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Avant-Garde Film in England & Europe

David Curtis
English Avant-Garde
Film

Deke Dusinberre
On Expanding Cinema

Peter Gidal
Structural/
Materialist Film

Ron Haselden
MFV Maureen

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Return to Reason

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Kurt Kren

Barbara Meter
Film-making in Holland

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Alan Sheridan
David Dye

Peter Weibel
Avant-Garde Film in
Austria

Peter Wollen
The Two Avant-Gardes



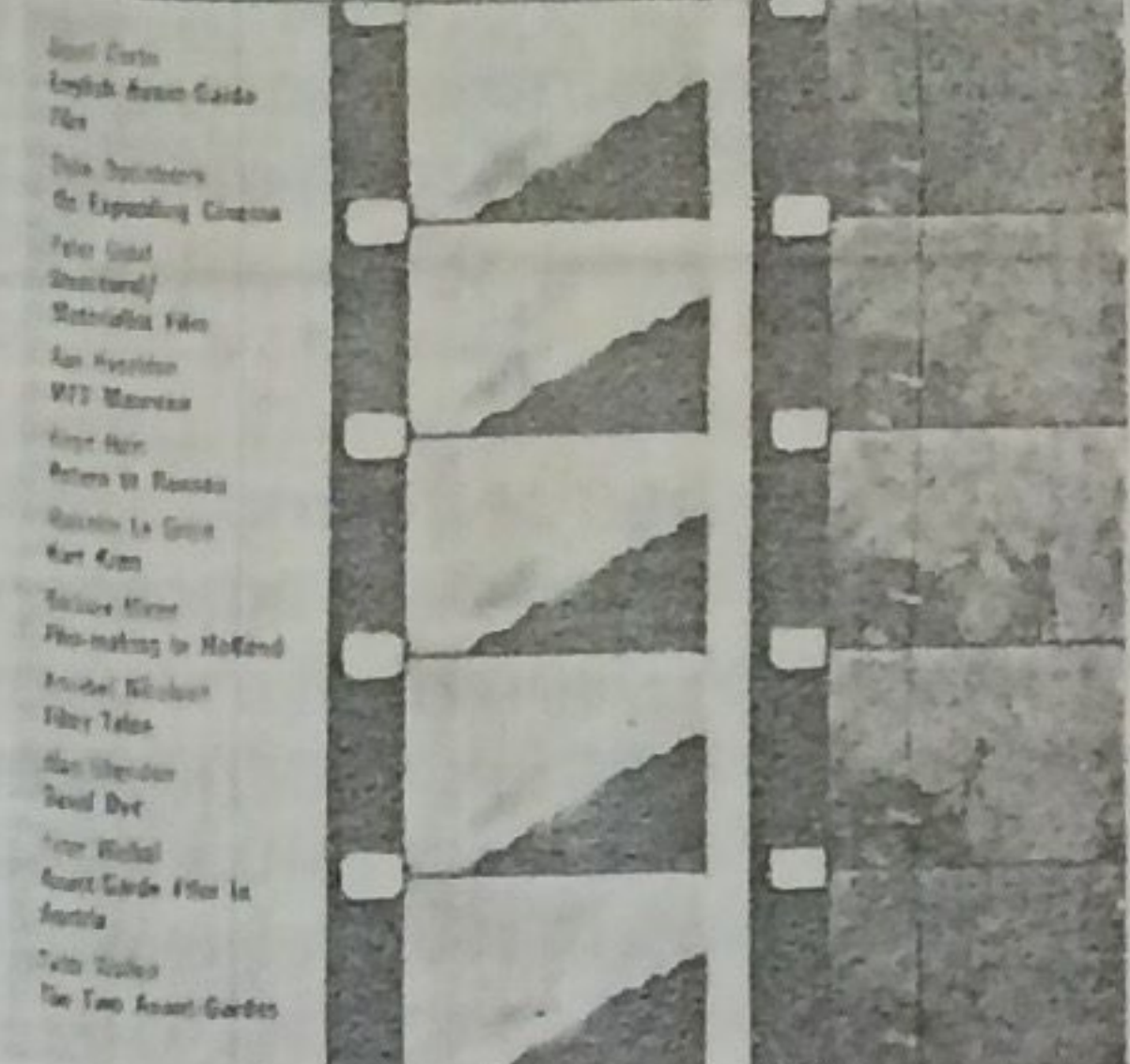
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Many of the English films discussed in this issue are available from: London Film-makers Co-op, 44 Fitzroy Road, NW1

