

## Article

# The Edge of Perception: Gordon Matta-Clark's Hermeneutic of Place and the Possibilities of Absence for the Theological Imagination

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**Abstract:** This article places the conceptual artist Gordon Matta-Clark in conversation with hermeneutical debates within the field of theological aesthetics. By exploring the transformative effect Matta-Clark's *Splitting* evokes on spatially related categories, I argue that place is a locus of meaning, and that absence is a constitutive feature of that meaning. The hermeneutics at play in Matta-Clark have a set of formal features which is in accord with certain positions within theological aesthetics, namely: the particularities of place over the generalities of space, the constitutive role of both absence and presence for perception, and the formative power of these on human identity. A final section argues that while meaning is embedded in place, the imagination retains a vital place in the hermeneutical process through its "imaging" function in events of perception.

**Keywords:** Gordon Matta-Clark; theological aesthetics; theology and the arts; conceptual art; hermeneutics; perception; imagination; place



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## 1. Introduction

The impact of Gordon Matta-Clark cannot be understated. The work he produced in the span of only a decade—from 1968 to 1978—managed to cement a legacy in the hallowed halls of conceptual art of the 20th century. He is considered a foundational influence of the art world in downtown New York during the 1970s (Richard 2019, p. 4). He has also become a "cult figure . . . for architects," acting as a "mirror" by revealing the "limitations of [architectural] possibilities." (Ursprung 2012, vol. 28, p. 30) His legacy is further evidenced by a growing number of publications that are increasing in volume in recent years.<sup>1</sup> These follow a timeline dotted with retrospective exhibitions on his work, which include: Chicago (1986), Marseilles (1993), San Diego (2006), New York (2007). And his legacy was concretized by the establishment of an archive of his work, writings, and interviews in 2001.

At least part of this influence can be attributed to the fact that Matta-Clark's work embodies a certain emphasis on the specific features of place. There is a "literal inscription between art and the particularities of its site" which are unique to Matta-Clark even among his contemporaries pursuing similar ideas (Lee 2000, p. 88). This is explicitly evident through the rough quality of his work. He makes no attempts to hide the scars of demolition. In either the physical house or the organized gallery space, his work shows the architectural particularities of place in all their raw honesty. It forces the audience to look beyond the finished surfaces of the built world, and contemplate the various assumptions of their own spatial imaginations.

The argument put forth here is that a set of formal features of Matta-Clark's work have significant similarities to understandings of space, place, presence, and perception within theological aesthetics. Specifically, his work confirms the rather controversial claim in this field that place is a locus of meaning. What I mean is that the places we inhabit influence the way we understand ourselves and the world, and, in so doing, they give shape to our overall conceptions of space as well as to the possibilities of perception. What Matta-Clark exposes through his artistic cuts is the power of individual places to invoke a form of critical



self-reflection on tacit assumptions which accompany understandings of spatial categories. Given that a central question in theological aesthetics is how divine presence relates to these categories, the discourse is saturated with insights into how spatial conceptions and their corresponding perceptions which can shed light on the epistemological impact of Matta-Clark's cutting projects (Viladesau 1999, vol. 23, p. 51f). In a dialogical form, the conceptual art of Matta-Clark and the developments of a theological imagination aid one another in articulating how space can be transformed in such a way that is opened to new possibilities. From the former, a real-world, working model is provided; from the latter, a framework within which to understand this transformation.

As a preliminary note, a key claim employed throughout this essay is that "revelation" should not be relegated solely to a theological context. Doing so assumes that knowledge and understanding of the world can be obtained through rational reflection on its supposedly "objective" nature. In such a view, the things of the world are simply "there" for epistemic mastery, while God alone has the prerogative of controlling his mode of presence. Yet, as 20th century transformations in philosophy and theology have persuasively argued, the world itself is far more mysterious and lively to fit neatly within such an objectifying schema. Matta-Clark's work makes a powerful case in support of these developments.

In lieu of the framework inherited from modern epistemology, "revelation," in the words of Christoph Schwöbel, "is the foundation for all our engagement with the world in its cognitive, volutative and affective dimensions." (Schwöbel 2020) This means that the world, far from being a static landscape of inert objects, possesses a certain form of agency in our attempts for knowledge and understanding. Things of the world appear to us. They reveal themselves. This claim may not seem obvious if the appearance of things is taken to mean merely their material presence within the field of human perception, or what Heidegger called their "presence-at-hand." (Heidegger 2010, §16, pp. 72–5) But, if human inquiry is directed beyond the dimension of appearance to that of being—if it is directed towards questions of the *meaning* of things—it quickly becomes obvious that things are far more significant than their appearances may deceptively indicate. This deeper level of meaning is precisely what requires a revelatory event for the sake of human understanding. Things become present through an assertion of their meaning.

Beginning with the claim that understanding is restricted to the possibilities established through revelatory events has significant implications for the spatially related categories to be discussed here. I argue below that the work of Matta-Clark, particularly the work entitled *Splitting*, is aimed at disrupting our typical conceptions of space and the closely related categories of perception and presence. As such, his brand of conceptual art is itself a type of revelatory event. Yet, when interpreted from a theological perspective, his radical challenging of our "normal" conceptions of space (derived from objective schemas) also has dramatic implications for our conceptions of God and his relationship to the world. Matta-Clark's work helps to support a set of hermeneutical features already at work in theological aesthetics discourses: namely, that (divine) revelation is an event that occurs at particular places; and that theology must work from these particularities towards general accounts of the world and God's relationship to it.<sup>2</sup> Even more, an important aspect of these features that is often overlooked is a specific constitutive role of absence in shaping the possibility and meaning of presence.<sup>3</sup> This will be of specific concern in what follows. But the exchange is a two-way street. Insights from theological aesthetics offer Matta-Clark's pursuit an epistemological framework through which the disruption of space can be understood. These primarily include an emphasis on the imagination and its role in theological conception.



## 2. Absence and the Hermeneutics of Space

*Splitting* is one of several projects in which Matta-Clark experimented with how the categorical network of space, place, presence, and perception can be disrupted and re-shaped through an emphasis on absence. These experiments typically included dissecting various abandoned buildings to produce novel places that challenge our spatial assumptions. Matta-Clark explains that he is exploring the “the ambiguity of place verses object” through his cuts by “working with absence.” In these projects, cuts are made in such a manner that “the whole [building] works to receive an intrusion.”<sup>4</sup> “Whole” here denotes not only both the material presences and absences as aspects of perception, but also the tacitly held assumptions of space and place. It is precisely this “intrusion” that Matta-Clark understands to invoke a transformative experience on tacit presuppositions of space.

*Splitting* takes place in 1974 in the neglected neighborhood of Englewood, New Jersey (Wigley 2018, p. 169). The project involved physically cutting a derelict house into two halves by making a one-inch-wide incision through its material elements. The result is a glowing absence of materiality which conceptually de-stabilizes the perceptible form of the house. As light bursts forth from the void, questions concerning the nature of that domestic space begin to surface. The foundation under the rear of the house was then cut at a five-degree angle, tilting that half of the building backward, exposing the one-inch void in the middle of the house to a widening gradient as the eye works upward from the ground. The effect of the initial cut is compounded by this second cut. The “bluntly rectilinear gestalt” is “fractured,” presenting a sculpture where a building of “monumental blankness” once sat (Lee 2000).

