AP

Gonzo buddy Hunter S. Thompson

Continued from Page 3

increased the size of the reading public."

One of sad things about the baby boomers, he says, is "the way we treated our parents". They were despised and rebelled against. And now his own children are growing up in a different age, one of technology, with parents, many of whom have lived messy lives. Is it possible these teenagers have an electronic outlet that doesn't involve a searing break with their parents?

"I am not sure that the internet stuff really makes such a huge difference. I look at my 16-year-old and my 13-year-old. I don't really think their emotional life is much different. If anything they are less wild than one half of their parents. My 16-year-old is either much better behaved than I was at 16 or much more discreet about it."

O'Rourke works in a house he has bought down the road from the family home. His books are neither random nor crystallising as he writes but disciplined. "I am very old-fashioned, I take the impossible task that all writing is and divide it into conceivably possible units. I take a lot of notes and I do a lot of outlining. Of course in the process the thing changes. But I don't wing it. Although I like to have it sound as if it were winged. You don't want someone who is walking the tightrope at the circus to be up there obviously showing fear in a horrible sense that they may fall off at any moment."

Most people become more conservative as they age. Do conservatives become less so, or something? "Well, I suppose one mellows a little bit. Not in core principles, but the urge to scream lessens. But it is fun to write that way," he says.

O'Rourke's generation fought for civil rights, equality. It went to the blockades to fight against prejudice, poverty, war, injustice. There were inner-city riots. "We are the generation that changed everything," he writes. "Of all the eras and epochs of Americans, our is the one that made the biggest impression — on ourselves."

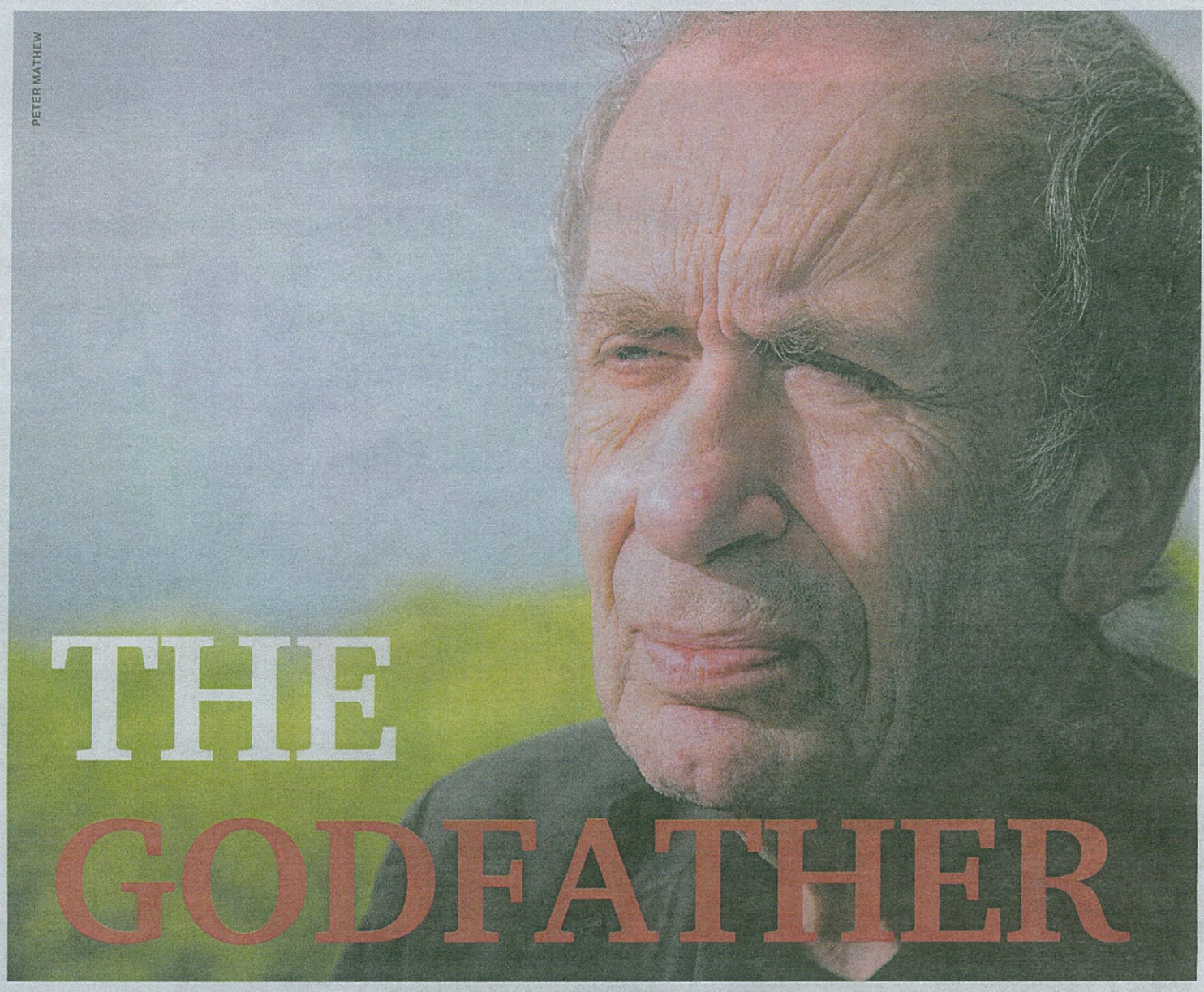
Then they discovered, he writes, that you really shouldn't throw dynamite while on hashish, and that the bong *will* set fire to the beanbag.

