

Bruce Nauman

Teaching Resource

Identical: September 19 – March 21, 2027

About Bruce Nauman

(Pronounced broos NOW-muhn)

During his high school years, Bruce Nauman played piano, guitar, and the upright bass in a polka band in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin. Later, he joined jazz groups, whose creative structures he found more interesting. Before shifting his focus to visual art, Nauman studied music theory in college. His study of and love for rhythm, composition, repetition, and sound heavily influenced his art making career.

Born in 1941, in Fort Wayne, Indiana, Nauman was raised in a home that valued pragmatism in both how one lived and worked. His father was an engineer and salesman for General Electric and respected trades that guaranteed an assured income. This was likely the reason he first pursued mathematics and physics before changing majors and receiving a BFA from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and an MFA from the University of California, Davis. It was that same year, 1966, when he made his *Self Portrait as a Fountain*, and changed the traditional role of the artist for good. The artist and the artwork were now one and the same.

Either looking at images or walking around the exhibition, can you find moments of rhythm or jazz-like improvisation?



Photograph by Brad Trone Courtesy of Bruce Nauman Studio and Marian Goodman Gallery

Since the beginning of Nauman's practice, art historians often remark that he has "worked in every conceivable art medium." His career is the ultimate display of experimentation: his body of work includes neon signs, wax casts, sculpture, drawings, performance, and video. Perhaps his greatest legacy is his knack for reinvention, instead of focusing uniquely on one medium, he expanded the boundaries of contemporary art by embracing them all. His success made him a household name and pushed him away from geographic art capitals in search of privacy and distance from the pressure of the art world. This long period of living and working on a ranch in New Mexico has directly influenced his artwork; he incorporates not just the animals he sees locally and what he's learned of their behavior but the sparse, expansive quality of his rural surroundings.

Despite his achievements and years of experience, "artist's block" is a part of Nauman's practice; instead of fighting it, he has developed the actions he uses to break out of it into the material for art itself. While he performs these actions, he simply has "faith that something will come."

What helps you to feel creative during a slump?

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Courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York.

While you explore, think about this!

“If I was an artist, and I was in the studio, then whatever I was doing in the studio must be art.”

With little money to spare, Nauman decided that anything he did while in the studio qualified as art making, whether it be reading a book or sweeping the floor. How can we use this mentality in other ways? Let’s give it a go.

“If I was a _____ in the _____,
then whatever I was doing in the _____
must be _____.”

Keywords and Concepts

Casting process objects: Look around for items relating to steps in the casting process: polyurethane foam forms, silicone molds, and plaster casts. Nauman’s idea of art materials includes many things, including items related to preparation.

Interior versus exterior: The works in *Identical* display items and processes traditionally meant to be hidden alongside those meant to be seen—displaying an object’s interior and exterior simultaneously.

Spatial encounters: Nauman often uses his exhibitions to turn a space into an active psychological and participatory space for the human body. His spaces can blur the line between artwork and viewer, making the work something you must navigate and confront rather than just look at.

Taxidermy: The practice of preserving and mounting the hide of an animal over a lifelike foam form so that it appears to be realistic for display or for study.



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Photo by Kevin Todora, courtesy of the Nasher Sculpture Center



Fun fact: Nauman once made a video artwork by recording his empty studio at night. Made to be “purposefully boring,” some of the video’s most exciting moments were when mice would scurry across the floor or moths would cover the camera lens.

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2 PLASTER COYOTES HORIZONTAL

In 1988, Nauman visited a taxidermy shop in a New Mexico town near his home. There, he was drawn to the abstract, featureless shapes of commercially manufactured taxidermy molds. He purchased a few intending to use them as studio subjects to enliven his drawing practice and as a return to making cast objects after spending decades focused on other mediums like video and performance. He strung the forms from his studio's ceiling and used materials and items around him to anchor them to the ground. While he drew, a friend suggested that the arrangements he'd made for his still-life was in fact a sculpture. After this, he was able to move forward into thinking about sculpture once again.

The two coyote plaster casts here are connected by wire in two places where their paws touch. The configuration feels playful, elegant, and alive. The work is both an arrangement of materials and an interaction between the animals.

What action words could be used to describe this work?



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Photo by Kevin Todora, courtesy of the Nasher Sculpture Center

2 FOXES VERTICAL HEAD TO FOOT AND CAN



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Photo by Kevin Todora, courtesy of the Nasher Sculpture Center

Nauman's exhibition features 27 unique, suspended sculptures. In this work, a cardboard box addressed to Nauman's studio serves as a floating pedestal that showcases two foxes engaged in opposing actions: jumping and falling. A can of peeled tomatoes decorates the neck of the ascending fox, its plaster cast counterpart is included in another sculpture nearby.

