

BOTH SIDES NOW:
BRUCE CONNER'S *CROSSROADS* & HEIDE FASNACHT'S
EXPLOSION

PATRICK HEBRON

Clement Greenberg's notion of Modernism requires that a work of art find concreteness and purity in the separate and irreducible terms of its medium. Unlike the plastic arts, which carry a long progressive history of representational technique, film art began with a technical invention that provided for the possibility of an artistic practice. The most basic element of the motion picture is the single frame. The frame is completely interchangeable with the photograph except with regard to its context. Each is an instantaneous moment captured. The motion picture describes a temporal event through a sequence of photographs or discreet integral reproductions displayed in rapid succession. The ability to capture an instantaneous event as a permanent impression in image is the photographic medium's most unique property. The advent of the photograph was integral to the dissolution of the seemingly implicit necessity of representational depiction within the traditional mediums. However, photography by no means brought an end to illusionistic painting and sculpture. One approach was to use the ontological premise of photography as a subject of mimetic depiction for the plastic arts.

Heide Fasnacht's *Explosion* (1998) depicts the instantaneous moment of an explosion using polymer clay, metal and pigment. Nancy Princenthal writes of Fasnacht's *Explosion* series: "They fall at the threshold of visibility, in the realm of things that, while not imperceptible, are more or less impossible to visualize in any stable, conventional way."¹ Fasnacht bases her rendering on the photographic model, an impression of light reflected off the object describing its shape, rather than the sculptural mode of casting the physical contour of the object itself, which is not possible for Fasnacht's subject. *Explosion* translates this into the three-dimensional. The illusion does not refer directly to the object itself but rather to the imaging or indexing of the object.

The motion picture bears a different sort of relation to the photograph. The still photograph is the element from which the motion picture is able to reproduce motion. Earlier, I claimed that the motion picture's frame and the

photograph were entirely interchangeable except in regard to their contexts. The context this refers to is the presence or absence of a sequence of photographs preceding and following the image in question. The photograph is presented as a whole. It is understood that since the photograph is *of* the world, there is an infinite continuation of the depicted world, both spatially and temporally, beyond the edges of the frame and duration of the sequence. The photograph may capture the duration of a temporal event, as in the case of a photo with motion-blurred elements. However, the photograph flattens the depicted event into a single static image. The 'instantaneousness' of a photograph is relative, as a shorter period can always be selected from any interval. The instant of the photographic event must always capture some temporal dimension from the temporally continuous world it images. The motion-blurred photograph is the extreme case of this. The photograph makes a static rendering of a dynamic event in the world by indiscriminately fixing all light cast through the lens for whatever duration it is open onto a single piece of celluloid.

The motion picture presents duration for its temporal subject by showing a sequence of photographs at regular intervals to provide the illusion of a continuous temporal reality. In so doing, it is also provided with the ability to extend its spatial limitations. It may change the limits of its frame with respect to time. The camera can move closer to or farther from its subject as well as move around it. As a result of the property of duration, the motion picture can depict multiple spatial perspectives of an object in a way that if not analogous to sculpture, at least bears some resemblance to it.

Bruce Conner's film, *Crossroads* (1976), presents the event of an atomic detonation from numerous spatial perspectives to construct the event as an aesthetic object. For the film, Conner gathered declassified United States Defense Department footage of the underwater test detonation of a nuclear bomb at Bikini Atoll in the South Pacific. The event was captured for research purposes by five hundred cameras stationed on unmanned planes, high-altitude aircraft, boats near the blast, and from more distant points on land around the Atoll.² The location was selected in part because the network of islands formed an almost complete ellipse around the detonation site, allowing for a comprehensive documentation of the event from numerous angles.

