

Avalanche was a unique media phenomenon in an age that crossed boundaries freely, a cross between a magazine, an artist book and an exhibition space in print.

THE
EARLY
HISTORY OF
Avalanche

LIZA BEAR and WILLOUGHBY SHARP

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THE STORY OF AVALANCHE IN BLACK & WHITE

IN THE SUMMER of 1968 Graham Stevens, an English environmental artist participating in Willoughby Sharp's Air Art show, asked one of his chums, Liza Bear, a little magazine editor then making her first visit to New York, to retrieve a film of his from Sharp, who lived in Gramercy Park, and bring it back to London with her in the Fall.

The package was dropped in the mail, and Bear sold her charter flight return ticket. There was good reason to stay.

BEAR: "Willoughby was a powerhouse of information. He had a mammoth collection of 20th century art books, periodicals and catalogues, all alphabetized. He was like his own worldwideweb site 28 years ago. And a lot more accessible."

By their second meeting in mid-November, Sharp, 32, and Bear, 26, had decided to produce a magazine that would focus on new forms of art-making.

BEAR: "To someone who'd spent 4 years at London University steeped in philosophy, from Heraclitus to post-Wittgenstein, the anti-materialistic aspects of the new art were exhilarating."

Both had publishing experience. An art historian by training and a prozelytizer for avant-garde art, Sharp was then working as an independent curator, also producing the catalogues for his shows. [At the time when they met, he was organizing "Earth Art", an exhibition which opened at the Ithaca Museum of Art, NY.] And he'd published a monograph on Gunther Uecker with his previous partner Paul Maenz, an art director at Young & Rubicam, from whom he picked up the basics of Bauhaus design.

Of French parentage but mostly educated in England, Bear got her start in trade journalism on Fleet Street, but quickly defected from the mainstream to London's underground magazine subculture in its heyday in the mid-60s, working as a translator and editor.

In 1968 the New York art world, like the culture at large, was in expansive mode and at a fever pitch of activity. Radical innovation in all major artistic fields called for a fresh approach to media.

BEAR: "We jumped right in and literally got down to work on the magazine's format, laying out early issues of Life and Dadaist publications on the floor. It never occurred to us to try to raise some money first."

THE BUZZ: 1969

THE SPARTAN CHALK-WHITE East 20th Street apartment (Amedee Ozenfant's former studio) now doubled up as a live/work, hand-to-mouth base of operations for the start-up of *Avalanche*. Artist contacts from Sharp's frequent trips to Europe (11 between 1957 and 1968) had generated a sizable information flow, but with word spreading in the art world that a new magazine was afoot, the mail increased dramatically, with artists from all over North America and Europe sending extensive photographic or textual documentation of their work. Among the most exciting unsolicited contributions were pieces by Vito Acconci and William Wegman. The San Francisco artist, Terry Fox was another.

The first joint interview, with Carl Andre, was done in December 1968. But with sweat equity in lieu of start-up capital, it wasn't until October 1970 that *Avalanche*, having secured a major national distributor, was finally out on newsstands across the United States and available in the art capitals of Europe and Canada.

After signing the distribution deal, or even before, we went uptown and showed the finished mechanicals to galleries and other art world people. 28 out of 30 took ads, among them Castelli, Sonnabend, Paula Cooper, John Gibson, Klaus Kertess, Holly Solomon, Dwan, Pace and even Parke-Bernet. Sometimes as an incentive we would suggest an ad idea and even design the ad for them."

Although there was no advance promotion save word of mouth (and a mailing of 1000 subscription flyers), according to the distributor, 72% of the 3000 copies put out on the stands were sold. But *Avalanche* had an impact far beyond its initial print run of 5000.

"When I discovered *Avalanche* on the shelves of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, I found information that related to the ways in which I understood the world," writes Kristine Stiles, Assistant Professor in Art History at Duke University in a 1992 letter to Bear. "You provided me with a vocabulary for working with art and artists that I carried into my own artistic practice."

John Lurie of the well-known band, The Lounge Lizards, told Sharp: "The first time I bought *Avalanche* was in a bus station in Buffalo, and I realized at that moment that I wasn't alone."

