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**Encountering Vito Acconci:
Performing Conceptual Art circa 1970**

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**Encountering Vito Acconci:
Performing Conceptual Art circa 1970**

by

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lens of discourse at the time about the importance of meaningful connections, face-to-face or mediated.

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“Encountering Vito Acconci: Performing Conceptual Art circa 1970” reframes Vito Acconci’s familiar oeuvre through re-uniting it with the contexts that first gave it meaning to audiences. Over the three chapters of this study I establish that Acconci began “performing” within the anti-establishment context of Conceptual Art in 1969 and continued doing so until 1974, and that his performance-based activities, which revolved around audience interaction, related to concerns at the time in the artist’s community and beyond about the nature and importance of human connection. More specifically, I show that Acconci’s performance-based activities related to social sciences discourses at the time with which the artist among others were framing ideas about human connection: *systems*, *encounters*, and *technology*. In each of three chapters I analyze several of Acconci’s activities and associated photographs, texts, diagrams, videotapes, and films alongside elements that framed them when they were first encountered by audiences: exhibition titles, other artworks, catalogue texts, reviews, and exhibition-related ephemera from the time, but also articles and books that the artist and others involved in Conceptual Art. Through examining Acconci’s practice within its original context I offer a new, more expansive perspective on his work. I also illuminate an important period in American art history, by showing that performance-based Conceptual Art was part of discourse in the United States in the social sciences and beyond about the importance of human connection in shaping experience and therefore meaning, including of art.

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Introduction

Recently, just before I introduced a screening of videotapes by Vito Acconci (b. 1940, Bronx) a well-informed contemporary art historian, among several others, confessed to me that his understanding of the artist's artwork was "mythic and little."¹ While Acconci is one of the more infamous figures associated with performance and video art circa 1970—this summer MoMA PS1 mounted an early retrospective—there



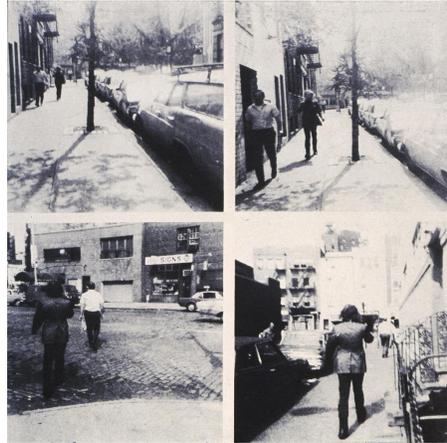
Installation view of Vito Acconci exhibiton
Vito Acconci: Where Are We Now (Who Are We Anyway?), MoMA PS1, Summer 2016
On screen left: *Watch*, 9 min, b&w, silent, super 8mm on video, 1971

are no scholarly books elucidating his seminal practice.² This study fills a lacuna in scholarship, examining Acconci's practice from 1967 through early 1974, when it revolved around what the artist called "activities," a term that usefully distinguishes his efforts from the narrative and fourth wall associated with the word "performance" because of its connection with theater. Acconci's activities, many of which took place in

¹ The screening, titled "Performance Tapes no. 4: Two by Vito Acconci," took place on 25 May 2016 at the Museum of Human Achievement in Austin, TX as part of magazine *Pastelegram*'s "Performance Tapes" series. The art historian mentioned is Dr. Andy Campbell.

² MoMA PS1's retrospective, titled "Vito Acconci: Where Are We Now (Who Are We Anyway?), 1976," was on view at the museum 19 June thru 18 September 2016. For a review of the exhibition see Holland Cotter, "Vito Acconci Invites You to Watch Him as He Watches Us," *The New York Times*, 30 June 2016, C15.

Manhattan where the artist continues to live today, often involved him doing things with other people. Yet notably, they did not generally involve face-to-face interactions. For example, in *Following Piece* (1969) Acconci, as always hirsute and clad in black, trailed



Vito Acconci, *Following Piece*, 1969

unwitting strangers on Greenwich Village streets without ever speaking to or looking at them, and without summoning anyone to watch. In *Seedbed* (1972), the artist uttered masturbatory musings beneath floorboards erected for him in SoHo's Sonnabend Gallery as gallery-goers—on a busy day there were dozens—walked above him. In this study I examine these and other activities by Acconci, as well as the photographs, texts, diagrams, videotapes, reviews, and essays through which most of us have encountered them. I use historical research to flesh out a practice that, as I show, circulated within the framework of Conceptual Art and reflected concerns about the nature of human connection—mediated and face-to-face—being debated circa 1970, at the dawn of the information age.

My work in this study is driven by two questions: Why, in 1967, three years after completing an M.F.A. in poetry from Iowa Writers' Workshop and returning home to

New York, where as a child he attended Catholic primary and a Jesuit secondary school before leaving for Holy Cross College, did Acconci begin doing activities that revolved around interactions with other people, and that he framed as art?³ What role did these activities, many performed in the Lower Manhattan neighborhoods where he and many of his peers lived and worked, play in the avant-garde Conceptual Art scene within which they gained traction? Over three chapters I answer these questions, by examining select activities by Acconci—in each chapter I focus on several exhibitions within which the artist performed activities or presented work—alongside material that illuminates the art historical and intellectual context in which these activities emerged and were first encountered by audiences. I show that Acconci’s performance-based activities involving other people were part of a context that included the anti-art-establishment spirit animating difficult-to-exhibit and difficult-to-collect efforts being framed as Conceptual Art at the time. More unusually, I shed light on links between Acconci’s work and sociological concerns about the nature and importance of human connection. I show that the latter concerns are reflected in the artist’s work—thematically, structurally—and also that they dominated his reading material and that of many others in a period defined, at least in part, by debates about social alienation and authenticity, and about the dynamics of technologically-mediated communications and of face-to-face encounters.

³ Vito Acconci was born in Bronx, NY, 24 January 1940. He went to Catholic primary school in the Bronx (Our Lady of Mercy Grammar School), a Jesuit secondary school in Manhattan (Regis High School), and a Catholic college in Worcester, Massachusetts (College of the Holy Cross). He returned to New York City after graduating with his M.F.A. from the University of Iowa’s Writers’ Workshop in 1964. By the time he returned he was married to Rosemary Mayer. They initially lived in Park Slope, Brooklyn. Vito Acconci moved to an apartment in Manhattan in 1965. For more on Acconci’s biography see Kate Linker, with Vito Acconci, *Vito Acconci* (New York: Rizzoli, 1994) 11-12.

In this study I use historical research to elucidate a seminal practice that is often circumscribed by debates that, however captivating, limit or post-date Acconci's work, such those about whether the artist was narcissistic, chauvinist, confessing, or transgressing norms of private and public spheres. Through examining Acconci's practice within its original context I offer a new, more expansive perspective on his work. I also illuminate an important period in American art history, by showing that performance-based Conceptual Art was part of discourse in the United States in the social sciences and beyond about the importance of human connection in shaping experience, including of art.

Though for many today the phrase "Conceptual Art" evokes analytic, language-based artworks—by Joseph Kosuth, for example—scholars have long observed that circa 1970 the term described various practices, including performed activities. Consider the heterogeneous definition of Conceptual Art offered by curator and writer Lucy Lippard in the title and text of her 1973 book *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972: a cross-reference book of information on some esthetic boundaries: consisting of a bibliography into which are inserted a fragmented text, art works, documents, interviews, and symposia, arranged chronologically and focused on so-called conceptual or information or idea art with mentions of such vaguely designated areas as minimal, anti-form, systems, earth, or process art, occurring now in the Americas,*

*Europe, England, Australia, and Asia (with occasional political overtones).*⁴ Lippard writes, in a volume today considered an early document about and of Conceptual Art, that the activities, proposals, photographs, charts, texts, diagrams, accounts, and other elements referenced in her book—eight entries reference Acconci—adopt an “informational . . . idiom,” or what curator, critic, and systems theorist Jack Burnham described in 1970 as a “language of administration” fitting the increasingly administered nature of life in the information age.⁵ For Lippard, the new language produced a new “critical criteria,” with which artists aimed to challenge their sense that art had become merely a commodity. While Lippard laments in her book’s *Postface*, written in 1972, that the market had already expanded to consume the results of this new criteria, she takes solace in the fact that the “esthetic contributions of an ‘idea art’” might still have a “salutary effect on the way all art is examined and developed in the future.” She clarifies at the end of the passage: while those involved with Conceptual Art had not yet “broken down” real barriers between art and those “external disciplines . . . social, scientific, and academic” from which it draws “sustenance,” and “behavioral artists” had not yet had “rewarding” exchanges with “their psychological counterparts,” she remained hopeful.

In the often-cited essay “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism,” art historian Rosalind Krauss is less supportive of the work Lippard championed while likewise

⁴ Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966-1972* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973) Reprinted 2001.

⁵ Lucy Lippard, “Postface,” *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966-1972* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973) Reprinted 2001. “Postface” 263-264. Jack Burnham, *Software: Information Technology: Its New Meaning for Art* (New York: The Jewish Museum, 1970) 10-14.

detecting in it a newfound emphasis on the body and the psyche, and experience.⁶

Krauss' text, published in the 1976 first issue of the academic journal *October*, exposes the degree to which psychoanalytic theory, by the 20th century, permeated analyses of society, including its art. The art historian's argument revolves around her use of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's theorization of "narcissism," a concept associated in the modern era with psychoanalysis' founder Sigmund Freud. While by the 1960s critiques of culture and society on university campuses and beyond in the United States had already been shaped by the teachings of Frankfurt School exiles—Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse—trained in Freudian psychology, Krauss' use of the psychoanalytic term in her critique registers the currency, by the mid-1970s, of the ideas of Lacan and other so-called post-structuralists. By 1975, when Lacan gave a trio of lectures at Columbia University, Yale University, and Massachusetts Institute of Technology, academics and others in the United States were becoming interested in post-structuralist's exposure of the instability of signs and signification, and of the importance of (the reader's) experience.

While some readers have misinterpreted Krauss in her essay to be using the psychoanalytic term to label artists with a psychological condition, in fact in the text she deploys "narcissism" to theorize a condition of artists' videos—they had been circulating in the United States since about 1970—and of other recent art. Krauss argues that artists' use of videotaping technology and other mirroring devices—she discusses tapes or installations by Acconci, Lynda Benglis, Peter Campus, Joan Jonas, Bruce Nauman, and

⁶ Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," *October* (Spring 1976): 50-64.

Richard Serra and Nancy Holt—to simultaneously record and play footage of themselves or other people is experienced by the viewer as a trapping of the body and psyche in a situation that excludes the outside world.⁷ While the art historian focuses on video, she also addresses its “corollaries,” “conceptual art and...body art.”⁸ Krauss writes that artworks falling under these categories are linked with artists’ videotapes in that they depend on replay in “mass media” for verification, therein enacting a kind of “feedback” loop that mimics the condition of narcissism, or an exclusionary focus on self.

After a decade in which painting and sculpture were perceived to gain renewed vigor and attention, in the 1990s scholars began reconsidering Conceptual Art circa 1970 and the role of the body in it, even as they—like I—resisted cordoning off associated artworks to the aesthetic and temporal boundaries evoked by the term “movement.” Such resistance was in part in deference to the lack of apparent aesthetic cohesion involved, but also to what art historian Benjamin Buchloh identified, in an influential *October* essay published in 1990 at the beginning of the new wave of scholarship, to artists’ desire to disrupt the “hegemony of the visual” in art, in perpetuity.⁹ In his essay, titled “Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,” Buchloh creates a genealogy for artworks by Dan Graham, Joseph Kosuth,

⁷ Scholars have shown that Krauss’ formal reading of videotapes in the essay has its limits. See Anne Wagner, “Performance, Video, and the Rhetoric of Presence,” *October* (Winter 2000): 59-80; Robin Williams, “Against the ‘subject’ of video, circa 1976,” MA Thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 2010.

⁸ Rosalind Krauss, “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism,” *October* (Spring 1976): 50-64. For Krauss’ discussion of “conceptual art” and “body art” see page 60.

⁹ Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of the Institutions,” *October* 55 (Winter 1990) 105-143. See page 118

Lawrence Wiener, and several others involved in Conceptual Art, tracing them to Duchamp's interrogation of the status of the object in terms of "visuality," "commodification," and "distribution," and through the exploration of perception associated with Minimalism.¹⁰ Buchloh proposes that during the period these artists were united by their critique of the "institutional" nature of aesthetics and their exposure of the role of the "audience, object, and author" in the production of meaning.¹¹

Building on Buchloh's definition, around the turn of the recent century scholars began expanding canonical understandings of Conceptual Art circa 1970 to include more than the white male North American and European artists that dominate the exhibitions and texts in this study, and more than "analytic" or "linguistic" artworks.¹² Within this scholarly context, art historian Alexander Alberro published several now-seminal texts, including "Reconsidering Conceptual Art, 1966-1977," an essay that served as the introduction to his 1999 co-edited volume *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*.¹³ In the text Alberro defines Conceptual Art as a neo-avant-garde set of practices that emerged in the 1960s, and that involved various practices that shifted the focus in art away from "the

¹⁰ Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969," 107.

¹¹ Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969," 136-141.

¹² It is beyond the scope of this study to discuss the important body of literature that expanded the Conceptual Art canon to include more than white male artists living along the North American/European axis. For a place to start, consider texts by art historian Mari Carmen Ramirez, who is among those who have effectively addressed Conceptual Art in the context of Latin America. An early important essay on this topic by Ramirez is "Blueprint Circuits: Conceptual Art and Politics in Latin America" in Rasmussen, Waldo Rasmussen, Fatima Bercht, and Elizabeth Ferrer. *Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century*, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1993).

¹³ Alexander Alberro, "Reconsidering Conceptual Art, 1966-1977," in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, eds. Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1999). xvi-xxxvii.

perceptual object.” United by “common concerns about the role of the artist, the artwork, the public, and institutions,” such practices, according to Alberro, can be divided into five paths, each associated with an artist or group of artists: “linguistic conceptualism” (Joseph Kosuth), “dismantling myths of integrated subjectivity” (Sol LeWitt), “democratizing the production and reception of art” (Lawrence Weiner), exposing the “ideological conditions of the institution of art” (Hans Haacke), and a focus on the media’s impact (Cildo Miereles). Alberro lists Bas Jan Ader, Adrian Piper, Christopher D’Arcangelo, and Vito Acconci as practitioners who like Sol LeWitt decentered focus on the artist, specifically through “steering conceptual art toward an increasing emphasis on the body.”¹⁴ Yet in this section Alberro discusses only one artwork. It is Vito Acconci’s *Following Piece* (1969), which the art historian observes revolves around interactions between the performer and others, thus exposing the role that people play in producing art’s meaning.

A number of texts published around 2000 re-defined Conceptual Art through examining the role of performance within it. Consider the 1997 *Art Journal* article “Some Relations Between Conceptual and Performance Art” by art historian Frazer Ward, co-author of one of several well-illustrated survey monographs published around the same time—art critic Kate Linker authored another—on Acconci’s work since the late 1960s.¹⁵ In the article Ward argues that Conceptual Art during the period involved performance,

¹⁴ Alberro, “Reconsidering Conceptual Art, 1966-1977,” xxx; xx-xxi.

¹⁵ Frazer Ward, “Some Relations Between Conceptual and Performance Art,” *Art Journal* (Winter 1997) 36-40. Frazer Ward, Jennifer Bloomer, and Mark C. Taylor with Vito Acconci, *Vito Acconci* (London: Phaidon, 2002). Kate Linker with Vito Acconci, *Vito Acconci* (New York: Rizzoli, 1994); Gloria Moure with Vito Acconci. *Vito Acconci* (Barcelona: Polígrafa, 2001).

which he usefully defines as temporal events or activities performed either for a live audience or for those conceived of to be viewing the activity later, through photographs or other material.¹⁶ According to Ward, performances within the context of Conceptual Art queried the effects of “relations between aesthetic production and institutional conditions” on people.¹⁷ Focusing on Vito Acconci’s *Step Piece* (1970), which involved the artist stepping up to and down from a stool in the his apartment every morning for several months, the author argues that it and other activities performed within the framework of Conceptual Art pointed to the “contingent, social construction” of subjectivity. Acconci’s activity as well as associated photographs and texts that “do some work”—such material, for example, represented the activity to audiences as early as 1972, in Ursula Meyer’s anthology *Conceptual Art*— inserted into Conceptual Art “an emphatic kind of embodiment.”¹⁸

As scholars continued to explore the role of bodies, presence, and participation in Conceptual Art—think of Janet Kraynak’s article “Dependent Participation: Bruce Nauman’s Environments” from 2003 in *Grey Room*, or Anne M. Wagner’s 2000 essay “Performance Video, and the Rhetoric of Presence” published in *October*—others

¹⁶ Ward, “Some Relations Between Conceptual and Performance Art,” see discussion in first paragraph on page 36; also page 40, footnote 2.

¹⁷ Ward, “Some Relations Between Conceptual and Performance Art,” see discussion in second column, first full paragraph page 36.

¹⁸ Ward, “Some Relations Between Conceptual and Performance Art,” 40. Ursula Meyer, *Conceptual Art* (New York: Dutton, 1972), 2-3.

focused on the meaning of bodies in Acconci's work.¹⁹ Consider "Fugitive Signs," an article published by poet and academic Craig Douglas Dworkin in *October* in 2001.²⁰ In the essay Dworkin, editor of the 2006 book *Language to Cover a Page: The Early Writings of Vito Acconci*, analyzes Acconci's "poststructural texts," some of which appeared in *0 to 9*, the mimeographed publication he and Bernadette Mayer produced from 1967 through 1969 as the context for his efforts was shifting from poetry to Conceptual Art.²¹ Dworkin argues for understanding Acconci's work from the period, from words on the page to performed interactions with people, in terms of continuity rather than rupture. All of Acconci's efforts "deny the transparency of signification," he writes, as follower and followed signify only in relation to one another.²² In a 2002 article in *October*, critic Tom McDonough takes a different approach to the meaning of presence in Acconci's work.²³ In an article titled "The Crimes of the Flaneur," the critic uses the Baudelairian notion of the *flaneur* to frame Acconci's activities with the body. In McDonough's reading, the artist inserted his presence—its feelings, its desires—into urban space in pursuit of others.

¹⁹ Janet Kraynak, "Dependent Participation: Bruce Nauman's Environments," *Grey Room* 10 (Winter 2003): 22-45; Carrie Lambert-Beatty, *Being Watched: Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008); Pamela M. Lee, *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960's* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2004); Anne Wagner, "Performance, Video, and the Rhetoric of Presence," *October* 91 (Winter 2000): 59-80.

²⁰ Craig Douglas Dworkin, "Fugitive Signs," *October* 95 (Winter 2001) 90-113.

²¹ Craig Douglas Dworkin and Vito Acconci, *Language to Cover a Page: The Early Writings of Vito Acconci* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2006); Dworkin, "Fugitive Signs," 93.

²² Dworkin, "Fugitive Signs," 93; 108.

²³ Tom McDonough, "The Crimes of the Flaneur," *October* 102 (Autumn 2002) 101-122

Examining Acconci's activities circa 1970 through the lens that first framed them for audiences—as I do over the three chapters of this study—provides a new, enriched perspective on the meaning of presence in a seminal practice from the period. It does this through showing the degree to which anxieties about the nature of human connection circulated in culture-at-large circa 1970 and also grounded efforts within the context of Conceptual Art. This answers the question of why Acconci began performing activities with other bodies in this context: he and others perceived Conceptual Art to be newly open to—newly revealing—relationships between art and concerns traditionally considered by some to be beyond its boundaries. Acconci gained traction within the context of Conceptual Art through performing tense encounters that were understood to be de-privileging aesthetic concerns and highlighting the role of experience in making meaning.

Artworks by Acconci and others involved in Conceptual Art proposed that meaning materializes through elements that frame our experiences, and in this study I follow suit. I do this by examining the artist's activities—and associated photographs, texts, diagrams, videotapes, and films—not as isolated aesthetic objects but by stacking them with elements that framed them when audiences first encountered them: exhibition titles, other artworks, catalogue texts, reviews, and exhibition-related ephemera from the time, but also articles and books that the artist—like many others involved in Conceptual Art—were reading. Through my approach, it becomes evident that Acconci's activities and such material register the currency of debates about the physical and psychological dimensions of human encounters, about what social alienation and interpersonal

authenticity look like circa 1970, about the dynamics of technologically-mediated communications and of face-to-face encounters at the dawn of the information age.

The structure of this study reflects that while there was progression in Acconci's work from 1967 through 1974 there was also continuity, especially in terms of its engagement with ideas about presence and human connection. In each chapter I build relationships between Acconci's activities and concerns about human connection by examining several exhibitions and related material from the period through a framework from the social sciences that the artist and others were using to address human connection, from the perspective of the societal (Chapter One: *Systems*), the interpersonal (Chapter Two: *Encounters*), and the technical (Chapter Three: *Technology*). Because Acconci's interests "moved" and "shifted" my discussion of activities *within* each chapter unfolds roughly chronologically, but the reader will note that there is overlap *between* chapters in terms of the years, activities, and exhibitions addressed. This reflects that Acconci's activities, like the contexts in which they circulated, sometimes simultaneously addressed human connection in terms of systems, encounters, and technology.

As I discuss in Chapter One, in the late 1960s Acconci began performing activities that involved other people within the context of Conceptual Art: requiring readers to do things with his texts in *0 to 9* (1967-1969), following strangers on the street for a grass roots poetry/art project (*Following Piece*, 1969), and asking the Museum of Modern Art's guards to watch over his mail in the exhibition *Information (Service Area*, 1970). At the same time, Acconci was among those poring over the *Whole Earth Catalog*, whose first issue was published in 1968. That issue, as I show in the chapter,

registers the currency, amongst some in the United States at the time, of systems-oriented thinking, an approach to understanding society and how people interact—among other things—through patterns, or connections. While systems theory gained momentum in the post-war period through the work of biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy and philosopher-mathematician and cyberneticist Norbert Wiener, by the late 1960s it had wider appeal, as evidenced in the *Catalog*. Its pages feature books by Bertalanffy and Wiener, but also many volumes by and about architect-designer Buckminster Fuller, whose systems-oriented approach to design, according to the magazine’s editors, informed its mission, which was to connect people with tools for resisting the gains of “government, big business, formal education...”²⁴ As Acconci’s activities within the context of Conceptual Art exposed the interdependence of artist, artwork, and audience—that these elements become meaningful through each-other—Fuller was among those arguing for greater connectivity as an antidote to society’s ills.

It is curious, as I observe in Chapter Two, that many of the activities Acconci performed circa 1970 within the context of Conceptual aggressively demanded interaction—often from audience members—yet kept face-to-face encounters and touching at bay: for *Security Zone* the artist had his eyes covered and hands bound before being led around a rotting Manhattan pier by someone he did not trust (1971); for *Claim*, a one-night performance in a first floor loft, Acconci sat in the basement, blindfolded and grasping crowbars, taunting audience members above to descend (1971); for the artist’s first solo exhibition at SoHo’s Sonnabend Gallery he performed three activities, including

²⁴ *Whole Earth Catalog* (Menlo Park, Calif: Portola Institute, Fall 1968) 2.

one that involved building a ramp beneath which he masturbated, heard but not seen (*Seedbed*, 1972). As I discuss in Chapter Two, one path to understanding the charged yet distanced interactions Acconci courted through these activities, and the associated photographs, texts, and diagrams through which they circulated to audiences, can be found in Acconci's library. Acconci's bookshelves were lined with volumes by social scientists—among them psychologist R.D. Laing, sociologist Erving Goffman, psychoanalyst Rollo May, and sociologist-philosopher Herbert Marcuse—gaining followers by focusing on *Encounters*, a psychoanalytic principal that describes the corporeal and emotional charge transferred between people, even when they do not touch or look at one another. By the period in question the term “encounter” was being used much as it is today, to refer to charged interactions in therapy and beyond. As Acconci was performing activities that hinged on tense yet distanced interactions, and his work was being framed as infiltrating art with the body and its concerns, social scientists were discussing the nature of authentic encounters, and suggesting that they were a salve for everything from the growth of the military-industrial complex to racial inequality.

As I discuss in Chapter Three, by 1973 Acconci had become concerned with continuing to perform the live activities for which he had become well-known among those involved in Conceptual Art. Before withdrawing in 1974 from using his own visual presence as the basis for his work, he experimented with using videotape technology to mediate encounters with viewers: as Acconci tried to pry open the eyes of a female co-performer in a New York University auditorium, a video feed mediated the activity live for the seated audience (*Pryings*, 1971); in *Air Time* (1973) the artist “talked to” viewers

from inside a closet, through a live televisual system that fed a television monitor in the center of the gallery; in the installation *Command Performance* (1974) Acconci ordered viewer to take his place and perform through a videotape playing on loop on a television monitor. In this chapter I discuss these and other activities, elucidating the tension—between intimacy and distance—that they materialize. I do this discussing them in relationship to concurrent debates about whether, at the onset of the information age, new technologies would bring people closer together, as media theorist Marshall McLuhan and sociologist Raymond Williams were suggesting, or would alienate them further from one-another, as sociologist Jacques Ellul and philosopher Herbert Marcuse were proposing. In Chapter Three I discuss how Acconci’s work capitalized upon the dialectical condition of televisual technology to allow for and also mitigate presence, in order to engage and activate audience members.

Within the Conceptual Art community circa 1970, Acconci gained traction for activities that involved others. Supporters and detractors alike saw his activities to be inserting the body, mind, and the therapeutic into the sphere of art and thus to be fueling the neo-avant-garde’s challenge to the idea that art is solely concerned with aesthetics and that it is autonomous from life. Acconci’s activities and their associated material participated in debates about the nature of connection—within society and between individuals, with the body and its emotions, through face-to-face and mediated interactions—as distance and proximity between people across the world were perceived to be advancing circa 1970.

In closing, let us consider how Acconci read his own work during the period. In the thirty-minute black-and-white tape *Home Movies* (1973), one of two videotapes I selected for the screening I mentioned at the beginning of this text, Acconci “performs” a slide lecture of past work for an absent “audience” in a darkened room.²⁵ In the tape, one of several the artist made while in residence at Art/Tapes/22 in Florence, Italy, Acconci’s words can be heard, but hardly anything can be seen. The artist, his back mainly to the



Home Movies, 32:19, b&w, sound, 1973

camera, remains in shadow. In the dimly lit background, images of Acconci’s work click by but they are scarcely readable. The artist describes the images flickering by, though only briefly: “...She has her eyes closed and I’m trying to open them...This is an attempt to trust someone I really don’t trust...Masturbating, I’m under a floor, I’m having fantasies about people above that floor...” Acconci did not value the images for their aesthetics, but as signifiers of interactions. Every few minutes, the artist interrupts his own “lecture” by turning “off stage” to have an imaginary encounter with an ex-girlfriend: “...This is when she was living with us...you wanted a child...” Occasionally,

²⁵ For details on the screening see page 1, footnote 1. The two tapes by Vito Acconci I selected for the screening were: *Pryings*, 17:10, b&w, sound, 1971; *Home Movies*, 32:19, b&w, sound, 1973.

he turns to face the camera. In these moments he stands in front of the images. As pictures of his work project onto his body he tells us how to read his practice, saying: “...What I’m concerned with is a system of pieces... It’s not so much revelation...It’s a way of meeting people in a situation...” If the themes and structure of *Home Movies* provide a key to the artist’s practice, the videotape makes it clear that Acconci’s work circa 1970 engaged systems, encounters, and technology in order to explore the role that human connection—experience—plays in how we make meaning, including from art.

Chapter One: Systems

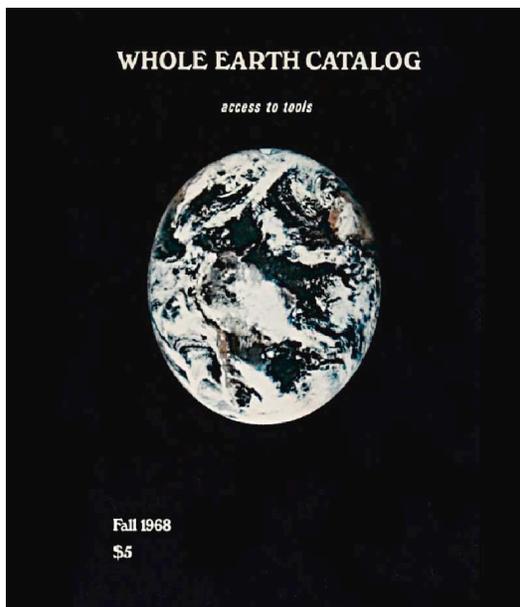
In this chapter I first demonstrate Acconci's exposure to discourse about "systems" circa 1968 through finding evidence of it in the *Whole Earth Catalog* that he and many others were reading at the time. I then use the notion of "systems" to illuminate the artist's circa 1968 shift from positioning his activities within what he perceived to be the autonomy-bound framework of poetry to what he saw as the more interdisciplinary context of Conceptual Art. I elucidate this shift through examining three projects Acconci was involved with during the period: his mimeographed poetry and art magazine *0 to 9*, which ran from 1967 to 1969; *Street Works*, a 1969 grass-roots project for which Acconci made *Following Piece*, among other pieces; and the Museum of Modern Art's 1970 exhibition *Information*, for which the artist developed the performance-based piece *Service Area*.

Systems

According to Acconci, the *Whole Earth Catalog* was the most important magazine of its time, and when its first issue came out in fall 1968 he and his peers immediately began "obsessing" over its pages.¹ The *Catalog*, in its various sections, included entries on everything from building geodesic domes to mushroom beds ("Shelter and Land Use"), engineering to sculpting ("Industry and Craft"), kibbutzim to

¹ Vito Acconci and Bernadette Mayer, *0 to 9: The Complete Magazine: 1967-1969* (Brooklyn, NY: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2006) 7; Vito Acconci, interview by Judith O. Richards, 21 June 2008, Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Unpublished Transcript Page 46. *Whole Earth Catalogue* was first published in fall 1968. *Whole Earth Catalog* (Menlo Park, Calif: Portola Institute, Fall 1968). Originally unpaginated but page numbers later added.

group dynamics (“Community”), survival to hot springs locating (“Nomadics”), television production to computer science (“Communication), and meditation to *The I Ching* (“Learning”). The *Catalog*’s expansive title and now-iconic first cover image of the earth from space suggest what its editors made clear in a note on the issue’s second page: the magazine’s purpose was to promote “tools” to enable “personal power” in the face of gains by “government, big business, formal education, [and] church...” This statement reflects a sense of alienation that, as I discuss further in Chapter Two,



philosopher Herbert Marcuse, amongst many others, was attributing to an increasingly administered society of people who were increasingly isolated, and as a result were becoming less empathetic toward others and less able to summon the sense of agency needed to effect change.² This, it was being theorized, was allowing for the continuation of inhumane operations abroad, in Southeast

Asia, and at home. If the *Catalog*’s editors framed its contents in anti-establishment terms as a way to relieve urgent social ills, they delivered by including as “tools” on the magazine’s pages books, catalogues, and pamphlets that would help people connect more

² In 1959 Arnold Kaufman described his book, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, as about “modern man’s alienation.” Walter Arnold Kaufmann, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York: Meridian Books, 1956) back cover.

meaningfully with each other and the earth, and therefore operate more productively as one system.

The *Catalog*'s first section, titled "Understanding Whole Systems," features resources on everything from trantric art to the writings of Carl Jung, but it is particularly rich with references to systems and systems-oriented thinking, an approach defined by understanding the world and its elements not from an ontological perspective but by observing how distinct elements connect and act together.³ The *Catalog*'s editors' introduce the first section with a note to readers that "the insights of Buckminster Fuller are what initiated this catalog."⁴ This is followed by entries on several books by Fuller, in which the architect's holistic, systems-oriented approach is highlighted. For example, Fuller's 1963 title *Ideas and Integrities: A Spontaneous Autobiographic Disclosure* is represented by a photograph of its cover and an excerpt from it that reads: "I define 'synergy' as...the unique behavior of whole systems, unpredicted by behavior of their respective subsystems events." On the pages devoted to Fuller in the *Catalog* editors also included diagrams, notes, and drawings by the architect that conjure his notion that, in his words as re-printed in the magazine, "...you do not belong to you. You belong to the universe."⁵

³ For more on systems theory, its early history, and applications to post-formalist thinking about art see: Francis Halsall, *Systems of Art* (Oxford, Bern: Peter Lang, 2008) 23.

⁴ *Whole Earth Catalog*, 3.

⁵ *Whole Earth Catalog*, 3-4. Other books by Fuller featured in the *Catalog*'s pages devoted to him: *Nine Chains to the Moon* (1938), *No More Secondhand God* (1953), and *The Unfinished Epic of Industrialization* (1963).

Also in the first section of the *Catalog* is an entry on *General Systems Yearbook*, which the *Catalog*'s editors introduce to readers as a publication whose articles reflect the reach of systems in theory in examining the “common dynamics” of such seemingly disparate realms as “...[the] Social, Psychological, Games, Linguistic, Political, Cybernetic and Meteorological.”⁶ The editors also note that the *Yearbook* was co-initiated, in 1956, by biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy, and that he is credited with founding general systems theory, which proposes that a collection of components become meaningful through connecting and organizing together.⁷ In the introduction to Bertalanffy's 1968 book *General Systems Theory*, which features his essays on the topic, the author clarifies.⁸ Bertalanffy writes, under the heading “Systems Everywhere,” that in response to “modern technologies” systems-oriented thinking has arisen across disciplines, “from physics and biology to the behavioral and social sciences and to philosophy.”⁹ “If someone were to analyze current notions and fashionable catchwords,” Bertalanffy observes, “he would find ‘systems’ high on the list. The concept has pervaded all fields of science and penetrated into popular thinking, jargon and mass media...”¹⁰ As evidence of the influence of general systems theory Bertalanffy notes that “systems” was the focus of the most-attended session at a recent American Psychiatric

⁶ *Whole Earth Catalog*, 8.

⁷ The *Yearbook* was co-initiated by Anatol Rapoport.

⁸ Ludwig von Bertalanffy, *General System Theory; Foundations, Development, Applications* (New York: Braziller, 1968). Essays date from as early as the 1940s.

⁹ Bertalanffy, *General System Theory*, Introduction 3-17, quotes vii, 4.

¹⁰ Bertalanffy, *General System Theory*, 3.

Association conference, and that it undergirds a popular politician's platform, which reads, "The essential factors in public problems, issues, policies, and programs must always be considered and evaluated as interdependent components of a total system."¹¹

The extent of interest in systems theory circa 1970 is further evidenced in the *Catalog* in its two entries on books by Norbert Wiener, the founder of cybernetics, a branch of systems theory that applies its ideas "far beyond technology," according to Bertalanffy, to society and communication.¹² Reprinted in the *Catalog* is an excerpt from Wiener's 1954 book *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society*, in which the cyberneticist articulates the social utility of applying systems theory to communication: "...society can only be understood through a study of the messages and the communication facilities that belong to it...in the future development of these messages and communication facilities, messages between man and machine and between machine and machine, are destined to play an ever-increasing part."¹³ A note to readers accompanying the *Catalog's* entry on Wiener's 1948 book *Cybernetics: or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machines* reveals the breadth of interest at the time in viewing bodies and computers as connected. The note reads: "McLuhan's assertion that computers constitute an extension of the human nervous system is an accurate historical statement...Society, from organism to community to

¹¹ "When a room holding 1,500 people is so jammed that hundreds stand through an entire morning session, the subject must be one in which the audience is keenly interested. This was the situation at the symposium on the use of a general systems theory in psychiatry..." Bertalanffy writes of a 1967 meeting. The quote is from the platform of a Canadian Premier. Bertalanffy, *General System Theory*, 7.

¹² This is how Bertalanffy describes Wiener. Bertalanffy, *General System Theory*, 15.

¹³ Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings, Cybernetics and Society* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 1950, 1954 reprint).

civilization to universe, is the domain of cybernetics. Norbert Wiener has the story, and to some extent is the story.”¹⁴

Circa 1970 systems-oriented thinking was being applied far beyond the social sciences, and this evidenced in the *Catalog*’s entry on John Cage’s 1967 book *A Year From Monday*. The entry features an excerpt from Cage’s in which the author reflects the sense of urgency he felt for approaching the world through “connection” rather than “isolation” and notes his changing influences:

...I believe—and am acting upon—Marshal McLuhan’s statement that we have through electronic technology produced an extension of our brains to the world formerly outside of us. To me that means that the disciplines, gradual and sudden (principally Oriental), formerly practiced by individuals to pacify their minds...must now be practiced socially...in the world where our central nervous system now is. This has brought it about that the work and thought of Buckminster Fuller is of prime importance to me. He more than any other...sees the world situation—all of it—clearly and has reasoned projects for turning our attention away from ‘killingly’ toward ‘livingly’...I had studied with Richard Buhlig, Henry Cowell, Arnold Schoenberg, Daisetsu Suzuki, Guy Nearing. Now I’m studying with N.O. Brown, Marshal McLuhan, Buckminster Fuller, Marcel Duchamp.¹⁵

As Cage concludes, his “teachers” had been mainly musicians and poets, but by the late 1960s they included a social philosopher, a media theorist, and an architect. This suggests a shift occurring amongst some avant-gardes: toward viewing the practice of art not as autonomous but as involving other disciplines and as part of a larger system.

0 to 9

By the late 1960s Vito Acconci, having returned home to New York City in 1964 with an M.F.A. from Iowa Writers’ Workshop, had become unsatisfied with the poetry

¹⁴ *Whole Earth Catalog*, 34.

¹⁵ *Whole Earth Catalog*, 8.

context in which he had been circulating his work. To Acconci, the framework of poetry was burdened by modernist notions of autonomy and the framework of Conceptual Art was not. As Acconci saw and described it, the “non-field-field” of Conceptual Art was appealing because it offered him the freedom to engage with other disciplines, to connect his efforts within a larger context.¹⁶ With these concerns as a backdrop, in spring 1967 Acconci and poet Bernadette Mayer published the first issue of *0 to 9*, the mimeographed magazine they would produce through summer 1969, for a total of six issues. With *0 to 9* Acconci and Mayer have stated they aimed to “expose” language and also, it seems, to reach artists.¹⁷ With respect to this, consider *0 to 9*’s title, which is in homage to Jasper Johns whose *0 through 9* series, among other works dating from the 1950s and 1960s, were perceived by some to be challenging boundaries between art and other disciplines by materializing signs and foregrounding their immaterial nature. Copies of *0 to 9*, which the editors put together from submissions sent to Acconci’s Lower East Side and then West Village apartment and mimeographed at night in a borrowed New Jersey office, were sent not only to writers, but also to artists. Acconci and Mayer hand-delivered a portion of the several-hundred copies they printed of each *0 to 9* to local bookstores, and

¹⁶ In the *0 to 9* archive at New York University’s Fales Library there are letters by poet Aram Saroyan, one dated September 11, 1967, in which he alludes to the fact that both he and Acconci are trying to deflect the “concrete” term being thrown at their work.

¹⁷ Vito Acconci and Bernadette Mayer, *0 to 9: The Complete Magazine: 1967-1969* (Brooklyn, NY: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2006) 7.

sent the rest to those on their mailing list, which from the beginning included many of the visual artists whose work they eventually featured in their magazine.¹⁸

As *0 to 9* went into production in spring 1967 Acconci was among those seeing art exhibitions and reading texts that indicated some avant-garde artists in New York were interested in engaging material and ideas that had been the province of other disciplines, particularly linguistics.¹⁹ In summer 1967 consider that Acconci was likely among those who saw the first of Dwan Gallery's infamous shows on "language"—there would be four through 1970—in midtown.²⁰ Also in summer 1967, Acconci may have read the first printing of Sol LeWitt's *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art* on the pages of the magazine *Artforum*, which had just opened New York City offices.²¹ In the months following, Acconci likely came across Lucy Lippard and John Chandler essay *The Dematerialization of Art* in the magazine *Art International* and flipped through Seth Siegelau's *Xerox Book*, a page-bound exhibition featuring contributions by Robert

¹⁸ For more information and background on *0 to 9* see *0 to 9: The Complete Magazine*. For more on Acconci's perspective, particularly on sending *0 to 9* to artists and poets, see Thurston Moore, *0 to 9 and Back Again: An Interview with Vito Acconci* (Florence, MA: Ecstatic Peace, 2006). Unpaginated. See also letters from Dan Flavin and John Cage in *0 to 9* archive at Fales Library. *0 to 9*'s print runs varied from 100 to 350 copies. Acconci and Mayer mimeographed the magazine at Mayer's boyfriend's father's office in New Jersey, using materials they purchased at an office supply store. Copies were distributed to local bookstores such as Gotham Book Mart and East Side Books and sent to subscribers and others on their list. At the time of the publication of the April 1967 first issue of *0 to 9* Acconci was living at 217 Bowery. When the August 1967 second issue was published Acconci was living at 383 Broome Street. It appears this remained his address until the July 1969 sixth issue came out, when he was living at 102 Christopher.

¹⁹ Vito Acconci, *0 to 9 and Back Again*, Unpaginated. Vito Acconci. Vito Acconci, *Whitney Seminar With Artists*, 23 October 1980, Whitney Museum of American Art, transcribed by the author.

²⁰ Dwan Gallery, which existed at 29 West 57th in New York, NY from 1965 through June 1971, opened *Language to be Looked at and/or Things to be Read* on 3 June 1967. *Language II, III, and IV* opened there respectively on 25 May 1968, 24 May 24 1969, and 2 June 1970.

²¹ Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs On Conceptual Art," *Artforum* 5:10 (Summer 1967) 79-84. In 1967 *Artforum* moved its editorial offices from Los Angeles to New York City.

Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth, Sol LeWitt, and Lawrence Wiener.²² All of these artists, except Kosuth, were eventually published on the pages of *0 to 9*.

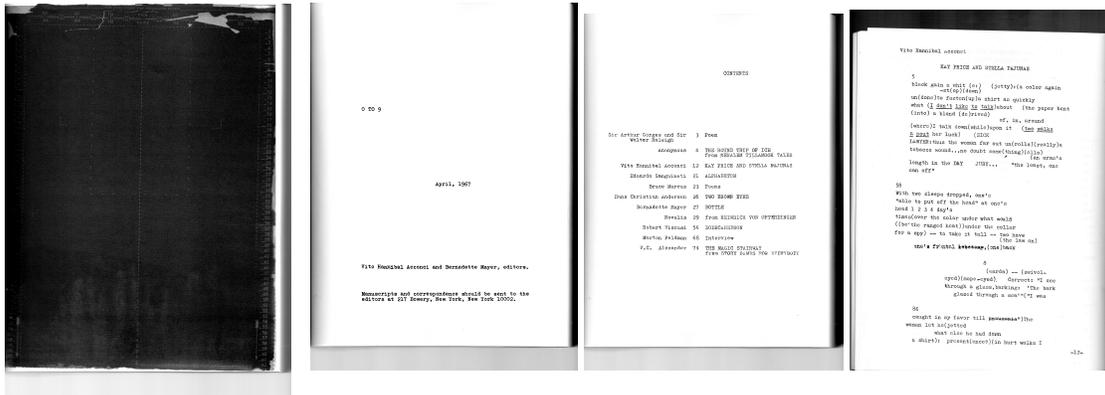
At the same time, Acconci recalls that he was beginning to hear “Conceptual Art” as a term to describe these efforts.²³ The phrase was gaining an initial definition to frame artworks, according to LeWitt in *Paragraphs*, that “engage the mind of the viewer rather than his eye or emotions,” and according to Lippard and Chandler in *Dematerialization*, that turn the “studio” into a “study,” demand viewer participation and experience, are “involved with opening up rather than narrowing down,” and that acknowledge that works of art connect with—refer to—much beyond themselves.²⁴ In other words, artworks gain meaning through circulating within a system.

With *0 to 9*’s strikingly tactile covers—a rainfall map of the United States, crumpled paper, actual dust jackets—Acconci and Mayer framed its page-bound contents with a context that extended far beyond the traditional boundaries of poetry. The editors covered the first issue of their magazine with mimeograph sheets, summoning process and production. Inside, the issue’s list of contributors reflects the editor’ eclectic

²² Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler, “The Dematerialization of Art,” *Art International* 12:2 (February 1968) 31-36. Seth Siegelau collaborated with John Wendler on *Xerox Book*, published in December 1968. The project involved Carl Andre, Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth, Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris, Lawrence Weiner, who were each asked to make a twenty-five-page work on 8 1/2" x 11" paper, which was then photocopied and printed into a book.

²³ Acconci, *0 to 9 and Back Again*, Unpaginated.

²⁴ LeWitt, *Paragraphs On Conceptual Art*, 79-84; Lippard and Chandler, *The Dematerialization of Art*, 31-36.



Left to right: Cover, Title Page, and Table of Contents of *0 to 9*, Issue One, April 1967
 Far right: Vito Acconci, *0 to 9*, Issue One, April 1967, *Kay Price and Stella Pajunas* (excerpt)

approach to literature: it includes Hans Christian Anderson, Italian avant-gardes Edoardo Sanguineti and Robert Viscusi, sixteenth-century courtiers Sirs Arthur Gorges and Walter Raleigh, and an anonymous Native American. Acconci has said that he was using “language to cover a space rather than to uncover a meaning” at the time, and his nine-page contribution to the issue, *Kay Price and Stella Pajunas*, bears that out.²⁵ It does not meet the expectation many have of poetry that it transport the reader with narrative or imagistic text. The piece begins with a mouthful, “black gain a whit (e) (jetty) : (a color again),” and continues with visually-striking syntax and spacing, concluding on its second page with: “LOCK: flocciPaunihilipilification:head-.” Sections begin at various tabs, are numbered out of order, and are interrupted by punctuation and letter sequences that challenge the reader to sound them out. Even the piece’s cumbersome title—Price and Pajunas were winners of a recent typing contest—requires a slow, second read. *Kay*

²⁵ This is how Acconci described his work from the period in *Avalanche*, 6 (Fall 1972) 4. It is also the title of the book he co-published on his writing with Dworkin, *Language to Cover a Page: The Early Writings of Vito Acconci* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2006). Vito Acconci, “Kay Price and Stella Pajunas,” *0 to 9* 1 (April 1967) 12-20.

Price and Stella Pajunas, with its typographic and phonic play, cannot be interpreted in a traditional literary sense. If Acconci's poem is "about" anything, it is about the experience of trying to create meaning from a page.

By the time Acconci and Mayer were putting together the fourth issue of *0 to 9* in summer 1968, it seems they were only marginally concerned with the genre of poetry. The July 1968 fourth issue, which the editors covered with used paperback jackets, includes more entries by artists, including John Giorno, Sol LeWitt, and Dan Graham, dancer Steve Paxton, and musician Phil Corner, than writers. Many contributions to the issue funnel the reader's attention from the page to what was happening beyond it. Consider, for example, Giorno's *Groovy and Linda*, which telescoped between two recent events in the East Village: a death—"A teen-aged girl A teen-aged girl from a wealthy Connecticut family a wealthy Connecticut family and a tattooed 21-year-old hippie were found..."—and a Jim Morrison performance—"He walked languidly He walked languidly to the microphone to the microphone..."²⁶ Pivoting amongst such fragmentary accounts, the reader conjures the events as well as Giorno's connection to them. The next entry, by Judson Dance Theater's Paxton, is a score for a dance titled *Satisfyin Lover* that involves groups of people wearing "casual" clothes walking, falling, and sitting at prescribed intervals. Included in Paxton's score are two pages of notes from him to the reader, in which he stipulates, among other things, that dancers should record their own rehearsal absences.²⁷ The issue also includes Sol LeWitt's *Drawings*, which features

²⁶ John Giorno, "Groovy and Line," *0 to 9* 4 (June 1968) 18-26.

²⁷ Steve Paxton, "Satisfyin Lover," *0 to 9* 4 (June 1968) 27-30.

diagrams populated by numbers and equations.²⁸ The piece suggests that math and planning are involved in LeWitt's artistic process, and therefore also in his aesthetic forms.

Acconci's contribution to the fourth issue of *0 to 9* is six pieces collectively titled *Poems* that evoke the various components—beyond contemplation—involved in writing and reading.²⁹ One of the six pieces conjures for its reader the act of typing with: “But he placed the copy...at the right side of the typewriter...you placed the fingertips of your left hand over the keys...”³⁰ Another features passages that are stricken throughout, as if they are in the midst of being revised: “~~reading is getting the meaning of something written...by interpreting its characters or signs...reading is uttering aloud printed or written matter...writing is forming or inserting words, letters, symbols, etc on a surface, as by cutting, carving, or, especially, marking with a pen or pencil...typewriter, etc...~~”³¹ The penultimate piece in the group encourages the reader to reflect on his or her role in the process of making meaning: “He is reading – that is, getting the meaning by interpreting the characters of signs...He is reading – in other words, understanding the nature or significance as if by reading.”³² Acconci ends this piece by breaking the fourth wall: “Note here that you are finished reading this, and how you feel about it now that it

²⁸ Sol LeWitt, “Drawings,” *0 to 9 4* (June 1968) 89-90.

²⁹ Vito Hannibal Acconci, “Poems,” *0 to 9 4* (June 1968) 51-64.

³⁰ Vito Hannibal Acconci, “Poems: Staples,” *0 to 9 4* (June 1968) 52-53.

³¹ Vito Hannibal Acconci, “Poems,” *0 to 9 4* (June 1968) 54-55.

³² Vito Hannibal Acconci, “Poems: Treed,” *0 to 9 4* (June 1968) 57.

is over.”³³ In effect, the note hinges the meaning of the piece on the experience of the reader.

The last two editions of *0 to 9* reflect the tenor of debates at the time about how meaning is made through the interplay of images, language, and experience. The cover of the fifth issue, published January 1969, features an image of crumpled paper that proposes the magazine’s content will reject writing’s traditional support. The issue’s first entry, Sol LeWitt’s *Sentences On Conceptual Art*, is more irreverent, offering thirty-five reflections that suggest an artwork’s meaning may be determined by much more than its appearance: “1. Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists...3. Illogical judgments lead to new experience...10. Ideas alone can be works of art...that may eventually find some form...24. Perception is subjective...35. These sentences comment on art but are not art.”³⁴ The issue also includes a six-page essay by Les Levine titled *The Disposable Transient Environment*. It includes Levine’s suggestion that instead of making objects for contemplation artists should dissolve the “separation between living time and thinking time.”³⁵ Other contributions to the issue suggest the same concern—that art should make you think, especially about the various components involved in making meaning from art—more obliquely. For example, Adrian Piper’s two entries involve numeric tables buried amongst notes that summon mathematics, and the artist’s

³³ Vito Hannibal Acconci, “Poems: Treed,” *0 to 9* 4 (June 1968) 58.

³⁴ Sol LeWitt, “Sentences on Conceptual Art,” *0 to 9* 5 (January 1969) 3-5.

³⁵ Les Levine, “The Disposable Transient Environment,” *0 to 9* 5 (January 1969) 41-47.

engagement with that discipline.³⁶ Robert Smithson's contribution to the issue, *Non-Site Map of Mono Lake, California*, consists of a blank page framed by a strip of map.³⁷ The emptied image does little to conjure for the viewer the titular lake, but much to prompt questions about its meaning in relationship to art and the artist.

Other entries in the issue use the forum of the magazine to spark an event that, in Acconci's works, "keeps going, off the page," at least in the imagination.³⁸ Yvonne Rainer contributed *Lecture for a Group of Expectant People*, an eight-page script—"I really don't like being up here; I don't like this kind of separation. I like the idea of creating a situation and becoming a part of it along with the rest of you..."—that evokes for the reader the experience of being in a lecture hall for Rainer's talk.³⁹ John Perreault's instructions for three "poetry events"—lighting matches, taping windows, reciting the word "rainbow"—summon visions of what is described.⁴⁰ Acconci contributed three pieces to the issue, two of which require the reader to use not just imagination, but actual labor. One piece is a footer that appears—it is not listed in the table of contents—at the bottom of dozens of other entries in the issue. In each appearance the unexplained appendage involves the word "moving" as well as another word—as in "moving art" or

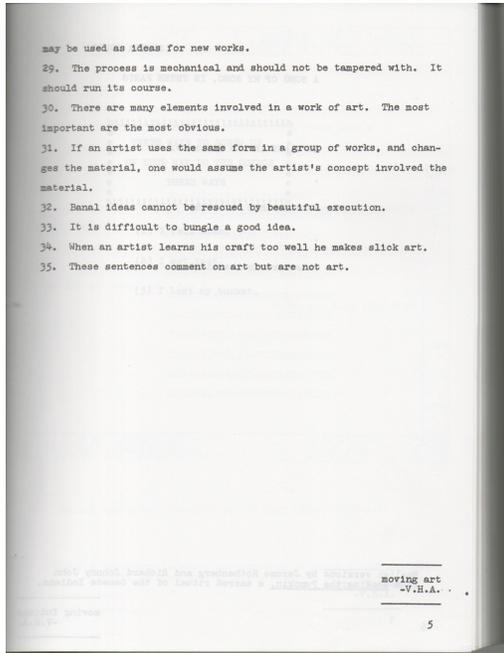
³⁶ Adrian Piper, "Untitled," *0 to 9 5* (January 1969) 49-52.

³⁷ Robert Smithson, "Non-Site Map of Mono Lake, California," *0 to 9 5* (January 1969) 9.

³⁸ Acconci, *Avalanche* 6 (Fall 1972) 4.

³⁹ Yvonne Rainer, "Lecture for a Group of Expectant People," *0 to 9 5* (January 1969) 12.

⁴⁰ John Perreault, "Three Poetry Events," *0 to 9 5* (January 1969) 11. Perreault notes in his piece that the events occurred on: 5 November 1968 at Orient Espresso Coffee House (batches, rainbow) and 1 November 1968 at Longview Country Club, an annex of Max's Kansas City (taping).



Left and right: Vito Acconci's contributions to *0 to 9*, Issue Five, January 1967; Untitled, *Four Pages*

“not moving”—and below that the letters “V.H.A.” After puzzling over several of these insertions, the reader may realize that in each case the word attached to the present participle is also the last word of the entry on that page, and that “V.H.A.” are Acconci’s initials (Vito Hannibal Acconci). Acconci created another sort of game of connection with *Act 3, Scene 4*.⁴¹ Beginning on page sixty-five of the issue, it consists of six pages that are blank, except for the piece’s title and a single line of text, inserted in a different location in each copy of the issue. For example, in one copy, the line “across the lake region, the middle Mississippi Valley, and” appears on the third page of the piece. Acconci explains in a note at the end of the piece: “The line you have read is the 208th of a 350 line piece; the rest appears in the other 349 copies of 0 to 9 number 5.” The reveal raises more questions than it answers: Who has the other copies of the issue? If all copies

⁴¹ Vito Acconci, “Act 3, Scene 4,” *0 to 9* 5 (January 1969). This piece appears on different pages in each copy of the issue.

of the issue were gathered, what would the full text say? Such questions, along with the experience of decoding the puzzle, constitute the work.

For *0 to 9*'s final issue, published in July 1969, the editors chose covers consisting of six blank pages, a gesture that evokes Acconci's game from the previous issue and pays homage to the magazine's six-issue-long challenge to page-bound linguistic traditions. Given the editors' initial inspiration for the magazine, it is fitting that they begin their last issue with a contribution by Jasper Johns. His *Sketchbook Notes* features no sketches but lots of notes, including a list, titled "EMBOSS," of some of the unlikely things the artist seemed to be considering materializing into art objects: "Flag," "Slice of Bread?," "Paper bag with Duchamp's signature (get photo from Bob Benson)," and "Ale Cans."⁴² In the issue Lee Lozano published *Dialogue Piece*, a text about inviting people over "to have dialogues, not to make a piece" that uses wit to seriously interrogate formalist, object-based definitions of art as separate from other realms of life.⁴³ Douglas Huebler's contribution to the issue activates the page and the reader's experience through an otherwise blank sheet of paper that contains the following note: "The point represented above...fixes, for an instant, each and every other point located within the physical space of this room and continues to do so for the entire time that this page is open...but it immediately ceases to exist when the page is turned."⁴⁴ For his contribution, Robert Barry discarded materiality almost entirely, leaving a trace of his piece only in the

⁴² Jasper Johns, "Sketchbook Notes," *0 to 9* 6 (July 1969) 1-2.

⁴³ Lee Lozano, "Dialogue Piece," *0 to 9* 6 (July 1969) 10.

⁴⁴ Douglas Huebler, "Unittled," *0 to 9* 6 (July 1969) 54.

issue's table of contents. There, it is listed as "The Space Between Pages 29 & 30" and "The Space Between Pages 74 & 75."⁴⁵

Acconci's contribution to the last *0 to 9* occupies ten pages toward the front of the issue, yet it colonizes an area much greater. *CONTACTS/CONTEXTS (FRAME OF REFERENCE): ten pages of reading Roget's Thesaurus* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965), is what it says it is: a typed record of an episode in which Acconci sat down with a copy of a thesaurus and let it lead him from entry to entry.⁴⁶ The first word, "Existence," sent Acconci to the three-hundred-and-sixtieth, "Life," and so forth. Since Acconci situated the piece's title discretely on the page that precedes it, most readers encounter the piece initially without its explanation, and so the list reads like a series of non-sequiturs. Yet as the reader solves the riddle and imagines the process that generated it, connections between the page and realms beyond unfold exponentially, and the piece conjures the idea that words gain meaning through connecting with other elements within a system.

Street Works

The last issue of *0 to 9* came with a supplement that connected readers with activities in the streets. The stapled supplement's cover sheet reads: "STREET WORKS: March 15, 1969, April 18, 1969, May 25, 1969," and *0 to 9*'s readers at the time needed

⁴⁵ Robert Barry, "The Space Between Pages 29 & 30," *0 to 9* 6 (July 1969).

⁴⁶ Vito Acconci, "Contacts/Contexts (Frame of Reference): Ten Pages of Reading Roget's Thesaurus (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965)," *0 to 9* 6 (July 1969) 17-26. See also a related book-length work by Acconci from the period. Acconci, Vito, and Peter Mark Roget. *Transference: Roget's Thesaurus* (New York: 0 to 9 Books, 1969).

no further explanation. Many of them knew about, or were involved with, *Street Works*, a downtown guerrilla poetry/art project that Acconci, Scott Burton, Eduardo Costa, Giorno, Mayer, Perreault, Marjorie Strider, and Hannah Weiner were organizing. Led informally by Perreault, this loose group of people, all but two of whom were also *0 to 9* contributors, gathered weekly in Perreault's Greenwich Village apartment to create events—they initially planned just one—that would connect literary, visual, and performing arts, and that would draw audiences for their experiments off the page, in Manhattan's streets.⁴⁷

Performing live was not new to most people in the group. Many had been participating in spoken word events in lower east side coffeehouses and nearby lofts.⁴⁸ For example, in May 1968 Acconci, Perreault, Burton, Clark Coolidge, Michael Benedikt, and several other *0 to 9* contributors shared billing in a “Poetry Event” to celebrate the publication of “The Young American Poets” at Robert Rauschenberg's Lafayette Street loft.⁴⁹ The performers took an expanded approach toward literary tradition—the program's list of media includes “typewriter,” “rubber,” “film,” “flashlights,” “shoes,” “girls,” and “helium”—yet the event was framed in terms of

⁴⁷ John Perreault, interview with author, 18 September 2011, email. See also John Perreault and Judy Collischan, *In Plain Sight: Street Works and Performances : 1968-1971*. (Lakewood, Colo: Lab at Belmar, 2008). Unpaginated exhibition catalogue. Evidence that the group initially did not plan a second event is suggested by the fact that they titled their first event *Street Works*, not *Street Works I*.

