

A ROSE HAS NO TEETH

A Rose Has No Teeth

Constance M. Lewallen

Davis, California, about one and a half hours north of San Francisco and just south of the state capital, Sacramento, is in a plain between the Coastal Range and Sierra Nevada mountains that drains into the Sacramento River. The University of California, Davis, one of ten campuses in the statewide system, was originally founded as an agricultural school. In the 1960s it was surrounded by orchards and grain fields, dairies and rice paddies. Bruce Nauman entered the graduate program in art, established only two years earlier, in the fall of 1964. Chair Richard L. Nelson, a painter, was known for his open-mindedness and commitment to excellence. He also proved to be a good judge of talent, as evidenced by his impressive faculty appointments. Between 1960 and 1965 he hired Wayne Thiebaud, William T. Wiley, Robert Arneson, Roy de Forest, Daniel Shapiro, and Manuel Neri, who as a group managed the delicate balancing act of pedagogy and personal artistic achievement and came to define the department.

Nelson also had the resources to make sure that there was a steady stream of visiting professors, many from New York, who could expose students to the world beyond the relative isolation of Davis and the San Francisco Bay Area. During Nauman's two-year tenure, these included Robert Kulicke, Miles Forst, Joseph Raffaele (now known as Joseph Raphael), Fred Reichman, Paul Waldman, Tony DeLap, and local artist William Allan, with whom Nauman would collaborate on several early films. Nelson could also spot artistic promise. Several of Nauman's fellow students became recognized

artists—ceramic sculptors Richard Shaw and David Gilhooly, and one of the area's early Conceptual artists, Steven J. Kaltenbach. Nelson grasped Nauman's potential and attempted twice to convince the administration to waive his out-of-state tuition, writing in a letter to the dean, "Mr. Nauman is an extremely talented artist and comes to us as a top student from a very distinguished school, the University of Wisconsin." In a letter written somewhat later, he noted that although Nauman was short three units to qualify for the tuition waiver, "he has, due to the nature of his total dedication, actually done more," citing work in film and etching.¹ Both requests were denied.

Indeed, there was a buzz about Davis. Arneson would be one of the artists credited with changing attitudes toward ceramic sculpture, then widely considered a craft unworthy of being called fine art. By the time Nauman arrived, Arneson had left behind his Peter Voulkos-inspired expressionist pots and was making sculptures based on ordinary objects like typewriters and urinals, both surreal and humorous and often bordering on the scatological. Thiebaud was becoming nationally known for paintings that celebrated the everyday pleasures of ice cream cones and fruit pies, which he depicted in bright, thick oil paints. He was included in the 1962 *New Realism* show at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York, which brought together Europeans such as Arman, Martial Raysse, and Öyvind Fahlström with the likes of Andy Warhol, Tom Wesselman, George Segal, Roy Lichtenstein, James Rosenquist, and Claes Oldenburg in an exhibition that launched Pop art (though this term was yet to be coined).²

Wiley, hired directly out of graduate school at the San Francisco Art Institute, would soon be one of the few California artists showing regularly in New York. He was dubbed a "Dude-Ranch Dadaist"³ for his folksy paintings full of references to the American West, wayfaring, and his own personal brand of Zen Buddhism. His sculptures were an irreverent mélange of found objects and rustic materials like tree branches and animal hides, and they shared with his paintings wildly fanciful verbal and visual punning. Their surface casualness and dumbness, however, belied an underlying sophistication.

Nauman heard about UC Davis from Wayne Taylor, a new ceramics instructor at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, where Nauman was a student. Taylor was from Sacramento and knew Thiebaud and Arneson. The latter no doubt inspired Taylor's highly unconventional ceramic sculpture, which intrigued Nauman.⁴ Nauman was also impressed by Taylor's storefront studio, a "real" studio as opposed to the office, bedroom, or garage studios of the rest of the art faculty.⁵

Nauman, who at that time was making paintings, had applied for a fellowship to Indiana University to study with James McGarrell, whose gestural figurative paintings he admired. When he didn't receive the fellowship, and because he was interested in the work of the Bay Area painters Richard Diebenkorn and Elmer Bischoff, Nauman followed Taylor's advice to look into Davis. That August he headed to California with his new wife, Judy.⁶ California has always had an allure for aspiring young artists. Those who came to the San Francisco Bay Area often did so

to attend one of the many art schools and universities that were enlarging their art departments to accommodate the postwar baby boomers reaching college age. In the absence of a significant art market in the region, it was the schools, each with its particular character and aesthetic, that offered artists a sense of community and a means of financial support. Nauman first stopped at the San Francisco Art Institute, only to learn that it was too late to apply for the fall semester. He then drove to Davis with a van packed with his paintings and everything the young couple owned. Since school was not in session, no one was around the art department except the secretary, Jeanie Bernauer, who assured Nauman that they would love to have him. When he asked if she wanted to see his paintings, she replied, "Oh, no. I wouldn't know what to look for."⁷ Because its graduate art program was so new, Davis was accepting everyone who applied.

The Midwest

Nauman was born in Fort Wayne, Indiana, on December 6, 1941, the day before the bombing of Pearl Harbor. He was the first of three boys born to Genevieve, a homemaker, and Calvin, a sales engineer for General Electric. Due to Calvin's job, the family moved several times when Nauman was young—first to Schenectady, New York, for a few years, then to Milwaukee until Nauman was in third grade, and next to Appleton, Wisconsin. This made establishing and retaining friendships difficult for Nauman, who turned to such solitary pursuits as making model airplanes and learning to play musical instruments. Finally, the family settled in suburban Milwaukee, and Nauman graduated with honors from Wauwatosa High School. He was a Boy Scout and enjoyed family camping and fishing trips, which fostered his enduring love of the outdoors. He took music lessons from an early age, first learning piano, then classical guitar, and finally playing bass in polka bands and at parties and weddings. While still in high school, Nauman took a class at an art school but really had no notion of what it meant to be an artist. Drawing came naturally to him, however, and he was quite adept at it even before receiving any formal instruction. When he enrolled at the University of Wisconsin, it was with the intent to study mathematics (more appealing to him than the applied field of engineering, which his father hoped he would pursue). Although he enjoyed studying mathematics and physics, he realized that he lacked the passion for them that he saw in his friends. The mathematics that did interest him was theoretical; he was drawn to its logic and structure and the ways logic could be turned inside out. Nauman later came to believe that artists who make important contributions are those who explore the structure of their discipline.

After two years at Wisconsin, Nauman rather abruptly switched his major to art, because, he has said, art allowed "room for both my mind and my hands to work."⁸ Before this he had briefly considered a major in music. Indeed, his love for music—Ludwig van Beethoven, Anton Webern, Alban Berg, Arnold Schoenberg, and especially jazz—has never waned. He has often cited the blind jazz pianist Lennie Tristano as an influence on his art. What he admires about Tristano is the enormous intensity with which he played, with no buildup or slowing down.⁹ "From the beginning I was trying to see if I could make art like that," he told Joan Simon, "art that was just there all at once. Like getting hit in the face with a baseball bat. Or better, like getting hit in the back of the neck. You never see it coming; it just knocks you down."¹⁰ Nauman also likes the fact that Tristano used technology to alter a recording (once speeding up a tape), to the chagrin of many jazz insiders.¹¹

Madison was near enough to Chicago that Nauman often visited the Art Institute there, where he especially admired works by Pablo Picasso and Willem de Kooning, particularly the latter's masterful painting *Excavation* (1950).¹² He also liked the possibilities set forth in Frank Stella's early paintings, but later lost interest when "it became clear that he was just going to be a painter. And I was interested in what art can be, not just what painting can be."¹³ The art department at Wisconsin was conservative, however. Most of the professors were former Works Progress Administration (WPA) artists who worked in a social realist style and believed that "art had a function beyond being beautiful—that it had a social reason to exist."¹⁴ The painter and sculptor Italo Scanga, one of Nauman's important teachers, was somewhat of a misfit; a recent appointment, he was dismissed while Nauman was there, apparently for making Pop sculpture, a direction unacceptable to the department,¹⁵ and for his generally unconventional behavior.¹⁶

UC Davis

All graduate students at Davis were given studios in former World War II prefab barracks. (Nauman's place was nicknamed "Aggie Villa," a reference to the school's agricultural emphasis.) There was very little structure and only a few required classes. In general, graduate students were left on their own and told that they could seek out an instructor if they wanted to talk to someone, which suited Nauman.¹⁷ "They were just happy if you were working," Nauman remembers.¹⁸ The Naumans first lived in a trailer on the edge of a tomato field. "In the heat, the rotting tomatoes gave off an odor that made you feel that you were living in the middle of tomato sauce," Nauman recalls. Later they lived over a shoe repair shop on G Street, the main drag in Davis, and finally moved to Mix Canyon, near Vacaville, where Nauman had "a little studio in the crawl space."¹⁹

Although Davis was relatively isolated from the explosive political atmosphere of San Francisco and UC Berkeley at that time,²⁰ still, according to Wiley, "Everything was fucking flying open—music, sex, race. It was really a creative time."²¹ Nauman played in a band with several of his teachers and friends—Allan, Wiley, Phil Brown, Frank Owen, Louise Pryor, Van and Ron Walter, Dan Welch,

and William M. Yates. First called Moving Van Walters and His Truck and then Blue Crumb Truck, the band had a regular gig at Deebo's, a club in Davis, and played at several of the local schools (including the San Francisco Art Institute and Sacramento State) and museums (at the opening of the 1967 show *Funk* at the University Art Museum in Berkeley, for instance). The band can also be heard on the soundtrack of Wiley and Robert Nelson's underground film classic *The Great Blondino* (1967), starring Wiley's brother Chuck. And while Nauman doesn't seem to have been directly involved in political activity, he did attend the human be-in in Golden Gate Park, where he remembers Allen Ginsberg reading and chanting.²²

Nauman entered Davis as a painter, providing the following description of his work in his application letter to the school:

I have included some slides of my work of the past year in the hopes that they would help clarify my statements I am expected to make here. The paintings seem to tend more and more in an expressionist direction—at the same time I have begun to add the small canvases in an effort to make a well defined shape and then to deny it with the paint and color—in other words, to search for another kind of ambiguity besides a painterly illusionistic one. This summer I have switched to polymer paints so that I can paint over the large areas I work with in a shorter time without muddying my color changes so much. This has led to fewer and simpler shapes and color, tending at present in a hard-edge direction, though still through the process of "discovery" painting. The last painting, while not exactly representative of my present painting, is a rather extreme example of both these ideas in a transition. I am at present dealing with a large closed line—the shape pushing off the canvas—on several different paintings, and as I am doing a good deal of painting this summer, hope to have worked out a few of the problems connected with the change in style and attitude and have settled down again. Incidentally I hope to get the MA so that I can teach—preferably on the college level.²³

Even though he enjoyed manipulating paint, Nauman made a conscious decision to stop painting during his first year at Davis, because he distrusted the "lush solution" that painting represented.²⁴ "Basically I couldn't function as a painter," he has said. "Painting is one of those things that I never quite made sense of. I just couldn't see how to proceed as a painter."²⁵ In his first semester at Davis, Nauman had been making both abstract and landscape paintings containing what he has described as "strange shapes." Eventually he just made the shapes independent of the paintings—first out of welded steel and then out of fiberglass because it was lighter—and bolted them to stretcher bars (p. 200).²⁶ He also experimented with ceramics under the tutelage of Arneson.²⁷ In two small, unglazed ceramic cups done in 1965, *Cup and Saucer Falling Over* and *Cup Merging with Its Saucer* (p. 12), he attempted to convey movement in a way that recalls the Italian Futurist sculptor Umberto Boccioni's 1912 *Development of a Bottle in Space*. The toppling cup is an image that has appeared often in Nauman's work (for example, in the photograph *Coffee Thrown Away Because It Was Too*



< *CUP AND SAUCER FALLING OVER*

1965; unglazed ceramic and graphite;
4 x 5 ½ x 5 ½ in.

