steidl ; Washington, D.C. : Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture
Garden, Smithsonian Museum, 2004), 9.

"Ladies Typology #1"

24 in. x 50 in., Carbon Pigment Print, 2006

My intended intervention was to open up the city, to include the concurrent manifestations of the old and the new urbanity in a snapshot of a community undergoing gentrification. Searching for a format to capture this change, I experimented with how I was appropriating the images from the signs. Initially, I felt it was important to represent the context of the signs by including their surroundings. Then, I created typographies of recurrent symbols in the signs, for example soda cans as shorthand for "convenience store". One typology combined women from signs in a supermarket, a department store and a restaurant. Resembling a narrative, the figures became characters in a comic strip. Finally, I rearranged the hand painted and development signs using digital imaging software into panoramic cityscapes. In the collages, the cut and pasted figures from the documentation of hand painted advertisements now represented the citizens of the city. Later, I found a link to this intention in the book <u>Spectacular City</u>. It points

out a similar concept, explaining that the "imagery of urban life [is] so closely

bound up with the images derived from advertising…[that] the image has

acquired the character of reality."[24] The reality of the city, as I saw it, was

rapid urbanization through gentrification of working class neighborhoods.

Is Gentrification Anti-Sprawl?

How is gentrification and urbanization different from sprawl? Having

lived through both, I relate to both experiences through my images. By

combining documentation of the changing urban landscape with the local

visual culture, I create narrative collages to discuss issues of community,

construction, destruction, the role of advertisement, and the public nature of

the city. For instance, in the hand painted signs and condo sales ads, women

are portrayed as sexual objects. *305 Venus* montages highly sexualized

305 Venus

24 in. x 76 in., Carbon Pigment Print, 2007.

depictions of women from signs into a panoramic photo of construction sites.

As enlarged figures, the women act as powerful forces in the

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[24] Gandolfi, <u>Spectacular City</u>, 7.

Underfoot

24 in. x 68 in., Carbon Pigment Print, 2006.

construction/destruction of the city, as opposed to being passive observers like

those lounging in condominium ads.

Another piece, *Underfoot,* uses an actual condo advertisement from an

Daniela Rossell
Untitled (Ricas y famosas)

abandoned condo sales center. The building never broke ground, instead creating blight, what revitalization of urban areas supposedly improves upon. I find similarities with

Daniella Rossell's photos about class and women's issues. My image shows a

woman in a swimsuit posing seductively while smaller figures of working

women busily push carts of laundry underneath her. Likewise, Rossell's

photo features a woman lounging in her living room while her maid stands by

awaiting orders. Lúcia Sá summarizes Rossell's work on women and the city:

> "[T]he collection of photographs in the book Ricas y Famosas
> (Rich and Famous Women) by Daniela Rossell […] grew out of
> a solo exhibition 'housed in a condemned mansion in the ritzy
> neighborhood of Polanco' (Gallo 2004:114)… Though the book
> is not supposed to be about 'neighborhoods', but about the
> young 'rich and famous' women, what strikes the reader is the
> constant revelation of what is inside some of the houses in
> those wealthy areas of the city. In other words, the
> photographs seem to be less interested in the women as much
> than in the space they inhabit." …For one brief moment (the
> time it took for the shot to materialize) we are allowed a peep
> into the houses of the rich, and what we see in the case of
> these photos is not normal life, but very strange, highly
> exoticized venues."[25]

As an example of the exotic venues in the Miami condo ads, *Underfoot*

materializes the reality behind the fantasy. The shoes falling from the sky in

the image symbolize the developments stepping on the neighborhoods. The

exposed building façade of the sales center accentuates the fabricated reality

of the housing market.

Like Rossell observes the rich and not-so-famous, three influential

German photographers similarly obsessed over and documented architecture.

