

# Vito Acconci, public places

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VITO ACCONCI

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1911-1912



# VITO ACCONCI

Public Places

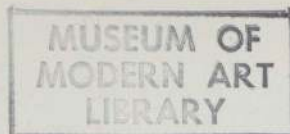
Linda Shearer



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## *Acknowledgments*

This exhibition, focusing on the work of the last five years, includes major pieces of sculpture chosen to emphasize the increasingly public nature of Vito Acconci's art. While the actual number of works involved is relatively small, the nature of the exhibition and the accompanying publication required an effort that has been truly monumental.

Within the Museum, I must first thank William Rubin, Director of the Department of Painting and Sculpture, for his unqualified support of this undertaking from its inception over two years ago. The concern and advice of my good friends and colleagues in the department, Carolyn Lanchner, who also provided invaluable help with the catalogue text, and Kynaston McShine, have been a constant source of encouragement.

The day-to-day preparation of the exhibition itself required an extraordinary range of talent and expertise. I would like to express my gratitude to Lynne Addison, for supervising the complicated shipping arrangements; to Jennifer Carlson, for dealing diligently with publicity; to Lacy D. Doyle, for tireless efforts toward funding the project; to Janis Ekdahl, for thorough research; and to Betsy Jablow, for guidance of all budgetary matters. Sue B. Dorn, Susan Jackson, Richard L. Palmer, James S. Snyder, and Philip Yenawine all willingly ventured into many areas beyond conventional job descriptions. From the beginning, Jerome Neuner and Randal Reackhof were indispensable in working out the daunting problems of production and installation.

The catalogue presented the very special challenge of trying to capture something of the spirit of Acconci's work. I am indebted to the designer, Keith Godard, for responding to the challenge with such sympathetic imagination. Within the Department of Publications, I gratefully acknowledge the material contributions of Tim McDonough and Daniel Frank, both of whom oversaw the complexities of production with attentive skill. James Leggio edited the catalogue with a keen intelligence and an even keener wit, and I would like to thank him for the great pleasure of working with him on this occasion.

Of all the individuals outside the Museum, I especially want to acknowledge Edward Batcheller, one of Acconci's designers and engineers. He graciously and cheerfully accomplished miracles of untold skill and patience. Ron Ervolino and Luis Vera, also responsible for the design and fabrication of the three large pieces reconceived for this exhibition, have worked closely with the artist on the execution of many of his sculptures; Vito joins me in thanking them both, along with John Tagiuri for his important contributions to the work. Together we both would like to express our appreciation to David C. Walentas of Two Trees, Inc., and his associate, George Pastor, for the generous donation of work space for constructing the pieces. Among the many people who were extremely helpful in preparing the exhibition, Gary Garrels, Rhona Hoffman, Michael Klein, Liz Koury, Joyce Schwartz, Judith van Wagner, and Ealan Wingate deserve special mention.

Two individuals must be cited quite apart, for all that they have done to make this project both a pleasure and a reality. The first, of course, is Vito Acconci himself. He responded to the inevitable pressures of such an exhibition with characteristic understanding and creative intensity, making the experience of working with him not only enjoyable but genuinely exhilarating. The second is Lynn Zelevansky, who assisted me during every phase of preparing the exhibition and catalogue. A true friend and collaborator, she shared equally in every decision, every problem, and every solution, doing so with enthusiasm, critical intelligence, and unfailing good humor. I remain profoundly in her debt.

On behalf of the Museum, I would like to express to the National Endowment for the Arts our deep appreciation of its timely and substantial grant for this exhibition. The Coca-Cola Foundation, General Atlantic Corporation, the Ford Motor Company Fund, and the New York State Council on the Arts each contributed additional support. The Contemporary Arts Council of The Museum of Modern Art deserves our thanks for funding this publication. Finally we are indebted to the lenders, especially two: Laura Donnelley and the Hillwood Art Gallery at the C.W. Post Campus of Long Island University; their commitment went far toward making the exhibition possible.

L.S.





*Vito Acconci: Public Places*

*Linda Shearer*

*with the collaboration of  
Lynn Zelevansky*

For almost two decades Vito Acconci has shocked, entertained, and angered art audiences. He has consistently been among our most astute social critics, but he has remained paradoxical. His message is not and never has been straightforward or easily definable. Instead, he seeks a pluralizing of meaning whose provocative ambiguity undercuts social and artistic conventions.

Acconci is an interdisciplinary artist. Roland Barthes, the French philosopher, whose influence Acconci acknowledges, has suggested that the idea of the interdisciplinary is a subversive one, upsetting "the calm of an easy security."<sup>1</sup> Modern artworks may often speak their own, very private language, but most of these difficult works at least fit into established categories — such as painting, sculpture, drawing, or film — and thereby offer a familiar starting point. Deprived of even this frame of reference, viewers may well feel insecure, even anxious. By eluding such conventional categories, Acconci imposes discomfort.

Born in 1940, Acconci began his career as a poet, but in 1969 started using photographs in addition to words to record simple actions like touching his toes (Toe-Touch, 1969) and throwing a ball (Throw, 1969). In the early 1970s he used video and film together with words to document more ambitious works in which he manipulated his body. There is rage as well as comedy in these pieces, which show Acconci, acting as transgressor, struggling against such ineluctable imperatives as gender. For example, in *Conversions 1* (1970–71) he burned the hair off his chest and then pulled at himself in "a futile attempt to develop a woman's breast."<sup>2</sup>

By 1971 he was mixing performance with gallery installations. The notorious *Seedbed* (1972) was an early instance of this. The ramp under which Acconci lay



was a kind of Minimalist sculpture, and his monologue, triggered by the unseen viewer above him and carried on as the artist masturbated, constituted the performance component. The years between 1974 and 1979 were devoted almost entirely to the mixture of audio- or videotapes with installation or sculpture, while in the 1980s his major concern has been sculpture alone. In this more recent work, language continues to play a role, but only a subordinate one, as titles and in the form of the commentaries that the artist writes for most of his pieces.

Since 1974, Acconci has absented his physical person from his work, evidence perhaps of an increasing concern with the viewer, as opposed to the artist. This shift in his work accords with Barthes's well-known essay "The Death of the Author" (1968), which asserts the creative primacy of the reader over the author. In his early work, Acconci had made himself the focus; meaning emanated exclusively from him. He had embraced the Romantic image of the artist as solitary rebel, an aspect of the cult of individuality. But as Acconci's work has matured, it has become instead the task of the audience to continually define and redefine its meaning.

Nonetheless, just as Acconci appears most susceptible to such a theoretical analysis, he slips out of it. Despite his increasing deference to the viewer as a source of power, Acconci never denies his own subjectivity, or relinquishes his prerogatives. He believes it is the role of the artist to throw a monkey wrench into existing political systems.<sup>3</sup> He continually places himself in opposition to social expectations, feeling compelled to make art that "takes a jab." He says, "I really don't know how to be interested in any relationship that doesn't cause trouble for me and potentially for another person."<sup>4</sup> In his attempt to rid himself,

and us, of the constraints of social and aesthetic conventions, he remains an antagonist, an outsider, an eternal wanderer. The resulting sense of alienation is essential to the experience of his work. If for Barthes "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author,"<sup>5</sup> for Acconci, the artist never quite dies.

It has been suggested that the cramped positions his environmental sculptures often demand from participants, and their close seating arrangements, carry a message of imposed identity and "enforced sociability."<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, Acconci is no cynic and is possessed of a genuine, even idealistic, urge toward community. He may not believe that such an ideal is easily attainable, but he doesn't ever give up on it, either. Although he has been an important influence on younger artists, he has not wholeheartedly endorsed the vision of fragmentation, derived largely from structuralist and poststructuralist theory, that characterizes much postmodern art.

The presence, in individual Acconci works, of both genuine belief in community and fear of the conformity a community imposes is typical of the paradoxes that characterize his art. Acconci plays with this irresolution. The idea of home, for example, holds special meaning, partly inspiring his use, in many sculptures, of the "house" motif. In Acconci's eyes, the house is filled with often contradictory associations — private on the inside, public on the outside — which are evoked through architectural conventions. Home represents security, shelter, protection, and sanctuary, the place where we grow up, and which we must ultimately leave, never to really return. But it is also restrictive. Although, as an idealized vision, he yearns for home, he can never quite accept the parental authority it implies, which he perceives to be repressive. Thus, the Swiss chalet architecture of *Houses Up the Wall* (1985; pp. 6–7)

has a quaint, inviting coziness, but inside, the piece turns out to be very confining to sit in.

Politically, Acconci maintains a similarly ambiguous position. The viewer activates *Instant House* (1980; p. 8) by sitting on a swing at the center of four panels that are like theater flats, lying on the floor. Pulleys attached to the swing then raise the panels, which now become walls that enclose the individual. The interiors of the walls are plastered with American flags, but the person operating the work cannot see that the hammer and sickle has also been raised, pasted on the exterior of the sculpture. Seduced by a seemingly innocent piece of playground equipment, participants become, on one hand, stooges in the home they have essentially built, unaware of their complicity in spreading propaganda. On the other hand, Acconci renders the national symbols of the USSR and USA interchangeable, neutralizing the symbolic language of political institutions. The piece indicates his reluctance to adopt an ideological orthodoxy. It also manifests the acknowledged influence of the architect Robert Venturi, who favors "signage" over modernist form because it is "explicit, denotive communication."<sup>7</sup> Venturi observes that, in Las Vegas, architecture and signs are often combined, with the facade of a casino acting as one big sign. He asks, "Is the sign the building or the building the sign?,"<sup>8</sup> a question equally pertinent to *Instant House*. Drawn, like Venturi, to the forms of vernacular American architecture, Acconci is also impelled by the history that shaped them.

Acconci has an abiding interest in the notion of the town square. He aspires to create what is termed "public art." Unique to him is his interpretation of the word *public* as conveying "the notion of a kind of town square, the notion of a kind of discussion place, argument place, start-a-revolution place."<sup>9</sup> In America, the



town square, derived from the village common or green, is identified with the concept of revolution. Militias, both colonial and British, trained on various American village greens; the Minutemen gathered on the common in Lexington, Massachusetts. These greens are symbolic of the townships where the revolution originated.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, the town square harkens back to a simpler, and seemingly more ideal form of community, for the village green was unowned, common land, used by all. In keeping with this vision, Acconci's installation for Coca-Cola headquarters in Atlanta, Garden of Columns (1987; pp. 28–29), subtitled Town Square for Workers, is essentially nonhierarchical. The installation is made up of columns of different heights, within which plants or seats are housed in torso-shaped cutouts. Acconci has rejected the formal topiary garden, a symbol of imperial power. His Coca-Cola piece is more like a garden grown wild, suggesting dispersal or decentralization of power, a potentially inflammatory concept for an employees' seating area in a corporate headquarters.

It is telling that Acconci greatly admires the film director John Ford. Acconci is drawn to Ford's romantic and sentimental tales of frontier settlers and their conquest of the American West because to him they express an "almost desperate need to have a home." Ford's films provide a model for Acconci's iconic structures, as well as for his town square, with the wilderness and savagery of the West just outside the boundaries of the town constantly threatening the vision: "I always remember that scene in *My Darling Clementine* where there are these half-built buildings, and they are very much The Church, The Courthouse. You see these half-built buildings, and then the camera pans to the empty landscape."

