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Nauman's Beckett Walk*

KATHRYN CHIONG

*Go on from where you left off, said Mr. Magershon, not from where you began. Or are you like Darwin's caterpillar?!*¹

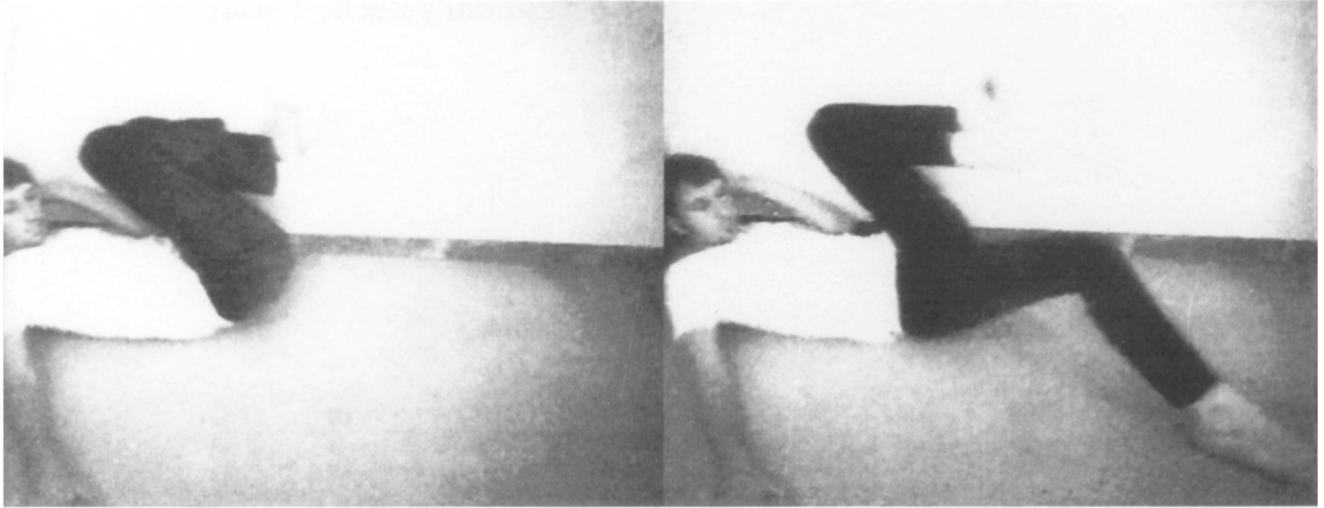
Caterpillar logic provides the model for Samuel Beckett's production, where series upon series go on from where they begin, where "going on" finally takes priority over all ends. And where Beckett leaves off, without having finished, we find Bruce Nauman² revolving it all again, leaving us differently at the same spot somewhere in the middle, so that Nauman's work agitates in the same way that the events at Mr. Knott's agitate Watt:

What distressed Watt in this incident of the Galls father and son, and in subsequent similar incidents, was not so much that he did not know what had happened, for he did not care what had happened, as that nothing had happened, that a thing that was nothing had happened, with the utmost formal distinctness, and that it continued to happen, in his mind, he supposed, though he did not know exactly what that meant, and though it seemed to be outside him, before him, about him, and so on, inexorably to unroll its phases, beginning with the first (the knock that was not a knock) and ending with the last (the door

* Deepest thanks to Rosalind Krauss for enabling this text, and to Hal Foster, Benjamin Buchloh, and Thomas Salopek for their critical insights.

1. Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (New York: Grove Press, 1953), p. 194; all subsequent references. "Darwin's caterpillar" behaved in the following way: when it had completed its cocoon up to the sixth layer and was then placed in a cocoon built to the third layer, the caterpillar would redo the last three stages of the new cocoon. When, however, this same caterpillar was placed in a cocoon already built to the sixth layer, instead of profiting from the work done, it started again at the third stage (see Michael Beausang, "Watt: Logic, Insanity, Aphasia," *Style* 30, no. 3 [Fall 1996], pp. 503–4).

2. While in San Francisco in 1966, Nauman read plays and stories by Beckett, making several references to him in interviews and in work (see *Bruce Nauman*, ed. Joan Simon [Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1994]). In 1968 he taped *Slow Angle Walk (Beckett Walk)* and installed at the Fischer Gallery, Düsseldorf, *Six Sound Problems for Konrad Fischer*, described by Coosje van Bruggen as resembling the stage for Beckett's 1958 play *Krapp's Last Tape* (van Bruggen, *Bruce Nauman* [New York: Rizzoli, 1988], p. 233).

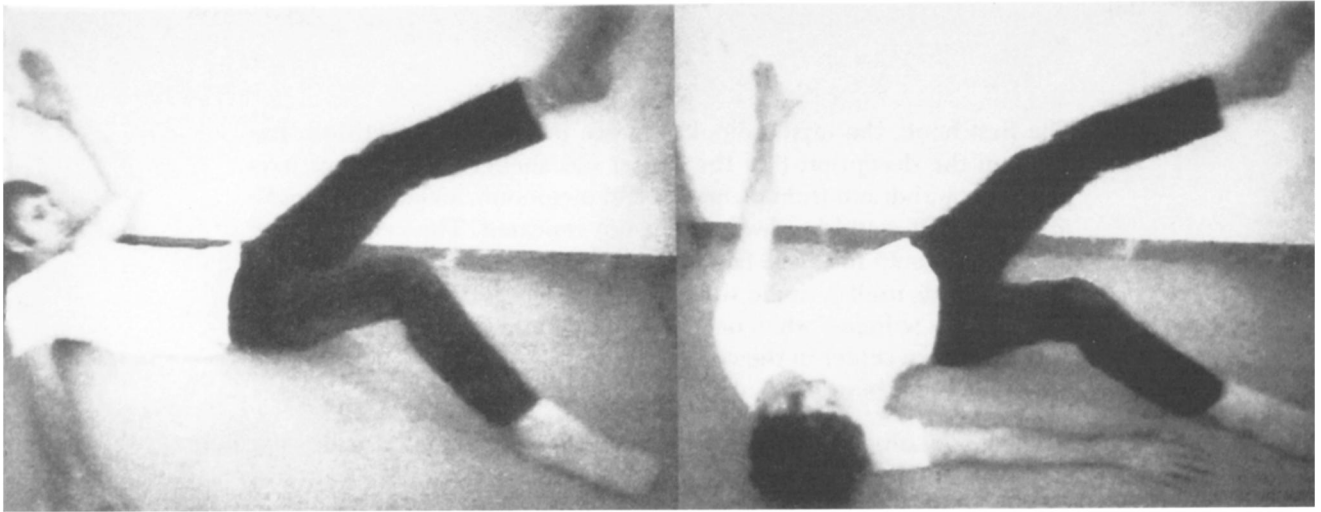


closing that was not a door closing), and omitting none, uninvoked, at the most unexpected moments, and the most inopportune. (*Watt*, p. 76)

