Action around the Edges Douglas Crimp

> *I should start with how it happened. I mean, what it's like to wander for months around New York trying to find a space to do a piece of work, and especially something to the scale that I have been able to do in other places but not in New York City.… Originally what I had sighted on were the facades because as you go down the Pier, driving down the pier along that empty highway in front, the facades are an incredible, animated grouping of different eras and different personalities. And I wanted to deal with one of the earlier ones, which this is—a turn of the century facade. There's the classic sort of tin classicism. And to cut at the facade. So the ones that I found originally were all completely overrun by the gays. And S&M, you know that whole S&M shadows of waterfront…*
>
> —Gordon Matta-Clark to Liza Bear, March 11, 1976

The day in August I'd chosen to move from Greenwich Village to Tribeca was one of the hottest of the summer of 1974. I rented a van and got my on-again, off-again boyfriend, Richard, to help out. My apartment on 10th Street just west of Hudson Street was a fourth-floor railroad flat; my new place was a spacious skylighted loft on Chambers Street, also west of Hudson. I'd arranged to use the loft building's freight elevator for the day, a rickety old contraption operated by pulling down hard on the hoist cable on a pulley system and stopped by yanking the other cable. It was a challenge to get the elevator to stop level with the floor. After piling all of my belongings onto the elevator's platform, Richard and I and the artist next door, from whom I was subletting the loft, managed to get the overloaded elevator to start its ascent, but by the time we'd reached the third floor it came to a grinding halt and began sliding back downward. We all grabbed the cable in an effort to slow the elevator's plunge and did manage to prevent a free fall, but it crashed onto the basement floor nevertheless. After recovering our wits and luckily finding ourselves unharmed, we had to lug my belongings through the old industrial building's dank basement and up the back stairs, make our way with them through a jam-packed hardware store on the ground floor, and then haul them up four more flights of stairs.

My new loft had a few other amenities besides its skylight, one of which had a classy provenance. The space had previously been rented to the set designer Robert Israel, who sold me the fixtures he'd installed when converting it from a commercial loft to a residence (plumbing and appliances for the kitchen and bathroom, space heaters, and so forth). Among these was a stagelike platform about ten feet square that stood two feet above the floor; Robert must have used it for mock-up designs.

I positioned it underneath the skylight and put a mattress on it, so that it became my bedroom. I didn't pay undue attention to the symbolism of bedroom-as-brightly-lit-stage, but I guess it was apt for that moment of my life. The fixture with the important provenance was a large refrigerator-freezer that had been given to Jasper Johns by Marion Javits, the art collector and socialite wife of New York's famous liberal Republican senator Jacob Javits. Johns had given it to Robert, and Robert sold it to me. It stopped working the following summer, so I found a thirty-five-dollar replacement at a used-appliance store on Kenmare Street, just east of SoHo. This one was a Raymond Loewy–designed General Electric model from the 1940s with a freezer compartment just big enough for a couple of ice-cube trays. I kept it for the next twenty years, and it was still working well when I finally replaced it.

My move from the Village to Tribeca came about as a result of my decision to get serious about being an art critic, to replace the gay scene with the art scene. I suppose it was a moment of my latent Calvinism taking hold. I'd come to feel myself adrift, not accomplishing enough, not spending enough time with the crowd to which I "rightly" belonged. My exchange of one scene for another was destined to fail, but my attempt to achieve it with an essentially spatial implementation interests me now. The immediate impulse is not easy for me to reconstruct, but it had something to do with the boyfriend who'd helped me move and crashed with me in the elevator. A friend had told me that Richard was "inappropriate" for me, something that has been said more than once about the objects of my sexual interest. In this case, I took the opinion more or less to heart, because Richard had become my tormentor. The on-again, off-again character of the affair was in fact quite brutal: as soon as I'd become really hooked on him, he'd abruptly ditch me, and then just as I'd be getting over being jilted, he'd come back pleading that he couldn't live without me, and I'd get hooked once again. This emotional S&M had its physical side, too, which is no doubt what enthralled me in the first place. But beyond these commonplace facts of what's called "a relationship," Richard was indeed very different from me, intellectually, politically. I came most fully to realize this when he informed me one day in the summer of 1975 that he was going to work for the Jimmy Carter election campaign. I was horrified: a born-again Christian from the South? The man who'd famously proclaimed he had sinned in his heart because he'd had impure sexual thoughts? But I'm getting ahead of my story, because by the time Jimmy Carter's campaign was under way, I was about to move out of the Chambers Street loft, farther downtown to Fulton Street; this time, I had the good sense to hire professional movers.

The emotional turmoil of my affair with Richard had come to symbolize for me my participation in the gay scene more generally—unjustly, of course. And my sense that I'd be better off living farther downtown, in Tribeca, was determined, in my memory of it now, by an event that represented a substitute love object. Sometime in the spring of 1974, I saw the Grand Union perform. The Grand Union

was an improvisational dance group that grew out of Yvonne Rainer's late 1960s Performance Demonstrations, especially *Continuous Project—Altered Daily* (1970). Its members were mostly dancers who had played a role in the Judson Dance Theater, including, in addition to Rainer, Trisha Brown, Barbara Dilley, Douglas Dunn, David
p. 97 Gordon, Nancy Green, and Steve Paxton—though by the time I saw the Grand Union perform, Rainer had already left the group. I'd seen very little dance after my first ecstatic exposure to it in Merce Cunningham's Brooklyn Academy of Music engagement in the winter of 1970, where I saw, most memorably, *Rainforest* (1968), with Andy Warhol's helium-filled silver Mylar clouds as the set and music by David Tudor; *Walkaround Time* (1968), with Jasper Johns's clear plastic rectangular elements printed with images from Marcel Duchamp's *Large Glass* (1915–21), to the music of David Behrman; *Tread* (1970), with a set by Bruce Nauman of evenly spaced industrial pedestal fans across the front of the proscenium blowing toward the audience, music by Christian Wolff; and *Canfield* (1970), whose set by Robert Morris was a gray columnar light box that moved back and forth on a track, also at the front of the proscenium, illuminating the stage as it moved, music by Pauline Oliveros.

