

Art 282B - Section 1: Empathy and Embodiment in Contemporary Art  
San Jose State University, Spring 2014  
Keith Daly - Final paper

## **Bruce Nauman: Space, Mirror, Body**

Since the mid-1960's, Bruce Nauman's abundant and complex body of work continues to address a fundamental notion in art: the nature of artistic experience. While Nauman's work is often labeled as conceptual, it carries a strong existentialist and deeply humanistic undercurrent, mapping a phenomenology of both artist and viewer from a dual perspective of spatial environment - as physical space and psychological entity - and of body, as site of psycho-physical tension. As we will see, the boundaries between these two perspectives are never, in Nauman's work, firmly established. They appear as a function of the interaction between artist, viewer and work - and embrace a number of philosophical tenets rooted in the notions of empathy and embodiment. In addition to our exploration of these sites of space and body, we will also consider Nauman's use of mirrors as an interface between them. We should mention a fourth perspective, central to Nauman's phenomenological mix: communication (in its verbal and textual forms), as a manifestation of the artist-viewer relationship; we will, however, focus primarily on the first two propositions of space and body, and their connector, the mirror.

Initially, I intended to base this paper on a text by Rosalind Krauss<sup>1</sup> and another by Miwon Kwon<sup>2</sup>, as a springboard to investigate various types of contemporary work, namely what is broadly referred to as *sculpture*, a multifaceted term (which Krauss usefully complicates). More specifically, my goal was to contrast works by artists such as Marina Abramovic, in which the human body is the locus of the work, with, on the other side of the spectrum, works by artists such as Michael Asher, with whom references to the body are either absent or much more indirect. Interestingly, Nauman's work which I chose to focus on, appears as a mid-point between these two types of work.

### Nauman Noise<sup>3</sup>

Willoughby Sharp: Pressure is also felt on the spectator's own body. Does that come from your ears?

Bruce Nauman: It has a lot to do with just your ears.

WS: So space is felt with one's ears?

BN: Yeah, that's right<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> "Sculpture in the Expanded Field", *October*, Vol. 8 (Spring 1979), 30-44.

<sup>2</sup> "One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity", *October*, Vol. 80 (Spring, 1997), 85-110.

<sup>3</sup> An irregular fluctuation accompanying a transmitted electrical signal but is not part of it and tends to obscure it.

<sup>4</sup> Willoughby Sharp, *Nauman Interview*, 1970. First published in *Arts Magazine* 44 (March 1970): 22–27. Reprinted in Janet Kray, *Please Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman's Words*, (MIT Press, 2003), 134. This sensing of space with the ears (Nauman has produced a very large body of work based on sound) seems like an interesting take - a spatial take, perhaps - on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's notion of seeing sound and hearing color. Nauman draws from the physiological fact that the ear does indeed sense space. A proof of that would be to simply assess what happens to our spatial awareness as we move about with earplugs - or earphones playing loud music: we feel dissociated from the surrounding space. On a related note, in *Green Light Corridor*, 1970, Nauman played with the experience the viewer had after entering a work which featured a space lit by an overwhelming green light: for several minutes after exiting the work, the viewer would see everything in a red-pink color. As such, the work perceptually continued after the viewer left the work. Nauman thus tested both the conventional physical and perceptual boundaries of works of art.

In researching this paper a background noise became audible. As I soon realized, that noise was Bruce Nauman. It grew louder and more frequent: it seemed that failure<sup>5</sup> to take it into account would constitute a failure to acknowledge my own position in relation to the themes of this seminar, namely empathy and embodiment, and, in particular, to the process of researching this paper. To hold back from investigating this noise would negate what is, perhaps, a more phenomenological aspect of the research - a view which, of course, leads back to one of the central themes of our seminar: phenomenology, as developed by Gaston Bachelard, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (and, in their wake Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault - the French connection? - and many others): the notion that one's perception of an object cannot, in the end, be separated from the object itself. Thus, this boundary between personal experience and the theme of this paper (and those encountered during this course) seemed worth *paying attention* to, and exploring - even if succinctly.

The noise carried on as a sense of disjunction between a desire to write about Nauman, almost *for the sake of writing about Nauman*, and that to address some of the topics developed in our course. I am not sure this quandary has been entirely resolved. Attempts to combine the theoretical, on one hand, with empirical observation, on the other, is often guided by the desire to make disparate elements "hold together"<sup>6</sup>. Nevertheless, I was struck, as I mentioned, by the number of connections between Nauman's prolific body of work and many of those topics.

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<sup>5</sup> Coincidentally there is an abundant literature on failure and art. Many artists, such as John Baldessari in the 60's and 70's, have explored that theme.

<sup>6</sup> One could ponder, however, whether this is not simply part of the process of constructing *meaning* - in terms borrowed from Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (1966) - and therefore the construction of reality itself.

Several connections in fact have been clearly stated by some observers (see below) and it appears that the theme of this course has in fact provided an invaluable conceptual framework - a catalyst - with which to read Nauman's work.

Connections - or their breakdown - are often present in my work. To assess my connection to Nauman, therefore, on an experiential and somewhat intuitive level, became an aspect of researching this paper. As, Christian Salanson, one of my professors at the Sorbonne, often said, "when investigating an object it is critical to always examine one's position in relation to it". It seems, then, that the construction of the object of investigation is as much a construction of the self.

