

# Tate Britain

## Bruce Nauman

14:30-15:00

Laurence Shafe

# Bruce Nauman

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## Guidelines

The title and artist are mentioned followed by a description of the work, any relevant anecdotes and a description of what was happening in the artists life and possible interpretations of the work. If possible the talk about each work finishes with a link to the next work.

The complete talk for each work lasts about 3 to 5 minutes so a maximum of five to seven works can be covered in the 30 minutes. The notes are provided to answer possible background questions. The section 'Visual Aids' towards the end contains additional images that may be used to make a point or show related works or ideas. The summary can be printed as a crib. Optional points are shown in square brackets, quotations are in bold and names are underlined. In general, avoid dates, movements and 'isms' unless directly relevant and only refer to other artists, works or historic events if it is essential to help explain the work being presented or the theme. Do not take any knowledge of history, the artist or an art movement for granted.

## Introduction

1. Welcome to Tate Modern. My name is Laurence and I am your guide for the next 30 minutes.
2. I have a hearing loop for anyone that requires it and if you need a seat there are folding stools over there.
3. The Tate is named after Henry Tate a wealthy nineteenth-century entrepreneur who started life working in a grocery store. He grew the business until he owned six stores and then sold out to build a sugar refinery in Silvertown, East London. Previously sugar was brown and came in large blocks and he made a fortune by refining white sugar and selling it as sugar cubes. In later life, he gave a great deal to charity including libraries and hospitals. He decided to donate his collection of 65 paintings to the nation on the condition they would be displayed. The National Gallery said it did not have the space and so Tate donated a further £80,000 to build this building on a marshy site called Millbank that previously was the site of a prison. There are now three associated galleries in London. The National Gallery houses international art prior to 1900. This building, Tate Modern houses international art since 1900 and this extension, the Blavatnik Building was opened in June 2016. In this part of the building the free displays are on levels 2, 3 and 4 and this display is dedicated to a single artist, Bruce Nauman.
4. We have managed to keep our permanent collection free by charging for temporary exhibitions, some Government funding and the use of volunteers like me. Please help us remain free by having lunch here, buying a book or giving a small donation.
5. This tour is called 'People and Places in the Nineteenth Century' and I will be talking about the massive social changes that took place during the nineteenth century and the key artists that represented them. I will touch on the industrial and agricultural revolutions, the class system and the role of women but I shall mostly concentrate on the artists and their lives.
6. I am happy to take questions as we go around so let's get started in the first room.

## Notes

- **The Founder.** Henry Tate (1819-1899) was the son of a clergyman and set up his own grocery shop when he was 20. He expanded this to a chain of six shops which he sold and became the owner of a sugar refinery in 1859. This was 26 years after slavery had been abolished in the British Empire (1833) and 52 years after Britain had abolished the slave trade (1807). In 1872, Tate bought a German patent for making sugar cubes from Eugen Langen and it was this that made his fortune. The same year he opened a refinery in Liverpool. Towards the end of his life he gave money to many colleges, hospitals and founded Streatham, Balham, South Lambeth and Brixton libraries. In 1897, he spent £150,000 (some say £80,000) on building the National Gallery of British Art ('Tate Gallery' in 1932), endowed it with his personal art collection of 65 contemporary paintings and gave it all to the nation. The famous portico was designed by the architect Sidney Smith. It was separated from the National Gallery in 1954. Tate Britain was extended twice by Joseph Duveen, an art dealer who also paid for an extension at the British Museum, and in 1987 Charles Clore funded the Turner wing.
- **Attendance.** According to Wikipedia Tate Modern is the eighth most visited art museum with 5.8 million visitors in 2016. The top eight are the Palace Museum China (16m), National Museum of China (7.6m), Louvre (7.3m), British Museum (6.8m), Metropolitan Museum of Art (6.7m), National Gallery (6.2m) and Vatican Museum (6m) making Tate Modern the most visited gallery of modern and contemporary art in the world.
- **Management.** The Director of the Tate is Maria Balshaw who was previously Director of the Whitworth (University of Manchester) and Manchester City Galleries, and Director of Culture for Manchester City Council. The previous Director, since 1988, was Sir Nicholas Serota (b. 1946). The Director of Tate Britain is Alex Farquharson and of Tate Modern is Frances Morris.
- **Women artists.** According to the Tate Report 2015/16 36% of the works on display in the Blavatnik Building, Tate Modern are by women and half the rooms devoted to individual artists are by women such as Rebecca Horn, Ana Lupas, Louise Nevelson and Phyllida Barlow. We have not achieved fifty percent women artists in our main galleries, the problem, as Tate Modern Director, Frances Morris said, is that **"You can rewrite history but you can't reinvent it. We are highlighting the great contributions of women but there is an imbalance in the history."**

## All Bruce Nauman

All the works on display in August 2017 by Bruce Nauman (b. 1941)

