

Criticism

Volume 54 | Issue 1

Article 6

2012

City Pictures

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Recommended Citation

Rebentisch, Juliane (2012) "City Pictures," Criticism: Vol. 54: Iss. 1, Article 6. Available at: http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism/vol54/iss1/6

CITY PICTURES Juliane Rebentisch

Mixed Use, Manhattan:
Photography and Related Practices,
1970s to the Present, edited by
Lynne Cooke and Douglas Crimp,
with Kristin Poor. Madrid: Museo
Nacional Centro de Arte Reina
Sofia; Cambridge, Massachusetts/
London: MIT Press, 2010. Pp. 300.
70 color illustrations, 130 b & w
illustrations. \$49.95 cloth.

New York has always been the ultimate modern city, more than an example, or a case study, for any theory of modernity. Looking at it in the twenty-first century, however, the great city of the twentieth century seems peculiarly outmoded, like the gigantic monument of a time already passed. In order to study the contradictions of our time, we have to direct our attention elsewhere it seems, to Dubai, Shanghai, or Kinshasa, for example. Yet as important as this might be, New York is still a focal point when it comes to understanding the heritage of modernity. Mixed Use, Manhattan, an exhibition curated by Lynne Cooke and Douglas Crimp for the Reina Sophia in Madrid last year and now documented in a carefully edited catalog,1 was committed to this heritage and to what it demands of us if we think of modernity as an unfinished project. To be true to this project, one could learn here, means to open it up for criticism. Yet, to emancipate modernity's potential for its critical self-transformation requires a sensibility for the cracks and ruptures that can be recorded at its margins.

It is not by chance, then, that the exhibition focused on the 1970s, a time when the deindustrialization of New York City had reached its peak. Large areas of Manhattan had turned into dysfunctional half-ruined places, thereby ruining its utopian image as a whole. Manhattan, the symbol of a confident and

progressive modernity, was shattered to the degree that the ideal of a unitary city in which each element had its clearly defined function fell apart. The recession left disintegrated neighborhoods behind, defined only through varying degrees of decay. But this crisis—as hard as it doubtless was for those who had lost their jobs and homes at the same moment that social services were drastically reduced—also exposed a different understanding of the city, one coming from below, from "mixed usages" of the urban environment. The crisis that New York City went through in the early 1970s was also a krisis—a turning point in the definition of modern urban life. One could say that this crisis made the structural tension explicit that Michel de Certeau detected between the perspective of modern urban planning with its "scopic drive," its will to transform the city into a transparent text, on the one hand, and the fragmentary perspectives of its inhabitants, on the other hand, whose practices "write" the city in a way that do not add up to a readable text or even totally evade the panoptic concept of the city.² Especially Lower Manhattan set the stage for these practices to appear. Abandoned from its original use value, the area became the exemplary place where the lived, embodied spatiality produced by its mixed usages could come to the fore as such and be read as a counterclaim to the homogenization and control

implied by the panoptic perspective on urban space.

This claim was both political and aesthetic. The ruins of Lower Manhattan attracted subcultures as well as artists. One main point of this attraction surely was the potentiality of the area, at the same time desolate and promising, its hauntingly beautiful and grandiose emptiness waiting to be filled with new forms of life. There was a certain enthusiasm in cruising the city's ripped backsides for a different life, a feeling that everything is possible, thereby expanding the meaning of cruising from a sexual practice to an attitude toward the city at large. "[O]ne point of cruising," Douglas Crimp writes in the catalog, "is feeling yourself alone and anonymous in the city, feeling that the city belongs to you, to you and maybe a chanced-on someone else like you—like you at least in an exploration of the empty city.... Can the city become just ours for this moment?"3 Now, although countercultural communities were formed, restaurants and galleries were founded, and discotheques were opened, there still was a certain commitment to the city's potentiality. This implied an attitude toward the meaning of urban life that differed from the perspective of urban planning, not so much in replacing the planned usages of urban spaces with however originally unforeseen other ones but in its commitment to the unforeseen as such. To express such an attitude—a stance that defends the potentiality of practice against any attempt to reify it—demands another form of visuality.

