Interview with Gordon Matta-Clark, Antwerp, september 1977.

Q.:When did you first start thinking about cutting sections out of buildings? And what might have been some of the motivations for these initial excursions into the building structure?

A.:I think that the loft situation, at least the early loft situation in which artists were constantly confronted with their own housing needs, was an atmosphere in which many were compelled to transform their real and illusory environment as well as the nature of their works. Living in New York creates such a need for adaptation that raw, uninhabitable spaces constantly had to be transformed into studios or exhibition areas. I imagine this is one of the ways that I became used to appraoching space on an aggressive level. One of the earliest times I can remember using cutting as a way of redefining a space was at Food Restaurant, a restaurant that I, along with other artists, set up in the early days of Soho - long before the influx of boutiques and bars which now congest that area. This was a restaurant that was also a performance area. We would put on shows and create food theater. The first design of the place was not as practical as we needed once the restaurant became a business. Consequently, I spent the second summer redesigning the space. I did this by cutting up what we had already built and rearranging it. This cutting up started with a number of counters and built-in work spaces. It then progressed to the walls and various other space dividers. This was perhaps, the last time I ever used cutting, the cutting process, in a pragmatic way. Later that year I made a series of visits to the ghetto areas of the Lower East Side and the Bronx visiting buildings occupied primarily by packs of dogs and periodicly by junkies. Many of the buildings had suffered heavy arson and were the epitamy of urban neglect. These first works simply involved moving into spaces with a handsawand cutting away rectangular sections of the floor or walls to create a view from one space into another. The sections were carefully removed from their original positions to an art gallery. The working conditions were always the most adverse that I can remember. We were not only stopped by the police on several occasions, but also by roving gangs from the neighborhood. There was always an acute sense of paranoia that accompanied this work.

Q.:Why did you select this totally unattractive and derelict situation? What was it that drew you to these conditions as an artistic medium?

A.:The first thing that has to be considered is the fact that I grew up in New York in this kind of environment. As the City evolved in the Fifties and Sixties into a completely architectured International Style steel and glass megalopolis, by contrast, great areas of what had been residential were being abandoned. These areas were being left as demoralizing reminders of "Exploit it or Leave it". It is the prevalence of this wasteland phenomina that drew me to it. I couldn't help but feel for the claustrophobic, cluttered rooms, stinking hallways, burned-out and windowless

environment that, in their abandoned condition, still reverberated with the miseries of ghetto lives. By undoing a building there are many aspects of the social condition against which I am gesturing: to open a state of enclosure which had been preconditioned not only by physical necessity but by the industry that profligates suburban and urban boxes as a context for insuring a passive, isolated consumer - a virtually captive audience. The fact that some of the buildings I have dealt with are in Black ghettos, reinforces some of this thinking, although I would not make a total distinction between the imprisonment of the poor and the remarkably sublte self-containerization of higher socio-economic neighborhoods.

I must also add that because these buildings were outside of society and not part of anybody's protective property motive, they were free to all. The wild dogs, the junkies and I used these spaces to work out some life problem, in my case, having no socially acceptable place to work.

Q.:I can see by the nature of your work that this would be an obstacle. Have you had any projects thwarted because of this?

A.:Yes, several. But there is much in our society that purposely intends denial: deny entry, deny passage, deny participation, etc. We would all still be living in towers and castles if we hadn't broken down some of the social and economic barriers, inhibitions and restraints.

Q.:Would you discuss how you use these buildings as a sculptural medium as opposed to wood or clay? I understand that it is the concept of the "home" that you use as much as the physical make up.

A.:That's correct. A Hole House was the beginning of an idea which was developed over a year with Splitting and Bingo X Ninths. These projects took most of their energy from the object-like treatment of the suburban home. Buildings are fixed entities in the minds of most people. The notion of mutable space is taboo especially in one's own house. People live in their space with a temerity that is frightening. Home owners generally do little more than maintain their property. Once an institution like the home is objectified in such a way, it does understandably raise a moral issue. These issues are not ones that I'm involved in but continue to inspire criticism from defenders of home and property.

Splitting was done 1973 at 322 Humphrey Street in Englewood, New Jersey. It was in a predominately Black neighborhood that was being demolished for an urban renewal project that was never completed. When I took over the house, it was strewn with personal debris left by its abruptly evicted tenants. The work began by cutting a one-inch slice through all the structural surfaces dividing the building in half. The second stage was to bevel down the forty linial feet of the foundation so that the rear half could be lowered one foot. The central 'split' was formed by the

five degree tilt activating the house with a brilliant wedge of sunlight that spilled every room.

