Fugitive Signs

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> *"He's a nice man."*
> *"You mean he hasn't bitten anybody yet."*
>
> —David Antin, *Autobiography-2*

> *I am he(re)*
> *that drops letters.*

This self-assertion, written by Vito Hannibal Acconci, makes its authoritative announcement for a young poet who was re-creating himself in the New York artistic community to which he had recently arrived. Before moving to New York in the mid-1960s, Acconci had graduated from the writing program at the University of Iowa—the model for the now ubiquitous academic poetry workshop—and the sentence's quirky, unconventional form marks Acconci's self-fashioning into an "experimental" writer at distinct odds with the conservative ethos of his alma mater. Acconci, whose poetry had appeared in *Art and Literature* and *The Paris Review*, was also included in Paul Carroll's 1968 anthology *The Young American Poets*, where he is described as being "among the more adventurous of the young poets who experiment with fresh, contemporary techniques."[1] Those contemporary techniques are nicely encapsulated in that single sentence: conventional reference ("re": "with regard to") literally bracketed off in favor of a focus on the physical manipulation ("drop") of the very material of a language ("letters"), which only points back to its place on the page (the locative "he[re]"). The sentence also carries an uncanny prolepsis, since it was written by a poet who would soon change media and "drop ... letters" in a turn to other, nonlexical, markings. In Catherine

Acconci. Claim. *1971.*

Quéloz's words (with an appropriately vital and manual verb): Acconci "takes hold of [*s'empare*] the body of language, of its materiality."[2] His poetry attempts "to give words body and weight"; and "body," or "corps," as I will argue, is all to the point in Acconci's early work.[3]

Acconci, of course, was not alone in this impulse to weigh the gravity of linguistic material. Robert Smithson, for one, habitually equated words and rocks in a geolinguistics predicated on the realization that written language is an object with the same brute physicality as stone. Works such as the visual poem *A Heap of Language* (1966) and the "geophotographic fiction" *Strata* (1970) embody his belief that "language should find itself in the physical world and not end up locked in an idea in somebody's head. . . . Writing should generate ideas into matter and not the other way around."[4] Smithson reiterates elsewhere that he "was interested in language as a material entity, as something that wasn't involved in ideational values," as "printed matter— information which has a kind of physical presence for me."[5] In other words, "language to be looked at and/or things to be read," a line Smithson used as the title of the first of the Dwan Gallery's four annual "language" exhibitions in 1967, and a nice summation of his sense of the accreted materiality of language. The announcement is signed, pseudonymously, with the brand name of its own material support: "Eton Corrasable." In a postscript to that statement added five years later he explains: "My sense of language is that it is matter and not ideas—i.e., "printed matter."[6] Smithson realized, in short, that *language is not transparent*. The eponymous phrase, graffitied by Mel Bochner as part of the wall painting he exhibited in the last of the Dwan "language" shows, might also have served as the title for any number of works by Bochner's contemporaries in both the art and poetry worlds— including Carl Andre, Lawrence Weiner, and Marcel Broodthaers.

In 1969, in fact, Broodthaers had restaged Man Ray's series of "lautgedicte" and published an edition of Stéphane Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés*, to which Broodthaers adds the subtitle "(image)." Replacing the lines of Mallarmé's poem with black rectangular blocks positioned and sized according to the instructions Mallarmé left for the layout and font of his poem, Broodthaers punctuates the space of Mallarmé's oversized page with a cool clinicism and translates the poem into a field of hard-edged precision and

2.   "Vito Acconci: langage in situ," *Les Cahiers du Musée National d'Art Moderne* 48 (Summer 1994), p. 101.
3.   Kate Linker, *Vito Acconci* (New York: Rizzoli, 1994), p. 12.
4.   Robert Smithson, *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 155.
5.   Ibid., p. 294.
6.   Ibid., p. 61.

fixed geometric forms. Taking the line as an isolated visual unit, Broodthærs adheres to Mallarmé's injunction in "The Book: A Spiritual Instrument": "Let us have no more of those successive, incessant, back and forth motions of our eyes, tracking from one line to the next and beginning all over again."[7] Like the mocked-up pages of commercial layout, or the sketches Mallarmé himself made in preparation for the realization of his later work, *(image)* emphasizes the spatial dimensions of language while eliminating its reference. With this thorough illegibility, Broodthaers thus establishes what Jacques Derrida would call "a text, that is, a readability without a signified."[8]

Acconci's own decidedly poststructural texts also deny the transparency of signification, though with less visual drama, and he explicitly uses the figure of opacity when he declares that he had wanted, in his poetry, "to use language to cover a space rather than dis-cover a meaning."[9] Such a covering is precisely what occurs in a poem that opens with the Steinian line, "A SHEET *a sheet* a sheet 'a-sheet' covers this page"; the words "a sheet" literally do cover the page on which they are written. The poem continues, "and protects it from coffee stains, etc.,/ that are on another level, we're on another level now." The irony, of course, is that despite its metatextuality, there is ultimately no "higher" platonic level for poetry: the written poem only ever exists in the base materiality of paper sheets and coffee stains, which it cannot transcend.

Acconci also draws attention to the page that is covered by his significantly titled poem "RE." A series of parentheses both holds the ordinary language of the poem in place and fills out the space of the page, emphasizing the dimensions of its palpable expanse and bracketing segments of its otherwise unmarked and unremarked surface for the reader's contemplation:

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(here) (   ) (      )
(  ) (there) (                        )
(  ) (                ) (here and there — I say here)
(                        ) (I do not say now) (                    )
(I do not say it now) (              ) (
)
(                        ) (then and there — I say there) (              )
(                        ) (                        ) (say there)
(   ) (I do not say then) (                        )
(I do not say, then, this) (                ) (              )
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7.   Stéphane Mallarmé, "The Book: A Spiritual Instrument," in *Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Mary Ann Caws (New York: New Directions, 1982), p. 82.
8.   Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 253.
9.   Vito Acconci, "Early Work: Movement over a Page," *Avalanche* 6 (Fall 1972), p. 4.

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(                        ) (then I say) (                    )
(   ) (                  ) (here and there)
(          ) (first here) (              )
(I said here second) (         ) (                        )
(               ) (I do not talk first) (             )
(               ) (        ) (there then)
(    ) (here goes) (                    )
(I do not say what goes) (              ) (                          )
(                   ) (I do not go on saying) (                )
(                  ) (                       ) (there is)
(    ) (that is not to say) (                 )
(I do not say that) (                             ) (             )
(               ) (here below) (                   )
(    ) (                       ) (I do not talk down)
(               ) (under my words) (                      )
(under discussion) (               ) (       )
(               ) (all there) (                 )
(    ) (        ) (I do not say all)
(               ) (all I say) (    )
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With its carefully positioned but grammatically shifting deictics and prepositions, this poem also deploys a self-reflexive modulation of common tropes ("here goes," "talk down," "under discussion") and concretizes those familiar idioms in spatial terms. This literalization of figurative language allows Acconci to once again manipulate words as physical objects (the Latin *re*, of the title, from *res*: "thing") and conflate the subject and object of their referential system into a closed circuit. Rather than merely referencing some signified beyond the page, the words in these poems gesture forward and backward within their pages as well. "Throughout the pieces," as Kate Linker recognizes, "language points to itself, reflexively describing its motion over the page."[10] The opening lines from *Extensions #2* exemplify this motile and insistent metatextuality:

> READ THIS WORD THEN READ THIS WORD READ THIS WORD
> NEXT READ THIS WORD NOW SEE ONE WORD SEE ONE WORD
> NEXT SEE ONE WORD NOW AND THEN SEE ONE WORD AGAIN
> LOOK AT THREE WORDS HERE . . .

