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ONE

PEYOTE FRONTIER

THE YOUNG BRUCE CONNER HAD BEEN UNABASHED in sizing up the prospects for his art career in both New York and San Francisco. On a first foray to the art capital in 1953, he had gone so far as to cold-call Robert Motherwell, securing a studio visit and conversation with this admired senior figure. Two years later, on the strength of a term scholarship to the art school then housed in the Brooklyn Museum, he arrived with portfolio and slides under his arm, his perseverance and his tolerance for the expected rejections yielding the prize of long-term affiliation with the estimable Charles Alan Gallery on Madison Avenue. The restless young artist, still in the midst of graduate studies at the University of Colorado, next traveled to San Francisco, where he stayed for a month with Michael McClure, the poet who had been his closest school friend from Wichita. As he had sought out Motherwell in New York, he approached Richard Diebenkorn as a comparable doyen of the local scene. Nearly two decades afterward, his choking experience on first seeing Diebenkorn's art in person remained vivid enough to prompt this rich analogy: "it was like too much icing. It was like eating sweet and sour pork for the first time and then having a banana split afterward. The only way I could think about comparing them was it was like a little too much at one time for me to take."¹

It would not then appear to have been the city's reigning style of painting that prompted Conner and his wife, the artist Jean Sandstedt Conner, to opt for San Francisco in 1957, but he at least knew he would no longer fear the life of the friendless outcast he had felt himself to be in New York—despite all the professional encouragement he had received: "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."² Perhaps his most trenchant work from his last stay in the city during 1956 meditated on the epic poetry of incarcerated torment to be found in Dante's *Inferno*. Already skilled as a printmaker, he crafted a dense drawing with pen, brush, and ink that emulates the fine hatching and border of an etching in order to bring into visibility the head of the poet's Florentine mentor Brunetto Latino (fig. 3), in life a distinguished writer and civic official, suddenly encountered in the parched, scalding sands traversed by the elliptically characterized "Sodomites," as rendered here in the widely read English translation of the 1950s by John Ciardi:

And I, when he stretched out his arm to me,
searched his baked features closely, till at last
I traced his image from my memory

in spite of the burnt crust, and bending near
to put my face closer to his, at last

I answered: "Ser Brunetto, are you here?" (*Inferno*, 15.25–30)

With simultaneous density and economy, Conner's drawing translates both the blackened features of Brunetto's bulbous, scorched-bare skull and the effort entailed in discerning the revered likeness beneath it, a shadow shadowed by the abyss that lies just beyond the rim of scalding sand and raining embers on which the narrator and Virgil at that moment find themselves. Their alternatively halting and hectic movement among the damned could well be described as "passing through passageways to get from one safe haven to another," always encircled, as Conner characterized the city, by an enclosing rim that blocked out the world: "I could rim as long as I wanted to and I still would not be able to see the horizon."

No such problems awaited him on the hillsides of San Francisco. The fact that McClure and his poet-spouse, Joanna, were already established there, living in the Western Addition building with compellingly unorthodox visual artists like Jay DeFeo and Wally Hedrick, another sympathetic married couple, doubtless played a large part in their choice. Conner nonetheless acknowledges that "most of the people that I knew or knew about here were poets . . . And all of the people that moved out here were more involved in literary things than the visual arts."³ McClure had, in fact, first migrated to the city wanting to study abstract painting with Clyfford Still at the California School of Fine Arts. Discovering that Still was no longer in residence, he found his life-long vocation on joining a poetry workshop at San Francisco State College with Robert Duncan (who enjoyed close ties to the art world via his partner, Jess Collins, and the social hub they made of their shared, four-story Victorian house in the Mission District).⁴ Nor was the most pressing reason for Conner's move to San Francisco a matter pertaining to either art form. Having left higher education, his Boulder M.F.A. unfinished, Conner was now subject to the military draft and determined to fail the medical examination. Here the liberal environment of the Bay Area, its receptiveness to eccentricity and wider allowance for psychiatric anomalies, made it more likely he would strike an examining physician open to the playacting he had in mind—in the service of which he transformed himself into the just the sort of forlorn outcast he had felt himself to have been in New York.

