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Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Bruce Conner,
1974 March 29

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Bruce Conner on March 29, 1974. The interview took place in San Francisco, CA, and was conducted by Paul Karlstrom and Serge Guilbaut for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose. This is a rough transcription that may include typographical errors.

Interview

PAUL KARLSTROM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. An interview with San Francisco artist Bruce Conner, conducted by Paul Karlstrom and UCLA graduate student Serge Guilbaut on March 29, 1974, in San Francisco.

[Break in tape.]

BRUCE CONNER: – been very negative.

MR. KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah?

MR. CONNER: I had a show when my [inaudible] arrived, in 1967, at the Galerie –

MR. KARLSTROM: You were over there?

MR. CONNER: No, I didn't go over there.

MR. KARLSTROM: No, you didn't? Oh.

MR. CONNER: But my most successful show, as far as sales, was in Paris at the Galerie J. Jeannine de Goldschmidt. And she sold 13 pieces.

MR. KARLSTROM: Yeah?

MR. CONNER: And she sent 350 dollars to Charles Alan and she wouldn't pay anything more. We had to go to court. Four years later, we got the money. In the meantime, you know, we had to pay for a lawyer. And she took her percentage off the top. We paid the lawyer – I paid the lawyer. And the Alan Gallery took their percentage, and I ended up with about 25 percent.

MR. KARLSTROM: In debt, probably.

MR. CONNER: Practically, you know?

MR. KARLSTROM: How was it resolved? Did you win the case?

MR. CONNER: Yeah. You know, all she paid was exactly how much she owed. And she didn't pay the court costs.

MR. KARLSTROM: Obviously, this means that if – your work is in French, or in European, collections.

MR. CONNER: It's in French hands. [Laughs.]

MR. KARLSTROM: In French hands.

MR. CONNER: I've never met her. It may be a very interesting meeting.

MR. GUILBAUT: When was it? Was it in the '60s or now?

MR. CONNER: '66. But all of those collages and assemblages, I stopped doing in 1964, ten years ago.

MR. GUILBAUT: Your movies – you started doing the movies after that? Or you were doing movies before, too?

MR. CONNER: No, I started movies, 1957.

MR. KARLSTROM: When was *Cosmic Ray* [1961] done?

MR. CONNER: 1960 to '61. I shot it here in San Francisco and edited it here and also down in Mexico, when I was living in Mexico.

MR. KARLSTROM: In Mexico?

MR. CONNER: I moved to Mexico. Let's see, I think it must have been the end of '61. Maybe it was then, the end of '61.

MR. KARLSTROM: Didn't you say that you had just seen *Cosmic Ray* recently in L.A.? Was it at UCLA?

MR. CONNER: Ferus Gallery.

MR. KARLSTROM: Ferus Gallery?

MR. CONNER: Oh, the three-screen version? I was there running the projectors. It's the only time I've ever seen it on three screens. [Laughs.]

MR. KARLSTROM: That's not easy.

MR. GUILBAUT: It was good, it was very good. It was interesting. The room is really nice. And it was really good atmosphere. I thought it was very good.

MR. KARLSTROM: Kurt Von Meier, when he was teaching at UCLA, showed it, to a packed house, I might add - probably with rock-and-roll accompaniment.

MR. CONNER: I got a call from a guy named Kipper [possibly George Kipper, Library of Congress, Motion Picture, Broadcasting, and Recorded sound Division], Library of Congress - archives-

MR. KARLSTROM: No. I don't know him. That's separate from us.

MR. CONNER: Whatever they are. They want to get negatives of my films for preservation.

MR. KARLSTROM: Oh, great. I hope you're going to do it.

MR. CONNER: I told them I would. They said they hadn't got the money for it yet. But it's a project they're going to try to raise the money for.

MR. KARLSTROM: Was that the Library of Congress, or was it the photo division of the Smithsonian?

MR. CONNER: Library of Congress.

MR. KARLSTROM: It was the Library of Congress.

MR. GUILBAUT: Can we start talking about the beginning?

MR. CONNER: The beginning?

MR. GUILBAUT: Some kind of - yes. I would be interested in your relation between the San Francisco art scene and the Los Angeles scene, when you started to work.

MR. CONNER: Well, I didn't know anything about the Los Angeles art scene. As far as I knew, it didn't exist.

MR. KARLSTROM: And this was - ?

MR. CONNER: In 1957, I moved to San Francisco. Got married, got on the airplane, flew to San Francisco. Moved in a block away from where Michael McClure lived, a friend of mine. He and I both went to school in Wichita, Kansas.

MR. KARLSTROM: Oh, really? He has a new play going. I think it's going right now.

MR. CONNER: You've got to see it before it closes.

MR. KARLSTROM: [Inaudible] or something?

MR. CONNER: You've got to see it.

MR. KARLSTROM: Is it still going? Okay.

MR. GUILBAUT: How was the - that's a very interesting point, with the Mike McClure relationship. What was - was

it at a time when people from Los Angeles, artists from Los Angeles were coming to San Francisco to see those poets and people like that?

MR. CONNER: No. I don't think they were interested in him at all.

MR. GUILBAUT: No?

MR. CONNER: I don't think they knew anything about him.

MR. GUILBAUT: So this was just before [Allen] Ginsberg and [Gregory] Corso came from New York?

MR. CONNER: No. Ginsberg and McClure and the other poets gave their reading at the Six Gallery, I think, in 1956 or '55 - I guess it was '56. And *Howl* [1956] was published just before that. I'd been out to visit Michael a couple of times before. I had been here for one summer and decided I wanted to live here. You can't live out in the middle of the United States very well, at least not in 1957.

MR. KARLSTROM: Unless you're a farmer, you can't. [Laughs.]

MR. CONNER: Everybody I knew either moved to San Francisco, out of Wichita, or moved to New York.

MR. GUILBAUT: San Francisco, why? Because it was a nice town or because something was happening or because it was very easy to live or - ?

MR. CONNER: It's a nice place.

MR. GUILBAUT: Yeah.

MR. KARLSTROM: So lifestyle was as attractive as, say, the art scene. In other words, the obvious option at that time would be New York, I would think, just for the art scene.

MR. CONNER: Well, the art scene in New York was already more or less, I thought, established. It didn't really exist here. I mean, it's hardly ever even existed here, as far as the art scene. There are more and more people doing work, and I think the galleries are doing better than ever.

MR. GUILBAUT: But when you came here, you came here with the idea to work - well, to establish yourself as an artist or, you know, with a colony of artists? Or just doing things around?

MR. CONNER: Well, I had already established myself as an artist as far as exhibitions because I had gone to New York in 1954 or '55, and Charles Alan at the Alan Gallery had bought some of my work and put me in group shows that he had. And he more or less represented my work in New York. And that work at that time was painting, oil paintings.

MR. GUILBAUT: Like what? What type of stuff?

MR. CONNER: Abstract [inaudible]

MR. KARLSTROM: Was it Abstract Expressionism?

MR. GUILBAUT: Yes.

MR. CONNER: It didn't fit any of those categories.

MR. KARLSTROM: It didn't?

MR. CONNER: No.

MR. KARLSTROM: Okay. Okay. [Inaudible]

MR. CONNER: They were almost - most - a lot of them were paintings on Masonite. And sometimes, I would cut the Masonite out into shapes, so it would look like remnants or parts of rocks or parts of some document that was very old. Then the paint on it was largely a white, like an ivory-white or - heavy impasto painting with colored glazes, so building up shapes. Sometimes, the shapes would look like seashells, and rock patterns and flowers and a lot of other things. But it was all very surface sort of thing.

But I'd been working in collages and watercolor and prints and other work before I ever came out here. I always have worked on a lot of different types of media.

MR. KARLSTROM: Did you go to art school in Kansas, then?

MR. CONNER: I went to Wichita University for two-and-a-half years. I went to the University of Nebraska and got a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree there, that's where I met my wife. I went to Kansas City Art Institute for one summer, and they certainly didn't like me. And I went to - I had a scholarship to Brooklyn Museum Art School and studied under Ruben Tam and enjoyed that.

Then I went to the University of Colorado for graduate work, but it was quite a difference of opinion by most of the graduate painting students as to what the curriculum was. I think about 12 of the painting - graduate painting students left and didn't get their degree there at all, which was actually, you know, almost four-fifths of the -

MR. KARLSTROM: I was just going to say. How many did that leave?

MR. CONNER: It left about three of them, that's what.

MR. KARLSTROM: Did you go to art school here in the Bay area? I guess you were really beyond that at that point.

MR. CONNER: No, I'd gone to school for - [Laughs.]

MR. KARLSTROM: Not as long as I have.

MR. CONNER: Twenty - twenty-one years or something, you know? See, when I moved here, I was 24. And I entered a collage that I had done in 1954 at the University of Nebraska in Artists of San Francisco Art Association Annual. Thomas Hess juried the show and in essence he gave it the first prize. All the other prizes were purchase prizes. This was the only prize that had a money prize, he didn't buy it. I think the money prize was something like 300 dollars, and the price of the collage was 300 dollars. So I got the collage and the prize. I still have the collage.

MR. KARLSTROM: Now you could sell it for more.

