

YOU ARE READING AN ARTICLE PRINTED FROM PLACES, THE JOURNAL OF PUBLIC SCHOLARSHIP ON ARCHITECTURE, LANDSCAPE, AND URBANISM. READ MORE AT [PLACESJOURNAL.ORG](https://placesjournal.org).

Unbuilding Gender

Trans Anarchitectures In and Beyond the Work of Gordon Matta-Clark*

JACK HALBERSTAM

OCTOBER 2018

Jack Halberstam is a recipient of the [Arcus/Places Prize](#), which supports innovative public scholarship on gender, sexuality, and the built environment.



Gordon Matta-Clark, *Splitting*, 1974.
 [Courtesy The Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark and David Zwirner. © The Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark/Artist's Rights Society (ARS), New York.]

The form of embodiment that, in the 20th and 21st centuries, we have come to call transgender is not simply a gender switching, a wrong body replaced by a right body, a shift in morphology. Trans* embodiment, rather, is the visual confirmation that all bodies are uncomfortable and wrong-ish, situated as they are within confining grammars of sense and security.¹ The wrong body — an appellation mostly used in the 1980s for people who have felt themselves to be out of place or out of time — now comes not to claim rightness but to dismantle the system that metes out rightness and wrongness according to the dictates of various social orders. Trans* bodies, in other words, function not simply to provide an image of the non-normative against which normative bodies can be discerned, but rather as bodies that are fragmentary and internally contradictory; bodies that remap gender and its relations to race, place, class, and sexuality; bodies that are in pain; bodies that sound different from how they look; bodies that represent palimpsestic identities or a play of surfaces; bodies that must be split open and reorganized, opened up to chance and random signification. And because it is not a matter of replacing wrong with right, we require different visual, aural, and haptic codes and systems that can figure the experience of being in such bodies. After all, the trans* variant body is not so easy to represent, and the visual frames that establish such representation tend either to reveal sites of contradiction upon the gender-variant body (through nakedness perhaps, which risks sensationalizing) or to mediate other kinds of exposure, violent, intrusive, or otherwise.

In recent years, many theorists of transgender embodiment, as well as various artists and activists, have steered clear of the identitarian traps presented by political strategies that center on recognition or respectability, and have begun to think in greatly expanded ways about the experience of “wrong” embodiment. Within a beautifully shifting (kaleidoscopic even) series of discursive and aesthetic maneuvers, scholars and artists and activists have turned away from a purely figurative regime for representing transgender bodies — a system, in other words, committed to offering recognizable and pleasing forms of trans embodiment. They — we — have turned away from figuration or indexical or mimetic representation and towards the abstract, the symptomatic, even the architectural. What might the abstract and architectural offer in terms of transgender representation?



Cassils, *Becoming An Image Performance Still No. 6* (National Theater Studio, SPILL Festival, London), 2013. [Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York. Photo: Cassils with Manuel Vason.]



Yve Laris Cohen, *al Coda*, from *D.S.*, 2014. Performance view, March 28, 2014. [Whitney Museum of American Art Biennial 2014, New York, NY. Courtesy the artist and Company Gallery, New York. Photo: Paula Court.]

boychild, *Moved by the Motion: You Sad Legend* with Wu Tsang featuring Patrick Belaga, 2016. [Courtesy the artist]

As the first of several answers to this question, on a most basic level, current conversations about transgender embodiment often relate to an ongoing national discussion about bathrooms and public access to facilities that are marked in binary terms. At least one solution to the so-called bathroom problem could be architectural and/or design-centered, and a number of recent projects offer design solutions to the binary management of public

space.² Second, many transgender people engage in medical procedures to rebuild their bodies, modifying this, extending that, smoothing one area, enlarging another. This act of rebuilding, rather than its outcome, is what preoccupies many transgender artists and theorists. Third, while these bodily modifications have often followed certain medical and psychiatric protocols and been understood using the language of a voyage of discovery, nowadays many such procedures are improvised and undertaken in no particular order. The framework of a journey has become misleading: it proposes a destination to which many transgender people are indifferent. In an enormous paradigm shift, we have begun to think less about definitive transition and more about a continuous building and unbuilding of the body. We have begun to engage in conversations about the various kinds of cuts and scars that unmake the normatively gendered body and make up a transgender body. What was previously theorized as a becoming, a stubborn pursuit of a seemingly impossible goal, now appears as a project of dismantling and remaking, a sculpting of flesh and molecular form — using the tools of surgery and hormones, for sure, but also deploying the concept of transgender as a kind of wrecking ball that can knock and batter at the fortress of binary gender.

To give one example of an emergent architectural turn in transgender studies, an essay by Athina Angelopoulou (in a special issue of *Footprint* focused on “Trans-Bodies/Queering Spaces”) looks to architecture in a discussion of gender transitioning, in order to explore the spatial dimensions of bodily transformation, medical or otherwise.³ Angelopoulou proposes that we think about architecture and surgery together, in order to locate the very specific remaking of space that the trans* body represents. The cutting and stitching that the trans* body undergoes creates a corporeal surface marked by the encounter with technologies of fabrication. This is a body that has been made and unmade, undone, frayed, opened up and then closed — imperfectly, and in ways that challenge many more binaries beyond male versus female. The trans* body as presently imagined confronts rather than confirms common assumptions about the coherent and incoherent, material and immaterial, internal and external. As Susan Stryker’s early essay on trans-monstrosities vividly puts it, the trans* body is “an unnatural body.” This body, Stryker continues, “is the product of medical science. It is a technological construction. It is flesh torn apart and sewn together again in a shape other than that in which it was born.”⁴ Positing a connection to Frankenstein’s creation, Stryker embraces the darkness of the unnatural, makes peace with the cut, and embraces the monstrous.

In the present essay, I myself look towards anarchitectural practices of unmaking as promulgated by the American artist Gordon Matta-Clark (1943–1978), extending the ideas of unbuilding and creative destruction that characterize his work in order to develop a queer concept of anarchitecture focused on the trans* body.⁵ The concept of “anarchitecture” is attributed mainly to Matta-Clark, whose inventive site-specific cuts into abandoned buildings demonstrated approaches to the concept of home and to the market system of real estate that were anarchistic, creatively destructive, and full of queer promise.

Of course, this is not to say that Matta-Clark or any of the participants in the Anarchitecture group that he helped to found in downtown Manhattan in 1973 and ’74 would have understood their work in this sense. Rather, we might take up the challenge offered by Matta-Clark’s anarchitectural projects in order to spin contemporary conversations about

queer and trans* politics away from notions of respectability and inclusion, and towards the anti-political project of unmaking a world that casts queers and trans people (and homeless people and immigrants, among others) as problems for the neoliberal state. I propose that, just as the transgender body once represented a form of bodily abjection counterposed to gender normativity, now trans* bodies offer fleshly blueprints for the unbuilding of binary understandings. Matta-Clark's art offers a fantastic legacy to young trans* artists who, as we will see, are less interested in making work within existing parameters for painting, sculpture, and/or performance than in tearing those parameters apart. Indeed, much of what we might now call trans* art engages in violent, destructive, and rigorous if chaotic attempts to unmake the frames of representation through which the transgender body has been viewed.

Gordon Matta-Clark, two views of *Conical Intersect*, 1975. [Courtesy The Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark and David Zwirner. © The Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.]

I. Building/Unbuilding

While the trans* body represents one particular challenge to ideas of physical coherence, all bodies pass through some version of the building and unbuilding that we tend to locate in the process of gender transition. Feminist art is filled with examples of such construction and deconstruction, often taking literal form as the projections of houses onto bodies and vice versa. To cite just one example: *Femme Maison* (1946–47), an early series of paintings, drawings, sculptures, and assemblages by Louise Bourgeois (1911–2010), depicts female bodies lodged within houses; then inverts the relation between body and building and puts the house into the body; and then situates the female body as literally exceeding the limits imposed by the house or by domestic space in general. Here the artist who would later create a massive sculpture of a spider titled *Maman* (1999) envisions multiple fusions of femaleness into built structures. While some of Bourgeois' spider sculptures form wall-less rooms in their own right, at least one, *Spider (Cell)* (1997), additionally contains a small room within the legs, as if to cement the link between the home and the maternal body.

