



Public Space in a Private Time

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Public Space in a Private Time

Vito Acconci

1

It used to be, you could walk down the streets of a city and always know what time it was. There was a clock in every store; all you had to do was look through the store window as you passed by. The business day came and went with its own time clock; after hours, if the store was dark, the street lights let you still see inside—you had the time not just for business but for pleasure. But then times changed, and time went away. Well, it didn't go *away* exactly, but it certainly did go *out*: time went out like a virus and spread through all those bodies walking the streets. Time aimed straight not for the heart but for the arm. It fit around the wrist in the form of a watch: the quartz watch that was no trouble to make and no worry to wear, the cheap wristwatch you could buy for two or three dollars off-the-shelf and on-the-street. The wristwatch was no longer an expensive graduation present, no longer a reward for a lifetime of service to the corporation. Time came cheap now; you picked up a watch like a pack of matches as you walked down Canal Street. Watches were instant fashion, you chose one to suit your every mood. Take one with a built-in calculator, one that ran on a few drops of water, one whose hands were entangled in a spider's web. There was no need anymore for time to be installed on the street, in a bank, or a liquor store—no need for time to be set in place, to be in the place where you happened by, when all the while you were on your own time, you wore time on your sleeve, you had time (almost) in the palm of your

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hand. Public time was dead; there wasn't time anymore for public space; public space was the next to go.