He turned up on McClure's doorstep in this willfully derelict condition, as the poet recalled: "Here was Bruce, whiskers growing in different directions, his face smeared, his clothes tattered and torn, dishevelment that would make Hamlet at his worst look like a sartorial exclusive."⁵ According to McClure, Conner completed his disheveled appearance with "the first Rat Bastard that I ever saw. It looked like a canvas with a handle on it . . . feathers sticking out, dolls heads in it, peyote buttons in it." That recollection appears to conflate



4 Bruce Conner, RAT BASTARD NO. 1 (front), 1958, wood, canvas, nylon, newspaper, photographic reproduction, wire, oil paint, nails, bead chain, etc., 42 × 23.5 × 7 cm, Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Gift of Lannan Foundation, 1997

this inaugural prototype with one or more that followed (no doll's head nor actual peyote buttons).⁶ For his part, Conner described the object (fig. 4) as taking on its own "persona": a "wounded" painting that he had attacked and then bandaged with nylon stockings, affixed with "a picture of a cadaver on an operating table . . . with wire and wood representing bones and structure."⁷ From these operations emerged a spell-casting fetish-object crafted to defeat the morbid powers of the war machine.

One way or another, Conner achieved his goal of exemption from the draft, and RAT BASTARD NO. 1 came to engender dozens more in a similar vein.⁸ But there is much bound up in this episode that goes beyond colorfully self-interested behavior. The date of Conner's draft resistance, which is what it was, came nearly a decade before the escalation of American draftees being sent to Vietnam, when such evasion became understandably widespread. The peacetime American military of the late 1950s was a largely non-lethal proposition. At the same moment, for example, the future novelist Robert Stone, who would become a Kesey-aligned countercultural figure during the mid-1960s, was willingly serving aboard a naval transport in the South Indian Ocean. Future light-and-space master James Turrell, who figures in the following chapter for his efforts to shield others from conscription, was then preparing to serve as a CIA pilot in Southeast Asia in order to fulfill his lawful military obligation as a conscientious objector. Irving Petlin, who will likewise emerge in that chapter as a key figure in bending art toward indictment of the Vietnam War, was at that moment leading a secret life as an Army intelligence non-com at the Presidio, all the while taking as full a part in the same San Francisco art scene as was Conner. In the context of the late years of the Eisenhower administration, Conner's actions stand out for their fierce anti-militarism and intention to subvert the law, deemed by him a force inimical to his personal survival. In the service of this subversion, he resorted to the artificial cultivation of extreme states of mind and body, self-transformation projected onto an uncomprehending world with extravagant outward dramatics: key traits in any definition of the counterculture.

RAT BASTARD NO. 1, bearing its charge of spleen and painful imaginings of authority and military discipline, bolstered his cause as he faced down the draft board's medical exam. Its contents are obscured from the front by dark nylon wrapping, but the other side offers a ragged newspaper clipping (fig. 5), its subject the staged photographs made by one William Langley of Dallas, in which costumed models posed for *tableaux vivants* re-creating ancient forms of torture. The featured example, its naked male figure in a crucifixion pose, is captioned: "The original 'Hot Foot' was the so-called 'Boot' in which the feet of prisoners were destroyed by ladles of molten metal."⁹ Nor was he finished with this line of analogy, the next year amplifying it in a far more public fashion when a more immediately urgent parallel to the moral case against the Cold War militarization had emerged in the campaign against capital punishment.

For more than ten years Caryl Chessman, imprisoned at San Quentin on northern San Francisco Bay, had been fighting a sentence of death for robberies and sex crimes that met no plausible legal threshold for execution. His memoir of confinement and plea for justice,



5 Bruce Conner, RAT BASTARD NO. 1 (back), 1958, wood, canvas, nylon, newspaper, photographic reproduction, wire, oil paint, nails, bead chain, etc., 42 x 23,5 x 7 cm, Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Gift of Lannan Foundation, 1997

smuggled out of the prison, became an international bestseller and an enormous impetus for the cause of abolition.

