LEFT Installation view, *Gordon Matta-Clark & Pope.L: Impossible Failures*, 52 Walker, New York, February 3–April 1, 2023. Courtesy 52 Walker, New York and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.

OPPOSITE Installation view, *Gordon Matta-Clark & Pope.L: Impossible Failures*, 52 Walker, New York, February 3–April 1, 2023. Courtesy 52 Walker, New York.

"IMPOSSIBLE FAILURES"

at 52 Walker, New York, February 3 – April 1, 2023

Gordon Matta-Clark saw his famous bores, fissures, cracks, and assemblies as forms of social sculpture—they would change the way we look at the city and, more important, how we interact with each other. His early projects, like *Garbage Wall* (1970), inspired by encounters with unhoused New Yorkers, and his participatory *Graffiti Truck* (1973), were indeed community-facing. But it is harder to argue that Matta-Clark's large-scale, structural interventions, his celebrated "building cuts," were truly engaged with others' needs. Or that his identification with social outcasts did not, at times, betray a fetishistic and acquisitive attitude—he once said that stretches of disused Manhattan tenements had been "left open to derelicts and stray dogs and to me."

I don't think it diminishes the aesthetic power of his work to acknowledge that, yes, Matta-Clark's way of occupying space had a puerile quality—especially when viewed on film. In dozens of 16mm shorts (digitized in the 2000s by Electronic Arts Intermix), Matta-Clark stars as a valorous, often brooding and solitary subject. In *Splitting* (1974) he appears bare-chested, smashing the foundations of an old house in suburban Englewood, New Jersey. In *Day's End* (1975), he hangs from a pulley, blowtorch in hand, cutting into the walls of a Hudson River warehouse. Watching the latter film, you get the impression that no-one else is around—that he had, in a sense, discovered the building. But of course he hadn't. Matta-Clark is on record complaining about gay men cruising in the area while he worked. Pier 52 was so "completely overrun" that the artist installed padlocks on the warehouse door.

Contradictions like these aren't unusual, and I'm certainly not alone in finding them instructive, or at least revealing. Over the last decade, several curators and scholars have turned to Matta-Clark's (non)relation to social difference in supplementary and corrective gestures. Liverpool's Eye Gallery, in 2014, exhibited the artist's work alongside Alvin Baltrop's photographs of Pier 52, which show a queer, multiracial public sunbathing beneath *Day's End*. The photographs also feature prominently in theorist Jack Halberstam's provocative argument that Matta-Clark's practices anticipated themes of "demolition" and "abyssal experience" in contemporary transgender performance art.

Most recently, the exhibit "Impossible Failures," at 52 Walker in Tribeca, paired Matta-Clark with William Pope.L, the performance artist best known for his agonizing crawls through New York City. In his *Times Square Crawl* (1978), *Tompkins Square Crawl* (1991), and *Great White Way* (2001-09), Pope.L dragged himself through the streets on hands and knees, staging confrontations with passers-by and eliciting anxieties around race and class crossing (video documentation was included in Pope.L's MoMA retrospective in 2019). The show at 52 Walker might be construed as itself confrontational, since Matta-Clark hails from a privileged background—his parents were well-known Greenwich Village artists—while Pope.L grew up black, working-class, and housing-insecure.

Interestingly, however, the exhibit, curated by Ebony L. Haynes, made no mention of Pope.L's performance interventions. The works on view were more cerebral, even anti-social. Scattered throughout the gallery were dozens of Pope.L's *Failure Drawings* (2003-) sketched with ballpoint pens on junk mail, newspaper inserts, hotel stationary—as if the artist were disappearing into the clutter and waste of the built environment (there are more than a thousand drawings in the series). The sense of material immersion was more fully realized in Pople.L's *Vigilance a.k.a Dust Room* (2023), a large encased structure surrounded by cables and ducts, a blizzard of particulates raging within.

Pope.L has described a strain of negativity in his work, what he calls "have-not-ness" and "lack worth having"—corollaries, perhaps, to the gaps and excisions in Matta-Clark's building cuts. His ironic description reminds us that violent practices can also be generative: glimmers of an emergence, or complexity, which lies on the other side of destruction. The gallery's press release refers to a "consideration for hope" in the obtuse assortment of works. But what I saw was startlingly pessimistic.

The exhibit overwhelmed with an aesthetics of damage and exposure. Three of Matta-Clark's films, projected at an enormous scale, wrapped the space with footage of demolished structures, building cross-sections, piles of debris—all of it scored and distorted by the aging filmstock. Among the films were *Bingo/Ninths* (1974), which shows the artist carving a house's facade into a perfect checkerboard, and *The Wall* (1976), in which he applies graffiti ("Made in America") to the Berlin Wall (the curators omitted the accompanying score by Peter Gordon).

The third film, *Conical Intersect* (1975), made with Gerry Hovagimyan, documents the creation of Matta-Clark's so-titled building cut at 27-29 Rue Beaubourg in Paris—a row house, built in 1690, standing in the way of the unfinished Centre Pompidou. The film begins with a white fleck on the house's sooty exterior (the cameraperson is standing in the street below). The fleck enlarges to a spot, then a circle, then a hole, as a chisel's sharp point breaks through. Soon it grows to reveal the interior of the old house, long ago converted to apartments. We glimpse its salmon-colored cabinets and chintzy wallpaper. Low ceilings make Matta-Clark and his team, in hardhats and canvas jumpsuits, look clunky and over-scaled. One of the men poses at the center of a completed circular cut, arms and legs outstretched in a parody of Vitruvian form. Another flicks his cigarette into the void.

The film is the most exhilarating and disturbing of Matta-Clark's exhibited works and forms a counterpoint to Pope.L's own discomfiting *Dust Eater a.k.a. White Woman Eating a Donut* (2009-2017/2022), a distorted 4-minute video with a strange, wobbling impression, dark and blurry, at its center. Pope.L's video looped on a small monitor in the back of the gallery, at the end of a long passage. Its placement hinted at something profound and imponderable—a burning bush—but you'd be right to suspect an altogether more trivial source. Around the corner was a photo of a jelly donut smashed under the artist's fist, red innards gushing out.

The video may be Pope.L's truest expression of "have-not-ness," but its jocular and suggestive title, and the accompanying image of bleeding pastry, raise questions, for me, about whether investments in negativity risk becoming… well, nihilistic. Or a party to a kind of chauvinism—a recurring thought, too, about the swaggering Matta-Clark, which this exhibit made no attempt to disabuse.

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