

# “It has to do with the theater”: Bruce Conner’s Ratbastards\*

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Bruce Conner’s engagement with the medium of assemblage was relatively brief—his first forays date to his arrival in San Francisco in 1957, while his purposefully grandiloquent farewell to the medium, *LOOKING GLASS*, was completed in 1964—but intensively productive.<sup>1</sup> Among the nearly 200 works made over those eight years, a subset, completed within the first few years of the artist’s settling in San Francisco, is of particular interest.<sup>2</sup> These were Conner’s first and some of his most forceful assemblages, works that registered the artist’s initial encounter with his new urban surroundings.<sup>3</sup> Possessed of a claustrophobic energy and dark sensibility, these idiosyncratic objects are identifiable by their muted tonal range, a product of the grimy, faded character of their constitutive materials—everything from fragments of charred wood and rope, to frayed photographs of pin-ups and femme fatales, to scraps of grubby lace, ribbon, and fabric, to the odd discrete object, such as a bicycle wheel or doll’s head. One might group this subset of works under the loose rubric of “Ratbastards,” as many have titles that include the words “rat” or “ratbastard” (an evocative term Conner

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Of course, this project would never have come to pass without both the assistance and inspiration of the artist himself (1933–2008), whose death this past July came as deeply saddening news. Bruce Conner’s keen intelligence, unflagging loyalty to friends, unfailing commitment to principle, and, not least, warm sense of humor touched many. This essay is dedicated to him.

1. The titles of Conner’s works are always printed in uppercase, at the artist’s request.

2. I am unaware of a definitive list of Conner’s assemblages composed by either the artist or another informed party. Such a list would be difficult to produce, in any event, given the ephemeral nature of many of the works in question. My own informal catalog numbers just under 200 unique works, though many of those are missing or no longer extant.

3. Conner was born outside Wichita, Kansas, on November 18, 1933. After time spent studying in Lincoln, Nebraska; Brooklyn, New York; and Boulder, Colorado, he and his wife, the artist Jean Conner, moved to San Francisco in September of 1957. There, Conner established his identity as a San Francisco artist quickly and firmly, despite extended periods spent in Mexico and Massachusetts in the early 1960s.



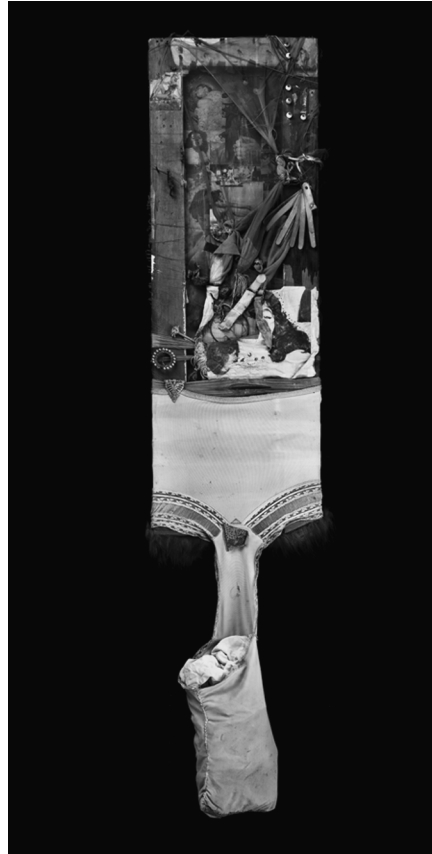
*Bruce Conner.*  
LOOKING GLASS. 1964.

borrowed from a friend, the poet Michael McClure), and all share a consistent set of formal attributes. Built up from Conner's eccentric hoard of objects, each work comprises a kind of reliquary of discards, lovingly pieced together by hand—and, in most cases, bound together with segments of nylon stockings, a gesture connoting both criminal violence and sexual bondage. With their array of once-seductive images and materials gone definitively to seed, the works solicit a voyeuristic gaze, but at the same time they bluntly, even brutally, reject it.

The Ratbastards established Conner's vocabulary of form and material for his assemblage practice, and gained him his first critical acclaim and commercial success. In 1962, Philip Leider wrote approvingly in *Artforum* of these early assemblages, suggesting they augured an uncompromising “new sensibility”—an authentic break with the accepted artistic idioms of his day. Though he did not use the word, Leider seemed to suggest that Conner's assemblages functioned like

fetishes, channeling the energies of a fundamentally disordered society. He lauded the fact that the works offered no readily legible critique, but rather glared unblinkingly at the brutal truths embodied in their very materiality. Leider stressed the deadness of the once sumptuous materials in Conner's works; unlike most of his assemblagist peers, Conner left his found objects in their rotten, lost state. "He can visualize the loveliest flesh charred beyond recognition," Leider wrote, appreciatively.<sup>4</sup>

Leider's enthusiasm notwithstanding, the impact of Conner's "new sensibility" found little traction in the 1960s, remaining out of step with the mainstream art world, all the more so as it increasingly embraced the harder-edged (and more readily salable) productions of Pop art and Color Field painting. This condition was reinforced by the perceptions of parochial isolation that have perennially plagued artists working in the Bay Area, but it was also exacerbated by Conner's own recalcitrance and tendency to sabotage his own success. For many years, the artist himself, through actions at turns comic and heartbreaking, contributed to the general obfuscation regarding his underappreciated contribution to assemblage—as when he refused to agree to a major retrospective exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Art in the early 1970s unless the museum agreed to split with him a percentage of the "box office." (Needless to say, the exhibition never took place.)<sup>5</sup> In time, a series of entertaining anecdotes attached themselves to Conner—for example, the time he painted a baby elephant with psychedelic patterns in front of the Samuel Goldwyn Studios in



Conner.  
UNTITLED. 1959–60.

4. Philip Leider, "Bruce Conner: A New Sensibility," *Artforum* 1, no. 6 (November–December 1962), p. 30.

5. This history is contained in letters held in the archival files of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The museum was known as the San Francisco Museum of Art until 1975.



*Bruce Conner painting an elephant. 1967.*

story, for Conner's work itself functions in a way not easily assimilable to the dictates of the dominant trends in advanced art—a fact borne of Conner's liminal status. For in the late 1950s and early '60s, Conner was indeed a liminal figure, neither fully within nor entirely removed from the dominant art world, with its center of gravity planted firmly on the East Coast. Unlike many of his West Coast peers, whose orientation was decidedly local, Conner had strong connections to New York, with numerous contacts in the city and steady uptown gallery representation beginning in 1956 and lasting through the 1960s. Further, despite the apparent sculptural character of his assemblage, the artist was deeply immersed in the discourse of modernist *painting*, the principal strains of which he had encountered during a semester of post-graduate schooling spent at the Brooklyn Museum of Art a year before he moved to San Francisco. Conner was stimulated by the painting he saw in New York, much of it for the first time in person, but he was also disheartened. Much of what he saw appeared to him to be cynically conceived products, done in signature styles and churned out to satisfy market demands.<sup>7</sup> "Painting" quickly came to signify a whole complex of evils for the young artist, from its institutional strictures—"don't touch"—to its privileged place in the

Hollywood, or the time he ran for public office in San Francisco and read a list of desserts for his major policy speech—that generally supplanted serious critical engagement. In the shadow of such stories, the finer points of the objects Conner created with such care remained lamentably unexamined.<sup>6</sup>

While geographical bias and anecdotal diversion have contributed to the lack of a thorough critical treatment of Conner's refractory objects, they do not tell the whole

6. In this regard, it is worth noting that, of the two most incisive scholarly treatments of Conner and his milieu, neither is written by an art historian: Richard Cándida Smith, *Utopia and Dissent: Art, Poetry, and Politics in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); and Rebecca Solnit, *Secret Exhibition: Six California Artists of the Cold War Era* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1990). Indispensable as these two texts are, art-historical readings of Conner's work lie outside their scope.

7. Bruce Conner, interview with Paul J. Karlstrom (August 12, 1974), Oral History Program, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.



commercial workings of what he would come to call, with increasing distaste, the "art business."

In response, Conner developed a sophisticated mode of assemblage that worked over the discourse of painting from the outside in, demonstrating a peculiar mixture of fascination and loathing born of his own hybridity. The particularity of this engagement was evident in his choice of materials as well as in his methods in the Ratbastard works: not only nailing and pinning, but also layering, melting, pasting, scraping, peeling, breaking, stuffing, tying, and binding. These were not the traditional methods of painting, but in the Ratbastards they were made to serve as such.<sup>8</sup> The result was a kind of *flaying* of painting: an externalization, at turns comic and violent, of the principal concerns of its practice—from mark-making to the figuration of subjectivity. Perhaps most radically, Conner developed a singularly dynamic approach that enveloped the viewer, suturing him or her directly into the experience of the work, and forcing a mode of interaction that was the very opposite of what seemed to him to be the static, passive mode of viewership elicited by the vast majority of modernist painting. Conner's assemblage was thus highly *theatrical* in orientation—a mode wholly unacceptable in the modernist idiom within and against which he worked.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, as Conner would later state straightforwardly of his assemblage, "It has to do with the theater."<sup>10</sup>

Yet it was theatrical in a particular sense: aggressive, environmental, participatory, transitory, ephemeral. As I hope to demonstrate here, Conner's assemblage enacted a mode of theatricality specific to his Bay Area milieu, one wholly other from that which would be fiercely debated across the pages of East Coast art periodicals only a few years later—and which would be codified and vilified most famously in Michael Fried's essay "Art and Objecthood."<sup>11</sup> For Fried and

8. In this, Conner's practice calls to mind another hybrid figure, part insider, part outsider: Eva Hesse. Hesse's work involves similarly unconventional methods, and, like Conner's assemblage, can be understood as being in unexpected dialogue with painting, as Rosalind Krauss has shown. Yet Hesse's work figures a mode of painting heavily invested in the "bodily," as Krauss has suggested (whether in the mode of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's "body without organs," as Krauss has argued, or in the figure of melancholic lack, as Briony Fer has put forth); Conner's work eschews such recourse to the body, one of several points of divergence from Hesse. See Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), pp. 309–20; and Briony Fer, "Bordering on Blank: Eva Hesse and Minimalism," in *On Abstract Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 109–30.

9. Conner's approach runs parallel in some ways to Michelangelo Pistoletto's embrace of the "theatrical" as recently elucidated by Claire Gilman. Gilman attributes Pistoletto's theatrical impulse to what she terms an "anti-modernist" strain in the Italian postwar milieu, in which "such typically taboo concepts as theatricality and narrativity assumed a critical force in light of the association between Italian modernist aesthetics and the Fascist regime." See Gilman, "Pistoletto's Staged Subjects," *October* 124 (Spring 2008), p. 55. Given Conner's radically different setting (in which, of course, the modernist aesthetic project was not burdened with such a politically fraught legacy), I would suggest his embrace of theatricality represented instead something more like a "para-modernism," symptomatic of the artist's own liminality—working within certain conventions, while subverting others.

10. Bruce Conner, interview with Paul Cummings (April 16, 1973), Oral History Program, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

11. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood" (1968), in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

other modernist critics, modernist painting could not countenance theatricality because the theatrical was inherently false, “hollow,” lacking in the true profundity that Fried labeled “presentness.” Yet neither did the proponents of Minimalism, Fried’s primary nemesis, take up the banner of theatricality; instead, they argued for their own non-theatrical, philosophically “credible” forms (a fact that points to a seldom-recognized commonality between the two camps).<sup>12</sup> It was left to Conner, liberated by his liminal status, to trick and trouble from the margins, to mobilize—through the arduous form of *looking* demanded by his assemblages—a mode of theatricality capable of subverting some of the sacrosanct fundamentals of the modernist project.

*“It was almost like cutting through skin”*

Conner’s serious engagement with the medium of assemblage began after his arrival in San Francisco in September 1957. Notably, the object he identified as his first assemblage began as a painting:

I was involved in this one oil painting and became so aggravated with it that I slashed it and hacked it, it was almost like cutting through skin. I dealt with it like it was a physical thing, this small square canvas, and I stuffed a bunch of nylon stockings in it so that it looked like its innards were coming out, wires and such, wrapped a nylon stocking over the front of it, stuck a picture that I found in *Life* magazine of a cadaver lying on a table, and after it was all finished, it was a real three-dimensional thing. There was no real reason to hang it on the wall as an art object, so I put a handle on it, a cloth handle, so that I could carry it around and put it on display any time I wanted to.<sup>13</sup>

He called the resulting work *RATBASTARD*.

