

# Whitney Museum of American Art 11

## The New American Filmmakers Series

EXHIBITIONS OF INDEPENDENT FILM AND VIDEO

### My Word

October 25–30, 1983

*My Word*, 1973–74. Super-8 film by Vito Acconci. 120 minutes. 12:00, 3:00; also Tuesday at 5:30.

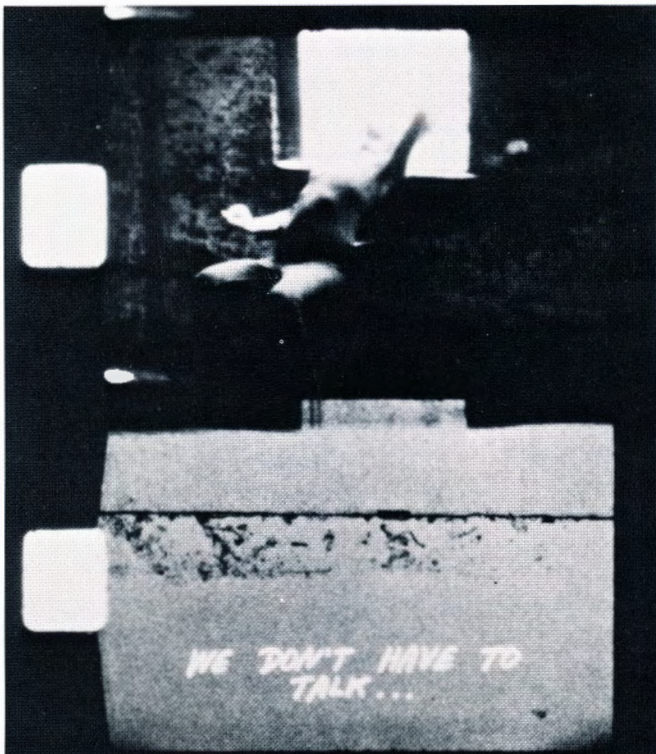
Gallery Talk, Thursday, October 27, following the 12:00 screening. Vito Acconci will be present.

Vito Acconci's *My Word* (1973–74) is an autobiographical film produced between the fall of 1973 and the summer of 1974. This feature-length work, with a running time of two hours, is a major project by one of the first artists to successfully develop a significant oeuvre in the Super-8 film format. To Acconci, who began to work with Super-8 in the late 1960s, the format had the advantage of being both flexible and inexpensive. Acconci adapts the medium of film to his aesthetic, which is distinguished by a probing into the self and an exploration of the psychology of perception. Thus, as in Acconci's other performance, video, and installation pieces, the camera in *My Word* is expressly focused on the artist's body and movements as he sets up situations and scenarios which create, within specific spaces, provocative narratives and actions related to his life and art-making.

In *My Word*, Acconci places his audience in an ambiguous position vis-à-vis the narrative and point of view. The film has no soundtrack and is composed of written statements alternating with shots of the artist in his studio and around his building. Acconci is the central protagonist whose gestures, actions, and written statements are all addressed to women—women are the other, unseen, presences in this work. The point of view of the camera can be interpreted as that of the women, silently confronting Acconci, or that of Acconci himself, mirroring his every move. "I have acknowledged what a screen could mean," Acconci writes at one point in the film, and *My Word* is a meditation on the screen as it captures what the camera records and becomes the ground on which the various personae of the artist, viewer, performer, and women interact and through which the artist explores language and silence.

The references to Acconci's art-making and to his female friends make the film, on one level, a commentary on his life from 1973 to 1974. However, on another level, he is seriously speculating on the idea of art offered up as the basis for a discourse on one's own life. Our perception of the film changes as the points of view shift between the artist staring at us, and the camera observing him. We perceive *My Word* as being on the border between a real and imaginary, a conscious and an unconscious, reflection of the artist's self and his world.

John G. Hanhardt  
Curator, Film and Video



Frames from *My Word*, 1973–74. Photograph by Babette Mançolte.

### My Word (1973–74)

1. By the end of 1973, Super-8 film was a part of my past. The 1970 pieces had almost all been on film: still camera, one take, three-minute film; my image as a target in front of the camera. If, now, I was going to return to film, three or four years later, the method would have to be different: moving camera ("every trick in the book"), change of scene, feature-length film; my person as viewpoint rather than target.

2. *My Word* started from the assumption that, at this particular time (1973), Super-8 is—by convention—a silent

medium: I would make a film, then, about being silent, about not talking.

3. Not talking would have its reasons, not talking could make a plot: I won't talk about it (whatever it is) because I don't want you (whoever you are) to know.