"Hypotheses about ways of writing, ways of reading—if a book is defined as writing on paper, discuss a hand-writing lesson; if reading takes place one word at a time, then discuss each word (definitions, functions)—can be the form of a particular piece of writing," as Acconci speculated in his note to the Carroll anthology.

10.   Linker, *Vito Acconci*, p. 12.

Taken as a whole, Acconci's poetry constitutes an extended meditation on the grammar of reading and writing: what it means "to read," and how wide a range of use the predicate "to write" can compass. While many of Acconci's poems are dictionary-driven, Wittgensteinian investigations of ordinary language, they all announce themselves as written, rather than spoken texts, and all put the act of reading and writing in question. Indeed, even when the ostensible source or subject of Acconci's investigations is spoken language, his poems are still based on the opacity of the written text. The piece *Installment (installation): Move, Remove,* for example, describes the pronunciation of an onomatopoeic word:

> What is placed here is the last entry of Webster's Third New International Dictionary, page 2662 —

> zyz.zo.ge.ton / ,zuza'je, tan / *n, cap* (NL fr. *Zyzza,* genus of leafhoppers in former classifications (prob. of imit. origin) + Gk *geiton* neighbor): a genus of large So. American leafhoppers (family Cicadellidae) having the pronotum

> —with the last six words removed.

Having hopped to the last leaf of the book, and cut out a section (probably of imitative origin in the activity of the insect the entry defines), Acconci's "assisted readymade" *places* and *removes* words—manipulating them as physical objects to be handled and assembled, moved and installed. And as with so many of Acconci's poems, this text hinges on the literalization of an idiomatic figure of speech; by removing the last words of the last word to have an entry in *Webster's Third,* Acconci ensures that he, in fact, "has the last word."

In the end, even one of Acconci's most referential poems emphasizes its opaque materiality. The 350-line *Act 3, Scene 4* was printed with these lines separated and spread through the 359 different copies of one number of a journal; the copy received by Donald Allen contains "the 251st" line typed across an otherwise blank page:

> will begin to change to snow in the extreme northern areas. snow

Positioned three-quarters of the way up the page from the bottom margin, and thus marking off the "extreme northern areas" of the page, the line stretches out across that page from right to left, so that the text creates the visual image of the scene it semantically predicts. The appropriated (or simulated) snippet of radio broadcast—strangely melancholy in its familiarity and isolation—transforms the black words and their white page from sign to icon: the bleak horizon line of a winter landscape dominated by "snow . . . snow." "White and black," in Lyn Hejinian's words, "are not colors but they are inks and paints."[11] Although this

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11.   Lyn Hejinian, *My Life,* first revised edition (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1987), p. 63.

In the first place, he wrote, from left to right: "Afghanistan occup

Second, from one side to the other, he wrote: "Albania is a narrow m

Beginning at the margin, on the third line, he wrote: "Algeria is lo

When he reached the fourth line, he wrote: "Andora is set high in th

The fifth line was where he wrote: "Argentina extends from Bolivia 2

He wrote, starting at the left on the sixth line: "Australia, a huge

He wrote, starting at the beginning of the seventh line: "Austria is

At the eighth line, he began at the left and wrote: "Barbados, furth

He made a fresh start on the ninth line: "Belgium's seacoast of fort

   Next, he crossed out what he had written first and then wr

      He moved the page over before he w

     He wrote, beginning at the left on the twelfth l

    Starting at the left, he doodled a while before writ

    After he considered carefully the possibilities, he wro

      He looked ahead and thus wro

   Beginning at the left margin, on the sixteenth line, he wro

    He wrote, starting at the beginning of the seventeenth li

  This line marked his place when he paused; then he returned to wri

.0 miles of mainland shores and 41,810 miles of island coastlines.

et with rivers draining south to the Congo and north to Lake Chad.

agala 8,281 feet. The climate is hot, with high relative humidity.

the Central African Republic, west by Cameroon, Nigeria and Niger.

is one of the world's driest regions, with little or no rainfall.

, rising to high elevation in the north in the Khinghan Mountains.

ly of high table lands, cool and healthful, and densely populated.

l ports. The crater atop Poas Volcano is the largest in the world.

e finest and safest in the world, also Guantanamo and Bahia Honda.

        -- Vito Hannibal Acconci

          35

Vito Acconci. Untitled. 1969.

iconicity is, of course, a chance effect, Acconci has built precisely such chance effects integrally into the disseminated format of the poem with an interest in the semantics of context that will continue throughout his career.

Even without such pictorial shaping, Acconci's poetry—mimeographed and marked with the signature look of an IBM typeface—repeatedly foregrounds visual elements such as strike-throughs, slash marks, parentheses, and words broken unconventionally across line breaks without hyphenation. Moreover, Acconci frequently thematizes the mode of their printing and production. The title of one poem, "Kay Price and Stella Pujals," for instance, commemorates two record-setting typists (the former for a fifty-three-hour marathon and the latter for a sprint at 216 words per minute). Like Robert Morris's *Cardfile*, or his *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* and other process-oriented works from the period, many of Acconci's poems describe *their* own making. One untitled piece, for instance, incorporates apparent citations from an almanac or other reference book and conflates those alphabetically ordered transcriptions with Acconci's own writing to repeatedly call attention to his poem's physical, typewriterly construction. In the second line, for example, "a narrow m[-]" suggests the phrase "a narrow margin of error," particularly when the words that follow on the next line read "Beginning at the margin." In both cases, the lines do in fact begin at the (left-hand) margin and end with a fragmented abbreviation because the page has—quite literally—a too narrow margin. Similarly, in the context of references to various waterways, the combination of the terminal words "furth[-]" and "fort[-]" of the eighth and ninth lines suggest "firth": an estuary. Accordingly, the left-lineated middle section's wavering outline, framed by references to "seacoast" and "coastlines," actually imitates the cartographic drift of a coast marked by headlands and estuaries. In all of these cases, the subject of the writing comes together with the writing itself.

