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Do *you* have something to contribute?

The whole 'secret admirer' thing is hot.

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ON THE COVER

ADRIANA DISMAN

Is she your mother?

March 2014

Performers: Steen Starr and Miriam Sherwin

Adriana Disman is a performance art maker, thinker, and curator based in Toronto and Montreal. Disman recently curated LINK&PIN performance art series (Toronto), sits on the board of directors of The School of Making Thinking (New York), and is launching Lines of Flight (LoF) Institute for Performance, Spirituality, and Politics (Montreal) with Danièle Bourque. This fall, she will be performing at Calgary's Intersite Visual Arts Festival and embarking on a 7 month performance and photo project with Montreal's DARE-DARE. In spring 2015, she has a forthcoming text on *ART BETRAYAL* in Canadian Theatre Review and is editing Theatre Review in Canada's *Forums* section. She holds an M.A. in Theatre and Performance Studies from York and is a graduate of the Neighborhood Playhouse School of the Theatre (NYC).

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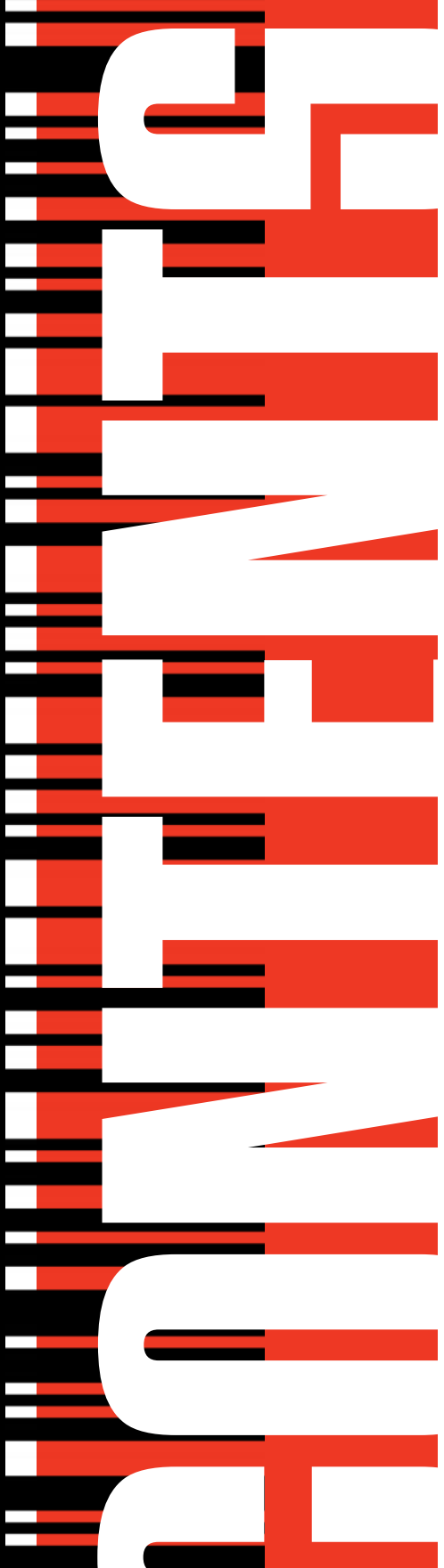
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How to have and hold

This month our contributors talk about houses, silver vanity mirrors, cell phones and plots of land. In an issue devoted to the “not for sale,” it’s a surprising focus. But it seems that, even in the wake of the immaterialized art object, people still want something to have and to hold. So our writers decided to make objects their subjects. At least we needn’t worry about running out of material, because

Penny Leong Browne has case studies scattered throughout. The objects speak for themselves, quite literally. Click on the images and see what they have to say. In each case study, Leong Browne traces the particular transformation of an object. A vanity mirror purchased on Craigslist hosts a poetic reconsideration of anonymity; an abandoned toy in an antiques shop bears witness to the futility of attentive parenting. Regardless of any discounts, Leong’s analyses solidify that any purchase comes with priceless implications.

We hope that you’re looking at Leong Browne’s art project somewhere interesting, and preferably on your phone. More and more these days, art viewers are trading in aura for a little augmented reality, which is a decent exchange if you aren’t a fan of leaving the house. As

Christopher Williams-Wynn notes, the phone in your pocket mediates experiences with art more than ever before, and increasingly defines the limits of exhibitions. In the past, exhibitions needed a space, something to ground them. Today they only need a receptive pair of eyes.

But increased mobility doesn’t always signal increased freedom, as *images accrue value in relation to one another, and in relation to the contexts in which they are viewed*. So pick your place wisely, and do this issue justice.

But if exhibition space in particular, and physical space more generally, continues becoming less and less important, what about those spaces that were already unimportant? The gutterspaces, the non-places? No one seems sure about their status now, but several decades ago they were being purchased by Gordon Matta-Clark.

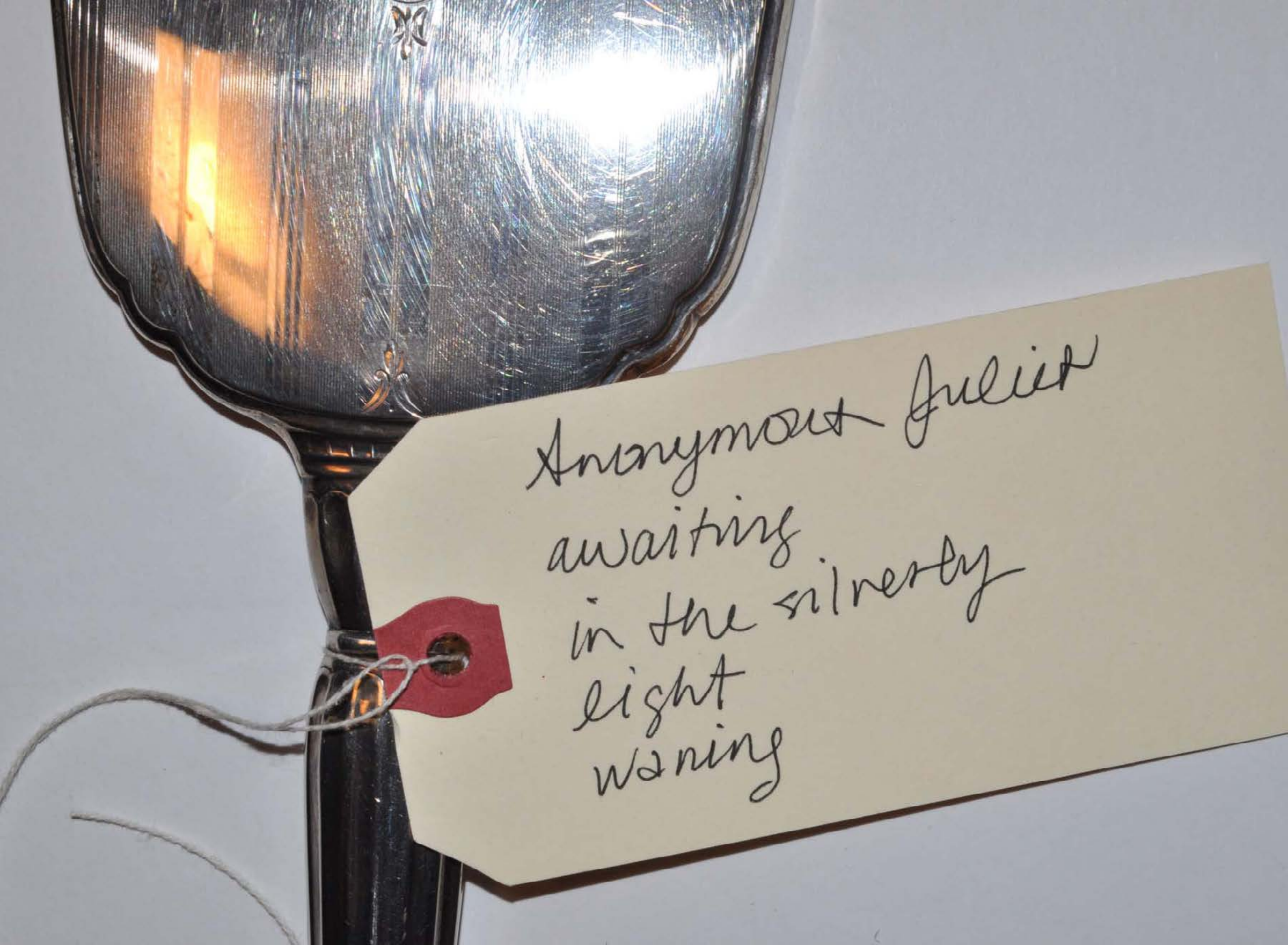
Greg Blair dissects the precursors to Matta-Clark’s (in)famous cut pieces. Looking at prior works that could be considered metaphoric ‘cuts,’ he counters criticism that Matta’s cuts were explicitly destructive, overly masculine gestures.

Matta-Clark’s purchases and actions point to the intangible: experience.

But where does experience lie on the continuum of the “not for sale”? Adam Barbu would suggest that, increasingly, it lies squarely in the commercial end. He looks to Alain de Botton’s recent curatorial interview at the Art Gallery of Ontario, “Art as Therapy,” and tries to determine what, precisely, is at stake.

Leong Browne purchased some of her objects second hand, the phones in Williams-Wynn’s article certainly don’t come for free, Matta-Clark bought the plots of land to enact the metaphoric cut and de Botton’s therapeutic experience requires the price of admission.

The resulting art might not be for sale, but make no mistake: it isn’t cheap.



