MARINA ABRAMOVIC subjects herself to extreme physical and mental stress. Sometimes her activities result in a loss of consciousness. In Western societies, such acts are commonly cited as evidence of insanity. But in other cultures, they are respected as holy. Abramovic calls them art. Spiritual transcendence is her goal.

Waiting for an Idea, 1991
Amethyst Mine, Santa Catherina, Brazil
Courtesy Sies+Holl, New York
Photo: Nico Bergade

SELF-TRANSCENDENCE

ABRAMOVIC THE ARTIST

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A QUESTION this author posed to thirty acquaintances generated the following answers:

Seal belts.
Insurance policies.
Money in the bank.
Mouth wash and deodorant.
Vitamins.
Water filters.
IRAs.
Sun-block lotion.
Condoms and the pill.
Burglar alarms.
Well-lit parking lots.
Shatterproof glass.
Smoke detectors.

The question was “What are the sources of protection and security in your life?” When confronting the vagaries of life, these respondents appealed to services and commodities that can be purchased in the marketplace. This manner of alleviating anxiety discloses our reliance on solutions and forms of guidance that are profane and therefore, provisional. Yet alternative approaches to achieving security have prevailed in societies occupying the furthest expanses of time and place. These approaches are rooted in the sacred and the eternal. In these cultures, decrees carry the supremacy of the gods. Explanations for natural phenomena are invested with the commanding power of totemic spirits. Social behavior is ordered by inviolable rituals. Faith is placed in the potency of prayer, fasting, and ritual. People seek assurance by placating angry gods, petitioning the blessings of benevolent beings, or pursuing the interventions of ancestral spirits.

What is significant about this little survey is that although most of the respondents identified themselves as “religious,” their trust nevertheless remains rooted in the profane world. It is vested in the products of a detached attitude, in a search for verifiable facts, and in the methodi
al processing of data. Problem-solving is considered a human affair, dependent on those who occupy professions in government, medicine, law, and science. Even explanations for the origin of the world, the enigma of death, the nature of life here on earth, have fallen within their purview. Religion persists in technologically advanced societies, but God must coexist with holograms, Hubble telescopes, and test-tube babies.

Some contemporary artists regret that art is among the many categories of human endeavor that have become secularized. They seek ways to return it to the sacred realm. Their work is designed to heal the spirit, dissolve the duality between humanity and nature, protect the community from evil, furnish knowledge of death, and serve as a conduit between the divine and the profane worlds. Marina Abramovic is such an artist. The aspect of her work that is the subject of this essay is removed from the sphere of private ownership. Nonmonetary measures of artistic merit prevail. Abramovic is our guide into the orb of the spirit. Her art provides vivid testimony of a form of awareness that is as immaterial as breath and as resplendent as a vision. It has no material counterpart and therefore cannot be sculpted or painted. It can only be experienced.

Abramovic molds her spirit. Her art activities, grueling and often perilous, propel her to an altered plane of consciousness. She persists until her physical condition is so depleted that earth-bound sensibilities cease to function and mundane thoughts are silenced. In this silence, spiritual states of being arise. Her work awakens neglected mental faculties.

Abramovic’s “Biography” begins with a simple statement of fact:

1946 Born in Belgrade  
Mother and father partisans

Further on, she enumerates her first self-imposed ordeals:

1972 Start using body as material  
Blood, pain  
Watching major surgical  
Operations in hospitals  
Pushing my body to its physical  
And mental limits

Other entries provide examples of these trials:

1973 Burning the hair  
Cutting a star in the stomach  
With Razorblade  
Lying naked on an ice cross

The year 1981 states:

Experiments without eating and  
Talking for long periods of time . . .  
Eating honey ants, lizards,  
Desert rats, grasshoppers

Marina Abramovic has enacted many of these activities with her partner, Uwe E. Laysiepen (known as Ulay), whom she met in 1975. They discovered that they not only shared artistic goals, they also shared physiognomies. Both have strong, sculpted facial features and full heads of dark hair. They even have the same birthday, although Ulay is three years older. They became lovers and collaborators on a series of remarkable art events.

