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# Margot's Dilemma:

El dilema de Margot:  
la salida es por la puerta trasera

# Exit Through the Back Door

Tania Tovar Torres

¿Qué pasa cuando un edificio deja de existir? ¿Qué pasa cuando la realidad sobre un edificio o una obra de arte se convierte en objeto de reconstrucción? Este ensayo argumenta la posibilidad de que la arquitectura ya no sobreviva como objeto –edificio– sino como documento, como historia. Contado a través de un dilema desenterrado por una carta de Margot Wellington a Gordon Matta-Clark, se presenta la relación entre el archivo, la arquitectura y las artes. En este sentido, se pone en duda la temporalidad de la arquitectura, ya que su historia puede ser reproducida y recreada a través de los documentos y páginas que se encuentran en el archivo, lo cual deja la pregunta abierta de qué fue primero, el edificio o el documento.

**Palabras clave:** arquitectura, arte, archivo, ficción, realidad, registros, documentos, Gordon Matta-Clark

What happens when a building ceases to exist? What happens when the reality of an edifice or a work of art becomes subject to reconstruction? This essay makes the argument that architecture can continue surviving not as an object –a building– but rather as a document, a story. Told through the dilemma uncovered in a letter from Margot Wellington to Gordon Matta-Clark, this essay examines the relationship between the archive, architecture and the arts. In this sense, the temporality of architecture is put into question, for its history can be reproduced and recreated through the documents and papers held in the archive, making us wonder: which came first, the building or the document?

**Keywords:** architecture, art, archive, fiction, reality, records, documents, Gordon Matta-Clark

The New York Times, February 18, 1975. The image shows a wall cut open with a hole, carefully made so as not to damage the structure of the building. This photograph could have been of any work by Gordon Matta-Clark if it hadn't been for the following caption: "Kung Sang Ho standing outside hole through which burglars entered to rob his store at 177 Canal Street in Chinatown. He said thieves must have known watchman's schedule."<sup>1</sup> Burglars, making *the right cut somewhere between the supports and collapse*,<sup>2</sup> laborious but unexpected, passed undetected, but not without leaving something behind. A story to be told by a circle-shaped hole in the corner of a wall. That same day, Ms. Margot Wellington, vice president of the Downtown Brooklyn Development Association, sent a letter to Mr. Matta-Clark. Attached was a clipping of this article. The letter read:<sup>3</sup>

Dear Gordon,  
It is said that life imitates art.  
Right after you left my office,  
I read and felt I must send  
it to you.  
Sincerely,  
Margot

Margot's letter reveals a deeper dilemma. Does life truly imitate art? Do our own constructs now dictate what we thought came first? And if so, which came first? Art or reality?

When *Office Baroque*, the last remaining building-intervention by Matta-Clark, was demolished, many felt that his contributions to art had been forever lost. It wasn't until later that the documentary material he left behind made it to the public, that the letters, notebooks, drawings, negatives and newspaper clippings ultimately replaced the works themselves. Long after both he and his pieces were gone, the previously private life of the artist/architect took over.<sup>4</sup> The many documents derived from his cut-up walls are the tools that allow these ideas to prevail over time, regardless of their physical lifespan.<sup>5</sup>

The archive not only mediates its relationship to the world by designating new representations, but also by producing an eidetic, a relationship to the world that represents these processes as documents.<sup>6</sup>

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MARGOT WELLINGTON  
Vice President

Feb. 18, 1975

Dear Gordon,

It is said that life imitates art.  
Right after you left my office, I  
read this and felt I must send  
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Sincerely,

Margot



Letter from Margot Wellington to Gordon Matta-Clark, February 18, 1975, typescript and ink on paper, 9.8 x 13.7 cm. PHCON2002:0016:003:048.1, Canadian Centre for Architecture, Gift of Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark

This documentation thus serves as a double, making up for what is absent. As the collapse of the wall approaches and its materiality disappears, the archive replaces its existence. The partially-collapsed wall in the news photograph, supported by the documentation of the text, prevented the hole from becoming nothingness, oblivion. Margot's interpretation turned it into memory. The price that the wall and the hole had to pay to prevail is connected not only to their materiality, but also to their reinterpretation. Documentation makes for the life of the archive and this makes the piece more complex and less rigid, less material and more abstract, more related to perception than in its original meaning; media becomes an inherent part of the experience, not only to the public, but also to the authors themselves.<sup>7</sup>

