After the Age of Aquarius:

American art in the early seventies

Vito Acconci
Michael Hurson
Bruce Nauman
Lucas Samaras
Joel Shapiro
An exhibition of American art from the 1970s reflects several important characteristics of the Ian Potter Museum of Art. Today’s universities are global institutions, with research partnerships and collegial relationships reaching around the world. For more than thirty years, the Potter has exhibited contemporary international art as part of the University of Melbourne’s engagement with culture, ideas and issues on a global scale. Equally significant is the research component of the exhibition, which parallels the university’s commitment to inquiry and investigation. The staging of this exhibition required research into the artists’ work, along with its historical and aesthetic context. But it also addresses methods of display, interpretation, security and reflection on the shifts in meaning that might arise as the artworks appear in a new context. The art on display relates to the director’s personal research interests but is also indicative of the Potter team’s ongoing reflection on exhibition philosophy. Subtly, the works in this exhibition invite examination of the museum itself. Their small scale draws attention to the grand formality of the gallery spaces, while their mood challenges the neutrality of the so-called ‘white cube’ of museum architecture.

Our thanks go to those in the museum and gallery sectors who have supported the Potter’s research in this project: the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra; Paula Cooper Gallery, New York; Sperone Westwater, New York; PaceWildenstein, New York; and Video Data Bank, School of the Art Institute of Chicago. We are very grateful to the participating artists for their generous assistance to the Potter’s staff.

Julie Ann Cox Chairman

The Vietnam War dragged on, extending into Cambodia and culminating in an ignominious withdrawal by the US in 1973. The domestic front, too, was riven by violence: four student protestors were gunned down at Kent State University in 1970. The Watergate scandal, with its tales of dirty tricks, break-ins and buggings, dominated political discourse from 1972 to 1974, ending with the resignation of President Nixon. The nation was left ‘shell-shocked and disillusioned’. A 1971 poll showed that ‘every major institution in America was distrusted by the majority of Americans’. By the end of the decade, President Carter’s notorious July 1979 address to the nation – the so-called ‘malaise’ speech – seemed to affirm a pervasive sense of accumulated dread.

In these fraught times, American art was shaped by concerns both local and international, aesthetic and political. The openness and experimentation of the sixties counter-culture shaped art. But so, too, did an acute awareness of European traditions, especially Dada and Surrealism. Artists grappled earnestly with philosophy, literature and social theory, but also responded to the modernity of pop music, television and advertising.

'It’s paranoia … and it’s paranoia … and it’s paranoia … UNH!'— Charles Manson¹

After the Age of Aquarius: American art in the early seventies

This exhibition presents five works by five artists, produced in the United States between 1969 and 1974; a period described as one of ‘major social and political crisis’, ‘the age of paranoia’, and a ‘doomed time’ haunted by ‘visions of gloom’.²
More specifically, the work in this exhibition reveals an art struggling with human presence. The body is deferred or deleted. Surrogates for the body, such as Joel Shapiro’s chair and Michael Hurson’s hallway, only serve to accentuate its absence. The actual or implied human presence of the artist is awkward or confronting. Lucas Samaras’s box is obsessive and prickly. Bruce Nauman turns his back on the viewer. Vito Acconci acts out the pathos of a failed lounge lizard. It is as if anxiety has driven the human into hiding and made the artist defensive; as if the optimism and utopianism of the sixties has been replaced by morbidity and autism.

An air of vulnerability, both physical and psychological, pervades the work. The viewer towers over miniaturised artworks. Sculptures huddle in corners. Fragile materials heighten the sense of threat. Visitors themselves are not safe; the artworks threaten to bite back. Samaras’s pin-lined box will wound anyone who succumbs to its seductive exterior. Acconci’s video performance traps the viewer in a conversation with the bar boor from hell. A claustrophobic mood is accentuated in tightly framed video works; Nauman is pinned to the edge of the screen, Acconci squirms on the floor of his apartment. Orwellian analogies are unavoidable: Hurson’s corridor is a small fragment of a vast architectural complex, Shapiro’s sculpture is an interrogator’s chair. The paranoid tone of these works extends across the artists’ diverse practices. Sculpture, photography, performance, video and painting share common motifs which suggest isolation, threat, surveillance and constriction. Small rooms, cramped spaces, corridors, chairs and boxes appear in all of their works in the seventies. Signs of psychological dysfunction – disjointed narrative, autobiographical fragments and rule-governed or repetitive behaviour – also figure regularly.