A “single line” thus stands at the core of *Splitting*. Matta-Clark explains that, throughout his cutting projects, he is “directing ... attention to the central void, to the gap.” (Wall 2006, p. 58) The absence between the material presence is what is in focus here. Laurie Anderson articulates how this occurs in *Splitting*:

The thing about this house in New Jersey, though, was that it wasn’t a house but a cut, single line. The two halves were elaborate, non-functional buttresses—their purpose to reveal a line that changed everything, the way Cezanne made a single ground line count, ... and sent his house reeling out of the realm of architectural possibilities.<sup>5</sup>

The physical form of *Splitting* is nevertheless an important aspect of its place. Matta-Clark took great care in his cuts to maintain the structural stability of the existing buildings, even going to the extent of developing detailed architectural drawings preceding the actual performance of cutting (Wigley 2018, p. 44). Physical de-stabilization was not the artist’s intent. The integrity of the structure is necessary because the negative space cannot be read in itself but requires material boundaries for its presence. As he explains, “you read through the negative space to the edges of the building ... the edge is what I work through, try to preserve, spend this energy to complete.” (Kirshner 2006, p. 324) The hermeneutical impact of his work thus takes place at the “edge” of the dialectical relationship between presence and absence.

Absence as a formative feature of perception has implications for space which parallel the emphasis on the particularity of places. Put simply, they imply that presence always possesses a limit. While the most perceptible form of this claim occurs in the cut Matta-Clark makes at the center of the house, it is equally true of the entire material boundary of the house as it is positioned on the site, and even of the formal feature of “place” as a spatial concept. In fact, the distinction between place and space is based on this feature. Places are concrete in that they are unique to some context. They are limited in their very nature. What Matta-Clark is showing, however, is that this limitation is not a necessary evil. The limitation of places to a particular set of features actually constitutes the meaning of that place. What this implies is that the hermeneutical topography of space is formed just as much by the absence of particular places as their presence. As we navigate through the world, we desire to move toward meaningful places because we are aware of their absence in general. And when we are in these meaningful places, we are equally aware of their absence in the generalities of places outside of them.



The absence of places does not lend itself to a semiotic structure, as in the meaningful presence of certain places refers to what is otherwise absent. Absence, rather, is itself present. It is a feature of the presentness of place. The positive content of absence is easily overlooked because of an incessant focus on physical or tangible presence. In fact, part of the force of Matta-Clark's work is that his cuts force us to reflect on absence, on the "pregnant void" in the midst of a physical structure (Béar 2006, p. 172). Absence grows in perceptible importance as Matta-Clark saws through the architectural fabric constraining the places of his art. It is the act of cutting itself that directs attention to the void. For *Splitting*, this aspect becomes overtly evident in the documentation of the project, as the process of cutting continues beyond the confines of the Englewood house.

Matta-Clark meticulously captures the entire process of cutting through photographs and videography (Moore 1974, p. 81). For the former, he produced a book to be sold at the gallery exhibition. In the photographic book, the power of the "single line" is intensified by the disorientating composition of common architectural spaces (Wigley 2018, p. 177). The architectural elements within the photographs—rooms, doors, stairs, windows—were all oriented according to the continuity of the line. The "intrusion" is compounded by the presentation of documentary materials. In viewing these photographs, the mind searches for something stable, to ground the reflection process. It struggles to find stability in the architectural elements because of their presentation. The line, which at once may have been the most unstable element, becomes the point of stability in the aesthetic experience.

This same feature is present within the videographic documentation of *Splitting*. Shots were taken from inside the house as Matta-Clark cut through its shell from the outside. As the cut progressed, the intensity of light pouring into the darkness of the structure intensified, until all the entire frame was overtaken by its brightness. Following one such scene, a frame of text reads: "The abandoned home was filled by a sliver of sunlight that passed the day throughout the rooms." (Public Delivery 1974) As the cut widens through tilting the rear of the house, similar camera angles trace the "intrusion" from the floor to the now exposed sky above, highlighting the gap between the architectural features and fabric. It is thus not only the cut which continues beyond the house in *Splitting*, but the transformative effect of the edge between presence and absence (Lee 2000, pp. 219–20).

Absence, as the visible object of *Splitting*, is further amplified in Matta-Clark's organization of the exhibition space. Corners from the upper portions of the Englewood house were removed and placed in the gallery in their original spatial relation to one another. The result is the presence of a massive void where the original house would have stood. Modified photographs of the cut are placed on the wall directly in front of these physical artifacts of the house, documenting the left-over voids from these architectural sculptures. This combination of sculptures and photographs reinforces the palpability of absence. It transforms the place defined by the room of the exhibition by exposing the dimension of space to conceptual reflection. The "sculptural" sense of the exhibit is, in Matta-Clark's words, "a vigorous transformation process that starts to redefine the given." (Béar 2006, p. 172).

There is a sense in which the formal exhibit employs a semiotic function. The fragments placed in the gallery, as Pamela Lee explains, "[lays] claim to the site in its absence." (Lee 2000, p. 58) They "establish a dialogue" with their original architectural place.<sup>6</sup> In Matta-Clark's words, "the installation materials end up making a confusing reference to what was not there."<sup>7</sup> This semiotic function is actually a key feature of the category of space discussed below. It is important to notice here, however, that the absence contained in the gallery space has this referential quality only if the actual place of the gallery is to some extent ignored. The absence of the house in the area between the corners is tangible when the observer is attempting to read what is immediately present in terms of the more common places they experience. They are imagining a house where only an absence lay before them. But, if the exhibition is given its own concrete status of a place, this semiotic function loses its usefulness. In *that* place, the empty area between Matta-Clark's fragments forms the meaning of the gallery room. Perhaps this meaning is not entirely positive, as



in it invokes a sense of longing for the place from which it derived. This could be why Matta-Clark explains that “for me, what was outside the display became more and more the essential experience.” (Wall 2006, p. 59) Yet, the point still stands. The exhibition becomes its own place through both its physical and absent features. And, importantly, in emphasizing the absence of the house which once tied these four corners together, assumptions of space are subjected to critique.

