



Vito Acconci, 2003, Mur Island, Graz, Austria

Vito Acconci The Language of Public Space

by Karlyn De Jongh

Born in the Bronx in 1940, Vito Acconci was a pioneer of performance art in the 1970s. Known particularly for his “Body art,” his work, however, spans performance, video, installation, sculpture, public art, and landscape architecture. Since the 1980s the artist has been focusing on architecture that integrates public and private space, to reconsider the language of environments.

Karlyn De Jongh: *You started as a poet and have expressed yourself in many ways. Language – whether written, spoken, or body language – seems very important to you. Nowadays you create work that is related to public space, which you have described as “a mix of the public and private.” Would you say the mix you spoke about is a*

kind of conversation between public and private?

Vito Acconci: Language is important for me, but I don’t know if it is important for everyone. I don’t think it is about conversation; it is more about being in the same place. No matter what problems New York has, for me the great thing about this city is this mix. It is the fact of a mix of colors: you walk down the street and really don’t know what nationality a person is. That’s probably here more than anywhere else. That’s what a city should be. A city should be a mix of people. It’s not necessary that they are talking; it is just that they are in the same place. The habits of one culture are starting to slip inside the habits of another culture. It does not have to be as conscious as a conversation; it is more a part of everyday life. The thing is: it probably takes time.

The people of my generation – who were very affected by the Vietnam

War – thought it would be possible for a revolution to happen in the United States. Maybe the notion of a revolution isn’t as great as we thought. Maybe a revolution makes a new power structure. Then there has to be another revolution and another one. Also I don’t know if things happen in a so-called public space. I think things happen over the telephone, through the Internet, in back alleys, in city streets, not so much in plazas. Well, the United States has no plazas. They really don’t. The only public spaces in the United States are corporation plazas and they are just there for the corporation to get more space. Plazas were incredibly important in the past: they were places where people met and discussed; I am not sure whether that is true now. Now, it seems as if a plaza is a convenient place for a city to get a large number of people together, so they can have a surveillance system. It’s almost like you know what it is people are doing when

they are all in that place. You don't know what they are doing in alleys, what they are doing in back streets. So, I don't know whether a plaza is a viable revolution notion.

KDJ: *You have described the public space first and foremost as a physical space – or even a physical place. Is it for you more about a location than about space in general? How do you see this physicality?*

VA: The way I have been thinking about space is physical. I think that is a mistake; I think it has to be some kind of mix of physical and virtual space. There is a project being built soon in Indianapolis, in the mid-west of the United States. It does have a physical place. The site is a street in Indianapolis that goes through a building. We did not have to pick this site, but we picked it because we thought there was not really a big budget for this project. By picking this site we forced ourselves to think more about the virtual than we usually do. The project works as follows: when the street goes through the ground floor of this building, the tunnel is actually a volume of color. At different times of day the color changes. We are not sure about the colors yet, but let's say it is blue in the morning, purple in the afternoon, and pink at night. When people walk or cycle through the building, around them is this massive structure that holds thousands of different LED lights. As people walk through, each person activates a sensor that turns on lights around them. So, in a way they are causing the lights. It's almost as if they have a swarm of fireflies around them. They act as lights, but they also start to intermix: if I have activated one cluster of lights, you have activated another, as I come to you and you to me, they start to mix.

For us it may have been a first attempt to make a space that will always be different, depending on how people will be using it. I think that is a very, very small start: it has to be more than light, but it gave us a chance. We are thinking about it a lot. It is easy to

do it by people activating light or sound. What we would really like is if a person comes into a room and there is nothing, but if he wants to sit down he leans against the wall and the wall starts to depress and make a seat for this person. If the person no longer wants to sit, he gets up and the seat turns back into a wall. Something like that. It should not be that a place is here and a person is there; it should be more that the place and the person start to intermingle. And I am sure it is going to happen. I hope we get a chance to do it, but I have the feeling it will be someone younger than I.

