

GORDON MATTA-CLARK'S PHOTOGRAPHIC SPACES

by

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Abstract

Gordon Matta-Clark (1943-1978) is best known for his experimental “building cuts,” in which he reconfigured whole architectural spaces slated for destruction in North and South America, and in Europe. An extensive scholarship theorizes Matta-Clark’s practice as a critique of his architectural education and a recuperation of the social spaces outside its purview. Today, audiences view Matta-Clark’s building cuts through the two-dimensional media of film and photography, further complicating the original works’ play with temporality and performance. Recent scholarship has seen photography as central to Matta-Clark’s performance-based and sculptural practice. This thesis addresses a gap in scholarship between Matta-Clark’s photography and his ephemeral works. Matta-Clark’s use of photography as document relates to the Land Art practice of exhibiting outdoor works inside the gallery. His photographs also engage in the photoconceptual practice of questioning that very documentary status. I trace three modalities for the *photographic* within Matta-Clark’s works: image (referent), object (medium), and apparatus (technology). I suggest that the photographic image is historically situated by the latter two categories as an ontologically specific space, at once material and abstract, technological and theoretical.

My research draws on theoretical discourses underpinning Modernist architecture. The role of photography is belied in Modernist architectural discourse, a mainstay of Cornell’s architecture program under the leadership of historian Colin Rowe, from which Matta-Clark received a BArch in 1968. I find an unstated connection between photography and *phenomenal transparency*, a term defined in Rowe and Robert Slutzky’s influential essay, “Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal,” where it is used to describe the abstraction of space in the work of Le Corbusier. I set up a theoretical framework for the conceptual role of photography in Matta-Clark’s practice by being attentive to the relationship between photography and architecture

through the photographic slice, the visualized analog to the sculptural cut. I argue that in order to criticize the supposed transparency of both photography and architecture apparent in contemporary art practices and Modernist architectural discourse respectively, Matta-Clark's work investigated the two media in tandem.

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Dedication

To M & D, my sister & brother, Kristin & Katrina

Introduction

The Work and Its Influences

My thesis engages with the practice of one artist, Gordon Matta-Clark (1943-1978), who occupied a central position within New York's contemporary art scene in the 1970s, producing conceptual, performative, and site-specific sculptural works. Best known for his large-scale "building cuts," which radically altered architectural sites, Matta-Clark investigated space using a number of strategies and media. His earliest documented works, created in Ithaca, New York, provide examples of the experimental and at times dangerous negotiations of the built environment and quotidian spaces that mark his entire practice: in 1969, Matta-Clark wove a virtually-unusable rope bridge, which was stretched across a treacherous ravine near the Cornell campus (*Rope Bridge*), and made a local house uninhabitable by filling the space with a large inflatable plastic sculpture (*Deflation*). These works can be juxtaposed against the education that Matta-Clark received from Cornell's architectural department, under the new leadership of Modernist historian and theorist Colin Rowe. At the time, the program was becoming increasingly theoretical, influenced by functionalist architectural discourse of the early 20th century as it was re-framed by Rowe and his colleagues. Matta-Clark earned a BArch from Cornell in 1968, but would ultimately find the architectural profession unreceptive to his alternative notions of ambiguous and non-functional space.¹

¹ Matta-Clark discusses how his notions of space differ from those of professional architecture on page fourteen of a rough draft of an interview between Donald Wall and Gordon Matta-Clark which resides in: Gordon Matta-Clark Archive, Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark on deposit at the Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montreal (hereafter referred to as GM-C Archive), PHCON2002:0016:002.077. Matta-Clark states that, "All places have ambiguity. Its not a clear cut either-or situation. Space is more than the "aesthetic" manipulation of shapes. It is this ambiguity that needs liberation, clarification, amplification, augmentation, call it what you wish." This interview was later published as "Gordon Matta-Clark's Building Dissections," in Moure, *Works and Collected Writings*, 53-71.

An extensive scholarship, including works by Thomas Crow, Pamela Lee, and Dan Graham, theorizes Matta-Clark's practice as a critique of his architectural education and a recuperation of the social spaces outside its purview.² In his own writing, Matta-Clark positioned himself against the discourse of functionalist architecture and its figurehead, Le Corbusier, of whom Rowe was an avid supporter. Matta-Clark's stated interest in social space is corroborated by his spatial inquiries, including real estate purchases of unusable plots of land (*Fake Estates* 1973) and performances of quotidian activities, such as cooking and cleaning, or shaving and showering, in overtly public places (*Garbage Wall* 1970 and *Clockshower* 1974). In the work *Fresh Air Cart*, 1972, Matta-Clark engaged passersby with an overtly environmental message, offering assisted breathes through a homemade breathing machine. Matta-Clark's physical investment into his own community further evidences the seriousness of his social practice: in 1977 Matta-Clark received a grant for a project that aimed to teach teenagers from impoverished New York neighbourhoods basic construction skills and, thereby, the ability to transform their own environment.

During his career, Matta-Clark received professional support from many members of the art community, including post-minimalists Robert Smithson and Dan Graham, founder of the Italian Arte Povera movement Germano Celant, as well as a young group of artists living in New York. Matta-Clark's immediate artistic and social circle included dancers and choreographers Tina Girourd, Trish Brown, Suzanne Harris, and Carol Gooden, performance artist Laurie Anderson, sculptors Jene Highstein and Richard Nonas, and artists Jeffrey Lew and Ted Greenwald. The community was instrumental in transforming the SoHo district from an industrial ghetto into an artistic hub of live-work studios, small galleries and co-operative spaces;

² The following works by the three scholars deal with this subject extensively: Crow, "Gordon Matta-Clark," in Diserens, Gordon Matta-Clark, 7-132; Lee, Object to be destroyed; Walker, Art, Architecture and the Attack on Modernism.

Matta-Clark was an active member of the artist-centered gallery at 112 Greene Street and designed and renovated the Holly Solomon Gallery. He was also a co-founder of the restaurant Food, which both employed and provided a meeting place for artists in SoHo. While maintaining a strong foundation in New York, Matta-Clark actively participated in the avant-garde European art world. His father, Robert Matta-Eucharen, the Chilean Surrealist painter (and, early in his career, a practicing draughtsman) best known as Matta, spent much of his life in Europe, providing Matta-Clark with a network and professional connections abroad. Just less than half of Matta-Clark's large-scale interventions into architecture were executed in Europe, with the majority taking place in the Northeastern United States, and one earlier intervention occurring in Santiago, Chile.

Matta-Clark's large-scale building cuts were executed both legally and illegally, with and without institutional support. In his first building cuts, executed in 1972, Matta-Clark subtracted sections of the walls and floors of condemned houses in impoverished New York boroughs, making small alterations in the building material. However, the majority of his cuts altered entire architectural structures, both out of public sight and in full view. The first whole building intervention occurred in 1973 in Genoa, where Matta-Clark was gifted a building by an engineer; he created a series of cuts within the walls and roof, collectively known as *A W-Hole House*. In *Splitting*, executed in 1975, Matta-Clark altered the structure and foundation of a New Jersey suburban house donated by Horace Solomon, one of his New York dealers. *Day's End* was executed in an abandoned warehouse along the Hudson River in New York in 1975, and was intended as an exhibition space before being reclaimed by the port authorities. In *Bingo* and *Conical Intersect*, created for the 1974 Art Park and the 1975 Paris Biennale respectively, the building façades' registered Matta-Clark's spectacular spatial interventions. Matta-Clark's last two major building cuts, often cited as his most complex ones, were organized with the help of established art institutions: *Office Baroque* through the International Cultural Centre, Antwerp,

in 1977, and *Circus* through the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, in 1978. The works produced large exhibition catalogues, including interviews with the artist. None of Matta-Clark's building cuts are extant.

Concurrently with the sculptural and social practice, Matta-Clark documented his activity and works, in particular the short-lived building cuts, through photography and film. His use of photography as document relates to contemporary Land Art and performance practices: Matta-Clark exhibited photographic, filmic and sculptural elements of his works in galleries throughout the United States and Europe. His practice generated three artist books, sixteen films and videos, and thousands of photographs, many taken by friends, colleagues, and viewers, as well as by the artist himself. Matta-Clark's engagement with the documentary media was often experimental. While he presented narrative black-and-white shots as stand-alone images, Matta-Clark also collaged multiple prints of a single architectural intervention in disorienting, rather than evidentiary, photomontages. He worked with new printing techniques, producing archival quality colour-saturated Cibachrome prints, as well as barely decipherable prints on cardboard boxes (Untitled, 1972, Moore College of Art, Philadelphia, *Photographic Portraits*). Matta-Clark also collaged the Cibachrome negatives themselves, which were subsequently printed as large art works, in which the masking tape joins and added paint strokes became highlighted. For Matta-Clark, the photographic process was both a tool for spatial investigation and the subject of material investigation.

Recent scholarship theorizes photography as central to Matta-Clark's performance-based and sculptural works. My thesis builds on this foundation, while addressing the often referenced, but seldom-breached gap in scholarship between the documentary medium and the more overtly physical works.³ I set up a theoretical framework for the conceptual role of photography in

³ Many scholars note the Matta-Clark's similar treatment of two and three-dimensional media:

Matta-Clark's practice by being attentive to the relationship between photography and architecture through the photographic slice, the visualized analog to the sculptural cut. Scholars note a number of possible influences for Matta-Clark's building cuts. For example, during the 1969 *Earth Art* exhibition, guest curated by Willoughby Sharp at the Andrew Dickson White Museum of Art at Cornell, Matta-Clark assisted with Dennis Oppenheim's *Beebe Lake City Ice Cut*, a work with formal similarities to Matta-Clark's later interventions into the built environment. Also, colleagues identify his first cut as a horizontal wedge spontaneously cut out of a wall in the restaurant Food during a renovation. Without discrediting these very direct influences on Matta-Clark's working method, my thesis considers how Matta-Clark's material investigation of photography conceptually influenced his simultaneous investigation of architectural spaces. I argue that, in order to criticize the supposed transparency of both photography and architecture, apparent in contemporary art practices and Modernist architectural discourse respectively, Matta-Clark's work investigated the two media in tandem.

Reception

For the purposes of this introduction, I will briefly outline the reception of Matta-Clark's work through exhibitions and scholarship, particularly as it relates to the themes of photography and architecture.⁴ In the years following Matta-Clark's untimely death, his work was included in numerous group exhibitions of conceptual art in Europe and North America. In 1985, Mary Jane

Diserens, Preface to *Gordon Matta-Clark*, 6; Fer, "Celluloid Circus," 137; Jacob, Introduction to *Gordon Matta-Clark: A Retrospective*, 8; Walker, "Drawing on Architecture," 122.

⁴ For a more thorough outline of Matta-Clark's projects and exhibitions, as well as publications on Matta-Clark's work, see the chronology sections in the exhibition catalogue for the 2007 retrospective, *Gordon Matta-Clark: "You are the Measure," at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York*, edited by Elizabeth Sussman, which provide the most comprehensive overviews to date.

Jacob spearheaded Matta-Clark's first major retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. The exhibition catalogue for the retrospective, produced only seven years after Matta-Clark's death, emphasizes his personal biography, family lineage and artistic community. Art critic Robert Pincus-Witten, a contemporary of Matta-Clark, produced a critical essay for the catalogue, in which he betrays a skeptical stance towards art produced in the 1970s, commenting on the different ideological tenor between that decade and the one in which he was writing. Pincus-Witten associates conceptualism with a seemingly idealistic commitment to the dematerialization of the art object (at the time back in full force). Any mention of photography is, therefore, dismissive, and fails to take into account conceptual art's practice of questing the photograph's status. Although Mary Jane Jacob discusses the multi-media aspect of Matta-Clark's career in her foreword to the catalogue, including photographer in a list of adjectives describing the artist, Matta-Clark's photographs themselves are not a topic of any major discussion.

