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Author(s):

Ursprung, Philip

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Anarchitecture: Gordon Matta-Clark and the Legacy of the 1970s

‘Nothing works’
Gordon Matta-Clark

‘There is no pilot’
Laurie Anderson

ZÜRICH – When an exhibition by a group of young, ambitious, professional artists in a cutting-edge artists’ space goes by almost undocumented, it naturally arouses our curiosity. And when, in the prosperous New York art world of the early 1970s – where artists were so self-conscious that virtually their every movement was recorded – we are faced with some obscure photographs of artists sitting at a table rather than being given a conventional publicity shot, we cannot help but suspect they may be hiding something.

Anarchitecture was a series of meetings that led to a group exhibition of the same name in March 1974, and, like many projects that involved Gordon Matta-Clark (1943–1978), it continues to haunt our imagination like a kind of ghost. The reason for this may lie in the fact that it represents an unsolved riddle. The ghost, it seems, will never be at rest until the riddle is solved.

The only documents published at the time of the exhibition were an invitation card and a photo spread in the Italian art journal *Flash Art*. So, strictly speaking, we have no evidence that the exhibition even happened. According to the invitation card, the Anarchitecture exhibition took place between 9 and 20 March 1974, in the artists’ space at 112 Greene Street, New York. (Fig. 1) The photo spread in *Flash Art* gives some idea of the content. The card, with 33 variations on the word ‘Anarchitecture’, ranging from ‘An ark kit puncture’ through ‘A knee cap fracture’ to ‘An air key tickle’, conveys the experimental and playful nature of the project. (Fig. 2) The photographs include images of a tumbler with a set of false teeth and the caption ‘George Washington Slept Here’, a house on a barge, a wrecked train carriage on a collapsed bridge and some texts with quotations such as ‘“Build me an ark” he said ...’ and ‘an assertion from structures, as a spell against falling objects’.

The images are intriguing, yet their meaning remains as obscure as the bottom of the hole depicted in one of them. There is a list of participants, with some of the names misspelt, as though they had been phoned through to Italy by phone and then hastily typed, without ever being proofread: ‘Lorie Anderson, Gordon Matta-Clark, Tina Girouard, Gene Highstein, Suzanne Harris, Burnie Kirschenbaum, Richard Landry (Dickie), Richard Nonas’. In a description of the exhibition, under the heading ‘Anarchi-itecture’, we learn that ‘the show was comprised of a collection of photographic notes evolving from a year of group discussion around mental, personal non structural

or architectural notions of space and place’ (*Flash Art* 1974).

The fascination of the project is due, in part, to its title. The paradoxical combination of ‘architecture’ (from the Greek *architekton*: ‘leader of construction’) with ‘anarchy’ (from the Greek *anarchia*: ‘lack of leadership’) is a manifesto in itself. We do not know whether Matta-Clark invented this term, whether he picked it up from Robin Evans’s article ‘Towards Anarchitecture’ (1970) or whether it evolved out of the group meetings, but it is clear from various testimonies that Matta-Clark was the driving force behind the project, and he certainly gave the name his blessing. In fact, although the show disappeared virtually without trace, the name did reverberate for a while in articles, almost as a synonym for Matta-Clark’s performance Splitting, which he created immediately after the Anarchitecture exhibition, between March and June 1974.

After Matta-Clark’s death the members of the group imposed strict limits on the amount of information they were prepared to divulge, thereby helping to keep the Anarchitecture myth alive. [...]

As the first Matta-Clark retrospective began to take shape at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago in 1985, it became obvious that his oeuvre was of historical importance. The comprehensive catalogue established the image of Matta-Clark that we have in our heads today. It is an image that puts great emphasis on collectivity, on spontaneity, on playfulness, on dialogue and on process. The Anarchitecture meetings feature prominently in the catalogue. Robert Pincus-Witten’s introductory essay opens with a shot of the group having a discussion in a loft. The catalogue actually depicts Anarchitecture as a kind of conspiracy against the establishment and reinforces Matta-Clark’s image as a political artist, rooted in the revolutionary ideas of 1968 and in stereotypes of the European intelligentsia. The collective nature of the group is underlined by the many voices that can be heard throughout the catalogue. [...]

Biography. Prof. Dr Philip Ursprung (born in Baltimore, MD), is Professor for the History of Art and Architecture at ETH Zürich. He received his PhD at Freie Universität Berlin and taught at the Universität der Künste Berlin, ETH Zürich, GSAPP of Columbia University New York and Barcelona Institute of Architecture. He curated the exhibition and edited the book *Herzog & de Meuron: Natural History* (CCA Montreal, Lars Müller Publishers, 2002), edited *Caruso St John: Almost Everything* (Poligrafa, 2008) and *Studio Olafur Eliasson: An Encyclopedia* (Taschen, 2008). His book *Allan Kaprow, Robert Smithson, and the Limits to Art* is forthcoming with University of California Press.

