

In-Between the Physical and the Psychological: Locating Gordon Matta-Clark and Architecture

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This paper considers the proximity and remoteness in the dual relation in Gordon Matta-Clark's work between art-and-architecture but also between the physical and the psychological, through the relation with his father, the artist-trained architect Roberto Matta. By examining the locus of his work, this text investigates themes of physicality and reachability as well as the inaccessibility of the psychological in the multi-media work of the artist. To achieve this, this paper examines the collection of the artist's archived work and the operation of what was to archive, to consigned it within an architectural institution in the Canadian Centre for Architecture. It is framed under Jacques Derrida's Archive Fever as a way to introduce the connection between the physical and the psychological in the archive.

Gordon Matta-Clark, son of artist Anne Clark—later Anne Alpert from New York, and architect and surrealist artist Roberto Matta from Chile, twin brother to Sebastian Matta, lived a short yet intense life always in between art and architecture. His name was given in the honor of his father's friend, Gordon Onslow Ford, an English born surrealist painter he had met in Paris. Roberto Matta left Anne Clark and the twins when they were just a few months old, marking perhaps the origin of what would be a life-long schism between them, which extended to their relation to the fields of art and architecture. Matta would find in art a form of alternative practice for architecture, a challenging of architectural space and architectural education. For Matta-Clark architecture was different, it was a weight, a paternal and disciplinary weight. His art, I will claim, was not an alternative to architecture or just a rethinking of space, it was also a practice of relieving himself from a psychological space only known to him (and perhaps his twin brother) but unreachable to us, a practice about recalibrating his body.

As a surrealist painter Roberto Matta was highly motivated by the psychological, by exploring the unconscious through painting, however, his motivations came as a direct reaction to his training in architecture. Matta was trained as an architect in his native Chile during the

early 1930s at the Pontifical Catholic University in Santiago, learning the principles of modernist architecture as they were received from Europe from such places as the Bauhaus. In 1935 after detaching from architecture he left Chile as a merchant marine and later arrived in Paris, where he joined the studio of Le Corbusier for around two years. It was through his privilege-family connections to famous writers and artists like Federico García Lorca or Pablo Neruda that Matta started to shift his already contested interest in architecture (meeting Salvador Dalí among others), rejecting the rationalist-modernist principles at play in Le Corbusier's studio. It is suspected that Matta worked on drawings for Le Corbusier's Radiant City project, known for been a highly rationalized scheme for living and redefining urban space. In direct reaction to architecture, Matta published an essay in the surrealists artists journal *Minotaure* Nº11 (May 1938), accompanied by an image of a painting with deformations of architectural surfaces in space under the name of *Mathématique sensible – Architecture du temps* (Sensitive Mathematics - Architecture of Time), altogether challenging architecture as a “machine for living,” Le Corbusier's famous slogan.

However, Gordon Matta-Clark had a different relation with architecture. His pursue of a career in architecture was suggested by his father when he told him “let it be architecture.” Matta-Clark was not sure at that time about what path to take when thinking about college education, and the ghost of Matta was omnipresent in the form of paternal figure and architecture itself. For Matta-Clark architecture had a special connotation, one that was tied not only to his intellectual curiosities but also to the psychological space product of his paternal relation. It can be said, as I would argue, that architecture was archived in him, that it was impressed in his own body, something he declared to his brother Sebastian right after finishing *Conical Intersect* in Paris in 1975 in an attempt to encourage him to deal with his own troubles after a major breakdown:

“I don't really know much better how to deal with my fundamental problems than you. But now you will hopefully start on the path to understanding some of the wild fears that are yours and ours all.”

The story about the encounters between father and son are without a doubt a larger topic in itself, but what might seem clear is that, as historian Pamela M. Lee suggests, “Matta-Clark wrestled for the rest of his short life with a simultaneous denial of his father's influence and a

