

# The cut, the hole and the eclipse: Matta-Clark's sections

## O corte, o furo e a eclipse: secções de Matta-Clark

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**ABSTRACT** – In 1974, Matta-Clark cut a suburban family house scheduled for demolition; action called “Splitting”, a radical dissection from the house’s foundation to the roof throughout the whole body of the house, creating a new and radical architectural state that anticipated his future interventions. Then came “Conical Intersect” and “Day’s End”. His works describe a permanent disagreement with architectural functionalism and modern principles of architecture and put forward an endless series of questions about architecture and the sense of space, where the value of space lies not on its functionality but on its metaphorical possibilities.

**Key words:** Matta-Clark, Splitting.

**RESUMO** – Em 1974, Matta-Clark corta uma casa condenada à demolição na periferia de NY, a ação chamada “*Splitting*”, é uma dissecação radical desde a fundação até o teto passando por todo o corpo da casa, criando um estado arquitetônico novo e radical que antecipa suas futuras intervenções. Em seguida veio “*Conical Intersect*” e “*Day’s End*”. Suas obras descrevem uma discordância permanente com o funcionalismo e princípios da arquitetura moderna e apresentam uma série de infinitas perguntas sobre a arquitetura e o sentido do espaço, onde seu valor não reside na funcionalidade, mas em suas possibilidades metafóricas.

**Palavras-chave:** Matta-Clark, Splitting.

### Introduction

When Louis Kahn, one of the masters of modern architecture that created some of the finest architectural masterpieces of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, died in 1974, the young artist and architect Gordon Matta-Clark (1943-1978) was creating radical interventions in architecture and exploring alternative ways of experiencing the built environment. The same year of the death of Kahn who said “the light, the giver of all presences, is the maker of a material, and the material was made to cast a shadow, and the shadow belong to the light” (Kahn, 2003 [1969], p. 108), Matta-Clark was making shocking interventions in abandoned buildings, modifying their structure and the nature of their space through ‘light cut’, revealing another dimension of the materials and architectural space.

Matta-Clark’s main works took place between 1968 after receiving his B.A. in architecture from Cornell University until his death in 1978. He was part of the Soho avant-garde in New York and his activities were a permanent critique to the American culture. Matta-Clark developed an individual expression combining ideas from the Minimalist Movement and Surrealism with his awareness on the dehumanization of modern life and the built environment. Using dumped buildings located in subur-

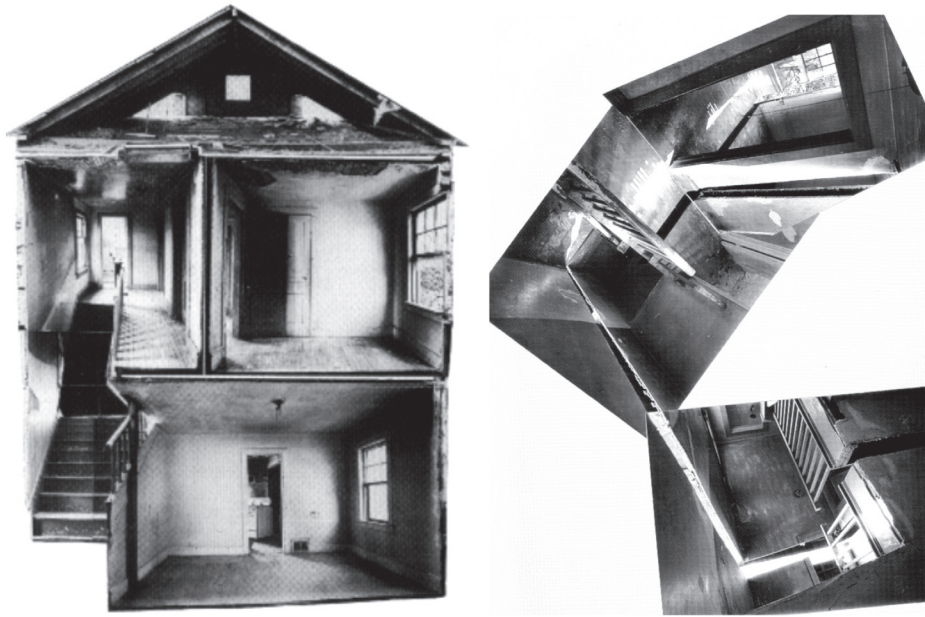
ban and depreciates areas of the city and manipulating industrial tools, he cuts building, making radical apertures and dissections. His works describe a disagreement with architectural functionalism and modern principles of architecture and put forward an endless series of questions about architecture, the sense of space and about the urban politics (Diserens, 2003; Moure, 2006).