The story of the 1929 Barcelona International Exhibition's German Pavilion is beautifully entangled

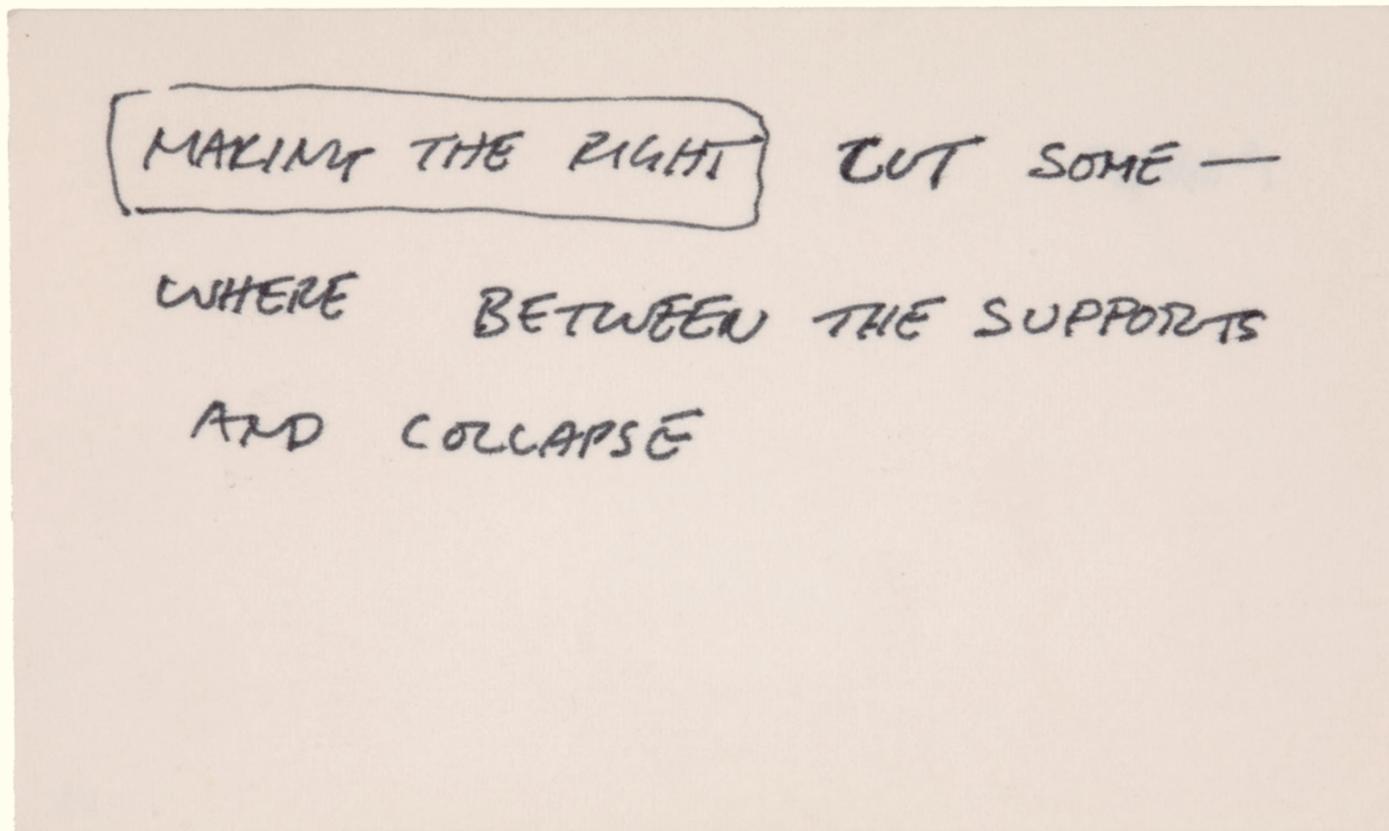
in Margot's dilemma.<sup>8</sup> A pavilion that almost nobody had seen prior to its demolition was rewritten into something that has now become a universal reference for Mies van der Rohe's work.<sup>9</sup> The image constructed through the many articles written about it, and in Margot's (or rather Oscar Wilde's)<sup>10</sup> terms —art— built not only a text, but a second pavilion —life— based on the image contained in its documentary descriptions. Today, photographs of the second pavilion are considered by many to be authentic. A few surviving photos of the first pavilion, and a few well-written words, have turned the reproduction into an icon of modernity.<sup>11</sup>

