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Request For Proposal: Vito Acconci, For Example

Vito Acconci is one of those figures you encounter on your way out of the art world, passing by the name like a landmark, or proverb. The sign lists “those who have traveled this way before.”

If you studied in Southern California, Acconci would be up there with Helen and Newton Harrison, Raivo Puusemp, or some ex-student of Allan Kaprow’s whose name has been forgotten as examples of those who tried to establish a practice outside the social construct that the term “art world” refers to. Descriptions of such efforts often use language like “escaping from” or “breaking out of,” as if a prison were involved. Paths, routes, planned destinations and the ultimate actual points of arrival. “There was this woman, she’d worked with Michael Asher and then...” As if art students could go underground. Slow burnouts, quick flameouts, temporary countermovements. I once asked Paul McCarthy what happened, in the end, to such people who gave up on art. After a pause to recollect (or perhaps come up with a good-sounding lie), he replied “local politics,” and after another pause, “or working with children.”

More often such stories are inconclusive. Like an escape attempt from Alcatraz Island—”no one knows, they never found him, maybe he drowned and was taken away by the savage currents. Or maybe...”

And later you hear it differently, that someone made it out alive and is living in some small city, on the margins of town. Like the guy whose credit card debt got so bad he left New York to go home but then started making projects in the neighborhood around his grandmother’s house. It’s a kind of illicit knowledge, spread amongst those who not only cultivate critique and complaint but who look to hatch a plan, to make a run for it. Faces light up with the disclosure of a newly revealed possible path, others listen attentively with eyes blank, focus inward, logging the details, looking over the angles, calculating odds.

For example: having decided not to pursue an MFA at Columbia or CalArts, having become a reporter (or something similar) and then quitting that, one might decide to take a seminar on Public Art at the local branch of the state university. The goal of the workshop would be quite practical: to teach people how to move into the world of making pieces for public commissions by responding to Request For Proposals (RFPs), designing and presenting public art projects that would secure public funding and get built.

This parallel economy, discourse and situation for making artworks is rather large in the US, where in many states a percentage of the construction costs of any new building must be spent by the builders on public art that should be connected with the architecture in some way. Also, local governments often look to take advantage of such “percent for art” programs to fund improvements in local infrastructure.

Such a seminar, titled “Public Art: Designing the Urban Hardscape” or something like that, could hold a very large appeal. It is hard now to accurately describe this appeal. Perhaps if one can imagine, on the one hand, all the sense of possibility that is contained in starting to make art seriously in school, having been inspired to consider the vast terrain available to work in, subjects to approach, strategies to pursue. And then on the other hand, the dawning realizations emerging when confronted with the practical reality of the institutions of contemporary art, the practical details with “being an artist”—galleries, curators, studio visits, trying to meet people. Someone talks to you but looks over your shoulder to see who’d they rather talk to.

The contraction from expansive possibility to narrowness: one can’t help but think “*there has to be some other way.*” And, “Aha!”—public art, you think! You will make interesting things in the city, deal with politicians and community groups, perhaps make a modest living negotiating these different priorities and demands, with the economic and social functions up front and explicit, candid and direct.

Of course such a two-week seminar is more than enough time to demonstrate that this route would not be so promising, or at least not without its own risks. One of the co-leaders often refers to the example of an artist who made flowers out of razor wire (like barbed wire, only with razors), which then lined the perimeter of the corporate office. This is, within the terms of the seminar, deemed a highly successful project, combining practical function, formal elegance and innovation. The terms of this game, too, turn out to be not to one’s liking.

Several important public artists are invited, people who don’t have catalogues but are in their way very successful. During a Q&A, a project by Acconci comes up—“Acconci?!”—, there is a shared laugh of recognition, but with warmth.

It turns out the panel of successful public artists all know Acconci because he is often in the final round of competitions. He is invited to come and make a full-scale presentation with models and visuals and a speech, but is known for “always coming in third place.” First place means they build your project; second means you get a fee for the proposal; third means that at best they cover the material and travel expenses. The panel of successful public artists don’t know about Acconci’s poetry, actions or videos, to them he is the funny character with the interesting (strange) but unrealized proposals. Interesting enough to have him come in and explain, but basically unrealizable within the terms of the Request For Proposal.

And hearing this at first you let go of public art, or rather hearing this is part of letting go of the plan of working in this way, having understood that Acconci had gone before and tried this route out, and you imagine all the frustration of those meetings, of making models and dioramas and graphics to explain visual gestures and concepts. The way those rooms look where you present your work and yourself to town managers and the historical society and maybe even a local art history professor or director of an ethnic art center. The way the coffee tastes in those buildings with fluorescent lights and carpets and powdered creamer. And the brutal discipline required to pursue that path, in the face of knowing and understanding a broader context, foregoing a place where one has achieved at least a modest reputation and success for a relentlessly difficult chore of trying to make a project work that would exist in the world of libraries, banks, town halls, new roadways and shopping districts, schools and clinics.

To be laughed at by people who are ignorant of one's face on the cover of *Avalanche* magazine. The lesson is that this escape attempt is not for you: the trials too great, the cliffs too steep, the fall too violent.

And in terms of considering Vito Acconci, as an example, and the decades spent trying to make such public projects, at first, it seems like a bad joke, a shame. These pieces are often so over-literal, obvious, somehow boneheaded. But then when you think about the friction produced at all those meetings—the heat of it—the testing and stressing of the fundamental aims and claims of bureaucrats who are supposed to administer the citizens' culture and public life; the confrontation involved in that...

Looking back, from now, from having abandoned the idea of escaping from the art world, having resigned oneself to it. Having had a thing like a morning spent at an art fair building up a presentation of one's work, or working on "your PDF" so that it is "better," or negotiating an artist fee with "left-wing curators."

Well, then the clear candid cutting friction and sting of Acconci offering himself up for mockery, but perhaps at least starting a conversation or two, provoking a debate, amongst the elected representatives and guardians of the public realm, and even once or twice making one of these public projects... It looks a bit different. The light starts to turn and his image in it gains a different character.

After all, escapees are caught years later, having failed at their new paths or simply for lack of vigilance. Others betray themselves, recaptured out of conscious and not-so-conscious longing for the familiar routine and structure. And who's to say it's better outside, in the end? But, in any case, some still calculate odds and gambits, plots yet to be hatched, examples, proposals. And for sure they must extrapolate, struggle in imagination. The lay of the land looks different when you have to chart your way through it. Sometimes envisioning scenarios is necessary: judging the choices deferred and the ones (and *that there are ones*) yet to be made.