⁴⁸ For more on the spoken word events happening in Lower East Side coffee houses such as Les Deux Megots and Le Metro see: Gwen Allen, *Artists' Magazines: An Alternative Space for Art*, 71.

⁴⁹ Material about this event can be found in the *0 to 9* archive held at New York University's Fales Library. Event took place on 25 May 1968 in Rauschenberg's Lafayette Street loft. According to the program, which is in the archive, it was titled a “Poetry Event...in celebration of the publication of The Young American Poets.” A program for the event is also included in the *In Plain Sight* exhibition catalogue. Acconci also refers to the event in *0 to 9 and Back Again*.

writing: participants were introduced to the invited audience by their publication histories.

When Acconci and the others were planning their first *Street Works* event they were, according to Perreault, aiming for new contexts: they wanted to make activities “outside of the establishment” and in the streets, in order to reach more than the “usual art audience.”⁵⁰ Given the anarchical spirit animating the effort, it is appropriate that the group planned their first *Street Works* event for the ides of March.⁵¹ Over twenty-four hours beginning the morning of Saturday, March 15 the event’s seven organizers, along with twelve other poets, artists, critics, and performers, including, Levine, Lippard, Meredith Monk, and Mr. T (Thomas Lannigan Schmidt), performed activities on sidewalks in midtown within a twenty-block radius that included busy Rockefeller Center.⁵² With such a large temporal and physical footprint and trafficked location, and no printed material to tell people where, when, or how to identify a “street work,” as the organizers called their efforts, it is understandable that everyone—passersby, organizers, invited visitors, and participants alike—had trouble distinguishing the event’s activities

⁵⁰ John Perreault, “Art On The Street,” *Village Voice*, 27 March 1969, 17-18. On page 17 Perreault writes: that the event was “intended mostly for those who were in the area, shopping, strolling, and doing various Saturday mid-town things during the natural course of their lives, rather than for the usual art audience....One of the most important aspects of Street Work seemed to be what it did to those who participated.” Perreault conveyed similar sentiments in interview with author, 18 September 2011, email. In *In Plain Sight* catalogue he wrote that the goal of the events was to disrupt “the usual boundaries separating art and poetry, writing, and performance.”

⁵¹ The first event took place on 15 March 1969. See material in *In Plain Sight* catalogue.

⁵² The perimeter stretched from 42nd street to 52nd and from Madison Avenue to 6th Avenue. See material in *In Plain Sight* catalogue.

from the “everyday” proceedings around them.⁵³ Even Perreault missed most of the street works, which were in any case “practically ‘invisible,’” as he wrote in his regular *Village Voice* “Art” column following the event.⁵⁴ After doing his own street work—placing calls from one phone booth to the next across the area, resulting in a map connecting the points into a system—Perreault left midtown exhausted, hearing later at a party who had done what. Before leaving midtown Perreault did see Strider hang more than a dozen empty picture frames. A bewildered passerby grabbed one of these to take home, telling a *New York Times* reporter that he was pleased to have something free to give his wife.⁵⁵

Meanwhile, Mayer shot Polaroid images and attached them to adjacent surfaces as part of her street work, and while doing so confused a group of protestors—outside a department store, against fur—for a street work. Elsewhere, Levine dropped tissues printed with “dirty” words and Giorno inscribed sidewalks with “John Giorno’s Dial-a-poem/628-0400.” Weiner managed to complete one of the activities she planned for the event—affixing blank stickers to things and people—but not the other: she was supposed to rendezvous with a psychotherapist who shared her name, but amidst the mayhem they never connected. Dealer Virginia Dwan stopped by, but left after mistaking a group of bystanders that included Kosuth for a political gathering. A policeman confused Mr. T’s “Miss Madison Avenue Teenage Queen of Arts Contest” questionnaires for advertisements and nearly confiscated them, but allowed their distribution to continue after determining that they were only “religious” in nature. Lippard tried to draw with

⁵³ John Perreault, “Art On The Street,” *Village Voice*, 27 March 1969, 17-18.

⁵⁴ John Perreault, “Art On The Street,” 17.

⁵⁵ *New York Times*, 17 March 1969, 44 L.

chalk around every poet she saw, yet she only managed to complete one circle: it was around Acconci.⁵⁶

It is fitting that Lippard used chalk, a tentative and ephemeral medium, to yoke Acconci to the term “poetry” when he was trying to slip away from that label, as he noted to her at the time.⁵⁷ Acconci wanted to circulate his work instead within what he felt was the wider context provided by “art.” The three activities Acconci contributed to the first *Street Works* event evidence his distance from literary conventions and interest in using his body to explore the way things, concepts, and people connect. Acconci slapped buses with stickers that stated the time and location when he did so, fastened mailboxes with directions to their twins elsewhere in the city, and walked the same path up and down three blocks for three hours.⁵⁸ Puzzled crowds gathered for the last activity, and they were not the only ones intrigued. In Perreault’s account of the event in the *Voice* he distinguishes Acconci’s walking from the others by noting that it provoked many stares and by referring to it with a title—he does not refer to other works by titles in this review—*Recognition*, a word that summons a visual and psychological connection between people.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Descriptions based on material in *0 to 9 Supplement: Street Works 6* (July 1969), Unpaginated.

⁵⁷ Typewritten note from Acconci to Lucy Lippard in *Lucy R. Lippard Papers*, Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art. Note dated 30 October. Year not indicated. Given where it falls in the files, it appears the note was sent in 1969.

⁵⁸ Descriptions based on material in *0 to 9 Supplement*. See also John Perreault, “Art On The Street,” 17.

⁵⁹ John Perreault, “Art On The Street,” 17.

After the first *Street Works* event, Acconci and the group planned a second one for a month later. With *Street Works II* the organizers used physical and temporal density to help audience members more meaningfully connect with street works, and street workers: the second event involved double the number of participants (thirty-nine) doing activities within a single downtown block (between 13th and 14th Streets and 5th and 6th Avenues) over one hour (5 to 6pm). The organizers also circulated information: seven hundred announcements were printed to help people find and identify the activities involved in *Street Works II*.⁶⁰ If “invisibility” summarized the first street works event, “contact” motivated the second.

Street Works II participants used various means to get the attention of those who came to see their activities on Friday April 18, 1969, or who happened to be walking along the busy sidewalks near Union Square during rush hour. Several street workers appropriated a strategy used by marketers and agitators, as well as Mr. T in the first event: they handed out leaflets. Giorno distributed 1,500 copies of his poem “from THE KAMA SUTRA OF JOHN GIORNO” in less than ten minutes. Lil Picard gave people her “mail art.” Arakawa hoped passersby would use his “Guide To A Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art” to tour nearby mailboxes, traffic lights, etc. Others street workers erected obstacles. Rosemarie Castoro made people step around strips of aluminum tape in the middle of the sidewalk. Mr. T panhandled \$6.33 over the hour.

⁶⁰ See material in *In Plain Sight* catalogue and in *0 to 9 Supplement*.

Piper asked people to listen to audiotape recordings she made in the area the week before.⁶¹

Three of Acconci's four activities for *Street Works II* involved directing people to what was around them: he fixed notes to bricks and litter baskets that referenced nearby objects, sent fifty area residents maps of the event before it took place, and mailed one-hundred recipients a sheet of paper with the event's details and a note stating that the sheet was "the location of a page of talk during and about STREET WORKS II."⁶² For his fourth activity, Acconci expanded upon the strategy he used in *Recognition*: he stood on a corner, selected a stranger on the street, and ran ahead and waited for him or her to arrive at the next corner, at which point he began again. While passersby may not have realized their involvement, they were connected—physically, psychologically—in the system that constituted the activity. Of Acconci's four activities for *Street Works II*, the only one Perreault mentioned in his *Voice* column on the event was the one that involved following strangers.⁶³

With *Street Works III* it seems that organizers aimed to gain visibility with a more select audience. Seven hundred participants were invited to make activities for three

⁶¹ See material in *In Plain Sight* catalogue and in *0 to 9 Supplement*.

⁶² According to material in *0 to 9 Supplement* Acconci sent his first mail piece to fifty residents of "13th Street" apartments. The second piece, a blank sheet of paper that read, "This 8 ½ x 11" area is the location of a page of talk during and about STREET WORKS II (Friday, April 18, 1969, 5 to 6 PM, from 13th Street to 14th Street, between the Avenue of the Americas and Fifth Avenue.)," was sent to one-hundred people in "all locations." A copy of the second piece is in the archival file for the exhibition *Information* at the Museum of Modern Art.

⁶³ John Perreault, "Art: Free Art," *Village Voice*, 1 May 1969, 14-15.

hours beginning at nine at night on Sunday, May 25th over six downtown blocks, from Wooster to Greene and Prince to Grand. This semi-industrial area of floor-through spaces in the midst of being converted into live/work lofts and a few art galleries would have been empty of commuters, shoppers, or passersby on a Sunday night.⁶⁴ While the project's target audience may have been people involved in the avant-garde art community developing in the area, few of them ultimately saw the activities planned to last until midnight. The police cleared the area at 10:30pm, reportedly because Giorno put nails in the streets as part of his activity. Before the event was halted: flour was dumped at an intersection and billowed when cars passed (Christos Gianakos), tours of the area were led with a London guidebook (George Doris and Jack Anderson), people were handed old gallery announcements stamped "mail art" (Picard), a rag company's loading dock was showcased as a "beautiful, anti-formal, condensed mess" (Abraham Lubelski), and an alarm clock was hidden in a warehouse doorway and set to startle anyone nearby the next morning at 8am (Acconci).

"Artists," Perreault wrote in a June 1969 *Voice* column discussing the difficulty of distinguishing some recent art from language, "are no longer interested in 'merely'

⁶⁴ For more detailed information on the neighborhood that became known by 1971 as SoHo see: Gwen Allen, *Artists' Magazines*. A chronology of galleries in the area, which had been the location of businesses doing "light manufacturing" and therefore had abundant floor-through spaces which were unobstructed by walls and had many windows and were appealing to people at the time for making and showing art: Richard Feigen directed a gallery in the area from 1965 to 1973, showing Joseph Beuys there in 1966 and John Baldessari in 1970. Paula Cooper opened a gallery at 96-100 Prince Street in October 1968. Ivan Karp opened a space called OK Harris Works of Art at 485 West Broadway in 1969. Leo Castell and others opened a gallery hub at 420 W. Broadway in September 1971. The area was known as SoHo by July 1971 as it was referred to by that name in: Grace Glueck, "Art Notes: Surprise Catch From Pier 18," *New York Times*, 25 July 1971, D22. In that article Glueck discusses recent re-zoning of the area to allow for people to legally live and work in its buildings.

providing audiences with something ‘to look at’ but instead in making people ‘think,’ ‘imagine,’ and ‘enact’.”⁶⁵ Perreault’s sentiments evoke the ideas about art—about Conceptual Art—that were circulating as their author hastily compiled a “Street Works” supplement to be published with the last *0 to 9* that month. For the supplement Perreault asked street workers to contribute whatever they wished and twenty-two responded, resulting in sixty-one pages of texts and pictures that Perreault collated by last name but did not edit or otherwise frame: the supplement includes no introduction, table of contents, index, or page numbers.⁶⁶ Without any framing, the contributions, many presented in a first-person perspective, emphasize the participants’ experience of the events. In his submission, Giorno provides details about one of his activities—“1,500 copies of 2 poems from THE KAMA SUTRA OF JOHN GIORNO were handed out by 7 people in 10 minutes. This is how it was.”—and accounts by his helpers: “There was one really insane old man who couldn’t believe what I had just handed him: ‘Hey girlie, this

⁶⁵ John Perreault, “Art: Para-Visual,” *Village Voice*, 5 June 1969, 16-17. In the article Perreault remarks upon the amount of time he is now spending “reading” art, citing midtown Dwan Gallery’s May 1969 *Language III* show (it included Acconci) and a show at Paula Cooper Gallery organized at 96-100 Prince Street by Lucy Lippard as a benefit for Art Workers Coalition. He notes that show involved instructions (Joseph Kosuth), a current of air (Hans Haacke), BB-gun holes (Lawrence Weiner), a measured-off section of wall (Mel Bochner), photos of mirrors in salt mines (Robert Smithson), and “endless notebooks, photos, and sheets of paper” (Adrian Piper, On Kawra, Robert Morris, Ed Ruscha, and Bruce Nauman). He also notes that many were busy preparing an artist’s resale rights contract and picketing the Museum of Modern Art’s support of American policies in Southeast Asia through their connections with the Rockefeller’s. A week after the article, on 13 June 1969, Acconci was among those who presented in an evening of activities at Paula Cooper’s third floor walk-up space at 96-100 Prince Street. On this Friday in June, Paula Cooper’s hosted activities by Acconci, Dan Graham, Bruce Nauman, Dennis Oppenheim, Yvonne Rainer, and Richard Serra. Acconci presented *A Performance situation using doors, unequal times, opening, closing* as well as *Points, Blanks*. In the latter he started the evening one hundred blocks away and telephoned every few minutes with his location, which was then announced to the audience gathered at Prince Street. An account of the action exists on paper: “At 7:31, Vito Acconci called and said he was at Broadway and 100th St. NE corner.” For descriptions of these activities see Vito Acconci and Gregory Volk *Vito Acconci: Diary of a Body, 1969-1973* (Milan: Charta, 2006) 43-45.

⁶⁶ John Perreault, interview with author, 18 September 2011, email. *0 to 9 Supplement*.

is pornography!” Piper contributed a page-long list of proposals—taking photographs, circling area, recording sounds, mapping block, distributing proposals—with indications of which she chose to complete (the last three). Mayer contributed a page filled top to bottom with ideas, all hand-written: “throw garbage cans away. run on one street for a short time. steal cars and replace them with photographs...” A handful of other entries convey first-person experience by combining textual accounts with photographs. Castoro submitted time-lapse photographs of her activities, including images of paint spilling from a can, along with personal narratives written in loopy, cursive script—“I have recently been making art outside of my studio. On March 15, 1969, at midnight, I rode my bicycle up to 52nd Street and Fifth Avenue from my studio at Spring Street, carrying four gallons of white enamel paint. I punched a hole in one gallon...” Picard contributed a photomontage within which she penned the following note: “In my first street work...I gave pennies away...in my second street work...I distributed mail-art. I like to communicate...streets are the ideal communication-object...”

Acconci’s contribution to the supplement consists of a typed text for each of his eight activities. The texts each begin with first-person accounts of what happened and continue with ruminations on meaning, yet they are not organized chronologically as one might expect. Instead, Acconci chose to begin and end his entry in the supplement with texts relating to the activities that involved the most interaction with other people.

Acconci’s first text in the supplement relates to his following activity from the second event:

A situation using streets, walking, running; Street Works II; April 18, 1969; 5 to 6 PM; 13 St. to 14 St...I stood on a corner, picked out (mentally) a person walking from that corner to the

next... When I choose the person walking, and know that I will reach the second corner before him, 'I am beginning to shift the first corner,' which he marks, to the second corner; until: when he moves ahead of me, as I stand timing him, 'he is beginning to shift the first corner,' which I mark; until as I pass alongside him, and our lines of moving meet...'⁶⁷

Acconci's concluding text in the supplement is on his walking activity from the first event, the one that Perreault singled out with the title *Recognition*. This text ends with an illuminating quote, the only one in Acconci's entry. It reads "'A region is called 'connected' if every point of it can be connected with every other point of it by a path which lies entirely within the region.'"⁶⁸ The sentence is from psychologist Kurt Lewin 1936 book *Principles of Topological Psychology*, reprinted in 1966, in which the author describes the physical and psychological dimensions of human interactions as vectors that produce "power fields."⁶⁹ In an interview several years after the supplement was published Acconci would observe that he was reading Lewin at the time, in order to understand how people connect with one another, and form a system.⁷⁰

Street Works IV, the group's final collaborative event, involved, for the first time, sponsorship from an arts organization, and as a result for the first time street works

⁶⁷ *0 to 9 Supplement*.

⁶⁸ *0 to 9 Supplement*.

⁶⁹ Kurt Lewin, Fritz Heider, and Grace M. Heider, *Principles of Topological Psychology* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co, 1936). Reprinted 1966.

⁷⁰ In 1972, in response to a question by Liza Béar about his interest in the "spatial projection of psychological phenomena," Acconci says: "I guess that's why Kurt Lewin's *Principles of Topological Psychology* interested me. I was reading him in '69, when my work started to shift from poetry to an outside space. The farthest thing from my mind was anything psychological, then. My concerns were strictly physical. But when I was thinking of myself in relation to another region, I was reading Lewin on psychological regions, and I think this really held over." Vito Acconci, "...a drift with a drive at the back of its mind," interview by Liza Béar 7-8 October 1972 and 2-3 November 1972, *Avalanche* 6 (Fall 1972) 71.

circulated within the framework of art.⁷¹ Amongst the material printed for the fourth event, presented in October 1969 and involving eleven participants, was a grant application involving proposals, a poster, a six-page schedule, and a press release bearing the letterhead of New York's Architectural League, the sponsoring institution.⁷² The language used in such material to describe the event and its activities was aligned with the institution of art: "street workers" became "artists," "actions" became "art works."⁷³ *Street Works IV*, which was scheduled to last a month rather than several hours, was described as an "exhibition." There was even an October 2 opening, in the League's white-walled midtown gallery. At the opening, which was listed in *New York Magazine's* "Best Bet" section and described by Perrault in the *Voice* as mobbed with photographers and television crews, members of the culture industry sipped wine.⁷⁴ According to accounts, at the reception visitors had the opportunity to: step around blue power sprinkled on sidewalks by Mayer, pick up dozens of "artworks" placed on the streets by

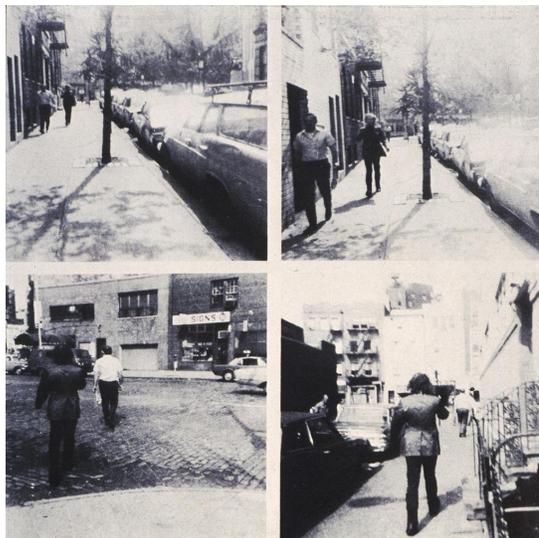
⁷¹ The group splintered after *Street Work IV*. Though there would two more associated events, Acconci was not involved in either. Perreault noted after the third event that the group might need to seek a sponsoring organization or find another way to avoid police interference. John Perreault, "Art: Para-Visual," *Village Voice*, 5 June 1969, 16. Perreault would have conflicted feelings about the decision to ally *Street Works IV* with an artist institution, writing that: "A Street Work is for the man on the street... as soon as [he] is able to identify [it] as a work of art [it] ceases to exist as a work of art. When a Street Work is identified as art, it can then be neatly filed away, can be avoided, can be stripped of its status as a-rational fact." John Perreault, "Art: Taking To The Street," *Village Voice*, 16 October 1969, 15-16.

⁷² Documents in *In Plain Sight* catalogue indicate that the group started planning the October 1969 event in May of that year. This is indicated by proposals for the grant, with one by Stephen Kaltenbach dated 21 May 1969. At the time, the *League* was presenting art exhibitions. In the years before and after *Street Works IV* the *League*, at their 65th and Madison Street gallery, hosted a mile-long garment (James Lee Byars, 1968), a labyrinth-like installation composed of light, sound, and surveillance cameras (*Environment IV: Corridors*, by John Lobell and Michael Steiner, 1967), John Giorno's Dial-A-Poem project (1969), and the distribution of 500 pollution masks for the inaugural Earth Day (1970).

⁷³ *In Plain Sight* catalogue.

⁷⁴ "And the Walls Came Tumbling Down," *New York Magazine*, 6 October 1969, 51; John Perreault, "Art: Taking To The Street," 15-16.

Costa, walk through a sixteen-foot picture frame Strider situated around the gallery entrance, eat wieners served by Weiner, look at Arakawa’s replica of the Empire State Building, punch a time clock installed by Lubelski, see twenty-six people wearing t-shirts stenciled with letters by Perreault, wonder about Burton lying on a lobby bench ostensibly dreaming of what he was going to do on the last day of the event, and encounter Acconci, who stood on a busy corner near the League imagining someone elsewhere doing the same. Some artists continued their actions after the opening—Mayer sprinkled blue power throughout the city, Costa placed more artworks in the streets, Burton enacted his dream—while others did something new for the month remaining in the exhibition. Weiner led tours of participants’ lofts and Perreault interviewed one hundred people. For the remaining twenty-three days of the show Acconci invaded the “power fields” of strangers on a daily basis.



Vito Acconci, *Following Piece*, 1969

Acconci did not invite anyone to witness his following activity, which involved, at some point nearly every day after leaving his Christopher Street apartment in October, selecting a stranger on a street corner and following the person—along sidewalks, across streets, into bookstores, through subways—until he or she entered a taxicab, apartment, office building, or some other space he could not.⁷⁵ Acconci did, however, index the episodes in a log: “October 11, 3:44 PM; 8th St. & 6th Ave... Woman in orange coat... at 3:57 PM, she enters Fred Braun’s, leather store...” This suggests he had an urge to, at some point, circulate the activity through more than just word-of-mouth. More to the point: Acconci realized after the performance was over that if he wanted it to register as visual art, he had to provide people within the art system something visual to circulate.⁷⁶ With this in mind, days after finishing the performance Acconci had a photographer shoot stills as he re-created an episode, resulting in two sequences of several black-and-white pictures.⁷⁷ In the pictures we see Acconci—signature long hair and heavy, dark jacket, jeans, and boots—trailing a man who by comparison appears clean-cut—closely cropped hair, pressed pants, and short-sleeved button-up shirt. The camera, which captures almost

⁷⁵ The activity took place from October 3-25, 1969, with a person selected each day to be followed except on October 12 and October 16 when no one was selected. See schedule for *Street Works IV* in *In Plain Sight* catalogue and documents, including log, relating to piece in Vito Acconci and Gregory Volk *Vito Acconci: Diary of a Body, 1969-1973* (Milan: Charta, 2006) 74-83.

⁷⁶ Vito Acconci has said that he realized in 1969, after doing *Following Piece*, that if he wanted his performances to circulate as art he had to produce something visual to represent them. Vito Acconci, interview by author, 23 July 2012, 20 Jay Street, Brooklyn, NY; With respect to this, Acconci has also said that he admired N.E. Think Co.’s saying that “a word is worth 1000th of an image.” Vito Acconci, interview by Judith O. Richards, 21 June 2008, Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Transcript page 37.

⁷⁷ Vito Acconci, interview with author, 23 July 2012, 20 Jay Street, Brooklyn, NY. In a 1975 book that includes photographs of the episode, which considering the cobbled streets and low buildings appears to have taken place in the West Village, they are credited to Betsy Jackson. Mario Diacono, *Vito Acconci: Dal Testo-Azione Al Corpo Come Testo* (New York: Out of London Press, 1975).

no one else in its frame, follows the two along sidewalks and across cobblestone streets, establishing a tense connection between the “the beatnik” and “the square.” In one sequence where the men walk toward the camera, their separated bodies form a diagonal vector that is echoed in, and strengthened by, the raking line of the sidewalk’s edge. In the other sequence, shot from behind the men, the diagonal is more acute. Acconci looms large and dark in the foreground and foreshortening makes him appear dangerously close to the other man’s back, on the verge of actualizing a physical connection. The snapshot quality of the photographs dramatizes the connection, as well as the photographer’s involvement in it. Within several years the pictures were circulating to represent the activity in exhibitions, magazines, and books. Yet before they did Acconci took further action toward defining the activity constituted through tense connection: he changed the title of the piece, and therefore the credit line printed till today with the images, from *An activity situation using streets, traveling, following, changing location* to *Following Piece*.⁷⁸ This charged phrase establishes a psychological and physical connection between the two people, making them points along a Lewin-ian vector.

Before *Following Piece*’s photographs started to circulate Acconci made another move that helped the activity gain traction as art. He began using his log of the activity to create text pieces that he mailed to certain people, alerting him to the performance. Using the log, Acconci “re-activated” each following episode for a different influential figure—critic, dealer, artist, curator—and sent the dedicatee a typed document to that effect,

⁷⁸ The earliest citation I have found referring to the work as *Following Piece* is dated fall 1972. *Avalanche* 6 (Fall 1972) 31.

beginning a month to the day after the first episode with a group of twenty-three fellow New Yorkers.⁷⁹ The first re-activation piece takes the same format of the others, reading:

Private piece for Lawrence Alloway (Nov. 3, 1969). Follow-up to an activity situation using streets, travelling, following, changing location...Street Works IV; New York City; October 3-25, 1969: "Each day, a person is chosen, at random, in the street...I follow him wherever he goes, no matter how long or how far he travels. I stop following only when he enters a private place...October 3: 9:12 AM; in front of the door, 102 Christopher Street. A man in a gray suit; he walked west...At 9:17, he got into a car...and drove away. November 3: November 3: The particular activity re-activated for Lawrence Alloway.—Vito Acconci.⁸⁰

After finishing with a first round of re-activations on November 25, Acconci continued.

In December he re-activated the October episodes for figures across the United States and in January for others around the world, noting in each document the re-activation history of the episode in question.⁸¹ For example, when Terry Atkinson in the United Kingdom received his re-activation (January 3) he read that his episode had already been re-activated for David Antin in California (December 3) and for Alloway in New York (November 3). Through such means, Acconci connected himself and his activity with, among others, Robert Barry, Joseph Beuys, Mel Bochner, Daniel Buren, Hanne Darboven, Walter DeMaria, Dan Graham, Douglas Huebler, Robert Morris, Bruce Nauman, Dennis Oppenheim, Allen Ruppersburg, Ed Ruscha, Richard Serra, and Robert Smithson, critics David Bourdon, Jack Burnham, and Lucy Lippard, dealers and curators Paula Cooper, Konrad Fischer, Heiner Friedrich, John Gibson, Kasper Koenig, Reese Palley, Seth Siegelaub, and Willoughby Sharp, composer John Cage, and architect

⁷⁹ Vito Acconci and Gregory Volk *Vito Acconci: Diary of a Body, 1969-1973* (Milan: Charta, 2006) 107-11.

⁸⁰ Vito Acconci and Gregory Volk *Vito Acconci: Diary of a Body, 1969-1973*, 107.

⁸¹ Acconci described November's re-dedications as the "city" series, December's as the "nation" series, and January's as the "world" series. Vito Acconci and Gregory Volk *Vito Acconci: Diary of a Body, 1969-1973*, 128-137.

Buckminster Fuller. Acconci created a system for *Following Piece*, and it is this system that helped the activity gain meaning.

Information

Acconci's effort to spread the word was effective. In February 1970, a month after the last set of re-activations, Jack Burnham, a December dedicatee, described Acconci in his influential *Artforum* essay *Alice's Head: Reflections on Conceptual Art* as a rising star of Conceptual Art, which he defined as reflecting systems-oriented thinking. Burnham, a sculptor-turned-academic then in the midst of curating the Jewish Museum's fall 1970 exhibition *Software, Information Technology: Its New Meaning for Art*, was already known to *Artforum* readers for writing about what he observed as a major shift in culture, from an "object-oriented" to a "systems-oriented" way of thinking.⁸² In *Alice's Head* Burnham uses McLuhan-inflected language—"Conceptual art's ideal medium is telepathy"—to describe Conceptual Art as de-valuing the original auratic object in favor of communication, "time, processes, and interrelated systems" as experienced "in

⁸² Jack Burnham, "Alice's Head: Reflections on Conceptual Art," *Artforum* February 1970, 37-43. Burnham, an Associate Professor of Art at Northwestern and a 1968-69 Fellow of the Center for Advanced Visual Studies at MIT, was, in winter 1969, asked by the Jewish Museum's then-director Karl Katz to curate a "major exhibition on computer technology." Jack Burnham, "Art and Technology: The Panacea That Failed," in *The Myths of Information: Technology and Postindustrial Culture*, by Kathleen M. Woodward (Madison, WI: Coda Press, 1980), 205. *Software* was on view at the Jewish Museum 16 September through 8 November 8 1970. Burnham's essays on his theory: "Systems Esthetics," *Artforum*, September 1968, 30-35.; "Real-Time Systems," *Artforum* September 1969, 49-5. Luke Skrebowski has written about Burnham that: "The Aesthetics of Intelligent Systems "Burnham's theory of systems aesthetics was developed out of his reading of the biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy's General Systems Theory, (1969). Sharing a publisher with Bertalanffy, Burnham picked up on systems theory as a key strand of his broad-ranging attempt to develop a position adequate to then-emerging postformalist practice." Luke Skrebowski, "All Systems Go: Recovering Jack Burnham's 'Systems Aesthetics,'" *Tate Papers*, 31 January 2012, 3 <http://www.tate.org.uk/download/file/fid/7301>).

everyday life.”⁸³ Discussing works by Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth, and Lawrence Weiner, Burnham writes that their art resists the kind of “symbolic” and “ideological” thinking that has brought society to the brink of thermonuclear war, catastrophic industrial harm, and more. While in his essay Burnham focuses on established figures, he does mention the name of one younger artist to watch: Vito Acconci.

