

Bruce
Nauman
Going
Solo

Robert Slifkin

“Nauman’s artistic practice, while hardly traditional, was resolutely studio based. At precisely the same moment of art’s displacement, dematerialization, and expansion beyond traditional media and modes of production, Nauman used the studio as a means to determine the ontology of the work of art and his identity as an artist.”

Robert Slifkin

COMPANION EDITIONS

Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery
Reed College, Portland, Oregon

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Introduction

Stephanie
Snyder

WHILE RECOGNIZED AS FOUNDATIONAL works of Conceptual Art, the early studio films of American artist Bruce Nauman (b. 1941), created between 1967 and 1969 using both 16 mm film and emergent video technology, are rarely exhibited in consideration of their essential qualities as films. Typically, they are exhibited in relationship to Nauman's early sculptures and photographs, shouldered with the burden of assuming a documentary voice, and positioned as evidence of the artist's intellectual evolution (and, not unreasonably, his intellectual prowess).

But how do we experience Nauman's early films when we are invited to encounter their presence as phenomenological entities, and absorb them as time-based media, embracing the artist's full-on recognition of the medium of time as a dematerialized companion to language, philosophy, and the sound and image of his own body? To be with Nauman's films on the terms of their own making is a different experience altogether.

Nauman based his enigmatic early studio films on an eccentric assortment of gestural exercises, drawn "scores," and live performances that evolved out of his graduate school activities at UC Davis (Nauman graduated in 1966). Teaching at the San

Francisco Art Institute at the time, and with minimal financial resources for the production of his work, Nauman focused his attention inward onto the sparse landscape of his nearly vacant studio, and onto his body, working with a borrowed 16 mm camera, and later with video, positioning the camera throughout the space in various fixed positions like a watchful, self-reflexive “eye” (read “I”). In the 16 mm films, the camera records the artist from a fixed position that speaks to surveillance footage and, somewhat ironically, the invasion of privacy by unseen forces. The camera’s unflinching perspective incites the viewer to scan and re-read the environment of Nauman’s cave-like studio for clues and aberrations. But in the video works, a completely different dynamic emerges. Here, the camera becomes a “touching” eye – caressing, truncating, and inverting the artist’s body – measuring and situating it against the architecture of the studio.

In an attempt to better understand and learn from this seminal period in Nauman’s oeuvre, the Cooley Gallery commissioned art historian and Nauman scholar Robert Slifkin to author an original essay on the subject. Slifkin’s work, *Bruce Nauman Going Solo* is a brilliant study of the artist’s relationship to time-based media and the conceptual, philosophical, and spatial phenomena that Nauman explored while subjecting himself – and the viewer – to a newly interiorized vision of the self.

Slifkin’s *Bruce Nauman Going Solo* inaugurates the Cooley Gallery’s new series of pocketbook readers published under the imprint Companion Editions. The design of the series has been beautifully conceived by Heather Watkins in Portland, Oregon.

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LIKE MANY OF THE ARTIST'S SCULPTURES from the 1960s, Bruce Nauman's *John Coltrane Piece* (1968) couples intransigent materiality with willful inscrutability to produce a mysterious, if not melancholic effect. Created the year after the celebrated saxophonist's death, the three-foot square sheet of aluminum, rising only three inches off the ground, stands – however lowly and unassumingly – as a portable cenotaph. The work's mirrored base, invisible to the naked eye, yet intelligible through the work's written description, keenly literalizes its appeal to non-existence. Partaking in the artist's penchant for punning titles, the work concretizes Coltrane's composition "Peace on Earth." With its lack of a traditional pedestal, and its level, horizontal alignment on the gallery floor, Nauman's sculpture is, literally, a "piece" on earth.

Like its Minimalist contemporaries, and in particular the floor works of Carl Andre assembled out of square metal tiles, the specific objectivity of Nauman's *John Coltrane Piece* – manifested

most visibly in its geometric austerity and industrial materiality – invites a degree of subjective projection from the viewer. Without a discernable focal point, let alone compositional order or figural referent, the work (again, like a great deal of Minimalist art of the time) diminishes signs of artistic authority, in turn increasing the participatory aesthetic possibilities for the viewer. Yet if Andre's works similarly do away with conventional markers of aesthetic autonomy (like pedestals) in order to expand their engagement with the space in which they are situated, Nauman's piece, through its hidden mirror, paradoxically makes the dark and slender space between the sculpture and the floor its primary site of focus. That is to say, while Minimalist works like Andre's effectively blurred the boundary between art and life, Nauman's piece claimed that boundary as a space worth examining in and of itself.

