

Now Man's *Bound to Fail*, More

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THE TRUE ARTIST HELPS THE WORLD BY REVEALING MYSTIC TRUTHS. Produced at a moment when the “put-on” (occupying “a fuzzy territory between simple leg pulling and elaborate practical joke”) was a fashionable mode of expression, it isn’t hard to imagine why Bruce Nauman’s neon sign, combining beer-light connotations of commercialism with earnest sentiment, might have engendered a skeptical—if not outright cynical—response.¹ As with many of Nauman’s works from the 1960s, *The True Artist* relies on a semantic confusion produced by the artist’s apparently ironical intent, with the statement being both “true and not true at the same time.”² (This can be seen even more clearly in a related work that states that “the true artist is an amazing luminous fountain.”) Just as the textual message invites both an embarrassingly romantic and a coolly ironic reading, the sign’s potential mounting on a window offers two modes of viewing the work: one in which the spiraling script is seen frontally, and thus legibly, and one in which the text is viewed from behind, reversed and illegible, thereby suggesting a corresponding visual tension between figuration and abstraction in the work. Nauman’s extensive engagement with the issue of figuration—both in its rhetorical and its morphological manifestations—was not simply an exercise in semiotic analysis or postmodern indeterminacy. Acknowledging that the statement conveyed in *The True Artist* is “a totally silly idea,” Nauman evidently found it not completely lacking in plausibility, explaining that his intention in making the work was to “find out if [he] believe[d] in it . . . which doesn’t make a fake or anything.”³ In such pieces Nauman tested the possible valence of an imaginary proposition by bringing it into contact with the real world via a public utterance. Rather than an ironic deconstruction of the romantic conception of the artist, *The True Artist* can be seen as an assessment of the survival of romanticism and the Western humanist tradition responsible for engendering such sentiments in postmodernists in the first place. In his work from the 1960s Nauman repeatedly employed figuration as a way to test the waters, to see if such apparently outdated and problematically humanist concepts as “commitment,” “expression,” and “metaphor” still had a place in a world where referential certitude, subjective sentiment, and immediate and universal communication were deemed increasingly problematic if not impossible.

The World Figured

Figuration is fundamental to the modern conception of the work of art. To recognize something as art, as something that is understood outside the boundaries of everyday experience—as a “thing” that is also “something else”—is to engage in a figurative act. In fact, within the realm of the visual arts, this transformative power of figuration (which is repeatedly actualized each time a viewer encounters an art object) provides a possible means for uniting modern notions of the autonomous and “open” work with “the image before the era of art.”⁴ In both cases—whether it be a Vera icon whose mimetic power imbues the image with an almost corporeal presence or a nineteenth-century portrait that wears its representational function on its sleeve—the object in question provides access to something beyond itself (a Christian eschatology, for example, or an absent individual).⁵ As even this most condensed historical trajectory demonstrates, the figurative potential of any object is to a certain degree determined by the historical and social conditions in which a “symbolic exchange” between viewer and work takes place.⁶ How the viewer chooses to actualize this connection is to a large extent determined by the institutional criteria and conceptual horizons delimiting this exchange, as was famously demonstrated by Marcel Duchamp’s figurative proposition that a urinal is a fountain, or more generally, that a urinal is a work of art. All of this is to say that different historical and social conditions have generated different figurative operations, some emphasizing morphological resemblance and others finding their most potent expression in temporal, institutional, or conceptual relationships.

The discourse encompassing the history of art has suppressed the temporal axis of the figurative act from its very inception, focusing instead on the morphological axis of figuration and the related immediacy of the visual image. This paradigm, in which the single static image is analyzed as a unique and autonomous utterance, utilizes what Paul de Man would call a “pseudosynchronic structure,” one predicated on a degree of critical blindness to the temporal logic underpinning such analyses.⁷ In its long tradition of endeavoring to produce a mimetic correspondence with the external world, the rhetoric surrounding visual art, and painting, in particular, typically placed its fate in a conception of the real defined by its immediacy and presence.

Yet if art’s ability to reproduce or even produce reality depended on its effecting a sense of immediacy, beginning in the 1960s a variety of factors such as the growth of information technology and the rising sensitivity to previously marginalized populations led to a fundamental reconsideration of the relationship between artistic representations and the world they ostensibly referred to. As Pamela Lee has recently argued, the capacity of information technology to transcend longstanding barriers of time and space created a situation in which many aspects of the world appeared temporally compressed and systematically interrelated.⁸ Immediate communication across the globe, and even into outer space, was not merely a physical reality; it was brought home to millions of living rooms through television sets. Ironically, as the world appeared more interrelated and compressed, the space between things became more noticeable. Cybernetic and structural theory made these spaces the focus of attention, analyzing how the network of interrelated systems kept various material and cognitive procedures operating. Meaning was seen to reside not within any particular thing itself but rather in its relation to a constellation of other concepts.

Consequently, many aspects of life were understood as increasingly mediated and, because of the inevitable gaps that occur within a mediated life, increasingly *figured*. Such a figurative conception of existence was proclaimed in the first pages of Marshall McLuhan's 1962 book *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. Arguing for the prosthetic nature of all human technology—a theme the author would expand upon in his subsequent book *Understanding Media* (1964)—McLuhan describes all aspects of human experience in terms of an “outering or uttering of sense” in which the space between an individual's sensory perception and external stimuli can only be bridged through a figurative act:

Language is metaphor in the sense that it not only stores but translates experience from one mode into another. Money is metaphor in the sense that it stores skill and labor and also translates one skill into another. But the principle of exchange and translation, or metaphor, is in our rational power to translate all our senses into one another. This we do every instant of our lives.⁹

