

Introduction:
Delay in Verse

*un retard en verre, comme
on dirait un poème en prose*

[*a delay in glass, as one
would say a poem in prose*]

—Marcel Duchamp

The entry from a dictionary of *idées reçues* would read: Before shifting his attention to performance and video, Vito Acconci began his career as a poet, working with the movement of language over the self-enclosed performance space of the printed page. Which is true enough, to a certain extent, but Acconci's poetry has been far more often mentioned than ever actually read. Only about a score of poems were published, mainly in mimeographed small-press chapbooks and journals with severely limited print runs. His best known work comes from a single page of excerpts in the Autumn 1972 issue of *Avalanche*.

With the exception of some juvenilia and early apprentice pieces, the present volume collects those published pieces together with hundreds of pages of unpublished writings, most of which are drawn from the typescript of *Kay Price and Stella Pajunas: Work for a Poetry Context 1967–1969*.¹ Scheduled for publication in 1981 by Richard Milazzo's Out of London Press, the project was never realized. By documenting the extent of Acconci's writing from this period, this volume illustrates the continuity of his activities from the late 1960s through the 1970s, as the venue for his work shifted from the small press journals and readings of the poetry scene to the art world's galleries and museums. The transition was far from abrupt; Acconci's writing for poetry contexts became increasingly performative, at the same time that his projects for art contexts continued to retain a decidedly literary style, structured and motivated by linguistic play. Consequently, works such as "Open House," published in the literary journal *Juillard*, and his index-card contribution to Lucy Lippard's art exhibition *955,000*—both from 1970—share obvious affinities and are difficult to place firmly in one realm or the other.² Because of that continuity, any volume of his poetry will only ever be a volume of "selected" poems, and I want to emphasize that this collection ends not where Acconci stopped writing or even ceased to make poetry, but where his poetic works could no longer be effectively translated from page to page.³ To begin to sketch the horizon of that limit, consider the nature of his readings in the late 1960s, a moment when the last of his poems, as such, bleed off the page into the first of his performances, as such. At the Orient Expresso Coffee

House, on 5 November 1968, as Acconci recalls it:

I distributed among the tables, at random, 8 1/2 by 11 sheets of paper, each containing a letter of the alphabet—then I picked up each letter in alphabetical order, saying, at each table, an adverbial or prepositional phrase, beginning with that particular letter ('along the way', 'back in a little', 'crossing over').

A few months later, in March of 1969, at Wesleyan University:

A taped recording of the dictionary—the tape was recorded at slow speed and played at fast speed—at intervals, while the tape was playing, I described where the particular word on tape could be found in the dictionary (2 feet: "Now, on tape, I am reading what is, in Webster's Third New International Dictionary, on page 1, column 1, line 3: 12 feet: "Now . . . page 1, Column 1, line 16: 22 feet: "Now... page 1, column 1, line 30.")⁴

Terry Fox recalls what may have been Acconci's last poetry reading:

Vito [...] walked from his apartment to the place where the reading was held and every block that he walked he phoned in to the place and they put it on speakers and he announced: "now I am on 42nd street" and described the situation. And of course he never made it in time to give an actual reading.⁵

Acconci had, however, made it just in time to witness and help direct the unprecedented collision between language and the arts in the late 1960s and early 1970s. From the art world's perspective, that intersection is exemplified by the series of annual "Language" shows at the Dwan Gallery (1967 to 1970), and from the literature perspective by the contemporaneous publication of Acconci and Bernadette Mayer's *0 to 9*, the most radically eclectic journal of the mimeograph revolution.⁶ Before that interdisciplinary moment, however, Acconci appeared to have been heading toward a successful and rather more conventional literary career. He graduated in 1964 from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where he had gone to study fiction writing. On the faculty at the time were the novelists R.V. Cassill, Vance Bourjaily, and John Clellon Holmes, as well as the poets Donald Justice, and Mark Strand (with whom Acconci took a course in poetry and translation). Marvin Bell could have been his classmate. So it is surprising, perhaps, that just a few years later Acconci would be noted not for a short story in *Esquire*, or a well honed, adjective heavy lyric in the *American Poetry Review*, or a first book of post-confessional soft-surrealism from Kayak Press, but rather as one of "the more adventurous of the young poets who experiment with fresh, contemporary techniques."⁷ Indeed, even thirty-five years after their composition, Acconci's early writings still seem strikingly fresh and edgily inventive. As I will argue, the extent of his innovations have only just begun to be legible as subsequent writing is finally coming within sight of the edges of the territory he pioneered.