Unlike the sculptural object, which the viewer encounters by moving around it to gather an understanding of its spatial continuity, the film object – the screened image – is viewed from a fixed perspective. The screen is in static spatial relation to its viewer. To portray the dimension of its subject, the camera must move to change the framed content. In *Crossroads*, though the viewer understands that there is a spatial continuity within the depicted space, it is presented as discontinuous. A long shot showing the entirety of the explosion is not explicitly spatially continuous with the close-up of one of the side jets engulfing a ship. These two shots are not temporally continuous, but are instead temporally synchronous. Therefore, the spatial discontinuity in the

use of multiple-point perspective in *Crossroads* is generated by the temporal discontinuity of showing multiple shots of the same event one after the other. On the other hand, while *Explosion* appears to be both temporally and spatially continuous it is impossible for the viewer to encounter it as such. Viewing it from one angle and then moving to another proves its spatial continuity. Yet, as it is meant to depict a single instant, the encounter of it must necessarily be temporally discontinuous.

The effect of re-contextualizing the event temporally and spatially for both *Crossroads* and *Explosion* is that the event is converted into an object for the purpose of its aesthetic consideration rather than for its ethical content. The first scene of *Crossroads* is a long shot of the Atoll. For a moment it is still, allowing the viewer to consider the seascape. Then, with only the faint sound of a countdown as warning, the frame is filled with a mushroom cloud formation. The subsequent shots begin progressively closer to the moment of detonation until the film becomes a rapid succession of blast after blast, nearing the ecstasies of a fireworks display.



Bruce Conner, *Crossroads* (1976)

The first section of the film is coupled with an apparently synchronous on-location soundtrack. William Moritz notes, “The subsequent roar of ‘airplane engines’ and ‘explosions’ is so close to traditional sound effects for fictional war movies that we never assume it is electronic music; rather, in realistic terms, it adds to our confusion about the ‘facts’ of the event or events we are watching.”³ It is not initially evident that these sounds are not authentically tied to the images they accompany. Conner first allows doubt of his simulation when he breaks the sound delay displacement to set the sound of the blast “in sync” with the visual event. In the first shots of the film, the blast is heard moments after it is seen. This accounts for the disparity between the speeds of light and sound. Having the visual and sonic events occur simultaneously, which is to say out of what would be actual sync, makes the depiction an aesthetic simulation of the event rather than a document of an actual one. This choice serves as a deliberate cinematizing of its content. As Moritz notes, the viewer’s point of reference is the fictional war movie. It is exactly this reference that informs Conner’s choice.

The event in a traditional narrative action film is constructed for the viewer's omniscient perspective. The use of slow motion and synchronization between the visual and sonic events are not informed by the desire for authenticity but rather to give the viewer the best seat in the house for each of his senses. The viewer is given omniscience in that he is not placed at a particular vantage point, but rather at a combination of vantage points that meet Conner's aim to present the event aesthetically.

There is a sudden change in the *Crossroads* soundtrack from the "on-location" sound to an electronic score composed by Terry Riley. This re-contextualization makes the viewer aware of Conner's aim to remove the experience of the event from the seemingly natural context to which we have been exposed. The viewer's attention is forcibly directed to formal aesthetic concerns. When accompanied by this delicate score, we are prone to call the sight beautiful as the massive formation gracefully expands and contracts in slow motion. We realize the many facets to the physicality of the event. It is no longer a mushroom cloud bearing implicit social meaning. It is instead the description of a voluminous mass in motion. The sense of destruction is almost entirely replaced by the serenity of a slow motion close-up of misty spray blanketing the frame.

