

## Introduction to Anarchitecture (Gordon Matta-Clark and Office Baroque)

‘My approach is about working with everything that is possible and thereby stretching our notion of  
what is possible’  
(Matta-Clark in a letter to Florent Bex)

### Architecture as performance

Matta-Clark calls his activities and those of the group around him 'anarchitecture', a contraction of the concepts of anarchy and architecture. Anarchitecture is a fusion of the criticism of cultural institutionalisation (characteristic of Conceptual Art), of direct involvement with the environment (characteristic of Land Art) and of the preference for the physical (characteristic of Performance Art). *Anarchitecture* was an informal group that was open to alternative art forms, felt connected to drop-outs and sympathised with activism. Through his anarchitecture, Matta-Clark literally and figuratively wanted to open up new possibilities: 'He began seeing buildings, rooms, urban space, neighbourhoods and places where people come together as situations in which he could create something new with his planned 'interventions'.<sup>1</sup>

It wasn't just about the abstract or utopian, but about creating work- and meeting places for young artists. As an example, Matta-Clark set up the '*Food*' restaurant together with Carol Goodden and Tina Girouard in 1971. *Food* was many different things in one: a commercial venture, a social initiative, and an artistic project. Artists cooked there for artists and these mealtimes were frequently raised to the status of performances. Art events and shows were also organised there. Moreover, it was the place that Matta-Clark pinpointed as the beginning of the series of major structural interventions, his *cuttings*.<sup>2</sup> The film *Food* (1972) gives a good sense of the hippy atmosphere there. The performance *Tree Dance* from 1971 and the project *Open House* of 1972 (a container that he converted into a performance space) can also be seen as socially critical solutions for the lack of space for artists.

Many of his early works are performances in the strict sense of the word, although most are related to architecture. Other examples, in addition to *Tree Dance*, are *Garbage Wall*, the film *Firechild* and *Fresh Kill*. *Clockshower* (1973) was one of his most daring performances. Suspended from the enormous face of a clock tower, high above the streets of New York, he washes and shaves himself, and cleans his teeth. But he also continued to put on performances in the later years of his short artistic career. *Window Blow Out* (1976) was an 'action' that was nothing short of vandalism: using an air rifle he shot out all the windows of a building which was hosting the architecture exhibition '*Idea as Model*'. That was his contribution. The work was quickly removed and the windows were replaced, but Matta-Clark had made his statement. It was his belief that architects only regarded derelict buildings as objects that could be demolished, so that new ones could be erected, that would in turn fall derelict; they ignored the needs of the residents of a city.

In addition to these works, which were performances in the strict sense, Matta-Clark also regarded the making of his *cuttings* as performances. In the famous interview he conducted with himself for the ICC catalogue, which he describes in a letter to Florent Bex as an 'extempore autodialogue'<sup>3</sup>, he says: "The work and the process are inextricably linked as a form of theatre in which the work process as well as the structural changes to and in the building, are the performance ... , a continuous act for passers-by, just as the building site is a scene for busy passing pedestrians'.<sup>4</sup>

Matta-Clark also has a reputation for being a daredevil, and the dangerous, physical part of his work with chain saws and grinding discs was part of his aura. Watching him at work was often a perilous spectacle. He refers to it in his self-interview: 'The confrontational nature of the work is as physically bold as it is socially bold. Taking over a building, even with heavy equipment and a few helpers is as physically demanding as dancing or taking part in a team sport. Maybe looking at the physical element is the easiest way of interpreting the work. The first thing that strikes you is that an act of violence has taken place. Then the violence takes on a visual aspect and then hopefully a feeling of heightened consciousness emerges ... I hope that the dynamics of the action can be seen as an alternative vocabulary with which to study the static and inert character of the building and its surroundings.'<sup>5</sup>

