

Impurely Applied: The Architecture and Landscape Architecture of Vito Acconci

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Résumé de l'article

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Impurely Applied: The Architecture and Landscape Architecture of Vito Acconci

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Résumé

Par un survol sommaire de la démarche de Vito Acconci – de la poésie à l'art de la performance, à l'installation et à l'art public – et par une discussion plus approfondie de ses récents projets d'architecture et d'aménagement de l'espace public, nous examinons certaines questions centrales de la pratique du design, notamment celle des définitions toujours mouvantes de la criticalité et celle des répercussions sur le design contemporain de la polarité persistante entre le « pur » et l'« appliqué ».

Contemporary art and contemporary design share roots in the avant-garde, yet have become estranged because of the dysfunctional binary of pure and applied inherited from their common history. Contemporary art can ask any question, down to the very grounds for thinking and doing. Design can build to fulfill any brief or program. There is a resistance, both in design and studio art departments, to seeing these two modes of practice collide and to acknowledge their common sources in the unfolding of avant-garde practices. Can design—whether architecture, landscape architecture, object, graphic, interaction, or gaming design, to name but a few categories—be “critical” in its practice or in its production for the “real world” in a way that art cannot? What could “criticality” mean in the contemporary context of a highly technologized design practice? Do some modes of art inquiry, shifted into the world of the “applied,” have something to tell us about how design can become more than an aesthetic adjunct of a culture of engineering and technology (its interface designer)? This essay takes the work of Vito Acconci as an example of a “critical practice” that, following the logic of its own inquiry, has crossed the threshold between art and design and in the process opened up a new critical space.¹

When one teases criticality out of avant-garde art, one gets what Theodor Adorno called the culture industry—that is, entertainment—and in the world of material culture, one gets design. When modern architecture, in the person of Mies van der Rohe, comes to America, it separates itself from its avant-garde roots and engenders an “international style,” the realization of a utilitarian notion of form following function with roots that go back to the Bauhaus, the Arts and Crafts movement, and beyond. According to Benjamin Buchloh, discussing the support for Moholy-Nagy’s new Bauhaus in America by Walter Paepcke, president of the Container Corporation of America, mid-twentieth century design coalesced around the idea

that mass culture and high art could be reconciled in a radically commercialized Bauhaus venture. But in his [Paepcke’s] vision, as in that of many others, the reconciliation was purged of all political and ideological implications concerning artistic intervention in collective social progress. The cognitive and perceptual devices of modernity simply would have to be deployed for the development of a new commodity aesthetic (product design, packaging, and advertising).²

By the end of the twentieth century we have a design culture fully separated from earlier avant-gardist positions (at least in the purest critical-theory terms, although the separation should certainly not be uniquely defined by those terms³) and, meanwhile, we have an art avant-garde which itself now exists merely as an historical category, occasionally re-staged as nostalgic repertoire, for example, in the recent work of Marina Abramović. These admittedly contentious assertions invite the rethinking of criticality in design and visual art as well as in a range of new practices in which distinctions between design and art do not seem obvious. These new practices include electronic media work, design for public space, approaches to gaming, and the academic zone of research-creation—all of which are coming to terms with a world where the push of corporate-technological culture seems to have shifted the boundaries of human discourse to an information-driven, predominantly visual and screen-based culture of event. Designers and artists alike must now face the question of how, as creative practitioners, they can do work that is relevant, rigorous, and critical, as opposed to merely “cutting edge.” As a teacher in the area of design and as an artist who collaborates frequently across the design-art boundary, these reflections come out of my own experience of both the permeability (through performative experimentation) and impermeability (through academic gate-keeping) of this boundary. Vito Acconci’s recent work finds easy rejection from purists on both the design *and* art sides. This makes Acconci, from my point of view, an ideal intruder—or fugitive, as we will see shortly—one whose shifting art practice demonstrates an opening to a critical engagement with design culture. It also demonstrates that cross-fertilization between art and design may be a key element in investigating the intimate relationship between design and evolving technologies of commerce and organization.

From Page to “Fact” in Public Space

Vito Acconci is principally recognized as a performance artist and as a key figure of the American avant-garde during the 1970s and 1980s. His best-known pieces are a group of performances (including photo-documented pieces and performed video works) from a period of eight or so years beginning in 1969. These pivotal works, which include *Following Piece* (1969), *Proximity Piece* (1970), *Claim* (1971), *Seedbed* (1972),

Untitled Project for Pier 17 (1971), and the *Red Tapes* (1977), are widely documented and discussed. Acconci's work in this period is important as part of a watershed of post-minimal performance and conceptual art practices that thrived in proximity to new tendencies in music, dance, experimental theatre, and poetry. Through the critical attention focused on the works generated in this short period, Acconci has come to be integrated into the canon of American visual and performance art as it is taught in art schools and performance studies programs.

There is a tendency in individual disciplines to separate the burst of energy and the wide-ranging exploration of formal, material, and conceptual boundaries prevalent in the cultural production of this period into distinct disciplinary streams. The purpose of this article is to consider Acconci's work both more broadly and more specifically—broadly, in the sense that I will make connections outside the discipline of visual art, in particular to design in Britain in the 1960s; and specifically, in that I will focus on how Acconci engages with some key issues in the complex relationship of art to design culture throughout his lengthy practice. I propose, then, to look at elements of Acconci's body of work as gestures within the frame of architecture and design, gestures which apply deliberate stress to that framing, just as the same work challenges and evolves the definitions of poetry or of art. The point will be neither to demonstrate a formal progression from Acconci's earlier art practice to his later interest in design (which would be writing an art historical fiction) nor to articulate a dramatic schism or reversal (that Acconci "gave up" art for design). Rather, I will identify a coherent exploration on the part of Acconci from his beginnings as a poet in the late 1960s to his performance work, his later installations that activated the viewer as part of the work, his public installations and art works for public space and, finally, to his design competition proposals and built architectural projects from approximately 1990 onward.⁴

