

Gordon Matta-Clark: “You Are the Measure”

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Curators: Elisabeth Sussman and Sondra Gilman
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I used to think Matta-Clark’s work was about the deconstruction of architecture, a post-modern exercise in the revelation of process. It is, but it’s also about some things even more profound: Social bonds. It wasn’t until seeing his comprehensive retrospective at the Whitney Museum that I realized Matta-Clark didn’t only pierce through buildings but he parsed the very way we encounter them socially. His work isn’t only about architecture, but about creation by removal, completing something by taking a piece of it away.

Like many art lovers, I was familiar with Matta-Clark’s architectural lacerations, his famous carving-out of holes in buildings as if slicing loaves of bread. What at first seemed like acts of violence Gustav Metzger would approve of, Matta-Clark’s incisions actually filled caverns with light and opened up, what can be read in some of his displayed notes, a “view to the invisible.” His building cuts were actually constructive, not destructive, in that they created a new condition of being in and apprehending that space. One of the best examples is *Day’s End*, a giant, lopsided half-moon shape carved into the walls of a warehouse that used to be on one of the piers in the meatpacking district, a place – like scores of others in New York City’s previous incarnation that only the seedy and poor would frequent – now long gone.

As with most of this renegade architect’s interventions, *Day’s End* survives only in documentation, posing a considerable challenge for a museum retrospective. But rather than feel like a display of surrogates and relics (even when Matta-Clark’s dread-locks are enshrined at the entrance), this show is dynamic and ebullient. The display implements (tables, vitrines) are unpolished, electrical wires have been left exposed, and even the wall labels have scruffy torn edges, as if Matta-Clark himself had ripped them off a wall. The layout of the show is democratically undirected, leaving the viewer to wander the space as if exploring abandoned property.

In addition to cusping together the most important of Matta-Clark’s famous building cut projects, this show incorporates a lineage of works that bring to the fore an artist that could easily be labeled a Situationist. The inclusion of fascinating early pieces spans the gamut of Matta-Clark’s alchemical cooking experiments and his flare for bringing people together. He was one of the founders of 112 Greene Street, an artist-run center now called White Columns. (It really was anti-institutional, with a checklist at the door where people signed up for exhibitions – first come, first serve.) This Whitney show put an emphasis on *Food*, a restaurant/hang-out founded by Matta-Clark along with various other artists, dancers and students. At the heart of SoHo, *Food* literally brought people together, with artists such as Donald Judd acting as guest chefs (one meal, for example, comprised of only bones). In fact, *Food* actually lead Matta-Clark to the beginning of architectural cuts. One day at the restaurant he was inspired to make a sandwich out of pieces of wall and door. He was so pleased that he began to display fragments cut from buildings indoors, later turning the maimed sites themselves into in-situ sculptures.

Sussman and Gilman have rounded up various other, pre-chainsaw early work that illustrates Matta-Clark’s social practice. For example, *Fresh Air* is a pushcart of sorts, on which Matta-Clark and Lance Fung offered sauntering passers-by hits of purified air. For *Tree Dance*, Matta-Clark constructed hammock-like suspensions in a big tree at the center of the Vassar College campus on which the school’s dance troop performed. *Tree Dance* is an engrossing example of Matta-Clark’s agility in creating apertures within static structures, letting in pockets of light but also of activity. *Tree Dance* is paired with *Clock Shower*, a film showing Matta-Clark reenacting Harold Lloyd’s iconic clock-tower scene from the film *Safety Last*. Matta-Clark carries out an entire grooming regimen, complete with shave and shower, while balancing on the clock’s hands high above Broadway.

Matta-Clark was also experimenting extensively with food, or more precisely, with cooking. He made works using agar, a type of seaweed gelatin, mixed with various non-palatable

material and displayed the fermented, moldy results. Sadly not included in this show is a short video of Matta-Clark's contribution to a performance evening at The Kitchen where he sliced up a gingerbread house and served it to the audience.

This piece was recently recreated by Rirkrit Tiravanija, along with Pierre Huyghe and Pamela Lee, who slice a house-shaped cake down the center (like Matta-Clark's *Splitting*). Their film, *In the Belly of an Architect*, is currently on view at *Air de Paris*, a show at the Centre Pompidou. It is placed alongside Matta-Clark's notorious *Conical Intersect*, from which Carsten Höller has carved a line through the walls of the exhibition hall in a 1° angle, radiating from the projector all the way to the windows overlooking Paris.

Scores of young artists align themselves with Matta-Clark and he is arguably the most influential post-modern artist, which makes his retrospective at the Whitney Museum all the more pertinent. Some strong forces have converged to bring to the fore an exhibition that asserts a timely reading of Matta-Clark as a deconstructionist pre-cursor to relational aesthetics and various other contemporary streams. This show brings his work alive, giving it room to be humorous and complex, letting it straddle the many planes on which it operates.

-Chen Tamir