Relation Works refers to a group of pieces in which the couple invented forms of nonsexual union that fulfill the mystical desire to dissolve physical and psychic boundaries. In Breathing In/Breathing Out (1977), for instance, the couple literally relinquished their autonomy and became united by sharing the most elementary unit of life—a single breath. They blocked their nostrils, locked their mouths together, and synchronized their breathing. She inhaled the air expelled by him. He breathed only the air exhaled by her. Each received ever higher concentrations of carbon dioxide. They persisted nineteen minutes, to the brink of asphyxiation.

Between 1980 and 1985, in a work entitled Modus Vivendi, the couple made frequent voyages to the central Australian desert. They were not tourists. In fact, they intentionally exchanged the pleasures of travel for painful ordeals that lasted months at a time. The unbearable temperatures by day and night made such elementary tasks as sleeping, eating, and walking extremely arduous. Survival in the desert meant withstanding thirst, windstorms, bandits, rats, illness. But instead of attempting to diminish this discomfort, the artists chose to intensify it by spending their time sitting silent and motionless in the sweltering heat. What was gained by these
physical tribulations? Abramovic and Ulay sojourned in the desert like prophets on a spiritual quest. Immobile and mute, they broke the patterns of behavior that prevail in advanced technological societies. Their activities had no pragmatic purpose, nor did they provide comfort, earn money, or entertain. By disjointing themselves from the habits of their upbringing, they learned that monotony need not be boring. Indeed, monotony revives extraordinary, inner-directed experiences. Those who attempt to describe the feelings that ensue use such uplifting words as joy, light, peace, warmth, unity, certainty, confidence, rebirth.

How can a painful ordeal become a form of art? It is difficult to find a place for Modus Vivendi within conventional categories of Western art. The artists’ activity did not involve representing it by shaping matter into a tangible object. Their enterprise cannot even be called a performance because there was no audience, no rehearsals, and no element of make-believe. It is, instead, a real-life experience of people who call themselves artists. Yet art historians and critics have willingly broadened art’s domain to incorporate Abramovic’s digressions. Perhaps it is because these incongruous acts are propelled by the same force that has been motivating change in art since Neolithic artists abandoned the realistic renderings of their Paleolithic predecessors. Art ceased being an accurate record of animal anatomy when hunting, which relies on keen observation of animal behavior, ceased to be the primary means of survival. Then as now, evolution from one art form to the next occurs when pre-existing forms are inadequate to convey a new experience or accomplish a new goal. Accordingly, Abramovic invented a medium (physical ordeals) to accommodate her message (that depriving the body restores the spirit).

Modus Vivendi, for instance, addresses a populace that has been pampered by material abundance. The work suggests that metaphysical fulfillment doesn’t thrive amid air-conditioned cars, padded toilet seats, and a profusion of other physical comforts. Achieving spiritual good fortune may require reversing the engines that drive our acquisitive impulses. Perhaps we should strive as eagerly for deprivation as we normally strive for plenty.

A series of ceremonial meditations called Nightsea Crossing amplified these themes. Between 1981 and 1986 Abramovic and Ulay endured periods of fasting and silence that lasted up to sixteen days at a time. Each day the artists occupied seats at opposite ends of a long table installed in a museum. They spent all the hours the museum was open staring transfixed into each other’s eyes. They were the work of art.

AUGUST STRINDBERG

Sometimes they emphasized their trance-like state by placing a particularly distracting object, for example a large snake, on the table between them. Visitors observed two people who had passed beyond normal consciousness. Instead of relying on words and gestures, Abramovic and Ulay engaged in a form of communication rarely employed in the West—pure psychic energy. Abramovic describes the experience:

Presence
Being present, over long stretches of time,
Till presence rises and falls, from
Material to immaterial, from
Form to formless, from
Instrumental to mental, from
Time to timeless

Outside of the museum as well as within, the two severed their ties to conventional modes of living and working. Throughout the period of Nightsea Crossing they lived and traveled in an old truck, stopping to perform the work in Düsseldorf, Berlin, Cologne, Amsterdam, Rassell, Helsinki, Ghent, Furka, Bonn, Lisbon, Lyons.

MARINA ABRAMOVIC
AND ULAY

Nightsea Crossing, 1985
Duration 2 days
São Paulo
Courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York

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It was also performed in Ushimado, São Paulo, New South Wales, Chicago, Toronto, and New York. A total of ninety days was spent absorbed in telepathic connection. During each of these days, Abramovic and Ulay subsisted on water alone and maintained total silence.

