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Acconci's Pied-à-terre: Taking the Archive for a Walk ?

How can we force history to wake from its recumbent pose, to tear scholars away from their digit-obsessed, virtualised labyrinths and touch the suppurating feet of those who walked *The Royal Way*?¹ How can I revisit a performance forty years after its occurrence without resorting to the familiar tropes that are ready-to-hand and already too familiar? The call to research from below, 'on foot', demands an approach that refuses familiarity and shouts at those who remain metaphorically tied to their desks. At times I will turn for aid to the work of French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, not as guide but as someone who was prepared to take a 'kicking' from all sides, refusing to remain in the boxes built by others to contain his thought. To kick the habit of conventional scholarship this article appeals to the archive's affective draw via a pedestrian, imaginative peregrination. There will be gestures, there will be the stamping of feet and there will be a gravelly Italian-American accent. Drop the anchor and let us proceed on foot.

Acconci's *Anchors*

Anchors is one of Vito Acconci's lesser-known performances; in fact it isn't really a performance in the conventional sense but rather an audio installation. The live element is brought by the visitor to the space -- the Sonnabend Gallery, Paris in 1972 -- and it is this perambulatory contribution that I want to emphasize in my account. Today, *Anchors* has come down to us in the form of an all too conveniently packaged book. Spread over three double-pages in *Vito Acconci: Diary of a Body 1969-73* (Acconci 2006: 310-315) are collaged facsimile documents from Acconci's archive (figure 1). However, several installation photographs, the script of the two main audio-dialogues and Acconci's notes are sufficient to allow me to imagine the sound-space created, and to set off on the heels of the performance.

Entering the main space, down four concrete steps, I see a low wooden box in the centre of the room and, in a separate area off to the side, a crude U shape of stones. There is an audio-tape playing underneath the shallow staircase: a man's voice in French tells the visitor to be cautious, not to be fooled and to 'walk on past him, step right over him if he gets in the way'. As you descend the steps and approach the arrangements of objects, described by Acconci as 'shelters', other sounds can be heard. In the wooden box Acconci's voice is making 'a low pitched "uunhh" sound'; you bend down to peer inside the box where there is a speaker covered by a woman's garment -- a beige nightgown.

¹ In André Malraux's 1930 novel *The Royal Way* the two protagonists are beset by the physical dangers of the Cambodian jungle resulting, for one, in a festering gangrenous wound which dogs his final steps.

You move over to the stones: here a pair of beige stockings is strewn inside the lines of the stones; another sound starts up as the ‘uunhh’ ends. It is a much higher pitched ‘oohh’ and continues for a long minute. You move away. Everything is monochrome: the floor, the stones, the box and the nightgown all blend in beige. Beige is also the colour of the blanket that marks the threshold into the second room; it is crumpled as though someone has slept there. Inside this smaller room is a third structure -- a ‘lean-to tent’, a ramp-shaped timber frame with a piece of canvas tacked to the top to make a roof. After a moment a third sound from underneath the ramp takes over from the high pitched oohh: Acconci’s distinctive voice once more begins to make noises, this time ‘middle-range ‘ehhrrr’ sounds’ (310).

The loop of sound playing within each ‘shelter’ consists of one minute of sound, two minutes of silence -- Acconci describes it as a ‘regular breathing rhythm’ each alternating so only one sound is emitted from each shelter in turn, calling the visitor’s attention to another space.

In the corner of the second room, at the point furthest from the point of entry, is a foam bed and pillow and behind these a fifth speaker relaying a continuous dialogue. At a distance you hear only an undistinguishable babble but getting closer, it becomes clear. There are two voices: Acconci’s distinctive gravelly Italian-American accent and a woman’s voice translating Acconci’s words into French. But the tone is different: the woman’s voice asks questions, incessantly. The transcript makes it clear: each time that the woman’s voice repeats Acconci’s statements it is changed into a question, but it also begins to anticipate and precipitate Acconci’s words. It becomes unclear who is initiating the dialogue:

Fr. Do you want to say that you can lie still, you can keep your voice steady, you can talk about your sister, you’ve never had a sister...

