

BOMB

Enacting Stillness by Kay Larson

From mindful Minimalism to inaction as activism

October 26, 2016



Bruce Nauman. Excerpt from *Dance or Exercise on the Perimeter of a Square (Square Dance)*, 1967–68, 16 mm film on video. Courtesy of Electronic Arts Intermix. Nauman has described undertaking these durational movements as a way of pinpointing the tensions implicit in finding balance during the process of performing a gesture to the point of fatigue.

In an untidy studio, on the outlines of a whitish square taped to the floor, Bruce Nauman dances. The movements in *Dance or Exercise*

on the Perimeter of a Square (Square Dance), choreographed by Meredith Monk, are simple yet hard to describe. Nauman's left foot repeatedly slaps a corner of the square, then the centerline, after which his right foot slaps the other corner, and in this way he moves himself around all four sides. This film is the earliest work in *Enacting Stillness*, a sixteen-artist exhibition at The 8th Floor, the Shelley and Donald Rubin Foundation's gallery space in Manhattan. It posits a crucial question: What is stillness? And following naturally: What kind of stillness?

The answers in this group show track changing views of stillness and silence within a time span of fifty years. Nauman, who appears anything but still, uses his body to exhaustion within the observable duration of an action that has no theme or narrative. Coming up in the decade of Minimalism, Process Art, and task-oriented dance, both Monk and Nauman were exposed to Merce Cunningham's non-narrative dance style and John Cage's chance operations. Cunningham and Cage embodied stillness in movement and sound since they merged their lives and work in the early 1940s. The body may move; the instruments may make sounds; but does the mind move? If the mind moves, you get narrative, emotion, interpretation, theme, grandeur, pathos, and so on. If the mind doesn't move, doesn't get distracted, it's just mind and only that. Nauman dances at this level: just awareness and only that. His face doesn't shift or emote. He's paying attention. He's pure concentration.