Since the mid 1990s, the number of traveling one-artist exhibitions of Matta-Clark's work has grown exponentially in Europe, the United States and Canada. As scholars and critics gain distance from the work's inception, the documentary media becomes increasingly important and, along with the sculptural works, takes on a richer theoretical dimension. "*Reorganizing structure by drawing through it*": *Zeichnung bei Gordon Matta-Clark*, a large exhibit executed in 1997 at the Generali Foundation, Vienna, sets a precedent for considering two-dimensional media, in this case his numerous graphic drawings, in tandem with the sculptural practice. Pamela Lee's association between the Matta-Clark's cut drawings and building cuts, discussed in her catalogue essay, "Drawing in Between," is particularly important for my own thinking of the photographic slice. *Gordon Matta-Clark: The Space Between*, conceived at the Centre for Contemporary Art, Glasgow in 2003, sets another precedent for my thesis: the exhibition presented mainly photographic material from the artist's practice, foregoing the sculptural

remnants of the large-scale works. In the foreword to the exhibition catalogue, Lisa Le Feuvre states that neither Matta-Clark's events nor his photographic works necessary depends upon the other, thereby acknowledging the independent lives of the photographs.⁵ *Transmission: The Art of Matta and Gordon Matta-Clark*, a 2006 exhibition from the San Diego Museum of Art, deals with the issue of architecture central to the artistic practices of both father and son. A fellow student of Rowe, Anthony Vidler's essay in *Transmission* provides insight into the influence of Cornell's Modernist architectural program as a theoretical foundation with physical manifestation in Matta-Clark's work.⁶

In the his 2009 monograph on the artist, *Gordon Matta-Clark: Art, Architecture and the Attack on Modernism*, Walker considers Gordon Matta-Clark's body of work as it relates to Modernist theory and postmodern dissent in the fields of art and architecture. His reading diverges from earlier accounts of Matta-Clark's social agenda, which often theorize Matta-Clark's work as a direct political attack on functionalist architecture.⁷ Walker's account is most similar to Vidler's nuanced understanding of Matta-Clark's work, as borrowing from rather than merely rejecting Modernist architectural discourse. Walker's discussion on Modernism includes the theoretical works of Clement Greenberg, Michael Fried and the Cornell Urban Design Studio under the direction of Colin Rowe. Using the theorists Henri Bergson and William James, among others, Walker argues that Matta-Clark does not reject Modernist formalism, but rather expands its assumed binaries.

⁵ Le Feuvre, "Foreword: Thinking about the Space Between," 9.

⁶ Vidler, "Architecture-To-Be," 68-69.

⁷ An example of this now-conventional reading of Matta-Clark's building cuts will be discussed in the body of my thesis, in particular through a critical re-reading of: Graham, "Gordon Matta-Clark," in *Rock My Religion*, 194-205.

In the first monograph on the artist, *Object to Destroy*, 2000, Pamela M. Lee also deals with the ambiguous role of Modernity in Matta-Clark's practice. She considers Matta-Clark's work against contemporary minimalist, site-specific and professional urban planning practices. She identifies fundamental themes in Matta-Clark's practice, including public versus private space, monumental versus domestic space, capitalism and private property. Lee also challenges criticism that posits Matta-Clark's work as mere nihilism, particularly apparent in the response of both the Left and the Right to *Conical Intersect* in Paris. Instead, Lee theorizes Matta-Clark's agenda as a political critique of the destruction that his work seemingly entails. However, by relying on the writings of George Bataille and Walter Benjamin Lee shows how Matta-Clark's ephemeral work complicates the idea of site-specificity and community and the limitations of these two concepts in art, while conveying the fundamentally Modern community of loss. She states that: "For Matta-Clark's art fully embraces the contradictions of both its production and reception, untethered as it is to fixed notions about the space of art in contemporary life."⁸ Perhaps most importantly for my own research, Lee deals with the issue of temporality in Matta-Clark's work *and* as a subsequent facet of art historical writing, locating a productive irony in both the creation of "workless" art and in writing about it.⁹ I find a relation between Lee's historiographical concerns and the scholarly reception of Matta-Clark's photographs, in which the play of temporality is further augmented.

Corrine Diserens edited an important anthology, *Gordon Matta-Clark*, in 2003, which includes an essay on photography by Christian Kravagna.¹⁰ Kravagna addresses the issue of representation in conceptual art practices. He is the first to categorize different types of

⁸ Lee, *Object to Be Destroyed*, xx.

⁹ Lee, *Object to Destroy*, 233-234.

¹⁰ Kravagna, "It's Nothing Worth Documenting If It's Not Difficult to Get," 133-146.

photographs in Matta-Clark's practice, each with a theoretical resonance. The categories include: the snapshot image, often depicting work-in-progress; the photo-conceptual narrative, made up a series of images, that is seemingly documentary, but in fact points to the analytical influence of photoconceptualism; the photomontage, which gives a sense of the disorientation that the original interventions produce. Kravagna identifies the last category as the most useful for Matta-Clark's critical project. He also asserts that film or video integrates the three aspects embodied by Matta-Clark's photographic types and, therefore, provides the most effective documentary representation.¹¹

Elisabeth Sussman coordinated the artist's most recent major retrospective, *Gordon Matta-Clark: "You Are the Measure,"* in 2007 for the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. The role of media, both photographic and filmic, is central to a number of essays in the exhibition catalogue. In an article specifically addressing Matta-Clark's photoworks, Briony Fer addresses the ambivalence that the photographs incite, as alternatively documentary, conceptual and aesthetic. However, Fer does not attempt to separate these photographic types, instead identifying the importance of, "the mixture of rawness and intricacy in the material world that this body of the photographic work contains—arguably a world no less material (or any more inward looking) than a building cut through."¹² Fer considers how Matta-Clark's collage techniques reveal themselves within the artwork and highlights the conceptual resonances of his material experimentation, in particular the importance of process for looking, making and moving. She suggest that: "Perhaps the space in front of the Cibachromes and photomontages, the space we, as viewers, move in, can also be thought of as a kind of open seam or join that is

¹¹ *Ibid*, 146.

¹² Fer, "Celluloid Circus," 137.

unhinged in the encounter with the image.”¹³ Here I find a direct connection between the cut of the photograph and Matta-Clark’s building cuts.

As evidenced by both Kravagna and Fer’s discussions of Matta-Clark’s experimental photomontages, mentioned above, Matta-Clark’s photographic experimentation is equated with his larger-scale building interventions by a number of scholars. In his 2004 article, “Drawing in Architecture,” Walker also alludes to the gap between the photographic media and more sculptural works, asserting that the role of the photograph is complicated within Matta-Clark’s photomontages in a way that relates to the function of the building cuts – both the cut and the photomontage challenge the concept of an original or complete experience. Walker states that, “The results of these experiments in representation can not only be read back over, and clarify, the kind of kinesthetic experience available within the buildings; they can arguably extend and complicate it.”¹⁴ My thesis both unpacks and complicates the pairing between photographic and building cut, as the above scholars mention it.

Lefebvre and Space

The concept of space, like that of photography, is theoretically unwieldy. And, in a manner similar to Matta-Clark’s photographic investigation, postmodern theory conceives of space as a socially produced medium. Henri Lefebvre’s seminal text, *The Production of Space*, first published in French in 1974, marks the radical leftist spatial discourse of the 1970s and 1980s. The work provides a touchstone for counter-culture interests that contest the political status quo, as constructed by centralized government control and capitalist interests, which depend upon professional architecture for legitimating. In part for this reason, much scholarship

¹³ *Ibid*, 142.

¹⁴ Walker, “Drawing on Architecture,” 122.

on Matta-Clark, including the monographs by Lee and Walker mentioned above, relies on Lefebvre as a theoretical parallel to the artistic practice. Although Lefebvre does not figure heavily within the body of my thesis, his theories on space provide an important foundation for the theoretical criticism on which I draw, and, therefore, deserve some discussion here: Lefebvre is unique among spatial theorists for his insistence on the unity of socially produced space, and its inextricably overlaid and multifaceted nature. His categorization of separate spatial types—inseparable in practice—make the theory a remarkably useful one and especially relevant to my understanding of Matta-Clark’s conceptual use of photography. Lefebvre’s fusion of spatial types relates to Matta-Clark’s necessarily *layered* photographic investigation; the *photographic* has multiple modalities, which when considered together critically inflect his practice.

In Lefebvre’s theory of spatial unity, *spatial practice* denotes empirical space created through material relationships, such as the technologies and infrastructure of the built environment; *representations of space* denote the systems by which empirical space is conceptualized, including the abstract Euclidean space of architectural manipulation, as well as the space of the ubiquitous photographic image. *Representations of space*, such as building plans and photographs have a dialectical influence on subsequent material action; they alter the way a viewer perceives and interacts with the world itself. This symbolically loaded world of lived experience, at once material and mental, makes up the last space of Lefebvre’s trinity, known as *representational space*. It is at once the most difficult space to conceptualize and the space of the very transactions through which we navigate our daily lives.

In his essay, “Drawing on Architecture,” discussed above, Walker provides a particularly sophisticated use of Lefebvre, contrasting Matta-Clark’s literal fragmentation of space with Lefebvre’s theorization of the fragmentary nature of Euclidean space in the capitalist city. According to Walker, the building cut literalizes the fragmentation of Euclidean space in the three-dimensional urban environment, and, as a result, diminishes its importance by shows

spatially what exceeds this particular *representation of space*.¹⁵ Walker also discusses the work *Reality Properties: Fake Estates*, in which Matta-Clark's juxtaposes documentary photographs, legal deeds and town-planning maps, and, as a result, diminishes the authority of all three systems and highlight the contingency upon which all are based.¹⁶ According to Walker, Matta-Clark subverts both photographic and Euclidean *representations of space* in *Fake Estates*, in order to show their incommensurability with each other and with actual *spatial practice*. Walker's discussion of Matta-Clark's conflation of different spatial types provides an important precedent for my own discussion of the artist's conceptual or formal use of photography.

In a manner that relates to my own understanding of Lefebvre, Anthony Vidler uses the Lefebvre's tripartite space as a foundation in the introduction to his book *Warped Space*. For Vidler, *representational space* is both material (the Real) and in-the-process-of-becoming Symbolic and, therefore, marks the space of artistic intervention—an intervention into the material world with symbolic repercussion. Using *Conical Intersect* as its main case study, my thesis suggests a resonance between Matta-Clark's photographic spaces—the spaces eked out through his photographic investigation and building cuts—and this simultaneously material and mental *representational space*. First, I outline three modalities for photography in Matta-Clark's practice more broadly—the photographic image, object and apparatus—through which I define a specific photographic space with historical and ontological resonance apparent in Matta-Clark's works; my thesis proposes that Matta-Clark's effective spatial critique takes into account the interpenetrating nature of the material (in this case by way of medium or object) and the mental (in this case by way of image) through process (in this case aided by the photographic apparatus). I then locate the unstated presence of this photographic space in Modernist

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 120.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 114.

architectural discourse, specifically in the work of Le Corbusier and in an influential essay by Rowe, “Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal.” Hence, Matta-Clark’s investigation into photographic space extends into a broader critique of the ways in which the space is understood, conceptualized, and utilized for vested interests. Ultimately, I locate Matta-Clark’s critique of this photographic space in *Conical Intersect* and its photographic extensions.

