

# DIRECTING ENERGY

Gordon Matta-Clark's Pursuit of Social Sculpture

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I have chosen not isolation from the social conditions, but to deal directly with social conditions whether by physical implication, as in most of my building works, or through more direct community involvement, which is how I want to see the work develop in the future. I think that differences in context is my primary concern. . . . In fact, it is the attention paid to the specific occupied areas of the community.

—Gordon Matta-Clark, 1976

Gordon Matta-Clark is perhaps better known for the monumental alterations he made to residential homes and historic buildings than for his socially engaged interventions in public space. Made in New York between 1970 and 1977 alongside the growth of alternative spaces such as 112 Greene Street, these projects include the restaurant Food (1971–73), mobile public artworks such as *Fresh Air Cart* (1972) and *Graffiti Truck* (1973), and his proposed Resource Center and Environmental Youth Program for Loisaida (1977). Smaller in scale and therefore subtler in their critique, they nonetheless brought attention to New York's failing social policies, displaced people, and abandoned spaces by empowering communities of artists and non-artists to take ownership of spaces and collaborate on their improvement. By presenting the work in public space and engaging city residents as participants, these projects exemplify the artist's ever-increasing desire to create artworks that responded directly to real people and the issues that affected them.

Matta-Clark attempted to harness human creativity to combat man's destructive habits, a goal he shared with the German artist Joseph Beuys, who described such artworks as "social sculpture." Although there is no known



concrete connection between the two artists, this essay proposes that they shared a pursuit of social sculpture as a means to transform society. Beuys's collaborative projects—which included the establishment of a political organization through which he encouraged citizen-initiated legislation and a tuition-free school for the development of creativity in a broad range of fields—were intended to heal the schisms created by World War II and usher in a new era of democratic equality, ecological awareness, and mutual support. Although Matta-Clark tended toward more symbolic interventions that activated participants outside the art world in New York, his efforts nonetheless embody Beuys's demand for a new political conception of aesthetics.<sup>2</sup> As his own form of social sculpture, Matta-Clark's socially conscious artwork subtly shaped man's relationship with space through a redirection of creative energy.

Although Matta-Clark likely encountered Beuys's concept of social sculpture as early as 1974, when the artist came to the United States on a lecture tour, the native New Yorker already held strong beliefs about art as a means of social change. Matta-Clark's political awareness was formed early in his life under the influence of his father, Surrealist painter Roberto Matta, a member of the Communist Party since the 1930s with a lifelong commitment to social causes, which can be seen in the explosive battle of forms that permeate his paintings. Although Matta left soon after Gordon and his twin brother Sebastian were born in 1943—they visited him only sporadically in Europe and South America thereafter—the boys' artistic talents were further nurtured through their mother's subsequent relationship with Isamu Noguchi and friendship with Buckminster Fuller, both of whom had similarly utopian ideals about the integration of art and society.<sup>3</sup>

During the turbulent decade of the 1960s, while Beuys was organizing his students at the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf, Matta-Clark studied architecture at Cornell University.<sup>4</sup> Returning from a year abroad in Paris, where he encountered students striking for education reform, he joined the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), one of the primary vehicles for demonstrations against the US role in the conflict in Vietnam.<sup>5</sup> Aligning with a generation of young people who were growing increasingly dissatisfied with authority in its many forms, he began to question his intended field. His artistic path was only solidified following his introduction at Cornell in 1969 to Robert Smithson, whose concepts of site specificity and entropy encouraged him to experiment with materials as conduits of energy.<sup>6</sup> These interests, which were magnified by his study of alchemy and metaphysics throughout the 1970s, established his belief in the exoteric power of transformation, a theme that was mirrored in the spiritual

properties that Beuys embodied in his own fat and felt sculptures from the 1960s onward.<sup>7</sup> When Matta-Clark returned to New York from Ithaca the same year, he was immediately struck by the inability of modernist forms to provide solutions to the city's increasing social problems, and began to combine his activist concerns with his artistic production. Harnessing the energy of activist movements like the SDS into material form, Matta-Clark imbued his drawings, sculptures, performances, films, and social projects with transformative potential.

By the time of Matta-Clark's return, artists in New York were already reacting to the perceived failure of established institutions through their politically charged work and involvement in countercultural and social justice movements. A number of practitioners eschewed the art world altogether by allying with identity-related activist groups that were fighting for specific causes such as civil rights and feminism. Others expanded the notion of what it meant for an artist to be politically active through their participation in groups bound together in opposition to art-world elitism and US military aggression, such as the Art Workers Coalition (1969–71) and Guerrilla Art Actions Group (1969–76). The socially conscious work of these artists was geared toward a public audience, prefiguring the paradigm in US public art of the 1980s and 1990s known as “art in the public interest,” which distinguished itself from the urban modernist sculptures that began appearing in US cities in the late 1960s in artists' attention to social issues and collaboration with specific communities.<sup>8</sup>

Matta-Clark was on the cutting edge of this trend. Yet art-historical narratives continue to celebrate the poetics of his forms rather than his subtle methods for expressing his opposition to war, his concern for the environment, and his response to the city's rapidly expanding inequality and homelessness epidemic.<sup>9</sup> His unique approach was inextricably linked to the abundance of problems occurring in New York during the 1970s, when a prolonged financial crisis and the threat of bankruptcy resulted in massive budget cuts and widespread layoffs that forced libraries and firehouses to shutter and piles of garbage to stand in the streets, uncollected.<sup>10</sup> Lower Manhattan, once thriving with industry, grew desolate as manufacturers abandoned their buildings in search of lower production costs, and the upper and middle classes left for a better quality of life in the suburbs. Establishing the framework for the neoliberal “Reagan Revolution” that was to come in the following decade, a gulf began to grow between the city's remaining poor and marginalized residents (including artists) and the corporate elite, who eagerly developed areas of Manhattan into modernist office towers and luxury apartments as the city razed large swaths of buildings in the name of urban renewal. Matta-Clark responded to this situation through his prominent role in the birth of the alternative space movement, a collective