This sense of a figured life would bring unprecedented attention to the prefix beginning the word “representation.” Cybernetics showed how each repetition or *re*-presentation of a message produced feedback and noise, which altered the content of the original message, thus demonstrating the impossibility of an immediate translation from an external source. At a moment when the various technical means of communication were foregrounded on a daily basis through contact with new technology, the cognitive space between stimuli and perception—and, for those willing to think through the consequences of such a phenomenological gap, the conceptual space between words and things—became more and more discernible and undeniable. As everyday life appeared increasingly divorced from immediacy, the relationship between art and the world appeared more difficult to reconcile. In a world seemingly filled with gaps, not only between words and things but generations and missiles, the question of figuration, with its overt connotations of representation and reification and its less commonly articulated suggestion of temporal contingency, was disparaged by a growing number of critics and artists who regarded such practices as at best inauthentic, degraded by their association with political and commercial manipulation, and at worst a form of ideological mystification. In his 1969 essay “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” de Man revealed the latent mediation underpinning the sort of Romantic aesthetic ideals that proposed a direct and instantaneous relationship between figurative language such as symbolism or metaphor and experience, and, more to the heart of his argument, sustained an individualist, humanist subjectivity in which people could see themselves as naturally accommodated to the perceptual world around them. In other words, one's faith in one's relationship to nature is nothing but an extension of one's faith in the correspondence between words and things. When the latter relationship is shown to be not only arbitrary but often constructed on hierarchies based on power relations, the seemingly natural sense of perceptual and cognitive immediacy becomes nothing more than a form of “mystification.”¹⁰ By deconstructing the various temporal and conceptual associations and transmissions that produce the effects of immediacy in such figurative language, de Man argued for the inevitability of such contingencies and semantic slippages in any form of meaning making. This essential relationship between figuration and temporality outlined by de Man would play a central (albeit usually unacknowledged) role in the

ardent aesthetic debates of the 1960s in which art's ability to defy figuration was seen to allow a degree of autonomy and sensuous immediacy in a world of commercial and technological manipulation and mediation.

Figuring Failure

As a body of work that repeatedly draws upon various modes of figurative image making (such as casting, photography, and traditional forms of pictorial illustration) and engages deeply with figurative language (primarily through the invocation of puns), Nauman's artistic output during the 1960s offers a highly nuanced and complex meditation on the prospects of figuration in the emerging discourse of postmodernism. In particular, the drawings, photographs, and sculptures Nauman produced between 1966 and 1967 dedicated to the British sculptor Henry Moore represent arguably the artist's most sustained and fully accomplished investigation of this theme. Produced in response to what Nauman felt to be the unfairly malicious criticism of Moore by a group of young sculptors, the "series" (never categorized by Nauman as such) consists of five finished works: *Seated Storage Capsule for H.M. Made of Metallic Plastic* (1966), a pastel and acrylic preparatory drawing for a never-produced object; another drawing, *Seated Storage Capsule (For Henry Moore)* (1966) (fig. 1), in which a similar capsule-shaped form is rendered in vibrant pink pastel and covered by a wash of thin ochre acrylic; two large-scale black-and-white photographs, *Light Trap for Henry Moore*, numbers one and two (both 1967) (fig. 2), in which the artist recreated a similar capsule-like form in light by mov-

Figure 1

Bruce Nauman (American, b. 1941), *Seated Storage Capsule (For Henry Moore)*, 1966. Pastel and acrylic on paper, 107 × 92 cm (41¾ × 35½ in.). Switzerland, Daros Collection. © 2010 Bruce Nauman/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo courtesy of the Daros Collection, Switzerland



Figure 2

Bruce Nauman (American, b. 1941), *Light Trap for Henry Moore, No. 1*, 1967. Black-and-white photograph, 162.6 × 101.6 cm (64 × 40 in.). Private collection. © 2010 Bruce Nauman/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo courtesy of Sperone Westwater, New York



ing a flashlight side to side in a time lapse exposure; and what is probably the most well known of the series, *Henry Moore Bound to Fail (Back View)* (1967) (fig. 3), a modeled plaster sculpture coated in wax depicting the backside of a headless torso restrained by a rope. Nauman would go on to make a series of nine cast-iron versions of this piece.

Repeatedly in the Moore series, the conventional art-historical understanding of figuration is expanded and complicated. For instance, in *Henry Moore Bound to Fail*, a semantic contradiction is produced between the title, in which the word “bound” means “destined” or “likely,” and the sculptural object itself, which depicts a torso “bound,” which is to say “restrained,” by rope. By splitting the word “bound” into a synonymous pair, the work produces a semantic situation in which the title becomes a pun, or, more categorically, a *figure* of speech, one whose figurative capability is dependent on a literal meaning manifested in the sculptural depiction of a bound torso.

To state that the semantic tension in the title of *Henry Moore Bound to Fail* makes the sculpture itself appear literal is to enter discursively into the impassioned aesthetic debates of the mid-1960s surrounding the status of the art object. The same year that Nauman produced *Henry Moore Bound to Fail*, Michael Fried, in his essay “Art and Objecthood,” famously derided minimalist art as being “literalist” for its tendency to offer the viewer an experience of