Acconci's exploration through these phases traverses several formal disciplines in the arts, moving, in conventional terms, from the pure to the applied. "Fact," "real," and the "useful" are consistent and intentionally provocative terms in his critical vocabulary. Consequently, the very definition of "applied" (applied from what, to what, for what?) and a definition of "usefulness" (to, for?) become vitally at stake. Another persistent and important preoccupation for Acconci is the body as the threshold between personal and public space. Public space as occupied through the body is emblematic of a threshold between private property and public space. Across his work, the body as understood through performance meets the body as understood through the architecture of the city (a rationalized body). Public space in relation to architecture (rational civic space) is brought into collision with public space in relation to human performance (free space, performed space, corporeal space). It is an ar-

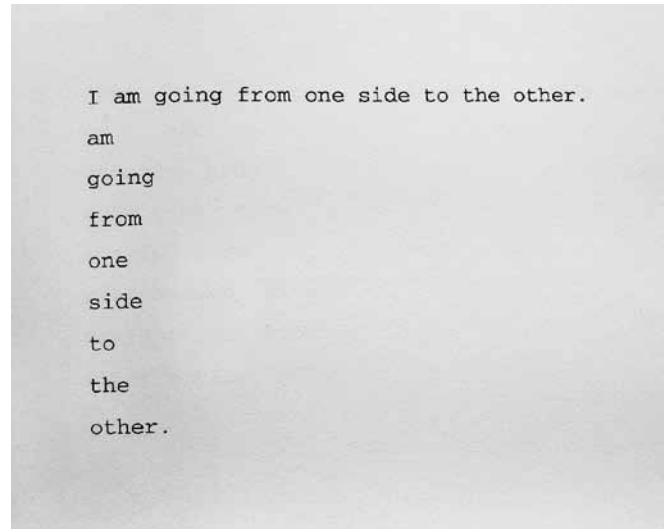


Figure 1. Vito Acconci. *I am going from one side to the other*, n.d. (reprinted courtesy of The MIT Press from *Language to Cover a Page: The Early Writings of Vito Acconci*, edited by Craig Dworkin, page 13).

ticipation of the meeting of the "applied" and the "pure"—what Hal Foster, citing Walter Benjamin, describes as the rational avant-garde of Le Corbusier meeting the irrational avant-garde of André Breton.⁵ This collision space, for Acconci, is *the* place to be. It is the place where we all live. The formal apparatus (the art, the performance, the poetry, the design, the architecture) is put into play to bring about this desired collision. This may distract us into a preoccupation with disciplinary definitions, as he constantly revises the means to his end. This is part of the disciplinary paradox of Acconci's exploration.

If there are consistencies of approach across Acconci's production from the late 1960s to the present, there are also important evolutions. Shifting modes within his art practice and the subsequent move into architecture and design are not arbitrary. They are driven by important changes in Acconci's own sense of agency and relationship to the work as he re-formulates ideas of audience and public place. In his early performance work, he is the singular iconoclast and privileged author, while the reader or audience, or unknowing participant, is a mute presence or witness. In his later installation work, he sets the stage for audiences to trigger or enact the work as their own engagement, although strictly limited by the framing conventions of the museum. The move to design for public space, art-in-architecture, and architecture proper provide an important opening to a potential experience where the authorship of the work is less in the foreground, and space and time are left to be experienced, to become, in a far more fluid way. Acconci predicts this turn very early on (in 1971):

Before it was mostly me turning on myself, involved with myself.... Now I'm thinking a lot more about interaction.... My sense now to be getting out as much work as I can, constantly doing "public" things... so that what becomes public is not so much finished pieces but a *process* of working... Faulkner was the biggest influence... his lack of desire to finish a sentence, his sense to keep on going beyond what you could possibly follow... sentences that go on for pages... his sentences seem to be consciously or unconsciously trying to subvert a fantastically conservative framework.... I think the push is really towards content, *real* content, and because you're not concerned with perfection, like in Nauman's pieces... it can be very messy, you can use anything, any content, that helps you get there.... [I am] concerned with the mental superstructure or process that is applied to everyday things and events.⁶

For Acconci, this "real content" is not subject matter but a different layer of meaning. Language becomes a tool to access it. This is a clue to all of Acconci's work. Language, whether spoken or written, whether as articulate phrases, fragmentary streams of consciousness, litanies, or individual words, is part of a process for engaging the culture of real things and relations, similar to a vine or root finding its way, entwining itself, through a human-made architecture. Acconci emerged from graduate studies in writing (Iowa Writer's Workshop, University of Iowa, 1964) with sensibilities attuned to contemporary American poetry. Language has consistently been a central part of his process, but very rarely a final product. He states, "Really, what I know how to do is use language.... Probably the grounding of all my stuff, I think, [is that] I like playing with words."⁷ In this respect it is significant that one of his earliest visual art influences upon his arrival in New York in the late 1960s was the work of Jasper Johns,⁸ and specifically, Johns's use of upscaled letters and numbers that turned language into "fact" on the canvas. Acconci states, "Johns taught me what idiom was, what convention was.... He was discovering 'fact,' and I thought, I wanted 'fact.'"⁹ His literalist approach is certainly akin to Johns's painting, but Acconci's practice as it transited restlessly back and forth from the world of poetry readings to visual art events in the late 1960s began to signal a more focused literalness extending far beyond the page (fig. 1).

As Craig Dworkin explains in a text entitled "Fugitive Signs," Acconci's early performance works constitute "the continuation of poetry by other means."¹⁰ This embodies a spatio-temporal gambit that seeks to escape, to become fugitive, from the boundaries of a particular form (poetry) in order to approach the "real content" or "fact" to which Acconci alludes. Dworkin cites a number of performances such as *Rubbing Piece* (where Acconci, using two fingers, rubs a sore on the opposite

forearm), *Trademarks* (where the artist bites his own skin anywhere on his body that he can reach, producing impressions that are then inked and printed), and *Hand-and-Mouth* (where he pushes his hand into his mouth until he chokes) as reflecting similar gestures to his poetry—both of writing as mark-making or marking space and language itself as intentionally confounding rather than building conventional expression.¹¹ The point that Dworkin makes with regard to Acconci's poetry is one that I will echo below when I discuss the so-called shift to design and architecture in Acconci's practice: that his apparent disciplinary shift actually involves a rigorous continuity of inquiry and method. In the case of Acconci's design practice we might think of his interest in making things that are "useful" as analogous to the idea of "fact" or literalness in relation to his poetry and early performance. They are tricks to implicate artist and viewer alike in a kind of "real" world as opposed to an "it is as if" hypotheticality of literature or art. The public space, or "doing public things" as an "attempt to bring out all that might be there,"¹² to which Acconci commits as early as 1970 is the same perplexing space engaged by his public art projects in the 1980s and his design and architecture projects from 1990 onward.

