

Vandalism as a Productive Force

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Splittings und Cuttings – The Art of Vandalism

In 1974 artist Gordon Matta-Clark used a precise cut to split a suburban single family house in New York in two pieces. In a “dramatic” act in 1976 he cut circular cone-shaped openings through two condemned buildings – in the immediate vicinity of the nearly completed Centre Pompidou in Paris.

A series of subtle interventions preceded these much published and discussed works of the artist: since 1972 Matta-Clark had roamed the streets of New York searching for empty real estate in and on which he could carry out his artistic operations. For the *Bronx Floors*, the first of these projects, he typically found a residential building in a run-down area of the Bronx. The first cuttings, in contrast to later projects, were of modest proportions: relatively small rectangles; openings which didn't affect the building's structural integrity and which were not necessarily recognizable as artistic deeds.

The artist's roaming around the streets of New York with the intention of carrying out aesthetically motivated “attacks” on existing architecture can be seen as a form of “vandalism” specifically aimed at empty buildings. The chosen buildings were, however, already on a list of buildings to be demolished, the “construction sites” were cordoned off and the possible consequences of any cuttings exactly calculated. In spite of this calculated risk, his work was successful due to the myth of appropriation.(1) This was in any case not illegitimate. Despite the buildings being empty, Matta-Clark's projects were always (with the exception of one) carried out with the owner's full consent.(2) They seem, however, to have anticipated other illegitimate appropriations whose formal appearances have remarkable similarities with Gordon Matta-Clark's early work: when drug dealers annex empty apartments or buildings as one of their places of business, they cut openings in the walls and ceilings with exactly as little arbitrariness as Matta-Clark, only – in these cases – with function in mind. In contrast to Gordon Matta-Clark's artistic interventions, those of the gangs are functional in nature and generally hidden: under rugs or linoleum flooring, in closets, behind ovens and refrigerators and so forth, according to Tim Vance from the Department of Housing, Preservation and Development in New York City.(3)

Real Crime

Drug gangs therefore set up an entrance to an apartment in a building as an “official” entrance, which is broken down upon being reported to, or discovered by, the police. They pretend to use only one apartment so that in case a police raid occurs, initially only this apartment has to be given up. But, according to Tim Vance, they create a system of connections through several empty apartments, perhaps through an entire apartment complex; they skip entire floors and go into neighboring buildings in order to create a variety of hideaways for drugs and money – at the same time keeping open several escape routes in different directions.

Before drug dealers settle into a building, however, they test it: they write graffiti in the hallways, wreak havoc on empty apartments, leave rubble behind and fill up bathtubs with garbage. If the graffiti isn't removed promptly or the devastated apartments cleaned and repaired, the new occupants know the building is either really empty, is not checked up on, or that the residents or owners aren't concerned about it. If the residents are docile and the local administration inattentive, then the gangs move in, drive out the “better” tenants and take over the building – room for room.

These beehive-like interventions (in police jargon actually known as “honeycomb architecture”) have increased since the mid 1980s to a point where a task force has been created with the job of searching for hideouts, especially in impoverished urban areas plagued by crime, and then recapturing them apartment by apartment from the gangs.

Officials know the drug trade cannot be prevented in this way; dealers will settle in other buildings or, at best, in other parts of the city. If the struggle appears to be hopeless because crime gets the upper hand, or there is no known demand for apartments within a particular block and occupancy levels sink below that which is economically acceptable, the ultimate solution is resorted to: the buildings will be blown up.

The Productive Forces of Vandalism

While vandalism is seen by some as a means and symbol of self-promotion and the appropriation of space, for others it is nothing more than a threatening sign of social decay. This double function produces a spectrum of productive forces within urban society, of which the above-mentioned is only the most radical form.

