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BRUCE CONNER

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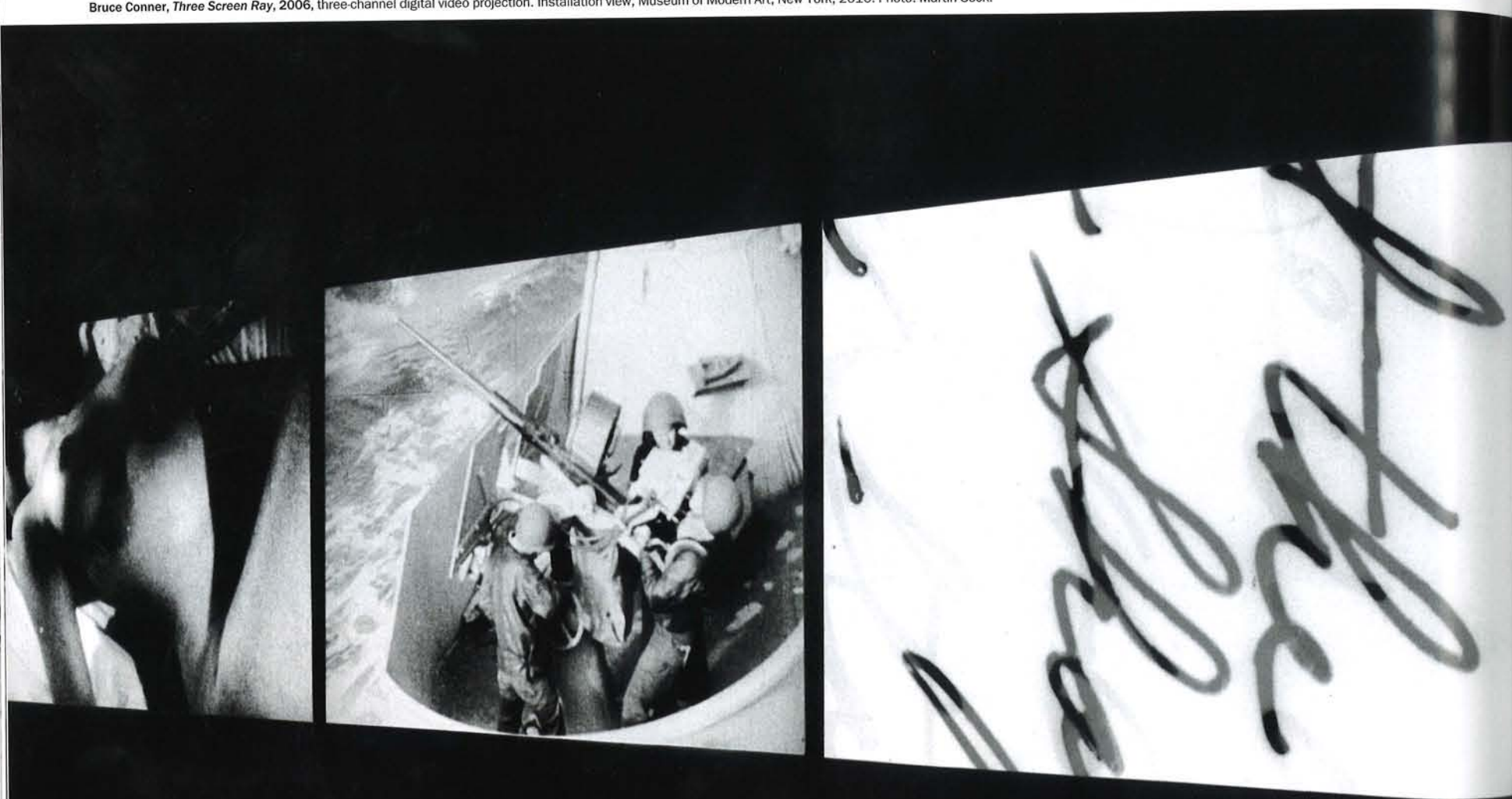
# SHINE A LIGHT

AMY TAUBIN ON THE ART OF BRUCE CONNER



Bruce Conner, *Looking for Mushrooms*, 1959-67/1996, 16 mm, color, sound, 14 minutes 30 seconds. Installation view, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2016. Photo: Martin Seck.