> *CUP MERGING WITH ITS SAUCER*

1965; unglazed ceramic and graphite;
2 x 5 ½ x 6 in.



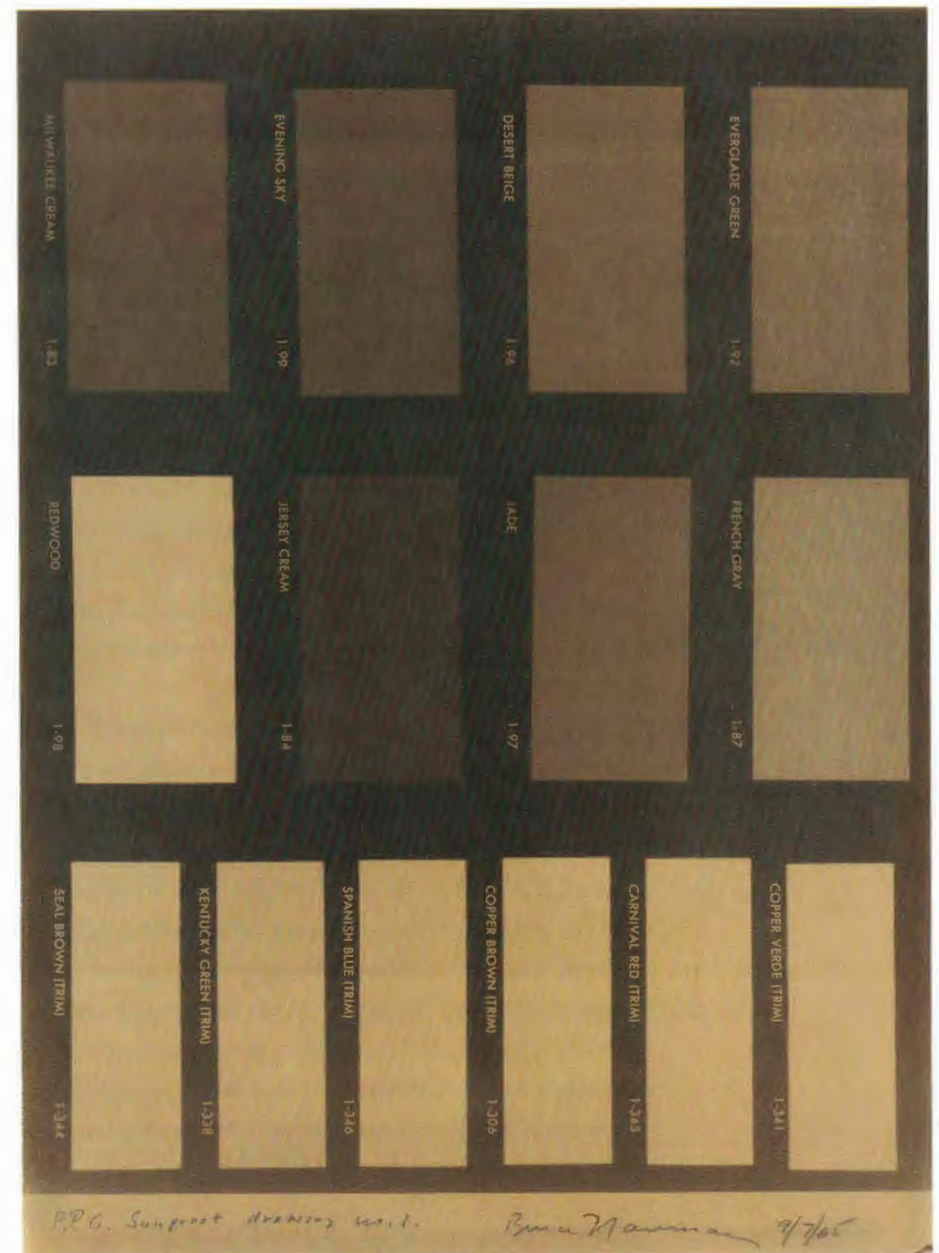
Cold, 1967, p. 67), suggesting that toppled cups were a common occurrence.²⁸ Another curious work, *P.P.G. Sunproof Drawing No. 1* (1965, p. 14), reveals Nauman's ambivalence toward painting. The "drawing" isn't a drawing at all, nor is it "sunproof."²⁹ In Duchampian terms, it is an altered readymade: to create it, Nauman turned a color chart on its side and reproduced it as a sepia-toned blueprint, thereby denying its original function and its relationship to painting.³⁰

At Davis, Wiley became Nauman's most important teacher and a friend. Only four years older than Nauman (and most of his students), Wiley was inspiring, always open and receptive to unorthodox ideas, and carried no preconceptions. His own work has always been a by-product of his life (the synchronicity of art and life is shared by many artists in the region), and anything and everything was potential content. He included puns and riddles in his paintings and assemblages, which, while not explicitly political, illuminated "the human condition and its fragilities."³¹ Nauman has said that Wiley was the "strongest influence I had. It was in being rigorous, being honest with yourself—trying to be clear—taking a moral position. . . . Wiley had great personal involvement with students. He might say it was terrible work but he would first get at *why* they made work. Bill was one of the first that gave me an idea of moral commitment, the worth of being an artist. It's that [San Francisco] Art Institute morality, that art is an ethic."³² Wiley conducted weekly seminars during which he would wait however long it took for students to begin the conversation. If a half hour or forty-five minutes went by in silence, he would say that if no one had anything to contribute they all might as well go home. Although Nauman has commented that he wasn't directly influenced by Wiley's artwork, he did learn from him not to worry about how a thing looked, and that it was okay to work, as Wiley did, in multiple styles and mediums.

Wiley recognized that Nauman was different from most entering graduate students. He attributed it to Nauman's having studied mathematics, music, and philosophy before concentrating on art, so that he didn't arrive with the usual "baggage" of art majors. Nauman's more open attitude and interest in words also set him apart. As an example of Nauman's originality, Wiley recalls a particular show of graduate work that took place in an empty room, "a terrible exhibit space": "Bruce comes walking in with a board under his arm, a one-by-three cut so that you can lean it at an angle against the wall. He had painted the whole thing about the color it was anyway and then added a slightly darker stripe down the side of it—something you could just barely distinguish from an arbitrary piece of wood. That really knocked me out, really impressed me with that kind of thinking. Counter to everybody, with this little dinky thing that he just flicked aside. I thought it was great."³³ A more senior faculty member, the painter Roland Petersen, recalled in a 2002 interview that Nauman was one of the most intellectual graduate students at Davis, adding, "He certainly brought new ideas into the graduate program that made other students sort of reconsider how they were thinking. I remember one time that Bruce Nauman brought in a fan, and he turned the fan on before the whole group, and he was describing how aesthetically pleasing this fan was in terms of form and sound."³⁴

P.P.G. SUNPROOF DRAWING NO. 1

1965; sepia-toned blueprint paper;
11 7/8 x 8 1/2 in.





Chris Unterseher, a fellow student, recalls that Nauman was regarded as eccentric, but “he was a guy that everybody knew was going to go somewhere, he just had that aura about him.”³⁵ Another classmate, Nina Van Rensselaer, agrees that Nauman always stood out and was “wildly original.” He was regarded more as an equal to his professors than as a student.³⁶ Kaltenbach recounts that other students thought Nauman was “aesthetically challenged.” He describes a piece Nauman made of latex rubber:

I believe it was four kind of like petal-like shapes, but they were square, they came off of an axis in four directions, maybe they were triangular. But basically, it was about a three-by-three-foot square and the way it was shown was that you stood back and you threw it into a corner . . . it just sort of landed. We all thought Bruce was crazy. He just diverged too much from our aesthetic. The fire marshal had heard that we were using flammable materials and decided to inspect, and he brought a photographer with him because he wanted to take photographs of dangerous practices and things that needed to be changed. So, Bruce had this piece laying over in the corner and the guy comes in with his uniform on and this guy with the camera. He pointed to Bruce's sculpture and said, “Get a picture of that accumulation over there.” And we all just cracked up. But it was a very enlightening moment for me, because I think it was the first time I consciously realized that it was possible to seriously do something that was so unrecognizable as art that it could actually be seen as trash.³⁷

Indeed, Nauman is credited with creating “the first viable mutation” of Minimalism, then at its apogee.³⁸ (Though Minimalism never had a stronghold in Northern California, artists in the region were certainly aware of its hegemony.) Artists like Eva Hesse, Robert Morris, Barry LeVa, Lynda Benglis, and Richard Serra on the East Coast and Paul Kos and Terry Fox in the San Francisco Bay Area were investigating new processes and nontraditional materials such as dirt, ice, dust, latex, and felt that produced results that didn't resemble anything that had been considered art until that time. While most of these artists continued certain Minimalist innovations, such as placing their sculptures or objects directly on the floor rather than on a pedestal or platform, they rejected the strict geometry and symmetry that characterizes classic Minimalism. Moreover, for the most part they crafted their works, rather than having them produced by an industrial fabricator. In essence, according to Maurice Berger, “anti-form overturned the conventions of connoisseurship, where the relative quality of sculpture was evaluated on the basis of beauty and refinement of its form, offering instead an indeterminate object with an indefinite set of sculptural possibilities.”³⁹ Robert Pincus-Witten dubbed such work Post-Minimal; alternate terms were “anti-form” and “process art,” which took into account tendencies such as Arte Povera in Italy.

Performances

Another new area of interest to adventurous young artists was performance, not in the theatrical sense, but rather as an extension of sculpture. In part, this interest grew out of a desire to circumvent the way art was being exhibited and marketed (though for Nauman, as a student, this probably wasn't much of a concern). More importantly, for a certain group of young artists no longer interested in painting and sculpture, the body represented another new "material" to be explored. The painter Frank Owen remembers Nauman, who was a teaching assistant for Thiebaud during his first semester at Davis, saying that one day he had a revelation—that it didn't make sense for students to sit in a circle all drawing a model in the middle. Then and there he decided he would use his own body as material.⁴⁰ In 1965—several years ahead of Vito Acconci, Chris Burden, Joan Jonas, and others who became leaders in the medium—Nauman gave a performance that involved putting his body through a series of poses.⁴¹ He described the performance in a 1970 interview with *Avalanche* magazine editor Willoughby Sharp: "I did a piece that involved standing with my back to the wall for about forty-five seconds or a minute, leaning out from the wall, then bending at the waist, squatting, sitting, and finally lying down. There were seven different positions in relationship to the wall and floor. Then I did the whole sequence again standing away from the wall, facing the wall, then facing left and facing right. There were twenty-eight positions and the whole presentation lasted for about half an hour." In a second performance, *Manipulating a Fluorescent Tube* (1965, p. 183), he explained, "I was using my body as one element and the light as another, treating them as equivalent and just making shapes."⁴² With the use of the light fixture, an obvious reference to Dan Flavin's Minimalist fluorescent tube sculptures, Nauman was both claiming and subverting a Minimalist paradigm.

In only two other instances did Nauman perform in public: first with his wife, Judy, and Meredith Monk in connection with the Whitney Museum of American Art's 1969 exhibition *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials*,⁴³ and in 1970 with Monk and Serra at the Santa Barbara Arts Festival.⁴⁴ However, Nauman continued to explore his body as subject and object in various media. In 1967, for example, he began an extended series of films and videos with *Thighing* (p. 18), a short film in which he manipulates the skin and flesh of his thigh with his hand.

Fiberglass and Rubber Sculptures

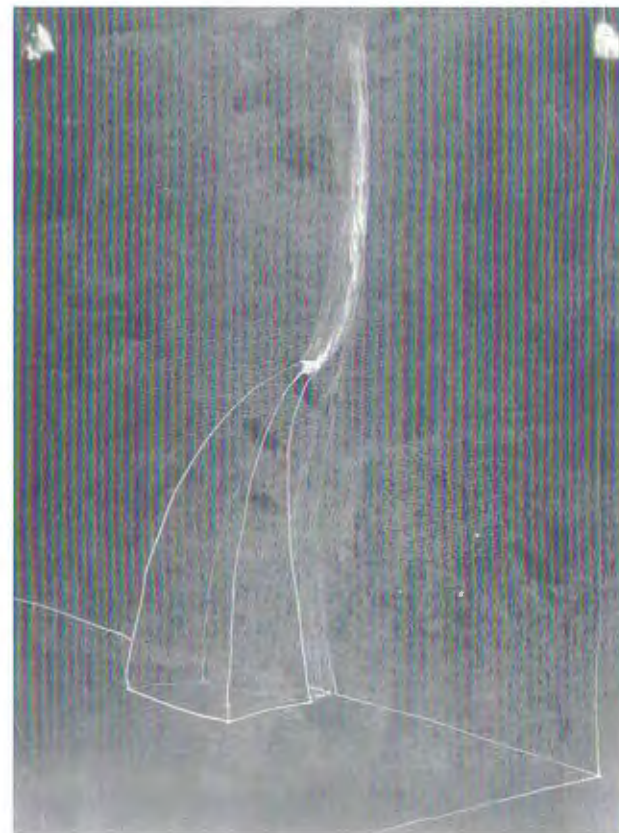
Nauman's early performances led to a series of abstract but anthropomorphic, cast-fiberglass sculptures. (Several drawings from early 1965 make clear the figurative aspect of Nauman's first sculptures.) A very early example is an untitled fiberglass sculpture in the shape of a squat, truncated pyramid that sits solidly on the floor but hugs the wall. Most of Nauman's subsequent fiberglass sculptures are long and slender and simply hang on the wall (as would the rubber sculptures that followed), while others, some of which have two elements, engage the wall and floor, as Nauman did with his body in performance. During this period, Nauman saw two sculptures by Richard Tuttle at



THIGHING

1967; 16 mm film, color, sound; 4 min., 36 sec.

4 min., 36 sec.



< *UNTITLED*

1965; fiberglass and polyester resin;
21 ½ × 18 × 11 ½ in.

> *UNTITLED*

1965; drawing on photographic paper;
11 × 8 ½ in.



< *UNTITLED*

1965; fiberglass and polyester resin;
83 x 48 x 3 ½ in.

> *UNTITLED*

1965; fiberglass; 82 x 21 x 27 in.

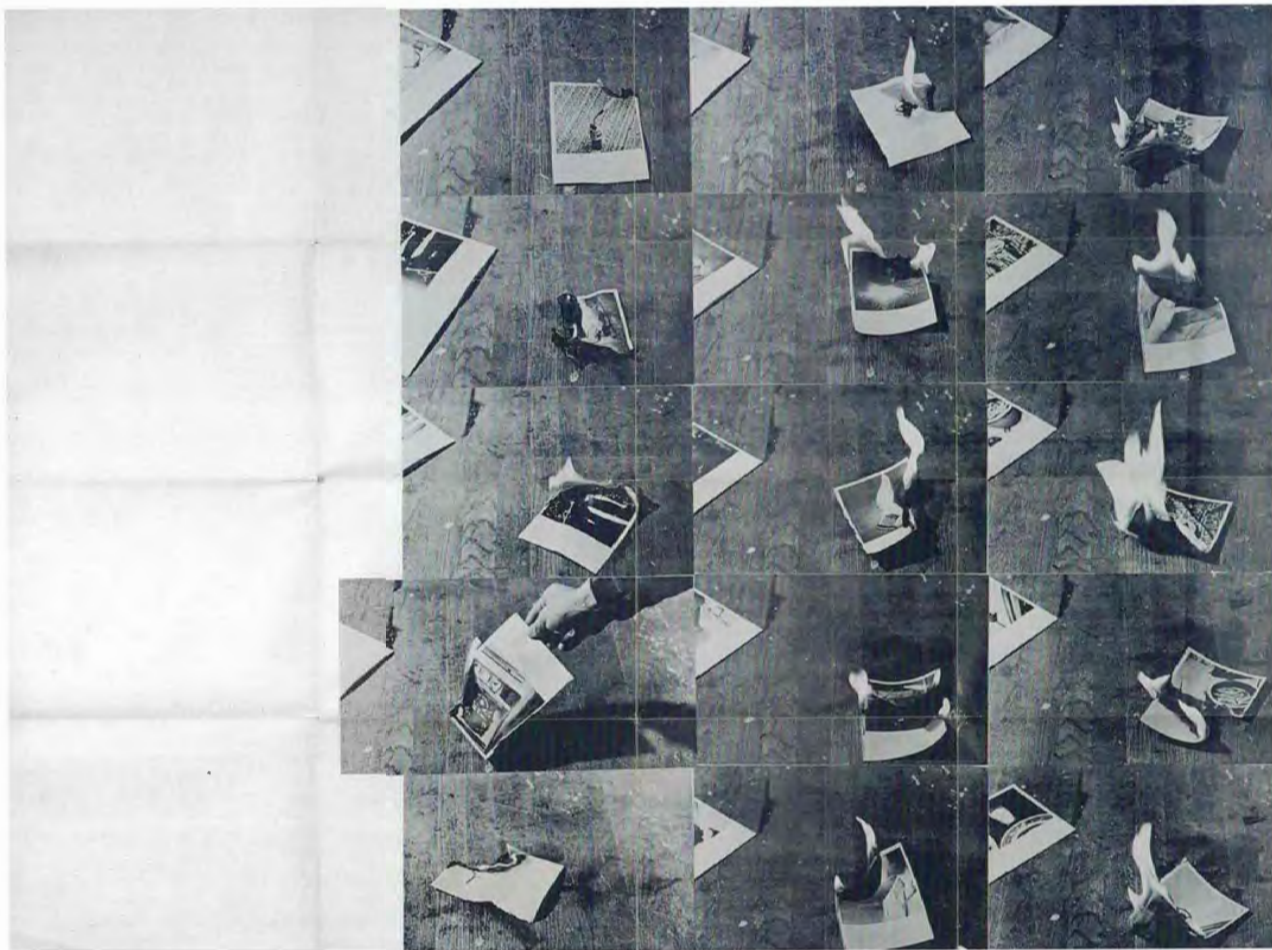
TITLED

fiberglass and polyester resin;
48 x 3 1/2 in.

TITLED

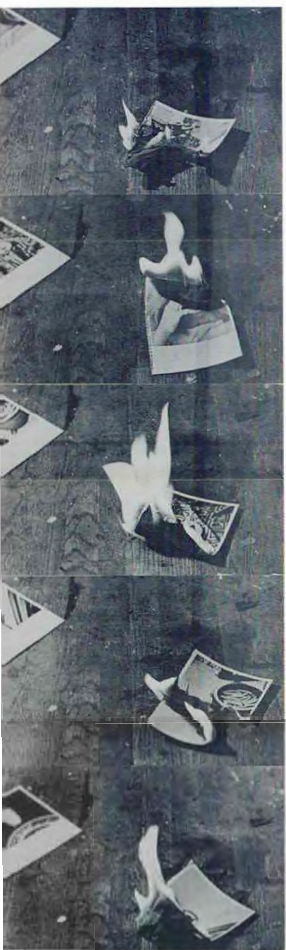
fiberglass; 82 x 21 x 27 in.





