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WeakForce at St Paul St

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To: Charlotte Huddleston <charlotte.huddleston@aut.ac.nz>
Cc: Andy Thomson <athomson@aut.ac.nz>

Mon, Nov 18, 2013 at 11:28 PM

Dear Charlotte & Andy,

Thank you for your invitation to contribute to this project. I have decided to send you this text in the form of an email, as this seems appropriate to the providence of this piece of writing, and the propositions that I will address here. It is in some senses a reply, to messages already sent to me and possibly to others; and in some senses a letter, a transmission that anticipates some future action in its turn. I disperse it here within the generic structure of the email format. As to whether some of the features of this apparatus are retained in the publication of this text I will leave to your discretion.

You asked that I address a contingency relating to weakForce. And it is with the contingencies of sending and receiving, interpreting and negotiating, that I wish to engage; as this appears, from my position, to be a significant aspect of this project. WeakForce is in many ways a series of events and exchanges, which are not simply limited to the four exhibitions that will take place under this banner. Some of these exchanges are discernable, within what will be presented as weakForce. Others undoubtedly are not, but may re-emerge in some form or other at a later date.

I want to address these matters through the intermediary of another text; an anecdote that also evokes these kinds of considerations. This passage is a curious fragment, included by Bruce Nauman in short statement about one of his well known installations. Nauman's text addresses a strange incident of exchange:

Some time ago Anthony d'Offay was going to do a show of John Cage's scores, which are often very beautiful. He also wanted to show work by artists who were interested in or influenced by Cage. So he asked if I would send him something that related. Cage was an important influence for me, especially his writings. So I sent d'Offay a fax that said FAT CHANCE JOHN CAGE. D'Offay thought it was a refusal to participate. I thought it was the work. (Nauman & Litz, 2003, 11)

This story continues to interest me for a number of reasons, which I believe have a strong relevance (if only a weak connection) to weakForce. The scene that Nauman composes in these few sentences takes me to d'Offay's office, imagining the possible outcomes that arise in relation to Nauman's fax. Does, as Nauman alleges, d'Offay believe that the letter is a rebuttal? I imagine him holding the freshly printed page in his hand, frowning, and then tossing it away. Or, does he laugh? Perhaps he laughs and then crosses Nauman's name promptly off the list of potential exhibitors. Or, does d'Offay understand that this fax is Nauman's contribution to the exhibition but—not wanting to exhibit it—decide to treat it as a refusal? Does the fax even make it to d'Offay or is it in fact intercepted by a gallery assistant, who discards it according to their own misapprehension or selfish designs? Clearly these contingencies are built into the 'work'. Nauman chooses to deliver the work in such a way that it may be interpreted as a non-work, a refusal to respond to Cage, or at the least a refusal to respond within parameters that might be expected by the organisers of the exhibition. In spite of the use of the word 'chance', and the invocation of chance processes, being so heavily determined in relation to Cage's legacy—which contextualise Nauman's otherwise very strange remark—Nauman clearly provokes a situation where his letter (I hesitate to say 'meaning') can go astray.

There is also the possibility that these events never took place. Nauman's anecdote is published in an exhibition catalogue some years later to accompany a different project. Nauman tells the story on the pretext of explaining the subtitle of the work in question, which is called *Mapping the Studio I (Fat Chance John Cage)*. It is possible that Nauman's story is a fabrication. Either way, it is interesting that Nauman creates the opportunity (the new work does not ostensibly have any direct connection to Cage, apart from the fact that it employs an element of chance or contingency) to report this incident and thus in a sense realises this piece of work retrospectively. Is Nauman's anecdote an explanation of his title, or is the title in fact a ruse to allow him to present the anecdote, which in itself constitutes a work? This reminds me of another remark made in an interview by Nauman. Here he states that he gained much from 'reading Cage', more perhaps than he did

from actually hearing his work (Nauman & Kraynak, 2005, 174). This comment is interesting in light of the emphasis on direct experience, sensation, corporeality etc. that is sometimes suggested in the critical literature on Nauman's work. Beyond this it seems to suggest that the actuality of what might be thought of as the work (i.e. Cage's compositions in opposition to the various traces of the texts, interviews, and correspondences that surround them), is not necessarily of primary importance in terms of Cage's influence or legacy. Nauman's fax (if it did exist) similarly does not take precedence in relation to the occasion of its reporting through Nauman's writing.

I believe this incident is a useful demonstration of the way in which art work operates within a discursive network; one in which the idea of the 'work in itself' becomes problematic (the word 'network' seems to strong, in that it primarily suggests connection, continuity, immanence, whereas Nauman suggests that disruption, loss and misapprehension are equally important). The same goes for the possibility of the event or exchange as locatable within a strictly demarcated region in time and space. Nauman's piece comments wryly on the conditions of influence, communication and realisation. This is not to say that the material conditions of the work are irrelevant – but that the work is never reducible to such conditions. It is instead something like a letter, or a fax, split between discourses, between existing and anticipated contexts. If these matters are pertinent to weakForce, it is because it is already more than an event, an exchange or a collaboration. It is a series of contingencies, propositions and influences. This not just a matter of saying that it is to be determined, synthesised or decided at some later date. Like Nauman's fax, that which doesn't eventuate directly, or reliably, within the frame of what is called the exhibition, in the limited sense, remains significant.

I hope this finds you well,

Stephen

Works Cited

Bruce Nauman & Christine Litz (2003) *AC: Bruce Nauman: Mapping the Studio I (Fat Chance, John Cage)* Köln: Museum Ludwig.

Bruce Nauman and Janet Kraynak (2005) *Please Pay Attention Please* Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

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