

Bruce Nauman's "Mapping the Studio I (Fat Chance John Cage)"

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*What expresses itself in language, we cannot express by means of a language.
What can be shown, cannot be said.*

(Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tractatus)

Enigmatic is a one-word summation of Bruce Nauman's artwork. He leaves us, as viewers of his work, without clear answers, with a pervading sense of ambiguity, perplexed as to his intended meanings. Upon first encounter, his work generally supplies an immediately apparent reading, but when we open that trap door, it opens to a broad universe of alternative interpretations, subtexts, and cross-references. It is difficult to interpret a single piece of Nauman's artwork without consideration of the large body of his other work where often he has approached the same underlying idea from different directions. Meanings of a particular piece build upon the explorations engaged in by other pieces. And these explorations supply different facets to the picture, different points of view from which to view Nauman's work.

The forms of these other explorations vary widely – fiberglass, bronze, video, neon, installation, concrete, photography are just a few of the media Nauman has worked in. Understandings of the meaning of his work develop slowly and over time in the viewer's mind. With exposure to a wide variety of his work, and with time to allow the perceptions to lie latent – “slow-cooking” in some place deep in the viewer's psyche – a meta-narrative begins to emerge. This paper will examine this meta-narrative through a close reading of one of his most recent works, *Mapping The Studio 1 (Fat Chance John Cage)*, with an eye towards his large body of work.¹



Figure 1: Bruce Nauman. Mapping the Studio 1 (Fat Chance John Cage). 2001. Jan 10, 2002 – July 27, 2002. Dia Art Center, New York, New York.

For this piece, Nauman videotaped the nocturnal life in his studio in one-hour segments on 42 nights stretching over 4 months over the summer of 2000.² He then placed these video recordings in a large-scale installation with 7 real-time projections each running 5 hours and 45 minutes, and multiple sound tracks of ambient sound in the studio.



Figure 2: Bruce Nauman. Mapping the Studio 1 (Fat Change John Cage). 2001. Installation view.

“Seven greenish gray monochrome video projections will reveal facets of Nauman's studio and the residue of his practice, including molds and equipment. Audio speakers will project ambient sounds of the mice, Nauman's prowling cat, moths, and a screen door, along with other noises indicative of the studio's rural setting. Viewers may catch a dark flash of movement in their peripheral vision as a rodent speeds across the

projection, with the occasional profile of the skulking predator or its striking head-on image, eyes glowing as it pauses in its chase.”³

In media, form and in overall structure, this piece immediately references Nauman’s video works completed in the late 1960’s where he filmed himself in his studio performing various banal and mundane tasks such as walking around the perimeter of a square or bouncing balls between the floor and the ceiling.⁴ Yet, as with many other of Nauman’s works, immediate impressions and associations are often deceptive.

Nauman’s films of the late 1960’s to Mapping the Studio 1

According to critic Rosalee Goldberg, Nauman's 1969 piece *Walking in an exaggerated manner around the perimeter of a square* had a direct relationship to his sculpture. "By walking around the square, he could experience at first hand the volume and dimensions of his sculptural works which also dealt with volume and the placement of objects in space."⁵ Goldberg’s assertion may have a grain of truth, but by placing the primary importance of these works as an issue of form, it is far off the mark. In Nauman's work, the aesthetic of the object is the least important aspect. What matters is the structure of the idea. Nauman’s concept does not seek to dilute the importance of the object as in the contemporaneous work of many of the other conceptual artists (such as Kossuth), but rather Nauman’s concept was to endow the object with a total meaning—overcoming the physical structure to embrace the idea. His statement that he wanted to make sculpture that was more than a “shape to look at” evidences this.⁶

As an alternative to Goldberg's assertion of the abstract formal basis for Nauman's films, these films were more likely the result of simultaneous exploration in several different directions. One of these was an exploration of the body; its characteristic poses, its measurements, its limitations, and its deformations. A second direction was an exploration of the nature of narrative structure and time. And a third direction, probably the primary direction was an exploration of the role of the artist and the process of art making. "Quite specifically, the questions of where to start and how to continue constitute the very ethos and practice of his [Nauman's] art-making."⁷ It is these latter two areas of exploration that have a direct relationship to *Mapping the Studio 1*.