In removing the temporal property of the event it portrays, *Explosion* removes the sense of consequence from its subject. spurts of matter emanate from a dense base of bubbling smoke formed by a solid plastic. Its stillness suggests that the viewer contemplate it as he would a flower. He may walk around it to inspect its detail. *Explosion* refers to the event it images in a way similar to a blurred photograph's mode of flattening the temporal dimension of its subject. *Explosion* mimics the shape of an explosion at a particular instant, one that does not exist long enough to be considered. Yet, this instant is of some duration. An explosion is a kinetic event affecting an object or series of objects rather than being an object itself. The sculpture refers to the event of the explosion, which affects the spatial relation of the discreet particles of the exploded object over time. The photograph shows a blurred object's change of position in relation to other imaged elements, which are stationary or relatively more stationary. As explained by Einstein's "Theory of Relativity," the velocity of a particular object is relative to the velocity of other objects. The viewer of a photograph showing a blurred element may surmise that that object is moving at a greater velocity than those objects that are not blurred. In this way, the photograph represents the dynamic and temporal properties of its subject. Fasnacht evokes this principle in her static rendering of an explosion. Though we may assume that all particles of the explosion she depicts are in motion, we can infer their relative velocities by the spectrum of the severity of 'blurring' particles. The spurts of matter most distant from the sculpture's base are rendered not as discreet particles, but rather as fluid trails. Other elements, such as those representing dense smoke imply a lower velocity in their static edges. Though Fasnacht chooses to distance herself

from the consequence of the event she depicts, she maintains its authenticity by reaching her model through the mediation of the photograph.

Both *Crossroads* and *Explosion* intentionally separate the explosive events from their social and moral content. Yet, violence must necessarily be implicit in their depictions. Conner does not force a clear moral stance upon his viewer. He allows us to be awed by the preconditions of reality: time, space and causality, as they are represented in a temporal medium. The magnificent portrayal of physical causality, forced upon the viewer in the repetition of the explosion from numerous angles serves to saturate the viewer to the point of disassociation of form and content. The nature of the photographic image as an index of reality makes its truth undeniable. Yet, the viewer is left in the safety of the theatre. The last shot of *Crossroads* is fixed on a massive tidal wave and its spray engulfing a giant war ship. This shot urges a moment of contemplation. Then, the ship reemerges from the blanket of mist. The film ends with its title, 'Crossroads,' recalling with this symbol the social context of the events the viewer has just witnessed. He must now try to reconcile the separation of the event from its representation.

The ethical implications of *Explosion* are less apparent. Produced some years after *Crossroads*, it perhaps reflects a greater social integration of its implicit issue. With the explosion and its representation so culturally melded, it is impossible to separate the actualities from their simulations, which have led us to become immune to these events by a falsified exposure. After the events of September 11, 2001, Fasnacht continued her study of the explosive event with the much less volatile subject of champagne bottles, glasses and other household objects.⁴ It is the moral ambiguity of her depiction that interests Fasnacht. The explosion is simultaneously a release and a loss. The static nature of her sculpture and the fact that this transient moment may be considered encountered in space and inspected from multiple vantage points keeps the viewer within that brief moment in which neither the catharsis nor the loss may yet be felt. Its formal properties, in this way, are a perfect reflection of our times. We are not yet ready to speculate on the consequences of what we have done to the world. The weight of these subjects is lost to the unending discussion that puts such events in terms that deliberately evade their being felt. We utter, "What unbelievable horror," without feeling anything. It has become automatic and perhaps we have become complicit. This ambivalence belongs to a world that cannot even compare itself to one without such unbelievable horror.

¹ Nancy Princenthal, "Heide Fasnacht: Exploded View," *Art in America*, February 2001, 125.

² William Moritz and Beverly O'Neill, "Fallout: Some Notes on the Films of Bruce Conner," *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 4, 37.

³ Moritz, 38.

⁴ Fasnacht, Heide, Personal interview. 29 Mar. 2005.

INTERVIEW WITH HEIDE FASNACHT

PATRICK HEBRON

PH: In his essay, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," André Bazin recalls the Ancient Egyptian practice of embalming. He claims this to be an early form of sculpture, in which the practicing culture seeks to preserve something precious to them, their king, from decay. What is it that you are trying to preserve in your pieces?

