

Bruce Nauman: Endurance Act

by Michaël Amy - Tuesday, September 01, 2020

<https://sculpturemagazine.art/bruce-nauman-endurance-act/>



Double Steel Cage Piece, 1974. Steel, 84 x 162 x 198 in.

Photo: © 2020 Bruce Nauman / Artists Rights Society (ARS), Courtesy Sperone Westwater, New York

Ever since the emergence of the avant-garde in the 19th century, artists have taken creative risks, explored unknown territories, thrust us out of our comfort zones, and upset the status quo. No American artist, however, has used a more wildly eclectic range of methods, materials, images, and ideas than Bruce Nauman to answer the question, “Can this, too, be art?” His will to experiment has earned him ardent admirers from the get-go and, I suspect, just as many detractors—even within the world of culture, only

that which conforms to prevailing standards garners majority approval.

Nauman's 2018–19 [exhibition](#) at PS1 and the Museum of Modern Art was only his second New York retrospective in the past quarter-century. "Disappearing Acts," with its emphasis on drawings and works produced before 1970, differed in mood, content, and organization from the stunning and raucous traveling retrospective of 1993–95. Only a small percentage of the featured works dated from the past 25 years, perhaps because many of the recent works rehash problems already explored years earlier. But perhaps that doesn't matter; Nauman's importance and influence have not subsided.

What strikes at the outset is Nauman's early determination to bypass painting in an effort to produce decidedly challenging work, first in sculpture, and subsequently, in other fields. By the early 1950s, painting had made New York City the center of the contemporary art world, and by the mid-'60s, painters still outnumbered sculptors by a considerable margin. Nauman applied to graduate school as a painter in 1964 and produced his last (abstract) painting the following year. Did painting appear exhausted to him? Did the possibilities within the relatively neglected area of sculpture seem vaster? Did he feel that he was not much good at painting or that he could not express what he needed to say within its scope? Duchamp—who garnered renewed attention in the '60s, and whom Nauman admired—had abandoned painting after practicing it, with mixed results, for two decades. The point is that it takes considerable nerve for an emerging artist to turn his back on the medium of painting as categorically as Nauman did, when he did it.

Only one (untitled) painting, an [abstract oil](#) of 1964–65 (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art) unusual for its shaped canvas, was included in Nauman's retrospective. The earliest work on display, it consists of a narrow vertical surface that veers at the top toward the right, before stopping. Two thick brown, parallel lines—dark brown on the left, and light brown on the right—run side by side down the entire length of the canvas, against a dark blue foil, to obtain four lanes of equal width. Because the object is very narrow, the depth of the stretchers stands out, thereby moving it toward the realm of sculpture.

The shape of this painting resembles a flat, stylized sleeve curving up toward an imaginary neck, but stopping before reaching it. Thus, we come rather close to Nauman's wax on cloth sculpture *From Hand to Mouth* (1967), which illustrates a saying with the utmost literalness—an approach that Nauman also explored in his portfolio of *Eleven Color Photographs* (1966–67, printed 1970). The transition from the modest untitled picture to a group of elongated abstract sculptures hanging vertically from the wall or lying on the ground like overlong baguettes is, in retrospect, logical. The objects, resembling shells or skins—though with the softness, roundness, or languor of human bodies—were displayed in proximity to the highly attenuated painting, thereby clarifying Nauman's development at this critical stage.

Melancholy and humor blend in these mixed-media sculptures, created in fiberglass, polyester resin (joined in one example by neon tubing, a medium to which Nauman would return in 1967 and later years, often to fascinating effect), or latex rubber with cloth backing. Nauman's experimentation with materials, hard or soft, and mildly anthropomorphic form—the vertical alludes to a standing, or hanging, figure; the horizontal to a prone figure (straight, stiff, and thus probably dead), or to a limb, or to a grotesque appendage—offered a critique of the hard-edged, perfect geometry of '60s Minimalism and set the standard for a new type of sculpture that came to be called post-Minimalism, which embraced organic qualities, process, accident, imperfections, and gravity.

The sculptures of 1965–67 were created through an additive process—an action akin to painting, and one to which Nauman held on. Color is an integral component of these process-oriented works, which so conspicuously remind us of the means by which they were generated. As far as gravity is concerned, *Untitled* from Houston (1965), with neon glowing faintly within, hugs the ground; and *Untitled* from Chicago (1965) has equal lengths hanging down from either side of a supporting object no longer there, the resulting image perhaps alluding to a hanged man, and (possibly) to the lynching of Black men in the United States.¹ One half of the object is affixed to the wall; the other half runs parallel to it, facing us, exposing its hollow interior. Kathy Halbreich, who curated the retrospective, argues in her catalogue essay that absence is a recurring theme in Nauman's work, or, to spin it another way, he makes absence visible, almost tangible, in a neo-Beckettian way.