### **The 'cuttings': the negative in architecture**

In his architectural interventions, the geometric forms of minimalism, circles, lines, cross-sections, cones, etc. are magnified and transferred to existing, disused buildings. By making cuts in buildings, the internal elements and the structure of the building are exposed. This makes it possible to read the building in a different way. Matta-Clark wants to break through everyday automatic observations with his work. 'His *cuttings* break with the ... perspectivist space, there is no longer a fixed viewpoint, no centre, no top and bottom, hardly any inside and outside.'<sup>6</sup>

These *cuttings* gave him fame and a name in the art world. His biggest projects were carried out in Paris (*Conical Intersect*, 1975), Antwerp (*Office Baroque*, 1977) and Chicago (*Caribbean Orange*, 1978). The 1973 piece called *Splitting* is regarded as probably the first cutting<sup>7</sup>: a wooden house that he simply sawed in two; then by removing a piece of the foundation, he let it pop open, allowing the sunlight to stream into every room. Thus he broke through the structure of the typical American house with its dark rooms. The house was situated in a predominantly black neighbourhood that was demolished to make way for an urban renewal project that was never completed. The title *Splitting* is probably an allusion to this. It was also a criticism of the urbanism of that time<sup>8</sup>. *Real Properties-Fake Estate* (1973) is also a good example of his strategy of condemning social and urban planning problems: he exposed attitudes to ownership by buying up leftover plots in Queens and Staten Island, the crevices between plots, and fully documenting, measuring and photographing them. Private ownership is taken to absurd lengths, in places that are owned but are not accessible, and can't even be experienced.

Matta-Clark doesn't break anything down, but redefines or, as he himself says, "experiments with the alternative use of these spaces that are so familiar to us"<sup>9</sup>. Instead of the functionalism of architecture, he opts for an architecture that questions itself, deconstructs itself. He was fascinated by making private or inaccessible areas public and also by urban development and decline. The temporary structural interventions by Matta-Clark aimed to induce something both in the building and at the location. His work is a critique of the conventions within architecture and the visual arts. He saw buildings, public spaces and neighbourhoods as opportunities for change. The clandestine project *Day's End* (1974), which survived two years (and as such was one of the few interventions with a specific duration) consisted of monumental cuts into the rear wall, floor and roof of a covered pier in a poor historic neighbourhood of New York. Although it was actually the private property of the City Port Authority, through neglect it had become a semi-public location and the scene of all kinds of marginal and illicit practices. By his own admission Matta-Clark 'took over this place until the project

was complete... All day long the water and the sun move through the building, which I regard as an 'indoor park'.<sup>10</sup>

## ***Office Baroque***

Matta-Clark responded with enthusiasm when invited by the ICC to do something in Antwerp: in his first reply all he asks for is a place, the rest he will take care of himself.<sup>11</sup> In that letter of 28 July 1976 to Florent Bex he beautifully sums up – in his enthusiasm – the approach and commitment of anarchitecture: 'My approach consists of working with everything that is possible and thereby stretching our notion of what is possible. I use the urban fabric in its raw, neglected state and transform disused structures or spaces into revitalised sites. The actual space in its final stage is the 'exhibition' and it will hopefully lead its own life within the community.'<sup>12</sup>

And thus it transpired: of the various proposals made, Matta-Clark chose an empty office building on the Ernest van Dijckkaai, because it is centrally located and a tourist area<sup>13</sup>. Having worked for years in back streets and neglected areas of the city or suburbs in America, he now had the opportunity to set to work in the centre of a city in Europe (in Paris and Antwerp), so that his 'performance' (the making of the *cutting*) would be more visible. He was also enthusiastic about being able to work on five floors<sup>14</sup>. Regrettably an intervention on the exterior was not permitted, so he was forced to make an 'introvert' *cutting*: 'As with most of my other projects, this work was conceived with the idea of working from the outside. I wanted to remove a spherical quadrant from the corner of the building so that passers-by could look through it. When the city council heard about this, they immediately banned the project. Fortunately the owner, Marcel Peeters-Omega NV, granted me permission to continue, as long as I promised to work inside the building completely out of public view.'<sup>15</sup> Even he admits that this restriction, which he first only accepted reluctantly, gave him the chance to make a complex form, a sort of open/shut cocoon in the building itself. 'This gave me a new opportunity to develop ideas about spatial rhythm and complexity, which I would otherwise not have had. With this shift from a public to a concealed work, the formal decisions underwent a strange metamorphosis.'<sup>16</sup> He rightly speaks of the intervention as a score<sup>17</sup> that gives rise to arabesque-shaped cut-outs<sup>18</sup>.

The patterns only gradually revealed themselves, from floor to floor. Only people who actually entered the building could understand and survey it (and very few did, given the half-clandestine and hazardous nature of the site). The work was not only 'obscure' and literally virtually inaccessible, but also difficult to visualise: 'I suppose that the roof with its various views could give you an idea of the depth and complexity of it, and this piece is almost undocumentable. And that is what I like about the whole documentation process, if it's not worth documenting then it's not worth having.'<sup>19</sup> *Office Baroque* is the first *cutting* in which the disorientation of the space is paramount because of the scope and complexity: 'In addition to the surprising and disorienting effect of this work, it created an especially satisfying mental model that helps the eye to remember it. *Office Baroque* differs from previous projects in that it gets away from what I call the snapshot interpretation. By that I mean a single characteristic snap that you find on a picture postcard or in art documentation.'<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the departure from the frame, the 'frameable' and ultimately two-dimensional picture is part of the artistic assessment of that time, the search for the inalienable here and now, that cannot be reduced to a museum label: people want to get away from the idea of an artwork as an object, away from the museum as a place, away from artwork as a commodity.

It's no exaggeration to say that with *Office Baroque* Matta-Clark's *cuttings* reached a new level of complexity; one could call it a baroque phase of the *cuttings*, as was suggested by his reference to the arabesque. This baroque complexity would probably have increased over time, as *Caribbean Orange* demonstrates. In other words: Matta-Clark abandons minimalism and the stark simplicity of his first interventions; they become more lyrical compositions (in *Office Baroque*: variations on a tea stain<sup>21</sup> that amongst other things result in a tear-like motif<sup>22</sup>).

The word baroque in the title may also have another connotation. As already mentioned, one of the legacies of Dada and Surrealism is Matta-Clark's love of word games, such as *Bingo X Ninths* (obviously an allusion to bingo nights, but he also made 'Bin-go.ne by ninths and days') or *Clock Shower* (play on the words clock tower, where he takes a shower). So it could also be that, besides a reference to the Rubens Year, in which the work just happened to be produced, there was also a wordplay hidden in the title of his Antwerp cutting. In American English, *Office Baroque* is pronounced in a way that sounds not unlike the word 'broke': broken, or broke, bankrupt. *Office Baroque* then becomes *Office Broke*. He intends this therefore as a reference to the fact that he has broken open the building as well as the fact that it is a business that has gone broke.

Matta-Clark tried to make his intervention as public as possible. Shuttles were laid on to *Splitting* as well as *Day's End* on the Pier in New York. In Antwerp he found the following solution: he placed an ad in the newspaper to rent out the building as 'very spacious, inhabitable work spaces', with a 'unique design', and a 'beautiful view'. In the wordplays (such as *gilded tour* instead of *guided tour* and *song* instead of *sum*)<sup>23</sup> he made it clear to those who grasped it that it was a joke, in the style of Dadaism or Surrealism. This stunt was not appreciated and he apologised in a letter to the owner, claiming that it was a misunderstanding, a translation error. But the incident evidently left a melancholic-ironic aftertaste and the inaccessibility of the site disappointed him, because in his self-interview he expressed his fear that it 'would remain the umpteenth esoteric hidden work in the history of inaccessible projects'<sup>24</sup>.

