

Sunday, June 30, 1996

# Challenging the accepted notion of art

By Neil Kendricks

Artist Vito Acconci's powerful body of work aims to do more than push the envelope of post-modern art. Whether it's his highly charged performance pieces or his current architectural environments, Acconci's provocative art reads collectively as a witty letter bomb addressed to the art world.

"I want stuff to be part of the everyday world," said Acconci, during a recent visit to San Diego to scout locations for a piece he will contribute to inSITE97, which opens Sept. 26, 1997. "I don't want stuff to be part of the art world anymore. Basically, I've gotten pretty sick and repelled by the values of museums."

"When a person goes into a museum, (he) is saying in effect 'I am an art viewer,' and by extension, 'I am separating myself from those other people.' In a lot of ways, you can do anything you want in an art space, but it's always isolated. It's always excluding, it's always supported by private money . . . It's always a kind of rich person's play thing."

In preparation for the piece Acconci will contribute to inSITE97, the New York-based artist spent three days surveying possible sites

in Tijuana. In addition to Acconci, more than 40 established and emerging artists have or will be trickling into town in order to gear up for the 10-week-long, site-specific arts festival.

The roster of artists range from Mexico's Helen Escobedo and Marcos Ramirez to New York's Lorna Simpson and such local talents as David Avalos and Deborah Small, among others. While inSITE97 is still 15 months away, Acconci plans to submit his proposal for the project sometime in the next month.

"For me, the interest in the show is probably neither San Diego nor Tijuana, but somewhere in the middle," Acconci said. "The interesting place to do (a piece) is on the border, which is probably a difficult place to do it."

Wandering through Tijuana for three days hardly seems like sufficient time to soak in the textures of the locale. It was enough time, however, for Acconci to find an intriguing, regional image: the border itself as a metaphorical wall dividing not just two nations, but two cultures and ways of life.

"The thing for me — I don't know if it's going to (be part of the

piece) — is that strange area where the fence between the two countries goes into the ocean," Acconci said. "It literally goes into the ocean. When the tide is low, you can walk out there and walk around the fence. So it seems like the fence is this sort of mean gesture. It's a symbol of power."

## Breaking boundaries

"Seedbed." With this piece, Acconci transformed a gallery's blank walls and unpainted floor into a kind of cerebral theater. Viewers walking into the space found it empty, except for the sound of Acconci's voice sharing sexual fantasies as he claimed to be masturbating beneath a specially constructed ramp in the floor.

"There wasn't anything to look at," Acconci recalled. "Basically, it was an unpainted, wooden floor and white walls like a minimal art space, except in this case, there was a voice coming up from the floor like a worm. There's a worm under the floor, and the voice is having sexual fantasies about people who come in."

If "Seedbed" was any indication, no one familiar with Acconci's eclectic oeuvre, would ever mistake his art as being designed to placate bourgeois taste. The work functioned both as a form of self-portraiture and intense self-analysis.

"The stuff was about me, by me, it was all through me," Acconci said. "So it was about personal space . . . It was almost like the language of the '60s: trying to find yourself. I was trying to find myself."

"They (the early works) may have begun as a way to find myself, but I started to realize that maybe there's no self to find. Maybe you can make yourself and you can change yourself."

"There might be certain physical boundaries, but you can stretch them, you can push them a little bit. They can melt. They're not so much your essence. I mean just because you have a penis doesn't necessarily mean you have to have a male gender. You can try on others. There's more a possibility for change than people think."



Acconci's work has always challenged the notions of art as socially acceptable and pleasing objects that could be exchanged in the marketplace.

But the 1987 exhibition, "Domestic Trappings: The Art of Vito Acconci," which was shown at the then-La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, began to reflect yet another shift in Acconci's art.

His recent work with architectural designs in particular suggests that it's high time contemporary art evolved into something more integrated into the milieu of contemporary life. In some respects, Acconci's earnest interest in architecture has eclipsed his obsessions with art making as a shocking form of self-discovery.

Architecture gives Acconci and his frequent collaborators Luis Verra, Celia Imrey, and Dave Leven the latitude to tap into a larger pool of reference where the general public can relate to the work.

