

The Piers: Art and Sex along the New York Waterfront

Curated by Jonathan Weinberg with Darren Jones

April 4 – May 10, 2012



City-Condoned Anarchy

By Jonathan Weinberg

“Why do gays love ruins?” I said to my friends when we emerged into the crisp autumn sunlight of a Sunday afternoon, “The Lower West Side, the docks. Why do we love slums so much?”
“One can hardly suck cock on Madison Avenue, darling . . .”
— Andrew Holleran, “Nostalgia for the Mud”

Posted like silent sentinels all around the town, stand thousands of mortal men fixed in ocean reveries. Some leaning against the piles, some seated upon the pier heads. But these are all landmen; of week days pent up in lath and plaster—tied to counters, nailed to benches, clinched to desks. How then is this? Are the green fields gone? What do they here?
— Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

The Piers: Art and Sex along the New York Waterfront is the first museum exhibition to focus exclusively on the relationship of the uses of the Hudson River docks by artists and a newly emerging gay subculture. Between 1971 and 1983, the piers below Fourteenth Street were the site of an enormous range of works by artists as different in their mediums and intentions as Vito Acconci and Peter Hujar, Selley Seccombe and Tava, Gordon Matta-Clark and David Wojnarowicz. At the same time, the fight for the rights of gay, lesbian and transgendered people, spurred by the 1969 Stonewall riots, was literally transforming the cultural and social landscape of New York City. Stepping out of the closet in droves, gay men suddenly felt free to sunbathe on the piers naked, cruise and have sex in public. Within walking distance of the World Trade Center and the posh brownstones of Greenwich Village, this “arena for sexual theater,” as the painter Delmas Howe put it, became the backdrop for elaborate photographic tableaux, sometimes staged as in Arthur Tress’s picture of two naked figures in almost identical poses in adjoining rooms, or seemingly spontaneous, as in Stanley Stellar’s image taken from the rooftop of a man below giving a hand job to a fellow sunbather.^a Other photographers like Alvin Baltrop, Frank Hallam, Shelley Seccombe, Lee Snider, and Rich Wandel, were intent on making a direct record of the collapsing structures, and the people that used them knowing that this strange world on the water’s

edge would not last.^b The expatriate filmmaker Ivan Galietti saw in the pier’s fire-scorched walls and obscene murals an updated version of the ruins of Pompeii of his native Italy. These same ruins were the perfect *Arabian Nights* backdrop for the famous avant-gardist Jack Smith to perform his alter-ego, Sinbad Glick for Uzi Parnes’s camera.

A visit to the piers was often the occasion for chance meetings between artist and friends outside their daily routine or the art gallery scene. For example, the photographer Stanley Stellar ran into his colleague Peter Hujar during a photo shoot on Pier 46 in 1981. Hujar allowed Stellar to photograph him having sex in the background of a picture of the half-naked porn star J.D. Slater leaning against a doorway alongside a Keith Haring graffiti. This picture creates a startling juxtaposition between an act of fellatio, a beautiful male body, and a signature Haring work that is only intensified when we learn that it also includes the image of Hujar, one of the great photographers of the twentieth century. In an act of mutual trust and respect, Stellar lent his camera to Hujar and both photographers used it to take portraits of each other. Another fortuitous moment was when Hallam just happened to be on Pier 46 in 1982 when Ivan Galietti was filming *Pompeii New York*, which includes a cameo performance by Wojnarowicz and a musical performance by singer accordionist Phoebe Legere.



Frank Hallam, *Sunners, Pier 51 (Exterior from Interior)*, 1978/2011, archival digital print from slide 18.5x12.5”



Stanley Stellar, *Peter Gets His Dick Sucked*, 1981, contemporary digital print, 42 1/8 x 28”

Hallam, thinking that he was filming some sort of porn shoot, took slides of Galietti in the midst of acting in his own film. (The two artists only met and learned about each other's work years later.)

The piers were not only the focus of visual artists; a new generation of queer writers included evocative descriptions of the waterfront sex scene in their writings. But whereas the ambivalent meditations of Andrew Holleran, John Rechy, and Edmund White evoked the metaphor of the decaying waterfront as the restless and furtive nature of homosexual desire, for Samuel Delany the scene spoke of the revolutionary potential of having sex with multiple strangers. In Delany's *Motion of Light in Water*, he speculates:

...the first direct sense of political power comes from the apprehension of massed bodies. That I'd felt it and was frightened by it means that others had felt it too. The myth said we, as isolated perverts, were only beings of desire, manifestations of the subject ... But what this experience said was that there was a population—not of individual homosexuals ... not of hundreds, not of thousands, but rather of millions of gay men, and that history had, actively and already, created for us whole galleries of institutions, good and bad, to accommodate our sex...^c