If mirrors are conventionally used as a means for seeing oneself, or the world outside of oneself, as a representation, in Nauman's *John Coltrane Piece*, any such self-identification is rendered impossible. Nothing can be reflected without light or distance, both of which are denied in the work. (Nauman would explicitly explore the necessary condition of light in a related sculpture, *Dark*, also from 1968. In *Dark*, the work's title is written underneath a similarly large and flat square steel panel placed directly on the ground.) Repeatedly in Nauman's work from the 1960s, this space – where art meets life, where the artificial meets the natural, where the figurative meets the literal – is shown to be a site of darkness, of indeterminacy, of illegibility, and of privacy, a place where meaning breaks down and becomes solely a personal matter and messages become intransmissible.

In a 1970 conversation with curator and critic Willoughby Sharp, Nauman commented upon this aspect of his *Coltrane Piece*, noting that the work, and his art in general, “tends to fall in the private category.”¹ In many ways the related themes of privacy and concealment (and their antipodes of communication and clarity) have been central concerns throughout the artist’s lengthy career. In a 1972 interview Nauman acknowledged that his preoccupation with the subject of privacy entailed the danger of hermeticism, noting that “if you make work that’s just too private, nobody else can understand it.”² The tension between the desire for communication – and as a possible analogue, community – and, as Nauman put it, the “personal fear of exposing myself,” runs through much of Nauman’s oeuvre. In many ways, it would become the central theme of the remarkable body of work that Nauman produced between 1967 and 1973, in which the artist began to use film and video – media that, because of their capacity to automatically mirror the world back to the artist and correspondingly project or transmit it to a distant audience – serve as ideal formats through which to explore the agonistic duality between the appeal for an intimate, if not private, experience, and the acknowledgment that any

¹ Nauman, in conversation with Willoughby Sharp, in *Please Pay Attention Please, Bruce Nauman’s Words, Selected Interviews*, ed. Janet Kraynak (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 129.

² Nauman, interview with Lorraine Sciarra, in *Please Pay Attention, Please*, 169. Michael Auping has more recently noted the centrality of this theme in the artist’s oeuvre: “Throughout his career,

Nauman has grappled with the tension between private thought and public exposure – one of the great dilemmas facing the modern artist who is challenged to be intensely personal in a very public way.” Auping, “Sound Thinking,” *Artforum* 43 (January 2005), 160.

successful artistic statement entails a degree of publicness that must transcend the boundaries of the individual subject.³

The exploration of private and public meaning established materially and spatially in sculptures like *John Coltrane Piece* and *Dark* was particularly “humanized” in a pair of nearly hour-long videos created by Nauman in 1973, in which two actors attempt to meld their bodies into the floor of a television studio. Nauman provided the actors with explicit instructions and allowed them to practice the exercise before the recording began. As evinced by the titles of the two videos – *Elke Allowing the Floor To Rise Up Over Her, Face Up*, and *Tony Sinking Into the Floor, Face Up and Face Down* – once again it is the thin space between body and floor that becomes the crucial site of Nauman’s artistic investigation. While the action in both videos is generally quite uneventful (depicting the actors gradually getting their bodies comfortable in a horizontal position, and then holding the position for a long period of time) in both cases the participants had to stop mid-exercise due to the disturbing intensity of the experience. Elke suffered from what Nauman called “a violent reaction,” and Tony coughed and choked, succumbing to the fear that the molecules of his skin might be torn from the surface of the ground.⁴ Like the space between Nauman’s *Coltrane Piece* and the gallery floor, the space between the actors’ bodies and the floor of the television studio becomes both the focus of the viewer’s attention and a site that suggests a certain

³ Nauman, interview with Jan Butterfield, in *Please Pay Attention, Please*, 182. The artist goes on to say, “We really want to expose the information, but, on the other

hand, we are afraid to let people in.”