Several months after Acconci was mentioned by Burnham in *Artforum* his place in the art historical record was secured when curator Kynaston McShine included him in *Information*, a Museum of Modern Art exhibition whose title evidences reverberations of systems-oriented thinking in the halls of New York’s premier museum.⁸⁴ Pitched by McShine, then a young member of the institution’s venerable department of Painting & Sculpture, as an “international report on recent activity of young artists,” *Information* opened in July 1970 and included over a hundred and fifty artworks by more than one hundred artists from fifteen countries.⁸⁵ In memos to his superiors McShine described the show he was working on as embracing “‘earthworks,’ ‘systems,’ ‘process art,’ ‘non-object,’ ‘dematerialized,’ and ‘conceptual art,’” among other new methods.⁸⁶ While *Information* would later be discussed as the first major United States museum exhibition

⁸³ Jack Burnham, “Alice’s Head: Reflections on Conceptual Art,” *Artforum* February 1970, 37-38.

⁸⁴ *Information* was on view at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2 July through 20 September 1970.

⁸⁵ MoMA *Information* Press Release 2 July 1970.

⁸⁶ McShine in memo to Mr. Arthur Drexler, then Director of Department of Architecture and Design, MoMA, 5 February 1970. MoMA, *Information* file, CUR 934. In a review of *Information*, John Perreault says McShine was assigned the task of producing a show of new art. John Perreault, “Art: Information,” *Village Voice* 16 July 1970, 14; 31.

of Conceptual Art, at the time it was understood by supporters and critics alike as reflecting anti-establishment outrage: in resisting formalist ideas about art's autonomy and in embracing the notion that artworks gain meaning from their connection within a larger system.

McShine and his team pitched *Information* as demonstrating art's umbilical cord to life, and when considering the urgent tone of their framing it is worth recalling the "antiauthoritarian, antiestablishment, antiwar outrage" bubbling in and around MoMA at the time.⁸⁷ Artists were calling for museums, the establishment that gave value to their labor, to acknowledge connections between their work and the world around them. A year before *Information* opened many who would become involved in it, including Carl Andre, Dan Graham, Hans Haacke, Kosuth, and Lippard, were agitating through Art Workers' Coalition for MoMA and other New York museums to be more responsive to artists' concerns.⁸⁸ When MoMA failed to address AWC's concerns, the group held an open forum downtown on the matter, and hundreds attended: Andre called for an end to the art world, Graham said that the "stink" begins with "the individual painter or sculptor ensconced 'high' in his loft," and Lippard pleaded with everyone to focus on civil rights.⁸⁹ By fall 1969, museum staff were more responsive—closing for a day in support

⁸⁷ For more on this history see Julie Ault, *Alternative Art, New York, 1965-1985: A Cultural Politics Book for the Social Text Collective* (New York: Drawing Center, 2002) and Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

⁸⁸ MoMA Press Release, 7 March 1970.

⁸⁹ The event took place downtown at the School of Visual Art on 10 April 1969. Art Workers Coalition, *An Open Public Hearing on the Subject: What Should Be the Program of the Art Workers Regarding Museum Reform and to Establish the Program of an Open Art Workers Coalition* (New York: The Coalition, 1969).

of the anti-war movement, collaborating on an anti-war poster—even as board members expressed concerns and AWC members demonstrated in the galleries in front of Picasso’s *Guernica*, to protest its treatment by the museum as a formal icon rather than as a political one.⁹⁰ By spring, as Nixon expanded the war on Communism into Cambodia and Kent State University national guardsmen shot student anti-war protestors, AWC was renewing demands that MoMA examine the interests and influence of its Rockefeller-led board members. McShine signed letters to *Information* artists “Peace,” and noted that he too was an “art worker.”⁹¹ The museum’s newly hired director issued an official statement protesting the Kent State killings.⁹² The document ended with a provocative declaration: “THE ARTS...DISPEL THE INHUMANITY THAT SEEMS SO INTENSELY TO PERVADE OUR SOCIETY.”⁹³ The museum no longer considered art autonomous.

Two months later, with MoMA staff framing art as a way to connect alienated people each other and the world around them, *Information* opened. Trustees were warned in a letter from the director that the exhibition would “undoubtedly be controversial,” but

⁹⁰ In response to AWC demands MoMA, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Jewish Museum, and several commercial galleries closed on 15 October 1969. The poster featured text from a CBS newscast in which a U.S. soldier admitted killing babies during the My Lai massacre and an image. Conceived on 25 November and printed on 18 December 1969. The AWC/GAAG protest took place on 8 January 1970.

⁹¹ MoMA, *Information* file, REG 934. Letter to Carl Andre dated 15 June 1970. Letter to Joseph Kosuth dated 22 May 1970.

⁹² John Hightower began tenure as MoMA Director on 1 May 1970 (director through 5 January 1972), 2 May 1970 AWC protests in front of MoMA charging racism, Kent State killings occurred on 4 May 1970. He oversaw unionization of staff and went to AWC meetings. MoMA, Press Release, 5 May 1970.

⁹³ MoMA, Press Release, 5 May 1970.

that if the museum wanted to remain vital it must support “the work of contemporary artists even if this work reflects political and social concern as much of it did in the Thirties.”⁹⁴ In the galleries, artists’ activism was evident in the many artworks that rejected the status quo of art, requiring viewers to actively engage with what was around them rather than allowing them to passively contemplate aesthetics. Even pieces that “hung” on the wall refused formalist logic. Take, for example, Mel Bochner’s contribution, which taunted the mind with a black chalk circle inside of which was scrawled equations for figuring the orb’s radius, area, and circumference (*Measurement Series: By Formula (Circle)*, 1970). Nearby Walter de Maria’s ten-foot tall Photostat of a magazine article described his recent “bed” of steel spikes as a reflection of “today’s dangerous world,” proclaiming and mocking the artist’s relevancy, and the rise of discourse as art (*Untitled*, 1970).⁹⁵ Elsewhere, Kosuth’s mounted photograph of a chair, enlarged dictionary definition, and actual wooden folding chair called out the equally coded nature of pictures, words, and things (*One and Three Chairs*, 1965).

Much was made of *Information*’s Olivetti-designed filmic “jukebox” and its many artworks that required audience members to “do.” Argentinian collective Group Frontera’s contribution asked visitors into a recording booth in the galleries to answer questions—What do you do for a living? Would you make love in public?—that were played back on a television monitor for everyone to witness live. Piper also turned museum-goers into content-creators. Her contribution, *Context #7*, 1970, featured a blank

⁹⁴ MoMA, *Information* file. Letter dated 2 July 1970.

⁹⁵ Walter de Maria presented *Bed of Spikes* at Dwan Gallery in 1969. Article *Time*, 2 May 1969, 54.

notebook and a note that began: “You (the viewer) are requested to write, draw, or otherwise indicate any response suggested by this situation...” Before the eleven-week show closed, Piper filled seven binders with visitors’ drawings, doodles, and messages, with one note reading “Power To The People,” another “Free all political prisoners!” and yet another “Artists who are truly concerned w/merging art & life...should refrain from participating in official exhibitions. Rather they should unify to occupy oppressive art institutions and return them to the People.” Haacke’s now-infamous *MoMA-Poll* (1970) registered the presence and thoughts of viewers, as it prompted them to consider how matters outside the museum shaped what occurred within its walls: a placard asked gallery-goers, “Would the fact that governor Rockefeller has not denounced President Nixon’s Indochina policy be a reason for you not to vote for him in November?,” and below it a clear box tallied their votes in real time. Two weeks into the show, the tally revealed the level of anti-war sentiment and support for MoMA’s founding family amongst gallery-goers: Yes=5,100, No=70.⁹⁶ The exhibition’s artwork was aptly summed up by the headline of one newspaper article: “Art Is a Two-Way Street: The Viewer Comes to See and Appreciate and in Turn is Seen and Appreciated.”⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Tally according to: John Perreault, “Art: Information,” *Village Voice* 16 July 1970, 14; 31. Nelson Rockefeller was board chairman of MoMA from 1938 to 1958, when he was elected governor of New York City. At that point his brother, David Rockefeller took over. In 1970 David was a trustee but not board president. According to letters in MoMA *Information* files, John Hightower and David Rockefeller exchanged a series of letters about Haacke’s piece after the show open. Hightower defended Haacke’s piece and David Rockefeller attacked as not art. See, in particular, three-page letter from Hightower to Rockefeller dated 7 July 1970. MoMA, *Information* file, CUR 934.

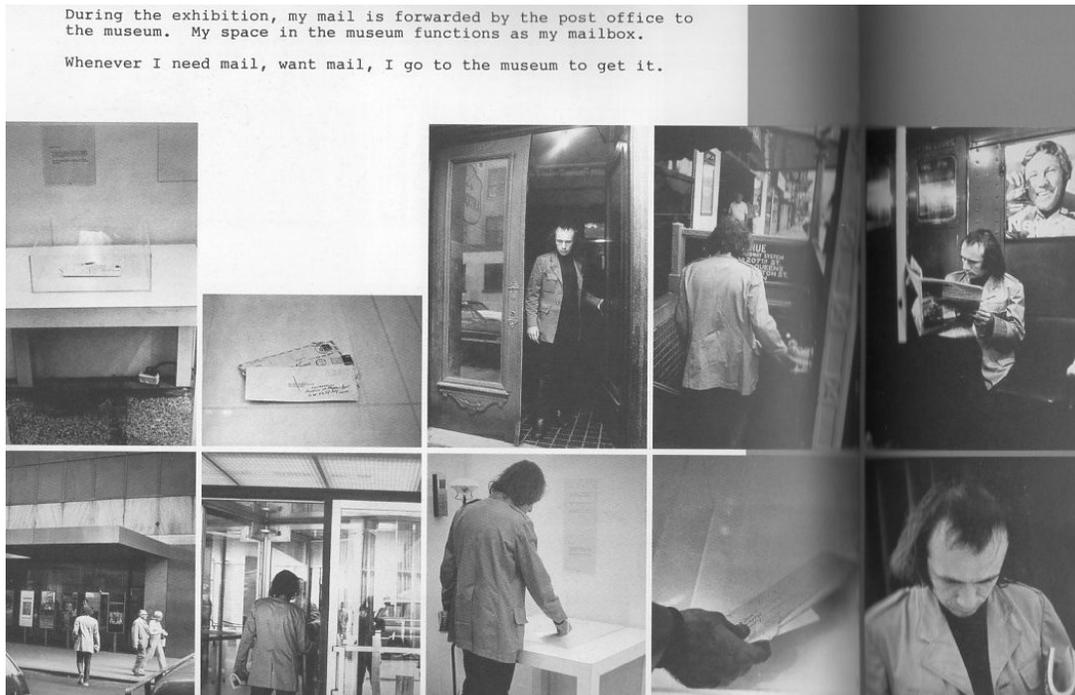
⁹⁷ MoMA, *Information* file, CUR 934. Photocopy of Kings Features Syndicate article. Date stamped 26 August 1970.

Vito Acconci's artwork, *Service Area*, involved many people, at least theoretically. For the three-month exhibition Acconci had his mail forwarded to the museum, where it stacked up in the gallery on a table, in a clear, open box that was watched over by gallery guards yet vulnerable to visitors' eyes and hands.⁹⁸ On a wall above the table Acconci planned to hang calendars on which he would make marks indexing his presence when he came to the gallery to pick up mail.⁹⁹ On the wall Acconci also hung notes, written in the first-person, that explained: "...My mail is being forwarded by the post office to the museum...the museum guard's normal services are used to guard against a 'federal offense'...the piece is performed (unawares) by the postal service...and by the senders of the mail." Nearby the artist installed a lamp that domesticized the installation and a text about the meaning of the activity: "In going to the museum, I am performing in a different style my ordinary role of going down to get my mail...My performing here means reacting to stimuli...Performing the piece means going against a form..."¹⁰⁰ A sequence of black-and-white photographs of the performance, though not exhibited in *Information*, has represented the activity since. In the pictures viewers see Acconci—long-hair, dark clothing—leaving his Christopher Street

⁹⁸ *Service Area* relates to the piece Acconci contributed to exhibitions *557,087* and *955,000*, organized in 1969-1970 by Lucy Lippard and Seth Siegelaub. The catalogue for those shows suggests that he had: "Postcard send from same NYC mailbox at same time each day, placed on calendar on square of date RECEIVED in space." Installation shots show big work calendar on table.

⁹⁹ MoMA, *Information* file. Note from Acconci to McShine dated 28 May 1970 states that he will have a calendar though none of the few installation shots of the piece include images of calendars and he does not.

¹⁰⁰ See texts and images on the piece in show's catalogue *Information* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1970) 5; in *Avalanche* 6 (Fall 1972) 17; and in Vito Acconci and Gregory Volk *Vito Acconci: Diary of a Body, 1969-1973* (Milan: Charta, 2006) 188-189.



Vito Acconci, *Service Area*, 1970

apartment, entering the subway, in-transit reading a newspaper, entering MoMA, and reaching into the open box in the gallery to get his mail. *Service Area*'s frisson arguably comes from the artist's infiltration of the museum with his body and the mail, and its linking together of Acconci, correspondents, post officers, museum guards, installation, and viewers into one system.

McShine and his team used *Information*'s catalogue to frame the artworks' effort to engage audiences in social and political terms. The book's cover features an acid-green sepia-toned photographic collage of some of the technological tools—typewriter, car, telephone—that McLuhan was arguing connected people into a "global village." Just inside the catalogue's cover, a photograph of crowds gathered for Martin Luther King's

infamous March on Washington suggests the stakes involved in mobilizing together.¹⁰¹ In the catalogue's essay McShine expands on these ideas, noting that the "social, political, and economic crises that are almost universal phenomena of 1970" mean that artists no longer find it "relevant and meaningful" to "get up in the morning, walk into a room, and apply dabs of paint from a little tube to a square of canvas."¹⁰² Instead, he writes, they want us to "participate," in order to make us "question ourselves and our responses...our natural and artificial environments...our prejudices...our inhibitions."¹⁰³

McShine and his team invited the show's artists to "speak" for themselves through their own entries in the catalogue—Acconci published the texts he hung on the gallery walls—and asked readers to do the same: two blank pages in the catalogue are headed by a note to readers to "PLEASE PROVIDE YOUR OWN TEXT OR IMAGE."¹⁰⁴ The catalogue also features a fifty-page montage of photographs and other images—stills from Jean-Luc Godard films, Archigram proposals, Alan Kaprow's *The Yard*, Yves Klein's *Leap Into the Void*, computer data, war protestor, Black Panthers, AWC anti-war poster, 1969's Woodstock festival, an orgy, the moon landing—that places everything from art to computers to sex to politics to the moon on equal footing, in one orbit.

¹⁰¹ *Information* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1970). The front and back endpapers are composed of a panoramic photograph of the 1963 March on Washington.

¹⁰² *Information*, 138-141.

¹⁰³ *Information*, 141.

¹⁰⁴ *Information*, 142-143.

The last element in *Information*'s catalogue is a six-page list of recommended readings, and it further frames art not as autonomous but as part of a larger system. The list includes books, catalogues, and articles by and about the exhibition's artists, as well as titles such as Jack Burnham's *Beyond Modern Sculpture: The Effects of Science and Technology On The Sculpture of This Century* (1968), Jacques Ellul's *The Technological Society* (1964), R.D. Laing's *The Divided Self* (1965), and *The Whole Earth Catalogue* (1969-1970 [sic]). Listed are also volumes by theorists—systems theorist C. West Churchman (one book), architectural designer Buckminster Fuller (three books), structural anthropologist Claude Lèvi-Strauss (five books), psychoanalytic philosopher Herbert Marcuse (two books), media theorist Marshal McLuhan (four books)—who, through different disciplines, were engaged in systems-oriented thinking.

As many were counseling the importance of systems-oriented thinking circa 1970 Acconci was making artwork that reflected such thinking. His artworks from the period conjured—were constituted by—the creation of networks. The material and activities that Acconci, among others, circulated within the framework of Conceptual Art were understood to show that art connects with other disciplines, and that artworks gain meaning through a system that involves the interplay of not only images and language, but also institutions and people, including viewers.

Chapter Two: Encounter

In this chapter I first demonstrate Acconci's exposure to discourse about "encounters" through examining its circulation in books the artist and many others was reading. I then use circa 1970 notions about "encounters" to elucidate the artist's performance-based activities at the time, which I show revolved around increasingly tense interactions he created between himself and others, often audience members. I illuminate such tension, and how it helped Acconci's efforts gain traction within the framework of Conceptual Art, through examining three projects from the period: *Security Zone*, an activity Acconci enacted on an abandoned New York City pier and presented to audience members through photographs (1971); *Claim*, an evening-long activity Acconci performed in a lower Manhattan loft (1971); and the artist's first exhibition at Sonnabend Gallery, which included his masturbatory *Seedbed* as well as two other performance activities (1972).

Encounters

By 1971 the largest category in Acconci's expansive library, organized by subjects—"Body," "Time," "Space," "Matter," "Code," "Organization," "Narrative," "Critical Theory"—was "Life World."¹ That section included subcategories such as "Sex," "Sociology," and "Psychoanalysis," for the many books Acconci was acquiring by

¹ A description of the library can be found in the catalogue of a 1980 retrospective of Acconci's work, organized by Judith Kirshner. In the catalogue Kirshner states: "Acconci has stated that he sometimes fears his organization of his library may be his best work..." Vito Acconci, and Judith Russi Kirshner. *Vito Acconci: A Retrospective, 1969 to 1980: an Exhibition Organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, March 21-May 18, 1980*. (Chicago: The Museum, 1980) 8-9. Acconci Studios provided me with access to the library and gave me an outline for the categories in the library.

progressive social scientists who were theorizing the importance of satisfying physical and psychological encounters in determining mental and social health. The wealth of literature Acconci was encountering on this topic reflected a shift in psychotherapeutic trends. In the 1940s methods of psychoanalysis originated by Sigmund Freud, who focused on personal history in shaping an individual's struggle with life-long "drives" and "desires," were flourishing in academies and beyond the United States, as European psychoanalysts took refuge from the rise of fascism. Freudian psychoanalysis, which classically takes place in sessions wherein analysand reclines looking away from analyst to maintain a charged yet "distanced" encounter, was so mainstream by 1945 that it was featured that year in the Hollywood movie *Spellbound*.² But by the 1950s, in the face of the devastation of World War II and the Cold War, interest in the philosophies of Existentialism, with its emphasis on experiences in the here and now rather than on essence, and Humanism, "the belief in the unity of the human race and man's potential to perfect himself by his own efforts," surged.³ By the end of the decade, when *Life* magazine pronounced in the title five-part feature that it was *The Age of Psychology in the United States*, attention was turning to the role of connections with others in producing meaningful existence.⁴

² Film based on 1927 novel *The House of Dr. Edwardes* by Francis Beeding, who was the pseudonym for the writing pair Hilary St. George Saunders and John Palmer.

³ For further insight into framings of Existentialism at the time and its popularity see: Rollo May, Gordon Allport, Herman Feifel, Abraham Maslow, and Carl R. Rogers, *Existential Psychology* (New York: Random House, 1960); Quote on Humanism from: Erich Fromm, *Socialist Humanism: An International Symposium* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965) vi.

⁴ In 1957, *Life* magazine published a five-part series, by author Ernest Havermann, titled "The Age of Psychology in the U.S." Cited in Jessica Lynn Grogan, "A Cultural History of the Humanistic Psychology Movement in America" (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2008), 2. See also Jessica

By the end of the 1960s in the United States, with Martin Luther King's assassinated, the war in Southeast Asia raging, and "existential crisis" a national catchphrase, the ideas of psychiatrist Carl Jung, who focused not on individual behavior and the past but on our connections with others through "archetypes" and the "collective unconscious," were gaining ground over those of his one-time collaborator, Freud.⁵ Consider that the 1968 first *Whole Earth Catalog*, which Acconci and many others were poring over as I discuss in Chapter One, featured no books by Freud but a half-page devoted to Jung and his recently republished 1953 book of essays *Psychological Reflections*.⁶ The *Catalog's* first issue also includes a text by John Cage in which he mentions among his recent influences "N.O. Brown," whom readers would have known as the author of the immensely popular 1966 book *Love's Body*.⁷ In that book the author uses his background in psychoanalysis to argue that civilization is a threat to the liberatory power of authentic, erotic love. Likewise, books by Erich Fromm, a Frankfurt School psychoanalyst critical of Freud and advocating that loving relationships were the

Grogan, *Encountering America: Humanistic Psychology, Sixties Culture, & the Shaping of the Modern Self* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2013).

⁵ Martin Luther King was assassinated on 4 April 1968. In 1966 United States B-52s first bombed North Vietnam. In the 1969 introduction to the anthology *Existential Psychology* Rollo May wrote: "The vocabulary of existential psychology has entered firmly into our language; 'existential crisis' is a common term now..." Rollo May, *Existential Psychology* (New York: Random House, 1969) vi. First printed by Random House in 1961. First published by The American Orthopsychiatric Association in 1960. Carl Jung died in 1961. His The multi-volume *Collected Works of C.G. Jung* began publication in 1953. It ultimately included nineteen volumes. Carl Jung, Herbert Read, Michael Fordham, and Gerhard Adler. *Collected Works* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953).

⁶ *Whole Earth Catalog* (Menlo Park, Calif: Portola Institute, Fall 1968) 11.

⁷ *Whole Earth Catalog*, 8. Norman Oliver Brown, *Love's Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). First issued in 1966.

fulcrum of a healthy life, were circulating widely.⁸ At the same time, droves were purchasing Rollo May's *Psychology and the Human Dilemma*, in which the psychoanalyst argued that the sense of isolation and anonymity pervading people in the face of an increasingly administered and militant society could be ameliorated through more meaningful physical and emotional connection with one another.⁹

By 1970, as televisions were bringing home footage of troops bombing North Vietnam, "encounter groups" were becoming so popular that founder psychologist Carl Rogers published his book on the topic, *Carl Rogers on Encounter Groups*, in which he describes the therapeutic method based on physical and emotional engagement with others.¹⁰ The breadth of interest in framing encounters with other bodies as a personal

⁸ In 1956 psychoanalyst Erich Fromm's *The Art of Loving* became a bestseller by placing meaningful relationships at the center of a happy life. Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (New York: Harper, 1956).

⁹ Rollo May, *Psychology and the Human Dilemma* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996). First published Princeton, N.J: Van Nostrand, 1966. By 1970 the book was in its third printing. Rollo May, *Existential Psychology* (New York: Random House, 1969). First published by Random House 1961. First published by The American Orthopsychiatric Association 1960.

¹⁰ On the war's coverage on television in the United States and its impact on American society see: Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992). The antecedent to "encounter groups" were Kurt Lewin's T Groups. In 1946 Kurt Lewin was asked by the state of Connecticut, after it passed a Fair Employment Practices Act, to train leaders to deal with tensions among groups in order to help change racial attitudes in the public. These groups were called T-groups ("T" for training in human relations). For more on the concept, history, and antecedents of "encounter groups," which at times have been confused with or referred to interchangeably as "T-groups," see Irvin D. Yalom, *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy* (New York: Basic Books, 1995). First published 1970. See especially chapter sixteen. Carl Rogers, whose approach toward psychotherapy has been described as humanist, existential, and phenomenological, is associated with the development of person-centered therapy in the 1960s. In the forward to his 1970 book on encounter groups he wrote: noted the popularity of the term and approach: "I have written papers and given talks on various facets of the burgeoning movement toward encounter groups... So I decided to assemble together for publication both the talks and papers I have given, together with new material written for this book..." Carl R. Rogers, *Carl Rogers on Encounter Groups* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970). That book was reprinted every year from 1970 to 1979 except 1972. See also Frederick S. Perls, *In and Out of the Garbage Pail* (New York: Bantam, 1969). "Encounter groups" as a term was by then so widespread that it was used in passing in a 1970 edition of the *Whole Earth Catalog*. *Whole Earth Catalog* (Menlo Park, Calif: Portola Institute, Fall 1970) 53.

and social salve was evidenced that year in the Museum of Modern Art's *Information*, an exhibition that included artwork by Acconci and more than one-hundred other artists, as I discuss in Chapter One. In curator Kynaston McShine essay for the show's catalogue he describes its artists as using "...their own bodies" to encourage "us to participate" at times in ways that are "therapeutic."¹¹ He further frames the show with a six-page list of recommended readings, and it includes, along with material by and about artists, books by a number of social scientists addressing the importance of encounters.¹² The list includes several titles by philosopher and Frankfurt School émigré Herbert Marcuse, including his 1955 volume *Eros and Civilization: An Inquiry Into Freud*, a precursor to the author's 1964 title *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*.¹³ In *Eros and Civilization* synthesized Marxist economic theory and Freudian psychoanalytic ideas to argue that the drive toward productivity creates an illusion of freedom through consumer goods that in actuality represses dissent, and creates a society of one-dimensional people alienated from meaningful encounters with one-another. *Information*'s list of recommended readings also includes four books by Marcuse's colleague Canadian communication theorist Marshal McLuhan, including his 1964 title *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*.¹⁴ In that book McLuhan critiques society's advanced capitalist, industrial, administered, and technology-driven

¹¹ *Information* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1970) 138-141.

¹² *Information*, 200-206.

¹³ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (New York: Random House, 1955); Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man; Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).

¹⁴ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994). First published New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964.

state, and suggests greater connection as a solution. The list also includes R.D. Laing's 1967 title *The Politics of Experience*, in which the psychiatrist links theories about the importance of fostering connection with the counter-cultural moment, writing that "normal men have killed perhaps 100,000,000 of their fellow men" and that the way to ameliorate this "alienated...out of mind" condition is to forge deeper connections with others.¹⁵

Acconci's library circa 1970 included books by Marcuse, McLuhan, and Laing, as well as books by social scientists involved in studying what happens—psychologically, physically, practically—when people do encounter one-another.¹⁶ This territory of research was of particular interest to the artist. At the time many were reading anthropologist Edward T. Hall's 1966 title *The Hidden Dimension*, in which, as a follow-up to the author's earlier study of non-verbal communication, Hall details his research into what he describes as the science of "proxemics," or how distance affects everything from architecture to relationships.¹⁷ Acconci was especially attune to such ideas as explored by psychologist Kurt Lewin, whose *Principles of Topological Psychology*, first published in 1936, surged in popularity in the late 1960s.¹⁸ Using vectors, Lewin mapped

¹⁵ R. D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967) 1.

¹⁶ Vito Acconci, interview with author, 10 July 2011, 20 Jay Street, Brooklyn, NY. Discusses interest in Laing and others.

¹⁷ Edward Twitchell Hall, *The Hidden Dimension: an Anthropologist Examines Man's Use of Space in Public and in Private* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1969). First published 1966. Edward Twitchell Hall, *The Silent Language*. (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1959).

¹⁸ Kurt Lewin, Fritz Heider, and Grace M. Heider, *Principles of Topological Psychology* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co, 1936). Reprinted 1966 and three more times through 1971. In 1972, in response to a question by Liza Béar about his interest in the "spatial projection of psychological phenomena," Acconci says: "I guess that's why Kurt Lewin's *Principles of Topological Psychology*

interactions—physically, psychologically—into “power fields,” showing the impact people exert on one another, even when touch is not involved. As I discuss in Chapter One, in interviews at the time Acconci noted his interest in Lewin’s research and evidence of this is can be found in his work: Acconci used the Lewin-ian phrase *Proximity Piece* to title a 1970 performance and frequently used vectors and Lewin-ian terms, such as “power field,” to diagram and describe his efforts.¹⁹ Acconci also noted interest in studies by sociologist Erving Goffman, whose 1956 *Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* about the performed nature of “self” was voted one of the ten most influential books of the century by sociologists’ international association.²⁰ Acconci was among those familiar with Goffman’s 1967 title *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior*, in which the author explores the nature of not just face-to-face interactions, but also “mediated” ones.

interested me. I was reading him in '69, when my work started to shift from poetry to an outside space. The farthest thing from my mind was anything psychological, then. My concerns were strictly physical. But when I was thinking of myself in relation to another region, I was reading Lewin on psychological regions, and I think this really held over.” Same interview Acconci discusses familiarity with Goffman. Vito Acconci, “...a drift with a drive at the back of its mind,” interview by Liza Béar 7-8 October 1972 and 2-3 November 1972, *Avalanche* 6 (Fall 1972) 71.

¹⁹ See categories Acconci used to divide his work at time—“Movement Over a Page,” “Body as Place,” “Peopled Space,” “Occupied Zone,” “Power Field”—and vectored diagrams *Avalanche* 6 (Fall 1972).

²⁰ Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982). First published New York: Anchor Books, 1967. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1959). First published 1956. Reprinted 1969-1978. Not reprinted in 1970. Vote took place in 1998. Based on International Sociologists’ Association Congress Programme Committee opinion survey in order to identify the ten most influential books for sociologists.