How did so many of these once grand wharf buildings that bordered the river come to be left empty and in decay? From the late-nineteenth century to World War II, the piers were part of a vibrant trade and transportation system that constituted the busiest port in the world. The docks functioned not so much as destinations in and of themselves, but as passageways, porous edges to enter and leave the city. The enormous Beaux-Arts structures contained halls the size of football fields with exposed truss framing and skylights that followed the length of their roofs. Here passengers would arrive or wait to depart, while their baggage and vast quantities of cargo from all over the world would be received or sent off. Manhattan's tightly packed finger pier system, in which every square inch of space was used by people, freight, and trucks, became obsolete by the rise of trans-Atlantic air transport, and even more by the advent of container shipping requiring direct rail connections and enormous amounts of space. By the 1960s most commercial shipping had moved to New Jersey and Brooklyn and most of the piers below Fourteenth Street were closed down and fell into disrepair.^d As many of Hallam's and Seccombe's photographs record, a series of fires turned Piers 46, 48 and 51 into charred ruins. The fiscal bankruptcy of New York City in the late 1970s meant there was little money for their demolition or to adequately keep people out. Adding to the overall decay of the Hudson waterfront was the collapse and closing of the elevated West Side Highway below 42nd street. Ignoring the no-trespassing signs, people walked out onto this skyway, now empty of cars, to take in the views of the Hudson River and Lower Manhattan and the decaying docks and pier sheds. The long and ultimately successful battle to stop the city's wildly ambitious West Way scheme to sink the West Side Highway below ground and replace the grumbling piers with parks left the waterfront in a state of limbo, allowing dangerous collapsed structures to exist in proximity to some of the most expensive real estate in the world.



Andreas Sterzing, *Pier 34-1211 Mike Bidlo and David Wojnarowicz, 1983/2012*, archival pigment print from slide, 12.5x18.5"

And yet in a city where space is always at a premium, the piers did not stay empty, particularly in the midst of an economic recession. Many homeless people camped out in the pier buildings throughout the 1970s and 80s. But they were not the only squatters. In 1983 a group of artists led by David Wojnarowicz and Mike Bidlo took over Pier 34, the so-called Ward Line Pier, and made it an extension of the East Village scene. Andreas Sterzing's remarkable photographs of the various projects realized there by artists included those by Louis Frangella, John Fekner, David Finn, and Judy Glantzman, display a marvelous sense of freedom and community. Yet with the notable exception of Fekner, whose site-specific signage directly relates to its environment, most of these artists were mostly using the spaces to make the kind of sculpture and painting they might have done elsewhere.

This was not the case for the first great communal art project on the piers curated by Willoughby Sharp in 1971. This avant-garde impresario and editor of the magazine *Avalanche* first recognized the potential of the abandoned piers as a vehicle for a new kind of conceptual and/or performance artist who wanted to break out of the studio and the traditional art system. At Sharp's bequest, 27 artists (unfortunately all men) created pieces that were documented by the photographic team of Harry Shunk and János (Jean) Kender (aka Shunk-Kender).^e According to Sharp, most of the pieces were conceived in a matter of hours, "some were done in just a few minutes." The vast majority of the works took

place on the uncovered section of the pier that thrust out into the Hudson River. A piece like William Wegman's *Pier 18 "Bill" Bowling*, in which the artist sent instructions from California for the dock to be used like a bowling alley only to have the ball eventually fall into the river, emphasizes both the enormity of the dock and its limits. Sharp made no attempt to get official permission to use the pier, which is why no one outside the artists' immediate circle was invited to witness the events and why it was necessary to document the proceedings with the camera.

Both Acconci and Matta-Clark discovered the piers through Sharp's invitation. Matta-Clark's *Pier 18* piece involved the artist transplanting an evergreen tree onto a pile of debris. He then used a rope to tie one leg to a ceiling rafter and suspend himself upside down over the tree. His pose was borrowed from the hanged man of the Tarot cards, a figure that symbolizes rebellion and transition.^f Like Yves Klein's famous *Leap into the Void* (1960, and also "documented" by Shunk-Kender), Matta-Clark hung perilously over the abyss. At the very inception of his career, the artist deftly manipulated earth, air, light, and water in feats of physical endurance and danger, involving cuts directly into the building that reveal aspects of its structure and the latent potential in its decay and imaginative reconstruction.



Shunk/Kender, *Gordon Matta-Clark, Pier 18* (detail), 1971/2012, Digital C print (exhibition reprint), 8x10", The Shunk/Kender / Harry Shunk Photography Archives of the Roy Lichtenstein Foundation



Leonard Fink, *Day's End*, 1977, silver gelatin print, 8x10", courtesy of the LGBT Community Center National History Archive

From the outset, the artists who participated in *Pier 18* knew that the process would involve some sort of interaction with photography. Indeed, the most important means of access to the project is through the photographs of Shunk and Kender, who were lovers. Typically in the history of conceptualism and performance art, such photographs are thought of as merely documents—the photographer's task conceived in terms of creating uninflected records of what occurred in the various performances. And yet in the case of the *Pier 18* projects, it is clear that many of the artists conceived of their pieces as active collaborations with the photographers. For example, Baldessarri used his hands simply to frame New York harbor, in essence simulating the process of the camera composing a scene. Douglas Huebler asked Shunk-Kender to "establish the best 'aesthetic' shots of the pier and then

mark the spots with an x." The resulting photographs documented the chalk marks rather than the supposedly beautiful views.