FROM THE FACE TO THE BODY

A THEME ISSUE devoted to earth art, *Avalanche* I was printed on high-quality glossy paper in a 9 3/8" square format with a full-bleed, black and white close up portrait of Joseph Beuys by Shunk-Kender on the cover. This format continued for the first 8 issues out of 13 issues until inflation sent up paper costs in 1974.

As well as Beuys' Fettecke installation at the seminal Bern Kunsthalle show, "When Attitudes Become Form", the issue featured early land works by Richard Long and a

process piece by Robert Morris. In separate interviews, Carl Andre and Jan Dibbets elaborated their attitudes to making and to place, topics which were taken up in the roundtable discussion between Michael Heizer, Robert Smithson and Dennis Oppenheim.

But, in an article entitled “Body Works”, referring to activities in which the artist (sculptor) uses himself as sculptural material, *Avalanche* I anticipated the theme of the next issue by reporting on a thoroughly liberating new trend.

Incidentally, Dennis Oppenheim provides a bridge between land and body art and even did a work called “Bridge”.

It was liberating because it gave you new ways of looking at the self. The 4-page survey enumerated some of these ways: “Body As Tool”, (Barry Le Va), “The Body As Place”, (Vito Acconci, Dennis Oppenheim) “The Body As Backdrop” (Bruce Nauman, William Wegman), “The Body As Object”, and “The Body in Normal Circumstances”.

WHO DID WHAT WHEN

AS A PRELUDE TO BODY WORKS, during the early 1960s, three European artists (a Frenchman, an Italian and a German) radically departed from traditional artistic practice, Yves Klein (1928-62), in formal attire and white gloves, abandoned his brushes and women models an active role. Their naked torsos were drenched with blue pigment and imprinted onto room-sized lengths of unprimed canvas. The work was titled “Les Anthropométriques”. For the cover page of his *Newspaper for a Day*, he ran a Shunk-Kender photograph of himself taking a perfect swan dive (head upright, arms outstretched, feet together) from a second story Paris building—“Le Peintre de l’espace se jette dans le vide”. The same year, his Italian friend, Piero Manzoni (1933-63) was making “living sculpture” by writing his signature on nude female models seated on large white pedestals.

Both these artists were tragically dead by November 1965 when Joseph Beuys (1921-86) did one of his earliest and most notorious “aktionen,” “How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare”, at Alfred Schmela’s tiny Dusseldorf storefront gallery. Seated on a small wooden stool in the floor-to-ceiling plate glass window of the locked gallery, Beuys, his head completely covered with gold-leaf sprinkled honey, murmured to the mute creature cradled in his folded arms during most of the 3-hour performance. In a subsequent interview Beuys stated: “This was a complex tableau about the problems of language and about the problems of thought, of human consciousness and the consciousness of animals.”

N.B. It’s interesting to note that Beuys mentions neither his body or the hare’s in his statement on the piece.

FOR THE RECORD

“BODY WORKS ARE YET another move away from object sculpture, whose relation to figurative art is ironic at most . . . In body works, assumptions about our modes of being are questioned and explored, often with a wry sense of humor. The new work can also be seen as a reaction to conceptual art which tries to remove experience from sculpture

. . . But works executed directly on the body are never intended to beautify or disfigure the artist. These are not sculptural concerns . . .

Nauman's first body work was done at the University of California at Davis in 1965 while he was still a graduate student. He gave a performance resembling calisthenics. For thirty minutes he put himself through a series of bodily exercises: standing, leaning, bending, squatting, sitting and lying down. It was easier to continue this work alone in his Pasadena studio so he did these performances in front of a 16mm camera that he generally operated by himself. A number of shorts of straightforward simple activities like "Bouncing a Ball", "Playing a Violin", "Pacing in the Studio", and "Pacing" followed. Even the more artificially structured events like dancing on a taped square on his studio floor, Nauman executes in the most natural way, giving an appearance of studied relaxation.

