Words to Be Looked At

Language in 1960s Art

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In his 1985 essay "My Works for Magazine Pages: 'A History of Conceptual Art,'" the artist Dan Graham describes his decision to make works specifically for the magazine page as a response to the contradictions in art practice between Pop and Minimal art. If Pop "referred to the surrounding world of media culture" as its framework, minimalism addressed the physical space of the gallery—the architectural container—as its material support. Graham was well aware of the economic and institutional interdependence of art galleries and magazines. For a work to attain the status of art, it had to be not only exhibited but also reproduced as a photograph and written about in publications. These "accretions of information after the fact" were almost part of the artwork insofar as they helped frame and define it. Graham sought to design artworks that would take the magazine page and information media as their support.

Thus in Schema (March 1966), Graham designed a self-generating structure that would incorporate and comment on its publication context: "Schema (March 1966) only exists by its presence in the functional structure of the magazine and can only be exhibited in a gallery second-hand." Published in various magazines and catalogues in the late 1960s, Schema famously presents itself as a structure that catalogues information about its presentation, compiling the number of adjectives, adverbs, columns, and so forth, according to the form given by each editor in each printed instance. As Alexander Alberro notes, it is a work about self-referentiality in which "each variant is reduced to a purely descriptive analysis of itself." As a system, Schema is always the same, but as a catalogue of results, it constantly varies depending on each realization.
SCHEMA

(number of) adjectives
(number of) adverbs
(percentage of) area not occupied by type
(percentage of) area occupied by type
(number of) columns
(number of) conjunctions
(number of) depression of type into surface of page
(number of) gerunds
(number of) infinitives
(number of) letters of alphabet
(number of) lines
(number of) mathematical symbols
(number of) nouns
(number of) numbers
(number of) participles
(perimeter of) page
(weight of) paper sheet
(type) paper stock
(thinness of) paper stock
(number of) prepositions
(number of) pronouns
(number of point) size type
(name of) typeface
(number of) words
(number of) words capitalized
(number of) words italicized
(number of) words not capitalized
(number of) words not italicized

Figure 4.1  Graham, Poem, March 1966 (1966). Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.
POEM

35 adjectives
7 adverbs
35.52% area not occupied by type
64.48% area occupied by type
1 column
1 conjunction
0 mms. depression of type into surface of page
0 gerunds
0 infinitives
247 letters of alphabet
28 lines
8 mathematical symbols
51 nouns
29 numbers
6 participles
8" x 8" page
80 lb. paper sheet
dull coated paper stock
.007" thin paper stock
3 prepositions
0 pronouns
10 point size type
univers 55 typeface
61 words
3 words capitalized
0 words italicized
58 words not capitalized
61 words not italicized
Although in most versions it is described as a “Schema for a set of pages,” in its first appearance, in the magazine Aspen 5–6, the work was titled Poem, March 1966 and described as a “Schema for a set of poems whose component pages are specifically published as individual poems in various publications.” In the mid-1960s, before he had fully decided that he was an artist and not only a writer, Graham also saw himself as a poet and provisionally considered several of his early works—including Schema (1965) and Schema (March 1966) to be “poems,” so labeling them in at least some instances. These early works lay on the boundary of genres, partaking of concrete poetry, quasi-scientific systems, and the types of linguistic and numerical scores that had emerged out of experimental music and Fluxus.

Graham’s self-identification as a poet suggests the extent to which poetry appeared, in the 1960s art world, as a potential field for investigating language as such and, in particular for exploring the behavior of words on the page. In this context, language is increasingly understood not just as a material but as a kind of “site.” The page is a visual, physical container—an 8 1/2 x 11 inch white rectangle analogous to the white cube of the gallery—and also a place for action and a publication context. This site is implicitly relational and dynamic: words on a page operate in relation to other texts and statements, since language as a system is perpetually in circulation. Viewed in this way, conventional poetic forms, and especially individual lyric utterances, are but a small part of a much wider field. Understood in its most general sense, as “language art,” poetry is a form that explores the aesthetics, structures, and operations of language as much as any specific content. In the postwar era, various types of concrete and visual poetry, in particular, promised to probe the space of the typographic page and link contemporary literature with the visual arts. Yet a reliance on rather quaint illustrational or pictorial modes—as in poems that take on the shape of their subjects—left much concrete poetry out of touch with changing paradigms in the visual arts and the wider conditions of language in modernity. In their turn to compositional procedures that sampled existing texts and fractured syntax, John Ashbery and Jackson Mac Low generated works whose extreme fragmentation of language seemed to divorce the utterance from the expression of any single speaker. Their collage-based treatment of words as found objects opened the
door to much wider investigations of nonliterary uses of language, yet ultimately their works tended to recontain these experiments back into something all-too-recognizable as poetic form. If Ashbery’s work rejoined a high-modernist lyric revitalized with the resources of nonliterary language, and Mac Low’s poems ultimately reconventionalized Cagean procedures within traditional models of oral performance, what other possibilities might one envision for work with language emerging out of poetry?

Alongside Graham, whose involvement with poetry was relatively short-lived, the crucial figures here are Carl Andre and Vito Acconci, two artists far better known for their work in other forms: sculpture for Andre; performance, video, and later architecture for Acconci. For both Andre and Acconci, their work with language is foundational for their larger projects: Acconci, as is well-known, began as a poet before he took up work in performance, and Andre produced much of his early poetry during the crucial period, 1960–1965, when he developed the core sculptural strategies that produced landmark works of Minimal art. In Andre’s case, unpacking the relationship between sculpture and language requires looking closely at a critical but little-known part of his production, the Seven Books of Poetry he privately published in 1969 with the Dwan Gallery and Seth Siegelaub.

