Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Bruce Conner, 1974 August 12

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Bruce Conner on August 12, 1974. The interview took place at the artist's home in San Francisco, California and was conducted by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

TAPE #1 (SIDE 1)

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is Paul Karlstrom of the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, interviewing the artist Bruce Conner at Mr. Conner's home. in San Francisco on August 12, 1974. Did I get that right?

BRUCE CONNER: At 7:49 p.m.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, Bruce, I thought this evening - although I know you'll have your own ideas that we might talk primarily about your work, attitudes toward your work. I'm interested particularly in two things. As I said, the work itself, but also the work as it reflects a San Francisco mood. You may or may not endorse that point of view. Last time, we went back and sketched in some of your background, talked about your education, when you came to San Francisco, which I believe was in the mid-fifties?

BRUCE CONNER: I moved here in 1957.

PAUL KARLSTROM: One of the first questions that I want to ask is: how you found San Francisco at the time? - without going into too much detail - the scene, how you found it in terms of the art scene and the art community, at least that part which you plugged into.

BRUCE CONNER: I grew up in Wichita, Kansas. Most of the people I knew when I was a senior in high school and when I went to college were at least a year or so ahead of me. Most of them ended up either in New York or in San Francisco. I had moved off to New York for a while to see whether or not I wanted to live there. I came out here in 1955 or 1956 and spent about a month one summer. I stayed at Michael McClure's house. Before that time Michael had been sending me letters, poetry by other people here, things about the arts that were happening here. I was reading stuff in the art magazines. I found a little black and white reproduction of a Richard Diebenkorn in the back of *Art Digest* which I thought was kind of interesting. When I was here I went to see Diebenkorn. It was quite a shocker to see how big his paintings were and the colors he was using. I asked him if he did any figurative painting. He said, "No, I never do figurative painting. But I do at least one figurative painting a year." He brought out this painting that had a figure in it. I thought it was one of the ugliest things I had ever seen.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What did you think of his colors? You said you saw them in black and white.

BRUCE CONNER: First of all I was totally unprepared for it. I don't know, I think it was like too much icing. It was like eating sweet and sour pork for the first time and then having a banana split afterward. The only way I could think about comparing them was it was like a little too much at one time for me to take.

PAUL KARLSTROM: When you arrived in San Francisco what was the prevalent mode, the prevalent style, if you want to call it that, in San Francisco? Was it still abstract expressionism primarily? Would Richard Diebenkorn pretty well have stood for it?

BRUCE CONNER: I guess most of what was being reviewed, what was being noticed by people outside the city, was Diebenkorn and some of the abstract artists - Gechtoff, Jay De Feo, and Ronald Bladen. And, of course, before that it was Still and Rothko and those others. So I think it was sort of like the end of that crowd. And, of course, the annuals kind of reflected what was being viewed from outside. They were always getting juries from outside the area to jury the shows. So on that basis I guess that's what you would say it was. There were the figurative painters, too - Paul Wonner and all those other people who were at the Art Institute.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Bischoff and --

BRUCE CONNER: Bischoff. They would get into the annuals also. But that whole figurative thing, which I think was being touted sometime around then, I thought was mainly the "art business" threat to abstract expressionism: they were digging hard to try to find something that would offset the strength that abstract expressionism had. David Park had a bit of that strength in his painting and in some of the space that other people were using. I think that at the time it was a little overblown - more than it actually was.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's certainly true that until not too long ago outside of the Bay Area people would equate San Francisco art with the figurative school, with Diebenkorn and Park. Anything important that came out of San Francisco was -

BRUCE CONNER: I never thought of it as being a San Francisco art. You know, I thought of it as being about seven or eight people who happened to be doing that kind of work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you weren't attracted - you didn't move here initially to expose yourself to this type of an activity? There wasn't a style, a movement - if you will - that attracted you to the Bay Area? There were other considerations? I gather that your friendship with McClure was one of the factors?

BRUCE CONNER: I don't know - I always felt there was a certain amount of mystery and romanticism about San Francisco and the artists that were here. I remember going to The Place at North Beach with Michael when I was here. There was this assemblage by Wally Hedrick in the window. I think it was part of a stovepipe, there was a doll's head in the vent, and it had wheels; it was like a cart (with a cane on it). Of course I'd been involved in films. I had started working with film societies. I knew a lot about what had happened here with Art In Cinema and about the film-makers who were working here and who had been here. I had watched George Belson give a lecture at S.F. State one day about his abstract films. I think I probably knew more about what had happened here than did a lot of the people who lived in San Francisco, it just seemed... Well, I don't know - in New York I never really felt very much at home at least mainly because everything seemed so much more difficult to keep together.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I gather that what you're saying is that you had more "simpatico" with San Francisco and whatever was happening; there was more of a sympathetic vibration?

BRUCE CONNER: And also I wanted to keep out of the Army. On account of the Wichita draft board I decided that I should transfer to San Francisco. I didn't want to get into the Army. The only way I could stay out would be on the basis of a mental deferment, or something like that. A friend of mine had his physical in Kansas City. He told me that his psychiatric exam was performed by a doctor sitting with his feet up on a desk reading the paper. The doctor read the paper for about two or three minutes, then put it down, looked over the top of it at my friend and said, "You think you're pretty damn smart, don't you?" He put the paper back up. Nobody was ever rejected, or hardly ever, for any mental reasons in those physicals. In that area of the country they didn't believe that there was any reason anybody should be in the Army.

PAUL KARLSTROM: The Midwesterners grow strong boys.

BRUCE CONNER: Well, they've got to make them shape up. Right?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

BRUCE CONNER: They don't put any stock by those pansy philosophies of mental health and everything. They've just got to make them shape up. Well, I didn't think I was going to shape up. It wasn't going to do either one of us any good. So I decided I'd come out here and have my physical here. I managed to get a one year 4-F. In the meantime I went to see a psychiatrist. After seeing the psychiatrist for about eight months I told him that the main reason I was there was to keep out of the Army. He said, "Well, I'll write a letter for you so they won't ever take you."

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you went to the right psychiatrist.

BRUCE CONNER: I guess so.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, if it kept you out of the Army I would say that was the right man.

BRUCE CONNER: But, you know, that was one attraction for coming here.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I guess San Francisco probably had a reputation - as it still has - a liberal reputation and you figured that maybe the draft board wouldn't be as stiff, and also you could make connection with those sharing similar views who would be in a position to write a letter.

BRUCE CONNER: Yes. I had no idea what I could do out here otherwise. I had left the University of Colorado without getting a master's degree. Jean had gotten a master's degree.

PAUL KARLSTROM: For the record that's your wife.

BRUCE CONNER: Mmhmm. She's never had a teaching job in all of this Women's Liberation stuff. I couldn't get a job this Fall. Most of the places I inquired about would say, or somebody else would tell me, that they're looking for a woman; preferably a Chicano or a black. But they're always looking for young women just like they always

look for young secretaries. They're not looking for anybody as old as Jean or Jay De Feo. I don't know anybody that's been hired in the past year or two that is, you know, a woman over forty teaching practical art; maybe art historians. I generally feel that the guys that are running the business are the same old hypocrites that created the problem in the first place.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now they just turn it to their advantage. If they have to hire a woman they want a "fox" that they can -

BRUCE CONNER: Well, they'll get a house nigger in there and have them do all the dirty work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Talking about teaching, how much teaching have you done? You taught at the San Francisco Art Institute for a while, didn't you?

BRUCE CONNER: Yes. I would teach only one class a semester. I didn't want to get that much involved in it. The first class I taught I wanted to call Wasted Time. Fred Martin wouldn't let me call it that. He said he didn't want to have to explain it for the next twenty years when he was sending out transcripts. We compromised and called it Undergraduate Seminar which, of course, doesn't mean anything. They described it as Wasted Time: Unproductive Activity with no Practical Application.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This was a popular course?

BRUCE CONNER: Well, - we had thirteen people in the class.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What would you do? I mean how would you help them waste the time?

BRUCE CONNER: Well, of.course Fred said he thought that description probably applied to almost all the courses they had.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's what I understand about the Art Institute.

BRUCE CONNER: And I felt that if you started with an assumption that you were wasting time that had no productive activity there could only be the possibility of productive activity coming out of it. I envisioned making it a cooperative group activity. But I found it was very difficult to get beyond the expectation that one person is in charge of everything. I would try to get other people involved in the things they wanted to do; or to work out some kind of group activity. Some of the things that they then got involved in... We had a room which was in a little side building that they were going to tear down at the end of the semester. We could do anything we wanted to. Build walls, tear them down, do all sorts of stuff. I told the students that they could come in there any time twenty-four hours a day and do whatever they wanted to; they could live there if they wanted to. About halfway through the semester one student decided he would. He was going to move in. Which I thought was fine. He moved in. About a week later Fred Martin told him he couldn't live in there. So the student moved out. He told me this about a week and a half later. I said, "Why didn't you tell me at the time? I could have talked to Fred about that." I thought it was a tremendous waste of space (to have this building with bathroom showers and heat and everything else) and you just lock it up when there were some students who had trouble getting enough to eat and so on. I felt they could just as well move into the place. We would go for walks. We would go to the park. You know, we'd keep running into fantasies, we'd make up fantasies. We'd have sessions where we'd talk about, say: wouldn't it be neat if we'd go over and paint the Golden Gate Bridge green. And one of the fantasies was a harem fantasy, you know, that most of the male students would have. We had a model budget. About three weeks before the end of the semester I took the whole budget and hired fourteen naked ladies.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, that's great.

BRUCE CONNER: I got them from the Haight-Ashbury Models Co-op. I told them to come with rugs, blankets or whatever to sit on, and bring candles. And so they came into the room and it was transformed. The class was supposed to start at seven but most of the students didn't show up on time. So the women were all there sitting naked on top of tables, or under tables, or on the floor, in corners, etc. when the first student showed up at about twelve minutes after seven. He walked in the door and just stopped! Somebody brought a slide projector and projected on these people. Somebody got a record player. Some of the students started dancing with the ladies. Somebody got some black light paint and black lights and started painting the ladies, dancing with the ladies. Then the ladies started painting the students. The students started taking off their clothes. It was a very respectful evening. There wasn't any real difficulty. When one of the students started taking off his clothes one of the women said, "What do you think about that? I don't know whether I like that." I said, "Well, you can go home if you want to."

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did she go home?

BRUCE CONNER: Yes, she left. Then I saw a couple women sitting over on the side and I said, "You know, if

you're bothered you don't have to stay here." "Bothered! This is great!"

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's interesting. It sounds very familiar. When was it? - a couple of months ago the birthday celebration for Anna Halprin's San Francisco Dance Workshop at the San Francisco Museum sounded like just a more elaborate example of the same type of thing. The projection -

BRUCE CONNER: Well, one of the things that's similar about it is that it's not expected. After we did that the students said, "Oh! We've got to do this again next week:" And the ladies said, "Hey, you know, when you have another party like this we want to come." But the thing is that if people came there expecting it then they start acting in a totally different way. Rather than it's being fair and gentle and pleasant there's liable to be a preconception -

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you recall this class exercise when you put together the visuals for the celebration at the San Francisco Museum?

BRUCE CONNER: At that time I was working with Ann Halprin. They were doing theater called Parades and Changes. I was taking classes from her. I was working as a production consultant for this thing. A guy named Patrick Hickey was doing the lighting. I suggested other ways of dealing with the lighting which I wanted to project from the sides with patterns and from the front and so on. There was one event where they went through a process of taking their clothes off, putting them back on again, taking them off, putting them back on, going through variations of these kinds of forms until the audience became acclimated to the people not having clothes on. Then they rolled great sheets of paper on stage and tore the paper up. And finally turned the masses of paper into big sculptures: which I felt would really work well with light projecting onto the figures and the paper. Everything would become one great mass of patterns of light ever-changing. But Hickey was in charge of the lights and I wasn't allowed to do any of that. Later that year some theater group over at Berkeley had nude dancing with light show effects. But I never could understand why they would always project from the front. I mean, if you're going to use the lights... What happens is that you only have a flat area of projection that people are moving in. It doesn't give you the three-dimensional space of movement, continuing change. If you move across space then the changes would be in relationship to the movement. So, anyway, that project probably grew out of my involvement with the dancers and with this class at the same time. But it never really happened until at the San Francisco Museum last month. I think the one you're talking about was actually the rehearsal ...about seven years ago.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes. It was very effective. There's no question about it. And it was a surprisingly non-erotic experience. It was sensual. But I found it extremely soft. Of course, we're not going here to discuss my reaction to your piece, to that particular performance.

BRUCE CONNER: It was really a collaborative event.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes, but in terms of the lighting and so forth.

BRUCE CONNER: Yes. But Ann Halprin was aware of how the audience would have to relate to the dancers. She gave instructions to the dancers. She would change the instructions while it was going on. One of the first things she told the dancers was, "Don't make eye contact with any of the audience." By maintaining the sort of distance it maintained the relationship. And also by keeping the movement down to very limited, almost totally quiet movements...

