



THE FUNCTIONAL ART OF BRUCE NAUMAN

JESSICA HULLMAN

... imagine having to sketch a sharply defined picture 'corresponding' to a blurred one. In the latter there is a blurred red rectangle: for it you put down a sharply defined one. Of course—several such sharply defined rectangles can be drawn to correspond to the indefinite one.—But if the colours in the original merge without a hint of any outline won't it become a hopeless task to draw a sharp picture corresponding to the blurred one? Won't you then have to say: "Here I might just as well draw a circle or heart as a rectangle, for all the colours merge. Anything—and nothing—is right. (36)

In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein likens our use of language to a game, best described as a continuous play of meaning governed by various guidelines. While the definitive meaning of a statement resists determination, due to variation in private interpretations, this indefinite aspect finds its complement in the very real actions that result from communication. Investigation #77 suggests that in lacking definitive rules able to bridge the gap between private and public, our statements lack the ultimate truth we imagine them to have. Yet they are not without their function. The rules that govern language should be seen not as hard and fast laws, but as a variable set of guidelines. These are aimed at allowing communication to continue much in the way the rules of a game exist in order for play to continue. What we often fail to realize is that the rules need not

be interpreted identically by the players, only that they continue to allow for further action and communication.

A similar situation exists with regard to the inner and outer dimensions of the game of contemporary art. Dependent upon the private aspect of individual encounters with artwork as well as a universal, comparatively “objective” concept of taste, giving rise to criticism and aesthetic discourse, art is a game the very title of which raises more questions than it answers. The paradoxical play between subjectivity and objectivity with regard to the meaning of an artwork fuels the production of art: without tension, another “statement” (artwork in this case) is not necessary (Bal 85). In the last several decades, as aesthetic trends have sought to introduce new critical frameworks, no artist has questioned the definition of art as thoroughly, pointedly, or unpredictably as Bruce Nauman. As evidenced in the diverse media, content, and methods constituting his practice, Nauman aims at challenging the viewer’s epistemological and phenomenological assumptions, both when encountering art and in everyday experience. Consistently negotiating art’s theoretical extremes, he works to decrease the distance between everyday life and art, while preserving the latter’s self-reflexivity as a system. As result, his work manifests a critical consciousness that by extension can be said to encourage individual agency within everyday life.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau inquires into how private meanings are manufactured from various public means within everyday life, and the implications of such makings. His findings offer an ideal entry point into an analysis of Nauman’s work. Grounded in usefulness, Nauman’s artistic ethic can be described as “functional”; Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language will be referenced, both for its concern

with the functional play between the private and public, subjective and objective dimensions of language, as well as for the philosopher's influence on Nauman's work.

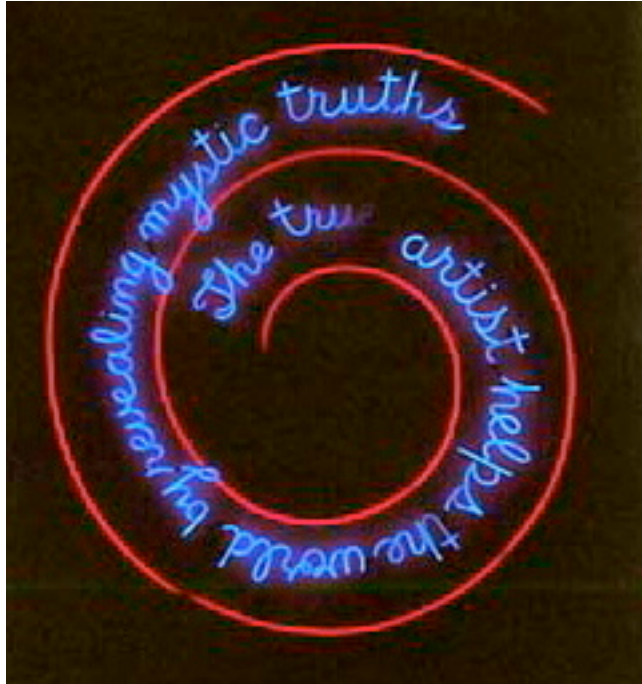
An attempt at deducing the ethics of an artistic practice calls for a consideration of the appropriate unit of analysis: the individual piece versus series of pieces or even the entire career. The resolution of this dilemma lies in recognizing art's self-reflexivity. For the purposes of this discussion, it will be assumed that art is a visual semiotic system, with semiotics implying communication of encoded meaning through a system of signs. When it comes to art, these signs exist as the various structural, imagistic, or linguistic elements that combine to make up a single piece. As in language, art retains a self-reflexivity due to the way that these elements refer for meaning to their relationship with other elements, whether those others lie within the same work or another work by the artist. Our investigation will therefore incorporate analyses on all three levels mentioned, in the hopes that a diverse approach will yield the more accurate reading.

I. Practice as Strategy

Within the field of contemporary art, differing sets of criteria for judging aesthetic value often act as opposing forces exerting pressure on an artist. The importance of the object is one point on which aesthetic frameworks differ. Conventionally, it is assumed that the object possesses an immanent meaning made visible by the artist's manipulation, which, in coming in contact with the viewer, becomes actualized for his or her realization. In such a view "the perceived object is an ensemble of stimuli to be registered on the conscious mind of the artist," who processes outside material in order to allow the viewer to experience a transcendence effect mirroring their own conscious operations "on the

ground of a universal basis of communication” (Kester 12). To gaze at Picasso’s *Seated Woman* is to assume the gaze of Picasso faced with a woman he loved. In recent years, however, an alternative, dialogic framework has been proposed, which “would locate meaning ‘outside’ the self; in the exchange that takes place, via discourse, between two subjects” (Kester 12). No longer does the physical object entail the end of the viewer’s perceptive process, the place where meaning is found, but instead the materials of the piece serve “a relationship that allows the viewer to ‘speak back’ to the artist in certain ways, and in which this reply becomes in effect a part of the ‘work’ itself” (Kester 4). This process enables the potential of challenging and transforming the subject positions of those involved, as is realized through multiple registers of meaning, “in which the work ‘means’ differently in different locations and times” as well as dialogic indeterminance, which allows the work the quality of open-endedness that “produces new and unanticipated forms of collaborative knowledge” (Kester 7). Together these qualities are believed by proponents to undermine modern tendencies of individualism and privatization and to encourage shared discourse as well as collaboration within communities.