All these works map maternity onto the notion of housing, and then call into question the whole signifying system that makes such an association meaningful. The woman/house and spider/house constructions are creepy because they suggest that the female body has become so entangled with ideas of nature, and of domestic architecture as well, that we perhaps cannot imagine femininity otherwise. At the same time, if the *Femme Maison* works

demand anything of the viewer, they seem to beg that we reach into the structures and pull the bodies out, alive or dead. Like conjoined twins, the bodies and buildings are so fused that any attempt to detach one from the other would, we sense, kill both. Perhaps this is the point. We must destroy both the woman in the building and the building in the woman. In so doing we can begin to reimagine the (re)constructed body as it intersects the coordinates of gender, the social constructions of identity, and the familiar contours of the built environment.

If the discipline of modernist architecture, as imagined by Ayn Rand and others, exemplified a monumental will to power in general, and a masculinist desire for imperial power in particular, then the counter-architectural project that came to be known as “anarchitecture” attempted to expose such projects and replace them with activist gestures. In the 1970s in New York City, the artists’ group that called itself Anarchitecture sought to unmake the schemas within which such connections between power and architecture resonate as right and true. The Soho-based group eschewed notions of genius, and basked in anarchist principles of improvisation and collaboration. Nonetheless, as Frances Richard shows in her book *Gordon Matta-Clark: Physical Poetics*, anarchitecture as a counter-proposal to mainstream architecture was, and remains, “largely Matta-Clark’s brainchild.”⁶

Gordon Matta-Clark, *Day’s End*, 1975.
[Courtesy The Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark
and David Zwirner. © The Estate of Gordon
Matta-Clark/Artists Rights Society (ARS),
New York.]

Indeed, it is to Matta-Clark that Angelopoulou turns in her essay as one example of queer forms of cutting. Angelopoulou first considers the surgical cut as theorized by Eva Hayward in a transgender context, where cutting and amputation register as “form[s] of becoming,” ways to “feel the growth of new margins”; the article likewise examines Karen Barad’s idea of the surgical incision as a “cutting together-apart,” a means by which entangled forms are differentiated without being fully divided.⁷ Angelopoulou then addresses Matta-Clark’s cutting as an architectural act.⁸ She sees his work as an exchange between the artist and the vital form of the building: “Matta Clark considered the buildings to be a form of living being and, as such ... active participant[s] in their transformational process. Artist and building were in an active dialogue during the preparation and the performance of the ‘cuts.’”⁹ The cuts that make up the gestural repertoire of Matta Clark’s projects — I am thinking particularly of *Splitting* (1974), *Day’s End*, and *Conical Intersect* (both 1975) — rehearse not only an undoing of architectural theory and a refusal of certain political paradigms for the urban environment. They also, perhaps unwittingly, posit the unmaking of certain binary logics of the body.

His work is often described in terms of anatomical dissection, using the language of a surgical “operation.”¹⁰ Again, this is not at all to say that Matta-Clark’s cuts into built structure mimic the cuts of sex reassignment surgery — only that these cuts, to the extent that they trouble the conventional gendering of the artist as male and the building as

female, run parallel to later queer and trans* critiques. Granted, not all theorists have seen Matta-Clark's work as sympathetic (or even relevant) to queer and feminist principles of bodily order/disorder; for some, his art represents a masculine assault on the female body of the house. But of course, a reading that makes Matta-Clark into a type of rapist and the house into a vulnerable female body only confirms the naturalized relations between architect and maleness and building and femaleness that anarchitecture seeks to unravel.¹¹

Neither a rescue operation nor a masculinist will to destroy, Matta-Clark's anarchic experiments with physical structures, and with the economies that assign such structures value, take on new meaning in our contemporary world, where real-estate markets have become pyramid schemes and bodily shapes are under constant revision. Matta-Clark's unusual practice of carving cavities and orifices into walls, floors, roofs, and ruins conjures a playful art of castration (i.e. the cut). His work presents a meditation on the bifurcation of the self into mind/body as well as male/female, and a critique of the formal project of architecture itself — all while offering multiple escape routes from the systems that mark and claim bodies and spaces.

Correspondingly, while progressive architectural theory has long since turned away from the imperial project of building worlds, gender theory has also subtly moved away from oppositions between essence and constructedness, and found new lexicons for embodiment. If feminist and queer and trans* debates in the 1980s and 1990s asked whether bodies were born a certain way or made into “men” and “women,” in the last few decades the emphasis has shifted in both biopolitical and architectural directions. A case in point is the work of Paul B. Preciado, whose book *Pornotopia: An Essay on Playboy's Architecture and Biopolitics* considers the spatial dynamics of sex and power.¹² Preciado's imaginative reading of sex and gender through the topography of Hugh Hefner's pleasure palace the Playboy Mansion; he considers the distance traveled from Virginia Woolf's feminist call in the early decades of the century for “a room of one's own” to Hefner's call at the century's end for a bachelor pad of one's own. Preciado proposes that, just as women fled domestic space under the influence of second-wave feminism in the postwar years (think Betty Friedan's farewell to suburban life), men were moving back in, to create pornotopic spaces not only beyond but within domestic spheres. The implication is that patriarchy must not simply be challenged. It must be unbuilt.

Alvin Baltrop, *Pier 52 (Gordon Matta-Clark's Day's End with nude man)*, n.d. (1975 – 1986).
[Courtesy The Alvin Baltrop Trust. © 2010,
The Alvin Baltrop Trust and Third Streaming.
All rights reserved.]

In making this point, Preciado echoes a maxim from Audre Lorde, who in 1979 famously cautioned that “the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.”¹³ For both Lorde and Preciado, race, sex, gender and, by extension, class are represented in metaphors of built space. According to both theorists, change will only come through demolition. It follows that if patriarchal systems of domination are understood as architectural, then queer/trans*/feminist activist responses can be received as anarchitectural. Indeed, this anarchitectural impulse echoes through contemporary gender theory, as we can see in Judith Butler's writings. Butler began in 1990 by discussing ways in which binary gender

systems are “troubled” – disrupted, made more complex – by the queer/trans* body. In later work, however, Butler’s terminology regarding embodiment shifted from a psychoanalytic frame in which traditional Freudian understandings are upended, to a materialist frame in which corporeality and personhood are understood in regard to “matter” – both as living substance, and as social “mattering,” or importance. From here, has Butler moved on toward the project of “undoing” gender.

Over the past few decades, then, conceptions of gender have changed irrevocably, from binary to multiple; from a centering of physical embodiment to the spatializing of identities; from definitive to fractal. And as new genders have been formed, old genders have also been destroyed. Gender ideologies that once facilitated intuitive connections – between the home and the maternal body, or the skyscraper or the gun and the male body, or the city or the ship and femaleness, and so on – are now thoroughly disarranged. The current tendency to describe queerness as a verb more than a noun is relevant here; you can queer something, but you cannot fashion an identity around queerness, which in current usage signals an anti-identitarian sense of personhood. This rhymes nicely with R. Buckminster Fuller’s utopian pronouncement about being a verb: “I seem to be a verb, / an evolutionary process – / an integral function of the universe.”¹⁴

Increasingly, we all seem to be verbs rather than nouns; evolving, shifting entities that are out of place, out of time, marooned. Current debates about bathrooms and transgender bodies are only the tip of a large and quickly melting iceberg. In this new landscape of gendered life, such debates register the mismatch between bodily forms and the built environment; disorientation is no longer the terrain solely of those who veer from the straight and narrow. More and more, it names a shared experience of life lived in the collapse of foundational fictions about identity – lived alongside a slow but perceptible declassification of knowledge, a movement away from the 19th-century project of ordering, typing, and cataloguing, and towards a 21st-century vision of multiplying, confusing, and unsorting. A queer and trans* anarchitecture offers an extensive vocabulary for expressing unbecoming.