- *Good Boy Bad Boy*, 1985
- *MAPPING THE STUDIO II with color shift, flip, flop, & flip/flop (Fat Chance John Cage)*, 2001
- *VIOLINS VIOLENCE SILENCE*, 1981–2
- *a*, 1970
- *c*, 1970
- *b*, 1970
- *d*, 1970
- *e*, 1970
- *Changing Light Corridor with Rooms*, 1971
- *Untitled (Hand Circle)*, 1996
- *Violent Incident*, 1986
- *Raw Material Washing Hands, Normal (A of A/B) Raw Material Washing Hands, Normal (B of A/B)*, 1996
- *Raw-War*, 1971
- *Untitled (Three Large Animals)*, 1989
- *Corridor with Mirror and White Lights*, 1971
- *Setting a Good Corner (Allegory and Metaphor)*, 1999
- *La Brea/Art Tips/Rat Spit/Tar Pits*, 1972
- *Double Face*, 1981
- *Three Dead End Adjacent Tunnels, Not Connected*, 1981
- *Untitled*, 1994
- *Partial Truth*, 1997
- *Enforced Perspective: Allegory and Symbolism*, 1975
- *NO (Black State)*, 1981
- *All Thumbs Holding Hands*, 1998
- *NO IMAGE, Violent Incident: Man-Woman Segment*, 1986
- *NO IMAGE, Normal Desires*, 1973
- *NO IMAGE, Raw Material with Continuous Shift - MMMM*, 1991
- *NO IMAGE, Oiled Dead*, 1975
- *NO IMAGE, Suck Cuts*, 1973
- *NO IMAGE, Double Poke in the Eye II*, 1985
- *NO IMAGE, Henry Moore Bound to Fail*, 1967/1970
- *NO IMAGE, No*, 1981
- *NO IMAGE, Pay Attention*, 1973
- *NO IMAGE, Help Me Hurt Me (State)*, 1975
- *NO IMAGE, Sugar Ragus*, 1973
- *NO IMAGE, Run from Fear, Fun from Rear*, 1972
- *NO IMAGE, Oiled Dead (State)*, 1975

## Turbine Hall

- *Raw Materials*, 2004, (no longer on display)

## Bruce Nauman, Introduction



- Bruce Nauman is a very influential American artist whose work has explored the issues surrounding violence, anxiety, boredom, ambiguity and failure since the 1960s. This is a picture of him as a cowboy (see Visual Aids) and he now loves knives, hats, boots, saddles and cars and breeds horses on his 700-acre New Mexico farm but as a child and a young man he was painfully shy.
- He was born in 1941 in the American Midwest [Fort Wayne, Indiana] but moved around America as his father's work necessitated travel. As a child he was interested in maths and music and was planning to study physics when he decided, for reasons he has never understood, that he would become an artist. He is a jack of all trades as he majored in mathematics with a minor in arts from the University of Wisconsin. However, he found the art teaching at Wisconsin still in the Middle Ages. So, in 1964 he moved to the University of California and was suddenly free to pursue his ideas. He could not see how to express his ideas in paint and he started to use many materials including his own body.
- In the late 1960s and 70s he was a key figure in the new experimental film and video movement but after 1972 he dropped them and worked with language-based neon sculptures. He returned to video ten years later with *Good Boy, Bad Boy* which we will see later.
- He has been influenced by musicians, like John Cage, playwrights, such as Samuel Beckett and, in particular, by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein who crops up in a lot of his writing. When he moved to San Francisco he reread Wittgenstein's "Philosophical Investigations" and John Cage's writings on chance and contingency, both of which he had discovered in college, and he enthusiastically read Samuel Beckett's novels and plays. He was always interested in word play and ambiguity as we shall see.
- His primary medium is now sculpture but he was worked in a wide range of materials and media over the years including film, video, drawings, prints, performance, sound, and neon light. I warn you now that some people find his work offensive and his stated approach is to shock and bludgeon the viewer so that you experience the work emotionally rather than intellectually.

## Notes

- Growing up he changed school many times as his father moved around the country as an engineer and salesman for General Electric. He married Judy Govan before going to California and they had two children Erik and Zoë but the marriage split up in the mid-1970s. Upon graduation (MFA, 1966), he taught at the San Francisco Art Institute from 1966 to 1968, and at the University of California at Irvine in 1970. He lived with Harriet Lindenberg, Zoë's kindergarten teacher who had three children from a previous marriage and it was Harriet who persuaded him to move to New Mexico in 1979. He met Susan Rothenberg in 1988 at a dinner party in New York and they were married three months later. He offered to move to New York although by then he was spending half his time breeding horses, but Rothenberg decided to move to New Mexico and they bought the farm in Galisteo. Rothenberg was one child by a previous marriage. It is unusual in the art world for two major international talents to be married and to work with competition or interference.

