

Yongyu Chen

Abstract

My project is about the visual art of David Wojnarowicz and the (an)architectural interventions of Gordon Matta-Clark. Both Wojnarowicz and Matta-Clark were situated in the New York City of the 70s and 80s — a period shaped by the city’s fiscal crisis and its transition from a Fordist economy to a Post-Fordist economy of flexible accumulation. Notably, the work of both artists is not only shaped by but also engages with this particular urban moment; in particular, the work of both artists is intimately tied to the landscape (architectural but also human) of some of the most derelict, most neglected zones of this New York City, such as the waterfront, such as the piers; zones in which buildings were in disrepair, zones inhabited most notably by an “underclass” of socially / economically / politically marginalized people.

My research this summer about Wojnarowicz and Matta-Clark is meant to build a foundation for my senior thesis in which I will try to understand how these two figures attempted, in their own ways, through their own mediums, to formulate a subversive, politically-inflected aesthetics in the context of their New York City (a very particular context which, however, encapsulates important global changes, which have been called, variously, the beginning of the postmodern condition, or the shift into late capitalism, or semiocapitalism.) And I will try to explore, as well, how their works play off of each other, the ways in which their projects are coordinated as well as the ways in which they contest each other, are incompatible. (We have to remember that Wojnarowicz and Matta-Clark came from very different backgrounds; and they were in other ways as well very different people and artists.) My analysis will be guided by concepts like potentiality, worklessness / inoperativity, the off-screen, the spectral, the ruin and the monument, and the idea of the community to come.

Biographical Sketch

I was born in Beijing, China; since then, I’ve lived in West Lafayette, Indiana and Columbia, Missouri and Knoxville, Tennessee, which is where I currently reside. At Cornell, I major in Comparative Literature; within my major, my academic interests aren’t focused in any particular language or medium — they include Latin American poetry, Italian cinema, the prose of Bolaño + Lispector + Kafka, as well as Agamben’s writings about *inoperosità* and Blanchot’s writings about *désœuvrement*. My interest in the anarchitecture of Gordon Matta-Clark comes from a

seminar that I took with Patty Keller and Cecelia Lawless called *Cinematic Cities*; my interest in the visual art of David Wojnarowicz comes from Patty Keller who encouraged me to look into his work. (My interest in both Wojnarowicz and Matta-Clark is sustained by how moving their art has been to me, has continued to be for me.)

My other interests: I'm also on the e-board of Cornell's undergraduate poetry review, *Marginalia* — and I help read prose submissions for the *Adroit Journal*. My own poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Black Warrior Review*, *BOAAT*, *DIAGRAM*, *Foundry*, *jubilat*, *Indiana Review*, and *Sonora Review*, among other journals.

Title Page

Yongyu Chen, 2020

Comparative Literature

“David Wojnarowicz, Gordon Matta-Clark, and the Angel of History in New York”

Statement of Purpose

I. Gordon Matta-Clark is best known for his “anarchitecture” — his practice of making large cuts (often on a monumental scale) through the walls of abandoned, crumbling buildings in New York mostly (but also in Paris, also in Antwerp, also in Chicago); the results include a suburban house literally split in two (*Splitting*, 1974), a series of holes incised through the width of two buildings (*Conical Intersect*, 1975), and cuts (like the rings left behind by teacups) that, eventually, cross each other in the middle of an empty office building (*Office Baroque*, 1977.) Such descriptions do not fully do justice to Gordon Matta-Clark’s anarchitecture — it’s difficult to describe what Matta-Clark does to interior space partly because so much of his work is dedicated to a radical contestation and transformation of what we assume interior space looks like, feels like, what it has to look like and feel like; so much of his work is dedicated to *rendering inoperative* our social conventions concerning space.

Matta-Clark, in his writings, revealed his antagonism towards modernist architecture in particular, for which considerations about the quality of life, about the effect of architecture on the mental existence of its inhabitants, is sacrificed for the sake of impersonal, capitalist ideals such as functionality; the result: homogeneous cities, repetitive cities and buildings; the result: urban lives that are, in a sense, stifled by the very physical structures that are supposed to sustain these lives; as Jonathan Hilburg says: “Matta-Clark felt, like the Situationists, that this dream [i.e. the utopian “dream” of modernist architecture] had been used as a political tool by the ruling classes through the provision of convenience and dwellings, in order to contain and control the masses.”