That Conner’s first assemblage found its origins in a painting is significant, but not surprising. By the time he had relocated to San Francisco, he had already attained considerable success as a painter. In 1956, while still a student, he had had several works accepted for display at the Alan Gallery, the showplace run by Charles Alan, formerly of Edith Halpert’s famous Downtown Gallery.<sup>14</sup> The paintings from

12. On “credible” forms, see Donald Judd, “Specific Objects” (1965), in *Complete Writings, 1959–1975* (Halifax: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design Press, 1975).

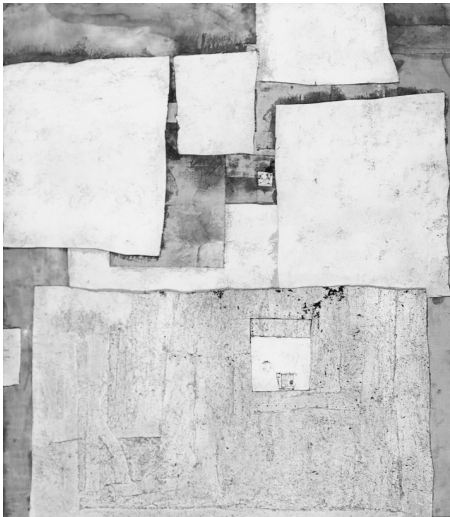
13. Conner, quoted in Solnit, *Secret Exhibition*, p. 61. Conner identifies *RATBASTARD* as his first assemblage in “Bruce Conner: Marilyn and Spaghetti Theory,” interview with Marc Selwyn, *Flash Art* 156 (January/February 1991), p. 94.

14. Charles Alan worked at the Downtown Gallery from 1945 to 1952 before opening his own gallery, where he exhibited an eclectic mix of contemporary American artists (most notably, the social realist Jack Levine) along with works by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century artists that appealed to, in his own words, his “neurotic” sensibility. See Charles Alan, “Interview: Paul Cummings Talks with Charles Alan,” *Archives of American Art Journal* 18, no. 2 (1978), p. 22. Conner’s connection to Alan began when the artist walked into the gallery unannounced with a portfolio of work. Conner’s 1956 showing began a lengthy working relationship with Alan, which culminated in a retrospective show in 1965.



*Conner. RATBASTARD. 1958.*

this early period show remarkable self-assurance. Monochromatically white or in harmonic ranges of muted earth tones, they feature highly impastoed surfaces built up with gesso, vermiculite, and other bulky substances. An early review described the paintings well, noting that they “look like nothing so much as framed cross-sections of prehistoric crustaceans embedded in limestone.”<sup>15</sup> The reviewer likely did not know of Conner’s abiding interest in paleontology, but the characterization is apt:



Conner. *Untitled*. 1954.

paint in these early works seems less applied than sedimented. Further adding to the sense of primordial layering, many of these early paintings feature excised sections from other works pasted directly onto their surfaces. Even at this early stage in Conner’s plastic work, the sanctity of painting as such was an open question.

Nevertheless, it is clear there is a substantive difference between such paintings and *RATBASTARD*, and that the latter represented something of a breakthrough for the young artist. Critics have routinely identified Conner’s move to San Francisco, that “oasis of delights . . . on the edge of the Pacific,” as the main stimulus for this breakthrough, citing both his interaction

with artists already working in the city and his encounter with refuse from the demolition of ornate Victorian houses in the area known as the Western Addition.<sup>16</sup> In doing so they have followed Conner himself, who identified as sources of inspiration and materials not only the junk shops and picturesque rubble in the Western Addition, but also the general gothic ambience of the city as typified by the Sutro Museum, the crumbling Victorian collection of curiosities which sat at the time on the western edge of Golden Gate Park.<sup>17</sup> However,

15. R. H. Hagan, “Music and Art,” *San Francisco Bay Window*, June 15, 1958.

16. Joan C. Siegfried, “Bruce Conner,” in *Bruce Conner: Sculpture, Assemblages, Collages, Drawings, Films*, ed. Stephen S. Prokopoff (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1967), n.p. Rebecca Solnit notes that the “thrift stores and ambience of gothic decay of the Western Addition” was a source of fascination not only for Conner but also for many artists working in the city. She also suggests there was a racist dimension to the city’s urban renewal project to raze homes in the largely African-American neighborhood, to which artists, including Conner, were attuned. See Solnit, *Secret Exhibition*, p. 61.

17. Thomas Albright, *Art in the San Francisco Bay Area: 1945–1980* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 98. Albright notes that the Sutro Museum “housed a surrealist treasure house of mummies, mechanical dolls, and toothpick carnivals, as well as the wardrobe used by Thom Thumb.” The building that housed the museum burned to the ground in 1966.

Conner had considered the aesthetic possibilities of found objects before his arrival in San Francisco, during his six-month stay in the Lower East Side of New York while on scholarship at the Brooklyn Museum. There, he lived in a district that was home to the city's rag pickers and was struck by the way they piled their multicolored wares behind large glass shop windows.<sup>18</sup> The play between surface and depth inherent in these window displays stayed with him, eventually finding its way the following year into the *Ratbastard* assemblages.

Of course, for an artist with little money, the found object was also what was at hand. Yet while poverty of means played a part in dictating his chosen medium, it is apparent that from his earliest period, Conner saw great poetic potential in overlooked, discarded materials. This sensibility was shared by the poets and writers of the so-called Beat Generation, the diffuse subculture that achieved national recognition in 1957, and with which Conner has often been grouped.<sup>19</sup> Despite his friendships with many of the Beats, however, Conner's magpie approach to art-making had more in common with the idiosyncratic group of visual artists working in the Bay Area in the 1950s, including George Herms, Wally Hedrick, Jay DeFeo, Joan Brown, and Wallace Berman. Most of these artists lived and worked in close proximity in the late 1950s, many occupying studios and living quarters in a large house in the Fillmore neighborhood rented by Hedrick and DeFeo, who were married at the time. As Richard Cándida Smith has discussed, the group shared an adventurous sense of playful possibility that energized their art—and suffered from anxieties that no one outside the group was paying attention.<sup>20</sup>

The lack of an informed (and paying) audience was an obvious threat to the viability of a working artist like Conner. But the absence of expectations allowed room for play, as demonstrated in Conner's notorious founding of the Rat Bastard Protective Association soon after his arrival in San Francisco. Conner named the group in solidarity with the city's garbage collectors, the Scavengers Protective Association. As he later remarked, "The people themselves were considered the lowest people employed by society . . . I decided we'll have the RAT BASTARD PROTECTIVE ASSOCIATION: people who were making things with the detritus of society, who were themselves ostracized or alienated from full involvement in society."<sup>21</sup> The group's initials, RBP, constituted an ironic parody of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. The RBP—whose members included DeFeo, Hedrick, Brown, Manuel Neri, and other local artists and writers—was more of a social club than a rigorous artistic alliance. Informal groupings of this sort cropped up regularly in 1950s San

18. Conner, interview with Cummings (1973).

19. For a sensitive recent consideration of Conner and his work in the context of the Beat Generation, see Lisa Phillips, ed., *Beat Culture and the New America, 1950–1965* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1995).