These bleak works signal an important transition in American art, marking a passage from high modernism to what we now call post-modernism. They reintroduce strategies maligned by the dominant critical models of the 1960s. Where formalist criticism demanded that each medium be hunted back to its exclusive area of competence, these artists indulge in rampant border crossing. They mix sculpture, music, painting, theatre and film. They meld the studio with domestic space. They are artists and hobbyists, professionals and amateurs.

The artists also reintroduce ideas expunged from art by vanguard practice in the 1960s. The non-objective languages of formalist abstraction are replaced by a renewed realism. The brightly coloured giantism of Pop art is replaced by monochrome miniaturisation. The studio is a domestic space rather than a factory or laboratory. The recondite philosophy of Conceptual art is replaced by everyday life and autobiography.

These reversals are not the pendulum swings of the ‘reaction-against’ model of art historical change. They are of a piece with the morbid character of the American mood at a moment when all manner of tendencies – post-Vietnam, post-Watergate, post-industrial – were about to congeal into post-modernism. Interior life returned as content not simply because previous styles had denied it but because there was a desperate need to affirm the survival of the self, however marginally, in the ‘hard times, confusing times’ of the 1970s. A culture of crisis encouraged a withdrawal into the self but didn’t guarantee recovery.

Image 1a, 1b Vito Acconci
Theme song 1973 (cat. 1)
© Vito Acconci, courtesy Video Data Bank, Chicago

Image 2 Michael Hurson
Hallway 1972 (cat. 2)
© The estate of Michael Hurson, courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York
It was not so much the return of the self as the revelation of a displaced human figure: an insecure and threatened self made for wan, masked or surrogate forms. Acconci stages a caricature of the self: a prowling Lothario. Hurson builds a set for an as-yet unwritten play. Shapiro dialls down scale so that viewers are forced to grasp after art. Samaras amps up interiority to the point of neurosis. Nauman suggests that each day in the studio is a renewed challenge, just keeping going is a small triumph.

The most pointed dialogue was with minimalism. Where minimalism demanded the elimination of interiority, these artists lift the lid on boxes, let us into their studio, tempt us to ask what’s behind the door, spill their guts on camera. American minimalism, for all its monumental physicality, seemed to celebrate distant emptiness: ‘The world around us turns back into a smooth surface, without signification, without soul, without values, on which we no longer have any purchase’. In a time of crisis, this elegant aesthetic formulation could read as a surrender to the very hollowness that troubled artists. So the mute surfaces of minimalism were replaced with gaudy décor, its monumental gestalts with the everyday spaces of chairs and apartments.

Theatricality, the guilty secret at the heart of minimalist installation, is brought out of the closet. The many theatrical references in these works – stage-sets, props, rehearsal, character, performance – suggest a call for a return to soul, signification and some kind of grip on the world. But it’s a muted call. Masked and distanced by theatricality, the human is still something of a scenario rather than the real thing. That is what a paradigm shift in art looks like; not a simple reversal of the previously dominant style but an awkward, determined grasping after a response to the pressures of the moment.

This is why it is important to revisit this art and the moment that engendered it. Today, having dispensed with ‘isms’ in art, and the ideas of dialogue and response within them, we risk granting contemporary art the status of pure presentness. We need rediscover the complexities of contemporary artists’ relationship to their predecessors. Many artists now are acutely conscious of both their dissatisfaction with the world and their inability to respond to it; we can learn from the practices of artists who confronted this dilemma almost forty years ago.

Dr Chris McAuliffe
Director

Endnotes
4 Jack Newfield & Jeff Greenfield, ‘The new populism’ [1972], in Dolan & Quinn (eds), The sense of the seventies, p. 16.
5 Benjamin DeMott, Surviving the 70s, Penguin, Baltimore, Maryland, 1971, p. 17.
### Catalogue of works

**Vito Acconci**

1. **Theme song** 1973
   - 3/4 inch videotape transferred to DVD, black and white, audio
   - 33:17 minutes

**Michael Hurson**

2. **Halway** 1972
   - balsa wood, composition board, metal wall brackets
   - 25.5 x 53.3 x 53.7 cm
   - National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
   - Purchased 1974

