

# Bruce Nauman: *Make Me Think Me* Educators' Pack

## Make Me Think Me

Central to Nauman's work is his exploration of art's potential as a means to investigate the human condition. *Make Me Think Me* focuses on this aspect of Nauman's work, and is divided into two parts.

Part One examines the artist's preoccupation with language. It includes photographs, neon works, sound pieces, sculptures and works on paper that incorporate wordplay. Nauman tests language to the point where it breaks down as a means of communication and becomes a mere pattern or sound.



Raw-War, 1971

Part Two explores his engagement with the body and its use as a symbol. The subject shifts from the artist's own body to that of clowns, actors and also to the viewer. Confronted with "*What to do*", alone in his studio following graduation, Nauman came to the conclusion that if he is an artist then everything he does in his studio is art. He recorded himself performing simple, mundane tasks such as applying make-up, pulling faces, bouncing a ball and walking around a square in order to investigate human behaviour, the actions being emblematic of the wider human condition.

Works such as *Corridor Installation (Nick Wilder Installation) 1971* and *Double Steel Cage Piece 1974* allow him to examine audience reaction and response. The viewer unwittingly becomes performer on entering these works, but movement is always predetermined and controlled by the artist.

The exhibition culminates with a selection of Nauman's animal and head casts. The interchanging of body parts in these sculptures can be read symbolically or metonymically, recalling the chopping and changing of words and phrases at the beginning of the exhibition.

## Bruce Nauman

Born in Fort Wayne, Indiana, 1941, Nauman studied mathematics, physics, music, art and philosophy before gaining an MA in art at the University of California. He subsequently taught in San Francisco where he became a key figure in the experimental art scene of the 1960s and 70s. Preferring to keep a distance from the media and publicity, he now lives and works on his ranch in New Mexico.

*"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 such a frustrating part of human history".*

Nauman's work goes beyond the boundaries of traditional art, incorporating a wide range of materials in a quest to discover "*what art can be*". He gave up painting early in his career in order to explore alternative means of expression such as dance, performance, sculpture and video. The diversity of his early studies, particularly mathematics, is often cited as a crucial factor in the development of Nauman's work. He said, "*there was a certain thinking process which was similar and which carried over into art. This investigative activity is necessary*".

The availability of portable video equipment in the late 1960s opened up a new range of possibilities, not only as a means of recording performances, but also allowing him to experiment with sound, language, rhythms of text, audience perception and participation. Further advancements in audio-visual technology contributed to the development of the video installation, an art-form that Nauman helped establish and continues to exploit. Alongside his video work, Nauman has also produced a large number of sculptures, photographic works and drawings.

Although difficult to categorise, Nauman's work has been linked with Minimalism, due to his interest in repeating simple forms, whether visually or verbally. He also displays a minimalist attitude to process, in that his art objects do not attempt to disguise how they were made. For example, sculptures are often left with rough edges and seams from casting.

- Talk about America in the 1960s – Flower Power, Kennedy and Martin Luther King Assassinations, Woodstock, Vietnam etc
- Compare Nauman's work to Minimalist artists such as Carl Andre, Donald Judd. How does his work differ?
- Look at alternative art in the 1960s eg dance, performance, body art, 'happenings' etc. Can you link any of these with Nauman's art?

# Nauman and Language

*"When language begins to break down a little bit, it becomes exciting and communicates in nearly the simplest way that it can function: you are forced to be aware of the sounds and the poetic parts of words. If you deal only with what is known, you'll have redundancy; on the other hand, if you deal only with the unknown, you cannot communicate at all. There is always some combination of the two, and it is how they touch each other that makes communication interesting."* Bruce Nauman, 1989

Much of Nauman's work explores language as a basic form of human interaction or communication. He is interested in what happens when you distort words and sentences, when you change fonts, when you play around with order and structure, or vary sound patterns and change meaning through palindromes, spoonerisms, puns and anagrams.



*No (Black State), 1981*

## Exercises:

- Make anagrams, puns and spoonerisms from your name or by using names of famous people
- Think of examples of words with the same spelling that have different meanings eg "dog" (animal) and "dog" (to follow)
- Think of words that sound the same but have different meanings eg "hare" and "hair". Think up sentences that could take on different meaning through misspelling eg "He was washing his hair" and "He was washing his hare".
- Discuss the difference between "1 2 3 4 5" and "one two three four five"  
Or.. "cdefgabc" (alphabetical letters) and "cdefgabc" (musical notes).

Nauman has cited Wittgenstein as a major influence on his work and shares the philosopher's concern with language and logic.

