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## ***Bruce Nauman's Philosophical and Material Explorations in Film and Video***

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Bruce Nauman's earliest films and videotapes are among the most compelling artworks of his influential career. His explorations into subject matter for his art, and his search for a form language related to ideality and willpower, are ultimately inscribed as struggle and resolution in his first moving-images. Applying low-cost, consumer-standard film and video equipment as sketch material, Nauman defined a distinctive framework for art while also introducing methods of artistic production of enduring value.

New materials and tools for art, notably film as a sculptor's medium and the use of open-reel video recording and its playback system, can be traced to Nauman's years of graduate study in the visual art department at the University of California, Davis. In projects later conceived and produced in his San Francisco storefront studio, Nauman broke with conventional parameters of sculpture to explore untested ground. In a time of anti-formalist attitudes and experimental forms, supplies for the artist expanded beyond traditional materials and often defied critical classification. Industrial processes and materials, unorthodox techniques of fabrication, and the apparatus of film and video were mined in Nauman's studio practice, with extraordinary results. His materials - such as wax, rape, signage, and wording - were closely associated with the culture at large, yet were unconventional in the realms of craft and fine art. Focusing on the human figure in action or as "template," Nauman introduced tangible possibilities for the translation of vision to the material, and immaterial, production of art.

*Span*, a ten-minute film made in collaboration with William Allan, was conceived and completed in 1966 while Nauman was still a student at Davis. It is one of a series of four works recording actions casually staged for the camera by Nauman and Allan, along with *Fishing for Asian Carp*, *Abstracting the Shoe*, and *Legal Size* (all 1966). The artists exchange roles with ease in each film, one functioning as cameraman and the other as performer, yet their roles were devised as equal and significant in each exercise. As the source for their style, the artists drew upon educational films and instructional media, such as popular handyman publications and the dumb show techniques of amateur arts and crafts manuals. Such manuals typically feature sequences of drawings or photographs, often showing a pair of hands detached from the full figure, to depict the proper assembly of mail-order components. In handyman films, as well as do-it-yourself publications, the materials are often set out in plan before construction, to instruct the reader or viewer on the correct procedures for achieving successful results.

Translating the sculptor's art-making activity from the private studio to an outdoor location, *Span* is a parody of the instructional film or manual in its step-by-step depiction of the construction of a freestanding form in the landscape, a frame over a woodland stream. A series of actions related to the construction are filmed as a documentary record of the artist's process: Nauman is seen moving the necessary tools and materials into position from a vintage Volkswagen. The red cap he wears is

often centered in the film frame as the construction proceeds to its final form. A flat, rectangular sheet of opaque black material hung across the span structure completes the work and concludes the film. This multistep fabrication and its series of constructive gestures accentuate the graphic qualities of film - its enclosure of the outlines of time and task - while the span, which is central to the camera's focus for much of the film, is a means to draw attention to the image's frame. The film further inverts expectations related to the projected image when the artists, testing the medium's limitations, impose a black rectangle within the image, masking the dead center and blocking from sight all but the landscape on the perimeter.

San Francisco is recognized as a city of perpetual change, with a cultural climate of persistent variation and transformation. Artists often describe life in the city as the source of artistic insight affecting the span of their creative careers. Resistance and rebellion are cultural traditions in San Francisco, and this has guided much of the creative inquiry related to artists' work. *Legal Size*, a three-minute film made in Allan's Muir Beach studio, is a subtle critique of conformity. Like *Span*, this film takes its form from popular instructional media, featuring a pair of hands at work cutting and folding paper as a number of ordinary envelopes of greeting-card size are cut open, expanded into two parts, and reconstructed with tape and scissors into a single legal-size envelope.

Studies in mathematics and philosophy (particularly existentialism) influenced Nauman's artistic practices in the 1960s: his attraction to the everyday and to actions based on personal convictions indicate a philosophical perspective on art, on truth to materials, and on the nature of meaningful work. Nauman's commonplace speech and his preoccupation with ordinary materials, such as an envelope or a length of lumber, have their roots in his prescient observations of thoughts held captive in language and ideas concealed in materials.