desire for his recognition.” But this influence and recognition is not only driven by their familiar relation, it is, however, a two-fold struggle. One is the evident paternal-filial link, but the other side, the fact that both were trained as architects prior to becoming artists became an extension of the paternal domain through their shared discipline. Historian Spyros Papapetros claims that Matta—the father, was a critical figure for Matta-Clark’s formal architectural education, saying: “Architecture comes with the sanction of paternal authority and the benefaction of the father’s renowned architect friends; they and perhaps not the architecture school, represent, for Matta, Gordon’s real schooling in architecture” Among those figures was the influential Philip Johnson as well as Jose Luis Sert who was at Harvard’s GSD at the moment. Both Lee’s and Papapetros’ assertions seems to support the idea that Matta-Clark indeed had a two-fold struggling relation with his father. With this, I would suggest—extending their claims, that in the production of Matta-Clark’s work there is a psychological cast impression of his father as architecture, an inscription, that is on one side a familiar-paternal weight, and on the other side a paternal-architectural weight. In addition to Papapetros argument of architecture been “schooled” to him by his father’s architects friends, I will claim that architecture was archived, impressed in Matta-Clark, in his own body, as well as in the repository of his work, in his archive. This psychologically driven impression will pose a series of questions not only to the production of Matta-Clark’s work (that I will not necessarily address in here), but mostly when we consider what we inherit from his work— to be part of an archive; even more, to an architectural archive, that of the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA), in Montreal, where a collection of his “archive” is located over a decade ago.

The complexity of Matta-Clark’s work can be registered in various conditions: being art and “[n]ot architectural in the strict sense,” realized, played, and performed in multiple mediums and formats; made in part to disappear; and informed by an apparently traumatic—though joyful short life, rises questions not only about the formal and practical re-collection of his “documents” and “works,” but also asks, what is it that we archive while being confronted to this ambivalent condition of production? What is to archive when we think of Matta-Clark? What is the role of an architectural institution —like the CCA— when collecting the work of a figure mostly ignored by architecture and absorbed by the art world?

There are two particular distinctions that I would like to highlight when considering the question of the archive. There is, on one side, a seemingly obvious challenge in the principle of archiving when we approach a work that was done in multiple media and was destined to be destructed or to disappear. However, different challenges arise when considering what the work is, in relation to what motivated it, this is, what and where are the works of Matta-Clark located? On the other side, I would suggest, following Anthony Vidler’s argument that Matta-Clark’s work was “a fundamentally architectural practice” and because of this, that it cannot be disconnected to the psychological bridge to art and architecture in the form of his father. With this, not only the question of, how do we archive a work that is a bridge between art and

architecture arises, but also, where is the work located, registered, and consigned?

An archive is, in principle, a repository of a collection. It is a place, the container, as well as both the act and the set of data, information, or objects arranged as to shape the collection. For this to happen there must exist first, as Jacques Derrida would suggest in the book *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, the idea of an origin, of a commencement, a beginning, a place for consignment. This is, he argues after revisiting the etymological concept of the archive, a place—the *arkheion*, and the figures—the archons who guard it. The story that is been told with this etymological explanation tries to lay out the principle that the archive is not possible “without substrate nor without residence,” and that in “this domiciliation, in this house arrest, that archives take place.” There must be first, following Derrida’s reconstruction of the notion of the archive, both the will and the place to originate it. I would like to propose, for the purpose of this text, and because of the strong two-fold psychological connection between Matta and Matta-Clark, two parallel readings for what is to archive, to and in Matta-Clark.

The first reading is derived by Derrida’s archon (the figures) and consignment, “Consignment aims to coordinate a single corpus, in a system or a synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration,” but that is also subject to the authority of someone, he continues, “The archontic principle of the archive is also a principle of consignment, that is, of gathering together.” Both concepts are the contenders for the power of the archive, the figure who collects and the moment of origin of its creation. In Matta-Clark there is a clear moment in which this operation first takes place when his widow, Jane Crawford, had the initiative and knowledge to gather his estate after his death, decided to put it up together to save it from oblivion—saving it in her own personal space. With this action, one form of origin to archive Matta-Clark was taking place, yet Derrida is there to remind us that the archive “will never be either memory or anamnesis as spontaneous, alive and internal experience. On the contrary: the archive takes place at the place of originary and structural breakdown of the said memory.” Matta-Clark’s work was first consigned in an attempt to save his estate, at the time that it inevitable started a process of formalizing and locating its production.