## References

- Tate *Raw Materials* <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/bruce-nauman-1691/long-read/raw-material>
- New Yorker <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/06/01/western-disturbances>
- <http://www.artnet.com/Magazine/features/kuspit/kuspit3-5-01.asp>
- <http://www.theartstory.org/artist-nauman-bruce.htm>
- <https://art21.org/artist/bruce-nauman/>

*'Henry Moore Bound to Fail'*, conceived in 1967 and executed in 1970



## *Henry Moore Bound to Fail*, conceived in 1967 and executed in 1970

- Let us start in this first room. What do you think this is? It is the back of someone wearing a jacket with their arms tied together. This is a photograph taken by Nauman (see Visual Aids). It shows him wearing a jumper and tied with rope and the work is called *Bound to Fail*. He turned the image into this work, called *Henry Moore Bound to Fail*, which he made in cast iron.
- The work was partly inspired by a work by the artist Man Ray (see Visual Aids) called *The Enigma of Isadore Ducasse* (*L'Enigme d'Isidore Ducasse*). Man Ray loved puns and word play and Isadore Ducasse, a nineteenth-century French poet who died when he was just twenty-four, had used the phrase in one of his poems '**Beautiful as the accidental encounter, on a dissecting table, of a sewing machine and an umbrella**'. The surreal imagery and the hidden sexual reference to the male umbrella and the female sewing machine provoked Man Ray into producing this sewing machine wrapped in a blanket which in turn inspired Nauman to show himself wrapped in a jumper tied in rope. It is a play on words, a man is bound with rope and so bound to fail.
- The reference to Henry Moore adds another dimension. It is not intended as a criticism of Moore. At the time this work was conceived in 1967 Henry Moore was a distinguished British sculptor but was rejected as old-fashioned by younger sculptors. Many years before, when Henry Moore's sculptures were first displayed, they were deemed so shocking that they were sometimes decapitated or daubed with paint. In fact, in 1938, a director of the Tate [J.B. Manson] declared that the Moore's work would only enter the gallery over his dead body. Years later however, Moore became one of the most respected international sculptors and Britain's unchallenged representative of Modern art. Bruce Nauman's *Henry Moore Bound to Fail*, addresses the attacks on Moore by young sculptors through Nauman's own witty brand of inquiry. Nauman had just graduated as an art student and maybe he was foreseeing the inevitability of all artists eventually being rejected by a younger generation and he thought that there was 'bound' to come a time when those young artists would themselves be rejected by the next generation.
- It is formed from a truncated sculpture of Nauman's own bound torso and refers to Moore's struggles as an artist and the artist's literal restraint. As I said, a lot of Nauman's work explores entrapment and failure.

## Notes on *Henry Moore Bound to Fail*, conceived in 1967 and executed in 1970

- ‘Look out for Henry Moore, and Man Ray influences in one work The Tate is showing *Henry Moore Bound to Fail*, a 1970 sculpture that was actually developed out of a 1967 photograph. “The photograph is called simply *Bound to Fail*, and it’s only when the image – a waist-to-neck back view of a person of indeterminate sex in a baggy sweater rather ineffectively, it seems, tied up with rope – is translated into a three-dimensional relief, that ‘Henry Moore’ is added,” Plagens explains, adding that “Nauman’s allusion to the great English sculptor is not, by the way, pejorative. At the time, Moore was out of fashion with a younger generation of British artists and Nauman thought that there was ‘bound’ to come a time when those artists would again need him as an inspiration.” However, the title is also a reference to an earlier sculpture Nauman admired, Plagens writes. “In particular, *Henry Moore Bound to Fail* comes out of Man Ray’s 1920 photograph of a blanketed and rope-tied sewing machine entitled, likewise in five words including the name of a famous artist, *The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse*.” (Phaidon)
- Sold at Christies 8 May 2016 for \$7 million. This work is number six from an edition of nine plus one artist's proof.

### References

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/06/01/western-disturbances>

<http://uk.phaidon.com/agenda/art/articles/2017/august/01/5-key-points-for-the-tate-s-new-bruce-nauman-show/>

'Untitled (Hand Circle)', 1996



## *Untitled (Hand Circle), 1966*

- This is also an early work made in 1966 and in the 1960s, Nauman made a number of wax casts of his body, all of which were given 'play on word' titles, such as 'hand to mouth', which is literally a cast of his body from hand to mouth. Yet the hands in this sculpture are left to speak for themselves, without a title. It is called *Untitled (Hand Circle)*.
- As you can see this consists of ten hands cast in bronze and soldered together in pairs, wrist to wrist. In each pair of hands one hand forms a circle with the thumb and forefinger and the other hand has the forefinger extended. The forefinger is inserted into the circle of the next pair in the sequence and the whole forms a ring. There are obvious sexual connotations but let's start with the OK sign.
- The thumb and forefinger placed together in this country means 'OK' and is synonymous with a thumbs-up sign. However, signs are fickle things and in Brazil and Iran it was and in some communities still is considered obscene and equivalent to an extended middle finger in this country. In parts of Europe the OK sign is an insult which means you are worthless, worth zero, and in others it is a rude or aggressive symbol used when driving. In the Arab world, the sign can represent the evil eye and can be used as a curse, but it is also like the Buddhist gesture with the palm face up meaning the unity of consciousness. In some areas both the positive "OK" and the negative forms are used depending on the context, which can lead to confusion over which meaning is intended.
- The point is that the meaning depends on the context and the use to which the symbol is put and this invokes the work of one of the most significant influences on Bruce Nauman, the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, perhaps the greatest philosopher of the twentieth century. But more of that later.
- Another important aspect of this work is that the hands form an endless cycle which reminds us of the ouroboros (pronounced 'oro-boros'), which the ancient alchemists showed as a serpent swallowing its own tail. The symbol is from ancient Egypt and is around 3,600 years old and represents infinity through the endless cycle of creation and destruction, life and death. This interpretation is emphasized by the fact that the forefinger is inserted in the circle of the thumb and forefinger. I have looked at many cultures and everywhere this always seems to mean the sexual act which is appropriate to a circle of birth and death.
- We have contradictions, as in a lot of Nauman's work. The apparent softness of the hands and the tender modelling are belied by the obscene gesture each pair of hands performs. If one represents the male and the other the female, then each pair is bisexual or hermaphroditic. One hand's gesture by itself has a completely different meaning than when Nauman places the two hands together. Nauman has long been obsessed with the ambiguity of symbols and with circularity and rotation which may arise from his early interest in mathematics.