Vito Acconci engaged in a similar activity each morning for a month. He used a small stool as a step and stepped up and down it at the rate of 30 steps a minute as long as he could without stopping. Although the piece was performed at home, the public was invited to visit him any morning at 8am during the time it was being executed. If he wasn't home, he performed the activity wherever he happened to be."

—From Willoughby Sharp, "Body Works" *Avalanche*, Fall 1970.

THE ARTIST'S VOICE

Coleen Fitzgibbon, filmmaker: "I first saw *Avalanche* in the Chicago Art Institute library. Instead of critics' boring palaver about what they thought the artists were doing, this time artists said what they thought they were doing. And it looked really professional. It was precise, clean, and it had a sense of humor. The others were so deadly serious or out of date."

FROM A LIZA BEAR interview with Joel Shapiro, *Avalanche*, Summer 1975:

- What happens is I work and then I get self-conscious . . . Sugar?
- No thanks.
- Do you want a cushion?
- No. I want to sit on a hard chair that's the right height.
- I want something I can put my feet on.
- I see we're both quite particular about our levels of comfort.
- Usually I lie down right over there.
- To talk, you mean?
- It's hard for me to talk anywhere, standing up. It's easier if I'm comfortable.

Apart from an exhaustive 8-page news section, and listings of artist publications, *Avalanche* included only interviews with artists done by Sharp and Bear, texts the artists wrote or documents of their work, no writing about them.

For many, appearance in *Avalanche* was their first exposure anywhere, often preceding a gallery or museum exhibition or at least a one-person show. [Artists who had

Avalanche sections before they had one-person gallery exhibitions in the US were: Vito Acconci, Joseph Beuys, Jan Dibbets, Michael Heizer, Bruce McLean, Klaus Rinke, Ulrich Ruckriem, George Trakas, Franz Erhard Walther and William Wegman.]

Michael Andre, New York poet, editor of *Unmuzzled Ox*: “*Avalanche* hands the podium over to the artists. Unlike traditional art publications, it was in the business of discovering rather than evaluating. The closest magazine to it is *File Magazine* in Toronto.”

Marked by a certain innocence and idealism, in *Avalanche* a well-defined and authentic artist’s voice emerged through dialogues that got into the nitty gritty of art making. No kissing cousin of the celebrity interview, but a kind of investigative reporting that aimed to understand rather than to expose, in which the questioning voice was closely attuned to the artist’s sensibility.

Jackie Winsor, sculptor: “[*Avalanche*] presented the realness of people and that was its appeal, at a time when being real counted—it was the period before everybody grew hair down to their butt. Of course, I was around the other artists all the time and heard them talk. But the experience that I got at first-hand was the same as the experience I got from reading the magazine.”

COLLABORATION: NEAR AND FAR

ALTHOUGH LATER IT had a minuscule part-time staff of artists and work-study interns, for the first few years *Avalanche* was a collaboration between two people who had an extremely close working relationship, with many others donating their time and labor, including excellent photographers such as Shunk-Kender, Gianfranco Gorgoni, Gwenn Thomas and Richard Landry. This gave it flexibility. But essentially this modus operandi extended to the artists in the presentation of their work, both inside the magazine and elsewhere in the world.

BEAR: “Once I’d seen the work and decided to do an interview, often a relationship with an artist would grow out of working on their text and turn into a continuing dialogue that might last for years. Unlike Willoughby, who would meet people on the road a lot, I met Bill Wegman, for instance, on the phone going over the words on the page and met him in person later.”

SHARP: “When I met Terry Fox in Berkeley in 1970, we became fast friends. I felt his sensibility had a lot in common with Beuys, whom I’d known for some time, and I helped get them together.”

Three days after his live performance at 93 Grand Street, Fox was in the cellar of the Staatliche Kunstakademie, Dusseldorf, doing a performance with Beuys and a dead mouse.

Sharp was still getting invitations to curate and had organized an exhibition of video art, also entitled “Body Works”, for San Francisco’s Museum of Contemporary Art, which opened the same month *Avalanche* came out. The show must have reinforced the phenomenon because it was reviewed in *Artforum*.