Security Zone

As Acconci was absorbing discourse about face-to-face and mediated encounters circa 1970 he was creating tense interactions with other people as his artwork. Consider *Security Zone*, a performance-based piece Acconci enacted with another person in February 1971 on an abandoned pier jutting over the water just below Canal Street. Acconci did the activity for a project organized that winter by Willoughby Sharp, the “Conceptual Art guru” of lower Manhattan, according to one reporter at the time.²¹ The project involved twenty-seven artists, most of whom had been or would be featured in *Avalanche*, a magazine Sharp and Liza Béar began in fall 1970 in Manhattan to, in their words, offer artists a space to “present...directly” to people “without critical mediation.”²² *Avalanche* did not employ writers, but it did employ photographers Harry Shunk and Janos Kender—known as Shunk-Kender—to shoot the artists’ activities it featured on its pages, along with interviews. The winter 1971 second issue of *Avalanche*, themed around “the body” and published as the pier project was coming together, involved a fourteen page photograph and text project by Acconci, for which Shunk-Kender shot pictures of the artist doing things outside (burrowing in sand on a

²¹ Alfred Frankenstein, "Pier 18 Conceptual Project of Artists," *San Francisco Examiner & Chronicle*, 4 July 1971, 30.

²² The reader will note that all of the artists included in the project were white, male, and based in the United States or Europe. (Artist Louise Lawler was asked to help with but not be a part of the show. See her response to this in *Birdcalls*, her 1972/1981). This was the profile of the artists Sharp invited to work with him on most projects during the period. For information on *Avalanche* see: “Survey of Contemporary Art Magazines,” *Studio International* Sept-Oct 1976, 158; Liza Béar and Willoughby Sharp, *The Early History of Avalanche: 1968-1972* (London: Chelsea, 1996) Reprinted 2005, 3; Liza Béar, Edward Sullivan, Benjamin Buchloh, Willoughby Sharp, “Experimental Magazines and the International Avant-Gardes, 1945-75,” *Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York*, 11 December 2006, 6pm, Symposium Transcript.

beach) and in a studio (tucking his genitals behind his legs).²³ Shunk-Kender's photographs were also instrumental to the visibility of the project on the pier. While Sharp reportedly wanted artists to do activities on the pier because he found it "a perfect place, totally disassociated from art-making and open to large variety of work," he always wanted the activities on the pier to circulate as art: in a museum exhibition he planned to organize of Shunk-Kender's photographs.²⁴

Many of the activities Shunk-Kender photographed in February and March 1971 on Pier 18—with no city permission, official schedule, or budget—featured the artist doing something on the pier, which rotted dangerously over the Hudson in the shadow of the just-being-completed Twin Towers nearby.²⁵ John Baldessari stood on the pier and made a square with his thumbs and forefingers to create a frame, through which Shunk-Kender captured the pier and beyond. Richard Serra was photographed cutting a trapezoidal frame from a placard, and then positioning it amongst debris to make it

²³ Béar notes "Body" as the theme of the second issue in "Experimental Magazines and the International Avant-Gardes." Bruce Nauman is on the cover of second issue, which also features interview with Acconci. Shunk-Kender, known for their work with French avant-gardes, including Yves Klein on *Leap Into The Void* (1960), listed as photographers for issue. Project titled "Drifts and Conversions." Acconci burrows himself in sand and surf at Jones Beach and in another sequence, taken inside a studio, attempts to "convert" his naked body by burning his hair and tucking his genitals. Accompanying text, printed in italic script that evokes the intimacy of handwriting, Acconci muses on the physical and psychological ramifications of using his body for his work: "embodied information; accessibility of person...body as pointer...performance as a scheme for splitting oneself in two...the...activation of biography...performer...as the subject...performance as disidentifier..." Vito Acconci, "Drifts and Conversions," *Avalanche 2* (Winter 1971) 82-95.

²⁴ The quote from Sharp regarding the pier is in Grace Glueck's review of the show in for the *New York Times*. Grace Glueck, "Art Notes: Surprise Catch From Pier 18," *New York Times*, 25 July 1971, D22. It is noted that Sharp initially wanted to curate an exhibition of the photographs at Pomona College Museum of Art through the invitation of Helene Winer, who was then the young twenty-something Director at the museum, but the show did not come to pass. Lynne Cooke, Lynne, Douglas Crimp, and Kristin Poor, *Mixed Use, Manhattan: Photography and Related Practices, 1970s to the Present* (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, 2010) 40.

²⁵ One tower opened December 1970 and the other Spring 1971.

appear square. Michael Snow, Jan Dibbets, and Douglas Huebler, all of whom provided Shunk-Kender instructions to complete their work in their stead, designed activities that summon the body through its absence: Snow asked the photographers to shoot from different locations at the same time, Dibbets had them capture sunrise and sunset, and Huebler instructed the duo to photograph “the most pictorially aesthetic” places on the pier and then shoot the spots from which they shot, marked with ghostly “Xs.”

Photographs of other activities more pointedly allude to the dangers of a body on the pier. Dan Graham was photographed standing on the pier awkwardly shooting his own angled photographs of the environment, with a camera he placed on his head, chest, and other body parts. Gordon Matta-Clark was photographed dangling upside-down by a rope from the pier building’s rotting roof-timbers. John Van Saun had Shunk-Kender shoot his daughter riding a trike amongst the decay on a trike, and then photograph the trike floating in the water. Allen Ruppersberg was photographed dragging around a locked-and-chained suitcase and then throwing it in the water, his effort suggesting corporeal cargo. Vito Acconci stood at the end of the pier with his eyes blindfolded, his ears plugged, and his arms bound, physically engaging with another man.²⁶ The photographs of Acconci’s activity on the pier are the only ones from the project to feature an encounter between two people.

While according to a reporter a “handful of devotees” witnessed the pier activities live they were not given an official audience until summer 1971, when an exhibition of

²⁶ Acconci’s activity took place on Sunday 28 February 28 1971. *Avalanche* 6 (Fall 1972) 40.

Shunk-Kender's photographs was presented at the Museum of Modern Art.²⁷ *Projects: Pier 18* featured roughly three-hundred-fifty black-and-white photos, and was initiated by young Department of Painting & Sculpture curators Kynaston McShine



Installation shot *Projects: Pier 18*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, Summer 1971

and Jennifer Licht, after the two saw Shunk-Kender's pier pictures in the photographers' Westbeth studio.²⁸ The show was organized hastily for a small gallery in the museum, on a meager budget of two thousand dollars and without Sharp, whose own efforts for an exhibition at Pomona College Museum of Art had stalled.²⁹ The show, introduced on a

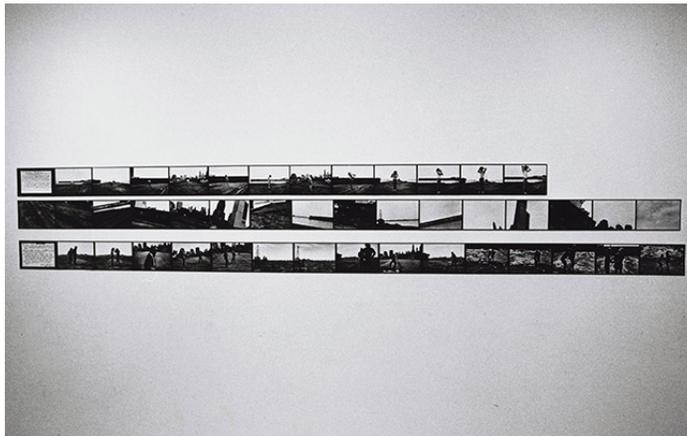
²⁷ Grace Glueck, "Art Notes: Surprise Catch From Pier 18," *New York Times*, 25 July 1971, D22.

²⁸ MoMA, "Projects: Pier 18" Press Release, July 1971. According to Shunk-Kender archive held at the Lichtenstein Foundation Shunk-Kender shot six hundred images of projects. They lent their photos to the museum uninsured.

²⁹ *Projects: Pier 18* presented at MoMA 18 June to 2 August 1971. Some materials says opened on 19 June not 18 June. According material in MoMA's press files on the show, the show had a budget of \$1500-\$2000 and was planned so last minute that the press department sent Licht a note dated 16 June lamenting that it would be have time to publicize. Note, from Wilder Green to Elizabeth Shaw and cc'd Jennifer Licht says "I'm delighted that we can do another Projects show and am certain that idea, funds, etc. could not could not have been assembled earlier. However, if this show closes in July, it will barely be even announced..." For more details on the exhibition at MoMA, installation shots, and the plans for

title wall with a list of artists and a photograph of the river, had a restrained, “administered” look.³⁰ The room was hung with eight-by-ten inch black-and-white photographs, mounted simply without glass on black cardboard and arranged linearly in horizontal rows, with each activity represented by a sequence of shots and a short description by its artist.

The fifteen photographs that represented Acconci’s activity in the show capture him, eyes blindfolded and hands bound behind back, engaged in an interaction on the pier with a less-encumbered man. Some viewers would have recognized the latter as Lee Jaffee, another contributor to the project—his activity involved being lashed to a “mast” dangling—whom Acconci chose for the task because of their “ambiguous” relationship.³¹



Installation shot *Projects: Pier 18*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, Summer 1971
Bottom row: Vito Acconci, *Security Zone*, 1971

Pomona College see: Lynne Cooke, Lynne, Douglas Crimp, and Kristin Poor, *Mixed Use, Manhattan: Photography and Related Practices, 1970s to the Present* (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, 2010) 40.

³⁰ In a memo in MoMA’s press files on the show Licht describes an “informal (and cheap) method of presentation. . . in keeping with the nature of the work.”

³¹ Vito Acconci. Marianne Eigenheer, and Martin Kunz, *Vito Acconci: [Ausstellung]*, *Kunstmuseum Luzern, 7. Mai-11. Juni 1978 Catalog* (Luzern: Kunstmuseum, 1978) 248-249.

Acconci instructed Shunk-Kender to shoot the pair's interaction from as far away as possible, so that the photographers would not be able to intervene.³² The resulting images suggest an ambiguous, dangerous encounter. We see Jaffee grasp Acconci, in some frames leaning in as if pushing him toward the water and in other pulling him back, as if keeping his companion from the pier's edge. A particularly intriguing picture—the one



Vito Acconci, *Security Zone*, 1971

the artist selected to represent *Security Zone* the following year in *Avalanche*—features Acconci and Jaffee facing each other on the debris-laden pier, about ten feet from the water's rough surface.³³ Acconci steps backwards toward the water as Jaffee steps forward, holding onto his companion's trunk with a tight grip. The moment suggests the kind of back-and-forth struggle that can occur—sometimes physically, sometimes psychologically—when people interact.

In the press reviewers described *Projects: Pier 18* as embodying the spirit of Conceptual Art, through its anti-object stance and use of photography to “insure exposure” for activities done “outside the traditional confines of the museum-gallery

³² Lecture by Vito Acconci at Skowhegan, 2011.

³³ *Avalanche* 6 (Fall 1972) 40.

structure,” as Grace Glueck wrote in the *New York Times*.³⁴ Glueck described the MoMA show as a “surprise catch,” a “two-month affair” of performances on the pier for the camera that was “one of the season’s liveliest art occasions.”³⁵ In the *San Francisco Examiner* Alfred Frankenstein was also effusive, describing MoMA’s exhibition as the “richest, most clearly defined, most meaningful of conceptual art” yet.³⁶ Frankenstein noted that the show’s absorbing photographs indicated that the artists recognized the importance of images. Their content, he wrote, suggested that those involved in the project were “anti-object,” because they demonstrated engagement with time, movement, physical presence, and “human relations,” at least in the case of Acconci.³⁷ For the same reasons that Glueck and Frankenstein embraced the exhibition, critic Robert Pincus-Witten, writing in *Artforum*, was less complimentary. In his review Pincus-Witten laments that “primary ‘things’” have been supplanted by “secondary sources”—“the photograph, the tape recording, the television loop, the film strip”—and through them an emphasis on artists’ “ideation.”³⁸ Pincus-Witten is disappointed that those involved in

³⁴ Grace Glueck, “Art Notes: Surprise Catch From Pier 18,” *New York Times*, 25 July 1971, D22.

³⁵ Grace Glueck, “Art Notes: Surprise Catch From Pier 18,” D22.

³⁶ Alfred Frankenstein, “Pier 18 Conceptual Project of Artists,” *San Francisco Examiner & Chronicle*, 4 July 1971, 30.

³⁷ Alfred Frankenstein, “Pier 18 Conceptual Project of Artists,” *San Francisco Examiner & Chronicle*, 4 July 1971, 31.

³⁸ Robert Pincus-Witten, “Anglo-American Standard Reference Works,” *Artforum* (Oct 1971) 82-85. Quotes 83; 85.

Projects: Pier 18 were “less concerned with works and more with human existences. The ego is demonstrated, reiterated, and ultimately proven.”³⁹ Precisely.

Claim

In September 1971 Acconci, whose work was revolving around concepts of “trust” and “vulnerability,” according to one critic at the time, created a live performance that hinged on tense interactions with audience members.⁴⁰ Acconci developed *Claim* several months after the activity on the pier in response to another invitation from Sharp. This time Sharp offered the artist a solo one-night performance in *Avalanche*’s new loft headquarters on Grand Street.⁴¹ Acconci’s performance was announced with a postcard featuring a printed text—“On Friday, September 10, at 93 Grand Street, Vito Acconci will be performing Claim, from 8PM to midnight”—hand-written three times by different hands, each time with the relevant information (date, location, etc.) arranged in a different order.⁴² The card, which suggested that *Claim* would be personal and perhaps participatory, was mailed in early September to a couple-hundred artists and friends,

³⁹ Robert Pincus-Witten, “Anglo-American Standard Reference Works,” 83-84.

⁴⁰ Critic is discussing a piece did around this time on Pier 17, for a show at John Gibson Gallery Larry Smith, “Participation on a Pier: Untrustworthy Artist,” *Village Voice*, 13 May 1971, page 30.

⁴¹ Acconci’s was the first in a series of projects at 93 Grand that would over the next year include projects by Bill Beckley, Terry Fox, and William Wegman.

⁴² Copy of card addressed to Lucy Lippard at 138 Prince Street date-stamped 8 September. *Lucy Lippard Archive*, Smithsonian Archives of American Art.

many of whom, like Lucy Lippard, Jack Smith, Richard, Serra, Joan Jonas, and Bernadette Mayer, were living in lofts on and near Grand Street in SoHo.⁴³

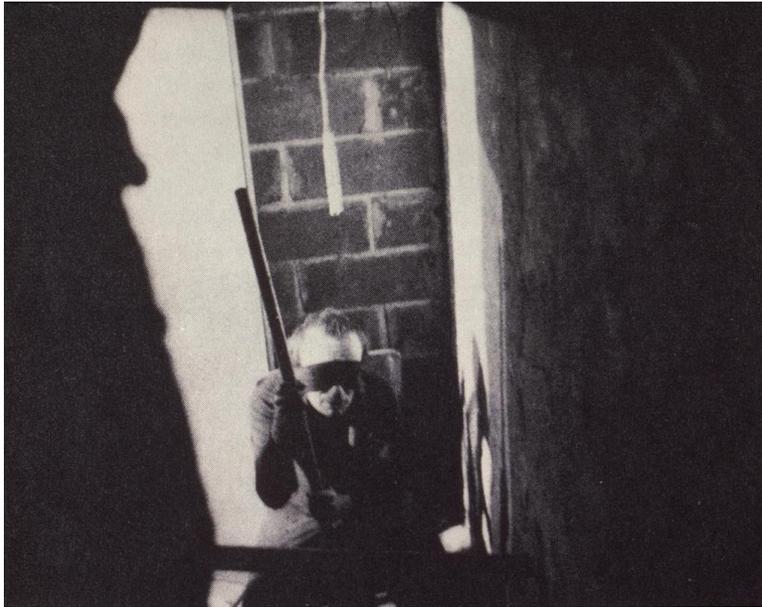
On the appointed Friday night—at the beginning of a season in SoHo that would include the opening not only of a gallery building anchored by formerly “uptown” dealers Leo Castelli and Ileana Sonnabend but also of Caroline Gooden and Gordon Matta-Clark’s co-op restaurant *Food*—when neighbors began filing into 93 Grand Street they found the ground floor loft nearly empty of objects.⁴⁴ *Avalanche*’s 1400 square feet space, with a sixteen-foot-high pressed-tin ceiling and picture windows, was installed with nothing more than a 23” black-and-white television monitor, which sat next to a closed basement door.⁴⁵ When people arrived Acconci was already behind the door, sitting in a chair at the foot of the basement stairs clad in his usual outfit—dark long-sleeved shirt and pants, boots—and a blindfold, and armed with a couple of lead pipes and a crow bar as well as plans to rant for four hours about the need “to stay alone” and

⁴³ At the time Lucy Lippard was living at 138 Prince Street, Richard Serra, Joan Jonas, Ed Bowles, and Bernadette Mayer were all at 74 Grand Street, Jack Smith was at 36 Greene Street. Recollections of Jackie Winsor in Béar and Sharp, *The Early History of Avalanche: 1968-1972*, 11.

⁴⁴ 420 W. Broadway, which had been a paper warehouse, opened as a gallery hub on September 25, 1971. The re-vamped building was co-owned as a co-op, with equal shares owned by Leo Castelli, Hague Art Deliveries, and dealer Andre Emmerich. Hague Art Deliveries occupied the basement and ground (or first) floor. Castelli Gallery second floor. Ileana Sonnabend’s gallery third floor (Sonnabend and Castelli were divorced). Initially Virginia Dwan and then John Weber had a gallery on the fourth floor. Andre Emmerich’s gallery was on the top or fifth floor. An unexpectedly large crowd of some 12,000 mobbed the Saturday opening. Sonnabend presented Gilbert & George, the British-based duo’s first United States performance of *The Singing Sculpture*: wearing tweed suits, the duo covered themselves with gold paint and stood on a table in the gallery lip-synching vaudeville tune “Underneath the Arches.” *Food* opened in October 1971 at 127 Prince Street.

⁴⁵ Sharp describes the space, which was 20’ x 70,’ in Willoughby Sharp, “Videoperformance,” in *Video Art: An Anthology* eds. Ira Schneider and Beryl Korot (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976) 259. It is noted in another description of the space that the monitor was donated by artist Van Schley: Béar and Sharp, *The Early History of Avalanche: 1968-1972*, 11-12.

“kill...stop anyone from coming down here with me.” The television monitor was meant to broadcast a live-feed of Acconci below, yet initially there was a glitch. Dan Graham fixed the closed-circuit system with a soldering iron, and Acconci’s performance began, about an hour behind schedule.⁴⁶



Vito Acconci, *Claim*, 1971

Those gathered near the shut but unlocked basement door around 9:30pm when the video recording system started working saw and heard through the monitor Acconci below them.⁴⁷ The monitor was fed by a video camera mounted at the top of the darkened

⁴⁶ Recollections of Acconci. Vito Acconci, interview by author, 23 July 2012, 20 Jay Street, Brooklyn, NY. Also description by John Perreault, “Art,” *Village Voice*, 23 September 1971, 27.

⁴⁷ John Perreault, “Art,” *Village Voice*, 23 September 1971, 27.

stairs and a microphone hanging in the landing above that artist's head.⁴⁸ Over the following three hours Acconci again and again raised his weapons and wielded them, sometimes with both hands and sometimes connecting loudly with the concrete floor or wooden stairs.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, the artist maintained a nearly constant verbal barrage: "I'm alone down here...I want to stay alone here...I don't want anyone with me...I'll stop anyone from coming down the stairs...I have to keep talking...I've got to believe this..." All of this, for which Acconci prepared by studying self-hypnosis, was experienced by audience members through the monitor and likely also felt and heard through the planks of the floor.⁵⁰

According to accounts, roughly an hour into *Claim* people began responding to Acconci's exhortations and tested his resolve, by opening the basement door.⁵¹ This is evidenced midway through an hour-long videotape made from the video feed—it is also titled *Claim*—when a door creaks and footsteps are heard. Still-blindfolded, Acconci's mutterings and gestures flag as he seems to assess the situation, which he cannot see.⁵² On the tape we see people descend the stairs towards the artist, who is back-lit by a bulb hanging behind him. Audience members register on-camera as their silhouettes pass in front of the lens. Acconci's vigor returns—"I'll keep anybody from coming down the

⁴⁸ Description of *Claim*: in "Rumbles," *Avalanche* 3 (Fall 1971) 4.

⁴⁹ Willoughby Sharp, "Videoperformance," in *Video Art: An Anthology* eds. Ira Schneider and Beryl Korot (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976) 259.

⁵⁰ Recollections of Acconci. Vito Acconci, interview by author, 23 July 2012, 20 Jay Street, Brooklyn, NY.

⁵¹ Recollections of Acconci. Vito Acconci, interview by author, 23 July 2012.

⁵² *Claim Excerpts*, 1971, 62 minutes.

stairs”—and he swings more wildly, toward the stairs. Still-blindfolded, the artist rises from his seat and struggles with an approaching visitor. In the aftermath, Acconci, alone once again, rips a handrail from the wall and erects a barricade.⁵³ Acconci’s *Claim*, which is said to have ended when an alarm set by the artist sounded, was a success, according to a review by John Perreault in the *Village Voice*.⁵⁴ Perreault wrote that in *Claim* Acconci displayed a new “ability to generate strong and memorable...images” and triumphed because no one managed to “join” him in the basement, though a couple of people who tried nearly got their heads “bashed” in.⁵⁵

Perreault’s review of *Claim* makes the point that Acconci’s performance of wanting to be alone was successful because the artist’s verbal and physical resolve, conveyed to audience members through the monitor and handicapped by the blindfold, begged to be breached and tested. Further evidence for this can be found in a photograph Acconci chose to represent *Claim* in the fall 1972 issue of *Avalanche*.⁵⁶ In the black-and-white photograph, taken from the top of the stairs, blindfolded Acconci sits in the landing, wielding a metal pipe. The artist’s body, however, is interrupted by the shadow of a person coming into the frame and down the stairs. The potential of an encounter creates the tension in the image, and in *Claim*.

⁵³ Acconci recalls ripping the handrail to keep people at the top of the stairs from taunting him by rattling it. Vito Acconci, interview by author, 23 July 2012.

⁵⁴ Acconci recalls that the performance ended when an alarm set for three hours sounded. Vito Acconci, interview by author, 23 July 2012. John Perreault, “Art,” *Village Voice*, 23 September 1971, 27.

⁵⁵ Perreault writes *Claim* is Acconci’s, “best and most troublesome pieces to date.” John Perreault, “Art,” 27.

⁵⁶ *Avalanche* 6 (Fall 1972) 54-55.

Sonnabend

In 1972 Acconci's interest in the mind, body, and encounters were given fertile ground for exploration in the opportunity to show with Illeana Sonnabend, a well-respected and intrepid dealer whose Paris gallery, opened in 1962, helped introduce post-war American art to Europe.⁵⁷ In 1970 Sonnabend opened a gallery in New York's midtown, and in 1971 was planning a second space downtown when she sought suggestions of artists from photographers Harry Shunk and János Kender, friends from Paris. At the top of Shunk and Kender's list was thirty-one-year-old Acconci, with whom they had worked for *Avalanche* and for the project on the pier.⁵⁸ Whether Sonnabend saw the pier pictures is unclear, but around this time the fifty-seven-year-old dealer and several others from the gallery did visit the artist for the first time, climbing five flights to get to the door of Christopher Street apartment. Sitting in Acconci's living room, Sonnabend quietly watched the artist's recent Super 8 mm films, including one in which the artist appears to be pleasuring himself until a close-up reveals the action is composed

⁵⁷ Sonnabend was already known for introducing Pop and Minimalism to Europe through a Paris gallery she opened in 1962 and for bringing Arte Povera to the United States beginning in 1970, with a gallery on Madison Avenue. She opened a second gallery at 420 West Broadway, in a building part-owned by her ex-husband Leo Castelli, in fall 1971.

⁵⁸ Antonio Homem, who worked for Sonnabend and whom she adopted, recalled in an interview with the author that Sonnabend was first alerted to Acconci's work after Shunk-Kender, whom Sonnabend knew from Paris, brought photographs they had taken of activities by Acconci and the others on Pier 18 to the gallery. Homem recalls that the gallery showed them in Paris and tried to travel the work. Antonio Homem, interview by author, 13 January 2012, phone. Acconci recalls that Sonnabend asked Shunk-Kender for a list of young artists to look at and Acconci was at the top. Vito Acconci, interview by author, 23 July 2012, 20 Jay Street, Brooklyn, NY.

of a cockroach on skin—*Rubbings*, 1970—and another in which a woman “hides” his scrotum in her mouth—*Conversions Part II*, 1971.⁵⁹ After the latter film Sonnabend, who would several weeks after the visit attend *Claim*, turned to Acconci and told him approvingly that he did indeed “make things very difficult for people.”⁶⁰ The next day the artist was offered a solo exhibition at Sonnabend’s new 420 West Broadway space and was told he could do anything he wished.⁶¹

The chance to work with Sonnabend at her downtown gallery provided Acconci, who had been showing with a younger dealer so focused on sales that he once told the artist his artwork was of little use unless it could be easily packed and taken to fairs in Europe, new support.⁶² Sonnabend had her own fortune to rely on, as well as sales from a few marketable artists, such as Jasper Johns, so that she could afford to show what interested her.⁶³ In any case, Sonnabend stood to make little money from Acconci’s work: the price list for his first show at the gallery consists of five text and photo pieces,

⁵⁹ Studio visit involved Ileana Sonnabend and Antonio Homem, and perhaps also Sonnabend’s husband Michael Sonnabend and Ealan Wingate, who worked for the gallery. Vito Acconci, interview by author, 24 June 2014, phone. Antonio Homem, interview by author, 13 January 2012, phone. Ealan Wingate, interview by author, 27 Mary 2012, phone.

⁶⁰ Béar and Sharp, *The Early History of Avalanche: 1968-1972*, 12. Vito Acconci, interview by author, 24 June 2014, phone.

⁶¹ Vito Acconci, interview by author, 24 June 2014, phone. Antonio Homem, interview by author, 13 January 2012, phone.

⁶² The young dealer was John Gibson Vito Acconci, interview by author, 24 June 2014, phone.

⁶³ In interviews with the author both Antonio Homem—Sonnabend staff since the 1960s, adopted by the Sonnabends in the 1980s, director of gallery today—and Ealan Wingate, who worked at the New York City galleries until 1976, said that Sonnabend followed her interest and pursued being a dealer to satisfy her interests in the work and lifestyle rather than sales. Antonio Homem, interview by author, 13 January 2012, phone. Ealan Wingate, interview by author, 27 Mary 2012, phone. For more on history of Ileana Sonnabend and her galleries see: Roberta Smith, “Ileana Sonnabend, Art World Figure, Dies 92,” *New York Times*, 24 October 2007; Ann Temkin, *Ileana Sonnabend: Ambassador For The New* (New York: Museum of Modern Art) Exh. Cat. 2013.

each valued at \$750.⁶⁴ Showing with Sonnabend gave Acconci not only new creative and financial support but also new visibility within the Conceptual Art scene developing in and around 420 West Broadway, which opened as a lower Manhattan gallery hub on September 25th 1971, with Hague Art Deliveries on the ground and basement floors and on successive floors above galleries operated by Leo Castelli—Sonnabend’s ex-husband—Sonnabend, Virginia Dwan and then John Weber, and André Emmerich. The building’s Saturday opening shows drew a crowd of 12,000. The former manufacturing neighborhood of floor-through spaces, which artists had been converting into live-work situations, had arrived as a place for people to see avant-garde art.⁶⁵

The significance of the opportunity to show with Sonnabend downtown did not alter the artist’s habit of deciding what to do at the last moment.⁶⁶ A postcard-sized announcement for the exhibition, which was scheduled to take place from a Saturday to a Saturday over the last two weeks of January 1972, suggests activities that might involve bodily discomfort: it features contact-sheet photo strips of the naked artist corralling a rooster and of metal enclosures, along with the vague and Lewin-ian title “Behavior Fields-Transaction Arenas-Training Grounds-Maneuver Positions.”⁶⁷ In late December

⁶⁴ Price list in Sonnabend Gallery Archive. Document noted for show 15 January to 29 January 1972. In any case, the American market for Conceptual Art was tepid compared to the one in Europe. Recollections of: Antonio Homem, interview by author, 13 January 2012, phone; Ealan Wingate, interview by author, 27 Mary 2012, phone.

⁶⁵ As evidence of this consider that Acconci’s show at Sonnabend was listed in: “What’s New In Art,” *New York Times*, 23 January 1972, D22.

⁶⁶ Antonio Homem, interview by author, 13 January 2012, phone.

⁶⁷ Show was scheduled for 15 January 15 to 29 January 1972. See image of card in Acconci’s overview panel of show, owned by Tate, feference # T13175. An excerpt from the card also appears in Vito



Card for Vito Acconci's January 1972 show at Sonnabend Gallery

1971 Acconci finally settled on an idea for the first of the three day-long activities he would perform on rotation over the eleven days the show would be open to the public: visitors stepping off the elevator into the gallery's main space would not see the artist—he would be hidden behind a wall, in ceiling rafters, or perhaps under floorboards—but would hear him verbalizing fantasies and trying to masturbate, using as “material” the fictions he was concocting from glimpses of those above him.⁶⁸ When news of the proposed activity reached Sonnabend, who was vacationing in Venice, Italy with Mel Bochner and several others, the dealer's only concern was whether all that masturbating would be good for the artist's health.⁶⁹

By all accounts those who visited the SoHo gallery for the show were not shocked by Acconci's public performance around a sex act, and this makes sense given the era's

Acconci and Gregory Volk *Vito Acconci: Diary of a Body, 1969-1973* (Milan: Charta, 2006) 285. Also copy of front side of card in Acconci's file at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

⁶⁸ Vito Acconci, interview by author, 10 July 2011, 20 Jay Street, Brooklyn, NY.

