



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Bruce Conner,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Bruce Conner on April 16, 1973. The interview took place at Charley Brown's Restaurant in New York City and was conducted by Paul Cummings for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

PAUL CUMMINGS: You were born in McPherson, Kansas in 1933?

BRUCE CONNER: November 18.

PAUL CUMMINGS: November 18. Tell me something about how long you lived there, and if you have brothers and sisters and kind of a family background.

BRUCE CONNER: Well, my sister was born in McPherson but I think we moved out of there by the time I was about four years old to Wichita, Kansas.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Is she younger than you?

BRUCE CONNER: I guess she is about three and one-half or four years younger than me. Then, after I moved to Wichita... I remember that when my brother was born, my sister was seven and I was eleven.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What is your brother's name?

BRUCE CONNER: He is William Nicholas Conner, Jr. My sister is Joan Corine Conner. My mother claimed that Corine was the name of a striptease dancer. My father insisted that she should have that name. I am a monument to the family because I was the first grandchild. My first name, Bruce, is my mother's mother's maiden name. My middle name, Guldner, is my father's mother's maiden name.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So, you brought it all together.

BRUCE CONNER: Right, right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Basically, you grew up in Kansas.

BRUCE CONNER: Yes. I was in Wichita, at Wichita University and then I graduated from the University of Nebraska. I don't remember the grade schools, but Robinson Junior High, East High School and Wichita University.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you read a lot? Were you interested in things, have books around, or in music? What kind of young life was there?

BRUCE CONNER: I don't know exactly where to start on my childhood sort of thing. I guess I will try to limit it to how it related to art education or whatever.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You must have had other interests before you fell into that, didn't you?

BRUCE CONNER: Well, as I remember, the first school I went to, grade school, art was one of the more popular class periods. I think I was in kindergarten or something, doing drawings of teepees which the teacher liked very much. She had me do teepees all around the board. I thought that was fine and I would stay there after school to do it and then would realize how much time it was taking, to do the whole board. Anyway, we would have art classes and some of the other kids would come over and look at what I was doing. I would show them how to draw certain things. So I was there until probably the second or third grade -when everything changed drastically and my parents moved to another neighborhood which was a little more, economically, towards middle class, upper middle class. The people who were in the neighborhood, who I did not know, and the people in the school were totally disinterested in that characteristic of mine.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, had you drawn at home, before school?

BRUCE CONNER: I cannot remember that much. I would have to be like four years old.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you have any during let's say junior or high school, any instructors who you remember or who were important to you at that time?

BRUCE CONNER: Well, the Wichita Art Association had drawing classes. All I can remember was getting dirty charcoal all over my fingers and not liking what they wanted us to draw and getting kicked out of the class for doing something wrong like throwing water at somebody.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were you in high school then?

BRUCE CONNER: No, that was in grade school. I was maybe eight or nine years old. I was taking private lessons from a woman who lived just about three blocks from my house. I can't remember her name [Mrs. Rader] at all except I do remember that she had me copying a picture of Abraham Lincoln's birthplace, a cabin, and she came over to show me how to draw a tree which she drew on the paper. I was watching her and was really disgusted with her tree. I did my tree on the other side and she came around and looked at it and admired it and told the other students that I had drawn a better tree than she had. My parents still have that some place.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were your parents interested in this manifestation-of yours?

BRUCE CONNER: Well, my mother was but my father couldn't care less.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Has that attitude prevailed or is it different these days?

BRUCE CONNER: Oh, once I had people writing about me and shows appearing here and there and winning prizes and stuff, then things changed a little bit. Then I became a famous artist.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And it all kind of worked out. You went to quite a variety of schools. How did that come about? You went to the University of Nebraska and Kansas City and Brooklyn Museum.

BRUCE CONNER: Watson Bidwell was the head of the art department at East High School. There were a lot of people who game out at just about the same time. It was like a period where a lot of artists or people who had some artistic activity, working in...at that time, you know, like Corban LePell was in high school with me and he went to the University of Nebraska before I did and I went up there for art school. I still see him occasionally. He is teaching at Hayward and he lives in California. I remember my achievement then ...I kept trying to do something, well, it was art. Even when I was in high school I started looking at books and looking at Picasso and Modigliani and all varieties of things.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you have books at home or were these library books, school books?

BRUCE CONNER: Public library books, school books, things that would be shown to us by Bidwell. There was not a really exceptional reception on the part of the students for his education.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why is that do you think? His qualities as a teacher?

BRUCE CONNER: No, our class was a place where you goofed off. You did not have to do anything. You would sign up for art class and goof off. You did not have to do any studying so it was really sort of a babysitting job on his part.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I see.

BRUCE CONNER: Well, then I went to the University of Wichita,

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you go to the University to study? Where you an art major?

BRUCE CONNER: Yes, well, first of all I wanted to go to an art school but my father would not let me do that. He told me I could not make a living being a commercial artist, which was what I was telling him I wanted to do then. Which has not what I wanted to do at all. I knew that if I told him I wanted to be an artist it would be impossible to do anything. So I told him I wanted to be a commercial artist and do advertising and stuff like that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Where did you get the idea that you wanted to be an artist? Was it in high school, or when college came around?

BRUCE CONNER: Well, when I figured I couldn't really cope with my environment except using that as a device to rationalize my behavior.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How was the university? Did it accomplish what you wanted from it or did it do things that you did not want?

BRUCE CONNER: I don't know, I always seemed to be more involved in just going through all the stuff that you had to do. Going to college kept you out of the Army. While going to college, my father would support me. So I had to fulfill all the obligations of going to college and taking classes I did not want to take, whether they were

art classes, or speech classes, or whatever it was. I had no idea how to make a living. If you went to art school you were not deferred. I had a tremendous horror of going into the Army. That is probably why I went to college for so long.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Until you got past the age, or you got married at one point, didn't you?

BRUCE CONNER: Well, I went to the University of Nebraska. Most of the people I knew were moving to places like New York, or Arizona, or San Francisco, etc. Most of the people I knew were not visual artists. They were writers or actors or theatre people or musicians. There were very few people in the art department that I had anything to do with except some of the teachers.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who were they?

BRUCE CONNER: Buddy Rogers. Kiskadden is head of the art department now. David Bernard, he taught etching. I think I probably related more to David Bernard because he taught the art history classes and I liked his etchings.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what kind of major did you have, to stay in school so long?

BRUCE CONNER: I was an Art major and an English major. When I was in high school I was going through a Modigliani period. I did a painting of fish which was a breakthrough that Bidwell said was the best painting that any of the students had ever done at that school. When I was in college I was going through a Paul Klee period for the first year or so. Simultaneously, I was fascinated by Dada. We had a Dada show.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was where?

BRUCE CONNER: University of Wichita.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what year?

BRUCE CONNER: I don't know, 1952 or 1953.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who organized the Dada show?

BRUCE CONNER: It was not organized.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, it was just the students' Dada.

