

VITO ACCONCI

UNDER-HISTORY LESSONS

University Art Museum
Collections Study Space
January 27 – April 4, 2025

Vito Acconci

Under-History Lessons, 1976

Audio CD, 21:25 minutes

Courtesy of Electronic Arts Intermix

Under-History Lessons (1976) is a sound work recorded in stereo by conceptual artist Vito Acconci that points to indoctrination in the American school system. In one speaker, Acconci's voice is heard as he plays the role of a teacher, rattling off 12 lessons beginning with "Lesson 1: Let's believe we're in this together" and ending with "Lesson 12: Let's be oppressed." He urges his students to repeat each one. Acconci also plays the role of the students, heard through the other speaker, by having recorded his own voice multiple times so that he sounds like a classroom full of pupils incessantly reciting the required lesson. Acconci's husky voice and feigned enthusiasm evoke a sinister sense in the work. However, as the work progresses, the gravelly quality of his voice turns to white noise, allowing the listener to drift off, perhaps suggesting how oppressive lessons can slip into the unconscious and become normalized. *Under-History Lessons* was made for and first exhibited in *Rooms* (1976), the inaugural exhibition at P.S. 1 Center for Contemporary Art (now MoMA PS1), Queens, New York, curated by Alanna Heiss. It was presented in the former school's boiler room in an installation that included tables and desks.

Acconci is perhaps best known for his pioneering performances from the 1960s and 1970s, which blurred lines between public and private spaces, challenged the role of the traditional gallery system, and provoked viewers with erotic and, at times, sexist overtones. These included *Following Piece* (1969), *Remote Control* (1971) performed with artist Kathy Dillon, and *Seedbed* (1972). *Under-History Lessons* (1976) represents a midpoint in Acconci's career after he broke from performance art and focused primarily on audio/video installations. By the 1980s, Acconci pivoted again, this time to architecture and public art installations. This developed into the opening of the Acconci Studio in 1988, which remains a prominent architectural design firm today.

– Christian Wechgelaer, M.F.A. '25

Graduate Assistant, Department of Art and Art History

Vito Acconci (b. 1940, New York, New York; d. 2017, New York, New York)

Numerous institutions have held solo exhibitions of Acconci's work, including Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York (2016); Santa Monica Art Museum, Santa Monica, California (2006); Miami Art Museum, Miami, Florida, and Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands (both 2005); Musee d'Art Contemporain, Nantes, France; MACBA Museum of Contemporary Art of Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain; and Center for Contemporary Art, CCA Kitakyushu, Kitakyushu, Japan (all 2004); Royal College of Art, London, United Kingdom (2001); Centro per l'Arte Contemporanea Luigi Pecci, Prato, Italy (1992); Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York (1988); La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, La Jolla, California (1987); and Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Illinois (1980). Acconci held a BA in literature from College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, Massachusetts, and an MFA in writing from the University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa.