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Bruce Nauman, *Contrapposto Studies, I through VII*, 2015–16, seven-channel HD video projection, color, sound, indefinite duration. Installation view, Sperone Westwater, New York, 2016. *Study I* and *Study II*.

BEST OF 2016

BRUCE NAUMAN

Sperone Westwater, New York

JEFFREY WEISS

THERE ARE WORKS OF ART, though rare, that stop us cold. Bruce Nauman's installation *Contrapposto Studies, I through VII*, 2015–16, is one of them. On view at Sperone Westwater gallery this past fall, it was displayed in three rooms on the first and third floors. (A second version, *Contrapposto Studies, I through VII*, ran concurrently and remains on view at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, through January 8, 2017.) The work, a sequence of seven HD-video projections, is an adaptation of *Walk with Contrapposto*, a one-hour video Nauman made in 1968. In the early video, the artist, hands clasped behind his head, is seen walking back and forth through a narrow corridor within which his body just fits. With each deliberate step, he jerks his hips into an exaggerated contrapposto position, his body weight shifted to one leg. The weight-bearing leg is straight beneath the out-thrust hip, the other slightly bent at the knee; as a result, the line of the shoulders tilts downward toward the weight-bearing side. Nauman holds the pose for a few seconds before taking the next step and striking it again, now favoring the other leg.

In the new work, the corridor has been eliminated. Instead, the camera follows Nauman as he moves, the frame tightly cropped to contain the full length of the artist's body (wholly or partially excluding his head). Each projection—or "study"—is a composite of multiple frames, increasing in number as the studies progress from one through seven. The various projections range in height from roughly nine and a half to eleven and a half feet. The first two, each composed of four side-by-side





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vertical frames, show the artist walking toward, and then away from, the camera in a roughly seven-minute loop. Beginning with his back to a wall, he proceeds nine steps, then pivots to return; on reaching the wall, he pivots again and starts over. From *Study i* to *Study ii*, the images switch from “positive” to “negative.” That change results in a stark reversal of the vertical arrangement of values: Nauman’s shirt shifts from light to dark, his pants from dark to light. And his movement, too, is reversed. In *Study ii*, he is seen walking forward; in *Study i*, backward. Close inspection appears to reveal that the footage in both is actually the same—that Nauman was only shot walking forward. Because he steps with such elaborate care, when his stilted gait is shown in reverse it looks as if it were performed that way. In each of the two studies, the four identical sequences run simultaneously but out of sync.

In *Contrapposto Studies iii, iv, and v*, which were shown on three walls of the second room, the frames are reduced in size and stacked, four on top (negative), four below (positive). In *Studies iii* and *v*, Nauman has added a profile view, which shows him walking left, then right; in *Study iv*, he is again seen from front and back. *Studies iv* and *v* introduce a new formal device: the frames are horizontally split across the middle, roughly at the figure’s waist, with the footage above and below in any individual frame shown out of sync. That is, while each register (top and bottom) of an entire projection shows Nauman walking either forward or backward, within each frame the upper and lower halves of his body have become independent of each other; owing to the rhythm of the walk—nine steps, pivot, return—there are times when torso and legs face opposite directions. In the show’s final room, *Studies vi* and *vii* are presented on opposing walls. In *Study vi*, the artist is seen front and back; in *Study vii*, he is viewed in profile. These projections also comprise two registers, each a row of seven frames—negative above, positive

below. As with the first two studies, each row resembles a long frieze. Within the individual frames, the figure is now split into seven horizontal segments; the result is a startling proliferation of moving images.

Throughout the installation, and especially in the final room, sound can be confusing. In fact, the totality of amplified sound for any given projection is that of multiple iterations of the same original sound track—the sounds produced by Nauman’s activity along with a loud hum from the equipment used to make the recording. Like the images, the tracks play simultaneously and, it seems safe to infer, both forward and backward, but out of sync. Moments in which sound and image can be seen to correspond are therefore rare.