Gordon Matta-Clark

The limits of Matta-Clark's practice are difficult to define. To mark its definite end in 1978 with Matta-Clark's early death simplifies the issue of temporality at play within the works and their current assemblages. To state matter-of-factly, as I have done, that there are no extant building cuts undermines the related photography, film and video by which the interventions critique the conception of site. To define Matta-Clark's media, material and otherwise, as architecture, performance, sculpture, or photography, bypasses the thematic complexity between media that makes the practice so fascinating. And to say all of this without mentioning the ongoing life of Matta-Clark's memory and influence risks excluding the interconnectedness of community and art that fueled Matta-Clark's practice during his own lifetime. Therefore, I do not try to define either the practice or its limits *per se* (although it may seem that this is exactly what I am doing). Instead, my hope is that what appears at first to be an outer limit, a specific medium, and a single aspect, reveals itself to be an internal vein, a conceptual modality, and but a single thread of another twining.¹⁷

I am concerned with photography in Matta-Clark's practice—a simple enough statement for what is, in fact, a theoretically fraught and amorphous medium. An attempt at comprehensive overview would be necessarily simplistic. Nevertheless, my thesis outlines multiple roles for photography within Matta-Clark's practice in order to expose the underlying importance of the photographic process and the photographic *as* process. I hope to reveal, within this unwieldy

¹⁷ My first paragraph is in dialogue with Le Feuvre's foreword to the exhibition catalogue for *Gordon Matta-Clark: The Space Between*, in particular with the last sentence of the text: "The journey through Matta-Clark's practice does not seek to find an answer to the question >what is the work?< but aims instead to extend that interrogation. Perhaps it is only in these spaces-in-between that articulation of artwork can operate." (Le Feuvre, "Foreward: Thinking About the Space Between," 11).

terrain, the presence of a photographic space¹⁸ that occurs in tandem with the more overtly physical and sculptural aspects of the works and that functions as an architectural critique. By relating the photographic modalities of his practice to Matta-Clark's well-theorized social agenda, I also argue for the ideological necessity of his parallel investigation into photographs and buildings. My understanding of the *photographic* applies broadly across the practice. However, in part for the sake of clarity, this discussion centers on a single artwork, *Conical Intersect*, executed for the 1975 Paris Biennale. This fortuitous work succinctly illustrates the importance of the *photographic* as it emerges during a culminating point in Matta-Clark's admittedly short career.

For two weeks in the fall of 1975, Matta-Clark and assistants chiseled, hammered, sawed and cut a large, spiraling hole out of two seventeenth-century buildings in the Les Halles-Plateau Beaubourg district. As with all of his building interventions, the exact narrative of those two weeks can be only approximately pieced together through eyewitness accounts, photographs, and film (or video in some later projects). Single shot photographs show the progression of the building cuts, as seen from within the building's interior and from the street below. Interior shots juxtapose the disorienting and dissected walls, floors and ceilings with relatively intact views of the Marais framed by the large central hole cut through building's south façade. The same oculus, when photographed from outside the building produces the opposite effect: the view of the interior is comparatively dark and the kaleidoscopic effect of the cuts is reduced to a series of seemingly two-dimensional circular voids, resulting in a compressed sense of depth. The film

¹⁸ I borrow the term "photographic space" from Beatriz Colomina, who uses it to describe aspects of Le Corbusier's architectural practice. See Colomina, *Le Corbusier and Photography*.

record of *Conical Intersect*,¹⁹ titled by the work's alternate name, *Etant d'Art Pour Locataire*, combines both viewpoints and provides an outline for the work's chronology.

The soundless colour film shows the progression of the work's construction, most notably marked by the expanding aperture cut through the southern building's exposed façade: a gloved hand with hammer blasts through the exterior wall; Matta-Clark and an assistant dance the can-can at the edge of a semi-circular void; the semi-circular shape is systematically expanded into a four-foot wide hole / oculus / aperture / window. Numerous sequences situate the work within its urban context: cars and pedestrians travel the main route below; passersby stop to watch the progress and take pictures; Matta-Clark talks to people on the street; one continuous shot taken from a moving vehicle duplicates the view as seen from the heavily trafficked Rue Beaubourg; a number of close-up pans juxtapose the work and its neighbour, the George Pompidou Centre with its holey, lattice-like structure. During the last few minutes of the film, a front-loader methodically dismantles the work's support, the twin seventeenth century buildings, eventually destroying both the dense and empty spaces of the work.

From these documentary sources, we can deduce that for a short time the building cuts of *Conical Intersect* traversed the entire width and multiple floors of the residential buildings, directing the attention of passersby toward the neighbouring George Pompidou Centre, a monument to modern art and culture, at the time under construction. The apparent tension between architectural destruction (first through the cut and then by front-loader) and construction (of the neighbouring center) was heightened by the artwork's location on the edges of the recently demolished Les Halles area. This historic district had been a ruin in the Parisian cityscape for four years, and the vacant expanse, known as "le trou des Halles," acted as an

¹⁹ Matta-Clark et al., "'ETANT D'ART POUR LOCATAIRE,' CONICAL INTER-SECT," in *Program Seven*. New York: Electronic Arts Intermix, [2001?]. Videocassette (VHS), 37 min, 20 sec.

ironic counter argument to the promise of urban renewal under de Gaulle's government.²⁰ A theatrical act of urban recycling, *Conical Intersect* augmented the area's incidental critique against Modernism and city planning.²¹ The success of the work can be attributed, at least in part, to the lucky combination of contemporary spatial practices, the historical resonance of site, and formal intervention. Indeed, Matta-Clark described the work as, "...A FORM THAT HAS LITTLE TO DO WITH ANY 'ONE' THING."²²

According to Bruce Jenkins' recent account of *Conical Intersect*, Matta-Clark frequently downplayed the purely formal aspects of the work.²³ However, as evidenced by subsequent scholarship, the conical shape of the cuts has a strong resonance with the geometry of optics, perspective and image-making technology. Matta-Clark himself described the shape as a "spyglass," and both Lee and Graham mention the periscopic and telescopic qualities of *Conical Intersect*.²⁴ Jenkins provides the most extensive reading on the formal influences of filmic projection to date. The following two examples, although often mentioned in accounts of the work, had not been the subject of an extended critique prior to Jenkins' account.

²⁰ Lee, "On the Holes of History," 77.

²¹ This reading has become the standard one for *Conical Intersect*, first appearing in Jacob et al., *Gordon Matta-Clark*, 87. Dan Graham provides a similar anti-architectural reading of the work in Graham, "Gordon Matta-Clark," in *Rock My Religion*, 194-205.

²² This hand written statement is in the GM-C Archive, PHCON2002:0016:001.070.

²³ Jenkins, '*Conical Intersect*', 14.

²⁴ Incidentally, Graham and Lee provide contrasting descriptions of the structure. According to Graham the building cuts act as a periscope when viewed from the street, while Lee describes this same view as telescopic. However, both scholars use the formal structure to discuss the works metaphorical dialogue between the past and present: As Graham says, "With the aid of this 'periscope,' viewers could look not only into the interior of the Matta-Clark sculpture/building, but through the conical borings to other buildings that embody past and present era of Paris." (Graham, "Gordon Matta-Clark," 202). Similarly, Lee states that, "*Conical Intersect* literally telescoped the past through the present." (Lee, "On the Holes of History," 75). My thesis shifts its attention to the "literal telescoping" or seeing-technology itself and the implication of a photographic technology as formal model for an artwork made on architecture.

Before acquiring a site for the work, and after his initial proposal to cut through the exhibition space itself was rejected, Matta-Clark proposed to execute a variation on the *son et lumière*, a post-world war II French spectacle in which light and sound are projected onto building exteriors at historic sites. This imagined intervention, according to the artist, would resonate with its urban site as, “Something both in keeping with the French monumental tradition and a stab at dramatizing without actors.”²⁵ However, the shape of the final work, a diagonal tunnel carved through the width of a building (in this case two buildings), is similar to an unrealized New York project conceptualized the previous year,²⁶ which suggests a broader interest in the purely formal aspect. Matta-Clark viewed the second possible influence, Anthony McCall’s experimental film, *Line Describing a Cone* (1973), around a year before his Parisian cut. McCall’s film begins with a small circle of light caused by the throw of the projector. The projector’s cast of light widens, eventually creating a three-dimensional cone of light within the viewing space. Gerry Hovagimyan, Matta-Clark’s main assistant for the work reports that, “Gordon and I talked about it a lot, and that’s what he was trying to do at Beaubourg.”²⁷ There is an obvious formal relation between the inward spiraling vortex of Matta-Clark’s cut and McCall’s film, in which the viewer is turned towards the projector as opposed to the image being projected; the play of projection is important in both works.

Regardless of the exact source of inspiration, the cuts facilitated a (literally) pointed critique of (or at) Modernist architecture, embodied by the hyper-functionalist Pompidou Centre.

²⁵ Letter from Gordon Matta-Clark to Nina Felsin, dated June 30, in the GM-C Archive, PHCON2002:0016:003.090.

²⁶ In a letter to Dorris Friedman, dated January 25, 1975, Matta-Clark inquires about a possible projection in New York, which has formal resonances with *Conical Intersect*: “I would need use of the structure from one to month to cut a diagonal tunnel-like void the width of the building...” In GM-C Archives, PHCON2002:0016:003.020.

²⁷ Gerry Hovagimyan, interviewed by Joan Simon, in Jacob et al., *Gordon Matta-Clark: A Retrospective*, 88.

According to Pamela Lee, the Centre, designed by the Italian and British architectural team of Piano and Rogers, “arose in the neighbourhood like an irrepressible, scandalous machine, the monstrous child of a machine-age aesthetic of which it was the logical, if extreme, heir.”²⁸ For Dan Graham, *Conical Intersect* played directly on this Modernist ideology. He stated that: “To destroy and not to construct (or reconstruct) a building amounts to an inversion of functionalist doctrine.”²⁹ Both scholars identify Matta-Clark’s intervention as an attack on architecture, and for Lee the form of *Conical Intersect* embodies a metaphoric intersection of discourses, where the inscription of art onto architecture literalizes the non-commensurability between these two cultural practices. The symbiosis between art and architecture is, of course, exactly what the Centre was meant to embody, what Donald Wall describes as the “intradisciplinary” ideological discourse of the avant-garde art community in the early 20th century discourse.³⁰

Matta-Clark’s relationship to architecture, both as a theoretical discourse and profession, is a complex one. Indeed, the relationship is becoming increasingly nuanced in scholarship. Before taking up an artistic practice, Matta-Clark received a rigorous architectural education from Cornell University at the time the program was undergoing a theoretical shift under the new Head of the Urban Design Studio, architectural historian Colin Rowe. Rowe espoused Modernist principles and theory, based on the practices and writing of members of the Bauhaus School and on the Swiss-French architect, Le Corbusier.³¹ In writing and interviews, Matta-Clark often positions himself against the architectural profession, the architectural discourse of functionalist architecture, and, in particular, Le Corbusier, the outspoken proponent and figurehead of

²⁸ Lee, “On the Holes of History,” 81.

²⁹ Graham, “Gordon Matta-Clark,” 198.

³⁰ Wall et al., “Building Dissections,” 54.

³¹ Vidler, *Histories of the Immediate Present*, 66-71.

machine-age Modernism. However, as architectural historian, Anthony Vidler, asserts, Matta-Clark's modes of spatial manipulation and representation, as well as the language he uses to describe his own interventions, borrows a great deal from this Modernist discourse, especially as it was re-framed in the 1960s by Rowe.³² Indeed, Matta-Clark qualified his anti-architectural position by distinguishing between the ideals of the early avant-garde and their subsequent (mis)usage in political discourse, architectural practice, and the business of city planning:

The state of [American?] architecture reflects the iconography of the Western Corporate Axis. It is first the abuse of Bauhaus and early Purist ideals that I take issues with. Then I must clarify how Monolithic Idealist problem-solving has not only failed to solve the problems but created a dehumanized condition at both a domestic and institutional level. So what I am reacting to is the deformation of values (ethics) in the disguise of Modernity, Renewal, Urban Planning, call it what you will.³³

Paradoxically, the conception of space as a dynamic medium with social consequences entered into Modernist discourse, by and large, through architectural practice at the turn of the last century, along with the concomitant foregrounding of formalism and the related field of geometry.³⁴ In avant-garde discourse of the early twentieth century the universality of form was given a particularly social inflection and espoused by figures as politically diverse as Le Corbusier and El Lissitzky. Modernist discourse grounded functionalist architecture within the

³² Vidler asserts that, "...in making information about a building visible, and in describing the procedure as a 'formal' concern is an extension of Rowe's modern-mannerist analysis into the real." (Vidler, "Architecture-To-Be," 70).

