

Urban Guerrilla Art: (Re-)Imagining Public Space through Artistic Intervention Chloe Sugden

How and through what struggles, in the course of what class action and what political battle could urban historical action be born? This is the question toward which we are inevitably carried by our enquiry into the meaning of the city.¹

Dialogues on the spatial politics of contemporary art² are flourishing, especially when that art subverts the gallery or museum space. Many artists and critics are taking what Rosalyn Deutsche terms an ‘urban-aesthetic’ or ‘spatial-cultural’ approach to their work ‘that combines ideas about art, architecture, and urban design, on the one hand, with theories of the city, social space, and public space, on the other.’³ While this approach is by no means novel, it is ubiquitous.⁴ A renewed interest in public interventionist, neo-avant-garde artworks has blossomed,⁵ with historical roots in, for example: the anti-commercial, ‘anti-art’ aesthetics of the Fluxus movement of the 1960s;⁶ and the Marxist theories of spatial subversion explored by the Situationist International (1957-72).⁷ This trend in interventionist discourse goes hand-in-hand with the revived popularity of the everyday, (evidenced by Monash University Museum of Art’s current exhibition, *Reinventing the Wheel: the Readymade Century*); performance art by Joseph Beuys (1921-86) and Marina Abramović (b. 1946); and other visionary-utopian art practices that allow for temporary, participatory or site-specific experiences. Additionally, the rise⁸ (and in some cases, commercial and institutional success) of street artists and

¹ Raymond Ledrut, ‘Speech and the Silence of the City’, in *The City and the Sign: An Introduction to Urban Semiotics*, ed. Alexandros Ph Lagopoulos and Mark Gottdiener (New York: Columbia University Press 1986), 125.

² Throughout this essay, my approach to ‘contemporary art’ is grounded in history, drawing on art historian Terry Smith’s assertion that a post-historical attitude – a belief that contemporary art is created ‘beyond history’ – surrenders ‘...what art history, and historical materialist critique... can offer to an understanding of the present’. See Terry Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 244-6. Smith regards the contemporary as emergent in the 1970s, as evidenced by the proliferation of art practices at the time. I am, therefore, warranted in considering artworks created in the 1970s as contemporary in nature. See Terry Smith, *Contemporary Art: World Currents* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2011), 19-43.

³ Rosalyn Deutsche, ‘Introduction’, in *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*, ed. Rosalyn Deutsche (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), xi.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Timon Beyes, Sophie-Therese Krempl, and Amelie Deuffhard, ‘Introduction: Art Alone Can Do Nothing’, in *Parcitypate: Art and Urban Space*, ed. Timon Beyes, Sophie-Therese Krempl, and Amelie Deuffhard (Zurich: Verlag Niggli AG, 2009), 10.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁷ Situationist International, ‘The Theory of Moments and the Constructions of Situations’, in *Situation*, ed. Claire Doherty (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 114.

⁸ In 1975, Jean Baudrillard offered a theoretical critique of graffiti, erroneously asserting that graffiti in New York was already dead: ‘Today this movement has stopped... it could only have been ephemeral...’ See Jean Baudrillard, ‘Kool Killer, or the Insurrection of Signs’, in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (London: Sage, 1993), 76. Due to the ‘nomadic impetus’ of graffiti writers and technological

graffiti writers has, I may argue, contributed to a growing interest in transient, guerrilla urban art projects.⁹

Before individual projects can be discussed, a number of preliminary questions arise. What are the conditions and effects of urban artistic interventions? How do these disparate, often ephemeral artistic acts disrupt and (re-)define the spatial relationship between the individual and the city? What does the term public space mean? Critic Bruce Robbins describes public space as a 'phantom', as its '...claim to be fully inclusive has always been an illusion'.¹⁰ The concept of a homogeneous social space is indeed illusory, fraught with disagreement and 'disavowing plurality'. Deutsche claims that public space is in fact '...produced and structured by conflicts'.¹¹ If differences produce social space, our cities are by nature *living* (evolving, transforming), rather than *lived* (immobile, unchanging) spaces. This essay, then, explores the predominantly illegal urban in(ter)ventions of two artists – divergent in cities, styles and approach – exposing the 'space-producing' potential of public guerrilla art.

