

Parabol på Stiftelsen 3,14:

Audio from *Under-History Lessons* (1976)

Vito Acconci

The installation *Under-History Lessons* was first presented at P.S.1, New York in 1976. The following is Vito Acconci's description of the work:

The boiler-room of an old schoolhouse, converted into an alternative art-space. You go down a stairway into the boiler-room. In front of the boiler, and separating the boiler from the viewer's entry, is a pit about two feet deep, like an empty swimming pool.

Four wood planks, painted black, are laid down over the length of the pit. Six wood stools, very low and painted black, are placed in front of each plank. The existent electric cords, from the ceiling, are lowered so that two bare bulbs fit in-between the planks, in-between the stools, on either side, nearly touching the ground. These are the tables and stools of a schoolroom, at the base of the school. This is a schoolroom at your feet; you can step down into it, you can fall down into it.

From under the tables comes an audio sound-track, like the traces of a learning exercise. From one corner, in the front, my voice announces a subject: 'Lesson Number 1: Let's be suckers...' From the opposite corner, at the back, my voice re-iterates: 'Ready: Let's be suckers...' From both corners, my voice talks with itself and becomes the multiple voices of students: 'All right: We-are-suck-ers...Repeat: We-are-suck-ers...Again: Mm-mm-mm-mm...

Sometimes we feel summoned forth, feeling addressed in a way inciting exertion from ourselves.

Two perspectives on such a desire for propulsion can be achieved by prising apart thoughts of education as a *leading out* from a common situation – an anarchic emancipation – and provocation as a *calling forth* from an external position having apparent oversight of our own situation. Both are ideally directed towards emancipation and historical progression, yet can be differentiated by considering the situation they construct through the location from which they address us:

The 'leading out' of education could be thought of as the following of a 'leader' (a teacher/professor...etc), but we could exert a sense in which it is instead considered as the forming of an ethos calling upon those educated to lead themselves out from under ignorance's shadow. Whereas provocation addresses us from an external point, inciting us to come forward and respond to an address. But if we feel called forth by a provocation, if we cannot but hear an address beckoning us to come forward, we might want to ask ourselves why we feel compelled to reply and whether this compulsion is best

manifested by getting up on the stage and directly responding to the call. This treacherous ground of the theatrical, oppositional staging of provocation configures a situation in which we expect the provocateur to *know* and have a specific strategy following from their calling forth, simultaneously summoning the corrosive dynamics of idolatry and spectacle.

How could we reorganise this theatrical situation? A perverse (and cynical) perspective would be to view the calling forth as a satirical performance still possible within a society that continuously re-enacts and negatively criticises itself for comic effect. Perhaps through viewing provocation as satire, we, like the provocateur's movement to a stage, locate ourselves 'outside' or aside our common position, distancing ourselves to enable an *over-performance* and satiric hijacking of the theatre of provocation, re-provoking the provocateur by deferring sincerity, precariously proposing a dialectics of provocation. As in the voice of British comedian Simon Munnery: "If the crowd is behind you, you're facing the wrong way."

Another tactic could be to get behind the provocateur, supporting them, replacing the oppositional dynamic with a formation of emancipatory education in which we harness the situation to sympathise, subsequently attempting to learn the conditions from which a provocation has emerged. Whilst initially seemingly following a leader, the removal of the oppositional dynamic would dissolve the theatre as the audience would be on stage.

If we recalibrate and return to our two invocations of movement, however, how do we respond to voices calling us forth *in the name of* education? To what extent do educational structures perpetuate the dynamic of provocation and what is won and lost in playing by the given rules of such engagements?

I would like to thank Acconci Studio and Vito Acconci for allowing the presentation of the audio from *Under-History Lessons*.

Johnny Herbert, 2014.

Vito Acconci currently works as an architect at Acconci Studio in New York, having worked as a poet before making a name as a performance and installation artist in the late 60s and early 70s. His broad-ranging artistic work has been included in three Documentas (V, VI, VII); the Venice Biennale; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, and Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. His subsequent work as founder of Acconci Studio has moved towards developing his ideas with others in design and architecture, the studio's projects sited globally and in vastly different contexts.

For his work, both solo and with Acconci Studio, Vito Acconci has received numerous awards and grants from such bodies as the Guggenheim Foundation, the American Academy in Rome, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

www.acconci.com