

Disturbing Boundaries: The Art of Bruce Nauman



One of the most influential and innovative artists of the century, Bruce Nauman (born in 1941), remains a distinct and critical voice in contemporary art dialog. Nauman explores the intersection of art and life through installation, photography, performance, object making, and video. Nauman's work is a provocation, a call to attention, an intentional shifting of perspective. As art critic and curator Robert Storr describes Nauman's effect on his audience, "If they're not puzzled, they're not getting it." (Moorehead)

In a 1998 interview with Michele De Angelus, Nauman poses the fundamental question, "why do artists do what they do" and then further queries, "why does anyone do what they do, for that matter?" At the root of Nauman's work is an investigation into how and why people create, interact, behave, communicate—or fail to do so. His work pushes art beyond its context to examine "the nature and boundaries of art, and the position of art in the wider culture." (Harrison, 910)

From the beginning of his career, Nauman "rejected the traditional, self-contained art object in order to create an art of real experience." (Indepth) In the De Angelus interview he states, "A lot of people were doing work that was art about art. I needed to work out a broader social context, and I needed to get more of what I thought about and what I knew about it into the work." (Harrison, 911) Nauman subverts traditional meaning and associations to examine art through a broader cultural lens. He creates new systems and languages to come to his practice with an inquisitive mind and a unique and multi-faceted perspective. "His work has been animated by questions concerning the nature and boundaries of art activity, and the position of art in the wider culture. This has led to a perennial testing of the limits, not so much if what can be art... but of what remains interesting and significant, assuming the relaxation of any constraint." (Harrison, 910)

Nauman directly addresses the formal discipline of the art world: the rules, assumptions, and criteria by which art functions and is valued. Artists, dancers, and musicians of interest to Nauman (including visual artists Richard Tuttle and Robert Arneson, musicians Philip Glass and John Coltrane, and dancer Merce Cunningham) explore "the structure of the discipline. In that sense they're breaking the discipline down, too, as they're expanding it. They tend to break down what's there." (Harrison, 912) By breaking down traditional assumptions and rules within the discipline, Nauman exemplifies the "interesting" artist engaging in a more expansive dialog.

Transcending traditional rules and assumptions, Nauman employs original and innovative materials and structures to access new visual, emotional, and perceptual possibilities. One of the key materials used in his work are his body and that of his audience. Rather than fulfilling the traditional role of objective observer, the viewer is required to engage with the work in an individual, and often intensely personal, way. This physical and psychological discourse and engagement is integral to Nauman's artistic interests and explorations.

The constructed environment *Performance Corridor* (1969) exemplifies his interest in the body as an integral component of his work. As paraphrased from the press release for his 2003 *Theaters of Experience* at the Deutsche Guggenheim in Berlin, “Made from plywood and measuring twenty feet long and only twenty inches wide, the narrow passageway was originally designed to be the width of the artist’s hips . . . Not long after making this piece, the artist realized that the viewer could enact the same action or performance, and in so doing experience a keener sense of his or her physical and perceptual states.” (Indepth) As Nauman absented his physical body from his video work in the late 1960’s, he became increasingly interested in incorporating the viewer’s physical presence, rather than his own, into the process of invention, creation, and ultimate presentation.

This interactive process and ongoing exploration—the possibility of a new perspective—is of primary interest to Nauman. “I seldom have a lot of interest in it once it’s finished; I’ve done what I set out to do or gotten someplace and found something out about it.” (Harrison, 912) In this way, his work is by nature never truly “finished.” Each interaction with the work alters and generates new dimensions to each unresolved topic posed in his practice

Nauman places time, movement, and tension at the forefront of his work to draw the viewer from the lull of looking into active consideration and participation. As one must walk in, around, and through three-dimensional work to fully discover it, Nauman arranges his environments so the spectator physically, psychologically, and emotionally confronts his work. This physicality is crucial to the experience, as he describes: “I paced around a lot, so I tried to figure out a way of making that function as the work.” (Harrison, 911) The time in the studio, thinking, pacing, moving, is a critical element to his work and its end result, “in a new way of conveying the strange continuity of life, the work becomes what happens in the studio space, and the artist, the witness to the activities going on there.” (Legentil)

Nauman incorporates the everyday routine of his studio practice into his work. Repetition—verbal and physical—serves the function of lulling his audience into the monotonous and mundane habits of daily life. Yet embedded within each work is a tension—the probability of change from the norm, a disruption from the sequence. The prospect of a break from the strict patterns of words, actions, or movements engages the viewer and seizes his/her attention. As Nauman describes, “there’s a kind of tension set up when you . . . have the repeated action, and at the same time, over a long period of time you have mistakes or at least a chance, changes, and you get tired and all kinds of things happen, so there’s a certain tension that you can exploit once you begin to understand how those things function.” (Harrison, 910) The possibility of what could be, that anticipation, is ultimately sustaining to both artist and viewer. In actions or patterns that would otherwise appear boring or tedious, Nauman successfully makes the familiar uncomfortable. The presentation holds just enough suspense to engage the audience with the possibility of transformation.

