

Seedbed and the Wedge of Chastity: **The erotic play of interpretation**

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The artist Vito Acconci's still-notorious work, a performance-installation called *Seedbed*, today holds a recognised position in the expanding terrain that characterised art in the United States during the latter half of the 1960s and early 1970s. If one does not know the work directly, one will perhaps be familiar with the legend of this incident in the New York art scene in which the artist lay below the gallery floor masturbating. A bare description such as this emphasises the reputation of the provocation far more than its meaning. In considering the latter as construed by art critics and historians there are two main factors. Firstly, there is the experiential nature of the work, which unsurprisingly proved to be a central feature of the art critic's and public's response; and secondly, the structure of the artwork and its title, which have a significant role in how the work has been understood to relate to artistic precedents.

Both of these aspects will be considered in what follows. To appreciate the first point, it is necessary to reconstruct the experience one would have had of the performance-installation. The work was presented on two days each week for the one-month duration of the exhibition, a solo show in the newly opened Sonnabend gallery in downtown Manhattan. On entering the room, one of four spaces in the gallery, there would be few features to hold one's attention. The ten-minute film documenting the performance begins and ends with a panning shot of the space. In this one sees the expanse of the bare wooden floor, which from the centre of the room towards the far wall ascends to form an elevation. The analogy with a landscape suggested by the title is affirmed in this case by the movement of the camera. One would also see the white walls, and on the side wall nearest to us extending alongside the elevation there are four small black panels with handwritten notes. At the far side of the elevation there is a speaker. In still images of the work what is striking is the emptiness of the space; the raised floor and broadcasting apparatus suggest at most an unused stage. Yet from the speaker one would have heard a man's voice perhaps,

little more than muttering or moaning at first. As one walked into the room, ascending the elevation, as the visitors in the film predominantly do, one could make out the words intoned. Responsive to one's actions, the voice articulates a sexual scene between himself and the visitor. The reaction to this varied. The critic Peter Schjeldahl observed with abhorrence that 'some people, while I was present, seemed to be listening. I simply fled.'¹ The critic David Bourdon, by contrast, offered a more playful and empirical response, remarking that 'I not only listened but also stomped across the ramp a few times, which produced whimpering pleas of: "Oh, step on me, step on me harder".'²

The contrivance of the performance, in which the gallery visitor is implicated simply by virtue of being in the room, would have become clear, as Bourdon illustrates, as the experience unfolded. The notes presented on the wall not only made explicit what was occurring but also alluded to the overall meaning of the experience. The artist's solitary sexual activity, which occurs below the elevated floor, and of which we only receive an aural testimony, is explained to be the 'production of seed' for which fantasies about the visitors present provides a spur to continued excitation. The fulfilled 'private' act, that of the 'seed planted on the floor', becomes, the artist's notes explain, 'a joint result of my presence and theirs.'³ The relation between the artist and viewer is therefore not simply a broadcast of intermittent sexual fantasies but rather a sustained metaphor of semination, entailing both the initiator of the situation and the recipient. As a result, the work made a general claim about the assumed nature of the artist and the artwork, exposing the implicit masculine gendering of artistic production. As Kate Linker commented, it plays on the notion of the virile, 'prolific' artist and the 'seminal' work.⁴

The historian of performance art Amelia Jones was the first to overturn the prevailing view of Acconci's sexual politics, and show how it formed a comprehensive interrogation of masculinity. In her view the performance-installation tells us a greater



truth about the work of art. Challenging the autonomy of the modernist artwork and the corresponding 'disinterestedness' of its viewing subject, *Seedbed*, she asserts, puts into effect a 'radicalizing, polymorphous erotics of intersubjective experience' between the artist and viewer.⁵ The eroticised exchange, which involves a relation between gendered bodies, exposes the forms of identification that sustain power relations in the institution of art. Conversely, the work offers the possibility of unbinding established identifications and actively forming new forms of identification and meaning. Importantly, this dynamic is not simply present in the encounter with the performance but also persists in the subsequent construction of the artwork's meaning.

