

537 Broadway

Performance and Buildings

Agustin Schang

I

Since 1974, like many other spaces in downtown Manhattan, the 537-541 Broadway cast-iron building became the headquarters of an artists' community that worked outside the conventional borders of the art system. Moved by the co-operative housing spirit that took roots in SoHo during the late 1960s and early 1970s, Fluxus leader George Maciunas helped to buy and refurbish many commercial lofts formerly used by marginal business in the neighborhood.¹ In 1967, he organized the acquisition of the first building on 80 Wooster Street, which he named FluxHouse II, after a first attempt on Spring Street. He kept the basement as his personal operation base, and from there, he ran the entire Fluxhouse project: the first artists' co-op initiative in SoHo. Beyond residences and studios, Maciunas hoped to establish collective workshops, food-buying co-operatives, and theatres to link the strengths of various media and bridge the gap between the artists and the neighborhood.

He materialized his utopian planning impulses through detailed projections of construction costs and the benefits of wholesale purchases. He was convinced that legal prohibitions could be overcome, despite the fact that SoHo was not zoned for residential use. He established himself as the president of Fluxhouse Co-operatives, Inc., performing all the organizational work involved in the planning. He was in charge of creating the collectives, purchasing buildings, obtaining mortgages, securing legal and architectural services, and conducting work as a general contractor for all renovations. He also offered to handle the future management, if so desired by the members. It was through this planning that Maciunas helped to purchase sixteen buildings that he later remodeled and sold to artists, making very little profit.²

Five thirty-seven and five forty-one Broadway—later separated in two artists' co-ops—was the last building developed through this plan. In 1868, the five-story cast-iron building was erected by Irish architect Charles Mettam after a spectacular fire on the former site of P. T. Barnum's *Chinese Museum Collection* (1853–1863) and, later, P. T. Barnum's second *American Museum* (1865–1868). Five thirty-seven and five forty-one Broadway was designed shortly after the Civil War for joint owners Benjamin Franklin Beekman, who had his office there, and Peter Gilsey, the strong advocate of cast-iron who was soon to build the Gilsey Hotel, which is still standing on Broadway at Twenty-Ninth Street. The Broadway building was later extended two hundred feet through the block to Mercer Street, where it currently appears under the numbers 108-112 Mercer Street.³

For this last FluxHouse, Maciunas assembled a group of multi-disciplinary artists who subsequently split the 537-541 building into two co-operatives. Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs, David Gordon, Valda Settefield, and Joan Jonas bought lofts at 541 Broadway. The building was shortly going to become the so-called "Dancers' Building." Their spaces were wider than the standard twenty-five-foot-long lofts without columns, and the floors were entirely made of wood; these factors qualified as an ideal combination for performance practices.⁴ For the 537 Broadway section, Maciunas brought together Nam June Paik and Shigeo Kubota, Ay-O, Yoshi Wada, Simone Forti, Peter Van Riper, Frances Alenikoff, Mary Beth Edelson, Davidson Gigliotti, Elaine Summers, and Maciunas himself. They decided to name their co-op *The Cast-Iron Court Corporation* after the internal courtyard separating them from their symmetrical artists twin-co-op at 541 Broadway. With this newly established artistic community, the whole building became a laboratory accommodating the emerging fields of video, performance, and visionary new works in disciplines such as poetry, music, and dance.

As Maciunas did with many of the buildings he helped to purchase and renovate, he kept a spot in the building for himself: the second-floor loft on 537 Broadway would become the base of his renewal operations until 1976, when he was forced to leave New York after suffering a violent assault by the construction mafia, causing the end of his ambitions housing program. He then sold the loft to the French artist Jean Dupuy, who moved in with Olga Adorno and dubbed the space Grommet Studio. For the next three years, and engaging over two hundred artists, Dupuy presented a series of Collective Performance Concerts, in which he participated as both an organizer and an artist.⁵ In 1982, Dupuy and Adorno rented the front half of the loft to Emily Harvey—a corporate art consultant—and the Grommet Gallery opened under Harvey's direction, on January 15, 1982, with Adorno's first solo exhibition. It was after a couple of years that Dupuy and Adorno decided to move to France and sold the loft to