As an artist working in the late 20th century during which ‘post-modern’ frameworks like Dialogic Aesthetics emerged, as well as one associated for much of his career with the more ‘experimental’ West Coast art scene, Nauman might be expected to produce work exhibiting dialogic tendencies. 1967’s *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths (Window or Wall Sign)* offers an entry point into the investigation.



When first confronted with the scrolled assertion, “The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths,” most striking to many viewers is the sarcasm implied by the choice to use neon, implying that the statement is outdated, and that Nauman in using it mocks the beliefs on which much of the viewing community is founded. A second plausible reading conceives of the choice of neon as implying that it is the sort of statement one might overhear late one night at a bar, which also suggests a sarcastic intent on the part of the author. Still another possibility is that the statement’s meaning lies in its being directed at the critical art community in New York by Nauman, who was at the time a little-known California-based artist, as a way of calling attention to himself, as well as suggesting that in overlooking his work, they would be overlooking “the true artist” that such a community remains so dependent on. No correct interpretation exists, leaving one to conclude that, just as in Wittgenstein’s conception of language, in which the meaning of a word is ultimately its use, or the concrete actions brought into existence through communication, in Nauman’s work art exists as a series of opportunities.

One method used toward achieving layers of potential meaning is through the literal rendering of linguistic performativity, a trend from the very start of Nauman's career. *Eleven color photographs*, dating from 1966-7, depict Nauman executing the photo's title phrases: *Waxing Hot* displays one waxing the letters in "hot", *Eating My Words* shows Nauman spreading jelly on bread letters, *Self-Portrait as a Fountain* has him posed spewing water from his mouth. A similar literal playfulness is realized through tangential orders of information within a series of sculptures. First appearing as an installation of new work in 1978, the pieces are presented along with the information that they exist as 1:40 scale models of monumental, yet-uncrafted outdoor works. The meaning of such a piece comes to lie in the tension between the conflicting sets of information, the material sculptures at hand and the fictional ones suggested.



Bruce Nauman
 Waxing Hot Prints Eleven Color
 Photographs (1966-67/70)
 Color photograph, 20.0625 x
 20.25 in (51 x 51.4 cm),
 Whitney Museum of American
 Art, New York.



The decreased importance of the material object in such pieces is complicated, however, by marked executions of artistic control on Nauman's part. Contrary to the production of multiple possible meanings, these aspects of his work narrow the interpretative possibilities of the viewer. *Performance Corridor* consists of a narrow wooden corridor set up in the gallery. Viewers are free to enter the corridor, making the piece similar to any number of installations popular beginning in the late 1960's and early 1970's, in which an artist sets up an object or collection of objects within the gallery that

the participants are then free to interact with. As the piece lacks instructions, there is again no 'one' way to view the work, no correct way to move through the space, but rather a range of possibilities. In entering the corridor, however, a sixteen-inch wide passageway in which one's attention is forced out of the typical passive museum awareness by the cramped space, the resulting experience is almost inevitably limited to one dealing with claustrophobia. The physical constraints of the corridor's size act as a set of instructions for interpretation, much in the way that literal renderings are used in language and tangential works (Kraynak 30).

This eliciting of specific effects from the viewer opens Nauman's work to being criticized as "anti-discursive." An anti-discursive tendency implies a perspective that bestows the artwork with a unique power which somatically affects the viewer, and results in a sensation akin to alienation or shock (Kester 5). The viewing of art becomes a passive activity; the book *How to Visit a Museum* instructs the viewer of art to "do your best at all times to let the work of art speak directly to you, with a minimum of interference or distinctions" (Finn pg). However ridiculous such an instruction may seem, in its underlying assumption that somatically-affective artwork necessarily breeds passivity, the dialogic criticism fails to allow for an approach in which art similarly jars the viewer, in order to expose his or her basic assumptions and expectations of art. This is the function Nauman enacts.

By setting up an uncomfortable situation, a piece like *Performance Corridor* works to debase the equating of the idealized "good", "beautiful", and "true", a notion on which western philosophy and consequently aesthetics is based. In discussing the inspiration for *Performance Corridor*, Nauman mentions the peculiar reaction common to people in tight spaces: an uncomfortable sensation produced by a heightened awareness of the body

("Interview with Bruce Nauman" 135). The reduced ability to evade others when restrained by such a space leads to further discomfort. Both effects reveal a basic human desire to remain self-contained, unaware of our being subjected to outside forces, as well as our freedom to move and act despite this being subjected. As a result, Nauman's strategy can be described as ethical, and the ethics it promotes is one of use. The meaning, and therefore use of the piece, is an experience that calls the viewer to question not only aesthetic values, but the epistemological assumptions and tendencies of life in general. The tendency to judge an art work by pleasure-based criteria is exposed and consequently debased, and the viewer is left to judge the piece having gained this awareness in addition to a more generalized awareness of subjectivity and agency.

This tendency, to disorient *without rendering passive*, differentiates Nauman's use of a "shock effect" from that of his contemporaries. To watch Joseph Beuys cradle and sing to a dead hare, on the other hand, is to witness without hope of an avenue for further action. Nauman recognizes the "silencing" effect of Beuys and others' work; in a 1980 Interview with Michele de Angelus, Beuys' comes up:

MD: [H]e takes over an area so completely that—
 BN: -there's nothing left to show you a way to make art (273).

