

# ART WORKER'S GUIDE TO POST-OLYMPIC CHINATOWN & DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE

BY N . O . P . E .

THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENT PRESENTS  
EXCERPTS FROM A FORTHCOMING  
PUBLICATION BY 221A THAT CULMINATES  
THE RESEARCH WORK OF N.O.P.E. (NOTES  
ON POLITICAL ECOLOGIES) IN 2016–2017.

The collectively authored Art Worker's Guide to Post-Olympic Chinatown and Downtown Eastside is a critical glossary that introduces terms, concepts, and relationships that together constitute Vancouver's political conjuncture. We do not claim to present a comprehensive guide to the city's complex entwinement of real estate and cultural institutions, but rather we endeavour, earnestly, to chart the map of collective human action against capital.

N.O.P.E. (2016) was an institutional experiment and collective research program initiated by 221A. The program assembled a collective of Vancouver-based emerging artists, writers, and researchers, and invited them to appropriate 221A's exhibition space as a site of communal study from 2016–2017. Over this time, we formulated propositions to reconfigure the institution's relationship to Chinatown and the Downtown

Eastside. These neighbourhoods have historically constituted a vital nexus of struggles for immigrant and working class power, Indigenous sovereignty, and the right to housing. At present, this contested terrain is besieged by a resurgent campaign of capital investment —‘economic revitalization’; or eviction, displacement, and gentrification. N.O.P.E. considers its activity as a repudiation of the ‘political’ artist as, foremost, an advocate for the oppressed.

We locate this understanding of the artist-as-advocate within the American scholar and union organizer Jane McAlevey’s taxonomy of what she calls “change processes”: advocacy, mobilizing, and organizing. The advocacy model of “change processes” conceives of social good as something achieved through small wins fought for by a professional class on behalf of a marginalized-client-group. This logic is typical of the ‘political’ artist’s contrived relationship to ‘the political’. However, advocacy, much like most ‘political’ art, does not affect significant shifts in the balance of power between the employer and the employed, landlord and tenant, the ruling class and the ruled.

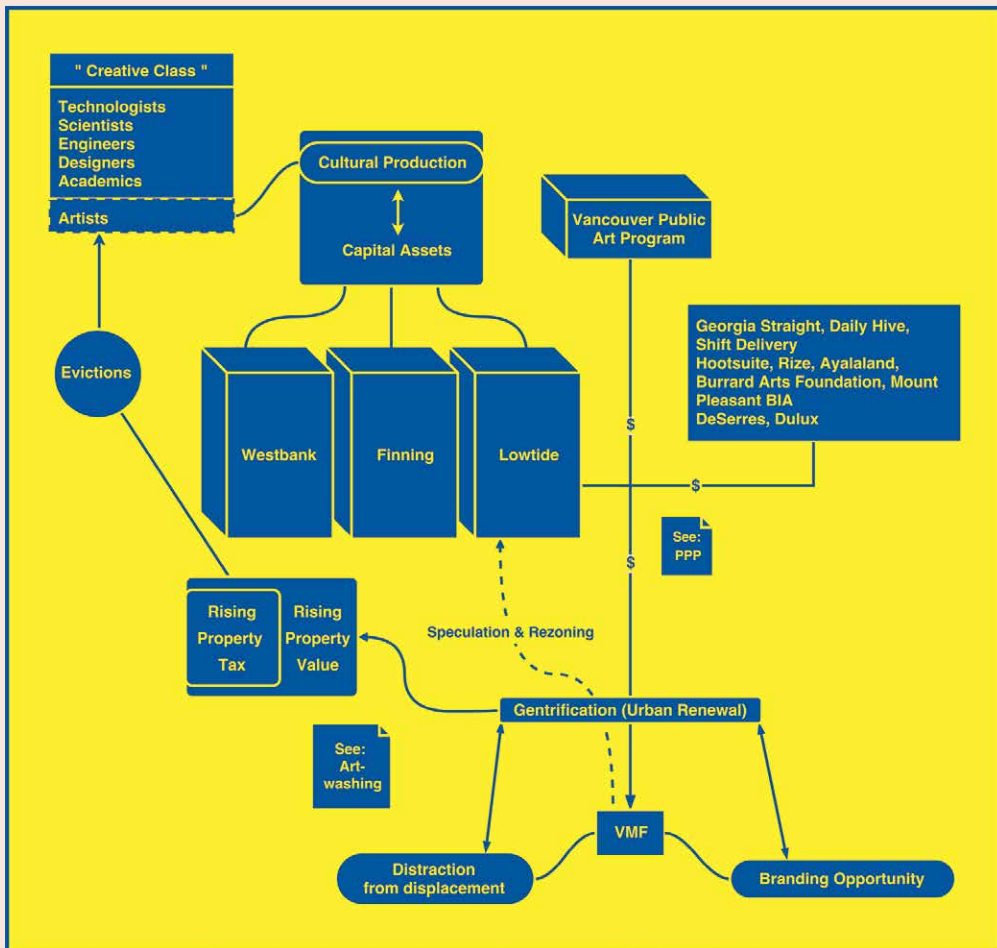
N.O.P.E. conspires as such to shift the work of the political artist into the territories of mobilization and organizing—that is, to discard the bourgeois pretensions of the artist and re-embed