### Splitting, the idea to cut a building

In 1974, Matta-Clark dissected a suburban family house scheduled for demolition cutting it down the middle and dismembering it; converting the narrow two-level house located in 322 Humphrey Street, New Jersey into the sculpture he called “Splitting” (Figure 1). The radical cut from the house’s foundation to the roof throughout the whole body of the house was mercilessly and divided everything: floors, walls, and stairs. The light from the incision invaded the interior creating a dramatic architectural state that predicts the inevitable.

Matta-Clark transforms the space of the familiar and everyday life into an uncanny scenario, creating a series of fantasmagoric images and vertigo (Valdés, 2006; Jenkins, 2006). This radical act, anticipated in the poetic decapitation of a disused office of engineers

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**Figure 1.** ‘Splitting’, New York City, 1974 (Corinne, 2003).

“W-Hole House: Atrium Roof” (Genoa, 1973), have got in “Splitting” a total dissection of the building where walls and doors, roof and ceiling are united by light openings, embodying an in-between state amongst the building’s current reality- the materialness of the human habitat- and its future demolition. Matta-Clark defied the conventional sense of architecture: cutting, fragmenting or dissecting a building emphasize a bizarre side of architecture when an old building is going to be demolished to build a new one.

On the other hand, “Splitting” changed the nature of a simple architectural object by critical cuts and generate a dissociated three dimensional entity opposed to the idea of an organized system. In this way, ‘Splitting’ confronts the ideas of Modern Architecture reacting to the serial house and the questionable Le Corbusier’s idea of the house as a machine for living. According to Celant, in Splitting “the system of relations is overturned, the abstract signs, such a door or wall, ceiling or corner, opening or closing, are transformed into material quantity, no longer geometrically rational. The aristocracy of architecture is thus forced to withdraw by its vulgarity and practical elementariness” (Celant, 2003 [1974], p. 162). Matta-Clark’s action, intentionally violent and transgressive, exposes the contradiction between some abstract ideas of modern architecture and the decadence of this model in suburban areas of the city.

‘Splitting’ “has since become an iconic work of the period -despite its destruction- by virtue of its extreme procedural and visual simplicity” (Crown, 2002, p. 74) and it also represented the tip of the iceberg of

the Soho avant-garde in the seventies and it defined the extreme approach that anticipated the unique language and expression of his futures interventions.

### The hole/the eclipse

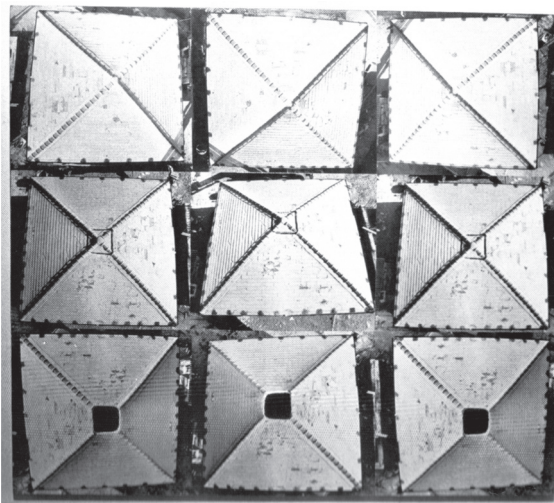
“The brilliant August sunset course through a gap creating a physical presence. At the lower left corner, a 20-foot diameter quarter circle has been described and the floor planking removed. Way up in the clerestory, where the roof intersected two corner walls, a circular removal revealed the sky at the edge of the ‘interior canal’ a jaunty cut-out seemed to mimic the outline of an unfurled sail. Light, air, sky and water. Everything was alive with motion and light” (Gerry Hovagimyan *in* Crown, 2003, p. 11. Description of ‘Day’s End’, Pier 52, New York. 1975).