**Bruce Nauman**

3. **Violin tuned D.E.A.D.**
   - 3/4 inch videotape transferred to DVD, black and white, audio
   - 54:34 minutes

**Lucas Samaras**

4. **Box no. 85** 1973
   - pins and stones on cardboard
   - 27.1 x 44.8 x 28.6 cm
   - National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
   - Purchased 1981

**Joel Shapiro**

5. **Untitled (chair)** 1974
   - bronze
   - 7.9 x 3.2 x 3.4 cm
   - National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
   - Purchased 1974

**Note:** All dimensions are given as height before width before depth.

### Artists' biographies and bibliographies

**Vito Acconci**

- Born the Bronx, New York, 1940. Lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. Vito Acconci was educated at Holy Cross College, Worcester, Massachusetts and at the University of Iowa. Initially, he worked as a writer and poet before commencing in the late sixties an important series of performance and video pieces which shaped the direction of American performance art. Each video had the character of a task or investigation, with themes such as learning, concentration, exhaustion and deprivation. Frequently, Acconci pushed at the boundary between audience and performer, and explored the close relationship between performance and sexual fantasy. By 1973, Acconci had staged solo exhibitions in the US, Canada, France, Italy and Belgium. He had been included in almost thirty group exhibitions, including *Information* (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1969) and *Documenta 5* (Kassel, Germany, 1972). [www.acconci.com](http://www.acconci.com)

**Michael Hurson**

- Born Youngstown, Ohio, 1941. Died New York, 2007. Michael Hurson studied at the Art Institute of Chicago from 1959 to 1963. He received early curatorial attention, appearing in the 1961, 1963 and 1964 Chicago annual exhibitions, and sold a work to the Metropolitan Museum of Art while still a student. Hurson served in the Army from 1965 to 1966, stationed in Maryland and Thailand, working as a draughtsman. Later in the sixties, he acted as an assistant to the puppeteer, Burr Tillstrom, a pioneer of American television entertainment. Hurson began his constructed rooms in 1971. They were exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (1973), and Museum of Modern Art, New York (1974). In the second half of the seventies, Hurson’s figurative works, using silkscreen and painting in comic strip-style sequences, were seen as heralding a return to narrative in American art. He was included in *New image painting* at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1978. Michael Hurson is represented by Paula Cooper Gallery, New York. [www.paulacoopergallery.com](http://www.paulacoopergallery.com)

**Bruce Nauman**

- Born Fort Wayne, Indiana, 1941. Lives and works in New Mexico. Bruce Nauman attended the University of Wisconsin from 1960 to 1964, commencing a major in mathematics, before transferring to art. He then undertook a master of fine arts degree at the University of California, Davis, graduating in June 1966. In the sixties, Nauman’s practice was characterised by a remarkable volume and range of activities, including sculpture, photography, holograms, film, video, audio, installation and texts. By 1969, Nauman had staged eight solo exhibitions in Los Angeles, New York, Cologne and Paris, and had been included in major exhibitions introducing post-minimal and conceptual art: *Eccentric abstraction* (New York, 1966), *Documenta 4* (Kassel, Germany, 1968) and *When attitude becomes form* (Bern, Switzerland, 1969). Bruce Nauman is represented by Sperone Westwater, New York. [www.speronewestwater.com](http://www.speronewestwater.com)

**Lucas Samaras**

Joel Shapiro
Born 1941, New York. Lives and works in New York. Joel Shapiro studied at New York University, completing a bachelor of arts (1964) and a master of arts (1969). In the sixties, Shapiro spent time in India, working with the Peace Corps, a period which inspired him to pursue sculpture. Between 1969 and 1974, he staged four solo shows, including installations at the Clocktower Gallery (Institute for Art and Urban Resources) and Salvatore Ala, Milan. Between 1969 and 1974, Shapiro participated in twenty-five group exhibitions, including Anti-illusion: procedures/materials (Whitney Museum of American Art, 1969), and the Whitney annual (1970). In the early seventies, Shapiro's small-scale sculptures attracted the attention of critics such as Douglas Crimp, Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe and Rosalind Krauss, whose writing at the time was critical in the transition from modernist to postmodernist criticism. Joel Shapiro is represented by Pace/Wildenstein, New York. www.pacewildenstein.com

Note: Biographical summaries focus on activities up to the date of the work displayed in the exhibition. Full career details can be found in the publications listed at right.

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