her as just one of many agents in the collective struggle for a better society. Our research embarked from the sober premise that strategies of ‘political engagement’ deployed in contemporary art practice have proven inadequate in winning material ground in the struggle against capital’s death grip on life-in-common. Between the depressive self-flagellation of institutional critique and the naive optimism of ‘social practice’, contemporary art, even with the best intentions, has rarely been able to shake its generic tendency to deactivate social processes and immobilize them as artefacts for contemplation and consumption. It is an understanding of poor people’s movements not as a raw material to be sublimated by the supposed genius of aesthetic mediation, but instead as pulsing, living energies whose rhythms the artist’s heart and mind must, ethically, be integrated within. In short: N.O.P.E. 2016 was interested in the reorientation of the work of the artist—not the work of art—towards the living practice of solidarity.

Without consigning the field of art and its operations entirely to the wastebin of commodity culture, N.O.P.E. 2016 sought, rather pragmatically, to imagine how the art institution, as a peculiar concentration of resources, human capacities, and relative ‘freedoms’ in action and expression, could lend itself as an effective instrument to anti-capitalist organizing.

## → ARTWASHING

Artwashing refers to a set of ideas and processes that instrumentalize the production of “art and culture” into speculative real estate development. Art becomes at once an incentive to build a massive condo and a justification of gentrification after the fact. You can recognize artwashing in overly ambitious branding schemes that cast a forthcoming condominium as a *gesamtkunstwerk* (a German term for “total work of art”) and heroic developer narratives that not only give a heady concept to the building, but also infiltrate the imagination of prospective homeowners. The future



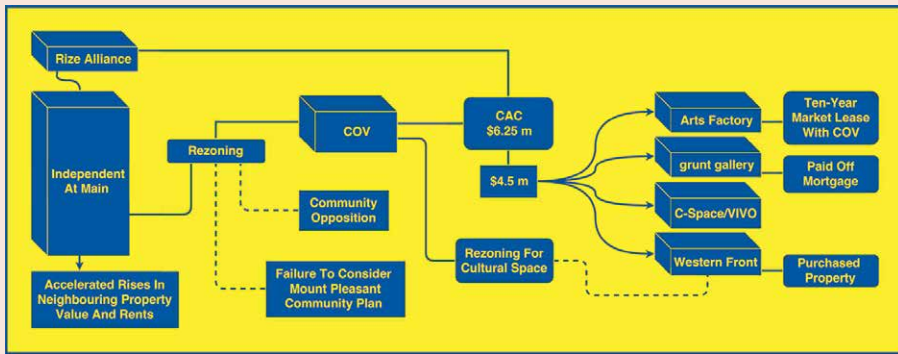
owners of these vacuous boxes can be proud to say they live in a “work of art” because it is a testament to their creative lifestyles or career goals.

Part of the term’s slipperiness can be found in the fact that artwashing is more about the feeling of art, than it is about content, or anything of artistic substance. Ultimately the art that developers parade around is decorative. Any specific aesthetic is secondary to the more lucrative task of selling condos. The idea is that the displacement of working class residents by a bland, shoddily built condo block feels a lot better when you think of the whole thing as a work of art.

As a rhetorical tool, artwashing promises a lot. You can follow a genealogical line back to the proclamations of New Urbanism (Jane Jacob’s *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* being a classic text), which was looking to address urban alienation through feel-good design changes. Artwashing promises that a real estate development will bring exciting sights, sounds, and smells; a whole new realm of sensations that the already existing neighbourhood just couldn’t provide for an invading class of young urban professionals. “Arts and culture” is evoked in the name of displacing already existing arts and culture.