It is issues of interpretation such as these that are brought to mind when looking at Marcel Duchamp's *Wedge of Chastity*, on permanent display at the Dean Gallery, Edinburgh. This is not coincidence, since the art critic Robert Pincus-Witten has spoken insistently of a relationship between the two works. However, Duchamp's object seems extremely disconcerting in a way that the documentation of Acconci's performance no longer is. The object, the artist's wedding gift for his wife Teeny, consists of an irregular

oblong block of galvanised plaster forced into a piece of dentist's modelling plastic. It was the last of the three so-named erotic objects that Duchamp produced in the 1950s – the other two were *Female Fig Leaf* and *Objet Dard*.

Whereas the two earlier works are clearly related to the male and female anatomy and signalled the pleasures of the body, the final object is not immediately identifiable in these terms, suggesting instead a union of sexes. One can discern a significant polarity in how this particular object, of all of the three erotic objects, has been considered by art historians. Frances Nauman, observing the close embrace of the two materials, has suggested that the work may be understood as articulating the artist's philosophy of eroticism. In an interview Duchamp declared: 'I want to grasp things with the mind the way the penis is grasped by the vagina.'⁶ The object in this case stands in for an intellectual eroticism, and highlights a desire to see in the work a general erotic philosophy, which is fundamental, as we have seen, to the understanding of Acconci's work. At the other end of the spectrum is the assertion that the object conveys not pleasure but 'sexual anxiety'.⁷ The visual and material resemblance of the object to a tooth in a gum brings with it a common association in psychoanalysis with

1. Vito Acconci, *Seedbed*, 1972.

Reproduced courtesy of the artist; photo Ed Bowes

anxiety and castration. Prompted by a strong subjective response to the object, one can recognise in these uneasy and conflicted interpretative positions the potential usefulness of the *Wedge of Chastity* as a mediating object with which to think about *Seedbed*.

It should be said that to discuss Acconci's work in the same breath as Duchamp's is in itself unremarkable. In a recent survey of the so-called 'Duchamp effect', Acconci has been seen as profiting from the 'very frankness of Duchamp's interest in sexual mechanics' and his 'exploration of male identity'.⁸ It is worth recalling in this respect that the assertion of art historical paternity, Duchamp's work as a precedent for Acconci's, was established within months of the performance of *Seedbed* in an article written by Robert Pincus-Witten and published in the leading art magazine of the day, *Artforum*.⁹ The Sonnabend exhibition cemented Acconci's reputation as one of the rising stars of the New York art scene. And, importantly, this was in the midst of curatorial and critical endeavours to establish Duchamp's legacy in the art of the United States after the Second World War, following the artist's death in 1968. What had sustained this line of interpretation is an equivalence drawn between the structures of *Seedbed* and Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (commonly referred to as the *Large Glass*, 1915–23). Both works concern a relationship between the sexes but one that is notably defined by frustrated desire. In Duchamp's free-standing glass-panel construction there are two separated realms, that of the bachelors below and the bride above, just as in *Seedbed* there is the onanistic activity of the artist below the floor separated from the space of the visitor above. The obvious compatibility of the two structures has not, however, been tested beyond this basic similarity, leaving at the heart of this assertion of Duchampian precedent a degree of vacuity.

In Pincus-Witten's article the relationship between *Seedbed* and the *Large Glass* was first established. Of particular significance for the critic was Duchamp's description of the work as being an 'agricultural machine'. The metaphor, which evokes the idea of fecund nature being harnessed by male industry, was consistent with Duchamp's mechanomorphic thinking. It also corresponds with the metaphor of fertility and semination that both the title and notes of Acconci's work elaborate. Pincus-Witten also