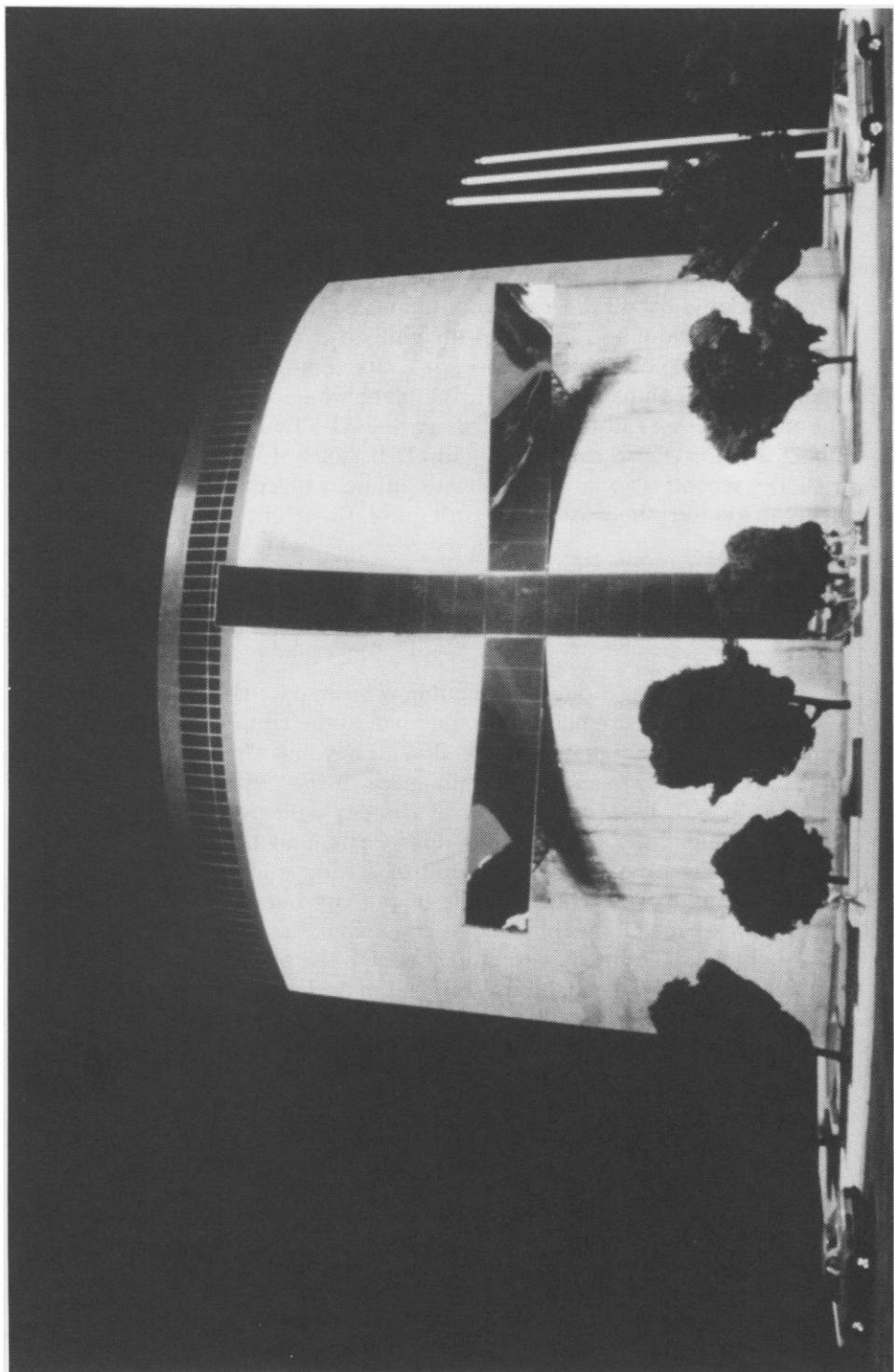
2

Public space is an old habit. The words *public space* are deceptive; when I hear the words, when I say the words, I'm forced to have an image of a physical place I can point to and be in. I should be thinking only of a condition; but, instead, I imagine an architectural type, and I think of a piazza, or a town square, or a city commons. Public space, I assume, without thinking about it, is a place where the public gathers. The public gathers in two kinds of spaces. The first is a space that *is* public, a place where the public gathers because it has a right to the place; the second is a space that is *made* public, a place where the public gathers precisely because it doesn't have the right—a place made public by force.

3

In the space that *is* public, the public whose space this is has agreed to be a public; these are people "in the form of the city," they are public when they act "in the name of the city." They "own" the city only in quotes. The establishment of certain space in the city as "public" is a reminder, a warning, that the rest of the city isn't public. New York doesn't belong to us, and neither does Paris, and neither does Des Moines. Setting up a public space means setting *aside* a public space. Public space is a place in the middle of the city but isolated from the city. Public space is the piazza, an open space separated from the closure of alleys and dead ends; public space is the piazza, a space in the light, away from the plots and conspiracies in dark smokey rooms.

Vito Acconci's latest show, entitled "Public Places," was held in 1988 at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. He is currently at work on a park in Detroit, a pedestrian mall in Baltimore, and a housing project in Regensburg, Germany.



Proposal for city hall complex, Las Vegas

1989

Mirrored stainless steel, aluminum space-frame and trusses, concrete, water

120' × 120' × 60'

The front of the city hall building is a side-to-side convex curve. Most of the facade is a blank wall surfaced with travertine marble. In front of this fortresslike wall is a reflecting pool, which resembles a moat.

The proposal attaches to the front of the building a mirrored cross, a giant Greek cross made of mirrors. The cross peels away from the building: the arms of the cross curve out, away from the curve of the building, and down, as does the top of the cross.

Where the cross peels away, the panels of marble are removed from the wall; what remains are signs of removal—rough concrete, patches of adhesive. From the removal-area behind the arms of the cross, water drips down the wall of the building and into the reflecting pool.

Where the cross peels away, searchlights are tucked away in the space-frame of the cross, and they shine at night off to each side and up into the sky.

Just as the cross curves away from the building, the plaza in front of the pool curves away from itself. A strip of the plaza, the width of the cross, slips away from the sidewalk and toward the building, down into the ground and into the water. The slippage moves whatever is on the surface—a tree, a bench, a patch of grass. As the path goes down into the water, the side walls are waterfalls formed from the reflecting pool above.

The pathway leads you to the cross as if toward an entrance to the building. This entrance is a fake one: it doesn't open into the building. Instead, it opens the building up to the outside; it brings onto the building images of the city and its people, reflected as if in a funhouse.

4

The space that is *made* public began as its own opposite. This was a space that was never meant to be public at all: a royal space, or a presidential space, or a corporate space. This private and privileged space had inherent in it, from its beginning, the seeds of public space: the fact of its existence provoked desire, its privacy functioned as a taunt to the public that felt left out. Once that space has been taken over by force and made public, it has inherent in it, in turn, the seeds of private place, the seeds of a redefined and reinhabited privacy: the public that takes it over is working its way up to the royalty or the presidency or the corporate office. Private space becomes public when the public wants it; public space becomes private when the public that has it won't give it up.

