

The Gordon Matta-Clark Archive at the Canadian Centre for Architecture

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When Gordon Matta-Clark died in 1978 at age thirty-five, the art world lost a bright and creative mind. At the time of his death, he was best known for *Splitting*, *Conical Intersect*, *Caribbean Orange*, and his other building cuts in abandoned structures; by removing parts of the walls, floors, or ceilings, Matta-Clark created extraordinary spaces with vistas through, out, and around the missing components. Only one building intervention, *Office Baroque*, remained, and it too was later demolished, despite protests by an impressive alliance of artists and art world luminaries. The artist's surviving photographs, photo collages, drawings, and films then inevitably took on greater importance, not just as the only record of the building projects, but also because they were increasingly recognized as works of art in their own right. Notwithstanding their originality, however, these works offered a narrower and more restricted picture of the artist/architect. Many felt that Matta-Clark's real contribution to art was forever lost when his last building intervention was destroyed.

There were hints, however, of another side to this fascinating artist that had not been fully explored or understood in his lifetime. For some people verbal stuff is just a hobby, rather than a

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way to be. For Gordon, it wasn't an exercise; words were his way, even more than the physical work, remarked artist Laurie Anderson in an interview in 1984.¹ This more faceted picture of the artist/architect slowly began to come into sharper relief as the documentary material he left behind became known: letters, notebooks, drawings, negatives, photographs, and clippings, which his widow, Jane Crawford, executor of his estate, had carefully preserved. Scholars who made the pilgrimage to see her found themselves amidst the records of someone who was clearly interested in the built environment with all its complexity and contradictions, not just in the buildings that he could artfully cut apart. Faced with a limited time in a private home, these researchers struggled with the daunting task of trying to understand the overlapping and interwoven puzzle of projects and ideas.

In 2002, Jane Crawford made an important decision: to put the archive on long-term deposit at the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA) in Montreal in order to make it accessible. To some, the CCA seemed like an odd choice of institution. Matta-Clark had never done a project in Canada, and he had never actually built a building. His work was shown in galleries and museums; he was an art world figure, not someone whose career was covered in the standard curriculum in architecture schools. But the CCA, an international research centre and museum founded in 1979 by architect Phyllis Lambert on the conviction that architecture is a public concern, saw Matta-Clark's contribution to architectural thinking as critical.

It was clear to Jane Crawford that the archive needed to be in an institution that would not merely care for the material, but expand the critical

discourse on Matta-Clark, and this was precisely what the CCA sought to do. Described in its mission statement as being a new form of cultural institution to build public awareness of the role of architecture in society, promote scholarly research in the field, and stimulate innovation in design practice, the CCA has as its guiding purpose to make comprehensive and integrated bodies of material available for advanced interdisciplinary research. Concerned with the history of architectural theory and practice from classical times to the present, and with a major focus on the second half of the twentieth century, the CCA collection of over 150 architectural archives, 60,000 photographs, 100,000 prints and drawings, and 215,000 printed monographs is considered a single entity in which different media reinforce and complement each other. For the CCA, the receipt of the archive gave new impetus to the collection, as it opened perspectives for research into Matta-Clark within an institution devoted to architecture.

The CCA was also able to provide ample opportunity for researchers examining the material to see it in juxtaposition with the archives of some of his architectural contemporaries, including Cedric Price, Peter Eisenman, John Hedjuk, James Stirling, and Aldo Rossi. Serious scholars had long understood that architecture was at the root of his thinking; his father, the surrealist artist Roberto Matta-Echaurren, had studied architecture, practiced it from time to time, and advocated it as the right discipline for his son to study. In turn, Matta-Clark, after a somewhat shaky academic start, went on to be one of the best students in his graduating class at Cornell University's School of Architecture in 1968. At the CCA, Matta-Clark would not have to give up his artist's pedigree the institution has

many objects that can be described as art instead, his work could be viewed from multiple, overlapping perspectives.