BURNING SMALL FIRES (detail)

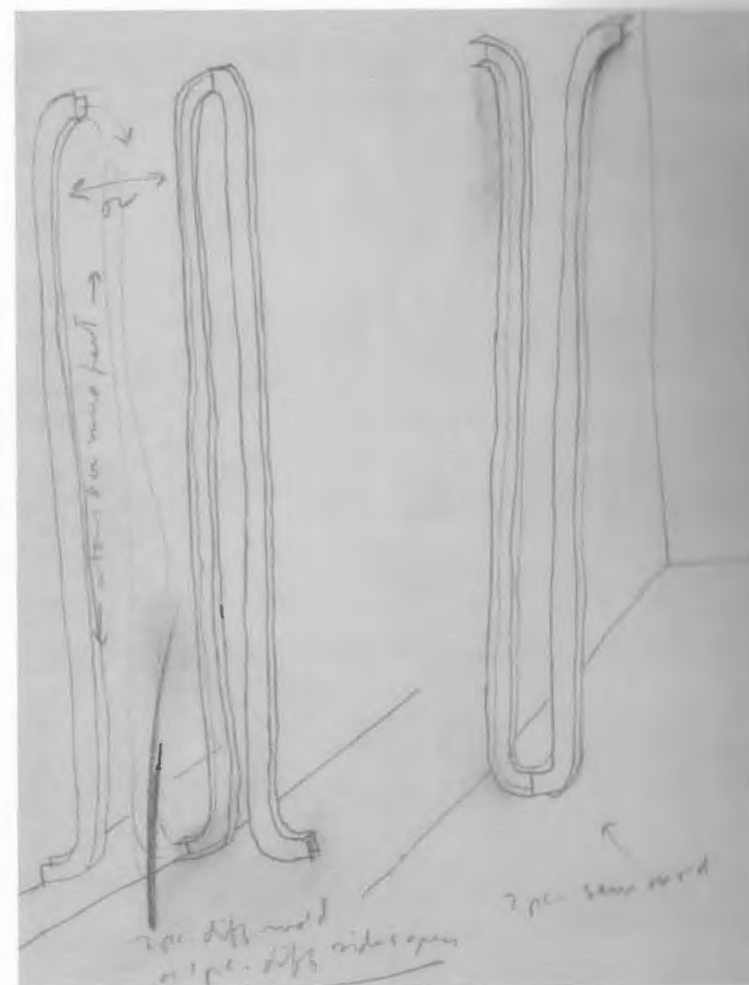
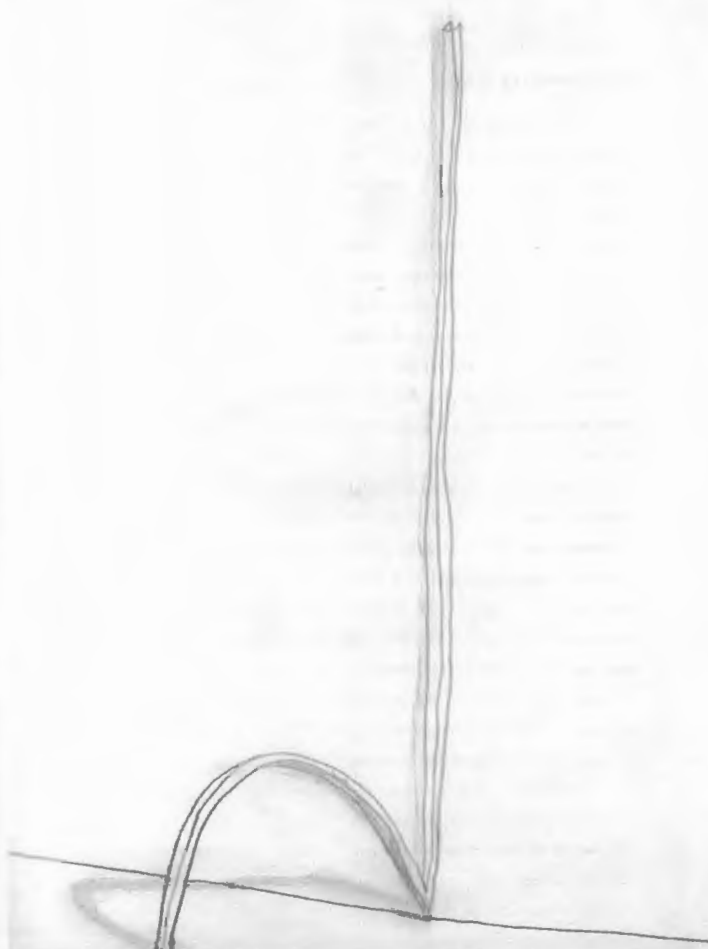
1968; artist book, one folded sheet; open: 37 1/8 x 49 in.



Even though Nauman's fiberglass works are distinct objects, he was already thinking about sculpture in relationship to the space it inhabits, as exemplified in several recently discovered drawings from early 1965, the beginning of his second semester at Davis. In these drawings Nauman indicated the floor and wall planes of rooms and sometimes added a written notation, such as "rubber 'Y' shaped piece in a large bare room." His concern with the placement of his sculpture is also evident in a 1965–66 student project, *Pictures of Sculpture in a Room* (pp. 132–33), an eight-page book consisting of photographs of four fiberglass sculptures.⁵² Nauman's intent was to make a book that was an object, "to confuse the issue a little bit. It is a total object, but it has pictures—however, it is a book, not a catalogue."⁵³ Nauman subsequently made other artist books, as they became known, such as *CLEAR SKY* (1968, p. 28)⁵⁴ and *Burning Small Fires* (1968, p. 26). The latter consists of photographs of pages from Edward Ruscha's book *Various Small Fires and Milk* (1964), burning. Nauman was paying humorous homage to Ruscha, who pioneered the artist book with his *26 Gasoline Stations* (1963).

Following the fiberglass works (he would not return to casting until much later, at the end of the 1980s, in his played animal series), Nauman continued his deconstructive investigations of sculpture in several latex rubber pieces composed of a single sheet cut into strips, which derived from experiments with paper sculptures (none of which have survived). Most of these rubber sculptures hang on the wall, although one folds into a corner (and is the first of several pieces, such as the cardboard-and-paint *Untitled* [1966, p. 31], that focus on a corner space).⁵⁵ David Whitney wrote of this work and others like it, "Late in 1965 Nauman began to work with latex rubber on cloth backing. Here the 'throw-away' look became intensified, some of the works resembling nothing more than piles of rags. The limp, sagging quality gives the impression that the intended product has collapsed."⁵⁶ Nauman explained later that casting with soft materials gave him a way to move beyond the formal problems that arose in fiberglass casting.⁵⁷ Soon, however, he found the fiberglass and rubber sculptures too resistant to his incorporation of other areas of interest to him, such as language.⁵⁸

Several of Nauman's teachers—Wiley, Arneson, de Forest, Neri—were often grouped under the rubric "Funk," a designation derived from the 1967 exhibition at the University Art Museum, Berkeley, of the same name. The exhibition organizer, Peter Selz, defined Funk, a term borrowed from jazz, as "a matter of attitude." He wrote in the exhibition catalogue, "Funk is at the opposite extreme of such manifestations as New York's Primary Structures or the Finish Fetish sculpture which prevails in Southern California. Funk art is hot rather than cool; it is committed rather than disengaged; it is bizarre rather than formal; it is sensuous; and frequently it is quite ugly. Although usually three-dimensional, it is non-sculptural in any traditional way, and irreverent in attitude. Like the dialogue in a play by Ionesco or Beckett, the juxtaposition of unexpected things seems to make no apparent sense."⁵⁹ Nauman was never a Funk artist (he has noted that the height of Funk had already passed by the time he arrived in California), but, like those associated with Funk, he eschewed matters of taste and finish in his fiberglass and rubber sculptures, which also partook of Funk art's casual, homemade look.⁶⁰



< *UNTITLED*

1965; pencil on verso of ditto paper;
11 × 8½ in.

> *UNTITLED (2 PC. DIFFERENT MOLD, 2 PC. SAME MOLD...)*

1965; felt-tip pen on verso of ditto paper;
11 × 8½ in.

FOLLOWING PAGES

>> *UNTITLED*

1965-66; latex on burlap;
approx. 14 × 49 × 36 in.

>>> *UNTITLED*

1966; cardboard and paint;
7 × 24 × 7 in.



The Slant Step

The "Slant Step" exemplifies the prevailing attitude among the Davis group and their like-minded Bay Area cohorts.⁶¹ The story goes that Wiley took Nauman to the Mt. Carmel Salvage Shop on Lovell Street near his Mill Valley studio to see a strange object that looked like a step stool, but that was angled in such a way that one could not actually stand on it (p. 33). Crudely constructed of wood covered with green linoleum, the step stayed in Nauman's mind, and he finally asked Wiley to buy it (it cost about fifty cents) and bring it to Davis. Nauman kept it in his studio for most of 1966, using it as a footstool that worked well enough if he tilted his chair on its back legs. He showed it to artist friends who likewise became intrigued by this homely object of no apparent function. It didn't take long for the Slant Step to acquire a certain mystique, so that when the poet William Withers was invited to do something at the Berkeley Gallery, a co-op run by Marion Wintersteen,⁶² he, along with Wiley, Allan, and William Geis, invited artists and poets to create works in response to the Slant Step. *The Slant Step Show* opened on September 9, 1966, at the gallery's new location at 555 Sansome Street in San Francisco (p. 201).⁶³ Nauman's contribution was *Mold for a Modernized Slant Step* (p. 34), a two-part plaster mold made from a wood and plaster master that he originally intended to cast in another material but decided to leave as it was.⁶⁴ The night after the show was installed, a few of the artists went to Allan's studio and, fortified by a considerable amount of whiskey, later returned to the gallery, where they took art off the walls and pedestals and stacked everything into a corner so that when visitors arrived they had to paw through the pile. During the run of the show, Serra, on a visit to his hometown, absconded with the original Slant Step and took it to New York.⁶⁵

Nauman drew the Slant Step a couple of times, once from memory (p. 35) before Wiley bought it and once from life. He and Allan also built a facsimile for a film (both the facsimile and the film are lost). Christopher French observed in a review of *The Slant Step Revisited*, a 1983 re-creation of the Berkeley Gallery show, at UC Davis, "Today, of all the artists in the current exhibit, only Nauman retains the ideas and methods of working implied in the Slant Step, ideas he had begun to explore just before happening on the object."⁶⁶ Nauman has confirmed that the Slant Step intrigued him because he had been "trying to make an object . . . that appeared to have a function and so there was apparently an excuse for formal invention . . . but in fact didn't have any actual function."⁶⁷ In 1965 and 1966 Nauman went on to make other works in this vein, among them the several nonfunctional "device" sculptures that resemble industrial models, including *Device to Control the Flow of Air in a Room*, *Device to Hold a Box at a Slight Angle*, two works titled *Device to Stand In* (p. 130), and the related *Untitled (Eye-Level Piece)* (p. 37), a shelf-like object that juts out of the wall at eye level, aggressively, counter to the fragility of its material and construction (cardboard and pins). Nauman's interest in objects that only appear to be functional persists, as can be seen in his late-1990s *Indoor Outdoor Seating Arrangements*.