4. Super-8 film had "made my image": on the one hand, the 1970 pieces recorded my image as that image adapted to, or changed by, my activity; on the other hand, the 1970 pieces were the first pieces attended to by the media. If now, in 1973, I was going to use Super-8 film again, I had to parody the image, the trademark, that I had let film form for myself.

5. In the back of my mind: first-person films like the Robert Montgomery version of Raymond Chandler's *The Lady in the Lake*, or Claude Chabrol's *The Third Lover*.

6. "I" blowing itself up, becoming bigger than it should be, becoming "too big for its britches" (just as Super-8 film is being blown up here, becoming a feature-length movie, becoming bigger than it should be, becoming too big for its medium).

7. Super-8 film as home movies: the film takes place in one space (my own home, my own mind)—the film starts with corner and wall (banging my head against the wall, driving myself into a corner), then goes to windows (but I can only walk past them, I can't look out), then to deep interior space (I can walk around in circles), then out the window (but I can only look), then outside (but it's only the roof of my own house), then back inside (I can only go home again).

8. If the film has no sound, if I can't talk about "it" aloud, then I can always write it down: words would be written on the screen, as if on a blackboard. Not speaking, "person" loses breath, loses the "spirit" of person: the person becomes de-personalized, becomes a schematic of person, as if a person were looking down at his/her self from out of the body (as if a person were looking at his/her self on screen).

9. The words are written at the bottom of the screen, as if they're subtitles to a scene that isn't there, subtitles to a conversation in another language that isn't there (it's all in my mind anyway, it's only words).

10. In 1973, the last two years of work had been live: the making of a meeting-place between artist and viewer—the making of an intimate space. By 1973, this psychological space seemed to be an escapist space: pointing out the faults in "us" was an excuse to avoid seeing the flaws in an external system, a social/cultural/political system. (*My Word* turned out to be the last piece that "showed myself.")

11. The film keeps ending, keeps being about to end (I can't end the film because then I would be ending the relationships—I can't end the relationships because then I would be ending myself). So the film is either a last gasp of "I," a desperate attempt to retain what's seen as "identity"; or it's a view, from a detached non-I position, of "me" as a dead end, of the absurdity of personalness.

Vito Acconci

## Biography

Vito Acconci, born in the Bronx, New York, in 1940, lives and works in Brooklyn. He was represented at the Whitney Museum of American Art in the 1977 Biennial Exhibition with his videotape *Undertone*; by his three-part videotape *The Red Tapes* in the New American Filmmakers Series in 1978; and in nine group exhibitions. His sculptural installation *False Center for L.A. (or: the New York Address)* (1978-79) is currently on view in the Whitney Museum's exhibition "Minimalism to Expressionism: Painting and Sculpture Since 1965 from the Permanent Collection," through December 4, 1983.

## Selected One-Artist Exhibitions

And/Or, Seattle, 1975; The Kitchen Center for Video and Music, New York, 1976; Anthology Film Archives, New York, 1977; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1978; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1980; Institute of Contemporary Art, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, 1982.

## Selected Group Exhibitions

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, "Information," 1970; Kassel, West Germany, Documenta 5, 1972; Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, "Video Art," 1975; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1977 and 1981 Biennial Exhibitions; Kassel, West Germany, Documenta 7, 1982.

## Selected Bibliography

Kirshner, Judith Russi. *Vito Acconci. A Retrospective: 1969-1980. An Exhibition Organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, March 21-May 18, 1980* (exhibition catalogue). Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1980 (with citation of earlier literature).

## Filmography

All films are Super-8, silent, except where otherwise noted.

*Three Attention Studies*, 1969. Color; 9 minutes.

*Three Frame Studies (Circle, Jump, Push)*, 1969. Color and black and white; 9 minutes.

*Applications*, 1970. Color; 8 minutes.

*Fill*, 1970. Color; 3 minutes.

*Open-Close*, 1970. Color; 6 minutes.

*Openings*, 1970. Color; 14 minutes.

*Push*, 1970. Color; 3 minutes.

*Rubbings*, 1970. Color; 8 minutes.

*See-Through*, 1970. Color; 5 minutes.

*Three Adaptation Studies*, 1970. Color and black and white, 16mm; 16 minutes.

*Three Relationship Studies*, 1970. Color; 15 minutes.

*Two Cover Studies*, 1970. Color; 9 minutes.

*Two Takes*, 1970. Color; 8 minutes.

*Conversions*, 1971. Black and white; 72 minutes.

*Pick-Ups*, 1971. Color; 15 minutes.

*Watch*, 1971. Black and white; 9 minutes.

*Waterways (Burst: Storage)*, 1971. Color; 6 minutes.

