

FOOD

Gordon Matta Clark

Ned Smyth

In August 1971, I was hitchhiking into New York City from Colorado. I was 23 and on my way to become an artist. In New Jersey, a pickup truck pulled over and asked where I was going. "SoHo," I said. The two guys in the truck started laughing -- they were heading to the same place. Hop in, one of them said, and we drove south through Harlem and midtown Manhattan to SoHo.

It turned out that I had been picked up by Keith Sonnier, a Postminimalist neon artist, and Dickie Landry, who played saxophone for Phil Glass. I was amazed. They dropped me off on West Broadway and wished me well. "Good luck, kid," Landry said.

The next day I went looking for a job. On Prince Street, I saw an ad in a storefront window for waiters and bus boys. I went in to inquire. The woman in charge -- it was Carol Gooden, who was the owner of the place and also Gordon Matta-Clark's girlfriend -- said, "Sure, you can be a waiter or bus boy, but what I really need is an assistant chef."

"What do I have to do?" I asked.

"Can you chop and boil vegetables? Can you make a salad dressing?"

"Yes," I said.

I was hired. The storefront was Food, the first real restaurant in Soho (besides Fanellis Bar down the street) and a conceptual idea and experiment by Matta-Clark -- a restaurant run and staffed by artists for artists.

Two days later, Sonnier and Landry came in, and saw me cooking behind the counter. Kid, you work fast, said Landry. Food became something of a SoHo legend, as did its founder. The experimental theater company Mabou Mines, the Philip Glass group, the dancers of Grand Union, and the artists who were involved with the 112 Greene Street exhibition space either worked or hung out there -- and Matta-Clark was the catalyst. The restaurant was a central meeting place. For me, too, that experience was something of an epiphany. The openness, research, exploration, camaraderie and energy were unlike anything I've experienced before or since -- and Gordon was at the center of it all.

Soon I was also working as an artists assistant, helping them install their work at 112 Greene Street and at other places around the city. Again, Matta-Clark played an important role, as a founder of 112, an artist-run nonprofit that became an early locus in SoHo for experimental sculpture, painting, dance and music. Working at Food and at 112, Gordon and I became friends. We talked a lot about architecture. He was developing his theories of An-Architecture -- a dramatically physical, deconstructivist architecture, rather ahead of its time -- and I was making architectural facades by pouring my own cast-concrete 2 x 4s. Gordon liked these pieces, and in 1973 he included me in a show about architecture that he put together at 112 -- my first exhibition. In 1974, Gordon was slated for a solo show in the gallery, but he said he wasn't ready -- and gave me his slot. A year later, we both began exhibiting with the new Holly Solomon Gallery.

I worked with Gordon on many of his projects in the early 1970s. These included CUTTING and FOUR CORNERS, both done in Englewood, N.J.; his shows at 122 Greene Street; and numerous other projects that he called cuttings. We would break into abandoned buildings in the South Bronx and cut large, geometrically shaped pieces out of walls and floors, opening up the spaces to be photographed. This was always scary, with blocks and blocks of empty, boarded-up buildings, haunted by junkies who would steal copper wire and pipe to sell as scrap to get money for drugs. You never knew what you might run into, and if anything happened, no one would ever know.

But it didnt seem to bother Gordon. We would haul all his saws and other tools, including a power generator, up into these building shells. Sometimes the apartments looked as if the occupants had simply walked out on their lives, leaving their furniture just as it was, their clothes hanging on hooks behind the doors.

Gordon would cut slits or shaped holes in the walls, leading from one room to another, until you could see through the entire apartment. When he could, he would have these views end up looking out the windows. It was even better if the view, through a long horizontal cut, could expose the passage of the elevated subway. It was like watching a movie on a shaped screen. You looked through dark faded rooms, each with its own artifacts, colors and wallpaper, to the natural light outdoors. If the frame of the cut hole was sighted on the raised track of the subway, every few minutes or so you could see a train move across the frame.

Gordon loved the archeological quality of his work. He viewed the layers of linoleum, plaster lath and beams as historical excavations. Michael Heizer cut through natural earth and rock. Gordon cut through the urban landscape. The cultural information of the moldings, doors, windows and wallpaper that Matta-Clark incorporated into his pieces led me to add narration, images and color to my architectural forms and spaces.

One piece we worked on entailed multiple cuts down through one floor after another. With the generator blasting and Gordon bent over cutting into the floor with a chainsaw, I looked up -- and saw two cops on either side of us, their guns drawn. Gordon was oblivious. I shut down the generator and Gordon, losing power, looked up quizzically. "What's going on here? What are you guys doing?" shouted the cops. Gordon didn't miss a beat. "Demolition, the whole area," he said, blithely waving a gloved hand around to encompass the entire area. The cops nodded, put their guns away and left.

Gordon was always balancing on the edge and usually getting away with it. Another example of his walking on the edge was his cutting of a Hudson River Pier. That time, he had to leave the country until the heat died down.

In 1976, Gordon's twin brother committed suicide by jumping from Gordon's loft, which was located on the corner of Wooster and Houston Streets. This had an enormous effect on Gordon's life. He spent time after that in Europe, making some great work. Not long after that, he was diagnosed with cancer. He was a young man, and at the time, it was hard for me to acknowledge that Gordon was so sick that he could die, that this could happen to anyone. He fought the disease bravely, and was inspiring throughout. Near the end, he calmly told me, "It's all about evolution." For some reason, this remark was both a release and reassurance for me. Gordon was always a great mentor, even at the end.

Years later, I moved to Sag Harbor. On my street is a graveyard with beautiful monuments that I regularly visit. While meandering through it one day, I came upon a new rock gravestone covered with pebbles.

On closer inspection, I saw that it read, Anne Alpert 5-5-1914 to 3-30-1997, John Sebastian Matta 6-22-1943 to 7-14-1976, Gordon Matta Clark 6-22-1943 to 8-27-1978. I was thunderstruck. Being back on the same street with Gordon was coming full circle, an unbelievable continuum. Now I often pass or visit his grave. Gordon is still on my mind, and his voice still sounds in my ears.

NED SMYTH is a sculptor. His public art projects can be seen in downtown Philadelphia, Fort Lauderdale, the Anchorage Art Museum, Piazza Lavoro in Pittsburgh and at Battery Park City in Manhattan.

Gordon Matta-Clark, still from the film *Splitting*, 1974. [Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark].
Gordon Matta-Clark, note cards, c. 1973-74. [Canadian Centre for Architecture, Gift of Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark © 2019 Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York]. A close examination shows, nevertheless, that Matta-Clark's notes, letters, and recorded conversations are larded with references to radical politics. Gordon Matta-Clark (1943–1978), who trained originally as an architect, is best known for his spectacular "building cuts". These have often been seen as an outright rejection of the architectural profession. The collaborative project *Anarchitecture* (1974), however, demonstrates how the language of modernism, particularly the polemical and epigrammatic *Towards a New Architecture* by the French modernist artist and architect Le Corbusier, was very much part of his raw material. For Gordon Matta-Clark, who cut holes through derelict buildings and made homeless shelters out of garbage, 1970s New York was ripe for artistic reinvention. In the cash-strapped New York City of the late 1960s and early 1970s, piles of uncollected garbage consumed sidewalks, abandoned buildings turned neighborhoods into ghost towns, and the homeless population seeped far beyond the Bowery. This civic squalor was too much for the late. Gordon Matta-Clark.