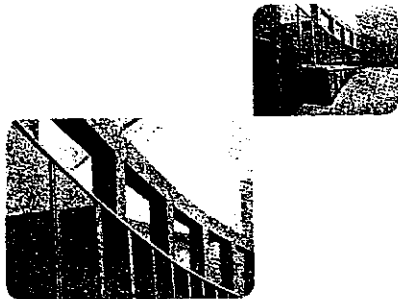


From "Dialogues in Public Art"
by Tom Finkelpearl (2001)



*Interview: **Vito Acconci** on
Art, Architecture,
Arvada, and StoreFront*

Introduction

Vito Acconci was born in 1940, in the Bronx, New York. He graduated from Holy Cross College in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1962, with a major in English literature.¹ Acconci then attended the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa, where he received his M.F.A. in creative writing. After graduation in 1964, he moved back to New York City. In the mid- and late-1960s, Acconci was a writer, employing a systematic, logical approach that would be the hallmark of his performances in the 1970s. For example, his poem called "Wall and the Ladder" (1968) begins thus:

1. *This one, it's a movement starting down and going up.*
2. *It's a sentence.*
3. *It began with a pointer, to this.*
4. *It is declarative . . . !*

In the late 1960s, Acconci made the gradual transition from writing to performing his work, as poetry readings gave way to performances at galleries. But Acconci's performances were not limited to sanctioned exhibition spaces, but included sites in the city. Acconci said, "Going into the street was a way of literally breaking the margins, breaking out of the house and leaving the paper behind."² The early 1970s also saw a proliferation of video art in Acconci's work. Acconci's performances and videotapes followed the highly literal, systematic mode of his writing. Repetition and variations on a theme are constants in Acconci's work, as is evident in the prose style of the following interview, which closely resembles the way that he talks.

In 1972, Acconci created one of his most famous works, *Seedbed*, at the Sonnabend Gallery in Soho. For this piece, he built a ramp in the gallery that looked much like the sort of minimal installation art that was common in New York at the time. However, Acconci was lying under the ramp during gallery hours, masturbating in response to the footsteps of the visitors. Two speakers broadcast Acconci's voice as he narrated his masturbatory fantasies. *Seedbed* was typical of Acconci's work in the early 1970s, in that it was an installation that depended upon the participation of the viewer. Kate Linker has written of Acconci, "His career traces a movement from self-isolation to interrelation in which dependency on the other, or others, is a mark of human interdependency necessary for social proceedings."⁴ While *Seedbed* is often

cited as the polar opposite of Acconci's public work, it was with works of this nature that his investigation of interdependency with the viewer became increasingly evident. Acconci's installations in the later 1970s also began to regularly include places for the viewer to sit, which would become a central aspect of his work later.

In 1980, Acconci began a series of works he called "self-erecting architecture," spaces that were activated and/or created with the participation of the viewer. Whether the viewer was asked to pedal a bicycle that moved scenery, or sit on a swing that pulled up walls as they fell to the floor, the works were incomplete without active participation. In the 1980s, Acconci also created a number of sculptural environments that used the image of the house, often flipped over or turned on angle. These installations always allowed the viewer to investigate, to walk through the space and sit in a number of locations. By the late 1980s, Acconci was becoming increasingly interested in creating permanent public art. As he says in the following interview, "It wasn't until 1988, after I did a show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, that I began to be asked, frequently, to make public proposals. I had called the show 'Public Places.' It was as if I had to announce my intentions. I thought everybody knew, but they didn't. Only after I told them what I was doing, in the title of the show, did people ask me." By 1990, Acconci had begun to focus mostly on large-scale, permanent commissions, with an occasional museum exhibition or gallery show. His public art is characterized by the variety of social spaces it creates. There are always benches, but they are often in eccentric configuration, and his work is often created in some sort of ironic relationship with the architecture. For these works, Acconci assembled a team of collaborators under the name, "Acconci Studio," as discussed in the interview. This late phase is the focus of the following discussion.

In 1988, I called the current director of the Arvada Center, Kathy Andrews, to get a user's assessment of the project, and she had very positive things to say. She said that the outside portion of Acconci's project is used by people waiting to be picked up and that people use the seating indoors for a wide variety of interactions. Children have a particular fondness for the work. She said that some of the people who come to the center know that Acconci's project is art, while others assume that it is simply a part of the architecture. While there was a controversy at the time the work was commissioned (described in the interview), it was pretty much forgotten several years later. Andrews said that Acconci was very accommodating with the community representatives during the controversy and "did what it took to make the project work."

In general, she reported that the work is weathering well. Panels have broken from time to time, but it is only a matter for routine maintenance. After six years of constant use, the project was in excellent condition.⁵

The following interview was conducted in Vito Acconci's studio in Brooklyn, New York, in May 1996. It was thoroughly reedited by Acconci, so the punctuation is different from other interviews in the book.

Tom Finkelpearl. How do you see the role of the artist in the world of public commissions?

