

# Gordon Matta-Clark: Passing Through The Boundaries

STEPHEN WALKER  
University of Sheffield

## INTRODUCTION

*PASSING THROUGH THE BOUNDARIES  
PASSING AWAY WITH A PIECE TO GO CHOOSING  
AND CLEARING OUT A CRITICAL POINT IN STRESS  
AND WORKING BETWEEN FAILURE AND MINI-  
MALISM REDUCTION AND COLLAPSE.*

— Gordon Matta-Clark<sup>1</sup>

The artist Gordon Matta-Clark (1943-78) trained as an architect at Cornell. Although he is best known for the so-called building dissections such as *Splitting*, he produced a large oeuvre in a wide range of different media, which continues to elide art-historical attempts at classification. Alongside this elision, his work has proved to be of enduring interest to architects, despite his claim that he didn't 'do architecture.'

These two moments of mis-fit are linked inasmuch as both suggest his work continues to over-reach its own boundaries. It is perhaps of no surprise that Matta-Clark repeatedly emphasised his interest in boundaries (boundaries of objects, of disciplines, legal, behavioural and philosophical boundaries...), an interest which is born out across the breadth of his oeuvre.

In response to criticisms that his work was a simple attack on architecture, Matta-Clark repeatedly stated that his interest lay in 'passing through the boundaries' in such a way as to work between the maintenance and collapse of the discipline thus bounded. This paper proposes to examine the motivation and operation of this proposition through two of Matta-Clark's projects: *Splitting* (1974) and *Reality Properties: Fake Estates* (1973). In each, his working methods undertook a sophisticated negotiation of the particular boundaries involved. Once these have been sketched out, the

importance and modality of such a negotiation will be examined more metaphorically across his oeuvre.

## SPLITTING

*Splitting* (Englewood, NJ, 1974) involved dividing a derelict house in half by cutting a one inch slice through all its structural surfaces, then tilting one half back through five degrees by chiselling out a wedge shape from the foundation and jacking the superstructure down onto its altered base. A number of visitors made their way out from NYC to visit the piece before it was demolished: as with many projects, Matta-Clark continued to work through it with photographs, videos and collages, and these have established a further audience for the piece.

The experience of *Splitting* would have changed as the visitor moved around the dissected building, stepping over the split as the passage was made from room to room and from storey to storey. This movement through the building would have been interrupted by the presence of the cut, the section, which would begin to call into question the tacit assumptions and claims made by architecture.

The cut of *Splitting* overturns the usual importance of the architectural 'whole' by forcibly revealing that the parts that might make it up belong to a variety of other realms as well as contributing to that of Architecture; the particular framework of Architectural rules that the logic of the whole building usually hides away was presented, in different ways, to the few that visited the piece in the short time that it existed, and to the viewer of the photo-collages made from that object.

One disciplinary technique that is of particular relevance here is the convention of orthographic architectural drawing, where architectural space is represented as if it were viewed from an omnipresent, Archimedean point, providing an idealised, disembodied overview of the architectural object. But as Matta-Clark himself noted:

'...you can't see *Splitting* [in a single view]. You have to walk... There are certain kinds of pieces that can be summarised—or at least characterised—very quickly from a single view. And then there are other ones which interest me more, finally, which have a kind of internal complexity which doesn't allow for a single and overall view, which I think is a good thing. I like it for a number of reasons, one of which is that it does defy that category of a sort of snapshot scenic work. The other thing is that it also defies that whole object quality...'<sup>2</sup>

Rather than just being the 'snapshot' work that Matta-Clark criticised, available for consumption from a single point of view, and rather than allowing observation 'from nowhere' that the privileged Architectural system presumes, *Splitting* forced a juxtaposition of architectural 'moments,' namely production and consumption, that would usually remain apart.

Taking the static mapping of architectural space usually associated with its design and construction, rather than with its use, *Splitting* redeployed the techniques of architectural convention—here the section, or sectional drawing—and literally sectioned the building. With an equally literal follow up Matta-Clark tampered with the very foundations of Architecture: this simple alteration shifted the object beyond the boundary endorsed by the discipline.