Concealment and release, obstruction and revelation are consistent themes in Nauman's serial projects in film and video. Where the film *Legal Size* articulates a wry commentary about a non-conformist's struggle against regulation, the two-minute film *Abstracting the Shoe* documents the real-time process of concealing a familiar object (a shoe) in layers of black roofing tar, applied as a means to transform the familiar into a disguised object. This is done in several ways: the shoe is initially translated from its solid form into a film image, and subsequently from film to a mysterious form made dark and decayed through an exercise of transubstantiation. *Art Make-Up* (1967) creates a similar tension by constructing layers of information and color transformations within a single film image. A quick-witted reference to the conceptual grounding of each of Nauman's projects, *Art Make-Up* involves the application of paint to the artist's torso, arms, and head in a prepared sequence of colors-white, pink, green, black. Becoming both object and subject for the camera, the artist uses his hands to apply paint to his body to camouflage his flesh. Conceived for an exhibition of contemporary sculpture at the San Francisco Museum of Art, Nauman's film project was rejected for not meeting the established medium requirements of the discipline.<sup>1</sup> The translation of the mundane - an envelope, a shoe, a human form - from the real to the abstract draws from the artist's interest in existential thought and evokes a cluster of philosophical problems that characterize Nauman's work, in his questioning of established conventions of measurement, judgment, and classification.

The very short, simply constructed film *Uncovering a Sculpture* (1965) likewise tests the viewer's ability to discern scale, material, and meaning from the cinematic presentation of an enigmatic object. A still image of a textured material, recorded by a stationary camera, is manually rolled on-screen from left to right into a round tube. As the material is rolled, a small wedge-shaped object is revealed behind it, centered in the film image. Nauman holds the camera on the form for a matter of seconds before ending the film.

*Uncovering a Sculpture* is one in a group of Nauman's earliest films once presumed lost but recently

found among holdings in a Northern California collection. The films provide further insight into the artist's fascination with the theme of enclosure, as well as his subjective consideration of the quantity and quality of time as an artistic concept. The title of *Span* refers not only to the structure built across the ravine, but also to the span of time needed for the completion of the project as well as to the time it takes to view the entire film. *Manipulating the T Bar* (1965) is filmed in spare black-and-white and engages the corner of the artist's studio as a boxlike location, in the manner of a Constructivist sculpture. Nauman's manipulations emphasize the dynamic visual interplay between the artist's figure in motion, the fixed film frame, and the studio structure. In a series of planned movements, he maneuvers a large T formed from plumber pipes to create various spatial relationships with the film frame: the T is first parallel to the top of the frame, then advances into the image field, bisects the frame, and then recedes, as drawn lines might on a flat picture plane to create the illusion of depth. All the while, Nauman stressed the sculptural forms of four shapes in fluid engagement - the film image, the T, the fixed dimensions of the room, and the figure of the artist dressed in high-contrast white T-shirt and black jeans.

*Wall-Floor Positions*, Nauman's serial exploration of the figure contained by a fixed enclosure, was presented as a performance at UC Davis in 1965 and reenacted for video in 1968. The videotape is prized in the history of video art as it establishes hallmarks of the medium in its relationship to the evolution of three-dimensional sculpture into a four-dimensional platform. As electronic video equipment became commercially available for consumer use, it moved swiftly into artists' studios, introducing a medium free of historical encumbrance at a time of late-Modern, Post-Minimal, and Conceptual art practices. Nauman concentrated on the shape of the frame as a structural consideration in his earliest projects for film, and video introduced an enclosure of extraordinary potential for the expression of psychological states, repetition, and marking the passage of time.

*Wall-Floor Positions*, a sixty-minute work for videotape, video camera, and Nauman's figure, reflects Minimalist sculpture as well as the anti-illusionist Modern movements in art and dance. With Nauman holding various positions suspended against the right-angle intersection of a floor and a wall in his studio, periodically shifting position and orientation, *Wall-Floor Positions* stresses concentration and endurance as the highest values of Conceptual art practices. This tape was the first in a series of auto-surveillance projects - by Nauman as well as others - that placed the camera in the artist's studio, an interior space of forceful dimension, to reflect on its status as a stage for emotional conditions.

The art historian and theorist Rosalind Krauss, in "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism,"<sup>2</sup> a foundational essay published in 1978, asserted that video's real medium is a psychological situation in which external objects are invested with the artist's self. Discussing narcissism in artists' videos of the 1960s and early 1970s by Nauman, Vito Acconci, Richard Serra, and Nancy Holt, Krauss focused on the psychological model of the medium over its machinery. The body, she pointed out, is the central instrument in video art, along with the more formal properties of the simultaneous reception and transmission of an image.