Wittgenstein argues that without rules and shared attitudes towards the things around us, communication would be impossible. For example, in order for us to be able to discuss colour, there has to be an agreement or shared concept on what different colours are. Nauman presents us with what can happen if these understandings break down.

*"The limits of my language mean the limits of my world"*  
Ludwig Wittgenstein

—

Nauman is also interested in the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin which are concerned with how human beings act and think and, particularly, how they communicate. His writings focus primarily on the concept of dialogue and the relationship between speaker and listener or respondent. He argues that all language and any form of speech or writing is dialogue, in other words, language is always the product of a speaker and a respondent.

*"Any speaker is himself a respondent to a greater or lesser degree. He is not, after all, the first speaker, the one who disturbs the eternal silence of the universe"*  
*-Mikhail Bakhtin*

### Discuss..

- quotes from Wittgenstein and Bakhtin in relation to Nauman's work
- if it is possible for language to exist without a respondent?
- the relationship between artist and viewer – how does Nauman communicate with his audience?

### Gallery Activity

Choose a work in the exhibition that explores language eg *Eleven Colour Photographs 1966/7-70*, *First Poem Piece, 1968* or *Human Nature Doesn't Know, 1983/6*.

- What materials has the artist used? Are these traditional artist's materials? Where else might you find these materials?
- How does Nauman change or distort words in this work? What effect does this have on their meaning?
- Do you find this work confusing, funny, clever, silly..? Why?

### Other Activities

- Look at other artists who have used words or text eg, Picasso, the Futurists, Dada, Rene Magritte, Jasper Johns, Ed Ruseha... Compare their use of words or text with Nauman's.
- Use the language exercises above as a starting point. Create your own artworks using words and phrases that distort language. Your works could take the form of performance, drawings, poetry, music, collage or sculpture.

## Nauman and Music

*"Music plays a role in a lot of my work...even when there is no music".*

Although Nauman's works do not feature musical compositions or soundtracks, they reveal the artist's interest in structure and music theory. His text works in particular, rely on simple repetitive patterns that are characteristic of minimalist music.

Even works that do not feature sound, such as *Corridor Installation (Nick Wilder Installation) 1971* could be said to use a John Cage-like silence which the participating visitor is uncomfortably aware of.

In the Catalogue to Nauman's 1992 Hayward Exhibition, Christine Van Assche comments on his use of musical structure:

*"What is developed in the sound pieces (and texts) is a diachronic, binary structure made up of alternating full passages and blanks, positives and negatives, affirmatives and blanks"*  
Later works such as *Violent Incident, 1986* or *World Peace (Received)1996*, become more complex and are described by ... as *"a polyphony based on permutations, gaps, inversions, shifts and*

- Listen to John Cage, Steve Reich, La Monte Young or Phil Glass
- Explore the musicality of Nauman's works through rhythm, tempo and tone.
- Discuss rhythm and movement, eg, is it possible to walk without rhythm?

### Activity

- Divide the class into small groups and give each group a word or well-known phrase and ask them to repeat it out loud until they fall naturally into a rhythm.
- Give each group a different selection of musical terms (eg *adagio, dolce, pianissimo, fortissimo*). Ask them to apply these terms to their recitation. You could supply them with percussion instruments, drum machine or a metronome to help keep a beat (or even vary the beats or rhythm). Groups could take turns to perform their word or phrase to the rest of the class and invite them to guess the musical terms they have interpreted.
- Discuss what effect the variations in rhythm and tone have on the deliverance of the word or phrase. Does it reinforce meaning or destroy it?
- Supply the groups with a wide range of art materials and invite them to re-create the word or phrase as a work of art, trying to capture the same tones and rhythms of their recitation pieces. This could take the form of a drawing, painting, collage, sculpture etc. Be inventive!

## Nauman and Drama

In his early works, Nauman used his own body in order to examine and portray different aspects of the human condition. Works such as *Slow Angle Walk (Beckett Walk)*, 1968 are subjective, drawing upon his own personal experiences and physical parameters. His work gradually becomes more objective with the introduction of the third person, in the form of clowns or actors (*Shit in Your Hat- Head on a Chair*, 1990). They begin to address the viewer directly (*Good Boy Bad Boy*, 1985) They become more staged, involving sets or assemblages (*World Peace(Received)*1996). They become increasingly complex in their involvement and manipulation of the audience, and yet the scripts, settings and performances remain minimalist.

Nauman has cited Samuel Beckett as a major influence on his art.

His characters exchange simple Beckettian sentences, perform mundane, repetitive Beckettian exercises in neutral, ahistorical Beckettian spaces.

