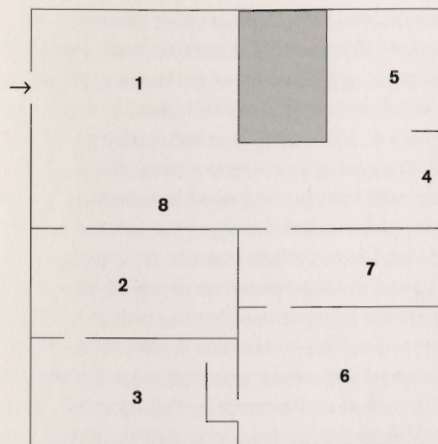


# site map and checklist



9 in rooftop cafe

## Bruce Nauman

1. *Hanging Carousel (George Skins a Fox)*, 1988  
steel and polyurethane foam, motor, color videotape with sound  
204 inches in diameter  
Collection Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Gerald S. Elliot Collection
2. *Green Horses*, 1988  
chair, 2 video players, 2 monitors, projector  
dimensions variable  
Collection of Lannan Foundation  
Future gift to Dia Center for the Arts
3. *Doppelgänger/UFO*, 1988  
steel beam, steel cable, two portable audiocassette players, motor  
157ft inches in length  
Annibale Berlingieri Collection, Rome
4. *Setting a Good Corner*, 2000  
edition of 40  
single-channel video, DVD-R format  
59 minutes  
Courtesy Sperone Westwater, New York

## Rodney Graham

5. *75 Polaroids*, 1976  
installation, various media  
12 x 12 x 12 feet  
Courtesy of Patrick Painter and Juan Muñoz
6. *How I Became a Ramblin' Man*, 1999  
edition of 4, with 2 artist's proofs  
video and sound installation, 9 minutes  
35mm film transferred to digital  
videodisc, DVD player, projector, 2 speakers, AV receiver  
Courtesy Donald Young Gallery, Chicago
7. *Aberdeen*, 2000  
multimedia installation, including slide projection and sound  
20 minutes  
Collection of the artist
8. *Fishing on a Jetty*, 2000  
edition of 2  
two C-prints, framed  
each 8 x 6 feet  
overall 8 feet x 13 feet 5 inches  
Courtesy Donald Young Gallery, Chicago
9. *The Bed-Bug, Love Buzz, and Other Short Songs in the Popular Idiom*, 2000  
audio CD  
50 minutes  
Produced by Dia Center for the Arts and Rodney Graham

photo top: Rodney Graham,  
*How I Became a Ramblin' Man*, 1999  
photo bottom: Bruce Nauman,  
*Green Horses*, 1988

## Rodney Graham and Bruce Nauman

"... the nearest faraway place ..."

May 10, 2000–Spring 2001



Dia center for the arts  
548 west 22nd street new york



**Rodney Graham and Bruce Nauman** "... the nearest faraway place ..."

*Fishing for Asian Carp* (1966), one of Bruce Nauman's first ventures with film, lasts just under three minutes, the length of time it took for the protagonist (William Allen) to capture his quarry.<sup>1</sup> Like several others Nauman shot at this time, it reflects the strong impression made on him as a student by an industrial training film depicting an elevator in operation, its doors mechanically opening and closing. Such early works embody certain concerns that have endured, shaping his subsequent activity, notwithstanding the extensive range and diversity of subject, material, medium, and genre. Recalling that prophetic film, Nauman's most recent work, *Setting a Good Corner* (2000), records in real time and in straightforward, pragmatic fashion a practical action, by contrast with subsequent works from the late sixties recorded mostly on video, which entailed performing in the studio for the camera. In *Setting a Good Corner*, the stationary lens was focused directly onto the site where the artist intended to build the junction of the two fences prior to extending their intersecting arms. Lasting an hour, the length of a tape, this work documents his activity—excavating holes, setting posts, straining tension wires, inserting stays—as well as certain fortuitous episodes, including the arrival of his wife with their dogs. The detached matter-of-factness of the presentation serves paradoxically to reinforce a seemingly irresolvable ambiguity at its core: the question of how the piece should be read—even by a dogged viewer who steadfastly sits through the full sixty minutes to the closing frames when, instead of credits, certain comments proffered by one of Nauman's veteran neighbors on the (relative) novice's technique appear.

