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HYPERALLERGIC

112 Greene Street: The Soho that Used to Be

Written by: Frances Richard

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Installation view of “112 Greene Street: The Early Years (1970–1974)” at David Zwirner Gallery, January 2011

“It is rather inspiring,” writes Peter Schjeldahl in the New York Times, “that in an hour of political crisis this art (despite its makers’ eschewal of revolutionary postures) has arisen to make possible a project like 112 Greene Street.” The year is 1970. The place is Soho, until recently known as the South Houston Industrial District. Here an unemployed artist can buy a six-story cast-iron ex-rag-picking warehouse, and huge chunks of sheet-zinc cornice can lie abandoned on the sidewalk at a demolition site until another artist bribes the garbage men to drive them to his studio. Sculptor Jeffrey Lew owns the six-story building at 112 Greene Street, where the eponymous exhibition space and workshop is taking shape. Alan Saret, who lives a block away, has joined in to get the gallery (extremely loosely) organized, and it is here that his piece “Cornicing,” slung from the ceiling, becomes the sort of art that inspires the young critic.

6150 Wilshire Blvd
Los Angeles, CA 90048
+1 (323) 272 3418

anatebgi.com

4859 Fountain Ave
Los Angeles, CA 90029
+1 (323) 407 6806

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Saret tells the story of the cornices in 112 Greene Street: *The Early Years, 1970–1974*, edited by Jessamyn Fiore. Half oral history and half exhibition catalogue, Fiore’s book follows a show she curated last winter at David Zwirner, which prominently featured 112’s celebrated alumnus, Gordon Matta-Clark (1943–1978), along with Saret, Richard Nonas, **Tina Girouard**, Suzanne Harris, Jene Highstein, Larry Miller, and Richard Serra. The show is lushly documented in the book. In addition, Fiore has interviewed nineteen artists, including Lew and all of the living exhibition participants but Serra, weaving their reminiscences into an episodic narrative. Fiore comes by her interest organically; she ran a nonprofit space, *Thisisnotashop*, in Dublin. Moreover, her parents, filmmakers Jane Crawford and Robert Fiore, belonged to the 112 circle, Crawford by way of her first marriage, to Matta-Clark. Fiore has an insider’s feel for her subject, and her book is an evocative addition to the archive on downtown scenes — especially since the comprehensive oral history *112 Workshop/112 Greene Street: History, Artists & Artwork* (New York University Press, 1981), edited by Robyn Brentano and Mark Savitt, has long been out of print.

It’s easy to see why oral history is the favored mode. These people did wild stuff some forty years in the past. A few got famous. A few, like Matta-Clark and Harris, died young, and have been posthumously canonized or not (Harris’s oeuvre is ripe for reinvestigation). Some left New York decades ago, and some live in the same lofts they renovated under the 1971 artist-in-residence law. Almost all continue to make art, and they remain bracingly nonrevisionist about their shared experience. Their voices nuance a still-evolving historiography, just as their sculptures, films, and performances helped to define post-Minimal and post-Conceptual practice. Nevertheless, part of what fascinates about 112 Greene Street, and sister endeavors like *FOOD* restaurant and the collective *The Natural History of the American Dancer* (both discussed by Fiore’s interviewees), is the sense that no single interpretive strategy, not even that of first-person witness, totally explains how it all happened. It’s a synergy of flukes that makes and breaks utopia.

