

Images of a Moving Self: Plotinus and Bruce Nauman

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What follows is an exploration of the relation between Plotinus' thought and the work of Bruce Nauman, one of the most prolific and controversial artists of our times. My primary aim is to examine the way in which Nauman and Plotinus engage in a similar problematic concerning the relation between art and self, between the project of being a self and the project of being an artist. Both Plotinus' and Nauman's works are informed by a concentrated interest in the relationship between selfhood and art. A distinctive mark of Plotinus' philosophy is a pioneering account of soul and selfhood developed in tandem with a carefully constructed defence of creativity and art. Nauman's work is particularly pertinent because the issue of the self is a constant thematic pre-occupation explored, in ways informed by Nauman's highly self-reflective attitude towards (his) art, in a variety of media and their combinations, from short films and video art, to photographs, performance pieces, installations, or sculptures.

There have been various attempts to bring Plotinian philosophy into contact with contemporary aesthetics and art, although very rarely, if at all, with video art and

film.¹ Regardless of their particular aims, these attempts raise the issue of the relevance of Plotinus' thought for understanding the changes in the practice and theory of art triggered by the various artistic movements of the late 19th and early 20th century.² This relevance is thus assessed by the extent to which the deployment of Plotinian thought can enrich our understanding of contemporary art. Hence the movement of understanding in this kind of approach is invariably one-way: from Plotinus to contemporary art. In this chapter I will juxtapose Plotinus and Nauman in an attempt to enrich our understanding of both figures. This attempt does not consist in an historical enquiry: there is no evidence that Nauman has read Plotinus, and there are no direct historical links connecting them. Rather, I argue, that if, in some properly qualified sense, both Plotinus and Nauman engage with the same problematic, namely the question of selfhood, then the similarities and differences between their respective engagements with it are not just illuminating of Nauman's creative output, but they can also shed some light on Plotinus' thought.

The first section presents a synoptic overview of Plotinus' conception of art and Nauman's artistic project, thus setting the stage for the encounter between a philosopher and an artist. The second section outlines the problematic of human selfhood and its connection with art both in Plotinus and Nauman. With this necessary context in place, the third section proceeds to the discussion of Nauman's engagement with the issue of the self, with constant reference to relevant Plotinian themes, through an examination of three particularly pertinent and interconnected works, delivered in different media. At its core lies the interpretation of *Live-Taped Video Corridor* (1970), an installation that relies heavily on video art, informed and further enriched

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1. One such rare occasion linking Plotinus to film is Botz-Bornstein (2004).
 2. For example, Alexandrakis 2002, focuses on the relevance of Plotinus' notion of beauty in a contemporary context; Beierwaltes 2002, offers a broader overview of selected relevant themes.

by the discussion of *From Hand to Mouth* (1967) and *Lighted Performance Box* (1969).

I Philosophy and Art

Plotinus' reflections on art are embedded within a broader philosophical discourse on beauty, which in turn has a systematic function in the context of Plotinus' metaphysics, epistemology, and psychology. *Prima facie*, this is hardly a promising starting point for establishing the relevance of a Plotinian framework with regard to contemporary art, since its philosophical presuppositions are quite foreign to the metaphysical principles of Neoplatonism. Plotinus adopts a broader notion of beauty than the modern one, which, after Kant, restricts beauty to sensibility; and he treats art as belonging to the order of nature, in contrast to the contemporary understanding of art that, after Hegel, places it firmly within history (Hegel 1975: 2, 9–11). However, the very fact that Plotinus elaborates his conception of art on the basis of systematic philosophical considerations, without actually taking into account the specific characteristics of works of art or artistic practices historically available to him, strengthens surprisingly the prospect of establishing the relevance that his reflections on art may have for us today.

Consider in this light Plotinus' well-known defence of art against its nameless "despisers," a passage that encapsulates the essence of his understanding of art:

But if anyone despises the arts because they produce their works by imitating nature, we must tell him, first, that natural things are imitations too. Then he must know that the arts do not simply imitate what they see, but they run back up to the forming principles from which nature derives; (...) For Pheidias too did not make his Zeus from any model perceived by the senses, but understood what Zeus would look like if he wanted to make himself visible. (*Enn.* v 8, 1, 32-41)³

3. Plotinus' text is that of Henry and Schwyzer 1964–82, and translations follow, with frequent revisions, Armstrong 1966–88.

In this passage, it is relatively easy to disregard the art-historical implications of the reference to Pheidias' statue of Zeus. Plotinus (who most probably had not actually seen the statue) merely uses it as an example of a work of art widely considered to be successful, without drawing any normative conclusions regarding the acceptable form, content, or medium of works of art.⁴ It is rather more difficult to disregard Plotinus' metaphysical assumption, i.e., the Platonic claim that sensible nature in general should be conceived as an image that imitates a beautiful intelligible world, and its immediate implication with regard to art that the norm of the successful work of art is the sensible presentation of this beauty, already visible in natural objects.

However, this passage already suggests two important points for the interpretation of this implication. First, it is not the primary function of art to present in some way sensible objects: nothing material is, for Plotinus, beautiful in itself and thus worthy of artistic imitation. This is because, second, Plotinian beauty is not essentially a matter of some (definite or indefinite) sensible characteristic of an object stimulating the spectator in the appropriate (pleasurable) way,⁵ but rather a question of the success with which sensible objects can be naturally or artificially motivated to exhibit intelligible content. In other words, for Plotinus, art is essentially symbolic or conceptual, it presents meanings not things. Accordingly, works of art should be considered as "metaphors," "translations," "symbols" or "interpretations" of meanings in sensible or material terms, to be judged not on the basis of any notion of verisimilitude (their

4. For a historical examination of the issues raised by this passage, see Kuisma 2003: 83–131, including additional references to the relevant literature (Plotinus' conventional use of Pheidias' statue is documented in 120–122).

5. Plotinus argues explicitly against an understanding of beauty in terms of sensible (formal or material) qualities in i 6, 1 and vi 7, 22. He notes the intimate link between beauty and pleasure (e.g., in i 6, 1, 18–19; 2 2–4; 4 13–18), but attributes this pleasure to the affinity that the spectator's soul feels for the intelligible content made sensibly present through the form of the beautiful object (see i 6, 3, 1–9).

adequacy to their apparent objects within the order of sensibility), but rather in terms of the “metaphoric” effectiveness of the link to meaning they establish.⁶

This conception of art can be further illuminated if we situate it within Plotinus’ understanding of human creativity in general. Plotinus clearly subordinates the practical capacities and interests of the human subject to her theoretical ones by claiming both that the theoretical availability of an object is a necessary condition for its successful creation, and that the essential purpose of the creation of an object is to make it available to its creator as an object of theoretical contemplation.⁷ These claims, implicated in Plotinus’ “defence” of the artist as someone who has prior theoretical access to the intelligible item she wants to “translate” into sensible terms, clearly imply that creative activity cannot possess any value of its own, since it is not undertaken for its own sake, but rather so that “the finished product would be an object or a form of contemplation” (iii 8, 7, 8–10). One could indeed wonder what the point of any creative activity of this kind is, since its purpose seems to be the contemplative recovery of a theoretical object already available at the beginning of the creative process. How can Plotinus assert at the same time that one has to know something in order to make it and to make it in order to know it?

One way to resolve this tension at a broad metaphysical level would be to say that Zeus wills to make himself visible, assigning thus to artists this mediating task. Differently put, meaning, even if otherwise available through philosophical contemplation in its pure intelligibility, must be “interpreted” in sensible or material configurations, so that nothing remains without its proper share of meaning in the whole of reality.⁸ Another way would be to account for the function of art (or other practical

6. For a more elaborate discussion of the claims made here about Plotinus’ conception of art, and his notion of creativity, see Vassilopoulou 2014: 493–498.

7. “Some wisdom makes all the things which have come into being, whether they are products of art or nature” (v 8, 5, 1–3), while “action is for the sake of contemplation and vision, so that for men of action, too, contemplation is the goal” (iii 8, 6, 1–2).

8. “Creating is bringing a form into being, and this is filling all things with contemplation” (iii 8, 7,

activities) with reference to agents who, although motivated by a desire to contemplate, cannot satisfy it directly, and thus “what they cannot get by going straight to it, so to speak, they seek to obtain by going round about” (iii 8, 6, 1–4). According to Plotinus, what characterises these agents is a certain deficiency, an inability to satisfy their contemplative interests internally through pure thinking. For this reason, they have to “utter” (*pro-pherein* as in *meta-pherein*), articulate, or express through creative projects the relevant objects, “with a view to examining, trying to learn thoroughly” (iii 8, 6, 28–29) what in a sense they already “possess,” even if they cannot have it directly available as “present in their soul” (iii 8, 6, 6). In this case, the object is not sufficiently known at the beginning of the creative process to guide it securely; however, it is available as an intimation strong enough to prompt and orientate a creative process aiming at its clarification.

These remarks give us a sense of Plotinus’ conception of art and enable us to address the issue of its broad applicability to contemporary art. One way to assess it is by comparing Plotinus’ conception with substantive conceptions of art that take into account contemporary developments in the art world. A good example would be Arthur Danto’s conditions for art: “first that works of art are always about something, and hence have a content or meaning; and second that to be a work of art something had to embody its meaning” (Danto 2000: 132), i.e., “to show what [it is] about” (Danto 2000: 133). Or, in Noël Carroll’s gloss, “to discover a mode of presentation that is intended to be appropriate to its meaning” (Carroll 1997: 386).

Danto’s conception seems particularly suited to contemporary art since it avoids any reference to the modern notion of the aesthetic (to the aesthetic experience of the subject or the aesthetic properties of the object), which would appear unnecessarily restrictive in the contemporary context. Instead, it concentrates on the minimal re-

22–23); cf. iv 7, 13, 5–7, i 6, 7, 31–33.

quirement that a work of art must be an appropriately motivated sign, a sign that in some way points to its meaning through its sensible or material form.⁹ This brings Danto quite close to Plotinus, whose understanding of beauty is directly connected to the work's power to make meaning visible rather than being limited to its aesthetic qualities. In this light, Plotinus' claim that Pheidias intended to create a work revealing what "Zeus would look like if he wanted to make himself visible" (v 8, I, 4I) captures brilliantly Danto's contention that the work of art must embody its meaning.

Turning now to Bruce Nauman, who first appeared in the art-scene in the 1960s, one is clearly impressed by the volume and diversity of his work ranging,

from drawings done by an obviously deft and talented hand, through freestanding objects that all but the most reactionary academic would agree to call sculpture, to neon signs, esoteric installations, aggressively matter-of-fact videos, to what is often called Body Art, to playing games with language, and pure "sound" pieces. (Plagens 2014: 14)

This diversity of artistic practices and media, frequently combined in specific works, the thematic and conceptual complexity of the works and the many ways in which the relation between the artist, the work, and the audience is articulated, make it hard to place Nauman's creative output under an all-inclusive medium, style, or theme, even leading to "the realization that his oeuvre is an unmappable universe" (Battle 2009: 85).¹⁰ In this sense, a philosophical conception of art that relies on aesthetic notions, or a definite objective associated with the artist or the audience, or an art historical theory constructed around individual arts or distinct media, is clearly of limited use as a framework for understanding Nauman's artistic practice.

9. Danto defends his essentially Hegelian conception of art in the context of contemporary art in Danto 1997.

10. A recent overview of Nauman's work is Plagens 2014, with further references to previous studies; Benezra 2002b provides a useful survey up to the mid-90s. Nauman 2003 is a collection of texts and interviews by Nauman himself; Morgan 2002a is a useful collection of essays, reviews and documents; Lewallen 2007 is a study of Nauman's work in the 1960s, the period on which this chapter focuses.