⁴ Nauman, interview with Ian Wallace and Russell Keziere, in *Please Pay Attention Please*, 191.

impossibility, whether of metaphysical transcendence, meaning, or simply visibility.

Nauman's interest in the meditative, if not quasi-therapeutic practices enacted in these two videos from 1973 was, in part, influenced by his reading of the 1951 book *Gestalt Therapy* by Frederick Perls, Ralph F. Hefferline, and Paul Goodman. The book, whose first sentence invited readers to "invade your own privacy," espoused ways to establish a sense of psychic cohesiveness, or what the authors called a "strong gestalt," through a series of attention-focusing exercises that examined the interplay between the "organism and its environment."⁵ According to the authors, due to the dulling effects of modern life with its various forms of distraction, most individuals cast off parts of themselves in the name of efficiency only to ultimately render themselves less psychically effective because of these losses. "Attention, concentration, interest, concern, excitement and grace are representative of healthy figure-ground formation, while confusion, boredom, fixations, anxiety, amnesias, stagnation and self-consciousness are indicative of figure-ground formation which is disturbed."⁶

It is quite understandable why the book's diagnosis of the blurred boundaries between the self and the external world resonated

⁵ Fredric Perls et. al. *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality* (New York: The Julian Press, 1951), 3. For a discussion of the influence of Perls' book on Nauman, see Marco De Michelis, "Spaces," in Carlos Basualdo and Michael R. Taylor, *Bruce Nauman,*

Topological Gardens (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 67-71. Nauman acknowledges his interest in the book in his interview with Lorraine Sciarra in *Please Pay Attention Please*, 166.

⁶ Perls et. al., *Gestalt Therapy*, ix.

with Nauman. The artist's first major body of sculptures consisted of fiberglass molds that were split such that their interiors were as visible and sculpturally important as their exteriors. This interest in making interiority visible – and converting “ground” into “figure” – was perhaps most famously explored in the artist's concrete sculpture *Cast of the Space Under My Chair* (1965–68). That said, Nauman's work hardly suggests a wholesale adoption of the tenets of Gestalt Therapy (which would promote the strong articulation of such boundaries). Insofar as Perls and his collaborators provided various exercises to help demarcate one's gestalt, Nauman drew upon these attention-focusing practices and turned them into methodologies for examining moments of what might be called *gestalt incohesion* – situations in which the body might meld into its surroundings.⁷ In fact, the artist created a series of works that, in their instructional character, appear like perverted exercises from the book; but Nauman's “exercises” appear to be less about the cohesion of the ego or its fluid interplay with its environment, and more about its dilution into its surroundings. For instance, in *Instructions for a Mental Exercise* (on facing page), written in 1969 but not published until 1974 (and apparently serving as the foundation for the two “floor melding” videos from 1973), Nauman encouraged the participant to attempt just such a physical amalgamation with his or her surroundings.⁸

⁷ Nauman described the exercise in Perls' book as promoting situations where “you can't relax following resistances.” Quoted in Coosje van Bruggen, *Bruce Nauman* (New York: Rizolli, 1988), 228.

⁸ *Instructions for a Mental Exercise* was originally written in 1969, titled *Untitled (Project for Leverkusen)*, and published under this title in the journal *Interfunktionen* 11 (1974), 122–24.

I N S T R U C T I O N S

- A. LIE DOWN ON THE FLOOR NEAR THE CENTER OF THE SPACE, FACE DOWN,
AND SLOWLY ALLOW YOURSELF TO SINK DOWN INTO THE FLOOR. EYES OPEN.
- B. LIE ON YOUR BACK ON THE FLOOR NEAR THE CENTER OF THE SPACE AND
SLOWLY ALLOW THE FLOOR TO RISE UP AROUND YOU. EYES OPEN.

This is a mental exercise.

Practice each day for one hour,

1/2 hour for A, then a sufficient break to clear
the mind and body, then 1/2 hour practice B.

At first, as concentration and continuity are broken
or allowed to stray every few seconds or minutes,
simply start over and continue to repeat the exercise
until the 1/2 hour is used.