Abramovic’s works provide evidence that the human mind is capable of operating on a number of different wavelengths. Every world has its own frequency. We communicate with the worlds that share our wavelength. Monks, for instance, relate to the world mystically, through “prior-dimensional” means that unify the conscious and the unconscious minds. As a result, whatever their specific religion or language, they freely commune with each other. This truth is dramatized in a version of Nightsea Crossing in which Abramovic and Ulay were joined by an Australian aborigine and a Tibetan monk. Visitors observed four disparate people conversing in silence and stillness.

In 1988, the Great Wall of China, an ancient, crumbling ruin that meanders and zigzags over one-twentieth of the earth’s circumference, became the site of a work entitled The Lovers: The Great Wall Walk. The artists walked the wall for ninety days, covering 2,400 miles. Abramovic started at the sea, in the zone of cold liquid. Ulay started in the desert, the zone of dry heat. They walked in the manner of a prolonged meditation, with no purpose but to achieve awareness. When they met on June 27, male/female, fire/water, hot/cold, dry/wet were symbolically united.

Intentional risk and discomfort are the distinguishing characteristics of Abramovic’s performance works. For Rhythm V (1974), she constructed the outline of a large wooden five-pointed star, which was placed on the floor and then set on fire. To Yugoslavians like Abramovic, the red star carries powerful symbolism. It served as the official emblem of the Communist state, which made it compulsory to plaster stars on stores, restaurants, nurseries, schools, etc. But the same five-pointed star appears in hermetic traditions, where it is linked to life, health, and Mother Earth. Abramovic resurrected the star’s ancient life-enhancing associations by including a traditional purification ritual in her performance. She chopped off her hair, cut her nails, and then lay down in the center of the flames. She waited patiently for the fire to consume all of the oxygen and usher her into a state of unconsciousness. The audience did not know that she was unconscious until flames touched her leg and she did not respond.

In Rest/Energy (1980), Abramovic and Ulay gambled with her life, as if heightening the risk also heightens the state of consciousness it generates. She held the wooden shaft of a great bow fitted with an arrow. Ulay faced her, holding the arrow against the string of the bow. He was blindfolded. Marina’s eyes were open. Gradually, they leaned back, the weight of their bodies pulling the string taut. The arrow was aimed at Marina’s heart and poised for release. They maintained this precarious balance until fatigue overwhelmed them.

In Dragon Heads (1995), Abramovic sat for an hour inside a ring of ice with five pythons and boas. The snakes sought the warmth of her body. They writhed across her face, tangled her hair, and even copulated on her head. Any trace of tension would have triggered their biting and strangling instincts. Thus the piece required Abramovic’s utter surrender to the sacred role serpents played in prehistory. She merged with Ouroboros, Quetzalcoatl, and Atum, the cosmic serpents in the cosmogonies of Africa, Mexico, and the Mediterranean countries.

In all of these works Abramovic is passive. She exposes herself to elements that, to the typical Western mind, are agents of danger. But at...
other times and in other places, these very same elements were respected as valuable human resources. Abramovic returns them to their ancient origins. “I think that we live in an age which faces emergency: our consciousness has completely separated from our sources of energy. I want to reproduce this consciousness.”

Individuals who believe that subjecting oneself to such forms of danger is a sign of mental disturbance constitute Abramovic’s ideal audience. Her work jangles the ether that lashes viewers to the belief systems of Western culture. She asserts that artists need not be object-fabricators. They can act as ceremonial voyagers who travel into the forbidden territories of consciousness. To Abramovic, this journey is urgent: “It is too late, the destruction is already such that the world can no longer be ‘cured.’ . . . Its destruction will continue, inevitably. I only want to prepare people for the fact that we are all living on a dying planet and that we will all be destroyed. I see a chance or a possibility of at least dying in union with the earth, at least grasping reality one single time.”

In addition to her performance works, Abramovic provides opportunities for others to enter the consciousness she engages. She arranges chunks of copper, iron, and crystals in gallery settings in specific configurations that visitors can place to their foreheads, their hearts, their genitals. In the stillness, many report they have been stirred, for the first time, by the energies these materials contain. “This awareness,” she hopes, “may at least lend man to a state of unity with himself.”

The extreme nature of Abramovic’s activities runs counter to Judeo-Christian religious beliefs. Instead, it closely parallels the practices of traditional shamanistic leaders for whom danger and pain serve as catalysts for spiritual transpor. Shamans master fire, endure solitude or self-mutilation, subject themselves to fatigue or fasts to learn the mysteries of life.

In eschewing Western patterns of communication, Abramovic stills the mind and stirs the consciousness. In this way, she demonstrates that the analytic functions of the brain are not the only means to process experience. Thoughts must be quieted in order to pass to a higher plane of awareness. Presumed separations between the self and the world must be restored to unity.

Abramovic’s work suggests that the word “illogical” is not synonymous with “nonsensical.” A wondrous world is disclosed when we relinquish the habit of forming practical applications or drawing rational conclusions. This reward is relayed in her description of Nightsea Crossing:

Be quiet still and solitary
The world will roll in ecstasy
At your feet

ABRAMOVIC POSTSCRIPT:
The fast-forward button is a symbol of the pace of contemporary life. People clamor for a place in the express lane on highways and at supermarket checkout. They rush for faxes and E-mail messages, microwave food, buy instant coffee, and demand millisecond responses from computers. Sustained activity and patience are anachronistic to our time, yet they appear frequently in contemporary art. Tempo is commonly associated with art forms that transpire in time like music, dance, film, and theater. Yet tempo is also an aesthetic ingredient of today’s visual art. For instance, Marina Abramovic settles into stasis to resist earthbound tempers and enter a suspended, liminal state. James Luna freezes time when he transforms himself into an object for display. Mel Chin’s art is dictated by the growth rate of plants. Chuck Close applies paint to canvas at a pace that seems inhumanly methodical and slow. All of these artists reject the hip-hop syncopations that characterize the velocity of contemporary urban life. They slow their lives’ metronomes to a near halt.
TWO ISSUES—"where we are" and "who are we?"—are not merely posed by the title of a 1976 work of art by Vito Acconci, they are inflicted on unsuspecting viewers. No one in hearing range of Where We Are Now (Who Are We Anyway?) can escape the interrogation it instigates. This artwork contains a script and a score. Viewers are thus also listeners. They encounter a barrage of sound projected from two seventy-minute audiotapes: muffled voices, a dramatized recitation, musical instruments, and such noisemaking objects as clocks and gavels.

Where We Are Now (Who Are We Anyway?), 1976
Exterior view of installation
Courtesy the artist and Barbara Gladstone Gallery

SOUND
WHAT IS THE SOUND of art-viewing?
The hushed stillness of intense perceiving.

What kind of demeanor is welcome in museums? A silent viewer engrossed in the contemplation of a silent art object.

What is the ultimate exchange between the viewer and the artwork? A rapture in which language is halted and time is suspended.

Concurring with these answers suggests the opinion that sound is an alien aesthetic ingredient in art, one that impinges upon such long-established tenets as: art is an inaudible, tangible representation of a mood, event, or thing; spoken words belong to theater, not art; instrumental sounds belong to music, not art; environmental noises belong to life, not art.

Contemporary artists like Vito Acconci challenge art viewers to expand the aesthetic territory of art. Where We Are Now (Who Are We Anyway?) (1976) bombards the audience with clatter and clamor emitting from two tapes playing simultaneously at different locations within an art gallery. Sound surmounts one-dimensional viewing of two-dimensional paintings and three-dimensional sculptures. The interface between the audience and the artwork unfolds as a dynamic sensorium in the surround. Art’s dimensions expand from the physical edges of an object to the limits of the space. Multiple senses are engaged. Events unfold in time. Tension escalates. Suspense builds. The visitor does not interrogate this artwork: it is the artwork that interrogates the visitor.

Because sound’s scale is boundless and its essence invisible, it is an unlikely component in visual art. Art incorporating sound mirrors the new technologies that no longer specialize in single-sense transmissions. Music videos, CD-ROMs, and videophones have annexed visual partners to auditory forms of communication. Virtual reality and robotics combine multiple faculties of perception. Computers speak. Security systems are...
voice-responsive. Acconci’s unfeathered use of words and noise parallels this sensory fusion. An argument can be made that static, silent, optical art may eventually seem as archaic as silent movies, phonographs, and typewriters.

