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“Some strange mix of public and private”

Vito Acconci’s methodology of connecting the private with the public: Writing on the page - Following the casual passer-by - Inventing the city

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Abstract. *New York-based Vito Acconci (born 1940) is considered a pioneer of the Performance art of the 1960s. His work has evolved from poetry through video and performance art to architecture and design. Vito Acconci’s production can be understood in terms of “some strange mix(ing) of public and private.” Several concerns intersect: the linguistic representation of space; the bodily experiences of space; and the ambiance-related dimensions of public and private space. Acconci considers architecture as an opportunity for action. Acconci’s interest for the built environment and its sensory construction has grown organically from earlier interests of the artist Acconci for the relation of the human body to the public space, and the writer Acconci for the physicality of language and the spatial structure of poetry.*

Keywords: *public – private, public space – private space, language, performance, Vito Acconci*

Introduction

For the architect Vito Acconci, the architecture is concerned with the sensory transformation of the contemporary world, or in his words, with “the strange mix of private space and public space where people can organize their own performance.” He says, the Acconci Studio is interested in designing a space “where a person might coincidentally meet another person: a democratic space that can account for people who want to be alone as well.”¹ Already for the performer Vito Acconci, the sensory quality of the contemporary world is *some strange mix of public and private*: “Public space is the air space between bodies and information and other bodies, public space is a mix of electric current and sexual magnetism”. (Acconci, 1992)

In this paper I would like to discuss some of the passages from poetry to performance art and architecture in the work of Acconci. Vito Acconci has never been committed to a style or an artistic movement and has continually changed genre, material, site and – what is exceptional and striking – conception of art and discipline. The analysis of this gradual passage of one medium to another comes down to answer the question as to how the personal and the social, the individual and the collective, the public space and the private space intermingle or merge. As the French philosopher Jacques Rancière argues in *The Space of Words: From Mallarmé to Broodthaers* and in other texts, the fluidity of the territories of the different disciplines can be traced to the fluidity of the public and private spaces in the political realm.

1. www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=69955501773, (last accessed 12/25/2011): in conversation: Vito Acconci with Delia Bajo and Brainard Carey, May 2004, by Vito Acconci on Friday, March 20, 2009 at 5:25am.

The key concepts of this process relate to the sensory relationships between the space and the body and above all to the ambiance-related relationships between public and private spaces.

New Yorker Vito Acconci is a forerunner of contemporary art as we know it today. Although he has never made work that is easy to exhibit, to collect and to sell, he has never had any lack of attention from galleries around the world. In the second half of the 1960s, Acconci is a poet interested in the spatial quality of the written word. In the first half of the 1970s, he moves to the “real” space of the performance, usually using video, film and audio. During these years, he proposes, according to art critic Kate Linker, “a nearly unbroken succession of projects in which the self is defined in the matrix of its relations to space, to its social order, and to itself, or in which Acconci examines the structure of art production, bracketing the terms ‘artist,’ ‘art object’ and ‘viewer’”. (...) The projects of this period exhibit Acconci’s sharp analytic rigor as well as the theoretical energy common to “70s American art (Linker 1988).” Gradually these city-based interventions in the public space turn into gallery installations in New York City and Europe, and eventually in the 1980s into veritable architectural projects. In 1988, more precisely after his exhibition *‘Public Spaces’* at The Museum of Modern Art in New York, he founds the collaborative enterprise, Acconci Studio.

All these shifts in methods, conceptions and disciplines may seem big steps, but they are developed so apparently seamlessly by Acconci because he has never deviated from his persistent thematic preoccupation with public and private space. One thing, however, can be said from the outset, Acconci has been an artist unafraid of failure. Once he entered the realm of performance, failure becomes an integral part of his methodology and themes. Also these admissions of failure have allowed Acconci to move effortlessly through different styles and to change conceptions radically.

