

# Exhibitions

## A rare opportunity to see a wide range of Bruce Nauman's work reveals his centrality to art of the past half century

### **Bruce Nauman: Disappearing Acts**

Museum of Modern Art and  
MoMA PS1, New York  
21st October 2018–18th February

by LYNNE COOKE

In 1998, when Bridget Riley walked into a retrospective featuring Nauman's video- and film-based works in London, she 'immediately felt a shock of recognition'. 'My own work is so very different from Nauman's', she later wrote, 'and yet in many pieces he was using formalist devices that were familiar to me.' Given the range and diversity of artists for whom the American is a lodestar, a point of reference or of affiliation, it is not surprising that he is repeatedly

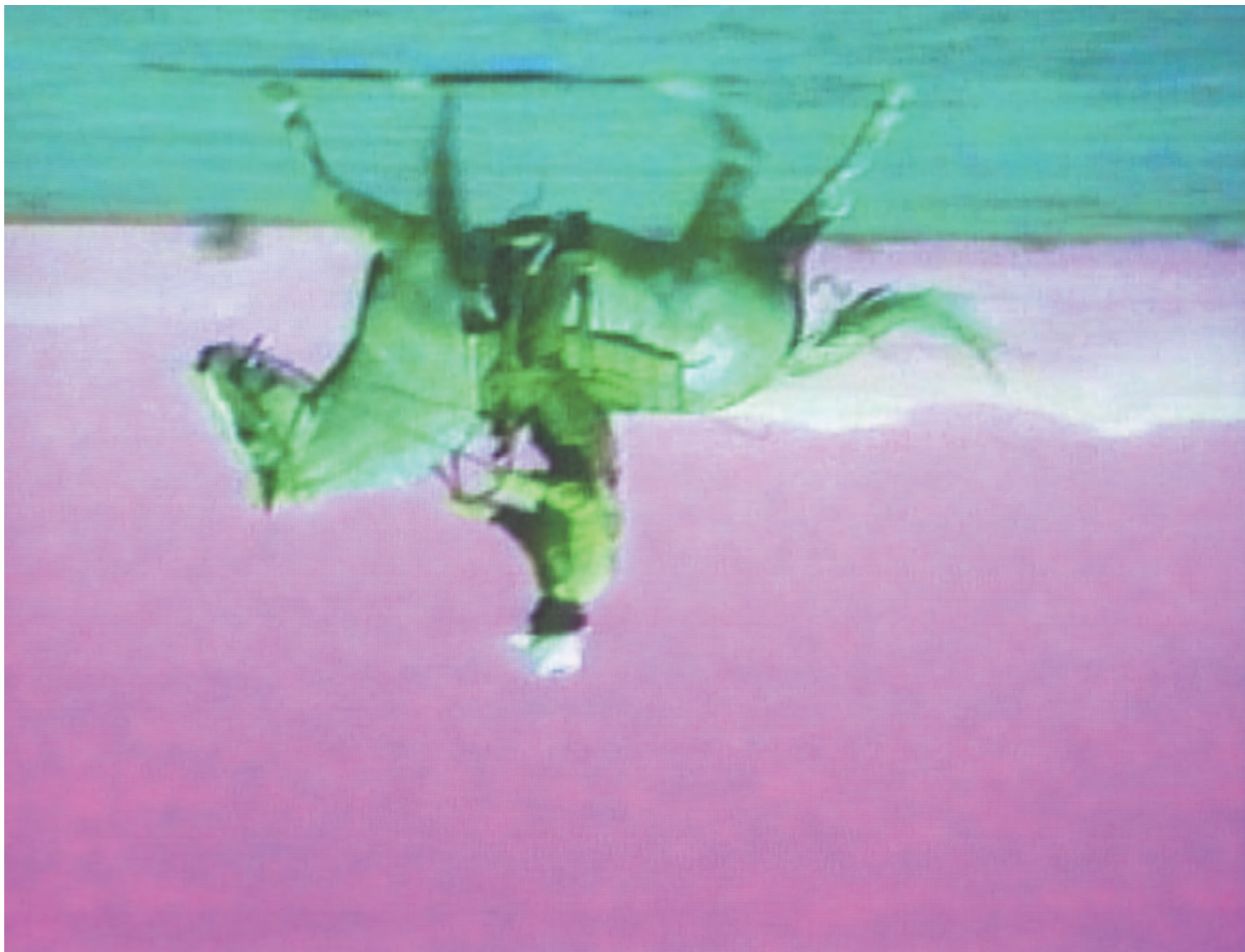
acclaimed the most influential artist alive today. Eschewing a signature style or mode of production, Nauman has explored an exceptionally diverse range of materials and media (video, film, ceramics, assemblage, holography, photography, text etc.) over a career that now spans more than five decades. His art consequently straddles multiple categories and genres: drawing, sculpture, assemblage, installation, environmental, sound and time-based art among them. In short, virtually every cutting-edge mode save painting, which he abandoned in his sophomore year at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Nauman's work entered the public arena in a solo show at a Los Angeles gallery in 1966 that coincided

