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BROKEN SCREEN

**26 CONVERSATIONS
WITH DOUG AITKEN
EXPANDING THE IMAGE
BREAKING THE NARRATIVE
EDITED BY NOEL DANIEL**



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Broken Screen
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Breaking the Narrative
26 Conversations with Doug Aitken

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Page 286 includes a list that Hou Hanru and Hans Ulrich Obrist compiled for the exhibition *Cities on the Move* (1997–99), as well as names given by the architectural collective Gruppo A12 and artists Gilbert and George, among others. Hans Ulrich Obrist would like to thank Archigram, Peter Cook, Rem Koolhaas, Georges Perec, and Cedric Price for triggering the list, as well as thanks to Stefano Boeri, Andrea Branzi, David Greene, and Peter Smithson. Obrist is curator of contemporary art at ARC/Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris. Page 286 cites JW, which refers to Jason Wesche.

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These conversations took place between 2003 and 2005. They have been edited for clarity.



d.a.p.



Bruce Conner

In 1958 artist Bruce Conner (b. 1933, McPherson, Kansas) made the groundbreaking twelve-minute collage film *A MOVIE*. It was created entirely from black-and-white newsreels and found footage and revolutionized the use of appropriated imagery in film. A leading figure in assemblage art and the West Coast counterculture scene, Conner made twenty-one films from 1958 to 1981, a selection of which is shown here in stills. As one of the first artists to have used pop music with the moving image, his films are among the forerunners of music videos.

Doug:

5, 4, 3, 2, 1...calling Bruce Conner. In the rolling fog of San Francisco, I know you're there...hello Bruce. I'd like to hear your thoughts on *A MOVIE*, the film that jumps, skips, and trips. Before you made the film in 1958, you were making collages, drawings, and still images. How did your work lift off the page and onto the reel in such an extreme way?

Bruce:

One of the reasons I made *A MOVIE* was because it's what I wanted to see happen in film. Ever since I was fifteen years old, I'd been watching movies and thinking of ways to play with their story lines. For instance, I would imagine taking a backlit shot of Marlene Dietrich in *Blonde Venus* (1932) walking through a doorway and overlaying it with something like the final words from *King Kong*: "Beauty killed the beast." Then I'd imagine the next shot being something else entirely with different sound. Basically, for years I'd been playing with bits and pieces of different films in my head, and I kept assembling and reassembling this immense movie using pictures and sounds and music from all sorts of things. I'd been waiting for someone to come up with a movie like this. And nobody did.

Doug:

It's as if you instinctively wanted to construct one single movie out of every movie you'd ever seen.

Bruce:

I thought, surely there must be somebody out there making experimental films, or maybe experimental historical films, using other movies as sources. I was determined to find this film, and I just didn't. I had always been interested in trying to find films you couldn't see in standard movie theaters, and from very early on, I was involved in film groups and clubs. It was the only way you could see these films. You have to realize that in the 1950s it was really hard to see any interesting feature films. You couldn't even see Charlie Chaplin films. Period. No one played them. You couldn't see films like D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916) or Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia* (1938) in any theaters at all. If you wanted to see these kinds of films, you had to start a non-profit film society and rent the films from the Museum of Modern Art. When I came

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THIS CONVERSATION TOOK PLACE BETWEEN SAN FRANCISCO AND VENICE, CALIFORNIA.



to San Francisco from Colorado, I started a film club with Larry Jordan called Camera Obscura. We were the only film society or film group in the entire Bay area at the time. There were no theaters showing at that time. We were it.

Doug:

How did you begin making A MOVIE?

Bruce:

Film from other movies was really hard to get your hands on. The only piece of film that I owned at that time was this filmstrip that I'd found at a friend's house. It was a scrap of film showing a woman almost completely naked on a stool in the process of taking off a stocking. My friend had discovered it in his brother's dresser. He gave it to me since he knew I was interested in film. This filmstrip got the whole project started. I was inspired by the projectionists who sometimes mistakenly ran the countdown leader on-screen before the film. I'd originally wanted to surprise everybody at Camera Obscura by sticking this filmstrip between the numbers in the countdown leaders of what we were showing. But Larry Jordan said if I did, he'd quit the film society. He was outraged by the idea. So I decided that the only way I could deal with this—and still watch what I wanted to see on-screen—was to make it. Larry showed me the basics of splicing and so for two weeks let me use his wet splicer, his movie projector, and his viewer. I went out and bought a bunch of shortened versions of films at local photo shops, like 100-foot versions of things like *Hop-Along Cassidy* (1935) and newsreels. These had all the action and visual elements of film that I needed, and eventually I even spliced the filmstrip that had been given to me in between the numbers in the countdown leader of *A MOVIE*.

