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NeonSense

Ways of Seeing Bruce Nauman's Neon Artworks

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Abstract

The neon artworks of Bruce Nauman remain as original and as affecting as they were when first exhibited and are arguably the facet of his *oeuvre* which has been most influential to subsequent generations of artists. This paper attempts to solve the mystery of why his neon work is so affecting and so very effective in communicating the artist's message.

In order to accomplish this the history of neon as an advertising medium and advertising theory are investigated as it is undoubtedly with these influences in mind that we approach the neon work of art initially, so deeply entrenched is neon in the psyche of popular culture.

The playfulness and sincerity that Nauman's neon works seem to emanate in spite of, or as a direct reaction to, his chosen subject is also placed under scrutiny. Nauman's neon works, whether they be textual or figurative, are intrinsically playful. This notion is only accentuated by the candy colours of the neon and the stilted animation of the more complex works. His neon art plays with us, plays with our understanding of language and our own human nature.

Neon advertising can be taken at face value. In the advertising world neon is essentially 'straight'. Unlike all other advertising media neon doesn't sell to the consumer, it informs. It would seem plausible, therefore, that neon transfigured as art would retain that reputability, at least in terms of the viewer's initial perception of the work displayed. Nauman's neon artworks are also always displayed as signs - they are always vertically displayed on walls, in windows - adding to this sublimation of the advertising form.

The role of literary and philosophical influences upon the artist may also hold the key to the success of Nauman's work especially in terms of language reception. Nauman has often cited the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein as an important influence, while the affinity his work has with playwright Samuel Beckett's own obsession with the human condition is too strong to deny. Nauman also takes from French novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet his repetitive

rhythm. Repetition being used by both to force the reader/viewer to pay attention.

Finally, in order to ascertain whether this phenomenon is specific to Nauman or is, in fact, generally symptomatic of the use of neon as art, his work is compared with his closest contemporaries - Joseph Kosuth and Maurizio Nannucci. Both of whom also first used neon - particularly as a means to investigate language use and reception - in the mid-1960's.

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Introduction

"Art should raise questions."

Bruce Nauman

Everyone who is knowledgeably aware of contemporary art should know who Bruce Nauman is and the impact he has had on the wider art world since his solo debut in 1966. This artist is frequently exhibited and frequently written about as one of America's greatest living artists. He is regularly cited as a major influence on subsequent generations of artists and is also acclaimed as heir to the Duchampian throne of multifariously non-luxe, concept-based artworks.

Born in 1941 in Fort Wayne, Indiana, he studied art, mathematics, and physics at the University of Wisconsin at Madison from 1960 to 1964. He went on to study under William T. Wiley and Robert Arneson at the University of California at Davis, graduating with an M.F.A. in 1966. Since the mid-1960's, this artist has created an open-ended body of work that includes sculptures, films, holograms, interactive environments, neon signs, photographs, prints, sculptures, videotapes and performance. His Conceptual work stresses meaning over aesthetics; it often uses irony and wordplay to raise issues about existence and alienation, and increasingly it provokes the viewer's participation and dismay.

Since the early 1970's Nauman has been recognised as one of the most innovative and provocative of America's contemporary artists taking his inspiration from the activities, speech, and materials of everyday life. Working in a diverse range of media Nauman concentrates less on the development of a characteristic style and more on the way in which a process or activity can transform or become a work of art. As he puts it: "I realized that I would never have a process; I would have to reinvent it, over and over again."¹

A general survey of his varied output demonstrates the alternately political, prosaic, spiritual and crass methods by which Nauman examines life in all its gory details and in so doing essentially maps the human arc between life

and death. The text from an early neon work proclaims: "The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths." Whether or not we - or even Nauman - agree with this statement the underlying subtext of the piece emphasises the way in which the audience, artist and culture at large are involved in the resonance a work of art will ultimately have.

As our reaction to a work of art is undoubtedly initially intuitive the neon pieces discussed in the following paper are, in spite of their oftentimes sobering messages and shocking enacted behaviours, works of art which are undoubtedly beautiful. Indeed the collected neon works are somehow set apart from the the rest of Bruce Nauman's multifarious *oeuvre* through their blatant illumination of language use and the human condition - the overarching theme for so much of his work - in such an overt way.

These works are superficially attractive despite their true nature and are, in direct contrast to the majority of his other works, finished to a professional standard. This is in no small part due to Nauman's reticence to achieve any mastery of medium. Necessarily then the physical fabrication of the neons are carried out by professional artisans. In almost all other medium-specific groupings² his artworks more-or-less retain an unfinished quality because he "has never been able to stick to one thing, he has had to test himself over and over, putting himself in the position of an 'amateur' starting from scratch."³ Nauman maintains a sense of this in many of his neon works by refusing to box-in cables, transformers etc. It is a move which seeks to affirm the processes involved in making the finished artwork.

Even though Nauman's own standard of proficiency may improve over time, or he embraces new advancement in technology which may render a more professional-looking result, his treatment of other media generally tends to be much rougher, sketchy, crude and raw simply as a consequence of his deliberate lack of mastery. The resulting home-made quality to an extent frees the intrinsic idea from being constrained by the medium through which it is transmitted. Also, confusingly, the level of consideration given by the artist to the appropriate choice of media for that base idea arguably results in an artwork where medium functions as a means of expanding and reinforcing that idea. One thinks of his rough and untidy taxidermy sculptures for instance where this level, or indeed lack, of finish seems necessary to emphasise the

implied violence and aggression or his imperfectly represented negative space where it would seem entirely appropriate that - in making the previously unacknowledged space/proportions tangible - the resulting casts of the space under chairs or shelves should have a look of unrefined and imprecise simplicity. At the most basic level the initial eye-catching prettiness of the neon may well contribute to the popularity of pieces such as *One Hundred Live and Die* (1984) [fig. 11] before true attention is paid and the message is received.

Bruce Nauman's neon works can be split into two phases. The first phase begins with the commencement of his artistic career in 1964 and his first investigations into the fundamental nature/role of the artist. During this first phase the use of word games in his neon works grows beyond playing with signatures and becomes boisterous, amusing and more and more interested in the basic function of language; most especially in how we comprehend written text. This he accomplishes through the utilisation of words as phonic devices made tangible in neon.

By the mid-seventies the limited functionality of neon provokes an abandonment of the medium in favour of installation and sculpture. For him: "neon really went out of style for a long time."⁴ Although Nauman returns to neon in the early 1980's a change has taken place in the interim years which sees a shift from the sense of innocent, childlike play to sinister existentialism and grandiose (homo)eroticism which is in keeping with the tone of his non-neon works. Figural animation and complex lighting programmes creating ever more complex signs are facilitated by a significant advancement in technology and the reinvention of the medium in popular culture. Nauman had had an idea for a complex figural neon piece prior to this vital technological advancement, but spent "a couple of years of looking at it on the wall of the studio" simply because "[he] didn't know what to do with it."⁵

*"When I first started to do [the neons] again, all that was really available was mechanical switches, which would always go out of sync and wear out, break, and stuff like that. Then when the neon began to get popular again, all that electronic stuff was available. [the process] was so much simpler. You could do very complicated stuff and basically just programme it with the chip in there. ... I made it a lot simpler, a lot more precise."*⁶

Interestingly Nauman also took a prolonged break from working with video. The respite in video production - which began in 1970 directly following his taped corridor installations - continues until the medium was eventually reemployed in 1985 with *Good Boy, Bad Boy* which he then goes on to remake a year later in neon. Asked why he returned to video he explains: "I think it's because I had this information that I was writing. [...] I didn't know what to do with it, really. I could write it and publish it, print it or whatever. ... It took a long time to decide to do it, but I finally did it as a video."⁷ The gist seems to be that should a particular medium be unsuitable, or incapable of communicating the idea it is not used.

The tautological nature of Nauman's art - the re-examination of themes, specific phrases and the reuse of certain media - seems to be almost incidental in that it relates directly to his need not to be pigeonholed as a specific kind of artist even though, at some level, he chooses media based upon its suitability to convey the idea. "What I tend to do is see something, then remake it and remake it and remake it and try every possible way of making it. If I'm persistent enough I get back to where I started."⁸

Following the Baltimore Museum of Art's retrospective of Nauman's neon artworks in 1983 the neon works begin to focus on aggressive word play and disquieting cartoon figures creating a loose collection which is now largely motivated by politics and is highly critical of (Western) human nature. The innocence of his metaphorical artistic childhood has gone and is replaced by a jaded, argumentative, stubborn young adult who demands to be given attention, to be listened to and taken seriously.

The basic nature of neon, that is its main historical and cultural purpose as an advertising medium, has been almost consistently overlooked by Nauman scholars and critics⁹ when examining his neon artworks. This area of investigation into the way the neon artwork is read by the viewer, with reference to preconceived notions of how we view and react to neon, may create another way of thinking about the medium as an artform. Necessarily then not only is the history of neon in the wider sense investigated in some detail, but also the theoretical narratives surrounding this particular medium - in both its incarnations - are discussed at some length.

This turn to the academic and philosophical, seemingly at the expense of

the physical art itself, is necessary in order to investigate the work of an artist who at once steep himself in these texts and is also a product of the theoretical turn of Art to the post-modern.

Neon is traditionally thought of as an advertising form therefore an examination of this aspect of the medium's history is undertaken in order to ascertain how the reception of conceptual neon art may be influenced by neon's wider cultural history. The tools of advertising itself - semiotics, image reception and basic marketing theory - are also explored as a means of altering the neon sign's function as an appropriated artform.

Nauman's neon art is, on the whole, playful in terms of play as an explorative learning/teaching process, as an aggressive manifestation of the competitive spirit and as childish whimsy. The honest nature of neon as an advertising medium may also transfer to neon art which remains within the traditional bounds of the neon sign, i.e. text and figure.

With regards to reception the basic role of neon as primarily an American advertising media - one that was once grand but fell from grace - must be taken into account. Does the history of neon affect the way we react to neon art? Does how we look at advertising in general change how we view an advertising medium transfigured as art? It would seem reasonable to suggest that we are unconsciously conditioned to perceive neon advertising as 'straight' signage because we simply take it at face value. Therefore, it could be argued that we subconsciously read this form of art as we would any neon sign and in so doing presume it automatically to be possibly less complex and guileful than many other textual works presented to us as art within the art world.

Advertising plays with words just as this artist does. Semiotically, at the most basic level, Nauman plays with signifier and signified distorting and confusing our preconceived notions of meaning and language use. In turn that which is advertised by him transcends the expected boundaries of market-driven promotion of services/goods to draw attention to a topic that sells us nothing but our true (alternate?) nature and illuminates that dark side of us that most would sooner deny ever existed.

On another note the increasingly visually calloused world we live in favours the quick visual over the written so much so that T.V. news reports are

seen to have more integrity than quality newspapers and T.V. documentaries are considered to be more factual than the books on which they were based. This very intensively visual media, as handled by Nauman, also naturally lent itself to the snapshot 1980's M.T.V. generation of nightclubbers in day-glo colours for whom neon was a cultural icon. This supposition seems all the more significant when one considers that during the early 1980's Nauman's influence and popularity peaked with six solo shows in the U.S. and Europe during the years 1982 to 1984. Most importantly the retrospective of Nauman's neon works held by the Baltimore Museum of Art opened in 1983.

As the neon works are predominately text based it is also necessary to examine the writers who have influenced or, at the very least, have been found by the artist to be in concert with his own thinking. Nauman's language pieces are often presented in strongly contrasting pairs or opposites. This in conjunction with the constant movement of light - one part comes on, another goes off - in swift rhythm also strongly affects perception. The repetition and the retinal shock of the light make the viewing of a neon artwork by him an alternately soothing and hostile, highly affecting experience. This begs the question of whether or not the neon art of his peers Joseph Kosuth and Maurizio Nannucci create the same level of impact.

Under discussion then are various themes and subjects which may explain why the viewing of conceptual neon art is somehow set apart from other contemporary art media. It may well be that the strong aesthetic response we have to the medium provides the initial shock that Nauman requires in order for the art experience that follows to be "like getting hit in the face with a baseball bat. Or better, like getting hit in the back of the neck. ... the kind of intensity that doesn't give you any trace of whether you're going to like it or not."¹⁰

Chapter One

Neon

*"I smelled Los Angeles before I got to it.
It smelled stale and old like a living room that had been closed too long.
But the colored lights fooled you. The lights were wonderful.
There ought to be a monument to the man who invented neon lights."*

Raymond Chandler 'The Little Sister' 1949

Although neon lighting has been used as an artistic medium almost since its invention¹ its use within the art sphere in more recent decades is innately coloured by the history of its wider commercial use. Whether it be that neon engenders the idea of the halcyon days of 1920's and 30's American noir, the rise of Las Vegas and its Liberacian showmanship, 1980's narcissism and bravura, modern-day technological Tokyo, a dystopian future as seen in *Blade Runner* or any not-so-anonymous big city red-light district this medium undeniably screams 'advertising'.

It is extremely likely that it is with one or more of these preconceived notions that we will approach the work of neon art. This is especially true of figurative or linguistically based neon artwork which are easily posited within the traditional advertising realm. The more abstract uses of neon such as the work of Keith Sonnier, Chryssa, François Morellet and Lili Lakich would seem to lend themselves more freely to a purely reflexive aesthetic or emotive reading.

In abstract use of the medium like that of Morellet's *12 white neon tubes, of that 7 with an angle of 90°, 5 of 9°* (1971) [fig. 1] the artist uses the neon to refer explicitly and implicitly to itself. There is no emotional content other than that which the viewer brings to the work themselves and it is entirely formal and geometric in structure. The work is void, cold and mechanical. Even the title of the work is a neutral description of content. In this way Morellet has divorced the medium from its commercial history and from any advertising associations the viewer may attempt to attach to the

work.

Though the process of producing light via inert gasses¹² was created by the Frenchman Georges Claude neon has long been most associated with America and all things American. This is largely due to the all but instantaneous adoption of this medium as an effective and lavish advertising tool after that first neon sign was commissioned for a Californian Packard dealership in 1923.¹³ Neon signs exemplified - through their sometimes ostentatious use of light, gimmickry and technology - the prosperous, energetic, commercially and industrially booming forward-looking America.

Neon found its heyday in the U.S. during the 1920's to 1930's and was used extensively in every conceivable advertising use. In 1927 there were a total of 750 neon signs in New York alone.¹⁴ Any image could be created in multicoloured neon light and just about every possible business could, and did, advertise with it. With added mechanisation and multiple, overlapping images to create the illusion of movement a cowboy beckoned gamblers to The Strip in Las Vegas and a champagne bottle tipped and poured its liquid contents. To say that the neon signs of this era were inventive would seem somewhat understated.

Neon's popularity only started to wane after the Second World War with the advent of alternate and cheaper forms of illuminated signage. Most notable was the rise of screen printed perspex light boxes which quickly relegated the vibrant and inventive neon signs to the status of gaudy symbols belonging to a past epoch. It would not be until the 1980's that neon would make any large scale resurgence into popular culture. Then it would be reborn as a post-modern architectural symbol of decadence, power and technological advancement seen in fashionable night clubs, boutiques and YUPPIE interior design while, as part of a trend to luminosity which included highlighter pens¹⁵, neon-coloured (day-glo) clothing became, for a short time, the vogue in fashion.

Neon as a conceptual art medium is undoubtedly easier to accept in the post-Duchampian age than it would had it been employed in any substantial way during the waning years of Impressionism, but unlike any 'readymade' as conceived of by Duchamp the making of a piece of original neon art necessarily involves a highly skilled and labour-intensive process. Some artists choose to

study this skill in order to completely control the creation of their own art whilst others, including Bruce Nauman, are happy to let professional neon artisans manufacture the work to their specification. To this end Nauman's sketches for his neon pieces can be extremely specific in their attention to detail, outlining not only the words and style of type the glass must be bent into, but also tend to illustrate the necessary wires and transformers needed for their operation.

For Nauman any mastery of technical skill is to be avoided. To become a neon artist and make his own tubes proficiently would require a substantial apprenticeship which would, in fact, span many years. In this respect Nauman - who is not a Neon Artist simply because he does not confine himself to this particular medium - is not unlike Vito Acconci who also chose to investigate the role of the artist in society through personal exploration and has also chosen not to confine himself to any one medium:

"If I specialise in a medium, I would be fixing ground for myself, a ground I would have to be digging myself out of, constantly, as one medium was substituted for another - so, then instead of turning toward 'ground' I would shift my attention and turn to 'instrument,' I would focus on myself as the instrument that acted on whatever ground was available." ⁶

This attitude seems to be typical of a generation of artists who emerged in the 1960's. Abstract Expressionism of the 1950's had given way to Pop and a diaspora of other art movements which reacted specifically against the traditional modes of creating Art. Symptomatic of the 1960's was the new-found ability to make use of any viable medium. As Nauman himself has said: "it was simple in that in the 1960's you didn't have to pick up just one medium. There didn't seem to be any problem with using different materials." ⁷ This is undoubtedly due to Duchamp and the Dada movement's earlier use of found objects in their art.

Certainly Acconci's attitude is very much in concert with Nauman's own investigations into his role as an artist. These enquiries include very personal and specific investigations of his own body and identity through video, performance, photography and, in Nauman's case, also included working with neon.

The inspiration behind Nauman's artistic interest in this medium is generally thought to be Jasper Johns who, along with fellow Pop artist Robert Rauschenberg, did use neon in a subservient role - as an illuminated highlight - in some works. Rauschenberg held a neon rod as part of performance piece *Map Room II*, (1965) while Johns placed a bright, red neon 'R' in his *Field Painting* of 1964. For both of these Pop artists this meant that the neon was part of a composite whole which reflected the consumeristic attitude of 1960's America.

Nauman has been quoted as saying that Jasper Johns was a major influence on him and it has also been argued that this influence was a possible source of his more Duchampian artistic traits. While this is almost certainly a realistic assumption the inspiration behind Nauman's adoption of neon was - he recalls - two particular pieces of work by James Rosenquist which he had seen reproduced in a magazine: *Capillary Action II*, (1963) and *Tumbleweed*, (1964-66). Both of which feature neon as part of multimedia works.⁸ According to Brenda Richardson, in her catalogue for the Baltimore Museum of Art's retrospective exhibition of Nauman's neon work in 1983, these particular pieces were not important simply because of their use of neon, but because "he saw the strength of those two pieces in their 'intellectual fitting together of idea and material.'" " Although Johns and Rauschenberg did use neon in their art of this time period it was used - as with Rosenquist - as a decorative appendage. It was an adjunct to the main work and not of primary importance.

Other than Pop artists, Conceptual artists and Post-Minimalists another artistic group that used neon during the 1960's was the Italian Arte Povera movement. Though difficult to concretely define Arte Povera - so pluralistic are the artists outputs and interests, the main tenets of the collective so diverse - there is an overarching theme of the linking of nature and culture by using the most mundane and ordinary objects and media to create a natural sense of beauty and poetry.

The term itself was coined in 1967 by Germano Celant in his first catalogue essay for the exhibition, '*Arte Povera - Im spazio*':

"the commonplace has entered the sphere of art. The insignificant has begun to exist - indeed, it has imposed itself.

*Physical presence and behaviour have become art. They [the artists] eliminate from their inquiry all of which may seem mimetic reflection and representation or linguistic custom in order to attain a new kind of art, which, to borrow a term from the theatre of Grotowsky, one may call "poor".*²⁰

This movement seems to have developed as a reaction, in part, to Italian artists being confronted by Pop Art from America - Robert Rauschenberg won the Grand Prize at the Biennale in Venice in 1964. To put the movement into its wider cultural context however, Italy of the 1950's and early 1960's went through a period of rapid industrialisation and economic growth.

Consumerism was on the rise and faith in the bettering of the human condition through industrial, scientific and artistic development was widespread. By the mid 1960's however recession took over and the mood shifted from optimism to scepticism. For example, 1968 saw the student and workers uprisings throughout Europe and America (where it was spurred on by anti-Vietnam feeling) and was referenced by Merz in some neon works.²¹

Critical social theory as developed by the Frankfurt School during the period of the 1930's to the 1950's in the works of Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse and Erich Fromm was especially influential on the radical thinking of the New Left in the 1960's. Linking psychoanalysis and Marxism, Adorno analysed the contradictions of individual behaviour in *bourgeois* society. In his *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1947, written with Horkheimer, Adorno reveals the relationship between reason and power and explains the development of totalitarian political systems such as Fascism. Marxism and psychoanalysis also underline Marcuse's theories which unmask and critique the exploitative, repressive instincts to be found in the work-and-savings ethic of capitalist society.

Although Arte Povera artists never explicitly used critical social theory in their works it is nonetheless important to underline the prevalence of the issues discussed by the New Left at the time of the movement's emergence. As such the use of neon in their art was unlike that of the aforementioned, predominantly America-based, artistic movements of Pop, Conceptualism and Post-Minimalism. It was not a relevant medium because of any celebratory commercial connotations that could be linked to its use - commerciality was

not such an overarching part of Italian culture as it so obviously was in America - instead the object of the inclusion of neon was seen more as a physical means to connote light and all that is associated with it: energy, purity, transience, the divine.

Of course the use of light, the artist's interest in capturing light accurately and in using it effectively, is an essential part of painting. From Caravaggio's sublime use of light giving a remarkable sense of earthy ethereality to his subjects, to Van Eyck's meticulous use of light to create high realism it has constantly been light in art that moulds figures, creates depth, draws the eye.

Mario Merz used neon and neon text extensively throughout his artistic career, the latter most notably with his 'igloos' (a symbol for the primitive and natural) and in his use of neon to highlight his interest in the Fibonacci number series. Merz's work with this medium differs greatly from that of Nauman and any other American advocates of neon. The possible exception to this assertion is Keith Sonnier whose work with neon, being abstract in nature, do tend to lean towards a more spiritual, ethereal understanding. Indeed Sonnier even reports a neon-related quasi 'religious' experience:

*"About the most 'religious' experience I've had in Louisiana: coming back from a dance late at night and driving over the flat land and, all of a sudden, seeing these waves of light going up and down in this thick fog."*²²

It was not until 1968 that Merz used neon text. Before this the neon had been employed - for the two years previous - as shards of impermeable light used to penetrate and issue forth from other materials.

Unlike Nauman, Kosuth and Nannucci however Merz rarely intended his neon texts to stand on their own. One exception is *Che Fare?* [What is to be done?] (1968) which formed part of a themed series in which Merz transferred student protest slogans into his own handwriting in neon thus capturing the importance of this politically charged time in a static, but equally charged medium. Another work in this series is of a radically different bent and adheres more accurately to Merz's Arte Povera ideals by combining and contrasting heavily symbolic materials. *Solitario Solidale* (1968)[fig. 2] is another protest slogan as is *Sitin* [Sit in] (1968) both consisting of the title

words sculpted in neon which then rest on wax in a metal container. The wax will soften and melt due to the heat from the illuminated neon. In this respect the wax - much as with Joseph Beuy's use of fat - is a natural store for heat (a symbol of the natural) while the neon (light as the symbol of life) provides that warmth. The work is a metaphor for non-violent political action: though sitting in a pot the neon still has a gradual effect. For Merz these materials (the neon in particular) are imbued with symbolism far beyond the simple aesthetic commandeering of an advertising medium.

Merz's Fibonacci-themed series of artworks were based on the work of a twelfth century monk named Leonardo Fibonacci who, while studying the procreation of rabbits, noticed an elegantly simple number sequence that explained their increase in population. The sequence starts with zero and one, then adds the latest two numbers to get the next one. So zero plus one equals one, one plus one equal two, one plus two equal three, two plus three equal five, three plus five equal eight and so on.

