

As a young artist in the 1960s, Bruce Nauman used video, photography, sound recording, and various sculptural materials in a wide-ranging practice that the artist regarded as an “investigative activity”—a practice not restricted by limitations of medium or traditional lines of inquiry.¹ Fascinated by Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophical writings on logic and language, Nauman has used words—in riddles, puns, and other language puzzles—as one of the few constants in his highly diverse oeuvre. In several early sculptures, he experimented with translating idiomatic phrases into visual form: *From Hand to Mouth* (1967), for instance, is a wax cast of exactly that expanse of the body; while *Henry Moore Bound to Fail* (1967) presents a relief of a pair of arms bound behind the back with rope—a sly takedown of the eponymous modernist sculptor's relevance as well as an elegant illustration of the title's familiar last three words.

Phrases soon entered Nauman's work in a more explicit way. After finishing graduate school, Nauman set up a studio in San Francisco in a former grocery store with a large display window. Noticing the neon signage decorating the windows of nearby businesses, Nauman had a sign fabricated for his own, a red-and-blue spiral of words proclaiming the work's title: *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths* (1967). Ambiguous in its seriousness of intent, the piece is also—depending on its context—ambiguous in its status as an art object, which was exactly what intrigued Nauman: “I had an idea that I could make art that would kind of disappear—an art that was supposed to not quite look like art. In that case, you wouldn't really notice it until you paid attention. Then, when you read it, you would have to think about it.”² Of course, a neon sign in a window normally functions as a mode of advertising display; Nauman's inaugural sign “advertised” the nature of the



Bruce Nauman, *Silver Livres*. 1974
Neon tubing with clear glass tubing suspension frame
11 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 19 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ " (30.2 × 49.7 × 7 cm)
Collection Ealan and Melinda Wingate

labor being performed by the artist in the space behind the illuminated window. Neon signs quickly proliferated in his work, at times anagrammatic (as in *Raw War* and *Run from Fear/Fun from Rear*), at times conceptual (as in *My Name as Though It Were Written on the Surface of the Moon*, in which each letter in “Bruce” is repeated many times over, as though floating in the thin atmosphere of outer space).

Silver Livres, a neon sign fabricated with two sets of tubing in different colors (green over yellow for the word “silver,” pink over orange for “livres”) was made for Nauman’s 1974 show at Galerie Ileana Sonnabend in Paris. The exhibition also featured the multipartite neon work *Silver Grotto*; consisting of five phrases fabricated in white and red neon, that work reads, THIS IS THE SILVER GROTTTO / YOU CANT HELP ME / I CANT HEAR YOU / PLACATE ART / PLACATE MY ART. For Nauman, the work expresses “an attempt to regain some control over the making of his own work—a kind of incantation to appease the gods, ‘to get the rain to come and the corn to grow.’”³ *Silver Livres* was made as an additional work to accompany this large-scale poetic installation, and, unusually, the anagram is bilingual (the letters of the word “silver” rearranged to spell “livres,” French for “books”)—presumably inspired by the Parisian setting for the exhibition.⁴ If Nauman considered *Silver Grotto* an “appeasement” to the gods or an “incantation,” “silver books” summons up quasi-religious associations: after all, only words of the greatest importance deserve inscription on precious metal. c.l.

1. As quoted in Neal Benezra, “Surveying Nauman,” in *Bruce Nauman*, ed. Joan Simon (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1994), p. 13.

2. Brenda Richardson, *Bruce Nauman: Neons* (Baltimore: Baltimore Museum of Art, 1982), p. 20.

3. Richardson, *Neons*, p. 22.

4. Nauman recalls designing another foreign-language neon for his German dealer, Konrad Fischer, but it was never fabricated. See Richardson, *Neons*, p. 84.



PLACATE MY ART

Bruce Nauman, *Silver Grotto* (detail), installed at Galerie Ileana Sonnabend, Paris, 1974