The image of Beuys performing assumes the role conventionally relegated to the material piece, and the observer takes on the role of an inherently passive object that receives the work's effect. "Silenced", or rendered impossible, is the viewer's chance of acting by "speaking back" to the work: an object doesn't hear. While it might shock its viewer with an uncomfortable situation or tongue-in-cheek phrase, a Nauman work leaves room for the viewer to make empowered use of the experience, rather than to simply absorb the shock. By blatantly contradicting the viewer's expectations, Nauman is

providing a situation in which he must then *choose* whether to accept the work despite the contradiction, or reject it; the presence of choice prevents his remaining passive.

The situations Nauman designs can be analyzed with regard to the overarching theme in de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, an examination of the everyday occasions for private meaning-makings out of society's various media confrontations. De Certeau's inquiry rests on distinguishing between tactics and strategies. Everyday private practices are called tactics, and are defined by the lack of a place from which to exert their force: "the place of the tactic is the place of the other" (xix). A strategy, on the other hand, assumes a proper place. This differentiation easily applies itself to the context of Nauman's work. Even a less-explicitly spatial piece¹ like a neon sign, by creating a situation in which multiple individualized meanings can be made, recalls an encounter such as one might come across in a game like chess, or even a board game or videogame where with every direct encounter of playing pieces, opponents face multiple avenues for further action. Two pieces, each possessing inherent qualities designed to operate on opposing pieces in predefined ways, attempt to exert their force. Behind the scene pulling the strings are the two opponents. Nauman, using the "playing pieces" of specific works, encounters the individual viewing the work within the museum, embodying and in a sense "controlled by" the aesthetic values instilled by society. In these situations, Nauman's position most resembles a strategist. Of his works none models this relation more explicitly than a room that appeared as part of the 1970 *Corridor Installation (Nick Wilder Installation)*. The otherwise empty room contains a video camera that oscillates on a mount, and sends a live feed to a monitor in a nearby corridor. As viewers walk through this corridor, they

¹ Language can be described as a spatializing function: throughout *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau discusses the spatial relationships inherent to language use.

become aware that they are denied access to the room (Nauman, "Interview with Bruce Nauman" 151-2). The viewer's interaction with such as piece, as he or she is implicated within a context defined by the artist, is best described as tactical; what is important is de Certeau's contention throughout his inquiry that we can apply tactics in making personal, empowered use of media in society's otherwise assaulting inscription processes. While the space of a Nauman piece might be defined as his, the viewer is given the power to interact within that space; Nauman's work provides a setting for the viewer's conscious realization of this possibility, and the opportunity to act upon the realization.

II. Practice as Investigative Activity

The ethical effectiveness of Nauman's strategic approach hinges on his application of pseudo-scientific method to art-making. Originally a mathematician, Nauman switched to art late in his academic career, yet retained an interest in mathematic methodologies. A natural predisposition for problem-solving allows him to avoid tendencies common to art as an individual undertaking, in order to increase the utility of his work as a whole; the potential for private meaning-making as well as its ability to function as epistemological criticism are direct results of methodical choice-making.

In using methodic operations, an artist inevitably questions the possibility of agency. While techniques like chance operations have been applied toward liberating the artist from internalized discourse codes, a problem-solving approach is more frequently associated with attempts to create art under less influence of the individual consciousness. Rational thought-processes work to remove the thinker from personal implication within a problem so that it can be seen as an objective whole, a function Nauman recognizes:

+

Nauman uses this approach to avoid making art that acts simply as a register of the artist's unconscious mind, a function on which conventional aesthetics is grounded.

Chance operations are one well-known application of a problem-solving approach to art-making. Nauman cites John Cage's use of chance as influential, in particular as he used chance to integrate his artistic practice with his everyday life. Cage "opened" his compositions by incorporating everyday sounds, and the absence of sound, thus "transforming normal activity into a formal presentation" (Nauman, "Keep Taking It Apart: A Conversation with Bruce Nauman" 310). In a 1988 interview, in response to the comment that the phrase "a direct statement on how the artist lives, works, and thinks" could be applied to any number of Nauman works, he replies, "There was also the idea that if I was in the studio, whatever I was doing was art. Pacing around, for example" ("Breaking the Silence" 322-323). This follows his recognition that "there is the particularly American idea about morality that has to do with the artist as workman. Many artists used to feel all right about making a living with their art because they identified with the working class. Some still do. I mean, I do..." ("Breaking the Silence" 322). Nauman states:

It seems as though more of my life is concerned with things I care about that I can't get into my work. It is important to me to be able to get these things into the work so that the art isn't just something that I do off in the corner, while hiking in the mountains remains separate. ("Breaking the Silence" 367)

While hiking in the mountains has yet to find its way in to Nauman's gallery works, the making of a video like 2000's *Setting a Good Corner*, which depicts him building a fence on his New Mexico ranch, demonstrates one means to narrowing the distance between life and art. The decision to present an everyday activity as art effectively decreases the distance between life and art. Furthermore, in choosing to film the building process from start to finish, chance enters the work in that structural determinations including the pacing, conflict, and ending are then left to resolve themselves by way of the parameters of the

task, rather than being individually subject to Nauman's will as artist. Nauman explains, "[I]t comes from some thoughts about earlier work where you could control the length of the film or video tape or activity by having a specific job. You began when the job started, and when the job was over, the film was over. And that became a way of structuring it without having to think about it, other than deciding what the job was that you were going to call the work" ("Setting a Good Corner" par. 4). The work acquires a sense of time as continuous and looping; the tape becomes something the viewer can walk away from and return to without "missing" a vital statement on the part of the artist. While Nauman, unlike Cage and the I-Ching, does not profess to a preferred method for incorporating indeterminateness, the decision to present the everyday as art, in combination with structuring of the work by way of the natural duration of its content allows for the incorporation of unexpected meanings. Even the most banal aspect of the task at hand – tool-care, for example – can acquire significance and invite interpretation.

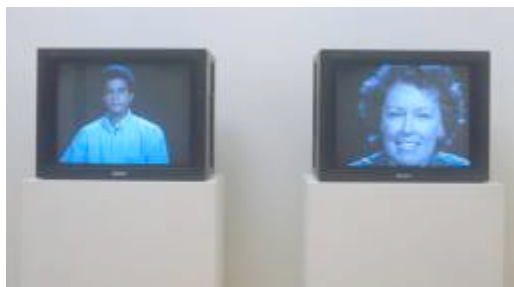
To Cage as well as Nauman, the reason behind the aspiration to meld life and art lies in the constant change that unites the two, forming the site of art's essential mystery:

"I think the hardest thing to do is to present an idea in the most straightforward way... Still, how to proceed is always the mystery. I remember at one point thinking that some day I would figure out how you do this, how you do art – like, "What's the procedure here, folks?" – and then it wouldn't be such a struggle anymore. Later I realized it was never going to be like that, it was always going to be a struggle. I realized I would never have a specific process; I would have to re-invent it, over and over again." ("Breaking the Silence" 319)

Art exists as a record of this creative process. Even artistic choices later 'erased' from the final work inevitably alter the subsequent steps in its creation. Approaches such as chance operations insure a more direct translation of this process, a goal Cage associated with making art that expresses no emotion, and Nauman associates with an aim to portray the artist in exact relation to his ideas ("Breaking the Silence" 319).

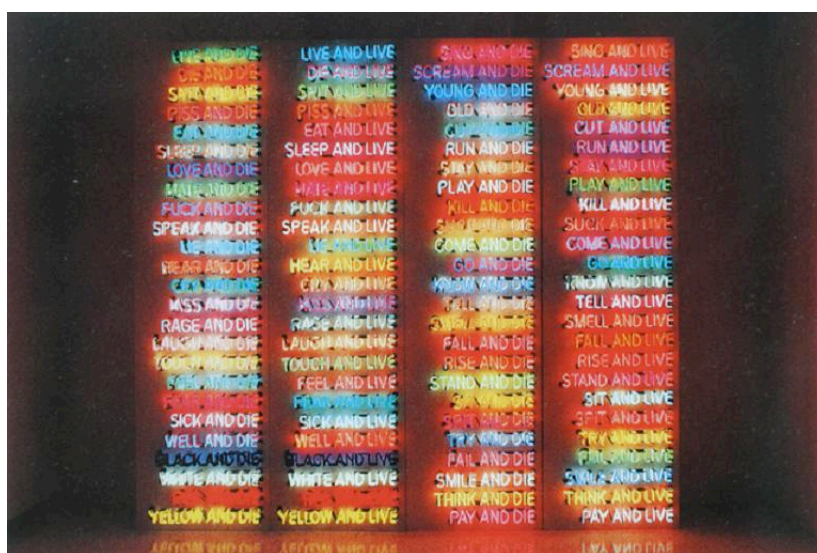
In encountering a challenging mathematical proof, attempting to prove the counter-example can give insight into the workings of the problem. In an effort to place the relating of ideas that constitutes artistic process over his own unconscious desires, Nauman focuses on the most problematic aspect of the piece rather than cutting it: making that the piece (“Bruce Nauman Interview” 401). Another technique involves cutting any elements he believes to be “the point of the piece... precisely because it is contrary to the piece” (“Bruce Nauman Interview”401). Doing so similarly opens the work to meanings that might otherwise remain shadowed by the artist’s original vision.

Another means of achieving this goal related to chance, is seen in the way list-making, or “covering all the possibilities”, can lead to a skewing of duration. This is best observed in Nauman’s language works. 1985’s *Good Boy Bad Boy* consists of two television screens side by side; on one, a woman recites a list of one hundred statements beginning “I was a good boy” (see Appendix), on the other, a man recites the same list. Nauman cites the choice of an arbitrary number as stopping point; the repetitive structure of the list likewise incorporates chance (Every fifth statement substitutes a new phrase for “was a good boy”).



The natural difference in the rate at which the two recite allows various combinations of statements throughout the narrative, and leaves the woman speaking for nearly a minute after the man has finished. Nauman explains how in skewing time “by

making this very simple program of one being slightly faster than the other, there is a randomness that covers all the possibilities” (“Keep Taking It Apart” 308). Listing and skewed duration similarly combine in *One Hundred Live and Die* (1984), a billboard-sized neon work of four columns of three-word phrases, most containing either the word “live” or “die”: “speak and die”, “sick and live”, “yellow and live”, etc. The phrases light up on an approximate five minute cycle; while Nauman again refrains from divulging the methodology behind their order, the effects of the list and the time-skewing multiply the potential meanings that can be made.



Regardless of whether they are used to avoid internalized discourse codes or one's personal agenda, by adding room for interpretation, methodic operations facilitate an increase in the *conscious* agency of the artist. Whether using tactics or strategies, whether making art or a business deal, our ability to act effectively within a situation directly correlates with the number of possible avenues available to us for action. A game like chess is won when one's opponent is forced into a deciding move: by opening an artist's eyes to see aspects of a piece he might not have otherwise recognized, methodic

operations increase his relative force towards avoiding having his work similarly “pigeonholed” or “typecast” in terms of his artistic style or intent. Our potential for effective agency correlates as well to our awareness of the situational forces that act upon us, both those internal and external.

