

LESSON FOUR: Public Interventions

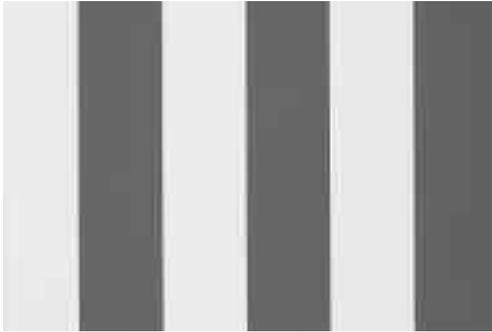


IMAGE FOURTEEN: Daniel Buren. French, born 1938. One screenprint from *D'Une Impression L'Autre*. 1983. Photographs of installation executed 1968–82. Illustrated book of thirty mounted color photographs and thirty screenprints, page: 13 ¾ x 20 ½" (35 x 52 cm). Publisher: the artist and Éditions Média, Neuchâtel, Switzerland. Edition: 95. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase, 1985. © 2007 Daniel Buren / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris

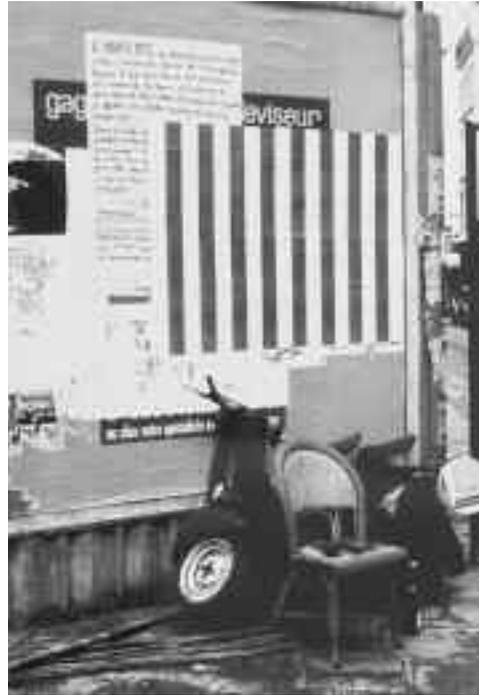


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IMAGE SIXTEEN: Gordon Matta-Clark. American, 1945–1978. *Bingo*. 1974. Building fragments, three sections, overall 69" x 25' 7" x 10" (175.3 x 779.8 x 25.4 cm). Nina and Gordon Bunshaft Bequest Fund, Nelson A. Rockefeller Bequest Fund, and the Enid A. Haupt Fund. © 2007 Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



IMAGE SEVENTEEN: Gordon Matta-Clark, American, 1945–1978. *Bingo*. 1974. Building fragments, three sections, overall 69" x 25' 7" x 10" (175.3 x 779.8 x 25.4 cm). Nina and Gordon Bunshaft Bequest Fund, Nelson A. Rockefeller Bequest Fund, and the Enid A. Haupt Fund. © 2007 Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



IMAGE EIGHTEEN: Gordon Matta-Clark, American, 1945–1978. *Untitled*. 1974. Chromogenic color print 13 7/8 x 20 1/8" (35.2 x 51.1 cm). Gift of the Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. © 2007 Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

INTRODUCTION

The 1960s were years of experimentation and of rethinking the social order. This decade saw struggles against established power structures and institutions of all kinds—most notably related to gender and racial equality. The Vietnam War incited mass protests in the United States, and in Europe students and workers violently clashed with police in May 1968. Many public spaces, including streets and university campuses, became active sites of political expression. Artists began to look at such spaces as ideal sites of artistic intervention.

In this lesson, students will be introduced to two artists who made interventions in public spaces, and they will consider how their practices expose underlying power structures in society.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will be introduced to the notion of ephemeral and **site-specific** art and will consider the role of the photodocumentation of these works.
- Students will explore works that challenge traditional notions of where art should be displayed.
- Students will be introduced to artists' strategies of **institutional critique**.

INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION

- Ask your students to name locations where they typically encounter works of art. Then ask them to name what these locations have in common.
- Now ask your students to name unexpected places where they have seen art. Ask them to consider how their reactions to works of art differ in relation to where they encounter them.
- Ask your students to consider why artists might choose to make works for display in public spaces. They should keep these ideas in mind as they explore the artwork in this lesson.

IMAGE-BASED DISCUSSION

- Show your students Image Fourteen, from Daniel Buren's artist's book *D'Une Impression L'Autre*, and ask them to describe what they see. Do not show them Image Fifteen right away.

In 1966, Buren began producing striped materials, including posters, banners, billboards, and clothing, in a variety of colors, materials, and overall dimensions. This white paper printed with green stripes is one example of his work. Buren considered this motif of alternating colored and white vertical stripes precisely 3.4 inches (8.7 centimeters) in width to be a stand-in for painting and hoped it would free painting from its traditional burden of having to tell a story, represent something or someone, or express emotion.

