

BEFORE PICTURES

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ACTION AROUND THE EDGES

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 a 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 Baer, March 11, 1976

THE DAY IN AUGUST I moved from Greenwich Village to Tribeca was one of the hottest of summer 1974. I rented a van and got my on-again, off-again boyfriend Richard Cook to help out. My apartment on Tenth Street just west of Hudson Street was a fourth-floor railroad flat; my new place was a spacious skylit loft on Chambers Street, also west of Hudson. I'd arranged to use the freight elevator in the loft building for the day, a rickety old contraption operated by pulling down hard on the hoist cable of a pulley system and stopped by yanking the other cable. It was a challenge to bring it level with the floor. After piling all of my belongings on the elevator's platform, Richard and I, along with the artist next door from whom I was subletting the loft, managed to get the overloaded elevator to start its ascent. By the time we'd reached the third floor, though, it came to a grinding halt and began sliding back downward. We all grabbed the cable 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 finding ourselves luckily 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 some amenities besides the skylight, one of them with a classy provenance. The set designer Robert Israel had previously rented the space, and from him I bought its fixtures (appurtenances necessary to convert a commercial loft into a residence—plumbing and appliances for kitchen and bathroom, space heaters, and so forth). Among these was a stage-like platform about ten-foot square and standing two feet above the floor, which Robert must have used to mock up designs. I positioned it underneath the skylight and used it to demarcate my bedroom. I didn't pay much 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 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 State's famous liberal Republican senator. Johns had given it to Robert. It stopped working the summer after I bought it from Robert, so I found a thirty-five-dollar replacement at a used-appliance store on Kenmare Street, just east of SoHo. This one was a General Electric model from the 1940s with a freezer compartment just big enough for ice-cube trays. I kept it for the next twenty years, and it still worked fine 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'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 a geographic implementation interests me now. The immediate impulse is not easy for me to reconstruct, but it had something to do with the sometime boyfriend who 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. But 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 became really hooked on him, he'd abruptly ditch me, and just as I was getting over being jilted he'd come back pleading that he couldn't live without me, and I'd get hooked again. This emotional S&M had its physical side too, which is no doubt what



Me in my Chambers Street loft, c. 1975



Meg Harper and Merce Cunningham in Cunningham's *RainForest*, 1968. Photo by James Klosty

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 in the summer of 1975 that he was going to work for Jimmy Carter's election. I was horrified: a born-again Christian from the South? The man who famously proclaimed that he had sinned in his heart because he'd had impure sexual thoughts? But I'm getting ahead of the story, because by the time Carter's campaign was under way, I was about to move out of the Chambers Street loft farther downtown to Nassau 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. An event that represented a substitute love object determined my sense that I'd be better off living in Tribeca. Sometime in spring 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* (1969). Its members included, in addition to Rainer, Trisha Brown, Barbara Dilley, Douglas Dunn, David Gordon, Nancy Green, and Steve Paxton, most of whom were dancers who had participated in the Judson Dance Theater. By the time I saw the Grand Union perform, Rainer had already left the group. I'd seen very little dance since my first ecstatic exposure to it in winter 1970 at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, where Merce Cunningham's company performed *RainForest* (1968), with Andy Warhol's helium-filled *Silver 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*, to the music of David Behrman; *Tread* (1970), with a set by Bruce Nauman of industrial pedestal fans evenly spaced across the proscenium, half of them blowing toward the audience, and music by Christian Wolff; and *Canfield* (1969), whose set by Robert Morris was a gray columnar light box that moved back and forth on a track, also across the proscenium, illuminating the stage as it moved, with music by Pauline Oliveros.

I saw Martha Graham dance *Cortege of Eagles* (1967) that same season, but I wasn't nearly as moved by Graham's expressionism as by Cunningham's repudiation of it, and in her final stage performances at the age of seventy-six,



Yvonne Rainer, *This Is the Story of a Woman Who . . .*, 1973. Photo by Babette Mangolte

Graham had become a self-parody. Cunningham was something else, something that thrilled me as much as anything I'd ever seen. I date my love of dance to that moment, so looking back I cannot understand why I didn't continue to pursue it. By the time I first saw Rainer's work, she had already turned to filmmaking. 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 which Rainer performed *Three Satie Spoons* (1961), *Trio A* (1966), and *Walk, She Said* (1972), but otherwise the closest she came to dancing in that performance piece was vacuuming the stage while wearing a green eyeshade.