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's right. Yes. Very soft - I used the words "soft" or "soft and quiet."

BRUCE CONNER: And she also instructed the musicians.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I thought it was a knockout. I thought it was one of the greatest things I've seen. I found it very interesting that this seems to be a culmination of one aspect of your interest that goes back to - when was this class in which this --?

BRUCE CONNER: It was probably about 1965 or 1966. Then I got involved with light shows. I worked at the Avalon Ballroom up through 1967. That was three or four nights a week with a light show called the North American Ibis Alchemical Light Show. It more or less culminated all my work with motion pictures. Because I was working with two or three sixteen millimeter projectors in the same way. There was a whole bank of slide projectors with sixty slides in each: there were a dozen of those. And three strobe lights, and overhead liquid projectors. There were five or six other people who were working with me on this. It was like working in a rock band. People would improvise. We were improvising off the music and the music would improvise off us. It was like a 200 degree screen. Most of my movies prior to that time dealt with sound and a more or less visual mime to the music (or sound). It just broke up completely. It was consumed then. And it was all happening, rather than spending four months editing a four-minute movie that everybody sat and watched until it ended. After that I really couldn't make the same movies as I had done before. Although the only movies I've done since then are

structurally like the ones I'd done before. I found that I couldn't get the money to do the other film projects which I wanted to do synchronous sound, cinema verite; which meant several thousands of dollars.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's what you wanted to do? But you didn't--?

BRUCE CONNER: Yes. But I never did it. I think probably my whole activity in films is - it's like a dinosaur. I mean any movies I do from now on will probably be the same sort of thing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, of course, your reputation as a film maker is probably as pronounced as your reputation as a pictorial artist. I mean many people know you probably more as a film maker?

BRUCE CONNER: Yes. Because the films get shown. Well, even people who are in the art business don't have any idea of what I've been doing. I mean you have to have some place where you can refer to. You have to look at the stuff. One of the advantages of being in New York is that there's always somebody there keeping track of it all. The media is always there trying to dig up something to write about.

PAUL KARLSTROM: There's a whole machinery that they have to feed.

BRUCE CONNER: Yes. They have to feed it. So they're out there digging up whatever they can. But in general, you know, what I did just happened and disappeared because I really wasn't into that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you really didn't care that much perhaps about the aspect of it? In other words, everything being recorded, everything being - and this is funny for me to say - documented. In fact I think there's a slight irony in the fact that we're sitting here right now doing this in terms of what Tom Garver said in his introduction to the Rose Art Museum Show in 1965. He made some statement early on... In fact I have the catalogue right here. He writes something to the effect that you simply weren't interested in - well, in art history and the whole idea of plugging into historical evolution and development perhaps in your own work. Oh, here is a quote: (reading) "Conner himself is disinterested in his work as history and will deal with it only in the present tense. His way of attempting to prevent the inevitable "classification of these objects into the stream of historical Kunst Wissenschaft."

BRUCE CONNER: That's a lot of shit.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's what I mean, you know. The introduction, of course, is -- But that is one -

BRUCE CONNER: One of the things about the tapes with Tom is that kind of dialogue. Tom has come further since then but we still run into things where I don't believe he's talking the right way. He's not thinking the right way about what he's dealing with. He keeps referring to other artists, to other movements or events which don't really deal directly to what is happening in the works themselves. Also the fact that a lot of the time...Well, the show that he is putting together is a subjective show.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is the Drawings show which is going to be at the De Young Museum.

BRUCE CONNER: Yes. Basically he picked out the drawings that he liked and then in retrospect he started comparing them to each other and comparing them to other periods of my time and what's happening around me, and so on and so forth. I keep telling him that his whole premise is totally subjective and false because I could go in there and pull out another fifty or seventy drawings that would represent an entirely different set of values and assumptions.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And he says, "Don't confuse the curator."

BRUCE CONNER: Yes. He says: don't confuse the curator; he's in charge there. Well, actually somebody was supposed to do it but nobody did. The things themselves were begging for somebody to do something with them. They deal with right now; which means you have to take the responsibility right now to deal with this object; if you wait ten years it won't be here any more.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes. That's right.

BRUCE CONNER: There are certain ways of dealing with your environment which have to do with the time. They're all time machines.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's interesting that you should say that. I was talking with Wally Hedrick and he said something very similar to that. I don't know if the slant is exactly the same. But he had this feeling about his work: that there is a time that is right to show it - I think he was talking about his black paintings - and that time had really passed; there was, you know, the right moment to show these; and it had to do with historical context of what was going on, and their meaning to him and what they were supposed to be about. Is that the same thing you're saying?

BRUCE CONNER: Yes - well, I wrote a note to Henry Hopkins about this show that he is planning for sometime in the next couple of years. I wrote it when I was drunk so I don't know whether or not it really said exactly what I meant. Let me see if I can find it. (Reading) "Dramatic realization of the conflict between the artist person and the external artist..." In a way, one of the themes that I'm talking about is that whole relationship of the spirit of the person (the artist) to the object itself. It became the form of the objects I was making. Playing out those levels of social relationship of the art history of museums, of myself being alienated from the object itself, the object turning into things that I have no control over. But the object gets my name on them. And it gets to a point where it exists as a personality. If it becomes historical it exists as a weapon to me as a person, as an artist.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean to say as a weapon that you can use against --?

BRUCE CONNER: No, it can be used against me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Against you? Okay.

BRUCE CONNER: I mean it can be used to destroy me as an artist, a living artist.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Put you into a box, do you mean? If you do this type of thing you become so associated with one expression, with one object, style, one object? I'm just trying to clarify -

BRUCE CONNER: Well, that's one level of dealing with it. Also, you're involved with processes that are alien to the work that you're doing. What would be more alien than a museum to deal with living art?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, there's a problem.

BRUCE CONNER: You know, some of the work was purposely designed for that context. There were things that were so fragile that they would have to be preserved with the utmost dedication and care. A museum would do that with Egyptian relics or a Chinese scroll or whatever. I felt that there were things involved in my own activity that were just as fragile. I was almost making a point of it. Making what I felt were epic, heroic assemblages and sculptures which would demand that they be treated that way.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Aha! And I suppose to see, for one thing, if the museum personnel - curators would be sensitive to this fragility and if it would receive appropriate treatment. Is this part of it?

BRUCE CONNER: Well, the treatment would be part of the work itself. It would continue the process. I mean what it was would change as soon as you did anything to it. When I let it out of my hands it changed into something else. If somebody took it and put it up on the wall just the way I gave it to them, unframed, they could either leave it up there like that and never dust it. Or they could rearrange things. Or if something fell off they could glue it back. The whole process is continuing. It didn't stop when I stopped. I gave it to a certain point. If somebody wanted to preserve it, there are all sorts of ways of preserving it. It could be cast in a block of solid plastic.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But it would still change?

BRUCE CONNER: It would still change, yes. But that would be the paradox of assuming that you're preventing it from changing, but it would be actually changing it unalterably.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes. Of course, that's true of any work of art, any object. Think of Renaissance picture. It was framed in a certain way, it was shown in a certain context, and that work of Art is drastically altered by hanging in a museum. Most likely it's put in a different frame; or maybe it's put under glass. If it's a religious work, certainly it's removed from the sacred context, the church context. So wouldn't you say that this is just a condition, a circumstance that applies to almost any object, any work of art?

BRUCE CONNER: Well, I was dealing with objects. Museums deal with objects. And my feeling was to make it contemporaneous. I mean Rembrandt is a ,couple of hundred years back right?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

BRUCE CONNER: Most people look at Rembrandt's painting and think maybe it's exactly what everything looked like around him. People went around with helmets on and lived in those atmospheres. But everything was probably bathed in light. Rembrandt would pull these costumes out from a trunk.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Not many people were nailed to crosses, and things like that.

BRUCE CONNER: Costumes that people were wearing, were not contemporaneous either with his time or with the period depicted in the painting. But of course when things are a hundred years or two hundred years back it

gets pretty nebulous about how things actually were. So I was bringing it into, you know, twelve hours from now, how are you going to relate to this? How are you going to deal with it? Are you going to make it immediate history? How are you going to deal with this object? Are you going to deal with it as a religious museum like a church where there are reliquaries with a piece of the elbow of a saint stuck into a life size wax figure; or a crucifixion. There's constantly a dialogue in words and song and the arts between...Well, like everybody is playing a big chess game or something. It's like this whole dialogue going on through the religious texts and the pronouncements of the Church. It's always body-spirit, spirit-body; bodies turn into spirit, turns into body. It keeps changing. A big circle. If you go far enough on the circle of relationship, you come to the opposite. The Church is continually involved in that activity. They're so terrified, on one level, of the devil and accepting only something that they think is God's hand. They get so involved in it that it starts taking the form of the devil until they establish it totally as the devil. Then it starts another process they have to deal with.

PAUL KARLSTROM: If it keeps changing it can't get you. Maybe that's part of it.

BRUCE CONNER: My feeling about dealing with museums - one of the aspects was to point out this relationship and make people participants, clearly participants, in the activity.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, in a way then, if what you just described has been one of your artistic concerns it's an ongoing process; it's almost like an experimentation, it's like you set up conditions of an experiment; there's a process involved; the creative process continues, or the object continues to participate in a process. And so it's almost like doing research. And if you follow my analogy here what do you see as the results? Are you able to gauge the results of your own research? And is it something that you're able to watch? Is this part of the total artistic experience?

BRUCE CONNER: Whatever I should be involved in I should be learning something. This was an enormous learning process dealing with my emotions, dealing with other people's emotions, dealing with structures, requisites, things that contain energy, events or activities which would release energy, and finding out why they do or don't work. People who are scientists and people who are mathematicians, and people who are called artists, visual artists, musicians, are all working on the same processes. Except that certain areas of activity are predominant within certain categories. The artist has his role in our society that the madman had, that the fool had, that the prophet had ...he's a protected fool. The fool with his bells says foolish, stupid things, but every once in a while he also comes out with the truth. It's a very dangerous job to be the fool. He's got to eat at the king's table and be part of the process. The king really wants him around because all the other people (who are real fools) wouldn't say what they really meant.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, in Shakespeare, of course, the fool is the voice of wisdom. The one thing you can trust is what the fool has to say, if you can understand it. When you think of King Lear or a play like that.

BRUCE CONNER: What I was dealing with would incorporate, areas of psychology and various sciences of light and color, etc., but basically dealing with unique phenomena. In *Scientific American* they have a column that deals with phenomena that only happens temporarily.- like a volcano erupts in the middle of the ocean, or a comet appears, or some other event. Some people try to organize their activities so that they'll get there and find out what's going on before it disappears.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right. Like the Kahoutek comet.

BRUCE CONNER: Yes. Of course they have more organization behind them. But that kind of phenomenon is what I'm interested in; one-time phenomenon. An event that can happen only once. When it's repeatable then you're involved in a structure which is limited somehow. I keep finding relationships between.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, when you talk about the non-repeatable event, I gather you're talking about more performance than the objects that you create?

BRUCE CONNER: No, the objects are-non-repeatable events, too. The objects that go into the assemblages are not repeatable. They're totally unique.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's true, of course. What this wouldn't apply to would be prints. In the graphics you've got repeatable images. The prints are still considered original works of art. But I think that's another problem anyway.

BRUCE CONNER: Well, one of the areas I was dealing with was: what is a repeatable work of art? And how do you put your name to it? For almost four years I didn't sign anything. I didn't sign anything at all. And that's when I did -

PAUL KARLSTROM: When was that?

BRUCE CONNER: It was about 1960 through 1964. I did not sign the drawings. I've gone through and signed all the drawings now.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Good for you.

BRUCE CONNER: I had a studio once in back of the mime troupe which was like a giant brain; a huge consciousness. I was doing assemblages. My "job" was to go in the studio. I set myself a goal: every day I had to produce at least one sculpture, or one collage, or one painting, or one drawing. It was the rationale for my behavior. The involvement I was having there wasn't what it appears I was working on. I had to come out with a product to rationalize what I was doing. I would have all sorts of objects in there: photographs, books, feathers, beads, etc. Some would be organized. Sometimes I'd get into a fury of activity and things would get scattered. I'd start painting and it would get to the point where it just didn't make any sense to keep the paint on a limited area and I'd throw it over the whole corner of the room, so that everything had aluminum paint on it suddenly. I would start on a collage, and I would start looking for an object to complete it. The collage could be a dialogue between separate attitudes trying to reach a common agreement: a drama. I made some assemblages dealing with violence and sexual obsessions and fetishes: One of them was called *The Black Dahlia* (it was on the announcement for my first show at the Batman Gallery). Black Dahlia was a lady of the evening who met an unpleasant sex-related death. That collage was a dialogue between the victim and the person who was assaulting her. I felt this was, like performing a play. It was a theater. I was using objects and photographs and endowing them with character. Like my movies where I take parts from other, different, movies and endow them with an entirely separate character by the juxtaposition of one image to another. When I exhibited, people would project on to me the violence of these pieces. Like they would identify me with a person who was obsessed with love's garbage or was very violent ....

