

The Matta-Clark Complex: Materials, Interpretation and the Designer

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Consideration of materials appropriate for a given project is a fundamental part of graphic design, particularly book design. You could say that, when dealing with books, graphic design crosses over into product design territory. Books are three-dimensional objects of which the designer must consider the aesthetic, functional and structural aspects. Effective use of materials can succinctly communicate a book's content, imbue it with a certain character and simply compel a reader to pick it up.

An alternative title for this text might have been 'The Temptations of Interpretation'. The temptations lie in the vast range of materials the designer has at her/his disposal, combined with the degree to which she or he chooses to interpret a given content. How far one should go with the interpretation of content through the choice of material is a question I face with every project, particularly with the art books that represent a large share of my commissioned work. A key role of the designer is not only to take interest in a book's content, but also to research and understand it. Critical analysis of the content and application of this knowledge usually result in a well-designed book, both aesthetically and conceptually. But there is a fine line between relevant, clever reference to the artist and more overt, less helpful pastiche.

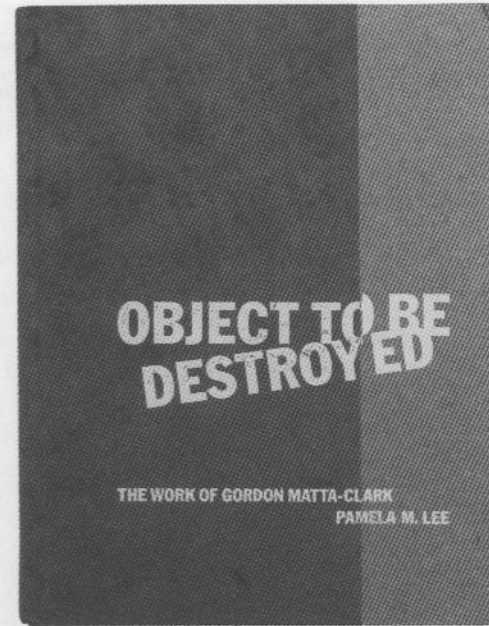
With particular artists, one risks reducing to parody the very content of the book, or even blurring lines between 'the work' and 'the document'. The book should subjectively communicate the work in a sympathetic way, but not attempt to be the work, or risk being mistaken as such. When designing a book, I aim to use relevant materials in a measured way, but in spite of a general confidence in my interpretation of the subject matter, there is always

an element of uncertainty: I always wonder if I have been thoughtful enough in the design. What might seem a knowledgeable, referential solution to me might come across as unnecessary imitation to someone else.

Such concerns are exemplified by books on the American artist Gordon Matta-Clark, which I have been looking at for the past ten years. A now established figure of conceptual and land art, Matta-Clark is best-known for what he called his 'building cuts' – works in abandoned buildings where he removed geometric sections of floors, ceilings and walls.

The design of books dealing with an artist often employs certain motifs or references to her or his practice: a certain material on the cover, a particular typeface for the text. I confess that I am by no means innocent of this, as such devices are often useful in communicating specific ideas of the artist's work. Books on Matta-Clark represent an ideal case study for investigating how far design should go in referencing art. Matta-Clark died prematurely in 1978 at the age of 35 and his ephemeral, site-specific work now exists mostly in documented form, particularly in books. This immediately sets up the potential for confusion between the artwork, its documentation and the book. Several books published posthumously on Matta-Clark mimic his interventions, or reference architectural materials from the artist's work in their construction (or *de*-construction) and typography.