Writing on the page

Acconci starts as a writer. He has always wanted to be a writer. In high school and as an English Major at university, he writes short stories and poems in the school newspaper. Later he attends a *Writer’s Workshop* at the University of Iowa, where he finds a kindred spirit in Samuel Beckett, for whom words are the primary constituent of the art of failure. Characteristic of Beckett’s literature are the absurd perspective and exposing of the human condition, the irony inserting a playful element in the work, despite misery and boredom, and the flashes of illumination and insight lighting up from the flow of words. The same humor, irony and “striptease” of meaning are also to be found in Acconci’s poetry and in his later performances. In 1964, Acconci returns to New York City and looks for opportunities to launch a career as a writer. He seeks contact with the New York School poets and the beat generation poets active in the 1950s and 1960s. During this period, he develops his style which becomes more abstract. He begins using the page as an active field where generic spatio-temporal terms emerge such as here, there, up, farther, longer, now, and then (Rian, 1992).

According to Kate Linker, for Acconci, the page of a poem is just “a neutral ground on which words are dumped, deposited or transferred from another location (Linker, 1988).” What his written words primarily do, is to determine their place in front of the given space. In particular, these words are selected that are capable of entering into a confirmatory, real, exciting, absurd or paradoxical, but always direct dialogue with space, in the same way as minimal art sculptures are meant to do in the white-box modernist galleries of the 1960s. Acconci confirms this with the statement that his intention is “(to) use language to cover a space rather than to uncover a meaning (Linker, 1988).” By the end of the 1960s, Acconci’s poetry is so stripped bare that the words appear as objects on the empty space of the white page, as materialized or reified language.

In the 1960's, the *Less is More* or *Doing More with Less* of the modernist architecture impacts on the visual arts, and on literature. The reductionism of the minimal and conceptual art of Sol LeWitt, Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, Adrian Piper, Dan Graham, Robert Barry, Les Levine, Robert Smithson and others places an exclusive emphasis on the physical presence of the artwork in the space, and in so doing demonstrates a clear distance between the object and the subject. Simplicity and economy of resources become the norm, ambiance the reference, and perception the goal. Acconci applies the same methodology to his poetry. In his last poems, the written words are reduced to mere indications – indices – of the itinerary the author and the reader undertake on the page. This technique leads to an absurdity that reminds us of “Beckett's delicate dramas of the withdrawn consciousness – pared down to essentials, cut off, often represented as physically immobilised (...).”²

From 1967 to 1969, Acconci and the New York School poet Bernadette Mayer set up the mimeographed journal *O to 9*. The magazine is the first in releasing the conceptual work of Dan Graham, Adrian Piper and Sol LeWitt's *Sentences on Conceptual Art*. For the first time and perhaps the only time, the magazine succeeds in uniting experimental poetry and conceptual art in the 1960s. It becomes a paradigm of the appropriation of the written word as the only remaining method for conceptual art in its radical reductionism.

According to the philosopher Jacques Rancière, the written word belongs to everyone. It differs from the spoken word because it does not belong to the person who actually emits it nor to the one who is receiving it, to what can be said or what cannot be said, to the “sayable.” Unlike the spoken word, the written word is a reservoir of words, or as Rancière puts it, a “wandering excess” over which “the logic of the proper” has no hold. It is this release of the written word of the “communal order,” this ability to disrupt the existing network of words, opinions and “places of enunciation” by an inexhaustible and unexpected flood of meanings and contents that transforms the written word into a democratic principle. Consequently, this connection between language and the written word which is essentially a poetic construction, becomes ultimately a political one, through the import of the democratic ambiance concept. “Humans are political animals,” Rancière says, “for two reasons: first, because we have the power to put into circulation more words, ‘useless’ and unnecessary words, words that exceed the function of rigid designation, secondly, because this fundamental ability to proliferate words is unceasingly contested by those who claim to ‘speak correctly’.”³ This mix of the political and the poetical brings to mind a key work of Marcel Broodthaers, *Carte du monde poétique* (1968), where the conceptual artist manages to change from one territory to another by simply replacing a few characters. Similarly to Vito Acconci, Marcel Broodthaers has been a poet before becoming a visual artist.