PAUL KARLSTROM: Isn't that part of the continuing process that you were seeking? I mean it's a negative one perhaps, or at least it would be unpleasant for you to be identified, without understanding, with aspects of your work. But then the object itself is changing. It indicates that life is continuing in this process for the object. We were talking about that earlier - the continuing process...We were talking more specifically about the way a particular object is handled, how the new owner, or new viewer chooses to deal with it. Wouldn't this be related to this negative reaction - the accusations that go your way as a result of --?

BRUCE CONNER: Well, I expected that at one level. But it's hardly ever happened that anybody approached it at the level that I was working at. The way you speak about how people deal with the object, yes, it's purposeful. I become involved in symbols or movements of objects and- how they change. Using symbolical relationships that have been incorporated into philosophical structures such as Ying Yang and Crucifixion and Resurrection. The Ying Yang image symbolizes one thing but I felt, also, that an old rubber ball that I collected out of an old house had the same power to it. It was the same thing. It was the Ying Yang and it was changing all the time. I became involved in using those symbols, symbols of chance, symbols of emotional content that can change very quickly into something else. One of the themes is that none of it is real. But it is all real.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is this then the explanation for some of your recent work using the Mandala? Is that a formal interest? This is something I was going to ask you much later but I guess we're touching on it: is your concern with that type of imagery, or even the use of the word, a thing of content? Are you actively seeking the evocative potential, the connotations? Does it tie in with mysticism? In other words, is it something beyond form? (pause) Is that question clear?

BRUCE CONNER: Your question is clear. It's just that I'm going in twenty directions at once. Well, first of all, I think one of the reasons why I do what I do is because nobody else is. When I made my first movie, *A Movie*, I started making it in my head at least ten or twelve years beforehand. I waited for somebody to make the movie in my head. Nobody did. I thought it was perfectly obvious that this movie had to be made. Nobody made it. So I figured that the only way it would ever be done was for me to do it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I've. never seen it. Is it something that you can - obviously you can't do justice to it - but is it something that you can describe? What is the quality? What is it that was so obvious that other people should have done?

Q BRUCE CONNER: Well, first of all, that you can make a movie out of other people's movies. Other filmmakers have done it before. But, mainly in a comic sort of way. I'd seen a Marx Brothers movie in which Groucho said to Harpo, "There's a revolution going on. We need help." Harpo goes out and pins a "Help Wanted" sign on the door. Suddenly you see tanks and airplanes and soldiers and elephants all coming to their aid. After that I started thinking: well, you can put a train in, you can put, you know -

PAUL KARLSTROM: Juxtapositions then was what -- ?

BRUCE CONNER: Yes. Then, you know, I became aware that putting in an image from a totally different movie you could make it more complex. Like taking the sound track from one film that was made in 1932 and put it on

top of images from a movie made in 1948, and,- inter-cutting other images together with it. I had this tremendous, fantastic movie going in my head made up of all the scenes I'd seen...a three-hour spectacular.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is what you did in *A Movie*?

BRUCE CONNER: What I found out was how impossible it was to get that footage. I ended up buying a lot of Castle Home Movies and editing it into this kind of structure. But I felt that ...Well, I feel that it's the same concept I have used with other pieces, other things that I've done.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean like the collages?

BRUCE CONNER: They're dramatic evidence of these concepts. When I was in high school I really liked a lot of art. I knew that I would never make enough money to buy the stuff so I figured I'll make it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Aha! Now we're getting down to some seminal information as to how Bruce Conner became an artist.

BRUCE CONNER: I'm one of the major collectors of this kind of art. The Mandalas evolved through different channels. Probably the first overt kind of drawings like that was when I was in high school. I was-taking plane geometry. We were assigned to have a project for the semester. Independent of any assignment. My project was to draw a circle with twenty-four points around the circumference and then draw a line from each point to all the other twenty-three, creating a pattern of lines. It was exasperating and tiresome. Going through those changes bit by bit had something to do with the Mandalas that I was involved in later.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's what I was getting at. When you describe this exercise in geometry, what you're talking about is the creation fundamentally of a formal statement. It's geometrical, it's a design, it's formal. But obviously there's more to it for you than that. And that is what I was asking about.

BRUCE CONNER: If you have a container everything is formal within the container. If you define the limitations for it, it's formal. I feel that the activity that's inside those drawings is as chaotic and as controlled as any of the assemblages or sculptures or movies or other works that I've been involved in. When I work on the drawings they aren't finished drawings. They're changing all the time.

Sometimes I start at the top left-hand corner and go across, becoming silhouettes and shapes, figures. Images are continually changing all the way through the process. It's like watching a whole - you know, it's watching a river, it's watching a movie, it's watching a thousand different drawings all happening, all of which could be stopped at any time. As far as I was concerned I could stop at any time. If something stopped me, that would make a finished drawing. If I cover the whole page there isn't any room any more, it's finished. They fill up the space until there isn't any room any more. The drawings became my main activity after about 1964, when I stopped making collages.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, this is one thing that I do want to talk about - the collages. I have some specific questions. Aside from the movies, or equally with the movies, you are best known for your collages, wouldn't you say?

BRUCE CONNER: It depends on who you talk to. I mean I meet some people-who say,"I love your work," and I don't know whether they're talking about prints or collages or sculpture or movies, or what. It could be any one of those and the person could be ignorant of any of the rest of them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: My guess would be that it would be probably the collages -- the assemblages, the sculpture -- or the movies -

BRUCE CONNER: I'd like to make a few points of relationships which I think tie in a lot of different activities. One is the period when I did not sign anything. Another one is when I stopped making collages and sculptures (which was about the time I started signing my work again). I stopped signing the work in 1960 through 1964. In 1964 I stopped making collages and assemblages and sculptures and I continued doing drawings and working on films. Then I started signing things again. In 1967 I quit all the art business until 1971.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I didn't realize that. I didn't realize there was this hiatus.

BRUCE CONNER: There were a series of hiatuses.

PAUL KARLSTROM: "Hiati."

BRUCE CONNER: That's an island somewhere down in the South Seas. Mostly black people live there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Papa Doc used to live there. Anyway, --

BRUCE CONNER: Anyway, I draw relationships to those periods of time. Like when I moved to San Francisco in 1957; when I went off to Mexico; each of those movements in space are like movements in my thoughts. Whenever I'd move myself physically, or when I would treat my environment in a different way, they were main points of -

PAUL KARLSTROM: There's a relationship.

BRUCE CONNER: One of the reasons I stopped doing the assemblages was that I didn't want to glue anything down any more. Which doesn't mean that I stopped doing what I had been doing. But the processes I was involved in were developed to the point that I didn't want to glue it down any more. Objects became part of another structure.

They were out in the streets, they were out in the hills and they became independent objects. I remember I went into the Alan Gallery in 1963. I had a cardboard box which had eight or nine objects in it. I said, "This is a new work." He said, "What do you do with it?" I said, "That's it. It's that box.." "You mean. you exhibit the box?" I said, "You can if you want to. Or you can take them all out and put them all over the room, or put them in your pocket and walk home, or go to the movie, or put them on a shelf. But you have to remember that they all go together." Charles Alan couldn't deal with that.

END OF SIDE 1
SIDE 2

BRUCE CONNER: An artist should be able to make a work of art out of anything. If you put Picasso in a room with a hundred yards of string and a thousand toothpicks and some paper napkins he would come out with all kinds of marvelous things. If I had to rely on technology and compete on that same level, there was no way for me to compete.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean like we were talking about the electronic music devices?

BRUCE CONNER: Ron Davis's $30,000 worth of equipment.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I don't know what kind of sounds it makes but it's a fabulous toy in any event. Well, we were talking about, I think, the collages.

BRUCE CONNER: Yes, you keep wanting to talk about collages.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I know. I sense you really don't want to talk about them.

BRUCE CONNER: That's all I do is talk about them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is that all you do?

BRUCE CONNER: Practically.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes? You mean that's all people ask you about?

BRUCE CONNER: Yes. Mainly that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I think that indicates that's what somebody out there feels is Bruce Conner.

BRUCE CONNER: It's hard work if you're going to be an artist and have to deal with structures of consciousness that existed at a certain period of time. I mean you can't - you can never reconstruct it exactly the way it was. What was happening in my work was going on at the time but it wasn't being dealt with. So we deal with it in retrospect. Now people want to buy all these little collages. I only have what are in this room right now. And if I sell those I probably won't have any economic base left.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes. I'd say hang on.

BRUCE CONNER: But if I hang on to them I can't pay the rent.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, hang on for a while.

BRUCE CONNER: That one is twenty years old.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What is it called?

BRUCE CONNER: You can't carry around baggage like that forever.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's big, it's about - what - four feet by four feet, or more?

BRUCE CONNER: It's five by four. I did it in 1954.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What is it called?

BRUCE CONNER: It's untitled. Or: It's called *Untitled*.

PAUL KARLSTROM: 1954 *Untitled*. Well, I don't want to rehash --

BRUCE CONNER: Charles Alan would ask me what the titles were, "What do you call that one?" I'd say, "Well, I don't know. Let's call it Alfred." Some titles would come out that way.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But on the other hand, some of your titles...Obviously the titles have meaning, some sort of significance. You give different works titles like Homage to - I don't know who - *Homage to Mae West*, *Homage to Jay De Feo. Homage to Valentino.* And then other things. So the titles have some meaning; it seems to me there's some significance. Or is it arbitrary?

BRUCE CONNER: Whatever you say.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You're not being very helpful.

BRUCE CONNER: Well, I guess we have to deal with individual titles and how they relate to the works themselves.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes.

BRUCE CONNER: Sometimes the titles are poetic titles that existed on the same level as what was happening visually. Sometimes they were titles that have absolutely nothing to do with what was happening visually except it was in a process. The whole idea of dealing with titles became titles. Like *Title Removed by Order of the San. Francisco Police.* Another was called *No Title*. Another one was called *Secret Title*. The whole idea of putting titles to them is surrealistic.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But some of your titles seem very descriptive in that they're related to the content of the piece. And I imagine that these are titles that you gave them, maybe just descriptive titles. For instance, well, there's the famous one *Child*; I don't think that's any problem. *Cross* - that's what it is, a cross. But *Looking Glass* - that relates very much, it seems to me, to the content of the piece. *Homage to Jean Harlow* -

BRUCE CONNER: It looks like Jean Harlow.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes. Right. I was just wondering if your attitude toward titles relates at all, is at any time related to that of Wally Hedrick -his use of funny titles, sometimes punning titles, actually including writing in the pieces themselves? Is there any give and take there? Any influence of Wally Hedrick? Or in a more general sense, was there any influence on your work from Wally?

BRUCE CONNER: That's narrowing it down. When I moved to San Francisco I was living near Fillmore Street. Michael McClure lived two blocks away. Below him lived Wally and Jay. Next to them lived Joan Brown and Bill Brown. Then above them (sooner or later) Jim Newman moved in. And Craig Kauffman. Half a year after I moved in at Jackson. Street, Wally Berman moved in from Los Angeles. George Herms came up the next year. In San Francisco, the city was doing a thing called Redevelopment, which meant they were tearing down all the Victorian buildings in the city. I'd go through those buildings and bring back objects and make them into collages. I'd go through thrift stores and second-hand stores and find things that people had no value for; I thought they were beautiful; I'd bring them home. And I figured that one way at least of dealing with them was to make them into works of art. I could go on a trip around the city and bring back all sorts of things. Now I can't afford to do any of those collages.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because they're selling pieces of those Victorian houses in antique stores.

BRUCE CONNER: I would go to the Salvation Army. I'd get a great big cardboard box full of feathers off women's hats for a dollar and fifty cents. A huge box full. Now you couldn't get even one of those feathers for less than seven fifty or ten dollars. The same thing with costume jewelry. I went to the Salvation Army once and, they had three card tables loaded with earrings, necklaces, brooches, V.F.W. buttons, cuff links, bracelets. I asked, "How much for all of this?" They said, "three dollars." Carrying the stuff home it was so heavy I'd walk half a block and then have to change hands. You know, it's impossible to deal with that now. You could buy a second-hand beaded dress from the 1920's and 1930 's for about seven dollars and fifty cents. I bought a stained glass lamp for twenty-seven dollars and fifty cents. All those things that I liked are now what other people want. I couldn't buy a Tiffany lamp for $180 in 1957. I still can't buy a Tiffany lamp today.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So it doesn't make any difference.

