

## San Francisco, Ruin of the Nineteenth Century: The Assemblage Work of Bruce Conner, 1957 – 1962

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### Abstract

This essay looks at the work of the Californian artist Bruce Conner between 1957 and 1962. It provides a general historical context in which to place the work – looking for example at groups of artists, galleries and exhibitions in San Francisco in the period. It investigates Conner's use of assemblage techniques, with reference to urban renewal and draws parallels to Walter Benjamin's account of urban reform in Paris during the previous century. The nineteenth century is further referenced in close analysis of two works: *CHILD* and *BLACK DAHLIA*. Here use is made of psychoanalytical writings about the return of the dead and the femme fatale.

For many in the New York art world the exhibition *The Art of Assemblage*, curated by William Seitz at the Museum of Modern Art in 1962, came as a revelation. Galleries long dominated by large abstract paintings and clunking welded sculpture instead sparkled with the poetry of everyday objects shackled together. Although Bruce Conner had exhibited in New York before his inclusion in Seitz's show, the exhibition made him part of the kind of rich narrative tale MoMA was so fond of telling.<sup>1</sup> The story was largely one told through formal resemblance with Futurist, analytical Cubist and Surrealist pieces jostling with work by the likes of Robert Rauschenberg, Arman and Enrico Baj. In New York the recent work had been viewed under the heading neo-dada and it proved all too easy to assimilate the less familiar work from Europe and the West Coast under a similar rubric. The privileging of dada's heritage was shown in the choice of artists invited to speak at MoMA's accompanying symposium: Richard Huelsenbeck, Marcel Duchamp and Robert Rauschenberg. The exhibition was yet another example of the way in which legacies of surrealism were not only repressed in formalist accounts of modernism but also within the first phase of the neo-avant-garde, which instead chose to look to constructivist and dada precedents.<sup>2</sup> If acknowledged at all, the place of surrealism within an American avant-garde context was given to painters such as Roberto Matta, Joan Miro and Yves Tanguy as precursors to the 'triumph of American painting.'<sup>3</sup> As a movement firmly grounded in literary sources, surrealism was complete anathema to a form of Modernism that privileged the purity of the medium. For Conner's New York contemporaries the lessons from the historical avant-garde came from Marcel Duchamp's readymade rather than the surrealist *objet trouvé* – its seemingly indifferent selection suiting their turn away from the expressive and confessional attitude of the older



generation of painters. On the West Coast, however, artists like Jay de Feo, Wallace Berman, Wally Hedrik, George Herms and Bruce Conner used the example of the last great European avant-garde movement as a way of turning their eye 'on the American cities just as they began to become old.'<sup>4</sup>

In North Beach San Francisco during the 1950s a small group of artists and poets embraced the literature of the romantic era, published their own periodical and explored the connections between creativity and the unconscious. The lack of any significant support structure for the visual aspect of such work in the form of museums, collectors or galleries meant that the achievement of these artists has been largely neglected since the 1950s. Recently, however, contemporary Californian practitioners such as Mike Kelley, Jim Shaw and Paul McCarthy have championed the San Francisco artists, while the last decade has seen an increasing interest in their form of visual poetry. The survey *2000 B.C.: The Bruce Conner Story: Part II* at the Walker Art Centre in Minneapolis brought his work to a wider audience, yet largely ignored its debts to earlier artistic movements.<sup>5</sup> In 1949, at East High, Wichita, Conner met Lee Streiff and Michael McClure. This pair of writers had, since meeting at Robinson Junior High, accumulated a group of friends interested in literature of the romantic period, surrealism, science fiction, geology and modern music. This small group, many of whom would move to San Francisco, later became known as the Wichita beats, immortalised in McClure's 1970 novel *The Mad Cub* and Allan Ginsberg's 1966 poem *The Wichita Vortex Sutra*. Isolated from the galleries of the big cities, Conner and his friends were hungry readers of anything they could get their hands on that told them about the avant-garde activities in New York and Europe. Conner remembers reading Robert Motherwell's *The Dada Painters and Poets* as soon as it came out in 1952 and learning about Duchamp through Winthrop Sergeant's *Life* magazine article, 'Dada's Daddy,' the same year.<sup>6</sup> Paradoxically, it seems Conner's isolated situation actually provided the impetus for a much clearer understanding of his avant-garde forbears than that of his metropolitan contemporaries. Edward Kienholz, who grew up in Los Angeles, has commented that he had never heard of Kurt Schwitters until his Pasadena museum retrospective in 1962.<sup>7</sup> Amongst the works avidly consumed by this group were the writings of several the nineteenth-century authors whose vision of the city had greatly influenced the Parisian avant-garde of the inter-war years –