MR. CONNER: Now it's priced about 4,000.

MR. KARLSTROM: Now it's priceless.

MR. CONNER: [Laughs]

MR. GUILBAUT: So what was the idea of the collage? Were you looking to Surrealist collage, Cubist collage or why - what was the - or it was only coming out from you without any connection?

MR. CONNER: No, I was familiar with that. But you know, at that time - and I think, still, people think that you have to draw some kind of relationship to historical forms of collage or assemblage in order to rationalize it.

MR. GUILBAUT: [Inaudible]

MR. CONNER: But I don't. I don't do that at all. I just think of it as a perfectly natural kind of activity. And, you know, if somebody does a painting, just because they're using that type of material - oil paints mixed with thinner on canvas or whatever - you know, there's a tremendous history of painting. But you know, when somebody starts pasting a piece of paper onto another paper, then all of a sudden, nobody seems to recognize that anything existed before Pablo Picasso glued something on a canvas -

MR. GUILBAUT: No, but the thing is that when we use - if you use collage, it is because you want to achieve something else you can't do with a painting, with paint. I mean, you have a different type of texture or different types of organization of shape and content.

MR. CONNER: Well, I'd paint on the collages. And I've use collage in painting as well. I did all kinds of variety of additives towards collage and assemblage because at that time it was totally open. I didn't have any competition, really. The only competition might be Robert Rauschenberg, whose work I hadn't really seen. I'd only seen it in reproductions, black-and-white photographs. And I kept wondering if it was like what I was doing.

And then when I went to New York, I found out it wasn't, because he was really doing paintings. He's doing paintings or he's doing drawings, and he's using photographs and other elements to achieve some effect that he couldn't get just with paint. But basically, he's working from a painter's point of view.

And I would start, you know, at a lot of different areas of, say, relating to an object in itself and then developing an environment around it, or using materials to create a simulated space of some time or place, or relating a sort of a drama of - a characterization, like some of the things they talk about, the erotic collages, were - a lot of the times they were like a dialogue.

One of them was called the Black Dahlia. And there was a famous case of the woman who was murdered in Los Angeles in 1945. And they called her the Black Dahlia, it was a sex crime.

MR. KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah.

MR. GUILBAUT: Oh, yeah, yeah.

MR. CONNER: I did a collage. It was on the announcement for the Batman show that I had in 1960 [Batman Gallery, San Francisco, 1960]. And actually, what it was - I was taking theater into the collage. I was performing as - you know, it was like a dialogue between the combatants in that, or the personalities in that event, as also being viewed through the eyes of whoever the artist is that does the play and the audience.

But, in general, what I would find is that, rather than people relating to it as a theater and a dialogue, they would relate to me as being one of the characters. And since I wasn't a woman, they would relate to me as being this sadistic monster that hated women. All right? Whereas I was actually treating these attitudes as elements of the construction that I was performing with.

I know now that if you go to a movie in New York and there's anybody in that movie who expresses, because of his character, a rather male chauvinist attitude, the women in the audience will hiss. And it's like they refuse to even acknowledge the existence. It's like they want to totally destroy the character. And they haven't reached any kind of development in their own character to understand that people who have these attitudes are as entrapped in those attitudes as women are entrapped, you know?

MR. KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm.

MR. CONNER: And they - you know, by continuing to treat it as an adversary, kind of proceeding - they kind of defeat their own purposes.

MR. KARLSTROM: Did you get some backlash, then, as a result of the -

MR. CONNER: Well, I mean, they were a number of reasons why I stopped doing collages, assemblages. I mean, there must be about a dozen of them, if I sat long enough to try to figure it out. One of them was - there were people who decided that, you know, I just loved trash or garbage. I would go to my house and there'd be a big box full of real garbage, rotten crap, right? [They laugh.]

MR. KARLSTROM: Right. Yeah.

MR. CONNER: I would get letters. I would get - people would call me up at three o'clock in the morning and start running numbers on me. All of a sudden, I had entered into their psychodrama, and I was making a lot of contact with psychotics or neurotics that I didn't want to deal with at all.

MR. GUILBAUT: Yeah, but that's interesting, because it shows you that the power of the image that you were creating was just - was powerful enough to create something that would - what kind of answer did you want from being an artist, when you tried to have a communication with somebody else, what kind of response did you expect?

MR. CONNER: Well, of course, my view of those as being theater was probably a view that nobody was really ready to accept until 15 years later.

MR. GUILBAUT: Well, even here -

MR. CONNER: I mean, now I find - you know, like five years ago, somebody finally got around to saying, "Hey, Bruce, would you like to take a room and make an environment?"

MR. KARLSTROM: Yeah, yeah.

MR. CONNER: Because a bunch of other guys -

MR. KARLSTROM: Are doing it.

MR. CONNER: - in New York had done environments. But in 1958, I wanted to do that. I couldn't get anybody to give me a space. And I was absolutely poverty stricken. I couldn't deal with it myself. But I couldn't find any sympathy for the cause. As soon as something similar would happen in New York, it would establish a -

MR. KARLSTROM: Makes it legitimate.

MR. CONNER: Well, makes it legitimate. Also, it would establish a required form where everybody would expect

you to perform within that form. Like, we were doing things here which, maybe another year later, people were doing something that they called "Happenings." Except what happened here was that we never would announce what we were doing. It was like street theater. All of a sudden -

MR. KARLSTROM: Like guerilla theater or something - or underground activity.

MR. CONNER: Yeah. A parade would happen out on the street. And you would make everybody on the street part of the performance.

MR. KARLSTROM: But you can't very well send out invitations.

MR. CONNER: No, I mean -

MR. KARLSTROM: Formalize this kind of thing.

MR. CONNER: But that's exactly what happens in New York. And I think, in a way, that is the reason why the style of that was never - never recorded or anybody paid any attention to it. I mean, nobody reported it. Somehow, certain things happen in San Francisco that don't happen in New York. And one of the things is that in New York, almost even if you don't want to, it's going to get itself fit within a package. Somebody's going to write about it, or somebody's going to deal with it.

And of course, all those people who live in New York like to feel that everything that's important revolves around *them*. So all the important art in the world does exist there.

MR. KARLSTROM: Was this the same time that *Artforum* was being published up here? It was before?

MR. CONNER: Well, I think that was about -

MR. GUILBAUT: '62. '62 was [Inaudible].

MR. KARLSTROM: In other words, these activities preceded the appearance of *Artforum* by a couple of years?

MR. GUILBAUT: Well, that's a point. At the time when we were doing these things [inaudible] in here, it was no [inaudible] at all, like in terms of art criticism or in terms of explanation or presentation.

MR. KARLSTROM: Right.

MR. CONNER: In fact, I don't think that people now would be paying much attention to California artists if *Artforum* hadn't started here.

MR. KARLSTROM: Yeah, I understand.

MR. CONNER: Because they really did report what was happening here. Otherwise, it would have totally disappeared. And even the history of back when people like Mark Rothko and such had been teaching at the San Francisco Art Institute.

MR. KARLSTROM: Right.

MR. CONNER: There are people here that don't even know that those people were ever here.

MR. KARLSTROM: That was one thing that I was going to ask you.

MR. CONNER: [Ad] Reinhardt, Reinhardt was here, no?

MR. KARLSTROM: Yeah, Reinhardt, Still. Clyfford Still, especially.

MR. CONNER: The Six Gallery - all those people that exhibited at the Six Gallery, that's where the poets read. And when I moved here, it was like the last six or seven months of the existence of the gallery, it was run by six artists. And it was never open. They'd have a big party for an opening. Everybody would get drunk and look at the stuff on the wall.

MR. KARLSTROM: Where was that located?

MR. CONNER: And - it was on Fillmore.

MR. KARLSTROM: Uh-huh.

MR. CONNER: Near Lombard, across from the East-West Gallery. And what would happen is that the opening

would happen. Everybody would have a good party, and then it would never be open because no artist wanted to sit in there for seven hours with another artist's work, right?

MR. KARLSTROM: [Laughs]

MR. CONNER: The only way you could get in was if you knew Wally Hedrick or any of the other six artists who had a key to the lock. You could go in and see the show. But in general, most of the galleries where we had to exhibit in San Francisco were run by artists.

MR. GUILBAUT: Co-operative style?

MR. CONNER: Well, co-operative, or some person who – like Dmitri Gracias [phonetic], who lived in a two-car garage. Half of the garage was the gallery and the other half was his studio-living space. You know, he was living on just very minimum kind of activity. He was not selling anything, really. But this was the kind of way that people had to show.

MR. KARLSTROM: What about Metart [Metart Gallery, San Francisco] and Musilay [phonetic]? Was that at the same time?

MR. CONNER: What?

MR. KARLSTROM: Metart?

MR. CONNER: That was before. Because [Clyfford] Still showed there.

MR. KARLSTROM: Oh, that's right. This was Jack Jefferson and Still – well, supposedly, the first Non-objective gallery in San Francisco – Nonobjective painting – but I wasn't clear how long it went.

MR. GUILBAUT: I think it was [inaudible] I don't know.

