The following essay discusses the phenomenon of socially sanctioned and unsanctioned forms of transgression. It attempts to connect in three sections an underlying conceptual relationship between Carnival, Gordon Matta-Clark’s art-work, and the policies that surrounded the redevelopment of Times Square. Although these three issues are very different from one another on the surface, when they are brought together, they create a picture of how society controls rebellious behavior and also allows for it as long as it is temporary, or takes place away from the city’s center.
Introduction
For centuries and throughout a variety of cultures, there are examples of carnivals, festivities, and rituals where ordinary and everyday behaviors are ignored, altered, or completely reversed. These otherwise transgressive acts are frequently encompassed in an event or at a location where breaking rules and crossing boundaries is sanctioned and expected. Out of the variety of examples, Carnival, also known as Mardi Gras, stands out among the rest as a particularly vital and rich festival. This paper will first explore particular aspects of Carnival and Mardi Gras in its original form in Europe and as it is commonly known in the United States on the Gulf Coast, particularly New Orleans. The intent of this exploration is to show how the events and transgressions associated with Carnival are outlets that serve as “safety valves” for social discontent, and although initially rebellious in appearance, these festivities ultimately uphold society’s structures.

Carnival is not the only outlet through which expressions of frustration materialize in a society. The arts are a particularly rich area in this respect. The second investigation this essay pursues is how the work of Gordon Matta-Clark transgresses against the status quo through the creation of liminal spaces in architecture. This section applies Bataille’s theories to show how architecture acts as a manifestation of society’s rules and structures, and by cutting into them, as Matta-Clark does, he is in fact rebelling against society itself.

The final section of this study investigates how societies create policies that deal with these transgressions and rebellions either by ensuring that they are temporary, or by pushing them into undesirable neighborhoods. Both Carnival and Gordon Matta-Clark’s artwork are temporally bound. Their message of rebellion only briefly takes form and
then vanishes. Carnival, a seasonal activity, provides a short window during which rebellion is accepted, but at the end of the festival, the participants are expected to go back to normal behavior and to “clean up their act.” Matta-Clark’s work is temporal in a different way. The “cuttings” – a series of buildings from which he removed large sections – had short lives before they were torn down to create something more pragmatic and permanent. His films are also temporal, as the media is time-based, and Food, the restaurant/art project, is no longer in existence; when it was, all of the art activities were either fleeting performances or meals that began and ended within a few hours. In all of these circumstances, the moment of rebellious activity faded back into the structure it was in rebellion against, sometimes with the hope of gaining a little ground each time. But there have been other cases where transgressive spaces were more permanent. One particularly clear example is Times Square before it was completely altered through the legislation that enabled Disney’s development. The neighborhood that was once populated with brothels and adult stores was cleaned up when the city passed laws that pushed those businesses out to clear the way for a more “family friendly” Disney to come in and set the tone for Times Square.

Because socially unacceptable behavior had become permanent in a central area of the city, the state took action to displace it. But there are certain areas where rebellion can settle in – the marginal or undesirable places in the city. This phenomenon is clearly demonstrated in places where parts of town that were once used for slaughterhouses are re-developed into places for leisure and the arts, two activities that are directly connected to sexual and social rebellion. Geographically connecting the unseemliness of slaughter with leisure and art sends the clear message that the behaviors associated with free-time
are not central to society’s core values but are dirty and undesirable. Bataille writes on the connection between slaughterhouses and museums in his essay *Musée*. Dennis Hollier, in his introduction to this essay, remarks that, “slaughterhouses and museums remain two distinct institutions, museums have a strange way of following in the footsteps of slaughterhouses…”\(^1\) This observation is remarkable when considering the Chicago art world’s most vital art district, which consistently shows rebellious and controversial work, is in the meatpacking district. These galleries thrive among the butchers, temporarily showing the art until it gains notoriety and is sold to the permanent collection of the museum. Work that once inhabited a dirty, bloody neighborhood is transferred to the clean, pristine vault of the museum. This further elaborates how the dirty and unseemly spaces of human interaction are regarded as temporary in a variety of ways, whether it’s a carnival, a split house, a brothel, or a gallery that is situated in the butcher’s district. The aspects of life that are in contrast to society’s image of itself as a clean and perfect structure will be continually regarded as temporary and will be up-rooted should they begin to settle in.

…the basic carnival nucleus of this culture is by no means a purely artistic form, nor a spectacle and does not generally speaking, belong to the sphere of art. It belongs to the borderline between art and life. Pg. 7

-Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*

**Carnival**

Carnival, also known as Mardi Gras, is a festival that is both rich with history and wrought with symbolism. It provides many examples of hierarchical reversals, indulgent behavior, and a visual culture that supports and creates a liminal setting for the festival.