I saw Martha Graham dance *Clytemnestra* (1958) that same season, but I wasn't nearly as moved by Graham's expressionism as by Cunningham's repudiation of it, and Graham herself had by then become a self-parody. But Cunningham was something else entirely, something that thrilled me as much as anything I'd ever seen. I date my love of dance to that moment, so I can't understand now why I didn't continue to pursue it. By the time I first saw Rainer's work, she had already turned to filmmaking.
p. 97 I did see *This is the story of a woman who…*, presented at the Theater for the New City in the West Village in 1973. In it Rainer performed *Three Satie Spoons* (1961), *Trio A* (1966), and *Walk, She Said* (1971), but otherwise the closest she came to dancing was when she performed the task of vacuuming the stage while wearing a green eyeshade.

It was, in fact, more performance art than dance that I was drawn to in the improvisational antics of the Grand Union dancers. And indeed, it was performance art that seemed to beckon as a substitute object for my libido. By this time, I had seen early works by Joan Jonas, who acknowledges a debt to Judson. In 1971, I sat with other audience members on the floor of Jonas's loft on Grand Street in SoHo to watch
p. 97 her *Choreomania*, performed on a swinging mirrored wall constructed by Richard Serra. Here is a description of the performance space that Jonas and I wrote together ten years later for her Berkeley Art Museum exhibition catalogue:

> A twelve-by-eight-foot wall of wood hangs by chains from the ceiling two-and-a-half feet from the ground. Ropes and handles are attached to the back so that the five performers can climb the wall unseen by the spectators. The right-hand third of the front of the wall is mirrored. The wall can be swung back and forth and sideways by the performers, and their movements are

> choreographed in relation to the wall's motion. The swinging of the wall on its chains, hung from the ceiling beams, creates the sound of the piece, a rhythmic creaking like that of a ship moving through the ocean's wake.
>
> The wall is hung so that it bisects the long narrow space of the loft. The spectators sit in the front half of the loft, facing the prop. The spectators' space and the spectators themselves are reflected in the mirrored portion of the wall as it swings from side to side. Because this wall is also the fourth wall of the spectators' space, the illusion is created that their space is swaying.
>
> The main function of the wall is to fragment the performance in such a way that much of the performance action is seen only around the wall's four edges. The appearing/disappearing actions recall a magic show.[1]

The few existing photographs that document *Choreomania* provide a good sense of what downtown New York performance spaces were like at the moment of performance art's birth. Often they were artists' private living and work spaces, large compared with the typical New Yorker's apartments, but small compared with public performance venues, even essentially makeshift ones like the Judson Church sanctuary. Seating was strictly on the floor, usually in an uncomfortable jumble of fellow audience members.

Artists' resourceful uses of the forsaken spaces of Manhattan's light industry in this era are now legendary. The deindustrialization of New York City in the postwar period had reached its most wrenching moment by the early 1970s, but some of us were unintended, temporary beneficiaries of the crisis even as others lost their jobs and homes at the same moment that social services were slashed. Some of the refashioned industrial spaces are now well known, such as 112 Greene Street, the alternative exhibition venue founded by Jeffrey Lew,[2] and the Kitchen, a performance space founded by Woody and Steina Vasulka, both of which predate by a year or so the relocation of many commercial galleries from uptown to SoHo. Less well documented is the fact that artists with large and relatively accessible lofts would open their spaces to guests for performances and concerts. I remember, for example, hearing Philip Glass's *Music in Twelve Parts* (1971–74) at an informal artist-loft gathering on a Sunday afternoon in SoHo. To enhance the experience, joints were freely passed around among the listeners.

Equally legendary, but rarely considered within this context, is the significance of these loft spaces to the birth of a very different kind of music and performance scene.[3] In 1970, David Mancuso started throwing rent parties in his SoHo loft that represented the pinnacle of disco for a generation and spawned a dance-club scene that persists today. A group of such clubs was at the center of New York nightlife throughout the decade. In 1974, just down the street from the Loft at the corner of Broadway and Houston Street, Michael Fesco opened a private gay disco called Flamingo on the second floor of a building that extended all the way through to Mercer

Street. A year later, 12 West opened in an old plant nursery at 12th and West streets on the northwestern edge of Greenwich Village. Toward the end of the decade, what some consider the greatest of all discos opened in a former truck garage on King Street west of 7th Avenue. It was called, appropriately enough, the Paradise Garage.[4]

But before these discos that followed the Loft came into being, there was another place for post-Stonewall liberated gay men and women to dance, an unused firehouse on Wooster Street in SoHo that had been taken over in the spring of 1971 by the Gay Activists Alliance. On Saturday nights, the old fire-engine garage became a dance hall, while up on the second floor, where firefighters once whiled away their time, dancers rested, drank beer, and cruised one another. In 1974, the firehouse was burned down, probably by neighborhood kids angry that fags and dykes were invading their territory every Saturday night. One of the perils of going to the Firehouse dances was the possibility of running into gangs of baseball-bat-wielding Italian-American kids. Most everyone knows that SoHo was an industrial area before it became a gallery/residential district. But what is now called SoHo had in fact already been a mixed-use neighborhood. The South of Houston Industrial District overlapped with an Italian residential neighborhood known as the South Village. The Feast of Saint Anthony, an Italian street fair, is still held every summer in front of the Shrine Church of Saint Anthony of Padua on Sullivan Street just below Houston Street. When I was searching for my first New York apartment in the early fall of 1967, I looked at a railroad flat on this very street but was frightened away by how rough the area seemed. I rented a place uptown in Spanish Harlem instead. Later, around the time I started going to the Firehouse dances, I spent one summer house-sitting for my friend Pat Steir, who lived in a loft on Mulberry Street in Little Italy, on the other side of SoHo, and again I remember feeling distinctly like an outsider and fearing that the neighborhood toughs would figure out that I was gay. I loved buying prosciutto and fresh mozzarella at the local markets, but the framed photographs of Mussolini in many of the shopwindows certainly gave me pause. Paradoxically—or maybe not—an interior designer I met at the Firehouse dances who became a sometime sex buddy and a lifelong friend was one of those very working-class New York Italians. He grew up in the projects on the Lower East Side, but when I met him in 1971 he lived a block north and east of Saint Anthony of Padua and then later, for years, a block south and west of the church in a garret apartment rented from family friends who owned a house in the old Italian neighborhood.

The one place to get a bite to eat in SoHo in the earliest years of artists living in the area was Fanelli Cafe, also a remnant of the area's Italian-American heritage. It got some competition from a very different kind of eatery in the fall of 1971, when dancer-choreographer Caroline Goodden, artist Gordon Matta-Clark, and a group of their friends opened a restaurant called Food, just up the street from the GAA Firehouse. Although Food survived into the early 1980s, it is now remembered

best for its first two years of operation and is regarded as a long-running Matta-Clark performance piece. The documentary film that Matta-Clark made with Robert Frank and others in Food's first year reveals something of the place's communal feel, but it doesn't suggest performance art nearly as much as it does the daily labor of operating a restaurant. The film begins with before-dawn shopping at the Fulton Fish Market and ends after the restaurant has closed for the night, the chairs have been stacked on the tabletops, and a great many loaves of bread are being baked for the next day by a solitary baker, presumably, like most of Food's staff, an artist.

Matta-Clark is currently the figure most identified with the spirit of downtown Manhattan as a utopian artists' community and site of artistic experimentation in the 1970s, a status that no doubt derives in part from the fact that he died so young; his youth is all we know of him, and his short career coincided with a moment of particularly intense artistic ferment. But the identification also certainly has to do with the fact that the subject and the site of Matta-Clark's art were the city itself, the city experienced simultaneously as neglected and usable, as dilapidated and beautiful, as loss and possibility. Matta-Clark wrote,

> Work with abandoned structures began with my concern for the life of the city of which a major side effect is the metabolization of old buildings. Here as in many urban centers the availability of empty and neglected structures was a prime textural reminder of the ongoing fallacy of renewal through modernization. The omnipresence of emptiness, of abandoned housing and imminent demolition gave me the freedom to experiment with the multiple alternatives to one's life in a box as well as popular attitudes about the need for enclosure.…
>
> The earliest works were also a foray into a city that was still evolving for me. It was an exploration of New York's least remembered parts of the space between the walls of views inside out. I would drive around in my pick-up hunting for emptiness, for a quiet abandoned spot on which to concentrate my piercing attention.[5]

"Hunting for emptiness" in a dense urban fabric like Manhattan might seem incongruous, and indeed today it would be well-nigh futile. But New York was a very different city three decades ago. I offer as evidence several series of photographs taken in the mid- to late 1970s, among them Bernard Guillot's *12th Avenue (dedicated to Orpheus and Eurydice)* (1977). Guillot, a French artist who lived for several years in New York during this period, was an indefatigable explorer of the city's overlooked neighborhoods, which resulted in, among other things, his living clandestinely in a ninth-floor loft at the corner of Broadway and Canal Street. Since the loft was in a still-working industrial building, its elevator was available to Bernard and his guests only from 9:00 am

pp. 109–13

to 5:00 pm, and Bernard was not a nine-to-five kind of guy. You had to be a determined friend to visit him at home. Guillot's exploratory bent resulted, more importantly, in *12th Avenue*, a series of 184 photographs of Manhattan's farthest western periphery shot along a route from Greenwich Village northward to 42nd Street. The photographs were taken on two outings in 1977 and record—systematically, but not rigorously so, at intervals of several paces—views of the city looking north and east along the streets bordering the Hudson River (12th Avenue exists only north of 22nd Street). In them, we recognize a few landmarks of their time, most memorably the gay sex club the Anvil at the foot of 11th Avenue at 14th Street; and familiar landmarks of today in their 1970s guise, such as the Gansevoort Market, the High Line, and the Starrett-Lehigh Building in Chelsea. What is difficult for us to comprehend now is the bright-daylight emptiness these photographs show. Together with a few signs of still-existing industry—tractor trailers backed into loading docks, the parked cars of factory workers, lots full of delivery trucks and moving vans, luncheonettes—there are empty lots overgrown with weeds, heaps of rubble, barricaded streets, abandoned cars, and railroad tracks no longer in use. Almost entirely absent from the images are people.

p. 111 p. 109

Similarly showing urban emptiness is a group of photographs by Peter Hujar dating from 1976, taken not during the day but at night and on a route that goes in the opposite direction from Guillot's, down the Far West Side of Manhattan, southward from the Meatpacking District to the Battery Park City landfill and around the Financial District and Civic Center. These photographs are of two kinds, one showing desolate, fading industrial areas, and the other, downtown Manhattan emptied out after business hours. Mediating the two are photographs of parking lots. All of them, to my mind, are cruising pictures—cruising pictures with no people in them: this, too, might seem incongruous. But the point of cruising—or at least *one* point of cruising—is feeling yourself alone and anonymous in the city, feeling that the city belongs to you, to you and maybe a chanced-on someone else like you—like you at least in an exploration of the empty city. Is there by chance someone else wandering these deserted streets? Might that someone else be on the prowl? Could the two of us find a dark corner where we could get together? Can the city become just *ours* for this moment?

pp. 85–86

Not everyone experiences urban emptiness this way. A year after Hujar made these pictures, Cindy Sherman began shooting her famous series of *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–80), also on the deserted streets of Lower Manhattan. Hers are very different kinds of pictures, not least because most of them are taken, like Guillot's, during the daytime (Lower Manhattan, too, was deserted back then, even during the day on weekends). But they are also different because they always include a lone female character played by Sherman herself and are staged in such a way as to suggest an incident in that character's story. The few of them that were shot on the streets at night are noirish images of threatened femininity, showing an apprehensive woman walking

pp. 120–23

down a dark and forlorn street. But this woman is not Cindy Sherman and the city is not New York; the city in these pictures is a generic city, like a film location. This is a woman in a city, and the city is not a good place for her to be right now. (Of course, the notion that a city street at night is no place for a woman is also belied by Sherman's use of this very street to make her photograph.)

