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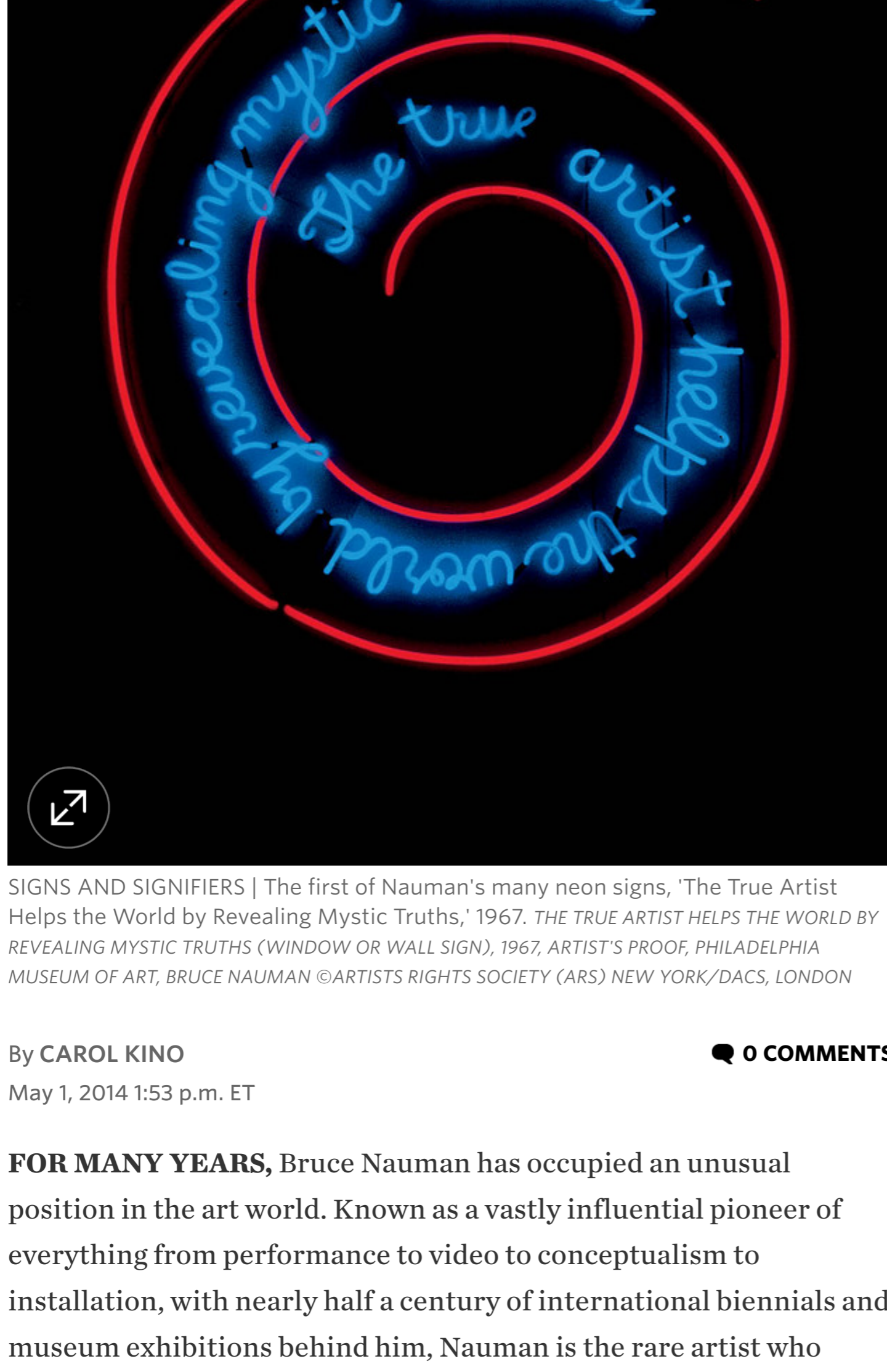
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## Pioneering Artist Bruce Nauman Releases a New Monograph

Throughout his long career, the famously reclusive artist has rarely agreed to interviews, so this month's publication of Phaidon's book on the artist, 'Bruce Nauman: The True Artist,' is truly a red-letter occasion



