

Patronage of art could help avert more Ghost Ships

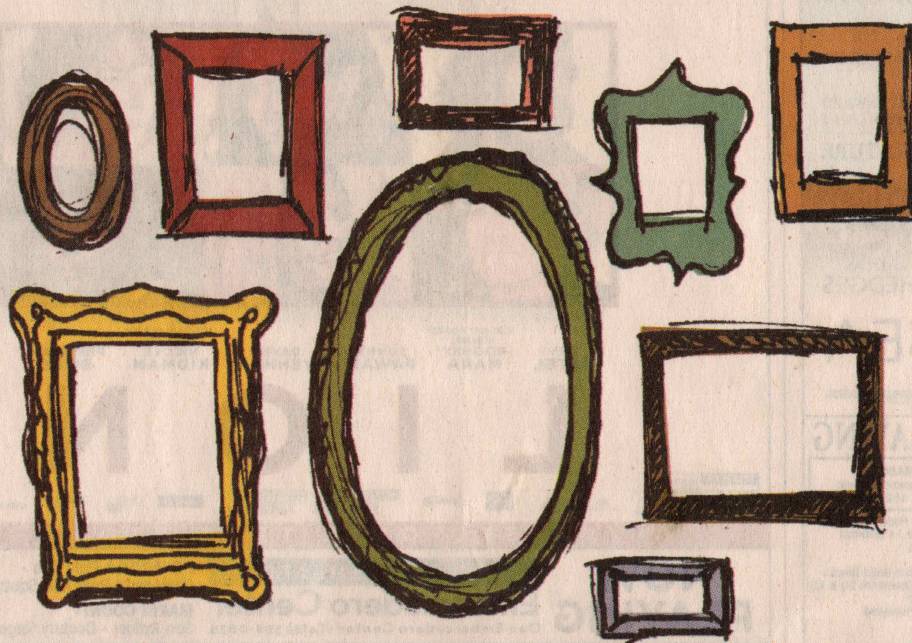
Artists are vital, need our support

A fantasy vessel marooned in a concrete warehouse, freighted with artists and performers invisible except to each other. What better name than the Ghost Ship?

The symbolism is apt: To much of society, the dozens who died in Oakland's horrible fire were people who, even in life, you might never know existed — that you looked right through.

This is not to say we are heartless. There has been a tremendous outpouring of grief in response to the loss of life. And we have seen widespread sympathy for those left

Desmarais continues on E3



Steven Boyle / The Chronicle

Art institutions respond, or not

Like everyone else in the Bay Area, I'm devastated by the deadly fire that killed 36 people in an Oakland warehouse last weekend. I was also moved by the outpouring of support for the fire victims' families.

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From our local sports teams (the Oakland A's, Raiders and Golden State Warriors have all pledged relief funds) to our local musical heroes (Boots Riley, Tune-Yards and Primus are throwing a benefit at the Fox Theater on Wednesday, Dec. 14), it feels like everyone in the Bay Area is eager to help.

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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

We need artists, they need support

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behind in the aftermath of the conflagration.

Yet among the artists who died were experimenters whose new ideas had not yet taken hold; learners whose work, given their youth, might not have yet gelled; the passionate still striving to match technical skill to transcendent vision. In the parlance of the art world at its harshest, many of them were "nobodies." When you start out, that's what you are, until by force of will and a lot of luck and support, you make yourself somebody.

You might say that they were incipient talents with something to prove. More to the point, they were the kind who feel no need to prove anything to you and me — convinced they are making the future, and we can grab hold or be left behind.

They are right, of course. Life is growth, and growth is change. We can minimally sustain ourselves with the basics of food, water and air. But no human society, no community can be fully alive if its intellectual and creative vitality are not equally nourished.

Not that everyone who starts out as an artist will make it. Not every seed germinates. Very occasionally, though, the new springs up to replace the old. So it must be with a community. But if we value our creative ecology, how do we nurture such growth?

We are told that artists need places like the Ghost Ship. I will never accept that there is a need for unsanitary fire traps. There might be a certain outlaw glamour in an illegal squat, with its short-lived appeal to the adolescent romantic in each of us, but no one should be required to live someplace inadequate for human habitation.