## Notes on *Untitled (Hand Circle)*, 1966

- *Untitled (Hands Circled)*, is made of cast phosphorous bronze, silver solder, copper and bronze wire. It consists of five pairs of hands soldered at the wrists.
- Forming a circle with thumb and forefinger “For Hispanic Americans it is an invitation to perform a sexual act” (see ‘Becoming a Nurse’). In Venezuela and Turkey, the OK symbol means you are homosexual. In France and Belgium, it can mean you are worthless. In Brazil it is equivalent to giving the middle finger although I asked a young Brazilian who said it means OK and was not regarded as obscene so, it is possible the meaning has changed over the years. Nixon gave the sign when landing in Brazil in the 1950s and it was much commented upon in the press as a negative gesture. In Japan among older people it means money. It is used by Trump and is becoming a symbol referring to the alt-right community and conspiracy theorists claim that as Trump raises his other three fingers it represents ‘666’ the sign of the devil which shows he is a member of the Illuminati. Some sources say in Germany and Russia the sign, made by pinching together the thumb and forefinger, is considered extremely rude and vulgar.
- Executed in 1996 the work is from an edition of nine plus one artist's proof and one foundry proof. One version of this work was sold at Christies 10 November 2010 for \$1.2 million, double the estimate. It was acquired by the Tate in conjunction with the National Galleries of Scotland with assistance of donations and various art funds in 2008.

## References

<http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/Lot/bruce-nauman-b-1941-untitled-hand-5371744-details.aspx>

'Run from Fear, Fun from Rear', 1972



## 'Run from Fear, Fun from Rear', 1972

- Nauman often uses neon signs to create his work. Neon signs remind us of the tasteless signs once common and still used in Western cities, particularly in lower-end cocktail lounges and hotels, greasy-spoon restaurants, and the kind of entertainment definitely not suitable for children, such as red-light districts. The purpose of neon is to attract attention and we associate it with everything that is crass, brassy, vulgar and cheap.
- Nauman began creating these signs in 1965 and although he was not the first artist to use neon he did not try to overstate their importance as art but instead referred to them simply as 'signs', clearly linking his work with the commercial versions out on the street.
- Here we see 'Run from Fear' above 'Fun from Rear', green on top and pink below. It shows that simply reversing two letters, the 'R' and the 'F' can dramatically change the meaning. Are you focusing on one meaning or the other or switching between them? We naturally try to link the meanings to understand why the artist put them together. It might simply be a play on words, but it could be a warning. In an area of the city that threatens 'fun from rear' we might well 'run from fear'. Fear, pleasure and sex and closely linked particularly in areas that use neon signs. Nauman is playing games with us and having fun.
- This work returns us to the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. In his final work *Philosophical Investigations* (published posthumously) he explains that many philosophical problems arise because we have a mistaken idea of the nature of language. We think of words as referring to objects and this leads us into philosophical confusion such as asking where do we find the object that, say 'fear' refers to. Wittgenstein takes the word 'game' and asks us to define it. We discover that no definition covers the wide range of uses we put the word to from solitaire to war games. This, he argues, is true of all words. Words do not refer to objects they play a part in what he calls language games. Words acquire their meaning from the role they play in the game. 'Run' can be a command, an answer to a question, a description of a fault in cloth and it has many other uses and shades of meaning depending on the social game we are playing. Nauman has said that Wittgenstein is one of the biggest influences on his work.
- In the 1980s Nauman stopped using neon signs and switched to video installations so let's look at one next.

## Notes on *Run from Fear, Fun from Rear*, 1972

- On short term loan from the Froehlich Collection. Anna and Josef Froehlich started collecting art actively in 1982 and became closely involved with many artists, including Joseph Beuys. The collection (based in Stuttgart) now numbers more than 320 pieces and includes the work of ten American and nine German artists, all key figures in the art of the last four decades.

