

Vito Acconci



video and performance

Programme Timings

Three Relationship Studies	1970	12 mins
Theme Song	1973	33 mins
Home Movies	1973	32 mins
Shoot	1974	10 mins
Open Book	1974	10 mins

Total running time 97 mins

Selection Steven Bode and Lori Zippay
Thanks to Mike Jones and Keith Whittle at Film and Video Umbrella, Stephen Vitiello at Electronic Arts Intermix
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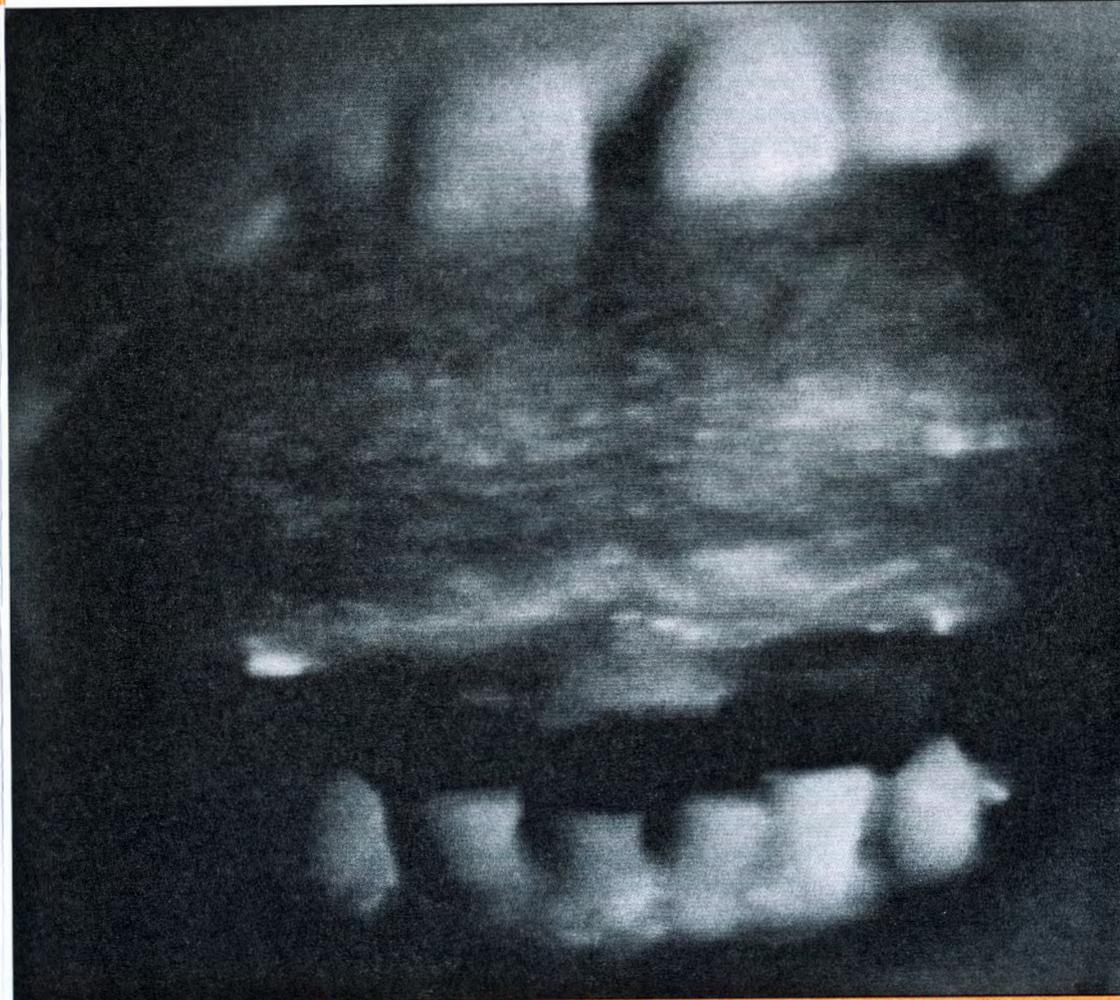
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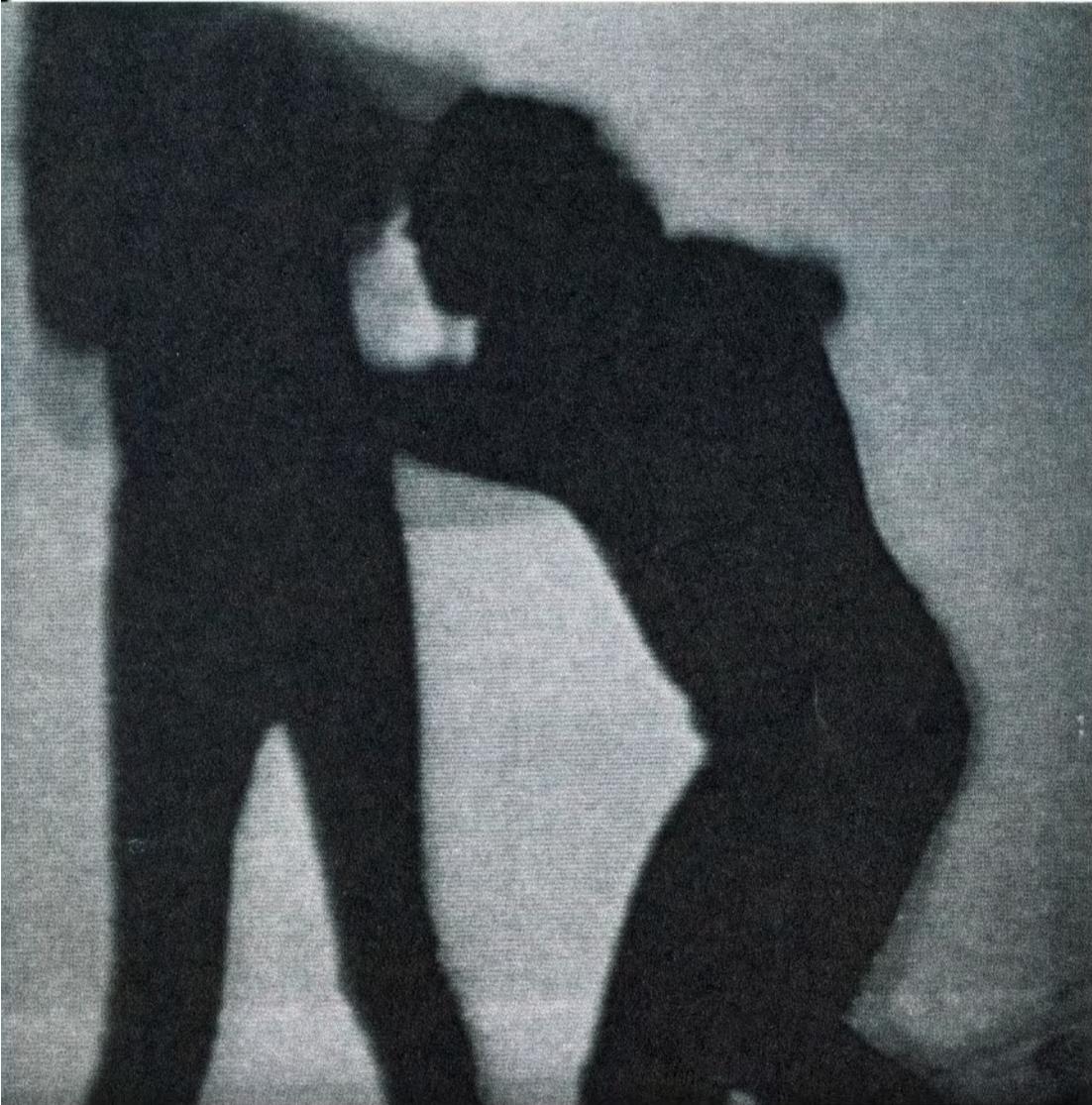
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This selection of classic works by the American artist Vito Acconci continues a series of Film and Video Umbrella programmes on the theme of 'Video and Performance'. Acconci's pioneering video tapes and Super 8 films, made during the early-to-mid Seventies, are universally acknowledged as landmarks of the form, acclaimed for their originality, insight and intensity of focus as well as their enduring influence. Singular in their unflinching excavation of subjectivity, sexuality and the psyche, these stark and compelling works perform a unique examination of the self in the context of art making. Hugely significant as historical documents, their preoccupation with the body and their one-take, low-tech sensibility also possess an extraordinary contemporary resonance.