Carnival provides many insights into how humans account for desires that are unfulfilled in ordinary life, and how people release the frustrations that accompany a life rigidly bound to a constricting structure of society. These festive moments and acts, seemingly frivolous at their best and immoral at their worst, illustrate the complex human struggle between control and chaos, right and wrong, prudence and excess. Behaviors and spaces that are on these thresholds are complex because they are more than just one thing and are on the border of multiple things.

Carnival’s inception sometime around the fourteenth century in Europe was prompted by the Christian holiday Lent, during which time eating meat was forbidden, as were other pleasures of the flesh. Carnival (derived from the word carne, which means meat, and vale which means farewell) was celebrated in the time leading up to Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent. Because this festival of excess was created in a direct response to a holiday of repression, it elaborates how festivals are created in order to compensate for some apparently lacking element in society and to relieve the subsequent tensions created by these absences.

In order to create a space in which one was able to escape the frustrations of the everyday, Carnival had to provide an environment that was markedly different from ordinary life. Its rules were rules of inversion. Typically, lewd and absurd behaviors were the standard forms of engagement.

Carnival was opposed not only to lent but also to everyday, not only to forty days, which began on Ash Wednesday, but to the rest of the year. Carnival was an enactment of ‘the world turned upside down’ a favourite theme in the popular culture of early modern Europe… There was a physical reversal: people standing on their heads, cities in the sky…or that favorite item of carnival procession, a horse going backwards with its rider facing the devil. There was reversal of the relation between man and beast…the ox turned

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butcher, cutting up a man… Also represented was the reversal of the relations between man and man… The son is shown beating his father, the pupil beating his teacher, servants giving orders to their masters… the king going on foot while the peasant rides, the husbands holding the baby and spinning while his wife smokes and holds a gun.3

The hierarchical inversions that air real frustrations were accepted because they were played out in an unreality, a world separated from normal life. Carnival succeeds in creating this false space through heavily visual means. To believe that a man is a woman, that a peasant is a queen, or that a King is a pauper, one must look the part. To complete these inversions they must actually appear to be true. In this way Carnival “belongs to the borderline between art and life”; everyday people adopt visual symbols that have transformative qualities in their appearance, but not their function. Wearing costumes and drinking in excess aided the creation of these liminal environments that were in between reality and fantasy. Creating fantastical environments allowed people to fulfill desires and release their anger, through various kinds of role-playing, with no concern for the consequences of the “real world.”

Although Carnival is set up in contrast to everyday life and as a reprieve from it, it generally functions as something put in place to sustain the structures of hierarchy. It has at least two functions. One is an outlet for frustration with everyday life; the other is to support the very systems that cause these frustrations.

Cognitively, nothing underlines regularity so well as absurdity or paradox. Emotionally, nothing satisfies as much as extravagant or temporarily permitted behavior. Rituals of status reversal accommodate both aspects. By making the low high and the high low, they reaffirm the hierarchical principle. By making the low mimic (often to the point of caricature) the behavior of the high, and by restraining the initiatives of the proud, they

underline the reasonableness of everyday culturally predictable behavior between the various estates of society.  

By allowing rebellion within the particular framework of Carnival, the society accounts for its shortcomings in a way that sustains structure. Therefore, no matter how much Carnival appears to be rebellious and riotous, it truly is an integral part of the structures that sustain peace and order. “On this account, it is appropriate that rituals of status reversal are often located either at fixed points in the annual cycle or in relation to movable feasts that vary within a limited period of time, for structural regularity is here reflected in temporal order.” By giving the Carnival a predictable cycle, one with a clear ending, it helps ensure that the rebellion remains contained. It has been the case, in particularly volatile points in history, that Carnival’s rebellious momentum has caused real riots and political upheavals, but for the most part, Carnival has been a period of release without any permanent consequences.

Although it had its genesis in Europe, Carnival has traveled around the world and flourished in New Orleans, where the festival has achieved world fame. A natural home for the festival, New Orleans is a city that geographically and culturally encompasses the spirit of the holiday, half marsh and half land, half French and half English, the city itself is full of complex relationships that cross many borders.

In many ways, Mardi Gras, as Carnival is known in New Orleans today, has become a highly structured event with its own hierarchies. There are complex systems in

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5 Turner, 176.

6 The longevity of this tradition is now uncertain due to the destruction of New Orleans caused by Hurricane Katrina. It remains to be seen what form Mardi Gras will now take.
which people form social orders. Being the King or Queen of a Mardi Gras parade and ball is much coveted and sought after.