*Vito Acconci: When you're asked to do a public art project, you're asked to do something that's peripheral to the building designed by the architect; you're asked to do something on the margin; you don't get the main space, you're put in the corner. And sometimes it's worse than that; we've been working a long time on a project where the architects are saying things like, "Well, we need some art overlay here." So the artist is asked to provide something like paint, or wallpaper, or a carpet. Or sometimes not even that; some architects—maybe understandably—want their walls and floors to be left alone, untampered with; so, what they want is floating art, maybe an "art float," separate from their walls, from their floor. As a public artist, you're asked to do something extra, something unnecessary. The ticket counters have been designed, the transfer corridors have been designed, all of the airport that's actually needed and usable has already been designed by the architect; yet the city has a One Percent for Art law, so art has to come in at the last minute, like a *deus ex machina*, like an architect's nightmare.*

We're asked to do a folly; our program is: to have no program, to do nothing but art. But we—Acconci Studio—work best when we have a program of functions and needs. Usually we have to write our own program; we search desperately for functions to provide. So, if we're asked to do a folly, we try to turn that folly into a joker, a pest.

There shouldn't be a separate field called "public art," there should be only architecture, only landscape architecture; there should be architecture projects, and landscape architecture projects, that everyone—including so-called artists—can apply for. "Public art" gives an artist an excuse to say: this is like architecture, but it isn't really architecture—so it doesn't have to ob-

serve the rules and regulations that architecture has to observe, it doesn't have to be as functional as architecture. If the public artist were in the role of architect, there would be nothing to hide behind.

TF: You often do projects that comment on the architecture.

VA: Yes; if we're asked to deal with extra space, marginal space, we can turn that extra space into a cancer: what this superfluous space can do is disease the main space, undercut the main space. Can you nudge into it? Can you make that main space less sure of itself? Can you cast a doubt, show hesitation, insert a parenthesis, a second thought? And that's the advantage of coming in on the margin, coming in from the outside: you can make a marginal note to the main body of the text of a culture. If you're in a space off to the side, if you're in a lower position, then maybe you can express a minority voice. Which you can't do if you're in the main space, the major position; because then you'd be the majority; you're one of them.

TF: You have talked about getting in the back door.

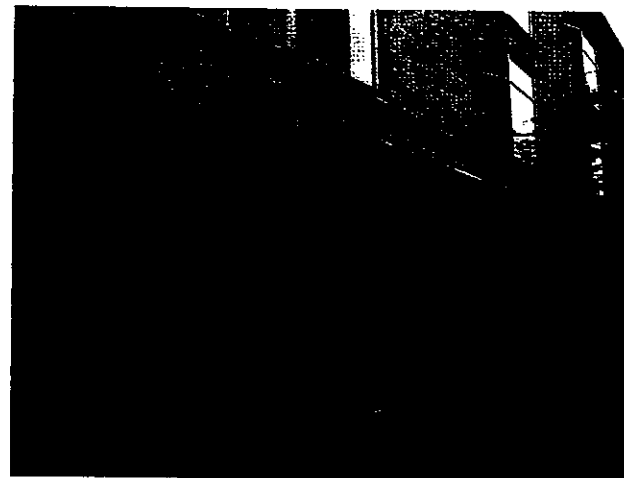
VA: Yes. And I've talked about coming in from the side, and coming up from underneath, and clinging on like a leech. I'd welcome the chance sometime, the risk, of having to start from the center; then I'd have to make my own center, I wouldn't have the luxury of reacting.

TF: Well, your design along with Steven Holl for StoreFront for Art and Architecture did address the whole space. How did it come about?

VA: Steven and I were approached together by Kyong Park and Shirin Neshat (codirectors of StoreFront).

TF: It was their idea that you collaborate?

VA: Yes; they knew that Steven and I had worked together, starting in 1988, on a seven-block walkway in Washington, D.C. The project never happened. It reached the research and development phase; but, after working together



Acconci Studio/Steven Holl, Storefront Renovation, 1993, New York, New York. Client: StoreFront for Art and Architecture. Photograph courtesy of Acconci Studio.

for fourteen months, we never even got to the design phase. So Shirin and Kyong wondered if we wanted to try again. They asked us to do a piece, an installation; it was us who introduced the idea not of doing something in StoreFront but, instead, of doing StoreFront, renovating StoreFront.

TF: Well, that's certainly a case of writing your own program.

VA: It was me who wanted the renovation, more than Steven. After all, he can do renovations all the time. He probably wanted to do art; for me, it was a chance to do architecture.

TF: What year was that?

VA: It was built in '93; they asked us, probably, a year before that. We knew we had a small budget, \$50,000. We knew we had a small space, 10' x 100'. With such



Acconci Studio/Steven Hall, Storefront Renovation. Photograph courtesy of Acconci Studio.

a budget, and in such a space, all we could do was give StoreFront, literally, a new front, a new facade. By changing StoreFront's face, by loosening its face, we could renovate the whole space.

