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

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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.