HAVING FUN WITH THE LAY-OUT: THE TURNING PAGE

Jackie Winsor, sculptor: “The hand of the artist was on all fronts. The design of the advertisements also supported the rest and wasn’t intrusive or junky. You were willing to have it around simply because it looked good.”

THE WORK WAS SO new that the methods of presenting it had to be new as well. Instead of adopting a standard format, each artist’s section was individually designed. *Avalanche* featured lavish photo spreads (sometimes 16 pages long) and a cinematic approach to lay-out through the use of multiple angles, serial images, close-ups and photographic sequences, showing work in the making rather than a single still of the finished product, as was customary. Some sections are the print equivalent of documentary film. Of course, this process-oriented approach to image and text was dictated by the work itself, much of which existed in photographic form to begin with. The fact that the reader was holding a 3-dimensional object and moving through its pages in time was built into *Avalanche*’s design principles.

CLIMATE OF THE TIMES: THE BODY AS HORIZON

PETER SCHJELDAHL, poet, art critic, May 1996: “The Bruce Nauman *Avalanche* cover with the unshaven look redefined sex appeal for a generation. [Gianfranco Gorgoni’s photo] was a very glamorous picture—a shortwave kind of glamour. But it was beamed a short distance, Only certain sets [of people] picked up on it. It wasn’t about bridging worlds. It was more like irradiating the world that was coming into being. The 60s had created this huge explosion in the culture, but by the end of the 60s it had all imploded, politically, economically. The market collapsed. Suddenly people realized that the big revolutionary changes weren’t happening and they were going to be in proximity for a while. And there was very little sense of what the questions were any more, let alone the answers. [The art scene] was a microculture— *Avalanche* was one of the first and most fetching expressions of it . . . Also, there was a sense of adventure attached to the idea of logic, like when Sol Lewitt said ‘Irrational ideas should be followed absolutely and logically’. That was the ethos. The reasoning was, okay, if we’re imploding, if we’re getting smaller, we’re pulling in, let’s see how far can we pull in. And finally you get to your body as the horizon.

Bear: Did you see that at the time?

Schjeldahl: Oh, I didn’t see any damn thing at the time. I was taking far too many drugs.

BODY AWARENESS: BRUCE NAUMAN

AVALANCHE 2, a 144-page double issue published in April 1971, introduced the work of Bruce McLean from England, Klaus Rinke from Germany, Terry Fox from San Francisco and William Wegman. There was also an extensive interview with Bruce Nauman and photographs of Nauman’s installation at San Jose State University by Gianfranco Gorgoni. His work shows you what he looks like: tall and angular, with an

actor's physique. [In the mass media lately, he's been referred to as the Sam Shepard of the art world.] Sharp had previously interviewed Nauman on the telephone for *Arts* magazine, but the interview for *Avalanche* was done live as part of a TV show and transcribed from videotape. Video stills did not exist and had to be taken specially for publication.

SHARP: "[Your] concern for the body seems stronger now."

NAUMAN: "Well, the first time I talked to anybody about body awareness was in the summer of 68. Meredith Monk was in San Francisco. She had thought about or seen some of my work and recognized it. An awareness of yourself comes from a certain amount of activity and you can't get it from just thinking about yourself. You do exercises, you have certain kinds of awareness that you don't have if you read books. So the films and some of the pieces that I did after that for videotapes were specifically about doing exercises in balance. I thought of them as dance problems without being a dancer, being interested in the kind of tension that arises when you try to balance and you can't . . ."

CROSSING BOUNDARIES: SCULPTURE AND PERFORMANCE

MUSIC AND DANCE performance were an integral feature of the postminimalist conceptual art scene. It would be hard to overemphasize the mutual influence of New York sculptors (Serra, Sonnier, Morris), choreographers (Forti, Brown, Rainer, Paxton, Monk), and composers (Glass, Reich, Chambers, Young) on each other during the postminimalist period, with strong allegiances and partnerships being formed. Or to overestimate Yvonne Rainer's stamp on the artistic climate throughout the 60s and early 70s. The final version of her seminal 8-person work "The Mind is a Muscle" had been performed at the Anderson Theater, New York, in April 1968. One of her 1968 statements* reads: "It's my overall concern to reveal people as they are engaged in various activities, alone, with each other, with objects, and to weight the the quality of the human body towards that of objects and away from the superstylization of the dancer."

