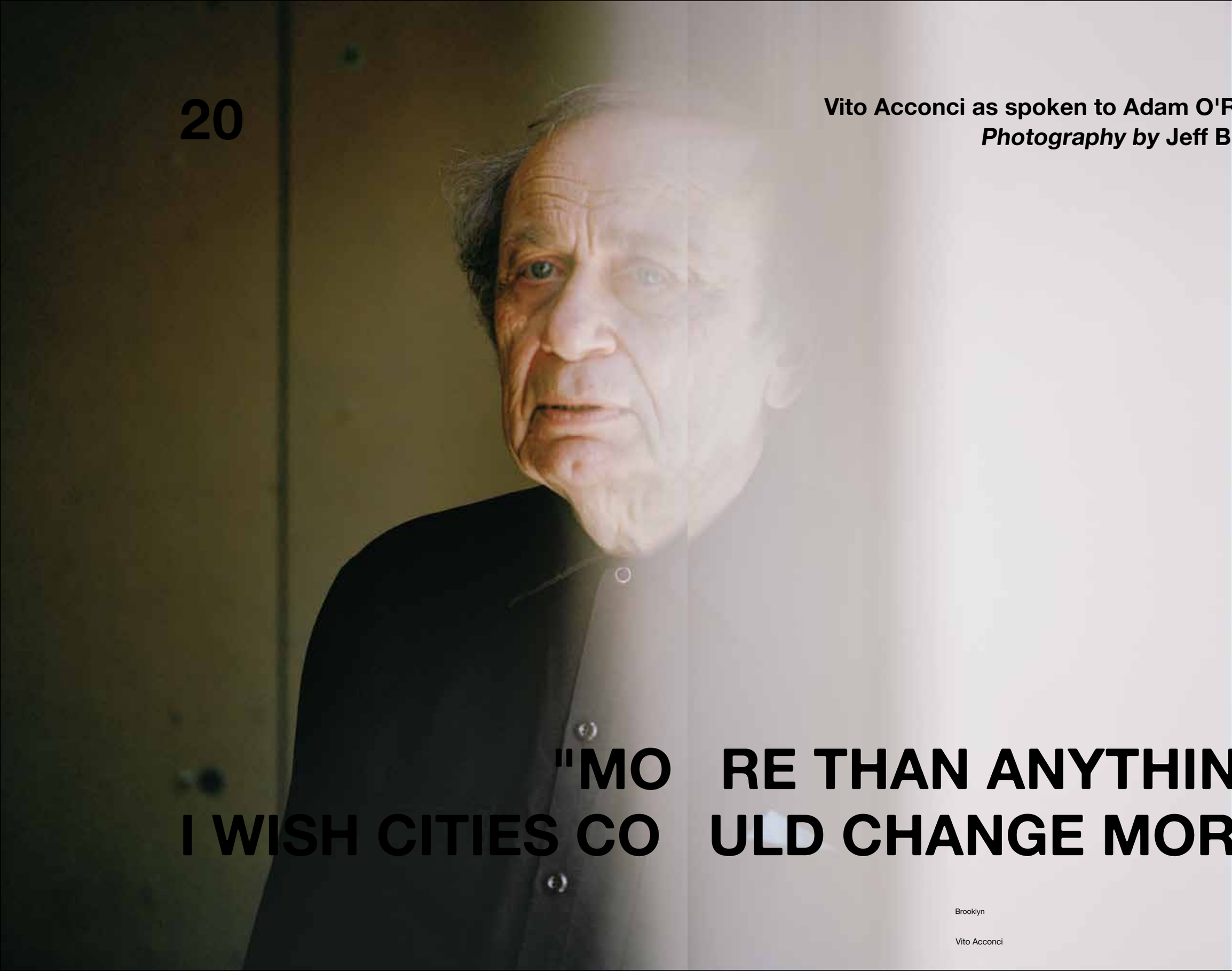
Vito Acconci as spoken to Adam O'Reilly
***Photography by* Jeff Burch**



"MO RE THAN ANYTHING, I WISH CITIES CO ULD CHANGE MORE"

Brooklyn

Vito Acconci

Born in the Bronx in 1940, Vito Acconci has lived his entire life in New York and is one of the city's definitive contemporary artists. He wrote poetry early in his career, but received notoriety and acclaim for the performances and videos he made during the '60s and '70s which engaged directly (even combatively) with viewers. His work has traveled from the literary to the performative to the sculptural and recently, to the formation of spaces and structures. Regardless of its shape it is always focused on engagement and change. Now in his seventies, Acconci runs an architectural studio in Brooklyn producing spaces which refuse to become dormant. Here he visits and reflects on five personal sites which define his experience of New York City.

