

INTERVIEW WITH: Vito Acconci (VA)

INTERVIEWER: Jeff Weinstein (JW)

LOCATION: THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, ARCHIVES READING ROOM

DATE: JANUARY 17, 2012

BEGIN AUDIO FILE: ACCONCI_T02

JW: I'm Jeff Weinstein. It's January 17, 2012. We are at the Museum of Modern Art in the sixth floor Archives reading room. And I'm sitting with Vito Acconci. Vito, would introduce yourself and -- to us and tell us how you think of yourself as an -- if you would call yourself, "I'm Vito Acconci, the artist," I'm Vito Acconci, the architect," "I'm just Vito Acconci."

VA: I'm Vito Acconci, now a designer, an architect. But didn't start that way. Started as a writer, as a poet. Then stuff went into an art context, but an art context in -- not in terms of printing or sculpture, but in terms of activity and performance, and then installation, which led to at least an attempt at architecture. You know? And there's another big change. Early stuff of mine began with me working alone as a single person. Now it's become the opposite. I work as part of a group of people, Acconci Studio.

JW: Would you describe the studio?

VA: Yeah, the studio's a -- The designers in the studio all have an architecture background. It's a relatively small studio, four or five designers plus me, studio manager, archivist. When I realized that the stuff was becoming at least something like architecture, I thought that I had to change my way of working, because once the stuff was becoming architecture, the way I thought of it was, it

was becoming public. It was entering a public space. And I started to think, I don't know if public space can be dealt with by a single person. Public space possibly or probably needed a group of people thinking together.

I started to think of number a lot. One is a solo. Two is a couple or a mirror image. The third person starts an argument. And that's when public begins, so. And when did that happen? Through the '80s. At the end of the '80s, in 1988, I kind of officially formed a studio, meaning brought in, at that time just one other person to work with me. It's gradually grown, but hasn't grown that much. But since that time -- I don't know when I developed an aversion to art. [00:05:01] But part of the aversion to art is -- and obviously museums have to do this -- the 'do not touch' signs in the museum made for me art seem superior to people. And I kind of couldn't stand that.

JW: Well, you once said that when somebody asked you what you thought of the perfect, if you could achieve the perfect, you said, "Well, the problem with the perfect is that's how you talk about art." And unfortunately it means that it belongs to somebody else, it's..

VA: Yeah, yeah. And also if something's perfect, there's no need to try again. And I hope there's always a need to try again.

JW: You raise a paradox, however, which I'm sure you know --

VA: Yes, yes.

JW: -- yes -- which has to do with the fact that museums are here, not only to show work, whether that work is perfect or not, or art or not, but it's to preserve it and to collect it so that it won't disappear.

VA: In fact, I had a conversation some time in the last year and a half with conservators here at MoMA because there was a show some time in -- I don't remember now. Was a year and a half ago, two years ago, where a piece of mine, a mid-'70s installation, was part of the show. And it involved sound, but it

also involved these kinds of little stools. It was almost like a kind of children's schoolroom.

JW: Was this the columns --

VA: [Three Columns For America](#) [[MoMA # 190.2007](#)] .

JW: [Three Columns for America](#), right.

VA: And there was a sign saying, you couldn't sit on the seats, sit on the stools. And I questioned this because I said, you know, "This is what the piece is." And they brought up some really interesting things. They said that a lot of the materials that you used, especially in the maybe '70s and '80s were materials that were fragile, fabric for example. MoMA also owns a piece called *Peeling House* [MoMA #153.1986], which is almost one house inside another inside another inside another. Each house, the walls of each house is fabric. And they said that if people used this piece, the fabric is going to wear out. And my immediately retort was, "Well, buy it again." You know? They said, "Well, some fabric that you can get"

JW: It was pink -- You had lamé and you had camo and --

VA: Yeah. And they said, "Well," you know, "fabric you might be able to get in the '70s, you can't get in the 2010s."

JW: I actually have -- This was a show that Linda Shearer curated at MoMA [MoMA exhibition # 1719A] in which *The Peeling House* [MoMA #153.1986] was shown, and I have a memo here that she wrote to one of the staffers. I'd like to read you part of that --

VA: Yeah, please.

JW: -- it concerns what you said. It's referring to the *Peeling House*. And it's by Linda Shearer. "Now that the work has been accepted, we should meet at some

point to go over the modifications that would be made for the installation in the collection galleries. While it was originally conceived of as a participatory piece, it will be necessary to alter it for actual exhibition.” And she says she talked about this with -- “I have discussed this with Vito Acconci.”

VA: I’m sure. I’m sure she did. I have to admit, I wish in retrospect [Laughing] I hadn’t allowed museums to buy this stuff. But then again, I thought, well, maybe I’m doing it wrong. If I am -- And this was before maybe I thought the work -- Well, no. By this time, the work -- Starting the beginning of 1980, the work was obviously heading towards architecture. The first piece I did in 1980 was a piece called [Instant House \[MoMA #7.1999\]](#), you know? But it was houses that I wanted -- It was stuff that I wanted people to form. A person sits on a swing, walls of the house go up.

JW: Pop up.

VA: There’s a kind of closed house. There are kind of shade pulls. You pull on this ring, first layer goes up. But you still haven’t gotten inside. You need another person, another person, another person. They were probably too complicated. But for me, it was the beginning of -- Even though the stuff has become architecture, what I hate about architecture is the fact that when you design the space, you’re also designing people’s behavior in the space, so that I think architecture is almost inherently a totalitarian activity. [00:10:08] You know? So the urge is -- so I don’t know if we can ever reach that -- is that, can people change their space? Because until people can change their space, they’re subjected to it. I admit what I want -- did I always want this in work, and maybe I didn’t know it? -- but what I really want from work is, I wanted a work that can make people freer than they were before.

JW: So you think architecture can free people in some ways more do you think --

VA: I don’t know, I mean, it probably traps them more.

JW: As well? So would this be participatory architecture of some sort that you're looking for?

VA: Yeah. I mean ideally, people have to have something to do with at least part of the making of a space. So for example, just to give you an idea of how the studio works, yes, I might want to do architecture, but I really don't know architecture. The only thing I really know is writing. I started as a writer, and I'm probably always a writer. But the interesting thing about writing is that you can write about anything, about any field. So I probably write architecture. So that when we start, Acconci Studio starts a project, the group of us -- which again is small, four or five, though very often we have a lot of interns in the summer, we have interns between semesters, so it's usually more than four or five people -- I start a project off with a general idea. I don't know if this is because I started as a writer. But I think the things I do -- the stuff I do best is overall ideas. And possibly, it's not that I'm not interested in specifics; I'm incredibly interested in specifics. I hate abstractions. I hate abstract words because I think abstract words are in the realm of politics or religion. They're telling people what to believe. Whereas concrete words, specific words, that allows people to think for themselves. I always thought that in writing, and I still think that in any work I do. I want people to be able to -- It's not that I don't want to talk about work, but I don't want to exactly say, "This is what a work means." That's up to people.

JW: So you're sitting --

VA: Oh left, I

JW: This is in Brooklyn. Is your studio in Brooklyn?

VA: Yeah, but one subway stop from Manhattan. New York is really Manhattan to me.

JW: Yes. So you're sitting with your group and you're discussing an idea that you're having. Could you walk me through how it moves?

VA: Sure, yeah. Let me give an example from maybe 2007 or '08. We were asked to be in a competition for a museum in Perm, in Russia. The site for the museum was on top of a slope, and the slope then went down to a body of water. So most often, I think, I start a project off with an overall idea. And the way I started this was, Okay, the museum's at the top of a slope. Let's say that the slope is too steep, too strong. The museum can't resist the slope. So it might start on the top of the slope where it was ordained to be, but the museum can't resist the slope. And I think I used the words, "Let's think of the slope as the call of the wild." So the museum starts to fold, starts to go down the slope, starts to go down the slope. There's a bridge. The museum goes under the bridge. There's a set of railroad tracks. The museum goes over the tracks and then finally goes to the edge of the water and starts to go in the water.

And that's, you know, the project we did. I mean, it got more advanced from that. But that beginning was -- Like it or not, it's easy for me to start from site, because I feel -- I mean, I think there were two ways to do architecture. [00:15:05] You start from site or you totally ignore the site. If you ignore the site, you do a kind of spaceship that comes in from elsewhere. It can land anywhere. Doesn't care where it lands. It's a world of its own. Which is probably legitimate. I tend more to something being part of a surrounding, but also it gives you a starting point. If I started with this thing as a thing in itself, then I don't know what this thing in itself will be except a spaceship. But --

JW: Well, let me ask you more about the process, though, because you have -- When you said it starts with the site, I thought both S-I-T-E and S-I-G-H-T.

VA: Oh, yeah. I meant S-I-T-E.

JW: Yeah. No, I --

VA: At the same time, the first I knew of this S-I-T-E was to have in my sight a picture of it.

JW: Picture of it, yes. But you have your team, your group. And what's the next thing that they do?

VA: Well, we talk. Once I start that, we talk. But they can do more and -- other than talk. You know? The people in the studio, at least now -- This was different in the end of the '80s and somewhat different in the '90s. But by the end of the '90s, people in the studio became very, very computer -- not just computer literate, but most of the people --

JW: Savvy.