In 2013, at the time I was applying for this MFA program, several people mentioned that certain aspects of my work were reminiscent of Nauman's (some of them believed he graduated from San Jose State University - I will address that shortly). When I was admitted into the program some members of the committee mentioned this again. But Nauman was, in fact, quite foreign to me. I could remember seeing only one of his works, *Four Corner Piece* (1970), in the flesh, so to speak, and it was a long time ago. In January this year, I found a short and pithy book at the bookstore at LACMA in LA - *Bruce Nauman: Going Solo*<sup>7</sup>. Reading it, I realized that the themes Nauman addresses correlated strongly with my own interests. Later, throughout the course of the semester, I also realized Nauman's work seemed to connect with almost all the subjects developed in this seminar. More recently, and perhaps most significantly, I discovered the

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<sup>7</sup>Robert Slifkin, *Bruce Nauman: Going Solo* (Portland: Companion Editions / The Reed Institute, 2012).

source of the misunderstanding around Nauman's education. He received his BFA at the University of Wisconsin, and his MFA at Davis - not San Jose State College (the name of San Jose State University's previous incarnation). But he did, in fact, come to San Jose State where he created an architectural installation in the Art building, in the form of a V-shaped corridor (*Double Wedge Corridor with Mirror*). The year was 1970, the month was May: the installation took place the week I was born.

Nauman's work ranges from discrete sculpture, performance, film, video, and text-based works to multipart installations incorporating sound, video recording and monitors, and architectural structures. His investigation of the nature of the creative process is intertwined with that of the nature of the human condition, and, in his practice, the process of artistic creation (in particular its doubts, wanderings, idle or stalled moments), is as important as the artwork itself. Like many artists of his generation, Nauman rejects the traditional idea of the work of art and its conception as independent, or autonomous, and advocates art created from the experience of one's own body and mind.

In an essay for the catalog of Nauman's commissioned work for the 53rd Venice Biennial (2009), Marco de Michelis writes:

Nauman's space continues to provide answers to questions initially posed in the late nineteenth century, when art historians such as the Germans August Schmarsow and Heinrich Wölfflin, using the theories of empathy developed by Robert Vischer and Wilhelm Worringer as a starting point, proposed an idea of space as an emanation of the body, as a construct that takes shape through the movement of the body, and, more, through

the gaze of the individual who perceives it. [...] *A Cast of the Space under My Chair* [ 1965-68] recalls a fundamental problem posited as early as 1893 by the German sculptor Adolf Hildebrand, who sought to transfer the new understanding of space, originally emerging in architecture to [...] sculpture.<sup>8</sup>

In the same essay, we also encounter references to Gaston Bachelard and Maurice Merleau-Ponty<sup>9</sup>. In a 1970 issue of *Artforum*, the critic Marcia Tucker found these two philosophers to be so prevalent in Nauman's work that she titled her article, "PheNAUMANology"<sup>10</sup>.

This surveying of illustrious references would constitute little more than a mere naming-game of theoretical credentials, if an investigation of Nauman's work and its philosophical ramifications neglected to commence with the artist's starting point: the studio.

"[...] a lot of things I was doing didn't make sense so I quit doing them. That left me alone in the studio; this in turn raised the fundamental question of what an artist does when left alone in the studio. My conclusion was that [if] I was an artist and I was in the studio, then whatever it was I was doing in the studio must be art<sup>11</sup>. And what I was in fact doing was drinking coffee and pacing the floor. It became a question then of how to structure those activities into being art, or some kind of cohesive unit that could be made available to people. At this point art became more of an activity and less of a product."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Marco de Michelis, "Spaces". Bruce Nauman: Topological Gardens, ed. Carlos Basualdo, (Yale University Press, 2009), 79.

<sup>9</sup>De Michelis, 71, 77, 79.

<sup>10</sup>Marcia Tucker, "PheNAUMANology", *Artforum* 9, no. 4, December 1970.

<sup>11</sup>An important point here is Nauman's acknowledgment that art and the artist's life are not separate: hardships and dry spells are in fact the very fuel of his work. Tellingly, when the artist Tony Oursler interviewed Nauman (*Paper Magazine* 2, no. 10, April 1995, 104), his opening question was: "Do you ever get artist's block?" This is a recurrent theme of Nauman's as we will see in *Mapping the Studio*.

<sup>12</sup>Willoughby Sharp, 135.

## Artist and studio: Space As Mental Projection

In Nauman's practice - perhaps more than any other contemporary artist's - a central theme (and site) is indeed the studio. The artist's studio is this particular site in which the body and mind of the artist seem to merge with physical space. As such it can be seen as an extension or a manifestation of the artist's body and psyche. It is both an architectural space and an intimate, psychological domain of artistic activity.

