

Fantasies of the candid camera



Marina Baromolc in 1976 video, Art must be beautiful, Artist must be beautiful

By [Nick Hackworth](#) [Evening Standard](#) | 30 July 2003



V

ideo Acts: Institute of Contemporary Arts

Among the many films included in this show of seminal video artworks from the Sixties onwards is one that serves to sum them all up. It is a video from 1973 that consists of the artist Vito Acconci sitting behind a very high table, describing a sexual fantasy straight to camera, while he gently masturbates under the table.

Trending

1 Covid cases 'not falling' despite lockdown as UK sees deadliest day

2 Exclusive: People are 'jumping the vaccine queue' due to IT loophole

With an exceptional display of savoirfaire, Acconci performed physically what his contemporaries were doing only intellectually, thus neatly (except under the table) encapsulating the spirit of the age.

Along with Acconci, the artists represented here have come to be regarded as figures of unquestionable art historical importance. Among them are Marina Abramovic and Ulay, Joan Jonas, John Baldessari, Dan Graham and one of the most highly critically acclaimed artist of our times, Bruce Nauman. Their achievement, celebrated here, was to push forward performance art by using the portable video technology that emerged in the late Sixties.

Some, like art-duo Abramovic and Ulay, used video merely to record public performances; others, such as Acconci, Nauman and Baldessari, performed privately (often alone) before the camera. So essentially all the works here are dramatic, inhabiting the space between theatre and dance, and the term "video art" is misleading, for the intrinsic qualities of the medium only sometimes play a part.

Most of the early works in this genre are informed by the same radical and iconoclastic desire to reduce cultural forms to their bare bones that motivated Samuel Beckett in literature and John Cage in music. Specific physical activities are isolated and repeated, as when Nauman spends an hour moving almost robotically within a small, circumscribed space, or when Abramovic, seemingly suffering from obsessive-compulsive disorder, repeatedly combs her hair. Other physical actions are performed irrationally, sometimes injuring the artist - as when Acconci burns off his body hair or Abramovic and Ulay, in public, repeatedly walk into each other. Language is taken to its basest level, with Abramovic and Ulay screaming at each other.

3 Cases down by third in half of London boroughs... but rates still high

4 Full list of last-minute pardons and commutations granted by Trump

5 Lady Gaga gives performance of national anthem at Biden's inauguration

Promoted Stories



ELIE SAAB
MYTHERESA



People Born 1951 - 1979 Claim This Benefit In January
REASSURED



Though far less significant than Beckett, or even Cage, all these artists necessarily fetch up on the same barren shore. The main themes their reductive activities highlight, the absurdity of human action, the power of social and cultural convention and the limits of physicality, can be quickly grasped. This artificial, almost autistic simplicity can only sustain interest for so long. Extended viewing of these works thus pays out rapidly diminishing returns, unfortunate since the narcissism encouraged by the ease of using video technology resulted in the creation of endless works of interminable length.

It would take a day and a half to watch the 86 videos here all the way through. Fortunately, technology advances, and these video works, once incarnate as open reels of tape, have been transferred to DVD, which has made fast-forwarding through them easier than ever before.