## References

- <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/nauman-run-from-fear-fun-from-rear-x68514>

'Good Boy, Bad Boy', 1985



## 'Good Boy, Bad Boy', 1985

- Following a ten-year break during which time he worked mostly with neon signs he switched back to video with this work. It is called 'Good Boy, Bad Boy' and was produced in 1985.
- There are two TV monitors, one showing a black actor speaking the other an older white American TV actress. They are each repeating one hundred phrases as the camera zooms in closer and closer and then out a bit. The two actors start together but they slowly get out of sync. It is a reference to another of Nauman's influences, the playwright Samuel Beckett, is this pointless repetition or indoctrination?
- They are conjugating the verb 'to be' linked with the phrase, 'good boy'. You might remember conjugating verbs at school – 'I am', 'You are', 'He is', 'We are' and so on. So, they are saying 'I am a good boy', 'You are a good boy', 'He is a good boy', 'We are good boys' etcetera. They repeat the sequence five times beginning in a flat neutral tone, and becoming increasingly animated and intense until by the fifth recitation they appear very angry. Their techniques of delivery are quite different, and result in a slippage of time, so that played on a continuous loop, the two tapes become out of sequence.
- Nauman was one of the first artists to use neon and he was one of the first to use film and video. Shortly after graduating [in 1966] he had the simple but profound realization that **"If I was an artist and I was in the studio, then whatever I was doing in the studio must be art. At this point art became more of an activity and less of a product."** He started to investigate the visual language of the body, using his own body in 16mm films and then using video tape.
- He was never comfortable as a performance artist and when he returned to video with this work he used actors. Nauman said, **'Because they are actors, it's not autobiographical, it's not real anger, but pretending to be angry and they are pretty good at it, but maybe not really convincing.'** The playwright Samuel Beckett once said, **'It is a game, everything is a game ... That has got to be done artificially, balletically. Otherwise everything becomes an imitation, an imitation of reality ... It is a game in order to survive'**.
- As well as the staged presentation there is ambiguity. The direct eye contact and the increasingly emotional delivery suggest aggression and attack but the reciting of grammar, the conjugating of a verb is a basic element of education. As in much of his work, attracting the viewer and attacking or repulsing the viewer operate equally to disturb and disorientate us.

## Notes on 'Good Boy, Bad Boy', 1985

- After video his body in the studio he began to make sculptural installations, creating situations in which the viewer would physically experience what the artist had been exploring alone in his video performances. In his corridor pieces of the early 1970s, such as *Corridor with Mirror and White Lights* 1971 (Tate T01753), Nauman turned a mirror and then a video camera directly on the viewer, forcing him into a confrontation with 'the connection between public and private experiences' (Nauman quoted in Bruce Nauman 1998, p.100).
- Conceived as a didactic moral statement, the installation employs two actors, Joan Lancaster and Tucker Smallwood, who are presented in close-up, like newscasters, on two separate monitors. Each recites a one-hundred-line commentary on the human condition that includes passages such as "I was a good boy/You were a good boy/We were good boys" and "I hate/You hate/We hate/This is hating." Directly confronting the viewer, they deliver each repetition with increased emotional intensity, shifting in and out of sync with one another.

## References

- <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/nauman-good-boy-bad-boy-t06853>

'Violins Violence Silence', 1981-82



## 'Violins Violence Silence' 1981-82

- Can anyone see what it says? Violins, Violence, Silence with each word repeated and shown in two directions. The word 'Silence' is silenced by being covered by itself in a reverse direction. The end of the word 'Violence' echoes back as the word 'Violin'. The word 'violence' incorporates the first four letters of the first word, 'violins', and the last five letters of the word 'silence'. The words convey extremes of sound and situation. The work is called 'Violins Violence Silence'.
- Violin suggest a pure musical sound, but violence silences the sound, so the combination combines the extremes of music and silence, creativity and violence. The reference to music, through a musical instrument, is countered by silence, which is complicated by the suggestion of violence. Nauman studied music when he was young and is interested in the composer John Cage, so it may be a reference to Cage's work 4' 33" in which a musician or musicians sit for four minutes thirty-three seconds in silence.
- Nauman's work was commissioned by California State University and one version was intended to be wrapped around the exterior wall of the music department, but it was never installed. The words are written in both directions as it can be seen from both sides in some installations.
- There are other interpretations, one critic wrote, **"'Violins' carries a pleasant connotation and alludes to the better side of human endeavours. 'Violence' connotes the opposite – say, war as opposed to a symphony orchestra – and 'silence' could signify either the best of all possible worlds (perfect peace) or the worst (annihilation)."**
- Another wrote, **'Nauman has always, especially in the neons, consciously tried to provoke the viewer to a response; the language in the neons is often scrappy or even contentious in tone'**. In other words, we can intellectualise too much, the aim is to provoke us and achieve an emotional reaction.

