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# ARTFORUM

112 Greene Street: The Early Years (1970 – 1974)

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Gordon Matta-Clark, *Open House*, 1972, still from a film in 16 mm transferred to DVD, 41 minutes.  
From "112 Greene Street: The Early Years (1970–1974)."

112 Greene Street helped catalyze SoHo in the 1970s. The artist-run gallery occupied a building owned by Jeffrey Lew, with Gordon Matta-Clark as resident imp and impresario; artists and dancers working there comprised a friendship circle that was also a post-Minimal Who's Who. Like that of any legend, the history of this wild incubator—where site-specific, collaborative artmaking bloomed—poses curatorial problems now. Whose memories get sanctioned? How can re-created objects, archived ephemera, and grainy video in commercial white cubes capture what participants loved: no-holds-barred play?

Two shows, separately conceived, told parallel versions of the story. Both were inside jobs. "112 Greene Street: A Nexus of Ideas in the Early '70s," at Salomon, was curated by Ned Smyth, who joined the party in 1971 when Keith Sonnier and Dickie Landry picked him up hitchhiking. "112 Greene Street: The Early Years (1970–1974)," at Zwirner, was organized by Jessamyn Fiore, whose mother, Jane Crawford, was married to Matta-Clark. Together, the exhibitions showcased nineteen artists, without overlap. Fiore's project was framed as a Matta-Clark exhibition "with" works by **Tina Girouard**, Jene Highstein, Larry Miller, Richard Nonas, Alan

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Saret, Richard Serra, and Rachel Wood. This somewhat awkward foregrounding of a single—albeit brilliant—denizen of 112 shifted in Smyth’s show, which presented one or two pieces each by Alice Aycock, Joan Jonas, Dennis Oppenheim, Smyth himself, and others.

Fiore’s show was more expansive, and perhaps truer to the spirit of the place. It was also, perforce, more elusive. **Girouard’s** four-panel canopy of flowered fabrics, *Air Space Stage*, 1972, and matching floor-work, *Lie-No*, 1973, consisting of four lengths of flowered linoleum, begged to be activated by live bodies, though it wasn’t clear how. Saret’s *Four Piece Folding Glade*, 1970, a quartet of tall wire bundles, seemed inconsequential propped in a corner, though the industrial-garden motif rhymed with rough-hewn components in Nonas’s serial array *Blocks of Wood (Light to Dark, Dark to Light)*, 1970, as well as with Matta-Clark’s pulsatile “Energy Tree” drawings, 1970–74. It wasn’t that Fiore’s installation should have pushed these connections; the missing link was not formal relationship but an experiential urgency that has dissipated like perfume. Thus the most telling part of “The Early Years”—though not the best looking—was film and video. Matta-Clark’s *Open House*, 1972—a film documenting a slapstick dance in a Dumpster parked on Greene Street that he had fitted with partitions and doors—made particular sense juxtaposed against Wood’s films of performances by the improvisatory group the *Natural History of the American Dancer*. (In the same vein, one missed the video—a collaboration with Juan Downey—that accompanies Matta-Clark’s *Fresh Air Cart*, 1972. The two-seat contraption with umbrella and oxygen tank was on display, but Matta-Clark did not conceive it as static sculpture; it was a street-performance prop.) Other rare film footage captured Harris’s *Wheels/Flying Machine*, 1973, exuberant, equipment-based dances utilizing giant gears and aerial harnesses. Serra’s video *Prisoner’s Dilemma*, 1974—in which an amused yet wary Leo Castelli (Serra’s dealer) is the guest in a mock game show masterminded by Serra himself—hints at 112’s role in the tight-knit art world of the era. It was gallery as antigallery.

Smyth’s show was more serious, and more normal. Mostly large-scale sculpture leavened with a few paintings, plus photos of and sketches for performances, it demonstrated how welcoming 112 was to women, with big works by Aycock, Jonas, Mary Heilmann, Susan Rothenberg, and Jackie Winsor, along with smaller contributions by Louise Bourgeois and Carolee Schneemann (both of whom showed there once, in 1974 and 1977, respectively). Smyth also included as a kind of centerpiece a strong revision of George Trakas’s 1970 installation *The Piece that Went Through the Floor*. Documentary photographs show how this construction of heavy beams extended through the floor into the basement at 112. At Salomon, Trakas reconceived it as *Through the Looking Glass: The Piece that Went Through the Ceiling*, 2011. The timber platform was topped with mirrors angled at the gallery’s windows, so that a viewer gazing up saw snowy ground five stories below reflected, floating. Once upon a time, say 112 alumni, such witty perceptual surprises were ubiquitous. That’s a difficult vibe to historicize. But the 112 experiment remains potent in part because it was never meant to join the canon.

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