

Fight, Flight, or Freeze: Stilling the Moving Image in Bruce Nauman's *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii*

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Abstract

This article examines the ways in which Bruce Nauman's art installations provoke audience experiences analogous to those felt during traumatic events. A central assertion of the present study is that the looping mechanisms of Nauman's video artworks produce a theoretical stilling of the moving image that is reflective of the fight-flight-or-freeze response to a highly charged incident, which often entails a temporal shift as time appears to slow to a halt. Whereas in the past, the human response to acute stress was typically prompted by a physical threat in the natural environment, today an evolutionary misfire occurs when this survival mechanism becomes prompted instead during everyday situations. Throughout human history, the experience of viewing an artwork has developed into an act of aesthetic appreciation involving a search for meaning. However, in this case, the sensory overload triggered by Nauman's artwork purposefully impedes neuroprocessing, highlighting the adverse effects of mediation saturation in contemporary society; therefore, a stilling of the moving image in essence functions as a biological adaptation strategy in an attempt to come to terms with the puzzling nature of these artworks. By applying French philosopher Roland Barthes's theories of the image, this article expands Barthes's thought from the image to the performative as a reflection of human adaptation to technological advancement.

Keywords: Bruce Nauman, Roland Barthes, *punctum*, third meaning, neutral, sculpture, installation art, video art, fight-or-flight, trauma

INTRODUCTION

"I know there are a lot of artists who function in relation to beauty—who try to make beautiful things. They are moved by beautiful things and they see that as their role: to provide or make beautiful things for other people. I don't work that way. Part of it has to do with an idea of beauty. Sunsets, flowers, landscapes: these kinds of things don't move me to do anything. I just want to leave them alone. 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 a frustrating part of human history"—Bruce Nauman in "Breaking the Silence" by Joan Simon

Recently on view at the Punta Della Dogana gallery in Venice, Italy, Nauman's *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii* (2015–2016) consists of a seven-channel color video installation with larger-than-life images: at eight feet in height—spanning to sixteen feet when the images are stacked atop one another—the colossal figures projected on the walls tower over their audiences, the sheer size suggestive of the scale of

sculptural monuments. This reintroduction of the human figure into the equation of post-modern sculpture represents a full-circle return to classical figurative sculpture. In what follows, this article will examine how *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii* expands sculptural aesthetics through depicting the static contrapposto pose of traditional sculpture in motion.



Bruce Nauman, *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii*, 2015-2016 (still). Seven-channel video projection (color, stereo sound), continuous duration, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York. © 2023 Bruce Nauman / Artists Rights Society (ARS) (fig. 1)

The approach taken in this article provides an opportunity to break down the mechanisms of Nauman's artworks as a way of accounting for the intense reactions of audiences, who often-times are at a loss to describe the artworks, let alone explain the experience of being in the space of the installation. One of Nauman's earliest stated goals of artmaking was already tinged with violence: "to try to make art...that was just there all at once. Like getting hit in the face with a baseball bat. Or better, like getting hit in the back of the neck. You never see it coming; it just knocks you down" (Simon).

Nauman employs various tactics to attack viewers in that space, turning audience members into active participants. To the degree that these tactics may paralyze some viewers' perception of time and space, this type of formal trauma ends up situating the viewer in the position of the film still, enacting signification through experience. A typical reaction is the desire to leave the gallery or museum space.

Of particular note is the exceedingly brief action portrayed, which ultimately lacks any narrative context whatsoever, so that the video being set on an infinite loop results in what could be thought of as a stilling of the moving image. In this respect, French philosopher Roland Barthes's analysis of the effects of extracting a film still from the context of its overall narrative progression provides a fitting lens through which to analyze *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii*. This article explores the stilling of the moving image as a response to the human encounter with contemporary media. In that Nauman's art installations mount a multi-pronged attack on the viewer's senses via sound and image, I contend that the experience mirrors that which is felt during a highly charged event. The formal characteristics of the artworks that work to still the movement of both the figures in the videos and spectators in the museum reflect a coping mechanism to process traumatic situations.