Matta-Clark's photo-collages of the piece follow a similar strategy, organising a number of views taken from within the dissected building into a composition. Some followed the rules of the Architectural section drawing juxtaposing partial and contingent photographs with this system of omnipresent mapping. As with the original dissection, architectural conventions were here redeployed against the rules of the discipline, and the vertiginous discomfort that this brings about forcibly foregrounds the existence of other interests in space and in architecture. These interests would involve the users of architecture, the interests in movement, of architecture as an always-incomplete operation, interests regarding change over time, the interest of construction and materials, archaeologies of decay and renovation, all of which can work to offset a static

version of the whole-object traditionally espoused by Architecture. As Matta-Clark himself emphasised,

'...space...should be in perpetual metamorphosis by virtue of people continually acting on the space that surrounds them. A house, for instance, is definitely a fixed entity in the minds of most people. It shouldn't be. So one of the effects of my work is to dramatize the ways, or stage ways in altering that sense of stasis.'<sup>3</sup>

Actually, there are plenty of things within buildings that Architecture might deny exist or go on there, and the building dissections very effectively stage or dramatize these unsanctioned things by redeploying the disciplinary techniques usually used by Architecture to establish and maintain itself. The operation of these projects exceeds the 'language of architecture' despite deploying architectural elements, methods of representation, work and setting. Such a staging is also evident through the related operations of his earlier project *Reality Properties: Fake Estates*.

#### REALITY PROPERTIES: FAKE ESTATES

At an auction in 1973, Matta-Clark bought some small pieces of land in New York City, which had reverted to the ownership of the City due to non-payment of taxes by previous owners. Each property was a small, irregularly-shaped plot between buildings or boundaries, known as 'curb property' or 'gutterspace.' These were deformities within the property system, for which Matta-Clark paid between \$25 and \$75 each. In an interview, he described how he was drawn to the auction:

When I bought those properties at the New York City Auction, the description of them that always excited me the most was 'inaccessible.' They were a group of fifteen micro-parcels of land in Queens, left over properties from an architect's drawing...Buying them was my own take on the strangeness of existing property demarcation lines.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly to *Splitting's* redeployal of disciplinary rules to reveal the unexpected aspect of that discipline, Matta-Clark here followed the conventions of the real estate market to dramatize the shortcomings of those same conventions:

"[A] piece I bought I understand from the auction catalog I can't even get to. There's no access to it, which is fine with me. That's an interesting quality:

something that can be owned but never experienced. That's an experience in itself.<sup>5</sup>

However, he intended the project to exceed the gesture of the land purchase. Although it is not clear in what format it was first exhibited, some initial thoughts shared with the journalist Dan Carlinsky indicate that he proposed a gallery-based work involving written documentation and a full-size photographic work, appropriately reminiscent of Borges' tale "Of Exactitude in Science." The implication was that these would establish a relationship with the third part of the work, the plot of land itself, in a way that echoed the Site/Non-Site projects of his early mentor, Robert Smithson.<sup>6</sup>

In what has (accidentally) become the definitive version, the project is (re)presented plot by plot through a juxtaposition of the architectural drawing of the city block plan, the title deed, and a documentary photograph of the plot, all displayed within a frame. Broadly, each plot receives this same treatment: fourteen plots, fourteen frames.

It becomes evident that beyond the obvious differences between the media within each frame, a more thoroughgoing disparity exists between the various modes of description brought together there, each mode 'accounting for' the plot in a different language, or according to the conventions of a different discipline. Architectural space, legal space, and documentary (photographic) space are juxtaposed: as a consequence, three purportedly definitive discourses are played off against one another, though none gains the upper hand. Photographic 'evidence' (the camera never lies), architectural (geometric) definition, and legal ownership fail to coincide completely with the plots themselves, an inconsistency stemming from the differing interests held by each account. Following this failure to add up, it becomes apparent that there are gaps between the parameters of the discourses that constitute each frame, and the tensions involved in the initial stage of the project are thus reinforced by the inconsistencies dramatized through its (re)presentation.<sup>7</sup>

The system of real-estate is in this way contested from outside, as various attempts at the spatial definition of these plots of land are witnessed alongside one another, a move that upsets claims to stasis or supremacy made by any one of these definitions, and that changes the properties of these Properties in the process. This juxtaposition works to undo the notion of total revelation in a timeless present that underlies the conventions of architectural representation: this gesture acknowledges the attempt of each discipline to establish a view point from where such total revelations could be made,

but reveal it to be a *blind spot* by foregrounding the existence of various other spatial readings. The (re)presentations thus allow for an experience that is neither foreclosed by one pre-established definition of space, nor self-defeating in its complexity. They provide not a static mapping of the spaces involved in the operations of real-estate, but rather a description of their relative movement.

