

Diana Abells  
Full Statement

## ARTIST STATEMENT

It is possible that I became interested in art because I was a scientist.

For as long as I can remember, I wanted to figure out what the world really was. Not in terms of word or equation but rather in terms of my body. I have laid on my back, with one leg sprawled out across the floor and the other stretched up a nearby wall, trying to map out where vertical meets horizontal, wondering how my body fits into that axis. The force of the wall and floor push back at me, and, as my blood flows with primal urgency, a Cartesian coordinate space springs up against my legs. This is the beginning of physics, where objects are taken out of their original world and placed in specifically defined coordinate space. My goal is to take physical analysis out of its abstract space by defining a new space with the physical and cognitive properties of the human body. I take in raw data of my motion, through video and observational drawing, and then frame it in a new coordinate system that contains details describing both the visceral experience of that motion and the body's cognition of that motion. Through this process, I want to figure out a way to observe and measure the world as a function of the body's physical experience of it.

Our observation of the world is defined by the parameters of our body. What we see is a function of the eye, and what we feel is a function of the fingertips. While the reality of the physical world is more efficiently contained by constructed mathematical equations, useful for manipulating large entities of data, when it comes time to extrapolate this information back to physical reality, data can become meaningless unless we relate it back to our physical experience of the world. I believe a human's ability to see reality through all the mathematics is contingent

upon a less scientific means of description. At this point, description becomes more subjective because we must rely on our own perceptions of the situation. To be more direct in my study of my experience of space, in lieu of equations, I began to study physics through the body. I am interested in how I can observe the world through the body's physical movements.

Experiments with physical motion often yield results in terms of the mind's awareness of physical motion. The opposite is true as well: a cerebral awareness of the body directs its physical responses. I am interested in using my visual experiments to reveal the interface of the body's cognizance and physicality. My images of body parts solving puzzles, tugging on objects, or gesturing at each other, create a space where sensual observation and perceptual experience merge. I am able to effectively create this space when I can physically take the real motion of my body and re-frame it to describe my experience moving. Thus, the actual process of staging physical motion is a significant part of my artwork, and I use video to record the physical results of my kinetic experiments. By using editing techniques such as filming upside down, or overlaying two video clips, I translate the raw data of my motion into a new coordinate system, which changes the perspective of the viewer, and consequently their perception of the body.

I ultimately want to ground my ideas about our existence in space in the most tangible, spatial and universal object available to us: our bodies. My inspiration comes directly from observing the body. My resulting artwork creates a new space to examine the world through the body. This new space is constructed at the point where cognition and physical experience merge, and presents a place where both schematic map and sensual experience combine, revealing the physical truths viewers have always known and felt, but perhaps have never seen.

## BRUCE NAUMAN

The artist Bruce Nauman has been one of my sources for analyzing my physical and cognitive experiences in the world through the video medium. His empirical approach to examining the world allows him to consider the world literally, in terms of what actually exists in space. He presents his thoughts and considerations directly with minimally edited video. Nauman makes use of raw materials, simple shapes, and the natural body acting out realistic and simple tasks in order to familiarize himself with simple physical experiences. Nauman's work covers a lot of mediums and concepts. I'm most interested in his earlier (1960s-70s) video and photographic work that examines the body, especially when he uses his manipulation of his own body to describe a physical experience. Nauman captures my interest in how he grounds the fundamental and intangible experiences of life in the physical actions of his body. He proves and maps out existence by physically being in the world, touching it and presenting it in a simple way for us to compare our experiences against his experiences. I find that my videos are the result of investigations into my own sensations and perceptions, and Nauman's work is likewise a subjective analysis of his motion and actions. Our work is not autobiographical, but it acknowledges our viewpoints and narratives as artists who can create and examine things.

In the early 1970s, Nauman made architectonic installations that were designed to make viewers aware of the space they move through. He also began to make film installations that worked similarly to his sculptural installations. His film *Spinning Spheres*, from 1970, containing footage of metallic spheres spinning around, was projected from floor to ceiling on all walls of a gallery space, such that it took over the space (Iles 37). Viewers in the gallery are forced to deal with the illusion of the space in a very physical way because their bodies are

immersed in the projections. The result is Nauman's ability to remove the body from tangible coordinates of space. It is a creation of a new world. In my own work, such as in my video *Legs*, I have attempted to create a similar image of reformulated space. What I have found in my own results, which is verified by Nauman's perceptions, is a heightened awareness of the body.