It was not until 2002 when it was transferred to the CCA in a second originary operation. With this operation of re-instituting an archive, there was a repetition, a double, a remake, a re-origination, but also a relocation of the consignment—to follow Derrida’s narrative. What has been already “archived,” this is, extracted from circulation, domiciliated, was again being consigned to another place. The CCA would be the institution to host the space where researchers would try to clarify the “overlapping and interwoven puzzle” of the material archived, and facilitate the navigation through its contents. The material is strictly categorized and organized, and the exquisite facilities for consultation help produce an environment from where to consider Matta-Clark’s legacy in the context of architecture. Yet this operation confirms the existence of an archive while insisting in a location, and in a new commencement, “There is no archive without a place of consignment, without a

technique of repetition, and without a certain exteriority. No archive without outside.” Moving Matta-Clark to a place with an exteriority was casting, re-locating, originating a new locus for it, a new impression. “Jane Crawford had made it clear that she wanted the archive to be presented to the public, not just preserved.” This statement is clear in articulating that the archive should be exposed and exteriorized to the public, perhaps also to be saved—again—from oblivion, but perhaps mostly to be re-signified by the new arkheion and the new archons.

In this new consignment at the CCA Matta-Clark was re-inscribed in an architectural domain. This re-insertion of Matta-Clark into architecture, I would argue, is as well another evidence, and a key reaffirmation of his always-present consciousness within architecture that was inscribed, impressed in him, by his father. This operation was for me a reenactment, a reanimation of his own will to archive architecture.

I would like to propose now the second reading of what is to archive in Matta-Clark through the strong presence of Matta, his father, in his life and in relation to architecture and art.

“Dear Gordy:

Keep writing me, I’m very interested in your anti-architect (...)” reads a fragment of one undated letter from Roberto Matta to Gordon Matta-Clark after he had already finished his architectural studies at Cornell University.

The apparent troubled relation between them, besides being an emotional tie of loss and presence, was also informed by Matta’s own complex relation to architecture. Matta, as well as Matta-Clark did later on his life, rejected the principles and the hardness of the Modern Movement in architecture—and some of its later variations, and found in painting a more “expressive” medium where to escape from his interior self—this is, from architecture impressed in his own body. Yet, as Matta declared in an interview in 1981 after Matta-Clark’s death in 1978, “I am not an artist, I am an architect. With Gordon I talked about housing ideas. Modular units you could combine as you please. We talked about working together. We talked about getting the motorcar business to change – I had proposed housing units from cars.” This might not be—coming from a figure like Matta—just an anecdote or casual comment. Declaring that he is not an artist but an architect could be completely elusive—a characteristic clearly stated by Matta-Clark of his father in his letters exchange, or it could be even revealing of his own complex with the discipline of architecture, and in this operation of distraction, he makes evident that for him, Gordon was part of that complex psychological space.

In one of the letters that Matta sent to Matta-Clark when he was still undecided about what to follow as a career before entering the Cornell University School of Architecture, Matta wrote, “Since you seem to feel that your life has become a senseless driving from here to nowhere—you need an end, let it be architecture (remember that no where can be now here).” As evidence, I will argue, these letters—as writings and substrates—are the formal inscription in which Matta transmitted the troubled legacy of architecture to his son, as well as the

moment of impression in which the archive’s death drive materializes in Matta-Clark.

Matta-Clark’s work, thus, is rooted in the originary moment of the impression, when the “archive drive,” (the archive fever, the death drive) is creating the inscription, the impression, thus, the archive, but also, to archive, becomes an encrypted condition for his work. It becomes remote, inaccessible from its psychological space, barely relegating our proximity to it to a double consignment, first in the personal domicile of his widow and now in the fortress of architecture collections. His work production, its making, works against itself while it carries the destructive drive, and with this, a building cut—for example—is unarchivable and anarchivable, while its archive has no locus in it, its impression, what we inherited from it, has a place, but mainly a time in the psychological bridge to his ties to architecture and his father. With this, architecture in Matta-Clark would always be anarchitecture. The insistence in undoing and in anarchitecture is in itself, I would argue, his own futile yet extremely productive and extraordinary effort to liberate himself from architecture. Architecture is archived in him, and his work reenact the death drive towards it, each time he tries to repress or suppress it, archiving it again; consigning and creating moments for it—or as he would say to create a space “from moment to moment.” To archive Matta-Clark in an architectural institution is to reaffirm that the strongest impression in him is the paternal link to his father and to architecture, even to his first archon, his widow, who by been the one more personally connected to him at the time of his death in 1978, eventually saw in architecture the place where to allow his full liberating intentions to be saved—and expanded.

