Bruce Nauman -- 'Mapping the Studio I (Fat Chance John Cage)'

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Abstract: The gallery at Dia, much bigger than Mr. [Bruce Nauman]'s studio in New Mexico, multiplies the sense of desolation but distorts the domestic scale. What's at Sperone Westwater is a second version, with colors added (sickly reds, greens and blues, typical Nauman off-key colors -- I love them -- which slowly phase from one image to the next), the images also flipping upside down, then right side up every several minutes.

The desolate beauty of "Mapping the Studio" is really to do with its long stretches of inaction. The grinding pace gradually sinks into your bones, as is the case with Mr. Nauman's early videos in which he neurotically paced around his studio, but here the desolation is grander because the place is empty; and the work overwhelms you with the anxiety, and expectation, that an artist must feel in a studio, alone, desperately waiting for an idea. Mr. Nauman has done more than make something of nothing. He has found a haunting mental music in the endless silence of an empty room. MICHAEL KIMMELMAN

Links: Check SFX for Availability

Full text: Dia Center for the Arts
548 West 22nd Street
Chelsea
Through July 27

'SMapping the Studio II (Fat Chance John Cage)'
Sperone Westwater Gallery
415 West 13th Street
West Village
Through July 27

"Mapping the Studio I," at Dia, which even some Bruce Nauman fans I've heard from find stupefyingly dull, may turn out to be one of his most important works. I find it amazing, as a Cagean gambit and a grueling, weirdly beautiful meditation on nothingness and artist's block, but I admit it took a while to sink in. Another version of it now at Sperone Westwater makes a useful comparison.

The original 5-hour, 45-minute version has occupied a vast Dia gallery all year: seven DVD's projected around the walls of the room, showing Mr. Nauman's studio from different angles. The work is shot with a cheap video camera at night, in darkness, by infrared light. What you see are real-time gray-green images edited down from months of shooting. Visually the sort of images you see on security cameras, with the same paranoid overtones.

Visitors on rolling office chairs, like night watchmen, stare at almost nothing for hours and hours. After a while the tendency is simply to stop watching and just gaze passively, the empty room becoming strangely comforting, with much of what you register happening unconsciously on the periphery of your vision, the way you sense what's going on around you even when you're focused on something different or half-dozing. The scenes flicker and shimmy slightly. You can hear, on the seven soundtracks, the drone of an air-conditioner, the wind and a distant train whistle. Sound is psychologically crucial in Mr. Nauman's work, but always subtly. The work is like Cage's music, making use of ambient noise and chance. I said almost nothing happens because a cat or mouse sometimes skitters through the studio, and a chair or a stack of videotapes
moves around, the result of different nights of shooting spliced together. But otherwise, nothing changes.
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greens and blues, typical Nauman off-key colors -- I love them -- which slowly phase from one image to the
next), the images also flipping upside down, then right side up every several minutes.
The Sperone gallery is closer to the size of Mr. Nauman's studio, so you can feel more as if you were there,
except that the colors and the flipping at the same time abstract the projected images, making you less attuned
to specific objects and more to generalized moving shapes. Mr. Nauman has talked, interestingly, about the
work going on all the time, like a Warhol movie -- or like a sculpture, which is always there, even when you're
not in the room looking at it. There's also something sculptural about the way the gallery shares space with the
video projections.
In a back room at Sperone, Mr. Nauman's "All Action Edit," as he calls it, picks out just "highlights" of the
original 42 hours of tape: instants when something moves (a moth, the cat). But after you've got accustomed to
the real-time version, the "action edit" suddenly seems too full of action. Your head spins.
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gradually sinks into your bones, as is the case with Mr. Nauman's early videos in which he neurotically paced
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Photograph
Shades of paranoia in meditations on nothingness: Above, scenes projected on the walls of Sperone Westwater
Gallery in the Village show Bruce Nauman's studio in New Mexico at night. Left, a still of cats at the studio. Both
are part of "Mapping the Studio II (Fat Chance John Cage)." (Photographs from Sperone Westwater)

Subject: Art exhibits; Visual artists;
People: Nauman, Bruce
Publication title: New York Times,  Late Edition (East Coast)
Pages: E.35
Number of pages: 0
Publication year: 2002
Publication date: Jul 5, 2002
Year: 2002
column: Art in Review
Section: E
Publisher: New York Times Company
Place of publication: New York, N.Y.
Country of publication: United States
Publication subject: General Interest Periodicals--United States
ISSN: 03624331
CODEN: NYTIAO