Moreover, the map-like, left-unjustified middle section of the poem performs an identical conflation of form and content at another level as well. Thematically, the lineated section omits citations and focuses on writing; at the same time, it bases its visual organization precisely around "line[ation]" and "writi[ng]." By enacting its layout on a smaller scale, the text becomes congruent at both the level of the word and the page; at the right-hand margin of a text where writing and lines are conspicuously truncated, the sentences repeatedly stutter and break at the words "writing," "wrote," "write," and "line." With all of these correspondences, the reader ultimately comes to understand the logic behind the seemingly arbitrary inclusion of quotations from a fact sheet on political geography. "Geography"—a concern with recording the placement of discreet but contiguous units in space—characterizes the subject of both the sentences and the poem itself, which evinces a fastidious concern with the placement of its lines (discreet and contiguous units) over the surface of the page.

The tone of this poem, with its deadpan reportage, is typical of Acconci's poetry, which combines the dry, banal description prevalent in Fluxus writing and

the *nouveau roman* with earnest, process-oriented narrations of its own physical construction. The result are sentences such as this line from "Staples": "She, on the other hand, picked up the paper with her left hand about midway along the eleven inch side—thumb under the sheet and fingers on top." Combining this style with an attention to puns and anagrams, Acconci helped open the way for the "new sentence" championed by poet Ron Silliman and one hallmark of the subsequent generation of experimental poets who would come to be known under the rubric "Language."[12]

The most innovative poetry of the 1970s and '80s, as it happens, emerged directly from the climate documented by the Dwan shows and fostered by Acconci's own exactly contemporaneous editorial activity. After moving to New York, Acconci and Bernadette Mayer edited *0 to 9*, one of the premier publications of the mimeographic revolution that had begun earlier in the decade. The run lasted six numbers, and from 1967 to 1969 this self-consciously eclectic journal published a startlingly wide variety of work. *0 to 9* mixed contemporary "New York" poets (Mayer, Kenneth Koch, John Giorno, Ron Padgett, and Ted Berrigan), canonical writers (Flaubert, Hans Christian Andersen, Novalis), OuLiPo writers (Raymond Queneau and Harry Matthews), Fluxus poets (Jackson Mac Low, Dick Higgins, Bern Porter, Emmett Williams), an unaccountable selection of early modern writers (Sir Walter Raleigh, Robert Greene, Lords Stirling, Herbert of Cherbury), and a diverse range of past and present experimentalists (Guillaume Apollinaire and Gertrude Stein, Jerome Rothenberg and Stefan Themerson, Aram Saroyan and Clark Coolidge). Side-by-side with the texts from these writers *0 to 9* also published, without distinction or comment, the work of visual artists; a partial list would include Jasper Johns ("Sketchbook Notes") and Sol LeWitt ("Sentences on Conceptual Art"), as well as work by Robert Smithson, Lawrence Weiner, Dan Graham, Douglas Huebler, Yvonne Rainer, Les Levine, Michael Heizer, and Adrian Piper.

In the wake of *0 to 9*, other publications would assemble similarly eclectic work along the lines of its inclusive and paratactic model; and scholars of both art and literary history should keep in mind this moment of generic crossings and convergence. In the extraordinary issue of *Toothpick, Lisbon, & the Orcas Islands* edited by Bruce Andrews, for instance, Acconci's writing appeared alongside the work of those who were, or would soon come to be, associated with Conceptual art, Minimalism, Fluxus, and Language Writing.[13] That same year his work was also included—along with contributions by John Baldessari, Eleanor Antin, Dan

12.   Ron Silliman, *The New Sentence* (New York: Roof Books, 1986), pp. 63–93.
13.   The issue was to be the last of the five issues *Toothpick* would publish: vol. 3, no. 1 (Fall 1973). For Acconci's relation to Fluxus, see Peter Frank's "Fluxus Fallout: New York in the Wake of the New Sensibility," *Visible Language* 26: 1/2 (1992), pp. 211–20.

Graham, Douglas Huebler, and Robert Smithson—in an anthology of new fiction works from a range of traditions and disciplinary associations.[14] Acconci's "fiction" was the photodocumentation of his barroom performance "Rubbing Piece." By the time of these publications, he had already stopped writing in favor of performance art. Or so the story goes.

*

To read only a few pieces of Acconci criticism produces a striking sense of *déjà lit*; common rhetorical structures become familiar enough that one can actually anticipate them. At the beginning of her monograph, for example, Kate Linker makes a move so seemingly de rigueur that one might almost fail to notice it. She writes: "In 1969 Acconci, who had been a poet, made his first visual pieces."[15] Compare Linker's assertion with the opening sentence of a much earlier essay by François Pluchart, who writes of Acconci as "a poet who, beginning in 1969, progressively abandoned the space of the page for a place in which the body was assigned the task of going beyond the poetic function."[16] Similarly, Catherine Quéloz contrasts Acconci's "initial literary works [*premiers travaux, littéraires*]" with his later works "in the world [*dans le monde*]."[17] Innocent-sounding statements, certainly, but the presuppositions behind "had been" and "first visual" are precisely what I want to call into question. Rather than "going beyond the poetic function," Acconci's body art, I want to argue, is actually an explicit continuation of his poetry. Moreover, the converse holds true as well: despite the implications of these critics, poetic works—as Acconci's own poetry makes clear—exist in a "real space," *"un environnement réel" "dans le monde"* [a real environment in the world].[18]

Nor is this to say that any of these critics ignore the literary. Linker, who sees a "literary subtext to [all of] Acconci's work," maps his entire career onto a model in which each phase of artistic production is read as a different "chapter."[19] Similarly, Quéloz opens her essay on Acconci with the assertion that " Language is the primary constituent of Acconci's work."[20] Quéloz's article, structured around the literary conceit of "intrigue," then goes on to argue that in spite of a move to the larger space of theatrical performance, Acconci "does not entirely abandon

14.   Richard Kostelanetz, ed., *Breakthrough Fictioneers* (West Glover, Vt.: Something Else Press, 1973).
15.   Linker, *Vito Acconci*, p. 12.
16.   François Pluchart, "Risk as the Practice of Thought," in Gregory Battcock and Robert Nickas, eds., *The Art of Performance: A Critical Anthology* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1984), p. 125.
17.   Catherine Quéloz, "Langage in situ," pp. 101 and 103. Compare these statements with those by Anne Rorimer, *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965–1975* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), p. 42; and Carrie Rickey, "Vito Acconci: The Body Impolitic," *Art in America* 68, no. 8 (October 1980), p. 118.
18.   Linker, *Vito Acconci*, p. 15; Quéloz, "Language in situ," pp. 102 and 101.
19.   Linker, *Vito Acconci*, p. 7.
20.   Quéloz, "Language in situ," p. 101.

the page; on the contrary, he retains it in order to put it to a range of different uses"; the page, in Quéloz's account, appears as an alternative to the workshop and becomes the atelier of Acconci's performance art.[21] Such readings, however, do not take seriously enough—or literally enough—the literary model. Even more striking, given the references to Acconci's poetry in all of these critical accounts, such readings reveal a failure to have learned the primary lessons of Acconci's own poetics. The argument for a literary model can be put more forcefully: most of Acconci's early performances constitute, in short, the continuation of poetry by other means.