## Violins, Violence, Silence

- This wall-hung work comprises the words 'VIOLINS', 'VIOLENCE', and 'SILENCE' spelled out in coloured neon tubing. Each word appears twice; one of each pair is written left to right while the other is presented backwards from right to left. The six words are composed to form a loosely triangular shape, the horizontal bottom of which consists of two instances of the word 'SILENCE', one overlaid on top of the other so that the individual letters are barely distinguishable. The two angled sides of the triangle each consist of the words 'VIOLINS' and 'VIOLENCE': on the left-hand side 'VIOLINS' can be read from left to right and 'VIOLENCE' is presented backwards, while on the right 'VIOLENCE' can be read from left to right and 'VIOLINS' is presented backwards. Supporting each word is a clear glass tubing suspension frame. Each word is rendered in a single colour using various shades of pink, yellow, and red neon and argon gas, and there is an audible buzzing from the neon. The words illuminate on a cycle which begins with them all lit up, then each in turn starting with 'SILENCE', then the left 'VIOLENCE', then the left 'VIOLINS', again 'SILENCE', then the right 'VIOLENCE' and finally the right 'VIOLINS', before all lighting up together once more. The work is displayed on the wall using glass support mounts. Although Nauman designed the work and planned its specificities, it was actually fashioned by a commercial neon expert.
- California State University rejected the outdoor proposal but Nauman revisited the idea later for the landmark 1983 exhibition of his neon works at the Baltimore Museum of Art, where he eventually realised the outdoor version.
- The flashing light and buzzing of the neon convey a sense of playfulness that contrasts with the uneasy connotations of the words. As one critic wrote it evokes '**a carnivalesque world that is part visual wonderment and part uncomfortable confrontation**'. And another critic wrote, '**The lovely, vaguely haiku-like title of Nauman's double show – Violins. Violence. Silence. – is a reminder that, unlike many artists who toy with language, he has a poet's ear.**'
- Other suggestions are the link between violins in funeral music and the silence of victims and the silence of those who chose not to bear witness or to oppose.
- Nauman began making works using neon while he was a graduate student at the University of California, Davis. His early neon works included pieces where the artist painted over the neon tubing or submerged it in oil, although Nauman has since destroyed these (Richardson 1982, p.14). In that they are displayed in galleries as artworks, existent neon pieces such as VIOLINS VIOLENCE SILENCE foreground the iridescent material qualities of neon, which are often overlooked when it is used for commercial signage.

## References

<http://uk.phaidon.com/agenda/art/articles/2017/august/01/5-key-points-for-the-tate-s-new-bruce-nauman-show/>

'Raw Material Washing Hands, Normal (A of A/B) Raw Material Washing Hands, Normal (B of A/B)', 1996



## Raw Material Washing Our Hands, 1996

- Two video monitors showing a man washing his hands. What do you think of it? A bit boring? Both the same one upside down. We don't have to watch the complete video as he washes his hands for fifty-five minutes. Boring action taken to the extreme. Or are there other references that start to spring to mind as we watch? The phrase 'to wash one's hands of something' suggest perhaps Pontius Pilate or the famous scene in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* when Lady Macbeth tries to remove the blood of dead King Duncan, '**Out, damned spot! Out, I say!**' The water draining down the plug perhaps also reminds of the shower scene in Alfred Hitchcock's film *Psycho*.
- When we first see the film, it could have positive associations, of a surgeon scrupulously scrubbing his hands to avoid any contamination during surgery, but as it goes on and on there are darker undertones. If the cleaning is so vigorous the hands must have been very dirty and as the scrubbing continues the associations become psychotic. It doesn't shock immediately but it slowly gets under your skin the longer you watch.
- Nauman continues his ongoing investigation into human psychology and feelings of discomfort. The sense of anxiety is heightened by the echoing sound of the water draining away for fifty-five-minutes.

## Raw Material Washing Our Hands, 1996

- Acquired jointly with the National Galleries of Scotland through The d'Offay Donation with assistance from the National Heritage Memorial Fund and the Art Fund 2008

### References

<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/nauman-raw-material-washing-hands-normal-a-of-a-b-raw-material-washing-hands-normal-b-of-a-ar00579>

'Violent Incident', 1986



## 'Violent Incident', 1986

- Before we start I should warn you that this work includes violence and bad language.
- We don't have time to watch the complete video so let me tell you what is happening. The work is called *Violent Incident* and begins with a cruel joke. There is a table set for dinner and two people arrive to enjoy the meal. As she goes to sit down he pulls the chair away and she falls on the floor. As he bends to pick up the chair she turns and pinches his backside he turns around and yells at her and calls her names. She grabs a glass and throws the drink in his face, he slaps her, she knees him in the groin and as he doubles over he grabs a knife from the table. They struggle, and both end up on the floor.
- There are twelve video monitors and the sequence I just described is repeated in each of the four columns. In one it is a man and women, in the next the roles change, the next is played by two men and the final column by two women. Each version has been edited with slow-motion, colour change, and the addition of footage filmed during the rehearsals in which the action was deconstructed by a man's voice shouting out instructions. The twelve monitors result in a wall of continuous violence, **'The images are aggressive, the characters are physically aggressive, the language is abusive. The scripting, having the characters act out these roles and the repetition all build on that aggressive tension.'**
- Nauman has explained that at this time, it was made in 1986, he was feeling angry and frustrated about the human condition. He added, **'And about how people refuse to understand other people. And about how people can be cruel to each other. It's not that I think I can change that, but it's just such a frustrating part of human history.'** The viewer is presented with a hypnotic repetition of pointlessly cruel, mindless escalation and destructive violence which is both seductive and alienating.