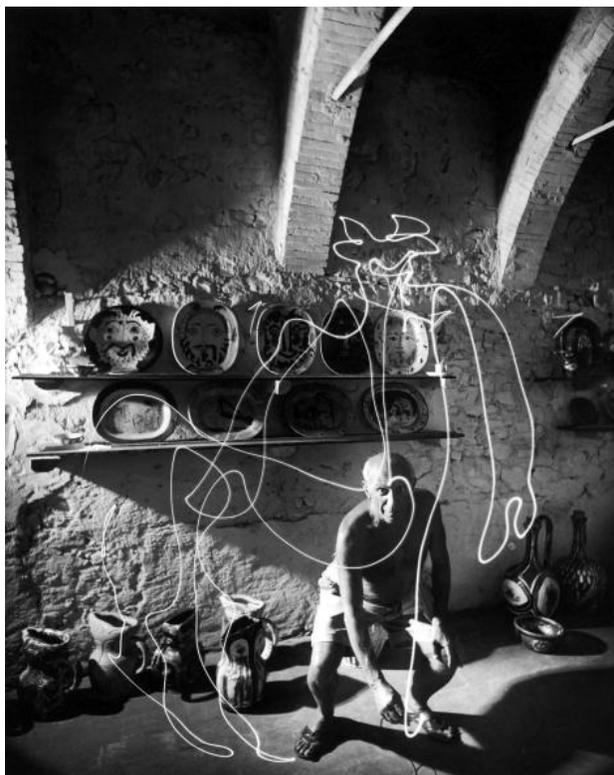


Figure 3
Bruce Nauman (American, b. 1941), *Henry Moore Bound to Fail* (back view), 1967. Wax over plaster, 66 × 61 × 8.9 cm (26 × 24 × 3½ in.). © 2010 Bruce Nauman/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo courtesy of Sperone Westwater, New York

obdurate materiality in which, as he put it, the work's inherent objecthood was not "defeat[ed] or suspend[ed]" through an act of self-reflexive acknowledgment of the material and aesthetic preconditions of its production.¹¹ While Nauman's work is certainly not an illustration or even a response to this oft-cited essay, the fundamental literalism (and related figurativeness) of *Henry Moore Bound to Fail* reveals how the sculpture operates within a conceptual paradigm alluded to but never explicitly articulated in Fried's text, one that posits the motivating tension in modern art as being between figuration and literalism rather than the more conventional antithesis of figuration and abstraction. In fact, in an earlier essay celebrating the achievement of Jackson Pollock's drip paintings, Fried argues that Pollock's wholly optical skeins of paint were able to, as he put it, "defy" figuration, no matter the degree of visual resemblance or referentiality in the paintings themselves: "Pollock has managed to free line . . . from its task of describing or bounding shapes or figures, whether abstract or representational." Repeatedly in the essay, Fried invokes line's traditional task of "bounding shapes or figures," writing, "line . . . has been freed at last from the job of describing contours and bounding shapes. It has been purged of its figurative character. . . . Pollock's line bounds and delimits nothing—except, in a sense, eyesight."¹²

If these statements by Fried do not locate a specific textual reference for Nauman's title, they do offer a discursive framework for understanding some of the fundamental formal and conceptual aspects of the Moore series. Certainly, the bounding function of line plays a central role in the two light-trap photographs, in which a humanoid shape is produced by a line that is figuratively non-bounding insofar as it does not cohere into a closed form (and consequently invokes the drip paintings of Pollock as much as it does Gjon Mili's famous photographs of Picasso drawing a bull in light from 1949 [fig. 4]). Yet in terms of

Figure 4
Gjon Mili, *Picasso "Drawing" with Flashlight, Vallauris*, 1949. Silver print photograph. Photo: Gjon Mili/Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images



Slifkin, "Now Man's Bound to Fail, More," *Anglo-American Exchange in Postwar Sculpture, 1945–1975* (Getty, 2011)

the actual events that produced the photographic images, the depicted line produced by the moving flashlight literally bounds the space within the spirals of light, however briefly and ephemerally. Asked about these works in a 1980 interview, Nauman stated that he “tried to make . . . drawing three-dimensional” suggesting a certain correspondence between his enterprise and a modernist reading of Pollock’s line freed from the task of bounding forms and able to “body forth,” as Clement Greenberg would famously write, into the viewer’s physical space in front of the painting.¹³ In these photographs, Nauman presents line as something that exists as a real, albeit transient, thing in the world, both representing a humanoid figure through an unbounded line and literally bounding—which is to say, “enclosing”—an (unseen) human figure. If they explore line as a means of delimiting recognizable forms, they also exhibit the artist’s fondness for puns: after all, the light traps concerned are not literal light traps, of the kind used to catch insects or, somewhat more related to their manifest subject matter, seal off cameras or darkrooms, but rather figurative traps of light through photographic fixing. Thus, these images, as with *Henry Moore Bound to Fail* (Back View), hold two types of figuration in suspension: what can be called the traditional morphological understanding of figuration as the evocation of recognizable imagery—or, even more explicitly, the use of the human figure in visual imagery—and a much broader and decidedly rhetorical conception of the term, in which figuration is understood as an act of meaning-making through a semantic analogy or inconsistency, as in a figure of speech.

Figuration in both its morphological and rhetorical manifestations creates a structure of meaning through reference and analogy by forging associative chains, or what de Man calls a “hidden system of relays,” in which a series of semiotic associations relating words to concepts are used to create a powerful and often memorable message, one that because of its associative logic is in some ways less “real” than a more literal mode of communication.¹⁴ For instance, in *Henry Moore Bound to Fail*, a human torso is morphologically figured by the mimetic sculpture, just as the linguistic relationship between being destined to fail and a sense of restraint is figured in a sort of mongrel rhetorical/visual pun. Both instances of figuration—morphological and rhetorical—rely on associative logic based upon a fundamental fiction (i.e., the sculpture is not a torso and the binding rope has nothing to do with Moore’s likely failure or vice versa). It was precisely this persuasive power of association and its underlying artifice that was at the root of the various critiques of figuration that emerged in the 1960s. Such a position was perhaps most clearly articulated in certain minimalist objects or color-field paintings that ostensibly offered the beholder an immediate, antifigurative experience, whether through literal materiality or optical presentness. Yet it was equally operative in the reception of the so-called “new generation” of British sculptors, such as Anthony Caro and William Tucker, the artists whose vitriolic critiques of Moore incited Nauman’s interest in the subject. For instance, in a sentence that seems to draw upon Fried’s description of Pollock’s achievement, Alan Solomon claimed that [Caro’s] forms “flow along the ground or rise on diagonals in a manner which line might say has freed him from the figuration implicit in abstract floor sculpture up to this point.”¹⁵ Writing of Caro’s *Prairie*, Fried would claim that the work “compels us to believe what we see rather than what we know, to accept the witness of the sense against the constructions of the mind.”¹⁶ In other words, nonfigurative works like Caro’s would present the beholder with a perceptual experience devoid of

external associations and consequently demand a degree of attentiveness and independence of judgment (what Fried would call “presentness”) typically unavailable or rarely utilized in everyday experience.