Nauman's controlled environments are frameworks in which the viewer is invited, asked, even forced, to interact within a closely controlled set of boundaries. Systems, patterns, and routines are integral to creating visual structures capable of these explorations. In his words, "it's how you structure the experience in order to communicate it. I think that's very important.... I think that's where the art comes in, it is the ability to communicate not just a bunch of information but to make an experience that's more general." (Harrison, 910) By setting clear parameters, Nauman focuses attention on creating, looking at, and experiencing art.

The sound installation *Raw Materials* (as shown at the Tate Modern) was described by Adrian Searle from the participants viewpoint:

I became intensely conscious of my own body and its orientation... Nauman starts yelling "Think!" over and over. The command slices down the stairwell from above the bridge, crashing in from afar. Once you stand on the bridge, the words effectively flatten you to the floor. I move away, crabwise, but the voice is so insistent that it drowns any possibility of independent thought, and circumscribes my movements. I think I'm acting, remembering Nauman's own pacing in his early videos, which I'm starting to mime from memory.

Nauman incorporates mirrors, cameras, and monitors into many of his environments so the viewer observes the work, but also views him/herself in the process. By confusing and distorting the objective viewing perspective, the audience is caught off-balance and what is "real" becomes increasingly ambiguous the longer the spectator engages with the installation.

Describing one of his corridor pieces, Nauman states that he "used a wide-angle lens and it was above and behind you as you walked into the corridors, so you were removed from yourself, sort of doubly removed... so as you took a step, you took a double step with your own image. It's a strange feeling." (De Angelus) The effect of disorientation and loss of connection to the familiar is the physical equivalent of repeating a simple word over and over. At first, its meaning is direct and clear. As the word is repeated, however, it loses its correlation to the object it describes and floats into literary abstraction. Once an abstraction, the word has the potential to mean anything or nothing at all.

Nauman presents the rituals that give shape and meaning to daily life with topics common enough to be intimately recognizable, yet within the context of the environments these mundane activities are repeated and re-contextualized until they are abstracted narratives. Without beginning or end, Nauman highlights both the absurdity of life and its ceaseless possibility for change.

The 1987 installation *Clown Torture* highlights Nauman's exploration of frustration, absurdity, and disorientation. In this piece, five simultaneous videos are placed throughout a room. Some are tipped on their side, some upside-down; all are played at disconcertingly high volumes. Each monitor shows clowns performing specific, repetitive, and ludicrous tasks. On one monitor, a clown screams "No!" over and over. In

another, a clown repeats the riddle "Pete and Repeat were sitting on a fence. Pete fell off; who was left? Repeat. Pete and Repeat were sitting on a fence." Two videos show clowns trying balance objects—goldfish bowls and buckets of water—to no avail. The final video is of a clown using a public restroom. The vertiginous experience of watching the clown torture—too loud, too skewed—gives the viewer the feeling of being an active participant in the work (torturer or tortured also becomes a matter of perspective). The viewer feels the same hopelessness, the inability to break the pattern and escape, a subject of the same lugubrious experiment.

Tension, nervousness, and disorientation are all factors that play into Nauman's work, and audience participation on that edge of discomfort is deliberate. When asked by De Angelus about issues of frustration and spectator manipulation the artist responded, "I think a lot of the work is about that—not about frustrating, more about the tension of giving and taking away, of giving a certain amount of information and setting up some kind of expectations and then not allowing them to be fulfilled, at least not in the sense that you expect...because you set up certain expectations, then go someplace else, or don't follow them at all, or stop people from getting wherever you might be going." (De Angelus)

Constantly probing, altering, and rearranging expectations, Nauman invites the viewer into a disconcerting space of inquiry that captures his attention. The viewer is a vital element of the query, the process, and the agony of creation. Nauman's work reaches the viewer on both intellectual and visceral levels, and serves as a mirror into the self regardless of the discomfort it may produce. His need to explore, test, and examine is what makes his art meaningful to him, and therefore interesting: "When I do something that is of interest to me, or the experience of the work is just interesting, then I have to assume that some number of people will, if I've done a good job and made some interesting statement, be interested in that, too.... In the end all you can do is trust that my needs and the situation are general enough that other people can become involved in it." (Harrison, 911)

Bruce Nauman questions boundaries, and invites the viewer to do the same. He questions limitations of space, art, comfort, and possibility. It is nearly impossible to be a passive viewer when confronted with his art. His work poses a challenge, a tension, and an invitation to anyone interacting with it to heightened awareness through disorientation, frustration, awe, confusion, anger, and humor. As Jasmine Moorhead describes, "there is nothing dogmatic about the way Nauman evokes this awareness. He does not pretend to have taught you something profound about yourself... You and he can only smile because unknowingly, you have entered his world and he has entered yours. It is an equitable relationship, and likewise engaging."

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