

# MoMA

## Curatorial Statement

### ***Bruce Nauman: Disappearing Acts***

Bruce Nauman (b. 1941) is widely acknowledged as a central figure in contemporary art whose stringent questioning of such values as “good” and “bad” remains urgent today, when so many established norms have been upended. Throughout his 50-year career, he has explored how mutable experiences of time, space, sound, movement, and language provide an insecure foundation for our understanding of our place in the world.

*Disappearing Acts* provides an opportunity to experience his singular command of an ever-widening range of mediums, including video, film, performance, sculptures made out of materials both fugitive and lasting, architecturally scaled environments, photography, drawing, neon, sound, and immersive, technologically sophisticated installations. Such variety has been read by some as an indication of a lack of coherence, a sense that no one stylistic or conceptual principle guides his seemingly disparate practice.

But in the course of preparing this exhibition, nearly a quarter-century after the Nauman retrospective I co-organized in 1994, I accidentally stumbled upon a logic of correspondences I had not recognized before. What surprised—really sideswiped—me was a pattern that presented a slightly oxymoronic alternative to the prevailing narrative: the manifold appearances of *disappearance* in his work actually offer a continuous thread of emotional, intellectual, and formal attentiveness that began when Nauman was a graduate student and continues to this day.

Functioning as an act, concept, perceptual probe, magical deceit, working method, and metaphor, disappearance has been a useful and persistent prompt for Nauman’s art. Close relatives of disappearance—the absent, the void, and ensuing senses of nonexistence, privation, or omission—also appear in many forms. They are seen, for example, in holes the size of a body part, in the space under a chair, in the self vanishing around a corner, in the nocturnal goings-on of the empty studio, and in the mental blocks that empty creative possibility. Disappearance, then, is both a real phenomenon and a magnificently ample metaphor for grappling with the anxieties of both the creative process and of navigating the everyday world.

Leaving things open to multiple, often conflicting, understandings, Nauman repeatedly tests the viewer’s willingness to relinquish the safety of the familiar. As we move through his environments or stand in front of a drawing such as *Make Me Think Me*, ideas surface about what it means to be alert—to be in the world. Challenging the ways in which conventions become codified, his work erases all forms of certainty, mandating that we craft our own meanings rather than accede to habitual rules. This, his work teaches us, is where freedom begins.

-- Kathy Halbreich, *Laurenz Foundation Curator and Advisor to the Director,*  
*The Museum of Modern Art*