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Partisan Dilemmas Between Activism and Socially Engaged Art: Situations in Loisaída at the End of the Seventies

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Partisan Dilemmas Between Activism and Socially Engaged Art: *Situations* in Loisaida at the end of the Seventies

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Abstract

The end of 1970s is an interesting moment to understand the epistemic shift that involves the passage from partisan artistic activism to contemporary socially engaged art. Then, a significant convergence took place in the neighborhood of Loisaida (NYC), where artists and local residents coincided in their modes of action. However, its subsequent cultural interpretations have overlooked each other. Art history cosmopolitan approaches clashed with migration identities, traversed by victimhood, but also by transnational heritages. This article examines and reunites both traditions looking for a reparative art history.

Resumen

El final de la década de los setenta es un momento interesante para entender el cambio epistemológico que supuso la transición entre un activismo artístico partisano y un arte socialmente comprometido. En este momento, tuvo lugar una convergencia significativa entre ambos en el barrio neoyorkino de Loisaida, donde artistas y vecinos coincidieron en sus modos de acción. Sin embargo, las interpretaciones posteriores sobre esta coincidencia se han eludido mutuamente. Las aproximaciones de una historia del arte cosmopolita chocaban con las que provenían de las identidades migrantes, atravesadas por su victimización, pero también por sus legados transnacionales. Este artículo examina y reúne ambas tradiciones en busca de una historia del arte reparadora.

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The turn of the seventies can be considered a transitional moment in the New York art scene. While artists kept coming attracted by the city's liberal way of life and its educational opportunities, new conceptualist and experimental practices were to overcome some of the fatigue and disappointments associated with the political-oriented art of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Concurrently, and often at the same venues, neighborhood cultural practitioners, informed by other artistic traditions, such as muralism, cooperative theatre or Third World cinema, were updating their own partisan heritage¹. Some of these artistic experiences, many of them collective or co-authored, were in close relation to currents that later were going to be identified as socially engaged art. However, these politically charged practices have been overlooked in the established art narratives of social or community art.

The diverse names given to socially-oriented art practices constitute a historiographic problem that inhibits an integrated view. In fact, they rather seem to emphasize a formula that enumerates the variety of their denominations, each one connected to an author, a period, a lineage, a genre, a complete conceptualization or a small nuance, thus inhibiting to see their common ground². In this article, instead of aligning these actions that I will term 'Losaida's partisan practices' with a particular narrative,

¹ This paper has been written in the framework of the research project *Ré.Part. Résistance(s) Partisane(s): Culture visuelle, imaginaires collectifs et mémoire révolutionnaire / Partisan Resistance(s): Visual culture, collective imagination and revolutionary memory* (IDEX de l'Université Grenoble Alpes, ANR-15-IDEX-02). This project has provided a context in which to reconsider the notion of "partisan" and its diverse understandings. See URL: <https://modernidadesdescentralizadas.com/projects/re-part-2/>. Accessed 20 December 2021.

² To name but a few: Collaborative, participatory (Claire Bishop), relational (Nicolas Bourriaud), community-based, dialogic/conversational (Grant Kester), situational (Claire O'Doherty), socially engaged (Pablo Helguera), new genre public art (Suzanne Lacy), social sculpture (Joseph Beuys), site-oriented practices (Miwon Kwon). A (classic) list of references will include, among others, Arlene Raven (ed.), *Art in the Public Interest* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989); Suzanne Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1994); Lucy Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Sense of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: The New Press, 1997); Mary Jane Jacob and Michael Brenson (ed.), *Conversations at The Castle. Changing Audiences and Contemporary Art* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1998); Nicolas Bourriaud, *Esthétique relationnelle* (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 1998); James Meyer, 'The Functional Site; or the Transformation of Site-Specificity', in Erika Suderburg (ed.), *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp. 23–37; Tom Finkelpearl, *Dialogues in Public Art*, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2000); Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002); Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces*, (Berkeley-Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004); Claire Doherty (ed.), *Contemporary Art: From Studio to Situation* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2008); Pablo Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art. A Materials and Techniques Handbook* (New York: Jorge Pinto books, 2011); Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells. Participatory art and the politics of the spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012).

I want to problematize their segregated, scattered view that continues to obscure their interpretation, on the basis of an ample literature addressing them in recent years. For that purpose I will place alongside Gordon Matta-Clark's *A resource Center and Environmental Youth Program for Loisaida* (1976), an author fully integrated in the canonical art history, with several simultaneous projects that took place in the same neighborhood and that can be linked to the partisan art genealogy, which is being explored in this *Artl@s Bulletin* issue. I will advocate that they were doing the *same thing*, but that they have been read within different disciplinary frameworks, establishing thus a divide that needs to be overcome. This re-connection will furthermore exemplify how, during the late seventies, a partisan artistic tradition helped to redefine contemporary socially engaged art and challenged artistic assumptions.

Matta-Clark's Dilemma

In 1976, Gordon Matta-Clark presented a project called *A resource Center and Environmental Youth Program for Loisaida* to the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship. Prior, the artist had established contacts with several organizations of this Hispanic neighborhood on the Lower Eastside of Manhattan (NYC), a community already carrying out actions that encompassed art and social/political change, which I will later explain further and designate as partisan. The Guggenheim grant was awarded the following year with the actual funding starting in 1978, but the venture was left uncompleted due to the artist's untimely death. During recent years, this project has gained attention in an art historiographic context characterized by a rising interest in political and socially engaged artistic practices and in an attempt to expand the scope of Matta-Clark's work³.

Although Matta-Clark's statements in relation to an expansion of (the concept of) art are to some

³ See Corinne Diserens (ed.), *Gordon Matta-Clark* (Valencia: IVAM, 1992); Pamela M. Lee, *Object to Be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001) or Iria Candela, *Sombras de ciudad. Arte y transformación urbana en Nueva York 1970–1990* (Madrid: Alianza Ed., 2007).

extent ambivalent, this new approach is dominant in recent texts by Frances Richard and Cara Jordan, which both state a growing anti-institutional attitude of the artist during his last years and emphasize his interest in the collaboration with communities⁴. In her book, Richard seeks to provide a context for some of Matta-Clark's contradictions through a methodological exploration of the role that language played in (and also *as*) his work and through a detailed look at the way in which his historical and biographical background had set experiential boundaries for him⁵. Matta-Clark's epochal conditions, then, help to explain some of the difficulties that he encountered to substantiate the liaison between art, social practice, and participatory politics. For Richard, "the social turn enacted by his generation is not sufficient to save art from a crisis of relevance"⁶, as Matta-Clark's own words confirm:

I know how I'm going to try to solve my personal guilt, let's say social, political, guilt, but I don't really know how to describe it for other people. I don't think that there is a formula. I think that basically art in society, in our community, is an incredible dilemma, and I don't think that there are any pat[terns] or generalized ways of doing it. I think the character of your dealing with that specific situation is the piece, the work. If you can work with people in addition to working out your ideas, and so forth, then that can become an interesting ingredient in the art⁷.

In addition to Richard's comment on the crisis of relevance of art, it is interesting to note that Matta-Clark, when trying to characterize his own projects, used names such as experience or situation, terms

that do not clarify the nature of what he was doing. On the contrary, they rather created a conundrum. In this text the dilemma will be regarded in relation to art's autonomy, easily dissolved in the broader social or political realm (art *as*, *in*, or *with* a community?) and, in consequence, in relation to the question of an authorial position that either disappears in the process of working with communities or eclipses the many subjects involved in the process. Therefore, I will look at the dilemmas that these *situations* generated, not only in regard of Matta-Clark, but also for the neighborhood that he aimed to address.

In order to address this dilemma, I will refer now to a contemporaneous artist, Joseph Beuys, who has been also reclaimed, after years of historiographic disgrace in the U.S. American context, and whose notions of an expanded concept of art and social sculpture have been helpful in the shaping and thinking of the here explained experiences and situations. Cara Jordan has comprehensively written about the impact of Joseph Beuys in the U.S. scene of the late 1970s and early 1980s⁸. For her, the arrival of Beuys' persona and ideas broke into an artistic scenario with very different genealogies, methodologies, and objectives regarding the relationship between art and politics. In her words: "Beuys' approach had been entirely conceptual—he used social sculpture as an umbrella for his political activities, and hence his project was purely symbolic. U.S. artists came from an opposing viewpoint. They were more interested in using aesthetic strategies as part of a broader political movement"⁹.

Simplifying the argument, we could say that, for Beuys, art and social forming were *the same thing*, a productive and transformative energy that is engendered in and by the relations between humans¹⁰, whereas, for activist-artists in the U.S., art was a transformative/instrumental tool for political

⁴ For Cara Jordan this attitude can be related to his involvement in alternative spaces and the creation of a social network quite independent of the market economy. See Cara Jordan, 'Directing Energy: Gordon Matta-Clark's Pursuit of Social Sculpture' in Antonio Sergio Bessa and Jessamyn Fiore (ed.), *Gordon Matta-Clark: Anarchitect* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), pp. 39-41. For Frances Richard, Matta-Clark was committed "to undermining systems he found oppressive — whether those systems were architectural or economic, spatial or semiotic". See Frances Richard, "Spacism. Gordon Matta-Clark and the Politics of Shared Space", *Places Journal*, March 2019. <https://placesjournal.org/article/gordon-matta-clark-spacism/?cn-reloaded=1#0>. Accessed 6 November 2021.

⁵ Frances Richard, *Gordon Matta-Clark: Physical Poetics* (Berkeley- Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2019).

⁶ Frances Richard, "Spacism. Gordon Matta-Clark and the Politics of Shared Space". Accessed 6 November 2021.

⁷ Judith Russi Kirshner, 'Interview with Gordon Matta-Clark,' in Corinne Diserens (ed.), *Gordon Matta-Clark* (Valencia: IVAM Centro Julio González, 1992), 392.

⁸ Beuys had been featured in 6 of the 13 issues of *Avalanche* (1970-74), published by Willoughby Sharp and Liza Béar, he presented his works at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts and he lectured at the New School (January 1974), in his *Energy Plan for the Western Man Tour* in his short tour of New York, Chicago, and Minneapolis. Also that year took place his performance *I Like America and America Likes Me*.

⁹ Cara Jordan, *Joseph Beuys and Social Sculpture in the United States*, PhD Dissertation (New York: CUNY, 2017), 153-154, https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/1731/ Accessed 18 May 2021.

¹⁰ Eric Michaud and Rosalind Krauss, 'The Ends of Art According to Beuys', *October*, vol. 45, 1988, 36-46.

(revolutionary) change. Cara Jordan sees a further difference, stating that “artists and critics in the United States were also distinct from Beuys in their ability to organize communities, a skill that was developed through their participation in larger civil rights and feminist movements, who in turn were inspired by labor unions in the early twentieth century”¹¹. Nevertheless, for the issue of this present text, it seems meaningful that she also analyses the affinities and the shared “pursuit of social sculpture as a means to transform society”¹²—a search that connects Beuys and Matta-Clark, even though there was no personal relationship between them.

As I have mentioned, one of the underlying problems that social and political art face both is the extent to which “art” is not only instrumentalized, but disappears as a distinctive activity. This question can be posed as an aesthetic debate (or a conundrum), but surely it has other implications. In the case of Matta-Clark, Richard points out how some of his initiatives, such as the *Contrabienal* catalogue, FOOD, the Brooklyn Bridge Event, Graffiti Truck or even Arc de Triomphe for Workers, all of them not easily classifiable at that time, were pushed by him towards their consideration as artworks and even as saleable ones¹³. One strategy to solve the problem (art’s distinctiveness) was to turn to Marcel Duchamp, a path that was simple for Matta-Clark, not only because of his biographical background, but also on the account of other affinities between the two artists.¹⁴ For Richard “in the terms of Duchamp’s lexicon, contrary possibilities are *reconciled* in the readymade, even though a glitch or gap -a *delay*- keeps them distinct”¹⁵. For Beuys, this operation was not necessary, since art and social formation were *the same thing*, and he thus didn’t need to use the readymade in order to reconcile or to solve the contradiction. For Duchamp and Matta-Clark, the dilemma could be shortcut through the aesthetic reframing that the readymade enables, with the advantage that the artistic differential was

always safeguarded in the *delay*. The disadvantages are that the readymade is inevitably dependent on the artistic institutions and narratives thus easily run the risk of appropriation in order to obtain symbolic capital for artists/an artist’s work.

By the same token, the social/activist practice is erased twice in such move. The process by which a social practice becomes an artistic project, through its reframing as a readymade for the art sphere, operates as a transmutation in which the former (the social practice) is alchemically-duchampianly-transformed into art. For the clarity of the argument, I am neither questioning the value of the readymade, which is a foundational basis of 20th century art; nor am I distrusting Matta-Clark’s purposes, somewhat authorial, but explained by his own time and conditions. It is arguable that the present inscription of these types of projects into an art history discursive framework re-enacts the magical trick that eclipse the social and activist coexisting practices in an effort to safeguard disciplinary (art history) boundaries. After all, Matta-Clark’s project and the actions that were already being carried out by the local residents were actually *the same thing*. However, the contemporary interpreters of the artist’s Loisaida Project overlook the extension of the struggles that were occurring in the neighborhood as Loisaida was, in fact, conceived as a mere scenario in which the artist performed his last work, barely a footnote with a couple of local names. Hence, in spite of the good intentions of including socially engaged projects in art history, it is surprising that so little is told about the actual contemporary context. Moreover, when art historians have approached the interrelations of artistic practices in this part of the city, it has often been with regard to the 1980s artistic boom and later gentrification of New York’s Lower Eastside.

The range of artistic and social practices that were taking place in Loisaida was very diverse and they have been similarly recovered in more recent years, as we shall see¹⁶. Their retrieval stems from an increasing interest in the neighborhood local history

¹¹ Cara Jordan, *Joseph Beuys and Social Sculpture in the United States*, 155.