MR. CONNER: Well, [starts imitating] Lieutenant [Kenneth] Rexroth says that *he* invented Non-objective art.

MR. KARLSTROM: [Laughs] Now he's –

MR. CONNER: And of course, he's the foremost Non-objective artist ever to appear in California [ends imitating]. Has the documentation to prove it.

MR. KARLSTROM: Does he?

MR. CONNER: Lots of really bad paintings to show you. [Laughs.]

MR. KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah? Well, still.

MR. GUILBAUT: He's in Santa Barbara?

MR. KARLSTROM: Yeah. He's a poet and a writer, and he has a little gallery, a bookstore, on Union Street near where [inaudible] –

MR. CONNER: But somebody else runs the whole thing.

MR. KARLSTROM: I couldn't figure that out.

MR. CONNER: He was a book reviewer for years.

MR. KARLSTROM: Uh-huh.

MR. CONNER: So all the publishers, especially art books – you know, Scarum [phonetic] would send him a 25 dollar book to review.

MR. KARLSTROM: So he's got a great collection.

MR. CONNER: He has this huge collection. When I used to know him in the '50s, he had a five-room house with orange crates from floor to ceiling in every room and the hallways. And every – it was all these books, all these fantastic books. And so finally, he just turned them over to this bookstore, and they've been selling them.

MR. KARLSTROM: And so that's how –

MR. CONNER: That's the source of the material.

MR. KARLSTROM: I can't believe that. What a racket. What a racket.

MR. CONNER: He had thousands of books.

MR. KARLSTROM: That's what I should do, as a matter of fact.

MR. GUILBAUT: But was it like Rexroth, was it against – not against, but kind of the tension between the Beatnik group and himself or with artists? How was the connection between the Beatnik artist and poets in San Francisco at the time? I'm really interested in this period there.

MR. CONNER: Well, most of the people that I knew or knew about here were poets because I knew Michael McClure. He was a poet. And most of the people that I knew at Wichita were not artists. And all of the people that moved out here were more involved in literary things than the visual arts.

MR. KARLSTROM: Do you want some more?

MR. CONNER: I – No.

MR. KARLSTROM: What about you? That's okay.

MR. CONNER: So – but I did meet some of the artists. I remember looking in *Arts* magazine and seeing in there one page on San Francisco art. They would review shows, and they would have a little, tiny sort of stamp-size reproduction of a [Richard] Diebenkorn in black and white. I thought the Diebenkorns looked real neat, little like that and black and white. And I was terribly shocked when I found out what kind of colors he was dealing with.

And I'd read the reviews and look at all these names, Hassel Smith and Jay DeFeo. Jay DeFeo just sounded like the most exotic name for an artist that I could think of.

MR. KARLSTROM: Right.

MR. CONNER: And Jay DeFeo lived in the flat below Michael McClure next to – of course, she was married to Wally Hedrick. And next to them on the other side of 2222 Fillmore lived Joan Brown and Bill Brown. Up above them lived Craig Kauffman and James Newman.

MR. KARLSTROM: And Newman – I don't know if you're aware of this, but Newman ran the Dilexi Gallery here in San Francisco.

MR. GUILBAUT: I didn't know that.

MR. KARLSTROM: [Inaudible]

MR. CONNER: And when I moved in '57, Craig and Jim hadn't moved in yet up above there. But I moved into an apartment about a block-and-a-half from there. And in the next six months, I think they moved in up above Joan and Bill. And Wally Berman moved in a half-a-block from me.

MR. GUILBAUT: Oh, Wally Berman, too, was there at that time?

MR. CONNER: Well, Wally Berman had a show in L.A. at the old –

MR. GUILBAUT: Ferus?

MR. CONNER: Ferus Gallery – and had been arrested for showing obscene art. And he'd just decided that Los Angeles wasn't where he could deal with it. So he came up here. The beatnik scene was burgeoning in North Beach, except [Jack] Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg and most of the people that were considered to be the figureheads weren't here. They'd moved out like in the middle of 1956 and gone out to the East Coast.

MR. KARLSTROM: What about [inaudible]? He was –

MR. CONNER: So during that whole period of publicity in magazines and stuff, which was comparable to the Haight-Ashbury number, none of those people were here. And you'd go to North Beach –

MR. KARLSTROM: So it's living on a legend, really, more than anything else.

MR. CONNER: Well, it was such an exploitation on so many levels, of social groups. Apparently, it was so close – like the person who *really* invented the name "beatnik" was not "Baghdad by the Bay." Mrs. [Sonia] Gechtoff, who ran the East-West Gallery –

MR. KARLSTROM: Oh, really?

MR. CONNER: - invented that. And about four months later -

MR. KARLSTROM: Sonia Gechtoff, is that it?

MR. CONNER: Huh?

MR. KARLSTROM: Sonia?

MR. CONNER: Sonia's mother. And then - I got a real mental block against "Baghdad by the Bay," Herb Caen. About four months later, Herb Caen used the word.

MR. KARLSTROM: Oh, that guy, yeah. And he gets the credit for -

MR. CONNER: And by the time he used it, then, you'd say, you'd say, "Hey, did you notice that Herb Caen used that word that Mrs. Gechtoff has been calling people?" "Oh, yeah?"

MR. KARLSTROM: I can't stand Herb Caen but -

MR. CONNER: Yes. We love each other. [They laugh.]

So, anyway, my first show here in San Francisco, it was at Mrs. Gechtoff's gallery.

MR. KARLSTROM: Mm-hm.

MR. CONNER: And I think at one time she took issue. The way I first heard that word was, I think because of a collage that I had - was putting into the show. The show had drawings, watercolors, painting, collages, sculptures. A pretty small gallery, it was floor to ceiling. And most of the work I had produced before I came to San Francisco, and I'd shipped it out. And she - I think it was one of the collages that she said something about, "You aren't some kind of a beatnik, are you?" At that time, Sputnik was in the news.

MR. KARLSTROM: And so everything was -

MR. CONNER: And everything was with a "nik" at the ending. [They laugh.]

And I guess Kerouac had called people the "Beat Generation," and she just put a "nik" on the end of it. She died about six months later, and the gallery closed. And I had no place else to show after that. That was the time that I showed - it was the premiere showing of *A MOVIE* [1958], was at that gallery.

MR. GUILBAUT: What was the name of the gallery?

MR. CONNER: Called the East-West Gallery.

MR. KARLSTROM: And that was on Fillmore? Down by Lombard.

MR. CONNER: On Fillmore between Union and Lombard. It's now a greenhouse, selling plants.

MR. GUILBAUT: And the beatnik stuff, when they call it "beatnik," okay, was it with the idea of some kind of a spiritual importance?

MR. CONNER: Oh, "beatnik" was a put-down.

MR. GUILBAUT: Was it? Oh, yeah.

MR. CONNER: It was a put-down. Anybody who would use the name "beatnik" was exploiting it, you know. And there were people who would move out here from New York and do a bunch of beatnik readings at the coffeehouse or have a beatnik painting show.

MR. KARLSTROM: [Inaudible]

MR. CONNER: Yeah. And then they would do a lot of interviews and get written up in national magazines. They would exploit that. The same thing happened with the Haight-Ashbury. In fact, when the - when I - I'd been living in the Haight-Ashbury ever since 1958, except for the year I went to Mexico, and about two-and-a-half years I was in Massachusetts. And there was always a place where there was low rent and it was, nobody hassled you. It was a mixture of races and low economic groups.

MR. KARLSTROM: It was a great liberal neighborhood, wasn't it?

MR. CONNER: But in - you know, when I moved back here in 1965, I was - me and the five people that were in a

group called The Charlatans, a rock-and-roll group – we were the only ones that had long hair and beards and mustaches in Haight-Ashbury.

MR. KARLSTROM: You still do.

MR. CONNER: I still look the same as I did in 1965, you know?

MR. KARLSTROM: [Laughs] I wish we could all say that.

MR. CONNER: And, except that every year-and-a-half I would cut the hair short and maybe shave off the beard and then grow it back. And every time I did it, it was an entirely different scene that I was involved in.

MR. KARLSTROM: That's how you avoided getting busted, by changing your hair.

MR. GUILBAUT: [Laughs]

MR. CONNER: No, no. That's how I kept tabs on what was happening in my environment. You know, when it started out in 1965, I walked real fast anyplace in a public place because people would hit you, yell at you, create scenes. I was – you know, I'd walk down the –

MR. KARLSTROM: In the Haight? This was when you were living in the Haight.

MR. GUILBAUT: '65?

MR. CONNER: In San Francisco, anyplace in the United States.

MR. KARLSTROM: Yeah, yeah.

MR. CONNER: Including London.

MR. GUILBAUT: Oh, yeah?

MR. CONNER: You know, I was in Paris or something, and some big six-foot-three –

MR. KARLSTROM: Bouncers or –

MR. CONNER: – redneck –

MR. KARLSTROM: Redneck.

MR. CONNER: Redneck Englishman came walking down the aisle –

MR. KARLSTROM: A Welshman, a Welshman.

MR. CONNER: – as though he couldn't see me, and smashed into me as hard as he could and then walked on without any comment.