In Matta-Clark’s oeuvre, *decreation is a form of creation* — this, I think, is the heart of anarchitecture; decreating, deconstructing, ruining the modernist structures of the metropolis in his very particular way, Matta-Clark also decreates, hollows out, renders inoperative our socially conditioned assumptions about what space can be like. Matta-Clark shows us urban spaces that are so intensely different (both in terms of how they look and how, according to testimonies, they *feel*) from the usual spaces of the city — spaces that are so new to us — that Matta-Clark is making us realize that the homogenous urban landscape in which we are still largely living in is not the way that architecture *has to be*; Matta-Clark, through architectural (de)creation, potentializes architectural space; he shows us that the buildings in which we live and move *can be otherwise* (in particular: can be more liveable¹, spiritual, more human.)

¹ In “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Walter Benjamin posits the possibility of a new experience of time as an alternative to the linear, homogeneous, empty progression of time, the chronology, of

In his *Day's End* (1975) project, Matta-Clark intended, in his own words, to convert an abandoned warehouse on the piers of New York City into a “sun-and-water temple”; like this project on the piers, all of his projects had very particular goals — all produced an immediate and concrete significance in the context in which they were performed — but, what I’ll concentrate on here, in this statement of purpose, and what will be the starting-point of my senior thesis, is that, more generally, Matta-Clark’s work is in general about human potentiality, or, in his case, about the potentialization of urban space.

II. My thinking about potentialization comes from Agamben (but also, in a more indirect way, from Blanchot.) In his essay “What Is a Destituent Power,” Agamben provocatively defines human nature as *the very lack of a fixed nature* — the human being is, according to Agamben, “a being of pure potentiality (*potenza*), that no identity and no work could exhaust.” (Notably, Agamben, while on the radical left, is here moving away from Marx’s identification of human labour with work.) What Agamben means in his quote is the following: if the question is, as Aristotle posited it, “if, as for the flute player, the sculptor, the carpenter, and every artisan there exists a proper work (*ergon*), there is also for man as such something like an *ergon* or if he is not instead *argos*, without work, inoperative,” Agamben would like to answer (along with Averroes and Dante) that “man [is exactly] the living being without work, which is to say, devoid of any specific vocation” — the human being (and the human world formed by the human being) is characterized by its “essential inoperativity,” its contingency, its ability reinvent itself, to have the potential to be and do otherwise.

Importantly: inoperativity, says Agamben, “does not mean inertia, but [rather] names an operation that deactivates and renders works (of economy, of religion, of language, [elements of the human world,] etc) inoperative” by “deactivat[ing]... existing values and powers,” stripping away the accumulated habits and customs that furrow one’s potentiality into one particular cultural mode of being actualized. (“The modern epoch,” says Agamben, “starting from Christianity — whose creator God defined himself from the origin in opposition to the *deus otiosus* of the pagans — is constitutively unable to think inoperativity except in the negative form of the suspension of labor.” What Agamben calls *inoperosità* instead dwells in the neither/nor of work and worklessness as the simple suspension of labour (simply destined to

capitalism — a time that, as he argues and Agamben also argues, is a time that is inhuman, unliveable, ungraspable. Messianic time is, instead, a time that can be fully lived in, loved in; in a way, then, Matta-Clark is dreaming of a messianic space, the counterpart to messianic time.

reproduce the ability to work later.)) Agamben's key idea is, to reiterate, that inoperativity is, above all else, a paradoxical *operation of inoperativity*, an operation through which humans "[make] human works and productions inoperative, opening them to a *new possible use* [emphasis added]" and thus (re)affirming our own potentiality in the process, (re)affirming the radical contingency of our human world (Agamben "What Is a Destituent Power?") Our inoperativity (we can also translate *inoperosità* as the state of being out of work or worklessness) is the direct consequence of our (non-)nature as beings of pure potentiality; the operation of rendering inoperative is, then, (non-)work proper to us, the (non-)work that accords with our (non-)nature.

