

September 2020

Bruce Nauman: Models

In the seventies and eighties Bruce Nauman's influence as an artist in Europe was subtle, but impossible to ignore. Nauman exhibited regularly at the Konrad Fischer Gallery in Düsseldorf and his first travelling shows toured to Düsseldorf and Baden Baden as well as Bern and Basel. I have never forgotten my experience of being inside the narrow curved structure that Nauman created for documenta 5 in 1972. Noise and light could still penetrate from the outside world at either end of the enclosed space in which you found yourself, but the open ends of the room were out of reach on account of the tapering of its curving walls. Isolation and frustration, discomfort and ease—all these reactions were deliberately provoked by the artist. Nauman's thinking can be ascertained from his drawings and models. The exhibition I have curated for the Skulpturenhalle in Neuss therefore addresses the works from these decades. Moreover, the presentation focuses on the idea of the model that Nauman conceived during that period.



For Nauman the drawing has always played a central role. Drawing enabled him to employ words and numbers to illuminate something, get around formal restrictions and use a depiction to refer not only to the feasible, but also to the conceivable. Drawing gave rise to the models; both drawing and model are not committed to a particular style, opening up possibilities. In the late seventies Nauman began to design subterranean tunnels to be accessed down vertical shafts. Some of these models are exhibited in the Skulpturenhalle: the first one was circular and cast in iron; a triangular and a square model made of the same material were to follow. The three geometrically shaped casts, made up of several parts, are being shown together in this exhibition for the first time. The pieces are mounted on small wood blocks, since they are not sculptures but models, in spite of their monumental dimensions. The sides of the shapes have different cross-sections—a triangle with an acute angle, an obtuse-angled triangle and a square—each with its own quite different impact, as this manner of presentation makes clear. These are individual models rather than a coherent geometrical sequence, but to what end?



If you imagine the subterranean tunnels represented by the models, these shapes represent the exterior forms that would not be visible underground. And what would the subterranean circle look like from inside? Nauman investigates the space in-between, the yawning gap between reality and idea. In these models, subject and physical projection, private and public spheres shift and merge. Something similar happens in the intimate works with hands that constitute a counterpart to the models in the exhibition. Purportedly the hand is the very instrument that can translate a person's intentions into practice as a matter of course and yet is also always in sight; it is bound up with the self both inwardly and outwardly, being part of the subject and at the same time its object. Nauman put this split into words as follows, "It's like thinking two thoughts at once, or seeing a piece of paper from both sides at once. There is leftover information to deal with."

The exhibition of works by Bruce Naumann at the Skulpturenhalle in Neuss lasts until December 13, 2020 (www.thomas-schuettenstiftung.de).

Dieter Schwarz