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THE ORIGINAL SLANT-STEP, WOOD AND LINOLEUM

1966; ink wash and pencil on paper; 22 x 18 ¼ in.

Early Films

Nauman made his first films in 1965, using a cheap 16 mm wind-up camera he bought in a pawnshop. All silent and black-and-white, Nauman's earliest films are short—three minutes long or less—and record simple actions. *Manipulating the T Bar* (p. 183) relates to Nauman's performance *Manipulating a Fluorescent Tube*, as well as to fiberglass works he made around the same time. In the film, Nauman goes through a series of manipulations of two long plumber pipes in the form of a T, each change separated by a blank screen created by turning the camera off and then on again. The title of a related film, *Sound Effects for Manipulating the T Bar* (p. 39), is amusingly and deliberately misleading, as is the disingenuous text with which the film opens: "Film of an actor pretending to be myself making a tape of the sound effects of the film *Manipulating the T Bar*." The work is silent, but Nauman, pretending to watch the aforementioned film off-screen, knocks two pieces of lead together to create "sound effects" each time he takes a step. In his third film, *Uncovering a Sculpture* (p. 181), the first of many works that deal with concealment, Nauman rolls back a carpet to reveal a wedge-shaped sculpture (reminiscent of his 1966 sculpture *Felt Formed over Sketch for a Metal Floor Piece*). Again, as in *Manipulating the T Bar*, Nauman simulates the effect of animation by switching the camera on and off. A fourth film, *Smoke* (1966, p. 39), was shot in Frank Owen's overgrown Sacramento backyard and shows Owen, Yates, and Edward Higgins smoking.⁶⁸

In his next four films, Nauman collaborated with William Allan. Allan has said the idea for these films came out of conversations they had at Davis, in which they agreed on "the humble beginnings of a piece."⁶⁹ They shared the intent, Nauman has said, of "making a film without considering art."⁷⁰ Allan claimed he "knew Bruce could just do it straight, without any kind of artifice . . . and it was important to both of us that they be done with the simplest, commonest idea, with the most simple things." He explained further that they intuitively understood, in the spirit of the time, that if you put together the right people and materials in the right situation, something interesting would come out of it. In less than a week, the two artists made all four films, each of which records an activity and ends when the task is completed. The first, *Fishing for Asian Carp* (pp. 40–41), was shot at Putah Creek near Davis and features Allan, an avid fisherman to this day, doing just as the title describes; the film ends when he hooks a fish. Nauman and Allan made the film in the form of a travelogue, with narration provided by the filmmaker Robert Nelson (who was also responsible for the sound recording and editing, which neither Allan nor Nauman knew how to do). Nauman operated the camera and added sound effects by sloshing water in a bucket. He admits the film would have been "really dumb and boring"⁷¹ but for the last scene, when Allan picks up the hooked fish with his finger in the gills and Nelson says, "Well, Bill, I see you've caught your fish now and you're picking it up with your fingers like that." Allan replies, "Well, when you don't have a gaff or a net, I guess you call it finger gaffing." This elicits an extended laugh from Nelson.

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*SOUND EFFECTS FOR
MANIPULATING THE T BAR*

1965; 16 mm film, black-and-white, silent;
3 min.

> *SMOKE*

1966; 16 mm film, black-and-white, silent;
2 min., 37 sec.





Nauman and Allan made the other three films at Muir Beach, where Allan had a studio. *Abstracting the Shoe* (a parody on abstract art) and *Legal Size* (both pp. 178–79) were shot in the deadpan style of shop films. In the former, Nauman applies black roofing tar to a wood shoe form, and in the latter Allan sits at a table as he carefully extends the length of a standard envelope using tape, scissors, and paint.⁷² In *Span*, Nauman and Allan, armed with wood two-by-fours and a toolbox, take turns (with assistance from Richard Pervier) building a frame to span a creek. They then suspend from the frame a dark plastic tarp, which gently moves with the air current. As the film ends, the camera pulls back and the plastic curtain gradually disappears against the foliage and shadows. (One cannot help comparing this simple, poetic intervention to Christo's later monumental *Valley Curtain*, 1970–72.) In 1999 Nauman made a digital video titled *Setting a Good Corner (Allegory and Metaphor)*, which, despite its higher production values, doesn't deviate from the basic philosophy of his earliest work in film—the straightforward recording of a task from beginning to end.

A Rose Has No Teeth

A Rose Has No Teeth (Lead Tree Plaque) (1966, pp. v, 43), a lead plaque with the title words stamped on it, is a distinctive and significant piece in Nauman's early oeuvre and prefigures much of his later work. It is his first word piece, the first work he intended to be displayed outdoors (in this case to be affixed to a tree), and the only one in which his intense reading of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* is made manifest.⁷³ By the end of the 1960s Wittgenstein had achieved a cultlike status among Minimal and Conceptual artists, but Nauman seems to have been aware of his writings in the early years of the decade. He has said that he learned from Wittgenstein how to think about things.⁷⁴ The title of *A Rose Has No Teeth* is a direct quote from Wittgenstein, who takes the phrase "The law has no teeth" through a series of logical permutations until he arrives at the final absurd proposition. Nauman has commented that he liked "the clarity of the process . . . and the fact that he [Wittgenstein] developed an argument to the point of logical absurdity—the point where logic and language break down."⁷⁵

Believing that, in general, outdoor sculpture is never a match for nature, Nauman purposely designed a work that would disappear under vegetation: if the plaque were attached to a tree, it would gradually be covered by bark. Once the plaque entered the collection of Thomas Ammann in Zurich, where it was not going to be destroyed by nature, Nauman took the mold he used to make the lead plaque and made a tinted polyester cast (p. 6), which he sent to his former teacher Italo Scanga, who would, presumably, carry out his wishes.⁷⁶ However, it, too, was not nailed to a tree.

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*A ROSE HAS NO TEETH
(LEAD TREE PLAQUE)*

1966; lead plaque,
7 ½ x 8 ½ x 2 ¼ in.

Nicholas Wilder

Just before receiving his master's degree in June 1966, Nauman had his first important one-person show at the Nicholas Wilder Gallery in Los Angeles. Wilder, a young Stanford art history graduate, first saw Nauman's work at Tony DeLap's house. Nauman had taken a class with DeLap his first semester at Davis, and the two artists had eventually traded work. DeLap remembers it this way:

I traded him one of those [fiberglass] pieces, a yellow one, for, I think, a print and hung it in my house in San Francisco. One day Nick Wilder came by and saw Bruce's piece hanging up in my house. I was in the studio, which was separate from the house, and Nick came in and said, "I just saw probably the worst piece of art I have ever seen in my life." Those were almost his exact words. And I said, "Oh yeah, Bruce is one of the students at Davis, and he is actually an interesting guy." About two weeks later Nick asked, "Do you mind if I come over and see that piece again that you have hanging there?" He drove up and looked at it for a while and said, "Would it be possible to meet this guy?" So one of the days when I went up to Davis to teach, Nick came with me, and I introduced him to Bruce, and that is really how they got together.⁷⁷

In a 1988 interview, Wilder described the Nauman piece he had seen at DeLap's and his response to it: "It was about forty-six inches wide, a kind of khaki-colored thing that was cast plastic that dropped about forty or so inches down the wall . . . it wasn't quite clean . . . it didn't quite fit the wall. He didn't have it quite down, I thought. Well, I was wrong. I wasn't getting it. But I got home and I couldn't forget it." Not long after visiting Nauman in Davis and seeing more of his rubber and fiberglass pieces, Wilder offered him a show.⁷⁸

The exhibition took place from May 10 to June 2, 1966 (p. 199). Nauman showed *Mold for a Modernized Slant Step* (the piece he had made for *The Slant Step Show*); *Device to Hold a Box at a Slight Angle*; *Shelf Sinking into the Wall with Copper-Painted Plaster Casts of the Spaces Underneath*; *Untitled (Eye-Level Piece)*; and an untitled cardboard corner piece installed eight feet above the floor (all 1966). He also showed fiberglass pieces, including *Platform Made Up of the Space between Two Rectilinear Boxes on the Floor* (also 1966, p. 138), the first of his works in which he concretized negative space.

The latter work and other fiberglass sculptures demonstrated Nauman's abiding curiosity about the underside and backside of things.⁷⁹ According to the artist, *A Cast of the Space under My Chair* (p. 141)—the culmination of Nauman's negative space works, finalized in 1968 but conceived in 1965—is "the sculptural version of de Kooning's statement, 'when you paint a chair, you should paint the space between the rungs not the chair itself.'"⁸⁰ A simple concrete, notched, rectangular solid, this work can be seen as a critique of Minimalism as well as a subversion of the function of the object from which it derives. Chairs served as surrogates for Nauman's body as he began to move away from its direct use, and they would recur with more sinister effect in his later work, notably the "South America" hanging-chair series begun in the early 1980s.⁸¹

According to Katherine Bishop Crum, who ran the gallery with Wilder, few works were sold from Nauman's exhibition. Crum bought two sculptures; John Coplans, then a contributing editor at *Artforum*,⁸² bought a T-shaped fiberglass piece, which he returned a week later because friends talked him out of it; and *Artforum's* publisher, Charles Cowles, bought a fiberglass piece.⁸³ John Baldessari saw the show and remembers it as signaling a sea change in how he thought about sculpture.⁸⁴

San Francisco

After receiving his master of arts degree with an emphasis on sculpture (over the objections of some of the older Davis faculty), the Naumans moved to a former grocery store at 144 Twenty-seventh Street in San Francisco's Mission District. He had been offered a part-time teaching job at the San Francisco Art Institute by Fred Martin, then director of the college of the institute, on the urging of Robert Hudson (who was leaving the institute to teach at UC Berkeley).⁸⁵ No longer part of a community and with no other commitments apart from teaching one class at the San Francisco Art Institute (which he would continue to do through spring 1968), Nauman had a lot of time on his hands and very little money. As his classes were in the early morning, he had little contact with other instructors. According to several of his students, he was reticent, but what he did say made an impact. For example, he advised John Woodall that the most important thing for an artist to do is to decide what to do, which Woodall felt was "a very meaty comment."⁸⁶ Another student, the filmmaker Peter Hutton, notes that Nauman represented a new generation of teachers who were conceptually oriented (most of the other sculpture faculty members were still working within an Abstract Expressionist idiom) and that Nauman would work right along with the students, sometimes bringing in his own work as a way to stimulate ideas.⁸⁷ Nauman was also known to give provocative assignments to his students. Fellow teacher Richard Shaw remembers once needing a project for his class, and Nauman suggesting that he ask the students to make something in their pockets.⁸⁸