Reading Nauman through Beckett, our discussion can only retrace these lines. Nonetheless, by revisiting “The old thing where it always was, back again” (*Watt*, p. 44), we find ourselves in hot pursuit of nothing, which is exactly where Beckett and Nauman wanted to place us. It’s a little too like running Lewis Carroll’s Caucus-race, and we can start and stop where we like (since everybody wins by sheer virtue of having at some point run). As a matter of consistency, however, we could keep pace with Watt, whose first memory of the Galls coming to tune Mr. Knott’s piano was a noise.

... *beginning with the first (the knock that was not a knock)* ...

Think of sound specifically, as the knock that begins an encounter, with Nauman’s single-channel video *Wall-Floor Positions* (1968). The work can be seen (without playing the tape) in a succession of photographic stills to reveal Nauman, acting a bad version of the sideshow contortionist. In these closely cropped frames, Nauman assumes every position except for the vertical one, turning the entire body into a single part-object that refuses to produce symmetry. By themselves, the pictures initiate a certain discomfort through an insistence on horizontality. What cannot be guessed without playing the tape, however, is that the crucial aspect of *Wall-Floor Positions* is the first moment, when Nauman enters the frame, falling into focus with a thud. Each subsequent pose is carried off with a similar slam of foot or hand. Each noise, in turn, cocoons itself within what seems an unendurable pause. Such passages “from silence to sound and from sound to silence” (*Watt*, p. 72) form the incessantly recurring events of Watt’s memory, no less than our experience of Nauman’s looping videos or Beckett’s regressive plays. This passage of sound is what strikes first and hardest in *Wall-Floor Positions*, making similar impact in Beckett’s 1966 television play *Eh*



Joe.³ After moments of solitary quiet, paranoid Joe ventures toward the window of his bare room, suddenly drawing apart the curtains with a violent rattle. A lull follows, broken again when Joe approaches the second window and rips the drapes apart once more. The unexpected noise, jolting enough at first, becomes doubly alarming in its reiteration. For now, concentrate on this fact, that the sound must happen, in Beckett as in Nauman, always more than once.

In order for a knock to be a knock, which might be recognized as “someone at the door,” the sound must normally recur, the second proving that the first was not just the banging of a branch but the work of communication. Roman Jakobson identifies this operation in verbal behavior wherein duplication signals “that the uttered sounds do not represent a babble, but a senseful, semantic entity.”⁴ What if, on the other hand, as Watt proposes, the knock is not simply a knock, in that it occurs not twice, but too many times? What happens, for instance, when a word is repronounced until that senseful semantic entity collapses into a series of too-distinct phonemes? The result is not simply babble. Rather, what the excess finally signals is its own presence. The sound then, not of *someone* at the door, but of *knock-knock-knock-knock*—and this mechanism of repetition.

... in subsequent similar incidents ...

Jacques Derrida describes repetition not as posterior to the origin, but somehow simultaneous with it, “a trace which replaces a presence which has never been present.”⁵ The notion of an autonomous origin, then, is a kind of lure, a fantasy:

3. *Eh Joe*, produced by BBC television, was first shown on July 4, 1966.

4. Roman Jakobson, “Why Mama and Papa?” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1 (The Hague: Mouton, 1962), pp. 538-45; and as discussed in Rosalind Krauss, “Yo-Yo,” in Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), pp. 219-20.

5. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 295.

The first book, the mythic book, the eve prior to all repetition, has lived on the deception that the center was sheltered from play: irreplaceable, withdrawn from metaphor and metonymy, a kind of *invariable first name* that could be invoked but not repeated. The center of the first book should not have been repeatable in its own representation. Once it lends itself a single time to such a representation—that is to say, once it is written—when one can read a book in the book, an origin in the origin, a center in the center, it is the abyss, is the bottomlessness of infinite redoubling.⁶

Affirming, like Jakobson, that signs are born in their capacity to be repeated, Derrida goes on to venture that at the mystical center where there is no such play of origin, we find death. Repetition is thus conceived not as supplementary accumulation, but as an essential operation, as the “bottomlessness” that provides the very grounds for existence. It finds voice in Beckett’s and Nauman’s production, when a spoken phrase becomes a maddening refrain, when a sound begins to grate in its seeming sameness. Through these repetitions, refusing an isolated origin, Beckett and Nauman show being, so that one might have mentioned to the other, as did Estragon to Vladimir, “We always find something, eh, Didi, to give us the impression we exist?”⁷

And this “something,” constantly rehearsed, is often precisely nothing. Nothing but the phrase “lip synch” whispered until the throat dries (Nauman, *Lip Synch* [1968]), nothing but the strum of D, E, A, D on a violin until the arm tires (Nauman, *Violin Tuned D E A D* [1969]), nothing but the sound of a woman’s relentless pacing across the stage (Beckett, *Footfalls* [1976]). These exercises, however, consistently maintain themselves as failed affirmations, as finally only “impressions,” which in their patent actuality always ever return to the question “We exist?” For this is also the function of repetition, to unmake the very identity that it seeks to confirm, disrupting the hierarchy of model and copy, as Derrida describes: “We are faced then with mimicry imitating nothing; faced, so to speak, with a double that doubles no simple, a double that nothing anticipates, nothing at least that is not itself already double.”⁸ Rather than reaffirming the identity of the one, repetition inspires the rabid production of another, from which the one cannot extricate itself, but with which it will never be identical. It is this relationship of nonidentity, somewhere between parasitic and symbiotic, which Beckett and Nauman force their characters to endure with every recurrence.⁹

In Nauman’s video installation *Clown Torture* (1987), four different clowns,

6. Ibid., p. 296.

7. Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, reprinted in Samuel Beckett, *I Can’t Go On, I’ll Go On*, ed. Richard W. Seaver (New York: Grove Press, 1976), p. 444; all subsequent references.

