

Gordon Matta-Clark's Urban Cuttings

HOLLY MYERS | **OCTOBER 31, 2007** | **9:00AM**

Gordon Matta-Clark's New York was a tougher, grittier, more tumultuous place than the stylish television backdrop it often seems today: The city was virtually bankrupt; crime was rampant; the World Trade Center was going up while tenements stood abandoned; and Soho was cheap enough to attract the artists who would one day make it Soho. Like any such age, it had its share of poets, but few who captured the spirit of the tumult more succinctly than Matta-Clark. A second-generation architecture dropout – his father, the Surrealist painter Roberto Echaurren Matta, studied in Chile and worked under Le Corbusier for a time – Matta-Clark went to school at Cornell but never practiced; he seemed to perceive the promise and the inadequacy of architecture simultaneously. He approached the city on its own terms, using its spaces, structures, sidewalks, rubbish heaps and plant life as his materials, and in a career that spanned less than a decade – he died, sadly, at 35 – he encapsulated an era.

Matta-Clark is best known today for his “building cuts”: ephemeral works that involved cutting shapes out of the walls, floors and ceilings of abandoned buildings, sometimes legally, sometimes not. One of the many rewards of the excellent survey that opened at the Whitney in February and is now at MOCA, however, is the revelation of how many other things he did as well. His output, though limited in duration, was tireless. In addition to the building cuts, he made sculptures using food products and gelatinous sheets of agar; propped up the chassis of abandoned cars to fashion shelters under the Brooklyn Bridge; choreographed a dance performance high in the branches of a tree on the campus of Vassar College; purchased orphaned slivers of New York real estate (curbs, gutters, abandoned strips of alley) and lavished them with documentation; fashioned a “Fresh Air Cart” stocked with tanks of oxygen to offer to passing New Yorkers; filmed himself showering while clinging to the face of a clock tower; and opened and operated a restaurant (with a group of other artists) called Food. He made wonderfully whimsical drawings of trees, and abstract “drawings” produced

by slicing into stacks of gessoed paper. He filmed and photographed just about everything, and fashioned many of the photographs into spatially sophisticated collages. He also left a beguiling literary legacy in the form of linguistically playful, philosophically shrewd journals and notes.

That said, the building cuts – or, to be more specific, the photographs, collages and films that document them – are undoubtedly the most spectacular works, crystallizing the breadth of Matta-Clark's vision in a few, deceptively simple strokes. (Executed with chain saw and crowbar and often entwined with a given building's structural supports, the cuts were, of course, far from simple.) In one, *Conical Intersect* (1975), he cut a cone-shaped spiral into the side of a condemned building in the Les Halles neighborhood of Paris, piercing several layers to reveal a dazzling snarl of lines, volumes and shapes. In another – breathtakingly simple by contrast – he sliced a New Jersey row house straight down the middle and manipulated the foundation such that the two halves tilted very slightly apart. This piece, called *Splitting*, takes on a particular poignancy when you know that Matta-Clark's twin brother, Batan, would commit suicide two years later, leaping from Matta-Clark's own studio window.

Installed snugly but comfortably in one large gallery, the show would seem at a glance little more than a collection of scraps – and in a sense it is: notes, drawings, photographs and films, mostly, documenting events long past or sculptures that no longer exist. The longer one spends with it, however, the more distinct – and profound – this sense of absence becomes. Even at its most concrete, the work is continually flirting with nothingness, both materially and existentially. In a note on display in one of the show's vitrines, Matta-Clark wrote:

A RESPONSE TO COSMETIC DESIGN

COMPLETION THROUGH REMOVAL

COMPLETION THROUGH COLLAPSE

COMPLETION IN EMPTINESS

“Completion” is the key word, because as muscular as much of this work is, what's moving in the end is its peacefulness, its resolution. It is as if, in peering into the

chaos of the ailing city, Matta-Clark saw through to the calm in the eye of the storm.

What seems to excite curators and historians about this issue of absence is the problem it poses to collectors, conservators and the archival operations of art history. In his forward to the catalog, for example, Whitney Museum director Adam Weinberg declares: “The profundity of a project like *Splitting*, as of Matta-Clark’s work as a whole, is in the questions it poses: What is the work of art? Are the boundaries between artistic media of any real significance? How important is the exhibition of the artwork itself? What is the relationship between the destructive and constructive art process?” These are entertaining questions for a grad school seminar, but they shortchange the artist considerably. The profundity of the work, it seems to me, goes far beyond the question of art, into questions like: What is matter? Are the boundaries between rooms/bodies/countries/worlds of any real significance? How important is physical existence? And – not to be too grandiose about it – what is the relationship between death and life?

One project that goes almost unremarked in the exhibition is *Descending Steps for Batan*, which involved the artist digging a hole into the foundation of a gallery in Paris, shortly after his brother’s death. Photographs of the work depict Matta-Clark crouched at the bottom of a dark, narrow passage, his body twisted and cramped, his white T-shirt a blur as he digs, well beyond arm’s reach. He would be dead himself in a little more than a year (cancer, not suicide) and already looks to be moving toward the grasp of that darkness. In one of the images, an unidentified man stands at the edge of the hole, looking in, and his somber reverence speaks volumes. After this, it’s hard not to see a kind of spiritual hunger in the building cuts: a fervent desire to make space, to break through, to crack the shell of this life, this body, this world, and flood that space with the light of whatever waits beyond. Indeed, there’s something almost angelic about it, as if the artist were a spirit escorting these buildings toward a more peaceful death.

Nowhere is this sense of grace more palpable than in the aptly titled *Day’s End* (1975), a project in which Matta-Clark cut, among other things, a large crescent shape into the massive tin wall of an abandoned warehouse on Pier 54 in New York. The piece prompted the New York City Police Department to issue a warrant for the artist’s arrest, but that gesture feels hopelessly petty in comparison to the

light that streams in through the cut, transforming the dingy, doomed space into a cathedral.

GORDON MATTA-CLARK: YOU ARE THE MEASURE | MOCA | 250 S. Grand Ave.,
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