

Destructive Knowledge: Strategies for Learning to Un-Dō

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ABSTRACT

Architects are moved by a genealogical inertia that drives them towards doing. Their tools are thought to be the means to imagine, to design, to construct, in the end, to do. The Latin *dō*, serves as the root to a series of words that are related to the notion of accumulated knowledge, *doctus*, doctor, but also to *docilis*, to be docile. Gordon Matta-Clark, the well-known artist taught as architect essentially kept working with the tools of architecture, but instead of doing, most of his work is dedicated to undo. His strategies are not only about un-constructing buildings, however, I would argue, they were mostly a mode of search and exposition of his archival impressions of art and architecture. This text considers the conceptual consequence of this working process of the artist as a tool for interrogating the formative moment of art and architecture by developing tools to un-dō, this is, to remove docility from disciplinary knowledge.

A profession makes one thoughtless, therein lies its greatest blessing. For it is a rampart behind which one can

lawfully retreat when one is assailed by commonplace cares and scruples (Nietzsche, 1986: 184).

Early in 1974, as registered in the artist's archive at the Canadian Centre for Architecture, Gordon Matta-Clark explicitly said in a conversation to Holly Solomon, of the Holly Solomon Gallery, that he need a house.⁽¹⁾ After having made smaller cuts in buildings located in the Bronx in New York City, he was in a desperate search of another site for his next work. The Solomon's, one of the primary supporters of his work, offered him a house. By that time the Solomon's family had around half dozen properties located in the City of Englewood in New Jersey. Holly's husband Horace, responded to the artist's claim saying he did not understand what Matta-Clark wanted to do with it and the risks it could take, nevertheless he decided to give him a property located in the 322 of South Humphrey Street. With this, the artist trained as architect, moved onto developing what became his first major building cut, Splitting.

Destructive Knowledge is the title of this textual proposition, and it refers to a practice in which to be able to produce knowledge, we inevitable and necessary destruct some form and evidence of a previous one – conscious or not – by disturbing or erasing the traces of it. This text is in part about exposing the consciousness of this removal condition, and in part to explore the strategies that allow it. Under this premise, my research on Matta-Clark's Splitting is not interested in the striking destruction

of a building. Since in his work objects are a "proleptic temporality" and "always already an object projected for a later moment" (Lee, 2000: 234), their destruction was not a condition to achieve the work, but a consequence that even exceeded his own will. This condition of replacing knowledge interest me as radical strategy in the way it is useful to discuss the extent in which Matta-Clark's actions were a mode of stripping down docility or discipline out of an object, or even more, as I would try to argue, mostly of his own self.

Gordon Matta-Clark's work is an evidence of a certain kind of instability to both the objects where they were performed as well as to the conceptual ground where they were located. An instability that has been explained by a variety of authors in relation to a troubled family background (Crawford, 2003; Lee, 2000; Papapetros, 2007; Vidler, 2006), to an apparent rejection to the architectural principles of modernism, or to the temporality of existence, where all point out to the search for opening new forms of conceiving relations between the ground and whatever object or space exist over it. Ground was without a doubt a key subject for testing the instability of things as we can evidence in various early works of the artist, as it is the case of Cherry Tree (1971), Time Well (1971) and Winter Garden (1971), all at the 112 of Greene Street in New York City, were he dug a hole in the ground to be able to go underneath the building foundations in an act of challenging

both the ground that gives the material support to the building and the stability of the building itself (Lee, 2000). Matta-Clark felt the necessity of being the liberator of the space and the symbolic dimension of confinement of a house in *Splitting*, a work that could also be read as a way to remove the knowledge of the house as site, as container, as repository, as body, as archive.

For Matta-Clark, the doing was also the un-doing; his mode of constructing knowledge was achieved by continuously destructing a previous form of it, not by literally destructing a building itself, but by tearing apart the evidences left by the previous form of knowledge in it. He was destabilizing the pre-existence of a certain object giving it the opportunity to override itself. Michel Foucault explains in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* how the historical a priori

is not a condition of validity for judgements, but a condition of reality for statements. It is not a question of rediscovering what might legitimize an assertion, but of freeing the conditions of emergence of statements, the law of their coexistence with others, the specific form of being, the principles according to which they survive, become transformed and disappear (Foucault, 1970: 127).

