

INTRODUCTION

CONFUSION GUIDED BY A CLEAR
SENSE OF PURPOSE; or, *a comet,*
which would have its tail in front

Gordon Matta-Clark's archive is housed in the Study Centre of the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montreal. The visitor enters through a gray garden-level door, and stops to check in at the security desk. Opposite the desk, in large type on the wall, is emblazoned a message—part welcome, part warning, part statement of purpose. It was written by Matta-Clark in the early 1970s apropos the artists' group Anarchitecture, in which he was a pivotal thinker and gadfly-in-chief:

HERE IS WHAT WE HAVE TO OFFER
YOU IN ITS MOST ELABORATE
FORM——CONFUSION
GUIDED BY A CLEAR SENSE OF
PURPOSE.

Any researcher or biographer—any poet or critic or student of the relationship of language to experience—any artist—can likely feel the scattering exuberance of this statement—its mobilizing of the tension between madness and method. Purposive CONFUSION is a good guide to discovery of almost any kind, and this is what makes Matta-Clark's OFFER apt for posting at the entrance to a place of study. His note will likewise prove helpful, I hope, as a methodological statement about the way in which this book about the artist and his verbal sensibility is structured.

A famously prolix conversationalist, a legendary dance partner, a punning and alliterative personality in language, Matta-Clark spun freely

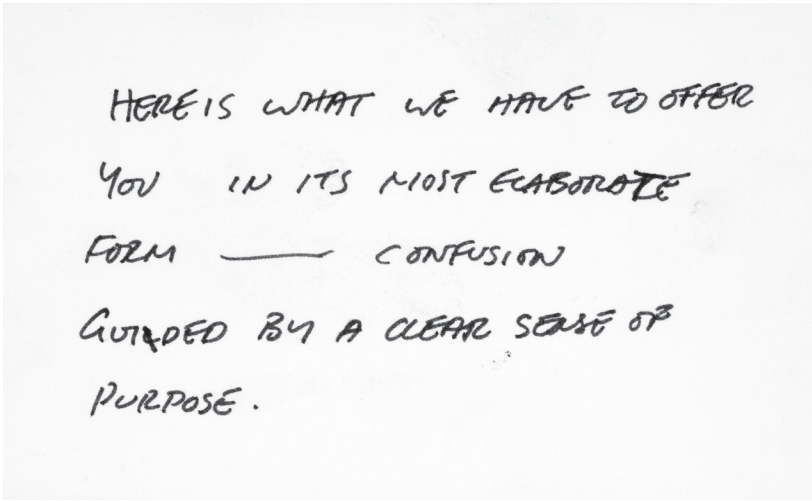


FIGURE 1. Gordon Matta-Clark, index card note, ca. 1973–74. Black felt-tip pen, 3 × 5 in. (7.6 × 12.7 cm). PHCON2002:0016:001:042.5. Canadian Centre for Architecture, gift of Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark. © Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark.

from concept to concept and phrase to phrase. “That’s how his mind worked—in forward-revolving circles,” observes Carol Goodden, the dancer, photographer, and founder of FOOD restaurant who was Matta-Clark’s romantic and artistic partner in the early 1970s. “And that’s how he talked—skipping words and whole sentences as he cometed forward until something would bring him back and he’d pick up a thought that he’d left behind.”¹ Such spiraling disjunctures shape the interventions into abandoned buildings for which Matta-Clark is justly celebrated. His films are ordered by chronological jumps and folds. His series of drawings now known in the critical literature as *Arrows* and *Energy Trees* (both ca. 1970–74) take as their motive and technique a surging interlooping of trajectories. Proleptic events and after-the-fact documentation, origins hiding in plain sight and gestures known by their residues alone, are characteristic of the story of his family, and of the fate of his site-specific artworks and performances following his death at age thirty-five.

Accordingly, as an essay on this artist and his interest in words—especially in words as dynamic forces that occupy and shape space—the argument that follows accommodates parenthetical expansion and episodic structure. Issues are discussed only to reappear later, turned a few degrees in another direction. Information about the demolition of a

project, or about Matta-Clark's death, precedes information about the making of that project or Matta-Clark's birth. Speculative interpretations and missed encounters are, at times, accorded the same levels of attention as undisputed valuations and well-attested facts.

