

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

GIVEN THE BREADTH of his career and the widespread recognition of the significance of his art, Bruce Nauman has conducted relatively few interviews over the course of the past thirty-five years. Unlike many of his artist colleagues who also began their careers in the sixties, Nauman has refrained from participating in the critical discourse surrounding his art. He does not write criticism, has never been active as a public speaker, and has spent limited time within the recognized centers of the contemporary artworld. The resulting impression is one of silence.

In contrast, words—indeed language—are everywhere in Nauman's art. There are words that scream at the viewer, and words that flash on and off in bright neon tubing; there are words that are assembled into ponderously long, descriptive titles, and others that are presented alone as stark messages in otherwise empty fields of white paper; there are words that are spoken back and forth by actors on video screens, and words that are recorded on audiotapes. Indeed, the incorporation of language was not only foundational to the formation of Nauman's diverse aesthetic but continues to play a significant role in its development.

The question that arises is how can an artistic practice of so many words be made by an artist of so few words? Perhaps, however, this is a flawed approach, in that rather than the *quantity*, the focus should be upon the *quality*—that is, the nature or types—of words the artist chooses to circulate in public. From this perspective, Nauman's reticence—his reluctance to control the discourse—may reveal insight into both the function and

meaning of language in his art. This is the subtext of the current book, which, beyond an anthology of documents, represents an investigation of Bruce Nauman's words.

The artist's reputation as a reluctant speaker, moreover, has been compounded by the limited availability of his interviews; many of them appeared in obscure or now out-of-print journals, and some have never been published in the first place. As an archival resource, this book counters Nauman's reputation for silence by demonstrating both the historical and critical value of those interviews that do exist. On the other hand, it seeks to offer an interpretive perspective, investigating the models of language operative in Nauman's art: the subject of the critical essay that serves as the book's introduction. While the issue of language and the "linguistic turn" of artistic practices since the sixties has been addressed at length in the literature, in this essay I argue that the discussion has largely been framed through a structuralist or semiotic model, leading to certain conclusions about the nature of language—and its function in the visual arts. In approaching language through the notion of the "speech act" or performative utterance, however, a different perspective emerges, one crucial in understanding the larger significance of Nauman's art and its historical legacy.

Following the introductory essay is the first archival section, consisting of a selection of Nauman's "writings." The word here is placed in quotes as, by their very inclusion, the interpretive question of what constitutes an artist's "writing" is raised. Given the nature of Nauman's textual production, which largely falls outside the domain of traditional artists' writings, this issue is doubly complex. Nauman's writings consist not of biographical musings, critical or philosophical essays, or reflective reviews. Rather, they belong to diverse and multiplicitous genres: from dialogues, transcribed from video/audio works; prose texts, written as components of architectural installations; instructions or proposals for objects or per-

performances to be made; to texts that constitute artworks in their own right. They are variously didactic, informational, literary, and even “poetic.”¹

In the critical essay, an interpretation of these writings is explored, but here some explanation regarding the criteria for their inclusion is warranted. As language is a ubiquitous component in Nauman’s artwork, the book does not simply reproduce every instance in which it appears; indeed if sculptures, neon signs, video pieces, audio works, drawings, and prints were all taken into account, this number would be in the hundreds. Rather, what are reprinted here are those writings the artist himself previously published—in magazines, brochures, or posters—as well as those that he otherwise considers to function autonomously as text or writing. In keeping with the nature of these writings—which, in many cases, have highly intentional graphic or visual formats—they are reproduced in this book as faithful to the originals as possible. In cases where the original texts have been lost or were not otherwise available, an approximation of their appearance has been made. Each writing is accompanied by annotations, explaining their original contexts and formats, as well as other pertinent information.

Part II, forming the book’s second archival section, includes interviews the artist conducted from the very beginning of his career to the present: the first from 1966 and the last, December of 2001.² This section includes two previously unpublished interviews and others that were first published in journals that, for a variety of reasons, now have limited public access. The interviews are arranged chronologically and annotated with relevant contextual information and a brief introduction to their contents. While instances of repetition occur, with Nauman revisiting topics and statements made on other occasions, I have chosen to include all extant interviews that were available. For one, given their relatively small number, each interview merits entry into the historical record. More significantly, however, such repetitions are themselves meaningful, underscoring concerns that continue to preoccupy the artist over a lengthy period of time. As one aim of the book is to demonstrate the conceptual and philosophical continuity

of what appears, on the surface, to be a radically differentiated artistic practice, such echoes of ideas underlying seemingly unrelated works bear interpretive significance. In this sense, documentation intends also to function as commentary.