Another work that suggests—and simultaneously pokes fun at—the dangers facing women on desolate Manhattan streets was made in response to artists' using the abandoned city in the early 1970s. The work is Louise Lawler's sound piece
p. 119
Birdcalls (1972/1981), in which Lawler "squeals, squawks, chirps, twitters, croaks, squeaks, and occasionally warbles the names—primarily the surnames—of twenty-eight contemporary male artists, from Vito Acconci to Lawrence Weiner" (I borrow Rosalyn Deutsche's concise description).[6] Lawler explains that the work

> originated in the early 1970s when my friend Martha Kite and I were helping some artists on one of the Hudson River pier projects. The women involved were doing tons of work, but the work being shown was only by male artists. Walking home at night in New York, one way to feel safe is to pretend you're crazy or at least be really loud. Martha and I called ourselves the *dewey chantoosies*, and we'd sing off-key and make other noises. Willoughby Sharp was the impresario of this project, so we'd make a "Willoughby Willoughby" sound, trying to sound like birds. This developed into a series of bird calls based on artists' names.[7]

The show in question was *Projects: Pier 18*, a sequence of projects by twenty-seven artists, all male, commissioned by Sharp and photographed by the art-world photographic team Shunk-Kender. The resulting photographic series were subsequently exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art.[8] While the works were situated on the pier and often took it as their subject, many also provide intriguing views of a greater
p. 67
expanse of the city in 1971. For example, John Baldessari's *Hands Framing New York Harbor* is a single photograph of a freighter moored at the pier, framed by a rectangle in the foreground made by the artist's thumbs and index fingers pressed together. Above and to the right of the hands we see the downtown skyline, including the Woolworth Building on Broadway, the top of the U.S. Courthouse in Foley Square, and the New York Telephone Company building on West Street. Looming up in front of the Woolworth Building is the huge sign for the *New York World-Telegram*, a newspaper that had been defunct for several years by 1971.

p. 68
Dan Graham's description of his work for *Projects: Pier 18* reads: "Still camera pressed to body—Beginning at my feet, each shot progressively spirals to top of my head—Lens faces out—back of camera side pressed flush to contour of skin."[9]
pp. 70–71
The photographs Graham took as he moved the camera in a spiral around his body

capture oblique views of the pier, the river, and the skyline. In some, we see fragments of the twin towers of the World Trade Center, their summits not yet completed.

Most of the old industrial piers along the West Side of Manhattan on the Hudson River, including Pier 18, stood abandoned and in partial or nearly total ruin at that time; when you walked on them you were in constant danger of falling through the floor or falling off the rotting timbered edges into the river six or eight feet below. On those piers that retained their superstructures, the upper rooms could also be hazardous. Vito Acconci's work for *Projects: Pier 18*, titled *Security Zone*, made at least oblique reference to the sense of remoteness and danger of Manhattan's Lower West Side piers. Acconci—with hands bound behind his back, blindfolded, and wearing earplugs—entrusted his safety to fellow artist Lee Jaffe as he walked around the far end of the pier. The piece was, Acconci wrote, "designed to affect, improve, an everyday relationship" by forcing himself to develop trust in someone about whom he had "ambiguous" feelings.[10] Looking at the photographs, you sometimes can't tell whether Jaffe is about to push Acconci off the edge of the pier or is saving him from falling off.

Acconci made even more explicit the sense of danger in the piers in an untitled project for Pier 17 a month later. He posted a notice at the John Gibson Gallery during his exhibition there, announcing that from March 27 to April 24 he would wait at the end of the pier for one hour every night, beginning at 1:00 am, and that anyone who came there to meet him would be rewarded by being told a secret he had never before divulged, something about which he felt ashamed and that could be used against him. In addition to having to make himself vulnerable by revealing to whoever showed up a dirty secret, Acconci had to confront the dangers of the deserted pier itself: on the "first night," he writes, "I'm waiting outside, afraid to go in (inside I'll be on unfamiliar ground—I could be taken unawares—from outside I can get a view of the whole—if anyone comes, I'll have to go in after him, overtake him before he stakes out a position)."[11] Acconci recalls what ensued one night when a visitor showed up: "Someone shouts my name at the entrance. I don't answer him: he has to be willing to throw himself into it, he has to come and get me (I'm in the position of prey—I have to be stalked)."[12]

Gordon Matta-Clark, too, made a project for *Pier 18*, but his reference to endangerment was, as in so much of his work, one of bravura, of physical derring-do rather than psychological vulnerability. At Pier 18, he planted an evergreen tree in what he called "a parked island barge" and suspended himself by rope upside down above it. But this stunt was only a harmless rehearsal for what would be Matta-Clark's most audacious act and certainly one of his most magnificent works, *Day's End* (1975), his summer-long transformation of the dilapidated Pier 52, which stood at the end of Gansevoort Street in New York's Meatpacking District.

