

Gordon Matta-Clark and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Antwerp (M HKA)

Gordon Matta-Clark's *Office Baroque* is closely linked to the story of the founding of the MUHKA. The history of the MUHKA starts with the ICC, the International Cultural Centre, which under the direction of Florent Bex was the first public avant-garde art institution in Flanders and laid the foundations of Belgian video art. In 1977, the famous Rubens Year, the ICC invited Gordon Matta-Clark to carry out a project in an empty office building opposite 'het Steen' (a mediaeval fortress) on the Antwerp quays, right behind the town hall and bang in the city centre. Collectors Jo Goldberg and Silvain Perlstein kept up the pressure from the very beginning.ⁱ *Office Baroque* was part of his series of so-called *Cuttings*, the cutting away of parts of buildings, whereby Matta-Clark provisionally blew new life and movement into deserted derelict buildings and forgotten neighbourhoods. It immediately became one of the biggest *cuttings* that he had ever done. The name of the project was a clear reference to the baroque Antwerp master who was being celebrated that year. The project immediately became one of the most important artistic interventions in public space ever to appear in Belgium.

Upon the premature death of the artist a year later, *Office Baroque* appeared to be the only structural intervention of his that was still standing. Led by the ICC, the Antwerp art scene began a campaign to preserve this masterpiece and to integrate it into a future museum for contemporary art in Antwerp. An appeal was launched in newspapers and magazines, and flyers were distributed.ⁱⁱ The local and international press published the pamphlet, which included a bank account number; the indifference of the city and the provincial councils was a particular target of criticism.ⁱⁱⁱ Artists from around the world supported the project and donated a work to the Gordon Matta-Clark Foundation. In Düsseldorf an exhibition was set up to support the project.^{iv}

Unfortunately, *Office Baroque* was doomed, despite everyone's efforts. A major operation was launched and in no time at all the building was razed to the ground.^v

It was years before Antwerp got its museum of contemporary art. The collection held by the Gordon Matta-Clark Foundation was, however, one of the reasons behind the eventual establishment of the 'Muhka' in 1985. The collection of artists' donations to the foundation is a private body of artwork and documents from the end of the 1970s, which forms the historical basis of the M HKA collection.

The M HKA has always tried to give Gordon Matta-Clark and *Office Baroque* the attention they deserve within the museum. In this vein, the opening exhibition at the M HKA was the 'Gordon Matta-Clark' retrospective, a major exhibition taken over from the Museum of Contemporary Art of Chicago, supplemented with some works from Belgian private collections.

Through the Gordon Matta-Clark Foundation, the M HKA also used the 1977 photo work entitled *Office Baroque # 669*: a collage of three cibachromes stuck onto hardboard with black tape, which Matta-Clark gave to Florent Bex for his future Museum of Contemporary Art (indicating that Florent Bex already had plans for a museum before the artist's death). The rights to the film by Roger Stylaerts and Cherika Convents were also acquired through the foundation. The offset litho (from photos and a plan) made by Matta-Clark for the project in 1977, was bought by the M HKA. On the occasion of the *Dear ICC* exhibition, a model of *Office Baroque* was also made.

The M HKA also has a 3-D work by Matta-Clark in its possession: *Doors Crossing*, a sort of spin-off of the *Office Baroque* project. It consists of a combination of an original door from *Office Baroque* (above) and a door from the collector's home (below), made into one by circular incisions. It is therefore not just a *removal*, but a hybrid, somewhere between an *objet trouvé* and a new site-specific installation. It is on the one hand an 'import' but also a new *cutting*, a new action in space. *Office Baroque (Doors Crossing)* was created in the house of a collector and is also part of *Office Baroque*. Jo

Goldberg received the work from the artist because he had paid for the plane tickets that had made the realisation of *Office Baroque* possible. In 2007 he sold the work to the M HKA. In 2009 Flor Bex also donated the correspondence between him and the artist, the slides that he made of *Office Baroque* and *Jacob's Ladder*, the archive of the Gordon Matta-Clark Foundation and a number of vintage photos. The museum also bought Matta-Clark's art books. There are also a large number of documents preserved in the ICC archives, which after the closure of the ICC were largely incorporated into the M HKA library.