Bruce Conner, *Three Screen Ray*, 2006, three-channel digital video projection. Installation view, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2016. Photo: Martin Seck.



Right: Bruce Conner, *Looking for Mushrooms*, 1959–67/1996, 16 mm, color, sound, 14 minutes 30 seconds.

Below: Bruce Conner, *Child*, 1959, wax, nylon, fabric, metal, twine, wooden high chair, 34¾ × 17 × 16½".



"WHAT A SHOW! WHAT A SHOW!" The reaction of the unseen, breathless, and elated MC at the end of Bruce Conner's moving-image installation *Three Screen Ray*, 2006, is likely to be the exclamation of many a visitor exiting "Bruce Conner: It's All True," the revelatory retrospective of some 250 works currently installed at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (through October 2). In his half century of making art, Conner (1933–2008) embraced painting, sculpture, assemblage, collage, drawing, photography, performance, and movies—all (save, perforce, performance) generously represented at MOMA. Whether aggressively confrontational or deeply meditative, his art is implicitly experiential. Individual works evoke powerful emotional, intellectual, kinetic, or visceral responses from the viewer, sometimes all at once. For Conner, who in 2004 threw a party to celebrate his "fifty years in show business," the way in which his work was experienced was dependent on how it was "shown." Exhibition was integral to his art.

Though notoriously averse to established art institutions, large and small—he occasionally went so far as to create his own exhibition spaces—Conner might well have approved of this retrospective, for its scope and for its positioning of works made in various mediums so that they reflect on one another. This is most evident in the placement of seven moving-image pieces, each projected in its own black box adjacent to a brightly lit gallery where related nonmoving works hang on the walls or are arranged on the floor or in vitrines. This approach may sound elementary, but I have never seen moving image and static images mixed together as successfully as they have been in MOMA's installation (designed in-house by Stuart Comer and Laura Hoptman). The accepted practice is to relegate the moving-image works to a theater, where they function at best as accompaniments to the main attraction—the static work; alternatively, if they are shown in the exhibition space proper, they are, typically, projected badly in uninviting curtained-off corners or shown on monitors that require those who wish to listen to the sound track to



**Girls and guns, sex and death—*A Movie* both embraces and critiques everything that at once thrills and appalls us in the movies and in modern history.**

don headphones. And does anyone really want to stand in a gallery for more than ten seconds wearing a headset while people line up behind you impatiently waiting their turn?

Cocurated by Comer and Hoptman and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's Rudolf Frieling and Gary Garrels (who began work on the show years ago), "It's All True" has made MOMA its first stop, but it was, appropriately enough, organized by SFMOMA. For Conner lived mostly in San Francisco from 1957 until his death and was for decades a heroic presence in the West Coast art and experimental-film world. That so much of the work in the exhibition is little known in New York speaks to a long East Coast/West Coast divide. It was not until the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis mounted a large retrospective in 1999 (in which Conner's work in assemblage, rather than film, was given pride of place) that Conner was understood simply as a major American artist rather than as a regional outlier. And it was probably not until 2010, two years after his death, when restorations of almost all his major films showed at New York's Film Forum, that his enormously innovative, influential, and just plain masterful moving-image work was recognized beyond the rarefied if embattled avant-garde-film world and the advertising and music-video producers who've cribbed from Conner for decades. (Three of the movies in "It's All True" are in the permanent collection of New York's Anthology Film Archives and have been screened there annually since the early 1970s.)

