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VITO ACCONCI

by Judith Russi Kirshner

VITO ACCONCI is one of today's most influential and provocative artists, whose career has embraced poetry, bodyworks, performance, video and most recently, visually striking sculptural installations. The occasion of this conversation is Accconi's first American retrospective at the MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART in Chicago.

After living in Manhattan for seven years, Accconi has just moved to Brooklyn. We spoke in his large new studio the day after his move.

JUDITH RUSSI KIRSHNER: You've just moved to this new space on Pearl Street in Brooklyn. Why did you move to Brooklyn?

VITO ACCONCI: I'd been in Manhattan, since 1965-1966. The first place I lived in Manhattan was Chrystie Street. I was there for seven years. The immediate reason for moving to Brooklyn was that Chrystie Street has been traditionally a prostitute neighborhood and Anne, the person I'm living with, had been constantly bothered by the prostitutes. Apparently, the prostitutes in the neighborhood have a difficult time recognizing the existence of women with blond hair. The trouble first started with verbal hassle, then they began throwing bottles at her; finally, Anne would come upstairs with black-and-blue marks on her arms. For her it became a kind of "moment of decision" when she had to leave the house. She'd have to drastically prepare herself before she could step outside. Therefore, we moved. That was the immediate reason. For a long time, however, we've been vaguely thinking about moving.

JRK: Why?

VA: Reason number one: I'd been there for such a long time, so the place was designed for one person, designed specifically for me. Anyone else would have to fit into my space. So because of that and because we'd been living together for the last two years, we were thinking of moving. Another reason was that I had started wondering about living in that place for so long. I liked the place, I liked the light in the place, I liked the constant changing levels of the place; but I began to wonder about things that I couldn't determine, like how much of this was affecting my work; if I'm so affected by this constant base, do I know if my work could be affected by other things?

JRK: Do you think you'll miss being away from the art community, further away from SoHo and Manhattan?

VA: Yeah, but I'm sure I will go to Manhattan every day. At first, the notion of Brooklyn disturbed me a little bit. I think I'm still disturbed that letters are addressed "Brooklyn, New York." Possibly because I grew up in the Bronx and all my friends in high school came from Brooklyn. So I think of this as a move backwards; with regards to Brooklyn. When we first mentioned moving to Brooklyn everyone said, "But it's so isolated." And it seems to me that maybe that's true, but obviously that's the way I've arranged my life thus far and maybe Brooklyn has been a con-

then, is involved with me using the candle to burn the hair off each breast. Once the hair on each breast is removed, I pull at each breast in a kind of futile attempt to develop a woman's breasts. Now what was important to me in that piece is—one thing is the fact that it was a *futile* attempt to develop a woman's breasts. What was important—

JRK: Then why did you do it knowing it was futile?

VA: I think I did it because it was futile.

JRK: These notions come from psychology. What made you think that these notions, which in some cases were therapeutic, were appropriate for an art context?

VA: I think again that it goes back to that notion of thinking of a general condition of art—the notion of availability of artist. I think it seemed to me that in any kind of art, that an art object is there—at least in Western art as we know it—and that somewhere behind this art object is the person who did it. The notion of availability seems to me to be something to focus on. So I wanted to make myself available to the viewer, and obviously the way to do it was to borrow things from the field of physiology. If I could weaken my body or weaken myself *physically*—or borrow things from psychology—I could dig into myself mentally, or present myself mentally. Again, remember this was the end of the 60s. It was a time when a lot of people did work which was valued in the art context by the fact that this seemed to be a kind of "non-field" field. Art was a field that seemed to have no inherent characteristics except for the fact that it was labelled "art." In other words, I thought of those pieces like *Conversions* as kinds of concentration exercises. The reason film interested me is that it set up this kind of isolation chamber.

JRK: Your training in college and in graduate school was as a writer. You were a published poet and a writer before you decided to become a visual artist. Why did you decide to make the change?

VA: It was gradual. Probably the change started even in the early 60s, and probably the change was started in graduate school, though I certainly didn't know how to "phrase" that change. In other words, what I mean was that when I was writing, it became clearer and clearer to me that the thing that interested me in writing was a concentration on the page as this space you move across. I was using words as a kind of "prop" for movement. Words were ways to get from left side of page, left margin, to right side, right margin.