Although the community may fail, Acconci never loses sight of it as an ideal. He appears to have faith in

the dynamic of bringing people together, no matter what the consequences. His recent sculptures, which he refers to as "occasions for interaction,"<sup>11</sup> can be seen as public arenas of pure potential, where we are free to confront our hopes and fears. As has been said of Ford, Acconci is drawn "to public places where men speak their minds openly."<sup>12</sup>

This town-square ideal and the notion of the artwork as a meeting place are, in some ways, recent developments, and help to explain the shift in focus for the artist. Many of the confrontational elements usually associated with Acconci have been purged from his work in the last few years. He says he stopped creating performance and body works because "it seemed to me that as long as I was there live, the work couldn't get beyond my own personality. Whereas in the beginning I could see my stuff as 'person meets person,'

*Houses Up the Wall, 1985*  
Wood, vinyl, tinted and  
mirrored plexiglass, and  
plants, 10 x 16' x 4' 4"  
(304.8 x 487.6 x 132.1 cm)  
Collection the artist







gradually I came to realize it was 'art viewer meets art star.' I had always been against this notion of cult, or art as religion, or art as sacred object. My shift, then, was from a kind of psychological self to a sociological self."<sup>13</sup> After 1974, his gravelly, sinister voice remained as a vestige of his physical person; in his audio pieces from the mid- and late seventies, his disembodied voice seemed to envelop the viewer and delimit space. But now, his "presence" is totally absent from his work. Language itself, so critical to his earlier work — as poetry, as sound, as visual signifier — is now gone too, except in punning titles.

Today, his still-aggressive messages are communicated less abrasively, out of respect for the expectations of a wider audience, the general public. Transitory installations have given way to sculptural objects and environments for sustained public use. Monologues

have become dialogues. Private has become public.

These changes seem like sharp breaks with the past, but all of Acconci's work is of a piece, and this last phase is a wholly logical, albeit distinct, development. Humor, although rarely discussed, has been a persistent element in his work. His early monologues recall the blunt, aggressive wit of the late stand-up comic Lenny Bruce, as does Acconci's choosing to behave as a transgressor; as with Bruce, what some saw as obscene was meant as social satire. Few of Acconci's recent works attempt the sheer preposterousness of such earlier pieces as *Trappings* (1971), wherein he talked to his penis, which was dressed in doll clothes, and *Gang-Bang* (1980; p. 9), in which huge inflated penises mounted on the roofs of cars chased an inflated breast through Spoleto, Italy. His public constructions of the eighties bespeak a darker sense of folly. In *Sexopath* (*Parting of the Ways*) (1985; pp. 10–11), a clothed figure that is half man and half woman is split by a walkway. This is a sensibility that swings from adolescent slapstick to deeply sinister humor. *Face of the Earth* (1984; pp. 26–27) is at once a good-natured jack-o'-lantern that we can sit in and on and a frighteningly monumental and grotesque skull, with viewers reduced to ants and worms that crawl in and out of its empty sockets.<sup>14</sup>

The threatening and outrageous aspects of Acconci's humor have been tolerated, which was emphatically not the case with Bruce. Acconci has been sheltered by the art world — a world that has fascinated him because, though it has its own fairly rigid set of rules, it lacks many traditional restrictions. His classic performance works were, in fact, fostered by the art community, apparently to satisfy its need for a show of rebellion.

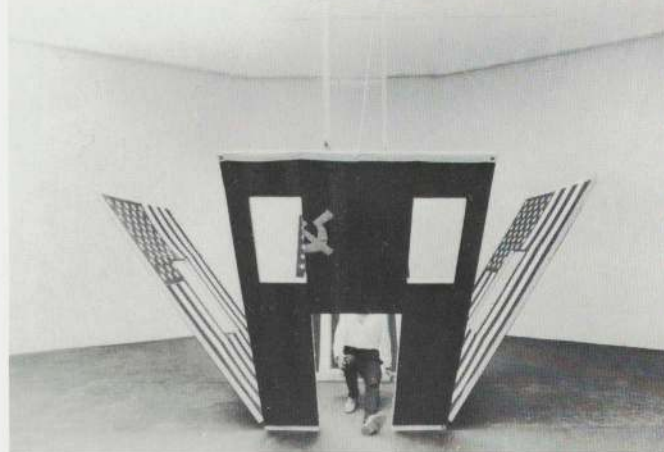
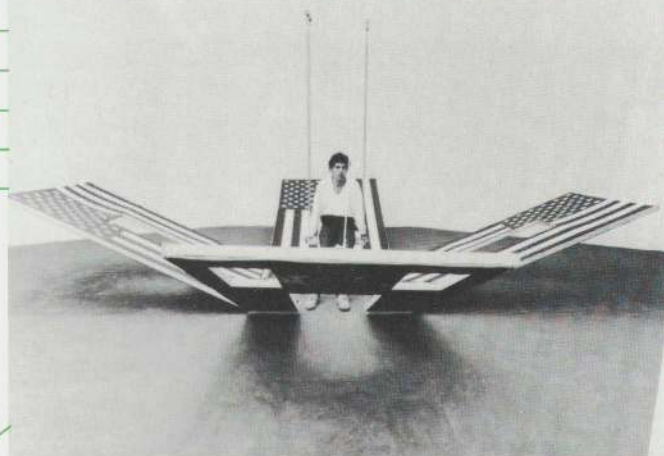
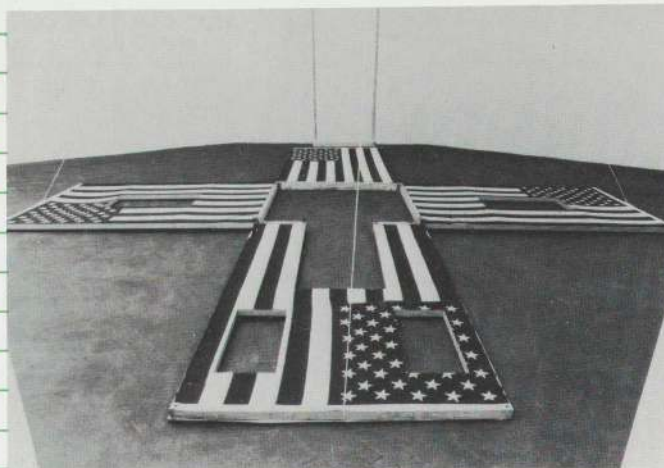
Game-playing, with its implications of both fun and manipulation, is another persistent theme in Acconci's



work. According to Jacques Derrida, play is associated with anxiety, since it implies that the world does not have a stable, fixed structure.<sup>15</sup> Acconci toys with shifts in meaning and the sense of instability and tension they generate. In *Following Piece* (1969), for example, he engaged in an activity usually deemed dangerous or perverse: he tailed strangers, until they entered a private place he could not go. But when the artist documented this activity and shamelessly displayed his documentation in a gallery context, our understanding of the meaning of the recorded acts, as well as of words like "danger" and "perversity," began to destabilize.

Although there is a manipulative side to Acconci's games, he is also playful in the traditional sense. Many of his works correspond to childhood and adult games and sports: *Following Piece* corresponded to "follow the leader." *Broadjump 71* (1971) simulated a real contest

*Instant House*. 1980  
Flags, wood, springs,  
ropes, and pulleys;  
8 x 5 x 5' (243.8 x 152.4 x  
152.4 cm) closed  
La Jolla Museum of  
Contemporary Art



with an actual prize. It took place in Atlantic City, home of the Miss America pageant. Acconci acted as MC, inviting men to compete at the traditional track-and-field event. The winner walked away with a "broad," his choice of one of two women whose pictures were prominent in the installation. In the realm of what Acconci terms "self-erecting architecture," *Peeling House* (1981) requires that four viewers cooperate (like "team players") in order to reveal the interior (inner meaning) of the work.

Acconci's games were originally acted out by himself and perhaps a few others in small, restrictive enclosures (closets, basements, within the confines of photographs and video and film frames). Some of these spaces have the quality of confessionals, and confession is another persistent theme in Acconci's work. In *Untitled Project for Pier 17* (1971), Acconci spent between 1:00 and 2:00 a.m., every night for a month, at an abandoned pier. Anyone who met him there heard a secret which, if revealed, would cause the artist embarrassment or difficulty. Acconci seems to feel that only by exposing the worst, the most sadistic, or the most sexist aspects of himself will those elements be purged. Today Acconci's private, confessional activities have been transformed into public games, acted out by strangers in large, playground-like spaces.

As he has moved from the internalized psychodrama identified with the early work to this involvement with public accessibility, the role and image of the human body have persisted as leitmotifs. Of interest to Acconci has been the theorist Michel Foucault's identification of the body as a primary metaphor for power. Foucault cited the physical presence of the king's body in the seventeenth century, and the idea of a social body constituted through a universality of wills in the nineteenth century, as indicating the significance of this concept.<sup>16</sup>



Almost from the beginning, Acconci used his body and the bodies of others as instruments for revealing the mechanisms of a male-dominated culture, and for flouting its taboos. Broadjump 71, for example, outrageously caricatures the game of male prerogative. The two women, as mere silent images, are put at the mercy of a set of rules permitting a man to live out his fantasies at their expense. Acconci mimics, and so exposes, how a phallogentric society represents women

— as passive; the evidence, not the source, of power.

In later works, images of the human body often function as actual bodies and photographs of bodies do in Broadjump 71. For example, mirrors in the shape of body parts are an important element in Palladium Underground (Garden of Bodies) (1986; p. 11), the large, complex, cave-like seating structure currently installed in the basement of

the New York disco. The mirror stage, according to Jacques Lacan, represents the child's first articulation of the concept "I." At this stage the child, frustrated with its limited motor capacities, believes its likeness to be more perfect than itself.<sup>17</sup> So begins the lifelong struggle between image and self-image; and the early fight for control over oneself also foreshadows a later struggle for power over one's environment. The mirrors in the forms of parts of dismembered bodies serve as

reminders of the underlying violence of these struggles.

Bodies in the Park (1985; p. 12)

makes this violence more explicit. Its vine-covered figures function as high-style lawn furniture but can seem, for an instant, like camouflaged corpses.

In addition to the human body itself, it is the spaces that the body occupies, and their boundaries, which concern Acconci. By the late



*Gang-Bang, 1980*  
Ten cars, roof racks, wind  
scoops, camouflage  
fabric, and parachute;  
dimensions variable  
No longer extant



1970s, the claustrophobic, closet-like spaces of pieces like *Claim* (1971), in which a blindfolded Acconci sat in a basement, threatening people with two lead pipes and a crowbar, had been transformed into objects that, by opening up and closing down, defined the viewer's relationship to him- or herself, to others, and to the surrounding environment. Acconci was no longer acting the madman, haranguing or lecturing the audience, but he continued to exert his control by insisting the viewer work hard to uncover a work's meaning, and by manipulating social dynamics through the work. In pieces such as *Community House* (1981), one person had the capacity to trap another inside the work. Anyone who entered the piece had to trust that another person would reactivate the sculpture and let him or her out.

