

ART REVIEW

Inspiration From Real Estate Rejects

By MICHAEL KIMMELMAN

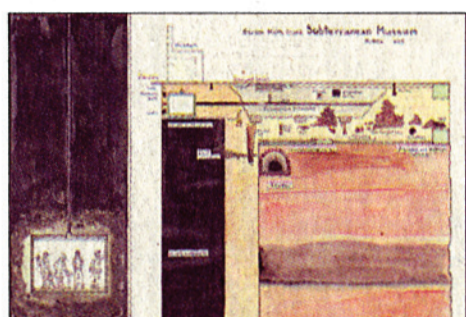
In the early 1970's, the artist Gordon Matta-Clark discovered that periodically New York City, rooting around for petty tax revenue, auctioned off "gutterspace" — tiny, irregular, inaccessible or otherwise unusable parcels of land, the remnants of surveying errors or other zoning anomalies.

They often consisted of only a strip of curb or the edge of an alleyway or some tiny, locked-in plot at the intersection of several backyards. The lots went for as little as \$25, for which the city hoped to collect maybe \$7 or \$8 a year in taxes — generally less, as auditors would find out later, than it cost New York to administer the lots.

Matta-Clark bought 15 parcels, 14 in Queens and 1 in Staten Island. When he died of cancer at 35, in 1978, he left behind the deeds and their unpaid tax bills. Apparently, he had vaguely thought about installing art



Mitchell Albus Gallery; top right, Queens Museum of Art



Gordon Matta-Clark in Jaime Davidovich's video at the Queens Museum, and Mark Dion's sketch of an imagined subterranean museum at White Columns.

Gordon Matta-Clark

White Columns and Queens Museum

on the plots or giving plots to artists to install their art, although the properties were really too impractical to use. Years after he died, his widow, Jane Crawford, coming upon the documents in a box, devised collages that consisted of the deeds, photographs and maps — surrogate versions of the property, not unlike the "nonsites" by his mentor and fellow entropist Robert Smithson.

Matta-Clark also appeared in a video, shot by Jaime Davidovich, in which he wandered around Queens hunting for his properties, a kind of hipster Harold Lloyd aspiring to be a lord of the manor, knocking on doors,

encountering touchy neighbors and dutifully chalking off tiny strips of driveway or peering through chain-link fences at some nondescript little patch of weeds, which he had determined belonged to him.

His Dadaist assortment of micro-parcels came to be called, collectively, "Reality Properties: Fake Estates," and the work gained mystique over time as a partly tongue-in-cheek but critical project in Matta-Clark's brief and influential career. A few years ago the editors of Cabinet, the savvy and inquisitive art quarterly, located and licensed some of the parcels, which after Matta-Clark's death had reverted to the city and to administrative limbo. The magazine

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New York Real Estate Rejects As a Source of Inspiration

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commissioned several artists to imagine works of their own based on "Fake Estates" for an issue about property.

Now Cabinet's editors (Frances Richard, Jeffrey Kastner and Sina Najafi) have chosen 19 artists for a full-fledged show at the West Village gallery White Columns, with a few artists doing bus tours to the sites. At the Queens Museum of Art, starting Sunday, there is documentation of Matta-Clark's original work, with stakes on the museum's panorama marking the locations of the plots.

Clearly, Matta-Clark's time has come. A full-dress retrospective is slated for the Whitney in 2007. His influence is already abroad in works by Rachel Whiteread, Gregor Schneider, Toba Khedoori and a slew of others, fashionable or otherwise, who more or less grasp his subtle and often intangible aura. The interest in Matta-Clark belongs to a more general revival of the scrappy, anarchic decade of the 70's, further proof being the present Smithson traveling show (at the Whitney through Oct. 23).

Some of this nostalgia is merely academic: Smithson, in particular, is a darling of modish historians. But the romance may also partly signal a healthy reaction by young artists against our timorous and competitive climate, which now prizes crafty little artworks to please a youth-besotted market. Matta-Clark represents an entirely different sort of youthful aspiration.

Bohemian born, he was the son of Roberto Matta, the Chilean Surrealist. Co-founder of a cooperative exhibition and performance space on the ground floor of 112 Greene Street (which became White Columns) and a founder of the erstwhile restaurant Food, which was also a communal, artist-run beer in what was then still the frontier neighborhood of SoHo, Matta-Clark now conjures up a messier, more mischievous era. There was considerably less money around but, perhaps as a result, a greater sense of freedom and opportunity, or so it can seem in

"Odd Lots: Revisiting Gordon Matta-Clark's 'Fake Estates'" is on view through Oct. 15 at White Columns, 320 West 13th Street, (212) 924-4212; the accompanying exhibition at the Queens Museum of Art, Flushing Meadows-Corona Park, (718) 592-9700, opens Sunday and continues through Jan. 22.

retrospect.

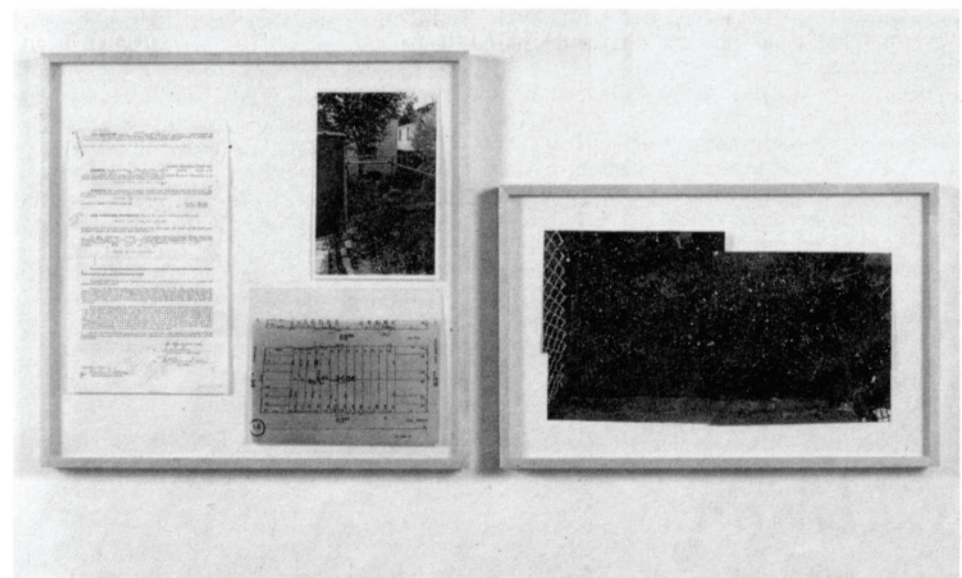
A more gifted formalist than Smithson, more generous, with a penchant for seducing and offending at the same time, Matta-Clark owed something to the example of artist-activists like Hans Haacke. He conceived his own alchemical brand of urban earthwork, a kind of tool-belt conceptualism, which he and his radical architectural friends called Anarchitecture. It combined daredevil theatrics with formal elegance, breathing fresh life into the notion of modernist space through guerrilla tactics by making huge, baroque cuts and holes with chainsaws in abandoned buildings, often under cover of darkness. These were like urban readymades. They made something out of nothing: voids, gaps and leftover spaces.

In New Jersey, Matta-Clark chopped a condemned suburban frame house in half. He and several collaborators sliced conical openings through the exterior walls of a pair of 18th-century buildings slated for destruction next to where the Pompidou Center was being erected in Paris. To the consternation of New York City officials, he temporarily turned a decrepit Hudson River pier into a cathedral of light by cutting an elliptically shaped window out of a wall.

