

on the ground. Similarly, his subjects are typically framed in the comfort of their new home environments, either interiors reflecting their interests (e.g., food journalist and critic Julia della Croce's kitchen) and sense of belonging (e.g., couches and armchairs) or against a backdrop of walls that metaphorically suggest the solidity of their residency in their newfound countries. Finally, in describing how his photographic subjects selected the objects that express their emotional ties to Italy, Badagliacca revealed that they were not allowed time to meditate on these choices but were asked to choose on the day of the photographic shoot, suggesting that their selection operates at a more emotional-impulsive level than if the subjects had been granted a longer time to think more carefully about their selections.

Though limited by the shortcomings discussed previously, Badagliacca's exhibit is a welcome contribution to the debate over the concept of Italianness in contemporary public discourse. Clearly guided by aesthetic principles of composition—clean lines, bright lighting, and balanced framing dominate the photographs—Badagliacca's *Italy Is Out* reflects both the desire to reframe what it means to be Italian in a globalized twenty-first century, away from scholarly, twentieth-century models of Italian emigration, and the anxieties that emerge when notions of citizenship and belonging frame a subject between a new homeland and cultural vestiges of a wistful past.

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Vito Acconci: Where Are We Now (Who Are We Anyway?), 1976.

Curated by Klaus Biesenbach.

MoMA P.S. 1, Long Island City, New York.

June 19–September 18, 2016.

Vito Acconci: Where Are We Now (Who Are We Anyway?), 1976, presented at MoMA P.S. 1 from June 19 to September 18, 2016, featured a survey of early performance and video works by the late American artist Vito Acconci (1940–2017), culminating in an installation piece of the same title and from the same year. What emerges most sharply from this sprawling show in terms of recent preoccupations in contemporary art is Acconci's fixation on the fluidity of gender and identity, a continuous exploration of the decentered self as measured in space. What follows will be a series of notes and sketches, ruminations on possible new avenues of investigation into Acconci's work.

Acconci grew up in the Bronx, the son of Italian American parents, but his work has rarely thematized his Italian American identity. If anything, Acconci seems to self-identify as a New Yorker, rather than being of Italian descent. In his work, his own body, its physical and psychological limits, are subject to repetition by the artist with discomfort, ironic humor, and hirsute abandon. The central exhibition space, designed by the Acconci Studio, features elliptical steel-mesh partitions upon which a dizzying assemblage of Acconci's actions and notes are arrayed asymmetrically, unframed, as if they had been quickly tacked up on a public message board. Interspersed among these partitions are some video works. The partitions bear an ironic commentary upon the midcentury modernist exhibition designs of architect Paul Rudolph, hinting at Acconci's antimodernist tendencies. The range and complexity of Acconci's production during this early phase of his work make it ripe for scholarly reconsideration.

Acconci joins a long list of twentieth-century artists who began as poets and made the transition from the written word to the visual image. Due to the significance of Happenings, Fluxus, and John Cage's avant-garde music scores, the physical presence of the artist as a means of subjective investigation took on a new urgency for Acconci. His performances emerge alongside conceptual art's rejection of the commodified status of art embodied in the pop and minimalism movements. Bruce Nauman's banalized actions performed in his studio are a precedent for Acconci, works such as *Failing to Levitate in the Studio* (1966), which explicitly rejected the artist in the studio as a kind of mage or shaman producing works of transcendent genius. Acconci's works of this period seem deliberately antimodernist in their provocative and antimaterialist subjectivity.

Acconci was a pioneer of conceptual art and video, and his repeated investigations of the body in those media must be considered within the context of his earlier poetry. As in the case of pieces by avant-garde composer John Cage, score, time signature, and duration are key in Acconci's performances. The grid of the city became a physical and psychological boundary of his work. The iconic *Following Piece*, done from October 3 to 25, 1969, took place in various locations throughout New York. At random Acconci chose someone to follow until the person went into a private space he could not enter. The work raised unsettling notions of stalking and surveillance. Acconci took body art into the street, a choice that must be seen within the context of the Vietnam War. Like Michel Foucault, his works are implicit critiques of institutions and their socio-political power over individuals.