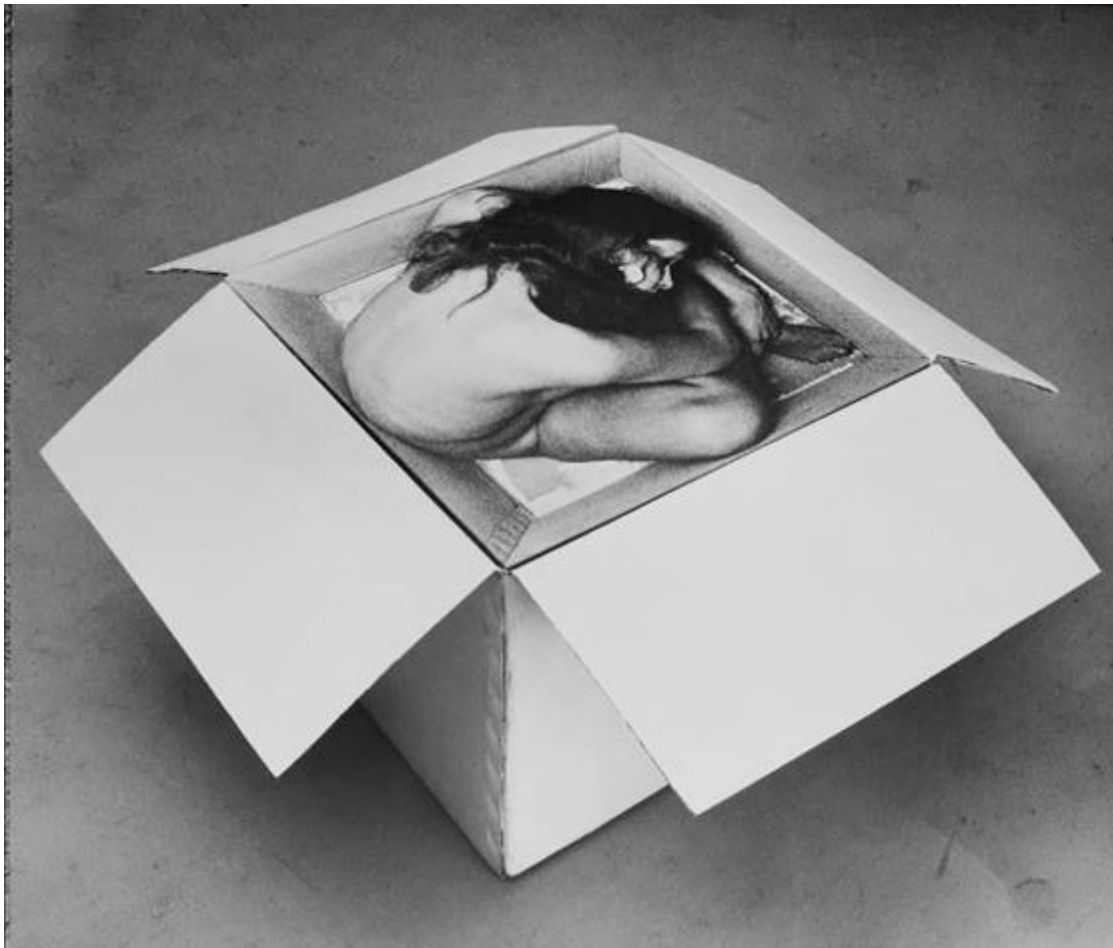


Joan Jonas. Still from *Songdelay*, 1973, 16mm film. Courtesy of Electronic Arts Intermix.

Practicing stillness of mind might have led artists to turn their awareness to the ground that supports them. In 1973, Joan Jonas brought some friends, including Gordon Matta-Clark and Steve Paxton, to an abandoned lot in Lower Manhattan to perform an earthwork in a city landscape. *Songdelay*, a grainy 16-mm film, features non-narrative movements, some of them (like bricks being slapped together) generating percussive sounds, which formally link to the Nauman video.

The divide between stillness and urgency is noticeable in the exhibition. *Enacting Stillness* splinters as it encounters personal histories and global events that overwhelm stillness. Curator Sara

Reisman oversees the foundation's "Art and Social Justice" initiative, and she's inevitably partial to the underserved. Her show makes a subtle distinction between the stillness of the mind in meditation versus the silence of a shell-shocked reaction to suffering.



Kirsten Justesen. *Sculpture #2*, 1968, painted cardboard box and photograph.
Courtesy of the artist.

Responding to Minimalism's lack of room for protest in a world raging with war and insurrection, Danish artist Kirsten Justesen's *Sculpture II* (1968) features a photograph of Justesen naked and hunched over like a Peruvian mummy. In trying to fit her whole being into the "box" of Minimalist rigor, she was figuratively

burying her female identity, sexuality, and political consciousness— everything feminism was trying to bring awareness to at the time.



Claudia Juskowicz. *Sympathy for the Devil*, 2011, two-channel video.
Courtesy of the artist and LMAK gallery, NYC.

Evoking World War II histories, Claudia Juskowicz's two-channel video *Sympathy for the Devil* (2011) features a young man and his roommate, a white-haired Polish Jewish refugee from World War II,

as well as their neighbor, Klaus Barbie, the Nazi Butcher of Lyon, who's hiding under the assumed name. The silence between these three men contains catastrophes and conditions that bring language to a halt.



Alicia Grullón. *Southern Boulevard*, 2008. Courtesy of the artist.

Some artists choose to talk back to suffering. Alicia Grullón roved the Bronx, her face covered in papier-mâché masks made from newspapers whose headlines blare social disasters. For her video *Transmigration of the SOLD* (2006-2016), Yoko Inoue commissioned (and taped) South American artisans laboriously crafting knitted wool sweaters with American flag emblems. Subsequently, we see her in a Canal Street vendor stand deliberately unraveling them, an act so insulting and dispiriting that it can only be meant to invoke the exploitative attitude of Western commercialism toward the

sincerity of traditional cultures.

How do you bear witness? It's tricky. Pakistan-born Rehan Ansari was propelled by a disaster of terrible proportions, the Partition of India, to make *Unburdened* (2010-2016), a play and installation presenting the story of characters who are struck speechless when confronted with suffering in their pasts. The inherent power of this tale is difficult to extract from the skimpy evidence on view in the exhibition.



Clifford Owens. Still from *Anthology* (Maren Hassinger), 2011, HD video.

In a documentary video by performance artist Clifford Owens—who asked Maren Hassinger to give him a performance score for *Anthology* (2011)—we see him nude and motionless in a marked-up rectangle on the floor as his limp body is manipulated and moved into various positions by members of the audience (all white). Here stillness evokes the potential of pacifism, yet also and

equally the enforced passivity of slavery and the immobility caused by racism.



John Ahearn. *Isaiah*, 1999, acrylic paint on plaster.
Courtesy of the artist and Alexander and Bonin, New York.

After so much dwelling in conflict and difficulty, John Ahearn's radiant and simple painted-plaster portraits of ordinary people from New York's neighborhoods are silent in a way that honors the subjects' humanity, and one's own.

Enacting Stillness is on view at The 8th Floor through January 13, 2017.

*Kay Larson is the author of *Where the Heart Beats: John Cage, Zen Buddhism, and the Inner Life of Artists*, Penguin Press, 2012. She is now preparing a second book on Cage.*