Eng. Yes, I can lie still, I can keep my voice steady, I can talk about my sister, you’re lying down, you’re alone, you’re in bed, on a different bed than this one...
(312)

What I have not conveyed in this account is the extent to which such a reconstruction relies on the succinct and carefully constructed written notes of Acconci. It is well known that Acconci’s artistic practice grew from his previous work as a poet (Dworkin 2006), but the publication of documentation from his archive of this period highlights Acconci’s skill in turning an otherwise ephemeral event into an accessible body of text. Gregory Volk, writing an introduction to *Vito Acconci: Diary of a Body 1969-73*, comments on the role of the writing in the archive: ‘Acconci’s descriptions and notes don’t define, but rather amplify, elucidate and function in tandem with the work; the more one pores through the archives, the more open-ended and evocative the works become’ (Acconci

2006: 10). In ironic counterpoint to the title of the piece, the aim here is not to anchor meaning; rather, there is slippage between characters and personae in the installation and that slippage is maintained in the documentation. For example, the first audio-tape is described by Acconci as follows: ‘A tape loop with another man’s voice, in French: he tells the viewer to pass right over me -- don’t be tricked into wanting to help me -- I don’t want anyone real, I only want a sister I can’t have’ (2006: 310). The personal pronoun ‘I’ refuses fixed signification; it is activated only through enunciation, thereby wakening a dormant element of the written text. In *Anchors* -- both the recording in the gallery and its transcription as a document -- the ‘I’ eludes even this enunciation because it is an absent voice: as there is no one to ‘pass over’, no one to help. The figure evoked by Acconci is a construct of fiction, yet it also works against such a set-up through the uncertainty created by the quality of the recorded voice. Acconci refers to the installation in spatial terms, which reminds us that the visitor might be unsure as to what could be lurking under the steps, or the box, or the ramp -- after all it was 1972, the year of Acconci’s *Seedbed* when the artist had been there, underneath the ramp: was he here, too? And what does he mean about a sister? How does he want her? To be ‘close to her clothes’, to call her his ‘silly goose’, to ‘smash her to pieces...’ (315). The text is hard to read, it is perverse, disturbing. Hearing it in the gallery, I don’t want to stay to listen. Do you want to say that you don’t want to listen but that you’d be drawn back? Yes, I don’t want to listen but I am drawn back. That voice, it keeps calling me back, I feel uneasy – what if someone else comes in and sees me listening? Do you want to say that you’re afraid that someone else may see you listening? Yes, I’m afraid that someone else might see me listening and I want to leave because this man is a pervert and he’s playing games and he talks about Antigone, I mean he talks about his sister, how she doesn’t want a sister, only a brother but that her brother is dead? Yes, I am thinking about Antigone and that her brothers were dead, but she had a sister... Do you want to say that she wanted a brother and not the sister she had...²

The ‘notion of mental space’ is how Acconci describes his concerns with regard to *Anchors* in a taped conversation from May 1977 (Acconci 2005: 291). Acconci hesitates over the piece, describing it as ‘an attempt to get into non-live pieces’, part of ‘various kinds of broken attempts’ and adds, more positively: ‘But the piece, I think, was trying to take further that notion of mental space’ (291). The combination of the transcripts from the audio tapes of *Anchors* and Acconci’s documentary notes from the archive evoke a different ‘mental space’ which simultaneously allows for an imaginary recreation and disorients the assumed direction of the links which form communication: ambiguity and uncertainty abound.

It is useful to turn here to the work of Lyotard in order to consider this aspect of disorientation, woven into the conception of Acconci’s piece. The parallel between

² This section is my own peregrination away from Acconci’s script.

Acconci and Lyotard comes through a stumbling manner, an approach particularly in evidence at *Les Immatériaux*: the exhibition that Lyotard co-curated at the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, in 1985. We continue on foot, hesitant and resistant to the familiar. Feet first and with toes outstretched, feeling for thorny threats to the tender instep, made vulnerable by its nakedness.