Edgar Allen Poe, Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud. In his second year of college at the University of Wichita in 1952 Conner took part in an unauthorized exhibition, in the hallway of the art department, of student work inspired by dada.<sup>8</sup> In 1952 Conner went to study at the University of Nebraska – still staying in contact with his friends from high school and returning to Wichita in the holidays. In 1956, on graduation, Conner went east to New York, where he attended art classes and viewed the works that he had previously only seen in books and magazines.<sup>9</sup> Having found representation with the Charles Alan Gallery in New York, Conner moved on again to Boulder, Colorado. At the University of Colorado he met the film makers Larry Jordan and Stan Brakhage, both of whom had strong connections to the artistic community of San Francisco. The works he created in Colorado – scraped back white oil works on battered masonite – only hinted at the objects he would feel free to make when he arrived in San Francisco the following year.

Michael McClure moved from Wichita to San Francisco in 1953 and often wrote to Conner. McClure told him about the growing community of poets and artists that had settled around North Beach and encouraged Conner to join them. Having moved to San Francisco, McClure had initially been disappointed by the city, finding it in many ways as provincial, paranoid and intolerant as the Wichita he was fleeing. In North Beach, however, he found a cosmopolitan haven just right for his artistic temperament. San Francisco's relatively relaxed atmosphere in the cold war years was put down to its mixture of settlers. Founded by pioneers in 1776 and developed by prospectors following the discovery of gold at Coloma in 1848. It was a major west coast port throughout the nineteenth century, with sea links to the Asian continent. McClure persuaded Conner to move to the Fillmore district of San Francisco with tales of intellectuals and anarchists and whispers about peyote, perpetuating a myth that has lingered long in the American imagination – a myth that Conner would successfully mine.<sup>10</sup>

When William Seitz travelled to San Francisco in 1962 in order to find artists for his forthcoming exhibition, it was Conner who showed him around. The kind of things he showed Seitz reveal some of his sources of inspiration:



I showed him the second hand store on McAllister Street run by a black man, who was a major inspiration to me. He called himself a minister, who had these objects ostensibly for sale in a little storefront, but he asked prohibitive prices. He would make these little environments of like an ice cream soda glass with a doctor's mirror, with a doll's head on top with its eye missing and a feather in its place.<sup>11</sup>

Conner, however, wasn't showing Seitz these things to give him background: he was actively trying to get him to show them in the MoMA exhibition, a show of serious 'artists.'<sup>12</sup> This reveals Conner's attitude towards what could be described as 'folk art,' an attitude that raises it to the status of high art whilst at the same time lowers Conner's own work to the level of a storefront trinket.

This attitude is one that was shared by artists like Wally Hedrick, George Herms and Wallace Berman, also active at this time in San Francisco. This shared aesthetic is firmly connected to the contemporary state of the art market. There were very few commercial galleries in San Francisco; The Dilexi and 6 galleries, both opened in the late 1950s, were exceptions.<sup>13</sup> The collectors in San Francisco meanwhile were travelling Europe picking off Impressionist works or buying relatively safe modern works from New York (the collector Sally Lilienthal for example was buying work by Morris Louis in 1962).<sup>14</sup> For those working in assembled sculpture the prospects looked bleak as far as making a living went and the work being created reflects this. Rather than making lasting commodities, as for example Edward Kienholz (Conner's near contemporary in L.A.) would go on to do, they would create ramshackle pieces that would fall apart or only be seen once. Conner recalls early plaster pieces by Manuel Neri crumbling whilst on show at the San Francisco Museum, causing attendants to sweep up their mess on a daily basis.<sup>15</sup> Wallace Berman took the group's attitude towards impermanence to extremes. Berman arrived in San Francisco in the same year as Conner, having left L.A. following police censorship of an exhibition he had put together at the Ferus gallery some months before.<sup>16</sup> In San Francisco Berman would continue to produce his collaged periodical *Semina*. In 1960 he moved to a shack in the marshes at Larkspur where he would hold exhibitions that opened for an hour and lasted one day, an



activity that continued until the shed sunk into the ground in 1961. There is no doubt that Conner had a similar attitude as Berman towards the necessity of exhibition,

Why have a show? Just have a party. And if you're going to have a show, why even bother to take on all the trimmings and expectations of what art should be as a permanent work of art? I mean why spend your money on that if nobody is going to buy it? You really were doing it for yourself.<sup>17</sup>

Hal Foster, drawing on Peter Bürger's analysis of the avant-garde, has suggested that 'the *first* neo-avant-garde recovers the historical avant-garde ... literally, through a reprise of its basic devices, the effect of which is *less to transform the institution of art than to transform the avant-garde into an institution*.'<sup>18</sup> Foster's view echoes that expressed at the time by the elder statesman of dada, Richard Huelsenbeck who remarked: 'Neo-dada has turned the weapons used by dada, and later by Surrealism, into popular ploughshares with which to till the fertile soil of sensation-hungry galleries eager for business.'<sup>19</sup> These views are clearly untenable in relation to San Francisco where the peculiar circumstances of the market dictated an alliance with an avant-garde called to Baudelaire's definition of modernity as related to 'the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and immutable.'<sup>20</sup>

