



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

**Oral history interview with Vito Acconci, 2008
June 21-28**

Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Vito Acconci on 2008 June 21 and 28. The interview was conducted at Acconci's studio (Studio Milo) in Brooklyn, NY by Judith O. Richards for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Acconci has reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

JUDITH RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Vito Acconci at his studio at 20 J Street, Brooklyn, on June 21, 2008, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc number one.

So, Vito. Let's start at the very beginning and ask you to talk about your family—when you were born, where you were born. Anything about your parents, your grandparents, your siblings, the whole thing. And then we'll work into your—

VITO ACCONCI: Well, maybe as I start talking, you can ask specific questions.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. ACCONCI: Because you've asked a very, very broad one.

MS. RICHARDS: Okay.

MR. ACCONCI: I was born in the Bronx. I was born in the Bronx, New York, in 1940. My parents were—my father was Italian, from Italy. He had come to the United States at the age of 11.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you know what year he came?

MR. ACCONCI: He was born in 1904—I think 1915.

MS. RICHARDS: Where in Italy?

MR. ACCONCI: Aquila in the Abruzzo mountain region south of Rome. My mother was also Italian, but born in the United States—same region or similar region. Her family came from Campobasso. My father was a bathrobe manufacturer. They met at a bathrobe factory on—around 23rd Street, actually.

MS. RICHARDS: In Manhattan?

MR. ACCONCI: Near the Flatiron building, but I don't know exactly there.

MS. RICHARDS: Was she working there?

MR. ACCONCI: Yes. They were both working there. When was this? I remember hearing from my

family that they knew each other a relatively long time before they were married. But now I admit I don't remember—but probably about 11 years, 12 years. They were married in—two years before I was born. They were married '38, maybe '39.

MS. RICHARDS: What is your exact birth date?

MR. ACCONCI: January 24, 1940. So the story I had heard was that, you know, they waited 11 years to get married. My father, who has an amazing influence on my life—and hopefully we'll go into this. My father said that, obviously, he had to make sure. There are four million women in New York, so he had to make sure that—as far as I could tell, they an amazingly close relationship.

MS. RICHARDS: What was your mother's name? What were your parents' names?

MR. ACCONCI: My father's name was Hamilcar, or in Italian, Amilcare, which led to my middle name.

MS. RICHARDS: Would you spell that?

MR. ACCONCI: Yes. The Italian version is A-M-I-L-C-A-R-E; in English, Hamilcar, H- A-M-I-L-C-A-R-E. It has historical ramifications, and it was continued in my family. Hamilcar Barca was a Carthaginian, who was a great—strangely, a great enemy of Rome. He had a son named Hannibal, and my middle name is Hannibal. And Hannibal tried to attack Rome by crossing the Alps with elephants; he failed. [Laughs.] But I come from—my father's side of the family is incredibly named. My grandmother's name, my father's mother, is Crocifissa, crucifix in Italian.

MS. RICHARDS: Spell that?

MR. ACCONCI: C-R-O-C-I-F-I-S-S-A. I'm partially guessing, but I think I'm close—but, crucifix.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah. There were three children in my father's family. My father was Hamilcar. My uncle, his brother, was Themistocles.

MS. RICHARDS: Wow.

MR. ACCONCI: And their sister was Cabiria. So things started for me before I was born. [Laughs.] Language started for me very early.

MS. RICHARDS: Indeed.

MR. ACCONCI: And my father—and as I said, my father came to the United States when he was 11. I only found out when he died—and he died, unfortunately, very—relatively early. He died at the age of 58 in 1962. I found out then, even though my father was, you know, an avid newspaper reader, an avid follower of everyday politics, I realized my father had never become an American citizen, because I think for him that would have been—he had to retain some loyalty to Italy.

There was a strange—I mean, there was—luckily, my father had an incredible mix. There was an over-praise and an over-adulation of Italy. So I grew up probably learning to despise Italy because it was so favored in my family. I'm skipping around a lot, but I remember when I was a teenager, an uncle of mine throwing me out of the house for defending Irish people. So it was a [laughs]—you know, I started to think there's a reason for those thick walls in Italy, those thick walls in Rome. This is about closure, this is about isolation. And I despised it.

MS. RICHARDS: Secrecy.

MR. ACCONCI: Everything in the family—I remember my mother—and this was a language habit—

MS. RICHARDS: What was your mother's name?

MR. ACCONCI: My mother's name was much simpler than that, Catherine, except it really wasn't Catherine. Apparently, her name was—

MS. RICHARDS: Catherine with a "C"?

MR. ACCONCI: With a "C." But her name really was Chiara, which should be translated probably as Claire.

MS. RICHARDS: And how do you spell that?

MR. ACCONCI: Chiara, I'm not so sure. I think it's C-H-I-A-R-A. And somehow in the United States, people couldn't pronounce Chiara, so it became Catherine, you know, or "Kay" in my family.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: Just as Hamilcar became "Ame." Themistocles became "Denny." Cabiria, I never heard a shortened version of that.

MS. RICHARDS: So you were born in the Bronx, you said?

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you remember where in the Bronx?

MR. ACCONCI: Exactly. Well, in fact, I remember the address. No, no, that's not true. It was on a street called Bathgate Avenue—Bathgate and Fordham Road. Fordham University was across the street, across Fordham Road. The Bronx Zoo was four blocks away. The New York Botanical Gardens—you know, I was a city kid. I lived on the third floor of an apartment. But Fordham University was part of my playground. Bronx Zoo was, Botanical Gardens. You know, you didn't need a private house. [Laughs.] This was, you know—or I never thought I needed a private house, never knew one, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you have brothers or sisters?

MR. ACCONCI: No, I was an only child. And a very spoiled one. A very spoiled one. I mean, I grew up—my family was—

MS. RICHARDS: The only Italian son.

MR. ACCONCI: I mean, my family was relatively poor. They never let me know that. My father was—you know, one thing I very much learned from my father was a total inability to handle money or to care about money. It was so unimportant to my father. I mean, I can't even say that. Was it unimportant or was he just incapable? I don't think it was important. What was important to my father was music, art, and literature.

MS. RICHARDS: So your involvement, your interest in art was from him?

MR. ACCONCI: Was totally accepted.

MS. RICHARDS: And totally accepted, not from your mother?

MR. ACCONCI: Not just accepted—not from my mother at all. My mother was much more practical. But she didn't really have a say in this family. [Laughs.] She was an Italian mother. And she had such respect and love for my father, who in turn had, I think, the same for her—but it was very clear that he would—whatever he said was accepted. My father lived in a world of puns. I mean, I grew up—my father so—

MS. RICHARDS: So the language—

MR. ACCONCI: So loved Italy. But when he came to the United States, so fell in love with the American language. So, you know, I had a childhood in which he would read Dante to me and he would play Verdi. But he would also play Cole Porter. He would read William Faulkner to me.

MS. RICHARDS: Did they only speak English in your house?

MR. ACCONCI: My grandmother, the Crucifix, lived in the apartment across the hall. They always spoke Italian. My grandmother hardly spoke English.

MS. RICHARDS: So you didn't learn Italian?

MR. ACCONCI: I didn't learn Italian—it certainly wasn't forced on me. But, you know, I grew up—and as I said, I was born in 1940. So, you know, when I was conscious of language—I don't know. When do you become conscious of language? I'm not sure. I don't know. Do you become conscious of language before the age of five or so?

But it was 1945 now. America had won the war. Italy had lost. I wanted to be an American. I wanted to be an American child. I hated my name, you know? I wanted to be named, you know, Duane, Buck.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you ever try to have a new name?

MR. ACCONCI: No, no, no.

MS. RICHARDS: You were still you.

MR. ACCONCI: No, no, no, not at all. But you know—and also, there was an unfortunate circumstance at that time. There was a drugstore product that was a spray deodorant called Veto Spray Deodorant, V-E-T-O. It was the bane of my childhood. [Laughs.] As you know, children are very—children pick up on anything, and they really picked up that one. And they pick on—I mean, children are beautiful name players. Vito Acconci became Vito Unconscious.

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs.]

MR. ACCONCI: And Veto Spray Deodorant Unconscious. So it was even worse.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, when you were a child in elementary school, did you exhibit any special gifts, any special interests? Do you remember a special, different—

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah, yeah. I mean, I—

MS. RICHARDS: Did you think you knew what you wanted to be when you grew up, then?

MR. ACCONCI: No. I don't think so. Strangely, I half remember when I was a child saying at one point, you know, that I wanted to be an architect. But I don't think I knew what an architect was, and I certainly didn't betray that until much, much later, [laughs] till in my 40s, you know. But I remember that came up. I'm not sure why. Maybe because other professions I knew the name of, I could understand what they were. Architect was mysterious to me. I'm not sure.

But I did—I drew a lot. My father and I had drawing contests. We would like draw my mother. Of course, my mother was cooking, grating cheese, doing things that an Italian mother did, while the husband and son had the luxury of portraying her at these everyday tasks that we didn't have anything to do with. Yeah. Male was very important. And only son was important and everything. Everything was oriented—as I said, everything was oriented towards me. But it was all a learning experience.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you do well in school, in elementary school?

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah. Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: And what were your strongest subjects? Do you remember? Or what you loved most?

MR. ACCONCI: What I didn't—anything having to do with language, I gravitated towards. I had no, or I made myself believe I had no aptitude for math, for science. And in retrospect, that was a very bad choice because I realize now—now I crave math and science. But I grew up the opposite, you know. And I went to a great high school. I don't know—should we be skipping so much?

MS. RICHARDS: Sure. No, no. What high school?

MR. ACCONCI: I went to Regis High School on 84th. I went to Catholic schools all my life. Not graduate school, but I went to Catholic schools from kindergarten to college. And a lot of it was me. I chose to go to a Catholic college.

MS. RICHARDS: When you were a kid in elementary, secondary, high school, did you spend a lot of time with language and poetry or reading or—

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah, yeah, yeah. By high school, I thought of myself as a writer, certainly. I don't think I can claim I thought that in elementary school. But I honestly don't remember—but certainly in high school.

MS. RICHARDS: And your teachers recognized the talent? Or were you fighting against?

MR. ACCONCI: It was a mix. I mean, yeah, they recognized. But they thought—they had some—they probably had some objections or questions of what were clearly my influences, you know. They had some questions about Samuel Beckett and Nabakov and that kind of stuff. But they, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: You had a broader education in the sense that they—

MR. ACCONCI: They were Jesuits. And you know, as priests go, Jesuits are—[laughs]—

MS. RICHARDS: Open.

MR. ACCONCI: Jesuits are radical. And some of them very much were. I mean, the most influential teacher I ever had, I think, was a teacher in [College of the] Holy Cross, Father Thomas Grace, who, like a lot of Jesuits, he drank himself to death. And, you know, was very open to me—said he really had no idea if he believed. However, he had to observe [Blaise] Pascal's wager, that in if they were right he had an awful lot to lose. But in the meantime, he couldn't bear it. So he, in effect, drank himself to death. But he was an English teacher. But specifically, you know, the Jesuits kept the Medieval ways of learning, so rhetoric was important. And it was a very important thing to me because this was a time in the '60s where the standard of literary criticism was what was at that time called the New Criticism—Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren—the piece of writing as a thing in itself, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: You mention Brooks. What was the first name?

MR. ACCONCI: Cleanth. They were all from the South.

MS. RICHARDS: How do you spell it?

MR. ACCONCI: C-L-E-A-N-T-H. It was a very—you know, I only realized later these were ultraconservative, old aristocrat Southerners that took over.

MS. RICHARDS: So tell me the name of your teacher again, your most influential.

MR. ACCONCI: Thomas—oh, now, what did I say? I think I gave his wrong name before.

MS. RICHARDS: I think you did. Okay. No?

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah, but I gave him a wrong name. Now it's—what's his name? Father Brooks? I'm remembering it as Brooks, but I don't think I'm right.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, maybe we'll come up—it will come up later.

MR. ACCONCI: That's strange. Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you recall anything else?

MR. ACCONCI: Let me just continue about one thing—

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, yes.

MR. ACCONCI: Because this was so important about this guy, even though now I'm puzzled that I've forgotten his name.

Because I don't think it's Brooks. It began with a—I think Brooks was another priest at Holy Cross who I very much despised. [Laughs.] And now I've given the favorite the name of the person I hated.

In concentrating on something that, you know, in Medieval times was called rhetoric, he introduced a really important thing to me. And this was way—obviously, way before Derrida—that the notion of the reader became just as important as the thing that was being read. And that was kind of a shocking thing at that time. And it was the kind of thing that later I would come upon in, you know, John Cage, you know, that if you're sitting in a theater and you happen to be behind the column, this column is part of your experience. The notion that something is different when you have a

headache, the notion of the reader and the reader's—the reader almost making the thing—this wasn't a time when people were talking that way.

And, you know, now the language I'm using doesn't necessarily come from this priest, but what came later. But it certainly started there. I've got to remember this guy's name eventually or try to check it.

MS. RICHARDS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] When you were younger in school, did any of your friends have a particular influence, either in support of—or did you struggle because they were not in support of your interest in language?

MR. ACCONCI: I remember at Regis High School, these were kids talking Greek to each other. You know, we all studied classical Greek, classical Latin. We were feverishly involved with learning. Regis is a very special place. Yeah, everybody was on the same side—not everybody, of course not. But—no. I mean, everybody wanted—I mean, a very close friend of mine in high school—we didn't go to the same college. But he went to Fordham University. I obviously couldn't go to Fordham. It was across the street, you know. He, you know, very much thought of himself as a writer, another Italian American, Robert Viscusi, and has become a novelist. He wrote a novel. He wrote a novel a few years ago called *Astoria* that got some attention. He's written some critical stuff. He's been teaching for a very long time at Brooklyn College. Not that we've had contact, but, you know, I think each of us knows what the other does.

The other great thing about Regis was that, first of all, it was in Manhattan. And—but Manhattan was second nature to me because my father took me to Manhattan a lot, you know. My father took me—you know, every weekend my father and I went to the Metropolitan Opera—not the Metropolitan Museum. We went to the opera together. I had seen *La Bohème* five times by the age of five, you know. I mean, I grew up so much in the middle of this stuff. I didn't know what was going on, but I could say, "Wait. The tree last time was in a different place on the stage." I had no idea what they were saying. [Laughs.]

But it was a great way of growing up. My father lived in a world—my father—the great thing about my father, it wasn't about learning. It was about an exultation in learning. It was about learning as part of everyday life. It was obviously fun for my father.

MS. RICHARDS: It sounds like he might have wanted to be a teacher.

MR. ACCONCI: I don't know. I really don't know.

MS. RICHARDS: You don't know what his aspirations were?

MR. ACCONCI: No. I mean, he couldn't have any because there were two sons in the family. And the younger one was chosen to go to college. He became the teacher. He became a biology teacher. The older son had to support the younger. I think this was the way of the world at that time, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: And so Themistocles—

MR. ACCONCI: And maybe my father questioned it, but never, never, never, never revealed that to me. But again, you know—

MS. RICHARDS: Themistocles went to college?

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And your aunt and your uncle both lived in New York?

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Near your grandparents.

MR. ACCONCI: In the Bronx.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: Near Riverdale.

MS. RICHARDS: They were born—

MR. ACCONCI: But a part of the time—

MS. RICHARDS: Your father was born—

MR. ACCONCI: No, no, remember, he came here when he was 11.

MS. RICHARDS: No, no, no, never mind. Sorry. Yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah. And, you know, my uncle came at the same time. The whole family came at the same time.

MS. RICHARDS: So you were talking about your father taking you to the opera.

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah. But it was part of everyday life. When you asked, you know, did my father have other aspirations? I knew he did. But he never told me, you know. But he turned what he did into language, into writing. He was in the robe business. So he would say, you know, he would sing songs like, "There's no business like the robe business, like no business I know. Everything about it is appalling." So you know? He lived it. But he never had the chance to do it.

There again, this is my language. He never said anything like that to me. But everything, everything in life was a pun. Like he was talk about, "What's honeymoon salad? Lettuce alone." And then that would be followed up by, "Don't look now. Mayonnaise is dressing" or, "And the Lord said to Peter, 'Come forth.' But Peter came fifth, so he lost the race." But it was constant, constant, constant.

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs.]

MR. ACCONCI: But it made me—it was a great way to grow up, because I think people grow up with the unfortunate way of thinking that language is a very definite thing. I learned the opposite from my father. You can play with language. Language explodes. Language falls apart, you know. You have to desperately make it give meaning, but it doesn't have meaning in itself. It's a complex of tarantulas. You know, it's a complex of things.

I mean, my father taught me what—I relearned later in the '60s when I first started to see Godard movies, which for me was the most important thing of the '60s, where you know, Godard would focus—would shoot a word and then would zoom in to the middle of the word. And the middle of the word would be a word in itself that probably contradicted the overall word. So language is a

very flimsy, shaky thing, you know. But I think I learned that before from my father.

MS. RICHARDS: So he was very supportive, and your mother, too, of all your interests?

MR. ACCONCI: Yes. I mean, the only thing that—I don't know if this was ever spoken. But from my father, the only things, the only goals you should have, the only careers you could have were writing, literature, art, music, you know. Never, never said, you know, "You've got to be a lawyer." [Laughs.] Probably would have been horrified, you know. I'm kind of surprised that I didn't rebel and become a doctor or a lawyer because this was all set up for me. It was like no, no, no, no, no second thought.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: When you were in high school, how did you—you said you went to Holy Cross?

MR. ACCONCI: College.

MS. RICHARDS: College. In—

MR. ACCONCI: Worcester, Massachusetts. I remember being there and thinking, "Jesus"—

MS. RICHARDS: How did you end up there?

MR. ACCONCI: How did I end up there? I ended up there in a strange way. I mentioned that I had done a lot of Greek and Latin, as almost everybody did. There were choices in Regis. You could be in the classical language part, or you could be in the science part. I was certainly in the classical language part. There was something called a Greek Academy that five or six of us were part of. And the Greek Academy was—you know, we had performances on stage. Classicists from Yale, Harvard, Amherst would come and question us, you know.

And because of stuff like this, I had fellowships to—I mean, I can't remember now—Yale, Amherst, and Columbia. But I decided I'd better go to Holy Cross because if I went to Yale, Amherst, or Columbia, I would lose my faith. Probably the best decision I could have done because, maybe if I had gone to Yale, Amherst, or Columbia, I might be a practicing Catholic.

I remember this horrifying—when I grew up, everything about this guy was horrifying. But now he seems to be over-praised now that he's dead—a William Buckley book called *God and Man at Yale*. I probably read that book when I was a child—not a child, post-child. But probably I thought, "Oh, I'd better not go to a place like this." But, you know, as soon as I went there, I learned to hate—because Regis was great. Holy Cross was Catholic and very Catholic, and you know, the kind of memory Catholic, you know. "Why did God make me," kind of Catholic, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you ever imagine transferring to another school?

MR. ACCONCI: I did. But, you know, I had—my father—by that time, I knew my family didn't have money, although it was kept from me for a long time. And I didn't know if I had the option because, you know, I had scholarships to where I was going.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: If I switched—I had rejected the scholarship to Yale. I didn't think I could get it back

after my first year, after my second year. I'm not sure. Or maybe I didn't have enough—I mean, it's a puzzling thing to me. Why didn't I get out? Because the way myself was formed, or the way I formed myself. I think I did develop the kind of being that, if something was wrong, I would fight it and get out of it. I don't think I had developed that yet. I think I thought, "Well, I have to shrug my shoulders. It's a given." It kind of disturbs me, but I'm sure I did.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you recall—did you know when you went in what your major would be?

MR. ACCONCI: It would definitely be English, yeah. Though again, I didn't stop the Latin and Greek. I concentrated in, you know, what then was called English Literature. The English Literature meant any literature. There weren't departments like Comparative Literature then, et cetera.

MS. RICHARDS: Or Dramatic Literature.

MR. ACCONCI: Probably not. But I did—I still did a lot of Greek and Latin. I was in something called the Homeric Academy and the Virgil Academy in Holy Cross. Yeah, there never was question. By that time, there wasn't a question. Like I said, I mean, in high school I thought of myself as, "I'm a writer."

MS. RICHARDS: When you were in college, was there—

MR. ACCONCI: I was the editor of the literary magazine. But in Holy Cross, the year I and another person were co-editors, two of our four issues were suppressed by the priests, mostly for short stories of mine. So by that time, I was, quote, rebelling.

MS. RICHARDS: What was—why do you think they were—do you know?

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah, I know what they were.

MS. RICHARDS: What was the suppression about?

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah, because I wrote stories about—you know, I wrote stories where there was a scene of—a priest was visiting his sister. And the priest is sitting on a sofa. The priest—his sister is leaning over him, feeding him chocolate-covered cherries, with her breasts in his face. [Laughs.] So I was getting out, though I never literally got out. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. Were you writing poetry then? What was your writing?

MR. ACCONCI: I was writing poetry, but mainly fiction. Yeah. I wrote poetry, but I thought of myself as a fiction writer. The things—I certainly loved poets. Who did I love then? I loved Ezra Pound. Then I loved William Carlos Williams. But I loved fiction writers. Faulkner was my first literary hero, you know, and was the first model for me. And what I loved about Faulkner was, it seemed like he makes it so clear that it's so difficult to put a period onto a sentence. Once a period—a period is a finalization. So you want to keep going. You add a subordinate clause. You add—you know, you add another phrase. You try to avoid the end. That was a kind of important thing to me.

MS. RICHARDS: You talked about that teacher who was so influential. He was an English teacher?

MR. ACCONCI: Thomas Grace. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Thomas Grace. Okay.

MR. ACCONCI: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: You talked about—why was he so influential?

MR. ACCONCI: In fact—well, I thought I had mentioned it. Because he stressed things that at that time people didn't talk about in literature.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, you did talk about that. Sorry.

MR. ACCONCI: That's right. It's the reader's reception of something.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. Yes, I understand.

MR. ACCONCI: That the reader redoes a book. Again, I'm not even sure if he used a lot of those terms.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you take a number of classes with him? Or did you maintain a friendship with him after he was your teacher, beyond the classes you took?

MR. ACCONCI: I know I took—I mean, in each—it probably started in the second year. The first year, I don't think I knew him. But second, third year—second, third, and fourth year. And he, you know, was the person I could depend on for—I mean, he would—he disliked a lot of what I wrote. But, you know, he kept—but it was kind of interesting because he kept saying how, you know, that maybe something has to be more precise. He kept saying that—and he introduced this beautiful opposition to me. There's Walt Whitman on one side; there's Emily Dickenson on the other. And Walt Whitman is like the ocean. But there's nothing precise in the ocean.

And he recommended things to me, some kind of minor writers, like an English writer named Henry Green that I don't think many people read anymore. But it was very, very—

But very much it was about precision. And I think through him I started to love things like—I retained my love of Faulkner, but I needed to love Flaubert at the same time, you know? If Faulkner was Whitman, Flaubert was the precision that the whole sentence—so he was really, I just have to stress, a really important, important, important influence.

And also, you know, it was someone who talked—you know, I wanted people to talk about the stuff in, what did they see was wrong with it, you know? I could know what's right with it. I wanted to see, where can I go? What can I read? What haven't I read? And I can't remember. He liked a lot of British writers that I never liked so much. Anthony Powell—I can't remember what he read, but in the '60s had some reputation.

But again, it was kind of interesting that he was always focusing the fact that I needed refinement, I needed precision, that it's easy to make—you know, it's easy to—I don't know, it's easy. But it was easy for me to do writing like a kind of ocean, and I didn't have to worry, that you could be bowled over by something. But if you went into it, you would realize, well, maybe it doesn't make that much sense. So he focused on things that might have been antithetical to me, but I think I needed them because I needed that kind of—I needed the science that I never let myself learn. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: So when you finished—during your college years, thinking of yourself as a writer, were there external forces beyond literature that were very influential to you as a young artist, writer?

MR. ACCONCI: This is while still in school or—

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. While still in school, do you remember any external forces that—and maybe they may continue—that's where they started?

MR. ACCONCI: Well, the external—I mean, you know, they might have been external to writing.

MS. RICHARDS: Political issues, social, psychological, beyond writing?

