

Gordon Matta-Clark

words Kimberly Bradley

A Secret Life in Trees

In 1971, on the bucolic campus of Vassar College in upstate New York, artist Gordon Matta-Clark staged a performance called *Tree Dance* in a large tree in front of the college's chapel. Originally meant to be a one-man action in which Matta-Clark would "live" aloft in a hammock-like structure for three days (the dream of many a tree-climbing child), the piece instead evolved into a more complex happening, based on fertility rites, involving multiple dancers and friends swinging between netted rope sacks and climbing along multiple flexible ladders, all installed in the tree's high branches. The dancers and Matta-Clark levitated, interacted and glided from branch to branch through negative space, like acrobats in a circus.





Matta-Clark, a born New Yorker who died in 1978 at age 35, produced a dizzying array of multidisciplinary artworks, actions and concepts in his decade-long career. During this time, the artist became most widely known for works that took existing architecture as material for spatial experimentation — famously “cutting” abandoned buildings by creating intriguing interventions into their structures or cutting them open entirely. *Splitting* (1974) is one of his most recognisable works: the piece bisected a house in New Jersey that was slated for demolition. In *Days’ End* (1975), he cut curved apertures into the façade of an abandoned pier on the Hudson River, flooding it with light (and subjecting himself to an arrest warrant). He called his approach “anarchitecture” — a radical alternative architecture and a new way of thinking about buildings and living.

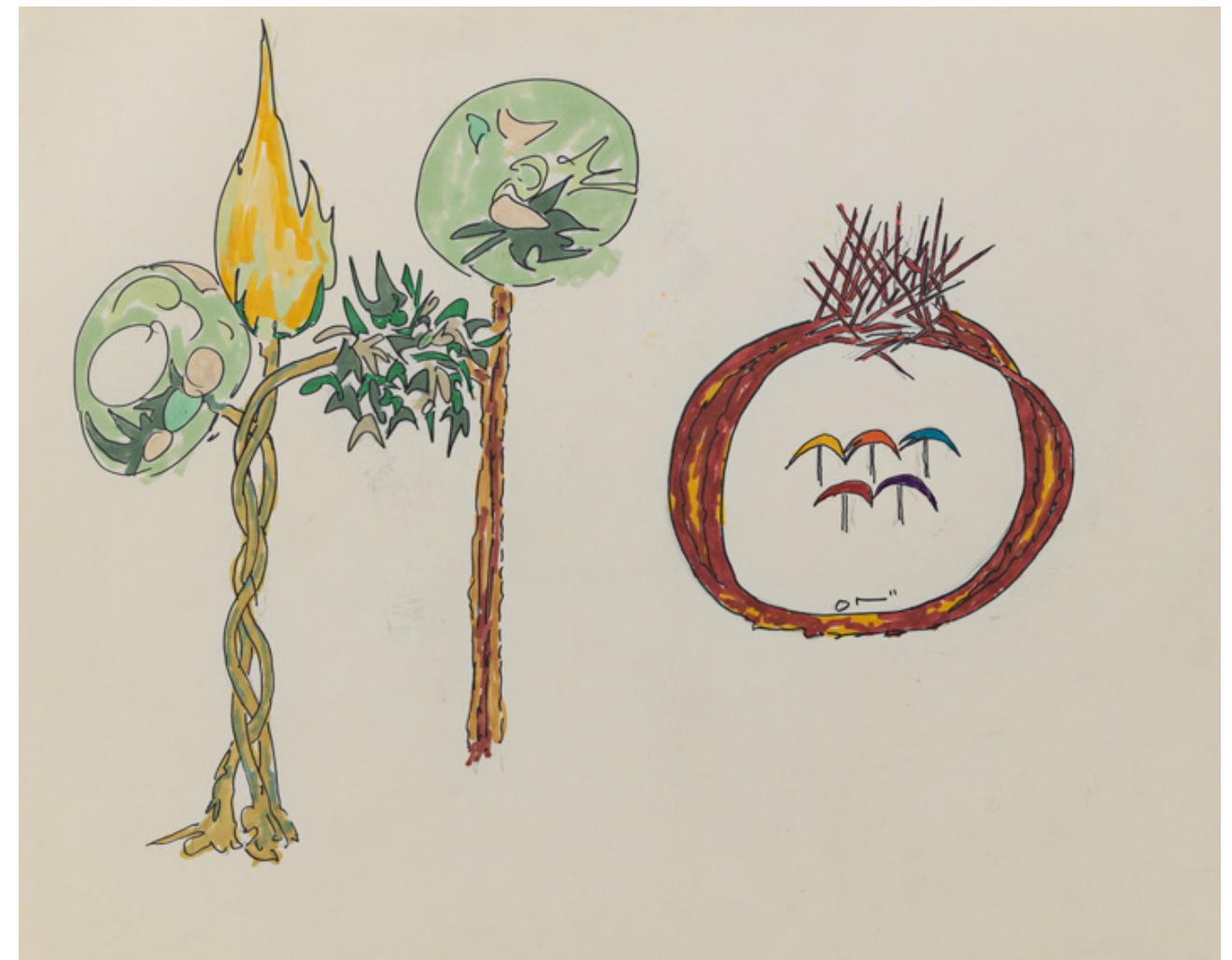
But through all his investigations into and interferences in the built environment, Matta-Clark also dove conceptually, artistically and physically into the organic, natural world — including an ongoing obsession with trees and the energies within and surrounding them. Beyond *Tree Dance*, the artist planted a cherry tree in the basement of 112 Greene Street in New York’s SoHo, where he ran a collaborative project space in the district’s earliest years as an art hub. In the autumn of 1970, he moved into the subterranean space and called it “The Winter Garden.” He proposed guerrilla gardens in vacant lots in Lower Manhattan as well as a resource center and youth program on New York’s Lower East Side, which he envisioned as a place where local youth could learn to transform derelict buildings. He won a Guggenheim grant for the latter proposal, but alas died before he could execute it. His *Rosebush*, a living sculpture planted in the yard of St. Mark’s Church-in-the-Bowery in New York’s East Village in 1972 and surrounded by a steel cage, was replanted at its original site as part of the Swiss Institute New York’s *Energies* exhibition in late 2024.