Harvey and her then husband Christian Xatrec who, in 1983, renamed the space the Emily Harvey Gallery. It is well-known that the space was not only an art gallery, but also a gathering place for the Fluxus diaspora at large, including the artists Dick Higgins, John Cage, Henry Flynt, Alison Knowles, Jackson Mac Low, Paik, Charlotte Moorman, Carolee Schneemann, Marian Zazeela, and La Monte Young. The Emily Harvey Gallery would continue to exist until Harvey's untimely death in 2004. After that, and for administrative reasons, the gallery reached a new legal status, becoming the Emily Harvey Foundation (EHF), and developing a comprehensive art-event program drawn from its rich history, art collection, and archival materials on Fluxus, Concept Art, Performance Art, and Mail Art.

II

In August 2013, I moved into the second-floor loft of this building, after an agreement with the present owners of the space: I would coordinate the activities taking place in the art foundation in exchange for housing.

Ever since I moved in, intrigued by the history of the site, I started conducting research in the institution's archive. It was obvious to me that the archival procedures within the institution had been unclear and fragmented. There had never been a proper, complete cataloguing process of the objects, artworks, shows, and transactions that had taken place at 537 Broadway Co-op, ranging from its origins as a FluxHouse to its later transition into a foundation. Although the EHF—due to the legal requirements as part of its status evolution—had to create an inventory of its inherited estate, many of the items skipped the cataloguing process, which mainly consisted of registering and appraising its art collection. Therefore—and as it would continue to occur in the case of odd findings—what objects could tell about themselves was all held in their own materiality: no register, no inscription, no album, or index was to be found anywhere, preventing me from identifying any footnote on when the object in question had entered the space at 537 Broadway.

During one of the frequent opening of drawers and boxes, I came across a series of aerial photographs that could have been taken from the spiral staircase that leads to the upper bedroom in the gallery room. The photographs captured a table centered in the space, surrounded by chairs and people sharing a dinner. Most likely, the event had taken place at night because the light in the picture was clearly artificial. I found out later that those snapshots were from approximately April 2002, preceding the opening of poet Emmett Williams's *Story Lines* exhibition, which was to be re-staged as part of my project in the space: the *EHF Dinner Series*.

The *EHF Dinner Series* was conceived with writer Valeria Meiller as a site-specific event that would replicate the setting and atmosphere around those photographs. In five private intimate gatherings, we would place a table in the same way as that found in the photographs and invite a group of artists and friends to dine, showing or performing a work of their choice. In these action-dinners, we were certain that by focusing our curiosity on the re-enactment of archival images, we could better understand the connections interrelating the elements in the loft. By activating works, gestures, and archival findings in the present, and using the residual index of actions that were once alive in the space, we found a way to imbue past and present time within the nature of our project.

In the *EHF Dinner Series #4*, the attendees were invited to show or share something on the figure of George Maciunas and the EHF loft. We invited people who had been close to Maciunas to participate and talk about his architectural and planning practice, as well as the trajectory of the loft's history from its original conception, from 1974 up to today. We invited filmmaker Jonas Mekas, who had been Maciunas's closest friend, and Kevin Harrison, who had worked with Maciunas refurbishing buildings, becoming the superintendent of 537 Broadway in 1988. Mekas and Harrison, along with their active collaboration with Maciunas, were also very interested in archives. Mekas had inherited part of Maciunas's personal archive in 1978; in fact, he brought a copy of Maciunas's architecture diploma from the Carnegie Institute of Technology (1954) to the dinner. Additionally, Mekas is founder of the Anthology Film Archives, a New York-based institution devoted to independent, experimental, and avant-garde cinema.⁶ Harrison, on the other hand, was building his own personal archive on the urban nature of SoHo and the cast-iron buildings by buying drawings, pictures, and stamps featuring the neighborhood's evolutions over time. Almost all the images Harrison showed during the event were dated from 1856, the moment when SoHo developed into an upscale commercial district populated by department stores, hotels, musical halls, and new cast-iron facades. This newly prefabricated technology incorporated the large open spaces known as lofts, which later would shape SoHo's rise as an artists' colony.⁷

