



# Seeing Language and Sound: The Linguistic and Musical Qualities in the Works of Bruce Nauman

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DOI: 10.32629/asc.v5i6.3163

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**Abstract:** This article examines the pivotal role of musicality in Bruce Nauman's artistic practice, highlighting how rhythm, repetition, and sound intertwine with language to create immersive experiences. Nauman's works, ranging from video installations to neon sculptures, illustrate a deep exploration of auditory and visual relationships. Influenced by avant-garde composers, his manipulation of sound, both intentional and incidental, challenges traditional boundaries and enhances the viewer's engagement. By analyzing the rhythmic structures in Nauman's art, this discussion reveals how musicality transforms meaning and invites emotional responses, asserting its significance in contemporary art.

**Keywords:** Bruce Nauman, musicality, sound, language, immersive experience

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## 1. Introduction

Bruce Nauman, born on December 6, 1941, in Fort Wayne, Indiana, is one of the most significant artists of our time. He studied mathematics and physics at the University of Wisconsin-Madison before pursuing art at the University of California, Davis. In 1964, he abandoned painting in favor of sculpture, performance, installation, film, video, and photography. He is regarded as a pioneer of video art in the 1960s, creating a series of groundbreaking and avant-garde works that capture simple yet absurd actions performed in his studio. Through his body, he explores the potential of art and the role of the artist while examining psychological states and behavioral norms.

Nauman's works reveal a profound interest in linguistics and vocabulary systems, delving into the nature of communication and the inherent issues of language. He often employs actors to repeatedly read or perform a text, revealing the ambiguities of language through subtle variations. In his artistic practice, language and sound are inseparable, with musicality playing a crucial role. He blurs the boundaries between sculpture, sound, and language, famously stating, "Music plays a role in many of my works, even when there is no music."

"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[1]

"The limits of my language mean the limits of my world." — Ludwig Wittgenstein[2]

## 2. The Linguistic Qualities in Nauman's Works

In discussions of contemporary art's exploration of linguistics, Nauman's works are indispensable. His engagement with language, logic, and vocabulary systems throughout his artistic career has been significantly influenced by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein posits that communication is impossible without consistent rules and a shared understanding of concepts. For example, to discuss color, we must agree on what color is. Nauman's works serve to counter this logic by illustrating what occurs in the absence of such rules. He is captivated by deconstructing language and probing its ambiguities, addressing the essence of communication and misunderstanding, themes that recur in his works.

Nauman experiments with language in various forms, exploring this fundamental aspect of human interaction. He manipulates words and sentences, alters typography, plays with order and structure, and employs palindromes, acronyms, puns, and riddles to transform phrases. Utilizing text, lighting, and sound, he evokes synesthetic responses that resonate with viewers or stir their emotions, imparting potent conceptual power. In his work *VIOLINS VIOLENCE SILENCE* (1981-1982), the words "violence," "violins," and "silence" intertwine in bright neon yellow, pink, and white, forming a triangular shape on the wall. The word "violence" is particularly pronounced, with the piercing flicker of the neon and its accompanying hum stimulating the senses, while the warm rainbow hues soften its impact. In this context, "violence" detaches from

its conventional meaning, becoming less “violent.” The audience knows the word’s significance but has not experienced or witnessed any form of unrest or radicalism; “violence” thus blurs, losing its rules and generating misunderstanding, resulting in a complete deconstruction. Conversely, “violins” conjures pleasant imagery, hinting at a more beautiful aspect. The subtle contradictions in Nauman’s work evoke fluctuating emotions in the viewer.



Figure 1. *Violins Violence Silence* 1981-1982 (Neon tubing with clear glass tubing suspension frame 60.5 × 66.5 × 6 inches; Oliver-Hoffmann Family Collection, Chicago)

In another print work, *CLEAR VISION* (1973), Nauman again investigates the ambiguity of language. He employs italicized uppercase letters, with black ink printed on white paper in two rows using silk screen, rendering the phrase “CLEAR VISION” While it appears clear, it is rife with contradictions. The messy letters are reversed and largely illegible. Nauman creates a critical point between clarity and obscurity, understanding and misunderstanding, legibility and illegibility. Essentially, the meaning of language is never absolute or definitive, and this work powerfully articulates that concept.



Figure 2. Bruce Nauman, *Clear vision*, 1973, lithograph and screenprint.

### 3. The Musical Qualities in Nauman’s Works

Musicality is another core element of Nauman’s oeuvre, particularly evident in rhythmic and variational effects. Many of his works reflect a strong exploration of musical structure, with repetitive voiceovers, recitations, or texts demonstrating a sense of rhythm. Variations in repetition embody the concept of variation in his pieces. This combination often induces a rhythmic sensation even in silent works.