SIGNS AND SIGNIFIERS | The first of Nauman's many neon signs, 'The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths,' 1967. THE TRUE ARTIST HELPS THE WORLD BY REVEALING MYSTIC TRUTHS (WINDOW OR WALL SIGN), 1967, ARTIST'S PROOF, PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART; BRUCE NAUMAN ©ARTISTS' RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS) NEW YORK/DACS, LONDON

By CAROL KINO  
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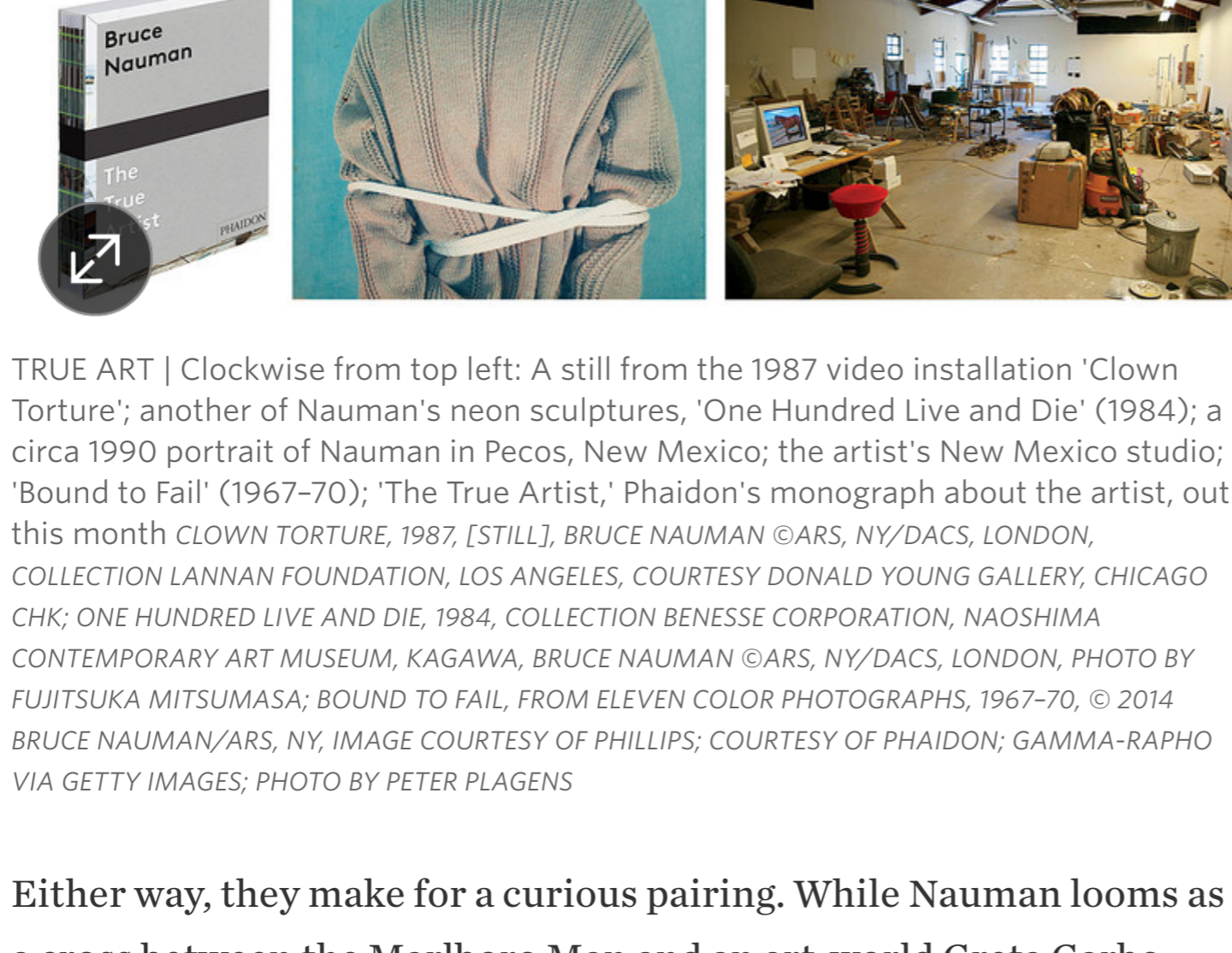
**FOR MANY YEARS**, Bruce Nauman has occupied an unusual position in the art world. Known as a vastly influential pioneer of everything from performance to video to conceptualism to installation, with nearly half a century of international biennials and museum exhibitions behind him, Nauman is the rare artist who seems entirely uninterested in pandering to the demands of his own celebrity—and he's been able to get away with it. In 1979, he moved to New Mexico, and he now spends most of his time on a 700-acre ranch south of Santa Fe, emerging from his cluttered studio only to train, breed and ride horses (and presumably to spend a little time with his wife of 25 years, the painter Susan Rothenberg). Communication with the outside world is conducted via his studio manager and gatekeeper of 29 years, Juliet Myers. And inquiries are often fruitless, as Nauman is known for almost always saying no to retrospectives, interviews or anything else that might "totalize," as he's said to put it, his work and career.