BRUCE CONNER: These objects had an implied life of their own; you know, like Victorian designs of wood grains, cloth patterns, images of some kind of nostalgic import. Objects have some kind of spirit in themselves. You know, like claw-footed stands sort of merging the animal and mineral; animate and inanimate objects. One reason I stopped doing that work was that I did it and also .. ..the art form I was involved in was a poverty art form. It's poor people's art.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I don't want to beg the question, and I don't want to try to sit here and create art history or pin down influences that don't exist, but just for the sake of the record, it strikes me that in a certain respect you were doing something very similar, and there was almost a shared sensibility, or at least interest in related materials between you and Wally Hedrick. He didn't deal with the same materials - okay, granted. But he was interested in beer cans and in the debris of society, if you want to put it that way, and he did go out--

BRUCE CONNER: But a lot of those things had more to do with Jay's work, things of Jay's that you never saw. The first year we were here in 1957...Okay, at Christmas time Jay had a Christmas party. Wally Hedrick had his Dixieland band there, and his Christmas tree that was supposed to have something to do with playing colors by light.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You're right.

BRUCE CONNER: It was totally random as far as I could tell, just absurd. Jay had decorated the whole place with tinsel. She'd wrapped packages like Christmas presents and hung them from the ceiling. The packages themselves were works of art. Some of the things that were hanging from the ceiling were presents. I see a very direct relationship between what she did for that Christmas party - which never really existed after that - and my hanging pieces, such as *Homage to Jay de Feo*, *Rat Bastard Number 1*, and *Number 2, Lady Brain, Superhuman Devotion*. Where things were wrapped up in packages and using colored bits of cloth and such.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Were you using nylon by that time? It's the same idea anyway. I'm just trying to visualize -

BRUCE CONNER: There's more relationship in that house between myself and Jay's work than there ever was between Wally's work and mine. For this Christmas party...Jean was dressed in a beaded dress with black ostrich feathers and some white egret feathers. Before the party I took a photograph of Jean in this costume so it looked like a period piece photograph. I was going to put the photograph in an oval frame. I noticed that on the back of the frame was the name and address of the photographer. The address was 2322 Fillmore, which is the same address as Jay's and Wally's apartment, the place where the party was being held. (The address is no longer on the back of the frame because I took it off and mailed it to Jay when I was in Mexico.) A frame that came out of 2322 Fillmore some forty or fifty years before. So I feel like the whole thing - the Christmas party, the costumes, the photograph, the frame, and everything was all part of an ongoing event. Anyway, I feel that that has more to do with my work, plus things that Joan Brown had gotten involved in. She was doing sculptures of string and cardboard, making animals and figures. Which I relate to some of the other things I've done.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I gather then there were just these relationships. Many of you were living nearby, some in the same building. I gather it was more a general thing in the air, at least among -- ?

BRUCE CONNER: Well, nobody ever saw it; I mean we who were at the party saw it. But nobody else ever saw it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But I mean the sensibility --

BRUCE CONNER: Well, sensibility I think was based mainly on the fact that there wasn't anything to do with the work once we did it. Nobody was going to buy it. And probably there wasn't going to be a gallery that would show it. The only gallery that might show it would be a co-op gallery like the Six Gallery, or some other gallery run by artists. And invariably what would happen is that at the opening everybody would come and have a party, Wally's band would play, everybody would get drunk, and after the opening the guy who ran the gallery would get tired of coming in. You'd never get into the place unless he'd open the door for you. So it seemed ludicrous to have a gallery and do all this other stuff if all you were going to do was have a party.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So the party became almost a work of art?

BRUCE CONNER: No, it was the whole art world, I mean the consumers, the audience, the performers, the environment.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It was a closed system? Almost?

BRUCE CONNER: It's like the kind of environment that was existing here when the first Family Dog dances and Trips festivals happened. Everybody there were all artists and performers and audience at once. Whatever was

in the air was all private air, because we knew each other -

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes, I realize that --

BRUCE CONNER: Manuel Neri was doing sculptures using corrugated cardboard and plaster. He was working shapes and forms. There was no reason to make them in anything more solid than that. What were you going to do with it if it was more solid? You'd show it to your friends and that was it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is what I was trying to get at. A certain number of you were creating objects and with an understood audience, your friends?

BRUCE CONNER: Yes. It was a real audience. And you didn't have to wait six months or a year or anything. You did it right now. You planned a party for the next weekend and you'd do a show.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I would surmise this would also have something to do with the ephemeral or fragile nature of much of the work. This is something you were talking about earlier in a different context.

BRUCE CONNER: You'd have the party hats and the cake and decorations. It all fades and goes away.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, let's see, before we leave collages I want to --

BRUCE CONNER: We never got into them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, we never did, did we? Well, we've dealt with the influence. So what I was trying to determine basically is if you felt there were any specific influences here present in the Bay Area when you arrived that affected the direction of your work. I think you've answered that.

BRUCE CONNER: There were plenty of influences before then. When I was in college at Nebraska University I wrote a paper drawing relationships between the paintings of early American artists like Peto and Harnett and relating them to collages dealing with the surface and object. I did this in 1954 three years before I came here. I was twenty-one then.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So the direction of your work at least for a number of years was already determined when you -- ?

BRUCE CONNER: Well, I was going in all kinds of directions. When I had my shows here I would show paintings and drawings and collages and sculptures and movies and all sorts of stuff. But what people noticed were those things which they thought were freakish; the assemblages. They would never even take them seriously enough to comment on them. But they were noticing them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mentioned that at an earlier stage you did a paper on Peto and Harnett. This interest in one aspect of what was essentially American popular art - what we're talking about is related to that - in the late nineteenth century and the interest in fooling the eye, in illusion, in the surface ...What this leads me to in regard to your own work, and especially again the collages is this: did you have any real interest in the classic, formal problem of the collage? By that I mean as formulated, say, by Picasso and Braque and the Cubist collages where they were dealing very much with formal problems with reality but with the nature of materials, with the idea of the picture plane, of a surface and space.

BRUCE CONNER: The only time I ever got involved in that was when I was in high school taking a crafts class. I was never interested much in the kind of collages that people were doing then, and are still doing. Like if you pick up a book on collages, they're using colored papers instead of paint to do a painting. Essentially they're doing a painting. And I never felt it that way. If there was a relationship between my work and Harnett, it was perhaps this: Harnett might paint each little scratch and form, but rather than paint the purpose is the object itself. The object itself suggests (because of all of the scuffings and scratchings and paint on its surface) another illusionistic space which you can read into, say, abstract paintings, or gesture paintings where images become birds and landscapes and other things. On one level like a landscape, on another level it's a wall.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So in a way you were - this is not unlike what Picasso and Braque were doing in terms of sort of a tension between the flatness of the picture plane and implied space bringing them into balance? I mean you are concerned with space in that sense?

BRUCE CONNER: Well, I remember maybe some photographs of a couple or three things of Picasso's but I think they were almost sculptures. I was interested in those. I generally thought the Cubist collages were a bore. Schwitters took that a little bit further and got closer to that. I had very little direct relationship to any of that, being in Kansas and Nebraska. The only relationship I had would be through a Museum of Modern Art publication on Dada and Surrealist art, or something like that. There is an awful lot of predominantly painterly attitudes toward collages. The attitudes I had were much less painterly. At other times it has painterly aspects. For some

time I thought that perhaps the things I was doing were like Rauschenberg's. I would see reproductions of his work. Then in 1960 I went to New York and I saw a lot of Rauschenberg's and I realized then that Rauschenberg was a painter and that these were paintings that he was doing, that rather than being a paint stroke it's a piece of cloth.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, how do you view yours? How would you distinguish or separate your own work from the more painterly -- ? Does it have to do with sculptural considerations? The use of unusual materials per se? - is that the content?

BRUCE CONNER: It has to do with the theater. Theater in the sense of an image, an environment that's made privately. Somebody makes an altar in their house, or they set up objects on tables, or they organize objects in windows (like a real theater with curtains). A church is another kind of theater; a museum, is another kind of theater.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You're creating an environment in a way then?

BRUCE CONNER: I'm always dealing with what's happening within that space.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So in a way it is a picture space? I hesitate to say "illustionistic" space but you're creating a world and there's the implication of death? I don't want to bring it back to formal considerations because that gets to be a bore, too; that's just one way of approaching art history. But you really do feel that you're creating a space in which things happen? Am I reading it correctly?

BRUCE CONNER: I'm using the space.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

BRUCE CONNER: Whatever it is. I was doing black wax sculptures that really couldn't do anything but turn into dead things. I did one that was called Oven. It's a sort of Buchenwald oven door, the door handle has wings on it; there are tubes coming out; the wall that it's on. Overgrown with those corrupt worms growing out of living things. It was called Oven. Of course, it came out of my studio where there were other objects, chaos...what might appear to be a trash heap. This piece was bought by Don Factor and his wife (Don is the son of Max Factor). When I was in Los Angeles in 1960 or 1961 I went to Don Factor's house. There the piece was on their wall. The wall was immaculate white. They had white overstuffed furniture and white modern furniture, and glass and chromium and a swimming pool and colored lights on the trees outside. The floor was perfectly white; there were little silver ash trays and when you'd flick the ash in the ash tray a maid would come in and pick it up. There was no dust anywhere; there was nothing...And here was this monstrosity on the wall.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How did you react to that?

BRUCE CONNER: I felt like it was exactly what the piece was. It was the most unbearable experience. I could hardly stand it. It was like I was living inside of that sculpture. I don't see how anybody could live in that environment. Of course, Don had to be in his father's business. Which he didn't want to be in. He had a stutter. It was like all of this was something he was caught into. He had to have this house, servants and all this other stuff. But it's an unbearable activity.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you think that your piece couldn't exist successfully in that new environment? It was forced into another environment. You were saying--

BRUCE CONNER: No, I was saying that the environment and the piece were exactly the same thing. I mean another way would be to put it in a slaughterhouse. That's what you'd expect in a slaughterhouse. It was like an immaculate slaughterhouse. That's what it felt like to me. People's emotions and life totally unnatural. What's more unnatural than to be in a place that's perfectly white and nothing gets dirty. Everything is organized.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It sounds like a hospital.

BRUCE CONNER: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How did you come to select materials? Actually you've answered that to a certain extent. You said that you did a lot of scavenging around in the Victorians and so forth and you picked up things that interested you, that I think as you said, seemed to have a life of their own and then you would combine these in some of your works. I don't know if you can even answer this - what lead you to select certain materials or types of materials? For instance, your use of nylon? Window frames? - well, that makes sense, you know, if you're taking things from old houses. Did the materials themselves carry any special meaning relating to content?

BRUCE CONNER: Yes. The stockings became tools that could be used in a lot of different ways; they could be used like screens on different surfaces. You could get spatial effects. They could become spider webby. They

could relate to women's garments and that whole erotic make-up of things which do not have any inherent erotic quality to them. Like all those photographs of naked ladies and such. Sometimes their effect is exactly the opposite of what people claim they're supposed to be.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes. Speaking of naked ladies, and referring again to Garver's introduction to the catalogue, he said something to the effect that women were - I don't want to misquote him - but something to the effect that women were the most important single stimulus to your art. I'm just curious about your reaction to that. Let's see - (quoting) "Perhaps the most important stimulus to Conner's work is woman." And then he goes on to talk about your pieces that incorporate the collages with the girlie photos, and then using underwear, actual bras and things like that. Here's your chance to answer what has gone down on the record in the form of this catalogue introduction.

BRUCE CONNER: Well, I'm always dealing with theater of one sort or another and with characters. I felt that everybody was involved in play acting forms that really weren't them, or they were under the control of forces, imposing themselves on them. I think it's true that a lot of it has to do with my view of women.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which is?

BRUCE CONNER: Well, I'm sure it's as complicated as anybody else's view.

PAUL KARLSTROM: At least you know enough about it to attempt to express your view.

BRUCE CONNER: ...I felt they were like an erotic heroine (which might be Jean Harlow or Mae West or somebody else) somebody who took on the activity as Christ would take on the Cross. It was obviously the tool, they had to work with and they were not bad people.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No. By no means. At least they didn't have to be.

BRUCE CONNER: Well, I think one of the themes of the work is an assumption that the creature is good. That the society which we have is alien to the animal. It expresses power and violence and death and that's its main structure. And the signs of that are in the symbols that we see around us in the arts, in the clothes, in the roles that people play in the society. That people have to deal with this kind of crucifixion of the spirit all the time; and that how well they shine through that is the triumph of those individuals.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So it's basically a positive view of humanity then?

BRUCE CONNER: Yes. I think that's it. It doesn't seem to look that way to a lot of people.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, no. I think you can understand why some people might be a little confused on that.

BRUCE CONNER: On somebody's review of a show of mine, they said, "He must really hate women." What I'm showing there isn't women. It's garter belts and halters and nylon stockings and false eyelashes, and falsity. You know, it's a false mask.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's a role that's forced upon them? Is this the idea?