"I guess what's interested me more and more about architecture is that architecture is something that everybody knows," Acconci remarked. "Even if they don't realize they know it. Because everybody goes through a doorway, everybody goes up a set of staircases.

"It seems that architecture is part of the everyday world that people know. So in other words, I get more interested in having stuff appear as part of a street, part of a railroad station. Something that doesn't necessarily announce itself as art. It's part of the space people are normally in, but just changes the space a little."

## Dirty tricks

While Acconci may have moved away from his highly personal work that established his reputation in the 1970s, his public-art projects still generate more than their share of controversy. Such was the case with Acconci's 1987 public-art proposal for Spanish Landing.

The project was ultimately rejected on the grounds that it reminded people of the 1978 PSA jet crash. In hindsight, Acconci admits that this particular proposal may have been insensitive to the concerns of the community.

"Sometimes, I think I'm incredibly naive because I honestly never saw that (project) as a plane crash," Acconci explained. "But everyone else apparently did. I've started to think that I might have been a little blind. If I proposed that proposal now it would probably be a very different piece.

"In retrospect, I'm not so sure I would propose something that is going to have such a definite mind-set, is obviously going to remind certain people of certain kinds of things. I don't think you can do that because in some ways it seems like a dirty trick."

In addition to exploring new approaches to art making, Acconci's collaborations with other people seem to have made him more cogni-

zant of other people's feelings, particularly in regard to public art. Perhaps, the art world's enfant terrible of the '70s isn't so terrible after all.

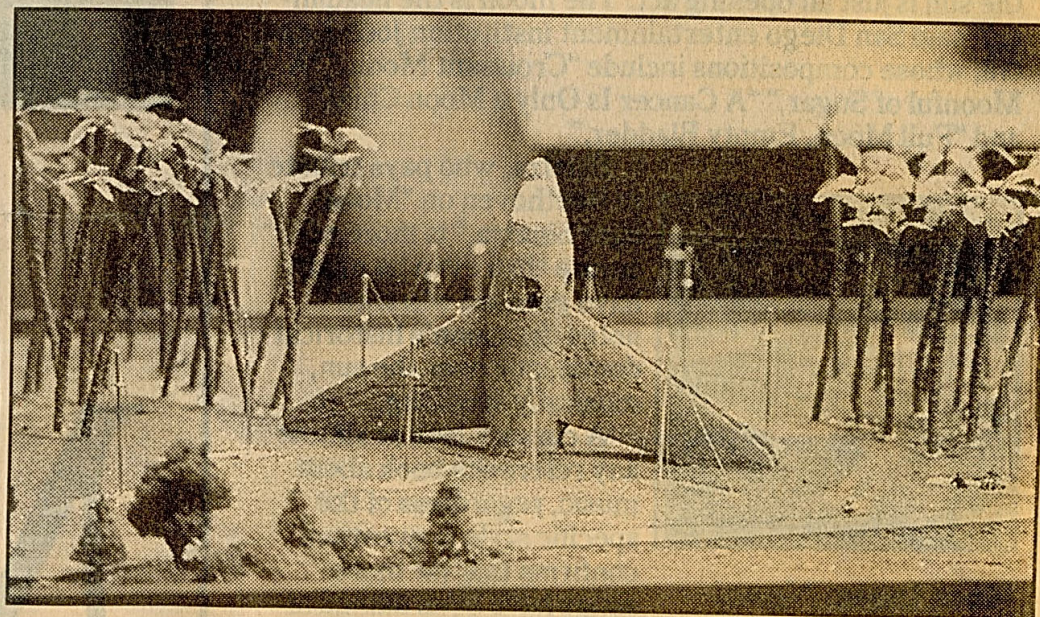
"I'm starting to think we should be applying for architectural competitions rather than art competitions," Acconci said. "I think we should be starting to do buildings. I would like to see us build a house.

"I would like us to do real architecture. It might be a mixed-up architecture, but that's where I see the work possibly going. It seems like from the work we've been doing that's where the work should go. Now do we have the nerve to take it there? I hope so."

