

“You could knock holes in the wall at Castelli. You couldn’t scratch the floor! The doors were open 24/7/365 at Greene St. It just felt like everything was wide open!” — Jeffrey Lew

ONE AT THE BEGINNING

CONCEPTUAL ART’S EARLY DAYS IN 1970S SOHO



Earlier this summer I attended an opening at Salomon Contemporary in East Hampton of works by four artists whose work I admired — George Trakas, Laurie Anderson, Jackie Winsor, and Vito Acconci; curated by a fifth, Alice Aycock. The show was called “Four at the Beginning,” and all the artists included, including the curator, are indelibly associated with the conceptual art movement of the early 1970s. It was a movement that was birthed at and around 112 Greene St., in New York’s Soho neighborhood, a prototypical communal space where art of the avant garde was both made and shown. It was a fertile time, with a lot of work produced that was site-specific, installation- and performance-based — in other words, was not art-as-commodity. In fact the work showed by both Acconci and Anderson consisted of notes, photography and drawings about performance pieces that were otherwise unrecorded, unrecordable. Trakas was the only artist to make a new piece, which incorporated parts of an older piece, and again it was an installation that relied (wonderfully, beautifully) on the interplay of inside and outside, that counterbalanced construction with pure sunlight. I had long been fascinated by what happened in Soho at the turn of that decade. I wasn’t there — I was born in 1969 — but the geography and the politics and the society and culture of the time, and of course the art, mesmerize me. Aycock and I stayed in touch, and over several meetings, phone calls and emails, she gave me a much fuller picture of what was happening two blocks and four decades from the office in which I write this, at the birthplace of conceptual art. — EDDIE BRANNAN

EB: Tell me how you got involved in 112 Workshop in the first place.

AA: I was in graduate school at Hunter College from ’68 to ’71, and there was a group of artists teaching there — Bob Morris, Tony Smith, Rosalind Krauss, Linda Nochlin and Leo Steinberg. It was a very lively great group of professors. Bob Morris was my thesis advisor and at some point he said to me that there were some interesting things going on down in Soho — Gordon Matta-Clark and a couple other people were running a gallery, and why don’t I go down there and show them my work? At that particular time the art world was pretty small, and there were not a lot of galleries anywhere. Most of the galleries that did exist were uptown, way uptown — the original Castelli Gallery in the 70s and maybe some on 57th street. So there weren’t a lot of places for young artists to show. It was kind of a closed-down situation — small and closed-down. Paula Cooper had a gallery in Soho, and as far as I know it was the first commercial gallery there with the exception of 112, which was artist-run. So, I met up somehow with Gordon. He had a place on Chrystie Street, and it was a pretty rough place back then.

It seems that everyone treated the city as a found object, in the way that the environment incorporated itself into the work.

Exactly. There wasn’t a lot of scrutiny because the city was so run-down and pretty much out of control, that if you weren’t a criminal, it really was your playpen in a way. I mean, we all like the fact that we don’t get mugged anymore, but back then you could pretty much colonize wherever you liked. And there were so many other things to distract the police that if you decided to do an art event somewhere, that was the least of their problems.

So it was Jeffery Lew and Gordon Matta-Clark, and several other artists; Jeffrey Lew lived in the building and there were artists that were beginning to rent loft spaces in Soho and work in these spaces. I don’t know exactly when that started to happen, but certainly in the early 70’s there were a lot of artists in Soho surreptitiously. It was kind of a loose thing: I met Gordon, showed him my work, and he said okay, here’s a time slot, do a show or do a piece, and I think he gave me the basement, or parts of the basement. I did a piece called Sand/Fans. I saw a



piece by George Trakas, in which he cut up the floor, and built a structure on the first floor of 112 and then it went through into the basement. And you couldn’t see the piece unless you went into the basement and then went back up into the first floor and kept the memory of what you saw on one floor and put it together.

Because it wasn’t a formal gallery, you could do whatever you wanted. In a sense, the whole notion of installation and site specific really developed there. There was no feeling that you were going to be in this pristine space. You could do whatever you wanted as long as you put things back the way they were. You also didn’t have this burden of saying “well, no one can buy that,” because it’s so site-specific, because no one was buying things anyway. You could explore whatever the limits of your imagination were. Those were your limitations. And again, we certainly knew there were art critics out there, and I think we were working for them to some degree, but we were also working for this small group of artists, some of whom were our teachers or mentors, and we were probably challenging their work and challenging ourselves. It

SAND/FANS BY ALICE AYCOCK



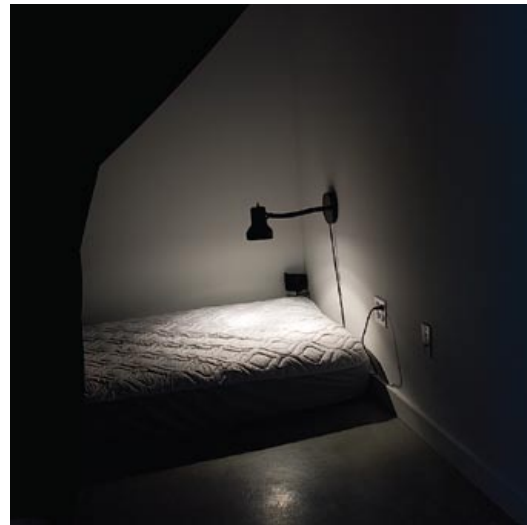
was like, “I can do this, no I can do this — well look at this.” It was very idealistic, very much in the spirit of the times, and I would say the information went back and forth quickly. It was a kind of hot spot.