One of a number of works that derive their subjects from Nauman's daily activities as he breeds quarter horses on his property in New Mexico where he took up residence in the late 1970s, it may be compared with *Green Horses*, a key multimedia installation he made in 1988. Among the first of Nauman's video pieces to draw on his concurrent occupation as a rancher, it shows the artist training and exercising two colts. The rider is captured moving first in one direction then another in ever-widening circles as he puts the animals through their paces. Recorded by Steina and Woody Vasulka (fragments of whose voices discussing the task at hand may be heard intermittently and indistinctly on the soundtrack), the footage has been edited so that each brief twenty-second segment is close to a mirror image of that which precedes or follows. Projected on a pair of monitors and simultaneously on the wall of the gallery, the imagery appears sometimes in positive, sometimes in negative, sometimes inverted, sometimes normally oriented, with a sometimes green and sometimes magenta cast. A chair positioned to offer the viewer a place from which to watch the work echoes the setup Nauman arranged for himself in his studio as he previewed the piece in process.

Excerpted, *Green Horses's* audio material is employed again in *Doppelgänger (UFO)* (1988), a companion work comprised of a rotating steel beam to which a pair of audio cassettes have been attached. Tracking these tapes in order to decipher their contents proves a frustrating, almost futile activity, given the poor quality of the sound—the muffled recording, the generally inconsequential character of mostly passing remarks and

incidental directives, and, above all, the uncanny results of the Doppler effect (moving sound building and receding around a fixed source). Elusive content combined with literal and immediate presentation in this, the most elliptical of the quartet of works here at Dia, brings to mind Nauman's telling averral made some years before, in 1971, albeit in very different circumstances: "When you display a piece of art, normally you add something to the environment. You give extra information. I thought why not remove some of the information."<sup>2</sup> A strategy of aphoristic parsimony—withholding as a means to communicate, refraining from articulating in the search for eloquence, focusing on the anterior by pointing forward—again and again manifests itself in this artist's practice. Its origins are multifarious but deep rooted, and include the never-forgotten advice of one of his instructors in Davis, California, William Wiley, as to the importance of "seeing with a dumb eye." Equally determinant is the stringent mode of inquiry Nauman developed as he scrutinized, examined, shaped, and tested a model and role for artistic practice literally and metaphorically from every angle and position, influenced as much by that rigorous investigatory mode pursued by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* as by the austere, reductive instantiations of Samuel Beckett's short texts for theater. As he sought to impart form, structure, significance, and a moral undergirding to the daily activities of an artist whether in his studio or later as a rancher at work on his land, both these predecessors proved exemplary.

*Hanging Carousel (George Skins a Fox)* (1988) relates to this pair of works in that a video records in graphic detail and real time the actions of another of Nauman's neighbors, a professional hunter, as he removes the pelt from his prey. Taxidermist's molds of wild animals hang from the mechanically rotating carousel to which the video monitor is affixed. In order to follow closely the steps by which the trophy is skinned, the viewer dodges back and forth as the mechanism twists then reverses itself, skirting the suspended forms, which have been likened to relics evoking totemism and blood sacrifice in the hunter's mythos. If this peripatetic course may be read as a gruesome if not morbid parody of the festive activity of a child riding a fairground counterpart, the skills of a professional at work in what is a vanishing way of life are equally acknowledged. Fully aware of the irony that in the popular imaginary this way of life has become a heroicized, romanticized, and mythified "life style," Nauman draws an acute and telling analogy with the manner in which the visual artist's role and identity has similarly been misconstrued and romanticized. The macabre, contradictory, and ambiguous tone thus veils a deeply serious and sustained investigation of the place of practical skills, technical proficiency, competent craftsmanship, and knowledge of materials and methodologies within these two shifting tropes, which Nauman provocatively treats as isomorphic to each other.