The cause and the uproar around it drew Conner for the first time into the topical arena of politics. Using a cast-off high chair as a support, he began sculpting an agonized stand-in for Chessman out of black wax, a figure that transformed itself as he worked it into a tortured and mutilated victim, gagged and bound with torn nylon (fig. 6). He called it CHILD, and for once such a gesture had an immediate public impact, sending visitors away horrified from the annual exhibition of the San Francisco Art Association, perhaps shocked as much by the adult genitals as by the ravaged face—or so reported the censorious critics, relishing the prospect of scandal from the “beatnik” fringe.¹⁰ Much is made in the literature on Conner of the later destiny of CHILD after he sent it to New York as part of his solo exhibition at the Charles Alan Gallery.¹¹ From there it passed to the collection of the august Museum of Modern Art, but not before an interim, private purchase by one of MoMA’s trustees, Philip Johnson, as a buffer to absorb its rebarbative character, much as Johnson had done a short time before with Jasper Johns’s 1956 *Flag*, out of apprehension over its putative mockery of the national symbol. Unlike Johns’s soon-to-be-celebrated work, however, Conner’s CHILD, possibly damaged in transport and prone to deterioration, languished unconserved in storage for many decades. During the interval between its two early moments of exhibition in the confines of art, however, Conner found another use for CHILD, one that made the most of the work’s saturation in talismanic ritual and torment, thus to be wielded like a power-object akin to RAT BASTARD NO. 1.

Chessman had finally been sent to the gas chamber in May 1960, following a signal failure of courage on the part of California’s liberal governor Edmund Brown. Thousands of students from San Francisco, Berkeley, and the surrounding area staged mass protests at the prison. Two months later, many of the same students were among the two thousand demonstrators protesting hearings in the city by the Un-American Activities Committee of the United States Congress, which had for more than a decade deployed its powers of subpoena to hound deviants from America’s anti-socialist orthodoxy, ruining careers and jailing witnesses on contrived charges of perjury and contempt of Congress. In a confrontation that turned the event into “Black Friday,” riot police beat two hundred protesters on the steps of the city hall. On the following day, when the demonstration swelled to five thousand, Conner joined the protest, carrying the heavy, awkward CHILD on his shoulders, with a sign affixed reading “Stop Police Brutality.” One smartly dressed young organizer confronted him over the repulsive character of the sculpture, complaining that it violated the high-minded decorum his committee wished to maintain and unnecessarily provoked the police.¹²

It has been too easy to split the New Left off from the counterculture, as capacity for moral witnessing and protest remained inseparable from the latter’s larger collective dissent from conformity and obedience. But an undeterred Conner had nonetheless provoked, at an early stage, what would become a persistent tension between the reasoned ethical appeals proffered by much of the New Left and the non-rational powers conjured by the counter-



6 Bruce Conner, CHILD (detail), 1959,
mixed media, 87.7 × 43.1 × 41.7 cm,
The Museum of Modern Art, New York

culture—even when their basic sentiments were aligned. Looking back in 1968, in conversation with the *Rolling Stone* magazine critic Thomas Albright, Conner would reflect that he had “always been involved in mysticism—Zen, alchemy, magic, all that stuff.”¹³ In the enlightened museums of the present, power objects revered by the traditional cultures that made them are kept from the view of the uninitiated public. In the long sequestering of CHILD in the MoMA storerooms, there may have been some unconscious perception of its inherent curse on the compromises with corrupt forms of authority (for example, the youthful record of Philip Johnson as a fervent Nazi sympathizer) on which the institution depended.

■

Analogous themes manifested themselves less overtly but just as profoundly in a large assemblage of the same year to which Conner gave the title *TEMPTATION OF ST. BARNEY GOOGLE* (fig. 8). The titular character was the furthest thing from saintly on the menu of popular

culture, a timeworn newspaper cartoon of a tattered, bug-eyed, racetrack tout that was first launched in 1919. But that comic indirection served Conner as a disingenuous alibi for his taking on the theme of demonic temptation in its most sublime artistic manifestation. In the legend of Saint Anthony, the desert hermit of the early Church overcame both the sensual enticements sent by Satan and the deadly blows of bestial creatures in a rocky, Egyptian cave. Among the many authoritative representations of the saint’s ordeal, the configuration of Conner’s assemblage points to one in particular: *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* by Matthias Grünewald on an inside wing of his testament to ultimate torment, the Isenheim altarpiece (fig. 7). Not for the last time, Conner would dispose his apparently improvised concatenations of disparate flotsam and nylon mesh into a composition that rhymes with the arrangement of an old-master painting. In the early literature of the Church, God was said to have observed Anthony’s mortal struggles from afar, only later praising him for his stalwart resistance to the swarming personifications of sin and evil. Grünewald places his divinity inside a loosely solar aura at the pinnacle of the composition, to which Conner responds with a shrouded lunar disk filling in the altar-like arch at the top of the