TF: How did the ideas evolve?

VA: There were so many conflicting ideas, it's hard to say now where they started. Steven starts a project with drawings—watercolor sketches—whereas we start with models. One model took StoreFront's old facade, the wood-panel facade, and tilted it, sank it, panel by panel, gradually, down to the ground. All of us—StoreFront, Steven, Acconci Studio—liked that a lot: StoreFront as a house of cards. But then we—Acconci Studio—drew back, and reconsidered: it was an art piece, it wasn't architecture. Once the old facade had been sunken in, it should have been possible to use the demolished facade as a

building, as the gallery that StoreFront was supposed to be. But you couldn't use it, you could only look at it. It would have been only the first phase in a two-phase process: now that the old StoreFront wall has fallen down, another wall had to be put up in its place—ideally, a new wall made up of reused pieces of the old wall that were lying there in front of you. Since there wouldn't have been money for that second phase, we gave it up: we would have been providing a demolition job, but not a construction job, not a reconstruction job.

The way Steven and I collaborated, each of us worked alone, separately, and then both of us came together and summarized, reviewed, exchanged ideas. The exchange was agonized, and agonizing. Instead of each of us playing off the other's idea, each of us replaced the other's idea, with one of our own. So, always, we had to begin again, from the beginning. Neither one of us stretched and extended what the other had presented. Or if one of us did, or if one of us anticipated where the other was going, the other had already gone on to something else. Then, after a series of dead ends, something happened. What happened might have been: knowing that now we were down to the wire, now we had to get serious.

So we—Acconci Studio—did a model with a shifting facade: sections of the facade pushed in, or pulled out, making seats within the facade. Steven compared the shifted sections to windows, which made us—Acconci Studio—think of doors, which made us think of shifting walls. Steven wanted to open up the facade to light; so we thought of opening up the facade to people—light could take care of itself. We—Acconci Studio—proportioned the movable panels; we did the drawings; but none of that would have happened without conversations with Steven, arguments with Steven, beating our heads against the wall with Steven.

TF: At StoreFront, were you thinking about opening up the relationship between the gallery and the street?

VA: We wanted to pull the sidewalk into the gallery—the sidewalk would sweep in with the pivoting of a wall—and we wanted the gallery to spill out, ooze out, onto the street. At the same time, we kept in the front of our minds that this

was an exhibition space, that different shows were going to happen here. So we wanted a space that would be constantly adjustable: the space could be different for each show—each exhibitor could change the space—outside walls could be inside, inside walls could be outside, part of the gallery could be open while part would be closed.

TF: Those are two things that architects often do not consider when designing galleries and museums. One thing that has been consistent about galleries has been their complete disengagement from the street. And another tradition has been for architects to design for their own aesthetic statement, not as a space for artists. As an artist, the first thing you are thinking about is how it is going to be used by other artists. So maybe we could say that museums should be designed with input from artists. I think there is such a great tradition of disastrous museum design by great architects.

VA: For example . . .

TF: Oh, the Guggenheim.

VA: Maybe, but it's the best building in New York. And, at the same time that it looked back, to a frontier landscape, it looked ahead, maybe in spite of itself; it's a museum for an electronic age: you can see stuff fast—you can't stop moving, you don't have to concentrate, you're going down, there's a void in the middle, you preserve yourself from suicide and make it out the door. It's like skimming through a book, fast-forwarding a videotape.

TF: Yeah, that is fine for a chronological exhibition of easel paintings, in which case you can look across and see what you are about to see; you can look back and see what you just saw. You can scan through it, and you have a sense of where you are in the artist's career. That's what was going on in exhibitions at that time the building was designed. But for sculpture?

VA: Okay, okay, I grant you: the art spaces that the Guggenheim provides are wall spaces. As I said before, it's like walking past pages, walking past movie screens. The Guggenheim is a sculpture that you're inside of, inside which

you spiral past walls as if you're a spinning top. Anyway, it's not bad for sculpture in the middle; maybe the ramp should be treated as a catwalk—a circle, a spiral, of people to watch a sculpture rise up in their midst and blow out through the roof. Remember, artists who do installations—they crave a space that has its own quirks, its own peculiarities.

TF: Well, the space at StoreFront has a lot of character to it. There are a lot of ways for artists to play off of your design in creating an installation. But it doesn't eliminate, for example, a traditional show of architectural drawings.

VA: We didn't want to provide a space that other people had to fit into; we wanted to provide a space that other people could fit out for their own uses, their own purposes. Their work could shape the space; their work doesn't have to be shaped by the space. We hope the space can serve them; they don't have to serve the space, or live up to the space. If anything, they might have to live up to change, to the possibilities of change that the space provides. If they want to show drawings on the walls, the walls don't have to stay in one position; if they want to show models, a section of the wall can be pivoted down to function as a table, a shelf.