Acconci used the *Pier 18* project as an opportunity "to affect, improve, an everyday relationship." In *Security Zone* he went to the end of the pier and was blindfolded. He then asked Lee Jaffe, a person Acconci claimed he had an "ambiguous feeling about," a person he did not trust, to make sure that he did not fall off the pier as he paced closer and closer to the edge. According to the notes for the piece:

I'm blindfolded, my hands are tied behind me, my ears are plugged; in my deprived position, I'm forced to have trust—there's only one person here who can stop me from walking off into the water. The piece measures my trust; more than that, it builds up trust.^g

Yet if one dispenses with the notes and only looks at the photographs of the performance, the pictures seem to have nothing to do with such issues of self-exploration and trust. Instead, Acconci's blindfolded and tied state, on the edge of an abandoned pier, evokes associations of torture, kidnapping, and even murder. In this film noir scenario, the artist appears to be blindfolded to maintain the security zone of the criminal's identity and the location of the hideaway where he does his nefarious work. This aspect of *Security Zone*, as well as Acconci's later piece for *Pier 17* with its emphasis on confession and blackmail, relate to the waterfront's history of crime and corruption, most famously depicted in Elia Kazan's *On the Waterfront*. Although the movie itself was largely filmed on the Hoboken side of the Hudson, it was based on a 1948 exposé in *The New York Sun* about corruption and violence in the longshoremen's union in New York City that

directly affected the piers below Fourteenth Street.^h

The bleakness of many of the photographs of the Pier 18 projects seems very different from the atmosphere of erotic exuberance of many of the later photographs of the piers taken at the height of summer in the late 70s and early 80s. Hujar's photograph of the Morton Street Pier with a man in shorts, legs crossed and napping in the sun, or Hallam's images of crowds of nude men carousing at the end of Pier 46, suggest why the *New York Times* in 1980 called the area "Manhattan's Beaches."ⁱ There is a Mardi Gras flavor to these pictures of men enjoying the Hudson River and the freedom of so much open space that belies the theme of danger and decay that is such a staple of so many of the recollections of the area.

Of course, at night, during cold weather it was a different story. We need only think about one particular Saturday, in early spring of 1971, when around midnight, Acconci stood before the entrance of Pier 17, a dilapidated and seemingly abandoned structure that had once been used by ships delivering cargo to the New York Central Railroad. He recalled, "I was afraid to go in. And I thought, is it worth going in? Is it worth going in?"^j Acconci found himself in this predicament because of a performance piece he had devised and set into motion when he posted the following announcement on a wall in the John Gibson Gallery:

I will be alone and wait at the far end of the pier for one hour. To anyone coming to meet me, I will attempt to reveal something I would normally keep concealed: censurable occurrences and habits, fears, jealousies—something that has not been exposed before and that would be disturbing for me to make public.^k

For Acconci the word performance resonates less with traditional concepts of theater, than with the idea of fulfilling a bargain or that is, *performing* the terms of a contract: "You say you are going to do something, now you are going to carry it through."^l In this case, the artist promised that whoever was brave enough to seek him out on the pier could make "any documentation he wishes, for any purpose; the result should be that he bring [sic] home material whose revelation could work to my disadvantage—material for blackmail."^m



Leonard Fink, *Pier 48 Interior*, 1980, silver gelatin print, 8x10", courtesy of the LGBT Community Center National History Archive

space. Street lamps from the westside highway burn in the windows, throwing shadows behind staircases and burying doors and halls. Walked out on the catwalk and watched the terrific gale and tossing waves of the river from one of the side doors. Huge panoramas of factories and water tanks were silhouetted by green roof lights and cars moving down the highway seen only by the red wink of their taillights.ⁿ

In 1975, Gordon Matta-Clark was also spending an enormous amount of his time at the waterfront. With the help of a loyal group of assistants, he used chain saws and acetylene torches to make the enormous cuts of *Day's End* in the structure of Pier 52, only a few blocks north of Pier 46. More so than the nocturnal trespassing of Acconci and Wojnarowicz, Matta-Clark's "improvements" to city-owned property placed him in jeopardy of being charged with criminal vandalism. Defending his actions, Matta-Clark wrote that when he found the pier it had "become a veritable muggers' playground, both

Some seven or eight years later—we don't know the exact date—Leonard Fink took a picture of David Wojnarowicz passing in front of Pier 46. Like Acconci, Wojnarowicz also risked wandering the interiors of waterfront warehouses at night, sometimes to make art, like the photographs from his *Rimbaud in New York Series*, but also to cruise and have sex with other men—that is, to literally commit the kinds of acts that in Acconci's terms might be "material for blackmail." Wojnarowicz remembered several of his nocturnal forays in his collection of autobiographical sketches, *Close to the Knives*:

Inside, for as far as the eye could see, there was darkness and waving walls of iron, rusting sounds painful and rampant, crashing sounds of glass from remaining windows, and no sign of people: I realized I was completely alone. The sense of it slightly unnerving in the cavernous



