Towards an Architecture of Trans-Dimensionality: New Ontologies of Embodiment in Gordon Matta-Clark’s Anarchitectural Practice

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Perhaps it is a product of being born in the time of the scholarly attitudes of the 1990s, but at present, my life is bearing witness to a personal embodied turn. I find myself constantly wondering - “what is the body?” Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological theories call back with the answer that the body is a product of spatial existence, that it is constituted by its relationship with the space around it and that the body is really just a fold of the fabric of space ‘outside’ itself. The spatial relationships of the world are literally what create my body (Merleau-Ponty 236).

What, then, are the implications of a space that is disrupted or otherworldly? If space is experienced in an entirely new way, will I find my body altered accordingly (discordantly)? The large-scale spatial interventions of Gordon Matta-Clark’s complex anarchitectural works such as Circus or Conical Intersect do indeed create novel and sometimes unfathomable spatial experiences. His splits and cuts disrupt perceptual elements such as line, angle, depth, and scale in order to remove us from unilateral modes of perception, exploring new avenues of reversible subject/object perception and thus situating us in entirely alternate spatial realities. Much virtual reality work of the 1990s is also concerned with such alternative spaces; notable are the immersive works of Char Davies which explore a break from familiar physics and standard ontologies in order that participants are enabled to question habitual perceptions and (meta)physical states.

In this paper, I intend to explore the manner in which Gordon Matta-Clark’s anarchitecture invites the exploration of novel spatial ontologies, approaching from the direction of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of how phenomenology’s spatial subject-body can be constituted (or re-constituted) according to virtual and alien laws of space. Triangulating between these ideas and certain theories of embodied alternate realities as elucidated in key VR works of the 1990s, I will investigate the nature of such surrogate existential planes, highlighting their possibilities of perceptual and ontological reinvigoration.

In order to begin, I ask that you please take a moment to look at the room around you. Notice its walls, floor, and ceiling - the planes, vertical and horizontal, that bracket the room and give it its particular shape. Study the angles at which they intersect, the straight lines which form their borders. Locate yourself in its horizon of space, the neatly contained volume within its boundaries. So often, we take all these spatial entities for granted - we fail to remember that these basic perceptual constituents such as lines, angles, and figure-ground relationships compose our spaces and dictate how they are to be perceived. The anarchitecture of Gordon Matta-Clark’s complex cut works transform such elementary perceptual elements in radical ways, shocking us out of habitual ignorance and into another realm of realization all together. Works such as Circus or Conical Intersect, which involve the intricate three-dimensional slicing-through and hollowing-out of built spaces, effectively disrupt such a common presentation of line, angle, positive and negative space, and scale; Interior space is manipulated to “reveal new dimensionalities,” to unveil an experimental space which does not adhere to the structural rules of the normal world (Hertz 15).
Looking back to your room again, allow me to orchestrate a small thought-experiment for you: imagine that one three-way angle where your floor and two walls meet has been carved out, so that the discrete meeting point of those planes is absent and instead meanders indecisively into the negative space of the room below. A cut such as this, employed often in Matta-Clark’s works, disrupts the location of line and angle so that “the clarity or legibility of spatial relationships is refused” (Lee 158). Such a spatial discrepancy makes it difficult for both the walls and the self to be situated in space by the faculties of your own perception.

Turning back to your imagined spatial playground, modeled after Matta-Clark’s *Circus*: imagine further that half your ceiling is now missing - bits of drywall litter your carpet and shorn-off copper pipes poke through the interstice between floors (sorry for the horrible mess!). A huge spherical hole is in its place, the void of its volume extending out through the walls and rooms adjacent as well as through the walls of the level above. In this act of spatial distortion, the horizontal and vertical axes of perspective and situation are again thrown into disarray; The nexus where angles and lines converge has been dissolved. It becomes impossible to delineate the shapes, the boundaries, the volumes of the surrounding space. Concepts of scale are interfered with - without the means to put a space into perspective or situate it within a figure/ground relationship, one is unable to determine its true shape or size and thus posit oneself in proportional relation to it. This not only deprives viewers of any fixed, certain elements with which to relativize self to object (and thus causing a crisis of scale), but also leads to a feeling of “the body’s seeming groundlessness in space, its dislocation” (140). This is difficult because it is the natural condition of the embodied human to find a way to posit oneself in space - we are constantly concerned with knowing where we are and sensing where we stand in our surroundings. Humans hate being off balance. This demand for situation is exactly what confirms the alien experience of an anarchitectural work, because Matta-Clark’s warped spaces require us to move through them, perceiving the cuts from different locations and thus continually attempting to understand through perceptual triangulation. These are not two-dimensional art objects; they are architectures, they are three-dimensional, and thus do not allow for a single, definitive view. This emphasizes the temporal character of Matta-Clark’s works while highlighting Merleau-Ponty’s theory of the kinaesthetic nature of spatial experience: the body itself moves throughout a space in order to structure it for itself. Perhaps the very reason why Matta-Clark’s spatial shattering is so frightening is because it is the body of the perceiving subject itself which is causing its own experience of dislocation, for these spaces, like any other, are engaged with “by the viewer coursing through [them]; and that implicates the communicative and sensorial function of the body in that body’s destabilization” (160). It is the movement of and the situation within the body itself which leads to these spaces being incomprehensible.