BRUCE CONNER: There had been a faculty show a couple of weeks before where they served tea and coffee and cookies. I asked for and got the hallway upstairs for the exhibit. It was supposed to be for two weeks, and I put up signs announcing the opening of the exhibit, serving lukewarm tap water and soggy pretzels. The show had some gilded soup bones that Coleta Eck had made. She would take plain soup bones and paint them gold. Dave Haselwood had a toothbrush framed in an ornate frame and it was called "Professor Emeritus." Michael McClure had a sculpture that he had started to do at one time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

BRUCE CONNER: It was a big stone block. He had a chisel and a hammer and he chipped off some stuff and he had given up very quickly. After half an hour of chipping he had given up, the whole thing. It sat in his bedroom where he was living near the campus for a long time. Then he painted two eyes on it, big red dots with circles around them. There was a half of a block of a cement cinder block (it had broken in a way that it sort of had almost little knobs like hands end feet) which this block sat on top of. It was a very ludicrous piece. I don't remember what that one was called. I had a painting called *Old Nobodaddy*, and some of my recent drawings, and a collage that I had done in high school. Michael, besides that, had several elephant drawings that he had done. He was showing how easy it was to do art. He would draw this sort of elephant with one line. Like a hand of fingers with an eye. He would show me how easy it was by closing his eyes to do it. He would draw several on top of one another. I would turn the pages and he would admire them and talk about how important they were and how aesthetic they were. The best one was *Elephant Graveyard* which had a black spot for a sun and, of course, the elephant was upside down with his feet sticking up in the air. It was a good show. The head of the art department said that they had to use the hallway for something else about forty-eight hours after it opened, although nothing else went into the hallway immediately after that. I had a feeling that they did not have great sympathies for what we were doing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was the interest in Dada at that time? Was it with satire or, you know, the more traditional Dada point of view?

BRUCE CONNER: Well, there was not much to relate to Dada except Robert Motherwell's book and that was

mostly poetry. It seemed to me that the art world in Wichita, Kansas was as absurd. I went to the Kansas City Art Institute one summer where I took a watercolor class and an oil painting class. I was trying to work to a style of painting somehow relating to abstract or abstract expressionism. I don't think it was actually called abstract expressionism at the time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, that would have been...?

BRUCE CONNER: 1953.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes, it was.

BRUCE CONNER: There was more than one phrase. Rothko was in a category that had something to do with abstract impressionism. I was trying to work at a style for myself. I had a painting instructor who was involved in doing still life and figure studies with lots of impasto. All of his students were expected to do the same. I certainly did not get any help from him and did not get a grade from him either.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So it was a real waste of time. What do you think provoked your interest in Dada originally? Was there also an interest in Surrealism or not?

BRUCE CONNER: I was interested in all sorts of things, Pre-Raphaelite paintings as well. I was taking art history courses and I was being deluged with different attitudes and images. I could not really recreate what my interest at that time was.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You were going around trying a little bit of everything.

BRUCE CONNER: Fun and games.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, but yet I get the feeling that there is a certain serious attitude in your perseverance

BRUCE CONNER: Right. Do you think I have been persevering?

PAUL CUMMINGS: You have been continuing.

BRUCE CONNER: I am still getting older.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You went from there to...?

BRUCE CONNER: The University of Nebraska.

PAUL CUMMINGS: University of Nebraska, and that was to pursue...?

BRUCE CONNER: Get out of Wichita and go some place that was not too far away. It was supposed to have a very good art department, and I knew somebody. Corban LePell was there. I took painting there from Leroy Burkett, and watercolor from Gail Butt, and Rudy Pozzatti was printmaking. I did some prints there. I had done some prints before in high school. I did etchings, woodcuts and such. Oil paintings. The painting that I developed was like low relief in oil paint using white paint to build up areas and then painting glazes, etc. on top of it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So there were different levels, physical levels.

BRUCE CONNER: It is like a relief of shapes like seashells, crustaceans, things that you might find in Permian Strata. I built up small details with oil paint and then oil washes on top of it. But then I also worked on paintings that were like Rembrandt, Goya.

PAUL CUMMINGS: These were of what? After paintings by those artists?

BRUCE CONNER: No, just paintings that would maybe look stylistically similar to those people. The paintings I was doing that were like relief were not like anybody else's paintings.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

BRUCE CONNER: I mean, they were my paintings. That was my first personal style of painting. When I was in Wichita there were not very many people that I could relate to. At the time if you read a book you were a creep and a queer. Generally someone that nobody wanted to relate to. There were only two or three people who were contemporaries of mine (that were in high school in my junior or senior year) that I might relate to. Everyone else I knew was in college.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why was that? I mean, how did it come about that you knew older people like that?

BRUCE CONNER: Because I was interested in books and I was interested in movies and I was interested in plays, music, and poetry, and art. All the people I knew who were seriously interested in that were in college. They were not in high school. There was Dave Haselwood and Michael McClure and Lee Streiff. James Stearns, who was designing sets there at the school, was at Lincoln Center for a year or two designing sets and now he is at the Disney Art School. It was a group of people who were involved in a variety of arts. There was not really any real artist group in Wichita. I mean there was at the most twelve to fifteen people that I could identify with in the whole of Wichita, Kansas (who were under thirty years old) that would have similar interests.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, that is pretty good, considering what the population is, what, half a million?

BRUCE CONNER: 150,000 maybe. What is fifteen? That is not even one percent, is it?

PAUL CUMMINGS: No.

BRUCE CONNER: I don't think, I mean, compared to the kind of interest that people have now, you know, if you are in a town of 150,000 you are going to expect quite a few people to be interested in those things. I mean, absolutely nobody had heard of Dada in Wichita, Kansas.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Where did you find the Motherwell book? Was it in a library?

BRUCE CONNER: No. Michael went to New York in 1952 and I think Dave might have gone at, the same time. Maybe he went by himself. There was an earlier generation of people from Wichita that had left and gone to New York. Phyllis Murray and Mary Jane Naanes. They were mostly people who were friends of James Stearns. He was the older person we related to. There was John Toy, who was a clown in a circus. I met him once at a bar in Wichita and then, years later, when the circus came to town, I saw him in the circus. He was doing the old "hit 'em on the butt" sort of thing, all that dumb kind of clown stuff and, for my benefit, he was calling his victim Ezra Pound--"Take that, Ezra Pound!" I was laughing and nobody else in the audience could understand what the hell I thought was so funny. When he died--he died about six or seven years ago--his obituary was in *Time* magazine. He was considered one of the important clowns of his time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He was with Ringling Brothers then?

BRUCE CONNER: No, not that I know of. He may have been at one time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who has he with then?

BRUCE CONNER: It was just a small traveling circus with one elephant.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see.

BRUCE CONNER: You know, a one-ring circus. I knew most of those people through knowing Michael. Lee Streiff was a writer who stayed in Wichita and ended up teaching English classes. If I was producing any art, that was my audience. That was my audience and that was why the group was there. Protection.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right. How many years did that function as a group, in one way or another, would you think?

BRUCE CONNER: Well, I don't know, like about two or three years.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That is all it takes really.

BRUCE CONNER: There was a lot of dissension and trouble and such.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Arguments and

BRUCE CONNER: Jealousies and so on and so forth. I remember at one time we were going to put out a magazine, a little magazine called *Provincial Review*, which was a satirical title on the *Partisan Review*.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That is a great title.

BRUCE CONNER: I had done a drawing of a chicken to go on the cover. Lee Streiff was editing and Mike McClure was editing also.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes.

BRUCE CONNER: But, Wichita was a formative period. I don't know what kind of formatives. I can't judge, except that I know there are certain points that are important for myself.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You left Wichita to go where then?

BRUCE CONNER: I went to the University of Nebraska in Lincoln.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was Nebraska. And from Nebraska you went...?

BRUCE CONNER: I was there for two and one-half years. I met my wife there. She was taking a painting class.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What is her name?

BRUCE CONNER: Her name was Jean Marilyn Sandstedt. After I graduated (a year after she did, because she went on to the University of Colorado) I had a scholarship to the Brooklyn Museum Art School for one year. I took it for one semester, January through the spring. I had a class from Reuben Tam.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you like it in New York, or in Brooklyn. Did you live in New York?