Recently the M HKA acquired the screening rights for the videos which are such an important by-product of this work. These are films of a number of performances such as *Tree Dance*, *Fire Child*, etc., of his actions concerning the reintegration of art into daily life such as *Food*, and of his exuberant and disturbing examination of architecture, or rather his 'anarchitecture', from *Splitting* to *Office Baroque*. There are no less than eighteen videos in total. These films and videos are more than just documents of remarkable interventions. Matta-Clark's own commentaries on his work give a unique insight into his creative process.

ⁱ Letter from F. Bex to Gordon Matta-Clark of 19 July 1976.

ⁱⁱ "Relatives and friends of Gordon Matta-Clark have begun an initiative to save the house at 1 Ernest Van Dijckkaai in Antwerp. The spatial work *Office Baroque* (1977) is located in this house: this work by Gordon Matta-Clark is currently the only remaining project in the world by this 32-year-old artist, who died in 1978. 'To stimulate the current art event' the foundation is taking the liberty of calling on all those interested to realise this initiative by donating a work of art or becoming a founding member by contributing a minimum of 1000 Bfr."

ⁱⁱⁱ In *Knack* magazine on 4th January 1980, Hektor Waterschoot wrote the following: "Flor Bex now wants to preserve *Office Baroque* intact and integrate it into a centre for contemporary art. The owner and property developer is prepared to abandon his project and leave the building to the Gordon Matta-Clark Foundation set up by Flor Bex. Artists from 14 countries have donated a work to this foundation on condition that the plans are realised. According to the sums cited by the artists, these works represent about 40 million francs. The foundation also has supporting members (minimum 1000 francs, maximum 1000 francs, to be paid into the foundation's account, number 551-2521500-54). Leading figures from the international art world have also lent their support. German, Italian, French and American curators, who allowed Gordon's empty houses to be demolished in their own country, are now wholeheartedly embracing Bex' initiative.

Neither Antwerp city council nor the provincial council have any money to spare for it. The ministry has not yet turned down the request. A subsidy of one symbolic franc would however be enough to begin with. In such a case the donations to the Foundation are tax deductible and the Foundation is pretty sure that under these conditions it will be able to collect the 30 million necessary for the purchase and restoration of the building and surrounding ground. Once that is done, millions will then pour in for the construction of a new museum building. And then the mayor can come and cut the ribbon."

^{iv} Gordon Matta-Clark. *One for All-All for one*, 5 May-4 June 1979, Städtische Kunsthallz Düsseldorf

^v The following appeared in an article in the *Gazet Van Antwerpen* of 3rd July 1987 under the title 'De Brokstukken vlogen Ogier om de oren': 'Right opposite the Antwerp Steenplein, the Ernest Van Dijckkaai is once more undergoing a facelift.

Yesterday the heavy demolition ball pounded against the broad building between Palingbrug and Willem Ogierplein. The umpteenth surprise for Willem. Having previously sacrificed half of his steps to an underground car park, rubble flew all around him on Monday.' And about the foolhardiness: 'Tearing down the building front on the quayside, the workers from the demolition company really got stuck in. Rubble and

debris even made it to the other side of the wide Ernest Van Dijckkaai. When huge resources are deployed, the results are frequently in proportion. Yesterday, in no time at all, the whole facade had been razed to the ground. Before long there will be an extraordinarily large hole adorning the Ernest Van Dijckkaai, because in recent weeks they have been industriously carrying out demolition work right behind the building concerned and in the Palingbrug. There have long been plans afoot for the newly opened-up space. At the time, the now defunct Marcel Peeters company applied for five building permits...'