Matta-Clark work is anarchivable, remote, inaccessible, in the same way that he thought of archiving architecture with Anarchitecture, his death drive towards architecture is consigned in him and within him in the unknown “place of [the] originary and structural breakdown of the said memory.” Matta-Clark’s work is greatly the interface of an archive, the mode of access to himself—no longer available to us. Is not only, or not at all about architecture as his father’s work would be. Matta I would suggest, was still trying to negotiate his relation to architecture through painting, as opposed to Matta-Clark where architecture was a way of negotiating his conflictive relation with this father. For Matta-Clark his work was not only about finding alternatives ways of making architecture, or just producing critical work around architectural issues, it was, I would claim, his way of manifesting and negotiating his relation to his father as architecture, his paternal figure as architecture; this is, architecture as the psychological space that he used to escape, in trying to understand but mostly in trying to liberate himself from. A revealing drawing found in his collection at the CCA, made by Matta-Clark during his high-school years, depicts the following: a central figure in the center top of the paper, a half-body half-skull figure facing the scene, right behind a roofless arches building, two back-facing human figures in the forefront of the paper, top part full bodies and bottom part either roots or flames representation, in between the two figures, close to the center, a circle on the ground, where fire flames seem to emerge, the full scene happens flanked by two hills, one in each side, one has a tree; each figure face a path connecting the building where the half-body

half-skull is. There's symmetry in the composition, there's also a triangle among the three humans, presumably the father-as figure and building, and the twins, perhaps uprooted with bodies only from the waist up. The father figure could be interpreted as half-alive half-dead, and the building without roof could speak both to the integral connection between father and architecture and the vulnerability of a building without roof.

Matta-Clark, following his own declarations and writings, has been understood as the anarchist or anti-architect, producing a particular excitement to everyone trying to see in his work another way of seeing architecture. His work, the spaces he created with it, were not just alternative spaces for architecture, they were spaces about architecture as a remote psychological condition, where its media manifestations in drawings, building cuts or performances, are only the closest proximity we, as audience, could see or experience of his work. The locus of it, inhabits a space that, in a similar place like that of his father, was located in the troubling places of memory. For Matta-Clark, architecture seemed to have removed himself from his body. One undated letter to his mother from the Cornell years revealed the following:

"This moment and my disgust is total to the point of a blind, invulnerable hatred for the system that encourages it. Well anyway I am waiting to hear whether my transfer from Architecture to the School of Arts and Sciences has been accepted and then I will begin formalizing my plans for a reborn."

One of his first performance and work out of architecture school, *Tree Dance*, made at Vassar College, serves as evidence of that attempt to be reborn, where he reinserted himself in a womb-like rope and fabric structure in the top of a tree, as if it were possible to restart the body that had just been removed from him in the past years, or as he desired, a rebirth.

His father impression, [as the photo at the beach may suggest], always existed behind him, as a ghost, in the back of his mind in an unknown (surreal) landscape. An impression that the surrealist Matta insightfully knew how to inscribe in Matta-Clark's conscious as an archive of himself. Matta-Clark's archive is an archive of impressions, anarchic impressions left by him in the mode of photographs, drawings, cut sketchbooks, films, videos, but also outside of the arkheion in the food recipes, in the restaurant, in what is left of the cuttings, in the performances, and, as many recount and most importantly, in his own sociability.

If there's a lesson for architecture—and for architects from Matta-Clark it is not only about opening spaces and cutting buildings, it would be to reinsert their body into their work, to recuperate the body of architecture and the body of the architect. The body with all its complexity, psychological, social, political, as his work suggests while developing a critique of architecture's complicit role in making people live in boxes, make visible the decaying nature of the cities he witnessed and the inequalities embedded in them, as well as architecture's implication in materializing the capitalist mode of production. Once architecture starts to interrogate its paternal-weight, it may open the spaces, liberate the energy, and reimagine its bodily dimension, if it ever had one.