8. Jacques Derrida, “The Double Session” (1969), reprinted in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 206.

9. For a comprehensive study of Beckett’s use of repetition, see Steven Connor, *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text* (New York: Blackwell, 1988).

one after another, tell the same joke while balancing on one leg: "It was a dark and stormy night. Three men were sitting around a campfire. One of the men said, 'Tell us a story, Jack,' and Jack said, 'It was a dark and stormy night. Three men were sitting around a campfire. One of the men said, "Tell us a story, Jack," and Jack said, "It was a dark and stormy night . . ."' On its own the joke enacts with marvelous economy the disruptive brand of repetition theorized by Derrida. Around the campfire is spun a tale of "infinite redoubling" in which no origin can be isolated. The joke exists without author and, under Nauman's unfunny direction, is even robbed of its object. The only logic to the joke is one identified by Freud in his famous study, which observes that intrinsic to the "joke-work" is the process of its being told—in other words, of its being repeated.¹⁰ Through each recital, performed now by an Emmett Kelly clown, then by a French baroque type, now by a jester, then by a clown in polka dots and big shoes, the similar incident spins into a series of what Derrida would call *differends*, terms in which "difference inscribes itself without any decidable poles, without any independent, irreversible terms."¹¹ Creating a confusion between two clowns and then four (without there ever having been *one* in the first place), Nauman's *Clown Torture* enacts this doubling, proving that even in the face of infinite regress,¹² "It's never going to be the same. . . ."¹³

Implicated in this specular mechanism is an elimination, partly of narrative and completely of eschatology. Take Nauman's video *Bouncing in the Corner* (1968). Despite dissimilarities among its beats, the stream of thumps produced as Nauman bounces his body into the corner of a studio still engages a continuity, a reassurance that the action is only minimally changing, only repeating. Nauman aptly describes the function of sound, here acting as if "to whistle down a dark space—say cellar stairs—and fill the void to make sure that nothing else is in there."¹⁴ Sound, in other words, assuring us of an absence, so that we can shut our eyes, leave the room, and because of this thud, be fairly certain that we have missed nothing. The experience, something like listening to the Weather Channel on TV while getting dressed in the morning.

... and that it continued to happen . . .

In *Clown Torture*, no punchline, no dénouement, just a shaggy-dog tale constantly rewind. As such, I could run the tape as I would run the Caucus-race,

10. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (New York: Norton, 1960), p. 143.

11. Derrida, "The Double Session," p. 210.

12. Using the example of Watt's serial manipulations, Rosalind Krauss describes this operation of "infinite regress" wherein logical analysis touches perversely on nonsense (Krauss, "The Mind/Body Problem: Robert Morris in Series," in *Robert Morris: The Mind/Body Problem* [New York: Guggenheim Museum Foundation, 1994], pp. 2–3). In the works of both Watt and Morris, an endless permutational overproduction nullifies the supposed internal coherence of language, body, and mind.

13. Nauman in Joan Simon, "Breaking the Silence: An Interview with Bruce Nauman," *Art in America* 76, no. 9 (September 1988), p. 142.

14. Nauman in Jane Livingston "Bruce Nauman," in Jane Livingston and Marcia Tucker, *Bruce Nauman: Work from 1965–1972* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1972), p. 12.

start and stop where I like. The order, while perhaps not irrelevant, is certainly changeable in the fashion of Watt's narration: "As Watt told the beginning of his story, not first, but second, so not fourth, but third, now he told its end. Two, one, four, three, that was the order in which Watt told his story" (*Watt*, p. 215). Nauman names such a format "this circular kind of story." It goes back, he says,

to Warhol films that really have no beginning or end. You could walk in at any time, leave, come back again and the figure was still asleep, or whatever. The circularity is also a lot like La Monte Young's idea about music. The music is always going on. . . . It's a way of structuring something so that you don't have to make a story.¹⁵

In order to understand what Nauman means by referring to a story that isn't a story, but more like circular music, we might first think of tempo.

In his introductory essay for Alain Robbe-Grillet's pair of novels *Jealousy* and *In the Labyrinth*, Roland Barthes makes a distinction between two concepts of time.¹⁶ The first one, classical, transforms with a reason, an ulterior motive: glory, decay, disappearance. Barthes contrasts this with Robbe-Grillet's temporality, during which "an object, described for the first time at a certain moment in the novel's progress, reappears later on, but with a barely perceptible difference. It is a difference of a situational or spatial order—what was on the right, for example, is now on the left."¹⁷ Transformation here consists of permutation without decay, disappearance, or mystery: "time is never a corruption or even a catastrophe, but merely a change of place, a hideout for data."¹⁸ Nauman often refers to his work as data: "Lack of information input (sensory deprivation). . . . Pieces of information which are in 'skew' rather than clearly contradictory, i.e., kinds of information which come from and go to unrelated response mechanism."¹⁹ Using information to take time, using time as a way of structuring information, Nauman's work lends itself to the logic of videotape and television chatter.

Mary Ann Doane describes television as "the textual technology of information theory,"²⁰ whose effect is rigorous decontextualization and the abolition of narrative. The important distinction Doane makes, however, is that television does not merely transmit this flow of information in its fragmented, multiple form, but dramatizes it through catastrophic interruptions. These discontinuities veil the

15. Nauman in "Breaking the Silence," p. 203.

16. Nauman also names Robbe-Grillet as one of his major influences. This connection, also with reference to the essay by Barthes, is mentioned in Kathy Halbreich's essay "Social Life," in *Bruce Nauman*, ed. Joan Simon, p. 102.

17. Roland Barthes, "Objective Literature: Alain Robbe-Grillet," in *Two Novels by Alain Robbe-Grillet*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p. 21.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

19. "Bruce Nauman: Notes and Projects," as printed in Marcia Tucker, "PheNAUMANology," *Artforum* 9, no. 4 (December 1970), p.44.

20. Mary Ann Doane, "Information, Crisis, Catastrophe," in *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, ed. Patricia Mellencamp (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 224–25.

fact that television is a space precisely of no event, disguising machine time in the operations of classical time. Beckett and Nauman expose these theatrics, using them to insist precisely on the uneventful. Laying bare the structure of what Stanley Cavell calls television's "undialectical" serial procedure,²¹ Beckett and Nauman harp on noncatastrophic intrusions that fail utterly to destabilize a stable condition, returning always to the show "already in progress." Understanding that TV flow is really "segmentation without closure,"²² Beckett and Nauman make us watch as events cut through the series without ever successfully leaving their mark.