This sequence can be used to describe an amazing variety of basic growth patterns in nature from the distances of the planets from the Sun to the rings of a tree to the proportions of the human body. Just why this simple sequence describes so many different processes of nature has been the subject of debate among philosophers and mathematicians alike for the past seven hundred years. Perhaps even more mysterious is how the same Fibonacci sequence also pops up, with astounding regularity, in the financial markets.²³ Commerce and nature intertwined. Perhaps the leap from the ordered chaos of nature to the chaotic order of the financial markets is not such a great one. After all, what is the market but a most basic interaction between people, so primal that it precedes language in the development of human intelligence and even today is largely independent of language.

Merz's use of this number series relates directly to life in all its forms in an attempt:

*"to create a subjective understanding of matter and space allowing for the experience of the 'primary' energy present in all aspects of life directly and not mediated through representation, ideology or codified languages."*²⁴

The energy was intended to, on the one hand, refer to the fundamental

elements of human nature (vitality, memory, emotion) and, conversely, to correspond to the basic physical forces of nature (gravity, electricity).

As Merz states: "In the Fibonacci series, there are no spatial limitations because space becomes infinite - not abstract infinity, but biological infinity [...]." ²⁵ The use of this number sequence and the artist's desire to use neon as the predominate display medium of these universally understood numbers signifies not only the use of neon as a representative physical incarnation of light and energy, but is also a positive reaction to the pure functionality of neon as an ephemeral and transient vehicle for his symbolism.

"When you attach a neon number to the wall you are using something physically separate from the wall - something you can take down at the end of the exhibition. If you paint a number on the wall it means that this number becomes part of it. [...] They [neon lights] don't become an integral part of the space." ²⁶

Numbers may be "the vitality of the world" ²⁷ so-far-as universality of understanding is concerned, but they are still relatively abstract notions. Language - words - are proportionately much more explicit and concrete in their meaning and implication.

The use of language alone in Neon Art carries with it not only the message as read and any philosophical/linguistic interpretations that may be perceived by the viewer, but also the way we react to the reading as 'art' and as 'a sign'. How often have we seen neon signs, whether in the general course of our daily lives or via some visual medium - on TV or in movies - where the sign's sole purpose is to state/promote the name, goods, services or nature of the business within? The only arena where neon becomes anything other than a purely commercial tool or a flashy adjunct in the living environment is within the art context: within the gallery/institution.

Brenda Richardson also looks to the influence of advertising not only upon Nauman's work, but also on the wider art world and culture of the 1960's when neon as art made its first real impact. As commercial interest in neon declined fine artists began to be attracted to the medium. While it is fair to say that Nauman's neon works were born in this era surrounded by an increasing mass cultural awareness of the effect of commerciality upon society,

what sets conceptual neon art apart - including the linguistic signs of Nauman's close contemporaries Joseph Kosuth and Mauricio Nannucci - is the complete subversion of the implicit reading of the material and how it is presented to the viewer.

Warhol utilised and subverted his commercial images. Although the images he exploited were well-known advertising images - the Campbell's soup cans and Brillo boxes - they were shifted wholesale from the realm of advertising to the art world. A reason for this appropriation of advertising images is the simple universality of meaning and instant recognition that it afforded him as a readymade iconography of consumerism:

*"What's great about this country is that America started the tradition where the richest consumers buy essentially the same things as the poorest. You can be watching TV and see Coca-Cola, and you can know that the President drinks Coke, Liz Taylor drinks Coke, and just think, you can drink Coke, too. A Coke is a Coke and no amount of money can get you a better Coke than the one the bum on the corner is drinking. All the Cokes are the same and all the Cokes are good. Liz Taylor knows it, the President knows it, the bum knows it, and you know it."*²⁸

It is important to remember that, unlike today's consciously art aware advertising agencies, advertising and art were generally completely different entities inhabiting disparate spheres of influence and reception. Today we are constantly bombarded with art-like images and concepts in the day-to-day selling of products. The major change in recent times arguably came about with Pollock's now infamous 1948 Life magazine spread which, not only served as an excellent advertisement for his art, but also for the *haute-couture* fashion that used his paintings as a backdrop. Art and advertising overlapped.

What Warhol did, however groundbreaking, was still curiously traditional in a sense. Although he sought out non-traditional art subjects (advertising images) he painted his Campbell's cans and leaned the individual canvases on a shelf just as the real cans of soup would have been presented to the shopper, the Brillo boxes (screen printed wooden constructions) were stacked as if waiting to be unpacked and their contents sold. The use of neon as

an artistic medium demands a different reading and response to the purely aesthetic or the purely art-centric.

With regards to the neon language works of contemporaries Nauman, Kosuth and Nannucci²⁹ what the viewer is confronted with is not a recognisable advertising image transferred, but a recognisable advertising medium subverted. Although this lends the artwork to a reading similar to that of, for example, the Brillo Boxes in the sense that the issue of commercialism/mass consumerism is undeniably brought to the fore we don't view the neon language signs as Art until they have been read and understood, or not, whatever the case may be. The initial response is to recognise the medium: the neon.

These three artists focus on language - wordplay, tautology, semiotics: the roles of signifier and signified - and it is this aspect of their work that takes precedence. The concept behind the language and its use is key. The use of neon to display the artist's written material, as opposed to any other medium capable of presenting text, for example Ruscha's words cut-out of or stencilled into landscapes, Barbara Kruger's printed advertising parodies or even Magritte's seminal use of words in his painting *La Trahison Des Images* (1929) (all firmly rooted in a form of traditional artistic discourse) would most obviously seem to rely on secondary associations to the advertising world and to primarily rely upon the pure showmanship of this material to capture the viewer's interest.

Neon is ten times brighter than ordinary incandescent lighting and remains eye-catchingly attractive even in most daylight conditions. The light generated by a neon sign, the diffused glow around the linear text, is almost ethereal - much like a modern equivalent to the use of gold in Medieval Art - and generates an 'otherness', a sensuous, mystical intrigue, to the illuminated words that could not be created by any other system of lighting.

The atmospheric fluorescent works of Dan Flavin are related insofar as his light art creates in us a sense of spatial awareness and altered perceptions that draws the viewer into the ambience of the work and the gallery. This creates a situation in the gallery where the art is no longer artist + work = art, but becomes artist + work + viewer = art experience, so shifting the discourse from a planar to a pyramidal dialogue.

This is where any family ties between fluorescent art and neon art come to an end. Flavin is frequently, though mistakenly, feted as a neon artist despite the fact that his choice of fluorescent tubing - the technological aspects and the reasoning behind it - is substantially unlike neon. Flavin's tubes are for all intents and purposes designed expressly for functional indoor lighting and are industrially produced to specific criteria - to standard lengths and colours - in order to meet this need. Also the technological aspects of fluorescent tubes differ with regards to the lower tension that is required to create luminosity and the girth of the tubes themselves is also significantly greater.

Flavin's artistic use of mass produced lighting is appropriate to the axioms of Minimalist Art. Flavin seeks to pare down his art to the minimum, to reduce his light-sculpture to the bare-bones essential of geometric abstraction. The artist's touch is completely missing from the sculpture and, as with the majority of other Minimalist artists, the role and importance of industrial fabrication is marked. Neon art, by contrast, is created by handcrafting each piece thereby producing an essentially unique object. Even if the piece is reproduced it will never be an exact replica. The hand of the neon artisan will always generate inconsistencies however minor. It is specifically with this in mind that Nauman's sketches for his neon pieces are so detailed.

Crucially the general associations made with neon at the time that artists were first experimenting with neon word signs in this way - during the 1960's - were to the everyday, cheaper, tawdrier side of the advertising world. The contemporary neon advertising of this era was beer signs, cheap bars and cafés, motels that had seen better days [fig. 3]. Commercial neon, like an ageing Hollywood starlet, was a symbol of the past clinging for dear life onto its celebrity despite the inevitable and obvious decline. It had lost its stature, but it could still pull a crowd.

It was a beer sign that first inspired Nauman to create two window or wall signs in 1966/7 both of which tried to explore, denounce or ratify the notion of the Artist at work. Although this was not his first use of neon by any means *The True Artist Reveals To The World Mystic Truth* (1967) [fig. 4] was his first foray into neon language signs. This work is undoubtedly based on advertising principles and both it and its close cousin the screen printed *The True Artist Is An Amazing Luminous Fountain* (1966) [fig. 5] are intended to

be put on display preferably on/in a window. Just as a shopkeeper wants to display or advertise his products to the consumer the artist is attempting to advertise his purpose. These signs are therefore seen from both sides - interior and exterior - but in direct contrast to 'normal' use. Only those on the inside can, or are allowed to, understand. Those on the outside are seemingly left to attempt to decipher the backwards letters. This is only made all the more difficult by Nauman's insistence upon his spiral configuration and the odd run-around placement of words in the rectangular screen print.

The True Artist is a prime example of the subversion of neon as a recognisable advertising form. This language sign, more than any other by Nauman, seems to attempt to connect itself with the commercial in the most overt way. This work shamelessly adopts the host medium's conventions for the artist's own purpose. It is extremely eye-catching in order to best attract its potential customers and the unusual design facilitates a prolonged interest giving ample time for the message to be digested and stored in the conscious and, most importantly in advertising terms, the subconscious mind where it is then filed away and will hopefully be associated with the advertised product/producer in future. One could quite safely conclude that, since this neon sign is one piece of work that critics and art theorists will most often refer to whilst attempting to classify Nauman's artistic purpose, that his advert has performed very well.³⁰

The objective and the meaning of the text in these two artworks would seem to be one of the most scrutinised and oft referred to of Nauman's textual *oeuvre*. The assumption here being that this early work would set forth the artist's agenda. Whether or not the sign declares unequivocally or questions its statement is pure speculation on the viewer's part and this is the fundamental reason for this work of art's success. The declaration or question challenges the artistic beliefs of the viewer as well as those of the artist. The only true question is whose beliefs are more important at the time of reception. This again is wholly dependant upon the attitudes and reactions of the individual viewer. In the end even the questions arising from Nauman's work spiral out of control only to always return to the core: the beliefs of the viewer.

Interestingly Nauman was not the only artist of this era to commandeer the identifiable semblance of commercial neon to create an artistic simulacrum

in such an obvious way. Although he is most associated with his later, monumental use of Corten steel Richard Serra experimented with neon for a time during the years 1966 to 1969. This restricted time period understandably resulted in a limited number of works. Of these the majority use neon in conjunction with other materials specifically in order to create contrasts, for example draping a randomly fashioned string of neon with similarly casually arranged hanging belts of rubber. This mode of creating visual and material contrast is undoubtedly related to his later, better known Public Art while the method of presentation - hanging the material from nails in the wall to create happenstance configurations - is comparable to Robert Morris' 'felt pieces' of the mid to late 1960's and Nauman's own similar use of cloth backed rubber of the same time period.

Serra's work *Outside* (1969) [fig. 6] was created at the very end of his artistic interest in neon as a viable medium and is most unlike any of his other work. *Outside* is a pure neon object and, like Nauman's earlier *True Artist* sign there is direct play not only upon what is expected from neon as a visual medium with regards to its commercial history, but also with how the piece is to be interpreted. Like Nauman's work too is Serra's use of the juxtaposition of the visual and the linguistic. The central text 'outside' does not fill the void left by the single circle that surrounds it. The text is kept inside the barrier creating an instant contradiction in this highly conceptual work. Taken a step further the placement of the piece in a window - as specified by Serra - facilitates a further contradiction: 'outside' is doubly entrapped, firstly by the band of light and secondly by the barrier of glass between it and the true exterior. *Outside* is firmly inside. The uncluttered simplicity of Serra's design makes the viewing of the outside world through the image exceedingly clear which only reinforces this notion of contradictory declaration through an unavoidably direct visual contrast.

The complicated and interwoven history of neon with advertising and, more recently, with art and the discourses that surround each creates an art medium that is as complex as it seems simple. Not only are there positive and negative associations to be made in response to the high and low periods of neon's popularity as an advertising tool, but the neon art viewer may also recall the importance of neon to certain epochs, for example, the glitzy,

Technicolor 1930's or even a future illuminated by neon as envisioned by William Gibson.³¹ The modern individual may be more familiar with neon takeaway or sex shops signs, the bustle and commerce of Tokyo or even with The Strip in Las Vegas. Neon is heavily laden with a complicated symbolic history that, unless negated, will inevitably colour the way we view a piece of neon art. Nauman's neon works don't attempt to throw out neon's tumultuous past. He positively embraces neon's associations with advertising and uses our instinctive reactions to this medium - whatever they may be - to make his point. We pay attention to his neon artworks because we must. We understand them if we can. Even if we can't the impact of this lurid yet alluringly beautiful medium can be overwhelming.

Chapter Two

Advertising

*"When you're alone and life is making you lonely
You can always go - downtown.
When you've got worries all the noise and the hurry
Seems to help I know - downtown.
Just listen to the music of the traffic in the city
Linger on the sidewalk where the neon signs are pretty
How can you lose?"*

Petula Clark *Downtown* 1964

The use of language in advertising may play an important part in both the reasoning behind Nauman's artistic use of the medium and as an important interpretative tool for the viewer of textual neon artwork. The use of language/text in advertising can function on many levels. Indeed the complexity of meaning bestowed upon advertisements in general has steadily increased due to the advertising world's own turn towards the self-referential. This move in conjunction with an arrant use of symbolism, icons and images from other fields and the relatively recent willingness of academia to accept the study of advertising as a part of wider 'cultural study' has contributed to the increase in scholastic interest.

Advertising has been playing with language almost since its inception and has continued with alacrity to continually update its language use as society and consumerist culture has changed. From the wholesome and scientifically based adverts of the late 1800's to a style of advertising of the inter-war and depression years that devoted itself to selling lifestyles and not just products and, finally, to a methodology of selling that is happy to acknowledge the consumer's own scepticism towards commercial marketing tools whilst still smugly continuing to successfully sell products. This latest approach to advertising began in the 1960's approximately synchronous with

the rise of a more conceptual art.³²

While this may seem unrelated to the topic of this thesis the role of advertising - especially the role of language in advertising in all its incumbent forms, uses and discourses - is inextricably linked to contemporary social structures, to the immediate connotative properties of neon as an advertising medium and, therefore, is also of import to neon art whether it be textual or figural in nature.

The greater part of Nauman's *oeuvre* is concerned with society and the human condition. Society is almost certainly informed by contemporary media - television, magazines etc. - just as he himself would undoubtedly be. This, in turn, necessarily includes the selling of commodities, attitudes and lifestyles through advertising. What is particular to the neon artworks is the inescapable association with neon advertising.

Advertising is probably the most pervasive, universal and intrusive of all media. As Judith Williamson asserts in the opening sentences of her book *Decoding Advertisements* :

*"Advertisements are one of the most important cultural factors moulding and reflecting our life today. They are ubiquitous, an inevitable part of everyone's lives: even if you do not read a newspaper or watch television, the images posted over our urban surroundings are inescapable. Pervading all the media, but limited to none, advertising forms a vast superstructure with an apparently autonomous existence and an immense influence."*³³

This makes it an ideal conduit for post-modern artistic subversion. Nauman's own utilisation of neon - with regards to both his language and figural pieces - is a direct descendant of Warhol, Johns and Rauschenberg's use of advertising and modern everyday culture in their art. The impact of consumerist society and the ever-burgeoning marketplace economy upon artists of the late 1950's and early 60's created a reflexive art that naturally had to appropriate advertising language, materials and images in order to successfully comment upon contemporary culture. These artists also, conversely, subverted these well-known staples of everyday visual life into an art context whereby the language of advertising could be employed to comment upon issues important

to the artist as an individual.

Regarding advertising in general possibly the most striking facet of contemporary advertising is the wholesale use of intertextuality. In this way modern adverts make extensive use of associations from a wide range of other texts (film, literature, art etc.) as well as diverse cultural referents. Essentially advertising language is a used language: familiar, everyday and conceitedly *au fait*. The generation jaded by daily bombardments from multiple brands vying for their business is free to associate this used language with personal knowledge and their own lifestyles.

Though not all adverts will lead us to buy their products or use particular services they can successfully sell us a certain ideal to covet and may even tempt us to change our behaviour. But whether this be conceptualising the ideal American high school experience wherein drinking a certain brand of soft drink will make you popular or that mums are still encouraged to make their washing 'whiter than white' they sell us snapshots of a world that is skewed in its representation of reality.

"We are made to feel that we can rise or fall in society through what we are able to buy, and this obscures the actual class basis which still underlies social position. The fundamental differences in our society are still class differences, but the use of manufactured goods as means of creating classes or groups forms an overlay on them." ³⁴

They sell the majority an impossible ideal. This oftentimes subtle manipulation of truth and perception of the socially acceptable and what is personally necessary for the life to which we should all aspire has frequently resulted in the blaming of advertising for leading hapless consumers astray. While this may be the case for some of the more easily led viewers, as with any visual or linguistic medium advertising is very much open to individual interpretation. The thought that society *en masse* is so naive as to believe that buying a certain product or using a particular service, that buying wholeheartedly into any of the advertisements we are subjected to and are surrounded by daily, will lead to living a perfect life is like subscribing to the theory that certain films inexorably incite violence or the assumption that all heavy metal music is necessarily Satanic.

Images³⁵ generate meaning. This meaning is subjective and is wholly dependant upon the individual viewer. We can also say that meanings are not inherent in images. Indeed we usually have no way of truly knowing the image producer's intentions as far as meaning is concerned simply because all who see the image bring to it their own experience and knowledge and this necessarily colours personal interpretation. Meaning is also coloured by the context in which the image is being viewed. As this works for art within the art world where seemingly non-art items are presented and acknowledged as being valid Art just as long as they are within the Institution - where context justifies and bestows legitimacy that would possibly never otherwise be given - so too context within the visually cluttered advertising landscape will undeniably mutate meaning within the commodity culture of contemporary society in conjunction with the individual's own cultural associations.

Artists within the art world know that meaning is subjective and rarely explicit. Advertisers too (since the 1960's) have understood, not that viewers wrongly interpret the images set before them or that their selling tactics are unsuccessful, but that meaning is created when, where and by whom the image is absorbed. Advertisers are in no more control over the subjectivity of meaning than, for example, artists or poets. Full, unmitigated control over meaning by the producer of the image would seem to be a highly improbable notion. The meaning of an image changes in accordance to the social orientation, level of knowledge etc. of the the viewer/consumer.

Meanings are not built-in to images but are produced within a social context - the context of the moment - and within this social context's relation to its own cultural ideology and the individual ideologies of each viewer. Ideologies exist for every level of society, every culture and are just as diverse. Our ideologies inform every level of our everyday lives whether we are aware of it or not so by taking an image out of its original context, to put it in another country or another time, will change the meanings according to those new sets of social values and ideological constructs. A successful and popular film, such as *M*A*S*H*³⁶, makes for a good example. The impact of the political aspects of the film - set as it is in an American mobile surgical unit during the Korean War and aired during the Vietnam War - would arguably have had more of an impact during its first airing than through any re-runs today. The

implications of the subject and content of the film will also have different meanings when taken out of its original context (home country) and shown, for example, in Vietnam itself, even though some aspects of the humour that offsets the political and military base for the film may be more universal.

Commercial advertising is linked to, and makes us aware of, social structure. It is only logical then to presume that advertising in turn informs and moulds the thinking of society, concerning the way things are and what they should be. Advertising can persuade us to alter ourselves: to change our outlook, to take up certain values or to adopt a lifestyle. Advertising "obscure[s] the real stature of society by replacing class with distinctions made by the consumption of particular goods."³⁷

Contemporary advertising can be dangerous in this respect. It may change our assumptions about what is beautiful, desirable, acceptable. It is largely vacuous and superficial. We have become so acclimatised to this portrayal of 'the beautiful people' (as Marilyn Manson would put it³⁸) that we are now almost wholly apathetic towards these images in the sense that we no longer view them as advertising - as separate and distinct from our everyday reality - but as an attainable higher reality. If we buy the right shoes, wear the right designer clothing, drive the right car life will be better:

"...advertising does not simply reflect the real world as we experience it: the world portrayed in advertisements moves on a day-dream level, which implies a dissatisfaction with the real world expressed through imaginary representations of the future as it might be: a Utopia."³⁹

It is only when the issue of our skewed assumptions of what we want and what we actually need is directly brought to our attention that we may react. We routinely underestimate the impact of advertising on the social consciousness and on humanity in the wider sense.

Adverts sell to us via representation. Representation of the world around us - the material world - is accomplished through systems of language. But do they reflect the world back to us as a form of mimesis or is our world constructed by these systems of representation? We view the world via our own specific cultural context. We create and take meanings in accordance with this context through our language systems: speech, writing, images. In this

way the material world can only be seen by us through these systems. Therefore the world is not only reflected back at us by these representations, but we actually construct the meaning of our world through these systems.

Language systems of representation - this idea of the mimesis of the material world - is put to good use in both the realms of advertising and Art. In Art what can seem to be a faithful, straightforward and expertly executed seventeenth-century Dutch still life, for example, can in fact be read into and will represent many things, from issues of mortality and religious allusions (taken directly from the illustrated shorthand of the highly popular emblem books) to the simple depiction of the food, wine and fine glass or silverware which generates their own association with taste, smell and touch. Advertising too will use 'straight images', that is images which seem to render a faithful and true image, to sell products, but it is more reasonable now to expect that adverts - in an attempt to grab our limited attention - will actually subvert expected representations of the norm.

Neon text as Art functions within and without the advertising world as both image and text; the words are presented to us in a highly visual manner simply due to the vibrant appearance of the medium. Also neon signs are always presented to us vertically, as signs, and are therefore immediately posited within the context of the consumerist landscape.

All images whether they be art, advertising or any negligible visual ephemera are subject to quality judgements regarding their, for example, beauty and effectiveness. Neon in any form cannot help but generate an aesthetic response. Once again the criteria used to distinguish and rate an image is highly dependant upon context, cultural codes and societal concepts. It does not exist in the image. In this way we evaluate what is beautiful, ugly, shocking, banal, interesting or boring. The judgement is restricted to individual notions of aesthetics and taste.

The notion of aesthetics - the perception of beauty - is not incontestable. Philosophers are still unsure as to whether the aesthetic qualities of an image are inherent to it or are formed solely in the mind of the viewer and are context and referent reliant. Immanuel Kant believed that pure beauty is universal rather than regulated by specific cultural or individual codes. For Kant beauty is kept separate from judgemental or subjective

conceptions. Certain things - nature and Art - inevitably and objectively are beautiful.

Kant's theory of aesthetics - of inherent beauty within an image/object as a transcendental *a priori* - has since been superseded by contemporary concepts which are based on the criteria that what is seen to be beautiful and what is not are established within notions of taste. Taste is culturally and sociologically specific to the viewer. Beauty is no longer an innate quality. The adage "beauty lies in the eye of the beholder" refers to just this supposition. Beauty and indeed the degree of beauty an image or object is deemed to possess is circumscribed by the individual.

The individual's idea of taste however is not based solely on personal interpretation. Taste refers both to the feelings of pleasure one experiences when confronted with beautiful objects and to the intrinsic standards of beauty embodied in these objects. Taste is an individual and subjective sentiment, but it is also a discriminating faculty, through which individuals discover the amount of pleasure that things ought to give them by virtue of their objective properties. Once again the forces of class, culture, lifestyle and education come into play in the matter of informing the individual's notions of their own identity and subsequently their concepts of taste - of what is 'good taste' and what is 'bad taste'. Traditionally the realm of 'good taste' is equated to that of high culture and 'bad taste' with low.

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu examined just this supposition in the 1970's when studying the responses of a range of French subjects on the topic of taste. According to Bourdieu: "taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier." ⁴⁰ This does not, as one would suspect, express a hierarchical, class-based schema for denoting who has taste and who does not, but that taste is not inherent in particular people, that it is learned through exposure to social and cultural institutions that promote certain class-based assumptions about the ability to recognise tastefulness. These institutions, regardless of individual class, not only teach, but also instil a sense of what is, for example, real art and what is not. Acceptance is conferred by the institution and is then passed on to the viewer who learns to be a discriminating consumer of the images and objects which are deemed worthy.