VA: -- they use computers like a second language. And I admit, that's really important to me, though I don't -- I mean, I use the computer as a word processor. When I said to a person in the studio a few years ago that I wish I knew the computer the way you did, this person said, "But your early work was exactly the way a computer works." You know? "You never had a visual effect in mind. You started with a kind of principle and you carried that principle through." And that's how I wrote.

JW: with words

VA: You know? I would try to write poems that could write themselves. You know? So I wrote what the sentence -- "Let it go," then go to the dictionary, copy down each word after the word 'go' in the dictionary until I reached the bottom of the page.

JW: Right. There were systems to the way --

VA: It was always a system.

JW: Right, the way it worked. And you weren't alone in that respect.

VA: Not at all. Not at all. There were people in the nineteenth century. I think Mallarmé was doing it that way.

JW: -- Mallarmé [was] doing that. But I've looked at -- Let me bring up an earlier -- We'll go back a bit so we can refer to this, because I expect that there has been an architectural interest in almost all of your work in the terms of the way in which people deal with space, whether it's a single person, two people, or, as you say, the argumentative group of three. You were co-editor of an important -- I think important -- magazine called *1 to 9* -- *0 to 9* -- I beg your pardon -- *0 to 9*, with Bernadette Mayer. And this magazine had -- It was done on Xerox pages. Is that right or --

VA: Not even Xerox, it was before Xerox.

JW: -- mimeographed, yes, before Xerox.

VA: It was mimeographed. I think Xerox was around, was --

JW: Right. Right. And they were --

VA: -- too expensive for us.

JW: They were typed pages, most of them.

VA: Yes.

JW: And by a number of different creators at the time, some of whom would now be considered, you know, mostly visual artists -- [Sol LeWitt](#) [OVERLAPPING DIALOGUE; INAUDIBLE:] [Bernar Venet](#) I remember --

VA: I think [Smithson](#) had something, [Jasper Johns](#)...

JW: -- [Jasper Johns](#). [Adrian Piper](#) was in it. There were so many people who would be considered artists. But we were looking at words. Some of it was, I guess, concrete poetry, poetry where the words were visualized.

VA: Yeah, Aram Saroyan [OVERLAPPING DIALOGUE; INAUDIBLE] stuff.

JW: Saroyan was there.

VA: Yeah. And that was important to us. Well, I don't know. I don't know if it was as important to Bernadette as to me. And I don't mean this, that what I was thinking was better. But I think I was thinking more I wanted words to be fact, I want the words to be material. I questioned the fact that when you see a word, you look through the word to subject matter, to content. And obviously there's nothing wrong with that. But I wanted the matter of the word, the matter of the page. When I began a poem, I thought, "How do I move? How do I move from left margin of the page to right margin? How do I move from one page to another?" I was fascinated by statements like [Raymond Roussel's] statement about, a book begins on the first -- should begin on the first page and end on the last, or a Gertrude Stein statement where she said that the only way a short story or a novel should end is when everybody dies. Sure, because the book is over now. You know? That world is over.

JW: So you were thinking of language spatially even then.

VA: Really [INAUDIBLE] yeah, yeah, yeah.

JW: So does that --

VA: I think Bernadette was more -- Though, I think she was somewhat involved with that, too, she was more of a, quote, "New York poet" than I was. Yeah. Yeah. And I loved some of that stuff. I loved Frank O'Hara's stuff. I loved John Ashbury's stuff. But I didn't want to do it, maybe because I couldn't do it. So I had to find something that I could do.

JW: But you do think that lyricism and meaning and metaphor could coexist with the spatial, concrete, sometimes automatic poetry that you --

VA: Yeah.

JW: -- were publishing and writing yourself? Did you think that they were good friends or they were fighting?

VA: Then I thought they were fighting. Kind of interestingly, only when I think I wasn't thinking of myself as a writer and was starting to do so-called art that I think, wow, I can write something that's about something. Because I think the way I thought, a page is sort of in the middle of nowhere. There's nothing to refer to on a page. When I was starting to do installations in the '70s, they always- the installations I did all used audio tape. Because I was making a space. And now I could not exactly talk about the space, but I could bring subject matter and content into the... And I did that in writing, too, but I did it by means of puns.

Kind of interestingly, I think the most important influence on me as a writer wasn't other writers, though of course I was interested. You know, like I said, I was interested in Mallarmé. Of course I was interested in Beckett. I was really interested when I was in graduate school in a fiction writer named John Hawkes, who was kind of not considered -- I think he was so much better than people think of him.

But when I came back to New York after being in Iowa -- I went to graduate school at the University of Iowa, from '62 to '64 -- I didn't particularly want to go to writing school. I mean, I knew I wanted to be a writer. But I had a Woodrow Wilson fellowship which meant, you know, I could go to graduate school for two years --

JW: You went to college in New York. Is that right?

VA: No. I went to college in Worcester, Massachusetts.

JW: Worcester, Massachusetts.

VA: I went to Catholic school for a large part of my life.

JW: That's right, that's right. You were born and raised in the Bronx. Is that right?

VA: Yeah. But I went to Catholic school from kindergarten to the end of undergraduate school. When I came back to New York, for awhile -- and this probably happens to people when they get out of school -- but I suddenly didn't know what to do. You know? I was writing fiction in Iowa. I was writing the beginnings of a novel. When I came back here, it was if -- you know, it's not that I had forgotten New York, and I certainly had come back to New York during school, but I felt -- first of all, there was such a kind of emphasis on art in New York. Yes, I had known museums before I went to Iowa. I didn't even know art galleries existed. So when I came back to New York, I would -- It was probably the time I was most open to different kinds of art, because I didn't know which were the good galleries, which were the bad ones, so I would, you know --

JW: Because we're sitting at the Museum of Modern Art -- let me interrupt you -- when was the first time you remember you were in the Museum of Modern Art?

VA: I mean, my father took me to museums, yeah, the Metropolitan more, but at the same time, my father, though he was, you know, totally obsessed with the kind of Italianism, still -- He might have been obsessed with a kind of Italianism, but he paid a lot of attention to punning in, like, Cole Porter, so. My father was probably the most important influence to me. He lived in a world of puns.

JW: Of puns and words.

VA: Yeah. Yeah. You know, in the middle of an ordinary day, he would say -- he would ask, "What's honeymoon salad?" And the answer is, "Lettuce alone." Then he would follow that with, "Don't look now. Mayonnaise is dressing," you know, or -- then something I found out later, that James Joyce used this before my father: "The Lord said to Peter come forth, but Peter came fifth, so he lost the race." So I grew up in a world of -- And it was a great way of growing up because when probably as a child you start to use language, language almost means law. It means order. This was the opposite.

JW: A pun breaks that law.

VA: This was a Marx Brothers movie.

JW: And a joke breaks that pun. But --

VA: Yeah. So it was about explosion. And I think that shaped everything I wanted to do.

JW: You're in New York. And it's, what, the mid-'60s, the early --

VA: Yeah, mid-60s, '64.

JW: Yes. And there's -- abstract expressionism is beginning to wane a little bit.

VA: And pop art was --

JW: Pop art was beginning to come up.

VA: Or at least, you know especially -- well, but [Rauschenberg](#) and Johns had been doing stuff for ten years by that time, or more than that. But the discovery of Johns was really important to me. And that's when I started to think, "Well, maybe now I know what to do." Because I was kind of obsessed with -- Or at least the way I imagined or made up [Jasper Johns](#) was, here was this person who really wanted to do a lot of little abstract expressionist brushstrokes. But he thinks there are so many people doing these abstract expressionist brushstrokes: "I need a gimmick," you know? "I need something that can catch attention. So if I use something that everybody knows, a number five, alphabet letters, so now I've gotten people, at least for a second. So now I can do all the little abstract expressionist brushstrokes."

So the way I took that to poetry was, you know, you can't invent language. Language is already there. So why not use conventions? Why not use everyday

expressions that, by themselves, don't really mean what they're saying: "From the horse's mouth." So I thought language already -- You know, in the same way that Johns could use a number, etc., maybe I could use -- I could start with a conventional phrase. It was a way to get me going.

JW: When you thought of language then, did you think of it aurally in terms of hearing the words?

VA: Probably not. Because I realized that the writing I was doing -- And again, it certainly wasn't so-called concrete poetry, but I knew what concrete poetry was at the time. So placing words on a page was important to me. I realized recently, somewhat recently -- when that *0 to 9* book that you mentioned came out, there was a reading at St. Marks that Bernadette and I gave. And I realized -- And I know I had never done this when I gave poetry readings. But I thought, I have to project the poems at the same time that I read them, because people had to see where these things were, you know?

JW: Well, the reason I'm asking is that I'm thinking of your transition to not writing only on a page for people to see. And by the way, you didn't think of these as precious pages. *0 to 9*, you told me, were mimeographed and done a couple of hundred for each --

VA: Yeah. Well, I mean, that's what we could do.

JW: That's what you could do.

VA: And nobody knew us. You know? Our first issue of *0 to 9* was we tried to look at things -- we tried to find things that we liked and that were out of print. I don't even know if that was totally legal, but we did. [Laughter]

JW: Well, it wouldn't be now, but it probably was okay then. But what I'm thinking of then is that you -- This was '67 to '69, was *0 to 9* --

VA: Yes.

JW: -- as I recall. And just at that time, you were beginning to take part with other poets, poet artists, in *Street Works* and the beginning of --

VA: Maybe a little later.