Numerous examples of rhythm abound in Nauman’s works, such as the video installation *Good Boy Bad Boy* (1985), where two monitors are placed at head height. One screen features a young Black man, while the other displays an older White woman. They recite the same 100 sentences, structured around subject-copula-predicate formats, varying between “good boy,” “bad boy,” “good girl,” and “bad girl.” Both repeat this sequence five times, starting with a neutral tone that gradually escalates into heightened emotion until, in the fifth iteration, they appear quite angry. The installation’s screens are

nearly life-sized, making the initial exchanges rhythmic before devolving into “varied repetition,” underscoring the work’s inherent musicality. Nauman engages the audience through this rhythmic and variational approach, even though it is not an interactive work; the rhythm, sound, visuals, and installation create an immersive experience that draws the viewer in, confronting them with the conflicts he presents.

Nauman remarked, “You don’t have to watch the entire video from beginning to end to understand the work.”[3] The artist noted that his 1985 video work *Good Boy Bad Boy* is designed to be non-linear, allowing for repeated viewings without a specific duration. He expressed appreciation for the idea that viewers can engage with the work briefly, step away, and return at any time, treating it as an object that invites revisitation rather than requiring continuous, uninterrupted attention. [4] This emphasis aligns perfectly with the musicality of his works, akin to a song that need not stress where to start or finish. You can begin listening from anywhere, then pause and return a week later, seamlessly engaging with the rhythm and variation that allows the audience to experience it from any point.



Figure 3. *Good Boy Bad Boy* Video, 2 monitors, colour and audio (mono) Duration: 60 min., 52 sec. Tate

Another iconic work imbued with musicality is *One Hundred Live and Die* (1984). Here, Nauman creates a visual rhythm by appending “and Live” and “and Die” to the end of each short phrase. After 50 words, “live” follows, and after another 50, “die” follows, with neon lights illuminating one by one, then in rows, and finally all at once, creating a unique visual rhythm. I term this rhythm a “visual symphony”, echoing Nauman’s assertion that “music plays a significant role in many of my works, even when there is no music.”



Figure 4. Bruce Nauman *One Hundred Live and Die* 1984

Nauman, influenced by composer John Cage, believes that incidental sound, environmental sound, and intentional composition are equally significant. In his silent work *Live-Taped Video Corridor* (1970), he employs a Cage-like silence reminiscent of *4'33* (1952). As the observer traverses the corridor, two monitors at the end display live and pre-recorded footage of the corridor, both without sound. Viewers find that as they approach their image, they shrink, while their reflection appears to recede. This entire experience is devoid of any sound actively placed by the artist, and within the narrow passage, the sounds of the viewer's footsteps and breathing seem amplified. The crowded yet vacant space leaves the viewer with nothing to see or hear, compelling attention toward their own sounds or sometimes intentionally creating noise in the "corridor". This mindfulness-like experience of incidental sound seems to invoke Cage's celebrated exploration of silence and randomness.

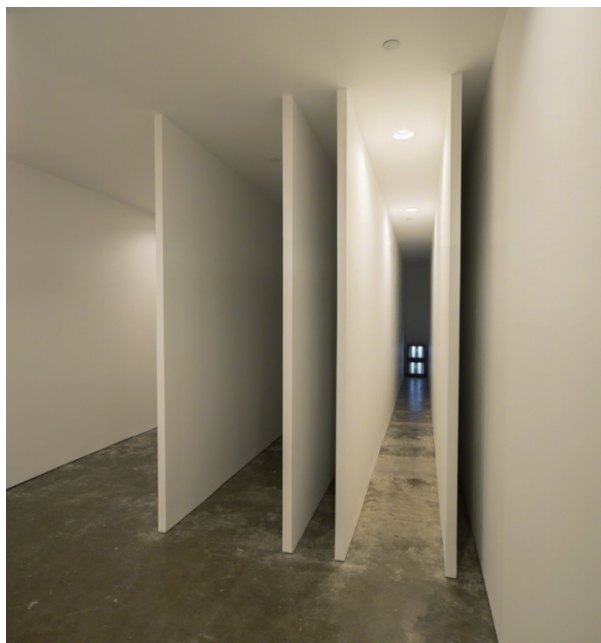


Figure 5. From Dia Art Foundation, Bruce Nauman, *Corridor Installation* (Nick Wilder Installation) (1970)

## 4. Conclusion

Language and sound are intricately connected. Analyzing the musicality within Nauman's works also entails exploring the broader possibilities of sound in art from both practical and conceptual perspectives, revealing how musicality can exist even in silent works. A piece infused with musical qualities becomes more readily disseminated.

Bruce Nauman's artistic practice is deeply rooted in the exploration of language and sound experimentation. Through diverse mediums, he intertwines abstract language with concrete sound, showcasing the complex and nuanced nature of art in communication. His creative approach, from the repetition of language to the utilization of sound and interactive bodily movements, embodies a disruptive artistic philosophy. This profound excavation of language and sound not only bestows Nauman's works with a unique aesthetic effect but also ensures their enduring impact in contemporary art.

## References

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