

# **Bruce Conner. Light out of Darkness**

08.10.2022 – 05.03.2023



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## **Bruce Conner. Light out of Darkness**

Exhibition | 8.10.2022 – 5.3.2023

Curator: Roland Wetzel

Opening: Saturday, October 8, 2022, at 11 a.m.

Bruce Conner (McPherson, Kansas, 1933 – San Francisco, 2008) is legendary as much for his critical view of the art world as for his reputation as the father of the video clip. He is one of the outstanding artists of the second half of the twentieth century and has even been hailed as an 'artist's artist'. His work is political and subversive and is expressed through various media, which makes him a transversal artist who travels through assemblage, drawing, painting, collage, photography and cinema. Many of his early collages, assemblages and installations are made of low-quality, ephemeral materials such as nylon, wax or worn textiles, and hence are too fragile to be exhibited except on very rare occasions. Conner's anarchic stance was defined by his caustic irony, boundless dedication and insistence on keeping as far away as possible from the art market.

The exhibition presents Conner's experimental films with a representative selection of nine works. Among these is *CROSSROADS* (1976), a film that assembles footage of the first U.S. underwater atomic bomb tests at Bikini Atoll in 1946 into a 36-minute study on the horror and sublimity of this apocalyptic event.

*Light out of Darkness* references a solo exhibition project of the same name for the University Art Museum at Berkeley, California, in the 1980s. One of the main reasons it never actually took place was Conner's refusal to compromise in his dealings with institutions, whose rules for artists he would not accept. The title *Light out of Darkness* emphasises the experimental character of Conner's filmic output, which in his early works, especially, resembles a brilliant probing of our perceptual possibilities. The symbolic dualism of light and darkness stands for the artist's propensity to think in opposites and metaphors and for his mysticism.

This exhibition has been realised in cooperation with Museum Tinguely, Basel.



## Biography

**Bruce Conner** (November 18, 1933 – July 7, 2008) was an American artist renowned for his work in film, assemblage, drawing, sculpture, painting, collage, photography, and conceptual pranks. Born in McPherson, Kansas and raised in Wichita, he attended Wichita State and got his BFA from Nebraska University in 1956, where he met and married Jean Sandstedt in 1957 before transplanting to San Francisco.

Initially known for his assemblage, Conner turned to film with *A MOVIE* in 1958, and other media soon after, with a freewheeling curiosity and resistance to pigeonholing that would last throughout his lifetime. He was an intensely focused artist whose tremendous discipline and skill was sometimes obscured by an irreverent playfulness, and a wildly diverse and frenetic output. Conner achieved much fame but showed little interest in its trappings, often refusing to be photographed, and occasionally not signing his work. For his “Who’s Who in American Art” entry, he sent a notice of his death, and he exhibited a series of his collages under the name of his friend, Dennis Hopper.

In San Francisco, Conner and friends including Joan Brown, Jay De Feo, Manuel Neri, and Wallace Berman were associated with Beat and post-Beat movements, but also formed their own collective, the Rat-Bastard Protective Association. After a two-year sojourn in Mexico and other travels in the mid-1960’s, Conner returned to San Francisco and went into a period of exile from 1967 to 1971, when he quit exhibiting or teaching art. Upon ending this hiatus he returned to more public practice, making some of his most mature films, including *CROSSROADS* and *TAKE THE 5:10 TO DREAMLAND*, as well as continuing his work in diverse media.

Despite his efforts to ensure the contrary, Conner’s reputation has only expanded over the years. His contributions to cinema stand among his greatest achievements. Many attribute the birth of the music video to his 1961 film *COSMIC RAY*, as well as his more direct forays into the form in *AMERICA IS WAITING* (for David Byrne and Brian Eno) and *MEA CULPA* (with Devo). *A MOVIE* has achieved canonicity, and is today taught in introductory film history courses across the world. Key exhibitions include the seminal “2000 BC: The Bruce Conner Story Part II” retrospective at the Walker Art Center, which was expanded upon in the highly lauded “BRUCE CONNER: IT’S ALL TRUE,” organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA). The survey opened at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in July 2016 and traveled to SFMOMA and the Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid. Conner is today recognized as one of the most important American artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## List of works:



### A MOVIE, 1958

16mm, b/w, sound, 12 min.