Queer theorists have long used architectural language to examine how heterosexist hegemony prevails, and how it must be confronted. In an essay on “Queer Phenomenology,” Sara Ahmed explains how heterosexuality literally grounds itself as normative: “Heterosexuality in a way becomes a field, a space that gives ground to, or even grounds, heterosexual action through the renunciation of what it is not, and also by the production of what it is.”¹⁵ She continues:

Heterosexuality is not then simply in objects, as if it could be a property of objects, and it is not simply about love objects or about delimiting who is available to love, although such objects do matter. Nor would heterosexual objects simply refer to objects that depict heterosexuality as a social and sexual good, although such objects also do matter. Rather, heterosexuality would be an effect of how objects gather to clear a ground, of how objects are arranged to create a background.¹⁶

Heterosexuality, Ahmed claims, governs both how objects are placed in space, and how objects are cleared from space. She discusses, as examples, not only the family home and the arrangement of bodies within it, but also the family as an absence of other kinds of bodies. This absence is as important as what is present. The heteronormative cultural field is shaped to encompass the home as if it lacks nothing. But anarchitectural performances insist on attention to what is not there, what has been removed, what is lacking — what has been destroyed, erased, or blacked out in order for what remains present to look permanent. Anarchitectural endeavors seek not to orient the subject properly to the object, nor to locate either in space and time. Rather anarchitecture chases disorientation, cultivates vertigo, and tilts the opposition between building and ruin on its axis, such that the body itself is no longer available to simple binary inscriptions. Instead, like the destroyed building, the body becomes a leaky vessel, a shattered surface, a mess of entrails, a discontinuous circuit for fluids and electricity, ideas and desires. As Christina Crosby proposes in her devastating memoir about becoming a quadriplegic, the body becomes “undone.”¹⁷

boychild, *BODY|SELF*, 2013. [Courtesy the artist. Photo: Paul Ward]

In fact, the Anarchitecture group’s interventions into the physical experience of the city in the 1970s in some ways anticipated current conversations about disability. For Crosby, the sudden experience of becoming quadriplegic after a devastating bicycling accident remakes her whole world. While she had previously experienced the built environment as a backdrop to her unfolding life of teaching, queer sex, sports, and multiple other intimacies, after the accident she inhabits a world “created by building codes and education policy, subway elevators that don’t work and school buses that don’t arrive, and all the marginalization, exploitation, demeaning acts, and active exclusions that deny full access and equality to ‘the disabled.’”¹⁸ Nothing works. It is this view from below, from the wheelchair, from the site of catastrophe, that Matta-Clark’s art engages.

Gordon Matta-Clark, *Fresh Air Cart*, 1972.
[Courtesy The Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark
and David Zwirner. © The Estate of Gordon
Matta-Clark/Artists Rights Society (ARS),
New York.]

Sometimes this engagement is explicit, as in the street performance *Fresh Air Cart* (1972), in which Matta-Clark and a team of helpers dispensed free “fresh air” from a contraption of oxygen tanks, a beach umbrella, and wheelchair-like seats. At other times, the interest in “disability” is implicit, as in Matta Clark’s large-scale anarchitectural sculptures in abandoned urban sites. Revealing the city’s tendency to enable passage for certain bodies through its streets, and then to deliver an understanding of public space based on such passage — think of Michel de Certeau’s pedestrian and Walter Benjamin’s flâneur, for example — Matta-Clark’s anarchitectural projects implicitly emphasized the absence of some bodies (the disabled and the sick), the suppression or incarceration of others (the poor and those deemed criminal), and the segregation of neighborhoods by race and class. Anarchitecture is the an-archive of what has been omitted, what was never there to begin with, what has been abandoned on the way to speculative real-estate deals and the securing of white neighborhoods. Anarchitecture deals in the “object to be destroyed,” as Pamela M.

Lee puts it in her book on Matta-Clark's art. Anarchitecture frames abandonment while preserving the spaces that the market has rejected in relentless pursuit of gentrification.

The Anarchitecture group, which counted Laurie Anderson and Richard Landry among its members, deliberately defied the mandates of Le Corbusier and others who understood the house as a “machine to live in” and, in the case of Le Corbusier in particular, likened modern architecture to “the image of nature.”¹⁹ In this view, the architect must follow lines laid out by some primordial instinct, in accordance with the laws “of gravity, of statistic and of dynamics.”²⁰ Not to do so would ensure failure; “[e]verything must hold together,” Corbusier writes, “or it will collapse.” But Matta-Clark had another sense of the dialectic between structure and failure, and he understood his cuts as balancing the building, in his words, “somewhere between the supports and collapse.” Matta Clark proposes in one of his note cards: “Corbusier is a classist whose faith in the past is restated in a machine aesthetic. Perhaps the faith we place in our past needs re-examination.”²¹

Gordon Matta-Clark, *Conical Intersect*, 1975.
[Courtesy The Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark
and David Zwirner. © The Estate of Gordon
Matta-Clark/Artists Rights Society (ARS),
New York.]

Past and future, and even time itself, are under construction in the anarchitectural spaces carved into the city and its communities, into history and futurity, by the utopian visions of activist groups — in Soho in the '70s, and in other times and places as well — who have combined a sense of purpose with an understanding of space. Modernist architecture believed that form followed function, and sought to impose a rational order upon an irrational existence. In contrast, the Anarchitecture group — much like Occupy decades later — outlined no goal, no trajectory, no mission. As Matta-Clark writes (again in response to Le Courbusier), “anarchitecture attempts to solve no problem.” Or, as another note card announces, “nothing works.” Of course, “nothing works” could easily be a comment on a deindustrialized New York City. But in an anarchitectural context, we might instead read this motto as a comment on the power of absence, silence, and invisibility to redefine and reshape dense urban landscapes. “Nothing works too...” the phrase proposes; or, “nothing is working”; or “the work is nothing.”

Gordon Matta-Clark, index card note, ca. 1973
– 1974. [Courtesy The Estate of Gordon
Matta-Clark and David Zwirner. © The Estate
of Gordon Matta-Clark/Artists Rights Society
(ARS), New York.]

In these political refusals of trajectory and teleology, we feel the potency of joining *anarchy* to *architecture*. Architecture derives from the Greek word *arkhitekton*, combining *arkhi* (chief) with *tekton* (builder). *Archon*, another root, means ruler or magistrate.

Anarchitecture — almost by definition — cannot be embodied by an architect. It resists mastery, refuses to build, and finds other ways to alter the environments we move through, where we live and die. This project of unmaking is obviously anti-utilitarian, and while it is industrial, it moves against the processes of production, to envision the building less as a machine and more as an event, an eruption, a process. Calling to mind Walter Benjamin's

famous formulation in which the filmmaker acts as a surgeon rather than a magician, Matta-Clark turns away from the magic of architectural productions of space, and decides to cut and suture the cityscape, making giant holes in buildings and removing walls to create matrices of light and air. His work thus holds within it what Lucas Crawford has called a “transgender architectonics.” For Crawford, architecture — as a practice rooted in solidity — and transgender bodies — those bodies committed to what he calls “an ethos of change” — seem to be irrevocably at odds. But transformation is anarchitecture’s very rationale.²²

2. Splitting

Anarchitecture is perhaps more attuned than any other performative or sculptural practice to the transformative opportunity represented by transgender orientations to space. Without implying any particular intentionality on the part of the artists and activists involved in the historical project of the ’70s, we might think about anarchitectural performances structurally, in relation to new aesthetic regimes ushered in by changes in the meaning of work, community, space, sex, and body.

Gordon Matta-Clark, *Splitting*, 1974.
[Courtesy The Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark
and David Zwirner. © The Estate of Gordon
Matta-Clark/Artist’s Rights Society (ARS),
New York.]

Here again, Benjamin is useful. In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” he writes:

The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web. There is a tremendous difference between the pictures they obtain. That of the painter is a total one, that of the camera man consists of multiple fragments which are assembled under a new law.²³

Benjamin is of course discussing film, but his thoughts on differing approaches to the real in painting and cinema take on new meaning in regard to the anarchitectural practices cultivated by Matta-Clark and others. We could adapt Benjamin’s comparison of the painter and the cinematographer to define the opposition between the architect and those who practice anarchitecture. While the architect envisions the building as a semiotic mark within a comprehensively legible system, the adherents of anarchitecture create holes, gaps, fissures, and crevices within the built environment. Like the cinematographer, artists like Matta-Clark offer us “multiple fragments which are assembled under a new law.” But this is where the comparison ends. For Benjamin, the filmmaker is still an auteur, a master builder who happens to deal in visual fragments rather than canvases. Anarchitectural artists eschew the screen as well as the canvas, cinematic suture as well as single-point perspective, narrative along with a glorification of visual form. Anarchitecture, in other words, requires the death of the author, the death of the building, and the end of the gendered vocabulary that continues to conflate power with masculine embodiment and to make the figure of the woman into what Teresa De Lauretis has described as “the mirror and the screen.”²⁴ If architecture is a structural grammar for organizing space and situating bodies in it, then

anarchitecture is premised on the exposure of those logics, and their destruction. As Matta-Clark writes, his cuts constitute a form of “breaking and entering,” and “completion through removal.” He proposes “rather than using language, using walls.”²⁵ The result of such completion or removal is to discover and to situate the void — the spatial void around which walls form, and the discursive void that takes the form of silence or a pause in language, fluid or ambiguous gender expression in the individual, and refusal in the body politic.