Vito Acconci

With his tragicomic clown's face and rasping voice, Vito Acconci's performance presence is at once oddly disarming and vaguely sinister. A startling physical and psychological intensity pervades his performance-based film and video works of the 1970s. Crudely executed and often harrowingly raw, these works define the phrase 'in your face.' Typically, Acconci performs a single action or a monologue in real time before a fixed camera. Using his body as a performance site, with language as a catalyst, Acconci mines an archaeology of the self, shifting between intimacy and mediation, exposure and control. Often Acconci is 'face to face' and up close to the viewer. Challenging the relationship between artist and audience, public and private, 'I' and 'you,' he proposes a radical rethinking of the very process of making art.

From 1969 to 1974 Acconci made over twenty Super 8 films. He has spoken of the distinction that he makes between film and video: film is landscape, video is close-up; film is silent, video is sound; film is history, video is news; film is physical, video is mental. Indeed, this is a virtual index of the opposing strategies that Acconci applies to film and video. The films are defined, in part, by their silence. Devoid of the psychodramatic monologues that propel the strongest video works, the films focus on physicality, gesture, ritualised action and the body. Performing controlled actions before a stationary camera, Acconci investigates manipulation, limitations, transformations and relationships. In the videotapes Acconci typically faces the camera alone; in the films he most often performs with an 'other.' In many film exercises, Acconci performs as if testing the limits of his physical vulnerability, often exploring notions of extreme concentration or intuitive communication. Other actions are more wilfully provocative, with a focus on sexuality, gender illusions and body transformations.

Three Relationship Studies are body-based exercises in which Acconci explores the dynamics of non-verbal interaction. Each 'relationship study' involves a form of mirroring: Acconci literally spars with his own shadow image, aggressively confronting himself as the other, then attempts to mimic the other man's gestures. In the third 'study,' Acconci initiates a circuit of control, voyeurism and desire, attempting to direct a woman's actions through his own. He makes a gesture, which she then mirrors on her own nude body. He caresses her body without touching her, enforcing an intimate relationship while never achieving direct contact. Confronting issues of power and control in the context of gender, Acconci explores a male/female relationship that is charged with physical and psychological manipulation. He constructs a dynamic of mirrored and mediated interaction, at once initiating and denying intimacy – a theme that recurs throughout his work, and culminates in the performance videos.

In 1971 Acconci began making videotapes. If the Super 8 films are primarily physical, the tapes are largely psychological. Acconci saw video as 'close-up,' and the shift to video precipitated a new interiority, a new focus on the self. The earliest tapes share the body art strategies of the films, while exploring the mirroring, immediacy and simultaneity specific to closed-circuit video. These exercises led to increasingly complex psychological and metaphorical examinations of subjectivity. In the classic performances tapes – which he terms the 'I - you' tapes – Acconci performs alone in a direct address of the camera. The viewer is now the other.

Significantly, video allowed Acconci to exploit the manipulative power of language. In 1973-74 he produced a series of language-driven works of remarkable psychodramatic intensity. In these one-on-one encounters, Acconci uses video as a vehicle for a compulsive exposure of the private self in a public context. His monologues are whispered confessions or stream-of-consciousness narratives that resonate with a riveting theatricality. In video, Acconci's project finds its perfect medium.