Music: 'The Pines of the Villa Borghese', 'Pines Near a Catacomb' and 'The Pines of the Appian Way', movements from *Pini di Roma* (Pines of Rome, 1923–24), composed by Ottorino Respighi, performed by the NBC Symphony, conducted by Arturo Toscanini

Courtesy: Kohn Gallery and Conner Family Trust. © Conner Family Trust

Conner's first film, produced in 1958 on a budget of just three dollars, is a collage of found footage gleaned from newsreels, B-movies and graphic animation. The result is a radically experimental film in which he deconstructs and reconstructs film-making and story-telling techniques, while at the same time using the effects of overstimulation, fade-ins, cross-fading and afterimage effects to probe the limits of retinal perception. *A MOVIE* links together a surplus of dramatic climaxes to form a new, open-ended sequence of actions and with it a meta-film that lends itself to multiple readings. The countdown, here interrupted by the interjection of a near-naked woman peeling off her pantyhose, becomes an integral part of the action.

The repetition of the title 'A MOVIE' is just as insistent as the fade-in of 'THE END' and the name of the author 'BRUCE CONNER'. Scenes of hot pursuit with cowboys and covered wagons from the Wild West are cut together with elephants, steam engines and automobiles to set in motion a furious race that segues into scenes of crashes and disaster. A submarine captain peers into his periscope and, on spotting a pin-up girl, fires a torpedo that ignites an atomic bomb. The detonation in turn sets off a tsunami that capsizes ships and knocks water-skiers off their skis. Conner's game is at once funny and tragic. It shows how drastically content is shaped by choreographed media images of it and exposes the powerful impact of music on our own perception – as when the image of a slain soldier is underpinned by the heroic fortissimo of Ottorino Respighi's *Pini di Roma* (1923–24).

For the first time in Spain, *A MOVIE* will be screened as a rear projection inside a 3 × 3 metre cube so as to maximise its presence as the artist specified, but which for financial reasons was not possible at the time. As a loop it has neither beginning nor end. Conner's original concept entailed constantly changing acoustic interventions that would have allowed the work to be experienced anew over and over again.



## **REPORT, 1963-1967**

16mm, b/w, sound, 13 min.

Sound: extracts of *The Assassination of John F. Kennedy: Four Days that Shocked the World* (1963); published by Colpix Records; speaker Reid Collins, WNEW Radio News

Courtesy: Kohn Gallery and Conner Family Trust. © Conner Family Trust

Scarcely any other event attracted such widespread media attention as the assassination of John F. Kennedy by Lee Harvey Oswald in Dallas, Texas, on 22 November 1963. In *REPORT*, Conner attempts to push back against the power of those few iconic media images that he believes obscured the actual event and exploited the slain president by essentially 'deifying' him and instead brings other pictures and other readings to the fore.

His work begins in 1963, in Kennedy's birth town of Brookline, Massachusetts, where Conner himself was living at the time. His original idea of measuring the massive media event against the local reality and the local response to it fails, as does his wish to reuse material from the radio and TV networks, either because he is unable to obtain the necessary rights or because the explicit footage has been confiscated by the government.

Conner worked on several versions of *REPORT* right up to 1967. The eighth now counts as the definitive version. The film is subdivided into a long first part, which Conner calls the 'Death of President Kennedy', and a shorter second part, which as an epilogue sets out to visually decode the 'Kennedy Myth' (s. Bruce Jenkins, 1999). While the voices of the reporters on the soundtrack advance the story itself, the images experiment with the communication of information, showing how repetition and mirroring can transform, aestheticize or render it banal, how subliminal messages can be smuggled in as text stills saying 'FINISH', 'HEAD', 'PICTURE', even as the reporter is telling us that something unusual has happened. Black space, light space, darkness and glare along with stroboscopic effects set in motion a drama underscored by police sirens that engages both mind and senses and that ends with a flash forward to the fetish-like presentation of the murder weapon.