Matta-Clark makes clear his understanding of the house as belonging to a seemingly unshakeable environmental grammar. But, he suggests, where a grammar becomes fixed, stuck, committed to only a few hegemonic signifying chains, it must be cut up, destroyed, deconstructed. This becomes clear in an interview with Liza Bear in 1974, where the artist says of his anarchitectural practice:

[The house] is not a canvas, no. I am dealing with architectural structure as reality. I mean, there is something about the house, which is very substantial, especially in terms of the environment in which it exists. It's like juggling with syntax, or disintegrating some kind of established sequence in parts.²⁶

He refuses the analogy between the building and the screen or canvas, stressing instead the fact that the house, too, can jump between significations, representing all at once safety and refuge, domestic terror and abuse, the carceral, the possessive, the market, and the city.

In *Splitting* (1974), Matta-Clark did not simply destroy a house; he bisected it and laid it open. The house at 322 Humphrey Street in Englewood, New Jersey, sat on a lot recently purchased by Matta-Clark's art dealers, Holly and Horace Solomon, and was slated for demolition anyway. Like many homes in the area, the empty house, whose tenants had been evicted, represented the failure of a postwar economic dream of space, safety, and consolidation; 322 Humphrey Street registered the decline of the suburbs from utopian enclaves to domestic prisons. Matta-Clark excised a slice from the center of the house while rocking the structure back on its foundation, and removed the four corners of the eaves; he filmed the whole process. His approach to this anatomical operation was methodical and deliberate. He had to open the house up — but, like a body under the surgeon's knife, it had to be able to survive the incision.

Gordon Matta-Clark, *Splitting*, 1974.
[Courtesy The Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark
and David Zwirner. © The Estate of Gordon
Matta-Clark/Artist's Rights Society (ARS),
New York.]

In a great essay about the feat of engineering that Matta-Clark performed in splitting the house, Éric Alliez remarks that the dismantling was at once a separation and an archaeological dig, in which sections of the house were excised in order to permanently expose what was left behind. The house had to be cut, supported, and tilted so that the forces holding it upright (Le Corbusier's conjuring of gravity, statistics, and dynamics comes to mind) could also be deployed to allow the building to fall open. In so doing, Matta-Clark violated a core principle of housing as such — i.e. that shelter erects boundaries between internal and external. This operation resembles some of the surgical maneuvers of sex-

reassignment surgery — opening the body up, rearranging the relations between internal and external, and/or removing some piece of the genital architecture in order to punctuate the change. The final move made by Matta Clark and described by Alliez was to turn his attention to

the substructure left intact by the vertical cut: the whole [back] length of the first layer of cinderblock foundations was removed and the back half of the house undercut and supported on jacks so that its entire 15-ton weight could be lowered until it tilted back at an angle. This tour de force, the outcome of which remained uncertain right up until the last moment, dissociated the architectural box from itself — a synonym for a total, disorienting, and defunctionalized disarticulation of space. The operation used the static structure of the house itself to wrench it from the gravitational inertia that ensured its firm seating, and then to keep it in a state of tension that spread to the whole interior, affecting, disquieting, the very possibility of inhabiting it.²⁷

What Alliez refers to as a tour de force is not the Sawzall cut through the center of 322 Humphrey Street, but the tilting back of the house at an angle that opens it and renders it uninhabitable at the same time. It is this move that we might understand as anarchitectural; not the cut per se, but the insertion of what Matta Clark referred to as an “abyss” into the built form, and hence the destruction of the house’s very purpose. The house was not just a ruin after he split it. Rather, the act of splitting (like the splitting of a verb, say) grammatically and structurally removed the building from its place in an architectural language centered on the home — that ideological site that purports to hold family, neighborhood, market, and nation securely in place.

Such grammars of unbuilding inhere to queer negativity, to abolitionist projects, to queer failure and trans-anarchy; such languages oppose the language of repair that can be deployed for liberal purposes to shore up the status quo.²⁸ To give one prominent example of such generative negativity, in the interview that closes Stefano Harney and Fred Moten’s manifesto *The Undercommons*, Moten argues that racialized society, American social dynamics, and our understandings of past and present are incorrigible. “I also know that what it is that is supposed to be repaired is irreparable. It can’t be repaired. The only thing we can do is tear this shit down completely and build something new.”²⁹ The abolitionist orientation in *The Undercommons* is underscored by the use of an architectural metaphor to describe what needs to happen next; not content to modify or reform the bankrupt systems we inhabit, denizens of the undercommons want to create space for something new. This dismantling is the precondition for newness, and is itself an anarchitecture. Indeed, anarchitectural metaphors abound in *The Undercommons*, where a fantasized “commons” emerges as part of a “fugitive enlightenment” carried forward by “the criminal, matricidal, queer, in the cistern, on the stroll of the stolen life.”³⁰ The undercommons, of course, is not a space or a place, not a group or an identity. Rather it is a kind of cut, or what Moten calls a break. This break exposes the entrenched patterning of habitable spaces such as schools and houses, a patterning that itself makes sense of certain social structures and justifies the

abandonment of others. (In this, the functions of Moten's break are not unlike those of Ahmed's queer phenomenology.) To be in the undercommons is to be with others; to be in the break of the undercommons is to be committed to the unmaking of the world as we know it.

The break that the undercommons seeks, the cut that anarchitecture makes, open vistas toward what José Esteban Muñoz has called queer futurity. For Muñoz, queer futurity cannot be reached through the here and now. It must be accessed through crazy, risky, wild leaps into the void (he gives the example of dancer Fred Herko's fatal but choreographed jump from a friend's window in 1964), and through the conjuring of the abyss itself. Muñoz locates a theory of this utopian glimpse of the future in the philosophy of Ernst Bloch; Bloch, Muñoz tells us, understands art as "enacting a pre-appearance in the world of another mode of being that is not yet here."³¹ Perhaps this is what we find, as well, in the anarchitectural unbuidings by Matta-Clark. The "not yet here," like the "already gone" and the sense that our faith in the past "needs reexamination" all reverberate through Matta-Clark's flayed and slashed buildings — and, as we shall see, extend into contemporary queer art.

Alvin Baltrop, *Pier 52 (Gordon Matta-Clark's Day's End)*, n.d. (1975 – 1986). [Courtesy The Alvin Baltrop Trust. © 2010, The Alvin Baltrop Trust and Third Streaming. All rights reserved.]