In Beckett's color-television play, *Quad I*, four mimes pace around a square, "each following his particular course."²³ Accompanied by a lively percussion, they walk feverishly, dropping in and out of the race in seemingly ordered sequence. To this fifteen-minute play Beckett wrote a five-minute sequel, *Quad II*. The action is essentially the same, but now with only two mimes, shot in black-and-white, without the drums. Like tired ghosts, the mimes continue pacing around the square. "Yes," Beckett said, "marvelous, it's 100,000 years later."²⁴ Between *Quad I* and *Quad II* lies a space of one hundred thousand years, but nothing much has changed. Beckett's time remains unperturbed by incident. As Barthes describes, "it is an unwonted time, a time for nothing."²⁵

In Nauman's *Violent Incident* (1986) a drama is enacted twelve times simultaneously, in a bank of television monitors. Nauman's proposal for the work is simple: woman pulls chair out from under man, she gooses him, exchange of epithets, scuffling, she gets shot, he gets shot.²⁶ The scene is replayed in several variations: between two men, between two women, roles reversed, in slow motion, as a rehearsal, using differing color schemes, and so on. In these multiple views, the installation mobilizes Cavell's concept of television as a space of "monitoring" or "simultaneous event reception."²⁷ The bank of screens, Cavell suggests, provides the best access to television, allowing for a "switching" from one instance to the next, conveniently, in case something were to happen. Necessary to the logic of television's continuance, however, nothing ever does, and we are left in a state of perpetual suspense. The violent incident replays itself over and again, without death ever lending a point to the drama; the gunshot proves to be not at all what

21. Stanley Cavell, "The Fact of Television," in *Video Culture*, ed. John G. Hanhardt (Layton, Utah: G. M. Smith/Peregrine Smith Books, 1986), p. 210.

22. Jane Feuer, "The Concept of Live Television," in *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches—An Anthology*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (Frederick, Md.: University Publications of America/American Film Institute, 1983), p. 16.

23. Beckett, in Enoch Brater, "Beckett's *Nacht und Träume* and *Quad*," *Modern Drama* 28, no. 1 (March 1985), p. 51. Reference is to the production done in Stuttgart by Süddeutscher Rundfunk, aired on October 8, 1981, under the title *Quadrat 1 + 2*. The text for this play is reduced to a series of mathematical permutations describing the courses, accompanied by a diagram of the stage.

24. Beckett, in Brater, "Beckett's *Nacht und Träume* and *Quad*," p. 52.

25. Barthes, "Objective Literature: Alain Robbe-Grillet," p. 22.

26. For exact transcription, see Coosje van Bruggen, "The True Artist Is an Amazing Luminous Fountain," in van Bruggen, *Bruce Nauman*, pp. 119–20.

27. Cavell, "The Fact of Television," p. 205.



Nauman. Violent Incident.
1986.

we were waiting for. It was just another piece of information, like Beckett's *Quad*, marking an "unwonted time."

Or, to put it differently, in subjugating the event to a constant stream of simultaneity, Nauman has succeeded in mapping spatially what is characteristically conceived linearly, as time line. Jean-Luc Nancy describes the appropriateness of line for graphing "pure time": "And so it is with good reason that the line representing it represents the static, unidimensional, nonspatial copresence of its points (a limit of space, not a space: the limit where space becomes pure time, but where pure time annuls the event)."²⁸ Pure time annuls the event, in being marked not as a thing which itself takes place, which creates and destroys. Rather, pure time exists as a series of "at onces": "It is the *altered sameness* of time—the

28. Jean-Luc Nancy, "Spanne," in *The Sense of the World*, trans. Jeffrey S. Librett (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 65.

untimeliness of time—and it is thus that it is spacing, or that it is *insofar as* it spaces itself out.”²⁹ *Violent Incident* produces this “altered sameness”: in one take the man shoots last, in another, the woman (what was once on the right is now on the left). And, as Nancy argues, this undialectical procedure requires a separation, a displacement; but now, instead of dashes on a line, Nauman (and Beckett too) will tick, like a clock.

As with *Wall-Floor Positions*, even when the viewer leaves the bank of screens, he/she may continue to monitor *Violent Incident* through sound. Nauman describes the audio effect of a particular installation at Whitechapel: “Because it was in a separate room, the sound was baffled; you only got the higher tones. So the main thing you heard throughout the museum was ‘Asshole!’”³⁰ Imagine it, wandering through the exhibition, surrounded by normal, ambient noise, and then, every few minutes or so, a scream—“Asshole!”—reminding you of the fact that in spite of your absence, the incident continues to take place. Significantly, the scream recurs within spaces, between pockets of rest filled with every other sound, giving the false impression of somehow being over. A kind of rhythm is produced then, an oscillation that marks the persistence of goings-on intermittently, within blankets of white noise, punctuated by a high-pitched yell.

... (*the door closing that was not a door closing*) ...

Consider this rhythm during which, amplified along with the word “Asshole!,” is all that comes in between. The white noise, the nonsignifying ground moves forward. It seems in cases to promise a kind of closure, and instead delivers a prolongation of suspense, “. . . *the perpetual suspense of a tear that can never be entirely formed nor fall.* . . .”³¹ Nauman and Beckett do nothing but point to this almost-shutting that is the sound of *Wall-Floor Positions*, where a slam is always re-marked by a reopening, a silence. The pause is empty, and noticeably so, in order to distinguish itself as trap, as that space wherein information, data, stuff, accumulates and reformulates irrepressibly. Through Mallarmé, Derrida has theorized this blank:

A folding back, once more: the hymen, “*a medium, a pure medium of fiction,*” is located between the present acts that don’t take place. What takes place is only the *entre*, the place, the spacing, which is nothing, the ideality (as nothingness) of the idea. No act, then, is *perpetrated* (“*Hymen . . . between perpetration and remembrance*”); no act is committed as a crime.³²

A hymen, figured by the white crease between two pages of a book (or fifteen minutes between two acts of a play).

