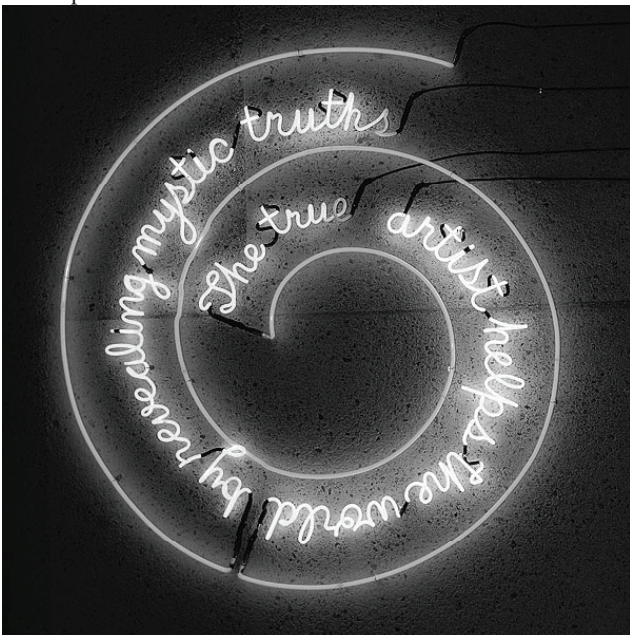


# Leaving No Maggot Lonely: Bruce Nauman at the PMA



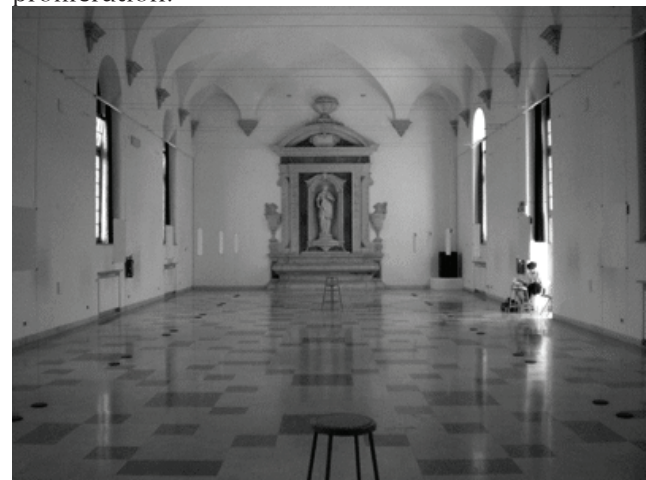
Currently on exhibit at the Philadelphia Museum of Art are the two site-sound installations, “Days” and “Giorni” (2009), that debuted at Bruce Nauman’s installation “Topological Gardens”, which won the Golden Lion at the 53rd Venice Biennale and was organized by Carlos Basualdo and Michael Taylor of the PMA. One can only admire the wit, rigour and humor of Bruce Nauman’s work, the strange and untimely vitality of which is fore-grounded by the presence of such early works as “The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths” (1967) and “Slow Angle Walk (Beckett Walk)” (1968). Through these varied media (video, neon and sound installation) Nauman persistently returns to the problem of how sense and meaning is effaced by the literality or materiality of its performance, inscription or utterance.



The great intelligence of “The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths” (1967) lies in the economy of its critical gesture. The sense of the neon sign, what is written, is short-circuited by means of how the language is literally presented. The media—the neon sign whose chief referent lies not in art but in the commercial realm—serves to pervert, even negate, what is signified. The cliché and hackneyed romantic notion of the artist as sage is exposed as an idea that serves commercial interests (the peddling of artistic wares). What is expressed (the artist as genius) is thus precisely the inverse of what is literal written; the literality of the linguistic presentation serves to debase the value of what is expressed; the meaning of the content negated by its means of expression (the reduction of art to commercially produced sign of itself). The mystical truth that is here revealed by the artist Nauman is that there is no mystical truth. Art like all other forms of sense is inscribed within a social context that imperils its signification. Such a brutal

demythologization of artistic practice and the role of artistic subjectivity was equally explored in works such as “Failing to Levitate in the Studio” (1966). In “Slow Angle Walk (Beckett Walk)” (1968), one of the Philadelphia Museum’s recent acquisitions also currently on display, Nauman painstakingly and repetitively walks with a hyperbolically stilted gait. Precisely choreographed, Nauman lifts each leg, straightening it before letting it drop. Rather than walking, gravity seems to force him to lunge forward, propelled along by physical forces rather than some shadowy will. His balance is always precarious, as if each step did not take place within, but displaced space with each step. The strangeness of the walk is heightened by the position of the camera, which is laid on its side, creating the illusion that Nauman is slowly traversing the wall of his studio. The glorious illusion of the weightless artist is shattered by the crude matter of factness of its presentation and the grueling nature of Nauman’s performance. Similarly to “The True Artist...”, in “Slow Angle Walk” the literal performance of means serves to undermine the purpose or meaning of the act; here the walk serves to destabilize the one who acts, just as the content of the signified in “The True artist...” was undermined by its manner of presentation.

As in these previous works, Nauman in “Days” and “Giorni” redeploys the strategy of forcing signification to plunge back into the materiality of the means of its expression. The site-specific installation, whose dimensions vary depending upon where it is installed, is composed of a colonnade of disembodied voices that repeat ad infinitum in shifting cadences and accents the days of the week. As the spectator proceeds through the passageway, the structure and sense composed by the iteration of the first set of voices collides with a second and then a third, etc. The structure and its meaning quickly becomes unstable, chaotic. Sense is revealed to be a comforting, and yet nonetheless tenuous, artifice. As the various utterances intersect, the structure is complicated and the sense made more tenuous. The repetition of the days of the week, which at first seems to provide a secure structure through its continued reiteration, seems to be threatened rather than secured by this proliferation.



The late Harold Pinter famously praised Samuel Beckett for his courage and remorseless. Pinter’s following description is as apt for Nauman—a great admirer of Beckett—as it is for Beckett himself: “the more he wipes my nose in the shit, the more I am grateful to him. He’s not fucking me about, he’s not leading me up any garden path, he’s not slipping me a wink, he’s not flogging me a remedy or a path or a revelation or a basinful of breadcrumbs, he’s not selling me anything I don’t want to buy—he doesn’t give a bollock whether I buy or not—he hasn’t got his hand over his heart. Well, I’ll buy his goods, hook, line and sinker, because he leaves no stone unturned and no maggot lonely.”

-Alexi Kukuljevic