It is worth noting that Matta Clark's *Splitting* was produced a year after the publication of a book with the same name, *Splitting: A Case of Female Masculinity*, by the sexologist Robert Stoller.³² Stoller's book is a case history of Mrs. G, who had visited Stoller after being diagnosed as a psychopath with deeply antisocial instincts and behaviors, including self-harm, murder, and theft. Mrs. G came to Stoller claiming to be a woman with a penis. Stoller characterized Mrs. G as a "walking bomb" and considered her to be dangerous precisely because she was skilled at "splitting off affects from her awareness."³³ In the interviews between Stoller and Mrs. G, the doctor seems punishing and cruel; Mrs. G comes off as an astute critic of her society's gender norms and hierarchies. She recognizes, for example, that being male is not just about having a penis; she understands that maleness grants access to social mobility, political power, and educational opportunity. In order to access such privileges for herself and to articulate her sexual identity, Mrs. G insists she has a penis, and that the penis and her male alter ego are vital to her sense of self. This so-called delusion leads to the diagnosis of *splitting*.³⁴

Mrs. G's masculinity sketches a prosthetic theory of the body akin to what Preciado has elaborated as a "contrasexual" or dildonic relation to embodied reality. What Preciado means by "contrasexual" is that the human body is always already enhanced, prosthetically extended, post-natural. The butch body extended by the dildo, like the trans* body altered by the surgical cut, become abject representations of this system, while the heterosexual cis-gender body, no matter how it may be altered or extended, holds fast to normativity. Preciado's analysis in turn allows us to see the gendered maneuvers discernible in Matta-Clark's *Splitting* as cuts into the system of heteronormativity. The house, in this reading, stands for the structures of desire and social being that tether productivity to maleness and limn the female body as a vessel. The disruptive cut through the house — the splitting the

cut performs – reterritorialize the mapping of the body (of any gender) onto space. As we see in photographs of the Humphrey Street house, as well as in Matta-Clark's film that documents the *Splitting* project, the cut comprises both the tilting of the back half of the house on its foundation, and the wedge of space thereby inserted between the house's halves. This cut is not empty space: it articulates a dialectic between presence and absence not far removed from that articulated by Mrs. G. She has a penis that, to Dr. Stoller, appears as a vagina. He wants her to see what she does not have; she wants him to acknowledge what she knows to be there. The masculine female body, a trans* body capable of transcending its morphology, tilts back on its axis and stands in the space of its own unbuilt femininity. This is trans* anarchitecture.

3. Cruising Dystopia

So far we have grappled with the concept of anarchitecture in terms of a counter-architectural project and as a way of conceptualizing the queer or trans* body. We have reckoned with the implications of Gordon Matta-Clark's own anarchitectural projects and the disorder they invoke in regard to heterosexual norms of embodied power and desire. To focus still more closely: one project in particular took Matta-Clark into what Kevin Mumford has called "interzones," or the mixed-race underworlds produced by and within the geographies of modern cities.³⁵ The interzone that Matta-Clark entered in 1975 was the counter-capitalist landscape of the piers along the Hudson River. A zone filled with abandoned and collapsing warehouses and other industrial structures, this space in that time exemplified not only New York City's failings, but also opportunities for new mappings of desire, relationality, contact, and collapse.

Emily Roysdon, from the series *The Piers*
Untitled, 2010. [Courtesy the artist]

In the 1970s, the deindustrialized neighborhoods of New York served as refuges for junkies, homeless people and, increasingly, for gay men cruising for sex in a homophobic society. No place evokes the fantasy of a lost gay subculture connected to endless cruising, subterranean sex worlds, and noncommercialized queer activity more than the Hudson river piers, once a thriving site of the shipping industry. The piers make an iconic appearance in Samuel Delaney's 1988 memoir *The Motion of Light on Water*, where he marvels at the crowds of men seeking anonymous sex, and creating in the process a heaving, erotic collectivity.

For Delany, gay cruising and the anonymous orgies that took place in empty trucks near the West Side Highway provided a welcome antidote to the sense of isolation that many closeted gay people felt. These throngs of men gathering to have sex, Delany says, were both terrifying and exciting; they sketched a utopian arc of emergence and visibility that Delany metaphorizes as "the motion of light on water." The piers appear likewise in David Wojnarowicz's art and writing, and constitute a vital part of the utopian vision in Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. For all these writers, what catches the attention is more than the pursuit of sex; it is the gathering of bodies and the abandoned spaces where these bodies meet that inspire awe. Cruising is not only a hunt for gay male sex. It is also a political quest for comrades, and a social marking of space. Muñoz points out

that sex in and of itself is not political; as he puts it cheekily in *Cruising Utopia*: “[B]ooks of criticism that simply glamorize the ontology of gay male cruising are more often than not simply boring.”³⁶

David Wojnarowicz, *Arthur Rimbaud in New York (diner)*, 1979. [Courtesy the Estate of David Wojnarowicz and P•P•O•W, New York.
© David Wojnarowicz]

Emily Roysdon, *Untitled (David Wojnarowicz Project)*, 2001 – 2007. [Courtesy the artist]

Preciado argues something similar. Considering the insurgent potential of erotic energies as celebrated by Herbert Marcuse, Preciado comments: “pleasure itself can no longer be the emancipatory force that Marcuse was waiting for. ... Instead, we need to open a revolutionary terrain for the invention of new organs and desires, for which no pleasure has yet been defined; new subjectivities that cannot be represented by the means of identity politics.”³⁷ Neither these new subjectivities nor Muñoz’s utopia is created out of the sex worlds filled with restless cruising bodies. Instead, like Moten, both Muñoz and Preciado insist that new social affects are possible only if we dismantle — rather than simply renovate — the roles and regimes that currently imprison us. Queer aesthetics (for Muñoz) and countersexual practices (for Preciado) perform the making and unmaking of space and time that utopian dreams foreground.

Matta-Clark focused on the piers as sites from which to unmake the city and make it anew. The destruction that he enacted in *Day’s End* opened up Pier 52 along the Hudson in Manhattan and splayed the warehouse out like a body on an operating table. However, this surgical intervention served neither to cure nor mend, but rather to explore damage, to embrace harm and blockage, and to refuse the cure that comes in the form of containment and order. In an undated manuscript that begins ~~psychology~~—and space, for example, Matta-Clark writes:

AN EDGE

~~A CITY IS~~

~~A CITY A PLACE WITHOUT~~

ENTRAPMENT

CONTAINMENT

A PRISON BEING DEMOLISHED

FIRE ESCAPES FOR PLANTING

FIRE HYDRANTS

In the film that documents *Day's End*, Matta-Clark records the making of a series of cuts into the façade of the metal warehouse at Pier 52. The effect was to flood the space with light and open it to the water, to create what some have called a cathedral-like effect. This project of perforating spaces contradicts state-sanctioned practices of entrapment and containment, and thinks instead about what buildings can do beyond “holding” bodies. How can bodies, especially bodies that have been undone or that willfully seek their own undoing, be understood in spaces like those Matta-Clark dreamed up? While much commentary on Matta-Clark’s art revisits it in terms of the end of modernist architecture, or in regard to the contemporaneous political climate (in an era that saw the bombings by the Weather Underground and other violent protests), what happens if we situate the work within a queer understanding of aesthetics, failure, disorientation, and the body?³⁸

The Black gay photographer Alvin Baltrop was, like Matta-Clark, a voyeur into the sexual underworlds on the abandoned West Side piers. Like Matta-Clark, Baltrop often suspended himself with a harness from the rafters of the massive warehouses to view the spaces and their inhabitants, and he too experienced the piers as potentially dangerous. But for Baltrop, these places were also explicitly erotic. Indeed, in an essay on Baltrop in *Artforum*, Douglas Crimp describes Baltrop as an artist who recognized the “joyous” and utopian project of cruising the piers in ways that Matta-Clark could not. Crimp writes:

Many of Baltrop’s photographs incidentally capture Matta-Clark’s *Day’s End* while at the same time showing Pier 52 appropriated for cruising and basking in the sun. Perhaps more than Matta-Clark could have imagined, Baltrop’s photographs portray the “joyous situation” Matta-Clark said he wanted to achieve there; and they constitute rare and indispensable evidence of the proximity and simultaneity of artistic and sexual experimentation in the declining industrial spaces of Manhattan during the 1970s, a time of particularly creative ferment for both scenes.³⁹

As Crimp points out, Baltrop attends as carefully to the bodies of men cruising as he does to the architecture of the piers. His camera lingers on men of color, on homeless people and — in synergy with Matta-Clark’s work, rather than in opposition or in tension — his photographs draw the eye into the void, into unruly spaces of dispossession and ruination that were not simply structural in New York City in those days, but that visited their most punishing power upon already vulnerable populations. The fact that many of these populations included gay men of color was of great interest to Baltrop, and it is this relentless motion of dispossession that he captured, rather than simply gay sex acts.

Alvin Baltrop, *The Piers (man looking in window)*, n.d. (1975 – 1986); *The Men at the Piers (performing sex act)*, n.d. (1975 – 1987); *The Piers (three men on dock)*, n.d. (1975 – 1986). [Courtesy The Alvin Baltrop Trust. © 2010, The Alvin Baltrop Trust and Third Streaming. All rights reserved.]