¹² Cara Jordan, ‘Directing Energy: Gordon Matta-Clark’s Pursuit of Social Sculpture’ in Antonio Sergio Bessa and Jessamyn Fiore (ed.), *Gordon Matta-Clark: Anarchitect* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 38.

¹³ Frances Richard, *Gordon Matta-Clark: Physical Poetics* (Berkeley- Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2019), 383.

¹⁴ Marcel Duchamp was a close friend of Roberto Matta, Gordon Matta-Clark’s father.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 337 (italics in the original).

¹⁶ One of the first ones was Mario Maffi, *Gateway to the Promised Land: Ethnic Cultures in New York’s Lower East Side* (New York: New York University Press, 1995). It was a translation on the 1992 original Italian version.

and collective memory and is informed by disciplinary perspectives brought by social anthropologists, urbanists, geographers or cultural analyzers. In this respect, it is significant to mention their emphasis on identity politics, a point of view that privileges the particularities of community building for the multi-ethnic base of the neighborhood, in which Latinxs played a major role. However, such citizen initiatives have not been fully addressed under an art history angle, in spite of their proximity to social artistic practices. Hence the question to be asked should be if it is possible to see both issues evolving from a common ground?

Underclass and Domestic Colonialism

The Lower East Side, along with the Bronx, Harlem, Spanish Harlem or Brooklyn, were inextricably linked to the visuality of New York during its 1970s crisis. The city was undergoing a difficult moment that affected the social fabric: de-industrialization, depopulation, bankruptcy and debt, drastic cuts, strikes, high rates of crime, and urban decline. While white middle classes abandoned the city (white flight), new waves of immigrants (especially Latinxs) arrived at the city during the 1960s and 1970s, adding a new layer to the city's demography. Landlords systematically neglected the buildings in those areas and even burned them to get insurance money, thus deepening the process of decay. There was an interrelated spatial concentration of abandoned buildings, vacant lots, poverty, unemployment, criminality and social unrest. Significant to this period was the spread of the term underclass, intended to frame poor people (mostly Black and Latinxs) as criminal. In John Welshman words:

The phrase 'underclass' was first used in the early 1960s by Gunnar Myrdal, who used it to describe the effects of technological change on the American workforce. (. . .) In the 1970s, Myrdal's concept was also to be transformed in intellectual and ideological terms, so that by the end of the decade it had become a behavioral term for poor people, mainly black, who behaved in ways that were

viewed as criminal, deviant, or simply different from the middle class¹⁷.

In this context, episodes such as the loots following the 1977 blackout can be read as symptoms of the racial and social tension accompanying the economic crisis of the 1970s. The spread of the term had a communicative impact in that moment. For instance, a notorious connection was established between several consecutive *Time* covers during July and August of 1977, significantly titled 'Youth Crime, Blackout'77', 'Once more, with looting', 'Minority within Minority' and 'The Underclass'¹⁸. This series was followed by Ken Auletta's book *The Underclass* (1982) that also helped to spread the term, even in the art context¹⁹. Lastly, and especially regarding the issues discussed here, it seems significant that the 1984 published and often-cited article by Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan relates underclass, the gentrification of the Lower East Side, and the artists' paradoxical position in it²⁰.

This manipulative, intellectual operation was established within a political framework if not a cultural war where the social unease was used by conservatives against the liberal assumptions of the American welfare programs of the 1960s. While the economic crisis was hitting hard, the right-wing ideological rearming was evolving. Neo-liberals sold themselves as modernizing agents that would bring employment through new technologies, financial capital, and service economy, just when the impetus of social and political movements had started to show signs of decay. However, we have to wonder if the "underclass" was as riotous as it was portrayed as well as to ask if its subjects still were politically active, if they were able to present some kind of resistance and if this opposition merged at some point with artistic practices.

Key to the here-described ideological turn was the role of images in constructing the picture of the city,

¹⁷ John Welshman, *Underclass: A History of the Excluded Since 1880* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 142.

¹⁸ *Time* covers from 11 July, 25 July and 29 August 1977.

¹⁹ Ken Auletta, *The Underclass* (New York: Random House, 1982).

²⁰ Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan, 'The Fine Art of Gentrification', *October*, vol. 31, 1984, 96.

especially these neighborhoods, as a theatre of war and their communities as a threatening enemy. In terms of visual representation, the image of NYC as a dangerous metropolis (a fear city²¹) was spread by films, documentary photographers, photojournalists and comics, all with varying agendas. For documentary photographers, it was a place to expand the liberal documentary genre; for photojournalists, the city was easily portrayable as a war zone. For example, if we take Bruce Davidson's renowned photographic series *East 100th St.*, it seems interesting to note that during its shooting, even though he would have tried to take "extensive precautions" regarding the representation of the local residents, as a contemporary art critic had stressed at the time, the artist was not able not overcome some of the inherent contradictions of documentary photography, such as the stereotyping and re-victimizing of disfranchised people in the ghettos²².

Soon after, significant writers and photographers such as Susan Sontag, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, Martha Rosler or Allan Sekulla were going to question such "safari of images" and to address the status of documentary photography as a form of social and political critique in the U.S. context²³. In spite of the predominance of suchlike distorting media images, there was a quite different, parallel production coming from inside the neighborhoods. Those kinds of pictures have lately become visible and been made available to a larger public through exhibitions and the democratizing possibilities brought by the internet archives. In them, the appalling situation of the neighborhoods was neither hidden, nor exoticized, and such images, for example to be found in the oeuvres of Camilo José Vergara, Ricky Flores, Geoffrey Biddle, Jamel Shabazz, Martha Cooper, Lisa Kahane or the so-called *Seis del Sur* (Joe Conzo Jr., Francisco Molina Reyes II, Edwin Pagan, Angel Franco and David Gonzalez) are to be situated at

the crossroads of documentary style, artistic legitimation and collective memory²⁴.

In the filmic realm, movies such as *The Warriors* (1979) helped to the spectatorial identification with white characters feeling out of place, with the derelict and vandalized city chosen as perfect setting to locate their stories. A momentous episode exemplifying the biased film-presentation took place in connection with the filming in the South Bronx and the debut of *Fort Apache, the Bronx* (1981), with its script based on Tom Walker's police memoir *Fort Apache: New York's Most Violent Precinct* (1976). This part of the city, populated by Afro-American and Puerto Ricans, was a symbol of urban decay, criminal reputation and police racist abuse. At first, the film-project seemed to have been framed under "impeccable liberal credentials", including the starring of Paul Newman, and conversations with the locals²⁵. However, in the film the residents continued to be portrayed as criminals and victims. Hence, several community organizations, under the name CAFA (Committee Against Fort Apache)²⁶, arranged various actions and mobilizations that included taking the production to court, marching, creating alliances with other national groups, talking to the press or picketing of theaters upon the film's release. Lawrence Webb, who has looked at public protest and film production more closely found that "what made the protests against these films distinctive was their focus on the point of production as well as exhibition, and the extent to which they were able to mobilize local and national media to generate publicity, shape public discourse, and create a framework for reception"²⁷.

