

From: *A Rose Has No Teeth. Bruce Nauman in the 1960s*, curated by C. M. Lewallen, exhibition catalog (Rivoli-Torino, Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, 23 May - 9 September 2007), Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Rivoli-Torino 2007, pp. 147-165.

Please Pay Attention, Please

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Traditionally, drawing has been a medium for describing the world. In Bruce Nauman's hands, it is a means of thinking it.

The distinction is an important one. Not because Nauman's drawings are not representational for the most part they are - but because the things represented are rarely objective in the sense of preexisting the image as a reality outside the artist's mind. Nor do they derive from rationally idealized versions of nature or logically a priori structures, as has been true for "classical" artists from antiquity to the geometric modernisms of the twentieth century. Rather, Nauman's gesture contours, textures, and, by stages, reconfigures a thought about what might exist. This thought stretches between the artist's primary intuition (the nagging, disquieting, as yet inarticulate mental or emotional paradox that, raising the artist from his chair or taking him away from his daily routines, prompts him to pick up a mark-making implement) and the physical presence (still nagging, still disquieting, but fully articulate and consequently even more puzzling) of a completed piece.

In a significant number of cases, though, the works on paper of this polymath maker of sculptures, installations, videos, performances, sound art, and more are as close to definitive physicality as an idea will get, but also as close as is necessary to give it legible, tangible substance. Thus the conventional flow of art-as-idea through the production line of the artist-as-craftsman, which typically proceeded from sketches to incrementally developed preparatory and presentational drawings to final realization in another, ostensibly nobler material, may, for Nauman, stop at any juncture with the recognition by both artist and viewer that what needs to be said, or shown, has been. Under those conditions, the "ultimate" statement may in fact resemble or even be a "preliminary" one, in a manner practiced by mid-century American writers like Frank O'Hara and Allen Ginsberg, for whom the principle of "first-thought-best-thought" held the promise of the greatest freshness and immediacy.

Nauman has occasionally chosen this option, and the wonderfully deft sheets that resulted remain among his most arresting and provocative accomplishments. This is especially true of his protean production of the late 1960s, including the work that gives the present exhibition its title, *A Rose Has No Teeth (Lead Tree Plaque)* (1966). The words are Ludwig Wittgenstein's, and they were meant to demonstrate our ability to create sentences that are perfect in their grammatical structure yet phenomenologically senseless. Although a rose has thorns, everybody knows that it has no teeth; however, the negative presupposes the possibility of a positive, even as visual analogy conflates one sharp thing with another, lending the whole assertion a liminal but finally unsustainable concreteness. Nauman's graphic "turn of phrase" takes critical analysis one step further by rendering the text-as-image into a convincing illusion of a metal plaque. Based on it, an actual plaque was cast in bronze. Nauman intended the plaque to be mounted on a tree, into which, by virtue of the young tree's continual growth, it would eventually disappear: in the fullness of time,

only the drawing of a statement without logical meaning was to have survived. If is a literalizing pictorial hypothesis reiterating an absurd linguistic claim. Notwithstanding the impossibility of verifying them, statements without logical meaning may be powerfully evocative (as poets prove without proofs) and intellectually emancipating (as the geniuses of illogic such as Lewis Carroll have argued, against argument). In the same vein, Nauman's conjuring of Wittgenstein's toothless rose may be aligned with Gertrude Stein's tautological word-object "a rose is a rose is a rose," and together they serve to quicken the synapses that discharge pictures in response to verbal suggestion and uncouple chains of reasoning from vision, all of this having been triggered by a semiotic slippage from printed letters on a page to graphite traces on a loose piece of paper.

At the time this drawing was made, Nauman, recently graduated from the University of California, Davis, had just taken a studio in a former San Francisco grocery store. Later he sublet William T. Wiley's place in Mill Valley, California. Emptying them of most of the vestiges of their previous use, Nauman created a tabula rasa in which his own philosophical investigations into the vocation of the artist and the conditions of artistic experience could take place. The white cube was his laboratory, the white sheet an equally raw two-dimensional space on which to notate and test ideas as they came to him. And if a few, like *A Rose Has No Teeth*, appear to have come fast and sure, over the long haul it is plain that Nauman is more likely to worry the conundrums that feed his art, producing variants of a given problem or hunch as a consequence. Moreover, the scribbled texts on some allow us to retroactively read his mind as he considers alternatives to an initial impulse.

