

A R T & I D E A

Story of an island

by Robert Punkerhofer

The history of the development of Mur Island began with a short fax on July 28, 1999, to Graz 2003 - European Capital of Culture and ended with the inauguration of a five hundred fifty-ton steel construction on January 9, 2003. From a very private island in the mind of its author, it became a public platform with more than a million visitors after a period of only twelve months.

The phrasing of the first project description was as simple as the choice of Vito Acconci and Acconci Studio for the architectural program; there was no public invitation for tenders. Acconci is one of the few contemporary artists who, since the start of his career, has repeatedly questioned and redefined his own work. Whereas many of his prominent artistic comrades-in-arms from the late sixties - Bruce Nauman, Dennis Oppenheim, and Chris Burden, for instance - have maintained their trajectory within the realm of visual expressions, Acconci has continually changed artistic fields - from poetry to body art, from performance to video work, from installations to art in public spaces, and finally from sculpture to architecture.

Although the self-imposed ban on the reiteration of successful artistic formulas may slightly reduce the commercial value of Acconci's work on the gallery and auction market, it nevertheless makes his oeuvre one of the most innovative in the art world. Even if the breaks between one group of works and the next may seem radical and, in contrast to many other artists, there is no cultivated signature style, one can still discern in Acconci's work several important recurring elements. These include his preoccupation with the human body as an instrument for the projection of artistic expression, the investigation of the relationship between the public and the private spaces, and the exploration of interdisciplinary work that transcends the borders of a wide variety of artistic genres. In the process, Acconci accepts with a wink the possibility of tragicomical failure.

To this day, Acconci's language of forms is firmly based on the minimal art of Donald Judd and Robert Morris. At the same time, particularly in the work that develops near and about architecture, he invests basic geometrical structures with psychological content. He manipulates these forms in such a playful way and to such an extent that they no longer correspond to the conventional norms of architecture. The wall then becomes the floor and the roof becomes a playground. The spectator is compelled to see things in new ways and from surprising perspectives. The certainty afforded by the apparent trust in basic architectural formulas such as the square, the triangle, and the circle, as well as the regular choice of transparent materials, is also immediately counteracted. Acconci Studio extends, transforms, and turns upside-down the basic structures always in a most subversive manner.

Just as the famously notorious work *Seedbed* (1972) assured Acconci of a place in art history as a performance artist, or the 1988 exhibition *Public Places* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York established Acconci as an artist engaged in animating

public spaces, so the completion of Mur Island positions the Acconci Studio as a team of architects that has to be taken seriously by the profession, even if their modus operandi will continue to correspond to that of an impulsive rock band, with Vito Acconci as the lead singer.

Although Mur Island now sits naturally in the water and has become a landmark of the city of Graz, the three-and-half-year path that led there was an intensive, arduous, and contradictory one. True to his roots as a writer and a poet, Acconci began the planning process by defining it in terms of a poetic working title: the intention was to create an Island of Water - light, transparent and with flowing transitions from the café to the playground, on to the amphitheatre and back again. Numerous visits to Graz allowed Acconci Studio to enter into an intensive dialogue with the geographical, social, and cultural location of the island project and on this basis work could start on the design process.

There followed a pre-design phase that lasted for almost a year, in which Acconci and his team elaborated the final form of the island. From these drawings, the architectural concept slowly began to take shape: from the Island of Bubbles to the Island of Whirlpools, from the Yin-Yang (-Yung) Island to the Island of Bridges and further to the Island of Waves.

Finally, what remained as the conceptual basis was the island variation in the organic form of an egg or a shell intersected along the longitudinal axis. The dome above the café would form the upper half, while the lower half would serve as the bowl-shaped foundation for the amphitheatre. At the intersecting level, the children's playground would develop as the connecting link, bringing the three isolated spaces together synergistically and allowing them to emerge as a homogeneous unity.

Although Acconci was accustomed to taking unusual or “forgotten” locations as the setting for his works and to using water as an elementary component in implementing them, he nonetheless found that the relatively narrow yet fast-flowing river Mur presented a special challenge as a “building site”. The tension between artistic vision and technical and financial feasibility led more than once to comments like, “This is not my island...”

For example, the shallow waters of the Mur made it impossible to implement an earlier idea of running transparent access tunnels below the surface of the water. It thus became impossible to achieve the idea of an isolated island. After intensive planning in close co-operation with the structural engineers from the offices of Kratzer and Zenkner & Handel, the original concept of anchoring the “island” firmly in the riverbed also had to be given up. In the event of a flood, the water level of the Mur can rise by up to eight meters; the amphitheatre would have been invaded by water and the access tunnels badly damaged. An initial attempt to solve this problem consisted in suggesting mounting the island on rising hydraulic supports. In the end, due to budgetary and structural constraints it was agreed to build a pontoon that would lie on the riverbed but could be floated in the event of a rise in the water level.

Vito Acconci's unconventional approach to architecture and his pronounced tendency as a poet and artist to search for an ever more perfect and more “beautiful” solution - not only in the planning phase but even in the implementation phase - made it

possible to explore unusual solutions in designing an architectural program such as that of an island with a café, a playground, and a theatre. This working method made the roles of the contractor and the structural engineers all the more important in quality of driving forces for the completion of the work.

It was only as a result of intensive collaboration between Acconci Studio, the engineers from Kratzer and Zenkner & Handel, and the architects of Purpur that the elaboration of the final structure and form could be successfully concluded and an optimal choice of materials made.

Even if the “island visionaries” involved in the project became mere “shipbuilders” in the course of implementing it, the primary vision was still achieved: that of using an unusual architectural project to rediscover a “forgotten” place in the heart of the city of Graz and to transform it into a lively piazza of communication for all the inhabitants and their visitors; of allowing the river to be a connecting link between two isolated parts of the city; and of building a successful symbol for the year of the Cultural Capital.

Small wonder, then, that Vito Acconci had long beforehand defined a very clear standard for implementing his idea of an island: “The city” - he had said already ten years before - “gets, or makes, the kind of public space it deserves: the structure and forms of the public space advertise the city’s biases - stability or change, single-mindedness or multiplicity, old or young, power culture or minority cultures, male or female”.