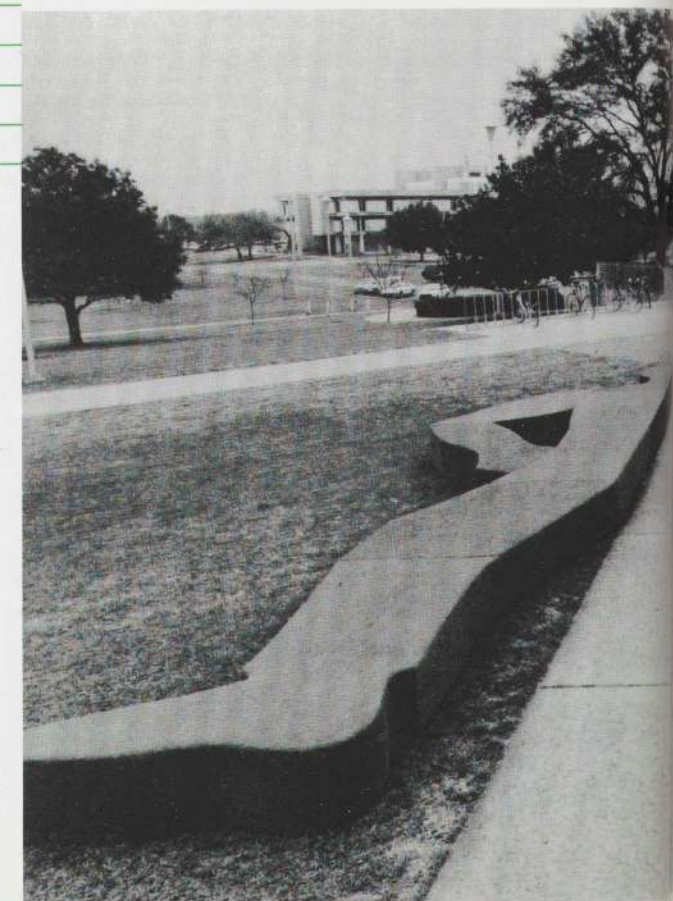
Somewhat surprisingly, in light of the controlling elements that had always been essential to his work, Acconci began to worry that he was victimizing people by insisting they activate his sculptures. He was also troubled by mechanical breakdowns, which rendered a full appreciation of a work impossible. *Room Dividers* (1982; p. 13) first hinted at the artist's dissatisfaction with work that aggressively sought to control the interaction of several viewers. Only one person is required to operate it, and the only action needed is the simple movement of walls, which slide like patio doors. *Room Dividers* eloquently, but didactically, elucidates Acconci's developing concern with creating architectural spaces that can be peopled or inhabited, and which provide the opportunity for people to gather and interact more autonomously. It constitutes his most graphic involvement with the division of space. But as with all of Acconci's work, the piece creates a sense of disorientation, confusion, and unease. We are not really comfortable with constantly shifting spaces.

Less controlling than earlier works, *Room Dividers* was a step toward an involvement with public space. For Acconci public space was to become, by definition, urban space, removed from the context of an art gallery or museum. The *Peplemobile* (1979; p. 14), which consisted of a flatbed truck that traveled to five cities in Holland, is an earlier work that manifests many of the artist's current concerns. This piece involved the European version of his archetypal American meeting place, as the truck parked for three days in the town square of each city. Acconci activated these town squares in an astonishingly provocative way. Each day different structures (benches, cubicles, tables, chairs) were formed by steel panels carried on the truck. For three hours each day, Acconci's rather menacing voice hauntingly intoned phrases in English and Dutch that alternately threatened and welcomed terrorists:

LAdies and GENTLEmen...  
DAMES EN HEREN-  
IS there a TERRORIST in the CROWD...  
IS ER EEN TERRORIST ONDER U-

LAdies and GENTLEmen...  
DAMES EN HEREN-  
I have COME for your TERRORists...  
IK BEN GEKOMEN ON UW TERRORISTEN  
TE VINDEN-  
WATCH me:I can LOOK at your TERRORist  
STRAIGHT in the EYE...  
LET OP MIJ:IK KAN UW TERRORISTEN  
RECHT IN DE OGEN KIJKEN-

(Day 1)  
WELcome, WELcome...  
WELKOM, WELKOM-  
WELcome, TERRORists...  
WELKOM, TERRORISTEN-  
PRESENTing: a TARget for  
TERRORists...  
VAL AAN, TERRORISTEN-  
I PROMise you: THIS time we're  
READY for you...  
IK VERZEKER U: DEZE KEER  
STAAN WE VOOR U KLAAR-  
BANG your HEADS against our  
WALL...  
BEUK JE HOOFD TEGEN  
ONZE MUUR AAN-





*Sexopath (Parting of the Ways), 1985  
Wood and Astroturf, 1'4" x 40 x 24' (40.6 x 1219.2 x 731.5 cm)  
No longer extant*



The Peplemobile was a pivotal piece. Its steel panels, with their shifting configurations, anticipated Acconci's current involvement with architectural elements that, viewed from another angle, also function as furniture. In addition, the work generates anxiety by toying with a dangerous subject, and introducing attitudes and images (a masked truck) which suggest the more violent historical events associated with European town squares, from the French Revolution to World War II. The work subverts ideas of civilized discourse connected with an established social venue. It illustrates the way Acconci's use of the conventions of architecture and related cultural settings (town square, recording studio, suburban home, park memorial) is directly linked to his interest in undercutting accepted notions of order and authority.

Critical to this development, Acconci's first ostensibly public sculpture was Sub-Urb (1983; p. 15), created for Artpark in Lewiston, New York. The artist took a standard house, approximately a hundred feet long, and inverted it so that its peaked roof was underground. Access to the house was through the floor, which was made of sliding panels, like those found in Room Dividers. In this piece, the panels were horizontal and level with the ground. Once one of the panels was moved to the center, a hidden stairway was revealed, permitting access to the underground structure. While Acconci feels the piece failed on a number of counts (the letters stenciled on the panels, which created different words as the panels shifted positions, could be properly deciphered only by passengers in low-flying aircraft), Sub-Urb signaled the direction that the artist explores to this day.

Sub-Urb was seminal in the way it established a relationship between the human body, its special needs (to sit, to interact), and the architecture that accom-



*Palladium Underground  
(Garden of Bodies), 1986  
Concrete, wood,  
plants, and mirrors;  
occupies two rooms, 8 x  
50 x 4' (243.8 x 1524 x  
1219.2 cm) and 8 x 30 x  
20' (243.8 x 914.4 x  
609.6 cm)  
The Palladium, New York*



*Bodies in the Park. 1985  
Steel, wood, Astroturf,  
and artificial ivy; figures,  
7' (213.4 cm) tall (equiv.)  
Collection Jean Sistovares*



modates it. The piece continues where *The Peoplemobile* left off, confounding architecture with furniture. In the newer work, a chair was built into the underside of the stairs, making it integral to the architecture. For Acconci, "The table and chair was a kind of community meeting place," but "the notion of the furniture becoming part of the architecture and in turn, a person then almost becoming part of the architecture as he used it" was of special interest.

Sub-Urb's message changes depending on where viewers are situated, and whether they are seated or standing. In this way, it is a physical realization of the concept of play: it makes visible the shifting meaning of signs. In the rooms of the house, relatively neutral words that are painted on the walls are paired with words that express darker associations: EVOLUTION/REVOLUTION, SOLDIER/GUERRILLA, FATHER/PATRICIDE. From one position the more neutral words can be read, from another the more provocative ones. The Artpark site, so far from the city, set Acconci to thinking about the origins of suburbs. Characteristically, the artist sees them as "a way of getting people out of the cities, because once people are in the cities, the revolution might happen." Thus, ideas of both repression and revolution permeate the illogical and seemingly benign structure of *Sub-Urb*, a piece which expresses Acconci's ideas on the authority of those in power who control our destinies.

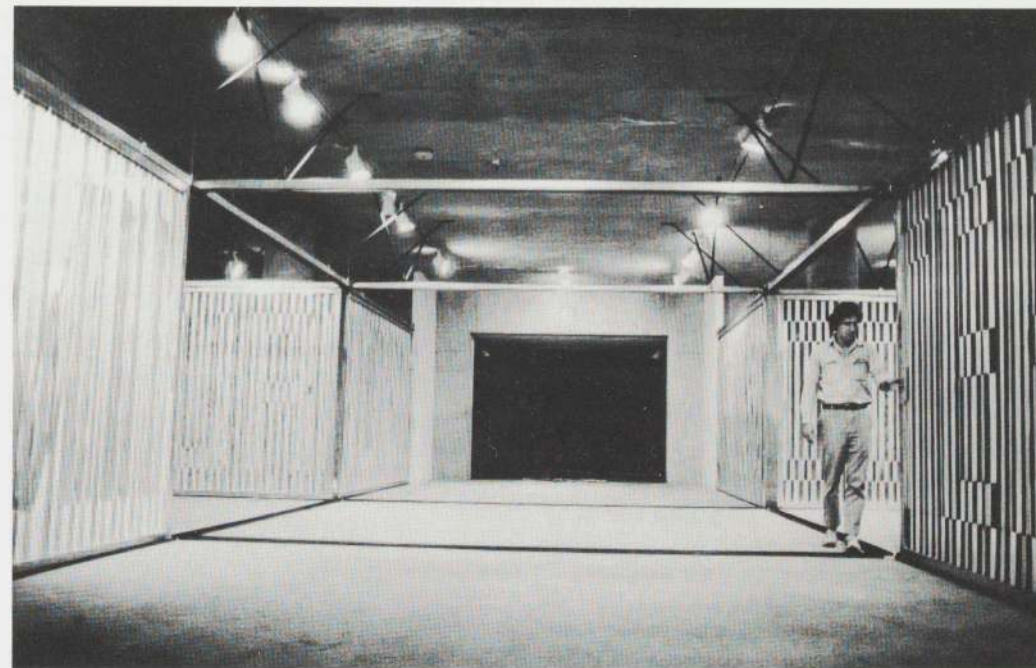
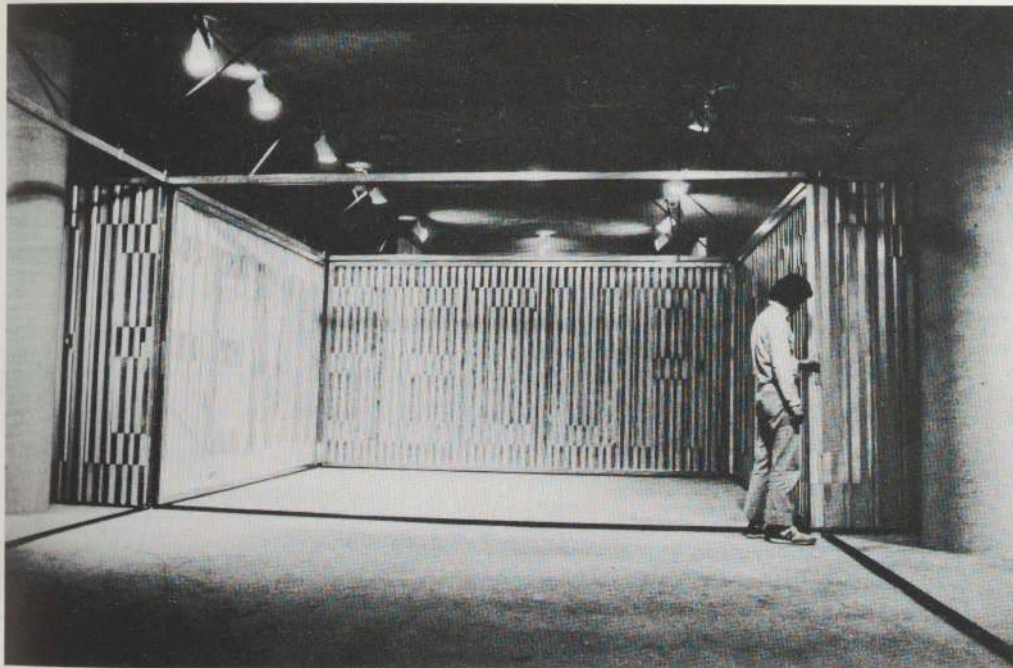
Although he has received relatively few public commissions, Acconci's interest in the public nature of art is profound. This exhibition of recent works focuses on that concern, bringing together three pieces that defy a conventional gallery space. *House of Cars* (1983), *Bad Dream House* (1984), and *Face of the Earth* (1984) are outdoor sculptures intended for permanent display that

have previously been installed in temporary situations. New versions are being constructed for this exhibition. Also on display is a model for *Garden of Columns* (Town Square for Workers) (1987). It and *House in the Ground* (1986; p. 16), which is not represented in the exhibition, are Acconci's two permanent commissions to date. They are installed at Coca-Cola headquarters in Atlanta and at New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, respectively. *Landing* (1986-87), the smallest piece in the exhibition, functioned as a prototype for another public project, *Proposal for Spanish Landing* (1987), represented here by a model.