In the catalogue to the European retrospective in 1993 more emphasis is put on Matta-Clark as an individual artist. Anarchitecture is now treated as a project by him in its own right. For the first time a reproduction of the 1974 *Flash Art* photo spread is published, accompanied by a photograph of Suzanne Harris, Jeffrey Lew and Gordon Matta-Clark meeting in Richard Nonas’s studio in 1973, the draft of the invitation card and a facsimile of a letter to Richard Nonas about the idea for the show. Matta-Clark’s role as inventor and author of Anarchitecture is emphasised in interviews with Girouard, Highstein and Nonas by Richard Armstrong in 1980, published for the first time in the 1993 catalogue. We are told that Matta-Clark was responsible for most of the photographs, either by choosing them from press archives or by taking them himself. He also seems to have photographed the documents, the drawings, the texts and collages that were made by the group members in order to give the show a greater feeling of coherence. Interestingly, the ambivalence of the project is acknowledged, as Nonas states that the actual Anarchitecture exhibition was ‘totally dull, [and] the promise of Anarchitecture never happened’.

The Limits to Utopia

The statement by Nonas touches at the very core of the problem of Anarchitecture – namely, the idea of unfulfilled promise. If Anarchitecture was about words, thoughts and interaction rather than about a finished product, then how could the group create physical works without betraying the original intention? Weren’t the anarchic impulse and static physical form inherently contradictory? Indeed, the very fact that the exhibition eventually took place could itself have been perceived as prefiguring the *rappel à l’ordre* that was to take place towards the end of the 1970s. ‘Experimental art is never tragic, it’s a prelude’, Allan Kaprow had once stated. Had



Philip Ursprung

Public Lecture: Philip Ursprung

‘Anarchitecture: Gordon Matta-Clark and Urbanism in the 1970s’

Tuesday 27 November 2012, 12:00 – 1:00 PM
Future Cities Laboratory, 6th Floor CREATE Tower

Why is Gordon Matta-Clark (1943-1978) so popular among architects? Does his oeuvre promise radical alternatives to the existing possibilities and constraints of the architecture and urbanism? Is it about a freedom to act that only the realm of art can guarantee? Or does he personify a kind of theory, a conceptual and practical horizon that is lacking in the current debate?

Philip Ursprung presents a public lecture that deals with Matta-Clark’s concept of Anarchitecture and locates his work in the economic and architectural context of the early 1970s.

The lecture draws on the edited extract of the paper reproduced in this edition of the FCL Gazette. The extended and fully referenced original was first published in the catalogue that accompanied the exhibition, *Laurie Anderson, Trisha Brown, Gordon Matta-Clark, Pioneers of the Downtown Scene, New York* (London, Barbican Art Gallery, München, Prestel, 2011).



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the time of experimentation come to an end with the exhibition? With the growing appetite of the art market for tangible works of art by Matta-Clark, and with the canonisation of his work in museum collections and monographs, attention shifted to new areas of his oeuvre that had not yet been domesticated: films, drawings and, particularly, the ephemeral projects. Exhibitions on the Food and Fake Estates projects tried to reconstruct the context of Matta-Clark's early work and to recontextualise it more generally within the culture of the 1970s. As a result, the grip on Anarchitecture also tightened.

The most ambitious attempt to reconstruct the Anarchitecture exhibition and to recreate its atmosphere was made by Jane Crawford for the exhibition *Open Systems: Rethinking Art c.1970*, at Tate Modern in London in 2005. Visitors entered a space where about 50 photographs and reproductions of drawings and texts were arranged along the walls, music was played from a CD player and a heat lamp hung from the ceiling (Fig. 3). The works were attributed to 'Gordon Matta-Clark and Anarchitecture'. The prints and the cards were derived from the Estate of Matta-Clark, most of them published for the first time. The exhibition was part of the aim to reconstruct missing parts of Matta-Clark's oeuvre posthumously as well as an attempt to refocus on his conceptual legacy and the issue of collective authorship.

When Jane Crawford deposited the archive of Matta-Clark and his mother, Anne Clark, at the Canadian Centre for Architecture, in Montreal, this inspired a new round of scholarship and shifted the focus from the art world to the realm of architecture. The exhibition *Gordon Matta-Clark and Anarchitecture: A Detective Story*, curated by Gwendolyn Owens, Mark Wigley and myself at the Arthur Ross Architectural Gallery of the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation at Columbia University, New York, in February 2006, addressed both Anarchitecture and an art audience. The aim was not to reconstruct the original exhibition but to shed light on the process that led up to the show and to reconstruct Matta-Clark's working method. All the photographs from the archive of Gordon Matta-Clark as well as a large quantity of note cards, whose relation to the show were unclear, were laid out flat, as documents, combined with letters, published material and works of art of the members of Anarchitecture. Mark Wigley conducted a series of interviews with participants and contemporary

historians, and the results were shown on screens on the wall. The aim was to reopen the case and, as is always the way with the emphasis of archive material, to focus again on the 'original'.