For instance, Bern and Hilla Becher focused on structures. Their approach to

systematically photographing from the same perspective and with identical

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[25] Lúcia Sá, <u>Life in the Megalopolis : Mexico City and São Paulo</u>, (London ;
New York : Routledge, 2007).

lighting conditions at first might appear as an exercise in cataloguing[26]. However, their aim was social. By removing the surrounding elements, they isolated neglected structures and placed them center stage. Studying their strategy of documenting architecture and buildings propelled me from recording hand-painted signs to instead viewing them as sources of conceptual work through typologies. Essayist Aaron Betsky explains their influence: "The typological emphasis on certain building types developed by Bernd and Hilla Becher…set several generations of photographers on the path to look long and hard at the cities they inhabited…they emptied their

Andreas Gursky
Hong Kong, Island

images out...manipulated them with a variety of techniques to produce a reality that did not exist... [a] Utopia."[27] To emphasize the results of rapid urbanization, I create an augmented reality, a caricature

[26] Reinhold Misselbeck, Becher in Oxford Art Online, http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T007200?q=becher&search=quick&pos=1&_start=1#firsthit, http://www.oxfordartonline.com, October 2008.
[27] Aaron Betsky, Here Now: The Myth of Spectacular Photography, ed. Gandolfi, Spectacular City, 5.

version of the city. To give, as Aaron Betsky puts it, "both the Utopia and the dystopia that is latent in our present day reality…making …a myth about our modern, urban reality, not necessarily fiction or fact."   Likewise, Andreas Gursky's large, urban photos project both a dystopian and Utopian view. Despite the engaging, symmetrical city environments, a sense of alienation seems to be part of the new architecture he captures.

A similar, generic urbanization encroaching Miami contrasted with the lively representations in the hand-painted signs. Since I wanted to make this period of transition in the city (specifically the concurrent destruction of the old and construction of the new) as the backdrop for the narratives of rapid urbanization, I looked for sweeping, wide vistas. I was influence by Gursky's cinematic skyline scenes, which appear documentarian by their impersonality.

For my series, I created collages with photographs of signs and cityscapes taken in Charlotte, San Francisco, Denver, Chicago and Honduras, where I found common economic and cultural themes. Taking elements from hand painted signs from these locations, I recreated my impression of their urban experience. I saturated and enhanced the color composition of the landscapes to match the lively hand painted signs. Additionally, I printed the images between five to eight feet wide, to surround the peripheral vision of the viewer and transport them into the environment.

Through another piece, titled *Miami es mia (Miami is mine)*, I question the ownership of the city. To whom does the city belong? Is it to the workers that keep it buzzing and moving? Over a shot of downtown, I collaged enlarged images of ladies buying or selling groceries and taking over a downtown scene while small, fancily dressed ladies gather in front of a beauty salon. However, the forces of change in the city are seen

"Building a Better Future", 24 in. x 50 in.

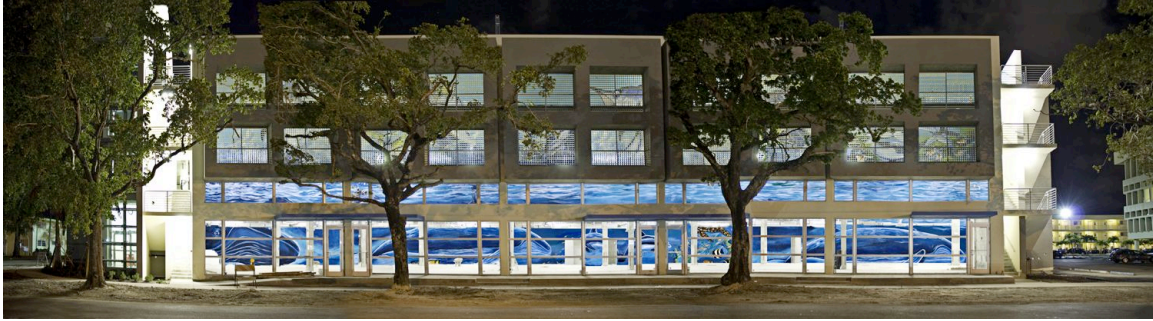Carbon Pigment Print, 2006

beyond in cranes and in the looming new construction in the distance. Other

The Check's In The Mail

Carbon Pigment Print, 2007

images such as *The Check's in the Mail* and *Building a Better Future* relate how the working class interacts with the newly built architecture, which they will never inhabit.