In 1914, the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé writes the poem *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*. In 1969, the Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers designs his own version of the famous poem. In 2004 at the Musée des Beaux-Arts of Nantes, Jacques Rancière gives a lecture entitled *The Space of Words* on this appropriation of the symbolist poem by the conceptual artist. In *Un coup de dés*, Broodthaers replaces the words by blank rectangles while prudently copying page size, paper, layout and cover of the original poem. Rancière seizes this conversion from written word to image to provide an analysis of the relationship between language and space. He does this by pointing out how the surface of the page serves as an exchange field, as a space where different media change places, where “words make themselves forms and forms make themselves acts (Rancière, 2007).” Rancière argues

2. www.google.be/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CCUQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ica.org.uk%2Fdownload.php%3Fid%3D751&ei=1umct8Swc8PW8gOMiJyZDw&usg=AFQjCNEDSjW52bVS9GqbMk9hwsFoFchwFA (last accessed 29/04/12): Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation, Ro-land*. The magazine of the ICA's visual art programme / issue 4 / november 2009 - January 2010, p. 47

3. <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2007-03-01-arsenjuk-en.html#footNote2> (last accessed 26/04/12): Rancière quoted in: Luka Arsenjuk, *On Jacques Rancière*, 01.03.2007

that poets and visual artists meet where the space of the word flow into the space of the image (Boisclair, 2008). The method used for this transition from one medium to another is tantamount to finding new languages for writing ambiance.

Following the casual passer-by

It does not take long before the space of a page is too small for Acconci's back and forth references to inside and outside, together and apart, opposite to or in the middle of. Acconci calls the page of the poem "a model space, a performance space in miniature or abstract form (Linker, 1988)." He then goes into the real space, but not the one of his office where he writes, but the one outside he writes about. He takes to the street, into the city and exchanges the personal private space of the writer for the social public space of the performer / artist. A number of famous performances is the result, which play out in the streets of New York City, usually not far from his home and work rooms. The space of the gallery is included in the public space as well. On this Acconci says: "We chose the gallery because we saw the gallery (we *wanted* to see the gallery) as an analogue of the street, a representation of the street: our model was the New York gallery, like 420 West Broadway, where – rather than having just one gallery as a destination – you walked from floor to floor, you meandered through five floors. The gallery, like the street, was not a mode you stopped at but a circulation route that you passed through; going to galleries was like window-shopping [...] (Acconci, 2002)."

In *Following Piece* (1969, performed in New York City between October 3 and 25, photographic documentation of an action, b&w), Acconci follows passers-by in the streets of New York City until they enter a private space. In *Claim Excerpts* (1971, 62:11 min, b&w, sound) he entrenches himself in the basement of a gallery in New York City, 93 Grand Street, and threatens verbally and with metal rods each passer-by who tries to enter. In *Seedbed* (1972), he moves crawling under the floor of the Sonnabend Gallery in New York City, following in erotic thoughts and words the visitor who, ignorant of his presence just underneath, is walking around in the empty gallery space. The performance *Seedbed* is, along with *Following Piece*, a key work in Acconci's oeuvre and a landmark in twentieth century modern art, the concepts of *public* and *private* flowing almost seamlessly into one another, both on the physical and the spatial plane. Acconci puts it this way: "*Seedbed* started by taking architecture, something assumed as neutral and apart from person, and filling it with person: I'd be part of the floor, the wall would breathe (Ward, 2002)." The essence of all these bodily practices of representing and expressing ambiance is again on covering space rather than uncovering meaning.

