

VITO ACCONCI

A IS FOR ANOTHER

By Katya Tylevich



Portrait by Alexei Tylevich



could kill a man, and my mother would tell me: 'This is just like the time you didn't go to the Vito Acconci lecture.' It is perhaps the biggest cross I bear in my family — a family of, how shall I put it?, Tarkovskyphile artists, to set the scene, originally from the FSU, 'where they didn't even print Acconci in the magazines.' My parents all but tell me they brought me to the U.S. as a child so that I could be so lucky as to attend Vito Acconci talks.

But that was the mid-90s then, and I was young, mama, and we all make mistakes. I made the mistake of forfeiting the talk in favor of a friend's birthday dinner, because I had already RSVP'd. 'No friend is worth that much,' my mother told me then. Ha. What a woman. She was right. 'Have you heard the man speak?'

Indeed, much has been written about Vito Acconci's voice. I'll abstain from

adding my own two cents, thank you, but here are some second-hand words for the pending google search: gravelly charismatic, intimate, memorable, dark secret. I recommend the interview conducted by Richard Prince for BOMB in 1991, in which Prince famously asks Acconci — 'They always talk about your voice. You really think you would have been able to fuck anyone without it?'

Anyway, I don't think my mother was referring to Acconci's voice — that would be one for the therapist, now wouldn't it? Rather, she was referring to his words. Acconci has a way with them, and they have a way with him. In the Spring of 2010, when I now meet Acconci in his architecture & design studio in Brooklyn, he pauses several times throughout our hours-long conversation to say: 'words fail me' (they don't), as if he's at their mercy. Words shape all of Acconci's projects, not just the written ones. Yes, he was a

poet before he was 'Vito Acconci'; an Iowa Writers' Workshop alum, he was a poetry performer (if I may be so bold), and, with writer Bernadette Mayer, the co-editor of literary journal *o to 9* in the late sixties.

But even *Seedbed* — Acconci's 1972 jaw-dropper for New York's Sonnabend Gallery, in which the 'artist' (I really shouldn't call him that, you'll see) positioned himself beneath the gallery floor, vocalizing his fantasies about the footsteps above him through loudspeakers, while engaging in an epic spell of masturbation — is a product of words; of executed language. Acconci explains this to me in very rational and removed terms. He further calls the project's enduring resonance 'nostalgia.' He might as well say, 'pssshhhh' with a wave of the hand. I love it. 'Acconci' is not a whimper of nostalgia, as some names that banged and roared in the sixties and seventies regrettably are, nailed to the past-tense, clini-



Left:
Instant House
'I thought, "Okay. A museum is never going to be a community meeting place. If I want public space, I better find some way to get there." My pieces started becoming house-like. Here, a person sits in a swing, the swing goes down, panels rise up to go around the person, making an instant house. An American flag inside,

a Soviet flag outside. Get up off the swing, and the panels go back down. I don't know how many people actually used it, because people are so afraid to touch things in a gallery, but pieces like this were almost rehearsals for architecture.'

1980

Below:
Seedbed
'There's a voice coming up from the floor. "I'm touching your hair, I'm running my hand down your back, touching your ass." Every once in a while, masturbation reaches climax. Maybe the person on top of the ramp is thinking "Oh, he's done this with me, he's done this for me." In any case, this was my attempt to join private

space with public space. [Pauses.] It was a terrible mistake. My voice suddenly became a focal point, and it wasn't supposed to be. In some ways, it's very fortunate for me that this piece became so much of a myth. There was one great joke: "It's very easy to own a Vito Acconci. All you have to do is shake his hand." Which I thought was really beautiful.'

1972



cally romanticized. 'Acconci' is decidedly present-tense. Maybe I can call his cohesive body of differing and metamorphosing works a deliberate run-on sentence. After all, at one point in our conversation, Acconci throws me this tasty —

Vito Acconci: What I love about Faulkner, my first literary influence, is that he seems to make a period so drastic. He always wants to keep going because he realizes a period is the end. A period is like dying. And you want to delay that as much as possible. You don't want to complete something.

A fear of completion! My God! And this coming from an architect. Acconci the architect, who is still Acconci the poet from the beginning of the run-on sentence, but now with over two decades of experimental design and radically mischievous structures to his name.