TF: Your public projects always offer the possibility for a lot of different kinds of interactions in the pieces. That's true at StoreFront, because it is so flexible, but even where there are benches, there are always benches for a single person, two people or five people.

VA: We try to provide a mix: a space, say, for a large group of people, for an orgy or a revolution, and, at the same time but off to the side, a space for face-to-face contact, where two people might feel each other out as they feel each other up, and, at the same time but around the corner, a single-person seat for a potential suicide, or for a serial murderer looking others over from afar . . .

TF: I think that one of the problems in a lot of architecture is that they have an idea of what the right kind of interaction in a public space is. The uniformity of the benches reflects a uniformity in planning . . .

VA: Since I don't know what a proper interaction should be, all I can do is provide enough occasions, situations, in which other people—through bodily use of those occasions—might come up with different methods of interaction, different attitudes of interaction, different reasons for interaction. When I say "interaction" here, it's an interaction, I hope, not just between person and person but also between person and culture. I hope I can provide the possibility of interaction, but not necessarily the program for interaction. Maybe I can provide a program of programs, a structure of programs.

TF: Well that's the problem with the Guggenheim. It provided one opportunity, which was maybe a good one and a brilliant one, but it didn't provide for enough flexibility.

VA: When our spaces work, it's because the space is flexible. And then maybe people are flexible, more flexible than they thought they were before. We make spaces for adults who can try out being children again. For a space of ours to really work, it has to liberate people. I get thrilled when I see, in a corporation plaza, a person sitting not on the bench that's been provided but, instead, on a step, even if the riser is too short for a seat. The bench functions as an order; you're supposed to sit there. So obviously your reaction should be: "I don't want to sit here, I want to sit over there. I'll sit on a step, I'll sit on a tree stump, I'll make a seat of my own."

TF: A lot of artists are creating tools for interaction. It's like an instrument. You can play it a lot of different ways.

VA: Which brings up a difference between so-called artists and so-called architects. My assumption has been that architecture is an instrument for interaction; the forms are there to allow that interaction to happen. But I'm struck by the difference between our models and the models some architects make. Our models are like model-railroad models; they're models that a child can understand. And our models have figures in them. Actually, putting the figures in the model is the only part of the model making that I do with my own hands. I need to place the figures myself so that I can understand how to use the space—I know where two people might come together as a couple, I know where one person might stand dominantly over another . . .

TF: And you've consistently photographed your projects with people in them.

VA: The only photos that don't have people in them are the photos of StoreFront, because Steven chose the photographer. I don't mean that snidely; it's just a fact. Most architectural photographs are free of people—they're empty.

TF: You know, most public art photographs don't have people in them either. When artists come in for interviews for public art commissions, one after the next will show slides of interesting projects with no people in them.

VA: A professional photographer can certainly take better, more polished photographs than I do; I mess up the scene, I block the shot with people. And I might lie down to get a shot; I shoot with a lens that's too wide an angle; it's a way of trying to get the experience of a space, rather than a view of the space. I want the opposite of distance. First I want people to be smack dab in the middle of the spaces I design; then I want viewers of a photo of that space to be smack dab in the middle of those people.

TF: And it goes without saying that if you look at an art book, there are no people in any of the pictures of paintings, for example. It would be out of the question.

VA: Because the tradition is: you're not photographing a space in which there happens to be a painting; you're photographing the painting, only the painting. So then the book, the mass of pages, becomes the space of the painting as photographed.

TF: Right, and then that's the idea of what a museum is. That blank wall, just like the blank white page of a book.

VA: It was that blank wall, that museum as a repository of blank walls, that was the impetus for many people in my generation to make art; we made art as a reaction to, as a rebellion against, the clean, white space. We made art as a reaction against the "Do-not-touch" signs in the museum. It occurred to us to ask: why aren't there any windows in the museum? Is art as fragile as all that? Does art have to be so protected, so preserved from the world outside? For

many of us in my generation, who are doing public art now, the starting point, the jumping-off point, was the museum. When a person enters a museum, that person is saying, "I am an art viewer." That person is separating himself or herself, then, from all those others who aren't art viewers. Inside the museum, the artist can do anything; the art viewer, after all, has asked for it. But, outside the museum, there aren't any art viewers; there are only passers-by, who haven't asked for art, who are simply passing through the things of the world. Inside the museum, you stand in front of art; you look at it from a distance, you're in the position of desire, you're in the position of frustration. Outside the museum, in the world, when you come upon something for the first time, you pick it up, you touch it, you listen to it, you smell it, you taste it. Outside the museum, the world is in your hands, and you're in the hands of the world.

TF: What's interesting to me also is that a lot of artists who began by doing installations ended up in public art. By thinking about space, the next logical step is to think about people in the space.

