

Excavations

MARTIN HOGUE
Auburn University

[TO EXCAVATE: MAKE (HOLE, CHANNEL) BY DIGGING; REVEAL OR EXTRACT BY DIGGING]

Summary

The process of conception and realization in architecture is founded upon a number of culturally-based presumptions: that growth is additive rather than subtractive; that an erasure implies a mistake, a step backward; that undoing and demolishing take less time than making; that strengthening is preferable to weakening; that to build is better than to demolish.

This paper will explore the idea of subtraction as an act of construction. The practices of conceptual artists Michael Heizer, Gordon Matta-Clark, Dennis Oppenheim, and Lawrence Weiner, constitute a foundation of critical projects and ideas upon which this investigation begins. The notion of removal as a creative gesture has placed each of these artists- either voluntarily or not- on the margins of our professional and intellectual consciousness as architects: not only does their work dispute some of the very premises central to our understanding of building as a process, but for Matta-Clark and Weiner in particular, it does so by quite literally engaging buildings.

Indeed the projects presented in this paper share a strong physical trait: they are completed without the addition of *any* materials. Space and form are created instead by a removal of existing matter- building fragments, earth, etc... Matta-Clark, Oppenheim, Heizer and Weiner operate with strong tectonic agendas, slicing with equal intensity and disregard through whatever stands in their way- earth, stone, ice, water, snow, wood, glass, plaster and masonry alike. The tools- for Matta-Clark and Weiner: chisels, bow saws, chain saws, hammers, blow torches; for Heizer: explosives, bulldozers; for Oppenheim: shovels, snowmobiles, chain saws, and pickaxes- provide gripping descriptions of the ambitions and difficulties associated with the realization of these endeavors. If the use of such tools gives the impression of violent acts of demolition, a closer examination will reveal instead a more critical and delicate process of engagement. As conceptual gestures, the projects presented in this paper have as much to do with unmaking as they do with the remaking of an existing condition. This process recalls the site of an archeological excavation, with the exception that it is the hole itself that constitutes the very *object* of the removal, a discovery that can only be brought into existence with digging.

To *excavate* in this way is to gently tease or radically interro-

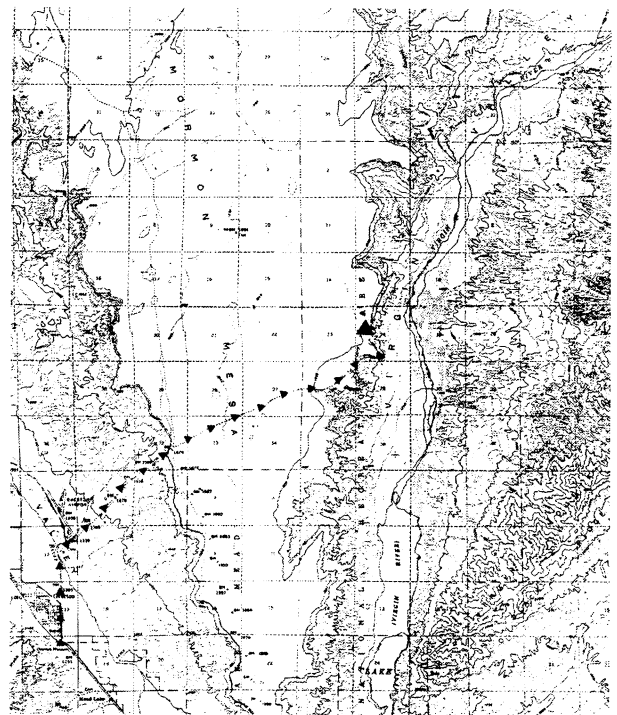


Fig. 1. Michael Heizer, *Double Negative* (Mormon Mesa, Overton, Nevada, 1969-70). Location map.

gate existing places with fresh thoughts and ideas in such a way as to critically and poetically underscore unacknowledged presences- that which is literally absent from view and (or) from the mind. Material and immaterial, absent and present, new and old, merge to form a renewed, cohesive whole.

The goal of this paper is to reveal in the work of these 4 artists a framework of architectural strategies, a set of gestures and critical approaches which we could make our own: terms such as erasures, removals, holes, incisions, cuts and absences, emerge as distinct ideals which can both challenge and enrich our understanding of architecture- a practice of making positive *backward* steps.

Excavations: Literal and Phenomenal

While excavations are generally concerned with the *physical* process of unearthing artifacts, the same term could also be used as a metaphor to characterize instead *intellectual* processes of investigation, a way of *digging* through complex social, cultural, historical and political sites and ideologies to uncover new meaning and clarity.

As a project that engages the viewer into reconsidering his/her assumptions about art, conceptual art may be deemed such a process of excavation. Inspired by radical ideas of the 60s, conceptual art brings into question the institutionality of the museum and art gallery with works that challenge the very nature of what might constitute art and an experience of viewing art. Simply defined, movements in conceptual art strove to redefine the nature of the work of art in a twofold strategy: first, by creating and displaying art outside of museums and art galleries- thus challenging the idea that works of art could only exist in these privileged environments-; second, by abandoning traditional art forms (painting, sculpture, etc...) in favor of expanded media.

As the boundaries of the gallery and art museum dissolve, so too does the protocol for viewing artworks. Gone is the idea of a Sunday afternoon spent browsing at a local museum or gallery: the city, its fabric and buildings, the environment at large, take on a new role the repository of artistic endeavors. At the center of the conceptual art movement is the idea that art might exist anywhere, and that it may take on a variety of forms, both conventional and unconventional. Conceptual art is in this sense unpredictable, everywhere and nowhere at the same time, free of the institutional traditions which it sought to criticize. It engages our cities and landscape, but most of all, it critically engages the viewer. Works are often free of charge, intended for all; they are encountered either deliberately or by accident, at any time, in a walk through the city or a distant landscape ^{fig 1}.

Projects by Heizer, Matta-Clark, Oppenheim, and Weiner, spring forth into this artistic tradition as *site-making* procedures, interventions which make a place- the way a museum or gallery would make a place to accommodate an object of art- while at the same time constituting the very *object* of (the) art itself. At work are both literal and phenomenal processes of excavation: removing material from the site produces a place, a niche for the viewer to dwell, contemplate and understand the site surrounding the intervention. The idea of critically explaining the site is the purpose of the art itself, its reason for coming into being ^{fig 2}. Site-making projects assume a double role as both objects and markers, and, as is the case with intervention projects, such works can rarely be moved: they are physically and conceptually *grounded* in the place where they are created. They cannot exist on their own.

Michael Heizer and Dennis Oppenheim's works exemplify this tradition of site-making projects so prevalent in conceptual art movements such as Land Art. Both artists chose to abandon the city as a territory for experimentation- which both felt too restrictive in terms of artistic opportunities-, focusing their at-

