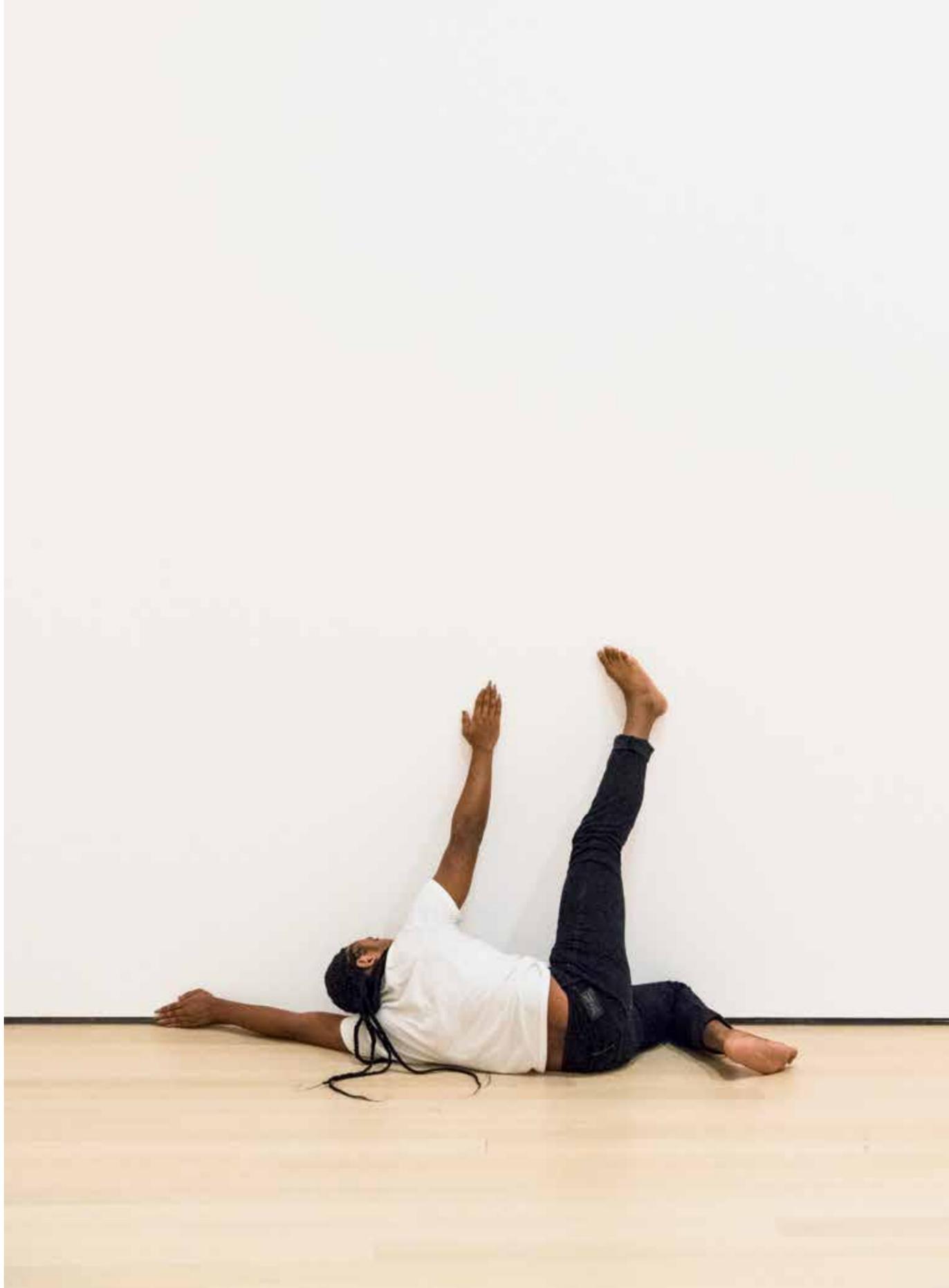


Art in America





AMONG THINGS

Bruce Nauman's sculptures and performances allow room for the complexities of an embodied intelligence.

by Gordon Hall

EVERY ONCE IN a while I get an artwork stuck in my head. Bruce Nauman's *A Cast of the Space Under My Chair* (1965–68) was one such work. For years, while sketching new sculptures or gabbing in a studio visit, I would remember it, though I'll admit that for the first few years this happened, I didn't consistently remember who made it. I didn't pause to figure it out. The sculpture just made intuitive sense to me and bubbled up every once in a while.