Doug:

The way you edited the found footage in A MOVIE, you took out all the extraneous elements and put the key dramatic scenes together into a narrative. Can you tell me about your ideas behind the sequencing of the footage?

Bruce:

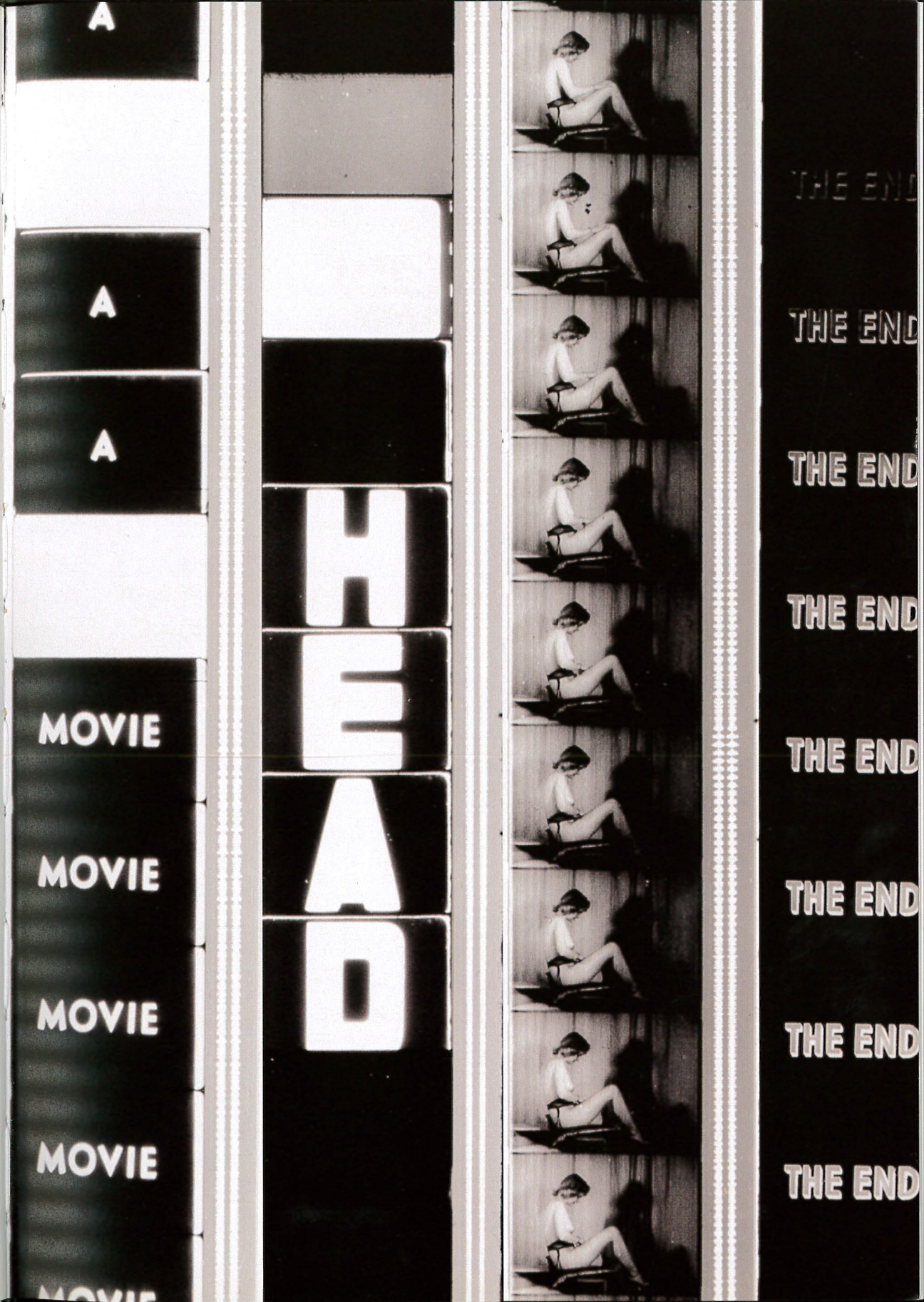
A MOVIE is a nonlinear film. Its fragmented structure makes the narrative appear to change and shift. People would say to me, "Oh, you reedited that film since the last time I saw it." Or, "You added something and took something out." And of course, I hadn't changed it at all. It just looked like it had changed from the way the footage was edited.