Because of the support that official culture has for more than a century given to the elite and elitizing system of the Carnival societies, there is a schism between the image of the Gulf Coast Mardi Gras and its form. Its image is that of errant, untrammeled gaiety. Its form is that of a show staged by competing private societies, to which access is difficult and whose customs are arcane.7

Once established, even organizations that exist outside of the mainstream structure of society develop hierarchies that can be just as oppressive as the society to which the organization was originally rebelling against. Once a group is formed, structures inevitably follow; while people need a reprieve from oppressive hierarchies, they also depend on a way of engaging with the world that helps them makes sense out of it. As much as people challenge structures, they also embrace and depend on them.

**Gordon Matta-Clark**

Expressions of rebellion against the structures of society are seen in other places besides Carnival and Mardi Gras. One example is the artwork of Gordon Matta-Clark. His work was primarily centered around architecture, or more accurately, anti-architecture. He is most frequently cited for his “cuttings” where he incised buildings, cutting them to pieces. Among these works were *Splitting*, 1974, which was a house that Matta-Clark cut down the center, and *Conical Intersect*, a five story residence about to be torn down to make way for the new Centre Pompidou, into which he cut multiple circles. Some of his other projects include films of the Paris and New York undergrounds where he reveals the hidden and often abandoned substrates of these cities, and finally, a restaurant named *Food* that doubled as a space for collaborative art projects and for food-based performances. Although varied in their medium, these projects all share the same

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7 Kinser, 278.
rebellious spirit of Carnival as well as the temporal qualities of a festival. Just as Carnival comes and goes with the season, each of these projects, particularly the cuttings, were fleeting, lasting only a few weeks, and sometimes only a day or two.

In order to understand these works as rebellious acts against society’s structure, it is important to look at what architecture represents and what role it plays. According to Bataille: “Architecture, is the expression of every society’s very being…[But] only the ideal being of society, the one that issues orders and interdictions with authority, is expressed in architectural compositions in the strict sense of the word.” If Matta-Clark’s work is understood through Bataille’s observation, then it becomes clear that by cutting into these buildings he was cutting into “society’s very being.” Matta-Clark himself thought of this work as an investigation into society’s values: “A cut is very analytical. It’s a probe! The essential probe. The scaffold of sharp-eyed inspectors.” And like Carnival, Matta-Clark’s cuttings created liminal spaces. Instead of using costumes that turn women to men and peasants into kings, he altered spaces to confuse notions of public versus private, stable versus unstable.

To make Splitting, Matta-Clark utilized a house that was out in the suburbs, cutting it down the center and leaning it back on one side. The effect was both violent and peaceful. In an interview, Matta-Clark describes the cuttings in terms of their violence:

The first thing one notices is that violence has been done. Then the violence turns to visual order and hopefully then to a sense of heightened awareness. You see that light enters places it otherwise couldn’t. Angles and depths can be perceived where they should have been hidden. Spaces are available to move through that were previously inaccessible. My hope is that the dynamism of the action can be seen as an alternative vocabulary with which to question the static inert building environment.

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8 Hollier, viii.

9 Steven Jenkins, ed., City Slivers and Fresh Kills: The films of Gordon Matta-Clark (San Francisco: San Francisco Cinematheque, 2004), 7.

10 Jenkins, 39.
Through the cut comes “awareness.” Because the light could enter otherwise dark places, and the blocked off paths were made accessible, the house no longer served the function of a home, but became the breeding ground for a new vocabulary, one capable of questioning the “static inert building environment.” In *Splitting*, violent action gives birth to a process that challenges the environments that represent the prevailing values of society.

Matta-Clark continues to question the values and the spirit of society in his films, *Sous-Sols de Paris [Paris Underground]* and *Substrait [Underground Dailies]*. These films reveal the complexities and hidden structures of the oft forgotten underground of Paris and New York. Similar to Carnival, these films reveal what is underneath the everyday exchanges between people. Where Carnival discloses the frustrations that most people keep hidden by reversing roles and permitting transgressions, these films uncover the unseen spaces that support the infrastructure of society by documenting and exploring what is underneath them. In both cases, the surface is peeled back. Whether it is the mask of social roles or the floor of the city, what emerges is the beautifully complex and intricate relationships and structures that are beneath the visible, everyday world. Questioning and challenging top-down hierarchical roles or geographical spaces provides a rare glimpse at the multipartite structures that give shape to existence.