Another border Acconci transgresses is the one surrounding the components of art. The novel activities that comprise his career make these boundaries ever more permeable. One of his first goals as an artist was to eliminate paper and substitute his own body as the surface on which he made marks. In Trademarks (1970), Acconci bit himself until the marks of his teeth left deep impressions in his flesh. But here, as in writing, the art object (his body) was self-contained; it implied a boundary that separated the active artist from the observing audience.

A work that integrated the audience, even if it consisted of just one person, is Following Piece (1969). In it Acconci followed a stranger in the streets until that person entered a private place. Because the artist was dependent on the decisions of the stranger, the audience was active, but the artist was passive and inaccessible. Seeking a balanced exchange with the public, Acconci invented ways to dissolve the boundary encircling his private life. In Mail—Service Area.
(1970), he arranged to have his personal mail delivered to New York’s Museum of Modern Art, where it was publicly displayed for the duration of a show entitled “Information.”

Acconci surmounted another boundary by devising two-way transmisions, from the artist to the audience and from the audience to the artist. In Claim (1971), the blindfolded Acconci—wielding a crowbar and two lead pipes—ranted repeatedly, “I want to be alone!” For three hours he drove himself to the brink of frenzy, daring visitors to challenge him or to admit their tidiness and retreat. Either response fulfilled the intentions of this piece because each reaction necessitated action. “I never leave out public opinion. Not public appreciation but public consideration . . . . People are a part of all the pieces I do. I anticipate the range of responses.”

Yet there remained another closed circuit between artist and viewer. Acconci broke through that boundary by removing himself from the artwork and creating emotionally charged settings that engaged many people simultaneously. Where We Are Now (Who Are We Anyway?) belongs to this endeavor. Sound plays five distinct roles in this work. It envelops visitors and becomes the catalyst for the unmediated exchanges with the public that Acconci consistently pursues.

ENGAGEMENT: As Marshall McLuhan observes, the human body has no earlids. Because we can’t shut our sound, listeners are immersed in stimuli that reverberate in the body. These stimuli cannot be escaped, and they cannot be altered. Acconci exploits the tyranny of sound by choosing a theme that invites consideration of oppression. Where We Are Now addresses the ruthless competition in the art world.

SPATIAL STRUCTURE: Aural components establish the physical parameters in which the contest for fame within the art world is waged. Because ears detect the locations of noises, sound is adaptable as a sculptural medium. It erects the intangible armature for Where We Are Now by differentiating inside from outside and high from low. In this piece sound dramatizes the opposition between art stars and art-star strivers.

SPATIAL DYNAMICS: A whisper requires that people stand close; it is intimate and personal. A shout spans distance and is used to attract attention or express anger. Sound without pattern is disorienting and may induce psychic feelings. Acconci exposes visitors to all these aural forms of control. Noise prods them into action.

EXPRESSIVE VEHICLE: Acconci orchestrates noises, voices, and instruments, exploiting sound’s full aesthetic range—the hypnotic effect of repetition, the disorientation from abrupt shifts in amplitude and tempo, and the oppression from barrages of speech. They erect palpable emotional resonances and disallow passive reception.

CONTENT: The audiotape gives structure to the story line and conveys the work’s narrative. The distinctive voice it belongs to Acconci, who describes his manner of speaking as “what you would expect of a voice making an obscene phone call,” and as being, “a storage of sexual associations (Humphrey Bogart, Ida Lupino). Also, it seems to come out of some depths, so it probably promises intimacy, sincerity, maybe some deep, dark secret.” In a voice charred by the incessant smoking of pungent French cigarettes, Acconci delivers a mesmerizing volley of words.

Where We Are Now was created at the Sonnabend Gallery in 1976. This prestigious gallery is situated in the United States (then the international headquarters for contemporary art), in New York (the capitol of art in this country), in SoHo (the central art district in New York), on West Broadway (the main artery in SoHo). Acconci exploited this location, the seismic center of art world politics. The characters who perform his artwork are gallery visitors, the actual people who participate in SoHo’s frenetic production. As Acconci explains, “I’m here to re-design, re-decorate a gallery—I’m working as a behavioral designer for an already-defined (pre-behavioral) public.”