The critical impact of *Splitting* on our spatial categories means that the project cannot be reduced to any one of these cuts. As a work of conceptual art, “the art object is . . . ‘dematerialized’” in that it moves from within the physical aspects of art into the minds of the participants through the physical aspects (Goldie and Schellekens 2007, p. xii). The “art” goes before the physical aspects, in that idea is the “machine which makes the art.” (LeWitt 1967, p. 12) *Splitting* is thus substantially the idea behind the very event of cutting, or, as I will argue below, the “imaging” feature of the imagination, which is expressed through the multiplicity of cuts. It is, as Mark Wigley describes it, an “elaborate extended intermedia performance of overlapping, intersecting, and interacting cuts” which transforms ideas of space (Wigley 2018, p. 169). While the “single line” may be the visible expression of the presence-absence dialectic in Matta-Clark, and the act of cutting the performative aspect, our ideas of “space” are the ultimate “object” of *Splitting* (Walker 2009, p. 56). Matta-Clark wanted to create an “opening up” of a view “to the invisible” by creating new possibilities for perception, which means a reorganization of our spatial topography.<sup>8</sup> Whatever other interpretive meanings that may be read into the “pregnant void” of the work—social, gender, political, economic—the various cuts of Matta-Clark inescapably expose the perceiver to “normal” ideas of space within the aesthetic experience.<sup>9</sup>

Wigley gives an especially succinct description of this shift in space with the term “forensic revelation.” What he intends to signify is that the transformations in space by Matta-Clark are less about creating a new place by addition of different physical features—or less about building or constructing places by material means—and more about treating existing places as concealing layers of spatial meaning that are lost on our typical modes of perception. In his words, Matta-Clark’s cuts are “a certain spatial exposure—a kind of forensic image of what is there, unseen but all too close.” (Wigley 2018, p. 61; Cf. Richard 2019, p. 76f) They bring to light a “new, vertiginous complexity as something that was already there, just masked by the orthodoxy of traditional divisions of spaces and our unwillingness to challenge that orthodoxy.” (Wall 2006, p. 61) Through Matta-Clark’s forensic revelations, “Space is being released, transformed, and multiplied rather than pinned down.”<sup>10</sup> Or, said differently, “A new world is invented but without the sense that anything has been forced—as if it were simply there all along.”<sup>11</sup> What Matta-Clark discovers is that he can expose this dialectic by emphasizing the latter. “The art of the building cut begins . . . when removal itself is seen to add something.”<sup>12</sup> In Matta-Clark’s own words, this is a process of “completion through renewal” of absence.<sup>13</sup>

What Matta-Clark leaves ambiguous in his work is any precise explanation of how these acts of cutting transform space.<sup>14</sup> This can simply be attributed to the fact that epistemology is not in the purview of the artist. He is interested in the experience itself, and not necessarily the epistemic mechanics at work in such an event.<sup>15</sup> Yet, this is precisely an opening for theological aesthetics, for two reasons. The first is that a key feature of theological aesthetics is discussing the possibility of perceiving God. Given that a claim to revelation is a claim to God’s presence in a particular place, the event of God’s self-presentation becomes a concrete locus for insights into spatially related categories and concepts. The second is that, given the difficulties of perceiving God, the power of Matta-Clark’s work to expose tacitly held assumptions of space and to decouple the possibilities of perception from the modes of presence inherent to the phenomena of the world, provides fertile ground for novel insights into the nature of perception, including the role of the imagination, and therefore the range of its possibilities.



### 3. Space, Perception, and Presence

At least part of the impact of *Splitting* can be attributed to its revelatory power pertaining to a network of intimately related spatial categories. The most directly pertinent of these are space, place, presence, and perception. In some sense, the conceptual nature of Matta-Clark's work can be understood as an impetus for contemplation on these categories, including their relation to one another. As argued below, a significant feature of this relationship is the conceptual ordering of categories, which begins to unveil the significance in claiming that place is a locus of meaning. Care must be taken, however, not to understand this claim as making the more radical assertion that these other categories are not irreducibly interwoven with place, and thereby to some extent vital for engagement with the physical world. The hermeneutical priority of place does not imply that space has no role in the possibilities of perception and presence. In fact, it is quite the opposite. A discussion of the irreducible relationship of space, perception, and presence will help ground this point as we turn to the more controversial claim of this paper below.

Space operates in Matta-Clark as a necessary hermeneutical feature for our embodied activities in the world.<sup>16</sup> This includes our perceptions of entities in the world as well as the values understood to be associated with these perceptions. Space is the intangible dimension of everyday life. It is what we move within as we encounter the meaning of the world. As such, space is never disconnected from the concrete realities of the places we inhabit. It is not a sort of metaphysical concept that describes the available "room" within the universe. It rather speaks to the implicit ordering of places as encountered by a person (See [Moure 2006c](#); [Kirshner 2006](#), pp. 327–33; [Moure 2006d](#); [Moure 2006e](#)). As a hermeneutical feature, it is what conditions perception to focus on certain aspects of the phenomenal realm by conveying value to the act of perceiving. It speaks to the manner in which a person sees the world, conditioning the possibilities for things to become present within the field of perception.

"Presence" speaks to the perceptible encounter between the self and the world. In general terms, something is present in Matta-Clark if it is both available for perception (i.e., present within a certain spatio-temporal range determined by the perceiver); but, also, if it becomes a focal point within the manifold of perceptions (i.e., "stands out" from the phenomena available for perception). As his work reveals, presence is often constrained to the material fabric of the world. Upon entering an empty room, for example, what is first apparent is the material features which give space definition. The walls, floor, and ceiling transform an undefined dimension of space into a definite and particular place. The room becomes present as a whole through our perception of these material elements. Variations in the materiality shape our experience of the place. High ceilings or more openings give the room a more spacious feel. Darker colors and more organic materials give it a sense of elegance. There is an implicit tendency to see materiality as a higher value than the emptiness which lies between the architectural fabric of the room. Per such "normal" operations, space is thereby understood on the basis of the (primarily) material particularities of the places we experience. Consequently, space and place become confused in their conceptual ordering.

According to Monica Manolescu, Matta-Clark was striving to conceptually distinguish between place and space by separating the reliance of the latter from the former ([Manolescu 2018](#), p. 186; Cf., [Wall 2006](#), p. 61). Interpreted as such, the issue for the artist was that space is too quickly defined in terms of the places present in typical acts of perception. We come to take for granted that the world should be spatially ordered in some way simply because we experience it as such. Manolescu continues to argue that "a basic principle of Matta-Clark's spatial vision is that architecture and [place] should be broken open." ([Manolescu 2018](#), p. 189) Matta-Clark's cuts are "a way of imposing presence, on idea, it's a way of disorientation by using a clear and given system" of architectural structures ([Béar 2006](#), p. 172). Yet, the influences of places on space seems to be a sort of natural process of perception. As such, Matta-Clark is not seeking to explore space as an abstract concept, but to disrupt general assumptions of space by "working with a very specific, particular



place.” (Wall 2006, p. 68) In other words, he augments the meaning of a place through his “forensic revelation” of the hermeneutical dimensions embedded within it. The surplus of meaning within the places of his work act as mountaintops in our spatial imaginations, giving us a better view of the entire spatial landscape. Through this “conceptual undoing” of space from generalities of place, perception is freed from the immediacy of the systems of presence typically encountered in the world.<sup>17</sup> This, in turn, allows for new possibilities of presence.