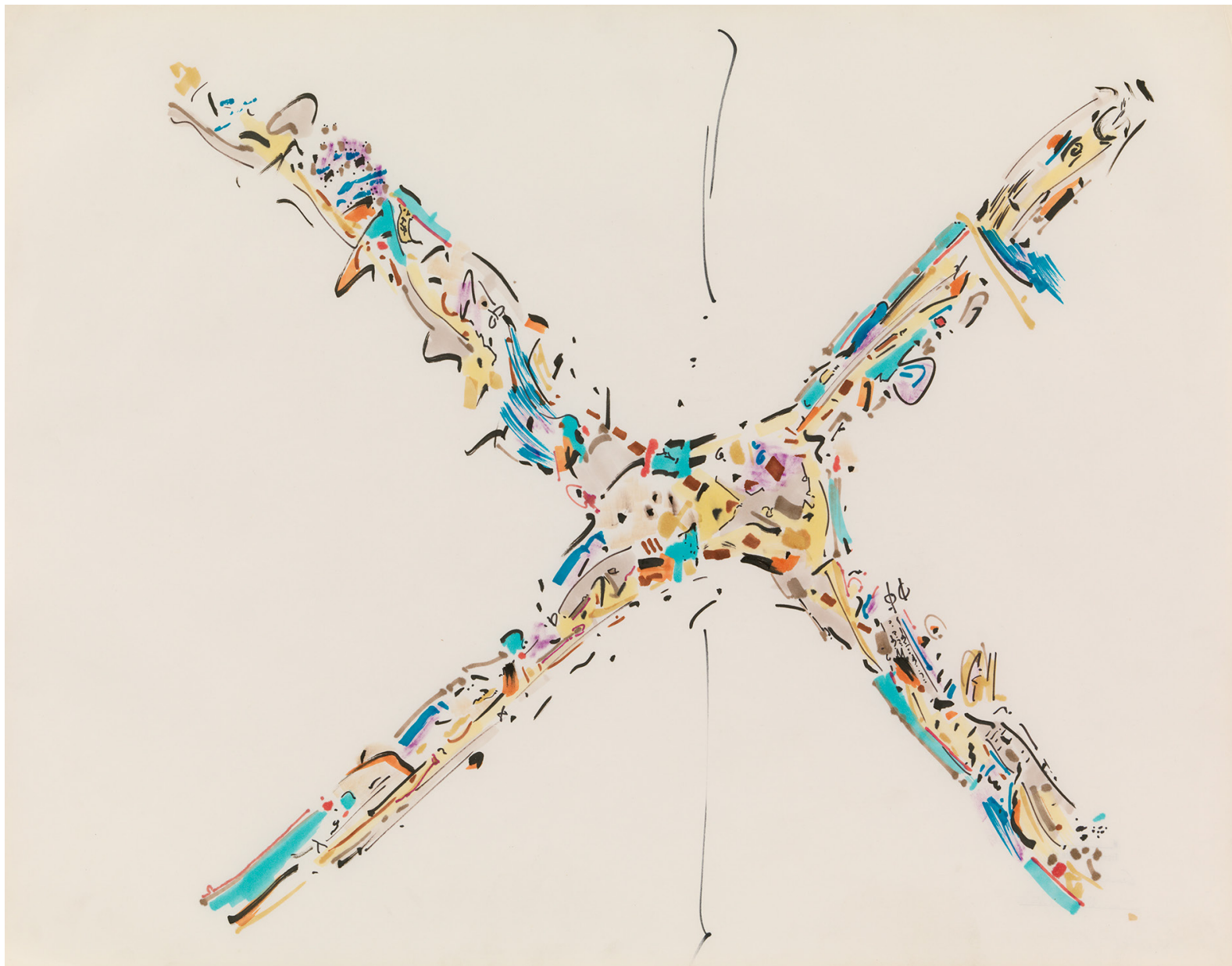
All the while, the artist also drew trees — striking drawings on paper rendered in coloured architectural markers or in stark, dynamic black and white. Some of Matta-Clark’s drawn trees appeared as recognisable figures, but he also abstracted trees into intricate collections of marks. Trees became studies of architecture, nature, space, time and life force, and making images of them served as intriguing thought experiments in an era when ecology seemed to be an answer to urban neglect — in the early 1970s, New York was essentially bankrupt, and residents were fleeing to the suburbs. Ultimately, for Matta-Clark, trees served as compelling expressions of the natural world’s potentials and energies — one of the artist’s many areas of concern — and nature’s interactions with the manmade world, and vice versa.