This was the main theme of the show. Photography, video, and film were its chosen formats. This is partly due to the fact that these media were able to document the constant transformation of the area, its deterioration but also its temporary appropriations for new purposes, be they social or artistic. But as Juan Suárez points out in his contribution to the catalog, it is important to note the new ethics behind such documentary projects. Instead of providing us with portraits of "the city" as a whole, as the experimental cinema of the 1920s and 1930s aimed to do, filmic-and one might add photographic—practices now chose "[d]eliberately limited standpoints, abstaining from any attempt at completeness or explanation," such that "New York appears . . . as porous territory."4 Yet the documentary truthfulness to the fragmentary, embodied, and subjective perspective also resonated with the social and artistic practices of the time in stressing that no single usage exhausts the space that it temporarily occupies. The city can be ours, it can belong to us, only to the degree that nobody owns it. "Belonging" here is to be heard not in the register of possession but rather in that of desire. The social

and artistic practices thematized in the show therefore understood their occupation of urban space as decidedly improvised, thereby keeping present the potential for other possible usages of that space.

This is already true for the new countercultural "institutions" that located themselves in deteriorating spaces, inhabiting them only provisionally, defining their usages by the needs of the moment and hence as temporarily limited. It is also true for the social practice of cruising that was part of the new subcultural life in Lower Manhattan at the time, for cruising leaves the meaning and extension of its territory decidedly unfixed. Cruising areas are essentially dependent on what Cindy Patton calls "timing," that brief moment of encounter that decides not only between involvement or withdrawal but also on the boundaries of the cruising zone itself.5 Such zones draw their attractiveness not least from their own latency, from the fact that the sense of where one is links here with the question of who one is. The art practices of the time likewise, if in their own way of course, made a use of space that preserved its potentiality. It was the birth moment of performance art, for staged occupations of spaces, that were at the same time theatrical and ephemeral. These art forms marked certain aspects of the city temporarily not to propose them for any concrete use but instead to make the aura of the urban

wasteland appear as such. And this meant nothing less than to aim at a perception that breaks with any instrumental interest in the respective spaces. "My own thinking and production," performance artist Joan Jonas is recorded as saying in 1975, "has focused on issues of space ways of dislocating it, attenuating it, flattening it, turning it inside out, always attempting to explore it without ever giving myself or to others the permission to penetrate it."6 The break with the instrumental perspective on the usefulness of the spaces is also an important aspect of site-specific works such as Gordon Matta-Clark's Day's End (1975), a cutout intervention in the dilapidated Pier 52 at the margin of New York's meatpacking district. As with many of Matta-Clark's artistically produced ruins of modern architecture, this work expressed the aura of the pier precisely by radically segregating it from all pragmatic relations, thereby stressing that the interest of artists in an area that has fallen out of the economic system had not only pragmatic but also aesthetic reasons. It is the implicit alliance between an aesthetic perception that is not compatible with any interested relation to its object and objects that have lost their use value anyway. For it is precisely those objects that lend themselves to unfolding a certain aesthetic surplus value, a value, of course, that cannot be calculated in economic terms.

Now, this aesthetic decoupling of urban perception from pragmatic use and meaning also brought about a heightened attention for the materiality of the urban milieu. Iuan A. Suárez stresses the heightened sensibility of 1970s' artists and filmmakers for the materiality of the city that differs not only from early experimental cinema's totalizing will to portray "the city" as subject but also from the attitude of later decades that humanized space again. although not by subjectivizing "the city" as such but instead by returning to story- and characterbased formats, focusing on the people inhabiting it "along with their sexuality, ethnicity, gestures, and noise." In the 1970s, however. the focus was on the materiality of the city, stressing its opaqueness and impenetrability. But this focus must not be misunderstood as a simple subtraction of matter from meaning as if artists were aiming at its dumb facticity; rather, what was aimed at was to unleash its expressive potential, its promise of usages and meanings yet to come. This sensibility was, it seems, at the heart of the new form of visuality that developed beneath the threshold of modernity's panoptic vision, eroding it from below. Consequentially, this sensibility was a red thread that ran through the exhibition, thereby not only connecting the works from the 1970s with later works that can be seen

as continuing their project but also unfolding different aspects of the sensibility.