However, the more we found out about some of the details, the less we felt able to grasp it as a whole. As Wigley (2009) puts it: 'The question raised in the ongoing research on Anarchitecture is one that deepens as the amount of evidence increases.' From the archival material as well as from the series of interviews, which were conducted by Wigley, it remains unclear when the group's meetings began, how often the members met and where. Yet it is obvious that Matta-Clark was the mastermind and that the core group consisted of himself, Richard Nonas, Tina Girouard and Suzanne Harris. Girouard says that the meetings were very serious rather than just informal chats. She says that there were rules about everything being in a single photographic format. [...] She also recalls that the meetings stopped after the exhibition took place. In an earlier interview she said she considered Anarchitecture as 'a kind of think tank, and we each had our various interests and benefited from the dialogue. But I would say that Gordon benefited most and was head cheerleader.' And she continued:

Gordon did the darkroom work and also dug up some extra images just in case. He went to archives of, I think, The New York Times, but also those belonging to the city, and found these photographs of odd things. So, again, by going to the city authorities and researching for Food, for lofts, and because of his history as an architect, he did this research.

What was clear from the archival perspective was the obvious discrepancy between Matta-Clark's original idea and the actual exhibition. [...]

Repression and Recession

Although none of his fellow artists mentions the fact, Anarchitecture was Matta-Clark's last exhibition at 112 Greene Street. He never subsequently exhibited in this artists' space, which had been his base for three years. Immediately after the show, as Mark Wigley has remarked, Matta-Clark distanced himself from Anarchitecture in an interview, back-dating it a



Figure 1. Invitation to Anarchitecture exhibition, 1974

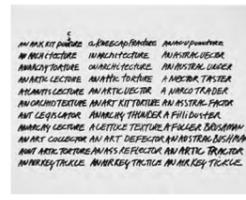


Figure 2. All participants, Anarchitecture: An ark kit puncture, 1974



Figure 3. Installation view of Anarchitecture in *Open Systems: Rethinking Art Since 1970*, Tate Modern, London, 2005

year, in a kind of Freudian slip: 'The Anarchitecture show at 112 Greene Street last year – which never got very strongly expressed – was about something other than the established architectural vocabulary, without getting fixed into anything too formal.' Asked if he considered his project *Splitting* – his cut into a building on Humphrey Street in Englewood, New Jersey – as a piece of anarchitecture, he replied: No. Our thinking about anarchitecture was more elusive than doing pieces that would demonstrate an alternate attitude to buildings, or, rather to the attitudes that determine containerization of usable space. [...] We were thinking more about metaphoric voids, gaps, left-over spaces, places that were not developed. [...] Metaphoric in the sense that their interest or value wasn't in their possible use [...] on a functional level that was so absurd as to ridicule the idea of function.

In the years that followed, Matta-Clark referred to Anarchitecture only sporadically – most notably in a proposal for an exhibition in the newly opened World Trade Center in New York. And none of the other participants mentioned it either, except when asked about it in interviews, although it can be found in their CVs during the 1970s. So one reason for the silence about the Anarchitecture show could be that it marked the end of Matta-Clark's presence in the artists' space. The absence of the driving force must have caused considerable pain, especially since Matta-Clark's career took off in a new direction in 1974. *Splitting* coincided not only with his separation from his partner, Carol Goodden, but also with the end of the collaborative projects. It marked his arrival as an internationally renowned artist, the darling of the media and the entire art world, famous far beyond New York for projects such as *Day's End*, *Conical Intersect* and *Jacob's Ladder*. No other member of the group, except Laurie Anderson, was to become as successful as Matta-Clark.

But although the disappointment at Matta-Clark leaving 112 Greene Street may perhaps explain the sublimation of Anarchitecture into a mystery, it remains a side-track. It cannot explain why Anarchitecture haunts the present, and it tells us nothing about the

exhibition's broader historical significance. As I am less interested in the definition of what Anarchitecture was than in how it worked and how it functioned in relation to the recent history of art and architecture, I will come back to the question of the problem it stands for. My argument is that Anarchitecture – both the meetings and the exhibition – is not a marginal event in the career of Matta-Clark, but that it marks a crucial moment in the recent history of visual culture. Anarchitecture articulates the ambivalence of the role of the artist as someone working in total freedom – anarchy – and yet subject to the rules and pressures of the political and economic context. It stands at the very epicenter of a seismic shift that took place in the early 1970s and whose effects we can still feel today. It coincides with the beginning of the economic revolution that is still shaking the societies of the industrialised world – characterised by the deregulation of the labour market, the end of the gold standard, the arrival of computers, huge rises in energy prices and the growth of the financial sector. This phase which many theoreticians since the late 1990s have identified with the origins of globalization, radically affected the way that time and space, private and public, individual and society, are perceived. Nowhere in the industrialised world emerged unscathed, but New York was particularly vulnerable. Urban blight, with the decay of entire areas of an almost bankrupt city, made it clear that the party of the 1950s and 1960s was over. Yet among the ruins of the post-war boom the new order was already making itself known.