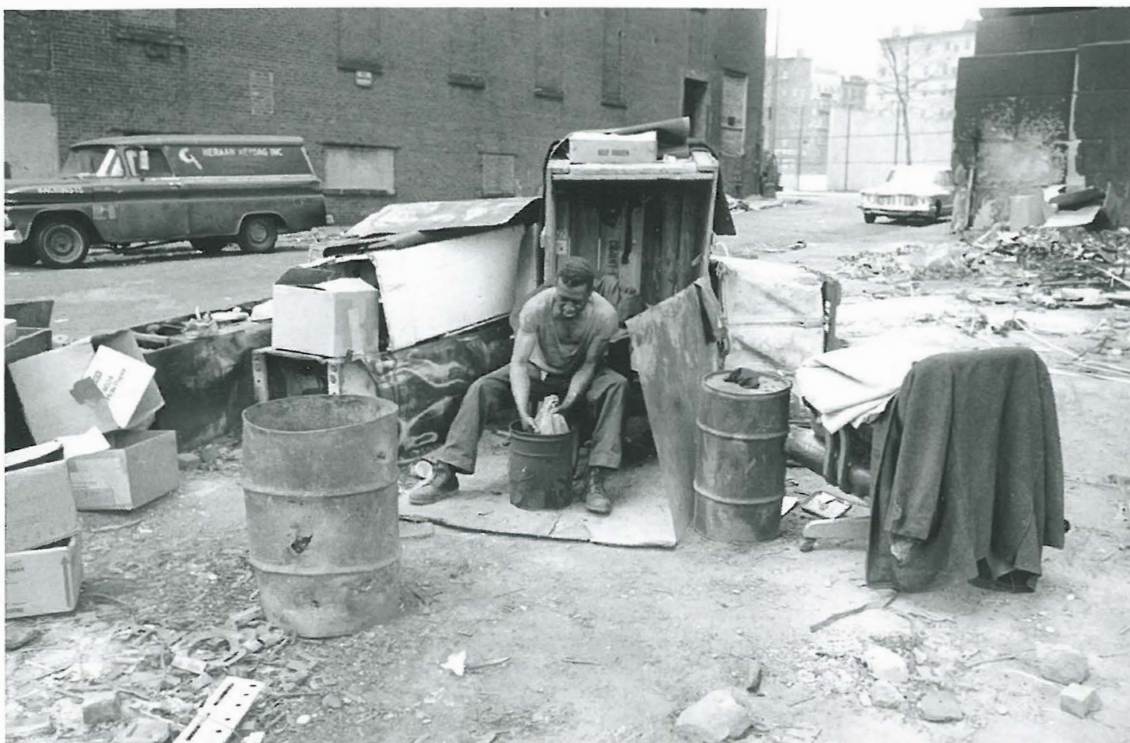


Gordon Matta-Clark, *Untitled, Anarchitecture*, 1974.  
 Courtesy the Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark and David Zwirner,  
 New York/London.

artistic reaction to the abandonment of downtown that reached its peak between 1969 and 1975, in addition to his own multidisciplinary practice.<sup>11</sup>

In the summer of 1970, Matta-Clark helped Jeffrey Lew and Alan Saret transform a former rag-picking factory into an exhibition space called 112 Greene Street, which featured the work of many emerging artists at the time.<sup>12</sup> Their method was markedly distinct from the market-centered uptown galleries. Lew, 112 Greene's director, used an extremely inclusive and casual model of exhibition organizing—the door was always unlocked, and the exhibition calendar was left open to artists' proposals.<sup>13</sup> During its peak, between 1970 and 1974, Matta-Clark performed and exhibited eleven works here, ranging from piles of recycled glass bottles and a small tree growing from a hole in the basement floor to hand-colored photographs of graffiti and a series of colorful drawings that show the growth and movements of trees. The raw space was used as a backdrop for these installations, but—more importantly for the history of socially engaged art—it was also an informal gathering place where artists could discuss ideas and experiment with a variety of mediums, styles of presentation, and concepts. As a forum for a free exchange of ideas not specific to discipline, the space formed an ideal intellectual community quite independent of the market economy. Matta-Clark mined this close-knit social network of creative people for his projects, which were infused with the generous and animated spirit of their social gatherings, group meals, and collaborative events. He and the other artists also branched out into the street for their activities, finding willing new audiences and participants for their work there.

Shortly after Matta-Clark began his involvement with 112 Greene, while scouting locations for his contribution to the site-specific exhibition *Under the Brooklyn Bridge*, organized by Alanna Heiss for the Municipal Art Society, he experienced a turning point in his career.<sup>14</sup> Beneath the Manhattan side of the Brooklyn Bridge, he encountered a homeless man who had built an elaborate living space from discarded materials, including a rudimentary stove and washing basin. Thinking that his architectural training could be used to help people like this man find sustainable forms of shelter, he produced *Jacks* (1971), a pile of gutted cars that he raised on jacks to provide protection, and reconfigured his *Garbage Wall* (1970), a wall constructed with cement and debris, as a building element that could be made quickly and inexpensively by the homeless themselves.<sup>15</sup> Deploying a tactic that he later developed into a form of collaborative art making—sharing food with his audience—the artist roasted a whole pig over an open fire and passed out free sandwiches to entice curious locals to the opening of the project on May 24, 1971, resulting in the film *Pig Roast*.<sup>16</sup> Although this was not his first public performance, these works show the artist's increased desire



Gordon Matta-Clark, *Homeless Man near the Brooklyn Bridge*, 1971.  
 Courtesy the Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark and David Zwirner,  
 New York/London.

to address marginalized groups by bringing to light the nutritional inequality and lack of access to affordable housing that accompanies poverty.