How many tree drawings did Matta-Clark make? “We don’t know,” Jesamyn Fiore, the director of the Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark (and daughter of his widow Jane Crawford), told me with a chuckle during a long phone call to discuss this fascinating body of work. What is known is that the earliest tree drawings date to the late 1960s and were made just after Matta-Clark finished his degree in architecture at Cornell in upstate New York in 1968. *Cactus* (1969) shows two squat cacti rendered in black ink, their roots visible under the earth’s surface, their crowns a burst of spines: the image reads as a structural sketch but still resembles an actual cactus. *Crossed Trees* from a year later, however, already moves into abstraction. Here, four tree trunks, rendered in elongated shapes of short, energetic lines, cascade downward in pairs from a wildly complex crown of “leaves”. Just beneath this foliage, rendered as tiny ladders or pointed cones, the sketched trunks cross as if two couples are leaning into and around each



Tree Forms, 1971. Pencil, ink and marker on paper, 47.9×61 cm





other (the structural “crossed tree” motif would repeat — like steel beams in a building blueprint, perhaps, but also an intriguingly human-looking expression of mutual support). Several different drawings titled *Tree Forms* from 1971 not only play with colour (Matta-Clark used architectural pens to shape and embellish some of his most intricate tree drawings) but also experiment with exuberant arboreal shapes. In one, a single tree trunk segues into a round of spindly 90-degree branches topped by a leafy circular crown — maybe a crown of thorns — in ochres, greens and browns. Accompanying *Tree Dance* was a schematic plan for the project, dated 1971. Another *Tree Forms* (1973) piece depicts groves of trees together, some with green or yellow foliage, seductively winding their trunks around the straight trunks of other trees or creeping along the ground, like leafy snakes.