Acconci resists monumentality of scale, seeing as authoritarian the vertical extension of monuments that dwarf the viewer. This, coupled with his attitude toward permanence, may in part account for the fact that more of his works have not found permanent homes. Acconci is not interested in objects designed to last forever. He tends to measure time in terms of a human life. He has proposed that public art be made of "materials that people are used to, materials that most people have already taken into their own hands: ordinary house-building materials, furniture-making materials. Public art might be meant to last only so long as an ordinary house lasts." He even suggests that his work can be restored "with the understanding that it will be restored with the materials and methods of a future time."<sup>18</sup> It is inevitable that as Acconci remakes sculptures for this exhibition, he will change them, and that his more recent work, current thinking, and the demands of the Museum's space will affect their revisions.

The exhibition also includes Acconci's 1983 *Proposal for a Playground* (p. 21). Swings, slides, seesaws, and jungle gym are all housed in oversize sports gear: a huge baseball catcher's mask, football and hockey





*Room Dividers, 1982*  
Corrugated aluminum,  
steel tracks, enamel spray  
paint; eight walls, four  
8 x 16' (243.8 x 487.6 cm)  
each, four 8 x 12' (243.8  
x 365.7 cm) each  
Collection the artist

helmets. At normal size, these objects function protectively; blown up they resemble cages and prisons. Indeed, to some, high-conflict sports like hockey and football already seem repressive and militaristic. Nevertheless, their status, their cultural role as adolescent initiation rites, makes criticizing the value placed on these all-American activities tantamount to criticizing our culture itself. This is what Acconci has done. In painting the enlarged mask and helmets pink, he has outraged the inviolability of the competitive sports they represent, and travestied the violence of such male-bonding rituals. It seems Acconci's subliminal messages have communicated effectively to prospective playground builders, who have remained wary of the work. In spite of its appealing surface cheerfulness, this project remains unrealized.

Chronologically, Acconci's playground proposal falls between House of Cars and Bad Dream House, both of

which can be seen as metaphorical playgrounds. House of Cars (pp. 22-23), termed by Acconci a "usable housing unit" and a "housing complex," is composed of automobiles that have been gutted and then welded together. The ground level and second story are connected by stairs. The interior of each car, painted a single color, contains realigned car seats, tables, shelves, even a mattress. In its original incarnation, the piece consisted of four battered automobiles that had been painted aluminum, and was situated in one of San Francisco's vacant lots. Inspired by the Australian director George Miller's movies *Road Warrior* and *Mad Max*, House of Cars shared their sense of makeshift living amid social (in this case, urban) collapse. The current version of this piece includes six cars. However much the museum context may modify its meaning, the work should retain the essential quality of a derelict refuge. That potential for habitation is communicated through the viewer's



physical engagement with the work, which is meant to be climbed on and sat in. *House of Cars* becomes a statement on urban survival.

For Acconci, *Bad Dream House* (pp. 24–25), first shown at Zone in Springfield, Massachusetts, in 1984, crystallized many of the ideas latent in *House of Cars*. “It had to do with pieces being composed of certain conventions that we all know, but perverted, the conventions twisted, turned upside down, which is literally what happens in *Bad Dream House*.” The work consists of two traditional peaked-roof wooden structures, placed upside down and side by side, with a third, greenhouse-type building also inverted and nestled on top. It is

like an architectural jigsaw puzzle (in the new version, more like a kaleidoscope). The rooms are interconnected, as in *House of Cars*, but here in moving through the piece we experience the distinction between interior and exterior being turned inside out. Imbued with Acconci’s characteristic contradictions, the piece is like an M.C. Escher drawing in three dimensions.

Of course, viewers recognize the difference between a “real” house and this perversion, but in this piece, the architectural conventions that so intrigue Acconci evoke other associations that are sociological and psychological. *Bad Dream House*, and the conventional houses to which it refers, are what he calls “dream

places, places of desire.” He is concerned with how the image of what we desire is constructed from social expectations. Acconci believes that, in our consumer-oriented society, we are all expected to want our own home, our own car. These are “conventionally desirable and conventionally . . . owned by one person.” But *Bad Dream House* is quite ambiguous in the language of desire that it speaks. With its tasteless artificial-brick facing, it might be a bad dream for the upwardly mobile, but it also fits the long-familiar image of the affordable suburban tract-house that is still perhaps dreamed of by many people of ordinary means. In addition, it is, to say the least, precariously constructed, in a manner threateningly like a nightmare. *House of Cars*, with its pun on “house of cards,” is equally precarious. Both works provoke us into recognizing the instability of a world we ordinarily see as constant and solid.

Acconci stresses how architectural conventions (and, by extension, other sets of conventions) organize our way of seeing things around accepted social norms. He also illuminates the psychological mechanism that makes us cling to these conventions. *Bad Dream House* is symbolic of the “home” that is so important to the artist. The presence of domestic architectural conventions in Acconci’s sculpture releases in us the forces of desire, not just to possess the literal house, but for reunification with our past, for a childhood security which is longed for but unattainable by adults in an uncertain world. Acconci confronts us with our suppressed desires; then, by making the houses so precarious, by undermining their structure, he underscores both the impossibility of regaining that longed-for security and his own ambivalence toward the very idea of home.

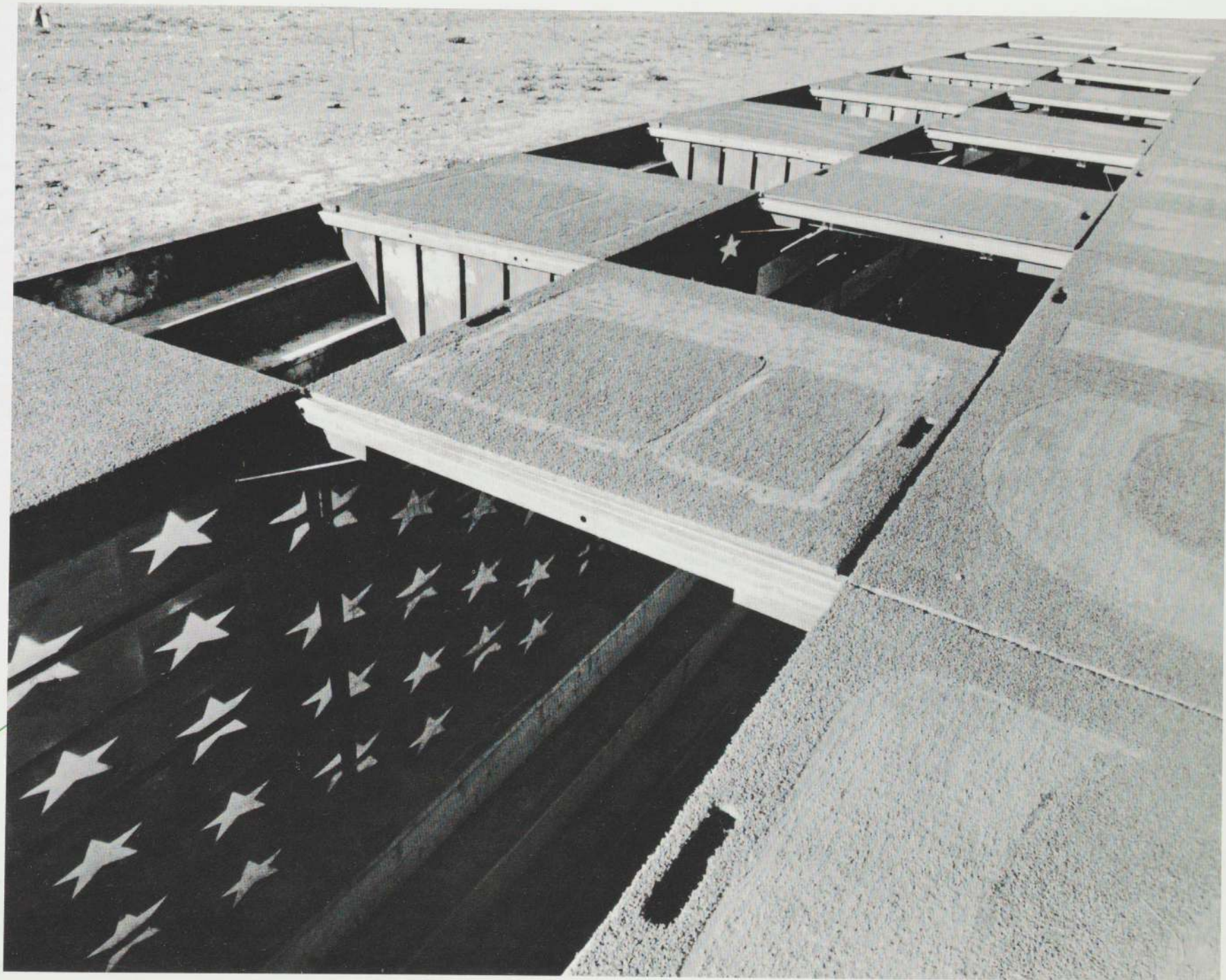
In a number of works, by encouraging interaction Acconci holds open the possibility that community



*The Peoplemobile*, 1979  
Audio speakers, black plastic, flatbed truck, steel panels; dimensions variable  
No longer extant



Sub-Urb. 1983  
Wood and Astroturf, 10 x  
100 x 21' (304.8 x 3048  
x 640.1 cm)  
No longer extant





*House in the Ground, 1986*  
 Adobe bricks, stucco, and  
 wood, 3'4" x 64 x 28'  
 (101.6 x 1930.7 x 853.4 cm)  
 New Mexico State  
 University, Las Cruces



might help compensate for the loss of childhood security. While *House of Cars* and *Bad Dream House* adhere closely to the idea of a private dwelling, *Face of the Earth* (pp. 26–27), along with other landscape-related pieces, is a mini-park, and therefore a public, community-oriented entity from the start. *Face of the Earth* functions as a park bench, a seating arrangement. The eyes each seat one person, the nose seats two sitting face-to-face, and the mouth accommodates several. From its initial inception, the work has been almost continuously on view, first at *Zone* in Springfield, then in New York's City Hall Park, and finally in Laumeier Sculpture Park, St. Louis. Its Astroturf surface has suffered from this long exposure to the elements. The piece is no longer on view outdoors, but there are plans to rebuild it.

