



Creative Conversations: Linda Levit

FCINY recently moved to a 1850s brownstone building in 26 Bond Street. We sat down with the long-time resident, artist Linda Levit to chat about the NoHo neighborhood's colorful history.

You have been living in this building since the late 70's. How did you end up here?

I lived on Bowery when one of my neighbors told me about this space, and I moved in in June 1977. At that time this neighborhood attracted people in creative fields; artists and designers mostly. NoHo was inexpensive, and there were plenty of large spaces where you could both work and live.

And then you never left NoHo?

Several artists have lived here for several years and even decades. Fashion illustrator Jack Champlin lived in the building since the 60s until his death; dancer Walter Richards lived here his whole adult life. We never left because when we moved in the neighborhood was not as

fancy and expensive as it is now. It is hard to leave when you have reasonable rent. It is unusual in New York. I don't know anyone who moved away from our generation.

You mentioned you are protected by the loft law. What does that mean?

When artists moved into what was considered commercial spaces, the city decided that the landlords need to bring the buildings up to the building code, to meet the city code regulations for living. The apartments in 26 Bond were considered lofts because there used to be small factories and workshops. The landlord can't raise the rent until he gets the certificate of occupancy (C of O). The code protects the tenants who often renovated the spaces themselves.

Tell us a bit more about the history of the building.

In the early 19th century NoHo was a fashionable neighborhood for the city's wealthy families. By 1880 it all changed when the residents started moving further north. First 26 Bond became a boarding house, then the street became more commercial and a center of fur trade, then residential again. At the moment there is only commercial space in the building, the current office of FCINY. When I





moved in, the FCINY office space was artist Brice Marden's studio. It was also artist Peter Mino's home for several years.

How would you describe the present NoHo?

We oldtimers in Bond Street buildings are all friends, so there is a nice community. I feel part of the neighborhood, and I love it. NoHo is very quiet, accessible and it is the great subway hub.

How has the neighborhood changed since the 70s?

This whole area was so deserted in the 70s that it is hard to imagine now. Only artists lived here. Broadway was empty in the evenings. It was a little scary. In the 80s we had a huge crack epidemic in the block. The police used to come and raid all the time, there were guns, and one of the persons on the block even stole my purse right in front of the building. Around 2005 all the empty spaces, auto repairs, gas stations, and parking lots on Bond and Lafayette streets were turned into luxury buildings. So suddenly we had two kinds of people in NoHo: the artists and the more affluent newcomers.

How do you feel about the change?

Parts of the change I like: the many restaurants and the fact that I feel safe here – there used to be a lot of break-ins in the 70s. I feel sad that the moderate-priced restaurants have closed. Everything is becoming upscale and expensive. But I enjoy seeing all the new buildings on Bond Street. I think you can have mixed architecture in a city like New York.

How has the art world changed since the 70s?

When I moved here the art world was in SoHo and Upper East Side; now it is everywhere from Bushwick to Lower East Side and Chelsea. It was very small and much more manageable. There weren't so many art galleries, so you could really see everything if you wanted. Even though some artists like Robert Rauschenberg and Roy Lichtenstein started making money, it was not so mammoth as nowadays.

Did you have some favorite art galleries or other spots back then?

Leo Castelli was in 420 Broadway as was Ileana Sonnabend. Paula Cooper was prominent from the beginning. Right around the corner was the CBGB music club where I saw The Ramones, The Blondie, Patti Smith. That was the place to go in the 70s and early 80s. My friend Roberta Bayley worked at the door and photographed all the bands, the visitors and everyone who was popular at that time.

Many of those places are long gone, but the 26 Bond Street is still standing. Is the building protected?

The facade of the building is landmarked so you can't tear the house down. This is one of the last townhouses in Bond Street.

Interview and photographs by Liisa Jokinen

The Finnish Cultural Institute in New York operates in the fields of contemporary art, design and architecture, creating dialogue between Finnish and American professionals and audiences.

<http://fciny.org/news/creative-conversations-linda-levit>