Although in the fall of 1966 the Art Institute gallery's director, James Monte, gave Nauman a show with Geis,⁸⁹ Nauman told Sharp, "I had no support structure for my art then . . . there was no chance to talk about my work." Therefore, he said, "I was forced to examine myself, and what I was doing there."⁹⁰ Self-examination took the form of body casts, films of simple actions, floor works, his first neon sculptures, and photography. Nauman acknowledged to Sharp that a fundamental shift took place in his work at this time, marked by a tendency toward conceptual and process-oriented works and away from his "form-based" pieces.⁹¹ A list titled "Codification" provides insight into Nauman's concerns at the time:

1. Personal appearance and skin
2. Gestures
3. Ordinary actions such as those concerned with eating and drinking
4. Traces of activity such as footprints and material objects

5. Simple sounds—spoken and written words

Metacommunication messages

Feedback

Analogic and digital codification⁹²

Some of these ideas are easily matched with realized works; for example, “Personal appearance and skin” relates to *Art Make-Up* (1967, pp. 172–73). *Flour Arrangements* (1966, p. 81) and *Composite Photo of Two Messes on the Studio Floor* (1967, p. 204) contain traces of activities. Other ideas he would explore in later works: “Simple sounds” describes the ambient sound in *Mapping the Studio (Fat Chance John Cage)* (2001), for instance, and “Feedback” is evident in the corridor installations. Michael Auping points out that over the course of Nauman’s career, “Each of these themes would play an interchangeable role in what Nauman would summarize as ‘Metacommunication messages’”—messages that are greater than the sum of their parts.⁹³

Body Measurement and Cast Body Works

Although Nauman’s work shifted in emphasis at this time, he continued to make body-related works. Some were based on systems of measurement, such as the fiberglass *Six Inches of My Knee Extended to Six Feet* (1967, p. 47)⁹⁴ and several drawings that converted body measurements into columns and planes. In another fascinating set of drawings that show how Nauman uses that medium to develop an idea, he transformed a tree into a hand and finally into a shoulder, which then assumed its final permutation as the plaster sculpture *Device for a Left Armpit* (1967, p. 126).⁹⁵ In another piece based on measurements of his own body, *Neon Templates of the Left Half of My Body Taken at Ten-Inch Intervals* (1966, p. 129), Nauman fashioned arcs from green neon tubing.⁹⁶ As in all of his neon sculptures, and consistent with his practice of revealing the working process, Nauman made no attempt to hide the transformer and wires. Nauman had experimented with neon tubing in conjunction with some of his cast-fiberglass sculptures as early as 1965, but *Neon Templates* was his first in which neon was the predominant material. This strangely poetic self-portrait is recapitulated in several drawings (some made before and some following the neon) that explore unorthodox methods of making visible the contours of the left side of the artist’s body. In one, glass sheets along an axis replace the neon tubes; in another, templates are separated by grease; and in a third, wax templates of abstracted body parts from the head to the calf are stacked in such a way as to evoke a Cubist sculpture.⁹⁷

Another body-related work, *Wax Impressions of the Knees of Five Famous Artists* (1966, pp. 52–53), is in actuality not made of wax but of fiberglass and polyester resin. Nauman not only purposely misstated the material in the title, but also misled the viewer into believing that the knee prints were made from other artists when they were actually made from his own knee. In a drawing made a year later (p. 53; he often makes drawings after the fact to further explore ideas broached in a finished

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*SIX INCHES OF MY KNEE
EXTENDED TO SIX FEET*

1967; fiberglass; 68 ½ x 5 ¾ x 3 ¾ in.



work), Nauman identified the “five famous artists” as de Kooning (although de Kooning’s name is crossed out and replaced with “self”), Wiley, Larry Bell, Lucas Samaras, and Leland Bell. Cognizant of the power of language, Nauman was here “interested in the idea of lying, of not telling the truth,” and in the “functional edges of language . . . when it ceases to be a tool of communication.”⁹⁸ As in *Neon Templates of the Left Half of My Body Taken at Ten-Inch Intervals* and other works, Nauman connected the sculpture with the body, removing it from a strictly formal reading. “Making the impressions of the knees in a wax block was a way of having a large rectangular solid with marks in it. I didn’t want to just make marks in it, so I had to follow another kind of reasoning.”⁹⁹ Again, as in mathematics or in any other field Nauman engages, it was the structure and the act of pushing a theory or idea to absurd extremes that most interested him.

After the fiberglass and rubber series, Nauman began to give his works elaborate titles, which he said came out of Dada and Surrealism. The titles provided a kind of rationale for what he was doing.¹⁰⁰ *From Hand to Mouth* (1967, p. 54), a cast made from moulage (a very accurate casting material Nauman found in a police shop), makes visual the idiomatic expression in the title, depicting only those parts of the body referred to in the words. (The piece might well be an allusion to Nauman’s meager finances at that time.) This was the first of Nauman’s visual puns. It is generally acknowledged that Wiley, and to a lesser extent Arneson, influenced Nauman in his use of puns, as did his reading of Wittgenstein and Vladimir Nabokov. No doubt Nauman also had in mind Jasper Johns’s casts of body fragments in such works as *Target with Plaster Casts* (1955). He must also have been aware of Duchamp’s punning titles, as well as his body casts, such as *With My Tongue in My Cheek* (1959, p. 55), a self-portrait in the form of a drawn profile combined with a plaster cast of his cheek pushed out by his tongue. While Nauman has said that Duchamp wasn’t a major influence, he has also acknowledged that all artists who were exploring conceptual or idea-based ways of making art were indebted to Duchamp—and although his commitment is generally to the material and physical, Nauman does occasionally riff on the Duchampian readymade. For example, *Wedge Piece* (1968, p. 55), comprising two steel woodcutting wedges, both painted red, one engraved with the word “like” above the word “keil,” and the other with the word “wedge” above the word “keil,” offers a play on words that Duchamp would have appreciated: “wedge” in German is *keil*, which is an anagram of the word “like.” The wedge form is also a vaginal symbol and thus relates to Duchamp’s *Coin de Chasteté* (1951), created by pressing dental plastic into a vagina.

In *Untitled* (1967, p. 118) Nauman joined a cast of a body fragment with a knotted rope that extends from each upper arm and from which the sculpture is suspended,¹⁰¹ drawing a visual parallel between the position of the arms and the knot. (This visual resemblance is even more explicit in his 1967 drawing *Square Knot*, p. 55.) Knots appear in several of Nauman’s drawings and sculptures from around this time, including *Knot an Ear* (1967, p. 56)—a wax earlike sculpture that is not an ear in the same sense that the pipe in René Magritte’s *Ceci n’est pas une pipe* is not a pipe—and

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Westermann's Ear (1967, p. 57). Nauman has cited Man Ray's *The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse* (1920, p. 59), a sewing machine wrapped in cloth and tied with twine, as one source of his knot imagery, but he has also noted that on a symbolic level it represented his feeling that he was "tied in a knot" and having difficulty working at that time.¹⁰² Additionally, Nauman learned knot-making techniques as a Boy Scout. The reference to H. C. Westermann goes back to an amusing interchange with the artist initiated by Wiley and Nauman. Both artists admired Westermann's ability to successfully combine sophisticated ideas with folk art traditions. Wiley especially related to Westermann's Surrealist objects and was dismayed to learn after the fact that Westermann had been living in San Francisco for a couple of years. As Wiley tells it:

Both Bruce and I were aware of and liked Westermann's work and after we noticed that Man Ray's *The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse* was sometimes also titled *The Riddle*, Nauman suggested we write to Westermann and see what he thought about this discrepancy. So we wrote to him care of his gallery in Chicago. Bruce suggested that we include with the letter these funny lozenge-shaped pieces of carbon paper that would record the marks of handling en route to Chicago. We got this card back from Westermann, a kind of a valentine that he had decorated, on which he wrote, "I know you are going to think I am some mean old thing, but that card you sent me was almost an enigma in itself. Slow down, what is your hurry? Sincerely, Cliff."¹⁰³

Another of Nauman's absurdist puns-made-literal (and another in which a knot plays a part) is *Henry Moore Bound to Fail* (1967), a wax and plaster sculpture, also done in a cast-iron version (1967–70, p. 58). The relief is not a cast from his body; rather, it was based on a photograph of the back of his torso with his arms tied together with rope (see *Three Well-Known Knots [Square Knot, Bowline and Clove Hitch]*, 1967, pp. 160–61, and *Eleven Color Photographs*, 1966–67/70, pp. 64–69). Later Nauman made plaster and then sand casts from the wax original, which he used to make an edition in cast iron.¹⁰⁴ While an earlier drawing titled *Bound to Fail* was perhaps an indication of Nauman's attitude toward failure (the flip side of the sentiment expressed in his *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths [Window or Wall Sign]*, 1967, p. 74), when he tacked on the name "Henry Moore," the phrase took on new meaning. Since the 1940s, Moore had dominated British sculpture, but by the 1960s young British sculptors not only felt oppressed by the weight of his importance, but also rejected his brand of monumental figurative sculpture. Although Nauman wasn't particularly fond of Moore, he felt that "they should really hang on to him, because he really did some good work and they might need him again sometime."¹⁰⁵ So as to "preserve" him for the future, Nauman conceived of a storage capsule, which he realized as a drawing reminiscent of Moore's bomb shelter drawings of the 1940s (p. 61). He also metaphorically "trapped" Moore's spirit (some saw Moore imprisoned by his own success) in two large photographs titled *Light Trap for Henry Moore, No. 1* and *No. 2* (1967, p. 62), in which a swirl of lines—made by manipulating a flashlight in a dark room—suggest a cage.¹⁰⁶



*WAX IMPRESSIONS OF THE KNEES OF
FIVE FAMOUS ARTISTS*

1966; fiberglass and polyester resin; 15⁵/₈ × 85¹/₄ × 2³/₄ in.