Andreas Sterzing, *Pier 34-1215 Luis Frangella Mural*, 1983/2012, archival pigment print from slide, 10x15"

for people who go only to enjoy walking there and for a recently popularized sado-masochistic fringe” and that “city-condoned anarchy” reigns there. He continued:

... in the midst of this state of affairs it would seem within the rights of an artist or any other person for that matter to enter such a premises with a desire to improve the property, to transform the structure in the midst of its ugly criminal state into a place of interest, fascination and value.^o



Shelley Seccombe, *Sunbathing on the Edge, Pier 52*, 1977, contemporary archival digital print, 11x15”

Matta-Clark talked about how, in the process of making *Day’s End*, he was competing for the space with “the teaming [sic] S&M renaissance that cruises the abandoned waterfront” and, as if he were the pier’s rightful owner. Matta-Clark remembered, “I simply appropriated the pier by keeping my crew of henchmen boarding up and barb-wiring all the alternative entrances except the front door for which I substituted my own lock and bolt.”^p Of course it was Matta-Clark whose aesthetic vandalism of city-owned property was actually criminal. (Indeed, the police tried to shut down the project and there was even talk that he would be arrested.)

No doubt Matta-Clark’s ironic explanation that he was rescuing the piers from gay men wasn’t meant to be taken entirely seriously, and yet it raises several questions that go to the core of this exhibition. How did *Day’s End* relate to the queer subculture? Was there any kind of equivalence between Matta-Clark’s act of aesthetic vandalism and the sexual deviant behavior that was being temporarily locked out of the space? Was there an erotic component to Matta-Clark’s hyper-masculine acts of cutting that resonates with what he described as an “S/M renaissance”?

In the end, queers were only temporarily shut out of Pier 52 as we can see from several photographs by Fink and one wonderful picture that Seccombe took of men sunbathing in front of the wedge Matta-Clark cut in the side of the shed. Indeed, Seccombe and Hallam, ended up recording the demolition of Pier 52 and what was left of *Day’s End* in January of 1979, with the great cut on the west wall still standing for a few more days, roofless and forlorn, a fitting memorial to the artist who had died four months before. That these two photographers knew nothing about Matta-Clark’s work when they photographed it testifies that, apart from an art world clique, few in the late-70s were aware of Matta-Clark’s supposedly scandalous transgressions. Far more shocking and notorious at the time, were the giant men with engorged penises that Tava (born Gustav von Will) painted on the west façade of Pier 46, in full view of the tourist boats that circled Manhattan. Hallam and Stellar both photographed how brazenly the handsome Tava went about painting



Leonard Fink, *Tava Mural Pier 46*, 1980, silver gelatin print, 8x10”, courtesy of the LGBT Community Center National History Archive

his murals in broad daylight, almost challenging the police to arrest him. *Day’s End* changed not only in relationship to where the sun was in the sky, but also in terms of those who interacted with it, in and outside of the art world. As the artist himself put it, after the building was shut down “a lot of people took it upon themselves to break in and so keep the work in some kind of public domain.”^q

This exhibition shows the connections to be made between artists that are usually kept separate in the history of conceptual performance art, such as Acconci and East-Village painters like Wojnarowicz, but also to illuminate

the interconnectedness between resistant subcultures that are typically seen as occupying different spaces and fulfilling different needs, yet which overlap. Bringing certain artists and queers together in scandalous proximity is not intended to render a comparative judgment on their bodies of work, nor to imply anything about their private sexual proclivities. The artists whose works are on view at the Leslie-Lohman Museum made a variety of work and lived a variety of lives. And yet all of the artists were attracted to the piers because they appeared to be outside or beyond social control—they were spaces of freedom that in their ruined state also served as apt symbols for the seeming collapse of modernity.

Hardly “abandoned”—a word so often used to describe them—these piers were actually full of all sorts of activities and behaviors in which these artists inserted themselves. By juxtaposing the works of such different artists, the goal of this exhibition is not to homogenize the strange artistic production along the waterfront, but to rescue that production from the sanitizing effect of academic categories and compartmentalizing. As Matta-Clark recognized, the aim is to recover the piers as a site of “interest, fascination and value” but also risk and sexual adventure. What were the fates of the pier structures as the waterfront morphed into the bucolic network of green parks and bicycle paths we know today? Of the piers that figure in this exhibition, Piers 17 and 18 were the first to go not long after Acconci made his project in 1971, buried under the landfill of Battery Park City. In 1979, Piers 51 and 52 were razed, and on into the 1980s, Piers 48, 46 and 45, followed. In the late 80s and 90s, these now open piers in Greenwich Village became a vibrant gathering place for a new generation of queers, and in particular gay, lesbian and transgender youth of color. However, the concerns and interests of these groups were largely left out of the planning process for the renewal of the area. In 2002 the direct action groups SexPanic! and FIERCE! were joined by the Radical Faeries to protest against the Giuliani administration for “squeezing and regulating” queer spaces at the piers and throughout the city. They organized unsuccessfully to stop the conversion of the area into a traditional waterfront park for the adjoining affluent neighborhood.^f