Now they have full control of the levers and pulleys of America's political mechanism, they are in charge of the global economy.

All too soon they will be slipping into old age and irrelevance, leaving a very big bill. In old age they will be nearly one-third of the population.

What will the legacy be? "Well, you know, it is hard to say because the younger generations are going to be so pissed off at us because of the structure of social benefits in a demographic lump, you know. I think it will be 100 years before anyone can look at this with a cold eye. The immediate legacy will be one of resentment, even though we did not create the system of social benefits either in the US or Australia — that was the generation before us. The other day I was talking to my doctor. He said, 'You are fine, I can't think of a reason to keep taking your money.' I said I am in Medicare, you are taking your money."

The Baby Boom: How It Got that Way . . . And It Wasn't My Fault . . . And I'll Never Do It Again *is published by Allen & Unwin.*



PETER MATHEW

THE GODFATHER

The life of Vito Acconci — poet, artist, architect — has been an uncompromising journey. Now he's bringing his vision to Hobart, writes **Sharon Verghis**

IN the 1970s, Vito Acconci was arguably America's — and perhaps the world's — leading performance artist. Dubbed the Godfather of Transgression, he's been nominated in polls of the world's greatest living artists. In his heyday, his works included prising open women's eyes, sitting blindfolded in a basement, and following random strangers through New York's crowded streets; using his body as a canvas, he burned off all his body hair, squeezed his chest to create breasts, and bit himself, printing the jagged teeth marks in black ink.

Most famously, he masturbated eight hours a day for three weeks under a makeshift wooden ramp in a New York gallery. The last, "an extraordinary artistic marker" as it was described by the *Village Voice* three decades later, was one of the decade's most notorious artistic happenings, catapulting him to instant — and enduring — notoriety. *Seedbed*, the 1972 performance art/installation at SoHo's Sonnabend Gallery, may have made him an art-world star, inspiring generations of artists from Matthew Barney to Marina Abramovic (who re-created the work, down to the last whispered sexual fantasy and orgasm, in her *Seven Easy Pieces* exhibition at the Guggenheim in 2005), but mention the project to Acconci, and you're met with a baleful glare.

Seedbed ruined his career, the art-world legend turned award-winning architect and designer says thinly: "It made me something that people were talking about, but they were only talking about one thing. It's frustrating — I haven't done that kind of stuff for years and years. But I don't know how to disown my background."

The shaggy-haired snake-hipped agent provocateur of 70s American art, creator of some of the most penetrating conceptual artworks ever produced, according to some critics, is nowhere to be seen in this stooped old man of 74 with the rheumy eyes and trademark baggy black suit. But then you hear his voice — a deep, husky Bronx growl — and that young renegade self suddenly is present.