Bourdieu's theory seats taste as a boundary - though not an

impermeable one - that in turn enforces class boundaries. All aspects of life are interconnected and so our taste in art is related directly to our taste in music, literature, film etc. and is related in turn to our social standing, profession and education level.

Kant in his *Critique of Judgement* of 1790 maintained that taste is an autonomous realm independent from external influences, be they rationality or passions, as well as from considerations of utility, morality or economy. This position paved the way for theories of art for art's sake, according to which art reflects the genius of the artist and should be allowed to develop unfettered by social and economic constraints. Throughout the 20th century, art increasingly came to be seen as an extension of subjective experience, reflecting the artist's personal interpretation of the outside world rather than mirroring some pre-existing and eternal cosmological order. Aesthetic experience thus lost its objective foundations, and the search for universal and immutable standards of taste increasingly appeared illusory.

With the arrival of Pop Art, the concept of *kitsch* and subsequently the rise of Postmodernism, the surety of traditional class distinctions has almost entirely been undermined. The traditional method of distinguishing high from low is class-based with the pursuits and mores of the higher echelon of society defining high culture and the working class low culture. Therefore, high culture necessarily included fine art, ballet, opera, classical music whilst low culture included television (after it became affordable for all), tabloid newspapers, B-movies and rock and roll music.

As Art and consumerism continue to overlap and thief from each other notions of taste have become as muddled as perceptions of High and Low culture values. Advertising is, and always has been, a cultural marker accommodating the spheres of good and bad taste just as easily as it straddles the boundaries of high and low culture. In effect contemporary advertising has proven itself useful as a means of breaking down old class divides and creating a wider audience for the arts. As Julian Stallabrass wrote in his paper, *The Fate of 'Young British Art'* (2001) :

"[...] the saturation of the culture with commercial imagery, especially advertising, has produced an effective, informal education in the way images work. This effect is reinforced by

the interplay between advertising and art, as advertising borrows from art, and art plays with the techniques of advertising.”⁴¹

During Nauman's early period of working with neon signs the medium was most definitely low culture. It wasn't even kitsch. Neon signs were used to advertise distinctly low-end commodities. The subtle transmogrification of *low* culture into an acceptable and more broadly based *popular* culture does not apply in the time frame that allowed Nauman, as well as Kosuth and Nannucci, to commandeer this medium and to use it within the conceptual boundaries of their art to literally enlighten their viewers/consumers. The fact that neon was once such a grand medium, so well-appreciated and sought after as an advertising medium, a medium which was once so high class, illustrates the sometimes transient nature of our notions of high and low culture.

This notion of the conferring of art value upon Nauman's neon work created for him a dichotomy in their method of presentation. As an advertising medium, and therefore associated with the mundane and the everyday, it is extremely commonplace so to install any of his neons successfully i.e. where they will be paid attention to necessitates an institutional setting even though this creates for him its own problems:

“There's a problem either way. If you avoid an art-related situation altogether - if you hang a neon sign anyplace - it is ignored and people don't give it any thought at all. If you hang it in a museum, you carry a lot of weight that's not yours. Sometimes it's too much weight for the piece, or the wrong kind of weight. I want the work to be taken seriously, but in the museum setting the seriousness of looking is often very narrow in its perspective. It may leave out much of the information that's most important to the work, aside from the formal considerations. But I don't know of any effective way - outside of galleries or museums - to have people pay attention. Somehow you have to point a finger and say “this is art and you have to pay attention - so think about it!”⁴²

The connection between class - that is social standing - and art has always been a divisive one. Art is traditionally associated with the upper class, the well-

educated, those who are more likely to seek out the knowledge to understand and appreciate it. To use neon as Art, moreover to use neon as a form of instructive, conceptual art is to completely upend the assumed status quo of stereotypical art viewers and the value rating they are likely to confer upon the neon art object which has been accepted and validated by the educative institution of the gallery and is now hanging before them. Do they automatically accept these apparently low cultural objects into their hierarchy of taste or does the medium itself - and its inescapable negative connotations - elicit a response that will find the objects tasteless? Possibly it is this Inner diatribe - do we accept this object because it has been institutionalised and therefore must be of artistic worth or reject it because it is a base form of advertising - that makes its use as an artistic tool so effective. We know it is Art but also recognise that there is a sleazy, cheapness to it. Though this is decidedly not the case now the use of neon, and especially neon words/text, then was a radical statement of the power of language: our use of it, how we understand it and how we view it.

To step back from advertisements in general and view them as texts makes us aware of language and enables us to see them in a way similar to poetry or literature ostensibly through decoding the messages contained within. Unlike literature or poetry though advertising language is ever-present, all inclusive and all engulfing whilst also retaining a sense of the 'throw away'. It may be all around us, but do we pay attention? What do we pay attention to?

Semiotics is one of the major methodologies that is used in the study of advertising and contributes to an understanding of advertising's place in modern society. The study of semiotics, or semiology in France, originated in a literary/linguistic context and has been expanding in a number of directions since the early turn-of-the-century due to the early work of C.S. Peirce in the U.S. and Levi Strauss and Ferdinand Saussure in France.

In semiotics the emphasis is on communication as the generation of meaning. "The making of meanings or messages is known as encoding. Interpreting the messages ... is known as decoding."⁴³ The mental image or idea that we produce by decoding a message is known as the "interpretant."⁴⁴ At the centre of this concern is the sign.

In semiotics, the 'reader' is seen as playing an active role. According to John Fiske semioticians prefer the term "reader" to "receiver" because it implies a greater degree of involvement. The reader helps to "create the meaning of the text by bringing it to his or her experience, attitudes, and emotions." ⁴⁵ Thus, the reader's brain is an indispensable component of the total communication system. His/her life experiences, as well as expectations of the stimuli he/she is receiving from the advertisement, interact with the advertiser's output in determining the meaning of the communication. The job of the advertiser is to know the world of the target audience intimately so that the stimuli created can evoke associations with whatever is stored in their memories. The advertiser's goal is that the messages encoded into the advertisements will stimulate the reader to create meanings that relate, as closely as possible, to the meanings that they have attempted to generate. As Fiske observes: "The more we share the same codes, the more we use the same sign systems, the closer the two meanings of the message will approximate to each other." ⁴⁶

Advertisements have to articulate quickly and at a glance. For this reason they offer highly sophisticated constructions. They are designed to have immediate appeal and attempt to hold the reader's limited attention for as long as possible. Therefore, advertisers are predisposed to rely on the repertoire of daily life for their materials. This does not mean that advertisements merely reflect reality however. Although they draw their materials from everyday life they select them carefully; much is included, but also much is omitted. It is important to note that "by choosing only some things and by reintegrating them into the meaning system of advertising, ads create new meanings [...] Thus, advertising enters into the routines of everyday life and produces meanings and categories that are not found elsewhere." ⁴⁷

In everyday human social life, which by nature is interactive, language with its conventional symbols (words) occupies the most noticeable position. A semiotic analysis of print advertising however, directs our attention to other form of signification such as colour, persons and objects involved, dress, the actual advertised product values and ideologies. From a semiological point of view all of the above are communicative and the way they are put together in

advertising can be studied. The relation between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary and conventional. In other words, signs can mean anything we agree that they mean and they can mean different things to different people. No matter how much they strive to make the decoding process an identical, but inverse, replica of the encoding process, advertisers can never achieve an absolute equivalence between the encoding and the decoding processes.

Nevertheless, the encoding side of the coin does establish the interpretative parameters and guidelines for making sense of the text. Both advertisers and viewers apply a social grammar - a shared set of propositions about how commercials are structured and how the narrative of a text will unfold. Since most of the global population have been watching commercials since they were 2 years old, recognising and making sense of advertising messages usually takes place at a non-reflexive level. The grammar of the ad remains unspoken; though not necessarily out of mind, it is out of sight.

Advertisements employ a shorthand of signification. Advertising agencies raid referent systems for visual and musical signifiers and then compress and sequence them together in a recognisable structure. Referent systems designate widely shared systems of knowledge and clusters of meaning. For the advert to work the viewer must validate the sign by attaching a signified to the signifier. In a commercial, for example, the viewer is guided through this validation process supported by narration, music, the relationship of each image to others and the viewer's own knowledge of the referent system from which the signifier is drawn. Certain clusters of signifiers recur again and again. Often drawn from image banks and rooted in stereotypical ways of seeing they serve as markers to facilitate making sense of the commercial text.

At its most elementary level branding is about equivalence. Brand building works to create an association in the consumer's mind between a recognisable commodity or corporation and imagery of a desirable quality. First the brand itself is given a recognisable, but differentiated, representation: the logo. Then that representation is attached to a series of layered signifiers that point to a specific set of meanings: the signified. The goal is to harmoniously blend layers of signifiers to support the branding message. Vectors are created across elements (visual, audio, textual) so that when we

hear the music we think of the slogan. Or a shared colour in the commercial might create a visual equivalence between a global scape and a corporation. Elements both signify and serve as conduits for these vectors of equivalence. A sound signature might cement a narrative to a logo as well as signifying something in its own right. Drawing on T.S. Elliot's discussion of poetry, Judith Williamson refers to the relation of these elements in an advertisement as an 'objective correlative'. She states:

"Thus once again we see that the form of advertisements is a part of ideology, and involves a false assumption which is the root of all ideology, namely that because things are as they are (in this case, because certain things are shown as connected in ads, placed together etc.), this state of affairs is somehow natural, and must 'make sense' simply because it exists. So when advertisements put two things side by side so that they co-exist, we do not question the sense of it. The form of advertisements, and their process of meaning through our acceptance of implications in that form, constitute an important part of ideology. Non-senses (the illogical juxtaposition of, say, a face and a bottle) become invisible - which is why it is important to state what may seem very basic, and once seen, very obvious, in this field; and sense is assumed simply on the basis of facts, that magical word whose original meaning is merely 'things already done.'" ⁴⁸

The signifiers that share the same space must indeed appear to have a natural connection. To create this sense of unquestioned objectivity advertising draws on a range of devices to establish a sense of equivalence between commodity/brand and a meaning plus affect. These devices include composition, size, colour, music, narrative, spokesperson, images, text, logo design or anything that suggests this and that are one and the same. If the viewer validates this process the formula - brand equals signifier equals signified - is completed. But one must always keep in mind Williamson's analysis. There is no logic in the correlation other than association. The ideology of legitimisation is at the core of branding.

In advertising terms it seems reasonable to say that Bruce Nauman

Suite Substitute (1968) and *Perfect Door/Perfect Odor/Perfect Rodo* (1973) prefigures French Connection U.K.'s controversial use of their company acronym FCUK™ as a very successful anagrammatic advertising device. The order of interior letters in a word is relatively unimportant to reading comprehension, so people naturally scan 'fcuk' as 'fuck'. By placing the acronym within phrases such as "FCUK like a Bunny", "Sexy as FCUK", "Cheeky as FCUK", "No FCUKing angel", "FCUK Fear" they actively encourage and positively promote this misreading of the word. Where Nauman simply draws attention to this kind of linguistic manipulation French Connection U.K.'s advertising campaign sticks it in your face.

Nauman's interest in language - as made evident in not only his neon works, but also in his lithographs and video work and as used in conjunction with the traditional American advertising medium of neon - is much more accessible to today's audience than it would have been to contemporary viewers. Though certain sections of his contemporary audience would have appreciated this kind of word play - possibly seeing it as akin to the work of the Beats, concrete poetry, automatic writing - it is only now since advertising has so forcefully and effectively adopted word play for its own ends that the shocking effect of Nauman's work has been muted and absorbed within advertising culture. Where once the content alone of the textual neon artwork would have been ample justification for its status as Art and the carrier medium was revolutionary in its subversion of low culture signage now the content as well as the medium could just as easily be pure advertising. The artists of today also have this problem: "Fine art's conceptual leanings are increasingly difficult to distinguish from the facile surfaces of advertising."⁴⁹ As both Art and Advertising parody and appropriate from each other, now more than ever, it is important to remember that artists like Warhol, Johns, Rauschenberg and Nauman were avant garde in their appropriation of advertising. It's equally important to remember why this appropriation was radical, what other discourses they introduced and how they used it for their artistic ends.

Chapter Three

Influences

"Every sign *by itself* seems dead. *What* gives it life? - In use it is *alive*.

Is life breathed into it there? - Or is the *use* its life?"

Ludwig Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* §432

Over the years Bruce Nauman has cited many influences on his work. Of these outside the world of art the importance of the German philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's ideas to his language-based neons cannot be underplayed. It is necessary, for the purposes of elucidation, to make sense of the Wittgenstinian language games in order to apply them to Nauman's work. This involves an intensive look at Wittgenstein's theories as outlined in *The Philosophical Investigations*. The figurative neons however, owe much to the playwright Samuel Beckett's interest in the human condition whilst novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet's obsessive attention to detail and use of repetition are important to both Nauman's figurative and textual neon pieces.

In terms of the nature of the textual neon works the majority of that influence would seem to come from Ludwig Wittgenstein's *The Philosophical Investigations*. Main Wittgenstinian ideas present the theory that language and the world share a common logical form wherein sentences are logical pictures of the world and so the logical relations between the elements of a sentence reflect the relations between the elements in the world. In using these sorts of ideas Nauman's use of words/sentences either confused, reflected or seemingly randomised within a greater whole may subsequently be interpreted as his reflections of the world as he sees it or, more importantly, as we would see it if we were to pay enough attention.

For many expressions, the meaning is the use: to grasp the "meaning" of such an expression is to know how to use it. Therefore the semantic theory behind this creates a divide. In the case of the neons what it *is* and what it

means can be completely different for each viewer. The role of the 'language game' as a content dependent and purpose relative form of human socially conditioned behaviour is used extensively by Nauman in several media, but is all the more ominous and shameless in his word-based neons. Yet again the 'language game' is seen by Wittgenstein to be a reflection of life. For Nauman then that which is a reflection is also illumination. The neon works could then be read as a physical manifestation of his almost overarching compulsion to reveal the darkness of human nature. Most importantly the language games, as used by Nauman, are context-dependant and purpose-relative - crossing the bounds between games and language, playing games and speaking it - and are wholly dependent upon circumstance/site for their analogous reading as the game is learnt differently by every society or group.

It was in his later work that Wittgenstein developed the idea that the job of philosophy was to clear up the conceptual confusions that arose through our unexamined use of language. Dissatisfied with the traditional expressionist and reflective approaches to language he sought a new model which would allow greater flexibility. Central to this was the concept of rule governed activity or 'language game'. Wittgenstein introduces the concept of 'language games' because of the analogy between using language and playing a game according to certain rules. It was his contention that our whole use of language was similar to game playing:

*"We can easily imagine people amusing themselves in a field by playing with a ball so as to start various existing games, but playing many without finishing them and in between throwing the ball aimlessly into the air, chasing one another with the ball and bombarding one another for a joke and so on. And now someone says: The whole time they are playing a ball-game and following definite rules at every throw."*⁵⁰

At every step we are following the rules, but not the same rules at every step. In the same way our use of language is always governed by rules, but not always by the same rules. We partake in a large number of language games and confusion usually arises when a statement in one language game is interpreted according to the rules of another. The concept of 'language games' illuminates the whole issue of meaning in language.

Language games are first described in remark 7 of the *Philosophical Investigations* and initially seem unproblematic: "We can also think of the whole process of using words in (2) as one of those games by means of which children learn their native language."⁵¹ The playing of language games are a necessary step in the learning of language, we learn to use a language through a variety of games, not least of which is the 'pointing and naming' game described by Augustine.⁵² But this simple conception explodes under further analysis. It seems that nothing could be simpler than pointing at an object and then naming it, in fact, it is supposed to be simple enough for young children to understand, but why do we expect the listener to immediately grasp our meaning? If we point at a table and say the word 'table' we are referring to a whole class of objects known as tables of which this one is only an example, but it could be taken to mean that this particular object is called 'table' and no other. We begin to see that some foreknowledge is necessary for understanding, we need to know the role that 'table' will play in our language game.

Wittgenstein highlights this by introducing proper names and numbers to his example language game, he asks how can we point at the number two? When two objects are pointed at how can anyone be sure that the word used for the number two is not the proper name for this particular pair of objects? It seems we must already have some prior idea of what role numbers play in the language, but what is this prior idea? Wittgenstein discusses this by analogy with the game of chess, telling the chess player "this is the king" will only tell him anything if "he already knows the rules of the game up to this last point."⁵³ He goes on to ask how we might teach someone the game if they did not already understand what a playing piece was. The rules of the game and the meaning of "this is the king" have to coexist, we cannot have one without the other. The rules do not precede the meaning and the meaning does not precede the rules. The meaning and the rules are so deeply intertwined as to be inseparable. We now see why the 'pointing and naming' cannot be the sole basis for learning language:

"Augustine describes the learning of human language as if the child came into a strange country and did not understand the language of the country; that is, as if it already had a language,

*only not this one. Or again: as if the child could already think, only not yet speak. And 'think' would here mean something like 'talk to itself'."*⁵⁴

The concept of 'language game' has already grown far beyond the initial conception of a children's game. One of the problems with Wittgenstein's naming of the concept is that it seems to imply the simplicity or frivolity of children playing, but this is a mistake. 'Rule governed activity' covers basically all aspects of human behaviour and particularly interaction between people. It can be seen that all language is a form of language game when we try to locate the meaning of words.

There are two traditional approaches to assigning meaning in language, the reflective theory and the expressionist theory. The reflective theory claims that each word has meaning because it represents some object in the world. Meaning in a sentence is built up from the component meanings of the individual words, the sentence reflecting some arrangement of objects in the world. This assumes that for each word there is some object we can point to, fixing the meaning, but problems arise when we consider statements such as, 'There is no dog in the basket'. How is this arrangement different from there being no cat in the basket? The reflective theory ultimately leads to large areas of human endeavour, such as aesthetics and ethics, being categorised as, at best, meaningless.

Wittgenstein developed his own reflective theory of language in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* but was not satisfied with the limits it imposed. The expressionist position is that meaning is derived because language is a reflection of our innermost thoughts, ie. we have thoughts and translate them into language. Wittgenstein doubted that it was possible to have thoughts without language: "When I think in language, there aren't 'meanings' going through my mind in addition to the verbal expressions: the language is itself the vehicle of thought."⁵⁵ He discounted the possibility of a private language of thought from which our language can then derive meaning because language, by its very nature, is a shared thing ("[A] wheel that can be turned though nothing else moves with it, is not part of the mechanism."⁵⁶). A language that exists for only one person is a contradiction. Wittgenstein claimed that words derive meaning from their use in language

games, words by themselves have no intrinsic meaning - "the meaning of a word is its use in the language."⁵⁷

Each word has meaning inasmuch as it has a use in a particular language game. Outside of the language game there is no meaning. It would be a mistake to search for meaning outside language because to go outside language is to go outside meaning. We can analyse a sentence in an attempt to find some essential meaning in it, but all we do is translate into another 'language game', we do not derive some essence of meaning because there is no essence of meaning. The lack of any absolute meaning may seem, at first, an unsettling prospect, we feel that words should refer to something concrete.

We may examine our language games by looking for some essential or universal feature, some hard point on which to build, but, Wittgenstein says, this will be a futile search:

*"Instead of producing something common to all that we call language, I am saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all - but that they are related to one another in many different ways. And it is because of this relationship, or these relationships, that we call them all 'language'."*⁵⁸

What we call language is a collection of language games which are related, but not in a fixed way. Wittgenstein called these relationships 'family resemblances' because the similarities between language games can be likened to the similarities between members of a family.

It is the inherent flexibility of language that makes it such a powerful tool, we are not limited to one view of the world. In fact, there are no limits and can be none:

*"For how is the concept of a game bounded? What still counts as a game and what no longer does? Can you give the boundary? No ... You can draw one; for none so far has been drawn. "But then the use of the word is unregulated, the 'game' we play with it is unregulated." - It is not everywhere circumscribed by rules; but no more are there any rules for how high one throws the ball in tennis, or how hard; yet tennis is a game for all that and has rules too."*⁵⁹

Wittgenstein's concept of the language game has allowed us to move away from the passive expressionist and reflective approaches to language and embrace a more inclusive position. Language is not a passive thing to be picked up and cast aside as is necessary, it is something that is a part of us - we shape the use of language as language shapes us.

As already mentioned the theories of Wittgenstein are of great significance to Nauman's work. Obviously when dealing with language based works of art, such as his neons and in conjunction with the artist's willingness to cite Wittgenstein as an influence, much has been made of Nauman's reliance upon, and reference to, the philosopher, his *Philosophical Investigations* and his theories on language games in particular. That the artist is deeply interested in Wittgenstein is not under dispute. David Salle reports an encounter with Nauman:

*"I had always been enamoured of Bruce Nauman's work, even when I was kid. I knew he was living in Pasadena, and I just called him up out of the blue, something which I have never done before or since. I said: "I really admire your work, I'm a student at Cal Arts, and is there any possibility that I can visit your studio?" And he said: "OK." So I went to Pasadena and visited Bruce in his studio; he had his feet up on his desk, reading Wittgenstein."*⁶⁰

The level to which Wittgenstein and his language game theories are actually of direct importance to Nauman's work is under investigation however. Nauman's utilisation of Wittgenstein had more to do with "...the way Wittgenstein proceeds in thinking about things, his awareness of how to think about things. ... [It] has to do with some sort of process of how to go about thinking about things." ⁶¹ Only one artwork, *A Rose Has No Teeth* (1966) - a lead plaque, bearing that statement, which is to be mounted on a tree - is a direct reference to Wittgenstein's writings. The full passage is as follows:

*"A new-born child has no teeth" - "A goose has no teeth." - "A rose has no teeth." - This last at any rate - one would like to say - is obviously untrue! It is even surer than that a goose has none. - And yet it is none so clear. For where should a rose's teeth have been?"*⁶²

It is this aspect of Wittgenstein's thinking - that he follows an argument logically, taking it further and further until it progresses past absurdity and is ultimately either shown to be correct or acknowledged to be flawed - that interests Nauman. The way he "would follow an idea until he could say either that it worked or that life doesn't work this way and we have to start over." ⁶³ Perhaps this attraction to problem solving stems from his interest in mathematics which he studied before turning to art.

It does seem obvious that a rose has no teeth, but the power of Wittgenstein's assertion, and Nauman's subsequent utilisation of this statement, is that in the course of our daily lives we have no need to think about whether roses have teeth or not. The statement, even though perfectly true, seems nonsensical and bewildering simply because we have never pondered the supposition before. This idea - that we need to pay attention - recurs in Nauman's work quite regularly and even results in two very explicit lithographic texts *Please Pay Attention Please* (1973) and *Pay Attention Motherfuckers* (1973). The need to make his audience aware of the way language operates, the way meaning is subjective and can equally contain no real value or be of extreme import and how (badly) we behave collectively as the human race are dominant threads. He asks us why don't we pay attention and think about these things seriously. Most often he tries to hammer it into us through repetition.

Nauman's interest in language games is evident throughout his *oeuvre*. In his textual neon work many different forms of word games are used. These range from palindromes (*Raw War*) to anagrams (*Suck Cuts* and *Silver Livres*), half anagrams (*Suite Substitute*), puns (*Run From Fear, Fun From Rear*) and homophones (*Violins, Violence, Silence*).

In terms of Wittgensteinian influence this not made explicit in Nauman's work. Instead there is a general feeling of affinity with, and appreciation of, the philosopher's thinking. As Jean Christophe Ammann in his catalogue essay, "*Wittgenstein and Nauman*" for the Whitechapel Art Gallery says: "[Nauman's] own approach was reinforced by Wittgenstein's writings." ⁶⁴

Nauman's investigative interest in the role and function of the artist seems to naturally turn to the investigation of language use and comprehension. The viewer doesn't necessarily need to understand

Wittgensteinian thought in order to understand the artwork, but the underlying implications of Nauman's extensive use of word games are better recognised and comprehended through the philosophy that the artist is so interested in.

