



Christian Ganzenberg **The section as artistic principle:
How Gordon Matta-Clark pushed the bound-
aries of graphics with his “cut drawings”**

The interaction of the human body in, or with, the natural world or architecture is the key concept uniting nearly all of the projects by Gordon Matta-Clark. It all began in the late 1960s: After training as an architect, the artist became involved in the “Earth Art” movement represented by the likes of Dennis Oppenheim, Jan Dibbets, and Robert Smithson, all of whom he befriended. Over the course of his career, cut short by his untimely death, Matta-Clark would become particularly known for the “cuttings” he executed in and on buildings, his excision and extractions of parts of structures. None of these works survive today, unfortunately, so that the ideas and workflows that went into them only can be reconstructed from videos or photos – and of course from the drawings the artist left behind.

Just like an architect, Matta-Clark, relied on drawings to comprehend his world and to conceive his projects. Consequently, the extraordinary diversity and extent of his output of drawings, which became known only after his death and has been documented in a catalogue raisonné by Sabine Breitwieser, comes as no surprise at all. Matta-Clark created a huge body of widely varied drawings, ranging from depictions of trees, energy diagrams, and sketches to the famous “Cut Drawings.” Many of his contemporaries describe the artist as highly charismatic and physically dynamic. They relate that he was an excellent dancer, and constantly in motion. “Even when he was drawing, he would work in a state of the most intense agitation. [...] He would do a little ‘devil’s dance.’ He would grab coloured pencils, push and press down on them very hard and quickly, just scribbling and doodling away.” (Mary Heilmann: Interview with Joan Simon, in: Gordon Matta-Clark. A Retrospective, Exhibition Catalogue of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago 1985).

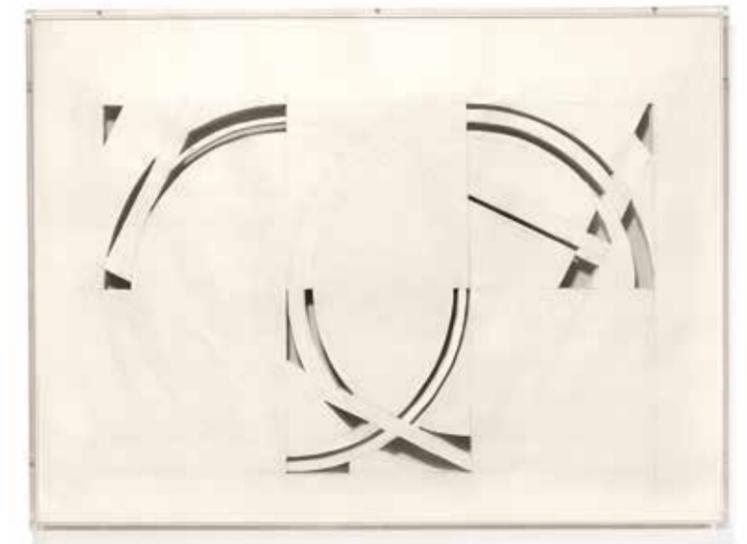
Down to a few exceptions, these drawings were left untitled and undated, making it difficult to relate their specific contents to his various projects. In the case of “Circle Grid Overlay” from 1977, however, it is possible to discern clear points of reference to one of the artist’s best-known works, “Office Baroque,” which he created in Antwerp in that same year.

Matta-Clark originally had planned to cut out and remove a spherical section from the corner of the building, along the structure’s full height. Since he was unable to obtain a permit for this idea, he came up with an alternate cutaway design to be executed inside the building: Two superimposed, circular arcs which, at their point of overlap, would create what looked like the prow of a boat. Matta-Clark implemented this cut design on all five storeys of the building, much like a recurring motif in a piece of music: “For the first time, it became possible to stage a multi-storey building with two arcs that modulate the space by changing the form and size of the building’s rooms. The result is a series of arabesque-like cutaways that open up the entire building into a promenade of constantly changing interior views.” (Gordon Matta-Clark. Office Baroque, in: Sabine Breitwieser: Reorganizing Structure by Drawing through It, Cologne 1997, p. 242).



Matta-Clark had already introduced the use of cutting as a both graphic and sculptural technique back in 1972 in his "Cut Drawings." The first of his sectional drawings were comparatively crude, executed on the fly without any preparatory sketches. Later ones such as "Circle Grid Overlay," however, evince a far more evolved complexity and technical finesse, yet still retain the "clean-line brutality" of their antecedents. To create his Cut Drawings, Matta-Clark would press paper sheets into stacks and draw geometric lines on the top sheet in pencil. He would then use a jigsaw or similar implement to cut along these lines, thereby removing whole three-dimensional chunks of paper. Some of these finished drawings, which could be up to 8 cm high, were presented lying flat on the ground. John Gibson, the artist's New York gallerist, recalls: "[...] He created the most exciting exhibition of drawings that I ever experienced. Each of the flat wooden crates placed on the floor held a stack of paper. He would take a saw and cut/'draw' through the stack of roughly 500 sheets all at the same time. On the back wall, he hung a photo behind each of the stacks; in them, he executed the same graphic gesture, i.e. he was cutting through the wall just like he had cut through the paper stack." (John Gibson: Interview with Joan Simon, in: Gordon Matta-Clark. A Retrospective, Exhibition Catalogue of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago 1985).

The later "Cut Drawings," including "Circle Grid Overlay," are roughly 2 cm high. Compared to the earlier specimens, their curving lines are executed with far more fluidity. The interplay between the pencil lines and the carefully made cuts on the stacked sheets of paper create a 3D "see-through" effect accentuated by light and shadow, thereby giving these drawings a sense of depth akin to that of "negative reliefs." (Pamela M. Lee: *Dazwischenzeichnen*, in: Sabine Breitwieser: *Reorganizing Structure by Drawing through It*, Cologne 1997, p. 19). It becomes apparent why the "Cut Drawings" – contrary to the artist's intention – no longer constitute drawings in the traditional sense; their materiality and the volume of the stacked paper become co-defining elements. By making the drawn line into a cut line and thus into a sculptural gesture, the iconoclastic Gordon Matta-Clark turned building structures into "panoramic arabesques." And more than that, he expanded the very definition of what a drawing can be.



Gordon Matta-Clark. "Office Baroque".
Antwerp. 1977

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