But it was hazardous to look that way. And then after a period of time it got to a place, well, you know, where people wouldn't actually physically do things to you or make a scene because there was more of me around. And then it got to a place where they wouldn't say things unless there was a whole bunch of them saying things. And then after awhile, they would just, like, look bad at you, but not say anything. And then after awhile, they wouldn't even dare do that because they were – the people with long hair and beards were getting scary.

MR. KARLSTROM: Also, they were in the majority in some areas.

MR. CONNER: And then – now it's gotten to the place where if you're – you know, if you're dealing with professionals in any kind of field in San Francisco, you find people that look pretty much the way I did in 1965. And I just feel like I'm a totally accepted member of society after all this time. [Laughs.]

MR. KARLSTROM: You're the most straight-looking guy I've seen in weeks, as a matter of fact.

MR. CONNER: Is that a fact. I'm going to get some more coffee.

MR. KARLSTROM: I'm going to get some more. Do you want some more?

[Break in tape.]

MR. CONNER: What questions do you have?

MR. GUILBAUT: Well, I was very interested by the relationship with the - at the time, with the beatnik people, and to see if you were really, you know, in relation with them, and if you were talking with them about the same kind of stuff -

MR. CONNER: Well, I think I was the only -

MR. GUILBAUT: Because your collage, what I find was very closely tied to the movement and some poetry -

MR. CONNER: Well, I did one assemblage, which was on the cover of a book by Philip Lamantia called *Destroyed Works* [San Francisco, Auerhahn Press: 1962]. And it was published by Auerhahn Press. And Philip also had a book called *Narcotica* [San Francisco, Auerhahn Press: 1959]. And I made a window display in the window of City Lights [Books] along with the book of poetry called *Narcotica*.

MR. GUILBAUT: Do you have a picture of that?

MR. CONNER: Of the collage or the window?

MR. GUILBAUT: Of the window.

MR. CONNER: No.

MR. GUILBAUT: Ah. Too bad. That's too bad.

MR. CONNER: Well, one of the things I discovered over a period of time is that if you start taking photographs of things, it changes what it is you're doing. Like when I was in the Haight-Ashbury, I never took a photograph, although I lived in the area all through that whole scene. I never took photographs of anybody or anything that was happening because people would start performing. And what was happening would disappear. Whatever the spirit was was so fragile that as soon as the camera came, either people would move out of the way, they would disguise themselves, they would perform.

And I think the same thing happens to an artist if he's that much involved in dealing with an activity that has that kind of fragility to it. Maybe that's the reason why I didn't try to keep all of that information and keep all of the documents and copies of things, because after a period of time -

MR. KARLSTROM: I'll never forgive you, but -

MR. CONNER: But I think you'll have to forgive me because I feel that I wouldn't have been able to do the work that I did if I had saved this stuff.

MR. KARLSTROM: Yeah.

MR. CONNER: Because what I find is that, once you've done something, it predisposes you if you have it around. Or you have things where you've made a statement of what you're doing, and you keep seeing that. It starts making you think that's what you are.

MR. KARLSTROM: You're locked into a direction that way.

MR. CONNER: You're locked into a concept or a way of dealing with things to the point where you deceive yourself and you don't really know - you know, you aren't aware of what's happening around you and how you're going to deal with your environment. I've always changed my way that I deal with the environment and I work with a lot of different materials, mainly because I feel that, you know, whatever way I have to deal with the environment is just one package.

MR. KARLSTROM: I'm going to ask you a loaded question because it interests me. You're obviously sensitive to your environment. You've been talking about that. Do you view your work as having a special San Francisco quality?

MR. CONNER: Now it does, because I -

MR. GUILBAUT: You've made an impact.

MR. CONNER: I've made a - [Laughs.]

MR. KARLSTROM: In other words, San Francisco art has a special Bruce Conner quality, to a certain extent.

MR. CONNER: Well, I think in general you could find a certain kind of San Francisco style of art. I don't know that it's really ever been clarified. I think in one respect you can find general relationships just by the fact that it's so

close to the Orient, and this has always been a port with contacts with Japan and China and the Oriental society that's here, and I think also the Oriental philosophies, which would attract people that were involved in the occult or with certain types of philosophies or psychic energies that did not find an outlet elsewhere.

I think in Boston, you find a similar kind of environment to San Francisco, except that it's much more involved in a -

MR. KARLSTROM: I think that's an insult to San Francisco.

MR. CONNER: No. I mean, the difference is -

MR. KARLSTROM: [Laughs]

MR. CONNER: You know, I can tell you the differences. The difference is that they - it's not a performing - they don't have performing artists.

MR. KARLSTROM: Mm-hm.

MR. CONNER: They have interpretive artists, which you interpret other people's work.

MR. KARLSTROM: Yeah.

MR. CONNER: They have good theater, they have good music.

MR. KARLSTROM: But it's not creative activity, in a sense.

MR. CONNER: But the creative activity is interpretive artists who interpret other artists' work. And I think in San Francisco, it's the real source of the creative spirit that blooms. Also, I think - I went to the zoo in Boston to record the lions during the feeding hour because when the lions are fed here at the zoo, they roar and scream and make this great performance. And I wanted to make a recording of this to go along with some tape-recordings I'd been making of Michael McClure. And I went to the Boston zoo, and they'd give them the meat, and they'd just eat.

MR. KARLSTROM: And they don't say anything. [They laugh.]

MR. CONNER: They don't say anything, you know? And that's the difference between San Francisco lions and Boston lions.

MR. KARLSTROM: [Laughs] That's great.

MR. CONNER: But the San Francisco lions roar, and the Boston lions just eat the meat. [They laugh.]

MR. KARLSTROM: The difference between wild and tame.

MR. CONNER: Yeah. Well, you know, they didn't want to deal with - it was almost like - actually, I think the environment in Boston was comparable to the kind of obscurity of the environment of San Francisco, by that very fact. The artists that I knew in Boston were mainly musicians, not writers. And they were very - almost hidden, you know. Like there'd be a concert. I performed a John Cage piece at Harvard with some other people. And a piece of mine was performed at Boston University. And I wrote an opera and gave it to George Crevoshay to take to the Once Festival. And he got three, four performers to perform it at the Once Festival, and then he lost the opera.

MR. KARLSTROM: The libretto.

MR. CONNER: The libretto. And of course, I didn't make any carbons. [They laugh.]

MR. KARLSTROM: What was it called?

MR. CONNER: I don't remember what it was called. I think it was called "Opera." [Laughs.]

MR. GUILBAUT: Was it done in what, like regular music, or only [inaudible]?

MR. CONNER: It was a conceptual sort of piece. It was two men and two women facing each other in a square, you know. And starting at the north - one would be north, south, east, west. Starting at the north, that person would read or sing the words on this page. And there would be - there were 25 pages. As he got to the end of the page, he would hand it to the person on his right. In this case, starting with the north, it would be the west.

MR. KARLSTROM: Mm-hm.

MR. CONNER: And that person would start at the top of the page, and north would continue at the top of the second page.

MR. GUILBAUT: [Inaudible]

MR. CONNER: Until all four of them were going simultaneously, which would require them to improvise and relate these words to each other. Because of the fact that they're facing each other, they would find that they would have to relate either to the person across from them or next to them.

And part of the words that were involved was in this dialogue. And it started out at one level as a kind of recitation. And then after a point, it started in where they were talking to each other. And they said, "Okay, South, what are you doing about this or that? Why do you keep repeating what I'm saying? I'm North."

MR. KARLSTROM: Mm-hm.

MR. CONNER: But then when South would receive the paper, it would be saying the same thing.

MR. KARLSTROM: And it's lost.

MR. CONNER: It's gone. It's a good story, though. [Laughs.]

MR. KARLSTROM: It's a good story. See? You really need the Archives of American Art [inaudible].

MR. CONNER: But I've always been involved in stories.

MR. KARLSTROM: Yeah.

MR. CONNER: You know, like the events or things that I've been involved in have a story form to it. I mean, I feel that every piece that I produce is not just a painting. You know, it has a whole dramatic relationship with my personal life and my environment and concepts that I'm involved in at the time so that it has to take in a lot of other elements. However, those elements aren't entirely necessary to the fact of relating to the individual piece.

MR. KARLSTROM: Yeah.

MR. CONNER: I always felt that whatever the individual piece was had multiples of levels to deal with and that if you dealt with one of those levels it's okay, and if you don't realize the others. But maybe 10 years later, you'll realize that there's another level to it.

MR. GUILBAUT: Yeah, why, for example, was like - the collage pieces were like a theater event. And why was it difficult to - why did you do only a little format? I think you answered half of the answer before, saying that it was not possible at the time to do Happenings then.

MR. CONNER: Well, I lived in a three-room apartment with my wife. And one room was the studio, one room was the kitchen, and the other one was living room/bedroom, and that was it. I just didn't have any space. I couldn't afford to buy the space. Nobody was going to buy what I did.

In fact, what happened at that time, I started a group called the Rat Bastard Protective Association, sent letters out to Joan Brown and Manuel Neri and Wally Hedrick and Jaden Bale [phonetic] and Art Grant [phonetic] and Pres Martin [phonetic] and a few other people I can't remember right now. Told them that they were members of the organization and I was the founder and president, and that they should pay their dues right away. The next meeting was next Friday at my house and that we would have meetings every three weeks at a different person's house.