Even though much of Acconci’s work has remained unpublished, the practical obstacles to addressing Andre’s poetry are even greater. Even before the recent publication of Acconci’s early, mostly unpublished poetry, a provocative sampling of his work has been available in journals, catalogues, and books as well as in the pages of the magazine he coedited with Bernadette Mayer, 0 to 9 (1967–1969). Although the six numbers of 0 to 9 and accompanying book works were only issued in modest print runs of 250 to 300 copies, the magazine was well-known and remarkably influential, and the very structure of Acconci’s work has always been to engage public channels of dissemination. To the contrary, to my knowledge, only two sets of Andre’s Seven Books of Poetry are in public collections, at the Museum of Modern Art Library in New York City and The Tate Gallery in London. Over the past decade, series of exhibitions—at the Paula Cooper Gallery in New York, the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas, the Cabinet des Estampes in Geneva, and elsewhere—have displayed the original pages of Andre’s poems as unique art
objects in specially designed cases. Few of the poems, however, are available in reproduction, in the form of the book page—the form that would seem to be the logical destination for them, and certainly the easiest format for reading and studying them. A handful of individual poems have been reproduced in catalogues, books, and magazines over the years, yet these are but a small sampling, and give little sense of the range or internal complexity of the Seven Books." Despite having published these volumes nearly forty years ago, more recently Andre has been exceedingly reluctant to permit the reproduction or publication of his poems, preferring these be encountered as original objects. No images are printed here for that reason. Therefore, I will describe and cite from them, and hope that readers will have a chance to view them elsewhere. I am all too aware of the limitations of, for example, citing from a concrete poem whose form is as much about its material and visual organization as the words employed, yet at present it may be the only way of discussing this work. If Acconci has always been legendarily casual about copyright, Andre's relation to his poetry has always been marked by authorial control.

Nonetheless, consideration of Andre's and Acconci's poetic production, is essential not only to discussions of 1960s' poetry but also to analysis of the tensions among object, site and performance that structure 1960s art. My goal here is not just to use visual art to understand this poetry but also to use the work with language to understand sculptural practice and, in Acconci's work, the turn to performance—and in so doing, to reexamine the terms of this "shift," from minimal to postminimal art, by looking at it through linguistic production. Untangling some of the relations between poetry and sculpture in the work of artists like Andre, Acconci, and Graham will also clarify how their projects depart from fundamentally different assumptions than, for instance, the 1950s' poetry of Ashbery or Mac Low.

Down to Words

Acconci cites Ashbery's work in The Tennis Court Oath as an impetus to "get it down to words"—to generate a poetry that would not be about lyric expression but about the properties of language and language play. A far more systematic execution of this urge to get it down to words is found in work by
Andre, who presented what he termed his “First Five Poems” (1960) as a series of five single lowercase words—“green / five / horn / eye / sound”—centered on each of five pages. These single-word poems are interspersed among other poems in Andre’s book A Theory of Poetry: 1960–1965, where they have a curious effect: suspended in white space, they arrest the reader’s attention on the fact of the single word. Recalling these poems in a 1963 dialogue with the photographer and filmmaker Hollis Frampton, Andre states:

They are not the first poems I ever wrote. . . . But they are the first poems in which I took the English language for subject matter. All my earlier poems originated in some conceit or observation or sentiment of my own. These poems begin in the qualities of words. Whole poems are made out of the many single poems we call words.10

Andre has repeated this last sentence in other conversations and remarks, and it represents something of a leitmotif for him—one of a series of principles that he returns to and uses to ground his practice. It implies a set of assumptions—the word in isolation, out of syntax—that inform Andre’s vast poetic production. For both Andre and Frampton, this isolation of the word is understood not simply as a selection of individual words but as what Andre terms a “cut”—an analogy not only to the literal, physical cuts in Andre’s 1958–1960 “negative sculptures” but also to the cut in film editing, as an operation that divides yet also potentially joins and reassembles a series of fragments or particles. This “cut in language” yields a series of elements that have been removed from an existing text or set. As Frampton proposes to Andre in their exchange,

A dictionary contains all dictions. It contains all the elements of all the possible fields, and is “closed” in the sense that an operation (alphabetization) has been performed on those elements. Now am I to understand that you have performed a different operation upon the sum of dictions in the O.E.D., namely removed all but five of the poems?11
This notion of the single word as both a discrete unit and an element removed from a larger set underlies Andre's poetry. In a manner that recalls John Cage's desire to "get rid of the glue" in order to work with "sounds in themselves," Andre has stated that "I try to boil out the grammar." The early dialogues with Frampton help elucidate this approach. After Frampton proposes an alternate set: "blue / six / hair / ear / light"—Andre responds that both sets are radically different from the poem: "I am a red pansy."

These latter five words relate most strongly to each other and depart very far from the specificity of their referents. In fact we may presume that the five words together share one super-referent. The five words of my First Five Poems very purposely do not share a referent. My green is a square of that color or a village's common land.

"I have gotten rid of the overriding super-referent," Andre insists, then asks, "Is that a valuable thing to do?"

It is a key question. What Andre describes as the super-referent is the larger meaning of a phrase or sentence. Syntax is a set of rules by which signs can be combined to make statements. When we use language to communicate, syntax subordinates individual elements—words—to a larger message. A syntagm is a chain or string of elements that are linked together to serve a larger function. For this chain to work, the individuality of its elements must be suppressed. In the example Andre provides, "I am a red pansy," there is no question that the richness and particularity of "I," "am," and "red" are lost and subsumed in the larger, and quite banal, statement that they make possible. By focusing on the particle, Andre's "First Five Poems" attempt to renovate language by salvaging these misused materials, and recovering the material complexity and semiotic multivalence of the individual word. Hence, we encounter a single word sound suspended in the middle of a blank page of paper. An extraordinarily simple and common thing, it is presented for our contemplation: the look and shape of its letters, the sound, all the possible meanings and associations it evokes. "The great natural poem about anything is its name," Andre insists. Yet to atomize language, to treat it as a collection
of particles, a collection of names, is quite perverse. To treat words in a sense as things is to repress all the other ways words operate, since words accrue their meanings in relation to other words.

Part of the peculiarity of Andre's practice is his use of what might seem to be the most impersonal of methods— is isolation, repetition, listing, grinding, scattering, alphabetic arrangement, and so forth—on fragments of language charged with great personal and historical meaning. In so doing, Andre's goal is not to suspend referentiality but to foreground the palpable, tactile, and material qualities of words. Throughout his poetry, Andre is powerfully drawn to nouns and proper names. Reference, memory, and association cling to language in his work, and Andre repeatedly links literature to inner speech, to the verbalizations we make to ourselves. If anything, the dissolution of syntax in his poems produces a heightened referentiality, as the thingness of the isolated word makes the qualities it stands for vivid, concrete, and yet almost unfathomable, recalling Russian futurist critic Victor Shklovsky's claim that art exists to defamiliarize and renovate perception, "to make the stone stoney."

