Wadsworth Atheneum
May 11 through June 23, 1985

Lions Gallery of the Senses
presents:
Vito Acconci/MATRIX 87

Vito Acconci in Maze Table, 1985
(Photo: Barbara Urban)

MATRIX is supported in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency.
The work of Vito Acconci has left an indelible mark on the art of our own time. New genres such as performance art and "site specific" installations have flourished in part under the influence and inspiration of Acconci's early pieces. Frequently, Acconci's art has trespassed the boundaries of the socially acceptable. In the early seventies he used his own body as the medium, pushing the limits of personal disclosure—both physical and psychological—to new extremes. These efforts, often shocking, were too thought provoking for the public and the critics to dismiss as sensationalism for its own sake. They raised important questions about the relationship between artist and viewer and about our feelings of territoriality in private and public spaces.

In 1973, Acconci stopped doing pieces in which he himself played a featured role. His fame and notoriety had inevitably infused such presentations with additional, unwelcome meanings. Instead, he began to use recordings of his deep, gravelly voice in his work, thereby still participating in the pieces but not by live appearance.

In recent years he has focused attention on making sculptures which are complete only when a viewer physically enters into the piece and takes an active role. In keeping with the tensions that seem to pervade Acconci's art, these pieces empower the visitor but are, at the same time, impositional. They appear to be "user friendly" but incorporate disorienting aspects and provocative meanings which are not readily apparent at first glance.

When located outdoors, these pieces have frequently been shaped like "houses." When indoors, recent pieces have been based on ideas of furniture (desk, couch, chair, or, in Maze Table, tables and benches). Acconci begins with a familiar convention which he then distorts with humor and, often, an iconoclastic twist or two.

Houses and furniture as subject matter may seem to be innocuous or even benign. Yet, because they often shape (and restrict) personal movement, position and relationships, they are, to an extent, inherently about power. Common to us are phrases such as "up against the wall," "backed into a corner," "out the window," and "Who has the floor?" Governmental policies are formulated in the White House, the House of Representatives or on the floor of the Senate. Social hierarchy is at the core of the cultural significance we attribute to who is seated at the head of the table. A chair becomes a throne when elevated on a platform. If seated a person is somewhat compromised and certainly less agile than when free-standing. These are things we might think of as we move through Maze Table.

Maze Table was commissioned by the Athenaeum's Lions Gallery of the Senses, funded primarily by a special grant from the National Endowment for the Arts' Visual Artists Forum and District 23B Lions International. Over the past year or so, Acconci has made several trips to Hartford in the course of planning this sculpture. He met with two blind members of the Lion's Advisory Committee, sharing information about his past work and discussing the quality and nature of their own previous gallery experiences. Based, in part, on these preliminary conversations, Acconci created Maze Table.
Interested in making an experience for the visually impaired visitor that would be comparable to the impact it would have for the sighted, he "decided to do something that would emphasize the people using it, rather than the features of the thing used." Originally, Aconci intended to build Maze Table out of wood covered with formica and vinyl. But, determined that he "wanted not a definite thing but rather an occasion for interaction, for people moving through the piece," he sought "to emphasize the use of the piece and de-emphasize, to as great a degree as possible, the physical presence of the piece" (letter to the curator, March 28, 1985).

It was his long-time fabricator, John Taguri of Weston, Massachusetts who suggested, "Well, if you don't want to see something, then you should make it out of glass." The irony of course is that, though unintentional, Maze Table is probably as visually dazzling a work as Aconci has ever made. Though the piece has been metaphorically dematerialized, it is likely that a tactile first reading of Maze Table will be of a "thing," hard and smooth and cool.

Aconci also wanted to conceive a piece "that would be orderly and precise and then thicken the plot." He wanted Maze Table to be a cold laboratory-like environment, representative in his mind of the eighties: "computer-like order, electronic-like order so that the viewer might even ask himself, how am I victimized by these things." (Maze Table also takes a potshot at Minimalism: Aconci asks, "Was it purity or was it prison?")

The grouping of tables and benches that make up Maze Table are initially inviting,
chic and café-like, suggesting hospitality and refreshment. However, most visitors will probably experience at least a moment of reluctance before accepting Acconci's invitation to walk on the glass floor and sit on the glass benches. The material is beautiful, but it is also one associated with potential danger and physical injury.