Doug:

There are so many different images in the film, people don't necessarily catch everything the first time they watch it.

Bruce:

Just by putting images together, relationships between things are suggested, whether they exist in real life or not. If you run three images together in sequence, people are going to draw a conclusion between them, and I wanted to play with this. A large part of the construction of almost any communication has to be its recreation by the person who experiences it. And this is not going to be the same all the time. It's going to





change with the viewer. Then there's the space between the images also, which is important. I extended this space by putting in black leader to isolate images or to make the screen suddenly go black, leaving the audience to wonder what was going to happen next. In *A MOVIE* I could play with the unplanned and the unexpected. I made them part of the entire concept of making the film. In fact, when I initially conceived of making *A MOVIE*, my ideas were even more extreme than the film ultimately became. What I wanted to do, I was not able to do back in 1958.

Doug:
What were the circumstances like that you were working under?

Bruce:
 First of all, I didn't have the money to do what I wanted. Secondly, there was no support for me in museums or any other place. To realize the project I'd wanted to do, I would have had to produce it myself and push it into a place like an artist-run gallery. But back then there were only about two or three in all of San Francisco and virtually nothing else.

Doug:
What had you originally wanted to do with the film?



Bruce:
 What I wanted to do was use a rear-projection loop projector so the film would be running continuously without end. I tried to capture this idea in what became the final version by splicing "THE END" into the film, but not at the actual end of the film.

Doug:
It seems like you were really making a statement by intercutting that along with "A MOVIE" and "BRUCE CONNER" in random places. It's a provocative way of making the viewer question the traditional structure of film. They're like traps.

Bruce:
 Yes, and then after the words flash on-screen, the film just keeps on going.

Doug:
Even though technically speaking A MOVIE has a beginning and an end, it still suggests a very fragmented narrative. You can start watching it in the middle or three minutes from the end and it doesn't really matter because there's no linear narrative. What other things had you originally wanted to do with the film that you couldn't ultimately?



A MOVIE IS A NONLINEAR FILM.

ITS FRAGMENTED STRUCTURE MAKES THE NARRATIVE APPEAR TO CHANGE. PEOPLE WOULD SAY TO ME, "OH, YOU REEDITED THAT FILM SINCE THE LAST TIME I SAW IT." AND I HADN'T CHANGED IT AT ALL.

Bruce:

I'd also wanted the film to be played in a small cube of about 10 x 10 x 10 feet that you could stand inside. And I'd wanted the lights to change and there to be tape recordings, radio programs, and television sound that would impinge aurally on the viewer at random moments. This way, the film could be viewed in a different context every time it ran. For example, one time it could have Ottorino Respighi's "Pines of Rome" with it, which is what I used in the final version of the film. And then for the next loop, it could have a silly pop song playing with it, or lions roaring at off moments. However, that said, I was working for ten cents above minimum wage as an usher in a movie theater at the time. It would have been impossible. I did not even own a movie camera.

Doug:

Having watched so many films, making A MOVIE must've felt like a really intense opportunity to put into practice all these ideas about film you'd been having for so long.

Bruce:

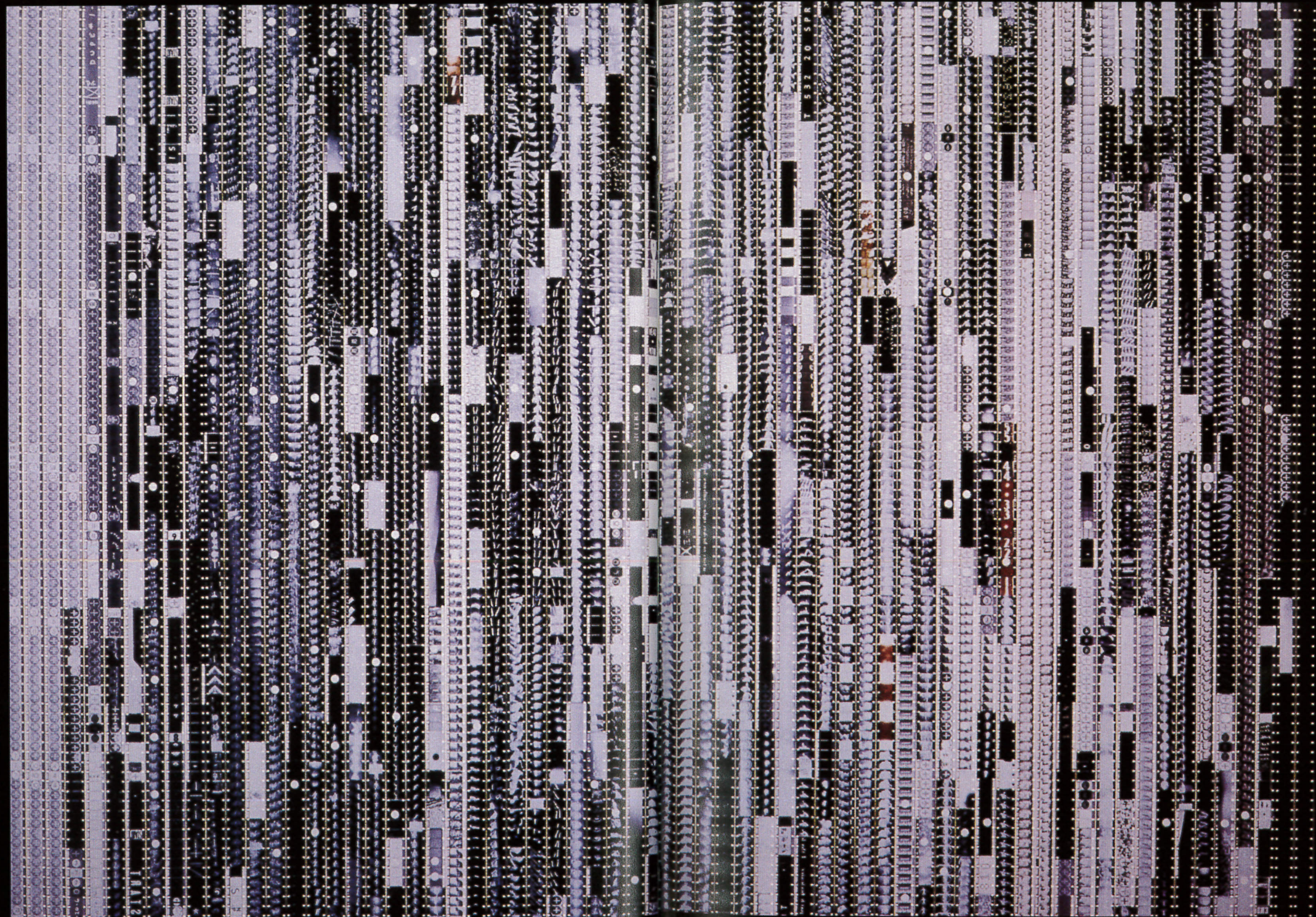
One of the values that I was dealing with in making *A MOVIE* was that I considered each shot of footage a movie in itself. For example, a shot of an airplane turning in the sky, that's a movie to me. So on one hand, *A MOVIE* is twelve minutes long with a start and a finish, and in this way is linear. But on the other hand, it has individual shots in it that are maybe two seconds long, and to me these are little movies that break up the film.

Doug:

It's interesting because the film reveals its own structure—the exact opposite of what traditional cinema does when it makes the technical craft invisible. In the editing you worked intensely with jumps in time and place, and with the scratches and skips in the original footage. The way you edited it was very much outside the tradition of narrative film. A MOVIE seems like a manifesto for perceiving a world that's inherently fractured and fluctuating. Where did this come from?

Bruce:

When I think of *A MOVIE*, I think about all of my life prior to that time and whatever I knew or experienced. My feeling is that nonlinear perception can't be beat from when you are one day old. So when I refer to the essentials of perception, I try to think back to how I reacted to things and how things impressed me when I was a small child. I remember when I went to see a movie for the first time, I didn't understand what was going on. There on the screen was a thirty-foot-tall image of a loud, obnoxious, unpleasant creature. I didn't realize that it was just a person. Instead, my experience was of a whole series of disjunctive images. I'm sure that's what people have to train themselves to ignore when they adapt themselves to reading moving images in television and cinema. It's like establishing a language of understanding. And when I think about nonlinear perception, I think about the way you collect various pieces of information and put them into some kind of functional use to make sense of the world. It is about consciousness itself.



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