Andre's early 1960s' work with language emerged closely from his work with objects and materials. Frampton recalls how in the fall of 1960, Andre "began taking given texts and 'cutting' directly from them as from a timber, mapping upon words what he had learned from sculpture," before shifting to the "modular and isometric structures" he used in sculptures after 1963/1964. Many of these early sculptures were lost or abandoned, and often the only record we have of them are Frampton's black-and-white photos, which show the beautiful, totemlike objects in the rooms where they were made and help make palpable Andre's processes of making them. *Negative Sculpture* (1958) is a large block of translucent Plexiglas with multiple holes drilled through it; *First Ladder* and *Last Ladder* (1958-1959) are large vertical wooden timbers with series of uniform cavities chiseled out of them. As Frampton notes, these sculptures were followed by Andre's turn to forms that no longer relied on cutting or artificial means of joining elements—sculptures that used the basic material properties of elements as he found them, and that could be assembled through stacking and basic operations of carpentry (such as notched joints) that don't require screws, nails or glue. Emblematic
of this move were the wooden *Pyramid* André assembled in 1959, stacking eighteen tiers of four interlocking fir two by fours to construct roughly human-scale columns.

Although André has always credited these core principles of what would become Minimal art to his close friendship with the painter Frank Stella, he forcefully resists simplistic readings of surface similarities between his work and Stella’s:

It was not basically the appearance of Stella’s paintings that influenced my sculpture but his practice. The prevailing convention of abstract painting in 1959 was gestural and rhythmic. Frank set off in an entirely different direction—neutralizing gesture by using uniform brush strokes that trace a metrical pattern over the whole canvas. By increments of identical gestures the ground of the canvas was transformed into the field of the painting. My *Pyramid* has the cross section of [Constantin] Brancusi’s *Endless Column*, but the method of building it with identical, repeated segments of 2 × 4 lumber derives from Stella.³⁰

These principles of incremental identical units and of generating a form from the properties of the materials themselves have grounded André’s practice in both sculpture and poetry, and require closer scrutiny. In a somewhat-idsyncratic definition, André terms these principles “constructivist”—a term referring to the Soviet art movement of the 1920s, but also, in André’s account, to radical modernist practitioners like Ezra Pound and Gertrude Stein as well as minimalists like Stella. As he explains to Frampton,

Let me indicate some shadow of what I mean by a Constructivist aesthetic. Frank Stella is a Constructivist. He makes paintings by combining identical, discrete units. Those units are not stripes, but brush strokes. We have both watched Frank Stella paint a picture. He fills in a pattern with uniform elements. His stripe designs are the result of the shape and limitation of his primary unit. A brick
wall is a Constructivist execution. The various overall bond patterns are a result of the shape of the individual bricks. . . . My Constructivism is the generation of overall designs by the multiplication of the qualities of the individual constituent elements.  

And, as Andre articulated in a 1970 interview:

My first problem has always been to find a set of particles—a set of units and then to combine them according to laws which are particular to each particle, rather than a law which is applied to the whole set, like glue or riveting or welding. They are non-structural combinations of particles and these particles particularly are combined in laws which have no more than the qualities that any one particle might have.

In Andre's sculptures, common industrial materials like fire bricks, metal plates, or even bales of hay can indeed function as a set of particles, as "identical, discrete units" that can be stacked, lined up, or placed in a grid, without joining or other "structural" means. When these same or similar operations are used on words, however, quite different things happen. As Andre repeatedly notes, "Words always connect when they are placed together." Of course, modernist poetry depends on the fact that when dislodged from conventional syntax or the prose sentence, the ways that words connect and combine are far from predictable or straightforward.

