

## ART.

ARTHUR C. DANTO

Bruce Nauman

Ludwig Wittgenstein began to talk about "language games" in the late 1930s, and conceived of these as very primitive forms of language that went with correspondingly elementary forms of life. Wittgenstein conjectured that these games "are the forms of language with which a child begins to make use of words," but he meant to use them as tools for analyzing what goes on when we engage in linguistic interchange: "When we look at such simple forms of language, the mental mist which seems to surround our ordinary use of language disappears." In *Philosophical Investigations*, he offers an example of a language game used to serve for communication between a builder, A, and an assistant, B. They use a language consisting only of the words "block," "pillar," "slab" and "beam." Here is play: A says "Slab" and B brings a slab. So in addition to a vocabulary, the game consists in commands—clearly "Slab" here means "Bring me a slab"—and compliances, which are non-vocal. Bringing a slab is as much a move in the language game as uttering the word "slab." Hence the language game is made up of words and actions.

A great deal of the work of Bruce Nauman consists in issuing commands, and since Wittgenstein's views on language are said to have had a marked influence on Nauman's art, it is perhaps helpful to consider those works as having at times the framework and logic of language games—which means, since the commands are often directed at us, that we are meant to do something in response. That is to say, by contrast with works of art that evoke only an aesthetic response, Nauman's are conceived to require something more strenuous, and in a way more active, on our part. Designed as plays in language games, they address us less as viewers than as participants. To experience a Nauman is to interact with it in some way that goes beyond appreciating it as a work of art.

Let's begin with a special kind of command, one that the "assistant" has no power to resist, once the command is understood. (This is clearly very different from one of Wittgenstein's primitive scenarios in which A calls out "Slab" and

B brings it, and where, though such contingencies rarely arise in these reduced scenarios, it is within B's power to say to hell with it and walk off the job.) As in baseball, striking is a way of not playing the game. So I am thinking of what we might call strike-proof games, where it is, as Continental thinkers like to say, "always already" too late to refuse to do what one is asked. "Read this sentence!" is perhaps a case in point: To read the sentence is ipso facto to have satisfied the obedience conditions it lays down. Alongside such commands one might think of logically non-nondisobeyable ones, like "Don't look!" (Oops, too late!) or "Don't read this sentence!" (ditto). The next time conversation flags, you might try to think of some examples of your own. The point is that such commands contrast with the typical orders and directives of everyday life, like "Open the window," where one must do something in order to refuse or comply with the command, other than merely understand it.

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*'Viewing' is but a stage of our response to Nauman's works, which are designed to elicit 'action.'*

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Nauman has come up with a non-disobeyable command and fashioned it into a work of art that his devotees admire extravagantly: *PAY ATTENTION!* Well, this in fact comes in more than one version. There is a lithograph in which "PAY ATTENTION MOTHERFUCKERS" is printed backward, one word per line. Of this the critic John Yau writes: "By describing both our experience and our specific existence, 'PAY ATTENTION . . .' successfully integrates our awareness with our sensations. We do what we see." This work is not in the show of Nauman's work at the Museum of Modern Art (which runs until May 23), but a kinder, gentler version is: *PLEASE PAY ATTENTION PLEASE*, a collage this time. Of this, the show's curator, Robert Storr, writes, "By reading the words on this collage, one automatically grants their plaintive request. Much of Nauman's work . . . draws the viewer into its constructs and often controls the way it is absorbed, either by demanding feats of concentration or imagi-

nation or by limiting the viewer's movements." Paul Schimmel, a co-curator, similarly writes: "Throughout Nauman's career he has baited, controlled, bored, infuriated, scared, insulted, angered, imperiled, experimented with, and manipulated us—his viewers—into experiencing his work within his parameters. . . . The meaning of the piece is what it does to us."

I am struck by the persistence of the word "viewer" in these glosses, which implies a greater continuity between normal museum experience and the rather more peremptory demands upon us that these works are praised for making. We "do what we see," remember. And our so doing is "the meaning" of the work. So "viewing" is but a stage in our response, and the rest is something the philosophical cross-examiner will force us to admit was an action. Admittedly, a fairly mild and tepid action, even if, once in front of the work, we could not help performing it. We did pay attention.