In David Troy's 16-millimeter film Dwellings (1972), the sculptor Charles Simonds is shown building miniature ruins of what looks like an ancient city into the real ruins of Lower Manhattan, using deteriorating brick walls as the literal basis for very, very small models of another form of urban life, at the same time already passed and utopian, crazily psychedelic and deadly serious, fragile and powerful, throwing new light on the status of the real ruins that function as their gigantic support. Other works such as Stefan Brecht's textphoto book 8th Street (1985), Sol LeWitt's Brick Wall (1977), or Zoe Leonhard's Bubblegum series (2000, 2003) disclose the beauty in abstract patterns of usually debased aspects of the city. Wet concrete, irregularly built fire walls, and even the traces of old bubble gum on the pavement achieve the dignity of nature. As in Gabriel Orozco's Isla en la Isla (Island within an Island, 1993), a photograph that juxtaposes the skyline of Manhattan with a structure of a roughly similar shape made out of some old wooden planks that rise out of a pile of refuse, the implicit reference to nature is not made to deny the forces of history or society. To the contrary, the pictures of the urban landscape here are compelling, aesthetically, because they are, as Adorno would have put it,

"etched by ... real suffering." It is a decidedly historical and social consciousness that produces pictures of the city that resemble the ruin even when the houses still stand, mementos of a deformed progress as well as promising traces of what escapes its logic.

But the thickening of the urban materiality is relevant also with respect to those artistic projects that were committed to documenting the social and artistic activities of their time. Alvin Baltrop's Pier Photographs series (1965–86)—a spectacular rediscovery of the show—is true to its subject, the pier cruising area, precisely by giving its photographic documentation a quality of the opaque. By embedding even the most explicit sexual activity in a forest of architectural structures, these pictures maintain the latency of homosexual desire so characteristic of cruising areas and pass its logic on to the beholder. How is what I see linked to who I am? Photography and related practices, as this example already shows, never simply or automatically registered what was going on. Sooner than later they had to be taken seriously as art forms in their own right. As Lynne Cooke elaborates in her introductory essay to the catalog, many of the performative practices "required the making, as distinct from the taking," of photographic and filmic pictures.9 The respective collaborations were not only due to pragmatic reasons, for 156

example, that those performing might not always have been familiar with the technologies needed to document their work: there was a need for collaboration in a more demanding sense. It was important that the photographic or filmic pictures live up to the ethics of the performances, and they could only do that in their own (media) specific way. What was needed, then, was artistic collaboration. Babette Mangolte's documentation of Trisha Brown's dance Roof Piece (1973) is a paradigmatic case in point. The action of single dancers simultaneously performing on a couple of roofs in Manhattan, loosely connected with each other, aimed at mobilizing a receptivity for the dramatic beauty of the urban landscape through which it could appear as more than it factually was: as image. This aura, like that of nature, cannot be depicted as such because its apparition has the character of an image itself. (This is why any attempt to ban the beauty of nature into a photograph is doomed to fail. It reifies what is intangible and fleeting, thereby reverting beauty to kitsch.) To be true to the experience that performances such as Trisha Brown's made possible thus could not mean to pin down what cannot be pinned down but instead must mean to rescue the logic of aesthetic semblance itself, transferring it to the other medium.