Some of Andre's poems work by massing, lining up, or dispersing a singular referential word in ruled typewritten forms. In One Hundred Sonnets (I . . . Flower) (1963/1969), Andre presents each single noun in a gridlike block of letters composed on a typewriter—"the kind of grid that a typewriter produced in a very machine-like way." Each block is about two by three inches and is suspended a bit above the middle of an otherwise-blank page. The format is straightforward, and I can provide a rough approximation of one such block here. True to their sonnet form, all blocks are fourteen lines long (although the number of times each word is repeated horizontally in
each line varies; unlike a classic sonnet, line-lengths are determined visually, not by number of syllables):

```
youyouyouyouyouyouyouyouyouyouyouyou
youyouyouyouyouyouyouyouyouyouyouyou
youyouyouyouyouyouyouyouyouyouyouyou
youyouyouyouyouyouyouyouyouyouyouyou
youyouyouyouyouyouyouyouyouyouyouyou
youyouyouyouyouyouyouyouyouyouyouyou
youyouyouyouyouyouyouyouyouyouyouyou
youyouyouyouyouyouyouyouyouyouyouyou
youyouyouyouyouyouyouyouyouyouyouyou
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Of course, what modern typography cannot replicate is the tactile quality of letters typed on a manual typewriter, with their inevitable variations in ink density, sharpness, and force of impression. Even though Andre has clearly strived for a uniformity of appearance, the inevitable slight variations—the differences within repetition—give the massed blocks a vulnerability and poignancy. The uniformity is never exact. As Rob Weiner points out, “The repetition of single words commands the page by forming a sequence of fields.” This massing of a single element recalls Henry Flynt’s definition of minimalism as a “saturation of uniformity” that “stripped the form to a core element and saturated the field with that element.” The one hundred sonnets move progressively from pronouns—1 / you / he / she / it—to body parts and fluids—head / hair / face / eye . . . blood / urine / sweat—to colors, numbers, minerals, and basic elements of the landscape—sun / moon / star / cloud / rain—as if to assemble a set of basic material properties analogous to those of Andre’s sculpture.

In a 1975 talk, Andre described the relation of his poetic project to his sculpture as follows:

I have been accused of trying to treat words as things, though I know very well that words are not things. But words do have palpable tactile qualities that we feel when we speak them, when we write them, or when we hear them . . . certainly my interest in elements or particles in sculpture is paralleled by my interest in
words as particles of language. I use words in units which are different from sentences, grammatical sentences, but of course words always connect when they are placed together if they are not nonsense words. I have attempted to write poetry in which the sentence is not the dominant form but the word is the dominant form.  

Describing poetry as "language mapped on an extraneous art," Andre proposes that "formerly it was language mapped on music, I think it is now language mapped on some aspect of the visual arts" such as sculpture or painting. To grasp the import of Andre's statement, we must understand how greatly his models of visual art differ from the pictorial or gestural models used to relate poetry to painting. In Andre's case, not only is language mapped on sculpture but the reverse is also true. Andre's use in sculpture of what he terms "elastic structures," employing "identical units of easily obtainable, everyday, functional materials" subject to continual arrangement and rearrangement, could be seen to derive in part from his work with language. The early massing or gridlike poems of *Passport* (1960) and *One Hundred Sonnets* precede Andre's better-known sculptural work with analogous forms, and suggest that Andre's experience handling and massing blocklike readymade words may have helped spur his subsequent move to arranging blocklike readymade industrial objects. In his many stories, Andre more often relates this sculptural strategy—"taking identical units, or close to identical units, and shifting them around"—to his job working as a brakeman on the Pennsylvania Railroad. Yet the sense that the ruled typewritten page may have been analogical to the space of the gallery gives us a quite different perspective on this work.

At times, it may be all too easy to observe morphological similarities between Andre's work with objects and his work with words—for instance, relating the repeated forms of his carved wood "ladders" to the loosely alphabetized "ladder" poems like "Essay on Sculpture for EC Gossen, 1964," which presents two columns of nouns in carefully arranged sawtooth edges, beginning with the following:
The alphabetization is far from strict, and shape is clearly the governing principle—an effort to give form to the materials that Andre has described as using "the appearance on the page...to impose a metric on the words." Yet despite their undeniable visual impact, poems like these strike me as among Andre's more conventional in that they hew closely to the familiar tradition of "shaped poems." More interesting as experiments in visual poetry are the works gathered in the book Shape and Structure (1960-1965), which presents a series of massed poems and constellations using individual words, letters, and typographic symbols, in which the graphic effect outweighs any semantic weight. Some are scattered in almost-circular shapes, others gridded, and one of the most beautiful consists only of two rows of slightly skewed lines of periods, which cross to create extraordinary series of perceptual effects: a kind of visual noise that produces colors, shapes, and a moiré-like impression of movement. In another, an entire page is covered with nothing but a grid of asterisks, yet the effect is not one of uniformity but of lightness, delicacy, and constant variation—a constant interplay between order and disorder. Rob Weiner describes how, in Shape and Structure,

Andre relieved punctuation of all grammatical responsibility, and avoided words altogether. In this series periods, dashes, and asterisks become the tools for creating pure design. These poems are like delicate drawings: line and space are created by the incessant banging out of punctuation. Dashes are typed in a triangular for-
mation, or in vertical stripes broken by irregular spaces. The effect looks like a sheet of rain. Periods are arranged in two large grids, one slightly overlapping the other, causing a moiré. Asterisks float across the page like snow.33

In overall effect, the pages are far closer to being drawings, composed of punctuation marks and letters, than what we think of as poems.

Divorced from the context of the book-length projects—which provide an overall structure and complexity of intercutting not unlike a filmic montage—Andre’s poetry sometimes acquires a static visual quality that his more dynamic sculptural works move beyond, particularly in their shifts from what Andre has termed “sculpture as shape,” to “sculpture as structure,” to “sculpture as place.”34 What might a parallel series of shifts in language look like, from “language as shape,” to “language as structure,” to “language as place”?

In sculptures and installations of the mid- and late 1960s, by selecting the most “neutral” and generic industrial materials—cinderblocks, bricks, and the like—Andre sought to minimize the metaphoric associations of objects in order to activate a latent operationality of scale, mass, number, and arrangement: cement bricks lined up one after another, to extend out from a wall; steel tiles placed in a gridlike formation, to cover a floor; gigantic Styrofoam planks stacked up to take over a room; and small plastic blocks emptied from a sack, to scatter across the floor. Regarding the works he presented at the 1965 exhibition Shape and Structure at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, Andre states that he set out “to seize and hold the space of the gallery—not simply fill it,” with a set of timbers so heavy they had to be moved to keep the floor from buckling.35 His subsequent installation featured stacked Styrofoam planks so massive that the three sculptures forced viewers to the edges of the room, where they were unable to take in the work as a whole.36 Describing his sculpture Reef, shown at the Whitney Museum’s Anti-Illusion exhibition and later installed at the Guggenheim, Andre states, “I had destructuralized my work and I wanted to use the Styrofoam in a way that would become place-generating. So I did a piece . . . where the Styrofoam is used to generate a kind of negative place, a place of no access, a plateau as it were. . . . It excludes the viewer from occupying the space.”37