The problem is to try to make the exercise continuous
and uninterrupted for the full 1/2 hour. That is, to take
The full 1/2 hour to A. Sink under the floor, or B.
to allow the floor to rise completely over you.

In exercise A it helps to become aware of peripheral vision
- use it to emphasize the space at the edges of the room
and begin to sink below the edges and finally under the
floor.

In B. begin to deemphasize peripheral vision - become
aware of tunneling of vision - so that the edges of the
space begin to fall away and the center rises up
around you.

In each case use caution in releasing yourself at
the end of the period of exercise.

Nauman continued this line of investigation in another instruction-based piece entitled *Body Pressure*. First exhibited at the Konrad Fisher Gallery in 1974, the work entailed nothing more than a free-standing wall and a set of instructions, printed in German and English, and similar to the earlier *Mental Exercise*. In *Body Pressure*, the participant was instructed to press his or her body against the wall and, according to the accompanying text, “form an image of yourself (suppose you had just stepped forward) on the opposite side of the wall pressing back against the wall very hard.”⁹ Like the pair of “floor melding” videos from 1973, and the two floor sculptures from 1968 already discussed in this essay, *Body Pressure* utilized a flat surface – in this a case vertical one – as the focal site of the work. Yet in this instance, rather than the incorporation of the body into a resistant surface, a bodily double is projected on the other side of the wall. Nauman notes in the final line of the instructions: “This may become a very erotic exercise.”

The distinctly erotic potential of *Body Pressure* may be best understood in relation to a work by Dan Graham from two years earlier entitled *Body Press*. (The titular similarity suggests the possibility of direct influence.) At once a sculpture, a performance, and a film, *Body Press* encompassed a cylinder with a mirrored interior in which a naked man and woman, both holding 16 mm film cameras, were instructed to record their skin – both in the distorted reflection of the curved, mirrored interior, and by directly filming their bodies – changing cameras

⁹ The text of *Body Pressure* is reprinted in *Please Pay Attention Please*, 83–85.

midway through the exercise. The two films were then projected on opposite ends of the gallery space so that, in a sense, the mirrored surface of the cylinder served as a literal prefiguration of the performance's subsequent projection.

The cinematic component of *Body Press* makes explicit the way in which the wall functions in Nauman's *Body Pressure* as both a barrier that the self should literally internalize, and a screen upon which the self is virtually projected.¹⁰ With its enactment of bodily projection across a flat screen, in many regards the situation proposed in *Body Pressure* resembles that of the respective transmission and projection of video and film. As art historian Rosalind Krauss recognized in a seminal essay from 1976, the use of mirroring, whether literal or imaginary, was a central component of a wide array of early video art practices. Repeatedly, artists such as Nauman, Graham, and Vito Acconci placed themselves between the video camera and the monitor so that "the self [was] split and doubled by the mirror reflections of synchronous feedback."¹¹ For Krauss, this technique of "self-encapsulation" revealed the medium of video art to be not so much a material substrate (as it was in traditional artistic formats such as painting or sculpture) but rather, a

¹⁰ It also reveals the central concern for bodily projection and incorporation in various of Nauman's works. My understanding of Nauman's engagement with bodily projection is deeply informed by Gabrielle Gopinath's reading of his work in her unpublished essay "Bruce Nauman's Astral Projections."

¹¹ Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthe-

tics of Narcissism," *October* 1 (Spring 1976), 53-55. And while the critic suggests at the end of her essay that this move into narcissism might have larger cultural implications in general, her interest is more in terms of the question of sustaining modernist tenets of medium specificity in the face of the distinctly dispersed apparatus of the video format.





psychological condition, namely narcissism. Placing their bodies between the recording input of the video camera and the receiving output of the monitor, early video artists entered into a literal situation whose virtual compression of time and space found a material correlate, not only in the flat horizontal planes of Nauman's *John Coltrane Piece* and *Dark*, but, perhaps even more explicitly, in the series of plywood corridors that Nauman constructed between 1967 and 1974.