I have no desire to impose a rigid, theory-laden framework onto the practices of the urban artists that I mention, as I am more interested in the ways in which these artists are capable of (re-)creating and thus questioning and manipulating public space through their work. I focus on artists who, through their various practices, change or transform our perceptions and understandings of a certain public locale in the city, interventions that give rise to 'other' spaces and 'other' visions of the public sphere, whether physically (*physical space*) and/or psychologically (*imagined/visual space*). Art is not merely a medium for the representation of 'things'. Contemporary artists have the ability to alter their surroundings through their work, and (re-)invent the imaginative potential of the public spaces in which we live a large portion of our lives. According to Timon Beyes, Sophie-Therese Krempf and Amelie Deuflhard:

What art can do... is become part of spatial assemblages through adding to or rerouting (some of) the trajectories that produce space and thus possibly enable other spatial arrangements. Such is its potentiality.¹²

developments such as the Internet, the cultural practice of graffiti has, however, rapidly spread across the world from New York City. Street art, graffiti's offshoot since the 1980s, has also developed into a global cultural practice. For a detailed analysis of the multiple functions of graffiti and street art, see Ulf Wuggenig, 'The Tattooing of Cities: Notes on the Artistic Field and Popular Art in the City', in *Parcitypate: Art and Urban Space*, ed. Timon Beyes, Sophie-Therese Krempf, and Amelie Deuflhard (Zurich: Verlag Niggli AG, 2009).

⁹ I use the term *guerrilla art*, for lack of a better phrase, to refer to works created in predominantly unauthorised or unorthodox, yet publicly accessible urban locations.

¹⁰ Deutsche, xxiii.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Beyes, Krempf, and Deuflhard, 22.

In order to explore the various methods of spatial rearrangement that artists working in public space may engage in, I will, firstly, consider the more historical case of New York-based artist Gordon Matta-Clark (1943-78). Matta-Clark was invested in both re-envisioning his city's urban sites and addressing 'non-art' spectators, those unexposed or indifferent to the institutional domains of art. Trained as an architect at Cornell University, most of Matta-Clark's short career took place on the streets of 1970s New York City – a constellation of forgotten and disused buildings plagued by crime and poverty.¹³ Lower Manhattan and its architecture was, however, being re-developed, with plans for The World Trade Centre and also a cross-city expressway that would have leveled parts of SoHo (then an abandoned area of cast-iron industrial buildings used by a community of artists as vital studio and living spaces).¹⁴ SoHo was saved from the expressway in 1969, however, and Matta-Clark was highly attuned to this moment.¹⁵ Across the city, especially earlier in his career, he conducted a series of temporary artistic interventions using these ruinous areas.¹⁶ Elizaebeth Sussman describes Matta-Clark's oeuvre as 'fragments of an imaginary architectural and social project stutured to art... [a] proposal for the city, first for great New York, and in particular SoHo, and then for other places in the world'.¹⁷

Matta-Clark transformed banal matter – the 'garbage' of the public spaces of urban civilisation (decrepit structures, disused cars and other forms of waste) – into art by drawing, building, cutting, removing and demolishing.¹⁸ In his early project, *Garbage Wall* (1970), Matta-Clark mixed cement with detritus that he found under the Brooklyn Bridge, creating a 'wall element' in the hope that the homeless residing under the bridge 'would follow his example and build their own homes'.¹⁹ His interest in the intersections of art, architecture, public space, and citizen engagement, as demonstrated in *Garbage Wall*, is also seen through his earlier guerrilla experiments. Exploring derelict buildings without permission, Matta-Clark cut through New York City's abandoned structures, creating unforeseen and thoughtfully placed apertures and incisions in their foundations.²⁰

¹³ Elizabeth Sussman, 'The Mind Is Vast and Ever Present', in *Gordon Matta-Clark: You Are the Measure*, ed. Elizabeth Sussman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 13.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 15.

¹⁶ Adam Weinberg, 'Foreword', in *Gordon Matta-Clark: You Are the Measure*, ed. Elizabeth Sussman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 9.

¹⁷ Sussman, 13.

¹⁸ Christian Scheidemann, 'Material and Process: Gordon Matta-Clark's Object Legacy', in *Gordon Matta-Clark: You Are the Measure*, ed. Elizabeth Sussman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 119.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Sussman, 21.