It was, in fact, more the performance art than the dance in the improvisational antics of the Grand Union dancers that I was drawn to. And, in truth, it was performance art that beckoned 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 her *Choreomania*, performed on a swinging, partially 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 surviving 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 typical working- and middle-class New Yorkers' apartments, but small compared with public performance venues, even makeshift ones like the Judson Memorial Church sanctuary. Seating was 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 in the postwar period had reached its most wrenching condition by the early 1970s, but some of us were unintended, temporary beneficiaries of the financial crisis, even as others lost their jobs and homes when 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 among the listeners.

Equally legendary, but rarely considered in this context, is the significance of these loft spaces for the birth of a different kind of music and performance scene.³ In his SoHo loft in 1970, David Mancuso started throwing the rent parties that came to represent the pinnacle of disco for a generation and spawned a dance-club scene that persisted until Mayor Rudolph Giuliani destroyed it with his “quality-of-life” policy in the early nineties. Mancuso's clubs were at the center of New York nightlife throughout the seventies. In 1974, just down the street from the Loft at the corner of Broadway and Houston Street, Michael Fesco opened the private gay disco Flamingo on the second floor of a building that extended all the way to Mercer Street. A year later, 12 West opened in an old plant nursery at Twelfth 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 Varick Street. It was called, appropriately enough, the Paradise Garage.

But before the gay discos 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 spring 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 once firefighters whiled away their time, dancers rested, drank beer, and cruised one another. In 1974, the firehouse was gutted in a fire probably set by neighborhood kids angry that fags and dykes invaded 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. SoHo is commonly thought of as having been an industrial area before it became a gallery district, but what is now called SoHo was in fact a mixed-use neighborhood. The South 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

church of St. Anthony of Padua on Sullivan Street just below Houston. When I was searching for my first New York apartment in the early fall of 1967, I looked at a railroad flat on that very street but was frightened away by how rough the area seemed. I rented the place uptown in Spanish Harlem instead. Later, around the time I started going to the Firehouse dances, I spent one summer house-sitting at my friend Pat Steir's loft on Mulberry Street in Little Italy, east of SoHo, and again I remember feeling distinctly like an outsider and being afraid 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 shop windows certainly gave me pause. Paradoxically—or maybe not—my sometime sex buddy and lifelong friend Carl D'Aquino, the interior designer I met at the Firehouse dances and with whom I'd rented the Fire Island house, was one of those 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 northeast of St. Anthony of Padua and then later, for years, a block southwest of it in a garret apartment rented from family friends who'd bought their house in the old Italian neighborhood.

The one place to find a bite to eat in SoHo in the earliest years of artists living in the area was Fanelli's Cafe, also a remnant of the area's Italian American heritage. It got some competition from a different kind of eatery in the fall of 1971, when dancer and choreographer Carol Gooden, artist Gordon Matta-Clark, and a group of their friends opened Food just up the street from the GAA Firehouse. Although Food survived as a SoHo restaurant into the early 1980s, it is 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 during Food's first year of operation reveals something of the communitarian feel of the place, but it doesn't suggest performance art nearly as much as it does the hard 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 for the next day have been loaded into the ovens by a solitary baker, presumably, like most of Food's staff, an artist.

Matta-Clark is the figure most identified with the spirit of 1970s downtown Manhattan as a utopian artists' community and site of artistic

experimentation. His status no doubt derives in part from the fact that he died so young; his youth is all we know of him, and his youthful career coincided with a moment of particularly intense artistic ferment. The identification also certainly has to do with the fact that the subject and site of Matta-Clark's art was the city itself, the city experienced as simultaneously neglected and usable, dilapidated and beautiful, loss and possibility. Matta-Clark wrote,