This is not the only debt Conner had to Baudelaire, whose vision of the nineteenth century so conditioned the view of that epoch within surrealist circles. For Walter Benjamin, one of Baudelaire's key motifs was that of the *chiffonnier* or rag picker, which Benjamin suggests he used as an 'extended metaphor for the procedure of the poet,' who picks his 'rhyme-booty' from the city streets.<sup>21</sup> Conner has related the stuffed bag like structures that hang from a work like *SNORE* (1960) to the way the bin men would place garbage onto large stretched out tarpaulin before gathering it together and hanging it from the sides of their trucks. The same refuse collectors inspired the name for the loose society of artists and poets that Conner gathered around himself in San Francisco known as the Rat Bastard Protective Association, a play on the workers' Scavengers Protective Society.<sup>22</sup> The rag-pickers trade is conjured in the very materials of the pieces themselves as well as in their formal structure.



The piece entitled *RATBASTARD* from 1958 is fairly typical in terms of the materials used. Compared to other works from the same time this is a fairly simple composition: a two-inch-thick canvas covered in dirty nylon, incorporating a photograph of an autopsy in the top right hand corner that is veiled by the fabric. The reverse is covered in a newspaper page illustrating an image of torture, the medieval style costume giving away its status as a film still, whilst the fragmented headline at the top of the work – ‘Talks to his wife by carrier pigeon’ – adds to its disconcerting nature. It is held together by clumsily inserted nails, the unprofessional look playing into the idea that this is a work that resists commodification – like the second hand store window display with its extortionate price tags. Like many of the works from this period it incorporates a handle at the top, which, in exhibition, was often used to suspend the pieces from the ceiling to reveal both sides of the composition.<sup>23</sup> As Conner explained: ‘[I] put a handle on it so I could carry it anyplace I wanted to. Part of the character of that work was that it wasn’t going anyplace except with my friends, with the artists that I knew.’<sup>24</sup>

The second-hand store was not the only site in San Francisco that inspired Conner’s homage; the Playland and Sutro site at Point Lobos was also important. Rebecca Solnit writes, ‘San Francisco was in many ways like a European city of the past with its Italian cafes, its small pedestrian scale, and its charming Victorian architecture. For many artists, the swirling fog, innumerable vistas, and places like the decrepit amusement park Playland at the Beach gave it a particular magic.’<sup>25</sup> Playland at the Beach was opened by George and Leo Whitney in 1928 as a spectacular amusement park. It incorporated a fun house, diving bell, roller coaster, camera obscura and a merry-go-round, each constructed lovingly from wood, which by the late 1950s was beginning to warp in the ocean air.<sup>26</sup> Above Playland on the cliffs at Point Lobos stood the Cliff House. This building was the third to stand on the site following on from two much more elaborate buildings that had been owned by the engineer and philanthropist Alfred Sutro, but which had been destroyed in mysterious fires. The Cliff House that stood in 1957 is the Art Deco diner building that still remains today, a streamlined casing added to the building when Sutro’s daughter Emma sold the Cliff House to the Playland creator George Whitney.



Also sold in 1952 were the baths that Sutro had built in 1863 for the people of San Francisco. This huge complex of glass and iron housed six different bathing tanks and had five hundred changing rooms. Built down on the rocks below Point Lobos several of the pools were filled with water flowing in from the Pacific. The baths were immensely popular with locals up until the late 1930s when Sutro's grandson, realising the baths weren't commercially viable, iced over the largest bath and turned it into an ice rink. After Whitney bought the baths they continued to deteriorate until they were sold to land developers in 1966, and burned to the ground a few years later. The planned condos were never built and the ruins still provide interest for tourists today. Housed also inside the complex was the Sutro museum, which Conner claimed had a great influence on his work. He recalled its mixture of Egyptian mummies, toothpick carnivals, mechanical dolls and the wardrobe used by Tom Thumb, a nineteenth century 'freak;' it too was destroyed in the fire.<sup>27</sup>