1. *Contrapposto studies, i through vii*, by Bruce Nauman. 2015–16. Seven-channel video (© 2018 Bruce Nauman; Museum of Modern Art, New York, and Emanuel Hoffmann Foundation, on permanent loan to the Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel; exh. MoMA PS1, New York).

with his graduation that spring from UC Davis, California. Since then it has regularly been featured in both commercial and institutional venues. In 1972, when thirty-one years old, he had his first retrospective. Hosted by the Whitney Museum in New York and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), and co-curated by Marcia Tucker and Jane Livingstone, it then travelled to six other venues, including four in Europe. Additional retrospectives have followed intermittently. So too have more focused shows devoted, for example, to a single medium (Neons at the Baltimore Museum of Art, 1982) or thematic in orientation (see *Samuel Beckett/Bruce Nauman*, which considered his art in relation to that of the writer, for whom he has a long-standing regard.) In addition, Nauman has been a key contributor to such seminal exhibitions as *When Attitudes Become Form* (Kunsthalbe Bern, 1969), and the 1972 edition of *documenta*. In 2009 he represented the United States at the Venice Biennale. What, beyond the obvious goals of contextualising his most recent work within the





fold of a five-decade long arc, and the recruiting of new audiences into his ever-expanding orbit, might we anticipate from yet another survey? If Bruce Nauman: *Disappearing Acts* offers no major discoveries aside from a medley of lesser- and little-known drawings (Fig.3), and ploughs no new theoretical terrain, this is not a limitation. The increasingly rare experience of encountering a broad sweep of works by an exceptional artist in full flight is cause enough for celebration.

That is not to say that the New York presentation of the exhibition is ideal. Hosted by the Museum of Modern Art, the retrospective is splayed across two sites. In Queens, at MoMA PS1, it occupies three floors of the former school house, installed

in both large and tiny rooms whose minimal refurbishment retains much of the feel of the building's original structure. Low-key, rough-and-ready, these galleries suit the work well, as does the institution's labyrinthine circulation. With no predetermined route imposed by the curator Kathy Halbreich and her team, viewers are left to wander at will. Works are assembled sometimes in accordance with chronology, as in the grouping of early pieces in a modest corner gallery on the second floor, and sometimes by medium, as in the case with the drawings that fill a corridor-like gallery on the floor above. Elsewhere, individual rooms are given over to single stand-out works, *Green horses* (Fig.2), for example. To an unusual degree, Nauman has let his gallerists

and, in their wake, his exhibition curators take charge: 'Once the work is out of the studio it's up to someone else how it gets shown'. Taking their cues from the building, while deferring to Nauman's restless shifting course – constantly changing materials and mediums, or circling back to previous concerns in order or take up deferred options – the curators' light-handed approach assumes that viewers know how to get on with it.

This approach fares less well in Manhattan, where the show occupies the full sixth floor of MoMA's headquarters. Following the opening salvo – a small gallery containing a dense presentation of early work in fibreglass, resin and metal, much of it based on the dimensions and

**2. Still from *Green horses*, by Bruce Nauman. 1988. Video installation (© 2018 Bruce Nauman; Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo NY, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; exh. MoMA PS1, New York).**

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form of the artist's body (Fig.4) – the presentation quickly devolves into a sampler, a synthetic prefiguration of the more fulsome display in Queens. More dutiful than galvanising, this part of the show feels enervated. A bolder, more provocative presentation that framed front and centre a few ineffably cutting-edge works might have been both compelling and affecting. What if the cavernous and corporate white cube was converted into darkened boxes? What if those video works from