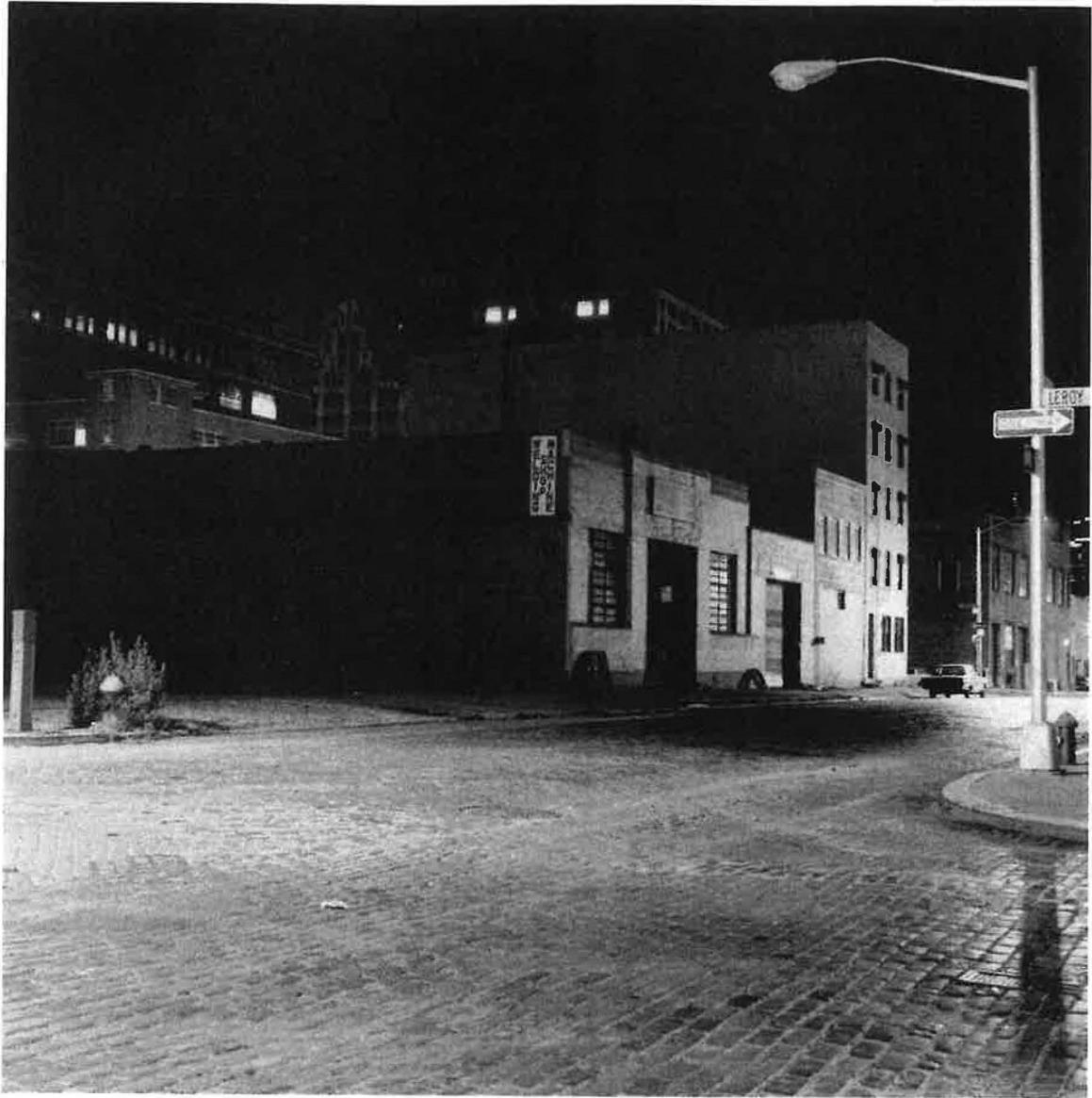
Work with abandoned structures began with my concern for the life of the city of which a major side effect is the metabolization of old buildings. Here as in many urban centers the availability of empty and neglected structures was a prime textural reminder of the ongoing fallacy of renewal through modernization. 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 still was 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.⁴