Vandalism, along with crime and other forms of deviation from normal behavior, interrupts “the monotony and everyday security of middle-class life. It saves it from stagnation and gives rise to an uneasy tension, without which even the thorn of competition would become dulled,” Karl Marx wrote 150 years ago.⁽⁴⁾ The fear evoked through real or even imagined “crime” is not only portrayed in numerous aesthetic productions which serve the psychological coping with of crime, as for example the genre of detective novels or films, but also in countless preventative architectural and urban planning measures. Alleged “crime” opens up a considerable market, it contributes – according to Karl

Marx – more to an increase in national wealth than some more respectable trades, and when “crime” is in danger of disappearing it is then rediscovered: from those who profit from fear – from the police, politicians, and planners, from the construction, security, and insurance industries – but also from artists, authors, and scientists, of which I am one, who have the focus of their “research projects” (or their publications) provided by this “industry.”(5)

Vandalism can thus serve as the motor of urban perception. Buildings which have been attacked by vandals or “decorated” buildings and objects draw attention to themselves and evoke speculation as to who the culprits are, where they are, why they did what they did, and so on. Suspicion of this nature is usually cast in the direction of areas where the poor, unemployed, and immigrants live.

In addition, vandalism in “homeopathic” doses, like all external attacks, can serve the establishment and strengthening of a community. It can bring strangers together for a time so that they can organize themselves against such attacks.(6) In his novel *Cocaine Nights* J.G. Ballard describes the formation of such a community in a vacation area in southern Spain. The motive for this is not political, but economic: because the community is lifeless, consumer and leisure zones are not sufficiently used. It is not until the management fabricates traces of vandalism, drug dealing, and prostitution that the remains of middle-class community are brought back to life – communication begins, activities are planned – at first merely for their own protection and then in order to maintain contact. The community becomes more attractive, new buyers show interest...(7) In a wider spatial context vandalism can contribute to the formation of an “imagined community,” an abstract community of individuals who do not know each other personally, and who don’t (only) see themselves as direct victims of attacks, but who must pay for repairs through taxes and insurance premiums.

Vandalism in “homeopathic” doses can also be a desirable aspect of city marketing: on the one hand as a design factor for public spaces in municipalities which have to be offered as eerie zones next to clean office parks, consumer districts and residential areas (seedy areas for the occasional breaking of rules, for relaxing and letting off steam: “fuse areas” as they are known in city management jargon).(8) Graffiti is example of one of the essential symbols of a big-city lifestyle.(9) Vandalism in large doses, on the other hand, can lead to panic and migration: in the United States – and to an increasing degree in Europe as well – a philosophy of security has caught on which has order as its central element instead of social policies. It is assumed that elements of “disorder” are symbols of decline within a community which make “respectable” residents uncertain to a point where they withdraw from public view or even move out of the neighborhood, successively leaving the streets to the “others,” the poor, the “criminals.” When this phobia – as in the United States – is shared by a majority of the population then entire neighborhoods are genuinely threatened by social change and every element of disorder, however small, becomes another part of this overall decline. The middle class flies to guarded enclaves in the suburbs which promise harmony, security, and secure investments, while the poor, unemployed, and homeless are left behind in inner city ghettos.

Urban vandalism does not, however, occur exclusively as an initiative of those who are dominated or marginalized – as a tactic used by the suppressed as a symbolic appropriation of space. Now and then vandalism is also initiated, or at least permitted, by dominant elements within society. As a strategy to produce fear, and as a calculated measure to create insecurity, vandalism serves to wear down and drive away stubborn residents and tenants in order to empty out buildings or entire neighborhoods, to force frightened residents into new and supposedly safe housing, to reduce property values, and finally to launch new, more profitable projects on unoccupied, inexpensive territory.(10) These strategies can

be supported by the media, for example when particular blocks are deliberately maligned as “gang areas.”

Anti-Vandal

In Europe, though, as opposed to the United States – despite current trends – the notion still exists that the best way to further develop cities is by continuously increasing density. It is therefore important to stop the process of decay and at times find other uses for empty, but nonetheless intact buildings in order to economically recycle them.

The firm ORBIS has specialized in the protection of precisely this kind of “temporarily empty real estate”:

“It’s more and more common that real estate remains empty for a certain amount of time. A lack of capital, an unsolved question of ownership, or long-term renovation prevent a building or apartment from actually being used. During this period of temporary emptiness the properties are often not protected or improperly so, and thus victims of criminals or negligence. Serious cases of vandalism are often the result, burglary/theft, illegal und unauthorized use, arson as well as accidents to children and youths looking for adventure.”(11)

The solution to the problem, according to ORBIS, is represented by their patented, rentable Sitex Security System, which does not detract from the “professional appearance of a residential and office environment. In addition, walls, doors and windows are not damaged, and your real estate retains its value.”(12)

Every opening in a building’s walls is closed up with brown steel plating, which is perforated, thus ensuring sufficient ventilation throughout the building. Telescopic poles are placed inside the building and braced from wall to wall or floor to ceiling near windows and doors. These are then connected to the steel plating with threaded rods or tied beams in order to press the steel plating to the outside of door and window frames without having to fasten them directly to any parts of the building.