In her *Avalanche*, Summer 1972 interview, Rainer positioned herself very clearly in relation to body works:

"From the point of view of artists who make performance works, I'm in a very theatrical tradition of artifice and representation . . . The closest I've ever come to using reality, and then it was totally camouflaged, was when I showed a slide of my scarred belly, but because there was no indication of scale, you didn't know what part of the body it was. That was deliberate."

THE NEW YORK SCENE 1968–1970: MAX'S KANSAS CITY

AVALANCHE WAS LOCATED four blocks from the art world's nerve center, Max's Kansas City, at East 17th Street and Park Avenue South. A bar owned by Mickey Ruskin, Max's Kansas City, got started with the encouragement of sculptor Forrest Myers, famous for his laser piece there. The Factory had relocated to Union Square, practically across the street from Max's in January, and every night the Warhol crowd, Andy, Gerard Malanga, Viva, Candy Darling and other habitués would make an entrance. At the time Warhol was also starting up his own publication, *Interview*.

Painter Ronnie Cutrone, musician Eric Emerson became acquaintances and also actress Brigid Polk, who lived at the Washington Hotel on 23rd Street and did a tit print on the sliding doors of the bookcase at 204 East 20th Street. Both *Avalanche* and *Interview* had their type set at *Rock Magazine* on Lexington Avenue and even though *Interview* was part of the Warhol empire, its editor, 23-year-old Glenn O'Brien, checked the proofs himself there too.

In 1968 Max's was the only place where all the different cultural worlds collided: art, rock and roll, theatre, writers. The art set included postminimalist sculptors and conceptualists but also abstract expressionists like Frosty Myers, John Chamberlain, painter Larry Poons, in fact artists of every persuasion. The regulars had accounts and would be there every night to drink, smoke, eat chick peas or share huge bowls of caesar salad, swap news and gossip. In the back there was a large table. Heavy-duty art talk was de rigueur as was the kind of serious drinking that sparks metaphysical insights. Robert Smithson's entropic concerns were very much in the foreground. Smithson and Carl Andre would often lock horns in debate until 4 am and then move on to an afterhours bar on West Houston Street.

Max's being a steak and lobster joint no one was at all health-conscious. Mickey Ruskin traded art for an account with a lot of artists and took trade ads in *Avalanche*, which is why people could afford to go there.

CHERCHEZ LA FEMME

PERFORMERS SUCH AS Joan Jonas and Carolee Schneeman, who paid considerable attention to the body, had been working in a dance or video/film context for a while. And a growing number of women sculptors making large scale constructions or conceptual works were coming to the fore, among them Jackie Winsor, Jackie Ferrara, Sarah Charlesworth, Brenda Miller and Mary Miss. At the turn of the decade, with the explosion of feminist consciousness, a sure sign that the movement had landed was the sound of laughter and female voices at Max's and the change in seating arrangements. Now groups of women artists banded together at the tables and argued as vehemently as the men in adjacent booths. And streakers of all persuasions ran over both sets of tables.

A NOTE ON GALLERIES

DURING THE 1970-71 SEASON pioneering dealer John Gibson, whose gallery was then on 68th Street in Manhattan, organized a series of 9 events downtown with the Art History Department at New York University. Four evenings were devoted to a show entitled "Performances and Activities" in 1971. Acconci, Fox, Graham and Oppenheim and-performed in January and films by Bruce Nauman, Richard Serra ("Hand Catching Lead") in March, along with the first New York screening of Canadian Michael Snow's single-take 360 film "La Region Centrale".

THE CAST IRON DISTRICT: ARTISTS TAKE OVER

JACKIE WINSOR: “All the spaces I occupied since I came to New York in 1967 were in buildings that had exceeded their factory use because the floor couldn’t hold more than a certain weight. One space had been vacant for 30 years. They were illegal to live in. You had to get an AIR (artist-in-residence) sign on the outside of the building so that the fire department would know you were living there in case of fire. At the time, there wasn’t a car in SoHo at night. Usually if you saw someone on the street you’d know who they were. The buildings would be black except for red lights on the staircase.”