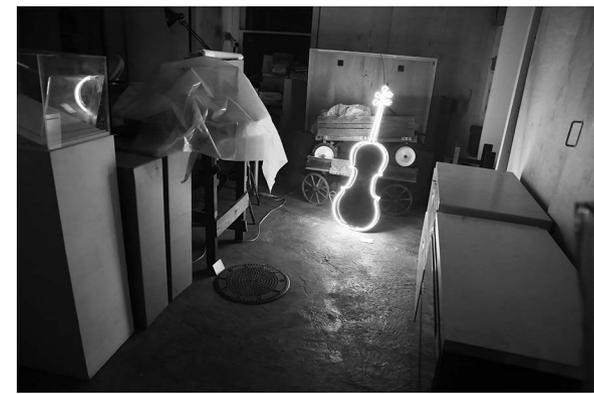
On December 7, 2014, we hosted our fifth and final dinner-action. We asked Summers—a dancer, choreographer, and founder of the Experimental Intermedia Foundation as well as an original member of the 537 Broadway Co-op—to screen a video recording of her work *Windows in the Kitchen* (1976). The twelve-minute film is made up of footage from 1976, shot by photographer Paula Court at The Kitchen when the experimental art venue was located at Wooster and Broome Streets. The clip features a bare setting for the dancer Matt Turney to perform under the guidance of Summers. The Kitchen's dance floor, where the original

performance took place, was very similar to the current spatial arrangement of the EHF gallery: the dancer moved along three large windows that very much resemble those of the Broadway loft. After the screening, artists Yolanda Hawkins and William Niederkorn, inspired by the history of modern dance, led the audience to think of the body as an archive of movements in which the embodiment of history is reflected. Their performance was called *Loft Dancing (With Eye-Robotic Warmup)* (2015). The scripted piece used movement and improvised text conveyed in a fictitious structure of a class setting, which resembled the way twentieth-century popular dances were taught. The piece was introduced by a warm-up of eye movements, and the following scored actions were performed on techno music.

The performative component of the actions from the fifth gathering placed the gallery into a new and vibrant dimension. Architecture, narratives, and bodies blurred time periods and categorizations. They revealed processes of time recording operated by different media, articulated through photographs, films, oral histories, and spatial excerpts. Hawkins and Niederkorn's instructed dance, driven by an archival impulse, captured bodily memories and movements, connecting past ideas of time and space to the present. Through actions in the space, performers and participants were actualizing every element and object in the gallery. The nature of an everyday item, such as a chair, could be transformed by repositioning it in the site. The residue of a past performance became palpable in the present through its reactivation. A similar transformative power affected the works of art that had been resting in storage for the previous twenty years, as well as the personal anecdotes from the participants of the dinner. The *EHF Dinner Series* was marked by evident moments of recognition for the connections between present and history, which were generated by the actions related to the objects resurfaced from the archive. As echoed by Hawkins, the *EHF Dinner Series* felt like "just another one of Emily's dinners."

III

In 1992, Harvey started the Venice gallery project while still running her established New York space. In the same year, she also conceived *The Cast-Iron Court Corporation Group* show, a curatorial project to be held in her own gallery.⁸ Diving into the records of the EHF, I found correspondence between Harvey and Dupuy—the previous owner of the loft still involved in the gallery's activity—where she described the exhibition plan: all the artist-members of the 537 building would be represented through a selection of their works. In the letter, she listed all the current and former shareowners, as well as suggestions for the display of some artist-friends. Nevertheless, *The Cast-Iron Court Corporation Group* show was never



Top: Emily Harvey Foundation Gallery space. Middle: Emily Harvey Foundation Dinner Series #3, 2014. Bottom: Jonas Mekas and Kevin Harrison. EHF Dinner Series #4, 2014. Photos courtesy Emily Harvey Foundation.