BRUCE CONNER: I see them as demonic devices. Like there's no reason why a martyr should go around carrying chains and thongs like you might see in a medieval icon. But that's what gets identified with them. I was pointing out that these were the same sort of things - the chains and the hooks and the crown of thorns. I was dealing with contemporary things. People were actually walking around wearing nylon stockings. And there was this whole dance going around it which I felt was being expressed more and more as a dance of death in that ....Well, there was like this tremendous separation of emotions, attitudes, and views of life; one was characterized by women, one characterized by men; and there wasn't supposed to be anything in between. Men were supposed to work hard and go to war and kill and die. Women were supposed to have babies and fuck and don't have any brains. And like talking about Women's Liberation, you know, true liberation would be liberation of men and women. Because men get tied up in that thing, too. What about a man who doesn't want to go out and kill? All sorts of terrible things happen because of that, because he has to take that role. Well, some of the works I made were a demonstration of how this works. Well, I made a Movie. A Movie is like that. I made a movie Cosmic Ray -

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes, I've seen something about that.

BRUCE CONNER: It's an anti war film. Someone asked me - "I'm writing an article on women and film. How do you defend your attitude toward women in Cosmic Ray?"

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is this something that has actually happened?

BRUCE CONNER: Yes. They're absolutely blind to what's going on there. They can see it only as an advocacy on black and white levels; of women who look like we want them to look in this; and this man did it, so it must be that he's attacking -- I see the relationship in that movie, and also in some of the collages as a battle between creative and destructive forces. If the creative forces can be re-channeled into the services of destructive forces, the destruction is even more powerful than it ever was before. The view in these works was that here were the elements involved basically with the creative process - the life process, of sex, being born, children, birth. And that process was being twisted and turned around into alienation, distancing between people so that you couldn't understand them at all; they were wearing masks. Men used to be wearing the same color suit and tie, same color shirt; and everybody had black cars.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Would you say then that these pieces - talking about Cosmic Ray, for example, are really about very special, very potent subversion and perversion? I mean what you're describing to me sounds like subversion.

BRUCE CONNER: Subversion?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes.

BRUCE CONNER: Yes - nothing was more subversive than the House Un-American Activities Committee. Here were these people who were espousing the American way, which involves people having their own points of view, no matter how wrong they might be (they should have the right to be wrong) - and then hounding them for it, and saying that's not American. My attitude toward them was that they were just a bunch of clowns and that anybody who would take them seriously would turn into a clown at the same time. I couldn't understand it when the Un-American Activities Committee came to San Francisco and there were people out protesting. It was absurd. Why do it? All you do is give them more power by doing that. The "manly" organizations and structures in our society are anti-woman. The macho image is a woman-hating image, the Playboy image, the man in charge, the soldier. The Army is the largest homosexual organization in the country. It not only isolates men from the company of women, but it takes that creative force (using that isolation) and turns it into a destructive force. By taking the youngest men in the society. They're told to kill. So it's perpetuating a kind of activity ....Then it gets twisted around, you know. Somehow you're a weakling, you're not a man if you don't go into the Army, if you don't want to fight the enemies of society. Totally the opposite of what the advertising says it is. The Army not only isolates men from women but destroys the fruit of the womb.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, it seems quite evident to me that your work, or at least certain of your work, is heavy on content of a sort of social or protest nature.

BRUCE CONNER: I gave up preaching.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But it does seem that content looms very large in much of your work at least during a certain period of time. That's evident.

BRUCE CONNER: I came out of my ivory tower about 1957. People would talk about artists in an ivory tower (somehow abstract paintings, landscapes and stuff just didn't have any relationship to what was really going on. I took it seriously. I started seriously –

PAUL KARLSTROM: You wanted to remedy that.

BRUCE CONNER: Remedy it, yes. And I got so involved in it and it became very difficult; it became violent; it threatened me. One time Ray Johnson mailed me a package containing a fur muff, a woman's fur muff that you put your hands in. When I opened the package inside was one of those curved knives that are used for cutting open cardboard boxes, it's sharp on all edges. When you put your hand in you get cut. People would leave bags of garbage at my doorstep.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean - well, you talked about that - you had to deal with that in response to your work?

BRUCE CONNER: Yes. I was attracting violent responses. I was so involved in processes you know, I had to deal with it personally.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I realize that. But in one sense don't you view that as flattering? It puts you in the position that very few contemporary artists can claim. And that is: evoking very strong responses.

BRUCE CONNER: There are only a few artists that survived. But I think that most of the artists that can make any claim like that, that survive, are the cowards.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean they learn their lesson and give it up?

BRUCE CONNER: They learn their lesson. They exploit a very limited process so that they don't - they themselves

are not threatened. There were other artists that were more involved on that level than I was; and they were destroyed. Maybe never even got to the place where anybody would even call them an artist.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Like who? Are there any names that I might know?

BRUCE CONNER: No. No, I mean it's, not necessarily on that level. I mean they would be people who were definitely involved in what was happening out there. I don't know how to deal with that theme too well. I might give a parallel to that. When the Art of Assemblage show happened Bill Seitz was here picking up stuff I'd take him down to McAllister Street to second-hand stores. There was a black man who had a second-hand-store. He said he was a Reverend. He had a lot to do with the work I was doing. For example, he'd have a hub cap; on top of that would be a soda glass from an ice cream soda fountain, with a hand mirror in the center, with a marble sitting on top of it, with a doll's head on top, of it, a peacock feather coming out of one eye, and a mirror back over here, and a picture of Martin Luther King. Walk through the place. It was ceilings, walls. It was a second-hand store - right?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mmhmm.

BRUCE CONNER: His prices were too high. I bought only a few things from him. He didn't want to sell anything. And he's one of the artists. I went back to his store about a year and a half later. It was all ruined, it was gone; here was the store but everything was on the shelves, everything was categorized; radios were in one place, and so on and so forth. I asked him,. "what have you done?" He said "This guy who had a store down the street told me I was doing it all wrong, that I'd never sell anything this way, that I should put it in order." I said, "Well, I don't think it's very good. I liked it better the way it was before." He said, "I liked it better, too." I said, "You ought to try to get it back that way again." He said, "Yes. I'm trying." He was still there when I moved back here in 1965-66. He got it back pretty much the way it was, but not as strong as it was in the first place. But, yes, he's one of the artists and I don't even know his name. But when I'd take Bill Seitz around town I showed him this place. There was a Chinese dry cleaner-laundry near Chinatown on Kearny Street. This guy had some old plants (some of which had died). He had American flags, dolls, emblems, all sorts of things in his window. Nobody would take it seriously. I mean he could do what he was doing because it just looked like a bunch of knick-knacks. But it wasn't. He would never be able to ....I told Bill Seitz was that all the people in the Art Assemblage show were dealing with natural folk art. Something is expressed naturally out of all people. And that the only reason Bill was dealing with this at the museum was that its influences had reached the art business. And I said, "Look, you should get to the real people."

PAUL KARLSTROM: Get to the roots of it.

BRUCE CONNER: Yes. "Don't just do all those people who are with art galleries or who you meet through an art museum or an art critic. Get these people that don't have any association with that art level at all, in no way at all." You know, like dealing with Simon Rodia, somebody like that, who just naturally did what he was doing. Of course Bill didn't. The only thing he had in the Assemblage show that wasn't made by an "artist" was a seashell boat that he bought in Chinatown. The problem with talking on tape is that I find that for me to - why it takes so long to talk about things: I always feel there are so many things to deal with. Like when we start to talk about a larger view, mostly what happens is you propose a subject or category. Then I react toward it usually by saying that it isn't that way at all. But only by going through it and coming back another way can
we build a structure. And that kind of structure is where I feel it's at.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, that happens. I agree with you. It's difficult to respond. In many cases you just can't respond one way. It isn't just one way. I realize that. There are qualifications here and there. Especially with a broad subject it's misleading to come up with –

BRUCE CONNER: I find that this has been a problem that I had to deal with all the time when I have been showing my work. You know, dealing with the art exhibitions. I've felt that most artists are just showing one painting; they have, say, a show of twenty paintings but they're all the same painting. Or an artist may show twenty sculptures but they're all the same sculpture. They're all different sizes and a bit different but they're all really the same story. Take the whole show together and maybe it's really a good show because you see some kind of curve or inter-relationship between them. You can take each part of it and each of them is the same thing. I would have a show and be intent on trying to make each piece in itself what it was; and also to deal with entirely different ideas at the same time. During the course of the day you can get angry, exasperated, bored, hungry, sleepy, exuberant ....So many variations go through your life you should be able to deal with many different elements in your life. I would have drawings that would be very fine and delicate sort of figure drawings or fantastic drawings, and I would do collages which would be one sort of thing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: They could be gross and offensive.

BRUCE CONNER: Yes. Or just be very sparkling and colorful.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's very interesting. You seem to be involved in a lot. of things. Which is the way it should be. And I suppose it is the way it is in most cases. It's frustrating when somebody like myself sits here trying to pinpoint, to create linear developments, one concern, and I realize that -

BRUCE CONNER: I feel that I could develop one linear development if we took just one show at a time. I have a show I'm working on now of silhouettes of myself. I could deal with that. There are people who have built whole careers on less. And it's their whole life. People can write books about them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes. Right. It's easier. That's what I'm getting at.

BRUCE CONNER: It's easier to deal with it that way.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, would you consider yourself - I think Sartre used the term - and "engaged" artist ....Going back a little bit to your interest in content of a social nature, a social statement reflecting your own philosophy and world view -- the "engaged" artist I suppose being opposed to one who raises art for art's sake -- it seems to me that you haven't been that interested in the idea of art for art's sake, formalism, or just plain aesthetics. Would this be a fair statement?

BRUCE CONNER: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. Well, what would be closer to the --?

BRUCE CONNER: I think that I have worked .... It's all of that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. What about --?

BRUCE CONNER: You haven't seen any of my paintings. I don't even have a photograph of them. But I went through three or four clearly defined periods of painting. The final paintings were white, sometimes cutout sort of shapes like remnants or archaeological things, reliefs, sometimes with bright colors, like flowers and such. I was very much into painting when I was at the University of Nebraska and University of Colorado. I really stopped painting once I got out here. People would relate me to Rembrandt, to Goya, to Paul Klee. There were a whole series of other things which they couldn't relate me to.

PAUL KARLSTROM: They don't like that. That makes it difficult.

BRUCE CONNER: But, you know, that was because I wasn't working all that kind of ....You know, I was doing my paintings, which might have more to do with landscapes, flowers, walls - maybe relate more to Redon, that sort of stuff. No, I have work that's very formal. The pieces that were given to the Oakland Museum, the "Do Not Touch" pieces, which Garver mentions in there, are as formal as you can get. They're each thirty by forty inches on pre-primed canvas, black frames, and each of them are exactly alike with formal letters in the center saying "Do Not Touch." And then there's one of them that says "Touch;" it has glass on the front. I think that pretty well sums up formality.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes, in one sense. But the fact that you put the "Touch" and "Do Not Touch" or I guess one of them "Touch" and the others say "Do Not Touch" - there are implications there. They go beyond just formal considerations. You're not simply concerned with the structure of the canvas, you know, and the framing edge and so forth.

BRUCE CONNER: I think that's the structure of most formal organizations like museums where when you are allowed to touch, you're only allowed to touch in a certain way with the glass over it. The other ones, which you could touch (because they don't have any glass on them), say "Do Not Touch." So it's another barrier.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's true. That's true.

BRUCE CONNER: In fact, when I did that piece I was here for one summer, I think it was 1964. I went to the San Francisco Museum to see a painting - it was a painting that I had given Michael McClure about the time he did a book called Dark Brown. I called the painting Dark Brown. I gave it to Michael; six months later he sold it to somebody so he could go to New York. It ended up in the collection at the Museum. It's paint and its got objects on it and fur. And it's just begging for people to touch it. It was the only piece in the whole museum that had a sign right next to it saying "Do Not Touch." They were scared of it. Humphrey was scared of it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It invited touching.

BRUCE CONNER: Yes. People were being invited to touch this work of art in the museum and he couldn't deal with that. In fact, he couldn't deal with it to the point where he did a survey of the sixties and he didn't put me in the show because I insisted that people should be allowed to touch and alter any work of mine in the show. We would drop all claims for insurance, my claims as well as claims of the people who were going to loan the pieces,

the owners.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Were willing to drop --

BRUCE CONNER: The idea was that you didn't necessarily expect people to touch them. That time, if anybody was going to touch them it was going to be because they were drawn to the work itself. They weren't involved necessarily in a destructive manner. But of course Humphrey said, "If you let people touch it they'll destroy it." I said, "You don't tell them to touch it." He kept thinking that you had to tell people to touch it, or whatever. There's still no way that you can get around this. I felt that it's quite possible that somebody would add something to this piece. That would make it just perfect. They would be so involved and in tune with what it was or they would move something. Because everything gets moved all the time. The museum puts it in a limited context ....Well, anyway, that was my philosophy at the time. I got very involved in it. I think that series of thirteen canvases grew out of that event. My attitude toward museums and toward the works themselves changed to the point where I stopped doing things. I used to want to do environments, take a space a build it up. Nobody wanted to let me do that in the fifties until people started doing environments in New York.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes. It became the thing.