And one of the purposes of this was that all of us were involved in work that we couldn't really show. Nobody would buy it. The only places we could show it was at places run by other artists. And they never sold anything. So the idea of having a fixed gallery, and you have a big party for an opening, and then the gallery is never open was - it was absurd to even have the gallery. So we just had parties.

So we'd have a party. And Manuel would fill the place with plaster and cardboard sculptures that would flake off and fall apart three weeks later. It wasn't any sense in trying to deal with any permanency because - why would you have to deal with any permanency if there was nobody who wanted to deal with it that way?

MR. KARLSTROM: Yeah.

MR. CONNER: If what we were involved in was a development of images or of concepts that were important to us and our friends -

MR. GUILBAUT: Ephemeral type of stuff.

MR. CONNER: Well, you know, our whole world was that, although, you know, we weren't rejecting anything else. We called the work "funky."

MR. KARLSTROM: Yeah. How did that term first come about?

MR. CONNER: Well, there was music. It was a movement in jazz at that time, which had, prior to this time, been – you know, been the "cool school," right?

MR. KARLSTROM: Yeah, yeah.

MR. CONNER: And there were some people who just didn't feel that was the right way to deal with it, particularly a few black people. They felt that the "cool school" was designed to put down the black musicians because the white musicians did the "cool school" real good. They got all the records going.

MR. KARLSTROM: [Inaudible]

MR. CONNER: Yeah. And so Charlie Mingus and a lot of other people were doing stuff they called this stuff "funky." And we felt, you know, this was – we liked that music. Wally Hedrick didn't play funky music, but he had a group of people that played Dixieland music. And that kind of environment of, like having a good time and drinking beer and dancing and making things that were part of a party environment where you were basically, it was like some kind of entertainment. But it wasn't just entertainment. You know, like funky music and blues sounds like it's – it's dance music, right?

MR. KARLSTROM: Right, yeah.

MR. CONNER: But they're really talking about heavy things, you know, heavy things.

MR. KARLSTROM: That's right. That's right.

MR. GUILBAUT: That's a point, too, like even in poetry and in collage or paintings of the time and music, it seems like it's kind of really tragic, you know, this type of stuff –

MR. KARLSTROM: Oh, certainly, when you think of Bessie Smith and –

MR. GUILBAUT: That's right.

[Break in tape.]

MR. CONNER: But he doesn't have a telephone.

MR. KARLSTROM: No.

MR. CONNER: He has a post office box. He teaches at San Jose, where I teach. And I have to drive from San Francisco to San Jose, which is about 45 miles.

MR. KARLSTROM: Yeah.

MR. CONNER: Wally lives another 25 miles up there.

MR. KARLSTROM: Oh, he's not in San Francisco?

MR. CONNER: He only teaches like one day a week.

MR. KARLSTROM: Mm-hm.

MR. CONNER: And there's absolutely no way for the school to get a hold of him. And nobody gets a hold of him. He dropped out – on his own level.

MR. KARLSTROM: Uh-huh. Do you think sometime you might be able to get him interested in –

MR. CONNER: I don't know.

MR. GUILBAUT: What is he doing now? Is he doing paint or –

MR. CONNER: I don't know. He, in protest – well, he quit art, in protest of the Vietnamese War, like long before anybody started making parades through University of California streets.

MR. KARLSTROM: Yeah, yeah.

MR. CONNER: He decided that his way of dealing with that was to not consume anything anymore and not to add anything to the economy. And he started doing black, totally black paintings. And he took all the tin cans of all the beer cans he drank, and he smashed them flat. And then he would weld them together, and they would be the sculptures. But he would put them out in the yard so that it would rain on them and they would rust and disintegrate.

MR. KARLSTROM: Hm.

MR. CONNER: And now he lives out in the country. He has his own septic tank. He recycles all the trash, and he's just a -

MR. KARLSTROM: So he's up in Miranda [phonetic] somewhere, I guess?

MR. CONNER: Yeah. He's quit the business. But, you know, he tried to buy a house. He's buying a house. And that's the main reason he's in San Jose, but - he had to pay off the mortgage.

MR. KARLSTROM: Yeah.

MR. CONNER: But now he only teaches one day a week, and he's the only person that they've made that concession to.

MR. GUILBAUT: This was not an issue in the '50s and '60s about the - with the art market, for example, when you were doing the -

MR. CONNER: The art "biz-niz" -

MR. GUILBAUT: [Laughs]

MR. CONNER: The art "biz-niz" was working continually along the same lines established by the Rockefellers [Abby Aldrich Rockefeller and John D. Rockefeller Jr.] in the Museum of Modern Art, which was, first of all, to establish that their conflicts and schools of art, which will take care of all the activities of artists - but one of the schools of art that isn't represented is social realism. The Museum of Modern Art was established like 1931 or whatever.

And those people who are not represented or who are represented with probably the most innocuous work they've ever produced out of that period, that were involved in social realism, like Diego Rivera, Siqueiros [José David Alfaro Siqueiros], and Orozco [José Clemente Orozco] in Mexico; in the United States, Groper [William Victor "Bill" Gropper], Jack Levine, and the rest of them were not represented by the museum. I felt it was - and it still continues as being a control of communications in our society.

Right now, the two most powerful people there are Rockefeller and Paley [William Samuel Paley]. Paley is president of CBS, news, radio, and TV. Also, he's in the position of controlling the information that comes out of The Museum of Modern Art because he's on the board of trustees with Rockefeller.

A couple of years ago there was a poster that was going to be produced through the Museum, which was an anti-Vietnam poster with a photograph of the My Lai disaster. And there were only two phrases. A question: "And babies, too"? Answer: "And babies, too." And Paley cut it off from Museum support. It was all ready to go out.

Now, how did we get to that?

MR. KARLSTROM: Oh, we were just talking about [inaudible].

MR. CONNER: Oh, there wasn't any social activity. It was like, all of these people, in order to deal with what they were doing with their art, took it into the galleries. I mean, there was no economic base at all for anybody who would take anything in their social environment seriously, other than the aesthetics and the personal -

MR. GUILBAUT: But you were aware - At the time, you were aware that, for instance, like with the Abstract Expressionists, it was the same problem. They were not selling those objects at the beginning, but after that, they started to sell. So they started to be included in the general economy and in the general gallery stuff.

MR. CONNER: Well, what I'm saying is that the garden they're growing in is made up of those plants. You know, The Museum of Modern Art and the philosophy involved there and the whole philosophy of their relationship to European arts that do not reflect any dynamic social criticism of this society - those were the arts that were always talked about, that is all you found in magazines. And the fact that it existed was that nobody even, more or less, took it seriously, that anybody could take a social stance. There were those people that did it, and there

were – occasionally, you'd read something about Jack Levine or William Gardner [phonetic] or something. I doubt if any of them sold much of their work.

MR. KARLSTROM: What about [Ed] Keinholz in terms of an artist taking, certainly at least superficially, a very strong social position, social commentary?

MR. CONNER: He's a hypocrite.

MR. KARLSTROM: A hypocrite?

MR. CONNER: He's a Cotton Mather. He gave sermons about the sins of other people. But he perpetrates the same sins himself.

MR. KARLSTROM: But that doesn't invalidate this content in his work, this social commentary – personal vantage points –

MR. CONNER: You have to realize that he's making political cartoons. And anybody who does sloganeering and political cartoons is there to exploit the situation, not to correct it.

MR. GUILBAUT: So the difference is between, for example, what you try – what you want to do is, you keep it on a personal level and not Kienholz, for example? That big –

MR. CONNER: Well, Kienholz is very personal, he gets very personal with Eisenhower and art critics and everybody else. But he's always battling them. But, you know, in his own personal life he's involved in things like cheating people out of – you know, on a sale. He's like a used car dealer. He sells people a bad car and gets a lot of money out of it. Or he makes deals – you know, he trades somebody for something, and they get something that isn't worth too much. I mean, that's his whole kick. It's also part of his art style, was to sell something to somebody and con them out of the money.

And of all the activity that he's considering – that might be considered social comment, he's really talking about other people that do the same kind of con games. And he's not –

MR. KARLSTROM: [Inaudible] And he's in a position to know, though, right?

MR. CONNER: Yeah, he's in a position to know.

MR. KARLSTROM: Okay.

MR. CONNER: But he's jealous that he's not in the game. Like, if *he* was president instead of Eisenhower, he'd be the most dictatorial and worst person that you could possibly relate to.

MR. KARLSTROM: I don't think it's a danger that we have to deal with. [Laughs.]

MR. CONNER: No. [Laughs.]

MR. KARLSTROM: I see what you're saying, though. And I've heard some of the same from people in L.A.

MR. CONNER: But, you know, I think that, you know, there should be a differentiation. It shouldn't be called social comment.

MR. KARLSTROM: No. Well, I was using that term, you know, very loosely.

MR. CONNER: Well, I made a lot of assumptions about the way that people act and the situation that we were involved in here in the '60s. And I did pieces that related to that. And I think I was terribly surprised to find out that, either people didn't see that happening around them, or they, with great ingenuity, denied that it existed, or reversed it and turned it back on me.

