

January 23 – April 19, 2009

January 23 – April 19, 2009

BRUCE NAUMAN

(Born in 1941 in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Lives in Northern New Mexico.)

Bruce Nauman studied mathematics, physics, and art. In 1966, he had his first solo show at the Nicholas Wilder Gallery in Los Angeles and in 1973, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York co-organized his first museum survey. A large-scale retrospective exhibition in 1994 was organized by the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis and the Hirschhorn Museum, Washington, D.C., and traveled to The Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and the Reina Sofia, Madrid. In the summer of 2009, Nauman will represent the United States in the *Venice Biennale*.

Cover image:

Double Poke in the Eye II, 1985

Neon tubing mounted on aluminum monolith, 24 x 36 x 9 1/4 inches, edition of 40. Collection of Lois and Steve Eisen.
© 2008 Bruce Nauman / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

General support for the Contemporary's exhibitions program is generously provided by the Whitaker Foundation; The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts; William E. Weiss Foundation; Regional Arts Commission; Missouri Arts Council, a state agency; Nancy Reynolds and Dwyer Brown; Arts and Education Council; and members of the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis.



Bar Tricks, 1995
Three color monitors, one video player, and one video source.
Courtesy of the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York.
© 2008 Bruce Nauman / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



1 — Main Galleries

Bruce Nauman

Dead Shot Dan

Bruce Nauman is among the most influential American artists of his generation. Since the early sixties, he has developed a multifaceted body of work that explores the nature of art, language, and human behavior. Resisting any distinct style or medium, his extensive oeuvre includes sculpture, photographs, neons, performances, drawings, prints, sound installations, and videos. Showcasing a selection of works ranging from 1966 to 1995, *Dead Shot Dan* foregrounds the artist's particular use of humor—one that is deadpan, painful, and relentlessly tongue-in-cheek.

Greeting viewers to the exhibition is *Double Poke in the Eye II* (1985), in which a pair of neon heads swap finger jabs under the whirr and hiss of pink and blue tube lights. Nauman traps the

duo in an endless back-and-forth of mindless aggression, locking them in a perpetual pantomime, wherein each poke becomes a tiny and short-lived victory. In the two-channel video *Jump* (1994), the artist traps his own face behind two square monitors. Stuck in a contest against himself and against gravity, Nauman performs a series of repetitive but rhythmic head-bangs—each jump a fleeting triumph. Nauman has taken on gravity before. An iconic double-exposed photograph, *Failing to Levitate in the Studio* (1966), shows the artist attempting to hover above his studio floor, resulting in yet another task that is bound to fail.

The tragi-comedy of simple gestures plays a prominent role in much of Nauman's work and re-appears in his early *Eleven Color Photographs* (1966/67-70), which depict the artist engaged in various mundane performances. He sits at a kitchen table spreading jam on a series of letters in *Eating My Words*. He polishes the letters H, O, and T in *Waxing Hot*. While these dumb one-liners act as purposefully bad jokes, they establish a complex

relationship between word and image and explore what the artist calls the “functional edges” of language. Another photograph in the series, *Bound to Fail*, shows the artist's hands tied behind his back and connects his mastery of wordplay to his penchant for the useless. Playing another linguistic joke, Nauman reshuffles a famous Elvis Presley lyric in *Love Me Tender, Move Te Lender*, a 1966 drawing from the collection of the Saint Louis Art Museum.

Humiliation, self-deprecation, and dysfunction are as central to Nauman's practice as they are to the nature of comedy. His work is often ruthless in shaming its audience, especially when it addresses and disparages them directly, as with *Pay Attention* (1973). As if on cue, the rarely-seen video *Bar Tricks* (1995) challenges viewers to find the magic in a card trick. Presented on surveillance monitors in the museum's public bathrooms and café, the video features a skilled illusionist performing a series of sleights-of-hand for the artist and a few friends. As she teases her audience with a slowed-down delivery, they chuckle

off-screen, never quite grasping the mechanics of the illusion.

Nauman's work is often discussed in relationship to Samuel Beckett, a writer whose work, while often droll, evokes the tortured drama of existence. His only film, *Film* (1965), stars the ageing Buster Keaton and adds a comic edge to the classic Beckettian loop of tragic paralysis. And indeed, Keaton's own films tell tales of endlessly violent, if slapstick, acts defined by Sisyphean traps, bodily contortions, linguistic slip-ups, and misunderstandings. Like both Beckett and Keaton, Nauman's comedy is marked by trickery, claustrophobia, mischief, and embarrassment. In Buster Keaton's 1921 silent short film *The Goat*, the star plays an innocent hero who finds himself mistaken for a wanted criminal named Dead Shot Dan. The twenty-seven minutes of narrow escapes, ridiculous disguises, pathetic violence, and hopeless hide-outs are among Keaton's most memorable performances and serve as an apt stand-in for the sour after-taste that follows Bruce Nauman's sense of the comic.



Failing to Levitate in the Studio, 1966

Black-and-white photograph, 20 x 24 inches.

Courtesy of the artist. © 2008 Bruce Nauman / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.