

GRACE MCQUILTEN

The exploded whale: Vito Acconci in the Design Market

ABSTRACT

This paper examines Acconci Studio's proposed redesign of the Ontario Science Center in Canada in 2004, based on the concept of an exploded whale's body. Acconci Studio is a design and architectural practice in Brooklyn, New York started by the notorious and controversial 1960s conceptual artist Vito Acconci. In his wide-ranging practice, Acconci has continuously reacted against the commercialisation of art and the reframing of subversive practices by the art market. As I argue, this critical practice continues in the design work of Acconci Studio, but repositioned in the context of the commercial design market. This paper looks at the ways in which the Ontario Science Center proposal challenges the conventions of commercial architecture by infusing the body into its spaces and posing critical questions within the context of design.

The exploded whale: Vito Acconci in the Design Market

How could a commercial design studio seriously propose a plan for a museum based on the exploded body of a whale? The answer to this question resides in the curious journey of artist Vito Acconci, now working under the auspices of "Acconci Studio" in Brooklyn, New York. In his wide-ranging practice, Acconci has continuously reacted against the commercialisation of art and the reframing of subversive practices by the art market. For this reason, his move from conceptual performance art in the 1960s into commercial design with Acconci Studio seems an unlikely one. However, in the context of an economic system with no "outside", Acconci's design practice is strategic in that it sets up a dialogue between the material conditions of architecture and the critical practices or intentions of art. As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue in *Empire* (2000), contemporary capitalism can only transform through the internal reorganisation of its processes; it has no opposition. They write 'postmodern liberation must be achieved within this world, on the plane of immanence, with no possibility of any even utopian outside'.¹ And so it is that Acconci Studio proposed a serious design for a science museum in Ontario, Canada, based on the body of an exploded whale. Acconci's practice, I argue, resists the pre-determined commercial focus of design by infusing the body into architecture and posing critical questions within the framework of a design studio.

The Ontario Science Centre is a science and technology museum that hosts temporary exhibitions alongside permanent exhibits. The original building was designed by Toronto architect Raymond Moriyama and opened in 1969. In 2004, the Centre put out a tender for the re-design of the museum. Acconci Studio responded with their proposal based on the idea of an exploded whale's body. Although the project was not realised in built form, it encapsulates Acconci's complex positioning of the Studio as a critical practice operating in the space between art and design.

The architect Bernard Tschumi, however, doesn't like Acconci's position. He argues: 'I don't think he's an architect and shouldn't try to be one. He has more freedom to ask more architectural questions by not being an architect, not being stuck with

1. Hardt and Negri, 2000, p. 65.

architecture's emphasis on function and the other cuffs it places.² Yet Tschumi's statement implies that contemporary art is somehow free from utility — and in particular the commercial usefulness of art in the market, which carries its own set of chains and cuffs. It is this problem of commercial entanglement, evident in both contemporary art and design practice, that Acconci seeks to expose by taking up architecture with a critical intention.

Acconci's transition from art to architecture has involved, on his part, some misleading disavowals. Initially, he gave up poetry for performance. He then abandoned performance for sculpture, before transforming sculpture into design. Each of these refusals can be seen as attempts to overcome the limitations of art — particularly its modes of authority and power, and its complicity with late capitalism. Acconci's entire practice can be conceived of as a sequence of problematic events leading to his current focus on architecture, which reacts against the limits of architecture from “within” the framework of a design studio. Before coming to the exploded whale concept for the Ontario Science Centre, it is therefore worthwhile to understand this artistic evolution.

In 1967, Acconci published the following poem:

I lie down on the land.
I had it
I have it
I did it
I do it
I will it
I lay him down on the line.
I had
I have
I did
I do
I will³

Cultural authority and the privilege of authorship have been central concerns in Acconci's work since he began his experimentation with the systems of language in the 1960s. His move off the written page and into performance, from performance into art and, most recently, from art into architecture, have all been driven by a motivation to overcome the prevailing systems of representation, to find liberation from the domination of cultural forms. Each shift in his practice marks an attempt to overcome his subordination to a system — the system of representation, the patriarchal system of culture and the commercial system of art. Each new stage in his artistic practice, in this sense, can be seen as a form overcoming.