Like much Minimalist art of the period, Nauman's corridor works emphasized the viewer's bodily engagement with the work of art, activating the space in and around the object and, in turn, like the dispersed apparatus of video, complicated and expanded conventional notions of autonomous and pure artistic media. In fact many of the ostensibly sculptural corridors had material connections to video. The first one Nauman constructed, *Performance Corridor*, consisted of nothing more than two parallel twelve-foot-long unadorned plywood walls set twelve inches apart from one another, and was originally created as a prop for his video *Walk With Contrapposto* (1967). Several of the structures utilized actual mirrors, sometimes placed at the end of the corridor at an angle, which presented confusing views to approaching spectators. In other instances, Nauman placed video monitors at the end of passageways, further substantiating the connection not only between mirror and monitor, but between the corridors and the dynamics of the video apparatus.¹² For instance, in Nauman's *Live Taped Video*

¹² In an interview with Sharp, Nauman notes that "the closed circuit functions

as a kind of electronic mirror." *In Please, Pay Attention, Please*, 150.

Corridor (1969-70) two monitors stacked vertically were placed at the end of a walkway. The top monitor showed a closed-circuit image of the narrow space between the walls, taken from above the entrance so that as a person approached the monitor they confronted an image of themselves from behind, producing an unnerving effect in which one's body diminished in size the closer it came to the monitor; the lower monitor displayed a previously recorded image of the corridor empty. Like many of the works already discussed, *Live Taped Video Corridor* presented a situation in which a body enters a physical space only to have its materiality seem to diminish and ultimately disappear within it.

Nauman has stated that the corridor pieces were “about the connection between public and private experience,” going on to add that “the video helps the private part even though it’s a public situation. The way you watch television is a private kind of experience.”¹³ Repeatedly in his published interviews the artist describes his use of video and film in terms of his interest in examining “the connection between public and private experience.” Describing how he began making videos after producing a series of short films, the artist stated, “Video is a much more

¹³ Nauman, interview with Chris Dercon, in *Please Pay Attention Please*, 310. In an essay addressing the recent trend in using the artist's body as a sculptural medium, Willoughby Sharp notes: “Generally the performance is executed in the privacy of the studio. Individual works are mostly communicated to the public through the strong visual

language of photographs, films, video-tapes and other media, all with strong immediacy of impact.” In Willoughby Sharp, “Body Works,” *Avalanche* 1 (Fall 1970), 14.

‘private’ kind of communication” than film. “You sit and have contact with a television set, as opposed to film, where generally a lot of people go and the image is very large; it’s more of a common experience.”¹⁴

If, in the 60s and 70s, Nauman associated privacy with the medium of video, this motif found a degree of overdetermination in his chosen locale for almost all of the video works, namely, his studio. Unlike many 1960s artists who radically undermined the romantic vision of the solitary artist working in seclusion in the studio – through managerial models (Warhol), physical displacement (Smithson), or dematerialization (Conceptual Art) – Nauman’s artistic practice, while hardly traditional, was resolutely studio based.¹⁵ At precisely the same moment of art’s displacement, dematerialization, and expansion beyond traditional media and modes of production, Nauman used the studio as a means to determine the ontology of the work of art and his identity as an artist. As he recollected about this crucial moment in his early career: “[Because] I was an artist and I was in the studio, then whatever it was I was doing in the studio must be art. And what I was in fact doing was drinking coffee and pacing the floor. It became a question of how to structure those activities into being art, or some kind

¹⁴ Nauman, interview with Chris Dercon, in *Please Pay Attention, Please*, 309.

¹⁵ For a discussion of this transformation in studio practice, see Caroline Jones, *Machine in the Studio, Constructing the Postwar American Artist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Michael R. Taylor, in his essay “Bruce

Nauman: Mapping the Studio, Changing the Field,” in *Topological Gardens*, states that “Nauman’s work ... simultaneously challenges and reinforces the twentieth-century notion of the artist’s studio as a private, almost sacred space, where the creative act takes place within an atmosphere of solitude and reflection ...” 49.

