

Violin Tuned D.E.E.D.
G Douglas Barrett, 2010

“Music plays a role in a lot of my work, even when there is no music.”
—Bruce Nauman¹

“Plagiarism implies progress, which is also progress toward a death already immanent in every repetition. Everything doubled is dead.”
—Paul Mann²

Violin Tuned D.E.A.D. (1969) is one of a series of performances artist Bruce Nauman created in the 1960s and ‘70s which involved simple, often repetitive and ritualistic activities, “exercises” the artist performed alone in his studio, and which Nauman recorded, first using film and later using video. For nearly an hour, in *Violin Tuned D.E.A.D.*, the artist stands with his back facing the camera and bows the open strings of a retuned violin. Nauman draws the bow quickly across all four strings, pauses for a few seconds, and repeats. Artist and theorist Seth Kim-Cohen explains that the work “enacts a jumbled cross-reference of the code of Western notation with the code of the English alphabet. Instead of tuning the violin according to harmonic logic, Nauman tunes it according to linguistic logic, facetiously declaring the instrument and, by association, the tradition of Western music embedded in the violin, to be dead.”³

I am interested in the Nauman work as an instance in which the ordinarily socially living spectacle of the musical concert is turned inward to the artist’s studio—perhaps even solipsistically, the term performance art critic André Lepecki uses to describe Nauman’s “dance” work, *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square* (1967-8)⁴—and from this mediated form, is pronounced dead. My work meditates on the question as to whether *Violin Tuned D.E.A.D.* announces this death sentence outside of a proper musical domain or proposes a new location for musical action: video performance.

Continuing this meditation, in my work the violin is retuned from D.E.A.D. to D.E.E.D. Sonically, this “deed” scordatura only seems to create more redundancy. By substituting a chord containing three unique pitches in place of the original four-note chord, the information found in the reduced Nauman performance is diminished further. Linguistically, however, the intervention creates a surplus by subtraction, plagiarizing/détourning the Nauman piece, itself a half-joke/meta-statement about Western art music spelled out using the latter’s own system of pitch denotation. The original Nauman work is reframed to highlight the social layer of the concert in its lived dimension, while simultaneously referring to property, ownership, and labor. The mediality of the piece is foregrounded by presenting the work as both a public performance and a video work, while artistic labor is also interrogated: the artist’s special “amateurism”—Nauman recalls buying the violin used in *D.E.A.D.* for fifteen dollars just a month before creating the work⁵—is replaced by the purchased labor of the musician-specialist professional.

¹ Lewallen, Constance, et al. *A Rose Has No Teeth: Bruce Nauman in the 1960s* (Berkeley: University of California, 2007), 101.

² Paul Mann, *Masocriticism* (Albany: State University of New York, 1999).

³ Seth Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear: towards a Non-cochlear Sonic Art* (New York: Continuum, 2009), 213–14.

⁴ André Lepecki, “Masculinity, Solipsism, Choreography - Bruce Nauman, Juan Dominguez, Xavier Le Roy.” *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement*. New York: Routledge, 2006. 19-43.

⁵ Nauman quoted in Willoughy Sharp, Bruce Nauman and Janet Kraynak. “INTERVIEW WITH BRUCE NAUMAN, 1971 (MAY 1970).” *Please Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman’s Words; Writings and Interviews* (Cambridge: MIT, 2005), 133–54.