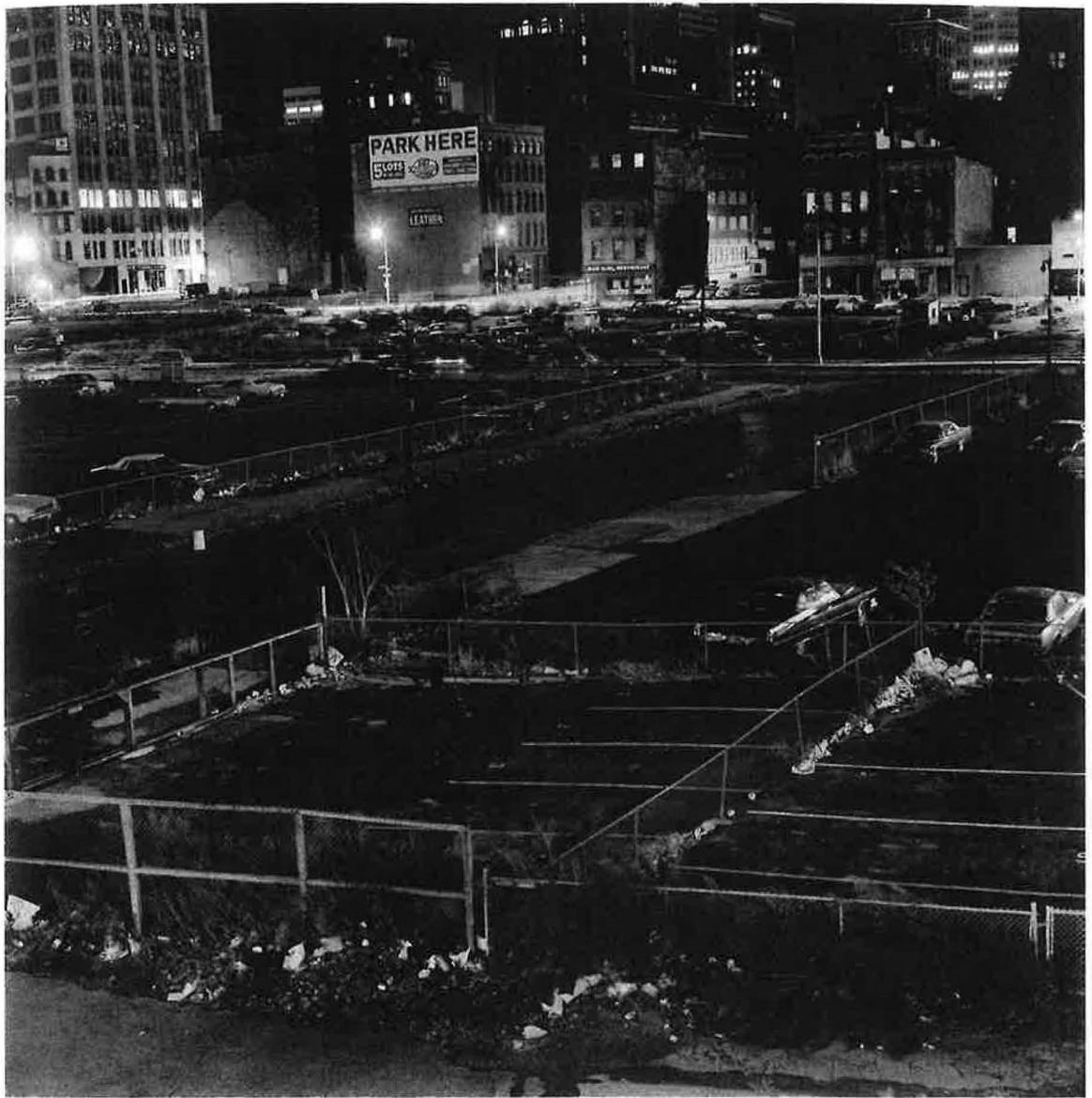
Hunting for emptiness in a dense urban fabric like Manhattan might seem incongruous, and indeed today it would be well-nigh futile there. But New York was a very different city four decades ago. I offer as evidence a group of photographs by Peter Hujar dating from 1975–76, taken on the far west side of Manhattan moving south from the Meatpacking District toward the Battery Park City landfill and around the Financial District and Civic Center. The photographs are of two kinds, one showing desolate, fading industrial areas and the other, downtown Manhattan emptied out at night. Among the latter is one of Nassau Street that includes, in the middle ground, the building I moved into the year after Hujar took this picture. All of them are, to my mind, cruising pictures—cruising pictures with no people in them: this too must 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-upon someone like you—at least, like you in your exploration of the empty city. Is there by chance someone else wandering these deserted streets? Might that



Peter Hujar, *Loading Dock at Night*, 1976. Gelatin silver print, 14 ½ x 14 ½ inches



Peter Hujar, *Leroy Street*, 1976. Gelatin silver print, 14 ½ x 14 ¾ inches



Peter Hujar, *West Side Parking Lots*, 1976. Gelatin silver print, 14 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 14 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches



Peter Hujar, *Land Fill, Hudson River, and New Jersey Skyline*, 1976. Gelatin silver print, 14 ¼ x 14 ¼ inches



Peter Hujar, *Nassau Street*, 1975. Gelatin silver print, 14 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 14 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #54*, 1980. Gelatin silver print, dimensions variable

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?

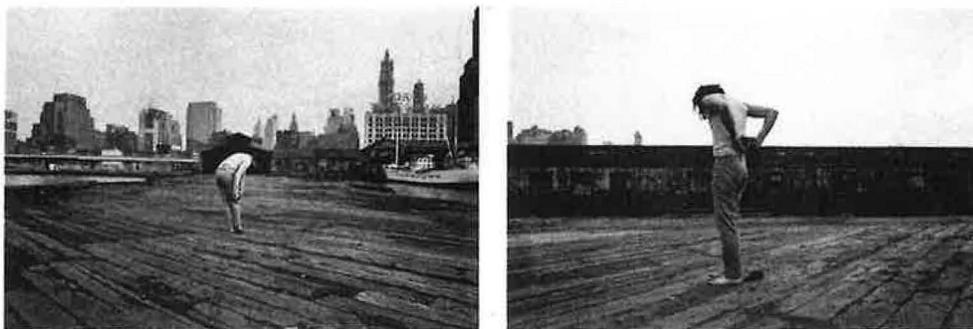
Of course, not everyone experiences urban emptiness this way. A year after Hujar made these pictures, Cindy Sherman began shooting her famous series of *Untitled Film Stills* also on the deserted streets of Lower Manhattan. Hers are a very different kind of picture, not least because most are taken during the daytime. (Lower Manhattan was deserted even during the day on weekends then.) 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 taken on the streets at night are noirish images of threatened femininity, showing an apprehensive woman walking down a dark, forlorn street. But the city in Sherman's pictures is not New York; it is a generic city, like a film location, and the city is not a good place for the woman in the pictures to be. (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 photographs.)