JW: Little later? You said that --

VA: No, no, no --

JW: -- '69, '70 --

VA: Sixty-eight, '69 -- '69 might have been the first *Street Works* series --

JW: Now those had words. There was a word connection. But you were now out in public space.

VA: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

JW: Which is why I'm thinking that when you say architecture came after art, that early on, you were considering public space.

VA: Yeah, you're right, actually. I thought of it as public space more in the sense of -- I was going to say, more in the sense of crowds than places, but that's not true at all. *Street Works* couldn't have been done in a small town. *Street Works* was about a city. And when I did [Following Piece](#) [MoMA [#864.2011](#);736.2011¹], if I had done [Following Piece](#) in Iowa City, for example, I would have been an aggressor; I would be a person stalking another person.

JW: Can you tell us quickly --

VA: In New York, I couldn't even --

¹ 864.2011 photography; 736.2011 Media and Performance Art

JW: Couldn't even do that. Could you tell us quickly what *Following Piece* is?

VA: Yeah. It was done for one -- the last *Street Works*, I guess, the one that was the most official one, I think. It was --and I never understood why -- it was sponsored. I don't know what that means, because I don't think anybody gave us money. But it was sponsored by the Architectural League of New York. And I never really understood [Laughing] what exactly that meant. But it was organized, as you know, by John Perreault, Hannah Weiner, Scott Burton, Eduardo Costa. They were the organizers. It was their idea to do -- And I'm not sure. Was it John's? Was it all of them? I'm not sure. It was probably John's.

JW: They were artists. There wasn't a very strict definition, at least as I know.

VA: I know John was probably more of a poet then.

JW: Poet.

VA: Scott was probably writing plays at that time.

JW: And beginning to do performances as well.

VA: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

JW: But these were works that were both individual -- different people did different *Street Works* -- but they were done in concert as well.

VA: Yes. They were done at the same time. And usually, at least the first ones were a relatively limited space. I remember one was in a SoHo space, not an indoor space, but a series of blocks. I think the first *Street Works*, from what I remember, because a piece I did involved walking on the outside of a block, and then the inside of a block on Fifth Avenue between, wherever Saks Fifth Avenue is and maybe right across from St. Patrick's Cathedral, so. Like it or not --

JW: Very close to the Museum of Modern Art.

VA: Yeah. I guess at that point, you know, did I think of that? I have no idea. What I did think of is that, how do I do something specific? I bring up the word 'specific' a lot because I think only when there's specificity can somebody else, can the receiver have their own ideas. I think more and more, to me, the freedom of a person is amazingly important.

JW: Did you keep a record of these?

VA: [The Following](#)?

JW: *The Following*, yes.

VA: Yeah.

JW: And what form did that record take?

VA: Not photographs. I took notes as I was following a person, which seems hard to believe now. How could I have done that? But yeah, the only way it's, quote, "represented" or kept is, each day is described as such and such a time, person in red dress walking down Morton Street, and then goes to a certain store, whatever. And I had set up that I had to stop when someone went to -- I could possibly go into a store, but I couldn't go into a kind of private place or office building. So that [Following](#) episodes ranged from, say, two- or three-minute episodes when someone got into a car and I couldn't follow, ranging from that to some -- a really interesting episode where someone went to a restaurant, a movie. And it was a movie on what's called the Academy of Music on East 14th Street, became the Palladium a few years later. But a person went to see this movie that Carol Baker made in Italy called *Paranoia*. [00;35:00] And I always thought, "Is this guy telling me something," [Laughing] you know? "Does he know?" But of course I couldn't know. But --

JW: So this particular *Street Work* now contains some language, because you had to sit down and think -- You can describe it in writing.

VA: Yeah.

JW: It's in public. It's in public space. It has duration. I'm thinking of the types --

VA: Most of the stuff I started to do years and years later --

JW: Years and years. Yes.

VA: -- was kind of started here.

JW: But the elements of this, I'm just noting, because the transition -- You've made what some people call transitions that seem dramatic in your working life.

VA: Yeah. I don't think they are.

JW: Sometimes when you look, it might seem that you're moving in a line in which your principles and your interests just take different forms.

VA: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I don't know. Something always happens where I realize that I think I've been doing something too long; I don't believe it anymore. And that's kind of lucky.

JW: Can you think of an example?

VA: Yeah, yeah, yeah. When I was writing, for example, when I began, I was writing things -- Like, a poem would begin with a period and then the rest of the poem would be taking off from the word 'period.' I think the second line is, "I have made my point. It. Now I make it again." So, you know? If there wasn't that period there -- In other words, there was such an attempt to -- I don't know if I would have used the word 'confine' then. But I didn't want anything that wasn't on the page, you know? There wasn't some content that was elsewhere that

was referred to. I wanted stuff to be -- I think I used the word at the time: 'fact.' That was maybe 1967. In 1969, I don't know if this was the last, quote, "poem" I wrote, but one of the very last, was a poem that consisted of a book on how to improve reading speed. So just copied the page, and the title I gave to it was "The Time Taken For Me to Walk from Such and Such a Corner to Such and Such a Corner," in other words, trying to make reading time somewhat equivalent to walking time.

So the way I saw that is, wow, I had started poetry by being confined to the page. Now it took me out into the street. So I thought that, I don't think I can go back. I have to start doing stuff on the street.

JW: Well, a year or two later, you then moved into the gallery.

VA: Which, in some ways, I regret, but...

JW: But you mentioned confinement just now. You're not the only one to talk about confinement. Many of the people who have written about you have, from a performance that we were just looking at in which there's a cat in a box. That was done in 1971, I think it was, in² --

VA: In John Gibson Gallery when he had an uptown space, 67th Street.

JW: There's a script to this performance. So you're still writing. Is that how it felt?

VA: I'm still writing now.

JW: Yes.

² Referring to materials from *the Avalanche* Magazine Archive. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York

VA: But, you know, sometimes the writing does -- after we're working on a piece. But no, I always took it for granted that every art piece had a description, everybody did this. But I realized, no, I did this because I was a writer.

JW: That's why I'm saying it, because I see you think, "That's what I do. That's how it happens."

VA: Yeah. In some ways, I always thought, well, a piece isn't finished until I write a description. Yeah.

JW: One of the things a museum, that's now got a department in which performance is considered important, is that it's looking for ways of marking that performance, if that performance hasn't been photographed, or, at that time, filmed in Super 8 or videotaped.

VA: I know at that time I -- It's not that I didn't photograph. Well, let me just get back to *Following Piece* for a second.

JW: Sure, please.

VA: When I did [Following Piece](#), I very purposefully did not have it photographed, because I thought, that's kind of silly. If I'm following some person and somebody's following me with a camera, this is kind of absurd. You know? But again, I don't think anybody -- Again, that person who went to see Carol Baker's *Paranoia* might have known what I was doing. But in general, everybody's following somebody in New York.

Once I -- whatever -- 23, 25 days passed, I thought, Wow, I think I'm finally starting to understand the art world. A piece doesn't exist unless it has an image. But it was very easy in this case because all I had to do was walk out on the street and have somebody photograph me and it looks like I was following somebody. Because, you know, again, this isn't Iowa City; it's New York. You're

always following or you look as if you're following someone, and someone looks as if they're following me.

JW: But you were then thinking, too, of -- Were you thinking of keeping a record or an image of this?

VA: I kept a lot of stuff. The art world is so destructive and so pervasive that you learn it very quickly. I remember a beautiful -- Iain Baxter, a conceptual artist at the time. Iain Baxter's statement is that, a word is worth one-thousandth of a picture. And he's probably right. With regard to art, it's really true. If it's not an image, nobody pays attention.

JW: Nobody pays attention.

VA: So I think I was learning that, maybe not during *Following Piece*, but at the end. And then I think I did start to have stuff photographed. I dislike the idea. Performance was supposed to be an act that disappears. And so I was of two minds. But I gave into the --

JW: Were you a theatre -- I know you were a filmgoer. But were you a theatergoer? Did you go to theatre a lot, or --

VA: At that time, the most important theatre for all of us was dance. I mean, Judson Dance Theater, I think was the most influential thing. You know? Everyone, I think, wanted to see, because maybe we could steal from it. [Laughter] You know? And also the kind of temporality of it. I mean, I think the best dance I ever saw was -- I think it was a Lucinda Childs dance somewhere in SoHo, a loft in SoHo. People went in. And for some reason we were -- I don't know if we were told -- but everybody stood or maybe sat -- I don't think there were chairs -- at one end of conventional New York loft, twenty-five feet wide, hundred feet long. After awhile people were probably talking with each other. And then you noticed that on the other end there were lights outside the window. This was, I don't know, third floor or fourth floor. And suddenly those lights then allowed -- Suddenly you saw something go from the top of the window to the bottom --

There was a person jumping from the floor above to the floor -- from the fire escape above, fire escape below. It lasted just a few seconds. There were a few of them. It was one of the most startling things I ever saw, or startling things I had seen.

But also it kind of confirmed things, that yes, space is important. But I think time is just as important, if not more important. But again, coming from writing, you automatically assume time. You know? It takes time to go from the top of a page to the bottom. Whereas, you know, you can look at a painting for an instant, you know? You see it all at once. You can't see a page all at once. You certainly can't see a book all at once. I mean, [Rob Grier 00:44:12] was very important to me when I was in graduate school. And that, too, was almost like, this is writing as just description. It's not, you know? It's about, you know, this description is here because we're seeing something through the eyes and words of a person obsessed that his wife is sleeping with somebody else.