With Nauman, the studio is both literally and metaphorically the artist's private space, a place of isolation, of fear and distrust of the world and the viewer, a site of existential wandering, and doubts. In a strange tautology, the studio is also, as stated above by Nauman, the marker of one's identity *as artist*. Nauman's studio is a far cry from Gustave Courbet's romantic depiction of his own working space<sup>13</sup>, a lively room filled with the artist's friends and entourage; and it is a far cry from the modernist studio, say Mondrian's spartan workspace, where the heroic artist retreats to devise new work. Nauman's studio is a space of turmoil. It is as if Nauman was resisting Daniel Buren<sup>14</sup>, who, in 1971, paved the way for the notion of "post-studio art", by advocating the emancipation of the artist from the confinement and conventions of the studio; Buren stressed that work made in one site could not, by definition, be transposed to any other

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<sup>13</sup> Gustave Courbet, *The Artist's Studio: A Real Allegory Summing up Seven Years of My Artistic and Moral Life*, 1854-1855.

<sup>14</sup> Daniel Buren and Thomas Rensek, "The Function of the Studio", *October*, Vol. 10 (Autumn, 1979): 51-58. Text written in 1971, published in 1979.

<sup>15</sup> In this respect, Miwon Kwon's investigation of the relationships between artistic practice and various types of site (in "One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity") is edifying.

Of all the frames, envelopes, and limits usually not perceived and certainly never questioned which enclose and constitute the work of art (picture frame, niche, pedestal, palace, church, gallery, museum, art history, economics, power, etc.), there is one rarely even mentioned today that remains of primary importance: the artist's studio<sup>16</sup>. (...) [Leaving the studio] the work is thus totally foreign to the world into which it is welcomed (museum, gallery, collection). This gives rise to the ever-widening gap between the work and its place.

Forty-one years later, Robert Slifkin notes:

Nauman's artistic presence, while hardly traditional, was resolutely studio-based. At precisely the same moment [the 1960' and 70's] as 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.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, embracing rather than rejecting the gap noted and denounced by Buren, Nauman's work seems to tell us: "the artist *is* his studio, there is no escape - there is no *other* place or site", thereby echoing the poet Noel Arnaud's words: "je suis l'espace ou je suis"<sup>18</sup> ("I am the space where I am"). Arnaud, quoted by Gaston Bachelard, points at the collapse of one's existential space and identity, with the physical space one inhabits: there is a blurring of the boundaries between subject and object, both of which merge with space. Bachelard's nomenclature of spaces casts another interesting light on Nauman's work: the artist's space is much more a *corner* than a *nest*. It is a space to retreat to, to hide. His installations, then, are often that

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<sup>16</sup> Buren and Repensek, 51.

<sup>17</sup> Slifkin, 24.

<sup>18</sup> Noel Arnaud, *L'état d'ébauche*, quoted in Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (1958), this edition (Boston Massachusetts: The Beacon Press, 1994), 137.

corner paradoxically made tangible, visible, turned *inside-out*<sup>19</sup> - the private made public, but through an often uninviting, hostile even, process of publicization. The critic Michael Auping has said of Nauman's work that it is infused with a strategy of withdrawal. *Get out of my Mind, Get Out of This Room* (1968), a work consisting of an empty room with speakers concealed in the walls, illustrates this notion: Nauman invites the viewer in, then urges him/her to get out.

Nauman felt the need to vocalise his language, directing the viewer, who had no idea where the voice was coming from, to "Get out of my mind, get out of this room". The standard narrative of activity and expectation was shattered. The artist is given a room, makes a work of art for that room, invites us into the room and then implores us to get out. The work acknowledges the ambiguous, darkly comic relationship between artist and audience, and *the tension that exists when the private and public spaces overlap*.<sup>20</sup>

The tension is heightened by the duality of the expected compliance to Nauman's injunction: the audience may easily fathom how to get out of a room, but much more unclear, and psychologically unnerving (or, literally, *haunting*), is how to get out of the artist's mind. When the viewer leaves the room, will he/she also leave the artist's mind? How exactly does one enter the artist's mind? Is this the very essence of art viewership: to enter the artist's mind (one can sense here the anxiety and frustration of the invaded, cornered artist). And where does the artist's mind *stop*?

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<sup>19</sup>In this we are reminded of Hal Foster's discussion of the abject as defined by Julia Kristeva (Hal Foster, "Obscene, Abject, Traumatic", *October*, Vol. 78 (1996), 112). While Nauman's work is of a much less graphic nature and eludes most of the gorey or scatological aspects of much "abject art" of the 80's and 90's (Cindy Sherman, Mike Kelly, Tony Oursler, ...) he nevertheless follows similar strategies by conflating (sometimes violently) traumatic and real. Following Arnaud's statement, which offers an interesting point of entry into Nauman's work, we are also reminded of the notion of *psychasthenia* developed both by Foster in relation to the surrealists, and by Merleau-Ponty with Cezanne ("Cezanne's Doubt", 1945). See also the excerpt from a recent interview of Matthew Barney (Joshua Reiman, *Matthew Barney: The Drama of Proportion*, Sculpture Vol. 33 No. 4, May 2014) which I have included at the end of this paper. Barney's own approach to the body and space appears as a mid-point between Nauman's work and the "abject art" analyzed by Foster.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Auping, "Metacommunicator", *Bruce Nauman: Raw Materials* (London: Tate, 2004), 11. Italics mine.