HF: I'm not sure I would use the word precious, but I am trying to preserve a moment that I don't comprehend. That is why there is a degree of meticulousness in my work. I'm making myself pay attention to something in this moment that is so swift, so momentous and so awesome. It is the only way I have to spend time in there and come to some kind of comprehension.

PH: Looking at mummies we can begin to perceive what was valued by that culture, they deified their political leaders, they believed in the immortality of the soul, and so forth. Do you feel that you are trying to encapsulate some notion of our time in your work?

HF: I think you can't help but make work about your own time. It filters through you. Making an effort has an element of falsity to it. So, I don't know that you can try. In our times, there is a quality of distraction, not paying attention. Things move through the news and through peoples' psyches so quickly. Momentous things are taking place.

PH: So are you countering that phenomenon with the labor of your work?

HF: In my work, there is a quality of mark making and time marking. There is a trajectory that I leave through the marks that can be followed. It's asking [the viewer] to pay attention.

PH: Can you or would you even want to ignore the violence in the events you are depicting?

HF: I don't think I'm ignoring it at all. There is a paradox to the violence. I think

some people might find my work morally ambiguous; maybe it is, I don't know. In the earlier "Explosion" series and in the current more domesticated exploding champagne bottles, there is a level of violence but then they have a level of beauty. In the Bruce Conner film, some of those images are gorgeous. But I think they are terrible at the same time. When I say they are gorgeous, I don't forget for a minute what they refer to. There is a scene in this movie, *The Day After*, about an atomic explosion, where people are driving and there is this atomic explosion behind them. They get out of their cars and turn back to look and they are transfixed. You must know that it is going to destroy you and you should get the hell out of there, but they can't take their eyes off of it. I am interested in the kind of image that does that to people. That's a moment that comes before any moral questions. In my champagne bottle and breaking glass pieces, what is taking place is very ambiguous. There could be an act of violence, but at the same time it could be celebratory. There is this Freudian idea that celebrations of this sort are meant to assist people in rehearsing people for tragedy. There is a drawing I did, *Three Buildings*, where one building is being imploded, one is complete and one is under construction. I was interested in pointing to the cycle of this. We live with great losses, recovery from great losses and anticipation of them. There is a sexual component to it. What's the ethics of that?



Exploding Champagne Bottle (2003)

PH: Sartre called the moment of sexual release an experience of nausea. He said it could be explained as a person being clogged by his objectivity.

HF: You could call my trying to really pay attention "objectivity," but I think my approach is a little more Eastern. It is about accepting what the forms are, not trying to alter them by any notions that I have. My job is to record them. I read *Nausea* in high school and I think I identified with his detachment. But that detachment is a disease in this culture.

PH: Do you feel you can ever keep yourself out of the work? It seems to me that the most you can do in this respect is to present yourself as trying to be invisible.

HF: Yes, my touch comes through. To try to totally eliminate personality is

almost as problematic as allowing it in a relaxed way. I've tried to achieve the balance between these two.

PH: How have your thoughts on your work changed since September 11? How has the viewer's perception of it changed?

HF: I went back to my place that night and I saw that work sitting out and I couldn't possibly look at it the same way. Some time earlier, maybe a year or a year and a half, I had done a very small sketch of rain dripping down a window and I found myself returning to that drawing and deciding to finish it. When I originally made that drawing, it just didn't resonate for me. I didn't understand how it fit in with everything else I was doing. There is a level in which I am just interested in the physics of stuff breaking up into little points and all the different ways that can happen. But at this point, the drawing actually became a comfort for me and I worked on it every day. Then I needed to do another one. I couldn't work on the other stuff. I never returned to what I had been doing. There was this feeling of no sense of the truth or clear vision. I realized I was still interested in those materials, but I couldn't pursue it. I felt a lot of guilt about the "Explosion" series. Then I started doing all these drawings of splashes of water. They allowed me to explore the same material but drain away the socio-political misinterpretations. The recent work brings it onto the scale of someone's living room. It's the elephant in the living room.