The self-reflexive nature enjoyed by this aspect of *Reality Properties*... thus demands a constructive reading: there is no single, 'correct' version, in spite of the postures of the various disciplines involved. By staging this disparity, the (re)presentations refuse to perpetuate, or even undo, the claims to universal equivalence that any of these disciplinary definitions might proffer. Rather, there exists a certain traffic between the various definitions of space, which takes place through a space beyond and prior to those established by specific disciplinary accounts, which they can never fully account for, and which itself proves resistant to discipline.

This is not to deny the importance of disciplinary boundaries, but rather to dramatize their actual porosity and *modus operandi*: expending energy, Matta-Clark considered his work as a *completion* of edges, though the modality of this completion would be at odds with that undertaken by the disciplines themselves, and needs to be clarified.

#### DISCIPLINARY BOUNDARIES: OVERT AND COVERT COMPLEXITY

Gordon Matta-Clark stated that his work revealed the 'autobiography' of a particular discipline:

"[W]hat interests me... is the element of stratification. Not the surface, but the thin edge, the severed surface which reveals the autobiographical process of its making. Or said another way, how a uniform surface gets established. All of this is present to sight. There is another complexity, covert and durational rather than overt and immediate, which comes in taking an otherwise completely normal, albeit anonymous situation and redefining it, re-translating it, into overlapping multiple readings of situations past and present."<sup>8</sup>

The 'overt and immediate' complexity of parameters such as the 'Language of Architecture' that establishes the uniform surface of a discipline is effectively only understood by those initiated into that discipline, and more generally it is deployed as a border guard to police the established disciplinary boundary.

In contrast, observers of *Splitting* or *Reality Properties*... are invited to make readings that penetrate the uniform surface assumed by Architecture or Real Estate, by involving the 'covert and durational' complexity available to them through the various devices sketched out above. In this situation, the establishment of any 'overt and immediate' spatial complexity becomes difficult, as the 'overlapping multiple readings of situations past and present' prevents the establishment of any one definition of space to which a higher appeal might be made. Instead, it demonstrates that any discourse has to struggle constantly to attain or maintain a completion of its own boundaries.<sup>9</sup> This does not bring down that discipline as such, but by demonstrating its actual contingency, it opens up possibilities beyond those acknowledged by the discipline under scrutiny.

Although the projects discussed deal directly with spatial complexity, the observations regarding the operations of Matta-Clark's projects can be linked back into the broader concerns of his work, where these differences in spatial complexity take on a metaphorical role. In this situation, they can be examined and expanded by recourse to that standard trope for spatial complexity—the labyrinth.

Matta-Clark argued that the reliance upon spatial complexity in the traditional view of the labyrinth presupposes the hegemony of geometry, and that this really provided a model for domination that excluded the uninitiated, those without access to knowledge of the geometry underlying the layout. Instead, he proposed a labyrinth *without walls*, a labyrinth without any one dominant discourse, any 'right' answer; a labyrinth within which one would have to struggle, admittedly, but struggle to negotiate a complexity that would permit a fuller experience, rather than struggle to create 'self-defeating' false alternatives.

'There is an endless history of the psychological fascination of the labyrinth, as really a model for domination by imposing a mind boggling procession, originally in the form of a Mycenaean dungeon. But the thing is, I don't see the labyrinth as an interesting spatial problem. I would make a labyrinth without walls. I would create a complexity which is not about a geometry, not about a simple enclosure or confinement, and also not about barriers, but about creating alternatives which aren't self-defeating... The labyrinth as a path must have been very understandable; it was almost like a calendar, a way of measuring.'<sup>10</sup>

The possibility of an omnipresent view (such as that which predicates the convention of architectural draw-

ing) occurs when a discourse denies this dynamic balance of labyrinthine alternatives. In this situation, the labyrinth closes down, its edges become impermeable and it imprisons, it becomes a static labyrinth about *simple enclosure, confinement* and *barriers*, rather than about the ongoing possibilities of unexpected connections.

According to the traditional expectations of such a labyrinth, those entrapped within this dungeon will desire to escape. But paradoxically, the energy devoted to escaping the labyrinth contributes to its maintenance; it is the desire to get out that both helps to perpetuate the understanding of the labyrinth as a singular and self-contained spatial system, and that produces the feeling of incarceration in the first place.