Consider, for starters, the almost unimaginable ubiquity of big, cheap spaces, and lackadaisical police and buildings-department oversight, in what was already the most important art city in the world. Art-markets hadn’t yet learned how to sell what the emerging sculptors, dancers, musicians, and photographers were producing. Lew lined up a couple backers for 112, from whom he demanded lump sums and strict noninterference; Carol Goodden founded *FOOD* with her modest inheritance. The real currency, however, was collaborative experiment. “I have an anarchistic nature,” Lew declares. “I’m an anarchistic phenomenon.” Other blithely anarchistic institution-builders created *Avalanche* magazine, the *Performing Garage*, *The Kitchen*, *Mabou Mines*, the *Grand Union*, the *Poetry Project*, *Artists Space*, and the *Institute for Art and Urban Resources*, shortly to become *P.S.1*. This DIY economy of scale guaranteed that people with skills and tools would be on hand to pitch in when one needed them, and enthusiastic audiences would turn up day after day, night after night. Borrowing an ethos from the counterculture yet jettisoning radical political objectives, the downtown artists could feel confident that they were furthering societal transformation while allowing themselves rambunctious aesthetic freedom; as Schjeldahl’s comments demonstrate in passing, revolution was not their aim, but it wasn’t not on their minds. Mary Heilmann tells Fiore, “Most of us came to 112 as bohemian outsiders and almost Marxists — against capitalist culture.” Bill Beckley puts it this way: “We were all friends then. Some of us were male, some female, some hetero, some gay, some both, or all three, but that wasn’t the issue. The issue was art [...] We were negating much about modernist aesthetics, but at the same time we believed that what we were doing was new, and that there was still a possibility of the new.”

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112 Greene Street: The Early Years is rife with era-defining anecdotes. Everyone involved, for instance, remembers George Trakas's "The Piece that Went Through the Floor" (1970), a timber-and-glass structure that punched through from the rough street-level gallery to the even-rougher basement. Lew "freaked out," Trakas reports cheerfully, but the fact that, at 112, one could carve up the very architecture set the tone. 112 was the place where Matta-Clark — soon to become, himself, building-cutter extraordinaire — planted a flowering sapling under grow-lights in the basement ("Cherry Tree," 1971). Alice Aycock brought in thousands of pounds of sand, to be randomly sculpted by industrial fans she'd scavenged on Canal Street ("Sand/Fans," 1971), and Harris and Rachel Wood made dances by bouncing off huge sheets of rubber stretched between the Corinthian columns that gave the ratty space its elegant profile ("Rubber Thoughts on the Way to Florida in January," 1971).

Vito Acconci locked himself in a tiny room with a fighting cock ("Combination," 1971), which escaped, and had to be trapped by **Girouard** — whose own piece "Four Stages" (1972) was used as a frame for Mabou Mines performances. It was in the basement, likewise, that Leo Castelli, in sports-coat and loafers, was detained as a "hostage" during the performance "Prisoner's Dilemma" (1974), an experiment with live-feed, multi-channel video that was masterminded by Serra and Robert Bell, with Spalding Gray and G.H. Hovagimyan playing hooligans pitted against each other by the cops.

Eventually 112 got stable funding, and evolved into a normal exhibition space. (White Columns, in Chelsea, is its lineal descendent.) The Greene Street building enjoyed another life in the eighties and nineties as a recording studio, first operated by members of the Philip Glass Ensemble — who had belonged to the coterie from the beginning — and later serving artists from Public Enemy to Sonic Youth. Fiore concentrates, however, on the intense first phase. Was it really anarcho-Marxist? Sort of. Was the art-world transformed by it? Subtly, and not in exclusively anti-careerist ways. "We actually made galleries stronger than they ever were — precisely because we were doing the kind of things that people didn't necessarily understand," muses Acconci. "We formed the 80s without realizing it." Personal fallout was dramatic too. Wood, a dancer and a key figure at FOOD, moved to Vermont in 1976:

"I left New York because the very people I cared about were on a "death path," you know? Because the way they were living was so extreme and it seemed like they had disregard for their own lives. They were going to die, and I didn't want to stick around for it. And then Suzi died, Gordon died. There was a feeling during this time that it just couldn't go on forever. And we really had had such a rich and full experience."

No utopia, after all, holds out forever against assimilation and crack-up. But is the story of its "rich and full" early years enticing, urban-mythical? Inescapably. 112 "was just a room, a big room where anything could happen," Highstein says to Fiore. "It was a time when artists believed that every new work was going to change the world. We actually believed the works we were putting up had the power to change everything — that everything was being reinvented. It sounds really strange today, but we really believed it."