Artist Self-Definition and Nauman's Working Method

Where to begin

"Art is what an artist does."⁸ This simple statement by Nauman belies its complexity. It is not saying, as it would first appear, that anything an artist does is art. Rather, it raises the implicit question—what exactly does an artist do to create art? By extension, the statement requires the artist to define the end goal of his endeavor. Nauman's work has long explored the idea and definition of what it is to be an artist. Ironically, his exploration of what makes an artist separate and distinct relies upon confrontation and confusion of the boundary conditions: "...if you think of art as a discipline, the people that are interesting are the people that are exploring the structure of the discipline. In that sense, they're breaking down the discipline too, as they are expanding it. They tend to break down what's there."⁹ So as the artist sets out on his or her quixotic quest to define

the boundary conditions, and then challenge them, Nauman poses the simple question, ‘Which direction?’

“It’s never clear to me where the start of a work comes from. One basic reason is that I like to use my hands and make things. So of I’m not doing that at some point, out of utter frustration or anxiety I’ll start to do something. It might seem pretty stupid or pointless, but that doesn’t matter, you just have to do something. And that gets you started. For me, some of the most interesting work is the stuff that starts like that--out of a raw need for activity.”¹⁰

He describes the process by which he started the *Mapping the Studio* in similar terms.

“I found myself going in the studio and just being frustrated that I didn’t have any new ideas to work on. What triggered this piece were the mice. We had a big influx of mice that summer...They were so plentiful that even the cat was getting bored with them. So I was sitting around the studio being frustrated because I didn’t have any new ideas and I decided that you just have to work with what you’ve got. What I had was this cat and the mice and I did have a video camera in the studio that happened to have infrared capacity.”¹¹

His work originates in the experiential, a result of his active investigations of a problem, using the materials and tools immediately available to him, rather than purely an exploration of abstract form. Theoretical approaches and influences in his work are visible, and his artwork responds to the world in which it exists. For example, Nauman credits a Daniel Spoerri writing called *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance, 1966*, with prompting the idea to film the nocturnal interaction of cat and mice.¹² He has taken structural cues from Samuel Beckett’s work (discussed later in this paper). And he has acknowledged the influence of the Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein on his work.¹³ Despite these influences and inspirations, Nauman's approach to creating artwork has always been resolutely personal and deliberately ignoring of the art-world trends around

it. Thus, "Nauman is neither cut off from the information around him nor hampered by it." ¹⁴

The output from his exploratory art process is widely varied. And this makes it difficult to classify his work in the standard categories that critics, museums and collectors prefer. His career does not follow a linear progression culminating in an apparent signature style in a particular medium. Rather, he has chosen to work in whatever medium - neon, paper, fiberglass, studio sculpture, environmental-scale sculpture, video - according to his particular needs and interests at the moment. Working this way, within multiple mediums and without the baggage of maintaining a style, has allowed Nauman to shift to a different path of inquiry whenever his way has been blocked in one direction.¹⁵ However, one of the common threads that winds its way through almost all of Nauman's artwork is that the experience of making the artwork, the processes that the artist follows in his studio, forms the background. And this background adds the texture of real lived experience to the work.¹⁶

Nicolas Serota, curator of the Whitechapel Art Gallery, describes Nauman's approach to creating artwork as follows:

"He works by intuition rather than by design, feeling his way into works, the ambiguities of which themselves seem to throw up further possibilities for examination. The means of this exploration are themselves revealing, for Nauman's approach is that of a practicing artisan - constantly working and reworking the subject through trial, modification and rejection of the obvious solution. His sculptures and models are objects of craft worked in the studio by hand and without assistance. He has found that ideas and the complexities of meaning emerge during the making rather than in an earlier conceptual stage."¹⁷

While Serota's description pretty well mirrors what Nauman himself has expressed, it breaks down in the last sentence in a way that exposes the difficulty of viewing Nauman's art using the common 'art world' trope. The weakness with this description is the separation into stages that Serota makes between conceptual work and the making of the piece. In Nauman's working style, there is no such boundary. Nauman 'thinks with his hands.' His work is conceptual by nature, and making the piece is part of the conception. He gives his conceptual ideas physical form and tries them on to see if they fit. There is a bilateral give and take between the concept and the form. It seems that Serota is trying to cast Nauman into the mold of the abstract expressionist mythos (heroic-mad-genius-artist slaving away alone in his studio), but this stereotypical characterization diminishes the complexity of process that Nauman uses. His intuitive search proceeds by trying things and reacting to them. The point of the art is the reaction, the thought that is inspired, the association that is made and the point that this leads to, rather than the actual object of art.