From the perspective of the twenty-first century—long after the asemantics of early Language writing and the developments of conceptual, minimal, and performance art in the 1970s—we can read a number of nascent tendencies back into Acconci's

poems. But how would his writing have looked in the literary landscape of the 1960s? Reading the *Evergreen Review* and on the lookout for new titles from Grove Press, those Francophile intellectuals attuned to the *écriture* being theorized by Tel Quel, the rule-breaking cinematography of *la nouvelle vague*, and the recursive descriptions of *le nouveau roman* might have been in the best position to understand a writing that no longer needed to tell any story other than its own material instantiation. Samuel Beckett's writing from the period was increasingly non-narrative, and the paratactic and procedural serialism of many of Acconci's texts echo Beckett's experiments with minimal statements elaborated in a maximal exfoliation. Acconci's declarative sentences—their factual descriptions presented in a series of flat, deadpan statements—also recall the novels of the *nouveaux romanciers*, particularly when those statements combine a cold numerical enumeration with the ominous suggestion of unspoken violence. Off the page, versions of those same impulses were being screened at the time, and one might also read Acconci's work in light of the fraught permutations of Alain Resnais' *L'année dernière à Marienbad*, or the jump-cuts of Jean-Luc Godard's films, with their explicit scenes of pun and self-reference.

From a slightly different direction, Jasper Johns's "Sketchbook Notes" would have provided another model for the investigative potential of procedural forms:

One thing working one way
 Another thing working another way,
 One thing working different ways
at different times

Take an object.
 Do something to it.
 Do something else to it.
 " " " " "8

Like Johns, Acconci was influenced by Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, and his poems frequently use their formal procedures to probe idiomatic and colloquial language, turning over phrases to test them from every possible perspective. "Using a Trot," for instance, opens: "He said: 'Straight from the horse's mouth.' / He said that was straight from the horse's mouth. / He said it straight from the horse's mouth," and continues through a series of definitions to conclude "He was no longer on his high horse."⁹ Other texts of the period, from the most austere concrete poetry to elaborate letristic systems like Robert Viscusi's "Dodecahedron," would also make use of permuted structures; the distinction of Acconci's writing is that it puts such techniques in the service of exploring colloquial speech.¹⁰ Acconci's work thus triangulates the preoccupations with "voice" and "speech" shared by so many of his contemporaries, whether in academic workshops or Lower East Side coffee houses. Unlike those writers, however, Acconci's distanced and impersonal manipulation of idioms does not treat them as tokens of personal and expressive discourse. Willfully misusing the most casual and natural idioms by literalizing the figural and phatic language of conversation, Acconci pursued a Wittgensteinian investigation into the games of ordinary language.¹¹ Or, as Johns's "Notes" puts it:

Make something
 Find a use for it.

AND/OR

Invent a function.

Find an object.

Acconci's discovery of a use for the strangeness of ordinary language is part of an explicitly defamiliarizing poetics. In a letter to Clayton Eshleman (March 26, 1969) he writes:

[...] words have charge, they develop an orientation in the reader.

Therefore, it is the work of the art situation to jolt the reader out of that orientation. That work cannot be accomplished by playing up to that orientation, by repeating that "charge."

From still another perspective, the charged linguistic attention of Acconci's writing would also have resonated with the work of Jack Spicer and Robert Duncan, two closely related poets of the "San Francisco Renaissance" who were both still publishing in the mid-1960s. One cannot imagine that Acconci had any patience with their mysticism, but he might well have been sympathetic to their poetry's sudden shifts in register and focus, idiomatic play, and moments of self-referential commentary, as well as their thematization of grammar and linguistics. The early numbers of Duncan's "The Structure of Rime" and "Keeping the Rhyme" provide especially clear examples of these facets, as do the later poems in Spicer's *Language*, such as "Transformations I." With a direct but abstract address, a shifting and repeating focus, and a play of parenthetical substitutions akin to Acconci's own restless writing, Spicer's poem opens:

They say "he need (present) enemy (plural)"

I am not them. This is the first transformation.

They say "we need (present) no enemy (singular)" No enemy in the universe is theirs worth having. We is an intimate pronoun which shifts its context almost as the I blinks at it [...]¹²