*Room with My Soul Left Out, Room That Does Not Care* (1984), another installation work, is an interesting example of a Bachelard-corner. Here, it is a space in which even the slightest sense of empathy, the possibility of some form of connection, of crossing over, seems to have dwindled to quasi-nothingness. At the intersection of a vertical and two horizontal black tunnels, a grating on the floor allows one to look down into a shaft and at the basement. The light is yellow dimmed by the darkness of the walls. At times, one can hear the sound of people walking and whispering in different parts of the installation. While August Schmarsow once defined architecture as the natural prolongation or emanation of the human body, Nauman turns this premise on its head: the space feels alien, invasive and oppressive. Or perhaps the space is indifferent (*it does not care*): and it is simply viewer and artist project their fears into it. In this work, Auping notes:

Standing where the three passageways come together, one feels conspicuously exposed [...], the term *alone in a crowd* comes to mind [...], private and public become strangely confused [...], the experience involves a shifting between voyeurism and introspection, [...] watching and being watched.<sup>21</sup>

Since Nauman exercises the authorial prerogative of titling the work - and thus of defining the identity of this particular room - a number of ambiguities arise. If the artist is the originator of the work, how can the artist's soul be left out? Can this room be a three-dimensional projection (an architecturalization) of the artist's sense of abandonment, his feeling of vacuity -

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<sup>21</sup> Auping, 12. This may remind us of Lacan's discussion of the *gaze* and its menacing or mortifying effect on the subject. Nauman may very well be applying to this architectural work the notion that the *screen*, as examined by Foster, has been torn: between viewer and artist, subject and object, eye and gaze there is nothing but a shaft or tunnel - no place to hide, no possibility of mediation or protection.

thus inhabited by, or a manifestation of Nauman's mind (or soul) - *and, at the same time*, a space where he is absent, *left out*? While the artist's soul is said to be absent, interestingly, the room itself seems anthropomorphized, turned into a living entity endowed with a soul and an emotional characteristic - even if it is one of indifference. *Room with My Soul*<sup>22</sup> ... relates to another theme (articulated, here, as is often the case, by a skillful use of language<sup>23</sup>) central to Nauman's oeuvre: can the artist be absent from the work<sup>24</sup>? If artistic convention has it that works of art are, in a sense, representations, even distorted ones, of their authors, and that they contain the artist's soul (a notion inherited perhaps from a deeply ingrained culture of relics and fetish), then how can Nauman's soul *not* be present in this work? *Room with My Soul*..., then, presents us with a rather dense conundrum: if the artist's soul is not in the room, conversely, according to a modernist view, the room cannot be the artist's work. If so, then, what is this room?

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<sup>22</sup> The word "soul" connotes primarily religion and spirituality, and was not chosen by chance. If we bear in mind two older works by Nauman, namely "The True Artist Is an Amazing Luminous Fountain" (date) and "The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths" we can subsume that Nauman, in his signature deadpan, is mocking the modernist vision of the artist as a mystic, promethean or spiritual hero/genius, à la Kandinsky, Mondrian, Rothko or Pollock. On several occasions Nauman satirized modernism by referencing Henry Moore. In one work, *Seated, Storage, Capsule For Henry Moore* (1966) he made "witty traps and storage devices to collect aspects of Moore's work and ideas, reasoning that the modernist search for form and humanism in nature might not be necessary to the then rising strands of conceptual and minimalist art, but they might be needed again one day and so should be kept safe somewhere" (Anita Feldman, "Gormley to Hirst: Today's Top Artists on the Genius of Henry Moore", *The Guardian*, April 11th, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/apr/11/gormley-hirst-henry-moore-influence-artists>). Another work in the same vein is *Henry Moore Bound To Fail* (1967-70). In these works, we should add, Nauman satirizes high modernism *as much as* contemporary art movements, such as conceptual art.

<sup>23</sup> For instance, at first glance, *Room With My Soul Left Out* - an inclusion followed by an exclusion ("with" vs. "left out") could have been phrased "Room *Without* My Soul". However, "Room *With* My Soul..." fosters - even if only for a fraction of a second - the idea that "this room has/contains my soul", "my soul is in this room". This initial - and partial - interpretation is then invalidated by the second part of the title: "Left Out". In addition, the notion of being left out adds a dimension to the work that "Room *Without* My Soul" would not convey.

<sup>24</sup> Nauman has often commented on "letting go" of his work, and on his production as being simply a form of activity, that does not necessarily have to be thought of in terms of "art".

In *Get out of My Mind...* Nauman separated himself from the viewer by rejection. In *Room with My Soul...* he drafts a paradoxical absence, confines us to empty structures and, in the end, severs himself from the work as non-author, thus furthering the strategy of withdrawal noted by Auping. Furthermore, in light of Nauman's older works often involving the use of his body, if the titles makes reference to a soul, it is interesting to note that it *leaves out* any reference to the body.