Nauman began using film and cameras because he believed he could use them to capture and communicate "strange situations," meaning that he could capture fleeting experiences and motions that typically go unseen (Bruggen 225). His own performances on camera center on examining and manipulating his body in order to dig deeper into an understanding of our physical existence. In his films like *Pulling Mouth* from 1969, he portrays himself as an artist in his studio busy at work, pulling on his face with his hand, as if experimenting to see how his body exists in space. His simple editing techniques, such as filming upside down or closely cropping the image of the figure, re-frame the viewer's perspective of the body because he is able to remove references to a typical spatial construct.

In my work, I have tried to emulate how his performances allow the body to become lost in abstract movements and gestures that fall out of context. Through what I choose to film, and how I manipulate it, I can change the frame of reference in which we consider the human body. I keep my setup fairly minimal, and create most illusions in the actual filming and staging. Like Nauman, this has allowed me to see the body from a new perspective, while maintaining a simple, amateur-style camera setup and staging. This coincides with my ideas of being an artist in the midst of experimentation. Working this way, I found that video could be ideal for recording my ideas immediately, in almost a raw state of being. I can thus capture exactly what is seen, as data, but then use video editing to translate the footage into a new coordinate system.

In his artist statement *Notes and Projects* from 1970, Nauman takes on the tone of a scientist describing several of his works as activities to be set up like experiments. In a series of ideas he lists “Manipulation or observation of self in extreme or controlled situations: observation of manipulations; manipulation of observations” (Stiles 607). He puts a tremendous focus on examining the sensual and perceptual aspects of life, such as what causes his own sensations, and how he can redirect those sensations to affect others. To objectify the intangible elements of the body, Nauman affirms that “an awareness of yourself comes from a certain amount of activity and you can’t get it from just thinking about yourself” (Bruggen 228). His thoughts and theories are made physical through his experimentation and documentation of his body through video. The mark of a good scientific experiment is its ability to be repeated by others. The familiarity of his simple body movements allows viewers to relate to his physical experiments because the viewers are capable of moving and feeling the same way. Thus, I turn to video and the body to document and hold my own physical experiments and illusions of space.

#### Works Cited

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## WILLIAM WEGMAN

William Wegman is an artist whose work spans many mediums, including photography, drawing, painting, and video. Famous for his photographs of his weimaraners, often posed and dressed in costumes, his work is often filled with a lighthearted and witty humor. I was naturally attracted to his imaginative staging of playful experiments. I found that the act of playing can turn out to be a form of focused study, without the parameters of scientific integrity or philosophy. Through his images and videos of dogs with human arms and hands, haphazardly performing simple tasks, Wegman scrutinizes gesture and action within the theatrical façade. I have worked to create a stage presence for my figures and objects by setting up simple, minimal environments and tasks, as well as acting calm, rational, and light-hearted when carrying out my experiments in gesture and action.

Wegman's dedication to so many mediums is a result of the fact he understands how each medium can convey something different, and his variety of ideas necessitates a variety of means of communication. In my work on my SMP, Wegman has been a source of guidance in how I approach communicating through a video medium, and how that medium can exist in context of my drawings. Similar ideas emerge in both my drawing and video work, but each medium has a specific way to revealing my ideas. Video has been the medium I use to show motion, and drawing has been the medium I use to show form. Drawing becomes a permanent map of line and shadow, and video becomes an immersive experience as a map of motion. Wegman described his attraction to video as exciting because of the similarities and differences to TV (Wegman 25). I understand this as the idea that video has the mask of TV, such that viewers can rely on the process of being shown moving images, but video doesn't have to communicate the same mold of stories or structures that TV has become associated with. Like drawing, the

process of video recording constructs and defines line, which viewers can visually see and examine. I hope that my simultaneous exhibit of drawing and video reveals the similarities of the two media.

When I began working with video in the second semester, I was particularly interested in how it would be able to reveal realistic motion and a straightforward sequence of time in narrative events. I also wanted to film things quickly in order to capture my ideas. The way I staged my videos, I relied on simple, clean, and minimal setups. This allowed the focus of the video to remain on the action of the scene. Wegman's description of using video lined up with my ideas of why I wanted to use video and how I wanted it to look. He describes his use of familiar household props, set and lighting to be unassuming and straight-forward. Viewers can see what he set up, and even how he set it up, and recognize these objects and places in their own lives. My creations of familiar gestures, actions or puzzles are repeatable and familiar creations. Viewers can approach the video with a sense of familiarity and understanding. Wegman does this by re-creating stereotypical narratives or vignettes, or by manipulating a familiar gesture.