Anonymous Juliet
awaiting
in the silver
light
wining

WHERE IS THE EXHIBITION?

Information Technology, the Internet and Exhibition Value

CHRISTOPHER WILLIAMS-WYNN

Over the past decade, developments in information technology, understood as the combination of telecommunications and computing technology, have accompanied an increase in the ubiquity of devices for mobile computing. The most prevalent device, the smartphone, combines a range of functions: its users can make calls, send messages and access the Internet, all through a small touch screen. And the ascendancy of the Internet itself as a means of networked communication has fuelled the popularity of these devices. A growing set of artistic projects and practices can be located at the nexus of these developments: the motility of viewers meets the mobility of images. This double action recalls Nikos Papastergiadis's

thesis that mobility, whether of individuals, cultures or ideas, constitutes a precondition for the production of art. More recently still, David Joselit argues that contemporary art has been transformed by the rise of digital networks, such that artists (and architects) are constantly reconfiguring and disseminating material, both using and producing networks. As these artistic works can be readily viewed online, they invite reflection upon the status and location of the exhibition, understood as a place or site for the viewing of art. Viewing a work no longer seems tethered to any particular site as spectators can encounter works in a range of potential conditions and locations, stemming from the impact of digital, networked technology.

In a previous age of image circulation during the early twentieth century, Walter Benjamin discussed the mechanical reproducibility afforded by technologies such as film and photography, and its effect upon the art object. For Benjamin, the original work of art possesses an aura, a form of authenticity and value that accrues on account of its location within a specific spatiotemporal setting and its particular material qualities. Mechanical

reproduction, he writes, threatens to destroy this auratic component of the work of art for two key reasons. Firstly, mechanical reproduction is "more independent of the original than manual reproduction," because technologies such as photography are able to detect and convey aspects of the image not usually perceptible to the human eye. Secondly, mechanical reproduction "can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself." These possibilities enable the work of art to be removed from its dependence upon tradition and ritual.

Positioned within its spatiotemporal context, the work of art was previously bound up with ritual and cult acts; its aura was "never entirely separated from its ritual function." In contrast to this cult value, Benjamin advances the concept of exhibition value. Although vaguely defined, he associates the exhibition value of a work of art with its being on view, as opposed to being used in ritual. In this focus upon visibility exists an implied turn towards the conditions of display, while noting that mechanical reproducibility allows the work to appear in multiple exhibition contexts. Unhinged from specific spaces

and particular uses, the exhibition value of the circulating image seems analogous to exchange value. That is, images accrue value in relation to one another, and in relation to the contexts in which they are viewed. Despite the potential for mass reproduction and a desire, on Benjamin's part, for their appearance in multiple contexts, one circles back not towards a specific instance of spatiotemporal surroundings, but towards a specific type of spatiotemporal experience: that of the gallery or museum.

If the white walls of the gallery or the controlled conditions of the museum aim to structure the reception of art, and so exert influence over the exhibition value of a work of art, installation practices could be an attempt by artists to re-take control over the conditions of display. Indeed, Boris Groys describes the installation as a mode of art production and display through which the artist attempts to exert control over the conditions of reception. As he writes, the "artistic installation is a way to expand the domain of the sovereign rights of the artist from the individual art object to that of the exhibition space itself." The installation, in establishing its presence in a specific place and time, at least

for the duration of its exhibition, marks a return to a kind of auratic experience. By permitting entry to a multitude of individuals into the space of the installation, it presents an "aura of the here and now," an aura reflecting an age of "mass-cultural transitory communities." Despite this type of dynamic, active experience, and although an installation may be staged in different locales, it nonetheless exists as a self-contained space centred on the viewers' experience of both the installation and themselves. Its exhibition value, a quality of visibility associated with an aesthetic mode of perception, is retained in an expanded form. No longer limited to the objects on display, it extends to the individuals circulating within. Exhibition value becomes a process of seeing and being seen.

While such installation work is generally displayed within a gallery or museum, Miwon Kwon has shown that site-specific art, which is created in response to a particular environment, has become increasingly disconnected from the gallery or museum.

Beginning with work from the 1960s, she discusses the phenomenological minimalism associated with artists such as Richard Serra and Robert Barry. Although Serra

is perhaps best known for his monumental Corten steel sculptures, in the late 1960s he produced more intimate works. To create *Splashing* (1968) he threw molten lead against the base of a gallery wall. The site of installation therefore directly influenced the form of the work through physical interaction. Although less process-orientated, some of Barry's installation work, comprising threads of wire and nylon, invites similar reflections on spatial relations. Produced specifically for their sites of exhibition, his delicate threads invite the viewer to examine the material itself and consider the spatial relationship between object, viewer and context. Despite their differences, both these practices appear indebted to the physical object and immediate site of experience.

Later, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, Kwon perceives a shift in site-specific artistic practices. Instead of exploring formal relationships between object and site, artists critiqued art institutions. She associates this intersection of physical and discursive space with, for example, the art of Hans Haacke and Michael Asher. Haacke's *MoMA Poll* (1970), for instance, established a ballot box to collect visitors' votes on Nelson

Rockefeller's policies regarding the Vietnam War. At the time, Rockefeller was State Governor of New York and a trustee of the Museum of Modern Art. Explicitly linking the art institution to politics, this kind of site-specific work undermines its supposed autonomy. In contrast to these strident statements, Asher re-configures museum space, removing walls and inserting partitions into the gallery. In so doing, he reveals the various display tactics that frame the art object and influence viewers' perception. Thus, in broad terms, institutional critique examined the particular social, political and cultural structures influencing the reception of art acknowledging the ideology of the museum and gallery setting.

Beyond phenomenological responses to sites and the development of institutional critiques, Kwon notes a further shift towards site-specificity defined in a more intangible manner. This shift in emphasis, she notes, leads to a "*discursively* determined site that is delineated as a field of knowledge, intellectual exchange, or cultural debate." The site, therefore, is less about actual space and more about the particular disciplines, ideas or emotions that the artwork engages with or

generates. The result of this interaction between real space and discursive concerns engenders “site as predominantly an intertextually coordinated, multiply located, discursive field of operation.” This shift represents a move towards a nomadic kind of art, a dynamic approach in which movement transforms the concept of site. In her analysis, the very concept of site-specificity is contested, for the concept interweaves physical, discursive and dynamic elements.

As this brief account of installation and site-specific practice indicates, there are two counter movements: installation practices reinstate the centrality of physical site, while the history of site-specific work moves towards a concern with discursive frames. At this juncture between physical instance and discursive frame it seems appropriate to consider Internet-based practices together with the mobile screens of smartphones and other electronic devices. They would appear to press against the idea of the exhibition as limited to any particular spatial setting and all the associations that attend it. Work constructed and viewed on the Internet extends the sense of installation as a means for drawing together various ele-

ments, while dispensing with the aura proposed by Benjamin. There is, then, no single space or time in which to view the event. Engaging in this purported freedom of access and movement seems liberatory—a kind of engagement unfettered by the demands or impositions of the artist, the gallery and museum space. It signals a loss of control over the conditions of viewing, perhaps akin to the artist’s general inability to control the reception of the art object once it enters the art gallery or museum space. However, with the advent of digital and (especially) public screen culture, the range of potential forces and experiences impacting the reception and meaning of an exhibition of work expands, and the limits of the exhibition further unravel.

The role of the frame as a paragon permitting the recognition of the work *as art* seems inescapable, even if viewing practices migrate towards mobile electronic devices. However, the terms of the frame itself have changed, for the viewing conditions surrounding this frame are not necessarily controlled or delimited. In fact, these viewing contexts are potentially infinite. If there are two recursive frames, that of the screen and that of the place of viewing, there

seems a contrary movement—while the screen has shrunk to the size of a smartphone, the place of viewing has expanded to almost any site the viewer cares to visit (which still allows access to the content). As Adriana de Souza e Silva writes, “[m]obile technologies bring these multi-user and playful experiences to physical space, encouraging users to go out on the streets, and bringing new meanings to familiar spaces.” While these changes recall Kwon’s shift towards the nomadic and discursively structured site, they also indicate technological circumstances wherein information technology both constitutes and counters the exhibition—it becomes a portal to the work but disperses the viewing context across any number of sites.

This shift can be seen in practices deploying mobile forms of information technology. As mobile devices have become more readily available and affordable, artists have begun to explore the potentials of augmented reality (AR). As a form of practice, augmented reality supplements physical experience with visual (or other) information derived from digital technologies, delivered through mobile devices such as smartphones. In effect, AR combines

both virtual and real experience. In this form of art, Amanda Starling Gould explains that “a digital installation e/merges into the physical experience of our bodies as we wander within its invisibly annotated milieu.” Reliant upon mobile technology, AR art allows the viewer to circulate through physical space while receiving information created by the artist. Given the prime position of the viewer in such work, it would appear that the viewer adopts a greater degree of responsibility for and control over the specific experience of the work. Rather than acting solely as a spectator in the controlled conditions of the gallery or museum, the viewer becomes an active participant—even crucial—in the production of the work.

With relative freedom of movement, AR art expands upon the mobility of the spectator that informs exhibitions of both installation and video art. Whereas Liz Kotz argues that contemporary video work often reiterates the methods of mass entertainment, it also retains the potential for intervening in contexts beyond the museum or gallery, as in cases of public display. AR art, however, shifts the display screen from the architecture of public

space onto the body of the viewer, meaning that both the screen and the viewer are mobile. This shift is evident in the work of Dutch artist Sander Veenhof, whose practice combines physical movement with personal digital technologies. In his work *Meet Your Stranger* (2012-ongoing), GPS tracking technology embedded in smartphones allows participants to locate each other within their physical vicinity. Upon 'finding' each other, their smartphone will display a physical gesture pattern that they must use in order to identify each other as participants. As Veenhof explains, the "visible gesture overcomes—in a very analogue way—the impreciseness of GPS technique [sic]." Cognisant of the limitations of digital technology, Veenhof's work conjoins both physical and virtual interaction, and points to their imbrication within contemporary social experience.