A number of Acconci's pieces dating from the early 1970s overtly thematize printing and explore a very literal writing from the body. In *Run-Off*, the naked Acconci jogs in place until he works up a heavy sweat and then rubs his lathered body against a wall prepared with blue tempera. Significantly, he transfers that paint to himself with the explicit intention of converting his body into a writing instrument, which can then mark other surfaces.[22] By using the body to lift paint from one surface and transfer it to another, *Run-Off*, like many of Acconci's early performances, realizes Sol LeWitt's proposal that "the artist must be (as Acconci put it) 'a kind of dumb copying machine.'"[23] *Rubbing Piece*, with a different focus, also centers around corporeal markings generated from the artist's body. Acconci's terse description of the performance is telling: "with the fingers of my right hand, rubbing my left forearm and producing a sore." The pun is exact, and Acconci provides a literal sample of his "handwriting" on the page of his arm.

Works like these might be seen to simply highlight the production of various printed or even painted works that need not be specifically textual. They occur, however, in a series of similar performances that more explicitly allegorize the printed text of the poet. Consider, for instance, a series of works that emphasize the origin of the printed text in the mouth, the traditional articulating organ of the poet since the Romantics. This association between poet and mouth, moreover, would have been particularly strong at the time of Acconci's first performances. During the 1960s, terms like "voice," "breath unit," and "speech-based poetry" were all gaining a wide currency and establishing themselves in the dominant doctrines of American poetics. For a student of creative writing at Iowa in the early '60s, the mouth would have been a locus charged with particularly vivid associations. And, in fact, that site of poetic production features prominently in the performance of *Applications*; a woman uses her mouth to cover Acconci's naked front with lipstick prints, and Acconci, with his body thus transformed into a marking instrument, as in *Run-Off*, then transfers the impressions to another

21.   Ibid., p. 103.
22.   Museum of Modern Art Artists Files, Chadwyck-Healey microfiche reproductions: MoMA2 A18–23, 2/19.
23.   Quoted in Linker, *Vito Acconci*, p. 15.

man's back in a cartoonishly eroticized "application." Similarly, in *Kiss-Off* Acconci applied lipstick to his own famously full lips, kissed his hand, and then transferred the lipstick "ink" by using his hand in order to write, à la *Rubbing Piece,* on a lithographic stone.[24]

This analogy is made even more explicit in *Hand-and-Mouth,* the title given to two similar films in which Acconci repeatedly stuffs his hand into his mouth until he chokes. Acconci performs a comparable gesture in the mordant *Trademarks;* after following his own perverse command to "Bite body, all I can reach," Acconci photographed the evidence of his saliva-dripping flesh and then printed inked impressions of the quite literally in-dented skin.[25] *Trademarks* thus dramatizes and makes visible the physical, material, hard-edged, textual production of what can come from the poet's mouth. Indeed, at precisely the point of producing the visual artistic text of *Trademarks,* the poet's voice, and all its lyrical effusions, are cut off. To this extent, works like *Trademarks* and *Hand-and-Mouth* might be read as conducting the same aggressive denial of speech-based poetics that Acconci's poetry had waged in less somatically violent terms. To appropriate a phrase from Acconci himself, and recall his wording of LeWitt's proposal, these works produce a "dumb literalness": leaving the artist speechless (dumb) in the face of a violent inscription.[26]

Trademarks, in fact, even more explicitly evokes the comparison with the literary text. The elided imperative of the evocative title—to trade marks—is a succinctly accurate definition of written communication: the exchange of visual markings. That exchange was precisely Acconci's vocation as a poet and editor, and he elicits the comparison with the poetic product by his repeated insistence that the prints of his bite marks are made specifically with "typographic," or "printers' ink."[27] Indeed, despite his own reference to a "leap off the page," Acconci himself suggests that performances like *Trademarks* might be thought of in the terms of specifically linguistic production.[28] In retrospect, Acconci characterized his body's role in the earlier pieces as "analogous to a word-system" for which "there was an attempt made to 'parse' the body."[29] Extending the linguistic metaphor even further, he then remarked, "it should be noted that most of the earlier pieces were kinds of self reflexive sentences."

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24.   I am drawing my information about this work, produced as part of the lithography workshop at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, from the reproduction in an advertisement that appeared in *Avalanche* 3 (Fall 1971), n.p.
25.   When Acconci moved back to New York in the mid-1960s, he was known to the children in his Brooklyn neighborhood as "Dracula" (Rosemary Mayer, "Performance and Experience," *Arts Magazine* 47, no. 3 [December 1972–January 1973], p. 34).
26.   Quoted in Peter Noever, *Vito Acconci: The City Inside Us* (Vienna: MAK, 1993), p. 173.
27.   See Mario Diacono, *Vito Acconci: dal testo-azione al corpo come testo* (New York: Out of London Press, 1975), p. 146; and Cindy Nesmer, "Interview with Vito Acconci," *Arts Magazine* 45, no. 5 (March 1971), p. 20.
28.   Linker, *Vito Acconci,* p. 12.
29.   Ibid., p. 22.

In the parsed sentences of Acconci's performances, "the body," in his own words, "could be [both] the subject of an action" as well as "the receiver, the object."[30] In this sense, Acconci's employment of the body in his exploration of "reflexive information" is identical to the use of language in his earlier poetry. The self-referential play in Acconci's body art suggests that he was continuing not only the physical mode of his poetry (writing and printing), but also its strategies and concerns. Another of those shared concerns is an emphatic antimimeticism. Like his early photographic works, these other projects do not serve as transparent windows on the world; rather, they redirect attention in such a way that Acconci evinces "a keen awareness of the window—as 'a thing in itself.'"[31] Acconci's texts and performances "are not the representation *of* an activity, but the record made *by* an activity."[32] Acconci's performance *See Through* stands, metaphorically, as the symbolic spectacle of this impulse: with the stance of a boxer, he aggressively strikes out at a full-length mirror—the emblem of mimetic reflection—until it shatters. Through this common focus on materiality, metatextuality, and antimimeticism, Acconci's experiments in printing form a coherent œuvre whether they take the form of written "poetry" or filmed performance "art."