The voice of the reporter announcing Kennedy's death is accompanied by a recurring countdown. The images of death multiply with scenes of a bullfight and slow-motion shots of exploding lightbulbs. Conner's staccato succession of images from mass-advertising,

presidential parades, glorifying war footage and flashbacks to the scene of the crime in Dallas makes us aware of the extent to which media images of the spectacle have defined our perceptions and attitudes. Yet at the same time he withholds precisely those images that our voyeurism most craves.



### **LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS (Beatles Version), 1959-1967**

### **LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS (Terry Riley Version), 1959-1967/1996**

(Beatles Version), 1959–67

16mm, colour, sound, 3 min.

Music: The Beatles, *Tomorrow Never Knows* (1966)

Courtesy: Kohn Gallery and Conner Family Trust. © Conner Family Trust

(Terry Riley Version), 1959–67/1996

16mm, colour, sound, 14 min. 30 sec.

Music: Terry Riley, *Poppy Nogood and the Phantom Band* (1968)

Courtesy Kohn Gallery and Conner Family Trust. © Conner Family Trust

LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS is made with footage that Conner shot during his long stay in Mexico in 1961 and 1962, as well as material from San Francisco and found footage from the period 1959 to 1967. The title is a play on the artist's own experiments with psychoactive psilocybin mushrooms, which in Mexico are used in ceremonial vigils called veladas. On at least one of these trips, he was accompanied by Timothy Leary, known for his forceful advocacy of psychedelic drugs, although Conner was very critical of Leary's methods of obtaining information from the Mexican natives. It was Leary's *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead* (1964) that inspired John Lennon to compose *Tomorrow Never Knows* (1966), the soundtrack of the short version of the film, which was originally screened as a silent movie.

The radical and experimental editing techniques that Conner employs in this film are matched on the acoustic level by the Beatles' use of sampling, musique concrète, electro-acoustic sound manipulation, Indian rhythms, vocal distortion and guitar sequences played backwards – which taken together lend the work a meditative spirituality.

LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS evokes visual fireworks with Conner taking his method of fast cutting to an extreme in order to generate perceptually overwhelming psychedelic effects with subliminally perceptible stills thrown in. Indeed, clustered footage of fireworks is central to the film; but so are meadows full of flowers, abstract coloured shapes, textures



and walls. Using blurring and spot focusing, these are spliced together to produce an intoxicating visual staccato interspersed with diary-like portraits of the mystic rituality of everyday life in rural Mexico.

In 1996 Conner reworked LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS to produce a long version in which every frame is shown five times over, making for a different viewer experience and a deeper dive into the artist's vast store of visual material. The soundtrack for this longer version is the piece *Poppy Nogood and the Phantom Band* (1968) by Conner's friend Terry Riley, a pioneer of minimal and pattern music.



### **TAKE THE 5:10 TO DREAMLAND, 1977**

16mm, colour - sepia, sound, 5 min. 10 sec.

Music: Patrick Gleeson

Courtesy: Kohn Gallery and Conner Family Trust. © Conner Family Trust

TAKE THE 5:10 TO DREAMLAND is a deeply poetic work that makes for a striking contrast with the choppy aesthetic of LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS. Here, a succession of rather more static film sequences is punctuated by black spaces, dissolves and fade-outs, and sometimes extended with afterimages.

TAKE THE 5:10 TO DREAMLAND combines natural elements such as water, sky and clouds with personal experiences and symbolic portraits to produce an introspective work. The film is based on a composition by Patrick Gleeson, one of the pioneers of electronic music. He translated his own particular experience of nature in a mountain valley near the Yuba Pass in northern California into an audio piece that blends meditative sounds with synthetic bird song, chirping crickets and rumbling thunder. Inspired by this piece, Conner raided his stock of found footage for a succession of sequences that would provide a visual equivalent for Gleeson's dream-like, 'auditory hallucinations'. The two authors conceived the work as a film for a single viewer only.