Conner was readily able to find material for his assemblages from the sites of demolition in the Western Addition area of the city and Salvation Army stores filled with old-fashioned junk cleared from the same place, remnants of a rapidly modernising society.<sup>28</sup> The new process of urbanisation planned to alleviate the jumble of streets that had allowed certain isolated areas to develop into ghettos. This system of urbanisation was heavily resisted during the city's rebuilding after the great earthquake of 1906. In its aim of papering over the differences in class and racial identity the plan can be compared to the scheme carried out by Baron Haussmann in late nineteenth-century Paris, that formed a central focus of Walter Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk* or *Arcades Project*.<sup>29</sup> The problems involved in such utopian schemes, Benjamin argues, are best evoked by the ruin – in his case the Parisian glassed in Arcades – which will act as an allegory for our current situation. The Arcades for Benjamin, as for Louis Aragon, were a symbol of an only just outmoded time; the lack of appeal of the dusty commodities displayed in the windows of the shops that lined these passages could reveal the lie of commodity fetishism. Susan Buck-Morss, interpreting Benjamin, writes: 'Because these decaying structures no longer hold sway over the collective imagination, it is possible to recognise them as the illusory dream images they always were.'<sup>30</sup> Sutro's baths in particular, but also some of the other elements of the Point Lobos complex, act in precisely this way. The baths evoke a classical vision, also key for Benjamin, of class harmony through a public



space, just as did the rebuilding of the Western Addition. However the failure of Sutro's project in Conner's time was able to show up the utopianism of the new urbanisation and allow the Point Lobos complex to work as an allegory.

Conner's materials themselves act as allegories for commodity fetishism. The grunge-covered items Conner incorporated into his assemblages evoke another era; the old leather suitcases, grimy furniture and fringed lampshades look back to the Victorian parlour and speak of 'the mortification of matter which is fashionable no longer.'<sup>31</sup> The tawdry sequins and feathers too, which lie abandoned and filth covered in so many of Conner's works, bring home the lie that Benjamin saw in the cult of the movie star: 'The cult of the movie star ... preserves not the unique aura of the person but the 'spell of personality,' the phoney spell of the commodity' – so many trappings are all that is left when that cult of personality wears thin.<sup>32</sup> It is this concern with allegory that makes Conner's work so different from that of his contemporaries. Ed Kienholz for example used objects that had reached the end of their useful lives in order to show the immense waste of industrial society whilst at the same time commenting on social issues like prostitution and abortion.<sup>33</sup> Most of Conner's materials never had a useful life in the sense that Kienholz's clocks, engine parts and broken television sets once did, they were in a sense already waste, a commodity whose only value was the one imposed by the price tag.

Sutro's museum with its mix of spinning dolls, scale models and Egyptian mummies may well have been the inspiration for an exhibition of 1960 at the Batman Gallery in San Francisco. Works made over the previous three years were displayed around the space, hanging from the ceiling, looming up from the floor. Works aesthetically united by the torn nylon covering them all and gently lit by the white candles that were inserted into the works themselves, the stubs of which remain as the crown of *THE BRIDE* (1960) and on top of *RATBASTARD # 2* (1959). Alfred Frankenstein in the *San Francisco Chronicle* described the exhibition thus, 'Some magic grotto, full of things that have been put under enchantment and left for years to the bats and spiders, but still alive and waiting to be revived.'<sup>34</sup> The lack of distinction between the living and the dead expressed in Frankenstein's review is of course pertinent to Sutro's museum where mummies and automata collide and blur those same boundaries. The Egyptian mummy was an emblem that circulated widely within The Rat



Bastard Protective Association; Manuel Neri and Joan Brown both were creating works that resembled mummified animals whilst Conner's works made from brown wax and nylon evoke the ancient bodies of the pharaohs. The display of the mummy, without its golden casing, reveals the fragility of the preservation process. Joan Brown called the mummy in the de Young Museum in San Francisco, 'that one dumb, stupid, ratty, rotten mummy' drawing attention to the travesty of exposing these bodies to the air.<sup>35</sup> In the B-movies that fascinated Conner (he used handbills advertising them for an early collage and used clips from them in his 1960 film *A MOVIE*) drew upon the mummy as a figure disturbed, looking for his rightful burial ground. Slavoj Žižek has looked at the use of this motif in horror movies in order to throw light on some aspects of Lacanian psychoanalysis. He argues that through the funeral rite,

The dead are inscribed into the text of symbolic tradition, they are assured that, in spite of their death, they will 'continue to live' in the memory of the community. The 'return of the living dead' is, on the other hand, the reverse of the proper funeral rite. While the latter implies a certain reconciliation, an acceptance of loss, the return of the dead signifies that they cannot find their proper place in the text of tradition.<sup>36</sup>

The animation of the mummified corpse in the poses and attitudes, as well as the evocative setting, of Conner's work seems to imply precisely this kind of return. Significantly, Žižek adds:

The two great traumatic events of the holocaust and the gulag are, of course, exemplary cases of the return of the dead in the twentieth century. The shadows of their victims will continue to chase us as 'living dead' until we give them a decent burial, until we integrate the trauma of their death into our historical memory.<sup>37</sup>