Watched by his much younger wife, Maria, he poses for *The Australian*'s cameras on the balcony of a Salamanca hotel penthouse facing Hobart's Derwent River. It's a typical Tasmanian day — changeable, blustery, a gloomy grey sky mirrored in the quiet harbour. It's Acconci's first visit to Tasmania, and he's here courtesy of David Walsh, fellow oddball iconoclast and founder of Hobart's Museum of Old and New Art.

Early last year, Walsh, via MONA's international art curator Olivier Varenne, approached Acconci in New York about the possibility of his Brooklyn-based company Acconci Studio designing a major piece of public architecture that would help connect the city's hilly green space, the Queens Domain, with the historic Cenotaph, and the Cenotaph with the central business district.

Earlier in the week, Acconci toured possible sites with Walsh ("he thinks fast, moves fast"), examining Hobart's toy-town scale and geography ahead of a meeting with the city council. The plan, says MONA'S research curator Delia Nicholls, is for Acconci and his team to put forward up to three design proposals that he will present at a two-day public meeting at Hobart Town Hall before they are displayed for community input during MONA's winter festival Dark Mofo in June.

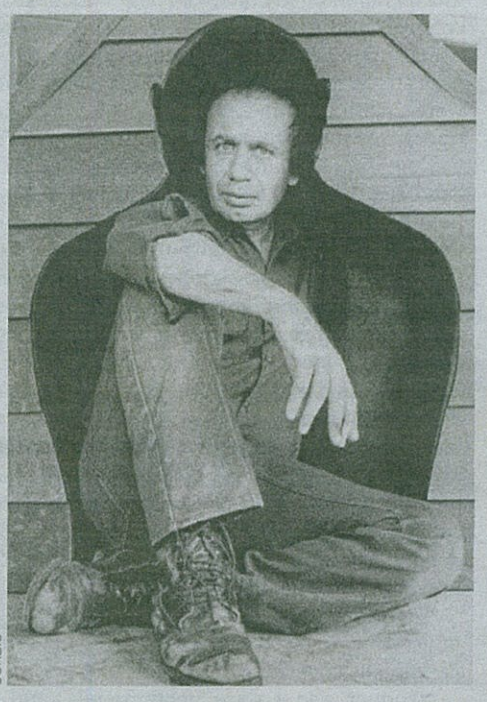
Walsh's funding involvement is limited to bringing Acconci over because, Nicholls says, "we feel it is important there is no MONA influence on what is decided by the community. We see our role as matchmaker. Once the community gives feedback, and if they are behind it, Hobart City Council will seek state and federal funding."

Details are sketchy at this stage — Acconci says the design will involve "bridges in some way — bridges are kind of important to us" — but Varenne is one of many who hopes to see a blueprint for something typically fantastical and unorthodox, in line with Acconci's sinuously curved and bulging buildings, twisted domes, undulating surfaces, floating artificial islands and coiled-snake structures. "All his work is very much linked, in an interesting way, to his ideas of public space and private space, inside and outside" Varenne says.

As we talk on this grey morning, Acconci's grumpy old man demeanour melts away to reveal a dry charm and a scholarly curiosity. A critic once described him as an ambidextrous thinker and doer: our conversation takes in everything from gender politics (women are infinitely more interesting than men "because they change their minds") to an architecture of pixels and particles he hopes to see in the future, to the "awful" aesthetics of Daniel Libeskind's butchered design for the new World Trade Centre (Acconci Studio's own proposal for the site was a building already "pre-exploded" to deter potential terrorists).

Then there's the journey he's had as an artist, beginning with writing and poetry in the 60s and then video works, installations and performance art in the 70s before he finally washed up on the shores of architecture, sculpture and design in the 80s.