Top: Charlotte Moorman, *Green Neon Cello: Shadow of my cello*, 1989, 537 Broadway Sub-basement. Emily Harvey Foundation Collection. Middle: Francesca Rheannon introducing the history of Eden's Expressway at 537 Broadway, 4th floor. Bottom: Cathy Weis performance at WeisAcre, 537 Broadway, 3rd Floor. *Ways of Treating Buildings in Order to See Them*, 2015. Photos: Paula Court.

realized. Later that year, Harvey decided to move to Venice, and slowly, most of the original members started to move out of the building. Consequently, the proposal was put aside and forgotten as time went by. Once again, the act of discovering through hidden or forgotten materials triggered questions on both the loft's and the building's layered relationship to history. How were all these pieces and settings housed in this building-container?

As part of my residence in the loft, I decided to stage one last event. Based on Harvey's exhibition proposal, I chose to bring back to life a list of artworks, actions, and relationships embedded within the architecture of the building. The event was called *Ways of Treating Buildings in Order to See Them*, modeled on George Brecht's description of *Ways of Treating Objects in Order to See Them* (Notebook #8–154, June 1961–September 1962), a set of notes in which he attempted to explain the criteria of the "event score." Brecht developed the event scores between 1959 and 1961, which are linguistic propositions that mediate visible and invisible everyday experiences between subjects and objects through a few lines of text printed on a white card.⁹ In his description of how to act toward objects, Brecht explains that they could become explicit by the act of "plac[ing] them in much empty space . . . plac[ing] them near one or more other objects . . . with which they form a new whole, (a) complementing by difference (unrelatedness) or (b) complementing by having . . . common ground . . ." ¹⁰ With my project, I aimed at investigating whether I could translate Brecht's proposition for understanding objects to the treatment of the building.

Designed to unveil the particular way that 537 Broadway recorded its own history, *Ways of Treating Buildings in Order to See Them* included three forty-five-minute guided tours, in which viewers were escorted through the private lofts and common spaces in the building. Based on archival research, oral history, interviews, legal transactions, and accidental findings, the exhibit registered twenty-seven arrangements—works done by the artists who participated in the site's life—disseminated throughout the entire structure. The tour was led by Harrison, the superintendent of the *Cast-Iron Court Corporation*, as well as myself. I would explain the chosen artworks at every stop while Harrison would add personal and historical details to shed light on these arrangements in time and space.

The expedition began in the sub-basement of 537 Broadway—where the EHF archives are located—with Moorman's *Green Neon Cello: Shadow of my Cello* (1989) displayed next to Xatrec's *Untitled (Man hole cover)* (1980), an artwork permanently installed in the floor of the archive when Xatrec used the space as his studio in 1984. Further down the sub-basement hallway, Harrison explained that a storage closet, now inaccessible by its closed door, had once been Ay-O's

Black Hole dedicated to George Maciunas (1992). This project was “a kind of tactile black-hole, carpeted and totally black where the only light [was] the one of the camera flash after the snapshot of each participant that Ay-O [took] as a record that they came out alive.”¹¹ The next arrangement included two speakers and the vinyl recording of *Off the Wall* (1984) by Yoshi Wada, who used to live on the third floor of the Mercer side of the building (110 Mercer Street). Wada used to work with Harrison doing plumbing jobs for Maciunas in various established co-ops, whose musical creations are written for instruments called “pipe horns.” In the early 1970s, Wada began building homemade musical instruments from plumbing pipes, writing compositions for them based on his personal, quotidian musical exploration.