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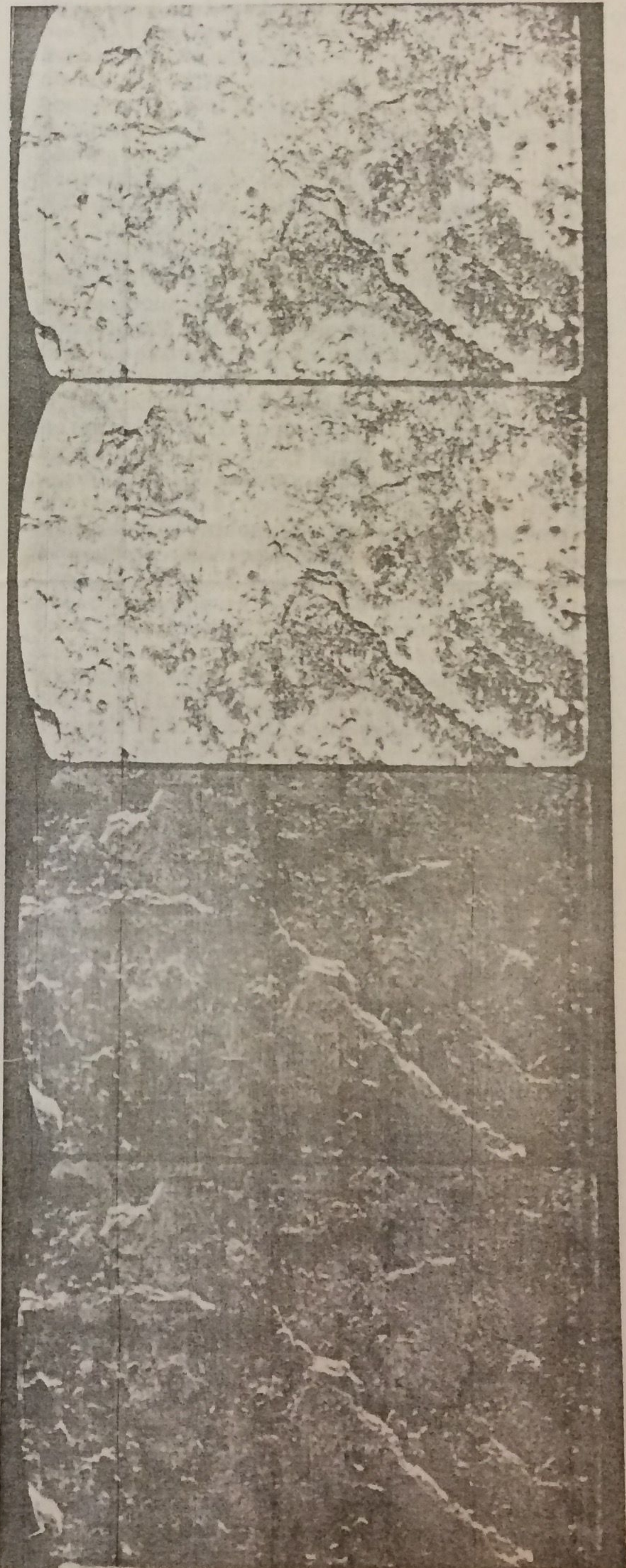
The January/February issue will be devoted to Contemporary Art in Italy