But there were other things going on too. The Whitney had a show called “Process Materials,” in which people like Dennis Oppenheim de-materialized The Whitney by laying out the different materials that the museum was constructed out of proportionally in terms of weight. There was the Castelli warehouse show where Richard Serra threw lead at the wall and cut up all these tires and threw them about. There was a lot in the air to provide a kind of backdrop for the work that went on at 112. It was not the way it is now where you have hundreds of galleries and you have to spend every waking moment visiting them to know what’s going on. Everyone went to these exhibitions, saw the work, knew about it and would pick up on it and extend it.

You spoke before about the conscious rejection of formalism inherent in and embodied by the work of you and your peers. Can you expand upon that?

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PIECES BY LAURIE ANDERSON,
JACKIE WINDSOR, AND VITO ACCONCI
AT THE SALOMON CONTEMPORARY.



GEORGE TRAKAS' NEW WORK (LEFT) ALSO INCORPORATED PARTS OF AN OLDER PIECE CALLED "THE PIECE THAT WENT THROUGH THE WINDOW."

Well, I think that — and I'm speaking for myself here — I think it was both an inability to abide by the rules of formalism. That somehow the world that we encountered didn't, couldn't remain within these rules. It was just too complex. It was too unwieldy to be able to be contained within the rules of formalism and minimalism. But we were also coming into the art world in a time in which many of us had been pretty highly educated in a liberal arts college and so we couldn't just sort of say, "Well, biology doesn't count, history or literature or anthropology doesn't count." We couldn't just throw all of that to one side and say, "Well I'm going to make this very pure, pure thing." Because we knew there were all these other areas of ferment. There was also the fact that there was so much going on in the world, so much civil unrest at that time. There was so much — the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, the environmental movement — so just by the nature of the sort of world that we were in, it would had been very difficult for us to say nothing counts but one plus one equals two.

Does that mean that you felt that minimalism was an inappropriate response to the hectic anarchy of that moment?

Yes, I think it was.

Given the fact that at that time there was no kind of commercial infrastructure for the kind of experimental work that you were doing, was that something you were consciously aware of, the distinction between what you were doing and what the minimalists were doing? That it really was art for art's sake, as it were?

Yes, and I would also say starting out as a young artist, if you looked at a pristine Don Judd box that was painted perfectly in the factory, we didn't have access to that. Or we thought we didn't. It was just like they were up there and we were down here. And in a way they were so elitist, even at that point. Now, that's not necessarily something that I would say today. I rather like having my work made in a factory. But from my vantage point then, it seemed to

me that there was just no way that we could have access to that. And therefore, we had to make our own way. In that way, it was a little bit like what was happening in Italy. You know, the Arte Povera movement, where they had what they had and they made poetry out of it. And maybe our work was not so much a reaction against minimalism as - this is where we're at, this is what we're seeing and envisioning and what makes sense now and so we're just going to do it.

Now, Gordon had studied architecture and he had organized a show up at Cornell, a kind of earth works conceptual show, or he had been part of the organizing. So, conceptual art was coming in, body art was coming in. There was a context. I think the fact that Gordon was interested in architecture, was very important to me. There are these neurons in your brain and sometimes people just hook right into them. I think there were some parts of Gordon's mindset that I hooked right into. The fact that architecture was kind of out there, there were things at

play, let's say. And we would sort of hook in at various points with each other.

And as the decade progressed, members of your group found celebrity and success as artists. How does that affect the work and ideas given that they were so rooted in an almost oppositional stance to the commercial structure?

Well, I think some of us were more successful than others commercially. I don't think anyone said, "I'm going to make art that no one can buy," because I don't think we believed that. But I think as we pursued the next phase in our work, none of us became great makers of commodity. We all survived by other ways, but for the most part we have been able to pursue our ideas. I think, of course, that Laurie Anderson being a performer, there was never necessarily a commodity that she was going to produce, other than her own performances.

It also seems to me that conceptual art as a whole is very anti-ivory tower in any case; it was a very pragmatic sort of approach to making art, I guess. Do you consider it a particularly theoretical form? Clearly the word "conceptual" implies theoretical to a certain degree, but it seems to me that it was based upon applied concept rather than abstract theory. What's your take on that?

In the best sense it was a combo of both the theory and the product of that theory, and not just one or the other. Not boring regurgitation of French structuralism or just simply some repetition of Duchampian thinking. (By the way, I think Duchamp's bottled Paris air is one of the most beautiful pieces of conceptual art.) For me all of that outside information, French philosophy, whatever one knew about experimental psychology or biology or history, etc. was only interesting if it could be made to make some new imaginative play within the realm of art. When I first started, I liked to say that I was having a romance with architecture and I think I still am. I look at an architect like Frank Gehry with envy, whereas I might not look at something I saw at a gallery with envy any more. But it's all relative to the moment, and I did sort of see some of us as doing the advanced work with slim budgets and then being kind of picked over by certain architects that were very aware of what was going on in the art world.

Was that true outside of architecture? Any other disciplines? Your group touched on so many fields of endeavor that one can imagine you could have enough material for a whole slew of disciplines.

Well, when I say things like being "picked over" I have to remember how influenced I have been by other artists and architects like the Russian Constructivists, and Fritz Lang and German expressionists and theater design. And

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maybe that's really more or less the game. And that's what's interesting to me — that's why I keep playing it. Put an idea out there and see if catches fire and if it does then what else can you do? Keep sort of stimulating yourself that way, and what else is left? Because in the end, your house may burn down. In the end you die anyway.

To me, some of the most exciting work has always been a few sentences I might read somewhere that I carry with me forever and ever and ever and ever, and repeat to myself, "Well how can you buy that?" Or some building that I've seen, that I can't take home with me, but that lives in my memory and that astounds me. I guess that I'm a lost cause in certain ways! ■