In transcribing Matta-Clark's writings, misspellings, crossings-out, afterthought insertions, and other unconventional marks have been preserved. This makes, on occasion, for occluded reading. But it also avoids the standardization that in some other transcriptions of his texts has obscured the tracks of his composition and decided for the reader in advance what shall be taken as error and erased, and what ratified as deliberate wit. When Matta-Clark writes in his characteristic block capitals, those notes are set in this book in SMALL CAPITALS; when he writes in cursive, that text appears in quotation marks. (Certain other texts written or influenced by Matta-Clark, such as the intertitles in his film *Splitting* [1974] and writings related to the Anarchitecture group, are set in SMALL CAPITALS as well.)² The spellings and forms of some names—of people, and of works of art—change depending on the period in question, as they changed in Matta-Clark's lifetime.

Fragments that resurface as significant; plays on words encoding fissile meaning; illogic productive of critical insight; a conviction that language insists on its own density while never transparently delivering its referent—these are, broadly, the concerns of the philosophers of the sign who, since the 1960s, have been grouped under the rubric of deconstruction. The work of these writers, from Roland Barthes to Jean Baudrillard to Jacques Derrida to Julia Kristeva, and the reception of that work by American artists (beginning with the publication of Barthes's "The Death of the Author" in *Aspen* magazine in 1967), have been integral to my thinking about Matta-Clark's poetics and their place in the critical and aesthetic landscape of Postconceptualism. But in examining his giddy, aphoristic verbal habits, I am mindful of the caution adduced by the comparative literature scholar Henry Staten, author of *Wittgenstein and Derrida* (1984): "There are three main dangers that the deconstructive appeal to the arts of language raises for those writers who oppose deconstruction. They are 1) arbitrariness or irrationalism, 2) narcissism or solipsism, and 3) a babble of tongues."³ Irrationalism, solipsism, and babble all eddy through what Matta-Clark wrote. Indeed, such disturbances of sense were a crux of his ambition. Without wishing to explain these disturbances away or stabilize them, I contend that this MOST ELABORATE FORM rewards sustained analysis—for language and the roles it plays in Matta-Clark's oeuvre are more

than a theme among themes. Language for him was a practice, a way of thinking. It therefore furnishes a critical framework that can alter how we see the artist, his work, and its reception, as well as the sociohistorical context in which all are embedded.

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Gordon Matta-Clark was born in New York City in 1943 and died of pancreatic cancer in Nyack, New York, in 1978. He earned a bachelor's degree in architecture at Cornell University, but decided while still in college to become an artist; uselessness, fracture, and the renegade inhabitation of urban space became his *métier*. In the short decade of his professional life, he executed seven major site-specific works, now customarily referred to as "building cuts," in which a building in toto was infiltrated with geometrically complex voids, cut by the artist and a few helpers using handheld tools. One of these cuts was located in Manhattan, and two more within striking distance of the city. Three were in Europe, and one was in Chicago. Some were sponsored by institutions or patrons, and some were illegal, executed guerrilla style. All were destroyed, sometimes before they were finished.

From these Piranesian environments, Matta-Clark occasionally saved sculptural chunks for exhibition. He also made films, photographs, drawings, and artist's books. With Carol Goodden, he cofounded FOOD restaurant in Soho, and his participatory street performances often centered on the preparation and consumption of meals. Other performances involved graffiti, or the construction of temporary shelters, or daredevil explorations in semisecret urban spaces, such as the tunnels below Grand Central Station. Matta-Clark is credited with having helped to invent the downtown New York art world of the 1970s, and with having been an early exponent of the festive and oppositional genre of interventions more recently thematized as social practice. His ideal as an artist and a critically alert inhabitant of the city was, he wrote, a continual process of MOVING IN, PASSING THROUGH / AND GETTING AWAY WITH IT.

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Gordon Matta-Clark: Physical Poetics is organized in four parts. Part One, "Total (Semiotic) System: Reading Gordon Matta-Clark," states the case for reading the artist's archive—a reading that, I argue, recalibrates our appraisal of spatial semiotics in his art. From here, the book's first part proceeds to look in some detail at Matta-Clark's graffiti

projects. These language-centered pieces address a principle that the artist repeatedly returned to, that of an equivalence between wall and page, architecture and inscription. They likewise make an occasion for examining the contents of his library—a window onto his disposition as a user of texts—and frame the issue of his links to deconstructivist theory. What Matta-Clark thought, said, and wrote cannot be reduced to or explained by what he read, or by appeal to the lineage of experimental Modernism to which his verbal sensibility belongs. Nevertheless, it remains true that his intellectual proclivities, and his relation to several generations of European and American writers and artists absorbed in counter-rational language play, imbued all he did, including the most apparently raw material experiments. It is only by setting his work in context with this lineage that his approach to language, and hence his thought, can be regarded in their full complexity.

