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## Places

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# The Lost Public Art of Gordon Matta-Clark

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An exhibit on the work of Gordon Matta-Clark at the Whitney Museum of Art this spring (March-June 2007) was a reminder of the prophetic insight he had in the 1970s, infiltrating the art and architectural worlds, revealing profound complacencies in each.

I first paid attention to the work of Matta-Clark in the early 1990s, well after his premature death in 1978 at age thirty-five. Despite having lived in the wake of his influence in Ithaca and New York City in the 1970s, I did not find my way to his work until I developed a professional and academic interest in the reuse of existing buildings.

Now, this exhibition and its attendant resources has further deepened my regard for his work. It also provides important insights into how

places *bold, conceal*, and through insightful intervention and reappropriation, can *reveal* complex cultural, psychological and physically embodied meanings. The exhibition, scheduled to travel to other parts of the country, deserves to be visited and scrutinized by those interested in the remaking of place. The exhibit will next be at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles through October 29.

## A Broad Scope of Interest

Matta-Clark was best known for his building cuts and fragment displacements. But he had a much broader range of artistic interests, as this exhibit clearly shows, and he was among the few artists in the 1960s and 70s who explored the social/performance dimensions of art.

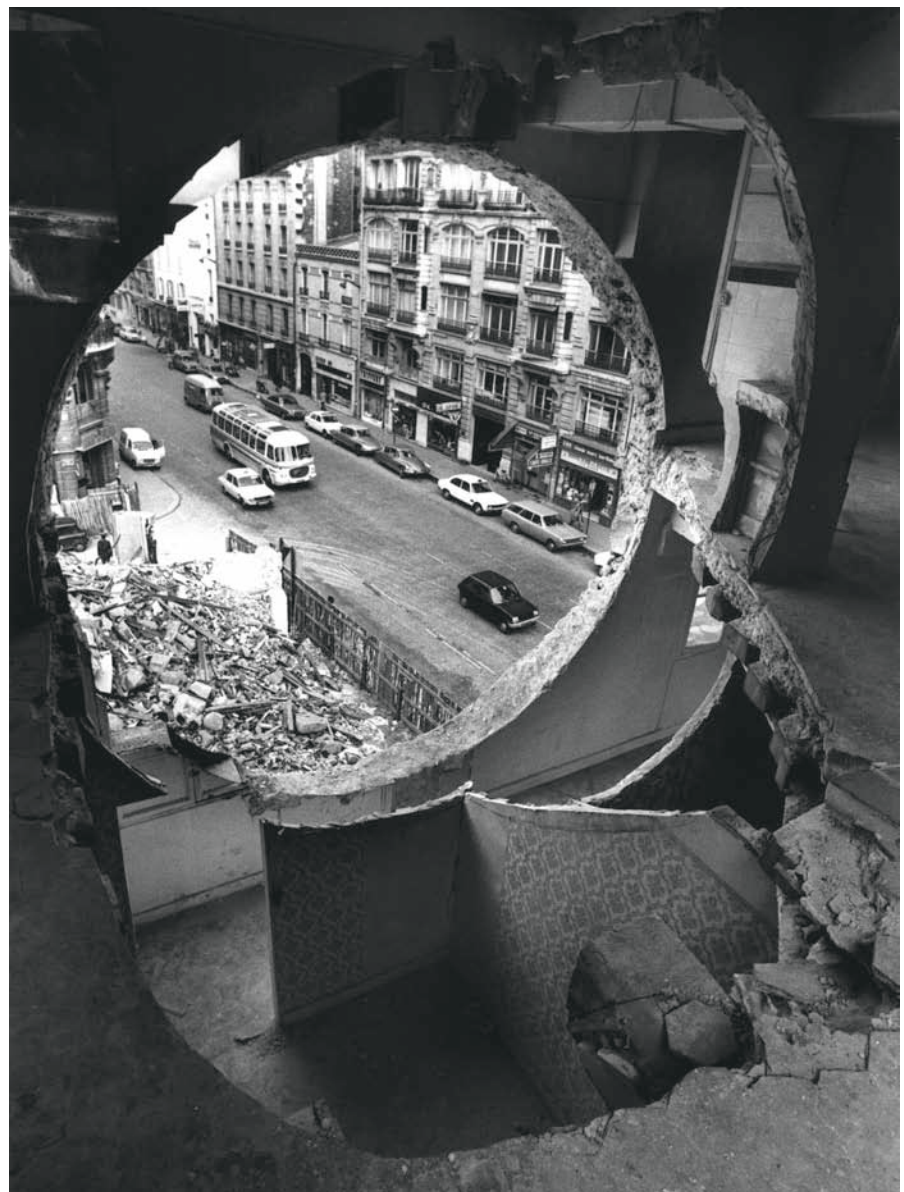
Matta-Clark's work emerged from an early exposure to architecture. He was an architecture student at Cornell University in the 1970s, and his estranged father, Roberto Matta Echaurren, was a surrealist artist who apprenticed for Le Corbusier and collaborated with Moholy-Nagy and Gropius.<sup>1</sup> But instead of pursuing his university training, Matta-Clark chose to help develop a new form of art that would better allow him to pursue his critical and creative interests. Disdainful of formalist and utopian Modern architecture, and frustrated with the relative lack of freedom in architectural culture, he chose a renegade path, exposing the constrictions and awakening the possibilities of a liberated understanding of visual and material culture.

