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The Ghost of Art Spaces

LIAT BERDUGO

on December 14, 2016 at 11:13 AM

By the time the mayor of Oakland, Libby Schaaf, took the microphone to address those standing in vigil for the 36 victims of the Ghost Ship fire, she received a large, collective “Boo.” The vigil took place three days after the fire, with enough time for feelings to fester. Parents spoke of their children; friends spoke of their fellow artists; young teens spoke of the DJs they admired; a local Rabbi spoke of loss, and of taking to the streets to fight for affordable housing. I held a little LED candle that was programmed to flicker like a real one — a fake flame my art students use when I forbid fire in the studio.

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Vigil for those who Died in the Ghost Ship Fire. Photo: Liat Berdugo

There has been a lot of shouting since the fire — or rather, shouting-as-blaming. The blame game goes like this: point fingers and ask leading questions. The unstated premise of the game is that disasters always have simple-to-understand, decipherable culprits, and we just need to find that culprit.

I oppose the blame game (“Boo!”). But first, shouldn’t we play? *Because, what were the code violations made the Ghost Ship a ‘tinderbox,’ as everyone is calling it? Could the city of Oakland have done more to prevent this? Was the Ghost Ship master tenant to blame? How about the landlord? Why hadn’t this building been inspected? Why aren’t artists living in better, safer places? Why would anyone make a staircase out of wooden pallets? Why wouldn’t anyone install sprinklers? Why would you invite death like that?*

When the fire started at the Ghost Ship, I was in bed in a new apartment in Berkeley, CA, about nine miles away. I would have been much closer, but I had been recently evicted from Oakland in one of the many no-fault evictions that have been pushing people further and further out to the fringes, or out of the Bay Area completely. Uber is moving its headquarters to Oakland, and rents are rising like crazy. I chose to settle in Berkeley because it was strangely affordable (relatively speaking), and has the strictest laws protecting tenants of all the cities surrounding San Francisco. I could deal with one eviction, but I thought two might crush me.

All around me, my fellow artists make living choices that feel like Ghost Ship. They live in illegal spaces in Oakland, close to my studio. They live with parents and float between couches. They live on boats in the Berkeley Marina or in Jack London Square. They live in their startups, or at the startups of their lovers. When I was evicted, I thought about living in an unzoned converted warehouse, too. It had high ceilings and space for my video-making messes. I hope by now we all can acknowledge that the Ghost Ship is not the only Ghost Ship of Oakland — and moreover that many other commercial warehouses-turned-artist-hubs happen with the tacit consent of landlords.

I picture the ‘ghost’ part of the Ghost Ship as a shadow: a shadow that reminds me how art often happens on the fringes of what is normal, acceptable, suitable. This is the shadow of an artistic practice: that it is often dirty, messy, and large. That it needs space. In Oakland, the Ghost Ships are the are the spaces where we make work, show work, and gather.



The Ghost Ship warehouse in Oakland. Photo: Jim Wilson/The New York Times

In the days after the Oakland fire, I sat with this ghost and I grew angrier at the blame game. What I see in the blame game is a resistance to looking at this tragedy through an economic, structural lens. We are missing the bigger picture by looking for the individual culprit in the Oakland fire. It's like we're looking for Waldo in a game of Chess. I don't want to know which refrigerator caused the fire at the Ghost Ship — I want to know which economic forces are cause artists collectives to live in unzoned spaces in the Bay Area. I don't want to know the police call logs about the Ghost ship — I want to know, what would it look like if instead of cracking down on artist-run warehouses, the city began supporting them with resources (like [neighbor Palo Alto does](#))? And I don't want to know if the master tenant at Ghost ship had children or not — I want to know, what would it look like if Oakland adopted a [Loft Law](#) like New York?

I picture the 'ghost' part of the Ghost Ship as the foreboding spectre — the future ghost of art spaces in Oakland. It is the specter that reminds me that if we continue to talk about these disasters without their larger skeletons — skeletons of housing prices and the cost of living, we're missing something. "Oakland is one of the most diverse and creative cities in our country," said Obama in his [official statement](#) about the Ghost Ship fire. In order to be this way, we are also diverse and creative with the way that we choose to live and make creative work.

Yet Obama's statement continued: "...and as families and residents pull together in the wake of this awful tragedy, they will have the unwavering support of the American people." So my question is: what kind of support will Oakland have? What is supportive about the blame game — about levying lentiginous guilt on singular entities? What is supportive about a plan to improve inspections and safety protocols in Oakland, with only minimal gestures towards remedying the widespread displacement of this effort on artist collectives? "Boo!"



Inside the Ghost Ship before the fire. Photo: the Ghost Ship tumblr

Boo, says the ghost. “Boo” is meant to scare, to haunt, to surprise, to disapprove. To “boo” is to spook the living, to appear as an apparition, to visit as an hallucination. I didn’t lose anyone close to me in the Oakland fire, but many members of my Oakland community lost brilliant and beautiful friends. I look at pictures of the living together with the now-dead, and I hear a soft, sad “boo.” These, too, are the ghosts of the Ghost Ship. These are the ones that crossed to the other side too soon.

In my most optimistic moments, I see the need to play the blame game as a reassurance that death is far away from the living. The blame game allows for superiority over death: we can say to ourselves, *my stairs aren’t built of palettes, so I won’t die like that*. We can say, *I live in a residential building, so I won’t die like that*. Of course fire codes help; of course city habitation codes are meant as civil measures of protection and ultimately habitations for the sake of supporting life. I do not endorse breaking codes willy nilly. But I do think we need to ask ourselves, what do we lose when we only focus on the ways of staving off death? Do we choose a culturally impoverished life?

I do not want that kind of impoverishment. I do not want it here in the Bay Area, or in any city in the US where artist collectives are similarly threatened as a result of this tragedy. I want to gather all the ghosts from this fire — the shadows of artistic work, the specters of future art spaces, and the ghosts of the dead — and I want to say to them all, “BOO!” Boo — as in, *surprise* — we did something unexpected: we took the Oakland fire as an economic and structural issue, and as a charge to invest in the arts once the Ghost ship had become fully ghosted.