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Gordon Matta-Clark sawing as he does his thing at Rue Beaubourg in Paris.

The Art of Putting Holes in Houses

PARIS (IHT).—Gordon Matta-Clark, inventor of the Englewood (N.J.) Split and fugitive from Manhattan justice, leaned against the mantelpiece and squinted through a camera lens at a 13-foot circle cut through the side of the building. From five floors up, the view of chimneys and lower roofs in the Marais, against a cloudy sky flecked with patches of bright blue, was rewarding. Three feet from where he stood, the tiled floor has been broken off, leaving a ragged edge. Below it is a sheer drop to the other floors. All that remains of Nos. 27 and 29 Rue Beaubourg, a pair of houses built about 300 years ago, is the facade and, clinging to it, a bit of standing room. Beyond these two, and another mixed pair, the wreckers are at work in a square block of leveled buildings that resembles a wartime saturation-bombing target.

Mr. Matta-Clark, a 30-year-old New Yorker, likes to stand up there on the fifth floor, or at another vantage point, and watch passersby do double takes as they come down the street and—if they happen to glance in that direction—see the hole in the side of the building, symmetrical as a bull's-eye. "The actual form," said Mr. Matta-Clark, "is called a conic intersect. The central axis of the cone is at a 45-degree angle to the street." There are two other related holes in the building, also the work of Mr. Matta-Clark and a couple of his friends. He has a degree in architecture from Cornell, though he has never practiced, and thus he has more than a layman's grasp on how far you can go in cutting up houses, old or new, without making them fall on you.

"It took us about 15 days to cut the holes," he said, "using chisels mostly." This meant cutting through about eight inches of masonry. And though the houses were built approximately around the time of the Pilgrim landing in the New World, the masonry looks as if it would have been good for at least another century or two. The stone and brick are braced at intervals by wooden beams that show no sign of rot.

Nos. 27 and 29, like other buildings on the site, are coming down to make way for a new commercial block. Mr. Matta-Clark is not especially pained by this. The houses, though they still, in their final stage of disintegration, look like a detail from an Utrillo or a Fouljita, have, as he sees it, "no special architectural interest. They are just a nice pair of husband-and-wife houses." No. 27, slightly lower than its mate, has subsided into a leaning position.

Mr. Matta-Clark, an engaging man dressed in jeans and a turtle-neck

Irving Marder

sweater, has established cordial relations with the wrecking crew, having persuaded them, evidently, that, if mad, he is harmless. "There were two main schools of thought at first," he said. "One was that I'm just another American *fou*—or, say, a CIA man, looking over a potential site for a secret missile base, and masquerading as an American *fou*. Another was that I've been looking for treasure hidden in the walls."

We walked down a flight of ancient wooden stairs to the floor below. The building has been, on the whole, picked clean. But against the truncated wall of what had been a kitchen stood a coal-fired cooking range, stovepipe intact. It looked like a well-preserved antique, though inside there was still a manufacturer's booklet of instructions. Mr. Matta-Clark took some more pictures, from various angles. He has also shot "about 40 minutes" of 16-mm. color film, a documentary of what has happened since he and his friends began to tinker with the buildings at the end of last month. The final act is slated to take place in about a week, when his cameras will record the ultimate leveling of No. 27 and No. 29.

Why does he cut holes in the sides of houses, and otherwise bend them to his will? An articulate man, Mr. Matta-Clark

nonetheless has no succinct answers to this. Though he has painted and sculpted, in conversation he shies away from questions about whether what he does should be pigeonholed under "Art" or "Stunt" or perhaps "Happening." He peered through his range-finder again and, after taking a few more shots, said: "A concierge here on the building site—really a charwoman, I suppose—said something one day that, I think, has some relevance. She said, 'You cut a hole in the building and people can look inside and see the way other people really lived.'"

What happened in Englewood? "Well," he said, "I took a house there and split it down the middle, sort of opened it up." With saws, and so on? He nodded. "That's right." And in New York? Laughing, he clambered over an exposed beam and leaned over dangerously for a shot upward through the circle. "There was this pier on the Hudson," he said. "Apparently abandoned. I worked on it, and did some interesting things. Along came the police from the New York Port Authority. They accused me of damaging their multimillion-dollar pier. They got hysterical. I told them I had improved it, but they said they were going to prosecute me under all sorts of laws—trespassing was the least of it. And I suppose they would have if they had caught up with me."

How does he live? You could exhibit, after a fashion, houses with holes cut in them, but you could hardly charge admission. "Oh," he said, "I don't have any money, but I survive—I've had grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, and so on." The present spate of activity results, he said, from a recent connection with the Biennale. He also had the blessings of the American Cultural Center, at the Rue du Dragon on the Left Bank.

The fact that his non-art, or whatever it may be, has affinities with that of, say, an ice sculptor, doesn't seem to bother him at all. On the Rue Beaubourg, it makes people stop and look up, and it will be doing that for another week or so, anyway.