JW: A particular point of view and shuttered and blinded

VA: Yeah, yeah, yeah. But I don't think I realized that at first. It took me maybe, of thinking of it again or re-reading again. But there was a beautiful Michel Butor book around that time called -- I'm not sure if it's pronounced -- Well, it's M-O-B-I-L-E, whether it's both "mobile" and the city, Mobile. But it's a book about traveling through the United States. And he has this -- he came upon this -- well, "came upon" -- or invented or realized looking at an atlas of the United States that there were a lot of cities with the same name. So he would start it with a city that's in the South. That would be for two pages. Then the same name of the city, but now we're in the Northeast, or -- And it was using book as travel. It was one of the most -- for me, the most significant things I ever read.

JW: And based on kind of punning, because at least a repetition of name.

VA: Sure, yeah.

JW: Let me ask a somewhat different question, just while we're in this time, which is the mid- to late-'60s, moving into the '70s. This was a pretty -- This was not the same as being in the '50s politically as well.

VA: No. Yeah.

JW: There was a war going on --

VA: Yeah, and that was the most important thing at that time, even if some of us didn't use -- maybe referred to it directly, it influenced everything we did. You know? Like when I did *Claim* in 1971, I know some people brought up, you know, was this supposed to be about the Vietnam War? Maybe not directly, but of course it was.

JW: Just for everybody, could you give one sentence about -- or just what *Claim* was?

VA: Yeah. *Claim* was a three-hour -- done in 1971. It was one of my first attempts at -- it's probably -- When you talk about things out of order, you maybe have to explain too much.

JW: I'm sorry.

VA: No, no, no, no. It's not your fault. I brought it up. It was an attempt to make performance be an interaction between I and you, between I and another person. So it was a three-hour piece. And it was done in the offices of -- It was a loft, a studio space. But it was the offices of *Avalanche Magazine*. Nothing in the main space. A doorway leads to a stairway that leads to a basement. So for these three hours, I'm alone in the basement. I'm videotaped, so that at the door on the ground floor, people could see what I'm doing behind the door. So a person maybe decides whether or not he or she wants to open the door, come downstairs. I'm seated in a chair at the foot of the stairs in the basement. I'm blindfolded. And I have with me two lead pipes and a crowbar. I'm constantly talking, talking aloud, but talking directed to myself, saying things like, "I'm alone here in the basement. I want to stay alone here in the basement. I don't want

anybody to come down in the basement with me. I'll stop anybody from coming down in the basement. I'm alone here in the basement." Did I mention that I have two lead pipes and a crowbar with me?

JW: Yeah. [Laughter]

VA: Yes. Okay. So anytime I hear somebody coming down the stairs -- And I'm blindfolded. I mentioned that. Anytime I hear somebody, I swing the lead pipe, the crowbar in front of me, as the title of the piece tries to say, claiming the space. So it was an attempt to hypnotize myself. And it kind of worked. By the second hour, I think I was -- I'm glad this didn't happen, but I could have killed somebody. So it was dangerous piece for me, but at the same time, it made me -- it started me thinking -- You know, I started doing person-oriented stuff by doing stuff on myself. Then I thought, This is too self-enclosed. I need it to be an encounter.

[CREW DISCUSSION]

JW: You had a series of performances the Sonnabend Gallery in '72. And they --

VA: Yeah. Interesting, not exactly a series.

JW: Wasn't a series?

VA: Well, it was one show. Well, it was. It was one show. And this maybe points out the -- my attempt to be as specific and maybe literal as possible. There were three rooms in Sonnabend. So I wanted to do three pieces. The pieces were all performances, because that's what I -- I wasn't thinking. But they were starting to be maybe more installation-like, though I don't know if I realized this. Maybe we can talk about that later.

So I had one piece. One piece was done two days a week. The second piece -- You know, I don't remember the exact days -- two days, and the last one, one day.

JW: You were thinking of --

VA: So it was a series.

JW: -- using the spaces, in other words. So again --

VA: Definitely, definitely.

JW: -- a sense of place, a sense of where you were, and of utilizing --

VA: Yeah. It was the first time, I think, I used, at least to myself in notes, the words 'architecture.' I mean, I had used 'room' before, but I wanted to be part of the architecture of the room. To me, that was the -- if *Seedbed* [MoMA #191.2007] was important. That was the important part of it to me.

JW: *Seedbed* is -- you know, it's been talked about a lot, maybe I know you think too much. One of the things though is that the -- people are very interested in it, but there isn't much of a record of it. There is a- the museum has a ten-minute Super 8 silent --

VA: Silent, which doesn't make sense.

JW: Yeah, which of course the piece is so much about the sound, your interaction and -- You're speaking out to the viewer.

VA: And I never made a sound recording. I never made an audio. I mean, I know that was done purposefully, because I thought, It's a performance. If you missed it, you missed it. You know? It's, like, you can't go back to a Vietnam War battle or a Second World War battle, you know

JW: [interrupts] Unless you make a movie out of it.

VA: Yes. Yeah, yeah. I mean, in a lot of ways, I regret that. I wish I did have a sound recording. It's not that I don't remember things I said, but I remember them generally, you know?

JW: Yeah. Well, many people have commented about this actual sound of your voice, calling it --

VA: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

JW: Comparing it to movie stars. Was it Humphrey Bogart or -- Do you remember --

VA: I don't know. [Laughter] I don't know. I have the kind of voice that maybe lulls you through a dark disturbed light --

JW: Well, it's been called sexy and -- People would think of you as a Gauloise chain smoker.

VA: I was.

JW: But it was part -- It was a voice that people heard in your art.

VA: Well, you know, from -- Well, some of the performances, but then all the installations from '72 to '79 used voice.

JW: Yes. But [Seedbed](#) in fact was an architectural intervention in a gallery space.

VA: But the reason it was, was that I -- One of the things that led to *Seedbed* was that, though I thought it was important for me to be part of the pieces I was doing, because they were activities and they were starting to be activities that made me have or helped me to have some relation with audience, with viewers, with people -- I almost wanted to try to subvert the word. It's so easy to talk about visitors to an art gallery as viewers. Why can't they hear something, too? You know? Or why can't they be in interaction with another person? And I think [Seedbed](#) was a sign that something was maybe starting to go wrong with

performances, because I felt that with pieces of mine previous to that, that everybody who knew a piece of mine knew what I looked like, and say, "Well of course," because I'm performing it.

But I started to -- I have a tendency to think badly of a lot of stuff I do. And I started to think, if everybody knows what I look like, am I doing art? Or am I developing a personality cult? You know? And I hated that notion of a kind of personality cult. I hate the idea of, this is this person that becomes embodied, you know, everybody who sees a piece of mine, everybody who sees a photograph. So I thought, I still want to do stuff interacting with people. But is there a way I can't be seen?

I do things somewhat logically. You know? I thought, well, if I want that, I could be behind the wall. I could be above a ceiling. I could be under the floor.

Behind the wall seemed wrong. Well first of all, I didn't know if there was a -- We would have to build a wall. But I thought I would be next to only people on this side of the room. Above a ceiling seemed wrong, because, well first of all, SoHo galleries had relatively low ceilings, nine and a half feet at most. So if I had a place for me there, people would probably have to bend or come close to that.

Under the floor seemed right, since it seemed like, if I'm under the floor, I can move under the floor. So I can move under these people, under those people, those people, etc. So, you know, my pieces tended to start with -- just like in writing, it tended to start with words as fact. Pieces of mine always tend to start with the particularities of a space, a structure. So I knew I was going to make this ramp. At first, I had no idea what I was going to do there.

JW: But you left then the particularity that -- for which was the springboard, the *dé* née or the jump point --

VA: Yeah. Yeah. I need something physical.

JW: And then you -- Right. But then you engage that. You work through that. And --

VA: But kind of interestingly, the way I got to what I was doing, the way I got to [Seedbed](#) was, very often -- I don't know if this happens -- It still happens. When I'm really stuck on something, I go to *Roget's Thesaurus*, and very specifically *Roget's Thesaurus*, not a dictionary, which is very different. A dictionary is part of the industrial world. You know? It's definitions of words. *Roget's Thesaurus* is probably the beginnings of computer thinking. You go to the back of the book. You have something in mind. You look up that word. That takes you to a number of entries. And the entries are numbered. So it could take you to something in the middle of the book. But now as you go through -- And it's analogs of words rather than definitions. Some of those analogs have a number. So now you might be in the middle of the book. Now you go to the beginning. Now you come upon a number. It takes you to the end of the book. It's a little bit like the way I describe the Michel Butor travel book. You're traveling. You're traveling. But traveling doesn't necessarily mean from here to there. You know? You travel there, but now you go back to something else.

Well, I looked up the word for 'floor'. And the word for 'floor' took me to words like 'foundation,' 'undercurrent,' 'understructure,' and then took me to the word 'seedbed'. And I thought, well, now I know what I have to do. You know?

[CREW DISCUSSION]

VA: Yeah, the piece was eight hours a day, not because I wanted to do some endurance test for myself, but because I didn't want anybody to come in the gallery those days in which I wasn't part of the floor or part of the under-floor, you know I didn't want it to be a performance, you know? Now I'm here. Now you see me. Now I go under. Now I come out. So it began before 10:00 and ended after 6:00.

JW: So a practical person would wonder, "Boy, you must be tired after that." And I hope there's somebody there to give you something to drink and you can have a smoke.