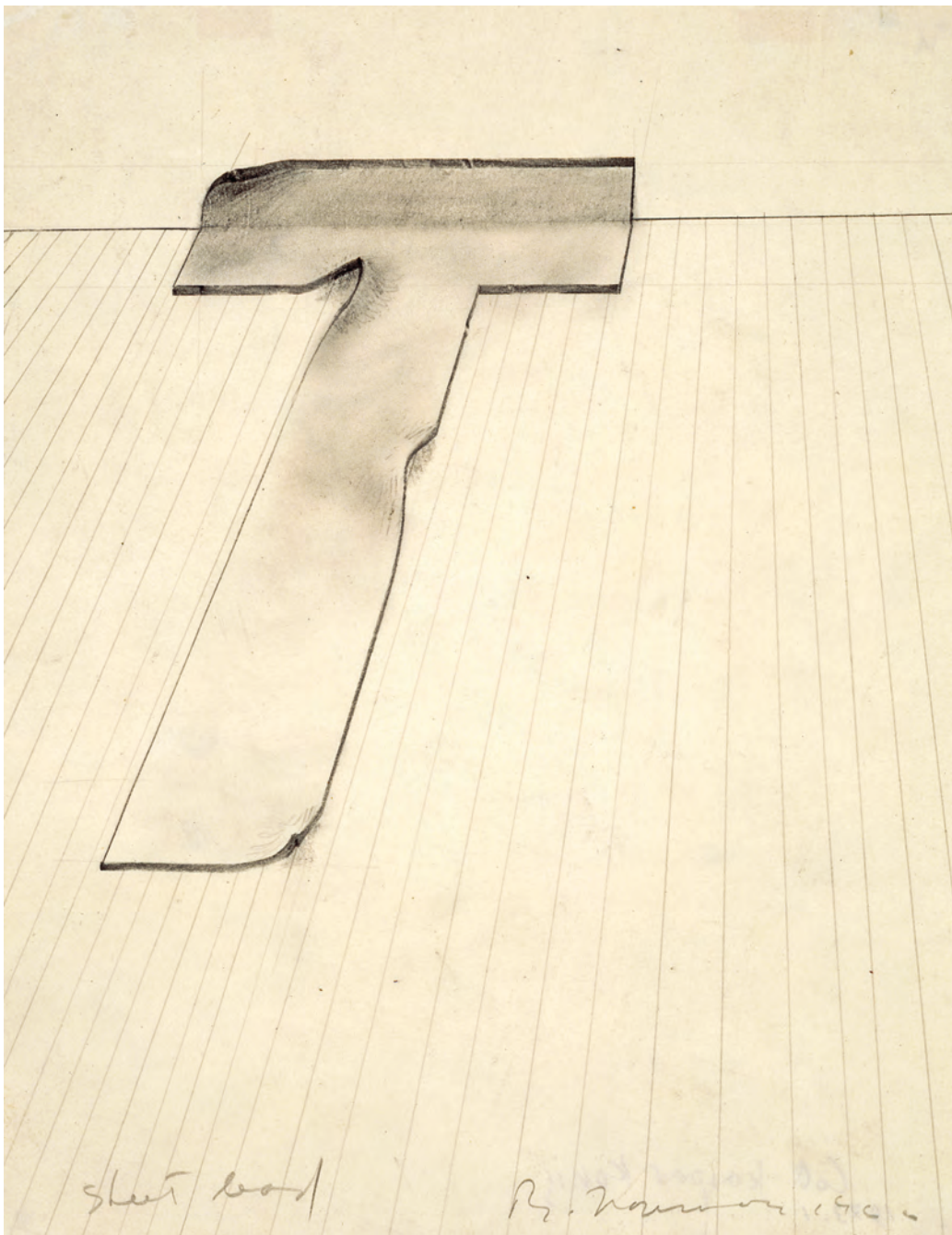
3. *Sheet lead*, by Bruce Nauman. 1966. Pencil, 27.9 by 21.6 cm. (© 2018 Bruce Nauman; Emanuel Hoffmann Foundation, on permanent loan to the Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel; exh. MoMA PS1, New York).

the 1960s that indelibly impacted Riley were juxtaposed with the monumental *Mapping the studio 1* (2002; Dia Art Foundation, New York), in which nocturnal invaders – mice, moths and more – take over the premises, followed by the most recent projections (Fig.1), in which the ageing artist restages his fey *Walk with contrapposto* from 1968. Such a grouping would not merely counter the museum's inhospitable 'neutral' spaces, but home attention on the artist's lair, the site where he

reliably conjures gold from the most humble of means.

While recognising the centrality of Nauman's work to the course of art over the last half century, this retrospective is premised on the claim that the artist has largely been an absent presence. At the end of the 1960s Nauman told Marcia Tucker, one of the first and still among the most astute curators to have championed his work, that 'being an artist has to do with a way of life, because you can choose what to do every day'. In 1979 Nauman relocated to New Mexico, where he began to divide his time between the studio and the ranch on which he still breeds and trains quarter horses. From time to time these seemingly disparate activities intersect, in works such as the video *Setting a good corner* (1999; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles), in which he learns the rudiments of fence-making. But what this 'way of life' encompasses stretches far beyond rural exploits, as evidenced in works informed by the artist's abiding interest in gestalt psychology, sociology, linguistic philosophy, literature of various types, music and much more. Such pursuits have, in turn, provided disciplinary and theoretical frameworks through which critics and historians probe his art. Famously laconic and private, Nauman has granted few interviews over his long career to contest such readings.

