



Bruce Conner, LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS (stills), 1959-67/1996. 16mm to 35mm optical blow-up, color, sound, 14:30 min., dimensions variable. Edition of 6. © Conner Family Trust. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

EASTER MORNING FROM HOME

Bruce Conner, EASTER MORNING

Streamed: April 8 - 15 2020, The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Bruce Conner, LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS

Streamed June 22 - 29 2020, Paula Cooper Gallery & Camden Arts Centre, London.

In April, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art hosted a week-long online screening of Bruce Conner's *EASTER MORNING* (1966/2008, 8mm/digital, color/sound, 10 min.). Scheduled to coincide with Easter weekend, the screening was part of SFMoMA's #MuseumFromHome virtual programming initiative, and was accompanied by a selection of catalogue essays from the artist's 2016 retrospective, including my essay, "EASTER MORNING: Bruce Conner's Second Coming." The essay's title is an allusion to Conner's end-of-life concession to digitization, of which *EASTER MORNING*, his final film, is a direct outcome. I intended it as a triple entendre; a reference to the film's status as a "last testament," as well as to Conner's preoccupation with Christian iconographies of martyrdom and resurrection, and, more cheekily, his reputation as a prurient spectator, unabashed objectifier and peeping tom. The prospect of Conner's "second coming" was meant to evoke a set of competing associations with adolescence and obsolescence, the material and the spiritual, death and desire, themes that coalesce within the film's dreamlike imagery: a flaming candle superimposed on lush close-ups of flowering plants, kaleidoscopic patterns in an oriental rug, a nude woman (Suzanne Mowat) lounging next to

a sun-dappled windowsill, and fleeting glimpses of a white stone cross against a cloudless San Francisco skyline, accompanied by a soundtrack of Terry Riley's "In C." With many scenes shot inside Mowat's apartment, *EASTER MORNING* speaks to avant-garde cinema's investment in interiority, both domestic and perceptual, making it an especially apt choice for springtime quarantine programming.

Two months later, in late June, Paula Cooper Gallery hosted a weeklong screening of the second, longer version of Conner's film *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS* (1959-67/1996, 16mm to 35mm blow-up, color, sound, 14.5 min.), also discussed in my catalogue essay. Like *EASTER MORNING*, *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS* consists of vibrant color footage that Conner shot himself, revised and expanded decades later, and then paired with a minimalist soundtrack by Riley, in this case, "Poppy Nogood and the Phantom Band." Meditative and transcendental, these two "second coming" films signal a departure from Conner's signature style of manic, staccato editing of black-and-white found footage, such as *A MOVIE* (1958) and *REPORT* (1963-1967), films that bombard the viewer with violence, destruction, and crisis, no relief or redemption in sight. By contrast, *EASTER*

MORNING and *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS* seem to register a turn inwards, away from collective experiences of history and politics, in favor of more local, personal vision, sensation and consciousness.

Perhaps paradoxically, revisiting these films amidst the pandemic has awakened political readings that would otherwise lay dormant. This awakening is largely a result of transformations that have occurred in the intervening months between the two screenings. By the end of May, mass protests against racism and state violence had erupted across the U.S., prompting comparisons to the summer of '68. As a result, my frame of reference for Conner's "second coming" has shifted radically away from anodyne questions of biography and medium, and towards the historical function of avant-garde film as revelatory poetic practice.

Rather than Conner's more politically-engaged work with found footage, a more generative touchstone for this summer's screenings comes in the form of lyrical poetry, specifically, two poems by W.B. Yeats: "Easter, 1916," which famously heralds "a terrible beauty is born" in the wake of Ireland's Easter Rising rebellion, and "The Second Coming" (1919), which shifts its gaze from armed revolution to impending revelation. Composed in the devastating aftermath of WWI and amidst the 1919 Spanish flu outbreak, while Yeats's pregnant wife was gravely ill, "The Second Coming" contains an apocalyptic exhortation: "what rough beast, its hour come round at last, Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?" Though its most quoted lines—"things fall apart; the centre cannot hold," and "The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity"—are often invoked in

times of political upheaval, "The Second Coming" is, in essence, pandemic poetry.

Like Yeats's poems, *EASTER MORNING* and the 1996 version of *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS* resonate anew in a moment marked by isolation, tension and anticipation. Conner's films speak to a specific historical turning-point, but rather than global pandemic or world war, they belatedly capture the spirit of the Summer of Love, which Joan Didion observed in all its terrible beauty in 1968's *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. Didion's title references "The Second Coming," presumably because she recognized that the center would not hold. As in '68, today's "center" encompasses atmospheric systems of white supremacy, state violence, and the cultural institutions that benefit from and support them, including traditional disciplines, canons and ways of seeing. Conner's films occupy these centers when viewed through the lens of biography, medium-specificity, or other criteria used to assign artistic value—but as works of poetic revelation, they are poised against these inherited systems, and enable anticipate unseen futures. Mediated through Yeats's apocalyptic visions, themselves born of violence and pandemic, Conner's "second coming" films help chart a visionary path from revolution to revelation, or what comes after things fall apart.

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Notes and Citations:
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