ENDNOTES

1. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995): 21.
2. Some of the accounts discussing the relation between Roberto Matta and Gordon Matta-Clark can be found in the following texts: Jane Crawford, "Crossover References in the Work of Roberto Matta and Gordon Matta-Clark", in Corine Diserens, ed., with texts by Thomas Crow, Judith Russi Kirshner, and Christian Hravagna, *Gordon Matta-Clark* (London: Phaidon Press, 2003): 214-217; Pamela M. Lee, "The First Place" in *Object To Be Destroyed* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2000): 2-11; Spyros Papapetros, "Oedipal and Edible: Roberto Matta Echaurren and Gordon Matta-Clark" in Elisabeth Sussman, *You Are The Measure* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007): 70-82; Anthony Vidler, "Architecture-To-Be: Notes On Architecture in The Work of Matta and Matta-Clark" in Michele Piranio, *Transmission: The Art of Matta and Gordon Matta-Clark* (San Diego: San Diego Museum of Art, 2006): 59-73.
3. Letter from Roberto Matta to Gordon Matta-Clark postmarked January 9, 1962, on deposit at the Gordon Matta-Clark Collection at the CCA. Quoted here from Elisabeth Sussman, *You Are The Measure* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007): 71.
4. Letter from Gordon Matta-Clark to Sebastian Matta, postmarked November 25, 1975, on deposit at the Gordon Matta-Clark Collection at the CCA.
5. Some of the accounts discussing the relation between Matta and Matta-Clark can be found in the following texts: Jane Crawford, "Crossover References in the Work of Roberto Matta and Gordon Matta-Clark", in Corine Diserens, ed., with texts by Thomas Crow, Judith Russi Kirshner, and Christian Hravagna, *Gordon Matta-Clark* (London: Phaidon Press, 2003): 214-217; Pamela M. Lee, "The First Place" in *Object To Be Destroyed* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2000): 2-11; Spyros Papapetros, "Oedipal and Edible: Roberto Matta Echaurren and Gordon Matta-Clark" in Elisabeth Sussman, *You Are The Measure* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007): 70-82; Anthony Vidler, "Architecture-To-Be: Notes On Architecture in The Work of Matta and Matta-Clark" in Michele Piranio, *Transmission: The Art of Matta and Gordon Matta-Clark* (San Diego: San Diego Museum of Art, 2006): 59-73.
6. Lee, 2000, p. 5.
7. Papapetros, 2007, p. 72. In this account, Papapetros refers to an exchange of letters between Matta and José Luis Sert in 1962, former dean of the architecture school at Harvard University, about Matta-Clark and his possible career in architecture.
8. Matta-Clark in an interview with Liza Bear first published in *Avalanche* magazine, December 1974, pp. 34-37 and reprinted and quoted here from, Gloria Moure, ed., *Gordon Matta-Clark: Works and Collected Writings* (Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, 2006): 166.
9. Anthony Vidler argues, to discuss the "Architecture-To-Be" between both Matta and Matta-Clark that they "never rejected an architecture per se, but simply refused the architecture they found in the contemporary world, and that one object, at least, of their work was the uncovering of a more fundamental architecture in all of its psychological, sociopolitical, and counterprofessional nature. To that end, I would argue, Matta forged an art practice that explored a space not yet attempted in architectural form and that held out the potential of an architecture that would lend truly psychological depth to life; and Matta-Clark, for his part, achieved his father's vision and developed it into a fundamentally architectural practice." Vidler, 2006, p. 59.
10. Derrida, 1995, p. 2.
11. Derrida, 1995, p. 3.
12. Derrida, 1995, p. 11.
13. Louise Désy and Gwendolyn Owens, "The Gordon Matta-Clark Archive at the Canadian Centre for Architecture", in *Gordon Matta-Clark, A cura di Lorenzo Fusi e Marco Pierini* (Milano: Silvana Editoriale, 2008) Quoted from the PDF article in the CCA website, accessed and downloaded on 05/14/12, http://www.cca.qc.ca/system/items/3298/original/GMC_CCA.pdf?1255983295, p. 2.
14. Derrida, 1995, p. 11.
15. Désy and Owens, 2008, p. 4.
16. Undated letter from Roberto Matta to Gordon Matta-Clark, on deposit at the Gordon Matta-Clark Collection at the CCA.
17. Roberto Matta in an interview by Richard Armstrong published in, Corine Diserens and Nuria Enguita, ed., *Gordon Matta-Clark* (Valencia: IVAM, 1993): 395-396.
18. Refer to footnote 3.
19. Refer to footnote 12.