of cohesive unit that could be made available to people. At this point art became more of an activity and less of a product.”¹⁶ Nauman’s solution to this crisis of artistic identity, and, as he notes, communication with a public, was to document his activities – first through film, and then after obtaining the necessary equipment from his dealer Leo Castelli – through videotape. In works such as *Stamping in the Studio* and *Slow Angle Walk (Beckett Walk)* (both 1968) Nauman literally videotaped himself pacing around the studio for sixty minutes, albeit with a rigorous intensity that invested his actions with an artistic intentionality that was reiterated in the oftentimes skewed or even inverted camera angles.¹⁷

The video apparatus of camera and monitor thus became a structuring boundary that could demarcate artistic production just as categorically as more conventional markers of aesthetic significance like frames and pedestals. By simply recording an event, even drinking coffee and pacing the floor could be discerned as art. And by performing acts that entailed a certain degree of rigor and endurance, Nauman sought to engender a model of communication with his audience. As he noted to Sharp, “If you really believe in what you’re doing and do it as well as you can ... if you are honestly getting tired ... there has to be a certain sympathetic response in someone who is watching you.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Nauman, interview with Ian Wallace and Russell Keziere, October 1978, in *Please Pay Attention Please*, 194.

¹⁷ In “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism,” Krauss notes that in the 1970s, artists’ capacity to present work, in public,

via reproductions and dissemination in the media, is “virtually the only means of verifying its existence as art ...” 59.

¹⁸ Nauman, interview with Willoughby Sharp, in *Please Pay Attention Please*, 148.

The medium of video with its divided modes of recording and transmission allowed Nauman to invest his intensely private actions with a degree of public communication, and through its durational component, which the artist took to its material limit in the form of a sixty minute tape, even expressive potential.

Yet the aesthetic boundary of video was one in which the self could not only be recorded and transmitted but, as in *Body Pressure*, and to a lesser extent *John Coltrane Piece*, also incorporated, albeit virtually. And, as in other works that employed actual sculptural elements to figure this merger of body and artistic medium, the process intimated a sense of privacy. If a central strategy of Nauman's art has been to "give two kinds of information that don't line up" in an effort to forge a productively thought-provoking confusion, the artist's use of video, specifically, has aligned this approach with his equally strong interest in examining the dichotomy between public and private experience.¹⁹ As David Joselit has recently noted "Television is the first major public medium experienced in private."²⁰ The intimacy of the format was enhanced by its low-grade resolution (especially in its formative years) which promoted the use of close-ups and more intimate modes of reception, typically in the viewer's living room and bedroom. While the video apparatus offered a means for defeating the privacy of experience through a model of mass reproduction and distribution, it nonetheless encouraged a private mode of viewership. Nauman

¹⁹ Nauman, interview with Michele de Angelus, *Please Pay Attention Please*, 272. *Against Democracy*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 21.

²⁰ David Joselit, *Feedback, Television*

would figure the fundamental intimacy of the medium by documenting himself performing a series of hermetically intense actions alone in his unadorned and nearly vacant studio. Yet by recording and exhibiting these actions, the artist made public – publicized – this privacy. “You work alone in the studio,” he stated, “and then the work goes out into a public situation.”²¹ If, for Nauman, the studio was a site of privacy and the gallery a “public situation,” video made the fundamental, if rarely considered dynamic of privacy and publicness underlying any artistic utterance an essential condition of its medium. In fact, the artist would describe the nature of television as “opaque,” going on to add that “it only gives to you, you can’t give back. You can’t participate. I like that.”²² That is to say, the video apparatus – with its split formats of recording and transmission – made explicit the ultimate public reception that haunts even the most solitary moments of artistic production, as well as the possibility of a private experience of a work in its public exhibition. In Nauman’s video works an intimate symmetry is established between the solitary artist and an (imagined) isolated viewer.

This aspect of the medium of video was powerfully reinforced by its use of monitors, the very same material substrate required in the medium of broadcast television. Some of the artists who first explored the potential of video art also considered the possibilities of public broadcasting, albeit frequently perverting the dominant understanding of its mass-communication potential by producing willfully recalcitrant and boring programs. In

²¹ Nauman, interview with Chris Dercon, in *Please Pay Attention, Please*, 309.

²² Nauman, interview with Chris Dercon in *Please Pay Attention, Please*, 313.