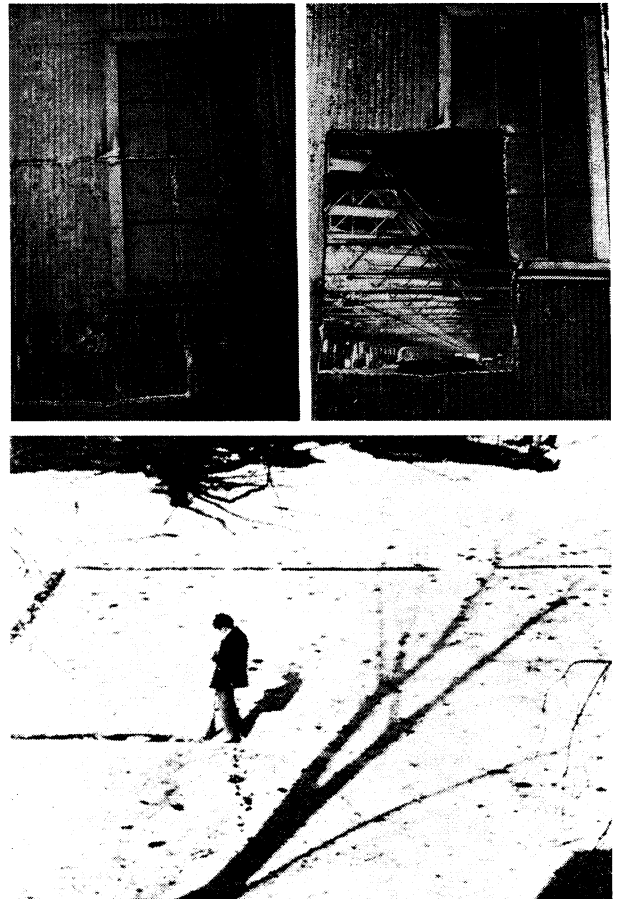


Fig. 2. Gordon Matta-Clark, *Pier In/Out* (Pier 14, New York, 1973).
Fig. 3. Dennis Oppenheim, *Gallery Transplant* (Jersey City, New Jersey; Ithaca, New York, 1969).

tention instead on vast, distant and uncharted landscapes: for Heizer, the seemingly infinite, perfectly flat surface of the Arizona desert floor; for Oppenheim, a frozen lake or snow-covered field in Maine. Conventionally speaking, there are no sites to speak of, no means of access (roads, etc...), no fences or visible boundaries- only perhaps the horizon or a distant tree line- which might come into play in the realization of these works. These seemingly boundless territories present new creative opportunities free of institutional traditions and expectations - that which was originally sought by rejecting the gallery and museum ^{fig 3}-, as is reflected in the expanse and ambition of both artists' projects. In *One-Hour Run* (1968), for example, Dennis Oppenheim rides his snowmobile across a snow-covered lake for a full hour with the spontaneity of a child scratching a sheet of paper for the first time. As if responding to a similar impulse, Heizer realizes a series of motorcycle drawings on the desert floor (*Ground Incision Loop*, 1968; *Circular Surface Planar Displacement*, 1970; *Tangential Drawing*, 1970).

Building as site

Excavations (read: the physical act of removing material and the phenomenal process of bringing into question ideas and values embedded within the site) are particularly compelling when they directly engage buildings. There is something sacred about an architectural site, a turf of professional, ethical and intellectual responsibilities which perhaps architects had hoped no one



Fig. 4. Gordon Matta-Clark, *Window Blow-Out* (*Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, Manhattan, New York, 1976*).

would dare invade. A former architecture student at Cornell himself, Gordon Matta-Clark was particularly outspoken in his criticism of the architectural profession. It comes as no surprise that the artist should come to use buildings as project sites as an outlet for his opinions about architecture (although the realization of these opportunities does take a few years of exploration following the artist's graduation from Cornell, which involved among other projects the opening of the restaurant *Food* in New York and the frying of photographs. The artist also co-founded *Anarchitecture* (anarchy-architecture), a group which brought together artists from the New York area with a common interest in radical space-making alternatives to traditional architectural practice).

If Heizer and Oppenheim's conclusions regarding artistic production and institutions each led them to find a clean slates far from the city, its museums and galleries, Matta-Clark's work is no less detached from these environments, but instead engages a different set of institutions. As artifacts of the artist's views on architecture, his sites are quite poignant: the artist seeks the anonymity of abandoned buildings in the New York area, piers and slums often occupied by local gangs and squatters. Early interventions such as *Bronx Floors/Threshold* (1972-73) are unauthorized projects. There is a fear/thrill of being caught at any time, a sense of trespassing and violation which only enhances the violence of the acts perpetrated upon these structures: not only is Matta-Clark accelerating the process of disintegration by cutting away at the buildings (floor and wall openings in buildings that are in an already ruinous state), but the artist is doing so without permission ^{fig. 4}. The element of danger constitutes an integral part of the process of realization: work is executed at night to afford greater privacy; hand tools are used to lessen the noise.