As the third stop in the tour, one floor above the archive, on the cellar level, Paik was being portrayed on a TV while riding the Mercer freight elevator. The video *Nam June Paik Freight Elevator* (1979) was shot by video artist Joan Logue, who used to share the fourth floor on Mercer Street with Ay-O. Logue’s video was played on a small, old monitor on top of a wooden pedestal designed by Dupuy in the early 1980s. In the proximity of the freight elevator, outside of Harrison’s studio, a reproduction of a print from 1857 titled *New York Scene in Broadway* documented a street scene on lower Broadway, between Spring Street and Prince Street. The drawing featured the Chinese Museum building that preceded the current 1868 cast-iron building. Adjacent to this, photographs arranged in acrylic boxes documented the unmanageable drive of artist and collector Citizen Kafka—pseudonym of Richard Schulman—a radio personality and folk musician who used to rent a space at 537 Broadway when one floor was converted into art studios. The selected photographs showed an event hosted at the Emily Harvey Gallery in 1987, when Kafka decided to sell all of his possessions as his fortieth birthday celebration. The sellout packed the gallery space from floor to ceiling with boxes; the number of goods that cluttered the loft made it almost impossible to walk through.

After taking the Broadway elevator to the fifth floor, the expedition arrived at Gigliotti’s—a member of the pioneer video collective Videofreex—and Summers’s loft. They had moved to the space in 1974, and sold it by 1987, before moving to Sarasota, Florida. Gigliotti assembled his studio and editing room over a mezzanine facing Elaine’s old dance studio and offices. Under the silhouette of an arch that still marks the wall—a relic from what used to be the connection with the adjoined building (541 Broadway)—a flat monitor showed Davidson’s video recording of Brown’s *Spanish Dance* (1977). Brown had her dance studio behind that arched wall, and the day they arranged to tape the piece, Gigliotti passed the video cables through the front windows. In the back of the loft, Summers’s

video *Buttons and Buttonholes* (1978) was placed on the kitchen counter. It was shot in the very same kitchen space that we were visiting. This was a video dance in four languages—an abstract comedic work about kitchens, cooking, and female impressions on domesticity.¹²

One floor below, in Frances Alenikoff's space, her daughter Francesca Rheannon explained the history of the dance studio's wooden floor. Alenikoff was a dancer, choreographer, and visual artist whose performances often combined movement with photo slides, film, voice, tape recordings, and chants. She moved in the loft in 1974, after signing Maciunas's Co-op contract, and found the floor inadequate to perform, due to the gaps and splinters. After fixing the floor in 1978, she began to use the studio to develop her own performance work, while also renting it under the name Eden's Expressway. In 2000, Movement Research bought the loft from Alenikoff and opened it to the public for classes and workshops.

On the third floor, *Plumbing Music* (1976) by musician Van Riper was playing, while his *Windows Shadows* (1976–1977) registers where showed on an old TV. In twenty-five minutes of footage, Van Riper delineates the contours of the sun-cast shadows of the building's decorative ironwork onto the Broadway windows, creating an animate net of superimposed lines. While looking at the video, the audience became aware that dancer Cathy Weis was laying on the floor, in front of their eyes. Weis purchased what used to be Simone Forti's loft in 2005, and since then, the space has functioned as the base of the Cathy Weis Project, a non-profit organization which explores dance, film screenings, performances, and other modalities of artistic gatherings.¹³ Weis's work intertwines video and technology with performance. In the piece she improvised for the tour, Weis placed two cameras on opposite walls. Her body moved while both live recordings slowly converged into one, as she reached the center of the studio.

At the end of the tour, the crowd returned to the EHF where the space had been modified to follow the spatial arrangement that articulated the gallery. On one of the walls, an extract from Jonas Mekas's *Zefiro Torna or Scenes From the Life of George Maciunas* (1992) was projected. The film was being screened in the exact position where Maciunas and Billy Hutchins celebrated their *Fluxwedding* in 1978. Dupuy's *Floor Mirror* (1973)—two symmetrically opposite openings on the east and west sides of the wooden floor—revealed the thin corridor underneath the horizontal structure, recalling the model of an archeological excavation. Close to the internal courtyard of the loft, the screening of Adorno's performances featured *Sola* (1977), a retro-projected invitation on the wall, and *Horse Piece* (1978), a video of the artist's feet and voice imitating a horse walk and recorded by Gigliotti on his fifth-floor loft. On a table, a work by Flynt revealed a portrait of Harvey from Flynt's series *Photos of Women* (1989–1991). Next to it, a pipe horn

from 1979, *Untitled*, by Yoshi Wada hung from a mezzanine structure. Finally, the exterior courtyard, previously mentioned as inspiration for the Co-op's name, was being animated by Anne Tardos's recording of a dance exploration of the building by Simone Forti. *Statues* (1977–1999) described the trajectories of bodily movements, space, and objects from what used to be Forti's loft on the third-floor to the communal rooftop, once left open for artistic explorations, alas now closed due to insurance policies.