In *Wall-Floor Positions* Nauman periodically shifts his body to fit precisely within the frame of the video image. The figure is scaled down from life-size to the dimensions of the screen that contains his contortions and motions. As such, this mediated presence of the figure expresses new ways of being. Nauman does not strive to break out of the psychological hold of the video image by altering it with effects or editing. Instead, he stresses the location of the camera in a contrary inversion of the compositional techniques of the painter, photographer, and cinematographer. *Manipulating a Fluorescent Tube*, another work in a series of actions performed for a stationary camera, was also based on a performance at UC Davis in 1965, restaged and recorded for videotape in 1969. Per the instructions for action contained in its title, Nauman sits in a darkened studio location, handling an

illuminated fluorescent tube. Video, like other photographic media, is an instrument particularly responsive to light. The glare of the illuminated tube creates a sharp line of light on the video image through the recording process, and when turned inward illuminates sections of the artist's body, legs, arms, and torso. Nauman's manipulation of light thus alters the reception of the figure within the proscenium of video in a poetic investigation of foreground and background.

In other early projects for video, such as the energetic *Stamping in the Studio*, *Slow Angle Walk* (*Beckett Walk*), and *Walk with Contrapposto* (all 1968), Nauman engages his body as subject matter in works that quantify space and measure time. On their surface, these tapes are expressive in gesture and motion, yet they also articulate the artist's deepest concerns about art as a durable form of labor and the implication of the body in the execution of art. Moreover, the extreme concentration demanded by these performed works further indicates the artist's commitment to his forms. The concentration expended by an artist in the fabrication of artwork is typically found to be the rationale behind the survival and relevance of that work, its ability to overcome time and to influence thought across generations. The term "fully inhabited" describes such a level of concentration. Working in video as a sketch material, Nauman devised motion and figure studies of considerable strength, though they were of necessity scaled down for the single television monitor. These sketches developed over many years of work into forceful expressions of contemporaneity, as in the recent *Raw Material* (1990) and *Mapping the Studio (Fat Chance John Cage)* (2001).

Samuel Beckett, the Irish author and playwright, is identified as an influence on Nauman in the subtitle of the videotape *Slow Angle Walk*. Beckett was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1969 in recognition of a circular form of reasoning in his plays that implied entrapment in circumstances - particularly, as in Nauman, in circumstances of one's own design. Nauman's series of videotapes capture the figure in action, performing a series of rigorous movements recorded through a camera installed in a fixed location. The camera does not change location in respect to the performer, but rather defines the location, or stage, for the performer. The rotation and flexibility of the camera define, as a stage, an inflexible field of sculptural significance to the placement and movement of the figure within its frame. Nauman's repetitive gestures - stamping, turning, walking - in the enclosure of the image, trapped in time, are exercises that paradoxically release the figure from confinement. Nauman isolates himself in the studio for the purposes of work, to conduct the endurance exercises that excite in the viewer a reception of the act as liberation.

Nauman lived and worked in his storefront studio during the years that San Francisco was an active center of experimental movement and dance. A gesture-based form of dance pioneered by the choreographer Anna Halprin embraced nontraditional forms of dance, lists of instructions, and obsessive movements either large or intimate for full figure or single body parts. Halprin's movement workshops were offered at the progressive Tape Music Center on Divisadero Street. Held on a regular basis, the workshops introduced new forms of social interaction, spontaneity, improvisation, and cultural practice in dance that countered established technique. The movement workshops attracted artists in the community, who created, in the process of attending them, a movement in art as process and collective production. In Halprin's workshops, as in Nauman's studio practice, the content and conscience in art preceded the development of technique.

Nauman's projects for his studio - such as *Slow Angle Walk* or *Stamping in the Studio* - contain in their directly worded titles the instructions for a set of tasks, a set of actions executed in isolation. Each of the tapes is performed for the sixty-minute duration of the videotape reel and performed for the camera following prefigured instructions that include camera location and, in some cases, registration marks and lines drawn on the floor. In an untitled drawing for *Slow Angle Walk* (known as *Beckett Walk Diagram II*) Nauman determined the motion of steps and the position of the figure

as a line diagram in a pinwheel-like sketch to articulate gesture and floor space. *Slow Angle Walk* embraces the tension of social convention against the presence of the subconscious, or the forces of will against vagaries or unintended consequences, as many characters in Beckett's plays might. Nauman reflects Beckett's vision of two states of being by holding a series of postures in position for sustained periods of time to accentuate the motions of walking and falling in a suspenseful balancing act between them. The artist holds his outstretched legs in position, his hands clasped behind his back as if in a thoughtful pose, counting time in each exaggerated step and footfall. In these works, Nauman uses his body as a vehicle through which concepts for art are translated into form with profound effect.

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<sup>1</sup> Kathy Halbreich, "Social Life," in Joan Simon, ed., *Bruce Nauman: Exhibition Catalogue and Catalogue Raisonné* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1994), 87.

<sup>2</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," in John G. Hanhardt, ed., *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation* (Layton, Utah: G. M. Smith, Peregrine Smith Books, in association with Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1986), 179-91.