Vito's studio in Brooklyn
-P20

Adam O'Reilly: We were talking about endless spaces before, what about in New York City? You've lived here your whole life.
Vito Acconci: I've gone out of the city a lot but I've never really lived elsewhere. Although I did stay in Iowa City for two years and I went to graduate school in Massachusetts. New York is important to me because it's exciting. Everyone says it's not as exciting as it was, it's possible that's true, but it's safer now. I've been robbed a few times on the street, but not for a while, that was mostly in the '60s and '70s. There are certainly denser cities, not many cities have the mix of things that New York has, maybe London comes close. I don't know if London can really get rid of its class system. Whereas the United States wasn't supposed to have a class system, [laughs] then it ended up with one.
AO: What's your take on Brooklyn? Most native New Yorkers I know have an interesting relationship with it. I mean we are in Brooklyn right now but you live in Manhattan.
VA: You know, I'm not sure what the mental block is that I have about Brooklyn. It probably began way before I even knew Brooklyn. It probably began because I was born in the Bronx. Brooklyn was another world to me. Maybe I have the wrong notion about Brooklyn. It actually seems very small and community oriented to me and I find it easy to get stuck in places like that. The only reason I moved the studio here was that the East river is two blocks away. You can see Manhattan; you're on the edge of things. One subway stop and you're somewhere else, so that really meant something to me. The idea of the edge of a city, I love the idea of it because it means there's something else. Bridges can take you somewhere else. I love the fact that when I first moved here the elevated part of the train was probably 100 feet away, at that time if people came over they would say "wow how can you stand that train noise?" and I realized that I had gotten so used to it that it was like the sound of a cricket. A mechanical cricket maybe.

Canal Street, East of Allan Street
-P23

AO: Is it loud in Chinatown?
VA: No it's in the most Eastern part. It's where Canal Street ends, East of Allan Street.
AO: What do you enjoy about that area?
VA: I like it there because I have no idea what anybody is saying. And I have no idea why there's a store that opens and then three months later it is another store. It's very clear that something is being manipulated by...I can't remember what the Chinese mafia is called, they used to be very famous. They're much more hidden now but they're still very effective. I admit I've only lived with someone in this Chinatown apartment for the last six or seven years. And it was very purposefully chosen. The person I live with had never lived in Manhattan, and I thought we just had to live in Manhattan. But I also thought it would be great to orient where I'm living towards where the studio is.
AO: It was a romantic decision...
VA: It was a romantic decision but also a very very practical one because I can get to the studio within twenty minutes. I don't know if it was necessarily romantic, I mean yes, me being with that person, was and is a romantic event but I thought, you know, she had been in New York ten years and she hadn't lived in Manhattan and I thought New York is being ruined by the boroughs – well, that part is probably not true.

Canal Street, East of Allan Street

85th Street between Park and Madison

85th Street between Park and Madison
-P24 and 26

AO: What was it like for you growing up in the Bronx, what was your interaction with Manhattan like?
VA: My father took me to Manhattan a lot; I went to high school in Manhattan. I went to Catholic schools most of my life – high school and college. My high school was on 85th Street, between Park and Madison. So it's two or three blocks away from the Metropolitan Museum, and at that time the Guggenheim was being built. It was an astonishing event.
AO: You got to see it being built?
VA: Yes, all through the time I was there. I went to high school from '54 to '58; I think the Guggenheim might have opened in '59. It's funny what I'm about to say, at the time I was totally misguided because I didn't know the history, but when I first saw it I thought, "Wow New York is going to change." Fifth Avenue, Central Park, even the Metropolitan are going to change because of this building. I only found out later that that building was originally designed for the Midwest. There was absolutely no care in the actual placement [laughs].
AO: It was just plopped down there…
VA: Very plopped! [laughs] There's two types of architecture, there's the architecture that tries to take a clue from its site, it doesn't necessarily mean it has to be subservient to the site, which most of that kind of stuff is. It's hard to have an argument with the site, I'd rather have a conversation and hope that that conversation can go on. The worst thing about architecture is that it doesn't change. I think architecture should change all the time. It gets old. It gets old but you get used to it. And particularly people should be able to change existing architecture. That's probably a harder thing for people to get used to.