## **VALSE TRISTE, 1978**

16mm, b/w - sepia, sound, 5 min.

Music: Jean Sibelius, *Valse Triste*, Op. 44 (1903/04)

Courtesy: Kohn Gallery and Conner Family Trust. © Conner Family Trust

VALSE TRISTE is Conner's most autobiographical film. In it he uses film footage from the 1940s to create dream-like sequences that reflect what it was like growing up in McPherson in rural Kansas. The piece by Sibelius that Conner selected for the soundtrack had a personal meaning for him. It was the signature music for what was once his favourite radio show: a miscellany of murder mysteries, adventures and tales of supernatural horror called *I Love a Mystery* that aired on NBC and CBS in the years 1939–1944. VALSE TRISTE begins with images of a boy going to bed followed by an associative, surrealistic and deeply symbolic dream sequence.

The image of a locomotive is followed by mining scenes, a rotating globe and sunlit clouds. A recurring sequence with grazing sheep leads into the next section featuring images of rural Kansas with its wide empty roads, fields and windmills, which, in turn, segues into associative images of female sexuality, such as the fall of a length of satin cloth, the slow opening of a flower and a mannequin modelling a fur coat with a coloured lining. Conner's humour and love of a good yarn is apparent in the imperfection of a performance by a group of women gymnasts, whose rhythmic antics are at odds with the rhythm of Sibelius' waltz. The impression made by these memories of a lost time is further enhanced by the all-over sepia of the footage, which in fact resulted from a misstep in the production process, but which Conner embraced as a fortuitous mistake.



## **MONGOLOID, 1978**

16mm, digitised, b/w, sound, 3 min. 30 sec.

Music: DEVO, *Mongoloid* (1977)

Courtesy: Kohn Gallery and Conner Family Trust. © Conner Family Trust

When Conner attended a concert by the Art Punk band DEVO at Mabuhay Gardens Club in San Francisco in October 1977, he also met the band members in person. He was fascinated by the latent energy of punk counterculture, which reminded him of the Beat Generation of the 1950s. Among those he met that evening was V. Vale, editor of the punk magazine *Search and Destroy*, for which Conner would produce a photo essay on the local punk scene the following year. It was around this time that Conner acquired the reputation of 'godfather of the music video clip'.

His 1961 work *COSMIC RAY*, based on Ray Charles's song *What'd I Say*, had a formative influence on the style of such clips. The superfluity of images and development of micro-narratives alongside the music are also characteristic features of *MONGOLOID*.

The film clips come from eclectic sources so that physics teaching films and experiments, everyday scenes, commercial spots, ornamental and abstract forms that often originate in film-making techniques, or even a vacation taken inside a suitcase all play on the musically driven dialectic between precisely choreographed movement and immobility. With their mainstream messages of an intact family and suburban bliss, they undercut the satirical subtext of the music.



## **MEA CULPA, 1981**

16mm, digitised, b/w, sound, 5 min.

Music: David Byrne and Brian Eno, 'Mea Culpa' from *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1981)

Courtesy: Kohn Gallery and Conner Family Trust. © Conner Family Trust

MEA CULPA is a tour de force of sampling, in which Conner recycles the animated graphics of historical physics teaching films. Thus, there is a basso continuo of diagrams of electrical current and visualisations of thermodynamic effects over which Conner illustrates the pulsating rhythm of the music with black-and-white polarities, movements that procreate still more movement in the form of colliding dots and corpuses, and stroboscopic optical assaults. The initiative for the collaboration came from David Byrne, who after first encountering Conner's films as a student became a loyal fan. For their experimental collaboration on the album *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, Byrne and Brian Eno worked with voice extracts that were taken exclusively from found voice samples.

Although copyright reasons prevented Conner's films from being played on MTV, the film techniques he employed – the jump cut, flash frame, flickering, reverse editing, fast cutting, double and multiple exposures and the use of found footage – had a formative influence not just on the experimental film-making of his age, but also on the pioneering phase of the MTV music video.