Wegman felt that video would allow him to expand the range of subject matter in his work, and deal with things that really meant something to him, what he describes as "the kinds of things you tend to catch yourself thinking about whether you're supposed to or not." (Wegman 25) I found that video could be ideal for recording random ideas immediately, in a way that aligned with how I naturally thought about these ideas: in motion. I could document my own activities, and I could fabricate scenes derived from my own random activities. Wegman's own transition into film began when he realized both photography and video could be more than documentation tools. In an interview, David Ross notes Wegman's work shows that video could be a function of drawing rather than cinema. While his videos often have a fundamental

beginning, middle and end, they are ultimately an exploration in the theatrical equivalents of line and form (Ross 17).

Ross noticed that in much of his work, especially in the videos and drawings, Wegman seemed to be struggling with a “world that doesn’t work” (Ross 19). Wegman’s response was to tell a story of a boy who used to play in a gravel driveway, enjoying the small pebbles, only to return one day to find the driveway paved (Ross 21). In context of his work, I understand this anecdote as the idea that he wants to dig through, find and examine the little and obscure things in life. Wegman’s film *Gray Hairs* (1976) is a mix of overlaid panning shots across his dog’s back, and reveals how deeper inspection of the simple world around us can create a new level of space and world. (Simon 106). It is a realistic image, but it becomes abstract and formalist. It can be geological in how it reveals layers and build up of material, yet it is fundamentally anatomical. While I may toy with what appears to be mundane objects, body parts, or motions, I find that this level of examination reveals new worlds and objects. In my video *Arms*, I show footage of my arms, overlaid, to create a new creature from the movement, gesture, and spatial construct of the arms. The truth of the actual world is implicit in the video recording, but the ability of video editing to crop out the rest of the world, and overlay clips allows for the visual truth of reality to be dissected. At this point, I find video to be the most accurate and acute observer.

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## PHYSICS

I often think about physics when I think about art. I am fascinated by how both fields of study can capture abstract ideas and make them concrete. Physics and art share the requirements of observation and description. Physicists strive to create descriptive equations and models for our environment. Likewise, artists make models and descriptions of the same environment, offering just as much insight and precision as equations. I have tried to create images of what I see in the world around me, as a function of my own bodily perceptions and physical experiences. Author Leonard Shlain describes the intersection of physics and art on the common ground of investigations into the nature of reality (16).

One of the ways that physics and art both study reality is through imagination. Philosopher Immanuel Kant stated that our senses and mind filter reality and nature. We are forced to peer out at reality through our senses and formulate ideas about what it must really be like (Shlain 22). Thus, internally imagining is required to make advancements in our perception. In my recent video work for my SMP, I have attempted to document a “more real” existence and awareness of the body in space and time. By being playful and carefully using the frame of the video to stage my experiments, I hoped to incite viewer’s imaginations, forcing thought about what the body is and what it can do. I emphasize senses of sound and touch in order to speak to viewers through their own senses, such that they might perceive a new reality.

The fascinating thing about physics is that it describes what is happening at the most fundamental level of existence for anything in our world. Beneath the physical world that we do see, physics describes fundamental particles that make up our macroscopic world. When making videos and drawings, I am very aware of the seemingly infinite chain of structure and motion that reduces down to fundamental particles and space. Author Peter Pearce’s book *Structure in*

*Nature is a Strategy for Design* reveals how natural structures reduce to a fundamental framework governed by physics. The resulting framework is one of simplicity and repetition. Pearce stresses the major theme in structure is “minimum inventory and maximum diversity” (xii). Systems that follow this make use of a small number of input units to create a virtually infinite number of outputs. For instance in our world, there is a small number of chemical elements that make up the tremendous variety of substances and materials we know. The process of understanding the world in terms of physics relies on reducing the world down to a small number of physical forces and systems. Diagrammatic drawings in space reveal these fundamental forces and actions. For my most recent drawings, I have found that I am able to best capture a sense of underlying structure in the body when I limit my materials to simple pencil and paper drawings, of simple isolated forms. This process helps me to see and then reveal to my viewers a focused and particular interaction of body parts or objects.

Reiterating how fundamental physics really is, Pearce develops a visual approach to reveal how a variety of natural objects, even those that appear to be random, always follow an underlying guide of triangular “closest-packing” principles (7). From plant forms, to random bubble clusters, to a giraffe’s skin pattern, a structure of fundamental triangles shines through. This persistence of form throughout nature has determined what we make, how we see, and what we define as aesthetic.

Physics is ultimately an objective science, where the reality of the physical world is efficiently contained by mathematical equations because such statements define and present material without bias or emotion. However, when it comes time to extrapolate this information back to the real world, data can become meaningless. The physicists’ ability to see reality through all the mathematics is contingent upon a less scientific means of description. They must

rely on perceptions from within their selves. It is a mix of the personal experience with physical understandings of the world that I have tried to create in my artworks. The work relies on the observers' ability to merge their cognitive perceptions of the world with their physical, sensual experiences of the world.

#### Works Cited

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