A couple of years ago, I did some research about a legendary piece of found furniture called the "slant step" while looking for an example of an object that was beloved because of, rather than in spite of, its ambiguous functionality. I was surprised to learn that the slant step had been purchased for Bruce Nauman in 1965 at a thrift store north of San Francisco by his graduate school mentor, William Wiley. Nauman, Wiley, and others in their Bay Area artistic circle latched onto the slant step as a sort of icon—a model for art-making or even a way of living. They organized an exhibition called "The Slant Step Show," published a book, and created a wide variety of artworks dedicated to it, including Nauman's *Mold for a Modernized Slant Step* (1966), a rough copy of the object in plaster with a groove down the middle. After that I stopped forgetting who made *A Cast of the Space Under My Chair*. It was logical to me that the artistic sensibility drawn to the slant step would also have produced this sculpture.

My excitement about the slant step originated in my pursuit of furniture and furniture-like objects that appear both functional and ambiguous, objects that refuse my efforts to easily identify them while also asking me to speculate about their possible uses. This way of thinking about objects leads to particular questions: "What is this object trying to teach me?" Or the more specific but weirder-sounding: "What does this object-body want my flesh-body to understand as a result of our encounter?"¹ I am drawn to sculpture because it speaks the same language my body does, in three dimensions, in size, weight, and movement. When I stand with it or move around it, it offers its guidance to me directly. What

does *A Cast of the Space Under My Chair* have to teach me? And why couldn't I forget this modest block of concrete?

Most obviously, *A Cast of the Space Under My Chair* embodies a space I seldom, if ever, think about. By making a positive from the negative space that our bodies hover over while seated, the sculpture pushes us to remember that the spaces we inhabit are far richer, more complex, and more nuanced than we usually experience them to be. I am reminded that my typical way of perceiving the world is exceedingly narrow. I only think I know what is going on around me, or even beneath me.

This kind of phenomenological prodding out of our habituated spatial schemas can be a pleasant but unimpactful perceptual exercise. But it can also have crucial implications when taken seriously: just because we don't notice something, or can't see it, doesn't mean it isn't there. The world is full of overlooked areas of possibility that we can learn about by attuning ourselves to how our bodies share those spaces with other bodies—both the bodies of sculptures and the bodies of other human and nonhuman beings. We always have the capacity to learn to perceive what we previously overlooked.

I am reminded of a related Nauman work from the same period, *John Coltrane Piece* (1968), a three-foot-square and three-inch-thick aluminum slab with a mirrored face. Nauman put the piece on the floor with the polished mirrored surface facing down, obscuring it completely. Made shortly after the death of John Coltrane, who was known for his reticence to speak publicly about his music, Nauman's sculpture asks us to think about the nonvisible places where objects touch the floor.² It relies on our belief in the existence of the mirrored surface. While some viewers and critics found this obfuscation irritating, even antisocial, Nauman has said that he did not intend it that way: "To me it seemed that hiding the mirror was a positive thing, because it made for an entirely different kind of experience—the mirror reflecting and yet not being able to reflect the floor."³ This

Bruce Nauman: *Untitled (Wall-Floor Positions)*, ca. 1965, re-created during the exhibition "Bruce Nauman: Disappearing Acts," 2018–19, at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo Martin Seck.

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CURRENTLY ON VIEW "Bruce Nauman: Disappearing Acts," at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, through Feb. 18, 2019, and MoMA PS1, through Feb. 25, 2019.

GORDON HALL is an artist who lives in New York. See Contributors Page.

Nauman: *A Cast of the Space Under My Chair*, 1965–68, concrete, 17½ by 15¾ by 14¾ inches. Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo. Courtesy Sperone Weswater, New York



makes sense to me, and I appreciate being asked to do this kind of perceptual act of faith on behalf of an object. I value the viewing of art as a means of retraining our perceptual faculties to work in less normative ways.

When I read each word of the title *A Cast of the Space Under My Chair*, the one that sticks out is “my”—as in “my, Bruce Nauman’s, chair.” Nauman, a cute white guy in his mid-twenties who had recently completed a free MFA at University of California Davis and was teaching one day a week, who had a studio near San Francisco and a lot of free time on his hands. This description of young Nauman isn’t meant to be accusatory; rather, I offer it as a fulfillment of what I understand this sculpture to be asking of me. It wants me to consider the numerous events, decisions, and allowances that enabled him to be sitting in the chair that the cast space was under. Wherever there is someone sitting in a chair, there are the conditions of that person’s arrival in that chair—the web of social, financial, institutional, and interpersonal events that led to a chair holding the person’s body up in a specific space.

