The Construction of Gordon Matta-Clark

Gordon Matta-Clark has never been an easy artist to categorize or to explain. Few figures in the second half of the twentieth century have made both the world of art and the world of architecture as uneasy as Gordon Matta-Clark did. He studied architecture at Cornell University in the 1960s, and yet, because he did not use his training to build or construct, he is rarely considered an architect. Instead, he used his training to un-build, or transform spaces, creating art by altering existing structures or environments. He is viewed as a sculptor, a photographer, an organizer of performances, a writer of manifestos. In the brief span of his career, from 1968 to his early death in 1978, he created an oeuvre that has made him a cult figure, whose art continues to inspire and bewilder.

During his lifetime, Matta-Clark’s performative interventions in existing buildings, such as Splitting (1974) and Conical Intersect (1975), caused a sensation within a specific slice of the art world. Only a small group of friends, gallerists, critics, and passersby saw the interventions in person or participated in the performances. But Matta-Clark produced films, drawings, photographs, and photographic collages that documented his work. Drawings and photographs were shown in galleries and museums and works were sold, although he was not broadly known by collectors or curators. The impact of his work on the broader arts community wouldn’t truly be felt until after his death. Even now, his influence on art and architecture continues to deepen and expand.

It was the circulating retrospective exhibitions, first in the groundbreaking show in Chicago (1985), curated by Mary Jane Jacob, and next in the show in Marseille (1993), curated by Corinne Diserens, that laid the groundwork for his posthumous fame. These exhibitions were widely seen and the catalogues of both shows set high standards. Viewers were able to get to know his work through the written documentation of his processes as well as through photographs and collages. Later exhibitions—at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid (2006), curated by Gloria Moure, with a catalogue that made accessible many new sources; at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York (2007), curated by Elisabeth Sussman; and at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Santiago, Chile (2009), curated by Tatiana Cuevas—solidified his reputation. Recent exhibitions at the Queens Museum (2015), the Bronx Museum (2017), the Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art in Porto, Portugal (2017), and the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo (2018) have continued to augment it.

THE ARTIST’S VOICE
WRITINGS BY GORDON MATTA-CLARK

Gwendolyn Owens and Philip Ursprung

The Construction of Gordon Matta-Clark
In addition to these exhibitions, a growing number of scholarly studies have enriched our knowledge of Matta-Clark. Since the millennium, scholars such as Pamela Lee, James Attlee, Thomas Crow, Mark Wigley, Frances Richard, and many others depict a Matta-Clark who preferred setting processes in motion rather than leaving objects behind, an artist who oscillated between architectural and artistic practice, and who produced collective, urban performances whose character as works of art, and indeed on occasion even whose authorship, were intentionally left open and disordered. This at times chaotic artist was the Matta-Clark who altered lofts, experimented with video while documenting his every step, and played language games that are manifested in hundreds of index cards.

His art consists of an open series of fragments and all but cries out to be "completed" by each of its interpreters. Consequently, biography plays a central role in interpretation, as his work is seen as an integral component of his life. Matta-Clark’s life story is indeed fascinating—one need only think of the apparent rivalry with his father, the Surrealist painter Roberto Matta (1911–2002), whose brilliant career and lifestyle Matta-Clark tried to outdo, or his solicitous love for his twin brother, Sebastian (1943–1976), also an artist, whose failure to conform to and cope with everyday life was a constant worry for the family. Upon discovering these biographical details, one can hardly resist the urge to use Matta-Clark’s life to explain his work. The more we find out, the more we become ensnared in the dense web of facts and fictions that link his person, his oeuvre, and its reception. The unapologetic informality of his life as described in interviews, along with the easy, friendly voice we discover in his letters, leads many interpreters to refer to him by his first name. For this Sourcebook, we have chosen not to follow the fashion of calling him simply "Gordon," but instead to use the more formal "Matta-Clark."

In his case, it is less the cult of the star or genius that serves as the basis of the interest in his person. Our desire to know more about his biographical details has to do with the performative structure of his work and the fact that his most influential work can only be interacted with indirectly, as it exists solely through film, photography, or video of ephemeral events. Because it showcases a process more than a product, and because we are witness to the art only through its captured echoes, his body of work calls for additional clarification. This may explain why the voices of his contemporaries, more so than for some other artists of his generation, carry such great weight in interpreting his work. Indeed, the interviews that Joan Simon and Richard Armstrong conducted with Matta-Clark’s comrades-in-arms only a few years after his death, which are published in the catalogue of the retrospective in Chicago [by Simon] and in the Marseille exhibition catalogue [by Armstrong], still function as central sources for interpretation. In fact, their importance rivaled published statements by Matta-Clark himself in establishing his status as an artist. A selection of the Simon interviews is included in this Sourcebook; together, Matta-Clark’s writings and the statements by those who knew him and his work round out our understanding.
The Construction of the Archive