MR. ACCONCI: I mean, you know, music—music and movies were very important. I guess it was probably in my junior year of high—sophomore year, junior. When did I first see? The introduction of outside-of-America movies was very important. And for me, that started to happen probably in high school. I think Fellini was the first introduction—when *La Strada* came out, I was probably—I was still in high school. I think my father actually took me to see *La Strada*. I don't remember what year—'54, '55? Which might have meant I was—I might have been a sophomore in high school.

But then, especially when I was in college, '58, '59, suddenly there was this, you know—but for us, people I know, it seemed like an explosion.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. Yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: The introduction of Godard and Truffaut, seeing *Last Year at Marienbad* for the first time. Again, you know, a continuation of Fellini. But, you know, Fellini was never as important to me, except for maybe $8\frac{1}{2}$. The important things, to me, were what Godard—but maybe the most important thing to me, the most important movie to me, maybe in some ways the most important thing in my life at that time was the Alain Robbe-Grillet *Last Year at Marienbad*. I mean, millions of things changed my life, but that certainly did. A lot of things did, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you remember what year that was?

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah. I think it came out in '61.

MS. RICHARDS: You were a senior.

MR. ACCONCI: I think I saw it between my junior and senior year.

MS. RICHARDS: And how did that have an effect on you?

MR. ACCONCI: It was—well, by that time, I was started—yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: You had graduated, or you were about to.

MR. ACCONCI: I was about to graduate. I hadn't graduated yet. But I had already come across part of that. Robbe-Grillet started to be important to me. And Robbe-Grillet was—Robbe-Grillet, in maybe his own special way, was a kind of combination of that ocean and precision. You know, everything was written as if it was fact, as if it was observed by a scientist. But then you realize that it's observed so thoroughly that it's written as if by an insane person. So it was almost this combination of absolute precision, but you're in a kind of swoon.

But also, I was—I mean, I know a lot—I'm not sure if some of this stuff was stuff that I thought. But if friends of mine at college—you know, suddenly, we realized that you didn't need all the money in the world to make a movie—a really important thing for us. It was a very important thing for me, you

know. It was very important thing for me when I saw Godard movies, and I realized, "Wow, you know, if you want to shoot a movie in the jungle, you don't have to go on location. You go to Central Park. You zoom in on some grass." The idea of making do seemed important, the idea that there's something else in a movie than a kind of aura of expense. And the notion of things don't need all the money in the world became very important to me.

But also—but it's even more than that, that maybe if you don't have all the money in the world, you learn to be inventive. You know, you learn to—making do with what you have makes you reinvent what you have. And so—now, when exactly did that happen? I'm not sure. Was I still in college? But it was that formation time, when I got out of college, came back to New York. When I came back to New York, I was—it was a kind of shock to me. I mean, not that I didn't know—

MS. RICHARDS: What did you do during the summers during college? During the summer—anything interesting?

MR. ACCONCI: I worked for relatives that had more money than my father, but not a lot of money.

MS. RICHARDS: In Manhattan?

MR. ACCONCI: Well, I worked for an uncle who had a dry cleaning, rug cleaning place. And it was kind of interesting, because we picked up rugs from Arthur Miller's apartment. And there was a very famous restaurant then all over the place called Schraffts. So his clients were things like that. But a lot of Sutton Place apartments, you know, that kind of stuff.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: And so I can't remember the sequence now. I spent at least two summers working for him, and two other summers working for another uncle, my father's brother, Themistocles, the biology teacher at Manhattan College in the Bronx, who with his wife had a bookstore on Broadway and 242nd Street. And I worked in the bookstore.

MS. RICHARDS: So when you graduated—

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: You mentioned just now, you came back to New York?

MR. ACCONCI: No, when I graduated college I went to graduate school.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, okay. So when you graduated from college, you decided you wanted to go to graduate school?

MR. ACCONCI: Well, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that a difficult decision? Was it absolutely certain?

MR. ACCONCI: No, no, no.

MS. RICHARDS: You knew.

MR. ACCONCI: It was a given, because I thought of myself as a writer, but I knew I was never going to make money. So I obviously had to teach. And I was maybe more strategic than I maybe thought I could be. I decided that I'd better not go to graduate school in, say, American literature,

which is what I really wanted to go to graduate school in. But there are this many people getting out of schools, trying to get jobs in American literature departments. So I decided I would major—I would specialize in Medieval English. Why would this make sense?

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs.]

MR. ACCONCI: So I had something called a Woodrow Wilson fellowship. And a Woodrow Wilson fellowship was something you could use at a number of schools if they accepted you. And I was going to go to Yale. And I was going to major in Medieval English. And then the summer before I was going to enter Yale, sometime in August, I started to get an amazing fear. I started to think of all these people all over the United States who had gotten out of graduate school and had unfinished novels in their drawers. And I thought, if I go to Yale, Yale wins. There's no way that I can—there's no way that I'm really going to be a writer. I'm going to be an academic. And I knew I couldn't be an academic.

However, I had this Woodrow Wilson fellowship. And I thought, this means two years that I didn't have to worry about money. So I've got to find a way to use this Woodrow Wilson fellowship. So at, you know, literally the last minute, sometime in August, I, you know, did a little bit of research. And I did realize that there is such a thing in some colleges as—there is such a thing as creative writing and writers workshops. There weren't many then. It was basically the University of Iowa, where it all started. And I think there was also Stanford at the time. And possibly, very, very—not many more—obviously now, there are hundreds, if not thousands. Maybe they're not there anymore. I don't know. For awhile, there were hundreds and thousands.

So in August, I contacted the University of Iowa, and I said, "I have a Woodrow Fellowship. I know it's late, but can I use it there? Can I use it there?" And they said yes. So I thought this is a way that I can, you know, use the money. No, I'm not going to get an academic career from this. But I'm going to have—it was like a layover, you know. It was like two years before I had to worry about money.

So I went to Iowa, which was good and bad. On the one hand a terrible experience because like all writers schools, just like art schools, it depends who's there at the time. It depends who's teaching there. It was a two-year program. The first year was—and you studied with one person. You could see others, but, you know, I was a fiction writer then. So there were three possible fiction writers.

And I must have picked this guy because I had read some stories of his, a short story writer named—maybe a novelist, too, even though I knew his short stories—named R.V. Cassill, C-A-S-S-I-L-L, who hated everything I was doing. But I kind of hated everything he was doing, too, I realized. But I remember at my introduction to him was when he asked me—my first meeting with him—this was when? This was the fall of '62. My first meeting with him, he asked, what writers am I currently interested in? And I said, probably the person I'm most interested in now is Robbe-Grillet. And he said, "I think Robbe-Grillet is worth toilet paper." Okay. What do I say now? [Laughs.] You know, I don't think he's worth toilet paper? So I thought, this is going to be—this isn't going to be a great year. [Laughs.]

And I remember the first—the way the writers workshop worked then was—this was even before—it was 1962. So it's not that Xeroxing didn't exist, but Xeroxing was probably still a bit expensive. So things were mimeographed. And what happened in each meeting of the writers workshop, they would mimeograph one person's story and present—it would be presented to people anonymously. So people would feel free to say what they wanted to say.

So the—pretty early, I'm not sure why a story of mine was—maybe you volunteered for a story of yours to be distributed. I don't—

MS. RICHARDS: How many people are in this distribution?

MR. ACCONCI: Oh, 25-30.

MS. RICHARDS: Students?

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah, 25-30.

MS. RICHARDS: Plus all the faculty?

MR. ACCONCI: No, just one. Just one teacher. I don't think there was so much of a mix. You could talk to other teachers, sure. But you were in one person's—you know, just like in architecture school you're in one person's studio. It was kind of the equivalent of that.

So second, third week—I actually realize, I'm kind of guessing at the 25 or 30. I'm inclined to think back and it seemed like that. But that seems like a lot of people, actually, maybe too many people for a workshop. Though I know Iowa tried to get a—maybe because they were one of the only writers workshops, there tended to be a large number of people there. And they tended to try to get a lot of foreigners because this seemed to mean something to them, even though there were sometimes—there were all these people from Taiwan at that time. And I know it seemed really strange, what happens.

MS. RICHARDS: So you were saying your story was picked.

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah. My story was picked. And, you know, just to—and the first person who wanted to comment got up and said, "I think the person who wrote this story should be thrown into the Iowa River." And it was cold in Iowa. Gets icy fast. [Laughs.] And you know, on the one hand I thought, "Wow. Writing is a serious matter." But on the other hand, I felt like I might not be in the right place. Yeah, in general—

MS. RICHARDS: And the other comments weren't any more positive?

MR. ACCONCI: I don't remember them as much.

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs.]

MR. ACCONCI: I don't know. There were probably some, but no. People didn't necessarily like my stuff. There was a story that I got published. Stupidly, I don't have—I save everything, but I started to save much later than that, because I don't have magazines where short stories of mine were published. And that's a real lack. It was published in a European—kind of a famous press magazine.

MS. RICHARDS: It could be found.

MR. ACCONCI: It probably could.

MS. RICHARDS: Sure.

MR. ACCONCI: It was Olympia Press. Olympia Press put a magazine out also called *Olympia*.

And this story was in it. But—so, you know, right away, either while I was in—I don't remember if it necessarily happened while I was in Iowa or while I was in, the summer I got out. You know, one, two stories were accepted. But then nothing was accepted. [Laughs.] I thought, wow, this is a start. But it wasn't necessarily a start.

MS. RICHARDS: This was including the second year in Iowa, too?

MR. ACCONCI: This was after the second year, yeah, yeah. I mean, I don't remember when I—

MS. RICHARDS: Was the second year better than the first year?

MR. ACCONCI: Second year was. Not an interesting writer, but a really interesting and really great person named John Clellon Holmes—middle name is C-L-E-L-L-O-N and last name Holmes, H-O-L-M-E-S. He was kind of the academic member of the beat generation. He was a very close friend of Kerouac and Ginsberg. And he showed me this great, great copy of Herman Melville's *Pierre*, which is one of my favorite books, actually, and it's a lot of writers' favorite books. It's a very messy, sloppy book, and it's—like all American literature, it's about incest. American literature is based on incest, you know.

It's based on—American literature is about, you know, sex is leaving home. But Americans are afraid to leave home because they don't have a European base of home. So they fuck their sister instead. [Laughs.] It's kind of leaving home and not leaving home at the same time. [Laughs.] I mean, Faulkner is all about incest. Melville's all—Hawthorne's all about incest. American literature is grounded on that not knowing what to do with family. I wrote an essay in the late '80s called "Projections of Home" that tries to talk about that. Yeah, anyway.

MS. RICHARDS: So you had this better year because you had John Clellon Holmes as your—he was more sympathetic.

MR. ACCONCI: He just—again, he wasn't an interesting writer. But he allowed for things. And he—you know, he could show me things like this Melville book. It was approximately the time where I was starting to be—I was starting to discover new music, you know, new classical music. John Cage-influenced stuff. Christian Wolf, Martin Feldman—you know, he knew that stuff. So, you know, we played that stuff for each other. I mean, we were in the same world, you know. Whereas Verlaine Cassill—R.V. Cassill, he did have a name. I never knew what the "R" was. But the "V" was Verlaine. And it was too hard not to make jokes about that—Verlaine, vermin, et cetera.

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs.]

MR. ACCONCI: [Laughs.] It seemed, of course his name was Verlaine. What else could it be? You know? [Laughs.] Sounds sneaky.

I remember being so shocked by something I read of his. At the same time, you know, I had read this and I took his class. But he wrote this introduction in which he very, very, very, so casually—and this was early. This was early, but it made me so angry somehow because I'm sure I came upon it in 1962—well, somewhere between '62 and '63. This introduction to a book of short stories by him, a book *New Directions* put out. I don't think I have it anymore, but stories by three different, you know, at that time relatively young writers.

And he kept referring to—it seemed very flippant—referring to "wife number three" or "wife number four" or "wife number five," but never mentioning her by name, but saying how important it is for a writer—and the assumption was that this writer is male—to have a wife who takes care of him.

And I remember, God, feeling, wow. I hope that never happens to me. [Laughs.] God, I'm glad I saw this because I will never think like that. But it was so jolting to me. Anyway, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: So you graduated? You finished the program in Iowa?

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And then what?

MR. ACCONCI: Then I came back to New York.

MS. RICHARDS: And you felt confident that you would go on as a writer at that point?

MR. ACCONCI: I felt confident I would go on as a writer.

MS. RICHARDS: Of fiction, or you weren't sure?

MR. ACCONCI: I thought fiction, though at that time I was never in a poetry workshop at Iowa. And I wasn't writing any poetry at Iowa. Whereas, you know, in college, at least in my first year, besides writing fiction I was writing poetry. But I guess I thought of myself as a fiction writer—until I got back to New York.

And when I got back into New York—I remember this didn't happen when I was in New York. This happened, I think, when I was in Iowa. I started to think that, wow. A lot has happened in the last 10 years that I am really totally unaware of. There were things going on in art that I really didn't know. You know—and before I saw it live, which I'm sure happened when I came back to New York, but I started to see reproductions of, especially Jasper Johns and Rauschenberg. And I thought the world has changed and I didn't know. I really felt like—

MS. RICHARDS: But you knew Cage, you said?

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah, I did. I did know Cage's music, but I didn't know the Cage circle yet. When I came back to New York, I did. When I came back to New York, that was the year of the E.A.T. performances, all that kind of stuff. So I saw all that stuff. And there was stuff of Judson Church. Yeah, once I got back I knew. But from Iowa, I didn't, you know. Cage was like—it's not an isolated phenomenon. I connected Cage to other music. I don't think—but very possibly, you know, because I did—it was when I was in Iowa where I saw at least reproductions of Rauschenberg and Johns. So very likely it was doing some kind of research based on Cage. I'm not sure.

But seeing Johns, especially—I mean, seeing Rauschenberg was very, very important to me because it seemed like it was—I remember seeing the bed piece for the first time and thinking that, wow, this literally turned the world, if not upside-down, on its side. And it seems like once you do that, you're using the wall as a kind of platform. You can now throw things at the wall and things are going to stick there. Anything can come from outside, you know. It was like—it was—to me, Rauschenberg was like an openness to anything. I mean, after awhile I started to think maybe it was going in the wrong direction, an openness to everything. But he was bringing it into art. I preferred you maybe brought art out into the world. But that took a long time for me to think that.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: But seeing Rauschenberg, especially, made me stop writing fiction. It made me think that suddenly I understood what conventions were. That, you know, when I first saw—and

this I think, I have to see it real, because I don't think you can see this in a reproduction. Things are too smooth in a reproduction, in a picture in a magazine. But I think when I actually saw it I started to think, yeah. This was my version of Johns, you know. He's a person who wants so badly to be an abstract expressionist painter. But he knows it's too late, first of all. It's already happened. But he also knows that, by this time, there has been so much abstract expressionist brushstrokes. He still wants to make abstract expressionist brushstrokes. How does he get somebody to pay attention? The way to do it is to first make the base of the canvas something that everybody knows—a target, a number five, alphabet letters.

And suddenly this was—this was my—suddenly it returned me to Thomas Grace and rhetoric, you know? [Laughs.] This is the way you take a viewer in. Now that you have a viewer's attention, now he can do all the abstract expressionist brushstrokes he wants, which made me think, you know, this is how I should think of writing, writing is about idioms, you know. Every language is made up of idioms, idioms that, when you take them literally, don't mean anything. You know, "From the horse's mouth," you know—but that gives you a base. That gives you a base of language. And then you can play off it.

And that became so important to me that I thought—I don't know if I thought—I don't even know if I thought consciously that, I don't know how to do this in fiction, but I can do it in poetry. And that's when I started to think I was a writer, you know, a writer, a poet.

MS. RICHARDS: Were there other poets at that time who you—who were starting to do or had done—

MR. ACCONCI: There were a few.

MS. RICHARDS: English poets?

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah, no, there were some people in my generation that I started to know about. I mean, the standard in New York when I came back was the so-called New York Poetry School—John Ashbury, Kenneth Koch, Frank O'Hara—who I certainly liked. I had very early stuff of my mine—was so imitative of John Ashbury. This was starting before I—not before I saw Johns, but before I realized that I have to pare down things to idioms.

There was a poet named Aram Saroyan who was William Saroyan's son, who for a very short time—and now all his stuff has been reprinted. MIT just put out a book of my poetry, not just, a year and a half ago. So I don't think there's a big revivification of things like this. But the Aram Saroyan book that was put out by a small press called Ugly Duckling Press has become a very big seller. And Aram Saroyan did like one-word poems, two-word poems.

And I remember—in fact, I wrote one of the blurbs to the Aram Saroyan book because I was always kind of jealous of Aram Saroyan. I always thought, wow. I was so involved with verbs and motion. He knew how to rest at nouns, you know? I didn't think I was confident enough to use nouns. [Laughs.]

But it was a time when there were a few people—Clark, a New York poet. Oh, I don't know if he lived—he lived in New York then; I don't think he does now—named Clark Coolidge. But there weren't that many. A few years later, there were some people that started to call themselves Language School. Bruce Andrews, Kenneth Goldsmith—so there were people.

I put out a little magazine at the time—I don't know you knew it—and recently, that has come out

as a collection, too—called 0-9, from '67 to '69, a poet named Bernadette Mayer and I. That's something I didn't mention. When I was in—

And she's become a relatively well-known, you know, poet, kind of a continuation of the New York school, but the generation—well, it's not a younger generation anymore, but generation of people like Ann Waldman, Michael Brownstein. Peter Schjeldahl was one of this generation before he became a—

MS. RICHARDS: When you first came back to New York from Iowa, where did you live?

MR. ACCONCI: The first place I lived was—actually, was in Brooklyn for a year, in Park Slope, Union Street, between 7th and 8th Avenue. And Brooklyn was an unknown to me.

Just to backtrack for a second—one other valuable thing about Regis High School—I said one of the valuable things was, yes. Here were these people who took very seriously the fact of talking to each other in Greek. That was very important, you know. Learning was very important. Being in Manhattan was very important. The other important thing was that Regis was in Manhattan, and it was composed of people from Queens, people from Brooklyn, people from all over New York. And that was kind of important to me because I didn't know. I knew the Bronx and I knew Manhattan. I didn't have any idea.

I grew up at a time when, in the neighborhood I was in in the Bronx, if you got angry at somebody and you would say, you know, "I'll knock you from here to Canarsie." We had no idea where Canarsie was.

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs.]

MR. ACCONCI: [Laughs.] I mean, I remember when I saw *On the Waterfront* for the first time, and Lee J. Cobbs says, "You come from Greenpoint. You go back to Greenpoint. You don't work here no more." That was exotic to me. I didn't know where Greenpoint was, you know? [Laughs.] I knew it was in Brooklyn. But this was another world.

But being in Regis, you know, I went to see friends in Queens. And it was an important thing. They were all Catholic kids, but they were Catholics with questions, at least.

MS. RICHARDS: So the first place you lived was in Brooklyn for about a year?

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah. What I didn't mention is that when I got out of Holy Cross and before I went to Iowa, I got married. And I married a person named Rosemary Mayer, who at that time was doing a lot of classics, Greek and—

MS. RICHARDS: M-A-Y-E-R?

MR. ACCONCI: M-A-Y-E-R, Bernadette's sister.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh.

MR. ACCONCI: That's what started it. And she was a—you know, when I graduated Holy Cross, she was a sophomore in college, all women's, just like all the schools I went to were all men's. All women's school in Brooklyn, I think, called St. Joseph's College for Women. So we went to Iowa together. She finished school in Iowa. She was a classics scholar. She was also a painter. And then when she got out of college, she—like I had a Woodrow Wilson, she had a Woodrow Wilson,

but realized that she didn't want to be a classicist and wanted to be a painter.

So when we came back to New York, we lived together in Union Street. She started taking classes at the Brooklyn Museum, I think, and then later went to the School of Visual Arts for awhile.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: We had a pretty short-lived marriage. We were married for two years in Iowa, came back to New York for a year, then didn't live together for a year. Then tried to live together again for part of a year, and then didn't. But by that time, you know, her sister and I became very close friends. And her sister was a poet, or was starting to be a poet.

MS. RICHARDS: Rosemary?

MR. ACCONCI: Rosemary was two or three years younger than me. Bernadette, in turn, was two or three years younger than Bernadette [sic]. But Bernadette and I put out this poetry magazine, *O-9*, together, mainly because, you know, we were connected to New York School, but we felt like we wanted to do something else. Maybe we weren't sure what it was.

MS. RICHARDS: How long did that magazine last?

MR. ACCONCI: Sixty-seven to '69. But it became a myth. Let me just grab it. I know there are no—sorry. I know there are no visuals. But it might make things—just might make things a little bit clearer. This is the poetry book that MIT put out. I'm not crazy about it. But this is *O-9*.

MS. RICHARDS: Wow. This is two inches thick, 8-1/2 by 11, approximately. *O-9*, the complete magazine, 1967 to 1969, edited by Vito Acconci and Bernadette Mayer. And how many issues does this represent?

MR. ACCONCI: Six.

MS. RICHARDS: Three a year?

MR. ACCONCI: I don't know if it was that—

MS. RICHARDS: Two, three, four, five, six.

MR. ACCONCI: It was more like two a year, probably. Looking through the contents is interesting because you could see where my work was going, because by the fourth issue—the first issue, we had nobody to publish, right? So we took out-of-print things.

MS. RICHARDS: Published yourselves.

MR. ACCONCI: We took out-of-print things, Flaubert, travel journals, things I don't even know if legally we could publish. But you know, we were publishing 200 copies. By issue number four or five, Sol LeWitt published something with us. It was the first place he published—Sentences on Conceptual Art. Smithson, Yvonne Rainer—so just as my work was changing, the magazine was changing.

And I didn't realize what a—I didn't even know who saw the magazine. We would send magazines to people. But at that time, there were at least a few more independent bookstores in New York than there are now. You know, there was the great 8th Street Bookshop, which was the best.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you feel a connection—there were independent—

MR. ACCONCI: Magazines.

MS. RICHARDS: – magazines—

MR. ACCONCI: Oh, yes.

MS. RICHARDS: —in the Bay area in San Francisco. There was a whole culture of that.

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah, but they were in New York, too. I knew the ones in New York more. Ted Berrigan put out a magazine called *See*. Peter Schjeldahl put out a magazine called *Mother*. Aram Saroyan, I think, had a magazine called *Lines*. There were millions of them, you know? This was the time of Ed Sanders bookstore called *Fuck You*.

MS. RICHARDS: Which was where?

MR. ACCONCI: Lower East Side. But I remember East 2nd, East 3rd, probably B and C, maybe C and D.

MS. RICHARDS: Okay.

MR. ACCONCI: It was a thriving thing, you know? I mean, the little magazines meant a lot.

MS. RICHARDS: When you left—where did you move after living in Brooklyn?

MR. ACCONCI: I was in Brooklyn for a year. I know exactly because it's come up recently with the new museum. Then Rosemary and I—I thought we lived together one year after Iowa and then didn't live together again, but that might not be true. It might have been a second year because after this Brooklyn thing, you know, both of us, obviously, wanted to live in Manhattan. And we had a very large loft very cheap for like 80 dollars a month on the Bowery and Rivington Street.

MS. RICHARDS: Here is an address. The first issue, that's on Bowery.

MR. ACCONCI: Are you sure? Because I think by that time—217 Bowery, yes.

MS. RICHARDS: 217 Bowery.

MR. ACCONCI: [Laughs.] Yep. So this was after. I think it was after Rosemary and I didn't live together and then—

MS. RICHARDS: April 1, 1967 is the first issue.

MR. ACCONCI: Does it say April—it doesn't say April 1st. It's not as much April Fool's Day as—
[Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs.] Reading quickly—April of 1967.

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: I'm going to just change this disc for a second.

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah, please.

[END DISC 1.]

MS. RICHARDS: Hello. This is Judith Richards, June 21, 2008, interviewing Vito Acconci. This is disc two.

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah. So anyway, the Bowery—

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: The Bowery loft was—there was a break. I mean, because that was 1967. And when I got out of Iowa, it was—we moved back to New York probably in summer/fall of '64, so lived in Brooklyn. Then the way I remember it, we weren't living together for a year. I had a little apartment on East Second Street, Second Street between B and C. I was starting to get little teaching jobs.

MS. RICHARDS: Where did you teach?

MR. ACCONCI: A number of little places. One summer at Iona College, New Rochelle, taught a kind of history of world literature course. Taught a lot of English composition courses at Brooklyn College. Had a little place, actually near here, a part of the CUNY system, Brooklyn Polytech.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you want these adjunct teaching jobs to be—you didn't want full-time teaching jobs?