With this, the way that I have approached *Splitting* is not to re-write the actual evidences of it, but to look at them as testimonies to surface a certain reality contained in the event; to create the means for the 'emergence of statements' outside their existing known a priori condition.

A critical moment for knowledge, discipline and docility is when it is cast

in the body, mostly in the psychological register. Matta-Clark's relation with his father, the surrealist painter Roberto Matta, becomes particularly crucial in this casting. The story about the encounters between father and son are without a doubt a topic in itself, but what might seem clear is that "Matta-Clark wrestled for the rest of his short life with a simultaneous denial of his father's influence and a desire for his recognition" (Lee, 2000: 5). But this influence and recognition is not only driven by the familiar relation between them; it is, however, a two-fold struggle. On the one side the father and son relation was beyond the oedipal complex that is directly informed by the nature of their paternal-filial link. On the other side, the fact that both were trained as architects prior to becoming artists, added a new layer of complexity as an extension of the paternal domain through their shared instructive discipline. Historian and theorist Spyros Papapetros claims that Matta was a critical figure for Matta-Clark's formal architectural education, saying: "Architecture comes with the sanction of paternal authority and the benefaction of the father's renowned architect friends; they and perhaps not the architecture school, represent, for Matta, Gordon's real schooling in architecture" (Papapetros, 2007: 72). Both Lee's and Papapetros' assertions seems to support the idea that Matta-Clark indeed had a two-fold struggling relation with his father. With this, I would suggest that in the production of Matta-Clark's work there is a psychological cast impression of his father, an inscription, that is on one side a familiar-paternal weight, and on the other side a paternal-architectural weight (I've expanded this argument in the unpublished text "Archival Impressions: [Re] Collecting Gordon Matta-Clark", 2013). This

psychologically driven impression will pose a series of questions not only to the production of Matta-Clark's work, but also when we consider his work a deployment of radical strategies for pedagogical inquiries in art and architectural practices.

Another way in which knowledge could be cast in a body, perhaps not only in Matta-Clark, is through the way of a discipline's own cultural history and by the ways in which it is assembled to sustain a mode of thought in time. In architecture, this comes in the form of academia, guild and profession, among others. The principle of knowledge as accumulation is also linked to the notion of history as the medium for shaping its continuity, disciplinary knowledge would thus enforce time as a source for reproducing itself in the present. The mechanisms that sustain various aspects of that disciplinary thinking in the present are marked greatly by the transformation of that knowledge into a profession, taught and reproduced in academia and its branches. With this I am referring to, in example, in the way in which Matta-Clark formally explained his concerns with the knowledge of architecture. While talking in an interview with Judith Russi Kishner in Chicago about the inability of architects of doing a work like that of himself, Matta-Clark said that although they might be willing to do it, they would not be able because of the discipline's formal restrictions (Moure, 2006). The accumulation of disciplinary knowledge, in the form of academia-profession, could be read here as the symptomatic evidence for a practice of docility; their discipline, their knowledge of it, makes them – architects – docile to the very principle of what they apparently know and are allow to conceive (free

space as Matta-Clark intended). This symptom serves here as evidence of how disciplinary knowledge could diminish the personal self in favour of a 'disciplinary-self,' restricting the exercise of wills of the 'architect-self' with docility supported by the disciplinary knowledge that have shaped an apparent stable ground for it.

