

Vito Acconci: Thinking Space
Middlebury College Museum of Art
www.museum.middlebury.edu
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At the heart of this aptly titled exhibition is Vito Acconci's first permanent commission; *Way Station I (Study Chamber)*, a piece that ignited a controversy and inspired a collection.

In 1983 Acconci was a provocative performance and video artist who had been invited to Middlebury College to participate in their on campus residency program. During this period, he worked collaboratively with students to construct a closet-like structure of steel, concrete, spray enamel and mirror that incorporated architecture, politics, painting and design. An interior underground space was included that might serve as a study room and was accessible to passers by. It was sited in a very visible place on the college grounds adjacent to a sidewalk near where McCardell Bicentennial Hall now stands. Not long after the installation of the piece came the public outcry and demand to have it removed. One small gallery in the current exhibition is dedicated to the documentation of this controversy involving students, faculty, and administration as well as the surrounding community. Spanning several years the discontent culminated in a fire that resulted in the destruction and removal of the work in 1985. A large, grainy, black and white photo reproduction showed the charred remains of the piece in storage following this act of vandalism. It was like a death in the family.

Thirty years later, thanks in part to the persistence of Museum Director Richard Saunders and chief curator Emmie Donadio, in consultation with the artist, *Way Station I* has been restored, using what was salvaged from the original, and reinstalled near the pond behind the Mahaney Center for the Arts. No longer a battleground for public art, in 1994 Middlebury College adopted a "One Percent for Art" policy that has resulted in one of the most important on campus sculpture collections of any American liberal arts college. It includes a wide range of aesthetic approaches from Tony Smith to Joseph Beuys and now, Acconci's *Way Station I*.

Acconci's Middlebury experience provided a critical turning point in his career paving the way to the founding of Acconci Studio whose design work has expanded to include clothing and automobiles as well as public spaces. A selection of the Studio's best known projects are documented here including *Mur Island*, Graz, Austria 2003, *Wave-A-Wall* Coney Island, 2006 and thirteen other public and private spaces.

A catalogue recounting the history of *Way Station I (Study Chamber)* will accompany the exhibition.

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The following information is not included in my review but may be useful for the ANE calendar:

In conjunction with the exhibition, Vito Acconci will return to the Middlebury College campus as Cameron Visiting Architect. He will meet with students in the Programs in Studio Art and Architectural Studies and will give an illustrated talk, free and open to the public, in Dana Auditorium on Thursday, November 7, at 7 p.m. In addition to the Cameron funds, his visit is sponsored by the Museum, the Committee on Art in Public Places, the Department of History of Art and Architecture, and the Programs in Studio Art and Architectural Studies.

—Cynthia L. Close