- Ask your students if they agree with Buren's designation of this work as a painting even though it is printed on paper. What, if any, characteristics does it share with traditional painting?
- Now show your students Image Fifteen. Ask them to describe the location pictured in this photograph, using visual evidence. Ask them to consider how this image might be related to Image Fourteen.

This image is what Buren calls a **photo-souvenir**, a photographic snapshot that documents his artworks **in situ**. When installed outdoors, Buren's works are inevitably covered up, removed, or worn down over time. Although they are instrumental in documenting his ephemeral, or temporary, works, Buren insists that photo-souvenirs cannot replicate the experience of seeing the work of art in person, nor, he says, should they be considered art.

- Ask your students if seeing Buren's photo-souvenir documenting the painting's original location affects their interpretation of the work of art. Why or why not?

This photo-souvenir was taken in Paris in April 1968, just days before leftist student protests engulfed the city. In an *affichagees sauvage*, or "wild postering" campaign, Buren pasted two hundred green-and-white-striped posters around Paris without authorization, in the middle of the night. In this image, Buren's painting partially obscures advertisements and a poster announcing an upcoming student protest.

Buren maintains a critical attitude towards museums and galleries. He has stated, "The museum/gallery instantly promotes to 'art' status whatever it exhibits with conviction, i.e., habit, thus diverting in advance any attempt to question the foundations of art."²⁷

Concerned that the institutional authority assumed by museums and galleries leads audiences to accept everything displayed in those locations as art, Buren circumvented institutions by installing his paintings in highly visible public and commercial spaces, such as advertising billboards, store windows, and subway stations, rather than conventional art spaces.

27. Daniel Buren, "The Function of the Museum" (Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1973).

- Ask your students if they agree or disagree with Buren’s belief that context or location affects the interpretation of a work of art. Why or why not? You may want to refer back to work by Marcel Duchamp (*Setting the Scene*) and Joseph Kosuth (*Lesson Two*), which deal with similar notions of institutional critique and context.
- Show your students the two images of *Bingo*, by Gordon Matta-Clark (Images Sixteen and Seventeen), but do not show them Image Eighteen right away. Inform your students that these two images show opposite sides of the same work.
- Ask your students to infer what materials *Bingo* is made of. Write a list of these materials on the board for reference. As students name materials, ask them to consider what is unusual about how they are arranged in *Bingo*.
- Now show your students *Untitled* (Image Eighteen), by Matta-Clark, and ask them to infer how *Bingo* was made, based on this photograph.

Bingo was made from three building fragments taken from the facade of a suburban house in Niagara Falls, New York, that was about to be demolished by the local housing commission. Matta-Clark secured permission to “unbuild” this two-story, red-shingled house over the course of ten days. Working twelve hours per day with a small team, he cut the north facade into nine equivalent rectangles (each nine feet wide and five feet tall), then removed each one until only the central rectangle remained. Of his choice of medium, Matta-Clark stated, “Why hang things on the wall when the wall itself is so much more a challenging medium?... A simple cut or series of cuts acts as a powerful drawing device able to redefine spatial situations and structural components.”²⁸

- Now have your students compare the images of *Bingo* with *Untitled*. Have them try to figure out which building fragment came from which part of the facade.
- Based on visual evidence and what they know about the game Bingo, ask your students to consider why Matta-Clark titled this work as he did.

The artist called this work *Bingo* because the facade, when cut into nine pieces, resembled the grid of a Bingo game card. In his complete vision for the project, Matta-Clark hoped to cut out the central panel of the opposite facade and leave the rest intact, to create a negative, or opposite, of this facade, but there was not enough time. He explained in his film *The Making of “Bingo”* that “an hour later, the bulldozer arrived.”²⁹

- According to Matta-Clark, this house was “last used as a beauty parlor removed to make room for weeds.”³⁰ Ask your students to consider what Matta-Clark meant by this statement. Have them infer some possible motivations that prompted Matta-Clark to “unbuild” this house and other buildings on the verge of demolition.

Growing up in New York City, Matta-Clark witnessed firsthand the ever-shifting value of real estate, which resulted in the demolition of older buildings for the construction of new ones. The artist claimed, “If anything emerges to cut up, I’ll go anywhere anytime” in the hope of giving buildings a new life—a process he referred to as “anarchitecture.”³¹ While the gesture of sawing back and forth through walls and floors may seem destructive or even violent, Matta-Clark believed it ultimately resulted in visual order, “opening up the view to the invisible”—the normally hidden interiors of walls and floors.³²

28. Gordon Matta-Clark, quoted in Corinne Diserens, ed., *Gordon Matta-Clark* (New York: Phaidon, 2003), 19.

29. Gordon Matta-Clark, in *The Making of “Bingo,”* 1974. Super 8, color, silent, 9 minutes, 40 seconds.

30. Ibid.

31. Gordon Matta-Clark, quoted in Diserens, *Matta-Clark*, 148.

32. Gordon Matta-Clark, quoted in Michael Kimmelman, “Cross Sections of Yesterday,” *New York Times*, February 23, 2007.

Matta-Clark “judiciously dumped” five of the eight building fragments at Art Park, a sculpture park in nearby Lewiston, New York, where he hoped they would be “gradually reclaimed by the Niagara River Gorge.”³³ He did not initially intend the three remaining fragments, which make up *Bingo*, to be reconstructed and displayed as sculpture.