Q.:What kind of reaction did you get from this work?

A.:I received a lot of mail, much of it positive but among the angry letters was one from an architect who said I was violating the sanctity and dignity of abandoned buildings by interrupting their transition to ruin or demolition. Another person saw what I did as out and out rape. There were also occasional accusations (particularly because of my architectural training) of my occupying an ideological position diametrically opposed to the practicing architect and to all that the profession implicates regarding solving human problems. However, I don't think most practitioners are solving anything except how to make a living. Architecture is a lacky to big business. It's an enormously costly undertaking and therefore, like government, comes equipped with its entire panoply of propaganda. I think Monolithic Idealist problem-solving has not only failed to solve the problems but created a dehumanized condition at both a domestic and institutional level.

In the midst of all this moralist crossfire, I have to digress from an air of self-righteousness and settle comfortably back to the certainty of my own perversity, especially to the extent that anyone is, who enjoys breaking the rules while being convinced that he is right some of the time.

Q.:How much do traditional concepts of art (drawing and sculpture) come to play in your work?

A.:My initial decisions were based on the avoidence of making sculptural objects and an abhorrence of flat art. Why hang things on a wall when the wall itself is so much more a challenging medium? It is the rigid mentality that architects install the walls and artists decorate them that offends my sense of either profession. A simple cut or series of cuts, act as a powerful drawing device able to redefine spatial situations and structural componants. What is invisibly at play behind a wall of floor, once exposed, becomes an active participant in a spatial drawing of the building's inner life. The act of cutting through from one space to another produces a certain complexity involving depth perception. Aspects of stratification probably interest me more than the unexpected views which are generated by the removals - not the surface, but the thin edge, the severed surface that reveals the autobiographical process of its making. There is a kind of complexity which comes from taking an otherwise completely normal, conventional, albeit anonymous situation and redefining it, retranslating it into overlapping and multiple readings of conditions past and present. Each building generates its own unique situation.

Q.:If I understand correctly, you see your work as not destroying a building but as redefining it. Are you suggestinf this as a means or justification for preserving these old tenements?

A.:I am experimenting with alternative uses of space that are most familiar. I like to think of these works as by-passing questions of imaginative design by suggesting ways of rethinking what is already there. I do not want

to create a totally new supportive field of vision, of cognition. I want to reuse the old one, the existing framework of thought and sight. I am altering the existing units of perception normally employed to discern the wholeness of a thing. It is an organic response to what already has been well done. More than a call for preservation, this work reacts against a hygenic obsession in the name of redevelopment which sweeps away what little there is of an American past, to be cleansed by pavement and parking. What might have been a richly layered underground is being excavated for deeper, new building-foundations. Only our garbage heaps are s red as they fill up with history.

Q.:Do you see your art in any way affecting this condition?

A.:To a small degree Days Passing done at Pier 52 in New York City in 1975, was a step in the right direction. I didn't have any illusion about the causes, only about making a mark in a sad moment of history. This piece is on the Hudson River and is the only one of my works to have survived over two years. As it stands in New York's most dramatically neglected historical area, this pier has turned into a mugger's lane for the sexual underground community. Technically under the jurisdiction of the City Port Authority, their level of disinterested abandonment virtually removed the property from the realm of society. I simply took it over until the project was finished. Pier 52 is an intact nineteeth century industrial relic of steel and corruated tin looking like an enormous Christian bascilica whose dim interior was barely lit by the clerestory windows fifty feet overhead.

The initial cuts were made through the pier floor across the center forming a tidal channel nine feet wide by seventy feet long. A sail-shaped opening provides access to the river. A similar shape through the roof directly above this channel allows a patch of light to enter which arches over the floor until it's captured at noon within the watery slot. During the afternoon the sun shines through a cat-eye-like 'rose window' in the west wall. At first a sliver and then a strongly defined shape of light continues to wander into the warf until the whole pier is fully illuminated at dusk. Below the rear 'wall-hole' is another large quarter circular cut opening the floor of the southwest corner to a turbulent view of the Hudson water. The water and sun move constantly in the pier throughout the day in what I see as an indoor park.

Q.:Is it the imperminance of your works, the pier piece only lasting as long as it did by sheer luck, that makes you describe them as performance? Would you talk a little more about that?