- Read *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett
- Compare Beckett's dialogues with texts from Nauman's works (Eg *Good Boy Bad Boy*, 1985 - *See Work in Focus*).

### Excerpt from "Waiting for Godot Part 2

**ESTRAGON:**

What am I to say?

**VLADIMIR:**

Say, I am happy.

**ESTRAGON:**

I am happy.

**VLADIMIR:**

So am I.

**ESTRAGON:**

So am I.

**VLADIMIR:**

We are happy.

**ESTRAGON:**

We are happy. (*Silence.*) What do we do now, now that we are happy?

**VLADIMIR:**

Wait for Godot. (*Estragon groans. Silence.*) Things have changed here since yesterday.

**ESTRAGON:**

And if he doesn't come?

**VLADIMIR:**

(*after a moment of bewilderment*). We'll see when the time comes...

NB Beckett texts can be downloaded from the website listed below

## Points for discussion in class and in the gallery

1. In *Waiting for Godot*..

- What happens?

- Describe the stage set. What props are used?
- What is the dramatic effect of repetition?
- What does Beckett tell you about the human condition?

2. Choose a work in the *Make Me Think Me* exhibition

- Describe what happens
- Describe the setting or background. What materials has the artist used?
- What is the effect of repetition?
- Does Nauman tell you anything about the human condition?

**Excerpt from "Waiting for Godot Part 2**

**ESTRAGON:**

What do we do now?

**VLADIMIR:**

While waiting.

**ESTRAGON:**

While waiting.

*Silence.*

**VLADIMIR:**

We could do our exercises.

**ESTRAGON:**

Our movements.

**VLADIMIR:**

Our elevations.

**ESTRAGON:**

Our relaxations.

**VLADIMIR:**

Our elongations.

**ESTRAGON:**

Our relaxations.

**VLADIMIR:**

To warm us up.

**ESTRAGON:**

To calm us down.

**VLADIMIR:**

Off we go.

*Vladimir hops from one foot to the other. Estragon imitates him.*

**ESTRAGON:**

*(stopping).* That's enough. I'm tired.

You could also discuss the relationship between written language and physical behaviour in Nauman's works. A link could be made between *Slow Angle Walk (Beckett Walk) 1968*, which could have been based on Beckett's character, Molloy, who walked painfully with a stiff leg and a crutch. You could also compare this description of Watt, in Beckett's novel of the same name, with Nauman's performances:

“Watt’s way of advancing due east, for example, was to turn his bust as far as possible towards the north and at the same time to fling out his right leg as far as possible towards the south, and then to turn his bust as far as possible towards the south and at the same time to fling out his left leg as far as possible towards the north and to fling out his right leg as far as possible towards the south...”

Witnessing or experiencing physical activity is crucial to understanding physical and mental duress. Acting out the parts of Molloy or Watt gives an insight into their characters and dispositions that cannot be gained through simply reading the text. Similarly, Nauman argues that self-awareness relies on studying your own body movements. He stated, “An awareness of yourself comes from a certain amount of activity, and you can’t get it from just thinking about yourself”.



*Slow Angle Walk (Beckett Walk), 1968*

### Exercise

- Write down instructions for some simple routines and have groups act out these movements from your script.
- Repeat the exercise after demonstrating the movements to them
- Repeat the exercise with the addition of props eg crutch, weight to carry, chair etc
- Repeat the exercise by adding character traits to the performance (eg nervous woman, angry man, shy child etc)
- Discuss how these changes affect the performance in each case.

## Work in Focus: *Good Boy Bad Boy*, 1985

*"Video is a much more 'private' kind of communication. Generally it's what one person does. You sit and have contact with a television set as opposed to a film where generally a lot of people go and the image is very large; it's more of a common experience".*



This work consists of two monitors, displayed on plinths at head height. One screen shows a head and shoulders image of a young man, the other an older woman. Their heads are almost life size.