7 Matthias Grünewald, *Temptation of Saint Anthony*, 1512–16, oil on wood, 265 × 141 cm, Musée d’Unterlinden, Colmar



8 Bruce Conner, TEMPTATION OF ST. BARNEY GOOGLE, 1959,
mixed media, 21.1 × 42 cm,
Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, Vienna

panel. One skein of stocking, stretched to a point from right to left across the center, echoes the arms of two creatures reaching toward the bald pate of the hermit, while the shallow curve of a skein below tracks the prominent fold in the cloak of the saint. A collection of bundles with an old vacuum tube occupy the place in the lower left occupied by swollen, diseased body of a peasant in the Grünewald panel.

It is an art-historical commonplace to note that the complex altarpiece, housed in what was a monastery hospital in the Franco-German Alsace, is dedicated to the healing of “Saint Anthony’s fire,” a debilitating ergotism induced by a mold on grain. Hence the prominence

of skin sores on this peasant figure and on the body of the crucified Christ himself in the principal tableau. Centuries later, this same substance would yield the refined hallucinogen LSD, lycergic acid being the molecular core of ergot. While the Swiss pharmaceutical researcher Albert Hofmann had long before synthesized what he named LSD-25 in 1938, it stayed largely out of view until shortly before Conner composed his *TEMPTATION OF ST. BARNEY GOOGLE*. At the initiative of the Beverly Hills psychiatrists Oscar Janiger and Sidney Cohen a select coterie of wealthy celebrities, Cary Grant among them, were being administered the drug in therapeutic sessions; Aldous Huxley first obtained the drug from the same source.¹⁴ None of this was likely a secret from Conner. As will emerge in detail below, a friend and clinician, the psychiatrist Michael Agron at the University of California medical campus in San



9 Shirley, Tosh, and Wallace Berman, c. 1957, photograph by Charles Brittin, Charles Brittin Collection, Getty Research Library, Los Angeles

Francisco, as noted in the Prologue, had already embarked on his own use of psychotropic drugs for therapeutic purposes.

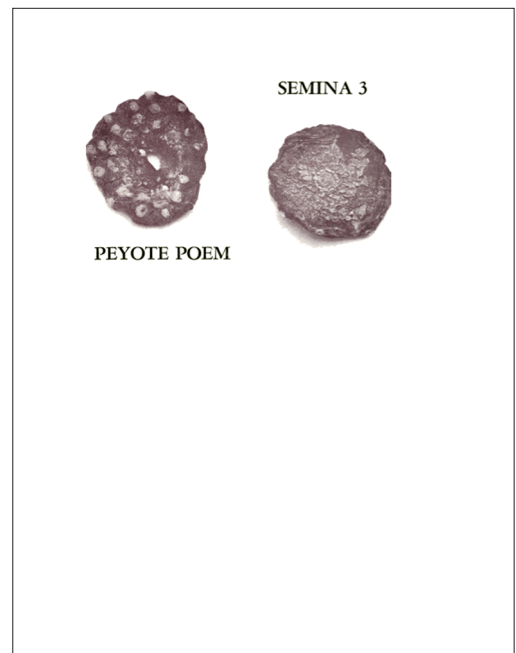
At that juncture, adventurous spirits among the San Francisco bohemians favored more organically derived hallucinogens that had the imprimatur of Native American ritual sanctity. Michael McClure, harking back to 1958, writes at length about his introduction to the mescaline-bearing pulp from the buttons of the peyote cactus, describing its preparation and sacramental ingestion “for joy, for consciousness, for spiritual elevation, for what the Romantic poet Keats called ‘Soul-making.’” It is probably safe to correlate “joy” with getting high to an ecstatic degree beyond the pleasures of marijuana, which moreover brought, for

that moment at least, no legal jeopardy. This mind catalyst came to McClure from the recent Los Angeles transplant Wallace Berman (fig. 9), whom he called a “mystic painter and photographer” and his “peyote father.”¹⁵

Berman had been a long-admired leading light in bohemian circles, a tireless disseminator of experimental writing and graphics via *Semina*, his finely printed, unbound journal of poetry and prints that he assembled and mailed to friends at irregular intervals starting in 1955. An exhibition of his sculpture in 1957 had led to his arrest and conviction on a far-fetched charge of public obscenity; at the announcement of the verdict, he had compounded his punishment by writing on a courtroom chalkboard: “There is no justice, only revenge.” His fine paid by a friend, the actor Dean Stockwell, Berman then fled the city with his wife, Shirley, and their young son, Tosh, for the more tolerant environs of San Francisco, where they first established themselves at the end of 1957 within blocks of both the McClures and the Connors in the Western Addition.

