

ANGELS: Bruce Conner 1973-1975

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

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The wide-ranging and prolific career of Bruce Conner has spanned more than four decades and includes work produced in a variety of media. Born in McPherson, Kansas, in 1933, Conner received his B.F.A. from the University of Nebraska in 1956 and studied at the Brooklyn Museum Art School and the University of Colorado. He moved to San Francisco in 1957 and immediately immersed himself in the thriving art and literary scene in the Bay Area, where he continues to work today. Perhaps most celebrated for his assemblage work, Conner also has explored the expressive possibilities of sculpture, painting, collage, drawing, conceptual gesture, printmaking, film, and photography. It is only one aspect of his work in the medium of photography that comprises this exhibition.

In 1972, a year in which he found himself artistically directionless, Conner came upon the idea of producing life-size, negative shadow images of himself in black velvet. These could be carried with him and variously placed in any number of locales as reminders of his creative impasse. In order to find a starting point for this project, Conner collaborated with photographer Edmund Shea to create photograms of his body as templates for the velvet forms. Technically, a photogram is a cameraless work, and the process can be traced back historically to the sixteenth-century and the use of the camera obscura, or "dark room," for its production. Conner, nude and standing on a platform in front of light-sensitive paper tacked to one wall of Shea's completely darkened studio, posed his body in various configurations. When the right pose was found, Shea flashed white light from a slide projector onto the sensitized paper. Where Conner's body or other objects blocked the light, the finished print captured them as white patterns against a black background. The photographic paper reversed the phenomenon it recorded—positive (light) became negative (black background), and negative (absence of light, or shadow) became positive (Conner's body). Because his body became a

vessel of radiance, a transformer of energy, in the printed photograms, Conner abandoned the idea of making negative shadow images of himself in velvet. He focused instead on the positive image of himself as light<sup>1</sup> and his body as a medium of creative exploration. The result was a series of twenty-nine photograms, each designated as an ANGEL, produced between 1973 and 1975.<sup>2</sup> Conner compares these images to the "angels" one makes by lying flat in deep snow and sweeping arcs with the arms to make "wings."<sup>3</sup> When viewed both individually and in progression as a series, the ANGELS present a meditative grouping of self-portraits that show the evolution of an increasingly spiritually enhanced being.

Within the context of the series, three groupings can be discerned. The first contains the most highly contrasting imagery. Clearly defined body images are silhouetted against black backgrounds. Here, the human figure is most recognizable, and occasionally makes reference to historical sources. *CROUCHING ANGEL*, for example, could exist as the shadow of Rodin's *Thinker*. In *BOWING ANGEL*, *TEARDROP ANGEL*, and *ENFOLDING ANGEL*, Conner posed himself as crouching and bent, in essence presenting himself as a contorted mass of imploded energy. These initial photograms have the greatest variety of size, shape, and imagery, in part due to the fact that these were the earliest created, and the process was still being explored.

The second group presents the human figure as a full-standing, frontal form, totemic in stance. The shapes become more translucent in this grouping where light seems to emanate from within the figures outward, thus producing an ephemeral quality. Conner achieved this effect by placing parts of his body, particularly his hands, directly on the paper, causing the rest of his body to subtly fade in and out of the background or darkness. The result is a magical resonance of the body between earthly and unearthly realms, the light and the void. The subtle, horizontal striations in these photograms, an effect that resulted from the necessity of rolling the large sheets of paper during processing, add to their ethereal appearance. This effect is magnified by the allusions to exploded stars, doves, and butterflies created by the hand postures, all symbols of the unfolding energy of transformation, as seen in *BUTTERFLY ANGEL*, *BLESSING ANGEL*, *SOUND OF ONE HAND ANGEL*, and *SOUND OF TWO HANDS ANGEL*.

In the final grouping, Conner's body is almost entirely dissolved into the blackness of the background void. Fingertips, nose, lips, and toes become abstract shapes, points of pure light that expand and disintegrate into the cosmological darkness. These last photograms—*FLAME ANGEL*, *ANGEL KISS*, and *KISS ANGEL*—are perhaps the most compelling and poignant as they relate to pure form and abstract imagery that resembles celestial bodies or flames that explode, flicker, and eventually disappear into the peaceful quietude of nothingness and solitude. These last photograms are not unlike Conner's series of pen and ink drawings produced during the same time period wherein specks of white—points of light or energy—emerge from obsessively drawn, heavily cross-hatched, black fields: mini, mythic universes filled with the possibility of radiance. In the photograms, however, it is the body and being of Conner himself that carries the possibility of radiance and light. As Conner has stated, "I don't think I can do anything outside my own body. My attitude towards myself is like my attitude toward each of those dots of light: isolated—formless—with the power of light within it."<sup>4</sup>

For Conner, the photograms were a very personal project relating to his own exploration into the internal depths of self.<sup>5</sup> Embodying the preoccupations of an intimate, three-year journey, the series remains one of Conner's most intensive and beautiful bodies of work.

Judith Clzek  
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<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Solnit, *Secret Exhibition: Six California Artists of the Cold War Era* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1991), 123.

<sup>2</sup> Twenty-seven of the original twenty-nine are extant.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce Conner in an interview with Judith Clzek at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, January 12, 1992.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce Conner quoted by Beth Coffelt in "Bruce Conner: Figures of the Body in the Universe" (unpublished essay for the Walnut Creek Art Center, 1975). It should be noted that in 1967 Conner ran for the office of supervisor in San Francisco on a platform of "light" based on the Gospel According to Luke (11: 34-36).

<sup>5</sup> Bruce Conner in an interview with Terri Cohn on July 6, 1984, quoted in *Bruce Conner: Photograms* (San Francisco: The Art Museum Association of America, 1985).