Baltrop's photographs of *Day's End* remain vivid depictions of this work. But rather than seeing these images as the result of a fortuitous overlap between the two artists in space and time, I think Baltrop's photographs should be situated alongside Matta-Clark's cuts in the ever-expanding portrait of cruising's *dystopian* features. Matta-Clark reportedly spoke of his work on the piers as creating "some kind of edge — flirting with some sort of abyss."⁴⁰ This idea that a cut into the built environment can disorient the visitor and challenge any assumption of security gets at the power of the project. However, both Jonathan Weinberg and Douglas Crimp, interpret Matta-Clark as an interloper into the scene on the piers, who felt threatened by the gay male sex there. Weinberg proposes that Matta-Clark understood himself to be the piers "rightful owner."⁴¹ And Crimp suggests that while the piers may have been scary for a straight man, he himself never felt afraid there.⁴² Frances Richard is willing, in her analysis of *Day's End*, to consider Crimp's charge against Matta-Clark; that is, that he was a phobic observer of the gay male cultures he encountered on the piers: "For Crimp, the fact that Matta-Clark wired closed the holes in the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad building and put his own lock on the door while he was working betrays a homophobic insecurity."⁴³ But Richard also reads closely Matta-Clark's interviews with the downtown critic Liza Bear, and cites a conversation conducted after *Day's End* was complete. Here, he steps back from an earlier exchange in which he described the piers as "completely overrun by the gays." Now, in reflection, he comments that although the police had tried to block the piers off, and had even vandalized his work there, the gay men have returned. He says: "I like the fact that people are still going into Pier 52."

Matta-Clark's succinct comment captures the essence of his anarchitectural project for the piers. He wanted to open up the space to people, to lots of people — to poor people who could not commission architects, to homeless people who lived in abandoned spaces, to the ghosts of other eras, to light, to water, to the power of creative destruction. In Crimp's and Weinberg's visions, we lose the utopian force of gathering that Delany and Muñoz celebrate: we are encouraged to view the piers as merely a playground for gay sex. Yet the counter-capitalist circuits of gay male cruising so beloved of Crimp, so celebrated by Delany, so alluring to Wojnarowicz, were also, in the scheme of things, fragile. Today, as we see so many gay male geographies of cruising disappear under the digital tsunami of Grindr and other location apps, we can appreciate the wisdom of Matta-Clark's attempt to make the piers into more than just male spaces of desire. Capitalism has reworked the very circuits established by gay men, replacing the slow and patient temporalities of cruising, the now-and-then of gestures and glances, with the impatience of a consumerist insistence on the now-and-here, delivered with a swipe left or right. Nothing much remains of a counter-capitalist gay urban interzone. Yet the anarchitectural insistence on transitive zones of light and shadow — on the end of capitalist time ("day's end"), and the beginning of other calculations of temporal worth — lives on in the memories of those cuts that Matta-Clark left in the walls and floor of Pier 52.

Gordon Matta-Clark, *Day's End*, 1975.
 [Courtesy The Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark
 and David Zwirner. © The Estate of Gordon
 Matta-Clark/Artists Rights Society (ARS),
 New York.]

Matta-Clark's vision for the piers, like his shared vision for other Anarchitecture group projects, was closer to the Muñozian view of a utopian space that can be glimpsed only when an extreme act temporarily clears the landscape of impediments. The abyss, in this understanding of utopia, is not a space of vacancy and failed promise; it is the necessary punctuation between what Muñoz calls the "wasteland" of the here-and-now and the glimmer of a "then and there of queer futurity." The piers allowed Matta-Clark to "flirt with the abyss" — with an emptiness brimming with precarious lives. Such abandoned spaces are "vacuums" in Karen Barad's sense of the term. For Barad, the vacuum teems with a vitality that physicists recognize, even as others may apprehend a void; she describes this "nothingness as the scene of wild activities."⁴⁴ Nothingness becomes a site for dynamic change. It is the void rendered visible by the cut; nothingness emerges as a site for queer and trans* life.

Éric Alliez, in his discussion of *Splitting* and *Days End*, charts the dynamics of this nothingness through what he calls "a machinic trans-expressivity."⁴⁵ Here Alliez refers not only to the power-tools with which Matta-Clark made his anarchitectural interventions, but also to the photographic and cinematic apparatus deployed to document those interventions. "Running through all of the photomontages," Alliez writes, "the cut holds all of space in a suspense which allows the void to operate (the photographs also capture Matta-Clark himself at work, hanging suspended in line with the walls)." Mediated first by the machine of the Sawzall and then by the machine of the camera, Matta-Clark's performances play between presence and absence. His extractions allow "the void to operate," to become a "scene of wild activities." Barad and Alliez each point to the cut as something embedded in nothing, a nothing that brackets movement and transformation — in this sense, the "trans" in "trans-expressivity" signifies a traversal that produces but also foils the projection of spaces and buildings onto bodies.

David Wojnarowicz, *Arthur Rimbaud in New York (under boardwalk)*, 1978 – 1979.
[Courtesy The Estate of David Wojnarowicz and P•P•O•W, New York. © David Wojnarowicz]

Emily Roysdon, *Untitled (David Wojnarowicz Project)*, 2001 – 2007. [Courtesy the artist]

Emily Roysdon, from the series *The Piers*
Untitled, 2010. [Courtesy the artist]

Trans-expressivity figures the void, and a form of expression issuing from the void, an oscillation between space and that which structures it. This oscillation in turn creates what Alliez describes as "cinemato-graphic disorientation," a dispersed sense of confusion both visual and spatial, which is generated in Matta-Clark's *Splitting* by the dismantling of the house.⁴⁶ Matta-Clark used his cuts to comment on the shadow side of architecture, the brutal and exploitative qualities of the built environment, as opposed to making a one-to-one equation with the dismantling and rebuilding of gendered bodies or the experience of gender dysphorias. The implications of his unbuildings nevertheless echo across a new

landscape of trans* aesthetics whose primary feature is to be constantly “under construction.”

Coda

Anarchitectural voids, demolitions, and abyssal experiments: all find their way into the language of destruction deployed by contemporary trans* artists. To provide an example from 2013: in the ferocious performance piece *Becoming an Image*, the artist Cassils pounded a huge block of clay before a live audience in a darkened room. The piece was commissioned for an event at the ONE Archive in Los Angeles, a repository of LGBT materials, and Cassils was seeking to draw attention to all that is missing from even gay archives of art and political movements. *Becoming an Image* comments on the disappearance of bodies and lives, and the unmaking of some worlds via the process of documenting others. The performance was experienced in the dark, with only the sound of Cassils’s monumental exertions filling the air; only the flash of an onsite photographer allowed the audience to see, intermittently, how the performance destroyed the block of clay and the block of clay destroyed Cassils. In the process of becoming an image, both the subject and the object were un/becoming, deforming, demolished and demolishing. What remained were two bodies, present but destroyed.

Becoming an Image, like Matta-Clark’s performances, persists only as a photographic record. These photographs, like those of *Splitting*, are stunning, but they remain at a distance from the performances themselves; neither witness nor accomplice, the camera cannot totally document what is wild about these live activities. The precarious relation of Cassils’s body to breakdown, on the one hand, and the proximity of Matta-Clark’s building to collapse, on the other, cannot be captured by a still photograph — which records moments of unraveling, but cannot fully reveal it, since the image itself stills the process of collapse. And so, in the wake of their own disappearance, these performances remind us of the abyssal quality of time itself.

Cassils, *Becoming An Image* Performance Still
No. 2, (National Theater Studio, SPILL
Festival, London), 2013. [Courtesy the artist
and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York.
Photo: Cassils with Manuel Vason.]

Yve Laris Cohen’s work, to give an example from the realm of trans* dance, explores intersections between dance, labor, and space that can easily be situated within the un-genre of anarchitecture. In 2016, Cohen reconstructed a set built in 1958 by Isamu Noguchi for the Martha Graham composition *Embattled Garden*, which had been damaged when Hurricane Sandy flooded the dance company’s west Village storage facility. Cohen had been hired by the Martha Graham Company as a part-time handyman, but he quickly transformed the role into a grander undertaking. The *New York Times* described the rebuilt set as “a colorful, bisected raked platform and a 12-foot tree.”⁴⁷ Cohen explains the work in terms of “objects that are not sculpture and not sets, not architecture, not art objects, not props — yet are all those things at once”; he adds, “It’s not going to be sold.”⁴⁸

From distinctions between genres to disdain for market appeal, we can hear in these descriptions a deliberate shuffling of the syntax of art production. This gives Cohen's work an anarchitectural echo. Matta-Clark transformed demolition into an aesthetic practice of unbuilding, while Cohen blurs the boundaries between sculpture, art objects, stage sets, dance studios, architectural labor, and construction. The resulting new grammar — here the rebuilding of a destroyed set — makes synonyms of construction and architecture, dance and labor, theater and display; it makes the body into both a source of work and the work itself. Of course, this altered grammar also rearranges the architecture that literally supported the Martha Graham technique, cutting into its hetero-choreographies to find new moves for bodies in transition.