³³ *Ibid*, p. 65.

³⁴ Of course, the discourses of space have a long and complex trajectory. (For a useful overview of spatial history see Burgin, *Indifferent Spaces, Place and Memory in Visual Culture*). However, this discourse comes to the fore as matter of debate for art historians, architects, painters, etc. at the beginning of the 20th century. Furthermore, early 20th century discourse prompts an understanding of space as material product dependent on human intervention. According to Vidler, "By 1914 this understanding of the space of humanist play had become widely accepted." (Vidler, *Warped Space*, 4).

tenet of social equality by utilizing the concept of *transparency*, which provided a material or physical metaphor for honest governance and a re-organized social structure. As it was seemingly manifested in new building technology and design practices, *transparency* also bridged the modernist ideals of scientific progress and social utopianism. According to cultural and architectural critics, however, architectural discourse was severed from its political and social avant-garde roots by the second half of the twentieth century.³⁵ At this time, the ever ephemeral and slippery concept of space moved to the foreground as medium and site of investigation in postmodern art practices, including post-minimalism, Land art, and performance art. Although the discourses of architecture and art still shared the concept of space as a central concern, the issue was often approached from opposing positions, with many contemporary postmodern artists critiquing the architectural container itself.

In a 1978 interview with Judith Russi Kirshner, Matta-Clark remarked: “I’m really into the whole group of people who are trying in an artistic way to create and expand the ‘mythology’ of space.”³⁶ This expanded “mythology” can be contrasted with finite Euclidean space, the mathematical abstraction of space that dictates the parceling of property and sectioning of architectural space. Before it was applied more generally and abstractly across urban and geographical place, Euclidean geometry was conceived of through the finite space of the architectural plan.³⁷ In order to counter the formal spatial regime lauded in his architectural

³⁵ For example, Vidler notes that, “While in the work and theory of the first avant-gardes such interchanges were frequent—between architecture properly speak, art, installation, and drama—they were by and large undertaken within a general theory of spatial construction as a universal flux, a medium, so to speak, that subsumed and informed all media. Today, however, with the boundary lines between the arts quite strictly drawn, and with no one overarching theory of space, the transgression of art and architectures takes on a definite critical role.” (Vidler, *Warped Space*, 10-11).

³⁶ Kirshner et al., “Interview with Gordon Matta-Clark,” 335.

³⁷ Burgin, *Indifferent Spaces*, 41.

education, now deprived of a social counterpart, Matta-Clark utilized and critiqued the ancient conception of Euclidean space, manifest in recognizable architectural forms and a Modern architectural discourse invested in formalism. Matta-Clark literally expanded spatial mythology by piercing, cutting and opening the seemingly finite limits of walls, floors and ceilings of the original Euclidean space—the building.³⁸

However, the exact nature of Matta-Clark's "expanded space," that which is outside the precincts of functionalist and formalist architectural discourse is multivalent and difficult to define. In the interview mentioned above, Matta-Clark admitted: "I don't know what the word "space" means either. I keep using it. But I'm not quite sure what it means."³⁹ In the same interview, in an attempt to convey the breadth of spatial inquiries in contemporary practices, Matta-Clark contrasts those concerned purely with perception and light itself, an important element in many Land art practices, to those concerned with the space of the body, central to performance art.⁴⁰ Interestingly, Matta-Clark's own work spans the length of this spectrum. His building cuts utilize light in order to disrupt the body within domestic space, and according to eye-witnesses, the cuts put into conflict both visual and haptic orientation. Indeed, at the expense of both eye and body, Matta-Clark's work pointed towards a simultaneously material and symbolic space, perhaps embodied within architectural material, but often outside of the architectural purview.

³⁸ I discuss the phenomenon in the introduction to this thesis, in particular as the phenomenon is theorized by Walker in "Drawing on Architecture."

³⁹ Kirshner et al., "Interview with Gordon Matta-Clark," 335.

⁴⁰ Matta-Clark defines one extreme as art that deals with the speed of light, and on the other end, "there is Vito Acconci; he deals in an entirely different spatial context, which is a type of space we all, all of us, have stored in memory: spaces that are detailed and precise, fragments generally, at all levels of reminiscence, an infinite number of associations emerge. Memory seems to create a unique kind of space setting up an about-to-be-disintegrated level." (Wall et al., "Gordon Matta-Clark's Building Dissections," 66). I associate the latter space with the corporeal and the phenomenological.

Scholars relate much of Matta-Clark's interest in the urban environment to his own biography, corroborating the artist's own reflections on his childhood spent in New York, in which, "the city evolved...into a completely architected International Style steel and glass megalopolis."⁴¹ Among a likeminded group of artists living and working in (as well as transforming) the SoHo loft district of New York, Matta-Clark spearheaded the group Anarchitecture that sought out "metaphoric gaps" within the urban environment. For the artistic collective, made up of dancers, sculptors, photographers and conceptual artists, including Tina Girourd, Suzanne Harris, Laurie Anderson, Bernard Kirschenbaum, Jene Highstein, Richard Landry, and Richard Nonas, this theoretically coherent fabric of the city became a medium for deconstruction. In opposition to the sanitized space of the purely visual, and the gallery setting that supported it, this group was interested in the idiosyncratic inflection of the everyday, the particular, and the corporeal.

Having briefly discussed Matta-Clark's personal and artistic investment in the urban fabric, I can now return to *Conical Intersect* and its site on the edge of the Halles area, a historic site in the Parisian cityscape. In her account of *Conical Intersect*, Lee relates Matta-Clark's architectural intervention to Jean Baudrillard's critique of the new Pompidou Centre in his essay, "The Beaubourg Effect." For Baudrillard, according to Lee, the literal use of transparency within the Centre's building design belies an implosive vacuum at the core of culture: centralized and administrative government control over the fine arts. Lee notes that transparency stands for both intelligence and sight in architectural discourse, and relates Baudrillard's metaphoric vacuum to the dark and obscure holes of Matta-Clark's Parisian work.⁴² Lee locates the critical potential for the work's opacity in its resonance with "the *untimeliness* of the past in the space of the modern

⁴¹ Matta-Clark, "Interview with Gordon Matta-Clark, Antwerp, September 1977," 250.

⁴² Lee, "On the Holes of History," 83-84.

city.⁴³ For Lee, *Conical Intersect* embodies a Modern phenomenon of loss; she connects the illusion of permanence, at play in the concept of community central to both site-specific work and urban planning practices, to the illusion of transparency. I suggest that the sense of loss that Lee locates in *Conical Intersect* is augmented by the role of the camera in capturing the work. Photography is often theorized as the very index of loss, an opaque reminder of an unknowable past, and, therefore, undoes both illusions identified by Lee and critiqued by Matta-Clark. My thesis, therefore, extends Lee's argument by relating Modernist architectural discourse, and the ideal of transparency, to the apparent transparency and actual obscurity of photography, as it is formally investigated in this one work and in Matta-Clark's practice more broadly.

In this thesis, I suggest that the apparatus of the camera brings both the seemingly elemental medium of light and the material and haptic space of the body into the realm of the social and the symbolic. I do this, in part, by considering how photography is dialectically involved in the creation of architecture and embedded within the Modernist understanding of transparency. First, however, I consider how Matta-Clark's own photographic practice and the burgeoning importance of photography in a contemporary art context inflects the discursive clash between the old teammates of art and architecture. Due to his architectural education and his family background, Matta-Clark occupies a unique position between the fields of contemporary sculpture and professional architecture. I suggest that, rather than merely widening the gap, Matta-Clark investigates this in-between place, where photography provides a mediating link and, therefore, a modality for the critique of both spatial discourses.

⁴³ Lee, *Object to Destroy*, 209. Lee's discussion of *Conical Intersect* in *Object to Destroy* follows her argument from "On the Holes of History." However, I prefer the wording of this section of the argument in the latter book.

Matta-Clark's Photographic Practice

Photography as Process

Photography has a particular significance for this historical moment in contemporary site-specific and performance art: the photographic document was becoming increasingly necessary as evidentiary support. For Land art, photography provided the solution to a spatial problem—the inaccessibility of work outside of the gallery setting—and, for performance art, photography solved a temporal problem—the ephemeral nature of the work. Both spatial and temporal complexities are apparent in Matta-Clark's large and short-lived building cuts. And, by 1975, with Matta-Clark's career taking off in the United States and in Europe, photography was becoming an increasingly important element of his gallery practice, not only as a stand-in for the inaccessible works, but as art works in themselves.⁴⁴ *Photoglyphs*, a series of photographs of New York subway graffiti, traveled to galleries throughout Europe both with and without Matta-Clark's consent; galleries representing Matta-Clark attempted to track down all sold photographs to assign certificates of authenticity and experimental Cibachrome colour prints became popular among buyers.⁴⁵ Yet, as his photographs, in particular the photomontages became increasingly

⁴⁴ This general statement about the importance of photography in Matta-Clark's practice is founded on my own research at the GM-C Archive. Based on the available correspondence and consignment sheets, I estimate that the minimum price for a single 40" x 40" photograph increased from \$250 to \$500 between 1974 and 1976, with photography-related correspondence increasingly steadily during this time. In a letter dated 30/11/75 written to Galerie Alfred Schemal regarding its upcoming show of Matta-Clark's photographs, Horace Solomon describes the both documentary and conceptual role of photography: "The total number of photos and process works is 30, most in color. Gordon has created new work that he refers to as process work that illustrates both with written text and small black and white photos, the final realization of the complete finished work which is then photographed in color. He has done this for three of his best works, Conical Intersect, Splitting and Pier 52. We feel it best illustrates what the artist is doing and how he does it." (PHCON2002:0016:004.077).

⁴⁵ This statement is founded on my own research at the GM-C Archives. Examples of informative correspondence include: A letter from dealer, Salvatore Ala, dated 24/5/76, reports a general interest among Parisian buyers in Matta-Clark's colour work.

complex and salable, Matta-Clark remained concerned that the photographic work might dull the reception of the physical cuts.⁴⁶

In Matta-Clark's original proposal for *Conical Intersect* he suggested cutting through the exhibition space itself, presumably an attempt to bypass any mediation between the viewer and the work. This proposal was denied and instead Matta-Clark was allotted space for hanging photographic documentation. He was unsatisfied with this now-conventional solution and numerous exchanges with Biennale officials suggest that, in or out of the gallery space, Matta-Clark's primary goal for this Parisian work to make a physical cut. In a letter to Biennale delegate, Georges Boudaille, Matta-Clark asserts that, "As I have discussed with Walter Hopps, my intention to convert an abandoned structure slated for demolition into a work could be in any location and need have no particular character."⁴⁷ Matta-Clark later articulates this concern in his interview with Donald Wall:

All too often there is a price to pay due to exhibition conditions; my kind of work pays more than most just because the installation materials end up making a confusing reference to what was not there. But for me, what was outside the display became more and more the essential experience.⁴⁸

(PHCON2002:0016:004.013). Also, in a letter to an art enthusiast, dated June 23, 1976, Matta-Clark echoes the concerns often stated by his galleries by making clear the importance of limited editions: "Since the documentation of my work was all taken by me and is the only existing remains of my efforts I must take special steps to insure that too many copies of my slides or negatives don't get distributed without due protection and remuneration."⁴⁷ (PHCON2002:0016:004).

⁴⁶ Matta-Clark states that, "The whole question of gallery space and the exhibition convention is a profound dilemma for me. I don't like the way most art needs to be looked at in galleries any more than the way empty halls make people look or high-rise city plazas create lifeless environments. And even though my works has always stressed an involvement with spaces outside the studio-gallery context, I have put objects and documentation on display in gallery spaces." (Wall et al., "Building Dissections," 59).