> *UNTITLED (STUDY AFTER "WAX IMPRESSIONS OF
THE RIGHT KNEES OF FIVE FAMOUS ARTISTS")*

1967; ink on paper; 19 × 24 in.



FROM HAND TO MOUTH

1967; wax over cloth; 28 x 10½ x 4 in.



KNOT AN EAR

1967; wax; $1\frac{1}{16} \times 6 \times 3\frac{3}{16}$ in.

> *WESTERMANN'S EAR*

1967/68; plaster and rope;
 $33\frac{1}{2} \times 15\frac{3}{4} \times 1\frac{1}{2}$ in.

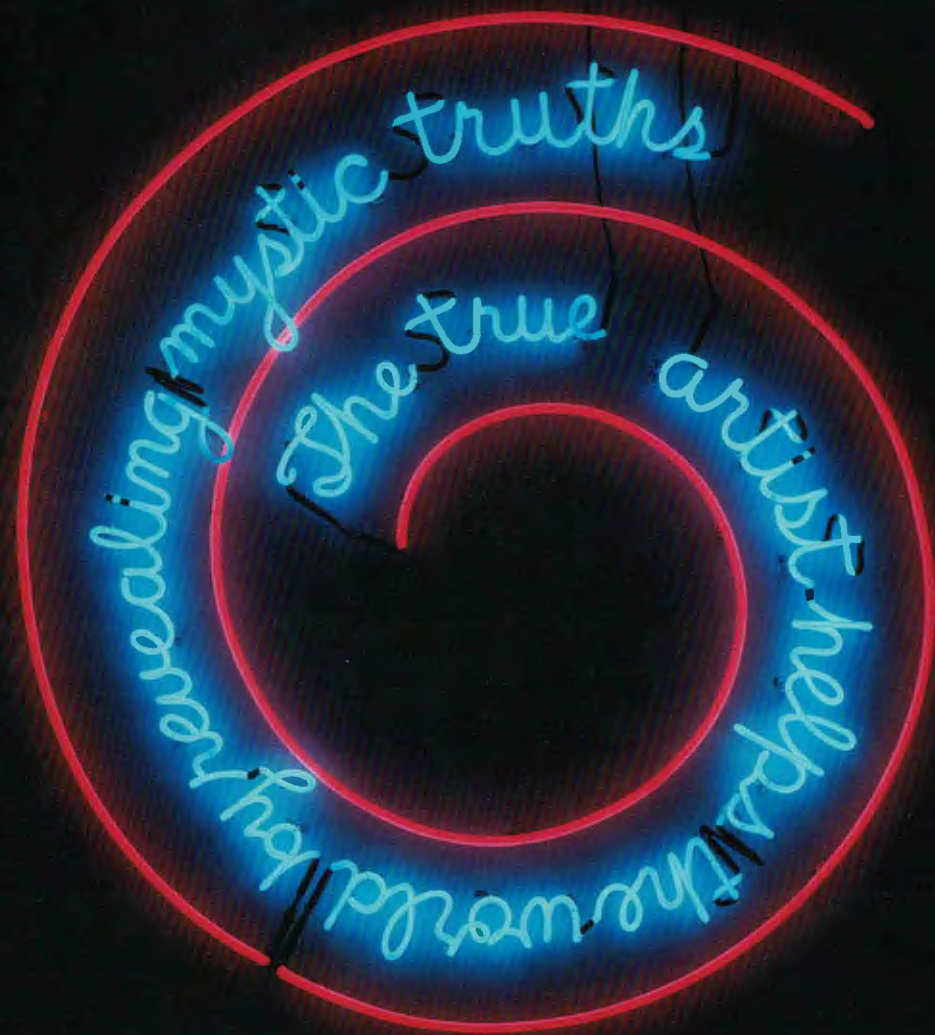


Bruce Nauman, *Henry Moore Bound to Fail*, 1967, cast iron, 25 x 23 x 3.5 in.

real-life incidents. (He would do so again much later, in his 1993 video installation *Coffee Spilled and Balloon Dog*.) The signature image of the group, *Self-Portrait as a Fountain* (p. 69), relates to a black-and-white photo of 1966–67, *The Artist as a Fountain*, in which Nauman is seen spewing water in a backyard garden, and to a 1967 drawing of a figure spouting water into a wading pool (p. 70). These fountain works both spoof garden sculpture—as early as 1965 Nauman was exploring unconventional fountains in such drawings as *Flat Fountain* (p. 71)—and, along with Nauman's several manifestations of *The True Artist Is an Amazing Luminous Fountain* (p. 150), refer to Duchamp's 1917 *Fountain*.¹¹¹ The subject would make a return in the monumental 2005 installation *100 Fish Fountain*.

Neon Signs

Along with artists such as Martial Raysse, James Rosenquist, and Joseph Kosuth, Nauman began incorporating neon as an illuminated linear element in his sculptures in the mid-1960s. Attracted by materials not normally associated with art, he used neon in *Neon Templates of the Left Half of My Body Taken at Ten-Inch Intervals*, in *My Last Name Exaggerated Fourteen Times Vertically* (1967, p. 73), presented as if an aerial map, and in *My Name as though It Were Written on the Surface of the Moon* (1968, pp. 76–77). Robert Pincus-Witten wrote that this latter work appeared “as if a repeatedly beamed electronic signal forming the letters of Nauman's first name had bounced off the moon and returned to earth at constant intervals.”¹¹² In both name works, Nauman evoked the self but, as always, obliquely, since he distorted his handwriting beyond legibility. This self-declaration was first suggested to him when, as an undergraduate, he saw Barnett Newman's bold signature on one of his paintings at the Art Institute of Chicago. It was, he has said, “so real and so there.”¹¹³ Nauman's response was to make works consisting solely of his signature. Most artists who were exploring neon didn't imitate its commercial function as a sign. The idea to do so came to Nauman from a neon beer sign that hung in the window of his San Francisco studio. Nauman liked that you could see it both from the street and from the interior, where the message was confused. In other words, as in his fiberglass sculptures, he was still interested in making works that dealt with exterior/interior inversions and also artworks that might not immediately be understood as such, that “would kind of disappear” (as he had literally intended *A Rose Has No Teeth* would do)—“an art that was supposed to not quite look like art.”¹¹⁴ Nauman designed a blue and pink spiral sign with the rather grandiose assertion “The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths,” had it fabricated, and hung it on the plate-glass window of his studio, alongside a related work from the year before, a Mylar window shade with “The true artist is an amazing luminous fountain” printed around its perimeter.¹¹⁵ These oft-cited works, made at a time when Nauman, only recently out of school, was grappling with what it meant to be an artist, are usually interpreted more as questions than as convictions. “On the one hand I believed it,” he has said. “It's true and it's not true at the same time. It depends on how you interpret it and how seriously you take yourself. For me it's still a very strong thought.”¹¹⁶



SUSWETTE



Nauman has continued to make neon works throughout his career, first with superimposed words, as in the three-layered *Sweet, Suite, Substitute* (1968, p. 78), in which each of the three words, in red, yellow, and blue, is lit for about five seconds (the title is a variant of the title of a 1940 Jelly Roll Morton song about substituting affections), and later with increasingly complex word plays and imagery. Nauman added a witty notation on the fabrication drawing for *Sweet, Suite, Substitute*, playing on the word "substitute": "Art to replace your favorite furniture." Jane Livingston comments, "It cannot be insignificant that the word 'substitute' appears in this context, in that he continuously sparred with the notions of art as substitute for experience."¹¹⁷ Nauman has said that his text pieces came out of his reading, and he remembers a journal that had a strong impact:

There was a magazine that I read when I was at school: *Art and Literature*. There was always a lot of poetry, there would be interviews, and there were, I think, descriptions of things. It was an interesting range of stuff, and it opened up ways of thinking about things, and I learned what other people were doing.¹¹⁸

Floor Works

Spending time in his virtually empty San Francisco studio, Nauman was forced to consider what it was that constituted an art activity. He eventually concluded that whatever he did in his studio was art.¹¹⁹ One such activity consisted of rearranging piles of fine, white Japanese flour on his studio floor with a two-by-four. He photographed each new design and chose a set of seven photographs to document the month-long process. In an obvious pun, he named the set *Flour Arrangements*. Nauman was among the first artists to preserve such activities as photographic documents. Very soon this practice became a primary tool of earth and Conceptual artists, such as Robert Smithson, whose *Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey*, a photo essay of found earthworks, was published in the December 1967 issue of *Artforum*, and Michael Heizer, who began photographing his interventions in the land the same year. Nauman and other Conceptual artists did not consider themselves photographers, were not trained as such, and weren't much concerned with the fine photographic print. In fact, they pointedly distanced themselves from the tradition of fine art photography. Nevertheless, the photographic document, displayed on a gallery wall, assumed the status of art.

The *Flour Arrangements* photos have a blue-green cast that Fulton, who printed them, thinks was caused by using daylight color film in a fluorescent-lit interior. Because of their cool color, and the way the flour mounds are isolated and shot from above, providing no clue as to scale or surroundings, they could easily be mistaken for floating icebergs. As for the genesis of the idea, Wiley recalls that once when Nauman visited him, Wiley had laid out a wood grid covered with white felt that he was going to cover with flour and name *Japanese Flour Arranging*. Soon after, Nauman asked Wiley whether or not he had finished the piece, and Wiley said he hadn't been able to figure out exactly what to do with it and had more or less abandoned it. Nauman asked if it was okay for him to

appropriate the idea, and Wiley said yes. Afterward Nauman joked to Wiley, "You've been influenced by my work long enough. I thought I could take something from you."¹²⁰ A related work, *Composite Photo of Two Messes on the Studio Floor*, is a multipart photo-collage that depicts the remnants of the flour piece along with other projects. Livingston notes that these works relate to LeVa's contemporaneous scatter sculptures.¹²¹ They also recall Duchamp and Man Ray's 1920 photograph *Dust Breeding*, which records the dust that accumulated on Duchamp's *The Large Glass* while it lay in his studio.