The publication of *Semina* came with them, the old circle of free spirits like Stockwell sporadically augmenting their new, like-minded community in San Francisco. When *Semina* 3 appeared in 1958, its cover sheet announced McClure’s poetic translation of the transforming experience, his “adventure of consciousness,” induced by ingesting peyote, the title juxtaposed with cropped photographs of a peyote button as an isolated disc from the front and back (fig. 10). The poem reads in part, “My eyes won’t focus but leap. / I see I have three feet. / I see seven places at once! / . . . Flashes / of light / and meldings. I wait / seeing the physical things pass.”¹⁶

And that psychedelic bond encompassed Conner, who matched McClure’s forthrightness on more than one occasion, proposing his sculpture as visual and tactile correspondences to the peyote experience. He confided to Albright, “I had a lot to do with psychedelics up till the time I stopped doing assemblages—I thought of myself like George Catlin traveling across the country into a new territory, then coming back and making a report. But I decided this represented a kind of arbitrary role-taking, communicating something that couldn’t really be communicated.”¹⁷ The ethnography of peyote ingestion as a Native American rite very likely prompted his thoughts turning to Catlin, the nineteenth-century explorer-painter who specialized in Native-American subjects. And his regretful confession of untranslatability may parallel a tactful unwillingness to presume entry into that culture, however



10 Wallace Berman, *Semina* 3, 1958, cover sheet, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

extravagantly the mythic Native American would be admired and aped within the 1960s counterculture.¹⁸

Conner's remark nonetheless fully acknowledges that the much-admired assemblages he fashioned between 1958 and 1964 were, indeed, apart from anything else, "reports" of rewired associations and mental dislocations from inside psychotropic episodes. Allen Ginsberg offered a cognate account, pithier than McClure's, of sharing peyote with his companion Peter Orlovsky in San Francisco during the writing of *Howl*, a few years before. As they stood at the main traffic intersection of North Beach, he recalled, "I looked into Peter's eyes, and I couldn't find anyone there . . . It was shock when we looked at each other and perceived two phantom ghosts with empty eyes, laughing fiendishly."¹⁹ And Conner's recollection of one peyote voyage accords with Ginsberg's shocking encounter with the self as a stranger:

I experienced myself as this very tenuously held-together construction—the tendons and muscles and organs loosely hanging around inside—and it seemed like at any moment disaster could strike and you could fall apart. I mean, you were just held together by this thin skin and strings of flesh. And shortly after that I started working on a number of named pieces, but the first one was SNORE, which has all these organ-like lumps of things.²⁰

Though relatively small at three feet in height, the hunched, upright configuration of SNORE (fig. 11) approximates a human shape, its chest and cranium hollow voids in which space and substance change places. For matter analogous to this stretched, frayed, barely holding encasement, Conner's brilliant choice was the torn and laddered nylon stocking, a manufactured material he had tried out as the bandages in *RAT BASTARD NO. 1* and as the restraints in *CHILD*. Its fragility, transparency, and web-like patterns when stressed all suited the theme of incipient physical disintegration; but it inescapably carried disturbingly uncanny, perversely eroticized associations with the epidermis to which it normally clings.



Conner was at the time disciplining himself to produce one new piece in some medium every day, using a studio space adjoining the storage of props and costumes maintained by the San Francisco Mime Troupe.²¹ It is more than telling that Conner would have been so linked to this acting ensemble almost from its inception, as the Mime Troupe's trajectory runs like a bright thread through the entire saga of the San Francisco counterculture. Founded in 1959 by Ronny Davis, the group's name derived from the fanciful grotesqueries of the bygone Italian *commedia dell'arte*, which had dominated popular entertainment in Europe from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries. In a kind of pastoral return to a putatively simpler but more vivid time, Davis embraced the highly stylized artifice, cross-dressing, and disguise that characterized the genre, its broad comedic types, and declamatory acting style, along with its itinerant mode of production: rough platforms set up in public parks, a hat passed round after performances.