VA: I don't know if I -- I certainly had a smoke.

JW: Well, you say that you did move away from art. And the '70s to the '80s were the time in which you did that. But that's a long time. You did a lot of work in the '70s.

VA: Yes. Yeah, yeah.

JW: And you're making objects. And I wonder if you -- this might be a time to see what you were -- you know, to see about that transition. And again, I want to think about space, architecture, and the way in which people are part of your thinking, even though they may not be, you're trying to please them. You're trying to build a house so that they can have the right kitchen that they want. Not thinking along those lines. But again, you want people to be active in your work and not passive.

VA: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

JW: So where did this take you? Where was the next -- after, let's say, the performance art?

VA: Well, the installations in the '70s were -- I mean, [Seedbed](#) was almost an installation, but it was performed in. So installations really didn't -- But they started around the same time, 1972. By '72, '73, there were a few performances, but most of the stuff was what people were calling installations. I mean, there are a lot of vague terms in art. 'Installation' might be one of the vaguest, because there isn't anything that isn't installed. A painting is installed. A rug is installed. A table is installed. So I think those of us who were doing -- And those terms, I think, didn't come from any of the people doing it, but from maybe some curators, maybe some critics. I don't really know specifically.

But once that word was applied, I think some of us -- those of us who were doing so-called installations had to start to think, what's important to us? What exactly are we doing in these installations? And to me, the most important things were -- The most important thing was, at that time, that I didn't want to have an idea for a

piece until I knew I was doing a show somewhere. Once I knew I was doing a show someplace, I wanted to -- In some way, it's not as grandiose as it sounds. But guerilla fighters were very important to me at that time. So the idea of a guerilla fighter who wants to set up a bomb somewhere -- So the guerilla fighter examines the space, examines the terrain, and then decides where you can do something in this terrain. That's kind of how I was trying to treat a space where I was going to do a show. You know? Does this space have some overhang in the middle? Does this space have windows or no windows? So the attempt was to orient a piece towards the space, not have an idea until there was the space.

JW: Well, the way you described your Russian museum --

VA: Yeah, no, it's true --

JW: -- site oriented architecture is --

VA: -- it's still somewhat like that. So because of that, though, most of the installations really couldn't be done again, because they made sense at this space. Maybe they didn't make sense in another space. So there was something about something not lasting that seemed very important to me. And I admit, this was a time, I think, you know, people were- people in my generation were thinking more of art sales. It's not that I particularly wanted to be poor, but I hated the idea of an art space making money. It seemed wrong somehow.

JW: So you wanted to be invisible in your work, [Laughing], and then you also don't want to have any art space, make any money.

VA: Yeah. Except I want to go on doing work.

JW: Right. Well, this, though, does follow what those earlier *Street Works* were about, which was making work that would be evanescent and that would, in effect, be hard to know were there.

VA: Yeah. I mean, there are installations now that there are ways to, you know, redo them. And I have let them be, so. Because at the same time, I thought, I wish people had a chance to see this stuff. So, I don't know. Maybe everything I did depends on a strange double bind.

JW: Is there an installation that you feel strongly about in that period?

VA: Yeah. And actually this was one that would have probably a hard time being somewhere else. Maybe two, but let's just maybe have one, because this, I think, tried -- This, I think, made me realize what I was doing, or the embodiment. You know? I thought I knew what I was doing, but this was an embodiment that maybe kind of certified it.

A 1976 piece at Sonnabend when Sonnabend -- well, most galleries were in SoHo -- a piece called *Where We are Now (Who Are We Anyway)* basically a long table, maybe sixty or so feet long. The table has legs, stools on either side of the table. The table is propped up on the windowsill of the gallery and then goes out the window. So what began as a table becomes a diving board, a hanging speaker -- sorry, I keep reaching up -- a hanging speaker on top of the table, constant clock ticking. And my voice comes in, says things like, "Now that we're all here together," and, "What do you think, Bob, now that we've gone as far as we can go," and, "What do you think, Barbara, now that we're satisfied," etc. Every now and then -- I left out one part. There's a kind of black wall next to the table going out the window. The black wall is the outside of a second space at Sonnabend. So this became a kind of black cube. But every once and awhile, crowd noise come out of the black room, almost as if he has a crowd trying to make their way onto the table.

At that time, it started me -- It was important to me, because I started to think that, I don't know if I should -- I think I'm in the wrong field. I started to think that, you know, I want places where people can talk to each other, where people can use the space they're in and maybe -- I don't know -- start an argument, start something. So it was then, even though certainly design and architecture didn't

start 'til kind of way after that, but starting in '76, I thought, I'm in the wrong field. I have to start to learn design for myself. I think stuff has to be in a public space.

And that's what kind of started to happen, the beginning of the '80s. And these were pieces that, you know, weren't as site-specific as the pieces in the '70s. I don't think they were site-specific, because I thought, well, site-specific stuff is hard to sell. I think what I wanted -- What I started doing through the '80s were things that people could do something in, for example, a piece called [*Instant House*](#), [\[MoMA # 7.1999\]](#) four panels, American flag covered on the floor, five by eight, like wall size, or wall height, a swing in the middle. These four, that I say, the four flags are American flag covered. If a person sits on the swing, the swing goes down and these panels rise up around the user. And the other side of the American flag is a Soviet flag. And it was done -- You know, I mean, this part I think has disappeared. But it was done at the time that Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, long before the United States did.

So that was the beginning of pieces for the next two or three years where people, in order for the piece to be -- I mean, people could ignore it, obviously. And there were people, I remember telling me, "I didn't understand that piece you did with the" --

JW: And where was that piece first shown. Do you remember? I have that here somewhere.

VA: At the Kitchen, actually, yeah. And then I --

JW: [Laughing] So shown at a performance space, basically.

VA: Yes, yes. The Kitchen was trying -- Yeah. But now it was like somebody else's performance. It was as if I said, "Oh, I've performed too long. Somebody else" --

JW: Do you remember the critical reaction to it?

VA: I don't know if there were any reviews. I'm not sure. I'm really not sure. And I don't even know how many people saw it. Coincidentally, at the Venice Biennale that summer -- The Kitchen show was in January of '80. The piece was in the Venice Biennale, not connected with a particular country. I can't remember what that overall show was called. But interestingly in this case -- and this wasn't anything I had to do with -- but there was a corridor that took you from one room to another room to another room. And at the end of the corridor was a room where [Instant House](#) was. So here, it was very often used. It was probably continuously used because as somebody's walking, they saw it being used. So they knew what to do. So people need some kind of instruction -- you know? -- especially in an art gallery where the rules are, "Don't touch," you know? Maybe it's not as much now as it used to be.

JW: Of course then you have people using something like that, you have to make sure it doesn't break.

VA: They broke all the time. We did them cheaply. They broke all the time. Some of them could be easily fixed. Yeah.

JW: You made -- There were a number of these?

VA: Well, no. No. I mean, there's only one *Instant House*. But there's something called *Collision House*. There's something called *Community House*, *Exploding House*. It got --

JW: [Laughing] I was asking a leading question so that you would say that.

VA: The first one was, you know, one person. But then I thought, this is -- I started to wonder, why should I -- you know? I can do something in front of people. Why am I forcing somebody else to do something in front of people?

JW: But, you know, they were all houses. You had a whole bunch of houses.

VA: Yes.

JW: Gee. Sounds like architecture to me.

VA: Well, again, you know, at *Where We Are Now*, in the mid-'70s, I was starting to think I need- I think this stuff has to be -- You know, I don't know if I could say at that time, architecture. I certainly said something like architecture. But yes, they were all houses. And then gradually, by around '83, '84, they remained house-like. But, I mean -- yes, I loved the fact actually that people could do something that changed this. But it always went back to its original -- Well, some of them went back to its original position. But they could always be re-moved, not removed in the sense of taken away. Of course they could.

JW: Did you think there was a playground or fun aspect to any of this?

VA: Yeah. Yeah. I started to think that, if I really want to do something public, I'm never going to do something like *Seedbed* public. But maybe I could do something like -- But I hoped it could be something like a playground, because this would invite people to do something. I hope it could possibly go beyond playground. And I think people who think badly of those pieces say, you know, "He was doing serious stuff. Now he's just doing play stuff."

I always thought stuff of mine was funnier than other people did. I thought it was kind of funny that -- you know, being under a floor and masturbating for eight hours. [Laughing] But I didn't think that was the only thing. But funny is really important to me. It's important to me because I think when a person laughs, a person is having a second thought. If you're so channeled to something -- I came across this somewhere and I don't know the source. But it was somebody's explanation of the difference between tragedy and comedy.

In tragedy, there's a protagonist. There's a goal. And the protagonist goes on a kind of single-minded channeled direction towards this goal. So all the while, if there's an audience, the audience is also channeled toward that goal and concentrated on the protagonist, probably being beaten by that goal. In comedy, according to this person whose name --

JW: It sounds very Aristotelian to me. It's very Aristotle .

VA: Do you really think? Yeah. I'm not sure. Now comedy, according to this person, there's the same protagonist, same goal, but halfway along the pathway, the protagonist slips on a banana peel. All of a sudden, people laugh. All of a sudden, that goal isn't as important anymore. And that seemed so important to me, the recon--

JW: So like your father, you like to make people laugh?