Even at this early juncture in his career, Matta-Clark demonstrated a synergy with Beuys's belief that art could include the entire process of living—thoughts, actions, dialogue, and objects—and therefore could be enacted by a wide range of people who were not professional artists. At the same time of Matta-Clark's participation in *Under the Brooklyn Bridge*, Beuys was promoting this agenda through the Organization for Direct Democracy, a storefront meeting place aimed at citizen-initiated legislation on topics such as education reform, women's rights, and the protection of the environment, which he operated in Düsseldorf with a group of collaborators between 1970 and 1980.<sup>17</sup> Although both artists included non-artists in the production of the work, Beuys's formalized act of political dissonance contrasts with the casual and playful nature of



Gordon Matta-Clark, *Garbage Wall: Brooklyn Bridge*, 1971.  
 Courtesy the Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark and David Zwirner,  
 New York/London.

Matta-Clark's projects, which empowered the homeless to resist exclusion by bringing visibility to their community.

In the months that followed, Matta-Clark began renovating a storefront at the corner of Prince and Wooster Streets for a project that also built upon this idea. The former luncheonette was transformed into Food, the restaurant he opened with Carol Goodden on September 25, 1971. Less explicitly political than Matta-Clark's other socially engaged artworks, Food was the natural result of his experimentation with food as an artistic medium and the convivial atmosphere of the pair's social circle, in which art-themed dinner parties were frequent occasions. Together Matta-Clark and Goodden developed the concept and



Interior of Food restaurant, 1972.  
Photograph by Cosmos Andrew Sarchiapone.  
Courtesy the Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark and  
David Zwirner, New York/London.

design of the restaurant, and managed its operations alongside fellow artists Tina Girouard, Suzanne Harris, and Rachel Lew, in addition to a variety of other artists, until June 1973.<sup>18</sup> Characterized by an open-plan kitchen that spilled into an often-crowded dining room with mismatched chairs, Food was a place where artists met and discussed ideas, had an inexpensive meal, and found paid jobs to support their own work (much of which was not marketable in traditional gallery settings). However, diners from all over the city were attracted to its creative menu and bohemian atmosphere, where they might encounter a famous artist like Robert Rauschenberg.<sup>19</sup> Inasmuch as 112 Greene had been inclusive of new audiences, the popularity of this restaurant encouraged the participation of the general, non-gallery-going public in SoHo's artistic scene. It was a place where social bonds could be restored among friends, and lively conversation, music, and laughter could also be shared with strangers.

Unlike his collaborators, Matta-Clark thought of Food as a work of art, from the design of its interior and the special Sunday menus curated by artists (Donald Judd, Keith Sonnier, and Yvonne Rainer, among others) to the films he produced of meal preparations and service.<sup>20</sup> Owing as much to such clear pronouncements of his intentions as to his charismatic personality, authorship of Food is often attributed to Matta-Clark alone, despite his attempt to resist a hierarchical structure. This inherent contradiction reappears in the collaborative works that followed, just as it had in Beuys's projects like the Organization for Direct Democracy, and points toward a consistent issue in the later field of socially engaged art: one artist catalyzes a project's art-historical canonization, thereby obscuring the contributions of others. Nonetheless, the restaurant was innovative in its conceptualization of domestic activities such as grocery shopping, food preparation and service, and cleaning as performances, forming a lineage between Fluxus artists' efforts to blur the division between art and life, feminist artistic approaches, and European artists' experimentation with food-as-art around the same period.<sup>21</sup> Beuys imbued the edible materials in his sculptures, such as margarine and honey, with metaphoric meaning related to the ability of art to treat greater social ills.<sup>22</sup> For Matta-Clark, the act of consuming food was another form of transformation, through which the body digests and embodies the processes and products of art-making.

Through his activities at Food, Matta-Clark shifted toward an audience-oriented approach to art-making, in which his exchanges with his audience became paramount to the conception of the work. One such example is his famous "Matta Bones" dinner, for which he strung animal bones into necklaces for guests to wear home following a meal of oxtail soup. Takeaways, which are characteristic of his work from this period, were part of an orchestrated art



Anarchitecture group meeting, c. 1974. From left to right: Suzanne Harris, Ree Morton (back to camera), Jeffrey Lew, Gordon Matta-Clark.  
© Richard Nonas; Courtesy of the artist.

experience in which the artist and guests were active creators and passive consumers. Curator Mary Jane Jacob, who organized the first retrospective of his work at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago in 1985, recognized this gesture as an act of “reciprocal generosity,” in which both the artist and the audience benefit from the interaction, a trend that would be replicated in her site-specific public exhibitions of the early 1990s by artists and collectives such as Suzanne Lacy and Haha.<sup>23</sup>

Much of Matta-Clark’s own practice naturally flowed from the spontaneous discussions that occurred at 112 Greene and Food. In 1973, for example, he began hosting weekly discussion group meetings at 112 Greene with other artists associated with the SoHo scene, motivated by the idea that previous generations of architects had not arrived at solutions to the city’s problems through their theories and constructions.<sup>24</sup> They called the group Anarchitecture, a name that, despite its revolutionary tone, was intended to reflect the members’ highly personal reactions to space.<sup>25</sup> In their elusive meetings, they critiqued architecture’s role in the capitalist system through multidisciplinary proposals

for artistic expression, including dance, performance, sculpture, architecture, engineering, and sound. Their efforts were not unlike those of Beuys, whose Free International University for Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research (FIU), an alternative pedagogic system based on the advancement of creativity over skills, was planned with a group of collaborators the same year Anarchitecture meetings began.<sup>26</sup> The school, which was intended to cater to all people regardless of artistic talent, developed creativity through interdisciplinary research including psychology, communications, information theory, and perception teaching, accomplished through a mobile learning system consisting of educators from a variety of disciplines teaching as guest lecturers. Combining the creation of objects, encouragement of dialogue, and political activism, the FIU was a forum for enacting social change through art. While Anarchitecture had more utopian goals, it nonetheless oriented the artists’ skills toward improving the built environment.