For instance, if we believe the title of *A Cast of the Space Under My Chair* (1965–68)—which is somewhat akin to a painting by Piet Mondrian, developed in the third dimension and all gray—the intangible becomes quite literally concrete; nothingness takes on solidity, weightlessness is replaced with ponderous mass, transparency with opacity, and fluidity with a full stop. Placed directly on the ground, this object becomes an obstacle, reminiscent of Ad Reinhardt's well-known statement about sculpture.

Nauman has an abiding interest in fragments, which evoke breakdown and eventual disappearance or death.² They inevitably make us wonder exactly what is missing. *Henry Moore Bound to Fail, Back View* (1967/1970) constitutes a fragment of a human body, as do *From Hand to Mouth* (1967) and the epoxy resin and fiberglass heads in *Three Heads Fountain (Juliet, Andrew, Rinde)* and *Three Heads Fountain (Three Andrews)* (both 2005), where they are suspended in clusters and gushing water in different directions from different orifices.³ The hyperrealist fountain heads evoke countless classical heads knocked off marble statues, Géricault's grim painting of the severed heads of prisoners, and the fate of Holofernes in Donatello's bronze statue of Judith, planned for a fountain in the garden of the Palazzo Medici in Florence.⁴

This engagement with fragments implies an interest in the classical tradition, which is proclaimed more overtly in *Walk with Contrapposto* (1968), one of several mesmerizing video works produced with a

borrowed Portapak. By tackling Greek and Roman tradition, Nauman indirectly takes on the whole of Western art history, and thus time and history in general. Sculpture has been about the body since time immemorial; its field of inquiry widened only in 1912, with Picasso's Cubist still-life sculptures. Nauman has tackled the body from the outset, however elliptically, but he has never made a sculpture of an entire figure—only parts or contours of sections, as in the almost Beuysian floor-bound *Collection of Various Flexible Materials Separated by Layers of Grease with Holes the Size of My Waist and Wrists* (1966).

In *Walk with Contrapposto*, Nauman continued his breakthroughs in performance art by again using his body as sculptural matter and presenting himself as a moving statue. The term *contrapposto* takes us back to the introduction of antithesis in Greek life-size statuary, circa 480 BCE. The stance gives the illusion of movement to the figure by disrupting its symmetry, thereby imbuing it with life. In the video, however, the figure is obviously alive, so there is no need for Nauman to exaggerate the swing of his hips so forcibly as he walks back and forth with his hands raised behind his head, except to underscore the absurdity of making art while the whole world seems to be going to hell, or to playfully reverse gender roles, thereby testing power structures. We watch an androgynous figure in blue jeans and white t-shirt walking lasciviously down a narrow passageway, a possible response to Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase, No.2* (1912), in which the swing of the woman's hips is emphasized by stippled lines.

Almost 50 years later, Nauman returned to this seminal video with *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii* (2015/16) in which he repeats his action—now filmed from the side—with lesser ease and multiplies his likeness inside a grid projected on the wall. His body is digitally chopped up, so that one section appears to move to the left, and the one above it to the right, and so forth, on and on. Nauman plays with the value contrasts, turning light to dark and vice versa. The number of bodies and fragments increases or decreases as we turn from one wall projection to the next. The whole thing feels gimmicky and strangely indebted to Synthetic Cubism, with Futurist movement added to the mix. Seeing aging artists tackle their physical decline—as John Coplans did so magisterially in colossal black and white photographic close-ups of his body—is not always riveting.

Nauman has used video brilliantly over the years to record a wide range of states of being, first using himself as a model and subsequently relying on professional actors. *Art Make-Up: No.1 White, No.2 Pink, No.3 Green, No.4 Black* (1967–68) shows the artist in bust-length close-up, filling the entire height and almost the entire width of the frame, applying color with his right hand to his face, arms, and torso with extreme deliberation, as he examines himself in a mirror situated outside the composition. Nauman covers his skin with one monochrome paint application after another, thereby seemingly embracing both sexual and racial diversity. There is something highly sensual, and feminine, about this silent performance.