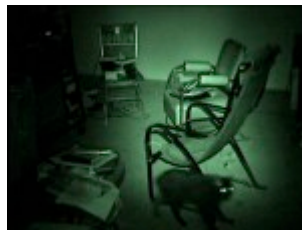
Nauman’s use of a pseudo-scientific approach to increase a work’s possible interpretations, however, seems to oppose other aspects of his ethic, namely the professed belief in artistic control. The resolution to this paradox lies in the difference between artistic control as *intention* on the part of the artist versus artistic control manifesting through *epistemological assertion*. “If you make a statement, you eliminate options” Nauman says; because, as Cage is often quoted, chance operations allow the artist to “choose what questions to ask”, a methodological approach is able to preserve conscious intentionality on the part of the artist, while avoiding imbuing the work with premeditated ethical assertions. Again a parallel arises within the work of Wittgenstein, for whom to speak on any discourse of ethics “does not add to our knowledge sense. But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind” (qtd. in Schjehdahl 103). By using his work to document a more open-ended intentionality behind the creative process, Nauman’s work not only achieves a greater degree of functionality, but also preserves a more realistic relationship between the artist and work.

His most recent work, *Mapping the Studio I (Fat Chance John Cage)* is an example of how these various methodical approaches result in a multi-layered work. The piece consists of DVD’s of footage of seven different locations in Nauman’s studio, filmed during



one fall when it was infested by mice. The

footage is projected on the gallery walls, totaling seven projections, and played in real-time, totaling approximately six hours. The choice to create a work whose running time far exceeds the average gallery viewing time incorporates chance: whether or not one will glimpse a "performer" (a mouse or one of Nauman's cats) cannot be predicted. This choice succeeds in de-emphasizing the conventional role of the object as facilitator of a



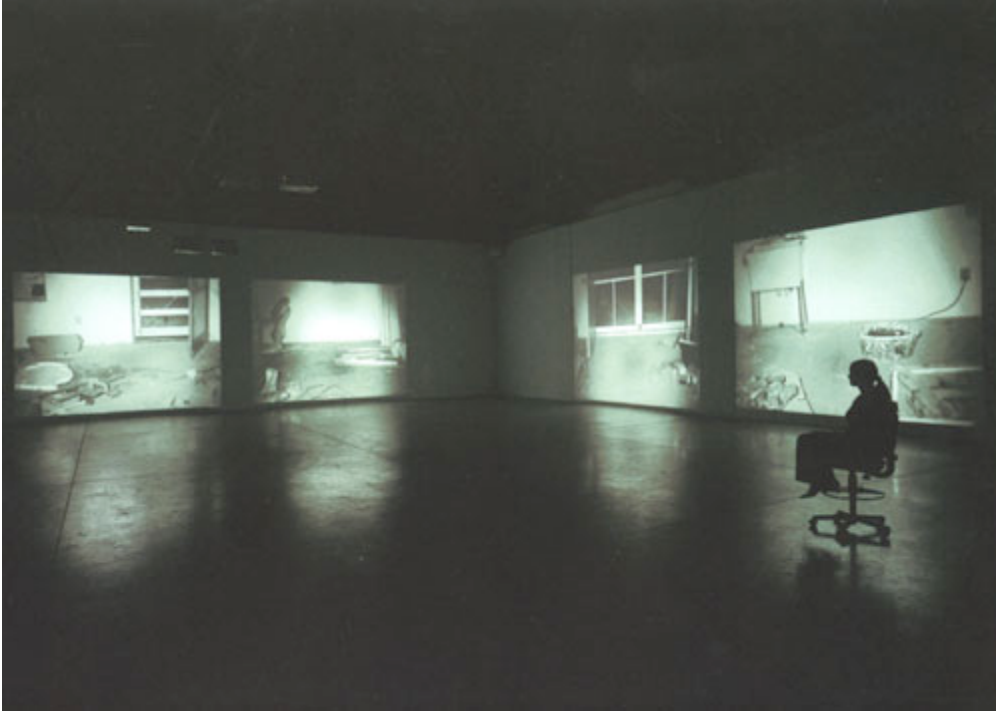
transcendence effect. The work is imbued with a "feeling that the piece was just there, almost like an object, just there, ongoing, being itself" (Nauman, "Bruce Nauman Interview" 399). The object's function as transmitter of artist's unconscious is overshadowed by its basic material existence. The methodical filming procedure- (Nauman filmed a one-hour tape nightly in each of the seven locations, for a total of 42 nights)- reduced the risk that he might unconsciously stage or pre-script the content.



Even the "map" of the studio was left to the animals: the locations

were chosen based on where the mice tended to travel. Yet if chance represents the "point of the piece", the making of *Mapping the Studio II with color shift, flip, flop, & flip/flop* (Fat Chance John Cage) *All Action Edit* further opens the work's interpretative possibilities by contradicting *Mapping the Studio I*'s randomness. The former is edited to contain only instances of "action" between cat and mouse.

The combined effect of these choices is the high level of ambiguity surrounding how the work should be interpreted. The cat and mouse have been guessed to represent artist and muse (Nauman, "Bruce Nauman Interview" 401), though they might also be read as the critic who "chases" the artist, leaving the studio to symbolize the New York headquarters of the fine art community. Nauman, who has chosen to remain in the West for most of his career, might then be represented by the coyotes, who, though they fail to appear, can be heard howling in the distance. Finally, the use of an infrared camera (a matter of relative chance, it being the only available to Nauman at the time) results in what Michael Auping describes as "a kind of forlorn beauty... almost a pathos" (402), suggesting possible existential interpretations



as well. The irony lies in how techniques aimed at removing the "messy, human aspect" result in work that conveys an "overwhelming meaningfulness" that even those skeptical of Nauman have noted (Danto 150).

III. Practice as Performance

Approaching art as problem solving prevents Nauman's work from acting as mere autobiographical register. Yet his particular angle on the implication of the artist in the creative process, with its aim to blur the line between his life and art, results in work that retains a highly personal quality.

Videos of the late 1960's, which depict Nauman passing time in his studio, can be

read as literal attempts to probe what it means to be an artist.