As the early 1970s progressed, Matta-Clark’s tree drawings became increasingly abstract, with the trees’ structures appearing to dissolve into a fever of complex mark-making. “There was an evolution in these drawings,” says Fiore. “You start with a tree, then it moves into pure abstraction, expanding the notion of what these systems are. What is this life, and what is this energy? You end up with a body of drawings called *Energy Trees*.” The *Energy Trees* are stunning to behold — their forms are loose and surreal, with curved limbs and what appear to be intricate branch and root systems exploding on the page. The trees’ trunks and branches are often comprised of thick and thin marks that range from squiggles and hatches to forms reminiscent of an imaginary alphabet of pictograms, symbols, cuneiforms or flowery calligraphy. Some *Energy Trees* are rendered in black pencil and ink; others are a jumble of primary colours applied as shadows or small doodles over the tree’s mutable forms.

The longer you look, the more detail emerges. At the same time, the drawings, seen as a whole, vibrate with a cohesive life force, and there are moments in which they evoke a musical or choreographic score (dancers in the 1970s noticed this, too, with Tricia Brown even asking whether it would be possible to *dance* once of Matta-Clark’s later *Energy drawings*. Matta-Clark himself was apparently an excellent dancer), or even an entirely new language (later drawings by Matta-Clark would veer even more into this calligraphic register). “Is this the energy of moving through space, or is this the energy of the world around us?” asks Fiore, referring to the drawings. While the drawings are playful and dynamic, they also feel like blueprints to a new ecology that Matta-Clark imagined and proposed, around his visions of a built environment melding and living in harmony with an organic one. They feel futuristic and utopian at the same time as echoing a grounded, rooted sensibility that might have existed since the beginning of time. As Fiore once explained: “The tree is the stand-in for an energy source; these drawings are really about trying to do a live experiment in understanding space and energy.”