## **CROSSROADS, 1976**

35mm, digitised, b/w, sound, 37 min.

Original Music: Patrick Gleeson and Terry Riley Restoration by UCLA Film & Television Archive  
Courtesy: Kohn Gallery and Conner Family Trust. © Conner Family Trust

'Operation Crossroads' was the name used by the U.S. Army for a series of nuclear tests conducted at Bikini Atoll in the Pacific in the summer of 1946. Conner managed to obtain footage of the second bomb that had hitherto been held under lock and key in the National Archives. The objective of 'Test Baker' was to study the impact of a submarine explosion on ships in the immediate vicinity. Most of these were seized Japanese warships, which the testers strategically positioned inside a given radius. To record the moment of detonation from every possible angle, the U.S. Army deployed hundreds of cameras – some of them high-speed – on land, on sea and in the air.

As the visual record of the second-ever nuclear test, 'Baker' is more than just a picture of a nuclear Armageddon. It is also a visualisation of the hitherto unseen, highly aesthetic phenomena of elemental physical force: the fearful symmetry of the mushroom cloud with its cap of water vapour and debris sucked up into the stratosphere; the water column whose clearly delimited cylindrical shaft turns ragged with feathery fallout at the edges; and the horizontal and vertical rings of kinetic energy spreading eccentrically at sonic or supersonic speeds. By repeating these images and lining them up – without further processing – in ever new sequences, Conner creates a work of high drama that elicits sublimity and visual exuberance.

What he also finds in them are the mass-distributed, but unparalleled iconic images that continue to define our image of the atom bomb to this day. For the first part of CROSSROADS, Conner had Patrick Gleeson create an atmospheric, synthesised soundtrack that underscores the images' strong, unmediated presence, while the hypnotic, electronic sound of the second part is the work of the composer Terry Riley.

After first evacuating the inhabitants of the Bikini Atoll, the U.S. Army conducted a total of twenty-three nuclear tests there between 1946 and 1958. A 1970 initiative aimed at enabling the islanders to return came to nothing after discovering that the lagoon and its twenty-three islands were still highly contaminated. CROSSROADS can be read as a warning of the environmental and human devastation that nuclear weapons inevitably spell.

## Activities around the exhibition *Bruce Conner. Light out of the Darkness*

The programme of activities around this exhibition of works by Bruce Conner includes:

**-Looking for a movie, un projecte educatiu i de creació experimental** a càrrec de l'artista audiovisual Laura Ginès, que proposarà a tres centres educatius un projecte de creació que parteix de l'exposició *Bruce Conner. Llum de la foscor*. L'activitat s'iniciarà amb una sessió de treball amb els docents dels centres implicats. Durant diverses setmanes, l'alumnat produirà en grup diversos films musicats amb unes característiques pactades, que al final del projecte formaran la retrospectiva d'una cineasta inventada.

-Amb Laura Ginès i l'artista i educadora Bea Ortiz hem organitzat, a més, el taller **Llum i tinta**, en el marc del festival **Barcelona Dibuixa**, el diumenge 23 d'octubre.

-Amb Teresa Rubio, també artista i educadora, tornem a programar un **taller de collage**, una tècnica molt present en la trajectòria de Conner.

-En el marc de la nova exposició de Conner, estrenarem una **activitat familiar** al voltant dels orígens del cinema.

-A més de les activitats esmentades, es preveu que tindrà lloc un **cicle de pel·lícules** seleccionades per Michelle Silva, de la Conner Family Trust, amb la col·laboració de Zumzeig.

-Finally, on 23 October, and 6, 13 and 20 November at noon, the **Autumn Vermouths** will take place, with a visit to the exhibition followed by an aperitif on the terrace of the Museum.

For more information on the programme of activities around the exhibition: [www.fundaciotapies.org](http://www.fundaciotapies.org).

## Graphic material for the press

The press section of the Fundació Antoni Tàpies website is accessed through the menu at the top of the screen, under the Fundació logo, in the 'Museum and Library' section. On the other hand, in the 'Press' section you can access the dossier and images for the press.





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