Matta-Clark played a critical role in the group’s attempt to reevaluate more traditional concepts of architecture. Much like Beuys and the FIU, many of the group members saw it as a way for Matta-Clark to work out his own theories.<sup>27</sup> His philosophy revolved around the relationship between urban architecture—particularly modernist constructions typical of the postwar period—and the everyday life of residents. He thought that buildings should reflect society and the character of the city’s districts, rather than alienating people through its monumental physical presence, as was common with tall skyscrapers. He discussed these ideas with other artists in an effort to find pragmatic solutions that capitalized on their artistic skills, although unlike his other socially informed projects from this period, which involved interactive structures placed in public spaces, their efforts were constrained to hermetic discussions within 112 Greene. As such, the project was ultimately a utopian exercise, the result of which was an exhibition at 112 Greene Street held the following year, consisting primarily of anonymously displayed photographs of their observations of architectural failures using a uniform format and high-contrast black-and-white aesthetic.<sup>28</sup>

Goodden later remarked that the participatory work she made with Matta-Clark during this period was informed by the open-minded, ecologically conscious spirit of the era, which was also reflected in Beuys’s sculptures and performances of the late 1970s.<sup>29</sup> In Matta-Clark’s own body of work, this manifested itself particularly in sculptures and performances that drew on environmental concerns, undoubtedly informed by Smithson and Land art. Perhaps the best known of these was *Fresh Air Cart*, a participatory project in which the artist invited passersby to take a break from their daily lives and inhale a mixture of oxygen and nitrogen from a portable tank installed between two back-to-back

chairs on a small wheeled vehicle topped with a white canopy. Both a performance piece and a work of public art, *Fresh Art Cart* was a critique of big business's ignorance and exacerbation of environmental issues like air pollution as well as a public gesture that brought significance to individual acts of resistance. The cart was strategically parked in areas with a high traffic of businesspeople: outside the US Treasury building on Wall Street and in front of Grand Central Terminal at Forty-Second Street and Vanderbilt Avenue on two occasions in September 1972.<sup>30</sup>

Attributed to the "para-medical philanthropist" George Smudge when it was exhibited at 112 Greene Street later the same month, *Fresh Air Cart* was operated by actress Ginger J. Walker and painter Ed Baynard, rather than the artist himself.<sup>31</sup> The act of inviting others to perform in his stead, an early example of what art historian Claire Bishop calls "delegated performance," signals his desire to de-author his projects and bring more prominence to the interaction between participants and the work itself.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps the most object-based project in his



Gordon Matta-Clark, *Fresh Air Cart*, September 1972.  
Courtesy the Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark and David  
Zwirner, New York/London.

socially engaged repertoire, the cart was participatory in that members of the public were invited into physical interactions with its machinery. However, they were not necessarily forced into social exchanges with each other, the artist, or the cart's monitors (in fact, they were prevented from so doing by the air masks). Instead, their use of the cart exposed the societal mechanisms that maintained metropolitan smog and busy streets such as heavy industry, automobiles, and a high population density, while providing little opportunity for citizens to maintain a healthy lifestyle. With scant effort toward didacticism, the artist provided a humorous new perspective on the interaction between people and the environment, which has continued through conversations about air quality sparked by the cart's inclusion in numerous exhibitions.

Matta-Clark also had a keen interest in the emergence of graffiti, which he saw as a revolutionary way to bring art out of the studio.<sup>33</sup> Around this time, a veritable explosion of tags and murals could be seen everywhere from the subway to the street corner, thanks to individual artists and groups of taggers from neglected areas of the city like Harlem and the South Bronx. Matta-Clark considered the medium as a found material that was both social and transgressive. Not only was it a vernacular visual language that was inclusive of styles and forms of expression, but it also gave a voice to disenfranchised groups who had little sense of ownership over public spaces. Matta-Clark photographed spray-painted subway cars and walls for his 1973 series *Photoglyphs*, transforming this street art into long hand-colored scrolls that he proposed to exhibit at the annual outdoor Washington Square Art Fair that summer. Their unanimous rejection by the exhibition's jury prompted Matta-Clark to arrange his own counterexhibition, *Alternatives to the Washington Square Art Fair*, nearby on Mercer Street between West Third and Bleecker Streets in SoHo. There, he displayed the *Photoglyphs* alongside his parked delivery truck, which had been covered in brightly colored spray-painted designs and tags by South Bronx residents the day prior. During two weekend-long events in June 1973, the artist invited passersby to take pieces of *Graffiti Truck* home for display as works of art.<sup>34</sup>

*Graffiti Truck* was a protest against the contemporary model of urbanism that economically and racially segregated large sections of the population into less desirable areas of the city. Instead of purporting to speak for those communities, the artist allowed them to speak for themselves, using their own language. This had the dual effect of exposing the exclusivity of the New York art world, since the artist was publicly presenting—and thereby legitimizing—the creative expression of those deemed "vandals" by police and more affluent city residents. Recognizing that their talent merited recognition through display, distribution, and even sale, Matta-Clark provided them with an opportunity to



Gordon Matta-Clark, *Graffiti Truck*, 1973.  
Courtesy the Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark  
and David Zwirner, New York/London.

publicly express themselves within the artistic epicenter of the city, where their work might be seen by other artists and possibly collectors.