In the period from 1969 to 1972 Acconci executed a tremendous number of works. The Fall 1972 issue of *Avalanche* magazine, dedicated to Acconci's work, documents at least seventy-five individual works indexed as "activities," "performances," "performance situations," "performance spaces," "photograph pieces," "films," "audiotapes," and "video tapes" between 1969 and the publication of the issue.¹³ These works systematically explore body, power, and the physical, social, and psychological thresholds of public and private space. They include the works most often cited and associated with Vito Acconci the performance artist, such as *Following Piece* (1969), *Proximity Piece* (1970), *Trademarks* (1970), *Claim* (1971), *Security Zone* (1971), *Trappings* (1971), *Seedbed* (1972), and the films *Blindfold Catching* (1970), *Rubbing* (1971), and *Hand and Mouth* (1970). There is a sense that these pieces are not conceived as works of art (as iconic objects or commodity), but rather as an event-flow, a process of sounding out boundaries now well off the printed page. A glance at a handful of works from this period shows how Acconci articulates with growing clarity a process of play between private and public and an interest in issues which also had come to preoccupy architecture, design, and urbanism in the same period.¹⁴

Private Property (1971) was executed in a loft in New York, in someone's living space. Acconci is blindfolded, ear-plugged, lying on the floor, and tied to a post for six hours. He blindly takes notes and photographs when he senses something happening. A short description of the piece appeared together with photo documentation in the Fall 1972 issue of *Avalanche*.¹⁵ In

this statement, Acconci takes two points of view. Firstly, he is a sensor in an unfamiliar space, for the most part blind and deaf, seeking to pick up and record both what is happening around him and his own feelings about his physically and sensorially restricted position. Secondly, he is a subservient, non-threatening presence in the private space of others: "I'm a kind of silent partner—I can be an obstruction in their path—I'm a pawn they can play tricks on."¹⁶ Even without sight and hearing the space is still experienced and somehow articulate. This is an important point in the development of Acconci's play on architecture and shows the beginning of a thorough, but certainly not systematic, inquiry into the membrane where public and private space meet.

In *Room piece* (1970) Acconci transports some of the contents of his apartment to a West Side gallery. If he needs one of the objects deposited there, he must go to the gallery to retrieve it and once finished using it, return it to the gallery, in another part of the city. In Acconci's description his apartment loses a room, only to gain another one eighty blocks away.¹⁷ If *Private Property* collapses public and private gestures by dumbing them down, attenuating the flow of information, *Room Piece* extends them, stretches them out over (or under) blocks and blocks of New York's urban terrain. The private space at the end of the line is in fact public, and not just any public space but a place dedicated explicitly to the viewing of meaningful things. In this work Acconci makes explicit that what is viewed is the terminus of a process of holding an object in mind, of maintaining the idea of a thing as a *thing* for the duration of eighty blocks. If art is supposed to unveil some private expression, some desire, some meaning, then here it is, in "fact."

Security Zone (Pier 18, New York, 1971) works on, or against, trust. Acconci is blindfolded, his ears are plugged, and his hands are tied behind his back. He is standing and moving on a pier extending into the river. His lone interlocutor is "someone about whom my feelings are ambiguous, someone I don't fully trust."¹⁸ The pier, with its precipitous and dangerous boundaries, is a platform, a public space, a place of interaction. Acconci moves through this space, depending completely on the other for safety. Acconci says of the piece,

I'm thinking of a system of places like this—I could be sitting in front of a geographical map that serves as a map of needs, emotions, appearances—these would tend towards specific people—each place would be visited with a different person, we'd play out the keynote of our relationship—each place would fit a certain kind of interchange: our reasons to be there might force us to shelter ourselves against the place, or make it easy for us to build ourselves into its corners—the places would spread out, there could be routes from place to place, emotion to emotion, one appearance to another—this

could be a way to locate emotions, give each person a position; a value, into which his normal life leads him or against which his normal life pulls him away.¹⁹

Acconci imagines a map of the city, a geography of spaces of encounter that is not a utopian city of fantastic forms but a fantasy/phantasy city where spaces amplify and permutate relations with others. It is social space *extraordinaire*. Each individual has their own map of spaces and the paths between them. Each space is a space of encounter, perfectly ordinary, perhaps, but with a heightened sense of singularity or specificity.

Seedbed (1972) is usually introduced with a sentence that includes the word "notorious," and indeed, the notoriety of the piece makes it difficult to discuss. Thinking first of *Seedbed's* architectural/spatial play can help it take its place among these works investigating the threshold of public and private. *Seedbed* occupies a particular architectural setting, this time partially fabricated (it is an installation). A sloping floor rises from halfway across the gallery space to hit the wall two feet above the floor. It is a minimalist architectonic intrusion into the pure white cube of the gallery. It activates the critical zone where the gallery walls and floor meet. Imagined in another way it is a wedge into public space. Like El Lissitzky's avant-gardist intrusion, *the red wedge*, it is an emblematic rupture. Thus *Seedbed* proposes a subterranean zone, one that intrudes into the public space, pushing up the floor like a theatrical stage trapdoor, insisting on the infiltration of the private into the public. Like *Room Piece*, *Seedbed* confounds the neutralized space of public viewing with a different kind of experience. We look and listen in the silent gallery. We walk on a surface animated from directly beneath our privileged viewing position. Down there, as we all know, is the artist; fantasizing, masturbating, narrating his experience, seeping up via the sound system into the refined and socially regulated public space of the gallery. The piece tells us much more about this particular kind of public space than it does about the underground litany of sexual fantasy and the persona of the artist. The actual fantasy here is about the contested social space above. *Seedbed* feeds on it, plays with it, projects onto it a false permissiveness, distorts it to its own ends, and provokes a revealing of its true nature.