In this work, the gallery was divided into two areas: an enclosed room which could not be entered, and an open corridor which contained a long, bare table. Stools were set up on either side of the table. The table extended forty feet across the room, but it did not stop at the outer

“Art that results in empathy is a failure. Empathy is inactive. Empathy doesn’t lead to action.”

ACCONCI/SOME AESTHETICS
wall. The table protruded out of the third-story window to form a plank or a diving board hovering over the street below.

These visual components were enriched by auditory experiences that cannot be conveyed through photographs. Tapes played continuously in both areas of the gallery. Muffled voices of an amorphous crowd could be heard coming from the boxed room, while the sounds of a meeting in progress filled the room that contained the table/plank and chairs. The contrast between chaos in one and organization in the other was dramatized by the addition of other sounds. Disorder was magnified by the continuous banging of a gavel, a futile attempt to establish order. The regimen of the meeting was intensified by the ticking of a clock. It introduced the impression of regulated schedules, appointments, timetables. These recorded sounds made the social dynamics of each gathering seem vivid, although the only bodies actually present in the gallery were those of the visitors.

The auditory narrative, which is the focus of this essay, seems to originate with the ticking of the clock. Accconi's voice is heard in the role of a presiding officer. He is soliciting opinions of individuals whose presence is implied by the stools around the table:

Now that we're all here together... (And what do you think, Bob?)
Now that we've come back home... (And what do you think, Jane?)
Now that we were here all the time... (And what do you think, Bill?)
Now that we can take it... (And what do you think, Nancy?)
Now that we take it or leave it... (And what do you think, Joe?)
Now that we get what we can get... (And what do you think, Dan?)
Now that we get what we deserve... (And what do you think, Barbara?)
Now that we're satisfied... (And what do you think, John?)

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VITO ACCONEC
3 views of Where We Are Now (Who Are We Anyway?). 1976
Installation: wood tables and stools, painted wall, 4-channel audio. 10 x 30 x 70 ft.
Courtesy the artist and Barbara Gladstone Gallery
These vacuous formalities accomplish no business. The meeting is a mere ceremony in decorum. Suddenly there is a startling shift in dynamics. A voice announces: "Now that we know we failed..." At this instant the clock stops ticking and is replaced by the tension-mounting sound of a violin being played very quickly. There is a sudden call: "RISE! Change places! RISE!" and then "SEATS! Everybody! Take your SEATS!"

The sound suggests a frantic shuffling in which the imagined participants scramble to assume new seats at the table. Aconc is invented a lunatic game of musical chairs. -Who will occupy the head? Who will be the flanking subordinates? Who will be eliminated? Who will be expelled? The tape continues: "But there's one left over... what do we do with that one... where do we put that one... what do we do with that one...?" These words transform the table's perplexing extension the window into a tragicomic symbol of ostracism. It takes on the ominous appearance of a gangplank. Visitors recognize that the odd person out walks the plank, one more victim of the legendary rivalry that dominated the art world during this era.

Most visitors to this SoHo location are artists competing for "a place at this table." The scrambling, clawing, and yelling that is transmitted from the exitless room manifests their states of being. But Aconc doesn't present them with a simple "win-lose" scenario. He demonstrates that even those who have been awarded a place at the table are usually ill-fated. The aural text now projects a sequence of phrases. Each appears to be the final sentence of a long discourse describing the troublesome lives of those assembled:

So the family wept when we lost you that winter.
So we answered the note for the kidnapper's ransom.
So you criticize yourself. So you criticize your use of language.
So you can't separate theory from practice.
So you can't separate fact from fiction.
So you come back out and sit down with us...

...and said you had sabotaged the factory.

The sequence ends with the assertion: "So now it's 1917. So now it's 1968. So now it's 1996"—suggesting that the unhappy conditions of the chosen few existed in the past and will likely prevail in the future.

Again, there is the sound of the gavel and the call for "ORDER! ORDER! ORDER!" The crowd is heard saying:

We are the people. We have the people.
We make the people, We make up the people.
We have all the people we want.
We have all the people we need.