The structure of *Mapping the Studio I* is directly attributable to Nauman's working method. It is the result of his preferred tangential approach. We can imagine the scenario of this project unfolding. Without really knowing where it was heading, he began the project intuitively by filming the mice and cats in his studio at night. His experience of viewing what he had filmed led to thoughts about chance, about narrative structure, about theatrics, about meditative states, about the new thought the mice created about the studio space they inhabited. He worked on it, choosing the spots to film to create the performance space for the mice and cats. He edited it together carefully preserving the

sense of real time and space. He played with projections, and found the number of projections that would create the proper sense of simultaneity. He brought the project to a point where it was saying what he wanted it to say, something that was interesting to him and he called it "enough."¹⁸ The end result, the aesthetic of the piece, is not based on the beauty of the object, but on the raw experience of the work. "The emphasis is given to a phenomenological awareness of the self as it becomes witness to an object or space that appears ordinary."¹⁹

Nauman's working method and the wide-ranging body of work he has produced with this method is not derivative from any other art; it is uniquely Nauman. Because it spans such a wide range and variety of media, it defies categorization and to some critics eludes the perception of an underlying sensibility. Add to this the fact that Nauman himself makes self-contradictory comments about his art. The British critic E. Lucie-Smith reacted to a 1998 show of Nauman's work in the Tate Gallery with the comments:

"Nauman has often been held up, especially by European curators, as the destined successor to the late Joseph Beuys. This implies that he is a sort of shaman with a social conscience. This seems to me almost total misunderstanding. The keynote of the show, belying its slick electronic wizardry, is its often hostile infantilism. Nauman is like an autistic child, whose tics and neuroses are writ very large by technological processes."²⁰

There are many levels of meaning encompassed in even the simplest of Nauman's works. The artwork, therefore, requires an active willingness on the part of the viewer to search out these layers of meaning. In our current society we are exposed to such an overwhelming cacophony of stimuli, and much of our visual and art culture has responded to this by producing immediately consumable goods.²¹ We are inundated with "one liners" and "sound bites." Nauman's work, in this context draws you in by its surface

simplicity, a simplicity that has as one possible reading that of Lucie-Smith. However, with an investment of time and thought, an alternate and deeper interpretation begins to reveal itself. The resolution of this alternate meaning leads to still other possible interpretations and soon the simple interpretation that was provided at first glance mushrooms into meanings that are deep and broad. Jane Livingston expresses this phenomenon succinctly when she states that Nauman's works have "the peculiar attribute of being able to hide their own primary meaning through, not obliquity nor abstruseness, but their very straightforwardness and their paradoxical conceptual transparency."²²

Narrative Structure

One of the films in Nauman's group of studio-based films from the late 1960's was *Slow Angle Walk, 1968* which he subtitled *Beckett Walk*. This film and its telling subtitle point to the influence of Beckett's narrative style on Nauman's work. As Nauman tells it

"My problem was to make tapes that go on and on, with no beginning or end. I wanted the tension of waiting for something to happen, and then you should get drawn into the rhythm of the thing. There's a passage in Beckett's *Malloy* about transferring stones from one place to another...It's elaborate without any point."²³

Nauman has also expressed the influence of Andy Warhol's films on the circular format of much of his work. His interest goes back, he says,

"...to Warhol films that really have no beginning or end. You could walk in at any time, leave, come back again and the figure was still asleep, or whatever. The circularity is also a lot like La Monte Young's idea about music. The music is always going on...it's a way of structuring something so that you don't have to make a story."²⁴

And finally a similar sentiment is expressed in Nauman's interview with Michele De Angelus for the "Archives of American Art" series.

MG: "Quite a lot of your work exists in time, like a musical performance, to a greater extent than a conventional sculpture does."

BN: "Yes, but the structure isn't about a beginning and end. The experience is always available."²⁵

We can see the influence of this concept of narrative structure in *Mapping the Studio*

I. In the overall presentation of the piece, at the end of the nearly 6-hour video, it simply loops back onto itself and starts over again. Aside from this physical repetition however, there is a sense of repetition of content. Things change, but stay pretty much the same, and as with the Warhol films, the expectation is that you can enter and exit the installation at any time.

The similarity of the approaches between this work and the writings of Samuel Beckett is quite clear especially as it relates to the space of possibility and anticipation. Just as Beckett in his play, *Waiting for Godot*, relishes the immanence of the end, without ever arriving there, so does Nauman in *Mapping the Studio I*. In *Godot* the play is precisely this curtained stage, the space of no-event and perpetual waiting. In *Mapping the Studio*, the stage is the area where the camera is pointed, perpetually waiting for the performers (the cat and mice) to appear. "Nauman and Beckett both insist on [waiting], pointing always to the end, traversing it but never arriving there, a perpetual nonpenetration."²⁶ In *Mapping the Studio I* the structure leads to the realization that the meaning of the piece is not the narrative events occurring by chance in the videos (events which you may or may not ever see), but it is the waiting itself.