5

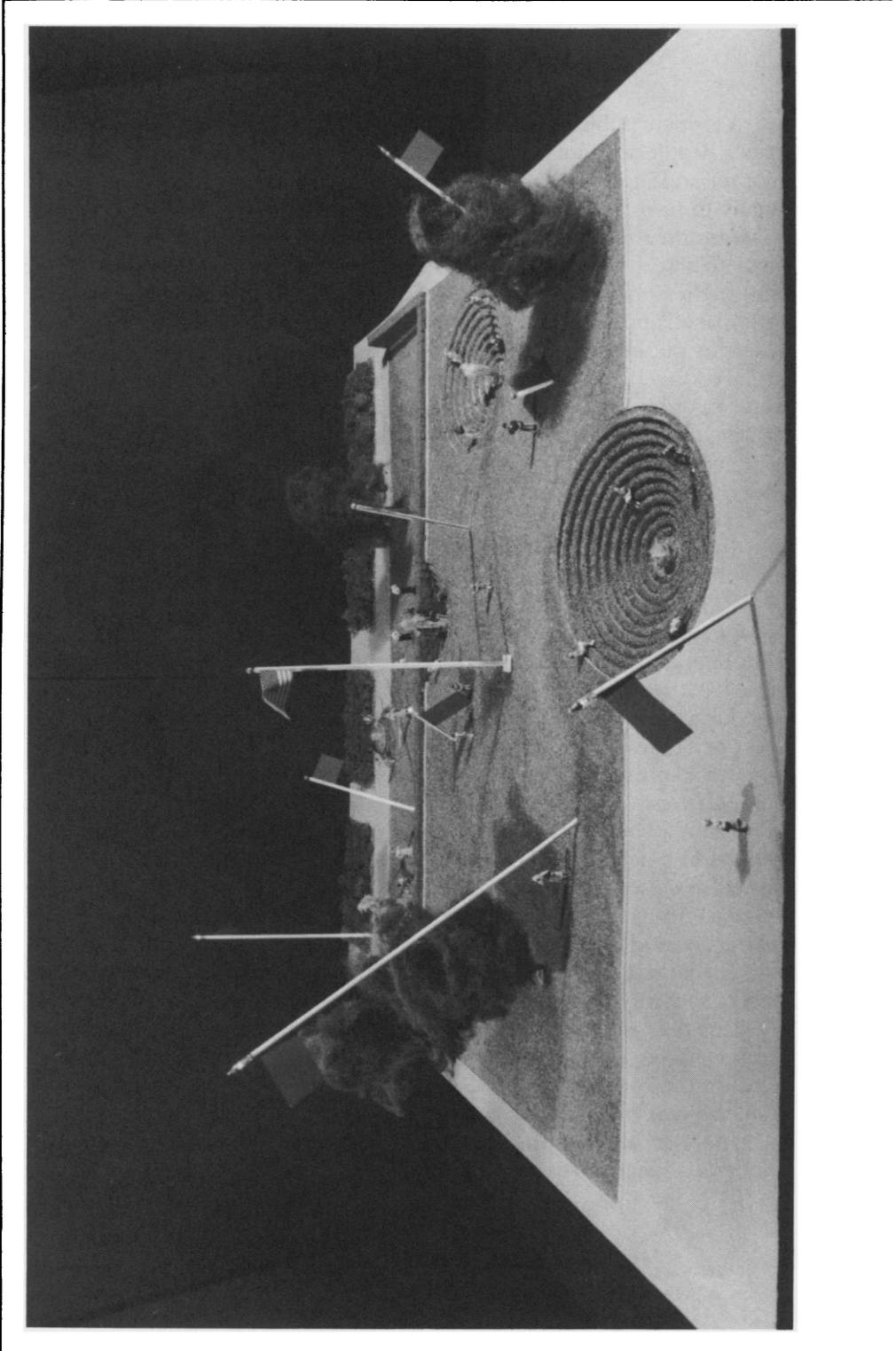
The making of a public space demands a belief in God, or at least in *a* god. That god is either a target or an instrument that aims at the target. God-as-target is the institution that the public dreams of, the institution that—now that dreams have become a reality and are just out of reach—the public is attempting to storm. In this scenario, the current inhabitants of the institution are questionable, but the institution itself is never questioned; it can't be questioned; if it were, there'd be no reason to try and take it over. God-as-instrument, on the other hand, comes in two varieties. Either it is the public itself, more specifically, the *idea* of a public that acts as a belief system, a "body politic" that subsumes and glorifies the particular bodies that make it up, no matter how misshapen those bodies might be; or it's one person who has been picked out of the crowd, or who picks him- or herself out. In the latter scenario, the public doesn't know what it wants; in fact, it *shouldn't* know what it wants. The public exists as raw material; it exists only so that it can be mesmerized by a solo voice, only so that it can follow a leader.

6

An open public space, like the piazza, is a vast multidirectional space. People are dots sprinkled across the floor; one dot slides into another and slips past another to continue on its own. A number of dots queue up to form a dotted line of tourists who follow a flag and criss-cross another dotted line of tourists. Here and there, as if scattered through a sea, dots merge together into islands. It's every person for him- or herself here, every group for itself, and the tower above all. The space is public, but the people in it don't function as a public. In order for public space to be a gathering place, where all the people are gathered together as a public, it needs a gathering *point*. To be seen and read as a public, to act and/or be used as a public, the dots have to form a circle, as if *around* a point; or they have to form a line, as if *toward* a point; or they have to blend together so that they form a point themselves, which blots and spreads out to cover the piazza floor.

7

One diagram of the piazza might show dots scattered and separate from one another at varying distances; a second diagram might show these dots condensed into areas. The first diagram analyzes public space as a park or a suburb; the second analyzes public space as a city street or as the city itself. In the first diagram, the dots are too far apart from each other to mix: people are solitary and spend only passing moments together. All you can do in a space like this is sit down, lose yourself in a book, satisfy yourself with lunch, drift into dirty thoughts about other people walking by. In the second diagram, the dots are pushed so close to each other they can't be seen as dots anymore, and the space itself can't be seen for all the dots: the dots have filled the open space and closed it until it's about to burst; it can no longer function as a container, it has to become something else. This type of public space is, potentially, a politically active space. But it becomes that only when the dots within are brought together by, and put at the service of, an external point: that point might enter the space and dwell in the mind, in the form of a shared idea, or it might enter the space in the flesh, in the form of a leader. To become a political arena, the piazza—the model of an open public space—gives up any claims of being a democratic space: it resigns itself and becomes an authoritarian space.