Introduction to *Les Immatériaux*

Les Immatériaux transformed the Pompidou into a labyrinth of thirty zones but one without ordered connections, and which was confused rather by its own complexity. The transformation of the exhibition space is reminiscent of Lyotard's dissection of the body in his 1974 book *Libidinal Economy* and its opening description of the 'Great Ephemeral skin', as a body opened up and laid out as a single surface along which libidinal charges flow uninterrupted, from anus to the slit open jejunum, investing energy across the surface of the opened trachea. Lyotard describes this exposed body as made like the 'skeleton of a boat under construction' (2004: 1). Like the ephemeral skin, the exhibition aimed to create an endless Moebian band of zones without beginning or end, front or back, inside or outside. In his review of the exhibition Pierre Restany, the art critic who promoted Nouveau Réalisme in the 1960s, draws attention to the sensory reach of the exhibition: 'The visitor will not forget the sound of blood in the entrance hall, Artaud's cry to the equivalent derm, or the voice of Yves Klein talking about the architecture of the air' (Restany 1985: 60-1).

The recent resurgence of interest in the exhibition (Graham and Cook 2010) relates mainly to the display of new technologies and the rise of the curator's importance, but my specific interest in the exhibition concerns the role of the body -- both the bodies of the visitors and the role of the body in sensory communication. Lyotard's consideration of the body's 'immateriality' suggests that there are far-reaching philosophical implications in the technological adaptations that have taken place under modern capitalism. The 'immaterial' invades and replaces that which has traditionally been regarded as human, including the manipulation of emotion and the sidelining of affect.³ It is Lyotard's investigation of this 'immateriality' that will feedback into a consideration of Acconci's *anchors* and question the role of the absent, yet present, record of a body.

A 'body in movement'

The textual, in its broadest sense as both written and spoken language, dominated *Les*

³ One of Lyotard's most provocative texts from this period 'Can Thought go on without a Body?' deals with the impact of technology on the body (Lyotard 1991).

Immatériaux, acting out an excess of information which obscured rather than aided attempts to understand the exhibition in a conventional sense. The excess is what Derrida and Lacan write about in relation to the inevitable failure of the signifier to match the signified (to sign its referent); it also resonates with Peggy Phelan's (1993: 5-6) transgressive notion of sexual difference, as that force with which neither the conscious nor the symbolic systems of signification can cope.

There was a deliberate attempt to overwhelm the senses in *Les Immatériaux*, and it is in its extension beyond the visual that the parallel with performance art becomes pertinent. Lyotard positions the approach in contrast to the exhibition of paintings in early modernity where 'the visitor is an eye ... he is offered views', and sent on a journey with a purpose. The experience is likened by Lyotard to the voyage of discovery in a *Bildungsroman*, an Enlightenment 'educational novel', which he categorizes as 'the acquisition and assimilation of heterogeneous data in the unity of an experience which constitutes a subject' (Lyotard 1996 [1984]: 167). In *Les Immatériaux*, Lyotard sought to avoid such a didactic process, aiming rather to disrupt ocularcentrism as well as problematizing the assumed aims, direction and authority of normative modes of narration. Contrary to the traditions of an educative *Bildungsroman*, Lyotard's model is closer to the ambiguous itinerary and ambivalent authorial voices of Denis Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew* (c1761), where Diderot's multivocal format and slippery moral conscience play out the excesses of the character *Lui*: singing both high and low and simultaneously mixing musical styles.

Thereupon he began to execute a quite extraordinary fugue [...] at one moment he was imitating the bass and at the next one the upper parts [...]. As for me, I didn't know whether to stay or run away, laugh or be furious. (Diderot 1966: 96-7)

It was intended that the visitor to *Les Immatériaux* should be similarly perplexed and displaced, no longer only a 'body in movement', but one immersed in an 'overexposition' (Lyotard 1996:167-8). The aim of the complex, interactive and deliberately confusing movement of bodies in the exhibition was, I suggest, to enlist the visitor as a participant in the performance of the exhibition. It was an artistic performance -- a 'dramaturgy', in his own words.⁴ This consideration of the visitor as performer echoes the desire to break down the 'fourth wall' in avant-garde theatre and involve the spectator, as in say Allan Kaprow's desire to make the viewer become a participant in Happenings. But the non-didactic approach of *Les Immatériaux* is perhaps more closely related to Vito Acconci's consideration of the viewer as performer. Writing in *Notes on 12 Pictures* (1969), Acconci considers how photographs resulting from a performance can be approached in different ways: if displayed on a wall the 'reader' is a 'moving performer', whereas in a