Nauman and other viewers have noted that the piece induces a meditative mood "it's like a little meditation because you can't really watch any one part of the screen or you'll miss something that happens in another part because it happens pretty fast and its real

short. So you have to kind of not watch anything, so that you can be aware of everything."²⁷ The viewer, then, moves into a here-and-now temporality with the piece. The presence of the piece shifts from a narrative structure relying on the perceived passage of time, into a collection of "at-once" events that occur and recur as distinct entities. The importance of the passage of time is reduced to almost nothing, and the spatial mapping of the studio begins to take precedence. It is in this space, "that we notice the detritus of the artists works --those material that would normally appear incidental and unimportant, the furniture, the wood, the cloth, the metal, the molds, the video monitor, the tape deck, the light bulbs...He enlarges our vision of the specifics to include the general notion of art, a kind of total sculpture. Everything matters. Everything is important. Everything has potential meaning."²⁸ Nauman then has taken time, normally perceived as a linear structure, and folded it back upon itself, in doing so creating a 3-dimensional spatial structure.

Variations of this narrative style, with its repetition, looping, time folding back onto itself is found many of Nauman's other works as well. It is particularly noticeable and prevalent in his sound and neon pieces because these use words and linguistic relationships to do the work. The end effect of this is to set up a condition where the reading of the piece flips between two or more rapidly shifting meanings or interpretations. In doing this, Nauman sets up to what I will refer as binary conditions.²⁹

Binary conditions

Nauman explores this binary relationship in a number of areas, both physically and psychologically: inside vs. outside, front vs. back, interior vs. exterior, private vs. public.

A fertile area for this exploration is in the scrutiny of human actions. He deliberately sets up relationships “good” vs. “bad” for example, then by their juxtaposition deconstructs their meaning until we see that the difference between the extremes is not so clear-cut. In his neons, these binary relationships are often signaled explicitly by flashing back and forth between two messages "Eat/Death", "Run From Fear/Fun From Rear", "Violins +Silence=Violence". This ambivalent relationship is also visible less directly in his installations and sculptures. *South American Triangle, 1981*, for example, is comprised of an inverted chair suspended in a triangle made of steel I-beams. It is at once playful in form, and simultaneously chilling in its allusions to torture and confinement. As he sets up this binary condition, Nauman creates a resonance between the two that causes the viewer to question the read on the original. The psychological effect is analogous to the visual effect of placing two colors from the opposite side of the color wheel next to one another. The colors vibrate in opposition and a third entity is created as a line between – the third entity is there only in perception.

In *Mapping the Studio I* Nauman sets up this binary condition in the cat and mouse relationship. This relationship could be considered a metaphor for human interaction. In one interpretation, “cat and mouse” has a humorous, cartoonish connotation. Whether we are proud of this or not, Tom and Jerry are certainly a part of our cultural heritage. In a second connotation, “cat and mouse” involves an extremely serious life and death struggle, and highlights the relationship between predator and prey. This predator/prey relationship can be viewed dispassionately as a natural system. Depending upon your point of view this might be considered bad (from the mouse’s point of view and need to

avoid being eaten to survive) or good (from the cat's point of view in its need to eat to survive). Further connotations can be found in the human language of "cat and mouse" inferring either cruelty—idly toying with emotions— or shrewd avoidance. And as you are watching and waiting for the "performance" of the cat and mouse, do you want the cat to win and rid the studio of the nuisance and destruction wreaked by the mouse, or do you want the mouse to win, the underdog to triumph. In short the concept of cat and mouse is loaded with these binary relationships, all of which you have ample time to ponder while waiting, as in *Waiting for Godot*, for the performance that never happens.

Meanings

Nauman does not definitively circumscribe a meaning to his work and it is impossible to give a final and complete reading on the meanings of *Mapping the Studio 1 (Fat Chance John Cage)*. This open-ended aspect of the work adds to the conversation between him, his materials, his work and us as viewers. It is presented as an open-text; we are required to complete the work for ourselves, and this allows the works to accrue meaning and depth over time. Nauman's refusal to identify any question as having been answered definitively, his willingness to go back and re-examine issues from another angle creates an artwork that is both elusive and dense.³⁰

"Nauman makes us aware of the fact that the world is a complex layered structure,... and of the fact that we are sentient beings with the ability to give shape to our existence. He obliges us to confront the realities of the human conditions. His is an existential position."³¹

Epilogue

Bruce Nauman created an outdoor stairway for Steven and Nancy Oliver documented in an interview on the Art: 21 video from PBS. He offers an explanation of this stairway that seems to me to be a perfectly metaphorical expression of his art and the way that we as viewers need to approach it.