Presence is, however, not relegated solely to the material dimensions of place. As explicitly evident in *Splitting*, a particular insight of Matta-Clark is that absence exerts an equally constitutive force on space, presence, and perception as does the material fabric of the world. His work largely consists of exploiting the power of absence to evoke a shift in the perception and subsequent conceptions of space. He explains that he would “drive around . . . hunting for emptiness” to use for “experiments” concerning “the multiple alternatives to one’s life in a box as well as the popular attitudes about the need for enclosure.” (Moure 2006f) He describes this as “a kind of psychic alteration” (Béar 2006, p. 172) or “an alternative attitude . . . to the attitudes that determine the containerization of usable space.”<sup>18</sup> It involves “Rethinking a building from top to bottom, end to end.”<sup>19</sup> Absence aides in revealing new possibilities for presence through its disruptive impact on our conceptions of space.<sup>20</sup>

The “conceptual undoing” of space and place is not entirely dissolved into the general features of perception. Matta-Clark explains that while his “preoccupations involve creating deep metamorphic incisions into space/place,” he does not desire “to create a totally new supportive field of vision.” He is rather pursuing the more limited aim of “altering the existing units of perception normally employed to discern the wholeness of the thing.”<sup>21</sup> In the project *Splitting*, for example, he says that “nothing more than a modest shift of structure and perception could be hoped for” through his cutting (Moure 2006f). By “punctuating the relations between view and the invisible,” Matta-Clark’s cuts in general reveal “a limited removal’s effect on the larger structural context.” (Moure 2006g).

But, as discussed above, the presence of absence is itself dependent on the materiality of the world. He speaks of the need of a “very direct physical change” in the transformative process, and explains that his “actual method . . . is dealing with the materials of the [place].” (Béar 2006, p. 174) This primarily comes to pass in the form of removing aspects of the architectural fabric, which he describes as “Making the right cut somewhere between support and collapse.”<sup>22</sup> The conceptual shift occurs at the edge of presence and absence. While exposing presuppositions on our spatial categories, the power of absence in Matta-Clark highlights how intertwined these categories are.

The conception of space as a necessary feature of perception and presence is largely in accord with understandings of the category throughout modern aesthetics. Immanuel Kant, in arguably the most important development of space in the tradition, posits that it belongs to a set of a priori features that are actively employed by the subjective mind throughout the process of acquiring knowledge (See Kant 1998, pp. 155f, 72f, A20f, B34f). These innate features of rationality become apparent through the mind’s interactions with intuitions of the sensible world. As the knowing subject gathers data from the senses, the mind is able to turn in on itself and reflect on its own internal processes. This self-reflection exposes a range of necessary conditions for the possibility of perception itself, which Kant argues are innate and active features of subjectivity.

Along with a set of categories which the mind spontaneously employs to make sense out of intuitions, Kant designates space and time as of specific importance in this process. He places these “pure forms of intuition” into one of three divisions of his transcendental system which he labels the “Transcendental Aesthetic.” Here, “aesthetic” functions simply as a synonym for “perception.” What is notable is that space and time are set apart from the innate set of categories precisely in their transcendental relationship with perception. The categories, which Kant places in the division of “Transcendental Analytics,” operate as “pure concepts” which give reason the power to move from mere sense data to scientific



knowledge. But, as Kant would develop in *The Critique of the Power of Judgment*, the aesthetically related processes of the knowing subject, especially the role of the imagination, are the gateway for rational content (Kant 2000, pp. 25–7, 89. vol. 20, pp. 222–5; vol. 5, pp. 203–4).

The special relationship of space and time to perception is supported by Kant in the need to locate the presence of objects within the manifold of intuitions. In his words, “Space is a necessary representation, a priori, which is the ground of all outer intuitions . . . It is therefore to be regarded as the conditions of the possibility of appearance.” (Kant 1998, pp. 158–75, A24, B38–B39) These pure forms of intuition relate to presence in that an object is only perceptible to the knowing subject if it appears before it at a certain place and time. The object of perception—tree, building, artwork, etc.—must be before the perceiver as a sensible reality (i.e., physical entity) in order for it to be received as data from the senses. Yet, a necessary condition for such a perception to occur is the subjective employment of a priori features of the mind which allow the possibility for experience. Space and time here are not, as Kant puts it, “objects of real existence,” but are a sort of conceptual map applied to the empirical world *so that* the human mind can experience objects as they appear to it. Presence influences perception; but space determines presence.

Less important here is Kant’s claim to the subjective nature of space. The point is that space is understood as a necessary condition for perception of the world regardless if it is understood as a feature of human knowledge, as a static sort of container within which objects are placed (as with Newton), or a logical representation of the relationship between objects (as with Leibniz). What is pertinent to the present conversation is that space holds a particular status in terms of the possibility of perception. Space serves as a coordinate system to the entire frame of perception. It is what locates objects as distinct physical entities, and thereby allows the mind to focus on them individually and distinguish them collectively.

As the tradition continues, questions arise concerning the possibilities of various sorts of coordinate systems, which highlight different objects of perception according to some form of hermeneutical principles.<sup>23</sup> Martin Heidegger, for example, argues that space is a feature that humanity inherently possesses as beings-in-the-world (Heidegger 2010, p. 101f). Unlike Kant, humanity’s spatiality is not a category of knowledge, but rather an ontological means through which the physical world is ontically experienced. “Space, which is discovered in circumspect being-in-the-world as the spatiality of a totality of useful things, belongs to beings themselves as their place.”<sup>24</sup> Human beings become aware of space as an ontological dimension as they interact with particular things in the world which are present in particular places.

Space still operates in Heidegger as a form of transcendental feature of perception, but it does so as the “peculiar unity” of individual places which is concealed precisely in our experiences with places. Space is not something employed by the human subject for the possibility of perception to occur, but is rather a constitutive feature of being human that is discovered as a person moves through everyday life. As Heidegger explains, this means that the “place” of a human being is not defined by some overarching map that can be viewed from outside of the human perspective. A person is located “in” space in a manner specific to their interactions with the things they encounter.<sup>25</sup> The distance between a person and a thing is thereby not determined by an objective measurement, but rather by the value the thing holds for the person which is disclosed through human engagement with the world. In this way, space and place are formative for human identity. “To say that mortals *are* is to say that *in dwelling* they persist through [places] by virtue of their stay among things and locations.”<sup>26</sup> “Presence,” then, is a revelatory event in which the person discovers something fundamental to existence itself. This understanding of space subsequently shapes perception because the presence of a thing is neither determined by the conditions of knowledge nor by the geometric position of the object, but rather by the meaning of the relationship between a person and their “world” as it is revealed within the particular event of perception. In a bit of a reversal from Kant’s system, and in closer accord



with Matta-Clark, presence, in Heidegger, determines space, which in turn conditions the way things are perceived.