VA: For many of us those installations, from the beginning, involved people. In the mid-1970s, in my audio installations, I provided furniture (though I don't think I would have called it that then) for people to be on, I provided architecture (though I don't think I would have called it that then) for people to walk through, while they listened. If there was a table, with stools on each side, this was obviously a marker for people, an invitation to people, a place for people to inhabit. In the mid-1970s, I was using the gallery as if it were a town square; there was a voice on audiotape calling a group of people to order, as if at a town meeting. Sooner or later, I'd better go to a real town square. The pieces were telling me where to go; I just didn't know how to get out there yet.

In the beginning of the 1980s, I made equipment for public places. The pieces were interactive, the viewer "made" the piece: a piece consisted of a vehicle, or an instrument, that a viewer could use—the use resulted in, erected, a shelter, an architecture—the architecture carried a sign—the viewer decided where he or she stood in relation to that sign, which functioned as the power sign of a culture—the architecture lasted only so long as

the viewer used the vehicle or instrument. But the equipment needed constant maintenance; the use of the equipment needed guidance; in spite of my desire for public space, those pieces could exist only in the controlled environment of a gallery or museum. In the mid-1980s, the pieces were no longer games of making a space, building a space; they were spaces to be in now. But they were furniture, and private houses, and they announced themselves as domestic places rather than public places. I thought people would get the idea; I thought they would realize that I was only waiting for the opportunity, that I could adapt my furniture for—orient my furniture to—a public space. But, until 1988, there were, maybe, four invitations, no more than that, to propose public projects. Two of these proposals were built; but one was for a corporation, indoors, and only for people who worked there, and the other was for a nightclub, and this one was temporary.

It wasn't until 1988, after I did a show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, that I began to be asked, frequently, to make public proposals. I had called the show "Public Places." It was as if I had to announce my intentions. I thought everybody knew, but they didn't. Only after I told them what I was doing, in the title of the show, did people ask me.

TF: So, in a way, the ultimate museum show was something like farewell to the museum.

VA: In order to go outside the museum, I needed to be, first, inside the prototype museum. In order to go out of the museum, I needed the museum as a distribution system.

TF: Well, a lot of the commissions are still controlled by people who read art magazines, who go to art libraries. And everybody looks to the Museum of Modern Art for leadership, so that you can be certified by the Museum of Modern Art as an official public artist, which is interesting . . .

VA: And a little sad.

TF: It is, but it's also ironic, because the Museum of Modern Art is sort of the essential Modernist museum.

VA: I'm not sure if modern architecture is as anti-city as all that; maybe it posits a machine city, and maybe we're not good enough machines to use it yet. But that's another story. At the MoMA show, Jackie Ferrara said to me, as she walked in the door, before she had a chance to see the show, that she felt so surprised and so invigorated at seeing a banner hanging outside the museum with the words "Public Places." If the show did nothing else, she said, that was already something.

TF: Before we go on to discussing the next project, can you say what you mean when you say "we" in terms of your designs? Who is "Acconci Studio"?

VA: There are three people who work with me full-time: Luis Vera, Jenny Schrider, Charles Doherty. Two of them are architects; one comes from an art background, and is doing music now. Luis has worked with me for over nine years, Jenny for over five, Charlie for over two. And we work very much with each other; we work at least quasi-collaboratively. I might start a project off with a vague idea, a general structure; but then we work together, we think together, each of us contradicts the others' ideas, each of us plays off the others' ideas.

TF: I think it's a very traditional way of working actually, like the artist's workshop.

VA: More like an architect's office, I think—the kind of architects that work as a studio, a workshop. These aren't people who are there to carry out, technically, my ideas; rather, these people are there so that I can have ideas. We prod each other on. Each of us questions the other, argues with the other, each of us keeps the other honest, and forces the other to keep to a logic-system. I said before that I might start off a project with a general idea. But not all the time. Often I have no ideas, or I can't find my idea, or I can't say my idea. They can push me, shame me, into clarifying. Or, sometimes, we throw all our ideas into a pot, we expose our ideas shamelessly, until one idea stands out, until one idea excites us enough to run with it. When we draw a complete blank, then we start from the ground up: we build a rough study model of the site, before we have even an inkling of a project. So all of us, together, can have

the site in the palm of our hands—we can, physically and literally, push it and pull it in different directions—we can take the site as a tangible thing that we can divide, multiply, shift, pivot, turn upside-down, turn inside-out, etc. We always begin with a model. That way, we're in the space from the start, we don't have to find a way in—we're too big for the model space, but we can get down to its size, we can squeeze our hands and heads inside. I can't move from a two-dimensional space to an experiential space; I need the model as a halfway house. Remember, I don't have architectural training, I don't have art training; I was a writer; I still think as a writer. But talk is cheap; and I need a fact, an implacable fact, in my hands so that I can prove my idea. In front of a two-dimensional space, I understand the space, but only from a distance; I'm a voyeur; I can only visit, I can't stay for a while.

