

MA Computer Arts

Module 2: Computer Principles for Artists

Essay by Paul Glennon – November 2005

Bruce Nauman's 'Raw Materials' in the Digital Arena

technological advances. For example, photography has been said to have 'ended the authority of painting to reproduce reality'. (Appignanesi and Garratt, 2003, p. 13).

The last thirty years have witnessed great advances in electronic and digital equipment. Such devices have been used by many artists as vehicles for physical pieces of work and therefore have become yet another tool in the artist's palette. It is the intention of this essay to examine the role that technology plays in the development of contemporary arts by an examination of the works of Bruce Nauman, in particular recent works in the Tate Modern.

Recently, Bruce Nauman exhibited, as part of the Unilever Series, in the Turbine Hall at the Tate Modern. This work, entitled 'Raw Materials', was a sound installation that brought together over 20 recordings of text taken from various works, like 'Double No' (right).



Double No, 1998

Previous artists, like Anish Kapoor (Marsyas) and Olafur Eliasson (The Weather Project) have filled the Turbine Hall with visual spectacles. Bruce Nauman uses sound only. What was interesting about this installation was its existence on the Internet after the exhibition had finished. The extension of an exhibition onto the Internet would have been impossible 10 years ago. This study will look at the implications that such developments have for computer arts and artists.



Turbine Hall, Tate modern, 2004

Essay

Bruce Nauman (born 1941, Fort Wayne, Indiana) studied a range of subjects at university such as mathematics, physics, art, music and philosophy, then gained an MA in Art at the University of California. Like many artists at that time, Nauman gave up painting early in his career for 'sculpture, performance, filmed performance, cinema and even holograms'. (Van Asche, 1998, p. 13). With the arrival of video equipment on the consumer market in the 70s Nauman's interest in film grew. 8-millimetre film had always been very popular prior to video and indeed proved a cheap alternative for budding film amateurs with a desire to recreate Hollywood, but with video came the added bonus of synchronous sound. These technological advances helped shape Nauman's work as it did that of other prominent artists:

Initiated by inventors outside the world of art, technology-based art (encompassing a range of practices from photography to film to video art to video to virtual reality, and much else in between) has directed art into areas once dominated by engineers and technicians.
(Rush, 1999, p. 8)

Nauman has been linked to Minimal Art through his exploration of words using neon (a theme still common in contemporary artists' work such as Tracy Emin), but it is difficult to pin him to a given movement as he has 'traversed the entire history of contemporary art without stopping...' (Van Asche, 1998, p. 14). Nauman's traversing from Conceptual Art to Body Art earned him his own personal art title:

'PheNAUMANology'

The structure of sound and movement as a basic function of human behaviour and communication are phenomena which provide not only the artist, but the linguist, the philosopher and the social scientist with sources of our knowledge and mind.
(Tucker, 1970, p. 38)

The roots of this 'PheNAUMANology' can be found in the written works of Samuel Beckett (1906-1989). Nauman's interest in Beckett is made explicit by the very use of Beckett's name in the titles of his work 'Slow Walk (Beckett Walk)' 1968. In this piece of work Nauman himself is filmed walking in an erratic fashion across his studio. Van Tuyl (1998) links this work to one of

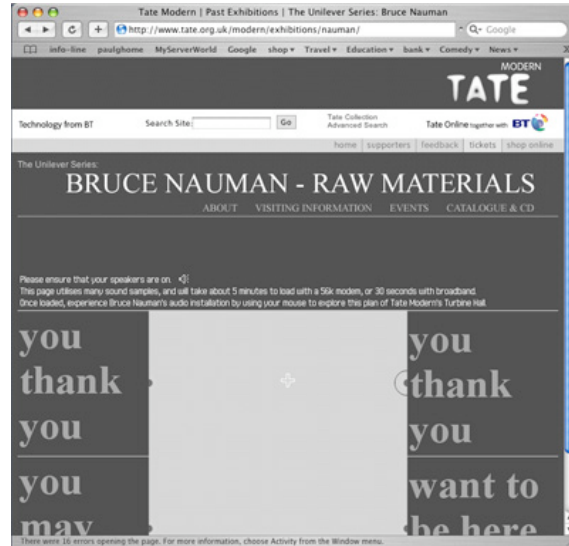
Beckett's novels, 'Molloy': 'Nauman himself moves criss-cross through the studio, ignoring the logic of straight line, echoing the three page description of how Molloy hobbles on his crutch, his leg stiff, his knee straight, taking frequent rests.' (p. 68). Beckett was interested in the human condition and in his works he attempted to 'protest against the prescriptive and limited nature of "realist" conventions...' (Davies, 2005). Beckett's innovative approach to dealing with the human condition had a pivotal affect on Nauman.