⁴⁷ Letter to Georges Boudaille from Matta-Clark, dated July 30, 1975, in the GM-C Archive, PHCON2002:0016:003.112.

⁴⁸ Wall et al., "Building Dissections," 59.

Matta-Clark's ambivalence towards the photographic medium reflects the fluctuating status of the photograph in 1960s and early 1970s American contemporary art circles, a phenomenon that occurred alongside the medium's increased accessibility and usage in art practice. Conceptual and performance artists often negatively criticized the photographic document in order to accent the de-materialized aspect of artwork or the ephemeral nature of performance.⁴⁹ However, the relationship between contemporary art and photography would also tend towards nuance. During this time conceptual artists, such as Edward Ruscha, Dan Graham, and friend and mentor Robert Smithson, were actively revaluing the status of the de-skilled snapshot photograph and the mediated experience of photography would become a site of much scholarly reflection.

In an influential essay on postmodern practices, Douglas Crimp asserts that the photograph does more than simply document the markedly absent referent. Instead, the photograph acts as a ghostly double that provides an excessive kind of presence. The sense of excess, according to Crimp, is an aspect of performance art and many other postmodern works.⁵⁰ The photograph and performance have a parallel function as a mode of hyper-presentation and consequently a marker of loss. The photograph, as theorized by Crimp, has a conceptual resonance with Matta-Clark's extra-ordinarily contingent and spectacular body of dramatically short-lived works. Furthermore, the contingent nature of photography makes it an appropriate media for the critique against a-historical Modernist discourse and the metaphorically static realm of architecture. However, the critical potential for the photographic image is complicated

⁴⁹ One example of a considered approach to this problem appears in the following article: Balme, "Aporias of Ekphrasis: The Performance Archive—Archiving the Performance."

⁵⁰ Crimp, "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism," 92-94.

by Matta-Clark's photographic experimentation. Within his practice, the photograph acts as both tool for, and subject of, critique.

In a letter describing his work, Matta-Clark states that, "The photographic materials are interpolated from the spacial situation becoming independent though referential works, while film or video is at present documentary (sic)."⁵¹ Here the photographic unit is allotted unique potential for artistic manipulation in contrast to the technologies of the moving-image, with which photography has both material and conceptual ties. According to Kravagna, Matta-Clark's photography deconstructs the experience offered by film or video: the photographs complicate and extend the effect of the cuts.⁵² Walker and Fer, have assigned similarly theoretical roles to Matta-Clark's photographic experimentation and in particular his photomontages, which inflect interpretations of both the original three-dimensional interventions and subsequent documentary material. Matta-Clark's photographic experimentation complicates the play of temporality by calling into question the legitimacy of the originally indexed moment in new spatial configurations, and also, any possibility for an authentic experience of the three-dimensional reconfigured space. Although Matta-Clark was at times reluctant to rely too heavily on photography, he was clearly aware of the conceptual development of his photographic practice, reporting that:

⁵¹ This letter was written to Ms. Lauren Ewing, Art Department, Williams College, Williamstown, Mass, regarding a "visiting-exhibiting artist program" and dated January 17, 1975. In GM-C Archive, PHCON2002:0016:003.014.

⁵² I discuss Kravagna's categorization of Matta-Clark's photographs in the introduction to this thesis. (Kravagna, "'It's Nothing Worth Documenting If It's Not Difficult to Get'.") Here Kravagna divides Matta-Clark's photographs into three types—narrative, photo-conceptual narrative and photomontage—and points to the varied use of photography in the Conceptual, site-specific and performance art that contextualizes Matta-Clark's practice. These three categories fall under my first two categories of image and object, which will be explicated later in this essay.

...I think it's possible to see the merit of very personally interpretive groups of photographic images which attempt to interpret, like in this case, a spatial situation...It's gone from just the snapshot to a process documentation to a kind of personalized process documentation to a sort of voyeuristic interpretation and then finally into some sort of thing where the whole looking at the piece being made and having been finished becomes a narrative which is subject to all kind of variations.⁵³

The photomontages in particular mark a transition from photography's role in process work and a new importance for the photographic process. The photomontages outdo the documentary potential of the single photograph by showing multiple spaces in a single instant, therefore, approximating both the spatial confusion of the cuts, and the peripatetic experience of the viewer within the intervention.⁵⁴ As Matta-Clark accurately described the effect of his photomontages, "It is an approximation of this kind of ambulatory "getting to know" what the space is about."⁵⁵ Scholars note that connection between montage and building cut is augmented Matta-Clark's similar treatment of photographs and buildings—he *cut up* both media. My thinking draws on this theoretical foundation. I propose that the precise nature of the interrelationship between photographs and building is best understood within the context of the photographic *as* process, as it is revealed across the scope of Matta-Clark's works.

⁵³ Kirshner et al., "Interview with Gordon Matta-Clark," 332.

⁵⁴ In his article, "Gordon Matta-Clark: Drawing on Architecture," Walker notes that montage, a technique of Matta-Clark's collage work, is already a part of an architectural experience. He also states that, "The suggestion that the photo-collages offer a polyvalence of visual of visual experiences, as well as opening onto the familiarity of everyday spaces, highlights a similarity between them and the operation of the building dissection themselves." (Walker, "Gordon Matta-Clark: Drawing on Architecture," 123-124). I will extend this connection later in the essay by aligning the photographic act itself, as opposed to the subsequent work of the photomontages, and the process of cutting in Matta-Clark's work. I will also further investigating the dialectical relationship between photography and architecture by considering the photographic unit itself, within filmic montage.

⁵⁵ Kirshner et al., "Interview with Gordon Matta-Clark," 332.

An overview of the multiple conceptual levels at which photography functions within Matta-Clark's practice reveals an interest in the photographic process that far surpasses its merely instrumental or technological usage. When considered comprehensively, the process of photography, the process through which a photograph is made and concurrently made to have meaning, becomes a subject itself. In order to make this case, I have defined what I understand to be Matta-Clark's three main modes of investigation into the photographic process: the photographic image, the photographic object, and the photographic apparatus. I propose that each aspect of the *photographic* plays a separate and necessary role within the practice, while simultaneously coming into conflict with the other aspects. As a result of this tension, the photographic process, that which holds all three modes together is revealed, reversed, critiqued, and brought to the fore as a particular kind of space for artistic intervention.

The Photographic Image

The photographic image points to photography's representational aspect, utilized as both "snapshot" and "process documentation." The indexicality of the image grants the medium its documentary status utilized by de-materialized conceptual and performance art practices. Indeed, photographic images of Matta-Clark's works continue to circulate through books, exhibition catalogues and the Internet and are arguably the most accessible mode of engagement with his practice. Even within the seemingly instrumental usage of photography, however, we can locate an internal tension. While some photographs document Matta-Clark's artistic actions, such as the extraction of large sections of abandoned buildings, other photographs are the outcome of the artistic action of selection, such as the photographs of found spaces exhibited in *Anarchitecture's* group show or those of purchased city lots included in *Fake Estates*. This second type, in which the act of photographing becomes the process of spatial inquiry, represents a relatively new

strategy in conceptual art, in which the photograph stands for art object, and I will later relate this parallel action between photographing and conceptual probing to Matta-Clark's more overt spatial inquires.⁵⁶ I understand this internal tension within seemingly documentary photographs as a fluctuation between the photographic image and the second mode of investigation, the photographic object. As document, the image within / which constitutes the photograph is essential, while the photographic object remains secondary to the multi-dimensional work and world. However, as the photographs are sold, bought and exhibited as artworks in themselves, their materiality—colour, size, printing quality, etc.—becomes increasingly important.

The Photographic Object

Matta-Clark's investigation of the photographic object is evident in works for which photography acts as medium for subsequent artistic action. His attitude toward the photographic medium was admittedly irreverent—a position that challenges the sanctity of the photographic image. Matta-Clark stated that, "I like very much the idea of breaking—the same way I cut up buildings. I like the idea that the sacred photo framing process is equally "violatable."⁵⁷ Friends and fellow artists took many of the documentary photos, and much of the photographic "work"—cooking, cutting, pasting, taping, bundling, installing, and re-printing—mitigates the role of the traditionally authoritarian photographer's "eye."⁵⁸ Perhaps the most drastic investigation of the photograph as medium occurred in 1969 at the John Gibson Gallery in New

⁵⁶ For example, in a interview with Bruce Nauman, Willoughby Sharp states that, "to present a photograph as a work in 1966 was pretty advanced. there weren't very many sculptors, i can't think of any, who were presenting photographs as the work at that time. (sic)" (Beijeren et al., *Made by Sculptors/Door Beeldhouwers Gemaakt*, 14).

⁵⁷ Kirshner et al., "Interview with Gordon Matta-Clark," 332.

⁵⁸ Weinberg, Foreword to "*You Are the Measure*", 7.

York, where Matta-Clark cooked photographs of Christmas trees on an old stove in a pan of grease. The remains of these photographs were later gold-leafed, boxed and sent out as belated Christmas presents. Yves Alain-Bois relates this work to the 1939 work of Surrealist Raoul Ubac, in which the photographic emulsion and negative were placed over a hot plate and the image liquefied.⁵⁹ In a manner that is similar to this earlier work, which presents a failure to develop an image, I suggest that Matta-Clark's chemical alteration of the print through cooking and gold-leafing can be read as a development in reverse, the material investigation probes and undoes the process of its creation, a move that unsettles the photograph's epistemological function as transparent document, by both pointing to and altering its constructed nature.

The Photographic Apparatus

As a historically constituted medium the photographic image can be ontologically linked to the third mode of investigation, the photographic apparatus, and has been in recent theory.⁶⁰ Theorist Roland Barthes famously located the unique potential of the photograph to its indexical nature, as produced by the camera: "the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially."⁶¹ My understanding of the photographic apparatus, relates to the technology of the 35-mm format analog camera that Matta-Clark employed to document his work, but exceeds the physical limits of the camera-object itself. I understand the apparatus's basic constituents as thus: a particular orientation, within a finite amount of time, in which a

⁵⁹ Bois et al., "A User's Guide to Entropy," 54.

⁶⁰ The ontology of photography, of course, is an important matter of debate in postmodern discourses. For an overview of this debate and the role of photography's technological origins within its theoretical functioning, see Batchen's first chapter, "Identity," in *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography*, 2-21.

⁶¹ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 4.

quantity of light is exposed through an aperture into a dark container of space. We find a direct connection between this formal photographic model and Matta-Clark's *Untitled* piece of 1971, executed in the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Santiago, Chile. In this little-researched piece, Matta-Clark created a lens system using a series of building cuts and mirrors, by which images of the sky framed by the museum's glass dome were projected down and through the building and onto screens and mirrors placed on the walls of the basement urinals. As Walker has aptly observed, the Santiago work acts as a camera obscura while simultaneously complicating the camera's traditional functioning by gathering the residue of gallery spaces at various stages of the lens system within the final projected image; the clarity of the moving image is, therefore, compromised and the process of projection is inflected and revealed.⁶² I suggest that Matta-Clark's (mis)use of the camera obscura, a pre-cursor to the photographic apparatus, points to the *photographic* itself.