BRUCE CONNER: Yes, the lower east side. Off East Broadway on Division Street. Something like 175 Division, in the area where all the rag pickers of New York would bring their rags and clothes to sell. The store windows around there would be piled full. The glass windows would be piled with multicolored cloth. I thought about working this into assemblages, of using glass windows and putting things behind the glass windows, cloth and objects.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

BRUCE CONNER: It was a way of assembling objects within a limited space, and making it a two-dimensional surface. But the assemblage might go back into space or it may employ even more levels, like cross levels of Permian strata.

PAUL CUMMINGS: This is interest in archeology.

BRUCE CONNER: Well, when I was in high school I was very interested in paleontology and archeology. I had a geology class which I had no real interest in because they were always scratching rocks for the first two-thirds of the semester before it got into paleontology. My instructor in high school, Dr. Barnard, made a claim that there were no trilobites in the Permian strata in Kansas. Nobody had ever found any. Michael and Dave knew of a limestone quarry where there were lots of fossils. There were many fossils that had come loose, little bits of pyrenoids. There was a big heap of pieces of rock. You did not have to dig things up. It was just mounds and tons of shattered rock with fossils in it. I drove out there with them. I had the car. They were just having a trip in the country. I was looking for fossils. I crawled up on one big heap and started looking at rocks and Michael was throwing rocks at me. Dave was throwing rocks at me and I said, "Stop it. I have to look at this stuff and find some good fossils." Mike picked up a rock indiscriminately and threw it to me and said, "There is your trilobite." I looked at it and *it was*. There was a trilobite and that made us excited. I ended up with twenty-five trilobites that I brought to this class. I changed my instructor's attitude that trilobites did not exist in Kansas Permian strata. Later, Dave was taking science classes and was doing student teaching under that same teacher. Unbeknownst to the teacher, Dave knew all about this story and he asked him about trilobites and Permian strata. He said, "Yes, they just don't seem to exist in Kansas. But there is one place seventy-five miles east of here where they have been found."

PAUL CUMMINGS: Marvelous.

BRUCE CONNER: I named a movie after that, which had a sound track of Bob Dylan singing "Everybody Must Get Stoned." It was a bad joke movie and I figured that the most obscure and elliptic kind of way of referring to it would be to call it "Permian Strata." Nobody would really know what it was about until they saw it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You get three geologists and they say, "Ah, there is something new."

BRUCE CONNER: Now, let's see. I've got to tell you some other things.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you find New York though, when you came, and what was the Brooklyn Museum School like?

BRUCE CONNER: Brooklyn Museum Art School was a surprise because I had a class where the head of the school would come by and say that he had noticed that most of the students did not have studios. Since they could not have space for studios right there, they were trying to make space in the building for them to have studios. He thought it was something that was a problem. Where I came from, the University of Nebraska, that attitude did not exist at all. It was the reverse as far as the administration was concerned. They did not approve of students sending to local, competitive shows because they were *not* professional artists. Also, sometimes the students would get into the shows and even win a prize when the head of the art department would be rejected.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right.

BRUCE CONNER: After about one year there, there was a ruling that students could not use the facilities of the art department to create their paintings and send them off to shows. It was generally discouraged by Mr. Peter Worth, the head of the art department.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He really put his foot down. But Brooklyn was very different?

BRUCE CONNER: Yes. I was not going to class because I would stay up at night listening to Jean Shepherd talking from 11:30 until maybe 5:00 in the morning.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He was on all night then, wasn't he?

BRUCE CONNER: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So this must have been what, 1955? 1958?

BRUCE CONNER: The beginning of 1956. So that generally wiped out my morning watercolor class. I don't think I hit that man more than about four or five times during the whole semester.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you find Jean Shepherd?

BRUCE CONNER: On the radio.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I mean, just dialing around or did somebody mention it?

BRUCE CONNER: I think somebody said, you know, "You ought to listen to him. He talks just like 'ya, ya, ya, ya.'" It was kind of a bunch of crap because he would just ramble for a long, long time but then, every once in a while he would do something. He would say something that he had not said before. He kept running through a lot of the same things. Structures of his stories were very similar. It was obviously something you could not listen to if you were not doing anything. I was painting all the time he was talking. I went to Reuben's class and worked on painting there but mostly I would bring paintings that I had done at home. By that time I was showing at the Alan Gallery and he was also showing at the Alan Gallery.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

BRUCE CONNER: He was in the position of being my instructor and I was his student but we were also exhibiting in the same gallery. So there was a problem with him criticizing my work. Towards the end of the semester he finally got through that and criticized my work and told me what was wrong with it was exactly what I knew. But it was good to hear it from him.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When did you start showing with Alan then?

BRUCE CONNER: I went to New York in, I don't know, it must have been 1954. I don't remember exactly when it was.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Because the first show I read was 1960 with him.

BRUCE CONNER: Well, no. I mean, I was in group shows.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see.

BRUCE CONNER: I came to New York, it was 1953 or 1954. I am not sure exactly when, but I went to New York. I remember going to New York one summer trying to find a gallery. It was in June. I went around with all these slides. No, it was much later. It must have been 1955, after I was at the University of Nebraska. So I went around with slides, photographs and paintings, portfolio.

PAUL CUMMINGS: A whole production.

BRUCE CONNER: I was walking down the street with four framed oil paintings and a big portfolio and my slides, and photographs. It must have been sixty pounds of stuff and I was walking to all these galleries. I would walk in. The guy would say, "I can't see anybody. I am making money. Can't you see I am making money. Get out of here!" It certainly was not a very friendly reception.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

BRUCE CONNER: I went to twenty galleries, being rejected one right after another. Nobody was really interested except that there were a few places where the people who ran the gallery would sit down and look at my work. I

can't remember ...there was a woman who had a gallery on 57th Street, and I am sure you would know who it was if I mentioned her name.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Bertha Schaeffer, or somebody like that?

BRUCE CONNER: Yes, I think it was.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Bertha Schaeffer, Betty Parsons?

BRUCE CONNER: It was Bertha Schaeffer, and I showed her the slides. She said, "Well, this is interesting work but I can't handle it here in my gallery. It doesn't fit what I have, but why don't you go to Charles Alan." I had never thought going to Charles Alan because I knew of what he showed [Jack] Levine and the other people.

PAUL CUMMINGS: No variety shown at Downtown.

BRUCE CONNER: He had been at Downtown but had just opened his gallery and had Levine and those painters. People I considered to be really conservative, and I was doing abstract work. "Okay, I'll try it." I went in with the stuff and he was really interested in it. "Do you have more work?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Why don't you bring it down because I would like to buy one of these and maybe I will buy something else." So I got the other stuff and came back and he bought three pieces. That was absolutely amazing to me after all this rejection. That is why I never got another gallery in New York. I figured that anybody that would do that, notwithstanding whatever kind of economic advantages, that was the person to stay with. People would tell me when I was showing at the Alan Gallery that, "You know, he is an honest dealer." I had this impression that a lot of dealers in New York were not exceptionally honest and that for somebody to find an exceptional phrase to say about Charles Alan, that he was an honest dealer, meant a lot.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Honesty has many definitions on Madison Avenue.

BRUCE CONNER: Well, my feeling is that Charles has been one of the most honest, dependable people I have ever worked with.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He carried you then for ten years?

BRUCE CONNER: Well, I was in group shows until my first one-man show. He was there waiting and watching to see what happened. He had a certain kind of catholic taste in what artists made and what he would show. That first show was made up of my collages. I figured I would not be able to show them, that Charles would not like them. Previously he had talked about somebody whose collages he did not like. So somehow I felt that he did not like collages.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He did a Mesens show.

BRUCE CONNER: A what?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mesens. E. L. T. Mesens, a surrealist dealer who was around that time, I think, and it did not somehow work well.