The area between the artists' spaces at 112 Greene Street and Food, the Holly Solomon Gallery and Matta-Clark's loft stand at the crossroads of this dynamic in the early 1970s and can be seen as a microcosm of the dynamics of the global transformation. The change that took place was partly visible, partly invisible. High over decrepit SoHo the World Trade Center was nearing completion. And deep in the cellars of the old city Matta-Clark was planting a cherry tree for his first performance in 1971 in the newly opened artists' space.

Shortly after Richard Nixon, at first almost unnoticed, took the dollar off the gold standard, ending the Bretton Woods system and paving the way for the deregulation of the financial industry, Carmen Beuchat and Juan Downey staged *Energy Fields*, a performance where a curtain was cut into strips and set on fire, laser patterns were generated, controlled by the level of radioactivity measured in the loft, and performers reacted to an invisible field of ultrasonic waves. While 'container tonnage nearly doubled from 1971 and 1973', spelling the death knell for New York's already ailing docks and destroying tens of thousands of jobs in ports around the world, Matta-Clark, Girouard, Landry, Harris and others performed *Open House* in a container without a roof in front of 112 Greene Street. And while energy prices rocketed and the American middle class felt the effects of the recession, and with capital beginning, as Mario Montano put it, 'to test [...] the production of wealth without labor' by restructuring itself into the two fundamental sectors of oil and food, Matta-Clark participated in *Food* and came up with proposals for a theme for Anarchitecture: 'Help preserve our short-age of gasoline energy. Burn a neighbour's house.' As the stock market crashed and

as Carol Goodden lost her fortune, which had been the basis of her and Matta-Clark's existence, Matta-Clark suggested opening the Anarchitecture exhibition with the slogan 'Nothing works'.

The members of Anarchitecture stood at the intersection between total freedom and a dependence on the political and economic context. They were both observers and the protagonists of what was happening around them. Anarchitecture embodied a radical alternative to the existing power structure, but it was also a dry run for gentrification and thus paved the way to the establishment of new power structures.

The dancers, sculptors, musicians and architects who flocked to New York in the late 1960s and early 1970s could afford their airy lofts because of the crisis, and they were able to make a living out of property development. They could live there, because others – such as those involved in manufacturing or light industry – could no longer afford the rents and had to move elsewhere. Perhaps this is the reason for the photographs of the manufacturer that featured in Anarchitecture.

The prosperity of the art world was also, though not only, a result of the policy that combined deregulation with preservation: for example, the re-zoning of SoHo from a manufacturing to a city landmark district in 1973.⁴¹ Gordon Matta-Clark's purchase of unusable slivers of land at auction for *Reality Properties: Fake Estates* was a brilliant comment on the absurdity of property, on how the property market worked and how value was transformed. Food, which introduced sushi and the open kitchen to New York, was simultaneously a playful event, an escape from the constraints of the food industry and the forerunner of the new lifestyle which would, by the late 1980s, oust from the area the very people who had transformed it.

The exploitation of new kinds of spatiality by Anarchitecture, 'based in ignorance innocence and idiocy', prefigured what property tycoons such as Donald Trump would soon do – that is, simultaneously profit from the 'crisis' and bring it to an end by developing abandoned areas. One day there would be bronze plaques of famous artists on the cast-iron façades of the lofts. Perhaps this is the meaning of the glass with false teeth – Matta-Clark's own – and the comment that 'George Washington Slept Here'.

The conspirators of Anarchitecture, it seems, knew too much. For once, their findings were not transformed into works of art. Rather, they remained in a stasis between text and illustration, keeping the meaning open, refusing to pin it down in the form of art. They made their issue transparent, openly displayed, like an open book, to be used and abused by anyone. A narrow line separated the anarchy they invoked from the ideal of deregulation that facilitated the property speculation and destabilised the labour markets internationally for the coming decades. As comparable cycles have taken place in London during the 1980s and in Berlin since the Millennium, the situation of SoHo in the early 1970s has come to feel increasingly familiar. Anarchitecture is everywhere. It's a mirror image that keeps both attracting and repelling us.

PHILIP URSPRUNG

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