This merger of virtual and physical environments, and the associated movement of participants, signals the possibility of further challenging established modes of exhibition value. With the viewer roaming over potentially loosely defined sites and subject to the contingent circumstances therein, AR art such as Veenhof's marks a shift in exhibition value. Incorporating social and virtual experience while also distributing it spatially, the actual exhibition site is more difficult to define and delimit, sapping the kind of control Groys identifies as part of installation art. Indeed, the significant reliance upon technology, and its propensity for glitches and failure, further curtails the limits of artistic control. Whereas exhibition value fundamentally turns on the visibility of the generally discrete art object, and may encourage phenomenological responses (as in Minimalist art), AR work centres on a triadic relation between digital information, physical environment and bodily experience.

While contingencies within the environment cannot be controlled or predicted by the artist in advance, AR art nonetheless attempts to shape the contours of experience within a certain physical area. Other practices are less dependent upon a given exhibition site, because the exhibition site itself is seen as inherently a product of networked communication facilitated by the Internet. As the Internet forms an integral component of such works, whether for distribution or reception, they may be termed "Internet-aware." Engaging with the networked world of image circulation, such

work further transforms the concept of exhibition value. In a world of hypervisibility, of status updates and Twitter posts, a glut of images appears a given. Discussing the prevalence of digital forms of image editing and recombination, Jos de Mul posits that exhibition value has been transformed into "manipulation value," which refers to the capacity for a virtual object to be altered by users. However, for de Mul this shift is limited to online and digital experience. Given the reliance upon the Internet for all manner of services, communications and transactions, it appears that its logic of exchange is not limited to a purely virtual experience. It is not simply that images are circulated and altered online, but that they inform and structure the experience of both online and offline contexts.

In a similar vein, albeit more directly concerned with the cultural effects of networked capitalism, Hito Steyerl writes that the Internet gives rise to circulationism. Moving beyond the production of unique objects and accompanying notions of authenticity and originality, this form of (artistic) work centres on postproduction and distribution, a form of output stemming from the manipulation of extant content and reflecting its

online existence. Although the potential for supposedly equal access and the sharing of content echo the remix culture of deejaying advocated by Nicolas Bourriaud, she extends her analysis by considering the risk that such forms of content creation will be co-opted by corporate interests and bent to the demands of "productivity, acceleration, and heroic exhaustion." In order to avoid this outcome, Steyerl proposes that "[i]f circulationism is to mean anything, it has to move into the world of offline distribution, of 3D dissemination of resources, of music, land, and inspiration." Circulationism thus renders possible a set of intersecting conditions: both the artistic work and the viewer are drawn into a web of circulation, a twinned movement between offline and online domains of experience. The work exists in neither individually, but in both spheres.

Recent practices, especially those associated with the erstwhile REFERENCE Art Gallery in Richmond, Virginia, explicitly engage this link between online and offline practices through their use of the Internet. From 2009 to 2012, REFERENCE presented a programme of exhibitions investigating contemporary forms of image circulation with a particular focus upon the Internet

as a distribution platform. These exhibitions presented physical objects, but added attention to their existence as images circulating online. As co-founder and artist Conor Backman explains, although the physical space was a primary site of display, he “became increasingly interested in the problems of online viewership as we realized the majority of our traffic existed here.” Recognising this entwined relationship between online and offline domains, Artie Vierkant produced his *Image Objects* (2011-ongoing). Beginning with a digital file, Vierkant renders these images as UV prints on dibond, adding a sculptural quality to the physical work. After photographically documenting the installed works, they are then altered to include digital watermarks and other effects, before being distributed online by the artist, viewers, the press and other institutions. Although Vierkant displays his works as physical objects within the white walled enclosures of the gallery, his images also proliferate online. The viewer is thus able to alter and re-circulate them through any number of networks and contexts. In its formal contingency, Vierkant’s work points towards the distributed form of exhibition value, even if it does not achieve the

lofty goal of social change sought by Steyerl.

Vierkant’s ongoing project demonstrates a concern with the existence of images and objects between online and offline domains, such that the actual site of exhibition cannot be definitively located. The physical exhibition venue can be visited, but the works on display will not necessarily match those seen online or in print. Yet even those works are liable to change as they circulate through networks of online exchange, where viewers are able to introduce their own alterations. Existing as images online, a given ‘exhibition’ of these works can effectively be anywhere, so long as there is an available Internet connection and computer screen. Not so much copies as versions or instances of an absent and invisible digital file, these works incorporate the logic of alteration and circulation that constitutes their conditions of visibility. These practices point towards an expanded concept of the exhibition itself. Indistinctly defined, the exhibition space as a context for viewing becomes widely dispersed in both physical and virtual terms.

Despite the potential for reconfiguring exhibition value, such prac-

tices remain ambivalently linked to contemporary forms of information capitalism. After all, these works crucially depend upon their circulation through the Internet, despite circulation being among their central concerns. By placing the issue of circulation at its centre, Vierkant’s project indulges in a form of outsourced promotion whereby viewers distribute images that refer back to the objects on display and for sale in the gallery space. Online circulation circles back to the realm of commercial exchange. This inability to abandon the physical object can be viewed, notes Claire Bishop, as symptomatic of an art market still in the thrall of the unique and physical object, as opposed to the multiple and digital object. This focus links such work to sociologist Manuel Castells’s observation that contemporary capitalism is marked by its networks of circulating information, a “space of flows.” The growth of the capitalist network society crucially depends upon telecommunications technology to facilitate the rapid exchange of information. More than an economic phenomenon, information technology also effects cultural changes, as it is used to produce and mediate cultural objects and images. Thus, while Vierkant’s project recognises

and renders explicit the liminal boundary between online and offline forms of exhibition value, in doing so it echoes the structures of contemporary network capitalism.

Both AR and Internet-aware art multiply the potential range of viewing contexts. The exhibition is, in other words, no longer limited to a museum or gallery site, nor a spatial area bounded by the artists, nor even a stationary screen. The mobility afforded by smartphones and similar devices allows art to be viewed in almost any context. This change represents a further transformation of the nomadic and discursive site-specificity identified by Kwon, as well as the attempts at aesthetic control advanced by Groys. Rather than the artist elucidating the discursive frame for the exhibition in advance, the viewer transplants the work into his or her own frame, both physical and virtual environments. Exhibition space becomes potentially unbounded in terms of both discourse and site.

With a frayed concept of the exhibition space, Benjamin’s concept of exhibition value becomes similarly dispersed. With exhibitions distributed across real and virtual domains, exhibition value is less a matter of visibility alone and

more one of experience, circulation and manipulation. The work is still, of course, to be seen, but the point remains that its conditions for viewing have been dispersed. Work will still be viewed in the traditional spaces, as the museum construction boom indicates, but the coherency of the very term exhibition, in the sense of a delimited site for viewing art, is at issue. How this dispersal will affect the conditions of art remains to be seen, for, as the twentieth century has shown, art retains a remarkable capacity to persist despite numerous challenges to its constitution and presentation. While wary of trends towards an experience economy and informational capitalism, this less strictly defined concept of the exhibition may lead to further reconsiderations of art and its relation to sites of display, whether online or offline.

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The image features three light-colored wooden blocks, each with a circular hole. They are arranged on a white surface. A white rectangular card is placed behind them, featuring a brown geometric diagram consisting of several nested rectangles and lines. The word "submodalities" is printed in a brown serif font across the center of the image, overlapping the blocks and the card.

submodalities

SITE UNSEEN

Gordon Matta-Clark

GREG BLAIR

THIS WORLD JUST DROPS A BUNCH OF RULES
ON TOP OF YOU...

– DONALD DRAPER, MADMEN

EACH SPACE, EACH SPATIAL INTERVAL, IS A
VECTOR OF CONSTRAINTS AND A BEARER OF
NORMS AND ‘VALUES.’

– HENRI LEFEBVRE

During his rather short lifetime, Gordon Matta-Clark (1943–1978) produced an astonishingly diverse group of artistic projects. Experimenting with photography, film, sculpture, performance, site-specificity and installation, Matta-Clark’s activities were consistent with the emphasis on fragmentation and accumulations of the ‘70s postmodern era. While he voraciously explored an assortment of approaches and media, Matta-Clark is perhaps best known for his “cut” pieces—physical interventions into architectural spaces—typified by his project *Splitting* from 1974. In *Splitting*, Matta-Clark made an incision through the entire structure of a suburban New Jersey house—both literally and metaphorically cutting the place open to reveal and deconstruct its spatial organization.

Some critics have interpreted Matta-Clark’s “cut” pieces negatively as a form of transgression that borders on violence; in fact, Matta-Clark received several angry letters about *Splitting*. One such letter from an architect railed that Matta-Clark was “violating the sanctity and dignity

of abandoned buildings by interrupting their transition to ruin.” Another critic, Maud Lauvin, claimed that Matta-Clark’s “wounding of a house can be seen as a male violation of a domestic realm with female associations.” Many of these criticisms posit the concept of architectural space as being sanctified and secure. Therefore, any degradation is cast as degenerate. This is especially true of the domestic space used in *Splitting*, as the home can be read as a symbolic “spatio-temporal retreat [and respite] from a public sphere.” It is reasonable to understand the association with acts of violence in Matta-Clark’s artwork. Many of his pieces required extreme physical exertion and labour involving heavy tools. The incisions that he made into buildings have a strong tactile and visceral quality, and the evidence of the cutting action, such as splintered wood or frayed edges of plaster, feature prominently in the photo doc-

umentation of many of his projects.