Yve Laris Cohen, *Embattled Garden*,
installation view, Company Gallery, New
York, 2016. [Courtesy the artist and Company
Gallery, New York. Photo: Mark Fitton.]

In a 2012 interview with R.E.H Gordon for *Critical Correspondence*, Cohen described another work, *Coda*, in terms of a melding of objects and bodies:

Half self-deprecatingly, half to preempt (and thereby have some control over?) viewers' objectification of my body, I include "transsexual" among materials such as plywood, vinyl, and sweat (in the case of *Coda*, the materials list reads simply: "Sprung floor, dancing transsexual"). This move both attempts to erase my subjecthood and positions the other materials in the realm of bodies.⁴⁹

Cohen notes in personal correspondence that "the SculptureCenter required the wall label" to add "Courtesy the artist" under this materials list ("sprung floor, dancing transsexual") because "they were anxious about matter-of-factly listing transsexual as a material and didn't want the public to think they had made that decision rather than it being my artistic intervention."⁵⁰

Yve Laris Cohen, *Coda* (2012), wall label.
SculptureCenter, Long Island City, NY.
[Courtesy the artist and Company Gallery,
New York.]

In both *Coda* and a later piece for the 2014 Whitney Biennial titled *al Coda*, Cohen cut into the space of the studio. In the first piece, he lifted a sprung floor from its mounting and turned it into a sculptural object, while in the second, he performed a kind of duet with a wall. The sprung floor is a surface for dance that absorbs shock, a kind of floating platform for the body on display. Sprung floors are used in spaces associated with vigorous bodily activity, including performance venues, sports clubs, and nightclubs. By raising the sprung floor and transforming the horizontal surface into a vertical one, Cohen points to the dynamic interchanges between surfaces and bodies; to the shifting and even elastic foundations of bodily performance; and to the lift that certain bodies acquire by being grounded, while others gather a sense of the unruly by seeming to float free of all cultural supports. In *al Coda*, Cohen was explicit about this dynamic. He inscribed the word "transsexual" on a slab of wall from the Marcel Breuer building on Madison Avenue that had

long housed the Whitney Museum of Modern Art, and pushed the slab out of place. He then transported it to the museum's new site in the West Village.

The removal and resituating of the slab call to mind the fragments removed from Matta-Clark's *Splitting* (independently titled *Four Corners*, 1974) and the debris from *Day's End*.⁵¹ Such fragments, the artists remind us, are not just waste, leftovers after "art" has been made. The removed parts are the evidence we all need in order to see that the seemingly unmovable structures of art, embodiment, race, class, sexuality, gender, and time are, in the end, elements of an ever-evolving grammar, new syntagms in the emergent language of unbeing that are realized by the trans* body in concert with the anarchitectural turn.

A final example of trans* anarchitectural art can be found in the lip-syncing performances of multimedia artist boychild. In the absence of speech that drives these works, we might glimpse a reappearance of the absence that was marked by light bouncing off the water and into the darkness of the warehouse in *Day's End*, or by the wedge of light that filled the split in the Humphrey Street house. boychild (who uses plural pronouns to self-identify) is a mixed-race, mixed-gender performer who blends improvised dance with *Butoh*-like choreographies and drag lip sync. These mesmerizing performances emerge out of drag communities and club scenes, yet segue restlessly into art installations; while boychild often dances through the interzones of afterhours clubs, they also appear on stage in collaborations with the Thai artist Korakrit Arunanondchai, whose astonishing multimedia installations deploy film, light projections, and music to suggest life's unraveling and re-emergence in apocalyptic post-worlds. boychild's choreography is the result of a rigorous exploration of dance history and improvisation, combining performance art with ballet; these works establish and occupy spaces laced with pleasure and pain, torture and jouissance. While drag is most often understood as a dressing up, boychild strips down, to appear bare yet ambiguous. Their movements combine slow and grotesque precision with fast-twitch convulsions, making it unclear if the body is breaking down or struggling to be born. boychild, like Cassils, unmakes the choreographies they inhabit; like Yve Laris Cohen, they emerge out of and transform the spaces in which they appear.

Trans* anarchitectural performers are among the most innovative heirs to the project begun by Gordon Matta-Clark and his collaborators in the 1970s, in a New York City where buildings fell or burned down, industries failed, economies collapsed, and artists and activists found a way to push different worlds through the cracks of the crumbling city. These other worlds were not crafted out of a utopian fullness. They emerged *from* gaps as gaps; worlds conceived as splits, voids, emptyings-out of space and time. Our world, too, needs these cuts and holes, portals to razed spaces and unbuilt futures. As real-estate capitalism turns the unoccupied luxury building into the symbol of economic domination, the act of splitting that Matta-Clark performed nearly half a century ago upon an abandoned house appears as the first cut into the postwar myth of property. Not a route to middle-class prosperity or a refuge from the storm of poverty, the house as such has proven to be a (tax) shelter for the rich, essential to new modes of exploitation. Property is indeed theft on a very grand scale, and it is no wonder that we cannot quite see the contours of our current,

rapidly changing political landscape. We are living in an ideological bouncy house, where a few large white Americans jump for joy and at each bounce we lose more people down the edges of the whole grotesque, imploding structure. It is time to tear the bouncy house down, with or without the master's tools, and to turn to the language of unmaking, unbuilding, undoing, refusing capital's vertiginous techniques of litigious accusation and criminalization.

Speaking of the master's tools: Let's look, in closing, at an anarchitectural aphorism that still resonates. Audre Lorde's epochal statement that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" is more important now than ever. I think that critical engagement with this sentiment in the past has emphasized the master's tools, when perhaps we should all be thinking about dismantling the house. Mostly, when this great line is used, it is to emphasize that we need distance from dominant rhetoric in order to produce subversive ideas. But the more we focus on which tools to use, the less likely it is that the house will ever come down. In her famous 1979 speech, delivered at an academic conference in New York, Lorde was not only critiquing patriarchy; she was also taking aim at what she called "racist feminism." Noting that she was often the lone woman of color at feminist conferences, appearing among white women who had hired women of color to take care of their kids so they could attend the event, Lorde declares: "For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support."⁵²

boychild, *Untitled Lipsync: Fugue itive Drag*,
2016. [Courtesy the artist. Photo: Texas
Isaiah]

In the spirit of removing the master's house altogether, anarchitecture offers acts of unbuilding and dismantling that rhyme, for instance, with contemporary efforts to remove racist monuments. Such achievements remind us that we should and must abandon the master's tools. But, more fundamentally, by any means necessary, the master's house and all the monuments and buildings it authors and authorizes, and all those dependent upon it, must fall. We are in a new anarchitectural moment, and it is all coming down.

P

YOUR SUPPORT MAKES OUR WORK POSSIBLE.

DONATE TO PLACES

SUBSCRIBE

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I wish to thank the editors of *Places* for their help and guidance, and for the opportunity to research and write this essay under the auspices of the Arcus/Places Prize. Thanks in particular to Frances Richard for sharing with me her soon-to-be-published work on Gordon Matta-Clark.