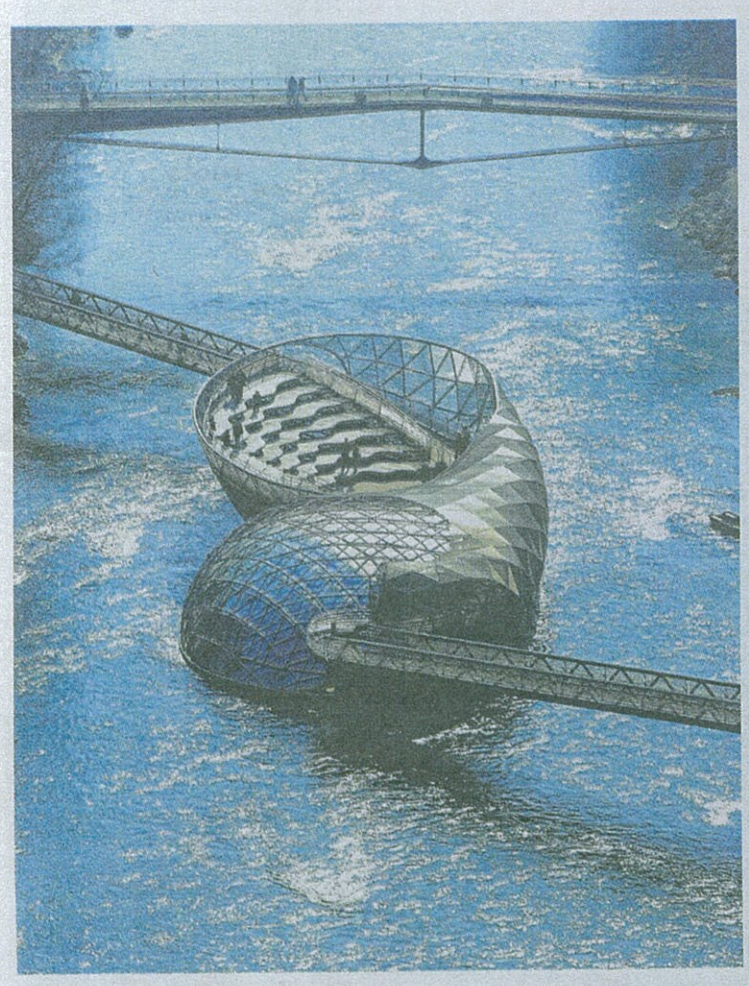
Vito Hannibal Acconci was born on January 24, 1940, into a working-class, immigrant neighbourhood in the Bronx, New York. His



CORBIS

WHAT I HATE ABOUT ART IS IT LEAVES THE VIEWER OUT

VITO ACCONCI



Clockwise from left, Vito Acconci; Acconci Studio designs, Mur Island, Graz (2003); screens for a walkway, Shibuya Station, Tokyo (2000); and Mur Island interior; below left, Acconci sits in a doghouse whose doorway mimics the human form (1984)

father, a bathrobe manufacturer who migrated from Italy's Abruzzi region at age 11, was a vital early influence, taking him on regular visits to the Metropolitan Museum and Metropolitan Opera, reading him Dante in Italian ("though I didn't understand a word"), playing him Verdi and Cole Porter, and introducing him to William Faulkner, wordplay and puns. This unconventional, free-thinking childhood was like living in a Marx Brothers movie, he says. "It was another way of seeing the world, seeing it upside down and inside out, which are constant themes in my work." Unorthodoxy ruled the household. "If I had said to my father that I wanted to be a doctor or a lawyer he would have probably kicked me out."

He began dabbling in poetry in the early 60s but, in what would become a recurring pattern, grew frustrated with the limitations of his medium and the solipsism that was prevalent in 60s culture. He moved into video art and performance pieces with a wider sociopolitical focus, tapping into a volatile national mood of uncertainty that he believes erupted following the Watergate scandal ("we were supposed to be the hero nation which had saved Europe, and then we have a president whose face is on the cover of *Time*, with the words 'I am not a crook' underneath") and the seemingly intractable Vietnam War. Key works from this time — confrontational, visceral, crude and occasionally creepy — included *Following Piece*, where he followed a randomly picked person through the streets of New York, *Pryings*, showing Acconci trying to prise open a woman's closed eyelids, *Claim*, where he sat blindfolded in a basement swinging a metal pipe, the three-part epic *The Red Tapes*, the infamous *Undertone*, where he recounts a masturbatory fantasy, *Open Book*, where he attempted to talk without closing his mouth, and *Tonight We Escape from New York*, where he installed a rope ladder and four loudspeakers broadcasting racist dialogue in the Whitney Museum.