As an artist whose development was rooted in the New York avant-garde of the late ‘60s, Matta-Clark, along with many other artists, felt the urge to critically question the established norms of their contemporary environments. In fact, a close and rigorous reading of Matta-Clark’s “cuts” can reveal that they are not primarily (or even predominantly) acts of mindless violence. Rather, I argue that they should be considered as strategies of resistance to the spatial distribution of power and the discursive reorganization of urban space. It was through the development of place-produced thought that Matta-Clark formulated his strategy of resistance, situated with/in the odd shaped properties of his *Fake Estates* project from 1973.

Matta-Clark first began building an aversion to-

wards the hegemonic tropes of Modernist architecture and urban planning during his studies at Cornell University in the late '60s. Even though its beginnings came from his Cornell experience, Matta-Clark's political ideology was fully developed by thinking with/in place—grounded in the intimate encounter with place. As a resident of NYC, Matta-Clark also witnessed first hand the means by which Modernist architectural projects privileged simple, clean and functional design over anything else. Several iconic buildings displaying the aesthetic philosophy of Modernist architecture began to dot the skyline of NYC in the 1950s, including *the Seagram building* designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and the *United Nations Headquarters* designed by Le Corbusier and Oscar Niemeyer. By thinking with/in place, Matta-Clark enacted a form of political resistance that was both a response to the “abstract tendencies of modern architecture... [and to] the degeneracy these models wrought in the urban environment.” As Matta-Clark witnessed the indifference or lack of concern for landscaping, aesthetics and local usage of space, best epitomized by Robert Moses' newly constructed freeway system, he was impelled to cultivate a politics of place that wanted to resist these types of impositions.

For Matta-Clark, this obtrusive imposition of power upon the landscape was disturbing because it radically altered the ontological value of different places in one fell swoop. He did

not agree with these types of state regulated spatial dispersions of power and knowledge and sought a means to subvert them. Therefore, not only should the *Fake Estates* project be considered as Matta-Clark's *think place*, producing critical insights about the philosophy of “the cut” and the reiteration of power, but it can also be considered a political act in the sense that it attempted to subvert the dispersion of power that defined the form and being of the *Fake Estates* lots.

GEOGRAPHIES OF RESISTANCE

Beginning in 1969, New York City experienced an eight-year period that was particularly unfavorable. Police corruption was rampant—economic and political turbulence cast a veil of distress over the spirit of most New Yorkers. As early as 1968, one of mayor John Lindsay's commissioners even commented: “The city has begun to die.” No single event can be pinpointed as the start of the downturn for NYC. As is the case with many crises on this level, a convergence of political, social and economic problems yielded a general malaise. As Jefferson Cowie explains, the melancholy stemmed from the realization that “the immense institutional achievements of the previous generation... were both sources of power as well as systems of constraint on the future fortunes of the American working class.” Polarizing war efforts in Vietnam, racial backlash and an economic downturn compounded this anxiety.

In addition to budgetary bedlam, the city also saw increases in “white flight” and ghettoization. With the escalation of felonies in NYC throughout the '60s, many members of the upper middle class migrated to the perceived safety of suburbia. During the same period, public housing for low-income families in the urban center proliferated. Public housing “by the sixties... became eth-

nicized as ‘ghettos,’” claims Lucy Lippard, “confining social evils (and resistance) in specific places.”

Within this environment, the power relations related to place became especially evident. “Isolation epitomizes the ghetto, which has become a fortress,” contends Lucy Lippard, “a last bastion, to keep some people in and others out.” Many New Yorkers in the '70s felt frustration at their seeming inability to affect change, at the crushing sense that there were stuck in place—geographically, socially and economically. These are the conditions that characterized the implicit dissatisfaction of Matta-Clark's “cuts” into buildings. The “cuts” were conceptualized as a form of resistance against the use of place as an imposed instrument of power that delimits as well as defines. Matta-Clark believed that his interventions into architectural spaces could engender important perceptual shifts in the way that places were occupied and utilized.

As a graduate of Cornell's architecture program, Matta-Clark was well versed in the current tropes and theories circulating in the world of architecture. Rather than buying into the dominant Modernist ideology typified by Le Corbusier, Matta-Clark left Cornell feeling agitation

towards the canons of Modern architecture and the political control of urban landscapes. His desires to question the formalism of Modern architecture and to create a sense of an ambiguity of place were also reflective of cultural sentiments in the early '70s in America. Cowie describes this disposition as an "outward contest of power relations that defined the first half of the seventies."

The ballooning agitation with the architectural old guard came to a head for Matta-Clark in 1976, when he was invited to participate in an exhibition at the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies in NYC. Around 3 o'clock in the morning before the night of the opening, Matta-Clark entered the space of the exhibition while the installation was still in progress and gained permission from the curator to shoot out some of the already cracked windows with a BB gun. What ensued was both a performance and political statement. While blasting out all of the windows on the floor of the exhibition, Matta-Clark delivered an acerbic diatribe "against its esteemed members and the architectural ideologies they supported." As Matta-Clark later claimed, "These

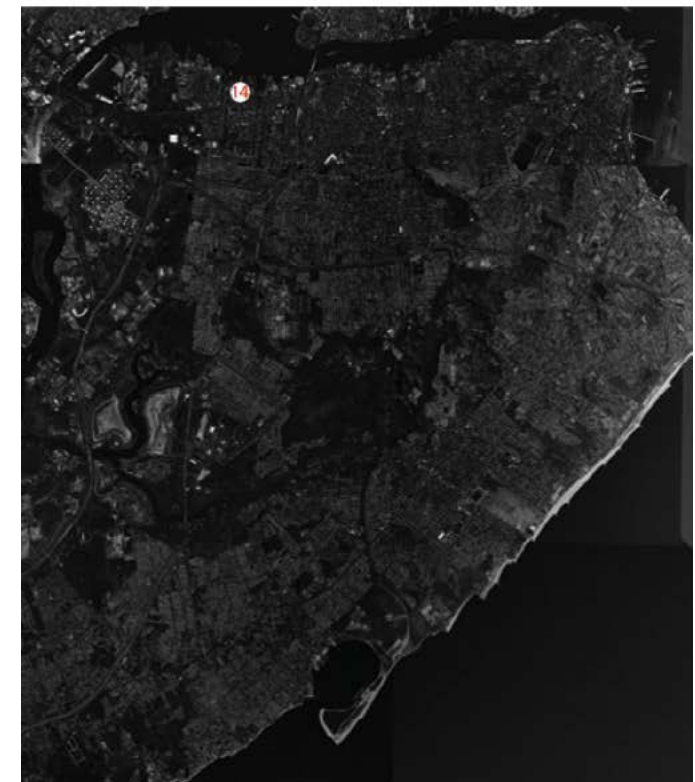
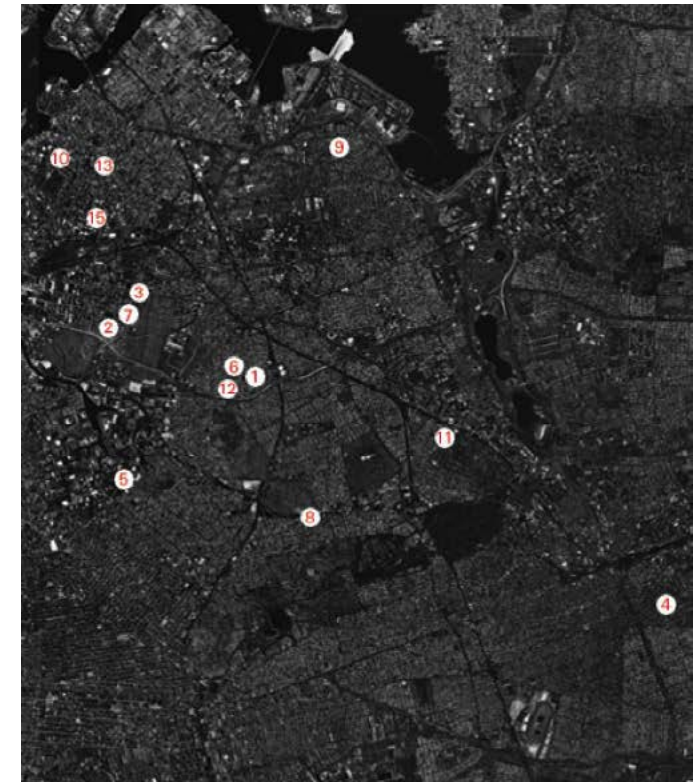
were my teachers. I hate what they stand for."

While the physicality of this act is undeniable, I would argue that the conceptualization behind the actions was not mindless violence, but rather part of an arc of thought that characterizes Matta-Clark's developing practice. That arc did not begin with blasting out the windows; rather, one can see evidence of it as early as the *Fake Estates* project from 1973. From the thinking cultivated in the *Fake Estates* project, Matta-Clark was able to reaffirm the intimate linkage between place and identity, as well as appreciate how the "cut" (in its various articulations) could act as a form of reinscription and reclamation—as a means to play with the constitution of place and allow for it to be made "anew."

