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ART & DESIGN

Vito Acconci, an Artist as Influential as He Is Eccentric

By RANDY KENNEDY JUNE 2, 2016

In the late 1960s, the artist Vito Acconci wandered into a movie theater near Times Square hoping to catch an art film and was confused to see a group of ragged-looking musicians take the stage. That group turned out to be the Velvet Underground, whose first album sold poorly but whose influence was so profound, as Brian Eno later said, that everyone who bought the record started a band.

The same sentiment might be expressed about Mr. Acconci's influence in the contemporary art world. The genetic impact of his performances, photographs and video works from just an eight-year period — 1968 to 1976 — is so pervasive that it is difficult to trace. But Mr. Acconci, who turned 76 this year, has not had a retrospective in the United States in more than three decades, and his most important work can now sometimes seem more like legend than fact.

That is set to change on June 19, when MoMA PS1 in Queens opens "Vito Acconci: Where We Are Now (Who Are We Anyway?), 1976," which traces his

career from his early days as a poet through his art-world heyday and around the corner of a radical turn in the mid-1970s, when he abandoned the gallery world and remade himself as a highly unorthodox architect and designer, to the confusion of many.

In a series of interviews over the last three months as the PS1 show was being planned, Mr. Acconci spoke about his perpetual unease in the art world, and before that the poetry world, where he said he always felt like an outsider, someone with a relentless creative drive for which a genre had not — and still has not — been invented. Almost because of this, he has opened bold new avenues over the years for artists as important and widely varied as Laurie Anderson, Martin Kippenberger, Mike Kelley and Tania Bruguera.

"I hated the word artist," he said. "To me, even in the years when I was showing things in galleries, it seemed to me that I didn't really have anything to do with art. The word itself sounded, and still sounds to me, like 'high art,' and that was never what I saw myself doing."

As far as the art world was concerned, his leap into architecture — designs for things like public parks, airport rest areas and a man-made island — was almost as if Mr. Acconci decided to enter the witness protection program. But he disappeared right in the art world's midst, continuing to teach generations of art students (at Brooklyn College and at Pratt Institute); working in a cluttered, book-saturated studio in Dumbo, Brooklyn; and lecturing so often over the years that his shambling-eccentric presence — his long unruly hair, his all-black wardrobe, his gravel-bed voice with its distinctive loping stutter and, before he quit, the endless cigarettes he would light and stub out and light again — became a kind of ongoing work in itself.

Born in the Bronx into a Catholic Italian family, the overprotected only son of a bathrobe manufacturer and a mother who later worked in a public-school cafeteria, Mr. Acconci came of age in the politically agitated years when artists began trying to find ways around the making and selling of objects.

They turned to their bodies, their ideas and their actions as the currency of a new realm. Along with peers like Chris Burden, Adrian Piper, Dan Graham and Valie Export, Mr. Acconci began conceiving and documenting performances — at a rate of sometimes one a day in what he called "a kind of fever" in 1969 — that were conducted on the streets or for audiences so small that they seemed almost not to have happened.

In Mr. Acconci's case, the work grew out of an experience as an aspiring poet and fiction writer whose fascination with the physical space of the page eventually led out into the world. In 1962, in thrall to postmodern writers like Alain Robbe-Grillet and John Hawkes, he enrolled in the graduate writing program at the University of Iowa, taking along with him a short story he had written, titled "Run-Around," that when read anonymously in the class provoked a minor riot. Its subject, a horrifying surrealist-sculptural vision, was a recently limbless man. It began: "They cut him up and since the chairs had just been varnished for the celebration, he was set down on a giant floor urn. The chalice-shaped jar was waist-high for most people, but not for Rockram, because he had no legs."

"When the professor asked for reactions," Mr. Acconci recalled, "one guy said that whoever wrote it should be chucked out the window into the Iowa River."

Back in New York City after getting his degree, in the wastelands of the Lower East Side, the East Village and SoHo, Mr. Acconci began experimenting with using the city as another means of making literature.

In one of his most-cited early works, "Following Piece," from 1969, he spent each day for almost a month following a person picked at random on the street, sometimes with a friend following Mr. Acconci to record the action. The rules were only that he had to keep following the person until he or she entered a private place where Mr. Acconci couldn't go in. During years when crime and urban paranoia were spiking, the work might be seen as a creepy

metaphor for vulnerability, but Mr. Acconci saw it essentially as an open-ended and in many ways optimistic narrative.

