

ANIMATED DISCOURSE

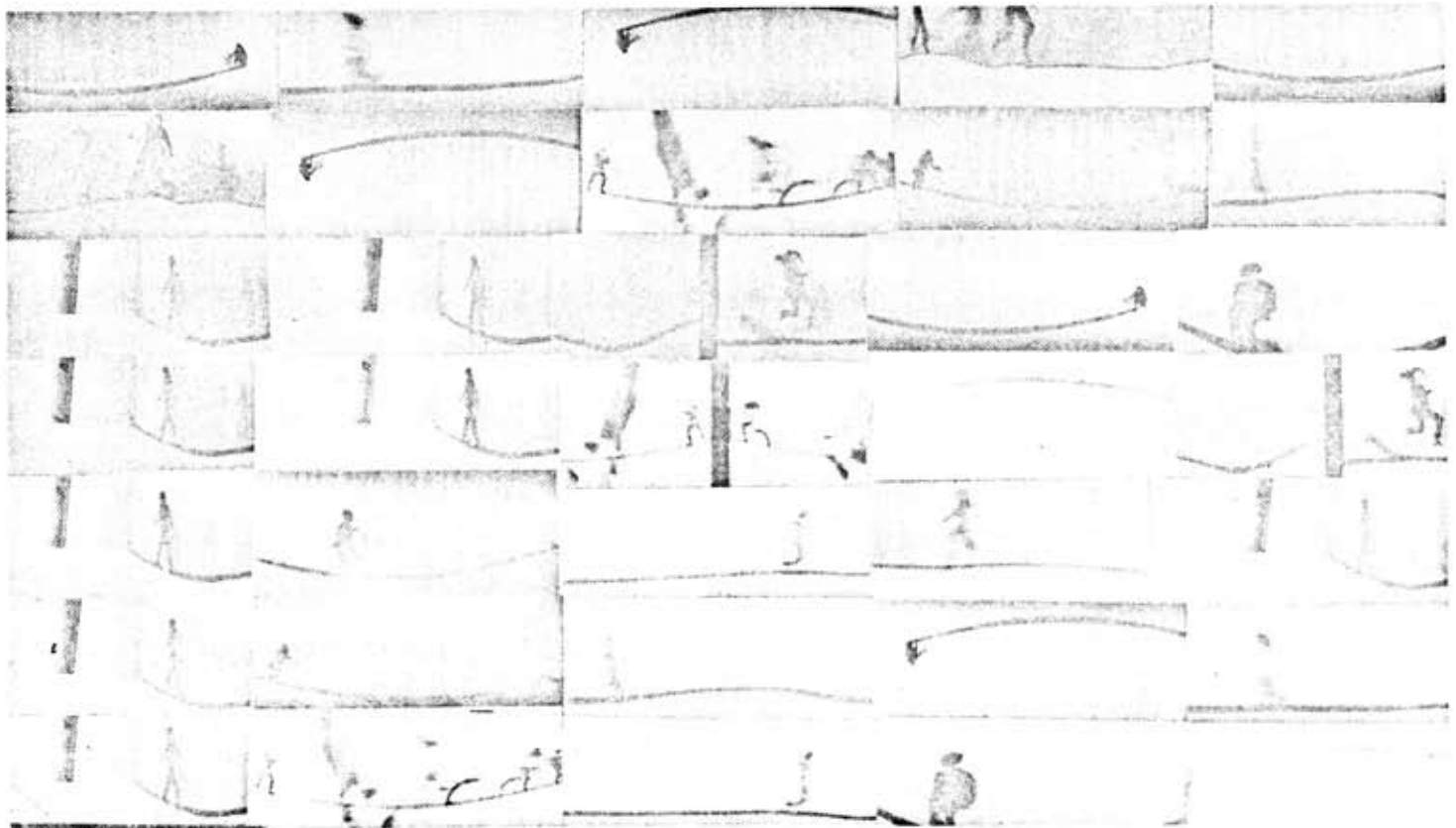
Critics have been arguing for years on how a photograph should be read. Artists Larry Bell and Guy De Cointet have collaborated on a book, ANIMATED DISCOURSE (1975), which is a must for all "visual literacy" buffs. Bell has provided Cointet with 29 photographs which that artist (noted for his puzzling code books) has encoded into a meaningful text (supposedly a story written by Bell's brother). Each photograph corresponds to an alphabetical letter or to a punctuation sign. The reader-viewer must decipher the 60" long code strip (equivalent to a Rosetta Stone) before undertaking the decoding of the book's text. Archaeology, crypto-analysis, photography, and linguistics-- the book immerses one in all these disciplines as the book's content unfolds before the trial and error process of decoding.

Visually the text is meaningful as what appear to be dancers perform leaps, hold poses, or walk in front of the camera (which maybe a Widelux panoramic camera judging from the spatial distortions). Quickly flipping the pages animates the figures as well as the dark molding along a curtained wall. Bell has inverted some of the images so that this dark molding "reads" like an oscillating line, a wave upon which the dancers seem to jump in time with. Perhaps the amplitude of these "waves" correspond in some degree with the way Cointet would want the encoded message to be read aloud.

The book is closer to a sort of Morse Code than it is to being a rebus, the former being a term-to-term code while the latter is predicated upon an identity between figure and word. The book is also analogous to Morse Code in that the relationship between the signifier (the photograph) and what it signifies (a letter) is un-motivated, that is arbitrary, like language. The binary opposition which Bell and Cointet use to generate their articulated system is that of chaos/order, the basic semiotic unit as recognized by structural linguists. Bell provides the chaos in the form of 29 photographs; Cointet arbitrarily orders them. The tension between these two functions produces the richness of meanings in the book.

ANIMATED DISCOURSE is hard-bound with a plain silver cover and is 140 pages in length. The code strip is secreted in the inside rear cover. The book I saw was signed by both Bell and Cointet and was purchased from the Fort Worth Museum for \$25. Copies of this book may also be had through Newspace Gallery, 5015 Melrose Ave., Los Angeles, California.□

James Hugunin

ANIMATED DISCOURSE (detail)