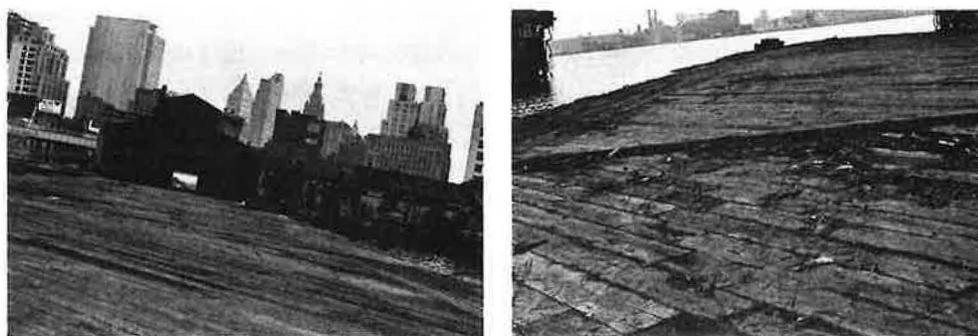
John Baldessari, *Hands Framing New York Harbor* (from *Projects: Pier 18*), 1971. Photo by Shunk-Kender

Another work that suggests—and simultaneously pokes fun at—the dangers facing women on desolate Manhattan streets was made in response to artists’ use of the abandoned city in the early 1970s. The work is Louise Lawler’s sound piece *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).⁵ 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 the 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.⁶



The show in question was *Projects: Pier 18*, an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art of photographs by the art-world team Shunk-Kender that documented a succession of artists' projects by twenty-seven artists, all male.⁷ While the projects were situated on the pier, several taking it as their subject, many also provide intriguing views of the city in 1971. For example, John Baldessari's *Hands Framing New York Harbor* is a single image of a freighter moored at the pier framed by a foreground rectangle Baldessari made by pressing together his thumbs and index fingers. Above and to the right of his hands, we see the downtown skyline, including the Woolworth Building on Broadway, the top of the US Courthouse in Foley Square, and the New York Telephone Company building on West Street. Looming in front of the Woolworth Building is the huge New York World-Telegram sign. 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

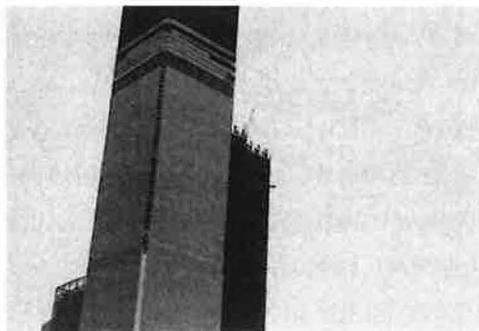


Dan Graham, *Dan Graham—Pier 18* (from *Projects: Pier 18*), 1971. Photos by Shunk-Kender and Dan Graham



to contour of skin.” The photographs Graham took as he moved the camera around his body capture oblique views of the pier, the river, and the skyline. In some, we see fragments of the towers of the World Trade Center, whose summit is not yet complete.

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 near ruin at that time, so 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 to eight feet below. In those piers that retained their superstructures, the upper rooms might also be hazardous. *Security Zone*, Vito Acconci’s work for *Projects: Pier 18*, implicitly referred to the sense of remoteness and danger of Lower Manhattan’s 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 said, “designed to affect an everyday relationship” in that it





Vito Acconci, *Security Zone* (from *Projects: Pier 18*), 1971. Photo by Shunk-Kender

forced him to develop trust in someone about whom he had “ambiguous” feelings.⁸ It’s hard to tell in some of the photographs whether Jaffe is about to push Acconci off the edge of the pier or is saving him from falling off.

