

Arts & Entertainment

Bruce Nauman and his touring torture chamber

Generous Joe Hirshhorn is rolling in his grave.

Winning security guards stationed on the second floor wear orange earplugs to dim the racket coming from the Hirshhorn Museum's latest exhibit.

At its entrance, a warning sign is posted — "This Show May Be Inappropriate For Children and Sensitive Adults." Oh no, "Bruce Nauman" is in town.

Dante might have known better what to say about this touring extravaganza of 60 works in video, voice, neon, holography, photography, pornography, more pornography and perversion by one of America's most controversial artists. Occupying a whole ring of galleries, it is an infernal slog for even the most obdurate of contemporary art viewers.

You could criticize the 30-year retrospective just because so much of it is immature. Homoerotic clowns — the erections blink on and off — in neon. Four-letter profanity — the obvious words — in syncoated neon. A film of the artist painting his naked torso in oil paint. Did this man get developmentally stuck at age 13?

What makes the exhibit par-

ticularly terrible is the fierce brutality Bruce Nauman, 53, aims at the viewer. This is immoral. Brechtian, totalitarian, it is aggression disguised as art.

Mr. Nauman uses the context of art for a variety of pseudo-psychological experiments, and as an occasion for assault. No hyperbole; he said it himself.

Experiencing his installations should be "like getting hit in the face with a baseball bat. Or better, like getting hit in the back of the neck. You never see it coming; it just knocks you down," Mr. Nauman told Art in America in 1988.

So in the Hirshhorn retrospective (which already has been seen in Madrid, Minneapolis and Los Angeles), he treats the audience to such subtle experiences as the 1988 installation "Learned Helplessness in Rats (Rock and Roll Drummer)."

You enter a darkened gallery. Dumb-dumb-tang! Tangitty-tang! An ear-splitting solo drum tag ricochets around your head. There is a video projector in the middle of the room sending alternating images to the far wall: a hysterical rat up close, sniffing through a see-through maze, then the annoying drum-

Art / Eleanor Kennelly

WHAT: Bruce Nauman

WHEN: Through Jan. 29

WHERE: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Independence Avenue at Seventh Street SW

SPONSORS: Lannan Foundation, Bohlen Foundation, Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, National Endowment for the Arts

RELATED EVENTS: Lecture by Village Voice art critic Peter Schjeldahl, Dec. 4, 4 p.m.

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mer beating out his inane repetition.

Farther along, another recent one-room installation uses repetition, noise and grusome images to shock. "Carousel" is a macabre cross between a slaughterhouse and a merry-go-round. Around and around go life-sized polyurethane dummies of dogs and deer on a rotating crossbar.

Not satisfied to combine images of death and innocence, he adds an aural attack, a mind-numbing squuuuuurrrreeeeeeeech to the carousel motor.

How on earth did this man enter the canon of contemporary art? Things used to be prettier, which you can see in his early work, and Mr. Nauman used to have more fun. But he always has used easy tricks to depict the unsavory.

He emerged in the late 1960s with post-minimalist sculptors such as Robert Morris and Richard Serra who wanted to make things that did not conform, things animated by ideas and philosophical inquiry, anti-establishment things, anti-museum things.

Especially for his combinations of neon and language, and his use of his own body as the primary subject, he gained an influential following among art elites here and abroad as an "artist's artist."

In the 1970s, Mr. Nauman began to explore themes of surveillance, torture and cruelty. Many of these pieces are overtly political. "South America Triangle" is a 1981 installation owned by the Hirshhorn Museum. Composed of a 14-foot triangle of steel beams suspended by cable in midair, an inverted iron chair hangs in the middle.

The installation shares with some of Mr. Nauman's more



A scene from Bruce Nauman's video "Clown Torture," where a clown in a dark, claustrophobic room keeps shrieking "No! No!"

traditional sculpture a formal elegance from its simple use of material and straightforward symbolism of interrogation. Quiet, it does not in itself harass the museumgoer.

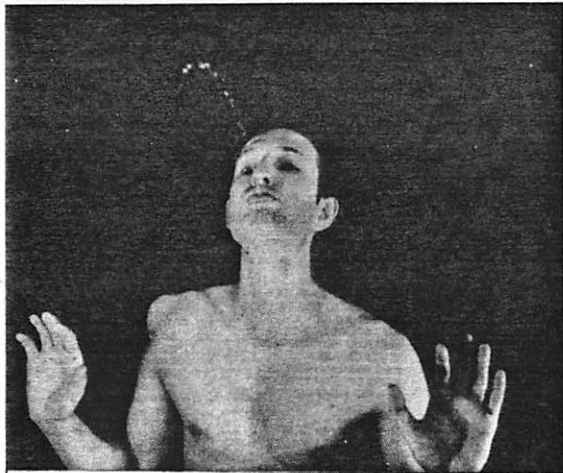
But Mr. Nauman crosses a line into politically correct assault and battery in many of his recent contrivances. Instead of critiquing torture, he tortures.

Twelve TV monitors show scenes of an abusive couple fighting in "Violent Incident." A dark, claustrophobic room is

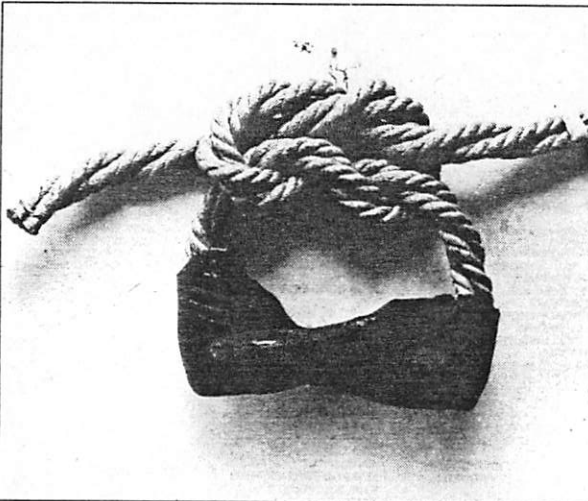
filled with a clown shrieking "No! No!" as part of "Clown Torture." All over the museum, among sculpture by Rodin, Matisse and Daumier — Mr. Hirshhorn's treasures — the wailing voice is heard.

Because he uses hired actors for the installations, Mr. Nauman can pretend no one is hurt. But we are badly affected, forced to be passive witnesses to a decomposing spirit.

No joke, this nihilism is, at base, cultural destruction.



A photo titled "Self-Portrait as a Fountain." The 30-year retrospective also includes homoerotic clowns and four-letter profanity in neon.



Another work by Mr. Nauman, this one untitled. The exhibit runs through Jan. 29 at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden.