

Crossroads The Films of Bruce Conner

Program Two

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Introduced by Henry S. Rosenthal

In his drive to re-present mainstream culture's visual icons of violence and conformity, sex and death, Bruce Conner (1933–2008) was a master of irony and juxtaposition. Arguably the inventor of the “found footage” genre and the music video, Conner's films are veritable x-rays of the 20th Century American mind, often representing struggles to come to terms with the cruelties of history and its mediated representation while describing collective fantasies and fears. Ultimately, they remain deeply personal, intimate and darkly elusive. Conner, famously distrustful of art world elitism, made films that were immediately accessible, immensely pleasurable, yet frequently highly critical (even condemnatory) of the culture from which they grew. They represent the thrills and spills of Conner's seventy-four years. This two-part celebration of the work of Bruce Conner includes (nearly) every work completed by this highly original, deeply American artist, including rarities, recent works and other surprises. (Steve Polta)

Cosmic Ray (1961) by Bruce Conner; 16mm, b&w, sound, 4 minutes

“Sexploitation is what Conner concentrates on transforming in *Cosmic Ray*. It is my suspicion that he is very much concerned with the exploitation of sex, just as his concern in *Report* is with the exploitation of President Kennedy's death. Similarly, he deals with sexploitation through TV and in the uses of advertising. [...] You get a perspective, as though you could look inside of the mind that is affected by and imagining the multiplicity of sexual feedback.” (Stan Brakhage, *Film at Wit's End*)

Marilyn Times Five (1968–73) by Bruce Conner; 16mm, b&w, sound, 14 minutes

[...] extends the theme of sexual exploitation introduced in *Looking Glass*, *Black Dahlia*, and other assemblages [by Conner]. The footage of a Monroe-lookalike undressing and writhing on the ground was given to him while he was in Massachusetts; the soundtrack is of Monroe herself singing ‘I'm through with love.’ ‘I used it because I realized that sooner or later it was going to be exposed as a Marilyn Monroe film and I thought that it was a fairly ugly movie.’ Conner recalls, ‘My first step was to go through the movie and try to gather the things that had more grace to them.’ Edited into five segments that stretch out the striptease interminably, the film becomes a paean to aborted desire. Conner saw the footage as conveying tremendous loneliness—a solitary female meant to be watched by lonely males, the antithesis of genuine lovemaking.” (Rebecca Solnit, *Secret Exhibition: Six California Artists of the Cold War Era*.)

Breakaway (1966) by Bruce Conner; 16mm, b&w, sound, 5 minutes

[...] an exuberant erotic demonstration of the power of movement and dance to alter consciousness lifting off from the constraints of the quotidian and corporal realms while simultaneously celebrating the body.” (Mark McElhatten, New York Film Festival, Views from the Avant-garde, 2008)

Vivian (1964) by Bruce Conner; 16mm, b&w, sound, 3 minutes

[...] a more lighthearted piece featuring the young Vivian Kurtz frolicking through a 1964 Conner exhibition at the Batman Gallery to the sound of Conway Twitty's ‘Mona Lisa’—‘Are you real, Mona Lisa? Or are you just a lovely, lonely work of art?’ the song plaintively inquires as the pre-Raphaelite heroine dances, encases herself in a display case, and views Conner's *Do Not Touch/Touch* artworks.” (Rebecca Solnit, *Secret Exhibition: Six California Artists of the Cold War Era*.)

Ten Second Film (1965) by Bruce Conner; 16mm, b&w, silent, 10 seconds

“When [...] commissioned to design the poster for the 1965 New York Film Festival Conner constructed *Ten Second Film*, [...] to precede the film programs in the theater. It was [...] composed, like the poster, of a series of ten strips of film (each 24 frames long) of count-down leader, seen as fundamental heraldry of motion picture exhibition. The leaders of the Festival, however, felt it was too risky to submit the public to this secret image of their heritage.” (Anthony Reveaux, *Bruce Conner*)

“One reason the festival gave for rejecting the film was it ‘went too fast.’” (Bruce Conner)

Mongoloid (1978) by Bruce Conner; 16mm, b&w, sound, 4 minutes

“A documentary film exploring the manner in which a determined young man overcame a basic mental defect and became a useful member of society. Insightful editing techniques reveal the dreams, ideals and problems that face a large segment of the American male population. Educational. Background music written and performed by the Devo orchestra.” (Bruce Conner)

America Is Waiting (1982) by Bruce Conner; 16mm, b&w, sound 4 minutes

“The lyrics of David Byrne and Brian Eno’s [...] cued Conner for a strongly structured and richly varied piece which examines ideas of loyalty, power, patriotism and paranoia.” (Anthony Reveaux, *Bruce Conner*)

Report (1963–67) by Bruce Conner; 16mm, b&w, sound 13 minutes

“The continuity of *Report* drew upon what was by then the bottomless font of his imagery: newsclips, documentaries and television commercials. There is a new depth of interior rhythm imposed here, strengthening not only an audio-visual critique of a discrete event, but also re-examining how we receive informational history.

“As seen over and over again in the news, every television set in the country becomes, unwittingly, a Conneresque loop projection of tragedy. In *Report* we see this electro-celluloid Shroud of Turin drift repeatedly by, unstoppable in its dire momentum. The insistent pitch of the reporter’s voice-over [...] leads and anticipates as it diffuses and obscures. Accelerating pulses of light destroy the peace of not-seeing. At a moment of realization, the image goes to black and the event is shifted off-screen. [...] The counterpoint of Conner’s irony is here more direct in its relationship of the verbal to the visual than in any other of his films [...]. It assumes the stance of a complex, elliptical dialogue. In the end, *Report* is a cinemataph of the shock-waves of communicable destruction. (Anthony Reveaux, *Bruce Conner*)

Looking for Mushrooms (1959–67/1996) by Bruce Conner; 16mm, color, sound, 15 minutes

“[...] a freewheeling yet meticulously composed work of frame bursts shot during Conner’s relocation to Mexico, a time of chemical transformation, fertile productivity and misplaced hope.” (Mark McElhatten, New York Film Festival, Views from the Avant-garde, 2008)

Crossroads (1976) by Bruce Conner; 35mm, b&w, sound, 36 minutes

“[...]based] on government footage of the first underwater A-bomb test, July 25, 1946, at Bikini Atoll in the Pacific. [...] The opening segment emphasizes the awesome grandeur of the explosion—the destructiveness, as well as the dramatic spectacle and beauty. As the repetition builds, however, the explosion is gradually removed from the realm of historic phenomena, assuming the dimensions of a universal, cosmic force. And in the film’s second section this force is brought into a kind of cosmic harmony, part of the lyrically indifferent ebb and flow of life that one sees in a lingering, elegaic view of the ocean.” (Thomas Albright, *San Francisco Chronicle*)

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