As an activist, Matta-Clark convened a gathering of artists which called itself “Anarchitecture” (fusing anarchy and architecture), whose goal was to address transformational possibilities, neglected places, and taboo ideas outside architecture proper.<sup>2</sup> Their critique of architectural design focused on the limits of “cosmetic” or surface considerations, emphasizing the insights about specific places possible through removal, displacement, and intervention. It was the revelatory, phenomenal and metaphorical possibilities of place they pursued, more than the advancement of any alternative, formal image or notion of space. And the work Matta-Clark pursued that rose from this group freely crossed disciplinary boundaries and exposed the deep but often invisible or subconscious power of place.

### Affirmation by Displacement

This exhibition attends exceptionally well to the diverse fascinations and modes of creative/critical enterprise Matta-Clark had—with film, street theater, waste, landscape and food, to name only a few. But it is his poetic and daring interventions into derelict places that I still find most appealing. In short, his cutting, relocating, representing, and reinterpreting of vulnerable buildings and places is particularly instructive to an understanding of place creation, alteration and stewardship.

As we have come to realize over the past several decades, thanks especially to the preservation and sustainability movements, the embodied energy and meaning places gain over time and through use (how they come to support, protect and represented us) is profound. Matta-Clark’s interventional work demonstrated like nothing before or since that these realities can be critical and creative sources of meaning, just waiting to be



engaged. This tangible “action” work has even amplified and linked for me the diverse writings about place by such twentieth-century titans as Yi-Fu Tuan, Jane Jacobs, Howard Mansfield, and Colin Rowe.

Perhaps because this intervention work is largely unavailable today but for a few teasing remnants, its alluring power continues to attract. Not unlike his own use of absence in the presence of the previously complacent settings in which he intervened, we (as designers and planners) are reminded of the potency of memory or association, whether based on real or imagined experience. It just might be, then, less the particular latent facts or qualities of this work we should be paying atten-

tion to, and more the creative, revelatory and existential affirmations of how place matters that so readily precipitate from such displacement work.

### Notes

1. Pamela M. Lee, *Object to be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), p. 6.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

**Opposite:** Gordon Matta-Clark, “Bingo,” 1974. Building fragments, three sections. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Nina and Gordon Bunshaft Bequest Fund, Nelson A. Rockefeller Bequest Fund, and the Enid A. Haupt Fund. 309.2004.a-d.

**Above:** Gordon Matta-Clark, “Conical Intersect,” 1974. Courtesy the Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark and David Zwirner, New York.