11 Bruce Conner, *SNORE*, 1960,
mixed media, 92.7 × 44.5 × 54.6 cm,
Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

It merits a pause in this account to note in definitional terms the salient place of the Mime Troupe in the development of the San Francisco counterculture, at this juncture barely visible but due to borrow much of its outward aspect and attitudes from Davis's company. The Troupe itself offered a model for communal, self-organized, and self-sufficient survival on one's own terms. Perhaps less obvious but central was the practice they pioneered of freely appropriating the city's public parks as places for group assembly, play, and growing self-recognition. More overt were the eclectically fanciful costumes, which members of the audience began taking up themselves as templates for rebelliously out-of-time self-fashioning. Turning the irreverence inherent in his chosen theatrical tradition toward intransigent Leftist agitation, Davis began regularly clashing with Parks authorities, confounding the usual bifurcation between hippies and militants. These legal imbroglios hastened the development of an intensified community consciousness, as San Francisco musicians rallied behind the group with benefit concerts, these then setting the pattern for the burgeoning ballroom scene to follow. A breakaway group of Mime Troupe actors, eager to turn their energy and personal charisma toward a utopian social project, became the fabled Diggers, who proved the most inventive and bold organizers of alternative institutions to feed and clothe the hippie influx.

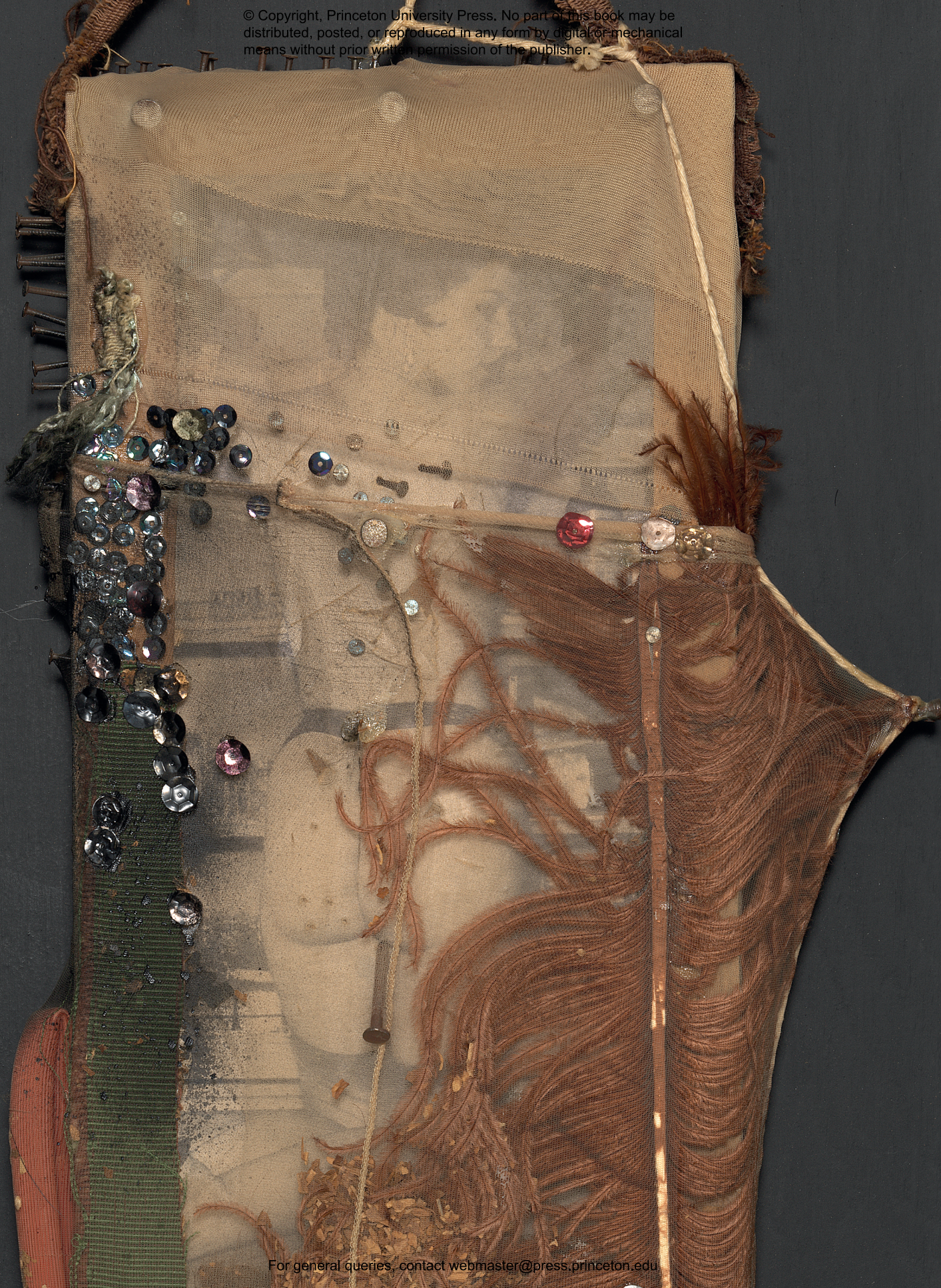
In that most of these developments lay in the future, however, what can be drawn from Conner's early bond with Davis and his incipient project of "guerilla theater"? He offered a possible answer to a later interviewer who was quizzing him about his work of this period in relation to that of other assemblage artists: "How would you distinguish or separate your own work . . . ?" asks his interlocutor, "Does it have to do with sculptural considerations? The use of unusual materials per se?—is that the content?" Conner's answer cuts through the confusion: "It has to do with the theater. Theater in the sense of an image, an environment that's made privately. Somebody makes an altar in their house, or they set up objects on tables, or they organize objects in windows (like a real theater with curtains). A church is another kind of theater; a museum, is another kind of theater."²²