Throughout Nauman’s career he was given the benefit of the doubt. It’s as if the people in power around him said, “Let’s get this guy a seat at the table. We may not understand what he is doing but it seems like it’s probably important.” Nauman was taken seriously, even while making work that was confusing, or difficult, or self-contradictory, or non-archival. He is someone who tends to have a chair pulled out for him to sit in. Now, after five decades of Nauman’s charmed career, I can experience the sculpture as urging us to think through the conditions of being welcome in institutional and cultural settings, not just for Nauman, but for any of us. How did this chair end up under me, supporting my body in this place? Or, why do some kinds of artists find themselves offered a seat right away, while others have to wait, or are refused a seat altogether? *A Cast of the Space Under My Chair* is a material provocation to consider the infrastructure that holds each of us up, and to feel how this system holds some of us up better than others.

DURING THE PERIOD of free time and experimentation in his studio in the mid- to late ’60s, Nauman also produced one of his best-known works, the performance video *Wall-Floor Positions* (1968), which is being re-performed by a rotating cast of dancers at the artist’s retrospective, “Disappearing Acts,” currently on view at the Museum of Modern Art and MoMA PS1 in New York. In the original video, Nauman earnestly plods through a long series of body positions that span his studio’s wall and floor, pausing for a few seconds between each pose. The matter-of-fact quality of his untrained movement and the decisive smack of his hands and feet on the wall or floor as he arrives at each new position contribute to the sense that I am watching someone attempt to be a sculptural object.

Indeed, Nauman framed *Wall-Floor Positions* and other performance works of this period as “using my body as a piece of material and manipulating it.”⁴ This is not to say that the result is devoid of feeling. For me at least, it is the opposite: the becoming-object of Nauman’s body produces a feeling of tenderness for him and for the vulnerability displayed in his effort to hold the more gymnastic positions, which are interspersed among moments of rest in the less taxing ones. My voyeuristic gaze at his exertion and introverted stillness, combined with the perhaps inadvertent sexuality of many of the poses, adds a quietly erotic undertone to this seemingly straightforward set of movements within the most basic of architectures.

I am reminded of a line from a review of Nauman’s 1966 exhibition of sculpture at the San Francisco Art Institute: “As one looks at these things one feels that they were not designed to be looked at.”⁵ Though written about sculptures, this could also describe the effect of watching *Wall-Floor Positions*.



Nauman: *Mold for a Modernized Slant Step*, 1966, plaster, 18¼ by 14½ by 13¾ inches. Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.



View of Gordon Hall’s exhibition/performance *Brothers and Sisters*, 2018, at the Renaissance Society, Chicago. Photo Meg Noe.

I feel that I am witnessing Nauman attempt to keep himself company with a private challenge to feel the vulnerability and pleasure of becoming an object for the gaze of an unknown number of others. Judging by the crooked angle, the gap between the poorly constructed wall and floor of the studio, and the presence in the frame of the edge of some fabric-covered object he didn’t bother to move out of the way before filming, I would wager that one aspect of this video’s ongoing appeal is its casualness, and the feeling of intimacy that arises from watching someone do something while not really thinking that so many people would end up watching it.

I admire Nauman’s effort to produce confusion around the distinctions between objects and bodies in *Wall-Floor Positions*. This mixing of categories animates many of his other early sculptures, including lesser-known works such as *Device to Stand In* (1966), a steel triangular ramp with a slot in the back where feet can be inserted. Nauman described this work as “choreography for a dance in which the viewer is invited to participate within very narrow boundaries.”⁶ Nauman continued this line of thinking by describing his interactive works such as *Performance Corridor* (1969) as props for videos and performances that also exist as sculptures. *Performance Corridor*, two freestanding walls facing each other to create a narrow hallway just wide enough to walk down, originated as the set for the video *Walk with Contrapposto* (1968). If I think about these works as teachers, letting my body follow their lead, I feel myself learning from them how to take up Nauman’s casual confusion of boundaries and fully inhabit my objecthood. These sculptures invite me to understand myself as both a person and a thing.

Many of us have lived through numerous experiences of being nonconsensually objectified by others, and recent political events have stirred up the visceral sense of harm that objectification of this kind can produce. For me, working through these experiences has involved a dedication to taking objects seriously on their own terms, and on taking my own bodily materiality seriously as a source of healing and power. Rather than devoting my energy to being seen as a convincing subject, I have sought to make work and build a life that closes the gap between my

Nauman: *Body Pressure*, 1974, performed by visitors to "Disappearing Acts," 2018–19, at MoMA PS1, New York. Photo Walter Wlodarczyk.



body and the lives of objects. I have desired to become ever more objectlike, working within my communities to develop ways to objectify one another with respect and dignity. These practices of reparative objectification are multiple and shifting, from making and caring for sculptural objects to pursuing sexual practices that find pleasure in consensual objectification to developing relations with the material world that might include things like investing in the joys of fashion and night life, or watering one's houseplants, or caring for one's possessions, or pursuing a smaller ecological footprint. I feel kinship with others who have been damagingly objectified within a culture whose underlying logic remains largely Cartesian—dividing the mind from the body and valuing the former over the latter.