The publication accompanying *Bruce Nauman: Disappearing Acts* appears aimed at a scholarly as well as an exhibition audience.<sup>2</sup> It includes essays by some eighteen contributors from several generations, art and film historians, theorists of various persuasion, two artists and a choreographer. Several texts usefully challenge entrenched if glib interpretations of his work, like those that routinely read it in terms of behaviourist or sociological studies. Others foreground questions rife at this moment but hitherto largely ignored. Foremost among these is the subject of white masculinity, which has prompted searching, exigent essays by Ralph Lemon, Nicolas Guagnini, Thomas Beard





4. *Wax impressions of the knees of five famous artists*, by Bruce Nauman. 1966. Fibreglass and polyester resin, 39.7 by 216.5 by 7 cm. (© 2018 Bruce Nauman; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; exh. Museum of Modern Art, New York).

and Taylor Walsh. The abstracted design on book's wrap-around cover is revealed on close scrutiny to be an inverted image of a vast unmodulated landscape, whose lurid purple and green hues betray its origins in video footage. Confined to the jacket's spine is a distant figure: a cowboy on horseback. Backlit, the rider is hard to identify – as are the bounds of his gaze.

1 B. Riley: 'Nauman's formalism' [1999], reprinted in R. Kudielka, ed.: *The Eye's Mind: Bridget Riley Collected Writings 1965–1999*, London 1999, pp.212–16

2 Catalogue: *Bruce Nauman: Disappearing Acts*. Edited by Kathy Halbreich. 356 pp. incl. 250 col. ill. (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2018), \$75. ISBN 978-1-63345-031-8. The decision to replace the standard artist's biography with an annotated 'Selected exhibition history' underscores the curatorial approach. Spanning 1966 to 2017, the list of shows is amplified by short accounts by the curatorial assistant Taylor Walsh, whose hallmark is a discerning eye for the telling detail and a sharp ear for understated wit.

### Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms: Art, Word, War

British Library, London  
19th October 2018–19th February

by RORY NAISMITH

The British Library's exhibition on Anglo-Saxon kingdoms is a triumph on two levels. Not only is it a magnificent

display of early medieval masterpieces, but it also reclaims the intellectual high ground for the Anglo-Saxons at a time when the label 'Anglo-Saxon' is tainted by its use in some quarters as a byword for racial essentialism and when Britain finds itself in the midst of a debate over its future in Europe and the world. The exhibition mounts a resolute rejoinder to the perception that the people of England in the era between the collapse of Roman rule in the 5th century and the Norman Conquest in 1066 were isolated, primitive or ignorant.

To make this point, the exhibition has brought together a unique body of written artefacts. Probably the single most impressive item is the gargantuan Codex Amiatinus (cat. no.34), the oldest surviving single-volume Latin bible, over one thousand large pages in length, written at Wearmouth-Jarrow at the beginning of the eighth century. This is the first time the Codex has returned to Britain since its departure in 716. In the full-page illumination of the dedication page (Fig.7), a scribe at work in front of an open cupboard containing a nine-volume bible is identified by inscription as the Old Testament prophet Ezra. Another manuscript returning from Italy for the first time in a millennium is the so-called Vercelli Book (Biblioteca

Capitolare, Vercelli; no.87), a collection of religious prose and verse texts written in the tenth century. By securing its loan, the British Library has achieved the unprecedented feat of bringing together in one display case the four main manuscripts of Old English verse, consisting of the Vercelli Book, the Bodleian's Junius Manuscript (no.89), Exeter Cathedral's Exeter Book (no.90) and the British Library's *Beowulf* manuscript (no.86).

Most of the 180 items chosen to illustrate the richness of Anglo-Saxon learning and written culture are books, but there are also letters and charters, which are mounted in frames on walls, while a smaller selection of objects broadens the picture of engagement with the written word. They range from inscribed coins, brooches and a miniature portable sundial from the tenth century (no.105; Fig.6) to a full-size replica of the eighth-century Ruthwell Cross – a stone sculpture, some 5.5 metres high, on which is carved a poem in Old English runes. The curators have taken pains to ensure that each item is comprehensible. Captions generally strike a good balance between academic depth and accessibility, and for virtually all the books on display a panel highlights meaningful portions of the text and offers a translation, unlocking the Latin and Old English contents for visitors. Even so, the wealth of material on offer is almost overwhelming, and the exhibition is best appreciated with reference to the lavish catalogue, which is limited only by the brevity of the text allocated to each object and by the frustrating decision to provide only a few citations of scholarship per item, with no specific page references.<sup>1</sup>

It is inevitable in any exhibition that depends so heavily on the written word that the manuscripts themselves serve a dual role, as both work of art and metonym – many of the books on display are astoundingly beautiful and charged with visual meaning, but the single visible opening of two pages in each book also represents the manuscript's contents and its historical importance. Both aspects are explored in the exhibition. Its first half is essentially structured