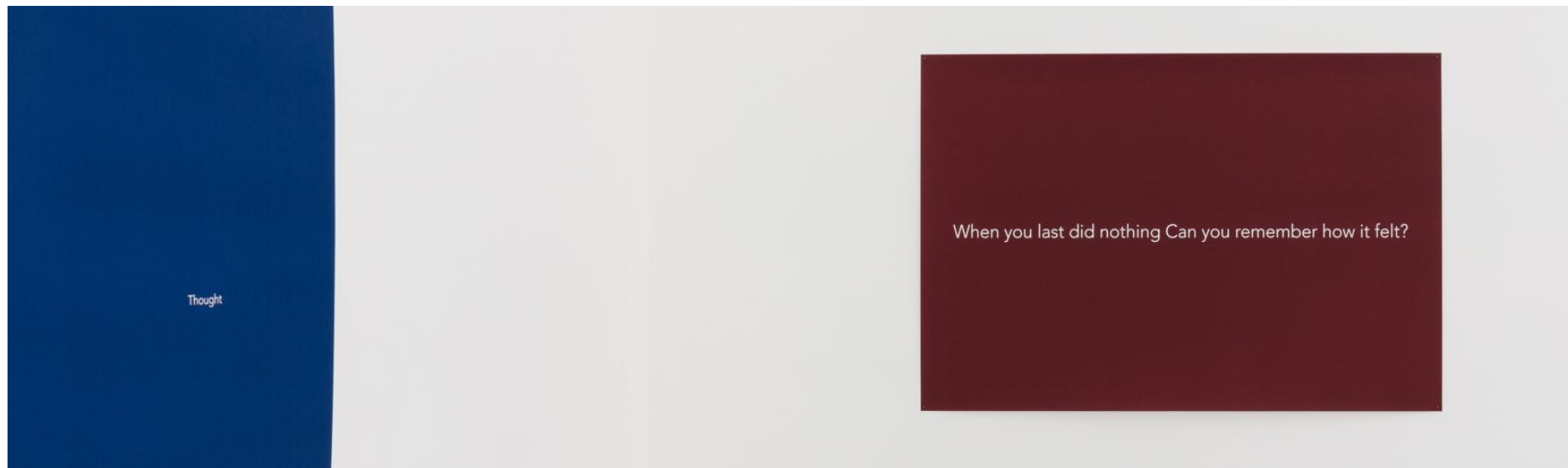


frieze

When Was the Last Time You Did Nothing?

In London, shows by Bruce Nauman, Klara Lidén and Helen Cammock reflect on the pleasures and politics of idleness

BY [PHILOMENA EPPS](#) IN [OPINION](#) | 08 OCT 20



In 1967, Bruce Nauman made his ten-minute, 16mm film *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square*. Using a Sony Portapak camera borrowed from the gallerist Leo Castelli, Nauman recorded himself slowly traversing lines of masking tape tacked to the floor of his studio. Stepping one foot in front of the other, and with an overstated sway of his hips, he repeatedly paces the boundaries of his temporary square. The position of the camera is static and the video is silent aside from the melodic, repetitive whirring of the rolling film. When exhibited – as in the retrospective of [Nauman's work that opened earlier this week at Tate Modern](#) – it is shown on loop, giving the impression that the task is a relentless, perpetual undertaking, with no discernible outcome.

frieze



Klara Lidén, *You're all places that leave me breathless*, video still, 2020. Courtesy: the artist and Sadie Coles HQ, London
© Klara Lidén

In an interview in 1978, Nauman claimed that, after graduating from his MFA in 1966, he came to realize: '[if] I was an artist and I was in the studio, then whatever I was doing in the studio must be art.' This phrase has been used to define the premise behind much of his *oeuvre*, with the studio being demarcated – often quite literally, as with the square – as a space for action. The impact, however, is frequently one of banality and boredom, with any artistic exertion being rooted in a bid to merely pass the time. In her essay 'Pacing the Cell: Walking and Productivity in the Work of Bruce Nauman' (2016), which considers the artist's relationship to the concept of productivity in capitalist society, the academic Ruth Burgon argues that, in these films, Nauman challenged 'the very idea of making artistic objects at all', with walking becoming 'a means of *not* making'.

Klara Lidén's four-minute video *You're all places that leave me breathless* (2020) – a component of her current solo show, 'Turn Me On', at Sadie Coles HQ – echoes the absurdity of Nauman's repetitive tasks. Projected to scale against the wall of the gallery space, the viewer observes Lidén relentlessly climbing a labyrinthine network of scaffolding. Played on continuous loop, the film begins in the middle of the action, with no evident beginning nor destination for the artist. The performance is both compelling and exhausting to watch. Unlike Nauman's use of a steady camera, the filmic lens is constantly rotating, with Lidén's body becoming vertiginously connected to the metal architecture.

frieze

With their deliberate, tragicomic futility, Lidén's and Nauman's moving-image works complicate the idea that being active always yields tangible results. In Helen Cammock's film *They Call It Idlewild* (2020), shown as part of her current exhibition 'I Decided I Want to Walk' at Kate MacGarry, the artist suggests that we 'shouldn't confuse inactivity with idleness'. A spoken narration overlays a series of photographs of the local environment and interior spaces at Wysing Arts Centre, where the film was made as part of a residency. The images are clean and minimal, making space for the voice to be heard clearly, commanding a quiet power. Cammock uses the example of a fisherman, who might 'look idle when he sits' but is 'constrained, not free'. 'The artist model sitting still is theoretically active, the amateur sculpture chiselling away at the block is theoretically idle,' the artist's voice-over continues, while the film's photography depicts a clean potter's wheel slowly spinning, visually reminiscent of a ticking clock.



Helen Cammock's, *They Call It Idlewild*, 2020, video still. Courtesy: the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

frieze

Much of Cammock's discussion regarding the 'activeness of doing nothing [and] the passiveness of working' is rooted in a wider conversation about the politics of laziness, and of purposelessness as a form of privilege. The rejection of labour is configured as a form of resistance in a neoliberal society that demands and rewards excessive, unhealthy productivity. In a searing refusal of the historic, racist stereotype of the 'lazy black person' – prompted by her rendition of Johnny Mercer's 1933 song *Lazybones* – she details how 'the plantation owner, the land owner, the person owner, the knighted landed peer, the Tory MP with business interests that belong to him, but are never worked by him, that came to him at birth [...] is, of course, the faithful lazy bones [...] all the time hiding their own parasitic embodiment through the projection of the lazy in all those who keep him or her there.'

These questions have taken on an acute resonance over the last six months, both in terms of the reckoning that needs to happen with regard to racial justice and British history, and the way in which the COVID-19 pandemic has further exposed the gross inequalities in society. 'All living creatures have to work to stay alive, some have to work harder than others,' Cammock notes early in the film. 'Those creatures that need to do little work to stay alive are more likely to survive periods of difficulty than those that must work harder and longer.' Who can stay at home? Who has a right to idleness? To safety? As one of her screen prints nudges us to consider: When you last did nothing, can you remember how it felt?

Main Image: Helen Cammock, 'I Decided I Want To Walk', 2020, exhibition view (detail), Kate MacGarry, London. Courtesy: the artist and Kate MacGarry

'Bruce Nauman' runs at Tate Modern, London, until 21 February 2021.

Helen Cammock, 'I Decided I Want To Walk' runs at Kate MacGarry, London, until 17 October 2020.

Klara Lidén, 'Turn Me On' runs at Sadie Coles HQ, London, until 31 October 2020.