29. Ibid., p. 66.

30. Nauman, in “Breaking the Silence,” p. 148.

31. Mallarmé, as quoted by Derrida in “The Double Session,” p. 180.

32. Derrida, “The Double Session,” p. 214.

Waiting for Godot contains an intermission. The curtained stage marks the space of possibility and anticipation, which make all the more resonant the maddening recurrences on the stage of Act 2: "Next day. Same time. Same place," and Vladimir's first words to Estragon, "You again!" (*Waiting for Godot*, p. 430).³³ What becomes painfully apparent then is that the play is precisely this curtained stage, this space of no-event and perpetual waiting. Boasting of their endurance in this place, Vladimir will remark to Estragon, "We are not saints, but we have kept our appointment" (*Waiting for Godot*, p. 458). Godot, however, will never keep his appointment, and the play brackets nothing but this missed encounter: a meeting that was presumed to occur never does. Thus, the curtain falling at the end of Act 2 signals no end, but a lingering nonfinality, the suspense of a pause (*a tear*) hovering between. Not too much unlike the brief switch between monitors, or as a video loops back around to the beginning. *Violent Incident* is marked by such hiccups, disturbances that call attention to what seems like the substance, the point of the work. Again, what one finds is that switch and flicker are all of *Violent Incident*. No crime is committed, nothing is perpetrated. "Asshole!" is only part of the ambient noise after all, signaling nothing, except perhaps an appointment. The incident, it turns out, is about monitoring, waiting in between acts.

At the 1997 Whitney Biennial, Nauman's video installation was called *End of the World*, leading one to expect an apocalypse, only to be met with some sad song perpetually dying. A series of three projected videos replayed differing takes of the same man (whose body is always cropped so you couldn't precisely tell), playing the same song (too many layers to know for sure), on a pedal steel guitar (every one slightly altered from the last). The videos of each projection were segmented, stopping and starting in a kind of nonthematic orchestration, like entr'acte organ music. Certainly in this constant making and unmaking, there was no cataclysmic explosion then, only a lingering trace, a vestige, characterized by Nancy through "its *infinite finishing* (or *infinishing*) and not its *finite perfection*."³⁴ According to Nancy, art defines itself precisely through the vestigial, "infinishing," nonessential:

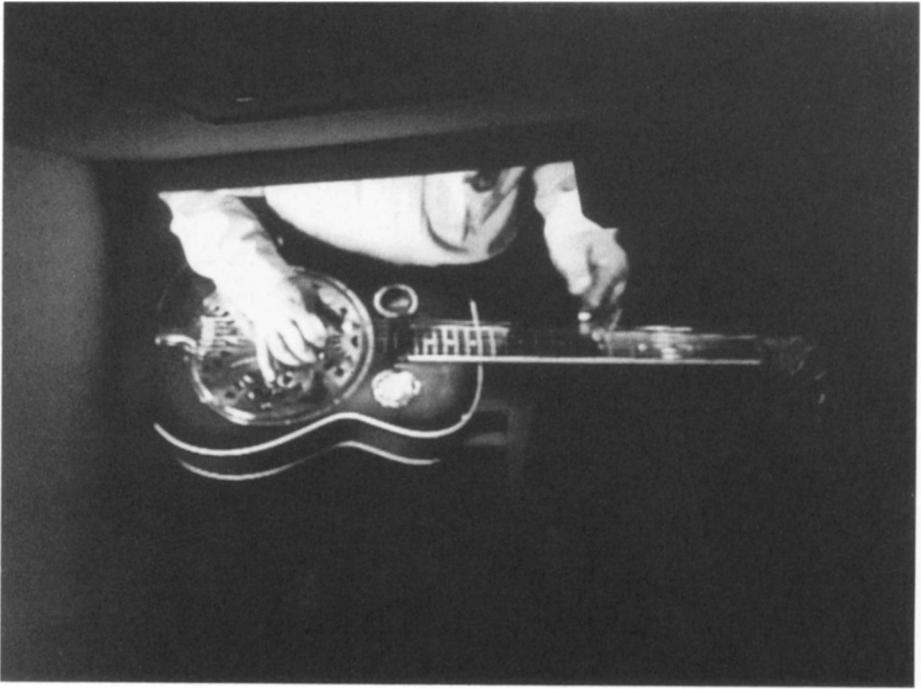
The vestigial is not an essence—and no doubt this is what puts us on the track of "the essence of art." That art is today its own vestige, this is what opens us to it. It is not a degraded presentation of the Idea, nor the presentation of a degraded Idea; it presents what is not "Idea": motion, coming, passage, the going-on of coming-to-presence.³⁵

And *waiting* too, which Nancy could have mentioned, which Nauman and Beckett both insist on, pointing always to the end, traversing it but never arriving there, a

33. As discussed by Steven Connor in *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text*.

34. Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Vestige of Art," in *The Muses*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 98. This discussion relies on Raichel Haidu's work on Nancy's theory of the vestige.

35. Nancy, "The Vestige of Art," p. 98.



Nauman. *End of the World*. 1996.

perpetual nonpenetration “without breaking the ice or the mirror.”³⁶ Steven Connor discusses this compulsive relishing of the ending’s immanence in Beckett, citing the last passage from *Ill Seen, Ill Said*:

Farewell to farewell. Then in that perfect dark foreknell darling sound pip for end begun. First last moment. Grant only enough remain to devour all. Moment by glutton moment. Sky earth the whole kit and boodle. Not another crumb of carrion left. Lick chops and basta. No. One moment more. One last. Grace to breathe that void. Know happiness.³⁷

During *End of the World*, this is the promise of every silence that breaks the stream of steel-pedal guitar, the anticipation of “One moment more,” of the relishing of space within an “end begun,” so that end therefore resides at the unraveled origin.³⁸

In his own version of “The End of the World,”³⁹ Nancy, like Nauman, invokes not a dark apocalypse but a clarity of realization: that there is no “end” in the sense of determinable liquidation with its antipode of birth. In other words, no “‘once and for all,’ . . . but the spacing of all ‘onces.’”⁴⁰ Brilliantly, Nauman and

36. Mallarmé, in Derrida, “The Double Session,” p. 215.

37. Beckett, in Steven Connor, *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text*, pp. 10–11.

38. See Nancy’s discussion of finitude in “Infinite Finitude,” in *The Sense of the World*, pp. 29–33.

39. Nancy, “The End of the World,” in *The Sense of the World*, pp. 4–9.

40. Nancy, “Spanne,” p. 65.

Beckett engender this finitude, folded within the structure of infinity, the uneventful displacements of “pure time.” And through this spacing, which enables a continual surging forth and retreat, enter *End of the World*, like *Violent Incident*, *Quad*, *Footfalls*, *Wall-Floor Positions* . . . engaged in a rhythm. Nancy characterizes the perpetual progress (not passage) of the vestige’s *infinite finishing* in just such terms:

This rhythm comprises sequence and syncopation, trajectory and interruption, gait and gap, phase and spasm. It thereby cuts a *figure*, but this figure is not an image in the sense I have spoken of here. The step of the figure, or the vestige, is its tracing, its spacing.⁴¹

... and though it seemed to be outside him, before him, about him . . .