²⁴ *Seis del Sur: Dispatches From Home by Six Nuyorican Photographers*, exhibition held at Bronx Documentary Center, January-March, 2013.

²⁵ A narration by activist Richie Pérez, *The Bronx Mobilizes Against Multinational Media* (1985) in the Media Justice History Project: <https://www.mediajusticehistoryproject.org/archives/82>. Accessed 18 May 2021.

²⁶ Pérez explains: "By the time CAFA was two weeks old, it had grown to include the Black United Front, the Black and Latino Coalition Against Police Brutality, the United Tremont Trades (construction workers), the United Bronx Parents, the Coalition in Defense of Puerto Rican and Hispanic Rights, and the Union of Patriotic Puerto Ricans, as well as many unaffiliated individuals. Many of CAFA's members had been active in the 1973 protests that closed down the racist film *Badge 373* and the more recent protests against anti Puerto Ricans slurs that had appeared in and in the *New York Post*", *Ibid*.

²⁷ Lawrence Webb, 'Made in New York: Film Production, the City Government, and Public Protest in the Kock Era', in Johan Andersson, Lawrence Webb (eds.), *The City in American Cinema. Film and Postindustrial Culture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 87.

²¹ Kim Phillips-Fein, *Fear City: New York's Fiscal Crisis and the Rise of Austerity Politics* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2017).

²² A. D. Coleman, 'Two Critics Look at Davidson's 'East 100th St.', *The New York Times*, 11 October 1970.

²³ Martha Rosler, 'In, Around, and Afterthoughts (on Documentary Photography)' in Martha Rosler, *3 Works* (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, [1981] 2006), 86.

Amy Lynn Corbin has highlighted the analogies that emerge in the film between the South Bronx and the Wild West of the Western genre, by depicting the prior as an “urban frontier” in which cowboy-cops fight urban residents including numerous other Western allusions and racialization procedures. For her, it was a narrative that “became more pervasive in mainstream discourse as crime rose in the 1970s and 1980s”²⁸. In her view, “transferring the frontier analogy to the inner city meant employing both, the imperialist demonology of a savage other culture and a distanced admiration of that same culture”²⁹. In this respect, it may be relevant to connect her perspective to Hell Kitchen’s mural by Arnold Belkin titled *Against Domestic Colonialism* (1972), in which a sign reads “We the people demand control of our communities”, a claim that will become relevant for the hereinafter outlined partisan approach. Lastly, and connecting to the initial paragraphs on the neglect of New York’s real estate and the correlating enrichment of its owners, one cannot emphasize too much Corbin’s observation that the frontier metaphor began also to be re-used when gentrification and real estate opportunities began to open up at that precise moment³⁰.

***Mejore, No Se Mude* [Improve, don’t Move]**

In spite of, or maybe even because of the here described dramatic situation, many concerned districts, grassroots communities were vigorous³¹. Since the 1960s, the Lower East Side, with its multi-ethnic constituency, was invigorated by the transnational experience of the Puerto Rico Independence Movement, the Young Lords Party or

the Latin American exiled³². They all helped developing a long-enduring impact on the collective conscience of the area and a sense of agency that were spread through educational, community, and youth programs³³, and the organization of various Tenant’s Associations, such as Avenue C Preservation Committee, 7th Street Block, 11th Street Movement, Adopt-A-Building, or the campaign *Mejore, No Se Mude* [Improve, don’t move]. In the last years, several authors, as we shall see, have recovered the memory of these struggles and re-framed these engaged forms of activism and social change, in which countercultural, artistic experimentation played an important part. As Lis Ševčenko states:

Loisaidan activists worked to define a cultural identity for the neighborhood and its residents that reflected the new experiences of Puerto Ricans in New York. Perhaps more than any other efforts, what put Loisaida on the map was the intense activity of artists, musicians, and poets who gave shape to the idea of what came to be known as Nuyorican culture and language starting in the mid-1970s. The work of the Nuyorican poets and musicians, like that of other Loisaida organizers, was related to the neighborhood and the efforts to improve its physical conditions³⁴.

Among others, significant spaces and organizations were the Nuyorican Poets Café, Real Great Society/CHARAS/El Bohío, CUANDO, The Poetry Project, or programs such as University of the Streets, the Young Filmmakers Foundation and the Film Club. Events such as the building of a Buckminster Fuller’s geodesic dome in a vacant lot, organized by CHARAS (1970), the collective murals, the solar collectors or the experimental windmill (1976), along with a calendar of public parades, street festivals,

²⁸ Amy Lynn Corbin, *The Urban Frontier: From Inner City Tourist to Resident, Cinematic Geographies and Multicultural Spectatorship in America* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 114.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Also interesting is how countercultural films, such as Charlie Ahearn’s *Wild Style* (1982), revamped hip-hop culture and graffiti “wilderness” under a musical-documentary genre.

³¹ Christopher Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side: Culture, Real Estate, and Resistance in New York City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000). Clayton Patterson (ed.), *Resistance: A Radical Political and Social History of the Lower East Side* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007). Nandini Bagchee, *Counter Institution: Activist Estates of the Lower East Side* (New York City: Fordham University Press, 2018).

³² On transnational struggles of the sixties, see Anne Garland Mahler, *From the Tricontinental to the Global South Race, Radicalism, and Transnational Solidarity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018).

³³ “The Lords’ mission was to ‘unite the two most oppressed classes, the lumpens and the workers, and also the two social groups in which our people are divided, the most oppressed Afro-Puerto Ricans and the *jibaros*’. They offered classes in Afro-Puerto Rican history on the Lower East Side and around the city, believing that it had important implications for present-day Puerto Ricans”, in Liz Ševčenko, ‘Making Loisaida: Placing Puertorriqueñidad in Lower Manhattan’, in Agustín Laó-Montes and Arlene Dávila, *Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 303.

³⁴ Liz Ševčenko, ‘Making Loisaida: Placing Puertorriqueñidad in Lower Manhattan’, p. 300.

and awards, helped to resist the physical decline and social disintegration of the area. Hence, it is this already vibrant context into which Matta-Clark project needs to be inscribed, too.

Various independent films of the second half of the 1970s are helpful to understand how the situation was lived from within. *LES* (Coleen Fitzgibbon, 1976), *Viva Loïsaida* (Marlis Momber, 1978) and *El corazón de Loïsaida* (Bienvenida Matias, with Marci Reavens, 1979) were three films that offered different approaches to the living conditions of the Latinx residents of “Loïsaida”, actually the phonetic re-naming of the Lower East Side by the Nuyorican poet Bimbo Rivas.