An important aspect of the rise of hermeneutical presuppositions of space is the shift from a focus on the general conditions for experience (i.e., Kant's argument that space is what makes *any* experience of the objective realm possible) to an emphasis on the particular places in which we have experiences. Even more important for this paper, the shift includes a concern for how particular places, along with their associated objects of perception, influence the hermeneutical aspects of space.<sup>27</sup> This shift is developed within discussions of the aesthetic realm, and often with an emphasis on the formative role of art. Heidegger, of course, famously designated art as an event in which "the truth of beings" establishes itself (Hofstadter 1971b, p. 35). But this theme has multiplied since his groundbreaking work. According to Henri Lefebvre, art influences space precisely because of its ability "to lead out of what is present, out of what is close, out of representations of space, into what is further off, into nature, into symbols, into representational spaces." (Lefebvre 1991, pp. 231–32) Or, in a more theologically influenced discourse, Jennifer Allen Craft claims that "art can 'shape the places that shape us' while also shaping our sense of place and imagination within them." (Craft 2018, p. 21) And, in direct reference to Matta-Clark, Pamela Lee simply states: "The history of art is a litany of places." (Lee 2000, p. 2).

For the present conversation, the similarities of the spatially related categories between Matta-Clark and the discourse of modern aesthetics serves as a conceptual meeting point of these two domains. In that Matta-Clark is aiming to disrupt our understandings of place through a hermeneutical transformation on our categories of space—that is, to be present as a revelatory event—such a transcendental understanding of space can serve to articulate the impact of his work. In other words, the disruptions to our spatiality can be understood as the formal possibility for divine perception. Even more, given that the hermeneutical prioritizing of place over space is a feature embedded into the Christian imagination, theological aesthetics are poised to offer valuable insights for how such a fundamental category is shaped through presence and perception.

#### 4. Theologies of Place

Both the interwoven relationship of space, place, presence, and perception as well as the emphasis on particularity over generality continues into the field of theological aesthetics.<sup>28</sup> David Brown, for example, claims that Heidegger's understanding of presence and space being shaped through value "is actually a theme as old as Christianity itself." Brown explains that Jerusalem functioned in this precise manner throughout the Old Testament, which "was not only placed at the centre of the Christian universe" but was "also brought imaginatively close" through the value it held in God's relationship to the world "that it could shape fully the believer's identity." (Brown 2006, p. 189) According to Brown, in a theological framework, the hermeneutics of space are oriented by "the enchantment that comes from perceiving particular ways of God relating to human beings and the world."<sup>29</sup> That is, some places were understood to possess a sacred status.

Walter Brueggemann argues that the sacrality of these places is a combination of both the physical features of the place as well as its cultural meaning (Brueggemann 2002; Habgood 1995, p. 40). An altar was erected on the east bank of the Red Sea, for example, because the physical reality of the sea posed an impossible barrier in the Israelite's flight from Egypt which could only be removed through God's actions. Or, as one of Brueggemann's primary examples, the "wilderness" land in which God's people wandered received its title as much from the barren and "disordered" landscape as from the metaphorical sense of the Israelites' spiritual state.<sup>30</sup> While it is perhaps best to understand that the physical features of places exist in a horizon of potentiality for a sacred status, it should not be overlooked that the landscapes of these biblical stories have a fitting representation to the theological meaning given to them (Gorringe 2002, p. 40; Cf., Habgood 1995, pp. 24, 38). In other words, places, in their physical features, have some sense of an identity apart from the imaginative productions of humanity.



In accord with this claim, it is important to note that historically God's people never statically resided in a multitude of these sacred places. They were constantly moving despite the cultural significance embedded in the locality of these places. Brueggemann argues that this is because they were ultimately seeking a sense of dwelling and not a single experience with God: "the central problem is not emancipation but *rootage*, not meaning but *belonging*, not separation from community but *location* within it, not isolation from others but *placement*." (Brueggemann 2002, pp. 199–200) This implies that Jerusalem held the highest status of sacrality for Jewish identity because it was the place where God's people *dwelt*. It was the place to which God led his redeemed people and within which God resided with those people, "with all the hope and demands that belong to [their] peculiar historicity."<sup>31</sup>

What all of this discloses is that the activity of dwelling is rooted in a deep, primordial level of being human in the world. Philip Sheldrake explains further that one of "three essential characteristics" of place is that "it engages with our identity." (Sheldrake 2001, p. 9) Or, according to Brueggemann, the combination of the physical landscape which humanity inhabits and the presence of God within this landscape is "a declaration that our humanness cannot be found in escape, detachment," or "undefined freedom." (Brueggemann 2002, p. 4) More generally stated, the places we inhabit are not mere "machines for living," as Le Corbusier describes them.<sup>32</sup> They are, rather, formative aspects of our identity and, in this way, influential for our overall spatial sensibilities. Space is tied to this identity through its hermeneutical topography which is influenced by places. As Craft explains, "Inhabited space, or intimately 'made places,' can be understood to form the actual structure of our memory, identity, and imagination." (Craft 2018, p. 77; Cf., Hummel 1995, p. 91; de Certeau 2000, p. 112) What all of this means is that humans draw meaning from the places they inhabit. There is a hermeneutical dimension embedded within them. This dimension is especially powerful in the homes in which we dwell, "For our house is our corner of the world." (Bachelard 1964, p. 4).

In fact, Matta-Clark seems to be aware of the intimate relationship between place and identity (Cf., Lee 2000, p. 58f). Spatial identity—that is, the meaning certain places hold—is a key criteria for the buildings chosen by the artist for his cuts. He says that "the degree to which my intervention can transform the structure into an act of communication" is thwarted by "a situation where the fabric of the space is too run down for it to be identified as ever having been changed." (Wall 2006, p. 61) The building must maintain the identity it holds in its everyday use, as a "clear, recognizable object" so that the "distortions of that object" can function as a "direct train of thought." (Béar 2006, p. 177). For *Splitting*, the house retains a sense of the possibility of habitation, a sense that it still could be used as a dwelling, in order for the hermeneutical transformation to occur. Matta-Clark is cutting through the natural tendency toward this possibility as he cuts through the living spaces.

Yet also, the cut cannot erase the place's identity completely if it is to exert an impact: "No manipulation made . . . can be stronger than the object's identity." (Moure 2006f, p. 142) This is not a mere guideline for Matta-Clark. The claim is that the specificity of place is so entrenched in our spatial imagination that even through the most total disruption the place retains the hermeneutic attached to it. In his words, "even when flattened and cleared" by a "violent bulldozing," the "scar still reads house."<sup>33</sup> It does so because we live our lives in these sorts of places. We dwell in their particularity. It is buried deep within us and, as such, holds a certain power of us. Matta-Clark is driven by the awareness of this power. As he says, "the more I know a particular place and structure, the more I want to bow to it." (Béar 2006, p. 177). He elsewhere expounds on this idea by describing his cuts as "direct exercises in centering and recentering" the relationship between place and identity. Even more explicit to the relation of space and dwelling, he argues "how one manoeuvres [sic] in the system determines what kind of [place one] works and lives in."<sup>34</sup> He refers to this as the "hermetic aspect" of his work "because it relates to an inner, personal gesture, by which the microcosmic self is related to the whole." (Wall 2006, p. 57) This is the power of place; the command of the particular.