⁶⁹ Antonio Homem, interview by author, 13 January 2012, phone.

context of sexual and also emotional “liberation.” As the artist was planning *Seedbed* sexual intimacy beyond the marital bedroom was the focus of countercultural and mainstream attention. Consider the images of sexual intimacy that circulated to represent 1967’s “Summer of Love” and 1969’s Woodstock Festival. In 1969 Hollywood capitalized on the currency of sexual and emotional experimentation with its hit *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice*. That film depicted a swinging couple enlightened by group therapy at an Esalen-like Institute, the facility that, after opening in 1962 in Big Sur, California, had quickly become known for experiments with Gestalt-rooted therapies involving mind and body. 1969 was also the year that sexual hustling on New York City’s streets earned *Midnight Cowboy* an X-rating yet also three Academy Awards, including one for Best Picture. Two years after that, when Acconci was planning his show at Sonnabend, the film *W.R.: Mysteries of the Organism* was screened to much fanfare at Cannes’ Film Festival and Manhattan’s Lincoln Center. The film links sexual repression with Stalinism, and its popularity reflected the widespread interest at the time in psychiatrist Wilhelm Reich’s ideas about the energy and importance of orgasms.

Within this context of sexual liberation, and with the support of Sonnabend, finally, a few days before Acconci’s show was scheduled to open, the artist settled on how he would engage audience members through a sexual act. On Wednesday and Saturdays, in the gallery’s main space just off the elevator, Acconci would perform a

sexual encounter with visitors that would involve no touching or even any mutual visual contact.⁷⁰ After dismissing the idea of hiding in the ceiling (too distanced) or a wall



Vito Acconci, *Seedbed*, 1972

(adjacent interference), Acconci decided he would be under foot, ensuring proximity by default as people walked “over” him. A box-like structure was built, but Acconci realized visitors would not climb atop, and so instead a wooden ramp was constructed to fill half

⁷⁰ Because *Seedbed* was scheduled to take place on Wednesdays and Saturdays and the show was open for two weeks from a Saturday to a Saturday, Acconci performed the piece for a total of five days. Some accounts say Acconci performed for eight hours each day, some say six hours each day. Given that the gallery was likely not open to the public longer than six hours each day—from 11am to 5pm or noon to 6pm rather than 10am to 6pm—it is likely that Acconci performed the piece for six hours each day. Acconci and Sonnabend’s staff anticipated much about *Seedbed*, including that it would garner attention: they scheduled it for all three Saturdays, the busiest days of the week. They also predicted that Acconci would not take a lunch break, that he would need a bottle for urine, and that he might need assistance (the first day Acconci took pornographic magazines, but then realized it was too dark for them to be of use). Acconci’s recollections in film shown in *Ileana Sonnabend: Ambassador for the New*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 21 December 2013 to 21 April 2014. *Seedbed*, Super 8 mm film transferred to video with sound track spoken in Acconci’s voice featuring text written in 1972 as well as improvised commentary, recorded 2013, 11:46 min. Ealan Wingate, interview by author, 27 May 2012, phone.

the room. Beginning midway between the elevator and the wall thirty-five feet away, its plywood sheets rose gradually out of the planked floor to a height of two feet above the floor, and stretched wall-to-wall twenty-four feet in the other direction.⁷¹ Though the material difference between the plywood ramp and the planked floorboards distinguished the performance space from that of the everyday more than the artist would have liked, the setup functioned mostly as he intended. The artist, who crawled beneath the ramp each day via a removable side panel before visitors arrived, assumed the iconic position of the male voyeur: he could spy but not be spied. Scuttling under foot until the gallery closed each day, Acconci's presence was palpable through sound, but all visitors saw was the ramp, and five pieces of unframed paper tacked on a wall in a linear "L" configuration.⁷² On these black sheets Acconci wrote, with institutional white chalk in impersonal block lettering, the performance's title *Seedbed*, schedule, and a dispassionate explanation:

1. THE ROOM IS ACTIVATED BY MY PRESENCE..." 2. "THE GOAL OF MY ACTIVITY IS THE PRODUCTION OF SEED..." 3. "THE MEANS TO THIS GOAL IS PRIVATE SEXUAL ACTIVITY..." 4. "MY AIDS ARE THE VISITORS...(THE SEED...IS A JOINT RESULT OF MY PRESENCE AND THEIRS)."⁷³

Perhaps because of the clinical framework Acconci established for the piece, people participated in the artist's performance of a sexual encounter, which, in a savvy

⁷¹ Vito Acconci, interview by author, 10 July 2011, 20 Jay Street, Brooklyn, NY.

⁷² Vito Acconci, interview with author, 23 July 2012, 20 Jay Street, Brooklyn, NY.

⁷³ Placement of text panels at eye level before the ramp on the wall facing the elevator, and what they contained, is evident in panels Acconci made and provided to Rhona Hoffman Gallery to sell to a collector. Documentation of panel to author provided by Acconci Studios. Documentation lists piece as: chalk on paper, 5 sheets with gallery text, 20 x 26" each (unframed), numbered on lower right corner of each sheet, signed.

move, was scheduled for Saturdays, the busiest day of the gallery week, when up to twenty people might visit.⁷⁴ A last-minute adjustment to the installation further organized how people interacted with the artist in the performance: on opening day Acconci, who turned thirty-two during the run of the show, realized that he could not masturbate all day while crawling around, and that visitors could not hear him through the ramp.⁷⁵ The artist was outfitted with a microphone wired to a speaker placed in the upper-left corner of the ramp.⁷⁶ After this adjustment, people began to gather in the corner of the ramp near the speaker, listening to Acconci in the awkward crawl space below, voicing fantasies about them ranging from the subtle—“I’m doing this with you now...I’m moving toward you...”—to the explicit—“I’m touching your hair...I’m running my fingers down your back...you’re pushing your cunt down on my mouth...you’re ramming your cock down into my ass...”⁷⁷ Up to a half-dozen times a day, audience members heard the groans of an orgasm.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Ealan Wingate recalls an average of 15 visitors a day. Ealan Wingate, interview by author, 27 Mary 2012, phone.

⁷⁵ Acconci born January 24, 1940.

⁷⁶ Acconci’s recollections in film shown in *Ileana Sonnabend: Ambassador for the New*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 21 December 2013 to 21 April 2014. *Seedbed*, Super 8 mm film transferred to video with sound track spoken in Acconci’s voice featuring text written in 1972 as well as improvised commentary, recorded 2013, 11:46 min.

⁷⁷ Transcript of what Acconci said found in: *Avalanche* 6 (Fall 1972) 62; Vito Acconci and Gregory Volk *Vito Acconci: Diary of a Body, 1969-1973* (Milan: Charta, 2006) 286; *Seedbed*, 1972, owned by Tate, Reference #t13176 (3 works on paper, photographs, ink, and printed papers in three framed supports). Image of piece from Acconci Studios shows four framed supports.

⁷⁸ Acconci recalls reaching climax six to eight times during a busy day. Acconci’s recollections in film shown in *Ileana Sonnabend: Ambassador for the New*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 21 December 2013 to 21 April 2014. *Seedbed*, Super 8 mm film transferred to video with sound track spoken in Acconci’s voice featuring text written in 1972 as well as improvised commentary, recorded 2013, 11:46 min.

Despite *Seedbed*'s explicit content, in the event the performance was a fairly static, cerebral affair, especially after the last-minute addition of the audio equipment, which, along with the ramp, mediated between audience and artist and encouraged both to stay in one place. Perhaps the push and pull between a sense of closeness and of distance with the artist was part of the performance's appeal. In a favorable assessment in *Artforum* critic Robert Pincus-Witten classified *Seedbed* as a prime example of "Conceptual performance" and praised its synthesis of Minimalist sculpture and Dadaist sexuality, sourcing the origins of the ramp to Robert Morris' wedges (1965-68) and of the performance's content to Marcel Duchamp's *Wedge of Chastity* (1951).⁷⁹ More interestingly, in his review Pincus-Witten asserts that the "gallery situation" neutralizes the performance's "sexual emphasis," and that in this context auto-stimulation expresses "the processes of the mind as opposed to the experiences of the senses."⁸⁰ Photographs of the performance, some of which appeared with Pincus-Witten's review, compound the point, by making order out of the often-unruly terrain of fantasies and sexual stimulation. Among the black-and-white photographs that circulate to represent the performance is a half-page picture of Sonnabend's nearly empty white cube, altered only by the geometry of the ramp, texts, and speaker. A smaller photo is often nestled inside this larger photo. The smaller image features Acconci, supine under the ramp, seemingly in the midst of masturbating, with pants around knees and hand on penis. Yet the act is distanced from the viewer by the artist's containment to the smaller, shadowed cutaway, wherein he is

⁷⁹ Robert Pincus-Witten, "Vito Acconci and the Conceptual Performance," *Artforum* (April 1972) 47-49.

⁸⁰ Robert Pincus-Witten, "Vito Acconci and the Conceptual Performance," 47; 49.

boxed in by the planks of the floor, the ribs of the ramp, and a flank of two-by-four supports that fall diagonally across the front of his body and obscure his face, which betrays no hint of enjoyment and in any case is tilted down, and away from the camera. The organizational—or administered—language of Conceptual Art evacuates the messy, unpredictable, and emotional from the sexual, turning *Seedbed* into a mediated sexual encounter, one that is less about actualization and more about study.

On Tuesdays and Fridays *Seedbed*'s room was dark and silent, as was an adjacent gallery where the show's third performance was held on Thursdays. But down a hallway hung with Acconci's notes, diagrams, and photographs, and past an anteroom where the artist's Super 8 films were screening, in the gallery's largest room, another performance was occurring.⁸¹ Just inside the open doorway of the forty-six-foot long by twenty-two feet wide space were comfortable mid-century chairs, a plush rug, and a standing ashtray. Hanging on a wall were sheets of black paper arranged in an "L" with text in white chalk and block lettering explaining the "waiting" area and a closet-like enclosure, at the other end of the room opposite it. The panels read, in part:

1. THE ROOM IS ACTIVATED BY MY PRESENCE IN THE CORNER CHAMBER...IT CONTAINS POSSESSION OF SIX 'PRIME PERSONS' IN MY LIFE...2. BY MEANS OF THESE AIDS...MY ATTEMPT IS TO GET THE FEEL OF THOSE PERSONS...3. IF A

⁸¹ I have not been able to find any documentation of the panels that, according to film documentation of show, lined the wall in Sonnabend that was between *Supply Room* and *Transference Zone*. It appears the wall was twenty-five feet and lined with brown paper upon which notes were written or pasted. Acconci does not recall what if anything was on the brown paper. In a review of the show Peter Schjeldahl mentions the show included documentation—"photographs," "notebook prose"—of previous activities. *Ileana Sonnabend: Ambassador for the New*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 21 December 2013 to 21 April 2014, *Seedbed*, Super 8 mm film transferred to video with sound track spoken in Acconci's voice featuring text written in 1972 as well as improvised commentary, recorded 2013, 11:46 min. Peter Schjeldahl, "Vito Acconci at Sonnabend," *Art In America* (March-April 1972) 119. It has been similarly difficult to determine what films Acconci presented in the show's "Film Room," as labeled by him on a map he made of the exhibition. In his review of the show Pincus-Witten mentions *Conversions* (1971) was screened. Robert Pincus-Witten, "Vito Acconci and the Conceptual Performance," 47-49.

VIEWER ENTERS THE CHAMBER, MY ATTEMPT IS TO REACT TO HIM AS IF HE WERE ONE OF THOSE 'PRIME PERSONS.' 4. MY GOAL IS THAT I...UNTHINKINGLY TRANSFER HIS IMAGE, AND MY FEELINGS FOR HIM, TO THE VISITOR...5. IF A VIEWER WANTS TO ENTER THE CHAMBER, HE SHOULD KNOCK...IF I AM ALONE, I WILL LET HIM IN.⁸²

Despite Acconci's use of the male pronoun in the text, photographs suggest that people of both sexes heeded the instructions and awaited sessions with the artist in *Transference Zone*.



Vito Acconci, *Transference Zone*, 1972

Structurally and conceptually *Transference Zone* referenced the psychotherapeutic principle of “transference,” which observes that patients transfer repressed feelings about people important to them onto their therapist, and that this is productive, allowing the patient to process problems with loved ones through the therapist as a proxy. During the activity, Acconci sat in the cramped five-by-five foot enclosure waiting for visitors, some of whom, once inside, stayed for an hour, the

⁸² *Transference Zone*, 1972, owned by Tate, reference #t13178, 6 works on paper, photographs, ink and printed papers, supports: 585 x 992 mm, 857 x 680 mm, 350 x 812mm, 578 x 731mm, 1110 x 1391mm, 1148 x 896mm. Image provided to author by Acconci Studios.

standard for psychotherapeutic sessions.⁸³ Within the dimly lit chamber Acconci used a flashlight to illuminate unfinished walls taped, between exposed studs, with eight-by-ten-inch black-and-white photographs of his “prime persons:” mother, father, childhood friend and poet Robert Viscusi, former wife and artist Rosemary Mayer, former sister-in-law and poet Bernadette Mayer, current-girlfriend and collaborator Kathy Dillon, and Betsy Jackson, a young woman with whom he was also openly involved.⁸⁴ Acconci used the photographs, along with clothing and other items strewn on the floor belonging to the people in them, to conjure and transfer memories, feelings, and even names onto the audience members who entered the chamber and sat with him. Installation shots of *Transference Zone* show people waiting—on chairs, rug, windowsills, just outside the enclosure’s door—looking toward the chamber, as if eavesdropping on the drama

⁸³ People could stay with Acconci in *Transference Zone* for as long or as short an amount of time as they wished. Acconci did not particularly encourage people to stay for an hour.

⁸⁴ Six “prime persons” are mentioned in the text piece for *Transference Zone*, yet images of the chamber show photographs of seven “prime persons.” After completing the text for the work Acconci must have added one person. Included: Acconci’s Italian-American mother Catherine, whose “real” name was Chiara. Next a photo of Hamilcar Acconci, the artist’s opera-loving Italian immigrant father who manufactured bathrobes and was the family’s beloved center of attention, when he was not urging his only child to perform. Following this was a photo of poet Robert Viscusi, Acconci’s friend from Catholic upper-east-side Regis High School. Then came a photograph of artist Rosemary Mayer, Acconci’s high school sweetheart, whom he married in 1962, the same year he and Mayer, who left college at that point, moved to Iowa so that Acconci could attend the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. The two separated in 1967. Next photo was of Acconci’s sister-in-law poet Bernadette Mayer. Next was a photograph of Acconci’s then-girlfriend Kathy Dillon, a frequent collaborator. Finally Betsy Jackson, a young woman with whom Acconci was openly involved while with Kathy. Acconci’s recollections from: *Ileana Sonnabend: Ambassador for the New*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 21 December 2013 to 21 April 2014, *Seedbed*, Super 8 mm film transferred to video with sound track spoken in Acconci’s voice featuring text written in 1972 as well as improvised commentary, recorded 2013, 11:46 min; Vito Acconci, *Whitney Seminar With Artists*, 20 December 1978, Whitney Museum of American Art, transcribed by the author; Vito Acconci, interview by Judith O. Richards, 21 June, 28 June 2008, Smithsonian Archives of American; Art Seminar with Artists Series. All images can be seen in panels owned by Tate, *Transference Zone*, 1972, 6 works on paper, photographs, ink and printed papers, supports: 585 x 992 mm, 857 x 680 mmm, 350 x 812mm, 578 x 731mm, 1110 x 1391mm, 1148 x 896mm, reference #t13178. Image provided to me by Acconci Studios.

within.⁸⁵ As Acconci recalls, he had more difficulty maintaining the illusion that the person face-to-face before him in *Transference Zone* was one of his “prime persons” than he did conjuring visions for masturbation under *Seedbed*’s ramp: perhaps the ramp mediating between artist and visitors in the latter made those encounters more liberating.⁸⁶ One ardent Acconci supporter, Willoughby Sharp, found the scenario in *Transference Zone*’s chamber so charged that he refused to enter.⁸⁷

If *Transference Zone* borrowed elements from psychotherapy, the show’s final activity, *Supply Room*, tapped into then-recent trends in group and “encounter” therapy. Such therapies, seeded in sociologist Kurt Lewin’s experiments with group dynamics in the 1940s and popularized in the 1960s not only by psychologist Carl Rogers but also by psychotherapist Fritz Perls and by practices at Esalen Institute, encouraged unrestrained verbal and physical expression as a means of achieving self-actualization, and more authentic relations with others. Performances of *Supply Room*, which took place on Thursdays, drew on the therapeutic promise of verbal and physical expression: Acconci stood in a corner blindfolded and trapped behind a green net hanging ceiling to floor while across the room Kathy Dillon, armed with a whip, drums, a tape and more netting, urged female visitors to join her in taking out their grievances toward men on the artist.

⁸⁵ In some installation stills it appears that Acconci had a hand-held microphone wired to a speaker atop the closet. In his review of the show Pincus-Witten mentions amplification equipment, though he does not state specifically how it worked or whether it amplified sound. He notes that a tape reorder and microphone were present in the closet. Robert Pincus-Witten, “Vito Acconci and the Conceptual Performance,” *Artforum* (April 1972) 47.

⁸⁶ Acconci’s recollections in Vito Acconci and Willoughby Sharp, *Willoughby Sharp Videoviews Vito Acconci*, 1973, 62:07 min., black and white, sound.

⁸⁷ Sharp’s recollections in Vito Acconci and Willoughby Sharp, *Willoughby Sharp Videoviews Vito Acconci*, 1973.

The text in this room was suggestive but ambiguous, reading—“1. POTENTIAL VICTIM 2. HIS ABILITY TO FIGHT BACK 3. CALL TO ARMS; AN ORGANIZER 4. HER CONCENTRATION ON HATE.”—and photographs of the performance and the artist’s own recollections advise that visitors did not heed Dillon’s call. Instead, they



Vito Acconci, *Supply Room*, 1972

stood near the doorway watching and listening to Dillon, whose recorded pleas were broadcast via a tape player, from which people heard:

Right now, in the corner, Vito is in the position of a prisoner. I want to enjoy that...I am suggesting that a woman, or a group of women, come up and take him captive...I want to work myself into feeling free of him...so I’m addressing other women now, and asking you to do it for me...my motives here don’t relate only to Vito: rather, I want to free myself from dependence on men, free myself from control by men..⁸⁸

Over the tape, Dillon improvised with the drums, whip, and more words of resentment.

⁸⁸ Acconci regrets that he wrote the script that Kathy Dillon spoke on the tapes, and that she did not jointly credit her for the piece. Vito Acconci, interview with author, 12 May 2014, 20 Jay Street, Brooklyn, NY. *Ileana Sonnabend: Ambassador for the New*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 21 December 2013 to 21 April 2014, *Seedbed*, Super 8 mm film transferred to video with sound track spoken in Acconci’s voice featuring text written in 1972 as well as improvised commentary, recorded 2013, 11:46 min.

It is revealing of discourse in 1972, just after the psychotherapeutic boom and the publication of Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* and of first edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, yet just before the gender-equity legislation of Title IX, Roe vs. Wade, and the Women's Educational Equity Act, that the troubling sexual politics in Acconci's performances at Sonnabend did not register in critics' reviews of the show, but links with therapy did.⁸⁹ In *Art in America* Peter Schjeldahl cited Acconci's efforts as an example of the unfortunate proliferation of "Post-Minimal" artists "literally falling back on themselves in search of new ground, taking their own bodies and physiological and mental processes as subject matter and medium."⁹⁰ Meanwhile, in *Arts Magazine* Denise Wolmer voiced related dismay, describing Acconci's performances as "body art" that fails because of its "therapeutic aspect" and its emphasis on "psychological rather than perceptual" concerns.⁹¹ In *Artforum*, Pincus-Witten was more encouraging, writing that Acconci's thinking about "therapy" and "behavioral phenomenology" was distanced enough to be productive, and therefore to produce art.⁹² In *Art International* Carter Ratcliff fully supported Acconci's infusion of "communication-therapy," "living bodies," and "eroticized space" into the

⁸⁹ In Shulamith's book she synthesizes theories by Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Sigmund Freud, Wilhelm Riech, and Simone de Beauvoir into an assessment of gender inequality that became a bestseller. Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970.) Reprinted every year from 1970 through 1974. Boston Women's Health Book Collective, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973). First published 1971.

⁹⁰ Peter Schjeldahl, "Vito Acconci at Sonnabend," *Art In America* (March-April 1972) 119.

⁹¹ Denise Wolmer, "In the Galleries," *Arts Magazine* (March 1972) 58.

⁹² Pincus-Witten writes that Acconci's recent work is "more convincing as art because...manipulate and relocate inherited attitudes which need only be understood as behavioral phenomenology." Robert Pincus-Witten, "Vito Acconci and the Conceptual Performance," 47.

context of art.⁹³ Lucy Lippard may have believed that Acconci had not gone far enough. In a text written at the time about Conceptual Art she wrote with disappointment that artworks involved in the movement had not managed to circumvent the market and fully dissolve lines between art and other disciplines and suggested that if “behavioral artists” like Acconci cross-fertilized more substantively with their “psychologist counterparts” more rewarding dialogues would result.⁹⁴ Acconci’s performances were understood by critics and supporters alike as bringing therapeutic ideas and strategies into the gallery, and therefore blurring boundaries between art and life: for some it was too much, for others not enough.

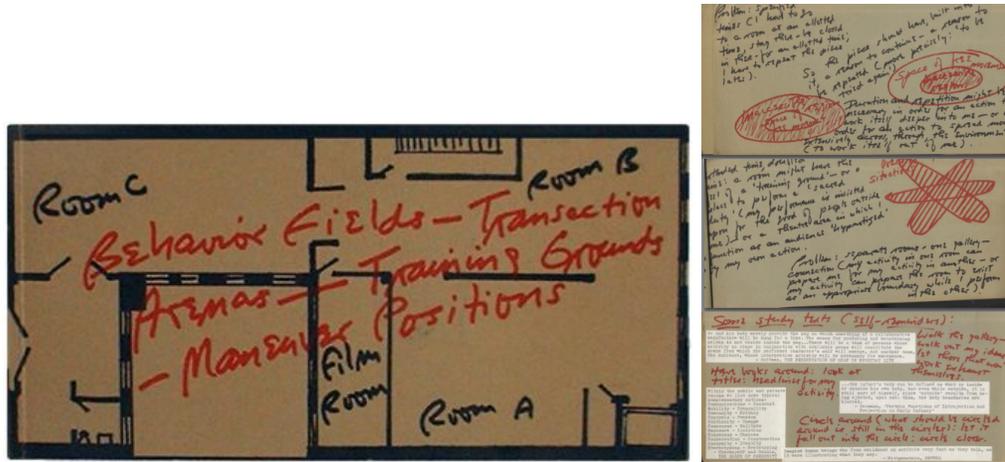
In the months following Acconci’s show at Sonnabend the artist gained a stage for framing his own work, and used it to articulate his interest in the body, mind, and communication in a manner that is illuminating. In a 1973 artist’s book on the show Acconci introduced the performances in it with Lewin-ian diagrams mapping the physical and psychological dimensions of their encounters.⁹⁵ A list of “Study Texts (self reminders)” features passages by sociologist Erving Goffman and psychiatrist Paula Heimann, and one by philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein on the body’s permeable

⁹³ Carter Ratcliff, “New York Letter” *Art International* (March 1972) 31.

⁹⁴ Lucy, “Postface,” *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966-1972* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973) Reprinted 2001. Postface written 1972. 263.

⁹⁵ Vito Acconci, *Notes on the Development of a Show: Notes Toward Performing a Gallery Space*. (Hamburg: Edition Lebeer Hossman, 1973) Edition of 250. Unpaginated.

boundary and the role of “external factors”—audience, language—in constituting notions of self.⁹⁶ Acconci sheds further light on his interest in performance and engaging other



Vito Acconci, *Notes on the Development of a Show: Notes Toward Performing a Gallery Space*, 1973 (book)

People through it in an eight-page interview in the fall 1972 issue of *Avalanche* devoted entirely to the artist. Conducted by Béar, the interview is interspersed at each centerfold with images representing group dynamics: a crowd collectively holding a ball aloft, walruses socializing, football teams running plays.⁹⁷ In the interview Acconci discusses his childhood of performance and word play, his lack of training in the tradition of

⁹⁶ Vito Acconci. *Notes on the Development of a Show: Notes Toward Performing a Gallery Space*. Hamburg: Edition Lebeer Hossman, 1973. Edition of 250. Unpaginated. Quoted by Acconci in this section are: Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1959). First published 1956; Psychoanalyst Paula Heimann, credited with theorizing the notion of countertransference, from her article “Certain function of projection and introjection in early infancy,” which is from her 1943 co-authored book *Developments in Psycho-Analysis*; Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, from his discussions of psychology in his 1967 book *Zettel*; Architects Serge Chermayeff and Alexander Tzonis, from their 1971 book *The Shape of Community: Realization of Human Potential*; Jack A. Vernon, from his 1963 book about experiments at Princeton in sensory deprivation titled *Inside the Black Room*; John N. Bleibtreu from his 1968 *The Parable of the Beast* about man’s “alienated relationship to his animal self”; Anthropologist Carlos Castañeda from his 1968 *The Teaching of Don Juan* about his training in shamanism.

⁹⁷ Vito Acconci, “...a drift with a drive at the back of its mind,” interview by Liza Béar 7-8 October 1972 and 2-3 November 1972, *Avalanche* 6 (Fall 1972) 70-77.

“painting sculpture,” his love of Ezra Pound, Jasper Johns, and Jean-Luc Godard, and the therapeutic. He allows that he is familiar with “encounter groups” and studies by Goffman, Lewin, and even the group activities of then-popular mystical teacher George Ivanovich Gurdjieff, but that his own performance-based activities are distinct from such efforts in that they do not aim for therapeutic “self awareness” amongst participants.⁹⁸

Amidst an explosion of discourse about the importance of meaningful physical and emotional encounters circa 1970, Acconci was engaging signs of the self—the body, presence, autobiography, sexuality—in performance-based artworks to create encounters with audience members. Acconci lured audience members into engaging with him through the specter of his body and his desires, and kept them there through the safety accorded by the administered language of Conceptual Art.

⁹⁸ Vito Acconci, “...a drift with a drive at the back of its mind,” 71.

Chapter Three: Technology

In his performance-based activities circa 1970, Acconci initiated encounters with audience members, yet he also erected significant barriers to physical connection. In this chapter I show that as the artist incorporated videotape technology into his performances the tension in his work—between a sense of closeness and distance with the artist—mounted until early 1974, at which point he withdrew from using his visual presence altogether in his artwork, either live or through videotape. I elucidate the mounting tension in Acconci’s performance-based artwork from the period by discussing it in relationship to concurrent debates about whether, at the onset of “the age of information,” technology was bringing people closer together or alienating them further from one-another. I show that Acconci was capitalizing upon the dialectical condition of televisual technology to allow for and also mitigate presence in order to engage and activate audience members.

Software

In the catalogue for the Museum of Modern Art’s summer 1970 exhibition *Information* curator Kynaston McShine wrote that against the “social, political, and economic crises that are almost universal phenomena” of the moment artists are developing new methods for “communicating.” “Television and other technologies,” he noted, provide artists access to a “global village,” yet they also create new competition for attention: in the “age of information” audiences are “unwilling to give the delicate

responses needed for looking at a painting.”¹ In a *New York* magazine review of *Information*, which ran with a photograph not of an artwork but of the show’s Olivetti-designed “information machine” for on-demand viewing of films, critic John Gruen agreed.² He wrote that when “television can instantaneously bring a war or a walk on the moon into one’s living room” artists have “to embrace the communications media, to work with and through it” so that “their ideas can be fully communicated and understood.”³ In the *New York Times* Hilton Kramer observed the turn from “objects” toward “communication media” with contempt, describing *Information* as “unmitigated nonsense,” a show full of “visual data” wherein artists “ask spectators questions on closed-circuit delayed-tape television...go to town with the Xerox machine, and collect a lot of pointless photographic junk.”⁴ In his litany Kramer could have included Acconci’s activity *Service Area*, in which, as I discuss in Chapter One, the artist invoked his presence in MoMA’s gallery through having his mail sent there.

While still performing presence through mail in *Information*, Acconci came nearly but not quite “face-to-face” with visitors to *Software: Information Technology, Its New Meaning for Art*, an exhibition that opened on September 16, 1970 at the Jewish Museum uptown, four days before MoMA’s show closed in midtown. The two exhibitions were linked along spatio-temporal but also thematic axes. The Jewish

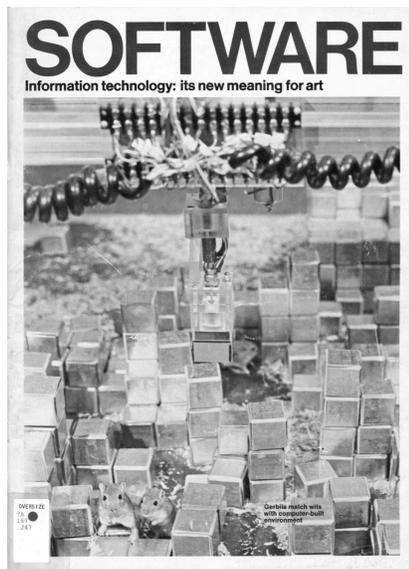
¹ *Information* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1970) 138-141.

² John Gruen, “New Worlds To Conquer,” *New York Magazine*, 6 July 1970, 65.

³ John Gruen, “New Worlds To Conquer,” 65.

⁴ Hilton Kramer, “Miracles, ‘Information,’ ‘Recommended Reading,’” *New York Times*, 12 July 1970, 87.