Maze Table is, in fact, structurally quite sound. It is built of 3/8" plate glass and joined with silicone, the same material used in aquariums and jet airplanes. While the load bearing capacity of a livingroom floor is about 120 pounds per square foot, the strength of Maze Table is estimated to be 240 pounds per square foot. However, because any piece which has play value is open to the possiblity of misuse, visitors will be invited to enter the piece only when an attendant is present in the room.

Upon entering, participants will soon realize that Acconci has indeed "thickened the plot." It is a situation of some confinement. So narrow are the measurements that one can move through Maze Table best only by sliding along on the benches. The maze compounds the sense of uneasiness, and the glass, sometimes transparent and sometimes reflecting, further distorts one's bearings. All this dislocation occurs in a "see-through" sculpture that reaches only to a little above one's knees.

Vito Acconci was born in Bronx, New York in 1940. He received a B.A. from Holy Cross College in Worcester, Massachusetts in 1962 and an M.F.A. from the the Writers Workshop, University of Iowa in 1964 (Acconci was first a poet). He has received numerous grants including several from the National Endowment for the Arts and was named a recipient of a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation for "Conceptual Art" in 1979. Acconci is currently completing a semester as Visiting Artist at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. He lives in Brooklyn, New York and is represented by Carpenter + Hochman and Michael Klein, Inc., both of New York City.

Andrea Miller-Keller
Curator of MATRIX

(All quotes are in conversation with AMK, April 29, 1985 unless otherwise indicated.)

Works in MATRIX:
Maze Table, 1985, 3/8" plate glass and silicone, 30" x 144" x 144". Courtesy of Carpenter + Hochman Gallery, New York City. Funded by the Visual Arts Forum, National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency, and District 23B Lions International.

Special thanks to Lynn Curley, Director of the Connecticut Network: Arts for the Handicapped, and Assistant to the Curator of the Lions Gallery of the Senses.
PLEASE NOTE:
Vito Acconci will give a MA-
TRIX Evening Lecture on Tues-
day, May 14, 1985 at 7:30 p.m.
in the Connecticut Room.

Mr. Acconci will be available
to meet with the general pub-
lic in MATRIX Gallery Sunday
afternoon, May 12, 1985 from
2-5 p.m. In addition, there
are previously scheduled meet-
ings with small groups of
students and adults, during
the day on Monday, May 13 and
Tuesday, May 14.

Selected one-man exhibitions/
screenings:
Rhode Island School of De-
sign, Providence '69; John
Gibson Gallery, NYC '71; Sonn-
abend Gallery, NYC '72, '73,
'75, '76, '79; Hallwalls,
Buffalo '75; And/Or, Seattle
'75; The Kitchen, NYC '76,
'78, '80, '81; Centre d'Art
Contemporain, Geneva, Swit-
zerland '77; Anthology Film
Archives, NYC '77; Stedelijk
Museum, Amsterdam '78; Whit-
ney Museum of American Art,
NYC '78; Museum of Contemp-
orary Art, Chicago '80; Univer-
sity Gallery of Massachu-
setts, Amherst '82; Gallery
Nature Morte, NYC '84; Car-
penter + Hochman Gallery, NYC
'85.
Selected group exhibitions:
Seattle Art Museum 557,087 '69, travelled to Vancouver Art Gallery; Architectural League of New York, NYC Street Works '69; Museum of Modern Art, NYC Information '70;
Kassel, West Germany Documenta 5 & 7 '72, '82; Museum of Modern Art, NYC Eight
Contemporary Artists '74;
Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, PA '75, also to the Wadsworth Atheneum; Venice Biennale '76, '78, '80; Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia Improbable Furniture '77; Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC Biennial; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris Journees Interdisciplinaires sur l'art corporel et les performances '78; Spoleto, Italy Festival of Two Worlds '80; Kunstenverein, Hamburg The Artist: Hermit? Investigator? Social Worker? '79; Museen der Stadt Koln, Cologne Westkunst '81; Franklin Furnace, NYC Illegal America '82; Hayden Gallery, Massachusetts Institute of Technology Visions of Paradise: Installations by Vito Acconci, David Ireland, James Surls '84.

Selected bibliography about Acconci:

Vito Acconci, Stedelijk Museum (Amsterdam) '79.


Schwartz, Ellen. "Vito Acconci: 'I want to Put the Viewer on Shakey Ground," Artnews, vol. 80 no. 6 (Summer '81), p. 93+.


Garrels, Gary. Visions of Paradise: Vito Acconci, David Ireland, James Surls, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Cambridge), '84.

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