The mystery surrounding the “hermetic aspect” of Matta-Clark’s work, specifically as it pertains to the relationship between place and identity, is precisely what is illuminated through God’s revelation and its hermeneutical inscription on place. Brown argues that this sense of belonging is part of the “embodied character given in creation to human beings by God.” (Brown 2006, p. 158) Or, as put by Gorringer, “To be human is to be placed.” (Gorringer 2002, p. 1) Places and the meaning buried within them is a general feature of human existence in the created world. This is theologically grounded because whenever God becomes present, it is always in a place. Even the most transcendent records of divine presence in Scripture are always rooted in some place and never in terms of a generalized “space.”<sup>35</sup>

The notion of sacred places implies that the general features of space cannot simply be relegated to a geometric analysis. In accord with Heidegger’s notion of space, the meaning attached to a place can easily usurp its geographic location. Revelation reveals that space has a hermeneutical topography, comprised of mountain tops and valleys of meaning. Places are imbedded with a “capacity to develop a symbolic and imaginative reality that is larger than the construction of specific individuals that keeps their power alive.” (Brown 2006, p. 162) As Brueggemann asserts, “Place is indeed a protest against the unpromising pursuit of space.” (Brueggemann 2002, p. 4).

Divine revelation also exposes that the limits which define place are an essential feature of its “placeness.” The aspect of limit in presence discussed above is pertinent. But so is the claim that a revelatory event implies that an entity has moved from some mode of concealment to one of being present. Theologically this means that the absence of God’s presence is a constitutive feature of the meaning of sacred places in themselves. Precisely because God cannot be experienced as equally present in all places is what makes the places where he has become present meaningful. Absence, as Natalie Carnes explains, “names the condition for the possibility” of presence (Carnes 2018, p. 6). This does not mean that God is a deistic entity, whose reality is solely apart from the world. In very much the same vein as Matta-Clark’s “forensic revelation,” the revelatory events of God’s presence imply that divine interruption in the world is always a possibility for perception. The hermeneutical emphasis on particularity allows absence to constitute presence, but not to dominate it.

Yet, absence performs a constitutive role even while God is present and available for perception. This role of absence is best explained according to Trinitarian theology which, in accordance with the biblical witness, speaks to a surplus of divine being within any perception of God’s presence.<sup>36</sup> To take a general example, as God is present in the human Jesus, he is also notably absent. Jesus makes constant references to his Father which at the same time establishes his identity to God as well as articulates the absence of God even as God is walking within the world. He even cries out to the Father in agony on the cross, only to be met with a deafening absence. While an “immanent” dimension of God’s relationship to the world is revealed in the divinity of Jesus, the equally important “transcendent” dimension is established through God’s worldly absence in this revelatory event.

This sort of absence cannot be explained by a theory of images or a semiotic structure. Even though absence performs an important role in these sorts of theories, it does so precisely because the being toward which the image or sign makes reference is not present in the particularities of perception. Again, Carnes explains that, in these views, “the image presents what it is not, and in the presentation of the ‘is not,’ the ‘is’—the literal image—recedes.”<sup>37</sup> The kind of presence-absence dialectic at work here relies on memory to shift from absence to presence, and presence remains merely a sign of an absent being. This sort of logic ultimately leads, as David Tracy articulates, “to an impoverished notion of perception, wherein image is simply a weak or absent or vague substitute for ‘real’ sensation.” (Tracy 1981, p. 128).

When we speak of the revelation in the historic Jesus, however, we are not *just* speaking of a semiotic image of a distant God which mediates divine presence through representation and memory. We are speaking of the very presence of God as one particular person of



a trinitarian being.<sup>38</sup> Jesus *is* God—not a hollowed out human pointing to divinity. The absence of God here does not speak to the lack of his real presence, but rather to the surplus of his being that remains despite the fact that he is actually present in the world. Rather than serving as a sort of precondition for the meaning of presence, absence is understood as a mode of presence itself.

In terms of aesthetics, this meaning of God's presence and absence is much closer to Matta-Clark's "edge" and the "vertiginous complexity" of place exposed by his "forensic revelations" than to the world of icons and images. In every reference to the Father, Jesus directs our attention to the distinction between the particular persons of the Trinity, and thereby resists theological reflection to be content with explorations into God's "divinity" as such. In these references, the mind goes from the Incarnated God to the seemingly Unrepresentable God and back again *in the single act* of perception, just as in *Splitting* the mind goes from the physical material to the void. Absence, in this sense, constitutes an excess of presence. It is as much a perceptible aspect of revelation as presence. It augments presence as typically understood. In this way, it expands the possibilities of perception to include the limits which are unconcealed in aesthetic presences. In other words, the possibility of God's presence is not a priori problematic for perception, but is rather a defining feature of the very act of perception. Rather than clinging to sensible presence, theology has room to explore, imagine, and reflect on an entire realm of absences which are present to perception.

## 5. Theological Imagination

The set of hermeneutical features associated with the claim that place is a locus of meaning—the particularities of place over the generalities of space, the constitutive role of both absence and presence for perception, and the formative power of these on human identity—stand in a somewhat precarious position given their dialectical nature. This is, in part, what gives the claim its controversial nature. A number of voices opt to continue to establish human imaginative capacity as the sole locus of meaning in theological aesthetics.<sup>39</sup> Yet, as Sheldrake critiques, "This is simply to substitute a new anthropocentrism for old." (Sheldrake 2001, p. 15). To be clear, the argument here is not the outright dominion of place and perceptible presence against space and innate features of human thought, but rather the more modest claim that place influences the meaning of presence, and, in the same vein, of perception and space. This argument is hermeneutical in nature and not strictly epistemological.

While the imagination retains a vital role in the meaning of place, it does so by a certain function which accords with this set of hermeneutical features. Judith Wolfe has recently described this as "the power of gestalt formation: of perceiving or envisioning a field of isolated, unstructured, or even disparate phenomena as a form, shape, pattern or whole." (Wolfe 2021; Cf., Green 1989, pp. 65–6; Brown 1989, p. 95f) That is, one feature of the imagination is to offer "images" of perceptible presences for the processes of thought. To take one of the features prevalent in *Splitting*, this means that both the presence and absence within the perception of Matta-Clark's cut is reproduced as a single image in human thought. There is not dialectical movement back and forth. Through the imagination, both the absence and presence are simply "present" to the mind (Cf., Viladesau 1999, p. 100).

This specific capacity of the imagination does not fit neatly into either of the more common categories of "productive" and "reproductive." (See, Green 2020, pp. 96–104; Schulte-Sasse 2016, pp. 7–13) In "imaging" the world in perception, the imagination is simultaneously performing both capacities. As such, the productions of the imagination are never entirely severed from the reproductive material while at the same time not merely conceptually reproducing perceptions. The imagination has a "vital part to play in brokering [the] hypostatic union between material and meaning with the human creature," as Trevor Hart explains, "making of the flesh more than, as flesh alone, it can account for." (Hart 2013, p. 1) This point not only grounds the trustworthiness of the imagination against suspicions arising from reason, but also implies that the productive capacity is in fact



formed through the reproduction of perceptions. As Wolfe further argues, “engagements with art have a role to play in shaping our ordinary interaction with the world by ‘training’ the imagination.” (Wolfe 2021, pp. 115–6).