One way of honouring this memory for many Americans was the abolition of capital punishment, considered to demean the value of human life and as an insult to those who died in those 'two great traumatic events'. The terms of the argument were often couched around the problems of totalitarianism and Conner's work *CHILD*, inspired by the execution of Caryl Chessman, references this through the symbol of the mummy (Fig. 1).<sup>38</sup> *CHILD* is a seated figure made from brown wax, evocative of the leather like bodies of the long dead, covered in a web of nylon. The piece was first exhibited in the de Young Museum highlighting its call to the past. Its seated position alerts us that this is no ordinary death, but an execution. Chessman spent eleven years on death row in a San Francisco prison pleading his innocence on charges of kidnapping. Many believed the charge had been invented as a response to his acquittal on a previous count of sexual molestation, dropped due to lack of evidence. The power of this work came not just from its contemporary relevance but also from the cries it whispered from beyond the grave, from Egypt, from Germany, from the Siberian wasteland.





Fig. 1: Bruce Conner, *CHILD*, 1959 – 60, assemblage, wax figure with nylon, twine, cloth and metal in a high chair, 87.7 x 43.1 x 41.7 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York. (Photo: Michael Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles) © Bruce Conner.





Fig. 2. Bruce Conner, BLACK DAHLIA, 1960, mixed Media, 67.9 x 27.3 x 7 cm. Collection Walter Hopps, Houston. (Photo: Michael Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles). © Bruce Conner.



If Conner's materials evoked the late nineteenth-century's ruined philanthropy, whilst the figure of the mummy looked to that era's feverish ethnographic collecting, a third reference to the period emerges when we examine his treatment of women. A number of box-like constructions from 1959 entitled *SPIDER LADY*, *SPIDER LADY NEST*, and *SPIDER LADY HOUSE* evoke the figure of the femme fatale through their titles that remind us of the Black Widow spider who eats her male counterpart. Each of the pieces uses nylon fabric to create an elaborate web across the front of the construction, masking in the case of *SPIDER LADY* a beauty pageant photograph and in *SPIDER LADY HOUSE* the head of a doll with a nail hammered through its forehead. The femme fatale is important elsewhere too, in *BLACK DAHLIA* (1960) for example, a work inspired by the notorious murder of Elizabeth Short in 1946 (fig. 2). The body of the beautiful drifter was discovered horrifically mutilated and drained of blood in an abandoned lot on Norton and 39<sup>th</sup> Street, just south of Hollywood. Eager for stardom the victim had mixed with hoodlums and call girls, adding a sleazy patina to long running and still unsolved Los Angeles Police Department investigation.<sup>39</sup> Although a national scandal, it is significant for Conner's appropriation of the killing that it took place in Los Angeles and that the horrific vision of the blood drained corpse left its stain on the sunshine state. The victim's associations with prostitution and the pornographic image Conner uses to represent her, bring Short into the sexualised realm of the femme fatale.

Elaine Showalter has argued that the femme fatale arises as a symbol of misogyny in the 1890s. She relates this to the rise of women's suffrage movements in the same decade and the resultant crisis in masculinity.<sup>40</sup> Another symptom of this crisis can be seen in the hyper masculine sphere of 'Clubland,' the network of men's drinking clubs that emerged at the end of the century. This sphere of society was completely devoid of women and, as Showalter argues, provided an extension of the public school system and a mirror of the government. The periodic returns of the femme fatale bear out Showalter's reading; in Weimar Germany she comes as a response to the surrender in World War I, whilst in fifties America she is a symptom of a crisis in masculinity caused by the woman's role as worker during the depression and the war years that had left the masculine role as breadwinner somewhat redundant. This feeling was only increased by changes in the economy from one of production to consumption, leaving jobs for men outside the realm of physical exertion and



founding the image of 'organisation man'.<sup>41</sup> As a result we can observe similar consequences to the situation in the late nineteenth century in popular representations of women and in male bonding in the 1950s. The B-movies of the 1950s took the image of the femme fatale that had so fascinated interwar cinema goers and exaggerated it to grotesque extremes: *Attack of the Fifty Foot Woman* (1958), *The Wasp Woman* (1956) and *The Daughter of Dr Jekyll* (1957), are just a few examples of the genre. Artists, who had always suffered from an anxiety about the masculinity of their task, retreated into clubs and bars that, although admitting women, often left them ostracised or as tokenistic sexual talismans.