BRUCE CONNER: And then they said, "Hey, we'll give you a room and you can do an environment. We'll fill it full of old tires or sand or whatever you want." But they still wanted me to do somebody else's environment. I went to the University of Chicago. Oldenburg had been there doing happenings. So they said I should do a happening. I said I couldn't do a happening, that I had never been to one. It sounded like things we had done in San Francisco but we didn't consider them happening. It doesn't happen if you tell people that it's a happening.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you've done environments and happenings ....Again getting back to the San Francisco Dance Workshop's celebration at the Museum, you certainly created with your lights an environment - it wasn't just a light show.

END OF SIDE 2
TAPE #2 (SIDE 3)

PAUL KARLSTROM: Interview with Bruce Conner - August 12, 1974 - Side 3. (Mr. Conner has gotten out his scrapbook.)

BRUCE CONNER: Well, here are some of the clippings. Why don't you move your chair over here.

PAUL KARLSTROM: First you've got to answer my question from Side 2.

BRUCE CONNER: What was that?

PAUL KARLSTROM: What the hell was it?

BRUCE CONNER: I can't answer that question.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's very simple. Maybe it was even obvious. You were talking about how you wanted to do an environment and were never offered the space.

BRUCE CONNER: And you're saying that I did an environment.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, it seems to me .... I view these things as --

BRUCE CONNER: The difference I see is that for the event, for the space, for the object, for the art to have its full meaning it should have a certain amount of wonder to it. The reactions to it, or what it is, shouldn't be programmed at the time. That stands in the way of any kind of direct relationship to what's going on. My feeling is that if somebody has a happening and they call it "a happening" they're already outlining a course of activities of how to act, how to relate to the event. It's already prescribed how you're supposed to deal with it. If you do an environment and you call it an environment and you put it in an art museum you're expecting people to act in a certain way toward it. If somebody were to say, "I'm going to give you $10,000 to do an environment at the San Francisco Museum next month," I would do an environment. But I would tell them not to tell anybody that I was doing an environment so that they would never know that what was going on was being done for their benefit exclusively, a theater that they're involved in.

PAUL KARLSTROM: They wouldn't know what to expect.

BRUCE CONNER: Well, that's the idea. I mean it's the point of difference between somebody, say, taking a room and blocking off the end of it and talking behind what is blocked off. Everybody comes in there and has to pay attention. He's behind this wall talking and they pay very close attention to it and set up that kind of

relationship. But of course if you don't say "this is an environment or event that's taking place" it's there and you just have an empty room. This guy is back there talking. That's exactly what it is in a museum.

PAUL KARLSTROM: In this connection what do you think of some of the pieces of, oh, say, Bruce Naumann; or do you know Chris Burden's work at all?

BRUCE CONNER: No, not really.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you've probably heard about him. Did you see the Naumann show?

BRUCE CONNER: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'd be curious to have your reaction to that.

BRUCE CONNER: Most of what I thought about was how much money they spent on the show, how much space was being used, and how much technology and electronics, and attention was being paid to it. And I thought that that clearly demonstrated what it was; it's museum art. It's not any other kind of art.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Even though it's bound not to be popular in a museum?

BRUCE CONNER: No, but it's popular with museums.

PAUL KARLSTROM: With the critics, or some of them anyway.

BRUCE CONNER: Well, do you know why? Because it's a kind of theater which they can have an exclusivity to. It's like somebody having a contract for all the new Cecil B. DeMille films, right? They have the exclusive contract. They have roped off an area of activity where they are the authorities in charge of dealing with it. They have a sphere of influence.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, let's take something that doesn't fit into that category, some --

BRUCE CONNER: But that is exactly what I deal with. What I have had to be up against. Because the form of art takes the form of the space that it's put into. There's an art that's Artforum art; there's an art that's museum art. There's art that you write about.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's right.

BRUCE CONNER: And all of the art magazines always write about art. They don't take something which is totally visual (which doesn't make any sense to say anything about it at all) and just print a picture of it. They never do that. If they can't write about it they won't print it. There ought to be some kind of tradition where you can deal with a visual reproduction of something and just let it be exactly what it is. But since most of the people are there because they want to run literary journals and they never have been able to get themselves into a literary journal, this is their literary journal. They're using these other tools to do it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Certainly it's possible to write about your work. There's a certain literary quality in your work. We discussed the importance of content, maybe not in the same way that appeals at the moment to Artforum. I'm not sure.

BRUCE CONNER: It's biography. That's the literary content. Nobody really wants to deal with my biography. Now I'll show you my scrapbook.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Except me.

BRUCE CONNER: You see.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. Let's look at your scrapbook. Oh, there I see is a Morris Graves.

BRUCE CONNER: This guy?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes.

BRUCE CONNER: It's a little bit like a Paul Klee. There's John Pearson who did the Twelve Canvases for me that said "Do Not Touch." We were students at Wichita University. I can't remember when this is; it must have been about 1952. And that's my painting back there, they put me down here in front of this thing but that's my painting.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is back in -- ?

BRUCE CONNER: Wichita, Kansas, in 1952 I guess. This is the next year. Oh, there's my college right in back of me, 1954.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which one?

BRUCE CONNER: That one over there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh.

BRUCE CONNER: And there's a painting which is unfinished.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It looks sort of like an abstract expressionist type of painting.

BRUCE CONNER: Not really.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Not really. I saw just a corner of it. When are you going to give us all these scrapbooks?

BRUCE CONNER: Well, do you want to copy all this stuff? Or what?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, when we start copying - doing loan collections again, yes.

BRUCE CONNER: Well, I can't give you this stuff because it's the last I've got. I thought you were going to copy it. So we could just give it to you. This was the first group show I was in New York. It was at the Alan Gallery. In the summer of 1955 I went to New York with my paintings and slides and photographs, under my arms. A terrible experience. I finally went to the Alan Gallery. Charles Alan said that he wanted to buy a couple and would show some of them later. I decided it would take an awful lot of persuasion to get me out of that gallery after that so I stuck with the gallery until I quit the business. It probably would have done my career a little heftier push if I hadn't stayed.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you ever deal with the Dilexi Gallery here - Jim Newman -- ?

BRUCE CONNER: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is there any reason? It seems to me that -- ?

BRUCE CONNER: Well, one reason: he said that he wanted to be the exclusive dealer. And I already had the Alan Gallery in New York. He would want to be my dealer and if I showed in New York they would have to make arrangements with him. He wasn't going to show anybody else's work that he wasn't the dealer for. I thought that the real reason was that he didn't like my work that much.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Hmm? I think that you're a strange omission from the --

BRUCE CONNER: Well, I don't know - The people that he showed, except for two or three, were very similar. Formal, abstract sculptors and painters. Well - he showed Neri and Joan Brown. I believe that's right. Yes. Oh, well -- (Turning page). Well, let's see. Oh, well then that collage won a prize here in 1958. Thomas Hess juried the show and that helped very much because I got the show at the East West Gallery owned by Mrs. Gechtoff. She's the person who invented the derogatory term "beatnik,"

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes? Not "Baghdad by the Bay" (Herb Caen)?

BRUCE CONNER: No. I remember I had a collage in the show. There was a little dusty mirror in it and part of a doll. I found her in there cleaning it, spitting on the mirror and cleaning it. I said, "Don't do that:" She said, "Well, it's dirty. What's the matter? You don't like clean? What's the matter with you? Are you some kind of beatnik? Are you one of those dirty beatniks?" That was the first time I had heard the word. It was a nasty thing to say. You know, like sputnik had happened. It was derogatory. About three months later Herb Caen was using the word in his column. Dimitri Grachis, who lived just around the corner from the gallery said, "Oh, I see that Herb Caen is using that word that Mrs. Gechtoff invented."

PAUL KARLSTROM: What year was this show?

BRUCE CONNER: 1958. June, 1958. There were paintings, collages, drawings. And I showed A Movie. We had a searchlight out in front. Nobody had a searchlight at their openings.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Just like a Hollywood premiere or something.

BRUCE CONNER: Then I had a show of drawings, and paintings at the Designers Gallery on Union Street. It had a naked lady in the front window. A cop said that it had to be taken out.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Not a real naked lady?

BRUCE CONNER: No, it was a painting. Oh, then I had a show at the Spatsa Gallery - "Works by the late Bruce Conner." That was Dimitri's garage on Filbert near Fillmore. (1960).

PAUL KARLSTROM: But a guy would look at that and say it's like a death announcement in black. I wonder if anybody fell for it.

BRUCE CONNER: Well, Alfred Frankenstein did. Dimitri said that Alfred came in and found out that I wasn't really dead. I figured that if it turns out that people can only deal with an artist's work when he's dead....They should treat the work that the artist has just done as being the work of the dead artist. But also in the sense that it's the late work, the latest work - "Works by the Late Bruce Conner." Of course, it did imply a death.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Frankenstein was probably disappointed, he probably thought, "Aha" ....

BRUCE CONNER: Dimitri said he got a little angry right at first when he found out that I wasn't really dead. He isn't really dead like he promised. In 1959 we had a parade through North Beach for this benefit poetry reading for the Auerhahn Press. I didn't expect that those collages would be of much interest to the Alan Gallery because I'd been doing paintings and that's what Charles had been showing. So by the time I got this show together for Spatsa Gallery I thought it was all over with New York (that's when I showed all those constructions). I had written off ever showing anything in New York again. I sent slides to Charles and he thought they were marvelous. Those were all the Rat Bastards and -

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was the Spatsa Gallery the first place you showed the collages, at least in a one-man show?

BRUCE CONNER: Well, it was almost all assemblages, collages and such. The East West Gallery probably had about five or six.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I notice here that you got a lot of write-ups in the hometown press.

BRUCE CONNER: That had to do partly with the fact that my father was district supervisor for thirteen grocery stores that took out at least full-page ads every day in the newspaper.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I can understand that.

BRUCE CONNER: When he would mention to the editor that his son was having a big show in New York the editor would dutifully run an article about it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did they send a critic to review the show?

BRUCE CONNER: They usually got it by word of mouth somewhere from an art teacher or someone, or from a reprint. (Turning Page) Well, I don't know - that's The New York Times; there was something at the Jackson Gallery.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is an interesting scrapbook. We should film it. There's no question.

BRUCE CONNER: Jack Zajac won first prize in a Church Art Today show at the Episcopal Diocese here in the city. I got the second prize for a Crucifixion painting. Then I went off to New York for my show of collages and constructions at the Alan Gallery. When I got there there were people from the San Francisco News and the Chronicle and the Examiner, Call Bulletin who were calling long distance about The Child. I substituted The Child instead of an assemblage called Ma Jolie Rat Bastard at an Art Association Members Annual. Each member artist could put something in the show. The piece I was going to put in had a doll's hand coming out holding a little box like a suitcase and the hand was covered with a prophylactic. Fred Martin talked to me about this piece. He said that he felt that the museum would ask them to take that out of the show, that they wouldn't want to show it publicly. The policy of the Art Association was that the De Young Museum had to accept the entire show. If they rejected that one piece they would tell them that they would take the whole show out. "So, Bruce, if you want to put this piece in the show you may, but if you'd like to substitute something else you may." So I decided to substitute The Child which I thought was well within the tradition of expressionist art. And people just didn't ...Some of these were on the front page of the paper.

PAUL KARLSTROM: The Child was done, if I remember correctly, in response to Caryl Chessman?

BRUCE CONNER: It started out that way because I saw him as a child strapped into a high chair, and he was going to be strapped into that chair in the gas chamber. I was going to put it inside a green box. But the more I got involved in working on it the more I felt I didn't want to put it into the box. It became this high chair, this sculpture, and it became The Child. The child formed and constrained by the social forces that were going to kill him out of their own guilt.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What the hell is this?

BRUCE CONNER: These are low cost works many can buy.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And one of them is a Bruce Conner.

BRUCE CONNER: This little postage stamp right here is called Secret Title and it costs $150.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, let's see, you're in good company. There's a Picasso print I think up there.

BRUCE CONNER: His stuff ought to be worth about $150 in a few months.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, give it a little longer than that.

BRUCE CONNER: Well, here's the Batman Gallery announcement. Bruce Conner was the first one in the gallery.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Your show was the first show at the Batman Gallery?

BRUCE CONNER: Yes - I went out and found the space. I designed the space with Ernie Burden (who used to run the Designer's Gallery). He's an architect friend of mine. I designed the announcements. I put up the show. I did everything.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It sounds like it was your gallery?

BRUCE CONNER: Well, it was except that they had the money and they had no organization. It was supposed to be open from ten to five. Some days it wasn't open at all. Sometimes it was open at two in the afternoons. So it was not much of a gallery.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what did Joan "Batman" - what's the story with that? Was the last name Bryden?

