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Art Attack:

427 Massachusetts Ave NW

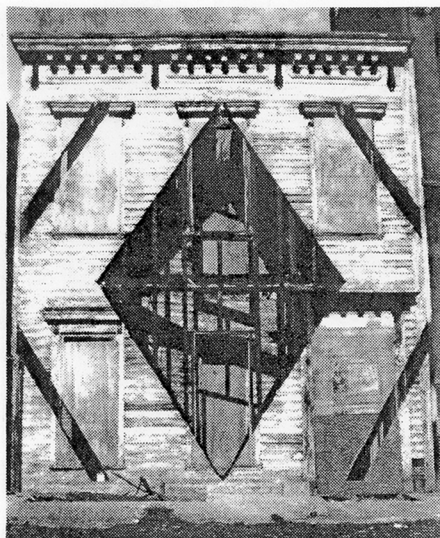
427 Massachusetts Ave NW
Washington, DC

January 8 - open indefinitely

The type of work that used to be known as avant-garde has now settled into a kind of Baroque state. What was once a matter of innovation has now become one of refinement, of nuance rather than of breakthrough, as avant-garde techniques and methods have, with time and (most importantly) exposure, become conventions in themselves. This is clearly the case with Art Attack's 427 Massachusetts Ave NW, a work that employs methods and techniques pioneered by a previous avant-garde, and then goes on to extend them.

427 Massachusetts Ave NW is a work that is identical to the row house which provides both its setting and the material from which it was produced. It sits in what is euphemistically termed a transitional neighborhood, one abandoned row house among many. But this house is different: the double outline of a diamond shape has been cut out of the facade, exposing parts of the house's structural skeleton in front. The pieces of wall removed from the facade have been hung like a mobile inside the house's interior, along with glass wind chimes. It's a site-specific installation that is both site and installation simultaneously. The absence of whole sections of the house's exterior produces an effect of estrangement in the viewer: where we are accustomed to seeing a house, we see something else, an intervention rather than a domicile.

This brief description of 427 Massachusetts Ave NW will probably sound somewhat familiar—it is reminiscent of some of Gordon Matta-Clark's work. (That is, if we interpret 427 within the conventions of looking at and thinking about art.) Matta-Clark established a precedent for 427—which Art Attack cheerfully acknowledges—and in effect created an artistic genre out of the mutilation of houses for aesthetic purposes. (And in the absence of settled genres, art, no less than law, seems to be increasingly based on the rule of precedent.)



Art Attack, installation, 1988-9 (photo courtesy of Art Attack).

But this kind of art goes beyond the limits established by previous works of public art, and engages extra-aesthetic considerations in the process. And that is where 427 extends the boundaries of Matta-Clark's work, providing the Baroque refinement and adding the nuance to a preexisting corpus.

427 Massachusetts Ave NW continues a line of Art Attack's semi-covert public pieces such as *Five Continents Divide*, for which the group erected a number of free standing structures on the median grass dividing MacArthur Boulevard. This type of work presupposes a conflation of the genre of "public art" with something else altogether. Perhaps we can call it a material discourse of altered environments, in which one is aware more of the patterns of social and other interaction within the environment than of the environment's aesthetic appeal. In a context of this kind, the work's capacity to engage public attention on a discursive level becomes primary, leaving the artistic effect to a secondary and perhaps even entirely academic level. (Though much of what we call art we call art for lack of a better term. This doesn't mean that the work is any less valid, though it does indicate the probable futility of distinguishing art from other sorts of discourse. 427 discourages that sort of distinction more than Matta-Clark's work did, though in any event, the term "art" has come to stand for a set of conventions that guides the interpretation of sense data, and shouldn't be thought of in terms of genre, medium, form, etc.)

Previous work that, like Matta-Clark's, was produced for display outside of a gallery, or which made a gallery exhibition impossible, was made that way in order to protest the commodification of the object that is integral to the gallery's function as a glorified sales showroom. But by the early '80s it became apparent that the gallery system of distribution could commodify not only the art object, but the artist's career as well. This change in circumstance provides a Baroque nuance to the development of art packaging. (Quite literally, when we remember the celebrity status of the artist in, say 17th century Rome.) From earlier critiques focusing on the commodity status of the art object alone, Art Attack has extracted a collective approach to the work, and has retained an at least semi-anonymity for its members and assistants. Clearly, it is no longer quite accurate to call attention to the fact of art as a commodity alone.

The conception behind 427 Massachusetts Ave NW represents the construction of a

concrete language that reaches beyond the constricted bounds of aesthetic rhetoric and into the realm of direct sensual experience, after that experience has been sprung from the prison of aesthetics. This recalls Artaud's call for a stage set that would act as a kind of physical hieroglyph capable of breaking down discursive boundaries. Artaud liked to stress the gratuitous nature of this type of stage set, and indeed of theater in general. There is some of that evident in Art Attack's work, too. The whole history of 427 Massachusetts Ave NW has been gratuitous, from its beginning as a condemned building left standing, to its uncertain duration as a public work. (Its run will end whenever the developer's wrecking ball gets around to it.) And there is, perhaps, something inherently gratuitous about the conversion of living space—in a city so short of it—into art. But it is not out of place to ask here about the largely gratuitous nature of much of contemporary life, and perhaps it is one function of 427 Massachusetts Ave NW's kind of material discourse to train our eyes to see the absurdities of life as being part of its systematic gratuitousness rather than as occasional exceptions to the rule of reason.

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