VA: Yes, the reconsideration of the goal seems important, because then you're thinking for yourself. Then you don't have to be taken. And that, I think, remained pretty important to me.

[CREW DISCUSSION]

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[CREW DISCUSSION]

JW: So in a way, there's another way to look at what you've been telling me, which is, it's a funny emotional New York school poet word, but there's the lonely artist, is a solitary artist moving to a much more public artist --

VA: Yes, yeah.

JW: -- even though art is public, and performances are in public spaces, even if they're ephemeral. But you're interested in the freeing effect your work can have on people as opposed to a determinant effect, and that's what --

VA: Yeah. I keep on using the same words.

JW: Yeah, but it's a -- but it --

VA: I want people to decide for themselves.

JW: Decide for themselves. And you really do want to engage people in this way, partly by their participation.

VA: Yeah.

JW: There's another type of work that you were doing, too, some of which is behind us, which you were making -- They're lithographs, and architectural as well. And the one that --

VA: It was almost accidental. But go ahead, yeah, yeah.

JW: Yeah. It may be accidental. I'd like to hear about how that worked. But the twenty foot ladder series [[MoMA no.5.1996](#)] is a very interesting concept --

VA: I like that a lot.

JW: -- which -- Well, I do, too.

VA: Of course, it doesn't work if there's a twenty-foot-high wall. It worked best when it goes --

JW: When it goes somewhere.

VA: -- and it turns and goes in the ceiling.

JW: But it's divided into --

VA: I don't remember how many. But each plate, each --

JW: I think there are eight, yeah.

VA: -- not each plate. It's only one plate. Each piece of paper is the rung of the ladder. I can't remember now. And above and below, I think. So it's --

JW: Right. I think there were eight of them if I'm not mistaken. But that's -- I have it written --

VA: There might have been even more.

JW: There may have been more.

VA: I mean, because to go twenty feet, I just don't remember.

JW: Yeah. But they were -- Apparently, according to what I read, it took you two years to have these made. You were very, very -- working with --

VA: It was Crown Point Press. But --

JW: -- Crown Point Press --

VA: -- was it really two years?

JW: That's what it said in the record. I read the record --

VA: I don't remember it at all --

JW: -- of them being made. And you were very, very interested in getting exactly the image you wanted, but also interested in the indeterminacy of it, in the fact that-- how do you install this?

VA: Yeah. Well, I hoped people would -- Again, they could put some of the panel -- If -- You know, say they have a twelve-foot wall. They can do a number of things, three or four panels on the floor, main part of it on a wall, go onto the ceiling, or start at the bottom. I hoped they could do it the way -- They could put a ladder anywhere. Maybe they could do this.

JW: Well, for you -- it was also --

JW: I don't remember the two years, though, because it was pretty simple in some ways.

JW: Okay, well maybe --

VA: I mean, as long as -- it was based on photographs -- it was a photograph of a rung --

JW: I got that from the person who -- at Crown Point who --

VA: Oh, so she probably knows.

JW: -- wrote it -- did an interview and wrote about it. But your feeling is that it --

VA: I mean, it could have -- well, I honestly don't remember. It could have been Crown Point was working on some other stuff, or it could have been, I started this and then started to do --

JW: Something else.

VA: -- other projects, didn't know how to get back to it. It could have been that.

JW: But what's unusual, too, is that in all of the work that you had done up 'til that point, these were objects now. These were actually framed objects that --

VA: Yeah. Yeah. True.

JW: -- for you is --

VA: Yeah, not so usual for me. They began, though, doing print -- Well, they began, maybe a year or two before that, more of a lithography press. In Chicago,

Landfall asked me to do -- And again, it was a set of things, different -- I think the ladder was better. They never finished it. So I'm not sure why. I think they decided, "This is so un-saleable," [Laughing] but...

JW: Well, you had done, early, a body lithography piece -- is that right? -- where you --

VA: At Nova Scotia College of Art and Design --

JW: Yes, right -- where you made the image with your body.

VA: Yeah. What I was going to say, until I started thinking of Landfall Press and Crown Point Press is that most of the prints I did were done when doing a talk at a school, doing a short teaching thing at a school, and that school had some press. So if it wasn't for those talks, I'm not sure if -- Again, the Crown Point and Landfall obviously weren't from schools.

JW: About the masks³ in back of you, what started you on those? Do you recall?

VA: That was a little bit later, I think, but not that much later, early '80s, maybe around '83. I'm not sure. I don't know.

JW: I'll find out.

VA: I don't know what the date is.

JW: If you'll give me a second, I will find it.

VA: It was done at the same time as a much larger print called -- It was kind of like a doorway. It was --

JW: Excuse me. It was 1983. Right.

³ Red Mask, MoMA # 236.1991; People Mask, MoMA# 237.1991; End Mask, MoMA# 238.1191

VA: It was done at the University of South Florida. And they had connected to them a press called Graphic Studio. And I wanted to do this kind of wall-sized print, and did, but that did take a long time. I think it was called [Stones For A Wall \[MoMA# 76.1996. 1-10\]](#) in which each plate was an approximation of what could have been a large brick or a piece of concrete. But then they all had different textures, words. But it became a very involved print. And I think the way the -- What are the masks called?

JW: *The Red Mask* [OVERLAPPING DIALOGUE; INAUDIBLE: 00:07:06] --

VA: *Red* -- Yeah, *People Mask* -- [[Red Mask, MoMA# 236.1996](#); [People Mask, MoMA# 237.1996](#)]

JW: Yes, they're different -- [People Mask](#), [Red Mask](#), and the [End Mask](#).

VA: Yeah, yeah. I think because we started to realize that this is going to take a long time to really do, can we do something else in the meantime? And I thought, okay, if I'm thinking in terms of wall, the space in front of a person, around a person, why don't I go in the other direction and think of person? What's a small part of a person? A face. So let's do masks. Let's do two or three masks. Again, I think that's what this person in studio said a few years ago when he was saying that I always thought something like a computer, you know? [Laughter]

JW: However, the content, at least on one of them, is pretty shocking.

VA: Yes, yeah.

JW: There's a Holocaust image.

VA: Yeah, the *People Mask* --

JW: The *People Mask*.

VA: The *People Mask* is a Holocaust scene.

JW: Yeah. Did you choose that for -- what reason?

VA: To make something that I hoped that at first you would just think it was people.
Then if you look closely --

JW: Closely --

VA: -- it was very --

JW: If you look behind the mask, you'd see what it was?

VA: -- specific. Yeah.

[CREW DISCUSSION]

END AUDIO FILE: ACCONCI__T03

BEGIN AUDIO FILE: ACCONCI_T05

**Location: The Museum of Modern Art
Fourth Floor Painting and Sculpture Gallery 24**

[CREW DISCUSSION]

JW: I wanted to ask you. It's come up already in our discussion about the [Adjustable Wall Bra](#) [MoMA# 91.1991]. It was first shown, you said, in California?

VA: Yeah, I don't remember the name of the gallery, but very soon after it at Gladstone's.

JW: At Barbara Gladstone. And this is --

VA: Yeah, yeah. And they were numbered, I mean, they're called adjustable for a reason. Anyone can be put into maybe any one of seven, eight, nine positions.

JW: So there are certain --

VA: In relation to a wall.

JW: In relation. So it's a bra, but more than that. It's a shape. It's a padded shape. And you can sit in them. Is that correct?

VA: Yeah, yeah. It started for me because I realized we very rarely did things that were frontal. It seemed like, especially starting in the '80s, the kind of space I was really interested in was -- And by this time, it wasn't 'I' anymore since the studio started in 1988. So from then on, it's very difficult, I think, for me to talk about 'I' because everything we do, except for maybe writings I do -- But the writings have to do with architecture and probably come from the way I think with the studio, so. Even the writings maybe could be called Acconci Studio. I went off as usual.

JW: That's all right. But even though this was a work done with studio input, it still has a lot of the same qualities that you were interested in before, audience interaction, voice. A breathing sound is being miked. Is that right? Is that how it works?

VA: No, it's recorded.

JW: It's recorded?

VA: It's recorded. I'm not sure if I remember now what the sounds are for this. I mean, there were breathing sounds, but I think there was another -- Oh no. There was breathing sounds, but the -- I mean, I wanted these things to be -- to function as light, as furniture. So there was a light from inside the bra, the light spilling outside. I wanted them to function as audio speakers. And I don't know if

-- I'm not sure of MoMA has done it this way. But the way it was supposed to be is that you could play anything you want. The bra cups acted as speakers.

JW: As speakers- I see.

VA: I know for awhile they were whatever -- Whatever CD Barbara Gladstone had in it, they continued to play. But that's not the way it's supposed to be.

JW: They were probably eight-tracks then, but I don't know when CDs started.

VA: No, it was a CD in '80. This was '90.

JW: Ninety, yes, right.

VA: By '90. But, you know, we wanted them to be -- Once I realized that what I really wanted to do was architecture, and that I -- I almost wanted to turn against art, I thought. But to do architecture, we should be able to do clothing. We should be able to do furniture. We should be able to do interiors. We should be able to do buildings, and probably go on from buildings to landscape to vehicles. But it was a very kind of concerted effort to try to be in the world of design and architecture. Why? Because that was the ordinary, everyday world.

JW: Did you --

VA: Unfortunately, when a museum has it, it's not the ordinary, everyday world.

JW: But what about the humor? You said that you always thought your pieces were more humorous than other people did. Did you see this as a humorous piece?