The wedge as a disruptive architectonic element recurs in several later pieces. In 1993 Acconci made a temporary "renovation" of the Central Exhibition Hall of the Austrian Museum of Applied Arts and Contemporary Art, Vienna (MAK) that collapsed and tilted the exhibition space, dropped the skylight to the floor, and pushed the floor up into a slope, thereby making the walls acute triangles of surface. Here the wedge creates a confined and restricted space full of oblique angles, a collapsed architecture. Again the purpose (the program) of the building (a museum for looking) is brought into a highly intensified play.

The piece was conceived by Acconci not as a work of art but as a design for a new exhibition space in which walls and floor and ceiling no longer perform as they would in a rectilinear space. The main purpose was compromised and the original program put under stress. He re-jigs the terms of exhibition to force other possibilities. Acconci conjectures,

When a room slips, and loses its ground, then the ground takes over, the ground can grow up over the room. That does not mean, necessarily, that the room is destroyed; it can mean instead, that the room has been freed...something else can begin now, from the ground up.²⁰

The MAK renovation is an inquiry into the nature and function of cultural space as a subset of public space, an inquiry that was hinted at but not made explicit in the performance pieces described above and in installation works of the mid-1970s that situated the viewer as a participant in the work, exploring the public/private interaction space of the museum. *Venice Belongs to Us* was constructed for curator Germano Celant's "Ambiente/arte dal futurismo alla body art" (*Ambient/Art—from Futurism to Body Art*) exhibition,²¹ the curated portion of the 1976 Venice Biennale (whose overall theme was "Environment, Participation, Cultural Structures"). Celant's exhibition proposed an environment-oriented art that both extended avant-gardist moves around site specificity and, more explicitly, crossed over from art into architecture. Celant featured several artists who, in the decades to follow, would continue to work across the boundary separating art from architecture, including Acconci, Dan Graham (who presented the work "Public Space"), Michael Asher (whose work was to place folding stools in the space), and Maria Nordman (who created an ephemeral light installation). In retrospect, it might be concluded that Celant's testing of the art/architecture boundary largely resulted in the absorption of installation and site specificity as stylistic terms within the hermetic boundaries of the museum, rather than having any radical impact on the discipline of architecture or design (beyond the appropriation of the aesthetics of minimalism and land art, which draw architecture students en masse to DIA Beacon to this day). However, the artists themselves *were* thinking about the phenomenological nature of space and considering the socio-political aspect of the room as a viewing and meeting space.

In Acconci's installation, a courtyard-like room with a large opening to the sky is arranged so that viewers enter at floor level through one of three doors.²² At each entrance stands a ladder, almost blocking the doorway, leading up into the sky. The opening to the sky is closed off by a set of regularly spaced bars that would prevent the viewer from leaving the space by climbing one of the ladders. Sitting on top of the bars are four loudspeakers and several benches arranged as if for visitors to this in-

accessible upper level. Like many of Acconci's installations there is a division of space, a theatre of in-and-out, citizen-and-non-citizen, public-and-private. The sound we hear in this piece is a spoken ordering of a fictional movie or theatre piece, like the voice of a director (or dictator). One loudspeaker gives "you," the viewer, specific directions for movement. Another gives general scene-setting directions. Another proposes theatrical intentions for the protagonists. The crosstalk of voices, accompanied by marching band music, ordains a certain cinematic activity in a public space, yet lets the goal or aim of that activity dissipate into a kind of confusion.

Where We Are Now (Who Are We Anyway?), at the end of 1993, carries on this theme of a thwarted or problematized public space that begins to gel as a metaphor for the complex and problematic nature of the gallery and museum as nodes of power and commerce. The normal entrance to the prestigious Sonnabend Gallery in New York is blocked off, and the walls delimiting the now inaccessible gallery are painted black, making the gallery an "object within the overall space,"²³ a black box. In the resulting antechamber is a long table with stools around it. Above hangs a loudspeaker. This apparent setup for a meeting is thrown into a state of confusion by the fact that half of the thirty-two-foot long table protrudes out the window over West Broadway Street, three stories below. The soundtrack exacerbates this precarious situation by inciting the listener into a game of musical chairs—this is a meeting where not everyone has a place at the table. The soundtrack revolves around a fictionalized dialogue of a bureaucratic meeting:

Now that we are all here together... and what do you think, Bob? Now that we've come back home... and what do you think, Jane? Now that we were here all the time... and what do you think Bill? Now that we have nowhere else to go... and what do you think, Nancy? Rise! Change Places! Rise! Seats! Everyone take your seats!.... So you've lost your voice. So they're speaking up for you... We are the people. We have the people.²⁴

The dialogue refers to the power structure immanent in this top-flight institution. The voices, while expressing dissent, are captives of the structure. The entry of the social into this space is fraught both with a rigid conception of politics and the (representational) framing that the gallery or museum permits. The only way out is a precipitous one, through the window into the street below. The work, a "continuation of poetry by other means," wriggles out of the "it is as if" world of representation within the gallery or museum in search of a "real" opened up by a transit across this threshold from private to public.

With *Seedbed*, *Venice Belongs to Us*, and *Where We Are Now (Who Are We Anyway?)*, we see Acconci reframing the viewer's

experience of the gallery or museum, spaces *designed* for looking at things. Each of these pieces invokes an experience that shifts parameters, pulling the viewer into new relations with the work and its container, provoking a rethinking of the specifics of public and private that these particular spaces represent. If we are not simply to “view” in these situations, what is it that we do, and who is the “we” that has this experience? And if the artist is part of the design of such spaces, to what degree can he/she incite them to become something else entirely? What is the purpose of this design? Together, these works signal a push beyond a given frame of action (the museum and the conventions of artistic practice) into a more “real” or “public” space that is analogous to Acconci’s fugitive position in relation to poetry and the page. Seemingly, an understanding of the form (of poetry or of art) permits an act of escape that makes a space for thought that transits across disciplines to occupy another space (rather than an evolution within a form). If the museum can be collapsed, the public/private membrane becomes completely mobile rather than framed. These concerns make the MAK renovation of 1993 (a work of design) a direct continuation of the preoccupations and subtexts of earlier works.