Acconci writes: 'I was thinking of video as close-up, video as a place where my face on-screen faces a viewer's off-screen – a place for talk, for me talking to you, the viewer.' The viewer's presence is integral to these performances, propelling a dizzying psychological circuit. Acconci examines the self – the 'I' – by parsing his relationship to an other (the viewer), who is addressed as 'you.' However, when Acconci faces the camera and speaks to the viewer/other, the meaning of 'you' is unstable. Acconci speaks to the viewer as a means of addressing himself.

Acconci exploits the intimacy as well as the distancing inherent to video, which he uses as both mirror and mediating device. Despite the close-up scale and space suggested by video, the 'face-to-face' relationship between artist and viewer is, of course, illusory. Acconci engages in extreme psychological exposure countered by absence, manipulation and control.

The dynamic tension between 'I and you,' artist and viewer, is perhaps most brilliantly realised in **Theme Song**, a pivotal work. Here he uses the close-up to extraordinary effect, constructing a charged confrontation with the viewer. Acconci is 'face to face,' his head looming onto the screen. With a disquieting intimacy, he shifts between vulnerability and manipulation, candour and seduction, in a pop song driven 'come-on' to the viewer. While Acconci's monologues often refer specifically to women, **Theme Song** is effective precisely because the 'you' here is ungendered, non-specific, universal: 'You could be anybody out there.' Describing a relationship of trust and deception, Acconci ultimately acknowledges that the notion of being 'face to face' is, after all, a rather pathetic illusion: 'I can feel your body right next to me...

I know I'm only kidding myself... You're not here.'

In **Open Book**, Acconci again toys with the psychology of artist and viewer, using his body as metaphor and intimate performance site. His mouth open in excruciating close-up, he strains to speak, unintelligibly, to the viewer. Acconci implicates the viewer, apologising for failing to remain open. However, the terms of this implicit 'contract' are self-imposed; he's ultimately speaking to himself. In **Home Movies**, on the other hand, Acconci uses autobiography to examine the self within the context of the art-making process. He alternately turns his back on or faces the viewer to speak about his art-making strategies, at times projecting slides of his work onto his body. When he turns and speaks to an unseen person in a conspiratorial whisper, he allows the viewer to eavesdrop on 'private' revelations of the personal history and psychology that inform the works, ultimately 'confessing' secrets. Although the absent other and the viewer are both addressed as 'you,' the true subject and object of the monologue is Acconci himself.

In later tapes, Acconci's investigation of identity shifts from the psychological to the cultural, as he integrates autobiographical and narrative strategies in what he terms an 'introduction to myself.' **Shoot** is a self-consciously theatrical performance in which Acconci hurls a crazed barrage at the viewer. Like an obnoxious child playing war games, he imitates the sound of guns and explosions. Assaulting the screen with his face, penis and belly, he growls out a deliberately outrageous monologue in which he personifies a nightmare vision of the Ugly American. In so doing, Acconci maps a topography of the self via hyperbolic cultural mythology and iconography.

Acconci's completed this rich period of conceptual video performance with the three-part epic **Red Tapes**. In this 1976 *tour-de-force*, Acconci comes full circle, merging the 'close-up' of video with the 'landscape' of film. Culminating in the **Red Tapes**, Acconci's video works trace a trajectory from psychological investigations of subjectivity to examinations of the cultural, historical and social construction of the self – what two decades later would be termed identity politics.

Acconci's film and video works from the 1970s form a fascinating chapter in the history of performance, body art and conceptual art. Singular in their physical and psychological engagement, they chart a unique investigation of subjectivity and art-making using the body and language. Informed by contemporary contexts of the 1960s counterculture and of the arrival of new time-based media, these works challenge modernist notions of the art object, the art institution and the relationship of the artist to the audience. Over twenty years later, these works continue to resonate, confronting the viewer, face-to-face, with their startling originality. **Lori Zippay**