VA: Yeah. I mean, I thought, you know, when you're a baby, the bra is this big. So I wanted to put it in a position where, when you're an adult, the bra is still that big.

JW: There's a *Gulliver's Travels* type of-

VA: Kind of. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[CREW DISCUSSION]

VA: I admit, in retrospect, they were a little too cutesy for me --

[CREW DISCUSSION]

JW: You were saying about the bra.

VA: I think I was starting to say that, they're far from my favorite pieces.

JW: Yeah. Okay, but [OVERLAPPING DIALOGUE; INAUDIBLE: 00:08:07] --

VA: They were a little too cutesy for me and a little too --

JW: But you do note, they got more than the usual amount of attention
[OVERLAPPING DIALOGUE; INAUDIBLE: 00:08:13] --

VA: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

JW: Did that bother you, or...?

VA: I guess I wish some other stuff had gotten as much. They're really hard to show in a museum because the inside is made out of fabric, so that the museum won't let people sit in them. So I think it's stuff -- it's things like that that made me more and more convinced that my stuff now doesn't belong in museums.

JW: So this was a piece, in a way, that gave -- that had its own transition built in [to it]

VA: Probably. Probably it did. I mean, at the same time that there were these adjustable wall bras, there was another set of piece -- I guess they're pieces. But I thought of them more as furniture. I remember Barbara Gladstone always saying, don't call them furniture; call them sculpture. But of course I didn't want to do that. So we always had a fight going on. But there was another set of

furniture called convertible clam shelters, so same kind of thing with [a] clam, but in different positions.

JW: In different positions you could adjust?

VA: You know? It's out like this, so it's a sofa. It's like this, so you can come in as if you're between two walls. The urge was, one thing into a number -- I have a feeling that whoever owns these pieces don't really change the position much.

JW: The positions vary much?

VA: But I can't control that, or we can't control that. [00:10:01]

JW: Your old acquaintance, Scott Burton, was dealing with the furniture versus sculpture --

VA: Sure.

JW: -- issue at the same time.

VA: Yeah. And even, maybe even before. I mean, definitely even before. I think he was really -- I mean, I was starting to do stuff like that in the '80s. Whereas, what, Scott died around '89?

JW: Yes, I think so.

VA: Yeah, yeah.

JW: I want to ask you --

VA: I mean, I thought about Scott's stuff a lot because I thought we were -- We didn't -- By that time, I don't know if we really had much of a connection with each other. But it should have been a time when we did.

JW: Yes. But you both came out of writing and performing and moved in many ways to object making that's usually considered design and public work as well.

VA: I mean it was purposeful on my part. I think it was on his, too.

JW: I want to ask you more, change the subject a bit, go to what you're doing now, and a little bit more about -- You'd given me an example -- You'd given us an example earlier about, when you have an idea, you talk it out to your staff. Can you be a little more specific about the sort of time table about your projects, something you're thinking about now, an example of what you're working on now?

VA: Yeah. The time table changes; there could be projects that we're having incredible problems with. But at the same time, we don't necessarily -- we very rarely just work on one project at the same time. I think the best way, just to talk about the kind of stuff, maybe not just now, but in the last number of years, I become more and more convinced that architecture and design begins close to the body. So it begins with clothing. So, you know, we've made some attempts of clothing, not so successful yet. And then it's a matter of going further and further away from the body, so start with clothing, then things that you use with your hands, utensils, tools, appliances, then further out to furniture. Furniture, in a way, is the first kind of -- You know, an armchair is something like the first kind of housing. You know? It has something like walls. So then from furniture to the interiors of buildings, to buildings, then maybe to plazas to the outlands of a city. Once you're in the outlands of a city, you have to get there somewhere, so the notion of vehicles. So we haven't successfully made a vehicle, but I think it's kind of important.

I think the architecture of the future is going to be moveable. I won't be alive. But I think the future will be, no national boundaries, so that maybe you'll carry your home with you like the turtle. If we were going to redesign the turtle, we would probably try to make it more malleable and not have such a hard shell. But nobody's going to ask us to redo the turtle. But I think the notion of mobility is probably what the future is.

JW: Architects now are thinking in many different ways as well, people who started as more traditional architects, as opposed to people who started as writers and artists. Are there people in the architecture world you're kind of interested in looking at?

VA: Sure. Yeah. Yeah. I admit, I tend to pay more attention to people younger than I am, because I think I kind of know what my generation thinks. Though certainly in the recent past I've been involved with -- I've been interested in Rem Koolhaas, not so much lately. But until lately, it seemed like he was thinking of a building as a kind of city, as a kind of miniature city, or, you know, an easy transition from city to the interior of a building of his.

Maybe I'm more interested now in, again, younger people, François Roche, Greg Lynn. Greg Lynn especially though, I don't know. I'm not sure exactly. I don't know if I know, if we know what he's doing --

JW: He's based in Los Angeles, is that right?

VA: -- what he's doing now -- Yeah, yeah. Yeah. But what interests me is that he's interested in things like a kind of new notion of prefab housing, of thinking in modular parts. But in a digital world, modular parts don't necessarily have to be all the same.

JW: The same.

VA: Yeah.

JW: As I remember, he's also interested in input from -- at the outside. He's asked people to help him design certain things.

VA: Really? I don't think I knew that.

JW: And is in social networking as well.

VA: Huh. So asking, like, other designers, or...

JW: Designers and general people, if my memory serves.

VA: I love that idea. Have we done it? No. But I think -- I mean, the studio's changed a lot recently, changed --

JW: How has it changed?

VA: Well, changed in the sense that the people have changed. I felt like we were -- And it's not that I don't want us to work digitally. I think it's ultimately important. But I started to feel some of the people in the studio were so interested in digital for just digital's sake, that we weren't really getting anywhere. We weren't being- because, you know, yes, I love the idea of the digital; but I love the idea that digital -- that thinking digitally is a way to possibly think, not so much in surfaces, but in terms of points, dots, lines. You can break up a surface into particles, into pixels and bits. Can you ever build something like that? I'm sure eventually we can. I don't think we can now, though. You know? So I sometimes think that -- And it's not that I don't like theory. In fact, if I want to think what architects led me to architecture, the answers would be two eighteenth-century architects, Boullée and Piranesi, and 1960s Archigram, not one built project, but a lot of notions of projects. In some, maybe horrible way, it's easier to be influenced by un-built architecture because you can see it faster. You see it on a page. You see the whole model at once. The great thing about architecture is that you never see it at once. Architecture is a matter of instance that you gain by going through time. The beginning of Alain Resnais and Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Last Year at Marienbad* for me is maybe the best representation of architecture I've ever seen, this camera going down a corridor as a voice. I mean, I saw that movie probably in 1961.

JW: I was going to say [OVERLAPPING DIALOGUE; INAUDIBLE: 00:18:09] --

VA: I was twenty-one years old.

JW: -- this is why architecture has been part of your work ever since you began working.

VA: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, that was important. But besides the camera going down the corridor is the narrator's voice. You know? So it seemed like everything I've done through the years I've gotten from a movie I saw when I was twenty. [Laughter] You know? That doesn't mean there aren't other movies -- Movies are important to me. Music is even more important, though. Music is important, music, especially now. But I've always thought the best clue to the time you're in is music. And I know, like, you know, when I was doing stuff involved with my own person, and then other people's persons, it was the late '60s, early '70s. The music I was listening to was Van Morrison, Neil Young, Single Voice, Long Song, I think was -- you know? I started doing stuff with my own person because that's what the time was doing. At that time, everybody was talking about finding oneself. So I thought, what else can I do? Maybe I don't want to do this. But if the time is doing it, I'd better try.

I admit I've always wanted stuff to change, and to change. And I thought, if I'm aware enough of the time I'm in, as that time has changed, maybe my stuff can change, too.

JW: Do you listen to music now when you're working?

VA: Yes.

JW: What do you listen to?

VA: A kind of pop electronics, digitally-derived music, Vladislav Delay, Alva Noto. I probably try to force it on the rest of the studio. [Laughing]

JW: I was going to say, are you making the whole staff listen to it?

VA: Well, I mean, they can play what they want. [Laughter] But if they play too much of it -- I want to bring this back, because this is a movie -- this is a -- not a movie,

but this is a music that is so involved with braiding and weaving and interweaving. And I'm kind of convinced if we can really understand that music, we can do a better architecture. Because this- I'm not even sure if it's the music of now, but things change fast. The strange thing about the music of now -- You know, at least music in the late '60s had something to do with -- at least the semi-popular music-- Now it's a total break. This is probably the worst pop music time there's ever been. [Laughs]

JW: You talk about your work now and architecture now as not so much, "I'm going to build buildings practical" -- we know that -- but as the work that you may be doing, that's real, that would be changing people, that would inspire people. Do you have a- I know 'inspiration' is a corny, nineteenth-century word. Is that something in your head [OVERLAPPING DIALOGUE00:21:13] --

VA: Huh? Of inspiring people?

JW: Yes.

VA: I don't want to -- I mean, it's hard for me since I went to Catholic school for such a long time, to use words like 'inspire people.' I would love to have the kinds of spaces that people -- I'm not sure if I mentioned this before, but I would love people who were in spaces of ours to think, "Wow," you know, "I didn't know spaces could be like this." But it's not that we're the only people who do this kind of stuff. You know? But here we are now, or these are the people using our spaces. Here we're in a space that seems to be turned inside-out, turned upside-down. Maybe I can turn my own space inside-out. I would love stuff -- I don't know. Maybe this sounds like religion, too. But I think it's a more person-directed religion. I would love stuff of ours -- And I think the stuff we're drawn to, I think that stuff can possibly empower people, that you don't have to feel like, "Well, this is the way this room is. I have to fit in."