Chapter 4

Placement displaces. It is an activity that generates effects in a larger site. As Andre famously intoned, "A thing is a hole in a thing it is not." These key installations foreground an aggressivity and attention to site elsewhere latent in Andre's work. Andre's attention to sculpture as an object that fills and overcrowds the space of the gallery recalls earlier poems that cover the space of the page, simultaneously filling and obliterating it. This formula, of "language to cover a space rather than uncover a meaning," is one of the most oft-quoted phrases Acconci uses to describe his own, quite different poetry. Yet I think we can read Andre against the grain or, in effect, read Andre through Acconci to foreground the performative and operational dimensions that underlie some of Andre's most interesting work.

Art historians have tended to read Andre's project in by-now-conventional minimalist terms—as suppressing meaning and reference, and eschewing overt engagement with narrative or history. Thus, it may be surprising to learn that his most substantial series of poems of the 1960s concerned King Philip's War, a series of battles that took place in 1675–1676 in Massachusetts that were among the bloodiest in early US history. The war's outcome devastated the traditional way of life of the native peoples of New England—a history Andre felt personally having grown up in Quincy, Massachusetts. Andre repeatedly returned to one source text, E. W. Pierce's 1878 Indian History and Genealogy, which he was given by his friend Michael Chapman in 1957. As Frampton recalls, Andre's "Long History" comprised "an alphabetization of all the words of the Urtexx"; the "Short History" (1960) yielded "52 terms in four suits or seasons," made by mapping the words against the conventional sequences of a deck of playing cards. Andre asserts that "the only dissociation complete enough for my purposes was the reduction of Pierce's text into its smallest constituent elements: the isolation of each word." The resulting suite of poems was "not a narrative poem or a history. What I wanted was the isolation of the terms of war, and then a recombining of these words to produce a poem."

Over a process of several years, Andre subjected the book to a series of operations: culling words and phrases, gridding them, isolating key terms that he then ordered alphabetically using file cards, and so forth. In addition, he used "this whole kind of statistical analysis of texts and diction ... founded
through biblical study at the beginning of the nineteenth century" to subject the text to quantitative analysis, analyzing words by their frequency of appearance in the book. As he explains, "Each of us has a distinct diction in our writing and in our speech, which is the range of words available to us at any one time, and the ones we prefer to use, that is quite distinct." For Andre, these methods provide a way of reading something like the suppressed or unconscious core of a poem, the shape, the "curve of distribution of words." In an interview, he recalled that "I found I had ceased to be interested in what I had to express, even ceased to be interested in what the text expressed, but . . . I tried to boil away narrative and grammar, so I could get at what the words have to say." He relates this approach, with its extreme pulverization of syntax, to the work of Gertrude Stein, stating that "she wanted to find out . . . what language says." Having broken language down to the level of the word, down to a set of particles, Andre then sought "a suitable operation for recombinining them" in such a way as to produce a poem. Subjecting the alphabetized list, the "Long History of King Philips War," to a series of repeating prime numbers, Andre came up with the short poem "King Philips War Primer," and then produced the extended "Ode on King Philips War," which was published in the book *Lyrics and Odes* (1969). Andre composed the twenty-three-page poem by subjecting short phrases drawn from Pierce's book to a simple permutational structure. Having already pulverized the terms of the *Indian History and Genealogy* into all manner of lists and combinations, Andre explains that "the idea of mapping my terms against the natural numbers comes directly from my understanding of Godel's method in his famous Proof." In discussion with Frampton, Andre explicitly positions his methods as impersonal, as operating to eliminate his own authorship:

The poetry I am trying to write is poetry which eliminates the poet, or at least makes the poet transparent in relation to the light cast upon his subject. . . . What I want to illuminate in my poetry are not those things which only I can see, but those things which any man can see. I am interested in those poems which you can go back to Manhattan and duplicate."
Reading the poem, we can work backward to reconstruct both the numerical schema and the phrases Andre used, which include “woods lands meadows rivers brooks to them and their heirs forever,” “am not willing at present to sell all they do desire,” and “dead whose bones for several years unbowed unbleached in the sun.” The permutational scheme, which generates eleven lines of six words each, is as follows:

\[
\begin{array}{cccccc}
1 & 1 & 2 & 1 & 2 & 3 \\
2 & 3 & 4 & 4 & 5 & 6 \\
3 & 5 & 6 & 7 & 8 & 9 \\
4 & 8 & 9 & 10 & 11 & 1 \\
5 & 9 & 10 & 2 & 3 & 4 \\
6 & 11 & 1 & 5 & 6 & 7 \\
7 & 2 & 3 & 8 & 9 & 10 \\
8 & 4 & 5 & 11 & 1 & 2 \\
9 & 6 & 7 & 3 & 4 & 5 \\
10 & 8 & 9 & 6 & 7 & 8 \\
11 & 10 & 11 & 9 & 10 & 11 \\
\end{array}
\]

Although the method seems simple, it yields results that are emotionally and poetically complex:

woods woods lands woods lands meadows
lands meadows rivers rivers brooks to
meadows brooks to them and their
rivers then and heirs forever woods
brooks their heirs lands meadows rivers
to forever woods brooks to them
them lands meadows and their heirs
and rivers brooks forever woods lands
their to them meadows rivers brooks
heirs and their to them and
forever heirs forever their heirs forever

Andre’s method breaks up the syntax of each line, forcing us to read one word at a time, going forward, then going back. This advances and retards the narrative, producing a repetition and stuttering that is quite moving. On different pages, the abundant repetition produces effects that uncannily mirror the content: a cataloguing of landscape, an oppressive sameness, stuttered insistence, an evocation of mourning. Likewise, the gradual introduction of new terms provokes a visceral sense of action and accumulation that somehow allows the tragic impact of the narrative to unfold.

Like the “Ode,” many of Andre’s poems utilize mechanisms of removal and rearrangement, extracting words from a historical source in order to construct a lexicon, which is then reassembled through a series of procedures—for instance, alternating words, lines, or lists of terms taken from two different texts—as “a way of analyzing a text to discover tendencies which are not immediately apparent even to the author.” Nonetheless, one could argue that while these series of isolated words, primarily nouns, have a dynamic effect in relation to the prior source and its meanings, they are results of processes not the processes themselves. However massed, they are lists, not actions. A studied avoidance of the overtly relational or transactional may indeed be a characteristic of Andre’s work—evidenced by Andre’s preference, in poetry, for the bounded and enclosed page of the catalogue or privately printed book over the more contaminated public space of the magazine. Andre himself recollected how “some critic said that Richard Serra’s sculptures were a verb, and that Carl Andre’s were nouns: that’s really good. Verbs are relational. I prefer nouns.” As we now turn to a consideration of Acconci’s poetry, it should not surprise us that Acconci himself has often recalled how important Richard Serra’s prop pieces were to him in the late 1960s, as he tried to figure out how to go beyond minimalism, because they suggested an agent and an action latent in minimal forms.