MR. KARLSTROM: Mm-hm.

MR. CONNER: Like, whereas I had a sculpture that was at the de Young Museum called *A Child* [1959], which started out as a protest to the death of Caryl Chessman. Actually, he wasn't dead at that time. But he was in San Quentin, and they were going to put him in a gas chamber.

MR. KARLSTROM: I remember.

MR. CONNER: And my feeling about Chessman was – you know what they were killing him for?

MR. GUILBAUT: Well, yeah. He was a – he attacked a [inaudible] – no, he raped – a little child.

MR. KARLSTROM: No, that's Mulholland Drive is actually technically what he was [inaudible] .

MR. CONNER: The actual crime is a "crime against nature." He forced a woman to give him a blow job. And they killed him in the gas chamber for this - the death penalty, right? But he had been arrested and been in jail about three or four times before. He'd written about all of that.

MR. KARLSTROM: On rape charges or?

MR. CONNER: No, not rape charges.

MR. GUILBAUT: [Inaudible]

MR. CONNER: You know, but he was being sacrificed by the system. And my view of him was that he was entirely a child of our society. And it was because the parents were upset by the fact that they had failed so miserably in their bringing up of this child that they were going to destroy it.

MR. KARLSTROM: What about Charles Manson? I mean, I don't mean to interrupt.

MR. CONNER: The sculpture, the vision of the sculpture was, I had this baby chair, which Sonia Gechtoff had given me.

MR. KARLSTROM: Mm-hm.

MR. CONNER: And I had started doing some sculptures in wax. And John Pearson [phonetic] was doing casting sculptures. And I would do the sculptures, and he would pour the metal in. And everything would meld into a big lump. So after about three of those turning into big lumps, I just decided, well, the next one, I'm just going to work with the wax and I'm not going to cast it.

So I started working on the idea of this child in a high chair, strapped down inside of a green box with a glass window, like the gas chamber at San Quentin. And it was going to be a memorial or an homage to Chessman. Although he hadn't been killed, I knew that was going to be happening.

MR. KARLSTROM: It took a long time.

MR. CONNER: As I went through it, I just didn't feel that it should be that particular, that the sculpture meant more than just that particular event. It meant that concept of the relationship with the child to the parent to the -

MR. KARLSTROM: Being society.

MR. CONNER: - being society. And I called it *The Child*. And I went off to New York for my first one-man show at the Alan Gallery in 1960. And there were all these long-distance phone calls from newspapers and stuff. And at that time, there were three or four newspapers in San Francisco. And it was in every one of the papers. Sometimes, it was on the front page.

MR. KARLSTROM: Rained a lot of shit down on your head?

MR. CONNER: Oh, they said, you know, "It's not murder, it's art." And he must hate children.

MR. GUILBAUT: Oh, yeah.

MR. CONNER: And this whole idea of projecting me into this - and I thought it was in a rather innocuous piece.

MR. KARLSTROM: Did [Alfred] Frankenstein [art critic at the *San Francisco Chronicle*] review it, by the way, do you recall?

MR. CONNER: He did an interview with me on the phone.

MR. KARLSTROM: Was he sympathetic?

MR. CONNER: He sure listened. [Laughs.]

MR. GUILBAUT: Did he interview you on the phone?

MR. CONNER: Huh?

MR. GUILBAUT: Did he interview you on the phone?

MR. KARLSTROM: Frankenstein doesn't have time to do anything else.

MR. GUILBAUT: You don't see the person with which -

MR. CONNER: Well, he has to write a review every day, and see all the shows in all the museums and galleries as well as write books. And, well, he's a very busy person.

MR. KARLSTROM: He sure is. I can't even get in touch with him.

MR. GUILBAUT: I want to ask two or three things. One thing more than the others.

MR. KARLSTROM: I've got to leave very shortly. I'm going to go get some cigarettes. And then if you want to, you know, continue this back at the -

MR. CONNER: Well, I've got to -

MR. KARLSTROM: You've got to -

MR. CONNER: I've got to go myself. So let's just get one or two questions.

MR. GUILBAUT: Yeah. That's too bad but that's okay. [Laughs.] It's about the - like when you were talking about Zen and stuff, the kind of Oriental influence on San Francisco.

MR. CONNER: Yeah.

MR. GUILBAUT: Do you think that the book by Alan Watts - it was a little pamphlet, about Square Zen, Beat Zen, and Zen philosophy [*Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen*. San Francisco, City Light Books: 1959]. Was that of influence in the art group here, or whether [inaudible]?

MR. CONNER: Alan Watts had a radio program every week on KPFA radio in Berkeley. Every week he would talk for half an hour or an hour about Zen. And that station specialized in political and social programming, concerts, poetry readings, and the arts, and other events that could not be reported on any other radio station. And I'm sure that thousands of people in the arts heard him and listened to what he was talking about. So I'm sure that he had a lot of influence on all of the varieties of arts here.

MR. GUILBAUT: That's good. [Inaudible.] You don't find that, those type of indications, you don't find that anywhere, that's really good. Yeah.

MR. CONNER: Yeah. Got another question? [They laugh.]

MR. GUILBAUT: Well, after that, it was more about your technique, the technique of your work, about the kind of line and stuff. I was interested in that, this kind of web, or kind of - spider, you call that spider type of environment?

MR. CONNER: Yeah.

MR. KARLSTROM: Spider web or web?

MR. GUILBAUT: Spider web, yeah.

MR. CONNER: Yeah.

MR. GUILBAUT: And how - you know, why did you - I think you are the only one to use this, the medium of this nylon type of stuff.

MR. CONNER: Well, it became a trademark. But it became a trademark that I didn't really want to assume, because people started thinking that was the way I did my work. Of course, what happened after those first pieces was that more and more people started getting involved in doing assemblages, especially after the assemblage art show happened at The Museum of Modern Art. Prior to that time, it was a totally subterranean activity. It just didn't exist in the art market or in the art museums, or anybody really writing about what was happening - in fact, the only kind of comment you would get would be like, "Well, Kurt Schwitters did it, and he did it better."

MR. KARLSTROM: Mm-hm.

MR. CONNER: And I'll make, use Kurt Schwitters to beat the artist to death. [Laughs.]

MR. KARLSTROM: Yeah.

MR. CONNER: But one of the things that changed the way my attitude towards the assemblages was that, as time went on, more and more people patented certain materials. You know, when Andy Warhol did soup can paintings, you couldn't put a soup can in your collage. You know, somebody specialized in doing nothing but light switches. Or if you put a cartoon in the collage, they would turn off – it would be a barrier to any kind of communication. Instead of somebody seeing the image that was there in a relationship, they'd start disassembling and breaking it up by saying, "Oh, [Roy] Lichtenstein."

MR. KARLSTROM: Mm-hm.

MR. CONNER: And this is a common battle that the artist has to get involved in all the time.

MR. KARLSTROM: Right.

MR. GUILBAUT: Yeah.

MR. CONNER: It's like somebody imposing a philosophy, even a philosophy of his own – based on his own work, because I've had people – you know, like I find with all the drawings and paintings that I do now, that most of the people that relate to my work are relating to stuff that I did 15 years ago. And they don't want to buy what I'm doing now. They don't even want to show it. And they don't want to consider it seriously; they don't take it seriously. They consider it something they don't understand, particularly. They're not prepared for it. Nobody's really written about it.

But on the nylon stocking thing, I imagine at one level I'd gotten involved with spiders because I always loved spider webs and the intricacy of their designs. It's like, when it would rain, drops would sit on it. And the spider I thought of as being an extreme – kind of a hero. I used to do paintings of spiders and watercolors and drawings of spiders years before I did those collages.

When I was in grade school, I remember we – in our history class or whatever, there was this story about King Robert Bruce of Scotland, who was being chased by the bad guys. And they were going to take over his kingdom. And the way he survived was that he jumped into a cave. And while he was in there – there were two stories. One is that, while he was there, a spider covered the front of the cave with a spider web so that when the soldiers came by, they saw this small hole with a spider web over the front and said, well, nobody could be inside of there.

MR. KARLSTROM: Mm-hm. That's great.

MR. CONNER: And then the other one was that, by his own view of the determination of the spider trying again and again to bridge the gulf of the cave, of the two walls, and to build his web enabled him to have the emotional resource to go on and battle the forces against him.

My grandfather, Albert Mapston [phonetic], who was married to a Bruce, used to tell me that we were descended from King Robert Bruce. And I'm a memorial, as a grandchild, to my great-grandparents. My first name is my mother's mother's maiden name; my second name is my father's mother's maiden name.

Well, I guess – when I started using those materials, I think the first piece that I did – I was doing paintings, and I was – I just got really at the end of the painting. And I had a small canvas of about 12 by 12 inches, with a lot of thick paint on it. And I just got totally disgusted with it, and I slashed it. I cut about three almost horizontal slashes in it.

And I took some chain from a bathtub stopper and wrapped it around and tied it up. And I felt like I was attacking a creature.