A general understanding of the work of Matta-Clark gives us an idea of the stress that is inherent in the evolution of our contemporary cities; his interventions reflect a tension between the idea of progress and the destruction of old buildings that is necessary for the new development of the urban fabric. From ‘Pier In/Out, Pier 14’ (Figure 2) and ‘W-Hole House’ (Figure 3) to ‘Conical Intersect’ and ‘Office Baroque’ this confrontation is always present, and through the metaphor of the hole Matta-Clark filled the gap between the building past and its inevitable demolition in the name of progress.

The metaphor of the hole refers to a poetic and ephemeral connection among past and present and it is physically powerful in ‘Conical Intersect’ (Paris, 1975), where Matta-Clark inscribed an invisible cone in an axis of 45 degrees into an old property, “the hole recalled the



**Figure 2.** Pier In/Out, Pier 14 (New York City, 1973) (Corinne, 2003).



**Figure 3.** W-Hole House: Rooftop Atrium (Genoa, 1973) (Corinne, 2003).

structure of a telescope from outside the building, a periscope from within. [...] As Dan Graham note, “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 these other buildings that embody past and present eras of Paris” (Lee, 2001, p. 180). The site was adjacent to the almost finished Centre Pompidou designed by Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers, and his idea was to create a pointed space allowing sight through

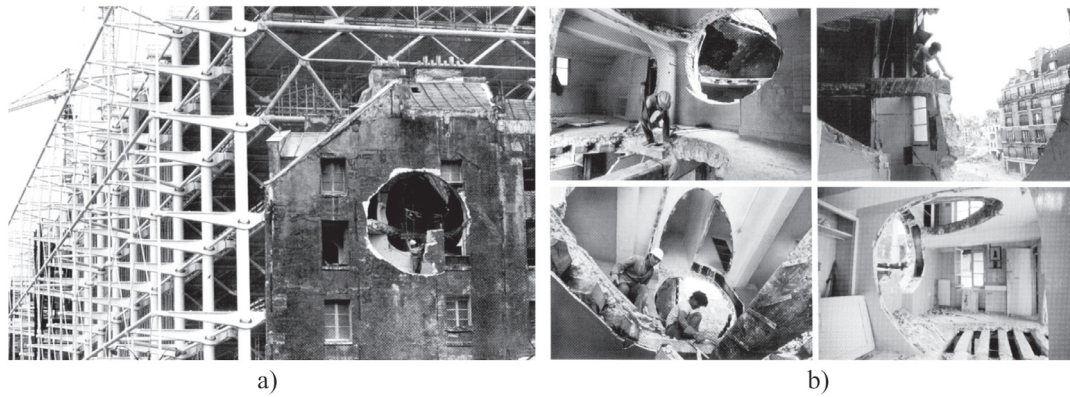
ruined surfaces and heavy masonry to the white structure of the Centre Pompidou. This temporary transformation was like a shotgun impact on a building in process of demolition aiming to connect an historical location with the construction of the Centre Pompidou (Figure 4).

Matta-Clark's vision of the urban transformation was created through the scale of the intervention by anatomical dissection of materials; a naked drama between lightness and darkness and the ephemeral presence of a conical emptiness defined by light cut. According to Lee ‘Conical Intersect’ is about “the tension between narratives of historical progress – embodied in the construction of the Centre Pompidou – and the destruction of historical site that is prerequisite for progress” (Lee, 2001, p. 171). The hole, in short, becomes a cyclopean vision of destruction and modernization, a dramatic motif of the relationship among history and current events.