BRUCE CONNER: Well, in any case, I stopped painting. I had gone through some other stages. I had started larger paintings and I started figurative paintings (which were actually kind of oversized drawings, using black paint, white paint). Sort of like washes. But then, at the same period of time I started getting very much involved in collages and assemblages. I did a big collage at the University of Nebraska in 1954, which I showed in San Francisco and it won the main prize in the San Francisco Art Association Annual in 1958 when Thomas Hess juried the show. So I had been working in collages for some time, since high school. In high school, when I was taking a crafts class, the teacher assigned us to do mosaics using pieces of colored paper and cardboard, various textures and stuff. I was totally bored with the mosaic concept and began laying things on top of one another and making different shapes. It was much more interesting. I did a collage. I knew it was not mosaic but I took it in and she was really pissed off. She said, "That isn't a mosaic, that is a collage." She took it to show to Watson Bidwell who was head of the art department and said, "This boy was assigned to do a mosaic and look what he did: That is not a mosaic, that is a collage," and Watson looked at it and said, "Yes, very good, isn't it?" What was the point of doing a bad mosaic when you were working with something and it turned out to be a good collage?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right.

BRUCE CONNER: I was at Brooklyn Museum Art School in 1956 and then in the fall I had a scholarship at the University of Colorado, where my wife was going to school. I was not married to her then. I was there for one year. She graduated with an M.F.A. and I got a "D" and a "C" minus from Mr. Wendell Mack in Life Drawing and Graphics. He did not like my attitude. It was very clear that I was not going to get a Master's degree after I had

gotten those grades, because if you make less than a "C" you were flunked.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Flunked, right.

BRUCE CONNER: Especially in two classes. He just wiped me out. It was basically jealousy. He had been working with intaglio engraving and pushing all this stuff for years and years and he had never had a show in New York, He had never even had a gallery in New York. I was a student who had had that sort of thing. He considered me to be intolerable in my attitude.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, yes, it happens to people.

BRUCE CONNER: After I left there I got a job in Wichita, Kansas that summer, saved up some money, married my wife on September 30, 1957 and, immediately after the ceremony, we flew to San Francisco.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why San Francisco?

BRUCE CONNER: Where the hell else would I go?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you know, New York.

BRUCE CONNER: New York.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You'd been there, right?

BRUCE CONNER: Yes. I hated New York. I couldn't stand it. My six months here and all the other times I have been here has been just miserable. I was hungry and I did not know very many people. It did not seem to be a friendly place and I felt claustrophobic after living in Kansas where you can look out the window and see the horizon line.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

BRUCE CONNER: When I was in New York it was like a maze, a rat maze, going from one little box to another little box and passing through passageways to get from one safe haven to another.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hopefully.

BRUCE CONNER: If I would try to get out and try to go out and see the horizon, I couldn't see it. I could rim as long as I wanted to and I still would not be able to see the horizon.. It certainly was not where my mind was at that time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But did you know people there in San Francisco?

BRUCE CONNER: Yes, well, Michael had moved there several years before and I had visited him there in about 1956, one summer. He had married Joanne and they had had a baby and we had had a correspondence going. I moved to San Francisco and practically the first week we were there we found an apartment for rent a block and a half from Michael on Jackson Street. Michael lived in a building with Wally Hedrick and Jay De Feo. They were both painters. Next to them were Bill Brown and Joan Brown, and above them was, I think, Craig Kaufman and Newman, the guy who had the gallery.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, Phil Newman, yes? Phil Newman?

BRUCE CONNER: No.

PAUL CUMMINGS: No, who had the...?

BRUCE CONNER: Dilexi Gallery. Jim Newman.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Dilexi, right.

BRUCE CONNER: About six months later, Wally Berman moved in half a block from me, down the street. George Herms came in about a year after I got there. It was a group right in that area. Most of the other artists were over in North Beach. That was the "bohemian" area where the fabled degeneration was supposed to be mythically existing. I got to see the whole beatnik phenomenon; how the media related to it, how the neighborhood changed, how it was exploited and how it degenerated, decayed and turned into boutiques.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right.

BRUCE CONNER: So, when the phenomenon of Haight-Ashbury happened, I predicted how the changes would

take place. I was over there on Jackson Street for one year and then I moved to the Haight-Ashbury. At that time it was a lower middle class area with low rents near the park. Nobody bothered anybody. In 1958 I was painting my windows and creating collages, assemblages, theatre events and parades through North Beach. Things were happening there that people later were calling "Happenings" in New York. We never called them "Happenings" because if you announced a "happening" it did not happen. I mean, how could something happen if you announced that everybody is going to assemble at eight-thirty and there is going to be a happening.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. It was a performance then.

BRUCE CONNER: Hell, we had street theatre. That is what it was.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. But, you know, one thing that is interesting is all these people living in such close proximity. Did that come about because you knew each other or was it kind of by chance that you all lived next door or down the street or a block or two away?

BRUCE CONNER: Well, or course I always wanted to go some place where I knew someone. I knew Michael but I did not know Jay or Wally or any of these other people. I guess the artists had found this building which had inexpensive rent, huge flats with high ceilings. Michael had, because he knew artists in San Francisco, found out about the space and he moved in there. When I got there, he was really the only person I knew in San Francisco. So we would be helpful. If there is a problem there is somebody there to help you.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right. Well, how did you find the cultural life at that time?

BRUCE CONNER: The cultural life in San Francisco, you mean the art world?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes.

BRUCE CONNER: The art world was absurd. There was the Six Gallery which you definitely have heard of because of the poetry readings.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right.

BRUCE CONNER: It was a place where Mark Rothko and all those people who were at the Art Institute...

PAUL CUMMINGS: At the school.

BRUCE CONNER: ...had exhibited. Wally Hedrick and Jay De Feo had shows there. There was no market for art. The galleries were absurd because the galleries that were showing the things by San Francisco artists were run by artists themselves.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were they co-ops or...?

BRUCE CONNER: They were co-ops or somebody who decided to do that or several artists wanted to put something together. The Six Gallery was that sort of thing. The Six Galley would have an opening and everybody would have a lot of beer and wine and get drunk and maybe Wally Hedrick and Dixieland friends would play music. The only way it was opened afterwards was that one of those artists who ran the place would have to go and open it up. It was never open. They were sick and tired of it when nobody came, so it was never opened.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see.

BRUCE CONNER: You could see the shows if Wally would take you down and unlock it and give you a private tour of Fred Martin's show, or something like that. The idea of having shows was silly. Most of the other people that I knew that were artists just figured it was absurd. Why have a show? Just have a party. If you are going to have a show, why bother to take on all the trimmings and expectations of what art should be as a permanent work of art? Why spend your money on that if nobody is going to buy it? You *really* are doing it for yourself.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It was a momentary thing.

BRUCE CONNER: I guess it is like a spontaneity-- outside the values limited to a rectangle in oil painting.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

BRUCE CONNER: Artists were using oil paint which I felt was a pretty limited medium for spontaneity; for using what was around for you. We figured you would use anything you wanted to. The main thing was to make it, to make the image. To make the thing that you were trying to do, and whether it fell apart or not was of secondary importance. In fact, for me it became of primary importance. It became a dialogue of how you relate to objects. You have a choice of how you want to relate. If you want to you can take assemblage or collage and seal it in a

solid block of plastic.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

BRUCE CONNER: Or you don't. Time is working on it. Manuel Neri would make his sculptures of plaster on cardboard, corrugated cardboard. The first time they were shown at the San Francisco Museum a couple or three years later, they had to sweep up the floor underneath every day because the plaster would keep popping off. Joan Borwn was doing things like little wooden triangles made into fake sandwiches, and glass milk bottles filled with plaster and doing that whole art food concept before that was happening in New York.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When was she doing those?