The spectator as performer in Nauman's video installations points to a gradual dissolution of the gap between people and technology. In this sense, what becomes apparent in Barthes's analysis of photography in the 1980s is the relative distance between ourselves and technology some half a century ago, in contrast to today when adaptation entails a closer melding of technology and the human body. Thus, it is important to note here at the outset that Barthes never applied his concept of the neutral to the moving image. This article expands the boundaries of the space in which the neutral moves by showing how the strategies Nauman employs in *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii* lead to a recontextualization of Barthes's theories, in particular a movement away from a semiotics of the still image, to one of a moving image within the space of the art installation, as well as to that of the viewer's body in that space. The ramifications of this expansion of application of Barthes's thought from the image to the performative reflect the human need to adapt to technological advancement.

Contrapposto Studies, i through vii **(Videos 1 and 2)**

To begin, of the seven video projections in the museum exhibit, the viewers encounter the first two in a separate room, where each projection is eight feet high. One of the video projections features four images of Nauman walking toward and away from viewers, caught at different points in the action. Clad in blue jeans and a loose-fitting white t-shirt, Nauman has his hands clasped behind his neck, and his head has been excised from the picture frame.

The second view projected on the opposite wall includes the same four figures, except this time they represent an inversion in being the negatives of the images: the white shirt turned dark navy blue—almost black—with the jeans now taking on a faded beige color (fig. 2).



Bruce Nauman, *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii*, 2015-2016 (still). Seven-channel video projection (color, stereo sound), continuous duration, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York. © 2023 Bruce Nauman / Artists Rights Society (ARS) (fig. 2)

Yellowish-green in color, Nauman's skin takes on an unnatural tone. It should be underscored here that the action of this video plays in reverse, so that Nauman's movements run backwards. This is of particular significance in that—because the figure's gait is so slow that he in effect pauses between steps—it becomes doubly difficult to discern whether or not he is indeed walking forwards or backwards. Moreover, this confusing sense of both coming and going is exacerbated by the turning of the figure, which heightens this sense of ambiguity.

STILLING THE MOVING FIGURE

Contrapposto Studies, i through vii (2015-2016) represents a reiteration of Nauman's earlier artwork titled *Walk with Contrapposto* (1968) (fig. 2). Nauman's stated goal of this return to a previous artwork was to "still" the moving image, while conversely at the same time attempting to set the stationary background in motion. The 1968 *Walk with Contrapposto* consists of a single-channel black and white video piece, featuring the artist walking up and down the length of a corridor that is twenty inches wide and twenty feet long, built especially for this performance. Approximately sixty minutes in length, the *Walk with Contrapposto* video does contain sound, though the sound in this piece fails to play as prominent a role as it does in some of the artist's other video works. Featuring the young artist in his twenties, donning a simple pair of blue jeans and a white t-shirt, the depiction portrays the artist sauntering slowly up and down the corridor, hands clasped behind his neck. Swinging his hips from side-to-side in an exaggerated manner, he continually strikes the contrapposto pose of classical sculpture. In her essay "Body at Work", Erica Battle (2018), curator at the Philadelphia Museum Art, confirms *Walk with Contrapposto* as an early "benchmark" of experimental video (46).

In the 1968 *Walk with Contrapposto*, as Nauman walks up and down the structure, his body naturally becomes smaller as it recedes from view before returning to fill up the entire screen as he approaches the camera. In a rare departure from precedent, Nauman has returned here with *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii* (2015-2016) to revamp one of his artworks from the past (Bourgeois 2018, 72). A primary goal of this return to the previous artwork was that, this time around, Nauman's body in *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii* would appear *neither to recede nor come closer*. Indeed, even though audiences view the figure of *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii* in motion, it actually *appears not to move*, an effect achieved by the video recording device

always keeping his body in focus. In an interview regarding *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii*, Nauman confides, “That was the whole point of my original thought—that instead of the figure going back and forth, getting bigger and smaller [as in *Walk with Contrapposto*], the figure would stay the same size and the room would appear to move” (Basualdo 2018, 36). The end result is that the moving figure in this newer video *seems not to go anywhere whereas the background appears to oscillate and shift*. Carlos Basualdo (2018), curator of the exhibit at Punta Della Dogana, acknowledges that in *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii* “the body is seen to move, but at the same time it seemingly remains always in the same place” (13).

In this respect, the moving image achieves a degree of stasis. In her essay, Battle (2018) asks, “What does it mean to keep the body constant in scale while the space around it changes? What it *does*, if not what it *means*, can be stated conclusively: within each fragment of the *Contrapposto Studies* a delimited circuit of movement counters any notion of physical progression” (57). It is my contention that the moving image takes on the static nature of the film still. In being a moving image suggestive of an inanimate figure, my claim is that this inversion represents an evolution of the sculptural medium.

TRAUMA

The impetus for this essay was prompted by an attempt to explain the spectator’s experience in Nauman’s installations. The critical literature on Nauman has already suggested that this artist employs the same strategy as the advertising world to stop the audience in its tracks, beginning with a work like his neon *The True Artists Helps the World By Revealing Mystic Truths* (1967), a sign that he put up in the window of his studio. Moreover, much has been said about Nauman’s artworks’ outright attack on viewers. David Levine (2019) in *Bruce Nauman: Artists on Artists Lecture Series* reports one critic’s contention that, “You could always recognize a

Bruce Nauman piece by the way it made you want to leave the room immediately” (62). Of Nauman’s work, Neal Benezra (1994) analyzes what he calls “the adversarial nature of space in the artist’s new installations” that generate “equally compelling and disorienting effects by altering lighting conditions or the configuration of his spaces.” Benezra writes of Nauman that “by his own account, he was now experimenting with “sensory manipulation and overload” and the “denial or confusion of a Gestalt invocation of physiological defense mechanisms”” (28). Although some sources have explicitly labeled Nauman’s works as disorienting or anxiety-producing, they often stop short at this more superficial level without diving more deeply into how the mechanisms of the artworks produce those feelings. Nauman’s strategy is debilitating. In light of this, I argue that the stunning of the spectator imbues the experience with characteristics similar to those of a traumatic event.

Nauman’s attacks are levied at primal levels of human consciousness. In *Bruce Nauman: Theaters of Experience*, Susan Cross (2003) compares Nauman’s strategy with Antoni Artaud’s *Theater of Cruelty*: “a mode in which one is shocked bodily into an awareness of...the uncanny...” (17). Cross goes on to observe that Nauman’s “use of a jarring cacophony of color and sound again also evoke [sic] Artaud’s strategies, which sought to reveal and provoke the viewer’s most primitive, brutal instincts in an effort to overcome them” (20). The formal aspects of the artworks work towards breaking down and bypassing viewers’ normal defense mechanisms.

Trauma is a topic that has gained increased focus in contemporary society. Of particular interest regarding the growing field of trauma studies is that most of the focus in this area of research has been on the literary representation of trauma rather than its visual representation. In *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*, Jill Bennett (2005) acknowledges that “much recent work on the literary expression of trauma draws on psychoanalytic

models to interpret trauma within a text, although this application of psychoanalysis has been rather more limited in the visual arts" (2). Bennett insists that "up until now, theorists of trauma and memory have paid relatively little attention to visual and performance art" (23). In their introduction to *Trauma and Visuality in Modernity* (2006), Lisa Saltzman and Eric Rosenberg mention how "one of those forms of traumatic inhabitation and encounter is art, even as we acknowledge the fundamental shifts in its epistemological and ontological status" (ix-x).

In the past, the word "trauma" denoted primarily a physical wounding, but in modern parlance it can also refer to psychological wounding. The term itself has become common enough in everyday speech that it covers a broad range of phenomena, where everyday events could be labeled traumatic. However, the word most commonly denotes involvement in highly charged events such as car accidents, physical attacks, natural disasters, or war, wherein the threat of severe bodily harm is high. Along with physical injury, the term can apply to the resultant psychological damage after the incident. Much of the focus of contemporary studies on trauma is centered on its aftereffects, including posttraumatic stress disorder.

What is clear is that trauma may be difficult to describe. Saltzman and Rosenberg put it succinctly when they state that "the formulation of trauma as discourse is predicated upon metaphors of visuality and image as unavoidable carrier of the unrepresentable" (2006, xi-xii). In this sense, I assert that the stilling of the moving image examined in this article in relation to Nauman and Barthes reflects a strategy employed in an attempt to make sense of the inexplicable.