And what if this spacing were to consist in beating one’s entire body against the corner of a wall, as Nauman did in his video *Bouncing in the Corner* (1968)? The knock would signify, once again not someone at the door, but a collision of body and matter. This impact resonates in Nauman and Beckett. Sound produces the difficulty of existing among things, of having sense. In Beckett’s 1957 radio play *All That Fall*, considerable airtime is given to grunting and groaning, as the heavy-set and rickety couple Maddy and Dan Rooney maneuver into cars, up stairs, down roads.⁴² Again, what makes the performance exhausting to hear is this strained effort, figured in a rhythm painfully maintained, as the Rooneys inch their way back from the train station toward their home. And prototypically for Beckett, it is precisely this arduous re-percussion that proves existence.

In Beckett’s 1976 stage play *Footfalls*, the disheveled, aged May speaks with or to an offstage voice accompanied by the sound of her own pacing, to and fro in the dark. While May paces, the single voice recites this schizophrenic narration:

The mother: What do you mean, May, not enough, what can you possibly mean, May, not enough? *May*: I mean, Mother, that I must hear the feet, however faint they fall. *The mother*: The motion alone is not enough? *May*: No, Mother, the motion alone is not enough, I must hear the feet, however faint they fall.⁴³

Striking the ground, touching it is not enough. There must be an excess of sense, a vestige of movement which consists in this pulse, however faint, of pacing. Slightly different in dynamic, perhaps, from the slam of *Wall-Floor Positions*, the beat in both is never metronomic, but the irregular pulse of a body that falters, accelerates, decelerates. In describing the music of Schumann, Barthes describes such a rhythm, of pure violence, invested in the body that “speaks but says

41. Nancy, “The Vestige of Art,” p. 98.

42. *All That Fall* was first aired by the BBC on January 13, 1957.

43. Samuel Beckett, *Footfalls* (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), p. 11.

nothing.”⁴⁴ Of Schumann's *Kreisleriana*, Barthes writes, “No, what I hear are blows: I hear what beats in the body, what beats the body, or better: I hear this body that beats.”⁴⁵ Beating the body into music without the relay of a signifier, this is the power of Schumann's rhythm, which explodes and rages, but never expresses. Similarly, if in Nauman's tightly cropped loops of tape, a torso is extracted, a head lopped off, if on Beckett's darkened stage only a mouth emerges, a cowed figure scurrying, a hooded lump, what bears the body into presence is this beating (shuffling, slamming, bouncing) that is at once the sense of touching or hearing something outside the body, and the vestige that points to the sense of having touched, stepped, moved.

Barthes describes the effect of Schumann's violent rhythm as madness. Incorporating this pulse, Nauman's installation *Learned Helplessness in Rats, Rock and Roll Drummer* (1988) is a laboratory for just such destabilization, engaged here by the double accompaniment of a different sort of beat. On one wall, a video projection alternates, clicking regularly from shots of a rat in a Plexiglas maze, to live footage from a surveillance camera hovering in the room, to a recording of the drum session that produced the installation's obnoxious sound track. Madness here, however, is not so much caused by the loudly pounding drum riffs, but by the fact that this noise, made somewhere and sometime else by the boy in the video, strikes the body immediately in this small room. What actually sets the viewer reeling is this constant shift, amplified by each mechanical click of the sequencer, switching the projection from prerecorded drummer/rat (*then*) to live surveillance footage (*now*). With every shift Nauman strips away the moorings of past-present, leaving a series of spaced “at onces” that tremble in between.⁴⁶

Engaging this perpetual temporal implosion, Nauman pries apart the seam between now and then, the distance typically screened by the television set. Imposing a remote, other vision on a situated viewer, television creates what Samuel Weber refers to as “undecidability,” a condition that the screen itself simultaneously masks and marks.⁴⁷ Nauman wants to expose this “undecidability,” showing how television's confusion of time also produces a confusion of substance, a sense of being—as Weber notes—“neither fully there, nor entirely here.”

44. Roland Barthes, “Rasch” (1975), in *The Responsibility of Forms*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1991), p. 306.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 299.

46. Derrida writes:

The present is no longer a mother-form around which are gathered and differentiated the future (present) and the past (present). What is marked in this hymen between the future (desire) and the present (fulfillment), between past (remembrance) and the present (perpetration), between the capacity and the act, etc., is only a series of temporal differences without any central present, without a present of which the past and future would be but modifications.” (“The Double Session,” p. 210)

47. Samuel Weber, “Television: Set and Screen,” in *Mass Mediauras Form, Technics, Media* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 108–28.

Appropriately then, while Nauman's beat attacks before/after, it collapses *inside/outside* on the way.

... in his mind, he supposed, though he did not know exactly what that meant ...

In Beckett's stage play *Not I* (1972), a disembodied mouth, surrounded by black curtain, is slowly born into light, chattering faster and faster without skipping a beat, slowing only at the intermittent refrain of "... what? ... who? ... no! ... she!"⁴⁸ In *Not I*, constant bafflement, about what comes from within the mouth (mind) and what bombards from without. The mouth struggles to keep pace with its own thoughts (which it cannot be sure are its own).⁴⁹ Nauman's sixty-minute black-and-white video *Lip Synch* (1968) uses the same bodiless orifice, this time suspended upside down by the camera. What is most disturbing about Nauman's mouth is the tempo of repronounced words, "Liiiiip ... Sin ... k," which *almost* seem to come from it, pronounced according to Barthes's definition, wherein pronunciation emerges "from the depths of the body's cavities," manifesting the materiality of signifier-sounds, rubbing against the message in a kind of perverted friction.⁵⁰ We hear and see this grating in *Lip Synch* when the mouth closes and swallows after a tiring string of speech, when the throat clears itself of accumulated saliva, when the microphone pops with every force of air from the plosive consonants *p!* and *k!* Most alarming about these sounds, however, is the fact that their synchronization with the mouth on-screen wavers, engendering a perpetual undecidability, as the embodied materiality of voice collides with the absence of a coherent body.

