

WHAT IS WORTHLESS

Martha Rosler's 'The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems' (1975) transforms the abject poverty of those at the edges of society into a black humour worthy of Samuel Beckett. Gordon Matta-Clark's 'Walls Paper' (1972) shows the crumbling buildings of neighbouring Soho in a way that exposes the physical residue and human stories of the city. Rosler has subsequently written about artists' complicity, through gentrification, in the commodification of property. But for a decade, artists working in this kind of urban ground zero refused to give up on either the city or its people. This was a time when small, alternative communities took advantage of the frequently selfish freedoms of the sixties to develop something more coherent and substantial, a second phase of modernism that was no longer reliant on post-war positivism and the state, but had not yet succumbed to neo-liberal consumerism.

The 1970s were dirtier, noisier, and poorer than today. In London this was the time of the three day week and striking miners. New York City was also in decline, dangerous, and in 1975 on the brink of bankruptcy. Zürich's Niederdorf, with its cheap rents and untidy charm was a magnet for Zürich bohemian society, for students, artists, the emerging gay scene, for the marginal, recreational, and not always legal activities of the city. It is apparent that a post-war social democratic consensus was coming to an end, and yet, as crisis followed crisis, a crack within the inexorable progress of capitalism created space for a productive idealism to flower, one that was emancipatory and that worked in a light and provisional way. Out of the hedonism of the sixties emerged feminism, gay rights and environmentalism, taking root in the empty spaces and under-occupied buildings of the inner city. Squatting became a social movement as well as way to live cheaply, new citizens who not only fixed up the decaying building stock, but also

brought a new life back into the empty shell of the city, forming communes and other kinds of experimental households. Existence was not defined by work and earnings, but instead by the balance and the artistry that one brought to living, and the way in which individual lives enriched the neighbourhood, and society.

The pressure of capital is consuming the open spaces and under-used buildings that have typically provided the slack for the experimental and provisional uses of Zürich. This semester we will engage with the spirit of the second phase of modernism, and deploy some of its instruments to resist these forces, encouraging instead the conditions of openness, mutability and inclusion that were possible in the ruins of the 70s, and are essential if we are going to make a sustainable and democratic city today. We will use photography to engage with the spaces and people of the city around us, making studies that will be collated into artist's books. These books will serve as a springing point for interventions on our main site, the unloved buildings that line Thurgauerstrasse, once prestigious corporate headquarters, today standing half occupied, waiting for redevelopment.

Introduction: 18 Februar 2020, 11:00 am,
location to be announced

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Gordon Matta-Clark, Walls Paper, 1972