Fishbowl 2007-2008.

I also use the imagery appropriated from the hand painted signs to beautify the blight and the homogeneity of buildings. Through this, the new buildings are integrated back into the community, "tagging" the new structures with imagery from the hand painted signs. Reading about the graffiti of Sao Paulo in the book <u>Living in the Megalopolis</u>, I found artist similarly marking buildings for this reason: "[m]any of the designs incorporate the decaying surface of the wall…[and] graffiti interventions like this serve to call attention to the abandoned space, so as not to let it

Charlotte, NC Narrative, 2007

disappear in the landscape."[28]

     My pieces follow the Dadaist intentions for creating collages. For example in *Charlotte, NC Narrative* the figures were taken from a signs painted on a building, so they retain the textures of cement blocks, and are enlarged to match the scale of the buildings. As the Dadaist used machinery parts to comment on modern industrial society, I'm using building parts to comment on the social effect of rapid urbanization.[29] In the book <u>Dada</u>, historian Leah Dickerman writes that Dada montage artists

> *"Scholz allude[d] to a contemporary definition of the word montage as a technique for assembling or mounting machine parts in modern industry that the Dadaist invoked when they called their process of making pictures montieren. Thus the Dadaists, after them Scholz, associated their production of pictures with the operations of the assembly line, and more broadly, the expanding modernization…sometimes praising, sometimes criticizing, but always insisting on the determinative significance of technologies of industrial production and reproduction in contemporary modernity…the point was to associate Dada montage with modernized industry[.]"* [30]

The brick and mortar appearance of the figures adds to their interaction with the skyline as entities of the city.

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[28] Sa, <u>Living in the Megalopolis</u>, 150.
[29] Leah Dickerman, "Berlin," in <u>Dada : Zurich, Berlin, Hannover, Cologne, New York, Paris</u>, ed. Leah Dickerman (Washington [D.C.] : National Gallery of Art in association with D.A.P./ Distributed Art Publishers, New York, 2005).
[30] Dickerman, <u>Dada</u>, 93.

Left in the Rubbles (Cabrini Green)
72 x 24 inches, 2008

This illusion is also used in *Left in the Rubbles (Cabrini Green)*. The image is the demolition of the infamous housing project. In the foreground is a partially demolished building with exposed, colorfully painted interior walls. One last building remains to the left. Behind this scene is the Chicago skyline, with the Sears Tower in the center and construction cranes hovering in the background.

Two large adults sit on the demolition, each holding the hand of a child pulling away. These figures were taken from a hand-painted sign from Latino community center in Chicago. The figures' brick wall texture associates them with demolition and rubble, to be replaced by the new construction.

This image visualizes the open city experience as outlined by urbanist Richard Sennet. He calls for "incorporating porosity of territory, narrative indeterminacy and incomplete form."[31] If the family in this image is seen as

[31] Richard Sennet, "The Open City," in The Endless City : The Urban Age Project by the London School of Economics and Deutsche Bank's Alfred

an incomplete wall of a building, then it's an open structure, a backdrop on a

stage for conflict and dissonance observed in the figures' interaction with

their environment.