Acconci titles the scores for his first street works *Situations*, in a nod to the Situationist International (1957–1972), a group of neo-avant garde artists and theorists centered in Paris who sought to counter the increasing homogeneity

and spectacle of everyday urban life with random gatherings in which art and Marxist politics would be discussed. In his “Situational Aesthetics” (1969), Victor Burgin posits that artists move away from art’s overt “objectness” into the perceptual field of ephemeral phenomenological experience, of simultaneous motion and psychological investigation in relation to time. Certainly, Acconci’s use of photography and video fits right into Burgin’s concept. Some of his actions seem unremarkable but employ a more personal, psychological component. Of this period covered by the exhibition, Acconci noted that, “When I was writing notes about those pieces they were all in the language of systems theory. I was trying to take a body, which is a kind of unbridled thing, and—was I trying to bridle it, into this system?—I’m not quite sure, but the interesting thing was that it couldn’t be bridled. After a while I had to face the fact that a person isn’t just a body, a person is a thinking, feeling, confused, worried, nervous, fearful being” (Jackson, 2006–2007).

For Acconci there were limits to the focus on the body. He felt that the psychological would ultimately lead to the personal, to the self, to the inseparability of the body from the self: “I thought, if I’m going to go on using my own person in pieces, maybe I have to concentrate more on person. Rather than attend to a world considered as if it’s out there, I have to start to attend to me. That led to some things that I never wanted it to lead to, person as a sort of psychological miasma. I started to get wrapped up in self, and then, for the first time, self did become an autobiographical self” (Jackson, 2006–2007). It is precisely this realization that made Acconci move away from performance when he could no longer separate autobiographical self from the body as text.

Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the body without organs seems an apt theoretical model in terms of examining Acconci’s work of the late 1960s and early 1970s. They wrote *Anti-Oedipus* in 1972, contemporaneous with Acconci’s performances. For Deleuze and Guattari, the body without organs is a complex metaphor for phenomenological human experience mediated between “desiring production” (that of the psychological mind) and “social production” (Deleuze and Guattari, 10). The body without organs is a surface of continuous production and desire and a metaphor for the body as a social construct. The body without organs is affected by power and by institutionalized psychoanalysis. For Acconci, his body becomes paper, the sculptural medium, the receiver of the text, the physical space of experience, a surface upon which poems are written with various literal substances, incursions, and actions; it becomes something larger than himself, a repetition.

Acconci’s work of this period also needs to be seen in the context of punk poets who also worked with music and performance, artists like Patti Smith, Richard Hell, Tom Verlaine, and Iggy Pop. Their performances were raw, immediate, and in deliberate opposition to the slick, melodramatic, breezy pop

rock that dominated the radio waves, what they referred to as “stadium rock,” exemplified by bands like the Eagles and America. This tendency extends the written and spoken word into the public. Like early punk, Acconci’s performances are raw, stripped-down actions that push the limits of subjectivity, the body, and interaction with the audience into dangerous areas, transgressing social boundaries.

One element of Acconci’s production whose timeliness the exhibition makes patently clear is the artist’s raw pantomimes of gender performance and fluctuation. Through photographs and video, Acconci’s body becomes the site of gender transformation. Bringing to mind Diane Arbus’s *A Naked Man Being a Woman N.Y.C.* (1968), Acconci literally pretends to be a woman by clenching his penis between his legs, out of sight. In his *Conversions* series 1970–71, performed with Kathy Dillon (who is sometimes in front of and sometimes behind the camera), Acconci takes gender transformation through various awkward tasks of movement and repetition; in the textual description accompanying one of the series, he meditates on some aspects of performance, including “pulling: performance as shifting a boundary (going from one region to another).” The work is displayed as text and a series of black-and-white photographs. The more sexual work reminds me of Paul McCarthy’s raw performances of the 1970s, such as *Sailor’s Meat (Sailor’s Delight)* (1975). The work has an abject sense of pain or failure, of a body not doing what society, or the brain, wants it to do.

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