MR. ACCONCI: I needed to survive.

MS. RICHARDS: But you wanted these jobs to survive?

MR. ACCONCI: I needed to survive.

MS. RICHARDS: But you weren't looking for a full-time job?

MR. ACCONCI: No. I wanted to—you know, first of all, I was a writer. I didn't need much money. It was a time when rents were very, very different than they are now. I mean, I remember how much—in Brooklyn, in that Brooklyn apartment, which—I don't think it was a studio. I don't really remember it well, but it was probably at least two rooms. It was probably 60 dollars a month. The loft on the Bowery, which was, you know, kind of a conventional New York loft, 25 feet by 100 feet, very low ceiling, and I remember there wasn't any heat, maybe. But it was approximately 65 dollars a month. Until 1968, I didn't pay any rent that was more than 92 dollars a month.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: So it was easier.

MS. RICHARDS: So what was your—

MR. ACCONCI: So you could have, you know, part-time teaching jobs. I would get like 11 dollars an hour. But, you know—

MS. RICHARDS: That was a lot.

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: It was a lot. The minimum wage in 1967 might have been like a dollar-ninety-two?

MR. ACCONCI: Maybe. By 1968, I had a job teaching a course called Exploring the Arts—in 1967, actually—Exploring the Arts at the School of Visual Arts [New York City]. And it was around the same—it was exactly the same time that stuff of mine was shifting. But that was a great—that was a very important thing to me because I could try out things with my students, you know. I could play—I played Phil Glass and Steve Reich to my students.

At the same time, I played Quicksilver. You know, I never made a distinction between, you know, high art and low art. I mean—but it was—the thing that I've always done best is to be interdisciplinary. I've never had particular skills.

MS. RICHARDS: Were you, at that time, 1967 now, or coming close to 1968—did politics—how did the whole—

MR. ACCONCI: It was normal life.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: We went to—everybody went to demonstrations. Sometimes you didn't know. Were you going to demonstrations to possibly make a date? Or were you going for—you didn't really know. You were probably doing both. [Laughs.] It was a way that people of a like frame of mind—and, you know, they might have been very unlike. But with regard to this one thing, with regard to this one thing that, you know—

MS. RICHARDS: And that was the Vietnam War?

MR. ACCONCI: America has become criminal. We were all united.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you have an issue with the draft?

MR. ACCONCI: I was too late, again. I mean, I was a little—and I've forgotten something. I think I was too old because I was 27 in 1967. But there was a little thing that I didn't mention. When I was college, when I was in Holy Cross, the end of my first year, I joined something called the Marine Platoon Leaders Corps, where it was kind of like a reserve unit. It was the kind of thing where you would, after your first—if it worked, after your freshman year and after your junior year, you would go six weeks to Quantico, Virginia, and go through a Marine training. And then afterwards, after graduation, you would be in the Marines for three years as a second lieutenant.

MS. RICHARDS: So that was like ROTC [Reserve Officers Training Corps].

MR. ACCONCI: It was kind of—it was a little bit different than that, but I guess it was like that. I joined not because I had any interest in the military. I joined because I was seeing this woman who seemed to have no interest in me. And I wrote her a letter saying, "Because you have no interest in me, I'm going to join the Marines." And I sent a letter, and then I thought "Fuck. I've got to join the Marines now." [Laughs.] So I went down and joined the Marines.

MS. RICHARDS: Was there also, since your family didn't have money, a positive element that you would get money from this? Because I think that ROTC had this—they give you a little stipend.

MR. ACCONCI: I don't remember that being an issue at all, because I was still in school. You know, I wasn't—I never took it serious. I mean, I didn't take seriously that, wow, this means I have to be a

Marine for three years?

MS. RICHARDS: But after you graduated from Holy Cross, then you were a commissioned junior officer.

MR. ACCONCI: No, because—

MS. RICHARDS: Not like ROTC?

MR. ACCONCI: Well, no, you would be if you made the program. But after my first six weeks in Quantico, Virginia, I was kicked out. You could choose to leave. These were all like college kids, all right?

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. Yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: And this Marine thing is an important thing to bring up because I think it was so important to work of mine. It maybe on one hand was a continuation of Catholic School. But it was almost like a cartoon version of Catholic school. It was all about degradation. It was all about being totally, totally degraded. A whole platoon of these, you know, college kids—and, you know, the sergeants knew these were college kids. So they would have everybody say, all together, "I am whale shit. And that's the lowest thing in the ocean. I am whale shit."

And everything had some kind of quirk. If you were asked to go to the captain's hut, you had to knock on the door. And you'd hear this voice saying, "Louder. I can't hear you." Then you'd knock. Then he'd come and look. And if your fingers were bleeding, he would let you in. It was phenomenal.

MS. RICHARDS: Theater of the absurd.

MR. ACCONCI: It was phenomenal, you know. The way—okay. There would be mail call every day. Obviously, you wanted to get mail. You wanted to get mail very badly. But in order to get mail, the platoon would be on one end of a hut. The—I don't remember if it was a sergeant or lieutenant on the other end. In the middle, he would put one person in the platoon inside a garbage can. So the guy would be inside a garbage can with his head sticking up. If you're called to get mail, you had to run, jump over the garbage can, which was pretty high, almost inevitably kicking this guy's head in, and then you would get mail. So you'd be in a double bind. I want mail. I really don't want to kick this guy's head in. So you never know what you want. You can't want anything. You can only want what they want. It was unbelievable. Yeah, unbelievable.

There would be these exercises where, on a large trestle structure, there was a very big loudspeaker. There were two lines of people, two lines of, you know, whatever these people are called—pre-Marines. And we have in our hands this kind of stick with this hard pillow on either end. And we're facing each other. And this loudspeaker voice is saying, "You're a tiger. You're a tiger. Kill him. Kill him. You're a tiger." And I'm thinking, "I'm not a tiger." And I see this guy opposite me—he thinks he's a tiger. [Laughs.] So you're—every single day is like that. And every single day—

MS. RICHARDS: How did you get out of it then?

MR. ACCONCI: I got out of it because certain things I did, I did right. And one of the things that you had to do was, each day you would go to the shooting range at 5:30 in the morning. And somehow, I became this—I had never shot a rifle in my life. I think it all came out of hatred, that I hated these people so much that I was thinking, "I am shooting them." So I became a pretty good marksman.

And I could outlast everybody on hikes. You know, I had will.

But everything else, I did wrong. I would shave, and I would drip blood on my shirt. I would do a last-minute shine on my shoes, and I would get shoe polish on my ass. I did everything wrong. So I was kicked out. But when you got kicked out, it was a very significant thing because, again—well, not so much kicked out. This was more oriented to people—because you could leave. It was still a volunteer program.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: But I knew I wasn't going to leave, you know, because I—

MS. RICHARDS: What do you mean? You knew you wouldn't leave?

MR. ACCONCI: I knew that I was never going to say, "I don't want to do it anymore."

MS. RICHARDS: Really?

MR. ACCONCI: Because—

MS. RICHARDS: Even though you hated them?

MR. ACCONCI: I couldn't stand it. But, you know, I didn't get out of Holy Cross either. I don't quite know how to explain this. But it's like, once I said I—just like, you know, I sent this girl a letter saying I'd join the Marines, I've got to do it now. It was like [Jean] Genêt, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: Some kind of honor.

MR. ACCONCI: Like in that beautiful Jean-Paul Sartre essay on Genêt that, when Genêt was a kid, he apparently took a loaf of bread. And people around him said, "You're a thief." So, according to Sartre—I don't think a seven-year-old kid can decide this. But according to Sartre, Genêt decided, "From now on I am a thief. I am called a thief; that is my essence. Now I live up to my essence." I think I thought that way. Maybe that's a Catholic way of thinking. It might be.

MS. RICHARDS: So, luckily, you managed to be kicked out.

MR. ACCONCI: I was kicked out. But it takes you awhile to get kicked out. You know, it takes a while for your papers to be processed. So they put you in a special platoon, a platoon called the idiots platoon. Yes, these are all these college kids, you know, with probably relatively high IQs. The people who lead the idiots platoon have an IQ of 70 or under. They can barely speak. Yet they're ordering you around. [Laughs.] They're ordering you around, they're hitting you.

It's—did you ever see the—this is—it probably doesn't change very much because the standard Kubrick movie, *Full Metal Jacket*, was exactly like the training I went—and this was in 1980, this was exact—but it was about the time of the Vietnam War. But it was exactly like it. It doesn't change. It's been proven that this works.

MS. RICHARDS: So you were saying that this was an important experience.

MR. ACCONCI: Look at—I mean, I don't know. But I mean, also like, "You're a tiger. You're a tiger. Kill them." Audiotape stuff I did in the '70s.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: I don't know. I can't—I don't know if it directly came from that, but I can't claim it didn't come from that. And also—

MS. RICHARDS: Part of the—

MR. ACCONCI: Well, early '70s, you know. Catholic confession—I mean, I obviously got the—

MS. RICHARDS: So we're talking about—

MR. ACCONCI: But it was a mix. I got it from Catholic confession, but I also got it from the '60s, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: So at what point did your work move from this poetry and using the space on the page and words to performance? Is that the—is that correct that that's where it was?

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah, yeah, yeah. By '68-'69.

MS. RICHARDS: So in the midst of doing the *0-9*—

MR. ACCONCI: Things were changing. That's why I—

MS. RICHARDS: Your work was moving off the page.

MR. ACCONCI: That's why I pointed out that *0-9* was changing.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: John Perreault, who, you know, later—or maybe he was starting at the time, maybe a little bit later—wrote an art column for *The Village Voice*. He and two other people—no, some other people—he, Scott Burton, a person named Eduardo Costa, and Hannah Weiner did some programs of pieces called Street Works. The last issue of *0-9* has a supplement of Street Works. And stuff of mine had gone on the street, had gone to the street then. I mean, the last pieces of—

MS. RICHARDS: What do you mean stuff of yours had gone to the street?

MR. ACCONCI: The last pieces of mine that I thought of as a piece of writing was—I was dealing—when I was writing poetry, I wanted the page to be a field of movement. You know, how do I move from left margin to right margin? How do I move from top to the bottom? I wanted the words to be what they probably can be. I wanted words to be material, you know. Words are something you see through. I, and I think a number of people—I think Aram Saroyan was thinking this way. We wanted words that you looked at. We wanted words to be matter on a page. We wanted—I don't know if I can say "we" here, but I wanted a space where you traveled from left to right, from top to bottom.

I would try to write poems that wrote themselves, you know. I would start with the phrase, "Let it go." Then I would go to the word "go" in a dictionary and write down each word after "go" until I reached the bottom of the page. Or one of the last pieces of mine that I thought of as a piece of poetry was a book that consisted—a poem that consisted of a page from a book on reading speed, how to improve reading speed. And the title given to the poem was "The Time Taken for Me to Walk from 14th Street and Sixth Avenue to 14th Street and Fifth Avenue"—so an attempt to make reading time equivalent to writing time. By the time I got there, I thought, "Uh-oh. I'm on the street."

And also, I realized that, you know—I mean, I wanted to go on the street. I wanted to go to the street. And maybe I didn't know how to say that. But I started to think, if I'm so interested in moving over a space, why am I limiting the space to an eight-and-a-half-by-eleven piece of paper? There's a floor. There's a floor out there. There's a street out there. There's a ground out there. So in the back of my mind was, I got to move in real space. I don't know how yet.

MS. RICHARDS: Were you thinking of your work in relationship to choreographers of the time? Were you using space abstractly?

MR. ACCONCI: I mean, one of the most important things at the time was Judson Dance Theater. I think to anybody doing any kind of art at that time, Judson Dance Theater was in the background, you know. I mean, I never thought that I wanted to do dance on the stage or anything. But they did ordinary movement. I wanted to do something like ordinary movement in the world.

MS. RICHARDS: You were, though, doing this movement yourself. Your own body was doing this movement?

MR. ACCONCI: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: As opposed to imagining other people?

MR. ACCONCI: I didn't—it was so much mine. Did I ever think of another person then? No. A little bit later, I mean, in 197— but still it was me and another person. You know, after I did stuff involving my own person, I started to think, am I too isolated? I have to break the circle. And some piece in 1971 started to deal with me and another person. But I thought, I'm not changing anything. It's still—the viewer is still an outsider, you know. It wasn't until I started to do things treating the viewer as you that I made some kind of break, I think.

MS. RICHARDS: Was it difficult to—a difficult transition to stop thinking of yourself as a writer? I mean, did you remember that?

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And was that hard, since you had thought of yourself as a writer since you were a child?

MR. ACCONCI: Well, I thought of myself as a writer since I was a child, though, you know, I kind of passed over the fact—I did a lot of drawing when I was a kid, too. So according to elementary school teachers, you know, I had two talents. God gave me two talents. Which was I going to use? So I always thought of myself as a quasi-artist. But I had left that because I certainly didn't want to draw. And I couldn't draw. I copied. I mean, I did little sports magazines when I was a kid, you know. An edition of one that my mother and father saw, you know. But I copied. I copied things. I copied from sports magazines. I copied cowboy pictures. I was a not-very-good illustrator.

MS. RICHARDS: So as your work is moving from the page to the street, it's a smooth evolution?

MR. ACCONCI: Well, it was smooth for a number of reasons. It was smooth because of the time. You know, this was still, you know—okay. Maybe it wasn't quite 1968. But it was a time when things were shaking, all right? When schools were starting—you know, I'm teaching a course at the School of Visual Arts. It's not called English. It's called Exploring the Arts. It's a mix.

MS. RICHARDS: Very interdisciplinary.

MR. ACCONCI: I'm giving classes that, yeah, I'm reading pages from Samuel Becket on collecting stones, but I'm playing Steve Reich. And it's a whole mix of things.

MS. RICHARDS: Speaking of collecting stones—I'm trying to remember. Is this too early for Fluxus? No, there's—

MR. ACCONCI: Oh, no, no, no. I mean, when I came back to New York, they had Fluxus festivals every year on West 57th Street.

MS. RICHARDS: And how did that all—

MR. ACCONCI: I liked and hated it at the same—not hated. I liked and didn't like at the same time. It seemed too much about attention-getting, to me. It seemed too much about art as, I can be a little child, which has always bothered me a little bit about art. At the same time, sure, I was interested. I just didn't know it had to be so much, you know, I can do—the idea of somebody on stage, yeah. Judson Dance Theater interested me because it was bringing ordinary movement to the stage. Fluxus seemed a little bit like, watch me make a fool of myself and this counts as art.

And at the same time that I loved the idea of art, I started to think, I wonder if art is a way to become—is a way to keep being a child. I thought that you can get away with anything if you call it art. And I hated that part of it.

MS. RICHARDS: When—so going back to the time when your work moved from the page to the street and you did the piece on 14th Street—

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: So where did it go from there? And when did videos—

MR. ACCONCI: I want to make sure—when you said, was it difficult thinking of myself not as a writer? It wasn't because, again, John Perreault was very influential for me. In fact, one of these books—I don't know if it's 0-9, probably not. The poetry book is one of the people it's dedicated to because he really helped form my frame of mind. Because—and not just him, but he coined the word—he kept—you know, I was giving poetry readings at the time. It was kind of hard for me to do poetry readings because the stuff I was going on the page, you really needed to see it in relation to the page.

And I remember John Perreault at that time saying that, well, maybe poetry readings should be different than the stuff we write. Maybe there should be poetry events. And I know—so when I was giving poetry readings, they started to be different. But I don't know if I would have thought of that if he hadn't—that word poetry "event" seemed like an interesting thing. And I kept using the word "situation" at the time, though, strangely—and I don't know how this happened—at that time, neither I nor anybody I know ever mentioned the Situationists.

MS. RICHARDS: I was going to ask you about that.

MR. ACCONCI: I didn't know the Situationists existed until 1979. I remember a big book coming out then called *A Situationist Reader*. I missed it somehow. And I don't know if I missed it or if it was kind of very consciously suppressed in the United States. It might have been because, you know, Fluxus was available. All this went—but I never, I never knew situationists.

MS. RICHARDS: I meant to ask you, when you talked of Perreault—

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: What was the social milieu and the kind of the sense of artists—artists in the broadest sense—community at that time?

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: I've heard painters who were living in the coldwater lofts in Soho and all that talk about how much the community of painters is important.

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: How is your—who is your community and were they important to you?

MR. ACCONCI: I don't know if it was so—I mean, at that point, you know, I lived—at that point, now I was living in the—but in '67-'68, I was living in the West Village, a little—an apartment on Christopher Street between Bleecker and—can't remember now—Bleecker and Bedford, maybe. John Perreault, coincidentally, lived on West 10th Street around the corner. I remember Hannah Weiner, who also straddled maybe art world and the poetry world, had a loft on 20th Street.

MS. RICHARDS: That W-E-I-N-E-R?

MR. ACCONCI: W—I don't know if it's E-I or I-E.

MS. RICHARDS: Okay. I can look it up.

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Okay.

MR. ACCONCI: She had a loft, actually, on West 20th. I mean, I—

MS. RICHARDS: Was there a version of the Cedar Tavern—

MR. ACCONCI: I'm trying to—

MS. RICHARDS: —or a version of hanging around the automat or—

MR. ACCONCI: I was never a bar person. I was never—I mean, yeah, you know, we visited each other in our apartments or loft. But I—but this isn't saying it didn't exist. I never had a bar—I never was a real drinker and I never, you know—yes, I certainly tried drugs at the time—never liked them. I was always a workaholic.

MS. RICHARDS: That St. Regis—

MR. ACCONCI: Yes. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs.]

MR. ACCONCI: I don't know. I always—wasting time was scary to me. I don't know—still is.

MS. RICHARDS: So I interrupted you a bit. Going back to the trajectory—

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah. But like when I brought up the poetry event thing—I had the illusion that a lot of people who thought of themselves as poets were now doing these things called poetry events. So we were all going off the page. I didn't quite realize that I think I was the only one. [Laughs.] I mean, maybe people did it as a night out, but I apparently took it seriously. I apparently—once I went off the page, I thought I couldn't go back. But I don't think—it certainly wasn't like that for other poets.

But just the fact that I thought, oh, we're all doing it, this isn't anything special—it didn't seem very scary. But also what didn't make it scary was that I never thought of making money from any of this. I always thought I'd have a teaching job.

MS. RICHARDS: When you were working—when your work was becoming more performative, when did you start thinking of how to document that?

MR. ACCONCI: Probably very quickly.

MS. RICHARDS: And how did you?

MR. ACCONCI: Well, I documented it mainly in writing. I was a writer.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. ACCONCI: So you know, I realized, even I didn't write down something before an activity, my writing was a kind of directive for an activity, you know? Each day, pick out a person in the street. Each day, follow this person until this person enters a private place—home, office, whatever.

MS. RICHARDS: That's it—what's the title—

MR. ACCONCI: And as I follow each person, I wrote it down.

MS. RICHARDS: And what was the title of that piece?

MR. ACCONCI: *Following Piece*.

MS. RICHARDS: And the date of it?

MR. ACCONCI: Sixty-nine, October '69.

MS. RICHARDS: And this wasn't—you didn't—did you keep also a journal?

MR. ACCONCI: Never had—journals was really difficult for me. I mean, I've always tried to keep a journal, never really worked. I'm not sure why.

MS. RICHARDS: So this piece was documented in your notes?

MR. ACCONCI: It was documented in notes. But it was part of a program that John Perreault, et cetera, had organized, you know. And I mean, part of it is in here, you know. But also, conveniently, John Perreault, had started, I think—had started to write for *The Village Voice* at the time. So things got attention because he worked for the *Voice*. He could report it.

MS. RICHARDS: And how many times did you do that piece?

MR. ACCONCI: Well, it was done for—it was—I mean, it was something that the organizers of this

thing called Street Works had stipulated. There would be a show called Street Works for a month. And at the show, it would have a place—it was part of the architectural league. So you could hang something up on the wall. But for me, it meant the show takes place for a month. Each day for this month I have to follow a person.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that your first exhibition?

MR. ACCONCI: Probably.

MS. RICHARDS: In the art world context?

MR. ACCONCI: Probably was. I mean, by the time I had done that, I had already started doing things on the street. I had done kind of private—well, this was a private following thing. Anything following thing is private. But I would do these exercises that then I wrote down. I would stand on a corner. I'd pick out a person. This person is walking to the next corner. I give this person a head start. I give this person, say, a minute. Now I run. Do I outrun him, or does he beat me to the corner, you know?

MS. RICHARDS: Were any of these actions—

MR. ACCONCI: They were all documented.

MS. RICHARDS:—dictated in any way that connected to the way Cage or others used chance? Or how did you decide how long, how many people? What was—

MR. ACCONCI: I always thought of my stuff as the opposite of chance. There were always—they always had specifics. They always had directions. But, you know, they might still—I'm not—I don't agree with my answer yet. I'm not sure. They always had a specific time.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you plan it ahead, those criteria?

MR. ACCONCI: Yes, they were all—

MS. RICHARDS: Did you establish the criteria ahead?

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah. I mean, they might have been a minute ahead. Or I don't know. But they were written down, you know, that before I did something, I never thought like, oh, I'm following this person, now I've followed this person. I don't think it was ever like that. It was always—there was always a scheme.

MS. RICHARDS: A script.

MR. ACCONCI: Exactly, a script is the right term.

MS. RICHARDS: A score.

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah, yeah. A script, even better, because now, you know, just skipping for a second to architecture—you know, since the architecture we do has become very computer oriented, there is such a thing in architecture now called scripting. And I know people who are very adept at computer scripting said I was always doing scripting. It was a different kind of scripting, maybe. But it really is about, you give the computer a set of directions. I didn't give the computer a set of directions; I gave myself a set of directions.

[END DISC 2, TRACK 1.]

MS. RICHARDS: So going—that was 1971?

MR. ACCONCI: What? *Following Piece*? No.

MS. RICHARDS: Sorry, you said '69.

MR. ACCONCI: Sixty-nine, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Continue on how your work then evolved from that, that piece.

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah. Well, throughout '69, there were—most of the stuff was done on the street. And most of the stuff then was documented by words. At the same time, you know, for *Following Piece*, there are some photographs for *Following Piece*. Those photographs, in a sense, are not real. When I did the piece, nobody photographed me. I didn't want anybody to photograph me because I thought, if I'm following a person and somebody is in turn photographing me, whoever I'm following—I mean, this might be too visible; it didn't make sense.

At the same time, once I did *Following Piece*, I think I started to realize—and there was a beautiful—there was a conceptual artist then named Ian Baxter. Is that a familiar name to you? He was around a lot. And they called him—called himself—called himself and his wife N.E. Thing Co.—N period E period Thing Company, Canadian. And he had this great phrase that a word is worth 1000th of a picture.

And I started to realize, wow, in art terms, that's really true. It doesn't count. It doesn't count unless there's a photograph. Art magazines deal with images. So I thought, I have to have photographs of *Following Piece*. But it was very easy because on a New York street, all you have to do is stand there and it looks like you're following somebody because there's somebody there, you know? [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: That's an interesting statement you've made about art magazines.

MR. ACCONCI: Oh, yeah. It's a terrifying thing.

MS. RICHARDS: It's so—

MR. ACCONCI: That's why I think my stuff—I'm skipping. But in the '70s, when I was doing installations with sound, nobody knew what to do with those because an art magazine can't show sound.

MS. RICHARDS: But it points out your ambition. It points out that you were ambitious in the sense of thinking about how your work could be seen in magazines and seen by—

MR. ACCONCI: Oh, definitely, oh yeah. Oh, no, I never thought of stuff as private activities. I never thought of writing as private. I always made the assumption that there are people who have really influenced me, whether it's Faulkner, Genêt, William Carlos Williams, Jean-Luc Godard. I wanted to influence other people.

I never thought—you know, whether stuff of mine would make money or not, that wasn't up to me. But distribution, I thought, was important. Did I know how to distribute? Probably not. I don't think I've ever been a great distributor. But I always assumed this would be public.

MS. RICHARDS: That it's in the conscious—yes.

MR. ACCONCI: Which is probably another reason why, when you said before did I keep a journal? No, because I don't think I knew how to do anything private, in a way. When I tried to keep a journal, I found I was so conscious of writing that I had to stop. I didn't know how to just take notes. I do occasionally. But they're notes—somehow I have a—I've always, when I write privately or when I write notes, if I don't read it—if I don't read it within two hours, I can't read it anymore.