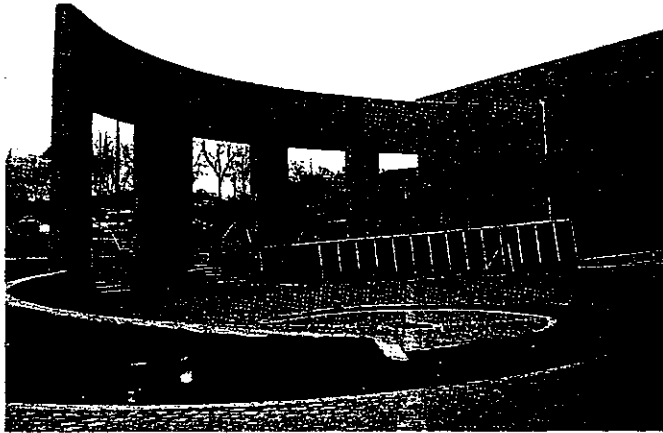
TF: Let's talk about the project in Colorado. As opposed to the StoreFront reconstruction, this was a project in which you were presented with an architect's completed design, and you added to it in a very significant way. What was the site?

VA: The Arvada Center for Arts and Humanities: a community center, a place for theater and music events, art shows, dance classes, arts and crafts classes.

The project started the way most projects start: you're on a mailing list, there's a request for qualifications, a call for slides. Sometimes they ask for twenty slides, sometimes ten, sometimes seven—so you try to foresee the project, you orient the slides toward the project, you pick slides that might relate to the project. But you're always guessing, of course. I remember some requests for three slides; so, foolhardily, you try to pick that project of projects, the project that demonstrates how you work with every site in the world.

Anyway, back to Arvada. On the original application, there were two sites to choose from; one was a blank wall that was the back of a theater; the other was a concrete wall, starting outside the building, that wound its way through the building. My choice was obvious: since my bias is toward a space you walk through and not a space you stand in front of and look at, I chose the winding wall.

The next step was: we were among a group of finalists, who were asked to make proposals. The form of the proposal wasn't specified. Our tendency,



Acconci Studio, Project for Arvada Art Center, 1992, Arvada, Colorado. Percent for Art, city of Arvada. Photograph courtesy of Acconci Studio.

as I've said, is to make a model; we make a model first to convince ourselves, then to convince others.

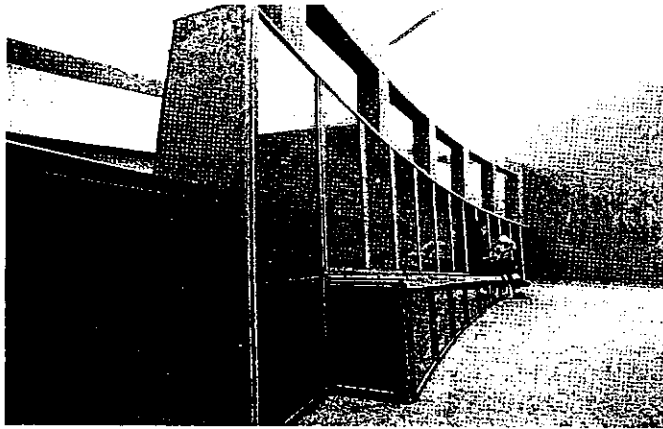
They chose our project, which tried to cling on to the site. The center was being renovated; the architect, Ken Berendt, had designed a concrete wall, 20 feet high, that started at the end of a grass spiral, outside the building, and then continued the spiral by winding up to the front of the building, going through the building and curving through it. Berendt claimed that the shape of the wall came from the meaning of the building: this was a center for art, music—the winding wall, then, functioned as a G clef.

Since the architect's scheme had already started a motion from outside to inside, we wanted to continue that motion, do that motion: could we bring, literally, the outside inside? The wall started abruptly, where the spiral of grass ended; could we take the ground up, could we lift the ground up onto the wall? In the back of our minds was Arvada's history: the city began from farming, dirt farming. Our project starts from the ground up, our project starts at the bottom of the wall and ends at the top. A dirt wall rises out of the spiral of grass, a glass retaining wall that holds in dirt, holds back dirt.

The dirt wall grabs on to the concrete wall, it enters the building with the wall. The dirt wall passes through the reception desk, it climbs the stairs, it inserts itself into the building like a parasite. The dirt wall grows, it climbs the concrete wall, covers the wall. To enter a room, you have to walk through the dirt wall; niches are carved into the dirt wall—you sit inside the dirt wall as if in a cave. When the dirt wall reaches the height of the concrete wall, it folds over onto the second floor of the building; the dirt wall bulges out, to make seats against the wall. The dirt wall rises above you like a cut in a mountain; it's four feet deep at the base, and it tapers in to less than a foot at the top—the dirt wall recedes away from you, off in the distance.

They weren't looking for an interactive project. They simply had a wall; and what they wanted, I think, was a picture for the wall, a mural on the wall. Once we provided spaces for habitation, for interaction, they wanted them. But they didn't know they wanted them before that.