Indeed, if Acconci's poetry provides a lens through which to view his performances, those later activities illuminate the performance qualities of his writing as well. According to Acconci, the space of the poem constituted "a model space, a performance area in miniature or abstract form."[33] An unpublished 1967 poem announces this aspect of Acconci's poetry with its very title: *My Performance of Ezra Pound's 'Alba.'* This poem writes through the original source text by supplying parenthetical asides to Pound's poem:[34]

> (For example,) As cool (and cooling)
> (Furthermore,) as the pale (until paler)
> (Well,) wet (, in fact,) leaves
>   (in a manner of speaking, if you leave it to me)
> of (live—no,) lily-of-the-valley (They run down
>   from the hills)
> (The reason is that) She lay (there, to the right)
> (That is to say,) beside me (, in addition)
> (see) (knee) (plea)
> (17.) in (18.) the (19.) dawn.
> (She was *on* the lawn *of* the valley, all *in* all)

30.   Linker, *Vito Acconci*, p. 22.
31.   Smithson, *Collected Writings*, p. 64.
32.   Quéloz, "Language in situ," p. 103.
33.   Vito Acconci, "Notes On My Photographs, 1969–1970," in *Vito Acconci: Photographic Works 1969–1970* (New York: Brooke Alexander Gallery, 1988), n.p.
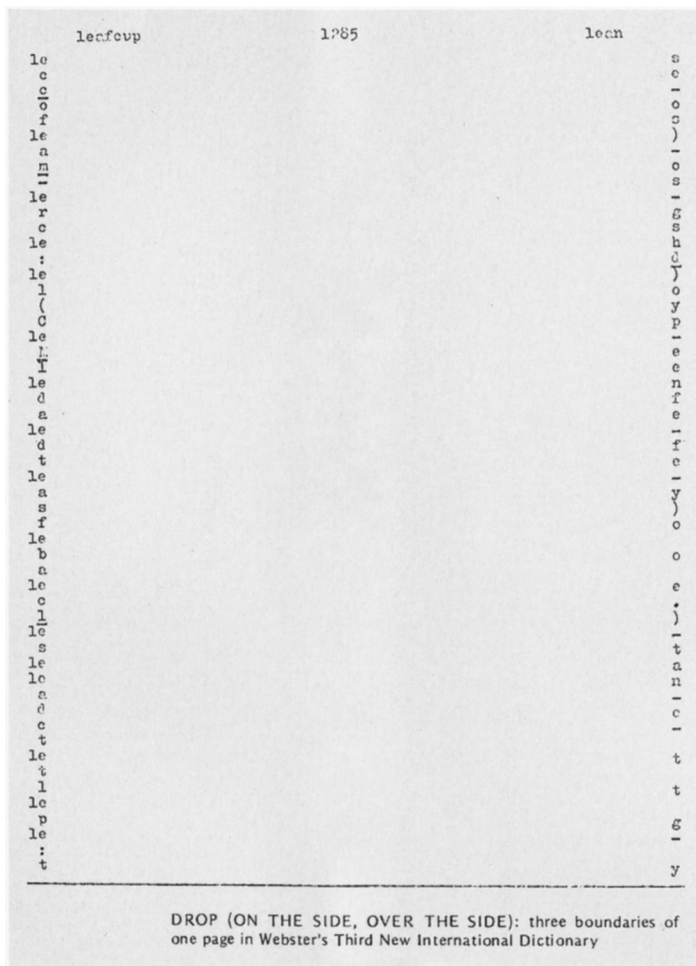34.   The text can be found in Diacono, *Vito Acconci*, p. 68.

These parentheticals work to unsettle and loosen the joints of Pound's tightly wrought imagist lyric by referencing larger rhetorical structures in which it might be embedded ("For example," "Furthermore"), acknowledging an interaction between poet and audience ("if you leave it to me"), and revealing the qualifications and hesitations that signal a discursive process of construction by shifting the focus from the finished print product to the performance of its rhetorical composition ("Well," "in a manner of speaking"). In general, as Quéloz recognizes, Acconci's poetry "uses terms which emphasize movement, displacement, evasion, migration."[35] Accordingly, the words in *My Performance* narrate their own movement over the page of the poem in a manner that should by now be familiar; they literally "run down" and lay "in addition" "to the right" of the "me." The words also emphasize their own performance of gestures within the text: "*on . . . of . . . in.*" In light of these literalizing and performative techniques, the sentence that opened this essay—"*I am he*(re)*/ that drops letters*"—permits another reading as well. If the initial pronoun refers to the reader, the sentence describes the physical act of reading: arriving at a particular place in the text ("here": the physical space marked by the line break) that leaves ("that drops") already read letters behind the path of the eye ("I"). Beyond a simple self-reflection, this line, like so much of Acconci's writing, itself performs what the reader performs. Recall the previously quoted excerpt from *Extensions*, which scripts a similar activity for its readers as they activate a performance that follows the movement of the words across the page according to the choreographed changes of pace and direction mandated by the poem itself. Not only were Acconci's performances like his poetry, but that poetry itself was certainly very much like performance. "When I do a piece," Acconci has written, "I'm automatically re-doing, un-doing, past pieces."[36] With his body art performances, Acconci literally incorporates his writing: translating the body of the text to new media as he continues to flesh out consistent and coherent themes in different genres.

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Acconci's investigative project was undertaken in a climate of radical semiotic interrogation. Without explicit connection or commentary, artists and poets were creating works that proposed the same theoretical conclusions being simultaneously advanced by poststructural theorists. By considering the work of Acconci, Smithson, and their contemporaries in this context, we can see how the linguistically based arguments and models of those theorists might be translated to a nonliterary realm. Specifically, I want to suggest what might constitute a

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35.   Quéloz, "Language in situ," p. 101.
36.   *THINK/LEAP/RE-THINK/FALL* (Dayton: University Art Galleries, Wright State University, 1976), n.p.

DROP (ON THE SIDE, OVER THE SIDE): three boundaries of one page in Webster's Third New International Dictionary

Acconci. Drop (on the side, over the side). *1969.*

purely visual example of the "trace" of Jacques Derrida's *différance.* In an interview with Julia Kristeva, Derrida famously defines *le trace* as

> a formal play of differences . . . [which] supposes in effect, syntheses and referrals which forbid at any moment, or in any sense, that a simple element be present in and of itself, referring only to itself. . . . [N]o element can function as a sign without referent to another element which itself is not simply present.[37]

In language, such "elements" are graphemes and phonemes, and the importance of the relationship between elements of an arbitrary system is familiar from