In a later work, *Mapping the Studio I (Fat Chance John Cage)* (2001), this thematic motif of exposure and withdrawal is pushed further. Here, the artist's withdrawal is almost complete. Nauman invites us into his studio (we can even say, as we will soon see, that he leaves the TV turned on for us!), but he is nowhere to be seen. In *Mapping...* Nauman responded to an influx of rodents in his New Mexico studio, by setting up, over several months, infrared cameras in seven locations throughout the studio recording the nightly comings and goings of the mice as well as that of his prowling cat, thus recording scenes of implied violence<sup>25</sup>. The result is an installation featuring a five hour, forty-five minute projection (extracted from over forty hours of footage) on seven large screens (each twelve feet high, by fifteen feet across) on the walls of a cavernous room. The gray-green images, shot in darkness by infrared light, are low-angled, static views of small areas inside the studio. Central to the work is its sound component which

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<sup>25</sup> In this voyeuristic game of cat and mouse Nauman tackles (again) the question of public versus private, and communication between viewer and artist. "[...] privacy and concealment (and their antipodes of communication and clarity) have been central concerns throughout the artist's lengthy career. [...] The tension between the desire for communication - and as a possible analogue, community - and, as Nauman puts it, the "personal fear of exposing myself," runs through much of Nauman's oeuvre." Slifkin, 13. And: "Nauman has grappled with the tension between private thought and public exposure - one of the great dilemmas facing the modernist artist who is challenged to be intensely personal in a very public way." Auping, "Sound Thinking", *Artforum* 43, January 2005, 160.

consists of seven recordings of ambient noises of low buzzing heating fans, the sounds of dogs, horses, distant coyotes and traffic, and the occasional whine of a cat. Very little moves or happens in the videos. As such, these projections almost seem like still lifes of the studio. Even if the stillness is broken, here and there, by the appearance of a prowling cat or skittering mice, as these depart, the scene returns to immobility. The tapes are played in numbing real-time so that the beholder, depending upon when he or she enters the room of projections, may or may not see any movement or incident<sup>26</sup>: the appearance of either mouse or cat - or the occasional moth - thus being a matter of *chance* (hence the reference to John Cage, which is also implied in the audio itself: the musicality of random night sounds).

The artist is absent - a fact that could be contrasted with Marina Abramovic's work called *The Artist Is Present* (2010), for instance, in which the artist is in the room, fully present (meditative practices of presence/awareness come to mind when witnessing Abramovic's performance<sup>27</sup>), without artifice, seated at a table across the viewer-participant. While in his early task-oriented videos Nauman's body was a recurrent and central protagonist, in "Mapping..." we have a projection of what could be a metaphor of the artist's mental space. This mental space mirrors the absent artist as there is, in fact, very little going on in it - though activity does trickle in now and then (interestingly, much like mental activity in meditative states), as long as the viewer can bear waiting and stay present. There is a sense of a void, and, perhaps, of a need (unfulfilled?) to fill it. On the origins of this work, Nauman stated:

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<sup>26</sup>Nauman's feat here is to perform another withdrawal: from that of the figure of the *artist-as-entertainer*: The audience has to sit with the work for long periods of time without any visual stimulation.

<sup>27</sup>Coincidentally, in 2005, Abramovic performed a work by Nauman, *Body Pressure*, as part of her *Seven Easy Pieces*.

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 happened to have a video camera in the studio that had infrared capability. So I set it up and turned it on at night and let it run when I wasn't there, just to see what I'd get.<sup>28</sup>

The striking similarity of this statement with an earlier one (see above, p. 5) made by Nauman underscores a remarkable continuity in his work over a period of forty years.

### **Between Space and Body: Reflections on the Mirror**

Key to the mediation between space and body, spatial awareness and self-awareness, is Nauman's use of mirrors (and, later, video monitors). His three-foot square sculpture, *John Coltrane Piece*<sup>29</sup> (1968), (seldom discussed in monographies or surveys) rises only three inches off the ground and features a mirrored base. The mirror, however, remains invisible to the naked eye - but it is intelligible through the work's written description. Slifkin notes:

Through its hidden mirror [this work] paradoxically makes the dark and slender space between the sculpture and the floor its primary site of focus [...] If mirrors are conventionally used as a means for seeing oneself, or the

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<sup>28</sup>Michael Auping in Janet Kray, op. cit., 398.

<sup>29</sup> "Partaking in the artist's penchant for punning titles, the work [created a year after the celebrated saxophonist's death] concretizes Coltrane's composition "Peace on Earth". With its lack of traditional pedestal, and its level, horizontal alignment on the gallery floor, Nauman's sculpture is, literally, a "piece" on earth." Slifkin, 11.

world outside of oneself, as a representation [...] any such self-identification is rendered impossible. Nothing can be reflected without light or distance, both of which are denied in the work.<sup>30</sup>

If we think of the the critical role attributed to the mirror in Lacanian thought, what strikes us here, is the impossibility for the viewer to visually access the reflective quality of the mirror - either to see his or her own image, or a reflection of something else. The reflection can only be interpreted intellectually, conceptually - it is imagined. The reflection, then, is not “out there”, in the world, it is “in here”, in the mind, in the subjectivity of the viewer. It is internal, in a psychological sense, as much as the physical mirror is the internal base of *John Coltrane Piece*, but at the level of physical tangibility and spatial confinement. Similarly as in *Room With My Soul Left Out...*, Nauman severs any possibility to access the work in a conventional way: if the mirror and its reflection cannot be *seen*, the viewer conjures an imagined mirror. This is an interesting conundrum if we consider that one’s perception of her reflection from a mirror is, from the onset, a subjective event but experienced as objective reality. In this work, occulting the mirror, then, adds a second layer of subjectivity. If mirrors facilitate a mediation between self and the world, a mediation which, in Lacan’s terms builds and fortifies the self or ego, what is the effect, then, of a mirror that is there but remains unseen?