There are many examples, modes of inoperative operations (potentializing operations) described in Agamben's writings — there is, for instance, the way *play* allows us to find new uses for objects (generally uses divorced from the frequently functionalist, instrumentalist uses enforced by capitalist society); Agamben also speaks of profanation, of the carnival-space, of Paul's messianic gesture.

III. Though David Wojnarowicz's experience of New York City must have been very different from that of Gordon Matta-Clark (Wojnarowicz left his lower-class family as a teenager and lived, for a few years, on the streets — Matta-Clark, on the other hand, was educated at Cornell University, with a father who was a famous Surrealist, and he had connections with many artists of the SoHo scene; moreover, Wojnarowicz was gay and died in 1992 of AIDS — Matta-Clark died of cancer), in Wojnarowicz's art as well the theme of potentiality keeps recurring. For example, in his series called *Rimbaud in New York*, Wojnarowicz photographs his friends wearing Rimbaud masks in derelict zones of New York; in this series, which hovers between play and survival, Wojnarowicz problematizes, renders inoperative our assumptions about identity, namely that identity and the self are stable, unitary, homogeneous things; these photographs also bring up the issue of the off-screen — in many photographs, at least one hand is cut off by the frame, invisible but still, in a way, visible; the off-screen zone (as suggested by Peretz) is a virtual zone, a space and time of potentiality, a zone in which the world from the inside of the frame is present in the form of absence.

This summer, as part of my research, I would like to read more about how other thinkers, besides Agamben, deal with the concept of potentiality — in particular, I would like to read more of Deleuze and Guattari and think through the difference between their "virtuality" and Agamben's "potentiality"; and I would like to read more, as well, about architecture and

urbanism (for Matta-Clark) and about photography, queer theory, and performance art (for Wojnarowicz) so that I can better situate what potentiality means in these particular fields — how the idea of potentiality fits in with the concepts and histories particular to these mediums, these contexts, these artists. (For example, it's too simplistic to say that the work of Matta-Clark is about the potentialization of urban space or that the work of Wojnarowicz is about the potentialization of the self — I would like to explore how their work does so and the degree to which it is successful — and the degree to which their works cannot in fact be understood by the categories of potential and actual.) And I would like, moreover, to explore the ways in which potentiality is a concept that *radiates outward*, touches on and influences many other ideas; I would like to better understand, for instance, the links between potentiality and Derrida's idea of haunting², and also the links between potentiality and community and ethics³, and also the links between potentiality and memory and forgetting. I will try to use these concepts to better understand the work of Wojnarowicz and Matta-Clark; at the same time, I will use Wojnarowicz's and Matta-Clark's art to better understand potentiality and other linked philosophical concepts — I will use their work as a kind of laboratory for thinking through what Agamben's radical idea of the human being as a being of pure potentiality entails.

For my research it's important to have access to Wojnarowicz's and Matta-Clark's artwork. I would like to stay in Madrid⁴ for two weeks to spend time with the many materials on display at the major exhibition of Wojnarowicz's work at the Museo Reina Sofia. (Since I am already in Europe for study abroad this semester, it will be simple to fly to Spain.) Then, I would like to spend two weeks in Montréal to work with Matta-Clark's archives which are stored at the Canadian Center for Architecture. Since Matta-Clark's architectural interventions no longer exist, all that remains are his archival photograph, films, documentations of his own performances. And, finally, if possible, I would like to stay in Ithaca for a month to use Cornell Library's resources and piece things together.

I think that this project will be valuable in that, though much has been written about Wojnarowicz and Matta-Clark, no one has (to my knowledge) approached their work through this constellation of theoretical terms, this framework; I think that potentiality is a cipher

² Agamben's description of potentiality as exiting in the mode of the "presence of an absence" gives it a spectral mode of existence.

³ The "coming community" envisioned by Agamben, a community that would take into account the potentiality of human beings, a community of what he calls "whatever" beings has much to do with Levinas's ethics of infinity.

⁴ I was intending to work with the Wojnarowicz archives at the NYU Fales Library — but that library will be undergoing renovations this summer and its contents will be, for that period, inaccessible.

through which much of their art can be understood better and also a place where their distinct aesthetic practices connect (besides an article by Strombeck in the journal *Post45*, not much (if any) criticism has had as a key focus the desire to view their aesthetic practices in conjunction, in productive consonance and dissonance.)

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