The idea of leaving the space of the page and of going back and forth between private space and public space is elaborated in some of Acconci's first performances where he physically challenges the boundaries between the private and the public. The borders around each of these areas, around the page, around the studio, around the street, and even the framework of the film that documents the performance, are put under pressure. In *Three Frame Studies* (1969-1970, 10:58 min, b&w and color, silent, Super 8 film on video), he performs a number of basic actions such as running in a circle, jumping, pushing someone. The work shows that for the transition from inside to outside, from private to public and from private space to public space, a writing and reading mind is inadequate while an acting body is required. But the boundaries of the body are not left untouched either. Despite the emphasis being firmly and clearly on the public space, the private space keeps a vital place in Acconci's performance art in the appearance of the body, of his own body. In *Trademarks* (1970) for instance, Acconci bites his own body, scorches his chest and abdominal hair with a candle, and tries to change gender by pushing back his genitals.

Despite giving up and leaving behind the discipline of writing, the word, written or spoken, like the body, continues to play an essential role on the edge between private and public,

between subjectivity and objectivity. Language is the basis and precondition for the development of an idea or concept. Language is also the means to transform the listener into a spectator, to engage him in the performance, to seduce and attack him, to subvert and oppose and victimize him. Precisely because of the rapprochement with the other, the word needs to breach the framework of the film or video, just as the body needs to cross the border between one space and the other, between inside and outside, private and public, individuality and collectivity. In a brief statement about *Following Piece*, Acconci explains it simply but unambiguously. "I let my control be taken away – I'm dependent on the other person... My positional value counts here, not my individual characteristics (Ward, 2002)." The subject is of no significance, the ambiance is the condition and the method, and the site is the criterion.

Inventing the city

The remarkable conclusion here arrived at, is that these border crossings from imaginary, i.e. conceptual spaces and relations to real, i.e. physical spaces and relations also mean the passage from one medium to another, from word to image, from language to art. Eventually, they mean the passage from the poetic to the political, in the sense of Rancière's assertion that "art is primarily political in creating a space-time sensorium, in certain modes of being together or apart, of defining being inside or outside, opposite to or in the middle of."⁴

Elsewhere Rancière argues: "A number of artists today set out to create no more artworks. Instead they want to get out of the museum, and provoke modifications of the space of everyday life, giving rise to new forms of relations, (...) to create new forms of social bonds in the 'bad' neighbourhoods."⁵ It is noteworthy that these "bad" neighborhoods play an essential role in the plastic and the architectural work of Acconci as well. A performance, he says, is done "... in the street, any location (...) in a non-place (Ward, 2002)."

The non-lieu, the undifferentiated nowhere or everywhere, the heterotopia without identity, without qualities, the megalopolis, the metapolis of New York City, in other words, the space that questions and ignores the traditional opposition between public and private space and where sensory territories through the unfolding of urban and architectural ambiances might be buildable, is the scene of action of Acconci's performance art.

Exactly the same is true of his later work as an architect. Designing the public space, Acconci prefers what he calls the leftover sites, the outlands, "these throwaways, these wastelands, that provide the last opportunity for model cities, theoretical cities, future cities. (...) It's only in the outlands then – only on a garbage dump, say – that you have the luxury to invent a city, test out a city, and rehearse a city (Ward, 2002)." Because of these indefinable heterotopias that are so critical for the methodology of his performances and architectural designs, the different media of Acconci's work are able to blend.

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4. <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0106/kastner/en> (last accessed at 26/04/12): Jacques Rancière quoted in Jens Kastner, *Artistic Internationalism and Institutional Critique*, 11 2006: (Rancière 2006: 77). Rancière, Jacques 2006: "Die Politik der Kunst und ihre Paradoxien", in *ibid.*: Die Aufteilung des Sinnlichen. Die Politik der Kunst und ihre Paradoxien, edited by Maria Muhle, Berlin (b_books/Polypen), pp. 75–100.

5. www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n1/pdfs/ranciere.pdf: Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetic Separation, Aesthetic Community: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, *ART&RESEARCH: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods*, Volume 2, No. 1, Summer 2008, p. 3.

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