⁴ Lyotard describes the exhibition as a 'dramaturgie' in the interview with Alain Arnaud in the 'Album' part of the catalogue. See Lyotard (1985).

book the photographs place the ‘reader as performer in a moving performance area’, and when the photographs are stacked in a pile the reader becomes a ‘reader as rereader; reader as former of the performance’ (Acconci 2006: 41). It is this latter format that *Les Immatériaux* adopts for the ‘Inventory’ part of the catalogue, an unbound ‘pile’ of separate sheets that describe the work, objects and installations included in each of the sixty-one sites (figure 2). The form of the ‘Inventory’ asks the viewer to ‘reread’ and thereby produce the performance of the exhibition. The catalogue pages are not intended as a guide but as something closer to an index-card belonging to a gargantuan system, ‘a reduced monograph of the library of Babel’ suggested Lyotard.

The visitor to *Les Immatériaux*, an uneasy ‘body in movement’, was given a headphone set, but, unlike the audio guides now familiar in museums, this set did not relate directly to individual works or zones for the visitor to access manually. Instead infra-red signals were embedded into the exhibition which triggered short-wave radio signals broadcasting different information dependent on the visitor’s location within the exhibition space. Lyotard likened the experience of the sound system to that of the multiple radio stations picked up by a car transistor on a drive down the East coast of the United States, retuning the radio as a marker of shifts in space: ‘ [On the radio] information circulates by radiation and invisible interfaces’ (1996: 168). There is a significant conceptual difference between constructing a system of communication as a web into which the visitor enters, rather than one which the visitor has the appearance of controlling. The anchors on which the visitor has become reliant – catalogue, audio guide and systematic display – are rendered as unstable and inadequate as the ‘shelters’ provided by Acconci in his installation space.

Central to *Les Immatériaux* was both a questioning of authorship and the limitations of existing discourse: the entrance vestibule showed an Egyptian bas-relief of anonymous authorship whilst similarly anonymous sounds of breathing filled the headset and the sound of blood pumped through the darkened corridor. The sound system was organized to cover several sites at once, not to explain but to disorientate, and to offer conflicting simultaneous experiences which elicited not meaning but affects. The use of the term ‘affect’ here refers to an unfamiliar and contested feeling which differs from the category of emotion because of its inability to be defined; an affective intensity is felt but cannot be categorized.⁵ This use of sound to destabilize the expectations of the visitor is also characteristic of the work of Acconci, whether through the amplified voice of the hidden artist in *Seedbed* or in the absent bodies presented through multiple sound recordings in *Anchors*. I have argued elsewhere (Bamford 2010) that the ambiguous nature of Acconci’s *Seedbed*, as evident both in its performance set-up and through its subsequent historicization, encouraged a documentation based on gossip and speculation. In contrast, *Anchors* plays its own internal dialogue of propositions.

⁵ As Melissa Gregg notes in her Introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader* ‘There is no single, generalizable theory of affect: not yet, and (thankfully) there never will be’ (Greggs 2011: 4).

There is little art historical commentary on *Anchors* compared to many other works by Acconci, perhaps because of Acconci's own reticence (a 'broken attempt'), or because of its close proximity to a live performance piece at *Documenta 5*, earlier in 1972, which received greater coverage. *Anchors* is briefly discussed, however, by Kate Linker in her 1996 monograph on Acconci in terms of the 'decentering of the subject by language' (53) in relation to Jacques Lacan's formation of the subject in the 'mirror stage' -- the reliance of the self on the Other, as constituted only through (mis)recognition of the self in the other. Thus, Linker is able to highlight the Lacanian paradox with regard to the subject, positioned by its representation in language but simultaneously excluded from it. In Lacanian terms the subject always remains within the sphere of the symbolic and is unable to access that which drives their (unattainable) desire, leading to criticisms made by Lyotard of the structuralist reliance on language and its inability to recognize that which language fails to present. This is summed up by Lyotard's ironic comment that Lacan 'is the last great living French philosopher: that the Other would give rise to representation through discourse is the masterful utterance upon which philosophy continues to promote itself' (Lyotard 1993: 79). Lyotard suggests that because the subject for Lacan is alienated through language -- forever positioned within the Platonic cave of representation whilst the *imago*, the idealized whole self, remains outside, unattainable yet desired -- the latter continues the Platonic tradition of constructing a theatre of representation which constitutes 'a retreat from presence' (Lyotard 1993: 71).

