HIS RAW MATERIALS
Bruce Nauman at Tate Modern

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Tate Modern is twenty-first century London’s Crystal Palace. Unlike the doomed Millennium Dome several miles down river at Greenwich, it seems to capture the spirit of the age, and since it opened in 2000, has become one of London’s most significant cultural spaces, extending the arts complex of the South Bank further down river. Tate Modern is a place where people gather—to look, to eat, to wander; to watch the river from the high balconied galleries; to see and be seen.

Tate Modern was formerly Bankside power station, a massive piece of 1940s brutalism designed by Gilbert Scott, and redesigned by Swiss architects Herzog and de Meuron. Reclaimed and post-industrial rather than purpose built, as the South Bank complex was, Tate Modern has similarities in some respects to the new Dia Hudson building in upstate New York, and not only in its riverine aspect. Outside New York, Dia Hudson is the newest and most celebrated East Coast art gallery in the United States and, like Tate Modern, it reinvigorates a former industrial space with a design (by Robert Irwin) that refers to the form and function of the original in reimagining the site as a home for art.

Dia Hudson, isolated on the edge of a small town about an hour north of New York, was a packaging factory, and its redesign has a narrative aspect, as if its former life were present in a kind of ghosting. Visual traces remain—industrial glass in the windows, lines from the small gauge railway track that carried boxes to the river—and their presence in the context of often large, conceptually based works reminds us of the nature of industrial work itself, and of where it happens, how it is structured, and how it has changed. The building has a kind of Protestant austerity, lit as it is almost entirely with natural light, and the work inside, much of it minimalist and conceptual, is set in spaces so big and open that the work acquires a kind of lucidity of scale, a strange visual sumptuousness due merely to the opulence of size. Dia devotes a whole floor to Bruce Nauman, who has
also created the latest installation for the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern. At Dia the Nauman floor is below ground, eerie, and quiet. Walking through his strangely shaped rooms and marked out floor spaces is an odd, unsettling experience that informs whatever one sees next—almost like a tracing floor above a Gothic cathedral, Nauman’s conceptual process-based work lays out the pattern for art practice.

At Tate Modern only the Turbine Hall retains the austerity and gloom of the power station itself. Elsewhere the orchestration of the space is almost hectic. A hive of rooms of varying sizes leads off a stacked bank of hallways reached by tall, centrally located escalators. The galleries themselves face the river and from several floors the visitor can step from the teeming interior (Tate Modern is almost always teeming) onto deep balconies, or smaller viewing platforms, and look out towards St. Paul’s. Crossing the river on the Millennium bridge below the building, one can always see flocks of people on any of the open ledges, like passengers on some huge ocean liner about to set off for open water. Tate Modern is both a city space and a place that signifies departure; a space that offers respite from the city and that allows viewers to view the city, as well as the art. In its vistas of London’s panorama the building makes sense of the scale of the city, and it refers to leisure and pleasure in its use of space—with closed hanging balconies inside looking into the Turbine Hall, complete with sofas and reading matter.

Over the past five years the Turbine Hall, a vast cavern that stretches upwards for six floors across the back of the building, has been home to a series of installations by major artists, each commissioned as part of the Unilever series, an annual art commission sponsored by the company Unilever. Bruce Nauman’s installation *Raw Materials* is the fifth in the series. Beginning with work by Louise Bourgeois and including commissions from Juan Muñoz, Anish Kapoor, and Olafur Eliasson, the space demands massive ingenuity from any artist given the task of making work to fill it. The previous installation, Eliasson’s epic *Weather Project* (2003) created a huge “sun” from monochromatic lamps at the eastern end of the hall. The ceiling was mirrored, and during the day, clouds of fine mist hovered under it, formed from the fine spray of water that permeated the space. Viewers lay on the floor as if sun bathing, held picnics, or figured alphabets with their bodies and watched themselves reflected in the mirrored roof. *The Weather Project* was both operatic and scenographic, undercutting its own grandiosity through the playful way that it encouraged the audience to perform for itself.

Nauman does something quite different. In *Raw Materials* he has staged a personal retrospective in sound that encourages the viewer to reconsider his work in terms of music and performance. Eschewing dazzling visuals, he has created a fluid but discontinuous sound spill that flows in and out of hearing as the listener traverses the hall. This is not a retrospective of his sound work, but a new work that strips sound elements from earlier works in video, sculpture, or performance. He has sited eighteen of these new-from-old pieces around the walls of the space at intervals of about twenty feet, so that they both frame and punctuate the space, with the
sound of the spoken texts emanating from flat speakers placed at about body height. The pieces are looped so that they play continuously and they mirror one another down each side of the hall, while at the closed eastern end—away from the entrance—a double piece (19 and 20), called World Peace plays on flat speakers turned end out from the wall facing one another and projecting into the space. Number 21 is ambient, a long “mmmm” made by looping a fifteen-second tape of Nauman’s voice humming, mirroring the sound that he heard on first encountering the space, the sound of the turbine, now turned back on itself like some kind of benign feedback loop. In context it feels like wind filling the space.