In addition, ORBIS offers mobile self-powered alarm systems and video cameras on a rental basis, a control room manned twenty-four hours a day, and, together with Generali Lloyd, insurance for empty buildings fitted with the Sitex system.

Just as parts of empty buildings which have been torn down can “survive” in the context of art as works of art and valued artifacts, as for example Gordon Matta-Clark’s and Kyong Park’s (13) have, it is also possible to “market” security and exclusion systems from Sitex in other critical systems of discourse. At the exhibition *Gewalt ist der Rand aller Dinge* in January 2002 at the Generali Foundation in Vienna, the Berlin group *Freies Fach* used Sitex construction elements in order to divide the exhibition space into a “stage” and a “backstage.”(14) Especially interesting in this situation is that Generali Insurance, as the art institute’s sponsor, took a critical position concerning this type of security technology in a cultural sense, while at the same time cooperating with Sitex in an economic context.

Vandalism and Economics

In *Notes about Productive Force* Karl Marx long ago emphasized that capitalist society was developed to a point where those individuals or groups which fought against it, which don't want to submit to it or that could no longer be integrated into it, even contributed to a greater differentiation of productivity through their oppositional behavior: like the foundation of a drug treatment unit within municipal property management, the development of the Sitex Security System is an excellent indication of vandalism's productive force – not only with regard to differentiation within the security market, but also to its exploitation through appropriation by the art world.

The creation of insecurity within the community through acts of vandalism, above all the resulting threat of a drop in real estate values, is without doubt one of the driving forces in the development of security systems. Vandalism as a herald of moral decay or threatening attacks by those “outside the law” has definitely contributed to suburbanization, to the flight of the middle class from urban areas, to a fortification and militarization of private and public space.

Candy Man

The horror film *Candy Man*(15) takes place in such a derelict urban area characterized by predominantly black residents who are mostly unemployed and nearly empty modernist residential blocks.

The heroin of the film, Helen Lyle - a young scientist working on her dissertation in urban sociology at the University of Chicago, attempts to find out about the popular myth of the “candy man”: the spirit of a black man who was tortured to death attempts to get its revenge on society by giving children candies laced with pieces of razor blades. This spirit supposedly lives in a labyrinth of rooms which, not visible from outside, spreads out like a beehive in a sixteen-story tower block at Cabrini Green, a crowded residential development with a nasty reputation in South Central Chicago. Helen believes The Candy Man is just a projection of the resident's fear and frustration as they have little chance finding a job, earn money dealing drugs, and develop self-esteem through gang warfare.

Helen is not content with interviewing residents within the safe confines of her university though; she physically forces her way into the spirit's realm by climbing into the empty apartment through an opening hidden behind a bathroom mirror in the neighboring apartment, which is also empty. She penetrates his lair through a wide-open mouth spray-painted on the wall. Right next to this opening she finds the candies containing pieces of razor blade that give the myth its name. From this point she then enters a series of rooms and connections bored through innumerable apartments. The further in she goes, the more brutal the destruction to the building becomes: The walls have large holes in them, the flooring is torn up.

She comes across the spirit at the center of this labyrinth, who then takes control of her body in order to take his campaign of revenge against society beyond the ghetto – all the way to the university. With

her help he kills not only her friends but her teachers as well, who are professors at the Chicago School of Sociology, the elite institute for urban sociology.

In the end Helen sacrifices her body in a fire in order to put an end to the killing – and afterward returns to the residential development as her own myth.

Dichotomies of the Urban View

Candy Man is also a didactic look at contemporary urban perception: during the introduction the camera shows a distant, analytical view of the city's streets from the perspective of a police helicopter. As Helen gets closer to the residential area in her car the camera drops down to half its previous height, opening up the social space while maintaining an overview. As soon as the heroin enters the development, though, the camera position drops to the ground – in an eerie, uncontrollable space filled with myths.