37.   Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 26.
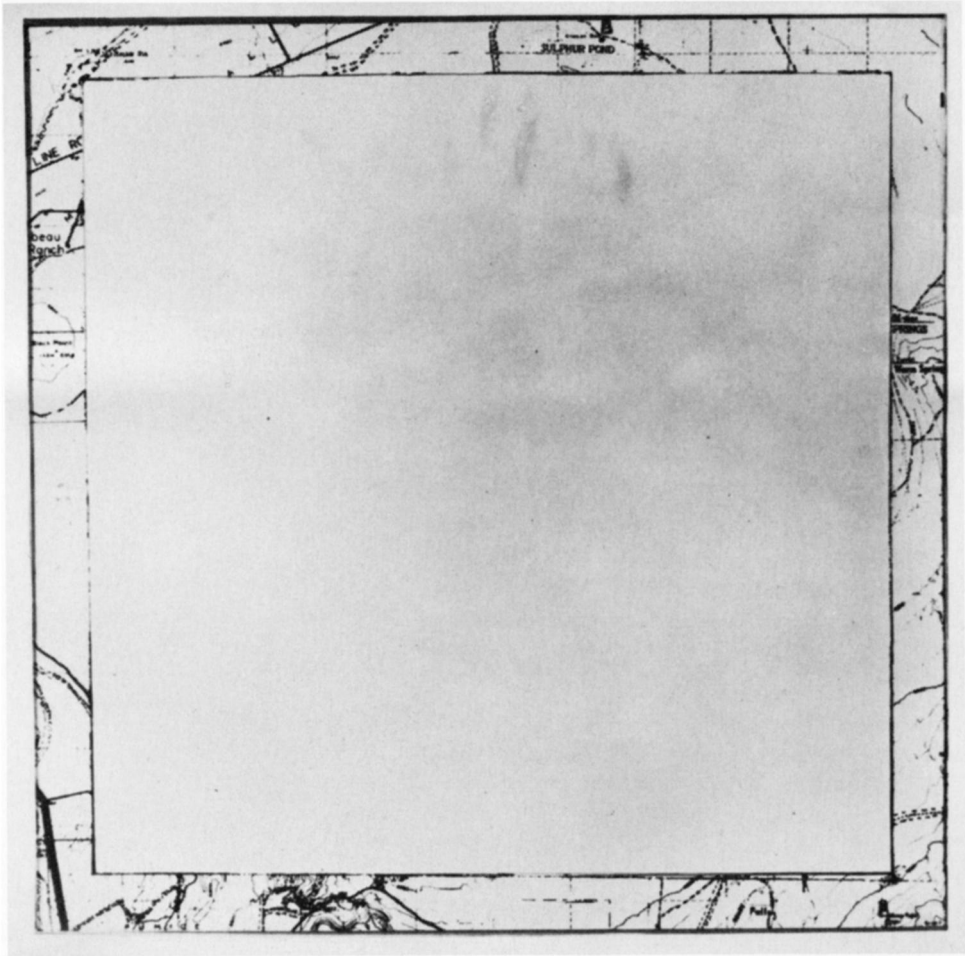
Robert Smithson. Mono Lake Nonsite. *1968.*

Saussure's structuralist argument that meaning does not inhere in words, but rather in the difference between a given signifier and other, absent, unrealized possibilities for its role in the system of signs. "This interweaving" between presence and absence, according to Derrida, "results in each element . . . being constituted on the basis of the trace within it of the other elements of the chain or system."[38] Any word, in such a system, contains the ghostly presence, or trace, of the others—those into which it threatens to slide and dissolve through a graphemic (or phonemic) proximity. No word, that is, can be "ever simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces."[39] In this

38.   Ibid.
39.   Ibid.

way, the elements in a system of differences both differ from one another and also defer to one another along an illimitable chain: from "trace" to "trance" to "France" *ad infinitum.* Derrida terms the activity motivated by this combination of difference and deferral with the neologism *différance,* or

> the systematic play of differences, of the traces of differences.... The activity or productivity connoted by the *a* of *différance* [the mark of a verbal noun in French] refers to the generative movement in the play of differences.[40]

When the difference of a single grapheme in one word can suggest another word, which in turn evokes another word, which in turn suggests another..., that generative motivation along the chain of signification constitutes *différance.*

Acconci investigates this "formal" and "systematic play of differences" in the poem *Drop (on the side, over the side),* in which the center of a dictionary page is cut out to create a square of white surrounded by a thin frame of letters remaining around the border. In fact, with that fall of disarticulated type down the narrow margin of the evacuated page, Acconci does indeed become "he ... that drops letters." The cutout leaf chosen for *Drop,* significantly, would have contained both the words "leafcutter" and "leafhopper," which figured so prominently in the other dictionary-based poem quoted earlier. Of course, it would have included a large number of other words as well (everything from "leafcup" to "lean"), and by isolating the first vertical column of letters down the left-hand side of the dictionary page, *Drop* underscores the slight differing and combinatory logic of differences that permit alphabetic signification. The potential implied by this differing is further noted by the centered numerals, which remind readers that after 1,285 pages of definitions the dictionary has exhausted less than half of the alphabet. *Drop* also emphasizes the generative aspect of *différance*; the precise graphemic ordering along the metonymic chain that motivates the structure of the dictionary and the layout of its pages is the very structure of differences that permits signification. Moreover, by removing the definitions from the center of the page, *Drop* highlights the endless deferral of *le trace*: the headwords that are half-legible at the left-hand margin refer to an absence that can only throw the reader back to the incomplete words at the periphery of the text, where all signs point them back, again, in.[41]

An identical play of differences occurs in the strikingly similar map for Robert Smithson's *Mono Lake Nonsite.* The two had met in 1968, the same year Smithson constructed the Mono Lake project, and in 1969 Acconci both com-

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40.   Ibid., p. 27.
41.   That one of only three items David Bourdon catalogues in Acconci's "sparsely furnished" living room is "an open dictionary (*Webster's Third New International*) spread-eagle facedown on the floor" (p. 189), seems more than a random detail of atmosphere.

posed *Drop* and published Smithson's photostat map in *0 to 9*. By adding a corre-
sponding gallery component and including the geographic site of Mono Lake
environs, Smithson's work—like all of his nonsites and much of his writing—also
sets in motion the illimitable deferrals and references of *différance*. The title of the
work directs viewers to the map, which in turn references the absent center of the
site, sending them perhaps to the gallery piece, which contains displaced material
from the absent site of Mono Lake itself, which would only point one back to the
map, and so on in an endless concatenation.

In Derrida's account, there is "nothing, neither among the elements nor
within the system," which escapes the interweaving play of *le trace*.[42] Just as *Drop*
explores that play at the structural level of the letter, a series of Acconci's works
writing through *Roget's Thesaurus* illustrates that play at the denotative level of the
word and capitalizes on the generative deferral of *différance*. In both
Contacts/Contexts (Frame of Reference) and *Transference*, Acconci manifests the impli-
cations of other thesaurus works such as Mel Bochner's 'portraits' and Robert
Smithson's *A Heap of Language*.[43] Acconci's works record the illimitable movement
from one definition, or synonym, to the next, with no ultimate point of fixity; look
up the meaning of a word in the dictionary and it only points to other words,
which point to yet other words, et cetera—with the possibility (but never the cer-
tainty) of returning to the word one began with, and no hope of ever escaping the
system. Moreover, the generative structure of such works actually motivates this
deferral of reference with words and phrases like "see . . . ," "*confer* . . . ," "synony-
mous with . . ." Each word shimmers with the ghosts of the others that
approximate and inhabit it to give it meaning, and each of those quickly generates
a flurry of other terms, beneath the blur of which the original term runs the risk
of disappearing from memory. By deliberately mapping this process, these poems
thus relentlessly pursue a logic of geometric increase and suggest the endless
inflorescence of language once set in motion.