“There is no regular rhythm in going up and down. You have to take each step and watch it. It requires you to pay quite a lot of attention. I'm not even sure if you need to walk on it, but of course everybody does. It's the intention that changes it from a stairway to a stairway as a work of art.”³²

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¹ I have decided to look at a very recent work of Nauman's for two main reasons. First of all it reflects a mature worldview, the work of an artist who has mastered his creative process. And secondly, because it has not had a lot of review, this allows me broader range in developing this narrative.

² M.d. Brugerolle, et. al., "Bruce Nauman: Museum Für Gegenwartskunst," *Art Press*, March 2003, p.78.

³ From: Bruce Nauman: Mapping the Studio I Press Release *Bruce Nauman, Mapping the Studio I (Fat Chance John Cage)* (Dia Art Foundation, 2005 [cited May 29 2005]); available from http://www.diacenter.org/exhibs_bak/nauman/mapping/index.html.

⁴ To be completely accurate, these works were actually recorded on 16mm film. Later works were recorded on video tape. I have chosen to use the term "video" because the distinction is not significant to my point.

⁵ RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Art : From Futurism to the Present*, Rev. & expanded ed., *World of Art* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2001), p.159.

⁶ Bruce Nauman et al., *Bruce Nauman: Work from 1965 to 1972* ([Los Angeles]: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Praeger, 1973), p.10-11.

⁷ Joan Simon, *Nauman Variations* in Bruce Nauman et al., *Bruce Nauman* (London: Trustees of the Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1986), p.11.

⁸ Coosje van Bruggen, *Bruce Nauman* (New York: Rizzoli, 1988), p.14.

⁹ From an interview with Michele de Angelus in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, *Art in Theory, 1900-2000 : An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2003), p912.

¹⁰ Martin Gayford, "His Raw Materials," *Modern Painters*, December 2004/January 2005, p.69.

¹¹ Bruce Nauman and Janet Kraynak, *Please Pay Attention Please : Bruce Nauman's Words : Writings and Interviews* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), p.398.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Jean-Cristophe Ammann in Nauman et al., *Bruce Nauman*, p.22.

¹⁴ Joan Simon, *Nauman Variations* in Ibid., p.15.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.7.

¹⁶ Jean-Claude Ammann, *Wittgenstein and Nauman*, in Ibid., p.21.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.8.

¹⁸ Probably one of the most important capabilities of an artist is in knowing when a piece is done. "There is a knowing when it is enough and I can leave it alone."-Bruce Nauman in Inc. Art 21, *Art:21 Art in the Twenty First Century* (PBS Home Video, 2003).

¹⁹ R.C. Morgan, "Bruce Nauman: Dia Center for the Arts," *Sculpture (Washington, D.C.)*, July/August 2002, p.70.

²⁰ E Lucie-Smith, "Critic's Diary," *Art Review (London, England)*, September 1998, p.23.

²¹ "Immediately consumable" in this sense meaning not requiring a great deal of thought and effort (hence an investment of time) to decipher. I present this as self-evident, but support it anecdotally with the observation that the amount of time the average viewer in a museum spends in front of a painting is measured in seconds, not minutes.

²² Nauman et al., *Bruce Nauman: Work from 1965 to 1972*, p.9.

²³ Bruce Nauman et al., *Bruce Nauman, 1985-1996 : Drawings, Prints, and Related Works* (Ridgefield, Conn.: Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, 1997), p.21.

²⁴ Kathryn Chiong, "Nauman's Beckett Walk," *October (Cambridge, Mass.)* 86 (1998): p. 64.

²⁵ Gayford, "His Raw Materials," p.70.

²⁶ Chiong, "Nauman's Beckett Walk," p.70.

²⁷ Bruce Nauman speaking in Art 21, *Art:21 Art in the Twenty First Century*.

²⁸ Morgan, "Bruce Nauman: Dia Center for the Arts," p.71.

²⁹ To be accurate, Nauman uses more than two messages in many, or perhaps most of his pieces. However, the same binary phenomena can be observed in these pieces of 3 or more messages, so for the sake of elucidating this concept simply, I am limiting my discussion to binary messages

³⁰ Nauman et al., *Bruce Nauman*, p.9.

³¹ Eva Keller et al., *Nauman, Kruger, Jaar* (Zèurich, New York: Daros ; Scalo : Distributed in North America by D.A.P., 2001), p.46.

³² Art 21, *Art:21 Art in the Twenty First Century*.

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