Wittgenstein's list of examples of language games almost reads like an overview of Nauman's entire work to date, taking in his video, installation, performance, neon/text, sculpture and audio work.

- "Giving orders, and obeying them –*
- Describing the appearance of an object, or giving its measurements –*
- Constructing an object from a description (drawing) –*
- Reporting an event –*
- Speculating about an event –*
- Forming and testing a hypothesis –*
- Presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams –*
- Making up a story; and reading it –*
- Play-acting –*
- Singing catches –*
- Guessing riddles –*
- Making a joke; telling it –*
- Solving a problem in practical arithmetic –*
- Translating from one language into another –*
- Requesting, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying."* ⁶⁵

In spite of this however, it is Nauman's word play pieces which are most frequently associated with his Wittgensteinian leanings.

If language is the mirror of the world then to play with language is to play with the world. The manipulation of language should simply confuse, but in the case of the neon works out of initial bafflement comes revelation. Once again the importance of the medium Nauman chooses to present his puns, anagrams, rhymes, palindromes etc. is pivotal to the way we react to the work and to how much attention we give it. The importance of the neon is such that:

"His ideas are embodied in neon signs, objects that, because they flash on and off, seem to have little material substance and instead turn into pure surface - writing in space, which is

*repeatedly erased and rewritten. The message, which gets broken down by being flashed on and off, holds the viewer's attention by its seductive visual display and by its seemingly nonsensical quality."*⁶⁶

Whilst he has our attention he makes us think about language and language use in ways that we hadn't considered before. In a way the neon works operate on a similar level to his corridor pieces and video installations - they draw you in and require you to take a more active role in the reception of the work. Because we take an active role in the way the manipulation of language affects us his work is somehow made personal even though he presents us with universals. So when we come to stand in front of a neon artwork like *One Hundred Live and Die* (1984) [fig. 11] what we see is our own life flashing before us, leading to our death. We too hope to go out in a blaze of glory before all falls dark. Universals become specific and highly reactionary. Our world is mirrored in them.

Nauman also uses neon to charge his words with meaning they do not usually have. *Violins, Violence, Silence* (1981-82) [fig. 12] puts to use homophonic words to great effect. Because the first two words - violins and violence - are so similar phonetically they could easily be confused when spoken. This brings into play Wittgenstein's theories about language use, specifically the importance of context in deciphering meaning. Wittgenstein illustrates this with the analogy of builder A shouting "Slab!" and his assistant B fetching him a slab in response.⁶⁷ We take for granted that the calling out of "Slab!" is an order - a shortened form of the sentence "Bring me a slab" - which we understand because of our exposure to language games and because of the context of the expression. As Nauman stated:

*"... if one context is different from the context that was given to you by the writer, two different kinds of things you understand rub up against each other. When language begins to break down a little bit, it becomes exciting and communicates in nearly the simplest way that it can function: you are forced to be aware of sounds and the poetic parts of words."*⁶⁸

Violins, Violence, Silence operates on multiple levels. The words are set out in a

triangle and in two layers of double-layered neon words. The top layer runs - clockwise from the horizontal base of the triangle - as follows:

SILENCE (in white and pink, backwards and in mirror image)

VIOLENCE (orange and green, backwards)

VIOLINS (turquoise and peach, backwards)

The bottom layer runs:

SILENCE (coral and sky blue, backwards and upside down)

VIOLINS (yellow and fuschia)

VIOLENCE (red and blue).

Of the top and bottom layers the colour-ways of the neon words are so subtly different as to be almost indiscernible unless one pays extremely close attention. In this respect only two words noticeably stand out - the bottom layer's VIOLINS and the top layer's VIOLENCE. Importantly these words also overlap in Nauman's configuration.

This differentiation is only significant when the program runs its course. The bottom layer flashes each word for three seconds in a clockwise rotation (VIOLINS / VIOLENCE / SILENCE) and then the top layer does the same, but in an anticlockwise rotation (SILENCE / VIOLENCE / VIOLINS). In keeping with his other multipart neon works the whole is illuminated for a prolonged time only at the end of the programme, then all is suddenly black and the cycle repeats.

The use of significantly different colouration for the two words indicated above results in a particular and explicit emphasis in each illuminated rotation. *VIOLINS* / VIOLENCE / SILENCE hints at the passion, ferocity and power of music or possibly the degeneration of culture in times of conflict. SILENCE / *VIOLENCE* / VIOLINS is much more maudlin, conjuring up images of musical lamentation following a death or, just as easily, it could be the more upbeat sound of the joyous celebration of a full life lead after death.

Certainly the pointing out, or in Nauman's case his leading us through the reading, of the two groups leaves little room for deviation from the approximate conclusion we are to reach. Even so there is only so far an artist can control his audience: "what I was doing [...] is to use 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." ⁹ In this case Nauman leads us in a very specific direction, but leaves the particulars to us.

Nauman and playwright/novelist Samuel Beckett share an obsessive interest in the human condition. Both demonstrate a profound sympathy with the lot of Man in their work. Indeed, the one fundamental behind all Beckett's works is the ancient tragic knowledge of man's solitude, imprisonment and pain in an intolerable universe that is indifferent to this suffering. Beckett employs a minimalistic approach, stripping the stage of unnecessary spectacle and characters. Tragedy and comedy collide in a bleak illustration of the human condition and the absurdity of existence. In this way each work, from the lengthy productions (*Godot*, *Endgame*) to the very brief (*Ohio Impromptu*, *Catastrophe*) to the despairing monologues (*Rockaby*, *A Piece of Monologue*), serves as a metaphor for existence. So too do many of Nauman's works focus upon phenomenology:

"My work comes out of being frustrated about the human condition. And about how people refuse to understand other people. And about how people can be cruel to each other. It's not that I think I can change that, but it's just such a frustrating part of human history." ⁷⁰

Beckett's drama is most closely associated with the Theatre of the Absurd. The plays of the theatre of the absurd express a sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition through a series of anti-realistic techniques: plotlessness, unexplained events, undeveloped and puppet-like characters and unstructured, often nonsensical dialogue where language resembles that of dreams and nightmares.

Absurdist works usually employ illogical situations, unconventional dialogue and minimal plots to express the apparent absurdity of human existence. French thinkers such as Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre used the term 'absurd' in the 1940's in recognition of their inability to find any rational explanation for human life. The term described what they understood as the fundamentally meaningless situation of humans in a confusing, hostile and indifferent world. As American critic Martin Esslin - who coined the description 'Theatre of the Absurd' for this kind of drama - explains:

"The human condition being what it is, with man small, helpless, insecure, and unable ever to fathom the world in all its hopelessness, death, and absurdity, the theatre has to confront

him with the bitter truth that most human endeavour is irrational and senseless, that communication between human beings is well-nigh impossible, and that the world will forever remain an impenetrable mystery. At the same time, the recognition of all these bitter truths will have a liberating effect: if we realise the basic absurdity of most of our objectives we are freed from being obsessed with them and this release expresses itself in laughter.”⁷¹

In spite of Beckett's courageous tackling of the ultimate mystery and despair of human existence he was essentially a comic writer. In a French farce laughter will arise from seeing the frantic, and usually unsuccessful, pursuit of trivial sexual gratification. In Beckett's work as well a recognition of the triviality and ultimate pointlessness of most human strivings, by freeing the viewer from his concern with senseless and futile objectives, should also have a liberating effect. The laughter will arise from a view of pompous and self-important preoccupation with illusory ambitions and futile desires. Nothing is funnier than the trivialities of the human existence and we laugh. We laugh with a will in the beginning, but it soon becomes like the funny story we have heard too often, we still find it funny, but we don't laugh any more.

As with Nauman's links to Wittgenstein his connection to Beckett also tends to be taken at face value. More often than not this will mean drawing attention to direct references in his artwork, the video *Slow Angle Beckett Walk* (1968) for example, but any association between the two artist's work is much more far reaching. The neon artwork *Hanged Man* (1985) [fig. 12] can also be linked directly with a small scene in Beckett's *Waiting For Godot*⁷² :

(Silence. Estragon looks attentively at the tree.)

VLADIMIR:

What do we do now?

ESTRAGON:

Wait.

VLADIMIR:

Yes, but while waiting.

ESTRAGON:

What about hanging ourselves?

VLADIMIR:

Hmm. It'd give us an erection.

ESTRAGON:

(*highly excited*). An erection!

VLADIMIR:

With all that follows. Where it falls mandrakes grow. That's why they shriek when you pull them up. Did you not know that?

ESTRAGON:

Let's hang ourselves immediately!

This excerpt is more than enough to take the reading of this artwork beyond mere associations with childhood games. Seen in the context of this scene the piece hints at the human desire for quick gratification at any cost. It doesn't matter to Estragon that by hanging himself just to get an erection he will die as a consequence.

Once again Nauman's neon *One Hundred Live and Die* (1984) [fig. 11], with its essential listing of human attributes and activities reflects, not only Nauman's interest in the complexities and mundanities of the human condition, but also that of Beckett. The dramatic commands which mirror each other with their "AND LIVE" and "AND DIE" are intimately linked with the contradictory experiences of human nature: pain and pleasure, love and hate, laughing and crying and ultimately of life and death.

A neon work much more akin to Beckett's thinking is *Human Nature/Life Death/Knows Doesn't Know* (1983) [fig. 14]. This is another eye-catching piece and is probably the most complicated textual neon Nauman has created thus far. This work has three layers of text, in a mixture of plain and italic style, overlapping and crossing over each other. The bottom most layer is a circle which reads from the top clockwise: LIFE DEATH LOVE HATE PLEASURE PAIN. The second layer consists of approximately two statements which cross in the middle of the circle: MATTERS/KNOWS DOESNT KNOW/CARE, KNOWS/CARES DOESNT CARE/MATTER. Lastly three pairs of words - one plain, one italic - form a Manx cross radiating from the centre of the circle: HUMAN/HUMAN, NATURE/NATURE, ANIMAL/ANIMAL. Reading the text as written on the page one can see where Nauman is going with this work - he is distilling human nature to its essentials. When the artwork is

running in the gallery however, this is no easy task. The statements and words seem to switch on and off at random and at a speed which is far too rapid for the human eye to register anything but every other illuminated word. We only get tantalising glimpses. Nauman doesn't want us to be able to make sense of it because the human life is unfathomable, confusing. The basic cycle of life is periodically bisected by happenings and events and flashes of emotion. It's an indecipherable jumble that is over all too soon. Only those who burn the brightest attain any type of immortality. Only at the end of the cycle does the whole piece illuminate for a mere seven seconds. This isn't enough time to register or make sense of all the text. Just as abruptly the neon falls into darkness and begins its chaotic and fevered dance once more. We haven't learned anything. We can't.

The textual neon works by Bruce Nauman challenge the way we read and think about language specifically and human communication in general. Aside from Beckett and Wittgenstein Nauman also was influenced by novelist and filmmaker Alain Robbe-Grillet. According to Coosje van Bruggen he was especially "inspired by Alain Robbe-Grillet's novel *Jealousy*"⁷³ when working with his more intricate, everyday inspired language pieces.

Robbe-Grillet is the founder of the movement known as *Nouveau Roman* (new novel) part of the French New Wave in literature and film in the 1950's. Because his novels and films avoid conventional narrative structure and character development they are sometimes called 'anti-novels'. Robbe-Grillet argued that the writer should content himself with the impersonal description of physical objects. Psychological or ideological analysis should be excluded - the reader must guess what hides under details and events. Despite its focus on objective reality cleansed of human feeling, as Robbe-Grillet insisted, the *nouveau roman* is entirely subjective - its world is always perceived through the eyes of a character and not an omniscient narrator. The novels are composed largely of recurring images, impersonally depicted physical objects and random events of everyday life. His novels all challenge their readers to re-evaluate the way they read, the way they think and the way they visualise the world around them.

Robbe-Grillet's extensive use of repetition - repetition of language which alters just as subtly as human perception and memory changes details -

can also be found in Nauman's work where repetition is used as a forceful learning device which borders on the aggressive:

*"I think it is almost like reading Robbe-Grillet: you come to a point where he has repeated what he said earlier, but it means something altogether different, because even though he has changed only two words, they have changed the whole meaning about what he is talking about."*⁷⁴

Robbe-Grillet warned of the death of the novel if it could not progress beyond what he felt were essentially 19th century features. He started writing novels that challenged or eliminated traditional narrative conventions in plot, setting and character, and that offered innovations in point of view and time. This artistic movement is known as the *nouveau roman* or New Novel. (The term "anti-novel" undesirably privileges an implicit "novel" being written against.) Typical features of the New Novel include the absence of emotion; detailed, objective, sometimes repetitive and sometimes geometric descriptions; and the absence of a narrator's commentary.

The traditional Novel has always been considered a temporal art based on the consecutiveness of time. As a consequence narratives used to be linear transcriptions of events that would sum up at the end constituting what we know as a story. Modern literature has criticised this tradition by experimenting with the breaking up of linearity, sometimes even leaving stories unfinished. Robbe-Grillet pushes these changes even further, challenging the concept of story in its traditional sense. In this respect: "Robbe-Grillet's aversion to allegory, symbol, and concealed meaning is fundamental."⁷⁵ He claims that stories cannot be told as they used to, for 'ready-made' stories with a beginning and an end belong to an era where the world was stable, clear and innocent. The world does not present itself to us as a complete and whole reality, but as fragments of realities that depend upon our re-creation of them in order to mean something. Thus what he gives us are fragments of a story or scattered events that could be joined by the reader in order to form one. Yet he refuses to join the pieces, teaching us that our life and our experience of the world cannot be reduced to an explanation, but have to be worked out, re-created in order to acquire meaning.

Robbe-Grillet's novel *Jealousy* features prose which seems disarmingly

plain and simple, but the reader soon becomes aware that paragraphs are made of sentences that repeat on and on and blocks of text are re-arranged in different combinations.

In Robbe-Grillet's text the narrator functions as stand-in for both the writer and the reader who is facing a situation that unfolds independently of his will. Like an Edgar Allan Poe character he seems to have been walled up alive, caught between the interstices of this space. What he sees and can't prevent from happening is often happening in another room which he can only glimpse through the blinds of a window.

The window's blinds parallel the lines of text on the book's page: one reads (through the blinds/lines) the narrator's account of his reading through the blinds. It is thus that Robbe-Grillet acknowledges the circular nature of reading⁷⁶ and how wordplay is a useful tool in shifting perception: sun-blinds and blindness, *jalousies* and jealousy.⁷⁷

The page is our most abstract invention - a window onto a virtual space. In his textual neon artworks Bruce Nauman addresses the problem of the page-as-screen. His frequent use of overlapping words, two-tone words, puns, homophones etc. obfuscate meaning even though he is literally telling us what to read and constantly repeats himself in order to make sure we pay attention.

Good Boy, Bad Boy (1986-87) [fig. 15] is the textual reworking of a video piece of the same name which was completed in 1985. In the video a black man and a white woman, shown in separate monitors, repeat the same tract but are shown at different points of the sequence. The neon artwork makes physical the twenty five groups of four sentences - one hundred sentences in all. This is executed in a similar way to Robbe-Grillet's use of repetition and change of tense as in, for example, this simple line of text from *In The Labyrinth*: "Outside it is snowing. Outside it has snowed, it was snowing, outside it is snowing."⁷⁸ Nauman takes one word and changes the tense and usage four times: "I was a good girl, You were a good girl, We were good girls, That was good" or "I'm alive, You're alive, We're alive, This is our life". It sounds like some sort of boring lesson in a language class.

In the video piece the actors repeat the whole work three times before the loop returns them to the beginning. During this cycle the delivery of the words starts out as deadpan and gradually becomes more emotive until the

actors finally almost scream the last section: "I don't want to die, You don't want to die, We don't want to die, This is fear of death". What is easy to miss in the video piece is the repetition of the verb 'to bore' in both adjective forms, the tired and uninterested 'bored' - "I'm bored, You're bored, We're bored, Life is boring" - and the tedious and uninteresting 'boring' - "I'm boring, You're boring, We're boring, This is boring". One runs directly after the other which is why we miss it - or think we mishear it - in the video. The mundanity, the relentless classroom repetition, of the video conceals the truism that life *is* boring and this artwork *is* boring.

Works such as those by Nauman and Robbe-Grillet are unsettling because they make evident this effect in art - that we pay extra attention to - which we overlook everyday life. In these works simplicity is deceiving and fiction is built upon this deceit. After all, what the eye comprehends on the page is but a series of signs repeated in different combinations.

Chapter Four

Reaction and Interpretation

"Pete and Repeat were sitting on a fence.

Pete fell off; who was left?

Repeat. Pete and Repeat were sitting on a fence."

Bruce Nauman *Clown Torture* 1987

The individual viewer's reaction to and reception of works of art is undoubtedly a highly personal and subjective experience. This confrontation and interaction may provoke various emotions, thoughts and actions - many of which are seemingly intangible and of no obvious design - instilling within the viewer an unrefined sense of 'something' that will often linger far beyond the gallery exit. This investigation into Bruce Nauman's neon works was borne out of a need to attempt to explain the reactions to, and answer the questions posed by, these strangely affecting and extremely original works of art. Although many diverse issues are tackled by Nauman within his *oeuvre* there are two quite specific notions his neon works generate irregardless of subject matter: a sense of playfulness and straightforwardness as expressed by both the work and the artist himself.

In order to generate the strong response he demands to his work Nauman expertly appeals to and manipulates our sense of playfulness and the ability of Art to transmit truths through his skilful utilisation of visual trickery, word play and emotional disturbance. For Nauman the work of art has its true being in the fact that it becomes an experience which changes the person who encounters it. In this vein Nauman has stated the desire for his work to be:

*"Art that was just all there 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. I like that idea very much: the kind of intensity that doesn't give you any trace of whether you're going to like it or not."*⁷⁹

One of the most obviously striking features of Nauman's neon artworks is that, via the use of electric relays and timers, many of these pieces seem to interact directly with the spectator. The animation may only be a two-step process - a simple on off - but the presentation of the neon sign as Art, wall-hung as any painting would be, creates a strange dichotomy: we approach the work as one would any conventional canvas presented to us, but are forced to reappraise our initial assumptions as to how we should judge the work due to the medium used and - in complete antithesis to the traditionally presented painting - the physical light and movement. This instantly puts the viewer on their guard within the usually sombre institutional setting.

We visit the art institution in order to play the art game - we play the game of looking and understanding per the rules of the art institution. This is why Nauman feels that institutional settings whether it be gallery or museum or - one suspects - any setting where the player/viewer has been made aware of the particular game to be played (the art game) that the response to his work will be set within specific, preconceived rules. "I want the work to be taken seriously, but in the museum setting the seriousness of looking is often very narrow in its perspective."⁸⁰ So the sphere of the art game within the institutional playing field is seen as a closed world, one without transition or mediation.

Despite being housed within this serious institutional environment the intrinsically playful nature of these pieces shines through. Is it not, in fact, most likely that it is precisely because of this institutional setting that the attention grabbing 'come play with me' nature of his neon work creates such a stir? Certainly with reference to Nauman's more overtly political work, his chair pieces for example, this aspect is a much more unassuming facet of the whole though undoubtedly still tangible. This playfulness in his art ranges from the schoolground - bouncing a ball, writing his name in the way that he imagines it would be had he inscribed it on the surface of the moon, manipulating language and the sounds of words to produce either rhymes of oddly appropriate/conflicting sense or mere phonetic nonsense - to pieces such as *Diamond Africa with Chair Tuned D E A D* (1981) where the suspended chair's metal legs 'play' specific musical notes when striking the unyielding diamond-shaped steel boundary that confines it. A grown-up version of musical chairs

perhaps. No matter how sophisticated the art may be it could be argued that even the making of the art is in itself a form of play. Playing with culture, society, humanity and all that Western propriety deems normal and acceptable and all that is not so.

Though seeming playful his work carries with it a gravitas that nullifies any sense of silliness that may be perceived on first impression. To play by virtue of his art is Nauman's way of relaying a seriousness that will only be comprehended when true attention is paid to the artwork. Even Nauman's kind of child's play is not - aside perhaps for his earliest period of work - innocent. His sense of play can be amusing, baffling, instructive, honest, sinister, overwhelming and aggressive. It goes beyond 'language games' and becomes a literal play with humanity. That his chosen themes seem to take a wholly anti-human stance - highlighting the negative aspects of our society and its functions - is actually misleading. Nauman brings these facets of our humanity literally to light in a tremendously pro-human way.

Although they can be read as wholesale condemnation of our collective negatives they are also, in a way, a celebration of what it is that makes us - the human race - who we are. Everyone has the potential to carry out atrocities. We all have the inherent capability to be, for example, vicious, vulgar and brutally honest. This brutal honesty in Nauman's work is his desire to enlighten his viewers. His work "... is basically an outgrowth of the anger I feel about the human condition. The aspects of it that make me angry are our capacity for cruelty and the ability people have to ignore situations they don't like."⁸⁴ Provoking a response to and an awareness of these negatives through the unadulterated confrontation this artist insists upon ("like getting hit in the back of the neck"⁸⁵) and the viewer's whole attention being given will provide the reaction that he requires.

Nauman's work addresses the essential questions of our own culture, indeed our own century of self-awareness. It cannot help but be successful in its resonance with the fundamental nature of what it is to be human and a part of the World within contemporary society, especially when this resonance is deliberately sought after: "Art ought to have a moral value, a moral stance, a position. ... art [has] a function beyond being beautiful - that is it [has] a social reason to exist."⁸⁶

But does contemporary society with its myriad of rules, systems and technological advances somehow stymie the creative impulse? It would seem so to Johan Huizinga. Our "compulsive craving for originality distorts the creative impulse"⁸⁴ as art becomes "more susceptible to the deleterious influences of modern techniques of production."⁸⁵ A slave to "mechanisation, advertising, sensation-mongering [which] have a much greater hold upon art because as a rule it works directly for a market and has a free choice of all the techniques available."⁸⁶ The artist becomes a "superior species of being... and the public at large is washed by the mighty waves of snobbery."⁸⁷ Damnably "none of these conditions entitles us to speak of a play-element in contemporary art"⁸⁸ for when "art becomes self-conscious... it is apt to lose something of its eternal childlike innocence."⁸⁹ A bleak outlook for contemporary art indeed. Huizinga was writing at a time (1944) when art itself was undergoing massive change. Change that was not widely understood. That Huizinga describes art's "constant striving after new and unheard-of forms impel[ling] art down the steep slope of Impressionism into the turgidities and escrescences of the 20th Century"⁹⁰ undoubtedly gives us an insight, if not the reason, for his negativity towards modern art's capacity for play.

Though art's role in society has changed significantly it has only done so in keeping with modern culture. Surely the rise of technology and mechanisation which affords the artist the opportunity to experiment with non-traditional art subjects and media can only aid and enhance the reflexive nature of art as mimesis of humanity in the widest sense? We, collectively as the human race, are now, not necessarily more self-conscious than ever, but certainly are more consciously commercially driven both in terms of commodity and personal worth. Image and status are ideals that are sold to us every day by modern advertising. Art therefore, in order to attempt to reflect our own ways of thinking must be conscious of this. As Nauman has said: "art is like cheating - it involves inverting the rules or taking the game apart and changing it."⁹¹ Though the art game may have changed from art as a 'simple' reflection of society illustrated by way of pictorial realism the modern art game may be all the more serious in its nature due to the fact that esoteric

conventions necessitate a specific art community that has a *priori* knowledge to some degree. The irony is that modern art is oftentimes seen as being too playful and too simplistic a game, a game that leads nowhere and to no higher understanding, to be of any real cultural worth.⁹²

Playfulness however, is not simple at all. It can often give way to a weightier, more seriously competitive objective wherein the desire to win, control and dominate becomes the be-all-and-end-all of the so-called game. It is this kind of contest that we can see being played in Bruce Nauman's figure-based neon sculptures. The commodification of bodies, or the politicisation of bodies, is consumer culture, sex and power. *Porno Chain* (1985) [fig. 16] illustrates seven neon figures, four men and three women, carrying out all the basic varieties of sexual intercourse. These figures are wholly symbolic as they have no individuality, save their gender, they belong to no race nor do they subscribe to any creed, their different colours are non-representative. They are crude line drawings animated in two steps, two movements, two colours about sex and power. Gaining control in either wins the contest. This particular work is filled with anger and degradation. Eroticism is frustrated and frozen, reduced to stilted movements in time. There is nothing arousing about this piece, or any of his other sex neons of the same era (1985-86). Love and lust are smothered by a sense of mechanical ritual and obscenity. To further extend the sex/power dualistic contest the female representations in *Porno Chain* are illustrated in softer colours than the male: female = secondary, male = primary.