Davis aimed to clothe in light-hearted, fancy-dress farce the stark, uncomfortable truths of social oppression by the rich and powerful. Conner likewise conceived his static theater as exposure of internalized structures of oppression, most pointedly the character and effect of what today would be termed toxic masculinity, exemplified but not monopolized by the military ethos he so despised. The bits of female finery he placed inside his assemblages signaled in his mind a woman's self-abnegating submission to the unequal regime of power between the sexes; he likened these adornments to Christian saints depicted holding the instruments of their own martyrdom. In perhaps the most discussed of Conner's assemblages, *BLACK DAHLIA* (fig. 12) of 1960, he again used nylon stockings as the basic matrix, here deployed as a sack or envelope around the black and white photograph of young female figure, nude except for stockings, standing and viewed from the rear. A burlesque-show panoply descends from her discreetly naked torso—sequins, feathers, fringe, and tinsel—so as to fill and distend the base of the nylon envelope, one set of tendrils extending itself, hovering between touch and disguise, to cover the cleft between her buttocks. The profile



12 Bruce Conner,
BLACK DAHLIA, 1960,
mixed media, 67.9 × 27.3 × 7 cm,
Museum of Modern Art,
New York

13 and 14 (FOLLOWING
PAGES) Bruce Conner,
BLACK DAHLIA (details)





turn of her face reveals little feeling, but the flowing luxuriance around her, notwithstanding its origins in feathered hats and threadbare, sequined dresses from the Salvation Army store, supplies the furniture of a recumbent, dreaming state. Amidst the flotsam hangs a pattern for a Japanese death's-head tattoo, in keeping with the morbid connotations of the work's title, the Black Dahlia having been the name pinned by the newspapers in 1947 on the victim of a horrifying murder in Los Angeles. The case became a sensation under that name because the body of a young newcomer to the city named Elizabeth Short had been dismembered and left to be discovered in a revoltingly gruesome display—and because her murderer was never found.

Despite Short's lack of any acting credits, an appetite for perverse glamour fed the legend that she had been an aspiring actress, so one wonders whether the erstwhile entertain-



15 Loree Fox and Wallace Berman, at Tempo Records, Hollywood Boulevard, 1947, photograph by Lee Wilder, Charles Brittin Collection, Getty Research Library, Los Angeles

ment-industry apprentice Wallace Berman might have played a part in Conner's choice of subject. Before adopting his earthy, alternative mode of life, the young Berman had been a magnetic figure on the margins of Hollywood show business. In the recollection of Sidney Felsen, a Fairfax High School friend (who would co-found the lithography workshop Gemini G.E.L), "Wally hung around with Sammy Davis Jr. quite a bit, and you'd regularly see them at Herbert's Drive-In with a crowd of hot young dancers . . ." ²³ In the striking photograph from the year of the murder (fig. 15), Berman poses with his regular dance partner, Loree Fox, on Hollywood Boulevard in flamboyant zoot-suit trousers, his hair styled in a dramatic pompadour. Consistent with his frequenting the jazz clubs of South Central Los Angeles, his studied look par-took of both Chicano and African American style cues. Short's remains had been discovered in the district of Leimert Park, just to the west of the Berman's favored Black neighborhoods. Having occurred at the fringes of Berman's way of life in the years just after the war, the Black Dahlia case would likely have been far more present to the

mind of Berman than of Conner, who had been a Kansas teenager at the time of these events.

So might it have been conversations with the Bermans, along with their own sense of martyrdom at the hands of what Berman called the "city of degenerate angels," that brought Elizabeth Short so vividly into Conner's imaginative universe? Conner referred to fake finery of the kind enfolded into his assemblage as "demonic devices," objects of martyrdom akin

to “the chains and the locks and the crowns of thorns,” just as in the scenography staged by the provincial fetishist William Langley that he had inserted into RAT BASTARD NO. 1. Not exempting himself, Conner said of the work, “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.”²⁴ In Conner’s mind, then, his macabre *guignol* was not so much about transposing the multiple roles in the drama as it was about subjecthood that never settles, the fluid substitution of one potential self for another and another in an agonistic scene of inner conflict.

Laboring daily in the studio adjacent to the Mime Troupe, with the wages of sin in his mind’s eye, he sought some compensatory stability via two pieces grounded in the west’s core narrative of redemption, CRUCIFIXION and RESURRECTION, thereby completing the thematic arc of Grünewald’s altarpiece.²⁵ The former (fig. 16), at more than two meters in height, towers over upright works like CHILD and SNORE.²⁶ The blackened figure suspended from the cross, trailing wisps of nylon hose wrapped and stretched from crossbar to base, artfully adapts to three dimensions any number of devices from painted Renaissance representations of Christ’s agony, while the amputations of the lower limbs bring into visibility the victim’s dismemberment, which had only been implied in the BLACK DAHLIA (into whose figure cruel nails had nevertheless been driven). The pendant RESURRECTION (fig. 17) reverts to his customary size, the shreds of sheer nylon now transfigured into the torn burial shroud falling away from the rising figure suggested by wooden sticks crossed in an X configuration, the chest achingly hollow, with its just previous recumbent position enveloped in a cocoon-like body bag at its feet.

These were wholly serious works, no other artist having brought the theme so fully into a contemporary arena of torment this side of Francis Bacon. In the exchange with Thomas Albright noted above, having asserted his attachment to various forms of esoteric mysticism, Conner pointedly added, “there’s no reason to reject the Christian mysticism,” while Albright notes that Conner kept at hand his own typewritten concordance to the New Testament. And that scriptural application came through in a later interview from the mid-1970s, where he offered forthright testimony to the moral seriousness with which he invested the cycle of RAT BASTARDS: “The society which we have . . . expresses power and violence and death and that’s its main structure. And the signs of that are in the symbols that we see around us in the arts, in the clothes, in the roles that people play in the society. That people have to deal with this kind of crucifixion of the spirit all the time; and that how well they shine through that is the triumph of those individuals.”²⁷

Conner’s thoughts anticipate in their own way the sophisticated reckoning by the philosopher Mark Johnston with the incomparable import of the Crucifixion as the ultimate indictment of our general human regime of competitive self-love and punitively orthodox righteousness. “There is nothing noble or ‘humanly redeeming’ about it,” he avers,



16 Bruce Conner, CRUCIFIXION, 1960,
mixed media, 215.9 × 119.4 × 69.9 cm,
di Rosa Collection, Napa



17 Bruce Conner,
RESURRECTION, 1960,
mixed media, 91.4 × 61 × 58.4 cm,
Museum of Contemporary Art,
San Diego

“beginning as it does with his desperation in the Garden and ending with his despair on the Cross. It is not a cathartic tragedy.” He shares with Conner the recognition that “Victimization, sacrifice, and religious violence have been forever unmasked as illegitimate strategies by which our murderous envy of each other is temporarily discharged, and yet preserved as an ongoing psychological orientation.”²⁸ That last phrase about “murderous envy” might be re-stated as “crucifixion of the spirit all the time,” and Conner came to a point in 1961 when he felt compelled to escape entirely the realm of the American war machine and the social sickness engendered by it.



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