FAKE ESTATES

The *Reality Properties: Fake Estates* project (commonly referred to as *Fake Estates*) from 1973 was an important juncture in the development of Matta-Clark's artistic theories and practice. This project can be considered as a significant instance of place-produced thought because Matta-Clark derived much of his mature theory and practice from the thinking situated with/in the small urban properties of the *Fake Estates* project. The development of Matta-Clark's ideas about, and the deployment of, "the cut" as both a philosophical concept and a spatial strategy of resistance are inextricably connected to the fusion of place and thought manifested in the *Fake Estates* project.

The project began with Matta-Clark's acquisition of five small parcels of real estate from the city of New York. The number of properties eventually numbered fifteen—fourteen in Queens and one on Staten Island (Fig. 3). A crucial question to consider when analyzing the *Fake Estates* project is why Matta-Clark chose these precise bits of the urban landscape. What was attractive about these fifteen spaces for the artist? In a broad context, their location within NYC was



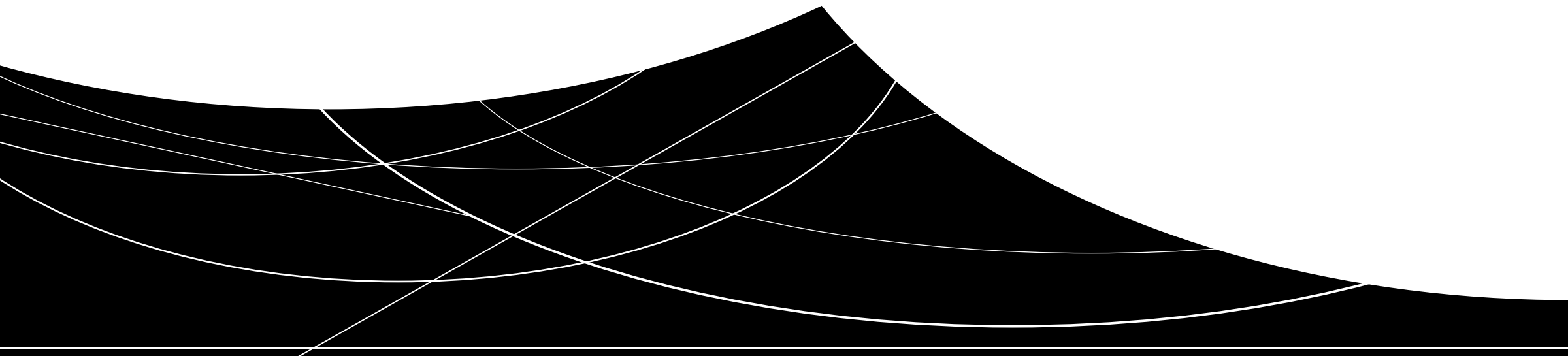
of utmost importance. Beginning with rezoning in the late '50s, which had not occurred since 1916, the rearrangement of the city was further accelerated throughout the early '60s. In the escalating transformations of NYC by city planners, private redevelopments and the movement of people and capital, the city underwent a radical reorganization. The primary player behind the restructuring was Robert Moses. It is perhaps not surprising that "Moses's vision derived from the popular urban design theory of the day promoted by French architect Le Corbusier in his 1925 plan for Voison for Paris," which included the ruthless demolition of the current urban landscape in favour of a "revolutionary re-design of the city." Beginning in the period immediately following the war, Moses set about reconfiguring NYC to be more automobile friendly, including an expansive set of freeways that connected Manhattan to Brooklyn, the Bronx and Staten Island. The design of many of these expressways displayed a lack of concern for landscaping, aesthetics

or local usage of space in the name of accessible and efficient travel. The most recent research by the editors of *Cabinet* magazine has indeed indicated that the gutterspaces purchased by Matta-Clark were most likely created by Robert Moses's freeway infrastructure reorganization of the post-war period.

Matta-Clark considered NYC his home and was intensely aware of how the face of the city was altered by the freeway systems and rezoning of the Moses administration. In an undated note, Matta-Clark wrote that, "as a native New Yorker my sense of the city as home runs deep, being full of an honest regard for its state and the quality of life available there." The quality of life as determined by the organization of space had been a central concern for Matta-Clark, dating back to his studies at Cornell. But by observing the spatial reorganization of the city, Matta-Clark became increasingly conscious during the

late '60s and early '70s of how place was being employed as an organizational instrument of power. In an interview from 1976, Matta-Clark declared: "what I am reacting to is the deformation of values (ethics) in the disguise of Modernity, Renewal, Urban Planning, call it what you will."

A significant transition in Matta-Clark's thinking occurred during this time regarding the relationship of place and identity. Rather than only focus on the people that have been marginalized, Matta-Clark began to more directly examine how places can exacerbate the disenfranchisement of certain groups. The concern for the ways that a place may condition and contain its inhabitants also led Matta-Clark to consider how places themselves can be marginalized within a larger spatial organizational system. For Matta-Clark, place and identity were so closely related that their relationship was ontological. He realized that when the world of a being is altered, because of the contextual connectivity of being with place, the being of an entity also undergoes a radical transformation. In the case of the *Fake Estates* properties, Matta-Clark recognized that their designation as unusable spaces transformed their very being. More importantly, Matta-Clark also recognized that this determination of being was a product of the spatial reconfiguration of the city through state intervention, and did not represent their entire measure of being.



Beyond any nostalgic or protective instincts, Matta-Clark also chose the fifteen properties of *Fake Estates* because of the type of places they were, and because of the forces that had determined their classification. All were deemed “gutterspaces”—spaces drained of any value. “Urbanism is capitalism’s seizure of the natural and human environment,” vilifies Debord, “in which banalization dominates.” These banalized “gutterspaces” found throughout urban environments are often compact, and have unorthodox shapes and dimensions (Fig.4). For instance, one of the *Fake Estates* properties measured 2.33’ by 355’ while another was 1.83’ by 1.11’. Matta-Clark acquired each these properties for very little money (around \$35.00 a piece) after the previous owners had failed to pay taxes on them and they were seized by the city. Many of the properties, including a 2.77’ by 100’ lot were surrounded by other properties or fenced off, making them completely inaccessible (Fig. 5).

The inaccessibility and marginalization of these places was also a critical factor in their selection for the *Fake Estates* project. For Matta-Clark, these places were victims of a demarcation processes that served the dominant power structure, as exercised through the state and the exchange of capital. Matta-Clark was drawn to the condition of these properties because “their level of disinterested abandonment virtually removed the property from the realm of society.” Matta-Clark was specifically drawn to ex-

posing the multiple systems of power responsible for their virtual removal from society—Modernist ideology, rezoning laws, efficiency of scale and the logic of the grid.

The properties of the *Fake Estates* were considered marginal because they deviated from the normalized conception of property in the episteme of NYC during the early ‘70s. Due to their odd dimensions and inaccessibility, they lacked conventional value, and thus the lots existed as non-places. In *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*, Marc Augé identifies a range of generic spaces—airports, bus terminals, shopping malls—as non-places because they exist only to be moved through. As spaces for mobility, these non-places are not quite the same as the properties of *Fake Estates*. However, they do resonate well with Augé’s description of the constitution of a non-place: “If a place can be defined as relational, historical, and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, historical, and concerned with identity will be a non-place.” Augé’s notion of non-places is reflective of Foucault’s concept of the heterotopia—a counter-site—in which “real sites that can be found within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested, and in-verted.” The non-places of *Fake Estates* had in many ways been removed from an active role and function in society—having been virtually erased by the spatial reorganization of the Moses urban planning strategies.

That the properties were marginalized non-places was of great significance to Matta-Clark. He had a longstanding interest in activities and entities operating on the “edge of a system.” For example, he had a strong interest in graffiti writing, which he regard-

ed as the inscriptions of maligned youths attempting to inject their voice into the facade of the city. This fascination is manifest in the *Photoglyphs* and *Graffiti Truck* projects of 1973. *Photoglyphs* consisted of photomontaged graffiti from the outer boroughs while *Graffiti Truck* invited locals to tag Matta-Clark's truck with spray paint, which he then cut into sections and sold as works of art. Both works were displayed under the title *Alternatives to Washington Square Art Show* after his joke application was rejected by the actual Washington Square Art Fair. Both projects demonstrate Matta-Clark's concern for empowering the marginalized and for rejecting established conventions. Further suggestion of Matta-Clark's affinity for the maligned is evident in his own words: "I have based my outlook and my work on those given things in the environment which have passed over into a neglected state... just as much out of a very personal identification with the cultural and social sense of being." Not only did Matta-Clark identify himself with the properties of the *Fake Estates* project, he also viewed these places as potential geographies of resistance.

These interests are also connected to the activist and revolutionary tendencies in Matta-Clark's projects. As a student of architecture at Cornell in the late '60s, Matta-Clark first became conscious of how architectonics and urban landscapes

impel their inhabitants. During his years at Cornell, the school was steeped in the ideological auspices of Modernist architecture, exemplified by the designs and theories of Le Corbusier. Matta-Clark's antipathy "linked the abstract tendencies of modern architecture... with the degeneracy these models wrought in the urban environment, [as] witnessed in the failed housing projects of the Bronx." After leaving Cornell, Matta-Clark also became increasingly aware that places within the urban landscape could be sites of disruption from the prescribed architectural programmes and codes of existing power relations. As Judith Russi Kirchner describes in her analysis of community in Matta-Clark's artwork—"resisting the regulatory systems that dominated the urban environments he inhabited, Matta-Clark's signature work literally sliced into and deconstructed the political and social function of each of his sites." Through the resistance to the prescribed perception or function of a place, Matta-Clark hoped to bring attention to the limits imposed upon it. For Matta-Clark, the process of this exposure held the potent possibility of an ontological shift because it questioned the seemingly fixed constitution of place, revealing its fragmentation and indeterminate status.