Helen is neither a policewoman nor an urban planner. She has no ambition at all to reform the city or reduce it to a “concept.” “She wants to understand the mythical textures by entering their legends and fears. She has to make herself vulnerable, expose herself to horror's power, and while doing this,” writes James Donald, “she is seduced from their irresistible powers.”(16)

This film's message appears to refer to Michel de Certeau's thesis of a dual view of the city:(17) if we really deal with the everyday problems of the residents, get involved with local myths, then we run the danger of losing the analytical distance which makes visionary planning (and thinking) possible.

When we – as a way of self-protection – defend this perspective of analytical distance, when we for the most part dismiss the disturbing experiences and needs of those individuals who live in these developments, then it is much easier to think up new planning concepts. Then it is possible to compare Sitex's building fortification techniques with Gordon Matta-Clark's projects. Then it is possible to present projects of the *Freien Fach*, who put elements for sealing up buildings in art exhibitions instead of those which open them up, as artistic “inversions” of those of Gordon Matta-Clark's. And then it is even possible to view the results of the demolition or burning down of empty buildings as choreographed restructuring – all of them impressive aesthetic sensations which the added value of eeriness is attached to...

Translated from the German by David Skogley

Notes

1 Cp. Pamela M. Lee, *Object to Be Destroyed. The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark* (New York 1999).

2 The single family house used in *Splitting* (1974) was, for example, bought by gallery owners Holly and Horace Solomon solely for the purpose of deconstruction by the artist. cp. Ibid.

3 Tim Vance is the director of the Department of Housing, Preservation and Development's (HUD) drugs division in New York City, which was founded in 1988 with 20 officers. Tim Vance, *How to Get Drug Enterprise out of Housing* (a Citizens Housing and Planning Council advisory brochure) (New York, 1996). Cp. Eugenia Bone, *Honeycomb Architecture* (Cambridge, 1996).

4 Karl Marx, Theorien über den Mehrwert. Erster Teil. *Karl Marx und Friedrich Engels, Werke*, 26.1, (Berlin, 1985),

www.gutenberg2000.de/marx/abschwei.htm.

5 For detailed views of the productive force of crime see: Michael Zinganel, *Real Crime. Architektur, Stadt und Verbrechen*, (Wien, 2003).

6 Letzten Endes stellt auch eine Bürgerwehr eine Form von Gemeinwesen dar, auch wenn man politisch andere Vorstellungen von Gemeinwesen haben mag.

Ultimately, a vigilance committee is also a community organization, even if politically one would like to have different ideas of what a community is.

7 J. G. Ballard, *Cocaine Nights*, (London, 1996).

8 Cp. Taner Oc und Steven Tiedell, Urban Design Approaches to Safer City Centers. The Fortress, the Panoptic, the Regulatory and the Animated, John Gold und George Revill, *Landscapes of Defence* (London, 2000), p. 198.

9 In many cities “graffiti artists” are invited to decorate surfaces placed at their disposal by municipal authorities, while others are pursued and punished by the legal system.

10 As Mike Davis (in Los Angeles) and Neil Smith (in New York) have explained. Cp. Mike Davis, *City of Quartz. Ausgrabungen der Zukunft in Los Angeles* (Berlin, 1994), und Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier, Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (London und New York, 1996).

11 Anti-Vandal: Mietbare Eigentumssicherung (Interview with the general manager of ORBIS Deutschland GmbH), *An Architektur* (2, 2002).

12 *Ibid.*

13 See also *House 24620* in this catalog.

14 *Die Gewalt ist der Rand aller Dinge. Subjektverhältnisse, politische Militanz und künstlerische Vorgehensweisen*, ed. by Alice Creischer and Andreas Siekmann, exhibition catalog, Generali Foundation, (Vienna, 2002).

15 *Candy Man*, directed by Bernhard Rose (USA, 1992).

16 James Donald, *Imagining the Modern City* (London, 1999), p. 70.

17 Cp. Michel de Certeau, *Die Kunst des Handelns* (Berlin, 1988), p. 179.