In another provocative enterprise that challenged accepted notions of structure, Matta-Clark opened the restaurant *Food* in 1971. When it opened in SoHo’s desolate industrial space, *Food* was one of the only places for people to commune. Matta-Clark was one of the pioneers who brought art and new ideas to the otherwise undeveloped neighborhood. *Food* was a working restaurant, providing the community of artists with a
space to connect and make art. At his Sunday Night Guest Chef Dinners, Matta-Clark and his friends created an assortment of dishes including a feast of bones as well as hard-boiled eggs with live brine shrimp inside. Food was a hybrid space that encompassed both practical and artistic sides of life – two worlds that are generally at odds with one another. As Catharine Morris notes, “Food was a spatial and temporal art experiment, operating in Robert Rauschenberg’s by now clichéd space between ‘art and life.’ Food existed where the boundaries between pragmatic human needs and the creation of works of art ceased to exist.” Food addressed the failure of the art world and the pragmatic world to provide environments that satisfy both basic and creative needs. Similar to the way Carnival creates a temporary space where indecent or unacceptable behavior is sanctioned, Food compensated for apparent absences in the lives of artists. They no longer had to compromise art for pragmatism, or vice versa, but could attain both at once.

**Policies**

If Carnival is a “gap” in the fabric of society if it is a celebration of the “gaps and holes” in both the individual and the social body, does one celebrate these holes by filling them in, by plugging them up? – Can the celebration of a gap as gap result in plentitude?... Otherness, in other words, is not simply a matter of pleasure and enjoyment. There is no Carnival without loss, no Luna Park without a slaughterhouse. Pg. xxiii

-Dennis Hollier

Each society develops ways of regulating transgression. Carnival is permitted because it ultimately upholds society’s structures and is temporary. Gordon Matta-Clark’s projects were also temporary and therefore unthreatening to the overall structures of society. The film Conical Intersect presents a perfect illustration of this phenomenon.

In the film the Centre Pompidou is being built the background while the work Conical

Intersect crumbles in the foreground. This film portrays a clear contrast between the permanent and impermanent. The Centre Pompidou rises as a place of established culture and regulations -- what goes on inside its walls does not challenge the systems of society, but reinforces them. As the rebellious Conical Intersect falls, Centre Pompidou grows.

The commercial system of the contemporary art-world in Chicago, Illinois is another prime example of how spaces that are outside of the mainstream are frequently transitory. If one follows the geographical axis of the two artistic end points on the East and West ends of Washington Street, an interesting dichotomy emerges. By Lake Michigan, in the heart of the financial district, sits Millennium Park; less than a block south from there is The Art Institute of Chicago. Both of these locations are very much permanent fixtures in the city. The Park, full of sculptures by world famous artists, is a representation of the city’s wealth and status as an internationally relevant cultural center. The Art Institute serves the same purpose. It is a repository of cultural objects that once collected, in theory, never leave.¹³

Traveling about a mile west on Washington reveals a vibrant gallery district populated with both young and established commercial art dealers, save one non-profit artist residency program, Three-Walls Gallery. Not only is this area a gallery district, but it is also the meatpacking district. Among the crisp and clean galleries are establishments of slaughter. It is not rare to find people loading trucks with sculptures next to those loading trucks with stacks of skinned lambs. This arts district is one of the few in

¹³ There have been recent cases of Museums, including The Art Institute of Chicago, selling items in their collection. The debate over whether this practice is really in the best interest of a museum or adheres to their mission statements continues, but it certainly puts into question the role of these institutions as cultural repositories with so-called permanent collections.
Chicago that is responsible for exhibitions that challenge social norms. The art in these
galleries is frequently political and rebellious. These galleries have roots and are
established, but not at the city’s core.

Dennis Hollier, in his introduction to Against Architecture: The Writings of
George Bataille, titled “Bloody Sundays,” explores the symbolic connection between the
slaughterhouse and the museum:

Slaughterhouses, along with the museum, make up a system in which the ambivalence
defining the sacred nucleus is at work: the slaughterhouses are the negative pole, the
generator of repulsion, the centrifuge (they are placed farther and farther away from the
center of the city). Museums, the pole of attraction, are centripetal. But within the heart
of one the other is hidden. At the heart of beauty lies murder, a sacrifice, a killing (no
beauty without blood). Bataille reminds us that the Louvre is turned into a museum by the
Convention when the function of royalty has been put to an end. The museum is what
Terror invented to replace the king, to replace the irreplaceable. ‘The origin of the
modern museum,’ he comments ‘would thus be linked to the development of the
guillotine.’ 14