The interviews are reprinted here as they were first published—that is, in edited form—even when original, unedited manuscripts were available. Not only does this result in a more accurate reflection of the genre of the interview (which, despite its pretense to “natural” conversation, is always a construct in some respect), but it also allows for different authorial voices to be represented, thereby enriching the interpretive perspective for the reader. Supplementary information, clarifications, and other comments, however, are added as editor’s notes to assist the reader throughout this section of the book. In this part and in part I, editor’s interpolations appear in brackets []. All notes are by the editor unless otherwise indicated.

I AM EXTREMELY GRATEFUL for the assistance of the many people and institutions who helped me gather materials and permissions, and otherwise supplied important information for the book. First, I want to offer my sincere gratitude to Bruce Nauman, who not only supported the project and gave me permission to use his written and visual materials but also allowed me the freedom to shape the book’s contents and editorial perspective. Such a hands-off approach is highly unusual and reinforces those qualities in his art that compelled me to write about it in the first place. From the beginning of this process, Juliet Myers, Nauman’s invaluable assistant of seventeen years, has been a constant source of help and information, serving as an important liaison, gracefully accommodating my many requests. I am very thankful for her ongoing support and for generously lending me materials that were crucial for the finished publication.

Equally, I owe a very large debt to all of the contributors and other individuals who granted me permission to reprint the interviews; without their

generosity, this book simply would not exist. As the number of Nauman interviews is small, each one makes a valuable contribution to the creation of a historical archive; thus I am doubly grateful for their willingness to make their work available for this publication, which I hope will serve many researchers and readers to come.

In addition, there were numerous individuals who, over the course of the book's development, contributed in many ways. First, I want to thank the staff of Sperone Westwater Gallery—Angela Westwater, David Leiber, Karen Polack, Rachel Foullon, Michael Short—for their multifaceted support. Karen deserves special mention for taking on the time-consuming task of organizing and assembling a large portion of the photographic materials and answering my numerous inquiries. I am also grateful to Donald Young and Emily Letourneau of Donald Young Gallery in Chicago, and Sabrina Gschwandtner at Electronic Arts Intermix in New York, for their kind assistance in acquiring various photographic materials. Dorothee Fischer of Konrad Fischer Galerie in Düsseldorf generously provided me with an original copy of a poster containing one of Nauman's writings, as well as details of its original installation. Thanks also to Barbara Castelli and Diana Turco of the Leo Castelli Gallery, New York, for providing other textual materials.

In my lengthy search to track down the original copyright holders and various other individuals,³ a number of people gave me their welcome assistance: the staff of Nancy Hoffman Gallery in New York; Dave Dymant at Art Metropole in Toronto; Jean Beckner and Candace Lebel at the Honnold/Mudd Library, The Claremont Colleges, in Claremont, California; Steven Leiber, of Steven Leiber, San Francisco; Bob Monk, formerly of Lorence-Monk Gallery, New York; and Caroline Weaver at the Archives of American Art in Washington, D.C. I also want to acknowledge Ann Gale at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Jean-Christophe Castelli of Castelli Graphics; and Jon Hendricks, curator of The Gilbert and Lila Silverman

Fluxus Collection Foundation, Detroit, all of whom donated information and assistance.

I am fortunate to have enjoyed the support (moral and otherwise) of a number of colleagues and friends: particular acknowledgment is due to Miwon Kwon, Michael Lobel, Catherine Morris, Margaret Sundell, and Frazer Ward, who were constant sources of advice, feedback, and reassuring words. I am grateful to all of them for their intelligence and friendship, which sustain me beyond this project. Additionally, Leah Dickerman, David Joselit, Judith Rodenbeck, Ellen Tepfer, and Helena Vidal all deserve my warm thanks for their various contributions. Stefano Basilico helped me in all these and other ways; I owe him the most gratitude.

Finally, I want to express my thanks to Alex Alberro, who encouraged me to send my proposal for this book to The MIT Press, providing the incentive to put into form what then existed as an idea. At The MIT Press, thanks to Lisa Reeve for answering many questions along the way; to Derek George for his thoughtful and beautiful design; and to Sandra Minkinen, who has been a dedicated and generous editor. The final shape of the book owes much to their untiring efforts. Lastly, I am extremely grateful to Roger Conover, who enthusiastically supported the book from the outset, provided me with the opportunity to pursue it, and had the patience to see it through.

NOTES

1. "Poetic," however, as Nauman once described: "When language begins to break down a little bit, it becomes exciting and communicates in the simplest way that it can function: you are forced to be aware of the sounds and the poetic parts of words." Quoted in Christopher Cordes, "Talking With Bruce Nauman," reprinted in this volume, p. 354.
2. Although comprehensive, the book does not claim to include every existing Nauman interview.
3. Every effort has been made to identify the original copyright holders, but if any have been inadvertently overlooked or mistakenly identified, correction will be made at the first opportunity.