By way of example, Judith Rosenbeck (2006) focuses on Jim Dine's performance titled *Car Crash* (1960) in which he attempts to mimic the space of a car accident. Rosenbeck examines the breakdown of language in the work that incites a sense of anxiety that spreads to the audience, offering striking parallels to the formal mechanisms of Nauman's *Contrapposto Studies*,

i through vii such as sound and image. Rosenbeck provides a spectator's description of the experience: "The repeated failure to signify produce[s] a closing sequence that cycles in reverse through the process of memory, rejection, and trauma as the language of the collective breaks down into the most rudimentary bodily evocation of the language-making capacity..." (2006,105). This phenomenon mirrors the lack of dialogue in *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii* whereby all that remains for the viewer to decode is body language, and this process of decoding begins with the viewer's body.

What this leads us to is the effect of the installation space on the spectator's body. The way Rosenbeck describes the stream of consciousness dialogue in the *Car Crash* performance as "peeling away signifier from signified (or: favoring signified-as-form over signified-as-content)" (2006,116) offers a rare comparison to the breakdown of signification in Nauman's work. This gibes with the idea that Nauman was interested less in the object status of the final product of the artwork and instead more on the viewer's experience amidst the artwork. An emphasis on the function of form, as opposed to content, elucidates the way the formal characteristics of Nauman's *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii* work to in effect still the moving image in space, evoking a sense of trauma that impedes viewers' search for meaning.

THE NEUTRAL: STILLNESS VERSUS MOVEMENT

The concept of the neutral provides a particularly fitting lens through which to view *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii*; moreover, the nature of the stilling of figurative representation in this video artwork provides an opportunity to expand Barthes's concept of the neutral. In this analysis of *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii*, I show how the figure is, in a sense, depicted both coming and going at one and the same time, inhabiting a liminal space that never progresses to a final destination. This entails a suspension, which is still in motion. I argue that Nauman's

sculptural strategy pushes the boundaries of the notion of Barthesian neutrality by way of the human figure's adoption of the static contrapposto stance in motion. A central point to be examined in what follows is that in *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii* the neutral is a product of a paradigm involving stasis and motion.

Barthes lectured on this concept of the neutral for one fall term at the Collège de France late in 1978—just two years before his death. The lectures were devoted to one or more aspects of the neutral (twenty-three “figures” in all), ranging from “anger” and “conflict” to “silence” and “retreat.” The notion of the neutral is not merely an in-between term, such as, for example, the word “warm” between the polarity of “hot” versus “cold.” Rather, the neutral is a term that both “unites” (2005, 192 and 193) hot and cold while at the same time “annulling” (2005, 7) their opposition. It is a “complex” operation, and by “complex” Barthes does not mean “complicated” or “sophisticated”. Instead, the term “complex degree” (2005, 193) is clarified by a note in the book linking it to Barthes's notion of “the third term” (2005, 255). This complex degree represents a transcending of the structuralist diagram of binary oppositions. Barthes (2005) explains, “Whence the idea of a structural creation that would defeat, annul, or contradict the implacable binarism of the paradigm by means of a third term → the *tertium*: (a) In structural linguistics, Hjelmslev, Brondal, and phoneticians: A/B → A + B (complex) and neither A nor B: amorphous, neutral term (phonological neutralization) or zero degree” (7). This represents an escape of the duality of the binary, all while keeping it intact.

In terms of the neutral in Nauman's *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii*, it is my contention that this sense of the neutral grows out of the dichotomy of “movement” and “stillness.” I argue that “repetition” produces the neutral. I demonstrate how the looping mechanism of Nauman's video achieves the neutrality of “the complex” by culminating in a combination of the following: (1) movement;

(2) stillness; (3) both movement and stillness at the same time; and (4) ultimately, in all actuality, neither movement nor stillness.

It is important to note that the neutral leads us not to an *idea*, but to an “*open field*,” which is to say, it takes us to a place. Regarding what we might term the “space of neutrality,” an important point bears mention: Barthes's purpose in his analysis of the neutral was never to definitively to tell us *what the neutral is*. On the contrary, it was to examine “where the neutral leads” (2005, 45). Barthes does go on to suggest where this term might actually take us, and it is to a “region.” This article demonstrates how Nauman's art installations create a region in the exhibition space that approximates the space of highly charged event. Echoing the way in which Nauman's art installations may be less about the finished product and more about the spectator's physiological experience in the museum or gallery, Bennett (2005) refers to Gilles Deleuze's coining of the term “*encountered sign*” which is a “sign that is felt, rather than recognized or perceived through cognition” (7). Bennett echoes the sentiments of Saltzman and Rosenberg when she underscores the inability of language to convey the traumatic experience, acknowledging how “trauma itself is classically defined as beyond the scope of language and representation; hence, an imagery of trauma might not readily conform to the logic of representation” (3).

