

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Bruce Nauman

Microphone/Tree Piece

Grote Hertstraat 12 Rue du Grand Cerf

1000 Brussels, Belgium

August 17 – September 12, 2021

'Nauman, in fact, is a master of inversions and secrets.'

– Kathy Halbreich, *Social Life*¹

Bruce Nauman's *Microphone/Tree Piece* originally began life as *Amplified Tree Piece*, the artist's written contribution to an exhibition of proposals called 'Art in the Mind' in 1970². He subsequently added more details a year later, certifying it as *Microphone/Tree Piece*, yet the instructions essentially remained the same: drill a hole into a tree trunk, mic it up, and amplify the sound into an empty room. Nauman's other submission to 'Art in the Mind', *Untitled* (1969) similarly involved making a hole in which to conceal a microphone, except this one would have been a mile-deep below the ground. During a rush of works in the late-1960s, the artist had poured water through holes in slabs of metal to make them rust (*Water-Mirror Piece* and *Untitled*, both 1968, and *Dead Center*, 1969), and then, years later, made another hole in neon: this one from thumb and forefinger to form an orifice (*Human Sexual Experience*, 1985).

By shifting the emphasis onto the instrument of recording in the title, Nauman pays attention to the fact that *Microphone/Tree Piece* is about listening. Consider the invasiveness of this gesture in regard to the artist's interest in technologies of surveillance, which had begun to appear more frequently in his work: he effectively makes the tree wear a wire. We all know trees talk to one another – Nauman just plants an informant amongst them. Those on the receiving end indoors are not only privy to their perennial conversations but pick up other sounds in the vicinity too, such as 'dogs barking at about 20 feet', as the artist noted when it was first installed in a Eucalyptus tree in a backyard.

Following Nauman's removal of himself as a subject around the end of the 1960s, 'surveillance would become an important theme...with numerous installations utilizing video equipment to record and represent the movement of visitors', observes Neal Benezra in his essay *Surveying Nauman*³. If the behavior of other people became a growing preoccupation for the artist, then it was at a time when America was ratting out secrets unto itself until Watergate would scandalize the country only a few years later. The consequences of spying were already implied in an earlier work, *Concrete Tape Recorder* (1968) in which the very device upon which secrets are caught on – here, sublimated screams – are wrapped up in plastic and buried underground encased in concrete, a material befitting of organized crime since, after all, the mafia used 'cement shoes' to dispose of snitches.

While it's obvious to say that *Microphone/Tree Piece* requires physical presence, perhaps it's required now more than ever within the image-saturated and pandemic-afflicted culture of viewership. Sound creates a hyper awareness of space – in this case, a Belgium townhouse stripped bare like 'bugger' Harry Caul's apartment at the end of *The Conversation* (1974) after he tears it apart looking for listening devices. The transference of information has often been one-way in Nauman's work, playing out in spaces made publicly inaccessible, or under watch such as in *Audio Video Piece for London, Ontario* (1969-1970) and *Audio-Video Underground Chamber* (1972-1974) that bookend *Microphone/Tree Piece* within his practice. But what have the arboreal got to spill? Fifty years on, are we eavesdropping on secrets, or might it be that plant intelligence is still beyond our cognition. A tree's interiority remains its own.

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Brussels gallery hours: Tuesday–Friday, 10am–6pm and Saturday, 12pm–6pm
New York gallery hours: Tuesday–Saturday, 10am–6pm

¹ Halbreich, Kathy. "Social Life." Essay. In Bruce Nauman. Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1994

² Art in the Mind." Allen Memorial Art Museum. Oberlin College. Oberlin, Ohio. April 17-May 12.

³ Benezra, Neal. "Surveying Nauman." Essay. In Bruce Nauman. Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1994