If time and space allowed, these thoughts surrounding *John Coltrane Piece*’s internal mirror might lead us into a digression around the old adage of the tree falling in the forest, or Jean Cocteau’s statement that “mirrors should reflect [as in “think”] more before sending back [as in

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<sup>30</sup> Slifkin, 11.

“reflecting”] images<sup>31</sup>. But we’ve probably gone too far in the deep-end (or other side) of the mirror. Cocteau will forgive us. Let us add that, following Slifkin’s comment that “the dark and slender space between the sculpture and the floor [is the work’s] primary site of focus” (see also note 27 below), it is important to consider the process by which one projects oneself into the invisible space between mirror and floor and, thus, the implications in terms of one’s sense of body and space.

As *John Coltrane Piece* - and its novel perverted? use of the mirror - complicates notions of physical and mental space, eye and subjectivity of the viewer, private and public, inside and outside, Nauman continued the experimentation with mirrors in *Double Wedge Corridor with Mirror*, mentioned previously: a V-shaped structure two feet wide at the beginning, narrowing down to sixteen inches, with a mirror at the end. This time, he directly incorporated the physical body of the viewer:

Bruce Nauman: [...] going into it is easy, because there is enough space around you for you not to be aware of the walls too much until you start to walk down the corridor. Then the walls are closer and force you to be aware of your body. It can be a very self-conscious kind of experience.

Willoughby Sharp: So you find yourself in *a situation where you are really put up against yourself*.

BN: Yes, and still the interest—since you are looking into the mirror and seeing out of the other corridor—the visual interest is pretty strong and it’s centered somewhere else; it’s either in the mirror or looking beyond the

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<sup>31</sup> “Les miroirs feraient bien de réfléchir un peu avant de renvoyer les images”. Jean Cocteau, *Essai de Critique Indirecte*, 1932. Cocteau plays with the double-meaning of “réfléchir”, which in French, as “reflect” in English, is both “to think” and “to reflect”. Does Nauman’s pun on John Coltrane’s *Peace/Piece* (see note 21) reflect (pun intended) Jean Cocteau’s pun on mirrors (with a duchampian *delay* in time)?

mirror into the end of the V.”<sup>32</sup>

The tendency for the eye is to seek one’s reflection in the mirror. Here, however the mirror confuses: it does not reflect the person walking towards it. Instead, it shows a space the viewer is unable to identify immediately (the other corridor). A space similar to the one in which the beholder walks, *but without the beholder’s body*. In an environment of shrinking space and increasing physical pressure, this situation provokes a dissociation between body, anticipated reflection, and the viewer’s self-awareness and perception of the surrounding space.

Willoughby Sharp: Did you consider using a video system in the San Jose piece?

Bruce Nauman: Well, in this piece the mirror takes the place of any video element. *In most of the pieces with closed circuit video, the closed circuit functions as a kind of electronic mirror.*

WS: So you are really *throwing the spectator back on himself*. That’s interesting. I hadn’t realized the similarity between the mirror and the video image before. Is there a natural extension into video from a certain situation, such as this piece? Or didn’t you even consider that?

BN: I didn’t consider it. *The mirror allows you to see some place that you didn’t think you could see*. In other words you are seeing around the corner. Some of the video pieces have to do with seeing yourself go around a corner, or seeing a room that you know you can’t get into like one where the television camera is set on an oscillating mount in a sealed room.<sup>33</sup>

In *Four Corner Piece*, Nauman pushes even further the tension between mirrored body and self-awareness with the use of video monitors. A monitor is installed on the floor at each

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<sup>32</sup> Willoughby Sharp, *Interview with Bruce Nauman, 1971 (MAY 1970)*. First published in *Avalanche 2* (Winter 1971), 22–31. Reprinted in Janet Kray, op. cit., 135. Italics mine.

<sup>33</sup> Sharp, *Interview with Bruce Nauman, 1971 (MAY 1970)*. 150. Italics mine.

corner of a large cube-like structure around which the viewer walks. The viewer is filmed from behind by video cameras (there are also four, at each corner, but elevated) and her image appears simultaneously on the monitor towards which she walks. Thus, the viewer's body, as perceived on the monitor, becomes smaller (since the viewer is walking *away* from the camera) at the very same time that her physical body gets closer to the monitor. As the viewer goes around each corner, the experience is repeated into a loop. The viewer is mirrored back to herself but she never sees her face. An unusual and unnerving type of reflection is created: whereas a mirror normally reflects the front of the viewer looking at it, here the subject sees herself from behind<sup>34</sup> (from a preying point of view, our back, as it cannot see but can be seen, is often perceived as the vulnerable or weak point of the body) as if seen by someone else. The viewer might even wonder if this is her image on the screen or another person's - someone behind her, perhaps. In the end, it is just the viewer following herself - potentially endlessly - and, as she turns the corner, realizing she will never catch up. The viewer's identity, sense of body and space, and her self-awareness are thwarted by this fragmentation of the space into the real-time but virtual "reflection" of the video on the one hand, and the physical space of the installation she walks in on the other.