20. Cándida Smith, "The Beat Phenomenon," in *Utopia*.

21. Conner, interview with Peter Boswell (June 15, 1983), quoted in Boswell, "Bruce Conner: Theater of Light and Shadow," in *2000 BC: THE BRUCE CONNER STORY, PART II*, ed. Peter Boswell, Joan Rothfuss, and Bruce Jenkins (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999), p. 4.



Francisco, often around a gallery space. The RBP numbered around a dozen members, and while the members attended parties, few made use of the stamp Conner gave them to mark their work. Conner himself did, however, make numerous works using the word “rat” or “rat bastard” in the title, including *RAT-BASTARD 2*, *RAT BACK PACK*, *RAT PURSE*, *GENERIC RAT HAND GRENADE*, and others. John Bowles has noted that the names and putative functions of many of these objects had a martial bent, as if Conner were “outfitting an army of Ratbastards,” furthering the idea of an embattled subculture.<sup>22</sup> Bowles has suggested that Conner adopted this aggressive strategy as a means of confronting a press bent on pigeonholing him as “Beat,” understood by Conner and other artists as a limiting and derogatory term; Bowles has also noted the RBP’s simultaneous critique of materialist society and art-world exclusion. Indeed, for Conner, working with refuse became not only a means of cementing in-group status and circumventing established channels of distribution, but also a defense against the Bay Area’s lack of serious galleries and collectors. As Conner later noted about the San Francisco art scene of the late 1950s, “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.”<sup>23</sup>

However, it is important not to overestimate this indifferent attitude toward the art object, at least in Conner’s case. Unlike some of his peers (most notably, Berman and Hedrick), Conner did create a substantial body of art objects in the late 1950s. While a number of these objects came to an early end, either accidentally or through deliberate action of the artist (Conner would occasionally burn or otherwise divest himself of works—a 1982 list of “lost and destroyed works” included thirty assemblages), many more have survived to the present.<sup>24</sup> The insistent materiality of those that have survived, together with the meticulous care put into their construction, demand they be examined closely. The ferocity of Conner’s attack on the painting that would become *RATBASTARD*, for example, suggests that more was at stake in the project than mere destruction.

*RATBASTARD*, after all, is not a destroyed painting, though it does convey a sense of having been tormented, or even tortured. The front of the work contains a mix of fabric, wire, and other objects compressed into the space

22. John P. Bowles, “Shocking ‘Beat’ Art Displayed’: California Artists and the Beat Image,” in *Reading California: Art, Image, and Identity, 1900–2000*, ed. Stephanie Barron, Sheri Bernstein, and Ilene Susan Fort (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 239.

23. Conner, interview with Cummings (1973). Emphasis in original.

24. Conner himself expressed contradictory feelings about the fate of his assemblages. While consistently asserting that the works are ephemeral and subject to the vicissitudes of time (for example, the accretion of dust), he nonetheless remained vigilant to the point of obsession concerning their care, and expressed anger in not being allowed to conserve works in private collections.



Conner. RATBASTARD 2. 1958.

between the original painting's canvas and the nylon stockings stretched and stapled across its surface. Tucked into the upper corner, and nailed in for good measure, is the photograph Conner identifies as a picture of a "cadaver on a table." The back of the work is dominated by a page from *The American Weekly*—a sensationalist newspaper supplement—which has been stapled to the stretcher bars of the original canvas. The page contains fragments of two articles, one an illustrated feature on gory medieval tortures and the other a human-interest story about an itinerant boxer who communicates with his farmhouse wife via carrier pigeon.

The photograph of the cadaver inserted into the front and the illustrated article about torture stapled to the back together establish the tone of *RATBASTARD*, which might best be characterized as manifesting a concern with *violation*. "Violation" connotes both the transgression of taboo and the carrying out of violence, and both senses of the term are active in the assemblage. The notion of violation is present in a number of registers. Most immediately obvious is the way it defies one of the fundamental tenets of traditional painting: the hierarchy between front and back. In *RATBASTARD*, both sides compete for the



Conner.  
*RATBASTARD (verso)*.

viewer's attention, despite the fact that when the work is displayed one side is necessarily held close to the wall and kept out of sight. This tendency to veil part of a work, either through strategies of display or via the use of unconventional media (such as melted wax, bunched cloth, torn wallpaper, and, above all, shrouds of nylon stockings), would soon become a hallmark of Conner's Ratbastards and other assemblages.

*RATBASTARD* also boldly violates another of painting's core principles: it is not stationary—or rather, it dispenses with the myth that a painting is stationary. Concepts of painting active in the late 1950s—whether invested in illusionism and narrative or committed to flatness and surface opticality—rarely if ever took into account the fact that paintings do, in fact, move: from studio to exhibition, from gallery to collector, and from museum storage to display. *RATBASTARD* makes

recognizing this fact unavoidable. The handle from which it hangs, whenever and wherever it is displayed, always contains the latent possibility of its being moved (and therefore touched—another art world prohibition). With the simple addition of a cloth strap, Conner vaulted his assemblage into a new relationship with the viewer, one that fundamentally altered the power relation between artist, viewer, and work. While the obvious device of a handle would recur only rarely in future works, other increasingly sophisticated devices would be employed to extend and develop this new artwork/viewer relationship.