According to its detractors, figuration, understood in terms of its broadest cognitive ramifications, was an inherently humanist endeavor, requiring a human agent to forge meaningful associations that could universalize the particular through the naturalizing powers of analogy.¹⁷ It was precisely this verdict on figuration that prompted the criticism of Moore, which in turn inspired Nauman’s artistic response. For instance, when Roland Piché, a young British sculptor whose work was included in the important 1965 exhibition *The New Generation* at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, stated his position as being “against nature” while “Moore is on its side,” he was evoking the humanist connotations of figuration in which art was seen to mediate and somehow universalize natural forms.¹⁸ Such a conception of art’s relationship to nature was repeatedly reiterated in a long two-part *The New Yorker* profile of Moore by the poet Donald Hall that appeared in November 1965, an article that was the likely source for Nauman’s knowledge of the current disparagement of Moore.¹⁹ In the article’s final paragraph, Hall describes the experience of walking around a Moore sculpture that had recently been installed in the courtyard of Lincoln Center:

one recognizes the protean nature of the shapes—here a thigh, there a horizon. The eye flows from association to association, from a claw to a root to a face. Strange disparities grow from these associations: the reclining figure is a whole body in the grave; her torso is the single bone of a huge body. She is an immovable cliff and she is a running figure. She is a piece of nature, as inclusive as nature.²⁰

De Man’s “hidden system of relays” is fully operative in this passage, as Moore’s allusive forms are seen to generate a series of associations in the viewer’s mind, associations governed as much by the viewer’s imagination as by the work itself. Moreover, the last sentence of the quotation, in which the reclining figure becomes a piece of nature, exemplifies what critics such as de Man recognized as the trope’s “tenacious” ability to naturalize what is in fact culturally conditioned.²¹ This universalizing tendency of figuration is evident in a passage from an essay by Moore quoted in *The New Yorker* profile in which the artist promotes the use of “universal shapes to which everybody is subconsciously conditioned and to which they can respond if their conscious control does not shut them off.”²²

In making a relationship between two things, the figurative capacity of the work invests the associative relationship with possible significance: to say that a woman is like a bone, or more generally, like nature, is to endow the object with a whole system of cultural (and possibly oppressive) connotations. As artists increasingly came to reject this associative model of art-making in the 1960s, they sought to produce works that confronted the viewer with objects of unmediated intensity devoid of prior preconceptions. Such literal works could in turn question the sort of humanistic readings that produced universalizing associations that were deemed not only conventional but, because of their basis on power relations, malevolent.

It is certainly possible to read the willful hermeticism of Nauman’s work in terms of a similar critique of figuration. In fact, his art is often cele-

brated for its apparent semantic undecidability, its refusal to provide the viewer with an explicit meaning.²³ For many recent critics, Nauman's avowed attempt in his early works to, as he put it, "giv[e] two kinds of information that don't line up"—as when he offers a figurative and literal representation of a statement in *Henry Moore Bound to Fail*—is seen to be an exemplary instance of post-modernist indeterminacy, often considered an integral strategy for the critique of universalizing humanism.²⁴ The apparent indications of refusal in *Henry Moore Bound to Fail* seem to align with the broader humanist critique of the period. Hung directly against the wall so that only the "back view" is visible, the work literally turns its back on the viewer, preventing not only the sort of multiperspectival observation traditionally associated with sculpture, but also concealing the conventional loci of gesture and expression for the human figure: the hands and face.²⁵ Headless and bound (and thus unable to form the celebrated negative spaces and humanoid heads of so many of Moore's more conventionally figurative sculptures), *Henry Moore Bound to Fail* is in many regards a meditation on the negation of Moore if not the broader humanistic tradition in which the British sculptor aligned himself and his work.²⁶

With its creased and uneven application of wax and its ungainly shaped torso (note the extended or perhaps flattened right shoulder), *Henry Moore Bound to Fail* imaginatively portrays how Moore's sculpture might have appeared to the ardent antifigurals of the 1960s. One could say that the work figures the inevitable failure to represent (or figure) an entity or idea with certainty (just as Nauman's 1966 photograph *Failing to Levitate in the Studio* can be seen to figure the failure of metaphysical transcendence). Yet acknowledging the inevitable failure of figuration and championing decidedly nonfigural practices, as artists such as Caro and his followers were doing, are two quite different things. In its literal portrayal of restraint, the sculpture suggests how the predominant antifigurative aesthetics that rejected the previous generation's seemingly overt emotionalism and expressiveness for a decidedly *restrained* mode of art was itself inherently restrictive. If it was in part Moore's lack of restraint—the expansive way his art sought to express multivalent connotations far beyond the literal material of his sculptures—that led to his being derided by Caro and other younger artists, Nauman's sculpture *restrains* (and retains) this aspect of Moore's art. It is a demonstration, perhaps, of the absurdity of considering Moore within the narrowly bound aesthetic criteria of '60s modernism, or a means of preserving the central vestiges of Moore's art during this critical period by tying them up in a secure if markedly unwieldy bundle, a storage capsule of sorts.