LES (initials for Lower East Side) was filmed by Coleen Fitzgibbon, an artist self-ascribed to a recognizable art and film history genealogy articulated around her educational background (1960s Structuralist cinema) and the network of artists and cultural activist formed in NYC during those years (she was a founder of Colab)³⁵. As a cultural activist, Fitzgibbon was then involved with her practice in the organization of various projects that implied questioning the relations of wealth and class³⁶. She belonged to a group of artists that had started to address the critique of wealth and power in relation to the situation of the city. They also had a renewed interest in the “human subject matter” as understood by Joseph Beuys and as shown in exhibitions such as *Lives. Artists Who Deal With Peoples’ Lives (Including Their Own) As The Subject And/Or The Medium Of Their Work* (1975), organized by Jeffrey Deitch³⁷.

³⁵ On her website: “Coleen Fitzgibbon is an experimental film artist based in NYC. Fitzgibbon has screened her work at international film festivals, museums and galleries. (. . .) A student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and the Whitney Independent Study Program, Fitzgibbon studied with Owen Land, Stan Brakhage, Yvonne Rainer, Carolee Schneemann, and Jack Smith, and worked on film and sound projects for Dennis Oppenheim, Gordon Matta-Clark and Les Levine. She formed the collaborative X+Y with Robin Winters in 1976, The Offices of Fend, Fitzgibbon, Holzer, Nadin, Prince and Winters in 1979, and cofounded the New York based Collaborative Projects, Inc. (Colab) in 1977 through 1981, along with forty plus artists”. <http://www.coleenfitzgibbon.com/> Accessed: 18 May 2021.

³⁶ We can mention her video projects with the collective X+Y (with Robin Winters), *Take the money and run* (1977) and *Rich & Poor* (1977) and exhibitions in which she was involved, such as *Citizens United. Stomp the rich* (1976), with Robin Winters, *Manifesto Show* (Colab, 5 Bleeker Street Store, 1979) with Jenny Holzer, or *Income and wealth* (Colab, 5 Bleeker Street Store, 1979).

³⁷ This exhibition took place at the Fine Arts Building at 105 Hudson Street, an important independent space of the city. Inside the catalogue we can read: “Beuys is certainly an important figure for a number of artists in the show, but like the meaning of his work, his influence on other artists is difficult to directly trace”, Jeffrey Deitch, *Lives*.

The alliance between experimental filmmaking and activism against inequality helps to understand the nature of *LES*, an ethno-fiction dystopia shot in the neighborhood³⁸. In her approach, Fitzgibbon uses documentary footage, but inserts an ironic dystopia story, narrated in an ethnographic-style by a voice-over. In the film *LES* inhabitants are portrayed as adorers of a god of wealth and survivors of a lost civilization caused by scientific experiments. The film ends by stating that the rulers would want them to remain poor and that they are “unable to realize that they have become social guinea pigs of international financiers and trade development”. The futuristic choice eases some of the problems associated with liberal documentary contradictions, such as white artists representing communities from a distance, an issue that she reflects on in 2012:

I basically roamed around the streets with my camera (. . .) I forget who else was in the film but a lot of it was me going around taking pictures with a Super 8 camera. It’s all shot below 14th Street and above Houston, east of Avenue A, and people were pretty okay with it. I asked people before I filmed them (. . .). Later, I did shoot my neighborhood and people knew me. You sort of learn to ask people if it’s okay to shoot, even your neighbors. (. . .) I can’t think of too many artists that didn’t get somewhat involved with the neighborhood³⁹.

However, *LES* inhabitants’ role in the narrative as “guinea pigs” is problematic, because they are, maybe inadvertently as in Matta-Clark’s case, repositioned as “test subjects” for Fitzgibbon, in order to formulate her critique to neoliberalism and the impact of the new forms of capitalism. At the end, the ethno-fiction objectified the local residents, who were filmed, but without giving them a voice or agency.

Artists Who Deal With Peoples’ Lives (Including Their Own) As The Subject And/Or The Medium Of Their Work (New York: The Fine Arts Building, 1975). The connection between Deitch, Beuys and Colab is well established, as shown in the support that Beuys gave to the protest of Colab’s now famous *Real State Show*. See Marvin Taylor and Carlo McCormick, *The Downtown Book: The New York Art Scene, 1974–1984* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2006).

³⁸ The film was broadcasted in Colab’s Manhattan Cable Channel in the *Red Curtain Show* (1978).

³⁹ Coleen Fitzgibbon ‘Excerpt from the Bowery Artist Tribute interview’, 30 April 2012, <http://www.coleenfitzgibbon.com/coleen-fitzgibbon-excerpt-from-the-bowery-artist-tribute-interview-april-30-2012>. Accessed 18 May 2021.

The other two mentioned films avoided the fictive element and opted instead for a conventional documentary approach. Both preferred to use in their titles the term *Loisaida* instead of Lower East Side; and both emphasized youth engagement, network building, and the human right to the city as well as stressing community activism and creativity. Bienvenida “Beni” Matías is a pioneer independent Latina filmmaker, film executive and producer. She was born in Puerto Rico and emigrated as a child to NYC, where she lived in El Barrio. Matías suggests a correlation between the struggles of the Latinx residents and of her own beginnings as a Boricua filmmaker, pointing towards shared experiences of resistance, political activation and diaspora. Talking about the late seventies, she recalls:

At the end of the seventies, a wave of people like myself, from humble backgrounds, often with families having little schooling, themselves the first to go to college, made films . . . [. . .] The government was offering filmmakers money and grants at the time. This support was given to organizations such as the Young Filmmakers on the Lower East Side that in turn made equipment available to the filmmakers . . . A space was created in this manner, a door opened, that allowed people without connections or money to do films. That’s how I was able to forge ahead⁴⁰.

Her debut film *El corazón de Loisaida* was partially funded by the above-mentioned tenants’ organization Adopt-A-Building and narrates the collective struggles of Puerto Rican residents in order to improve their housing conditions.⁴¹ For Frances Negrón-Muntaner, the film “sought the identification of the viewer with the central ‘voices’ and their mobilization into action” and, according to her, the film uses three different strategies⁴². Firstly, the narrator’s position is to be located as part of the

“we”, thus re-affirming “the community’s symbolic empowerment measured by its capacity to name and transform” and seeing the protagonists not necessarily as individuals “but rather members of a community”. Secondly, the lack of major historical contextualization in the film connected their actual problems to colonial history and therefore provides an expanded, larger historical context. And thirdly, the significant inclusion of women and their voices provides a more inclusive view on the issue. Notwithstanding, in *El corazón de Loisaida* the tenants’ association held the protagonist position, explaining the actions to repair, maintain and reclaim the buildings and stressing how psychological growth came about as a result of these collective efforts.

The third of the above-cited films, *Viva Loisaida*, was made by Marlis Momber, a German-born photographer who arrived at New York in 1966. She started to hang around this neighborhood in the mid-1970s and retrospectively remembered that moment with the words: “People called it a war zone (. . .) I grew up in Berlin after World War II, and it looked the same”⁴³; and having been a local resident since 1975, her artist’s statement expands:

Her photographs document the struggle of the mostly Puerto Rican people living in that part of Manhattan. Her photographs have been used to illustrate national and international publications on political and cultural topics such as: gentrification, urban development, slum lords/arson for profit, squatting, affordable housing/homesteading, cultural identity, education, the arts, drugs and urban crime⁴⁴.