The works are all for the human voice; most are in English. Some are of Nauman himself speaking, some use actors, one the voice of a child. As a sequence they selectively instruct, seduce, admonish, and exhort the listener by turns. At the entrance the listener first hears the words “thank you” repeated ad infinitum. In the next piece a child speaks phrases that move through a series of transformations and elisions of the words “you may not want to be here” and “you may not want to hear.”

Work and No, in which a male and a female voice (Vandi Snyder and Walter Stevens) repeat the words while chanting, screaming, and grunting, and Think, performed by Nauman himself as he repeatedly jumps and runs out of breath, are interspersed with other plays on words, systems, and narratives. A circular campfire tale creates a never-ending narrative loop; there are pieces that deal with language systems, with rhetoric and gesture, with cut-up and collaged texts, language games, exercises, and lists. Together they seem to form an index to and an archive of some of Nauman’s most important work with sound and language. Much has been written about Nauman’s interest in language, his debt to both Beckett and Wittgenstein, and the history of his work with text. Separating the sound elements from the visual and then placing them in a formal sequence allows the listener to take them in as an aural series, in relation to one another.

Raw Materials is a wonderfully pliable title, and one that becomes richer and more suggestive the more one considers it. It refers in part to the materiality of language, and, in choosing the word “materials” rather than the singular “material,” Nauman also seems to allude to scientific practice, and specifically to that practice through which distinct materials can be alchemically transformed. As Emma Dexter points out, it also suggests the raw state of the original works, which are “cooked” in this configuration, and possibly alludes to the Turbine Hall in its “raw” state. Sonically Nauman’s materials are far from raw. Digitally re-mastered and balanced, and made acutely sensitive to hearing distance, the sound spaces of the works have been extensively treated and sometimes rerecorded before being sited and swept clean of any unintentional noise. In this sense the title is ironic; we simply no longer notice the technology that shapes the sound worlds that we hear.

Nauman’s work has always derived energy from its context, both the immediate context in which the viewer encounters the work, and subtler cultural contexts and histories of practice. It is
pertinent that he presents this sound work in the context of the recent virtual explosion of sound as art. In early March I saw sound artist Christian Marclay’s first international solo show at London’s Barbican Gallery. Marclay’s work operates a kind of synaesthesia, working across the boundaries of the visual and the sonic, using scratch, cut-up, and radical juxtapositions of scale and form, clearly referring to Cage, Warhol, and Rauschenberg as well as to the experiments of earlier composers with feedback and tape loops. While Marclay’s work is post-punk post-scratch, Nauman’s (though just as fresh and not in any way dated) refers structurally and materially to the practice of an earlier generation of sound artists and composers, and because Nauman extends the use of these materials and means, he therefore draws our attention to ways in which those practices, particularly in the American art scene, have informed contemporary art. In the context of new sound art, Nauman’s allusion seems especially timely.

Two American composers, both in their sixties, come to mind in relation to Nauman’s installation—Steve Reich and Alvin Lucier. Nauman’s Get Out of My Mind, Get Out of My Room was originally recorded at about the same time as Alvin Lucier’s feedback piece I Am Sitting In A Room, in which, over 45 minutes, his own voice is recorded by one tape recorder and then played back into another, gradually erasing into a “surging wash of metallic tones.” Lucier’s aesthetic erases any trace of personal voice, whereas Nauman’s Get Out of My Mind aggressively (but ultimately fruitlessly) asserts ego and presence. It is, in the emotional sense, “raw”—“it’s so angry it scares people,” Nauman has said. They make an interesting pair, and in terms of Nauman’s present work, the notion of the ephemerality of sound, and the “sounding” of the space are important allusions.

Raw Materials might also be, of course, “Roar Materials.” In the Turbine Hall we hear Bruce Nauman’s own voice, its hum like the roar of the world, or like the sound of what is inside one’s own body, as in John Cage’s famous experiment in the Harvard anechoic chamber. Cage heard the whistling of his own nerves and the pulsing of his own blood. That roar, that breath, is “elemental” in another sense, for the wind that passes over raw materials also gives it life. It is the “pneuma,” the breath of the world, through whose touch all material originates. Cage’s roaring world is evidenced in his Roaratorio, his recorded “reading through” of James Joyce’s Finnegan’s Wake in which the disparate elements, sounds, Cage’s own discontinuous reading, scraps of Irish traditional music simply occupy the same space. They do not relate to one another but instead create a sound work that coheres through the musical structure of the procedures through which they are generated. I also like to think that for Raw Materials Bruce Nauman can hardly have been unaware of inhabiting the exhibition space below Joseph Beuys, that mad and sinister conductor of experiments in energy who was also obsessed with the work of both Joyce and Cage, with Cage’s Joyce
and with the material, incantatory, and magical properties of language.