The relationship of the imagination to perception is key here. A growing consensus within theological aesthetics is the claim that the aesthetic realm is of far greater importance to knowledge than what was once considered. Garrett Green argues that “the relation of image to concept” is not a “dichotomy” as the modern tradition once posited, but rather a “spectrum, extending from the pregnant image, full of implicit or potential application, to the developed concept, in which the underlying analogy has been articulated and delimited.” (Green 1989, p. 70) Viladesau concurs, arguing that reasoning “can take place through symbolic structures other than verbal language.” (Viladesau 1999, p. 88) And Brown claims that “Place and building were thus seen to have the capacity for an impact no less powerful than the word.” (Brown 2006, p. 207).

These claims stand against a desire to separate the function and content of the imagination from the presences of perception. One example of this is to ground imaginative reflection in language rather than perception.<sup>40</sup> Another path is to ground it in a set of innate “intuitions” of being which pre-figures the act of perception.<sup>41</sup> These sorts of attempts ultimately usurp the importance of the particularities of place by appealing to a general feature of human thought. In doing so, they somewhat repeat the modern tendency of defining space prior to interacting with place, and thereby limiting the possibilities of the latter by the presuppositions of the former. As Matta-Clark’s work exemplifies, a variety of axiomatic positions concerning space, place, presence, and perception can be disrupted through an emphasis on the particular places in which we dwell. Even “leftover places” have the power to become “interruptions in . . . daily movements.” (Béar 2006, p. 166).

What is pertinent here is that asserting that place is a locus of meaning does not eradicate the role of the imagination in engaging with that meaning. There is certainly some quality of value attached to perceptible presences through the operations of the mind, and, by extension, developments of cultural imagination. The point is that the productive capacities of the imagination are not as free from the perceptible world as sometimes assumed. A hermeneutical emphasis on place does not establish that the mind is passive, but rather that the activities of the mind take place in *dialogue* with the places we inhabit. “The physical place,” as Sheldrake puts it, “is a partner . . . in the conversation that creates the nature of a place.” (Sheldrake 2001, p. 15) As *Splitting* reveals, the particularities of a place, including both presence and absence, can cause the activities of the mind to stumble, provoking a critical process of self-reflection which is required to gain footing once again in our interactions with the world. In other words, by a disruption through place, the mind becomes aware of the extent to which it holds imaginative “products,” which here have been described as the hermeneutical presuppositions of space and the axiomatic possibilities of presence. It is thereby through the disorienting encounters with place that the productive role of the imagination becomes a point of reflection.

Theologically, then, the power of the imagination in dialogue with place is not tied to making something present that is absent to perception (Cf., Hart 2013, p. 233; Viladesau 1999, p. 100). Even while maintaining the irreducibility of perception, this understanding of the gestalt power of the imagination also continues to allow presence to be defined through something akin to materiality. Yet, as we have seen above through the analysis of *Splitting*, absence is just as perceptible as physical presence. This is precisely what Matta-Clark’s work offers to the understanding of the imagination in theological aesthetics.

The concrete implication of this claim for a theological perception of the world is to allow God to be absent. This means, among other things, not to force God to appear in a somewhat tangible form—such as through an invisible working of his power that becomes visible through physical change (i.e., a causal schema)—but rather to allow God to sustain the prerogative for his more tangible modes of presence. Surely, this is not to say God is not present in the world. It is precisely the opposite: God’s presence includes absence. Or, as the hermeneutical theologian Eberhard Jüngel puts it, the event of God’s self-revelation



“explodes the alternatives of presence and absence.”<sup>42</sup> Ingolf Dalferth in particular has begun to work through the implications of this way of thinking by explaining that the claim to either God’s presence or absence must be determined “*in God’s own divine way*.” And this means, among other things, that “God is not present everywhere in an unqualified sense but *present to every presence*,” or holds a certain relationship to every revelatory event as it occurs in the specific places humans inhabit (Dalferth 2009, pp. 11–3). Yet, as a relationship, God’s presence to the events of perception is distinguished from those events on the basis of his absence. God’s own revelation in Jesus holds a special status, then, because he is both present and absent at the same time and to similar degrees in a way impossible for general revelatory events.

The theological imagination informed by absence thereby focuses on the “edge” of presence, on the relationship between God and place, thereby allowing both modes of presence to inform its sensibilities and avenues of thought. This allows a degree of caution from confusing divine presence with “worldly” presence, but in such a way that the “dialectic of presence and absence does not end in contradiction.” (Carnes 2018, p. 183) Per the discussion of sacred places, God’s particular acts in specific places qualifies the extent to which God is present. And, following Matta-Clark, absence adds to our conceptions of space, rather than subtracting from it.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> These include, among others: Flam (2022); Davila et al. (2020); Richard (2019); Wigley (2018); von Amelunxen et al. (2012); Jenkins (2011); Walker (2009); Sussman (2007a); Moure (2006a); Lee (2000).

<sup>2</sup> While Heidegger’s later work is a key (although not the sole) impetus for a resurgence of the emphasis of place and the constitutive effects of absence, the discussion here is guided by the conversation of these concepts within the field referred to as theology of place, which includes: Brown (2006); Brueggemann (2002); de Certeau (2000); Gorringer (2002); Sheldrake (2001).

<sup>3</sup> A notable exception of this claim is Jennifer Craft, who similarly argues for the importance of absence by an investigation of the work of the Canadian photographer Marlene Creates (Craft 2018, pp. 49–59. Also, pp. 227–28).

<sup>4</sup> These quotes are taken from a flyer announcing *A W-Hole House*. Quoted from: Sussman (2007b, p. 22).

<sup>5</sup> (Anderson 1974, p. 5). This article is photographically reproduced in: Wigley (2018, p. 37).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>7</sup> (Wall 2006, p. 59). As Richards points out, Matta-Clark is somewhat contradictory on whether his works have a semiotic element. At other points, he claims: “It’s all about a direct, immediate activity, and not about making associations with anything outside it.” Richards seems correct in emphasizing the role that functional engagement (in either contrasting mode of goal orientated or spontaneous functionality) with places plays in resolving this contradiction. See Richard (2019, pp. 76–79).

<sup>8</sup> (Matta-Clark n.d.); Referenced in: Sussman (2007b, p. 21).