In his *Bronx Floors* project (1972-3), for example, he entered deserted tenement buildings in the South Bronx and dissected their structures, sawing fragments²¹ from the walls and floors, leaving behind voids in their architecture.²² Though smaller in scale compared to his later interventionist works, Matta-Clark transformed these abandoned structures into disorienting, walk-through sculptures that no doubt defied viewers' conventional perceptions of (public) space and gravity. Matta-Clark's 'cuts' exposed a sophisticated design logic, an awareness of space and structure that 'complicated the perception of walls and floors in normative experience.'²³ As he intervened in the structures of in-between buildings, their interiors became visible and available to the public in pioneering ways – to passersby on the street, who were exposed to a new vista through the gaps or voids in these forgotten foundations, and to those who chose to enter the tenements, uninhibited or intrigued by the careful alterations to their façades. Layers and layers of building materials, such as linoleum and timber, would have confronted the passerby inspecting the surface of the gaps left by Matta-Clark's incisions. In a sense, these many material, foundational layers formed a metaphor for the multiple, fleeting histories lived out across their different surfaces.

Matta-Clark's interest in physical alteration culminated in his well-known project, *Splitting* (1974), which involved the 'direct, dramatic and radical' intervention of the artist, who, wielding a chainsaw, bisected an abandoned, destined-for-demolition house in New Jersey.²⁴ These spatial concerns were further explored through Matta-Clark's renowned intervention, *Conical Intersect* (1975), as working with assistants, he sliced holes through the walls and floors in two seventeenth-century Parisian buildings adjacent to the construction site of the Centre Pompidou.²⁵ The result was a spiralling, cone-shaped, sculptural cut into the façade of the structures – a pivotal work of 'anarchitecture'²⁶ that forced the buildings' stark, crumbling insides into contact with the

²¹ Though he exhibited these 'fragments' in an exhibition in 1972, I am more interested in the structural voids that remained, recorded by Matta-Clark in photographs. For more information on the installation of his building cuts in galleries, see *ibid.*, 21-22.

²² Matta-Clark's incisions were predominantly rectangular and L-shaped; see Pamela M. Lee, *Object to be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark* (Cambridge: MIT Press), 73.

²³ Sussman.

²⁴ Weinberg, 9.

²⁵ Joan Simon, 'Motion Pictures', in *Gordon Matta-Clark: You Are the Measure*, ed. Elizabeth Sussman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 132.

²⁶ Matta-Clark used the term 'anarchitecture' in several different contexts before and after his exhibition of the same title. His precise definition of the word remains elusive, however, art critic James Attlee suggests that he used the phrase in accordance with his belief that a 'rigid adherence to certain ideas of form will restrict an object or a building's usefulness'. See James Attlee, 'Towards Anarchitecture: Gordon Matta-Clark and Le Corbusier', *Tate Papers* (Spring 2007). <http://www.tate.org.uk/download/file/fid/7297>.

air, sunlight and most importantly, *people* of the fourth arrondissement. In Marc Petitjean's film of the (de-)construction process of *Concial Intersect*, Elizabeth Lebovici interviews Matta-Clark, who explains that 'the actual form is... a conical intersect... [and] the central axis of the cone is at a 45-degree angle to the street'.²⁷ In the video, the public walking by are seen curiously gazing up into the gaping hole, and Matta-Clark is in conversation with people both on the street and inside the building,²⁸ no doubt initiating dialogues on the role of public art in urban development.

Matta-Clark was very evidently intrigued by fleeting views of the interiors of structures from the street, whether glimpsed through an open door, a ground-level window, or as a result of the wrecking crew.²⁹ Tired of the 'surface formalism' that was the basis of his architectural education,³⁰ as he opened up semi-demolished buildings, he actively contributed to and manipulated the ever-changing public face of the city in which he was intervening. It is clear from Matta-Clark's notebooks that he was interested in transforming buildings into *states of mind* by 'liberating structures from the straightjacket of their maker's intentions'.³¹ He exploited the disregarded ruins of urban civilisation to create sculptural interventions that provoked conscious reactions from the public. His unexpected building dissections urged people on the street to stop, to look, to question, and to consider the spatial characteristics of their surroundings – to consider 'other' possibilities, whether physical or imaginative, for their public spaces. In this sense, Matta-Clark's view of urban space was utopian and limitless, as for him, and those who encountered (and continue to encounter) his ephemeral work, public space has the potential to operate as a communal 'site of psychic and physical freedom and inventiveness', rather than a place for strict civic and architectural laws and limits.³²

Contemporary, Los Angeles-based artist John Divola (b. 1949) appears to share Matta-Clark's concern for the way that publicly visible or accessible buildings act on human consciousness and our understandings of space. Although Divola shared Matta-Clark's interests in urban detritus, ephemerality and unsanctioned artistic interventions in social space, Divola's practice differed significantly. During the 1970s, around the same time

²⁷ Simon, 133.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Attlee.

³⁰ Ibid., 14.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Sussman, 14.

Matta-Clark was working,³³ Divola shot *Vandalism* (1974-5),³⁴ an extensive series of photographs in neglected houses, a series that embraced the flaking paint of disused urban surfaces, the punctured walls and ceilings, and the fragments of junk that littered the floors of these derelict spaces. In addition to this debris, the square, black-and-white *Vandalism* images reveal a series of controlled, graffiti-esque strokes, dots and other marks that Divola made across the walls with a spray can.³⁵ Given the state of decay in these abandoned buildings, these geometric patterns are visually striking. Artist and writer David Company describes his encounter with the photographs in the *Vandalism* series:

They looked like vandalism, only prettier... the scenario looked playful and sinister. The photography was precise and controlled, but its intention was mysterious, defying character... a mixture of... police forensic picture, trophy snapshot of the kind a graffiti artist might take of his work, and a totem from some kind of secular ritual.³⁶

Rather than stagnant photography centred solely on picture-making, Divola's *Vandalism* images are more performative; they are, I may argue, the outcome of a series of open-ended, post-medium specific urban interventions, falling somewhere between sculpture, painting, installation, graffiti and photography. As an artist, Divola thrives in these half-abandoned, publically accessible (unauthorised or not) urban ruins, disregarding the artist's stereotypical 'private' studio for a more communal, yet fugitive space. The images are a collaborative result of Divola and other anonymous visitors (or 'vandals', depending on the subsequent viewer's perspective) who have contributed to the current state of the building. The *Vandalism* photographs remind viewers that their originary realm is no longer a 'home', nor a private space. Like the defunct interiors glimpsed in Matta-Clark's work, *Vandalism* exposes us to the in-between spaces of our society, spaces stripped of their previous social function, yet perhaps destined for another.³⁷

Divola revels in the decaying structure as a site in which he has unhindered creative potential to improvise and (re-)invent certain perceptions of urban social space. Rather than a non-place strictly for the urban dispossessed, his images re-envision the ruinous house as an enigmatic site for unencumbered artistic experimentation. In other words, through intervening in and shooting these deserted urban spaces, Divola allows them to

³³ David Company, 'Who, What, Where, with What, Why, How and When? The Forensic Rituals of John Divola', in *John Divola: Three Acts*, ed. Michael Famighetti (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2006), 129.

³⁴ Divola's website features a comprehensive archive of the *Vandalism* series: <http://www.divola.com/>

³⁵ Company, 128.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 131.

once again perform a functional, if not temporary, societal and spatial role as platforms for intense artistic creativity. The interiors captured in *Vandalism* are records of past inhabitants and occurrences, including those creative actions of Divola. However, they also stand as metaphors for the changing nature of public space – they are sites of continuous action and transformation at the hands of Divola and those anonymous others. Every photograph in *Vandalism*, according to Company, is a ‘pause in an unfolding, improvised situation. The space we see will no doubt be changed into something else... this is emphasised through the use of a series’.³⁸ As a result, the line between destruction and creation remains poignantly frayed.

Through their interventionist art projects, Matta-Clark and Divola actively (re-)created and (re-)imagined their urban surroundings, offering new possibilities for public spatial arrangements. Working outside art institutions as part of their practice, they were able to hijack and intervene in the foundations of decrepit dwellings in order to question the mediums of artistic creation and consumption, but more importantly, the public’s conceptions of, and attitudes toward their spatial surroundings.

³⁸ Ibid.

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