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WHAT WILL BE: THE DEFERRED LANGUAGE OF VITO ACCONCI

JOHN STADLER

Most criticism makes only fleeting reference to Vito Acconci's formal poetic training when considering his conceptual works, suggesting poetry and conceptual art are two entirely separate practices.¹ This disarticulation is unproductive, though, given conceptual art's engagement with language. Perhaps critics took Acconci at his word when he stated firmly that he was no longer a poet after 1969: "Once I had gotten out of poetry, I would probably have had at the back of my mind, don't get into anything that has any resemblance to my literature background."² Nevertheless, on this point he often wavered: "Okay, this interest in movement. Trace it back to poetry, movement over a page."³ Or, perhaps, the lack of an archive for Acconci's collected poetry prior to 2006 explains the paucity of scholarship bridging these two voices of Acconci together.⁴ Whatever the reason, Acconci (the poet) and Acconci (the conceptual artist) rarely are brought into conversation. Yet these practices are complementary, and this essay reunites the two aspects of the poet/artist. In 2004, Acconci's notes and documentation for conceptual works came out in *Vito Acconci: Diary of a Body 1969-1973*, with an introduction by Gregory Volk, followed in 2006, by an extensive collection of Acconci's poetry in *Language to Cover a Page: The Early Writings of Vito Acconci*, edited by Craig Dworkin. I examine two less well-known works from these archives to draw connections between Acconci's poetry and conceptual art. Through this trans-discursive analysis, I argue that Acconci pointedly critiques language as a system of deferral and indeterminacy, questioning its capacity for representation.

Poetry as Conceptual Art

The tension in how to read a poem whose literal register overshadows its figurative quality dominates Acconci's untitled poem, referred to hereafter as "What will be." (Fig. 1) The lack of a proper title should not be ignored, since the act of *not* naming initiates a procedural poem whose primary interest centers on the act of naming. In a series of thirty dependent clauses, Acconci anticipates "What will be the *n*th word" of an advertisement.⁵ Here Acconci makes an implicit contract: if the reader elects to locate



Figure 1: Announcing an advertisement that will appear in *The New York Times*⁶.

these words, for which Acconci provides the page numbers in *Webster's Dictionary*, s/he will know the poem's hidden message. If the reader elects not to do so, then only the cipher exists; the encoded message remains unrealized. How should the agency of the reader be conceived, though? There is never an addressee to these statements (neither a *you*, *I*, nor *he/she/it* are beckoned to fulfill an action). These words will simply "appear," Acconci promises, contingent upon the subjectless dependent clauses that harken their very manifestation. He never insists that the reader bring forth additional language. It is as though the statement that words *will be* can bring them into existence. Because Acconci's diction passively negates the role of the subject at the same time that it necessarily requires it, he cleverly incites the reader into action.

I located a 1966 *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* and set about constructing the poem's hidden subject, what might be considered its "other." What emerged, as the text promised, was an advertisement for women's clothing. The errors that Acconci wove into these instructions are worth noting, including mislabeled page numbers (11),

missing instructions (12), incorrect words (18, 19, 23), and additional or convoluted directions (13, 14, 20, 24, 28, 29). These errors highlighted Acconci's interrogation into the fixity of language by pointing to a system fraught with inconsistency. Despite the hindrances in the procedural system, once translated, the poem is compellingly coherent. In "What will be," a literal reading of the text is vexed without the reader's participation, which relied on various assumptions, leaps of faith, and associative guesswork. These exchanges between the reader and author lend the poem a dynamism that is akin to collaboration.

To consider what Acconci asks of language and poetry, I offer the following chart that maps the extant of the poem's cipher words beside their decoded referents. (Fig. 2) If this poem were simply an advertisement, as Acconci claims in the first line, it might be read as nothing more than an appropriation in the spirit of Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917). Such a comparison is inadequate, though, because Duchamp positioned the status of *Fountain* as art via the context he established through his intention, naming, and signature. Something different is at work in how Acconci presents the advertisement as poem. In this case, *not* naming the text became a critical decision. Furthermore, the procedure employed fuses the intention of the reader with that of the artist (the desire to complete the poem). This distributed network of participation grants the poem its gravitas.