The effect of the medium - the neon - is startling. The pretty colourfulness draws the viewer in and what may be initially amusing - we tend to laugh when we find ourselves discomfited - soon turns to mute consternation as the figures in the chain enact their given function at ever increasing speeds and disjointed timings. As with many of Nauman's other animated neon works this particular sculpture's increasingly frenetic movements build up to end in a blinding crescendo/orgasm before repeating the process once again. Their programmed behaviour does not allow free will.

Jean-Charles Masséra in his essay 'Dance With The Law'⁹³ relates this specific neon sculpture to a particular film by Jean Luc Godard, *Sauve qui peut (la vie)*, (1979).

*"Seated at his desk, a boss organises a pornography chain whose departure and arrival point is himself. The system's function rests entirely with him. Each body must carry out a task (lick, suck, penetrate) at the moment when the preceding body in the chain gives the sign (a foot on the breast, fellatio and so forth)."*⁹⁴

As Foucault said: "Modern society is perverse, not in spite of its puritanism or as if from a backlash provoked by its hypocrisy; it is in actual fact, and directly, perverse."⁹⁵ This reduction of people to bodies, further reduced once more to mechanical things, solely concerns the exertion of power. Where the movie asserts power via a physically active participant the neon places power squarely on the shoulders of the spectator/voyeur. Certainly we - as viewers in a gallery - have no real power over the figures per se, but we do have a power over the artwork: when we are in the gallery viewing this piece it is the viewer who is master, we have the power to start and stop watching as we choose. The sculpture may be physically turned on and off by the employees of the institution displaying it and the artist may have created the spectacle, but it is the viewer who has the power to either watch or walk away.

Though this is a possible reading of this work there is another, more politically charged way we can view this neon sculpture. The timing of the creation of these pieces by Nauman, the fact that all the sex neons were produced in 1985, coincides almost exactly with the real beginning of the AIDS crisis. That this general period of Nauman's work is more highly politically charged than at any other time would also suggest a possible connection with this subject. If plausible it shifts the contest or game played by this artwork from 'sex and power' to 'sex and death'.

During the early 1980's AIDS was immediately perceived by the general public as a stigmatised consequence of actions, a deliberate violation of social norms in which normal society as a whole was untouched. Normal society, of course, consisted of white, non-drug using heterosexuals. AIDS was confined to gay men or injecting drug users causing many people to be indifferent or outright hostile to people with the disease. Many heterosexuals at the time only thought of the disease as a 'gay plague'⁹⁶ increasing their own risk of exposure by rejecting warnings that HIV/AIDS was not restricted to the gay

community.

As early as 1983 - two years after the first cases were identified - media reports first raised the possibility of infection through routine household contact, heightening the public's fears over even the most casual of interactions. It would take a further two years of research before scientists would conclude that exchanging saliva with an HIV positive person would not lead to automatic infection.⁹⁷ Interestingly as soon as heterosexual transmission of the disease was identified in 1984 "immediate attention was placed on women as vectors of transmission to men or children, either through their roles as prostitutes or childbearers."⁹⁸ The media of the time also reinforced this image of women as infectors even though they are only half as likely to infect their male partners through penetrative sex.

By August 1985 The New York Times was reporting that the "Fear of AIDS Grows Among Heterosexuals".⁹⁹ This was in no small part due to the revelation in July of the same year that the film actor Rock Hudson had AIDS. He was the first celebrity to announce that he had the disease and died only three months later. The disclosure of Hudson's condition played a catalytic role in transforming public attitudes. Although he was gay the public's perception of him as heterosexual appeared to heighten fears of "an epidemic that would affect the general population."¹⁰⁰ Sex and sexuality was very much in the public consciousness and a lot of the animosity surrounding the AIDS crisis was squarely aimed at the gay community as originators.

The variety of sexual position and acts in *Porno Chain* - being basically all inclusive - suggests in light of this correlation with AIDS and the public perception of it that sex is universal just as the risk related to sex and AIDS is universal. There are no labels attached to these figures. Coupled with the lack of intimacy and the public showing of private actions the more personal issues involved in sex and sexuality are made almost void. Private has become public through the artist's employment of a tremendously seductive and very public medium. The programmed figures are a metaphor for our own social programming. As Nauman has stated: "There's a conflict between our animal instincts and how we're socialized to behave, and a lot of my work plays on the tension between these two drives."¹⁰¹

interpretation because first names are the ones we scribble absentmindedly on jotters.

The two figurative neon sculptures - *Hanged Man* (1985) [fig. 13] and *Mean Clown Welcome* (1985) [fig. 17] - appropriate child-play in an altogether different way. The children's spelling/guessing game of Hang Man results in the symbolic hanging of the man. The man is completed in stages - line by line much like the animation process of Nauman's figurative neon sculptures - if the guesser loses the figure is completed and is hung.

*"In my piece you're not allowed to participate - the parts of the figure are put into place without you. The neon lines flash on and off in a programmed sequence. And then the game doesn't end. Once the figure is complete, the whole picture starts to be recreated again."*¹⁰³

So the player (viewer) has no control over the game. There is no objective save the inevitable 'death' of the man on the gibbet. Though Nauman "added the bit about having an erection or ejaculation when you're hanged"¹⁰⁴ it, in fact, truly is a physiological reaction to hanging (strangulation) and neatly continues the sex/death theme. The man experiences *le petit mort* just as his life is extinguished.

The player also has to wonder if the man is being hanged as punishment or if he is committing suicide. Suicide, according to the Catholic Church, is a mortal sin resulting in an afterlife spent in Hell and if we presume that the man is experiencing a masturbatory pleasure in addition to this (another mortal sin) then he will be doubly damned.

Clowns are now almost as synonymous with children's birthday parties as they are with the circus. In either case their function is ostensibly to entertain children: to play the fool. According to clown and expert on the subject, Bruce 'Charlie' Johnson a clown "can contain exaggerated traits in the performer's personality, ones he wishes he had, and ones observed in others... The specific traits chosen for the character will be determined by the performer's personal sense of humour and by audience interaction."¹⁰⁵ In essence then the clown is not one individual, but an abstract or pastiche of many individuals collectively which hides or masks the true character of the person under the make-up. As Cindy Sherman has said with reference to her

own clown photos: "I was fascinated by who the person was behind the clown's greasepaint. Could he be an alcoholic, or even a child molester?"¹⁰⁶

This negative view of the clown - the sinister, disturbing side - is what interested Nauman also:

"because clowns are abstract in some sense, they become very disconcerting. You, I, one, we can't make contact with them. ... And when you think about vaudeville or circus clowns, there is a lot of cruelty and meanness. You couldn't get away with that without makeup. People wouldn't put up with it, it's too mean. But in the circus it's okay, it's still funny."¹⁰⁷

Mean Clown Welcome (1985) bridges Nauman's figurative sex neons and his video work *Clown Torture* (1987). To invoke the sense of duress that the limited animation of neon cannot create he relies on the programming of the animation itself. "With the figure neons, the timing sequence is very important - it becomes violent. The pace and repetition make it hard to see the figures, and ... the colors are pretty - so the confusion and dichotomy of what is going on are important too."¹⁰⁸

This neon is not about the physical act of violence, but the violent and confusing nature of menace. The clowns greet each other, naked but for their outsized clown hands, round clown noses and clown makeup complete with clown smile. They lean in as if to shake hands, their once flaccid penises becoming instantly erect, but their gloved fingers just overlap and they begin again.

The sequence Nauman sets up - that of each clown taking turns to lean in with knees bent, bottom out, hand outstretched, penis erect before finally both lean in fingers touching - is uncomfortable to watch. The clown's posture as it reaches out to the other is possibly best described as a mocking half-curtsey. A sort of prissy movement that directly contradicts the clown's male state of arousal. Or maybe this is the point. The movement is used as a subservient form of aggression. Both clowns are playing a submissive role before they meet - tentatively as equals - in the middle. Possibly the clowns are 'playing' at being gay. The nature of clowns as masked individuals or hidden personalities is a metaphor for the awkward and uncertain process of 'coming out'. The large clown gloves the figures wear symbolic of the clumsiness felt

when trying to make others understand just as the makeup conceals the individual from persecution.

Playfulness is an essential and intrinsic part of Bruce Nauman's art. The play-element in his work is not only implied but explicit. Contemporary art may have become "more susceptible to the deleterious influences of modern techniques of production" ¹⁰⁹ as Huizinga asserts, but modern society has moved beyond the need for naturalistic works of art to preach at us via historical, mythological or biblical allegory. If art truly is a mimesis of contemporary culture then it must also truly reflect a culture that is self-reflexive, dependant upon technology and, unfortunately, is generally ignorant of the wider world around it. Nauman's art - though not strictly seeking to correct this state of affairs in any way - does carry a weighty morality even though he does play with us.

Since we are already preconditioned to assume that any work of art displayed in a gallery or art-institution is to be taken seriously - viewed within the art context - it may be relatively safe to assume that this seriousness may be transferred to the works of art themselves. Therefore, it could be argued that words exhibited either as art or with art carry with them a certain weight and cache that may not be placed upon them should they be displayed in an innocuous, everyday setting. Billboards, for example, may capture the attention of the average viewer, but not for any considerable length of time.

"There's a problem either way. If you avoid an art-related situation altogether - if you hang a neon sign anyplace - it is ignored and people don't give it any thought at all. If you hang it in a museum, you carry a lot of weight that's not yours. [...] But I don't know of any effective way - outside of galleries or museums - to have people pay attention. Somehow you have to point a finger at it and say "this is art and you have to pay attention - so think about it!" ¹¹⁰

Art that is presented as Art demands that time be spent trying to understand or absorb it. This is one reason that galleries and museums are generally so solemn.

Although Nauman is aware of the phenomena he is quite reticent about the results of this institutional effect. Despite his own preoccupation with his

work being 'paid attention' to the "very narrow... perspective" ¹³ the museum setting gives the artwork would seem to push the meaning of the work possibly too far in the direction of the 'art game' for his liking. Certainly with respect to his neon pieces the meaning of the works shifts completely from the realm of advertising and low culture (the traditional realm of the medium) to the art world and traditionally high culture (the realm of the artwork). As he puts it the neon - as part of our advertising culture - manifests "the straightforward fixation on doing one thing that our culture emphasises in its slogans." ¹⁴ To shift this straightforwardness of our reception of the sign to the art world - with all its incumbent theories and discourses - does possibly tend to complicate the way the viewer sees the work. For Nauman:

"There is a tendency to clutter things up, to try to make sure people know something is art, when all that's necessary is to present it, to leave it alone. I think the hardest thing to do is to present an idea in the most straightforward way." ¹⁵

Despite Nauman's own misgivings regarding the reception and interpretation of his work within the institutional setting the critical validity of his work is undeniable. His important position in the postmodern art world is best summed up by Robert C. Morgan, who also acknowledges that Nauman's conscious decision to distance himself as much as possible from 'The Art World' is distinctly advantageous in terms of the integrity of the truths he chooses to draw our attention to:

"The artist is a living fountain, an instigator of truth in a hypermediated world, yet at the same time it is difficult to ignore the corruption, deceit, and mindless academic repetition that have evolved over the years in relation to any presumed truth. Nauman has given himself the distance. Like Beckett, Bourgeois, and Duchamp, the encapsulating vision of Bruce Nauman, fraught with the absurd tensions of language and experience, functions as a catalyst, as a transformer, and finally as a resistor to all that is fashionable and predictable in the media-ridden art world." ¹⁶

The decisive shift from 'advertising sign' to 'art sign' may not seem terribly noteworthy, but the fundamental function of the neon sign - to inform in basic

terms, generally in as basic language or image as possible and to greatest effect - transfers the straightforward declaration of the sign to the artwork. Possibly it is a step too far to state that neon is unequivocally truthful but there is - through the weight of its fluctuating history especially - a simplicity and the sense of a lack of duplicity about it that gives the language-based neon artwork an instant, and almost enigmatic, gravitas.

As has been stated above the basic neon sign, as an advertising tool, was/is used to declare product, name or services rendered. There is no hard sell of lifestyle. Therefore this mode of advertising would seem to have escaped the feeling of jaded disenchantment that comes with our contemporary, complicated selling techniques. Because the neon doesn't 'sell to' so much as 'inform' the potential consumer it would seem reasonable to say that this sense of straightforwardness is transferred to the neon artwork.

This straightness of sign is, of course, not only limited to neon, but to any sign which, for example, declares a shop to be "closed", "open 24 hours", that the business within sells "chinese food" or offers "girls, girls, girls". These statements are seen as essentially trustworthy. To employ a well known advertising slogan, 'it does exactly what it says on the tin'. That Nauman, his contemporaries and younger artists since have utilised this mode of signage over, say, the perspex light boxes which have replaced neon advertising almost wholesale is simply due to neon's vacillating connotations within popular culture. To be more explicit about the impact of Nauman's use of neon:

*"Rather than employing commercial neon technology to take a distanced or ironic stance [...] as the Pop artists might have done, Nauman used it to advertise his own ambivalence. Honky-tonk signage thus becomes an emblem of vatic illumination; a question without a question mark replaces a slogan with an implicit exclamation point."*¹⁵

This notion goes hand in hand with the idea that low-culture is possibly more honest than high-culture or, at the very least, is more transparent in its motivation. Choreographer Lloyd Newson works almost exclusively with popular notions of high and low culture - the connection between class (that is to say, social standing) and art. Newson is fascinated by the sometimes very slight variations in costume, context and movement that can determine

whether a dance is considered 'classy or trashy'. He asks:

"What is the difference between a ballroom dancer who lifts her legs very high in a sheer costume, dancing around at speed and a lap dancer who also lifts her legs high in a sheer costume? In fact, is one more honest than the other?"¹⁶

We similarly might say that neon, given its negative connotations as a present-day low culture form of advertising, seems honest merely because it exhibits no false bravado or pretence.

If this is the case then Nauman's brand of honesty is brutal in its simplicity. A text piece like *Raw War* (1970) [fig. 18] is extremely direct and leaves no room for arguments. That war, to be involved as a participant or witnessed as an onlooker, is very much a 'raw' experience is not in doubt. The 'rawness' of war, the inexperienced soldiers, the maiming and killing, the sensitivity (heightened awareness or delicacy in the details) is created in just a few seconds and by one word that happens to read as another when reversed.

The idea behind the work itself is, like most good ideas, unsophisticated in its conception. Possibly this aspect of the work is the most emotive; that both words are present and yet we don't immediately associate one with the other in ordinary circumstances. When it is pointed out that 'raw' is 'war' backwards (or vice versa) the implications seem clear, but Nauman's method of illustrating this portentous coincidence is not to be overtly threatening or aggressive in any way - as one might expect - in order to force the message home. Instead he has chosen to lead us through it as a teacher or parent might help a child learn to read. The work doesn't preach about the harshness of war and all it entails, but Nauman patiently points the fact out to us that 'raw' is a palindrome of 'war' as if he knew we hadn't noticed it before.

The title on the initial sketch Nauman did for the work in 1968 reads, "sign to hang when there is a war on." A sardonic statement about the effectiveness of his teaching technique perhaps. This one statement is enough, not only to universalise the artwork's intent, but also the artist's motive. That this work was completed in the midst of one of the most politically, morally and physically destructive wars in recent American history cannot be sidestepped.

By 1968 the Anti-War movement had been effectively organising sit-ins,

rallies and marches for three years. This same year was also the bloodiest of the war for the Americans with a total of 16,511 dead, 87,388 wounded and 176 captured.¹⁷ The infamous TET Offensive of January 30th 1968¹⁸ claimed the lives of 1,536 American personnel while 7,764 were wounded in action and 18 were captured in action.¹⁹ In typical Nauman fashion any personal point becomes universal.

Only one word sculpted in neon is actually physically present though formed in two layers, red on top of orange. It is the word 'WAR', but that is not the starting point of the lesson. First the word 'RAW' is spelt out letter by letter in orange from right to left, R - A - W, and then you read it through left to right in red, WAR. The same sequence is repeated again, R - A - W, WAR. This cycle repeats four more times before the teacher pauses for breath and the self same lesson begins again.

The only real aggressive feeling comes from the colours involved - the red and orange. Both are fiery colours, the red especially being associated with rage, aggression, blood. The colours are deliberately chosen to accentuate the fierceness of the statement. What is a little unsettling about this artwork is that the reader/viewer is practically encouraged to chant along with the flashing sequence. The rhythm of the illumination like a drum keeping time, keeping us in step, marching on. It is only when you are caught up in the rhythm that you forget the essential significance of the words and their coincidental but significant partnership. The lesson has failed.

Not all of Nauman's neon artworks are quite so urgent in their need to be understood. Neon signs like *The True Artist Reveals To The World Mystic Truth* (1967) [fig. 4] and *Neon Templates of the Left Half of my Body Taken at Ten-Inch Intervals* (1966) [fig. 7] promote different kinds of philosophical truths. The truth learned from *The True Artist* is almost entirely rooted in the individual viewer's own reading of the message delivered by the artist, the use of neon explicit in its link to advertising, whereas *Neon Templates* presents an artist-specific, personal truth.

Nauman's choice of neon to outline his figure as opposed to, for example, the wax, rubber or fibreglass that he had used for other projects in the same period, is a significant one. The neon - the coloured light - is not a concrete medium in the sense that any of these other moulding substances

are. Undoubtedly the glass tubes are solid, defining and sculptural, but the neon gas they hold and the light they emit is not tangible. The way Nauman delineates his body - through strips bent around one side to create a profile - forms only a half figure. The bands do not outline the complete circumference of his figure, there are no facial features nor are there any obvious body shapes. Were it not for the straightforward descriptiveness of the title of the piece it would not be immediately apparent that this artwork represents a human figure at all. Only when illuminated does the light spread to fill the void left by the body inasmuch as it reveals the absence, or lack, of physical form. Shown in the right circumstances this artwork creates a ghostly impression of the body shape of the artist as he was 38 years ago. It becomes a kind of portrait without real substance and is only a true figural representation when illuminated.

For this artwork to be truthful for the viewer we simply must trust that the artist has nothing to hide. Certainly Nauman could have, for whatever reason, fabricated the dimensions that we look upon as accurate, but such a falsehood would undermine the purpose of the work altogether. This artwork is a physical representation of the missing artist illuminated for us in bands of green neon. In essence this work allows the artist to be physically present even when in absentia. The pseudo-presence of the artist's physical being replaces the recognition of the 'hand' of the artist as sought after in the traditional creation of the work of art. The space left by a body, the area that a person inhabits, prompts us to consider the space around us and the space that we - as individuals and as a race - inhabit in the World. In this sense the artist's personal truth becomes a universal supported and modulated by the ideas and beliefs of the individual. Our thoughts motivated by the artist himself in a physical sense as well as the artistic.

Many of Nauman's artworks do not discuss the state of art, the role of the artist or instruct us in language use, but address wider culture and the universals of human nature via, what should be referred to as, post-modernist media such as video, installation, the use of the everyday and neon. He routinely employs humour, but in such a way that it is highly likely to be accompanied by a feeling of disconcertedness and a matter-of-fact detachedness which can also cause concern in the viewer simply because his

detachment draws our attention to our own lack of interest. He subverts the happy, blinking colours of the neon to create statements that are serious, ridiculous, intimidating and embarrassing at the same time - attractive, but not.

An artwork like *One Hundred Live And Die* (1984) [fig. 11] assails the viewer with the simple, trivial, mundane, scary, stupid, wonderful monumentality of what constitutes a human life and even though the aesthetic is not intentionally the primary response, once again the beauty of the neon light cannot be ignored. Aesthetics is not the impetus behind this artist's work at any conscious level despite the obvious attraction we might perceive and experience initially. The use of neon delivers a vivid shock to the system when one comes upon an artwork so bright and vibrant in the generally staid institutional environment. This piece is at once superficially attractive - all the pretty, flashing, Crayola-coloured lights - and at the same time repellently disconcerting in its ultimate message. Like many of his neon pieces it seems amusing at first simply because of his blatant use of the taboo. In this case words like "shit", "piss", "fuck" etc. are interspersed with the everyday, such as "eat", "love", "know" and this appeals to an inherent sense of childhood naughtiness. We smile at Nauman's use of these words, but the inevitable transgression from simple amusement to a sense of being forced to see the dreaded truth is quick and sobering. It's the light that draws you in, beckoning the viewer to a confrontation with a neon artwork which is unrelenting in its visual barrage and brutal in its direct assessment of humanity and how we live and die.

The one hundred statements are arranged into fifty pairs. Each word chosen by the artist is finished by the contradictory statements "...AND DIE" and "...AND LIVE" in that order, for example, "TELL AND DIE" "TELL AND LIVE". The simple statements combined with our seemingly self-imposed mind-numbing boredom in having to acknowledge each one on an individual basis as they flash in turn make us increasingly aware of our own mortality and how, despite our attempts to separate ourselves from everyone else, we are all fundamentally the same in the processes that we go through as human beings. It is the story of life, but in making us recognise this it also makes us realise that inevitably we will die. The catch is that the viewer has to suffer the twenty

or so minutes that it takes to complete the cycle. But to suffer Nauman's art seem to be very much necessary. As one critic has stated:

"...only at the very end of that time did I understand what the work was about.

In the final moments of the cycle, the viewer is rewarded with a frisson of pure visual bliss... like the Catherine wheel closing a firework display.

*... Of no particular interest in themselves, individual actions feel mechanical and meaningless as we do them, and yet the sum total of those actions makes up a person's life, the most joyous and exhilarating thing there is. As usual with Nauman, there was a sting in the tail. Because the work was fully illuminated only for a minute or two at the very end of the cycle, the implication was that we can't see how beautiful life is until we are near the end of it."*¹²⁰

This is one possible reading of the work. To look in greater detail the viewer realises that the contradictory statements are arranged in such a way that one is read immediately after the other - "...AND LIVE" "...AND DIE". This creates an instant paradox in reading and response to the text wherein each chosen word generates imagined scenarios around the statements. Some pairs can provoke the idea that one scenario has two possible outcomes. For example, "FALL AND DIE" is jumping out of a plane without a parachute while "FALL AND LIVE" is jumping out a plane with a parachute. In a similar fashion different scenarios can be thought up to explain the individual statements. "OLD AND DIE" may be the peaceful passing away of a person who has lead a long, fruitful life whereas "OLD AND LIVE" could be the conciliatory release of the elderly from a hostage situation. The imagination can run riot with these statements if you allow it to.

Nauman uses layered neon in this piece - one colour laid directly over another - forming coloured shadows that either complement the primary, topmost colour or fight against it creating a discordant, jarring optical sensation. There is a material, visual duality to mirror the linguistic contradiction. This pairing seems to be arbitrary as there is no overall symmetry to the piece in colour terms, but, on closer examination there exists

in the work six pairs of statements which are completely identical in colour ways. Interestingly there seems to be no reference made to this possibly significant singling out of these statements by previous Nauman critics or scholars.¹²¹ Indeed Vincent Labaume in his catalogue essay, "Bruce Nauman Are You Roman or Italic?" goes so far as to suggest that the group of four statements has no value whatsoever:

"... some of these anomalous messages seem to be no more than padding, as if the artist had suddenly run out of verbs (BLACK AND DIE - BLACK AND LIVE/WHITE AND DIE - WHITE AND LIVE' and 'YELLOW AND DIE - YELLOW AND LIVE)." ¹²²

These six statements can be arranged into one group of four and two stand-alone pairings. The stand-alone pairs of "SPEAK AND LIVE", "SPEAK AND DIE" and "LAUGH AND LIVE", "LAUGH AND DIE" seem to directly comment upon Nauman's art in general. His art relies heavily upon language and our understanding of it. For Nauman "language is a very powerful tool"¹²³ therefore his setting aside of "SPEAK" in particular leads the Nauman scholar to his well-known association with Wittgensteinian thought on 'language games' and how this use and understanding of our language leads us to an ultimate understanding of our society and world, for language use is deemed a reflection of culture. Nauman's subtle detachment of "LAUGH" from the piece is also telling. Humour - ranging from the innocent and irreverent to the black and ironic - often manifested through absurdity is also a tool widely used in his work. Humour is used to take the viewer off guard in order to make the ultimate message of his work all the more significant. Although play can be serious there must be a humorous element to make it playful.

Much more serious is the group of four statements which hide in the bottom left corner of the work. We (in the Western World) read from left to right, top to bottom which means that our eye is most drawn to the top left of a painting/text and then to the bottom right. Whether or not Nauman's placement of this group in a relatively worthless position in visual terms was deliberate is unknown. What is significant are the implications of the inclusion of this deliberately interconnected group:

BLACK AND LIVE BLACK AND DIE

WHITE AND LIVE WHITE AND DIE
RED AND LIVE RED AND DIE
YELLOW AND LIVE YELLOW AND DIE

Unlike all the other pairs of statements - including the two stand-alone statements discussed - these are the only four pairs which are pure in colour; black on black, white on white etc. The obvious conclusion is that these statements refer explicitly to race. All other statements made by the artist in this artwork are universal in nature and seemingly random in placement. These four are specific and intentionally grouped together. The scenarios the viewer may imagine are instances in which the sole reason for the outcome of either life or death are entirely dependant upon and limited to the colour of a person's skin. The positioning of this group in an area of the work which will be mostly overlooked, unless the artwork as a whole is seriously paid attention to, is significant indeed.

Works like *One Hundred Live and Die* and *Neon Templates* makes us re-evaluate our lives and question the processes we go through - something we generally don't do unless prompted by some outside factor. These artworks are prompts which give us the opportunity to look at things - life, space, absence, routine - in a different light. The artist himself does not explicitly cite a need for 'truthfulness' in his work, perhaps because the basic concept of Truth is not wholly universal. What he does require of his art is a sense of morality : "Art ought to have a moral value, a moral stance, a position. ... art ha[s] a function beyond being beautiful - it ha[s] a social reason to exist." ¹²⁴ Irregardless of Nauman's utilisation of typically postmodern media they contain straightforward truth(s) which we must seek out.

Chapter Five

Contemporaries

“Manipulation of information that has to do with how we perceive rather than what.”

Bruce Nauman

Neon began to be used seriously as an art medium in the Sixties ostensibly as a natural progression from the wholesale pop culture highjackings of Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns et al. Neon advertising had become an entrenched part of the commercial subculture and also served the *avant garde* artist's general interest in experimenting with unusual and very specific material qualities - an interest that was also expressed by turning to other materials that had not been explored aesthetically until then like wax, felt or fibreglass. On the other hand neon writing was an almost ideal medium in the context of the increasing conceptualisation of art during this time. Of the artists who took on neon in this period only three used neon writing extensively: Bruce Nauman, Joseph Kosuth and Maurizio Nannucci. All three are interested in how we see language and all three are also interested in the 'language games' of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Of these three though only Nauman veered away from taking Wittgenstein too literally. Instead he finds the philosopher interesting at precisely the point where his investigations become open and integrative, even when ideas are incompatible and contradictory.

The work of Joseph Kosuth appears to be the result of a logical and inevitable development following Twentieth Century moves towards autonomy for art. As soon as art was liberated from social, ideological and decorative handicaps and tasks other questions could be asked which had hitherto been suppressed for utilitarian reasons. From this position Kosuth and other representatives of Conceptual Art developed their critical approach which selected Art itself as the object of their considerations. Joseph Kosuth

was most interested in whether, and to what extent, autonomous art could continue to function in society.

Like any other reflective, intellectual process this analysis also needs to formulate ideas and be articulate about functional mechanisms of art therefore, language is a necessary instrument. An almost inevitable consequence of this artistic approach for Kosuth was that he integrated language, as a medium, directly into his work.

*"I felt that art had been functioning on a linguistic level for some time, and that created a lot of problems, and so I finally said: what the hell! - why not just use language instead of circling round it all the time. Just wade straight through it. So that the work becomes language."*²⁵

With his work *One and Three Chairs* (1965) Kosuth created an experimental, tripartite arrangement which confronts a simple wooden chair with a photograph of the same chair and its dictionary definition. The central subject of this work is that the 'three chairs' indicated in the title are an illusion. They cannot exist precisely because the 'chair' as object, photograph and lexical definition fulfill different functions and are also in a different context on each occasion. The photographic version or linguistic translation can only inadequately and imperfectly represent the one chair which is actually present. To a significant extent the work of René Magritte is a comparable reflection on the identity or non-identity of pictorial or linguistic means of representation.

Ohne and Eight: A Description (1965) [fig. 19] is a work directed exclusively at itself. It has no external reference point and makes a statement only about its own material condition: NEON ELECTRICAL LIGHT ENGLISH GLASS LETTERS VIOLET EIGHT. Each of the words describes an individual characteristic. We are therefore, dealing with a work consisting of neon, electrical light, in the English language, made of glass letters, violet in colour which consists of eight words in total. The various concepts attempt to determine the entire object linguistically from various points of view. They complement each other and thus suggest that they have described the work in all its aspects. Here too Kosuth is demonstrating the impossibility of capturing the object linguistically and in such a way that the offered definition does the real model complete justice. The reader/viewer, however is generally only too

ready to accept this offered identity.

The neon writing *Self-Defined and Self-Described* (1965) [fig. 20] is not only a tautological assertion, but could stand as a title for all of Kosuth's early work to 1974. His various clusters of work are, in the first place, differing ways of presenting self-reflection and description. His work excludes subjective and aesthetic design by dint of its artistic approach. Work with textual material requires absolute clarity in the form of its presentation.

In working with neon the complicated manufacturing process immediately separates the artistic idea from possible execution by another individual. We may conclude from the fact that Kosuth does not make a single mention of neon in his collected writings *Art after Philosophy and After* (1993) that in the case of this material he is only interested in its purely technical character to the exclusion of any aesthetic subjectivity. Thus Kosuth seems to wish consciously to eliminate from his work the sensual presence of the coloured neon light. Instead statements are defined by their relationship with the forms in which they appear materially.

Like Joseph Kosuth, Maurizio Nannucci also makes intensive use of language as an artistic medium. In the Sixties at least, related formulations grew in the visual transposition of their ideas, but these seem to cover up indifferences of context. At the time both artists created tautological and self-referential situations in their work in which words were given material form in the neon objects executed and the meaning of the word was also given concrete expression in the same way.

In *Corner* (1968/69) the neon outline forms a right angle and is designed to be installed in the corner of a room. This neon piece makes no statement beyond its actuality - it simply confirms its own linguistic statement and form - and brings it very close to Kosuth's *One and Eight: A Description* (1965). But this is a formal relationship and also one that did not last for long. Both Nannucci's and Kosuth's artworks stem from different approaches and also very soon developed in different directions. Nannucci's handling of language is less laden with theory; he approaches it more from a literary position which selects poetic elements, plays with words and, at the same time, includes linguistic jokes and irony.

Nannucci's artistic statements and investigations are based in the

context of Concrete Literature, Visual Poetry and Sound Poetry. Nannucci's neon work is about the way words look. His work suggests the qualities of Visual Poetry which uses words as an element of pictorial design. It thus brings to the fore the tense relationship between the meaning and the image of a word. His neon writings are identical to their semantic statement. *When White is White* (1970) [fig. 21] explores just these themes. The whole work reads:

when white is white
blue is blue
and red is red
when red is red
white is white
and blue is blue
when blue is blue
red is red
and white is white

The colour mentioned in each line is fabricated in just that colour of neon. This work explores language use like Kosuth through literal manifestation and like Nauman through use of repetition. Ultimately though there is no great depth of message, only surface. Unlike Kosuth, Nannucci is not trying to pinpoint the artwork's non-identity and unlike Nauman there is no reference to language use as a means of commenting upon humanity. The language is colour and the language is sound that compounds upon ideas of colour. There is no deviation, no colour Nannucci employs in this artwork becomes any other colour. They are pure, simple and unchanging.

Alberto fonetico (1968) was Nannucci's first work in neon. It is a representation of the alphabet written as it is pronounced in Italian. Like all his work in the sixties there is a tension between word and image, writing and language:

*"For anyone who is deeply involved with words and the sounds of them, the silence of this still potential alphabet comes as something of a relief: it's not. ... We don't often think much about the mysteries of the signs, that give visibility to the elements of speech."*¹²⁶

The phonetic method of writing it down is, in essence, written and linguistic representation all in one; presenting the letters in neon would also give them a high degree of visual presence.

Like Nauman, Nannucci's work is collectively realised in numerous media. In the large-scale neon writings he realises a complementary concept arising from the recognition that neon is a commercial advertising medium. The viewer cannot escape from their presence, which is intensified by their sheer luminosity, and as consequence they demand the attention of the viewer.

Nannucci's fundamentally different approach from Conceptual Art is seen in the execution of his neon works in particular. He consciously avoids allowing the rational/neutral components contained in neon as a technical material from being too conspicuous in his work. On the other hand, he tries to introduce as many new subjective criteria as possible into the design. The choice of colours used is an exclusively aesthetic decision, appealing to the sensitivity of the viewer. He therefore expressly does not restrict himself to normal commercial colours but works with mixed halftones. This gives the neon outline an individual shape in which the artist's personality is expressed gesturally. His artistic output is determined by three different areas of work: handling and analysing language, colour as a central theme - which finds the ideal medium in neon - and finally reflection about art and how it should be dealt with.

Although Kosuth, Nannucci and Nauman all work in neon their artistic methodologies differ widely. As all three are interested in language use and all three have used specific colour in their neons as physical texts it would seem that the simplest way to differentiate between their approaches is to directly compare works that deal only with colour.

Joseph Kosuth prefigured Nauman's use of neon text by approximately one year with his *Five Words In Blue Neon* (1965) [fig. 22] in which object, title and language are used to describe analytically the plain truth of the artwork. This piece consists of five words made out of blue neon. There is nothing more to it. The concept is so simple and so explicit that we expect to be able to make more of it, but we can't. Kosuth created a series of these works in 1965 including *Five Words in Orange Neon* and *Five Words in Green Neon*. Equally

as literal though not quite so obvious is *Four Words Four Colors* (1965) [fig. 23] which makes no specification as to which four colour are included in the work. In this case the colours are Four (blue), Words (red), Four (green) Colors (white). Once again, all the viewer can take from this type of rigid, inordinately truthful artwork is to slightly question our perceptions of language use. Kosuth shows his strict adherence to Wittgenstinian thought through the severity of his art.

Nannucci also tends to use colour and language in a very simple and literal way. *White Blue Green Red* (1969) [fig. 24] links the visual colour, what we see when we see white, blue, green and red, with its linguistic signifier - its name. Nannucci doesn't just present us with the neon text of, for example, red with red neon, but closes the colour-name within incomplete squares. This creates more colour than the illuminated text alone would and suggests that, for Nannucci, the concept of colour - how we see it, define it, describe it - is more important than the ability to name it alone. The signs are textual, but not. Text is secondary to our perception of colour. This creates links to the Wittgenstinian language game of 'naming'. "What is it to *mean* the words "That is blue" at one time as a statement about the object one is pointing to - at another as an explanation of the word "blue"?"¹²⁷ In the case of this work by Nannucci the object *is* the explanation of the word.

Nauman, as we know, is not so strictly adherent to Wittgenstein. He also rarely uses colour itself as a literal vehicle for his work. Colour use tends to be largely random, so much so that the colour ways for his more intensive and complicated text and figural pieces can be extremely jarring. One neon piece which is specific to colour is *White Anger, Red Danger, Yellow Peril, Black Death* (1985) [fig. 25]. Specific colours are associated with their equivalent in text. Unlike the two artists previously mentioned Nauman's use of corresponding colour/text in this way is intended to provoke thought outside of language games. WHITE ANGER is allusive to the rage whipped up by affirmative action programmes of the 1960's which were, of course, borne out of the Civil Rights Movement. RED DANGER may well provoke ideas of the 'Red Menace' of Communism at the height of the Cold War, McCarthy's witch hunts or even may harken back to the great race to settle America - the danger presented by the continent's indigenous people. YELLOW PERIL is the anti-

Asian sentiment of America in the nineteenth and early twentieth century due to the high level of immigration from the East. In the 1980's this was the fear in America that Eastern business would supersede American domination of World markets. BLACK DEATH when considered in the context of the others does not apply to the obvious i.e. the plagues of the Middle Ages which are so named, but fittingly to a relatively more recent American history - to Southern slavery practices and the Ku Klux Klan.

All of the colour statements Nauman has chosen to highlight relate directly to the recent and not-so-recent history of his own country. As all of the statements are race-related it's interesting, and not a little unsettling, to note that the configuration of these statements is cyclical, never ending. He has formed them into the potent and highly suggestive shape of a bastardised swastika.

In conclusion then even though Nauman has two close contemporaries in the use of neon text as Art both Joseph Kosuth and Maurizio Nannucci choose to take the medium at face value. Their art is rigidly intellectual (Kosuth) and philosophically/lyrically smug (Nannucci). Nauman, as we have seen over the course of this paper, uses neon with feeling. His art can be at turns irreverent, serious, logical, truthful, illuminating and playful. It is never unvaried.

Conclusion

The proposed ways and means of understanding the importance of Bruce Nauman's handling and utilisation of neon as an art medium and as argued in this paper are just that: propositions. Art - regardless of media used - can never be distilled completely into one way of seeing. Nevertheless it is hoped that the theories and discourses outlined in this thesis may provoke an awareness of the range of themes that Nauman draws into his art with just this one medium and the importance of their use in the ultimate understanding of his neon artworks.

It is all too easy to forget the revolutionary nature of Nauman's initial utilisation and subversion of neon from a low-culture advertising medium to a highly capable, involving and affecting artform. This is in no small part due to his decision not to eschew the intrinsic nature of the medium. This permits the carrying over of decades of positive and negative connotative baggage into the artwork both in terms of how we see the work and how we decipher it. Advertising and Art collide. We cannot help but regard the work as a 'sign' because it is presented to us as such. This is why advertising theory forms a useful base as a means of understanding - on one level - why the neon pieces are at once so familiar and so rebellious. Nauman exploits and manipulates the used language of advertising for his own ends.

We may say that neon advertising is essentially 'straight' due to its continual use as functional, declarative signage. This basic use has not changed significantly since neon was first used in that Packard Dealership in 1923 therefore, the viewer has an abiding cognitive association of how neon is used. We don't expect our neon signs to be difficult, to carry messages that involve complicated language use or force us to consider our own humanity. Neon signs illuminate statements like "stringfellows", "open 24 hours", "tattoos". Unlike other forms of advertising they don't preach at us about the ideal life we should attain. They inform the consumer in an uncluttered, truthful and open way. It is this truth function that Nauman exploits shamelessly in his

neon pieces so to understand both neon's use in advertising and how his truth functions gives the viewer/consumer a deeper understanding of these artworks.

These aspects are inherent to neon. Though some neon signs may be described as playful, either in word-use or in animated movement, the play element in Nauman's neons comes from a much darker and more serious place. Nauman's play is instructive in that we learn from it or, more appropriately, he teaches us through it. Though seeming frivolous the neon signs Bruce Nauman creates manipulate childishness and game playing in such a way that this exploitation of the childlike is completely unnerving and superbly effectual. Nauman understands that play functions beyond the innocent games of childhood and reaches into the darker edges of the human psyche where play can all too easily shift into competitiveness, domination, war. Far from being harmless, good fun play can be both serious and dangerous.

Nauman also brings to his collected neon works influences from outwith the realm of Art. The philosophy of Wittgenstein is instrumental in the way he thinks about words in terms of language use and how we comprehend it. An understanding of the main Wittgensteinian ideas surrounding his 'language games' is essential in order to lead to a deeper understanding and awareness of Nauman's motives, what he produces and how we react to it. In league with this is Alain Robbe-Grillet's particular use of repetition where subtle changes take place in language and meaning. The neons naturally lend themselves to repetitive illumination and Nauman's sly changes in tense are made all the more visible when considered in terms of Robbe-Grillet's work. More obvious an influence perhaps upon the art of Bruce Nauman is Samuel Beckett's dissection of the human condition - the absurdity and pointlessness of it all - which encroaches upon all facets of Nauman's work.

Over and again we return - or are forced to return - to this idea/compulsion of Nauman's that the audience/viewer should make an effort to 'pay attention' to his work, that "this is art and you have to pay attention - so think about it!"^{DB} What better way to accomplish this than by using neon - that bright, gaudy, eye-catching, frivolous, undistinguished and overlooked advertising material - to catch the viewer in the white temple unawares, to draw them in, lull them with the pretty colours until they pay true attention

even though they might very well regret doing so in the end. In this sense Nauman functions as an artistic version of the 'Child Catcher'.¹²⁹ He lures his audience in by means of the unassuming, prettily coloured flashing lights and the funny, stilted animation in neon and it is diverting at first. The neon does pull you towards it maybe because the novelty of a neon sign in a gallery piques your curiosity. The light, the colour, the movement catches your attention from a distance. Then Nauman employs child's tricks and games, silly/naughty words, cartoonish figures and flick-book animation to lead you down the rose-coloured path of childhood remembrances and naivety. Then you pay attention. Then you look a little closer, second-guess what you see, reluctantly absorb the message and understand. This is why Nauman's use of neon in particular - above all other artistic use of the medium - is both so exquisitely effective and so terribly affecting.

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Introduction

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² I must make a point of excluding Nauman's holographic works simply because they too were not made by Nauman directly.

³ Van Bruggen, Coosje, *Bruce Nauman*. Rizzoli, New York. 1988, p105

⁴ Bruce Nauman quoted in: Simon, Joan, "Bruce Nauman: Vices and Virtues: Interview". Originally published in M. L. Beebe, J. DeSilva, R. Storr, and J. Simon (eds.), *Landmarks: Sculpture Commissions for the Stuart Collection at the University of California, San Diego*. Rizzoli, New York. 2001. In: J. Kraynak (ed), *Please Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman's Words*. The MIT Press, London. 2003, p389

⁵ Bruce Nauman quoted in: Morgan, Robert C, "Interview With Bruce Nauman" interview conducted at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York City, September 10, 1987. In: R. C. Morgan (ed.) *Bruce Nauman*. The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore. 2002, p261

⁶ Bruce Nauman quoted in: Simon, Joan, "Bruce Nauman: Vices and Virtues: Interview". Originally published in M. L. Beebe, J. DeSilva, R. Storr, and J. Simon (eds.), *Landmarks: Sculpture Commissions for the Stuart Collection at the University of California, San Diego*. Rizzoli, New York. 2001. In: J. Kraynak (ed.) *Please Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman's Words*. MIT Press, London. 2003, p389-390

⁷ Bruce Nauman quoted in: Dercon, Chris, "Keep Taking it Apart: A Conversation With Bruce Nauman". Parkett 10, September 1986, p68

⁸ Bruce Nauman quoted in: Simon, Joan, "Breaking The Silence" originally published in *Art In America* 76, no. 9, September 1988. In: R. C. Morgan (ed.) *Bruce Nauman*. The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore. 2002, p270

⁹ The notable exception being Brenda Richardson in her catalogue of Nauman's neon works, but even she only skims the surface of the theories and discourses involved .

¹⁰ Bruce Nauman quoted in: Simon, Joan, "Breaking The Silence" originally published in *Art In America* 76, no. 9, September 1988. In: R. C. Morgan (ed.) *Bruce Nauman*. The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore. 2002, p271

Chapter One

¹¹ In 1923 Sonja Delaunay - artist, fabric designer, and wife of the famous cubist painter Robert Delaunay - made her "Zig-Zag" neon display applying paint directly to the tubing. Aargon-Neon [online] Available from: <<http://www.aargon-neon.com>> Accessed 10 May 2004.

¹² Neon or Argon mixed with various other Noble gasses and, periodically, Mercury which together generate the rainbow of colours that we are familiar with.

¹³ Stern, Rudi, *Let There Be Neon* . Academy Additions, 1980. p24

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ Although highlighter pens had been in use since the 1960's (the first fluorescent highlighter was put on the market in 1978) Avery Office Products [online] Available from: <<http://avery.mktadb.com/hi-liter/en/history.htm>> Accessed 13 June 2004.

¹⁶ Rush, Michael, *New Media in Late 20th Century Art*. Thames and Hudson, London. 1999, p50

¹⁷ Bruce Nauman quoted in: Simon, Joan, "Breaking The Silence". *Art in America* , no. 9, Sept 1988. In: R. C. Morgan (ed) *Bruce Nauman*. PAJ Books, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore. 2002, p272

¹⁸ Richardson, Brenda, *Bruce Nauman: Neons* . The Baltimore Museum of Art ,Baltimore,1983. p17

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ Celant, Germano, "Arte Povera - Im Spazio". La Bertesca/Mantasnata/Trentalence, Genoa, 1967. In: C. Christov-Bakargiev, *Arte Povera*. Phaion Press, London,1999. p 220-221

²¹ Three of these such artworks will be examined later in this chapter.

²² Sonnier, Keith, *Keith Sonnier* [cat.] Centre d'Art Contemporain du Domaine de Kerguehennec, 1987. no page.

²³ A whole system of playing the financial markets has sprung up around Fibonacci's number sequence. One such title is *Fibonacci and Gann Applications in Financial Markets: Practical Applications of Natural and Synthetic Ratios in Technical Analysis*, by George MacLean. Details of which can be found: <<http://www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/ASIN/047001217X/202-7365755-1221429>> Accessed 7 July 2004

²⁴ Christov-Bakargiev, Caroiyn, *Arte Povera*. Phaidon Press, London, 1999. p17

²⁵ Koshalek, Richard, "Interview with Mario Merz, 1971", *Mario Merz* [cat.] Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. 1972. In: C. Christov-Bakargiev, *Arte Povera*. Phaidon Press, London, 1999, p 252

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ Warhol, Andy. "The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)". H. B. Jankovich, New York, 1975. p100-101. In: K. Sriles and P. Selz (ed) *Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artist's Writings*. University of California Press, London. 1996, p341-342

²⁹ To be discussed in following chapters.

³⁰ Although this neon artwork is heavily referred to by a wide array of scholars and critics as being a key to deciphering Nauman's attitude towards the role of the artist in society (and for himself personally) the conclusions derived from its study lead to one of two possible conclusions: that Nauman believes this statement wholeheartedly or that he is simply being ironic. The conclusion decided upon is, of course, a reflection of the writer's own beliefs in this regard.

³¹ In Gibson's 1983 novel *Neuromancer* the main mode of lighting is neon. The text itself is littered with mentions of neon lighting, as well as that of holograms and laser light. Considering the book was written in 1983 - at the height of neon club culture - we may read this ambient, technological atmosphere as being roughly analogous with contemporary moods.