Matta-Clark clearly regarded the work as one of his most ambitious, as a synthesis of his cuttings: 'this piece will be a combination of a whole series of attitudes and projects that I wanted to make; and it is intended to try to bundle them together in a sort of formal unity'<sup>25</sup>. In the letter of July 1976 to Flor Bex, he writes: 'Just for Antwerp I hope to be able to create a '*non-u-mental*' work that the city can enjoy for some time after its completion'<sup>26</sup>. He makes it clear with the wordplay that it is an 'antimonument'; a deconstruction, the undressing of a building. But the second half of the sentence indicates that with *Office Baroque* Matta-Clark hoped finally to make a cutting that would not be utterly temporary. He hoped the project would be able to develop in time so that people could explore and feel its possibilities: 'extend the idea of the possible' as he explained in his letter to Bex. To a certain extent, the fact that its demolition reignited the debate, through the Gordon Matta-Clark Foundation, about setting up a museum of contemporary art in Antwerp and thus was one of the key factors behind the opening of the M HKA, is a 'posthumous' realisation of the dream that the space '[would] hopefully lead its own life within the community'.

## Architecture as concrete utopia (conclusion)

As the word suggests, 'anarchitecture' is literally and figuratively the deconstruction, decomposition, unravelling of architecture. In that sense it is an architectural critique of architecture and the human city. It is art as criticism and question.

In his self-interview, Matta-Clark explains his credo beautifully: 'Why hang things on the wall, when the wall itself is so much more of a challenging medium? The set idea that architects put up walls and artists decorate them goes against my vision of both professions. A simple cut or a series of cuts function as a powerful drawing tool that can redefine spatial situations and spatial structural components.'<sup>27</sup> Matta-Clark's path in a nutshell: from the reduction of the medium through the frame to the rejection of professional pigeon-holing and social categories, to the *cuttings*. And even in the rather formal description of his cuttings there are echoes of this opening-up of possibilities for a different kind of social practice.<sup>28</sup> Matta-Clark was a conceptual idealist who wanted to stand alongside those with no rights, with no possessions. Most so-called engaged art is illustrative or ideological – Matta-Clark's 'Anarchitecture' is neither. It is a form of concrete utopia.

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<sup>1</sup> Press release from the exhibition *Gordon Matta-Clark: You Are the Measure* (from 16.9.2007 to 1.7.2008, Museum of Contemporary Art, LA, Los Angeles, CA, USA, available online?\*)

<sup>2</sup> Gordon Matta-Clark, Interview with Gordon Matta-Clark in *Gordon Matta-Clark* (cat. 8.10.1977 to .11.1977, ICC), see \*\*\*.

<sup>3</sup> G. Matta-Clark to F. Bex, letter of 28 July 1976: MHKA archives.

<sup>4</sup> Gordon Matta-Clark, Interview with Gordon Matta-Clark in, *Gordon Matta-Clark* (cat. 8.10.1977 to .11.1977, ICC), see \*\*\*.

<sup>5</sup> Gordon Matta-Clark, Interview with Gordon Matta-Clark in, *Gordon Matta-Clark* (cat. 8.10.1977 to .11.1977, ICC), see \*\*\*.

<sup>6</sup> Lieven De Cauter, *Anarchitectuur: de kunst van Gordon Matta-Clark* in *Het hiernamaals van de kunst*. Damme: Laat-XXe-eeuws Genootschap, 1991, (1987), p. 45.

<sup>7</sup> Although Matta-Clark had already made *A W-Hole House* in Genoa in 1973, *Splitting* from 1974 is regarded as the first completed *cutting* because here he cut through the structure of the building.

<sup>8</sup> He explains this in full in his 'extempore autodialogue' (see p. \*\*\*).

<sup>9</sup> Gordon Matta-Clark, Interview with Gordon Matta-Clark in, *Gordon Matta-Clark* (cat. 8.10.1977 to .11.1977, ICC), see \*\*\*.

<sup>10</sup> Gordon Matta-Clark, Interview with Gordon Matta-Clark in, *Gordon Matta-Clark* (cat. 8.10.1977 to .11.1977, ICC), see \*\*\*.