The photographic apparatus, a formal model shared with the camera obscura, seemingly acts as a formal summation of the photographic process or photography *as* process. However, unlike the camera obscura, metaphorically associated with the 18th century ideals of transparency, the photographic apparatus materially solidifies the image as photographic object through chemical transformation. Therefore, while the presence of the photographic apparatus in his practice connects photographic technology to a history of optics and the geometry of perspective, Matta-Clark's concurrent investigation of both the photographic image and object

⁶² Stephen Walker ends the first chapter of his recent book, *Gordon Matta-Clark, Art, Architecture and Attack on Modernism*, with a discussion of this piece. Walker argues, the viewer's body, situated within the public space of the basement urinal undermines the autonomy and authority of the interior mind's eye, once metaphorically connected to this proto-photographic technology. Walker uses this example to illustrate how Matta-Clark's work upsets Cartesian space and the binary of mind and body and how Matta-Clark's work obscures, so to speak, as well as illuminate. From Walker's complex and elegant argument, I have gleaned a single aspect by which to trace the practice: the critical potential of photographic image making and its technology. (22-27).

distinguishes photographic technology from other types of seeing-technology as a conceptual model underlying his practice. I suggest that Matta-Clark's investigation of these three aspects of photographic process relates to a specific photographic space. In contrast to the implied deep space of perspective, formally connoted by the photographic apparatus, photographic space is that of framed, fixed material inscription that mediates between perspectival vision and two-dimensional abstraction.

Phenomenal Transparency

Borrowing Matta-Clark's terminology, I suggest that his building cuts alter and make visible the "invisible,"⁶³ the cuts reveal the simultaneously mental and material construction of the built environment.⁶⁴ Matta-Clark investigates the object of architectural space in order to undo its construction as such. His architectural education, in particular, an influential essay by Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky, "Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal," provide clues to the specific nature of these "invisible" *representational spaces*. Vidler, a student of Rowe's around the same time as Matta-Clark, reads Matta-Clark's large interventions as an extension of Rowe's spatial theories, which find a condensed form in Rowe's essay on transparency.⁶⁵ I also find a connection between Rowe's spatial theories and Matta-Clark's spatial investigations. However, I understand Matta-Clark's material use of Rowe's theoretical space as performing a critique of Rowe's theory: Matta-Clark's building cuts literalize the implied, dynamic space that Rowe locates in Le Corbusier's practice. I propose that through the process of literalization the cuts reveal and, ultimately, unravel the clandestine presence of the *photographic* within Rowe's concept of *phenomenal transparency*. This revelation of photographic space complicates the

⁶³ Presumably in reference to his practice, Matta-Clark wrote on a note card, "OPENING UP VIEW TO THE UNVISIBLE," which I relate to a nuanced understanding of the "invisible." In GM-C Archive, PHCON2002:0016:001.025.4.

⁶⁴ As Vidler states, transparency makes this environment itself an object for investigation, a single fabric: "A transparency that, extending the universal panopticism of Benthamite ideology, will finally render buildings subjects: subject to space, absorbed and dissolved in it, penetrated from all sides by light and air, undercut by greenery, roofs planted as gardens in the sky." (Vidler, *Warped Space*, 62).

⁶⁵ Vidler discusses Rowe's lectures during the early 1960s as relating to his later article "Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal." He relates Rowe's discussion of transparent and opaque spaces to the "slipping and sliding according to the tricks of Gestalt perception and the consistent cutting up of closed structures characteristic of Matta-Clark's later work consisting of facades cut upon forensically as it were, to display their true phenomenal being." I will connect Rowe's concepts to the effects of Matta-Clark's cuts more generally, and relate these effects to the *photographic*. (Vidler, "Architecture-To-Be," 68-69).

concept of transparency, as an embodiment of scientific objectivity and social equality within Modernist architectural discourse, utilized in Rowe's spatial theories.

In his essay on transparency, Rowe attempts to unpack the ubiquitous Modernist term. Rowe distinguishes between two types of transparency: *literal transparency*, a property of an isolated material; and *phenomenal transparency*, a relational property between interpenetrating material or objects. *Phenomenal transparency* is, therefore, distinguished as a property belonging to the object of space or, more accurately, to a flux in space-time where different locations can be perceived simultaneously. Rowe reads the less sophisticated *literal transparency* into the glass curtain walls of Walter Gropius's Bauhaus building at Dessau, and champions the *phenomenal transparency* of Le Corbusier's Villa Stein at Garches, in which the relationship between glass windows and concrete walls suggests the interpenetration of a conceptual grid into the actual physical structure of the building.⁶⁶ Here the imaginary space of *phenomenal transparency* is embodied within seemingly transparent glass windows, which now function as opaquely as the building's concrete walls. Rowe states that, "There is a continuous dialectic between fact and implication."⁶⁷ However, he does not investigate the tension within this overlapping space. Instead, Rowe sublimates this compressed space-time within the imaginary and the visual.

Importantly, Rowe references Bauhaus artist László Moholy-Nagy as a proponent of *phenomenal transparency*. Rowe quotes from Moholy-Nagy's work *Vision in Motion*, in order to illustrate Rowe's own spatial theory: "The transparent qualities of superimpositions often suggest transparency of context as well, revealing unnoticed structural qualities in the object."⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Rowe et al., "Transparency," 168.

⁶⁷ Rowe et al., "Transparency," 170.

⁶⁸ Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion*, (Chicago: P. Theobald, 1947), qtd. in Rowe, "Transparency," 161.

However, Rowe reads Moholy-Nagy's paintings themselves as examples of the less sophisticated, *literal transparency*. Rowe also fails to reference Moholy-Nagy's photographic practice, and in particular his experimental aerial shots, in which the new media is used a tool of spatial investigation, aptly illustrating Rowe's theory. And although Rowe quotes Moholy-Nagy from his 1946 book, he bypasses the central theme of *Vision in Motion*, in which both photography and architecture are used to theorize space.⁶⁹ With this erasure in mind, we reinsert the history / ontology / concept of photography into Rowe's definition of *phenomenal transparency*. Indeed, I am suggesting that Matta-Clark reinserted the *photographic* into three-dimensional space.

As many critics and architects note, "our experience of architecture is reliant to an extraordinary degree on the mediation of the photographic image, used and reproduced in a vast array of contexts."⁷⁰ Architectural magazines began incorporating illustrative photography into page layouts by the turn of the last century and, in part due to this fact, architectural photography became an increasingly specialized practice in the preceding decades.⁷¹ Furthermore, the mediation of the architectural space through the representational space of photography began to feed back into subsequent design practices. The early 20th century represents the first occurrence of this dialectical relationship between the two media; at which time a growing awareness of the photogenic possibilities for building design is apparent.⁷²

⁶⁹ Caiger-Smith, "Site Work," 8

⁷⁰ Caiger-Smith, Preface for *Site Work*. 5.

⁷¹ Elwall, "The Specialist Eye," 63.

⁷² Caiger-Smith, Preface for *Site Work*, 5.

This argument has been made as early as 1946, in an article published in *Architectural Review*, written by Michael Rothenstein, quoted in Robert Elwall's "The Specialist Eye." Rothenstein argued that the new trend of dramatic black and white photographs, were influencing architects

Scholars note two general trends for photography of early Modernist architecture. New Photography, associated with the Bauhaus, shares the school's interest in abstraction and form, and in particular the use of pattern, grid and light: for Bauhaus members Moholy-Nagy, Lucia Moholy, and Werner Mantz, "photography, in particular, looks upward and outward away from the confusion and debris of streets and battlefields."⁷³ In contrast, a number of experimental and documentary photographers used Modernist architecture as background for the burgeoning underground life begotten by the city itself. By the 1930s, in both the US and in Europe, the 1920s experimental abstract style of the New Photographers became standard format in avant-garde architectural magazines.⁷⁴ As Robert Elwall has articulated, post-war photography responded to the machine aesthetic of architecture with its interest in abstraction through dramatic angles, pattern and reflection.⁷⁵ The camera represents an auxiliary machine within the Machine Age:

With the translation of Bauhaus canon to International Style, photography and architecture enjoyed a new fusion. Their coalescence was pure. The camera had little problem recording architecture as abstraction, simply because much International Style architecture was itself abstract.⁷⁶

to design buildings without consideration of colour or the even the nuanced of grey-scale. (Elwall, "The Specialist Eye," 66).

Also, Elwall has suggested, by 1979, "...photographs had become the indispensable currency of architectural exchange, and underlined important developments since the turn of the century in the way photographs were perceived and used, and in the relationship between photographer and architect, architect and the public." (Elwall, "The Specialist Eye," 63).

⁷³ Jeffrey, "Morality, Darkness and Light: The Metropolis in Pictures," 59.

⁷⁴ Caiger-Smith, "Site Work," 8.

⁷⁵ Elwall, "The Specialist Eye," 63.

⁷⁶ Akiko Busch, *The Photography of Architecture: Twelve Views*, New York (1987): 7-8, qtd. in Caiger-Smith, "Site Work," 7-8.

In a manner similar to Bauhaus photography, photographs of Le Corbusier's work eliminate context and tend towards the formal and abstract. However, the architect disparaged the role of photography within design practice. Beatriz Colomina complicates this stated position by exposing the architect's direct engagement with photographs and advertising media, specifically during his time as a member of the magazine *L'Esprit Nouveau*. According to Colomina, "[Le Corbusier] came to understand the press, the printed media, not only as a medium for the cultural diffusion of something previously existing, but also as a context of production with its own autonomy."⁷⁷ For example, Le Corbusier frequently airbrushed photographs of his built designs in magazine and book publication, at times erasing structural elements and environmental context. The supposed transparency of photography was sacrificed for the sake of Le Corbusier's abstract representational space. In contrast to Moholy-Nagy's overt photographic investigations, Le Corbusier's manipulation of photography occurs at the expense of the medium's integrity, and the conceptual architectural object takes precedent over built environment through the altered photographic image.⁷⁸

Colomina theorizes the dialectic engagement between Le Corbusier's autonomous photographic space and his design practice: she has convincingly attributed the shape and function of Le Corbusier's now-iconic bands of horizontal glazing to the flat and isolated view of the photographic landscape. In this way, Le Corbusier sublimates the photographic object within the spatial practice of architecture. Indeed, the photographic capture of space through architecture relates to Le Corbusier writing on transparency, specifically his concept of "ineffable space," in which we also find a theoretical precedent for Rowe's formal readings. In

⁷⁷ Colomina, *Le Corbusier and Photography*, 11.

⁷⁸ Le Corbusier demonstrates an extreme lack of concern with place or site, which Matta-Clark and the artistic collective Anarchitecture would heavily critique. As Colomina asserts, "By eliminating the site, he makes architecture into an object relatively independent of place." *Ibid*, 12.

the following quote from *New World of Space*, Le Corbusier's description of this amorphous space directly relates to Rowe's later iterations of *phenomenal transparency*: "In complete and successful work there are hidden masses of implications, a veritable world which reveals itself to those it may concern."⁷⁹

The inception of "ineffable space" is often attributed to Le Corbusier's first trip to the Acropolis, in which he famously sketched, not only the object of the Parthenon, but the successive vistas on his journey up to it. Vidler understands "ineffable space" as the explosion of that particular panoramic scene, as it would become incorporated into his designs: "[ineffable space] dissolves walls and opens the inside to the outside, an outside now simply framed in order to testify its visual existence."⁸⁰ Colomina also draws on this incident: she asserts that Le Corbusier conceptualized space through photography, as opposed to architectural plan, using the filmic sketches of his ascent as testimony.⁸¹

I find a direct connection between Colomina's photographic space and Le Corbusier's "ineffable" space, as a surface that eclipses three-dimensional volumetric space.⁸² The frame, rather than the perspectival illusion, of the view determines photography's epistemological function, as a space both detached from the world and superimposed onto it. Le Corbusier's horizontal windows undermine the epistemology of perspective and the progression of depth in space.⁸³ Here the photographic object re-situates an older classical model for transparency, still

⁷⁹Le Corbusier, *New World of Space* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1948), qtd. in Footnote 10 Vidler, *Warped Space*, 54.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 55.

⁸¹ Colomina, *Le Corbusier and Photography*, 15.

⁸² As Vidler asserts, "What in *Vers une architecture* had been a vast 'cubic volume' is now transformed into an instrument of the modernist sublime." (Vidler, *Warped Space*, 54).

