



Vito Acconci's *Convertible Clam Shelter* (1990).

Shock Architecture

Uncomfortable? You're supposed to be.

"Vito Acconci: Acts of Architecture,"
Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston,
September 29–November 25, 2001.
Organized by the Milwaukee Art Museum.
Guest curated by Dean Sobel.

BY SUSIE KALIL

VITO ACCONCI knows how to make your skin crawl. In the history of '70s performance art, he will be forever remembered for *Seedbed*, the exhibition in which he masturbated beneath a closed wooden ramp while fantasizing about the people walking above him. A sound hookup relayed his mumbles and moans. In *Following Piece*, he randomly chose people on the street and trailed them for hours until they reached their homes or offices. In other works, he bit his own flesh, killed cockroaches on his stomach, and burned off his chest hairs with a lit match.

If those descriptions unnerve you — and they should — it's because Acconci was tampering with accepted borders: control and dependence, mine and yours, public and private, home and body, inside and outside. Given those concerns, it's not surprising that the performance artist turned to architecture. Nor is it surprising that his works retain the power to shock.

For the traveling exhibit "Acts of Architecture," curator Dean Sobel, the director of the Aspen Art Museum, concentrated on Acconci's works from the past 20 years — not performance art, but physical objects, or plans for physical objects. "Instruments for action," Acconci calls his zany pieces. Each demands the viewer's absolute involvement.

Adjustable Wall Bra (1990-91) is a humorous jumble of sex, comfort, and

regression, all packaged as a multipurpose piece of furniture. The immense plaster, canvas and steel-reinforced structure is large enough to serve as a chair, bed or room divider. But to understand the work, you must do more than stand in front of it and observe. You're expected to climb inside the padded cups, where you hear a taped clatter of stereo sounds and deep breathing. Similarly, in *Convertible Clam Shelter* (1990), two halves of a giant clam shape open, allowing you to recline, take shelter, or snuggle into the soft, womblike interior.

Much like a playground jungle gym, *Tele-Furni-System* (1997) invites you climb from floor to ceiling on TV monitors encased in steel armatures. The monitors, which simultaneously play cartoons, soaps, commercials, and news, serve as building blocks in the network of stairs, benches and landings. By choosing where you stand, you choose what you watch — and by extension, you choose how you fit into the social world.

Acconci asks that you put your body on the line — or at least think about your body and its relation to the social world. *Shirt of Pockets/Jacket of Pockets* (1993) is a long-sleeved garment made by stitching together dozens of transparent zippered pockets. The naked chest underneath is visible except for meager protection of consumer items tucked

inside the jacket's pockets: a pack of Camels, a floppy disk, sticky notes. What you buy affords you precious little protection — an anti-commodity sentiment that harks back to an era when artists regarded themselves more as priests than professionals.

Since 1990, Acconci has devoted most of his energies to architectural projects — usually projects that push the boundaries between inside and outside, public and private. In collaboration with a team of architects and project managers, the Acconci Studio, he has designed radical, playful buildings and parks. The projects were displayed as maquettes, mounted on a chain-link fence that wound through the exhibition.

In *Project for Marienbof, Munich, (Circles in the Square)*, Acconci addressed an "accidental" plaza created by World War II bombing. He proposed a new plaza, dense with spheres that rise like bubbles — cities within a city, open tubular structures in three sizes, bunched together and interlocked. "From the spiraling walkways around the Garden-Sphere," he writes, "you can access other spheres, other globes, other worlds." Inside the Skate-Sphere, skateboarders appear like ghosts behind transparent fiberglass ramps. Inside the Aviary Sphere, people walk around birds, below birds, and even above them.

With *World in Your Bones* (MAK Center, Los Angeles), Acconci imagines a shelter you screw directly into your skeleton. "Like a turtle, you carry your home on your back...." he writes. "Your backpack telescopes, it opens like a fan.... you are your own house. Visitors can enter your house, they get under your skin. Not everyone is invited inside.... You learn to live with your second skeleton: it moves as you move, like a shadow, a mirror image, a dancing partner, a double...."

Many more such concepts clamored for attention at the CAM, where the show felt crowded, but not all of Acconci's ideas are so wondrous. Some are mundane, and others hermetic. But the show proved that his best efforts have real staying power. He examines not only the difference between stasis and change, but also the oppositions between private and public, between self and the world at large, between our hidden obsessions and our daily passage with one another. ■