Urbanist Mike Davis analyzed this impact Latinos have on cities: "the

Brazilian futurist Alfredo Valladao, fascinated by the store signs in Miami

and Los Angeles that say 'Se habla inglés,' sees the new Spanish-language

'beachheads' in the US cities as research laboratories for the cross-

fertilization of North and South American cultures. The result, he confidently

predicts, will be a new hegemonic global culture: 'a Pan-American twenty

first century.'"[32] However, as a result of gentrification, such diversity in city

life is wiped out. Lucia Sa comments:

> "[O]ne tendency of the contemporary megalopolis is violent
> separation, the ever widening gulf between social classes.
> This may be epitomized not just by the sever degrees of
> poverty and marginalization …but at the other extreme, by
> the 'fortified enclaves' in rich neighborhoods, which consist of
> walled condominium, apartment buildings guarded by
> security towers, private policing, 'armed response', and so
> on.[33]

While sprawl inhibits community, gentrification destroys it, both culturally

and physically. The resulting homogenous spaces are alienating and extend

the reach of global brands at the expense of local businesses. The erasing of

the hand painted signs is just the "writing on the wall".

Herrhausen Society, ed. Ricky Burdett and Deyan Sudjic, (London : Phaidon, 2007), 296.
[32] Davis, 23.
[33] Sa, 155

Sennet's stand is that cities fail "due to government policy, irreparable social ills and economic forces beyond local control…The fault is over determination…[in] order and control." He points to Le Corbusier's 'Plan Voisin' which proposed replacing the historical center of Paris with "uniform buildings… for people to live and work." Sennet draws a line from this plan to public housing. He points to further realizations of "Le Corbusier's intended destruction of vibrant street life …realized in suburban growth for the middle classes, with the replacement of [main] streets by mono-function shopping malls, by gated communities, by schools and hospitals built as isolated campuses." As "over-determination" influences the growth of new "brittle" cities, communities fail to grow. In his opinion, this is caused by "segregating functions, homogenizing populations, pre-empting through zoning and regulation of the meaning of place"[34]. In contrast, the cities in my work create a platform where racial, social and economic borders are dissolved, people make themselves known and interact with the city. Inspired by this urbanist concept, I named my series *The Open City* since it functions as a "forum for these strangers to interact."

I'm concerned with rapid urbanization's resulting relocation and propagation of rings of poverty around cities, which inverses the location of the problems instead of solving them. An Atlantic Monthly article this past summer reports that "researchers around the country are seeing the same

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[34] Sennet, <u>Endless,</u> 290-292.

basic pattern: projects coming down in inner cities and crime pushing

outward, in many cases destabilizing cities or their surrounding areas."[35]

These areas are usually suburban developments. In response to this cycle of

shuffling away problems, I created *Reap What You Sole*. Using a current

photo I took in the last remaining agricultural field in my teenage

neighborhood, which is now suffering from higher crime rates and declining

property values.

Reap What You Sole, 2008

I join other artists that are observing these changes. Note for example

the work done in Brazil, through the project Arte/cidade Intervencoes

Urbanas through which the artist Nelson Brissac Peixoto uses "art

installations that use the city itself as a place of exhibitions. Peixoto

mentions: 'The modern city is the stage of incessant transformation that

reveals its precariousness. Ruins and construction sites are

indistinguishable'"[36]. Grounded in these concerns, my work stands in a space

between Fatimah Tuggar's digital collages of NY billboards pasted into

[35] Hanna Rosin, "American Murder Mystery", <u>Atlantic Monthly</u> July/August
(2008), 50.
[36] Sá, <u>Living in the Megalopolis</u>, 147.

photos of African urban scenes[37], Krisztof Wodiczko's projections of people on

to buildings to tell stories, and Jeff Gillette's cautionary paintings depicting

shanty cities built from discarded billboards,[38] and Sheila Pinkel's collages of

clandestine sweatshops against billboards in city streets[39]. Ismail Serageldin

from the World Bank says that, "Seeing our cities is seeing our future." *The

Open City* illustrates what I see as an intersection of the past, the present

and the future of where we are all living.

[37] Yee, Lydia, "Street Art, Street Life", (Aperture/Bronx Museum of the Arts: 2008), 89.
[38] Owens, Annie, "Jeff Gillete", *HiFructose*, Albany, CA, Vol. 9.
[39] Hirsh, Robert, "Exploring Color Photography: From the Darkroom to the Digital Studio", (McGraw-Hill Humanities/Social Sciences/Languages: 2004), 146.

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