JRK: When did you come back to New York?

VA: I've been in New York since '64. The fact that art-context places were showing written work on the wall made art-context places an available field for me, whereas, at another time, I probably wouldn't have known how to think other than in rigid terms of book, publication. Now I saw written stuff on the wall, I could think of book, publication, gallery space. In other words, the existence of those other things I think, made the shift much easier. Obviously, there were other reasons for the shift, too. This was a time when a lot of New

around the galleries? Did you go to openings, go to parties in SoHo—hang out in bars?

VA: No. Probably in the late 60s when work of mine first started to appear in the art context, I tried to go to parties and I realized that I didn't know how. I always felt uncomfortable at parties. I feel most comfortable in groups of two or three people, so there are friends I see. We don't see each other at bars. In a lot of ways, that almost bothers me about me. It seems like the value of living in the art scene is that there is this kind of community grouping. Bars act as meeting places for the artist community, and I've never known how to use them.

JRK: *So this move creates physical isolation, whereas before it was self-imposed.*

VA: Yes, in a lot of ways, this move is really not moving at all; rather I'm confirming the isolated self I've set myself up to be.

JRK: *Do you think your education in the Catholic school system has informed your work at all?*

VA: Yes, I'm sure it has. I mean I hate to bring up the kind of obvious connection between my Catholic background and a lot of my early work — a kind of small chamber, confessional booth-like feeling of some of the early stuff. Obviously, I could have gotten that from a lot of places. What I'd like to say though is that true, I got it from there, but I don't want to believe that my desire to use that kind of space was determined by my Catholic background.

JRK: *But rather than focusing on that space, do you think the need to reveal secrets about yourself has more to do with the function of the confessional rather than just that space? Do you think that you were trained to tell secrets about yourself?*

VA: It's hard to say, though it's probably true. I was doing those pieces at the end of the 60s, at a time when things like encounter groups were very much in the air. Maybe my interests were pre-set because of this Catholic background, because of this confessional background. Even the pieces that involved no language but involved the notion of me turning in on myself, of me applying some kind of stress to myself, just using that language came from there. To me, the reason for the pieces was that I thought there was some kind of value in availability of artist to viewer. I could make myself available by making myself vulnerable. If I was there as this normal person, then I was setting up some kind of normal block against the viewer. If on the other hand, I could make myself vulnerable, weaken myself, then maybe this would allow the viewer to have some kind of approach towards me. Therefore, applying some kind of stress to my person would put me into a potentially weakened position where the viewer would have some kind of in-route. That might have been the reason for the pieces. But why did I get to that? Why did I so conveniently get to that notion of applying stress? Very possibly it had to do with the fact that I grew up in this Catholic framework where the constant urge was to apply stress to yourself.

JRK: *Can we talk about the films you did, like Conversions, where you burnt the hair off your chest? How did you arrive at that particular idea? And then how did you actually get yourself to do something that must have been painful and was real stress?*

VA: Maybe I should describe *Conversions* a little bit and describe the intentions and see if I'm right. *Conversions* is a long film, a long black-and-white, Super-8 film. The first part of *Conversions* is a major part of the piece. The film begins in total darkness. There's a light moving around on the screen; gradually it becomes clear that this light is a candle. I'm moving the candle around in front of my body. As I move the candle towards my breast, the camera zooms in and the rest of the film

mously revealing pieces that you were doing at one point, such as dressing up your penis in Barbie Doll clothes, or showing the pimples on your ass in the piece Reception Room which you did in Naples. Could you ever do pieces that were similarly painful and revealing again?

VA: Well, no. The only thing that interested me in the word "performance" was the notion that you're called upon to perform something, you're called upon to fulfill terms. It's almost the performance of a contract, the performance of a job. You carry this through. So what interested me in performance was that notion that you're on the spot, you've worked yourself up to something. You do it. You do it that one time. You don't do it again. So a lot of that stuff was after I had worked myself up to do it for that time. It would have been almost impossible to do it again.

JRK: *How much of the impulse behind the bodyworks such as Openings and Conversions was a kind of narcissism or a kind of therapy? I once asked if you'd ever been in analysis and you laughed and said—*

VA: "I don't have to."

JRK: *Right.*

VA: Yeah, now, how serious was my answer . . .