In visual representations of the femme fatale her role of showing up the 'disparity between seeming and being, the deception, instability and unpredictability associated with the woman' is often, as Mary Ann Doane has pointed out, visualised by the depiction of the veil.<sup>42</sup> Doane notes that this visualisation is able to stabilise the 'instability and precariousness of sexuality.' This also seems to be the role of the veil in Jacques Lacan's theorisation of the phallus, the veil acting to cover up the disparity between the penis and the phallus.<sup>43</sup> In order for the veil to do its job of stabilising it needs to be blank, to signify nothing but its own opacity. Even when it overtly signifies the oriental it is used as an amplification of the veils opacity through the connotations of mystery. Conner's use of the stocking, itself a privileged fetish object, denies this function. Acting itself as a replacement for the woman's 'lack,' it initially acts against the threat of castration, as does the phallused woman behind it. Here the doubling of the fetish, both the woman and her veil, is, as Sigmund Freud wrote 'a confirmation of the technical rule according to which a multiplication of penis symbols signifies castration.'<sup>44</sup> *BLACK DAHLIA*, with its phallic dimensions that seem to elongate the woman's body, is a perfect illustration of this: the stocking's seam that runs down its centre screams the veil's true identity. *BLACK DAHLIA*, although representing a victim seems also to show a predator, the depicted woman wears a leather belt, a weapon of sadistic intent. The piece is studded with rusting nails that evoke the nail fetishes made in the Congo that are pierced so that they might release their hidden powers adding another level to the work's meaning.<sup>45</sup> The evocation of the Congo here, significantly the site of Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*, again brings us back to the nineteenth century when ethnographic collectors brought back trinkets from the dark continent to be sealed behind glass. The conflation of the



'primitive' with the femme fatale creates a new figure, a new 'danger' returning from the past like the mummy with a message for the present: it references the old century's belief in degeneration through miscegenation and the new era's inability to let that belief go.<sup>46</sup> It is the castrative feeling and the dangerous sexuality of 'the dark continent' that is conjured by *BLACK DAHLIA* that tells why she must die, yet it is the use of uncannily outmoded materials which allows the victim to remain in our realm – yet another figure unable to find her place in the text of tradition. The castrative woman is also evoked by the piece entitled *MEDUSA*. Freud argued that the snakes on the Gorgon's head are multiple analogues for the missing penis and so again through 'the technical rule' mentioned earlier speak of castration. In the Medusa myth it is the gaze that has the power to kill, it is here the veil is needed, but Conner does not comfort us, he rips it aside leaving us face to face with the threat of castration.<sup>47</sup>

In the reading of *CHILD* we have seen how Conner has used a surrealist vocabulary in order to investigate the trauma of war – an investigation familiar to us from Hal Foster's influential reading of surrealism as concerned with compulsive repetition and traumatic shock.<sup>48</sup> In Conner's use of the femme fatale we see the return of a figure dear to the surrealist consciousness – Conner exchanging the recurrent motif of the praying mantis for the black widow – complete with the still unresolved connotations of misogyny and violence.<sup>49</sup> In examining the sources of Conner's assemblages within the salvation army stores of the city we see reflected the trips Breton made to the Saint-Ouen flea-market in search of 'objects that can be found nowhere else: old fashioned, broken, useless, almost incomprehensible, even perverse ...'.<sup>50</sup> For Conner, however, the era of the *objet trouvé* shining forth to its finder was long gone – the *flâneur* instead was crushed beneath the waste of a consumer society unconcerned with the grimy remains of the past. Conner has remarked of his materials:

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.<sup>51</sup>



Such a reading points, both in its reference to the living shapes of wood grain and in its 'claw footed stands,' to the work of Max Ernst. Ernst's collage novels use the outmoded Victorian interior as a sign for both the spaces repressed by contemporary modernist architecture and, in turn, the phantom of the unconscious – represented by the birth place of psychoanalysis.<sup>52</sup> Conner destroys these scenes of interior unrest – his works are much more clearly composed of fragments than Ernst's unified images – and delivers them up as soiled bags of traumatic dreams. The repression of a non-painterly surrealism during the 1950s was ultimately what led to its revival in the work of Conner and his circle, just as the repression of the Victorian interior led to its use in Ernst's collages, in a compulsive cycle which we see still in motion in Mike Kelley's neo-gothic output or Jim Shaw's thrift store bounty, and which shows no sign of stopping. Such work however makes use of the same ruins – the blackened monuments of the nineteenth century, so brilliantly illustrated by the crumbling remains of San Francisco. At the opening of a new century we are beginning to see the fruits of an artistic practice that hears Modernism's death rattle and hastens to play its rag and bone man – has the time come for the capitals of the twentieth century to become the ruins of our own?

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<sup>1</sup> *The Art of Assemblage*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1962.

<sup>2</sup> This is a very rough generalisation which derives from Hal Foster's account of the situation in the introduction to Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> To quote the title of Irving Sandler's influential study of Abstract Expressionism, Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting*, New York, 1970.

<sup>4</sup> The phrase is Michael McClure's from 'Sixty-six things about the California Assemblage Movement' (1992), published in Michael McClure, *Lighting the Corners*, Albuquerque, 1993, 181.