Even structures in which the artist is later invited to intervene in are no less hospitable than early sites and have often been earmarked for demolition following completion of the work (projects like *Splitting/4 Corners*, which was commissioned by Matta-Clark's agent Holly Solomon in a house which she owned and planned to tear down, or *Bingo*, where the artist had precisely 10 days to realize and document his project before the city of Lewiston, New Jersey, would tear down the building). Matta-Clark's work lies in anticipation of the literal demolition of the building itself: his floor and wall removals, his slicing through structural elements, push the sense of the ruin to a point of delicate balance between its standing and its anticipated collapse ^{fig. 5}. This process of excavation is rich in contradictions: on the one hand, the cuts constitute brutal and violent gestures

of aggression, acts which weaken the integrity of built form. The artist employs a methodology of subtraction precisely to position himself against the traditional aspirations of architecture. Furthermore, the cuts have a tectonic logic of their own (circular and arc-shaped incisions, vertical wells of space) which challenge the order of building in place. Yet it may also be said that the purpose of Matta-Clark's interventions lies in literally *excavating* or digging up these anonymous structures from isolation. After all, the decision to choose the most generic and anonymous of structures is a politically and socially loaded decision (not to mention a realistic one, as these are the only buildings where such work would be conceivable). The interventions bring a new life to the buildings, if only for a few moments: Matta-Clark's interventions, while critical, seem to offer a glimpse hope at the same time. His carefully considered removals operate to release interior spaces from darkness and confinement by establishing new visual and physical connections with adjacent rooms and the exterior realm- outside landscape, views, and the sky. New dialogues are formed, as the building is brought out of its solitude. The light is perhaps the most dynamic presence admitted within and plays dramatically against the darkness of the interiors.

Lawrence Weiner's interventions, while sharing the use of buildings as sites and the idea of art as excavation in general, engages a different set of institutions. Most of Weiner's carvings revolve around a simple program: a 3 feet square removal, generally executed as a commissioned work on the wall of a gallery or collector's home ^{fig. 6}. The interventions focus on the outer surface (sheetrock or plaster) of the wall, exposing its inner layers (joists or masonry) for passers-by to see. At work is a process of excavation of the viewer's values and assumptions about art. Perhaps what makes Weiner's interventions successful is the disarming simplicity of his removals. By repeating this simple square cut onto many sites, the artist is bringing into question the site-specific nature of conceptual works. Conversely, the interventions remain very site specific because they cannot be moved. Weiner's works start to look alike, as if stolen or copied ^{fig. 9}. Artistic production in general is brought under suspicion: after all, anybody can cut a square hole. One might wonder upon encountering one of these works: *is this a real Weiner or is it a fake?*

Weiner's intervention(s) conceptually engages the viewer much in the way of all conceptual artworks. Unlike most, the artist's strategy is to buy into the game of the institution only in order to later subvert it. These interventions exploit (excavate) traditional conditions associated with works of art: the notion of patronage of artistic activity; the irony of hanging works on a wall, which refers to a more classical way of displaying art. Somebody visiting a museum or collector's home for the first time might marvel at the unsightly nature of such prominently displayed holes. Upon returning to this very gallery or museum some time later, the same visitor might question why the hole is *still* there. *Can't they patch it up?*