My intention here is not merely to search out particular stylistic similarities or to suggest anything like direct influences—especially because influence, for the avant-garde, less often takes the form of imitation than of license: the permission, or provocation, precisely to "do something else." Rather, I want to situate Acconci's poetry in the network of associations that describes a constellation of "radical writing": a genre that could be defined not by the filiations or affinities among works but by the extremity of their deviations. The literary history of radical writing, accordingly, would map not so much trends, period styles, movements or schools, but rather discontinuous set of singularities, errors and exceptions. For those on the lookout in the late 1960s, the swerves away from the typical verse of the New American Poetries and the early generations of the New York School were dizzying. Orbiting somewhere just beyond the gravitational pull of those communities was the influence of Fluxus, with John Cage and Jackson Mac Low's aleatory procedures, the event scores of George Brecht and La Monte Young, and the kind of writing showcased in the collaborative *Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (by Daniel Spoerri, Robert Filliou, and Emmett Williams). Along a different axis, balanced somewhere between Robert Creeley and Robert Grenier, Aram Saroyan's telegraphic reductions to single-word poems were gesturing toward the conceptual and sculptural: "an untitled wrapped ream of typing paper stamped Aram Saroyan 1968." At the same time, collage and confession were being reconfigured by

writers as different as William Burroughs, Bernadette Mayer, and Andy Warhol, whose transcribed text *a: a novel* was published in 1968. From Die Wiener Gruppe to the Brazilian *Noigandres* poets, concrete poetry had developed into an international phenomenon, and with the launch of Henri Chopin's journal *Revue Ou* in 1963 "sound poetry" was coming into its own. As if out of nowhere, Clark Coolidge had been sculpting word structures that would be even harder to assimilate into the context of their publication. And then there were also the atypical works, those aberrations from careers that would come to be defined otherwise: Jack Kerouac's *Old Angel Midnight*, John Ashbery's *The Tennis Court Oath*, Ted Berrigan's *Sonnets*, Joseph Ceravolo's *Fits of Dawn*; Ted Greenwald's *Lapstrake*; Kenneth Koch's *When the Sun Tries to Go On*, occasional poems by Bill Berkson or Tom Clark, and oddities, experiments, or goofs by others long since forgotten: Edward van Aelstyn, Harry Fainlight, G. W. Watson . . . minor works with major impacts on those desperate to find evidence of what John Ashbery would call "the Other Tradition."¹³

One should also remember the proximity of the modernist precedents for that alternative tradition. Robert Motherwell's influential anthology of the dada painters and poets had been published in 1951, and the editions and translations that followed are one barometer of the pressure put on the literature of the time: Raymond Roussel's *Locus Solus* and *Impressions of Africa*, as well as selections from his "New Impressions of Africa"; Giorgio de Chirico's *Hebdomeros*; Max Jacob's *Le Cornet à Dés*; William Carlos Williams's *Kora in Hell*; and Mina Loy's *Lumar Baedeker and Time-Tables*, to name only a few. Moreover, George Oppen and Louis Zukofsky, poets of the Objectivist '30s, were still alive and publishing major works, and their associate Lorine Neidecker was at the height of her career. The *Cantos* of Ezra Pound (who was released from St. Elizabeth's in 1958) had been hurriedly updated and republished in 1968 to hedge against the copyright complications of Ed Sanders's samizdat edition of *Cantos 110 to 116*.

In a handful of his earliest poems, one can see Acconci making his way through this heritage of American modernism poet by poet. One of his first published poems, "Blowstock," imitates both the themes and techniques of Zukofsky's short lyrics, while "The Liquid Boxes of Agamemnon," ostensibly a translation of the first choral ode of *Agamemnon*, is as much a pastiche of Pound's *Cantos* as a translation of Aeschylus.¹⁴ Acconci would take on Pound's imagist mode in his "performance of Ezra Pound's 'Alba,'" which discursively expands and explodes the signature condensation of the original. Similarly, "Paying the Dilapidations of a Lease," one of the poems in Acconci's first chapbook, *Double Bubble*, gives Wallace Stevens a hilarious send-up by rewriting "The Idea of Order at Key West" with a heightened nonsensical pomp:

Condescensions of the stolen boot devote her,
And the early ointments in a carpenter's
Dependence; the late knowledge of a yellow condor
Of the yellow condors in the note is horned
Exposure to separate nocturnals by.

Not surprisingly, Acconci's poetic apprenticeship grants Gertrude Stein a more serious and extended engagement. Throughout the 1950s, Yale University Press had brought out eight volumes of Stein's previously unpublished writings, and these interpellated publications—reinserted into the literary record decades after their composition—

made Stein, in some sense, a major mid-century poet. Continuing that posthumous success, her legendary *Making of Americans* was republished in 1966, and Stein's work would have been another context in which Acconci's interest in grammar, proper names, and syntactic repetition would have been read.

Moreover, Stein's reception history also gives us a way to understand the situation of Acconci's oeuvre, in which a large number of unprecedented and originally unpublished texts appear decades after the few small-press publications that anticipated them, all the while secretly writing the history of the future that will one day recognize them. This tactic of delay—*un retard en vers* [a delay in verse] as Duchamp might have put it—is one means by which the avant-garde survives its inhospitable cultural environment. Seeded in ephemera, work too radical to be assimilated, diluted, absorbed, or even recognized in its own moment of composition disappears to lie dormant, but not before provoking a few subsequent experiments that will eventually develop the context in which those original strains can finally be read. Which is to say that the blank pages of Acconci's excised reference books, or the endless deferrals of "Contacts/Contexts (Frame Of Reference)," or the cicadas of "Installment" are all to the point, and allegories of their own survival: place-holders in the written record, procedures of "delay," and creatures that outwit the odds against them by greatly extending the life-cycle lag between their periodic returns.¹⁵ Or, for just one concrete example of this locust logic: in the early 1970s, a few of Acconci's published poems were a spur to Bruce Andrews, a young poet actively seeking out evidence of a radical poetic avant-garde.¹⁶ Like the poetry that in part inspired it, Andrews' quite different but equally difficult writing has yet to be fully recognized, although it in turn gave license—two decades after *its* own composition—to yet again quite different and exacting writing by Kenneth Goldsmith. Which returns us, with the perfect prescience of literary amnesia, to Acconci's poetry. Reframing text from the *New York Times* and the New York City weather report respectively, Goldsmith's books *Day* and *The Weather* were written with complete inscience of Acconci's own newspaper and weather forecast poems from thirty-five years earlier, despite the striking and uncanny family resemblance of those subsequent precedents.¹⁷ "Literature," as Ezra Pound famously defined it, "is news that STAYS news," and Acconci's citations from the *Times* and the weather line—already superceded and obsolete as soon as he had written them down—are finally once again relevant and up-to-date.¹⁸

The avant-garde cycles with a belated prolepsis. This volume is one revolution in that cycle.

Notes

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Anne Wagner first convinced me to work on Vito Acconci's writing; this project is for her.

1. In addition to the works listed in the bibliography, the texts excluded from this present volume include five typescript poems in the Fales collections at NYU and two short idiomatic exercise, "Straight From The Horse's Mouth" (which reads, in its entirety: "The horse that you read about in the story that you read yesterday/ that covered the whole field of the thing in mind any day") and another beginning with the line "Now he reads: 'Then he jumps out of his skin.'"

2. Like "Open House," which is itself foreshadowed by the line "Vb. *be hospitable*, keep open house 813vb." in his poem "CONTACTS/CONTEXTS (FRAME OF REFERENCE)," Acconci's untitled contribution to Lippard's exhibition, consists of an architectural event motivated by the dictionary; the second part of his card reads:

1. Performing; forming; transforming. 2. Day by day; from day to day; the other day. 3. End of an action; an action without an end. 4. "Place" (specific locality; an indeterminate region or expanse). 5. "Post" (to mail; to station in a given place). 6. "Point" (a particular place; a particular narrowly limited step, stage, or degree in the condition or development of something; a run – as a cross-country run – made straight from one place to another; to cause to be turned in a particular direction or toward a particular thing). 7. "Points of view" (view of the sender; view of the sender).

Even before he moved his activity into an "art context," Acconci's writing was pushing against the physical parameters of its publication. "Act 3, Scene 4," for instance, was distributed through the Fifth number of *0 to 9* (January 1969), with one line from the poem in each copy, making each copy of the journal unique. Similarly, "ON (a magazine version of a section of long prose)," printed in the third number of *0 to 9* (January 1968), derives its scatter of marginal words from whatever happen to be the first or last words on the corresponding lines of adjacent pages. With this coincident grafting, Acconci's poem sutures itself to the surrounding works of its magazine context, crossing fore-edge and gutter to inextricably intertwine its text with the codex form of the journal itself.

3. I expand this argument in "Fugitive Signs" (*October* 95 [Winter 2001]: 90–113), itself written with knowledge of only a few of Acconci's published poems.

In addition to the schema of poetry and performance, one might also consider the possibility of other generic reconfigurations. Acconci's signature early performance "Rubbing Piece," for instance, was included in Richard Kostelanetz's 1973 anthology of *Breakthrough Fictioneers* (West Glover: Something Else Press, 1973).

4. Vito Acconci, "Early Work: Movement Over a Page," *Avalanche*, no. 6 (Fall 1972): 5. See also "A Situation Using Typewriter, Voice, Descriptions," performed in the same two venues (*Vito Acconci: Dal Testo-azione al corpo come testo*, ed. Mario Diacono [New York/Milano: Out of London Press, 1975]: 112).

