

## Print Article



Outside the U.S. Pavilion in the Giardini at the Venice Biennale, 2009



Bruce Nauman at the press conference for "Topological Gardens" in Venice



"Topological Gardens" at the Università Ca' Foscari in Venice



Bruce Nauman's *Flayed Earth Flayed Self (Skin Sink)* (1973), installed at the Università Ca' Foscari

## BITTERSWEET CACOPHONY

### by Ben Davis

When the Bruce Nauman show won the Golden Lion in Venice earlier this month for "Best Pavilion," most art-world people were not surprised. Nauman, after all, is one of the world's most influential living artists, a postmodern master. He came to Venice on the strength of a lavish Calvin Tomkins profile in the *New Yorker*, depicting the 68-year-old artist as the lonely cowboy of American contemporary art (the article may as well have been subtitled "Bruce Nauman: An American Original.") The U.S. presentation of Nauman - tightly focused but spread out over three locations throughout the city -- blew everyone else away.

Before we all begin to chant "U.S.A.! U.S.A.!" though, it's worth appreciating how unlikely it is for Nauman to be press-ganged into service as cultural ambassador. Nauman is the kind of artist that people make fun of when they make fun of contemporary art. His works are often *literally* the equivalent of watching someone run their head into a wall over and over again; unleavened by humor, they generally fall into the grey area of taking stupid things very seriously. You've really got to start with this point to understand the achievement of "Topological Gardens," as the three-part Nauman show -- sponsored by the Philadelphia Museum of Art and smartly assembled by curators Carlos Basualdo and Michael R. Taylor -- is called. This show actually makes me connect with Nauman in a way I never have before.

It's not that I didn't understand the meaning of his works. Eccentric as they are, Nauman's gestures have a pretty clear logic to them (or anti-logic, if you prefer), a fact that can be confirmed by perusing Venice's career-spanning selection of art. Officially, the exhibition focuses on three aspects of Nauman's production, "Heads and Hands," "Sound and Space" and "Fountains and Neons." But really there is only one theme: "Crazy."

The key work in Venice, in this respect, is *Flayed Earth Flayed Self (Skin Sink)* (1973), located at the exhibition spaces of the Università Ca' Foscari (up the Grand Canal from the Giardini). The piece consists of a pattern of masking tape, six curving lines radiating out from a central point on the floor and continuing up the walls, as if to represent a drain. On the wall at the back of the room is hung a sort of pencil diagram of the same design, adorned with typewritten text on green notecards, featuring various schizophrenic-sounding reflections. Here is one:

"The problem is to divide your skin into six equal parts / lines starting at your feet and ending / at your head / (five lines to make six equal surface areas); / To twist and spiral into the ground / your skin peeling off / stretching and expanding to cover the surface of the earth, / each sixth of / your skin covering the sixth of the earth indicated by the spiral leaves generated by the spiraling twisting screwing descent and investiture / (investment or investing) / of the earth by your swelling body / spiraling, twisting, ascent descent screwing in screwing out screwing. . ." And so on.



Detail of Bruce Nauman's *Flayed Earth Flayed Self (Skin Sink)* (1973)



"Topological Gardens" at the Università Iuav di Venezia



Bruce Nauman's *Get Out of My Mind, Get Out of This Room* (1968), installed at the Università Iuav di Venezia

Pretty much all of Nauman's work spirals into and out of this drain: the rambling, repeating internal monologue; the sense of mind and body no longer holding together; the tormenting sense of space. The classic Nauman move, it would seem, is to take hold of a symptom of mental illness, and build a work around it.

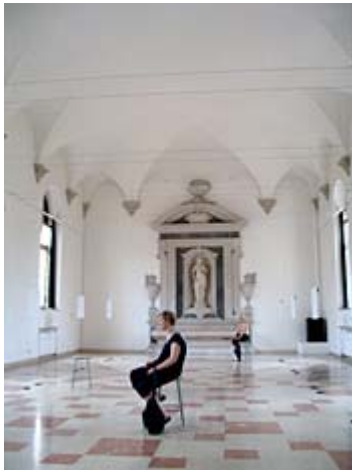
Thus, an early work like *Get Out of My Mind, Get Out of This Room* (1968) -- a single light bulb in a room, rigged so that it seems to be whispering the titular phrase to the viewer -- seems to portray auditory hallucination. But so does the show's most recent work, made specifically for the Biennale, *Days / Giorni* (2009), audio installations in which speakers installed along the length of a space play recordings of voices whispering the names of the days of the weeks to you, over and over and over again. A work like *Vices and Virtues* (1983-1988), with its neon signs that mechanically flicker words like "Envy," "Temperance," "Anger" and "Fortitude" (installed on the exterior of the U.S. Pavilion in the Giardini) may seem more decorative -- but it is no less about emotions reduced to mechanical impulses, inhuman and independent of a body. A condition which is, of course, the other side of Nauman's perennial theme of bodies coming apart, of body parts detached and floating independently, as in *Untitled (Hand Circle)*. Or the sense of a consciousness itself coming undone, as in *Audio Video Piece for London, Ontario* (1969/70): a TV monitor installed on the floor shows the empty interior of a room; standing in the frame of a nearby locked door you hear a looped, rhythmic knocking sound, as if something were happening within; you are unable to look directly at the monitor and stand in the door at the same time; the input from your different senses doesn't add up, contradicting itself, as if your reality were splitting.

The textbook reading of Nauman acknowledges this preoccupation. Thus, in the *Topological Gardens* catalogue, Marco De Michaels positions Nauman's work as a negative demonstration of *Gestalt* theory, enacting "the experience and awareness of fragmentation and duality" of a mind that cannot integrate its parts into a healthy whole.