Instead, a broadly Plotinian approach, in which the work of art is essentially an embodied object of contemplation, resonates strongly with Nauman's conceptualism expressed through "the principle that the idea must prevail over its formal realization" (Benezra 2002a: 92). The impression generated when surveying Nauman's art is that works and projects correspond to the reflective statement or investigation of theoretical problems that he approaches "systematically, even if he often pushes their inner logic to absurdity" (van Bruggen 1988: 105). This aspect, which is clearly linked to Nauman's well-documented background interest in philosophy and especially Wittgenstein (e.g., Nauman 2003: 127, 131; Amman 1986; Pirenne 2013: 48–54), implies that the engagement of the viewer with Nauman's works is essentially cognitive, i.e., attempt to come to terms with conceptual questions and puzzles.

Certainly, for both Plotinus and Nauman, this engagement is also physical and psychological, as is proper to embodied individuals who engage with embodied meanings. For Plotinus, this may be the main shortcoming of art when compared to philosophy; and it is strongly pronounced in Nauman, whose artistic investigations have nothing "refined" or "subtle," as they are typically pursued through material or sensory configurations that, even when minimalistic, tend towards the "blatant, [the] startling, [the] confrontational" (Wallach 2002: 36). If artistic creativity is related to a demand for "filling all things with contemplation" (iii 8, 7, 23), for turning everything into an object of thought, Nauman is thus an extreme Plotinian artist in his insistence that even the most resistant material (the elementary, the gross, the cheap, the apparently random, the sophomoric, the industrial, the boringly matter-of-fact) is not immune to the infusion of meaning. In this sense, "the basic working mode" of Nauman appears indeed as a combination of "a visceral conceptualism and a bluntly conceptual sense" (Plagens 2014: 72) of art.

2 Making and Knowing the Self

Plotinus' views on art and creativity pertain also to the specific theoretical problematic of human selfhood which provides the focus for the present discussion. The starting point of Plotinus' account is a metaphysical conception of the soul as a separate entity that in significant respects resembles the "deficient" creators indicated previously. Although, in general, the soul has access to the intelligible world of meaning (i.e., it is capable of contemplating noetic objects directly), it does not contain its own origin within itself: the soul itself is an image of a higher metaphysical principle, the Intellect. Hence, the soul is not available to itself as a secure object of a self-constitutive contemplation through which it could achieve and sustain a self-sufficient identity (see, for example, the comparison between the soul and the Intellect in iv 4, 1-4). In simpler terms, since the soul does not make itself directly, it cannot know itself immediately and vice versa. In order to address this "deficiency," the soul has two opposing yet at the same time mutually dependent resources, one theoretical and one practical. The first is to withdraw within itself in order to recollect in contemplation its original simple identity, to know itself without making itself. The second is to project itself into a series of images, in order to make itself without fully knowing itself. The process of projection is equivalent to the constitution of the embodied human individual, the human self: the structure of the soul taken together with the series of images it generates corresponds to the full biological and psychological reality of the human individual (iv 3, 12, 1-12).

This projection is essentially creative: the soul creates or shapes its embodiment as an image of itself, and thus "externalizes" or "translates" itself into a sensible, material configuration.¹¹ In this sense, being a self becomes a special and important case of

11. Note that this embodiment is not merely the biological or material body of the individual; Plotinus is not thinking in terms of a Cartesian dualism of mind and matter. Rather, the soul's embodiment

being engaged in a creative project, one that is similar to the project of the artist. This similarity is underlined in a well-known passage from the treatise “On Beauty,” where Plotinus describes the project of being a self in terms of a self-creation to be accomplished in the way a sculptor works on a statue:

Go back into yourself and look; and if you do not yet see yourself beautiful, then, just as someone making a statue which has to be beautiful cuts away here and polishes there and makes one part smooth and clears another till he has given his statue a beautiful face, so you too must cut away excess and straighten the crooked and clear the dark and make it bright, and never stop working on your statue till the divine glory of virtue shines out on you, till you see self-mastery enthroned upon its holy seat. (i 6, 9, 7-16)

This passage can be considered as metaphorical in an ordinary, rhetorical, sense, establishing an analogy between a sculptor working on a statue and an “I” working on a self. However, the metaphor is more complex and substantial from a philosophical point of view, relying on another set of analogies with ontological significance for Plotinus: as the statue is a link established through a transfer (literally *metaphora*) between Zeus and a piece of gold and ivory, the self is a link established through a transfer between the I or soul and its sensible embodiment.¹²

The constitution of the self is a process of self-creation, and thus its various elements point back to the same entity, the soul: the soul (*qua* creator) creates an image of itself (hence becoming a work), so that it (*qua* spectator) can then contemplate itself in its work. This multiplicity is the direct result of the inability of the soul to occupy simultaneously the roles of the creator and the spectator: to know itself as it makes itself and to make itself as it knows itself without any remainder, i.e., without the need for an external work that will mediate this process. Moreover, it establishes

includes everything that pertains to the interaction of an individual with sensible reality (e.g., one’s sensations, memories, pleasures, concerns, practical activities, actions).

12. These brief remarks cannot, of course, capture the full complexity of the Plotinian embodied self. For a detailed discussion, see Remes 2007.

an internal distance, extension or displacement within the soul that, in its various expressions, determines essentially the structure of the self. In this sense, being a self is, for Plotinus, a direct consequence of the inability of the soul to be fully and immediately present to itself that results in its diffraction in a spatial-temporal spectrum.