It may be because Conner's greatest strength lies in his moving-image work, or because my expertise lies in the moving image, or because MOMA's installation of the moving-image pieces is so intelligent and controlled that I saw them in ways I hadn't before (and these are movies I know almost by heart). Or it may be because the moving image shapes our world today with even more dire consequences than those which Conner—a child of World War II who reached puberty in sync with the A-bomb, the Cold War, and the arrival of a TV in every American home—already knew it had. Or it may be a combination of all of these things. But, for me, the pieces that secure the meaning that emerges from "It's All True" are *Report* (1963–67), *Three Screen Ray*, *Crossroads* (1976), and his first and final moving pictures, *A Movie* (1958) and *Easter Morning* (2008). The movies are touchstones for the static work, not the other way around.



Left: Bruce Conner, *Black Dahlia*, 1960, cut-and-pasted printed paper, feathers, fabric, rubber tubing, razor blade, nails, tobacco, sequins, string, shell, and paint encased in nylon stocking over wood, 26 3/4 x 10 3/4 x 2 3/4".

Below: Bruce Conner, *Tick-Tock Jelly Clock Cosmotron*, 1961, wood, fabric, cardboard, wallpaper, magazine pages, stickers, string, twine, plastic film, glass fragments, mirror fragments, iron straps, grommets, nails, screws, upholstery tacks, metal foil, aluminum sheet, electrical socket, electrical wiring, rubber hose, beads, costume-jewelry parts, sequins, ribbon, nylon stocking, cigarette filter, paint, graphite, bitumen, and resin on pressed hardboard, painted wooden frame with mirror segments; wooden spool, fiberboard cone, paper, paint, monofilament netting, electrical plug, insulated wire, speaker, audio cable, iron wire, rings, clips, paper, yarn, twine, half-track monaural tape transferred to digital files; wall component: 57 1/2 x 53 3/4 x 5", cone: 43 3/4 x 15 x 15".



**ON ENTERING** "It's All True," one finds oneself at the back of a room in which the twelve-minute, black-and-white *A Movie* is being projected as a loop, and it serves as an introduction to all the work in the show. Despite the protean transformations Conner effected throughout his career in respect to materials, forms, and identity (he had several artist alter egos), he was an obsessive imagemaker, and almost all the obsessions that inspired his work are present in *A Movie*. Collaged from such "worthless" genres as Hollywood B pictures, trailers, soft-core porn, newsreels, educational and medical films, *National Geographic*-style travelogues (nudies in disguise), early TV commercials,

and more, *A Movie* begins as a gleeful celebration of the essence of all movies: They show stuff moving. After a fast-cut opening montage that includes a few seconds of a nudie flick starring a bare-breasted blonde and a piece of Academy countdown leader (Conner's favorite types of "forbidden" images, the first for obvious reasons, the second because it is part of a technical apparatus that must remain hidden else disrupt the audience's suspension of disbelief), as well as title cards giving the filmmaker's name and the name of the movie (these are repeated several times, as if Conner needs to convince himself that he's had the audacity to make *A Movie*), it's off to the races with a sequence of



Eight stills from Bruce Conner's *A Movie*, 1958, 16 mm, black-and-white, sound, 12 minutes.

galloping horses, careering wagon trains, speeding cars, a charging elephant—the trailers for a dozen movies jockeying for first place in the viewer's eyes. D. W. Griffith's maxim, later appropriated by Jean-Luc Godard (whose *Histoire[s] du cinéma* [1988–98] owes a little something to *A Movie*), that cinema needs nothing more than a girl and a gun is illustrated by an extended sight gag: a seemingly causal sequence in which a German U-boat gunner looks through his periscope, a seminude woman is seen posing, a missile speeds toward an unseen target.