Nonetheless, as photographic evidence shows, the installation received few visitors, none of whom took Matta-Clark up on his offer to take a piece of the installation.<sup>35</sup> While Matta-Clark's established name in the art world was intended to elevate their work to the status of his peers', the efforts of the graffiti artists were again obscured when parts of the installation were later sold as Matta-Clark's work alone. In its focus on creating an aesthetic experience for participants who painted the truck and reliance on tangible art objects to convey his message, this work conveniently circumvents the so-called "ethical turn" in dematerialized, community-driven work that followed in the 1980s, by which the quality of projects was often gauged based entirely on an artist's ability to represent or identify with participants in their work.<sup>36</sup>

In the years that followed, Matta-Clark's numerous writings and interviews began to demonstrate a growing attraction to socialist ideals and giving back to the community in a more tangible way. This is particularly evident following a visit to Italy in November 1975, when he sought out a radical group of Marxist

teenagers who were occupying a small abandoned factory in Sesto San Giovanni in the hope of turning it into a community service center, into which he offered to make a building cut.<sup>37</sup> In his proposal, he said, "As an artist, for years I have endeavored to channel my actions toward an idea of social welfare. . . . I feel the need to become directly involved in a context that is physically, politically and socially structured, in short, to leave the studio and go out on the streets . . . to relate to those buildings that have been abandoned by a system that doesn't look after them, that imposes the use and fate of property only as an end in itself."<sup>38</sup> Like the young activists he addressed, Matta-Clark wanted institutions to serve the people—artists and non-artists alike—rather than the elite. Instead of overturning existing structures, however, he wanted to establish a coexisting alternative to support the needs of everyday citizens and nonmainstream artists. Such concerns were amplified following the tragic death of his brother, who fell from a window in Matta-Clark's loft in 1976. With the help of his girlfriend, Jane Crawford, he turned to Buddhism, which may have influenced his decision to engage in charity toward others as part of his mourning process.<sup>39</sup>

Over the next two years, Matta-Clark focused his energy on creating a positive environment for those who had been marginalized by society and empowering them to take ownership of their neighborhoods. To ensure that his efforts had longevity, he designed socially integrative projects that incorporated the preexisting efforts of the community and were intended to be self-sustainable. The first of these, an art center in the South Bronx conceived with Alanna Heiss, Robert Rauschenberg, and Robert Morris, failed to come to fruition.<sup>40</sup> However, it propelled the artist to propose an organization-cum-artwork, the Resource Center and Environmental Youth Program for Loisaida, for which he was awarded a prestigious John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship in 1977.<sup>41</sup> With this money, the artist purchased a building on East Second Street between First and Second Avenues on the Lower East Side (often called Loisaida by the area's Spanish-speaking residents) through an organization called Sweat Equity, which offered abandoned buildings to potential tenants at low interest rates in exchange for their labor during its renovation. The Resource Center project merged concerns of the area's community action groups, gardening initiatives, and alternative living arrangements with the underlying themes Matta-Clark had developed through his activities in SoHo. However, instead of enlisting other artists for this project, he hoped to involve the area's disenfranchised youth as his collaborators.

The Resource Center involved two aspects: first, a community space where materials and equipment could be salvaged for recycle or resale; and second, a free program that involved training neighborhood youth to renovate and



maintain buildings for the use of the community taught by Matta-Clark, Jene Highstein, Suzanne Harris, and Fraser Sinclair, among others. The “informal school of the streets” was intended to inspire the youth to become leaders of future projects that were in line with this belief by gaining technical and organizational skills. Only then, in Matta-Clark’s vision, would the site be “responsive to the expressive will of its occupants.”<sup>42</sup> The project had the dual effect of making the participants employable, truly embodying the artist’s desire to transform the area through its own positive efforts. Sadly, the artist was only able to help them build a few concrete columns on an empty lot and initiate the cleanup of the building’s storefront before his untimely death from pancreatic cancer on August 26, 1978. As an unfulfilled proposal, the Resource Center merely set the stage for other artists to engage directly with communities about issues that most affected them, establishing a model of social engagement by which a project can be considered both an aesthetic proposal and a two-way collaboration with public audiences.

On January 11, 1974, Beuys gave a contentious lecture at the New School in New York, in which he made a case for the necessity of “social sculpture” as a means to resist capitalist tendencies in art. This was the first encounter many US artists had with his idea that art could revolutionize society. Although Beuys was lambasted by critics for his lack of pragmatism and the opacity of his utopian thought, many artists warmed to the idea that there could be no boundaries between artistic disciplines and professional specializations, and that all people had creative potential that might be used to shape a better society. It is possible that Matta-Clark encountered Beuys on this occasion, or that he saw film documentation of the event screened the next day at 112 Greene, or that he read the transcript of the lecture in the pages of *Avalanche* magazine.<sup>43</sup> It is also possible that Matta-Clark met Beuys in person several years later in 1977, while he was in Kassel, Germany, for the installation of *Jacob’s Ladder* at documenta 6. Throughout that summer, Beuys held FIU workshops on topics such as immigration, education reform, and nuclear energy that ran in tandem with his sculptural installation *Honey Pump in the Workplace*.<sup>44</sup> Beuys was convinced that the transformations in energy embodied in these interactions, like those in Matta-Clark’s activities at the Resource Center, could be used to holistically reorganize social structures.

The socially engaged artwork that each artist produced during the 1970s demonstrates that a work of art can concurrently serve as an aesthetic proposition and as a method to ameliorate problematic political and economic structures. Their exchanges with audiences involving both objects and dialogue

opened up symbolic space for real change to occur. However, their work also shows the limits of art’s larger political resonance. Without a trained team to carry out his vision, Matta-Clark’s youth program fell apart following his death in 1978 (most of Beuys’s projects met a similar fate). Although his beliefs may have been revolutionary, in that he empowered people who didn’t otherwise have the opportunity for creative or political expression, as an artist Matta-Clark lacked the power to actually realize the utopian citizen-oriented spaces he imagined because he lacked the practical ability to put his plans into action. As aesthetic propositions, Matta-Clark’s socially engaged projects held symbolic resonance primarily for those who witnessed them firsthand.

Matta-Clark’s interventions in the public sphere set aside considerations of economic worth by drawing attention to the inherent spatial and social value of human capital, a concept that was central to Beuys’s concept of social sculpture. Matta-Clark demonstrated that with minimal alterations, the built environment could take into account the history and socioeconomic circumstances of the community, and further that it could attend to their needs, rather than capitulating to the constraints imposed by property developers and city administrators. By bringing people into the streets, Matta-Clark drew attention to New York’s growing inequality, passive compartmentalization of social and economic classes, and long-established racial segregation. He promoted social interaction as a way to facilitate new relationships between people and space that extended beyond the physical to include historical and cultural considerations. Employing varying levels of participation—from direct interactions between the artist and participants to delegated performance and service/hospitality—Matta-Clark countered the alienation of urban life by prioritizing the existing context of a place and empowering residents to shape their own surroundings.

Matta-Clark has been particularly influential since the 1990s, when artists tried to conceive of more inclusive, social, and participatory art, as well as to address broader political and social concerns. One of his primary contributions was his incorporation of others in the production and presentation of the artwork. This collaborative approach was rooted in his belief that artistic genius was a vestige of the past and was no longer applicable to the contemporary context, and that artists should find a way to eliminate hierarchic relationships between each other and their audiences. Ultimately, neither he nor Beuys was able to escape singular authorship, however, as nearly the entirety of the projects described above are attributed to their names alone. This does not distract from the fact that Matta-Clark, like Beuys, thought that art had a broader responsibility to culture at large and should not be hermetic, confined to galleries and museums. Although he was not able to realize his most integrative projects,



Gordon Matta-Clark, A Resource Center and  
Environmental Youth Program for Loisaida, 1978.  
Courtesy the Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark and  
David Zwirner, New York/London.



Joseph Beuys, FIU workshop at documenta 6, Summer 1977.  
 Photograph by Joachim Scherzer / © documenta Archive.

like the Resource Center, he intended his work to play a role in the physical and social transformation of a place. He did this not by challenging his participants' worldview or shocking them into a new reality, as artists would do in the 1990s, but by making work that promoted giving back to the community through the act of exchange. Matta-Clark enacted this on a hyperlocal level by addressing the concerns of a micro-community such as SoHo artists, taggers, or Loisaia youth, rather than establishing a more universal model for society as a whole.

Matta-Clark was known for his generosity and his vivacious spirit, which permeated his artistic production and presentation. This is clearly seen in his use of food as a way to attract participants to his work and incorporate them in his process, as with *Pig Roast* and *Food*, where artists could interact with and serve an everyday public. An echo of Matta-Clark's approach can be seen in the work of Rirkrit Tiravanija, a US-based artist with a nomadic international background comparable to Matta-Clark's, who has incorporated meals into his installations to breach the boundaries between public and private space and to navigate his own cultural identity. For *Untitled (Pad Thai)*, first staged at the Paula Allen



Rirkrit Tiravanija, *Untitled (Pad Thai)*, 1990.  
 Courtesy Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York.

Gallery in New York in 1990, Tiravanija offered Thai noodles to visitors in an effort to generate dialogue between strangers. However, like Matta-Clark in his early projects at 112 Greene, Tiravanija has been criticized for limiting his audience to conscious supporters of the arts.<sup>45</sup> Particularly since 2000, artists have used cooking to bring people together for a politically focused discussion with didactic goals. This can be seen in the work of US artists such as Michael Rakowitz, whose collaborative cooking project *Enemy Kitchen* (2003–present) generates conversations about cultural visibility and the US–Iraq war, and Jon Rubin and Dawn Weleski, whose Conflict Kitchen restaurant in Pittsburgh features a rotating selection of cuisines from countries with which the United States is currently in conflict.

Matta-Clark's use of space as a mediator for political discussion has also been an important referent for artists whose work brings attention to blighted or neglected urban spaces. This was a prominent part of site-specific exhibitions like those curated by Jacob in the early 1990s, such as *Places with a Past* (1991) in Charleston, South Carolina, and *Culture in Action* (1993–94) in Chicago,

for which she invited artists including Anne Hamilton, David Hammons, Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle, and Mark Dion to create installations using abandoned architecture and engage underserved communities in participatory artworks. Rick Lowe and a group of African American artists also took on this theme in 1992, when they started Project Row Houses in Houston's Third Ward, a neighborhood-turned-artwork that employs the architecture of the shotgun house to draw attention to urban blight, segregation, and the need for affordable housing. Identifying itself with the idea of social sculpture, Project Row Houses incorporates aspects of Beuys's expanded concept of creativity while addressing local concerns through its education offerings, residential housing program for young mothers, and public art installations. More recently, Chicago artist Theaster Gates has teamed up with local politicians to turn this model into a nonprofit venture by founding the Rebuild Foundation, through which he manages cultural spaces like a movie theater and record shop in the city's underresourced African American neighborhoods. While these projects have extended the institutional challenge proposed by alternative spaces in the 1970s by decentering creative production away from New York and into smaller cities, on the other hand they have also been easily capitalized upon by developers hoping to turn blighted areas into attractive places for potential homebuyers.

Employing his own form of social sculpture at a time when New York was on the brink of collapse, Matta-Clark used art to combat the constant threat of displacement, a lack of city services, and growing inequality by transforming abandoned spaces into places that reflected the basic needs of residents. More than just incorporating marginalized groups in the production of these works, he activated their innate creativity toward the realization of this vision, much as Beuys expanded the concept of art to include the contributions of nonprofessionals. Through works of art that addressed transformation, they inspired people to direct their energy toward bringing about positive changes in their daily lives. As a model for the type of community-specific social practice that emerged in the Reagan–Bush era, Matta-Clark's socially engaged projects demonstrate how art can be a beacon for the resistance of societal problems, including inequality and the destruction of the environment.



Project Row Houses, c. 1999. Photograph by Rick Lowe.  
Courtesy Project Row Houses.

1 Although Beuys had been developing his concept of social sculpture since his involvement with the West German student movement in 1967, he first expressed his ideas in English in 1974. Joseph Beuys, "I Am Searching for Field Character," in *Art into Society, Society into Art: Seven German Artists*, ed. Caroline Tisdall (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1974), 48.

2 Elsewhere I have discussed Beuys's concept of social sculpture as a formative principle in the work of US social practice of the 1990s, including his relationship to artists Suzanne Lacy and Rick Lowe. See Cara Jordan, "The Evolution of Social Sculpture in the United States: Joseph Beuys and the Work of Suzanne Lacy and Rick Lowe," *Public Art Dialogue* 3, no. 2 (Autumn 2013): 144–67; Cara Jordan, "Joseph Beuys and Social Sculpture in the United States" (PhD diss., City University of New York Graduate Center, 2017). Thanks to Kamyar Hariri for his research assistance on this essay.

3 Masayo Duus, *The Life of Isamu Noguchi: Journey without Borders* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 181–83.

4 Beuys—together with his student Johannes Stüttgen and artist Bazon Brock—established the German Student Party (Deutsche Studenten Partei) at the Düsseldorf Academy of Art, where he was then teaching, on June 22, 1967. The party was closely linked to student movements in West Germany, which had been growing in opposition to nuclear armament, the Vietnam conflict, and the urgent need for education reform, and was catalyzed by the shooting of a student during a protest in West Berlin earlier that month.

5 Gwendolyn Owens, "Lessons Learned Well: The Education of Gordon Matta-Clark," in *Gordon Matta-Clark: You Are the Measure*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 166. The SDS was one of the largest student organizations on the Cornell campus during this period, so Matta-Clark's participation is unsurprising; however, he was not a leader of the group. Bruce Dancis, e-mail to author, February 17, 2017.

6 Entropy, a principle of thermodynamics, is a measurement of the energy used when the universe changes from order to disorder, as when one form of matter transforms into another. Pamela M. Lee, *Object to Be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 39–46.

7 According to his widow, Jane Crawford, Matta-Clark owned many books on alchemy. Pedro Donoso, ed., *Gordon Matta-Clark: Experience Becomes the Object = La Experiencia Se Convierte en Objeto* (Barcelona: Polígrafa, 2015), 109. Beuys's spiritual beliefs were informed by the writings of Rudolf Steiner, an Austrian philosopher known for establishing the anthroposophist movement in the early twentieth century. See Wolfgang Zumdieck, *Death Keeps Me Awake: Joseph Beuys and Rudolf Steiner, Foundations of Their Thought* (Baunach, Germany: Spurbuchverlag, 2013).

8 See Arlene Raven, ed., *Art in the Public Interest*, Studies in the Fine Arts 32 (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989); Suzanne Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995).

9 Matta-Clark produced only a few projects with overt political themes. One example is a series of drawings from 1975 that he called "Hammer and Sycle" (a combination of "sickle" and "circle") in which he would inscribe an image of a "sycle" onto layers of glass placed atop a hammer directly on the wall. Sabine Breitwieser, ed., *Reorganizing Structure by Drawing Through It: Zeichnung bei Gordon Matta-Clark; Werkverzeichnis* (Vienna: Generali Foundation, 1997), 16. Although it is unknown if Matta-Clark took part in any political demonstrations, he made a public statement of protest against the brutal dictatorship in Brazil through an open letter demanding that artists boycott the 1971 São Paulo Bienal. Grace Glueck, "U.S. Decides Not to Take Part in Sao Paulo Bienal This Year," *New York Times*, May 31, 1971.

10 See Jane Crawford, "Gordon Matta-Clark: In Context," in *Gordon Matta-Clark: Moment to Moment; Space*, ed. Hubertus von Amelnunxen,

Angela Lammert, and Philip Ursprung (Nuremberg, Germany: Verlag für Moderne Kunst, 2012), 152–68.

11 See Melissa Rachleff, "Do It Yourself: Histories of Alternatives," in *Alternative Histories: New York Art Spaces, 1960 to 2010*, ed. Lauren Rosati and Mary Anne Staniszewski (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 23–40. This movement has reached cult status; however, there was already a thriving artistic community in the area by the 1950s, as explored in the exhibition *Inventing Downtown: Artist-Run Galleries in New York City 1952–1965* at the Grey Art Gallery, New York University, New York, January 10–April 1, 2017.

12 This includes Vito Acconci, Alice Aycock, Jennifer Bartlett, Mel Bochner, Trisha Brown, and Philip Glass, among many others. See Jessamyn Fiore, *112 Greene Street: The Early Years, 1970–1974*, ed. Louise Sørensen (Santa Fe, NM: Radius, 2012).

13 Lee, *Object to Be Destroyed*, 61. The activities of 112 Greene began to slow beginning in 1974, when Lew received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York State Council on the Arts. He left the building in 1976, but the organization eventually reopened in a new location on Spring Street with the name White Columns in 1979. Louise Sørensen, introduction to Fiore, *112 Greene Street*, 11.

14 *Under the Brooklyn Bridge* (also known as the *Brooklyn Bridge Event*), New York, May 22–24, 1971. Matta-Clark also produced a second film, *Fire Child* (or *Fire Boy*), in conjunction with his project.

15 *Jacks* was photographed by Matta-Clark's partner at the time, Carol Goodden, for a project in the artist-run publication *Avalanche* in fall 1971. *Garbage Wall* was originally produced for an ongoing performance consisting of domestic activities at St. Mark's Church from April 20 to 23, 1970, but was reconstructed numerous times both during the artist's lifetime and posthumously.

16 *Pig Roast*, 1971, Super 8 film, color, silent, 21:50 mins. Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark, David Zwirner Gallery, New York.

17 The Organisation für direkte Demokratie (Organization for Direct Democracy) was founded and managed by Beuys, Stüttgen, and activist Karl Fastabend in 1970 and presented as Beuys's contribution to documenta 5 in 1972. Their purpose was to educate average people about the working process of the democratic system and how they might avoid engaging with the dominant political party system. While they initially discouraged citizens from voting in elections as a means to break the "dictatorship" of the party system, Beuys used their office to urge a broad cross-section of the public to enact their own legislative referenda through a direct democratic process.