Physical space is a result of the soul's embodiment, or more appropriately for Plotinus, the body's ensoulment: "The universe extends as far as soul goes; its limit of extension is the point to which in going forth it has soul to keep it in being" (iv 3, 9, 46–48). However, the diffraction of the soul results also in the distinction between the external and the internal, the distance between the interiority of the soul and the exteriority of its sensible image or its other creative works. This is the distance, for example, between what I mean or intend and what I say or do, between the work as conceived and the work as executed. For Plotinus, it marks the weakening of soul's metaphysical identity through the generation of self-images characterized by increasing alterity. Time is also a result of the soul's embodiment "for we maintain that we grasp time in its essential nature as around the activity of the soul and deriving from it" (iv 4, 15, 3–5). In the life of the embodied individual, time is implicated in the distance between the creative moment of self-projection and the reflective moment of self-recognition in the projected image, as complicated by the ever present possibility of a recollection of soul's original condition. In terms of Plotinus' metaphor of the statue, this is the distance between first working on your statue, then pause in order to see if indeed you can recognise yourself in the result, i.e., recognize a vision of yourself available to you only as a recollection. From the point of view of the soul as a metaphysical entity, these conditions, to use a Kantian formulation, are merely conditions of experience: the soul, being itself outside space and time, must experience its works in space and time, side by side, or one after the other. But for the self, conceived as the link between the soul and its embodied image, these are conditions of

being: the self is itself a constantly changing multiplicity, finding at any moment itself side by side with itself or before and after itself.

We could then say that the project of being a self essentially amounts to managing the tensions and risks inherent in this fragmented condition of the soul with the help of its theoretical and practical capacities. For Plotinus, as I have already suggested, the final imperative of this task seems to be theoretical. The primary aim, as defined by the Delphic oracle, is to “know yourself,” since, as he puts it in a way which would certainly have delighted Nietzsche or Freud, this is the appropriate task for

those who because of their selves’ multiplicity have the business of counting themselves up and learning that they do not know all of the number and kind of things they are, or do not know any of them, not what their ruling principle is or by what they are themselves. (vi 7, 41, 22-26)

The primacy of the theoretical delimits the scope of the corresponding practical imperative: one has to “make” oneself only to the extent that this contributes to the project of “knowing” oneself. However, behind this demand for self-knowledge lies a deeper quest for soul overcoming its fragmented condition, since the distinctive mark of contemplation is that it “unifies more, so what knows, in so far as it knows (...) comes into unity with what is known” (iii 8, 6, 16–17). In this sense, the primacy of the theoretical “know yourself” over the practical “make yourself” reflects both the importance that Plotinus attaches to the more fundamental “unify yourself” as the ultimate aim of the project of being a self and a certain evaluation as to how one can achieve this kind of self-identity.

Regardless of Plotinus’ specific primacy of the theoretical over the practical, it is clear that being a self defines a project that is both philosophical and artistic. Thus, in one sense, to successfully engage with this project entails that each one of us has to be in turns a philosopher and an artist. In another sense, the project itself can be a common preoccupation of philosophers and artists; it can be fruitfully explored both

in philosophical and artistic ways. An artistic exploration of this kind is clearly evidenced throughout Nauman's work. His preoccupation with the issue of the self is so central that it leads, for example, Robert Morgan to attribute to Nauman both a "persistence in exploring art as an investigation of the self" (Morgan 2002b: 1) and a resolve "to think about art as a phenomenon of the self" (Morgan 2002b: 14), capturing thus the *raison d'être* of art itself, or the task of the artist, in terms of the theoretical and practical interests that guide and sustain the project of being a self.

This constant reflection on the possibilities and limits of the artistic representation, expression, or communication of the self may well underlie Nauman's "eventual contribution," the transformation of "Minimalism's iconic (platonian) form into something more mutative and psychological" (Auping 2004: 8). It certainly links Nauman to the long artistic tradition of exploring this theme¹³ and it is expressed throughout his creative output in a variety of ways. Thematically, there are works concerned with one's own body or physical self, with the self considered as a social mechanism, with the confrontation between human individuality and modern mass society, or the relation between the private and the public. Nauman's engagement with selfhood is expressed through works that typically blur, or even eliminate, the traditional separation between the artist, the work, and the audience, inserting the experience of the (actual) artist or the (actual) viewer into the very core of the work. In terms of media, even in the short period between 1966–1970 to which this discussion is limited, Nauman pursues issues pertaining to selfhood through short films, videos, photographs, performances, sculptures, and installations combining these media in different ways. In respect to their theme, each of the three works to be discussed in the following section contributes a particular angle to the problematic of selfhood; while being of different

13. "The investigation of self by someone truly interested in exploring and then restating the self in visual terms lies fully in keeping with the traditional art values of representation and communication of self" (Goodman 2002: 29).

kind, in terms of media and techniques, they highlight the interconnectedness of Nauman's artistic output.

3 Works and Words

From Hand to Mouth (1967) is one of Nauman's early and best-known sculptures. The work is a wax cast on cloth of a hand, arm, and mouth, hung on the wall at a height that gives the impression that it belongs to a real human being, albeit invisible as a whole. Nauman himself described that period of his work as a time when he "was forced to examine [him]self, and what [he] was doing [in the studio]"; this self-examination included an interest in using his own body in his work, which often "took the form of acting out puns" (Nauman 2003, 118).¹⁴ Nauman's fascination with the possibility of a literal "realization" of linguistic metaphors or puns is evident in *From Hand to Mouth*. We start from the literal meaning of the title, "with barely enough money or food to satisfy immediate needs," which is then captured metaphorically in the expression "from hand to mouth," which is further transferred and literally embodied in a three-dimensional material medium. This double movement, from the linguistic to the material/visual and from the metaphorical to the literal, raises several issues. Some take the form of allusions pertaining to language: its origin and nature (the emergence of speech out of gesture, i.e., in a movement from hand to mouth; the analogy between language and tools)¹⁵ or the need of a context for the appreciation of meaning: a de-contextualized expression, "cut off" from the fabric of

14. See Wagner 2007: 55–56 for a discussion of the significance of the period for the emergence of Nauman's artistic identity. Nauman discusses further his interest in puns in Nauman 2003: 159. About his influences and objectives in such works, see Lewallen 2007: 48–49; for a broader discussion of this tendency in American art, see Bowman 1985.