The problem, however, is this: Nauman ain't crazy. What he is, as Tomkins' *New Yorker* profile illustrates, is a painfully awkward guy who has read a lot of Beckett. His works, however *anti-social*, are not *asocial*. They are still social gestures, intended to connect with his audience in some way. A work like *Double Steel Cage Piece* (1974) -- two metal cages, one nested inside the other, so that you can squeeze through the narrow passage between the two -- is obviously meant to inflict a sense of frustration and panic on its audience. Any analysis that reads Bruce Nauman's artworks simply as illustrations of schizo themes isn't doing justice to what they are.

Which is why I find "Topological Gardens" particularly good as a show, because (some aspects of the catalogue aside) it implicitly ditches the purely one-sided "theoretical" reading of Nauman, and produces a more honest picture of what he is all about. In many ways, the show is organized around *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystical Truths (Window or Wall Sign)* (1967) -- a neon spiral inspired by a beer sign, offering the titular aphorism. This seminal early Nauman piece is the first thing you encounter as you enter the U.S. Pavilion in the Giardini. As contemporary viewers accustomed to self-reflexive art, we instinctively read this piece as implosive irony. In marking Nauman's alienation from the idea of art's "mystic" function in communicating "truths," it would seem to herald the development by which his production became simply a series of psychotic, quasi-autistic fragments.

And yet, what Nauman himself said about this piece was quite different. The work's statement was "on the one hand a totally silly



Visitors interacting with Bruce Nauman's *Days* (2009) at Università Iuav di Venezia



Bruce Nauman's *Untitled (Hand Circle)* (1996) at Università Ca' Foscari



Installation view of Bruce Nauman's *Audio Video Piece for London, Ontario* (1969/70) at the Università Ca' Foscari



Visitor in Bruce Nauman's *Double Steel Cage Piece* (1974) at the Università Ca' Foscari

idea and yet, on the other hand, I believed it," he said, going on to add that for him it was "still a very strong thought."

Perhaps it is the pressure of crafting something for a popular event like the Venice Biennale, or perhaps it is a reflection of the softening of Nauman's own temperament over time, alluded to by Tomkins. But the fact is that in constructing "Topological Gardens," Basualdo and Taylor have edited Nauman's oeuvre down, bracketing out the more overwrought elements and the aspects that are more openly hostile toward his audience (e.g. no *Clown Torture*), distilling from the cacophony of Nauman's work a show that is bittersweet, valedictory. Installed in the two chambers flanking the entrance where you encounter *The True Artist*, Nauman's mobile of heads, on the one side, and casts of hands, on the other, are odd and discomfiting -- but also somehow elegant and even charming in a world-weary kind of way. They almost seem to justify the overused comparison to Beckett.

Some of the most memorable moments of "Topological Gardens" are those that fall slightly to one side of the traditional Nauman formula. I think of the artist's recent *Mapping the Studio I (Fat Chance John Cage)* (2001), a lengthy night-vision film which simply captures what goes on at night in the artist's studio when the lights are off. It is as anti-social as ever in its affectlessness and patience-defying duration, but also expressive of a kind of bemused curiosity about the secret world of mice, cats and other things that go bump in the night. I think of the recreation of an untitled 1970 film piece, depicting two black-clad female dancers slowly rolling their bodies around a pattern of spokes made with black tape, like human clock-hands, their hands barely touching at the center -- an action you might read as metaphor for the possibility of snatching a moment of human connection from the monotony of arbitrary ritual. I think of Nauman's uncharacteristic 1996 portrait work, a video triptych focusing on guitarist Lloyd Maines, pictured playing a wistful composition called *The End of the World* on three separate instruments, his actions moving in and out of synch with each other on the various screens, the suggestion of overlapping soundtracks giving the whole thing a kind of ambient quality. This tribute to a fellow artist and his craft -- the film lingers on Maines' hands stroking the strings -- makes you think back to the ambiguous sentiment in *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystical Truths*. With its fragmented, uncertain esthetic, it's as if Nauman's film is daring to make a human connection, but also afraid to.

The curators have said that they tried to construct "Topological Gardens" to reflect on the context of Venice, attempting to find a particularly Venetian side of the artist. This is a tall order (and probably the silliest part of the catalogue is where Basualdo states, with reference to Nauman's casts of hands which sometimes make lewd gestures, that the various sites of the show "are the fingers to the city's holes.") Nevertheless, the show definitely succeeds in its goal in one way: Bracing as Nauman's works often are, when set against the airy pretensions of the Venice Biennale, you appreciate them, not as theoretical ciphers, but in terms of the mode of enjoyment that is proper to them. Nauman's withered, elemental art hits like a splash of cold water. As for the Italian context more generally, well, this show (or perhaps just Tomkins' boozy profile) left me thinking: If Bruce Nauman's work were a liquor, it might well be Campari, the vile Italian drink that nevertheless tastes so refreshing on muggy Italian afternoons. Come to think of it, isn't a Campari and soda called an "Americano?"

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Bruce Nauman's *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystical Truths* (Window or Wall Sign) (1967), installed in the U.S. Pavilion in Venice



Installation view of Bruce Nauman's *Fifteen Pairs of Hands* (1996) at the U.S. Pavilion



Installation view of *Mapping the Studio I* (Fat Chance John Cage) (2001) at Università Ca' Foscari



Installation view of *Untitled*  
(1970/2009) at Università Ca' Foscari