Acconci's poem operates like the Oulipian writing practice *n + 7*. This writing constraint involves the deliberate de-familiarization of a source text by modifying nouns with the use of a dictionary: every noun (*n*) in a text is replaced by the seventh noun to follow its entry in a dictionary. Larger dictionaries produce less radical transformations

than smaller dictionaries. These texts are not entirely divorced from their original, and often retain either the charge of meaning (by way of etymological and lexical similitude) or the sonic resonance of the transformed text, revealing both the variant and homologous qualities of language. So while the overall meaning of the second text is drastically altered, a connection to the prior version remains. For example, read the code on the left column and then the translated advertisement in the right. Note the homologies and variance. I have drawn out this examination to reveal how Acconci departs from Duchamp. While Acconci appropriates an advertisement, his appropriation is inherently transformed, not just from its original context (the newspaper) but also from its original form (the advertisement). The initial poem—itsself a kind of mistranslation—operates as a reverse *n + 7* process, whereby the duplicate precedes the original.

But what does this say about language? Acconci's poem achieves one of his most valued ambitions for language, to cover a page. Through the serialized instructions, he has filled the page with inscription, given the reader many more words than are necessary to relay what is, in essence, a much simpler text. In the process of covering the page, Acconci acknowledges the influence of concrete poetry and imagistic play, most clearly through the repetition of the words "What will be" and "appears after," which operate as visual anchors throughout the poem. The more complicated the instruction, the longer the line runs (usually because of an error), spilling over into a second line, which disrupts the repetition of negative space between words of these left-justified refrains. Thus the poem devolves from a kind of structured space to a more chaotic space as it covers the page.

Readerly expectation is radically altered throughout this process to force the reader to reconsider the very nature of poetry, which grants it its conceptual lens. Acconci presents several decision points for the reader to deliberate on in order to produce sense in the meaning of the text. The first question is whether to accept the cipher as the complete text or to decipher it. If the task is accepted, the second choice concerns which dictionary to use, as Acconci did not specify an edition. If the "wrong" dictionary were selected, the result would be the multiplication of errata and the breakdown of the instructions. As an example, when Acconci informs the reader that the 18th word will appear after *milk* on page 1361, one of these two bits of information appears incorrect. If, for instance, I select the word after milk, I receive "milkadder," but if I proceed to page 1361, I find "mail." The next clue reveals the word "order," which then allows me to deduce that the 18th word should be "mail," not "milkadder." However, considering again "milkadder" as a homophonic translation of "mail order," both share the same basic consonant and vowel structure, as well as syllabic count. Acconci loves to play word games of this kind.⁸ The reader is left with a sense of uncertainty. Even when the poem is considered in the context of advertisement, it does not always clearly add up, especially near the conclusion, where the text reads "Jacob's / Ltd. / Tailor / for / 60 / Dawson / St. / Dublin / Ireland." Here, the

Announcement	Advertisement
frederiksberg	free
catalo	catalog
iris green	Irish
handworker	handwoven
twee	tweed
la-di-da	ladies
suipestifer infection	suit
ancyroid	&
coastwise	coat
custody	custom
tailordom	tailored
dollarleaf	\$
forty-three	42
senatus consultum	send
FOQ	for
frederiksberg	free
milk	milkadder / mail
ordeal tree	order
catalc	catalog
ancyroid	&
swat	swatch
jack winter	Jacob's
LTA	Ltd.
tail of the eye	Tailor
FOQ	for
sixtine	60
daws / dawsonia	Dawson
SSW / streen	St.
dubitative	Dublin
ireful	Ireland

Figure 2: Cipher and deciphered text of poem, lineated.⁷

word “for” appears to miss some accompaniment and begs the reader to recheck her/his work.