15. Leroi-Gourhan's *Le Geste et la parole*, an attempt at a unified theory linking language, gesture, technology, and art in the context of human evolution was published in France in 1964. According to Storr, *From Hand to Mouth* "constitutes an aesthetic equation relating the work of hands to the workings of language, the manipulation of matter to that of words" (2002: 157).

language, is presented aesthetically as a “mutilated appendage” (De Michelis 2009: 69).

However, the central issue thematized directly by the work is the very notion of the work of art as an object of embodied meaning. The literalization of meaning results in a work that seems to bypass the issue of understanding art, by trapping the spectator in an unsatisfactory vacuous movement from one metaphor to another that misses altogether the encounter with meaning, displaying a “linguistic primitivism in which the gap between signifier and signified is imagined to be closed” (Miller 1995: 127). In one sense, by looking at *From Hand to Mouth* “what you see is what you get” (Goodman 2002: 30): the meaning of the work is as deadly obvious as any tautology; in another sense, “somewhere between an expression of poverty and a literal measurement from one part of the body to another,” “meaning is suspended” (Morgan 2002b: 5). Nauman’s strategy clearly takes “the risks inherent to all art posed as metaphysics: trivialization and self-regard” (Goodman 2002: 30). Danto’s reading of the work, for example, contends that Nauman’s transformations are “pretty silly,” showing “a certain blindness to meaning or a will to subvert it” (Danto 2002: 152). It is indeed the case that understanding “the image by finding the *cliché* that fits it” (152) does not help us understand what it means to live “from hand to mouth.” In this light, and in order to redeem Nauman’s work, we may take it as a forceful reminder that the intuitive concreteness and density of the artwork is always a matter of a reflective and imaginative encounter with meaning: imitation in the derogatory Platonic sense (the mere replication of something, be it a meaning or an object, in another medium, however literally or realistically) leads to rather impoverished, lifeless, or even “macabre” art.¹⁶

16. Basualdo 2009: 35 notes the work’s “greenish surface, full of detail and somewhat macabre associations”; to these we may add its status as a “relic” (Morgan 2002b: 4) and the impression of hollowness it creates.

However, *From Hand to Mouth* does not simply offer the literal rendering of a randomly chosen metaphorical expression. This expression significantly alludes to a certain kind of human life, while also being a representation of the human body that can be taken, in the most straightforward manner, as an embodied metaphor for the human self. From this point of view, what is actually present in the work points exclusively to the “parts” of the self that establish the points of contact between the internal and the external, the points through which the self interacts causally with the world and thus becomes a part of it available in empirical experience. Along these lines, the distance between hand and mouth must be interpreted differently: if the hand is the point in which the self is externalized, in making, doing, working, transforming the material environment in active independence, then the mouth is the point in which the self internalizes, through ingestion, all the materials necessary for its sustenance in passive dependence on the environment. Thus, the work may be considered as a portrait of the Plotinian artist, for whom some felt lack or deficiency provides the motivation for making, and the project of being a self is exclusively focused on preserving the cycle between transforming the external world and receiving nourishment from it. Its title would be, then, a playful allusion “to the precarious livelihood of artists” (Storr 2002: 157; Hixson 2002: 110), their proverbial difficulty to make ends meet, or, more generally, a comment on the mundane difficulties of human existence, its pervasive fragility, or even the dangers involved in feeding ourselves with what is immediately at hand. However, since the extremely accurate cast of the arm, together with its placement, “[evoke] precisely the totality of the body that the casting process has subtracted” (Basualdo 2009: 35), the stronger suggestion of the work is that a life from hand to mouth is an amputated life.

A way to understand the absence of this palpably evoked body is to take it as a reference to the relation between the artist and the work. If we assume that Nauman’s use of his wife’s body was only a matter of convenience and the cast was meant as an

impression of himself,¹⁷ then the work, which in this case is the literal externalisation of the artist's body, a fragment of the self's outermost manifestation, can be generally considered as the externalisation of the artist's self. An artist can thus present herself through her art (to herself and others) only to the extent that she can turn herself into a work, create an external image of herself that can achieve, however tentatively or misleadingly, an identity of her own as something separate from herself. However, under these conditions, the creator, the "I" behind the work or, in Plotinus' terms, the soul of the artist, has to remain invisible, while the work acts as its trace. This trace is a symbol in the original sense: a token indicating the existence of the whole of which it is but one half. However, in *From Hand to Mouth*, this unification of the external and the internal, the two halves, is not realized: what is presented is precisely the gap between the "I" (that cannot be presented) and its work (that is the presentation). Even if the work is seen as an attempt "to transform intimate subjectivity into objective demonstration" with the maximum conceptual and material austerity, to catch the artist at the moment "he acts and is acted upon" by himself (Tucker 2002: 23), the fact remains that the "I" that acts is visible in *From Hand to Mouth* only through its absence.

This absence contributes clearly to the almost classical poignancy that characterises *From Hand to Mouth*. The way the cast hangs on the wall, its fragmented status, the posture of the face slightly bent downwards, the repose of the hand freely hanging

17. In a 1970 interview to W. Sharp, the interviewer assumes that *From Hand to Mouth* is a wax impression of Nauman's own body; Nauman does not correct this assumption and discusses the work in the context of a question about using his own body in his work (Nauman 2003: 118). In two interviews from 1972 and 1980 (Nauman 2003: 163; 257), Nauman reveals that the model was his wife, pointing that "[i]t's pretty difficult to make a cast of yourself" (257). However, most critics who discuss the work, even after 1980, assume that the cast was taken from Nauman's own body, as acknowledged by Nauman himself in his last comment on the issue: "In that case, the cast was of someone else, not of myself as has generally been assumed—but that doesn't really matter" (Nauman 2003: 324). And later in his career, as Plagens notes, Nauman was "drawing 'self-portraits' in the form of reverse-side—the hollow side—views of plaster casts of what may or may not be (he's not saying) his own face" (Plagens 2014: 28).

without being engaged in any activity, make the work similar to an ancient Greek funerary relief, which is also a symbol (a sema) for an irrevocably lost body.¹⁸ This similarity reveals a discrepancy between the temporal character of the life from hand to mouth, an active life punctuated by preoccupation, lack, effort, satisfaction, and the contemplative temporality fostered upon the spectator, whether sincerely or ironically, by the work. But it is also directly related to the absence of the body: in the same sense that the work does not define a space where the external and the internal aspects of the self are co-presented, it also does not define a time when such co-presentation is possible; thus, the work is essentially elegiac.