**NEIL KENDRICKS** writes about the arts for the Union-Tribune.



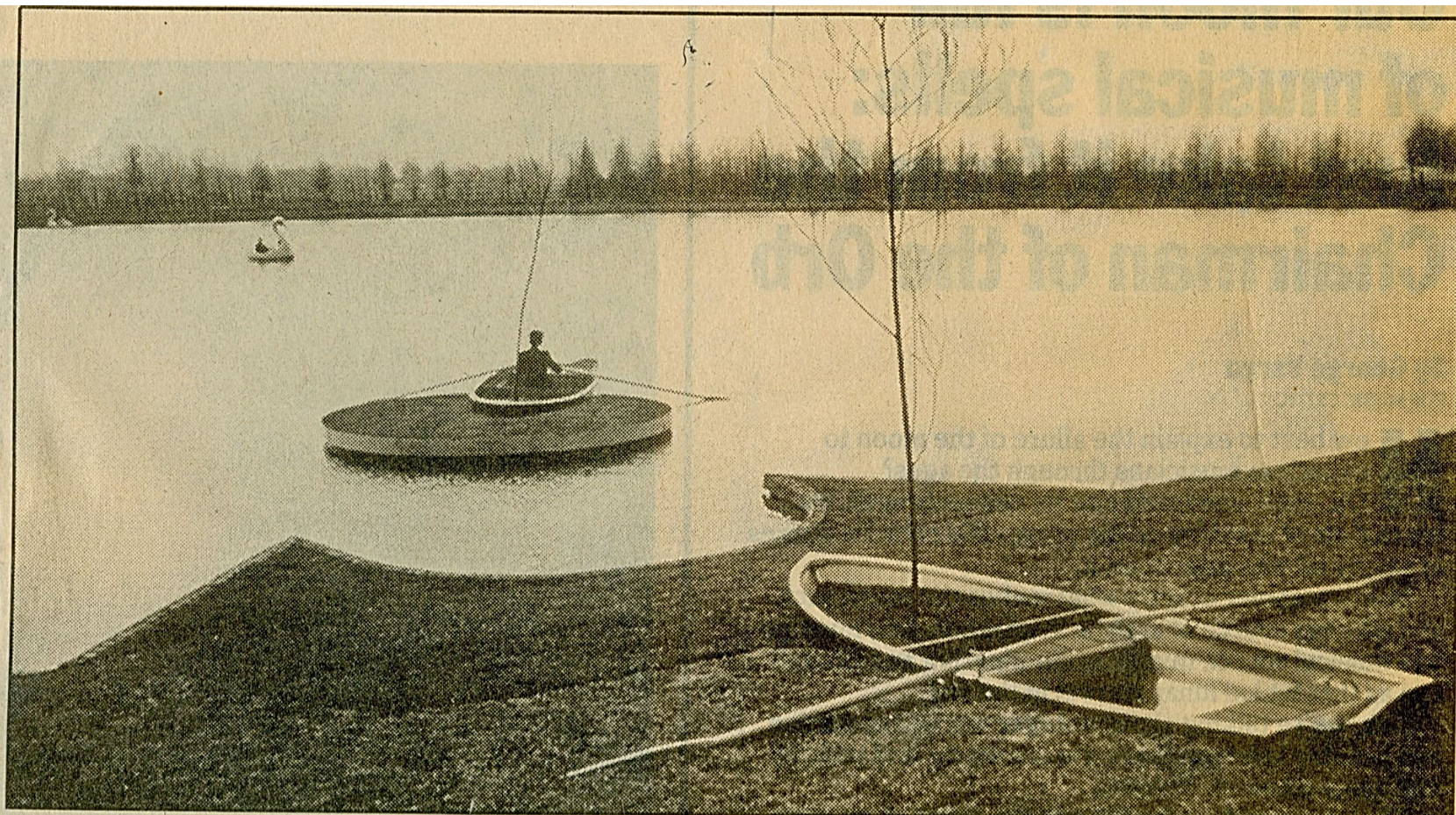
**Vito Acconci:** Shown in a 1987 photo, he wants his art to be part of the everyday world.



Union-Tribune

**Creating controversy:** Acconci's 1987 proposed installation for Spanish Landing.





(At right, 'Personal Island,'  
1992.)