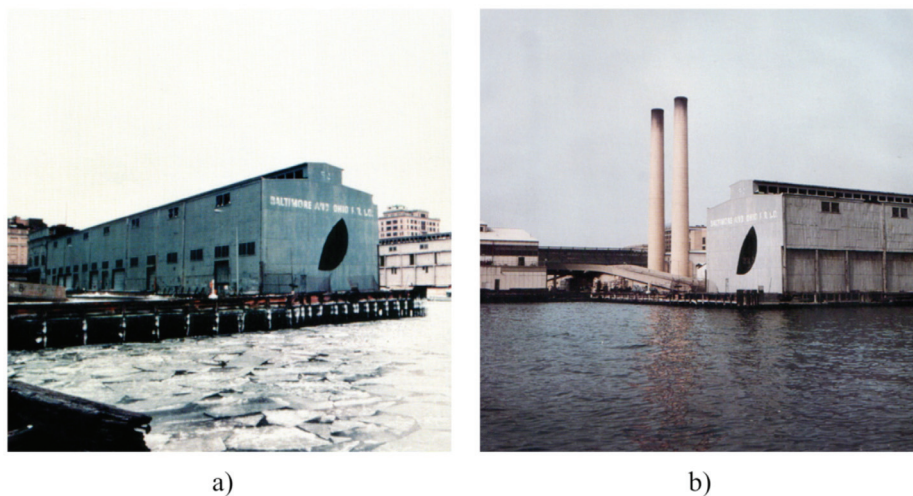
On the other hand, the metaphor of the hole refers to a sense of loss. The story of the transformation and subsequent destruction of a building holds the idea of sadness and abandon but also the hole is a metaphysic interpretation of our lonely modern life. ‘Office Baroque’ (Antwerp, 1977) and in particular ‘Descending Steps for Batan’ (Paris, 1977), in memory of his twin brother who committed suicide, consisted on a profound hole excavated in the foundations of a new gallery in Paris in contrast to the immaculate space of the exhibition room. In this work the hole expresses his lack and emptiness after the loss of his brother (Lee, 2001).

‘Day’s End’ in Pier 52 (New York, 1975) uses the idea of the hole as means of radical and extreme understanding of architecture (Figure 5). It represents a transformation of an abandoned warehouse located on the West Side waterfront of the Hudson River into an astonishing intervention that exposes a new urban narrative with buildings in decayed areas and in an uncertainly state. This building with “basilical light and proportions” was a former warehouse with a large steel structure and corrugated façade and his intervention, in words of Matta-Clark, was described as “making a mark in a sad moment of history” (Matta-Clark in Lee, 2001, p. 121) in relation to abandoned piers in Manhattan by economic changes and new shipping technologies. Once again, this statement reflects the ‘Conical Intersect’s idea of the periscope and telescope and his worries about the transformation of the city in the name of progress.

The basis plan of this intervention consisted on patterns derived from overlapping circles, thus Matta-Clark and his helpers made huge oval penetrations on the corrugated façade of the structure and cut out the structural steel beams from the underside of the pier creating an interior canal into the building. “A simple cut or series of cuts acts as a powerful drawing device able to redefine spatial situations and structural components... There is a kind of complexity that comes from taking an otherwise



**Figure 4.** Conical Intersect (Paris, 1975) (Corinne, 2003).



**Figure 5.** Exterior views of Day's End. (New York, 1975) (Corinne, 2003).

completely normal, conventional, albeit anonymous situation and redefining it, retranslating it into overlapping and multiple readings of conditions past and present. Each building generates its own unique situation” (Matta-Clark *in* Crown, 2003, p. 19).