## Notes on 'Violent Incident', 1986

- In 1973 Nauman employed professional actors for the first time in his videotapes, previously having used his own body. He then stopped working with video for twelve years, returning to it in 1985 (see *Good Boy, Bad Boy*). He has said that the confrontational work he made around this time stemmed from his feelings of 'anger and frustration. My work comes out of being frustrated about the human condition. And about how people refuse to understand other people. And about how people can be cruel to each other. It's not that I think I can change that, but it's just such a frustrating part of human history.' (Quoted in Simon, p.148.)
- 'While Nauman's videos might focus on violence between the sexes, Nauman doesn't trivialise this abuse Plagens considers *Violent Incident*, a 1986 video on show at the Tate featuring a man and woman assaulting each other around the dinner table. At first the man pulls the woman's chair away, beginning the film's vicious circle. However, Nauman switches these roles in a second take, undermining our expectations. "Lest *Violent Incident* be misunderstood as a demonstration of man-on-woman violence, Nauman repeats the incident in reverse," writes Plagens, "with the woman starting the unfortunate chain of events by jerking the fellow's chair out from under him. The symmetry is necessary: although man-on-woman violence occurs far more often than the reverse and, in the United States at least, women commit less than ten per cent of all murders, if Nauman is to make a comment on the universality of humanity's propensity towards violence by whittling it down to emblematic essentials, he has to use both sexes. And the artificial balance of violence by the sexes, for me, actually adds to the lesson: I don't find the video funny at all.'" (Phaidon)

## References

- <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/nauman-violent-incident-t06732>
- <http://uk.phaidon.com/agenda/art/articles/2017/august/01/5-key-points-for-the-tate-s-new-bruce-nauman-show/>

'Untitled (Three Large Animals)', 1989



## 'Untitled (Three Large Animals)', 1989

- I wanted to finish with the central and most eye-catching work in the room. What do you think it is? Three large animals suspended from wires with legs sticking out in various directions.
- The animals are constructed by Nauman using taxidermists' moulds which he started using in the late 1980's. This one is cast in aluminium and the three animals are hybrids made by severing and reattaching heads and limbs to bodies in the wrong position. The aluminium has been roughly scratched to suggest the texture of fur and their bodies have a raw flayed-skin look. Taxidermists use moulds to stretch the skin of animals they intend to stuff. The distorted shapes look like animals that have been produced by some failed Frankenstein experiment. The way they are suspended in the air suggests a slaughter house and the bright aluminium suggest something not of this world.
- It is called *Untitled (Three Large Animals)* is one of a series of works that used taxidermic moulds. Can you tell what the animals are? I thought they were dogs, but I am told they are wolves and deer. He has cut off the ears and there are flat surfaces where the legs have been cut off to add to the suggestion of hanging carcasses. He has used thin wire to join and suspend them in a circular shape that looks like a child's mobile and this contrasts the brutality of the image with a sense of delicacy and innocence.
- Like a lot of his work in the 1980s he borders on making a political statement. He refers here to the darker side of games played by children and adults. He connects, in fact merges, predator and prey which creates a single object of both fear and attraction. The hybrid animals perhaps suggest all animal life is similarly vulnerable. The uniting of organic animal form with metal and industrial processes reminds us of the effect our civilisation has on the natural world, our, so called, victory over nature. It could also suggest the cruelty behind human creativity, which today includes genetic cloning and attempts to breed across species and to combine species.
- Finally, what is it all about, what is the purpose of an artist? Nauman has his own view he has said he wants to produce, **'art that was just there all at once. Like getting hit in the face with a baseball bat. Or better, like getting hit in the back of the neck. You never see it coming; it just knocks you down.'** It's up to you to judge whether he has succeeded.

## Notes on 'Untitled (Three Large Animals)', 1989

- Presented by the Froehlich Foundation, Stuttgart 2000

## References

- <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/nauman-untitled-three-large-animals-t07617>

## Visual Aids

- Bruce Nauman (b. 1941), photograph as cowboy
- Bruce Nauman (b. 1941), *Bound to Fail*, 1966-67, printed 1970, chromogenic print, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
- Man Ray, *L'Enigme d'Isidore Ducasse*, 1920, remade 1972







Man Ray's *The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse* (*L'Enigme d'Isidore Ducasse*, 1920, remade 1972)

## Summary of Bruce Nauman (14:30-15:00)

**Bruce Nauman (b. 1941)** his work has explored the poetics of confusion, anxiety, boredom, entrapment, and failure since the 1960s. He now loves knives, hats, boots, saddles and cars and breeds horses on his 700-acre New Mexico. Painfully shy when young. Born Fort Wayne, Indiana. Interested in maths and music. Majored in maths and minor was arts. In 1964 went to University of California. In 60s and 70s leading film and video artist. Dropped in 1973 for neon. Returned to video with *Good Boy, Bad Boy* in 1985. Influenced by John Cage, Samuel Beckett, Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wants to shock and bludgeon the viewer.