By 1970, with the exodus of manufacturers from loft buildings in what’s now called SoHo, artists were increasingly moving into the empty spaces. This was the epoch of retail-free bliss. There was as yet no art scene as such for the public. Everything took place within a radius of a 10-12 minute walk. Dave’s Luncheonette on Broadway and Canal and The Market Diner on the West Side Highway and Laight street were open 24 hours. Prior to answering machines, computers, voice-mail, faxes, beepers, word of the first performances of Philip Glass’ “Music in 12 Parts” at 10 Bleecker Street would be passed along by running into someone at the hardware store or the Canal Street post office. Max’s was still the nightspot of choice and the artworld nerve center, with film screenings and bands like Iggy Pop and Bob Marley playing upstairs.

Saturday was the big social day. There’d only be a handful of events and two or three big dance parties and you’d try and make as many of them as you could. The dancing to Sly and the Family Stone, Janis Joplin, Aretha Franklin was very physical and athletic, with one person being lifted by a group and carried over people’s heads. After the gallery openings everyone met their friends at the Spring Street Bar. The women artists drank Irish coffees, margaritas or kwahla liqueur. In those days after an opening the dealer would pay for a big dinner for the artist and all their friends at a Chinatown restaurant. Soho had none of its own.

THE GALLERIES: FROM UPTOWN TO DOWNTOWN

THE NEW YORK ART WORLD was being transformed from an old-money controlled, nine-to-five mentality. Formerly gallery row had been concentrated on the 57th Street corridor (between Lexington and Sixth Avenues) making a right angle with the Madison Allee (from 57th Street to 86th Street, but important new art was now being exhibited all-over town from The Castelli Warehouse on 108th Street down to Front Street, where Frosty Myers, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg and Walter de Maria had their studios.

With the changing atmosphere of the times, the galleries realized it was necessary to install themselves in the artists’ ambiance to be closer to them. Besides Paula Cooper, the first dealer in SoHo, there were already two other galleries in the area: Ivan Karp and Max Hutchinson. (The number rose from 117 in 1993 to 232 in 1996, according to a recent New York Times article). Aside from the Italian workers’ bar, Fanelli’s, there were a handful of Hispanic bodegas, and some Italian butchers and bakers in the little Italy section between West Broadway and Sixth Avenue.

The year 1971, in which *Avalanche* 2 and 3 were published, was the year of the big move downtown for key galleries, notably Leo Castelli, Ileana Sonnabend and Virginia Dwan at 420 West Broadway. For the opening on September 28, Gilbert and George did a performance, “Singing Sculpture” on top of the table. Food Restaurant, founded by artists Gordon Matta and Carol Goodden, opened the same day serving the food for free. Later, Sunday became guest chef night at Food with Robert Rauschenberg among the cooks.

93 GRAND STREET: RELOCATION

PRIOR TO THE LOFT LAW of 1982, which considered artists to be a type of manufacturer and who therefore could live in their lofts, SoHo was a kind of no-man’s land not yet conquered by the forces of capitalism. Space has always been at a premium in New York and therefore has an absolute value. Unlike boxy cramped apartment rooms, the scale of the lofts was exhilarating and allowed the imagination, as well the limbs and torso, to roam.

After the publication of its second issue, which enabled it to get two foundation grants, *Avalanche* moved to a 1225 square foot ground floor space in a 4-story loft building at 93 Grand Street, a former thread warehouse, right at the heart of the action. Around the corner on 36 Greene Street, filmmaker Jack Smith staged exotic performances in a makeshift theatre on the 4th and 5th floors. Sculptor Richard Serra and performer Joan Jonas, the poets Ed Bowes and Bernadette Meyer (co-editor of *Zero to Nine* with Acconci) lived across the street at 74 Grand. Robert Morris was 3 blocks down the road. There was a Spanish bodega on one corner, (later occupied by Chanterelle, the first 4-star restaurant in SoHo) and a Cuban coffee shop with Latin music on the jukebox and huge grilled ham and cheese heroes for a dollar on the other. The nearest vegetable store was in Little Italy at Grand and Mott.