There is an alternative to this process that might also constitute “reading” the poem. One might simply forego the exercise and locate the *New York Times Magazine* from January 26, 1969. At the bottom of page 87, nestled among advertisements for Needle Point and Beaded Bags, a Jonny Mop Special, and Crystal Gamebird Plates, is the inconspicuous ad, which answers one of my initial questions: Did Acconci actually appropriate the text or make it up? (Fig. 3) At first glance, the advertisement appears to be the same as the translated poem, but there are discrepancies. Acconci left three words in the ad out of his poem: *from*, *20*, and *Years*. The result is that he provided the reader with a misconstrued address, which reads as 60 Dawson St., instead of 20 Dawson St.



Figure 3: Advertisement⁹

The lack of a true index for the tailor’s address reminds the reader how the concept of indexicality informs the poem. This advertisement is an index of an index, a meta-index, which promises a catalog not yet present, along with innumerable suits and coats also not yet present. Thus does the poem become an index of an ad that also is not present. Acconci’s meta-indexical discourse constantly defers the objecthood of the poem. Even the object of the ad—ladies suits and coats—may be read as an inside joke: these articles of clothing would cover a body in the manner that Acconci desires language to dress a page. It is noteworthy that the clothing advertised was tailored. With such intermixing of language and apparel, Acconci offers the promise of a tailored language that speaks individually to the reader, but which at each turn defers stable meaning.

As if dressing a page in language is not enough, Acconci complicates the act of reading even further. A closer analysis of the poem’s diction reveals limitless instructions that shatter both transcendental and fixed meaning. Throughout the poem, Acconci writes of what will be a certain word *after* another word. “After” implies the next sequential word in the dictionary. But rather, if the reader simply selects a word that, in the instance of the first clue, appears anywhere subsequent to “frederiksberg,” the choice of “freedom” or “zebra” become equally valid—both still *after* “free.” An infinite number of permutations is possible.¹⁰ Acconci brings the pact that he implicitly makes with the reader into crisis rather than closure, as the reader will never reach a single meaning. What is promised is only the promise of becoming something else unknown.

In the spring of 1971, John Perreault wrote a review of Acconci’s exhibition, “Ongoing Activities and Situations” at the John Gibson Gallery. Perreault stated: “The photographs would be virtually meaningless without the handwritten texts, but this does not mean that the works referred to are literature or poetry or are literary.” Perreault continued, “Acconci’s works are not poetry, for they operate totally within the art context-system, as now practiced. We are all by now familiar with documentation pieces, systems pieces, body pieces, conceptual pieces, and Acconci’s works are within these contexts.”¹¹ For Perreault, Acconci’s use of language, in support of photography, is nothing more than documentation. By contrast, in his introduction to *Vito Acconci: Diary of a Body*, Gregory Volk complicates the relationship between poetry and conceptual art, writing of the arresting quality of Acconci’s text.

What is particularly striking about this note is its power as writing. It reads like a compelling poem, or rather a strange amalgamation of a poem, a diary entry, and a personal manifesto, and it is packed with both driving aspirations and nagging alienation. Of course, one doesn’t need this note to appreciate *Following Piece* [...] On the other hand, Acconci’s note – like so much else in the archive – contributes a great deal to the work.¹²

I argue that the documents and notes for Acconci’s *Untitled Project for Pier 17* operate as poetry. Perreault’s notion of distinct art forms should be seen for what it is—outdated and prescriptive. Acconci’s documentation investigates language in a manner strikingly similar to the previously discussed poem “What will be.”