The deposit in 2002 was just the beginning. Jane Crawford generously added more material to the collection in 2003, 2005, 2006, 2007, and 2008. Friends and collaborators of the artist's, including Carol Goodden McCoy, Susan Ensley, Jabez van Cleef, Marc Petitjean, Richard Rubinstein, and Jaime Davidovich, have either given original material or archival copies for consultation, enriching the already extraordinary resources on Matta-Clark.

The ever-expanding archive a veritable treasure trove of drawings, photographs, writings, sculpture, and films revealed how Matta-Clark conceived of and acted on abandoned buildings, and how he radically explored and subverted the social environment. In his correspondence - - he was constantly sending letters, seeking support, proposing projects or developing ideas - - one sees his unusual mind at work. The language of his letters winsome, full of puns, and often quite personal offered a glimpse into the psyche of a person whose ideas outran what he was actually able to accomplish physically. For my spring line, I'm hoping for some action in Texas, maybe LA, and a major number in New York I would like to think that my views and whatever my ideas may be clear enough to cut through and continue changing on a few different levels, so the surface deep ready-made designed surroundings start getting already-unmade , he wrote to Germano Celant in Italy; to K.J. Geirlandt in Belgium he wrote since I always try to familiarize myself with new cities, I spent some time looking at the 'redevelopment' near the Gare du Nord in Bruxelles. ² Never looking at only one project at a time, or in one direction (geographic or otherwise), the letters make clear

how much he was hoping to do. The roots of that thinking, and the playful sense of language, can also be seen in early letters to his mother, Anne Alpert, and in the family correspondence that she saved and left at her death in 1999 to Jane Crawford, with the idea that researchers on Matta-Clark might want to know about his beginnings; this material, previously almost completely unknown and unexplored, came to the CCA as well.

While fewer than twenty films were completed by Matta-Clark during his lifetime, in the over 350 individual reels of film and video now at the CCA, which consist of original footage, outtakes, archival copies, and scenarios, the medium is revealed to be not tangential to his practice, but a central aspect. As outtakes and early versions of his films are progressively copied to modern media for ease of consultation, they offer new opportunities for research: in unused footage of *Day's End*, we hear Matta-Clark directing how to frame views of pier building as seen from a boat on the water; footage of a bus trip to see *Splitting* in New Jersey shows the artist walking along the ridgepole of the house as if he were walking on a tightrope. Matta-Clark's films of his little-known intervention at the Berlin Wall remained undeveloped at his death; in 2007, Jane Crawford, herself a film editor, took the original spools back from the CCA and had them developed. They revealed that the event was carefully and professionally documented on film.

Notes, photographs, and documents on *Anarchitecture*, some fifteen sketchbooks, many with unrealized project drawings, address books, artifacts (a pulley), and sculpture also enlarge our understanding of the artist. Nearly one hundred books from his personal library, on architecture, psychology, religion, aesthetics, and literature,

among them an extraordinary, heavily annotated copy of *Paradise Lost* by John Milton, are now at the CCA along with audio recordings of interviews. Notes on index cards in the archive reveal Matta-Clark's habit of constantly jotting down ideas.³ They includes short poetic statements such as Wear house wear your house-well, and quick, off-the-cuff observations about architecture: Corbusier is a classist whose faith in the past is restated in a machine aesthetic. Perhaps the faith we place in our past needs re examination. Together, all these objects give rise to a more detailed picture of the artist as a person of unbounded enthusiasms, ideas, and energy for planning, which is just how friends such as Laurie Anderson described him.

Not long after the initial deposit, the CCA acquired the drawings, cut book, and photographs of *A W-Hole House*, a major project that Matta-Clark undertook in Genoa in 1973, his first officially sanctioned cutting of an entire structure.⁴ The institution also bought finished copies of all of his films: from the well-known *Fresh Kill*, about the demise of his truck, to the more hermetic *Chinatown*, which documented New York City as seen from a Chinatown roof, in the course of one night. This meant that now the CCA had works that represented both the public and private aspects of Gordon Matta-Clark.