It has often, in the history of art, been hoped that works would entail effects that went beyond mere aesthetic gratification. The great ecclesiastical art of the Roman Baroque, for example, was specifically commissioned to strengthen the faith of those who viewed it. So artists were instructed to represent Christ and the martyrs as suffering, and it is reasonable to suppose that the tremendous expressiveness of these representations was calculated to arouse feelings of compassion in the viewers that could not help but strengthen the latter's bonds with those subjects of torture, humiliation and crucifixion. I have deliberately lapsed into the idiom of "viewers," but of course those upon whom these works were to have had the desired effects were first of all Christians, and then too were usually engaged in some religious activity like praying before an altarpiece when they experienced it. The altarpiece was composed in such a way as to enhance the bond between the saint prayed to and the supplicant. Whether or not this worked out was a matter of how astute Baroque psychology was and then how manipulative Baroque artists were capable of being. But the hope was something religious art often and political art always aspires to: that some change of state would be induced by seeing the work. And certainly that happens sufficiently often that only against a formalist aesthetic would it be remarked upon at all. We approach works of art as viewers but leave them as altered beings, whether the alteration

was something calculated in or not.

Still, this alteration is something that may happen or not; it is not something *entailed*. Like the ordinary game of command and obey, in which there is space for insubordination, the soul may not respond: The work looks too contrived, or too cold, or one is simply not in the mood. How grateful the Baroque patrons would then have been for a form of response that cannot go wrong, where simply to view the work is to be in the altered state, however one may want or try to resist—where resistance is, strictly speaking, unthinkable. To see “Pay Attention” is to pay attention. Still, the question cannot but nag as to what, beyond having been trumped in a forced language game, has been achieved. What have we been paying attention to? To the command and to nothing else. The moment we pay attention to the lettering, to whether the lettering goes forward or backward, to whether the command is plaintive or ugly, we are no longer in compliance with the directive but rather are attentive in the ordinary way in which we regard works of art in galleries—we are outside the horizons of the language game. So the artist’s victory is fairly trivial. It is a kind of joke. Like writing “Behold!” when there is nothing to look at but the imperative itself.

*PAY ATTENTION* may seem a rather minor work for this degree of critical examination, but it typifies the Nauman corpus. It is peremptory, invasive, aggressive; it uses coarse language (in its lithographic version); it straddles (in the collage version) the boundary between a work of art and a poster—an admonition on the wall of the machine shop to watch what one is doing—and hence raises the deep ontological questions that have been with us since at least Duchamp; it similarly straddles the boundary between writing and image that has come to define an entire genre of art-making; and it uses (again in the collage version) unprepossessing, even proletarian materials, which defined the Minimalist movement with its various ideologies and established an aesthetic axis between American art in the late sixties and such European art movements as *Arte Povera*, which gave Nauman a widely appreciative audience on the Continent. (*PAY ATTENTION* was borrowed from an important Italian collection for the MoMA show.) All this has made Nauman the cynosure—the focus of rapt attention, to make an internal connection between artist and work—of our advanced curatoriat. Four outstanding curators have collaborated in bringing this

exhibition to their respective institutions.

Critical opinion is by contrast considerably more divided, and I must admit to a certain division within myself. I have seen works by Nauman that seemed to me simply tremendous. One was the monumental *Anthro/Socio:Anthro/Socio* exhibited at MoMA in 1991, in which the head of a rather fierce bald man is projected on various scales and in various orientations—he is sometimes upside down—chanting, Hare Krishna style, over and over, in unison with himself, “Feed me/Eat me/Anthropology. Help me/Hurt me/Sociology.” Standing in the vast gallery among these talking heads, one felt moved and powerless, and in some crazy way the chanter’s seemed to be the Voice of Humanity. In a show of works on paper at MoMA the following year, called “Allegories of Modernism,” there was a photomontage of animal forms called *Model for Animal Pyramid II*, as well as a drawing of what looked like a suffering animal that was delicate, beautiful and, in its own way, as moving as *Anthro/Socio*. . . There is, in the catalogue to the present show, a photograph of *Animal Pyramid*, a kind of acrobatic formation of animals (Nauman uses taxidermy forms for these), with deer at the base and smaller animals as one ascends. I have no idea of the intent behind that piece, but it conveys a sense of overwhelming meaningfulness, and I must say, on the basis of these works, that I was prepared to regard Nauman as a very major artist indeed. When asked to write a citation to go with a major prize to be awarded him, I wrote, in part, “He is an avant-garde artist whose theme is the human condition, and whose aim is to make us conscious of our limits and our needs.”