After a trip to Panama City in which she encountered mural painting, she began to document NYC murals, especially the ones of María Dominguez’ and the CITYarts Workshop that eventually would determine her involvement in this neighborhood⁴⁵.

⁴⁰ Ana María García, *Cine y vídeo puertorriqueño: un proyecto de historia oral* (Río Piedras: UPR, Recinto de Río Piedras, 2000), p. xxxiii.

⁴¹ Furthermore, the film’s realisation owed to the substantial support of the Young Filmmakers Foundation, which provided the equipment. On Young Filmmakers see: Jessica Gordon-Burroughs, “Entrevista a Rodger Larson. Los Young Filmmakers, Jaime Barrios y el Lower East Side”, *La Fuga* 21, 2018. Available at: <http://2016.lafuga.cl/los-young-filmmakers-jaime-barrios-y-el-lower-east-side/905>. Accessed 9 January 2022.

⁴² Frances Negrón-Muntaner, ‘Puerto Rican women directors. Of lonesome stars and broken hearts’, *Jump Cut*, no. 38, June 1993, 67–78, <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC38folder/PRicanWomen.html>. Accessed 18 May 2021.

⁴³ Colin Moynihan, ‘In Images, the Lower East Side of Starker Days’, *The New York Times*, 18 February 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/18/nyregion/18photos.html>. Accessed 18 May 2021.

⁴⁴ <https://www.marlismomberphoto.com/about.html>. Accessed 18 May 2021.

⁴⁵ Liza Zapol, ‘Oral History Interview Marlis Momber’ *Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation East Village Oral History Project*, New York, June 15–October 28, 2015, https://www.villagepreservation.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf/Momber_Marlis_TranscriptFinalforWebsite.pdf. Accessed 18 May 2021.

Viva Loisaida is the outcome of her growing commitment with the community and owed to the funding from her German and Manhattan friends.

In the film, the neighborhood is presented as a “guided tour” by a local, Tyrone Jackson, who interviews different people. Through this walk, the viewer gets to know diverse collective initiatives, such as the murals designed by the CITYarts program (- “collective art out of the studios into the street for the benefit of all”, we can hear). Overall, Momber pays careful attention to the iconographies, both, regarding the visuality as well as the narrative. Her film thus shows, community gardens, where local residents cleaned empty lots in order to transform them into playgrounds, sitting space, gardens and orchards and provides interviews with tenants regarding the building repairs and their fights with the landlords without forgetting to explain the activities of CHARAS.

This Land is Ours

Viva Loisaida and *El corazón de Loisaida* combined the filming of the urban landscape in decay with a narration and the interviews of the local residents and informed about their daily struggles. Fight, survival, cooperation, construction or sweat equity are part of the vocabulary they used to confront deterioration with regeneration. The efforts of local residents to re-vivify the buildings produced feelings of moral ownership rights. Along with the collective labor engendered in the conservation of their houses, cultural events, murals and community gardens, coming from a socialized creativity, were instrumental to the construction of a sense of place and political activity, at the heart of economic recession and municipal neglect. Creativity’s significance can be associated with its potentialities in relation to generate or consolidate communities, produce cultural identities, and, sometimes, elicit emancipatory awareness. Be it as it may, the history of socially engaged art, in its diverse forms, is usually questioned from different points of view, such as lack of artistic quality, problems with authorship, extractivism,

its instrumental value, beautification, etc.⁴⁶ An example for such approach is the (art-)history of community murals. Although frequently described in books on art history it is rarely integrated in a de-hierarchized or horizontal approach to synchronic artistic scenes or networks, even if the murals are to be considered as public art. Besides, their closeness to minorities and politics may have not fostered a legitimation that would put them on eye to eye with the referential works or artistic productions of established art canon(s). In the case of *Loisaida*, the role played by collective murals in the self-definition of the neighborhood, projecting positive images, denouncing the inhabitants’ situation and representing racial tensions seems undeniable. Susan Shapiro-Kiok, an artist influenced by muralist collective Brigada Ramona Parra (BRP) with whom she worked in Chile in 1972, provided in Eva Cockcroft’s edited volume *Toward’s a People Art’s* (1977) and early recount of the history of CITYarts, reaching from 1968 to 1977⁴⁷. Shapiro-Kiok’s contemporary, self-conscious narration stressed the importance of the particular momentum of the neighborhood in the post-1968 years, as a time when “heightened ethnic consciousness sought new forms of expression. It was therefore entirely fitting for community groups to seize the opportunity offered by CITYarts to create collaborative murals celebrating their cultural heritage”⁴⁸. In this case, the artists’ dilemmas, far from being exempt of contradictions, are put at the forefront. Shapiro-Kiok’s account is watchful when she talks of/from her experience and, therefore, exposes the problematics and significance of mural methodologies

⁴⁶ See Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, Ma: The MIT Press, 2002) and Claire Doherty, *Contemporary Art: From Studio to Situation* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2004), pp. 169–185.

⁴⁷ Susan Shapiro-Kiok, “Cityarts Workshop: Out of the Gallery and into the Streets”, Eva Cockcroft (ed.), *Toward’s a People Art’s: The Contemporary Mural Movement* (New York: Dutton, 1977), 169–185. See also Florencia San Martín, ‘Aesthetics of Disobedience’ (2018), <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/blogs/archives-american-art/2018/08/23/aesthetics-disobedience/>. Accessed 18 May 2021.

⁴⁸ Eva Cockcroft (ed.), *Toward’s a People Art’s: The Contemporary Mural Movement* (New York: Dutton, 1977), 176. See also Philip Pocock and Gregory Battcock, *The Obvious Illusion: Murals from the Lower East Side* (New York: George Barziller, 1980); Janet Braun-Reinitz y Jane Weissman, *On The Wall: Four Decades Of Community Murals In New York City* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2009); Timo Schrader ‘Loisaida Community Murals as Activism’, in *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory: Puerto Rican Community Activism in New York* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2020).

based on discussions and the search for collective techniques⁴⁹.

In close alliance to murals were casitas and community gardens, part of them developed in relation to the citywide Liz Christy's Green Guerrillas, and in these last years, the recovery of the collective memory of this area has converged with a growing interest in past models of social ecology and community development⁵⁰. Daniel Chodorkoff focuses on the utopian side of these initiatives and proposes an atypical description of the urban landscape, worth to be quoted in length:

A walk through the streets of Loisaida in 1978 revealed some remarkable things if one knew where to look beyond the garbage-strewn lots and abandoned buildings. Vacant lots on 12th, 11th, 9th, 8th, 3rd Street and Houston Street were producing a bounty of fresh, organically grown tomatoes, lettuce, peppers, squash, and beans. A rooftop on 11th Street had sprouted a windmill and a bank of solar collectors. (. . .) An abandoned oil company garage on 8th Street was transformed into a recycling center. (. . .) A garbage-filled lot on 9th Street and Avenue C was developed into a cultural plaza for neighborhood residents. Design work had begun on a permanent dome greenhouse intended to house a 2,400 gallon (9,000 liters) pond for raising fish to edible size in an intensive, closed system aquaculture project; fish were also being raised in basements on 11th Street. (. . .) Rooftop gardens were flourishing at various locations around the neighborhood, and rooftop solar greenhouses were under construction⁵¹.