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MR. CONNER: – and I felt like I was attacking a creature in itself. And on the back of the stretcher, I put a picture that I cut out of a magazine of a photograph of a man who had been assassinated. And there were all these people standing around looking at the body, which had been sort of ripped open. And on – I put – I stretched over the front of this a nylon stocking, over the whole area, and tacked a piece of cord or whatever, for a handle, like you could carry it around.

MR. GUILBAUT: Yes, yeah.

MR. CONNER: Because it was like – it was this object that was almost like a – it was like a purse or a package that you could carry. And you could relate to it. Rather than something that you would hang on the wall, you could carry it with you wherever you wanted to and set it up in any place.

And at that time, I was talking to Michael McClure about publishing a magazine. We talked about calling it *Rat*

Bastard. Michael was always talking about such things, but always in a humorous way, privately. But he never would ever publish them. He was very self-conscious about his stance as a published poet, and it's only been in the last four or five years that he's managed to break out of that and let all of that kind of funky rat-bastard-ism come out in his plays. But his plays are like my collages.

MR. KARLSTROM: That's interesting. [Inaudible.]

MR. CONNER: There's one called *Spider Rabbit* about this rabbit with arms like a spider that has his suitcase full of things like – gets his web that he puts up.

MR. KARLSTROM: No, not the tape. You're talking about the suitcase, like that briefcase that you carry around.

MR. GUILBAUT: Oh. [Laughs.]

MR. CONNER: Yeah. He has all of these things. And the characters of that play – it's more or less patterned after those things that I would make and the kind of dialogues that were coming through there.

Then Michael also did another play called the – oh, *Super Conner and Spout Burglar* [phonetic]. And then there's a whole bunch of other things that are – you know. And the people who are performing the plays are doing costumes and sets a lot of the time which are similar to the kind of things that we were doing back in 1959. I don't know if some of them really realize what they're doing. But it's all from there.

MR. KARLSTROM: There really was a relationship.

MR. CONNER: Yeah. It all existed and keeps going on. But the nylon stocking after that point, became a lot of different things. It was possible to put veils at different levels, move things to different levels, make space, make them into sculpture, cover them over things.

MR. GUILBAUT: Let's open the window, yeah.

MR. CONNER: Use them as things to set things on, to make them as windows, to make them as things that disguise things, that hold packages, simulating –

MR. GUILBAUT: Why very often the relationship with the erotic pictures or pornographic pictures? With the stockings, was it really to create the atmosphere?

MR. CONNER: Well, we'd have to think about particular pieces. I mean –

MR. GUILBAUT: What about, for instance, your relationship with Hollywood mythology? Because I remember one sculpture is for Jean Harlow?

MR. KARLSTROM: Jean Harlow.

MR. GUILBAUT: Jean Harlow. Certainly, it's really weird because you have this kind of leg, kind of robe, and it's really long. And I really think that's really great. But what is the relationship with your idea of mythology, Hollywood mythology and stuff like that?

MR. CONNER: Well, I was treating it as mythology, which nobody else was at that time, except possibly somebody might write an essay on some obscure magazine or draw some kind of Freudian relationships. But –

MR. GUILBAUT: Yeah. What is the relationship –

MR. CONNER: But I was purposely using these figures as performers on a variety of different levels. Sometimes, they were being treated as a mythology that I observed in the movies. And since I'd gotten involved in films, I was very involved in watching movies. Like, you know, I have a whole philosophy, a period of filmmaking, as to the relationship of monsters and creatures in the films, and their relationship to young ladies that are always being attacked.

MR. KARLSTROM: Mm-hm. That's right. King Kong and Fay Wray.

MR. CONNER: You know, in order to deal with the fact that the films could not present sexually explicit material, the sex aspect of it was stylized into a drama where the animal nature was symbolized by a monster.

MR. KARLSTROM: Mm-hm.

MR. CONNER: And he was always after this beautiful young lady who would scream hysterically, but always would, inevitably, put herself in a position where she's always have to confront this monster. I mean, all the –

you know the monster walks down the road, but for some reason, she decides to go out and walk on the road.

MR. KARLSTROM: At the same time, yes.

MR. CONNER: And this kind of naivete, this kind of – I figured – I thought it was a folk art kind of thing, although some of the people, I'm sure, were very clear about it.

MR. KARLSTROM: It's a working out of erotic fantasies, I think, very, very much so.

MR. CONNER: Yeah. Like *Creature from the Black Lagoon*.

MR. KARLSTROM: Yeah.

MR. CONNER: The only time he comes up – they dump some poison in the water, and he becomes erotically aroused because he doesn't do anything except chase this chick, every time they put this stuff in the water. [Laughs] They don't say that's what's happening. But he's crazy about her, you know? The same thing with King Kong.

MR. KARLSTROM: Yeah, right, when he's peeling off the clothes, it's one of the great erotic scenes in –

MR. CONNER: But then there's also a whole series of relationships with monsters, which have changed over the time. And I think one of the things that happened, and one of the things that I would use as part of that, was that the monsters, up until 1950, were very human. They were like children. Frankenstein, King Kong, and the rest of them. In the '40s, they started getting dehumanized, until finally, Frankenstein and the Wolf Man meet Abbott and Costello [*Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein*, 1948]. Or they had the *House of Frankenstein* [1944], and you get a hodgepodge of seven different monsters in the same movie.

MR. KARLSTROM: Mm-hm.

MR. CONNER: And then it just really disappeared. Then it returned as science fiction. And at that time, the threat, it was used – the creatures were mindless creatures, a product of a deformed society and an inept, manipulative kind of army that couldn't cope with anything, and scientists that invented very bad things.

MR. KARLSTROM: Right, right.

MR. CONNER: And they became almost like – it was almost like a character of the period, also, that you couldn't have any sympathy for these creatures anymore. They were destroyed in the worst kind of way. Like these creatures were burned. They had arrows stuck in their eyes and all sorts of things. And they would howl incoherently. It was like all of a sudden, they had no human character at all.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, they became more fantastic, too. This was [inaudible].

MR. CONNER: But my feeling also is that the ongoing tradition was that it was still the same creature. And in the development of our social relationship towards children and towards the values which might be called humanistic that express themselves in the '30s in the movies then, was that they were being rejected. Like people really started believing there wasn't no god.

MR. KARLSTROM: Mm-hm.

MR. GUILBAUT: Mm-hm.

MR. CONNER: They stopped going to church, and they stopped believing that the army and the scientists were good guys. The army was always bungling, really, because they never could cope. They always had the most simplistic solutions. The scientists were always inventing something really bad that got out of hand.

MR. KARLSTROM: Always out of hand.

MR. CONNER: And you couldn't take any of it with any seriousness. And in fact, you were being disassociated – like being alienated from it.

MR. KARLSTROM: Everything is out of control.

MR. CONNER: Which I think, in a way – I mean, that's my generation. I came out of the Eisenhower – I came out of the silent generation. I was in between, a place where nobody danced. You know, jitterbug had been before, and rock-and-roll was later. And we are – you know, we are the enemy. Everybody I went to school with – man, when I run into them – you know. [Laughs.]

MR. KARLSTROM: I know.

MR. CONNER: It was me and about seven other people in Wichita, Kansas, that I could communicate with. And every one of those other people was like an enemy. And they still are. You know, I run into them. They're the ones that –

MR. KARLSTROM: That don't –

MR. CONNER: Yeah. They're the ones that punched me out on the street in 1965. [Laughs.]

MR. KARLSTROM: That's right. How many of your high school friends –

MR. CONNER: John Dean. John Dean. I'll bet he's the same age as I am. [They laugh]

And I did a thing. I took the *Time* cover with Richard Brautigan, and I drew the hair in and the mustache and the beard. And we look exactly the same. With the glasses.

MR. KARLSTROM: We better split.

MR. GUILBAUT: I have one more. It's about the political. Were you politically involved with all these friends in San Francisco at the time?

MR. CONNER: Politicking?

MR. GUILBAUT: Yeah.

MR. CONNER: No. There weren't any politics.

MR. GUILBAUT: [Laughs]

MR. KARLSTROM: That's an easy answer.

MR. CONNER: It's still right. Well, the politics didn't exist. When I did that sculpture of the child [*A Child*, 1959], a few minutes later, there was – the Un-American Activities Committee came to San Francisco, and I'd heard they were coming.

MR. KARLSTROM: Was that '63?

MR. CONNER: '60 or '61.

MR. KARLSTROM: Okay.

MR. CONNER: And my feeling about them was that they were such a bunch of fools that nobody would ever take them seriously when they came out here. They were on the way out, right?

MR. KARLSTROM: Yeah.

MR. CONNER: But I was totally wrong. All of a sudden, there were all these thousands of people in the city hall chanting and yelling and doing crap. And by the very fact that they took it seriously and protested it, it made the Un-American Activities Committee have a brand-new life.

MR. KARLSTROM: Aha.

MR. CONNER: And they created this theater at city hall that –

MR. KARLSTROM: So the protesters were responsible for a revival, you think?

MR. CONNER: Yeah. Well, instead of going in the committee and saying, "I refuse to answer this question because of the Fifth Amendment" – instead of that – they said – "You know, you're just a bunch of assholes. You know, what the shit? Sure. I belong to this group. What else do you want to know, you dumb shit?"