In this way, Matta-Clark’s works open up a new kind of sublime experience for the viewer. If the Kantian sublime is the inability of the embodied mind to grasp what is sensed, then anarchitecture’s embodied experience of not knowing the body, the mind, or what is perceived is a total experiential privation. But hold on a moment. How is the body made unknown? We see that Matta-Clark’s impossible spaces are just that -
external locations that we can’t quite perceptually or cognitively piece together. But how do these sublimely alien space-scapes cause us to lose our hold on our very own bodies - aren’t we situated in them as we pursue our embodied experience of the works, as the preceding quote suggests? Here I will turn briefly to Merleau-Ponty’s explanation of how the body itself is formed through its own experience of the spatial world.

For Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the subject-body is not a special kind of entity, some separate, privileged essence observing and reflecting upon the world with a distinct agency. The body is not some trans-physical being, simply situated in space with a floating barrier between its edge and the world outside. Space and the body enjoy an intimate relationship, constituting one another and indeed allowing for and facilitating the other’s subjective existence. The body is not in space, it is of space. Beautifully, Merleau-Ponty elucidates this idea in a simple sentence when he says that “my body is the fabric into which all objects are woven” (Merleau-Ponty 229). Here already we can see how space and the body are one, and how any disturbance in the former could have profound effects on the latter - if the perceptual elements of space external to the body are linked, threaded, and sewn with the needle of vision into the whole being of the subject-body, then these perceived objects, these worldly entities, are indeed a part of that body’s identity and its very physical and cognitive configuration (and here is where the dualist distinction is revealed to be insufficient). The world, for Merleau-Ponty, is characterized by what he terms ‘reversibility,’ a kind of mutual exchange of confirmation and creation through both the subject and the object’s agency and reception (and if the active authority of the objective thing is thusly acknowledged, the traditional subject/object dichotomy is also proven inadequate). “In short, my body is not only an object among all other objects, a nexus of sensible qualities among others, but an object which is sensitive to all the rest, which reverberates to all sounds, [and] vibrates to all colours” (236). The world constitutes us - what we perceive literally changes and thus forms our bodies and our minds. We reflect the world, but we are also the source of perspective upon it and thus enable the world to be for us; we live through a sensual and essential relationship, a reversibility: we touch the world and the world is the hand which is both touched and touching back.

With these ideas in mind, it is easy to see why Matta-Clark’s anarchitecture can create such a sublime tension between mind, world, and body. If space is so disrupted - if his physically alien environments are an “articulation of geometric incomprehensibility” (Hertz 16), impossible spaces in which angle, plane, depth, and other Euclidian standards are distorted, then the very means by which the body knows itself and organizes its experience is sundered. Not only do Matta-Clark’s complex spatial interventions thus alter the world and the self - they create for us a world and a self that are entirely unfamiliar. They situate us in a novel and perhaps terrifyingly foreign existential realm.

However, dear reader, it is my task and my pleasure to soothe such fears, to explain how there is no need to be frightened by this original embodiment, no reason to turn away from the experience of this uncharted ontology. The reason for this lies in a new kind of embodied theory that was proposed in the 1990s amidst new horizons of virtual realities. Triangulating between Matta-Clark, Merleau-Ponty, and the writings of
VR artist Char Davies, it is possible to realize the positive and emancipatory capacities inherent in Matta-Clark’s spatial/bodily unhinging.