Over a three-year period, a team at the CCA, made up of consulting curator Gwendolyn Owens, photographs curator Louise Désy, and a staff of archivist cataloguers, worked to create a structure for the Finding Aid to the material, and to put electronic records into a collections management system so that they could be accessed and understood. Nothing is worth documenting if it is not hard to get, Matta-Clark stated in the film

about *Office Baroque*, his building intervention in Antwerp. Documenting the archive turned out to be rather like documenting the building cuts: it was certainly hard to get and hard to get right because of the many twists and turns and interconnections. Indeed, it has been an exercise in advanced thinking about cataloguing for all involved. But again like the building cuts, with planning and thought, it has proved to be something that can be accomplished.

Jane Crawford had made it clear that she wanted the archive to be presented to the public, not just preserved. This was in line with the approach of Mirko Zardini, then senior consulting curator of exhibitions and programs and today CCA director, who shortly after the first deposit of materials was made, conceived *out of the box: price rossi stirling + matta-clark*, a novel experimental exhibition with emphasis on the research and investigation of four important archives that had recently entered the collection.⁵ By opening these archives to view, the exhibition was able to look at the 1960s and 1970s, the years of the crisis of modernism and of the first symptoms of the post-modern, and a time when a series of experiments produced radical new reflections on the status of architecture and its fundamental nature. Starting from different premises and points of view, the exhibition put forward wildly diverse ideas by architects Cedric Price, Aldo Rossi, James Stirling, and Gordon Matta-Clark on the role of the architect and of architecture, with a special focus on its place as a more or less autonomous discipline with an independent status in society. The inclusion of Matta-Clark's practice alongside works taken from the professional archives of three major architects articulated his thought in a new way, redefining it, and according him the

status not only of an artist and architect, but also of a theoretician of architecture.

Since that time, CCA exhibitions have continued to be enlivened by Matta-Clark's particular point of view: the projects *Pipes* (1971-72) and *Fresh Air Cart* (1972) were included in the 2005 show *Sense of the City*, which explored how we experience architecture with all five senses. *The Living Archive Project*, a major partnership between the CCA and the Graduate School of Architecture Planning and Preservation (GSAPP) of Columbia University, set up to bring archival documents and artworks to life in experimental design discourse, gave rise to an exhibition in 2006, as well as a series of interviews, and a symposium toward an open-ended research work on *Anarchitecture*.⁶ The major Matta-Clark exhibitions in recent years --ranging from the retrospectives at the Centre for Contemporary Art in Glasgow, Scotland in 2003 and at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2006 to the exhibition at the SMS Contemporanea Santa Maria della Scala in Siena--capitalized on the newly available material at the CCA to present a more holistic view of Gordon Matta-Clark.⁷

The scholars, curators, and students who come to the CCA are encouraged to examine the material slowly and carefully, as can only be done in an institution with the proper spaces, standards, and procedures for archival consultation. They identify themselves as architects, artists, art historians, critics, and students, all sharing a curiosity about this charismatic art world figure. So far, they have journeyed to Montréal from eleven countries for this common purpose; and many others, from all over the world, have written to ask a question or confirm a fact.

But rather than turning Matta-Clark into a kind of frozen, preserved hero of 1970s art, carefully codified and classified, but robbed of relevance and vitality, the increased accessibility of the archive is having the opposite effect. Much like the building interventions, which revealed inner workings and shed light on spaces that would otherwise have been shrouded in darkness, the enhanced accessibility of the archive allows the complex corners and crevices of an extraordinary mind to be exposed and illuminated. As a result, his work is being reconsidered in essays, specialized articles, lectures, and conferences that present in-depth studies and new interpretations. There is a lot more to look at and a lot more to say about this artist than anyone realized.