'His' name. Sorry. The 'he' in question will find my verbal liberties appalling,

my use of the third-person singular totally embarrassing. They're not his works, Acconci will say, maybe while throwing his hands to the ceiling, wondering aloud whether I heard even one word he uttered. Just look at what happens when I first enter Acconci Studio (established in 1988), and sit on a tall chair next to the atelier's founder — whose hands never let go of a cup of coffee, then another, and who greets me like the warmest of hosts. I start by asking a question beginning with 'Your recent projects, they...'

Cue Vito Acconci: 'They're not my projects, they're projects we do together in this studio. Maybe I start a project off with a general idea, an overall method — I think what I do best is 'overall method' — but then we talk a lot. We discuss, we argue.'

'Everyone at the studio is very computer adroit. I'm not at all. I come from an art background, a writing background, so this studio is a kind of collision of po-

etry and math, narrative and biology, social relations and chemistry. I think that clash is so important. I can't definitively say that four or five people think better than one, but they certainly think more than one. Somebody always says, 'Well, we haven't tried this yet,' which is only a bad thing in that it can be very difficult, sometimes, to end a project.'

'Then again, I think if a building is so complete, why would anybody want to come inside? If a building is so complete, maybe a person is not necessary, he becomes an observer, and architecture is the opposite of observing. Architecture is about traversing. Architecture magazines, it's not their fault, but they ruin architecture because they turn it into images. Architecture has nothing to do with images. Architecture is time, as much as it is space, and still-pictures take that away. I think architecture and music are the same. They both make a surrounding

This page:

Mur Island

'Now we're in the water. Here, we were asked to place a man-made island on the Mur River, and provide a place with three functions: a theater, a café, and a playground. We thought: Lets start with the conventional idea of a theater, a bowl. But what if we twist it? Now we turn it upside down. Now it's a dome. The bowl is the theater, the dome is the café, and the spaces between the playground.'

2003

Opposite page:

A Museum That Takes The Fall, Perm Museum

'This was an invited competition for a museum in Russia. As with a lot of competitions, nothing ever got built. We got an honorable mention. The museum was supposed to be at the top of a slope, that leads down to the river. I couldn't get that slope out of my head. It's like the call of the wild — this museum can't resist the slope. Yes, it is supposed to be at the top but our museum just can't resist going down, squeezing under a bridge, over train tracks, into the water.'



and an ambience. You can do other things while you're listening to music, and obviously, you can do other things, while you're in the middle of architecture.'

You don't attribute much permanence to space, then.

Neither does architecture. The assumption is that, sooner or later, every project built is going to be renovated. Art: now that's about conservation. Art is for the museum, and the museum is like a cemetery. That's why architecture is so refreshing for me: It recognizes life.

Of course, there are problems with architecture, too. The biggest being that when you design a space, you necessarily design peoples' behavior in a space. Architecture is an inherently totalitarian activity, and somebody's got to find some way out of it.

Have you found it?

No. But we're trying. We try to give choice. We try to make spaces in which maybe you can move something, you can unhinge something. But since the rules are already there, that may be like supermarket freedom. You can have anything you want, as long as the supermarket carries it. What if a person wants something we don't offer?

Is your 'unhinge me' approach in architecture a kind of whimsy?

I think whimsy happens inherently. And it was true for me before architecture. [Pause.] Because I think laughter means you're having a second thought. I

came across a statement in the seventies or eighties, I don't know where, I didn't make this up, though I wish I did [he paraphrases]:

'The difference between tragedy and comedy is that in tragedy there is a goal, a protagonist, and a single-minded pathway toward that goal. In comedy, there is the same goal, the same protagonist, but halfway through the journey, the protagonist slips on a banana peel. Suddenly, the goal isn't so important. Suddenly, things open up.'

There's something so invigorating about comedy. Unless you're obsessed with order, of course. I remember a long time ago, going out with somebody who said, yeah, she likes the Marx Brothers movies, but it makes her nervous to think 'Who cleans up afterward?' I always felt, 'God, what a horrible thing to think.'

Are you saying you're not obsessed with order?

I don't know if I can go so far as to say, 'I never want to clean up.' In spite of everything I'm telling you, I do order my books, I order my archives. There are so many things I have to think and worry about, that I want certain things to be automatic. One time, a woman — a different woman — looked at my bookshelves, and said 'Ah, typical male domination.' She's probably right. Anyway, ordering systems always fail.

That's the banana peel.