Residual Monumentalism

When asked about the Moore series in interviews, Nauman has consistently offered the same account and rationale for their creation, describing them as responses to the widespread dismissal of Moore's art by a younger generation of artists and critics. In an interview from 1970, speaking about *Henry Moore Bound to Fail*, Nauman stated, "When I made the piece a lot of young English sculptors who were getting publicity were putting down Henry Moore, and I thought they shouldn't be so hard on him, because they're going to need him."²⁷ Two years later, Nauman would expand on this explanation, claiming that the series of works

had to do with the emergence of the new English sculptors, Anthony Caro and [William] Tucker and several other people. There was a lot written about them and . . . some of them sort of bad-mouthed Henry Moore—[saying] that the way Moore made work was old-fashioned and oppressive and all the people were really held down by his importance. He kept other people from being able to do work that anyone would pay attention to. So he was being put down, shoved aside, and the idea I had at the time was that while it was probably true to a certain extent, they should really hang on to Henry Moore, because he really did some good work and they might need him again sometime.²⁸

Nauman's account finds a degree of corroboration in a 1970 essay by the critic Patrick McCaughey, in which the author describes how it was precisely Moore's prior preeminence that led to the apparent ignorance of his work by younger artists: "once his influence was paramount, it also proved asphyxiating. . . . We see now that the best sculpture of the sixties has been not so much in reaction to his work but as though it had never been."²⁹ By the end of the decade, with the apotheosis of the minimalist aesthetic of "less is more" and its corresponding mistrust of expressivity and reference, the overt expressive pathos and figural allusiveness of Moore's sculpture (not to mention its seemingly inescapable pervasiveness in public spaces) placed his oeuvre decidedly outside the boundaries of current artistic practice. Or, put another way, by the end of the sixties, many practicing artists did not want this apparent excess of Moore.

Nauman's artistic engagement with the tarnished legacy of Moore addressed the widespread rejection and outright negation of the elder sculptor's work. As has been seen, Nauman frequently repeats the point that these younger artists might need Moore later on.³⁰ While such a suggestion initially seems willfully perverse, the artist's contention reveals what might be considered the underlying, if unconventional, monumentality in these works—a monumentality derived not so much from a sense of massiveness or ambition but from the term's etymological basis in ideas of memorialization and remembrance through objectification.³¹ While many scholars have examined the role of temporality in Nauman's work—how his works, and especially those that utilize video and installation, often demand that the viewer perceive and bodily engage with the work in time—few if any have recognized what could be considered the longer temporality functioning in many of them, namely their engagement with historical time.³² Indeed, Nauman articulated his conception of art's inherent yet indirect relation to history in an interview from 1980, claiming

I would think that art is what's used in history; it's what [is] kind of left and that's how we view history, as through art and writing. . . . I think art's about those things [political and social issues], and art is a very indirect way of pursuing those kind of thoughts. So the impact has to be *indirect*, but at the same time I think it can be real.³³

In this statement, Nauman describes art as a sort of historical residue that is possessed of an indirectness allowing it a degree of objectivity, or at least a realism, less accessible in ostensibly more impartial discourses. This

conception of art could lead one to the view that every aesthetic utterance is a (sometimes unwitting) monument of sorts, and indeed Nauman frequently employed various techniques of monumentalism throughout the 1960s, making it in some ways the fundamental characteristic of his works' conceptual rhetoric and visual appearance.³⁴ This is most evident in *Cast of the Space Under My Chair* (1968) and the various works that imaginatively delineate and encapsulate portions of the artist's body, including *Neon Templates of the Left Half of My Body Taken at Ten Inch Intervals* and *Storage Capsule for the Right Rear Quarter of My Body* (both 1966). In all of these examples, an absent object, typically the artist's body, or an object associated with the artist—for instance, his chair—is materially evoked (albeit negatively). This simultaneous juxtaposition of evocation and negation, coupled with an unassuming and even coarse appearance, produces a distinctively “leftover” quality to their monumentality. Within the Moore series in particular, this residual aspect is arrived at through both the ungainly resinous acrylic washes that coat the otherwise bright and animated pastels, giving the drawing an artificial patina, and the equally resinous wax that coats the surface of *Henry Moore Bound to Fail* but notably stops short of the plaster edges, suggesting either incompleteness or deterioration. What might be called a residual monumentalism is most categorically employed in Nauman's Moore series, not only titularly, with a forgotten and currently derided figure being memorialized, but visually as well: with both of his drawings of storage capsules, the concept of preservation is literally represented, and with the two light trap photographs, the preservation or entrapment of an ephemeral action is documented (and through the enlarged format of the two photographs, which are made monumental in terms of size). Through the implied transience of their imagery the light trap photographs are part of and in many ways exemplify the artist's broader project of a residual monumentalism, in which an object or part of an object is preserved negatively through a representation of its absence or threatened absence.

As avowed placeholders for posterity, the works in Nauman's Moore series can be understood as an attempt to safeguard something seen to be threatened by historical oblivion circa 1965. Yet what precisely is that thing that these works seek to preserve? Moore's reputation? A specific aspect of his artistic practice, such as the crosshatched lines in his drawings? It seems safe to say these works are clearly not monuments to the artistic greatness of Moore—in fact, Nauman even admitted in a later interview that he was “not particularly fond of” Moore's work, and beyond the possible reference to Moore's Shelter Drawings, which Nauman admired for their “heavy-handed quality,” there is very little visual similarity between Nauman's and Moore's art.³⁵ Rather than such direct associations, Nauman's Moore series evokes the elder artist in the same sort of negative manner in which he evokes his own absent body in his other works from the mid-1960s. (The fact that Nauman imagined “storage capsules” both for parts of his own body and the body of Henry Moore suggests that he conceived of an affinity between Moore and himself.) Created in response to Moore's derision and disregard by younger artists in the '60s, these works present the elder artist's apparent obsolescence as a negative conceptual space whose emptiness is significant in a particularly memorial manner. That is to say: it is Moore's absence, or better yet his impending historical oblivion, that is summoned forth in these works.