Conner repeatedly described his practice of assemblage in the 1950s and '60s as "gluing the world down," and the phrase is telling.<sup>25</sup> It suggests the existence of an aggregate totality of fabricated things from which it is possible to apprehend and frame a cross-section—a semi-automatic process, akin to the taking of a photograph. This sensibility is apparent in *RATBASTARD*, which in many respects served as a template for further elaboration in subsequent assemblages. The work is literally stuffed with items, which appear to be not so much selected by an individual artist as accreted by some unknown force. Of course, the assumption of a preexisting matrix of material out of which an artwork may accumulate was diametrically opposed to the myth of the virgin canvas that underwrote Abstract Expressionist painting and that still held sway, in many camps, in the late 1950s. However, it also differed in kind from the clever manipulation of sign systems and the deft arrangement of semiotic bits at play in the contemporaneous work of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg—figures with whom critics regularly compared Conner at the time.<sup>26</sup>

Conner's work contrasts most sharply with Johns's and Rauschenberg's work in his handling of signs. Fred Orton has argued that in Johns's work signs are stitched together metonymically, in associative sequences that are best read allegorically.<sup>27</sup> Signs enact a network of meanings across the surface of Johns's work, in metonymic chains polysemically resonant with meanings both private and public: a broom suggests movement, a poem fragment suggests a poet—and both may conjure an absent human presence, to take only one, relatively simple, example.<sup>28</sup> In Rauschenberg's case, Leo Steinberg presciently and famously

25. See for example Bruce Conner, "A Conversation with Bruce Conner," interview with Robert Dean, in *Bruce Conner: Assemblages, Paintings, Drawings, Engraving Collages, 1960–1990* (Santa Monica, CA: Michael Kohn Gallery, 1990), n.p.

26. See for example William Seitz's comments in his essay for the catalog of the *Art of Assemblage* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, in which he notes Willem De Kooning's precedent in using pop cultural references that "became so important as a subject for Rauschenberg, Johns, Conner, and so many subsequent, but usually less skillful, painters and assemblers." *The Art of Assemblage* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1961), p. 74.

27. Fred Orton, *Figuring Jasper Johns* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994).

28. According to Orton, Johns's work operates allegorically: "Johns's dominant mode of seeing, thinking and speaking 'the visual world' and forming 'works of art' is allegorical" (*Figuring*, p. 157). This means that it operates in relation to, and extrapolates on, an antecedent text, or pretext—in Johns's case, the narrative of modern painting, which had its apogee in Abstract Expressionism. Allegory operates textually—that is, linguistically, as Johns's work does—and consists of metonymic chains of meaning (rather than metaphoric symbols).

focused on the semiotics, the “artistic language,” of the artist’s work.<sup>29</sup> Steinberg was the first to point out the “flatbed” nature of Rauschenberg’s picture plane, which, he noted, was like a sensitized plate highly receptive to signs of wildly divergent natures: “Against Rauschenberg’s picture plane you can pin or project any image because it will not work as the glimpse of a world, but as a scrap of printed material. And you can attach any object, so long as it beds itself down on the work-surface.”<sup>30</sup> Taking up this question of the sign in Rauschenberg’s early work, Branden Joseph has recently argued that the activation of the idea of “difference”—that is, the fissures *between* signs—is the locus of meaning in the artist’s work. As with Johns, signs are deployed across the visual surface, but the making of meaning takes place in the “gaps” between them. In this model—which Joseph regards as a consistent avant-garde strategy—meaning occurs in the *process* of signification, in a multiplicity of semantic forces which never quite cohere; it is interstitial, generated by the unresolved relay, for example, between linguistic and visual registers.<sup>31</sup>

These are schematic sketches of complex semiotic analyses; I mention them here only to clarify the issues at hand in Conner’s work. For, paraphrasing Orton discussing Johns, the question in Conner’s case is not *what* the work means, but rather *how* the work makes meaning. Like Johns and Rauschenberg, Conner definitively breaks with the dominant semiotic system of the immediate past, namely, the romantic poetics of Abstract Expressionism. Yet rather than elaborating meaning in metonymic chains of signifiers, or infinitely deferring it in a play of difference, a Conner assemblage like *RATBASTARD* approaches a density beyond sign systems. It is not that Conner’s assemblage exists outside of language—this would be impossible. But the work’s signs are damaged to such a degree and compressed with such force that it ultimately offers up language itself as ruined, broken—seemingly pushed beyond any semiotic recovery, allegorical or otherwise.<sup>32</sup> Significatory meaning of any kind is dispensed with in favor of the brute power of tangible reality. Rather than exhibiting a surplus of narratives, as Peter Boswell has suggested, *RATBASTARD* and Conner’s other assemblages in fact bury any potentially intelligible narratives under the weight

29. Leo Steinberg, “Other Criteria,” in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 85.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 88.

31. Branden Joseph, *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003). See especially Chapter 3, “Mole Archaeology.”

32. In a well-known essay, Craig Owens argued for an allegorical reading of what he labeled post-modernist art, citing an “allegorical impulse” motivating certain contemporary art practices against the modernist myths that privileged the “symbolic” and suppressed the allegorical on behalf of the Kantian-Romantic aesthetic. In his explication of the postmodern operation of allegory, Owens bears down on the opacity of language, the material dimension of the sign, which can amount to ruins. Conner’s assemblage, however, overruns opacity; annihilation and obliteration are more useful descriptive terms. See Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism,” in *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), pp. 203–35.



of their own sheer physicality.<sup>33</sup> Their point of origin as artworks is not the realm of signs, of communication, but rather the pre-semiotic sphere of feeling which Conner's close friend McClure called the "undersoul"—"the deepest, most personal, physiological core," far from "the outer social world of speech."<sup>34</sup> McClure considered achieving awareness of the undersoul an overwhelming but joyous experience. It was the point from which such distinctions as body/mind and self/other could be effaced, and the groundswell from which energy might be channeled into the making of a new poetry.<sup>35</sup> It is safe to say that for Conner the experience was far less joyful, and far more terrifying; nonetheless, in both the visual conundrum it poses to its viewer and in its breaking with the conventions of painting, *RATBASTARD* pointed toward a new, theatrically animated relay between work and viewer that would find fuller expression in subsequent works.

*Dark Brown*

Conner borrowed the term "ratbastard" from a friend, the poet Michael McClure, who had overheard the word used in a gym locker room.<sup>36</sup> In the environment of the San Francisco locker room, the term constituted both a base insult and a playful means of marking off a (male) speaker and addressee from the rest of society. However, for both McClure and Conner the term suggested more than an insult or indicator of subculture, subtending a whole theory of the unspeakable; the "ratbastard" was that which lacked recourse to signification, and thus required instantiation in process—whether in terms of the physical grafting of materials in an assemblage, or in the almost physical wrestling of words away from their understood meanings—to form a new poetry "far from the outer social world of speech."