A.:The direct expression of a strong gestural act is in all the works to such an extent that the nature of each intrusion is the whole work. Splitting was split, Bingo X Ninth was removed a ninth part at a time, Days Passing at Pier 52 was 'opened' to the elements and populace, Conical Intersect created a sort of street theater during its creation and Office Baroque is a walk-through panoramic arabesque. I can not separate how intimately linked the work is with the process

as a form of theater in which both the working activity and the structural changes to and within the building are the performance. I also include a free interpretation of movement as gesture, both metaphoric, sculptural, and social into my sense of theater with only the most incidental audience - an ongoing act for the passer-by just as the construction site provides a stage for busy pedestrians in transit.

The confrontational nature of the work is every bit as brutal physically as it is socially. Tackling a whole building even with power tools and a couple of helpers is as strenuous an action as any dance or team sport. Perhaps the physicality is the easiest reading of the work. The first thing one notices is that violence has been done. Then the violence turns to visual order and hopefully, then to a sense of heightened awareness. You see that light enters places it otherwise couldn't. Angles and depths can be perceived where they should have been hidden. Spaces are available to move through that were previously inaccessible. My hope is that the dynamism of the action can be seen as an alternative vocabulary with which to question the static inert building environment.

Q.:I understand that you had quite an audience for the project done in Paris in 1975. Would you tell us more about it?

A.:The Beaubourg Project, Conical Intersect, was a wonder of good luck and timing. It was conceived over a year earlier when I had first heard of plans to build the Centre Pompidou as a hub of contemporary culture. The site at 27-29 Rue Beaubourg was two modest town houses built in 1699 for Mr. and Mrs. Leiseville as what appeared to be 'his and hers' domiciles. These buildings were among the last left standing in the plan of modernizing the Les Halles - Plateau Beaubourg district. The work was interesting as non-monumental counterpart to the grandiose bridge-like skeleton of the Center just behind. For two plaster dusty weeks people watched us measuring, cutting and removing the debris from the truncated conicle void. The base of the lone was a circle of four meters in diameter through the north wall. The central axis made an approximately forty-five degree angle with the street below. As the cone diminished in circumfrence, it twisted up through walls, floors and out the attic roof of the adjoining house. This hollow form became a "Son Et Lumière" for passers-by or an extravagant new standard in sun and air for lodgers.

Q.:I would imagine that these projects get easier with each new encounter. Would you tell us about your most recent project in Antwerp, Belgium?

A.:Easier? Not at all! Antwerp has fulfilled my artistic needs for a conservative and resistant encounter, at least on an official level. Personally, I had a wonderful allie in Flor Bex at the I.C.C. and a wonderful result. The original idea for this piece was based on the fact that the building is in one of the most conspicuous areas of town -right in front of the Steen, the quintessence of a touristic hot spot where everyone comes to snap a shot. This work, like the majority of

my other works, was conceived of as an exterior of the building, something that would have had a spherical quadrant removed from the corner of the building allowing sightseers to see through it. Once the city found out what was planned, they killed the project. Luckily the owner, the MP-Omega N.V., allowed me to continue only if I promised to work completely out of public view inside the building. This gave me the enforced opportunity to develope ideas about spacial rhythm and complexity that I might have otherwise never done. In making this shift from a public to private work, the formal decisions passed through a curious sequence. My first five story building had unique potentials and I wanted to work out an almost musical score in which a fixed set of elements played their way up and down throughout the layers. By accident the rings left by a cup of tea on a drawing suggested organizing the piece around two semi-circular areas of slightly different diameters. These began on the first floor providing the constant motif as they were cut up through the floors and roof. Where these circles crossed, a peculiar, almost row-boat shaped hole resulted and was mutated from floor to floor as structural beams and available floor space dictated.

In this project, now called Office Baroque, the disposition of spaces (large open offices near the ground, small interconnecting rooms toward the top) determined how the formal elements transformed from uninterupted circular slices to shrapnel-like bits and pieces of the original form as they "collided" with partitions and walls. Besides the surprise and disorientation this work stimulates, it creates an especially satisfying mental map or model to help the eye remember. Office Baroque is distinct from earlier projects by eluding what I call snap-shot interpretation. This is a single characteristic view which one might find on a postcard or an art documentation. There is a sad irony in this. Although the project is in a prime location with many people hovering just outside the locked doors, the only way to get a comprehensive idea of the work, is to wander through from top to bottom inside. I suppose it will be another esoteric hidden work in the history of inaccessible projects.