The effect trauma has on the surrounding environment is one of nullification; it voids the space. Hal Foster's *Return of the Real* (1996) Foster illustrates how the subject of the traumatic event ultimately disappears, and that “the position is evacuated” (168). An encounter with trauma laces the atmosphere with a degree of unreality, making the terrain of the real seem foreign. Referring to Jacques Lacan, Foster writes about trauma functioning like a screen placed over the real: “Lacan defines the traumatic as a missed encounter with the real. As missed, the real cannot be represented; it can only be repeated....” (132). He goes on to note how “in

Freud, an event is registered as traumatic only through a later event that recodes it, retroactively in deferred action” (xii). One reason this is so is that the traumatic event in itself might be thought of as an empty space during the highly charged moment, that event only gaining significance afterwards, through memory. This also relates to traumatic signs being empty, lacking a clear referent.

Cinema offers a relevant contrast to much of Nauman’s work. The experience of watching a film involves a pleasurable immersion in the action without much consciousness of oneself sitting in the theater. As the lights of the theater are dimmed, the audience may look forward to giving themselves over to the fantasy as a type of escape. In the case of viewing the Nauman video, something different occurs: Nauman’s moving pictures work against that immersion. Nauman’s art videos do this in a few ways. First, the lack of narrative progression precludes one from being swept up by the story. Second, the disturbing sounds prevent one from achieving that type of communion with an artwork characterized by a sense of serenity as Alex Potts (2009) refers to it in *The Sculptural Imagination* when we think of looking at a beautiful painting or sculpture (358). Third, the omission of key details thwarts meaning production. These phenomena work together to produce an ambiguity that may be distressing to some audiences.

THE CONTRAPPOSTO STANCE: MOTION AND ANTITHESIS

We must now turn to inspect the contrapposto stance itself more closely. Three points will be examined here: first, the “step” involved in this stance; secondly, the antithetical nature of the contrapposto; and lastly, the sense of tension inherent in the stance. All three of these aspects relate intimately to the neutrality occurring in Nauman’s *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii*.

To start off, regarding the stepping motion, the contrapposto stance of classical sculpture portrays the human figure caught in the midst

of an action: namely, that of taking a step. In all actuality, this could just as easily be a step backward as much as it could be a step forward. This is similarly conveyed in *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii* in light of the figure’s footsteps. What I wish to claim is that the figure’s stepping in Nauman’s *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii* achieves a state of Barthesian neutrality in neither coming nor going, even though it is in motion. Out of all seven of the videos, a close inspection reveals to us that this phenomenon becomes most apparent in the second video with the negative images, wherein the walking motion is played back in reverse. Put more directly, it is in this second video in particular where it is at times unclear whether the figure takes a step forwards or backwards. When the figure turns, a hesitation occurs as he spins on his feet, resulting in a momentary freezing of motion mid-step. This freezing is evocative of the fight, flight, or freeze response as a survival mechanism in relation to a physical threat. Regarding these instinctual reactions, Jain (2019) refers to a book by Harvard researcher Dr. Judith Herman titled *Trauma and Recovery* wherein Herman notes how “changes in arousal, perception, and emotion are normal, adaptive reactions. They mobilize the threatened person for strenuous action, either in battle or in flight” (11).

This spin in *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii* evokes the twisting motion common in the type of sculptural figuration that graces the canon of classical and neoclassical sculpture, from the *Laocoon and His Sons* (1501) to Giambologna’s *Abduction of a Sabine Woman* (1579-1583). In addition, Myron’s *Discobolus* (2nd century CE) (fig. 3) offers one of the most useful examples for our purposes. In his article “Contrapposto: Style and Meaning in Renaissance Art”, David Summers (1977) examines Quintilian’s description of the twist of Myron’s discus thrower: “But that curve, I might almost call it motion, with which we are so familiar, gives an impression of action and animation... Where can we find a more violent and elaborate attitude than that of the

Discobolus of Myron?" (337). Tellingly, this description relies on terms such as "motion" and "action" to describe an inanimate object, and those attributes were attributed to the still sculpture due to the element of contrapposto.