Acconci's initial experiments with poetry involved a literal use of language in order to refuse signification, and thereby to overcome the structure of representation. He described words as ‘props for movement’, the page as ‘thing’ and explored writing as a spatial, territorial act. He wanted representation to account for the experience of the

2. Tschumi, cited in Chen, 2002, p. 41.

3. Acconci, cited in Diserens, 2004, p. 53.

lived body in space, and so he focused on the physical aspects of writing, such as ‘how to travel from left margin to right; how to make it necessary, or not necessary, to turn from one page to the next.’⁴ Testing the physical limits of the page was a means to test the representational limits of language. This involved an embrace of the authorial position. He notes, ‘I loved the notion of writing as intention, of writing as will.’⁵ But Acconci wielded the privilege of authorship against itself, seeking an escape from language altogether. In order to fully overcome the limits of representation, he abandoned the page and moved into physical space. His authorial voice thus moved from the white page of poetry into the performative space of art.

In 1971, Acconci spent three hours in a basement in New York, blindfolded and wielding a crowbar and lead pipes. Chanting his internal thoughts, he asserted his claim to the space, daring anyone from the outside to impinge on his territory. He was seated at the base of a set of stairs, behind a closed door. Upstairs, a video monitor projected his utterings to viewers outside. The performance, titled *Claim*, pointed to the implicit domination of the viewer by the conventional viewing modes of modern art. By extension, it exposed underlying relations of power in culture more broadly, questioning the democratic nature of the so-called “public” space of art. In addition to unsettling the conventions of modern art, *Claim* reconfigured the artwork itself as an unpredictable event rather than an object, thereby undermining the fetish of the art object and the commercialisation of art.

In *Claim*, Acconci’s voice was imperative to his assertion of territory. A live video monitor projected him uttering a threatening monologue to the audience outside. In a hypnotic tone, he asserted his claim to the territory of the basement, defying anyone to challenge his ownership of the space. Recalling his poem ‘I lie down on the land’ (1967), and making his authorial position patently evident, he intoned: ‘I’m alone down here in the basement ... I want to stay alone here ... I don’t want anyone with me ... I’ll stop anyone from coming down the stairs’.⁶ For the majority of the three-hour performance, he was passively seated. He would only become active, swing his weapons and engage with the viewer if they trespassed upon his territory by entering the stairwell. This involved risk — Acconci made himself vulnerable by blindfolding himself and by expressing his internal thoughts to the viewer outside. But the risk was two-fold. He threatened the viewer, antagonistically daring them to enter the space and encounter the artist. In this way, he made the viewer aware of a certain hostility in the act of gazing, drawing attention to complex power structures in the conventions of modern art, with an oscillation of power between viewer and subject.

By revealing the power relations of the space of the gallery, Acconci hoped to encourage more democratic exchanges in public space. However, *Claim* did not incite revolution from his audience. Instead, it only enhanced the victimisation of the viewer and reinforced Acconci’s authorial power. As Donald Kuspit has observed: ‘To create a sense of being trapped — situations of no escape — and terrorised by the feeling of entrapment: this is the ultimate goal of Acconci’s art.’⁷ By overstating the power relationship between artwork and viewer, Acconci literally refused engagement. The artist was aware of this failure, and it prompted him to give up performance. He

4. Acconci, 2002, p. 10.

5. Acconci, cited in Taylor, 2002, p. 10.

6. Acconci, cited in Poggi, 1999, p. 269.

7. Kuspit, 1988, p. 65.

states: ‘It seemed everything I disliked about art — art as religion, artwork as altar, artist as priest — was enhanced or confirmed by my work. *There had to be a way out.*’⁸

He then set about overcoming the privilege of the artist by removing his body from his works. In his words, ‘In order to give “you” more room to move, I had to get out.’⁹ He then moved into design. Acconci’s transition from the world of art to design involved taking a number of risks — financial, conceptual, philosophical and political. As he remarks, ‘A project begins in fear, with fear — maybe even from fear, because of fear. Fear of place, fear of context, fear of a city, fear of city authorities, fear of people, fear of a time, fear of history.’¹⁰ Just as earlier “failures” only provoked artistic transformation, this sense of fear provides impetus for the studio’s development. While risk, in one sense, compromises the outcome and potential success of a project, it also enables progress, a moving beyond the impasses of the present. The critical risk for Acconci’s practice highlights the extent of the studio’s collusion with capitalism.