Prompted to discuss *Seedbed*, he says the idea of hiding under a ramp came out of a growing aversion to the idea of performance, of being watched. He gradually began removing himself from the picture, focusing instead on built structures. A key early work was a 1976 installation called *Where We Are Now, Who Are We Anyway*, which featured a long table that became a diving board poking out of a window. He says his move into design and architecture was spurred by a growing hostility towards an art-world culture that treated art like a sacred object to be quarantined from the dirty hands and coarse sensibilities of the common folk. "Most museums have 'do not touch' signs, and I thought art should be something for people to be part of, to touch, to be inside of."

This proletarian sensibility comes to the fore when he recounts seeing a MONA exhibit, *Untitled (White Library)* by Wilfredo Prieto, which featured "a kind of library where all the books had blank, white pages, and that was fine. But what wasn't fine to me was that nobody could touch the books." Varenne, listening nearby, jumps in quickly, citing the need for preservation, but Acconci isn't buying it. "There's always a reason . . . maybe the person who did this piece had a reason for the blank pages but a passer-by would have no idea what that reason was. What I hate about art is that it leaves the viewer and user out."

With architecture, in contrast, you can touch, stroke — "even spit at" — pieces: he loves the fact it's a creative medium that combines the pragmatic with the creative, the functional and the beautiful. A key piece at this time was 1980's *Instant House*, where the viewer activated the rising of four walls by sitting on a swing. A definitive break with art came in 1988 when he set up Acconci Studio with a group of designers and architects. Since then, the company — a mix of maths and science, language and poetry as he puts it — has designed projects for public spaces, airports, playgrounds, theatres, subway stations and parks: only 10 per cent of their design briefs are built but that doesn't bother Acconci, who cites the lack of built pieces by artist and architect heroes such as 18th-century Italian visionary Giovanni Piranesi.

Acconci has said he wants to create an architecture "that inspires second thoughts instead of awe": certainly the unorthodox forms that emerge out of his Brooklyn studio (usually after some healthy disagreements) spark much debate. Some projects are inspired by the organic shapes of clouds and bubbles, others tap into everything from alien landscapes (think a heavily cratered Mars-style lunar surface) to German mathematician Felix Klein's concept of turning a Moebius strip into a structure — a Klein bottle — in which there is no demarcation between inside and outside.

"When we do a proposal," Acconci has said, "we have an incurable optimism". Recurring design motifs include fluid bulges, warping facades, tunnels, curves, mirrors, ramps, spirals and wave forms. Portability and plasticity are key guiding principles. The studio's design proposals (built and unbuilt) include everything from airport floors that cut away to reveal seating, to bridges that wind up like a snake, to children's playgrounds.

Key pieces include the United Bamboo fashion store in Tokyo where the bulging walls and shelves are made from PVC ("we thought, how do we make an interior that is as soft as clothes, as skin?"), and their biggest and most well-known project, an extravagant floating open-air theatre, playground and restaurant ("it's a sort of a playtime building") built on the Mur River in the Austrian town of Graz.

In the past, he's bemoaned what he sees as a lack of respect from his architect peers (his work is too whimsical for many, he suspects) so it was deeply gratifying when Acconci Studio was awarded the prestigious designer of the year title by Design Miami in 2012 for a body of work that is about "generating unexpected and intense interactions". He's not overly impressed by today's standards of architecture and blames "these bad-money times": even former revolutionaries like Renzo Piano, in his view, seem to be resorting to that ultimate sin of being derivative. He's hard pressed to cite great current examples of architecture even in his architecturally renowned home town. Libeskind's design for the new World Trade Centre "could have been fantastic, but what a wasted opportunity. In a way, it's a very conventional building."

As to the future of architecture, his vision takes flight. He's talked about biological design and an "architecture of pixels" instead of surfaces and planes: at its essence, his vision takes in the concept of a building being mutable, protean: "as long as a building can't change, then architecture has power over people". It's esoteric stuff, firmly rooted in the future — and this is where Acconci, you suspect, feels most as home. He likes what he sees in Japan, and Hong Kong ("it feels like an old version of the future," he has said) and in terms of Australian design, gives Walsh and his riverbank art museum a big tick "because in some ways it's almost quite a theatrical space, and I love theatricality". The man who once said he hopes to see architecture become just as alive as a tree, just as alive as a biological thing, looks out the window dreamily, then leans forward and asks: "Can we build a building that is something like a cloud? If a building is always changing, like a cloud, maybe the person will start changing too?"