Words to Cover a Page

While Andre’s poetic precedents lie in the classic modernism of Pound and Stein, working in the 1960s, Acconci’s project emerged out of the conflicting imperatives of post-New York School poetry and visual art. In her concision and attention to placement, Stein was very important to Acconci, but Acconci was also aware of the work of poets like Ashbery and Mac Low as well as contemporaries like Clark Coolidge, Bernadette Mayer, and Aram Saroyan who were seeking to find alternatives to the gestural models of the New York School poetry. Trained as a poet, Acconci returned to New York from the Iowa writer’s workshop just as minimalism was breaking to produce poems like the following:

\[
\text{(here)}\ (\ )\ (\ )
\text{(there)} (\ )
\text{(here and there—I say here)}
\text{(I do not say now)} (\ )
\text{(I do not say it now)} (\ )
\text{(then and there—I say there)} (\ )
\]

This excerpt from “R.E” (1967) might seem to recall Mac Low’s 1954–1955 “5 biblical poems”: series of parentheses of varying lengths circle around, some empty and others enclosing short snippets of repetitive text. The snippets of language are themselves highly circumscribed: mostly deictics or pointing words—like “here” and “there”—and other short phrases that reflect back on the conditions of utterance—“I say here,” “I do not say now,” “that is not to say,” and so forth. While the spatial dispersion and isolation of elements resemble chance-generated poetries, the tightly controlled structure implies an underlying logic or system of operations, however obscure. Blank spaces predominate—but these do not read as elision of a prior text or as silence during a reading. The parentheses, which recall Mac Low’s boxes, invite a filling in, but also evoke mathematical symbols and structures of confinement and substitution. To the extent that Acconci may have been informed by Mac Low’s poems, he reads these against the grain as strategies for isolating words and setting up physical relations among them. While Mac Low’s
Poetry from Object to Action

{here}(  )(  )
{  })(there)  
{  }{here and there — I say here}
{  }{I do not say now}{  }
{I do not say it now}{  }
{  })(then and there — I say there){  }
{  }{  }{(say there)
{  }{I do not say then}{  }
{I do not say, then, this}{  }
{  })(then I say){  }
{  }{  }{here and there}
{  }{(first here)}{  }
{I said here second}{  }
{  }{(I do not talk first)}{  }
{  }{  }{(there then)
{  }{(here goes)}{  }
{I do not say what goes}{  }
{  }{(I do not go on saying}{  }
{  }{  }{(there is)
{  }{(that is not to say}{  }
{I do not say that}{  }
{  }{(here below)}{  }
{  }{(I do not talk down)
{  }{(under my words)}{  }
{under discussion}{  }
{  }{(all there}{  }
{  }{  }{(I do not say all)
{  }{  }{(all I say}{  }

Figure 4.2  Acconci, “RE” (1967). ©Vito Acconci. Courtesy of the artist.
obsession with procedures for composition and/or performance effectively represses what happens on the page. Accocci presents words in a present-tense “space of encounter” that cannot be superseded by prior encounters with another text, or future encounters with an audience or group of performers.

Reading sculptures by Andre, Robert Morris, and others as challenges to use “language to cover a page, rather than uncover meaning” in poems like “R.E.” Accocci’s work with language systematically plumbs these more confrontational and aggressive dimensions. An “installation” of words on the physical space of the page analogous to an installation of objects in the physical space of a room, his poems use words as objects to be accumulated, arranged, stacked, dispersed, and moved. In order to render poetry as “an analogue to minimalist sculpture” in all its “objectivity” and refusal of reference, Accocci notoriously sought to preserve the “literalness” of the page by restricting himself to words that would refer to themselves, language, or the process of writing. Unlike Andre’s impulse to break language down to basic particles of nouns and single words, Accocci gradually reduced language to shifter and punctuation marks. In a 1993 interview, he recalls:

It started to seem impossible to use on the page a word like “tree,” a word like “chair,” because this referred to another space, a space off the page. Whereas I could use words like “there,” “then,” “at that time,” . . . words that referred to my activity on the page, my act of writing on the page. So, in fact, toward the end of the time I was writing, I was driving myself into a corner, into a kind of dead end, when in order to preserve the literalness of the page the only thing I could use on the page were commas, periods, punctuation marks.

While the total refusal of language’s referential and associational dimensions could seem a “dead end,” such experiments with language as a self-referential system stripped it down to a set of relational, transactional operations that Accocci would rehearse in his poetry of the late 1960s and then transfer into various forms of performance.

Unlike Andre’s fascination with the dictionary — that compendium of all possible word choices — Accocci targets the thesaurus, a compendium
Vito Hannibal Accoci

he had gone and was still (had) going about just (about) at the time when (he) you saw him (when) as it was is new fact that he sees through (that) it, you (saw) see, you he is just still (gone) going through with it

NOTE

he is coming back

N.B.

he -- yes, he is around and coming, quickly, back ... to a man

NOTED

he --- yes, he is around and coming, quickly

BACK --- to a man -- at ____ (one) on ____

(his own) in ____ (case) among ____ (friends)

between ____ (themselves) beside ____ (himself) here (AT LAST) now (AT THE END)

Figure 4.3  Accoci, Untitled ("he had gone"), 0 to 9 no. 4 (1968): 51. ©Vito Accoci. Courtesy of the artist.
of possible word uses, which he proceeds to demolish through a series of “relocations.” If Acconci’s first book work, Four Book (1968), compiled language as a series of clichés and self-referential conventions, in his subsequent project, Transference/Roger’s Thesaurus (1969), relocated columns of text—most only one to two letters thick—are aligned along the far right or left edge of the page, shattering any meaning or function.55 Yet like the activation of site implicit in Andre’s massing poems, what Acconci’s “transference” frames is the space of the page, which is here left almost entirely empty.

In O to 9, Acconci’s fragmented writing through projects spill from page to page, sometimes intrusively interrupting works by other authors. For instance, in O to 9 no. 3 (1968), Acconci’s sixteen-page poem “ON (a magazine version of a section of a long prose)” sprawl throughout the magazine, its pages appearing between works by Guillaume Apollinaire, Aram Saroyan, John Giorno, and Clark Coolidge, like some strange interstitial material. The right-hand column gathers words from whatever text it happens to be next to, in a parasitic manner that suggests “ON” could only exist among other materials. Unlike Andre, who works on a prior source, but whose poems exist in pristine isolation, Acconci’s magazine projects, like Graham’s, work on a site, in relation to other texts, in a profoundly social and relational practice.

In O to 9 no. 5, in 1969, Acconci performed a series of word transfers, in which he would “move” the final word of other contributors’ texts down to the bottom right corner of the page and in effect reauthor it as a work of his own. Thus, on the final page of Sol LeWitt’s “Sentences on Conceptual Art,” Acconci has relocated the word “art,” appending the notation “moving art / - V.L.A.” on the bottom right corner of the page. That Acconci performed such works with full awareness of contemporaneous developments in the visual arts is attested to by the double-page spread that follows the next contribution, in which a relocation performed on one of Jerome Rothenberg’s “Seneca Songs” appears next to a reproduction of Robert Smithson’s “Non-Site Map of Mono-Lake, California.” In these transference works and magazine projects, Acconci’s poems reveal the repressed aggressivity of Mac Low’s and Cage’s writing through projects, which frame their borrowings as honorific gestures of reappropriation—acts of homage typically performed on classic and long-dead authors—and recontain them within single, bounded works.56