BRUCE CONNER: 1957 or 1958. I went to the Art Institute and there would be this card table with this indelible stuff they had done. Maybe somebody would bump into it and it would fall down. THings would get broken and people would pick them up. But by then it was gone and it was really not very important. The importance of thi gs is who is going to pay attention to it. Nobofy was there with the eyes, ears, nose, and throat of the media. They all lived in New York.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, there were no collections out there really either.

BRUCE CONNER: New York is the center of that kind of communication. All the magazines come from there. All the information comes from there. If it is not in New York it is "not seen." It is not taken seriously unless it has come to New York.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It is not real.

BRUCE CONNER: Obviously, the important things in the world revolve around ourselves individually. All of those people in that business of communicating ideas are all in New York. The world has to revolve around New York.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, did you feel left out then, moving to San Francisco, or free? What was your reaction to this, or weren't you aware of this at that time, of what happened in New York? It's cultural tentacles spread everywhere.

BRUCE CONNER: Whatever was happening in New York did not seem to apply to what we were doing at all. Somebody in New York was discovering figurative painting (which I always thought was absurd) in San Francisco. What was that school of figurative painting supposed to be?

PAUL CUMMINGS: David Park and [Elmer] Bischoff and those people.

BRUCE CONNER: Even Diebenkorn was supposed to be figurative, but it was my impression that he did not know how to draw. I had gone to his studio about two years before, in 1955, when I visited Michael. I had just seen his work reproduced in black and white in back pages of *Art Digest* and I really liked it. I think they are "really neat" paintings and I was shocked at these colors that were happening there. I asked him if he ever did any figurative work. He pulled out this one painting with a really grotesque female figure. He said, "Well I try to do at least one figurative painting a year." About 1969, Michael said that he wanted to do a book about me and I never pursued it. I think he mentioned it another time. I did not talk to him about it. I did not think that is what I wanted because when I would talk to Michael about what I was involved in, it would always come back to me filtered through Michael's fantasies and illusions.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, sure.

BRUCE CONNER: Sometimes it would come out totally opposite of what was happening. When I would talk about some work that I produced, he would say, "You mean it was this sort of thing and blah, blah, blah." He kept invariably imposing concepts that I reject.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, it became a catalyst for him and he went off on his own.

BRUCE CONNER: For the rest of my life I would meet people expecting me to explain or discuss Michael McClure's concepts' about me. I would get totally lost in it. It certainly could not be a book about me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. Well, what about the book you did do with him where you did the drawings?

BRUCE CONNER: That is one of the very few things we have ever been able to collaborate on. I had done a whole series of drawings, all of them ten by ten inches using felt tip pens. I had thought about doing a book myself which would be a book of poetry. The drawings all had large, central mandala shapes with circles in the corners. It changed from one drawing to the other. I related to them a kind of writing like the symmetry of the image. I imagined that they were transparent. I thought of several drawings in a book and it would be as if you could see

from one page through to another, one area of one drawing relating to another drawing. How it changed, how they related to each other. How they didn't. I was thinking to position the words symmetrically. And it turned out at the same time that Michael was doing poems which were composed of isolated words. Prior to that book, in '64 in the summer, he was doing beast poems. Beast language poems using isolated words in sequences--roses breath, silver, meat. They were sentences. I suggested to him that he make a deck of cards. He put the words at the top of each card as well as down at the other end of the card. They could be shuffled and they would have all variety of combination. He selected the words that he wanted to be in the deck. He produced one, within a week and a half. I think he gave me a copy of it. He did another one which was printed. He has actually done several of them since then.

Shuffle them and then put them down, like you're playing a game. Put one in the center, at the side, in the middle and so on.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Like tarot cards.

BRUCE CONNER: Yeah, tarot cards. This collaboration started there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But there's no image in the middle of the cards,, is there?

BRUCE CONNER: No, I mean we're collaborating on the level of, poetry.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, I see. Right.

BRUCE CONNER: I was proposing the chance association in the deck of cards using random words as an extension of what he had been working with in written lines. The same sort of thing could come out that way. I myself consider this similar to the process I worked on with collages, using objects that would have meaning in themselves and arranging themselves. I mean it's like playing with a tarot pack.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you do the tarot cards?

BRUCE CONNER: My way. I read how they say you are supposed to do it, but I never do it that way. I do what I do. It's always symmetrical and it's in threes, twos, fours. It's very mathematical. It always works out. The drawing which was on the cover of that book was one of those series of drawings. I told Michael that I wanted to do a deck of cards using that drawing and cutting it up into two by two squares. It was five by five, so twenty-five two by two inch drawings. Dave Haselwood printed them and Michael selected words. The words were printed on each of the four sides of the cards. They worked like tarot. I took one set in to a friend of mine that was in the hospital. He had just had an operation. I got there three hours after the operation. I said, "Here's the set of cards that we've done. Let's shuffle them and see what they say." I shuffled them and I put out four cards and I think they did something like: sharp, knife, rainbow, scar.' It had everything to do with what had happened at that time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Where does the mandala image come from?

BRUCE CONNER: Where does the mandala image come from?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, but where did you pick it up?

BRUCE CONNER: Where did I pick it up? Well, the windows of Chartres and everywhere else that I can think of. Jung says where you pick it up. I read the whole book about it. He says it's a meditative, contemplative kind of thing. It has a purpose. It relates to centering yourself or focusing your attention, your consciousness.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But when did you start using it?

BRUCE CONNER: Well, when I was at the University of Wichita, and the University of Nebraska, I was doing drawings which would have a large central circular image.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see.

BRUCE CONNER: When I was in high school I was borrowing books out of the Wichita Public Library on witchcraft, alchemy, with all those drawings that were used as illustrations in the alchemical works. I thought the illustrations were just fascinating. Most of the things that I do have their basis in my interests in high school and before that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you see the cryptoligian book on magic?

BRUCE CONNER: Yeah. That was one that I was very much aware of. When I came here to New York I think in '51 or '52 I met Lionel and Joan Ziprin. I designed some greeting cards for them. At that time they were making what we call "studio" cards. The only greeting cards that weren't imitations of that monopoly of greetings from

that Kansas City greeting card company. Harry Smith was designing three dimensional Christmas cards. They were satirical with a little bit of black humor and totally unpopular. They were called Ink Weed Studios. They were totally disorganized as business people. They were not a business. They were very much involved in cabala and magic theory, and Tibetan mysticism as well. Harry Smith was very much involved in that. They would tell me stories, fantasies. Lionel gave me a book of cabala that was all in Hebrew. I could not read it but he said it was good for me and it was good luck to have. And it has mandala image in it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were did the Cambridge, Massachusetts period come in? That was what, late in the fifties that you were up there?

BRUCE CONNER: Well, I left San Francisco in 1961 and went to Mexico. In 1958 I got very involved in all kinds of chemical transformations. Besides changing my environment in a lot of different ways, I was involved in theatre, dance and music. I was working on concerts with Terry Riley. We were doing parades through North Beach. I was creating paintings, drawings, assemblages and collages. I was making sculptures and I was doing movies. I was a factory. Working on my total environment.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The movies started early then too.