One example begins with a plan for executing the work portrayed - "make plaster molds of the right knees of five people ... assign each knee an identity-preferably some (moderately) well known contemporary artists (perhaps some historical artist who has not been dead over 100 years?)" - but includes the caveat "Do not use Marcel Duchamp" and then suggests possibilities "William T. Wiley/Larry Bell/Lucas Samaras/Leland Bell or perhaps all 'knee prints' should be the same image but titled as above." Rich in potential significance, such details and proposed variants tease us with questions. Why the "100 years" cutoff and why Nauman's uncertainty about it? Why avoid Marcel Duchamp? (To keep his distance from Neo-Dada?) Why is Willem de Kooning's name crossed out? (Is that exclusion also a way of slipping the Oedipal noose?) Why include the conservative New York School figurative painter and staunch defender of traditional studio practice Leland Bell on a list of vanguard contemporaries, two out of three of whom are Californian peers? (Merely because his name echoes Larry Bell's, which is also on the list?) What would it mean to separate the names of people from "their" mark or waxen "reflection" (pace Jacques Lacan), by using the same knee in all cases? (In the event, Nauman's own knee provided the tool for making each "signature" dent in the resulting sculpture, *Wax Impressions of the Knees of Five Famous Artists*, 1966). In other instances, the viewer is almost tempted to add his or her own queries and comments, and the empty areas surrounding the images very nearly invite such interventions. Thus, whether or not a particular sheet has such captioning, in the aggregate Nauman's drawings do not so much depict ideas as narrate the processes of ideation.

An exception to Nauman's housecleaning in his San Francisco store-become-studio was a neon beer sign he found and kept in the window. Eventually the sign's commercial message - by way of a Mylar window shade with the inscription "The true artist is an amazing luminous fountain" around its border-morphed into Nauman's paradigm-changing but ever-ambiguous neon proclamation "The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths". Situated in the interface between the public and the private domains and in the gap between persuasion (advertising) and inquiry (philosophy), this neon koan was the metaphysical equivalent of running up the flag to see who might salute it, with the artist monitoring his own doubting responses with at least as much anticipation as those of passersby. For the most part, however, Nauman's spiritual, mental, and physical exercises have been

less declarative and more explicitly conjectural and experimental. Altogether they constitute a series of speculative propositions framed by a chosen discipline or medium, with the majority originating in, or at a crucial point passing through, the act of drawing.

During the 1990s and early 2000s drawing has made something of a comeback from an extended period of relative marginality. That said, it has generally been assigned the function of figuring - that is, depicting the flora and fauna of various, often fanciful dimensions of consciousness - while having been detached from that of figuring out, which is Nauman's way. In such a context, his workmanlike preoccupations and practices spin off images that have a frequently rough-edged, but unexpectedly old-fashioned quality of solid academic draftsmanship. Delineations are clear and generally crisp, hatchings and shadings are likewise methodical and decisive, and throughout light moves in and around forms and over the surface of the paper. Nowhere is this more true than in his often elegant renderings of three-dimensional objects, starting with the 1966 studies for latex and fiberglass pieces - the work that heralded this most radical of sculptor's arrival on the scene - and continuing into the present with his drawings of heads and hands, though the latter may have five thumbs and the former may have the nose and mouth stuffed (like the casts from which he works).

Conservative observers may be surprised to hear this, just as they will be surprised to discover that Nauman can draw after all, since the operating assumption among them has long been that artists given to new media are so inclined in part because they do not, indeed cannot, command the traditional ones. Nauman's training and disposition offer a thorough refutation of that canard. As a student, he was the graduate assistant of no less a realist painter than Wayne Thiebaud, whose impact Nauman readily acknowledges. In addition, his interest in another Old Master-haunted modernist, de Kooning, can be found not only in the sweep, sinew, and alternating glide and crackling friction of his stroke, but also in his choice of subject. In the early 1940s, when his output consisted largely of portraits, de Kooning struggled with the difficulty of drawing one of his own shoulders with the opposite hand while scanning himself in the mirror. On one level, it was a challenge of manual dexterity; on another, of perceptual acuity; and on a third, of psycho-physical dissociation and displacement. The result was a partial dislocation of the arm from its socket and an overall disjointedness of part to part that would become characteristic of de Kooning's Cubist- and Surrealist-modified neoclassicism from then on. Nauman's several drawings of his own rotating arm and shoulder involve the same difficulties, but his emphasis is on the continuity of form in motion and on the jointedness of limb and torso-which in a drawing of a tree becomes the knot of trunk, roots, and branches.