*Zone*, 1971. Color; 15 minutes.

*Face to Face*, 1972. Color; 15 minutes.

*Hand to Hand*, 1972. Color; 12 minutes.

*My Word*, 1973-74. Color and black and white; 120 minutes.

Vito Acconci is represented by Castelli-Sonnabend Tapes and Films, Inc., New York.

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## Whitney Museum of American Art

945 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10021

### Hours:

Tuesday 11:00-8:00

Wednesday-Saturday 11:00-6:00

Sunday 12:00-6:00

Film and video information: (212) 570-0537

# Whitney Museum of American Art 18

## The New American Filmmakers Series

EXHIBITIONS OF INDEPENDENT FILM AND VIDEO

### New American Video Art: A Historical Survey, 1967–1980

June 13–July 1, 1984

Gallery Talk by John G. Hanhardt  
Thursday, June 21, at 1:00.

#### Program 1

*Videotape Study No. 3*, 1967–69. Jud Yalkut and Nam June Paik. 5 minutes.  
*The Medium Is the Medium*, 1969. WGBH, Boston. 30 minutes.  
*TV as a Creative Medium*, 1969. Ira Schneider. 13 minutes.

#### Program 2

*Lip Sync*, 1969. Bruce Nauman. 60 minutes.

#### Program 3

*Vertical Roll*, 1972. Joan Jonas. 20 minutes.  
*Undertone*, 1972. Vito Acconci. 30 minutes.

#### Program 4

*Inventory*, 1972. John Baldessari. 30 minutes.  
*Selected Works, Reel 4*, 1972. William Wegman. 20 minutes.  
*Three Transitions*, 1973. Peter Campus. 5 minutes.

#### Program 5

*Television Delivers People*, 1973. Richard Serra. 6 minutes.  
*Global Groove*, 1973. Nam June Paik. 30 minutes.  
*Handling (The Austrian Tapes)*, 1974. Douglas Davis. 5 minutes.  
*Fourth of July in Saugerties*, 1972. Ira Schneider and Beryl Korot. 15 minutes.

#### Program 6

*Scapemates*, 1972. Ed Emshwiller. 29 minutes.  
*Vocabulary*, 1973. Woody and Steina Vasulka. 5 minutes.  
*Underscan*, 1974. Nancy Holt. 8 minutes.  
*Female Sensibility*, 1974. Lynda Benglis. 14 minutes.

#### Program 7

*Hark Hork*, 1973. Frank Gillette. 18 minutes.  
*One-Eyed Bum*, 1974. Andy Mann. 6 minutes.  
*Moving*, 1974. Juan Downey. 30 minutes.

#### Program 8

*Semiotics of the Kitchen*, 1975. Martha Rosler. 7 minutes.  
*Children's Tapes: A Selection*, 1974. Terry Fox. 30 minutes.  
*Boomerang*, 1974. Richard Serra. 10 minutes.  
*Running Outburst*, 1975. Charlemagne Palestine. 8 minutes.

#### Program 9

*Video Ecotopia*, 1975. Stephen Beck. 5 minutes.  
*Media Burn*, 1975. Ant Farm. 25 minutes.  
*Birth of an Industry*, 1977. TVTV. 18 minutes.

#### Program 10

*I Want to Live in the Country (and Other Romances)*, 1976. Joan Jonas. 30 minutes.  
*A Newsreel of Dreams*, 1976. Stan VanDerBeek. 24 minutes.

#### Program 11

*Four Sided Tape*, 1976. Peter Campus. 3 minutes.  
*The Space between the Teeth*, 1976. Bill Viola. 9 minutes.  
*The Morning after the Night of Power*, 1977. Bill Viola. 10 minutes.  
*Vito's Reef*, 1978. Howard Fried. 34 minutes.

#### Program 12

*Laughing Alligator*, 1979. Juan Downey. 29 minutes.  
*After Montgolfier*, 1979. Davidson Gigliotti. 10 minutes.  
*El Corandero*, 1979. Shalom Gorewitz. 6 minutes.

#### Program 13

*Lake Placid '80*, 1980. Nam June Paik. 4 minutes.  
*Olympic Fragments*, 1980. Kit Fitzgerald and John Sanborn. 10 minutes.  
*Chott el-Djerid (A Portrait in Light and Heat)*, 1979. Bill Viola. 28 minutes.