Undoubtedly gay men’s use of the area for sexual encounters dissipated even before the final demolition of Pier 45, the last of the sex piers, with the rise of the AIDS epidemic and its devastation to the queer community. Even though the importance of the Manhattan waterfront in the life of gay men goes back to the mid-nineteenth century and the time of Herman Melville and Walt Whitman, it is hard to think about the pre-AIDS sexual activity on the piers without seeing in them the role of sexual promiscuity in spreading the disease. For example, *After Stonewall*, the 1999 documentary about the gay liberation movement, used a photograph of men cruising a pier building interior from the 1970s to illustrate the advent of AIDS, although the disease was first identified in 1981.^g

Equally misleading is the nostalgia that tends to permeate discussions of gay sex during this time. If the nudity and anonymous sex of the pier scene suggests the possibility of a radical rethinking of sexuality and community, it is not because it was somehow exempt from the hierarchies and prejudices of ageism, race, and class that unfortunately are still so prevalent in the queer scene today. For every Samuel Delany who celebrates a Whitmanesque coming together of naked bodies along the waterfront, there are detractors like Arthur Tress, who was rebuffed when he tried to strike up a simple conversation with a fellow cruiser:^h So much of the expressive power of the photographs of sex on the piers is built on the way the ruined structures literally casts a shadow over the proceedings, as if the gay men, and the artists who depict them, for all their lack of inhibitions, still carried with them a strong sense of bourgeois morality. Indeed, the pleasure and intensity of such sex is bound up with a sense that it is forbidden and dangerous. Yet in the end what makes the pier scene seem so extraordinary is the promise it offered of liberation. Was there really a time like this, not so long ago, when in the very heart of the cultural and financial capital of the United States queer men were seemingly so free? If we could remake the edges of Manhattan into a site of sexual and artistic experimentation, what else might we change? To invoke Matta-Clark once again, we look back at the piers with fascination and nostalgia as the harbinger of the very “city-condoned anarchy” he claimed his own art mitigated, but which, in fact, was one of its most spectacular manifestations.



Frank Hallam, *Tava (Gustav von Will) Painting (Pier 46)*, 1980/2011, archival digital print from slide, 18.5x12.5”

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to acknowledge the generosity of all the artists who agreed to participate in the exhibition and shared with me their memories of the piers. I also want to thank Chris Dierks, Tierny Drummond, Stephen Koch, Sean Logue, Wendy Olsoff, Silva Skenderi, and Rich Wandel as well the Acconci Studio, the Peter Hujar Estate, The Roy Lichtenstein Foundation, The National Archive of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, & Transgender History, the Matthew Marks Gallery, and the P.P.O.W. Gallery. I want to salute the staff at the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art for their hard work on this exhibition, particularly Rob Hugh Rosen, Wayne Snellen, Julia Haas, and Jerry Kajpust, as well as the president of the board, Jonathan David Katz, and the Museum founder, Charles Leslie. Thomas Crow and Michael Lobel have given invaluable advice and inspiration along the way and, as always, my partner Nicholas Boshnack has nurtured my work on every level. I also want to acknowledge the funding I have gotten from the Getty Research Center, where I first started working on this project in 2002, and the Creative Capital/Andy Warhol Foundation to turn my pier research into a book.

NOTES

- a Jonathan Weinberg, Telephone interview with Delmas Howe, 8 December 2010.
- b Unfortunately we were not able to borrow works of art by Alvin Baltrop for this exhibition. Baltrop's works have been discussed at length by Douglas Crimp, most recently in Lynne Cooke and Douglas Crimp with Kristin Poor, ed. *Mixed Use*, Manhattan (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010).
- c Samuel R. Delany, *The Motion of Light in Water: Sex and Science Fiction Writing in the East Village, 1957-1965* (New York: New American Library, 1988), 174.
- d For a history of the waterfront, see Kevin Bone, ed. *The New York Waterfront: Evolution and Building Culture of the Port and Harbor* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1997).
- e Willoughby Sharp discusses the project in Luca Lo Pinto, "A Portrait of a Transcontinental Cultural Catalyst: A Dialogue with Willoughby Sharp," *Nero*, no. 14 (June/July 2007): 53-55. He mentions inviting 28 artists, but the 1992 Shunk catalogue only lists 27 (perhaps Sharp meant Shunk-Kender to count as number 28). The Pier 18 photographs were originally exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in 1971. In 1992, the Musée d'Art Moderne et d'Art Contemporain de Nice organized an exhibition of the photographs and published a catalogue and interview with Harry Shunk. In the catalogue all of the photographs are attributed solely to Shunk. In fact, there is barely a mention of Kender in the extensive catalogue. It seems that Shunk and Kender were not only professional collaborators but lovers, and when their relationship ended, Shunk simply eradicated him from the history of the project. I mention it here because not only has the role of photography taken a back seat in the understanding of the project, but the fact that a queer couple was instrumental in its success has also been ignored. See Harry Shunk, *Projects: Pier 18* (Nice: Musée d'Art Moderne et d'Art Contemporain de Nice, 1992). I would like to thank Arden Sherman, who wrote her master's thesis on Shunk-Kender and Pier 18, for sharing her thoughts and research on their collaboration.
- f For a discussion of Matta-Clark's evocation of the hanged man, see Tina Kukielski, "In the Spirit of the Vegetable: The Early Works of Gordon Matta-Clark (1969-71)," in *Gordon Matta-Clark: You Are the Measure*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2007), 42.
- g Vito Acconci, *Vito Acconci: Diary of a Body, 1969-1973* (Milan & New York: Charta, 2006), 248.
- h See Malcolm Johnson, *On the Waterfront* (New York: Chamberlain Bros., 2005).
- i E.R. Shipp, "Disused Piers Become Manhattan's 'Beaches,'" *New York Times* 1980, B1, B5.
- j Jonathan Weinberg, Interview with Vito Acconci. Brooklyn, 19 April 2009.
- k Acconci, *Vito Acconci: Diary of a Body, 1969-1973*: 258.
- l Weinberg, Interview with Vito Acconci.
- m Vito Acconci, "Vitto Acconci and His Pier 17 Project," *The Village Voice*, 18 May 1971.
- n David Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 19.
- o As quoted in Gordon Matta-Clark et al., *Gordon Matta-Clark* (London: Phaidon, 2003), 12.
- p *Ibid.*, 12-15.
- q Gordon Matta-Clark, Letter to Wolfgang Becker, 8 September 1975. As quoted in Thomas E. Crow, "Gordon Matta-Clark," in *Gordon Matta-Clark*, ed. Corinne Diserens (London: Phaidon, 2003), 8.
- r See Benjamin Shepard and Greg Smithsion, *The Beach Beneath the Streets: Contesting New York City's Public Spaces* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2011).
- s See *After Stonewall*, directed by John Scagliotti, 1999.
- t Jonathan Weinberg, Interview with Arthur Tress. Cambria, Calif., 26 December 2002.

