

## THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Bruce Conner  
*CROSSROADS*

Private view: 11 June 6.30-8.30pm  
Exhibition dates: 12 June – 01 August, 2015

*"[...] I do not suggest that there is a longing for the past in Conner's recycled images. Instead, they evoke a compulsive, semi-archaeological, occasionally obsessive fixation, which negates longing and makes the films more relevant to the present than to stagnant or out-dated issues. Like any archaeologist, Conner explores the supposedly familiar past in order to reach new perceptions."*

- Phil Anderson

*CROSSROADS* is a thirty-six-minute film by American artist Bruce Conner (b.1933, Kansas-2008) and is considered one of the most iconic works in the history of the moving image. It was produced in 1976 from archival footage of the first nuclear tests conducted at Bikini Atoll in the summer of 1946, also known as Operation Crossroads. For this film, Conner uses footage of the second test, which was an underwater detonation called Baker.

As terrifying as it is beautiful, *CROSSROADS* examines the detonation of a nuclear weapon with a yield equivalent to around 23,000 tons of TNT (identical with the atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki) ninety feet below the surface of the ocean, under a fleet of decayed and abandoned naval ships - test subjects for the bomb's destructive powers.

The test was filmed in its original film speed from various angles – footage that Connor used within the course of thirty-six minutes, enabling the viewer to experience the detonation in fifteen repetitions – a provocative effect, reinforcing the event's atmosphere in a mesmerizing sense of doom. For the purpose of its original documentation in 1946, sixty-four aircraft carried 328 still and motion picture cameras (some of which were radio-controlled drones).

These cameras, some of which were capable of filming at speeds of up to 8,000 frames per second, nearly formed a complete ellipse around the detonation site, allowing for a comprehensive documentation of the event from numerous angles. To paraphrase author Jonathan Weisgall, "Nearly half the world's supply of film was at Bikini for the tests, and photographers prepared specialized equipment that would take a million pictures in the first few seconds after the... explosion," marking the event as "[t]he most thoroughly photographed moment in history."

Conner carefully selected, combined and repeated each shot during the twelve minutes of the film's first part. Rather than dulling our response through a "standardization of catastrophe," this variation re-establishes the transcendent effect of the explosion. Conner takes advantage of that expanded time to intensify the events of the Baker test: At its extreme the slow motion extends one second of real time to more than three minutes of screen time (thanks to the special high-speed cameras at Operation Crossroads).

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Due to the slow pace of his editing, nine subsequent explosions seem to appear identical - an effect that allows us to take in the intensity of each explosion and underlines the unique experience of terror and awe of the nuclear sublime.

Through variations of observation, anticipation, surprise, and contemplation, Conner has created an interplay in the tempo of the editing, in the timing of the explosion in each shot, in “the speed on the footage,” as well as the relationship of sound to image.

The sound of the explosion in the first part of the film was created on a Moog Synthesizer by Patrick Gleason, whereas the soundtrack of part two contains a minimalist composition that might be thought of as “slow motion music” gradually changing shape and texture like an exfoliating mushroom cloud. The music, a sixteen-track recording of Terry Riley performing on an electronic organ, “drifts” much like the clouds in part two. In their own way both soundtracks deepen and expand upon the perceptual and emotional experience produced by the images, whilst underscoring the sense of expanded time created by the varying degrees of slow motion on the visual track.

Bruce Conner was an active member of the San Francisco counterculture and his aesthetic was typical of the bay area in the Sixties and Seventies. He was renowned for his use of de-contextualised fragments of any found footage he was able to obtain – ranging from newsreels, B-movies, stock footage, educational and industrial films to smut and most notoriously, celluloid leader and other filmic elements. He was an unpredictable and inveterate trickster, whose body of work embraces sculpture, collage, film, print, drawing, painting, photography and light shows.

Conner is considered to be a pioneer in rhythm editing for his carefully orchestrated kinetic and frequently shocking montages. He often relied on repetition to suggest our tendency to recede into our own destructive patterns. The anonymous, universal quality of the generic footage and bare-bones craft of the editing gives the films the stature of myth, as does their epic themes.

Bruce Conner (b.1933, Kansas- 2008) studied at Nebraska University and lived mainly in San Francisco. He initially gained attention for his assemblage pieces, but his practice also spanned sculpture, collage, painting, photography, printmaking and performance. Perhaps his most influential works were his films, often using collages of found footage to create short, experimental works, that inspired the style of many future filmmakers. He has exhibited at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, the Modern Art Museum of Forth Worth, M.H. de Young Memorial Museum in San Francisco, and the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art. The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art is currently developing plans for a large retrospective of Bruce Conner's work in close collaboration with the Conner Trust and the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

### **Bruce Conner**

*CROSSROADS*, 1976

35mm, black and white film, sound

(original music by Patrick Gleeson and Terry Riley)

37 min