If indeed it is the case that for Nauman “exploring art” is “an investigation of the self” (Morgan 2002b: 1), if, in other words, *From Hand to Mouth* is not only about the artist and her body, or the artist and her work, but also about the relation between self-knowledge and self-making, we are left with the question concerning the import of the work. Is the work a forceful affirmation that the distance and the movement between hand and mouth closes upon itself leaving nothing behind, and is Plotinus wrong when he insists that “even with those who practice arts of this kind, there must be something in themselves, something which stays unmoved, according to which they will make their works with their hands” (iii 8, 2, 11–14)? Is it the exploration of the hypothesis that living a life from hand to mouth is an unsatisfactory way to engage in the project of being a self since it amounts to a fragmented life allowing no possibility for self-knowledge? Is it meant in a quasi-transcendental Kantian sense, as a claim that the “I” behind the phenomenal self can never be “shown,” i.e., can never become an object of an intuitive presentation in experience or art? Clearly, there is no

18. In a 1987 interview, Nauman mentions the connection between *From Hand to Mouth* and death masks as pointing to a new meaning that the work had accrued for him 20 years after its completion, beyond its original function as “a visual pun or a picture of a visual pun” (Nauman 2003: 325).

definitive answer to these questions, but we can continue to pursue them by accepting Nauman's invitation to enter his *Live-Taped Video Corridor*.

Live-Taped Video Corridor (1970) is one of Nauman's most successful installations. It consists of a corridor, almost 10 meters long and only 50 centimetres wide, formed by two parallel white wallboards. At the far end of the corridor, there are two video monitors stacked on the floor. The top monitor plays live feed from a camera mounted at the corridor's entrance at a height of about three meters. The bottom monitor features taped footage of the empty corridor from the same angle. On entering the corridor and walking toward the monitors one views oneself on the top monitor, but, given the location of the camera, one sees oneself from behind, diminishing in size (receding) as one approaches the monitor. Moreover, the wide-angle lens of the camera changes the rate of one's movement: as one moves toward the monitor, one's image (of their back) appears to move faster. During this time, the bottom monitor shows the corridor empty.¹⁹

The critical reception of the work (e.g., Krauss 1977: 240–242; Plagens 2014: 130) has stressed the connection of *Live-Taped Video Corridor* to the notion of “theatricality” that Michael Fried attributed to Minimalist art in his seminal 1967 essay “Art and Objecthood” that identified, with a polemical intention, a number of important characteristics of Minimalism. At the core of this theatricality lies the concern “with the actual circumstances in which the beholder encounters” the work of art (Fried 1998: 150), a concern that aims, through the deployment of various elements in the work and its environment, to create a “stage” in which the experience of the work would be “of an object in a situation (...) that (...) includes the beholder” (Fried 1998: 150). In

19. Nauman discusses the work in various interviews in Nauman 2003: 112–115; 262–264; 312. The 1970 *Live-Taped Video Corridor* belongs to a sequence of similar corridor installations that started with *Performance Corridor* (1969), continued with corridors involving mirrors or coloured lights, and culminated in a multi-corridor installation created in 1970 at the Nicholas Wilder Gallery in Los Angeles, of which *Live-Taped Video Corridor* was essentially a part.

other words, the aim of the Minimalist artist is to create not a work containing its meaning or value in itself, but rather to create (the stage for) an experience of the interaction between the work and the spectator, whose participation becomes thus an integral part of the work, while the control of this participatory experience remains with the artist.

In *Live-Taped Video Corridor* this notion of theatricality is fully intensified. The staged interaction between the object and the viewer is transformed on both sides: the viewer becomes an active performer whose physical participation is indispensable for the actualisation of the work, while the object becomes an environmental sculpture entirely dedicated to the manipulation of the participant's experience. At the same time, the artist becomes a director, exercising strict control over the movement and the experience of the participant through the use of physical limitations or technological devices. Thus, "in the process the viewer becomes almost an object—a sculptural element—while external space itself seems to assume agency: overwhelming the spectator (...) as a controlling or disciplining factor" (Kraynak 2003: 24). From another point of view, following Nauman's remarks (Nauman 2003: 112–115), this kind of control seems necessary if the spectator is to successfully replace the artist in the role of the performer of the work: the initial corridor installation was "a construction originally conceived as a frame for a series of actions performed only for the video camera" by Nauman himself (Buskirk 2005: 246, referring to the video work *Walk with Contrapposto*, 1968). Either way, there seems to be a convergence of the spectator, the work, and the artist: the meaning of the work is in the end the embodied experience of the performer during the performance.

In the context of our discussion, the spectator-performer-artist who confronts the corridor wondering whether to enter could be understood as a Plotinian "man of action": an agent with the capacity to create (complex devices like the *Live-Taped Video Corridor* in pursuit of his ends); a capacity to act (walk towards a destination); a con-

sciousness of himself sufficient for this capacity (an awareness of one's position, motion, orientation; a notion of himself as "axiomatically coordinated" (Krauss 1977: 240); and a desire to contemplate (to see what is there to be seen at the end of the corridor). This, as the work shows, is essentially a desire for self-knowledge, a desire to see an image of one's face that cannot be satisfied directly, without the mediation of some external device. This agent resembles the child Dionysus, ready to project his self-image on the mirror made by Hephaestus, the god-artist responsible for the creation of sensible things in the Neoplatonic lore (Proclus, *In Tim.* i 142.24 Diehl), and (mis)recognise himself with pleasure in the image, in a story that, properly understood, reveals, for Plotinus, the truth about the embodiment of an individual soul, i.e., the constitution of the human self through the establishment of an affective bond between the soul and its image based on (mis)recognition (iv 3, 12, 1-12).

