

## Art Agency, Partners

Art Agency, Partners is a bespoke art advisory firm founded in 2014, and built upon decades of combined experience, to provide counsel to many of the world's leading art collectors and institutions on collection assessment and development, estate planning, and innovative approaches to museum giving and growth.

## Body and Soul

### Looking Back to Move Forward



Bruce Nauman, *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii*, 2015/16 (still from Study vii). © 2018 Bruce Nauman / Artists Rights Society (ARS), courtesy Sperone Westwater, New York

By Allan Schwartzman

Published 20 December 2018 in [Allan's Intro](#)

This is the time of year when top ten lists proliferate: a time to look back and take stock of the year. While there is an appeal in wrapping up 2018 with a bow, I don't really look at time that way (I lose track of time all the time).

It is obvious, though, that we are living through a particularly complex and muddled period in which there is more disruption than clarity. I have seen a lot of great art this year, been fortunate to be able to place some very special works in wonderful collections and taken on thrilling new advisory projects. And yet so much of my time has been spent grappling with where we are in art during these vexing times.

When I try to make sense of art today, it feels similar to the 1970s—a period during which the rule book was thrown out, and artists splintered into byways of plurality. Then as now, it was unclear where art was going. Looking back with the benefit of hindsight, we can now recognize the 1970s as one of the most exciting and epoch-transforming decades in the history of modern culture. But then, that was a daring, liberating and revolutionary time for art while today feels rife with careerism,

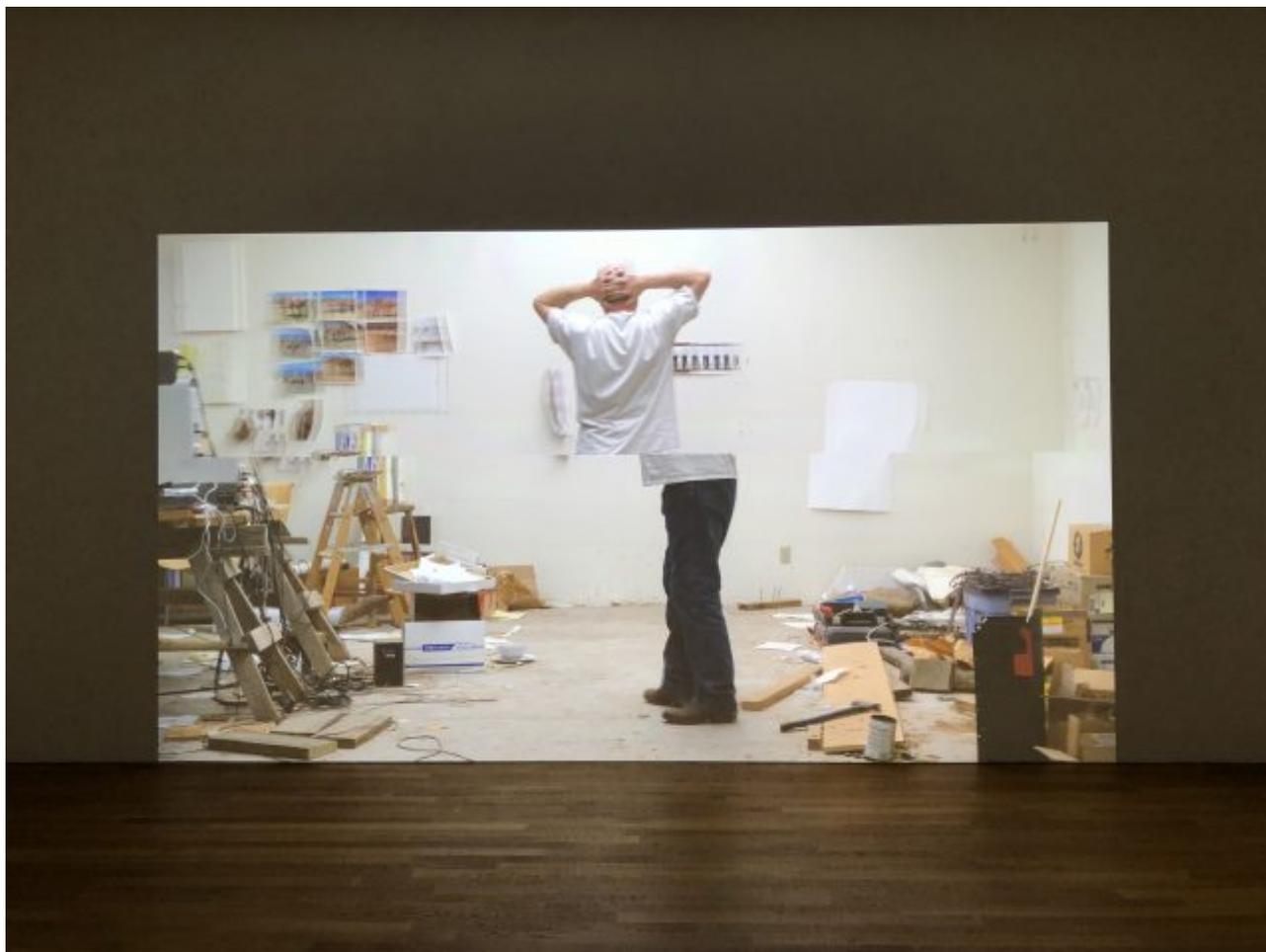
stylistic conservatism, and sophomoric (or base) chess moves.