Close description of *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii* helps demonstrate how the formal complexity of the work is achieved through concise means: mounting intricacy based on a multiplication of component parts. In turn, multiplication breeds contradiction, which then becomes a prevailing condition of the work—even a constitutive one. For example, while both the contrapposto position and the horizontal frieze are sculptural forms inherited from classical antiquity, together they represent an opposition. A frieze, which is executed in relief, allows for a display of activity that is, by implication, continuous or episodic, ranging from slow pageants to violent battles; conversely, contrapposto, largely a feature of sculpture in the round, was devised (in fifth-century Greece) to humanize the figure by representing the potential energy of a body at rest. Moreover, with Nauman’s rows of walking figures, procession is at odds with the simultaneity—throughout the seven-part work overall and within each study, at times within each frame—of movement in multiple directions. That is, Nauman’s frieze represents the repeating image of one figure for whom progress across the space of the composition is unattainable. Finally, Nauman’s contrapposto is decidedly feminizing, something heightened by

Opposite page: Bruce Nauman, *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii*, 2015–16, seven-channel HD video projection, color, sound, indefinite duration. Installation view, Sperone Westwater, New York, 2016. Study iii, Study iv, and Study v.

Right: Bruce Nauman, *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii* (detail), 2015–16, seven-channel HD video projection, color, sound, indefinite duration. Study vii, 62 minutes 19 seconds, loop.



the pseudovoluptuousness of his raised arms, a posture of erotic display historically associated with representations of the female nude. Yet the pose is acutely disjointed and deprived of grace, an incongruity reinforced by repetition. In its iconography, *Contrapposto Studies* draws from the antique, but the work is anti-classical in the extreme.

These conflicts trace back to *Walk with Contrapposto*, where actions are already at war: walking and contrapposto are inherently incompatible, and jamming them together defeats both. (Conversely, it is worth noting that, in Renaissance aesthetic theory, the term *contrapposto* came to refer broadly to the juxtaposition of opposites in pictorial composition and was likened, as such, to the rhetorical device of antithesis.) Yet elements of resemblance between *Contrapposto Studies* and *Walk with Contrapposto* are overpowered by one chief difference: the monumentality of the new work. To be sure, in its slow, unbeautiful, utterly unnerving way, *Contrapposto Studies* is neither lofty nor majestic and proud; its power is subliminal, its formal dignity enforced, fractured, almost spent. By turning to an early work for raw material—a method to which Nauman has long had recourse—he opposes the younger man to the older one. Further, the willful, at times painful, perseverance of the walking man is underscored by the way his actions are not just repeated but projected on a continuous loop, which becomes a recursive trap. Put differently, in contrast to *Walk with Contrapposto*, the aging body and the slow, deliberately stilted, at times tentative step endow the mechanicity of repeated actions with the regularity of a routine that never changes but grows heavy as we watch. Together, the rows of repeating figures look something like large, animated Eadweard Muybridge photographs that have been cut apart and rearranged, and thereby robbed of the straight-ahead temporal and spatial trajectory of progress or advance. Yet, overall, the work moves with a steady, inexorable cadence that makes it imposing and grave.

There is, then, no question of describing *Contrapposto Studies* as a collection of technical contrivances—a puzzle to be deciphered or solved. Its temper is unsettling, its cumulative impact almost overwhelming. This is the kind of work that sends one in search of historical archetypes. In that regard, allegories of psyche and subjective identity apply. For example, the figure of the doppelgänger, or double, is at stake, in that the mounting multiplication of the artist's image makes iteration a repetition—one less intensifying than depleting—of the self. The mechanical quality of a repeated action (Nauman's plodding, broken walk) also summons an uncanny reversal, in which the human figure is taken to be an automaton. Among the sounds that can be fleetingly observed to correspond to the image of the artist is that of Nauman's voice. Standing still before beginning to walk, he is seen to speak. Yet the amplification has a distorting effect thanks to which we cannot quite make out what he says, and the impact is dehumanizing—a sensation consonant with Nauman's appearance in the work as a kind of no-man. This quality, in turn, is reduplicated by the division between positive and negative images, which, like the opposition of forward and reverse, assigns the walking man to two conditions or states of being, even two worlds. Into this set of associations a measure of personal pathos can be introduced. For one thing, in the new work, Nauman's recovery of the early video collapses a time span—from the younger man to the older one—of nearly half a century. Further, in the course of completing *Contrapposto Studies*, cancer treatment had made walking difficult for the artist. (Indeed, an apparatus related to the treatment can be detected underneath his shirt.) Finally, though, what makes the installation a masterpiece is its remarkable distillation of deep content from early formal devices and motifs. Personal disclosure plays only a supporting role: The self as other inhabits the work's mortal core. □

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