MS. RICHARDS: You mean you can't read your handwriting?

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah, yeah. And certainly, now it's worse since I've—since you start to use the computer, you're so unused to handwriting that it's probably gotten worse.

MS. RICHARDS: So after 1969 when you did *Following Piece*, you continued in thinking about photography, image?

MR. ACCONCI: Well, the way I thought of photography was very specific. I mean, yes, there were photos for *Following Piece*. But that to me was, yeah, this is necessary documentation. But I was thinking of photography in another way. I was—I did a lot of—in 1969 and in the beginning of '70, so both before and after *Following Piece*, I did a number of what I thought of as—and I used this term then—photo activities.

And I would go through various—I would go through a different activity, holding a camera. I would hold a camera, for example, a piece called *Toe Touch*—hold the camera while going through the motion of touching my toes. Reach my hands above me, snap photo one. Bring my hands down to my toes, snap photo two. So the photo would be some blurry streak and it would need a description—you know, and pretty what I said.

So the attempt was, you know, could you take a photo, not so much of an activity, but through an activity? Could the activity of touching my toes—could the activity of throwing a ball—could activities result in photos? It's not really that. But it was a—

MS. RICHARDS: Did you know Bruce Nauman's work?

MR. ACCONCI: Yes. By '69, I know Bruce Nauman's work, meant something to me in the beginning. And I can't remember when. But it was, I think, before—Bruce Nauman's work meant something to me at that point. Richard Serra's work meant something to me. His prop pieces meant a lot to me because suddenly it was about a before and after, you know. Somebody propped them. Somebody could unprop them.

And also, I think before I did any—I'm not sure of the sequence. But I think I saw movies of his like *Hand Catching Lead* and stuff.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. When you were talking earlier.

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah, yeah, definitely, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. So we're up to the early '70s and talking about photography. And when did video come into the picture?

MR. ACCONCI: Well, film came. Film came much earlier. And at that time, there was a difference between film and video. Now it doesn't count anymore. And any films of mine now have been

transferred to video. But at that point, video—at that point, the notion of film was important, particularly because of Super 8 film, that you could buy a Super 8 camera very cheaply. You could buy film at any drugstore. It was relatively small, so you didn't have to think of yourself as a filmmaker. You could carry it with you wherever you went.

Not that I carried it with me and documented wherever I went. I never had that kind of bent. I never had that kind of intention, you know, let's photograph the world around me. Somehow, I never did. In some ways, I regret that I haven't. But I never—I always had to plan something. I don't think I ever did anything spontaneously. I never believed in intuition. All of my stuff was very carefully thought. Yes, Cage interested me. But I didn't believe any of that Eastern stuff. I read—yes, because of Cage, probably, I too read D.T. Suzuki at the time.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: But it was another world to me. And I felt like, you know, for better or worse, I'm a Westerner. You know, I don't mean I think being Western is superior. But I am. And I'm always going to be a visitor to these other things. And also, I—it was too close to religion to me, and I never wanted religion again. Maybe if I hadn't been brought up a Catholic; maybe if I didn't, you know—maybe if I hadn't been embedded in something that, you know, once I was embedded in something I wasn't going to choose something that had any kind of relation to that.

And I know I'm sure, you know, Buddhism isn't about belief. But I didn't want to believe. I didn't want anything. I wanted to be committed to things, but I didn't want to believe anything.

MS. RICHARDS: It sounds like in the early '70s, most of—am I correct? Most of your references had become other artists in the art world, and that you at that point—

MR. ACCONCI: Actually, no.

MS. RICHARDS: —considered yourself an artist?

MR. ACCONCI: Oh, definitely.

MS. RICHARDS: Not a poet anymore, but an artist?

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah, yeah. But it was the same thing when stuff of mine became architecture. People didn't want to think of me as an artist. They accepted me as an artist quicker than anybody has accepted us as architects. But I remember Lucy Lippard writing something and saying, you know, "Vito Acconci, a New York poet." And I thought, wait a second. I'm doing something. This is a show. It's an art—you know, why am I stuck to my background? But even people who would claim you aren't stuck to your background still think that way, or thought that way. It seems sort of necessary to describing.

MS. RICHARDS: What was the next key piece after the *Following Piece*? Which next piece would you want to talk about?

MR. ACCONCI: The next key piece—but I want to go back to something, though, that you—you know, when you mentioned, when did video start? And I said film started. In the same way that I was using a still camera, you know, by 1969 I was starting to make films. But they were films like, you know, I set up a camera. I ran in a circle around the camera so that, you know, every—I don't remember—every 40 seconds I appear on screen for a second or two. Part two, the camera—the screen is empty. I'm off to the side. I jump onto the screen. So the size of the screen becomes my

measuring. How far can I get? I mean, my stuff was always like scripted, you know. It was always like, set up a task for myself.

MS. RICHARDS: What were the ideas that you were exploring in that?

MR. ACCONCI: Well, it was—you know, how can I use my own person to—as a kind of measuring instrument? It wasn't that far away from Minimalism. I mean, the most important work for me was, you know, the work around that time or a little before. You know, the work that meant most to me was Minimalism.

Why? Because Minimalism broke the frame for me. That when I went into a gallery with a supposedly Minimalist show, suddenly I felt like I couldn't be sure where the art was. So you have to be very careful. You started to look at the woodwork. You started to look at the—you didn't want to be fooled, you know. You weren't really sure. And before that, it was easy. What was within the frame, you know, this is art. Minimalism? Here, of course, what was in the gallery was art. The frame didn't break, it just expanded. But, you know—and I was so—but for me, it started to change the terms of art.

At the same time, I didn't want to do Minimalism because this was what was influencing me. I wanted to kill the father, you know? And so I had to find something wrong with Minimalism. And what I could find wrong—I don't know if I really believed this was wrong—was that, isn't it strange that this thing—the great thing about Minimalism is that it's industrially produced. There's no sign of the artist. And to me, that meant a whole—this never happened. The reverse happened. But I thought this changed the nature of the game, you know. The de Kooning signature didn't mean anything anymore, you know. Art was valueless.

And this was important to me, because, you know, I hated the economic situation of art. I hated the idea of, something has value because—and obviously, you know, the Rauschenberg, de Kooning meant a lot to me. But it didn't do what I thought I did. It didn't take away the value; it made it even more. You know, and I wanted to believe the other.

But you know, all the—I wanted to believe that my generation was going to destroy galleries. We were amazingly simpleminded. I think that the work my generation produced—you know, people are now very used to saying that, ah, the '70s was this last gasp of art. Then the '80s came and everything went bad.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: Not true. It was my generation that made it bad. We didn't mean to. But we were really dumb, because we did the kind of work that made a gallery dealer more necessary than ever before. Because now a person would go into a gallery and they would possibly not see anything. And the gallery dealer could say, "Now I'll tell you what the art is." So our generation really ruined—my generation ruined everything. We made galleries—we put galleries in the position of, "I am going to explain to you, the potential collector, why buying air is important," you know? "You don't know this. You don't even know what you're buying."

And I don't think that was true before my generation. So I think we, you know—our intentions were elsewhere. We thought we were going to make galleries unnecessary. It did the opposite.

MS. RICHARDS: When did you first have a relationship with a gallery?

MR. ACCONCI: Well, as early as the beginning of 1970, but it was a very noncommercial gallery. I'll

come back to this because when you said what's the next important piece after *Following Piece*?

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, yes. And you were also talking about filming.

MR. ACCONCI: But I had this little—well, the film, video, you know—I was using film the way I was using a camera, you know, taking a camera, holding a camera while going to the position of throwing a ball here. Set up a camera and do an action. Do an action that the camera measures or—I don't know. I'm not even saying it right. You asked me what did I think those pieces were doing. Oh, that's how I started talking about Minimalism.

I had to find something wrong with minimalism. And maybe one of the things I could find was, in spite of the fact that I loved the idea that the artist's hand was there, when you see a Minimalist object, it appears as if from all time, as if, you know, where did it come from? And I made this connection that a Minimalist object is like the black monolith in Stanley Kubrick's *2001*. Where did it come from? It appears as if from all time. Maybe all you have to do is bow down to it.

So I started to feel like, I have to make the instrument clear. And I think I got this from Serra, you know. I think I got this from the prop pieces. That the prop pieces were very different from Minimalism, to me, because Minimalism—it's there. There's no past; there's no future. The prop pieces had a past. He propped them up. Somebody could kick them. Well, they usually have plastic around them. You can't kick them. But of course they have plastic around them.

So I thought that, you know, I have to—whatever I do has to reveal the instrument of the action. That's how I started thinking of my own person. But you know, yes, it came from other art. But it came more from sociologists of the time. It came from Erving Goffman, Ray Birdwhistle, Erving Goffman-like books—even the titles of books explain it.

But, you know, books like—now I can't even think of titles. The titles would tell. They're all about human interaction, relations in everyday space. He was a sociologist that did a lot of work in Philadelphia and a lot of different neighborhoods in Philadelphia, relations between people. How close are people to—you know, all that stuff was in the air at the time.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. Yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: That was much more important than the art, to me. But not that—but again, Nauman and those—certainly, Nowman and those early pieces of Serra were important. I was starting to have some relations with artists—Dan Graham saw my work early. I met Dennis Oppenheim. So a lot of us were doing a lot of the same things around the same time. Those were probably the two people I had most contact with in that '69-'70 time. Maybe Dan, a little bit earlier—'69—Dan, I think, came across poetry of mine, you know, before, stuff of mine. But Dan showed stuff of mine to John Gibson, and the first gallery connection I had was John Gibson in 1970. I had a little show at John Gibson's in maybe the spring of '70.

MS. RICHARDS: So going on to, what was the next important piece in the '70s?

MR. ACCONCI: A piece done in the summer of 1970 for a show at the Museum of Modern Art. The Museum of Modern Art did a show in the summer of 1970. Kynaston McShine was the curator. A show called "Information"—so this was really—in the meantime—there's a lot of in the meantime. Lucy Lippard did a show before this, a traveling show. It was in Seattle, and it was in Vancouver. The title of the show was the population of—was a number, population of Seattle, population of Vancouver. It was a show in which the catalogue consisted of index cards. That was probably the

first big show I was in. Big in small terms, you know? But in so-called, what was starting to be called conceptual art, big.

And I did a piece there where there was a blown-up calendar—blown up meaning I just drew out a calendar with each day slot was the size of an index card. The show was for a month, I think. Each day, from the same mailbox, I sent a postcard to the show. But because of the mail system, even though I sent it each day, it didn't necessarily get there each day. So on the calendar, one day there might be one card, then there might be a blank, then there might be three cards. It was—again, it was trying to relate my activity to a mail system.

At the Museum of Modern Art, for this "Information" show, just for me, I think, this was the next kind of important piece I did. The Seattle show was kind of different because it wasn't in a place that I was in. The Museum of Modern Art show put me in a kind of a—

The MoMA show, the information show put me in a kind of quandary, because I thought, I think a museum is totally antithetical to anything I'm doing, you know? I'm doing stuff that has to do with everyday life space. Now, this is a museum. I hate museums, you know? And I assumed my generation hates museums. Why do museums have no windows or few windows? Is art as fragile as all that? And I think the answer is yes. Art has to be protected. Art has nothing to do with the world outside, you know.

I come from—maybe, I mean—my whole—everything I did in art was based on a hatred of art and a hatred of museums, because it was the opposite of everyday life. So when the occasion to do something at MoMA, what do I do? Either I reject it, or I find some way to connect the museum with my everyday life. So I did a piece called *Service Area* in which, for the duration of the show—and I think it was approximately three months—I arranged that my mail be forwarded by the post office to the museum.

So my space in the museum was a table with a container, and my mail is put in the container. So whenever I need mail, whenever I want mail, I go up to the museum to pick up my mail. There is a little calendar, so I mark when I pick it up. And you know, it was important to me because I thought, maybe this is—you know, it's a clunky way of connecting museum to my everyday life space because, you know, I lived on Christopher Street in the Village. So every day I had to take a subway, go up to the museum. Maybe I didn't do it every day. I probably didn't get that much mail at the time.

But it was important in that at least it was an attempt to connect museum to the space I would ordinarily want to use.

MS. RICHARDS: Was your father still living then?

MR. ACCONCI: No, no. My father had died in—my father died much earlier, '63. My father knew writing of mine, never knew other stuff.

MS. RICHARDS: Would you say—when you were talking about hating art in museums, I'm thinking, you know, what is this relationship with your father.

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah, no, I didn't know enough about museums then to—it was only when I started to realize—but remember. This was 1968 it happened. Museum was an authority figure, just like the mail was or, you know—not mail—

MS. RICHARDS: U.S. government.

MR. ACCONCI: M-A-L-E was. U.S. government was, you know?

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: Work of mine wouldn't have existed without—yes, it wouldn't have existed without Erving Goffman. But it wouldn't have existed without first feminist writings. You know, maybe not that very early piece, but the pieces that used my own person.

MS. RICHARDS: So the piece in the show "Information"—

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: What was the title of that piece?

MR. ACCONCI: *Service Area*. But it had another—besides it—I think, again, was it the most successful attempt to connect museum with my everyday life space? I'm not sure. But I didn't know—it wasn't a bad attempt. And I didn't know yet of better ones.

But what it also did for me was, it started me thinking of private and public because I started to realize, wow, my mail, something that you ordinarily think of as private, is now up for grabs. Yes, I could go up to get it, but so could anybody else. The guard would probably stop them. But my—you know, that's—something that you don't even think about so much as a private thing now becomes public.

And that kind of led to the stage of—you know, the first stage of pieces that includes *Following Piece*, that includes *Service Area* could be described as I, a person, an agent, attends to it, a world considered as if it's out there. How do I tie myself in to that world? There are people ordinarily walking on the street. How do I tie myself in to the street activity? There's a mail activity. There's people going to a museum. How do I tie myself in to that?

But once I started thinking of public and private, I started to think maybe I have to concentrate more on me. Maybe I'm thinking of myself more as a—I'm subservient to this external scheme of following a person, of connecting to a mail system at the museum. Maybe I have to start to concentrate on me, you know. So rather than I attend to the world and try to connect to the world, now I start to attend to me. I concentrate on me.

How do I prove, both to myself and others, that I'm concentrating on myself? One obvious way is to apply some physical stress to my body. Now, what does this physical stress do? Do I change according to this physical stress? Do I adapt to this physical stress?

MS. RICHARDS: And what piece came out of that? Where did that lead?

MR. ACCONCI: I think the first—it's always hard to—I mean, probably if I look carefully through the archives—the first piece I think of that made me aware of that, but there might have been—there is probably always a precursor—around May of 1970. And again, you know, this was another program I think organized by John Perreault as one person. He arranged for—there was a place—I don't know if you know of this—were you in New York in the late '60s, early '70s?

MS. RICHARDS: No. In '74.

MR. ACCONCI: There was a bar called Max's Kansas City.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, very famous, yes, yes.

MR. ACCONCI: Very famous art bar. So John arranged this program of pieces, 15— just like *Following Piece, 12 People, 15 People*—would from 1:00 a.m. to 2:00—well, from 1:00 p.m. to a 2:00 p.m. on a Saturday afternoon, people would do pieces at Max's Kansas City. So I did a piece where I was sitting at a booth alone in Max's Kansas City. I was sitting alone at this booth. I have my forearm on the table. I'm constantly rubbing, with my right hand rubbing my left forearm, I thought gradually developing a sore—turned out to be much more of a gash than I thought. But it started very, very innocently, you know.

I'm doing a piece at Max's Kansas City. Okay. I'm doing a piece. I should be this kind of almost self-enclosed object. I do something to myself. But this started attack, this started a notion of I'm concentrating on myself. Concentrating on oneself might be attacking oneself. I don't know if I used the word "attacking" then. But it was a way to embody concentration, you know. Yes. I can look at myself and concentrate. But I can't prove that. If I'm doing this, I guess I'm proving it.

I think that was the first. It wasn't quite the first. No, because I remember at the end of 1969, I did a talk at RISD, in Providence. And I was asked to do this little piece. And I did this little piece where I would take a bottle cap and press the bottle cap to my arm. And I would then stay talking to people. But when the mark wasn't there anymore, I would leave. That was probably a precursor. I obviously was thinking of, I had to start, you know, not attending to the world, but attending to me.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. Since it's been two hours—

MR. ACCONCI: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you want to skip a little further into the '70s for like the next 10 minutes or so?

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah. I mean, I can summarize. I mean, it's a little bit—we've been talking very concentratedly. But yeah. I mean, then it really became a step-by-step thing. I'm concentrating on the world, okay? Maybe I'm cheating. I'm using my own person in pieces. If I'm using my own person in pieces, I got to start concentrating on myself. I'm concentrating on myself. But I'm isolating myself. I have no connection. You know, the viewer is a voyeur. The viewer is looking in on an action as if it's some secret. So maybe what I'm doing is much too isolated.

So I start to bring in another person. I did a lot of pieces with the person I was living with at that time, Kathy Dillon. In retrospect, I think she should have gotten credit for those pieces.

We lived with each other for five years, from '67 to 1972.

MS. RICHARDS: So in a way it was a collaboration?

MR. ACCONCI: It was more of a collaboration than I admitted, I think. You know, did we think of the pieces together? I'm not exactly sure. But we were living together, and I think the pieces formed a lot from my relation with her.

MS. RICHARDS: Is she also an artist?

MR. ACCONCI: She didn't think of herself as an artist, no. No. She taught at public school. But we talked a lot, you know, in the same way that this book of poetry is—is it the book of poetry that's dedicated to John Perreault? I'm not sure. Oh, no, I'm sorry. It's a different book. It's a book of pieces from 1969 to 1973, is dedicated to Kathy Dillon, John Perreault, Dennis Oppenheim, and Dan

Graham because they were the formative influences on me at that time.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah. So I did—well, like a typical piece, when I thought of I had to bring in another person—there was a piece with—a piece done—most pieces I did have an occasion, maybe not in '69. But starting in 1970, I don't know if I thought of pieces so much until there was an occasion to do a piece.

MS. RICHARDS: Is that true?

MR. ACCONCI: That's probably not true.

MS. RICHARDS: Is that true [inaudible]?

MR. ACCONCI: It's certainly true from the mid-'70s on, once I did installations. I had no idea what I was doing.

MS. RICHARDS: Until *Adaptations*?

MR. ACCONCI: Until I had a space, yeah, yeah. It wasn't as true in 1970 as I thought. I did a lot of films. They didn't have a space, you know. But in '71, Willoughby Sharp, who was also instrumental, though a little bit later, which is why probably I didn't list him—little magazines were important. *Avalanche* was important. But not just *Avalanche*—there was a magazine in Cologne called *Interfunktionen*, a magazine in France called—a magazine, not in Paris, but somewhere in France called *Artitudes*—attitude, but with "art" instead.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: *Avalanche*—both of these I think were a little bit earlier than *Avalanche*. But the importance of these magazines—I mean, maybe *Avalanche* more clearly than the others, though *Artitudes*, too—stressed the artist as performer, the artist as activator. *Avalanche* made a point of, there wouldn't be any writing by critics. There would be interviews with artists. There would be an artist's face on the cover. You know, they did a special issue of mine in 1972, but other covers were who? The first cover was Bruce—I don't now remember if the first cover was Bruce Nauman or just Joseph Beuys. There was an Yvonne Rainer cover, a Barry LeVa cover, a Lawrence Weiner cover.

So it was very much the—well, their point was the artist as a person. It had a bad byproduct. Not every person gets on the cover of an art magazine. So that the artist became maybe the specialized person that I think a lot of people in my generation wanted to negate. Just one comment—I remember at the time of the "Information" show, Dennis Oppenheim saying to me, "You know, we shouldn't have our names on these pieces. It's not our names that are important." And he was right. But we did have our names—we didn't take our names off.

But we didn't know what to do, you know, because we thought that our name spoils it. It doesn't matter if this stuff sells. Once our name is there, we're in the same kind of artist-as-personality cult. This is about a time. And that's what was important about these magazines, that you know, I started to realize, yeah, you did stuff like this. Yes, I knew Dennis was doing stuff like this. Dan Graham not so much, but a little bit.

But then I started to think, wow, there's a person in San Francisco doing this. There's a person in The Netherlands doing it. There's a person in Cologne. And you start to feel, maybe you're not

crazy. Maybe there's something in the air, you know? So it started to give you—you started to feel like, yeah, maybe I should keep doing this, you know.

But the other thing is, the biggest magazine at the time—and even before—was the *Whole Earth Catalog*. Not an art magazine, but the most important magazine of that time because it made you think of the world as available to you, you know? It was basically a list of books, but it's books of survival, books of the whole earth, you know. Buckminster Fuller became very important. But the notion of—you know, the notion of, there could be a revolution in the United States, and we'd better learn how to survive. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Do you think of your video work as kind of separate? I mean, you did some very important, influential video work.

MR. ACCONCI: They were always a side thing to me.

MS. RICHARDS: So I was wondering if it's a kind of—

MR. ACCONCI: They were a little bit of a side thing. Why? I mean, in some ways I felt, yeah. Some of the video stuff or film stuff I did was probably more, quote, perfect. I don't know if they were perfect, but they were maybe clearer than other things. But to me, it was a two-dimensional space. I don't know if I was so interested in the two-dimensional space.

MS. RICHARDS: How many years did your work in video cover? How long a period of time?

MR. ACCONCI: It's funny. You always say "video" and not "film." I wonder why because I did more films than videos. And I did film first.

MS. RICHARDS: Moving image.

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah, yeah, yeah. The first films I did were in 1969. The last films were probably '71. Last—by that time, the first video was in 1970. The last video was in 1973. But there were now two exceptions. I did another film in 1974 and another videotape in 1977. But they were both very different. They were—it was my attempt to do a feature-length film, you know? An hour-and-a-half Super 8 film, a two-and-a-half-hour video. But it was almost separate, you know.

It was like—and then I never—that's not true, again. In 1984, at the time of the 1984 election, Jenny Holzer did this truck that would go to various voting sites. And she asked a number of people to do a short video. And I did a Ronald Reagan video, a very short, 20-second, 30-second. So there were some other attempts.

But, you know, I always had a bias towards a space you're in the middle of. It's not that I—you know, yes, I like a lot of the video that I did and a lot of the film I did. But in some ways, it's in the same position as a painting. It moves, but it's a two-dimensional space, you know?

MS. RICHARDS: Right.

MR. ACCONCI: And so I always thought it was a way to practice for other things, maybe, or, you know, whatever I was doing live or once I started to do installations. I didn't start to do installations really until '73-'74—'73, really—'72 is the first one. It never was that clear. You know, it seems like I started to do installations in '73, but there was a precursor in '72.

MS. RICHARDS: What was in '73? What was the installation?

MR. ACCONCI: I mean, the one I think of—but it was—

MS. RICHARDS: Well, you can talk about the one in '74.

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah. I don't know—I mean, there were a number of installations. But by '74, there was a show at the Museum of Modern Art, a six- or eight-person show, where I did an installation called "Other Voices for a Second Sight." It wasn't the first installation I did. What was? Well, you know, how do you define installation? Because there was an in-between period. There was a period where it was a kind of installation, but I also performed in it.

The end of 1973, a piece called *Scenes from the Other Side of the Campo* done in Rome was probably—no, it's not. I was going to say it was the first piece that didn't have live presence of mine—not true. Fall of 1972 at Sonnabend Gallery in Paris was—every time I'm about to say—it was almost the first one. The first one was—

MS. RICHARDS: You have a phenomenal memory.

MR. ACCONCI: Of pieces. I have no memory with how much money we lost on a piece or anything like that. I have no memory of how much something cost. May 1972 in a small show at the School of Visual Arts, show with me, Dennis Oppenheim, Howard Freid, Terry Fox, maybe one other person, was probably the first installation I ever did—a kind of corner space, a kind of bed, and an audiotape at the head of the bed. All my installations used audiotape.