Mourning, Moore, Figuration

Nauman's non-parodic, sympathetic memorialization of Moore raises the possibility that the fundamental semantic tensions within his work might possess and produce expressive or communicative qualities. Recognizing the rhetoric of residual monumentalism in Nauman's art, and in the Moore series in particular, suggests the possible presence of figuration and even expressive content in his ostensibly literal and affectless art. Just as a traditional monument (even a wholly nonrepresentational one, such as an obelisk) is figurative in the sense that it forges a meaningful correspondence between two points in history, Nauman's Moore series produces meaning by associating the expressive figurative humanism of Moore with the discourse of antifiguration in the 1960s. Does Nauman's invocation of figuration belong to the period's widespread critique of the trope? Or is it instead something more sympathetic and engaged, an attempt to find ways to preserve aspects of figuration at a moment when it was endangered, when it seemed "bound to fail"?

Nauman's interest in expanding and not wholly discarding the tradition of artistic figuration is demonstrated in the source image for *Henry Moore Bound to Fail*. The sculpture was based on one of the eleven color photographs the artist produced in 1967 depicting puns and literalizations of statements, such as *Feet of Clay* (fig. 5) and *Self Portrait as Fountain*, images that demonstrate Nauman's abiding interest in the history of modern sculpture via their allusions to traditional sculptural material and the readymade. According to Anne Wagner, Nauman's Moore series is proof of the younger artist's commitment to the medium of sculpture and its historical legacy during a moment when such traditional medium-based classifications were under intense scrutiny.³⁶ As Nauman's only sculptural work produced by modeling rather than molding or casting, *Henry Moore Bound to Fail* exhibits a degree of authorial invention

Figure 5

Bruce Nauman (American, b. 1941), *Feet of Clay*, from the portfolio *Eleven Color Photographs*, 1966–67/1970. Chromogenic development print, 50.2 × 59.7 cm (19¾ × 23⅜ in.). Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Gerald S. Elliott Collection. © 2010 Bruce Nauman/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo courtesy of Sperone Westwater, New York



and imagination (and traditionalism) not found in the rest of his sculptural practice. This is most evident in the already-mentioned distorted right shoulder and the deep folds in the sweater whose fleshly convolutions reiterate the problematically universalizing capacities of Moore's allusively figurative sculptures. It could be argued that this inescapable distortion between referential source and handcrafted object produces a semantic remainder that is inherently *more* than the author intends, leading to the inevitable failure in *Henry Moore Bound to Fail*.³⁷ In fact, the source images for *Bound to Fail* and the other eleven color photographs were initially conceived by the artist in terms of the traditional medium of painting, but because Nauman was unsure of his technical proficiency as a painter, it was, as he put it, "just easier to use photographs."³⁸ That they are deeply engaged in the problem of figuration can be seen in several ways: in a preliminary sketch of *Bound to Fail*, in which a reversed composition highlights the mediation and distortion inevitable in any form of figurative expression; in the photographs' translation of a pictorial project initially considered in terms of painting or drawing; and in the photographs' use of punning and literalization of idiomatic language.³⁹

While a conventional postmodernist analysis of Nauman's work might interpret these invocations of figuration alongside their apparent semantic indeterminacy as a critique of humanist notions of interpretation and determinate meaning, aligning him with other literalist practitioners of the period, the artist's repeated professions of desire for his art to have communicative potential suggests an alternative approach, one in which the figurative content of the Moore series is seen as itself expressive and meaningful. Precisely by its capacity to jam conventional figuration, Nauman's dual invocation of morphological and rhetorical figural procedures in these works is itself figurative, expressing such themes as failure, frustration, and confinement. Rather than simply representing such feelings visually, or producing abstract (i.e., nonmimetic) correlates for such feelings, as in the fragmented and half-realized jagged forms found in a painting like Willem de Kooning's *Excavation* (1950) (a work Nauman greatly admired), he sought to create works that would produce such feelings in viewers.⁴⁰ That is to say, the semantic indeterminacy produced by Nauman's works is not simply illustrative of a philosophical insight concerning the inherent ambiguity of communication but, as Nauman's invocation of the avowedly humanist and figurative artist Henry Moore suggests, it was decidedly affective, communicative, and expressive.⁴¹ If, as Fredric Jameson has famously argued, postmodernism can be defined in part by what he calls a "waning of affect," Nauman's artistic output from the 1960s and the Moore series in particular can be understood as attempts to express what such a waning of affect felt like, producing an affect of affectlessness.⁴²

Nauman's works from the 1960s do not critique figuration, expression, or humanism so much as they produce situations that provide viewers with an experience of what the postmodern critique of humanist figuration *feels* like, notably presenting it not as liberatory but rather as morbid and restrictive. For instance, in his performance video *Walking with Contrapposto* (1968), Nauman portrays a humanist trope par excellence as being confining: the artist's wavering hips, speckled with what appears to be plaster dust, butt repeatedly against the narrow walls of a wooden corridor.⁴³ This theme of constraint and control—a central theme in Nauman's artistic production during the decade, one he not only literalized with rope and knots but also enacted in performance videos—

figured the postmodern condition of anti-interpretation as restrictive rather than propitious, as a loss as much as a gain, or perhaps a loss congruent with the expanded artistic and political possibilities of postmodernity.⁴⁴ If, as Rosalind Krauss and Hal Foster have respectively argued, the emergence of postmodernism entailed for many artists a “trauma of signification” and a “passion of the sign,” Nauman’s Moore series both mourns the loss of semiotic certainty and attempts to counteract it in order to salvage some remaining legitimacy from the referent.⁴⁵

Although this elegiac pathos has been rarely addressed in most analyses of Nauman’s art, its presence was recognized by some of his first critics. In one of the artist’s earlier reviews, Mel Bochner discerned what he called a certain “tiredness” in Nauman’s art while another early commentator described the works as having an “unfinished” and “thrown-away look.”⁴⁶ In another early review, Fidel Danieli noted how the works’ “poverty of visual appeal suggests a melancholy homeliness and even sadness, or at their most repulsive, a disgusting honesty.”⁴⁷ A disgusting honesty seems an especially apt description for the residual monumentalism of Nauman’s Moore series. In their attempt to make a meaningful statement at a moment when the possibility of meaning itself was being questioned, Nauman’s Moore series offers a model of meaning-making “under erasure.” These are works in which the new aesthetic terrain of postmodernity—the terrain of antification, antiexpressiveness, anti-interpretation, and antihumanism that was leaving artists like Henry Moore in the dust—is figured as elegiacal, as a melancholy homeliness, as something lost; something that, as Nauman would say, might be needed again someday.