Myron, *Discobolus*, (Roman bronze reproduction 2nd century CE) (fig. 3)

ANTITHESIS AND IMPAIRED MENTAL PROCESSING

The second aspect of contrapposto is its combination of opposing forces. A key component of the definition of "contrapposto" hinges on the concept of antithesis (Summers 1977, 339). "Antithesis," according to Summers, "had a variety of translations and synonyms; one of these was *contrapositum*, which, as is well known, was the basis for the word *contrapposto*" (339). In *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii*, the figure's movement, hindered by a kind of stasis, embodies this antithetical nature of contrapposto. Of particular relevance in the case of the

contraposition of action and inertia in Nauman's work is Summers's reference to the "*figura serpentinata*", the twist of a "serpentine figure" embodying two conflicting directions of movement at once: "...a work that made forthright use of a *contrapposto*, adding opposition of direction to a *figura serpentinata* [was] itself already a *contrapposto*..." (339). A sculptural figure could be torquing his or her body towards the back just as much as he or she could be spinning forwards. The effect of contrapposto as a "juxtaposition of opposites" (Summers 1977, 342) is that each pole of the paradigm becomes highlighted—its strength augmented—as a consequence of this contrast (Summers 347). To be clear, the intention of this article involves illustrating how the mechanism of Nauman's *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii*—in particular the slowed motion—highlights what is ultimately the stationary quality of the moving figure. As an example, even though a person spinning in place is technically moving, the person in all actuality fails to advance forward to occupy an altogether different locale or substantially change his or her position. The end result is what could be termed a "moving stasis."

This sense of stasis is evocative of the paralytic effect anxiety has on people when they become stricken with panic. Anxiety disorders resulting in panic attacks unfortunately appear to have become a rather commonplace phenomenon in contemporary culture. Ubiquitous media influences likely contribute to this trend by generating a sense of isolation through erosion of human connection and community, potentially exacerbating mental health disorders. Although it seems that mental health issues have been given increased scrutiny as of late—often in an effort to destigmatize the conditions by shedding light on the incidents—they continue to signify a negative evolutionary response to the rapid pace of technological advancements.

In the case of the *Discobolus*, the sense of antithesis centers on the fact that both the front and rear of the figure appear to be in plain view

at the same time (Summers 1977, 339). This phenomenon may be considered “unnatural.” Summers points out that “extreme contrapposto” is “conspicuous” and “contrary to nature” (340-341). Part of the allure of the contrapposto stance is its depiction of a certain natural “grace” (Summers 337). One important aspect of this study for our purposes is a viewer’s attraction to the abnormal or unnatural. It is my contention that this is part of the allure of *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii*, for it is unusual to see both the front and back of a person at the same time, which can be difficult to process.

However, what comes into play here is a certain degree of confusion faced by audience members in the Nauman installation as they potentially have difficulty processing these works of art. Audiences often convey the difficulty they have in categorizing Nauman’s artworks, or even in describing their experiences of having walked through one of these art installations. Of note is the fact that although the senses are likely primed and in high gear during a stressful situation such as this, the *mind* may still be hard-pressed to make sense of the unfolding events. In their analysis, James et al. illustrate this type of negative effect on cognition: “This processing shift involves enhanced sensory perceptual processing paralleled with a reduced conceptual processing of the event (Holmes & Bourne, 2008)” (118). Overloaded and overwhelmed, the human psyche may finally reach a point at which it is unable to focus on anything amidst the barrage of sensory stimulation, which can ultimately be attributed to a “‘competition of resource’ rationale for interference with cognitive tasks” (James et al. 118). This goes some way towards explaining the type of tunnel vision often accompanying highly charged situations, rendering one’s attention myopically focused on just one aspect of the scene to the exclusion of all others. Therefore, stilling the moving image in essence functions as a biological adaptation strategy in an attempt to come to terms with the enigmatic nature of these artworks.