First good installation was probably this 1974 Museum of Modern Art piece. It used the guise of a kind of all-night talk show radio show. So when people walked in to the space in the museum, there's a blinking red light. There's a table. There's audio equipment. There's a chair, so you could kind of sit at the chair or stand behind the chair. Voice—in the voice of a kind of long—15—radio show talk show that then led to these in-between moments of music. There would be two side rooms that people could only look into. One side, a kind of politic space. My person would—this is all stolen from Godard—political figures, political posters. The other side, kind of the opposite of politics, a kind of transcendence, mystic, disappear, but then always coming back to this talk show in the middle of very, very long text—like 45-minute, one-hour audiotape. Probably nobody listened to the whole thing.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, maybe this is a good time to stop.

[END DISC 2, TRACK 2.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Vito Acconci, 20 J Street, Brooklyn on June 28, 2008, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc number one [three], session two.

So as you were mentioning, last time we ended in the mid-ish '70s talking about the installation.

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah. What I don't remember is what we talked about and how—you know.

MS. RICHARDS: Okay. Not exactly, of course. Around that time—

MR. ACCONCI: I can try to sum up why stuff went to installation.

MS. RICHARDS: Good.

MR. ACCONCI: But I don't remember if I did that last time.

MS. RICHARDS: I think you should do it anyway.

MR. ACCONCI: I mean—probably starting by '72-'73, by the time I did *Seedbed*—and I think, you know, one of the reasons *Seedbed* was what it was, I wasn't visible. I was part of the space. I was under the floor. I mean, one reason was, I just hated the idea of a performer. I hated the idea that there was this attention on me. Therefore, I wanted to be part of the space inside.

MS. RICHARDS: Why did you hate that?

MR. ACCONCI: Because I didn't want to be a personality cult. Because I didn't want—

MS. RICHARDS: Were there other artists at the time you were reacting against in that way?

MR. ACCONCI: Oh, Fluxus was like that. That was way before. But it seemed like, you know, a person does this little act, almost like becoming a little spoiled child on stage. I hoped there was some way that this could be different. I hated the notion of performer. Performer meant theater. Performer meant actor, you know. I hoped that maybe there was another way to get at it. I wanted to be an instrument in relation to viewers. I wanted some interaction to occur. But if there's a star figure, I don't think there can be an interaction.

So I think—and I think one of the reasons I started to really question live presence is that it started to bother me that everybody who knew a piece of mine knew what I looked like. So I thought, you know, is this about developing a kind of work, a kind of art? Or is it about developing a personality? Is it about developing a cult of personality?

I might have mentioned last time, but I want to mention it again because if I didn't I think it was kind of important—you know, there were magazines that were important at the time. *Avalanche*, for example, in New York—and *Avalanche* made a point of, this is through the artist's eyes, through the artist's mouth. So there was the face of an artist.

MS. RICHARDS: You mentioned that they published a number of issues, artist's faces.

MR. ACCONCI: All their issues. All their issues had—

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. And that bothered you.

MR. ACCONCI: Well, no. I mean, I can—I mean, the urge was great. The urge was, let's show the artist as a person just like any other person. That part's fine, except every other person doesn't appear on the cover of a magazine. So once an artist's face is on the cover of a magazine, it probably makes too much of a point of who this person is. And this is something in passing. But I don't know. I think this is something that was told to me, rather than this person telling it to me.

Hans Haacke, for example, I think, has never allowed his picture to be taken—very understandable in a way. I've done so much the opposite. I always thought I wanted to be available. Both aims are worth considering, but I wonder if his is more effective. I mean, his I would be bothered by because it seems like I don't want to be as mysterious as all that. But each has its flaws, you know. [Laughs.] If you decide not to be photographed—

MS. RICHARDS: An in between where people don't care that much—that's kind of flawed, too. [Laughs.]

MR. ACCONCI: [Laughs.] Yeah, yeah. I mean, the thing is you have to say the yes or no. And both answers have a problem.

MS. RICHARDS: So moving ahead—

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah, please.

MS. RICHARDS: What was the next important exhibition and next important project, do you recall, from the mid-'70s?

MR. ACCONCI: I don't remember. Did we mention a piece called *Where We Are Now, Who Are We Anyway?*

MS. RICHARDS: Where was that installation?

MR. ACCONCI: Nineteen seventy-six at Sonnabend.

MS. RICHARDS: No, we didn't mention that.

MR. ACCONCI: Okay. Because that was, to me, a significant—I mean, it was my favorite installation or whatever. There were many.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that the piece with the table out the window?

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: No, we didn't talk about that.

MR. ACCONCI: I mean, there were many installations over the period of 1972 to '79. There were, what, 55 installations, 60 installations. You know, I tended always to do a lot of stuff. But also, this had to do with the way I was working because I didn't have pieces until I had a showing place, you know. I wasn't an artist who was doing stuff in a studio, and then stuff was transferred from studio to showing place. The showing place was—you know, installation meant something very, very literal for me.

You know, nothing existed until a space was given to me, until I kind of tried to figure out the gallery space, what particular quirks that it has. When I focused on those quirks, that's how I would evolve a piece. And that was really important to me because I didn't want the—I hated the notion of art is this universal thing that you can move from place to place. I wanted art to be very specific.

So what was important to me was, a piece took place in this particular space at this particular time. Ideally, it couldn't be repeated. Or if it was repeated, it means something else now because the space and the whatever—the groups of people—changed a piece. But you were asking?

MS. RICHARDS: Where—how do you do—can you say how you arrived at that position at that feeling of how you practiced? That was a very, very key part of your work.

MR. ACCONCI: Because I wanted to be—I wanted art to be part of—I don't think it ever really can. But I wanted art to be an activity like any other activity in the world, that you can describe, that's not mysterious, that changes as time changes. Neighborhoods change. Stores change. And I thought the idea of an art lasting through time seemed so horrendous to me because it seemed like religion. It was trying to make something be timeless. It was trying to make something not be

subjected to, just to the ordinary course of time in the world, you know.

I mean, at that time. I mean, I always loved the idea of Rome, you know, and things built on top of another. One time is built on top of the other. It's there as long as it has a use. And then it's covered by something else, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: Just to take a quick diversion, so how does that impact your attitude toward how museums maintain your pieces, museums that have acquired physical work?

MR. ACCONCI: It's not that easy for museums to acquire physical pieces of mine because most of those installations, the only physical things, you know, especially at that time, were installations. At that time, nobody believed an installation was worth keeping.

MS. RICHARDS: Do they have instructions on re-creating it, then?

MR. ACCONCI: I don't know. If somebody buys something, yeah. I have everything in my files. But even if there are directions or if there is a picture of the original space and the original—what if the space is different? It has to be adapted.

MS. RICHARDS: Going back to the piece at Sonnabend—that was 1976?

MR. ACCONCI: It was 1976.

MS. RICHARDS: Could you repeat the title of that?

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah. It was called the *Where We Are Now, Who Are We Anyway?* Like all the installations of the time, it tried to take off from the given physical space at that time. Sonnabend was at 420 West Broadway. The conventional entrance was the elevator. The elevator—when you got off the elevator, you went around the kind of L-shaped—it was basically an L-shaped corridor that then—and the L-shaped corridor passed in front of the three front windows of the gallery, an L-shaped corridor that led to what was usually used as the main room of the gallery.

So for the occasion of this show, the doorway of the main room of the gallery was blocked off. The outside of the gallery—the outside of this main room was painted black. So it became kind of a—maybe even a black object. It wasn't even a room, you know, it was a black object inside the overall space.

Next to this black room was a long wooden plank, a long—I can't quite remember. It was either close to the 40 feet or 60 feet. But it—the plank had legs, so it was a table. It was a long table extending down the leg of what I described as this L-shaped corridor. There were stools on either side of the plank, on either side of the table. The table was propped up on the windowsill of the gallery and then extends out the window, so over the sidewalk. How much over the sidewalk? Somewhere between 12 feet, 16 feet, pretty much the width of the sidewalk. At least, I know the goal was, it should be approximately as wide as the sidewalk.

Above the table, inside the gallery, is a speaker, a hanging speaker. There's a constant—the sound consists of a constant clock ticking. And as the clock is ticking, my voice comes in, my voice addressing potential people at the gallery, saying 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, what do you think, So-and-so?" "What do you think?" "What do you think, So-and-so?"

Sets of like 10—I think there were 10 questions. But there were a number—maybe 11 sets of 10 questions. At the end of the questions—I'm not sure if I'm remembering everything exactly. But at the end of the questions, there's a kind of shouting voice, again, my voice, saying, "Rise. Change places. Rise." There's a quick burst of music, violin music, almost like musical chairs, as if people are changing their seat at the table. Then the music is cut by a voice, again, my voice. So the voice changes a lot. I mean, I made it change a lot.

The musical chairs music cut short by my voice saying things like, "But there's one left over. What do we do with that one? Where do we put that one? What do we do with that one? Where do we put that one?" Then as the voice is kind of fading out, "Where do we put that one? What do we do with that one?" then from the enclosed—I don't know if I said that the room was enclosed. The black room was painted black and the doorway shut off.

As my voice is saying, "What do we do with that one? Where do we put that one?" from the black room there's a kind of burst of crowd noise, lots of people talking together. What I hoped was, the implication is, there's this crowd of people inside, the voices getting louder and louder. They conversed out of the room. You might be sitting at the table. Maybe these voices—this crowd inside can take over your place, your place at the table. But that's all—what I'm saying. I have no idea if people thought anything like that or not. I think they might have, but I can't say. This is what I hope. What I hope doesn't necessarily mean what happens.

MS. RICHARDS: Were you satisfied with the way that turned out?

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah. Well, to me, I felt like I had really—

MS. RICHARDS: You're doing it successfully.

MR. ACCONCI: I had really gotten to a point where I'm treating—or, at least, trying—I'm never totally successful. But I'm trying to treat a gallery or museum space as if it's a community meeting place. I'm trying to treat a gallery or museum space as if it's a normal place where people meet, as if it's a plaza, as if it's a town square. So yeah, I did feel this is where installation should be.

At the same time, I started to have the biggest nagging doubt I had had in art. I felt like I don't think my stuff should be art anymore, because I thought, I'm kidding myself. A gallery or museum is never going to be a plaza. It's never going to be a town square. A gallery or museum is a private place. It's not a public place. People can go there, but if I really want a public place, I'd better find some way to get there.

So at the same time, I think, that this was, you know, as far as I saw it, maybe—I don't really know if you can say as far as you can go in installations. But it certainly was as far as I had gone and, I thought, the best installation I did. I started to think, I've got to find some way out of art. That I found, I have to—if I really think I need a town square, a plaza, as much as all that, I'd better find some way to get there. So yes, it was the culmination of something. But it was also a very severe turning point.

MS. RICHARDS: And how did you proceed with that?

MR. ACCONCI: I mean, I was doing installations for awhile. In the back of my mind—and a long while, actually, because I was doing installations that I thought were always second best, third best to where we are now. But gradually, I think the way I always stopped one kind of thing, or I don't even know if I can say I stopped one kind of thing. It was more, one kind of thing, I kept going with it

because, at least for the time being, I didn't know where else to go. But I almost would let it kind of wear out until I realized I can't do this anymore.

But in the back of my mind, I started to think, if I really—or how do I—or it has been really in my—I don't even know if I can—maybe in 1969, 1970 I could say I was an artist. Starting from 1971, I think I kind of faced the facts. I was a gallery artist. I did stuff in galleries. Not that there's—and I'm saying this not that it's necessarily good or bad.

MS. RICHARDS: Rather than your studio? Is that what you mean?

MR. ACCONCI: Well, that I depend on—more than other artists, I depend—

MS. RICHARDS: But compared to an artist, you say a gallery artist is someone who doesn't do art in your studio for themselves, but does it for a public presentation in a gallery?

MR. ACCONCI: Well, it's more that I can't do art unless I have this gallery space. [Laughs.] I don't think I realized that when I was thinking of, you know, yes, I'm doing installations. I want to do installations for a specific place. Therefore, I don't have an idea until a gallery space is given to me. But the implication of that is, this is what I do.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. That period of years, those actions, those installations were incredibly influential.

MR. ACCONCI: Long period—'72 to '79.

MS. RICHARDS: In fact, in just yesterday's *New York Times*, maybe you noticed in the review of the Paul McCarthy show, your name came up, saying that he recognizes there's an installation in film program—

MR. ACCONCI: God, I must have skipped that over.

MS. RICHARDS: —recognizing that Nauman, Acconci, and someone else were very influential. And he absorbed it and appreciated it. And I think it's this period of your work that they were addressing.

MR. ACCONCI: I mean, I'm obviously grateful for that. But it put me in the position that a connection between me and a gallery—and it doesn't matter at all. You know, I had always made the assumption that my stuff probably wasn't going to sell. And that part was true. But it depended on the gallery, just as much if not more than artists who depended on a gallery to sell their art. It was an amazing double bind.

MS. RICHARDS: It sounds like the critical recognition that you had and the fact that you were showing in a very prominent gallery did—and what people knew of your work, for some artists that is a tremendous impediment to change. It doesn't sound like that was—I mean, how much of a role did that play in the transitions that you were making away from being, as you said, an artist, a gallery artist?

MR. ACCONCI: Probably none because I didn't think about selling very much. Does that mean I didn't want to sell? Not necessarily. But I didn't want to do stuff so that it would sell. And the stuff I did, you know, I didn't even have to say it was unsalable because galleries did. Galleries destroyed all these pieces. Not one installation was saved by a gallery. And I never stopped them because I—their attitude was, it was kind of—I was going to say their attitude was that this was like window

dressing. They would have never said that. I started to say that after awhile.

That I really provided—that, you know, I might not be providing sales. But I'm providing a very, very important business function for galleries. I'm bringing window dressing, curiosity interests, so that people—you know, this draws people in, and then they can go to the back room and buy something that's more easily salable.

I mean, I don't remember if I mentioned this last time. But this certainly wasn't something that I thought at the time. But in retrospect, I guess, after hearing so much talk about the '70s being such a pure period of art, you know, and the last pure period, and then the '80s came and everything changed—it was the '70s. It was we who caused it. Maybe not intentionally, but that doesn't matter because, with the kind of work we did, we put galleries in a stronger position than they had ever been before. A collector comes in and says, you know, "I don't know what I'm looking at."

MS. RICHARDS: You did talk about that.

MR. ACCONCI: I probably did.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. It changed the role of the gallery.

MR. ACCONCI: It really did. And I think that was very, very important.

MS. RICHARDS: So after that show—

MR. ACCONCI: And one other thing that I want to say, in passing—yeah. I mean, I showed with Sonnabend from '72 to '80. In retrospect, it was the only gallery I felt some kind of connection to. But it was a different time then. You know, it wasn't as—I don't think it's as—it wasn't necessarily all wonderful. But galleries—artists in the gallery, even if we were antithetical to each other, seemed to use the gallery as a kind of meeting place. And that's something that I think disappeared after that, you know. Mel Bochner and I would have conversations, you know. We were antithetical in work. But we argued. We discussed.

And, you know, it wasn't—I don't think it was just because of us. It was some spirit that Ileana transferred to that gallery, you know. And this was someone who I was exasperated by. But at the same time, it's the only gallery I've ever been connected to that I really felt like this is, you know, she might be an antagonist, but she's a really worthy one. And I really feel this closeness to this person. I never felt that with any other gallery.

MS. RICHARDS: So after that show?

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah, after that show.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah?

MR. ACCONCI: I was doing installations. But you know, as it went on and on—and some okay ones. But no new moves. I was going—I was using the same kind of method. But in the back of my mind—and maybe, you know, I think I'm convinced that you can't do anything until you have some kind of theory. You can't do something. I don't think you do things by accident. If it seems that way, you've formed something. You've formed something that then led to this kind of action.

But—and I know what was going on in the back of my mind, that I have to find a way to get to a public space. Now, I can't pinpoint exactly when a lot of this thinking happened. But it was

somewhere particularly between '76 to '80, probably getting more and more extreme about—I mean '78, it just occurred to me now, '78 I made these kinds of written and drawn proposals for street spaces. So nobody—I don't know if anybody ever saw them at the time. Or maybe they were published somewhere. But in my mind, I knew where I had to go.

MS. RICHARDS: During that pivotal time from '76 to '80, were there any exhibitions that you remember were influential that were important?

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah, yeah. I mean, again, the Sonnabend was a particularly important installation.

MS. RICHARDS: I don't mean your work.

MR. ACCONCI: Oh, oh.

MS. RICHARDS: I mean [inaudible] any individual artist, museum, gallery? Were there any things that, even if they're historic?

MR. ACCONCI: Art was never—like I tried to say last week—

MS. RICHARDS: Art was never the influence.

MR. ACCONCI: It was never the most important one.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah. You know, I was in Documenta [Kassel, Germany] in '72, and, you know, did a piece that was kind of important to me, but did a piece that was telling me that—that piece particularly was telling me that—it was done after *Seedbed* and it was an attempt at performance. And I thought, wow, I'm really going through the motions of performance. I'm almost setting myself up as an actor. It's clear that this stuff is over for me. But, you know, I still did—I did kinds of combination, installations with performances, like '73. And then it petered out.

MS. RICHARDS: So by 1980, then, where were you? What was your—where did you find yourself at that point?

MR. ACCONCI: Well, I mean, the stuff started to change from installations. I guess people still called these installations. They seemed different to be because they weren't necessarily dependent on a gallery space. But they were—yeah. And where we are now, people maybe—I don't think they did as much as I would have hoped they did. People sat on the stools at the table. But it was an art piece. People didn't know. You almost had to have a sign saying, "Please sit here." People are used to having their hand slapped. They're not going to sit down unless they're sure. Now maybe it's changed a little bit, but it's still very hard to know.

Let me just go back quickly to, during the '76 to '80 period, in the back of my mind I was starting to be convinced that, yes, I need to find a public space. I need to go to a public space. I have to realize, and I'd better recognize, that there are disciplines that already deal with public spaces. Architects deal with public spaces, maybe landscape architects, maybe industrial designers. But I started to realize, I have to find a way to do something like architecture for myself. If I'm doing something in a public space, I should know the rules. If I do something in a public space, it's architecture. So let me find a way.

I guess it could be sculpture that people walk around. But I assumed that that's not what I wanted

to do in a public space. But I thought I had to start to—you know, it's too grand to say I had to reinvent architecture for myself. But I had to resee architecture in a way that I could find a way to use it. Architecture—work of mine had, you know, pretty much been involved with body, with person. So I started to think, how can the body cause architecture?

So in the beginning of the '80s, you know, after stuff had been so-called installations from '76 to '80, some kind of change occurred. Pieces of mine started to consist of something that could be used by a visitor to the gallery, a user, a viewer. I wanted a viewer not to be a viewer. I wanted a viewer to be a user. So pieces started to consist of something that could be used by a viewer, something like an instrument, a vehicle, a swing. The use of this instrument or vehicle makes some kind of shelter, some kind of architecture.

The architecture carries some kind of sign, some kind of sign of the culture. Viewer maybe starts to think, where does he or she stand in relation to this sign? And the first attempts were, you made one kind of space for yourself, as you use something. You made another kind of space for another. Like in 1980, there was a piece called *Instant House*—four panels, five-by-eight panels in a cross shape.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you show that at Sonnabend?

MR. ACCONCI: No, I didn't, actually. I showed it at the Kitchen in 1980. Why at the Kitchen? I'm not sure. I mean, the Kitchen—I did it in a number of shows at the Kitchen. If I had a second-favorite installation, in '78, I did an installation at the Kitchen when the Kitchen was on Worcester Street, a piece called *VD Lives, TV Must Die*.

Why don't we go back to that piece, for example? Because that's a really maybe good example of how pieces—how I came up with pieces during that installation time. I was doing a piece in this Kitchen space. The space had five columns. The five columns are obviously interruptions to whatever was there. But obviously, I couldn't ignore the columns.

So the way I thought of it was, I have to make use of these columns. These columns now become the support for two giant slingshots, two large rubber bands, you know, one rubber band going to three columns. One column was shared. And then, you know, two columns and a shared column holding one rubber band, the other two columns and that shared column holding another rubber band.

And significant in installations, the physical—I don't know what to call it. The physical setting, the physical situation I made always came first, even though the pieces always had audio, sometimes video. They always had text. It never started with text. I needed to have a situation first, and then decide, okay, what can be said now? So I had to make these slingshots, or design the slingshots.

Each slingshot held in place a—it was a bowling ball, actually. So that—and they were really like slingshots, rubber band stretched. So that, you know, at least theoretically—I mean, this could be done. Again, it was the Kitchen, but it was still a gallery. A person could unhook the hook. The bowling ball now—the rubber band would spring. The bowling ball was aimed at a television set. There were two television sets. So the bowling ball would—maybe would miss the television set, maybe would break the television set.

But behind one television set, there was a window. So it could go out the window. Obviously, it didn't happen. So I think the title in this case came first. Knowing what this bowling ball could do, the piece became called *VD Lives, TV Must Die*—maybe my favorite title of installations. It had

video. It had—and it had text. And it was all about pricks and cunts. It was called *VD Lives*.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: But again, to go—I don't think it's necessary to go through the whole text. But what was important was, I couldn't—I don't know if I'm getting at this completely. But the way—what a piece meant to me during an installation is, I had to make this kind of—I had to make the physical qualities of what was starting to become this little world that viewers were in. But I had to make a little world first before I could title it, before I really knew what it was, what I was getting at, and before I could write text.

Like, you know, the table going out the window at Sonnabend came way before. Then I decided, okay, what happens here? Obviously, there's a community meeting. So there's my voice. What is my voice going to say? Well, I have a table here. I got to address these people. So therefore—and obviously, I wanted to pick common names, but names that, you know, you could very easily associate with somebody in the art world. But it's easy, you know.

"What do you think, Barbara?" Somebody's going to think of Barbara Gladstone. Probably when I said, "What do you think, Bob?" Bob Morris was somebody I had in mind. But there were a lot—Bob Rauschenberg, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: But—so I didn't want them to be so specific that they only were so-and-so. Yeah. Go on.

MS. RICHARDS: When you described the piece at the Kitchen—

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Unlike the pieces at the Sonnabend, it sounds like there's a sense of danger or potential violence or potential destruction. Did you want—did you ever—why didn't you allow the bowling ball to hit the TV at some point and then bring it back, and people would see the actual—why did you not—

MR. ACCONCI: I didn't not allow it. How would I allow it? It was there. A person could unhook it. Nobody said, "Don't touch." So—

MS. RICHARDS: So you wanted—did you—

MR. ACCONCI: It didn't make sense for me to touch it. It's for other people. I mean, at the end of the show, yeah, I wanted to see if this worked. So we put a mattress against the wall—because, obviously, we'd better not break the window. It worked. I released it.

MS. RICHARDS: It broke the TV?

MR. ACCONCI: But I released it—no. No, no, no. I didn't break the TV. The show was over. It wouldn't make sense for me to use my own piece.

MS. RICHARDS: Okay.

MR. ACCONCI: I don't know. I mean, why? You know, I mean, this is for other people.

MS. RICHARDS: So all that tension was in the mind of the viewer throughout the time, imagining what might have happened.

MR. ACCONCI: I don't know.

MS. RICHARDS: That was unintentional?

MR. ACCONCI: It was not a—

MS. RICHARDS: Was it intentional to you that that would be an element of the piece?

MR. ACCONCI: I hoped that a person would realize, this is a spring. I can't say whether a person realized that. This is a spring. I have the power now to release this. I don't know if they thought that. But for me to do it wouldn't give them a chance.

MS. RICHARDS: And whether or not someone actually did it wasn't a measure of the piece's success?

MR. ACCONCI: I think the piece would have—I mean, I asked myself, What if somebody does it?

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: And then I said, Probably the piece has to be over. I don't think it would be rebuilt if somebody did it.

MS. RICHARDS: So it needed to be seen in that state, before it was released?

MR. ACCONCI: Or somebody could have done it. I wouldn't stop it. I mean, I wasn't there. I'm not understanding.

MS. RICHARDS: You said if it had been done, the piece would have ended.

MR. ACCONCI: Well, I probably wouldn't have rebuilt it. The piece would have unbuilt itself.

MS. RICHARDS: But you would have left it on exhibition?

MR. ACCONCI: But it would have unbuilt itself.

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs.]

MR. ACCONCI: No, no, no. Maybe you're not getting it.

MS. RICHARDS: I see. Okay. The rubber band would have been released, and that would have [inaudible].

MR. ACCONCI: If it's released, it's not there anymore.

MS. RICHARDS: And you couldn't attach it again?