In 1968's "Bouncing in the Corner" he films himself alternately standing and leaning back against a corner before bouncing himself upright, while 1969's *Lip Sync* shows him lip-syncing to an audio tape of the words "lip sync" (Video Data Bank: Bruce Nauman). Other videos of the same period, *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner around the Perimeter of a Square*, *Dance or Exercise on the Perimeter of a Square*, *Bouncing Two Balls Between Floor and Ceiling with Changing Rhythm* and *Playing a Note on the Violin While I Walk Around the Studio* are equally tedious, lasting an hour or more with little to no variation in the actions performed. The constraint of systematically performing an action for a predetermined length of time undermines any urge to see the pieces as autobiographical, while Nauman's presence imparts a highly personal quality. He casts himself as performer, not in order to reveal his soul but because he, as artist, "belongs" to the work. This more general translation of the artist's role allows the works themselves to ask a larger question, one concerned with the duties required by the role as well as what constitutes art.

The rise of contemporary art is sometimes defined by an increased degree of self-referentiality; art becomes a process of questioning the definition of art. Nauman maintains this self-referential dimension. While installations consisting of passageways and rooms paired with cameras and monitors bring the viewer to monitor his or herself, in his self-

referential videos, photos, performances, and sculpture, Nauman quite literally monitors himself.

The result is a very individualized intention uniting his diverse endeavors. This seemingly paradoxical quality of his art has conventional connotations. For one, it can be construed as individualist in that it concerns itself with the individual artist, rather than a co-creating group. Individualism can be defined as

a doctrine that the interests of the individual are or ought to be ethically paramount; also a conduct guided by such a doctrine (2) : the conception that all values, rights, and duties originate in individuals **b** : a theory maintaining the political and economic independence of the individual and stressing individual initiative, action, and interests; *also* : conduct or practice guided by such a theory. (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary).

The crux of the criticism directed against “individualist” art is that it diffuses art’s ability to “interact with other areas of social practice” in order to produce social change.² Yet Nauman’s individualist tendencies fail to render art passive in this sense. What makes his work unique is the way Nauman integrates an “individualist” method of negation within an otherwise open-ended piece.

The structure that forms *Performance Corridor*, when considered in light of its original role in the video *Walk With Contrapasto*, gives an example of how this negation can take place even within a highly interactive piece. The record of Nauman’s presence within the corridor in the video, a 1968 piece which shows him sashaying down the passageway, establishes his control over *Performance Corridor* in a larger sense. The structure of the corridor lends itself to a dialogic reading, offering the viewer an interactive experience from

² Art that attempts to react with other spheres includes *1993's Soul Shadows: Urban Warrior Myths* by Dawn Dedeaux, a multi-media installation born out of the artist's work at prisons, and featuring audio recordings and portraits of imprisoned African-American males in the hopes of dissuading young black viewers from a similar path (Kester 13). Spanish artist Santiago Sierra's literal, situation-based works interact bluntly with various socio-economic spheres. In *Persons Paid to Have Their Hair Dyed Blond* (2001), illegal street vendors in Venice, most struggling immigrants, were paid \$60 to dye their (mostly dark) hair blond, then invited to take over the artist's exhibition space at the Venice Biennale exhibition (Bishop 73). Sierra, however, professes a belief that he "can't change anything" (as quoted in Bishop 71)

which multiple individual meanings may be made, yet for the viewer aware of Nauman's role in the video the piece assumes a negating or anti-discursive aspect. Not only is the viewer subject to Nauman's intention within the individual piece, but also in the wider "playing field" formed by his other works. Anti-discursive tendencies combine with a systematic approach, to result in a context that is "closed" or privatized when compared to a dialogic work aimed at a specific societal sphere. That the otherwise collective space of the corridor is defined as Nauman's by the video expresses an "indifference and... outright contempt towards the viewer" that dialogic aesthetics seeks to avoid (Kester 6).

Evidence of the purpose of this strategy can be traced to Nauman's professed mistrust of allowing the audience too much reign over the creation of a work ("Bruce Nauman: The Center of Yourself" 182). This lack of trust asserts an individualist stance in assuming that responsibility ultimately rests with the artist himself. As it is realized in an otherwise dialogical work, this paradox gets at the heart of the dynamic interplay between private and public judgments upon knowledge. Wittgenstein recognized this interplay as central to language; to Nauman, it is inevitable as well in art. "People are sufficiently similar so that you can have at least a similar kind of experience. But, certainly, the private thing can change the experience a great deal in some ways, and I don't expect to be able to control that. But, on the other hand, I don't like to leave things open so that people feel they are in a situation they can play games with" ("Bruce Nauman: The Center of Yourself" 182). The resolution lies in revising the rules, establishing his own by focusing on his own experience with a set of ideas or constraints and then portraying that, in order to insure that art maintains its potential to act as a means of communication. "And is there not also the case where we play and – make up the rules as we go along? And there is even one

where we alter them – as we go along” (Wittgenstein 39). The use of any language or communication system, including art, is a continual process.

A series of pieces spanning Nauman’s career together make clear how he uses his own presence within a greater artistic process. The works share a reference to corners. First come the self-explanatory videos *Bouncing in the Corner 1 and 2*, two early pieces which help introduce him to the art-viewing public. Performance continued to be a preferred medium into 1970, when he wrote instructions for and performed *Body as a Cylinder* and *Body as a Sphere*, both typical of his performances in that they entail the performer manipulating his body into a position which is held for an hour or more, while the concentration is directed toward a specific dimension of the surrounding space. In this case the body is pressed into a corner while the performer attempts to align his body with its own center or a line which intersects the corner, respectively, then attempts to push that center point or line into the corner. The 1970’s was a decade marked by an increase in installation works, both in Nauman’s career and contemporary art in general. 1970’s *Four Corner Piece* and *Going Around a Corner*, are two works consisting of an immense square structure presented in the middle of the gallery, rendering the viewer unable to get the customary distance away from the piece in order to take it in. In addition, video cameras mounted on the top corner of each wall filmed the room, while monitors stationed at a bottom corner of each wall played that which was filmed around the adjacent corner. Viewers are effectively left to wrestle not only with the lack of sufficient distance from which to view the piece, but also with the disorienting effects of the monitors. In 2000, Nauman returned to video to make the aforementioned *Setting a Good Corner*.

The *Corner* pieces, individually and as a series, suggest multiple plausible levels of interpretation. The videos exhibit a “built-in continuous loop”, a sense of time as endlessly

repetitive that suggests an exploration of the logic of duration. The performances address body awareness, while the installation works include an inquiry into surveillance. The works have in common a theme of questioning the limits of a space in the simplest sense. In addition, each acts as an inquiry into presentation. The early videos and performances ask the viewer whether simple physical movements can be presented as dance or performance, and the installation works ask whether a situation can be an artwork, and also whether art is a function of the viewer's distance. *Setting a Good Corner* asks if a functional everyday activity can be presented as performance. Together these forms of inquiry question the boundaries of art. By achieving a form that is personal but not subject to the specificity of autobiography, the videos and photographs in which Nauman casts himself as subject create a context that is simultaneously general or anonymous, and singular or specific. The ultimate function of his self-performance results of this dual context. By this duality, the context presented in a Nauman work becomes extendable to the experience of any social actor.

In his examination of the everyday, de Certeau repeatedly encounters a tension between *its* general and specific aspects. He cites the dilemma of attempting to critique the everyday despite the impossibility of completely detaching the objects of research (the vast ensemble of procedures that constitute everyday practices) from their everyday contexts (43-44). These objects "cannot be detached from the intellectual and social 'commerce' that organizes their definition and their displacements" (de Certeau 44). This troubled relationship motivates de Certeau to seek a poetics that captures the singularity of the everyday in a way that still allows for analysis of the political, subversive potential of everyday practices. This same tension within everyday life, between specificity and generality, is central to a discussion of open-ended art, as evidenced by the questions that

arise around works that, by placing the interactive experience over the artist, lead to cases in which the specific artist is marginal to the more general context of dialogue.³ By creating a bridge for meaning to be made between two contexts, metaphor is one method that closes the gap between the specific and general. Nauman enacts this function: while his works operate on a more general level of the artist questioning art, they are also specific depictions of him. A video of Nauman in his studio functions as metaphor because he is, very specifically, Bruce Nauman the artist bouncing a ball for exhibition in the New York gallery circuit, an action by which his very identity as artist is constructed. Yet at the same time he plays the role of the anonymous artist, performing a work for the anonymous critic or spectator.

In addition to metaphor, de Certeau finds further examples in everyday life in which a dual context is constructed, and used to empower its subject, all of which exhibit a notable degree of self-referentiality. Reading, narration (stories), and walking in the city all mediate a spatial relationship in which a subject experiences being “oneself to oneself”, or what it means to simultaneously “be other and to move toward the other” (de Certeau 110). In a work like *Performance Corridor*, it is a similar experience of being both foreign and familiar that the viewer of a Nauman work finds himself in. That the context represents the place of Nauman as artist designates it “other”, while the way the tight space forces the viewer to experience a heightened bodily awareness makes it clear it is his space as well. Throughout de Certeau’s study, the position is presented as empowering, allowing one to “develop an aptitude for being in the other’s place without possessing it, and for profiting

³ This “undermining [of] the highly personalized traditional notions of authorship... through increased reliance on reader/spectator participation) has been an aim of dialogic art beginning with Fluxus practitioners (Dezeuze 5. Artist Rirkrit Tiravanija’s *Untitled (Free)* of 1992, which consisted of the artist cooking Thai curry for gallery visitor’s, gives an example of a work designed to decenter authorship (Dezeuze 3). However, question arise when one considers that Tiravanija’s presence is in many ways vital to the piece (7).

from this alteration without destroying himself through it" (87). Hence the paradoxical opportunity for empowerment that Nauman provides his viewer despite his tendency toward maintaining control.

Directly connected to this dual context is a discussion of risk. When considered in light of his well-known tendency toward personal privacy, it stands as evidence of a willingness to take personal risks within his practice. He describes how as artist he is often simply the most convenient "body" or actor to serve in the work, although he has never been entirely comfortable with using himself due to a strong fear of self-exposure:

I can only give so much. If I go further, it would take away something, or do something, that would throw me off the tract. We all go so far that we have the fear of exposing ourselves. We really want to expose the information, but, on the other hand, we are afraid to let people in. (182)

By incorporating himself, Nauman does "let people in", thereby expressing a belief in the necessity of taking risks for a greater goal. The same man who warns us to "Get Out of Room, Get Out of My Mind" in the installation room of the same name offers his life's work for the use of his viewers. The result is an overall suggestion of the inevitable implication of a subject within a greater scheme. Not even Nauman as the artist in charge of conceiving and creating a work, can escape the consequences of that work, whether they be positive or negative. Even the mature work *Mapping the Studio I* (Fat Chance John Cage) incorporates, within the journal that records in writing the events of the videotape, repeated mention of its creator: "Bruce Nauman leaves the room." In the role of artist lies the duty to present what one has made, and to be seen is to be judged. Art, as a language in its own right, is less a definite cognitive function than it is an ensemble of practices in which one is implicated.

Everyday life is likewise defined by the multiple practices and spheres with which the modern subject interacts. "Artist-centered" work of this type shows more concern for

the viewer than many other dialogue-centered pieces. Nauman's works, rather than coercing the viewer into a literal participation like other contemporary works, ask only that he be a "thoughtful and reflective visitor" (Bishop 76). While more exception than rule, art enacting this function has been noted for the potential it holds for bringing about social change. The relative freedom of interpretation of the viewer "presuppose[s that he is] a subject of independent thought, which is the essential prerequisite for political action" (Bishop 77).