TENSION AND SUSPENSE

Lastly, a sense of tension is a third element that pervades the traditional contrapposto stance of classical sculpture, in that it portrays a movement stalled in the act, the lifted foot of the figure indicative of future forward movement, as seen in a sculpture by Polykleitos titled *Doryphoros* (fig. 5). The moment remains forever pregnant with the possibility of future movement, though that action is never borne out. Battle (2018) alludes to the idea of tension in *Doryphoros’s* contrapposto stance:

The shift in representation from the kouros to the *Doryphoros* thus marked a transition from the pursuit of symmetry to an emphasis on harmony in nature. Achieving *symmetria* through systematic counterbalance, Polykleitos implied the structural tension that binds and balances the natural order—a push-pull effect that not only forms an ideal body but, by extension, also accounts for the cosmic forces that govern the world. (52)



Polykleitos, *Doryphoros*, Roman copy of a 5th century BCE (fig. 4)

Referring to the body of both the viewer and the artist, Battle acknowledges the sense of tension that pervades Nauman's *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii*. She refers to the body portrayed in the video as riddled with tension (2018, 45). This evokes a sense of the pressure buildup of potential energy inherent in the moving figure, energy which is never released. The figure in *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii* remains in perpetual motion but goes nowhere, and this action is then set on loop, locked in perpetual suspense. In a similar sense, viewers become suspended in the exhibition space of *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii* as they turn, step, and sometimes become immobilized by sound and image, so that they end up embodying the contrapposto stance themselves as their bodies becoming vertical hubs that host a performance of the neutral. Therefore, the spectator theoretically inhabits the space of the sculpture of antiquity, at times frozen mid-step in the contrapposto pose. The present study expands Barthes's semiotics into the realm of performance by positioning the spectator in the space of the neutral.

CONTRAPPOSTO STUDIES, I THROUGH VII (VIDEOS 3-7): FRAGMENTATION AND ABSTRACTION

The second, larger room features the last five videos of *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii*. With the first three projected on one wall, each one features four of the eight-foot-high figures but now with four more of the negative images replicated above, essentially stacked on top of one another. Some of the bodies bear witness to what I would refer to as a type of violence ravaged on the human figure, displayed cut in half at the waist; the disorienting effect of this dismemberment is that, at some points, we may see the legs walking away from us while the torso faces us. At other times, the torso may be seen completely divorced from the rest of the body, hovering off to one side of the legs as it floats on

its own in space. Through manipulation of the video image, *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii* represents a violent subversion of the symmetry and equilibrium typically associated with sculptural figuration.



Bruce Nauman, *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii*, 2015-2016 (still). Seven-channel video projection (color, stereo sound), continuous duration, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York. © 2023 Bruce Nauman / Artists Rights Society (ARS) (fig. 5)

The uncanny effect of the dismemberment in *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii* (fig. 5) is on display when another set of the eight stacked figures is again chopped in half at the waist, but in this case the movements of Nauman's body have been recorded from a side view. The supernatural phenomenon entails a severed torso swiveling three hundred sixty degrees on its set of legs, or the legs in some instances walking to the right while the torso faces towards the left. On this wall, a third video projection of the same eight figures bears another unique, ghostly element: one of the eight figures turns and walks off camera, leaving the space vacant for a few moments before Nauman suddenly reappears again out of nowhere. This adds a chilling aspect to the work as the specter suddenly materializes out of thin air.

The opposite wall projects the last two videos, each of these pieces featuring now seven of the walking figures on the bottom, with another seven replicated on top. Meanwhile, each of the figures has now been sliced into seven

pieces (fig. 6). One of the videos shows the figure facing forwards and backwards, while the other depicts side views. Nauman's artwork evolves sculptural aesthetics by utilizing video strategies to deconstruct the human figure.



Bruce Nauman, *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii*, 2015-2016 (still). *Seven-channel video projection (color, stereo sound), continuous duration, dimensions variable.* Courtesy of the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York. © 2023 Bruce Nauman / Artists Rights Society (ARS) (fig. 6)

This deconstruction of the figure parallels a kind of psychic devolution of the human species, pointing to a fragmentation of modern identity. The present study investigates how the mechanisms of Nauman's often disconcerting artworks mount an attack on viewers that is powerful enough to break down human personality constructs. In *Bruce Nauman: Make Me Think Me*, Lynne Cooke (2006) refers to a quality of eeriness and an "unsettling fear" suggesting that Nauman's goal is one of "challenging his audience's psychic and physical equilibrium" by cultivating "a signature sense of frustration, and dislocation" (86). It is commonplace for those who live through an accident or disaster to describe the event as having a surreal quality to it. Similarly, the heightened sensory state cultivated in viewers by Nauman's installations can produce a kind of divorce from reality. Art critic

Robert Storr illustrates how the Nauman artwork "increases painful awareness of the breakdown of the subject's relation with itself and with other subjects" (55). This article investigates the type of subject-object relations indicative of Nauman's installation spaces.