Acconci’s *Untitled Project for Pier 17* has gone by many names. Perreault referred to it as Acconci’s “danger piece.”¹³ It has also been called his “secrets piece” and his “blackmail piece.” That the project was untitled and given substitutive names recalls “What will be” and foregrounds questions of naming. The same enigmatic impulse to learn more that animated Acconci’s poem also informs this conceptual performance. *Untitled Project for Pier 17* asks the viewer to participate in the performance itself, which will result in a discovery. The catalyst in both cases was an announcement, a seeming precursor to the main event. The announcement operated for the conceptual performance as a non-site, an artifact whose presentation conjures a space of alterity, both temporally and spatially.¹⁴

Because *Untitled Project for Pier 17* required linguistic activation in the gallery space, it is important to examine its language. (Fig. 4) Acconci’s announcement explicated the terms of an agreement. Critical to the reading of this text is its very specific language. Acconci’s text appeared to promise that he would provide a unique secret to the participant who visited him in at the abandoned pier. But his language is not straightforward. Acconci merely promised, “I will attempt to reveal something.” An *attempt* is quite different from an actualization. Acconci further underscored the uncertainty of his offer in the last paragraph of the announcement, echoing the errata

of the poem "What will be." Here, Acconci foretold the failure that might ensue. The secret he revealed might not be a secret, might be trivial, or might have been previously transmitted. These possible entanglements undermine and suspend the reception of a definitive meaning. Acconci would not promise the very thing with which he tempted the viewer, and since both this caveat and the event reside solely in the realm of language, there was only the uncertainty of words guaranteed. If the power of words is in a power play—there is the potential to blackmail—as Acconci suggests, he immediately diminishes such a possibility by suggesting the language necessary to do so must be pure.

UNTITLED PROJECT FOR PIER 17

Announcement on the wall, John Gibson Gallery:

From March 27 to April 24, 1971, 1 am each night, I will be at Pier 17, an abandoned pier at West Street And Park Place, New York; I will be alone, and will wait at the far end of the pier for one hour.

To anyone coming to meet me, I will attempt to reveal something I would normally keep concealed: censurable occurrences and habits, fears, jealousies –something that has not been exposed before and that would be disturbing for me to make public. I will document none of the meetings. Each visitor can make any documentation he wishes, for any purpose; the result should be that he bring home material whose revelation could work to my disadvantage –material for blackmail.

Each visitor has to see me alone (he'll have sole possession of the information given)—the visitor has to consider that the meeting might be a failure, (no secrets, trivial secrets, previously transmitted secrets) –the visitor might want to force me to make new and relevant confessions.

Figure 4:
Announcement at John Gibson Gallery¹⁵

and idiosyncratic. Given the manner in which Acconci uses language, the secrets in all likelihood would not have been verifiable. The viewer could not know that the so-called

First night: I'm waiting outside, afraid to go in (inside I'll be on unfamiliar ground—I could be taken unawares—from outside I can get a view of the whole—if anyone comes, I'll have to go in after him, overtake him before he stakes out a position).

—I'm alone at the pier: a flashlight at the entrance: it starts to wind its way toward me, gropingly, hesitantly. I fade into the background—I remain passive, motionless, while light and voices slip past me, rebound off me. (I tense up: I'm forced to be a focal point.)

—Someone shouts my name at the entrance, I don't answer him: he has to be willing to throw himself into it, he has to come and get me (I'm in the position of prey
—I have to be stalked).

—No one at the pier: I'm coughing. I have a cold (my coughing fills up the pier—my means of inhabiting the pier—settling in).

—A person with me, at the far end: we can lean against the wall gently so that we don't push through it—climb the stairs, I'm a step above him—crouch on some marble slabs—conceal ourselves in a small room—look out into the water. I'm talking about a deception—I'm telling about someone I've tried to turn people against—I'm talking about someone I wanted dead. (Not enough secrets that I find hard to reveal.)

Figure 5:
Notes on Untitled Project for Pier 17.¹⁶

secret was not trivial or that it had never been previously transmitted. Acconci's caveats reveal that to receive language is to risk misrepresentation.

This language was only the first instantiation of Acconci's *Untitled Project for Pier 17*; the second appeared a year later in the pages of *Avalanche*. (Fig. 5) What separates the second from the first is its inclusion of documentation, contradicting Acconci's earlier claim: "I will not document any of the meetings." Acconci's only promise is that language conceals. It remains a kind of cover. In his notes, Acconci recorded his meetings and anxieties in performing the piece, but they also served another purpose; since the performance had long since ceased to be, they became an index for it. While the first instantiation of the announcement offered a tangible set of directions to arriving at the site, the second was a non-material object: the memory of the performance. As the instantiations proliferate and are distanced from the performance, only language remains, which is all that existed to begin with. In this manner, the art journal becomes Acconci's gallery, and his notes a poetic narrative.

Having situated his language in a poetic valence, I want to suggest that these notes operate in a unique dialectic between text and punctuation. For example, in figure five after the dash, qualification attaches parasitically to each in the form of parenthetical statements. Parentheses are well suited to deploy the kind of indeterminate language Acconci prefers. The parenthesis operates through contradiction. What the parenthesis holds is not important enough to warrant inclusion in the body of a text, and yet its content is important enough to be included interstitially. As such, the parenthesis asks its reader to simultaneously look but not see. For Acconci, the parenthesis functions as emphatic addendum to whatever statements precede them. Particularly salient is the last one: "(Not enough secrets that I find hard to reveal)." In

this admission, Acconci admits his project's own failure. If the viewer trusted that the function of the conceptual performance had always been about revealing secrets and engendering blackmail, here the confession of failure opens the fissure of suspicion.

This reading, though, is problematized by a third iteration of Acconci's *Untitled Project for Pier 17*, which appeared in *Vito Acconci: Diary of A Body*. This iteration included all of the documentation found in *Avalanche*, with the addition of a second announcement, as well as a continuation of the final note, shown below (Fig. 6). The parenthetical statement continues where the one in *Avalanche* ended.

I'm talking about a deception; I'm talking about someone I've tried to turn people against; I'm talking about someone I wanted dead.
(I don't have enough secrets; there are only a few things worth telling -- the rest, it wouldn't bother me at all if they were revealed. This piece isn't about secrets: it's about searching for secrets, making secrets, using secrets as an excuse -- a device -- for forming a relationship. If I promise to tell you a secret, then you and I can meet; if I tell you a secret, then I belong to you...)

Figure 6: The same note from *Avalanche*, but with an extended parenthetical.¹⁷

Here, Acconci reveals the most telling secret, that this piece was not about secrets at all, but rather, the search for secrets; just as the poem "What will be" became meta-indexical, this example of Acconci's approach to conceptual art becomes meta-secretive. Layers of secrets open for the viewer to reconsider their nature: what is the secret of secrets? If a secret is its own lack of a secret, what does this reveal about language? Perhaps a secret compels action. Language pretends to be secretive, but only what is unspoken remains truly so. Acconci's creations argue for reciprocity, for the manner in which the reader/viewer becomes entwined with language. Not only must viewers give their trust to the artist, but Acconci must also give trust to them.

There are differences in how language functions in "What will be" and *Untitled Project for Pier 17*. Whereas the prior poem invited interaction at the cost of lost time or confusion, to interact with *Untitled Project for Pier 17* was far more sinister. Acconci asked viewers to risk embodied threat for language. When John Perreault reviewed the piece, he confirmed this point: the performance "is a dangerous location and a dangerous idea and even Acconci warns that people coming to meet him should probably come in groups for their own safety."¹⁸ However, Acconci contradicts his own suggestion here, which should

not be surprising. The contract Acconci proposed in his announcement is for a one-on-one encounter. Namely, he demanded a private experience, which is precisely the relation of the reader to a text. So if the viewer chose to visit Pier 17 in a group for safety, such an action would foreclose the possibility of Acconci revealing his secret. Reciprocal vulnerability became the precondition for the transmission of language.