MR. ACCONCI: You could. But I'm not sure what I would have done because it didn't happen. But, you know—and it occurred to me what would have happened. And I thought, maybe that means somebody used it, so it's over. But I never had to make that decision. But I think the piece was saying something to me. And I think that's—I think a violence was more—I was telling myself, I got

to get out of these fucking galleries. I have to break out of this window. I can't be here anymore.

So yeah, I don't know enough. I mean, yeah. I hope that tension, et cetera, was available to people. But I knew what it was saying to me, I think, that I have to break out. I think when you do—yeah, I hope when you do a piece, you're doing something that is available for people. But you also have a reason to do it, yourself. And I think, you know, with each project you do, you try to redo a project you've done before in a way, or undo the faults of a project you've done before. You hope you go to a further step, you know?

MS. RICHARDS: So—and where did that project then lead?

MR. ACCONCI: Well, that was like 1978, pretty close, not exactly close to 1980. But it led to—well, what it led for me for thinking that—okay. Obviously, did I really expect a viewer to release this rubber band? And I probably had to admit to myself that I think the custom of—I don't know—gallery politeness is too strong, you know. Nobody's going to do it. But I thought, maybe I'm telling myself that I have to find more for viewers to actually do. That it's not enough for viewers to sit on a stool at a table. It's not enough for viewers to walk by something and think, "Yes, I can release it, but I'm not going to because I'm in a gallery." I have to find something for people to do, which then led to pieces like *Person Sits in a Swing*, you know?

MS. RICHARDS: And where was that piece installed, the person sitting in a swing?

MR. ACCONCI: That was at the Kitchen, too.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh.

MR. ACCONCI: That happened to be at the Kitchen, too. But then there was one at Sonnabend a month later. There was a piece called—you know, from 1981 to '82, all the pieces were person does something. Person rides a bicycle, sits in a swing, pulls a little child's cart while that person is sitting in it. And whatever action of the instrument makes something.

[END DISC 3, TRACK 1.]

MS. RICHARDS: Was that time—during that time when you perhaps began collaborating more with people who would help you construct, built—

MR. ACCONCI: Totally, yes.

MS. RICHARDS: You're collaborating, whether it's an engineer or a mechanic or—

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Whatever you needed.

MR. ACCONCI: And it was very much two specific people. I mean, people had built pieces before, you know. People built *Seedbed* in 1972. *VD Lives*, the Kitchen piece, was built by people working at the Kitchen who happened to be Robert Longo, Michael Zwack, Troy Brauntuch. I mean, they were people I'd met. Troy I met at CalArts. Robert [Longo] and Cindy Sherman, I met—and we became pretty close friends for awhile in the late '70s—met them at University of Buffalo.

They ran this little place called Hall Walls. And they had this amazing kind of self-assurance, you know. They asked a number of people, "Can you come up to give a talk? We really don't have

money. But we would love to have you talk." And a lot of us said yes, you know, because they seemed so intent, you know. "We're in the middle of Buffalo. It's snowing. You know, we need something." [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Help.

MR. ACCONCI: And it was a great kind of environment. And other people taught there. Buffalo was a very strange place then. Tony Conrad taught there, Paul Sharits. It was a very live place.

MS. RICHARDS: How do you spell Sharits?

MR. ACCONCI: Sharits—he died afterwards.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: S-H-A-R-I-T-S. Filmmaker, Flicker Films?

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: Tony Conrad also did films, but did music, and is doing music now and is still very influential, I think, towards—to younger people.

MS. RICHARDS: So back to that time. You say you started more often collaborating with the person physically making the [inaudible].

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah—no, but that's a really important thing. And I'm glad you're using the word "collaborating," because that wasn't a word that we were used to using and it certainly wasn't a word that galleries wanted you to use. These were people who built pieces for the artist, you know.

I met these two people at the time, mainly because I tried to do *Instant House* maybe six months before, seven months before, couldn't find anybody who could make it work, you know. Then I—at this time, Dennis Oppenheim had just met these two people who had just graduated. I'm not even sure if when he met them they had graduated yet—graduated from graduate art department at Columbia—John Tagiuri and Robert Price.

And they had this great attitude of like, "Show me what you want, what you need. I bet we can do it." You know, it was like they had this troubleshooter attitude. And they also realized that, you know, the money that I was going to get to build stuff, the money that Dennis was going to get at that time was really low. You know, you had to build these pieces on like 2000 dollars. But I realized, wow, I've met people who can do pieces like *Instant House*.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: And after doing—and so I worked with them for, you know, for awhile really. You know, '81 to—'80 to '82, '83—and, you know, kept working with John. I mean, John and I are still friends, you know. He doesn't do that kind of stuff so much. But every once in awhile, if an old piece has to be done, he's the best person to get to do it. But it really shaped the frame of mind—it really started me thinking in terms of forming a studio because I've started to think that, you know, I couldn't even think of pieces like this if I didn't know these people and if I didn't know that John and Robert could build these pieces. I was starting to make assumptions. I could think of anything; then we could talk together and they could find a way to do it.

So I was starting to realize that—exactly the word that you used, that these people aren't building pieces for me. We're collaborating on pieces. And starting in the back of my mind was the notion that, I have to start to admit this. And—but again, there was a long time between 1980, 1982, to 1988, when Acconci Studio officially started. But the starting of Acconci Studio was trying to make the statement that, these are people working together, you know? Yeah, the studio might have my name—and in retrospect, I wish I hadn't given it my name. But this is a—these are a group of people thinking together, collaborating together. And it's a very hard thing to get people to accept.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you struggle with whether or not to put their names on the wall label or—

MR. ACCONCI: I always put their—

MS. RICHARDS: Did you have—

MR. ACCONCI: I always put the word—

MS. RICHARDS: Did you have—

MR. ACCONCI: I always put it on; galleries wanted to take it off.

MS. RICHARDS: Right. Did galleries and museums go along?

MR. ACCONCI: Museums weren't so bad.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh.

MR. ACCONCI: Museums—I don't know. I mean, I had a museum show in 1988 right before I had the studio.

MS. RICHARDS: I remember when it was controversial.

MR. ACCONCI: And certainly—I mean, Linda Shearer had a very short-lived career at MoMA. I think she did my show and nothing else. But she certainly agreed to it. Galleries were more hesitant because I think galleries saw that, "Wow, this means that, you know—who did the work?"

MS. RICHARDS: Right.

MR. ACCONCI: So, you know, I think it was a trickier question. And it's not that—and to be fair to galleries, you know, I mean, it's not that they didn't want to have it. But they thought, "Well, can't we just have it at the gallery desk?" And I said, "But, you know, people don't look at a gallery desk." And, you know, sometimes I got my way; sometimes, I didn't. But sometimes—I mean, there was at least one time when Sonnabend did put their—they'd say, you know, "built by." By it was "built by"; it wasn't that this was a collaboration. And that was my fault because I didn't think—you know, I started to think that I have to start admitting this collaboration. But I didn't until the studio formed.

And now—and even now, though, you know, any time—and it's not just art magazines. It's just as much architecture magazines. We always, any time we send photographs, it's always Acconci Studio and the names of people who worked on it are very often, in a magazine it's Vito Acconci.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. ACCONCI: I mean, the notion of the master architect is just as strong, if not stronger, than the kind of supreme artist.

MS. RICHARDS: So picking up—

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah, please.

MS. RICHARDS: The pieces you were making, the action pieces of the swing, et cetera—

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And then you—when we come to 1988 and you form the studio—

MR. ACCONCI: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: Then how did you work—what were the first pieces you did in the studio?

MR. ACCONCI: Well, I mean—again, we have to go back a little bit because—yeah. Person-activated pieces really didn't last that long. It was basically from '82, '83.

MS. RICHARDS: What year was that big piece at MoMA, where you walked in and there were different levels, and there's a whole structure I saw? My thinking—maybe it was somewhere else.

MR. ACCONCI: There was a show in '88 at MoMA. But I don't know if there could be pieces that would be described as that. There were pieces that were more described as three upside-down houses. There was a piece called *House of Cars*.

MS. RICHARDS: Okay. Maybe. But there were things—

MR. ACCONCI: I think you're thinking of a piece later.

MS. RICHARDS: Okay.

MR. ACCONCI: I think you're thinking of a piece at the Guggenheim downtown. But that wasn't until 1997 called *Tele Furnace Systems*.

MS. RICHARDS: No, I'm thinking of a piece, that piece at MoMA that—I'm putting things together.

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, anyway, go on.

MR. ACCONCI: Okay. Person-activated pieces were from '80 to '82, '83. Why did they stop? They stopped—I mean—what I loved about those pieces was that—it was about people doing something—or not doing something. The instrument was set up. They sat on a swing. They rode a bicycle. I mean, the reason I'm saying that, the reason I'm criticizing what I'm saying is, yes. On the one—I mean, any time I like something in a project—this has always been true—yes, there's something to like. But there's something to really not like, too.

Yes, a person can do something. But a person can do only what I've set them up to do. There's a swing and they can sit on the swing. There's a bicycle and they can ride the bicycle.

MS. RICHARDS: Is there something about—

MR. ACCONCI: In other words, it's a little bit like supermarket freedom. You can have everything you want, as long as the supermarket carries it.

MS. RICHARDS: I was thinking of it more on a philosophical level.

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: There's a certain kind of critical debate that give you a structure for moving on because you're thinking, you're always looking at something in two ways, in a kind of a pro and con. It goes back to that Regis High School and this wonderful training.

MR. ACCONCI: Well, yeah. No, I think it does. Hopefully, that the con, you know—the liking part—you can like something so much that now you can be so satisfied that you don't have to go on. If you don't like something, there's always something else to do. [Laughs.] So it's something that I probably inevitably have, because otherwise, I may be afraid that I would rest, you know. And I'd better not, you know, because—because why?

MS. RICHARDS: It sounds like that's a critical, a crucial way of thinking for you, to keep moving ahead, or keep moving. You're thinking, "Okay, what could I do better?"

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah, we always want to—

MS. RICHARDS: We have that. What can we do differently?

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah. I always want to find, you know—and the studio talks like this, okay? We like such-and-such. Okay, what was wrong with it? And it's very easy to find, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: Is that typical in an architecture studio, or is that really unique?

MR. ACCONCI: I don't know if I know. I would assume it's typical. I've been told by—you know, obviously, some people in the studio have been at other places.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: And they said this isn't typical at all. [Laughs.] And also they say what's not typical is the tendency we have, that's sometimes a very self-destructive one, that we're working on a project. And after, you know, we've been working on it for—you know, it's still in our proposal stages. You know, sometimes proposals take a long time to do. But we've been working on it a month. And we're working on it a month and a half.

And a day can come where I say, "Let's think a little bit because I'm starting to think we're on the wrong track." And people say—any architecture studio they work at never thinks that way. That once they decide on a method, they're going to carry it through. My retard is always that, I don't know how to carry something through if I start to believe something's gone bad. I've really—the spirit's gone, you know? I don't know how to finish something if it's so clear that we really could be doing something better.

And then they say, "Yeah, but maybe we don't have time to think of something better." That's possibly true, and I know that. But I don't know—once I know what's wrong—once I know there's something wrong, I don't know how to forget it. I don't know how to just carry it through.

And that is a lacking. At the same time, I'm kind of glad I have it. On the one hand, I'm sure I stressed last week that, you know, after coming from Catholic school, I don't particularly want to believe things. But I do want to be committed to things. And if I—but commitment usually means, for the time being, you know. But if I can't be committed to a project I'm working on, I've lost the

impetus.

MS. RICHARDS: So all that—

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah, sorry, sorry.

MS. RICHARDS: We should go to the studio, the formation of the studio.

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: When you decided to form the studio—

MR. ACCONCI: One quick sidetrack, though. After those—because this will lead into the studio easier. Yeah. There were those person-moving pieces. Why did they stop? Because I still wanted people to use things, but I thought there's—you know, what I love is, in those person-usable pieces, it's the person that's made the thing exist. Because as soon as the person gets off the swing, the thing doesn't exist anymore. And I really loved that part of it.

Yet, it seemed like, if you're dealing with spaces, spaces are something you go back to, you know? I mean—you know? I've lived in New York all my life, and I've discovered a new building on a street that I've walked down 1000 times. So you have to revisit spaces. So maybe spaces have to be there for awhile.

So starting in the mid-'80s—and this was before the studio—things became—weren't movable anymore. But they were all house-like or furniture-like. Did I think I was doing architecture? I think I was starting to find I'm going another step in rehearsing for architecture. I'm making architecture prototypes for myself, you know. I am making a prototype house. In my case, it's three upside-down houses, so it's a bad-dream house. It's still a house, but maybe a house on the other side, or you know.

Because a lot of pieces in the mid-'80s was making the idea of a landscape—a piece called *Face of the Earth*; an Astroturf-covered platform led up to by steps. The platform is in the shape of a face. The eyes, nose, and mouth are places where people can sit inside, you know. In some ways, this was—for me it was maybe the most important period that led to architecture. But at the same time, it was the hokiest period. This is my Disneyland piece—period. Every space had to almost look like a person. It was almost as if I didn't believe that people would use something unless it was person-related.

But it was also significant that, you know, a period of architecture that, in retrospect, for me, is a kind of like aberration, post-modernism, and, you know, American stuff—not just American stuff—in the '80s was the kind of architecture that made architecture accessible to me. That I think at another time, I would have thought, "How can I have anything to do with architecture?" But if I could think, wow, I can make a house. And the front of the house can look like a face, you know. The windows can be two eyes. There can be a window in the middle that's a nose. The door is a mouth. Suddenly, it was accessible to me.

So architecture became possible, whereas at another time, much as I—yes, I loved—from afar, but I loved Frank Lloyd Wright, [Le] Corbusier - I felt, I can't possibly do this. But you know, as hokey as a Michael Graves thing was, I thought, I can think this way. It's easy. You think like a child. You have a child's version of a house. And now you do it. So it was a great starting point for me.

And again, I think it's unfair to call Venturi exactly a post-modernist. Venturi was very, very

important to me at that time because it was—you know, in the same way that—and I know last time I talked about—you know, it's as if my notion of myself as a writer began when I learned conventions from Jasper Johns. Venturi was another way of learning conventions, you know? And it was—again, it made something so possible for me. I mean, you know, you started to realize, yes, windows and doors are openings. And now you're just—no, I don't know if Venturi said this. I probably said this. But I probably got it from Venturi. You know, a house is a closure. Now you have openings. It depends on your desire what kind of openings you have.

Say, first of all, if you're going to have openings in a house, where are you? Are you inside or outside? You know, if you're outside, you're trying to get in. If you're inside, you're maybe desperately trying to get out. I mean, I started to think of architecture that way. And I can't claim Venturi said that. I know I did. But something about Venturi's way of making these things so much a part of everyday life and statements of Venturi that seems—on the one hand, when I first read them, seem silly. But when, you know, he did the series of signs and somebody asked him, "Well, why did you make them in the form of flowers?" And his answer was, "Well, everybody likes flowers." [Laughs.]

And maybe that's not as silly as all that, you know? It's almost like Jasper Johns saying, well, why don't I put a number five in there?

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: It's again this notion of availability and accessibility, which has always been, you know, sometimes to maybe my detriment. And sometimes we've had a lot of arguments in the studio. And I still think that—I don't know if I'm necessarily right. But I always want all the moves to show. And people in the studio say, "Well, now, you really can't do that. There are things that we know we've done, but nobody else has to know."

And I said, "But shouldn't they? If other people are going to be there, shouldn't they be able to solve something? Shouldn't they be able to know why certain moves occurred?" It seems unfair to people. If you want them to be in the middle of something and use something, if there's something that they say, "Well, I don't know why this is this way. It just is," suddenly it sounds like religion to me again, you know? And I guess everything I want is so much the opposite of religion. And I think that still persists.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you find it useful to have these kind of debates in the studio?

MR. ACCONCI: Yes. Yeah, because I'm not so sure—

MS. RICHARDS: So when you formed the studio, did you imagine that one of the benefits was going to be this kind of dialog with other people, to have helped with—toward developing the work?

MR. ACCONCI: I have a feeling that only happened after the studio. And maybe soon after, maybe a year or two. But in the beginning, I thought the biggest reason for starting the studio was—

[TELEPHONE RINGS.]

Can I just maybe see who it is? Can we just take a one-minute break?

MS. RICHARDS: Sure. Sure.

[OFF THE RECORD]

MR. ACCONCI: Just give me like a minute-and-a-half or so, okay?

MS. RICHARDS: Sure. Sure.

MR. ACCONCI: Thanks.

[OFF THE RECORD]

MS. RICHARDS: Taking a break for a phone call. [LONG PAUSE.] Still taking a break. [LONG PAUSE.] Still taking a break. [LONG PAUSE.]

MR. ACCONCI: Sorry for the delay. You've got to remind me a little bit where we were.

MS. RICHARDS: You were talking—you were responding to the question that I raised about when—how the dialog with other people in the studio—

MR. ACCONCI: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, yes, yes, yes.

MS. RICHARDS: And you talked about the fact that you didn't think it started right away and that you [inaudible].

MR. ACCONCI: In the beginning, I think I thought of it was, you know, this is a matter of like efficiency. I want to do architecture. I don't know how to do it. I've got to have the people around me. But I'm leaving something out, though, because one of the people who, when the studio started, was part of the studio, was somebody who, in addition with another person—just like John and Robert were very instrumental in the beginning of the '80s, these two people, Luis Vera and Ron Ervolino—I met them just totally accidentally in the mid-'80s, '86.

They had moved—I've been in this neighborhood for a long time, had the studio in the neighborhood.

MS. RICHARDS: This is the neighborhood you call Dumbo?

MR. ACCONCI: That now is called Dumbo, yes. I moved here in 1980. In 1986, Ron and Luis had moved here. They had just gotten out of graduate school in architecture. And this is a neighborhood that—I don't think any of this is going on now, but they were always questioning of loft laws and what's legal, et cetera.

So because Ron and Luis were from architecture school, some neighborhood organization asked them to go around and measure everybody's lofts. So they came, and they saw stuff that was in the loft. And we started talking. They had no idea about me, you know. They knew nothing about me. But we seemed to be interested in the same architects, or some of the same architects.

So starting in 1986, they started to, again, build pieces for me. In the '80s, the kinds of pieces I was doing before the studio, you know, were things like these kinds of prototype houses, landscape, furniture. So they were building a lot of those pieces. Then in 1988, did the show at MoMA that they very much worked on. And it was right during the show at MoMA that I thought, the studio has to start. And it was a very significant moment.

There was—well, first of all, I mean, again, Linda Shearer was the curator. And she certainly thought of the show in terms of allowances, like, what kind of show did I want? And I thought that, you know, these—the stuff is becoming architecture. We have to do a kind of architecture show. So I

called the show "Public Places."

And I remember, at first—there wasn't the greatest amount—the greatest budget for the show. And I remember Linda saying that she didn't—it was kind of important for her for when you have a notable show at MoMA that you have a flag outside. And there wasn't enough money for a flag. But she said that Kynaston McShine urged that this is really important; you have to have a flag.

Okay. So we had this flag. And the title on the flag, it said "Vito Acconci: Public Places." And as soon as that flag went up, I had—it was this traumatic thing. I think I thought the way—there's a famous Jean Paul Sartre essay on Jean Genêt that, in the Grove edition of *Our Lady of the Flowers*, which was the first Jean Genêt to appear in the United States, or was the first fiction, it appeared with this essay. So I read it in, say, 1962. And it's a kind of beautiful essay, though I have no idea if it's really true.

But Janais's claim—or Sartre's claim is that when Genêt was a child, he took a loaf of bread. And everybody around him started to call him thief. "You're a thief." So from that moment on, according to Sartre—I don't know if eight-year-old child can really decide this. But because he was called thief so much, he decided that, "What can I do now? All I can do is become a thief. I've been given my essence by others. Now I have to live up to my essence."

I felt a little bit the same way when I saw that, when I saw that flag. My name was associated with public places. I thought, "I've got to do architecture now. And this means I have to start an architecture studio." So—and this, you know, I'm saying, I don't know if I believe Sartre. Should you really believe me as I say this? But I think it really was very close to that. That flag seemed so traumatic to me. And it seems like, no fooling around now. We have to face the fact. I have to face that fact that my name—and I've done this myself—my name has been connected to public places. This is what I have to be involved with now.

MS. RICHARDS: When you use the word "traumatic," it sounds a negative.

MR. ACCONCI: Maybe "traumatic" is the wrong word. Well, no, no, it's not a negative thing.

MS. RICHARDS: You don't mean it as a negative?

MR. ACCONCI: Oh, no, no. What's the right word? It was more that—

MS. RICHARDS: Kind of a stroke of light, lightning striking.

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah. And it was like, you know—well, it was like lightning striking, and lightning striking can also be traumatic in the sense that it can destroy something, but I'd better make use of it now, you know. It's like, this is something that—it's more—

MS. RICHARDS: Did you know what you meant by starting a studio?

MR. ACCONCI: It's more like there's no turning back. Yeah, because I knew architecture studios. You know, Steven Holl was somebody I knew a little bit. When he first came to New York, you know, he came to a friend's show.

MS. RICHARDS: When you envisioned an architecture studio, then, did you imagine—did you have a reference point in thinking about, it might look something like this other architect's studio? Might function that way?

MR. ACCONCI: A little bit. Because I—but I knew it wasn't going to be like SOM [Skidmore Owings and Merrill LLP]. It was going to be like a small architecture studio. In 1980, there was this, you know, total circumstance that I did this one-month teaching thing at UCLA. A person who was a—who had been a student of mine, a woman named Kathy Rush, who had been a student of mine at CalArts in 1976 was now going to architecture school at UCLA. And an important teacher to her was a person named Robert Mangurian.

And she somehow became convinced that, in this month that I was going to be in L.A., I should live with Robert Mangurian. Robert Mangurian had no intention of renting out part of his house. But she kind of convinced him and convinced me. So for a month, we lived in the same house. And I started to—it was as early as that. I mean, this is kind of an important thing. I started to realize what—how an architect's life and way of thinking is so involved with everyday fact and precision.

Like this guy—and I know he didn't just do it because I was around. He always had this 50-foot tape measure with him, so every time we sent out he kept measuring things. Kept measuring doorways.

MS. RICHARDS: Not all architects do that. [Laughs.]

MR. ACCONCI: No, I know that. [Laughs.] I know that. But it really, like, jolted me. It was like, wow, you know. Yes, this stuff was about ideas. But these ideas had better be connected with facts, you know. People are going to—you know, people are going to walk here. If a step is too high, there's a problem. If a ceiling is too low, maybe there's a problem.

So it was maybe the first time in my life where, you know, yeah—I was always—you know, my bias, my bent was always towards, you know, the metaphysical, the theoretical. But so was his. But he also thought—but this is part of everyday life. And that, you know—and I think it was things like that—

It was things like that that, you know, made me feel, you know—yes, I mentioned that—yeah, the work itself was making its way towards architecture. You know, in 1980, you know, I had already done pieces like *Instant House*. So it wasn't that this was a new idea for me. I obviously had been thinking. I obviously had said that, you know, in 1976, I had said to myself that, if I really want a public space, this means architecture. I got to find some way to get there. But meeting people like this was an interesting—you know, again, a total happenstance.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: But a very, very significant one.

MS. RICHARDS: So after that show at MoMA, you decided to open the studio?

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah. And I had one person working.

MS. RICHARDS: You had one person. And how did you—and what was the—were the—what was the first project you remember seceding—finishing there in that studio?

MR. ACCONCI: I mean, there wasn't anything built for awhile. But there were certain—again, in some ways they didn't happen by accident. But they—in some ways, they probably did because, you know—I didn't then and I still don't know now. We still don't make too much of an attempt to go find projects.

MS. RICHARDS: Commissions?

MR. ACCONCI: Projects, you know—I mean, at that time, you know, I had had some relation—some gallery relation with—

[END DISC 3, TRACK 2.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is disc two of two on June 28, Vito Acconci.

MR. ACCONCI: I don't know if I'm so—I don't know if what I said about, yes, when the studio started the biggest assumption was, you know, I needed to find a way to, you know, do architecture, so I needed to work with people who did it. But I don't think—I think that discussion mode was part of it from the beginning, especially—because, like I said, in the 80s, when John Tagiuri and Robert Price and I, when we talked about pieces, we were discussing pieces. It wasn't just figuring out how to, you know, what kind of nuts and bolts to use. It was about what a project meant. When Ron and Luis and I were working on furniture pieces in the '80s, it was always theoretical discussions.