Acconci also provides purely visual examples of this generative proliferation
in his early performances as well. Consider, for instance, his *Push-Up Piece*, in which
he performed one hundred push-ups in the sand, taking a photograph of the
increasingly marked ground after each gesture.[44] Each photograph in the series

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42.   Derrida, *Positions*, p. 26.
43.   "Transference," one might note, suggests not only psychoanalytic models, but also those perfor-
mances, like *Run-Off* and *Applications*; both those performance activities and Acconci's transcriptions
of the writings of Peter Mark Roget are constituted by the transfer of marks from one body to another.
44.   The comparison between the careers of Acconci and Dennis Oppenheim is unavoidable. A year
before Acconci performed *Rubbing Piece*, Oppenheim executed the painful and perversely masochistic
marking of his own forearm in *Arm and Wire*, and a year after Acconci's push-ups in the sand,
Oppenheim recorded his own *Push Ups in the Mud*. Moreover, evoking all of the works discussed in the
second section of this essay, Oppenheim's famous *Reading Position for Second Degree Burn* leaves a dis-
tinctly literary impression as he "writes" on his body with the template of a book, text turned to the flesh.

differs only slightly from the others, and any photograph has meaning within the series—an early push-up, a later push-up—only in relation to the others. Moreover, because the sequence of photographs is motivated in its order, each photograph engenders the next in a way that justifies the "generative movement" or "productivity connotated by the *a* of *différance*." That illimitable series of references which the *Push-Up Piece* suggests can be seen even more clearly in *Centers*, which consists of a closed-circuit camera and Acconci pointing at a video monitor of himself pointing; viewers follow Acconci's indexing finger to the monitor, which refers them back to Acconci, who only points back to the monitor in a maddening loop of endless gestures.

Or, for a more comprehensive example, consider the sequence of positions established and exchanged between pedestrians crossing the street and moving from corner to corner in *A Situation Using Streets, Walking, Running*, which had comprised part of Acconci's contribution to the collective activity of "street works" undertaken in the spring of 1969.[45] In the related, but better known *Following Piece*, Acconci also targets unsuspecting pedestrians; he then follows them wherever they go until they enter a home or their place of business. That is, like a private investigator or government agent he "puts a trace" on them. The two figures in each photograph have meaning (follower and followed) only in relation to each other. As they signify in this way, they mark off space: one points back to the other, who moves to the place then vacated by the first (who has moved on in relation to the place now held by the second), who refers forward to the other, *ad infinitum*. Acconci describes a similar network of relations in *A situation* as "shifting the shift," and this element of displacement and deferral is further complicated in *Following Piece*, when the viewer realizes that there is a third term; the photographer (Betsy Jackson) is an absolutely free-floating signifier in this chain: first marking a place ahead of the two men, and then, in the second two photographs, tracing their absent paths. And there is a *fourth* term as well: the viewer, who is always referred to the place of the absent photographer. That viewer comes to realize that in one of the photographs documenting the event a commercial sign that reads "signs"—already suggesting the *mise-en-abîme* deferral of signification—is all to the point. That sign might be read as both a descriptive caption for the *Following Piece* as well as an emblem for all of Acconci's early work.

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But signs, of course, are never so clear. Given the materiality of language, indeed of all channels of communication and dissemination, it follows that every generation of signs is accompanied by some noise: signifying effects that exceed

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45.   Documents related to these events were published as a supplement to *0 to 9*.

semantics and cannot be accommodated by any single hermeneutic account. From the axiom of materiality, a deconstructive analysis might show that all meaning is thus predicated on nonsense, but one might also argue that any particular meaning must result from a set of exclusions and filters, from the blind spots of a specific critical perspective and the medial noises they ignore. As Acconci realized in his "performances as channel," "generating expression ... need not be an official end of the action but only a side-effect" of presenting marks in a field of difference.[46] Those marks are what Acconci, discovering that "information need not be the primary end of action but only a side effect," called "fugitive signs." The body itself, as Acconci makes clear, is a spontaneous generator of precisely such signs. "If I do not perform," Acconci writes about a work that explicitly investigates the channels of communication, "the material [i.e., written messages] builds up ... while I am at rest," and elsewhere, with an almost hallucinatory paranoia, he imagines an artist whose body's very existence continuously produces a string of pure signifiers:

> *If the artist is a performer, in action, his presence alone produces signs and marks.* The information he provides necessarily concerns the source of information, himself, and cannot be solely about some absent object.[47]

Those actions, nonetheless, do not take place in isolation. In an interview from the early 1990s, Acconci states, "My early work depended on media. An action needed reportage, it didn't exist unless it was reported."[48] Those early texts and performances, however, reported little beyond self-referential assertions of their facticity and haecceity. Exercises in the sheer materiality of inscription, those activities produced texts at the zero degree: difference without meaning. In closing, I want to view those texts from what David Wellbery has termed a "post-hermeneutic" perspective and consider "not what is said or written but the fact—the brute and often brutal fact—that it is said [at all], that this and not rather something else is inscribed."[49]

      Acconci's performances, as we have seen, display the body as a signifying mechanism: transferring paint and displacing sand, scripting with its fingertips and imprinting with its lips, chafing and biting its skin. That body, moreover, is presented in these pieces as only one element in a chain of medial technologies, which work together to produce stains and paintings, prints and lithographs, photographs and films. By foregrounding and magnifying these bodily productions,

46.   MoMA, *Artist Files*, 2/19; Acconci, "Notebook," p. 69.
47.   Ibid., p. 68.
48.   Noever, *Vito Acconci: The City Inside Us*, p. 170.
49.   David Wellbery, "Foreword," in Friedrich Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. xii.

Acconci's performances underscore the fact that the body itself is always impli-
cated in what Friedrich Kittler has called *Aufschreibesysteme*: notational systems or
"discourse networks" describing "the linkages of power, technologies, signifying
marks, and bodies."[50] This connection between the body and other technologies
of communication is perhaps best summed up by what may still be Acconci's most
notorious work, *Seedbed.* Beneath a plywood ramp inclined against one wall of the
gallery like a piece of Minimalist sculpture, Acconci lay hidden with a microphone
in one hand and his penis in the other. With a certain glee, David Bourdon
describes the link between the masturbating Acconci and the gallery audience:
"he carried a microphone and broadcast his obscene ravings in every nuance of
polymorphous perversity. . . . 'Oh step on me, step on me harder'"[51] *Seedbed* is usu-
ally discussed with respect to the way it confronted and implicated its audience
with Acconci's "dirty work," but Bourdon unintentionally acknowledges a more
significant and complex aspect of the piece. With its connotations of both agricul-
ture and electronic media, "broadcast" conflates and collapses the Latin *semen*
(seed, from *serere*: to sow) and the Greek *sema* (sign), *sema* and *soma* (body), micro-
phone and phallus, the emissions of that body (semen) and the generation of its
medial communications (semantics, semiotics).