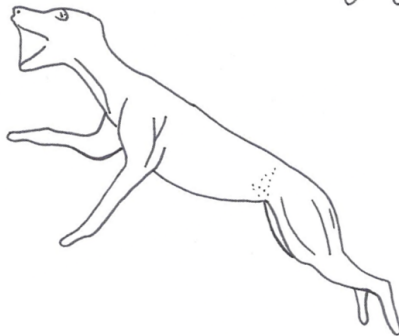
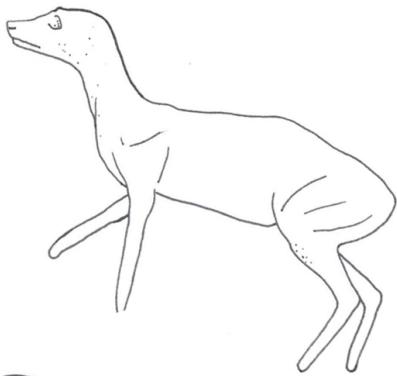
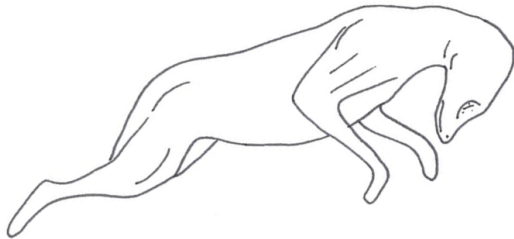
Nauman's work is the result of decision-making that stems from questions posed to solve problems. How can I hang this from the ceiling? How might I keep the sculptures still while I draw? What can I use to connect these forms? He seems unbothered by how closely we can study his process. Many artists would want to polish their final products so that the process is unknown, whereas, Nauman shows his work and invites us to admire his cobbled-together assembly process. In an interview, Nauman said this about the work: "If I like it, I leave it."

Using a selection of ordinary materials, spend time embracing what they can do. Assemble them into a quick sculpture while celebrating each stage of the process.

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Nauman's sculptures are composed in a way that could be compared to drawing. Many of the wires serve a purpose: taut, straight wires support or pose the objects he uses, while other wires embellish and extend from the sculptures like doodles.

Use wire-like lines to connect these animals and objects however you'd like! Add drawings of objects from around your home to weigh down the sculptures.



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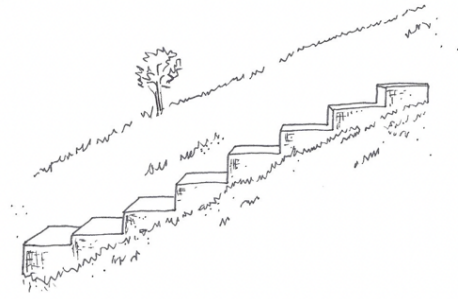
Additional Resources

A Rose has no teeth: Bruce Nauman in the 1960s. (2006, November 29). Bampfa. <https://bampfa.org/pressrose-has-no-teeth-bruce-nauman-1960s-january-17-%E2%80%93-april-15-2007>

CollDocumentary. (2017, December 8). Bruce Nauman 'The True Artist Helps the World.' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v+X2mn3wh2xek>
Searle, A. (2013, January 30). Artist Bruce Nauman's carnage-littered carousel will blow your mind. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/jan/30bruce-nauman/art-hauser-wirth>

Stipanovich, A. (2018, November 20). Bruce Nauman's Blissful Boredom. Interview Magazine. <https://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/bruce-naumans-blissful-boredome-disappearing-acts>

On Oliver Ranch, Nauman's property in New Mexico, he created a 600-foot stairway that descends a steep hillside. Each step varies in both height and depth. To safely walk down them, visitors must pay careful attention to their steps. He wanted the stairs to be a type of meditation on self-awareness.



How might his arrangement of the sculptures in *Identical* similarly force us into the present moment?

Suggested Curriculum Connections (TEKS)

Fine Arts: Knowledge and Skills | §117.302. Art, Level I (b) (4)
Fine Arts: Critical Evaluation and Response | §117.4 (b), (d) and (e)
Fine Arts: Critical Evaluation | §117.52 Art, Level I (c) (3) and (4)

Text and drawings by Angela Hall

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