Conner and McClure developed a friendship during their childhood together in Wichita, Kansas, and remained close through the 1950s and after. They traveled to New York together in the early 1950s, and it was McClure who urged Conner to move to San Francisco in 1957. In 1959, Conner made a painting for McClure called *DARK BROWN*. Conner took the name of the work from the title of a long poem McClure was working on at the time, published for the first

33. Peter Boswell has identified "high density narrative" as one of the two strategies (along with "optical overload") that Conner uses in order to assure the artwork is "subject to renewal and redefinition each time it is viewed." See Boswell, "Bruce Conner," p. 27. According to Boswell, a Conner assemblage provides too many signs to process during a single visual encounter, so each subsequent encounter allows new narratives to emerge. The works constitute "open-ended tales whose meaning is ultimately left up to the viewer." While I believe Boswell is correct in identifying density as being of fundamental importance in Conner's work, I disagree that this density is to be found in the register of narrative. Rather, narrative as such is undone at the level of material excess.

34. Michael McClure, *Scratching the Beat Surface* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1982), p. 26.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

36. Bowles, "Shocking "Beat" Art Displayed," p. 239.



*Conner*. DARK BROWN. 1959.

time by their mutual friend and fellow Wichitan Dave Haselwood in 1961.<sup>37</sup> The painting (or assemblage; the work, like Conner himself, is something of a hybrid) is a square canvas to which thick brown and black paint has been applied, highlighted by touches of ochre, orange, and yellow. A piece of pearl costume jewelry sits in a pool of silver-white aluminum paint near the lower center of the canvas, while a thin fringe of brown fur runs along its perimeter, an element Conner said he added to satisfy McClure's predilection for touching art objects. The facture of *DARK BROWN* recalls the heavily impastoed, furrowed surfaces of Conner's early paintings, but the latter work possesses a different sensibility; its visual field is richer, its colors denser and more evocative of something elusive and obscure behind them.

Peter Boswell has discussed *DARK BROWN* in relation to McClure's poem that gave it its name. McClure's long, exhortatory poem consists of the thoughts and feelings of a narrator venturing deep within himself in pursuit of mystical union with the undersoul (for which, in McClure's vocabulary, the phrase "dark brown" is a synonym). Boswell reads a duality in the poem between despair and hope, which for him corresponds to the bifurcation of the self into body and spirit. While McClure's "dark brown" journey is unavoidably traumatic, it is, according to Boswell, ultimately redemptive; he reads in the closing sections of the poem the narrator's discovery of liberation in the ecstasy of sexual union. For Boswell, Conner's *DARK BROWN* is legible as a kind of visual translation of McClure's poem: the fur tacked to the painting's four edges functions as a metaphor for the poet's "beast/body"; the "turgid darkness" of McClure's interior journey is "expressed" through thickly applied, glistening brown and black oil paint; and the "radiant hope and yearning" in McClure's poem find "parallels" in the pool of aluminum paint and the pearl brooch "shining with promise."<sup>38</sup>

Boswell's reading of *DARK BROWN* allows him to fold it into the overarching theme he sees running throughout Conner's diverse oeuvre, in which darkness and light act as "protean forces engaged in a metamorphic dance, one in which light can both illuminate and annihilate and darkness is both a well of despair and a cavern of fecund mysteries."<sup>39</sup> As evocative as such symbology might be, however, it is inconsistent with Conner's approach to assemblage, in which the key to interpretation is not metaphorical but rather embedded in the physical processes of making and looking. *DARK BROWN* is not a metaphorical analog for McClure's poem, nor does it illustrate spiritual joy overcoming corporeal terror; rather, much like the poem—and like Conner's other Ratbastard assemblages—it forces its viewer to perform, in the very act of looking, the uncertain and overpowering act of immersion into an unknown.

37. Michael McClure, *Dark Brown* (San Francisco: Auerhahn Press, 1961). Haselwood's Auerhahn Press published a number of important texts by Beat and other writers in San Francisco. All references to McClure's poem here are from *Hymns to St. Geryon and Other Poems; and Dark Brown* (London: Cape Goliard, 1969).

38. Boswell, "Bruce Conner," p. 69.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

McClure's poem is itself quite ambiguous, employing disjointed language, typographical idiosyncrasies and other devices in its attempt to represent an encounter with the "dark brown" depths. Its final lines,

Worse than blank pages. So little given.

Bright false images and dull  
words. Til all that  
comes from me is never-before-seen  
beauty. Til  
I no longer fight to hold vision for  
an instant! And can move in it bold.  
OH LONGING FOR OBJECTS. Fire of flesh  
beating on the cold rocks

fundamentally lack resolution, positing a self stuck groping toward longed-for objects that cannot be captured by or translated into "bright false images" or "dull words." Importantly, for McClure, the undersoul connotes a space within, but also something into which one descends. Entering the mind-space that it occupies entails not an Apollonian union of the body and spirit, but, crucially, a violent implosion of the two into one.

This much scarier proposition is what Conner's *DARK BROWN* presents. To begin with, the splash of silver-white paint occupying its center offers no reprieve from the dark, roiled expanse around it; instead, it appears, paradoxically, to be *both* behind the swirling dark brown field *and* contiguous with it. The bright white pool and the murky paint surrounding it are equally obstinate in their presence on the painting's surface; they promise, and frustrate the desire for, access to something beyond or below. The painting challenges its viewer with an impossible proposition in the same way McClure's poem asks its reader to imagine becoming "muscled space" and to envision the self as both "meat/and colored light." The paradox is presented as a visual conundrum. The painting implies vast internal depth, but does not construct it through the ordinary painterly devices of contrasting color relationships or linear or atmospheric perspective. Depth here appears symptomatic, as if somehow secreted through the coagulation of matter on the gnarled surface of the work; it is sensed but not seen.