Proposal for Revelle Plaza, University of California, San Diego

1988

Steel, grass, water, flagpoles

152' × 148' × 48'

The existent plaza is like a conventional college quadrangle but so vast that it can function only as a place to walk through—the buildings are too far apart to suggest a place to gather in.

The proposal deals with an area of grass off to the side of the central concrete walkway. This area of grass is on two levels, one plane about three feet higher than the other.

The ground is made to burst in or burst out, the ground is made to implode or explode. On the lower level the grass spirals up out of the ground; on the upper level the grass spirals down into the ground. You can walk up as if on a little mountain, you can walk down as if into a tunnel. The spiral ends in a pool of water fed by a timed fountain. (The spurts of water are all the same height so that the fountain from the lowest spiral is barely seen above ground while the fountain from the highest spiral rises above the site.) The water spurts for a few seconds here, then way over on the other side for a few seconds there.

The way the site is now, there's a flagpole, bearing an American flag, in the middle. The proposal calls for additional flagpoles: these are of different heights; they are not perpendicular to the ground but diagonal—it's as if they're rising up from or sinking into the ground. The flags are red, the flags are metal, the metal clanks in the wind. (The flags function as a kind of rallying cry, as if calling people to storm a hill or to come together underground.)

8

The piazza remains democratic when people break up into clusters. Groups of people form territories, as if over a vast plain. The cluster is small enough that it doesn't need a leader: each person in the cluster has the chance to talk for him- or herself, without asking for it, without needing to be granted the privilege of talking. Each cluster acts as if (at least for the moment) the rest of the space isn't there; each cluster acts as if it doesn't need the rest of the space. In fact, it doesn't *want* the rest of the space; the cluster-space exists as democratic only as long as it keeps the rest of the space out. The more people break in, and make the cluster bulge, the more the cluster dissolves into individual parts that would spread out indefinitely until one person either from within or without reshapes them into something bigger than a cluster, something that needs—and that is an—organization.

9

To keep itself intact, the cluster moves indoors where it has walls to preserve it. People gather together as small groups in bars, and in cafes, and in nightclubs. A person might come here specifically for a service that, as a by-product, inserts that person into a group of people seeking the same service; or the person might come here primarily to be part of a group, the service being only a decoy, an excuse for companionship. Whatever the intention, in order to achieve that goal these people have come to this particular place and no other. The individual goal is subsumed into what's called "a sense of place." When "place" is embodied concretely enough to be "sensed," it has been distinguished from the places surrounding it. Either it is a "historical place," a preservation or re-creation of the place as it once was, as if in a time capsule; or it is a "virtual place," the importation of another place far away from this one in space or time that you visit as if in a space capsule, or a time machine. The implication of a "historical place" is that there's no space without time—a place has no life until time has gone by. The implication of a "virtual place" is that there's no time without space—the past or the future can't be pre-lived or relived without a place to live it in. In either case, you're not where you are, you only desire to be somewhere else; place is linked either with memory or with imagination. Going to a "historical" cluster-place is the equivalent of going home, except that this is the home not only of the family but of the tribe; "historical place" turns the private time of the family into the public time of the tribe. Coming to a "virtual" cluster-place is the equivalent of going on vacation, except that you never have to leave your own backyard; "virtual place" transports the public space of the foreign into the private space

of the home. A “historical place” puts the place into the flow of history, but a history that’s stopped at a certain point in time; time has gone by, but it can’t go on. A “virtual place” puts the place into the field of geography, but a fragment of geography that’s cut off from its neighbors; you’re in place, but you can’t go from place to place. This is not history but myth, not geography but only a travelogue, not science fiction but romance: the laboratory invention of the perfect environment, which can’t be spoiled by further time and by other places encroaching on it.

10

In these indoor cluster-places, you get what you pay for. You pay to belong to the community, and the class, that is accustomed to use the place. You pay for the fabrication of a past or of a future, for the idea that this is how the place should be and not merely how it is. You pay, too, for the proximity of other bodies; you pay for the right to “test the waters,” to try your hand at this sea of bodies that swarm through the place. The bodies are packed close together so that, at least in theory, at least in the mind and in the libido, you can have your pick; here you’re the king of the mountain, you can’t be shot down, you will make a conquest. In a bar you’re allowed to make conversation, whereas on the street you’re expected to pretend that you walk alone. You’re obligated to just walk on by. You have to pay for the chance that you might get lucky; you pay in order to enter another body or consume another body.

11

The indoor cluster-place has embedded, within its own category, the principle of its own negation. The prototype of the self-destructive cluster-place is the rock music club. These are places with names, like *The Knitting Factory*, that flaunt the subversion of places that once had a history of their own; places with names, like *Deviate*, that encourage the perversion of inhabitants who once had a philosophy of their own. Like other indoor cluster-places, these clubs are privately owned; but the owners of these places betray their own masochism or display their own arrogance. They risk losing all they have—either they feel guilty for having it and want to give it up or they want to beat the devil and look death and destruction straight in the eye. The club has, as its end, the playing of music that draws people into the club and keeps them there as paying customers; but the end of the music itself—if it isn’t stopped too soon, before it’s too late—is to be so loud and so strong that the walls shatter: the goal of the music is, literally, to bring the

house down. On the one hand, these places deny privacy and ownership by admitting, within their own walls, the instruments of their own destruction, the instruments of revolution; on the other hand, these places appropriate destruction in order to extend ownership and privacy. They have their own insurance policy: if the place is destroyed, just build a bigger and better one—they domesticate revolution.

12

Sooner or later you have to leave the cluster-place; the bar closes; you've had one more for your baby, and one more for the road. You take this literally—either you go on home, or you walk around, through the city. But the choice of inside or outside, of private or public, is outdated now. In an electronic age, you have all the information of the city—the information of one city after another, of one city piled upon another city—at your fingertips, on a computer terminal, in the privacy of your own home. You never have to get up out of your seat, you never have to leave home. The information is in your head and on your mind; you leave your home computer not for the mind but for the body, not for the head but for the genitals. You go out to shake your body loose, you go out to shake rattle and roll. The public space of the city is the presence of other bodies: public space is an analogue for sex—either it's a composite of objects of the desire for sex, or it's a composite of images that substitute for sex. Public space contradicts its name and functions as the domestication of sex: you escape into public space when sex at home, within closed walls and where there's nothing else to do, becomes closed up in itself and festers and becomes a monster, out of control. Or else public space lives up to its name and functions to bring sex out into the open: you liberate yourself into public space when sex at home closes you up inside a relationship and "sex" becomes reduced to a subcategory of "relationship." Public space is the refusal of monogamous relationships and the acceptance of sex that has no bonds and knows no bounds.

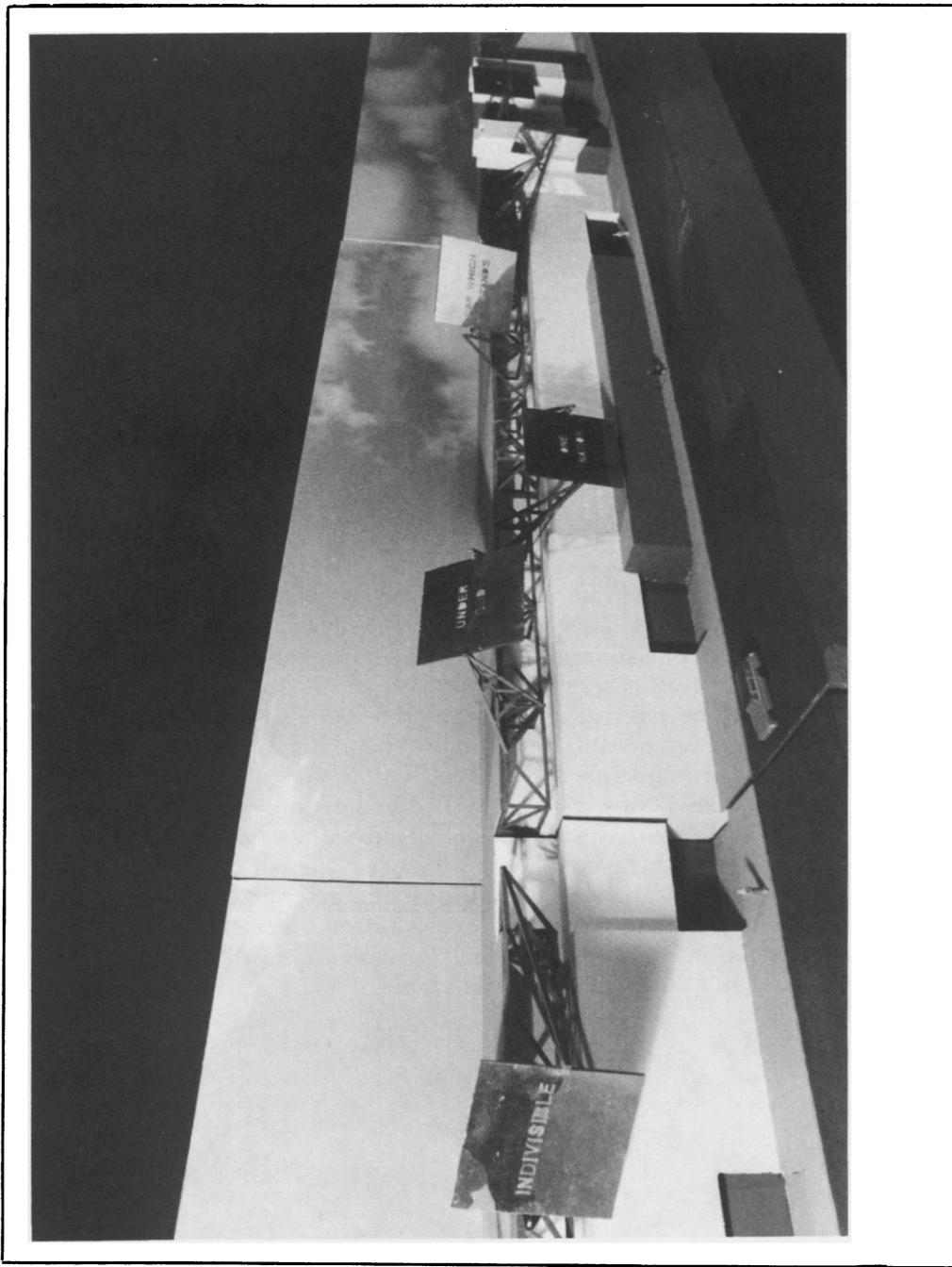
13

Time is fast, and space is slow. Space is an attempt to place time and understand time; space is a need to have something to see and solid ground to stand on; space is a desire to follow the course of events and to believe in cause and effect. The electronic age obliterates space and overlaps places. You travel by airplane: you're in one place, then it's all white outside the window, and then—zap!—you're in another place, with nothing in between. You're switching channels on a TV set,

rewinding and fast-forwarding a videotape, instead of watching a movie from beginning to end. The electronic age establishes the primacy of time. The video game versus the pinball machine. The push-button phone versus the rotary phone. The digital watch versus a clock whose hands travel around a field in which each individual second has a place. In a fast time, public space—in the form of an actual place with boundaries—is a slowing-down process, an attempt to stop time and go back in history and revert to an earlier age. The plaza, bounded by buildings and owned by a corporation, is a nostalgia for nineteenth-century nationalism.

14

Public space, in an electronic age, is space on the run. Public space is not space *in* the city but the city itself. Not nodes but circulation routes; not buildings and plazas but roads and bridges. Public space is leaving home and giving up all the comforts of the cluster-places that substitute for the home. Space on the run is life on the loose. There's no time to talk; there's no need for talk, since you have all the information you need on the radio you carry with you. There's no need for a person-to-person relationship, since you already have multiple relationships with voices on your radio, with images of persons in store windows and on billboards. There's no time to stop and have a relationship, which would be a denial of all those other bodies you're side-by-side with on the street, one different body after another, one body replacing another. There's no time and no need and no way to have "deep sex": in a plague year, in a time of AIDS, bodies mix while dressed in condoms and armored with vaginal shields—the body takes its own housing with it wherever it goes, it doesn't come out of its shell. The electronic age and the age of AIDS become intermixed in an age of virus, whether that virus is information or disease. Each person becomes too infected, either with information or with disease, to be with another. You come to visit, not to stay.



Project for Cervantes Convention Center, St. Louis
Steel, mirror, neon
1004' × 64' × 48' (Each panel 18' square)

The truss at the top of the building functions as the support for other trusses: triangular trusses jut out and up and down and to one side or the other, like cranes at a work-site, like limbs of the building.

Each pair of trusses holds a mirrored stainless steel panel, like a billboard, which rotates on the trusses as if on a spit. As the panel slowly rotates, it reflects first sky, then building, then street, then people, then sky again

On each mirrored panel is inscribed a phrase from the Pledge of Allegiance. The letters are cut out of the panel, the background made visible through the mirror. The letters are lined with white neon, the words are made readable at night. Some of the letters are lined also with an additional neon tube, either red or blue, which flashes on and off. One word pulls out of the basic phrase, a different word flashes at different times. One word calls the other word into question: you can't read one word without seeing another word rip it apart from within: you start to think harder, maybe, about the meaning of the words: as the panel rotates, now you see the words, now you don't, now you see the words upside down