<sup>11</sup> G. Matta-Clark to F. Bex, letter of 28 July 1976: MHKA archives.

<sup>12</sup> G. Matta-Clark to F. Bex, letter of 28 July 1976: MHKA archives.

<sup>13</sup> Gordon Matta-Clark, Interview with Gordon Matta-Clark in, *Gordon Matta-Clark* (cat. 8.10.1977 to .11.1977, ICC), see \*\*\*.

<sup>14</sup> Gordon Matta-Clark, Interview with Gordon Matta-Clark in, *Gordon Matta-Clark* (cat. 8.10.1977 to .11.1977, ICC), see \*\*\*.

<sup>15</sup> Gordon Matta-Clark, Interview with Gordon Matta-Clark in, *Gordon Matta-Clark* (cat. 8.10.1977 to .11.1977, ICC), see \*\*\*.

<sup>16</sup> Gordon Matta-Clark, Interview with Gordon Matta-Clark in, *Gordon Matta-Clark* (cat. 8.10.1977 to .11.1977, ICC), see \*\*\*.

<sup>17</sup> Gordon Matta-Clark, Interview with Gordon Matta-Clark in, *Gordon Matta-Clark* (cat. 8.10.1977 to .11.1977, ICC), see \*\*\*.

<sup>18</sup> For the first time it was possible to create a structure on several levels by using two round arches that modulate the space, while the form and dimensions of the rooms change on each floor. The result is a series of arabesque-shaped cut-outs that open up the whole building and invite people to wander through to experience new exterior and interior views. (A brief didactic description of the project, similar to a 'title board' for a work, found amongst the correspondence with Florent Bex. (Muhka archives).

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<sup>19</sup> Convents, E, Office Baroque, a project by Gordon Matta-Clark, [film]

<sup>20</sup> Gordon Matta-Clark, Interview with Gordon Matta-Clark in, *Gordon Matta-Clark* (cat. 8.10.1977 to .11.1977, ICC), see \*\*\*.

<sup>21</sup> Gordon Matta-Clark, Interview with Gordon Matta-Clark in, *Gordon Matta-Clark* (cat. 8.10.1977 to .11.1977, ICC), see \*\*\*.

<sup>22</sup> In the film about *Office Baroque* he speaks of a tear shape and describes the geometry as follows: ‘... the thing that dictates the overall work is two circles, one large that goes central, at the very centre of the building, and the other one, which is off-centre. The intersection of the two becomes the major opening, a teardrop-shaped opening, and as that form rises through the building it’s transformed either by intercepting structures’. Convents, E, Office Baroque, a project by Gordon Matta-Clark, [film]

<sup>23</sup> G. Matta-Clark to M. Peeters, letter 1977: MHKA archives.

<sup>24</sup> Convents, E, Office Baroque, a project by Gordon Matta-Clark, [film]

<sup>25</sup> Convents, E, Office Baroque, a project by Gordon Matta-Clark, [film]

<sup>26</sup> G. Matta-Clark to F. Bex, letter of 28 July 1976: MHKA archives.

<sup>27</sup> Gordon Matta-Clark, Interview with Gordon Matta-Clark in, *Gordon Matta-Clark* (cat. 8.10.1977 to .11.1977, ICC), see \*\*\*.

<sup>28</sup> This notice for the collected writings nicely summarises it: “He consistently broke the boundaries between sculpture and architecture, photography and film, performance and installation, and above all the permanent and the transitory. Once in a while he also broke the law” ([http://www.bookforfree.org/pdf-download\\_2/Gordon-Matta-Clark:-Works-and-Collected-Writings-BY-Gloria-Moure-Gordon-Matta-Clark-ID7226.pdf](http://www.bookforfree.org/pdf-download_2/Gordon-Matta-Clark:-Works-and-Collected-Writings-BY-Gloria-Moure-Gordon-Matta-Clark-ID7226.pdf))