Time and Tide

By Darren Jones

As an artist in my thirties who grew up in Scotland, I learned more about gay history from what had happened in the United States, than from anything closer to home. Immense historical accomplishments often transcend national boundaries and the impact of my clandestine education was profound. Although lacking firsthand experience of the piers or other significant events of the 1970s or 80s in New York, I felt deeply connected to them. America was where the battles of the gay movement had been most ferociously fought, where the iconic events and figures had emerged, and where the highest prices had been paid. So many of the images and works of art from the waterfront, with their messages of liberation, rebellion, or sexual freedom, evoke a spirit of much that has transpired in our difficult and glorious shared past.

Through all of us flow the attainments of our social forebears, of the lives and losses that carved paths ahead where none existed. We all are host to the empowerment gained from the efforts of previous generations, who, in facing the struggles of their time, made it possible for us to live as we do in ours.

The potency and humility of this inheritance is often laid aside today in favor of the hunger for what comes next in the frenetic urban sphere of our lives. Technology is less forgiving about drawing upon the past than it is about designing our legacies for the future. While it would be remiss of any generation to remain unaware of their pioneering predecessors, it is a common pretermission in a world where yesterday is fading and tomorrow beckons.

When one does consider the social realms and physical spaces of the recent past that exist only in remembrance and fragmented architectural ruins, there is an inevitable shift towards the romantic. We recall their comparative freedoms and laissez-faire, though that is rarely the full spectrum of the truth.

One of the most profound and invaluable characteristics of the work gathered in *The Piers: Art and Sex Along the New York Waterfront* is to afford a moment's contemplation on such themes; to apprehend the current instant and consider the depth and richness that the inhabitants of the piers during the 1970s represented, both as contemporary artists and as part of the gay subculture.

The images in this exhibition illuminate environments, social and physical, which have evolved enormously, and sometimes with great pain. The 1970s are often looked upon as the final moments of an unfettered sexual landscape within the context of the subsequent AIDS crisis. However, the men who claimed the piers as an arena for social interaction and erotic intimacy were not aware of what lay ahead, and it is helpful to consider the period for what it was, not only for what it preceded.

Gay men in America have often made the playgrounds of their most emancipated conditions on the geographic fringes of the country—Fire Island, Provincetown, or Key West come to mind. Such physical detachment and protection from heterosexual conformities and civic restrictions, with their inherent risks, have resulted in these hallowed places gaining a socio-mythological presence of immense emotional attraction.

In their final decades, the piers provided just such a refuge. That is not to say that the waterfront was without its dangers, but those hazards were a part of the allure. It is no coincidence that such locales also appeal to artists.

Looking at the fragments of the existing piers and these assembled works, one observes that those warm and dusty days of the 1970s and early 80s were not an isolated time in the history of New York's artistic and gay life: they were a profound moment in a fascinating urban continuum that extends to the present.

Artist Biographies

Vito Acconci (born 1940) has developed a vast body of work spanning the fields of poetry, design, art and architecture. Beginning in the late 1960s, Acconci established himself as one of the leading practitioners of performance and video art, multi-media installation, and sculpture. Themes have included the body and its relationship to space, language, and human action. His often politicized and socially challenging artistic experiments, coupled with his many teaching positions, have made him one of the most influential artists of the twentieth century. Today his focus has shifted to architectural practice.