Design and criticality form an uncomfortable alliance, particularly when financial concerns come into play. In order to participate in the commercial systems of design, certain compromises must be made. As Vilem Flusser argues, there is simply no such thing as utopian design. ‘Whoever decides to become a designer,’ he writes, ‘has decided against pure good.’¹¹ Acconci has decided to engage with design, and accordingly he dances with the devil of commerce. The studio makes money, takes corporate clients and designs corporate spaces, shops and commercial products. Its systematic and participatory approach retains little of the confrontational, aggressive, even militaristic approach of Acconci’s earlier artistic practice. This apparent collusion, however, does not negate their subversive potential. The criticality of Acconci Studio’s practice depends on how effectively it uses these instruments to challenge and question the usual design outcome: the “product”.

Acconci is well aware of this, and he states: ‘I love architecture because it deals with the materials and processes of the everyday world, but I hate architecture because architecture is inherently fascist, architecture determines human behaviour.’¹²

And so Acconci Studio’s products are characterised by indeterminacy. Sometimes slick, sometimes ugly, and most of the times simply absurd, Acconci Studio designs rear up out of the ground and descend from ceilings, willfully traversing boundaries and defying spatial and aesthetic logic. Titles alone give a sense of this — recent projects include *See-Saw Lawn* (2000), *A tunnel that burrows in between buildings* (2002), *Sitting in a room of sky* (2003) and *A skate park that glides the land and drops into the sea* (2004). Once finalised, the built objects are secondary to their conceptual propositions, each of which is specific to the location of the project.

This leads us to the whale. The studio’s proposal for the redesign of the Ontario Science Center in Canada in 2004 exemplifies their organic sense of process, their

8. Acconci, cited in Morgan, 2002, p. 46. [My emphasis.]

9. Acconci, cited in Taylor, 2002, p. 102.

10. Acconci, cited in Ruzicka, 1997, p. 29.

11. Flusser, 1999, p. 33.

12. Acconci, cited in Ryan, 2004, p. 27.

focus on conceptual evolution over determined results. In the three-page document, vivid imagery of an exploded whale's body is used in speculative, rather than methodological language, to articulate ideas about possible ways of transforming the building. It does not outline a program for the construction of architectural form. Instead, design is a pretext to play with concepts. The proposal is overt in acknowledging the improbability of many of its proposed ideas. For instance, they write: 'But we don't know how to do this yet; so, in the meantime, let's do this: from where we stand in the room, outside the belly and below it, from the perimeter of the belly, let's pull the insides out'.¹³ Here, the body of a whale — in this case its 'belly' — makes philosophical speculations physical, imaginable, visible. The body is used, along with architecture, to mediate a dialogue between thought and world.

In the context of modernist art, Acconci played with the social relations of space through embodied, physical performances. These concerns are now explored in architectural form — in the social relations between objects of design. This is an age, after all, where designed objects and bodies cannot be so easily distinguished. As Bernard Cache writes, 'Objects, which are those solid parts of our actions, are but a moment of densification in the folds of our behaviour that is itself fluctuating.'¹⁴ A conflated understanding of object and body is characteristic of contemporary architectural language. In *Warped Space*, for example, Anthony Vidler describes the proliferation of terms in postmodern architecture such as 'parasite' and 'virus'. It is as though, 'following the tradition of urban pathologies since the eighteenth century, the object were infected with the same illness attacking the subject.'¹⁵ As if in response to this subjectification of architecture, the forms of Acconci Studio are embodied, alive.

This shift in focus in Acconci's work from body to object was gradual, evolutionary. In earlier video works such as *Claim*, Acconci activated the viewer by distancing his body, in this case by separating himself from the audience. He then removed his body from his works by taking up sculpture that engaged the viewer's body. In *Instant House* (1980), for example, four panels lying on the ground rose up to create a small house when the viewer sat in a swing that was attached to ropes. Finally, he removed the viewer's body by working with architectural form. This accompanied a general perceptual shift in society. With the rise of a post-industrial, technological world came a simultaneous dematerialisation of the body and move away from the essentialist perception of self as central, whole and unified. Anthony Vidler vividly describes this effect in postmodern architecture, writing: 'We are contorted, racked, cut, wounded, dissected, intestinally revealed, impaled, immolated; we are suspended in a state of vertigo, or thrust into a confusion between belief and perception.'¹⁶