BRUCE CONNER: 1958 was *A Movie*. Well, I went to Mexico for a year in 1962. Ferus Gallery had bought some collages. I had made seven thousand dollars that year. Everybody told me you could live cheap in Mexico. I planned to go to Mexico and live cheap and produce all these great productions. I'd show them in the United States and sell them. I went to Mexico and found out that all in all it cost me more to live there than it did in San Francisco. It cost a lot traveling to and from the border and everything else that I had to contend with. Nobody bought my work when I wasn't in the neighborhood anymore. At the end of that 12 months I came back to the United States. We had a child. My son, Robert, has born in Mexico in 1963. I was totally penniless. Didn't have any money at all. I went to Wichita and lived there. My parents helped me furnish an apartment, gave me some money. I was there for five or six months. I had met Leary in New York before I went to Mexico. We'd gone around looking for mushrooms in Mexico. I made a movie called *Looking for Mushrooms*. Leary kept telling me I should come to Massachusetts and live. I went there at Christmastime for a week and a half. I liked all the people. I liked the place. Later that spring I drove there. When I arrived I found out that everybody had gone to Mexico and that everything was closing up. I was still practically penniless. I don't know what I had. The only income that I was getting was from whatever had sold at the Alan Gallery. It was really hard scraping. So I got stuck in Massachusetts, I couldn't get out. I got a Ford Foundation grant the next year. That managed it pretty well for us for a year or so. Mainly I got stuck there because of the work I had. I had a whole station wagon full of stuff when I got there. A lot of it was collages and things I was still working on. Couldn't afford to ship the stuff to California. I couldn't move to California. I couldn't afford to move my family and me and this stuff also. I got involved in doing a movie about Kennedy's assassination, which more or less meant living in Brookline. He was born eight or nine blocks from where I was living. I moved back to San Francisco in 1965. I've been there since '65.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, how did you find, you know, life in Massachusetts at that point, with Timothy Leary and the whole--the other people, were they gone pretty much by the time you were settled there?

BRUCE CONNER: I don't know whether I want to talk about they too much because it doesn't really have anything to do much with my art. I did my art in spite of them. They didn't help. They were sort of something that I had to contend with. I lived in this house with Tim Leary, his daughter and son, and Richard Alpert was with them there and about nine other people.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was Alpert there then in

BRUCE CONNER: Who?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Richard Alpert. That was later then.

BRUCE CONNER: Well, this is when he was fired from Harvard and went off to Mexico. He was kicked out of there in a month and a half, came back and he went off to the Virgin Islands. He kept getting kicked out of one place after another.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, around and around.

BRUCE CONNER: And started an organization called I.F.I.F. and it was a very destructive kind of conspicuous consumption of all spiritual and physical materials. It wasn't very positive at all. Very destructive.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So, but eventually ending up back in San Francisco.

BRUCE CONNER: Finally.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You say it like it was a great

BRUCE CONNER: I couldn't show my stuff in Boston. I mean, there wasn't any audience there for me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you had some shows with Swetzoﬀ.

BRUCE CONNER: Yeah, but nobody bought anything.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

BRUCE CONNER: I mean the only person that bought anything was Hyman Swetzoﬀ. He sold a couple of drawings, but I don't remember any collages at all, assemblages. I did like him. He gave me the shows despite the fact that he wasn't doing to make money from them. Reviews were horrid if there were any. The general public reaction was negative.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about the art world around. Did you get involved with

BRUCE CONNER: It's all teachers and professors. The art world revolves around spectator sports. People who don't perform. People who don't create. They sit and watch musicians play somebody else's written music. They watch somebody on the stage performing a play. But they aren't very much interested--as far as I could tell--in a poet talking to them. They weren't very much interested in any living artist. They were much more interested in dead artists. It's a great place for the spectator arts. There's lots of good plays. Lots of theatre, and dance, and music, and that seems to be what it is. They sit down and watch.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But nothing where they get involved.

BRUCE CONNER: No. Oh, they don't want to get involved. Not at all.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, did you know any artists around there or was it that little group of people that you mentioned?

BRUCE CONNER Hyman Bloom. He lived in Brookline about as far away as Kennedy's birthplace. I would see him once in a while. I had always respected him and thought of him as a very fine artist. He doesn't seem to be very much noticed at all nowadays. There seems to be one or two people who buy what he produces. No reason really to exhibit his work. He's picky, he won't let anybody see what his paintings look like. Nobody has seen his paintings for years and years. He invited some people to his studio to see my movie, A Movie. He thought it was a great movie. There were all these canvases there in the racks. Canvases up against the wall. Canvases with big pieces of paper over them. We can't see the forbidden image. Whatever he had been doing, he didn't want anybody to see it. There just weren't any artists for me to associate with. People who had any dynamism. They either adapted to the educational complex, the area, or they had gone to New York. They just get syphoned into New York and that's no reason to return to Boston at all. I went to a surrealist art exhibit at the Museum of Fine Arts. It was the tamest, blandest surrealist exhibition that I can imagine. Like the tamest Magritte that we can think of. The most sane Salvador Dali. The place was filled with these people you see cartoons of in the New Yorker. The dowagers with all their pearls. The short mafia at guy with the cigar in his mouth. And the reaction of these people was "outrage."

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

BRUCE CONNER: They were outraged at the world's tamest surrealist exhibit. "Ways going wrong with our museum?"

PAUL CUMMINGS: What would they do with a real one?

BRUCE CONNER: Well, they never have to be concerned with one. They obviously are being protective. I went to the opening and there were three people that I knew. Somebody who was an art student, who would introduce me to a couple of people who were artists. But, in that whole crowd here didn't seem to be more than four or five people that could be identified as artists. Mostly the people I knew were musicians, George Crevoshay and Larry Leitch. People who are involved in electronic music and performing Richard Maxfield's compositions. I performed in some concerts at Harvard, and at Boston University. Even wrote some.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You did some drawings once that were sort of like music.

BRUCE CONNER: Yeah. That's my music. They look like music. They are music. These musicians can perform it just as well as they can perform John Cage. So it seemed to be musicians and people that I met through musicians. Artists or students. There was a design student at Harvard who had seen my work and he tried to do something like it. He was more like somebody who could talk rather than do things. That's the way people were at Harvard anyway.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Talking.

BRUCE CONNER: Talkers.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who was that?

BRUCE CONNER: You know, if I could remember right off hand, it would be worthwhile. Most of the time prior to 1965 I'd never allowed a photograph of myself to be printed. It would be of the back of my head or something.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Great hoards of people.

BRUCE CONNER: At the University of Illinois there used to be a biennial show. They asked me for a photograph and I sent them a picture of a volcano erupting. When the catalogue came out there was a photo opposite the page with my wax sculpture, The Crucifixion. These was this very sensitive kind young man, large dark eyes and black hair. I had no idea how that had happened. I found out four years later that Thomas Garver was responsible. He had been in charge of putting together the catalogue. When I sent in the volcano, he had decided to pick a picture out of his collection of photographs that he had photographed. He put the picture in.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I see. Why did you do that about the photograph?

BRUCE CONNER: I've got to tell you about the musicians too. The other musicians that I was interested in were people around Jim Keveskin, such as Geoff Muldaur and Mel Lyman. People that were involved in folk music or popular music.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What interested you in music?

BRUCE CONNER: I always liked music.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah?

BRUCE CONNER: I like music a whole bunch. Probably more than any of the visuals. I'm learning to play the piano. It's difficult. I've always had a block against little black dots (written music). Most of the things that I have done I've done backwards. Not the way that you are trained to do it. Most people don't do things intuitively. People who can't relate except in a superimposed structure. I generally find those structures constricting. I know it isn't the way. When I was at Wichita U, I was required to take mechanical drawing. I was drawing cubes and solid forms in perspective. You were trained to draw horizon lines, vanishing points, and then draw the object. But I just drew the object and then the lines to a vanishing point on the horizon. Always worked exactly. It was the opposite. The reverse of what they were telling me to do. I got all "A's". It filled the obligation. I had to make movies just like that. I have my own ways of working things. It's why I've had a lot of problems with teachers who were teaching art. They would give assignments with a certain kind of construction. I was taking a life drawing class and the teacher didn't want me to do the drawing I was doing. They weren't "good drawings." I tried to explain (although I didn't have the vocabulary at the time) that it wasn't good drawings that I needed to do. I knew how to do a drawing that he would say was "good." A drawing that would have the flowing line and the composition and everything else required. I wanted to find out what was "THERE." It meant that I was making diagrams of drawing, partially drawing images or putting shading in places where none of it was consistent. I was trying to figure out the structure of things, not what you can pin up on the wall.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It looks like something that had already happened though.