Out of I PLEDGE ALLEGIANCE flashes LED or EDGE
or PEG LEG

Out of TO THE FLAG flashes TOT or LAG

Out of OF THE UNITED STATES flashes NITE or
STAT or TAT

Out of OF AMERICA flashes O or ME

Out of AND TO THE REPUBLIC flashes REP or PUB
or RELIC

Out of FOR WHICH IT STANDS flashes OR or HIC
or AND

Out of ONE NATION flashes TIN or TON

Out of UNDER GOD flashes GO or OD

Out of INDIVISIBLE flashes VISIBLE or INVISIBLE

Out of WITH LIBERTY flashes WIT or LIT or LIE

Out of AND JUSTICE flashes JUST or TIC or SIC

Out of FOR ALL flashes FALL

15

The electronic age redefines *public* as a composite of privates. When you're in a plane, and you look out the window and you're in the clouds and you have no clue as to what your route is, you might be anywhere you want to be, anywhere in the world. The image you have of where you are is different from the world in the dreams of the person sitting next to you. Except that it doesn't matter what either of you might think, what either of you might want; you're not going anywhere but here, where the plane has been programmed to land, where the pilot has taken you. You're in the position of a child: "This is your captain speaking. . . ." The electronic age—by turning concrete space into abstract space, by turning space into time—takes control out of your hands and puts it in the will of another, whether that other is called God or Magic or The Corporation or The Government. A single person has access to all the information of the city and becomes, him- or herself, a self-sufficient city. That self-contained entity is easier to contain now from the outside, easier to control, since it has no need and no desire to join with any other self-contained and self-sufficient entities in resistance. Each of these self-enclosed entities, by the way, might be wearing one of those cheap wristwatches that started off this essay, pages ago. The watch that used to be "Made in the U.S.A." is now "Made in Korea," or "Made in Taiwan." Electronics, by making information accessible and exchangeable, and by making the products of information repeatable and cheap, forces the breakup of national boundaries. One nation is connected to another, one nation goes through another. But older structures, economic and military, retain their power in the organization of electronics. One nation is connected to another either as dominant or submissive; one nation goes through another either as invader or as parasite. We in the United States don't have to go to South Korea anymore; we can have South Korea come to us. South Korea comes cheap; we can take it with us wherever we go. We have it up our sleeve like a wristwatch.

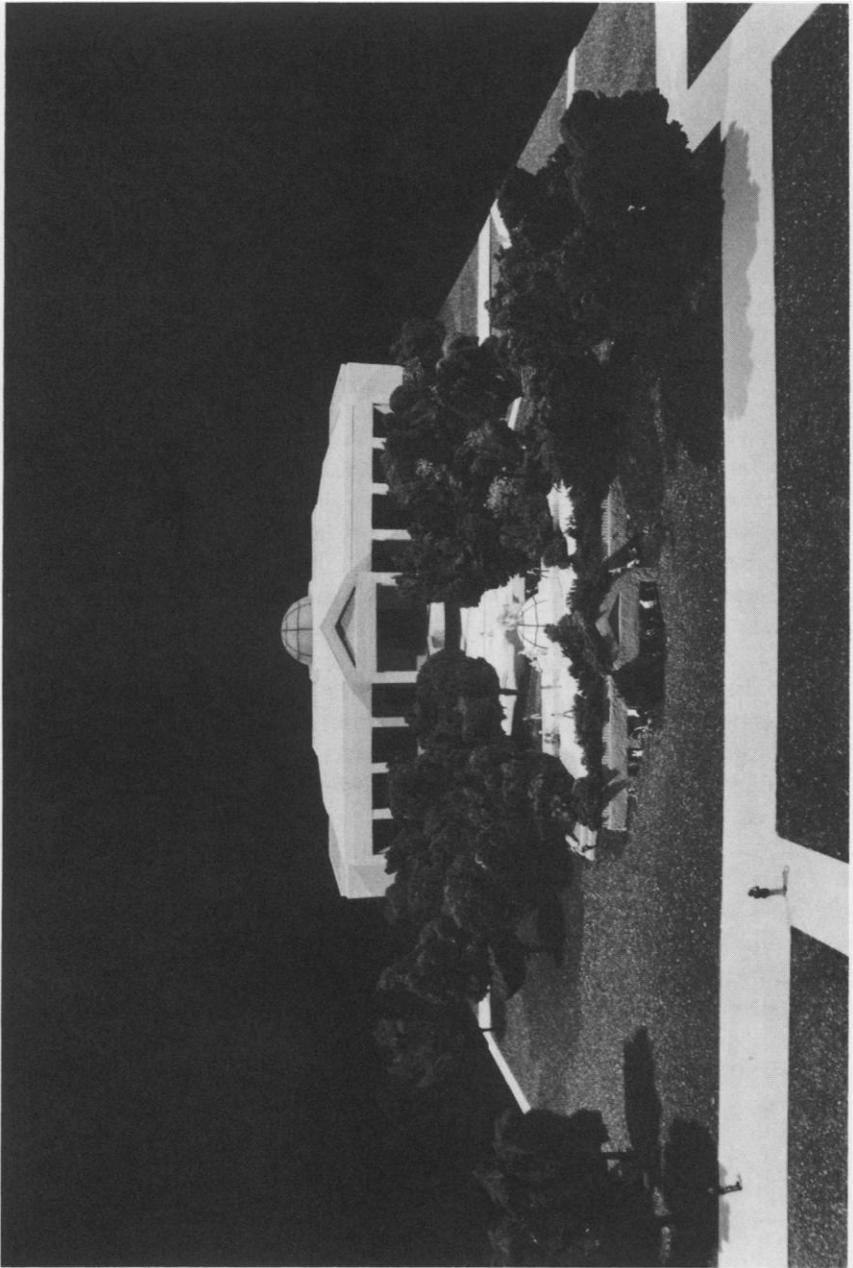
16

The collision of electronics and bodies will subvert the organization of information and of cities. Each bit of information is controlled, but the mix of information is accidental and can't be organized. The propaganda from one station, on a radio that's carried in the street, weaves in and out of the propaganda from another station, and

another. One product on a shelf, in a rack, bulges against another and pushes that one into another, etc. One billboard image peels away only to reveal behind it another image, which comes into collusion then with the unpeeled part of the upper image. One neon message is lost in the stars of other neon. One home computer can plant a bug in the programs of other computers. Public space is the air space between bodies and information and other bodies; public space is a mix of electric current and sexual magnetism. So much information fills the air, and so many things and so many bodies, that you can trust and love any one of them only "for the time being." There's no danger of being a true believer, no danger of being a husband or a wife—you're playing the electronic field, you're on the move and on the make.