1967, the same year that Nauman began working with video, he participated in a televised video project produced by his friend and previous teacher at UC Davis, William Allan. In the hour-long program, broadcast on KQED (public television channel for the San Francisco Bay Area where Allan was an artist-in-residence at the Experimental Television Project) Nauman opened five ten-pound bags of white flour and proceeded to make “flour arrangements” with the mass of fine powder using a long wooden plank and his limbs. As Nauman went about his task, Allan and the painter Peter Saul sat on a raised platform (and notably behind a real flower arrangement) and discussed various topics in the casually confident demeanor characteristic of television talk show hosts. A camera mounted directly above Nauman recorded aerial shots of his work in progress that were then interspersed between Allan and Saul’s commentary, and occasionally projected behind the two interlocutors.

Nauman’s performance on Allan’s program expanded upon a series of seven color photographs that the artist produced the same year of similar “flour arrangements.” According to Nauman, the *Flour Arrangements* series came out of the same central problem of determining the essence of artistic identity. Trying to produce an intentionally “unfamiliar situation” Nauman emptied his studio and worked exclusively on these arrangements “for about a month.” If Allan’s program offered a release from the hothouse environment of the artist’s studio, turning a sculptural “unfamiliar situation” into a decidedly public one (via its broadcast from a television studio), it nonetheless partook in a decidedly indifferent, if not antagonistic, attitude towards public, let alone mass-media, communication.²³

Nauman's indifference to reaching large audiences was related to what he described as his "mistrust [of] audience participation." Speaking about the already mentioned *Performance Corridor*, Nauman noted that "The piece is important because it gave me the idea that you could make a participation piece without the participants being able to alter your work."²⁴ Such control – literalized in the extremely narrow passageways of most of his corridors that allowed for only one body at a time to enter and experience them – ensured, according to the artist, that "people were bound to have more or less the same experiences I had."²⁵ Like the instruction pieces, the corridors were predicated on the idea of recreating a sensation that the artist himself had already personally experienced through a strategy of making the work "as limiting as possible."²⁶ As such, these works engaged in a dialectic between privacy and publicness, at once demanding an intimate, singular experience in the name of communion, if on the interpersonal rather than collective level, breaking down the

²³ The deeply parodic nature of Allan and Saul's personas suggest that the possibility of communication with a mass (or even moderately large) public was not really an issue in the program. Even if there was a sizable audience for the "show," it is hardly likely that many watched it, let alone understood it. In fact Nauman noted that he was not particularly interested in bringing his work to "a wider audience." (Nonetheless in his interview with Sharp, Nauman remarked that he would like to do something for network TV: "I'd like CBS to give me an hour on my terms ... to present some boring material.") Nauman,

interview with Sharp in *Please Pay Attention Please*, 152.

²⁴ Nauman, interview with Sharp in *Please Pay Attention Please*, 113-14.

²⁵ Nauman, quoted in van Bruggen, *Bruce Nauman*, 18. In an interview with Jan Butterfield, in *Please Pay Attention Please*, Nauman describes a similar effect in his *Floating Room* of 1972 in which "people seemed to either have pretty much the same experience or they were blocking it out," 179.

²⁶ Nauman, interview with Sharp in *Please Pay Attention Please*, 114.

barriers of privacy, albeit through techniques that destabilized, if not destroyed, the stable figure or ego of the participant. This paradox encapsulates the challenge that Nauman's artistic project faced in terms of privacy and publicness. Like many artists working in the 1960s Nauman was wary of facile and fallacious models of communication, such as expressionism, that promised universal comprehension. Yet he was also suspicious of the phenomenologically-inflected reception of Minimalist art that ostensibly offered infinitely unique subjective feedback. Against the two extremes of tenuous universality and incommunicable individuality, Nauman sought to produce situations and objects that restricted the subject's agency and yet, within a diminished scope of experience, offered the subject a transmissible situation and sensation. One might say that Nauman's works present a communal experience of disappearance, or that the possibility of community is experienced in these works as an absence – as privation – thus complicating and expanding the possible elegiac connotations of works such as the artist's *John Coltrane Piece*.