Our project was chosen, against the better judgment of two or three people in the community. A lawyer, for example, claimed that a person, sitting within a niche, might bang his or her head when getting up out of the niche. Problems like this are make-believe problems, false alarms; if an overhang of 6 feet is too low, then simply move it up to 7 feet. There's an inherent difficulty in a proposal that's categorized as "art." The implication is that it's a finished fact, it can't be modified—the art is inviolable, the artist can't be interfered with. So, then, if a part is objectionable, then the whole has to be rejected. But a public art proposal is like bargaining for a contract, it's like a business meeting. A public art proposal is the beginning of a discussion: with the client, with the community, with city regulations, with ADA recommendations. A proposal is just what the word says: it's only a proposal, it's a first grasp at the situation. This proposal for Arvada, for example, was made by a person from New York, a person who's only visiting Arvada, who doesn't live there; this is a proposal from the outside, made by a visitor from another planet. Now let's put the proposal up for grabs; now let's hear what the insiders think, what the local inhabitants think—let's have a mix of old and new, region and universe, tried-and-true and untested. When we present a proposal, we're presenting an essay, a theory of public space applied to our myth of a particular city. Now the theory has to be converted into practice, now the myth has to come down to earth.



Acconci Studio, Project for Arvada Art Center. Photograph courtesy of Acconci Studio.

In the Arvada case, when community people brought up supposedly practical problems, I had the feeling that they were talking about something else; I couldn't put my finger on the problem at the bottom of it all. Once our project was chosen, and reported in the press, the problem became clear. And the problem was language, my language. Talking about the project, I used, constantly, the word "dirt": a wall of "dirt." There was a newspaper editorial, then, that said: maybe in New York people want to bring dirt into buildings, but here in Colorado we try to keep dirt out. So I learned how regional language is: in New York, I would plant a flower in dirt, but here in Colorado that dirt was garbage. The problem wasn't in the model—people who saw the model seemed attracted to it; the problem was the word, and the word was in the air now, it became rumor, reportage, it became a rallying cry for people who hadn't seen the model—the word was stuck in their heads, the word became more than flesh, it became a wound, an insult. So I had to eat my words; I had to clean up my language.

TF: Did you change your rhetoric from "dirt" to "earth?"

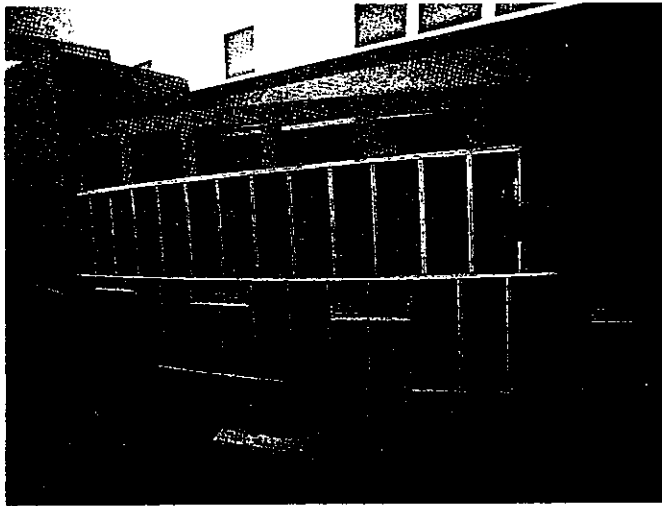
VA: I tried, but it's hard for me to say "earth"; I'm a New Yorker, I'm not from the West, "earth" is a little too mythic, too mystic, for me. But I could at least say "soil." Actually, it wasn't so much that I changed my language; it's more that I tried to make clear to my listeners where I was coming from when I used that language—I tried to mix my language with theirs.

TF: There are different sorts and colors of dirt?

VA: In our model, the dirt is a mass of dark brown. We were thinking in New York terms: dirt is that which isn't buildings—dirt is the generalized substructure under our world. Actually, the look of the dirt in the model was another problem, almost as much of a stumbling block as the dirt. Now, we didn't know how to get around this; dirt is dirt, we thought, and we can't change that; we had reached an impasse. Until I realized that the model was one thing and the experiential space was another; our model could be generalized, but the experiential space had to be specific—we had to use not the idea of dirt but dirt that was specific to the region. So we worked with a local geologist, Steven Schwochow, who told us exactly what the dirt was like on the site. The dirt wasn't a monochromatic brown: it was layers of color, it ranged from reds through tans to medium browns. So it turned out to be easy to satisfy people: all we had to do was see what was right in front of our eyes—or, at least, what was below our eyes, underground. I have to insist, though: we weren't going to make the dirt different colors because people liked it—but we had to make the dirt different colors because that's just what it was, in that particular place. I have to admit: I don't like the layers of color—to me, it looks like a Navajo rug—I prefer dirt as a mass of brown/black. But it didn't matter what I liked; what mattered was what was; there was no reason to impose a New Yorker's idea of dirt on the fact of dirt that happened to be there.

TF: So how site-specific is the dirt?

VA: It corresponds to the layers of dirt below the building—at least, if you trust the geologist.