This implied a commitment to the

indeterminate. As in Baltrop's Pier

Photographs, Mangolte's documentation of Brown's performance handled this task by creating wildly beautiful and extremely enigmatic pictures that unfold the dynamic of aesthetic semblance by mobilizing our desire to disclose their secrets but at the same time withdrawing them from us, making the pictures all the more picture-like, opaque, fixing our distance from them, a distance that will forever be the condition for our aesthetic closeness to them.¹⁰

The experience of the city as "endless image generator" 11 thus is not thinkable without a certain receptivity that recognized in the urban environment a potentiality that exceeds any concrete praxis and meaning. The respective sensibility found a metaimage, as it were, in John Baldessari's Hands Framing New York Harbor (1971), a photograph showing two hands framing an aspect of New York's harbor as if it were an image. This sensibility, however, gains its ethical and political potential in that it sets us at a reflective distance toward our praxis, interrupting the bustle that city life is made of, putting a temporary hold on our activities and busyness in order to open up the possibility of change. However, the alliance of art and politics in the practices of the 1970s did not, as it seemed to be the case in the mid-1980s and 1990s, inhere in political semantics. Art and politics were connected instead in an affinity in the stance of a self-reflective stepping back and questioning. To commit oneself politically to the idea that the city democratically belongs to the people and hence to a multitude of unforeseen usages, a belonging that can neither be captured by any claim to unity or transparancy nor be translated to the vocabulary of possession, implies a notion of democratic life in which the meaning of that which belongs to us as well as the respective "We" is always open to potential reformulation.

Today Lower Manhattan is gentrified, the public realm largely privatized. Remembering the 1970s from this perspective is as nostalgic as it is oppositional to the closures that dominate life now in New York City. In her catalogue essay, Johanna Burton looks at contemporary artists who try to recapture the sensibility for the city's potentiality. She discerns strategies "of laying . . . sites bare by momentarily decoupling them from the bodies and activities that provide their meaning"12 in photographic works such as Catherine Opie's Wall Street series (2001), Tom Burr's Unearthing the Public Restroom (1994), or Christopher Wool's East Broadway Breakdown (1994/2002). By interrupting current usages of the areas at issue, such works perform the double gesture of provoking a reflection on their specific histories, remembering what is lost and what is still there as a potentiality

for a different life yet to come. It is not the easiest task for art today to resist the overly familiar cultural image of "Manhattan, great modern city," that amounts to a sellout of modernity to the triumph of capitalism. The curators chose as the frontispiece for the catalog Zoe Leonhard's *Model of New York No. 1* (1989/90), a darkish yet promising picture of Manhattan as "a model—a construction, a fabrication, a hypothesis" that is a placeholder for a modernity still awaiting its future.

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NOTES

- Lynne Cooke and Douglas Crimp, eds., with Kristin Poor, Mixed Use, Manhattan. Photography and Related Practices, 1970s to the Present (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia; Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2010).
- Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the City," in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 91–110 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984).
- 3. Douglas Crimp, "Action around the Edges," in *Mixed Use, Manhattan,* 83–129; quotation on 105.
- 4. Juan A. Suárez, "Styles of Occupation: Manhattan in Experimental Film and

- Video from the 1970s to the Present" in *Mixed Use, Manhattan,* 131–61; quotation on 132.
- Cindy Patton, "Timing: A Sense of Where You Are," in Fatal Advice: How Safe Sex Education Went Wrong, 148–50 (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 1996); see especially 149.
- 6. Crimp "Action around the Edges," 125.
- 7. Suárez, "Styles of Occupation," 155.
- 8. Theodor W. Adorno, Aesthetic Theory (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1997), 64.
- 9. Lynne Cooke, "From Site to Non-Site: An Introduction to Mixed Use, Manhattan," in *Mixed Use, Manhattan*, 21–62; quotation on 40.
- 10. Cf. Douglas Crimp's theory of the aesthetic logic of pictures where he describes different artistic ways to establish a "distance that separates us from what those pictures simultaneously proffer and withhold," thereby setting our desire "in motion." Crimp, "Pictures," in *Art after Modernism:* Rethinking Representation, edited by Brian Wallis (New York and Boston: New Museum of Contemporary Art in association with Godine, 1984), 175–87; quotation here on 185.
- 11. Suárez, "Styles of Occupation," 150.
- 12. Johanna Burton, "New York, Beside Itself," in *Mixed Use, Manhattan,* 187–227; quotation on 202.
- 13. Cooke, "From Site to Non-Site," 60.