Girls and guns, sex and death—*A Movie* both embraces and critiques Griffith's rule and everything else that at once thrills and appalls us in the movies and in modern history, which has been written in the language of the movies, television, and, more recently, digital media. After the sprightly opening, the film takes an elegiac turn before plunging into disaster. The cars crash, the *Hindenburg* explodes in flames, the A-bomb releases its mushroom cloud, a bridge twists and collapses. The final image is of a diver at the dark bottom of the ocean, swimming into sunken wreckage. He cannot see the light glinting for a brief moment on the surface of the water. *A Movie* is set to excerpts from Respighi's *Pines of Rome* (it, too, sampled from another movie, Kenneth Anger's 1947 debut short, *Fireworks*). In the first two-thirds of the film, the music is in sync with the tone and tempo of the pictures, but as the images spiral downward, the music rises in triumph. The juxtaposition heightens the horror—surely horror is at the very heart of "It's All True"—and also sharpens Conner's critique of our (and his) pleasure and fascination. What exactly have we all been enjoying?

The space in which *A Movie* is projected is the most open of the exhibition's seven black boxes, so that the sound of *Pines of Rome*, especially the fortissimo brass finale, travels into adjacent rooms, where it mixes with the recorded sounds emanating from the multimedia assemblage *Tick-Tock Jelly Clock Cosmotron*, 1961, and floats over the early abstract paintings and an assortment of surreal assemblages from the late 1950s and '60s. I continued to hear strains of the Respighi (perhaps in my head rather than my ears) as I examined *Black Dahlia*, 1960, Conner's memento mori for the murdered Hollywood hopeful Elizabeth Short, and *Child*, 1959, made as a caustic protest against the impending execution of career criminal Caryl Chessman. Each murder—Short's in 1947 by a still unidentified individual, who arranged her grotesquely mutilated corpse in a vacant lot as if he were creating a *nature morte*; Chessman's







Above: Bruce Conner, *Spider Lady Nest*, 1959, aluminum paint on wooden box, spray paint, window shade, nylon, thread, fabric, fur, lead customs seal on string, pearl bead, cotton ball, feathers, tassels, cardboard, 31 x 28½ x 7". Below: Bruce Conner, *Couch*, 1963, resin, shellac, paint, fabric, plaster, plant fiber, wire, doll head, bottle cap, nails, hair, teeth, twine, and wax on couch, 32 x 70¼ x 27".

by the state—was brought to the screen as film noir, the genre that mined Cold War consciousness; each was also fodder for numerous pulp fictions and true-crime investigations. There are no images in Conner's films that have the horrific immediacy and skin-crawling tactility of *Black Dahlia* and *Child*—indeed, the black wax figure in the latter bears greater resemblance to images of the charred and dismembered human remains of Hiroshima than to any likeness of Chessman, at any age—but because the notoriety of their subjects' deaths created narratives that we bring to the assemblages, we make of them our own movies. In this exhibition, they also function literally as the return of the repressed. Ferus Gallery director Walter Hopps bought *Black Dahlia* at Conner's first show in LA in 1962 and hid it away for decades. In 1970, the architect, collector, and MOMA trustee Philip Johnson gifted *Child* to the museum, where it lay rotting in storage until a long-delayed restoration was completed in time for this exhibition.

**MY MOTHER**, who never shied from popular metaphors, used to say that she “wore her nylons to death.” During World War II, most nylon was consigned to the military, and even after the war ended stockings were scarce and expensive. Many of the soft-core clips in Conner's films depict women seductively pulling their stockings on or off. In the assemblages, almost all of which are wrapped in torn nylon stockings or have discarded nylons conspicuously placed in their compositions, the deeper, darker meaning of the stocking as fetish object is flagrantly revealed. It is a sign of female vulnerability and

violation and simultaneously, because it is an “intimate,” a substitute for and a shield against the female body and its terrifying, even annihilating grip on the imagination. Conner made art out of women's stockings that had been worn to death.