They look straight at the camera, and therefore make direct eye-contact with the viewer. They each repeat a hundred phrases, which are conjugations of a verb followed by a line that defines the statement:

I was a good boy  
You were a good boy  
We were good boys  
That was good  
I was a good girl  
You were a good girl  
We were good girls  
That was good  
I was a bad boy  
You were a bad boy  
We were bad boys  
That was bad  
I was a bad girl  
You were a bad girl  
We were bad girls  
That was bad  
I am a virtuous man  
You are a virtuous man  
We are virtuous men  
This is virtue

I am a virtuous woman  
You are a virtuous woman  
We are virtuous women  
This is virtue  
I am an evil man  
You are an evil man  
We are evil men  
This is evil  
I am an evil woman  
You are an evil woman  
We are evil women  
This is evil  
I'm alive  
You're alive  
We're alive  
This is our life  
I live the good life  
You live the good life  
We live the good life  
This is the good life  
I have work  
You have work  
We have work  
This is work  
I play  
You play  
We play  
This is play  
I'm having fun  
You're having fun  
We're having fun  
This is fun  
I'm bored  
You're bored  
We're bored  
Life is boring  
I'm boring  
You're boring  
We're boring  
This is boring  
I have sex  
You have sex  
We have sex  
This is sex  
I love  
You love  
We love  
This is our love  
I hate  
You hate  
We hate

This is hating  
I like to eat  
You like to eat  
We like to eat  
This is eating  
I like to drink  
You like to drink  
We like to drink  
This is drinking  
I (like to) shit  
You (like to) shit  
We (like to) shit  
This is shit(ting)  
I piss  
You piss  
We piss  
This is piss  
I like to sleep  
You like to sleep  
We like to sleep  
Sleep well  
I pay  
You pay  
We pay  
This is payment  
I don't want to die  
You don't want to die  
We don't want to die  
This is fear of death.

They each go through this sequence five times. The delivery is flat and neutral at the beginning and becomes increasingly emotional until by the fifth recitation they appear very animated. His delivery takes fifteen minutes while hers is sixty seconds longer, which means that their performances gradually fall out of synch. As a stage actor, his delivery is more exaggerated whilst as a television actress working the fields of daytime tv, soap-operas and advertising, her performance is less gestural, relying more on facial expressions

*"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" Bruce Nauman, 1998*

As in much of Nauman's work, the viewer becomes an active participant. The actors communicate with the spectator, through eye contact and by direct speech, saying "I", "You" and "We". It is not a conversation, as the viewer is not allowed to answer, but is confronted by a barrage of contradictory and increasingly angry accusations. Although the actors are delivering banal statements, the mounting emotional intensity suggests aggression and attack rather than education. The viewer is ultimately left feeling disturbed and disorientated. Many of the statements imply moral judgements which through repetition seem increasingly threatening.

**Discuss...**

- Nauman's use of the television monitors (use of actors, presentation, setting etc). What effect does the monitor have on the viewer? Would the work take on a different meaning if he had used large screens in order to show this work?
- the script as a monologue. Would this work would be as effective if shown with one monitor? Why has Nauman used two actors rather than one?
- Nauman's use of repetition – visually and aurally.
- why the artist used a negative statement for the last four lines.

### Activities:

- Find examples of repetition or wordplay in television advertisements
- Act out the script of Good Boy, Bad Boy between different characters eg child and older person, two men, two women etc, and discuss how this affects your interpretation of the work.
- Think up some new statements to add to the script
- Compare this work with another video piece eg *World Peace (Received)*, 1996 or *Get Out Of My Mind, Get Out Of This Room*, 1968. Discuss the relationship between the artist and the viewer in these works.

### Further Reading:

**Cooke**, Lynne, **Dezeuze**, Anna, **Drucker**, Johanna and **Grunenberg**, Christoph, (eds) *Make Me Think Me*, (cat) Tate Publishing, 2006

**Dexter**, Emma, Bruce Nauman *Raw Materials* Tate Publishing, 2004

**Goldberg**, Rose Lee, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*, Thames and Hudson, 2001

**Hall**, D and **Fifer**, S.J. (eds), *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*, Aperture, 1995

**Kraynak**, Janet (ed), *Please Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman's Words* MIT Press, 2000

**Morgan**, Robert C., *Bruce Nauman, PAJ Books: Art and Performance Monographs*, John Hopkins University Press, 2002

**Sayre**, H.M., *The Object of Performance: the American Avant-Garde since 1970*, University of Chicago Press, 1994

**Van Assche**, Christine, *Bruce Nauman*, (cat) Hayward Gallery, 1992

### Other Resources

<http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/nauman/default.shtm>

[http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/majorprojects/nauman/home\\_1.htm](http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/majorprojects/nauman/home_1.htm)

[http://samuel-beckett.net/Waiting\\_for\\_Godot\\_Part1.html](http://samuel-beckett.net/Waiting_for_Godot_Part1.html)

[http://samuel-beckett.net/Waiting\\_for\\_Godot\\_Part2.html](http://samuel-beckett.net/Waiting_for_Godot_Part2.html)

<http://www.iep.utm.edu/w/wittgens.htm>

<http://www.brocku.ca/english/courses/4F70/bakhtin.html>