*How I Became a Ramblin' Man* (1999), Rodney Graham's lyrical ode, draws on several well-established classic genres: the epic Western movie; the made-for-MTV music video; and the *echt* advertising image of the mythic cowboy, the Marlboro man, the "last survivor of the Western male in the heroic mode," according to acclaimed novelist and screenwriter



of the Southwest Larry McMurtry.<sup>3</sup> Partially conceived as an homage to *Green Horses*, this short film assembles as it samples a plethora of devices, styles, shots, and structures from these disparate sources in order to construct an alluring if seductive work, mock-cynical, wildly romantic, and earnestly sentimental, which finally eludes easy classification. Neither strict critique nor sly lampoon, *Ramblin' Man* contains a parodic yet nonetheless poignant confession, namely, the artist's willingness to adopt the role of grifter, that nomadic antihero whose guitar has now replaced his gun as his signal attribute. Desire and fantasy fuel this vision of the stereotypical artist of the former West. In contradistinction to Nauman who grounds this enduring trope in the mundane routine tasks still required in ranching today, Graham composes and himself sings his own country-and-western paean sitting by a brook in open virgin prairie as his horse grazes idly nearby. Made around the same time, the low-tech slide-tape piece *Aberdeen* (2000) pays tribute to another cult figure, the rock star Kurt Cobain, whom Graham wryly salutes as the one kind of artist who today truly achieves a global reach. Conceived as if from the perspective of a fan making a pilgrimage to the artist's despised birthplace, the small dreary backwater in Washington state located not far from the Graham's own hometown, this work is comprised of a tray of documentary-style slides accompanying a soundtrack with Graham's signature laconic chronicle interwoven with music inspired by Nirvana or by bands that had influenced Cobain.

The earliest work acknowledged in Graham's oeuvre, *75 Polaroids* (1976), is informed with a deceptively simple strategy, a set of procedures that again recalls the older, American artist's in their recourse to a beguiling straightforwardness that nonetheless results in enigma and paradox. As documented in the long sequence of nearly identical shots, Graham gradually traversed raw undergrowth, woodlands at night, by means of a camera. Aided by its momentarily illuminating flash, he was able to make his way through nature coded here as wild, dark, and treacherous. Ironically, the intensity of the glare blinded the photographer, making him temporarily insensitive to what was in front of him during those very instants that the images were gradually forming themselves on the paper. Marked intermittently by sparks of automatized epiphany, this journey creates a (mechanical and "blind") portrait of the locale. Installed in a black box, the work becomes a wonderfully rich yet characteristically perverse and double-edged metaphor for artistic practice, conceived now as an inversion of standard or normative Romantic formulations.

Disguise, duplicity, and mis-representation, permeated with a disarming and subversive humor, also constitute the point of departure for *Fishing on a Jetty* (2000), a photographic diptych based on a brief scene from Hitchcock's travelogue-like comedy, *To Catch a Thief* (1955). Its hero, Cary Grant, plays a retired upper-class burglar who (pretending to be an Oregon lumberman) briefly attempts to further disguise himself by assuming the mien of a local fisherman with the rudimentary aid of a hat

and a pair of sunglasses. Pointedly less convincing in its assumption of (Grant's) multiple identity, Graham's version, blatantly fusing studio and location photography, metamorphoses Vancouver into a Mediterranean idyll with the aid of imperfect Photoshop-derived golden glazes, contriving such manifest implausibility as to propel the question of representation into free-fall: endlessly and inescapably subject to the lens, we live not facts but fictions.