In *Think* (1993), Nauman's head bounces up and down on two television screens, one above the other, the camera tightly focused so that only the top of Nauman's head comes into full view, with the occasional peep of mouth ostensibly chanting as he bounces, "Think! Think! Think!" The laser-disc recordings are twinned, but once again not synchronized. The looped segments vary: a snowy image with sound distortion, "Think!" punctuated by clashing cymbals, top screen upside down, bottom screen right side up, vice versa, and so on. What remains constantly clear is the initial impression: that it is difficult to match which voice to which bobbing head, that it is preposterous to follow the imperative "Think! Think! Think!" with so much annoying distraction. The multiple voice, the echo that must, yet does not, seem to come from the on-screen/onstage fragment is a familiar discombobulating technique, one used in the romantic song:

... what is suggested, what is here vocally put before us, is the anguish of something that threatens to divide, to separate, to dissociate, to

48. Samuel Beckett, *Not I*, reprinted in *I Can't Go On, I'll Go On*, pp. 592–604. Later adapted for television and broadcast by the BBC, c. 1977.

49. See Connor, "What? Where? Space and the Body," in *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text*, pp. 140–69.

50. Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice" (1972), in *The Responsibility of Forms*, pp. 270–72.

dismember the body. The dark voice, voice of Evil or of Death, is a voice without site, a voice without origin: it resonates everywhere . . . in every case, it no longer refers to the body, which is distanced in a kind of non-site.⁵¹

Nauman and Beckett are both expert in producing this voice without a site, afflicting a kind of *sitelessness*, described by Nauman in terms of an early corridor piece:

It had to do with going up the stairs in the dark, when you think there is one more step and you take the step, but you are already at the top . . . or going down the stairs and expecting there to be another step, but you are already at the bottom. It seems that you always have that jolt and it really throws you off. I think that when these pieces work they do that too.⁵²

Playing on an expectation, that the sound will be sutured to the on-screen image, that it will come from a body, Nauman produces a jolt. In *Think*, shock and frustration are doubly pronounced as Nauman confounds this aural dislocation with an explicit mental sitelessness, making ridiculous the Hegelian notion of thought as a realm of pure interiority:

Thinking, however, results in thought alone; it evaporates the form of reality into the form of the pure Concept, and even if it grasps and apprehends real things in their particular character and real existence, it nevertheless lifts even this particular sphere into the element of the universal and ideal wherein alone thinking is at home with itself. . . . Thinking is only a reconciliation between reality and truth within thinking itself. But poetic creation and formation is a reconciliation in the form of a *real* phenomenon itself, even if this form be presented only spiritually.⁵³

Nancy articulates an interruption in Hegel's model, of *art* "conceived as the derived, external, and unseeing expression of the internal gaze of pure presence,"⁵⁴ and consequently of *thinking*, which could ever be alone "at home with itself." Positing sense before signification, Nancy reverses the dialectic: "thought uses itself to touch (to be touched by) that which is not for it a "content" but its *body*: the space of this extension and opening in which and as which it exscribes itself, that is, lets itself be transformed into the concreteness or *praxis* of sense."⁵⁵ For Nauman, like Nancy, to think touches on to jump, to crash cymbals,

51. Barthes, "The Romantic Song" (1976), in *ibid.*, p. 288.

52. Nauman, in Wiloughby Sharp, "Bruce Nauman," *Avalanche* 2 (winter 1971), p. 30.

53. G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Arts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), vol. 2, p. 976; quoted by Nancy in "The Girl Who Succeeds the Muses," in *The Muses*, p. 43.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

55. Nancy, "Suspended Step," in *The Sense of the World*, p. 10.

to scream, to hear. For Nancy, like Beckett, this process (of thought touching its body) is conceived as a step (*Footfalls*, "Suspended Step").

Trekking back to the mind/body problem, which Rosalind Krauss identifies as the snare of Robert Morris's *Box With the Sound of Its Own Making* (1961), we recognize this same fracturing, whereby no substance is integral, whole. Morris's Beckettian construction no doubt opens onto Nauman's, also baffling the notion of founding origin, also tracing the closed circuit of consciousness everywhere to an outside line. The fiction of "internal discourse," as attacked too by Derrida in 1969 ("The Double Session"), is left perpetually under siege. Nonetheless, while mobilizing this estrangement, "exscription," sitelessness, Beckett and Nauman still preserve the "concreteness" of sense, the specificities of situation. Their acoustic experiments have little to do with Artaud's, as described by Denis Hollier. If Artaud would open theater to the noises of the street, "to leave the space of representation for that, precisely of the event,"⁵⁶ by contrast Nauman and Beckett insist on the theatricality of their works, which only mimic events. For them, sound never breaks into an exterior world of lived experience, but bounces incessantly against the framing edges of stage, screen, installation. Their works depend on a relentless specificity⁵⁷ in line with Nancy's, in which sense is not indiscriminately dispersed, but zoned, discrete.

... *with the utmost formal distinctness* ...

If film has been theorized as a visual art, menaced by what Hollis Frampton, for instance, would deem the synesthetic "monster" of sound,⁵⁸ Beckett's directions for *Film* (1964), consisting mostly of outlines and diagrams, are appropriately headed by the motto "*Esse est percipi*."⁵⁹ Originally titled *The Eye*, *Film* inflicts on Buster Keaton an "anguish of perceivedness" through successive camera angles from which Keaton, designated O (the object), cannot escape: "We're trying to find a . . . cinematic equivalent for visual appetite and visual distaste . . . a reluctant . . . a disgusted vision [O's] and a ferociously voracious one [E's]."⁶⁰ As such, the film is silent, but not completely. There is a moment, the slightest threat to visual hegemony, when a woman turns to her companion, and "checks him with a gesture and

56. Denis Hollier, "The Death of Paper, Part Two: Artaud's Sound System," *October* 80 (Spring 1997), p. 36.

57. This discussion follows Krauss's work, rethinking the concepts of "medium" and "medium specificity" (see "' . . . And Then Turn Away?' An Essay on James Coleman," *October* 81 [Summer 1997], pp. 5–33).

58. See Hollis Frampton, "The Withering Away of the State of Art," delivered at a conference "Open Circuits: The Future of Television," held January 23–25, 1974, at MOMA; reprinted in *Circles of Confusion: Film, Photography, Video; Texts, 1968–1980* (Rochester, N.Y.: Visual Studios Workshop Press, 1983).

59. Samuel Beckett, "Film," in *Eh Joe and Other Writings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), pp. 29–44.

