



TOP Abbas Akhavan, *Study for a Monument* (2022), installation view at Tate Modern Gallery, July 2025. Photo: Grahame Weinbren.

RIGHT Open Group, Installation view of REPEAT AFTER ME II (2022-2024) at 601Artspace, 88 Eldridge Street, May 9 - June 22, 2025. Curated by Marta Czyż. Organized in collaboration with Magda Sawon of Postmasters Gallery. Courtesy 601 Art Space / Photo: Flaneurshan.studio.

BOTTOM Open Group, REPEAT AFTER ME II (2022-2024), still from video. © Open Group.



WAR IN PIECES

Three of the five works discussed here refer explicitly to war—its weapons, its effects, its consequences—while the broad sense of loss casts a shadow over all five. It is difficult, if not impossible, without banality, cliché or sentiment, to address the violence, pain and tragedy caused by the multiple conflicts across our globe. I suggest that the fragmentation, the open-endedness and especially the oblique techniques employed in these works can engender deeply felt responses—as witnessed by my own experience of the films. A chilling resonance is evoked with the shattering, lingering, traumas of war ...war in pieces rather than head on.

REPEAT AFTER ME II (2022-2024)

Open Group (Yuriy Biley, Pavlo Kovach, and Anton Varga)
Curated by Marta Czyż
Organized in collaboration with Magda Sawon
of Postmasters Gallery
601Artspace, 88 Eldridge Street
May 9 - June 22, 2025

REPEAT AFTER ME II was included in the Polish Pavilion of the 2024 Venice Biennale. It is composed of two films, *2022* and *2024*, described in the *601Artspace Gallery* handout as follows:

The 2022 work features “internal refugees”—those who escaped west from embattled eastern regions of Ukraine—sharing their visceral experience of the war in real time. In the 2024 work, the format is the same but the witnesses are Ukrainians now living in exile abroad, in other European cities as well as New York, reliving the sounds they recall.¹

The refugees were filmed outdoors in closeup and medium shot in largely open city spaces. Behind those filmed in Berlin, one can see the building of the former Tegel Airport, now converted to a refugee camp. The two films were projected alternately on two video projection screens, one at each end of a large unfinished room lit in a comfortable red glow. Six microphones mounted on stands were located immediately in front of each screen.

Men, women, old, middle aged, young. One by one they stare into the camera, identify themselves, and shout, yowl, grunt, hiss, roar the sounds of war.

UUUUhHHhh TDDURRShHTT'ZHH TT'ZHT!

Machine gun. Explosion. Siren. Drone. Helicopter. Bomber Plane.
WZWWFF BU BUUHH! WZWWFF BU BUUHH!

Oversized subtitles approximate the sounds. Once, twice.

WEEEEEEEEHHEWEeee. WEEEEEEEEHHEWEeee.

After producing the extended sound of war weapons or warning sirens, the performer issues the command “Повторюй за мною” or “Repeat after me.” It’s an invitation, in one instance followed by “... so that you hear the sound and never forget it.”

The performance is repeated, then audio is muted as the performer again discharges his or her sounds, allowing us time to study the onomatopoeic subtitle and the performer’s mouth contortions and lip positions. Now we can have a go at imitating the sounds of war into the ready microphones. But we are not as skilled in this special language as the victims of military operations. They are experts, the sounds of war embedded in their consciousness through unwanted repetition. Are they magically defusing their terrors by introjecting the ugly sounds of death from exterior to interior worlds, like children at play? The artists describe the piece as “a military karaoke bar of the future” and we sense that under different circumstances we could have been the citizens who learned to make sounds of war.



Bruce Conner, *CROSSROADS* (1976), Installation view at Tate Modern Gallery (June 2025). Photo: Grahame Weinbren.

CROSSROADS (1976)

Bruce Conner

Tate Modern, viewed June 2025

To reach *CROSSROADS* at the Tate Modern, the visitor first has to confront an installation work by artist Abbas Akhavan entitled *Study for a Monument* (2022). Immediately unsettling, it appears to be a collection of dead leaves and plants scattered on white bed sheets flat on the gallery floor. A wall text captures the mood: “It evokes makeshift funerary displays, sites of mass burial or piles of shrapnel.” Indeed the installation reeks of mortality. On closer inspection we see that *Study for a Monument* is a group of meticulously crafted bronze leaves and plants. They model species native to Iraq, the region still recovering from the 2003-2011 US invasion. But the eerie fragility of Akhavan’s installation conflicts with its setting. Directly above the sculptures, a line of windows frames a splendid view of the Thames and beyond, encompassing the dignity of St Paul’s Cathedral and a generous section of the original London Square Mile. A symphony of contrasts, it is an appropriate introduction to the 2025 Tate curation of Bruce Conner’s 1976 masterpiece. At the end of the gallery a short passage leads to a screening room furnished with a couple of benches, an HD projection filling the far wall. The transition from *Study for a Monument* to *CROSSROADS* has the effect of a masterful edit in a work of advanced cinema.

Like much of Conner’s cinematic oeuvre, its source is archival. The artist’s FOIA request for the extensive documentation of the 1946 Bikini Atoll underground atomic bomb test was, to his surprise, granted. He received copies of film recorded by seven high speed cameras mounted on ships, aircraft and nearby islands, and crafted the material into a thirty-nine minute film, commissioning soundtracks from Terry Riley and Patrick Gleeson.