In sum, *DARK BROWN* creates a dimensional space unlike that operating in most contemporaneous painting, whether on the East or the West Coast. To mention dimensional space in conjunction with painting in the late 1950s is inevitably to bring to mind the intense debates raging at the time regarding flatness and depth in advanced painting. It was, after all, in 1959 that Frank Stella claimed to have found a way to "force illusionistic space out of the painting at a constant rate

by using a regulated pattern";<sup>40</sup> while Clement Greenberg's essay "Modernist Painting," in which he would argue that modernist painting "in its latest phase" had abandoned "the representation of the kind of space that recognizable objects can inhabit," would appear the following year.<sup>41</sup> Conner may or may not have been aware of these debates about flatness and modernist painting, but the metaphysical ambition of his work rendered them beside the point. For Conner, the stakes of art making were different: his assemblage aimed to "glue down" a portion of the real, physical world in its manifold facticity, contradictions included. For an artist working in this vein, painting was not a discursive practice requiring extension and advancement, but a hindrance needing to be cannibalized and overcome. A painting-assemblage like *DARK BROWN*, in dialogue with painting but approaching it obliquely, turned the making of an art object into an open-ended process of submerging and revealing, manipulating for its own ends the interplay between seeing and not seeing.

*"like an immaculate slaughterhouse"*

The manipulation of dimensional space would find more and more sophisticated expression in subsequent assemblages in the Ratbastard idiom, as can be seen in a group of works dating from 1959 with spider-related titles: *ARACHNE*, *SPIDER LADY*, *SPIDER LADY NEST*, and *SPIDER LADY HOUSE*. These works extended and advanced Conner's grasp of the assemblage medium, while pointing to the macabre direction his exploration of the material world would increasingly take.

*ARACHNE* is perhaps the most haunting of the group. Encountering the assemblage in person is a disconcerting experience: it gives the viewer an odd visual sensation of infinitely receding space, absent any firm ground behind it. A slab of wood is barely discernible beneath layers of dirty, matted material. Shrouds of nylon encase its rectangular whole, creating a punctured and permeable surface membrane. The nylon scrim makes determining the depth of the work difficult; at points it appears extremely shallow, while at others it seems to plunge inward. Only by viewing the work from the side is it possible to see that it is in fact no more than a few inches deep; when one returns to face the work head-on, it regains its illusionary depth.

A pool of aluminum paint dominates the work's upper half. Moving downward, the bright aluminum paint gives way to a rectangular inky black void, which occupies the center of the work like an absent heart. Even after close examination, it remains unclear exactly what materials make up this wet-looking splotch. Elsewhere, wires worm their way to the surface, while balls of wadded cloth and other castoff objects—bits of crumpled newspaper, fake pearls, a doll's head—

40. Frank Stella, "Text of a Lecture Given at the Pratt Institute, Winter 1959–1960," in *Frank Stella*, ed. Robert Rosenblum (Hammondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1971), p. 57.

41. Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" (1960), in *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 87.



push forward like polyps, distending the work's porous skin. Toward the bottom of the assemblage, nylons, rags, strands of beads, and other detritus bunch and gather, calling to mind a promiscuous range of imagery: river sediment, intestines, bags of garbage. Crevices between the various materials and objects squeezed behind the outer layers of nylon capture and dissolve ambient light, further impeding our ability to plumb visually the work's interior. Huddled against the gallery wall, the work appears at once defensive and aggressive, as if unwilling to reveal itself, but unable to hide its face from view.

The dominant visual feature of *ARACHNE* is its shroud of nylon stockings. The sexual and violent overtones of Conner's use of nylon stockings are mainstays of the literature on the artist. What has gone unremarked, however, is the great variety in the disposition of the nylon material from assemblage to assemblage: at times, it is wrapped tightly and densely; at other times, it is balled up and loosely suspended; at still other times, it is stretched thin. In *ARACHNE*, nylon stockings are stretched to the breaking point, allowing holes to open up according to the material's chance points of weakness.

Here nylon is both like and unlike painting—for example, the skeins of paint covering an Abstract Expressionist canvas. The stretches of nylon work as surface gestures, but they also conceal and dissimulate the surface, like the semi-transparent overlays of an anatomy book or the screens of a magic lantern show. If these are theatrical similes, the allusion is not accidental. In a 1974 interview referred to earlier, Conner spoke explicitly of the theatrical dimension of his early assemblages:

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.<sup>42</sup>

When the interviewer pressed the artist to elaborate, Conner responded with an anecdote. He related seeing his work *OVEN*, an uncompromising work inspired by the death camps at Buchenwald, in the pristine, all-white environs of a patron's

42. Conner, interview with Cummings (1973). Virginia Fabbri Butera has also suggested there is an inherent theatricality in certain of Conner's assemblages. However, for Butera, this theatrical aspect has to do with Conner's occasional use of domestic objects such as furniture in his works, which invite imagined or even actual use, like props. For Butera, Conner's works are akin in this aspect to the environmental assemblages of Edward Kienholz, in that both "are dedicated to . . . merging art and life." See Butera, "The Folding Screen as Sexual Metaphor in Twentieth Century Western Art: An Analysis of Screens by Eileen Gray, Man Ray, and Bruce Conner" (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 2002). While both Conner and Kienholz lived and worked in California in the 1950s and '60s, and both rose to prominence at the same moment, the differences between the two are of greater significance than any similarities. In the present case, it is sufficient to note that Conner's employment of the theatrical in his work operated at some distance from that employed by Kienholz. For Kienholz, use of real objects in the physical space of the viewer created Magic Realist tableaux at odds with Conner's subtle inducements to tortuous looking.



*Conner. ARACHNE. 1959.*

ultra-modernist house. For Conner, the work was ideally suited to the space, in that it pulled the house into relation and showed how both were equally “unbearable”: “the environment and the piece were exactly the same thing . . . another way would be to put it in a slaughterhouse. [The house] was like an immaculate slaughterhouse. That’s what it felt like to me. People’s emotions and life totally unnatural.”<sup>43</sup> As his discussion of *OVEN* suggests, Conner envisioned his assemblage as operating like aggressive street theater, intervening in whatever space it occupied, like the parades and other proto-Happenings he and others periodically organized to disrupt daily life in San Francisco.<sup>44</sup> Like those activities, *OVEN*, *ARACHNE*, and other Ratbastard assemblages held the potential to activate their surroundings, in turn making their viewers over into “participants.”<sup>45</sup>