Indoors, *House of Cars*, *Bad Dream House*, and *Face of the Earth* are like hothouse plants, uprooted from their natural place, and isolated in the rarefied atmosphere of a museum. This incongruity fits Acconci's need to create a situation in which no one is ever entirely com-

fortable. It is typical of his paradoxical, even perverse thinking, then, that in its indoor incarnation, *Face of the Earth* should be stone and real grass instead of Astroturf. Juxtaposed against a natural environment outdoors, the Astroturf took on an exaggerated artificiality, making the disjunction between art and ordinary reality sharper. In the Museum, the contrast between the natural elements and the pristine white gallery space inverts the sense of artificiality. But just as Astroturf is perishable in the outdoors, real grass is vulnerable inside.

*Landing* (p. 30) has the same kind of inside-out absurdity. Rather than keeping out the water, three colliding aluminum rowboats actually house large goldfish, which swim around in deep-blue water beneath the seats. The boats are bracketed by plants, evoking a lakeside setting immediately contradicted by the gallery enclosure.

Acconci won a public-art commission in San Diego with his *Proposal for Spanish Landing* (p. 31) but is still

embroiled in a citywide controversy over the sculpture's appropriateness for its site, between the ocean and the airport. The work would include sailboats embedded in the grassy site, as if floating on the water, surrounded by airplane-shaped "islands." With its proximity to the airport, the piece has been interpreted as a cruel joke a plane crash — but for Acconci the elements of the sculpture are the elements of the neighborhood, and they connect the work to its surroundings. The airplanes would be "occasions for activity."<sup>19</sup> One would be filled with sand, another would contain a wading pool, and the third would be for climbing. The sailboats are designed for seating.

While it is tempting to attribute the troubles surrounding the San Diego project to the artist's provocativeness (a trait that apparently will not be repressed, his stated desire notwithstanding), it is also true that public-art commissions around the country have had similar difficulties, some of them highly publicized. An *Art News* article from 1982, "Does the Public Want Public Art?," reads like a litany of aborted projects.<sup>20</sup> Artists involved ranged from Robert Motherwell to Claes Oldenburger and Frank Stella. Currently, a heated debate in Charlotte, North Carolina, over a sculpture by Joel Shapiro threatens the very existence of the local policy of setting aside one percent of construction budgets for public art.

Albert Elsen has pointed out that in democracies, public art is always controversial. Under authoritarian regimes there are no debates over the suitability of a work for a site, "but when the regimes are overthrown, so are their statues, as we saw in Prague, Teheran, and Rhodesia in recent times."<sup>21</sup> Elsen notes that in the last years of the Florentine republic, Michelangelo's *David* was stoned on its way to its site in front of the Palazzo Vecchio.

Nevertheless, it seems that during the nineteenth



century there was a logic to public sculpture, based on its commemorative nature and the fact that it spoke symbolically about the meaning and use of its site.<sup>22</sup>

With modernism, that logic faded. It had already begun to do so in Rodin's time. Elsen suggests that the critical outcry for and against *The Thinker* provides "a model of the dilemmas faced by those living under elected governments who would install modern art in public."<sup>23</sup>

Modernist sculpture is largely self-referential, and cut off from temporal and spatial representation. It often demands of the viewer the knowledge of a specific "language" that is still foreign to most people. Certainly these qualities account for a good measure of the hostility it engenders. In addition, public sculpture originated as ornament to architecture. But twentieth-century architecture, largely devoid of ornamentation, has offered little opportunity to build a modernist tradition that would help make public art palatable to the general public.

For a long time, if sculpture was considered for the outside of a modern building, it was chosen by the architect well after the design was completed. Often insensitive to sculptural issues, architects frequently chose badly. Large modernist sculptures squatting in front of urban skyscrapers, ignoring their environment, earned the epithet "plop art."

Although more effective consultation among professionals has now generally improved the quality of outdoor work, the public remains antagonistic to many public projects. Time sometimes helps. Alexander Calder's *La Grande Vitesse*, created for Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 1969, was hated when first installed, yet has since become a kind of symbol of the city.<sup>24</sup> But as Acconci says, "The memory of public art is the tradition of domination: the monument is bigger than a person, and stands on a pedestal above the level of

people."<sup>25</sup> Too often contemporary public sculpture, imposed on a community without consultation, is seen as a symbol of authority, and vandalized.

A number of contemporary artists are addressing these issues by redefining their aesthetic program in terms of architecture. Siah Armajani says, "Our work is not meant to enhance architecture, or to alter it, but to be one in the other, like water in a glass. The public place engulfs us both."<sup>26</sup> He believes that artist and architect should work together. In order to achieve the desired unity with architecture, both Armajani and Scott Burton feel a need to redefine the artist's role. Working for the public sector means getting rid of certain myths about the artist. It means, to some extent, getting rid of the artist's ego. Scott Burton believes that "as a public artist, you have to work within the decorum of public taste."<sup>27</sup>

Despite Acconci's obvious similarities to some others interested in public art, his differences may be more significant. Prevailing attitudes dictate a piece sited for a specific location and not simply "plunked down" as decoration or ornament to a contemporary building, but Acconci's description of *Face of the Earth* indicates that the sculpture "can be placed almost anywhere (on grass or on concrete), preferably in an urban space." Far more important than the site is the situation, and the social and cultural dynamics it generates. Acconci is not above considering adjustments to accommodate a particular situation, and is doing so now in San Diego. He says, "I think public art should be public — it should take a little bit of discussion between me, if I'm chosen to do the piece, and some members of the community. I admittedly am an outsider and I might not know certain things about habits and frames of mind here."<sup>28</sup> This attitude is in keeping with his communal leanings. He might, however, find it difficult to suppress personal

expression in the manner recommended by Burton and Armajani, in order to fit in with the public's sense of decorum. That ideal is foreign to his vision of the artist's role.

For example, Acconci's ambivalent attitude toward permanence cannot endear him to public-art patrons. For him, "Public art anticipates its own history, it envisions its own revolution against it."<sup>29</sup> Impermanence in public art is not new. Recently installed, Richard Long's low-lying pile of twigs and branches, placed in the middle of a path in the park of the Kerguéhennec Estate in southwest Brittany, almost immediately began to disappear, taken over by moss, ferns, and buttercups.<sup>30</sup> Artists have made related works for decades, so we have developed ways to confront them. But for Acconci public art "can't just come and go, or else it's a performance, it's a demonstration. It needs to exist the way a city street exists: this is something we can come back to, years later."<sup>31</sup> Yet it can't be made of steel or bronze because of authoritarian associations with those materials. This is Acconci's concept of an art meant to last as long as an ordinary house. What he is proposing as yet has no model unless it is planned obsolescence: a quasi-permanent art.

Despite those who miss the more confrontational edge of Acconci's early work, it seems fair to argue that, in substance, though he has changed he has remained the same. The obsessions — with private and public interaction, with contradiction, authority, and control — continue. His art is as extreme and subversive as it has always been. His Romantic vision of the artist's role, and his embrace of the paradoxical, make Acconci easily capable of undercutting his own stated goals. And perhaps, as he pursues his attempt to break into the world of public art, he even remains his own worst enemy. The rebel will not be suppressed.



## Notes

For fuller documentation of Acconci's career, see the catalogues of his two retrospective exhibitions: Judith Russi Kirshner's *Vito Acconci: A Retrospective, 1969–1980* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1980) succinctly traces the artist's development through 1979, giving a particularly helpful account of the early body and performance works; Ron Onorato's comprehensive *Vito Acconci: Domestic Trappings* (La Jolla, Calif.: La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, 1987) marshals extensive bibliographical and exhibition information.

- 1 Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," in *Image — Music — Text* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), p.155.
- 2 Vito Acconci, "Conversions," in Judith Russi Kirshner, *Vito Acconci: A Retrospective, 1969–1980*, exhibition catalogue (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1980), p.15.
- 3 George Melrod, "Face to Face," *Eye*, October 1986, p.22.
- 4 Jan Avgikos, "Interview: Vito Acconci," *Art Papers*, January/February 1981, p.3.
- 5 Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image — Music — Text*, p.148.
- 6 Kate Linker, "Vito Acconci's Address to the Viewer or, How Do I Work This Chair?," in *Vito Acconci: The House and Furnishings as Social Metaphor*, exhibition catalogue (Tampa: University of South Florida, 1986), p.7.
- 7 Robert Venturi, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), p.100.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p.73.
- 9 Interview with Linda Shearer, May 23, 1987. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations of Vito Acconci are from this interview.
- 10 Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1965), pp.165–67.
- 11 Vito Acconci, commentary on *Maze Table*, published in Andrea Miller-Keller, *Vito Acconci: Matrix 87*, brochure (Hartford: Wadsworth Atheneum, 1985).
- 12 Andrew Sarris, *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions, 1929–1968* (New York: Dutton, 1968), p.45.
- 13 Ellen Schwartz, "'I Want to Put the Viewer on Shaky Ground,'" *Art News*, Summer 1981, p.98.
- 14 Michael Brenson, "What's New Around Town in Outdoor Sculpture?," *New York Times*, July 19, 1985, p.C23.
- 15 Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 279.
- 16 Michel Foucault, "Body/Power," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), p.55.
- 17 For a feminist reading of Jacques Lacan's interpretation of the mirror stage, and a consideration of its relation to visual imagery, see Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," and Kate Linker, "Representation and Sexuality," both in Brian Wallis, ed., *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984).
- 18 Vito Acconci, "Public Space (The Street and the Park)," in *Vito Acconci: The House and Furnishings as Social Metaphor*, p.20.
- 19 Priscilla Lister Schupp, "Acconci Doesn't Like Airplanes Crashing Either," *San Diego Daily Transcript*, June 5, 1987, p.4A.
- 20 Don Hawthorne, "Does the Public Want Public Sculpture?," *Art News*, May 1982, p.56–63.
- 21 Albert E. Elsen, *Rodin's "Thinker" and the Dilemmas of Modern Public Sculpture* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985), p.112.
- 22 Rosalind E. Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," in Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic* (Port Townsend, Wash.: Bay Press, 1983), p.33.
- 23 Elsen, *Rodin's "Thinker,"* p.112.
- 24 Hawthorne, "Does the Public Want Public Sculpture?," p.61.
- 25 Acconci, "Public Space," p.20.
- 26 Calvin Tomkins, "Like Water in a Glass," *The New Yorker*, March 21, 1983, p.92.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p.97.
- 28 Schupp, "Acconci Doesn't Like Airplanes Crashing Either," p.4A.
- 29 Acconci, "Public Space," p.20.
- 30 Klaus Kertess, "In Nature's Shadow," *Art in America*, September 1987, p.58.
- 31 Acconci, "Public Space," p.20.



*Plates and Artist's Statements*

**The following section illustrates all of the works in the exhibition. Re-created for this showing, House of Cars, Bad Dream House, and Face of the Earth are represented by the artist's preliminary drawings, as well as by photographs of the original versions of the sculptures. The accompanying statements by Acconci, written specially for this catalogue, concern the most recent phase of his work.**





Vito Acconci, 1985

1. The Escape from Art

The person who chooses to do public art might be considered a refugee, in flight from the gallery/museum which has been established as the proper occasion for art in our culture at this time. Escape from the confines of that space means losing the privileges of its laboratory conditions: the luxury of considering art either as a system of universals

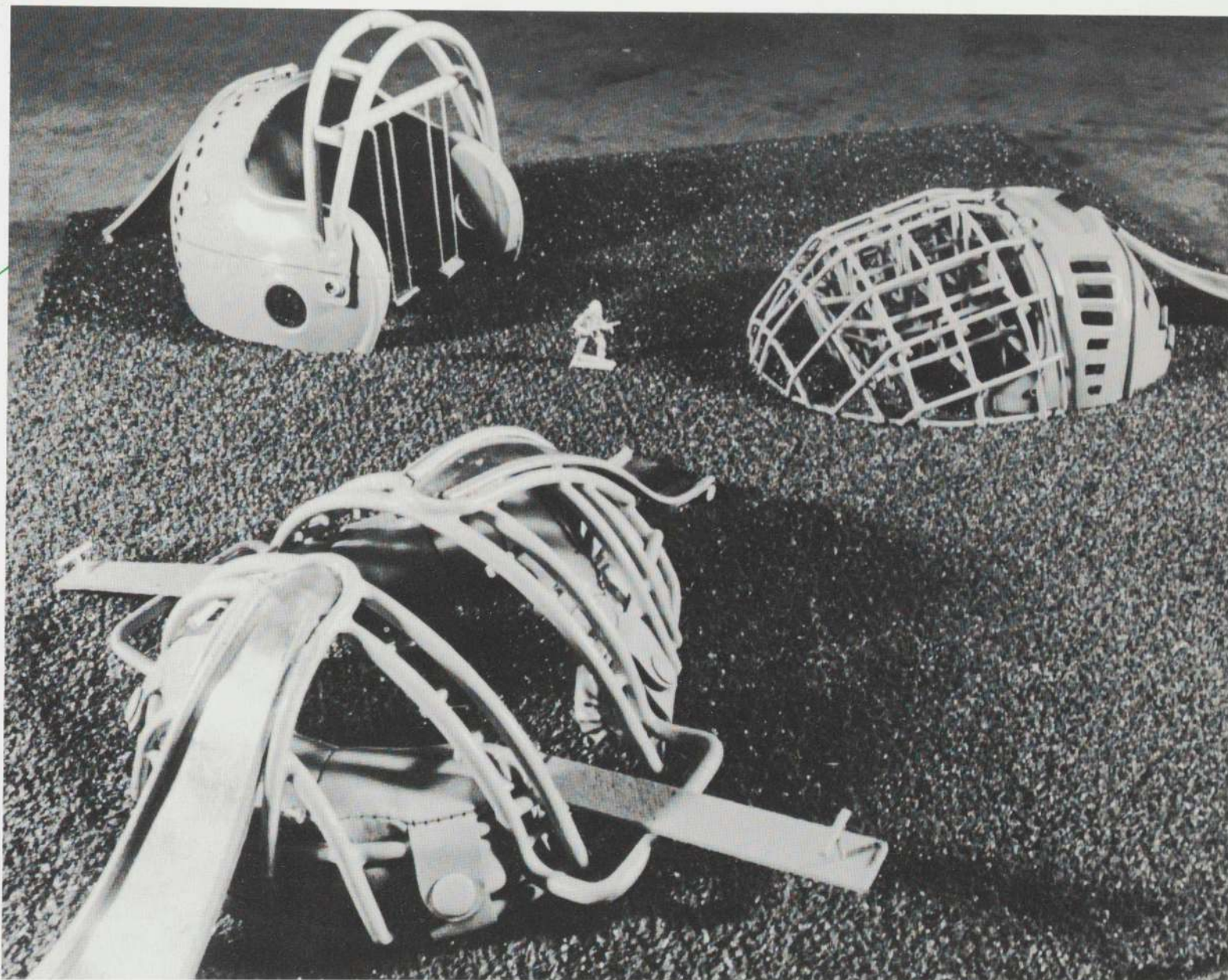
or as a system of commodities. Abdicating the accustomed space of art, the public artist declares himself/herself uninterested in art questions, and no longer involved in the development of art as we've known it. Public art revises the present of art and conjectures its future: a time when art might be considered not as a separable category, in its own arena and with its own products, but as an atmosphere instilled, almost secretly, within other categories of life.

2. Life on the Edge: Marginality as the Center of Public Art

Inside the gallery/museum, the artist functions as the center of a particular system; once outside that system, the artist is lost between worlds--



*Proposal for a  
Playground (model). 1983  
Wood, sports helmets,  
Astroturf, and toy figure,  
1'2" x 3 x 3' (35.6 x 91.4 x  
91.4 cm)  
Collection the artist*



the artist's position, in our culture, is marginal. The public artist can turn that marginality to advantage. Forced, physically, off to the side, the public artist is asked to deal not with the building but with the sidewalk, not with the road but with the benches at the side of the road,

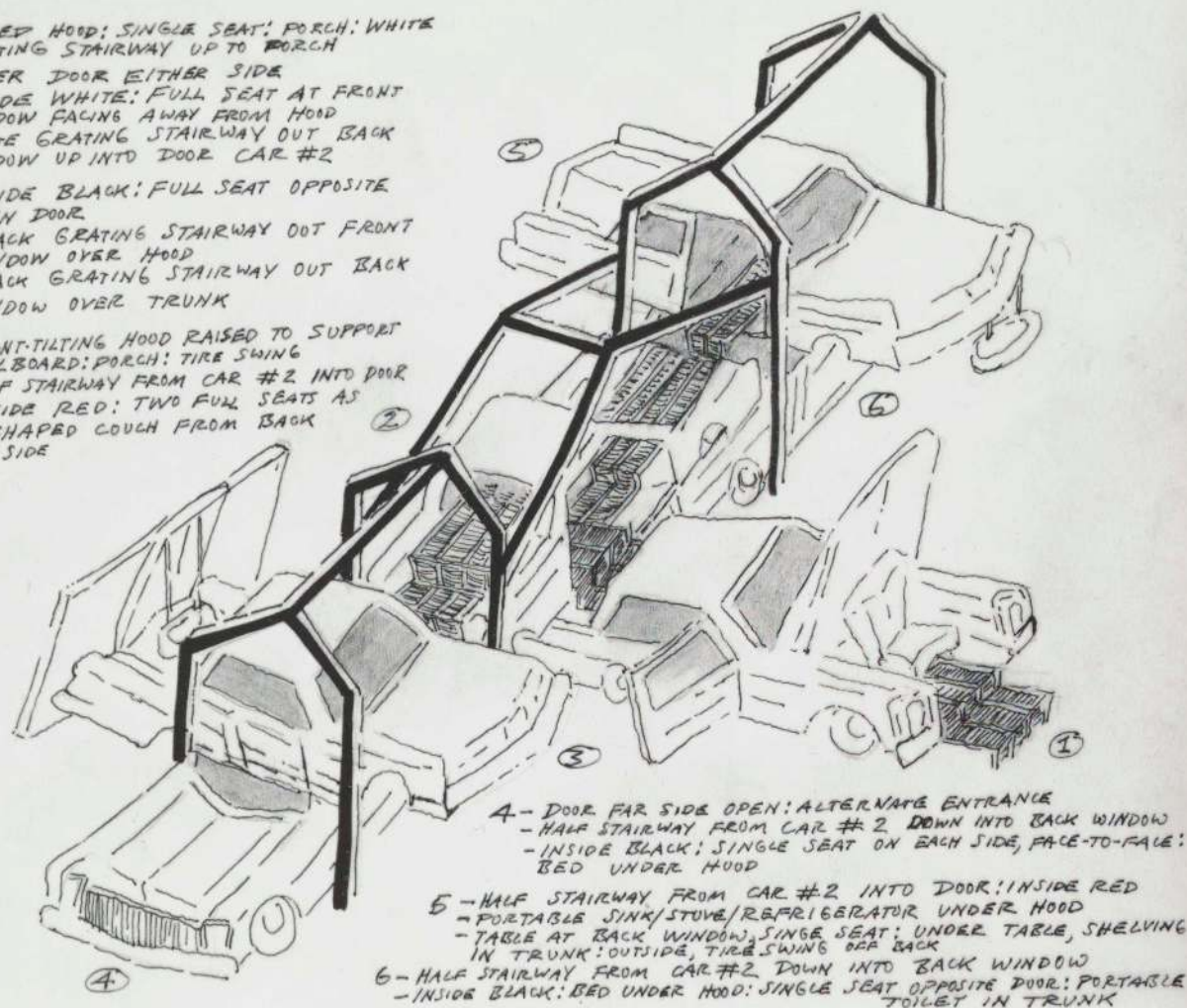
not with the city but with the bridges between cities. Outside and in between centers, the public artist is under cover; public art functions, literally, as a marginal note; it tries to comment on, and contradict, the main body of the text of a culture.





Drawing for House of  
Cars #2, 1987  
Graphite and ink on  
vellum, 9 x 12" (22.9 x  
30.5 cm)  
Collection the artist

- 1- RAISED HOOD: SINGLE SEAT: PORCH: WHITE GRATING STAIRWAY UP TO PORCH  
- ENTER DOOR EITHER SIDE  
- INSIDE WHITE: FULL SEAT AT FRONT WINDOW FACING AWAY FROM HOOD  
- WHITE GRATING STAIRWAY OUT BACK WINDOW UP INTO DOOR CAR #2
- 2- INSIDE BLACK: FULL SEAT OPPOSITE OPEN DOOR  
- BLACK GRATING STAIRWAY OUT FRONT WINDOW OVER HOOD  
- BLACK GRATING STAIRWAY OUT BACK WINDOW OVER TRUNK
- 3- FRONT-TILTING HOOD RAISED TO SUPPORT BILLBOARD: PORCH: TIRE SWING  
- HALF STAIRWAY FROM CAR #2 INTO DOOR  
- INSIDE RED: TWO FULL SEATS AS L-SHAPED COUCH FROM BACK TO SIDE