But if we need art in our lives — and I am thinking not only of painting and sculpture but also of music and literature and performance and entirely new forms of expression yet to be invented — then we certainly must have places where the constant fear of eviction does not stifle every generative urge, where creators can share and encourage each other's growth, where the outsider feels safe to live according to their true nature.

Some artists have ex-



Scott Strazzante / The Chronicle

After painting a memorial on East 12th St., John Paul Marcelo of Oakland rides his bike home.

pressed concern that city fire and building inspectors will crack down, forcing them from their homes and studios. Yet government's first job is to protect its citizens. Pointless and outdated zoning ordinances and building codes should be promptly reconsidered to encourage affordable live-work space for artists. At the same time, it is pretty clear that Oakland should — as all cities must — ensure that commercially zoned properties are used safely.

I do not think we should look to government to create or manage housing for artists — certainly not in competition with the basic needs of teachers or first responders or myriad other essential contributors to a healthy community. Past attempts across the country to artificially create artist communities have not fared well over the long term. And it has never been easy to define precisely who is an artist, when most of the best art resists definition to start with.

Artist communities grow up precisely where government doesn't penetrate — around dives like the Cedar Bar (in 1950s New York) and Lapin Agile (in turn-of-the-last-century Paris). In pickup groupings with provocative

names like the Rat Bastard Protective Association, cultivated by Bruce Conner, Jay DeFeo, Wally Hedrick, Manuel Neri, Joan Brown and others living near each other on Fillmore Street from about 1950 to 1965.

Earlier this week the mayor of Oakland announced a \$1.7 million grant and technical assistance program to help arts groups — the city says they number in the hundreds — with their real estate

valuable civic contribution. In that important sense, such financial support for artists was earned. Now it is gone.

Cities, too, once made grants to artists, but one by one they also dried up. San Francisco is "one of the few municipalities that still makes grants to individuals," according to San Francisco Arts Commission spokeswoman Kate Patterson-Murphy. It is the only one in the Bay Area. Last year, 41 artists received grants — which are taxable — of \$15,000 each. Much better than nothing, certainly, particularly if we can adopt the mind-set that it is a start.

Relatively small amounts can make a huge difference, particularly because some grants bring with them national recognition. Guggenheim Fellowships average about \$45,000 these days — not insignificant, if not in itself a life-changing amount — but we have seen recent fellows land tenure-track positions at UC Berkeley and Mills College promptly after their awards were announced.

Minnesota Street Project founders Deborah and Andy Rappaport continue to provide the most visible Bay Area example of a renewed trust in the age-old model of patronage, in the best sense of that old-fashioned word, fitting out 38 low-cost studios

for long-term artist residents.

Other efforts include grant programs and residencies run by private foundations like the San Francisco Foundation, Headlands Center for the Arts and others. But for all the great work being done, it must be seen for what it is: the base — and only that — for what must become a truly sustainable web of support and respect for the workers who make our region alive with invention, visual pleasure and ideas.

What can one person do, if such grand-scale efforts are beyond their means?

I can think of no better way to address the problem of keeping the best of the Bay Area's artists here and housed than through the active engagement of an informed audience. The pleasures of looking at art can be multiplied many times by such interaction. Attending their exhibitions, meeting them and discussing their work is fulfilling to all parties. That costs nothing.

And it could lead, for those who can afford it, to the oldest and most immediate form of financial support: direct sponsorship.

Buying or commissioning an individual work of art is a recognition that what the artist makes has value. Taking a chance on someone to whose work you respond, even if you don't fully understand it, provides an extraordinary opportunity to learn from and experience something of someone else. Something still pulsing with a bit of their life.

I have been taking stock of East Bay art galleries in recent months. There are more than 40 of them, mostly in Oakland. They range from the nationally plugged-in, like Johansson Projects and Magnolia Editions, to tiny places with challenging programs like Interface and Royal NoneSuch, some of which are open only a few hours a week. All of them gamble their time and resources on bringing artists into contact with interested viewers.

All of them give us an opportunity to do the only thing that will ultimately keep our art ecology thriving: pay artists for their work.

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needs. It's good news for organizations, but apparently little of that money will go directly to artists.

And that is where we find the most pressing need, and the greatest opportunity. After all, someone adequately paid for his or her labor can make an independent decision about where to live. The National Endowment for the Arts once made grants to individual artists based on the quality of their work. The process was extremely competitive — as it should be — but it respected the individual as a professional making a