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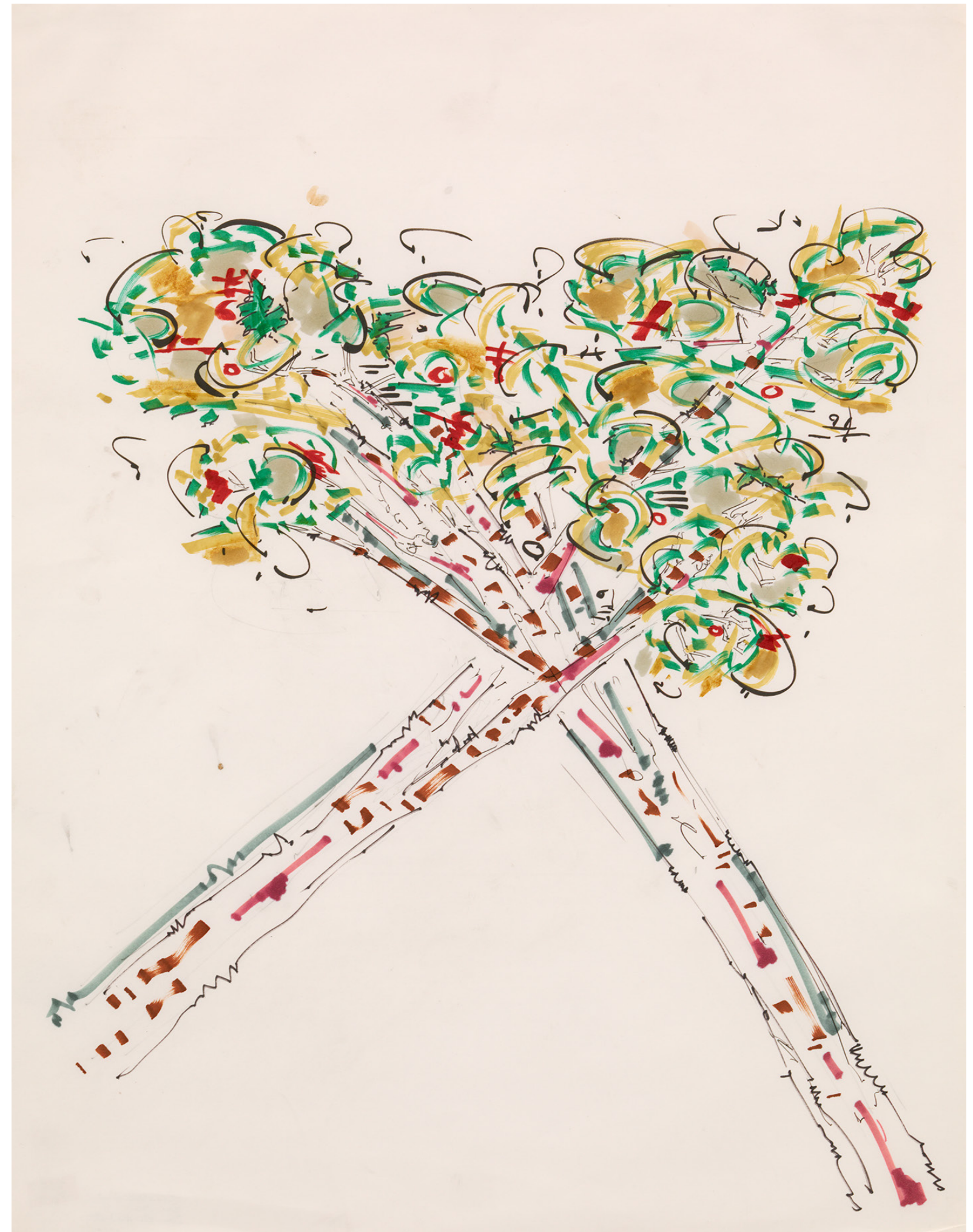
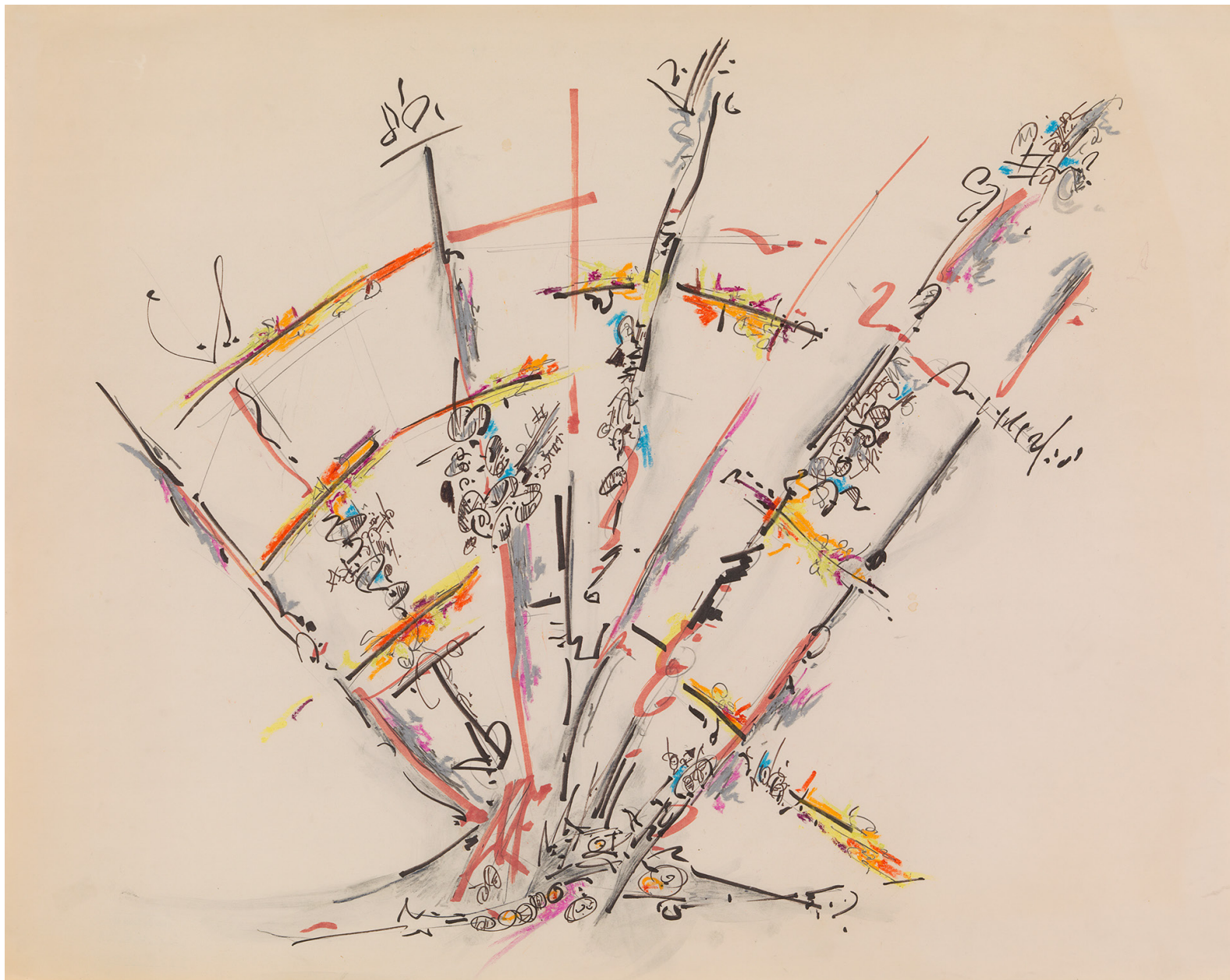
A family member of mine once admitted that he’d dropped acid as a youth, and during his LSD journey he was suddenly able to perceive the energy fields around all living things. But he most remembered the glowing auras around the many trees in our Minnesota forests, with jagged edges and rainbows of colours enveloping them in all directions (he can still conjure tree auras at will, an ability I envy, although I’m reluctant to drop acid to acquire it). Maybe Matta-Clark’s artistic visions and abstractions of trees were in part inspired by his