So I don't think it was as far apart as that, though, again, probably—I'm not sure if I can say. I think both were—both necessities were just as important at the same time. I wanted—you know, was clear that—and this had started from the notion of, I want stuff to be—from 1976, I want stuff to be in a public space. But disciplines already exist in public—already deal with public spaces. One of those disciplines is architecture. I have to find a way to be an architect, too. I don't know if I ever said at that time "be an architect," but at least act like an architect, function as an architect.

At the same time, I think I was starting to feel that if I really want to be involved with public spaces, I started to worry, can you really do that alone? I think I started to be very taken by, very obsessed with English language phrases like, "The person who lives by the sword dies by the sword." And I think I started to translate it into something like, If something begins private, can it end anything other than private? So I started to wonder, maybe if something is meant to be public, it has to start at least quasi-public. And public probably starts with the number three, you know. One is a solo; two is a couple or a mirror image; third person starts an argument. So maybe it has to be group thinking.

And that started very early, pretty early in the studio. I don't know if I can define it, but certainly by the—I don't know that it—did it start the day the studio started? I don't know. But it certainly started in that first year, that it was clear that the way people were working, the people who tended to come to the studio, and at the same time the people I tended to pick in the studio, were people who were in a discussion mode, you know. And that has always been true. And that's probably why sometimes, if we work on a project and we realize we're wrong, we want to go somewhere else.

And, you know, sometimes not everybody in the studio is so equipped to adapt for that. They said, you know, but we've wasted all this time. And now we—but some people feel like, what else could—of course we should do that. The studio doesn't agree on everything. And the studio has, you know—people have different biases in the studio.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you start out—how has the studio evolved in terms of the roles that the people you hire or bring in—their roles? Has that changed from the beginning to the present? Is it related to the way the typical architecture studio [inaudible]?

MR. ACCONCI: I mean, the—possibly not, in that we really don't have—we don't have someone in the studio. I mean, the person—the two—there are two nonarchitecture people in the studio, both

from an art background. One is the studio manager or the office manager. One is the person who is more archivist, you know, if there's requests for publications. But they, too, can be in discussions about a project if they want to be.

The studio has never had somebody in a role of, how do we look for projects? We have always tended to wait for projects to come for us. I don't think that's the right way to do it. I think we've—I think—you know, my biggest fear with the studio is that people don't take us seriously as architects. Through the '90s, after the studio first started, we were asked to do projects. But they were pretty much so-called public art projects. And a public art project, especially in the United States, exists like this: When a public building is built, one percent of the budget is allotted for art.

Now, I used to think or wanted to think—because these were the kinds of projects we were asked to do—that I'd better find some reason that doing public art is an important thing. And I tried to tell myself, and the studio at that time, that the advantage of doing a public art project is, maybe you can get away with more than the architect gets away with. If something comes in with less money, maybe it's coming in from the margins. You know, the way public art usually exists is, a building is either already built or already designed. The public art comes in later. And we thought, maybe we can take advantage of this position. Maybe we can come in as a kind of minority voice.

After doing public art for—or projects that were mostly public art projects for a number of years—and I think lately we've gotten to the point where we tried to say no to any public art project. I think I read the public art differently now. If public art exists because one percent of the budget for the building is spent for art, maybe the way to interpret that is that the art is worth one percent of the architecture. So I think public art is pretty inherently—I think we have made—we did do some interesting projects. But they were all done with not enough money. Some of them have basically fallen apart. You know, they never were maintained. But also, you know, I wonder what kind of status they have. The architect certainly doesn't want it.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you experience any of those where the architect did want it, and you had the opportunity to really—

MR. ACCONCI: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: —make something?

MR. ACCONCI: Some of the first ones. One of the first projects we did was a project that was built in 1992 in Colorado, in Arvada, Colorado. It was a community center. And the community center consisted of art classes, dance classes, performance events, et cetera. The community center was being renovated. The architect was named—God, I've forgotten now. I guess time has passed. I remember his first name, Ken.

MS. RICHARDS: You said it was in Arvada?

MR. ACCONCI: A-R-V-A-D-A. Basically, one of the many suburbs of Denver.

MS. RICHARDS: Okay.

MR. ACCONCI: So, half-hour, you know, half-hour from Denver.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. ACCONCI: In one direction, you're in Boulder; half-hour another, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: Okay. Got it.

MR. ACCONCI: The guy's first name was Ken, but I don't remember his last name, something like Berentor, something like that. But the architect had, you know, a renovation plan. And the community center had basically been renovated. Part of his renovation plan called for a tall wall, a wall—I can't remember now—somewhere between eight and 16 feet high, outside the building. A wall started to spiral to the building. At the beginning of the wall, the architect's plan was for a spiral of grass. So there was a spiral of grass. Then it continues as this spiraling wall. The wall goes into the building and continues through the building.

I know the architect's plan was, it's in the form of a musical notation. It's in the form of a G cleft. That's always my objection with—you know, I think people have to see this. I don't think you can see this. But, you know, it made us understand why he did it. This was a place that had music events, whatever. Sometimes—I don't know—sometimes, architects' reasoning becomes, yes, it's a very important way for them to get to a project. But there's absolutely no way that a passerby can understand anything of this. I still have a tendency of, I want it to be open to—or at least up for grabs for the person who uses it.

But anyway, okay. And this was a guy who really, you know, was so open to anything, anything we were doing. It was the project we ultimately came up with was—well, obviously, this wall was there. We thought the architect had already started a move that goes from outside the building, inside. We have to continue this. Can we maybe try to literally bring outside inside?

So we worked with a Colorado geologist to find out what kind of earth was under the ground. And then we tried to bring the earth up. We made this glass wall that enclosed earth, that came up from the ground and started to climb up the architect's concrete wall, went into the building. So it gradually becomes 18 feet high. And it's, you know—if I want to think badly of it, it looks like a Navajo rug. But that's how dirt looks like down there. You know, it's in layers.

So it's these layers of dirt, enclosed by glass. It's a thin layer. But anytime you go through the building, if there's a classroom, the doorway cuts through the glass wall. There are these little niches in this dirt wall, so you can sit inside the dirt wall. At the top of the architect's wall, there are these voids, these spaces. So when our dirt wall comes to the top of the architect's concrete wall, our dirt wall goes through the empty spaces and goes on to the second floor of the building.

So, I mean, the architect really let us do, you know—kind of seemed happy with what we were doing.

MS. RICHARDS: Great.

MR. ACCONCI: That doesn't always happen. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: That was almost an architectural collaboration.

MR. ACCONCI: Yes. Yeah. I mean, and we used his project as part of the collaboration. He had started something; let's continue it. That doesn't always happen, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, yeah. So you were saying that you, in some way, think you should have had, and maybe you should have now, a person on the staff who is—I don't know what they call that.

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah. I don't know what they call it either.

MS. RICHARDS: But it's a typical position, where you're maybe marketing the architecture.

MR. ACCONCI: Yes, we need that. We need that very badly. We have occasionally—

MS. RICHARDS: Because you sit back and wait for the things you want to come.

MR. ACCONCI: They're not going to come to us.

MS. RICHARDS: Is that something you're planning?

MR. ACCONCI: Well, we know the need for it. We don't know what kind of person can do this, exactly. We have—we certainly haven't—maybe we have to specifically advertise. Of course, we have advertised for people in the studio. You know, we don't always have the luxury of money to afford this. We very infrequently do. We're always—we always have money problems. Sometimes, we're fine for awhile. But then we realize—you know, right now, for example, we have no idea what happens after next month. We have to make the assumption that we're going to make something happen or something is happening.

And very often, we resort to—you know, maybe the—I don't know if this is a terrible thing or maybe it's a good thing. But the architecture studio does not survive from the design in architecture we do. What it survives from is an occasional sale of art from the '70s, whether it's an installation that, you know—

MS. RICHARDS: And that all belongs to the studio? Or it belongs to you?

MR. ACCONCI: Well, it belongs to me. Yeah. By that I mean, me and the studio are the same. I mean, I don't have any money that's not the studio money, you know. Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you want to—is there a project you'd like to talk about over on that wall?

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And I know a little bit about the project in Graz, Austria, which is quite fantastic. That's relatively recent?

MR. ACCONCI: Relatively, but now it's already five years old.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: That's one of the—I mean, I don't want to interrupt your question. But around 2003, it seemed like we were doing a number of projects that were real architecture projects, and we thought this was going to be the beginning of something.

MS. RICHARDS: And Kenny Schacter, the space you did in Charleston?

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah. There was that. There was a clothing store in Tokyo. There were a number of pieces, and it really seemed like everything was opening up for us. And we didn't know how to take advantage of it because it didn't. You know, we thought we were going to keep getting projects like that. But we really haven't. So we really need to make some effort. And I still don't know exactly what that means.

I mean, we've talked to, you know, a lot of architects in their 40s, who in a lot of ways are in similar positions we are, and who, you know, four or five years ago were and now have exploded. And

they've said they've done it by going [inaudible], you know. But I don't really know how to do this.

MS. RICHARDS: They've done it by how?

MR. ACCONCI: You know, Hani Rashid, for example.

MS. RICHARDS: Promoting your—

MR. ACCONCI: So, well, but he says he's gone to Dubai. He's gone to Abu Dhabi.

MS. RICHARDS: He's gone where the money is.

MR. ACCONCI: And I guess we could do that. But where do you go? I don't quite know how—I don't know, you know, gone to China.

MS. RICHARDS: You need a person whose job it is to figure that out. It's not your job.

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah, yeah. We really need that. We need that badly.

MS. RICHARDS: So how did you—do you want to talk about the project [inaudible]?

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah, do I really want to do a building in Abu Dhabi?

MS. RICHARDS: Well, that's just an example.

MR. ACCONCI: No, no, but that's important, you know, because if we do get offered a building, we have to kind of decide that. What's an oppressive culture, and how much do you want to be affected by that? And I do think you have to be affected by that. And we've done some projects that, in retrospect, I realize—maybe, luckily, they didn't get built. But you know, we've done projects—sometimes you get so eager to build that you forget who you're building for. And I don't think you can really do that.

There was a significant example a few years ago for the Novartis pharmaceutical company in Basel, where we were invited to this competition. And it was an important competition for us because we were in competition with Zaha Hadid, foreign office architects, people that we pay attention to.

Now, the circumstance was that none of the projects won, which happens a lot in competitions, you know. We each got a letter saying—

MS. RICHARDS: Was it a phony contest?

MR. ACCONCI: Not phony.

MS. RICHARDS: Or did they change their mind and didn't want to build anything?

MR. ACCONCI: I don't think it's phony. No, no, they built something. But they didn't want any of us. And we each got a letter saying, "None of the projects was considered appropriate." So it was going to be handed over to their in-house people, who I thought made pharmaceuticals, so I don't know.

But yeah, something is built now. And it was a competition for a parking garage for 1000 cars under a park, under a private Novartis park. And there was going to be an entrance gateway and visitors center. I mean, I've even—you know, it's basically now a parking garage, but probably perfectly

suitable.

But, you know, I wasn't blind to it at the time when we went for a site visit. The Novartis pharmaceutical company announced that—well, first of all, they spend most of their time devising campaigns against generic drugs. They made as a matter of public statement that they were no longer going to sell pharmaceuticals to Europe because pharmaceuticals are too inexpensive in Europe. So they'll sell them to the United States. They'll sell them to Africa. I mean, this wasn't even anything to hide, you know.

And so, none of us should have entered the competition. The second-best thing happened, probably, that at least nobody won. Because sometimes you say, "God, this is an important competition for us. Of course, we want to be in competition with Zaha Hadid," you know, which we'd been in before. Recently, we were in a competition for a museum in Russia that Zaha Hadid was in and Coop Himmelblau and a lot of architects. None of the famous architects won, including—we are not famous architects. We got a special prize.

But now we've heard that people are objecting to the two winners. It was co-winners, one Swiss person that none of us knew, and one Russian that everybody suspected that it was going to be a Russian to begin with, anyway. Now we've heard talk that they might do the competition over. I don't know. That would be great. We'd love to have a second chance. Because I think we had a kind of interesting proposal, but we didn't work on it—we didn't spend enough time on it, or it took us too long to get started.

We have that problem sometimes. And I'm not sure exactly why that is. We take too long doing things. On the other hand, we do do a lot of projects. So we obviously can't take that long.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: But sometimes, we don't hone in on things.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, do you feel that there's a basic conflict between a design firm working for a client, where there's time restraints, and an artist working in a studio, however collaboratively, who doesn't have time constraints?

MR. ACCONCI: Sure.

MS. RICHARDS: I mean, you might have a show coming up.

MR. ACCONCI: You have a show coming up. But yeah, you don't—no, there is, I think, a basic difference. But I'm not sure. The thing about the design constriction, that yes, there is a—I mean, you have to—I'm trying to think. Have I really felt that it's that different? In my particular case, I'm not sure if I have because so much of the stuff I did was always for a show. You know, the installations had to be done by a certain time. So I always—and, you know, maybe this is something I formed—didn't even—I don't know if it occurred to me until we started talking about this.

But you know, the way I did installations in the '70s, yes, there would be—I would allow time for this physical setting to be built. I don't think I ever did the audiotape for an installation before the night before the show, you know? I knew I would get it done. I mean, stuff that I know I can do, I can be assured. So you know, I wasn't particularly worried. But I always did things at the last minute.

MS. RICHARDS: Other than Venturi, have there been over the years—I mean, that was early.

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Other architects or designers who have influenced you?

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah. I mean, when I think—you know, in general, you know—and this may be as trans-Venturi, you know, when I think, you know what about architects over the years? What—when I wasn't even thinking about architecture, what did I come upon? And I think there were three. Significantly, all or virtually all, unbuilt architecture. In the eighteenth century, Parnassian, Boulee, and in the 1960s, Archigram - that definitely was the causes of architecture.

MS. RICHARDS: And since then, right now?

MR. ACCONCI: Oh, no, no—yeah. No, I'll go on. And the Boulez and Parnassian is kind of interesting because I'm sure when I talked about writing, I said, you know, Faulkner was a big influence. But I needed another side, and there was Flaubert. It's kind of like Parnassian and Boulee. [Laughs.] There's the kind of, let's get lost in the maze. Let's get lost in sentence after sentence. And let's have the absolute—a purity so abstracted that it can't exist.

Buildings of domes, you know, buildings of spheres.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, yeah, which reminds me of Buckminster Fuller, who showed—have you seen that?

MR. ACCONCI: Which I haven't seen yet. But of course, yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: When you're talking about doors and windows, what could be—

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah, yeah. I mean, Buckminster Fuller, to a lot of us—I mean, Buckminster Fuller meant so much to me in the '60s. But I'm not so sure if he meant that much to me as an architect then. You know, Buckminster Fuller was the cause of the Whole Earth Catalog, which for me was the—you know, but I read Buckminster Fuller texts then.

MS. RICHARDS: So now, of course—

MR. ACCONCI: And then later, you know, when I came upon this *Inventions of Buckminster Fuller* book, that became one of the most important books of my life. But what architects? Yeah. I mean, we pay attention to a lot of architects. We tend to pay attention—and I don't know. Is this my horror of getting old? But I'm much more interested in architects in their 40s than architects of my generation.

We pay a lot of attention to Greg Lynn, Foreign Office Architects, though I kind of fear that Foreign Office Architects did this—I think one of the best architectural things in whatever, the later half of the—when was it built, in 1997, 1998?—the Yokohama ferry terminal. But they seem to have burned out. Now they're doing a much more conventional architecture. That happens to architects, too. I mean, [inaudible] are doing much more. They're building now, but they're doing much more conventional stuff that they were.

I hope that doesn't have to be—I don't want to admit that's necessary, or I don't know. Maybe I still feel that building isn't—yes, building is very important to us because building proves a theory or at least tests a theory. You can have many theories, but theories ultimately are cheap. You know, yeah. When we design something, building is not the first thing in our mind. You know, we want to do a space that excites us. We make the assumption that if it excites us, maybe it can excite

somebody else. We want to do a space that we feel, wow, this is really maybe—maybe it gives people more to do than they usually do. Maybe this is a space that's two or three things at the same time.

MS. RICHARDS: What would you say are the goals of the studio then?

MR. ACCONCI: There's a simple way of defining it, but we can never reach this. We want to do an architecture that couldn't have been built, couldn't have been designed, couldn't have been even thought of or dreamt of before the twenty-first century. We want now. I mean, yes, I might have been influenced by then. But I don't know then. I only know then through now. And I'm interested in now and, hopefully, tomorrow. Now, have we done that? We haven't come near, near doing that.

MS. RICHARDS: Does it help—

MR. ACCONCI: I think it's a—I don't know. I think you have to have a goal, you know. Or at least you have to have an intention, you know. I mean, people have asked. You know, your stuff can't possibly be built. You're so involved with a kind of, you know, utopia. On the one hand—I mean, we have utopia as a kind of intention, but never as a goal. I don't want a world that pure.

MS. RICHARDS: Does it help or hurt to have a private client versus a public client? Or is it just simply the budget—

MR. ACCONCI: I don't know. No, it's not even the budget, you know? It's a coming together of a lot of different things.

MS. RICHARDS: So you can feel sympathetic—

MR. ACCONCI: Kenny Schachter, for example, you know, who on the one hand—I mean, Kenny Schachter was a client who—I mean, Kenny jokes. And it is a joke, but at the same time it's kind of deadly serious. He claimed that he had been trying to get in touch with me for years because he's done a lot of traveling shows. I never answered him. Then at some point, he saw an interview with me in *Time Out* that the guy who became the editor of *Artforum* did. I forgot his name—Tim.

MS. RICHARDS: Griffin.

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah, yeah. Did this interview that, I don't remember how the conversation got around to this. But I said that, you know, what we really need to do is a house. And Kenny saw that and called and said, "I don't have a house for you to do. But I want you to do my gallery." And he claims that, after ignoring his calls for 11 years, I answered him within 10 minutes. I'm sure that's true. [Laughs.]

But Kenny was an interesting client because, you know, Kenny—I don't know. Do you know Kenny at all? He has a very curmudgeonly attitude. But he was so clear what he didn't want, you know. Why do we have to have an all-white gallery? Or, showed us some stuff that Kessler had done and that Kessler had done for Peggy Guggenheim and said, you know—so he immediately set up a situation of such openness that it was—you know, it was such a kind of conversation.

On the other hand—and on the other hand, you know, this also was a private client that allowed us anything, but they didn't make clear at all what they wanted or didn't want, United Bamboo Clothing Designers. We did approximately the same time, 2003. We did their first clothing.

MS. RICHARDS: Where was that?

MR. ACCONCI: In Tokyo. But you know, they said, you know, we like—the only thing I remember that they said, that Thuy Phan, who is one of the partners in United Bamboo—

I know he kept making a point of, "I don't like clothes on mannequins." He says, "You know, I like clothes to be on living people. It doesn't work on mannequins," which was a kind of significant thing. Now, I don't know if this affected us. I mean, we ended up doing a clothing store that was all soft. We wanted—our beginning was, we're doing a clothing store. Let's make a clothing store as soft as clothing. Let's make a clothing store as soft as skin.

So the basic material we used—and really, the only material or the only visible material was PVC that's usually used for projection screen, rear screen projection. So we have this soft, not exactly stretchable, but pullable material, PVC on the ceiling. We pull it down to make walls. When we want to make shelves, we pull it out, stretch it out as far as possible, then pull it back. So that it's very taut, but taut enough that now it can hold products. It can hold shoes.

MS. RICHARDS: What year was that?

MR. ACCONCI: Two thousand three.

MS. RICHARDS: And how is that working? Have you been back to visit it or seen pictures of it?

MR. ACCONCI: I haven't been back. I've gotten reports. They say it's gotten a little bit dirty and it's not as easy to clean.

MS. RICHARDS: Commercial enterprises seem to change their interior quite frequently, no matter how excellent it was.

MR. ACCONCI: I know. And this is five years. I don't know how long it's going to last.

MS. RICHARDS: If they wanted to rip it out and put something else—

MR. ACCONCI: They have every right.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: Just like when Kenny Schachter moved—

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, yes. What happened to the Charles Street space?

MR. ACCONCI: It was destroyed. Some of the things—the desk downstairs and upstairs—but the desk, it was hard to separate things there because everything was kind of continuous, you know, wall twisted to become desk.

He auctioned the desks at Phillips de Pury, and I think they bought it, actually. I mean, it was—but it was—you know, it's funny. But it's very different from an art piece. It belongs to Kenny.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: So, you know, whatever money was made from the auction was his. It's a very different thing, doing things as—

MS. RICHARDS: How is working on the project in Graz? That was working for a government agency, right?

MR. ACCONCI: It was working for a government agency—

MS. RICHARDS: City?

MR. ACCONCI: But for one that had a limited time existence. It wasn't officially the city. Europe, every—is it every two years? Every two years, there's a city or sometimes a pair of cities that's picked as the European cultural capital. So this was the—2003 was the year that Graz was picked as the European cultural capital.

So the organization we were responsible to was called Gratz 2003. It was in existence only for that occasion, which is—which turned out to be a strange thing because the thing is still in existence. But I don't exactly know who owns it now. Because Gratz 2003 no longer exists. I think now the city owns it. But there have been some changes lately. You know, the—and changes that we can't quite control. But the furniture for the cafeteria, by the way, now has been changed.

MS. RICHARDS: You have no control over that?

MR. ACCONCI: We don't, apparently. And we probably could have been more careful about this. But we didn't specify anything.

MS. RICHARDS: One reads about architects in trying to manage those kinds of things from a distance, and it's hard.

MR. ACCONCI: But also, you have to do it at a time, since we didn't specify then that we had control. I don't remember if we tried to specify and they said this was illegal, because that could happen, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: I mean, there have been buildings where Mies van der Rohe furniture has been changed. I mean, architects—it's a different system of rites.

MS. RICHARDS: Absolutely, yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: I mean, we've had a lot of strange—I mean, you know. But we have somebody, some contact in Graz who is trying to work with us, because apparently the furniture of ours that was taken away wasn't destroyed. So now they were thinking, could that furniture be auctioned off and the money for the auction given to us to make new furniture? Because the cafeteria renter, who changed the furniture, said that some of the furniture wasn't useful enough for people, which is something that we would love to face. I just wish he had said, "Look, this doesn't work. Can you do it again?" But obviously, they probably didn't have money for us to do it again.

MS. RICHARDS: Were you pleased, though, overall by the results of that project? It received tremendous positive feedback.

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah. No, we were. And we were—I was really struck when the island opened, even before the café was put in. People in Gratz—now, maybe this was only because nothing was there before. But people on Gratz took walks on the island. And the thing that struck me, and at that point, at that time I was there a lot—what struck me was that, wow, I'm kind of used to our spaces appealing to younger people. But a lot of old people were taking walks. And usually, old people get a little bit—aren't as excited by our—I don't know. They seem to think it's too strange.

MS. RICHARDS: So how would you explain that?

MR. ACCONCI: I'm not sure. But what I saw—I mean, before I attempt to explain, what I saw was kind of interesting things. I mean, we didn't share a language. These were old Germans. These were people who probably—

MS. RICHARDS: Austrians.

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah, yeah, old Austrians who—as the Austrian Ramond Abraham was fond of telling me, you know, more Austrians accepted Hitler than Germany, you know. And, you know, the Germans never had to invade Austria. They were welcomed with open arms. And, coincidentally, Graz was the first city to welcome the Germans. [Laughs.]

You know, so it was a—but, you know, there was a pastry designed after us. There was a pastry called the Acconci Island. And it was in the shape of, you know—it was more two-dimensional. But as we had a dome that became a bowl, they had one shape that became another. I mean—but as they walked through it, you could tell. They like grinned or did a double-take as if, like, wow, something happened. We thought we were outside, and now we're inside. Like they looked around. And they like laughed. So you got the feeling that they absolutely knew what was going on. And I kind of loved that, you know?

MS. RICHARDS: Did you take some of that feeling to the next project? Those reactions or your visual—

MR. ACCONCI: Well, I don't know. What was the next project?

MS. RICHARDS: Did that project spawn another one?