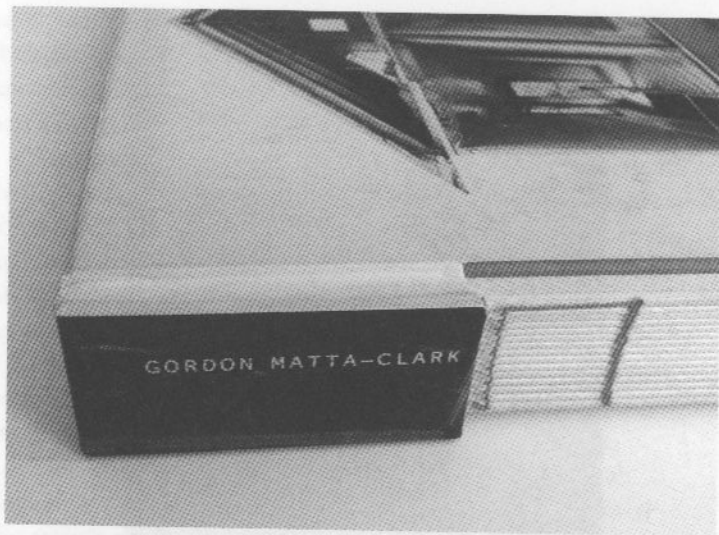
The first copy of *Object to be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark* (MIT Press, 2001) I encountered was the second edition: a paperback which could be described as an imitation of an imitation. This edition attempted, in flattened photographic form, to recreate the mix of flock pattern wallpaper and greyboard found on the original hardback cover. In both editions, the title on the cover is typographically cut across the two textures. The text pages are set in a more standard art catalogue format with serif type and generous margins, accompanied by the occasional angled title maintaining the cover's graphic device. The design approach here is to convey a rough idea of Matta-Clark's



Object to be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark (2001)

work without use of archival imagery, communicating his method through treatment of material and typography.

Later, I came across Linda Eerme's and Robin Kinross' article on three other books on Gordon Matta-Clark's work. (*Domus*, 2003, no. 863) Published as part of a regular collaborative column by Eerme and Kinross, the article covered two earlier Matta-Clark books before moving on to the then recently published, lavishly produced *Gordon Matta-Clark* (Phaidon, 2003). This title marks the point where books on Matta-Clark went from subtle referential nod to a more overt form of reference, bordering on caricature. Eerme describes a situation where the book's designer 'is unable to resist the temptation to enter into competition with the artist'. The cover board, featuring Matta-Clark's *Splitting* (1974), has a large chunk taken out of the spine, exposing signatures embellished with ostentatious coloured thread. This original hardcover edition is admittedly eye-catching,

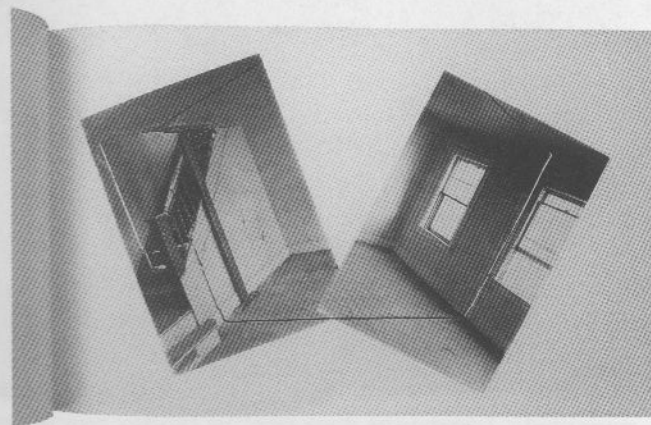


Gordon Matta-Clark (2003)

