

## Gordon Matta-Clark & 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.

The writer and playwright Samuel Beckett believed that failure was essential to an artist's work, ultimately helping them to succeed. A well-known line from his 1983 novella *Worstward Ho* admonishes one to “fail again” and to “fail better,” two sentiments the sixth exhibition at 52 Walker explores with great subtlety. In *Impossible Failures*, director Ebony L. Haynes focuses on works by Gordon Matta-Clark and Pope.L that explore the social conditions of space and how creative experimentation might help us to dream of a world that can hold the tension inherent in such social relationships. Through more than forty works spanning drawing, installation, and video, *Impossible Failures* proposes many gentle pushes that encourage engagement over confrontation.

Many of Matta-Clark and Pope.L's performative interventions could be considered overt—noisy incisions into abandoned buildings, a restaurant that serves as an art project, the stench of spoiling food, a man crawling along an urban thoroughfare wearing a suit—but they are really more like unsettled ideas. Pope.L's *Failure Drawings* (2003–ongoing) are made exclusively while the artist is traveling, often using scraps of paper like receipts or hotel stationery as their canvas. Worms, nature and landscapes, references to outer space, and glasses are rendered repeatedly, often bringing to mind particular preoccupations including transience, life and death, and the passage of time. Although the drawings are not meant to be read or understood as one cohesive narrative, their feeling of unresolve—as if testing out a pen—is more akin to iterative brainstorming sessions. In *Failure Drawing #997 Four Scenes* (2004), Pope.L's marks give viewers a different perspective on the idea of space travel and the discovery of new lands. In one quadrant, a rocket appears to blast off while in another, it lands; a worm inhabitant of this world notices the event, poking its head up through the ground, and puts on its glasses to see what's going on, all acts that seem to occur without the rocket ship occupants noticing. In other drawings such as *Failure Drawing #127 I Have This Fear...* (2004) and *Failure Drawing #33 Red Cloud* (2004–06), Pope.L has added multiple dates and sentences with different ideas, indicating that he revisits some of the preoccupations within these works by physically altering them over time.

# MITCHELL-INNES & NASH



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Matta-Clark's drawings embody similar kinds of contemplation, ideation, and brainstorming. The two-sided works of the "Dragon Building" series (1978) are rendered on white, lined paper, making the competing ideas on each side visible, and simultaneously forcing the viewer to make sense, make connections, or suspend belief about the (im)possibility of various hot-air-powered contraptions and how much weight they might lift. Similar reverie occurs in Flag Pole Housing (1974), where the artist sketches a shelter on a flagpole and in A Marbled Mirrored Ball Room in the Way of the 2nd Ave Subway (1974), a nod to the controversy surrounding the proposed subway stops that privileged wealthier east side neighborhoods.



Pope.L, Failure Drawing #184, 2004-2007 © Pope.L. Courtesy the artist, 52 Walker, New York, and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.

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The show's focus on juxtaposing the drawings of these two artists opens up a conversation about how Gordon Matta-Clark and Pope.L each have tried various approaches to the ongoing social conundrum of how to move what and who is marginal toward the center, drawing attention to the invisible and the overlooked. References to Matta-Clark's *Conical Intersect* (1975), which now only exists as video documentation, abound throughout the exhibition. Circular gouges into 52 Walker's walls and the accompanying drywall dust left on the floor echo his contribution to the Paris Biennale of the same year, when he bored a large, tornado-shaped hole through two neighboring seventeenth-century Parisian buildings that would be demolished to make way for the construction of the new and controversial Centre Pompidou. Matta-Clark's gesture, a comment on the transformation and gentrification of the neighborhood, invited passersby to consider the fleeting nature of history as they experienced another vantage point of the construction site, this time through the lens of spaces two centuries old.

Pope.L's massive installation *Vigilance* a.k.a. *Dust Room* (2023) faces a projection of the video documentation for *The Wall* (1976/2007), a performance Matta-Clark enacted after reconsidering his initial aim of going to Berlin and blowing up a section of the Berlin Wall. The dust room whirrs and chugs with industrial starts and stops, much like the construction equipment Matta-Clark would have used to bore that tornado-shaped hole in the Parisian buildings, a sound now only imagined in the silence of the existing documentation. In a similarly poetic gesture, Pope.L's *Failure Drawing #184* (2004–07) is installed on its side, leaning against *The Wall*'s wall, its own impossible failure being that it, too, is ultimately incomplete, its revision uncertain. *Impossible Failures* shows that for both artists, a gesture can be a question, a comment—a request to disrupt the status quo through imagining and conjuring, all in hopes of seeing something differently, or perhaps even for the first time.