Artwashing in general tends to end up quite clunky, but the Vancouver-based

luxury real estate developer Westbank has explicitly rebranded themselves as a “culture company,” which is a rather heavy-handed deployment of the tactic. Westbank claims that it’s not just creating expensive condos, but actually creating culture. Westbank even has an exhibition to inaugurate their rebranding efforts, called “Fight for Beauty,” because after all, who can argue with “beauty” when it’s a completely empty signifier that requires a triumphant struggle? The exhibition features architectural maquettes, marketing copy written in neon, artworks from the company’s private collection, Jean-Paul Gaultier haute couture, and Westbank-commissioned public artworks by Rodney Graham, Stan Douglas, Douglas Coupland and a host of others. Westbank is obligated by the City of Vancouver (and many North American cities) to allocate a percentage of their development budget towards public artworks, but that doesn’t stop them from positioning themselves as a selfless supporter of the arts. We have reason to be angry with artwashing, which uses the plight of art workers as an excuse to gentrify the more affordable neighbourhoods that we live and work in.



## → COMMUNITY AMENITY CONTRIBUTION

A community amenity contribution (or CAC) is a negotiated cash incentive provided to the City by developers when a property is rezoned, ostensibly to help offset the municipal cost of infrastructure and amenities that will come to service new residents. The cash may be put towards on-site amenities (parks, libraries, childcare centres, cultural facilities), “affordable housing” (because we know the City’s definition of affordable is a farce), or granted directly to the City, cash-in-lieu. Acting as a sort of loss lead for developers, CACs are predicated on the idea that they will increase land value, which creates an incentive not just for the developers themselves but for local landowners as well. Since the tax is geared specifically towards private development projects, many other types of developments receive exemptions from CACs, including social housing, public schools, community facilities, places of worship and buildings with floor areas related to heritage preservation.

This system presents some obvious conflicts of interest. Since CACs are negotiable on a case-by-case basis rather than fixed, inevitably development projects that have more cash to offer the City get preference over smaller ones; developers can literally bribe their way to higher density, thus higher profit projects. They can also act as a tool for stifling community resistance to developments, as concerns about increased density and displacement are muffled by a narrative of developers “giving back to the community.” Some may argue that this system produces much-needed social housing. Inevitably, increased land value and the creation of new amenities catering to the land-owning class lead to the pricing out of low-income residents (see P3).