There is, however, a particular characteristic in the work of Matta-Clark that, by been performed in multiple media, it is perceived as operating in various disciplines, or transgressing disciplines. I would not argue against the idea that the multiple media he worked on belongs to an expanded art practice, yet, do we consider architecture, performance, photography, sculpture, engineering, film, all being able to be subjected by art, or are they overlapping disciplines in their own right? Matta-Clark was quite aware of the conceptual and formal implications of this, and his easiness in moving from one place to another is what perhaps allowed Splitting to be conceived by these multiple means. Is there one discipline that allowed Matta-Clark to perform or conceive the work that way? Is this exchangeability of media, or discipline, a strict product of art? Or, could it be a product of architecture? Feeding the intriguing practice of Matta-Clark of 'performing a discipline' in an opportunistic way, he also easily switched his disciplinary capacities when writing letters and signing them conveniently sometimes as architect, artist, sculptor, filmmaker, and even as engineer as there is evidence on the artist's archive collection at the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA). To what extent his work in multiple media could be understood as a way to challenge the principle of

disciplinary knowledge discussed earlier and suggest a tool for learning to un-dō? Is this practice of exchanging media a mode of overturning the principle of discipline as container? Thus, where would be Splitting located? Splitting is about evidences that have been circulated, read, analysed, all evidences of something that happened somewhere else, in a mostly unknown location. For some it has been considered an important event in the history of art, and for others, a seemingly unnoticed one, as it was to the inhabitants of the city of Englewood in New Jersey when it was realized in 1974, as there are no records of press and news in the city's library. But there is a Splitting that existed only in himself.

Matta-Clark made himself aware of the complexities and opportunities of media. A copy of Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, was found in his library and is kept in the archive of his documents at the CCA. There are two underlined sentences of that book – with no confirmation that they were actually made by him, I will use them not as evidences of the voice or concern by the artist, but towards the work, with no particular intention of asserting the veracity of the highlights on the book as if they were made by him – that I would like to highlight in relation to the role of media in Splitting. The first one is from the first part of the book, "The Medium is the Message," and it says: "Since understanding stops action, as Nietzsche observed, we can moderate the fierceness of this conflict by understanding the media that extend us and raise these wars within and without us" (30). There might be two conflictive moments of understanding suggested here in the quote by McLuhan. One is what

could be called as the 'frozen moment', where the action of doing is stopped by understanding. The other one could be understood as the 'melting moment,' describing the fact when media is used as extension to moderate the conflictive nature of understanding and doing. This is, as a means to conciliate the interior and the exterior, the subject against the object, or the personal self against the mediated self. Frozen in the way it is capturing 'understanding,' and as such, I would argue, a critical moment when something is cast as understood, or acknowledged. Departing from the assumption that understanding stops action following Nietzsche's assertion, Matta-Clark's own practice in Splitting could be read as the action against the understood, or against the known. A practice of both, freezing and melting.

The next underlined sentence on McLuhan's book is within the context of 'Energy,' a clue that in a broader context is present in Matta-Clark's drawings and his known interest in Buddhism; it reads: "The oral's man inner world is a tangle of complex emotions and feelings that the Western practical man has long ago eroded or suppressed within himself in the interest of efficiency and practicality" (59). If I would take this sentence as a motivation for retroactively framing ideas about Splitting, it might represent in the hands of Matta-Clark a more personal dimension of media in his work; as evidence of the struggle between his inner voice and the extensions of it located in his own body-as-container and the energy that he wanted to expelled from it. This operation of opening-up could be seen relocated into the house where the work took place. Following Matta-Clark's struggle between action and understanding, the dialectical and

personal dimension suppressed in the body, the multiple media deployed with Splitting could be read as a transitory form of knowledge, as the process of performing the conflict of media and its extensions. A form of knowledge that defies fixation and containment, in virtue of suspense.