BRUCE CONNER: Yeah, something that had already happened. I couldn't explain to him. It had happened out of the experience. And it's the same with music. I got involved in music when I had a show at the University of Chicago in 1963. At that time there was a band playing once every week on campus. It was called the "Twist Band," and the man who was running it was Paul Butterfield. Played amplified harmonica. I had never heard anything like that before. Playing harmonica was something you didn't have to tune. You wouldn't have to learn notes. You could carry it around in your pocket.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about the amplifiers?

BRUCE CONNER: You know, you could decide whether you wanted to or not. I learned how to play the harmonica. I messed around on the piano, pretending that I was playing Bartok when I was nineteen years old. Maybe deceiving the guy who was teaching piano music that I actually was playing Bartok. Now I'm playing organ or piano that sounds like music. But I've never learned formal music training.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what kind of music? I mean whose music?

BRUCE CONNER: Whose music? My music.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you say it as if what you've been doing before wasn't music or was leading to music or was something else.

BRUCE CONNER: I was not learning music. I didn't learn music structure and form. The situation where you don't learn to play your music, you don't learn to improvise music, you don't learn to make music. You learn other people's music. After years and years of having those aspects of your consciousness atrophy, and be distorted then you supposedly are going to be--if you're a real exceptional person--somebody that can write music. My experience is that the more you get involved in that formula and the way they require you to think that the more difficult it becomes. I've only found things that work. If it works I want something to be glued down and stay on the wall more than thirty minutes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It works.

BRUCE CONNER: And if it falls off an hour later and makes a mess on the floor then I've got to find out something else to do with it. It's that kind of practicality that I'm speaking of. A lot of things that I've been involved in I've done because nobody else was doing them. I would make a certain kind of movie because nobody else had done it. Not because it's brand new, but because it was a movie that I wanted to see. I kept wondering why nobody had done it. When *Last Year at Marienbad* came out, I read reviews of it and I thought somebody had made the movie that I wanted to make. Time, space, breakup, past, future, bits and parts of concepts and still photographs. Everything coming together into one concept. Thinking. Total consciousness of all you're involved in. Future expectations and past memories. Building on top of them. Things, of their own accord, start breaking in on top of it. None of the arts are totally separate.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you know, that's interesting because I was going to ask you if you see an interrelationship between music, collage, films, drawings?

BRUCE CONNER: They are different forms to use.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you see them, you know, as different aspects of the same ideas expressed through, say, music in this instance, or films or are they kind of equal but parallel patterns that you follow, and move from one to the other. Or do they blend together at certain points?

BRUCE CONNER: I'm sure that's all true. What you said is all part of it. The same things appear in different places. Parallel. Merging one into another. Opportune things. The time that it happens and where the situation is. Producing something at a certain moment in time has a lot to do with what it means. At the time it's made it has that time and subsequently it's going to continue to change. Things that I've worked on I expected or even pushed them to make them change. Layers of paint that I know are going to crack. I know in a period of time, sometime in the distant future, the paint will come loose revealing what is underneath it. My collages are things built on top of other things. A lot of different surfaces that aren't just patterns and such.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You mean underneath.

BRUCE CONNER: Underneath. There is also the potentiality of how somebody is going to relate to it. I never put frames around the collages. That's one reason why they didn't sell so well. Potential buyers thought something was wrong with them because they weren't framed and "finished." If they're a part of your environment they should be able to sit there in the middle of it

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's very amusing because I have a collage of yours which is about so square and little pieces keep falling off of it, little sort of black things, fuzzy things and it was sold to me by Dioz and it was really in good condition except that these things are falling off of it. And if you would look at it now there are a lot more things that are falling off of it. And I'm sure he'd be terribly nervous about that. Ultimately, a great chunk will fall off revealing

BRUCE CONNER: How long is any of it going to last anyway? We come back here in another six months and you'll find the menus changed.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Or the whole decor will be gone and it will

BRUCE CONNER: How do you relate those things to the museum concept? It's an obvious part of the environment. You're not going to limit anything by putting a frame around it. It's limited or it expands because of the context it's in.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you know, it's interesting because before we started this we were saying that you hadn't talked about the art, your art activities and talking about the films recently. And Amy Baker last night said to me that when she had the print show on a couple of months ago at the gallery, that so many people came in saying, "Yeah, Bruce Conner films needed, too"

BRUCE CONNER: Or they came in looking for Bruce Conner collages.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

BRUCE CONNER: Or sculptures.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. What about these different things, is that a problem for you to cope with that people see you as

BRUCE CONNER: Yeah, because there's an audience that expects a certain thing. They're not there looking for what Bruce Conner is doing. They haven't had the opportunity to dig that much into what Bruce Conner's doing. They come with the assumption that I'm like other artists who only do one thing or variations of that one thing forever and ever.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The watercolor in six sizes with six different prices.

BRUCE CONNER: Or the, you know, the dot pattern, reproduction technique, Lichtenstein, or

PAUL CUMMINGS: Handy silk screens, whatever.

BRUCE CONNER: Some artist is going to make his sculptures out of wrought iron forever and ever. He almost invariably does because that's what everybody expects from him.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How do you cope with that external pressure and that sort of vague image that film people have, art people have, music people have?

BRUCE CONNER: I can't do much about it except tell them that there's something else. I haven't got the energy to tell them what all the other things are.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right. But do you find that it's a kind of hand on your shoulder, or

BRUCE CONNER: I'm crazy about this silverware.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, well they want a good stainless steel. But the whole business, their similarities, does that give you problems or does it tie together from your point of view that it's just another manifestation of the activity?

BRUCE CONNER: Well, I don't want to have to explain to people or sell what it is that I'm doing. There ought to be somebody out there who's going to do my biography while it's happening. Theoretically

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's still happening.

BRUCE CONNER: Yeah, but I mean Andy Warhol had his biography. And Lichtenstein. All these people get their biography coming out as often as possible.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Dealers who printed up and

BRUCE CONNER: Somebody's talking about what Rauschenberg did last month. My situation is that nobody knows what the shit I've done the last nine years until it comes out in this show at the Martha Jackson Gallery. Nobody's prepared them for it. Nobody has any idea how it relates to anything else. I mean how it relates to anything in the past.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, it's true because people would look at, say, a drawing I have, a collage or whatever there is to anything. "Look at that," I'd say. "Bruce Conner did that." They'd say, "He makes films," you know. And I'd say, "But that's....," and they can't....

BRUCE CONNER: I got a Ford Foundation grant for filmmaking. I got an application blank which I tore up and threw away because I decided it was a waste of time. That was '63. I talked to somebody else later who said, "Why don't you do it. I work at the Ford Foundation. Why don't you fill the thing out because it's sort of like a game." I decided I would play it as a game. I would play it like a dialogue between me and an invisible audience. I'm exposing myself telling them all of my history. My vaccinations. Explaining my whole theory of art and life and what I intend to do in the future. How I'm to use whatever alms they will give me. I started drawing parallels of this kind of activity with religious rituals. Confessionals, and ringing of bells, and doing penance in the streets. Fantasies of movies that I would make. It offered me a chance to fantasize. It was my opportunity to write in an entirely different context. I've never been able to write in the context of publication. I knew all the crap that you have to go through. You write it. You type it out. You make a bunch of copies. You send them out to all the magazines. Over the next two years you'll get the copies back. It's most disastrous. I've never been able to do

that. This was a way for me to have an audience. I would write letters. Well they loved it. Somebody loved it. They gave me a film grant and all I had made was sixteen minutes of movies. And I didn't expect to get it because there were a lot of other filmmakers who were more qualified and should have gotten it. Like Stan Brakhage was the man who had most to do with me getting into filmmaking, and he didn't get one. He really should have.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you do that?