Museum's director Karl Katz conceived of *Software* in 1969, as a sequel to MoMA's 1968 exhibition *The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age*.⁵ *Software* was like *The Machine* and *Information* in that it engaged issues of technology, yet the Jewish Museum's show focused more sharply on technology's role in society and art. Consider the cover of *Software*'s catalogue, which features a photograph of rodents trapped in a remote-controlled maze superimposed with the caption, "Gerbils match wits with



Software, Jewish Museum, Fall 1970, Catalogue cover

computer-built environment.” With the image *Software*'s organizers seemed to be suggesting that new technologies were a means of controlling and isolating more than

⁵ The underwriter of *Software* was American Motors Corporation, which provided a budget of \$75,000. Jack Burnham, “Art and Technology: The Panacea That Failed,” in *The Myths of Information: Technology and Postindustrial Culture*, ed. Kathleen M. Woodward (Madison, WI: Coda Press, 1980), 206. Jack Burnham, *Software: Information Technology: Its New Meaning for Art* (New York: The Jewish Museum, 1970) 11.

just gerbils.⁶ Inside the catalogue, in a dense essay *Software*'s guest curator Jack Burnham, a systems theorist, describes concern for the increasing presence in daily life of "information processing systems and their devices" and laments that "systems" initially conceived to facilitate "communication between men and machines" are now used by "industry" to make people conform.⁷ *Software*, Burnham argues, resists by putting "contemporary control and communication techniques in the hands of artists," who have lately, he notes, turned from making objects and toward mining "esthetics" from communication information: budgets, planning procedures, priorities, transactions. The "finest" works in *Software*, according to Burnham, do not necessarily use "machines" but communicate information to activate audience, and make "dialogue a conscious event."

If *Software*'s curator argued in the catalogue that activating audiences should and could interrupt techno-facilitated conditions of communication, the show's nearly two-dozen works, credited to nearly as many artists and several scientists, did just that.⁸ In the galleries, a computer terminal buzzed—when not broken—with *Labyrinth* (1970), a researcher-designed software program that prompted visitors to create their own "personalized" version of the catalogue to print out and take home.⁹ Nearby museum-goers gathered around Massachusetts Institute of Technology's *Seek* (1969-1970), a 7' x

⁶ Jack Burnham, *Software: Information Technology: Its New Meaning for Art* (New York: The Jewish Museum, 1970).

⁷ Jack Burnham, *Software: Information Technology: Its New Meaning for Art*, 10-14.

⁸ Jack Burnham writes in his catalogue essay that the exhibition makes "no distinctions between art and non-art; the need to make such decisions is left to each visitor." Jack Burnham, *Software: Information Technology: Its New Meaning for Art*, 10.

⁹ Title of the piece is *Labyrinth: An Interactive Catalogue*. Jack Burnham, *Software: Information Technology: Its New Meaning for Art*, 18.

5' maze—the one on the catalogue's cover—in which gerbils were tested against a “smart” machine that constantly re-arranged their environment.¹⁰ Elsewhere in the galleries, visitors tested out *Vision Substitution System* (begun 1959), an apparatus developed at a West Coast research center that “transmitted” filmic imagery, via sensors wired to a chair, onto audience members' skin.¹¹

In *Software*, pieces credited to artists relied, for the most part, more modestly on technology to engage viewers. John Baldessari cremated his paintings and interred their ashes (*Cremation Piece*, 1969) while Robert Barry installed vinyl signage noting the presence of ultrasonic waves (*Ultrasonic Wave Piece*, 1968). Other artists used technology in place of a person, to facilitate converting visitors into content-creators. Think, for example of, Hans Haacke's *Visitor's Profile* (1969)—it was a collaboration with a computer specialist in Harvard University's psychology department—in which a computerized system asked users personalized questions about behavior, the results of which were correlated in real time—“...of 12,000 visitors to ‘Software’, there have been 6,000 Jews who smoke pot...7,000 college educated women against the war in Vietnam...”—and screened on a television monitor in the gallery, as well as made available for print-out.¹² For the show David Antin produced *The Conversationalist* (1969-1970), which involved a sound booth in the gallery, inside of which visitors were

¹⁰ Credited to architect Nicholas Negroponte with his students in MIT's Architecture Machine Group. Jack Burnham, *Software: Information Technology: Its New Meaning for Art*, 23.

¹¹ Credited to Smith-Kettlewell Institute of Visual Sciences, Vision Substitution Systems. Jack Burnham, *Software: Information Technology: Its New Meaning for Art*, 55.

¹² According to an undated press release for the show, it did this through “time-sharing” with the “system” running *Labyrinth*. Jewish Museum, *Software* files, undated press release.

prompted one at a time to improvise a story, as everyone else watched the process through a window in the gallery.¹³ John Giorno set up a guerilla radio station broadcasting poems—by Vito Acconci, John Ashbery, John Cage, Allen Ginsberg, Bernadette Mayer, Frank O’Hara, Aram Saroyan, and dozens more—that visitors listened to on transistor radios checked out at the museum’s front desk.¹⁴ Les Levine, likewise, used technology to connect visitors inside the museum with information beyond it: in *A.I.R.* (1968-1970)—the recently coined term stood for Artist-In-Residence—television monitors played footage of the artist in his loft, while in *Wire Tap* (1969-1970) speakers played telephone conversations.¹⁵

Acconci’s contribution to *Software* engaged viewers in content creation, without the use of any technology at all. First titled *Room Situation (Proximity)* (1970) but later re-named *Proximity Piece*, the performance was announced on a gallery wall by a 3” x 5” index card bearing a typed text on which Acconci noted that each day he or a “substitute” would select someone in “relative privacy” in the show and “intrude on his personal space,” standing “behind him...closer than the accustomed distance...until he moves

¹³ According to an undated press release for the show, it recorded and played back to visitors inside the booth so that people could “hear the work of which [they had] been a part.” Jewish Museum, *Software* files, undated press release.

¹⁴ Titled *Radio Free Poetry*, undated, and credited to “Giorno Poetry Systems” in the catalogue. Visitors were also invited to set up their own stations through do-it-yourself instructions in the show’s catalogue—“buy the AM transmitter manufactured by...the guy to speak to is Dick...cost \$199 plus...” Jack Burnham, *Software: Information Technology: Its New Meaning for Art*, 52.

¹⁵ According to the catalogue entry on Levine’s efforts they made the “art process” more visible and created a “closer connection between art and general culture.” Both pieces were pre-recorded, not live. Jack Burnham, *Software: Information Technology: Its New Meaning for Art*, 62.



Vito Acconci, *Proximity Piece*, 1970

away...”¹⁶ Photographs of *Proximity Piece*, which have represented it along with notes and diagrams since, are unsettling.¹⁷ In each black-and-white picture we see Acconci, recognizable by his signature long hair and dark jacket, pants, and boots, standing less than a foot behind a visitor. The photographs show that Acconci invaded museum-goers through proximity and through body language. In one picture a woman—in the event, despite the gendered language on the card, both men and women were involved—tucks a hand in her pocket and looks up as the artist stands behind her and does the same. In another photograph a man bends down to inspect a machine as Acconci replicates the action beside him. *Software*'s catalogue concludes with a photograph of *Proximity Piece*, that, though un-credited to the performance, elucidates its charge.¹⁸ In the picture a man wearing a suit—the Jewish Museum's director Karl Katz—leans over the museum's

¹⁶ Jack Burnham, *Software: Information Technology: Its New Meaning for Art* (New York: The Jewish Museum, 1970) 44. Vito Acconci and Gregory Volk *Vito Acconci: Diary of a Body, 1969-1973* (Milan: Charta, 2006) 206.

¹⁷ Vito Acconci and Gregory Volk *Vito Acconci: Diary of a Body, 1969-1973*, 206.

¹⁸ Jack Burnham, *Software: Information Technology: Its New Meaning for Art*, back cover.



Software, Jewish Museum, Fall 1970, Catalogue back cover

outdoor railing as Acconci approaches from behind, imposing on the solitary moment. Acconci stands close to, but not face-to-face with, Katz. It appears that the artist never touched, talked to, or gazed eye-to-eye with anyone he intruded upon for *Proximity Piece*. In a show about communication and technology in the age of information, Acconci performed a series of encounters that conjure a sense of connection and alienation between people.

Reviews of *Software* reflect the tenor of discussions about technology and communication circa 1970. In the *New York Times* critic Grace Glueck describes the many problems that “short-circuited” the show’s opening and quotes Mr. Katz as saying that such issues are indicative of “the difficulties in communication,” especially when “artists, computer-men, electricians and animals” collide.¹⁹ Miscommunication was the

¹⁹ Grace Glueck, “Varied Problems Beset Opening of Jewish Museum’s ‘Software,’” *New York Times*, 18 September 1970, 37.

theme of John Perreault's review in the *Village Voice*.²⁰ The critic begins his piece by discussing a recent experiment into teaching chimpanzees to "talk"—perhaps, he writes, "we will...learn how to talk to each other, but I wouldn't bet on it"—and then goes on to list *Software*'s many problems, which he notes included not just technical malfunctions but also censorship of sexual (Levine) and political (Giorno) content. Perreault writes, darkly, that *Software* and other "collaborations between artists and technologists" such as "EAT" foretell a "rough year" for art, and reflect the "necessity we now have to communicate with machines, specifically computers."²¹

Technology

Perreault's casual mention in his *Software* review of "EAT," which stood for Experiments in Art and Technology, suggests the prevalence of discussions about technology and art circa 1970. Evidently, the acronym was so familiar to the *Voice*'s readers that editors did not believe it needed to be spelled out. East Coast's E.A.T., like Art & Technology (A & T) at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art on the West Coast, was using corporate funds to connect artists with technological equipment and experts with the aim, according to the brochure of its infamous 1966 first event, "*Nine Evenings: Theater and Engineering*," to help them "approach...towards the real world," or mediate the gap between "art" and "life" that had been plaguing avant-gardes since at

²⁰ John Perreault, "Art: Harder Software," *Village Voice*, 24 September 1970, 19-20.

²¹ John Perreault, "Art: Harder Software," 19-20.

least the early 20th century.²² Critics did not embrace that first event—it took place in a New York City armory building and involved artists such as Debra Hay, Yvonne Rainer, and Robert Rauschenberg doing things such as directing performers through walkie-talkies and having them move about on mechanized platforms—calling it a “limp disaster” and “depressing spectacle,” and noting that it managed to turn audiences “generally turned on...turned off.”²³ By 1970, as suspicions about corporate-backed marriages between artists and technocracy mounted, E.A.T.’s final large-scale endeavor, the Pepsi-Cola Pavilion at Expo ’70, was the subject of a scathing *New Yorker* expose in which Calvin Tomkins described it as a financial, technological, and aesthetic “debacle.” Tomkins described the affair as an example of the unfortunate trend of pairing “art and engineering...celebrated upon the alter of big business.”²⁴ A year later, the culminating exhibition of A & T’s corporate residences for artists—LACMA ultimately presented

²² Experiments in Art and Technology, Inc. (E.A.T.) began in 1966 with a Bell Telephone Laboratories laser research specialist Billy Klüver with art world connections that included museum director Pontus Hultén and artist Jean Tinguely. Bell engineers and artists Robert Rauschenberg, Robert Whitman, and several others began meeting regularly and formed E.A.T.

²³ The event, titled “*Nine Evenings: Theater and Engineering*,” took place in lower Manhattan’s 69th Regiment Armory building 13 October through 23 October 1966. 8:30pm each evening. Budget \$100,000. Hundreds bought three dollars tickets. Evenings included: dancers remotely controlling movable platforms (Debra Hay’s *Solo*) and being directed by walkie-talkies (Yvonne Rainer’s *Carriage Discreteness*), a tennis game wired to affect lights (Robert Rauschenberg’s *Open Score*), and machine-modulated ambient noise (John Cage’s *Variations VIII*). For more on this history see: the Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science, and Technology’s archives at <http://www.fondation-langlois.org/html/e/page.php?NumPage=394>; Jack Burnham, “Art and Technology: The Panacea That Failed,” in *The Myths of Information: Technology and Postindustrial Culture*, ed. Kathleen M. Woodward (Madison, WI: Coda Press, 1980), 202; Clive Barnes, “Nine Evenings: Dance or Something at the Armory,” *New York Times*, 15 October 1966, 33; Robert Smithson, “An Esthetics of Disappointment On The Occasion Of The Art and Technology Show At The Armory,” 1966, first published in Robert Smithson and Nancy Holt, *The Writings of Robert Smithson: Essays with Illustrations* (New York: New York University Press, 1979) 212.

²⁴ Calvin Tomkins, “Onward and Upward With The Arts: E.A.T.” *New Yorker*, 3 October 1970, 83-133. Quotes from pages 83 and 133.

sixteen projects, including a mechanized icebag by Claes Oldenburg, a massive steel plate by Richard Serra, and a “waterfall” by Andy Warhol—was decried by Max Kozloff on the pages of *Artforum*.²⁵ According to Kozloff, the project was indicative of the unfortunate trend in arrangements between art and “violence industries” that had produced none of the hoped-for “rapprochement with the masses...”²⁶ The show, he wrote, revealed an “avant-garde...enticed by feckless experimentalism” and “techno-euphoria.”²⁷ Jack Burnham was also commissioned by *Artforum* to assess the show, and

²⁵ Maurice Tuchman, LACMA’s Senior Curator of Modern Art, pitched A & T to museum administration in 1966, writing later for the catalogue of its 1971 culminating exhibition, that he had been inspired by Los Angeles’ aerospace, scientific, and film industries and by artists’ impulse, since at least the Italian Futurists, to “reform commercial industrial products, to create public monuments for a new society, to express fresh artist ideas with materials that only industry could provide.” Over its five years, the program involved approaching corporations to host an artist-in-residence and provide financial and technical support. Seventy-five artists were asked to submit proposal for collaborations that would be realized with industrial facilities and resources. Ultimately, of the many proposals submitted only sixteen were approved by sponsors, and actually realized. Three-dozen corporations were approached, including Lockheed Aircraft Corporation, Hewlett-Packard, The Rand Corporation, and IBM (the latter was also a sponsor of E.A.T. and tried to fund *Software* but the museum rejected the funds). Projects by eight of the sixteen were ready for a preview at Expo ’70. The program, Tuchman noted to trustees in a four-hundred-page catalogue for the culminating exhibition that reads like a report (it is titled “A Report on the Art and Technology Program of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art: 1967-1971,” its cover features headshots of the mostly white men in the project, its pages are filled with budgets, timelines, contracts, and other data) would draw “attention to the acknowledged need in the U.S. for institutions responsive to the interests of society...artists, and perhaps even businessmen.” even as they acknowledged that artists, among others, were, upon the program’s close, becoming unsure whether it was “valuable to effect a practical interchange between artists and members of the corporate-industrial society...” Richard Serra, in a text the museum chose to include in his catalogue entry, described the connection between technology and recent events bluntly: “technology is simultaneous hope and hoax...it deals with the affirmation of its own making. Technology is what we do to the Black Panthers and the Vietnamese under the guise of advancement in a materialistic theology.” Maurice Tuchman, *A Report on the Art and Technology Program of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1967-1971* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1971) Exh. Cat. Quotes from Tuchman: 9; 43. Quote from Serra: 300.

²⁶ Kozloff noted that the museum did not extend the opportunity to “blacks, Chicanos, women” or many on the West Coast, and that it is out of touch given the current landscape as dominated by “unemployment, recession, inflation...My Lai massacre, the Chicago Democratic Convention riots, the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, the invasion of Cambodia, and student killings at Kent and Jackson State.” Max Kozloff, “Million Dollar Boondoggle,” *Artforum* (October 1971) 74; 76.

²⁷ Max Kozloff, “Million Dollar Boondoggle,” 74; 76.

despite his involvement in the field—he was even an A & T consultant—he was also gloomy. Burnham found the projects at LACMA unimpressive, and suggested that they portended “the outlook for any future rapprochement between [art and technology] is dismal.”²⁸

As some within the art world were considering whether technology could help artists more effectively communicate with wider audiences, others were engaging in debates about whether technological innovations were giving people in greater agency, or taking it away. Circa 1970 televisions bombarded American living rooms nightly with gruesome images of military-industrial actions in Southeast Asia as critiques—some developed decades before, during the rise of fascism—of technology’s role in society circulated.²⁹ Consider that publishers chose the year 1971 for the first English edition of Antonio Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*, which includes the Italian communist’s 1930s essays on how technology feeds hegemony.³⁰ 1972 was the year that Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was first published in English. Grounded in Gramsci’s notions and the written in the 1940s, the Frankfurt School Marxists warn of a society driven by efficiency and technology into an administered state

²⁸ Jack Burnham, “Corporate Art,” *Artforum* (October 197), 68; 71.

²⁹ The Vietnam War has been dubbed the first “living-room” or “television war” because it was the first war experience by many through television. On the war’s coverage on television in the United States and its impact on American society see: Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

³⁰ Antonio Gramsci, Quintin Hoare, and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (N.Y.: International Publishers, 1971).

of reproducibility such that people are alienated from choice, meaningful content, nature, and ultimately each other.³¹ This condition was further theorized as de-humanizing by French sociologist Jacques Ellul in his book *The Technological Society*, which came out in French in 1954 and in English in 1964.³² 1964 was also the year that Frankfurt School philosopher Herbert Marcuse published *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial*, in which he argued that technology produces the illusion of access while repressing dissent, and feeding the hegemony of capital.³³

Other theorists were working from a less technological determinist perspective and gaining followers through expressing hope that in the right hands certain forms of technology could be used against the hegemony of capital. Consider the post-1968 popularity of Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*, in which the situationist argues that the stultifying spectacle of television can be opposed through re-purposing the apparatus' own language and tools, for example through the use of "live televisual projections."³⁴ At the same time, sociologist Raymond Williams began writing a monthly

³¹ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972). Adorno and Horkheimer's theory of "the culture industry" is rooted in the same notion of reproducibility that their colleague Walter Benjamin saw as productive and they viewed in less positive light.

³² Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (New York: Knopf, 1964). Originally published in French in 1954.

³³ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).

³⁴ Founding member of the Situationist International. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York, Zone Books: 1994) 12. Originally published as *La société du spectacle* (Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 1967). First English translation (Detroit: Black & Red, 1970). Think also of the interest in social scientist Theodore Roszak's 1969 *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition*, in which he argues that challenging science-based conventions would undermine the "technocracy." Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture*;

column on television for the BBC's journal. The columns formed the basis of Williams' 1973 book *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, in which he argues that people have the agency to disrupt capitalist logic, for example through taking advantage of new on-demand televisual services which he theorized allowed for greater control and access.³⁵ Note also that the spring 1970 first issue of the magazine *Radical Software* was subtitled *The Alternate Television Movement*.³⁶ It featured pronouncements by media philosopher Gene Youngblood—"television is... a sleeping giant," "the media must be liberated, must be removed from private ownership and commercial sponsorship"—and Buckminster Fuller, who on its pages declared, "we are technology."³⁷ The first issue of *Radical Software* also included a review of a book titled "How to Talk Back to Your Television Set" and notices for two exhibitions—*Vision and Television* at Brandeis University's Rose Art Museum and *TV As a Creative Medium* at The Howard Wise Gallery—that register the interest among some in the art world in framing the televisual as potentially radical.³⁸

Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969) 205.

³⁵ Raymond Williams, *Television* (Routledge: New York, 2008). First published (Fontana: London, 1974). Discussion of column in forward, xiv.

³⁶ Six issues published by Frank Gillette's Raindance Corporation, conceived of as an alternative media think tank formed in 1969 and with its name intended to ironically reference the Rand Corporation. *Radical Software* published 1970-1974. First issue Spring 1970. See: <http://www.radicalsoftware.org/e/index.html>.

³⁷ *Radical Software* (Spring 1970) 1, 5.

³⁸ *Radical Software* (Spring 1970) 14, 16.

As theorists were debating whether televisual and other new technologies would fight or feed the alienation produced by the hegemony of capitalism it was becoming practical for people to experiment with the issue: televisual tools were becoming accessible to greater numbers of people, including artists, for non-commercial use. In the late 1960s federal funding prompted public television stations across the United States to open their facilities and airwaves to artists, and by 1970 audio-visual video recording equipment had become affordable, portable, and standard enough to be used beyond television studios.³⁹ People—artists among them—had been using super 8mm film cameras. The footage recorded through these devices onto several-minute-long reels was difficult to synch with sound and was viewable only after processing and projection. New battery-operated audio-visual recording cameras, often called “Portapak” after Sony’s popular model, soon came equipped with in-camera viewing of footage as it recorded. Tapes often held thirty minutes of footage and sound, and were now standardized to the degree that they were playable, without processing, immediately through various deck

³⁹ In 1967 Congress responded to the growth of advertisement-based commercial television and radio by establishing the Corporation for Public Broadcasting to provide a federal funding structure for non-commercial programming. That same year television stations on both coasts—WGBH, Boston, founded 1951, KQUED, San Francisco, founded 1953—began inviting artists in to use their studios, to produce original works for broadcast. 1967 WGBH established its first artists-in-residence program with grants from Rockefeller/Ford foundations and KQUED established the Center for Experiments in Television, which was funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. In 1969 the latter was renamed the National Center for Experiments in Television and began receiving funds from the newly formed National Endowment for the Arts. Two years later Boston’s WGBH aired results with its 1969 program “The Medium is the Medium,” a thirty minute program which featured segments by, among others Alan Kaprow, Alan Kaprow, Nam June Paik, Otto Piene, James Seawright, Thomas Tadlock, and Aldo Tambellini. Produced by Fred Barzyk.

models onto television monitors.⁴⁰ In 1970 in the United States, a personal video recording system cost around \$1500 and weighed about seven pounds.

Acconci's Early Videos

Acconci made many videotapes from 1970 through 1974, mostly when video-recording equipment was available through friends, or at art institutions where he was teaching or presenting his artwork (the artist acquired his own video recording system in 1973).⁴¹ Acconci's tapes, like his many short silent super 8mm films dating from 1969 through 1971, often feature him doing something alone or with another person, such as tucking himself inside of a box (*Filler*, 1971 videotape) or pacing back and forth (*Filling Space*, 1970, film).⁴² Yet the artist presented his body through film and videotape differently, because he understood that spectators experienced each media under different conditions. Circa 1970, viewers generally watched films sitting in the dark at a distance from projected imagery, which dwarfed their bodies. As such, the experience of filmic imagery, as critic and video artist Douglas Davis observed at the time, was

⁴⁰ In 1965 Sony launched a campaign to get consumers for video equipment and lesser-known products by Norelco and Concord became available. In late 1969 the most mass-produced video tape recording system, Sony's AV 3400 Porta pak, became available, at a list price in early 1970 of \$1495. In 1970 new AV format Portapak produced that conformed to international standards for ½ inch videotape so tapes could be played back on competing manufacturer's equipment. In 1972 it was listed at \$1650. The system recorded up to 30 minutes of "live" action, and the recorded picture could be immediately played back and viewed on the camera viewfinder screen, which was its innovation over the 1967-introduced Sony Video Rover, which required a separate VTR to play back the recorded footage making the operation a two-person endeavor. 1970 3400 version was 7 pounds. 1973 3450 version weighed 4 pounds.

⁴¹ Vito Acconci, interview with author, 23 July 2012, 20 Jay Street, Brooklyn, NY. Vito Acconci, interview with author, 13 August 2014, 20 Jay Street, Brooklyn, NY.

⁴² Acconci made many Super 8mm films from 1969 through 1971, all silent and most under fifteen minutes. They were later transferred to video. He largely stopped making short Super 8mm films after 1971. He made two in 1972, and later made a cinema-length film.

“overpowering...larger than any imaginable life.”⁴³ Given this, Acconci felt that film was best suited for presenting the body whole, from afar.⁴⁴ Videotapes, by contrast, were watched circa 1970 on television monitors, which people were familiar with from their living rooms. Viewers in a gallery, like at home, might approach the sets and when they did their bodies dwarfed what they saw on-screen. According to Davis, videotapes were experienced through “a perceptual system grounded in the home and the self.”⁴⁵ According to Acconci, video was best suited for presenting the body close-up.⁴⁶



Vito Acconci, *Corrections*, 12 min, b&w, sound, 1970

Consider how Acconci used a close-up of his body to engage viewers in his first single-channel video, *Corrections*, which was recorded in September 1970 (as the artist

⁴³ Douglas Davis, “Filmgoing – Videogoing: Making Distinctions,” *American Film Institute Journal* (May 1973) 51.

⁴⁴ Vito Acconci, interview by author, 10 July 2011, 20 Jay Street, Brooklyn, NY.

⁴⁵ Douglas Davis, “Filmgoing – Videogoing: Making Distinctions,” 51; 52.

⁴⁶ Vito Acconci, interview by author, 10 July 2011, 20 Jay Street, Brooklyn, NY.

was coming nearly-but-not-quite face-to-face with museum-goers in his live performances of *Proximity Piece*).⁴⁷ *Corrections* was shown a month after it was made, in October 1970's *Body Works*, which was described by its organizer Willoughby Sharp in the fall 1970 first issue of his magazine *Avalanche* as a "non-definitive survey of very recent works using the human body."⁴⁸ *Body Works* featured tapes by Acconci, Terry Fox, Bruce Nauman, Dennis Oppenheim, Keith Sonnier, and William Wegman and was shown for one night only, at Breen's Bar, the unofficial San Francisco gathering spot of artist Tom Marioni's Museum of Conceptual Art (Marioni helped coordinate the exhibition).⁴⁹ On a television monitor hanging overhead in the darkened bar on October 18, 1970 patrons watched Acconci's nearly silent, black-and-white, twelve-minute tape *Corrections*. In the video the artist, turned away from the camera's lens toward a blank wall, fills the frame with the back of his head and naked shoulders. As the tape begins Acconci reaches behind him with a lit match and sets the hair on his nape aflame, then snuffs out the fire and begins again. Presumably guided by a live feed of the video camera's footage playing to a screen before him—the top edge of a monitor appears in the frame between the artist and wall—Acconci repeats the process for the duration of the tape. Despite the dangers and even pain associated with the activity, Acconci never

⁴⁷ *Corrections*, 12 min, b&w, sound, 1970.

⁴⁸ Willoughby Sharp, "Body Works, *Avalanche* 1 (Fall 1970) 14-15.

⁴⁹ *Body Works* exhibited at Breen's Bar, 71 Third St, 18 October 1970. Advertisement, *Avalanche* 2 (Winter 1971) last page in front matter (before page one). penultimate page before page 1. See also: mention of exhibition Lucy Lippard, Lucy Lippard, "Postface," *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966-1972* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973) Reprinted 2001. Tom Marioni, *Beer, Art and Philosophy: A Memoir* (San Francisco: Crown Point Press, 2003), 93-94; 97;102. *Avalanche* 6 (Fall 1972) 24-25.

betrays a reaction: he does not flinch or gasp or saying anything, and never turns around to reveal emotion on his face. In *Corrections* Acconci draws the viewer in with a close-up of his naked and vulnerable body but he keeps his audience at bay, not only from his emotions but also from his body, which is contained by the frame of the screen and to the time and space of the recorded videotape.

Within months of making his first videotape Acconci was using televisual equipment in live performances, not only to record footage he later edited into single-channel video works but also to mediate interactions during live proceedings. Consider *Pryings*, a January 20, 1971 performance—and related single-channel video work—that took place in a New York University auditorium for a program titled “Body,” which also featured that night activities by Terry Fox, Dan Graham, and Dennis Oppenheim and another evening pieces by Bruce Nauman, Richard Serra, and Michael Snow.⁵⁰ Given that the events were presented by NYU’s Art Students’ Association as part of their “Performances and Activities” series and produced by Acconci’s then-dealer John Gibson, it is likely that the audience consisted not only of students but also artists and others from the downtown art community, invited by Gibson and the performers. Standing not on the auditorium’s stage but on the floor level with an audience that included peers, Acconci performed *Pryings*, a twenty-minute, wordless struggle to open the closed eyes of co-performer Kathy Dillon. In the videotape *Pryings* it is evident that the artist, emboldened by the advantage of sight and also, one senses, entitlements

⁵⁰ See poster for event in Fales Library. Event 20 January 1971 at Eisner & Lubin Auditorium. Presented by NYU Art Students’ Association. Produced by dealer John Gibson. Event scheduled to being at 7:30pm. The poster features a photograph from Acconci’s 1970 *Trademarks* activity.

associated with his gender, tries to control Dillon, grabbing at her closed eyes, hair, and skin.⁵¹ Though Acconci never manages to wrest Dillon's eyes fully open, he does mostly keep her in his grasp. Dillon occasionally breaks away, yet in one of the piece's more disturbing elements, she always re-submits. While the live performance was taking place Bernadette Mayer was encircling the pair at close range, recording with a video camera



Vito Acconci, *Pryings*, 17:10 min, b&w, sound, 1971

that she focused mainly on Dillon's pained and pinched face. During the performance, the camera's footage fed live to a television monitor situated center stage. Seated spectators chose between watching the struggle "whole" yet obscured by their vantage point or viewing it through the close-up of Dillon's face, framed by the televisual system and presented center stage.

Consider how Acconci used televisual equipment to mediate interactions with audience members the following month, in February 1971, when he was invited to Halifax's Nova Scotia College of Art and Design to work with students in artist David

⁵¹ *Pryings*, 17:10 min, b&w, sound, 1971.