Gardens helped to clean the vacant lots, where dumped material could be recycled ("swings were made from discarded lumber and old tires, jungle

gyms were built from recycled beams"⁵²); they enabled intergenerational contact, teaching took place in them and they also could be used (and in fact were regarded) as cultural spaces, with murals frequently being placed in them.

The various researchers of these gardens study the phenomenon under diverse angles and concepts. For example, Efrat Eizenberg centers on place making and participatory politics, by acknowledging that "[Community Gardens] emphasize a process of mutual reinforcement between people and the environment through which place is endowed with special meaning. The investment of affect, cognition, and practices in the place as well as the feedback from the environment to these investments constitute the development of meaning, attachment, sense of place, and identification with the environment"⁵³. In comparison, Miranda J. Martínez examines their particular local praxis and its legacy, analyzing typologies and pointing out that "some gardens became spaces identified with the Puerto Rican nationalist project. Others became spaces identified with artistic movements, and others are communitarian ecological projects"⁵⁴ depending on the formal organization and the type of relationships they were able to generate.

It is important to stress in that regard correlations with already-mentioned artistic examples, such as Matías film *El corazón de Loisaida*, where the narrator comments in the beginning: "people are organizing their buildings, taking over abandoned buildings, asking on many levels, 'how can we make this ours?'" Furthermore, in one of the photographs, shown in Momber's film *Viva Loisaida* we can see a banner stating: "Lower East Side. Not for sale. This land is ours". This fight for the "land" and for the sense of belonging can be related to the notion of insurgent citizenship coined by political anthropologist James Holston. He affirms that the right to inhabit the city develops into an agenda of citizenship, creating a non-exclusionary "we" that

⁴⁹ Other testimonies of that moment are provided in a 1988 documentary by Ainslie Binder, Silvina Calderaro and Sarah Goodyear, *You Know . . . The Struggle*, https://youtu.be/anjx_nhkjfm. Accessed 18 May 2021.

⁵⁰ See Gregory Sholette, 'Unnatural Speculations Nature as an icon of urban resistance on NYC's Lower East Side 1979-1984', *Afterimage*, September-October 1997, 17-20. http://www.gregorysholette.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/15_unnatural1.pdf. Accessed 18 May 2021; Malve von Hassell, *The Struggle for Eden: Community Gardens in New York City* (Westport, CONN: Bergin & Garvey, 2002); Michela Pasquali, *Loisaida. NYC Community Gardens* (Milano: A&M bookstore, 2006).

⁵¹ Daniel Elliot Chodorkoff, *Un milagro de Loisaida: alternative technology and grass-roots efforts for neighborhood reconstruction on New York's Lower East Side* (Ann Arbor, MICH: University Microfilms International, 1980), 40.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵³ Efrat Eizenberg, *From the Ground Up. Community Gardens in New York City and the Politics of Spatial Transformation* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 36.

⁵⁴ Miranda J. Martinez, *Power at the Roots. Gentrification, Community Gardens, and the Puerto Ricans of the Lower East Side* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), 33.

challenges the formal membership in the nation-state, an approach that is useful to politically realigning migrant and diasporic communities or situations of “domestic colonialism”. In his words:

My point is that it is not in the civic square that the urban poor articulate this demand with greatest force and originality. It is rather in the realm of everyday and domestic life taking shape in the remote urban peripheries around the construction of residence. It is an insurgency that begins with the struggle for the right to have a daily life in the city worthy of a citizen’s dignity⁵⁵.

Furthermore, we could ask if this new citizenship could be related to a renewed concept of partisanship and with Carl Schmitt’s efforts to historicize its iterations. For instance, his findings could not just help us to distinguish between partisans and (common) thieves but also to find further nuances that could be useful in relation to rioters. Regarding the basic distinction between the first, he sees the actions of the partisan intensely imbued by a political character:

The person with no rights [*der rechtlos Gemachte*] seeks his justice in enmity. In it, he finds the meaning of the matter and the meaning of justice, once the carapace of protection and obedience that he inhabited is broken, or the system of norms of legality from which he once expected justice and legal protection is shattered (...). In such cases, irregularity is unpolitical and becomes purely criminal because it loses the positive interconnectedness with a somewhere available regularity⁵⁶.

In conjunction with Schmitt’s analysis, the rioting and looting people during the blackouts had lost all faith in the system and their actions are conjunctural, sparked by the violence and injustice under which they live. Nevertheless, to just see the violence and classify them as apolitical and (thus) criminal would be premature, as many organized communities helped to clean up the mess after the

pillage. Looking at this “positive interconnectedness” of citizens and local communities, it rather seems fit to emphasize what Schmitt denominates, after José María Jover Zamora, the “tellurian character” of the self-defense, thus stressing of what is felt as their own territory and their right to the city⁵⁷. Furthermore, such type of local resistance is, at the same time, transnational, since it is diasporic and aligned to other international struggles of that moment. In this respect, these partisan neighborhoods were able to articulate their political commitment and interconnect it with, to use Schmitt’s words, “the world-political fronts and contexts”⁵⁸. These references are not so remote and seem quite adequate, if we consider that these neighborhoods were portrayed as dangerous war zones.

The Same Thing

How far are these partisan initiatives from Matta-Clark’s proposal? Art historians have stressed how, after years of subverting architectural practice, the artist wanted to “exceed the exhibition context” and look for a “way of participating in people’s lives”⁵⁹. One of his 1974-75 documents reads:

[...] a specific project might be to work with an existing neighbourhood youth group and to involve them in converting the all too plentiful abandoned buildings into a social space. In this way, the young could get both practical information about how buildings are made and, more essentially, some first-hand experience with one aspect of the very real possibility of transforming their space⁶⁰.

Frances Richard relates in her study on Gordon Matta-Clark the artist’s inspiration to his 1975 Milan experience, where he worked with a factory occupied by a Communist youth group in Sesto San Giovanni, from whom he learned:

⁵⁷ The “tellurian character” refers to the spatial defensive character of the resistance. Carl Schmitt, *The Theory of the Partisan*, p. 13.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁵⁹ Frances Richard, *Gordon Matta-Clark: Physical Poetics* (Berkeley- Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2019), 385.

⁶⁰ Nicholas de Monchaux, “The Death and Life of Gordon Matta-Clark”, *AA Files*, no. 74, 2017, 193, n. 49.

⁵⁵ James Holston ‘Insurgent Citizenship in an Era of Global Urban Peripheries’, *City & Society*, 21(2) 2009, 246.

⁵⁶ Carl Schmitt, *The Theory of the Partisan. A Commentary/Remark on the Concept of the Political* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2004), 65.