Like most people, I know *Day's End* only from photographs, written descriptions, and the film that documents its making. Regrettably, I didn't see the actual work. Matta-Clark talked about it in a number of interviews; the one he gave in Antwerp at the time he made *Office Baroque* (1977), a few years after he completed *Day's End*, is for me the most evocative:

> Pier 52 is an intact nineteenth-century industrial relic of steel and corrugated tin looking like an enormous Christian basilica whose dim interior was barely lit by the clerestory windows fifty feet overhead.
>
> The initial cuts were made through the pier floor across the center forming a tidal channel nine feet wide by seventy feet long. A similar shape through the roof directly above this channel allows a patch of light to enter which arches over the floor until it's captured at noon within the watery slot. During the afternoon the sun shines through a cat's-eye-like "rose window" in the west wall. At first a sliver and then a strongly defined shape of light continues to wander into the wharf until the whole pier is fully illuminated at dusk. Below the rear "wall-hole" is another large quarter circle cut opening the floor of the south-west corner to a turbulent view of the Hudson water. The water and sun move constantly in the pier throughout the day in what I saw as an indoor park.[13]

Matta-Clark referred to the three months of work on *Day's End* as his "summer
p. 149
vacation…by the water."[14] Judging from the film that Betsy Sussler shot of it, it wasn't a restful vacation. Working with his friend Gerry Hovagimyan, Matta-Clark used such heavy-duty tools as a chain saw and a blowtorch to cut through the timbers of the pier's floor and corrugated tin roof and facade. The most dramatic moments of the film show Matta-Clark wielding the blowtorch as he dangles on a small platform strung up by rope pulley about twenty feet above the pier's floor. Often shirtless but wearing protective goggles as sparks fly about, Matta-Clark cuts the west-end oculus through the tin siding in a performance that is equal parts Harold Lloyd and Douglas Fairbanks. Matta-Clark speaks of the "element of absurdity in the whole activity,"[15] even as his references to the basilica-like structure and "rose window" that he added to it sacralize the setting. Some who had the good fortune to see *Day's End* relate a sense of awe enhanced by fear. Sculptor Joel Shapiro recalls that "the piece was dangerous," that Matta-Clark "was creating some kind of edge—flirting with some sort of abyss."[16] But Matta-Clark intended the opposite kind of experience:

> The one thing that I wanted was to make it possible for people to see it…in a peaceful enclosure totally enclosed in an un-menacing kind of way. That when they went in there, they wouldn't feel like every squeak or every shadow was

> a potential threat. I know in lots of the earlier works that I did, the kind of paranoia of being in a space where you didn't know who was there, what was happening or whether there were menacing people lurking about, was just distracting. And I just wanted it to be a more joyous situation.[17]

"An indoor park," "joyous," "dangerous," "absurd," "flirting with the abyss": descriptions of *Day's End* by Matta-Clark and others make it impossible for me not to think of the experiences of those other pier occupants, the ones from whom Matta-Clark seems in nearly all his statements about the work to want to differentiate himself—"you know, that whole S&M," as he put it.[18] Although in many instances Matta-Clark aligned his work with others who took over or otherwise made their mark on abandoned parts of cities, particularly workers, homeless people, and disenfranchised youth, in the case of Pier 52, Matta-Clark not only disavowed any bond with the gay men who were using the piers as cruising grounds but went so far as to lock them out:

> After looking up and down the waterfront for a pier, I just happened on this one. And of all of them, it was the one that was least trafficked. It had been broken into and was continuing to be broken into when I was there. But it remained a kind of side step from their general haunt. So I went in and realized without very much effort I could secure it. And it then occurred to me that while I was closing up holes and barb-wiring various parts, I would also change the lock and have my own lock. It would make it so much easier.[19]

It may be that Matta-Clark had no particular animus toward the gay men who were using the pier but that he simply wanted to be able to go about his work undisturbed, to protect himself from intruders of any kind. He might even have worried about liability should someone get hurt as a result of his cutting away sections of the pier's floor. But it's difficult to say, because Matta-Clark wasn't especially careful to differentiate among the various dangers that journalists writing at the time about the sexual activity at the piers often conflated: hazardous, disintegrating structures; threatening, perverse sexuality; and criminals who preyed on, robbed, and sometimes even murdered the piers' clandestine users:

> Besides my personal feelings of base mismanagement of the dying harbor and its ghost-like terminals, is the inextricable evidence of a new criminal situation of alarming proportions. The waterfront was probably never anything but tough and dangerous but now with this long slow transition period, it has become a veritable muggers' playground, both for people who go only to enjoy walking there and for a recently popularized sado-masochistic fringe.[20]

Gay men were acutely aware of the piers' dangers, and they painted, together with vernacular artwork and graffiti, signs warning fellow cruisers to watch their wallets. Moreover, Matta-Clark wasn't the only one who took to the piers for a summer vacation by the water. Shielded from public view by the warehouse structure, gay men used the pier's end that jutted far out into the river as a place to sunbathe. It doesn't, I think, diminish the accomplishment of *Day's End* to say that a romantic grandeur was perceptible in the ruined piers before Matta-Clark ever wrought a single change on Pier 52 and that much of the pleasure that gay men took in being at the piers was what drew artists to them as well. It's not just that the piers were there and available; they were also vast and hauntingly beautiful. Nor was the sex play on the piers only of the rough and kinky variety, unless you think that any kind of sex outside a domestic setting is kinky.