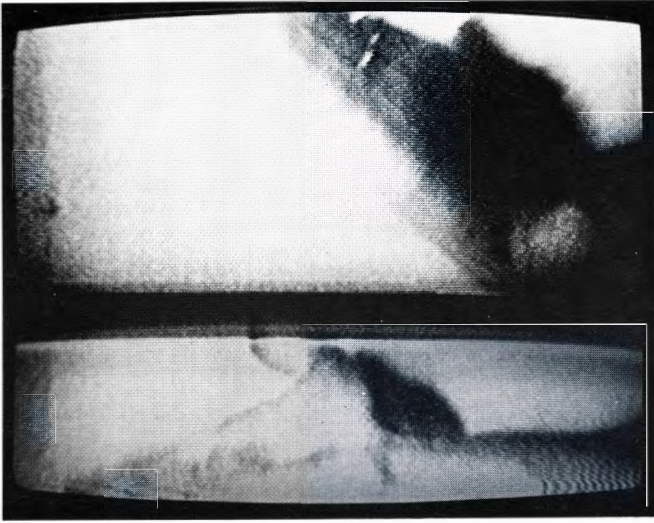
#### Program 14

*Wonder Woman*, 1979. Dara Birnbaum. 7 minutes.  
*Sunstone*, 1979. Ed Emshwiller. 3 minutes.  
*Hearts*, 1979. Barbara Buckner. 12 minutes.  
*Artifacts*, 1980. Woody Vasulka. 22 minutes.

The national tour of *New American Video Art: A Historical Survey, 1967–1980* is supported by the National Committee of the Whitney Museum of American Art.

"New American Video Art" surveys video as an art form from its beginnings in 1967 to 1980. These first years in the history of video art saw a wide variety of approaches, describing and defining a new field of art-making. But behind the diversity of these initial efforts lie three features common to video art in this period: its collaboration with the other arts, its involvement with political and ideological debates, and its intentional distinction from commercial television.

By the late 1960s television had become a pervasive mass medium viewed in virtually every home. On home television sets, the public was offered a homogeneous selection of programming that followed formulas for structure, running time, and content. The viewer's perception of the medium was largely determined by the role television had come to play as a commercial entertainment and information industry whose success—and therefore profit—was



Still from *Vertical Roll*, 1972, by Joan Jonas.

gauged by the number of viewers it attracted. In an attempt to challenge the television industry's hegemony, many activists worked—often as collectives—to use video as a tool for social change. At the same time, video artists began producing tapes and installations designed to explore the medium's potential for a new aesthetic discourse. It is the work of this latter group that "New American Video Art" seeks to elucidate.

While a number of people began experimenting with television in the mid-1960s, the direct appropriation of television began with the manipulation or destruction of the television set itself in the early Fluxus art projects of the Korean-born composer and musician Nam June Paik and of the German artist Wolf Vostell. Vostell's and Paik's actions signaled a rethinking of the television set as a cultural icon and as a technology removed from the control of the individual. Their first exhibitions, held in West Germany and the United States, reflect the international dimension of video art's beginnings. They also show how television contributed to the changing dynamic of the arts in the early 1960s, a process that involved the re-examination of sacrosanct visual traditions. One manifestation of this change was the focus on popular culture at large, formalized in painting and sculpture as Pop Art.

Just as the emergence of independent filmmaking in the 1940s owed much to the development of the small-gauge 16mm camera, video became more accessible to artists and activists in 1965, when the Sony Corporation introduced its portable videotape recorder to the New York market. Nam June Paik and Les Levine were the first artists to use it. In 1965, at the Café à Go-Go, Paik showed his first videotape—of Pope Paul VI's visit to New York, shot with a portable video camera he had bought that day. In a sense Paik's action symbolizes the initial attraction of this system: it was portable, and unlike film, which had to be processed, one could immediately see what the video camera was recording.

It was commonly believed that the new video equipment would enable the visionary producer to remove the pro-

duction of video from the economic and ideological constraints of the television industry. Further, in keeping with Marshall McLuhan's theories, encapsulated in his aphorism the "medium is the message," many artists envisioned an electronic age where individual and collective producers would participate in a "global village" of information and images that superseded national and cultural boundaries.

The fourteen programs of "New American Video Art" examine, within a chronological framework, the kinds of technical, aesthetic, and philosophical issues that appear and reappear throughout the period. These include: *image processing*, whereby the artist develops new tools and a range of abstract and representational forms for transforming both prerecorded and electronically generated imagery through colorizing and other means; *personal documentaries*, which use the portable hand-held video camera to explore the dynamic of places and events; *performance-based videotapes*, which employ a range of narrative strategies to re-examine the artist's self, the psychology of manipulation, and the relationship between the viewer and the artist/performer; *perceptual studies*, which explore the epistemology of perception and the properties of the video image and image-making process; and *narratives, texts*, and *actions* produced to criticize or counter the pervasive presence of commercial television.

John G. Hanhardt  
Curator, Film and Video

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