If the slaughterhouse is the negative pole to the museum’s positive pole, then this quote
illustrates how the West Loop galleries are connected to the city’s center that is a mile to
the east. It is “within the heart” of the Art Institute, and vice versa. It is therefore not
surprising to learn that the one of the primary functions of the West Loop galleries, which
are side by side with the butcher-shops, is to sell the artwork to the Art Institute and other
collecting individuals and institutions. Although it does not occupy the same space as the
museum, it is part and parcel of it. Just as the “origin of the modern museum…[is] linked
to the development of the guillotine,” the Art Institute is linked to the galleries
surrounded by slaughter. These galleries are holding bins that temporarily keep the work
before it is moved to the permanent collection of the attractive, beautiful, and clean

14 Hollier, xiii.
museums. The art makes a journey from the repulsive neighborhoods to the attractive ones.

This transfer of art from galleries to museums shows that rebellion is connected with society’s core while remaining transitory, on the outskirts of it. Transgression is allowed to exist, but not for too long and not too close to the city’s precious heart. One example of how counter-culture became permanent only to be uprooted and replaced is the reconstruction of Times Square in the late nineties. Through legislation that prohibited the sex shops from doing business and through state subsidies given to Disney, the unseemliness of the neighborhood was replaced with the image of family wholesomeness that Disney represents. This major reordering of a New York neighborhood is a primary example of how the state plays an active role in determining what are legitimate versus illegitimate forms of social pleasure.¹⁵

In many ways, before its redevelopment, Times Square was a kind of permanent Carnival, a landscape of establishments that continually questioned society’s values through the co-mingling of all levels of society. “Historically, Times Square has also been one of the few areas of New York City where ‘social elites shared the streets and institutions of the neighborhood with more ribald elements of New York’s social underworld,’ creating a sense of cultural democracy in an otherwise class-bound urban space.”¹⁶ Times Square achieved permanently what Carnival and Gordon Matta-Clark’s works only achieved fleetingly, a liminal space where cultural hierarchies are challenged and the boundaries between people cease to exist. Unlike Carnival, Times Square did not

¹⁶ Comella, 317.
“underline the reasonableness of everyday culturally predictable behavior between the various estates of society,” but continually undermined it, perhaps what a Matta-Clark cutting would have done if it hadn’t been destroyed. The behaviors common in Times Square wasn’t as much as a problem as was its permanent presence in the city that in turn gave its practices a continual voice.

In order to disenfranchise the counter-culture that thrived in Times Square, the city aggressively courted Disney, a company whose wholesome family values promotes an image that is not only in direct opposition to the sex shops, but is completely complacent to mainstream notions of socially acceptable behavior. Through policies that uproot sexually permissive behaviors, the state controls what people are able to do with their free time. “In pondering the impact of the Disneyfication of Times Square on his own sense of sexual enfranchisement, Delany asks ‘What kind of leaps am I going to have to make now between the acceptable and the unacceptable, between the legal and illegal, to continue having a satisfactory sex life?’” The issues surrounding how the city played an active role in altering the atmosphere in Times Square raises the question of the appropriate relationship of the state to activities that are on the fringe of social norms. Is it appropriate for the city to change laws in order to kick out sex shops and subsidize a corporation that shares its wholesome values? Or should it support all aspects of social interaction and only intervene when the safety and health of its citizens is at issue? The fact that unpopular establishments are rooted out through legislation gives the state the role of the arbiter of values as opposed to the regulator, the creator instead of the protector of how its citizens choose to conduct their lives.

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17 Turner, 176.
18 Comella, 323.
Conclusion

The state, the people inhabiting it, and the culture that governs their behavior have carved out a particular time and a place for transgressive behavior, which is both temporary and on the margins. It may seem that these three sections are loosely tied to one another, because their subject matter is so varied, but what this essay aimed to achieve was to show how rebellion is integrated into a wide range of experiences in society from festivals and leisure, to art, to how people conduct their sex lives. Although it takes on many forms, transgression is ever present in society, as if society could not function without it. The same way that there is no light without darkness, there is no order without disorder.

Victor Turner writes at the end of a chapter in his book *The Ritual Process*:

One final comment: Society (societas) seems to be a process rather than a thing – a dialectical process with successive phases of structure and communitas. There would seem to be – if one can use such a controversial terms – a human “need” to participate in both modalities. Persons starved of one in their functional day-to-day activities seek it in ritual liminality. The structurally inferior aspire to symbolic communitas and undergo penance to achieve it.

He shows how one way of life, whether committed to structure or to communitas, is incomplete and needs to partake in both frameworks in order to feel whole. Society creates spaces and times for people to transgress, because they need to be rebellious as much as they need a structure to rebel against.

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19 Turner defines “communitas” as “a generalized social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of social ties.”
20 Turner, 203.
Bibliography