PH: In your studio, I noticed that you are working from photos of your subject. Is this your primary means or do you ever actually break a bottle?

HF: I'm looking at a lot of images I have found of breaking glasses. I use a lot of photography. I looked at the last scene of [Antonioni's] *Zabriskie Point* a lot. The champagne piece is loosely based on a liquor ad. I've looked at so much stuff that I can just draw it off the top of my head now. I have a very strong sense of the physics of how things break and shatter. If I were to break something myself, it would just happen too fast. I really need the mediating.

PH: You bring it in already mediated. That's interesting to me. Do you think that is entirely a practical issue? It seems to me that you need to maintain your own serenity and keep the disaster outside.

HF: That's very interesting. Maybe it's that. I'd never thought of it. I'm interested in photography. The screen becomes something that you come to embrace rather than look through.

PH: You are working in both two-dimensional and three-dimensional mediums and for both you are looking at two-dimensional images. Do the two sides of

your work, each of which has a very different experience tied to it, interact with and affect each other?

HF: Yes, I do think back and forth a great deal. Someone once said that making sculpture takes four times as many brain cells as making two-dimensional work. Both of them come from looking at images, but then the sculptures start to recreate their subject, they start to bring it back. That goes back to the mummy analogy.



Blast (1997-98)

P: You could work in photography or film, but there is something very appropriate about the work you're doing being in the mediums you have chosen. You have to synthesize your subject and that allows the viewer to look at it differently than we can look at Conner's film.

HF: I think there's something about the reenactment that you look at differently than just the thing itself. I think this is why I moved away from the things that I grew up with as a young artist, with performance art and post-minimalism, the idea of the thing as it is. We've learned how to look at that now and so it isn't the thing as it is anymore. We've learned that those things still have frames around them. So in a funny way, I've reverted to something that is a little bit traditional. I'm making drawings and putting them into frames and I'm making object sculpture. I think that's what is required now in order to have a reenactment, in order to reframe things in a way that they can be seen. I place a great value in experience that can be shared and transmitted. I'm interested in the fact that if I really make myself pay close attention, I can act as a conduit.

PH: How does that sharing occur? Is the shared meaning in the object itself?

HF: I don't know if it resides in the work. When I talk to different people, I get different responses. I think some people find the work somewhat shocking. My hope is that people would be empathetic. I hope that they would be as awed by this stuff as I am. I'm trying to make these drawings beautiful, it is important to me that they are. At the same time, it's kind of horrible.

PH: Do you believe that there is a universal value or something in the object that must be uncovered by the viewer in order for him to understand it?

HF: A made-for-TV movie is formulaic, it tells you what to think. It even has an epilogue that says, "This happened to so-and-so. He served three years and then he was out..." Whereas a film like *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* doesn't tell you what to think. It's more like the way life really is. It's confusing. It's maybe boring or frustrating at turns. It allows you to experience valuable emotions that people need to experience to get through life. It's a kind of humanism that I am arguing for. When I use words like "value" and "quality," I don't mean them in terms of connoisseurship. I don't mean them in the Romantic sense.

PH: The Romantics believed that the artist creates a window into the soul. Does this have any truth for you? What is your idea of the artist?

HF: My view of what it means for me to be an artist is a bit traditional. They say to young writers that you have to go out and have experience in order to be able to write well. I think I agree with this. The artist looks closely. They insert a frame and provide clarity for their viewer.

PH: What is the role of the critic?

HF: It is a gift to make your work accessible to people verbally. I don't find it easy. I am hungry for people to have a dialogue with. It really helps me. I'm not always sure what kinds of questions people have about my work. I like being surprised with questions. I don't think a critic can make up for what isn't there in the long run. Curators put you with one group in one discussion and with another in a different discussion. It is all valid. It all cuts different facets of the same thing.



Exploding Plane (2000)