5. Interview, *Kunst heute*, Österreichischen Rundfunk, 1977.

6. Cf. Steven Clay and Rodney Phillips, who consider *0 to 9* to be "one of the most experimental of all the early mimeo magazines" (*A Secret Location on the Lower East Side: Adventures in Writing, 1960–1980* [New York: The New York Public Library and Granary Books, 1998]: 207). The tenor of Acconci's editorial practice can be glimpsed in a rejection letter to Hugh Fox: "Not the kind of thing *0 to 9* is out for; for me, there's too much emphasis on message here, not enough on the space of the page" (4 September 1968).

7. Paul Carroll, *The Young American Poets* (Chicago: Big Table, 1968): 30.

8. Jasper Johns, "Sketchbook Notes," *Art & Literature* 4 (Lausanne: Spring 1965): 192. Acconci and

Mayer would publish other excerpts from Johns "Notes" in the last number of *0 to 9*. See also "0 to 9 and back again: Thurston Moore interviews Vito Acconci," *vito hannibal acconci studio* (MACBA, 2005): 74.

9. From the unpublished manuscript, *Kay Price and Stella Pajunas: Work for a Poetry Context 1967–1969*, collection of the author.

10. Robert Viscusi, "Dodecahedron," *0 to 9* (April 1967): 56–67.

11. With respect to influence, Acconci himself has cited William Faulkner as his first literary hero, and particularly *Wild Palms* (personal interview, winter 2002; see also David Rosenberg, *The Necessity of Poetry* [Toronto: Coach House, 1973]; and "0 to 9 and back again," interview with Thurston Moore, *vito hannibal acconci studio* [MACBA, 2005]: 74). Even here, however, he is suspiciously close to Godard and *la nouvelle vague*. Agnès Varda's *La Pointe Courte* (1956), edited by Alain Resnais, was based on Faulkner's novel, which Godard himself particularly admired, letting Patricia ventriloquize for him in *À bout de souffle*: "Tu connais William Faulkner? [...] C'est un romancier que j'aime bien [...] Tu as lu *Les palmes sauvages*? [...] La dernière phrase, c'est très beau."

12. *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer*, ed. Robin Blaser (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1989): 232.

13. *Selected Poems* (New York: Penguin, 1985): 208.

14. "Blowstalk," *Lines* 6 (November 1965): 16; "The Liquid Boxes of Agamemnon," *Art & Literature* 11 (Winter 1967): 106–110.

15. Acconci's leafcutters are richly suggestive: descendents perhaps of Zukofsky's "Mantis," and competitive predators of Clayton Eshleman's *Caterpillar*: the "journal of the leaf." Although Acconci and Mayer would publish translations of anonymous folk songs in *0 to 9* Number 2 (August 1967), he was by no means sympathetic to the mythopoetics of "deep image" verse and its attendant ideologies. In the letter to Eshleman (whom Acconci accuses of being "interested in setting himself up as a priest"), Acconci explains his antipathy to "the reader's response to and nostalgia for primitivism": "I don't like to be forced to kneel before what sets itself up as 'myth,' 'legend,' etc. (Further: when someone announces something as myth, he doesn't ask for thinking, he asks for nodding.)"

16. In conversation, summer 2002; interview with Daniel Kane (10 May 1999); see *All Poets Welcome: The Lower East Side Poetry Scene in the 1960s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003): 197. See also Andrews's January 1971 letter to Clayton Eshleman (Caterpillar Archive, The Fales Collection, NYU).

Andrews published Acconci in the Fall 1973 number of *Toothpick, Lisbon, & the Orcas Islands* which he edited on the model of *0 to 9*, and he would include a quote from Acconci in his early collage essay "Index" (*Open Letter* Fall 1975; reprinted as the first chapter in *Paradise and Method: Poetics and Praxis* (Evanston: Northwestern U. P., 1996).

17. *Day* (Great Barrington: The Figures, 2003); *The Weather* (Los Angeles: Make Now Press, 2005). See, for comparison, works such as Acconci's "Act 3, Scene 4," "This is a note to a telephone weather report," "Decisions," "Page/Pages," and "Announcing an advertisement that will appear in the New York Times Magazine."

The latter, incidentally, translates an advertisement that did in fact appear at the bottom of page 87 of that day's *New York Times*, featuring a "FREE CATALOGUE" for "Irish hand-woven tweed . . . ladies' suits & coats / Custom tailored from \$42" and inviting the reader to "Send for [a] free Mail Order Catalogue & Swatches" from "Jacob's Ltd. Tailors for 60 Years" at "20 Dawson St. Dublin, Ireland." Wherever possible, I have verified Acconci's sources and procedures, which seem to have been strictly followed in every case.

18. Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (New York: New Directions, 1934): 29.