BRUCE CONNER: Yes. She lives here in the city now.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes. I think I have an address for her. Did she run the gallery then?

BRUCE CONNER: Well, Billy Jahrmarkt and Joan opened the gallery. They had shows. But it was hardly ever open. They hardly sold anything. Mainly it was because Bill was an awful lot into drugs and into junk. And it wasn't happening. There's my show, the Rat Bastard. See. That piece has disappeared.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you said that that's happened to a number of your things; or at least that you can't track them down.

BRUCE CONNER: I had this in a garage down at Thousand Oaks (California) at Janss. Larry Janss wanted to buy this one, or one other piece. I think he took both of them to look at for some period of time. He said that he returned it to the garage. It wasn't in the garage. And, in fact, about that time I visited him and he said: yes, he had it. But some three months later he said that he had delivered it to the garage before then. It wasn't there. It hasn't appeared any place. So it's totally disappeared. I don't know - he's a little bit schitzy. He might have gotten stoned or drunk and had it out in the car. Maybe it fell off the car and he didn't know it. This is the Black Dahlia. I used to have photographs of all these things. I don't have them now. I probably gave a lot of them to Watson Bidwell who was my high school teacher in Wichita, Kansas. If we could trace his heirs we might be able to find some of it. But I imagine they thought they were worthless and dumped them. This is the approved seal of the Rat Bastard Protective Association. The garbage collectors of San Francisco were called the Scavengers Protective Association. They made a habit of picking up trash they had in big burlap bags on these funny trucks. They had a big sheet of burlap which they dump all the trash in and gather it up in a bag tied up. Sometimes you'd see this truck going down the street with a couple of guys hanging on. The truck piled with trash, chair legs sticking up and these big pendulous testicles hanging out on the side of it. It was like a parade that was going on. I incorporated that into the work I was doing. The Rat Bastard Protective Association. These sort of bags of stuff in the collages where I'd stuff nylon stockings. The letters are PRB--Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Rat Bastard --

BRUCE CONNER: I sent announcements to eight or nine people, ten people probably, telling them that they were all members of the Rat Bastard Protective Association. I was president. They should pay their dues. The next meeting was scheduled at my house. Then it was scheduled after that for every couple of weeks at Fred Martin's, or Joan Brown's, or Wally's house, or wherever.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did they pay their dues?

BRUCE CONNER: No. But they supplied the beer and good times. I told them that they could use the approved stamp on their works. Or they could just initial the work with the letters R.B.P., which is an alliteration of P.R.B. Now this is The Box which was in a show that the National Council of Churches put together. They invited me to submit something for the show. I was already working on this box. It certainly had something to do with the spiritual and physical needs of man which was their theme. I made it very dark. I wanted to make it so- that you could not clearly see what was there until you got right up to it and looked into it. With The Child sculpture people would see it from a distance and not go near it. They were scared of it. But what happened was that they put this in the show and people just refused to see what was in it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What do you mean?

BRUCE CONNER: They'd go up and look at it --

PAUL KARLSTROM: They couldn't recognize it?

BRUCE CONNER: No, they'd say, "It looks..."

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what was in it?

BRUCE CONNER: There was like a wax figure of a body, there was a suitcase, and there were all these cobwebs and stuff. You had to acclimate your eyes to it. Like it says here (it's "to clarify visualized concern for human suffering." Well, naturally a human husband suffers when his wife's stockings are all ripped up.") Misquote from San Francisco Examiner.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Jesus!

BRUCE CONNER: But then I realized latex that they could tell from a distance that they didn't want to see what was in there. So they didn't want to see it. They wouldn't see it. So it was part of one aspect of experimental activity which was a surprise. If people don't want to see something (which is actually there) they won't see it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Even if they look at it?

BRUCE CONNER: Especially if they look at it. There is no point in doing anything like that because of the whole dichotomy and absurdity of people denying actual things that are occurring in our society. When you turn on the television set and there's a National Guardsman with a gun at somebody's head. And you talk to somebody who denies it even happened. He'd see the same things and he'd put different words into the Guardsman's mouth.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes, his own interpretation. Like interpreting the Watergate tapes, the evidence. But how do you feel .... Here are these pieces you've created that were greeted with shock or repulsion on the part of the viewers, they didn't want to deal with them; a very strong and usually negative reaction - how do you feel now that they're, in a way, part of art history? Which is true. If you're in a museum you know it's nice to have a Bruce Conner piece; and it's neatly exhibited. All of that seems to be gone now, the initial ....I'm not saying that the power isn't there; that's not my point at all. But it's become -

BRUCE CONNER: It's gotten worse.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How do you mean? It seems to me that it 's just become part of acceptable art.

BRUCE CONNER: There was a great pretense of what art was and how you would deal with what was around you at that time. Nobody would deal with this. It wasn't polite to speak that way.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

BRUCE CONNER: When people are watching television while they're eating dinner and they see our planes napalming the villages in Vietnam, and people getting their heads blown off right in front of your eyes. That kind of ritual. Everything else that has gone on in the last eight years or so. It's hard to devise any kind of shock with art work when you're confronted with that sort of thing in your daily life. You see friends being shot-blinded in the streets of Berkeley, artists with their eyes shot out by the police in the street.

PAUL KARLSTROM: True. But my point is this: that also you start on an art historical level. Your pieces have become acceptable; they've become high art, so to speak. Do you see what I'm getting at?

BRUCE CONNER: Well, they always were.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. I agree. But they weren't viewed that way.

BRUCE CONNER: Well, that's their problem. It's always been their problem. You know, they have to deal with

their problem. They wouldn't accept that I was dealing with it in a way that would do them any good because they really had a problem. They said it was my problem. I made about eight or nine sculptures. I get put in sculpture books more often than I get put in collage books. There's A Portrait of Allen Ginsberg in a show I had at the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles in 1962. It does look like Allen Ginsberg. That's what Michael told me. This is one show I had in Mexico City at Jacobo Glanz Gallery.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What did you do in Mexico?

BRUCE CONNER: A lot of drugs and pyramids and --

PAUL KARLSTROM: But I mean you produced some work while you were there?

BRUCE CONNER: Yes. It was a very difficult time. I found out that they don't have any trash in Mexico. If they have trash you don't want to touch it. If you leave a piece of wood out somebody takes it and uses it. Tin cans are valuable.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you didn't have any materials?

BRUCE CONNER: I did an assemblage for Matthias Goeritz. I did a sculpture out of wood. A very raw kind of wood (two by fours) they never really smoothed off. Wire and cord and such. It was like an atrophied cross, a lecturn sort of thing I took it out to his house in the suburbs of Mexico City. He wasn't home but I expected he would be there in a couple of hours. So I tied it to his tree. When he came home two hours later it wasn't there. It was taken away and was used by people.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's amazing. They're great ecologists in that sense.

BRUCE CONNER: No, they're very poor..

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, maybe that's what's needed for true ecology.

BRUCE CONNER: People starving to death right out in the streets. Well, the ecology is pretty dismal there because they've got millions of people living in rat-infested shacks made of cardboard and such.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You can see right through the walls.

BRUCE CONNER: They burn all their trash. The air is polluted. Sewage is terrible. The trash collectors make their living by going around collecting every little piece of paper that they can take. They sell the paper for something like forty centavos, which is like three and a half cents. And they will carry this big burlap bag. Here's this guy - usually an Indian - wearing just rags, no shoes. Maybe he's got sandals. Just a loin cloth, or his shirt is full of holes and in rags. And he's got this bag on his back that weighs two hundred and fifty pounds. He carries it all over town.. He has to walk twenty-five miles out to the place to sell it. I had a show at Antonio, Souza Gallery (I didn't get an announcement for it) some few months later. For the opening I wanted to hire one of those guys. They have an international opening - Spanish, German, English. And everybody is in their pearls and fancy. I wanted to get one of these guys to stand there. Pay him five dollars to stand there for an hour and a half during the opening. But I figured I couldn't stand it myself. I wouldn't be able to deal with it. So I didn't do it. They deserved it though. The contrasts in Mexico are enormous. Here's Margarita Nelkin. She gave me one of my most exceptional reviews.

PAUL KARLSTROM: En Espanol.

BRUCE CONNER: Yes. She's an old-time critic. When I had the show at the Glanz Gallery the woman who was the manager told Jacobo that these were degrading, degenerate works of art. There were a lot of drawings. Every other one was a drawing. And she hated these collages. Which I thought were very restrained collages. She quit her job rather than run the gallery while the show was on. This review came out. Philip Lamantia's lady Lucille, in Mexico translated it for me. I said, "Well, this review by Margarita Nelkin is really something; it's really a putdown." She said, "Well, she just can't see it; she can't see any of that stuff." And then about fifteen minutes later she told me. "She practically blind." I asked, "What do you mean she's blind: She's an art critic." She said, "No; she's got cataracts on her eyes, and she has somebody go with her to describe the shows to her."

PAUL KARLSTROM: Jesus.

BRUCE CONNER: About three or four months later I saw a picture of her in the newspaper. She was judging a print show. She had a print like this far from her with a giant magnifying glass looking at it. The people who ran the Excelsior newspaper wouldn't disgrace her by making her quit her job as art critic. She reviewed my show guided by the woman who quit the gallery and this woman described all the pieces. So she describes the pieces and talks about how degenerate and such they are. How they're made out of trash, and insults the Mexican government and the Mexican people -

PAUL KARLSTROM: Your comment on Mexico or something.

BRUCE CONNER: And it's superficial, and gringo bull shit, and inept, ineptly put together, etcetera, etcetera. And then criticizing it - the same way she would criticize any of the Dada works, and then saying: "of course, the Dadaists did it first and better." It's a classic. It's really nice. Well, let's see, Batman Gallery showed Cosmic Ray for the first time there. This was some kind of show where they borrowed things from everybody. This was in a magazine that Margaret Randall put out in Mexico. They were pushing people to put ads in their magazine. So I gave them an ad, which they refused to run. I told them that I would pay them if they would put in a statement in their magazine saying that they refused to print my advertisement. About this time Batman Gallery had a show called Gang Bang.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, great!

BRUCE CONNER: There were about twenty-five artists in it. That's a very real rarity. In 1962 nobody that I knew anywhere in the country was having any shows that they'd call Gang Bang, a group show.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Some people probably wouldn't even know what it means.

BRUCE CONNER: Ida Rodriguez is an art critic. She is married to Matthias Goeritz. She wrote for this magazine.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Were you in Mexico City while you were in Mexico?

BRUCE CONNER: Yes. Ida said that my Mexican collages were more Mexican than the Mexican's.

PAUL KARLSTROM: On what grounds?. What did she mean?

BRUCE CONNER: They are more Mexican. I mean they're really one hundred percent Mexican things. That's Mexican, that Suitcase. I carried that around Mexico. This was my suitcase before I put candles on it. I'd put my clothes in it. I'd go across the border. On the Mexican side the inspectors would say, "That's really nice." And the Mexicans would say, "Oh boy, look at that! Look at that!" It was a lot more colorful; it's faded a lot. Then when I'd get over to the American side nobody saw it at all.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes, I think you told me about that before.

BRUCE CONNER: In a Mexican garage where they're working on cars they'll have a little altar with flowers and pictures. They decorate everything with whatever they have to do it with. Mexican artists paint pictures of folk art. But it's degrading for them to use the actual materials because they think they are European artists. They only use paint. That sets them in the social -- That's high art. Yes. But the real power in the art of Mexico is, the Pre-Columbian Indian work and the contemporary folk arts. It's out there being sold for thirty-five cents a piece to tourists. They're the only people that are getting it. That are getting the good stuff. And then of course the Mexican artists are - who are they? Siqueiros, Tamayo.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Orozco.

BRUCE CONNER: Well, Orozco has been gone for some time. Siqueiros then was in jail. As far as I know about his personality and his political activities and social activities, he should have been. Ida Rodriguez wrote another review which had more to do with things I was doing here. This is when I was in Wichita, Kansas in about 1962, 1963 and I did this show - Box Car Show.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What did you do? - rent a refrigerator car or whatever? - a box car?

BRUCE CONNER: On the railroad tracks near the city hall there were about five or six railroad cars. This was one of them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You should have had the show inside the box car.

BRUCE CONNER: At San Jose State when I was teaching there, almost every week somebody would have an announcement of a show. It would be a pile of- earth on the ground, or a bunch of string strung around the place, or somebody wrapping people up in plastic. Most of the time they called it "conceptual" art. Well, this is 1963. I photographed the box car. Had it printed onto these postcards. Then I had very small labels printed up to fit inside of this framed area on the side of the box car photo. Everybody should go out and see the box car. It's already there - right? It says so - "Art..."

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's right.

BRUCE CONNER: I announced the "Box Car Show by Bruce Conner at 2:30 p.m. Sunday, April 28, Car #91640." I mailed it out to about fifteen people. I didn't go myself.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Then you don't know if anybody went?