Not one of these works, save for the photomontage, is in the present show, which is in the aggregate so inconsistent with the above appraisal of Nauman as an artist that I am constrained to ascribe this to a division in his own artistic persona, between the humanist I believed him to be and the smartass perpetrator of aesthetic practical jokes in which this noisy, awful exhibition consists. Either that or there is a division between the curatoriat, who seem dazzled by the artist who made these works, and me, who is repelled by them. It is possible that the revulsion, which made me want to flee the museum, was compounded by the high expectations I had had, based on partial evidence. That evidence had also caused me to explain away a number of other Nauman works I had seen—a chan-



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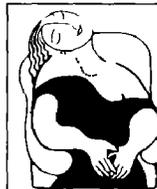
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link cage, a constricting passage between walls and some jejune wordplays in neon—rather than to construct a more realistic picture of his achievement.

**T**he *pièce de résistance* at MoMA is Nauman's celebrated *Clown Torture* of 1987, which, like *Anthro/Socio. . .*, is made up of a number of video images, though the spirit could hardly be more different. The images are of clowns doing, with one exception, fairly clownish things, like holding goldfish bowls against the ceiling with broomsticks and making a lot of racket. Whatever they do, they do over and over, so that repetition is as thematic here as in the chant of *Anthro/Socio. . .* Part of the cacophony consists in a tiresome joke one clown tells as his routine, a joke with a certain logical kinship to *PAY ATTENTION*. It goes: "Pete and Repeat were sitting on a fence. Pete fell off. Who was left? Repeat. Pete and Repeat were sitting on a fence. Pete fell off. Who was left? Repeat. . . ." The joke never comes to the point—or its not coming to the point *is* the point, but the clowns never learn. (If they allegorize the human condition, as can be argued, human life is the same thing over and over, and *we* never learn.) Another part of the racket comes from a clown who, lying on his back, waves his feet furiously in our direction, crying out, as if he were about to be tortured, "No! No! No! No! No! No! No! . . ." And finally there is "Clown Taking a Shit," on a large screen to one's left as one enters the clamorous, shrieking, clanging alcove where the repetitions take place on different screens.

I am uncertain what the iconography of the clown in the toilet stall is, though one may get a hint of its meaning in a large work called *One Hundred Live and Die*, which is made up of that number of paired fatalistic sayings, written in neon tubing, which flash on and off at different intervals, and of which "Shit and Live" and "Shit and Die" are but two. (Others are: "Speak and Die," "Laugh and Die," "Cry and Die"—the whole repertory of basic human doings on the left, and alternatively "Die" and "Live" on the right.) We live or die, and the regularity with which we move our bowels is invariant to the difference between life and death, like the regularity with which we eat or drink or sleep or make love. The overall feeling of *One Hundred Live and Die* is distantly Kierkegaardian: "If you marry, you will regret it; if you do not marry, you will also regret it; if you marry or do not

marry, you will regret both; whether you marry or do not marry, you will regret both." "My life is absolutely meaningless," the narrator in *Either/Or* states at one point, and perhaps from the perspective of life and death, everything we do is meaningless. Something like that is the intended implication of the incantatory declarations of *One Hundred Live and Die*. Robert Storr recalls that when he first saw the work, two girls, in complete spontaneity, began chanting the words, "Feel and die. . . . Fuck and live. . . ."