Part Two, “Anarchitecture as Poetic Device: Gordon Matta-Clark and the Soho Conversation,” situates Matta-Clark’s production in Manhattan in the 1970s, considering the function of open-ended dialogue in downtown circles like the Anarchitecture group, FOOD, 112 Greene Street, *Avalanche* magazine, the Judson Church dance enclave, and the Poetry Project at Saint Mark’s Church. This section looks, as well, at Matta-Clark’s responses to the Minimalist and Conceptualist artist-writers who were his friends and immediate forerunners.

No artist is detachable from his or her moment, any more than he or she is independent of precursors or untouched by historicizing commentary. But for the hyper-gregarious Matta-Clark, art making flourished to an extreme degree in the live interchange between friends, in which no barrier sealed off sociability from professionalism, or physical effort from intellection. As another member of the Anarchitecture group, Laurie Anderson, has observed, talk for the Soho cohort was “not only a way to figure out what you [were] doing, it [was] the work itself.”⁴ It is in Matta-Clark’s writings, interviews, and letters that this embeddedness in a social time and place most vividly reveals itself—and, in so doing, intensifies our awareness of his larger oeuvre as dependent on or striated by linguistic and syntactic elements whose corollaries are conversation, task-based performance, and the interrogation of social systems.

Part Three, “A Silent Force: The Legacies of Matta and Duchamp,” extends the inquiry into Matta-Clark’s biography to explore the influence of Dadaist and Surrealist language games. This influence was pervasive for American artists assimilating Conceptualism’s linguistic turn, as it had been for their Pop or Neo-Dada predecessors in the 1950s and

1960s, and for the Abstract Expressionists—indebted as they were to Surrealist automatism—in the 1940s. For Matta-Clark, the effects were delivered especially potently through his parents, the Chilean-born, Europe-based Surrealist painter Roberto Matta Echaurren, and the American artist, designer, and model Anne (née Ann) Clark Matta Alpert. It was also through his parents that Matta-Clark came close to that language-minded iconoclast, Marcel Duchamp. Certainly no artist appropriating capitalism’s detritus could ignore Duchamp, and he loomed large for figures as disparate as John Cage, Andy Warhol, and Robert Smithson. If deconstructivist theorists in Paris in the 1970s were more stimulated by Cage and Warhol than by Duchamp, they were nevertheless re-receiving the latter through the former. Matta-Clark is unique in these interlocking spheres, however, in that he is said to have been Duchamp’s godson. Oedipally overdetermined and ambient rather than causal, Matta-Clark’s rapport with Duchamp has, like his verbal wit, often been remarked on by his friends. But little detailed exploration of the issue has, to my knowledge, heretofore been made.

Lastly, Part Four, “SPACISM: Gordon Matta-Clark and the Political,” examines Matta-Clark’s leftist affinities, seeking to ground in archival specifics the oft-repeated assertions that he was a political or utopian or even Marxist artist. Here, again, the evidence of his writings and interviews is crucial, for this rebellious, communitarian skeptic frequently rendered his allegiances more explicitly in words than he did in projects and performances. Part Four sifts the archive for mention of movements, actors, and world historical events, gathering these fleeting yet numerous references to assemble a résumé of Matta-Clark’s political sympathies. Of particular importance are questions regarding his approach to communities living in—or evicted from—sites where he worked. Another concern is to investigate his relationships with women artists, and his thinking in regard to metaphors of gender as applied to built space.

Matta-Clark was heir to Surrealist theories of the city as oneiric terrain; he was stimulated by Situationist psycho-geographies, and steeped in Minimalist discourse about the literalist object. His aesthetics were enriched by contradictions across these influences, even as the vexed connections between advanced art practices and political activism as such perturbed him. All the while, he was collaborating intensively with female peers, at a moment when women were at the forefront of developments in performance, video, installation, dance, and experimental poetics—leadership positions that had largely been foreclosed to them in Surrealist, Situationist, and Minimalist circles. On a hermeneutic

level, the layered and fragmentary syntax of Matta-Clark's art is difficult to parse without recourse to theories of the sign that have likewise undergirded, and been inflected by, certain strains of feminist thought since the 1970s—in particular appraisals of signs and syntaxes as performative, and considerations of language as permeable to rhythmic pulsations and embodied drives.