Yeah, yeah. Like the changes in my career. But those changes never came from, 'I'm bored.' No. I just want to keep alive

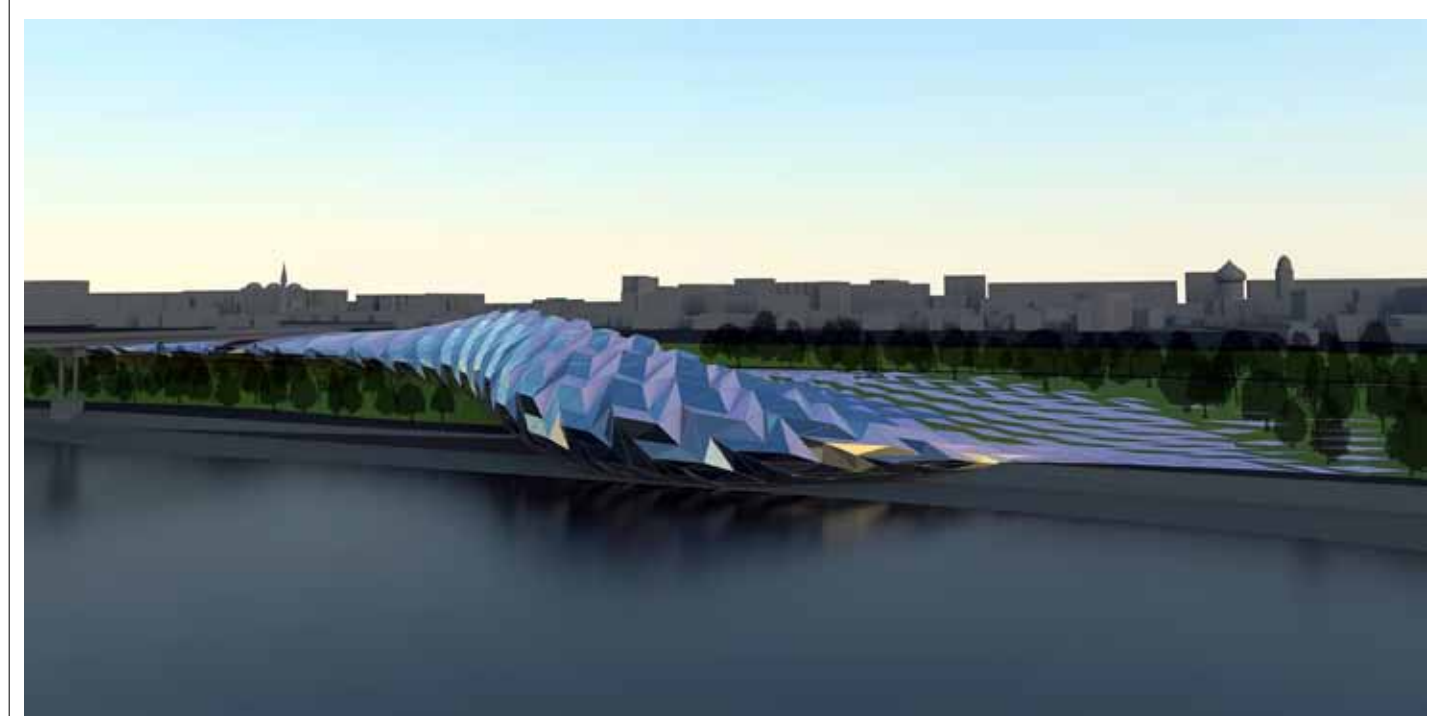
each day, and keep excited. So to do something different, I assume, is more exciting for me than to do the same thing a second or third time. Besides, I'm not so interested in perfection. Not if it means I have to do the same project over and over again until it's perfect.

Do I really mean that? I think I do, but at the same time, I don't want to leave things half-baked. What is true is that I'm most involved with those first approaches to a general idea. It's not that I don't want details, I just don't particularly like to do them.

No. I'm over-simplifying, because I also hate for something to be overly generalized. Sometimes, I think, maybe anything can be good as long as it's completely specific. I hate abstractions. That doesn't mean I hate abstract ideas, but I can't stand abstract words, because they just include too much.

Cohesion of words seems at the heart of everything you do.

It totally is. Sometimes I regret that. But it is the way I think: by playing with words. If I'm really stuck on something, I go to Roget's Thesaurus and I find words. There are many projects of mine that wouldn't have happened otherwise. Even old, famous pieces. Seedbed, for example: I knew I wanted a floor. I knew I wanted to be under the floor. I didn't know what I was going to do under the floor. I knew I wanted some connection between me and the people walking on the floor. The reason I picked the floor — because there were other choices — is because



Below:

Möbius Bench

'Here, we tried to do seating based on the notion of a Möbius strip, twisting, so that the inside becomes the outside, the back of the bench twists to become the seat itself, twists to become the bottom of the bench.'

