

The Figurative Tradition

Although Nauman's earliest work, made in the mid-1960s, bypassed traditional notions of sculpture, as a young artist he was highly attuned to the medium's recent history. A cast-iron relief of his torso with his arms tied down is titled *Henry Moore Bound to Fail*, a punning reference to the acclaimed British sculptor. While Nauman was not particularly fond of the older artist's work—celebrated for its polished (if conservative) renditions of the human form—he felt that something in Moore's figurative approach was worth preserving. At a time when contemporary sculpture was moving toward a minimalist, geometric aesthetic, Nauman still valued the potential of recognizable imagery to elicit an empathic response.

By the late 1980s Nauman was also working with readymade objects, engaging another key tradition of twentieth-century sculpture. He ordered taxidermy models of caribou, deer, and other wild animals from a manufacturer's catalog, and arranged the polyurethane casts in elaborate configurations. In *Carousel*, he attached the life-size replicas to a motorized contraption, modeled on a rancher's device for training horses. The animals' relentless churn produces a grating sound, as their hindquarters scrape across the gallery floor, leaving a line drawing in their wake. The mannequins also serve as modular units in large-scale assemblages like *Leaping Foxes*, which Nauman made for this exhibition. Suspended upside down, it forms an inverted pyramid, transforming this classical shape into a metaphor for upended order.

New Ways of Making Sculpture

Nauman applied to art school as a painter but always felt ill at ease with the medium: “Painting is one of those things I could never quite make sense of. . . . It seemed that if I didn’t think of myself as a painter, then it would be possible to continue.” He made his last painting while still a graduate student and then abruptly shifted course, experimenting instead with a range of unconventional materials in three dimensions. Latex-covered strips of canvas gave way to molded fiberglass, formed over lumps of clay and varnished with colored resin. One of these hollow casts encloses a neon tube, glowing from within.

He quickly grew wary of pure abstraction and began to assign his works elaborate titles, which helped to forge a connection between nonfigurative sculpture and parts of the body. Language allowed Nauman to guide the viewer’s imagination, or to lead it astray: *Wax Impressions of the Knees of Five Famous Artists* is made of fiberglass, not wax, and none of the indentations were made by the people he names in a companion drawing. Nauman’s signature offered another way to put himself in the work while distorting his identity. The neon *My Last Name Exaggerated Fourteen Times Vertically* alters his name beyond recognition; the elongated letters all but disappear into a jumble of lavender lines.

Invisible Forms

The desire to give form to the invisible is manifest in a number of Nauman's early sculptures. The film *Span* records the artist and some of his friends erecting a makeshift structure; when completed, it holds a tarp that sways gently over a stream—a sculpture in perpetual motion, animated by the breeze. Nauman soon found other ways to draw the eye to what is typically overlooked, as in a nondescript block of concrete that he says was cast from the empty space beneath a chair.

Elsewhere he took the opposite route, making solid objects disappear. Nauman planned to install a curved resin plaque outdoors, nailed to the trunk of a tree: “After a few years, the tree would grow over it, and finally cover it up, and it would be gone.” In a more absurd scenario, the artist envisions subjecting himself to a similar fate, allowing a tree to grow around the right half of his body and eventually trap him. With tongue-in-cheek humor, Nauman conjures up imperceptibly slow processes of change—gradual means of obscuring his art or himself. Taken together, these works suggest that sculpture is as much about what escapes our senses as about what is visible or tangible.

Performance

After graduating from art school at the age of twenty-four, Nauman found himself at a loss for how to fill his days. He sublet a studio, went there every day, but didn't know what to do with that empty time — until he realized that “if I was in the studio, whatever I was doing was art.” From 1967 to 1969 he made two dozen films and videos of mundane, repetitive motions: pacing the floor, stamping his feet, bouncing a rubber ball. Performance allowed Nauman to use his own body and daily tasks as raw material. “At this point,” he said, “art became more of an activity and less of a product.”

By the 1970s, Nauman's priorities had shifted from his physicality to the viewer's; the goal was to find ways of “having somebody else do the performance.” A text piece from this period instructs us to press our bodies against the gallery walls, and large-scale sculptures confront us with passageways just wide enough to enter. Faced with these interactive works, we must choose to participate or to stand back and watch — though either option can yield surprising spatial or social encounters.

In recent years, Nauman has turned to performance as a means of looking back, revisiting past work with new formal complexity and emotional range. *Contrapposto Studies i through vii* (2015/2016) finds the artist on familiar ground, retracing the steps of his *Walk with Contrapposto* (1968). That early video was Nauman's riff on a classical sculptural pose, designed to enliven static figures and lend the body a pleasing curve. A stationary camera filmed the lithe young Nauman pacing his first corridor, swinging his hips from side to side. The newer work again shows him walking the length of his studio dressed in a T-shirt and jeans, but the digital images echo across seven towering projections that disintegrate the body. The effects of age are manifest in Nauman's heavier torso and wavering balance, making *Contrapposto Studies* an exceptionally clear-eyed portrayal of how time unmakes the body.