In drawing out the connections among Matta-Clark's poetics, his debts to fellow artists, and his politics, I am interested in restoring to his oeuvre something of the saturating presence of other people and their ideas—including ideas not directly concerned with Postminimalist or Postconceptualist art—that he and his contemporaries would have assumed. This collaborative presence animates both the *WE* and the *YOU* in the statement *HERE IS WHAT WE HAVE TO OFFER / YOU . . .*, and it was fundamental to the way that Matta-Clark worked. This book is thus a close reading of Matta-Clark's art, and a close reading of anecdotes and oral histories accreted around that art. The examination of his language becomes, in effect, a partial biography and a partial reception history, pointing at once into the past of his parents' generation, into the present of his own life in the downtown scene, and into the "future" that has unfolded for his work in the forty-plus years since his career began.

Oral history is prominent in the literature surrounding early Soho, with interview-based volumes chronicling *FOOD*, the Grand Union dance group, and the artist-run gallery 112 Greene Street that was the hub of Matta-Clark's social world. Many of the same people speak in all of these books. The Matta-Clark material is the most extensive and, along with his own interviews, has formed the nucleus of scholarship about him since his death. It remains rare to read an article about him in which these sources are not quoted, and this alone merits critical attention not only to what they say, but to how they say it. Such documents should not, in my view, stand as unassailably authentic testimony, still less as nostalgic tokens of a bygone era. Rather, I receive such fragmentary statements—from Matta-Clark himself, and from his friends, family, and colleagues—as *text*. This not to debunk their value, but to emphasize their discursive, passed-along status, their status as rhetorical; I am curious about artifacts of memory and interpretation best understood as belonging to the category of the trace. These written traces point toward but can never unproblematically deliver the live or the literal. They are real, in that people who participated in a social group at a given time and place have spoken on the record about what they remember and believe, just as Matta-Clark spoke on the record in

his lifetime. Yet no seamlessly veridical whole can be reconstituted from them.

For my purposes it is important to read these records closely anyway, to quote verbatim and to remain alert to patternings, agreements, and divergences in what has been said. For these selectively gathered, recorded-transcribed-and-edited, temporally embedded statements—which have in some cases been further formalized in essays and memoirs by the artists—constitute a peculiar kind of materiality. This is not the classical primacy of speech as valorized over its handmaiden, writing; as interview and oral history, the speech in question was always bound to the written as its condition of possibility.⁵ It is rather the materiality *of* the written, the palimpsestic facticity of text processed through reproduction, excerpting, and citation until it thins toward recirculating trope, yet without losing—contradictorily, distortedly—its resonance in contextual experience. Indeed, this resonance is paramount to the leitmotif of face-to-face exchange that remains central to the Soho group’s discourse about itself. At play is a verbal density whose persistence in art-critical discourse is analogous to that of Matta-Clark’s most aggressively physical—and hence, now, most thoroughly distanced—artworks. This is not surprising, for those works were produced in conscious synergy with just this type of dynamically enlivened and hence, now, thoroughly distanced language.

To put this another way: because Matta-Clark’s career has been centrally concerned with breakage and disappearance—indelibly marked by ephemerality—a central intention of this study is simply to survey the written archive, gathering even small bits of evidence regarding his verbal disposition and conceptual investments, while holding that evidence in tension with its own incompleteness. As Matta-Clark’s friend, the critic and curator Joan Simon—who conducted a key set of interviews in the oral history literature—has observed, “Many of his pieces exist only in stories he told.”⁶ To puzzle through the critical status of these stories, re-narrated and re-cited as they have been by others, is to encounter Matta-Clark’s art as an anatomy of deferrals. In this dematerializing body, representation and sensual availability, poetics and physicality, repeatedly reframe each other.

Gordon Matta-Clark: Physical Poetics is thus conspicuously concerned with paradox and contradiction, marginalia and echoes. A sustained inquiry devoted to partial reflections and teasing wordplay has its own absurdity to manage; to spend too long unpacking a joke or interrogating an impression is to miss a point. For Matta-Clark’s readers, this is an occupational hazard. So too is the dizziness generated in

trying to diagram the “cometing forward” of a mercurial and iconoclastic personality whose complicated life ended abruptly, whose art historical reputation has been posthumously secured.

Gordon Matta-Clark as a living person is of course no more recoverable than the experience of walking through a building cut—say *Splitting*, on a sunny spring day in New Jersey in 1974. As a figure for investigation, he is not unlike his conversation or his site-specific works, at once boldly embodied and long gone. Each recalls the self-pursuing, self-ghosting, self-illuminating “headlight child” envisioned by Duchamp in 1912, projecting ahead of himself the traces of passage that logically should lengthen out behind him, like *a comet, which would have its tail in front.*⁷