The crowd noises die and the voice over the table chants a series of disquieting contradictions:

And then you say go
And then you say stop
And then you say yes
And then you say no
And then you say kill
And then you say die
And then you say front
And then you say back
And then you say...

The clock resumes its ticking and the interrogation continues with a new round of antithetical options and new players' names. The sound of the violin and the call to "RISE! Change places! RISE!" are heard anew. The competition for power is repeated. The frantic maneuvering for advantage recurs.

The art world provides a model of human dynamics that applies equally to relationships in business, government, and even families. In all of these categories, there are stars and there are supporting actors. That is why human interactions inevitably involve seduction, deceit, abuse, alliance, and conflict. Stars can't exist in isolation. "I began to use the idea that there are these parts, but each part has no value except within the whole. Like in a baseball team. The second baseman alone means nothing. The second baseman in combination with the rest of the team makes it." Visitors to Where We Are Now weigh their frustrations against their accomplishments.
This theme recurs in Accconci’s subsequent films, videos, playgrounds, and other interactive sculptures.

Three examples of recent sound pieces perpetuate Accconci’s determined effort to “provide some kind of situation that makes people do a double-take, that nudges people out of certainty and assumption of power.”

*Convertible Clam Shelter* (1990) is an oversized clam shell that can be configured to serve in five different household capacities: a bed, an alcove, an arch, a tent, and a couch. It emits the rhythmic sounds of the sea, which contrast with conventional sounds of domestic life: radio, stereos, and television.

In *Home Entertainment Center* (1991), male and female dolls are converted into multifunctional toys for adults. Three orifices are proffered by these anatomically correct playthings. Accconci inserts a strobe light in one and an audio speaker in another. The third is brandished at the viewer at hip height, inviting sexual engagement.

Accconci’s irresistible impertinence takes center stage in *Adjustable Wall Bra* (1990-91). At 8 feet by 21 feet, it is the size of a conventional wall. And like a wall, it is fabricated of rough plaster and metal lathe. Amusingly, however, it is not flat like a wall, but full-bosomed. The bra is adjustable and can serve as a chair, a bed, or a room divider. Outfitted with lights and audio systems, it delivers a taped clatter of radio, stereo, and television mixed with the sounds of heavy breathing. Thus it provides the occasion for a hilarious jumble of sex, comfort, and regression.

Accconci compares the gallery to a “laboratory.” There the artist serves as a “behavior designer” who reforms social conventions. But this seems too gentle an analogy for this artist’s renegade efforts. Accconci’s work can more readily be defined as a guerrilla attack on entrenched bourgeois values. The gallery is the combat zone for his hit-and-run tactics. Recorded sound and text constitute potent weapons to irritate areas of sensitivity, disrupt belief systems, mock social norms, and exploit insecurities. Sometimes they nudge, but often they persecute the viewer, intentionally inducing a state of distress.

This approach to art-making is diagnostic, not therapeutic. “I might want to shake up the existent order, but I don’t really know what that ideal system should be. I think of art as anti-institution. Whatever becomes rigidified, I want the opposite of.” For this reason, Accconci refuses to express his feelings about the human condition, arguing that, “Art that results in empathy is a failure. Empathy is inactive. Empathy doesn’t lead to action.” Thus he goads, prods, insults, and flatters museumgoers until reaction overflows into action and a lifelong shift in behavior occurs.

Where *We Are Now* dispenses no advice, but it does offer a warning: people who fight their way through the querulous crowd risk a graceless dive in the pavement. Accconci’s husky, monotone voice intones, “I don’t want people to jump. That is dynamic, but it would have pretty limited consequences.”

**ACCONCI POSTSCRIPT:**

Painters and sculptors typically tell stories by depicting a dramatic instant or presenting a sequence of images. Laurie Simmons’s dramatically tableaux provide an example of the former. Sophie Calle’s photographic documentation of sleepers is an instance of the latter. The incorporation of sound, however, greatly expands art’s storytelling potential by introducing the element of time, the natural medium through which narratives unfold. Sound enters visual art on tape in works by Vito Accconci, Amalia Mesa-Bains, Gilbert and George, Mike Kelley, and Barbara Kruger; on video in works by Orlan, Mike Kelley, and Carolee Schneemann; in virtual reality in works by Toni Dove; and in live voice by James Luna and Joseph Beuys.