But his art wasn't only about turning squalid architecture into sculpture. Property could have its own metabolism, he thought. It evolved. It could be traded, like stocks, making its value, its status, abstract. His broader interest was in inaccessible, forlorn spots: in the spaces inside walls, in ambiguous, in-between places around the city that are left over by bureaucratic neglect or fiat, and that go unnoticed or that can't actually be seen. He was interested in the topology of absence: places physically unloosed, elegiac sites, intensely felt. They awaited his intervention, through which people might picture the city afresh, might reconsider notions of property and ownership and social exchange — the forces that govern our lives.

His elegant cuts and slices mixed Minimalism with Cubism and Piranesian fantasy. Conceptually, as Ms. Richard, one of the Cabinet curators, puts it, the art trafficked also in the sort of "ambiguous spaces whose boundaries can be bored through in fantasy acts of creative trespass."

Which gets back to "Fake Estates." To visit these nondescript plots in Queens is to go on a treasure hunt without a treasure. A weedy footwide strip of nondescript drive-



Queens Museum of Art



Mitchell Albus Gallery/Queens Museum of Art

Gordon Matta-Clark, seen in the Jaime Davidovich video, working on his "Fake Estates" project; above, a collage of deeds, maps and other documents from that work.

way is locked behind a rusty gate across the street from a cemetery. (You see the site in the Davidovich video.) Another site is a tiny triangle of bramble and dirt beside a backyard fence fronting a highway.

Or maybe it's not. It's impossible to say for sure, because the plots aren't marked. They're hardly plots at all, which is part of Matta-Clark's conceptual point: that property as an idea may loom larger in the mind than it is in reality, but that its contempla-

tion may cause us to consider more closely all those mundane, unloosed fragments of the cityscape that we occupy and pass through.

This sort of concept does not translate easily into an exhibition, and the show at the Queens Museum is predictably dry, with materials recounting the administrative procedures that produced the anomalous plots along with Mr. Davidovich's amusing six-minute video.

Long, long ago, in the 1970's, an artwork could be as quirkily vague as a tidbit of urban land.

The show at White Columns is more visual: an intergenerational mix of multimedia artists, with proposals for fantasy excavations, performances and more traditional sculptures and drawings. Among these, Julia Mandel has devised yellow-chalk sandals, which she plans for two dancers to wear while outlining a pair of nearby parcels in Queens. Mark Dion imagines a Gordon Matta-Clark Subterranean Museum, consisting of an elevator shaft plunging visitors 225 feet down past the Pleistocene and Cretaceous periods straight to bedrock.

Dan Price discovered that Tupperware was invented the year Matta-Clark was born. And capitalizing on this coincidence, he acquired from eBay an assortment of yellow, burnt orange and avocado-colored containers with their original burp-tops from the early 70's, sleekly modernist in design like Matta-Clark's work, made for leftovers, which after all are what the micro-plots are, too, property-picks.

Valerie Hegarty, picking up on the weedy, ad-hoc nature of the sites, has made a sculpture of a rosebush bursting high up through one of White Columns' walls, a memorial to Matta-Clark, while Jude Tallichet, seizing on his sly utopianism, has employed feng shui to divine a co(s)mical installation for above the gallery's reception desk. And Sarah Oppenheimer, riffing on his contractual and destructive playfulness, has hired builders to install, remove and reinstall the same sheetrock wall as many times as she can afford from the show's honorarium.

These are amusing, crafty tributes. Unusual is the project by Mierle Laderman Ukeles, the public sculptor, who invited bakers in Queens to make cookies that can be cut in the shapes of the plots, to be sold at the gallery to pay for more cookies. A nod to Matta-Clark's Food, the restaurant's cooperative spirit and the ephemeral quality of so much of his art, the work is the only one that reaches out to the people who live near his former mini-properties.

Maybe it's a generation gap. Ms. Ukeles is one of the few artists in the show to have been around in the 70's. Youngsters today tend toward more discrete, salable objects, cleverly produced. It's the allusive spirit of Matta-Clark's art that remains hardest to emulate. The art writer Robert Pincus-Witten once mentioned his "wonderful, socially redeeming, hare-brained schemes." That's right, and more than ever, they're a good example to live by.