JRK: *I think you said that had you been in analysis, you wouldn't have needed to do this in your art.*

VA: Very likely if I was in analysis I wouldn't have been able to do it. The fact that I did a lot of those pieces most probably made analysis unnecessary. But as far as I'm aware, I don't think those pieces were done for therapy at all.

JRK: *And narcissism? This is a word you'd never use.*

VA: It's an incredibly complicated term. Afterwards, I think the reason my pieces changed from live to non-live was probably because I began to see the pieces as narcissistic, narcissistic in the sense of an activity that doesn't recognize the existence of a surrounding community. An activity that glorifies self, glorifies individual and leaves out group, leaves out past, leaves out history, leaves out culture.

JRK: *So could the move from bodyworks and performance be seen as a kind of evolution from concerns with the self to moving beyond youthful concerns with the self to focusing in your maturity on outside issues and other people?*

VA: Very possibly, because for me again I think so much of the work, at least so much of the intentions of the work, had to do with the fact I was a writer and then I was in another context. A lot of those very early pieces really had to do with probably a kind of basic confusion: Now that I'm in a different field, now that I'm in a real space, what do I do? How do I move? From there it seemed okay, now I have this existence in real space once I did pieces like that, now I start from the basic point, I start focusing on myself, developing this notion of self. Then from there, bring in another agent. And the pieces in 1971 started dealing with another person. Then from there, go from another agent still separate from group, still separate from viewer; then go to pieces where I face you. I'm more a member of this overall group. And finally you get to a position where it is kind of analogous to a child realizing that, well, the world exists even when I'm not there.

JRK: *Seedbed is a very important and notorious piece that was done as a performance/installation at Sonnabend Gallery in 1972. Describe that piece.*

VA: Conventional gallery room: 40 feet by 25 feet. Halfway across the room, the floor becomes a ramp that rises to a height of about 2 feet at the far wall. The piece is activated from opening time of the gallery till closing, from 10:00 in the morning till 6:00. During that time I'm underneath the ramp; I'm moving around the floor on

VITO ACCONCI, TONIGHT WE ESCAPE FROM NEW YORK, WHITNEY BIENNIAL INSTALLATION, February 18, 1977 – April 3, 1977. Speaker, 4 track tape, ladder wires and wood. Dimensions determined by site of installation. PHOTOGRAPH BY BEVAN DAVIES, COURTESY OF THE SONNABEND GALLERY, NEW YORK.



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which the viewers are walking. All the while I'm trying to maintain a constant masturbation. In order to do this, I can use the viewers as a kind of aid. I hear viewers' footsteps above me and I build up sexual fantasies about their footsteps that allow me to keep my masturbation going. So that viewer then comes into this space. Viewer comes into what, in fact, is the conventional clean, white, minimal art gallery space. White walls and floor. But because it's a ramp, the viewer walks across the floor and up the ramp almost without noticing, certainly without really making the decision that you're stepping up. As viewer walks across the ramp, viewer hears this voice coming up from below.

JRK: Your voice?

VA: My voice says something like, "I'm doing this with the person on my left; I'm touching your hair, I'm running my hand down your back, I'm touching your ass"—whatever. If it happens then that I have an orgasm, viewer is in this position that viewer can say, "He did this for me. I was the cause. He did this with me." So it was my space down there as private space being combined with public viewing space.

JRK: How did you decide to masturbate under the platform? What led you to that? Did it also have to do with sexual revelations?