The use of speech patterns and the percussive use of the body in Nauman’s work, led me to think about his possible relationship to Steve Reich. Nauman’s work *Rhythmic Stamping*, for instance, which isn’t included here but which I found archived on Ubu,* is closely related to percussive phase pieces like Reich’s *Clapping Music*, as well as his *Come Out to Show Them* and *It’s Gonna Rain*, both of which sample particularly compelling and powerful American voices—in one a pentecostalist preacher and the latter a boy in Harlem accused of murder. Like Richard Serra (who has also worked extensively with language), Nauman worked with Steve Reich in the late 1960s on some of his earlier audible sculptures and phase pieces.* Steve Reich has always been part visual artist and his work is informed by an understanding of the sculptural qualities of sound in space, both live and recorded, so that over many years he has used some of the means that contemporary artists and DJs now use in creating new musics—combining the textures of recording instruments with live sound.

Nauman’s work is always about the audience, and for this work the word “audience,” with its origins in the Latin for hearing, is more appropriate than viewer, for here he turns his ear toward us, and makes us make the work, and make it out. The activity he requires is “close listening,” that activity so important to the practice of experimental composers and musicians. The activity of listening to, and for, overlooked elements, afterthoughts, things not seen or heard at first—materials, ideas and events that lie outside the normal range of focus informs all of Nauman’s work. In one sense, as with Cage, the work is all about what emerges as art from the practice of paying attention. Site, context, and dialogue are essential to the process both of making art and of experiencing and understanding it. Nauman’s compelling (and monumental) video installation at the Dia Center in SoHo in 2001, *Mapping the Studio 1 (Fat Chance John Cage)* showed video recorded at night over several weeks in his studio. At one level it simply documented its night-life—the movements of moths, mice, and cat, but it requires of the viewer a strange sort of attention. Sitting in the middle of the huge warehouse space opposite the Dia Center in New York, surrounded by wall to wall and floor to ceiling video and sitting on a stool fitted with wheels to propel the viewer around the space, I found myself falling into an acutely sensitized reverie in which my eye and mind “caught”
Interior views of the Tate Modern. Top: South; Bottom: East. Photos: Courtesy Bonnie Marranca.
occasional movement patterns, slipping in and out of focus. Gradually I began to see pattern and rhythm in what at first seemed merely ambient—the greenish light of a still video camera in a cluttered room.

Writing this piece has led me backwards and forwards from desk to CD player. I am writing in Washington D.C., a few days after Easter, in the last weeks of my life in the U.S., before returning to England. I saw Bruce Nauman’s *Raw Materials* several times over the course of two or three weeks in London early March. As I write I am listening to the new, rerecorded, version of Steve Reich’s early work (which combines sampled voice and orchestra) *Different Trains.* It sounds very different, now scored for a large orchestra instead of a quartet. Like *Raw Materials* it is a resetting of the artist’s own, earlier work. *Different Trains* uses repeated phrases that, for the listener, move in and out of abstraction as they pass through patterned repetition. The music makes analogies between machines of different kinds and their musics—trains, voices, and musical instruments—and in doing so connects two great themes of American cultural life—music and the railroad. Reich provides a setting for the themes, and a setting for the voices, in ways that combine genres and registers—lyricism and structuralism in a sense; the vernacular and high art in another. When Nauman sets the voice into a soundscape I sense within his method this extraordinary tradition of practice, whose procedures include the juxtaposition of different elements, a powerful sense of the American vernacular, the combination of textures, and the emergence of the work through process.

After witnessing and listening to *Raw Materials* many times, and having recently spent time at Dia Hudson with Nauman’s work. I think that the elusive ethic of Nauman’s work so often lies in the throwaway, or the aside, the bit you have to listen hard for and then really to attend to. Having been admonished and screamed at, subjected to clapping and thumping, wheedling and cajoling, and having listened to 18 separate pieces of work the listener arrives at the eastern end of the room, where pieces 19 and 20 literally face each other as two speakers with blank faces. If you stand between them, you overhear two quiet voices speaking in a phased rhythm, a man on one speaker, and a woman on the other. Their words are reminiscent of a language lesson. They say, “I’ll talk. You’ll listen. You’ll talk. I’ll listen,” and they move through the whole system of possibilities, “We’ll talk to them. They’ll listen to us,” “They’ll talk to me. I’ll listen to them.” They speak slowly and rhythmically, in nuanced, vernacular voices, inexpressive but not unpleasant. As they speak they begin to exhaust the system, ending with, “You’ll talk to me. I’ll listen to you. I’ll talk to you. You’ll listen to me.” And then they begin again.

NOTES


4. Ibid., 40.
5. Quoted in Dexter, 20.

6. John Cage’s *Roaratorio: An Irish Circus on Finnegans Wake* was composed 1979.


9. Tate Modern is co-producing a concert featuring the piece Nauman performed in with Reich, *Pendulum Music*, at the Almeida Theatre in Islington, London on July 8, 2005 as one of the events linked to its *Open Systems* exhibition, which runs through the summer of 2005.


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