Life imitates art, making a built reality out of the document. The unintended reproduction of the hole becomes meaningful when it reminds someone of Matta-Clark's work. This provides the object with values, allowing it to prevail over time, but it is also capable of generating values on its own. Foucault explains the inversion of physical existence vis-à-vis the existence of the document or the archive<sup>12</sup> where the relationship in which the document followed history is reversed and the document is now able to create. Like the German Pavilion, *Splitting, Conical Intersect, Caribbean Orange* and *Office Baroque* are all vindicated through their reinterpretation. The multiple interpretations made by Margot, or by anyone else, determine reality — or more precisely, new realities in which art pieces can even serve as the inspiration to a burglary. Out of all the stories in the Matta-Clark archive, this letter, the connections made by Ms. Wellington, the burglars cutting through the wall, this essay and the many speculations the reader can engage in based on a short sentence, some photos and a caption are just some of the possible materializations and now-truthful variations on Matta-Clark's work.

The wall, as a material object, ceases to be a reference or a witness to an art piece, while documents become entities that are free to create, giving rise to something stranger than fiction:<sup>13</sup> documents rebuilding an object that has become expendable, turning the art piece into an idea and the letter, history. As carefully-curated images and letters, well-written essays and properly stored photographs reinterpret the world, reality will slowly exit through the same hole through which all those speculative images came in. However, Gordon Matta-Clark will remain in every man-made hole in a wall, in the photos contained in a folder, in the correspondence stored in a box or simply the exit through the back door of a store at 177 Canal Street in Chinatown.



Newspaper clipping from *The New York Times* included with a letter from Margot Wellington to Gordon Matta-Clark, February 18, 1975, newsprint, 19.0 x 13.1 cm (irregular). PHCON2002:0016:003:048.2, Canadian Centre for Architecture, Gift of Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark © The New York Times



Gordon Matta-Clark Art Card (Making the right...), 1970-1978, black felt-tip pen, 10.2 x 15.2 cm.  
PHCON2002:0016:001:030.7, Canadian Centre for Architecture, Gift of Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark © Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark

#### Notes

1. Margot Wellington, newspaper clipping from *The New York Times* included with a letter to Gordon Matta-Clark, February 18, 1975, 19.0 x 13.1 cm (irregular). PHCON2002:0016:003:048.2, Collection Centre Canadien d'Architecture / Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal, Don de la succession Gordon Matta-Clark / Gift of Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark.
2. Gordon Matta-Clark, "Making the right cut somewhere between the supports and collapse," ca. 1973, 7.6 x 12.7 cm. PHCON2002:0016:001:030.7, Collection Centre Canadien d'Architecture / Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal, Don de la succession Gordon Matta-Clark / Gift of Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark.
3. Margot Wellington, letter to Gordon Matta-Clark, February 18, 1975. 19.8 x 13.7 cm. PHCON2002:0016:003:048.1 Collection Centre Canadien d'Architecture / Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal, Don de la succession Gordon Matta-Clark / Gift of Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark.
4. Louise Désy & Gwendolyn Owens, "The Gordon Matta-Clark Archive at the Canadian Centre for Architecture," in Lorenzo Fusi e Marco Pierini, *Gordon Matta-Clark* (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2008).
5. The Gordon Matta-Clark collection at the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CP138) opens up as a framework for gathering traces—written and drawn—of his thinking. Reassembled hours of discarded film footage challenge the notion of documentation, forcing us to view the physical and social contexts—the relational space—of Matta-Clark's interventions, while hundreds of travel photographs—reconstructions of the panorama of Matta-Clark's visual notes on the world around him—act as a foil to his artworks. In foregrounding seemingly incidental parts of the collection, the studies that have been based on it manifest an exploratory way of working with archives in which selecting, presenting and writing are processes of ongoing research. Rather than synthesizing Matta Clark's pieces, the archive extends the scope of what constitutes his body of work and thus the physical and intellectual terrain within which to situate it. Yann Chateigné, Hila Peleg and Kitty Scott, *CP138 Gordon Matta-Clark* (London: Canadian Centre for Architecture, Koenig Books, 2020).
6. Gertrude Koch, "False Reconciliation: For a Conceptual and Practical Differentiation of Art and Image," *Texte zur Kunst* 95 "Art vs. Image" (September 2014): 40-47.
7. The Mirror Effect, understood as the impossibility of seeing the object in its wholeness rather than through its reflection or interpretation, already foresaw the imminent need for a medium able to apprehend the whole piece, now invisible in its materiality. "The mirror stage is a turning point. After it, the subject's relation to himself is always mediated through a totalizing image that has come from the outside." We have reached the point in which architecture is understood as a publication process, in which the medium is the mirror where all the parts and pieces of the enunciation and values that are ascribed to the object (many times not materialized) magically return to the object as a complete image. Jane Gallop, *Reading Lacan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).
8. Built for no other purpose other than that of representation, the Barcelona Pavilion was designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Lilly Reich as the German national pavilion for the 1929 Barcelona International Exhibition. In spite of the voices that requested the preservation of the building, the economic difficulties faced by the German state caused the pavilion to be dismantled at the end of the exhibition, in January 1930. The metal structure was sold locally and the marble pieces were returned to Germany. However, as time went by, this work gained recognition as a key reference for the history of twentieth century architecture. Starting in 1954, the architect Oriol Bohigas began promoting the idea of reconstructing the building in its original location, an initiative that was finally realized in the 1980s. Work began in 1983, undertaken by the architects Ignasi de Solà-Morales, Cristian Cirici, Fernando Ramos and Ana Vila after years of documentary research. This reconstruction, based entirely on the original design and built with the same materials, was inaugurated on June 2, 1986.
9. It is a little-known fact that, owing to its limited existence, the "original" German Pavilion was seen by "nobody," with a few exceptions such as Peter Behrens, local architects and the public. Despite this, the pavilion was soon recognized as a masterpiece of modern architecture and its drawings and photographs were widely reproduced. Beatriz Colomina and Joan Ockman, *Architectureproduction* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1988).
10. Oscar Wilde opined in his 1889 essay "The Decay of Lying" that "life imitates art far more than art imitates life."
11. After its reconstruction in Barcelona, Jose Quetglas wrote that the pavilion is, in fact, a meta-reading of not only the pavilion, but also both the local reaction, as represented in the contemporary local press, and the photographs and texts circulated in canonizing volumes. For Quetglas, the pavilion exists in these printed pages and photographs, which constitute our "memory" of it, and also comprises a set of reproductions of preceding works and projects by Mies himself. Josep Quetglas, "Fear of Glass," in Beatriz Colomina and Joan Ockman, *Architectureproduction*.
12. For history, the document is no longer an inert material through which it tries to reconstitute what was done or said, the events of which only the trace remains; history is now trying to define unities, totalities, series and relations within the documentary material itself. History, in its traditional form, undertook to "memorize" the monuments of the past, transform them into documents and lend speech to those traces which, in themselves, are often not verbal, or which silently say something other than what they actually say; in our time, history is that which transforms documents into monuments. Whereas, in the past, history deciphered the traces left by men, it now deploys a mass of elements that have to be grouped together, made relevant, placed in relation to one another to form totalities. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).
13. *Stranger than Fiction* is a 2006 American comedy-drama-fantasy film directed by Marc Forster. The plot follows Harold Crick, a nondescript white collar worker who begins hearing a disembodied voice narrating his life as it happens – which turns out to be a previously-written text to a novel in which it is already stated that he will soon die.

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