

### Gordon Matta-Clark and Pope.L: Impossible Failures

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Installation view: Gordon Matta-Clark & Pope.L: Impossible Failures, 52 Walker, New York, 2023. Courtesy 52 Walker, New York and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.

When I first arrived in New York City seven years ago, what first hit me was the noise. It's a relentless soundtrack that forces the metropolis' renowned energy straight through you: cars honking, sirens blaring, jackhammers juddering, construction sites clanking, and throngs of people shouting and screaming to be heard over it all. Usually, stepping into a gallery provides temporary respite. Unless, that is, you've decided to check out Gordon Matta-Clark and Pope.L: Impossible Failures at 52 Walker. Pairing iconic films and drawings by Matta-Clark with video, drawings, and an installation by contemporary multidisciplinary artist Pope.L, this exhibition is proudly, penetratingly loud—visually, aurally, and conceptually.

The raucous, machinic whirring that accompanies you throughout your visit emanates from a freshly commissioned installation by Pope.L—Vigilance a.k.a Dust Room (2023)—situated bang in the middle of the gallery space and composed of a self-contained room, fed by lengths of industrial ducting, whose interior is only visible through a few holes punched into its walls. Peer inside and you discover the source of the noise: a series of huge fans blowing heaps of tiny styrofoam balls around a blue-tinted, mirrored space like some kind of post-industrial snowstorm, both bombastic and boldly dystopic. And it's thoughtfully installed as well, with the surfaces of its windows reflecting Matta Clark's *The Wall* (1976/2007), which is projected on one of the walls behind it, opening up a visual dialogue between two works made almost fifty years apart.

Fortunately, the other works in the show are more than able to hold their own alongside a bedfellow as domineering as *Vigilance*. Matta-Clark's films, as well as the numerous drawings and conceptual sketches by both artists, seem to riff on the constant noise rather than allowing themselves to be overwhelmed by it. The physicality, sense of danger and artistic brazenness of Matta-Clark's *Conical Intersect* (1975)—a film recording the artist and workers cutting a conical hole through two seventeenth-century buildings on Paris's Rue Beaubourg—and *Bingo X Ninths* (1974)—where we watch Matta-Clark dividing a drawing of a soon-to-be-demolished building into nine sections before physically partitioning the

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structure itself—feel as subversive and relevant now as they must have in the 1970s. There are other plucky curatorial decisions here that also ensure Matta-Clark's films are shown to their full, vital potential. For example, *Conical Intersect* and *Bingo X Ninths* are each projected onto awkward corners rather than flat walls, working with the architecture of the space at 52 Walker rather than superseding it. Two holes, a foot or so in diameter, have been drilled directly through two of the space's partition walls, allowing us to glimpse behind the front desk and through to the crisp white lobby beyond them—small but important “anarchitectural” gestures that echo the viewing holes in Pope.L's cacophonous installation. Extending the conversation between the artists beyond the Dust Room's reflective windows, Pope.L's *Failure Drawing #184* (2004–07) is displayed on the floor and leaning against the wall so as to playfully butt right up against the projection of *The Wall*.



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The show's evocative title, *Impossible Failures*, provides much of the conceptual glue that binds Pope.L and Matta-Clark's practices, despite the chronological gap between the bodies of work shown here. It opens up some timeless questions about creative work more broadly: What is an artistic “failure”? What constitutes a “successful” artwork? In Matta-Clark's case, what could be described as his supposed failures are really intentional infeasibilities: to blow up a section of the Berlin Wall in the 1976 film *The Wall* (he ended up stenciling “Made in America” on it instead, leading to a run-in with the police), to construct a home at the top of a flagpole in his sketch *Flag Pole Housing* (1974) or suspended from hot air balloons in his *Dragon Building* drawing from 1978. Such a quixotic attitude is precisely what gives these works their power. The lasting wonder and fascination in Matta-Clark's sketched ideas lies in the very impossibility of their full realization. The “failures” (or at least hiccups) inherent in exhibiting documentation of seminal performances half a century later are also embraced by curator Ebony L. Haynes; *The Wall* is shown here without sound.

The exhibition's title is paralleled most obviously, though, by Pope.L's “*Failure Drawings*,” a selection from an ongoing series of well over a thousand drawings that goes back as far as 2003. By turns funny, surreal, and sensuous, they were all made while the artist was traveling, with whatever materials he could bring to hand: napkins, flyers, hotel stationery, ruled and printed paper provide his surfaces, while his marks and washes are made with inks, ballpoint, markers, or spilt coffee. Some resemble extraterrestrial landscapes, and penises, rockets, worms, and buildings are among his recurring motifs. Titling these drawings as “failures” feels like a cryptic decision, until you learn more about their backstory. The “failure” in question apparently refers more to the artist's ongoing anxieties while making them, rather than anything literally depicted in the drawings themselves—he began the series during an especially tumultuous period in his personal life, which included both a hospitalization and a traveling retrospective that brought his work unforeseen levels of international attention. For those more familiar with Pope.L's “crawl” performances—*Times Square Crawl* (1978), in which he dragged his body down West 42nd Street in Manhattan while dressed in a stereotypically bourgeois suit and tie, is probably the most widely known—these drawings present a vastly different example of his predilection for blurring the boundaries between art and life.

In its rowdy volume, its sense of utopic possibility amid urban decay, and its joyful exploration of risk and anxiety, this is an exhibition that's about as inimitably New York as it is possible to imagine.