The entire range of pleasures and dangers of the piers was captured by a too-little-known African-American photographer, Alvin Baltrop, who documented the goings-on there during the 1970s and 80s, up to and including the piers' demolition in the mid- to late 1980s. A number of Baltrop's photographs show gay men at Pier 52, taking in the beauty of Matta-Clark's *Day's End* along with whatever other beauties they might be pursuing. Indeed, these photographs wonderfully portray the "peaceful enclosure" and "joyous situation" that Matta-Clark said he wanted to achieve.[21] Like Matta-Clark, Baltrop also hoisted himself on a harness high in the air to make his work. In the preface for a book that he worked unsuccessfully to complete before dying of cancer in 2004, Baltrop wrote:

pp. 93–95

> Although initially terrified of the Piers, I began to take these photos as a voyeur, but soon grew determined to preserve the frightening, mad, unbelievable, violent, and beautiful things that were going on at that time. To get certain shots, I hung from the ceilings of several warehouses utilizing a makeshift harness, watching and waiting for hours to record the lives that these people led (friends, acquaintances, and strangers), and the unfortunate ends that they sometimes met. The casual sex and nonchalant narcotizing, the creation of artwork and music, sunbathing, dancing, merrymaking and the like habitually gave way to muggings, callous yet detached violence, rape, suicide, and in some instances, murder. The rapid emergence and expansion of AIDS in the 1980s further reduced the number of people going to and living at the Piers, and the sporadic joys that could be found there.[22]

Baltrop photographed obsessively: men engaged in sex shot from the distance of a neighboring pier or clandestinely through a doorway, and men happy to become exhibitionists for the camera at close-up range; portraits of men and women Baltrop came to know at the piers, including some who had no place else to live; guys cruising for sex, sometimes as naked as the nearby sunbathers; people just strolling about, transfixed by

the rays of sunlight streaming through disintegrating roof structures; graffiti, some of it the skillful handiwork of an artist known as Tava, who painted in a style that amalgamates Greek vase painting with Tom of Finland; gruesome corpses dredged up from the river and surrounded by the police and onlookers. Most of all, Baltrop photographed the piers themselves. The phantoms of New York's bustling industrial past appear in his pictures as vast heaps of trusses, buckled tin siding, rotting wooden pilings and floors, rickety staircases, and broken windows, sometimes with a ragged curtain still flapping in the river breezes. Baltrop's camera often zeros in on a just-discernable scene of butt fucking or cock sucking amid the rubble, but even when the sex is absent, we recognize the piers as the sexual playground they were.

Unlike Baltrop, I didn't feel consciously afraid of the piers. They were part of my neighborhood cityscape and one of many nearby places to play outdoors. Located a short walk from my apartment on 10th Street, Pier 42, which no longer had a structure on it, was a local place to hang out and be cooled by the Hudson River's breezes on hot summer days and watch the sun set over New Jersey in the evening. Even closer was Pier 45, the main gay-cruising pier, where the upper-floor warren of rooms along the West Street end functioned day and night like a sex club with no cover charge. Pier 45 was only one of many nearby places for outdoor sex play. Another Greenwich Village haunt of men seeking other men was known simply as "the trucks," a designation for the empty lots along Washington Street north of Christopher Street where delivery trucks were parked at night. After the bars closed at 4:00 am, gay men gathered in the spaces behind the trucks and often up inside the back of them for group sex. If you lived in the Village, this was an efficient way to bring your night at the bars to a satisfying end without having to repair to a bathhouse in another neighborhood. I remember a short period around 1973, before I first discovered the scene at the piers, when, late at night and into the morning, gay men also took over the half-completed structures of the West Village Houses, going up along Washington Street across from the trucks. The West Village Houses were a long-debated, underfinanced, and therefore architecturally diminished project of 420 units of low-rise, middle-income housing that indirectly resulted from Jane Jacobs's 1961 classic critique of modern urbanism, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*.[23] Although Jacobs's ideas about what made cities great—short blocks, dense concentrations of people, mixed uses, and aged buildings—grew out of her love of her own neighborhood, Greenwich Village, I don't think they included men meeting for sex in construction sites, parking lots, and waterfront warehouses, but this was part of the Village life I knew at the time.

Come to think of it, maybe I *was* afraid of the piers—afraid not only of their very real dangers, of which I tended to be overtly and stupidly dismissive, but also of their easy proximity and constant promise. I was struggling to write about art professionally as a freelancer then, which took more discipline than I could usually

muster, since the frustrations of being unable to find a good subject, devise a sound argument, even compose a sentence I was happy with or choose a word that rang true, could be easily if only momentarily alleviated by just walking out my door and into the playground that was my immediate neighborhood. This must be why seeing the Grand Union perform sticks in my mind as being such a momentous event for me, why it propelled me to another part of the city and another world. Apart from monthly reviewing for *Art News* and *Art International*, the most ambitious writing I managed during the several years I lived in the Village was a short monographic essay on Agnes Martin called "Number, Measure, Ratio" and a commissioned essay, which I titled "Opaque Surfaces," for the catalogue of an exhibition held in Milan of American Minimalist painters from Martin and Ad Reinhardt to Brice Marden and Richard Tuttle.[24] In both essays, I struggled to think beyond the Greenbergian formalism that still held sway in so much American art criticism at that time. What would finally free me from its grip was not painting but performance art.

The loft in Tribeca to which I moved in 1974 was just a block or so from the site of what had been perhaps the most ambitious and imaginative use of the deindustrializing city as the stage for an artwork, Joan Jonas's 1972 performance *Delay Delay*.[25] A year later, the performance was translated into the language of film in *Songdelay*, as compelling an aesthetic document of New York City of its era as Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler's 1921 city-symphony film *Manhatta* is of the city half a century earlier. Once again, Jonas and I describe the performance space of *Delay Delay* in our 1983 book:

p. 124

pp. 100–101

> The spectators view the performance from the roof of a five-story loft building facing west, located at 319 Greenwich Street in lower Manhattan. The performing area is a ten-block grid of city streets bounding vacant lots and leveled buildings. Beyond these lots are the elevated West Side Highway, the docks and piers along the Hudson River, and the factories of the New Jersey skyline across the river. Directly in front of the spectators at the back of the performance area is the Erie Lackawanna Pier building painted with large numbers 20 and 21. These indicate the old pier numbers.[26]

By the time I moved to Tribeca, these downtown piers had been torn down to make way for Battery Park City, which was then put on hold during the city's fiscal crisis. New York was going bankrupt, and its infrastructure was badly deteriorating, visibly symbolized in late 1973 by the collapse of a section of the elevated West Side Highway under the weight of an asphalt-laden repair truck. Just half a block down the street from the loft I moved into, the city trailed off into vacant lots. Beyond the razed blocks that had once been the Washington Market was the elevated highway, now empty, too, and beyond that, where the piers had been, a barren landfill that Lower Manhattan residents

christened "the beach." A few years later, the newly founded arts organization Creative Time would begin a series of outdoor exhibitions there called *Art on the Beach*.[27] An era of officially sponsored public art was underway, with its commissioning entities, panels of experts, permits, contracts, and eventually controversies and court cases.