Trying to escape any labyrinth so conceived will merely ensure that its domination can continue unchecked, because the escape strategy furthers the belief in a definable, hard boundary that clearly separates the labyrinth from the spatial system for which it serves as other. This strategy doesn't engage with the struggle involved in the constant give and take occurring within and between a very broad range of different spatial systems, but is instead based on a desire to be situated beyond the 'whole' system (the labyrinth) and effectively replace it with another (the outside), thus playing into the trap of *self-defeating alternatives* that Matta-Clark noted, *either here or there*.<sup>11</sup>

Rather than adopting this strategy of replacement, acknowledgement of the 'covert and durational' can permit a situation conceived more as a trajectory within a dynamic labyrinth, where one is neither inside nor outside, but rather moving between and contingent. This is precisely not to argue that *resistance is futile*, nor to dissuade struggle against repressive regimes, however metaphorical or real, but rather to emphasise the tactics that such a struggle can more effectively take on by acknowledging the interdisciplinary dynamic labyrinth always already present behind any discipline.

This relative movement between discipline and indiscipline is an enduring aspect across Matta-Clark's ...uvre, and it points to an apparent contradiction that much of his art enjoyed. He raised the issue in the context of another building dissection, *Circus: Caribbean Orange*, his last major project produced in 1978:

'What [visitors to *Circus: Caribbean Orange*] could identify with in terms of art activity is this kind of discrete violation of their sense of value, sense of orientation. This has become a bigger [issue]; I mean the cutting is the activity and so forth, but

the real idea is not that. So, I guess people need little—need doorknobs and cut doors and things like that to cling to as a way of relating it back to something that is familiar...<sup>12</sup>

From the remains of a door, to the activity of the cutting, to the central concerns that motivated Matta-Clark's work, his projects established a complex traffic between the objects of familiar experience and what he here calls the *real idea*. This latter differed with each project, though a fairly consistent method can be traced out which reveals the familiar as an excessive site by demonstrating the actual situation of familiar objects within a complex web of different, and often conflicting, disciplinary claims.

For this 'discrete violation' to amount to a positive situation for the observer, where they might be encouraged 'to act on the space that surrounds them,' it was crucial that their familiar expectations were not eliminated, otherwise the gestures being staged would be illegible. Matta-Clark stressed the point:

'...the situation must be common enough so that everyone can still understand it even after I undo it. Especially after I undo it, the original situation must remain undiminished in clarity. This imposes restrictions of another kind which the professional architect doesn't have...'<sup>13</sup>

To maintain his method as a discrete violation rather than a complete elimination of a particular discipline, Matta-Clark was obliged to fully acknowledge the restrictions imposed by Architecture and embraced by architects, while redeploying these very techniques beyond their familiar sphere of operation. He described this super-impositional approach as working 'WITH-ROUGH' walls:<sup>14</sup> by simultaneously adopting, redeploying and exceeding particular accepted boundaries of possibility, these projects remained beyond any explanation offered by the 'definitive' discourses that they address, while offering the observer a role in the establishment of contingent meaning.

Whether the diachronic superimposition of *Splitting*, or the synchronic operation undertaken by the (re)presentation of *Reality Properties...*, Matta-Clark's technique of 'passing through boundaries' proceeded by not only inscribing spaces from within and without the discipline under scrutiny, but also by passing through the interdisciplinary space prior to and underlying disciplinary spheres.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Gordon Matta-Clark, *Notebook* (Weston, Connecticut: The Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark (hereafter EGMC) unpublished, 1970).

<sup>2</sup> Gordon Matta-Clark, interviewed by Judith Russi Kirshner, February 13, 1978. Reproduced in Casanova, M. (ed.) *Gordon Matta-Clark* (Valencia, IVAM Centro Julio González, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> Gordon Matta-Clark, transcript of an interview with Donald Wall, *Interview Between Wall and Matta-Clark: Rough Draft*, (EGMC, *Articles and Documents, 1942-76*, unpublished, circa late 1975/ early 1976). The interview forms the basis of Donald Wall's article "Gordon Matta-Clark's Building Dissections," *Arts Magazine* 50/9 (May 1976): 74-79.

<sup>4</sup> Gordon Matta-Clark, interviewed by Liza Bear, *Avalanche* (1974): 35. Reproduced in Casanova, *op.cit.*

<sup>5</sup> Dan Carlinsky, "'Sliver' Buyers Have a Field Day at City Sales," *New York Times Real Estate Section* (October 14th 1973): 1, 12. The mechanics of this process stem from the representation of the properties as they are to be found on the architectural drawing of the city block plan, which launders a very real distinction between these 'useless' plots and their 'useful' neighbours. Although the logic of their representation in this plan is underpinned by a supposition that each plot will enjoy a deferred usefulness, Matta-Clark's purchases foreground the fact that according to the definitions of usefulness that the real-estate market itself would subscribe to, they are thoroughly useless. Nevertheless, the real-estate market chose to deny this and put them up for sale following the usual conventions.