BRUCE CONNER: Yes. I know that some people went.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's a good show.

BRUCE CONNER: They said they went there and they didn't know what it was all about. I said, "Didn't you see the box car?" "Yes, the box cars were there." I said, "That's what it was. That's what I said it was - a box car show."

PAUL KARLSTROM: Aha! When was that? What year?

BRUCE CONNER: 1962? 1963?

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's pretty advanced.

BRUCE CONNER: I had a show at the Wichita Art Museum. It was mostly drawings. Richard Grove who was running the Wichita Art Museum was a little apprehensive of the collages. He liked the drawings. Then I went on to Chicago. I had come out of Mexico penniless. Before I went to Mexico I had a show - I sold a bunch of things to the Ferus Gallery and I made about $7,000. Everybody had told me how cheap it was to live in Mexico. And besides I was sure The Bomb was going to drop. I'd go to Mexico and live cheaply and hide in the mountains when the bomb dropped. That was a mistake. First of all, I found that having to hit the border twice during the year and the expenses of maintaining a car, which are three or four times what they are here, and so forth, it cost me at least as much as if I had stayed in San Francisco. Plus the fact that as soon as I left the country nobody bought anything of mine. So my dream of producing all this stuff and having shows -

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why didn't they buy anything? Was that related to your leaving the country? Is that what you're saying?

BRUCE CONNER: I guess it must have had something to do with it. I wasn't available for interviews or for shows, or group shows. I had one show at the Ferus Gallery which opened June 4, 1962. Two days before the show opened something like two billion dollars was lost in the stock market. People that were going to buy things from that show didn't. I didn't sell a thing. Oh, I sold one thing; Betty Asher, bought something from each Ferus show. And Irving Blum made sure that she had a good price. She bought Clam. I got thirty dollars for it. It's a very nice piece. I wish I had it. After that I came back to the United States. I had no money, I had no income, a new baby; I had to live off my parents for six months. Some students at the University of Chicago were having a festival of the arts. They wanted me to be an artist-in-residence and show my movies and have a collage show. I did. No college would ever invite me to do anything if it were officially part of the college. They put out a magazine and put Senorita on the cover. They quoted things out of my letters. I didn't know they were going to do that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It says, "Happenings are lovely."

BRUCE CONNER: They should not be announced.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. All right.

BRUCE CONNER: (Reading) "Except underground, or not announced at all. They should happen anywhere, at any time, with audience or no audience, police sirens, naked ladies, flashlights, strawberry shortcake, feathered elbows, dead mice, rolled up sidewalks, smoked turning head inside out, growing fingers, sleeping in trees, sitting in pianos, happenings happen all the time." They had some balloons and circus posters inviting you to the Bruce Conner Circus on the Midway (the Midway is that area of Chicago where the University of Chicago is). When Norman Mailer came to give his lecture he looked at this magazine...(after we picked him up at the airport). They asked him what he wanted to do. He wanted to go see Bruce Conner's show right away. He went in and walked around the show and he bought one hanging assemblage (4th Dimensional Neo-Funky Box) and one drawing that morning.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He did?

BRUCE CONNER: Yes. He took the drawing. I said, "Would you like to take this assemblage." He said, "I don't know what the air conditioning will do to it. Why don't you bring it and install it when you come to New York."

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you?

BRUCE CONNER: Yes. I guess it was mainly to get me to go to New York to visit him.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I wonder what that means?

BRUCE CONNER: Well, you know, he could have taken it. But it was kind of fragile and it should have been installed by me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I wonder if he still has them? He must.

BRUCE CONNER: Oh, sure. Sure, he does. He's into doing a performance. I went there to meet him for lunch. His lunch was two Scotch on the rocks and a giant sirloin steak practically raw.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Macho.

BRUCE CONNER: Macho? He said I should make a tour of the bars with him some evening.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Maybe he's gay?

BRUCE CONNER: I'm sure he'd have something to say about that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He spends a lot of time talking about --

BRUCE CONNER: He likes to get into fights.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, that figures.

BRUCE CONNER: I don't want to get into any fights. So I didn't do it. I didn't let anybody take my picture. Up until around 1965 nobody ever saw a picture of me. That's the photo that was reproduced in that Pasadena catalogue that Coplans did, the opening of the new Pasadena Museum? There's the high chair before the sculpture was put in it. Well, that's the first scrapbook. When we get to the end of this tape we're finished - right?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right. How fast can we go through this one? Not too fast. Let's go just as far as we can.

BRUCE CONNER: Oh, this is Artforum. You can always find that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is good. This makes you tell stories, though.

BRUCE CONNER: This one, Deceit Fish, was in my show at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia. It was not returned. Stephen Prokopoff did not even acknowledge it. He wouldn't collect the insurance. It took three years to collect the insurance. I don't know whatever happened to it. He claimed that it was never in the show. It's in the catalogue and I saw it there myself.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But they did finally give you something because you sent the Archives the stub of the check.

BRUCE CONNER: I wrote to the University of Pennsylvania. I had been dealing with Prokopoff and the Institute of Contemporary Art at. the University of Pennsylvania. They said something about "piece alleged to have been lost from the exhibition," as if they were paying me off to get rid of me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean they never acknowledged that? That's right. We filed it under "Deceit" by the way.

BRUCE CONNER: Here's a chair. I think I did that in about 1960. I was having a discussion with Peter Selz about artists and who he'd show and so on; we got around to talking about his favorite - Harold Paris. Peter said that Harold was doing things that nobody else was doing. I said that I didn't really believe that he had, that they looked like somebody else's work. Peter said, "Well, you know, he did this whole series of chairs, and you were doing things with the nylon stockings instead." I said, "Well now, look, the only difference is that I did a child in a high chair. I did a thing called the Chair. Except I did these things with black wax,. What Harold does is that he casts it in bronze or gold. And his plastic form sculptures where he takes black plastic and vacuforms it, it's like stretching of nylon over surfaces.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's somehow not the same as Harold Paris.

BRUCE CONNER: But it's much more expensive though.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What?

BRUCE CONNER: His work. There was an auction at Parke-Bernet. That Crucifixion sculpture of mine ....If I had known about it I would have gone down there and bought it. I think it went for...? According to the catalogue that Peter had -

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was this recently?

BRUCE CONNER: About six months ago or something. In the catalogue Peter had put down what he thought the

value of it was; then somebody had taken the catalogue to the auction and wrote down what it actually sold for. Peter had written down something like $4,500 for this sculpture. It went for $2 ,500. Harold Paris's little plastic blob went for like $5,500.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well. What can one say? What can one say?

BRUCE CONNER: I had a show at the Swetzoff Gallery in Boston. I think I sold two drawings. I didn't sell any collages. There's at least one collage that's about six by four feet which I gave to him at that time. I said, "This is a gift to you but don't ever sell it; it's supposed to come back to me. It's not a piece of property." Then he was killed. I wouldn't admit that he 'd been killed for a long period of time. Finally some three or four years later I allowed it to hit me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you like him? (Swetzoff) Was he -- ?

BRUCE CONNER: He was one of the few people who would show my work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I was wondering if he was a personal friend.

BRUCE CONNER: He was a strange person. He showed Hyman Bloom's work. Who was pretty strange too. One drawing I sold, I sold to Hyman Bloom.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really: That's interesting.

BRUCE CONNER: Then I wrote to Swetzoff's lawyer. There's an assemblage called Cathedral. This was supposed to have been sent from the Swetzoff Gallery from the Brandeis show, and then somehow it was supposed to get over to the Institute of Contemporary Art. I was sure that it was in the Institute of Contemporary Art Show. That's another piece that disappeared. But in the meantime what happened was that Swetzoff died. His records were illegible. The pieces all were sent back from the Institute of Contemporary Art to the Alan Gallery. According to the invoice Cathedral was on the inventory. But there were riots in Harlem where the warehouse was. So Charles was afraid to go up through Harlem and look at them. It was about five months later before he went to look at them. Five months later the piece wasn't there. So I said, "Charles, why don't you collect the insurance?" The insurance company said, "We can't collect that because you signed for this saying that it had all been delivered and it was five months ago." So I couldn't trace it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Things like that are always happening to you, aren't they?

BRUCE CONNER: No, not always. But that's one of the things that happened. This is one of the things that should be straightened out. We should try to get hold of that lawyer and see ....There are some photographs I wrote to the lawyer. He said there were no photographs, that the records were all messed up, that only things that belong to the gallery were there. And I knew that this one piece, which is called Power Failure, that I gave to Swetzoff didn't belong to the gallery. He never bought it. I think that by the time I got into this I had quit the art business. It was such a headache. It was such a pain to deal with. When I quit the art business it was things like that ...the Institute of Contemporary Art show was a show that I didn't want to be in. It was a retrospective. I had just had a similar show at Brandeis. I had quit doing collages and assemblages and didn't want to think about them any more. Charles Alan said that it would be a good thing - good for business to have a show. People would buy my work. Well, it was really a disaster for me. I didn't sell anything during the show or at any time within eight or nine months after the show. Some pieces were lost. Some pieces were damaged. I shipped about twenty things from California with the stipulation that they had to be shipped back here immediately after the show. Prokopoff decided that he didn't have to do that. He would send it on to New York which was a lot cheaper than shipping it from Philadelphia to California. The only person who appeared in a year and a half that might buy something had gone over to the Pasadena Museum the day after they were being packed up. So I said, "We've got to get these things back right after the show within the next month and a half because this guy is going to buy something." Prokopoff said, "Sure."

PAUL KARLSTROM: But no.

BRUCE CONNER: And I was sending telegrams, making long distance phone calls, and he wouldn't reply. I was really getting upset. And the Funk Art show was happening. I was upset about that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why were you upset about that? That's another interesting question. Everybody seemed upset about it.

BRUCE CONNER: Well, I would have to say that the only thing that could maintain me as an artist was that I would have to preserve some illusions about my relationship to the art world or my work. One of the illusions would be that once you become known, or your work became known, you would have access to the public, that you could speak about your work and communicate with them. What I found was that in this Rat Bastard activity

was the essence of what the Funk Art show was about. The essence of what we had been involved in was distorted and shuttled off into the background. The only time that we had a chance to speak was at a panel discussion. Peter had control of the catalogue, of the show, press releases, as well as this panel discussion where we disagreed with him. And he wouldn't even allow that; he suppressed the tape. He wouldn't let it be broadcast over KPFA. He wouldn't let it be printed.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's the tape you mentioned that Jim Monte has? Is that right?

BRUCE CONNER: I think Merrill (Greene) has it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, he gave it to her?

BRUCE CONNER: Mmhmm. I told her that she should make sure that it doesn't get back to him. It seems that what he has is the original tape. He hasn't made a copy.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So that's the only one. (Now at the Archives of American Art)

BRUCE CONNER: Another illusion was that theoretically, although I'm not making any money, I have to get some kind of rewards on other levels. I had my most successful show ever in France at the Gallery J. And she wouldn't pay. It was all these different disappointments, you know - people taking my work, selling it, not paying me. People taking my work, misinterpreting it, dominating the way in which people would relate to it and not allowing me to talk. People taking my work, preventing me from dealing with it personally in my own home, and trying to sell it to somebody and then for their own economic gain putting it someplace else. I was poor at the time. Hardly had any money at all. I was teaching at the Art Institute. I found that their public relations director was exploiting me. Being a teacher there was not so much my value as myself, but that it lent prestige to the organization. Whenever they could use me they would. They were planning to do a film festival and they called in Bob Nelson and me to give them advice. We said it was awful; that it was fucked up, that it was ridiculous, that it was the worst thing they could have ever thought of and that they should cancel it. They didn't take our advice. They went ahead with it. The next thing is that we read in the paper an article about the festival: Eichelbaum says it's the idea of Bruce Conner and Bob Nelson, famous filmmakers. This is the work of the PR lady and the School. I just figured I can't teach there any more. It's doing me more damage and creating anxiety. Making me responsible for things that I have nothing to do with.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How long did you actually teach there.

BRUCE CONNER: I guess that happened in the third semester that I was there. All these events were happening at once. For a period of two months, three months. Plus the light show I was in at the Avalon Ballroom was falling apart. My application for grants from the Ford Foundation, and Guggenheim, weren't getting accepted. My personal life was falling apart. I got very, very sick. I got ulcerative colitis. I threw up and hemorrhaged. I couldn't eat anything but liquids for a year and a half. They tell me it's not psychosomatic. But when I got sick I thought: oh boy, I don't have to deal with this, I can go to bed. But it wasn't fun. It was like dying. And I decided then that if that's the way it was going to be, that I just wasn't going to suffer like that. I quit reading about art, quit replying to , letters, quit teaching, quit going to museums, quit exhibiting. (Tape is running off reel)

END OF SIDE 3 -- (TAPE 2 - SIDE 1)

END OF INTERVIEW

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