MR. ACCONCI: The very next project was the United Bamboo project, actually. I don't know how to answer directly because, you know, that feeling was, you know—I don't know. That somebody gets something and reveals it by, you know, attitude. I don't know how to transfer that. I mean, I guess we hoped that, yeah, by doing a soft clothing store, that that was almost like—wow, you know, you put on clothing. It's soft. It's malleable. But these shelves are kind of malleable, too. It's like almost another body.

But I don't know if I know how to transfer it. I don't know if I know how to, you know, once I saw that feeling, can we try to get it again? Sure. We always want—I don't know. This is a very indirect way of getting to your question. I mean, I know—I don't know if in this case I can even talk about us as I usually do, because I know this has been true for me before I became part of a "we" as the studio.

Humor is really important to me in work. It's been important from the beginning. I always thought early work of mine was funnier than other people did, you know. Somebody picking out hairs from his navel. People took it as a very serious existential act. [Richards laughs.] And maybe it is. But it's also kind of absurd, you know.

I always thought, you know, yes, my stuff is Samuel Beckett. But it's Buster Keaton at the same time. And, you know, it's significant that Buster Keaton—that Samuel Beckett wrote a piece for Buster Keaton. I don't know if you ever saw it. There's a film called *Film* [1965], written by Buster Keaton—written by Samuel Beckett, starring Buster Keaton. And I certainly saw that film before I did stuff—came out around 62-63. It's not so different, Buster Keaton and Samuel Beckett, you know, two people sitting in a garbage can on either side of the stage. It's not that different from a figure running down a hill, being chased by rocks.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: It's a very similar sensibility.

[END DISC 4, TRACK 1.]

MS. RICHARDS: Do you think that that element of humor exists in your architecture?

MR. ACCONCI: Yes. When it works. I don't know if—I don't know. Is Graz a particularly funny piece?

MS. RICHARDS: Well, it has—I've seen people smile.

MR. ACCONCI: It's more that it's, you know, when inside and outside become transferred. Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: It has something, yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: I mean, you know, humor is important to me because—

MS. RICHARDS: Paradox.

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah. I don't think I—sorry. Sometimes, obviously I've—and whether—I don't know is this is really—I was going to say "unfortunately." And since the time we talked last week, I did two other interviews this week. So I don't know if I always know what I say when.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh. Were those about your architecture?

MR. ACCONCI: But—that was more about specifically the architect, though the person went to early work, too. I think it was a very different interview, actually. But you know, sometimes I'm not sure. But just to make a note about humor—I don't think I mentioned this. I don't know what the source is. But sometime, probably in the mid-'70s, I came across a statement on the difference between comedy and tragedy. And I don't know who said it.

But according to this person, in the tragic view of life, there's a protagonist. There's a goal. And the protagonist, then, goes on this single-minded channel towards this goal. So if there's an audience, the audience is very solemnly attentive to the protagonist reaching this goal. A comic view of life is the same protagonist, same goal, same channel, but halfway—approximately half-way along this channel, the protagonist slips on a banana peel. Suddenly, the goal isn't as important anymore.

So the slipping on a banana peel and humor—now everybody laughs. Humor is a reconsideration. It's a second thought. And reading that made me realize how important second thoughts is so essential to work of mine. And second thought, you know, if you laugh you really are reconsidering. You know, that you thought you knew. And you know, I think that's what it seemed like, these people in Graz, you know. They thought they knew what was inside, what was outside. But now they laughed because inside had very fluidly shifted. There was a very fluid shift from one to the other.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: And they, you know, were kind of pleasantly surprised. It's a kind of—but I think that—I don't know what else to say about it except that, yeah, it's really—

MS. RICHARDS: It sounds like a perfect description of it.

MR. ACCONCI: It's really important for me that—because, I mean, humor is a sign of, wow, I've changed my mind. And "I've changed my mind" should be an exhilarating moment, I think. It is for me. I hope it is for other people.

MS. RICHARDS: Is there an example post-Graz and between 2003 and the present that that happened that you'd want to talk about?

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah. I think a lot of it is happening now. And I think a lot of it has happened from some of the newer people in the studio, who—yes, it's been true that for awhile the studio has been very computer-oriented. But it's become more and more computer-oriented. And it's a lot of people now—I don't know "a lot." The studio is obviously small. But one or two people in the studio are people who not just are very adept at using computer programs, but write their own programs.

So that a lot of way of thinking—the way of thinking of some of the newer people in the studio is totally mathematical, you know. And it's kind of interesting. And this person pointed out to me that, you know, that in some ways the studio was involved with scripting before it became a studio, but now is involved with something called computer scripting, and it's not that different. Because when people write a program, they literally write a program for a computer. And it's done in words and mathematical symbols.

And this person said to me, "But this is kind of what you were doing when you were writing poetry. It's different, yeah. But you didn't anticipate what something was going to look like. And this is what you did when you—you know, when you did pieces in 1969, you didn't care what something looked like. You set up a rule: I am going to follow a person each day and I will stop when this person enters a private house. This is what this computer script does. And then it produces something visual, but we don't know what it's going to be."

And he's right, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: What's the most recent project that you've completed that you'd want to describe—well, a recent.

MR. ACCONCI: Well, the most recent built project is nothing particularly new. I mean, new, yeah, but—

MS. RICHARDS: Well, you don't have to focus on that one. Focus—

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah. Let me just in passing say the most recent built project is a project actually—is a new façade for a Coney Island subway station. It was built two years ago. And it's an okay project. It's just, I don't know if it's any great new move for us. But for—it just got recently an *ID Magazine* award. And they made a point, saying that, you know, the fact that this was done by the MTA [Metro Transit Authority] is so unbelievable. And it probably is. But we've managed to do two projects for the MTA. And both times, we got them to do something that they never would have done.

We couldn't get them to do everything. But the—it's an elevated subway station in Coney Island. It had been mentioned to us that this is facing the beach and the amusement park, so it's very important to have views to the windows, to the amusement park and the beach. So we tried to make a system that would result in views.

We started with the idea of, there's an ocean here. Can our—can we make a subway façade like a wave? It could bulge out and bulge in. It could bulge out again. It's two stories, so it can bulge out

on the top story, bulge in on the bottom. So it's constantly bulging until it reaches a breaking point and then makes a view. You know, every once in a while, it doesn't reach a breaking point. And in that case, it kind of bulges in, and now it becomes a seat. So all the seats are made from our system.

MS. RICHARDS: I saw it.

MR. ACCONCI: The big problem with it is that it's only one side. And you know, they didn't do the—they wouldn't do the—they told us in the beginning they wouldn't have enough money to do the other side. And I—

MS. RICHARDS: What about at night? Is there special lighting that you created?

MR. ACCONCI: There's lighting. But it's—I mean, there's—we couldn't change the lighting on the subway platforms because there's a law.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. Yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: I mean, the things we couldn't change was—yes, you know, they let us do this bulging in and out system. We couldn't change the material. It had to be the conventional MTA material. We originally wanted to make it mirrored, which would have been kind of incredible. But kind of understandably, sometimes, you know—not that I necessarily agree with MTA rules, but once you understand rules, at least you're talking to human beings.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, obviously, given the possibilities, you succeeded tremendously. You were—well, you received an award.

MR. ACCONCI: We kind of did, you know. We kind of did. But like, one thing that was brought up—you know, for awhile, they kept saying, "No, you can't change the material." And so many people when they're in city positions to say you can't. And you know, we tried to have conversations. I'd say, "I know we can't. But why can't we?" You know, they'd say, "You just can't. That's the rule."

But finally, we talked to one person who said, "Look." And suddenly, it became totally clear. Subway stations get incredibly mistreated, you know. We have to fix them all the time. The only way we can really fix these is that—there are three basic colors. But it's all the same material. And the only way—we buy a large storage of material. And we buy them in these three colors. So whenever we have to fix them, we can very quickly fix them. That made total sense to me.
[Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: You know? You know? Still, I wish we could have used something else, but I understand it because, yeah. I mean, you know, while I was there, I see people tearing something apart or writing graffiti on it, of course. This is what people do in New York. And I don't want to stop people from doing that in New York. But, you know, it's so different when somebody treats you like—you know, when somebody says, you know—when somebody just makes the assumption that—rather than saying "You can't," let me try to explain to this person why. Suddenly you're on the same level with the person.

MS. RICHARDS: Right. They trust you.

MR. ACCONCI: And that's exactly why—you know, that's exactly the way we want to treat users

and exactly why, you know—yeah. You know, and sometimes we have, you know, big discussions with some of the new people in the studio because, you know, a lot of this kind of stuff is stuff that you really can't see. And I say, "Well, can't we try to make the cause clear?" Because as soon as people see a cause for something, I think they feel—I don't know. Now they can solve it themselves. They're in a world that hasn't been imposed on them. Of course it's been imposed on them, but they understand it.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. Yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: So they can now combine it. And that seems so important, and it's something that—yeah. I think our methods can always change. But there are certain things that I think have to be there. It can't be something like, wow, why did this happen, you know? When a person sees that, you start to feel like somebody has imposed something on you, and then you feel inferior. And, you know, the worst thing about architecture is that, of course you feel inferior to it, you know. There's a beautiful atrium space. It's amazing, you know. There are 60 feet above you. But also you feel like, you know, why am I so small?

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs.]

MR. ACCONCI: [Laughs.] You know? I mean, and we've tried to do that. I mean, one of the most interesting projects we tried to do that was rejected was for an atrium, the Fulton Street subway station that was a Nicholas Grimshaw building. But now it turns out that his building isn't going to be built either. So they've had—I think you know that corner of Broadway and Fulton Street. They got rid of all these—they got rid of a great falafel place. They got rid of all these places. But the station—now I don't even know what's going to happen. What an amazing area, you know? And now like everything has been—everything in this five-six-block area was kind of doomed. I don't know.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: For awhile, it seems like this is the—obviously, 9/11 was horrifying. But as a byproduct, it seemed like, wow, suddenly everybody in New York was, at least for a little while, amazingly, vehemently interested in architecture.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, yes, for a little while.

MR. ACCONCI: A plan is proposed, and they said "No. We have to do something." And now it's getting worse and worse and worse and worse and worse. And I guess people got bored because they felt like—it doesn't work, you know?

MS. RICHARDS: They thought—yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah, of course people give up.

MS. RICHARDS: Even the [inaudible], I'm not sure if this will be okay.

MR. ACCONCI: I'm not sure either. I don't know.

MS. RICHARDS: What—

MR. ACCONCI: Just quickly, for this Fulton Street station—so Grimshaw had designed this dome. And it was about 40 feet high. And it was potentially very, very, very, very beautiful. But we

thought, wow. What can people do here? So we tried to have the—and I thought we came up with a kind of great project. We kind of turned the dome inside out. So there was still this atrium and still, you know—light came in even better because we had this mirror system and light went down to the subway.

But now—but it became thinner. And around the edges was a spiraling park. So you could walk up the atrium and go to a park. I thought it was—I don't know. It was one of my favorite proposals. But I admit, the one person who knows us in the MTA said, "Did you seriously think they would accept this?" And I said, "I don't know. I think we do sometimes seriously believe that somebody is going to think, 'Wait. Why have an atrium—why have just an atrium if we can have an atrium and a park for people at pretty much the same time?'"

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: You know, we can have people doing something there. I know. Eventually, somebody is going to say—and they're probably right, unfortunately—that somebody gets up there and is going to throw things down on people. So they would have to put a cage there.

MS. RICHARDS: Or jump or fall.

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah, yeah. Of course. That happens at the NYU library.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you sometimes think—and maybe you've done this—you convert these public space projects into museum projects? Or they absolutely couldn't live in the protected setting of a museum?

MR. ACCONCI: I would love them to live in this unprotected—and I would love, you know. Yes. We don't want to put a cage around something. But you know, if you've got to do that, we'd better find a way to do a cage that doesn't announce itself as a cage, you know? Maybe, you know, it can have some structure of its own that, of course, as a byproduct is a cage. But maybe it becomes a—but I still have an incurable optimism, even though, believe me, we've been beaten down a lot—but not enough that we aren't going to try.

Because I—you know, yes, I did think these things should exist in a world of people and not so much a protected world or a world where only those people who choose to be in a museum—you know, it's not that we don't want to do museum spaces. But this is not—I mean, we would love to do a museum. You know, when we were trying to design this perm museum, we'd love to do it because, you know, especially—the studio says, in some ways this is ready-made for us because, you know, you've made so much effort to negate a museum and get out of it, now what kind of museum can we do?

I don't know if we really—we didn't go far enough to really make our alternative museum. You know, if we had an alternative museum, we would probably like to be a museum that's scattered throughout the city, and that's probably implausible. How many entries would you have to pay, you know? [Laughs.] I mean, there are—

MS. RICHARDS: It just could be free.

MR. ACCONCI: That's true. But I don't know. Museums have to survive. They're getting more and more expensive, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: Right, right. But there are some [inaudible].

MR. ACCONCI: And it's not necessarily—you know, yes, I think 20 dollars to get into MoMA is kind of—

MS. RICHARDS: Especially if you're a student.

MR. ACCONCI: There are—are there student discounts? I took a class of my—

MS. RICHARDS: Very low. It might be 16 dollars.

MR. ACCONCI: Really? That's all?

MS. RICHARDS: There's a few art schools they allow in, but not all art schools.

MR. ACCONCI: I know. In fact, the only—what did students of mine say, that they—I think they can get into the Whitney pretty freely. I'm not sure. But not every place. And Guggenheim is very hard.

MS. RICHARDS: Right, right. At this point, do you imagine continuing to run the studio as you have? Are there any changes you anticipate making in the future? You talked about the possibility of hiring someone who could—if you have the funds, to promote your work.

MR. ACCONCI: Yes, if we had the funds. Right now we have less funds than we've had for a long time. So I don't know if we can do it now. Yet, at the same time, yes. It's important for us. Projects don't necessarily come to you. And we do have to make some kind of effort.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: You know, in some small way I've done it, you know. I tend to give a lot of talks. I've limited those—I've tried to limit those talks a little lately. I much more readily give talks in some kind of architecture context, whether it's at architecture school. That doesn't necessarily mean that I just talk about the architecture, because I think, to—I realize, to some people in an architecture context, they don't even know where I came from. Not everybody—still most people, I think, think of me as an architect.

But also, I think the way I went from one field to another—it's not that I want this to be a model. But I think it's an important thing to share. I think this is an important thing that—obviously, things don't just happen. And I think in my case, it always was that the work went in a certain direction that I had to—you know, I had reached a kind of crisis point, where I either had to say—or I guess I can repeat the same thing over and over, or it seemed like I had to violently break a field.

MS. RICHARDS: Was there part—did any—did part of that have to do with wanting to get out of the gallery structure? And if you're running your own architecture studio, you're not involved in—

MR. ACCONCI: Oh, it certainly did to me. But at the same time, you know—but I mean, it happened before that, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: I mean, I don't mean just the showing context. I mean the—

MR. ACCONCI: I want—I had to get out of a poetry context. So I mean, it wasn't just that the gallery context I had to get out of. In some ways, it seems like I've had a career that got to—and this might even happen to architecture—in architecture, though I can't imagine where it would go exactly, because architecture does allow you, you know—it allows us to do a building, but to also—we can do a stapler.

MS. RICHARDS: When you've talked about lecturing, do you want to lecture to architecture students to give them a sense of—

MR. ACCONCI: Oh, I've done it a lot.

MS. RICHARDS: —the possibilities beyond what they may be experiencing?

MR. ACCONCI: Sure. I would love to teach in an architecture school. You know, I would love to do a studio. I would probably have to do it with the help of somebody in the studio because there are certain parts I could do well and certain parts I think somebody in the studio could do much better. But most classes have—most studios have teaching assistants anyway, you know.

But I've given—I've been asked to give many talks to architecture schools. But I've never been asked to teach at an architecture school.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you think that's because the curriculum is very defined and that what you do doesn't fit into that curriculum?

MR. ACCONCI: But I think what a lot of—what some architects that we're interested in, I don't know if that fits in. Now I think stuff fits into a curriculum very—architecture has, I don't know if the word is "advanced," but it's amazing how different things are, how a computer digital world has allowed, you know. There's no so much difference between designing a building and designing a videogame.

And there are a lot of architects that are doing that, you know, so that doing architecture now—to a lot of schools, not to all of them. But to Columbia, to Pratt, to probably CalArts in Los Angeles, are much more interested in—I mean, when you see these things, these are not buildable things. This is a different notion of architecture. But there are schools that are in the other direction, too.

MS. RICHARDS: Do the projects you're doing here that aren't buildable that you do—

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah. But I think most of—I mean, I think for us, most of the things we—maybe when we make an initial proposal for something for a competition, it doesn't seem necessarily initially buildable then. But I don't think we ever start something in that we want this to be a fantasy world. We sometimes say, Let's think of this as kind of science fiction. But science fiction has science in it, too.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: So, you know, maybe it can't be built this year.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. ACCONCI: But we always have—I mean—and anything we start to carry through is potentially buildable, I think. I mean, we want stuff to be in a future world, but in a now world at the same time, I think.

MS. RICHARDS: When you think about your work being published—

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: —do you want to see that happen in a certain context? Do you care how that

happens and do you try to control it in any way?

MR. ACCONCI: We don't control it. I mean, our stuff is published—seems to be published—I don't know. I've never really compared it with other people. Our stuff is hardly ever published in an art context anymore. Maybe in books.

MS. RICHARDS: You're happy about that?

MR. ACCONCI: I don't know. I mean, sometimes, even though I've said I don't want to be in art magazines, I want to be in architecture magazines. Since I'm not, sometimes I feel bad.

MS. RICHARDS: Some art magazines cover architecture.

MR. ACCONCI: Yeah, they don't—I mean, *Artforum* hasn't done an article on us in years and years and years. They did a little article on a book of poetry that MIT put out. But they've very rarely done anything. They did something, some very minor little show we did in Philadelphia.

MS. RICHARDS: Do European magazines pay more attention?

MR. ACCONCI: Not art magazines, I don't think.

MS. RICHARDS: I mean [inaudible].

MR. ACCONCI: We get a lot of stuff in architecture magazines, but there are so many architecture magazines. I have no idea how many important architecture magazines. You know, I have a feeling, you know, there are—behind you are all stuff that we're in. These last two shows, the last shelf—the last bookshelf-and-a-half are magazines from—but, you know, it's from nineteen—somebody brought this up the other day. But you know, luckily, I've saved a lot. This is a 1969 poetry magazine. So, you know, it ranges from 1969 poetry magazines to architecture stuff.

But I wonder sometimes. No, we never say no to a publication. We always send them stuff because I always think, somebody is going to see it.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you have a problem with their understanding, the way they approach your work? Sometimes, artists have issues with how their work is reviewed. Do you encounter that?

MR. ACCONCI: I don't—well, first of all—

MS. RICHARDS: Do you care about what it seems—

MR. ACCONCI: First of all, I don't—you know, most of it, you know—we've done things in Japanese magazines, in Korean magazines.

MS. RICHARDS: So you don't know what it says?

MR. ACCONCI: I don't have any idea what it says.

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs.]

MR. ACCONCI: But I remember sometimes—

MS. RICHARDS: But obviously, it's not a compelling interest to know.

MR. ACCONCI: No. What's important is that, you know, if at least the project is presented, even though—you know, yes, we've sent them the photographs. But obviously, they have a choice of how to present photographs and drawings. But I think the assumption we make is—or let's say I make because I don't think the studio together decides what—but we hardly—I don't—I can't say we've never said no to a magazine. But the hope is always that, whatever is said, the project is there to be seen. Somebody is going to see it. And maybe this can start somebody off.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. Right, right. Is there—as we end, is there any area that we haven't covered that you think is important?

MR. ACCONCI: Yes. Well, no. I mean, just maybe a quick general statement about recent projects, because we're trying to—we haven't reached it. But we're trying to make a space that really does change more as a person goes through it. So in some ways it's more of a mix of an actual physical space, but also a digital space. A lot of times we're using light more.

We're using light that—we're doing a project now—you know, it seems pretty definite that it will be built. We're still designing it. But it's a roadway that goes through a building in Indianapolis. And it's a building that happens to be the basketball arena. So it's a building—and it's a building that, because of the situation of roads, a lot of people in Indianapolis go through it. You drive through it. You bicycle through it. You walk through it.

And we're trying to make this—we're making the system where we probably can't do it with cars. And we might only be able to do it, and maybe understandably—we might only be able to do it, but it's not sure yet, for bicyclists and pedestrians. That there's this mesh structure around you filled with literally millions of LED lights. And when you walk through, you activate the lights. So you activate this kind of light in front of you. So you light your way.

MS. RICHARDS: Like a torch.

MR. ACCONCI: And when someone else comes, now they join. And it's a project that's in some ways very unlike—it's very interactive, but it's—it doesn't look like projects we've done. And that doesn't mean we want to do every project with light. But light gives us this chance to make something emerge and grow. It's like you've gathered this swarm of fireflies around you.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: And we've been trying to spin off that. We've been trying to design a piece of clothing where—you know, can clothing be based on a notion of attractors and repellants of magnetic fields? Like you pick five points on the body—two nipples, a navel, a penis and vagina, an asshole. Now, do these attract and repel and make a system of lines? We haven't quite worked it out yet.

But when we work on one project, it gives us a clue that, you know, maybe we can do something, you know. Yes, if we're doing something with a space that a person is walking through, can we do something with a piece of clothing?

MS. RICHARDS: How long is the space that would be walked through? I mean, approximately? Is it 100 feet?

MR. ACCONCI: No, no, more, more, more. I have 500-600 feet. Is that true?

MS. RICHARDS: A lot of time to experience [inaudible].

MR. ACCONCI: Oh yeah, you have time. It might even be longer. It may even be closer to 1000 feet. What's a football field? A football field is 100 yards.

MS. RICHARDS: A hundred yards, 300 feet.

MR. ACCONCI: So that's 300 feet. No, it's probably more like 500 or 600.

MS. RICHARDS: That's huge.

MR. ACCONCI: Enough to—yeah. Enough that you do occupy time as you're going through. And there was a—so far, there's been a resistance that maybe we can't do it with cars. And I can kind of understand, you know. But they haven't said definitely no yet. And we have to make some tests and see. And that's come up sometimes. Like we did a show—a show, God, I'm still an artist. [Laughs.]

We did a project in Memphis a few years ago that was the corner of a performing art center. And the material was mirrored. And again, it was not—and I don't think I need to define the project. It was just that something got on people's nerves very quickly when we proposed it—not nerves so much. But people said, this is dangerous because it was mirrored. It's at a corner. And they thought, uh-oh, what happens with cars?

MS. RICHARDS: Right, right.

MR. ACCONCI: And we can understand that. So we made all these tests. And we convinced them that, wow, you know, it's not going to—it's okay. And now they realize, when it's up, that it is okay. So, you know, it's okay when people bring up problems—and they should because if it is a problem—and we started to think, too—and we even thought, God, we didn't think about that enough.

But then, you know, just by maybe a few shifts or a few bends, we realized all the reflecting goes in another direction. It will never hit anybody walking or driving. So you can convince people if you try. Not all the time—there are certain times, you know. Like even in this thing, where some people—sometimes the problem with a thing is that there are so many authorities. Like in this—like one person owns the garage. But there's a train above. So the train company owns this part of it. Somebody owns the garage, but not the floor. The city owns that part of it. So you have to deal with all these agencies.

And sometimes somebody says that, no, you can't hang anything from the ceiling, you know. And you can say, but certainly, the ceiling can bear it. And they said, "I don't care. I own it. And you can't do it." And you can't fight that. So you have to find a way. Now, can you do it so that it's all supported on the floor? Because the person doesn't own the floor, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, yeah.

MR. ACCONCI: Sometimes it causes more problems. But again, in some ways, if you have decided to do stuff not in a museum art world, you've kind of asked for it.

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs.] Right.

MR. ACCONCI: [Laughs.] You know, the real world is full of many conflicting rules, you know. When we work on an MTA project, we could only go this far because then there's the DEP. The MTA doesn't count anymore.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. Yeah. It's [inaudible].

MR. ACCONCI: But, you know, even if we didn't know that at the beginning, we know that. And still, the idea of the multiplicity of people and the fact of, these are people of different kinds, different biases, different backgrounds is exciting enough that it's kind of worth it.

MS. RICHARDS: That's a perfect—

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

Last updated...June 11, 2009