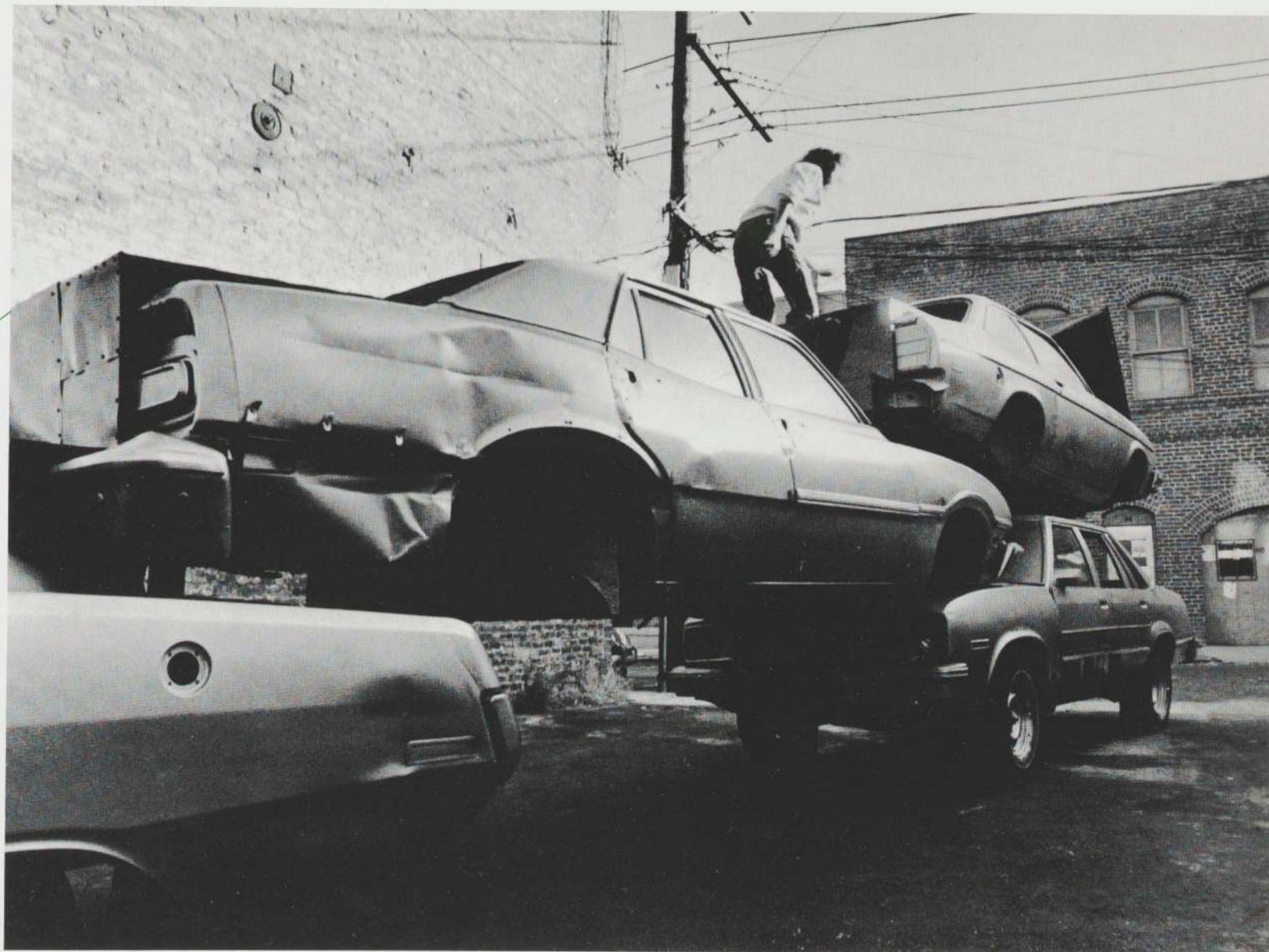


### 3. The Innocent Bystander and the Anxiety of Choice

When a person enters a gallery/museum, that person announces himself/herself as an art-viewer; the art-viewer submits to the terms of the art arena, the art-viewer agrees to be a victim. Outside the gallery/museum, in a public place, there is no art-viewer; there are only passers-by, with different

histories and varying biases, who haven't asked for art. Public art, in order to exist in the world, agrees to certain social conventions, certain rules of peaceful co-existence; the public artist gives up the gallery artist's privilege of imposition. Using manners as a cover, public art can lie low; instead of attacking, public art insinuates.





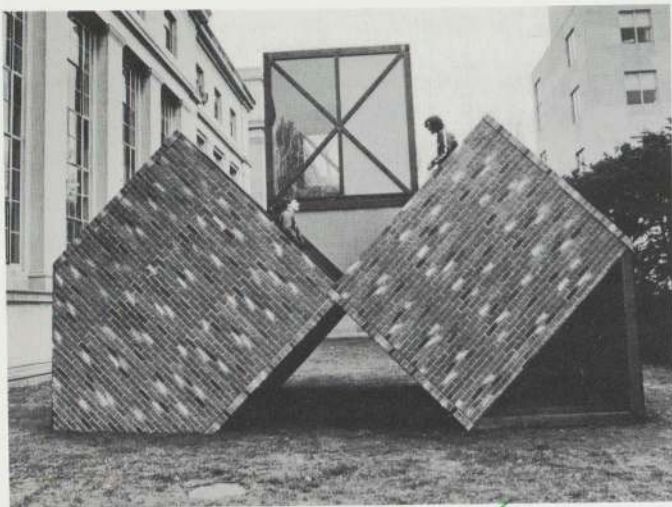
*House of Cars. Original  
version, 1983  
(Opposite page: interior  
view)  
Four used cars, 10 x 35' x  
6'6" (304.8 x 1066.8 x  
198.1 cm)  
No longer extant*

#### 4. A Geometry of Conventions

The words "public art" should be taken literally: on the one hand, a piece is public in that it's usable, inhabitable--on the other hand, a piece is public in that its forms and images are conventions (like a house-form,

like an advertising image) that everyone, in a particular culture, knows as a matter of habit. Conventions can be subjected to a set of mental operations: one convention can be rotated, as if on a grid--two conventions can collide with and interpenetrate one another.... These operations, by

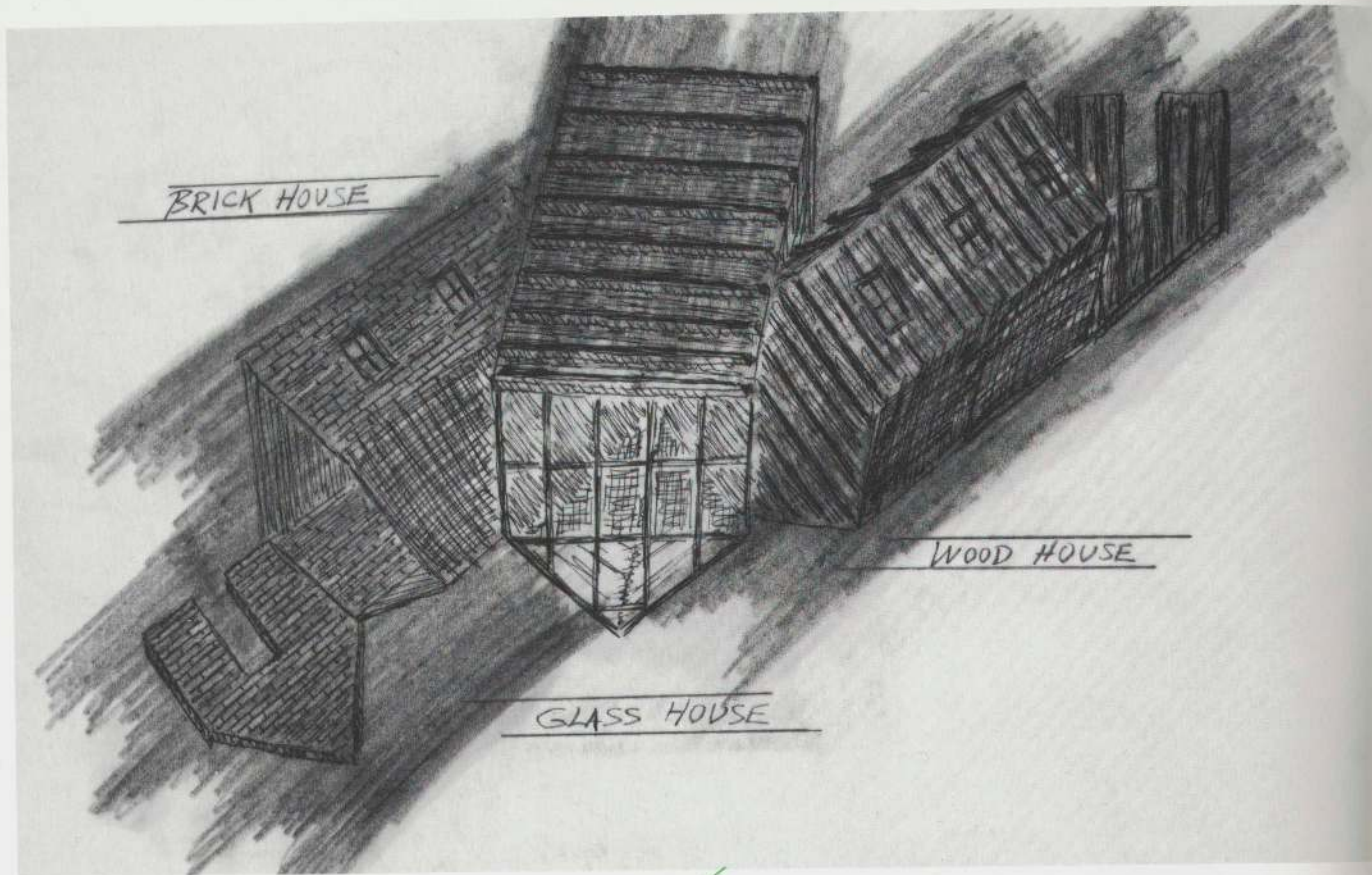




**Bad Dream House.**

Original version, 1984  
(Two exterior and two

interior views)  
Wood, artificial brick,  
and plexiglass, 18 x 24 x  
22' (548.6 x 731.5 x  
670.6 cm)  
No longer extant



**Drawing for Bad Dream  
House #2, 1987**

Graphite and ink on  
vellum, 12 x 15 7/8" (30.5 x  
40.3 cm)  
Collection the artist



isolating a convention, exhibit that convention as an icon that can't be further broken down, can't be analyzed. The operation of one convention with and against another subverts the power that each convention is a sign of.

