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SPACE

Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother

edited by Thomas Y. Levin, Ursula Frohne, and Peter Weibel

Vito Acconci

— Following Piece

3-25 October 1969, activity, varying times, each day, "Street Works IV"-Program, organized by the Architectural League, New York

Alongside Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci is one of those US artists whose action art in the late 1960s was referred to with the new label of "Art Performance." Acconci describes the beginning of this new type of practice as follows: "We did not want the remote isolation of the theater, attended only by the initiate, in which only abstractions of the world and not the dirty world itself was shown. We chose as our motto the song: Why don't we do it on the road?"¹

1. Vito Acconci, Performance after the Fact, in *Documents sur l'Art Contemporain*, N. Bourriaud, Paris 1992.

Acconci, who until then had been active as a poet, started in 1969 to perform what he would otherwise have written. By 1972 he had developed over 200 conceptually structured and radical body-related pieces and performances that were extremely simple in formal terms, but psychologically highly intricate. They took place, in part with, and in part without, the audience and were documented by photographs and films. Many of them were performed on the streets of New York, others in interiors, above all galleries. His performances stand out for the use and experience of his own body, as well as the reflection on and redefinition of the relationship between public and private spheres. By disappearing in the anonymity of the streets, Acconci not only penetrates real space, but also essentially endeavors to integrate art into everyday life, such that art itself "disappears."

Following Piece is one of his early works. The underlying idea was to randomly select on the street one of the passers-by who were walking and to follow the person until he or she disappeared into a private place where Acconci could not enter. The act of following could last a few minutes, if the person then got into a car, or four or five hours, if the person went to a cinema or restaurant. Acconci carried out this performance every day for a month. He typed up an account of each "pursuit," sending each account to a different member of the art community.

Two experiences were crucial. During the act of following, Acconci submitted his subjective will to the movements of the person followed, and in so doing penetrated a private sphere even though he moved in the public domain. Acconci demonstrated that urban public space is defined by the random encounters between people that take place within it. At the same time, he presents us with the city street as a space where civil protection potentially breaks down.

This performance is of special significance as Acconci, for the first time, deferred from defining what course the performance would take. Instead, he accorded an important role to the participation of outsiders. "I made my art by using other people." In *Following Piece*, the concept of the participation of persons who did not specifically agree to participate relied on persons who did not even know that they were being used.

The actual "performance" unfolded without anyone noticing. All the more important was that each piece was presented to a broader audience by means of the typewritten records and photographs. These form a constitutive part of the artwork. Acconci himself comments: "I think for a lot of us whose work began at the end of the 1960s there was a common assumption. The question is: is there a way to counter the notion of art as

Oct 8

12:04 PM, 14th St & 2nd Ave, SW corner: Man in black sweater – he walks W on 14th St, S side of street.

14:10 PM: just W of Broadway, on 14th St, I lose sight of him.

Oct 18

12:20 PM, 10th St & 6th, SE corner: Man in tan jacket – he walks S on 6th Ave.

12:23 PM: he goes into *Whelan's Drug Store*, 6th Ave & 8th St.

12:38 PM: he leaves *Whelan's* and walks E on 8th St, N side of street.

12:40 PM: at McDougal St, he crosses to other side of 8th St and sits on ledge outside *Paperback Booksmith's*, 30 W 8th St; he spends next few hours there, looking around and talking to passers-by.

4:28 PM: he and woman in black cape walk E on 8th St, S side of street.

5:05 PM: they turn S on Ave B, E side of street.

5:09 PM: they turn E on 5th St, N side of street.

5:12 PM: they enter apartment building, 725 E 5th St.



Following Piece
1969, Documentation
of the activity,
photographs, black-and-
white, texts
Vito Acconci

unique object? [...] In other words, people in general were thinking of art as a kind of distribution system more than as a unique object, a kind of newspaper report. [...] So when I was doing a piece like *Following Piece*, there was no viewer or, if anything, I was the viewer. [...] I designed the way a newspaper event is designed."²

The aim was to overcome the dividing line between artist and beholder/audience. A performance

closely related to the concept underlying *Following Piece* is *Proximity Piece (Room Situation)* dating from 1970. Here it is not the public space of the street but that of the museum in which Acconci went into action. He snuck up to viewers and stood unpleasantly close to them. By violating the socially defined borders of personal distance, he drove the person in question into a corner. He indirectly forced them to turn away and leave.³

Violations of taboos and staged interactions, evoked, for example, by means of his own person or involving outside persons, are likewise to be found in performances such as *Untitled Project (Piece for Pier 17)*, which focused on the exposure of unpleasant or embarrassing secrets, and *Security Zone*, which took as its topic proof of trust shown by utter strangers. Here, Acconci increasingly accorded the viewer a more important role until, in his *Command Performance* (1974) the beholder donned the role of the artist and the person of the artist withdrew from the works. In *Command Piece* you hear the artist calling on the viewer to perform certain actions and to then feel important ("You'll certainly look great there."). In the context of interacting with the audience, Acconci stated that his works had "hitherto been too private ... I was afraid of going beyond myself ... and discovering the world ... you can show me, how strong you are ... big ... public."⁴ Acconci thus caused a confrontation in which the viewer was manipulated as a prop in a sadistic game, while other viewers watched voyeuristically on a second screen.

Dörte Zbikowski

FOLLOWING PIECE-OCT 69-NY

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I NEED A SCHEME (FOLLOW THE SCHEME, FOLLOW A PERSON).

STREET (DEF): 'PROMISING LINE OF DEVELOPMENT,' 'CHANNELING OF EFFORT.'

ON THE STREET: HOMELESS, I HAVE TO FIND SOMEONE TO CLING TO.

ADJUNCTIVE RELATIONSHIP: I ADD MYSELF ON TO ANOTHER PERSON (I GIVE UP CONTROL, I DON'T HAVE TO CONTROL MYSELF, I BECOME DEPENDENT ON THE OTHER PERSON, I NEED THAT OTHER PERSON, THAT OTHER PERSON DOESN'T NEED ME).

SUBJECTIVE RELATIONSHIP: SUBJUNCTIVE RELATIONSHIP.

A WAY TO GET AROUND. (A WAY TO GET MYSELF OUT OF THE HOUSE.) GET INTO THE MIDDLE OF THINGS. (I'M DISTRIBUTED OVER A DIMENSIONAL DOMAIN.)

OUT IN SPACE. OUT OF TIME. (MY TIME AND SPACE ARE TAKEN UP OUT OF MYSELF, INTO A LARGER SYSTEM.) FALL INTO POSITION IN A SYSTEM. I CAN BE SUBSTITUTED FOR, I CAN BE REPLACED. MY POSITIONAL VALUE COUNTS HERE, NOT MY INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS.

OUT OF THE BODY (STEP OUT OF MYSELF, VIEW MYSELF FROM ABOVE.)

Following Piece (1969)
2001, Documentation
of the activity,
photographs, black-and-
white, texts, 40 x 60"
Vito Acconci