Indeed, if a mirror or a camera were at the end of Nauman's corridor, there would be nothing unsettling in the participant's experience. In walking toward it, her self-experience would be in complete harmony with her perception of the process through the reflective surface, while eventually, after the physical and psychological discomfort of going through the narrow corridor, she would be gratified with a self-image that could satisfy (however misleadingly) her desire to see herself, gain self-identity by being simultaneously the subject and object of her vision. This agent however, would run the risk of sharing Narcissus' fate (v 8, 2, 31-36), drowning herself in the attempt to identify with her image. Nauman's corridor eliminates this risk, but in a way that makes the possibility of recognizing oneself even more precarious.

Even if we disregard the bottom monitor that shows an empty corridor, the evidence of the top monitor is still unsettling, since it indicates that an instance of self-identity between subject and object of knowledge is impossible in these conditions. In "spatial" terms, the subject cannot see herself "face to face" but is limited to a view of herself "from the outside," an "outside" that can range from Plotinus' material real-

ity to Foucault's modern technological surveillance mechanisms. In "temporal" terms, the fact that the subject can see herself only from behind, that she cannot look simultaneously at the camera and the monitor, suggests that the self cannot be seen in the act of seeing: the attempt at self-knowledge thus implies an inevitable temporal lag between the subject and the object of knowledge. And, of course, what is even more unsettling is that walking toward the monitor, the only action available to the participant, makes things even worse: she sees herself receding in the image, an experience that undermines the bond of recognition on which the self depends by bringing into consciousness the doubling and displacement of the soul that, for Plotinus, is implicated in its embodiment and the establishment of the self.

Live-Taped Video Corridor questions thus the very coherence of the self. It raises the question "whether this complex mechanism of the self (...) simply exists as an ongoing work-in-process, an aggregate of systemic interventions that have no clear resolution" (Morgan 2002b: 1) and reveals the internal antinomic tensions of this process. In comparison with *From Hand to Mouth*, the introduction of performative participation through the use of video enables Nauman to move from a presentation of the self in its external aspect, a static fragment of a totality that cannot be presented, to a work in which the self is indeed presented as the stage of a dynamic yet somehow incoherent process. This is progress in terms of art's power to investigate the project of being a self, but renders the project itself even more problematic. Bearing this in mind, we proceed to the third and final work.

Lighted Performance Box is a sculpture installation consisting of a vertical rectangular aluminium box measuring 198.1×55.9×50.8 cm and a 1000-watt halogen theatrical lamp contained within it. Although the lamp itself is not visible, its strong light casts a bright reflection on the ceiling above, revealing that the box is hollow and open at the top.

A starting point for interpreting the work is to explore its connection with Minimalism. Initially this connection becomes evident in the stark sculptural shape of the rectangular column that appears as a prototypical Minimalist object, a clear example of “the use of strong gestalt or of unitary type forms to avoid divisiveness” (Robert Morris quoted in Fried 1998: 150). It is also clear with respect to another important effect of the “special complicity that [the Minimalist] work extorts from the beholder” (Fried 1998: 155) in their staged encounter, namely, the transformation of the object into something “like a surrogate person—that is, a kind of statue” (Fried 1998: 155). This impression is typically associated with “the apparent hollowness (...) the quality of having an inside” of many Minimalist works, which leads to a strong anthropomorphism “as though the work in question has an inner, even secret, life” (Fried 1998: 156). As noted (Cross 2003: 13; Lewallen 2007: 89), this kind of anthropomorphism emerges in *Lighted Performance Box* as the cumulative effect of its hollowness, scale, and placement. In this connection, the reconsideration of Pheidias’ artistic mandate to deliver “what Zeus would look like if he wanted to make himself visible” (v 8, 1, 32–41) proves quite suggestive. If Zeus were to be embodied as a physical object, he would have, in abstract terms, to acquire a material “exterior,” which, being material and thus opaque, would run counter to his transparency as an intelligible object. At the same time, the artist should shape this exterior in a way that its intelligible origin could be traced while motivating its contemplative recovery. In sum, Zeus’ statue, like *Lighted Performance Box*, would be an opaque material form capable of guiding our (inner) eyes upwards or inwards towards the (noetic) light that illuminates it. Moreover, given Plotinus’ own “anthropomorphic,” or rather “animistic” assumptions about art, that is, his claim that any work of art, regardless of its specific content, is, as a work of the soul, a “lifelikeness” (vi 7, 22, 30–32) of its creator in which the soul “sees something akin to it or a trace of its kindred reality” (i 6,

2, 9–10), this “generic” work of art can be equally well considered as a statue of the artist, the spectator, or the human being.

Nauman’s regress to the most obvious “Platonic” configuration of the human being in *Lighted Performance Box* (the material container of the body outside; the immaterial light of the soul inside) enables him to overcome the fragmentation evident in *From Hand to Mouth*. Moreover, the way he develops this configuration destabilizes the rigid distinctions that structure it (inside/outside, light/darkness) in the direction of a greater unification. The light, with its source hidden inside the container but pouring through the open top, renders visible the exterior of the container, that is, the very thing that makes it invisible, revealing in this way also its own presence. Thus the light, contained, as it were, initially within the box, in the end contains the box; in the transition between these two moments, the container is no longer an opaque solid object but has become a rather transparent boundary. Viewed this way, the problem of the representation of the self is radically transformed from a move from the external to the internal, the visible to the invisible, to an act of turning the container inside out: all along, the external is visible because of its invisible internal and vice versa, an idea particularly pronounced also in Plotinus (iv 3, 9, 36–43; v 5, 9, 29–31).