Chapter Two

³² the 1960's was witness to a sea change of almost all facets of contemporary life: political upheavals, the Civil Rights Movement, Feminism etc. These shifts in society, perception of roles within society and ideas about how we should live are mirrored by reflexive medium such as Art or advertising.

³³ Williamson, Judith, *Decoding Advertisements*. Marion Boyars Publishers, London, 1978. p11

³⁴ *ibid.* p13

³⁵ I am using the term 'image(s)' in the Barthesian sense and in relation to the wider field of Semiotics - especially Saussure from whom Barthes takes his theories - to mean visual image and/or text where the Signifier (image/sound/word) and its meaning - the Signified - together produce a Sign.

³⁶ M*A*S*H told the story of the day-to-day happenings of the 4077th Mobile Army Surgical Hospital stationed in Korea during that particular conflict. The film was released in 1970 at the height of the anti-Vietnam war movement while the tv series ran for 11 years from 1972-1983. In both the film and series the staff use humour - both spoken and visual - as a means of dealing with the horror of war. Available from:<<http://www.imdb.com>> [Accessed July 17th 2006].

³⁷ Williamson, Judith, *Decoding Advertisements*. Marion Boyars Publishers, London, 1978. p13

³⁸ "The Beautiful People" by Marilyn Manson. Featured on the album *Antichrist Superstar*. Release date 6/10/1996
The song is a critique of consumerist forces within the United States but easily applies to all nations equally bombarded by advertising. Pertinent verses are as follows:

The worms will live, in every host,
It's hard to pick which one they'll eat the most.

The horrible people, the horrible people,
It's all atomic as the size of your steeple,
Capitalism, has made it this way,
Old-Fashioned fascism will take it away."

- ³⁹ Vestergaard, T. & Schroder, K., *The Language of Advertising*. Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1985. p122
- ⁴⁰ Bourdieu, Pierre, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. [Tr. Richard Nice], Harvard University Press, London, 1984. p34
- ⁴¹ Stallabrass, Julian, *The Fate of Young British Art*, 2001. Archived article sourced at The Courtauld Institute website. Available from: <http://www.courtauld.ac.uk/people/stallabrass_julian/essays/lisbon_text.pdf> Accessed July 21st 2006.
- ⁴² Richardson, Brenda, *Bruce Nauman: Neons*. The Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, 1982. p23-24
- ⁴³ Tomaselli, Keyan Gray, *Appropriating images : The semiotics of visual representation*. Intervention Press, Denmark, 1996. p32
- ⁴⁴ Fiske, John, *Introduction to communication studies*. Routledge, London, 1990 (2nd ed.) p42
- ⁴⁵ *ibid.* p40
- ⁴⁶ *ibid.* p39
- ⁴⁷ Leiss, W. , Kline, S. & Jhally, S., *Social communication in advertising*. Routledge, London, 1990. p216
- ⁴⁸ Williamson, Judith, *Decoding Advertisements*. Marion Boyars Publishers, London, 1978. p35
- ⁴⁹ Thompson, David, "The Death of the Gallery", *The Guardian*, Thursday April 15th, 2004

Chapter Three

- ⁵⁰ Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Philosophical Investigations*. Blackwell Publishing Ltd., Oxford, 2001 (third edition) § 83
- ⁵¹ *ibid.* § 7
- ⁵² As discussed by Wittgenstein, *ibid.* Part 1 , § 1-3
- ⁵³ *ibid.* § 31
- ⁵⁴ *ibid.* § 32
- ⁵⁵ *ibid.* § 329
- ⁵⁶ *ibid.* § 271
- ⁵⁷ *ibid.* § 43
- ⁵⁸ *ibid.* § 65
- ⁵⁹ *ibid.* § 68
- ⁶⁰ Tuten, Frederic, "David Salle: at the edges - artist - Interview". *Art in America*, Sept. 1997. Archived article sourced at Find Articles. Available from: <<http://www.findarticles.com>> Accessed 10 February 2004
- ⁶¹ Bruce Nauman quoted in: Sharp, Willoghby, "Two Interviews". originally published in *Arts Magazine*, March 1970. In: R. C. Morgan (ed.) *Bruce Nauman*. The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2002. p245
- ⁶² Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Philosophical Investigations*. Blackwell Publishing Ltd., Oxford, 2001 (third edition) p188
- ⁶³ Van Bruggen, Coosje, *Bruce Nauman*. Rizzoli, New York, 1988. p9
- ⁶⁴ Ammann, Jean Christophe, "Wittgenstein and Nauman". *Bruce Nauman* [cat.] Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, 1986. p22
- ⁶⁵ Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Philosophical Investigations*. Blackwell Publishing Ltd., Oxford, 2001 (third edition) §23

- ⁶⁶ Van Bruggen, Coosje, *Bruce Nauman*. Rizzoli, New York, 1988. p112
- ⁶⁷ Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Philosophical Investigations*. Blackwell Publishing Ltd., Oxford, 2001 (third edition) original reference in Remark 2, in depth investigation in §17-§21
- ⁶⁸ Bruce Nauman quoted in: Cordes, Christopher, "Talking With Bruce Nauman". Originally published in *Bruce Nauman: Prints 1970-89*. Leo Castelli Graphic, New York, 1989. pp22-34. In: R. C. Morgan (ed) *Bruce Nauman*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2002. p293
- ⁶⁹ Bruce Nauman quoted in: Simon, Joan, "Breaking The Silence". Originally published in *Art In America* 76, no. 9 September 1988. In: R. C. Morgan (ed) *Bruce Nauman*. The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2002. p277
- ⁷⁰ *ibid.* p288
- ⁷¹ Esslin, Martin, *Theatre of the Absurd*. Penguin, London, 1961. p399
- ⁷² Beckett, Samuel, *Waiting For Godot*. Faber & Faber, London, 1998. p12
- ⁷³ Van Bruggen, Coosje, *Bruce Nauman*. Rizzoli, New York, 1988. p112
- ⁷⁴ Bruce Nauman quoted in: Butterfield, Jan, "Bruce Nauman: The Center of Yourself". Originally published in *Arts Magazine*, no. 49, February 1975. In: J. Kraynak (ed) *Please Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman's Words*. The MIT Press, London, 2003. p181
- ⁷⁵ Morrissette, Bruce, "Surfaces and Structures in Robbe-Grillet's Novels". In: A. Robbe-Grillet, *In Jealousy*. Grove Press Inc., New York, 198. p5
- ⁷⁶ This circularity one only presumes, for it is only experienced as a segment of an arc: the narrator is reading a situation, the reader is reading the narrator reading a situation, etc.
- ⁷⁷ In its original title *Jalousie* the title is already doubled as it refers both to jealousy and is French for venetian blinds.
- ⁷⁸ Robbe-Grillet, Alain, *In The Labyrinth*. (trans. C. Brooke-Rose) Calder Publications, London, (1959) reprinted 2000. p11

Chapter Four

- ⁷⁹ Bruce Nauman quoted in: Simon, Joan, "Breaking The Silence". Originally published in *Art In America* 76, no. 9, September 1988. In: R. C. Morgan (ed.) *Bruce Nauman*. The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2002. p271
- ⁸⁰ Bruce Nauman quoted in: Richardson, Brenda, *Bruce Nauman: Neons*. The Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, 1982. p23-24
- ⁸¹ *ibid.* p281
- ⁸² Bruce Nauman quoted in: Simon, Joan, "Breaking The Silence". Originally published in *Art In America* 76, no. 9, September 1988. In: R. C. Morgan (ed.) *Bruce Nauman*. The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2002. p271
- ⁸³ *ibid.* p273
- ⁸⁴ Huizinga, Johan, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., London, 1949. p202
- ⁸⁵ *ibid.*
- ⁸⁶ *ibid.*
- ⁸⁷ *ibid.*
- ⁸⁸ *ibid.*
- ⁸⁹ *ibid.*
- ⁹⁰ *ibid.*
- ⁹¹ Bruce Nauman quoted in: Simon, Joan, "Breaking The Silence". *Art in America*, no. 9, Sept 1988. In: R. C. Morgan (ed) *Bruce Nauman*. The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2002. p278
- ⁹² I refer to the relatively recent fire at the MoMart storage facility in London that has led to the loss of several pivotal and notorious pieces of work by Young British Artists, owned by Charles Saatchi, e.g. Tracy Emin's "All The People I Ever Slept With" which, it has been stated, could be easily replaced by purchasing a new tent from Millets and some darning wool. Of course this completely dismisses the point of the artwork as a wholly transient chronicle of, not only aspects/memories of Tracy's past life, but also her frame of mind at the time she made it.
- ⁹³ Masséra, Jean-Charles, "Dance With The Law". *Bruce Nauman* [cat.] Hayward Gallery, Cornerhouse Publications, Manchester, 1998. pp 21-33
- ⁹⁴ *ibid.* p22.

- ⁹⁵ Foucault, Michel, "The History of Sexuality vol 1. An introduction". (Tr. R. Hurley) Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1990. p47
- ⁹⁶ On June 15th 1982 The San Fransisco Chronical ran the headline "Gay Plague Is Epidemic" even though at the time of printing this epidemic only totalled 400. Trinkhaus, George. *How The Chronicle Invented AIDS*. 2001 *What Is Aids* [online]. Available from: <<http://www.whatisaids.com/howthechroninventedaids.htm>> [Accessed February 7th 2006]
- ⁹⁷ The New York Times [online]. *Saliva Discounted As An AIDS Threat*. 19/12/85. Availble from: <<http://www.nytimes.com/library/national/science/aids/121985sci-aids.html>> [Accessed February 7th 2006]
- ⁹⁸ Smith, Raymond A. (ed), *Encyclopaedia of AIDS*. Penguin Books, London, revised edition 2001. p593
- ⁹⁹ The New York Times [online]. Available from: <<http://www.nytimes.com/library/national/science/aids/articles-1985.html>> [Accessed February 7th 2006]
- ¹⁰⁰ Smith, Raymond A. (ed), *Encyclopaedia of AIDS*. Penguin Books, London, revised edition 2001. p552
- ¹⁰¹ Nauman quoted in: "Bruce Nauman: Dan Weinberg Gallery". *Los Angeles Times*, Calendar, Jan 27th, 1991. p.84
- ¹⁰² The Six Million Dollar Man television series ran from 1974-1978 on the back of a successful series of T.V. movies (1973). Steve Austin is the astronaut who is rebuilt (better... stronger... faster) with bionic bodyparts after an horrific crash on re-entry. The show's opening catch phrase, slow motion action sequences and the accompanying "electronic" sound effect have become an integral part of 1970's pop culture. The sound effect itself can be (insufficiently) phonetically descibed as a very staccato, fast paced, electronic ch-ch-ch-ch sound.
- ¹⁰³ Bruce Nauman quoted in: Simon, Joan, "Breaking The Silence". Originally published in *Art In America* 76, no. 9 September 1988. In: R. C. Morgan (ed), *Bruce Nauman*. The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2002. p278
- ¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*
- ¹⁰⁵ Steiner, Rochele, "Cast of Characters", *Cindy Sherman* [cat.] Serpentine Gallery, London, 2003. p20
- ¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*
- ¹⁰⁷ Bruce Nauman quoted in: Simon, Joan, "Breaking The Silence". Originally published in *Art In America* 76, no. 9 September 1988. In: R. C. Morgan (ed) *Bruce Nauman*. The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2002. p 282
- ¹⁰⁸ Bruce Nauman quoted in: Cordes, Christopher, "Talking With Bruce Nauman", *Bruce Nauman Prints 1970-89*. Leo Cstelli Graphics, New York, 1989. p34
- ¹⁰⁹ Huizinga, Johan, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., London, 1949. p202
- ¹¹⁰ Bruce Nauman quoted in: Richardson, Brenda, *Bruce Nauman: Neons*, The Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, 1982, p23-24 Author's interview with the artist.
- ¹¹¹ *ibid.* p23
- ¹¹² Bruce Nauman quoted in: Van Bruggen, Coosje, *Bruce Nauman*. Rizzoli International Publications, New York, 1988. p15
- ¹¹³ Bruce Nauman quoted in: Simon, Joan, "Breaking The Silence". Originally published in *Art In America* 76, no. 9, 1988, pp.140-203. In: R. C. Morgan (ed) *Bruce Nauman*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2002. p270
- ¹¹⁴ Morgan, Robert C., *Bruce Nauman*. The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2002. p13
- ¹¹⁵ Storr, Robert, "Flashing The Light Into The Shadow of Doubt". Originally published by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1995. In: R. C. Morgan (ed) *Bruce Nauman*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2002. p154
- ¹¹⁶ Rudebeck, Clare, Lloyd Newson interviewed, "From pavement to penthouse". As printed in The Independent Review, *The Independent Newspaper*, published on Monday, 19th May 2003, p18
- ¹¹⁷ Smith, Ray, Vietnam War Satistics and Facts [online]. Available from: <http://25thaviation.org/id275.htm#vietnam_war_casualties> [Accessed March 2nd 2006].

¹¹⁸ Although this battle was a resounding victory for the U.S. Forces militarily the Vietnamese Communists won an important media and propaganda victory. With much of the fighting caught by the U.S. media it dramatically contradicted optimistic claims by the U.S. government that the war had already been won. Vietnam-War.info [online]. Available from: <http://www.vietnam-war.info/battles/tet_offensive.php> [Accessed March 2nd 2006].

¹¹⁹ Smith, Ray, Vietnam War Statistics and Facts [online]. Available from: <http://25thaviation.org/id275.htm#vietnam_war_casualties> [Accessed March 2nd 2006].

¹²⁰ Dormant, Richard, "Look Forward". pub. Sat 14th June 1997. The Daily Telegraph [online] Available from: <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk>> [Accessed 10 May 2004]

¹²¹ I can only comment on the English language papers and articles available. I must acknowledge that there may be comment on just this aspect of *One Hundred Live and Die* contained in non-English writings.

¹²² Labaume, Vincent, "Bruce Nauman Are You Roman or Italic". *Bruce Nauman* [cat.] Hayward Gallery, Cornerhouse Publications, Manchester, 1998.

¹²³ Bruce Nauman quoted in: Cordes, Christopher, "Talking With Bruce Nauman". Originally published in *Bruce Nauman: Prints 1970-89*. Leo Castelli Graphics, New York, 1989. pp22-34 In: R. C. Morgan (ed), *Bruce Nauman*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2002. p293

¹²⁴ Bruce Nauman quoted in: Simon, Joan, "Breaking The Silence". Originally published in *Art In America* 76, no. 9 September 1988. In: R. C. Morgan (ed.) *Bruce Nauman*. The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2002. p273

Chapter Five

¹²⁵ Joseph Kosuth quoted in: Kosuth, Joseph, *Joseph Kosuth: Interviews*. Stuttgart, 1989. p25-26

¹²⁶ Maurizio Nannucci quoted in: Nannucci, Maurizio, *Image Du Ciel* ([cat.] Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt, 1984. p8

¹²⁷ Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Philosophical Investigations*. Blackwell Publishing Ltd., Oxford, 2001 (third edition) § 38

Conclusion

¹²⁸ Bruce Nauman quoted in: Richardson, Brenda, *Bruce Nauman: Neons* [cat.] The Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, 1982. p23-24

¹²⁹ The Child Catcher in the film *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* (1968) lures the 'kiddie-winkies' - so hated and feared by the Baron and Baroness - into captivity by offering them sweets, lollipops and ice cream thus diverting their attention from the all-too-obvious pretence and even the horrific guise of the Child Catcher himself. It is only when they have given in to their gluttonous desire and are taken in wholesale by this trickery that the pretence falls away and all they are left with is the sobering truth of the situation. The children were double-crossed, hoodwinked and now they are entrapped all they can do is pay attention.

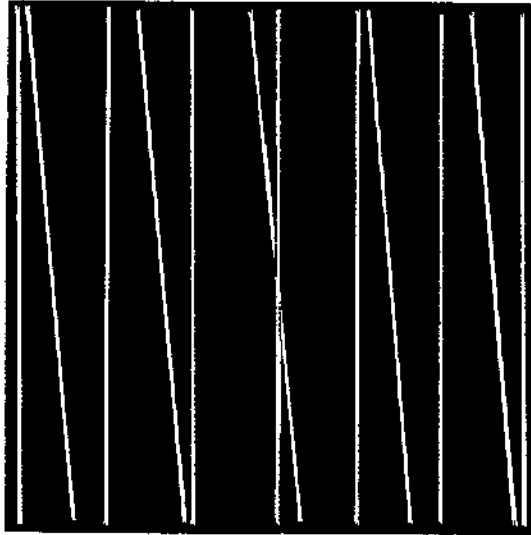


Figure 1 2 *white neon tubes, of that 7 with an angle of 90°, 5 of 9° (1971)*

François Morellet

neon, 80x80 cm

François Morellet, Cholet

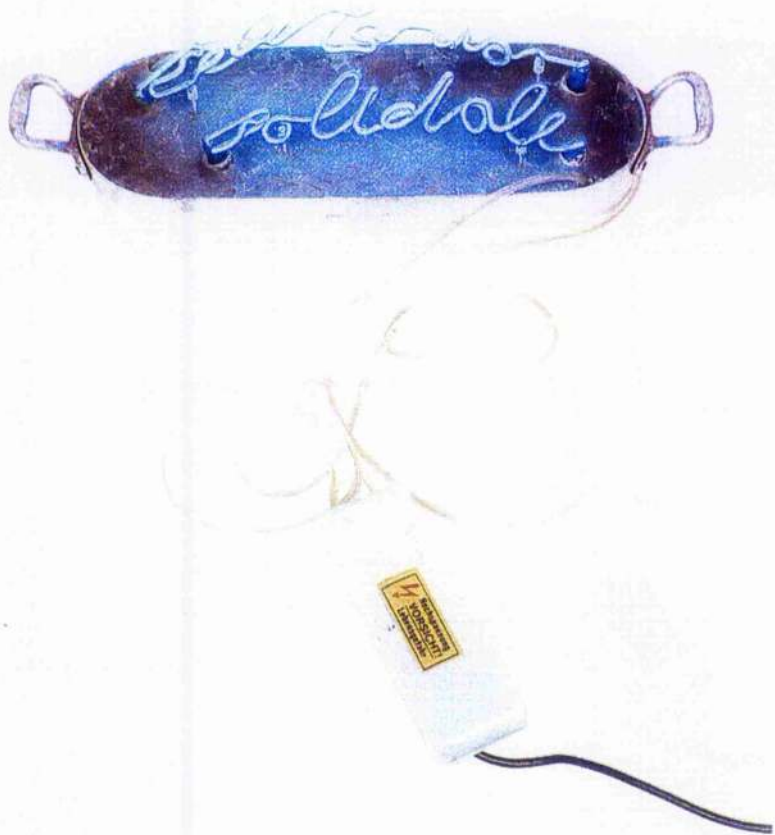


Figure 2. *Solitario Solidale* (1968)
Mario Merz
neon, metal container, wax, cables, transformer
KaiserWilhelm Museum, Krefeld

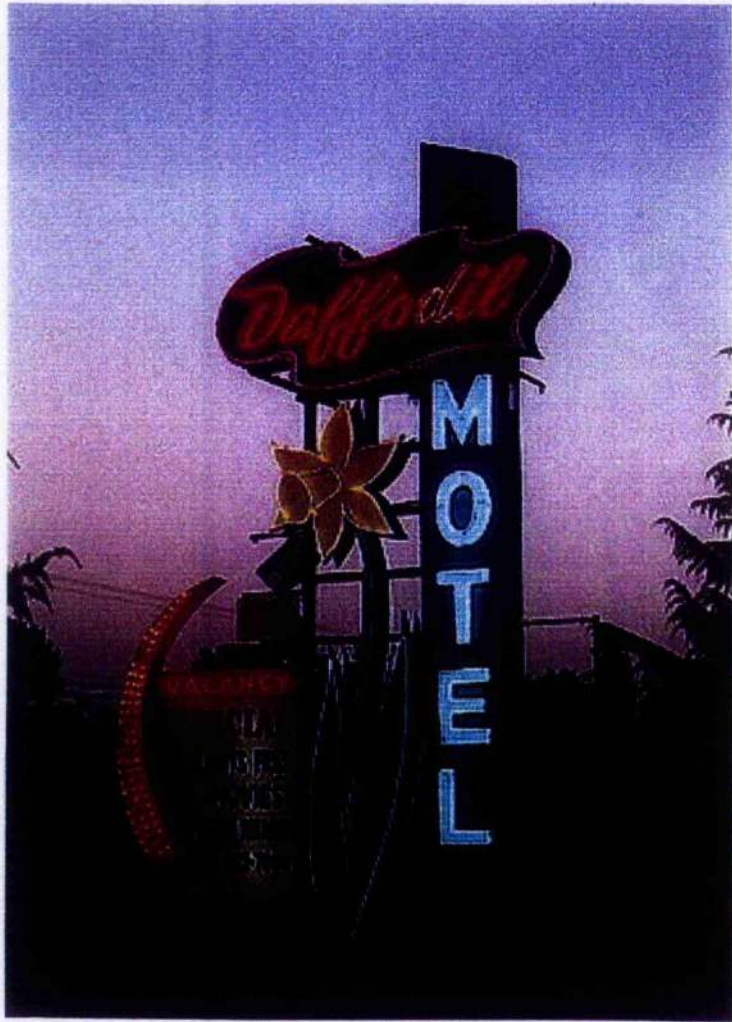


Figure 3 Motel Sign
stock image
Getty Images



Figure 4 *The True Artist Reveals To The World Mystic Truth* (1967)
Bruce Nauman

neon, clear glass suspension frame 149.9 x 139.7 x 51 cm
Collection Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo, The Netherlands

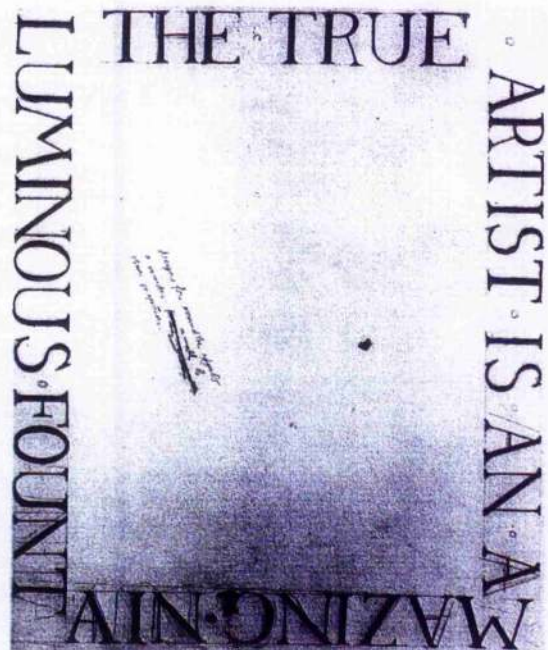


Figure 5 *True Artist Is An Amazing Luminous Fountain* (1966)