18 Goodden sold the restaurant in 1974, but it continued under different management until the early 1980s. Rosati and Staniszewski, *Alternative Histories*, 134. See also Lori Waxman, "The Banquet Years: FOOD, A SoHo Restaurant," *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture* 8, no. 4 (Autumn 2008): 24–33.

19 Milton Glaser and Jerome Snyder, "The Underground Gourmet: Food, Glorious Food," *New York Magazine*, January 3, 1972, 65.

20 Goodden in Mary Jane Jacob, *Gordon Matta-Clark: A Retrospective* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1985), 39; Donoso, *Gordon Matta-Clark*, 28. The artist filmed their activities for *Food*, 1972, 16 mm film; black and white, sound; 43 minutes. Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark, David Zwirner Gallery, New York.

21 Notable parallels can be made with US Fluxus artist Alison Knowles's event score *Make a Salad*, first performed in London in 1962; Mierle Laderman Ukeles's maintenance art performances of the early 1970s; Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975); and Swiss artist Daniel Spoerri's restaurant in Düsseldorf, which opened in 1968.

22 Beuys used margarine (fat) and felt in his sculptures beginning in the early 1960s, which he later related to the story of a fictitious plane crash that he experienced while in the Nazi Luftwaffe during the war. According to his vision, the materials, which symbolized the

healing of bodily trauma, could be a metaphor for a collective experience of war, loss, tragedy, and destruction in tangible form.

23 Mary Jane Jacob, "Reciprocal Generosity," in *What We Want Is Free: Generosity and Exchange in Recent Art*, ed. Ted Purves (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 4.

24 The group included Laurie Anderson, Tina Girouard, Suzanne Harris, Jene Highstein, Bernard Kirschenbaum, Richard Landry, Richard Nonas, and other occasional visitors.

25 Judith Russi Kirshner, "The Idea of Community in the Work of Gordon Matta-Clark," in *Gordon Matta-Clark*, ed. Corinne Diserens (London: Phaidon, 2003), 154.

26 The FIU was officially established at the home of lawyer and activist Klaus Staeck on April 27, 1973. At this meeting, roles were established among a small group of collaborators: Staeck became the chairman; Karlsruhe painting professor Georg Meistermann, the deputy; journalist Willi Bongard, the secretary; and Beuys, the founding rector.

27 Von Amelunxen, Lammert, and Ursprung, *Gordon Matta-Clark*, 24. Nonetheless, there was a strong feminist perspective expressed in their proposals, thanks to the efforts of Suzanne Harris.

28 *The Anarchitecture Show*, 112 Greene Street, New York, March 9–20, 1974. Included anonymous works by Anderson, Girouard, Harris, Highstein, Kirschenbaum, Landry, Matta-Clark, and Nonas.

29 Rosati and Staniszewski, "Interview with Carol Goodden: Food," in Rosati and Staniszewski, *Alternative Histories*, 60. Environmentalism was also a major thread in Beuys's work, including *7,000 Oaks* for documenta 7 (1981–87), and in his role in the founding of the West German Green Party in the late 1970s. See Cara Jordan, "Appealing for an Alternative: Ecology and Environmentalism in Joseph Beuys' Projects of Social Sculpture," *Seismopolite: Journal of Art and Politics* 15 (September 2016), [www.seismopolite.com](http://www.seismopolite.com).

30 *Fresh Air Cart* was parked on Wall Street on September 9, 1972, and on the corner of East

Forty-Second Street and Vanderbilt Avenue the following week. A film of the performance was made by video artist Juan Downey. Jacob, *Gordon Matta-Clark*, 46.

31 *Fresh Air Cart* appeared in an untitled group exhibition at 112 Greene Street September 23–October 6, 1972.

32 Claire Bishop, "Delegating Performance: Outsourcing Authenticity," *October* 140 (Spring 2012): 91–112.

33 Fiore, *112 Greene Street*, 147.

34 *Alternatives* was staged June 8–9 and 15–16, 1973. Sussman, *Gordon Matta-Clark*, 205.

35 Jane Crawford, interview with the author, Westport, CT, February 5, 2017.

36 In her book *Artificial Hells*, Bishop clarified this "ethical turn" in the evaluation of participatory art: since artists have a hard time describing the artistic merit of their projects, they resort to defending collaboration in terms of ethics. Singular authorship is vilified for its connection to the commercial art system, whereas collaborative practice, which suggests an alternate form of social unity, is valued regardless of its actual outcome. Bishop, "Delegating Performance," 12.

37 Matta-Clark also proposed to cut an *Arc de Triomphe for Workers* into the factory wall as a tribute to their efforts. However, the project was never completed because the authorities raided the building once they were notified of his intentions. Jacob, *Gordon Matta-Clark*, 89.

38 Gordon Matta-Clark, proposal to the workers of Sesto San Giovanni, Milan, 1975, in Gloria Moure, ed., *Gordon Matta-Clark: Works and Collected Writings* (Barcelona: Polígrafa, 2006), 120.

39 Jane Crawford, interview with the author, Westport, CT, February 5, 2017.

40 Ibid.

41 See Gordon Matta-Clark, "A Resource Center and Environmental Youth Program for Loisaída: A Proposal," c. August 1976, PHCON2002:0016:001:085, Gordon Matta-Clark Archives, Canadian Center for Architecture, Montreal.

42 Ibid.

43 See Joseph Beuys, Willoughby Sharp, and Andy Mann, *Joseph Beuys' Public Dialogue at the New School, New York* (New York: Monday/Wednesday/Friday Video Club, 1974); Joseph Beuys, "Joseph Beuys . . . Public Dialogue," *Avantgarde*, no. 9 (May–June 1974): 5–7.

44 Crawford accompanied Matta-Clark to Kassel and remembers attending one of Beuys's workshops; however, she was unable to participate because that day's session was in German. Jane Crawford, interview with the author, Westport, CT, February 5, 2017.

45 His work was used as an example to frame Claire Bishop's critique of relational aesthetics. See Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October*, no. 110 (Autumn 2004): 51–80.

# GORDON MATTA- CLARK

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