

“Vito Acconci The Sheltering City”, *Artweek*, September 1982

Vito Acconci's current installation at the San Francisco Art Institute has two parts. *The Portable City* and *The City that Drops Down from the Sky*. One city forecasts the future, the other recalls the past.

*The Portable City* is composed of three small pyramids, connected by a heavy cable, which are laid out on the roof of the institute. Acconci has given careful instructions on a side of each pyramid for using the city.

*1 The Portable City is stored as a stack of pyramids. The stack can be lifted by the handles at the corners and carried from place to place, wherever the people want to set up the city. When the stack is settled in its temporary site it can be tied in place. Each pyramid than can be lifted up off the other and set in palce as far apart as the cable allows.*

*2 Four people then can grab onto the pyramid at the four corners and lift it up to should height. They might hold the pyramid by resign the handles on their shoulders or by slipping their heads through the open corners. They pyramid now serves a sa roof. The people make a decision to function as the living columns of a house. 3 As long as the people keep the roof up another person might step in under it and pull down the two rings on the shade rollers inside bringing down the sides of the house.”*

This set of suggestions, worded in conditional verbs, rather than a more didactic voice, is placed in three of the twelve letters of the words “portable city” one letter of which is inscribed on each side of a pyramid. Each pyramid has one third of the instructions in the letters P, A and C respectively, a pun on pack, an appropriate reference for a portable city.

The prose is spaced in such a way inside of each letter that only a person who knows English well can put it goether to form instructions. Words are split up to conform to the shape of the letters in which they are placed, making a reader strongly aware of the shape of the framing letter, of the nature of words and meaning and of the arbitrariness of language. The words at the top of the letter p, for example are divided as follows: THE PORTA BLE CI TY IS STOR ED AS A STA CK. This playing with letters and words relates to Acconci's early poetry in which he worked with words and punctuation positioned on a page. It also recalls his roots in conceptual art and his interest in ideas, which exceeds his interest in esthetics.

Certainly, the social and political implications of Portable City are far more important than the form of the pieces as a precious object. One issue is the subversion of the normal gallery conventions of looking passively at a work of art that is not to be touched. The Portable City cannot even e seen with its shades drawn down unless a minimum of three people cooperate. At least two people (ideally four) have to hold up the pyramid, while another person climbs under it and pulls down the shades. On one level. Acconci's piece is about the artist/object/viewer dynamic. He is not presenting himself as an Oz-like boom from an amplifier. He has removed his powerful, didactic presence and only suggested to the viewers how the piece operates. Thus, the piece cannot simply be viewed; it can only be experienced. Naturally, the way in which the piece is actually lifted and explored often has little to do with Acconci's imagined use. It is apt to be closer to playing with toys. Such a distancing on Acconci's part demonstrates a tremendous commitment to the public. He is will to let us, in our befuddled and distracted way, make the piece happen. That we mush cooperate and interact to do so makes the piece even more challenging.

The idea of cooperation, as opposed to independent, private people calls to mind another portable city – the bizarre plans for the evacuation of big cities in the event of nuclear war. The plans call for large populations to move out into the countryside, where they would be hospitably welcomed by small town inhabitants. This plan would be an example of national cooperation to which, perhaps, Acconci's small pyramids make reference. The very awkwardness of the design of the pyramids, requiring four people to sacrifice for every one person who is sheltered, points to the complexity of the idea of shelter, survival and cooperation in the situation of displacement.

Another more immediate portable city is the current evacuation of the Palestine Liberation Organization from Beirut. With guerillas carrying grenades in one hand and suitcases in the other what could be more timely than a portable city. The Middle Eastern flavor of Acconci's concept is reinforced by the design of the piece – the three pyramids inevitably bring to mind Egypt, and the shades evoke international powers and exotic environments by their swastikas, hammer and sickles and American flag references. One of the pyramids has shades of silver and gold fabric, another is made of imitation tiger skin. These materials and signs correspond to cliché ideas relating to Africa, the Middle East and global intervention.

Whether the Portable City is connected to the art world itself, to evacuation for nuclear war or to the PLA, the main thrust of the piece is the cooperation necessary to make it work. Acconci has transformed the art display into a metaphor for survival.

The second part of the installation, *The City that Drops Down from the Sky*, is less coherent in its form and impact, perhaps because the mechanical parts were continually breaking or failing to work smoothly. While *The Portable City* is based on simple principles of lifting and pulling, *The City that Drops Down from the Sky* utilizes pulleys, swings and weights. When they don't work, it dilutes the effectiveness of the ideas more than the problems of fussy shades affect the pyramids. Both City pieces have a toylike character, but the basic functioning elements of *The City that Drops Down from the Sky* are more obviously playthings – specifically shadow plays, swings and sails.

The work is so titled because butterfly like skeletons that hang from the ceiling of the gallery in the largest of the three pieces, are brought down or "dropped" by someone on a swing in the center. Another person then pulls on the loops that bring up the covers or shades on the wings, an action not dissimilar to raising a sail on a boat. The sails are made of blue sailcloth and dominated by huge cliché hand signs- a clenched fist with a derogatory upraised finger and the V for Victory symbol. The hands gradually rise up and over the person on the swing as the shades are pulled, giving a sense of the shadowlike advance of a larger than life power. When the shades are fully raised, the swing is contained by an inverted tent.

A city dropping from the sky would seem to suggest anxiety or claustrophobia, but the sensation of Acconci's city (there are two other structures, more attached to the ground than the part described) is that of a gentle shelter, albeit a shelter from larger outside forces of good and evil, emblematically presented in the hand signs. A dichotomy of expectation and result also occurs with the swing. A swing suggests a flinging up from earth's gravity into the open sky, a sense of controlled uplift. Acconci's swing is just the opposite. Instead of a rhythmic repeated lift, we can only swing once from up to down on the floor. And as we swing, we are enclosed, rather than released. Somehow neither the swing, the shelter, nor the larger forces come across with conviction. Acconci has here put himself too far in the background of the piece. We get tangled in the inadequacies of what we are left to manipulate. Then, once the piece has happened, the city doesn't profoundly affect us.

*The City that Drops Down from the Sky* feels more like an early twentieth century fantasy, comparable in its engineering to something like Tatlin's glider. Even a fantasy of a city dropping from the sky can hardly be believable in the 1980s if it is butterfly gentle in its means of functioning or its mode of arrival, as compared to what the movies and NASA offer.

Acconci's pyramids are more effective because of the force of the verbal games and puns, as well as the innate simplicity of the principles implemented. The Portable City suggests a primitive state beyond machines and computers, when we will be dependent on simple actions and cooperative good will for the survival of the human race. The choice of a pyramid, the Egyptian tomb is a resonant form of early history suitable to the future that is still so uncertain.