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Notes

1 Jacob R. Brackman, “The Put-On,” *The New Yorker*, June 24, 1967, p. 34. According to the artist, the choice of neon was inspired by a beer sign that remained in the artist’s studio, which previously was a grocery store. Interview with Michele de Angelus, 1980, in *Please Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman’s Words: Writings and Interviews*, ed. Janet Kraynak (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), p. 252.

2 Interview with Brenda Richardson, June 21, 1982, quoted in *Bruce Nauman: Neons*, exh. cat. (Baltimore: Baltimore Museum of Art, 1982), p. 20.

3 Quoted in *ibid.*

4 Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

5 One could even extend this argument further back in Belting’s analysis and note that the sacred relics proceeding from the tradition of icons, which were actual things rather than representations, still operated within a figural paradigm, as a metonym of the saint’s body, in that a corporeal fragment figured an absent totality.

6 Michael Camille, review of Belting’s *Bild und Kunst*, *Art Bulletin* 74 (September 1992), p. 514.

- 7** Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd edn. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), pp. 132–33. For a discussion of the suppression of temporal modes of figuration within post-Renaissance art, see Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, trans. John Goodman (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005).
- 8** Pamela M. Lee, *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), pp. 7–81.
- 9** Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), p. 5.
- 10** De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, p. 211.
- 11** Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” *Artforum* 5 (June 1967), reprinted in Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 153. For a recent discussion on the discourse of literalism within 1960s artistic practice, see Joshua Shannon, *The Disappearance of Objects* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).
- 12** Michael Fried, “Jackson Pollock,” *Artforum* 4 (September 1965), reprinted in Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, pp. 225, 224.
- 13** Nauman, quoted in *Please Pay Attention Please*, p. 254. Clement Greenberg, “Our Period Style” (1949), reprinted in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O’Brian, 4 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986–93), vol. 2 (1986), p. 325. Nauman’s interest in the more traditional conception of linear figuration is evident in his application to the MFA program at UC Davis. He wanted to “search for another kind of ambiguity besides a painterly illusionistic one. . . . I am at present dealing with a large closed line.” Artist files, Richard L. Nelson Gallery, University of California, Davis, quoted in Constance M. Lewallen, “A Rose Has No Teeth,” in *A Rose Has No Teeth: Bruce Nauman in the 1960s*, exh. cat. (Berkeley: Berkeley Art Museum, University of California, 2007), p. 11.
- 14** Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 60.
- 15** Alan Solomon, “The Green Mountain Boys,” *Vogue*, August 1, 1966, p. 152.
- 16** Michael Fried, “Two Sculptures by Anthony Caro” (1968), reprinted in Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, p. 183. In the same essay Fried writes, “The heart of Caro’s genius is that he is able to make radically abstract sculptures out of concepts and experiences which seem . . . inescapably literal” (p. 180).
- 17** The relationship between figuration and humanism is articulated most forcefully in Alain Robbe-Grillet’s essay “Nature, Humanism, Tragedy,” in *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction* (New York: Grove Press, 1965). In it the author criticizes what he sees as a “subterranean communication” inherent in the act of metaphor in its capacity to “establish a constant relation between the universe and the being who inhabits it” (p. 53).
- 18** Roland Piché, quoted in “Whizz Kids in Sculpture,” *Daily Mail*, March 11, 1965, quoted in Roger Berthoud, *The Life of Henry Moore* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1987), p. 312.
- 19** In her monograph, Coosje van Bruggen cites Nauman’s interest in passages of this article. See van Bruggen, *Bruce Nauman* (New York: Rizzoli, 1988), p. 110.
- 20** Donald Hall, “The Experience of Forms, Part II,” *The New Yorker*, December 25, 1965, p. 151.
- 21** De Man, *Allegories of Reading*, p. 5.
- 22** Hall, “Experience of Forms,” p. 60. In a statement from 1937 Moore expands on this power of association in his work: “It might seem from what I have said of shape and form that I regard them as ends in themselves. Far from it. . . . The meaning and significance of form itself probably depends on the countless associations of man’s history. For example, rounded forms convey an idea of fruitfulness, maturity, probably because the earth, women’s breasts, and most fruits are rounded, and these shapes are important because they have this background in our habits of perception. I think the humanist organic element will always be for me of fundamental importance in sculpture, giving sculpture its vitality.” From “The Sculptor Speaks,” *The Listener*, August 1937, reprinted in *Henry Moore: Carvings 1961–70, Bronzes 1961–70*, joint exh. cat. (New York: Knoedler and Co. and Marlborough Gallery, 1970), p. 72.
- 23** See, for instance, Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User’s Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), p. 216: “What Nauman’s casts force us to realize is that the ultimate character of entropy is that it congeals the possibilities of meaning as well. Which is to say that this conception of entropy, as force that sucks out all the intervals between points of space . . . imagines the eradication of those distances that regulate the grid of oppositions, or differences, necessary to the production of meaning.”
- 24** Nauman, interview with de Angelus, in *Please Pay Attention Please*, p. 272.
- 25** The “back view” offered by *Henry Moore Bound to Fail* also suggestively aligns the work with Nauman’s wall or window signs such as *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths* which, as already noted, offer antithetical models of viewing—legible and figurative or illegible and abstract—depending on which side the viewer confronts the work.