The composite view of Matta-Clark's work as seen through the archive allows a new generation of researchers to consider it from other angles, to propose different critical points of view, and to map his various ideas on architecture, expressed in documents and works of art, in new ways. For contemporary artists, many of whom are known to have been inspired by the building cuts, it is also proving to be a stimulus to look at other aspects of his work: the Vancouver artist Geoffrey Farmer, for example, created his own installation based on the art card that says "Not the work ... the worker."⁸ A group of Cornell University students expanded upon his thoughts about installations and films, putting together a symposium with Professor Mary Woods in the spring of 2007.⁹ At the Rhode Island School of Design, as part of a sculpture seminar, each student was assigned the title of a book from Matta-Clark's library and asked to describe how it contributed to his work; the exercise had the effect of making the

students understand more readily how ideas and a working practice can come together.¹⁰

This is only the beginning. Gordon Matta-Clark's contribution to art and architecture is being revealed to be far more crucial, far more intricate and complex, than anyone realized. The expanding archive is opening up unlimited possibilities for collaborative research and exhibitions, attracting scholars working from many perspectives, from dance to film to literary theory. The archive is indeed alive.

NOTES

¹ Laurie Anderson interviewed by Joan Simon, in Mary Jane Jacob, *Gordon Matta-Clark: A Retrospective*, exhibition catalogue (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1985), p. 18.

² Gordon Matta-Clark, Letter to Germano Celant 17 January 1975; Gordon Matta-Clark, Letter to K.J. Geirlandt, 2 February 1976. Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark on deposit at the Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal.

³ Laurie Anderson interviewed by Joan Simon, in Mary Jane Jacob, *Gordon Matta-Clark: A Retrospective*, exhibition catalogue (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1985), p. 18.

⁴ This acquisition rounded out the earlier purchases by the CCA, a Cibachrome photograph of *Office Baroque* (1977) and the artist's books *Walls Paper* (1973) and *Splitting* (1974).

⁵ The exhibition was presented at the CCA from 23 October 2003 to 6 September 2004. It was developed by Mirko Zardini with the participation of a team of scholars, critics, curators, and architects, including Anthony

Vidler, Mark Wigley, Marco de Michelis, Philip Ursprung, Hubertus von Amelnunxen, and from CCA, Gwendolyn Owens, Howard Shubert, Louise Désy, and Pierre-Édouard Latouche. As part of the exhibition, an international forum about reflections on the role and nature of architecture in the 1960s and 1970s and the present day was held on 27 March 2004.

⁶ *Gordon Matta-Clark and Anarchitecture: A Detective Story* was displayed at the Arthur Ross Architecture Gallery at Columbia University, New York City, from 20 February to 14 April 2006. A symposium, *The Matta-Clark Summit*, was held on 27 February to gather artists, curators, scholars, and friends to discuss Matta-Clark's influence on contemporary art and architecture.

⁷ Material from the Matta-Clark archive at the CCA was loaned in exhibitions including *The Space Between*, Centre for Contemporary Art, Glasgow, and The Architectural Association, London (2003); *Open Systems*, Tate Gallery, London; *City Sliver*, Champs Libre, Montréal (2005); *Gordon Matta-Clark*, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid; *Transmission: The Art of Matta and Gordon Matta-Clark*, San Diego Museum of Art, San Diego (2006); *Spaces. Places of Art*, Akademie der Künste, Berlin; *Gordon Matta-Clark: You Are the Measure*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (2007); *Gordon Matta-Clark*, The Siena Contemporary Art Centre, Siena (2008).

⁸ The work was included in the exhibition *Geoffrey Farmer* presented at the Musée d'Art Contemporain, Montréal, from 3 February to 20 April 2008. Farmer has not been to visit the CCA archive but may have seen the art card on exhibition at Columbia University; it was also published in Gloria Moure, *Gordon Matta-Clark*, exhibition catalogue (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2006), p. 414.

⁹ Gordon Matta-Clark at Cornell, 30 31 March 2007. In addition to the students, participants included Jane Crawford, Teresa Hubbard, Kent Hubbell, and Gwendolyn Owens.

¹⁰ This seminar was taught by Frances Richard, who is currently working on a more extended study on language in the work of Gordon Matta-Clark.