BRUCE CONNER: Do what?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Get into filmmaking, in that way?

BRUCE CONNER: Well, I was involved in film societies and he was the first filmmaker I had ever met. When I was at the University of Colorado I started a group called the Experimental Cinema Group. We had ten film programs. Four hundred and fifty people joined the group for three dollars. The films were experimental film, old avant-garde films, historical films, silent films, foreign films, etc. There were a couple of his friends in the group. Brakhage would come from Denver and advise us. He brought his films and showed them. He told me I ought to make movies. But I didn't want to. When I got to San Francisco I knew Larry Jordan, who was sort of a student of his. I mean, he was a friend of Stan's and the films that he was making were very similar to Stan's. We started a film society and I ended up using his film equipment. I was able to get into a position where I would be encouraged and actually have the equipment and learn how to splice film. It depended on me and Stan Brakhage and Larry Jordan. At that time there were no film classes anywhere in the United States. There was one at NYU that Hans Richter was teaching. But you had to have two years of undergraduate study in something like sociology before you could take his class. The other one was at UCLA. It was a technical course for film technicians.

PAUL CUMMINGS: For the Hollywood business, yeah.

BRUCE CONNER: And now there's a hundred and fifty thousand film students in this country.

PAUL CUMMINGS: True.

BRUCE CONNER: Well, it wasn't easy to do it, and the kind of movies that I made weren't like anybody else's movies. With the Ford Foundation grant all of a sudden instead of being an artist that had made a couple of short films, I became a filmmaker who dabbled in the arts.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Identityship.

BRUCE CONNER: And the first major demonstration I had of what had happened was when Brian O'Doherty, New York Times I was having a ten-year retrospective at the Alan Gallery. A selection of collages of over ten years at the Alan Gallery in '64. O'Doherty came and saw the show. Charles told me he wanted to write about the show and he'd like to see my two movies. I showed him the movies. The review came out and it was spectacular. It was like one-third of a page, on Sunday. Three-quarters of it was about the movies. People came to the gallery and said, "Where are the movies? What's this junk on the walls?" I was very proud of the show. I wanted people to see what I had done. This kind of notice was something that I had always wanted. It meant some attention was going to be paid. But it was totally diverted and twisted around. The gallery sold two things out of the show. Didn't make enough to pay for the announcements. I decided to make a movie to ruin my reputation as a filmmaker.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Which one was that?

BRUCE CONNER: It's--nobody has seen it outside of the one time it was shown. It's called Leader, and was designed to drive the audience out of the theatre. They could say, "He used to be a good filmmaker before he got the Ford grant and that ruined him." That was the purpose. But it was shown in Boston at the Swetznoff Gallery and Bob Brown had got Flaming Creatures, which had an underground reputation as a dirty artistic movie. The "aesthetic people" of Boston were arriving to see this dirty movie. They might get raided by the police, but it's very--really not a dirty movie. It's artistic, right, but maybe we'll see something. And instead of showing my movie at the end of the program, he showed it before Flaming Creatures. Of course they hated it. And it became a scandal. They unplugged the projector, they yelled and screamed, and honked the car horns outside. They unplugged the projector again. Took away the movie screen. It became a celebrated cause. My attempt to ruin my reputation as a filmmaker failed immediately. They heard about it in New York. Jonas Mekas wanted to buy it and show it at the Cinematheque and to put in the

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was it made of? A series of leaders?

BRUCE CONNER: It was just leader. Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, down to three. That's all it was for thirty-five minutes. So the only other thing that was happening was the sound track.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Which was?

BRUCE CONNER: Which was recorded off of a television dramatization of American soldiers captured by the Nazis. It came through a television set (which had some distortion) onto a tape machine. It was then rerecorded over and over and transferred onto another tape. That tape was transferred onto sound negative and then transferred onto the film. So it had all these generations. It ended up like a third of the sound was inaudible. It was difficult to understand. You had to pay attention. And since it obviously wasn't visual, it had to be aural and it took a lot of effort. There were whole dramatic sections that I repeated. Basically it was dialogue between the filmmaker and the audience. The filmmaker was the Nazis that had captured the Americans. "You Americans are embarrassed you have been captured. Well, you won't get away." "We've got to get out of here. We got to get out of here." I'd repeat phrases like that over and over and over. "We can't stay here. We got to get out of here. If we get the gate open we can get out of here." By the end of a program and by the end of the movie everybody would have left. They would have gone out the exits. I mean, I was making it for myself as an audience, but it was also a dramatization which would eventually be told as a story to you through this microphone.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In a way you were dramatizing the audience, too.

BRUCE CONNER: Yeah, they were part of my work.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You haven't shown it since?

BRUCE CONNER: Well, I sent it to the co-op. I wanted them to sell it by the foot. I should have said, don't sell more than ten feet. People could buy a Bruce Conner film at thirty cents a foot. But then Jonas wanted to buy the whole reel. That meant it was going to go out as a film. I told them to send it back. When I was in San Francisco there was a funk art show. Sheldon Renan put on a show which was supposed to be funk film.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh really.

BRUCE CONNER: Afterwards there was supposed to be a panel discussion. I had that roll of film loose without any reel on it. I handed one end of it to same people in the first row and held it up. It went zigging and zagging through the whole audience. They wrapped it around their heads. They tore off parts. They threw it. It was a good audience. Berkeley audiences are good participatory audiences. And that's where the film went. That was the end of it. Well, it exists. It did what I wanted it to. It went into pieces and parts and went into other I've seen parts of things appear in other people's work. I think that is entirely a part of the process. Coming next week, the next tape that will come up we can start examining specific ibids and ivices from the past.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you know there are marvelous things that we haven't gotten into, such as your adventures at Tamarind.

BRUCE CONNER: Oh. You know, of all these should be broken up into, you know, the subject of discussion. That's sort of why I wanted to start out getting a general structure. Like, I never mentioned Tamarind. But, there are other things, you know, that would be, could be, used as pivotal points to talk about.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, there are a lot of things I don't know about you.

BRUCE CONNER: I have a lot of stories to tell.

PAUL CUMMINGS: About the world. You mean people.

BRUCE CONNER: No, it's another art form. I might project or assume the character of a personality. Like the person that's producing this is the Black Dahlia, and it's also the person that killed the Black Dahlia. Instead of there being individual actors before me, I'm using objects and characters that aren't defined as separate performing characters. Mental attitudes. The relationship of victim to assassin. Positive to negative. But they're both lovers. I mean, the Black Dahlia is loose within the structure of the attack of the man who had destroyed her. It's all basically love or passion that's been distorted and altered. Changed because of social or cultural imposition. But :hat I would get back from the culture of this society would be hate. Which, you know, isn't it at all. Or, you know, things which might be critical of the falsity of

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did they say because of the nylon stockings and all

BRUCE CONNER: Yeah, yeah. I mean all that sort of thing that might be attacked as male chauvinism now. It's a cliché., and it's something somebody doesn't want to get into. Very superficial, but that's more or less what the attitude was. Such an identification with all this sort of high heel shoes, long fingernails, costume jewelry, and all

the disguises of women. Which are like some kind of theatrics that may disguise really a horrible creature.

PAUL CUMMINGS: They are theatrics. Not a kind of. They are.

BRUCE CONNER: Well sometimes

END OF INTERVIEW

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