referred to the idea of the artist's name as a readymade, which allows us to consider the figure of the artist as combining masculine and female traits. The name Marcel separates into 'mar' and 'cel' which are the first letters of the two words *Mariée* (bride) and *Célibataire* (bachelor), thereby embracing the separate elements of the work in a single figure. This interpretation was further corroborated by Acconci's film *Conversions*, in which he attempted with bathos to change his physical form into a woman's, and Duchamp's female persona *Rose Sélavy*. However, in an interesting move, Pincus-Witten does not read *Seedbed* simply as a separation between two realms, that of the bachelors and bride, but focuses instead on the ascending floor as 'minimalist' insertion into the space. This 'wedge,' as he refers to it, is understood as an allusion to Duchamp's object. Noting the similarity between Robert Morris's minimalist sculpture of the mid-1960s and the elevated floor of Acconci's installation, the critic contends that 'the wedge-shaped floor seems apposite to the meaning of wedge as a fusion of male and female.'¹⁰ In the architectural-sculptural form of the installation the critic argues that there is a conjunction between opposing tendencies, the puritanical abstraction of minimalism and the expansive erotic ruminations of Duchamp's work. Significantly, though, this marriage of tendencies was in his view inherently unstable and potentially short-lived because 'of the virtually antithetical nature of these two positions'.¹¹

The interpretation of *Seedbed* is, to follow Jones's contention, an ongoing act in the construction of its meaning that extends the implications of the original erotic exchange. In this paper, Duchamp's erotic object, the *Wedge of Chastity*, has acted as a mediating term in examining these issues and recalling a history of the work's reception. In conclusion, one can distinguish two distinct aspects in Acconci's Duchampian inheritance. There is the direct, literal parallel between the performance-installation and Duchamp's *Large Glass*. And then there is the peculiar misdirection of the Duchampian object, that supports the former prevailing view, but also alludes both to a desire to see in the work a general erotic philosophy and also a profound sexual anxiety, echoing the 'antithetical nature' that Pincus-Witten suggested potentially de-stabilised a Duchampian inheritance. This is a positive state of affairs, one may argue, because it keeps in play the interpretative act.

As a final remark, it is appropriate to recall in relation to dominant interpretation that in the 1970s Acconci's work was seen as dangerous precisely because of what John Tancock described as the 'completely literal translation of Duchampian ideas'.¹² In passing judgment on *Seedbed*, the author remarked that the 'Duchampian pun of the title served only to emphasize the sterility of the event'.¹³ Although intentionally condemnatory, this turn of phrase actually affirms the questioning of masculinity and its metaphoric construction that we have come to recognise as the very point of Acconci's work.

NOTES

- 1 Peter Schjeldahl, 'Vito Acconci at Sonnabend,' *Art in America*, Vol.60, no.2, March–April 1972, p.119.
- 2 David Bourdon, 'An Eccentric Body of Art,' reprinted in Gregory Battcock and Robert Nickas (eds), *The Art of Performance: A Critical Anthology*, New York: E.P. Dutton 1984, p.192.
- 3 The exhibited notes are reproduced as figure 117 in Nikos Stangos (ed.), *Concepts of Modern Art*, London: Thames & Hudson 1997.
- 4 Kate Linker, *Vito Acconci*, New York: Rizzoli 1994, p.44.
- 5 Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject*, London & Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1998, p.137.
- 6 Frances M. Naumann, *Marcel Duchamp: The Art of Making Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Ghent: Ludion 1999, p.183.
- 7 Dawn Ades, Neil Cox and David Hopkins, *Marcel Duchamp*, London: Thames & Hudson 1999, p.187.
- 8 David Hopkins, 'Re-Thinking the "Duchamp Effect"', in Amelia Jones (ed.), *A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945*, Oxford & Malden, MA: Blackwell 2006, pp.145-63.
- 9 Robert Pincus-Witten, 'Vito Acconci and the Conceptual Performance,' *Artforum*, Vol.10, no.8, April 1972, p.47-9.
- 10 Pincus-Witten (n.9), p.49.
- 11 Pincus-Witten (n.9), p.47.
- 12 John Tancock, 'The Influence of Marcel Duchamp,' in Anne D'Harnoncourt and Kynaston McShine (eds), *Marcel Duchamp*, Munich: Prestel Verlag 1989, p.176.
- 13 John Tancock (n.12), p.178.