The strategy of resistance that Matta-Clark developed by thinking with/in place was

not strictly opposed to power, but rather sought to expose the distribution of power in place, including the limitations and conditions thrust upon a place. This strategy of resistance derived by thinking with/in place should not be overestimated, however, as Matta-Clark's intention was not to emancipate or grant the places agency. His strategy should be thought of more as an equivalent to play. By playing with place, Matta-Clark's strategy was to loosen the grips of the imposed state authority used to designate the character and value of place. This playfulness encouraged the possibility of yielding a "sense of ambiguity of a structure, the ambiguity of a place." As Matta-Clark added, this is "the quality I am interested in generating." At the heart of the *Fake Estates* project was a desire to reveal the power relations that had shaped the identity of the properties and show that places have a multiplicity of identities—not simply the one prescribed by the state. By doing so, Matta-Clark was able to demonstrate that the creation of these spaces was part of an ideological agenda to delineate places that functioned "spatially separated from each other," and that these impositions needed to be questioned and disrupted.

I believe that Matta-Clark intended the same general type of disruption in the *Window Blow-Out* actions of 1976. This event was important in Matta-Clark's conceptual development of "the cut" because it provided an opportunity to consider its effectiveness as a form of resistance. The initial explorations into the viability of "the cut," however, as both a philosophical concept and as a spatial strategy of resistance, preceded *Window Blow-Out* by several years. For example, in 1971 while working in the basement of 112 Greene Street in Soho, Matta-Clark generated his first project that included a laceration into an architectural structure. *Cherry Tree* consisted of a hole cut into the floor of the basement that was dug out to the depth of six feet. Within the hole, a cherry tree was planted. After surviving only a few months, the vestiges of the tree were buried in the hole. The entire cavity was then sealed off

with concrete and lead before being conceived as a new work with a new title—*Time Well*, also from 1971.

In 1972, Matta-Clark began a more ambitious exploration of the “cut” in his series of projects collected under the shared title of *Bronx doors*, *Bronx Floors*. In terms of redefining spatiality by cutting, *Bronx doors*, *Bronx Floors* was much more radical than any of Matta-Clark’s previous endeavors. The *Bronx doors*, *Bronx Floors* pieces consisted of chunks of walls, ceilings and floors removed from old abandoned warehouses in the Bronx. While the project predates *Fake Estates* by over a year, and seems to react “precisely to the imposed... order” of the place, just as *Fake Estates* also does, it was the fragments of the displacements—along with photo documentation—that were displayed in the gallery as works of art. The focus of the cutting actions were on the extraction of pieces of wall, ceiling and floor, that then acted as minimalistic sculptural forms aestheticized as art objects. As Pamela Lee writes, “there seemed to be [a] minimal guiding principle in extracting the fragments other than their portability as objects and the ease with which the artist could perform his removals without complicated equipment.” Therefore, while the *Bronx doors*, *Bronx floors* projects utilized cutting techniques, the “cut” was not yet employed as a strategy of resistance because there was not a significant conceptual response to the site of their execution and extraction. The place of “the cut” was not deliberately and carefully chosen for its particular perceptual and political attributes. Rather, locales were chosen for more practical reasons: they were easily accessible and could be modified without too much hassle or restriction.

The next step in Matta-Clark’s evolution of “cuts” came early in 1973, when he traveled to Milan, Italy. There, in an abandoned warehouse, Matta-Clark constructed *Infraform*, consisting of “a right-angled triangle [cut] through the perpendicular intersection of two block walls.” In many ways, *Infraform* seems to have been more of a logistical experiment to further test the possibilities of building incisions—almost a form of practice for later projects. There is almost no documentation of this project other than a few photographs. In both *Bronx doors*, *Bronx floors*

and *Infraform*, Matta-Clark does not seem to have achieved the same deliberate thoughtfulness and situatedness of “the cut,” as will be evident in his post-*Fake Estates* activities. That major transition in the nature of his “cuts” began by developing thinking with/in the *Fake Estates* project. The key distinction of this project is that Matta-Clark actively situated his thinking within a particular place (the 15 lots). By cultivating his thinking with/in place, he was able to engender a conceptualization of “the cut” that was metaphorical, conceptual and political rather than just literal. I argue that the conceptual leap in *Fake Estates* was directly tied to the calculated intent to localize the production of thought within a specific site.

The notion of “the cut” as a philosophical concept and strategy of resistance realized through *Fake Estates* allowed Matta-Clark to move beyond just the physicality of the act, and therefore also enabled him to refute the accusations that the strategy was rooted in violence and hostility. By identifying and purchasing the lots of *Fake Estates*, Matta-Clark created his first metaphorical cut—carving them from the urban fabric and wresting them from their designation as gutterspaces. Matta-Clark was able to bring awareness to the sites

that were previously unseen—calling into question the identity and limitations foisted upon them. In a sense, these sites, which were banal and invisible, were brought into a dialogical play of spatial relations, imposition of power, agency of place and identity.

THE CUT: DISRUPTING POWER

There is a critical correlation between Matta-Clark’s development of the “cut” as a philosophical concept and spatial strategy of resistance, and the writings of Michel Foucault because of their shared concern for the distribution of power through spatial organization. In an interview from the ‘70s, Foucault provides explication on how the division of spaces, through both physical demarcation and taxonomical language, can be spatial strategies for the dispersion of power. “There is an administration of knowledge,” asserts Foucault, “a politics of knowledge, relations of power which pass via knowledge and which, if one tries to transcribe them, lead one to consider forms of domination designated by such notions as field, region and territory.” What Foucault indicates is that these spatial concepts, and the language exercised to articulate them, are devices through which the relations of power are trans-

mitted. For Foucault, language is a mechanism of power. Once an entity such as a specific place has a certain taxonomical description, it is shaped by the restrictions that the linguistic term levies upon it. Therefore, the classification of a place as “gutterspace” or non-place simultaneously prescribes the limits of knowledge about, and the potential of being, for such a place.

In his text from 1966, *The Order of Things*, Foucault also indirectly discusses the relationship between power and geography by asserting that the a priori episteme “in a given period, delimits in the totality of experience a field of knowledge, [and] defines the mode of being of the objects that appear in that field.” This notion is applicable to the episteme of the Moses regime responsible for the delineation of the *Fake Estates* properties. Within this episteme, these spaces were seen as unusable and simply byproducts of making “conscious determinations about the future of the city through state intervention.”

Foucault also addresses the possible subversion of the spatial dispersion of power within a lecture entitled, *Des Espace Autres (Of Other Spaces)*, in which he discussed his notion of heterotopias as being “outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality.” Foucault expands upon the idea of how some places can be “outside” of other places by introducing the concept of *heterotopias of deviation*. According to Foucault, these types of heterotopias are established when place is deployed as site for locating irregularities from established societal convention. In many ways, the properties of *Fake Estates* fit this

description of a heterotopia because they were perceptually and even physically outside of the entrenched norms of properties in NYC.

For Foucault, heterotopias (such as the *Fake Estates* properties) held a special attraction because they do not operate by the same rules as other cultural spaces. As Foucault explains, heterotopias of deviation—prisons and hospitals for example—are places where people are sent when their behavior strays from normalized and established rules. This concept can be adapted to thinking about places themselves. As in *Fake Estates*, the places do not comply with the regular practices and codes of the urban spatial organization. Therefore, these types of places—leftovers of urban design—can also be considered as *heterotopias of deviation*.

Much of the perception of the sites that were to become the *Fake Estates* properties was created because of their deviation from capitalist value—their relatively low exchange and use value as a commodity. Within the realm of economic exchange, the *Fake Estates* properties held little value due to their odd dimensions, locations or because they contained insignificant objects or architecture. Henri Lefebvre has written about the values forced upon spaces by the hegemonic social and economic class as a means to serve its own needs and maintain its dominant position.

While Lefebvre does not share Foucault’s emphasis on language in the production of a place, he does agree that “nowhere is the confrontation between knowledge and power, between understanding and violence, more direct than it is in connection with intact space and space broken up.” When space is broken up, a dialectic emerges between the knowledge of or within in a space and the power exercised through demarcation. For Lefebvre, the economic and social relations acting upon and within a place determines the nature of the confrontation between knowledge and power. Robert Moses and his urban planners were acutely aware of this relationship and how it could be manipulated to control behavior. Moses’s view was that the state needed to intervene in economic and social relations occurring in place and that the city needed to be “reshaped, thinned out, [and] controlled” in order to do so.

This understanding of the prescriptive control of space and its function in the Moses regime brings us back to the development of the “cut” established with/in the *Fake Estates* project. It also allows us to see how Matta-Clark activated the *Fake Estates* as political heterotopias of deviation—as a means to subvert the state control of space. In doing so, the “cut” became less as an act of violence and more a form of play. As a form of play, the strategy of resistance developed by Matta-Clark with/in *Fake Estates* is akin to what Judith Butler calls a “reiteration of power.” This reiteration enables physical acts to become political actions, and through repetition exposes the conditions of power responsible for the formation of a subject/place. This reiterative process can become a strategy of resistance because “the reiteration of power not only temporalizes the conditions of subordination but shows these conditions to be, not static structures, but temporalized—active and productive.” As a reiteration of power, which is also a means to play with power, Matta-Clark’s “cuts” were able to reveal the con-

tingent and fluctuating conditions of power being imposed upon a place—by taking the means of control and using it against the very powers that wield them. In *Fake Estates*, Matta-Clark calls attention to and plays with the contingencies of the lot formations and their designation as non-places/gutterspaces by the Moses planning projects. By revealing these conditions, Matta-Clark was hopeful that the place could temporarily exceed the limitations of power to which the place remained tethered—that the places could push back against their forced designations.