60. Beckett, in S. E. Gontarski, *Film and Formal Integrity in Samuel Beckett: Humanistic Perspectives*, ed. Morris Beja, S. E. Gontarski, and Pierre Astier (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1983), p. 135; as quoted in Linda Ben-Zvi, "Samuel Beckett's Media Plays," *Modern Drama* 28, no. 1 (March 1985), p. 30.

soft 'ssh!'” *Film* reverberates with this quiet exclamation echoing in silence, puncturing the circumference of film’s voracious eye with a gaping hole.

Addressing the attempt to stage a theater production of *All That Fall*, Beckett reacted harshly:

All That Fall is a specifically radio play, or rather radio text, for voices, not bodies. I have already refused to have it “staged” and I cannot think of it in such terms. . . . It is no more theatre than *End-Game* is radio and to “act” it is to kill it. Even the reduced visual dimension it will receive from the simplest and most static of readings . . . will be destructive of whatever quality it may have and which depends on the whole thing’s *coming out of the dark*.⁶¹

When Beckett was proposed the transference of the stage play *Act Without Words* to film, he similarly replied, “If we can’t keep our genres more or less distinct, or extricate them from the confusion that has them where they are, we might as well go home and lie down.”⁶² Ironically, however, the very means that Beckett uses in order to keep his genres “more or less distinct” rely on a technique of studied confrontation, if not confusion. Writing about *All That Fall*, Linda Ben-Zvi describes Beckett’s method, which constantly thwarts the medium of radio, giving anything but the impression of another world constituted by sound in its entirety. Instead, the listener remains in wondering frustration, as Beckett issues cryptic clues, pointing mercilessly to the fact that one is sitting in the dark and wants to see what’s going on. Beckett’s medium consciousness resides, then, not in forming clear lines of demarcation but in creating constant friction, always implicating “other zones of sensing” in the manner of Nancy’s *toucher*:

Sensing and the sensing-oneself-sense that *makes* for sensing itself consists always in sensing at the same time that there is some other (which one senses) and that there are other zones of sensing, overlooked by the zone that is sensing at this moment, or else on which this zone touches on all sides but only at the limit where it ceases being the zone that it is.⁶³

Beckett’s work relentlessly pursues these limits, moving increasingly toward a degree of dissolution. His formalism, therefore, could never be characterized as reductive, but more properly as explosive. As such, *Quad I and II* do not produce a distillation, an essence of what it is to be a television play. Indeed, they border so

61. Beckett, in Thomas F. Van Laan, “*All That Fall* as a ‘Play for Radio,’” *Modern Drama* 28, no. 1 (March 1985), p. 38.

62. Letter from Beckett to his American publisher, August 27, 1957, as quoted in Linda Ben-Zvi, “Samuel Beckett’s Media Plays,” p. 24. See also Connor, “What? Where? Space and the Body,” pp. 150–51.

63. Nancy, “Why Are There Several Arts and Not Just One?,” in *The Muses*, p. 17.

closely on dance that Beckett must plug the spill with a proclamation: the cowed figures are “mimes,” he says, “not dancers.”⁶⁴ In creating this tenuous structure, however, Beckett does not deny the medium’s essence. Rather, to use Nancy’s terms again, he “entrances” it, seduces it, transverses it.⁶⁵

Like Beckett’s *Film*, Nauman’s film reels *Art Make-Up Nos. 1,2,3,4* (1967-68), the black-and-whites from 1969, *Black Balls*, *Bouncing Balls*, *Gauze*, and *Pulling Mouth*, are silent. Nauman will also agree that “films are about seeing,” and as such he too will produce an anguish, this time of perceiving, straining vision in his painfully decelerated slow-mos, shot at one thousand to four thousand frames per second. His videotapes, on the other hand, will not utilize this form of distortion, profiting instead from the initially accidental effects of a wild track that stretches and tightens, causing sound to go in and out of synch. Nauman himself, of course, will sound far more cavalier about his use of materials:

But it was simple in that in the '60s you didn't have to pick just one medium. There didn't seem to be any problem with using different kinds of materials, shifting from photographs to dance to performance to videotapes. It seemed very straightforward to use all those different ways of expressing ideas or presenting material. You could make neon signs, you could make written pieces, you could make jokes about parts of the body or casting things, or whatever.⁶⁶

Nauman thus refers to working in video, film, speaking as if it were a matter of convenience, not conviction. And his projects are undeniably invested in a kind of plurality without hierarchy: video, photograph, casting, neon sign, whatever. There is, nevertheless, in this seeming “anything goes” approach, an obsessively disciplined method, which recognizes as discrete “all those *different* ways of expressing.” As acutely as anyone, Nauman knows what it is to watch a screen, knows the expectations (embodied voices, sutured sound-image), the rhythm (repeated illusion of narrative), the circumstances (somewhat private, somewhat not), the frustrations (endless) that attend a TV viewing. And Nauman, as madly as Beckett, will not desist in unraveling, in making and remaking, until the work resembles a *Violent Incident*: “I liked all this, keep taking it apart, taking it apart.”⁶⁷

64. Beckett, in Brater, “Beckett’s *Nacht und Träume* and *Quad*,” p. 51.

65. In “Infinite Finitude,” in *The Sense of the World*, Nancy locates being as anterior to essence. Being neither allows essence to take place, nor denies it, but instead “entrances” (in the sense both of seduction and of entry) the essence and transverses it. The relationship mirrors the distinction that Nancy wants to make between the sense and signification: “sense comes before all significations, prevents and over-takes them, even as it makes them possible, forming the opening of the general signifyingness [or significance: *significance*] (or the opening of the world) in which and according to which it is first of all possible for significations to come to produce themselves” (“Suspended Step,” p. 10).

66. Bruce Nauman, in “Breaking the Silence,” p. 143.

67. Bruce Nauman, in Chris Dercon, “Keep Taking It Apart: A Conversation with Bruce Nauman,” *Parkett* 10 (1986), p. 61.

Obviously, this method of dissection can never produce an autonomous body that one could frame and hang on the wall to look at, because it would be dripping, leaking. Neither, on the other hand, does it produce a space of nondifferentiation, of art in general. On this, Nancy writes, "However, there is no 'art' in general: each one indicates the threshold by being itself also the threshold of another art. Each one touches the other without passing into it. . . ."68 Art and sense still intact, defined by thresholds, by spacing. Art that knows itself by rubbing constantly, grating its surface against another "with the utmost formal distinctness."

68. Nancy, "Painting," in *The Sense of the World*, p. 83.