In this work, as in various others, such as *Live-Taped Video Corridor* (1970), Nauman no longer uses video as a medium to document or display performative work, as he did in the 1960's. Instead, the video, like the mirror, functions as an interface, one with which viewers develop a

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<sup>34</sup> This brings to mind the title of another work by Nauman, *Run from Fear / Fun From Rear* (1972).

direct and shifting relationship - one that creates an alternative subjectivity<sup>35</sup>. The use of video technology, as an element to *perform with*, rather than something used to *render a performance* is similar to Vito Acconci's *Centers* (1971) as discussed by the critic Rosalind Krauss. In *Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism*, Krauss writes that many artists of Nauman's generation placed themselves between the camera and the monitor so that "the self [was] split and doubled by the mirror reflections of synchronous feedback"<sup>36</sup>. Slifkin notes that "for Krauss, this technique of 'self-encapsulation' revealed the medium of video-art to be not so much a material substrate (as in traditional artistic formats such as painting or sculpture) but, rather, a psychological condition, namely narcissism"<sup>37</sup>. It would seem that Nauman's shifting the camera away from himself and towards the body of a viewer-performer does not invalidate Krauss' analysis - it simply transfers the strategy of narcissism onto the viewer's experience.

Since the use of video (and mirrors) puts such a strong emphasis on the viewer's awareness of the body in space, it is opportune to examine the status of the body in Nauman's work.

## Body (Under) Pressure

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<sup>35</sup> The use of video technology, as an element to *perform with*, rather than something used to *render a performance* is similar to Vito Acconci's *Centers* (1971) as discussed by Rosalind Krauss in *Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism*, October, Vol. 1. (Spring, 1976), 50-64. Krauss writes that many artists of Nauman's generation placed themselves between the camera and the monitor so that "the self [was] split and doubled by the mirror reflections of synchronous feedback" (53). Slifkin notes that "for Krauss, this technique of 'self-encapsulation' revealed the medium of video-art to be not so much a material substrate (as in traditional artistic formats such as painting or sculpture) but rather, a psychological condition, namely narcissism". (Slifkin, 19-22). Does Nauman's shifting of the camera away from himself and towards the body of a viewer-performer still fit within this strategy of narcissism?

<sup>36</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism*, October, Vol. 1. (Spring, 1976), 53.

<sup>37</sup> Slifkin, 19-22.

*“Nauman focused his attention inward onto the sparse landscape of his nearly vacant studio, and onto his body, positioning the camera throughout the space in various fixed positions (sic) like a watchful, self-reflexive eye (read “I”)”<sup>38</sup>.*

While Nauman’s large scale installations manifest an attention to space as a mental environment - a space whose subjective and objective boundaries are in question - the physical body (both the artist’s and the viewer’s) becomes the site of an interplay between spatial, psychological and phenomenological tension. The body, in Nauman’s work, is then both the locus of intense psychophysical experience, and a medium expressing the often repetitive, absurd and banal qualities of human and artistic life.

By submitting the body to exacerbated experiences Nauman attempts to foster a fully embodied and phenomenological perception of the work and, thus, to break the binary of subject - object - an approach which favors an intimate and visceral experience over a disembodied and remote one. The artist must engage the viewer<sup>39</sup>, and the viewer must inhabit the work with both mind and body. Much of the art produced before the 1950’s was primarily a matter of visual perception, of beholding (at a safe distance), as theorized in the 19th century by Adolf von Hildebrand. The viewer’s experience and exposure to the work was therefore limited, as was, his or her empathetic reaction. While Minimalism operated a large fissure in this

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<sup>38</sup> Stephanie Snyder in Robert Slifkin, 8. Italics mine.

<sup>39</sup> In a 1973 lithograph that spells out "Pay attention Motherfuckers" in large mirror-image capitals, Nauman calls the elusive and distracted viewers on their lack of attention and engagement. In a strange oxymoron, to see this work and read its text, then, is to comply to Nauman’s injunction.

paradigm - much to the alarm of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried - by presenting work that engaged the viewer directly in a specific space and context, and by not referring to anything other than the objects themselves (work that had, as Donald Judd claimed, an undeniable “presence”) - the viewer, in his physical and, to a certain extent, psychological state remained unscathed. Viewers could still look at, and navigate works of art in a manner not so different from how one would view a painting by Courbet, for instance. While the content of the work may have had some novel, even shocking qualities (as in Surrealist work), the format in which this experience was available to the viewer was unchanged. In fact, for the artist, the viewer may have been little more than an after-thought. Increasingly, however, in the 60’s and 70’s, with installation and performance work and a focus on both body and psychology, the viewer’s experience becomes an integral part of the work. While Nauman does not think highly of viewers (in fact, he distrusts them<sup>40</sup>), he senses, even as he retreats to his bachelardian studio-corner, that the eye (like the relentless one looking at Cain in the grave<sup>41</sup>) and overbearing presence of the viewer / gaze can never be ignored.