The year after he made *Flour Arrangements*, Nauman was invited by William Allan to reenact his flour arranging on film. Allan was an artist-in-residence at the Rockefeller Foundation-funded Experimental Television Project at KQED, the Bay Area's educational TV channel. In the amusing film that resulted, made on October 22, 1967, Allan and Peter Saul act as the hosts of a mock TV talk show, as Nauman, filmed from above, uses a two-by-four to manipulate fifty pounds of white flour on the studio floor. The camera moves back and forth between Saul and Allan, smoking a pipe and a cigarette, respectively, and Nauman. The two "hosts" ad lib on a variety of subjects and comment from time to time on Nauman's flour patterns. Occasionally Nauman asks for their opinion about a specific arrangement. For a split second, one can see projected on a wall behind Allan and Saul a shot of the film *Sound Effects for Manipulating the T Bar*. Toward the end Nauman presses parts of his body into the flour, recalling such works as *Wax Impressions of the Knees of Five Famous Artists*, and the film ends when Nauman, at the request of Saul and Allan, signs "Bruce" in the flour (p. 202).

Mill Valley

In the summer of 1967 Nauman and his family, which now included his one-year-old son Eric, sublet Wiley's Mill Valley studio and apartment at 24 Summit Avenue while Wiley took a year-long sabbatical on the East Coast. *Art Make-Up* is one of the first film works Nauman made in Wiley's Mill Valley studio and is unique in his body of film work.¹²² It consists of four ten-minute films designed as loops to be projected simultaneously on the four walls of a room (as such it foreshadows Nauman's monumental multiscreen installation *Mapping the Studio [Fat Chance John Cage]*, 2001).¹²³ Nauman told interviewer Jan Butterfield that he made the films for a show at the San Francisco Museum of Art, but that when the museum's director, Gerald Nordland, discovered that Nauman had submitted films rather than sculpture, as was expected, he did not include him in the exhibition.¹²⁴

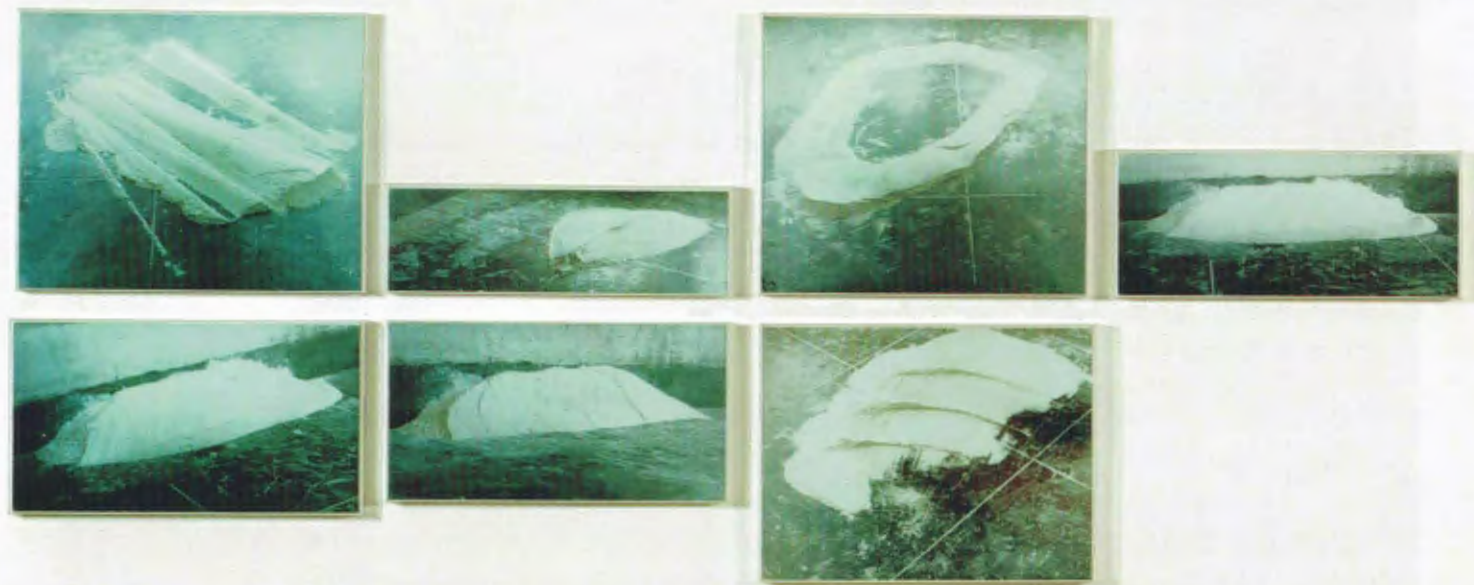
In *Art Make-Up* Nauman uses his body as a canvas, covering his face and torso successively with white, pink, green, and black paint. Nauman has admitted that the piece had "whatever social connections it had with skin color," but that it also had to do with the idea of "making up art."¹²⁵ *Art Make-Up* is an early example of self-erasure or masking in Nauman's work. Later he made several works in which he replaced himself with the figure of a clown, a traditional surrogate for an artist in

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FLOUR ARRANGEMENTS

1966; seven color photographs;

19 1/8 x 23 5/8 in.; 10 x 23 13/16 in.;

19 3/16 x 22 11/16 in.; 11 1/8 x 23 7/16 in.;

13 3/16 x 23 7/8 in.; 12 3/16 x 23 1/4 in.;

17 3/4 x 23 1/4 in.

modern art practice and, as "the abstracted idea of a person,"¹²⁶ a vehicle for dark humor, frustration, or even humiliation. Nauman has always had ambivalent feelings about self-revelation, but he recognizes:

to present yourself through your work is obviously part of being an artist. If you don't want people to see that self, you put on makeup. But artists are always interested in some kind of communication. . . . You spend all of this time in the studio and then when you do present the work, there is a kind of self-exposure that is threatening. It is a dangerous situation and I think that what I was doing . . . [was using] the tension between what you tell and what you don't tell as part of the work. What is given *and* what is withheld becomes the work.¹²⁷

Studio Films

An abiding leitmotif in Nauman's work is what the artist does in the studio. "It generally goes back to the idea that when you don't know what to do, then whatever it is that you are doing at the time becomes the work."¹²⁸ This statement describes the condition that gave rise to his studio films of 1967–68, although, as proof of the consistency of Nauman's philosophy, it was said in reference to the genesis of *Mapping the Studio (Fat Chance John Cage)*, created over thirty years later. The immediate impetus for filming his studio performances, Nauman has said, was that "no one at that time was interested in presenting them. I could have rented a hall, but didn't want to do it that way."¹²⁹

Before filming his performance activities, Nauman used a still camera to record himself trying to levitate in his studio. The double-exposure photograph *Failing to Levitate in the Studio* (1966, p. 83) shows him balanced between two chairs and then falling. This exercise in concentration relates to two of Nauman's videotapes of 1973—*Elke Allowing the Floor to Rise Up over Her* and *Tony Sinking into the Floor, Face Up and Face Down*—and to later works that deal with equilibrium. Like photography, film and videotape became widely used to document made-for-camera actions or performances during the late 1960s.¹³⁰ Nauman described his attitude toward film to Raffaele: "Films are about seeing. I wanted to find out what I would look at in a strange situation, and I decided that with a film and camera I could do that." He was also intrigued by the perceived veracity of the medium: "You tend to believe that what is shown on a film is really true—you believe a film, or a photograph, more than a painting."¹³¹

There was an active underground film scene in San Francisco, centered mostly around the Art Institute, and it was possible for Nauman to borrow or rent equipment for as little as a few dollars a day. He conceived his studio films as simply and directly as he had conceived the films he had made as a student. Most are approximately ten minutes long (the duration of a hundred-foot film reel) and are descriptively titled: *Bouncing Two Balls between the Floor and Ceiling with Changing Rhythms* (pp. 86–87), *Dance or Exercise on the Perimeter of a Square* (p. 187), *Playing a Note on the Violin while I Walk around the Studio* (pp. 84–85), and the like. Nauman has always believed

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FAILING TO LEVITATE IN THE STUDIO

1966; black-and-white photograph; 20 x 24 in.



*PLAYING A NOTE ON THE VIOLIN WHILE
I WALK AROUND THE STUDIO*

1967-68; 16 mm film, black-and-white, sound; 10 min.



that all human activity, no matter how commonplace, is worthy of being examined, and he found a literary parallel in Beckett, whom he began to read at this time.¹³²

Another influence was avant-garde dance. At a party in San Francisco, he had briefly met multimedia artist Meredith Monk, who introduced him to the concept of body awareness and voice as an instrument, and the Bay Area was on the forefront of a new concept in dance pioneered by Anna Halprin, which was constructed around ordinary movement. Several of the dancers who were to become chief proponents of new dance—such as Simone Forti and Yvonne Rainer—trained with Halprin at her Marin County studio and went on to become founding members of the Judson Dance Theater in New York. Nauman was also aware of Merce Cunningham and John Cage (he had seen Cunningham's company perform at the University of Wisconsin) and was influenced by their transformation of "normal activity into a formal presentation."¹³³ Nauman's films and first videos were "specifically about doing exercises in balance. I thought of them as dance problems without being a dancer, being interested in the kinds of tension that arise when you try to balance and can't. Or do something for a long time and get tired."¹³⁴ Nauman's reading of Gestalt therapy and body awareness was another important reinforcement,¹³⁵ as was the Minimalist music of La Monte Young, Steve Reich (whom he met in San Francisco through Wiley), and Terry Riley, all of whom based their compositions on repetitive structures that, like those of Nauman's jazz idols John Coltrane and Tristano, seemed as if they could continue indefinitely. Despite his sense of isolation and lack of financial resources, 1966 and 1967 were enormously productive years for Nauman. *Art 116 stop here...*

Southampton

In the fall of 1968 Nauman received an Individual Artist Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. Paul Waldman, whom Nauman got to know when he was teaching at Davis, offered Nauman and his family the use of a summer house and studio in Southampton, New York, that he co-owned with Roy Lichtenstein. The Naumans occupied the house during the winter of 1968–69. For the most part Nauman continued to perform for the camera, but instead of using film, he explored the new medium of video with equipment his dealer Leo Castelli purchased for his use. (When Nauman returned it, Castelli loaned the equipment to Serra, Keith Sonnier, and others.) Nauman approached video much as he had film, choosing the medium based on the availability of equipment.¹³⁶ He soon appreciated the advantages of video—he could lengthen his performances or actions to the sixty minutes of a videotape reel, rather than being restricted to the ten minutes of a film reel. Video also allowed for immediate feedback (looking at a monitor of himself in real time helped him position himself for *Wall-Floor Positions*, 1968, pp. 134–35) and thereby enabled him to make test tapes. By contrast, performances for his films had to have been fairly well worked out in advance, since Nauman could only afford to rent the 16 mm equipment for a day or two at a time.

Nauman experimented with changing the orientation of the camera, "partly because you could