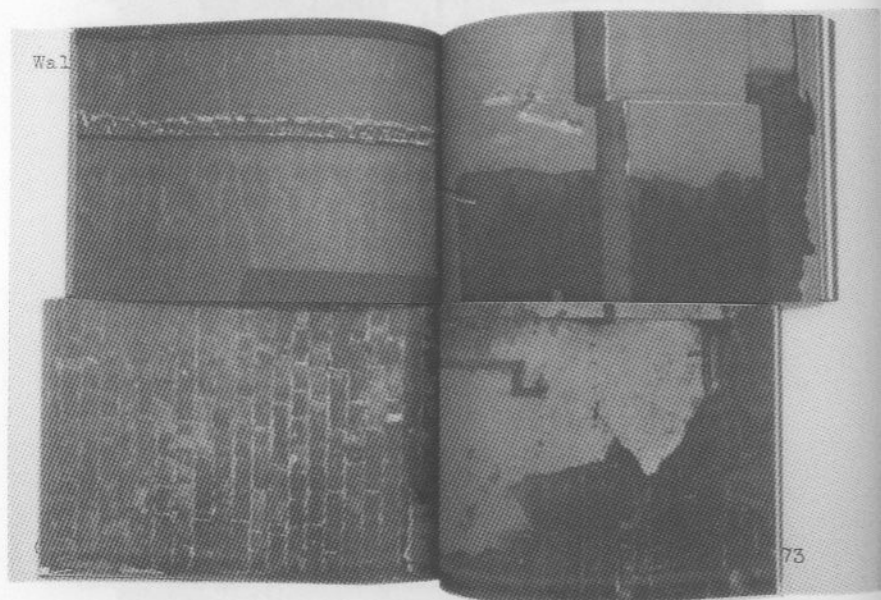
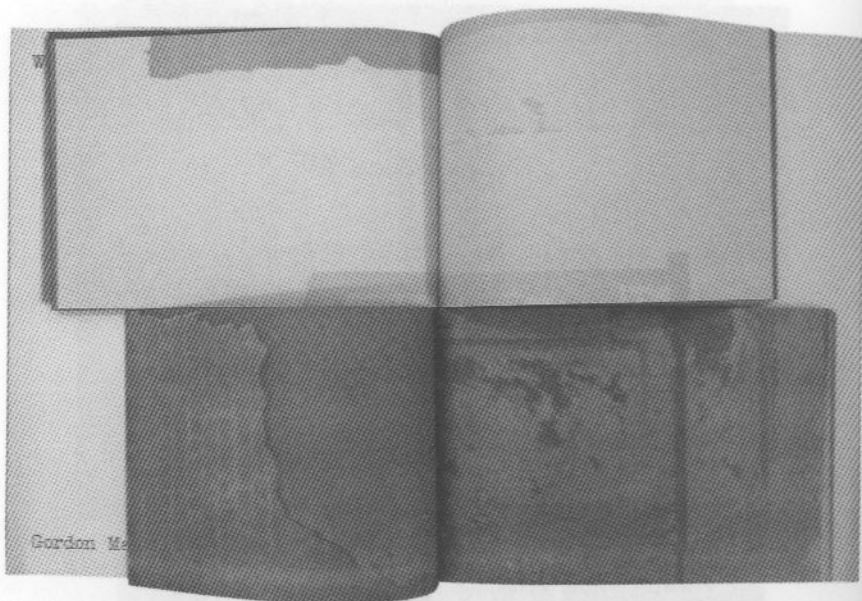
impressively executed and, we can assume, commercially successful (the edition is now sold out). And one could argue that the dramatic spine-cut was a striking way of bringing the artist's work to the attention of a wider audience. On the other hand, there is the danger that the motivation behind Matta-Clark's building cuts is trivialised if used merely as a decorative device.

In designing and producing his own book to document *Splitting* – published by 98 Greene Street Loft Press in 1974 – Matta-Clark was content to let the dramatic work speak for itself. The simple cover is set in a sans serif typeface with, inside, sets of overlapping photographs of the artist's architectural intervention.

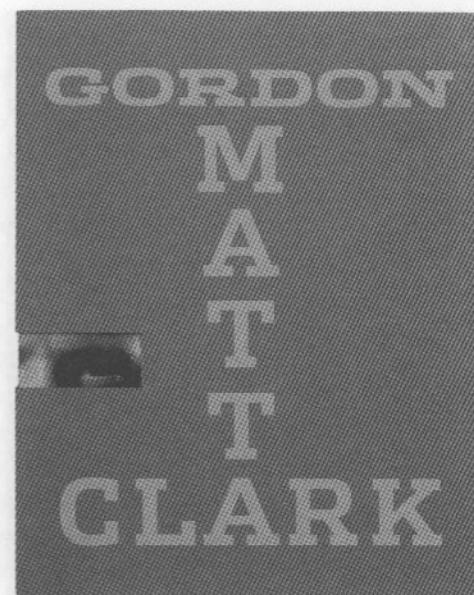
In *Walls paper* (Buffalo Press, 1973), another book by Matta-Clark, the publication itself becomes an in-situ work, where his cutting process is not used to mimic the piece but to replace it. The building documented in *Walls paper* was demolished before Matta-Clark could return to halve it, so he halved the book instead. The reader 'splits' the building with each turn of the page.