Even more fetishized in Conner's work is the image of the mushroom cloud. In 1961, the year of the Bay of Pigs invasion, Conner's fear of dying in an atomic explosion became so intense that he and his wife moved to Mexico, where he furthered his investigations—now of a more pleasurable kind of mushroom. In Mexico, Conner worked on a color movie, *Looking for Mushrooms*, which, at MOMA, is being projected on film—in both its original three-minute version (1959–67) and its fourteen-and-a-half-minute step-printed version (1959–67/1996)—in a black box near a grouping of his Mexico-inspired assemblages. Derived from hundred-foot rolls of film that Conner exposed multiple times at variable speeds inside the camera, both versions evoke the elastic time and space experienced in altered states of consciousness. But the Mexican psilocybin mushrooms failed to wipe away Conner's nuclear nightmares, as is evident in the domestic apocalypse of *Couch*, 1963, no less than in that iconic image of annihilated subjectivity, *Bombhead*, 1989 (both on display at MOMA). Still, the greatest expression of his atomic anxieties was *Crossroads*.

In the mid-1970s, a decade after he'd returned to San Francisco (by way of Wichita, Kansas, and Brookline, Massachusetts), Conner obtained some of the footage that had been shot of the 1946 underwater A-bomb test off Bikini Atoll. The event had been covered by hundreds of cameras positioned at every possible angle of sight. *Crossroads*, the thirty-

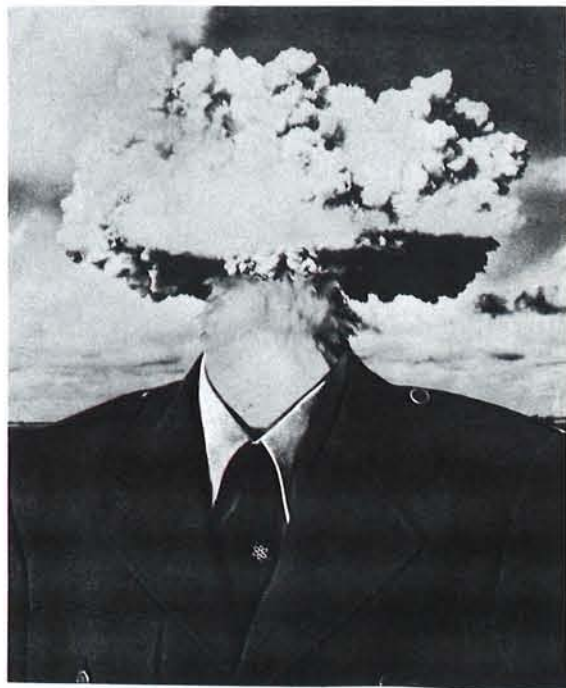




Right: Eight stills from Bruce Conner's *Looking for Mushrooms*, 1959-67/1996, 16 mm, color, sound, 14 minutes 30 seconds.

Below: Bruce Conner, *Bombhead*, 1989, collage of found illustration and photocopy on paper, 9 3/4 x 7 3/4".

Conner's fear of dying in an atomic explosion became so intense that he and his wife moved to Mexico, where he furthered his investigations—now of a more pleasurable kind of mushroom.







Left: Four stills from the 2013 digital remastering of Bruce Conner's *Crossroads*, 1976, 35 mm, black-and-white, sound, 37 minutes. Above: View of "Bruce Conner: It's All True," 2016, Museum of Modern Art, New York. From left: 26 Punk Photos, 1978; *Three Screen Ray*, 2006. Photo: Martin Seck. Right: Bruce Conner, *Ricky Williams: Sleepers*, 1978, gelatin silver print, 9 7/8 × 13 1/8". From the suite 26 Punk Photos, 1978.

will occur. In 2003, Conner made a standard-definition-video version of *Crossroads*, which was unsatisfactory. In this retrospective, the work is presented in the 2013 digital remastering that film preservationist Ross Lipman supervised and later detailed in these pages ("Conservation at a Crossroads," *Artforum*, October 2013). When I previously saw this digital version in one of MOMA's theaters, it felt pallid in comparison with the original film version, in which the illusion of depth in the image made it seem as if the cloud could engulf us. In MOMA's installation, the image is projected large and the seating arrangement places us so our eyes can take in the entire screen. And although we are close enough to see all the gradations in the gray scale and notice the digital "zombification" of the film grain, the image appears flat, each explosion merely a surface matter. What we are looking at is, unmistakably, a digital scan of an image that, in its original form, shook us in our seats. The digital *Crossroads* is a deadly experience, and given the subject of the work, that's precisely what it should be.