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*This show is the artistic correlative of whoopee cushions and gongs: clown torture.*

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On the other hand, this may be a rather more exalted interpretation of the clown in the toilet than Nauman intended. The artist communicated to Storr the thought that the times when it is difficult being an artist are very like the times when one is constipated. "Then the image of a clown taking a shit (not in a household bathroom but in a public restroom—a gas station, an airport—places where privacy is qualified or compromised) can show a useful parallel," Storr notes. (So how, to continue the parallel, are we to think of the art that comes out after the difficulties are resolved? Asking a rhetorical question is also a kind of language game. So you said it, I didn't! The parallel in any case is not mine. But what view can an artist have of his art if his favored image for artistic blockage is constipation?) There is in any case a certain callow consistency between this image, which is a somewhat unfortunate metaphor, and a set of images from the late sixties in which Nauman photographs mostly himself enacting certain charades, where the picture is to be understood—is to be "solved"—with a cliché. Thus he shows his feet covered with clay, which means—you guessed it—"Feet of clay." Or we see the artist eating some bread cut out in the shapes of letters which spell out W-O-R-D; it is titled *Eating My Words*. Or he applies wax to the cutout letters H-O-T, painted red, which is *Waxing Hot*. Or he photographs some drill bits ranked in their holder and gives it the title *Drill Team*.

In 1967 Nauman made a cast in waxed

cloth of a region of his body that included his hand, arm, part of his neck and chin, and his mouth, which has the inevitable title *From Hand to Mouth*. That very year, he made a cast of his crossed forearms, cut off at the biceps, out of which some heavy ropes extend that are knotted at the top. This one, in the spirit of the charade, is titled *Untitled*, meaning we are to find the cliché, which is, I would guess, "Knotted Muscles." These, too, I suppose, are in the nature of language games, or at least a certain sort of wordplay, in that we are to understand the image by finding the cliché that fits it. Storr writes of *Eating My Words* that it "transforms a worn-out phrase into a powerful one-liner," but I find the transformations limp and pretty silly. And it is difficult to see what has been achieved by finding a visual pun for "From hand to mouth," which, as a cliché, does not refer to a stretch of the body, where the hand is at one extreme and the mouth at another, but to a condition of marginal existence where the hand and mouth are in contact because the person of whom it is true has little to show for his expenditure of energy but the food he puts in his mouth. At the very least Nauman's transformations seem to show a certain blindness to meaning or a will to subvert it.

There is another way of looking at it, perhaps, which refers us to certain views of language considerably more primitive than anything Wittgenstein had in mind by language games. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud writes as follows:

The dream-thoughts and the dream-content are presented to us like two versions of the same subject-matter in two different languages. Or, more properly, the dream-content seems like a transcript of the dream-thoughts into another mode of expression, whose characters are syntactic laws it is our business to discover . . . The dream-content . . . is expressed as it were in a pictographic script, the characters of which have to be transposed individually into the language of the dream-thoughts.

Often, in classical dream analysis, one goes from dream-thought to dream-content by finding the pun that makes one the transform of the other in a way that makes no sense until the double entendre is found. A psychoanalyst I know told me that when she undertook her training analysis in German, her analyst asked her what she had dreamt the night before. She said she remembered dreaming about a fresh rose, and was told

that she had dreamed about her neurosis. What can the connection have been? Only the German pun between *neue Rose* (new rose) and *Neurose* (neurosis). As with puns always, it only works in the language(s) in which the sounds are interchangeable. Someone dreaming of a fresh rose whose language was French would be dreaming of something else. Freud's interpretations, like Lacan's, are often like solving rebuses, and indeed Freud explicitly talks of dreams as "picture puzzles." Nauman's pictures and sculptures in any case stand in this kind of relationship to one another, with this difference: Solving them takes us nowhere. PAY ATTENTION: The solution opens nothing up.

The above assessment can be extended to the other primitivism I find in Nauman's wordplay. The ancient Sanskrit thinkers used to try to elicit the secret of things by cracking open words. There is a lot of fairly crazy wordplay in the Upanishads, e.g., that since the word for chant—*saman*—contains *sa* (she) and *ama* (he), chants themselves must somehow connect men and women. The inference goes from the shape of the word to some deep truth about the universe. The shape *saman* also contains the shape *sama*, which means "equal," and hence the chant is said in the Upanishads to be equal to the world. "He who obtains intimate union with the Saman, he wins its world," the Upanishads proclaim, as if something had been discovered. In general, the argumentation proceeds as it would were one to observe that "he" is contained in "she" and deduce from that the truth that there is a masculine side to femininity. It is a very old kind of verbal magic, but at least the pundits (as they were called) had a theory that they were doing things by finding words within words and (hence) things within things. Nauman proceeds this way as well. Thus he finds the word "EAT" in "DEATH." Or he finds that "EROS" spelled backward is "SORE." He discovers shapes within the shapes of words or expressions, and presents them to us as if they mean something beyond the fact that one shape occurs in another. One genre of his work consists in neon signs, in which, for example, we are to join him in seeking the connection between VIOLINS and VIOLENCE and SILENCE, to refer to a work of 1981-82. Is there a connection? Other, that is, than at the level of sound? How about at the level of meaning?