⁸³ In her debate over the flattening of space in Le Corbusier's design, Colomina discusses an ongoing debate between Auguste Perret and Le Corbusier over the merits of vertical and

at work within photographic image, but threatening to unravel. In Le Corbusier's work, the perspectival image marks the beginning, not the end of an artistic action. Paradoxically, his use of photographic space makes the material immaterial within the three-dimensional world. The photograph is seamlessly superimposed onto the built environment. In direct contrast to Le Corbusier's sublimation of photographic space, Matta-Clark's investigation into photographic space reveals its materiality. His work undoes photographic seams within the Modernist conception of the built environment.

horizontal windows. Perret understand vertical windows as providing a complete view of space, from foreground to background, and therefore, embodying humanist perspective. (Colomina, *Le Corbusier and Photography*, 18).

Matta-Clark's Photographic Cuts

At the beginning of Rowe's influential essay he provides a three-part definition for the adjective 'transparent.' Rowe's concept of *phenomenal transparency* relates to the last definition, acknowledged as a rare one, that of: "Admitting the passage of light through interstices."⁸⁴ Here I find a direct connection between Rowe's *phenomenal transparency* and the photographic apparatus, which exposes a momentary slice of light. This definition also aptly describes Matta-Clark's spatial practice and the effect of his building cuts, in which light passes through new openings in the built structure, creating patterns of light and dark and complexities out of interstitial spaces. In response to the illumination of this interstitial space, spectators reported a confusion of figure/ground and a distortion of depth.⁸⁵

An unrealized proposal for *Conical Intersect* suggests a similar spatial affect. We can infer from correspondence between the artist and Biennale officials that Matta-Clark's first intention was to cut into the Biennale's exhibition space at the Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris. In a letter to Nina Felsin, the American contact for the Paris Biennale, written in June of 1974, months before the event, Matta-Clark describes an early permutation for the piece:

SINCE MY WORK OVER THE PAST THREE YEARS HAS DEALT WITH CUTS MADE THROUGH BUILDING SURFACES, FOR PARIS I PLAN TO 'INSCRIBE' THROUGH THE WALLS AND FLOORS OR CEILING (IF POSSIBLE) OF THE PROVIDED EXHIBITION SPACE A SERIES OF ONE INCH WIDE LINES LEAVING LONG SLIVERS OF LIBERATED SPACE. THE CONFIGURATION OF THESE OPENING LINES WILL BE DETERMINED BY FORMAL IDEAS THAT ARE BETTER EXPERIENCED THAN ANY ATTEMPT I COULD MAKE TO WRITE ABOUT THEM. AN OVER SIMPLIFIED REITERATION OF MY PLAN; IS TO INSTAL BY

⁸⁴ Rowe et al., "Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal," 160.

⁸⁵ For examples see: Lee, *Object to Destroy*, 158-159.

EXTRATION (sic); A DRAWING THROUGH PART OF THE EXHIBITION
SPACE IN PARIS.⁸⁶

I suggest that the “long sliver” in Matta-Clark’s proposal relates to the cut *qua* cut. In an interview regarding the 1974 work, *Splitting*, Matta-Clark describes the conceptual nature of the cut, asserting that, “...a cut is very analytical. It’s the probe! The essential probe.”⁸⁷ This form of intervention, the subtractive cut, is also referenced the overall shape of *Splitting*. Here a vertical cross-section, created by two long cuts inscribed one-inch apart through the middle of a suburban New Jersey house, reads as a single large cut. In an interview, Donald Wall asked, “What have you found enjoyable in your work, after, for instance, the act of cutting is all finished? In the Humphrey house [*Splitting*]?” To which Matta-Clark replied, “The way the light passed through.”⁸⁸ Here Matta-Clark points to the second type of cut in his work: the slice of light created by the physical cuts. A series of photographs from *Splitting*, in which sections of the house are photographed in cross-section, provides a succinct example of the photographic nature of this second type of cut. The building cuts, especially as they are physically captured by camera, mimic the photographic act of framing. In one example, the dark cut through the floor of the house is surrounded by a halo of light, while the light socket hanging from the ceiling above is empty: it is as if the cut exposes the image. The photographic act of framing creates an empty vignette peopled only by a few household appliances—the stove is turned coyly at 45 degrees in the adjoining room—and the space becomes a recognizable object.

⁸⁶ In GM-C Archive, PHCON2002:0016:002.064.

⁸⁷ Bear et al., “Gordon Matta-Clark: Splitting the Humphrey Street Building,” 167.

⁸⁸ On page thirteen of a rough draft of the interview between Donald Wall and Gordon Matta-Clark, at the GM-C Archive, PHCON2002:0016:002.077.

Light is an important element of every large-scale building intervention, through which previously hidden views, aspects and spaces of a building are revealed.⁸⁹ In an interview with Judith Kirshner, Matta-Clark states that, “certainly light is a very real issue and in any case—let’s say I were to do ten pieces in the future—I’m sure, that of those ten, some big percentage would be involved with light.”⁹⁰ The role of light is crucial, not only for the effect, but also in the design of *Day’s End*, which was executed the summer before *Conical Intersect*. Here we find a precedent to the circular holes of *Conical Intersect* in the ocular shape cut out of the side of a steel-trussed warehouse on edge of Hudson River, New York. This window / eye / aperture / hole tracked the passage of light throughout the day, and Matta-Clark marked the phenomenon by cutting a long canal into (or out of) the bottom of the warehouse in the pattern of the summer sun’s daily progression.

Interestingly, Matta-Clark stated that he was not concerned with light as an elemental, but rather as an integral part of contingent situation. He describes his work in an interview with Liza Bear as,

...very distinct from the California school which takes a neutral exhibition space and merely introduces a certain amount of light—the whole kind of post-Larry Bell school...And the distinction between what I’m doing and this is not just the phenomenology, the isolated effect. It’s a whole series of things that are very complex. And I don’t feel totally in control of the situation. I just try to get in there and alter it.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Note that scholars read the shape of the many of the cuts by the shape or design of the building: this is perhaps the most obvious with *Splitting*, in which the slice mimics an architectural cross-section, and *Bingo*, in which the façade itself is extracted, but it is also true for the rectangular shapes of *Bronx Floors* that mimic the shapes of walls and doorframes. While I agree with this general consensus on the nature of the cuts, I also suggest that the effect of the cuts is photographic.

⁹⁰ Kirshner, “Interview with Gordon Matta-Clark,” 22.

⁹¹ Bear et al., “Gordon Matta-Clark: Dilemmas,” 265.

Indeed, Matta-Clark's work deals with light in an *urban* or *suburban* context, in which it already has an ideological resonance with transparency. And I suggest that the importance of the built environment, the both mental and material medium through which light works, distinguishes his work from most other Land artists and allows architectural discourse to so effectively inflect the work. Light remains an essential aspect, but an aspect tied to social context.

With the preceding works in mind, I propose that the photograph apparatus is mimicked in the action of the building cuts, where the process of letting light into a building references the act of exposure. The act of photographic exposure both reveals and makes material: in Matta-Clark's physical iteration, therefore, the compressed space of *phenomenal transparency* relates not only to the photographic apparatus, but to photographic space in which representational image and material object become inseparable. While the overall shapes of his building cuts are highly geometric and formal—the planar cut of *Splitting*, the cone of *Conical Intersect*, the spheres of *Circus*, *Caribbean Orange*—these abstract forms are painstakingly inscribed through drywall, studs, wood, and steel. The act of cutting exposes the materiality of walls and floors, and the large geometric shapes are complicated by the interstitial spaces within the walls and floors that the cuts reveal. For Matta-Clark, “it was kind of the thin edge of what was being seen that interested me as much, if not more than, the views that were being created.”⁹² Indeed, in Matta-Clark's work the volumetric space of a room is flattened by the accumulation of floors and walls, which become internal frames running through the viewing space. These frayed edges become the metaphoric seams of the conceptual photographic image-object, as well as the material edges of (de)construction.

⁹² Bear et al., “Gordon Matta-Clark: Splitting the Humphrey Street Building,” 167.

Matta-Clark's cuts physically manifest the presence of photography in Rowe's conception of *phenomenal transparency*, which becomes opposed to the *literal transparency* that the photograph itself often connotes as documentation within Land Art and performance practices, as well as the ideological use of transparency in Modernist architectural discourse. For Le Corbusier, the transcendent space of transparency, like the objectivity of geometry itself, provided a solution to the social problems of the city itself, particularly modern phobias. The flattening, isolation and objectification of space was seen as "a liberating leap into infinity for modernist 'man.'"⁹³ However, for many cultural critics transparency provided architects and urban planners a solution to the wrong problems. According to Vidler: "infinite space became the instrument of suppression for everything [Le Corbusier and his supporters] hated about the city, if not the agent of repression of their own highly developed phobias: claustrophobia in the face of the old city, of course, but also, and linked to this...the fear of touching."⁹⁴ Le Corbusier's transparent space, therefore, directly contrasts the haptic, everyday space that performance artists in the 1970s would investigate as way of critique.

Matta-Clark's background augments Le Corbusier's status as a foil for Matta-Clark's own work.⁹⁵ Matta-Clark's father had worked for two years as a draftsman in Le Corbusier's studio, who was seen as socially conservative in the eyes of Matta's surrealist peers: Matta's architectural dreamscapes are often read as a direct critique of Le Corbusier's living machines.⁹⁶ And, as stated earlier, Matta-Clark's own architectural education was heavily inundated with Le Corbusier's practice and theory: as an avid proponent of Le Corbusier, Rowe promoted a

⁹³ Vidler, *Warped Space*, 10.

⁹⁴ Vidler, *Warped Space*, 58.

⁹⁵ For the most thorough discussion of the relationship between Le Corbusier and Matta-Clark to date, see Attlee, "Towards Anarchitecture: Gordon Matta-Clark and Le Corbusier."

⁹⁶ Vidler, "'Architecture-To-Be'."

conservative Utopianism, seemingly read by Matta-Clark as dogma. In response to Wall's question, "What images come to mind about Cornell?" Matta-Clark responded:

Catholicism. As a matter of fact, Colin Row, or one of those people, I don't know exactly who, made a clear statement which has always stuck. Which is, when you enter a design academy what you are doing is the same thing as entering the priesthood. You are going there for vocational training, as a novice. You learn to perform according to rubric, with all the trappings, including cowtowing in front of the cardinals and bishops, receiving the same sacraments upon leading the "good" life, and excommunication for heretical behavior. Its very clear to me that's what happens in a design school. You get the "word."⁹⁷

Even in his own time, Le Corbusier stood for bureaucratic, top-down control, which Matta-Clark understood, ironically, as French tradition and located in the centralized institution of the Pompidou Centre. Of particular relevance to Paris of the 1970s, Le Corbusier's *Plan Voisin* of 1925, ideologically founded on the concept of transparency⁹⁸ had called for a full-scale clearing of the historic centre of Paris. The plan implicitly celebrated the 19th century wholesale renovation of Paris by Haussmann, an historical event that was utilized in the negative critiques against the mass destruction of the Les Halles area that echo through *Conical Intersect*.⁹⁹ As accounts by Lee and Graham state, *Conical Intersect* represents a backwards glance through this historic past and technological projection into the future. I augment this reading by suggesting that, through artistic intervention, the architectural site becomes the material and symbolic form of the photographic apparatus, photographic space and by extension the photographic process.

⁹⁷ On page nine of a rough draft of the interview between Donald Wall and Gordon Matta-Clark, in GM-C Archive, PHCON2002:0016:001.077.

⁹⁸ Furthermore, the ideology of transparency soon became a, "commonplace that rendered it absurdly easy to construct the notion of a city to end all cities, from Le Corbusier's project for Une Ville Contemporaine of 1923, to his Voisin Plan of 1925, culminating in the Ville Verte and Ville Radieuse of 1933-35." (Vidler, *Warped Space*, 62).

⁹⁹ This phenomenon is discussed by Lee in "The Holes of History."

The photographic process, in return, acts on and critiques the site of architecture, with its particular social resonance in the history of bureaucratic Modernist discourse.