<sup>5</sup> See *2000 B.C: The Bruce Conner Story, Part II*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> See Elizabeth Armstrong's interview in Mignon Nixon and Martha Buskirk, eds, *The Duchamp Effect*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1996, 57–9.

<sup>7</sup> *Forty Years of California Assemblage: UCLA Art Council Annual Exhibition*, University of California, Los Angeles, 1989, 46.



<sup>8</sup> See 'Interview with Bruce Conner conducted by Paul Cummings in New York, April 16, 1973', at <http://artarchives.si.edu/oralhist/conner73.htm> 4.

<sup>9</sup> Conner had visited the city in 1952 – visiting friends who had moved there, however 1956 was the first time the artist spent an extended period of time there.

<sup>10</sup> The beat vision of San Francisco popular at the time would later become cynically exploited in later years. Commenting on his experience of Haight-Ashbury Conner remarked 'I got to see the whole beatnik phenomenon; how the media related to it, how the neighborhood [*sic.*] changed, how it was exploited and how it degenerated, decayed and turned into boutiques,'. Quoted in 'Interview with Bruce Conner by Paul Cummings', 13.

<sup>11</sup> Interview by Marc Selwyn, 'Bruce Conner, Marilyn and the Spaghetti Theory', *Flash Art*, 24: 156, Jan/Feb 1991, 94–7, especially 95.

<sup>12</sup> Although *The Art of Assemblage* exhibition did include anonymous African tribal pieces and a Victorian valentine card it was 'high art' that predominated in the show.

<sup>13</sup> See *Forty Years of California Assemblage*. The Dilexi Gallery was opened in 1957 and had strong connections to Walter Hopps' Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles. The 6 gallery was a co-operative opened in 1955; many of Conner's friends were members of it. Formerly it had been the King Ubu Gallery run by the artist Jess and the poet Robert Duncan.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Cowles, in Amy Newman, *Challenging Art: Artforum 1962–1974*, New York, 2000, 30.

<sup>15</sup> Rebecca Solnit, *Secret Exhibition – six california artists of the cold war era*, San Francisco, 1990, 68.

<sup>16</sup> See Maurice Berger, 'Libraries Full of Tears: The Beats and the Law', in Elizabeth Sussman, ed., *Beat Culture and the New America*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1996, 123–140. See also Thomas Crow, *The Rise of the Sixties*, London, 1996, 71.

<sup>17</sup> Bruce Conner quoted in Anne Ayres, 'Bruce Conner', in *Forty Years of California Assemblage*, 130–1, especially 131.

<sup>18</sup> Hal Foster, 'Who's Afraid of the Neo-Avant-Garde', in Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, Cambridge Massachusetts, 1996, 21. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Hans Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-art*, London, 1965, 211.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Baudelaire, 'The Painter of Modern Life', in Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, London, 1964, 13.

<sup>21</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire', in Walter Benjamin, trans. Harry Zohn, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, London, 1983, 80.

<sup>22</sup> The title also puns on the Pre Raphaelite Brotherhood; its initials the RBPA mirroring the PRB thus mocking the branding of a style and the covering into clans of so many artists. Its members included Jay de Feo, Michael McClure, Manuel Neri and Joan Brown. See Rebecca Solnit, 'Heretical Constellations: Notes on California, 1946–61', in Sussman, ed., *Beat Culture and the New America*, 69–122, especially 71.

<sup>23</sup> Conner was inspired by the way Jay de Feo wrapped and hung Christmas presents from the ceiling, *2000 B.C.: The Bruce Conner Story, Part II*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 1999, 39.

<sup>24</sup> Marc Selwyn, 'Bruce Conner, Marilyn and the Spaghetti Theory', 96.