Nauman's own orderly strategy of thoroughly constricting the viewer's experience ironically tips the scales in Nauman's favor, creating a sense of disorder in the audience. The tactic ends up throwing the viewer off balance. One reason Nauman's work produces such a strong reaction in audiences is the way the artist wields control of the environment, creating a toxic byproduct consisting of a feeling of being unable to escape the straight-jacketing mechanisms of the installations. In that some viewers inevitably come to the conclusion that they are simply unable to endure the experience, leaving the museum becomes the best option.

THE THIRD MEANING AND THE PUNCTUM OF CONTRAPPOSTO STUDIES, I THROUGH VII

Contrapposto Studies, i through vii ends up achieving a Barthesian third meaning. One way this occurs can be found in the action being portrayed, which consists of a slice of life divorced from any narrative context, so that the depicted figure inhabits a kind of narrative no-man's land. In light of the fact that the brief sequences of movement presented to the audience come to us utterly bereft of any beginning or ending, an important assertion of this article centers on how the brief sequence functions like a film still, even though it is in motion. Meanwhile, this moving *punctum* in *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii* is allied with death. The *punctum* itself occurs at precisely the moment the figure splits in half, its legs portrayed as walking away from viewers while its torso remains facing them. With this phenomenon, we find ourselves captive to that poignant element of the *punctum* which, according to Barthes (1980) in *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, "touches me" (38) and "distresses me" (40). The moving *punctum* in *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii* is a before-and-after occurring at one and the same time, achieving the bewildering sense of time Barthes refers to as a vertiginous dizziness (1980, 97) during his own experience of the *punctum*.

The temporality Barthes analyzes in his notion of the death *punctum*—that the eventual demise of the subject of any photograph comes to us always already inscribed in the image—becomes realized in *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii* in real time, the hacking apart of the body of the figure suggestive of the ravages of time. The palpable sense of time in Nauman's artworks does not adhere to the typical advancing of the clock moment-by-moment, but instead involves an unnatural sense of time. This is indicative of how one's altered perception while

enduring stressful experiences can make it seem as if time has slowed down, when the duration of moments appears to be stretched out. Hart-Davis (2011) in *The Book of Time: The Secrets of Time, How It Works and How We Measure It* refers to experiments done by Dr. David Eagleman on time perception during emergency situations. In some instances, participants in fact rated the period of time to be twice as long as the actual event lasted (39). In Nauman's *Contrapposto Studies*, manipulation of temporality comes into play via an interruption of the typical narrative progression to which viewers are accustomed.

In that narrative progression and the search for thematic content are often thwarted in Nauman's work, the audience's attempts to engage with the work are impeded, resulting in frustration. In her article "PheNAUMANology," Marcia Tucker (1970) comments on Nauman's strategies:

Since his first provocative New York exhibition at the Catelli Gallery in 1968, Nauman's work has become increasingly complex. We are no longer able to take refuge in art-historical analogies to Duchampian esthetics or reference to visual affinities with the work of Johns, Oldenburg, or "process" art. Nauman's roughly-built acoustical and performance corridors; his elusive camera/monitor pieces; his unenterable channels of air current; "dance" pieces and slow-motion single image films—all seem to defy our habitual esthetic expectations. To encounter one of these pieces is to experience basic phenomena that have been isolated, inverted, taken out of context, or progressively destroyed.

One reason for this could be the feeling of being let down at the realization that viewer gratification will likely never come to fruition, so that this sense of perpetual delay may end up being too much to bear.

CONCLUSION

The concept of Barthesian neutrality has not been explored in the literature on artist Bruce Nauman. This article explores how the mechanisms of Nauman's art installations achieve this sense of Barthesian neutrality, thereby expanding the field of application for Barthes's conception of the neutral. A central facet of this analysis is

that the looping mechanisms of the video in Nauman's *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii* result in the moving human figure approaching the static quality of sculpture. The effect is a paradoxical fossilization of the moving video image, a phenomenon that is reflective of the human evolutionary response to highly charged events.

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