***Henry Moore Bound to Fail, conceived in 1967 and executed in 1970.*** Influenced by Man Ray's *The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse (L'Enigme d'Isidore Ducasse, 1920, remade 1972)*. Man Ray loved puns and word play and Isidore Ducasse had used the phrase '**Beautiful as the accidental encounter, on a dissecting table, of a sewing machine and an umbrella**'. It is a play on words, a man is bound with rope and so bound to fail. In 1967 Henry Moore was an eminent sculptor but rejected by young artists. Moore was controversial when young, decapitation, daubed with paint. In 1938 a Tate director [J.B. Manson] declared his work would only enter the gallery over his dead body. Entrapment and failure.

***Untitled (Hand Circle), 1966.*** Ten hands cast in bronze joined at the wrists. In the 60s he made wax casts of his body. Symbols are ambiguous, in Brazil and Iran the OK symbol is obscene (equivalent to the middle finger raised), in some countries in Europe it means you are worthless, in the Arab world, it can mean the evil eye and a curse but in Buddhism it means the yoga of consciousness. The meaning depends on the social context and the use. Wittgenstein. The hands form an endless circle, an ouroboros. 3,600 years old symbol, means infinity and the endless cycle of birth and death. Forefinger placed in circle seems to always mean sexual union. Contradictions, apparent softness of the hands but an obscene gesture. One end of each pair is male the other female, so it is bisexual or hermaphroditic. Ambiguity from philosophy and circularity from his maths background.

***Run from Fear, Fun from Rear, 1972.*** Lower-end cocktail lounges and hotels, greasy-spoon restaurants, and the kind of entertainment definitely not suitable for children, such as red-light districts. One of the first to use neon in 1965. Letters 'R' and 'F' reversed, word games. In an area advertising 'fun from rear' we might 'run from fear'. Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* mistaken idea of language, that words refer to objects, what about 'fear'? Talks about the word 'game' from solitaire to war games. Words do not refer that play a part in language games. Acquire meaning from their role.

***Good Boy, Bad Boy, 1985.*** Two actors, conjugating the verb 'to be'. Repeated five times, more intense and animated each time, finally angry. One of the first to use video, after graduating he realised "**If I was an artist and I was in the studio, then whatever I was doing in the studio must be art. At this point art became more of an activity and less of a product.**" Nauman was not comfortable as a performance artist and used actors, he said, '**Because they are actors, it's not autobiographical, it's not real anger, but pretending to be angry and they are pretty good at it, but maybe not really convincing.**' The playwright Samuel Beckett once said, '**It is a game, everything is a game ... That has got to be done artificially, balletically. Otherwise everything becomes an imitation, an imitation of reality ... It is a game in order to survive**'. We have ambiguity, aggression, attack but also education, so it attracts and attacks in equal measure.

***Violins Violence Silence, 1981-82.*** Violence has the first four letters of violin and last five of silence. Words repeated, reminded of John Cage 4' 33". Commissioned by California State University music department. There are other interpretations, one critic wrote, **"'Violins' carries a pleasant connotation and alludes to the better side of human endeavours. 'Violence' connotes the opposite – say, war as opposed to a symphony orchestra – and 'silence' could signify either the best of all possible worlds (perfect peace) or the worst (annihilation)."** Another wrote, **'Nauman has always, especially in the neons, consciously tried to provoke the viewer to a response; the language in the neons is often scrappy or even contentious in tone'.**

***Raw Material Washing Hands, Normal (A of A/B) Raw Material Washing Hands, Normal (B of A/B), 1996.*** What do you think? 55 minutes washing hands. Boring? Pontius Pilate, Lady Macbeth tries to remove the blood of dead King Duncan, **'Out, damned spot! Out, I say!'**, Hitchcock's *Psycho*. Surgeon to begin, then very dirty hands then psychotic. Sound of running water. Human psychology and feelings of discomfort. Anxiety.

***Violent Incident, 1986.*** A cruel joke, chair pulled away, person goosed, yells, throws a drink, slaps her, knees him in the groin, grabs a knife, both fall on the floor. 12 monitors in four columns with four combinations of man/woman. Slow-motion, colour change and a man's voice shouting instructions. **'The images are aggressive, the characters are physically aggressive, the language is abusive. The scripting, having the characters act out these roles and the repetition all build on that aggressive tension.'** Nauman explained that in 1986 he felt angry and frustrated about violence and the human condition **'And about how people refuse to understand other people. And about how people can be cruel to each other. It's not that I think I can change that, but it's just such a frustrating part of human history.'** Hypnotic repetition, pointless cruelty, mindless escalation.

***Untitled (Three Large Animals), 1989.*** What is it? Three animals, taxidermists' moulds cut and cast in aluminium. Wolves and deer, flayed skin. Child's mobile, failed Frankenstein experiment, slaughterhouse, brutality, but delicacy and innocence. In 1980s started to border on making political statements. Predator and prey merged. The vulnerability of life. Unity of organic forms, metal and industry, experiments with nature, human creativity gone wrong, genetic cloning. What's it all about? Nauman has his own view he has said he wants to produce, **'art that was just there all at once. Like getting hit in the face with a baseball bat. Or better, like getting hit in the back of the neck. You never see it coming; it just knocks you down.'** It's up to you to judge whether he has succeeded.