This perceptual shift has been an increasing source of anxiety, as evident in Vidler's description, associated with enhanced privatisation and control rather than perceptual liberation. Acconci responds to this anxiety by shifting focus away from the subject and toward the object as a means to find human agency within material form. In all of his work he has maintained an underlying emphasis on the materiality of the body and the relations of bodies in space. By emphasising the physical qualities of writing, for example, he drew attention to the body trapped in language. In *Claim*, he used the

13. ASA, 'Ontario Science Center Proposal', 2005.

14. Cache, 1995, p. 96.

15. Vidler, 2000, p. 135.

16. Vidler, 1994, pp. 78–79. [His emphasis.]

threat of physical violence to assert the corporeality of his own body as well as the viewer's. The body was thus configured as both a locus of physical forces and a product of cultural relations. As Sanford Kwinter writes, 'For world and self, Acconci has tirelessly shown us, are generated together. This means that the one can always be dismantled through the other as well.'¹⁷ This conception provides scope for agency, change and becoming rather than postmodern dissolution and loss, as referred to by Vidler. Where architecture, in Vidler's sense, has the power to overwhelm and alienate the modern subject, or to dissolve the postmodern subject, in Acconci's design, the human body infuses architecture in order to re-generate and activate subjectivity.

Fittingly, the design of Acconci Studio now imagines a future body, in an overt attempt to overcome the effects of postmodernity. They claim, 'Our new starting point, however, is not the body so much but the body already dissolved: a field for a new body, or re-body.'¹⁸ Starting from the point of a contingent, dismantled body, they focus on its re-generation. Consider, for example, the studio's description of the whale's body in the Ontario Science Center proposal:

We want to turn the belly of the whale inside out, we want to stretch the skin of the whale down like plasma, plasma that oozes over the windowed walls, plasma that lets you see outside as if you're inside saliva, inside a circulatory system, inside a body with transparent skin.¹⁹

Here, graphic descriptions of animal flesh are used conceptually to outline the organisation of exhibition spaces, windows and walkways. Biological form is not privileged over architecture. The body of the whale becomes architectural, and architecture becomes the body of the whale. At the same time, the body is not abstracted. The proposal revels in the specific matter, sensation, and flesh of the form. The gratuitous proposal for the Ontario Science Center is a manifestation of, and attempt to literalise, a physical body in the midst of a virtual, technological world.

As the description progresses, it becomes increasingly speculative. Any sense of a plan gives way and questions proliferate: '(Since it's the outside of the whale's belly that hovers above us, what if we treated the air — as if it were water? What would be changed then in the paragraph above ... what if this empty space were filled with water ...)'²⁰

What would? What if? As if it were? The studio thus fuses philosophical meditations with the physical design of space. If design is considered as a process of conceiving and thinking about the world — the literal definition of the term is 'mental plan' — then this irresolute proposal serves to undermine the functional, purpose-based methodology of much design practice. It places emphasis on thought over outcome, shifts in perspective over design and changes in structure over determination of form. As the proposal nears its conclusion, an attempt to de-program design becomes clear:

Now what if we did the unthinkable? ...

17. Sobel, 2001, p. 44.

18. Acconci, 1992, p. 84.

19. ASA, 2005.

20. ASA, 2005.

(Think the unthinkable, make it thinkable...)²¹

Just as Acconci exaggerated the systems of language and then performance in the 1960s in order to provoke revolution, Acconci Studio misdirects the process of design in order to provoke questions, experimentation and critical thought. Where the language of culture was once seen as the locus of socio-political relations of power, the language of design is now seen as the economic and political language of the contemporary world. Acconci's critical practice has therefore evolved according to the social landscape.

In the context of an economic system with no "outside," Acconci's design practice sparks critique from "within". His simple act of asking questions in the field of design is groundbreaking. It implies a critical distance from the market, an active designer and the potential activation of the designed subject. To return to the words of Vilem Flusser, 'Design means, among other things, fate. This process of asking questions is the collective attempt to seize hold of fate and, collectively, to shape it.'²² Or in Acconci's case, to explode it.

Grace McQuilten is an art historian and curator interested in contemporary art and design and community development. She completed her PhD in art history at the University of Melbourne in 2008, researching the interconnections between art, design and consumer culture. In July 2011 she published Art in Consumer Culture with Ashgate Publishing in the USA/UK. Grace is an Honourary Fellow in the School of Culture and Communications, the University of Melbourne.

21. ASA, 2005.

22. Flusser, 1999, p. 107.

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