I didn't manage to change worlds by moving to Tribeca. I still spent nearly every evening in the Village, but now most of them ended with a long walk down the West Side to my new neighborhood, through the empty streets that Peter Hujar was photographing at just this time. It was a time when I could cherish the illusion that these Manhattan streets belonged to me—to me and others who were discovering them and using them for our own purposes. But I did nevertheless manage to become an art critic. The first article I wrote after moving downtown was "Joan Jonas's Performance Works," published in a special issue of *Studio International* devoted to performance art. Jonas was more clear-sighted than I was at the time about the possibility of appropriating city spaces. I quote her in my essay as saying: "My own thinking and production has focused on issues of space—ways of dislocating it, attenuating it, flattening it, turning it inside out, always attempting to explore it without ever giving to myself or to others the permission to penetrate it."[28]

I was still preoccupied enough with painting in the mid-1970s that I misinterpreted Jonas's explorations of spatial illusionism as reflecting her continuing involvement with the history of painting.[29] I overlooked in her statement what it foretold about the actual spaces Jonas was performing in: just how provisional was their availability for experimental uses. This is what her film *Songdelay* captures so well about the New York of its moment. Jonas's use of a telephoto lens in *Songdelay* shows the performance area and cityscape beyond, unlike the vista that opened out in front of the spectators beyond the rooftop from which they watched *Delay Delay*, collapsed into a single plane. A performer who appears to be in the near middleground claps blocks of wood together; a sound delay tells us that in fact he stands a great distance from us. A warehouse in Jersey City appears to be right behind him, but the sudden, uncanny appearance of a huge freighter between him and the building tells us otherwise—that in between lies the great expanse of the Hudson River.[30] A cut to a slow-motion, tight close-up shot of Jonas, limbs outstretched while rotating in a large hoop, makes clear how limited and fragmented is our perspective on the overall location, for beyond Jonas's torso we see only the street's cobblestones, a curb, a bit of sidewalk, and some rubble. Behind another figure, whose movements are rendered puppetlike by bamboo poles held in her outstretched arms and thrust into the opposite trouser leg, we glimpse a chain-link fence and rear-ground automobile traffic. Only one sequence grants us sufficient distance to make the location comprehensible: at the top right of a scene that shows several performers moving back and forth through a vacant lot, the back of the Federal Office Building on Church and Barclay streets is visible, and just below it, at the frame's right edge, we can make out the sole survivor of the wrecking balls of the

pp. 100–101

prior decade, a nineteenth-century building that stood alone and forlorn at the corner of West and Warren streets until 2003.[31] This means that the streets we see bordering the vacant lot's south and west sides must be Warren and Greenwich streets—right around the corner from where I lived between 1974 and 1976.[32] But just as we begin to be able to orient ourselves, Jonas cuts to another close-up of herself rotating in the hoop, and this time not only is she upside down but the film frame is also. Throughout *Songdelay*, sequences of action are interrupted by quick inserts—so quick they are nearly subliminal—of Jonas in the hoop, the puppetlike figure, flashes of light from a mirror that Jonas holds up to reflect the sun into the lens, and a pair of wooden blocks whose clacking together has provided much of the film's sound. Together with the shots through the telephoto lens, extreme close-ups of individual performers' bodies, and bird's-eye views of two people playing at being a slider-crank mechanism as they walk along a line and circle painted on the cobblestone pavement, these elements make us fully aware of the filmic mediation of the performance events. But that is far from the sole meaning of *Songdelay*'s varied techniques. The film also uses these techniques to thwart our desire to know or possess the city beyond our immediate experience of it in the moment of use. We see the city in fragments, not unlike those that Gordon Matta-Clark—one of *Songdelay*'s performers—gave us a few years later in his film *City Slivers* (1976), in which New York appears as a series of vertical striations made by masking the camera's lens. We glimpse the city in pieces, in the background, in our peripheral vision—and in recollection.