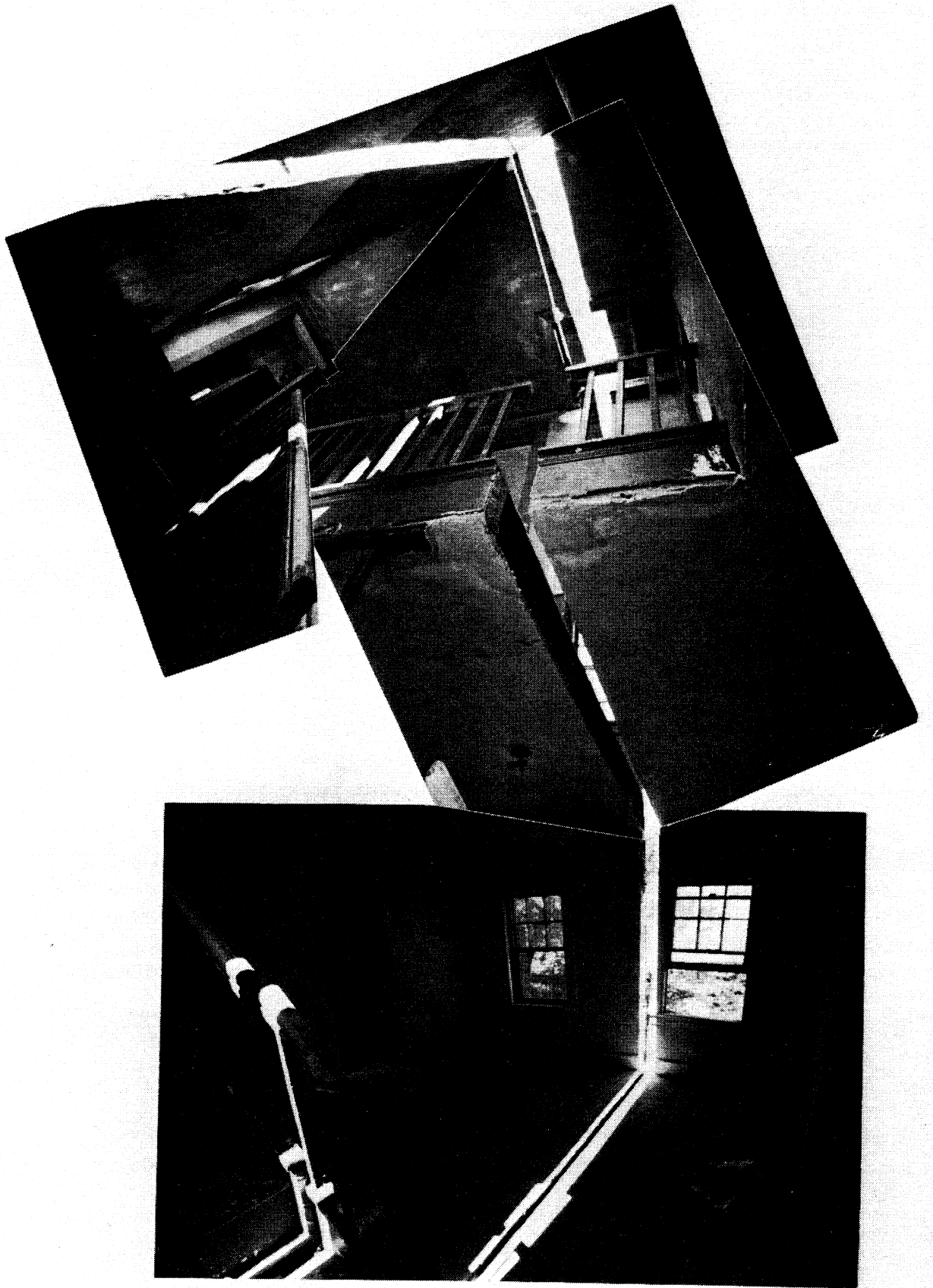


Fig. 5. Gordon Matta-Clark. *Splitting / 4 Corners* (Englewood, New Jersey, 1974).

Negative as absence, presence

To excavate is to encourage a constant shifting of perception as identities of absence and presence, solids and voids, erasures and markers: to remove something is in a way to expose another, and works in this paper are dependent on such multiple readings to disclose their full identity.

Whether in the context of a deserty or frozen landscape, an abandoned building, or an empty gallery, this notion of absence constitutes for these artists a mutual starting point, a shared site of sorts. As has been said earlier, the expression of absence is a common goal on some level as well- not to mention a shared formal strategy. For Lawrence Weiner, this condition is essential in understanding the artist's work: absence of the frame suggested by the removal on the wall; absence of new creative ideas (the irony of repeating the same removal in several places), of tradition; the absence of erudition in the viewer considering the work for the first time. For Michael Heizer, the process of creating absence is one which requires a great physical effort, an idea which seems contrary to the original definition of the word. The artist likes to refer to the tonnage of earth displaced as a way of programmatically describing the scope of individual works- a literal gauging of the weight of the site. As if responding to a challenge, his interventions on the landscape seem to grow exponentially with each new undertaking^{fig 7}. Heizer's tools (at first: shovels; later: dynamite, bulldozer) speak of ambitions on par with nature itself.