With 16 foot tin ceilings, a skylight in the back, a plate glass window onto the street and a usable basement, the space had charisma and a vaguely theatrical feel well-suited to performance as well as magazine production. It made you think of Plato’s cave in *The Republic*, because there was no daylight, with silhouettes of the passers-by behind the frosted glass.

The process of relocation from Gramercy Park to 93 Grand and minimal renovation (sanding the floors, painting the walls and installing a gas line) took about a year. To escape the dust and the paint fumes, I would occasionally stay at 10 Chatham Square in Chinatown, the heart of the Cajun scene which included Keith Sonnier (who actually lived on Mulberry Street); Jackie Winsor, Richard Landry, and Richard Peck, musicians in the Philip Glass Ensemble, Tina Girouard, Mary Heilmann, Carol Gooden, and numerous friends. All the Cajuns were excellent cooks and almost every night there’d be a pot of chicken gumbo or jambalaya served on the silver plywood table which filled the whole kitchen. Food restaurant was conceived around that oval table at Chatham Square. The front room was painted entirely black and used for rehearsals. There’d be a constant stream of people in and out and music or dance rehearsals at all hours.

During this transition period, 93 Grand Street was used for performances by four artists including Vito Acconci, Bill Beckley, Terry Fox and William Wegman, who had just

moved to New York from California and was living in the Chelsea Flower district with his wife Gayle, a fashion designer, and dog Man Ray.

The space stayed uncluttered with only a huge white plywood table, very few shelves and light tables in the front. The artist Van Schley had given *Avalanche* a 24" Setchell-Carlson black and white monitor, which had excellent definition and functioned as a light source in the cavernous space. It was usually left on with the sound off.

On September 10th 1971 Acconci performed a piece called "Claim" at 93 Grand. He sat blindfolded on a wooden chair at the bottom of the stairs, flailing away with a 4-foot metal pipe and a crowbar, threatening in husky tones: "I want to be alone, I won't let anyone down here" The performance was carried on close-circuit tv to the monitor upstairs where the public could watch.

Of particular significance among the audience was Ileana Sonnabend, who offered Acconci a show at 420, as she did Wegman after she saw his "Bobbing for Apples" piece a few weeks later.

ENFANT TERRIBLE: VITO ACCONCI, THEN AND NOW

"IT SEEMS LIKE MY stuff from then to now was taking the situation as literally, dumbly and doggedly as possible", Vito Acconci, 1996.

From 1968 to 1972 Vito Acconci had already created such an intense oeuvre using himself as the main element that an entire 100-page issue, *Avalanche* No.6, was devoted to it. Acconci's own writing accompanied the photographs of 77 works, as well as an index, biography, bibliography and interview. The works were divided into 8 sections under such headings as "Notes on Performing A Space", "Moving My Body into Place", "Body as Place", "Peopled Space", "Occupied Zone—Moving in on Another Agent", Concentration, "Power Field-Exchange Points-Transformations."

These headings and early texts (recited hypnotically during performances) point to the overlapping nature of Acconci's concerns. Interestingly, all of them make a reference to place or space, which is why the work was seen as closer to sculpture than performance. With a literary background as a concrete poet and editor of *Zero to Nine*, Acconci displays a sophistication and linguistic virtuosity which make him the quintessential conceptual artist. In these holistic times, does anyone still uphold mind-body segregation? Acconci's work, like that of many other alleged "body" artists—should lay any Cartesian ghosts to rest. With signature phrases and repetition, these first person incantations are as inseparable from the work as a bridal train. In some, like "Claim", Acconci's language may incite, taunt or cajole the viewer; in others, like "Seedbed," words create a verbal cocoon that shields the viewer against the aggressiveness of the action .

Q & A: KEEP ON MOVING

HOW DOES ACCONCI feel about the sheer volume of his early work?