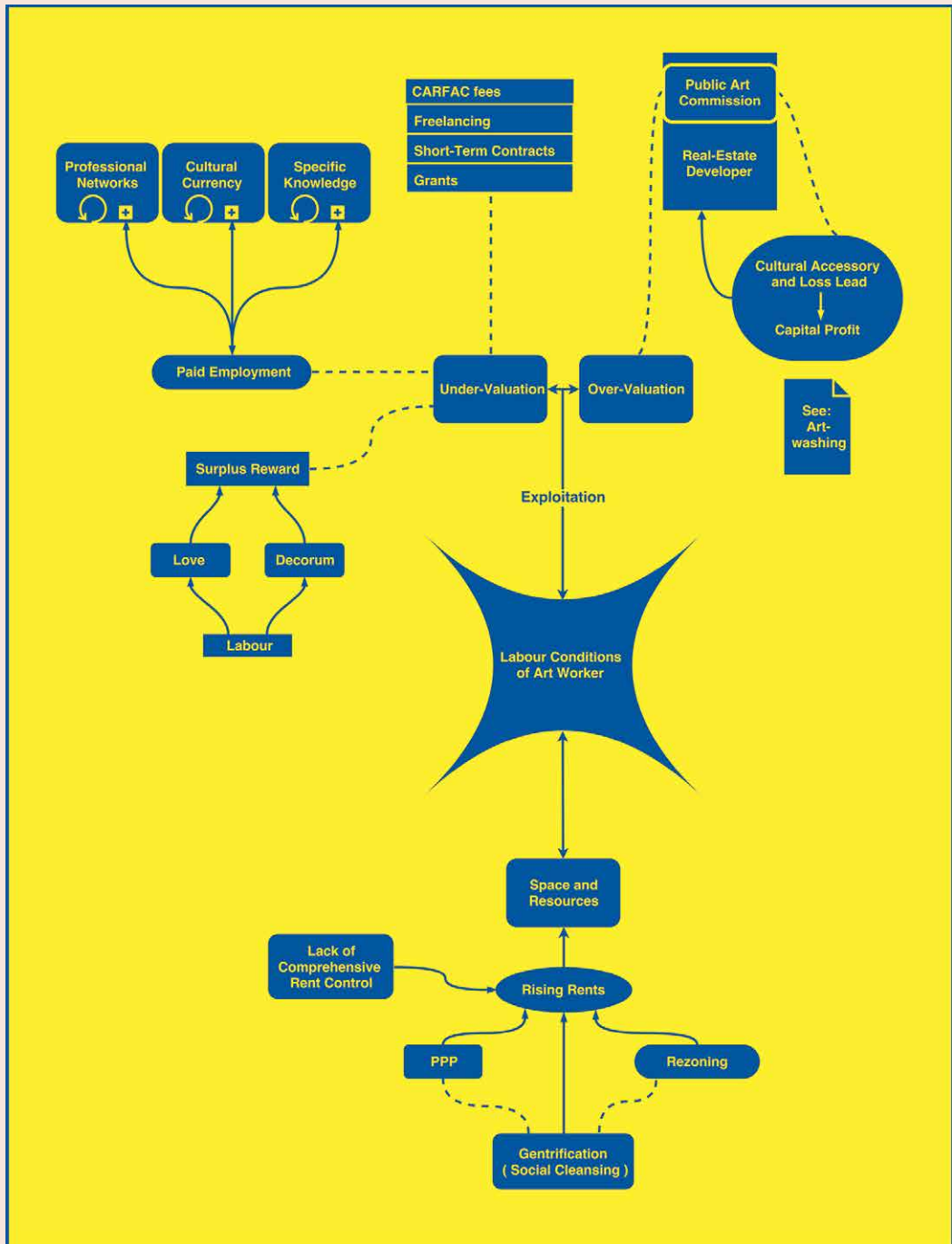
## → ART WORKER

If you dedicate any form of labour to the practice, presentation, or discourse of art, you are an art worker. In 1968, cultural theorist Raymond Williams differentiated work from labour like this: work stands in for general doing or making, as well as all forms of paid employment, while labour is more explicitly affiliated with the organization of employment under capitalism. For art workers, the structures that buttress these definitions do not apply. Paid employment has been converted to cultural currency (“exposure”), specific knowledge (“a good opportunity for you”), or expanding professional networks (“a good person to know”). An artist’s “employment under capitalism” is slippery to locate as well. Under our current state of capitalism, artistic labour is encapsulated by a masochistic combination of freelancing, short-term contract jobs, keeping our fingers crossed for CARFAC fees, and holding our breath for grant results. These are the labour conditions of art workers.

There is an imbalance of value ascribed to the art worker’s labour. Compensation for artistic labour is given as surplus value, as reward, even though it has not accounted for the physical and material labour that produces it. The labour is accepted as a labour of love (“doing what you love”) or entry level decorum (“paying your dues”).

In the inverse, but equally problematic case, the value of artistic labour can be inflated beyond speculation once it enters a viable profit scheme, such as a public art commission offered by a developer. This contributes to a developer’s utopian vision of a “creative city” so the value of artist labour can be an accessory to the overall profitability of a real estate development. Art workers are uniquely oppressed because their labour can be exploited and instrumentalized on either side of the poverty line. Without being able to distinguish our “bosses” from our patrons and funders, these working conditions are difficult to locate and refuse.

The claim that artists are too busy, privileged, or lack the resources to sustain their practice as well as participate in social movements or community organizing is a fallacy. We are not too busy, we do not lack resources. Arguably, this is in itself symptomatic of the effects of neoliberal ideology: heightened individualism, entrepreneurship, privatisation, a





do-it-yourself attitude. The notion of an artist's wage remains a "nice idea" and perhaps too radical a concept. A reliable and dignified structure for the exchange of labour for a wage is the stretch of imagination that keeps artists vulnerable to systemic labour exploitation, and self-exploitation too. Work and labour often become afterthoughts in the fruition of artistic practices.