The existence of these interventions is not something to be taken for granted either. The position of conceptual artworks in the world is often precarious: while the museum or gallery constituted a protective shell of sorts, such projects are at the mercy of the forces (natural, built, social, political, etc...) which surround them and which they physically and conceptually engage as artworks. This is quite literally the case for Heizer and Oppenheim. Once completed, their excavations are left alone, unmaintained. The artists leave the scene, without need to justify or stand behind their work. There is also an interest in testing the resistance of man-made gestures to the forces of nature. With the exception of *Double Negative*- a project so large that nature has yet to catch up with it-, none of these projects have survived for very long. Each passing day finds these works slightly less defined, their edges erased, un-excavated. Projects by Heizer are photographed filled with mud and water from the last rain; Oppenheim likes to refer to a re-freezing index, a life span after which his ice cuts freeze over. Similarly, his snow works simply disappear come the first heavy storm.

Similarly, none of Matta-Clark's interventions have survived for more than a few weeks following their completion. As it has been said earlier, the fact that he is aware that the work will soon disappear- an event that coincides with the demolition of the buildings he has intervened in- seems to only make stronger the artist's gestures of removal. In addition to vast photographic documentation (films, photomontages) realized during the realization of these projects, Matta-Clark salvaged a series of wall and floor extractions which survived some of these buildings

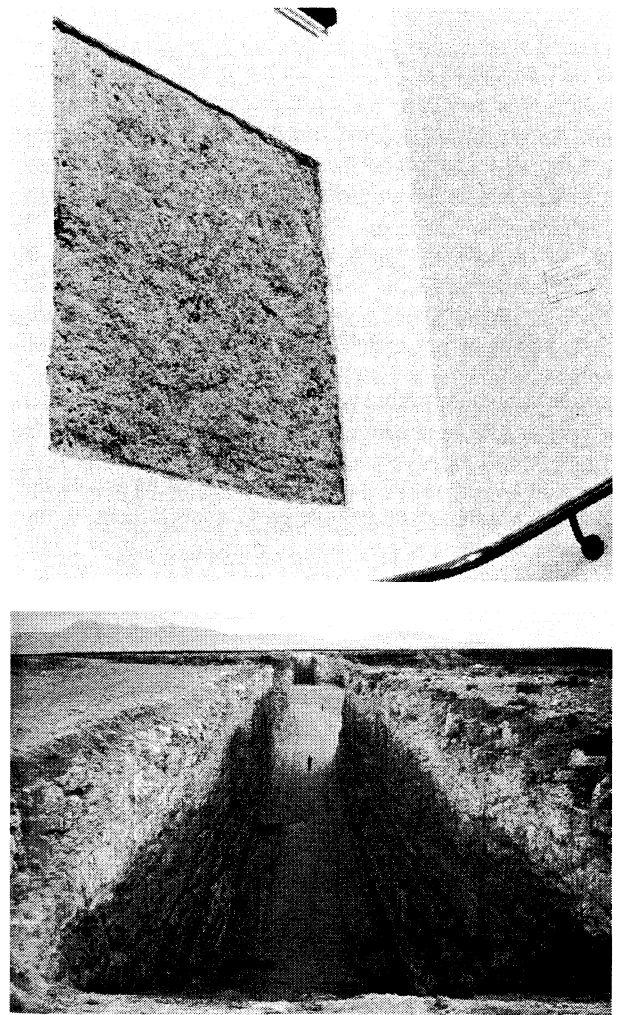


Fig. 6. Lawrence Weiner, A 36" x36" Removal to the Lathing or Support Wall of Plaster or Wallboard from a Wall (various locations, 1968-9). fig 7. Michael Heizer, Double Negative (Mormon Mesa, Overton, Nevada, 1969-70).

(typically those of wood or steel framed construction) long after their demolition. The cut-outs stand as material negatives, templates of sorts symbolizing with irony all that the interventions are not. These decontextualized artifacts were then to be displayed in a gallery or museum where, following Matta-Clark's own critical logic (and humor), they would take on a new identity of artworks in their own right^{fig 8}.