The repeated fugitive gambit in Acconci’s practice seems constantly to turn his actions toward public, inhabited, and urban space. He embraces it as a permeable, fluid, and polyvalent place in contrast to the strict structures and reverence for form that characterize the fields of poetry and visual art (and architecture, of course). Acconci does not ignore the singularity of his own discipline(s). It is specifically a poet’s or an artist’s attentiveness to form and craft, to language and idiom, that permits him to construct a passage off the page and into the city, or to collapse the “museum for looking” into an urban platform for other possibilities. What is freed in this process is a kind of idealized “artist without a discipline,” liberated to build and act in a mode that is fully implicated in the flow of urban culture. This idealized artist inhabits a fantastic city, one that has its roots not in the hygienic or utopic rationality of le Corbusier’s city plans, but in the dystopic science fiction of J. G. Ballard. Anything can happen here. In a sense it is the city as antidote to boundary. The point is that in seeking to do architecture or landscape architecture, Acconci is not seeking to become a master or servant of yet another discipline, but to occupy, to elbow into, these disciplines as spaces of action and conjecture. To step into this space as a practitioner, rather than as a historian or theorist, is to become implicated with the terms of action of that field. It is to enter a critical conversation (as before he did with poetry and art) with the idioms of architecture and design. This conversation includes a re-assessment of the notion of “applied” practice as well as of related definitions of usefulness and productiveness in the terms of technological commercial culture and its economic models.

Archigram and other Experiments Between Art and Architecture

In the last half of the twentieth century, architecture itself has a history of practices that attempt to intervene in the city with critical conjecture and with manifestations that challenge the presuppositions of the discipline. The work of architects and critics in post-World War II Britain, particularly the work of the group Archigram, provides a useful counterpoint in a discussion of Acconci’s move off the page and out of the gallery into urban space. Also, the exhibition *This is Tomorrow*, organized by the Independent Group and held at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London in 1956, was a watershed event that proposed a cross-fertilization between art, architecture, and a nascent popular culture bathed in new consumer technologies. Initially, architect and critic Theo Crosby²⁵ proposed an exhibition where twelve teams composed of artists, designers, and critics would make collaborative “installations” suggesting how “modern living” might be understood.²⁶ The resulting exhibition not only presented a model for collaborations between critical practitioners from across the pure and applied divide but also suggested a reframing of both art and design in the light of pop culture and new technology.²⁷ *This is Tomorrow* took place at the beginning of a particularly vibrant and critical period of renewal in design and architecture in Britain, a period that gave rise to the publication and subsequent collaborative architectural practice known as Archigram.

Archigram’s first major presentation of work was the exhibition *Living Cities* (organized by Theo Crosby) at the ICA, London, in 1963.²⁸ Archigram’s production was for the most part drawings, collages, and competition proposals with titles such as *Living City*, *Plug-in City*, and *Moving City*. They were not so much proposals for particular buildings or structures, but rather conjectures embracing novel approaches to living in and making urban space using strategies of modularity, adjustment, and the adoption of new materials (inflatables, soft materials, the integration of the organic with the manufactured, and so on). One such proposal was *Plug-in City*, an infinitely expandable city of pods where residents could choose (and re-choose) their location. Another was *Walking City*, where giant-legged cities stride the landscape looking for geographies to visit. These were proposals dedicated to being “engines of a culture dedicated to nomadism, social emancipation, endless exchange, interactive response systems and, following the lead of Cedric Price, pleasure, fun and comfort.”²⁹ Architecture historian Anthony Vidler sees a particular relationship to technology in the work of Archigram and their fellow travellers. “Of all those interrogating *une architecture autre* in the 1960s, the Archigram group, under the cover of what seemed to be irreverent and harmless play, had launched the most fundamental critique of the traditional



Figure 2. Acconci Studio. *The Storefront for Art and Architecture*, New York, 1993. Post-2008 reconstruction (Photo: A. Forster).

architectural program.”³⁰ Archigram’s science-fiction-like conjectural drawings and collages, far from being propaganda for positivistic technocratic utopias (in the mode of Le Corbusier or brutalism) were a collision with the future where technology served to create a new ecosystem of the built that questioned the very grounds of the discipline and conjectured buildings that were not fixed objects or monuments, but rather might move, or be evolved by their users, or disappear altogether. Archigram’s was a polemic practice in which a light-footed tuning to the logic of particular technologies became a device or a gambit for upsetting the kind of architecture that technology is habitually geared to maintain. They posited not a technology that keeps control but one that wanders according to a momentary logic of use—a Trojan horse in the house of techno-culture. Just as Acconci suggests that words might become “fact” and wander from the page into the city as a “continuation of poetry by other

means,” Archigram suggests that new ways of thinking with and about technology might allow architecture to “unground” itself, that the formulation of boundaries inherent to modernist architecture might not be the best starting point for “building” in the future. Echoing the implied thesis of *This is Tomorrow*, this meant that architecture could be based in new commercial technologies, the latest trends in social science, popular culture, art, cinema, literature, and so on, and that these many aspects of the social were all viable generators of a new architecture.

Radical conjecture during this period was certainly not confined to the work of Archigram. Conjecture that specifically attempted to question the grounds of the utilitarian modernist program of architecture and design was widespread. The critic and theorist Cedric Price was one fellow traveller of Archigram working in Britain during the same period. His *Fun Palace* (1960–64), a collaboration with British theatre director Joan Littlewood, was



Figure 3. Acconci Studio. *The Storefront for Art and Architecture*, New York, 1993. Post-2008 reconstruction (Photo: A. Forster).

a spectacular proposal for a kind of updated Crystal Palace in which spectators would lose their observer/audience status and participate in a delirious range of diversions concocted through cybernetic and physical systems in a completely re-configurable building interior. In 1971 the Seventh Congress of the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design (ICSID) took place in Eivissa (Ibiza), Spain. Alongside the formal proceedings was a parallel series of encounters which was “not just an open congress where professionals and students could meet and debate; it was a point of convergence between design and the most experimental forms of art and architecture at the time in Spain.”³¹ Among these was *Instant City*, conceived by Carlos Ferrater and Fernando Bendito, a massive modular inflatable village made of plastic, which was home to a social experiment involving collective design, meetings, dinners, and other events.