A month later, Acconci made explicit the sense of danger on the piers in an untitled project at Pier 17. He posted a notice at the John Gibson Gallery during his exhibition there, announcing that he would wait at the end of the pier at 1 a.m. every night for an hour, from March 27 to April 24, and that anyone who came to meet him there would be rewarded by being told a secret that Acconci had never before divulged, something about which he felt ashamed and which could be used against him. In addition to having to make himself vulnerable by revealing a dirty secret, Acconci had to confront the perils of the deserted pier. 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—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).”⁹ One night, a visitor showed up, and “someone shouts my name at the entrance,” Acconci recalled. “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)."¹⁰

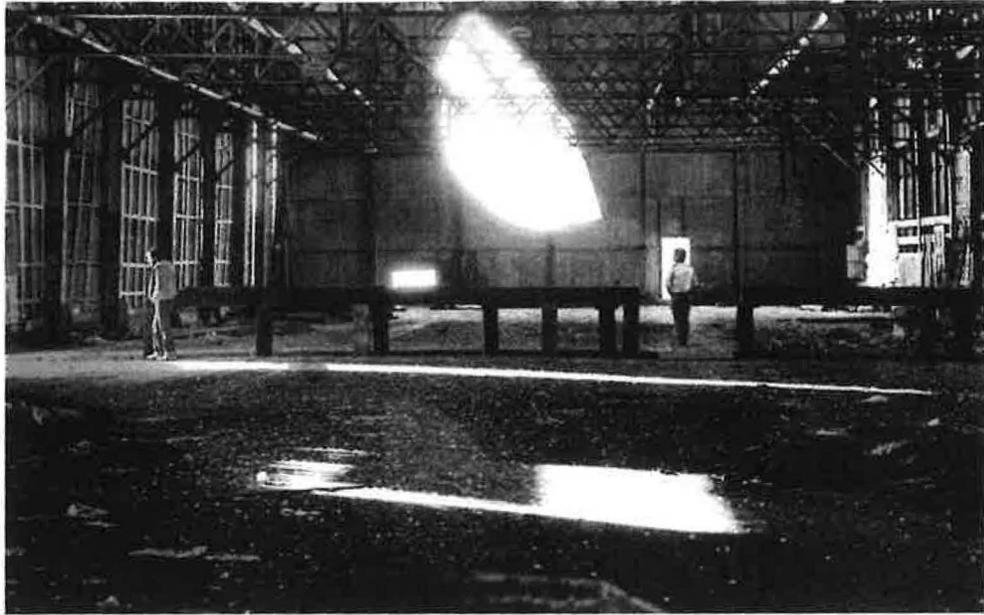
Matta-Clark, too, made a project for *Pier 18*, but his reference to endangerment was, as in so much of his work, one of bravura, of physical derring-do rather than psychological vulnerability. At Pier 18, he planted an evergreen tree in what he called “a parked island barge” and suspended himself by rope upside down above it. But this was only an easy rehearsal for what would be Matta-Clark's most audacious act and certainly one of his most magnificent works, *Day's End* (1975), his summerlong 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 it. Matta-Clark talked about the work in a number of interviews; the one he gave in Antwerp at the time he made *Office Baroque*, a couple of years after he completed *Day's End*, is 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 sail-shaped opening provides access to the river. 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 circular 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 see as an indoor park.¹¹

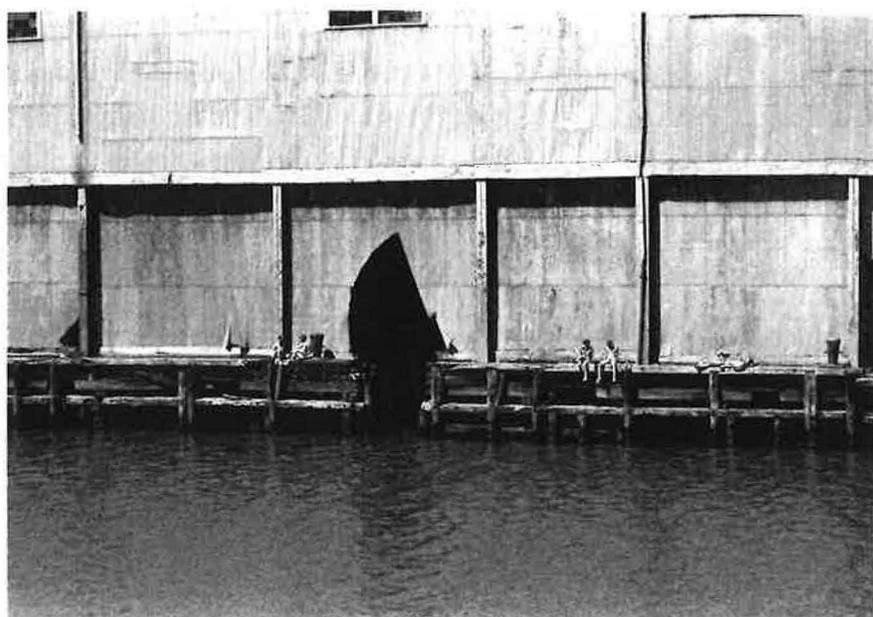
Matta-Clark referred to the three months of work on *Day's End* as his summer vacation by the water.¹² Judging from the film that Betsy Sussler and Jack Kruger shot of it, it wasn't a restful vacation. Working with his friend Gerry Hovagimyan, Matta-Clark used such heavy tools as a chain saw and a blowtorch to cut through the timbers of the pier's floor and the corrugated-tin roof and facade. The most dramatic moments of the film