In his incisive, terse, and affectionately mordant studies of the figure of the cowboy in North American culture, Larry McMurtry traces the gradual evolution of this shape-shifting protagonist from the epic heroic to the ironic, the sentimental, and, recently, back to the archetypal. Commenting on the inevitable gulf between representation and actuality, McMurtry notes that the dominant skill of the cowboy was horsemanship not marksmanship, unlike the gunfighter; yet the working cowboy has never been important to the Western movie's characterization.<sup>4</sup> Recognizing, as does McMurtry, that it is the symbolic frontiersman who has long been absorbed into the national bloodstream, Nauman and Graham, through this resonant point of departure, investigate artistic praxis by interweaving, in the former's case, different levels of fact and fiction and, in the latter's, different modes of representation and desire. The myth of the West, filtered primarily through that enduring and eponymous mythic figure beloved of literature and music as well as film becomes at once pretext and reason for "the nearest faraway place."<sup>5</sup> Those works of Nauman's and Graham's that draw however loosely on this subject, play on the manifold way that mimesis operates as a form of real life and vice versa. Steering knowingly and subtly between realities and their multiple offshoots (past and present), neither artist ever relies on an analytical, deconstructive methodology. Deadpan and straight-shot, Nauman, typically for his generation, begins with the actualities, the quiddities of the literal, phenomenal world. Graham, equally typically, works from representation, from a mediated reality that carries him ineluctably toward the elusive, the oblique, and the undecidable. Whether fugacious, sober, or mischievous, their contrarian attempts at clarity and illumination pay tribute to an abiding maxim central to the work of each. It is a maxim Nauman coined long ago in typically ambiguous terms, "The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths;"<sup>6</sup> since tellingly, "revelation" may imply exposure as well as its antipode—disclosure.



## notes

1. For a detailed study of this and all works in Nauman's oeuvre, see the catalogue raisonné: *Bruce Nauman* (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, in association with Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 1994).
2. Bruce Nauman, quoted in Jane Livingston, "Bruce Nauman," in *Bruce Nauman: Work from 1965 to 1972* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1972), p. 24.
3. Larry McMurtry, *Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen: Reflections at Sixty and Beyond* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), p. 186.
4. Ibid. See also McMurtry's landmark early study, *In a Narrow Grave: Essays on Texas* (Austin: Encino Press), 1968.
5. Numerous parallels and affinities may be drawn between Nauman's and Graham's art and aesthetics, not least their shared interest in philosophy and music, and a mutual delight in the interplay of verbal profligacy and thrift, together with the use of humor as a self-distancing technique for relentlessly investigating all kinds of media and materials and, above all, the identity of artistic praxis. What Wittgenstein is to Nauman, Freud is to Graham. Minimalist and serialist music offers points of reference to certain of Nauman's early works. Not only did he use musical instruments or reference music in certain individual works but he also played classical guitar, piano, and jazz bass. A long-standing and deep interest in music informs Graham's practice, reflected in the wide range of musical styles and forms referenced in his art, as well as his involvement in a number of bands over the past two decades. As a young man, Graham worked briefly on his uncle's ranch in western Canada. Both artists received training and for a time lived and worked on the West Coast. The title of this show is taken from a purely instrumental work by the Beach Boys.
6. This is the text of a neon work executed in 1967, *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths (Window or Wall Sign)*.

Born in 1949 in Masqui, British Columbia, **Rodney Graham** studied art history at the University of British Columbia from 1968 to 1971 and at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver from 1978 to 1979. Beginning with a series of solo shows in the late 1980s, he has exhibited widely in North America and Europe, including in Documenta IX, 1992, and in the Biennale of Venice, 1997, where he represented Canada. His most recent museum exhibition was held at the Kunstverein Munich in summer 2000. Graham lives and works in Vancouver.

**Bruce Nauman** was born in 1941 in Fort Wayne, Indiana. After studying at the University of Wisconsin from 1964 to 1965, he acquired an MFA from the University of California at Davis in 1966. Following his debut solo show in 1966 at the Nicholas Wilder Gallery in Los Angeles, he has exhibited widely in North America and Europe, including in Documenta IV (1968), V (1972), and VII (1982), and in the Whitney Biennales of 1984, 1991, and 1997. In the 1980s, several major large-scale exhibitions toured, principally in Europe. In 1994–1995, a retrospective was organized by the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C. In 1999, he was awarded the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale. Nauman lives and works in New Mexico, where he moved in 1979, developing a professional interest in horse breeding and training.

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