p. 148

Endnotes

1
Joan Jonas: Scripts and Descriptions 1968–1982, ed. Douglas Crimp (Berkeley: University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley; Eindhoven: Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, 1983), p. 22. Jonas's exhibition at the University Art Museum took place in 1980.
2
See 112 Workshop, 112 Greene Street: History, Artists & Artworks, ed. Robyn Brentano with Mark Savitt (New ork: New ork University Press, 1981).
3
An exception to this statement is the inclusion in New York—Downtown › anhattan: SoHo (Berlin: Akademie der Künste, 1976) of a 1976 fyer headlined "STOP D SCOS N SO O , protesting the plans for a fourth disco in So o after the Loft, lamingo, and rankenstein; see p. 25. A more signi cant exception is Tim Lawrence, Hold On to Your Dreams: Arthur Russell and the Downtown › usic Scene, 1973–92 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009). Arthur Russell, music director of the Kitchen Center for ideo and Music in 1974–75, straddled the experimental music and gay disco scenes.
4
or an account of my own experience at these discos, see my "Disss co (A ragment), Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts 50, no. 1 (Winter 2008), pp. 1–18.
5
Gordon Matta Clark, "Work with abandoned structures, typewritten statement circa 1975, in Gordon › atta¡ Clark: Works and Collected Writings, ed. Gloria Moure (Barcelona: Ediciones Pol grafa, 2006), p. 141.
6
Rosalyn Deutsche, "Louise Lawler's Rude Museum, in Twice Untitled and Other Pictures (Looking Back), ed. elen Molesworth (Columbus, O : Wexner Center for the Arts, 2006), p. 130.
7
Louise Lawler, "Prominence Given, Authority Taken: An nterview with Louise Lawler by Douglas Crimp, Grey Room 4 (Summer 2001), p. 80. Lawler recorded the Birdcalls in 1981 with a somewhat altered and updated roster of male artists' names. Lawler and Kite's pretense of cra"iness as self protection has a venerable New ork history. rom the introduction to Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace's Gotham, we learn that the designation of Manhattan as "Gotham originates in Washington rving's 1807 Salmagundi papers, mocking the foolish people of Manhattan. But the notion of Manhattan as an island of fools has a redeeming side taken from a story about the village of Gotham in Nottinghamshire: " n the early 1200s King John traveled regularly throughout England with a retinue of knights and ladies, and wherever the royal foot touched earth became forever after a public highway (i.e., the King's). One day John was heading to Nottingham by way of Gotham, and he dispatched a herald to announce his arrival. The herald reported back that the townspeople had refused the king entry, fearing the loss of their best lands. The enraged monarch sent an armed party to wreak vengeance, but the townsfolk had prepared a scheme to turn aside John's wrath. When the knights arrived, they found the inhabitants engaged in various forms of idiotic behavior: pouring water into a bottomless tub; painting green apples red; tying to drown an eel in a pool of water; dragging carts atop barns to shade the wood from the sun; and fencing in a cuckoo. The chortling knights reported back to the monarch that the townsfolk were clearly mad, and John accordingly spared them (Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898 New ork: Oxford University Press, 1999fi pp. xiii–xiv).
8
See Harry Shunk, Pro ects: Pier 18 (Nice: Musfi e d'Art Moderne et d'Art Contemporain, 1992). or this incarnation of Pro ects: Pier 18, János (Jean) Kender's name was erased from the collaboration. Between 1957 and 1973, arry Shunk and János Kender worked collaboratively, and all of their photographs taken during this period were credited as Shunk Kender. This was the case when Pro ects: Pier 18 was shown at the Museum of Modern Art in 1971. The collaboration was dissolved in 1973, with Shunk retaining the photographic archive (see "Roy Lichtenstein oundation Ac–uires arry Shunk Archive, http://www.lichtensteinfoundation.org/shunk01.htm accessed December 24, 2009fi).
9
The artists' handwritten instructions for the projects were also photographed by Shunk Kender and shown as part of the exhibition. See plates 27–35.
10
ito Acconci, Sarina Basta, and Garrett Ricciardi, Vito Acconci: Diary of a Body 1969–1973 (Milan: Charta, 2006), p. 248.
11
bid., p. 258
12
bid., p. 259.
13
" nterview with Gordon Matta Clark, Antwerp, September 1977, in Moure, Gordon › atta¡ Clark, pp. 252–53.
14
"Gordon Matta Clark: The Making of Pier 52, an nterview with Li"a Bear, March 11, 1976, in Moure, Gordon › atta¡ Clark, p. 217.
15
bid., p. 220.
16
uoted in Pamela M. Lee, Ob ect to Be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon › atta¡ Clark (Cambridge, MA: M T Press, 2000), p. 130. Lee argues for a combination of phenomenology and the sublime to capture the experience of Matta Clark's work.
17
"Gordon Matta Clark: The Making of Pier 52, p. 220.
18
bid., p. 215.
19
bid., p. 218.
20
Gordon Matta Clark, "My understanding of art, typewritten statement circa 1975, in Moure, Gordon › atta¡ Clark, p. 204. On the journalistic conf ation of the dangers to gay men using the piers with the supposed dangers of gay men's sexuality, see Lee, Ob ect to Be Destroyed, pp. 119–20.
21
Many others photographed the piers; none to my knowledge as extensively or beautifully as Baltrop. ncluded among those who took photographs of the piers were Peter ujar and Leonard ink. The latter's vast trove of photographs of the gay scene are held in the National Archive of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender istory in New ork. n addition to photo graphic documentation, the piers are the setting of a gay porn feature lm called Pier Groups, made by Arch Brown in 1979.
22
Alvin Baltrop, Ashes from a Flame: Photographs by Alvin Baltrop, ed. Randal Wilcox, http://baltrop.org/ashesintro.htm (accessed ebruary 1, 2008).
23
Jane Jacobs, The Death and Life of Great American Cities (New ork: Random ouse, 1961).
24
Douglas Crimp, "Agnes Martin: numero, misura, rapporto, Data 3, no. 10 (Winter 1973), pp. 83–85; "Opa–ue Surfaces, in Arte Come Arte (Milan: Centro Communitario di Brera, 1973), reprinted in James Meyer, › inimalism (London: Phaidon, 2000).
25
See Janelle Reiring, "Joan Jonas' Delay Delay, The Drama Review: TDR 16, no. 3 (September 1972), pp. 142–50; and Katie Stone, Joan Jonas: Beyond the Frame (master's thesis, Courtauld nstitute of Art, 2003).
26
Joan Jonas: Scripts and Descriptions, p. 34.
27
The Art on the Beach events at the Battery Park City land ll extended from 1978 to 1985. or a thorough analysis of the uses of a different version of "public art in the interests of real estate development at Battery Park City, see Rosalyn Deutsche, "Uneven Development: Public Art in New ork City, in Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics (Cambridge, MA: M T Press, 1996), pp. 49–107.
28
Joan Jonas with Rosalind Krauss misspelled "Krause fi "Seven ears, The Drama Review: TDR 19, no. 1 (March 1975), p. 13.