<sup>6</sup> see Gordon Matta-Clark, in Carlinsky, *op.cit.* Jane Crawford suggests Matta-Clark may have intended to add site tours or a map of directions to the final exhibition, similar to Smithson's *The Monuments of Passaic* (*Artforum*, December 1967).

Although an early version of the project was exhibited while the work was still in progress, once the documentation process was more complete, Matta-Clark boxed up all the documents and photos relating to "Reality Properties: Fake Estates" and gave them to Norman Fisher, a neighbourhood collector, with the instructions 'put them together however you want.' When this box returned to the Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark after the death of both collector and artist, these instructions were taken up and the project was prepared for exhibition. Paradoxically, and against the intentions of Matta-Clark and the Estate, the arrangement for this first posthumous exhibition of the project has been received as the definitive version, and there has been no further shuffling of the composition. (Jane Crawford, interviewed by the author, 7th January 2002. The various documents were put together by Jane Crawford, Bob Fiore and Corinne Diserens.)

<sup>7</sup> Importantly, the framing process itself introduces another space, as it implicitly reminds us that this work will be 'consumed' within the conventional architectural space of the art gallery, where frequently the only 'value' that is not neutral-or indeed neutralised-is that of exchange value demanded by the art market itself. The framed-up versions of this project by which it is now most commonly known mis-represent Matta-Clark's intentions for the project, which were sketched out above.

The petrification of the project into its current arrangement, despite Matta-Clark's suggestion that the various pieces of documentation could be put together and re-arranged, is due in part to the machinations of the art market, precipitated perhaps by the action of one of its more influential players, the Guggenheim, which purchased one of the works and then discovered this ambiguity regarding its provenance and arrangement: subsequent tacit agreement on the 'correct' version grants authority, authenticity, and originality that reassured the institution.

<sup>8</sup> Gordon Matta-Clark, transcript of an interview with Donald Wall, *Interview Between Wall and Matta-Clark: Rough Draft*, (EGMC,

*Articles and Documents, 1942-76*, unpublished, circa late 1975/ early 1976).

<sup>9</sup> Expósito & Villota discuss Matta-Clark's work in less in terms of boundary transgression than of boundary transposition: Marcelo Expósito & Gabriel Villota, "Saber Vivir," in D. Corbeira (ed.) *Construir... or deconstruir? Textos sobre Gordon Matta-Clark*. (Salamanca: Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> Gordon Matta-Clark in an interview with Liza Bear, *Avalanche* (1974): 35. Reproduced in Casanova, *op.cit.*

<sup>11</sup> Such a formulation is, of course, the traditional perception from within the labyrinth, and reverses the convention of 'whole' and 'outside' that underlies the principal or 'Normal' spatial system. There is no space here to develop either Bataille's nor, more obviously, Foucault's, discussions of the dynamics of this relationship, nor to discuss the differences between them.

<sup>12</sup> Matta-Clark, interviewed by Judith Russi Kirshner, Chicago, February 13th 1978. Reproduced in Casanova, *op.cit.*

<sup>13</sup> Gordon Matta-Clark, transcript of an interview with Donald Wall, *Interview Between Wall and Matta-Clark: Rough Draft*, (EGMC, *Articles and Documents, 1942-76*, unpublished, circa late 1975/ early 1976).

<sup>14</sup> 'I AM GETTING SOME NEW IDEAS ABOUT WORK 'WITHROUGH' WALLS SO THAT IT BECOMES MORE A SUPER-IMPOSITION OF DRAWINGS ON STRUCTURE. NOT JUST AN ISOLATED HOLE OR CUT BUT RELATED-CUTS UNIFYING THE SPACE AND DISSENGAGING POINTS OF SUPPORT. ALSO I WANT TO REINFORCE THE IDEA THAT THE AREA (BUILDING PARTS) BEYOND THE INTRUSION IS EFFECTED AND THAT EFFECT AS WELL AS CAUSE IS AN INGREDIENT.' Matta-Clark, Letter to Carol Gooden from Amsterdam, Monday December 3rd 1973. (EGMC, *Letters*, unpublished, 1973.)