

ARTFORUM

JANUARY 1973, VOL. 11, NO. 5

Gordon Matta-Clark
112 GREENE STREET

Many aspects of some recent Conceptual art or Arte Povera seem to me to be naturalistic, since they are involved in a direct way with depictions of the real world. Yet these aspects have gone largely unrecognized. Hans Haacke's recent poll of the visitors at the John Weber Gallery, for instance, or Doug Huebler's many variations on the theme of a snapshot, Vito Acconci's self-probing, Donald Burgoyne's Rock Piece—all of these try hard to be true to nature and to render it without distortion. However, when such work is viewed through the dark glasses needed for linguistic Conceptualism, the issues raised are difficult to discern. Actually the concepts these artists' works are supposedly about are of far less importance than their "natural" sociological, psychological, ecological, political, geological and/or historical implications. The confusion with linguistic Conceptualism's rhetoric results largely from the methods used by such artists to present their images naturalistically, i.e. accurately and undisturbed by the intervention of an "esthetic." Much of the work relies on the unselective and unprejudiced eye of the camera for its visual data for this very reason.

The drive toward a new "naturalistic" objectivity which seems to be present in much recent art informs the work of Gordon Matta-Clark as well. One of his current problems is whether he's not working too naturalistically for his products to be discernible as art. By making illicit raids on abandoned buildings with a band of cohorts armed with chain-saws, he liberates bits of urban "nature." A section of wall, a hunk of floor or ceiling (depending on how you look at it) becomes a work of art when it is transferred to the setting of a gallery. 112 Greene Street, however, looks like the sites from which his pieces have been removed, which makes it difficult for the viewer to "see" his work as art. But then if it were viewed in the glossy surroundings of an uptown art gallery it might look too arty to be real. Matta-Clark has left himself only a very fine margin between art and life in which to maneuver.

There is also the major problem of whether we want to see the chunks of squalor he has resurrected and is recycling for us, or not; whether they have any meaning for us as objects. Their shaping is crude and determinedly careless. The materials—dirty lath, crumbling plaster, old wallpaper, linoleum, worn floor boards and rotten beams—are common and ugly in themselves. Still they testify to the fact of the existence of the various people who had contact with these surfaces over the years, which is of touching associative interest. The "poesie" of all those lives spent hoping and despairing, etcetera, registers on the gallery visitor as fast as a campy interest in the wallpaper's vintage and the quality of the linoleum pattern.

These concerns are only incidental to the work though, which is more deeply involved with Process and sabotage, subversiveness and danger. The newsprint "wallpaper" which covered one long gallery wall was a wordless manifesto about urban decay recycled back into life-enhancing decoration. It eloquently recalled the role newspapers have traditionally played in revolutionary underground communication. Roughly trimmed photographs near his bits of "architecture without architects" document their role as performance artifacts. Matta-Clark is concerned for the body he has maimed with his chain-saws, for the fact that a floor might collapse after he's cut its center out, or that a piece of wall crumbles when it's out of its element.

There is a clear intention to conserve the past in a literal way, to keep the old buildings alive, even if only in sections. There are sexual, playful, murderous, ecological, and ultimately poetic overtones to Gordon Matta-Clark's work. It improves with consideration; its unprepossessing initial appearance of rank ugliness disappears as fascination takes over.

—April Kingsley