However, *Lighted Performance Box*, as a minimalist work, in full compliance with Fried’s conception of minimalism, is also “theatrical.” Its theatricality is clearly suggested by the word “performance” in its title: in a typical display of Nauman’s strict “conceptual restraint” in its “economy of mediums” (Battle 2009: 85), the work, although still a sculptural object, is not merely set on stage, but is itself the stage for a performance. Understanding the nature of this performance becomes thus a necessary component for the full appreciation of the work.

The performance may refer to the reaction that the work “extorts” from the viewer. After the first impression, that of an opaque solid box, the shape of the box, “whose ‘gestalt’ is supposedly delivered at a glance as an imperative to look upward” (Leider

1970: 70), directs our gaze to the illuminated space above the box. As the reflection of light captures our attention, we realise that the box is nothing but a hollow container for the light. The overall result is that we view the work by moving our head or eyes “up and down, like a yo-yo” (Leider 1970: 70) between the physical object and the illuminated reflection, perhaps in a repeatedly frustrated attempt to trace the projected light back to its invisible source. That we become aware of the contents of the box by looking at the light’s projection on the ceiling and not by looking directly inside the box “suggests that the real focus lies outside the artwork itself” (Cross 2003: 13), at a place, however, which the work reveals with its presence. Complicating things a little, the clear phenomenal focus provided by the reflected light, as strongly as it directs our attention outside the work, equally strongly suggests the existence of the source of light as the real focus within the invisible interior of the work.

The reaction described in the previous paragraph, suggests clearly that *Lighted Performance Box* is not a work that can be “taken in” in a single instance, a work “wholly manifest (...) at every moment” (Fried 1998: 167). Rather, our experience of it can be described in temporal terms as “a presentment of endless and indefinite duration” (ibid. 166), “a sense of time both passing and to come, simultaneously approaching and receding, as if apprehended in an infinite perspective” (ibid. 167). From this point of view, Nauman’s ability to overcome the fragmentation of *From Hand to Mouth* rests on the deployment of the temporality that for Plotinus characterises the existence of embodied souls, since their embodiment implies that they “have somewhere they come from (...) and somewhere to go to, and a going down and going about: consequently also a going up” (iii 9, 3, 5–6), and hence time is for them an indefinite duration of moving in two opposite directions.

However, there are more possibilities worth pursuing concerning the “performance” implied by the title of the work. Taking a lead from an earlier similar sculpture, *Lighted Center Piece* (1967), which consists of an aluminium square illuminated from four

sides by halogen lamps so that “[a]ll attention is focused on the blank surface as if on an empty stage,” and “the human presence is suggested by its absence,” the point of the work seems to be that “the spectator is left to conjure up the actor” (Lewallen 2007: 89), or, in other words, that “the work provokes the viewer to mentally project the image of the artist or even of his or her own body into the space” (Cross 2003: 13). In response to this “provocation” (which could be compared to Plotinus’ claim that the work of art, by being attractive to soul, is capable of issuing an invitation to it and receive a share of it; iv 3, 11, 1–8), the viewer establishes an anthropomorphic link, seeing the box as a statue, of the artist or herself, or attempts to occupy the performing stage through projection, “to climb into the box and stand under the bright light” (van Bruggen 1988: 238). In both cases, “the performer-spectator is made aware of the physical limitations the artist has imposed” (ibid.) through the opacity of the box. Viewed as a statue, the box offers no expressive inducements to anthropomorphic identification, no specific intimation of its “inner, even secret, life” (Fried 1998: 155); viewed as a theatre, the box does not have any physical point of entrance or any window that could allow the spectator at least some glimpse of the stage. The existence of these physical limitations suggests that the performance of *Lighted Performance Box* is not a physical action, but rather a mental exercise, similar to the ones we find scattered throughout Plotinus’ works (e.g., vi 4, 7, 19–40, which contains an example that seems quite relevant to the experience of the spectator “climbing into” Nauman’s box).

Crossing the distance from hand to mouth, entering the corridor, or turning the box inside out, involves different kinds of physical or mental activity and implies different relations between the artist, the work, and the spectator. However, they all seem to suggest very similar metaphoric exercises. What do these exercises, prompted and guided by visual or verbal metaphors, tell us about the project of being a self, of acquiring a self-identity? Carl Hausman suggests that a world “which includes the out-

comes of metaphors must be understood as a totality of identities” (Hausman 1989: 191). For Hausman, these identities refer not only to “whatever is” but also to what “could be.”²⁰ In the context of selfhood, this suggests that gaining a self-identity is not a task that can be accomplished by uncovering an internal “I,” or by recording thoughts, experiences and actions, or by constructing fully coherent and unified narratives. The self, as Plotinus suggests, is a multiplicity of metaphoric links that the soul, qua creator and spectator of its own image, establishes with itself through the mediation of its creations. These links are invariably fragmented, displaced, or opaque. However, like any “live” metaphor, the self, if it is to remain alive, cannot be defined or resolved through literalization; hence, it remains open-ended, always a work-in-progress. And it is in respect of the intricacies and implications of this idea that Plotinus offers a way to interpret Nauman’s works and Nauman’s art illuminates aspects articulated theoretically by Plotinus.²¹

20. For a related discussion of Hausman’s position see, Vassilopoulou & Ganeri 2005: 9.

21. An earlier version of this chapter was delivered as a lecture during my 2-year Philosophy Residency at the Bluecoat Arts Centre (2013–15). It formed the source of inspiration for *Mythos*, a performance piece by vocal artist Steve Boyland. The piece premiered in Liverpool in 2014 and has since been performed in many venues around Europe. In turn, Steve’s creative output and discussions I had with other members of the public have greatly informed the development of this chapter. I would like to thank the Bluecoat and its public for their generous support of my research.

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