**5. Public Art and the Public Welfare**

An artist who enters public space enters politics. Public art, mixing in with the other things of the world, either confirms or subverts that world, and the power structure that organizes it. The public artist can fall into





a double-bind situation: subverting the dominant culture at the same time keeps that culture an open system--it allows that culture to revivify and keep itself going. A more efficient subversion, then, might lie in confirming and re-confirming the elements of a culture, so that the culture has no breathing room and will slowly die off. But this method of sub-

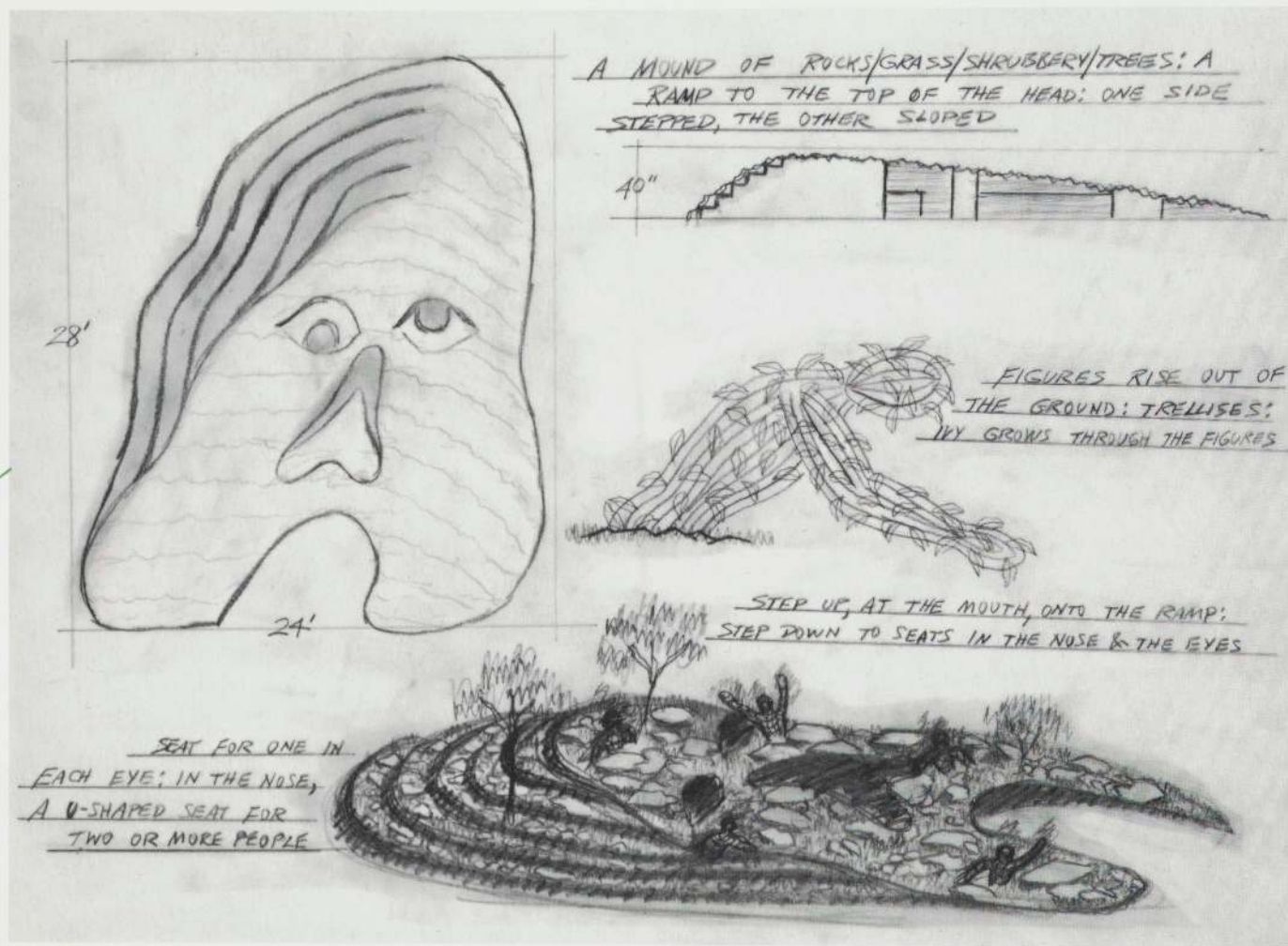
version demands patience, cynicism, and a blind trust in evolution.

#### 6. Rip Up the Posters, Dismantle the Billboards

The appropriate medium of political messages is assumed to be the poster. Its appropriateness lies in its two-dimensionality: the edges of the



Drawing for Face of the  
Earth #2, 1987  
Graphite on vellum, 11 1/2  
x 16" (29.2 x 40.6 cm)  
Collection the artist

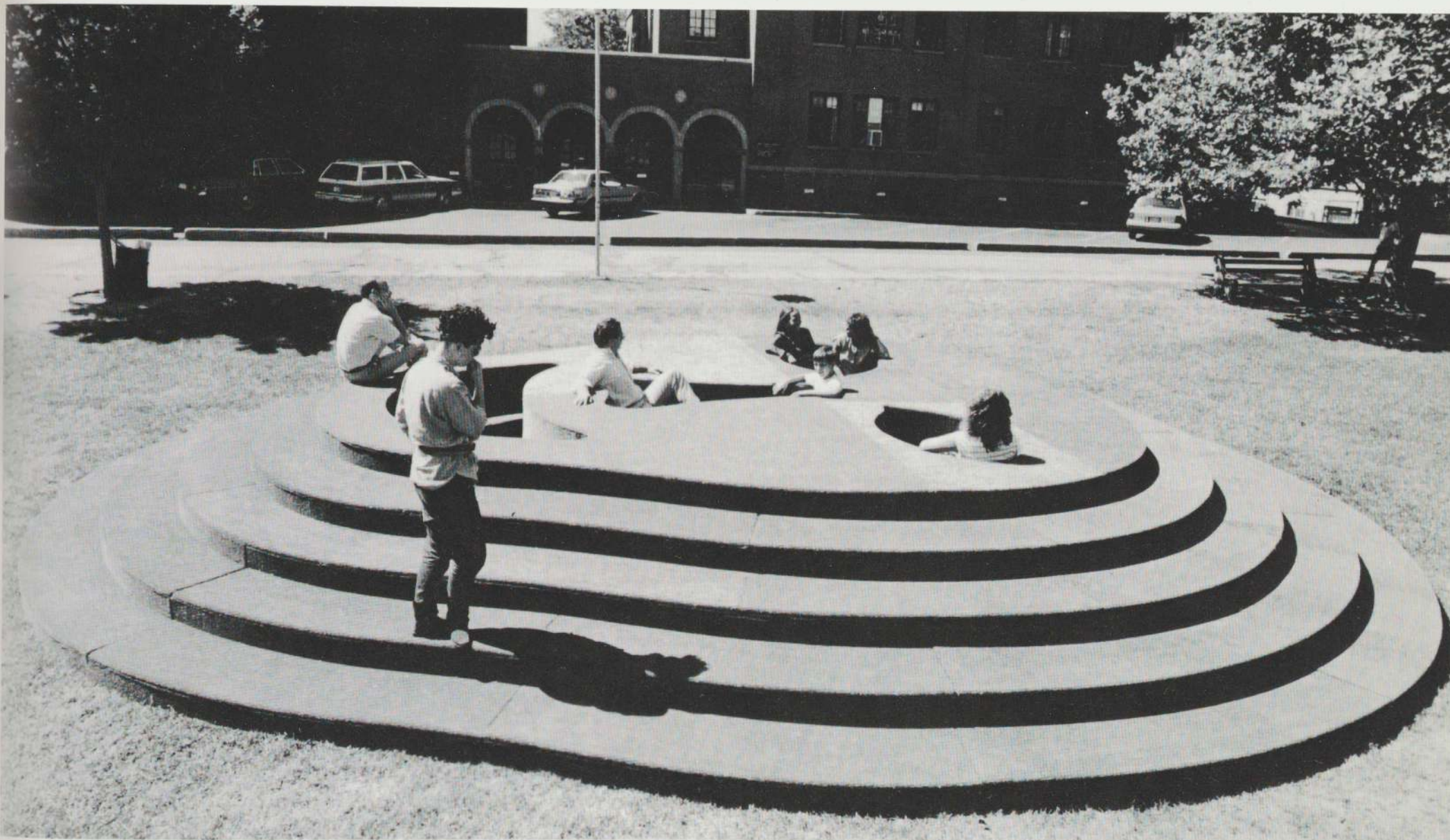


Face of the Earth.  
Original version, 1984  
(Two views)  
Wood and Astroturf,  
2'6" x 32'7" x 28'6"  
(76.2 x 993.1 x 868.7 cm)  
No longer extant

paper separate the message within from all other messages. Analysis of that message leads to action, away from the poster and out into the world-at-large. But the two-dimensionality of the poster confirms a mind/body separation: the mind might be influenced by the poster and might then impel the body to action, but all the while the body is in a world of its own,

out of the poster's reach--at any moment the body might rebel. The real political message is not in the poster but in the wall that supports the poster, in the ground that supports the person who reads the poster. This wall and this floor define the proper arena for a radical public art.





#### 7. Building as Nostalgia/Nostalgia as Resistance

The built environment, in an electronic age, is a throwback to an industrial era. In an age when quantities of places can be stored on a disc, the built environment occupies too much space; it takes too much time to walk through the built environment, in an age when distant places can be brought home on

television. Public art, as a gathering place for people, functions as a model of the city. By reinstating this model of another time, public art restores the peopled places that lead to discussions that lead to arguments that lead to reconsiderations that lead potentially to a revolution. In a world of shopping malls, public art reinserts the town square.



Garden of Columns (Town  
Square for Workers). 1987  
Thirteen painted  
fiberglass columns,  
plants, goldfish, water,  
and fluorescent lights,  
13 x 35 x 35' (396.2 x  
1066.8 x 1066.8 cm)  
The Coca-Cola Company,  
Atlanta



Garden of Columns (Town  
Square for Workers)  
(model). 1986  
Painted steel, wood, and  
artificial shrubbery,  
1'7<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" x 2'10" x 3' (50.2 x  
86.2 x 91.2 cm)  
The Coca-Cola Company,  
Atlanta

#### 8. The Two Traditions of Public Art

The older tradition is that of the monument; the newer tradition, which is fast becoming the contemporary standard, is street-and-park furniture. The monument asserts itself too much; it stands apart from its environment and over the heads of people; its message is--the individual is important, but

some individuals are more important than others. Street-and-park furniture, on the other hand, recedes too far into its environment, and plays up to the habits of people; its message is--be programmed, be comfortable, there's no reason to change. Each tradition has to be resisted on its own terms:

(A) Bring the monument down to earth, where it can be entered and be overrun





by people (this makes the vertical horizontal, and lays low the dominant male principle). (B) Instead of providing furniture, build something that people, using their own ingenuity, might make use of (rather than people at the mercy of furniture, this is furniture at the mercy of people).

9. Two Models for Public Art: The Curb and the Spaceship

The curb, or the lamppost, or the fire hydrant, goes almost unnoticed; it's as if it's always been there. This kind of public art blends in with its surroundings, and can criticize from within. The spaceship lands in an alien place; it revels in its look as if it came out of nowhere, it makes





*Landing, 1986-87  
Three aluminum rowboats,  
plants, water, and fish,  
4'6" x 11'6" x 11'6"  
(137.2 x 350.5 x 350.5 cm)  
Collection the artist*

no attempt at camouflage to fit its surroundings. This kind of public art can criticize from the outside, like a future-studies scenario. (The contemporary version of the spaceship is the park, which is set up as an oasis inside the city, separate from the city. The park substitutes greenery from a past time for the spaceship's white of the future.)

#### 10. Being There: Thinking from the Inside Out

Being in the world means being encased in the world. Our habit of thinking is: in order to analyze the world you have to step outside the world, jump out of the world. This habit of thinking, and of talking, allows the construction of a self to exist (you "go out of yourself," you "take your-



*Proposal for Spanish  
Landing (detail of  
model). 1987  
Wood, polyester resin,  
paint, pulverized stone,  
glue, model airplanes,  
trees, model grass,  
and artificial grass,  
1'4" x 6' x 3'4" (40.6 x  
182.9 x 101.6 cm)  
San Diego Unified Port  
District*



self out of it"). But, taking yourself out of the world, mentally, means only a retreat from material conditions, on the one hand, and from people, on the other. The implication is that you can think only when you're alone, only when you withdraw into a meditation chamber. One function of

public art is to re-imbed a person inside material conditions and within the company of other people; one function of public art is to learn, and teach, a simultaneity of experience and analysis; one function of public art is to undo the construction of a self.