The four-channel video installation *Clown Torture* (1987), which consists of two wall projections and four monitors, is equally unforgettable with its endless loop of repetition, loneliness, alienation,

frustration, howls, and anguish: life is absurd, on top of being quite horrible. This is an endurance piece—both for the performer and the viewer. Nauman doesn't go easy on us. He doesn't do cute. Love—in whatever shape or form—isn't his thing; neither is pleasure. Sex turns into an act of aggression, and violence always threatens. In the retrospective, a lithograph installed near *Clown Torture* cried out *Help Me Hurt Me* (1975) in Roman capitals.

Reminders of death and religion come to the fore in seven horizontal limestone blocks (*Seven Virtues / Seven Vices*, 1983–84) that recall tomb slabs. Nauman inscribed each one with the name of a virtue, then superimposed the name of the opposing vice, thereby rendering the words almost impossible to decipher. These blocks are apposite markers for the Reagan '80s, when the culture wars were unleashed, which painted the world in black or white instead of seeking to make sense of the many nuances of gray. In the two-channel video installation *Good Boy Bad Boy* (1985), a Black man and a white woman, shown bust-length on separate monitors within proximity of each other, make identical nonsensical statements—"I was a good boy. You were a good boy. We were good boys. That was good."—while talking over each other, our common plight.

Nauman's work amounts to a condemnation of American society as we know it, with its hypocrisies, intolerance, lack of curiosity, corruption, racism, double standards, cult of violence, moral blindness, greed, emotional apathy, short-term vision, sense of exceptionalism, absence of intellectual engagement, and brainwashing. His television monitors and neon tubing drag in advertising, which serves the interests of corporate America and American imperialism. Nauman's work has only grown more pertinent today—another sign of its exceptional depth and range, and occasional prescience. *Double Steel Cage Piece* (1974), which we attempt to enter only to find ourselves trapped between the inner and outer cage frames, clearly renders the culture of criminalization and mass incarceration. The large, floor-bound aluminum plate reflecting the light and heat of four 1,000-watt halogen lamps affixed to each of its sides in *Lighted Center Piece* (1967–68) can be interpreted in terms of surveillance (a theme long dear to Nauman), the squandering of resources, and the warming of the planet.

Nauman has expanded the boundaries—enormously. He is nothing less than one of Western art's great permission-granters. The avenues that he has carved out for others to explore are almost as important as the gripping, exhilarating, poetic, hilarious, mystifying, boring, lovely, terrifying, enervating, intriguing, aggressive, or profoundly annoying works he has made. His work—a distillation of what it means to be alive, and to fear, and to loathe, and to die in America—ranks among the glories of postwar art.

Notes:

¹ The former subject reappears in *Hanged Man* (1985), an absurdist pastel and pencil stick drawing, preparatory for a work in neon. The 1965 sculpture was produced during the era of Civil Rights marches and the demand for equal rights for African Americans, women, and homosexuals, which Nauman deals with powerfully in a large number of works by expressing a general sense of outrage with the state of society. The ongoing escalation in Vietnam during the late '60s threw fuel on the fire; while Watergate and other domestic and foreign disasters fanned the flames. A 1973 lithograph states in capital letters, reading from right to left and from top to bottom across four registers: "PAY ATTENTION MOTHER FUCKERS."

² Death is a recurring theme in Nauman's work. A lithograph spells out the word *Dead* (1975) in Roman capitals; neon tubing outlines two men and two women enacting *Sex and Death by Murder and Suicide* (1985); and in *Carousel (Stainless Steel Version)* (1988), animal casts used in taxidermy go round and round in a dance of death, accompanied by a scraping sound as jarring as chalk screeching against a blackboard.

³ *Henry Moore Bound to Fail, Back View* depicts a presumably male figure seen from the back, cropped at the collarbone and the waist, upper arms firmly bound with rope to the sides of the torso. The cut across the lower forearms is almost as jarring as the way that the rope buries itself into the flesh. This flattened cast iron skin distantly recalls Michelangelo's bound Captives for the bottom story of the Tomb of Pope Julius II, a reference particularly important in terms of absence and fragments. Michelangelo introduced absence into statuary, having left two-thirds of his sculptural output unfinished (even if for extrinsic reasons and not intentionally). Thus human and other forms remain buried in the rock. Henry Moore, steeped in an organic formalism inflected by Surrealism, was the still living older master who needed to be toppled. Nauman co-opted Michelangelo to do so.

⁴ Nauman's fountains feature three heads, while in Donatello's *Judith* (1457–64) emphasizes three principal views, highlighted by the three faces of its triangular base. Historically, identical male heads were used to depict the Trinity, while water is used to baptize in the Christian faith. Such a reading would introduce the theme of Christianity, and more widely speaking, religion into Nauman's work. The theme of sacrifice also appears in *Carousel*.