*As such, Splitting could be read as a record of stripping down the discipline and docility that produced it, trying to liberate not only the space confined in it, but to extend Matta-Clark's own concerns, as a repressed subject, as well as to the house as a subjected body. The moment of suspense when Matta-Clark hangs himself with ropes and a pulley and leaned to the wall of the house – his own claim that it was one of the moments of Splitting as he told Liza Béar on their famous interview reproduced first in *Avalanche* magazine (Moure, 2006); the other moment being the time, in minutes or seconds, it took the house to tilt back – could also be the frozen moment where he is trying to 'moderate the fierceness' of the conflict between understanding an action. This moment, the moment of Splitting, is precisely where the work exists and is sited. That particular moment drives the argument of this text as the moment of the destructive knowledge, and its capacity as a radical strategy. The moment of suspension, of knowledge suspension, becomes the radical strategy in the work of Matta-Clark that tries to mediate the tension between understanding and action.*


Matta-Clark perhaps learned to un-dō, this is, to remove docility from doing, while being suspended and in an unstable position in relation to the ground, and while in the act of contesting the basic structure, both literal and metaphysical, of

*the cut house. This attitude was not limited to that house, it speaks to buildings in general, buildings as objects and as institutions, grounded ideas, sustained principles. His search was more directed to that moment of suspense, to the moment of instability, than to produce a stable or a stabilizing condition as work, as permanent work. His very early performance and art work at Vassar College, when he realized *Tree Dance* in 1971, clearly supports the principle of suspension. The transience of his work pose a challenge to the principle of accumulation in a stable way, knowledge could be one of these contested sites. While 'undoing,' as Matta-Clark would said himself when describing his work, he was in a continuous search for something that seemed to be contained in the 'objects to be destroyed' as Pamela Lee (2000) would coin, but without having a clear location in them. This 'undoing' of the building, if we consider the building the basic device in which Matta-Clark was working, can give us clues about his own mode of operation. Splitting could be understood as a work that is contesting itself from within, from its own self, or the self that produced it. Either it is the disciplinary knowledge of art or of architecture, this work, as many others of the artist, may be seen as the media for exploiting "its metaphoric resource against itself" (Wigley, 1993: 42). This is, a work that is a manifestation, as action, of a search of an interior self that intend to articulate a new form of knowledge by destructing one.*

Yet there is another place that I would like to turn the attention to. The process of the 'unbuilding,' or the 'undoing' in the artist case, might be oriented 'to locate what it conceals.' Splitting a

house in two is to reveal the entrails of what might be contained in it, as if that operation would enable having access to it, or to free it from itself. But what can be concealed is a question that probably escapes the inner world hidden by the wood frame of the house where this inner world is located, it could be even more inaccessible in the performative operation. Matta Clark seemed perhaps to act, while undoing, against a certain figure, and this goes beyond being artist or architect, it is a proposition to build up by destructing any form of accumulation of knowledge that may seem to create a path to a mirror reflecting our own, or the shadow of a figure, paternal in the artist case. A figure was for him someone closer to the Dionysian character defined by Friedrich Nietzsche, a resemblance of his father, or his father's disciplines, or the objects that define figures; his work was thus a futile operation of grasping the inaccessible, directed to un-dō that particular figure, or to try to at least undo its psychological locus; his work is the mediated evidence of that action.

Matta-Clark work is extremely radical for been anarchivable in the same way that he thought of archiving architecture with Anarchitecture, his death drive towards architecture is consigned in him and within him in the unknown "place of [the] originary and structural breakdown of the said memory" (Derrida, 1995: 11). Matta-Clark's works are in part the interface of his work, always media, the mode of access to himself. His father impression always existed behind him, as a ghost, in the back of his mind in an unknown landscape. An impression that the surrealist Matta – insightfully – perhaps knew how to inscribe in Matta-Clark's subconscious, as an archive of

himself, and as such Matta-Clark, in an anarchic moment, repeated the operation inscribed by his father in him onto his own work. Matta-Clark's work is an archive of impressions, of heavily cast psychological impressions, anarchic impressions performed in suspense and left to us in the mode of photographs, drawings, cut sketchbooks, films and videos, but also outside of the arkheion, or container, in the exchange in the restaurant Food, in the imaginaries left by the cuttings, in the lives of those who witness the performances, and as many recount, in his own sociability. 

NOTES

(1) Archival research was conducted at the Canadian Centre For Architecture in Montreal, Canada, in October 2012 and March 2013, where the collection of the artist's documents is held.

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