John Baldessari (born 1931) has been featured in over 200 solo exhibitions internationally. His prodigious creative output is represented across various media, including film, books, video, painting, and photography. An influential teacher from 1970 to 2008, he taught at CalArts and UCLA. His work engages with such themes as language and text, structure and arbitrary goals, and the concept of direction, where he shows the viewer what to look at and how to make visual choices, an interest that developed after he read a criticism of contemporary art suggesting that it was merely pointing. In 1970, he created a work named *The Cremation Project*, for which he burnt all of the paintings he had made between 1953 and 1966 to call attention to the artistic process and the cyclical nature of life.

Frank Hallam was born in Indianapolis, Indiana. He started taking photographs in the early 1950s. He first came to New York City in 1958 where he began taking slides of the piers in the early 1970s. Besides being an accomplished photographer, he is a published writer. Under the pseudonym, Frank Holland, his stories have appeared in such magazines and journals as *MacGuffin*, *Oyez Review*, *Phantasmagoria*, and *Pleiades*. His autobiographic novel, *Debut: Chicago, 1952*, was published in 2008.

Peter Hujar (1934-1987) was one of the leading figures of New York's Downtown creative scene during the 1970s and 80s. An accomplished and intuitive photographer known for the evocative beauty of his black and white images, Hujar's subjects included farm animals, landscapes, and portraits. Perhaps his most intimate and powerful works remain those of the nocturnal characters and streets of New York. He photographed many of the era's cultural icons, from Susan Sontag to Divine. Hujar's 1976 book, *Portraits in Life and Death*, provides a rare insight into his life and work. He died from AIDS-related complications in 1987. Hujar was the lover of David Wojnarowicz.

Leonard Fink (1930-1993) was a lawyer and amateur photographer who documented the gay life of New York from the mid-1960s to the early 1990s. Working in obscurity, he photographed many facets of this environment including the first Gay Pride parade in 1970; Greenwich Village, particularly West Street and its proliferation of gay bars; and the secretive world of the West Side piers and the gay men who cruised them for sex. He also took many self-portraits. His images were seen mainly by friends and were not exhibited in his lifetime. Fink died of AIDS-related complications in 1993.

Andreas Sterzing (born 1956) is known internationally for his portraits of the people and places of his home environments. Although the German-born photographer is now based in England, he worked and lived in New York from 1982 to 2004, where he photographed the *D Train Portraits* and *14th Street Project*. In 1983-84, he documented the artists who worked in Pier 34, creating a visual time capsule of the underground graffiti scene. Photos and story about Pier 34 were published in *Stern* and other magazines at the time. Selected pictures were included in an exhibition in Prague in 2005 and in an online exhibition in 2008.

John Fekner is known for creating hundreds of site-specific conceptual artworks throughout New York during the 1970s and 80s, his philosophy being to "reduce the value of an art object to a shared visual experience for the public at large." The works often consisted of spray painted dates, words, and motifs related to their location. The purpose of Fekner's *Warning Signs* project, for example, was to focus attention on the dilapidated and dangerous condition of many of the buildings and neighborhoods where he made his art. His socially focused projects called attention not only to the buildings themselves but to the city officials who had the influence to improve the urban landscape. His latest work utilizes the web as a "social workspace" to consider media control, environmental issues, and society's relationship to greed. His work has been the subject of numerous solo exhibitions.

David Finn (born 1952) has worked as an artist since the late 1970s, exhibiting his drawings and sculptures in over 15 solo exhibitions, including venues in Hong Kong, London, Milan, New York, and at the 1984 Venice Biennale. He is known for his earlier, evocative 'Newspaper Children' installations. During the 1980s, he developed masked life-sized figures from refuse materials on New York's Lower East Side. Later work grew to encompass ceramics, steel, and wax. Stone and wood carvings form the basis of his current 'Ghosts and Networks' series of sculptures. He has received awards from the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York Foundation for the Arts. He is currently professor of art and

Rubin Fellow at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, where his focus is on community-based art.

Ivan Galietti (born 1952) is an Italian filmmaker and actor who recorded the piers during the early 1980s as the setting for his film, *Pompeii New York*. The film draws romantic parallels between ancient Pompeii and the secretive rituals of men hunting for sex amid the ruined buildings of the waterfront. Galietti's work features many of the central characters of the 80s art scene, including David Wojnarowicz, Phoebe Legere, and Penny Arcade. The film's setting animates for the viewer scenes of the piers so often seen today only in still images.

Gordon Matta-Clark (1943-1978) was a major artist of the American avant-garde during the 1970s. He is perhaps best known for his site-specific "building cuts" (1972-78), made in various locations including the decaying industrial environs of the West Side piers. Matta-Clark originally trained as an architect and referred to his carving and cutting of these buildings with a chainsaw as "anarchitecture." In 1971, he co-founded Food, a SoHo restaurant staffed by artists, which became a central meeting place for the New York art scene. His work has been shown at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, and the 1975 Biennale de Paris among many other venues. Matta-Clark died from pancreatic cancer in 1978.