Askevold's Projects Class.⁵² While at NSCAD Acconci took advantage of available video equipment in several live performances and also to shoot a single-channel video, *Centers*. In the twenty-two-minute black-and-white tape, which is silent except for occasional ambient noise, Acconci fills the screen with his face, confronting the camera's lens during taping, but the viewer's gaze in the resulting tape.⁵³ The encounter between artist



Vito Acconci, *Centers*, 22:38 min., b&w, sound, 1971

and viewer intensifies when, a couple of seconds into the tape, Acconci raises an arm and points directly out in front of his face, a position he maintains until the tape's end even as his arm quivers with effort. The sustained gesture is mesmerizing, and effective: it is difficult to refuse the artist's wordless demand to meet his gaze. In 1972 Acconci noted—though in relation to his 1970 performance *Service Area* and its photographs—that

⁵² Vito Acconci and Gregory Volk *Vito Acconci: Diary of a Body, 1969-1973* (Milan: Charta, 2006) 237, 240. In Halifax 8 February to 21 February 1971. While at NSCAD Acconci used blindfolds, first to keep his own eyes shut as he fell backwards toward students (*Trials*, 1971) and then in an activity wherein both he and artist Doug Waterman wore them, as well as earplugs, while trying to mimic each other's movement for an hour as off-stage someone voiced directions audible only to the audience, both those who watched live and those who experienced the performance afterward, through the videotape recorded (*Association Area*, 1971).

⁵³ *Centers*, 22:28 min, b&w, sound, 1971.

through the “frame” of the camera he was able to come “face to face” with viewers, “entwine” them in his “field of action.”⁵⁴

Air Time

As Acconci was exploring ways of coming “face to face” with viewers through televisual mediation he was more vigorously trying to create such encounters. Consider *Claim*, which, as I discuss in Chapter Two, the artist performed one fall night in 1971, in a ground floor loft in SoHo.⁵⁵ As the loft filled with spectators it was otherwise almost empty, except for, next to a closed basement door, a black-and-white television monitor. The monitor played a live feed of blindfolded Acconci, sitting at the foot of the stairs below, swinging pipes and muttering, among other threats, that he would “kill... stop anyone from coming down here with me.” The rant, which was mediated televisually but also by the wooden floorboards through which it was likely heard and even felt by bodies above, had an effect: audience members eventually opened the door and descended to engage the artist, though their encounters with him remained mediated by his blindfold, weapons, and sharp words.

By 1973 Acconci was using televisual means to mediate encounters with audiences as he was searching for reasons to continue making the live performances that gained him renown. In January 1972 the artist had garnered so much attention for performing the masturbatory *Seedbed* through the mediation of a ramp and other means –

⁵⁴ *Avalanche*, 6 (Fall 1972) 17. In reference to *Service Area*, performed in 1970 at the Museum of Modern Art in the exhibition *Information*.

⁵⁵ See Chapter 2 discussion of *Claim*. See also *Claim Excerpts*, 62:11 min, b&w, sound, 1971.

as I discuss in Chapter Two—that he was featured that summer in the international exhibition *Documenta 5* in Kassel, Germany, that fall in a special *Avalanche* issue devoted to him alone, and was one of forty artists writer Ursula Meyer profiled in her book *Conceptual Art*.⁵⁶ By February 1973 Acconci was working not on a live performance but on the videotape *Undertone*, when he remarked to critic David Bourdon that his “chief goal was to establish a dynamic interaction between himself and spectators.”⁵⁷ The black-and-white, thirty-five-minute videotape *Undertone* features a table extending lengthwise toward a blank wall.⁵⁸ The table’s foreground edge is parallel



Vito Acconci, *Undertone*, 34:12 min, b&w, sound, 1973

with the bottom of the frame, which situates the viewer in a “seat” at one end. As the tape begins Acconci steps into the frame and seats himself in a chair at the other end of the table, now squarely “facing” the viewer. After getting situated, the artist places his hands in his lap and gazes down, and begins breathily uttering a mantra—“I want to believe...I

⁵⁶ *Documenta 5*, Kassel, Germany; *Avalanche 6* (Fall 1972); Ursula Meyer, *Conceptual Art* (New York: Dutton, 1972).

⁵⁷ David Bourdon, “An Eccentric Body of Art,” *Saturday Review of the Arts*, 3 February 1973, 32.

⁵⁸ *Undertone*, 34:12 min, b&w, sound, 1973.

want to believe that there is a girl here under the table who is resting her forearms on my thighs...”—and moving his arms in a manner that appears to feed the sexual fiction he is attempting to conjure. After a few minutes the artist shifts gears, and brings his arms atop the table and his gaze up and out, to meet the viewer’s. At the same time Acconci addresses the viewer with his words: “I need you, I need you to be sitting there, facing me, I need you to be sitting there facing me because I have to have someone to talk to, I have to know you’re there facing me...” For the remainder of the tape, every few minutes Acconci shifts between looking down into his lap and then out at the viewer, the tedium of the former making the direct physical and verbal address of the latter that much more penetrating. *Undertone*, which was shown in spring 1973 a couple of weeks after it was made in *Circuit: A Video Invitational*, which originated at Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, New York and toured to several other institutions around the country, became a model for how the artist would, over the coming months, use himself—his body and words—on a monitor to lure audience members into an encounter with him, and persuade them of their essential role in his work.⁵⁹

Acconci used the format he established in *Undertone* to engage audiences through televisual and other devices a couple of months later, to mixed effect. In April 1973

⁵⁹ According to curator David Ross in the Winter 1973 issue of *Radical Software* the exhibition *Circuit: A Video Invitational* was shown in spring 1973 at the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, New York ; the Henry Gallery of the University of Washington in Seattle; and at the Cranbrook Academy of Art Museum in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. According to Ross, those showings were to be followed by exhibitions at the Los Angeles County Museum, The Greenville County Museum in South Carolina, and “other museums still unconfirmed as of this writing.” Includes image of Acconci’s *Undertone*, suggesting this was his contribution. David Ross, “On Circuit: A Video Invitational,” *Radical Software* V2, N5, Winter 1973, 32. Acconci states *Undertone* now “prototype” in conversation with Béar in *Avalanche* 9 (May/June 1974) 22.

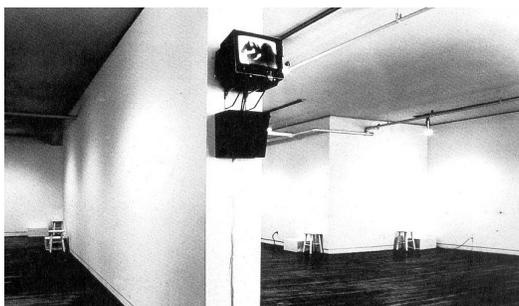
Acconci planned to do a performance-based activity at Hotel Earle, a seedy Greenwich Village spot popular at the time with artists and folk musicians, that would coincide with his second solo exhibition at Sonnabend Gallery in nearby SoHo. Both shows were announced with one postcard. The card features a grainy black-and-white photograph of Acconci lying in a corner on the floor, his body obscured by shadow and by the printed superimposition of text scrawled by the artist: “Will be at Hotel Earle, Washington Square North, Room 226, April 3 to 14, 6pm to 9pm each night—continuing at Sonnabend Gallery, April 7-21, 10am to 6pm—Vito Acconci.”⁶⁰ Acconci’s prone form and handwritten first-person text suggests that he planned to be present at both locations, but his visual and textual obfuscation—the text does not begin with “I”—suggests an opposing impulse, of retreat. In the event, Acconci was not physically present at Hotel Earle for his project there. Those who made their way to Room 226 on the appointed nights for *Stop-Over*, as the piece was titled, found the hotel room installed with audiotape machines playing tapes, through which the artist pleaded with viewers—“I need you...If you hadn’t come to the hotel...”—to be present.⁶¹

Through Acconci’s Saturday April 7 scheduled opening at Sonnabend Gallery he remained unsure what to do in that context, and so the gallery doors remained shut. But when Sonnabend opened for business four days later Acconci was prepared: he had decided he would be available to visitors, but only through the mediation of televisual

⁶⁰ See card: Vito Acconci and Gregory Volk *Vito Acconci: Diary of a Body, 1969-1973* (Milan: Charta, 2006) 325.

⁶¹ John Perreault, “Art,” *Village Voice*, 26 April 1973, page 34; Vito Acconci and Gregory Volk *Vito Acconci: Diary of a Body, 1969-1973* (Milan: Charta, 2006) 342-347.

equipment.⁶² For *Air Time*, as the project was titled, Acconci installed a large room—it was a couple-dozen feet across and fifty feet end-to-end—in the gallery with seven listening stations, each involving a stool next to a white box holding a tape machine. These played exhortations pre-recorded by the artist—“Turn on, tune in...I’m lighting my cigarette...you’re waking up...too crowded...can’t get to her...You’re still around?...”—that were activated in an alternating sequence, so that as Acconci’s voice circulated about the space visitors might as well.⁶³ The vector defining the installation’s main event, however, began at the room’s entrance. There, just inside the threshold, was a tiny closet outfitted with a closed circuit video and audio recording system. When the gallery was open for visitors Acconci sat shut inside the closet, his presence indicated by a light blinking red outside the door and by closed circuit footage of him that played on a monitor fixed, along with an audio speaker, on a freestanding wall in the middle of the



Left: Vito Acconci, *Air Time*, 1973, Installation Sonnabend Gallery, New York, New York
 Right: Vito Acconci, *Recording Studio From Air Time*, 36:49 min., b&w, sound, 1973

⁶² Such indecision by Acconci before a show and up until its opening was not unusual, but its was particularly acute in this case in that it lasted through the opening. A Sonnabend staff member told Acconci that the gallery could show works on paper until the following Saturday but Acconci was ready on the next day the gallery was scheduled to be ready to be open after the scheduled Saturday opening, a Tuesday. Ealan Wingate, interview by author, 27 May 2012, phone; Vito Acconci, interview with author, 13 August 2014, 20 Jay Street, Brooklyn, NY; John Perreault, “Art,” *Village Voice*, 26 April 1973, page 34.

⁶³ Notes, diagrams, and transcripts on piece in: Vito Acconci and Gregory Volk *Vito Acconci: Diary of a Body, 1969-1973* (Milan: Charta, 2006) 348-353.

room.⁶⁴ Visitors, drawn to the televisual close-up with the artist on the monitor installed at eye level, were thus positioned at the other end of the vector, at the center of *Air Time*.

Through *Air Time*'s monitor and speaker audience members saw and heard Acconci crouched on the closet floor with a microphone, in front of a mirror. The video camera was positioned behind the artist so that it captured his reflection in the mirror. This also meant that when Acconci looked at himself in the mirror he was looking at a reflection of the camera, and through its feed out at viewers watching on the monitor. The mediated scenario—artist, mirror, reflection, camera, feed, monitor—gave viewers access to Acconci and created barriers to connecting with him. The artist furthered this dialectic as he spoke into the microphone. In a half-hour videotape Acconci made from *Air Time*'s live feed—it is titled *Recording Studio from Air Time*—the artist, looking at his reflection, says: “I want to be in here as if I’m in here with you. I’m talking to you, looking straight at you, doesn’t matter if you can hear me or not...I want to see myself the way you’ve seen me over the last five years...I’m looking straight at you...” In this passage, the “you” seems to be viewers.⁶⁵ But then Acconci shifts this word’s referent—

⁶⁴ Acconci took two fifteen minute breaks a day. Notes, diagrams, and transcripts on piece in: Vito Acconci and Gregory Volk *Vito Acconci: Diary of a Body, 1969-1973*, 348-353.

⁶⁵ *Recording Studio From Air Time*, 36:49 min, b&w, sound, 1973. In the video we mostly see tape of Acconci in the closet, but this is preceded by a three-minute “introduction” in which the video is situated within the installation from which it emerged. In this segment we see a television monitor sitting on a shelf, much like the setup in the gallery. The television plays footage of Acconci in the closet, yet after a minute a hand reaches in from off-frame and mutes the set and a voice-over by the artist begins to explain. Acconci begins by noting his conditions in the closet—“...It was hard for me to pay attention to what I was doing, to concentrate on her, on my life with her as I sat inside here...it was a place meant for concentration...”—and then describes the show’s logistics, including how long it lasted, how often he

“three of us in that hotel room, you were getting in the way...”—to someone else, perhaps a girlfriend. Later, the artist further complicates matters, now addressing “you” yet also alluding to “them:” “I keep drifting off to the rest of them...its not them I’m talking to, I’m really only talking to you... I keep falling away from you and drifting off to them, standing around, sitting around, they keep getting in the way...” Through Acconci’s shifting mode of address he conjures various people, gazes, and encounters. Yet toward the end of the tape, when Acconci says “I want them to be out there, they’ve got to see the way I am...so that I can face it...,” he suggests that the most crucial connection conjured in *Air Time* was between him and viewers.

Command Performance

Following the show at Sonnabend, Acconci’s long-time supporter John Perreault lamented in the *Village Voice* that it indicated the artist was having trouble figuring “out how to deal with gallery situations.”⁶⁶ While Perreault may have been correct—after delaying the Sonnabend show Acconci canceled one at Washington D.C.’s Max Protech Gallery because he felt that he “couldn’t bring [a] piece together” that made sense in the space—he was also missing the point.⁶⁷ Douglas Davis came closer to understanding

performed in it, and the existence of the sound stations. At every turn Acconci highlights his role—we see him, hear his voice, are given insight into his thoughts—and also that of viewers: he is performing for us, isolating himself from us, distracted because of us, and talking to us. Acconci’s presence, which he negotiates through video, is as essential as ours.

⁶⁶ John Perreault, “Art,” *Village Voice*, 26 April 1973, 38.

⁶⁷ Letter from Acconci to David Bourdon, 9 August 1974. In “Bourdon Manuscript,” *Museum of Modern Art Bourdon Archive*, Bourdon I.12, Unpaginated, (Note #9, third page).

Acconci's difficulty with producing artwork for some environments in his 1973 year-end assessment of the arts, published in *Newsweek*.⁶⁸ In the essay Davis extends an argument he made several months before, in an *Artforum* article in which he defended the use of "content" and the "self" in art as effective ways of "linking" art with "the outside world."⁶⁹ In his *Newsweek* assessment Davis celebrates Acconci as one of the leading artists in the United States, not only because his "expressions" are not "confined" to objects but because his "psychodrama[s]...projected into a gallery by a TV monitor" fulfill the avant-garde goal of merging art with life.⁷⁰

Acconci effectively used televisual means to bring the "self" to viewers in *Command Performance*, a one-night installation in January 1974, after which the artist no longer used his visual presence in his artwork. Acconci developed *Command Performance* for 112 Greene Street, an artist-run space occupying ground floor and basement quarters in SoHo, as part of *Video Performance*, a nine-night series of events that took place there. The series, organized by *Avalanche*'s Liza Béar and Willoughby Sharp, involved Acconci and eight other artists—Joseph Beuys, Chris Burden, Dennis Oppenheim, Ulrike Rosenbach, Richard Serra with Robert Bell, Sharp, Keith Sonnier, and William Wegman—each of whom were given one evening, but no budget, to do

⁶⁸ Article was for a special issue on "The Arts in America." Davis wrote about art for the issue. Other critics covered the states of film, music, theater, literature, and even criticism for the issue. Issue introduced by letter from the editors which reflects the context: "...It has sometimes appeared that America is coming apart...[but] politics and economics and diplomacy are only part of any society...the creative life of the mind and spirit goes on—reflecting the rest of society..." Douglas Davis, "Art Without Limits," *Newsweek*, 24 December 1973, 68-74; editorial statement 3.

⁶⁹ Douglas Davis, "What is Content?: Notes Toward an Answer," *Artforum* (October 1973) 59-63.

⁷⁰ Douglas Davis, "Art Without Limits," *Newsweek*, 24 December 1973, 63.

something at the “interface of video and live performance,” according to Béar in a May/June 1974 issue of *Avalanche* devoted to the project.⁷¹ The issue, its cover featuring a still image of a television monitor, registers the editors’ belief in the interest amongst readers in the topic at hand: pages include interviews and features on each artist along with advertisements for Windsor Total Video, *Avalanche* Video, and other distributors of “art tapes” in or near SoHo. The issue also includes a two-page photographic spread of some of the hundreds of “artists and people from the SoHo community”—among them Phillip Glass, Ray Johnson, Robert Morris, and Jackie Winsor—who Béar notes showed up each night for the series.⁷²

The first night of *Video Performance* took place on Sunday January 13th, when hundreds gathered around a television monitor at 112 Greene Street to watch a tape of Joseph Beuys’ *Public Dialogue* the night before, at the New School for Social Research nearby. At the New School, Beuys, on his first visit to the United States, had delivered a lecture-cum-performance on “social sculpture” and entertained questions from an at-capacity crowd of three-hundred-fifty attendees. From the stage Beuys lamented that many people had to be turned away at the auditorium doors, and this may have played into his decision to use video the following night, to expand his audience.⁷³ On January 14th William Wegman, for his contribution to the series at 112 Greene Street, introduced

⁷¹ Liza Béar in *Avalanche* 9 (May/June 1974) 3.

⁷² There were two-hundred to eight-hundred people in attendance each night. *Avalanche* 9 (May/June 1974) 3; 18-19.

⁷³ Account in Robyn Brentano and Mark Savitt, *112 Workshop, 112 Greene Street: History, Artists & Artworks* (New York: New York University Press, 1981) 53.

himself to those gathered in the loft through audio tape—"I...am a relative newcomer to this part of the country...After the show I hope to meet with you...I can see by the look on your faces that many of your are confused by the new video movement from a technical standpoint..."—and then used a monitor to broadcast a live feed of him writing a story.⁷⁴ Ulrike Rosenbach also used televisual technology to provide viewers access to her. For *Isolation is Transparent* Rosenbach sat separated from audience members, behind a semi-transparent vinyl wall weaving yarn around her body. Cameras fed footage of the action to a monitor situated in front of attendees. Audience members could pivot between watching Rosenbach obscured by vinyl but at full-scale or framed by the televisual equipment yet close-up.

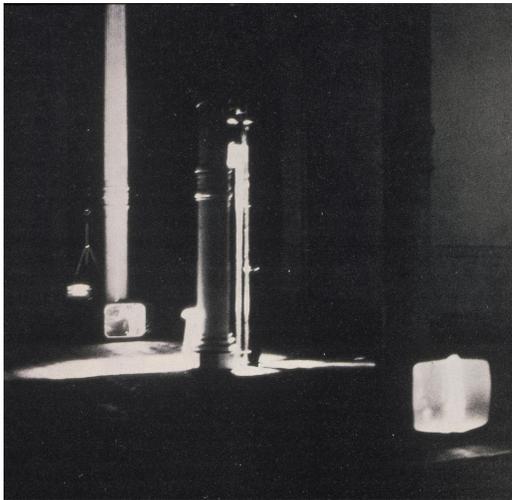
Other artists in *Video Performance* used televisual equipment to engage audience members. Consider Chris Burden's contribution *Back To You*, which began at nine at night on January 16,th when audience member Larry Bell volunteered, was brought to an elevator, and was instructed to push pins into the artist's naked body as the rest of the attendees watched through a live-feed on a monitor.⁷⁵ In Dennis Oppenheim's piece *Recall*, the absent artist used a videotaped close-up of himself to lure visitors to a monitor in the middle of 112 Greene Street, where a trough of turpentine ensured that those approaching "the artist" also encountered a noxious odor. In *Prisoner's Dilemma* Richard Serra and Robert Bell used equipment to keep audience members, many of whom were also participants (Leo Castelli, Bob Fiore, Spalding Gray, Suzanne Harris, Babette

⁷⁴ Wegman piece titled *Pathetic Readings*. *Avalanche* 9 (May/June 1974) 8-9.

⁷⁵ *Avalanche* 9 (May/June 1974) 12-13.

Mangolte), informed, at bay, and also guessing: tape machines played audio about detective work, a monitor played a video of a staged trial, and a live-feed provided access to a fake trial taking place in the loft but behind a temporary wall.

Those entering 112 Greene Street on Saturday January 19th for Acconci's installation found the ground-floor loft space dark, except around three columns, a line of which ran like a spine down the center of the room. At the base of one of the columns Acconci installed a seating area with a rug and a television monitor, at the base of the next a spot-lit stool, and in front of the third a monitor playing a videotape in which he addressed watchers with his body and words.⁷⁶ Acconci recorded the one-hour black-and-white videotape that was playing, also titled *Command Performance*, in a single take several hours before the event.⁷⁷ The tape features Acconci, lying fully dressed on a bed,



Left: Vito Acconci, *Command Performance*, Installation 112 Greene Street, January 1974
Right: Vito Acconci, *Command Performance*, 56:40 min, b&w, sound, 1974

⁷⁶ See notes, diagrams, installation shots, and descriptions in: *Avalanche* 9 (May/June 1974) 21-23; Vito Acconci and Gregory Volk *Vito Acconci: Diary of a Body, 1969-1973* (Milan: Charta, 2006) 386.

⁷⁷ *Command Performance*, 56:40 min, b&w, sound, 1974.

“upside-down” and “below” the viewer, as if during taping Acconci’s head was the foot of the bed with the camera above him. Prostrate in the intimate environment of a bedroom with his eyes closed, the artist seems both available and withdrawn. As the tape begins Acconci is smoking and moving his body to the beat of his own humming, which is audible: “dadadada...nananana...bombombom.” The artist starts talking, alternately imploring, antagonizing, and trying to seduce the watcher: “your there in the space...step right up... step into the spotlight,” “my little dancing bear, your there where I used to be...you can do it for me now,” “squeeze your breasts together, slowly gently, let them sit there on the edge of their seats.”⁷⁸ Those at 112 Greene Street noting Acconci’s call from the monitor to “step right up” might have noted the stool nearby, empty and spot-lit. Anyone who sat upon the stool found themselves before a video camera recording. The camera fed footage to the monitor near the rug, where other audience could gather to watch one of their own perform on-screen.

In *Command Performance* Acconci was not simply swapping performer, from artist to viewer. On the videotape Acconci expresses dissatisfaction with the performance model that had gained him such renown: “I’m not going to get back there again...I know my work has been too private, too personal, I’ve never been able to break out...” While on the videotape the artist does note that his own presence had become limiting—“its up to you now...I want you up there in the spotlight, you’ve got to be a model for me...you can teach me...lead me”—he also makes it clear that he does not simply want to replace

⁷⁸ The monologue was improvised based on an audiotape Acconci had recently made for *Instructions*, a show at Edinboro State College, PA. Acconci in interview with Liza Béar *Avalanche* 9 (May/June 1974) 21-23.

his presence with ours. At the end of the tape he says, “we could meet here...we’ll cheer each-other on, urge each-other on into the fight...there can be sunsets, mountains...it can be something else, I don’t know how to call it yet...you on the screen...I’ll learn not to follow you, not to follow you but to be with you ...” In *Command Performance* Acconci was using the televisual to create a scenario where audience members might become co-performers, joining him at the center and in the spotlight.

A few weeks after *Command Performance*, in an interview that took place in the artist’s Chrystie Street loft and that was published in the “Video Performance” issue of *Avalanche*, Acconci focused on “presence” and audience, and hardly mentions video at all. Up until the day before *Command Performance*, the artist notes in the interview, he remained unsure whether he would perform live in it and while he equivocated about this—he thought he might “walk” and “worry” near the columns—he had been certain about visitors.⁷⁹ The stool, he noted, signified the “possibility” of audience members performing. With it and the other elements in the installation, Acconci observed, he had been trying to create “a kind of meeting place, an interaction area” which would “allow viewers to have a much more viable presence...a much more active function.”⁸⁰ Béar seemed to concur. In *Avalanche* she introduces *Video Performance* by discussing each artist’s project but she concludes by discussing how they together activated audiences:

⁷⁹Acconci in interview with Liza Béar *Avalanche* 9 (May/June 1974) 21-23.

⁸⁰Acconci in interview with Liza Béar *Avalanche* 9, 23.

“the most significant aspect of the events at 112...was the undeniable energy...generated in the community...audience consciousness.”⁸¹

Acconci has described *Command Performance* as an “announcement” of new “intentions,” but it can also be understood as a bookend to the performance-based phase of his practice.⁸² In the installation Acconci sought to capitalize upon the conditions and discourse of the televisual to engage and activate audience members. As the artist would observe in 1976, video allowed him to come “face-to-face” with viewers because it safely contained him “under glass,” unable to actualize “contact.”⁸³ “It seems to me,” Acconci wrote to critic in summer 1974, that the “trend [in my work] has been to stretch—from single person acting on himself, to person acting on or with another person, to person acting with a group of people, etc.”⁸⁴ “The interest,” Acconci concluded in the letter “has been in conditions of performance, motives for performance (or, more exactly, presence), than in performance itself.” Acconci’s words are born out in his performance-based work from the early 1970s, in which he used the dialectic of access and distance that conditions the televisual to mediate his presence, and to physically activate audiences so that they might realize that they were always at the center of his artwork.

⁸¹ Béar in *Avalanche* 9, 3.

⁸² Vito Acconci and Gregory Volk *Vito Acconci: Diary of a Body, 1969-1973*, 386.

⁸³ Vito Acconci, “Vito Acconci: 10-Point Plan for Video,” in *Video Art: An Anthology*, ed. I. Schneider and B. Korot, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976) 8-9.

⁸⁴ Letter from Acconci to David Bourdon, 9 August 1974. In “Bourdon Manuscript,” *Museum of Modern Art Bourdon Archive*, Bourdon I.12, Unpaginated, (last page of letter).

Conclusion

By 1978 the art world was so captivated by Acconci that his artwork was featured in solo exhibitions that year at, among other venues, Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum, San Francisco's Museum of Modern Art, and New York City's Whitney Museum of American Art. At the Whitney the artist was also invited to deliver one of the museum's "Seminar with Artists" lectures, and from the podium Acconci explained his shift from the performance-based artworks that had gained him such renown. He stated that while circa 1970 he had been using presence to create a sense of closeness with viewers in situations that structurally resembled "therapy," he now believed his presence had been a distraction that prevented him from bringing "the outside world...the social, political, cultural world" into the context of art.¹ As a result, he noted, he was shifting the burden of action to spectators: through installations such as *Where We Are Now (Who Are We Anyway?)* (1976), in which visitors to Sonnabend Gallery encountered not the artist but stools, a long empty table extending out over the street, and an audio soundtrack—"Now that we're all here together...And what do you think, Bob?...Now that we know we failed....Everybody, take your seats?..."—that implored them to sit and engage with each other. Through the 1980s Acconci continued to produce sculptural installations, and they increasingly revolved around requiring audience members to work together and were transparent about attempting to bring the "outside world in." In *Instant House* (1980), for example, visitors to the Kitchen were prompted to raise and flatten a small "house" by

¹ *Whitney Seminar With Artists*, 20 December 1978, Audiotape, Whitney Museum of American Art. New York, New York.



Vito Acconci, *Instant House*, 1980

mounting a swing rigged to its four walls, which were festooned on the inside with American flags and on the outside with the Russian equivalent.

Though circa 1970 Acconci noted to Lucy Lippard and others that he was interested in working within the context of art because it offered him the freedom to engage with structures and ideas from various disciplines, by the end of the 1980s his hopes for art had, like Lippard's, waned. In 1972 Lippard wrote, in the *Postface* of her book *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972...*, that despite the idealism of those who had been involved in Conceptual Art, its artworks had not been able to escape “the ‘real world’s’ power structure” and capitalism, nor had they been able to “break down the real barriers between the art context and those external disciplines...social, scientific, academic” or “reach the mythical ‘masses’ with ‘advanced art’...”² Such disillusionment—with the idea that merging life with art can affect conditions in the former—is evidenced in Acconci's shift, by 1990, to working outside

² Lucy Lippard, “Postface,” *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966-1972* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973) Reprinted 2001. Postface written 1972. 263-264.

the context of art. Since 1988 Acconci has led, from a Dumbo loft, Acconci Studios, a firm that proposes structures for bodies in “public” spaces, such as plazas and airports. In a realized endeavor for a park in the Netherlands, for example, the firm designed a rowboat attached to a crescent-shaped piece of land that floats (*Personal Island*, 1992). However grounded in aesthetics the design of this intervention might be, park users rowing off to create their “personal island” do not necessarily view the experience through the framework of art.

Though today Acconci no longer frames his activities as art, the question of art’s relationship to life persists for many who are working within that framework. In the years since Acconci and others involved in Conceptual Art were perceived to break down barriers between art and life through using their bodies and engaging with audience members, frameworks for understanding art have shifted further away from focusing on objects and toward “experiences,” particularly those of viewers. Think of *Relational Aesthetics*, a framework developed in the 1990s to describe artworks wherein artists were understood to be catalyzing “open-ended” experiences for audience members, through importing into art contexts activities that were traditionally shared, social, and not understood as art, such as eating or playing. An iconic example of an artwork understood in these terms is Rikrit Tiravanija’s *Untitled (Free)* (1992), in which the artist converted Manhattan’s Gallery 303 into a kitchen for serving Thai food for savvy, informed gallery-goers. Think, too, of the more recent framework *Social Practice*, wherein the artist is understood to again be catalyzing experiences, but in this case for people in places outside the context of art, for an explicitly “social” benefit. An example of an artwork

understood in these terms is Tania Bruguera's *Immigrant Movement International*, for which, in 2010, the artist, supported by Creative Time and Queens Museum of Art, began setting up a community space for her "movement" in Corona, Queens, a neighborhood described in the project's literature as appropriate because of its "multinational" and "transnational" character. Though the project gains funding and visibility from circulating within the context of art, its traction in that context comes from the degree to which it is perceived to be affecting experiences for those who do not read what they are involved with through the framework of art.

Artists are not the only ones continuing to question how art relates to life. Over the course of writing this manuscript I have realized that there is benefit to continuing to understand art in philosophical terms as a special sphere accorded unique freedom of expression. Yet with this study, in which I make meaning from Acconci's performance-based Conceptual Art activities by stacking them with material that reflects concurrent social science discourse about human connection, I support the argument that art is not in actuality experienced as distinct from the rest of life, but through it.



Acconci Studios, *Personal Island*, 1992

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