Wittgenstein concludes Investigation #77's discussion of how, in lacking an outline, the simple task of tracing becomes one in which "Anything—and nothing—is right", continuing that "this is the position you are in if you look for definitions corresponding to our concepts in aesthetics or ethics" (36). The "truths" manufactured by aesthetic and philosophical communities, in failing to acknowledge their relative subjectivity, lose the ability to about the tangible changes that language produces. Yet as Nauman demonstrates, an artistic practice can function as a mode of critique, rather than manufacturer of further such truths, restoring this ability to promote change. The metaphor of a Nauman work unites the specific context of his life with a more general context of the everyday subject of modern society, allowing Nauman's actions and choices to act as an ethical template for this "everyman". The practice of aesthetics is ethics.

Appendix

1. I was a good boy
2. You were a good boy
3. We were good boys
4. That was good
5. I was a good girl
6. You were a good girl
7. We were good girls
8. That was good
9. I was a bad boy
10. You were a bad boy
11. We were bad boys
12. That was bad
13. I was a bad girl
14. You were a bad girl
15. We were bad girls
16. That was bad
17. I am a virtuous man
18. You are a virtuous man
19. We are virtuous men
20. This is virtue
21. I am a virtuous woman
22. You are a virtuous woman
23. We are virtuous women
24. This is virtue
25. I am an evil man
26. You are an evil man
27. We are evil men
28. This is evil
29. I am an evil woman
30. You are an evil woman
31. We are evil women
32. This is evil
33. I'm alive
34. You're alive
35. We're alive
36. This is our life
37. I live the good life
38. You live the good life
39. We live the good life
40. This is the good life
41. I have work
42. You have work
43. We have work
44. This is work
45. I play
46. You play
47. We play
48. This is play
49. I'm having fun
50. You're having fun
51. We're having fun
52. This is fun.
53. I'm bored
54. You're bored
55. We're bored
56. Life is boring
57. I'm boring
58. You're boring
59. We're boring
60. This is boring
61. I have sex
62. You have sex
63. We have sex
64. This is sex
65. I love
66. You love
67. We love
68. This is our love
69. I hate
70. You hate
71. We hate
72. This is hating
73. I like to eat
74. You like to eat
75. We like to eat
76. This is eating
77. I like to drink
78. You like to drink
79. We like to drink
80. This is drinking
81. I (like to) shit
82. You (like to) shit

83. We (like to) shit
84. This is shit(ting)
85. I piss
86. You piss
87. We piss
88. This is piss
89. I like to sleep
90. You like to sleep
91. We like to sleep
92. Sleep well

93. I pay
94. You pay
95. We pay
96. This is payment
97. I don't want to die
98. You don't want to die
99. We don't want to die
100. This is fear of death.

Works Cited

- Bal, Mieke. "Telling Objects: A Narrative Perspective on Collecting." *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*. Eds. Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago. London: Ashgate, 2004, 84-102.
- Bishop, Claire. "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics." *October* 110 (2004): 51-79.
- Danto, Arthur C. "Bruce Nauman." *Bruce Nauman*. Ed. Robert Morgan. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University, 2000. 146-154.
- de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: Univ. of California, 1988.
- Dezeuze, Anna. "Transfiguring the Commonplace." *Variant* 2.22 (2005): 17-19. 18 November, 2005.
<http://www.variant.randomstate.org/pdfs/issue22/commonplace.pdf>.
- Finn, David. *How to Visit a Museum*. New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1985
- Kester, Grant. "Dialogic Aesthetics: A Critical Framework for Littoral Art." *Variant* 2.9 (1999/2000): 1-8. 1 November, 2005.
<http://www.variant.randomstate.org/pdfs/issue9/Supplement9.pdf>
- Kraynak, Janet. Introduction. "Bruce Nauman's Words." *Please Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman's Words: Writings and Interviews*. Ed. Janet Kraynak. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005, 1-45.
- Merriam Webster Online Dictionary. 2005. Merriam Webster. 7 January 2006.
<http://www.m-w.com/dictionary/individualism>
- Nauman, Bruce. Interview with Michael Auping. "Bruce Nauman Interview." *Please Pay Attention Please* 397-404.

- Nauman, Bruce. Interview with Jan Butterfield. "Bruce Nauman: The Center of Yourself." *Please Pay Attention Please* 173-184.
- Nauman, Bruce. Interview with Chris Dercon. "Keep Taking It Apart: A Conversation With Bruce Nauman." *Please Pay Attention Please* 305-316.
- Nauman, Bruce. Interview with PBS Art: 21. "Setting a Good Corner." 2005. 22 December 2005. <<http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/nauman/clip.1.html>>
- Nauman, Bruce. Interview with Willoughby Sharp. "Interview with Bruce Nauman." *Please Pay Attention Please* 133-154.
- Nauman, Bruce. Interview with Joan Simon. "Breaking the Silence: An Interview with Bruce Nauman." *Please Pay Attention Please* 317-338.
- Nauman, Bruce. Interview with Bob Smith. "Bruce Nauman Interview." *Please Pay Attention Please* 297-304.
- Schjeldahl, Peter. "Only Connect: Bruce Nauman." *Bruce Nauman* 191-194.
- Schjeldahl, Peter. "The Trouble with Nauman." *Bruce Nauman* 100-107.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. 3rd ed. New York: Macmillan, 1969.

Works Referenced

- Agamben, Giorgio. *Man Without Content*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 1994.
- Cage, John. *M : Writings, '67-'72*. 3rd edition. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University, 1974.
- Krauss, Rosalyn. *Originality of the Avant-Garde*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986.
- Perloff, Marjorie. *Wittgenstein's Ladder*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 1999.