As noted in the preceding pages, the physical act of cutting was not something novel for Matta-Clark in 1973. However, *Fake Estates* should be acknowledged as the first project in which Matta-Clark envisions a “metaphorical cut” as a philosophical concept and strategy of playful resistance—as a means to develop an interstice—a *heterotopia of deviation*. By thinking with/in place Matta-Clark was able to arrive at a new realization of the non-physical implications of “the cut.” Through the situated nature of the *Fake Estates* project, Matta-Clark was able to respond to the particular conditions of the place and conceive of the “cut” as a method to question the decisions “regarding how we order and organize entities, subjects, bodies [and places].” Through the crucial situatedness of thought, the *Fake Estates* project enabled Matta-Clark to employ “the cut” in an entirely original manner that did not require a physical incision, but created the potential to disrupt the existing perceptions and supposed fixed identity of the properties.

GREG BLAIR

is originally from Red Deer, Alberta, Canada where he grew up cheering loudly for the Edmonton Oilers. Much of his days are filled with teaching and related activities as an Associate Professor of Art at Northern State University in Aberdeen, SD. Some of the things that currently receive heavy rotation in his consciousness are spatial theories, Heidegger, pangrams, alt country, blogs, Spivak, teaching, being human and most of all, his wife, son and daughter.

[1] Gordon Matta-Clark in *Gordon Matta-Clark: Works and Collected Writings*, Gloria Moure and Gordon Matta-Clark (Poligrafa, 2006), 251.

[2] Maud Lavin in *Object to Be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark*, Pamela M. Lee (The MIT Press, 2001), 114.

[3] Pamela M. Lee, *Object to Be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark*, (The MIT Press, 2001), 23.

[4] Several iconic buildings displaying the aesthetic philosophy of Modernist architecture were constructed in NYC in the 1950s, including the *Seagram building* designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and the *United Nations Headquarters* designed by Le Corbusier and Oscar Niemeyer.

[5] Lee, *Object to Be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark*, 116.

[6] George J. Lankevich, *New York City: A Short History* (NYU Press, 2002), 205.

[7] Jefferson R. Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New Press, The, 2012).

[8] Lucy R. Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New Press, 1998), 206.

[9] Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*, 208. The same can be said of the gated communities developed in the suburbs by the affluent.

[10] Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class*, 17.

[11] Lee, *Object to Be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark* (The MIT Press, 2001), 116.

[12] Gordon Matta-Clark in *Object to Be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark*, Pamela M. Lee (The MIT Press, 2001), 116.

[13] Roberta Brandes Gratz, *The Battle for Gotham: New York in the Shadow of Robert Moses and Jane Jacobs* (Nation Books, 2011), xxii.

[14] Judith Russi Kirshner in *Gordon Matta-Clark*, ed. Corinne Diserens (Phaidon Press, 2006), 148.

[15] Matta-Clark in *Gordon Matta-Clark: Works and Collected Writings*, 65.

[16] Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Black & Red, 2000), 59.

[17] This is not to imply that the imposition of power occurs only through autocracy, as Foucault reminds us, power is also dispersed (or not) through the actions of each person.

[18] Gordon Matta-Clark in *Gordon Matta-Clark*, ed. Corinne Diserens (Phaidon Press, 2006), 188.

[19] Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* (Verso, 1995), 63.

[20] Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowicz, “Of Other Spaces,” *Diacritics* 16.1 (April 1, 1986): 24.

[21] In an interview with Liza Bear, Matta-Clark commented “the description of them that always excited me the most was ‘inaccessible.’” Pamela M. Lee, *Object to Be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark*, 103.

[22] Kirshner in *Gordon Matta-Clark*, 152.

[23] Thomas Crow comments that it is “important to note the prescience in 1972 of Matta-Clark’s interest in graffiti as the territorial markings of the young and dispossessed,” in *Gordon Matta-Clark*, 53.

[24] Kirshner in *Gordon Matta-Clark*, 152.

[25] Lee, *Object to Be Destroyed*, 116.

[26] Kirshner in *Gordon Matta-Clark*, 152.

[27] Matta-Clark in *Object to Be Destroyed*, 34.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Brandes Gratz, *The Battle for Gotham: New York in the Shadow of Robert Moses and Jane Jacobs*, xxii.

[30] Dan Graham in *Gordon Matta-Clark*, 201.

[31] Lee, *Object to Be Destroyed*, 77.

[32] Jeff Rian, “[Rocking the Foundation](#),” *Frieze*, Issue 11, June-August 1993. Accessed 10/2/12.

[33] Michel Foucault and Colin Gordon, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (Random House Digital, Inc., 1980), 69.

[34] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, 1st ed. (Vintage, 1994), 158.

[35] Thomas Angotti, *New York for Sale: Community Planning Confronts Global Real Estate* (MIT Press, 2008), 34.

[36] Foucault and Miskowicz, “Of Other Spaces,” 24.

[37] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Wiley-Blackwell, 1992), 358.

[38] Brandes Gratz, *The Battle for Gotham: New York in the Shadow of Robert Moses and Jane Jacobs*, xxii.

[39] Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, 1st ed. (Stanford University Press, 1997), 16.

[40] Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, 16.

[41] David Kammerman, *Making the Cut: Medical, Political, and Textual Bodies in Seventeenth and Eighteenth-century France* (ProQuest, 2006), 9.



SELLING AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE



ADAM BARBU

Towards and Against Interpretation

In displacement, we are given space to rethink our axioms. We learn what we have chosen (not) to believe, and can begin to interrupt previously unmarked or seemingly inevitable ideas surrounding our experiences. “Art as Therapy,” a curatorial intervention into the Art Gallery of Ontario’s permanent collection by Alain de Botton, provides the discursive space to theorize new forms of resistance around the intersections of aesthetic value and cultural capital.


Now in its fourth month of display, “Art as Therapy” has garnered vast amounts of press. Some might claim that a continuation of coverage effectively beats a dead horse—but it seems troublesome, if not altogether inconsistent, that much of the discourse surrounding the exhibition, whether in print, dialogue, or passing commentary, has focused on de Botton as the ‘lost pop philosopher,’ rather than critically addressing the basic methodological impetus of his approach. Perversely, “Art as Therapy” has given the art community a moment to self-congratulate—that ‘this’ is somehow not ‘us.’

Today we see a growing interest in practices that blur the lines of art, culture and commerce, which necessarily intersect at the crossroads of aesthetic value. The intersection is perhaps most visible among popularized forms of contemporary art that are grounded in both canonical art historical knowledge and celebrity artist culture. Enter the ‘McGuggenheim,’ the globe-trotting, flaneural, Instagramming art stars Hans Ulrich Obrist and Klaus Biesenbach, and the Oedipal tragedy of Shia LaBeouf and his symbolic mother Marina Abramović. It is a paradox built into the impossible promise of aesthetic value (however articulated, and for whatever political and economic ends) that the desire to keep creating continues, despite the actuality of attaining visibility in the public realm.

I have had many conversations with AGO visitors who found the collection more accessible, and their experiences more enjoyable overall. However, as other critics have outlined, these responses come at a costly price. They are correct

in pointing out that art is a practice of means rather than ends—that “Art as Therapy” is overly didactic, making art ‘manageable’ when it shouldn’t be. \$20 buys your chance to tap into the mysterious realm of aesthetic experience. These critics have also outlined the performative authority de Botton assigns to the text, which forms this plane of consistency among viewers. De Botton assumes that a consenting public facilitates a system of exchange that extends along a utopic view of ‘democratization’ itself. We can begin to see how this interpretive gesture, based upon the idea of an untapped ‘public,’ directly serves neoliberal rhetoric of the richness of cultural capital.

From a view of the statistical measurements that govern public art institutions—numbers of attendees, the wealth of patrons, etc.—we see the categorization of aesthetic value as a calculated *effect* of the administration of the product. The basic orientation and trajectory of the values attached to aesthetic experiences shifts in accordance with flows of capital—in short,



of where and how this aesthetic becomes materialized, grounded and communicated—is an instrument of the State’s cultural message.

Here, we can begin to locate and interrupt our position as consumers of the ‘not for sale’ artwork with new criticality. In the symbolic space of the public art museum, the climatic moment of “being with” art operates as a kind of civilizing ritual, delivering histories to visitors as ceremonial abstractions of lineage, consensus and progress. In this context, aesthetic value is not limited to the current market value of the object, but the overarching social framework upon which the experience depends. In short, the transferable value of the object is no less constructed than the historical burden of the experience. Experience, then, is just as easily exploited along economic ends: the construction of the idea of the event—that something *will* happen—maps out an imagined space of exchange.

The exhibition subsequently erases the AGO as a site of social, cultural and economic tension. The fetishization of the historical depth of Monet’s *Charing Cross Bridge, Fog* (1902), for example, imbues it with a sentimental warmth. It does not ask for a single dollar, only your attention. This rhetoric renders “Art as Therapy” as a troubling theatre of morality. However, we must be consistent: even a ‘proper’ for-

malist method of analysis would fall into this general trap, as it pertains to a far wider problem of selling ideas—the academic and/or market thrust of ‘original research.’ For evidence, we would need to look no further than Clement Greenberg’s descriptions of some distant yet authentically American aesthetic value that (his brand of) mid-century abstraction works towards.

This overall system of exchange is enacted, as critic Dave Hickey writes (drawing on Deleuze), alongside the masochistic “contract” of our submission to the image.