So this month's publication of Phaidon's monograph on the artist, *Bruce Nauman: The True Artist*, is a red-letter occasion, if only because it represents one of the rare moments when Nauman said yes. Written by Peter Plagens, an abstract painter who was the art critic for *Newsweek* from 1989 to 2003, the book has been in the works since 2008—or even longer, if you count the fact that Phaidon's co-publisher, Amanda Renshaw, had been trying to get Nauman to agree to a project since she joined the company more than 20 years ago.

Early on, Renshaw says, "I made a list of the artists I thought any self-respecting publisher of art books should make a book on. Nauman was one of the artists on the top of my list." Over the years, she adds, she must have suggested 20 different writers to him, always in vain. "I don't want anyone to write a complete career retrospective on me," Renshaw recalls hearing from Nauman's studio over and over. "That's not what I want."

But when Plagens came on board, the obstacles evanesced. The two men had known each other in Los Angeles in the 1970s, when Plagens was trying to establish himself as a painter and critic, and Nauman was, as Plagens writes, the "neighborhood famous artist," jumping to shows and grappling with his first career survey, which opened at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in late 1972, traveled to the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York and then toured Europe and America until 1974. For most of that decade, Plagens and Nauman had studios on the same block in Pasadena and they played in a weekly Santa Monica artists' basketball game. Plagens also performed in Nauman's 1975 film *Pursuit*, which features more than 24 minutes of footage of men and women running on a treadmill against a black background, panting desperately into the void while staying in place.

But other than that relatively casual acquaintance, "I couldn't say why Bruce said yes to me," says Plagens over lunch in the East Village, as we retrace the footsteps of his last interview with Nauman in New York. Maybe it was because they used to shoot the breeze about the Lakers, he suggests, or because they're both originally Midwesterners—Plagens born in Dayton, Ohio, and Nauman in Fort Wayne, Indiana. On another occasion, Plagens posits that it might just be because "we are grizzled old white guys of a certain age." (He's 73 to Nauman's 72.)



TRUE ART | Clockwise from top left: A still from the 1987 video installation 'Clown Torture'; another of Nauman's neon sculptures, 'One Hundred Live and Die' (1984); a circa 1990 portrait of Nauman in Pecos, New Mexico; the artist's New Mexico studio; 'Bound to Fall' (1967-70); 'The True Artist,' Phaidon's monograph about the artist, out this month. CLOWN TORTURE, 1987, [STILL], BRUCE NAUMAN ©ARS, NY/DACS, LONDON, COLLECTION LANNAN FOUNDATION, LOS ANGELES, COURTESY DONALD YOUNG GALLERY, CHICAGO; CHK; ONE HUNDRED LIVE AND DIE, 1984, COLLECTION BENESSE CORPORATION, NAOSHIMA CONTEMPORARY ART MUSEUM, KAGAWA, BRUCE NAUMAN ©ARS, NY/DACS, LONDON. PHOTO BY FUITSUKA MITSUMASA; BOUND TO FAIL, FROM ELEVEN COLOR PHOTOGRAPHS, 1967-70, © 2014 BRUCE NAUMAN/ARS, NY. IMAGE COURTESY OF PHILLIPS; COURTESY OF PHAIDON; GAMMA-RAPHO VIA GETTY IMAGES; PHOTO BY PETER PLAGENS

Either way, they make for a curious pairing. While Nauman looms as a cross between the Marlboro Man and an art-world Greta Garbo, Plagens, who contributes art criticism to *The Wall Street Journal*, is an unrepentant chatterbox who tends toward mighty digressions. But that's also what makes the book such a delight. Full of riffs on subjects ranging from the use of neon in art to the history of the Venice Biennale, it's as much a social history of the modern-day art world as it is a guide to Nauman's life and career.