Acconci Studio, Project for Arvada Art Center. Photograph courtesy of Acconci Studio.

TF: You said that public space is sort of a nostalgic idea.

VA: Yeah. In the late twentieth century, early twenty-first century, the notion of a space that you go to, the notion of an outdoor room the walls of which are the city buildings, the notion of people gathering—I don't know how those notions coexist with an age of computers, airplanes, television, space travel, time travel . . . Why do you need a place to go to when you can take with you all the places you need?

TF: I guess that that's one of the basic problems we're dealing with in the field of public art. Cities are dying. The suburb is the city of the future . . .

VA: Is that true, or is it that there's no difference anymore between the suburb and the city? When we say the word "city," we immediately think of a center, of

downtown. But that's not what a late-twentieth-century/early-twenty-first-century city is. We have to think more about the periphery, more about cities joining and blending with cities. Networks and sprawl. It's not that everyone is moving to the suburbs; it's that the city is moving into the suburb, and the suburb is moving through the city.

Remember, in the mid-'70s, I thought that, if I was using the gallery as if it were a town square, the logical next step was to go to the actual town square. But the town square was gone by the time I got there. The town square, the piazza, is made up of talk, political talk: talk that leads to action that leads to change. But you don't need to go to the piazza now to share talk. The talk is already with us, in our minds and on our earphones. We don't have to go "there," to the town square; "there" is already here, "here" is everywhere. But that's not cause for despair; we just have to find out what public space is in a world of private space; instead of traveling into outer space, we have to travel out to inner space.

TF: But the community center in Colorado is public space for that community. The people come together. It still exists, even in the days of people sitting at home and watching TV.

VA: It still exists, but does it have to? Apparently for these people it does. While I was in Arvada, seven-year-old kids would come to dance classes; they wanted to be there; they craved it. The theater was putting on the 795th production of Hello, Dolly, and everybody wanted to go. As Samuel Goldwyn said, "Include me out." It gives me the creeps. Now maybe if they learned to dance on the ceiling . . . maybe if, while sitting in a theater, they watched Hello, Dolly each on a personal computer, while they did some matchmaking of their own, with each other's partner . . .

TF: Everybody talks about the death of the public space, but I am not convinced. There are a million kids who go to school in New York City every day. They are together for six or seven hours of the day. Sure, maybe they go home and watch TV instead of playing in a park after school, but the public schools are public spaces. People still spend a lot of time in public. And I don't think that a desire for certain parts of the past is necessarily conservative. That could be very progressive, like public

transportation, that old idea, is the new idea. That's why you are working on all these public transportation projects

VA: Like everybody else—everybody we probably know, anyway—I have a bias against suburbs. I'm a believer in the position that the suburbs were created to disperse people, to get them out of the city, where they couldn't help but meet and talk and argue and start a revolution.

I don't drive; I've never learned to drive; I'm a New Yorker. What I love about New York is: it's a city in close-up, a city of close-ups. From Manhattan, you can't see Manhattan; there are no views, no vistas, it's not like Chicago. You can't depend on vision, and from vision we get control; so you've lost control, and you have to resort to other senses: you hear New York, you touch New York, you smell New York, your face is up against it so much that you taste New York. I love to walk, meander, in New York, in between buildings. I love underground New York; I'd rather take the subway than a taxi, I'd rather walk than take the subway. But then I have to wonder: do I prefer the density, the tangibility, of the city because it's cozy, comforting, homey? After all, there's a world out there, beyond the city, a world represented by and reachable by that car that I don't know how to drive—that car that can shoot off on a route of its own, faster and freer than I can be—that unknown scary car that, for all I know, takes off into space once it disappears around the corner.

What I like about living here, under the bridge, on the other side of the river, is the feel of being on the edge of the city; the city falls off into water here. You're not in a Brooklyn neighborhood; you're not in Manhattan; you're neither here nor there, you don't have a place. But maybe you have too much time. What I miss here is the density of the city. It's isolated; you can't go out in the middle of the night to buy a candy bar. When I first moved here, this was my version of the country. Maybe I use the city as if on a computer; I don't use New York very much, I don't have time for movies, for clubs, for restaurants; but it doesn't matter, because other people are using them—they're there to be used even when I can't use them.

Once the computer terminal becomes the institution, you can subvert it with the tangible. But, once you do, you're regressing. In a world where you can have all the information of a city on a computer, what do you need the

city for? You need the city for other bodies, you need the city for sex. But maybe the city has so much sex that you don't have to do it any more; somebody else is doing it anyway, somebody else is doing it for you, they're so close you can almost touch them, you can close your eyes and you can almost feel them.

Notes

1. The information in the introduction is largely drawn from: Kate Linker, *Vito Acconci* (New York: Rizzoli, 1994). The book is an excellent overview of Acconci's career.
2. Linker, *Acconci*, p. 13.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
5. From a telephone interview with Kathy Andrews, October 15, 1997.