Ideally, we'd love to make the architecture something -- an architecture that's something like this. You go into a room. The room is possibly all empty. You feel a little tired. You lean against the wall. Now the wall starts to recede and

become some kind of almost cocoon-like seat. But now you're not tired anymore, so you get up. Now it goes back to its original position. Somebody comes in with another desire. I don't know if the architecture around us could ever read our desires, but it possibly can.

JW: I'm thinking of another old movie when you say that, which is Roman Polanski's *Repulsion*, where --

VA: Yes, where --

JW: -- poor Catherine Deneuve has walls that are coming out at her.

VA: Going down that corridor for her. That was a very important thing to me. But it was too one-sided to me. I don't know. I mean, I love *Last Year at Marienbad*. And this was a little earlier, I think -- no? -- *Repulsion* --

JW: Yes, that was --

VA: -- late '50s. I'm not sure.

JW: Early '60s, very- and it [OVERLAPPING DIALOGUE].

VA: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah. But, you know, I mean, movies have meant a lot to me. I don't know if they've been a particular influence on work. But like John Ford's *The Searchers* is another entry for possibly the best movie ever made, because it's so much about opening doors, you know? The film begins after the credits. It goes to black. Then in the middle of black, suddenly there's an opening. So this person is now -- Now you're in the inside of a room, looking out through to John Wayne coming to the room. And it ends almost the same way. John Wayne brings back his niece who he at first wanted to kill, because she's no longer white. She's lived with an Indian brave. And there's this beautiful scene where -- Jean-Luc Godard has this statement where, "I hate John Wayne," you know? It was done in the late '60s. "I hate John Wayne and his support of

the Vietnam War. I hate his Americanism. I hate his adulation of the Green Berets.”

But then I see *The Searchers* and I see the scene where John Wayne finally finds Natalie Wood, the young Natalie Wood who plays his niece. [00:24:56] And she’s terrified because she knows that my uncle wants to kill me. So she runs and falls. His horse rears. He gets down off the horse, picks her up and says, “Let’s go home, Debbie.” And then I cry and I love John Wayne. I cry every time, too. I can’t help it, just like I cry at the end of *Last Year at Marienbad* when there’s this beautiful scene where the woman that this guy has been trying to persuade this entire movie is now going off with him. And the last shot of the movie is this kind of baroque hotel, now seen from the outside in the dark. And the narrator’s voices say -- talks about the baroque hotel and says it was so orderly it seemed that no one could possibly get lost here. But this was the place where you were getting lost alone together with me. And that’s the end of the movie. I don’t think it’s possible to be alone and also together with me. It’s startling, you know? It’s like this person -- these two have become one. You know? Or these two have become him. She didn’t want to go. You know?

When we’ve put out ads for new designers, we very purposefully say, “We want people to be as interested in sciences, music, movies as architecture.” The great thing about architecture is that it deals with the world in which all those other things exist. You know? I don’t know. Art seems very separate. I hate the word ‘art.’

JW: Yes, you said that before.

VA: Did I say it, in other interviews? Well, the problem with the word -- Actually John Perreault taught me this. He said that, you know, art, very different from any other fields. The name ‘art’ is used to sometimes approve of something, you know? If in everyday life something strikes you, you said, “Wow, that’s just like a work of art.” So it’s almost like art has built into it already some kind of acceptance. And it’s not fair. [Laughter] It’s not fair for a discipline, for one kind of activity to be praising itself. Whereas if you say something is biological, you’re

not praising it. If you say something is architecture, you're just defining it. Art has a problem.

JW: And yet museums which of course exist in many ways to keep the problem of art alive --

VA: Well, that's true.

JW: -- are places where you have to -- where you are a part, and your work is hanging [OVERLAPPING DIALOGUE].

VA: Yeah. But at the same time, there's certain work, including maybe some of mine, that's been accepted by museums, whereas a lot of other art hasn't. So I don't know.

JW: Is there something that -- a topic that we haven't gone over that you'd like to say anything about, or -- as we're coming toward the end? I'll just -- I'll mention one other thing.

VA: Yeah, please.

JW: 'Architecture' of course is a word that people sometimes feel the same way you do about 'art,' as you'd say that architecture can be controlling, confining --

VA: No, no definitely. And I think I mentioned that. Yeah. When you design a space, you're already designing people's behavior in the space. So architecture is a totalitarian activity. And that's why I think I want so much -- And again, we're not the young people. Probably any architects that we're interested in want, too, to find some way where people can do something, but not just -- you know? It's easy to make spaces that have hinging parts, you know? You have it up, it's part of the wall. You have it down, it's a seat. But that's like supermarket freedom, you know? You can buy anything you want as long as the supermarket carries it. You can go this way, that way. But what if you want to go another way? And

that's probably harder. But, you know, maybe it has to be a mix of physical space and virtual space. But I'm not sure if that's enough.

JW: But all of your work that I think you talked about, or most of it anyway, there's another thread that has been one you've been following since -- comes from your writing, beginnings as a writer, which is narrative. [00:29:57] And there's your interest in mapping in a different way, and moving in different ways. Also, you're an obvious storyteller. You get great pleasure out of spatial stories. There's humanity in stories that you're aware of because you use that storytelling in your work.

VA: Yeah. I hope when we use narrative we break it sometime. I don't know. Yes, of course I'm drawn to narrative. But I'm also drawn to narrative that maybe doesn't [follow?] narrative can go in so many different lines.

JW: [INAUDIBLE: 00:30:34]

VA: It includes -- Yeah.

JW: I see your eyes light up when you tell stories. And there's part of that in your work that has to do with storytelling, starting and stopping, and this is true of that sort of earlier work. And I'm wondering if you have a feeling of your present design as having to do with stories at all or with narratives that are being made by other people as opposed to [OVERLAPPING DIALOGUE] --

VA: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

JW: -- instead of the architect. Is that part of this? Or is it just natural to you? If 'natural' is a word you can bear?

VA: [Laughing] I know 'natural,' maybe I have to replace 'natural' with 'conventional.' I'm not sure.

JW: If not [OVERLAPPING DIALOGUE] --

VA: I like premises and equations. Do I like narrative...? I don't like the lulling quality that narrative can have. But I do like- I like mazes and labyrinths, especially mazes, I think, because labyrinths always have a center. But mazes don't, which is maybe another reason why I like *Last Year at Marienbad*. But I would like our- the places we do to lead people somewhere, but at the same time, constantly giving them choices. I think that's so important. But at the same time, it's an easier choice. You either go this way or that way. [laughs] You know? And I think choice has to be maybe more consequential than that. You know?

When I want to think badly of our work -- and this happens. This happens probably somewhat often. I say, "God, we've done all this trouble. But what have we done except given people a few places to sit down? Couldn't we have just bought a few folding chairs, saved a lot of money? They already fold, so they have the changeability we want." I'm not satisfied with what we're doing or -
- You know, there are a lot of architects I'm jealous of, but they're mostly architects that have un-built projects. Once a project is built -- I don't know. I would hate to say there are always concessions you have to make, because some of those concessions are not necessarily just about law, though it is true that, especially in the United States, people are constantly looking for reasons to sue somebody, so. So you have to have railings a certain height.

But all that stuff is fine. And also, you know, you don't have to admit a railing. You can have a railing and a person might not even know it's a railing. It's important to me -- Maybe those rules are important because you need to find ways to subvert them, but not subvert them in a way that you want a person to fall. No.

JW: But if you're most interested in architecture that isn't going to- personally in Piranesian architecture where the un-built project --

VA: But I'm not. Those are the architectures that have influenced me. You know? No, I don't want us to build something just to build something. But I do think it's important that something is built, because only when something is built can people go through the architecture and think for themselves, that if it's a drawing

-- You know, the drawing even if when we or anybody does a drawing, we're not thinking about this. But obviously we want to, in some way, we want the viewer to understand. But understand probably also means be convinced by. So we're persuading. [00:34:58] Whereas when a person is going through architecture himself or herself, that person is -- ideally it's the kind of architecture where maybe there are constant choices. There's always a way, "Well, I have to go this way, that way," or, "I have to go up or down."

I don't think architecture makes sense if people -- does that not -- I should do a little side thought. Do I trust people all that much? Not at all. At the same time, [Laughing] I still like the idea of people. I hate the idea of God. I love the idea of people. And that maybe if the people -- If the idea of people keeps theorizing and maybe colliding with itself -- I think collision and conflict is just as important as -- probably more important than agreeing. The times I like best in the studio is when we're starting to disagree a lot, because it seems like, only from that, can some new idea come.

Also, if you're going to collaborate that easily and agree that easily, then one person might as well have done it. The thing about people together is that it thickens the plot and therefore maybe makes more viable and more explore-able the kind of space you're going to do.

JW: Well, you want collaborative space in general.

VA: Yeah. Yeah. But I want people to not always know that, "Okay, now I should go this way," that maybe I have to think a little bit or try out spaces.

[CREW DISCUSSION]

END AUDIO FILE: ACCONCI_T05

END OF INTERVIEW