The principal cut was facing out over the river, where it emerged a large oval penetration like a half moon, whereas inside the building is like an eclipse with an ecclesiastical aura. This cut reminds the round oculus of the Pantheon, constructed in the beginning of the Second Century as a tribute meant to commemorate all the gods in Roman times and lighted by a single circular window at its apex (Figure 6). The Pantheon embodies the idea of the light as “the giver of all presences”, using Kahn’s words, and represents a dramatic relationship between materiality, shadow and sunlight. And as the Pantheon, ‘Day’s End’ main hole was the focal source of light into the dark interior of the building. The correspondence between light and cut was a composition of lightness spread across darkened surfaces and a metaphorical

relation between space, materials and deconstruction by light. Matta-Clark argued “the thing I would really like to express is the idea of transforming the static, enclosed condition of architecture on a very mundane level into this kind of architecture which incorporates... this sort of animated geometry or this animated tenuous relationship between void and surface... [It] implies a kind of kinetic, internal dynamism of some sort” (Matta-Clark *in* Lee, 2001, p. 153). The duality light-cut was evident as a crucial part to contemplate and complete the trilogy: light, void and surface.

‘Day’s End’ itself belongs much more to the domain of architecture than sculpture and it embodies Matta-Clark’s ideas about the relationship between project and place; the building’s circular cuts relates to the sun path and the Hudson river, transforming the site into an unstable urban landscape that exposes a thin limit between art and architecture. The former warehouse itself was transformed from an abandoned industrial structure into a metaphysical social space (Figure 7).



**Figure 6.** The Pantheon (Rome 27 BC)  
Source: Postcard from Rome.



**Figure 7.** Interior view of Day's End (New York, 1975) (Corinne, 2003).

The parallel between the Pantheon and 'Day's End' is a bridge that connects the light mystery through history and architectural space. Today, both are precedents in art and architecture and particularly in some work of the artist Olafur Eliasson. In 'The Weather Project' at the Tate Modern in London (2004) (Figure 8), Eliasson used an artificial sun that confused the distinction between inside and outside as a metaphor to the Pantheon in Rome. In 'Your Sun Machine' (1997) (Figure 9) the visitors entered an empty room with a large circular hole perforated in the roof; every day the movement of the 'sun' appeared into the space creating first an elliptical and then a circular outline on the walls and floor of the gallery that conjugated the extemporal dimension of light and space. This project had a close relation to the work of Matta-Clark and the Agrippa's Temple in Rome (Grynsztejn, 2003).



**Figure 8.** 'Weather Project' at Tate Modern, London, England. Olafur Eliasson 2004  
Source: [www.olafureliasson.net](http://www.olafureliasson.net).



**Figure 9.** 'Your Sun Machine' at Marc Foxx Gallery, L.A., USA. Olafur Eliasson 1997.  
Source: [www.olafureliasson.net](http://www.olafureliasson.net).

## Conclusions

Dealing with nothing more complex than the limits of human scale (Matta-Clark in Lee, 2001, p. 131).

The work of Matta-Clark, which he produced within a short life, incorporates astonishing architectural interventions as well as urban performances and sculptures. His works are well-known, despite the fact that they exist today only through 16 mm films and photographic documentations. However, there are still lots of questions about the motif of his architectural interventions and proposals.

Matta Clark described his work as 'anarchitecture' (**anarchy + architecture**), a concept that explains his interest on architectural decay and the social changes

within urban space. He turned his focus on the city itself, not from the architect's practice but from the streets and marginal zones, cutting through light abandoned buildings to create architectural interventions in-between life and death; construction and demolition; mass and weight; past and present; light, void and surface.

Like light was a particular feature of modern architecture remarked by their masters, this use express the defeat of Matta-Clark to the institution and conventional practice and knowledge of architecture. Like personal fight, but also like urban and social claim. It uses disciplinary tools to struggle the reality, and in this task he gave a more wide understanding of its social role. Finally, the idea behind the work of Matta-Clark was to create 'building dissections': while 'Splitting' referred to abandon; 'Conical Intersect' was about demolition in the name of progress; and 'Day's End' displayed the dark side of architecture, city and progress. We can argue that all these interventions could represent the building's own redemption by cuts, holes and at the end the eclipse of its own nature. Redemption of its architectural spirit.

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