"It was sort of a way to get myself off the writer's desk and into the city — it was like I was praying for people to take me somewhere I didn't know how to go myself," he once told the musician Thurston Moore. (The band Sonic Youth was formed not long after Mr. Moore first met Mr. Acconci and began playing in various arrangements with Kim Gordon and Mr. Acconci's girlfriend at the time, Anne DeMarinis.)

The dozens of performance pieces that followed through the early 1970s, many of them now little-known, contained varying elements of existential unease, bodily discomfort, exhibitionism and gender play — elements he shared with some other artists of the time, particularly with female artists — but also a kind of wit and a Svengali aura that were Mr. Acconci's own.

In "Trademarks," (1970) Mr. Acconci sat naked on a floor and bit himself wherever he could reach, then applied printer's ink to the marks and stamped them on paper and other surfaces.

In "Pryings" (1971), Mr. Acconci and Kathy Dillon engaged in a disturbing pas-de-deux, in which she clenched her eyes shut as he grabbed her face and tried to force them open. (Ms. Dillon, with whom Mr. Acconci lived for a time, is a powerful presence in his early performances; after they separated they fell out of touch. "Or a better way to say it would be that she thought she had to get away from me because I was taking too much of her life, which I guess I was," he said.)

In "Seedbed," (1972) — undoubtedly Mr. Acconci's best-known piece, which has in a sense unfairly overshadowed much of his other work — he constructed an angled false floor at the Sonnebend Gallery in SoHo and hid himself beneath it with a microphone, speaking luridly to the people who walked above him, masturbating as he spoke. The piece became a touchstone of performance art in part because of its sheer, outlandish audacity. But it also

drew a remarkable line through the preoccupations that began Mr. Acconci's career and carry it up to the present day. The idea for the act under the floor arose linguistically, after he turned to a thesaurus to find synonyms for the word "foundation" and was struck by the poetry of "seedbed." And in constructing the floor, he was already beginning to explore his interests in architecture and public space, in this case a space in which he could merge with the building, ceasing to be a discrete human presence and becoming instead a kind of quantum field.

"I wanted people to go through space somehow, not to have people in front of space, looking at something, bowing down to something," Mr. Acconci said of the performance. "I wanted space people could be involved in."

Holly Block, the executive director of the Bronx Museum, which commissioned an architectural environment from him in 2009, said: "A lot of people don't understand Vito's turn to architecture, but I think he wanted to be more ambitious and make pieces that lived in the world — and in people's lives — in a different way than artworks usually do, and it was a risky and courageous thing to do."

Klaus Biesenbach, the director of PS1 and the organizer of the show, which was conceived as part of the institution's 40th birthday, said: "He's one of the most influential artists of his time because of the way he connects the private with the public sphere, the body with the street, the media space with the personal space. He's challenging our limits about what we want to be private and what we want to be public, and those questions have only become more important."

The show, which is being designed by Acconci Studios, the firm that Mr. Acconci runs in close collaboration with his wife, Maria, has been a kind of fragile work-in-progress over the past months, threatening at times to collapse under his unpredictably evolving ideas and inspirations. "You have to think about him deciding 'Maybe I should go to China tomorrow,'" said Mr. Biesenbach. "That's just how Vito is. With great artists — and Vito is one —

sometimes you have to have unprecedented flexibility."

But the tension also comes from Mr. Acconci's longstanding desire not to have his career bifurcated into pre- and post-architecture. "There are people who like to keep Vito in what I call a prison of a few years, and it's not right," said Maria Acconci, 36, a writer who met Mr. Acconci after seeing his work at a retrospective in Barcelona in 2004 and is a fierce defender of his prerogatives.

Mr. Biesenbach said he believed the show would strike a delicate balance to reveal the connections between the early work and Acconci Studio — the "two Vitos," as he calls it — though even as recently as late May he remained uncertain whether the exhibition would open as planned.

Mr. Acconci, around the same time, seemed to be leaning toward it actually happening — legend becoming fact. "I never liked museums," he said. "They always seemed artificially separated from real life. But you have to be seen, and I guess I've never cared enough about that. Maybe I should have."

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