2000

I didn't want to be visible. I started to think, 'as long as I'm there, I'm a focal point.' I might deny it, I might say, 'This has nothing to do with theater,' but I'm turning myself into a focal point, as if there's a spotlight on me. Well, I can't stand that. I hated the fact that everybody who knew a piece of mine, knew what I looked like. I started to think, 'Is this about doing art or is it about making a personality cult?' So I wanted to be part of the room. I thought, 'There are obviously three choices: Behind the wall, above a ceiling, or under the floor.' Behind the wall seemed wrong because I could be close to people on one side of the room, with no connection to people on the other. Above the ceiling was difficult for a practical reason and I also hated the idea of 'I am above it all.' I felt like, 'Why am I trying to be God?' But it seemed that if I was under the floor, I could be moving, there was a chance to be in constant contact with everyone.

Are you saying that Seedbed is the verbalization of these ideas, a kind of 'poetry'?

It's poetry that began with fact. There's a room. I wanted to be part of the architecture of the room. So poetry? Yes. I'm sure, in my case it is, but I also wanted things to be facts. Even when I was writing, I realized I couldn't use, on a page, words like 'tree,' or 'chair.' They refer to another space, off the page. But I could use words like 'here,' 'there,' 'at that time,' 'in that place.'

It was in the mid-seventies that I was thinking this way. The Vietnam War. I was born in 1940 and grew up at a time when America was the conqueror. Then we realized, maybe we're something else. 'Victims of abstractions.' I didn't want to hear generalized words anymore.

But don't you become an abstraction in Seedbed?

Right. After *Seedbed* I had questions: 'If I'm not seen in the space, do I have to be there at all?' More than that: 'Why all this

self?' These people are becoming material for my sexual fantasies. They don't have to have any specificity. They are footsteps, which is the opposite of specificity. Significantly, *Seedbed* was one of the last live pieces I ever did. It made me realize that all my work — no, I realized this before — but all my work at the end of the 'sixties comes from the 'sixties. It comes from the language of that time. This was the language of finding oneself.

What I was doing, and what other people in the arts context were doing, I think, was exactly what certain musicians were doing. Neil Young. Van Morrison. Single voice, usually male, very long song. There were some exceptions, there was Joni Mitchell and Claudi Simon, but for the most part, the 60s were a male time. Revolving around the self, trying to hone in on the self, which took time. There were nine-minute songs.

I do tend to oversimplify sometimes, to make some tenuous points.

In some ways, it was all country music. The American West, The Cowboy. 'Okay, I'm not going out there to kill Indians anymore, I'm going in here [points to chest] to find "me."'

After a while, I think, people said, 'Well, what is the self anyway?' You're making that much effort to be alone with the self, but what if the self is nothing?' In other words, when I did *Seedbed* I was thinking, 'My stuff is so based on this notion of concentrating on the self, as if the self is really a precious jewel.' Finding the self becomes a strange separation, it's a grammatical separation, you separate yourself into 'I' and 'me.' I am the agent who finds me. It's a kind of mind-body separation. That was the emphasis at the time.

So you put a date on your work? It's not timeless?

It's totally dated.

I always thought it was rather enduring. That's just nostalgia.

One of the many things that threw me, almost totally, to design was the realization that design deals with all the occasions of everyday life



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Just nostalgia?

Yeah, people thinking of a lost time. 'Ooh, the 60s were so wonderful.' No time is really that wonderful. The things that are around now make the 60s look like child's play.

Sometimes I wonder, when people are obsessed with something, is that a sign that the something is going to go away, and they want to preserve it? Not that there's something particularly wrong with going to gyms, but why are people going to gyms all the time? They probably know that sometime, not in the next year maybe, but certainly in the next twenty years, the body isn't going to be the same as it is now. And why, in the last however many years, has almost every country had an obsessive fear of immigrants? Probably because people realize — and I don't think this will happen as soon as the body will change — that countries aren't going to exist anymore. I don't think national boundaries are going to exist. Architecture as we know it is not going to exist. Architecture will be more related to clothing. You'll carry architecture with you, like the turtle. You won't have to go home, you'll always have your home. A mobile architecture.