Their program was to resist the intervention the of “laissez-faire” real estate developers from exploiting the property. Their proposal was that the area be used for a much needed community services center. My exposure to this confrontation was my first awakening to doing my work, not in artistic isolation, but through an active exchange with peoples’ concern for their own neighborhood⁶¹.

Furthermore, Richard connects it with his knowledge of the Preservation Youth Project at Saint Mark’s Church-in-the-Bowery on Second Avenue, where he had installed two sculptures in 1970. For her part, the scholar Cara Jordan interprets his weekly conversations with the Anarchitecture group as a kind of pedagogical experience and highlights, as an antecedent, Matta-Clark’s first failed attempt in the South Bronx (1975) to “design socially integrative projects that incorporated the preexisting efforts of the community and were intended to be self-sustainable”⁶². The project was then taken to Loaisaida, put into practice in the summer of 1976 (on the vacant lot that later would become La Plaza Cultural), and eventually prepared for the Guggenheim Fellowship to get some funding.

Frances Richard, following Matta-Clark’s own words, is cautious in ascribing political labels to these experiences. Based on the artist’s own words from a conversation with Judith Russi Kirshner, she states the difficulties posed to the subject of authorship, Matta-Clark’s relation to what he considered “a group of ghetto youths” and the dilemma of “leadership becoming dissolved within the activity”⁶³. Be it as it may, what is clear from his proposal is that the project would have had an educational nature. In the Center the “cadets” would

have learned practical building skills (installation and maintenance of heating and electrical systems, concrete casting, cost management, environmental awareness); they would have done exercises in order to solve abstract spatial problems, learned some basics of design, some organizational abilities regarding the planning process as well as the artistic use of materials, oriented towards both, to building restoration and the teaching of teenagers for construction jobs. Matta-Clark, as a trained architect, was aware of the artistic and technical expertise that he could bring to the already existing building- and regeneration activity of the neighborhood. He was also aware that his skills could help in making some of the existing programs “come to fruition both through planning and fund raising”⁶⁴. Therefore, the proposal for the Fellowship can be also related to the necessity of increasing the monetary support for the various initiatives.

It is important to underline that Matta-Clark’s proposal did not flourish in a void, not only conceptually, but in more prosaic material terms. There was an existing infrastructure that facilitated the search and distribution of federal or council funding from the many liberal programs promoted throughout the 1960s and 1970s.⁶⁵ For example, Matta-Clark’s application clearly shows an awareness regarding the synergies that could be achieved with the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA), namely that teenagers could be enrolled as CETA trainees at the Centre⁶⁶. The possibility of combining youth employment and skill training programs as a way to fund artistic projects, such as community murals, was always in the mind of Loaisaida activists, as Timo Schrader states. For this author, “the vagueness of the program goals and their eligibilities left enough space for ‘imaginative use’ by community organizations that were certainly on top of their game with regard to raising funds and

⁶¹ Frances Richard, *Gordon Matta-Clark: Physical Poetics* (Berkeley- Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2019), 392.

⁶² “The first of these, an art center in the South Bronx conceived with Alanna Heiss, Robert Rauschenberg, and Robert Morris, failed to come to fruition” Cara Jordan, ‘Directing Energy: Gordon Matta-Clark’s Pursuit of Social Sculpture’ in Antonio Sergio Bessa and Jessamyn Fiore (ed.), *Gordon Matta-Clark: Anarchitect* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 51.

⁶³ “I would try very hard to organize it so that that could be done effectively and reasonably. I wouldn’t create a situation where that couldn’t be done. . . . I think it’s important that something belongs to you, that your time belongs to you — energy, imagination. I must admit that I’m not all that much of a total collectivist socialist. There’s a kind of morality that is based on which I don’t think in fact works. I don’t know what it is. Maybe I’m too American. I don’t buy the dogma”, quoted in Frances Richard, *Gordon Matta-Clark: Physical Poetics* (Berkeley- Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2019), 394.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 395.

⁶⁵ On CETA Linda Frye Burnham and Steve Burland, *CETA and the Arts: Analyzing the Results of a Groundbreaking Federal Job Program* (Kindle self-edition, 2011); Virginia Maksymowicz and Blaise Tobia, “The Forgotten Federally Employed Artists”, *Hyperallergic*, 25 December 2020, <https://hyperallergic.com/610071/the-forgotten-federally-employed-artists/>. Accessed 9 January 2022; Also see the documentation accessible at <https://ceta-arts.com/>.

⁶⁶ CETA was signed by President Richard Nixon in 1973 and aimed to train low-income high school students for public service jobs.

applying for grants to keep sustaining their work: to pay activists, to pay young people, to pay artists”⁶⁷. Schrader indicates that “the increase of funding from these federal job training programs, coincided with the decrease in funding from traditional arts foundations such as National Endowment for the Arts. Nevertheless, later on, this tendency changed and organizations, such as CHARAS, shifted their “activism from housing and environmental projects to cultural programs”⁶⁸. In general, the here described strategy shows the extent to which Matta-Clark and Loisaida communities were part of the same *situation* and cooperated to solve the art/social conundrum.

The expansion of our understanding of art towards the idea of creativity as an anthropological and political activity, where art is unapologetically dissolved into social change, cannot be reduced to a terminological debate, but points toward an epistemic shift. I would therefore like to suspend for a moment the art historical, social anthropologist or urbanist disciplinary frameworks that have broken up the analysis of the same practices and look at them as actions that re-assemble, relationally, what is available at a certain moment, be it funding, activism, art or humans, things, situations, bodies, ideas and spaces⁶⁹.

The friction between Matta-Clark’s reading of Duchamp’s ready-made and Joseph Beuys’s notion of

social sculpture has been used to understand how, at the end of the 1970s, the aesthetic *delay* that safeguarded art and authorship boundaries in art theory was starting to be questioned. Instead of reclaiming the readymade, we rather should consider, with Beuys, that activists, socially engaged artists as well as Matta-Clark might all have been *doing the same thing*. Both Matta-Clark and Loisaida communities shared a common ground that surpassed the constraints of the art field and enabled a passage to cross from partisan, artistic activism to social sculpture and contemporary socially engaged art. Therefore, the way in which art history has decentralized or overlooked them needs to be reconsidered.

The rather interconnected (than exclusive) view of the frameworks, which are at the basis of the here-described dilemmas, allows for a more multifaceted understanding of what is at stake when thinking about the essence of socially engaged practices, that is about what they are and what they do. Therefore, it is important not to lose sight of the complex map that these *situations* produce. To revisit Matta-Clark’s Loisaida project and situating it in the same relational plane with the neighborhood’s partisan communities, as exemplified here, not only can advance our understanding of artistic practices towards a reparative art history, but also challenges art history’s hierarchized methodologies and ideologies.

⁶⁷ Timo Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory: Puerto Rican Community Activism in New York* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2020), 101.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁶⁹ Although it is tempting, at this point, to connect the Loisaida case with Bruno Latour’s conceptual and methodological framework, an adequate analysis exceeds the aim of this text.