

When SoHo Was Young

'112 Greene Street: The Early Years,' '70s Art in SoHo

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As a species of literature, art gallery exhibition catalogs usually fall into one of three categories, none of them good. There's the perfunctory. There's the expensively vacuous, the kind that Marc Spiegler, a director of Art Basel, has described as simply another rite in commercial art's "elaborate validation ritual."



Patricia Wall/The New York Times

112 GREENE STREET **The Early Years (1970-1974)**

By Jessamyn Fiore

Illustrated. 197 pages. Radius Books/David Zwirner. \$50.

And then there's the nonexistent, which is too often the case. In early 2011, when the David Zwirner gallery in Chelsea organized a fascinating show about the history of the archetypal '70s alternative art space 112 Greene Street, it certainly seemed as if any attendant publication would end up in the third category: it didn't arrive in time for the exhibition, and more than a year passed with rumors that it was in the works.

If a book had never materialized it would have been, in a way, wholly in keeping with the spirit of the subject. Founded in 1970 in an old rag-salvaging factory in a decrepit downtown neighborhood only then becoming known as SoHo, 112 Greene Street had no formal opening. It had no official name, other than its address, or 112 Workshop, which it was sometimes called. Almost any artist willing to install and dismantle his or her own work was welcome. Technically, some of the work made or shown there was for sale, but the majority of it disappeared, either because it was meant to or because no one had the slightest idea what to do with it outside of its hothouse hatchery.

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During the space's first year Bill Beckley created an anarchic piece of post-minimalism in which a plank bed was suspended beneath a rooster cage, with a live rooster inside. The installation wasn't just for show; the idea was that the bed would be slept in.

"An artist who shall remain nameless decided at this time to dye a pile of rope with a toxic substance, and in the wonderful spirit that was 112, dumped it beside my rooster piece," Mr. Beckley recalled. "The rooster first stumbled in circles and then fell, poisoned by the toxic fumes. I feel guilty to this day."

That reminiscence, and hundreds of others, have been gathered in "112 Greene Street: The Early Years (1970-1974)," the exhibition catalog that is finally seeing the light of day, published by David Zwirner and Radius Books. And it turns out that all the time it took to create the book was put to admirable use.

Given the outsize influence 112 Greene has had not only on art making but also on art spaces, alternative and otherwise, over the last four decades, it is stunning how little has been published about its history. The only substantial book fully devoted to the space, issued in 1981, is long out of print, and used copies sell for more than \$100.

"The Early Years," compiled by Jessamyn Fiore, the curator of the Zwirner exhibition, is a healthy start toward a fuller accounting, an oral history of the space told through the informal, hyper-articulate, at times hilariously surreal voices of 19 artists who worked in or around 112 Greene, including notables like Vito Acconci and Mary Heilmann.

The six-story, cast-iron-facade building was owned by Jeffrey Lew, who bought it with Rachel Wood, his wife at the time, as their home and studio. Many artists who gathered there had been cast upon the unpeopled shores of SoHo by the cultural tidal waves of 1968. Gordon Matta-Clark, who helped Mr. Lew open the ground floor and basement as an art gallery, was an architect who had been studying French literature at the Sorbonne. Richard Nonas was an anthropologist who came to art after working in the Mexican desert. Willoughby Sharp had been imbibing Meyer Schapiro's Marxist modernism at Columbia.

As Mr. Lew told *Avalanche* magazine in 1971: "I'm doing this because it's time for action and for clear thinking. There was once a time for being chaotic and letting yourself completely freak out. Now I just don't feel that way, I feel like getting it together." Getting it together, however, meant creating an art gallery that, judged even by the standards of its day, bordered on lunacy, a place that defiantly refused to let itself be defined. Dance and performance were as important as object making, and women played a central role, at a time when they were still vastly underrepresented in the art world at large.

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Sharp videotaped himself while living for three weeks inside a small box. Matta-Clark grew a cherry tree in the basement, with lights. Richard Serra and Spalding Gray collaborated on a video piece. Holes were cut (or jackhammered) through the floors for art's sake. The place was dirty, dark, smelly and splintery and remembered by everyone involved as a paradise almost too good to believe.

“It was all part of another way of thinking,” Alan Saret, who was also instrumental in forming the space, told Ms. Fiore. “An ideal thinking, if you would, a utopian kind of thinking.”

Ms. Fiore — a playwright and the daughter of Jane Crawford, Matta-Clark's widow, who manages his estate — has done a nice job resurrecting the riotous spirit of the era, allowing the participants to tell stories that circle, overlap and sometimes contradict one another. You find yourself wishing only that she had taken a year or two more, to dig even deeper, partly because the history of the space is also a wonderfully fine-grained portrait of 1970s New York and of an American cultural landscape in the act of fracturing beyond all recognition.

What killed the space in its original form was not its excesses or perennial lack of money, to hear Mr. Lew tell it. It was money itself — in the form of grants, given by well-meaning people — and the act of accepting it meant the excesses could never be quite as spontaneous again. “As soon as I got the first government grant,” he said, “they wanted to know who I was showing and what I was doing.” He became less involved after 1974, gave up control of the building in 1976, and 112 Greene eventually became the nonprofit gallery White Columns, now on West 13th Street.

The only real surprise among those there at the beginning was that it lasted in its undomesticated form as long as it did. “112 Greene Street was, to borrow Isaiah Berlin's terms, both a freedom ‘to’ and a freedom ‘from,’” Mr. Beckley said. “Both a positive and a negative liberty. That balance is difficult to maintain even for a moment's passing, let alone an era.”

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