17

The building of spaces in the city has already been assigned to established disciplines: the vertical is allotted to architecture, the horizontal to landscape architecture, and the network of lines between and through them to engineering. The city has all the design it needs. For another category—"public art"—to have a function in the design of city spaces, "art" has to be brought back to one of its root meanings: "cunning." Public art has to squeeze in and fit under and fall over what already exists in the city. Its mode of behavior is to perform operations—what appear to be unnecessary operations—on the built environment: it adds to the vertical, subtracts from the horizontal, multiplies and divides the network of in-between lines. These operations are superfluous; they replicate what's already there and make it proliferate like a disease. The function of public art is to de-design. It builds up, like a wart, on a building: there might be a capsule, say, that attaches itself like a leech to an empty wall, where it provides housing for people who wouldn't have access inside the building. Or public art digs out, like a wound, from the floor of a plaza or the ground of a park: at your feet, say, there might be a burrow or a foxhole or a lair, which could be used for a quick fuck or for a conspiracy. Or, instead of spaces that people have to stop at and slip into, public art furnishes spaces that house people as they keep moving: it might be in the form of vehicles, or it might be clothing, that takes as its model the T-shirt that invites you to read text at the same time as it dares you to stare at the breasts behind it. The end is public, but the means of public art might be private. The end is people, but the means might be individual persons. The end is space, but the means might be fragments and bits.



Proposal for the Supreme Court lawn, Carson City

1989

Concrete, metal, glass, plantings, water

128' × 64' × 10'

The Supreme Court building is a classical court building: columns and a portico in front, a dome on top. The proposal is for the lawn in front of the Supreme Court building.

On the lawn, between the walkways, another building is submerged in the ground. It is a replica of the Supreme Court building, half the size of the original. You can walk on the grass and onto the roof of the building; the lawn slopes down toward the portico so that the front of the building is partly visible, the roof here elevated off the ground.

The trees and shrubbery of the lawn continue onto the roof of this other building, around the edge (the trees and shrubbery form, as a by-product, a railing). Below the roof, behind the columns, fountains rise to different heights and shoot up against the ceiling and up through the dome and the open shaft at the side of the roof.

This other Supreme Court building functions as a person-made landscape: you can use the roof as a kind of park; you can walk around the roof and step up and sit on different levels of the roof.

This other Supreme Court building might be an older court that by now is sinking down into the ground (it's overgrown with shrubbery, the building has sprung a leak). Or it might be a newer court, an alternative court, that is starting to rise up out of the ground (it pushes up the landscape with it as it ascends, the water springing up shoots up the building with it).

18

The built environment is built because it's been allowed to be built. It's been allowed to be built because it stands for and reflects an institution or a dominant culture. The budget for architecture is a hundred times the budget for public art because a building provides jobs and products and services that augment the finances of a city. Public art comes in through the back door like a second-class citizen. Instead of bemoaning this, public art can use this marginal position to its advantage: public art can present itself as the voice of marginal cultures, as the minority report, as the opposition party. Public art exists to thicken the plot.

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The model for a new public art is pop music. Music is time and not space; music has no place, so it doesn't have to keep its place, it fills the air and doesn't take up space. Its mode of existence is to be in the middle of things; you can do other things while you're in the middle of it. You're not in front of it, and you don't go around it, or through it; the music goes through you, and stays inside you. It's a song you can't get out of your head. But there are so many voices, too many songs to keep in your head at once. You walk down the street and hear one song from the soundbox you carry with you, another song blaring out of an audio speaker in front of a store, one more through an open bedroom window, yet another coming off the radio in a car that speeds by another car with still one more, and then another, as the driver changes stations. This mix of musics produces a mix of cultures; of course pop music exploits minority cultures, but at the same time it "discovers" and uncovers them so that they become born again to sneak into and under the dominant culture. The music of the seventies was punk; the music of the eighties was rap. Each of these types is music that says: you can do it, too. You don't need a professional recording studio; anybody can do it, in the garage and in the house. The message of punk was: do what you can do and do it over and over until everybody else is driven crazy. The message of rap is: if something has been done better by somebody else, who had the means to do it, then steal it, and remix it; tape is cheap and airspace is free. The message of punk and rap together is: actions speak louder only because of words, so speak up and talk fast and keep your hands free and your eyes wide open and your ear to the ground and be quick on your feet and rock a body but don't forget to rock a culture, too.

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Beware of the Walkman.