Nauman was also inspired by the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951). Wittgenstein's philosophy centred around 'the nature of language and its relation to the world', and he has been described as a 'lexical minimalist, characterised by rigorous brevity' (Auping, 2004, p. 9). This would explain Nauman's interest with words and the power of their meanings in different scenarios. It would also explain why his latest work in the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall is a sound installation only. In the Guardian Adrian Searle (2004) described how the exhibition ignores the 'original meanings and contexts of individual works in order to reinforce their musicality and emotional content.'

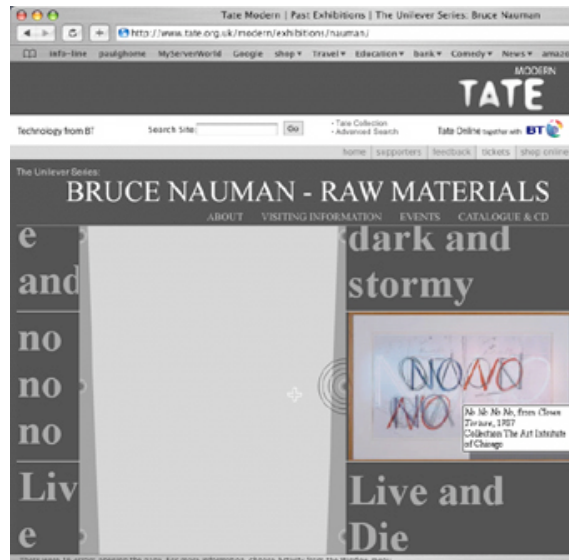
The reviews for this exhibition were very good. Mark Lawson from BBC Radio 4's 'Front Row', said 'it feels like being inside a radio – it could feel like being inside someone's memory' (Heard, 2004). Interestingly the reviews did not seem to mention the web space that accompanied the exhibition and is still working now the event is over.

Most exhibitions have a web space that accompanies the event, but they are usually produced for promotional reasons and are designed as a means of publicising the gallery exhibiting the work (White Cube in London is a good example – www.whitecube.com). These sites are good for information, but rarely capture the spirit of the artist's work. Nauman's space, which appears as part of the Tate Modern's web space, communicates the spirit of his work exceptionally well. It is basically a graphic arial view of the Turbine Hall that allows you to scroll up and down using the mouse. As you move either left or right you will hear the sound installation and the volume increases or decreases the closer you get to the words. This process

replicates the sound as if you were strolling up and down the exhibition yourself. Although you do not get to view the awesome sight of the Turbine Hall, you do get a real feel of the essence of the work as a whole. In some cases it is better than the real thing as you can click on the words and see which art work the sounds originally came from (see below).



The opportunities for this type of web space are excellent. For example, some people may not have been able to get to London to see the exhibition for financial reasons. They can experience the ethos of the exhibition online. The same is possible for educators in other countries who cannot realistically take a class of children to the Tate Modern – this site now exists as an experience for others to use and enjoy.



Nauman's online exhibition sets a precedent for other artists to try and embrace the Internet as an extension of their work and think of innovative ways to exhibit as they would in an open space. Perhaps in doing so it might shape the work itself or help us to understand how to use the Internet in different ways. <http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/nauman/>

Conclusion

In an article in 1995 in 'Paper Magazine', New York, by Tony Oursler, Bruce Nauman said this about new technology:

'In general, I think I just use stuff that's there. Sometimes you push a little bit, but not too much. It gets too expensive or too hard to find, then it's just not interesting'.

(Nauman, 1995, p. 104)

Bruce Nauman is an artist who uses the material that is around him to communicate his art. When Nauman rented a vacant grocery store as an Art Studio in San Francisco in 1967, left behind there was a neon light advertising beer that still worked. He found that the 'buzz and its radiant words' (Auping, 2004, p.10) inspired him to experiment with new ways of using language. Hence the birth of the work: 'The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths (Window or Wall Sign) 1967'. (right).

In the 1960s the term 'Conceptual Art' emerged. The focus for Conceptual Art was centred on the *idea* and not the actual execution of the work. This concept is evident in Nauman's work and he uses raw materials that surround him to communicate his art. Artists today cannot ignore the power of a communication tool such as the Internet. Nauman's 'Raw Material' space on the Tate Modern Web site is an excellent example of innovative exploration of an artist's work. Contemporary artists should consider different ways of exhibiting their work in order to exploit a bigger market and help increase the debate about art and how it works in today's society.

As mentioned earlier – artists need to consider the relationship between exhibiting in a physical open space to the virtual reality of an online environment. Such explorations might bring more enlightenment for the artist and the viewer.



'The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths (Window or Wall Sign) 1967'

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