Importantly, so-called “therapeutic institutions” might use the rhetoric of beauty as a tool to draw viewers in, and instruct them on the narrative ‘ends’ regarding the virtuousness of art. In the case of the AGO, then, these assumptions cannot be easily relinquished since the illusory mutuality and consistency of this ‘public’ is a financial target. Visible or not, the manufactured desire for virtue—the value of aesthetic experience—is built into the price of admission.

In her particularly iconic essay of formalist criticism, “Against Interpretation” (1966), Susan Sontag critiques practices of interpretation that depend on certain codes or rules to read the ‘content’ of works of art. For Sontag, any attempt to read or understand content in works of art is bound by “the perennial, never con-

summated, project of interpretation.” She continues that, “By reducing the work of art to its content and then interpreting that, one tames the work of art. Interpretation makes art manageable, comfortable.” Sontag’s text does not work to reinforce some absolute distinction between form and content, but introduces an approachable, critical framework that avoids the easy seduction of attributing unifying symbolic virtues to works of art. But what does “experiencing the luminousness of the thing in itself” mean if the work exists within the social and economic context of the museum?

Perhaps, in a contemporary art theory context, one would trace how conventional dichotomies of form/content, or “formalism”/other have become both unproductive and radically misunderstood. Still, it remains that the work of de Botton and Sontag extend along two very different bodies of thought. In this difference there are considerable stakes. I connect “Art as Therapy” to “Against Interpretation” not to trace them in seamless opposition, but to figure the tensions between them as a way of interrogating prevailing contradictions in attributing value to aesthetic experience. The comparison highlights the unwritten assumptions that underlie polemical art writing, which intersect at this very idea of aesthetic value.

For Sontag, no singular affective truth ex-



ists for any given work, as it would rely on an already failed interpretative gesture. It might at first seem that Sontag distances herself from stable meaning in works, in particular when she writes, “I don’t mean interpretation in the broadest sense, the sense in which Nietzsche (rightly) says, ‘There are no facts, only interpretations.’” However, she does hint towards a method of arriving at formal truth. It is the meaning a work appears to have, which would be ‘clear’ to the viewer. In other words, there *is* a meaning behind the interpreter’s interpretation, but he misses it in the method of his approach.

Conversely, de Botton suggests that the truth in any work is precisely that subjective interpretation brought onto it. The truth at stake here is that the work can offer

something more: that you might see yourself in it. But this position does not live up to its offer. In the gallery space, what extends from the gesture is only a rigid, pseudo subjective interpretation that de Botton prescribes to the viewer. Viewers are stripped of agency, and are configured *as* something, fixed by some mode or principle of the activity itself. Still, ideological baggage aside, the critical distinction in de Botton’s method is that this ‘public’ exists *first*—that aesthetic value begins and ends with viewer. In a paradoxical turn, aesthetic value is sold back to us in a kind of contractual obligation. De Botton assigns value to art through this supposed lack, as if had ever been taken away.

Between Sontag and de Botton, we can trace a relatively clear distinction between aesthetic value as

something that exists within the work versus something that viewers attribute to it. Sontag makes it clear that any method of interpretation that directly depends on the attribution of detached symbolic content would negate critical thinking about the object or experience at hand. De Botton, then, is entangled in what Sontag labels the “regime of interpretation.”

I find it particularly interesting that most critics of the exhibition seem preoccupied by de Botton’s supposed *misinterpretation* of the works, when the idea that aesthetic truth resides *within* the work was never at stake in his project. To trace a brief example: of course viewers know that Agnes Martin’s grids are not about “the stress of receiving too many emails.” For anyone to assume that the viewer cannot make this

very distinction, and to suggest that de Botton takes advantage of this ignorance, is highly condescending.

Today, the name “Agnes Martin” itself carries in its very utterance a particularly heavy, perhaps burdensome, weight of scholarship that extends on clearly defined, rigid categories of minimalism, conceptualism and, to a varying degree, institutional critique. In this context, de Botton’s curatorial intervention could be seen to interrupt a learned, detached mode spectatorship, which depends on a clearly defined art historical context, and tap into some other interpretive order in which both historical and contemporary aesthetic forms are figured as always already intersecting. In short, the reading allows us to unveil the imagined distances between the knowable ‘self’ and the work as ‘other.’ The

displacement felt throughout “Art as Therapy,” then, emerges from this rather ambiguous, yet distinct digression from how we believe aesthetic evaluations *should* be carried out.

Still, it would seem that any prefiguration of aesthetic truth (whether ‘attainable’ or not) necessarily stifles the work in question. In other words, if viewers approach a work with some supposed truth at stake within the experience, they have already rendered it a static thing. The ‘experience’ has stopped in the process of its own becoming; to briefly draw on Deleuze, viewers are operating on “striated” rather than “smooth” space.

In her 2013 documenta essay, Carolyn Christov-Barkagiev outlines a thoughtful position that questions the divide between these systems of value. She writes that within a pro-

cess of spectatorship works of art necessarily maintain a kind of “precarity,” from which a highly contextual, shifting, both ‘there’ and ‘not’ tangible meaning can be traced.

She suggests that the dichotomies of a viewer’s experience centre, on the one hand, on abstaining from making a choice, and, on the other, on making a choice that will be wrong. Aptly, Christov-Barkagiev refigures the philosophical tradition of skepticism towards a particular context of art viewing where “the suspension of judgment is not a closure—it opens the space of the propositional.”

And, although her concept specifically pertains to the geopolitical, shape-shifting character of documents, this “precarity” stands at the ideological fault lines of both “Art as Therapy” and “Against Interpretation.”

Of course, the basic problem remains: how do (Canadian) curators and art administrators work to en-

gage new audiences and simultaneously give the ‘product’ the critical attention and care it deserves? We stand at a crossroads between attempting to encourage a greater degree of self-reflexivity around spectatorship within museum spaces, and offering basic entry points into art for those who might be curious (but are not interested in reading Adorno or Derrida along the way).

This is not an impossible task. But balancing these disparate needs will never emerge from didactic aesthetic theory that proclaims certain truths of spectatorship guide the value of experience. We might ask: what does it mean to speak about an intermediate territory between the two—between ‘form’ and ‘interpretation’? Thus, returning back to Christov-Baragiev’s skepticism, what does it mean to cultivate the precariousness of aesthetic experience in the context of (grounded) public institutions?

In de Botton, and perhaps only to a degree in Sontag, the attempt to trace a particular way in which art *should* be read puts a tremendous burden on that work to perform according to some imagined higher principle. I make this distinction not to distance Sontag from her formalism, but to emphasize that, in her later works, she explicitly outlines the importance of approaching works, in particular photographs, with a certain criticality to the ways in which they are manipulated to project a kind of truth *through* form.

Of course, Sontag would argue that ‘people’ (read: philistines) *need* to be guided, and that they cannot be left to their own interpretive devices because this risks devaluing the very practice of ‘advanced art.’ Whether working towards formalist or interpretive ends, this search for truth frames the quintessential red herring of ‘aesthetic value.’ It erases the tenuousness of what it means to



be an active receptor of art historical knowledge, and, most critically, what it means to slip from this knowledge.

The search for a stable method presupposes aesthetic value as something that is surmountable. The attempt to stand deliberately anterior to this tendency, to attempt to look deeper, might require us to tell ourselves and others to stop looking entirely. The (imagined) binary of the interpretive and the formal allows us to consider the ways in which value judgments about aesthetic experiences manifest institutionally. To return to the earlier point, this initial pleasure in feeling unsettled extends from very the possibility of acting self-reflexively—in the context of both our viewing experiences and curatorial practice in general.

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NOTES

- [1] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke UP, 2006), 56.
- [2] Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), 15.
- [3] Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, “1227: Treatise on Nomadology: The War Machine,” in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1987).
- [4] Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995), 23.
- [5] George Dickie, “The New Institutional Theory of Art,” *Proceedings of the 8th Wittgenstein Symposium*, 10 (1983): 59.
- [6] Thierry de Deuve, *Clement Greenberg Between the Lines* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 28.
- [7] Dave Hickey, “After the Great Tsunami: On Beauty and the Therapeutic Institution,” in *The Invisible Dragon: Essays on Beauty* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 65.
- [8] Dave Hickey, “After the Great Tsunami,” 66.
- [9] Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation,” in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 2001), 6.
- [10] Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation,” 8.
- [11] Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation,” 13.
- [12] Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation,” 5, 12.
- [13] Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, “The Smooth and the Striated,” 474-501.
- [14] Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, “The Dance Was Very Frenetic,” In *dOCUMENTA (13): The Book of Books, Catalog 1/3*, (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2012), 37.
- [15] Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, “The Dance Was Very Frenetic,” 37.
- [16] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003).



PRECIOUS SALVAGE

(2009—ongoing)

The salvaging, reassembly and/or transformation of used, everyday items re-presents them as precious objects for social contemplation. By grouping the re-presented objects in serialized and categorical displays, the ready-mades are repositioned as artefacts for creative research. “Precious” may mean rare, valuable, unique, even fragile and ephemeral. Salvage is a noun but also an action word for reclaiming loss and recycling material value from capital to new social values of affect, identity and cultural practices. Following the lines of Félix Guattari’s idea of the ethico-aesthetic that proposes new collective subjectivities, the body sensorial and affect as ways towards difference, *Precious Salvage* approaches material things through a praxis-oriented aesthetics emerging out of social thought and action.

Precious Salvage materializes these socially creative acts, investing a new logic of the abject in which mass consumption and production give way to singular objects of individuated consumption. By disrupting the ontology of commodified goods, the various assemblage works are intended to redefine the abject through a process of renewal and regeneration into difference.

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