Like Buren’s paintings, Matta-Clark’s anarchitecture projects were intended to be ephemeral, or temporary, but now these works and the accompanying documentation are in the Museum’s collection.

- **Ask your students if Buren’s paintings and Matta-Clark’s building fragments offer institutional critiques similar to those in works by Marcel Duchamp, Joseph Kosuth, and Robert Smithson (see *Setting the Scene*, Lesson One, and Lesson Three). How does the meaning of these works change when they are displayed in an art museum?**
- **Ask your students to consider how photodocumentation has informed their understanding of these two works. Do they consider the photographs to be an essential part of the work? Why or why not?**

ACTIVITIES

Graffiti Compositions

In 1996, the artist Christian Marclay plastered more than five thousand blank musical notation sheets in public spaces throughout Berlin during a month-long sound festival. Members of the public filled them in with standard musical notations as well as scribbles, drawings, and random marks. Marclay photographed many of the graffitied sheets and compiled them into a book, creating a musical score from them. He called this selection of prints *Graffiti Composition* (2002), which can be seen in MoMA’s Online Collection, at www.moma.org/collection. Ask your students to compare and contrast Marclay’s project with Buren’s, bearing in mind their specific geographical and historical contexts.

After this discussion, divide your class into small groups to develop an artistic intervention on paper that can be photocopied and posted throughout the school. Each group should consider how they would like their work to engage other students. Do they want it to pose direct questions or remain more abstract, like Buren’s paintings? Have your students post their projects for one week, then collect them. Together, discuss the responses to these interventions. How did the format and content affect students’ responses? How may location have played a role?

May 1968

Leftist student protests and strikes erupted in Paris in May 1968, and much of France’s workforce joined in. Buren’s photo-souvenir from April 1968 shows a poster beneath his striped painting announcing a student protest on May 1 at the University of Paris at Nanterre, which was shut down by authorities on May 2. Have your students research the events of May 1968. What were the reasons behind the protests? What was the outcome?

Graffiti and posters allowed students to spread their messages during the protests. Some of your students may want to research the images and slogans of May 1968, particularly the posters made by *Atelier Populaire*, a renegade print workshop that was established at Paris’s *École des Beaux-Arts* during the protests. New posters were created daily at *Atelier Populaire* to respond to events as they happened.

For more information about *Atelier Populaire*, please visit the Web site *Eye on Europe: Prints, Book and Multiples / 1960 to Now*. For additional Web sites, please see Online Resources.

33. Gordon Matta-Clark, quoted in press release, David Zwirner Gallery, New York, 2004; Matta-Clark, *The Making of “Bingo.”*

As a point of comparison, some students may want to research the student protests that took place in the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

This Old House

Ask your students to write a short story about the people who lived in the house Matta-Clark “unbuilt” to make *Bingo*, keeping in mind the time period—the early 1970s—and the location—Niagara Falls, New York. Since the house was last used as a beauty parlor, students may opt to write about the parlor’s clients.

Digging Deeper

Matta-Clark made art out of residential, commercial, and civic structures before they were demolished, from a New York City pier to a Paris apartment building. Currently, in Detroit an anonymous group of artists called Object Orange draws attention to dilapidated houses by painting their front facades bright orange like those officially slated by the city for demolition. The group’s hope is that these buildings will be torn down to make room for open spaces. (For more information about Object Orange, see Online Resources.)

Have your students work in small groups to research a local site where existing structures were removed or demolished in order to make room for new construction or open space. Students may conduct research on an ongoing building project or a historic one. Those researching a large civic or commercial project, such as a courthouse, skyscraper, stadium, mall, park, or highway, should identify and research the architects and developers involved.

Major building projects can often be controversial, especially if homes or businesses are displaced in the process. Students should investigate whether local residents and politicians supported or contested the projects they choose to research. Some students may want to research artistic or other interventions that have occurred at these sites. Have each group present their findings to the class, along with photodocumentation of the old and new structures. Put up a map of your city in the classroom so students can indicate the locations of their sites with pushpins.

Local newspapers, historical societies, and Web sites will be helpful resources. Here are a few of the many Web sites about building projects in New York City:

Curbed
www.curbed.com

The Municipal Art Society of New York
www.mas.org/viewcategory.php?category=4

Neighborhood Preservation Center
www.neighborhoodpreservationcenter.org/designation_reports.htm

New York City Landmarks Preservations Commission
www.nyc.gov/html/lpc/html/home/home.shtml

Waterfront Preservation Alliance of Williamsburg and Greenpoint
www.waterfrontalliance.org