KDJ: *You want people to be participants and inhabitants of a space and mentioned you would like them to interact with something you make, that people would be able to touch an art object. Why is this tactile experience for*

you so important in reference to art?

VA: I wonder now if it should be as important as it was. For me it came from the 60s. You mentioned the importance of language, but the importance of language in the 60s was finding oneself: all my work was doing what the culture was doing; everybody was trying to find themselves. Maybe I, together with some other people, made it more obvious, but it was just what the culture at large was doing. There were a number of sociologists that were important to me at that time: Irving Goffman and a person named Edward Hall. Hall wrote *The Hidden Dimension* and *The Silent Language*. The latter was about spatial relations. I bought a lot of books at that time about how people communicate and how close they are, where their hands are in relation to other people. There



Vito Acconci, *New World Trade Center, 2002*, digital C-Print (detail)

was a psychiatrist at that time, R.D. Laing, who was important: he wrote about 'you and me'. The work of Hall struck me. He said there are four different kinds of distances. A so-called public distance with a speaker and an audience. There is a social distance, when people are approximately three meters away from each other and both can see the whole other person – in the case of being in the US this distance allows you to see whether the other person is carrying a gun; you can check if you are safe. When the same two people are suddenly a few millimeters away from each other, sight doesn't count anymore. Sight blurs; you start to resort to other senses – you start to resort to hearing, to smell, possibly to taste. Around that time, I started to think that maybe the visual is a way to control. Maybe the only way to possibly learn something is when you can't use that visual anymore: then you can't control. Even in language, when you talk about something you grope towards an idea, as if you are trying to feel the idea out.

I wonder sometimes if I would think as much the way that I do if I hadn't been born in New York and grew up in this city. This became clear to me in the 70s when I went to Chicago for the first time. I realized – and it was a startling thing – that you could see buildings in Chicago. That isn't such a strange thing, but for someone coming from New York it was: in New York you rarely see buildings; you see buildings in Manhattan when you are in Brooklyn. You are always in the presence of buildings, but everything is in close-up. I learned a lot from being in close-up rather than from being in panorama. There are advantages to each: panorama or vista give you a chance to consider; close-up doesn't. So, you probably need both. The proximity of things in New York is so important to the work I did, I think. I don't think that ever really stopped. It's not so easy for me to give an overall view.

I always try to let my students



Vito Acconci, 2003, Mur Island, Graz, Austria

think about what happens when you are too close. Think about a space that is so close that you cannot even see it. What happens? Things like that have shaped not only my thoughts, but also the way I worked. I hope I can think; the only way I know I can think is when I do some projects. They are a way to prove your thinking. Or writing.

When we make spaces, we try to think whether we can make space for people who don't mind a second chance to get to be children. Children go through space differently. We hope sometimes that we don't make space. When we make things that are real failures, these are things that are

immediately seen: 'this is a seat', 'this is a table', 'this is a shelf'. For me it is more important to make spaces that allow you to think 'this could be a shelf', 'this could be a table'. It gives people a chance to find something for themselves. To get back to the public plaza: I always like it if a public plaza has seats. It's interesting to see that if there are plenty of seats available, some people prefer to sit on the steps. This is the first act of rebellion. It's like: the seat tells you to sit down – I am going to find some place else. And it gets in the way: you cannot climb up and down those steps so easily, because a person is sitting there. At the same time

it's like 'wow, this person decided to do something on his or her own'.

KDJ: *Some time ago I was in Graz, Austria, where I visited the café you designed in the Mur River. The café is a functional space. If this piece were not used anymore, what meaning would the piece have for you then? When the use value of your pieces disappears, do they – in a way – die?*

VA: If they are not used anymore, yes. Then they would be like these museum pieces. They would be like artifacts of a past culture. Once a space is in a place for a number of years, why would it be used? I am giving a messy answer; I don't know how to give a more neat one.