Alvin Baltrop, *Untitled* (from the series *Pier Photographs*), 1975–86. Gelatin silver print, dimensions variable

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, Matta-Clark, in a performance that is equal parts Harold Lloyd and Douglas Fairbanks, cuts the west-end oculus through the tin siding as sparks fly around him. Matta-Clark acknowledged the "absurdity of the whole activity,"¹³ even as he sacralized it through his references to the basilica-like structure and "rose window." Some of those 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."¹⁴ But Matta-Clark intended the opposite sort 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 around, was just distracting. And I just wanted it to be more of a joyous situation.¹⁵



Alvin Baltrop, *Untitled* (from the series *Pier Photographs*), 1975–86. Gelatin silver print, dimensions variable

An indoor park, joyous, dangerous, absurd, flirting with the abyss: reading Matta-Clark's and others' descriptions of *Day's End*, it's 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.¹⁶ Although in many instances he aligns his work with that of others who take over or otherwise make 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 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 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.¹⁷

It may be that Matta-Clark had no particular animus toward the gay men who were using the pier but 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. It's difficult to say, because Matta-Clark wasn't careful to differentiate among the various dangers that journalists, in their writings about 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.¹⁸

Gay men were acutely aware of the piers' dangers; in fact, they posted 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 one 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 gay men took in being at the piers was what drew artists to them as well. It's not just that they were there and available; they were also vast and hauntingly beautiful. Nor was the sex play in 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 at the piers was captured by the too-little-known African-American photographer Alvin Baltrop, who documented the goings-on there during the seventies, up to and including the piers' demolition in the mid-to-late eighties. A number of Baltrop's photographs show gay men at Pier 52, taking in the beauty of *Day's End* along with whatever other beauties they might have been pursuing. Indeed, these photographs wonderfully portray the "peaceful enclosure" and "joyous

situation” that Matta-Clark said he wanted to achieve.¹⁹ Like Matta-Clark, Baltrop also hoisted himself in a harness to make his work. In the preface for a book that he worked unsuccessfully to complete before dying of cancer in 2004, Baltrop wrote:

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.²⁰

Baltrop photographed obsessively: men engaged in sex, shot from the distance of a neighboring pier or clandestinely through a doorway or happy to become exhibitionists for the camera at close range; 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 around, transfixed by the rays of sunlight streaming through disintegrating roof structures; graffiti and vernacular artworks, 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 Baltrop’s pictures as vast heaps of trusses, buckled tin siding, rotting pilings and floors, rickety staircases, 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, the piers can be recognized as the sexual playground they were.

Unlike Baltrop, I wasn’t consciously afraid of the piers. They were part of my neighborhood cityscape and one of many nearby places to play





Alvin Baltrop, *Untitled* (from the series *Pier Photographs*), 1975–86. Gelatin silver print, dimensions variable



Alvin Baltrop, *Untitled* (from the series *Pier Photographs*), 1975–86.
Gelatin silver print, dimensions variable

outdoors. Located a short walk from my apartment on Tenth 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. Along its West Street end, the upper-floor warren of rooms 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 4 a.m., when the bars closed, 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 out to a satisfying end without having to repair to a bathhouse in another neighborhood. I remember a short period in about 1973, before I first discovered the scene at the piers, when, late at night and into the morning, gay men 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*, in which she heralded short blocks, dense concentrations of people, mixed-use neighborhoods, and aged buildings as proper city values.²¹ Although Jacobs's ideas about what made cities great grew out of her love of her own neighborhood, Greenwich Village, I don't think she was thinking of men meeting for sex in construction sites, parking lots, and waterfront warehouses—but this was part of the life of the Village I knew a decade after she wrote her book.

Come to think of it, maybe I *was* afraid of the piers—afraid not only of their very real dangers, which I tended stupidly to dismiss, 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 choose a word that rang true or compose a sentence I was happy with could be easily if only momentarily alleviated just by walking out my door into the playground that was my immediate neighborhood. This is why, I think, seeing the Grand Union perform stays in my mind as such a momentous event, 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 were a monographic essay on Agnes Martin titled "Number, Measure, Ratio" and "Opaque Surfaces." In both essays, I struggled to think beyond the formalism that still held sway in so much American art criticism. What would finally free me from its grip was not painting but performance art.