　　　Acconci's early work—both his poetry and performance—inverts Robert
Smithson's assertion that "without linguistic awareness there is no physical aware-
ness" and declares instead that without physical awareness there is no linguistic
awareness.[52] Such an awareness would understand the physical body as

> the site upon which the various technologies of our culture inscribe
> themselves, the connecting link to which and from which our medial
> means of processing, storage, and transmission run.[53]

That culture, after Nietzsche and Foucault, might be roughly defined as what hap-
pens to bodies in order to make them behave within medial systems: what holds
people to their roles in the social production of signs, whatever, in short, makes
people mark "properly." Acconci's performances, taking place in a culture of sur-
veillance equipped with increasingly accurate and comprehensive medial systems
for the storage of data, foreground the "control [of] personal information."[54]
Those performances display and reproduce precisely those marks that circulate in
place of, and as proof of, socially authenticated subjects. Acconci drafts an illegiti-

50.　Wellbery, "Foreword," p. xiii.
51.　"An Eccentric Body of Art," in Battcock and Nickas, p. 192.
52.　*Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, p. 59. Smithson is discussing the work of Carl Andre; the
entire paragraph that precedes his statement might be read in parallel with the critical strategies I am
sketching in this section and associating with Acconci.
53.　Wellbery, "Foreword," p. xiv.
54.　Vito Acconci, "Notebook," p. 68; cf. MoMA, *Artists' Files*, 2/19.

mate and illegible signature with the "handwriting" of *Rubbing Piece*, and the prints from *Trademarks* are authorized by marks that resemble nothing so much as the signs of official and final proof: the fingerprints of criminals, the dental records of victims. Acconci's work thus reminds us of our bodies' position at the intersection of cultural networks of discourse, but in doing so his work also explores options for inscriptions which are radical, improper, inutile, naughty, misbehaved—in a word, noisy and beyond sense. With these performance activities, Acconci short-circuits the cultural regimen; his work is resistant in precisely this way. Resistance, of course, might be defined in the terms of electrical engineering as the "noise in the channel." There is always a politics to noise, and, Acconci suggests, the static in systems is worth listening to:

> Thingness makes language solid but, in doing so, destroys language—which, in order to work "normally," has to remain transparent so that it leaves the world as it is. When language becomes solid, it prevents normal flow, from person to language to world.[55]

One can see those blockages and opacities in Acconci's carefully staged simulations and exposures of the body in pain. The marks and contortions of that body and all of its pathologies witness the deformations produced by a particular discourse network, and one should not overlook the political logic of Acconci's morbid masochism.

Contemporaneous with Acconci's early performance pieces, Stanley Milgram conducted a series of notorious performances that enacted carefully staged models of social communication and their aberrant pathologies.[56] Linking electrified bodies into a network of medial technologies, Milgram set out to measure his subjects' "obedience to authority." Under the pretext of an experiment into the pedagogic efficacy of negative reinforcement, unsuspecting participants were instructed to administer increasingly potent electric shocks to an actor whom they had seen placed in an adjoining room and strapped down, prepped, and wired with electrodes. Despite an array of lab equipment and the scripted simulation of the cries and spasms of an electrocuted body, no electricity was actually administered to the complicitous "victim." Over the course of the experiment, however,

55.   Acconci, "Notes," n.p.
56.   For an account of these experiments, see Milgram's chilling and surprisingly poetic *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974). Milgram's experiments, like so much of the artistic work of the period, are thoroughly Wittgensteinian. Wittgenstein's own thought experiments were conducted in order to answer the questions: "How can we believe that the other has pain; what does it mean to believe this? How can the expression of such a supposition make sense?" (*The Blue Book and Brown Books* [New York: Harper and Row, 1958], p. 48), and his investigations return to the "connexion with 'pain in someone else's body'" (*Philosophical Investigations*, Third Edition, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe [New York: Macmillan, 1968], p. 222).

Milgram's subjects, like the gallery audience for *Seedbed*, heard the amplified broadcast of obscene noises—ostensibly the pleadings and screams of a body in pain—from the hidden performer, who appeared to respond to their activity. Milgram's work might be read as part of the documentation of postwar art. Acconci's work might be read as a scientific experiment.

By shifting the focus from "meaning" to the conditions under which meanings can be produced, much of Acconci's work, like Milgram's experiments, serves as a kind of litmus test for the audience. With an aestheticized artifice reminiscent of the work of Sophie Calle or Rudolf Schwarzkogler, pieces like *Broadjump* or the *Untitled Project for Pier 17* establish scenarios that vacillate almost indeterminately between threat and stagecraft. These works do not so much provide the record of a past event—an hermeneutic object that can be analyzed for meaning—as they carefully establish the architectonics of various narratives and leave the viewer to pursue particular plots within their parameters. In the distressingly titled *Broadjump*, for instance, Acconci made a standing broad jump, marking the length of his leap across the gallery floor and including photographs of two young women along with the announcement that anyone who bested his jump would be entitled to chose one of them with whom to spend a specified period of time. But the documentation for *Broadjump* stops short of providing the marks that would constitute communication: the addition of another jumper's prints to engage the "dumb literalness" of Acconci's solitary marks on the gallery floor and activate them from the level of signifiers to the status of signs. Refusing to confer meaning (time spent with one of the women) with this pretermission, *Broadjump* fabricates channels—the verb is chosen with consideration—but omits data.

Similarly, *Claim* posits the artist's body as a violently signifying machine, waiting to mark other bodies with its primitive stylus and plugged into a closed-circuit video loop. The blindfolded Acconci, armed with metal pipes and a baseball bat, sat swinging into space and ranting to the camera that was transmitting his taunts and threatening warnings street-side. According to Acconci's later accounts, no one really tried to get past him as he sat gesturing blindly at the bottom of Willoughby Sharp's basement stairs. Nonetheless, one of the photographs that documents the performance is taken from behind a figure apparently lurching unsteadily down the stairs.[57] The "documentation," that is, does in fact *claim* more than the actual performance will admit.

More than anything else, though, this photograph interrogates its viewers: Do we expect Acconci to strike someone? Do we *want* him to? To what extent do

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57.   This is not to privilege Acconci's personal account or invest it with any special authority. The same point could be made by simply pointing out that the "documentation" supplies no record of the mysterious figure's descent or confrontation; even if Acconci had bludgeoned someone, the records that come to us as *Claim* are constructed to present the performance, as it were, before the fact.

we empathize with Acconci's medial inscriptions of private space? As with many of his works, these photographs force us to realize at precisely what point we recognize the apparent drama as a simulacrum. Is that a grimace, or a grin, on Acconci's famous lips—menacing or mischievous? The stakes of the reading are high, not because the reading might fix some meaning on Acconci, but because it reveals something important about the viewer. That viewer's careful consideration of Acconci's work both poses and answers a further series of queries: to what point have we been conditioned to respond without questioning to an all-too-familiar narrative, *even a narrative of opposition*, and to follow without resistance the trace of signs along a particular path within a discourse network—within architectures of words and things, and words *as* things. "Oral language numbs. Written language demands. The listener dreams; the reader struggles."[58] But at what point do we refuse to participate? Can we ultimately make such a refusal at all? Milgram's work suggests one answer, and a more thorough account of Acconci's work might provide the framework within which to better read Milgram's performances—and all those activities that have brought electronic media to bear on our ceaselessly inscribed and ceaselessly inscribing bodies.

> *performance*
> *depends on knowledge*
> *of relations*
> *[...]*
> *who examines the flesh for signs?*

> —David Antin, *10th Separation Meditation*

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58. Vito Acconci, "Notes on Language," *Perverted by Language* (Brookville, NY: Hillwood Art Gallery, 1987), p. 6.