A large portion of Nauman’s body of work (no pun intended) deals with the body and has often been perceived as “body art”. Drawing from works such as *Collection of Various Flexible*

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<sup>40</sup> Nauman has stated that he wrote the instructions of his performative works as detailed as possible, so as to not give the viewer / participant any wiggle room. “I always prefer to do [the performances] myself, although I’ve given instructions to someone else from time to time. It’s a bit more difficult than doing it myself; I have to make the instructions really explicit, because I trust myself as a performer more than I do others. What I try to do is to make the situation sufficiently specific, so that the dancer can’t interpret his position too much”.

<sup>41</sup> While it is uncertain that Nauman, in *John Coltrane Piece*, intended to reference the Book of Genesis, one can still muse on the nature of this mirror/eye which gazes out into (and reflects?) the pitch dark interior of the sculpture. “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 under a similarly large and flat square steel panel placed directly on the floor.” (Slifkin, 12)

*Materials Separated by Layers of Grease with Holes the Size of my Waist and Wrists* (1966) or *From Hand to Mouth* (1967), Willoughby Sharp coins Nauman's early work "body sculpture" and notes the artist's identification of his body with his sculptural pieces: "there is a body-matter exchange which plays a very strong part in [Nauman's] thinking. "I [use] my body as a piece of material and manipul[at] it", Nauman tells Sharp. "I use the figure as object"<sup>42</sup>. In *Self Portrait as a Fountain* (1966), the artist uses his body as just that, recalling, nearly a half-century later, Marcel Duchamp's controversial piece. Here, however, Nauman wittingly reintroduces the figure and body of the artist (perhaps as readymade), whereas Duchamp's fountain-urinal was in part a statement on the absence of the artist - or, at least, the hand of the artist.

In terms of the activity of the body, Nauman, in an early performance piece titled *Flour Arrangements* (1967), cleared his studio entirely and, every day, made a different floor arrangement using flour. The work stems from both the notion of the studio as a site of repetitive, futile activity, and Nauman's interest in word puns. That an artist could spend (or waste) an entire month in his studio arranging "flowers" was, no doubt, shocking to many. Nauman had also started to explore the body in relation to the space around it, subjecting it to strange spatial constraints and patterns:

I did a piece at Davis which involved standing with my back to the wall for about forty-five seconds or a minute, leaning out from the wall, then bending at the waist, squatting, sitting and finally lying down. There were seven different positions *in relation to the wall and floor*. Then I did the whole sequence again standing away from the

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<sup>42</sup> Sharp, *Nauman Interview*, 1970, 122-123.

wall, facing the wall, then facing left and facing right. There were twenty-eight positions and the whole presentation lasted for about half an hour<sup>43</sup>.

With *Elke Allowing the Floor to Rise Up Over Her, Face Up*, and *Tony Sinking Into the Floor, Face Up and Face Down* (both 1973) Nauman starts to use bodies other than his own (in the following case those of performers) as sites of psychophysical tension. In 1969, he devised a set of mental exercises in which a live performer was to concentrate on sinking into the floor or allowing the floor to rise up over him or her. "What I was investigating at that time was how to *examine a purely mental activity* as opposed to a purely physical situation which might incur some mental activity."<sup>44</sup> This mental aspect of situations which may seem, at first glance, to involve only the body, run parallel to Nauman's investment of physical spaces (as in *Get Out of This Room...* or *Room With My Soul Left Out...*) with a psychological dimension. Slifkin notes about *Elke Allowing...* and *Tony Sinking...*:

Once again [as in *John Coltrane Piece*] it is *the thin space between body and floor* that becomes the site of Nauman's artistic investigation. [...] the space between the actors' bodies and the floor [...] becomes the focus of the viewer's attention and a site that suggests a certain impossibility, whether of metaphysical transcendence, meaning, or simply visibility<sup>45</sup>.

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<sup>43</sup> Sharp, *Nauman Interview*, 1970, 122.

<sup>44</sup> Ian Wallace and Russel Keziere, *Bruce Nauman Interviewed, 1979 (October 1978)*. First published in *Vanguard* 8 (February 1979): 15–18. Reprinted with permission, Ian Wallace, in Janet Kray, *op. cit.*, 191. Italics mine.

<sup>45</sup> Slifkin, 14-15.

According to Slifkin, Nauman's interest in these practices stemmed from his reading of *Gestalt Therapy*<sup>46</sup> - a book diagnosing the blurred boundaries between the self and the external world:

Nauman drew upon [the book's] 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. [His] "exercises" [...] appear to be less about the cohesion of the ego and its fluid interplay with its environment, and more about its dilution into its surroundings<sup>47</sup>.

Here, we are faced again with the notion of psychasthenia: the process of becoming the space, a stateless state, in a sense, a state of "being similar" (as in Mike Kelly's *Lumpen*), discussed in several of this seminar's readings, from Bachelard to Merleau-Ponty, Lacan and Bataille to Foster, and now manifesting at the level of the subject's body.

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There is no doubt that the incredible richness - and cohesion - of Nauman's oeuvre lies in his ability to continually address the vulnerability and sometimes absurdity of the human condition from the extremely personal point of view of the artist, and yet make it tangible in a way that is fully experienced, both physically and psychologically, by the viewer. Hopefully, this paper and the inspiration from various references in this course's materials has conveyed some useful entry points into Nauman's colossal body of work.

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<sup>46</sup> Perls, Hefferline and Goodman (1951).

<sup>47</sup> Slifkin, 16.