Char Davies’ salient works in the 1990s include *Osmose* and *Ephémere*, both being immersive virtual environments which intervene in regular spatial/bodily experience in order to explore otherworldly spaces governed by exotic laws of physics. Much like the anarchitectural works of Matta-Clark, Davies’ immersive environments offer sublime alternatives to Euclidian geometry. Concepts such as shape, depth, distance, and spatial presence are all subverted, so that one may occupy the same spatial terrain as a tree even as one’s breathing carries awareness of his or her physical embodiment; this environmental tree object is transparent, its planes melding into the depths of the background, so that the expanse of the spatial fabric is made apparent and the peculiarity of the virtual realm is total in its implication (and constitution) of the subject’s body. It is notable that Davies insists on defining participants as *immersants*, that her virtual spatial environments are fully *immersive*. She explains the rationale behind this terminology as thus: “I use the word [immerse] primarily in terms of its first meaning, which implies a bodily submersion in an enveloping medium such as water ... I deliberately emphasize the quality of being bodily-enveloped or encompassed” (Davies 258). As in Merleau-Ponty, we see in this aspect of Davies’ practice an illustration of embodied existence being situated completely within the horizon of spatiality. Davies is particularly interested in the dissolution of the Cartesian mind/body divide (which could also include the perception/body divide - deemed an inappropriate intellectual paradigm by Merleau-Ponty). Davies creates for us alternate realms which “harbor a unique convergence, or even an osmotic intermingling of spatialities - interior and exterior, mental, physical, and social” which “facilitate a dissolution of conventional [irreversible] boundaries between perceiver and perceived” (260).

They key here is the dissolution of habitually conceived categories and delineations. It is Davies’ intention in creating these un-real spatialities to indeed open us up to new ontologies so that we may experience novel structures of perception, fresh embodiments, unconventional modes of cognition and transcendent patterns of being. If our bodies are created anew by the unfamiliar spatial organizations of Davies and Matta-Clark, it is indeed emancipatory: new existential planes may be accessed, and a certain kind of rebirth is allowed to occur. The prospect is both refreshing and profoundly exciting. If these environments - these foreign and unconventional spatial configurations - are a “spatio-temporal context for [a] perceptual experience of boundary dissolution” (these dissolved boundaries being those between body and world, mind and matter, and reversible subjects), then these artistic endeavours are doing “nothing short of attempting to dismantle the western worldview by de-habituating and re-invigorating our perceptions of being in the world” (261). Here the difference between Davies and Matta-Clark becomes apparent. While *Osmose* and *Ephémere* are coded architectural environments, dependent on software and hardware for access, Matta-Clark extends these effects from virtual, symbolic space (or at least, a space that straddles the virtual and the actual, a constructed virtual domain and an actual immersive spatial reality) into an actual, concrete lived space. Matta-Clark allows for a much purer experience of body/space rebirth, in that his spaces are not only immersive but are actual. However,
the realness of the experience, the authenticity of the temporary loss of the situated body that the anarchitectural environment engenders is not to be feared: it is a glimpse at something higher, a real embodied ascension into an existential plane outside the one in which we are conventionally situated.

If space is the body, then altering the weave of spatiality will in turn effect the fold of embodiment. Gordon Matta-Clark’s determination to reorganize the physical and perceptual laws of embodied experience allows for such an ontological reconfiguration. By exploiting and adapting the principles of Merleau-Ponty which state that the body is not in space but is of the same essential material, Matta-Clark allows us to enter into a whole new existential realm of space and body. If such alternate realities can be used to “perturb our usual sense of locus in space and time” (Jones 130), then it follows that we are not merely being folded into the fabric of space in a novel way: Gordon Matta-Clark allows us to try becoming a fold in an entirely new spatial fabric. As Gaston Bachelard states in the *Poetics of Space*, this new state of being is thus a “communication with a space that is psychically innovating,” a step towards an evolutionary actualization that ensures “we do not change place, we change our nature” (Bachelard 206) into something new, a transcendent form of Being.

It is my final proposition to dub Gordon Matta-Clark the achiever of a transcendental architecture: in his complex anarchitectural practice, he masters the ultimate architectural goal of sculpting spatial experience. In prismatically multiplying the capacities of the architectural tradition, Gordon Matta-Clark situates the art of space beyond its own limitations, totalizing its spatial command by extending its dominion into the trans-dimensional.
Works Cited