West Fourth Street crosses West 10th Street
-P28 and 29

AO: What is important for you in the layout and design of a city?
VA: The most important thing for me in a city is its routes. Streets, but the streets that cross each other. Everybody says New York is great because it is based on a grid, but the most interesting places in New York are where the grid breaks, the West Village. Where West Fourth Street crosses West 10th Street the diagonals make New York. More than anything, I wish cities could change more. When I say this it seems like I have no love of or respect for history. I don't think I do, to tell the truth. I wish the city could constantly change so that you'd always be surprised. In 1998 there was a movie called Dark City where every night after people slept, they woke up and the city was changed. It happened when they were asleep and they didn't even know it. At first the idea of having a new space every day would seem like it would lead to confusion, but you'd have to have new thoughts for a new place.
AO: Do you try to design projects that can evolve?
VA: The way we think at the studio is that we can use any material. We can use things we don't know about, we can find out about them. I don't want to be committed to a material, I want to be committed to an idea. Materials are like clothes; you can change clothes so a building should be able to change clothes. We're working on this project in Indianapolis, the change is easy because it's made out of lights. It's being built now, a tunnel through a building.
AO: And how are the lights involved in the design?
VA: The way the light system works, when you walk or ride a bicycle through this tunnel you turn on sensors that activate literally thousands of LED lights on this kind of structural system above you and implanted in the pavement below you. They turn on around you as you're walking by them. If you're walking towards me, you have your own lights and as we pass each other our lights start to mix. We modeled it after what people refer to as a kind of flocking system, a swarm system, like birds which appear to have no leader yet they all go to the same place and they go to the same place by feeling each other out. It's not just birds, people usually do it when they want to beat somebody up. It is not conscious on the person's part; I want people to be fully aware of what they're doing. I don't want any secrets. That's been important about my work from the beginning to now. If I know what the project is about, I want to tell people. I've been to too many artist talks, where people don't want to say where the project came from. I want everything that can be known about the project to be known. I grew up Catholic, and I never want to believe anything again, and I don't want anybody who goes through my projects to believe something, I want them to judge for themselves. That's a really important thing to me.
AO: That light piece reminds me a bit of 'Following Piece' (1969).
VA: Yes, it is like that. That was one of the first pieces I ever did. I did that piece probably because I come from a writer background, I wanted a way to get away from my writers desk and out into the street, and that was a way.
AO: Do you still write?
VA: I write a lot but in conjunction with architecture. I mean the only thing I know how to do is write. The only way I know how to think is to play with words. One of the reasons I started the studio, it was a long time ago now, in 1988, was because I thought I wanted to do architecture, but really, I didn't know how. I thought I needed to work with at least one other person who maybe knew something about architecture. But very quickly I started to think that what I really wanted was a number of people working together, it doesn't necessarily need to be a large number, it could be two. It would be better with three because two becomes like a couple, you either agree too easily or you disagree too easily. The nice thing about the third person is that the third person thickens the plot.

The Guggenheim

"More than anything, I wish cities could change more"

West Fourth Street crosses West 10th Street

"More than anything, I wish cities could change more"

West Fourth Street crosses West 10th Street
From 14th Street and Sixth Avenue to 14th Street and Fifth Avenue

Vito Acconci

From 14th Street and Sixth Avenue to 14th Street and Fifth Avenue
Lower Manhattan viewed from Brooklyn

From 14th Street and Sixth Avenue to 14th Street and Fifth Avenue
-P29 and 30

AO: Do you have any parables that are bothering you these days?
VA: [Laughs] I don't think this is a parable but two or three days ago, Joseph Grima, who is now the editor of *Domus*, wrote me a note saying that he and Hans Ulrich Obrist were asking people to write something against Haste-ism? Against speed. I wanted to write the opposite! I think we need more speed, we need more simultaneity, being able to think of more than one thing at the same time. I realize this might not be a good thing, but I don't know if I've read a book from beginning to end in a very long time. When I go to the bookstore I look at the first page, the last page, and somewhere in the middle and I know I'm not going to read the whole book.
AO: With that attraction to change and haste, what is your relationship with projects in your past?
VA: If I could redo the past I would be very involved in it [laughs] but I can't do anything about it. I can try to take things in the past and let them twist and warp out of shape, mix two or three things together that seem like they shouldn't be together, maybe that can lead to a future. Even though I say I hate the past, I don't know if you could really go on if you didn't have a past to do something with, that's why I think, let's not take the past and take it straight. Let's turn it inside out let's turn it upside down.

AO: Do you have any regrets in the past?
VA: I mean there were certainly some pieces I did that I thought weren't really worth doing. I have this tendency when I get close to the end of something to fear that I am starting to repeat myself. One of the last poems I wrote consisted of a page from a book on reading speed, how to improve reading speed. The title I gave to it was the time taken for me to walk from 14th Street and Sixth Avenue to 14th Street and Fifth Avenue so it was an attempt to make reading time somewhat equivalent to walking time. But that poem kind of shook things up for me because I thought 'wow,' I began stuff by trying to keep stuff on the page, now I'm using the page to refer to streets, that's when I started to do what I thought of as art. I couldn't do stuff on the page anymore. There were a number of reasons. The music of the time is always a big clue. The end of the sixties was the time of the single voice, long songs, of Van Morrison, Neil Young, and it was a time when everybody was saying, "I have to find myself." So I thought what else could I do? I've got to start finding myself. So that's how those early pieces began. It began with I and me. I think I've always done things in a way that seemed logical to me. Like if I wanted to find myself then that meant, to me, thinking in terms of subject and object, if I'm the subject, maybe the first object is me. So I kind of circle around myself. But sooner or later I would keep on doing what I was doing. It would be kept in the page I would keep it to myself. So I started to think that I have to start thinking of him or her, and gradually I had to start thinking of you. I had to make direct contact with you. But then after a while, finding oneself. I think a lot of people started to question whether there is a self. So gradually, I thought I couldn't do that anymore and stuff started to be installations, I started to be more interested in what other people can do. Did I avoid your question? I think I did [Laughs].

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Storefront for Art and Architecture in SoHo