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Plagens begins with Nauman's graduate-school days at the University of California, Davis, where he starts out as a figurative painter but ends up making sculptures from studio detritus and using his own rangy body to create performances and films. He also conceives of his first sculpture of negative volumes, like *A Cast of the Space Under My Chair* (1965-68). Next come the early years in San Francisco, where working in a storefront studio, he makes his first neon sign, a blue-and-red spiral that reads "The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths" (1967).

During this period, Nauman also makes a lot of punning color photographs that show him enacting verbal clichés, like *Bound to Fail* and *Eating My Own Words*. Plagens, encountering the images at the 1968 German art exhibition "Documenta," writes in the book that he found them "superficial" and "smart-alecky." In 1973, he gave Nauman's LACMA retrospective a damning *Artforum* review, which he quotes from extensively.

Yet as Plagens grew to realize over the years—"I was wrong," he writes—Nauman's work seems discomfiting at first, precisely because it is so original. With time, it also grows increasingly hard to categorize. In New Mexico, as Nauman starts training horses, his pieces become more challenging, and oddly grotesque, as in the 1988 sculpture *Hanging Carousel (George Skins a Fox)*, which puts taxidermy casts of animals circling on a merry-go-round. There's also the cartoonish 1987 video installation *Clown Torture*, featuring clowns who perform gags ad infinitum, one screaming, "No, no, no, no, no!"

*"I just found him kind of regular. He was never censorious. He never said, 'I'd really wish you didn't say this about me.'"*

—Peter Plagens

A strong sense of Nauman himself emerges in the book. In Plagens's description, he's certainly taciturn but also loyal and straightforward—a man's man who loves horses, picks up technical know-how quickly, maintains old friendships and enjoys good food. ("For all his everyday-ness, Nauman has a way of ferreting out

good restaurants when he's out of town on a project," Plagens writes.)

Nauman also, surprisingly, comes across as quite funny, even something of a wry practical joker. Asked to contribute an earthwork to a 1969 show in Pasadena, he plans to hire four planes to skywrite "Leave the Land Alone"—a counterintuitively pollution-spewing project that wasn't realized until 2009. And years after trying to skip large rocks across a river with the painter Frank Owen, who shot *Pursuit*, he gathers 40 pounds of perfectly shaped skipping stones from California and lugs them across the country to Owen's New York loft as a gift.

Despite the wealth of anecdotes and quotes, however, it turns out that Plagens interviewed Nauman for the book only three times: once at the ranch, when they stayed up most of the night watching Elvis Costello on TV while Nauman drank neat whiskey; once in Venice, Italy, when Nauman represented the United States at the Biennale in 2009; and once in New York, over lunch at the same restaurant we are visiting today. How did Plagens get so much out of him? "Bruce makes it sort of easy," he says. "I just found him kind of regular." Plagens was also surprised to find that Nauman, whose work is often described as "controlling," never once tried to control his depiction. "He was never censorious. He never said, 'I'd really wish you didn't say this about me.'"

People who are close to Nauman seem to agree with this portrayal. "Bruce controls his sphere, his output, his production, his art," says Angela Westwater, his longtime New York dealer. "But if it's someone else's job or profession, he sees it differently."

Maybe that's why Nauman finally agreed to be "totalized" by Plagens. Maybe he realized someone would do it eventually, and he'd rather it be someone who was unlikely to indulge in hagiography.

But when I try to interview Nauman to find out if this is true, he won't speak with me directly. Instead, he sends a message through his devoted studio manager, Myers, who calls as Nauman is returning to the studio. "Bruce said yes to this monograph," Myers repeats carefully, as if she is reading from a script, "because Peter is a different kind of writer and he's known him on and off for many years." Then she delivers the kicker: "But what Bruce really loves about Peter is that Peter does all the talking."



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