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There could be, I suppose. Someone in ACT UP could say that SILENCE=VIOLENCE if indeed SILENCE=DEATH. But would this follow from the phonemes being what they are?

There is a work from 1988 titled *Learned Helplessness in Rats (Rock and Roll Drummer)*, which shows, among other things, videos of rats in a maze and of a drummer. The concept of "learned helplessness" initially had reference to what happens to rats in an inescapably painful situation. Shocks are administered in such a way that there is nothing the rats can do to keep them from happening. The rats are rendered helpless for the duration of the conditioning period, by contrast with rats in a control group who are in a more manipulable environment and thus are capable of learning to avoid the shocks. In subsequent experiments, the helpless rats learn much more slowly than the others, and, whatever the connection, show an elevated level of steroids in the blood. Some years ago, "learned helplessness" was generalized to humans to refer to pathologies believed to be the result of an individual's diminished capacity to control his or her environment. Depression, for example, was considered a form of learned helplessness, in at least some cases, and possibly this indicated a therapeutic direction.

Whatever the current state of that discussion, I somehow felt that the situation of the visitor to the Nauman show was a kind of learned helplessness, in that we are subjected to a certain series of shocks over which we have no control except that, unlike the laboratory rat, we can leave—after we pay attention, undergo torture, etc. Our learned helplessness may be a metaphor for the human condition as suggested by *One Hundred Live and Die*, with its fifty pairs of conditions that, though in our power, nevertheless leave life and death as independent variables over which we have no control. So the show may imply a kind of philosophical meaning grander than that carried by the works creating the sense of helplessness, though this is probably too charitable a view. The show is aggressive and nasty, cacophonous and arrogant, silly and portentous. It made me feel, overall, that I had better not think too much about those works of Nauman I really have admired, lest they too slip into language games, sophomoric puns or the artistic correlative of whoopee cushions and gongs: clown torture. □

## MUSIC.

GENE SANTORO

### Arc of a Diver

*Take extra care not to lose what you feel. That food you're eating is simple and real. Water the flowers that grow at your heel. Guiding your vision to heaven. And heaven is in your mind.*

—Traffic, 1967

Something happened to Steve (then Stevie) Winwood around 1969. Maybe it started with the breakup of Traffic. That near-mythic and highly influential group (an inspiration to The Band and countless others including the 1980s "downtown" New York scene) blended rock, pop, jazz, blues, folk and psychedelia, as well as Eastern and African and Native American music. Maybe it was distilled during the subsequent abortive months he spent with Eric Clapton and Ginger Baker. Refugees from the swashbuckling power trio Cream, they tried to breathe life into Blind Faith, that stillborn avatar of a still-born concept, the supergroup, whose nostalgic appeal still casts its foolish shadow over rock. Maybe surrendering to the rampant elephantiasis of form that bloated 1970s rock after becoming a crafty tunesmith damaged Winwood's internal creative balance. Maybe he was caught, pure and simple, on the standard rocker curve: Live fast, die young—and if you don't, outlive the thrust of your talent except when you reprise or rework past triumphs. In pictures what dominates his delicately handsome face, dramatically framed by draping hair, are the eyes: receding and wary, like a deer's caught in the headlights.

That's one way to hear *The Finer Things* (Island), a four-CD retrospective of the 46-year-old multi-instrumentalist/vocalist's musical pursuits over the past thirty years. Beginning with his recording debut as a 15-year-old *Wunderkind* anchoring the Spencer Davis Group, the box set traces Winwood's arc through Traffic, Blind Faith, Traffic redux, solo and group outings and his 1980s comeback hit singles. The sixty-three cuts are revealing even as they make you lean on your remote control's fast-forward button for long stretches. For like the career it recaps, the set presents several paradoxes. Well conceived and remixed, strikingly designed and exhaustively detailed about disco-

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