There is something reparative for me about finding a resource for this project in the work of Bruce Nauman, the straight art-dad par excellence. We must hold onto our ability to find nourishment wherever we can, even when it comes from people who do not represent us, and who may not have been thinking of us as a potential audience. Finding a way into work that one might initially write off as irrelevant to one's experience is one way of exercising this capacity. The artist and choreographer Ralph Lemon elaborated on this possibility in his 2003 work *After Bruce Nauman's Wall-Floor Positions* (1965), in which he restaged *Wall-Floor Positions* with another black performer at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. What are the stakes for different kinds of bodies experimenting with "becoming-object," especially when those bodies look like ones whose historical equation with objects has been genocidal? Lemon inserted himself into the body-object relation that was so casually taken up by Nauman, claiming it as his own in spite—or because—of the precariousness of this identification.

When I first saw that MoMA would be presenting a Nauman retrospective both at its Manhattan location and at PS1 in Queens, I thought: "Really? This year, with the fog of toxic white masculinity we have been slogging through?" I want a New York art world that is as diverse as the city itself, and a

Bruce Nauman retrospective is not contributing to this effort. I wish for shows that *correct* the historical record, not reify it. I wish that museums would invest in all different kinds of people making a wider array of artworks, and not in a tokenizing, checking-off-the-box way that does little to sustainably support artists as they develop.

However, I cannot overlook Nauman's work. I want art that is difficult, hard to place, or even hard to see. I want art that frustrates our attempts to say what it is "about," that makes us feel ridiculous for trying to translate it into any easy explication or summary. I seek experiences with art that are destabilizing and strange. And I need artworks that give us space to notice and feel and grieve without telling us what to think.

All of these desires draw me to Nauman's work. And so I feel some trepidation as I am moved by these sculptures and performances, knowing that I am out of step with our moment's enthusiasm for identitarian allegiances based primarily on artists' biographies. I will not use an artist's identity as a prerequisite for caring about their work, or finding something of myself within it. Just as I do not need to identify with all work made by people who are like me, I also do not think that any artists or artworks are beyond my ability to find something of personal and political use in them. I find that Nauman's early works still have something to teach me. My body is ready to learn. ○

1. I have addressed these issues in two previous essays on sculpture: "Reading Things: Gordon Hall on Gender, Sculpture, and Relearning How to See," *Walker Reader*, Aug. 8, 2016, walkerart.org; and "Object Lessons—Thinking Gender Variance Through Minimalist Sculpture," *Art Journal* 72, no. 4, Winter 2013.
2. The contextualizing information for *John Coltrane Piece* comes from the pamphlet for "Bruce Nauman: Inside Out," a traveling exhibition that was on view at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, from March 1 to May 23, 1995 ("Bruce Nauman," exhibition pamphlet, *Star Ledger*, Newark, N.J., 1995, p. 7). There seems to be some confusion about Coltrane's biography in relation to the work's title. In a 1994 catalogue raisonné, the notes for this work say that Coltrane "sometimes played with his back to the audience." But as Ralph Lemon pointed out to me in an email on Oct. 15, 2018, Coltrane was not known for doing this; it was Miles Davis who is famous for facing away from the audience while performing. It is unclear whether it was Nauman or the author of the notes to the work in the catalogue raisonné who was mistaken.
3. Bruce Nauman quoted in Willoughby Sharp, "Nauman Interview, 1970," *Please Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman's Words*, ed. Janet Kraynak, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2003, p. 129.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 122.
5. Knute Stiles, "William Geis and Bruce Nauman," *Artforum*, December 1966, p. 65.
6. "Device to Stand In (1966)," in *Bruce Nauman: Exhibition Catalogue and Catalogue Raisonné*, ed. Joan Simon, Minneapolis, Walker Art Center, 1994, p. 200.



Nauman: *Wall-Floor Positions*, 1968, video, 60-minute loop. Courtesy Sperone Westwater.



View of Hall's exhibition/performance *The Number of Inches Between Them*, 2017–18, at the MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, Mass. Photo Cassandra J. Rodriguez/Stealth Visuals.