Conclusion

In the untitled poem, "What will be," Vito Acconci created an index of indexes, but the meta-indexical nature was governed by time. He could only create an index of an index that already existed. With *Untitled Project for Pier 17*, the photographs and language that would normally have indexed an event from the past served as an index to an event that, at least on the first day of the exhibition, had not yet occurred. The idea of indexing something from the future highlights a temporal confusion; language classically records the past, but it can also contain potentiality. Prior to their publication in 2006, it would have been impossible to discuss rigorously these two creations without access to Acconci's personal archives. The belated appearance of these two publications makes it important to ask how an archive alters interpretations of ephemera. How many versions of *Untitled Project for Pier 17* are there or will there be?

For that matter, how many more Vito Acconcis will come forward? I began with identifying two. I end with the assertion that Acconci the poet and Acconci the conceptual artist are critically related and must be brought together. Acconci's interest in language did not cease when his poetic practice moved "off the page." The language he uses structures all that he creates and becomes the context within which they perpetually reside. In both his poetry and conceptual art, Acconci deferred the delivery and the acquisition of meaning. It should come as no surprise, then, to see that Acconci cites William Faulkner as one of his primary influences:

I'd say for instance Faulkner was the biggest influence of any kind I ever had, like his lack of desire to finish a sentence, his sense to keep on going beyond where you could possibly follow (did I say flow?), like sentences that go on for pages... with so many reconsiderations & hesitations & alternatives, his sentences seem to be consciously or unconsciously trying to subvert a fantastically conservative framework.... I think they win out... like in myself I sense a kind of impulse to overcomplicate things, to mess things up, or thicken the plot...¹⁹

ENDNOTES

¹ Acconci received his MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop in 1964.

² Vito Acconci, "Excerpts from Tapes with Liza Bear" *Avalanche* 6 (Fall 1972): 70.

³ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁴ Previously, Acconci's poetry could be found only in a handful of mimeographed journals and his publication *0 to 9*.

⁵ The line concerning the 12th word is missing, leaving the reader with 30 instructions.

⁶ Vito Acconci, *Language to Cover a Page: The Early Writings of Vito Acconci*, ed. Craig Dworkin (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006): 124.

⁷ For this task, I selected *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, 1966. My choice of this edition of the dictionary was a guess, since it was the most recent edition published prior to 1969, when the poem was written.

⁸ Acconci was fond of Wittgenstein's word games. See: Craig Dworkin, "Introduction: Delay in Verse," *Language to Cover a Page*: xiii.

⁹ Advertisement in *The New York Times*, Section 6 – the *New York Times Magazine* – (Sunday, January 26, 1969): 87.

¹⁰ In this regard, Acconci's poem resembles Raymond Queneau's *A Hundred Thousand Billion Poems* (1961), which consisted of ten sonnets of the same rhyme scheme, whose lines could be recombined into 10¹⁴ unique poems.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹² Gregory Volk, "1969-1973: Vito Acconci's Archives," in *Vito Acconci: Diary of a Body: 1969 – 1973* (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 2006): 9-10.

¹³ John Perreault, "Cockroach Art" *The Village Voice* 16:14 (April 8, 1971): 21.

¹⁴ I borrow this idea from Robert Smithson's theory of the non-site. See Lynne Cooke, "From Site to Non-Site," in Lynn Cooke and Douglas Crimp, *Mixed Use, Manhattan: Photography and Related Practices, 1970s to the Present* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010): 41.

¹⁵ See *Avalanche* 6 (Fall, 1972): 42.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Vito Acconci, *Vito Acconci: Diary of a Body: 1969 – 1973*: 259

¹⁸ Perreault: 23.

¹⁹ See David Rosenberg, "Notes from a Conversation Tape with Vito Acconci, July 22, 1971," in *A Space News* [Toronto] (July, 1971), reprinted in Lucy Lippard, *Six Years*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973): 244-245.