Introduction

I embarked upon this exhibition and book to examine how Bruce Nauman's time in Northern California during the late 1960s formed him as an artist and how it might have affected the art of the region. I realized that, although other authors had written about Nauman's early development, none had done so with exclusive focus or from a regional perspective. Over the course of my research, I conducted more than forty interviews with Nauman's art teachers at the University of California, Davis, fellow students, artist friends, and his students at the San Francisco Art Institute, as well as with several of the artists who became the core of the Conceptual movement in the Bay Area. I also read Nauman's reflections on his early years in California in his rare published interviews. It eventually became clear to me that, although the influence of Nauman's teachers at UC Davis, particularly William T. Wiley, and the school's freewheeling environment were significant and effected his shift from painting to sculpture, Nauman had arrived in California in 1964 already in possession of many of the ingredients that were to nourish his art—a grounding in mathematics, science, philosophy, and music, for example, as well as a solid moral sense and, most importantly, a keen and curious mind. Once in California, Nauman not only observed what was happening in visual art on the West Coast and beyond through publications and contact with visiting artists to the Davis campus, but he also drew information from the Bay Area's vibrant new dance and music scenes. Literature (Samuel Beckett, Vladimir Nabokov, Malcolm Lowry, and Alain Robbe-Grillet, in particular) and Gestalt psychology also played into his art making.

What finally emerged as the thesis of my project was that from 1964, when he arrived in Northern California, to 1969, when he left the area definitively, Nauman established much of his artistic vocabulary. In his early fiberglass and rubber sculptures, he explored new, untested materials as well as the methodology that came to be called Post-Minimal. He was also among the first to use his body as an expressive instrument, in live performance and in his classic studio performances made for film and video, and was among the pioneers of the latter. His search for new means and sources of expression led him to experiment with neon in signlike reliefs and with interactive installations, and to explore the relationship between words and images. He also made his first sound piece during this time.
Themes and subjects that appear in his work to this day can be found in some of his very earliest pieces (including a group of sketches he left behind in his graduate studio that have only recently come to light). These subjects include an emphasis on process; the artist’s studio as a site; the relationship of sculpture to its physical environment; fountains, stairs, and chairs as metaphors; wordplay (encouraged by Wiley and Robert Arneson, another Davis teacher); the inversion of exterior and interior; the tension between exposure and concealment; and the art potential of ordinary activities. Most importantly, though, are the fundamental themes he has addressed throughout his oeuvre—the role of the artist, the function of art, and the primacy of the idea over whatever form it takes. These themes define Nauman’s work and have profoundly influenced artists all over the world.

Because it seemed to exemplify many aspects of his philosophy, I named this show *A Rose Has No Teeth* after the eponymous work—an embossed lead plaque that Nauman made in 1966 when only twenty-four years old. The piece is at once a commentary on traditional outdoor sculpture, which Nauman found uninspiring, and a reference to Ludwig Wittgenstein’s language theory as put forth in his *Philosophical Investigations*, from which the phrase derives. The artist intended the plaque to be affixed to a tree, where, over time, it would disappear as the bark grew over it. As Nauman sees it, more typical outdoor sculpture, large and ambitious as it might be, can never compete with the scale and grandeur of nature itself. Not surprisingly, given his intelligence and range, Nauman was able, in this unprepossessing work, to raise fundamental questions about both art and language.

Although he was geographically removed from the centers of Conceptual art activity, Nauman was in the forefront of the revolutionary changes taking place in art and almost single-handedly redefined what it meant to be an artist. Even as a graduate student, Nauman demonstrated a precociousness and originality that made adventurous curators and dealers take note. He had his first major solo show at the Nicholas Wilder Gallery in Los Angeles in 1966, just before receiving his master’s degree, and by 1969 was exhibiting with the leading galleries for vanguard art—Leo Castelli Gallery in New York and Konrad Fischer Galerie in Düsseldorf. He was included in virtually all the early landmark Post-Minimal and Conceptual art exhibitions, such as *Eccentric Abstraction; Documenta 4; Prospect 68; Nine at Castelli; Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form*; and *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials.* In 1972 a survey of his work was co-organized by Jane Livingston at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Marcia Tucker at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, an unusual tribute to such a young artist.

Others have written about Nauman’s Northern California years, notably Livingston and Tucker in their 1972 catalogue, Neal Benezra in the catalogue for Nauman’s 1993 retrospective exhibition, and Coosje van Bruggen in her 1988 monograph. This exhibition and catalogue, however, will explore in depth Nauman’s relationship to the place where he created his earliest—and in some cases, his most strikingly innovative—works.
My essay traces the development of Nauman’s work; art historian Anne M. Wagner describes how the artist was “freed from the inbuilt limits of traditional materials to focus on the actions and motives of the embodied self”; art historian and curator Robert Storr shows that, in Nauman’s hands, drawing, rather than being a “medium for describing the world . . . is a means of thinking it”; and media curator and critic Robert R. Riley offers an analysis of the artist’s early work in film and video.

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Note
1. These exhibitions took place at Fischbach Gallery, New York, 1966; Museum Fridericianum, Kassel, Germany, 1968; Städtische Kunsthalle, Düsseldorf, 1968; Castelli Warehouse, New York, 1969; Kunsthalle Bern, Bern, Switzerland, 1969 (then traveling to the Museum Haus Lange, Krefeld, Germany, and the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London); and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1969, respectively.