**ON EXITING THE APOCALYPSE**, one enters a gallery of Conner's photographs (and related montages) of Bay Area punk clubs, which he began taking not long after completing *Crossroads*. If, at first blush, the filmic masterpiece and these throwaway snapshots couldn't be farther apart—whether in terms of craft, content, or ambition—a powerful attraction to nihilism must have underwritten both. And it is precisely this sort of hard-to-pin-down cross-pollination between the two- and three-dimensional pieces and the moving-image projections that is subtly at work throughout the exhibition, magnifying and deepening the resonances of the individual artworks within it.

Dark as the punk photos are, visually and metaphorically, the performers in many of them are captured with their faces turned upward, seeking the



glow of the spotlights overhead. After Conner gave up assemblage in 1964, he shifted his focus to drawing, and in the various series of black-and-white ink-on-paper works, which fill several rooms at MOMA, he, too, seems to be looking for illumination—sometimes just a pinhole in the darkness. And in the "Angel" photographs of 1973–75, shot in collaboration with Edmund Shea, Conner's entire body seems to dissolve into pure light, as does Toni Basil's in *Breakaway* (1966), wherein Conner's movie camera partners her as she dances to her eponymous hit single.

*Breakaway* is shown at MOMA in its digital version, as are *Three Screen Ray* and *Easter Morning*, all three re-visioned in the last years of Conner's life, the result of his work with his visually sensitive, technically ingenious digital editor, Michelle Silva. *Three Screen Ray*—the digital expanded-cinema version of Conner's granddaddy of all music videos, *Cosmic Ray* (1961)—has three times the kinetic excitement of the original. Sit in the middle of the black box as Ray Charles's "What'd I Say" blares from the loudspeakers and give your peripheral vision a workout: You might feel as if you're levitating. Derived from an unfinished 1966 film, *Easter Morning* was Conner's final moving-image piece. Fittingly set slightly apart from the artist's other work—the curators chose to project it in a black box just outside the exhibition's exit door—it is a vision of transcendence through color and light, its shimmering, layered images at once sensuous and evanescent.

seven-minute black-and-white film that Conner made of this material, is an assemblage of twenty-three shots, varying between a few seconds and about eight minutes in length, each one capturing the moment the mushroom cloud erupts from the ocean, each repetition shocking because Conner's editing and Terry Riley's blithely insidious, raga-like score make it impossible to anticipate exactly when the explosion

