

# Words before (against) words

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"I realized that I would never have a clearly defined working process. I would need to reinvent it over and over. That was truly depressing. (...) When I sit down and want to look at how I did the last work, it doesn't help me with the next one."<sup>1</sup> Bruce Nauman

In some ways, *Bodies of my Work* forces me to tidy up and revisit what I've done, taking note of what has accompanied me for years, those things that I cannot let go of, or what has been completed. I want to know how what I conceptualize and what results as a work are connected and whether or how this becomes visible through *Bodies of my Work*.

For some of my works, I know exactly what they should look like before I start on them, and then just jump in and see what emerges. It can be satisfying to systematically 'complete' what I had envisioned and to see the reality of the work as an end point. I like this conceptual approach, and the certainty of knowledge remaining 'stable', but I also (performatively) struggle against it. This is because, no matter how I plan 'something' in a conceptual sense, it diverges from that notion in the act of doing. Things fall into place. I get surprised. Excitement courses through my veins. My thinking unfolds in the process.

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Nauman: *Interviews 1967-1988*. Amsterdam: Fundus-Bücher 1996, S. 148. (German version.)

Some of the works shown here are a result of processing problems that I want to understand. Technical, practical, or theoretical questions and assertions can serve as starting points. Appropriation is a frequent driver and theme. I practice reality and structure with a work and 'invent' rules. For example, with *Three voices* [WVZ 86]<sup>2</sup>, I had to re-learn Slovakian.<sup>3</sup> For *The Speech* [WVZ 92], I wanted to let the audience participate in my brainstorming of the performance. I composed a speech for a large audience, staged in the cramped confines of a locker room. As part of the exhibition, *In my name* [WVZ 93], I included the main room of the Vienna Secession in the similarly titled video work and I gave control over the creative act to four writers who ghostwrote the opening speeches.<sup>4</sup>

When researching and developing works, I am sometimes guided by feelings, moods, and perceptions that only become 'tangible' in the working process – for example, when humor breaks through or shame arises because I am embarrassed by a result. Sometimes, many well-made decisions and a few lucky coincidences merge with pinpoint accuracy. These are the 'really great' works. But I don't want to 'only' focus on those: Instead, I want to briefly bring trial runs, failed or discarded projects to the fore, and make those movements of thought that are more like a faint murmur than a finished work visible or perceivable: They circle, sting, and implode. Parameters slip. I fumble around, stumble, and fall. Searching, movements without knowledge, out of focus, wandering, dawdling, hanging out. Some of that stuff gets stuck in the body and patiently waits for the perfect moment to come to the surface, as if out of the blue. Some video studies and *experiments with potential* serve to demonstrate this.

One event in particular shook my understanding of artistic progress. I considered the exhibition *In my name* as having the potential to open up new figurative doors and spaces for me. However, almost without response, my attention has wandered more towards film, the visual arts have left me alone, whether real or just sensed.

The video shoot for *So Far Real* [WVZ 98] opened up new spaces of possibilities<sup>5</sup>, that leave the staged and the real unclear. It allowed me to include the villa's exhibition space in the movie: In a cinematic-associative way I connected the 'talking heads' from the interviews with the rooms and the performer in the villa. In the film, the protagonists alternate between showing, representing, 'talking about something', acting, remembering, and being. Since that time, those blurred boundaries between documentary and fictional narratives have accompanied me to varying degrees and in differing forms. The key aspects here are how memory, both spatial and physical, as well as language interact with one another. I grew more and more interested in the possibilities of autofictional stories, where personal experience, participation,

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<sup>2</sup> WVZ is the shortcut for *Index of works*, followed by the specific number of the work in the catalogue.

<sup>3</sup> I wrote the initial text in German. In the video, I speak the Slovakian text in a voice-over.

<sup>4</sup> The four speeches can be read in: *In my name*, exhibition catalogue, Secession Vienna. Berlin: Revolver Verlag, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> I wish to thank Barbara Naegelin, an artist friend, who invited me to Villa Renata in Basel.

and empathy intersect. By translating my themes and messages into an artistic medium, I share something personal with the world. This creates a sense of bearing witness that makes the audience complicit to some degree. Since 2020, I have been trying to explicitly link personal history and collective memory, to sketch the relationship between social structures and individual experience, as well as to poetically mark power relations and inequalities or address the reproduction of social inequality. It is an ongoing quest for multiple perspectives, where certain voices are heard and others are less loud. My first feature-length film *Becoming Outline* [WVZ 127] bears testament to this intensive exploration.

Unlike my video works, where I shape space and time through concept, editing and language, drawing connects and binds me to time in a more continuous way. My drawings make visible the strange clash of wanting to depict a 'reality', to record and to document instead of creating 'stories'. I resist the urge to invent something. Some drawings make me uncomfortable. In trying to 'depict' things, to get as 'close' to them as possible, I become hung up on details and get lost in the lines. But who is going to tell my right hand to stop moving? When my hand takes over and my brain switches to a meditative state, I become happier. This makes me want to continue drawing until the sheet is (almost) entirely covered and ends up, crumpled and useless, stuffed in a drawer.

I have longed for an archive catalogue of this kind for so long. Looking back and tidying up was quite a lot of work. Now *Bodies of my Work* is organized as a pink-colored archive with catalogue raisonné numbers that invite both chronological reading and – thanks to its numerous cross-references – non-linear reading. My descriptive texts on the individual works were written contemporaneously – heterogeneously in terms of both style and content – and bear witness to different attentions and foci. The 'original manuscripts', which are marked in red as 'scans or text scripts' in the *index of works*<sup>6</sup>, refer either to text, performance, or sound works, or record what is spoken or written in video works. They are also integrated into the archive – alongside descriptions and many small illustrations of the individual works. The blue-colored pages – the wonderful texts by Claudia Slanar, Sabine Winkler and Jens Kastner – each have their own voice.

At last, all of this is bundled together in one book. What a reward!  
I am happy to share *Bodies of my Work* with you!

mb, Vienna, January 2024

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<sup>6</sup> An overview of the *Index of works* can be found immediately afterwards on pages 14 to 21. All page references to the single works can also be found there.