Architectural Excavations

I began writing this paper with a simple intuition: that connecting the practices of 4 artists engaged in subtraction (holes, cuts, excavations, carvings) as an artistic gesture could in the process reveal a framework of architectural opportunities. Should some of these strategies be applied literally to the context of our profession, a set of clear premises unfold: the idea that to destroy, to weaken, may in fact be better than- or at least a first step toward- building; that demolition can be a precise, mindful action, which requires a great deal of time. The process brings about a number of ethical considerations as well: if erasures imply the critical acknowledgment of a mistake, can architec-

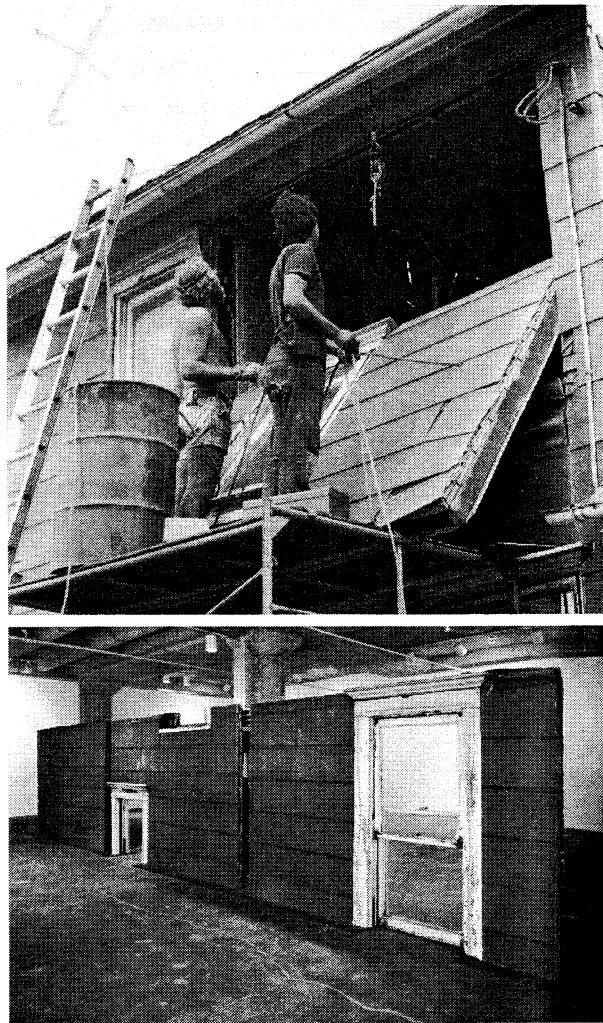


Fig. Lawrence Weiner, A 36"x36" Removal to the Lathing or Support Wall of Plaster or Wallboard from a Wall (various locations, 1969-70).
 Fig. 7. Michael Heizer, Double Negative (Mormon Mesa, Overton, Nevada, 1969-70).

ture take place by undoing works of architecture? Can architects undo their own architecture? Is undoing an act of arrogance or one of humility? Can erasures occur through an act of construction rather than an act of destruction?

While working through some of these ideas, I soon realized that to take these works literally at their word- that is, as physical subtractions- was to deny a great measure of their success as works of art. In a world of apparently growing connectedness and expectations, there is an honesty about the expression of absence, a willingness to show things for what they are: the solitude of an abandoned building (Matta-Clark), the strength of nature over human occupation (Heizer, Oppenheim), the ridiculous nature of understanding art (Weiner). Excavations celebrate the distinct possibility that no greater discovery lies at the bottom of the hole than the realization of our own failures. If architecture is the repository of human aspirations, our culture, and memories, then perhaps a great deal of our time should be devoted to making works that indeed celebrate absence. Inherent in architecture is the notion of human occupation, and yet perhaps the best of works are those which cannot be inhabited, which physically keep us out of ourselves, only for the

imagination to occupy. Absence is an idea which can only be understood in opposition to something else- the presence of another object, or the realization that something that has gone missing. A memory. An artist. A silence.

Illustration Notes

- fig 1 For Heizer, an experience of the project begins with the journey leading to the site. Navigation is made difficult by the fact that there are neither roads nor a clear set of directions leading to the site: many have tried to find the 1,500 long, 40' wide excavated channel, located 80 miles from Las Vegas in the Nevada desert, often without success. The effort required from the viewer in reaching the project lends a great deal of mystery to the work and makes its experience far more rewarding as well.
- fig 2 Though discrete in scope, the carving of this single opening in a seemingly arbitrary location along the façade of an abandoned warehouse (as if window and wall were one continuous surface) constitutes a strong visual statement which speaks to the ease of access to many properties along the New York waterfront. The project signals a new direction in Matta-Clark's work and methods: unlike previous projects like *Bronx Floors/Threshold*, which recognized to some degree a building's constructive logic (for example, a cutting would be limited to a floor or wall, but not both), the artist now engages several distinct assemblies (in this case, a window and a wall) in strong, connecting gestures.
- fig 3 Program: the plan of an exhibition gallery is traced full-scale in a field by dusting snow off the ground with a broom. The intervention is a good example of the site-making process discussed in this paper, and at the same time constitutes a quite literal statement of the artist's critical position towards museums as a place to display art. Realized in the span on a single winter, the body of Oppenheim's snow and ice cuts engage similar issues of man's ambition to dominate the landscape: invisible boundaries (political borders, for example, between Canada and the U.S., time zones, etc...) are literally carved out or traced in vacant fields or frozen lakes, thus forcing a confrontation between map and nature, the imagined and the visible.
- fig 4 Although Matta-Clark had been invited to contribute works for this exhibit, his performance was unauthorized. In an effort to draw attention to decaying modern slums around the city, the artist, with the help of Dennis Oppenheim's bb gun, blew out a series of windows in the IAUS exhibition space on the night before a major opening. The artist was inspired by a similar impromptu performance by Jackson Pollock who, complaining of a lack of fresh air during a stuffy opening, put his fist through a window to allow air into gallery.
- fig 5 Matta-Clark literally split the house in equal halves along its sides by systematically carving out a one inch slice throughout the entire framed part of the house. Matta-Clark then chiseled away at the foundation supporting the rear half of the building so that it could be hinged down slightly towards the rear, thus opening the house further towards the sky at the top of the building. While fairly discrete from the outside, this wedge profoundly illuminates the dark

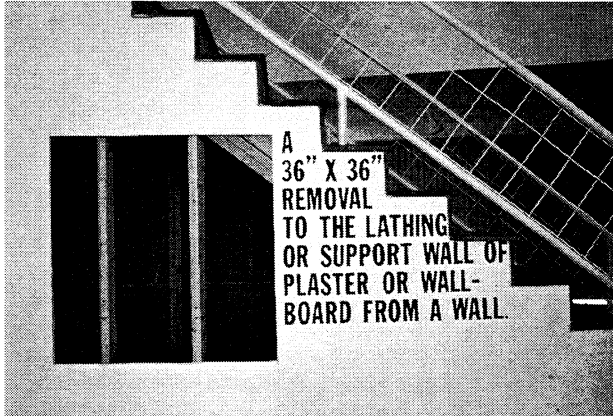


Fig. 9. Lawrence Weiner, *A 36"x36" Removal to the Lathing or Support Wall of Plaster or Wallboard from a Wall* (various locations, 1968-9).

interiors of the house, and constitutes a bridge between front and back for the viewer to cross. The artist also performed 4 extractions at the corners of the exterior walls and the gabled roof.

fig 6.⁹ The title of the piece, which is often found written next to the removal itself as a sort of program, leaves little to the imagination.

fig 7 Heizer's most ambitious excavation work, *Double Negative* is the culmination of several years of experimentation and knowledge (previous excavation works included *Nine Nevada Depressions*, *Five Conic Displacements*, *Displaced-Replaced Mass*, etc...) and his only such project still in existence. By carving out an immaterial space out of the desert floor, Heizer spoke about achieving a juxtaposition of absences- in the immateriality of the work and in the vacuum of the desert-, a contradiction of sorts which the artist has likened to a positive, a presence (a monumental 1,500 feet in length channel, which involved the excavation of 240,000 tons of earth, the work is hardly invisible either).

fig 8 For Matta-Clark, the execution of works is a delicate enterprise that requires a great deal of time and patience. The salvaging of cut-outs adds a new dimension to the complex process of realization.

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