Vito Hannibal Accconi

ON(a magazine version of a section of a long prose)

on(to this, that is, to the sum of it all, they move on until they have something on him, and another on her, and more on you, and most of all((it all))on me, that is to say, on one and all((it all)), until then, and then it was that they could move only on and off, and this it was((all this, it has been said))that they did on and on. They did it up. No, they did it up. No but's about it, it was the day that did it up.

But at least they half-did it up. "The smallest in size, in degree, in importance, they have done it up((just as much as they, at least, half-did it up there))when they mounted a ladder to climb into the saddle((they did it up here))to go upstairs."

--Continued on Page 11--

--Continued--
Figure 4.6 Cover of 0 to 9 no. 5 (1969), and Accensi, detail of “moving art” (5). Courtesy of Vito Accensi and The Getty Research Library.
may be used as ideas for new works.

29. The process is mechanical and should not be tampered with. It should run its course.

30. There are many elements involved in a work of art. The most important are the most obvious.

31. If an artist uses the same form in a group of works, and changes the material, one would assume the artist's concept involved the material.

32. Banal ideas cannot be rescued by beautiful execution.

33. It is difficult to bungle a good idea.

34. When an artist learns his craft too well he makes slick art.

35. These sentences comment on art but are not art.

moving art
-V.H.A.
Unlike the burgeoning movement of 1960s' "performance poetry" designed to be read aloud, Accouci constructs the poem itself as a highly enclosed "performance" space, a present-tense space of encounter in which the reader has little option but to retrace the path laid out by the poet: "I was thinking of the page, the book, almost as a field for me, as writer, to travel over. Then, in turn, this page would be a field for you, as reader, to move over, to travel over." His growing concern for extreme literalness confines both reading and writing, as "Text" (1969) demonstrates:

Rather than opening the poem out on to the world through communal vocal realization, Accouci's notion of the poem as a "field for action" opposes the collaborative, emancipatory dynamics of the oral poetics movement almost point for point. In earlier poems such as "R.E," Accouci orchestrates language as a self-enclosed set of operations of placement and replacement with almost no point of entry for the reader, constricting the page into a perversely conceived "arena in which to act" with no apparent human agency. And in "Text," the readerly performance is so tightly controlled that no room is left for interpretation or individual variation. As Accouci outlines his procedures in the journal *Avalanche*:

The page has to be narrowed in on, treated as a chamber space separated from its surroundings. 1. Use words that play off each other and so circle back on themselves, remaining confined on the page. 2. Use material that exists only as it's spoken, that exists
only in language (for example, use idioms . . . drawing attention to the language used).

For the page to work as a field of operations, it must be staked out, specified, and tested:

Once the limits of the field are determined, a system of flows and stopping places can be established. . . . The page has to recede, pull back: it doesn’t compete with elements outside but is used, instead, alongside them. Use this page as the start of an event that keeps going, off the page; use the page to fix the boundary of an event, or a series of events, that take place in some outside space.

The operative distinction here is not between written and oral forms, nor between text and performance. For Acconci, speech, like all language, is an extension of pragmatic human action and interaction, not a codified aesthetic sphere; it is a field of force, a field of encounter. Performance in Acconci’s work has no resemblance to a strategic resuscitation of theater’s archaic roots in ritual. Instead, working from language, Acconci is among the handful of artists who helped generate a new, entirely nontheatrical performance of the human body as a material subjected to physical and durational operations.

Acconci’s poems performed actions resembling the quintessential procedures of postminimal sculpture: cutting, moving, removing, interrupting, joining, separating, displacing, confining, dispersing, tearing, lifting, and breaking. Increasingly moving off the page, Acconci’s performances realized related actions with and on his body: lifting, pulling, displacing, and joining. From 1969 to 1971, these shift from the simple, externally directed operations of “Early Work: Moving My Body into Place”—throwing a ball, slapping a microphone—to the self-directed actions of “Body as Place: Moving in on Myself, Performing Myself,” which often involved inscribing marks on his own body—rubbing, burning, biting, and plucking—to work with surrogates in “People Space—Performing Myself Through Another Agent” and “Occupied Zone—Moving in, Performing on Another Agent,” in which Acconci attempts to control audience members or a fellow performer.

165
READ THIS WORD THEN READ THIS WORD READ THIS WORD NEXT READ THIS WORD NOW SEE ONE WORD SEE ONE WORD NEXT SEE ONE WORD NOW AND THEN SEE ONE WORD AGAIN LOOK AT THREE WORDS HERE LOOK AT THREE WORDS NOW LOOK AT THREE WORDS NOW TOO TAKE IN FIVE WORDS AGAIN TAKE IN FIVE WORDS SO TAKE IN FIVE WORDS DO IT NOW SEE THESE WORDS AT A GLANCE SEE THESE WORDS AT THIS GLANCE AT THIS GLANCE HOLD THIS LINE IN VIEW HOLD THIS LINE IN ANOTHER VIEW AND IN A THIRD VIEW SPOT SEVEN LINES AT ONCE THEN TWICE THEN THRICELY THEN A FOURTH TIME A FIFTH

Figure 4.7  Accad, “Text” (1969). * Vito Accad. Courtesy of the artist.
through increasingly aggressive physical actions—in installations like *Claim* (1971) and videos like *Pryings, Pull*, and *Remote Control* (all 1971).64

While many actions do not entail speech or talk, language is preserved at another level, to generate conventions that structure actions: a subject acts on an object, acts on itself, uses other subjects as surrogates to act, acts on other subjects, and so forth. We could not be further from Cage’s or Mac Low’s desire to make poetry and performance models for an idealized anarchist society, or from Ashbery’s sense of ironic detachment and aesthetic contemplation. Instead, like various corridor pieces and installations made by Bruce Nauman in 1968–1970, Acconci minimizes apparent freedom of movement in order to probe language and performance as inherently disciplinary fields of force and control. Despite appearances, however, this is not a total suppression of chance and indeterminacy but a necessary repositioning of them: rather than being arbitrarily generated through rather-contrived procedures, the unforeseen and unpredictable arise as unavoidable by-products of any system. If in Nauman’s durational performances bodily fatigue and loss of concentration cause repetitive systems to go awry, for Acconci the instabilities and incongruities of written and spoken language and performed actions perpetually disrupt procedural rigor.

As Craig Dworkin observes, a tendency to read Acconci’s trajectory as a move from the page to the “real space” of the external world obscures the profound continuity between Acconci’s poetic and performance work. Instead, Dworkin argues that “Acconci’s body art is an explicit continuation of, rather than a ‘going beyond’ . . . the poetic function,” and that “poetic works—as Acconci’s own poetry makes clear—exist in a ‘real space,’ in the world.”65 As Acconci declared in the journal *Avalanche* in 1972, “My involvement with poetry was with movement on a page, the page as a field for action . . . [to] use language to cover a space rather than uncover a meaning. . . . I consider that work now a series of scores for more current work: I can consider my use of the page as a model space, a performance area in miniature.”66 This notion of the score resembles the short, instrumental texts of George Brecht, Simone Forti, and La Monte Young far more than the musical, notational forms of Mac Low, Dick Higgins, or other poets and artists composing with language as performed sound.
Vito Acconci

STEP PIECE

Apartment 6B, 102 Christopher Street, New York City.