Conical Intersect

In *Conical Intersect*, the *son et lumière*, that which would be projected onto the exterior of a building, is instead generated from within the building by virtue of the cut. Here we see the influence of McCall's experimental film: the direction of the viewer's gaze, in this case the gaze of the passerby, is reversed, looking backwards into the projection, into the light source itself. The cuts internalize the projection. By referencing motion-picture projection, and reversing the viewing position, the intervention suggests a reversal of the standard order. The large-scale external projection becomes the internal projection by which an image is first captured. The formal shape of *Conical Intersect* mimics the action of the camera: the two-foot hole chiseled out of the attic of the southern building literalizes the aperture of the camera, and the conical shape mimics the shape of light refracting through a lens. From the position of the Pompidou Centre, the intervention takes the shape of a spyglass or telescope, but from the position of the viewer, the buildings take on the shape of a camera lens, of a rudimentary pinhole camera. In a letter to Yvon Lambert, from February of 1976, Matta-Clark describes this Parisian work as his, "cherished cyclopic 'Hole' (not a hole as much as a *coup d'oeil*)"¹⁰⁰ The phrase a *coup d'oeil* translates as a 'glance' or a 'wink.' Can we also hear a click?

By inscribing the photographic apparatus onto the Euclidean structure of architecture, the formal models of both spatial technologies are complicated and revealed as subjects for critique. The photographic apparatus, as it relates to the refraction of light through a lens typically positions the viewer behind the "cone of vision." As Victor Burgin attests, this formal geometry is a prevalent metaphor in 1970s post-structuralist writing, used to describe subject-object interrelations, and indeed, tends to rely on the eighteenth-century concept of transparency associated with the photographic camera's pre-cursor, the camera obscura, as well as the ideal of

¹⁰⁰ In GM-C Archive, PHCON2002:0016:003.034.

egalitarianism utilized in avant-garde Modernist discourse. According to Burgin, the “cone of vision” threatens to re-inscribe a particularly Western worldview associated with the perspectival geometry and the centered position of the viewer.¹⁰¹ However, in *Conical Intersect* the photographic apparatus or “cone of vision” is complicated by the photographic space inscribed in Matta-Clark’s Parisian work through the building cuts.

We can contrast the diagrammatic shape of *Conical Intersect* with the actual view seen by the local Parisians who passed by the work during its short life on Rue Beaubourg. According to Jean-Hubert Martin, Biennale curator, many passersby who witnessed the progress of the work in this busy section of Paris saw the piece as a giant (and often artless) hole. In order to see the work in its complexity required a privileged position inside the building, where, “The light coming down through it changed the piece throughout the day.”¹⁰² This tension is aptly illustrated in a Cibachrome photomontage juxtaposing the opposing views. Two colour negatives taken from the inside the building accent the view framed by the central aperture: the cityscape includes a block of row buildings and parked cars along Rue Beaubourg, which cuts diagonally through the scene, an orthogonal line accenting perspectival space. By contrast, the space imaged through the central aperture as seen in the smaller and more obscured black & white shots directed onto the work’s south façade is compressed. The conical shape is flattened into a series of receding and progressively darker holes, with a small glimpse of light past the end of the cut in the north attic. Theoretically, we see through the twin 17th-century buildings onto the Pompidou Centre. However, as evidenced by photographs and eyewitnesses accounts, passersby could, at best, catch glimpses of the new Centre through the actual conical cut. In reality, the intersecting curved edges of walls, floors, and ceilings, as well as the additional semi-circular

¹⁰¹ Burgin, *Indifferent Spaces*, 42, 46.

¹⁰² Jean-Hubert Martin interviewed by Joan Simon, *Gordon Matta-Clark: A Retrospective*, 89.

incisions, obscured the geometrical form. A passerby would most likely have *attempted* to see through the conical void, as though through a fractured mechanical gaze.

The role of the *photographic* in *Conical Intersect* is further complicated in a series of black and white photomontages that combine interior shots looking out of the southern façade's hole, in which both the photographic image and the photographic apparatus are fragmented.¹⁰³ The photomontages maintain the representational aspect of the photograph, while obscuring the images' legibility through juxtaposition and re-orientation of the photographic object. The metaphoric gaps between photographic frames are literally revealed, as the overlap of spaces around the central motif hints at the multiplicities of space lost within this single-shot monocular perspective and confuses any sense of the original conical shape of the building cuts.¹⁰⁴ As Matta-Clark said in 1978, "it's very easy to trick a camera, to outdo a camera. With the eye's peripheral field of vision, any slight movement of the head would give us more information than the camera ever had."¹⁰⁵ The photographic image can only approximate that peripheral field, which inflects the status of the photographic apparatus, metaphorically embodied by the central hole.

In one photomontage, the aperture is sliced and sutured, the perspective onto the surrounding buildings doubled—the resulting space threatens to double over. In another photomontage, the space between the two centre photographs widens, and with it, the cut through the aperture widens. In a third work, the white background of the photomontage

¹⁰³ Jenkins also suggests a general connection between the effect of photocollages and the motif of the aperture in Matta-Clark's works: "Rather than paring down the range of photographic effects to a purely denotative or informational function, he was opening up the medium in ways that closely paralleled the apertures characteristic of the altered sites of his projects." (Jenkins, *Conical Intersect*, 71).

¹⁰⁴ This phenomenon is discussed in many articles, including Walker. "Gordon Matta-Clark: Drawing on Architecture," 124.

¹⁰⁵ Kirshner et al., "Interview with Gordon Matta-Clark," 332-333.

annihilates the architectural view. Here the aperture has expanded and become an elliptical frame. As a result the pictorial surface inside it becomes a void. When read together, the group of three photomontages suggests a logical trajectory: the central aperture opens and closes, exposing the view to light and subsequently erasing the cityscape itself. The photographic apparatus functions at the expense of the photographic image, and its ability to document. Furthermore, the central hole takes on the function of the vanishing point, which marks the unstated place of absence within perspectival visibility.¹⁰⁶

Within early 20th century avant-garde discourse, the geometry of perspective itself became an object of analysis, and vanishing point of perspective, the counterpart to the invisible viewing position, became the space of investigation.¹⁰⁷ The function of the vanishing point is, therefore, equated with that of transparency, and finds its counterparts in the aperture and the window frame. Paradoxically, transparency does not necessarily offer the opening up onto a scene, also but the closure or limit of one. And here the large central aperture, in which the view threatens to collapse into the white background, points to the relationship between Modernist abstraction and photography, while re-inscribing the photograph's theoretical lack.

What kind of space can we find outside of this central void, beyond the mechanical gaze? I return to the first of this series of photomontages, in which the repetition of small, mullioned windows around the central space again suggests a multitude of viewpoints. The windows themselves are opaque, while the interstitial spaces exposed by light become textured and materially dense. Right-angled rooms are here darkened cavities, retaining hints of the building's former life—a wall post, a small cabinet, an open door, etc. Unlike the straight edges of the

¹⁰⁶ Burgin asserts that the vanishing traditionally point marks an unstated absence and connects the inside of the picture with the outside, with that which lies beyond. (Burgin, *Indifferent Spaces*, 55).

¹⁰⁷ Allen, *Practice: Architecture, Technique, and Representation*, 18.

material photographs, the internal edges depicted within the images are roughly hewn: walls and floors are no longer borders around empty space, but systemic veins and capillaries running through the body of architecture. In contrast to the living machines of Modernism, Matta-Clark's walls become organic membranes through his spatial and photographic interventions. The mechanical eye has broken down, revealing instead a sense of corporeality that references the embodied experience of social spaces, the space between representations. The fragmented photographic images both highlight and surpass the role of the camera and the gestalt of architecture within its focused gaze.

Matta-Clark distinguishes his most complicated interventions from other site-specific practices by describing his own interventions as those that “defy that category of a sort of snapshot scenic work.”¹⁰⁸ Here Matta-Clark uses the metaphor and form of the pictorial photograph to stand in for the disembodied sight of one-point perspective, in which the viewing subject remains exterior to the object, in this case the art work. While his analysis of contemporary Land art is undoubtedly too reductive, it points us towards the multi-layered engagement between artwork and the place of critique in Matta-Clark's own practice—an engagement that often takes place through the photograph. Photography acts as a means as well as an end of artistic action. Matta-Clark uses the conceptual model of photography as a place or starting point for investigation, either literally with his photomontages, or formally and metaphorically with the cut of light. Matta-Clark thereby uses the technology of photography against itself by reversing the process of creation, inflecting and, altering the material image. In opposition to a Modernist sublimation of the photograph, Matta-Clark reveals the image-object

¹⁰⁸ Kirshner et al., “Interview with Gordon Matta-Clark,” 319.

as a new model of transparency. And, in doing so, this catchall Modernist phrase becomes situated within the everyday; the literal contingency of photographic transparency is revealed, as are the historical and social resonances of the photographic process.

Conclusion

Matta-Clark's practice relates to various contemporary art trends in the 1970s, including Land art, conceptual art, and performance art, without belonging to a specific movement. During this decade, the fluctuating status of photography became an important issue for postmodern art practices. In my thesis, I traced three modalities for the *photographic* within Matta-Clark's works: image (referent), object (medium), and apparatus (technology). For Matta-Clark, the photographic image provided a necessary tool to gain publicity, exhibit in gallery spaces, and network within the art world, while remaining an aspect of his experimental photoworks. Matta-Clark's investigation of the photographic object is also apparent within his photographic experimentation: he collaged both prints and slide negatives, and used a variety of printing technologies, creating highly aesthetic colour-saturated cibachrome prints of sutured negatives and printing barely perceptible images onto cardboard boxes. Matta-Clark's interest in the photographic apparatus is evident in an untitled work of 1971, in which he created a functional camera obscura within multiple floors of a museum in Santiago, and, I suggest, by the formal shape of *Conical Intersect*, which mimics the lens of a camera. The photographic process is both a tool for the investigation of space and investigative subject. Furthermore, my thesis suggests that the photographic process informs the overtly political issues of Matta-Clark's spatial practice.

In his own writing, Matta-Clark positioned himself against the discourse of functionalist architecture and its figurehead, Le Corbusier. However, as Anthony Vidler asserts, Matta-Clark's modes of spatial manipulation borrow from Modernist architectural discourse, especially as it was re-framed in the 1960s by Rowe. I found an unstated connection between photography and *phenomenal transparency*, a term defined in Rowe and Robert Slutzky's influential essay, "Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal" where it is used to describe the abstraction of space in

the work of Le Corbusier. Beatriz Colomina provided an important case study for my thesis; she suggests that the flattened view of the photographic landscape became incorporated into Le Corbusier's design as his now-iconic bands of horizontal glazing. By considering Matta-Clark's realized sculptural works alongside his theoretical experimentation and architectural education, I will argue that the *photographic* is both crucial to and inextricably linked with his larger critical and social agenda. I showed how his cuts reference photographic space, as it appears in the writings of Rowe and the work of Le Corbusier. As such, his cut critiques the documentary status that photography often connoted in contemporary art practices, as well as the ideological use of transparency in Modernist architectural discourse.

My thesis has suggested one way in which we can re-frame Matta-Clark's unique contribution to the fields of contemporary sculpture and professional architecture, where he continues to be an influential figure. Matta-Clark's reconfigured spaces have influenced, and continue to influence architectural practices, most notably those of Frank Gehry. Furthermore, Matta-Clark's work has become increasingly influential to younger artists, inciting several examples of direct homage. Today the reception of Matta-Clark's work remains strong, with a new publication forthcoming in January 2012. For this reason, it is important to re-evaluate his critical agenda, especially as it can be applied to the current extensions of his practice. By reinserting a historically specific understanding of the *photographic* into Matta-Clark's physical investigations of both buildings and photographs, his forms take on insistently social dimensions, demonstrating the importance of critical means in the search for political ends.

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