For Nauman, the privacy of the studio engendered a corresponding intimacy for his work's "public," and in turn promoted an empathetic response in a small but selective audience. As he told Sharp, "I don't think that it bothers me that the pieces are not for many people, because the way I work, it seems that I am doing them in the studio for me or for the small number of people who come to the studio, so it really is one-to-one ... However, most of the people that came to the studio are sympathetic anyway (you can really feel that quickly)."²⁷ Nauman's sustained anxiety and interest in questions of privacy and the narrowing of public experience may be seen as a complex engagement with

what Richard Sennett has called the “intimate society,” a cultural condition in which “closeness between persons is [seen] as a moral good,” and “social relationships of all kinds are [seen as being] real, believable, and authentic the closer they approach the inner psychological concerns of each person.”²⁸ For Sennett, the intimate society represents a betrayal of the modern and particularly Enlightenment tradition of the public sphere and civic engagement. Yet rather than merely reflecting this particular cultural condition of late modernity, Nauman’s works may also suggest a stringent and intense attempt to sustain some sort of authentic, if drastically contracted, public experience at a moment when publicness itself, and the artist’s relationship with his or her public in particular, seemed endangered.

Considering this possibility, Nauman’s distinctive concern with barriers (walls, floors, and screens), marshalling them as sites to be transcended and yet which can also incorporate the subject, may imply an almost hysterical desire for communion in the fragile intimate society of postmodernity. In works such as *Playing A Note on the Violin While I Walk Around the Studio* (1967–68), *Dance or Exercise on the Perimeter of a Square* (1967–68), and *Flesh to White to Black to Flesh* (1968), Nauman seems to drain the esteemed performance tradition of the solo of its most prized attributes, transforming a moment when the single artist demonstrates his or her technical mastery and personal individuality into a repetitive and emotionless task which,

²⁷ Nauman, interview with Sharp in *Please, Pay Attention Please*, 80–81.

²⁸ Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man: On the Social Psychology of Capitalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978), 259.

more often than not, occludes the artist's personality. Through these works, Nauman's art makes intimacy seem perverse or even grotesque, reminding the viewer of the privation at the base of our culture's cherished privacy.

Robert Slifkin is Assistant Professor of Fine Arts at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, where he teaches courses addressing various aspects of modern and contemporary art. Slifkin has been the recipient of fellowships from the Henry Luce Foundation, the Getty Research Institute, and the Henry Moore Foundation. His essays on the work of James Whistler, Bruce Nauman, Donald Judd, and Philip Guston have appeared in such journals as *October*, *American Art*, *Oxford Art Journal*, and *The Art Bulletin*. His manuscript *Out of Time: Philip Guston and the Refiguration of Postwar Art* recently was awarded the Phillips Book Prize and is forthcoming from the University of California Press.

Bruce Nauman, Basements / Early Studio Films, 1967-69
Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery, Reed College
January 27 – March 9, 2012
Curated by Stephanie Snyder

*Dance or Exercise on the Perimeter of
a Square (Square Dance), 1967-68*
8:24 min., black and white, sound
16 mm film on video, digital projection

*Violin Film # 1 (Playing The Violin
As Fast As I Can), 1967-68*
10:54 min., black and white, sound
16 mm film on video, digital projection

*Bouncing Two Balls Between the Floor
and Ceiling with Changing Rhythms, 1967-68*
10 min., black and white, sound
16 mm film on video, digital projection

Wall-Floor Positions, 1968
60 min., black and white, sound
Displayed on Sony Trinitron
PVM-2530, 25 in. monitor

Bouncing in the Corner No. 1, 1968
60 min., black and white, sound
Displayed on Sony Trinitron
PVM-2530, 25 in. monitor

Flesh to White to Black to Flesh, 1968

51 min., black and white, sound

Displayed on Sony Trinitron

PVM-2530, 25 in. monitor

Violin Tuned D.E.A.D., 1969

60 min., black and white, sound

Displayed on Sony Trinitron

PVM-2530, 25 in. monitor

All works © 2012 Bruce Nauman
Courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix
(EAI), New York, NY

Colophon

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(pp. 20-21) Bruce Nauman, *Flesh to White to Black to Flesh*, 1968, 51 min., black and white, sound. © 2012 Bruce Nauman / Artists Rights Society (ARS). Courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York, NY.

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