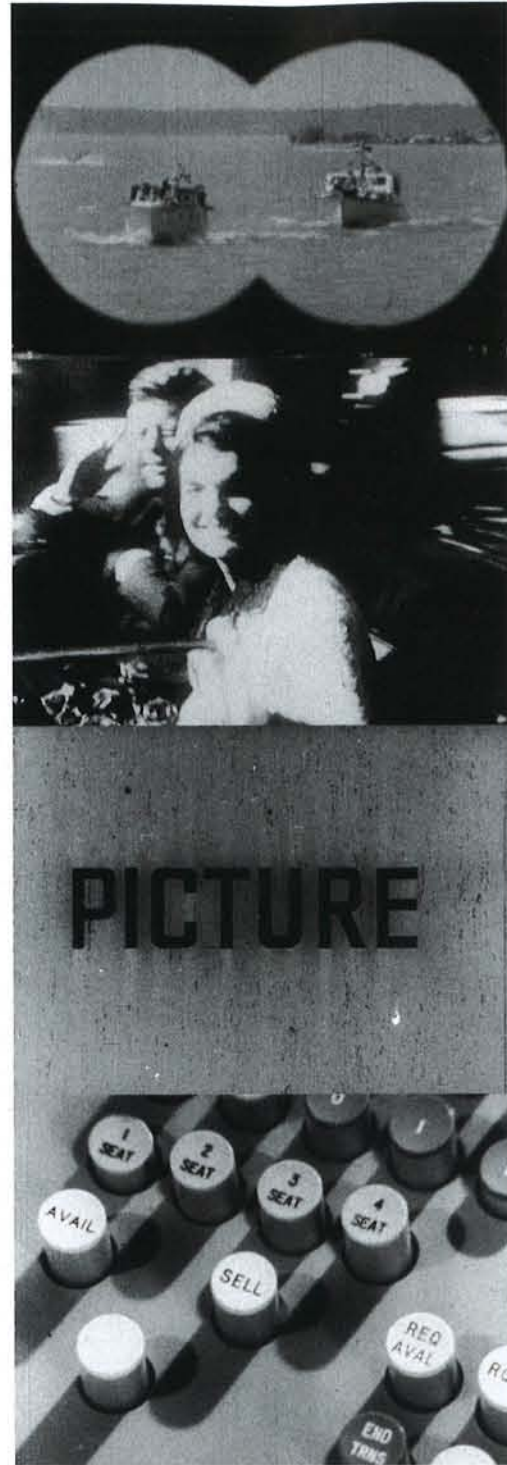




From left: Four stills from Bruce Conner's *Breakaway*, 1966, 16 mm, black-and-white, sound, 5 minutes. Toni Basil. Bruce Conner, *Untitled Drawing*, 1974, ink on paper, 22 x 20 1/4". Four stills from Bruce Conner's *Report*, 1963-67, 16 mm, black-and-white, sound, 13 minutes.



If *Easter Morning*, with its intimations of death and salvation, stands as the ultimate expression of Conner's spiritual quest, as a salve for the soul, *Report*, the most complex work in the exhibition, is both the artist's worldliest and his most profound meditation on bodily sacrifice and resurrection—and yet it offers no solace. Made from scraps of news footage surrounding John F. Kennedy's assassination, this thirteen-minute film would take its final form only after Conner had reworked it eight times. This was a reflection, perhaps, of the filmmaker's inability to accept as final the death of the man he saw as a savior (who had rescued the world from nuclear destruction), or maybe it was a measure of his fear of complicity in the very exploitation of death he critiques in the mordantly witty, deliberately flat-footed montage of TV commercials and documentary and fiction horror movies with which he concludes his film. *Report* begins, however, with the familiar images of the Kennedys' arrival in Dallas and the progress of the presidential motorcade, repeated forward and backward and every which way, accompanied by a radio reporter's description. At the point where the commentator says, "Something has happened . . .," Conner introduces a montage of his signature count-down leaders, and then a flickering white light fills the screen and expands into the entire black box, so that you feel its shattering impact in your solar plexus and your brain. When the image of the motorcade appears again, it is as if you are seeing it for the first time, and the exemplary projection at MOMA enhances that effect. The president and first lady are smiling for the crowds and for the cameras. Only they don't know where the motorcade is headed. □



"Bruce Conner: *It's All True*" is currently on view (through Oct. 2) at the Museum of Modern Art, New York; travels to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Oct. 29, 2016–Jan. 22, 2017; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, Feb. 21–May 22, 2017. MOMA is also presenting a complementary film series, "Movie in My Head: Bruce Conner and Beyond," Sept. 12–30.

AMY TAUBIN IS A CONTRIBUTING EDITOR OF ARTFORUM. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)

Visit our archive at [Artforum.com/inprint](http://Artforum.com/inprint) to read Ross Lipman's essay on the restoration of Bruce Conner's *Crossroads* (October 2013).