Human Nature /Animal Nature

The perils of binary thinking occupied Nauman for much of the 1980s, and these galleries feature a number of works that deal in such extremes. A glaring neon sign blinks out a string of oppositions—*human nature/animal nature, love/hate, life/death*. The seven vices and seven virtues are chiseled on stone tablets, with good and bad traits superimposed so that both are obscured. Depersonalized cartoon figures have sex and act out violent fantasies, giving pleasure and inflicting pain with a mechanical fervor. A black man and a white woman both tell us they were “a good boy” and “a bad girl,” blurring familiar categories we use to judge ourselves and others. Nauman’s work does not shy away from elemental questions, asking how we might live decently without conforming to a shared code of conduct.

Humans’ baser instincts, the artist suggests, are evident in our treatment of animals. Non-human beings became a recurring motif in his work after he moved to rural New Mexico in 1979. He began keeping livestock, learned to ride horses, and tended acres of land, and that daily contact with the natural world soon surfaced in his art. Images and effigies of animals appear in various guises, their bodies fragmented, strung from the ceiling, or perversely reconfigured. Nauman also casts the heads of friends and subjects them to similar treatment, collapsing the distinction between human and animal nature.

Vision

Nauman has made a career-long study of the ways our eyes can betray us, repeatedly engaging the fallibility and malleability of human perception. His 1973 lithograph *Vision*, for example, spells out its title in thin black type. The delicate letters almost disappear into the stark expanse of the page: to see the word is to strain the sense of sight that the print describes. Through optical tricks, alien perspectives, and manipulations of digital footage, Nauman's work explores the disconnect between what we see and what we know.

The artist has long been an early adopter of technologies for producing visual illusions. In 1968, he used the then-new medium of holography to create self-portraits in three dimensions, his face appearing eerily suspended against a black void. Fifty years later, Nauman resumed his search for special effects that convey depth and distance. His 3-D video *Contrapposto Split* (2017) was shot with a specialized camera and a Hollywood film crew, using today's state-of-the-art equipment to depict him and his studio as a high-definition mirage.

Body in Absentia

Nauman's first solo exhibition, in 1966, featured the fiberglass sculptures seen at right, cast from eccentric molds that he made from plywood or plaster formed over lumps of clay. The brittle casts were coated in a viscous resin infused with pigments and even glitter, their organic shapes and sprawling postures alluding to the body. The artist further embraced figuration in the eerily lifelike work *From Hand to Mouth*, cast in a forensic wax that captures every pore of a fragmented face and an arm.

Abstractions of the self occupied Nauman throughout the mid-1960s, when he often used his own body or signature as "a place to start." *Neon Templates of the Left Half of My Body Taken at Ten-Inch Intervals* reduces the figure to units of measure, slyly referring to the classical concept of ideal human proportions. His various "devices," "traps," and "storage capsules" are empty vessels that await an absent body. Nauman described his early experiments as "poking holes in what is known and thought to be art," and hollow cavities and voids abound in his work of this fertile period. *Collection of Various Flexible Materials Separated by Layers of Grease with Holes the Size of My Waist and Wrists* has the tarnish of an ancient relic, and the title claims that the work has been punctured by parts of the artist's anatomy.

Participatory Structures

By 1970, Nauman's work had undergone a radical shift in scale. Sculptural objects had given way to room-sized installations, and the scrutiny of his body had been replaced by a newfound interest in the viewer's. A series of corridors, partitions, and enclosures from this period beckon participation, their static forms enlivened through a real-time encounter with the spectators who move in and around them. With minimal means, these structures trigger physical sensation, calling attention to "how you locate yourself in space and doing something to confuse that."

Architecture gave Nauman a framework to test the dynamics of seeing and being seen. Many of his large-scale environments were outfitted with the latest in video surveillance technology, recording visitors and displaying their images to startling effect. *Going Around the Corner Piece* uses subtle cues to dictate movement and rattle the senses. Its twenty-foot walls form a sealed room that can be circled endlessly but never entered, each side equipped with a camera at one end and a monitor at the other. Those who pace the perimeter catch a glimpse of themselves from behind, only to watch that image slip from view as they approach a monitor. "You have disappeared," wrote one period critic of this disjunctive experience, relishing Nauman's talent for inducing "the feelings of vague dread that have become his trademark."

Imaginary Spaces

A model is a proxy, a substitute for something else. Mathematical models give shape to intangible theories or principles; an architectural model is a working prototype for a structure that has yet to be built. From the mid-1970s through the mid-1980s, Nauman devoted himself to constructing a series of maquettes: three-dimensional studies for vast subterranean tunnels, shafts, and trenches. Although the buried passages he envisioned were never realized, they marked another leap in scale—Nauman saw them as “extensions” of his earlier corridors, but magnified many times over. The models vary considerably in size and presentation, hung from the ceiling with scraggly bits of wire or propped up with wooden shims. Fashioned from humble materials—cardboard, fiberglass, scraps of lumber—these works have an ad hoc feel, with tape exposed and pitted surfaces left coarse and unrefined.

A model asks us to contend with two conflicting orders of experience: the physical facts of the thing itself and the ideal or concept to which it refers. Nauman describes this sense of disconnect as akin to having “two kinds of information that don’t line up,” and has made a career-long pursuit of the gap between “what you imagine and what you intend and what you make, and then what’s *there*.”