KDJ: *We have been talking about public space. Do you think there is also something like public time?*

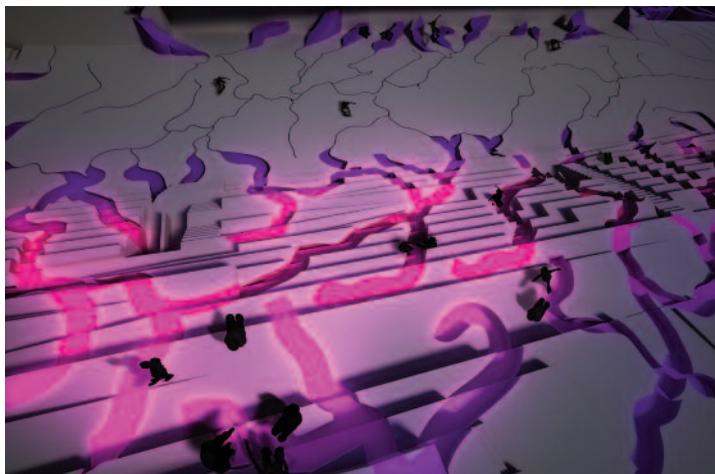
VA: I once wrote an essay called *A Public Space and A Private Time*. That was done in 1990. It began with a paragraph about there not being anymore public time, because of cheaply available wristwatches. It used to be so in New York – in particular when passing banks – that you could look into a window and see a clock. There would be clocks on the streets. Suddenly there aren't so many anymore. It seemed that time became private: time became something you wore on your wrist. To me that was a sign to the becoming private of public space. Whatever the computer is and how many possibilities it has, it also is a kind of introduction of privacy: you can have everything on your laptop. I realize some change here in the studio: when we were making physical models we spent more time together; people gathered around to talk about a model. And we used to play music a lot. Now people have headphones. We still talk, but you are sort of in a private enclosure. I am not saying we should go back to some other time, but I think we should find what we could do with that. There are all these private capsules. Once in a while these capsules bump into one another. Maybe they intermingle and become private again,

but maybe they have taken something over from the other private capsules. If they intermingle enough it may not be that bad, but maybe that's the new publicness. I think maybe that is why the new publicness is almost like particles rather than surfaces or...

I am not sure as to what I am saying yet. But I think there is private time. But I don't know how to define that exactly. I have never worn headphones on the street. That seems weird to me. That is another great thing in New York: I can walk down a street that I have known for years and years and suddenly there is a building I hadn't recognized before. It's not that it's a new building; it's just that New York has so much incident that you probably cannot pay attention to it all at the same time. There always seems to be something new. And I like the idea of gathering things on the street. Something that is very important to me in life is movies. It's not that movies aren't important to me, but it's hard to watch a movie from beginning to end; the notion of watching a movie on a DVD is great for me: I can see parts and I can see it in any order I want. It's easy to do that with a movie, but if you could do that with a space... going into a space, leaning against the wall. You can do that with a movie: you can

make your own version of it. I don't know if a person making movies is as fond of the DVD as anyone else, because it can be twisted. I always wondered, wouldn't it be great if you could walk down the street and a movie is being projected on buildings, so you can see the buildings, but you can also see the movie?

I keep coming back to the idea of mix. I think that is the kind of keynote to the 21st century. I think the closest thing to architecture is music: both of them make a kind of atmosphere, they make an ambiance. With both music and architecture you can be doing something else – you are always in the middle of architecture: you'd better be doing something else! But you can also be doing something else while listening to music. So, both have the notion of multi-attention. I think multi-attention is probably the keynote of the 21st century: you have to be able to pay attention to more than one thing at the same time. Maybe that can be the making of a new person. I hope we can do the kind of work that helps that new person to develop. I don't know if we can; I can think of so many architects that are more important than we are. And especially younger – I am jealous of younger architects.



Vito Acconci, project sketch