In 2002, Gordon Matta-Clark’s widow, Jane Crawford, put his archive on deposit at the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montreal. It includes the archive of the artist’s mother, Anne Clark Matta Alpert, which filled in much of the backstory of his childhood and, perhaps more importantly, included letters that he wrote to his mother while he was working as an artist. The arrival of the material was met with an overwhelming and almost instantaneous response. Suddenly, there was a new voice in the discussion of Matta-Clark’s work: his own. Containing letters, statements, interviews, drawings, photographs, and films, the CCA Archive, as we will call it, offered new paths into Matta-Clark’s intriguing art practice.

In 2011, the Gordon Matta-Clark Archive was formally donated to the CCA. Thus, CCA has become a permanent critical destination for those seeking a clearer understanding of Matta-Clark and his work. But rather than regarding the CCA Archive as neutral documentation and the key to the “real” Matta-Clark, we need to accept that it is fragmentary documentation, an autobiography, constructed by himself, his mother, and his widow. It begs for interpretation while eluding hard facts.

The Gordon Matta-Clark revealed through these sources continues to subvert expectations. We learn through letters, for example, about important connections to well-known artists and architects made through Matta-Clark’s family, particularly his cosmopolitan artist father, and also through his training in architecture at Cornell University. He made use of these connections and then stopped, instead becoming part of the downtown New York scene, exhibiting in the new alternative galleries in Soho, both the artist-run and newer commercial galleries. Later, letters in the archive document that he became an incredible networker—not unlike his father—expanding and following up on new connections made through friends and colleagues rather than through his family.

Overall, one discovers from reading Matta-Clark’s own writings an artist with a much more deliberate and serious purpose to his practice than we may have previously realized. We meet someone with some type of inner compass driving him forward on a path that, seen from the outside, comes across as disorganized and almost random. He was a tireless worker; the CCA Archive has letters showing that he was pursuing many more projects in many more places, such as in Houston and Los Angeles, than he ever was able to carry out.

Because of the seemingly disorganized nature of his actual output, both in his artwork and his writings, it is tempting to interpret the artist as more mysterious than he actually was. This book aims to present in chronological order—as best we can determine—what Gordon Matta-Clark said about his own work. The idea is to bring his own voice back to the fore in order to demystify his art by demonstrating his thought processes. Not everything in the CCA Archive is included in this Sourcebook, as this is not a complete catalogue, and personal rather than professional material is omitted, although these can be hard to separate. Materials included in
this volume from other sources—from archives of his friends, from institutions other than the CCA, and from published sources, some of them now obscure and out of print—add new information. Ultimately, our goal is not to provide the last word on Gordon Matta-Clark, but to advance thinking about his work.

The Projects

Although an authoritative chronology with a list of all projects and exhibitions by Gordon Matta-Clark would be useful, one may never be realized. When Mary Jane Jacob put together the first retrospective of his work for the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago in 1985, she, with the aid of Matta-Clark’s widow, Jane Crawford, compiled a list of his projects. That list provided the basis of our understanding of the progress of his work and was an essential step in organizing his material. But in working with the CCA Archive, one learns that titles and projects were fluid for Matta-Clark. The same photograph could be used in more than one presentation and be part of more than one project. Whether photographs of dilapidated housing were in Brooklyn, the Bronx, or Queens, for example, was not important—they all could be exhibited as “Bronx Floors.” Projects have multiple names, or their names seem to evolve; his project now best known as Bingo, for example, a house from which he removed one side, was called at various points BIN.GO.NE or Bingo X Ninths or simply The House at Niagara Falls. In the spirit of 1970s performance art, every step of the cutting process, from preliminary photographs with drawn-on sectioning (in a shape much like a Bingo card) to the actual walls of the house, became the art. The process
was the product. Three noncontiguous wall sections removed from that house were
reassembled; they are now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New
York. They document Bingo, but they are also a sculpture in their own right.

Moreover, the amount and type of documentation for projects varies enormously.
We have letters in which he described his work and his achievements, but the
information is often inconsistent and contradictory, which makes for a cataloguer’s
nightmare. Anarchitecture, a collaborative project of disaster-themed photographs,
is discussed in various letters, but no authoritative documents—no reviews, no
reminiscences, no installation photographs, nothing other than an announcement
card and a two-page photo spread in Flash Art magazine in June 1974—exist about
the actual exhibition. Likewise, Window Blow-Out, the 1976 performance piece
in which he shot out the windows of the exhibition space at New York’s Institute
for Architecture and Urban Studies and installed photographs of other broken