

Neoteric Art

DECEMBER 6, 2016

“A Ghost Ship of Tragedy and Crisis,” by Bruce Thorn



The horrific “Ghost Ship” fire in Oakland’s Fruitvale neighborhood on December 2nd was a tragedy waiting to happen. At least 36 young lives ended in a brief moment. Any of these victims could have been my own children or friends. We will never know the rewards of the music, art and poetry that these inspired young souls promised. Their parents, families and friends will forever mourn the

loss of loved ones. The tragedy at Ghost Ship will more than likely result in tightening zoning enforcement and increasing disappearance of affordable space for artists.



Already high and rapidly escalating rents have been squeezing the working class and poor in most cities for decades. People priced out of good

housing in good neighborhoods look for shelter based on the bottom line, moving to poorer, more dangerous and isolated neighborhoods with crumbling housing stock. That's how capitalism works.

For artists, the problem of escalating prices is especially difficult to solve. Along with the need for living space, most also require space to work. Escalating housing costs are partly due to the fact that there is so much liquid capital in the world with nowhere to go for profits, which gives rise to all sorts of speculative bubbles. Investment strategies are the name of the game because working for a wage or by making anything, let alone art, is no longer a guaranty of a roof over one's head or worldly riches.



Real estate musical chairs still rule the game of life here in the U.S.A. Creative people attract hipsters and mainstream middle class or better, pricing out older communities along with the artists who made the neighborhood attractive to more gentrification in the first place. Of course, most property owners love it when creative people and hipsters move into the hood because it means big gains for real estate values. There is never much concern for the trail of tears left by the displaced.

On April 15th, 1989 a large fire at 300 W. Superior Street in Chicago wiped out many of the town's art businesses. This one event drastically changed the whole art game in Chicago. Many galleries and artists lacked insurance and lost everything. I could see the smoke from miles away in the still un-gentrified Bucktown neighborhood.

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'It's devastating'

Big art loss as blaze hits 8 galleries; arson hinted

By Frank Burgos

An estimated \$50 million worth of irreplaceable artworks were destroyed in a suspected arson fire that swept through eight River North galleries Saturday, reducing four brick buildings, including one designed by legendary architect Louis Sullivan, to smoldering shells.

"Oh, my God," cried Roberta Lieberman, part owner of the Zolla-Lieberman Gallery, as she first laid eyes on the destruction. "It's devastating."

Besides Zolla-Lieberman, 356 W. Huron, the seven other galleries destroyed were: The Klein Gallery, Peter Miller Gallery, East-West Gallery and Ross Fine Arts, also at 356 W. Huron; Van Stratten Gallery, Habatat Galleries, 340 W. Huron, and Objecta Gallery, 341 W. Superior.

People in the buildings escaped unharmed. Two firefighters were injured.

The galleries were in the portion of the block-square, six-story complex, bounded by Orleans, Huron, Superior and Sedgwick, that was undergoing renovations to install more shops and apartments.

The turn-of-the-century buildings were filled with piles of wood and drywall, as well as acetylene and propane, which fire officials said fueled the blaze.

During the first furious hours of the fire, the heat could be felt a block away. Nearby cars were blanketed with soot or dented by



SUN-TIMES/JOHN H. WISSE

Plumes of flame devour building north of the Loop Saturday as firefighter Fred Barbara descends ladder. Left: Roberta Lieberman, whose art gallery was destroyed, is consoled by friend Ronald Wild.

City's art community shaken; dealers hit at 'the worst time'

By Frank Burgos



Obita, four blocks from the fire.

A number of old loft buildings that house artists and musicians have burned down since then. We quickly forget, because the fatality lists are usually

not quite as high. Today there are even fewer affordable work or live spaces for artists or galleries. When visiting art haunts, it is often glaringly obvious what a serious threat fire can be. In Chicago, I'm talking about places like Cornelia Arts or the Flat Iron Building.

Ghost Ship is a bell warning of a crisis in the arts in the United States. How are we ever going to provide our non-commercial artists with a living wage, affordable housing and safe studio space, or any studio space at all? Everybody seems to want the arts in their communities, schools and lives, but nobody wants to offer financial support to artists. It's like taxes, everybody wants somebody else to pick up the tab, but all want to enjoy the feast. There is currently little discussion or consensus for paths forward to resolve this crisis.

The art business crawls along because there are enough well financed players to support a rigged system. Real estate speculation and resulting shortages also change the nature of cultural output. Should our artists, musicians and poets only be cultivated among the well off? As fewer and fewer younger and struggling artists find affordable studio space, the nature of much contemporary art has also shifted to conceptual

and digital practices that don't require as much space.

Another elephant in the room is that it is nigh impossible for young people to become art collectors or patrons. First, they would need secure and adequate jobs to live and pay off student loans. Then they need homes for themselves and there just aren't enough billionaires around with egalitarian principals to support everybody. If you don't care about the arts to begin with, there is no crisis because life is an all-knowing marketplace.

Here's a gauntlet, an immediate call to action for those who do care about music, art, poetry and the lives of our families and friends: do whatever little you can to support and help those who you would like to help prosper.

If you own an empty building, make space available for low rent artists. If you are eating dinner alone, invite a creative type. They can sometimes make good conversation. When you are out entertaining yourself at generously offered free cultural events, after you drink the free cheap wine and beer to wash down those cheese crackers, please write a check for whatever amount feels comfortable to you.

There's no time for lip service anymore, go to a bordello and pay for that. Please make plans to do something real for the artists whom you love, then go out and encourage your friends and acquaintances to find joy by doing the same. Thank you.