Bruce Nauman

(fabrication drawing) pencil and ink on paper 61 x 48.2 cm

Collection Sonnabend, New York

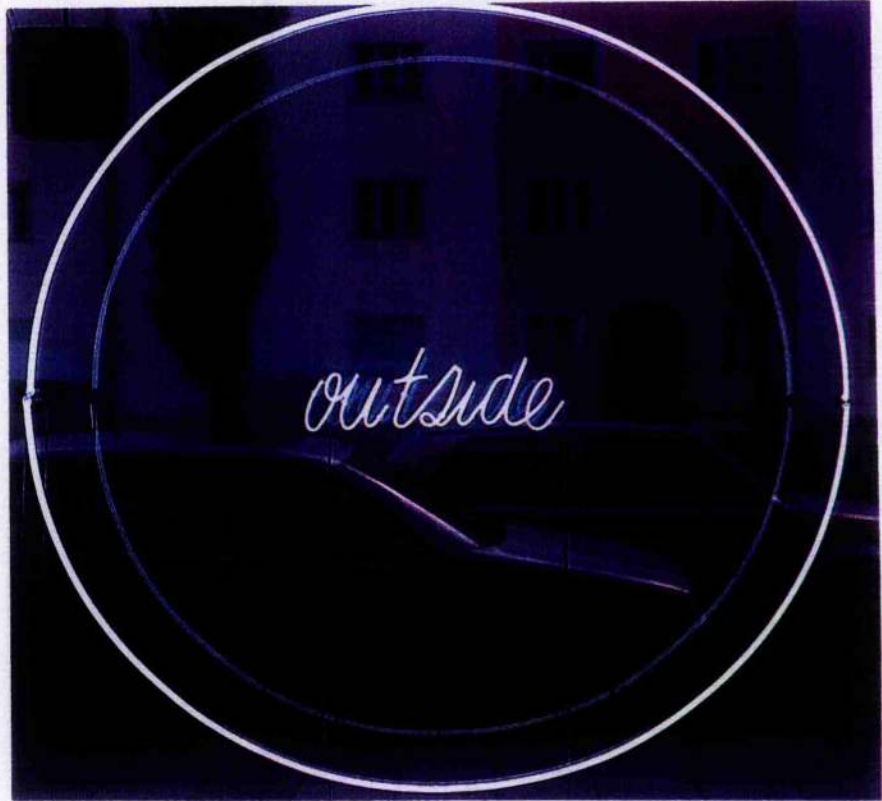


Figure 6 *Outside* (1969)
Richard Serra
neon, diameter 200 cm
Städtisches Museum Abteiberg, Munich

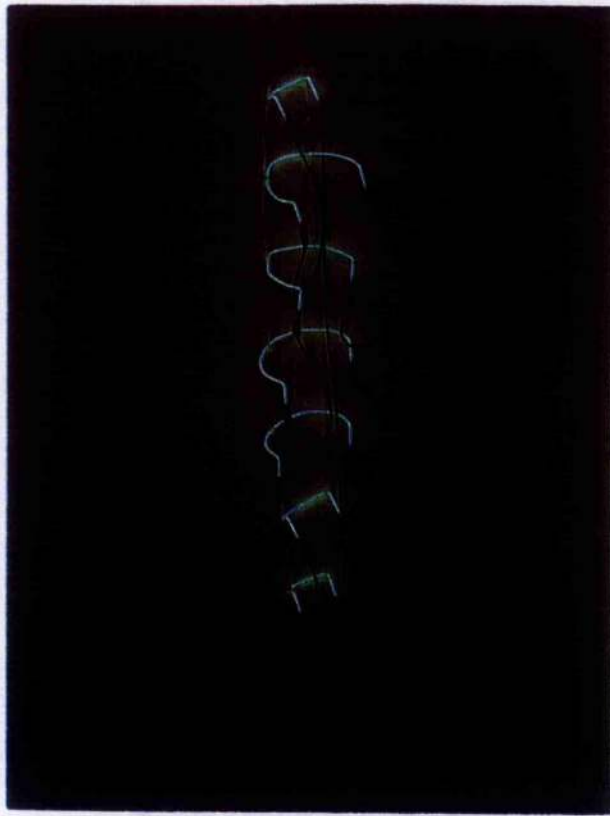


Figure 7 *Neon Templates of the Left Half of my Body Taken at Ten-Inch Intervals* (1966)

Bruce Nauman

neon, 177.8 x 22.8 x 15.2 cm

Philip Johnson, New Canaan, Connecticut

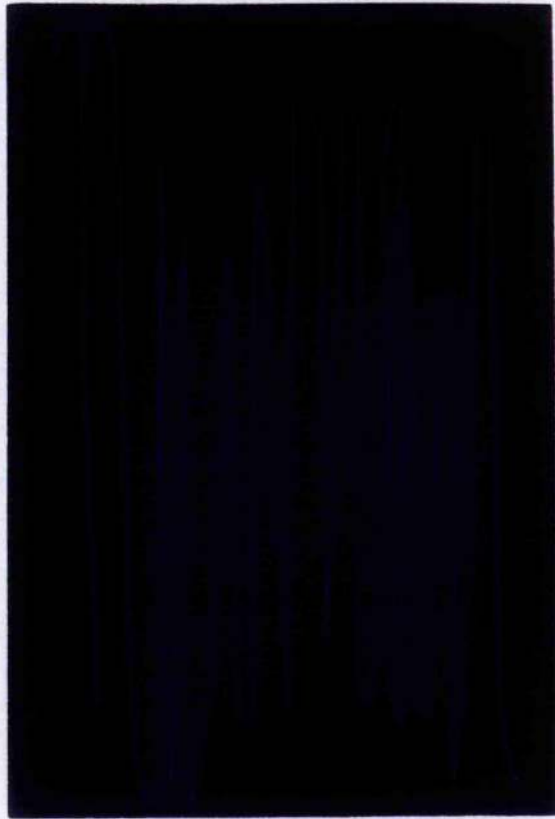


Figure 8 *My Last Name Exaggerated 14 Times Vertically* (1967)

Bruce Nauman

neon, clear glass tubing suspension frame, 160 x 83.8 x 5.1 cm

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

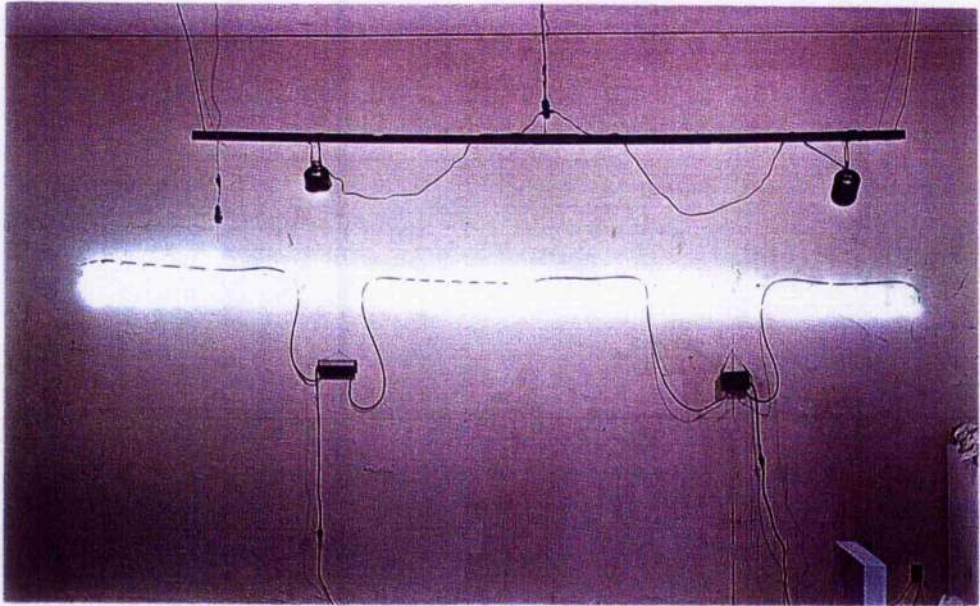


Figure 9 *My Name As Though It Were Written On The Surface Of The Moon:
bbbbbrrrrruuuuuccccceeeee* (1968)

Bruce Nauman

edition of three

neon, clear glass suspension frame, 27.9 x 518 x 5.1 cm

Collection Sonnabend, New York



Figure 10 *Eat Death* (1972)

Bruce Nauman

neon, 18.7 x 64.2 x 5.4

(one of edition of six)

unknown location



Figure 11 *One Hundred Live And Die* (1984)

Bruce Nauman

neon tubing mounted on four metal monoliths, 229.7 x 335.9 x 53.3 cm

Collection Kakutake Publishing Co. Ltd.,

Naoshima Contemporary Art Museum, Kagawa, Japan



Figure 12 *Violins, Violence, Silence* (1981-82)

Bruce Nauman

neon, clear glass suspension frame, 153.7 x 168.9 x 15.2 cm

Oliver Hoffman Family Collection, Chicago



Figure 13 *Hanged Man* (1985)

Bruce Nauman

neon tubing mounted on metal monolith 220 x 139.7 x 27.3 cm

Collection Gerald S. Elliot, Chicago



Figure 14 *Human Nature/Life Death/Knows Doesn't Know* (1983)

Bruce Nauman

neon, 273.1 x 271.8 x 14.6 cm

Collection Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles

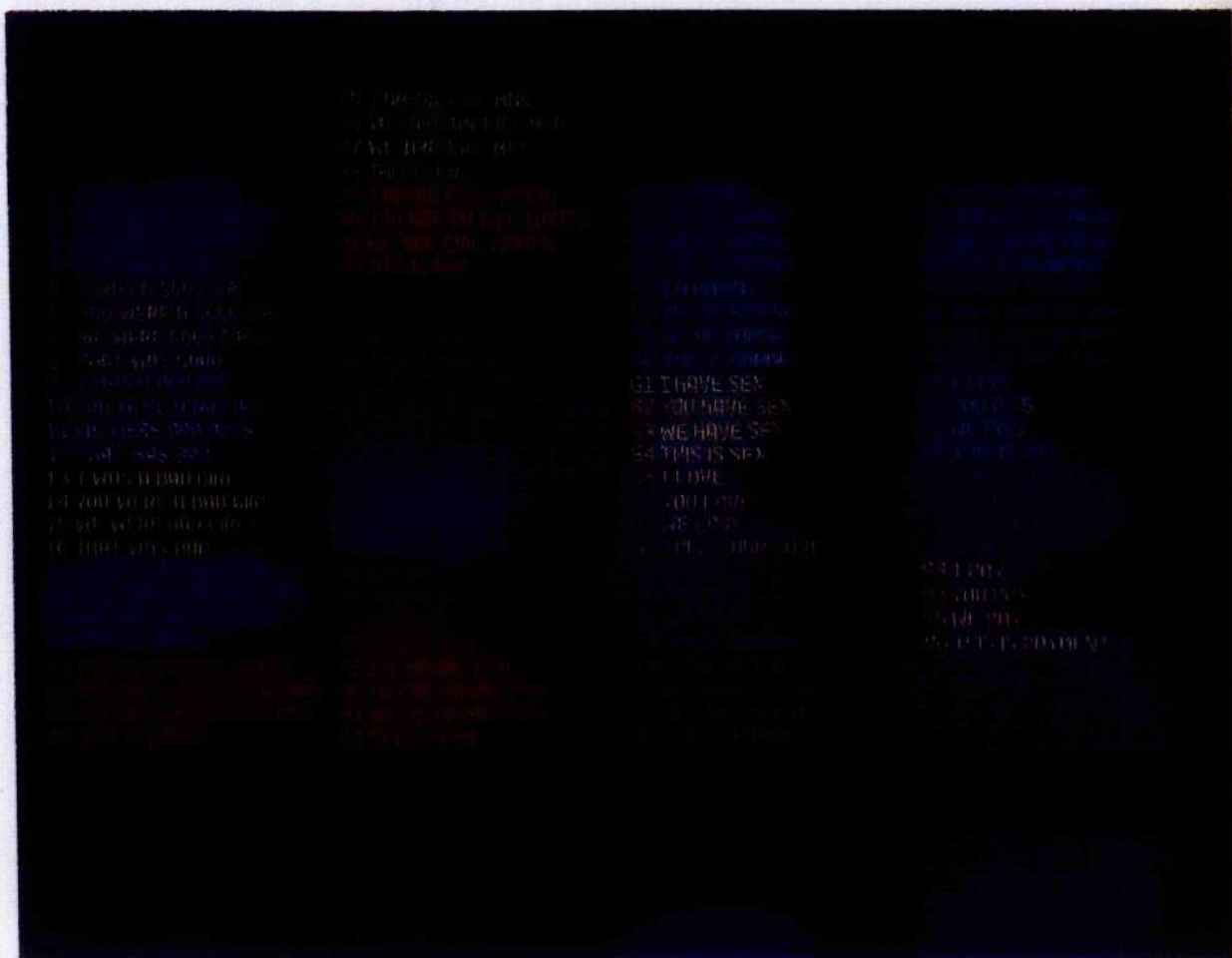


Figure 15 *Good Boy, Bad Boy* (1986-87)

Bruce Nauman

neon, clear glass suspension frame, 349.2 x 553.7 x 48.3 cm

The Oliver-Hoffman Family Collection, Chicago

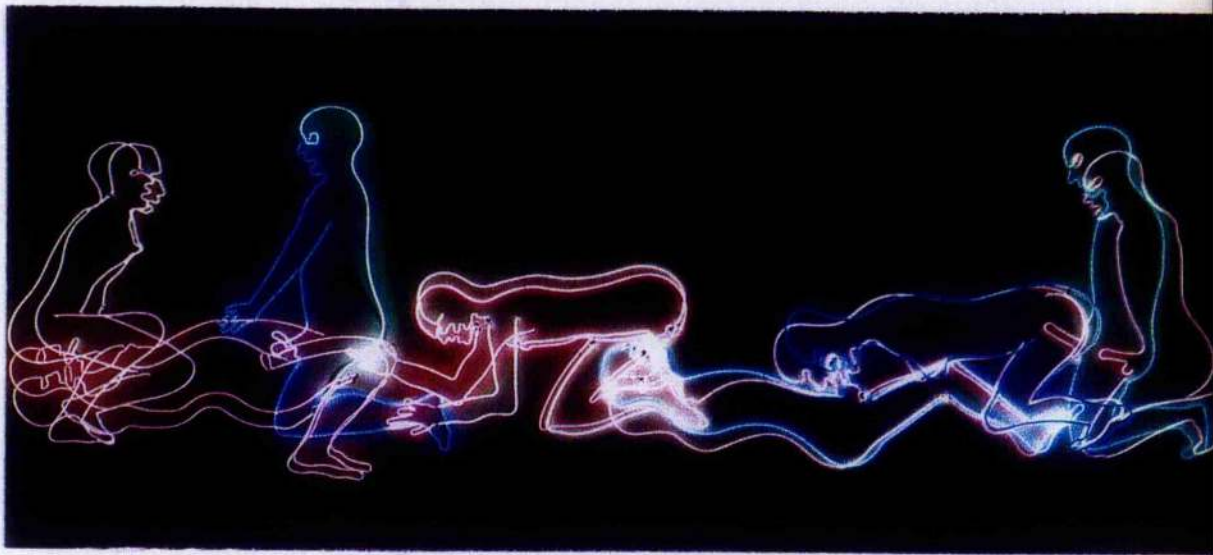


Figure 16 *Porno Chain* (1985)
Bruce Nauman
neon, dimensions and location unknown

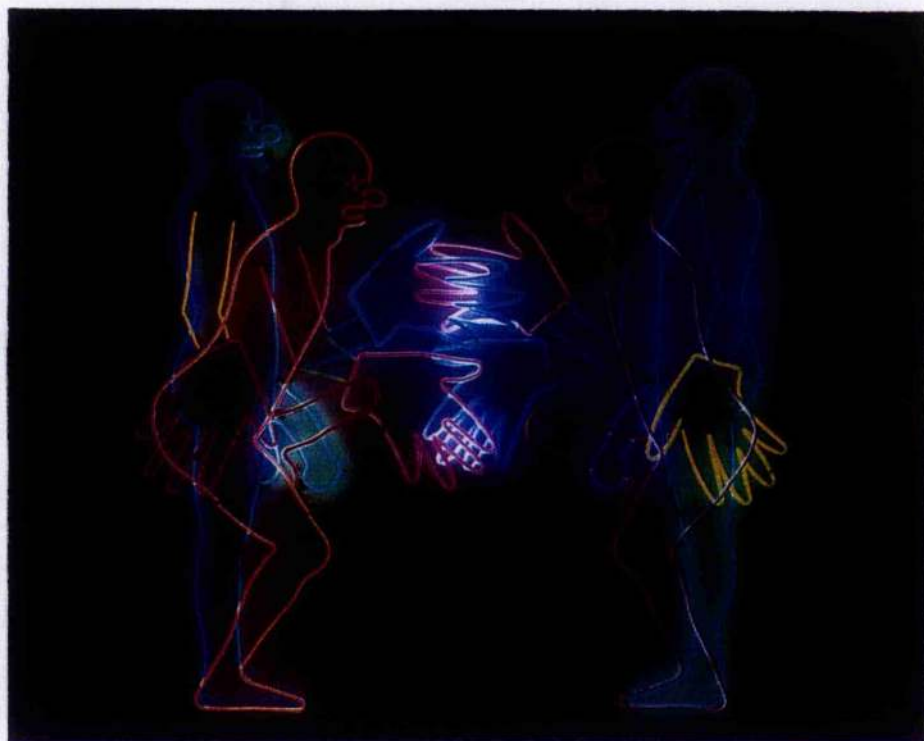


Figure 17 *Mean Clown Welcome* (1985)

Bruce Nauman

neon tubing mounted on metal monolith 182.9 x 208.3 x 34.3 cm

Collection Udo and Anette Brandhorst, Cologne



Figure 18 *Raw War* (1970)

Bruce Nauman

neon, clear glass suspension frame, 16.5 x 43.5 x 6.4 cm

Collection of The Baltimore Museum of Art

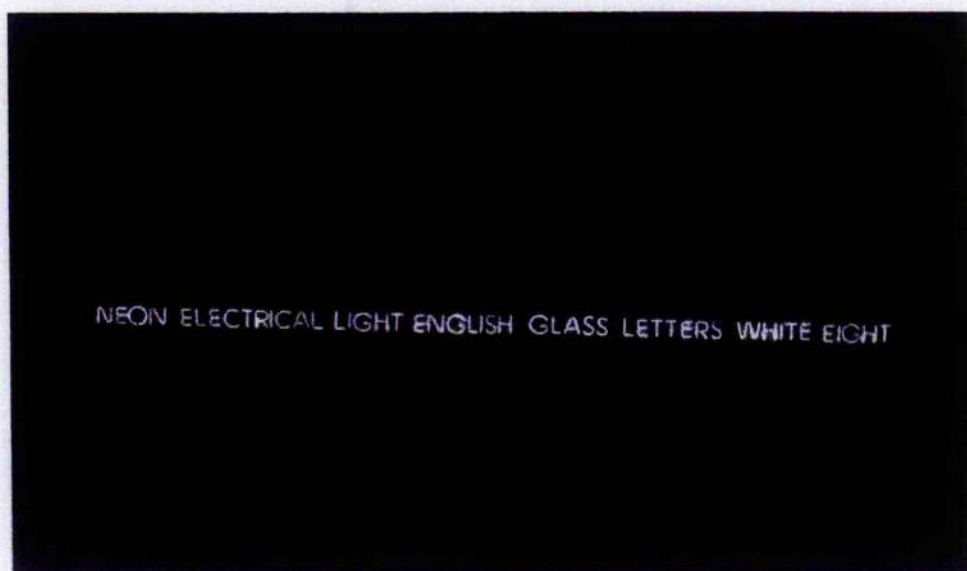


Figure 19 *Ohne and Eight: A Description* (1965)

Joseph Kosuth

neon, 11 x 390 x 5.5 cm

Leo Castelli Gallery, New York

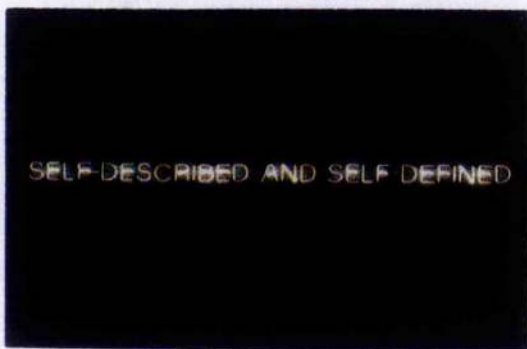


Figure 20 *Self-Defined and Self-Described* (1965)

Joseph Kosuth

neon, 11 x 250 x 5.5

Leo Castelli Gallery, New York



Figure 21 *When White is White* (1970)
Maurizio Nannucci
neon, dimensions and location unknown



Figure 22 *Five Words In Blue Neon* (1965)

Joseph Kosuth

neon, 10.2 x 160 cm

Collection Herbert, Ghent

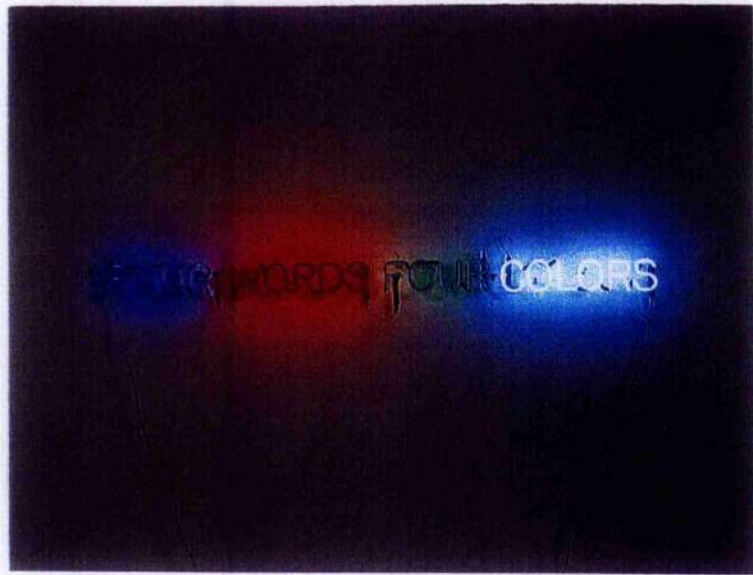


Figure 23 *Four Words Four Colors* (1965)
Joseph Kosuth
neon, dimensions unknown
Bild Kunst, Bonn

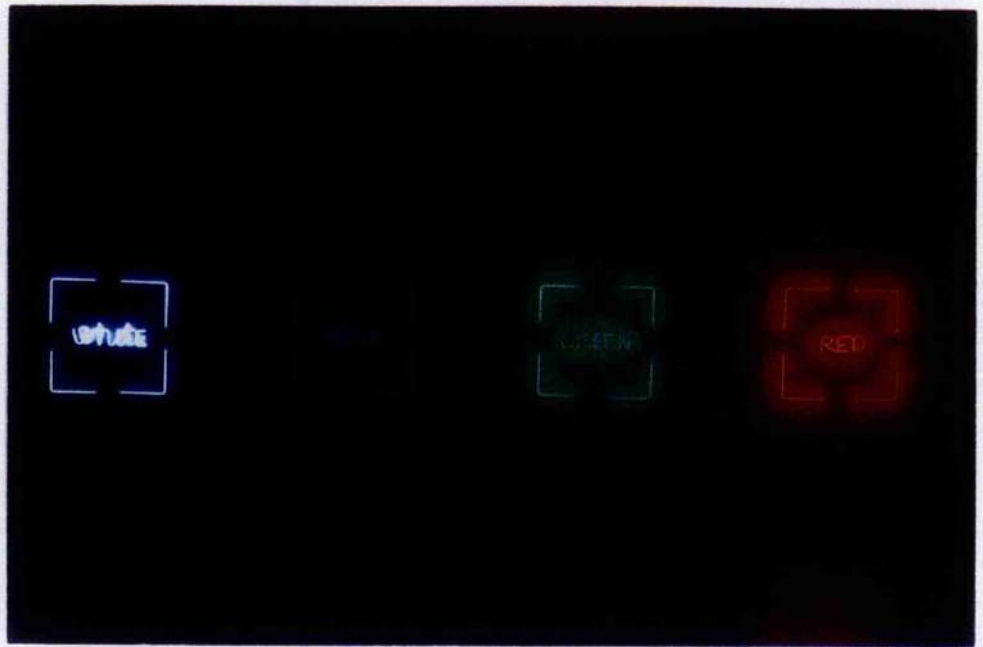


Figure 24 *White Blue Green Red* (1969)
Maurizio Nannucci
neon, dimensions and location unknown



Figure 25 *White Anger, Red Danger, Yellow Peril, Black Death* (1985)

Bruce Nauman

neon, clear suspension frame 203.2 x 219.7

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