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- <sup>25</sup> Rebecca Solnit, 'Heretical Constellations: Notes on California, 1946–61', 76.
- <sup>26</sup> See the Playland web site at, [www.sonic.net/~playland/playland.html](http://www.sonic.net/~playland/playland.html)
- <sup>27</sup> Thomas Albright, *Art in the San Francisco Bay Area 1945–1980*, Berkeley, 1985, 98
- <sup>28</sup> '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 which 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.' 'Interview with Bruce Conner conducted by Paul Karlstrom in San Francisco, California, August 12, 1974.' At <http://artarchives.si.edu/oralhist/conner74.htm> unpaginated.
- <sup>29</sup> See Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing, Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1991, 89–90 for a discussion of Benjamin's views on urbanism. See also Michael Scott, *The San Francisco Bay Area: A Metropolis in Perspective*, Berkeley, 1959.
- <sup>30</sup> Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 159
- <sup>31</sup> Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 159.
- <sup>32</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936), in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, London, 1968, (1999), 224.
- <sup>33</sup> In *The Illegal Operation* (1962) Keinholz tackled the theme of abortion whilst *Roxys* (1961–2) looked at prostitution. See *Kienholz: A Retrospective*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1996.
- <sup>34</sup> Alfred Frankenstein, 'The Batman makes its Bow with Modern Junk', *San Francisco Chronicle*, 13 November 1960, quoted in Anne Ayers, *Bruce Conner*, 130.
- <sup>35</sup> *The Art of Joan Brown*, Berkeley Art Museum, University of California, 1998–9, 198.
- <sup>36</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry, An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1991, 23.
- <sup>37</sup> Žižek, *Looking Awry*, 23.
- <sup>38</sup> Philip Leider in a feature article for *Artforum* picked up holocaust references in Conner's work writing, 'He can visualise the loveliest flesh charred beyond recognition. The data which informs this work is that of the extermination camps ... The data of the work [*Child*] is drawn from the greatest massacre of children in recorded history; that single charred body fixes a guilt which a dozen Disneylands cannot diminish.' Philip Leider, 'Bruce Conner, A New Sensibility', *Artforum*, 1: 6, 1962, 30.
- <sup>39</sup> See John Gilmore, *Severed: The True Story of the 'Black Dahlia' Murder*, London, (1994), 2004. The memory of the killing is perpetuated today by James Ellroy's fictional account of the killing – currently being adapted into a Hollywood movie. James Ellroy, *The Black Dahlia*, London, (1987), 1993.
- <sup>40</sup> Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anxiety, Gender and Culture at the Fin-de-Siècle*, London, 1992, 10. See also Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture*, Oxford, 1986.
- <sup>41</sup> See Andrew Perchuk, 'Pollock and Postwar Masculinity' and Simon Cohan, 'The Spy in the Grey Flannel Suit: Gender Performance and the Representation of Masculinity in *North by*



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*Northwest*, in *The Masculine Maquerade*, MIT Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1995, 31–42, and 43–63.

<sup>42</sup> Mary-Ann Doane, 'Veiling Over Desire: Close-Ups of the Woman', in Mary-Ann Doane, *Femme-Fatales, Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*, London, 1991, 46.

<sup>43</sup> See Jane Gallop, *Reading Lacan*, New York, 1985, 154–156 and Jacqueline Rose, 'Introduction II', in Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, eds, *Feminine Sexuality; Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne*, London, 1982, 27–57.

<sup>44</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'The Medusa's Head', written 1922, published posthumously 1940, reprinted in Louis Marin, *To Destroy Painting*, Chicago, 1995, 145–146.

<sup>45</sup> Seitz exhibited an example of a two headed dog nail fetish in *The Art of Assemblage*, see catalogue p. 83.

<sup>46</sup> See Marianna Torgovnick's reading of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* that reads Kurtz's downfall as a result of the African woman with whom the author implies Kurtz shared a sexual relationship. Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive*, Chicago, 1990, 141–158.

<sup>47</sup> Showalter argues (against Freud) that the castrative element of the Medusa myth arises from seeing the hair as pubic hair and therefore the mouth as a vagina, the castrative *vagina dentata*. Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anxiety*, 146. I however read the medusa myth as an act of blinding through the meeting of gazes that results into the viewer's metamorphosis into stone. Blinding is referred to by Freud as an analogue for castration, see Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny' (1919) in Sigmund Freud, *Art and Literature, Penguin Freud Library, volume 14*, London, 1985, 335–376.

<sup>48</sup> Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*.

<sup>49</sup> Conner has been the subject of endless accusations of misogyny – this may be valid in terms of the work (which he sees as a representation of the viewpoint of society rather than of the artist as its creator), but can certainly not be justified in terms of his personal and professional relationships with women, during the period covered by this essay and beyond into the next decade. The artistic milieu of San Francisco was renowned for its atmosphere of equality and respect in relation to differences of gender, race or sexuality in marked contrast to that of New York. The praying mantis was a recurrent symbol in surrealist work following the publication of Roger Callois' essay 'La mante religieuse', *Minotaure*, 1: 5, 1934. For an inroad into the extensive bibliography of the mantis symbol see Rosalind Krauss, 'No More Play', in Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1985, 41–85, especially 68–73.

<sup>50</sup> André Breton, trans. Richard Howard, *Nadja*, (Paris, 1928), New York, 1960, 52.

<sup>51</sup> 'Interview with Bruce Conner conducted by Paul Karlstrom'. Unpaginated.

<sup>52</sup> See Hal Foster, 'Outmoded Spaces', in *Compulsive Beauty*, 157–191, especially 174–182. Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1993, 32–93, especially 33–6. Anthony Vidler, 'Unhomely Houses', in Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1992, 17–44.

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