Uzi Parnes (born 1954) is a filmmaker and photographer who has been documenting the underground and performance art scenes, as well as the architectural heritage of New York since the mid-70s. A prolific creative force, Parnes has written and directed numerous short films shown at film festivals, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and on PBS. He has had fruitful collaborations with among others, Carmelita Tropicana and filmmaker and performance artist Jack Smith. He ran the Uzi N.Y. Gallery from 2003—2005, focusing on photography and painting. Parnes was the founder and co-director of the 1980s performance club, Chandalier [sic].

Shelley Secombe (born 1938) moved to New York City in the 1960s, where she settled in the West Village and taught music. Captivated by the waterfront on Manhattan's West Side, she began photographing the crumbling structures of the pier sheds in the 1970s, selling her piano to buy darkroom equipment. Her haunting pictures of the decaying piers and of those who frequented them testify to their power forty years later as she still documents the colorful scene along the Hudson River and its connecting waterways. Her photographs, widely exhibited, were published in *Lost Waterfront: The Decline and Rebirth of Manhattan's Western Shore* (Fordham University Press, 2008).

Shunk-Kender comprised the photographic team of Harry Shunk (1924-2006) and János (Jean) Kender (1937-2009). From 1959-1973, they documented some of the most important avant-garde performances and conceptual pieces of their era, from Yves Klein's *Leap into the Void*, to images of Christo's *Valley Curtain*, early photographs by Andy Warhol, Lucio Fontana, George Segal, Yayoi Kusama, Robert Rauschenberg, Niki de Saint Phalle, Jean Tinguely, Claes Oldenburg, the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, and Alan Kaprow's "happenings," among numerous others. After the partnership dissolved, Shunk continued to photograph many other emerging and important artists, critics, and collectors until his death.

Jack Smith (1932-1989) was a filmmaker, photographer, and actor. His 1963 film *Flaming Creatures* is considered a landmark of both underground and queer cinema. According to the director Richard Foreman, Smith "is the hidden source of practically everything that's of any interest in the so-called experimental theatre today." His work influenced the Ridiculous Theater Company and the performance artists Laurie Anderson and Matthew Barney. As an actor, he appeared in his own performance pieces and films as well as films by Andy Warhol and Ken Jacobs, and in the theater productions of Foreman.

Lee Snider (born 1939) has been a professional photographer for 35 years, specializing in travel photography. Previously he was the senior editor and art director at Chappell Music Publishing Company. His work has been published in books and major magazines and newspapers. He is also known for his profoundly moving and invaluable documentation of AIDS activism, AIDS walks, memorials, demonstrations, and Gay Pride events.

Stanley Stellar (born 1945) has been recording the panorama of New York's gay life and the men shaped by it for over thirty years. The visual archive of his subjects, often focusing on their physical beauty, provides a vast political and anthropological history. Conveyed by the men who passed in front of his lens, the viewer is afforded a glittering array of gay men enjoying their urban milieu. Stellar's work has been included in many exhibitions, publications, and anthologies. His most recent book, *The Beauty of All Men*, was published in 2011.

Tava (Gustav von Will) was a graffiti artist, active in New York throughout the 1970s. His massive phallogocentric murals of hyper-masculine men were painted in and around the derelict sheds of the waterfront. These nude giants evoke the heroes of ancient civilizations when homosexuality was celebrated. He also created murals at the Underground and the Flamingo clubs and for disco events such as the Sleaze Ball.

Arthur Tress (born 1940) began his photography career in his early teens, photographing the rundown amusement parks of his Coney Island neighborhood. Later, working in black-and-white and then color, he shot surrealist and allegorical portraits of children and adults, social documentary, and ethnographic photography. His documentation of the West Side fringes of Manhattan and his lush tableaux of gay male desire played out in the dilapidated ruins of the piers provides some of the richest iconic imagery of the subject extant today. The recipient of numerous awards, Tress's photography is exhibited internationally.

Rich Wandel (born 1946) is a longtime activist within the gay and lesbian community and the current archivist and historian of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community Center National History Archive in New York. Wandel is also an accomplished photographer. The focus of his work is the gay community and its ongoing struggle for political and social liberation. Wandel's photographs have appeared in many books, articles, and documentaries.

David Wojnarowicz (1954-1992) was one of the most prominent artists in the New York art world of the 1980s. A vociferous activist for the rights of artists and gay culture, his work was provocative and often political, social critiques of American culture and what he saw as its preoccupation with greed and violence. His work often juxtaposed eroticism and gay male sexual imagery and language within the context of the AIDS crisis and society's apathy towards the plight of his community. His multimedia work incorporated collage, sculpture, film, and performance. Often cited as an influence on the current generation of artists, Wojnarowicz was included in the 1985 Whitney Biennial. He died from AIDS-related complications in 1992.



Frank Hallam, *Filming Pompeii New York*, 1982/2011, archival digital print from slide, 12.5x18.5"

Cover image: Stanley Stellar, *Mike Nomad, West Side Highway*, 1980, silver gelatin print, 11x14"