It’s not the first time I’ve seen *CROSSROADS*. But it has never before affected me so immediately, so intensely, so breathtakingly. I returned several times. The first section of the film consists of views of the detonation from multiple angles and varying distances, made new again by the impressive quality of the restoration/conversion of the analog media. At the Tate, *CROSSROADS* is installed in a specially constructed viewing room, a constricted environment that emphasizes the very magnitude of the mushroom cloud—enormous power enfolded

within an awesome, almost operatic beauty, produced by a weapon designed for total obliteration of people and things. The impact of the installation is palpable in the absorbed attention of viewers, its exhibition at this moment in history reflecting the increasingly fragile state of our world. In the multiple strands of the column of poisonous smoke superimposed on a lovely sky decorated with pretty cumulus clouds, *CROSSROADS* bespeaks the uncertainty of its—and our own—future. The 1946 Operation Crossroads Baker Underwater Test yielded twenty-one kilotons of TNT, equivalent in destructive power to the 1945 Nagasaki “Fat Man” bomb that killed 100,000 people, mostly noncombatants. Twenty-one kilotons is a fraction of the explosive power of any single one of the 12,000+ contemporary nuclear warheads currently on call.

I won’t attempt further analysis or critique of *CROSSROADS*—there is much splendid writing about the iconic work. I refer readers to two texts published 8 and 10 years ago. First the incomparable 2015 review in the *Guardian* by distinguished painter, art critic and curator Adrian Searle which includes an unforgettable metaphor: “Presented in two unequal halves, the film allows us to witness the event both as a sudden, wrenching unleashing of power – the association with the male orgasm is unavoidable – and as a slow eclipse of the world.”²

My second reference, suggested by Amy Taubin, is Ray Lipman’s “Conservation at a Crossroads: the Restoration of a Film by Bruce Conner”³ first published in the October 2013 *Artforum*. As principal restorer, Lipman discusses the conversion of *CROSSROADS* from celluloid to digital and analog media. The attention to replicating the basic quality of photographic film on digital video is especially interesting. It is not a straightforward substitution, given the visible difference between the systematic ordering of the pixels of the digital image and the random scattering of photochemical grain. The dry, granular, rice-like texture of the post-explosion surface of the troubled sea in the final nine minutes of the film accentuates the unnatural quality of the man-made killing device. I’ll return to this section of the film at the end of this article.

BEING JOHN SMITH (2024)

John Smith
Kate MacGarry Gallery, Hackney, UK
January 18 to February 15, 2025

Concurrent with its inclusion in numerous film festivals, *Being John Smith* was installed at the Kate MacGarry Gallery in a darkened purpose-built alcove. An exhibition architecture similar to the Tate Modern CROSSROADS installation, though much smaller, lent *Being John Smith* an extra sense of value, significance, and sobriety.

The film begins with the familiar sound of a new-born infant’s first cry, quickly followed by the all-caps single word: BEING. The words JOHN SMITH appear almost 10 seconds later, just sufficient time for the double-meaning to register. *Being John Smith* has begun: 25 seconds for not only a three-word summary of its raw content, but also a microcosm of its ironic style, dry humor and inventiveness. Until the final scene, the film consists entirely of stills, narration, sound effects, and captions. The four elements frequently don’t quite match, generating a range of ideas in a kind of light dialectic.

After the title, Smith’s voice dominates, both revelatory and self-critical. Explicitly a memoir, a colleague dismissed it as “a British dude talking about himself,” but I understand all that talking as a subterfuge concealing private facts and feelings the filmmaker doesn’t wish to voice. For example, one specific sound effect defines Smith’s high school experience. Voice-over: “I got beaten by the headmaster frequently ...” The sound of the swish of a cane coupled with a jump cut to the tight-lipped headmaster’s arrogant grimace gives a vivid sense of the filmmaker’s continuing disdain for the man, more than half a century later. With the subtle application of cinematic construction, an emotional undercurrent flows as an unspoken subtext.

Twice Smith identifies the unreliable narrator as a familiar presence in his films. Does this throwaway confession apply when he off-handedly raises touchy issues about social class and conformity? Or when he regrets the impossibility of ardently desired fame when your name is shared with millions of English-speaking males, as evidenced in a montage of head shots of assorted John Smiths. The film sparkles with the filmmaker’s skillful employment of the inbuilt powers of cinema to refer to self-confessed flaws and insecurities. Is it *flippant*, *facetious*, *ironic*, *wry*, *ironical*, *cynical*, *dry*, *poignant*? Do we feel by the end of the

film that we’ve come to know the filmmaker? Hardly. He warned us not to believe him.

Zhuang Zhou took his brush and in an instant,
with a single flourish, drew a crab,
the most perfect crab anyone had ever seen.

MFJ editor Nicky Hamlyn pointed out to me that viewers familiar with Smith’s earlier work may experience this film very differently from those who don’t know it. *BJS* adds a retrospective irony to our understanding of his other unreliable narrator films, especially *The Black Tower* (1987).

A basic feature of all types of cinema involves revealing the signification of an incomprehensible, mysterious, or otherwise out-of-place element well after its appearance. This strategy offers a viewer the special pleasure of cognition through memory. One of the examples in *BJS* is the repeated off-subject insertions of images of a building under construction. The viewer accepts these short interruptions as decorative but not particularly salient, only comprehending their import in the final scene. At that *aha* moment one’s mind is whisked back through the film to make sense of images that had passed by like floaters in the visual field.

This review is continued online with a brief look at two works included in Day One of the 2025 Prismatic Ground Festival. Both achieve their effects by means of factors apparently unrelated to their immediate subjects.

GRAHAME WEINBREN

Part Two of the review online:
[www.millenniumfilmjournal.com/
war-in-pieces-part-2-weinbren/](http://www.millenniumfilmjournal.com/war-in-pieces-part-2-weinbren/)



John Smith, Installation view of *Being John Smith* (2024), Kate MacGarry Gallery, Hackney, UK (January 18 to February 15, 2025). Courtesy the artist and Kate MacGarry, London.