I have a nagging sense that we are in a post-art period where work of true greatness and vision is barely making itself known, if at all. This is one of several issues: another is the sharp decrease in supply of A+ work demanded by today's collectors (made by an increasingly narrow list of artists), and the concomitant decline of market interest in the work of living artists (whose names are not on the list). There has been a dramatic shift in the spirit of (and commitment to) collecting as a newer group of collectors surpasses an aging-out generation that is losing the appetite to attend the grand feast conjured up by a hyped and often superficial market.

At the same time, we are in a rich period in which the work of great artists who had previously been ignored or compartmentalized is being rediscovered, especially work by African American and female artists of the postwar years. But to many of us these artists were not hidden: they have simply been excluded from the feast that began in earnest when the market began writing the history of the art of our times in the early 1980s.

I keep asking "Why now?" Why are we replaying the recent past? I think, precisely, because we didn't get it right. Look at all those in leadership positions in various industries who were abusing their power sexually, as we have discovered in recent years. There has been a huge resurgence of the women's movement, as society at large is beginning to shout that it is mad as hell and not going to take it anymore.

And so, I am beginning to see this from the other side: maybe we are reexamining the past because the present can be so damned scary, corrupt, indecent and obscene. Society itself is demanding we get it right. To what extent it will succeed, I am not at all confident. But I do have abundant confidence in the world of art to lead the way.



Bruce Nauman, *Contrapposto Split* (2017). © 2018 Bruce Nauman / Artists Rights Society (ARS), courtesy Sperone Westwater, New York

For me, a person who has never really thought of December as a time to reflect backwards and set goals forwards, the spirit of our times is most poignantly and hauntingly encapsulated in the great retrospective "[Bruce Nauman: Disappearing Acts](#)" (at MoMA and MoMA PS1 until 18 February and 25 February respectively).

This exhibition of one of the greatest, most compelling and most incisive artists of our times roughly begins with a key early video work, *Walk with Contrapposto* (1968), and ends with a revisitation of it (*Contrapposto Split*, 2017). *Walk with*

*Contrapposto* is a key early work, in which the artist takes the classical sculptural pose of a contrapposto out of the object and into the body of the artist in real time and space.

In a later rendition—the most recently made work in the exhibition—the basic technology of early video art displayed on a monitor has been transformed into an enveloping environmental experience, the lithe, youthful, artist-maker now old, his body split at the waistline and moving in opposing directions in 3-D video, a colostomy bag casually visible as the split artist seems to move forward and back at the same time.

In art and the art market, we are at a crossroads of body and soul: the market becoming more efficient as it forensically consolidates; and art in search of its soul, looking to the past to prepare for a future while searching for meaning. There may be moments of brutal cleansing in the process of getting there, but I do believe that clarity, wealth of content and purpose are not so far around the corner.

Wishing everyone peace, clarity and conviction for 2019.