Nauman's studies and transformations of his own body-self-anatomies that developed parallel to the choreographed movement pieces the artist performed and videotaped in his vacant studio space - constitute a large percentage of his early works on paper. They range from modular, caliper-like cross sections of his torso and legs, lined up so as to reinterpret the academic proportional norm dictating that the ideal human body measures seven heads high (resulting in the 1966 light sculpture *Neon Templates of the Left Half of My Body Taken at Ten-Inch Intervals*), to a charcoal copy of a photograph of himself posing with arms tied (for *Henry Moore Bound to Fail*, 1967), to carefully rendered series of images of his fingers kneading his face as if it were clay, in so doing carrying to an extreme the muscular contortions of the lips as they shape sounds and articulate words. De Kooning-esque disarticulation would appear much later, in Nauman's handling of dismembered and recomposed taxidermy dummies of the 1990s. But from the late 1960s on, the conceptual mode was no longer grounded in modified neoclassical technique so much as in linguistic games in which phrases were progressively inverted, overlaid, and scrambled - such shifts in cognitive and formal register being paradigmatically Naumanesque. One such drawing testing the plasticity of language consists of all the changes that can be rung on Elvis Presley's plaintive lyric "Love me tender". The

anagrams engendered by this systematic reordering and reinscription are not just the written form of verbal play, but the graphic remodeling of texts, akin to Nauman's modeling of his mouth mentioned above. Even on the page, they can be read as word sculptures - and once translated into neon, as many subsequently were, they in fact became just that.

For Nauman, as should by now be obvious, the act of drawing is the thread running through a continuum of dialectical pairings linking hand to eye, hand to mouth-the latter is the title of one of his most famous wax sculptures, for which a pencil and wash drawing also exists; the reference is not just to the precariousness of the artist's economic state, but to the connection between manual facture and all verbal representations beginning in speech - conception to perception, mind to body, and body to mind. If stress has so far been placed on the latter term, something more needs to be said of the physical presence of Nauman's drawings and of the powerful emotional resonance they generate, lest old cultural habits of dichotomizing thought and feeling reimpose themselves at the artist's and the viewer's expense. Years ago, in an essay on de Kooning, the critic Thomas Hess tried to explain the exceptional spontaneous intelligence of the artist's draftsmanship by referencing a quality the French art historian Henri Focillon once called "the brain in the hand." "While drawing," Focillon explained, this brain "will criticize, improvise, invent, erase - think new thoughts."¹ The kind of thoughts Focillon probably had in mind are those attendant upon any mimetic artist since the Renaissance who has tried to seize reality by more or less traditional means. Those Hess was doubtlessly alluding to are the kinds of formal invention to which Abstract Expressionism was dedicated, with the assumption always being that the imperative to deform and reform the image is driven by Promethean urges and anxieties. Despite his reticence about Dada's father, the kind of thinking Nauman does is closer in its concentration on riddles, reversals, and contradictions to that of Duchamp than to the primarily pictorial problems that preoccupied de Kooning and his antecedents. Yet unlike Duchamp, whose cerebral detachment is palpable in the coolness of his touch, even when that touch is erotically electrified, Nauman's "brain in the hand" pulses with affect such that every line vibrates with the intertwinings of perplexity, incisiveness, tenderness, frustration, the urgent need for clarity combined with intimations of clarity's elusiveness, the desire to make contact, and the paired compulsions of withdrawing from viewers and striking out at them. All these strands and more come together when he puts a pen, pencil, charcoal stick, or brush to paper-that is, when he follows his own imperative, "Pay attention!" And what does paying attention consist of? It means to think with the senses and feel with the mind.

¹ Quoted in Robert Storr, "At Last Light," in *Willem de Kooning: The Late Paintings, the 1980s* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1995), 69.