Immaterial questions

What, then, does a Lyotardian understanding bring to Acconci's *Anchors*? Through paralleling the use of sound to position the viewer as an uncertain 'body in movement' we have already highlighted the means by which both *Les Immatériaux* and *Anchors* destabilize traditional forms of narrative and question the assumed role of commentary as an aid to clarification. But there are further questions regarding communication which can be amplified by a consideration of Lyotard's writings in preparation for the exhibition. Briefly, we can turn to Lyotard's adaptation of questions posed by communications theorist Harold Lasswell. Laswell asks *how*, and for *whom*, the message is operating?

Lyotard dispenses with the anthropocentric assumptions in Laswell's model, making it clear that the questions pertain to the dissolution of matter. In whose name does the message speak if it issues from and is carried by the 'immatériaux' (1996: 163)? The message no longer relates to matter in a form that can be grasped perceptually and its point of origin is thrown into question. The assertion made by Linker is that the 'message' of *Anchors* is an expression of 'the decentering of the subject by language', not only that voiced by Acconci and his interlocutors, but also that experienced by the visitor (Linker 1996: 53). But from where does this 'message' issue? Does its theoretical

assignment by Linker (to Lacanian theory) constitute a re-anchoring of those conditions that are already in a process of dissolution? This is the state that both Acconci and Lyotard are at pains to expose.

The installation presents us with the conflicting assertions of different voices -- some verbalized and others from the realm that Lyotard describes in *The Affect Phrase* (2006 [1990]) as 'unarticulated phrases': the confused, inarticulate voice that signals the aesthesis of pleasure and pain. The dissolution of the message into the *support* is cited by Lyotard as an example of instability. According to Lyotard, this shift occurs when the code is inscribed into the support to such an extent that the 'material disappears as an independent entity' (1996: 164), thus producing the 'immaterial'. Even the now-unglamorous technology which enables the recordings of sound onto tape in *Anchors* enacts an aspect of immateriality: 'uunhh'. The installation also presents us with the physical 'shelters' and the arrangement of both objects and sounds in space. But, at the same time, we have an absent body -- that which we expect but do not find -- and a present body, that of the visitor. In Linker's book we are given an indexical reference to this physical arrangement only through a tightly cropped photograph of the stockings lying inside the stone shelter and the list of materials used: 'Installation: Wood, stones, steel, canvas, underwear, blanket and audiotape 2' x 30' x 45' ' (figure 3). It is not obvious what these dimensions refer to, neither is it made clear that the body of the performer was absent from the installation. *Anchors* is only referred to in passing by Linker, in a sentence which links it to *Cross-Fronts* (1972) (Acconci's contribution to *Documenta 5*), which did include the performer's body. Linker's description of *Anchors*, prefaced by a discussion of Lacan's 'mirror stage', constitutes, in fact, only one sentence followed by a theoretical reflection on the preceding theatrical set-up:

His decentering of the subject by language is expressed in *Cross-Fronts* and *Anchors*, 1972, and other works in which the echoing of Acconci's voice in translation shifts in utterance from first to third person, "I" to "he" (and in consequence, from narration to fiction). Moreover, it evokes the familiar experience of seeing oneself in windows or mirrors, transmuted by reflection into a person external to oneself, that is germane to the medium of video. (Linker 1996: 53)