The block in Tribeca to which I moved in 1974 bordered 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 performance *Delay Delay* of 1972.²² A year later, Jonas translated the performance into the language of film for *Songdelay*, as compelling an aesthetic document of New York in the seventies as Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler's 1921 city-symphony film *Manhatta* is of the city half a century earlier. Jonas and I describe the performance space of *Delay Delay* in our 1983 book:

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.²³

By the time I moved to Tribeca, these downtown piers had been torn down to make way for Battery Park City, which then had been put on hold during the city's fiscal crisis. New York was going bankrupt, and its infrastructure was badly deteriorating, conspicuously epitomized 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 part of 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 began its series of outdoor exhibitions there called Art on the Beach.²⁴ An era of officially sponsored public art was under way, with 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 Hujar photographed 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 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 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.”²⁵

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.²⁶ I overlooked what her statement 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. Robert Fiore’s use of a telephoto lens in shooting Jonas’s film collapses onto a single plane the vista that opened out in front of the spectators beyond the rooftop from which they watched *Delay Delay*. A performer who appears to be in the near foreground 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 arrival of a huge freighter between him and the building tells us otherwise—that in between lies the great expanse of the Hudson River.²⁷ A cut to a slow-motion, tight close-up of Jonas, limbs outstretched and 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 pants legs, we glimpse a chain-link fence and background automobile traffic. Only one sequence grants us sufficient distance to make the location comprehensible: at the top left of a scene that shows several performers moving back and forth across 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 a decade earlier, a nineteenth-century building that stood alone and forlorn at the corner of West and Warren Streets until 2003.²⁸ 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

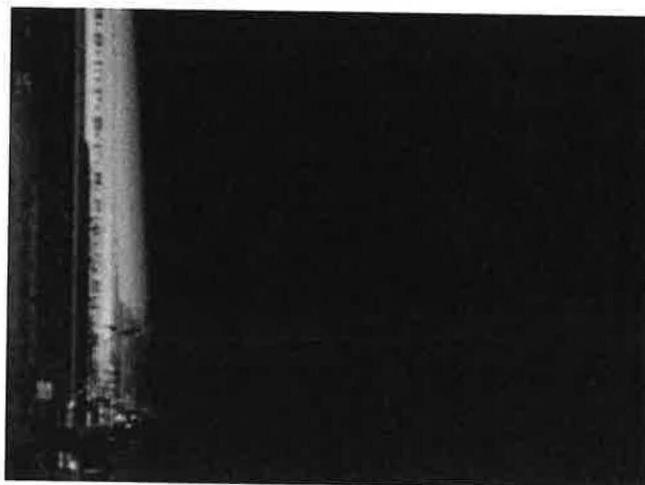
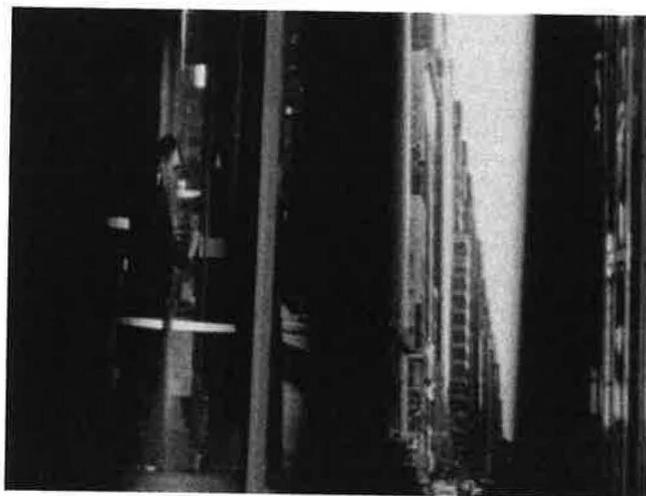
BEFORE PICTURES



Stills from Joan Jonas, *Songdelay*, 1973. 16 mm film, black-and-white, sound, 18:35 min.



BEFORE PICTURES



Stills from Gordon Matta-Clark, *City Slivers*, 1976.
Super 8 film, color, silent, 15 min.

corner from where I lived between 1974 and 1976.²⁹ 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 frames are also printed upside down.

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 that, clacking together, provide much of the film's sound. Together with the telephoto-lens shots, extreme close-ups of individual performers' bodies, and bird's-eye views of two people in the role of a slider-crank mechanism walking 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 function 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 anamorphic lens and shooting multiple exposures. We glimpse the city in pieces, in the background, in our peripheral vision—and in recollection.