- 26** See, for example, the group of three-color photographs *Three Well Known Knots* (1967) that visually allude to *Henry Moore Bound to Fail* and even more closely to the photographic version of “Bound to Fail” that is part of the *Eleven Color Photographs* portfolio. (Assuming there is a knot tying the binding rope—a likely hypothesis given that Nauman produced a number of works exploring knots in the 1960s—this negation even engages with the work’s broader semantic project so that the literal knot produces an aesthetic “not.”)
- 27** Bruce Nauman, interview with Willoughby Sharp, 1970, in *Please Pay Attention Please*, p. 127.
- 28** Bruce Nauman, interview with Lorraine Sciarra, 1972, in *Please Pay Attention Please*, pp. 159–60.
- 29** Patrick McCaughey, “The Monolith and Modernist Sculpture,” *Art International*, November 1970, p. 19.
- 30** For this later invocation of his reasons for making the works see Nauman, interview with de Angelus, in *Please Pay Attention Please*, pp. 255–56: “And I also had the idea that they would need Henry sooner or later, because he wasn’t bad. He was a good enough artist and they should keep him around. They shouldn’t just dump him because a bunch of other stuff is going on. And so I sort of invented a whole mythology about all that, I suppose you’d call it.”
- 31** This monumentality of Nauman’s work aligns itself with the artistic and discursive production of other prominent artists engaged in “post-medium” sculptural works in the 1960s such as Robert Smithson, Dan Graham, and Claes Oldenburg. See Robert Smithson, “Entropy and the New Monuments,” *Artforum* 4 (June 1966), reprinted in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Dan Graham, “Models and Monuments,” *Arts*, March 1967; and Claes Oldenburg, “Some Program Notes about Monuments, Mainly,” *Chelsea*, June 1968, pp. 87–92.
- 32** This attention to temporality is typically framed within a phenomenological engagement with the works, so that how a viewer bodily engages with Nauman’s sculptures, especially his corridors and rooms from the late ’60s and early ’70s, is understood as a temporal experience. See for instance, Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981), pp. 140–42, and Marcia Tucker, “PheNAUMANology,” *Artforum* 9 (December 1970), pp. 38–44.
- 33** Nauman, interview with de Angelus, in *Please Pay Attention Please*, p. 285.
- 34** One could in fact argue that such a residual project has motivated Nauman’s artistic production throughout his career, appearing in some of his recent works such as *Mapping the Studio (Fat Chance John Cage)*. In a 2001 interview with Michael Auping, Nauman notes that the sculptures of Daniel Spoerri in which remains of a meal were glued to a table were in his thoughts during the initial conception of his piece and that “It made me think that I have all this stuff laying around the studio, leftovers from different projects and unfinished projects and notes. And I thought to myself why not make a map of the studio and all its leftovers.” Nauman, quoted in *Please Pay Attention Please*, p. 398.
- 35** Nauman, interview with de Angelus, in *Please Pay Attention Please*, p. 255; van Bruggen, *Bruce Nauman*, p. 111. Nauman has claimed that he was not aware of Moore’s drawing *A Crowd Looking at a Tied Up Object* from the early 1940s, an image which undeniably shares both morphological and conceptual affinities with both the drawings and sculptures of the Moore series.
- 36** Anne Wagner, “Nauman’s Body of Sculpture,” in *A Rose Has No Teeth*, p. 139.
- 37** My thanks to David Getty for this compelling insight.
- 38** “I had been trying to think about how to get those images out, and I thought about making paintings but it had been such a long time since I did any painting, so if I would have made paintings, they would have been just very realistic, and I don’t know if I could have even done that at that point, but I would have retrained myself to draw or paint. And so it was just easier to use photographs.” Nauman, interview with Sciarra, in *Please Pay Attention Please*, p. 159.
- 39** And perhaps the artist’s use of commercial lighting and color photography connotes the seeming vulgarity and explicitness of the concept circa 1967.
- 40** For Nauman’s admiration of *Excavation*, see Lewallen, “A Rose Has No Teeth,” p. 10.
- 41** In the interview with Michele de Angelus from 1980, discussing the use of “normal” experiences as artistic subject matter, Nauman stated that “it’s how you structure the experience in order to communicate it” that defines the work art. “Art,” he goes on to claim, “is the ability to communicate not just a bunch of information but to make an experience that’s more general.” In an interview with Joan Simon from 1988 Nauman states that “artists are always interested in some kind of communication. . . . It is a dangerous situation and I think that what I was doing [was using] the tension between what you tell and what you don’t tell as part of the work. What is given and what is withheld becomes the work.” *Please Pay Attention Please*, pp. 248, 326–27.
- 42** Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 10. In *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 27, Brian Massumi argues that rather than waning, affect has become increasingly important to the postmodern period. Nauman’s art from the 1960s,

produced at the historical crux of postmodernism, can be seen as embodying the changing terrain from modernist emotiveness to postmodern affect.

43 In an interview of Nauman from 1970, Willoughby Sharp compares *Walking with Contrapposto* with *Henry Moore Bound to Fail* because of the occlusion of the figure's head and back view in both works. *Please Pay Attention Please*, p. 115.

44 Recalling a moment from the mid-1960s, Nauman told de Angelus that he felt "just sort of tied in a knot and couldn't get anything out." *Please Pay Attention Please*, p. 236.

45 See Rosalind E. Krauss, "Notes on the Index," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985); and Hal Foster, "The Passion of the Sign," in *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996).

46 Mel Bochner, "In the Galleries," *Arts* 41 (November 1966), p. 58; David Whitney, press release for Nauman's first one-man show at the Leo Castelli Gallery, reprinted in *Bruce Nauman, 25 Years, Leo Castelli* (New York: Rizzoli, 1994), unpaginated.

47 Fidel Danieli, "The Art of Bruce Nauman," *Artforum* 6 (December 1967), p. 15.