From *This is Tomorrow* to *Instant City* we see both a desire to circumvent the traditional boundary between pure and applied arts and a playful, apparently embracing attitude toward new technologies. In terms of a relationship of a critical practice to technology, Archigram, Cedric Price, and the parallel events of the ICSID all represent a third way, suggesting an approach that is neither technophilic nor technophobic, to borrow the binary Chris Salter uses to describe the avant-garde’s relation to technology.³² There are several similarities here to Acconci’s re-vision of design. It is possible for the poet Acconci to take a movement of thought across the page and out into the city, and later to use the terms of architecture to imagine a new space for engagement (an implication) without falling into a state either of rapture or rejection with regard to the technological disciplines and technologies involved. The idea that the architectural program is one



Figure 4. Acconci Studio. *Courtyard in the Wind*, Munich, Germany, 1997. Tower, turbine and courtyard (Photo: A. Forster).

place where the terms of the made world are to be loosened or un-fixed, where one can actually get at and change the grounding of the design process, is also central.³³ Acconci's play begins at the threshold of public and private space and extends beyond the hermetic boundaries of the art world in a conversation contextualized by experiment and implication in urban space. He explains, "We do think of a peopled space, so that we can take hints from the program, we like to double the program, or multiply the program, we like it not to have just a single program."³⁴

Design as Art Practice: Art Practice as Design

By the time of the MAK renovation, Acconci had moved away from being an artist who made "public art" or "art in architecture" toward operating more or less fully in the realms of land-

scape architecture and design for public space. The questions and provocations the work now poses engage critically with the discourse of design itself, as opposed to being artworks "exported" wholesale into public space. From 1990, with Acconci operating exclusively under the name Acconci Studio as a collaborative practice, we see works that are proposals for public space, experiments in urban inhabitation, and conjectural responses to architecture competitions. *House up the Building* (1996) and *Park up the Building* (1996), for instance, are mobile parasitic structures attached to modernist architectural facades. The polemic and function of these pieces seem related to Archigram's idea of the "plug-in." In the first case it is a domestic space that clings, sink, toilet, and all, to the industrial facade of a building, exteriorized and exposed. In the second it is a public "park" that is hung onto the inhospitable wall of private property.



Figure 5. Acconci Studio. *Courtyard in the Wind*, Munich, Germany, 1997. Tower, turbine and courtyard (Photo: A. Forster).

The Storefront for Art and Architecture, designed in 1993 in collaboration with architect Steven Holl, animates the very facade that defines a building from the outside or a room from the inside, taking this basic boundary of place as precisely the thing to be brought into play, and once again literally flipping the public into the private (figs. 2 and 3). It recalls the slapstick rotating walls in Buster Keaton's famous parody of building, *One Week* (1920), in which Keaton builds a pre-fab house, but completely mis-builds it, having lost the instructions. He opens a door and it has the sink attached to it, now on the outside of the house. It is a film of gags based on displacement and physical discomfort. *Storefront* is the beginning of a formal strategy (hinted at in *House up the Building* and *Park up the Building*) that continues through much later work, where floors and walls turn into seats and tables, where gardens go vertical, ceilings become ground, where paths wander off-axis, and civic space is floated offshore. This

architectural work remains preoccupied with leading the reader off the edge of the page, like much of Acconci's practice right back to poetry, with the transitional space between public and private, between in-frame and out-of frame, between apparently useful and useless. The work takes this transitional membrane as the place of action and implication. In *Storefront* it does so literally, with walls and windows that flip to turn inside into outside, private into public, and back again. Once the space is public, it is all open, part of the outdoors. The walls themselves embody Acconci's play on use, usability, and function. Their flipping makes them into tables, display units, and seats. It is a work of art that is a work of function and a work of design that is a work of cultural meditation or play. The work itself is the "and" between public *and* private or between art *and* design. In reinforcing this "and," the presuppositions of utility embedded in design procedures are brought into an encounter with their sources in the split



Figure 6. Acconci Studio. *Mur Island*, Graz, Austria, 2003 (Photo: A. Forster).

made at the Bauhaus and its antecedents between pure art and design for production, between the “irrational” and “rational” avant-gardes. Buster Keaton meets Mies van der Rohe.

Courtyard in the Wind (1997) in Munich is a ground-level rotating section of public plaza connected to a wind turbine on the highest of the surrounding buildings (figs. 4 and 5). This turntable is complete with a path, benches, and trees and rotates slowly, powered by the wind above. A passerby might be misdirected on a path (normally leading toward the nearby train station) that changes its orientation as the plaza turns. A reader might get up after a few minutes on a bench facing the opposite direction. *Courtyard in the Wind* is a landscape engine and a timepiece. In part, it is a meditation on seventeenth- to nineteenth-century formal gardens with their contrived vistas and trajectories.³⁵ It interrogates the designed nature of human-made landscape, which is normally the domain of landscape

architecture. In this revolving garden, nature is a representation: the earth does not go down to the “real” earth. Of course, as in any urban public space there is a vast amount of infrastructure (drainage, electricity, foundations) beneath any composed area of *nature*, and *Courtyard* plays on the visibility of romantic landscape, where any contrivance is permissible if the visual effect is “right” for the romantic viewing subject. Here in Munich the trees move with the wind. Nothing could be more romantic. Yet they do not move in the wind-blown way. They move cinematically, driven by motor and turbine, horizontally across our visual field. In *Courtyard* the aesthetic purity is compromised by the slapstick of achieving it. Purity and slapstick form a whole that, in this case, is the work of public art. Looking back to *Storefront*, this tension between aesthetic sincerity or purity and insincerity is perhaps the dividing line between co-designer Steven Holl and Acconci. Whereas Holl, in much of his architectural practice, is