NOTES

1. I use “trans*” rather than “trans” in order to emphasize the bagginess of the category of transgender, and to refuse the conventional work of easy classification that such terminology usually performs. See *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2018). ↩
2. Joel Sanders and Susan Stryker, “Stalled: Gender-Neutral Public Bathrooms,” *SAQ* vol. 15 no. 4 (2016): 779–788. ↩
3. Athina Angelopoulou, “A Surgery Issue: Cutting through the Architectural Fabric,” *Footprint*, “Trans Bodies/Queering Spaces,” (Autumn/Winter 2017): 25–50, <http://doi.org/cv9q>. ↩
4. Susan Stryker, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage” in *GLQ* vol. 1 no. 3 (1994): 238. ↩
5. Frances Richard’s *Gordon Matta-Clark: Physical Poetics* (University of California Press, forthcoming 2019) offers a deep history of the group and Matta-Clark’s place in it. She writes: “as oral histories, critical articles, and exhibitions have established, the original Anarchitecture was not a variety of building-based sculpture, nor a quip dreamed up by an architect-turned-artist [i.e. Matta-Clark]. It was a discussion group. Short-lived but influential, Anarchitecture was active in 1973 and ’74. Meetings were attended by Matta-Clark, [Laurie] Anderson, [Tina] Girouard, [Jene] Highstein, [Richard] Landry, [Richard] Nonas, Suzanne Harris, Bernard Kirschenbaum, and others in and around 112 Greene Street and the café-cum-art-project FOOD around the corner at Prince and Wooster. FOOD, 112, and Anarchitecture overlapped with other artist-run, authority-averse small institutions to create a downtown culture that Girouard describes as ‘anarchist’” (58). ↩
6. Richard, 60. ↩
7. Angelopoulou, 29. Angelopoulou cites Eva Hayward, “More Lessons from a Starfish: Prefixial Flesh and Transspeciated Selves,” in *Woman’s Studies Quarterly* vol. 36, no. 3 (2008): 72, and Karen Barad, “Intra-actions,” Interview by Adam Kleinman in *Mousse* vol. 34, no. 81 (2012): 80. ↩
8. See Eva Hayward, “Spider City Sex,” in *Women & Performance: a Journal of Feminist Theory* (2010): 225–251, <http://doi.org/cd9g3n>; and, Karen Barad, “Nature’s Queer Performativity,” in *Kvinder, Køn & Forskning* vol. 1 no. 2 (2012): 25–53. ↩
9. Angelopoulou, 30. ↩
10. See particularly Caroline van Eck, “Empty spaces haunted by presence. Abstraction, defiguration and the uncanny in Gordon Matta-Clark’s architecture photographs,” in *Take Place. Photography and Place from Multiple Perspectives*, ed. Helen Westgeest (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2009), 165–183; and

- Éric Alliez, "Gordon Matta-Clark: 'Somewhere Outside the Law,'" trans. Robin Mackay, *Journal of Visual Culture* vol. 15 no. 3 (2016): 317–333, <http://doi.org/cv9r>. ↩
11. For an excellent chapter on the gendered dynamics of cutting into buildings and the charges of metaphoric rape against Matta-Clark, see Frances Richard, *Gordon Matta-Clark: Physical Poetics*, Part IV, "spacism: Gordon Matta-Clark and the Political." In an extended reading of the artist's burrowing-out of the house in Paris at 29 rue Beaubourg, a work that came to be known as *Conical Intersect*, Richard explains: "Busy at the buildings' apertures and slipping through their recesses, Matta-Clark and his team occupy the architecture not as bestriding possessors but as miniaturized sprites; at one point, standing at the lip of the opening and being filmed from the street, they break into a most unmasculine cancan. The houses in these scenes read as womblike but phallic, dilated yet upright, allied with the artist and his assistants against the implacable forces of progress" (415). ↩
 12. Paul B. Preciado, *Pornotopia: An Essay on Playboy's Architecture and Biopolitics* (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 2014). ↩
 13. Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" (1984). ↩
 14. R. Buckminster Fuller, *I Seem To Be A Verb* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1970), 1. ↩
 15. Sara Ahmed, "Orientations: Toward A Queer Phenomenology" in *GLQ* Vol. 12 no. 4 (2006): 558. ↩
 16. Ahmed, 558. ↩
 17. Christina Crosby, *A Body, Undone: Living On After Great Pain* (Sexual Cultures), (New York: NYU Press, 2016). Kindle Edition. ↩
 18. Crosby, Kindle Edition. ↩
 19. Le Corbusier, *Towards A New Architecture* (1931), trans. Frederick Etchells (New York, NY: Dover Publications, 1986), 73. ↩
 20. Le Corbusier, 74. ↩
 21. For the complete suite of Matta-Clark's notecard aphorisms, see Gordon Matta-Clark, *Art Cards*, ed. Mónica Rios and Carlos Labbé (Brooklyn: Sangría, 2014). ↩
 22. Lucas Crawford, *Transgender Architectonics* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2017), 17. ↩
 23. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zorn (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1968), 233–34. ↩
 24. Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), 28. ↩
 25. This language appears in a 1974 text by Matta-Clark, now on deposit in the Gordon Matta-Clark collection at the Canadian Center for Architecture, archive number PHCON2002:0016:001:002. ↩
 26. Gordon Matta-Clark: Splitting the Humphrey Street Building," interview by Liza Bear, May 21, 1974 in Gloria Moure, *Gordon Matta-Clark: Works and Collected Writings* (Barcelona, Poligrafa, 2006), 172. ↩
 27. Alliez, 321. ↩

28. See Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011). ↩
29. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Wivenhoe/New York/Port Watson: Minor Compositions, 2013), 152. ↩
30. Harney and Moten, 28. ↩
31. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 147. ↩
32. Robert Stoller, *Splitting: A Case of Female Masculinity* (New Haven: CT, Yale University Press, 1973). ↩
33. Stoller, 176. ↩
34. For more on *Splitting*, the Stoller archive, and Stoller's relationship with Mrs. G, see Emmett Harsin Drager, "Looking After Mrs. G: Approaches and Methods for Reading Transsexual Clinical Case Files," in *Turning Archival: The Queer and the Historical*, ed. Zeb Tortorici, Daniel Marshall, and Kevin P. Murphy (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, forthcoming, 2019). ↩
35. See Kevin Mumford, *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1997). ↩
36. Muñoz, 19. ↩
37. Paul B. Preciado, from "New Introduction," *Counter-Sexual Manifesto*, trans. K.G. Dunn (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, forthcoming, 2019). ↩
38. See for example, Stephen Walker, *Gordon Matta-Clark: Art, Architecture and the Attack on Modernism* (New York, NY: I.B. Taurus, 2009); Pamela M. Lee, *Object To Be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark* (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 2001); Antonio Sergio Bessa et al., *Gordon Matta-Clark: Anarchitect* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017). ↩
39. Douglas Crimp, "Alvin Baltrop: Pier Photographs, 1975–1986," in *Artforum* vol. XLVI no. 6 (February 2008), 269. ↩
40. Matta-Clark's thinking is reported by the sculptor Joel Shapiro, interviewed by Joan Simon in *Gordon Matta-Clark*, ed. Mary Jane Jacob (Chicago, IL: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 1985), 142. ↩
41. Jonathan Weinberg, "City Cordoned Anarchy" in *The Piers from Here: Alvin Baltrop and Gordon Matta-Clark* (Liverpool, UK: Open Eye Gallery), 36. ↩
42. See Douglas Crimp, "Action Around the Edges," in *Before Pictures* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016). ↩
43. Richard, 398. ↩
44. Karen Barad, "Transmaterialities: Trans*/Matter/Realities and Queer Political Imaginings" in *GLQ* vol. 21 nos. 2–3 (2015): 394, <http://doi.org/gdccb>. ↩
45. Alliez, 323. ↩
46. Alliez, *ibid.* ↩
47. Gia Kourlas, "Yve Laris Cohen, Melding Identities as Laborer and Artist," *New York Times*, Art and Design Section (May 13, 2016). ↩

48. Cohen quoted in Kourlas, *ibid.* ↩
49. “Yve Laris Cohen in Conversation with R.E. H. Gordon on Coda” in *Movement Research: Critical Correspondence* (March 8, 2012). ↩
50. Personal correspondence with the artist, September 12, 2018. ↩
51. *Four Corners* is now in the collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, while the excised material from the making of *Day’s End* fell into the Hudson and was left there by Matta-Clark. ↩
52. Lorde, 2. ↩

CITE

Jack Halberstam, “Unbuilding Gender,” *Places Journal*, October 2018. Accessed 02 Sep 2022.
<https://doi.org/10.22269/181003>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jack Halberstam



Jack Halberstam is Professor of English and Gender Studies at Columbia University.