6 AM each day; February, April, July, November.

Project:

An 18-inch stool is set up in my apartment and used as a step.

Each morning, during the designated months, I step up and down

the stool at the rate of 30 steps a minute; each morning, the

activity lasts as long as I can perform it without stopping.

Program Report: daily record of performance time:

Third month (July, 1970):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Duration</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>July 1</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>2 min. 30 sec.</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>27 min. 18 sec.</td>
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<td>13 min. 56 sec.</td>
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<td>24</td>
<td>18 min. 42 sec.</td>
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<td>18 min. 50 sec.</td>
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<td>26</td>
<td>18 min. 18 sec.</td>
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<td>27</td>
<td>18 min. 4 sec.</td>
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<td>28</td>
<td>19 min. 20 sec.</td>
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<td>29</td>
<td>20 min.</td>
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<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>20 min. 6 sec.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>19 min. 20 sec.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Fourth series of performances: November 1970; 6 AM each day.

The public can see the activity performed, in my apartment, any

morning during the performance-month; whenever I cannot be home,

I will perform the activity wherever I happen to be.

Figure 4.8  Acconci, Step Piece (1970). Text and photographs × Vito Acconci. Courtesy of

the artist.
Poetry from Object to Action
In Acconci’s notations for performances, short gerund-based descriptions specify a core action or series of actions—for example, *Following Piece* (1969): “Daily scheme: choosing a person at random, in the street, any location; following him wherever he goes, however long or far he travels (the activity ends when he enters a private place—his home, office, etc.).” While a work like *Following Piece* employs language only at the initial stage—to state the general schema that will then be realized under different conditions each time—it extends the operations of text-based projects like *Transference Roget’s Thesaurus* into far more highly charged realms of urban public space. In other performances, like *Step Piece* (1970), language occurs both at the outset, as the set of instructions, and as part of the result, in the table that catalogues his efforts.

While the he/she dyad of videos like *Pull* and *Pryings* (performed with Kathy Dillon) permits viewers to watch while Acconci attempts to coerce a female performance partner, in a series of videos from 1972 to 1973 Acconci uses the paired shifters I/you to lure an ever-changing addressee into a never-ending series of language games embedded in the endlessly repeated presence of mechanically recorded speech. In *Theme Song* (1973), he lies cozily on the living room floor, his head nearly filling the monitor. Acconci talks to us in a deep, resonant voice, inviting us to come join him: “I need somebody. I just need a body next to me. Come in here, I’ll wrap around you. You need it as much as I do, we both need it. . . . My body’s here, your body could be here.” And so on, for the thirty-three minutes of the tape, as Acconci accompanies his monologue with songs of the Doors, Bob Dylan, Van Morrison, and others, noisily flipping the tapes in and out. Although recorded over thirty years ago, the perversely intimate address spins a web—a present-tense space of encounter—in which any viewer can be the “you” who Acconci implores to join him, the “you” who will complete his longings: “How long do I have to wait for you?”

*Theme Song*, which employs language as a paradigmatic space of human interaction, would be one of Acconci’s last projects to use words before he would shift toward overtly architectural containers. As he recalls in an interview from 1984, in moving from poetry to a general art practice, he no longer oriented himself to specific materials, but to transferable procedures not bound to a particular setting or media:
Figure 4.9  Ácconci, Theme Song (1973). Video still. ©Vito Acconci. Courtesy of the artist and Electronic Arts Intermix.
Chapter 4

reading-is-getting-the-meaning-of-something
processed-printed
to-by-interpreting-its-characteristics-sign
or-reading-as-uttering
itself
is-learning-the-true-meaning-of-something
understanding-the-nature-or-significance-of-
someby-reading-read-
ing-as-interpreting-a-subject
reading-as-telling-the-future-reading-as-
interpreting-or-understanding-a-printed-
passage-ster-as-having-a-particular-meaning-
recognizing-in-having
giving-something-a-sense-of-something-learn-
give-something-to-a-sense-of-something
by-applying-
smooth-to-something
studying-reading-as-
recognizing-distinguishing
recognizable-unrecognizable
recognize
another writing
Poetry from Object to Action

writing-is-forming-or
inserbing-words-letter-
simulating-symbols-ever-
na-surfase-as-by-sen-
ting-carving-on-every-
specially-marking-writ-
ina-generator-pencil-ww-
writing-is-forming-the-
words-letters-symbol-
is-of-something-with-
penny-chalk-typewr-
story-etc-putting-de-
wn-in-writing-writing-
a-a-producing-a-lit-
stream-of-musical-comp-
editing-composing-
writing-is-drawing-up-
er-composing-somethin-
g-in-legal-form-writing-
in-filling-in-a-c-
heed-printed-form-eve-
try-with-necessary-wr-
iting-writing-is-cover-
ner-something-with-
writing-writing-is-e-
communicating-somethin-
g-in-writing-writing-
ism-communicating-with-
someone-in-writing-
writing-a-letter-to-ne-
nte-to-someone-writin-
g-is-calling-entitli-
gy-or-designating-some-
me-ne-something-in-wr-
ting-writing-is-under-
erwriting-something-

lettuce
onager
cuttle
withal
writ of prohibition
symmetally
writ of right
literate
compositor
wrong
sometimes
wrongdoer
etch
wrongdoing
covering letter
communication
sometimes
wrongful
notebook
wrongheaded
entity
somersault
wreth

arm
bale
ceiling
car
chin
desk
door
dress
ear
eye
floor
forehead
grass
hand
lamp
leg
mouth
neck
nose
pants
radio

right
shirt

shoe
shoulder
sink
skirt
sky
table
wall
window
My work shifted from a literary to an art context because I had gotten to the point where it didn’t seem to me that the page was useful and at first I thought, ‘OK, I can chose something else that will be a replacement.’ However, since I’d gotten to that point, I realized that I could probably assume that any medium I chose would at some time in the future not be useful. Therefore, rather than focus on a particular ground, it seemed to make more sense to shift that emphasis to the instruments that worked on that ground. Why not shift that emphasis to me, then I could work on whatever ground happened to be available at that time."

Noting that his “exploration of the ground” began with poetry, Accouci elaborates that “when I was writing, I was interested in the page as a space: how you go left margin to right margin, how you go from one page to another page. It occurred to me that if I’m so interested in this question of space and movement over a page, why am I confining this movement to an 8 1/2 x 11 inch piece of paper?” Yet despite Accouci’s efforts in site-based and architectural projects to construct three-dimensional spaces for actual human interaction, the immense range of media, resources, and settings employed do not necessarily make these encounters more compelling than the exceedingly simple yet complex actions played out by words on a page. Indeed, these actions of language form the underlying basis of all his later work. However peculiar Accouci’s text-based works may be, the frequency with which such antireferential, apparently dysfunctional language systems appear in late 1960s’ projects by artists like Kosuth, LeWitt, and Adrian Piper suggests that these gestures of extreme linguistic reduction provided a necessary vehicle for testing out the spatial, contingent, and contextual properties of language strategies that would later be used to generate overtly politicized analyses of discursive and institutional systems by Hans Haacke, Piper, Martha Rosler, and others.