IV

If the *EHF Dinner Series* brought a whole group of artists, objects, and performances back to life in the second-floor loft at 537 Broadway, the event *Ways of Treating Buildings in Order to See Them* extended the action to the rest of the site. Connecting the different stages of the tour, works, objects, and authors, the Co-op re-materialized under a new light. During the guided tour, viewers made personal readings of the surroundings, coming into contact with the activated space through the voices of the tour guides, the loft owners, and the help of a newspaper that functioned as script throughout the walk.

Ephemeral, interactive, and sometimes disposable, many of the artistic practices hosted in the 537 building challenge their own nature, while also becoming supremely resistant to categorizations and cataloguing. The oscillation between art, authors, documents, and archival remains is crucial to understand the multifaceted art historical phenomenon that determines their meanings. My project, then, essentially focused on experimenting with this history, asking: How can individuals find their place within historical coordinates by experiencing buildings and dealing with altered temporal narratives?

I've come to realize that what is (and was) housed in the 537 section operates in a complicated overlay of settings where biographical, archeological, familiar, public, and personal constantly encounter and regenerate within a multitude of fluctuating historical links. By occupying the 537 Broadway loft, together with the projects conceived there, I was not only able to discover the fascinating nature of this space, but also experimented with the exercise of architecture. *Treating and seeing* the ways this site was built enacted an archival attempt to preserve constant processes of change. While permanent records can idealize and secure historical narratives, mediating history through pieces "in flux" renders complexities of the social settings visceral.

It will probably not be long before—as has happened to many other sites in New York—these objects, people, and spaces will be gone, pushed aside by real estate developers, excited shoppers, and trendy restaurants. Yet, I believe that an

archival-driven obsession and an interest in listening to residents and spaces, staging events and tours, and registering experiences in cheap newspapers constitutes a chance to rethink the ways of seeing layers of memories. Architecture can be preserved within a particular moment in time, enclosed by its walls, a structural whole, as the temporal container of the event. In this way, 537 Broadway—filled with its artifacts and objects—survived for at least a liminal interval of forty-five minutes.

NOTES

1. Aaron Shkuda, *The Lofts of SoHo: Gentrification, Art, and Industry in New York, 1950–1980* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 55.

2. Roslyn Bernstein and Shael Shapiro, *Illegal Living: 80 Wooster Street and the Evolution of SoHo* (Vilnius: The Jonas Mekas Foundation, 2010), 45–54.

3. Margot Gayle and Edmund V. Gillon, *Cast-Iron Architecture in New York: A Photographic Survey* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1974), 145.

4. Richard Kostelanetz, *SoHo: The Rise and Fall of an Artist's Colony* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 78–80.

5. Jean Dupuy, *Collective Consciousness: Art Performances in the Seventies* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1980), 46–61.

6. Anthology Film Archives website: <http://anthologyfilmarchives.org/about>.

7. Shkuda, *The Lofts of SoHo*, 51–53.

8. Emily Harvey Gallery Archive, *The Cast-Iron Court Corporation Group Show*, correspondence, 1992, n.p.

9. Julia Robinson, "In the Event of George Brecht" in *George Brecht: Events, A Heterospective*, ed. Alfred M. Fischer (Köln: Museum Ludwig, 2005), 18.

10. Ibid., "Defining the Event," 62.

11. Emily Harvey Gallery Archive, *Black Hole Dedicated to George Maciunas*, press release, October 23, 1991, n.p.

12. See Elaine Summers's website: <http://www.elainesummersdance.com>.

13. See Cathy Weis's website: <http://www.cathyweis.org>.

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