Figure 7. Acconci Studio. *Mur Island*, Graz, Austria, 2003 (Photo: A. Forster).

preoccupied with the visual atmospherics of sensorial experience (beauty?), Acconci seeks to articulate places of spatial seepage and discomfort (impurity?). The sensitivity to public space as event (or parade) aligns Acconci Studio clearly with discussions pertinent to the field of landscape architecture. If architecture needs to be resisted, perforated, even collapsed, *it is in order* to have a conversation with landscape as built public place: “I think building should melt into landscapes, and landscapes can maybe develop into buildings... I did start thinking of public space and of architecture as, let’s walk into, across the monument. Let’s bring the monument back to the ground we’re standing on.”³⁶

Mur Island (2002) is an island civic space constructed in the middle of the river Mur, which runs through the centre of the Austrian city of Graz (figs. 6 and 7). Part café, part theatre, part playground, it creates an entirely new floating urban space both metaphorically and in fact. *Mur Island* is not aligned to the grid of

the city and, in its alienness, subtly subverts the dominant urban scheme while accommodating a range of leisure activities. The work was a success in the terms of the city festival that commissioned it. Half a million visitors came to *Mur Island* in its first six months, and, while originally meant to be temporary, it is still in place and in active use.³⁷ In Acconci’s terms, though, success is a difficult thing to evaluate. His use of the term “useful” is intentionally provocative. We are not talking about use in the Bauhaus sense of functionality merged with aesthetics. The assertion that something should be useful allows him to slide away from the “it is as if” world of art into an engagement that must be experienced as part of daily going-on. In terms of conventional use *Mur Island* is a success. The café operates in the summer. The playground is compelling. The theatre is a public space. But in interviews about the project, you can almost hear Acconci saying, is that all there is? This is no slight to the island’s imaginativeness or its cleverness

in terms of engineering but rather attests to the complexity of balancing technical compromises with a desired implication: for design thought to exceed use on the most pragmatic level.

Storefront, *Courtyard in the Wind*, and *Mur Island* are ambitious built projects that seem to have some independence from Acconci's earlier artwork and transgressive persona. We could mistake them for architecture, or, more appropriately, landscape architecture, although I have shown that they are not simply that. The question that arises, now that these designed things live out in the world, is: what do they do that is different from the productions of super-star architects who populate our urban space with feats of visual audacity and inventiveness? In short, what is their criticality? We see in this brief survey how Acconci's practice has been an increasingly explicit dialogue with the grounds and procedural syntax of architecture, landscape, design for urban space, and indeed with the field of design in general. Along this trajectory Acconci has shown a consistent preoccupation with the social construction of the membrane between public and private space and the key role of, first, the work of art and, later, design for built space as an animator of the dynamic of that liminal zone. Part of that animation is a provocation of received ideas of utility or function inherited from the division of pure and applied as it had passed through the European avant-garde, in particular through the Bauhaus. Public space is taken up by Acconci as the prime location for experiment about these matters, a locus where the issues are alive and "at stake," in contrast to the hermetic or "it is as if" space of the art world. In these terms, it becomes the practitioner's responsibility to take the very program (using program in the architectural sense) that defines "utility" to be in play, and consequently the primary ground to be opened up for evaluation and re-building (that is, a territory for pure conjecture in the context of parameters perceived as real and utilitarian). It is here that we see the strongest affinity to the post-war neo-avant-garde in architecture and design of which Archigram is an example. Archigram and their fellow travellers are likewise precursors of Acconci's attitude toward technology, an attitude of taking specific technologies not as a defining syntax but rather as elements of play.

One could ask whether Acconci's architecture does not just import a subversive construction (or deconstruction) derived from art performance into the world of architecture, where it can only become ineffective and trivial. Or, one could ask whether this cross-disciplinary performativity allows a unique and essential questioning in the realm of public space that might offer an alternative to the ideas of utility inherited from outdated notions of pure and applied. I would suggest the latter. Looking at Acconci's architecture leads to a consideration of design as an inter-subjective cultural space, in contrast to a western history of design/architecture as aspects of a commercial and visual culture of display. Acconci also proposes a more fluid play with technol-

ogy. Like Buster Keaton or Archigram, he engages material culture in a manner where failure is a source rather than a fault. This very failure or clumsiness, which is a vestige of an artistic-poetic strategy, Dworkin's "continuation of poetry by other means," is what situates the work right on top of a fault-line that is *the* essential problem for design *and* design-related cross-disciplinary practice. It is the fault-line between art and design. The problem is a problem of meaning, a problem of criticality, and a problem of articulating a rigorous position in critical relationship to a design seen as techno-cultural anticipation of the future, a rigorous position characterized neither by rapture or rejection. So, while a given work may or may not be successful as commodity or *designed thing*, it might succeed in discursively opening a territory normally covered over by the architect/designer's finesse and sleight-of-hand at reproducing the expected (the future) in a novel way. That is, it contributes to a rethinking of the terms of building and *thinking through making* that disturbs an outmoded notion of pure and applied art that is design's reflex defense against art—and art's reflex rejection of design.

Notes

- ¹ This article is developed from the thesis, "Public Spaces—The Architecture and Landscape Architecture of Vito Acconci", 2013, Concordia University, Montreal (SIP-MA). The 2012 interview with Acconci cited in this article is from the same thesis.
- ² Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (Cambridge, MA, 2000), 467.
- ³ Although not elaborated in this text, there is a critique to be made (implicit, I think, in Acconci's practice) of the conception of the autonomy of art derived from critical theory as expounded by Benjamin Buchloh, Hal Foster, Peter Bürger, and others. Stephen Horne, in a review of Foster's *The Art-Architecture Complex* (London and New York, 2011), strikes at critical theory's blind spot: "Perhaps what is needed, following Hal Foster's denunciations of design as mere consumerist manipulation in the service of greater efficiencies for capitalism, is recognition of a more general outline...that attributes the root of the problem more deeply in a description of the rationalist prejudices that dominate our thinking and being. For Foster and his colleagues this would be bad news, leaving them revealed as part of the problem in so far as their project is itself inextricably dedicated to the founding of criticality in a modernity already itself a practice of instrumental rationality." Horne, "Hal Foster: The Art-Architecture Complex," *Menlo Park Journal* 1, 1 (March 2013).
- ⁴ Corinne Diserens et al., *Vito Hannibal Acconci Studio*, exh. cat., Barcelona, Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (Barcelona, 2004) contains a detailed chronology of Acconci's production from 1959 to 2004. The basic information on the trajectory of Acconci's

- work and the background material for descriptions of individual works are taken from this publication, unless otherwise noted.
- ⁵ Hal Foster, *Design and Crime (and Other Diatribes)*, (London, 2002), 60.
- ⁶ Vito Acconci, quoted in Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (New York, 1973), 243.
- ⁷ Interview with Vito Acconci by the author, Brooklyn, New York, 2 June 2012.
- ⁸ Interview.
- ⁹ Interview.
- ¹⁰ Craig Dworkin, "Fugitive Signs," *October* 95 (Winter 2001), 99.
- ¹¹ Dworkin, "Fugitive Signs," 102.
- ¹² Acconci, quoted in Lippard, *Six Years*, 243.
- ¹³ Vito Acconci, *Avalanche* 6 (Fall 1972).
- ¹⁴ As we see with the exhibition *This is Tomorrow* in London (1956), the work of Archigram, Cedric Price, and others discussed below. Events such as Montreal's Expo '67 present a techno-utopian vision infiltrated with social counter-currents where design and counter-culture are (temporarily) in active conversation.
- ¹⁵ Acconci, *Avalanche* 6, 53.
- ¹⁶ Acconci, *Avalanche* 6, 53.
- ¹⁷ Acconci, *Avalanche* 6, 16.
- ¹⁸ Acconci, *Avalanche* 6, 40.
- ¹⁹ Acconci, *Avalanche* 6, 40.
- ²⁰ Acconci, quoted in Diserens, *Acconci Studio*, 345.
- ²¹ Germano Celant, "Ambient/Art" in *Environment, Participation, Cultural Structures* (Venice, 1976), vol. 1, p. 6.
- ²² Diserens, *Acconci Studio*, 324.
- ²³ Acconci, cited in Diserens, *Acconci Studio*, 327.
- ²⁴ Diserens, *Acconci Studio*, 329.
- ²⁵ Theo Crosby was the technical editor of *Architectural Design* (AD) magazine. Another pivotal design event in which Crosby participated, collaborating with the influential graphic designer and typographer Edward Wright, was the design of two exhibition buildings for the 6th International Union of Architects Congress, London, 1961, combining temporary/modular architecture and exterior super-graphics. Later he organized the exhibition *Living Cities* (1963), which presented the work of Archigram for the first time. He was a co-founder (in 1972) of the design firm Pentagram.
- ²⁶ The exhibition is best known in art history for Richard Hamilton's collage *Just what is it that makes today's home so different, so appealing?* that was part of the collaboration of Hamilton with architects John McHale and John Voelker.
- ²⁷ The catalogue of *This is Tomorrow* ((London, Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1956) ends with two pages of acknowledgements of suppliers, a list which includes IBM and Marcel Duchamp, followed by twenty-four pages of advertising by suppliers of glass, plastic, construction systems, and other new high-tech materials, reflecting an idealistic notion of a confluence of artistic disciplines, daily life, and a corporate contribution in a "future" imminently at hand.
- ²⁸ Archigram was founded in (approximately) 1961 by architects Peter Cook, Warren Chalk, Ron Herron, Denis Crompton, Michael Webb, and David Green. *Archigram* was initially the name of the publication the group put together to disseminate their ideas. *Archigram* 1 through 8 were published from 1961 to 1968. *Archigram* 9 and 9 1/2 were published in 1970 and 1974 respectively. Archigram officially folded in 1974. A useful, and "in-tune," synopsis of Archigram's story is a series of cartoons drawn by Peter Cook as part of a touring exhibition about Archigram (available at: <http://www.archigram.net>).
- ²⁹ Anthony Vidler, *Histories of the Immediate Present, Inventing Architectural Modernism* (Cambridge, MA, 2008), 138.
- ³⁰ Vidler, *Histories*, 137.
- ³¹ Daniel Giralt-Miracle and Teresa Grandas, *Utopia is Possible*, information sheet for the exhibition at Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, Barcelona, 2012.
- ³² Chris Salter, *Entangled: Technology and the Transformation of Performance* (Cambridge, MA, 2010), xiii.
- ³³ This relationship to program resonates in Vidler's writings on both Archigram and Acconci. See his *Histories* for a discussion of program as well as the chapter on Acconci in *Warped Space* (Cambridge, MA, 2001), in which he uses Acconci's own statement, "The function of public art is to de-design," to summarize the artist's approach to architectural program (p. 141).
- ³⁴ Interview. An analogous and extremely rich articulation of similar territory is architect Jean Nouvel's conversation about complicity with Jean Baudrillard: "You've said you prefer complicity to complexity.... It reflects a real problem in architecture.... [O]nly through this complicity do we achieve a certain degree of complexity, which isn't an end in itself.... Complicity is the only guarantee that we'll be able to push the boundaries. If this complicity is established, it means that something more than simple comprehension is going on between people, a shared meaning, mutual assistance.... There has to be a shared dynamic, one that's often unspoken but translated into actions." Jean Baudrillard and Jean Nouvel, *The Singular Objects of Architecture* (Minneapolis, 2002), 77.
- ³⁵ Two celebrated parks are located in Munich. Von Sckell's *Englischer Garten* (1789) with its romantic vistas and idealized, formalized, and engineered "nature" is one of the largest urban parks in the world. The garden of the Baroque Nymphenburg Palace is a formal French garden with its *grand parterre* (1715-). It served as the setting for Alain Resnais's *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* (1961), a film Acconci cites as an important influence.
- ³⁶ Interview.
- ³⁷ Robert Punktenhofer, ed., *Building an Island: Vito Acconci/ Acconci Studio* (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany, 2003), 107.