VA: Well, again, my claim would be that I don't think it has anything to do with that, that it began totally unsexually. But like all the pieces, and this applies to more recent pieces, the more recent installations with the audio, the audio part of the piece is always the last part of the piece. The physical construction is first, the general, overall structure of the piece comes first. With regards to *Seedbed*, again the basic structure was first. Before *Seedbed* I was doing pieces that involved my position face-to-face with the viewer. I would set myself up at a point in a space and then viewers would come towards that point. I was setting myself up as artist in the specialized position that viewers, in a kind of lower-hierarchy, would have to move towards. So the way *Seedbed* evolved was I could take focus off myself by not being visible. There were three basic ways, it seemed, to do this. If I didn't want to be seen, I could be behind a wall, I could be above the ceiling, or I could be under the floor. Behind the wall seemed wrong. If I set myself up above the ceiling, it seemed to me there was too much space—the 10 feet or so between the ceiling and floor, too much space between my position and viewer's. Also if I was objecting to the fact that in the past pieces I was setting myself up as a focus point, I was setting up a grandiose position for myself if I put myself up on the ceiling. Under the floor seemed possible since that way I could be in the position that it was close to the position that viewers were in. I could be in this position where viewers walked. One other implication of that position, though I was probably leaving it out at the time, was that, well, if I didn't want to set myself up in the ceiling because I'd be above viewers, obviously setting myself under the floor was putting myself below viewers, and I don't know if I really came to terms with that at the time. But that coincided with the way the pieces were going for a while: I'd make myself vulnerable. Thinking then of this position on the floor, I would do a piece then that would allow me to be under the floor. I would do a piece that would in effect allow me to be a kind of floor for the viewer. Except at first it wasn't going to be a ramp at all. I realized when we were about to start building that something was drastically wrong. So the notion of the ramp came about for convenience, it was a convenient way that at least I could be under half the floor, while at the same time allowing my position to be a natural continuum of the viewer's floor. The piece then began with my physical position. I would be under the floor where viewers walked. What would I be doing? It seemed to me while trying to figure out what I would be doing there—I knew I would be moving around—but it seemed to me that if I was in this position under the ramp, what



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was doing was setting up a kind of private space and public space. I wasn't seen under the ramp, yet this was a public gallery space where viewers moved, so there was this private-public dichotomy. Continuing from that, there was a kind of inside-outside dichotomy. So it seemed to me that whatever I was doing had to have something to do with inside-outside. So I thought then, well, the way to go then was something from inside my body comes outside. I was toying around with ideas of things, like, I could spit, this is something that comes from inside to outside. But I didn't know what that meant and where I could take it. So trying to think then what I could be doing—probably this was because of my writing background, I tended to want to analyze the piece according to language. What was I doing? I was providing a floor for viewers; I was becoming a floor for viewers. Therefore, play around with words like floor, finding synonyms for floor, finding words then like "foundation," and "substructure" and eventually coming across the word "seedbed" as a synonym for floor. Coming across the word "seedbed" made everything click. Seedbed. Obviously this was a place where seed could be spread.

JRK: Has there been a recent influence of contemporary music, New Wave, or punk music?

VA: Yeah, I think for a while music has been important in pieces. When I first started to do the kinds of "cultural space pieces" in the mid-70s, I was using music as a kind of signature of a culture. What interested me in punk music when I first heard it was a kind of mass of voice, very different from the typical 60s rock song in which there was an individual voice.

JRK: Do you go to concerts? Do you go to clubs to hear music?

VA: Actually, very infrequently. I've always been in this position of this kind of "closet punk." And which probably reveals my mixed feelings about the stuff. I'm incredibly attracted to it, but at the same time I really have a hard time with the notion of this mass of audience grouped around performers on the stage.

JRK: Do you want your work to end up in museums, or would you rather remain somewhat peripheral to the system?

VA: I'm not sure. No, I probably would want my work to be in museums, because that means the work is available, that means the work is more distributable than if it just remained in the form of photographs and texts. But theoretically, in order to buy most of my pieces, you would have to buy the building they're in. If the piece was done at Sonnabend Gallery in New York, you just couldn't reproduce the space of Sonnabend Gallery because the piece wasn't just about physical space, but you'd ideally have to buy the floor, buy 420 West Broadway. You'd have to buy the particular situation that 420 West Broadway has as an art center at a particular time. So obviously that can't be bought. And when I say I want the stuff to be distributed, I want the stuff to exist in a museum space or whatever, I know that some of the pieces can't exist in such a space.

JRK: Do you ever worry that your work is accessible or understandable only to a select audience that is very sophisticated and aware of the events of the last ten years of contemporary art? What audience do you have in mind when you make the pieces?

VA: Yeah, but I'd like the work to be accessible to someone who has never seen any work in the last ten years and has never seen any of my previous work. Now obviously, a person who knows the career of my work can, when seeing a new piece, connect things and understand then the progress of the work.

JRK: You said that you still go to exhibitions in museums. Are you interested in the recent movements in painting, the "New Image" painting, decorative pattern painting?

VA: Well, I haven't been interested in that particular stuff. I mean I don't know how to really look at it. □