There is no video in *Anchors*, nor a shift from first to third person, but rather a dialogue of three voices (and three additional vocal sounds) using first, second and third person -- and it is the shift from the male, English 'I' to the female, French 'vous' [you] that is the prominent dialogue, set against the backdrop of the man's voice, in French, commenting on 'lui' [him]. This struggle with voice is the 'message' of the piece: 'I have shaken my voice off...Do you want to say that you're speaking in tongues, you're telling secrets you don't know, you can't remember what your voice sounds like...' (Acconci 2006: 310). It

is not the shift from first to third (or second) person which constitutes a shift from 'narration to fiction', but a particular narrative set-up that questions both the authority of each voice and the demand of the phrase. Just as Lyotard (1988) describes how the line of a drawing makes a demand of him to respond with his own written line, so too do these voices and the set-up of the installation demand that the visitor act as the 'body in movement' and respond to the demand of the phrase -- not sitting down, dusting off archival records, but on foot, ready to run.

Linker's response is to reflect on the wider issues of related works by Acconci and to connect these to theories of the subject. It is a link that is not unexpected as Lacan's model is frequently referred to in relation to art that deals with issues of identity. But there are, as I have been suggesting, other ways of responding, and if we take Lyotard's concerns from *Les Immatériaux* further there is a question of communication that is provocatively unfulfilled -- the immateriality of the message. Whereas the Cartesian system of thought demanded that the body, as substance, was simultaneously divorced from and complementary to the mind, the new materials -- which Lyotard referred to as 'immaterials' -- fail to adhere to such a stabilized set-up. It is not necessarily the materials themselves that are new but their effect on the long held presumptions regarding what it is to be human. Is our footfall heard in the digital archive? The inter-relationship between the human -- as the dominant player who 'uses' material and for whom material is, correspondingly, a compliant substance -- and matter is destabilized by the immaterial which establishes the human in a network of associations. 'The relationship between mind and matter is no longer one between an intelligent subject with a will of his own and an inert object. They are now cousins in the family of 'immaterials' (Lyotard 1996: 165). It is this associative relationship, like a 'nebula', that Lyotard sought to evoke in *Les Immatériaux* and which lends a sinister tone to the immaterial presence of *Anchors* where the body's absence is already played out.

Coda

When self-consciously translating the traces of a performance into writing it is good to be reminded of the physicality which evades such translations and to re-inscribe gestures into the telling of the tale. This is what an approach to performance 'on foot' reminds us - - physical passivity tends to petrify the archive and ignore its rotting, festering potential to infect. If we are to open ourselves to work from the archives, we must be prepared to be rendered powerless, to be wrong-footed by Acconci's provocations. Whilst we still have a body, let it be the recipient of the message, let us move through the archive and feel the possibilities presented by the immaterial peregrination it opens. We must permit work to shout 'straight to the body': if we are to be 'faithful to works' our readings must '*perform them*' -- on foot. Describing the affect of Karel Appel's work, it is significant that Lyotard describes how 'it shouts instead straight to the body, it lifts it: dance with me, *on me* as on a rhythm, dance me' Lyotard (2009: 45).

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Captions

Figure 1a. Documents relating to Vito Acconci, *Anchors* (1972), Sonnabend Gallery, Paris, as shown in the book: Vito Acconci (2006) *Vito Acconci: Diary of a Body: 1969-73*, Milan: Charta. With permission of the publishers and Vito Acconci.

Figure 1b & c. Installation photographs of Vito Acconci, *Anchors* (1972), Sonnabend Gallery, Paris. Vito Acconci.

Figure 1d. Vito Acconci, Sketch of 'Anchors' (1972), Vito Acconci.

Figure 1e. Vito Acconci, Typed description of 'Anchors' (1972), Vito Acconci.

Figure 2a. Catalogue for *Les Immatériaux*, presented in a metallic bag (originally hermetically sealed by a manufacturer of dried mashed potatoes), 1985. Luc Maillet / Grafibus. Photography Antony Hudek.

Figure 2b. Cover of Catalogue for *Les Immatériaux*, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1985. Luc Maillet / Grafibus.

Figure 2c. 'Inventaire' part of the catalogue for *Les Immatériaux*, showing unbound sheets. Luc Maillet / Grafibus.

Figure 3. Vito Acconci, *Anchors* (1972), as presented in the book: Kate Linker (1996) *Vito Acconci*, New York: Rizzoli. With permission of the publisher.