Conner’s comments also point to the private nature of the encounter; an assemblage such as *ARACHNE* is, like an altar, a theater for one. This means that participation takes a quite specific form. In this case, it means giving in to the spatial problems posed by the assemblage, experiencing the elusive spaces that it contains and conceals. Of course, the presence of an enterable, imaginary space in a work of art is not new; it has been, for example, a cardinal trait of traditional landscape painting from at least as far back as Poussin and Claude Lorrain. Many of Conner’s early assemblages, including *ARACHNE*, have the scale and sensibility of landscape paintings; their craggy surfaces recall mountains or moonscapes. Yet in Conner’s works, space is created and manipulated with a literalness foreign to traditional painting. A traditional landscape painting impels the viewer not only to see the landscape, but also to “visualize his presence at the scene,” as Michael Fried has observed.<sup>46</sup> Such a painting leads the viewer from foreground to horizon by means of an arrangement of carefully orchestrated visual cues; thus is the viewer made over into an ideal, disembodied “observer.”<sup>47</sup> *ARACHNE* demands a similarly circuitous looking, but its knotty thatch of materials frustrates any ideational progress inward. Embedded objects, always taken readymade, trip up the viewer, stubbornly rejecting his or her projection into the work—as with the doll’s head inserted behind the nylon scrim in the lower right of the work, which snaps the viewer back to the plane of experiential reality and wards off any attempt to enter. In subsequent assemblages, other objects and, increasingly, photographic images would come to serve a similar function.

*Poussiniste* painting posits an incorporeal viewer; Conner’s assemblage is

43. Conner, interview with Cummings (1973).

44. Speaking of the wide variety of impromptu actions, parades, and performances in the Bay Area in the late 1950s, Thomas Albright has commented, “In a sense, everything ultimately became a form of theater.” Albright, *Art in the San Francisco Bay Area*, p. 83.

45. Conner, interview with Cummings (1973).

46. Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 125.

47. *Ibid.* Fried labels this proto-modernist mode of viewing “the pastoral,” and argues that its invited projection is analogous to the “absorptive” mode of viewing that, he argues, would come to dominate avant-garde French painting from the age of Diderot through the painting of Edouard Manet and beyond.

materialist, grimy and real, with vision figured as penetration. The former promises intellectual mastery of an imagined landscape; the latter promises knowledge of the real—but that knowledge is ultimately withheld. Thus do so many of Conner's assemblages flout a cardinal trait of Western painting: they refuse to figure a subject, instead ensnaring vision within their undifferentiated, centerless fields, like the gossamer filaments of a spider web. A field without a center brings to mind the all-over compositions of Jackson Pollock, but the model of looking here differs fundamentally from that of Pollock. Conner's nylon snarls create no "space-filling curve of immense complexity," as Fried would come to find in Pollock's work.<sup>48</sup> Fried makes this observation in the context of his discussion of Pollock's decoupling of line from figuration, in which he sees the elements of each drip painting "woven together . . . to create an opulent and, in spite of their diversity, homogenous visual fabric which both invites the act of seeing on the part of the spectator and yet gives the eye nowhere to rest once and for all."<sup>49</sup> Conner's *ARACHNE* traduces any notion of a "homogenous visual fabric" in the despoiled furrows of its own nylon webbing.

Of course, Fried's reading of Pollock, invested as it is in a notion of pure modernist opticality, has received considerable critique. Perhaps most notably, Rosalind Krauss has offered a powerful reading of Pollock's painting that contrasts sharply with that of Fried.<sup>50</sup> For Krauss, Fried and other modernist critics sublimated Pollock into the modernist canon, reorienting his work from horizontal to vertical and reinventing the painter himself from "howling" Beat to sophisticated modernist.<sup>51</sup> Reading Pollock back through painters who best grasped the true stakes of his project, such as Cy Twombly, Krauss argues that it is possible to see the essence of the drip painting come into focus as the *graffito*, the indexical mark which is always already distanced from its maker: never "I *am* here," but always "I *was* here"—a mark "delivered over to a future that will be carried on without [the artist's] presence." By reading Pollock through Twombly, Krauss argues that the former's drip paintings were never "arenas for action," for the mirroring of the self, as has often been claimed; rather, they were the site of a violent cancellation of the figure, an abnegation of the self-image.<sup>52</sup>

Such cancellation—which, after all, reinscribes the subject, if in a violently dislocated form—differs sharply from the approach in Conner's assemblage. Coming as it does from outside the filial tradition that links such artists as Pollock and Twombly, Conner's attack on painting differs from the cancellation Krauss teases out from Twombly's working through of Pollock. Rather than a cancellation, Conner's assemblage stages a flaying, a ritualized sacrifice—as evinced by the

48. Michael Fried, "Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella," in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 223.

49. *Ibid.*

50. Krauss, Chapter 6, *Optical Unconscious*.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 244.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 260.

spilling innards of *RATBASTARD*, or the totemically shredded nylons of *ARACHNE*. These works do not cancel the subject; rather, they disturb the idea of subjecthood itself, to the point of annihilation. A radically different theory of mind animates a work like *ARACHNE*; its nylon strands veil nothing but its own voided core.

This lack of a core can create a powerful sense of instability, as in *ARACHNE*, which communicates a sense of extreme claustrophobic unease despite the absence of any narrative cues. For if, following Fried, in traditional landscape the eye mounts an idealized journey from point A to point B, and in Pollock the observer's eye dances endlessly across the painting's ribbons of pigment (or lingers over the graffiti-like indexical marks of the absent artistic subject, as asserted by Krauss), in *ARACHNE* there is no place for the observer whatsoever; no escape, no refuge is on offer. Returning to Conner's comments vis-à-vis *OVEN*, this is indeed a form of theatrical participation, but one with a brutal, even cruel, lack of resolution—something like a “painting of cruelty,” to borrow and bend Antonin Artaud's well-known formulation.

Like the “ratbastard”—the societal reject, which cannot rise to the level of subjecthood, but rather scurries below the threshold of semiotic (re)cognition—*ARACHNE* offers, at its core, nothing but a void. Wrestling with the ramifications of this absent core would remain the point of contention throughout Conner's engagement with assemblage, working itself out in manifold ways.<sup>53</sup> In case after case, the artist's assemblages stage their own eccentric theatrical encounters, forcing a mode of viewing in which the viewer must compulsively pursue what remains forever absent: solid ground. Conner often remarked that he never considered his assemblages finished; rather, he would just stop at some point. For *ARACHNE*, *DARK BROWN*, and Conner's many other Ratbastards from the late 1950s and early '60s, one might say the same for looking at them.

53. Conner, quoted in interview with Dean, *Bruce Conner*, n.p.