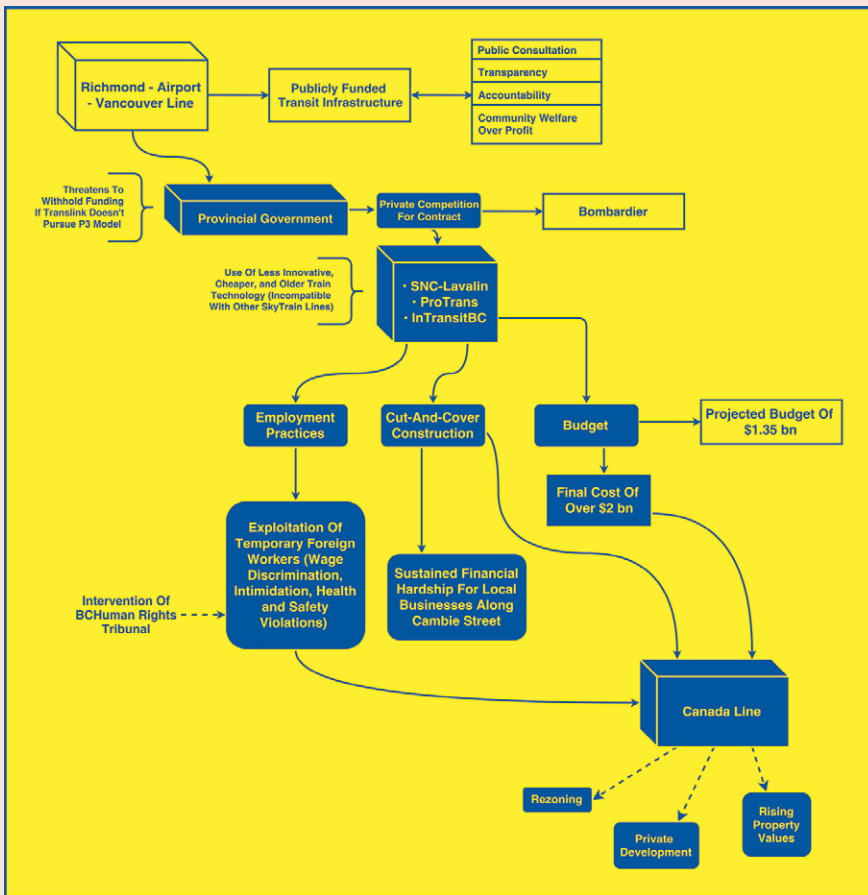
The question of how will I make a living as an artist begets practical questions like "how do I show my work?" or "how will I sell my work?" or "who will buy my work?" Further simplified, the question becomes, who, or what, will give me money to be an artist? This is all code for "how will I pay the rent?" This implies that getting shows and selling work will pay the rent, and it might for some, and that is the shoulder shrug of free market capitalism. So, if you are worried about paying the rent, we are paused on the process of going from artmaking to rent paying, and this perpetuates precarious labour in pursuit of an individual rent cheque that annually inches 4% further away from affordability.

Artists may perceive it a liability to their professional status, a personal risk to our own mobility as self-made precarious labourers. If we position ourselves in protest against exploitative opportunities for income, we become "difficult to work with" and "miss out on opportunities." So we may suppress our skepticisms

while deepening the normality of these labour practices that we ultimately end up paying for with our livelihood, mental health, and personal relationships.

Art workers have a long history of confronting the practical economics of the art market and museum system, in that artists have organized to set better conditions or exert control over how their work is presented (so as not to be instrumentalized). Their strategies include lobbying for free museum admission, and pointing to the profound lack of representation of women and artists of colour. Artists have been active organizers within social movements dating back to the Paris Commune. The Art Workers Coalition in New York questioned the museum's relationship to labour and environmental exploitation, racial and gender disparity in public collections, and anti-war campaigns. More recently, GULF Labour is an international group of art workers who are actively embroiled in negotiations and provocations with the Guggenheim Museum over their exploitation of migrant workers in the construction of Guggenheim Abu Dhabi. But however historically framed, artists, as professionals or art workers, have exceptional potential to galvanize around causes when given a basis of unity that echoes far beyond their individual practices.





## → PUBLIC PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP (3P/P3/PPP)

It is difficult to write a clear definition of Public Private Partnerships (PPP, P3, 3P), as they are inherently opaque, specific to the context, and there is no standardized protocol or agreed upon definition. Typically, P3s are comprised of fixed and long-term agreements between private and public entities for the construction of public infrastructure and services (transportation, healthcare, schools, community centres etc.), wherein a private entity finances the construction and/or maintenance of a project in return for payment directly from the government. These payments take the form of one-time grants, guarantee annual revenues,

or tax breaks. Allegedly, this model encourages the creation of innovative projects spurred by private competition, while simultaneously eliminating risk for the government (and thus taxpayers) in their construction.

In reality, governments usually award partnerships to companies and corporations that most effectively cut costs, sometimes resulting in unsafe working conditions for employees and greater disturbances to the public, both throughout the construction process and after its completion. In addition, as such projects are for the public but not of the public, details surrounding these partnerships are not readily available, as they would be were they undertaken by the government. This means that the public is granted less access to the process and consequently less power to question and shape public space. Once the project is completed, these issues beget a lack of accountability related to maintenance and upkeep, as well as loss of local control. Governments remain invested in pursuing the P3 model as no costs appear on the budget at the time of construction, but will instead be projected into future years when government payouts begin, alleviating governmental responsibility in both present and future simultaneously.

When private corporations are in charge of managing public infrastructure, the focus will, at its core, be on profit, rather than the welfare of citizens and the quality of services provided. In Canada, the P3 model has become the industry best-practice for new projects, and the party line reads that it is unsustainable and unfeasible for the government to fully fund public infrastructure. Public space as such is being phased out, and in its place we are confronted with convoluted entanglements between public and private.