Are you creating a mobile architecture, now? We'd like to. One of the many things that threw me, almost totally, to design was the realization that design deals with all the occasions of everyday life. The condition of art is: art is here and the person is here [shows a distance between his hands]. The person feels both desire and frustration, because there are 'Do Not Touch' signs in a museum. Whereas design doesn't have viewers. Design has users, participants, inhabitants. Yes, I know a lot of people try to use art to do that. When I did performances and installations, I was trying to make people part of the art, but I was kidding myself.

Now I'd like to make the kind of architecture that people aren't subservient to. You'll be able to walk into a room, maybe there's nothing there. You feel tired, so you lean against the wall, now

the wall begins to give a little and becomes a kind of seat. After a while, you don't need the seat anymore, now the seat goes back into the wall and it's not there anymore.

You're getting rid of navigational cues, in other words?

Okay, maybe if a person is in a space with invisible directions, he'll say 'I'm disoriented, I'm confused.' Or maybe he'll say, 'This gives me the chance to be a child again.'

Are you also getting rid of your signature — you know, that totalitarian aspect of architecture?

That's a question everything I said really leads to. Do I really want to get rid of not just me but us as architects? I don't know if I can say that, totally. Can there be a 'general arranger' and then a person inside can be a re-arranger? I don't know if

that can ever happen. It's true — if I really believe that, why don't I just put some materials on the floor and have people build it themselves?

I think that becomes art not architecture...

It kind of does. I don't know. I hate the idea of the architect. I wish an architect would be more like a marginal note. The main text is life, then you have a marginal note saying, 'Well why don't we start to shape this?' without overtaking the main text.

You're using literary terms again.

I can't help it. The only thing I can do is use words.

Do you use words differently as an architect, than you did as an artist?

I know. Listening to the way an architect talks: I don't talk like that at all. I don't know how to do it. But would I

Opposite page:
United Bamboo Store
2003

Below:
New World Trade Center
'I love this project: a hypothetical proposal for a new World Trade Center. We proposed one riddled with holes. If buildings nowadays

are to be exploded anyway, maybe buildings should come already exploded, as a kind of urban camouflage, so that a terrorist flying above might think, "We don't have to bother about this building, it's already been dealt with." And now that there are holes through the

building, there are tunnels through the building; street vendors can come inside, parks can come inside, a waterfall, as well as private offices. What makes this work is the mix of public and private space. A mix allows one type of space to criticize the other.'



want to if I did know how? No. Most architects deliver a speech as if it's from the top down. Can we design from the bottom-up? I don't know, but I'd like to. At our studio, we have music on, we laugh a lot, we discuss a lot, we share ideas. It's ours. The big problem is our name. I probably should never have called it 'Acconci Studio,' but it may be too late to change. In the late 80s, when the studio started, I made the assumption that I'm too much of a known quantity and that I couldn't take away my name. I think that was a mistake.

But don't you think your name helps you realize projects?

It helps and it hurts. To a lot of people, a lot of architects — especially of my generation — I will never be an architect. I am always an artist. Even to people who are friends.

Does it bother you?

Totally. It bothers me a lot. I don't think we're taken seriously enough as architects. If people know my work, ninety percent of them know the work I did as an artist. They probably don't know I was a poet, either — but that's okay, that was a long time ago. I wish they did know the work I did as a poet, because I think everything I do is grounded in poetry. I mean, I want to change, but I don't want to deny poetry.

In 1969, 1970, I hated the idea that people knew me as a poet, because I thought, 'I'm going to be stuck in poetry.' It isn't anyone's fault, but people can only deal with things that they know. I was described in a book once as, 'Vito Acconci, a New York Poet.' I thought, 'God, shouldn't work be defined by what you do?' Even if I was a poet, now I'm doing something in an art context, doesn't that become art?

I thought you hated to be called 'an artist,' though.

I did. I hated the word 'art.' I hated the word. 'Artist' sounded so grand to me. I was going to art lectures then, where some abstract expressionist would always say: 'I don't know where this comes from...' The implication being, 'It comes to me, it doesn't come to the rest of you.' I had gone to Catholic school for a very long time, and these people sounded like priests to me.

So as an act against Catholicism, and against this kind of 'art attitude,' I made the decision: If I'm ever asked to give a talk, it's going to be a totally different kind of talk. I want to be a working notebook. I want to reveal in every way I know how, where my ideas come from. I want all of my facts to be clear. And then, if my work still means something, then maybe there's a reason for it to mean something ●