Splitting (1974)

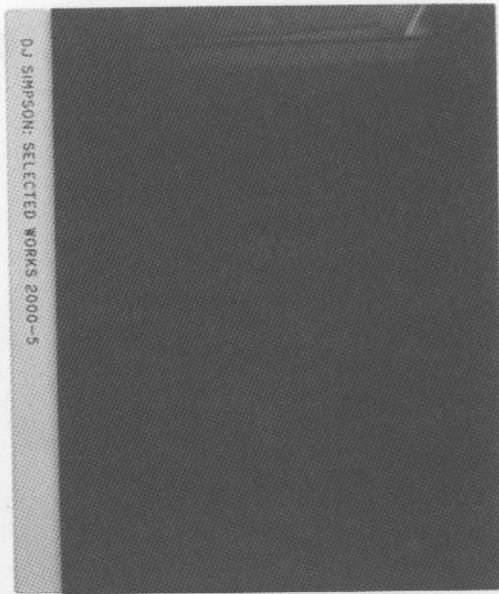


Walls paper (1973)

Gordon Matta-Clark: *You Are the Measure* (2007)

In *Gordon Matta-Clark: You Are the Measure* (Whitney/Yale, 2007), the most recent Matta-Clark book on my shelf, the book's designer also makes cuts: here in the kraft board cover, exposing a tightly-cropped portrait of the artist. The explicit reference, almost imitative, is still there, but manages to move beyond parody with the self-contained material play between die cut, photography and typography. One cut seems to approach tongue-in-cheek functionality: witness the neat void left for the all-important barcode. (See illustration p. 22)

As a parallel, questions similar to those raised by the Matta-Clark books came up while I was co-designing a book with Sara De Bondt, *DJ Simpson: Selected Works 2000–5*, which featured the work of British artist DJ Simpson (Mead Gallery, 2007). Simpson is also known for a method of subtraction, whereby a router is used to 'draw' by drilling lines across various surfaces such as plywood, aluminium, Formica and perspex.



DJ Simpson: Selected Works 2000-5 (2006)

Noting that a previous book on Simpson had mimicked the artist's mark-making with a scrawl-like headline font, we attempted a set of what we thought were subtler references. Headings and essays were set in fonts derived from plotting and engraving typography – a lettering technique often used to drill into materials similar to Simpson's, but in a more uniform way. With our perspex cover, we aimed to communicate the tension between a pristine slab of shiny red plastic and Simpson's striking destruction of the same material documented inside. In hindsight, we are perhaps equally guilty of over-enthusiastic interpretation, of an attempt to compete with the artist. The risk of such an approach is that it begins to turn the book itself into an art object, rather than letting the art speak for itself through the book.

This last observation highlights a key dilemma: where does the designer draw the line between engagement with content and pure decoration? Although consideration

of a project's content and context remains crucial, the question reminds us to consider the book itself as a functional object. The quality of a book's constituent parts can be prioritised, a particularly basic requirement that is surprisingly often overlooked by contemporary designers. Is the right glue being used for the binding? Does the book open easily – and stay open? Is it comfortable to hold for extended reading? Existing 'readymade' formats (trade paperbacks, children's books, dictionaries, etc.) can be more sensitive to the book's materiality than effect-laden coffee table books.

An awareness of over-interpretation needn't imply a kind of unattainable (and undesirable) objectivity, but rather a thoughtfully subjective approach, which does not involve second-guessing the artist. When content and materials are interpreted and combined in a balanced way, the result can be greater than the sum of its parts. A transformation of the given matter through a kind of elegant alchemy, rather than cut-and-paste pastiche.