Tree Forms, 1971. Pencil, ink, and marker on paper, 47.9 × 61 cm





father, the Chilean-born Surrealist painter Roberto Matta, who also included fantastical trees and many other motifs in his works. Or perhaps they were aided by a mind-altering substance or practice. Either way, the younger artist was surely tapping into something that transcended everyday consciousness in these and subsequent *Energy drawings* (the latter of which are even more reduced, involving arrows, vectors and minimal colours: pure energy, expressed).

In a 2023 *Bookforum* piece reviewing the book *Gordon Matta-Clark: An Archival Sourcebook*, critic Sasha Frere-Jones claimed that “Matta-Clark was tuned to frequencies prophetic in nature and number.” Fiore told me that a certain esotericism or spirituality was indeed in the air when these drawings were made, and Matta-Clark himself was a Buddhist. When her mother placed Matta-Clark’s archive with the Canadian Center for Architecture in Montreal, the institution mounted an exhibition focused on his library. Among his books were multiple volumes on alchemy and transformation, allegedly purchased in a bookshop in Lower Manhattan that sold volumes on the occult to many artists of the time. The painter Mary Heilmann, who was close to Matta-Clark, once claimed that “when [Gordon] was making drawings, he would work in a state of frenzy. His face would get determined... and he’d do a little devil dance. He’d take coloured pencils, dig in, press real hard and fast, and would scribble along.” Her perception of the artist was, at the time, “otherworldly” and “mysterious.”

Matta-Clark was certainly a channel to or conduit into new considerations of what could be possible in terms of living in community, and with nature, in early-1970s New York. “People on the Lower East Side were transforming their spaces using nature and gardens as a focus on community activism, a pushback against the failures of the city, and a questioning of systems of authority,” Fiore told me. “Gordon was in this context.” His many activities, not only the action-based or architectural artworks but also the 112 Greene Street project space or FOOD (one of the first restaurants in SoHo, co-founded by Matta-Clark and frequented by artists and other creatives) focused on the quotidian energies of resistance and establishing a creative community, but the drawings were perhaps the artist’s internal musings on a deeper energetic cohesion: attempts at putting together the puzzle pieces of an environment in flux or even capturing the essence of life.

Back to *Tree Dance*: a longer look at the black-and-white filmic documentation of this lighthearted performance with people, ladders, nets and boughs in an upstate New York tree, so many decades ago, shows how much awareness Gordon had of space, matter, and how much he questioned the potential of living creatures — plant or animal — being in the world and with each other. “So much of his work is just ‘what is architecture?’ And can architecture exist in alignment with the natural world and other entities? Like light, like water,” says Fiore. Matta-Clark’s ideas were not prescriptive, but rather metaphorical seeds planted with the hope of transformation. A hope he generously shared with his own generation and that also foretold some of the deepest concerns of those coming after him. One drawing, *The Beginning of Trees and the End* (1973), is so reduced that it looks like three lines of handwriting in an unknown language — or maybe, seen another way, three rows of naked, leafless trees in a wintry, windy prairie landscape. We still don’t know the end just yet, do we? §