MR. KARLSTROM: [Laughs]

MR. GUILBAUT: [Laughs]

MR. CONNER: Instead of doing something like that, they go through this whole thing, you know, becoming martyrs and such. Well, what happened –

[Break in tape.]

MR. CONNER: [Inaudible] – because, you know, they just started beating all these kids from high school and stuff, down the stairs, turning the fire hoses on them – the police did. They claimed that somebody had attacked the police when it never happened. And it was like just the most outrageous kind of use of police brutality to demonstrate their power and to do a public display, without any repercussions, it was like the same thing that happened in Chicago, right?

MR. KARLSTROM: They were in Century Plaza when Johnson –

MR. GUILBAUT: Yeah.

MR. CONNER: But this was like a purposeful kind of public display.

MR. KARLSTROM: Mm-hm.

MR. CONNER: You know? Like establishing their authority as an independent group to enforce their views on the society, by pure police brutality. So I wasn't going to go down there and picket. They had thousands of people out there with signs running around. So I went down there the next day with *The Child* on my shoulders, on the high chair, and a sign on there, said, "Stop Police Brutality." And I went there with two friends of mine. I made up some posters for them that said pretty much the same thing.

And I got in the picket line. I went around once. And this guy with an Ivy League suit and a black armband came over and he said, "I'm a monitor for the picket line. And we're trying to run an orderly picket line. We'd like you to talk to the leader of the group because we don't like your sign."

MR. GUILBAUT: [Laughs]

MR. CONNER: And I went to the group, this place, talked to these guys. And they said, "You know, we're here to protest the Un-American Activities Committee. And we don't want to disturb the police."

And I said, "Well, you know, I don't give a damn about the committee, and I don't give a damn about your attitude towards them. I think they're a bunch of clowns, and I think anybody that takes them seriously is a bunch of clowns. And I think the real event that's happened is that these police have demonstrated their political capacity to brutalize anybody that they want to. And I think that somebody ought to say something about it."

And they said, "Well, I don't" – you know, they gave me a lot of talk. And I finally said, "Well, let me alone for about 20 minutes and let me think about it." That was just to stall them. Finally, 20 minutes later, the same guy with the Ivy League suit and the short hair and the little armband and stuff comes by and he says, "Well, have you changed your mind?" I said, "No, I'm going to stay in the picket line. I think I have the right, just as what your right is here, to do this." And he said, "Well, it's pretty damn lucky for you that we're nonviolent here; otherwise, we'd shove you right off the sidewalk."

MR. KARLSTROM: [Laughs]

MR. GUILBAUT: [Laughs]

MR. CONNER: So, you know, like my political activity was – didn't fit into the norm of the political activity here that was taking place. The political activity that was taking place was the confrontation of two groups, like Ed Kienholz confronting his enemy. But if he or they were able to take over the system, they would probably be even worse than the people they were battling, because they're weren't battling for basic principles or humanistic values that would apply to all people. They were being very selective and private about it.

And then when they had – there was the big Vietnamese parade at UC, I think, about '65. And Allen Ginsberg was involved in it. And I was listening to the radio. And here were all these people protesting the war and marching down the middle of the street, right? Militantly marching down the middle of the street, confronting the police at the border.

And the next day, I talked to Allen Ginsberg, who had been involved in it. I said, "Allen, you should have just" – you know – "If the idea was to get over to the army depot, you don't have to walk down the middle of the street. You just go around the police and walk on the sidewalks. And then you don't go up there and shake your fist and yell at them. You give them flowers. And if you're going to have a parade or a march, why not have a parade with displays and comic costumes and all sorts of other stuff?"

And one of my purposes in telling him this was that, although I could say that and I could think that, I didn't have access to any kind of media to get that information out. But Allen did. And a week-and-a-half later in an interview, he started talking about how people ought to deal with this kind of situation.

MR. KARLSTROM: I hope he gave you a footnote.

MR. CONNER: I gave *you* a footnote.

[Break in tape.]

MR. KARLSTROM: No. I'm going to record this.

MR. GUILBAUT: Yeah. But I have one – I don't know if you want [Inaudible].

MR. KARLSTROM: I've got to go up to work.

MR. CONNER: Okay. All right.

MR. KARLSTROM: We'll be in touch. Okay?

MR. CONNER: Bye.

MR. GUILBAUT: I come back right now, maybe, okay?

MR. CONNER: See you.

MR. GUILBAUT: One more, if you're not tired of talking about all that. It's about the relationship with Wallace Berman.

MR. CONNER: It wasn't too much relationship with Wallace Berman.

MR. GUILBAUT: No?

MR. CONNER: What do you mean?

MR. GUILBAUT: [Laughs]

MR. CONNER: I mean, he lived a half-a-block from me. I'd see him and all.

MR. GUILBAUT: Yeah, but you know you know his work and what he was doing with *Semina* and all this kind of publications and collage.

MR. CONNER: He had the publications. I didn't see much collages because I guess whatever he had, he had had in that show at the Ferus Gallery. And it was either left down there or confiscated by the police. He only had a couple of things here, and I didn't think they were any different from what I was doing.

MR. GUILBAUT: Yeah. Did you –

MR. CONNER: But at one time – what I found was that John Coplans at one time was bugging me, trying to get all kinds of information from me, when I didn't want to talk to anybody about what I was doing or whatever. And he was asking me, who are the important artists, and stuff. And I told him that Wallace , Wally Berman, had a lot to do with what was happening in San Francisco and my work.

And the main reason I gave him that information was that I knew that Wally wouldn't tell him anything.

MR. GUILBAUT: [Laughs]

MR. CONNER: And that there was virtually no actual traceable relationship. Wally was the center of a *social* group of people that were from Los Angeles and artists and poets here in San Francisco. And he published a book, you know, that magazine. And other people around him were working with paintings, drawings, or whatever.

But Wally was sort of like just kind of an invisible person, people would meet at his house. And it was, I think – probably I couldn't tell what the hell was going on because most of them were involved in drugs.

MR. GUILBAUT: Yeah, that –

MR. CONNER: And that they were –

MR. GUILBAUT: Was it really important for the result or the product, you know, with the art – the drug business, the drug stuff? Because like Kauffman, Craig Kauffman told me also that in San Francisco the drugs was really important and that everybody was into drugs and stuff like that. So do you think that it changed all the way to

look at things or to be detached from political problems or stuff like that?

MR. CONNER: That's another three hours to answer. I can't deal with that one.

MR. GUILBAUT: [Laughs] But the drugs and the drug stuff already in the '50s was a big problem.

MR. CONNER: The Beat Generation wasn't into drugs except maybe some grass. Most of them were alcoholics, became alcoholics. Some of them were involved in speed or heroin. I mean, that's what Allen's writing about, you know, "the best minds of my generation."

MR. GUILBAUT: Sure. I thought -

MR. CONNER: But they weren't involved in psychedelics.

MR. GUILBAUT: Yeah. Okay.

MR. CONNER: And my involvement is basically in psychedelics.

MR. GUILBAUT: That's the difference, do you think - it seems to me that after my, the research I did on San Francisco and Los Angeles, it seemed that the beatnik movement didn't stop - like, for example, when you read in the newspaper, it seemed like the beatnik generation stopped after that, after ten years -

MR. CONNER: It came back as the Beatles.

MR. GUILBAUT: Yeah. But it seems to me that it was not true. I think that people were doing always the same thing and living the same type of life, but it was not known. It was not fancy [phonetic] anymore.

MR. CONNER: It's a media [inaudible].

MR. GUILBAUT: A media problem. Yeah, okay.

MR. CONNER: Like hippies. Hippies never existed until suddenly I read - you know, somebody was calling himself a hippy. The same thing happened in the Haight-Ashbury. You know, like it took six months for Herb Caen to find out what was happening, and he was the first one to write about it. And somebody would invent a name, which was "hippy," and he would put it in his column.

MR. GUILBAUT: But this is -

MR. CONNER: And then the newspapers locally would start doing exposes. And then the national media would start doing it. Pretty soon, it would become a whole business and, you know, gift shops and exploitation would build up around the whole area.

MR. GUILBAUT: Yeah, but this is kind of a characteristic trait of California, like a whole group of people were living the same type of life, and they were interested in the same type of things. And -

MR. CONNER: No, they were all different.

MR. GUILBAUT: [Laughs] No, like hippy and beatniks, I think is very close. And the entire atmosphere - you can't find that in Europe, for example. You don't find that.

MR. CONNER: We used to have meetings in the Haight-Ashbury of 30 or 40 people. It started out with one person talking. The only way the meetings would end - because all of these people represented different groups - like the diggers. I would be there representing myself or whatever. Somebody would be there from some flying saucer group. Or somebody else would be from another thing.

And the way the meetings always ended was that everybody disagreed and walked away. I mean, finally everybody - whatever anybody would say, they would always find somebody to disagree with it until it all ended. And then maybe in another couple of weeks, somebody would get the meeting together again. And they'd all meet, and then they'd all break up again.

MR. GUILBAUT: [Laughs] Okay.

MR. CONNER: You know?

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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