VITO ACCONCI , May 1996: The work was so much about that time. 1968 to 1972 was

an incredibly productive period, but it wasn't so concerned about the results of production. That was a kind of by-product. It was more about, "Keep on Moving." Now 40 things might come through your head, and you do one thing, whereas then 40 things came through your head, and you did 40 things."

LB: Did economics have a role?

VA: Yeah, definitely. Because [with these works] you were making a point that you didn't need the means with which to do it. You already had it built in— your body. You didn't have to run around Russia looking for money like Dmitri Karamazov.

LB: But it was really what formed your identity as an artist.

VA: It gave me a method of working. Maybe it wasn't so important whether those early pieces were done on Hudson or Greenwich, but it was an attempt to connect person with site. And that's what I do now. I work much more the way an architect works. We do stuff in airports, town squares, Since 1988 2 or 3 people have worked for me full time, and that's why it's been so difficult to survive, because I have to pay \$2000 worth of salaries every week.

LB: So you have to go out all the time and pitch proposals.

VA: Yeah. I just got fired from a convention centre in Milwaukee. The architect said we have such different frames of mind, we obviously can't work together. He's absolutely right. My stuff is so much a part of the building, in the same way that in those early pieces, my body was so much a part of the space. The galleries always wanted it to be on a pedestal.

LB: Didn't you feel more free then? What were the limits?

VA: My immediate impulse is to say yes, because no one had to approve or accept anything, but is that really true? We started to have this conversation 25 years ago. Have I become a civil servant doing government work? You start to develop the frame of mind of the mode you're in. That's always been the terrifying thing. Of course Sonnabend wouldn't have stopped me from doing "Seedbed." But I might have stopped myself.

FINANCIAL FAQ

OTHER THAN SWEAT equity, *Avalanche* was financed exclusively by advertising, international subscriptions, newsstand and bookstore sales [many from Europe], and public and private grants. The trade name *Avalanche* was initially registered in New York City as a joint partnership between Sharp and Bear. From 1970 to 1972 Kineticism Press was listed as publisher for continuity's sake and partly because it had a Park Avenue mailing address—though no capital. In 1974 Center for New Art Activities, Inc. [CNAA] was formed as a not-for-profit corporation to receive grants for *Avalanche* and subsequent artist projects such as *Avalanche* Video, Send/Receive Satellite Network, Colab, *Bomb* Magazine, Communications Update and Cast Iron TV. This was before the era of benefactors and corporate sponsorships.

TO BE CONTINUED

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

LIZA BEAR is a writer and filmmaker. She studied philosophy at The University of London. Her experimental films and videos have been shown at the Edinburgh Film Festival, Anthology Film Archives and the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Her short stories have been published in *Between C and D* and *Bomb Magazine*, where she is a contributing editor. In the past decade, her profiles of international filmmakers have appeared in *Newsday*, *The New York Times*, *Ms. Magazine*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Village Voice*, the *NY Daily News* and *Salon.com*. In 1994, she received an Edward Albee Writing Fellowship. She has taught at Columbia University, NYU and the School of Visual Arts.

WILLOUGHBY SHARP is a curator, writer and video artist. He obtained an MA in Art History at Columbia University. Since the mid-60s he has had a wideranging career promoting avant-garde art. He coproduced a tv program on Pop Art USA for WDR, Germany, and organized shows for the University Art Museum, Berkeley, Ca and the White Museum, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY. In the 70s he became a video performance artist, obtaining a Rockefeller Institute Fellowship, and showing in the Venice Biennale (1975); he also produced a series of video interviews with Vito Acconci, Joseph Beuys, and Chris Burden. His 16mm documentary film "Place and Process" was shown at the Information show at the Museum of Modern Art. In the 80s, he opened an art gallery on Spring Street, New York. He has taught at Parsons School of Design, the School of Visual Arts and was director of the Fine Arts Center at the University of Rhode Island, Kingston, RI.

After Avalanche ceased publication, Sharp and Bear collaborated again on a number of telecommunications projects including Warc Report, Allocating the Airwaves (1979), a live slow-scan-cable series.