<sup>9</sup> (Knight 1995; Lavin 1984). Although, it should be noted that Matta-Clark’s understanding of “space” was highly metaphorical, and thus could easily include social, cultural, political, economic, etc. reading. For one example, see a quoted from Matta-Clark on an undated notecard in: Lee (2000, p. 24); Also, see: Wall (2006, p. 57); Moure (2006b); Richard (2019, p. 351ff).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>13</sup> (Salte 2006). In accordance with this point, Matta-Clark expressed in 1976 his desire to begin a new kind of cutting project which was to concentrate on digging beneath the city to expose forgotten elements of its spatial past. He refers to it as an “expedition into the underground” which would be “a search for the forgotten spaces left buried under the city.” It would involve “working back into society from beneath.” He later explains that acquiring the necessary maps and surveys proved to be problematic to get the project started. It appears he found no resolution to these issues by the time of his untimely death in 1978. (Wall 2006, p. 66).

<sup>14</sup> “I’m really into that whole group of people who are trying in an artistic way to create and expand the ‘mythology’ of space. I don’t know what the word ‘space’ means either. I keep using it. But I’m not quite sure what it means.” (Kirshner 2006, p. 335).



A possible exception would be the faculty of memory, which Matta-Clark understands to be a historical source of modern identity. He describes the function of memory as “Trying to encourage the inclusion of some sort of being.” As such, his understanding of memory offers very little insight into the question here. See, *ibid.*, 326–7. Although outside the scope of the argument here, there is a fruitful dialogue to be had between the importance of memory to Matta-Clark and the role memory plays in establishing sacred places within the Christian tradition. For an account of the latter, see, [Sheldrake 2001](#), pp. 1–32.

As a general term, “space” consistently designates the various individual places of everyday life throughout the discourse surrounding Matta-Clark. Houses, buildings, the rooms within, and the sidewalks outside, are all referred to as “spaces.” Yet, in order to remain consistent with the typical employment of this term in aesthetics, I will refer to these individual spaces as “places,” and reserve the term “space” for a transcendental feature of perception. For similar uses of these terms, see: [Tuan \(1977, p. 6\)](#); [Sheldrake \(2001, pp. 6–8\)](#); [Craft \(2018, pp. 9–11\)](#).

Matta-Clark makes a particularly lucid comment on this point in speaking of his artistic influences: “At this point I should mention my feelings about Dada since its influence has been a great source of energy. Its challenge to the rigidity of language both formal and popular, as well as our perception of things, is now a basic part of art. Dada’s devotion to the imaginative disruption of convention is an essential liberation force.” *Ibid.*, p. 63.

*ibid.*, 169.

([Celant 1974](#)); Quoted in ([Wigley 2018](#), p. 139).

“The act of cutting through from one [place] to another produces a certain complexity involving depth perception . . . which comes from taking an otherwise completely normal, conventional, albeit anonymous situation and redefining it, retranslating it into overlapping and multiple readings of conditions past and present.” ([Wall 2006](#), p. 63).

*Ibid.*, p. 68.

([Celant 1974](#)); Quoted in ([Wigley 2018](#), p. 139).

For an account of this historical development, see, [Casey \(1997\)](#). Especially, “Part Four: The Reappearance of Place”, pp. 197–330. *Ibid.*, p. 101.

*Ibid.*, 54f. Cf., [Moure \(2006c, p. 386\)](#): “All measure is an (functional) administrative part a convenient fraction of whatever constant, Functions measure how far is anything away from the home and the kitchen. Measurement will always be a function of some rule and are just not as important as the sense of space. When measurement doesn’t work the need for reality of the a more intimate notion of space begins.”

([Hofstadter 1971a, p. 155](#)). Michel de Certeau develops “walking” as a similar concept. However, where “dwelling” seeks to establish place, walking is an interaction with the spatial environment which moves beyond place. Cf., [de Certeau \(2000, pp. 106–15\)](#).

For example: [Sheldrake \(2001, p. 1f\)](#).

This network of spatial categories also appears in accounts which emphasize a more objective nature to space. Wolfhart Pannenberg, for example, explains that “objective space” is one of a set of features which constitute a “universal” horizon “within which phenomena, whether of perception or of imagination, make their appearance.” ([Pannenberg 1985, p. 383](#)). And, in a development of Pannenberg’s position, Richard Viladesau says space and time are one of three a priori categories which aid in knowledge of the world and God ([Viladesau 1999, p. 81](#)).

*Ibid.*, p. 24.

([Brueggemann 2002, pp. 27–28](#)). David Hunt explains how a similar model emerges with the “followers of Christ” in that “Christian pilgrimage evolved naturally out of its environment.” ([Hunt 1995, p. 61](#)).

*Ibid.*, p. 5.

([Corbusier 1986, p. 107](#)). Cf., [Wall \(2006, p. 58\)](#): “One of my favorite definitions of the difference between architecture and sculpture is whether there is plumbing or not. So, although it is an incomplete definition, it puts the functionalist aspect of past due Machine Age moralists where it belongs—down some well-executed drain.” It is also notable that Matta-Clark’s father, Roberto Matta Echaurren, worked as a draftsman in Le Corbusier’s studio, much of the time spent on the architect’s *Villa Radieuse*, an ideal city plan based on modern efficiency and scientific organization. This experience seems to have prepared Matta to revolt in his own architectural designs by embracing the surrealism of such acquaintances as Salvador Dalí. This historical note is likely compounded with the praise given to Le Corbusier during Matta-Clark’s own training in architecture at Cornell in the 1960’s. See, [Lee \(2000, pp. 6–11, 34–48\)](#).

*Ibid.*

Matta-Clark, undated notecard, quoted from: [Lee \(2000, p. 24\)](#).

Brown comes dangerously close in his argument to simply replacing the concept of an abstracted “space” with that of a generalized “placeness.” What I am trying to keep in view here is that precisely by identifying certain places of a higher notion of meaning, theological reflection on place cannot be generalized. Cf., [Sheldrake \(2001, p. 66\)](#): “. . . the Incarnation anchors human experience of the sacred firmly in the world of particulars.” [Casey \(1997, p. 286\)](#): “[Place] has no steadfast essence.”

Cf., *ibid.*, pp. 13–14; 75–85.

*Ibid.*



- 38 Sheldrake argues further that trinitarian logic has positive benefits for our understanding of particularity, such as that the particular is never isolated from the set of relations in which it becomes present (Sheldrake 2001, p. 68).
- 39 For example, Tracy (1981, p. 128); Kaufmann (1981, pp. 11–12).
- 40 (Tracy 1981, p. 128). This is not to say language has no impact, positive or negative, on perception. For an interesting study on how Matta-Clark's "language" augments his physical work, see, Richard (2019, p. 3f).
- 41 For example, Pfau (2022, pp. 83–89).
- 42 (Jüngel 1983, p. 62). Jüngel is particularly relevant for the present discussion. He not only was a student of both Heidegger and Barth, attending the former's lectures to be published as *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, he was a key voice in the conversation on how theology within the dialectical tradition could incorporate Heidegger's later thought within post-metaphysical reflections of God. In fact, in 1961 Jüngel published an article critiquing Heinrich Ott's attempt at such a project, which culminates in Jüngel's claim that the primary gains to be had from Heidegger were already present in an undeveloped state in Barth's theology (Jüngel 1961).

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