KURT KREN

Malcolm Le Grice

The temptation in writing about Kurt Kren is to present him as some kind of father of European avant-garde film. His work is certainly held in very high regard by almost all the film-makers this side of the Atlantic involved in so-called structuralist film. At forty-six years old (born in Vienna on 20 September 1929), beginning his experiments with film on 8mm as early as 1953 and completing his first 16mm film in 1957, he has at least a ten-year start on those like Birgit and Wilhelm Hein, Peter Gidal, Werner Nekes, Peter Weibel, Valie Export or myself who otherwise have been the main generation initiating the 'formal' direction outside the USA. However, to see Kren in this way is somewhat misleading. Though his historical role is of great importance he should in no way be condemned to the history books, as he continues to be a leading figure of the avant-garde. Secondly, none of the innovators who started work later, in the mid-sixties, was a follower of Kren. Most, like myself, had already started in this direction before encountering Kren's films. The lack of information here about the American underground film was matched by a similar lack of exchange within Europe itself. I first saw a Kren film in 1967 or '68, during one of the early presentations of the London Film co-op. It was in a programme dominated by some very poor and obscure films from the USA. (The first American works to be distributed here came mostly from Robert Pike's Creative Film Society catalogue, and my reaction was very unfavourable to what I came to realize later were films quite unrepresentative of the New American Cinema). The Kren film, *10/65 Selbstverstümmelung*, was one of his less evidently formal works, but even so, I recognized a close affinity in filmic concept with the work I was doing. This was borne out by seeing some of his other films soon after, particularly *15/67-TV* which remains for me his most influential film. In many ways, in post-war Vienna, the art scene revived as an independent force more quickly than it did in most other European centres. It was also less dominated by the powerful new movements originating in the affluence of post-war America. Though the development of the Austrian Direct Art and Material-aktion movements of Brus, Muehl and Nitsch parallels the Happenings movement and has similar roots in Abstract Expressionism, the Viennese development was an independent growth from the already strong expressionist tradition of Klimt, Schiele or Kokoschka. Film experiment in Vienna also significantly preceded any other similar development in Europe and was likewise completely independent of the American Underground cinema. Apart from Kren's early 8mm films, which he does not consider as 'public' work, the first important post-war experimental film from Austria was *Mosaik im Vertrauen*, made jointly in 1955 by Ferry Radax and Peter Kubelka. In 1957 Kubelka made *Adebar*, Kren made *1/57-Versuch mit syntetischem Ton* and Marc Adrian began work on *Black Movie*. Though Kubelka collaborated with Radax on the one film, these four Viennese film-makers were not a group; they worked separately and had no significant influence on each other. Kren and Kubelka, whose respective films represent the most radical innovation in film thought at that time, demand some comparison. By 1961, both film-makers had produced at least three films, which together with contemporary work by Brakhage (particularly *Sirius Remembered*, 1959) and a little later Warhol (*Sleep*, 1963) brought about the biggest changes in concepts of film form since the early experiments of Man Ray, Léger, Eggeling, Richter et al. As such, I see these four film-makers as the main precursors of the current direction of avant-garde cinema.¹ In the case of

Kubelka, the three films are *Adebar* (1957), *Schwechater* (1958) and the exceptional, blank screen, alternating black and white *Arnulf Rainer* (1960). For Kren they were *2/60-48 Köpfe aus dem Szondi-Test*, *3/60-Bäume im Herbst* (both 1960) and *4/61-Mauern-Positiv-Negativ und Weg* (1961). Perhaps Kren's first 16mm film should be included as it certainly breaks significantly



4/61-Mauern-Positiv-Negativ und Weg 1961

...nd, but it is not as clearly successful as the
...ree.
...ough, unlike most other commentators, I have never
...sidered Kubelka's *Unsere Afrikareise* to be more than
...well-made but ordinary film, his three earlier films are
...rightly recognized as major points of reference, and it is a
...source of consternation and surprise to myself and many
...of my contemporaries that Kren's work is not similarly
...recognized by American critics. An atmosphere of
...recrimination has come to surround the comparison of
...these two Viennese innovators, and it is difficult to
...maintain an impartial stance, but my concern is with the
...contribution they make through their films.

Kubelka's best film remains the imageless, cinema-
concrete *Arnulf Rainer*. Considering the time at which it
was produced, it makes an extreme and surprising
challenge to preconceptions about film content,
eliminating both photography and representation.
Adebar and *Schwechater* are also important and
accomplished works, but their concept of abstracting
kinetic qualities by high contrast printing and the use of
negative, and counterpointing this with the
orchestration of the montage, can be seen to fulfil a
graphic function similar to certain abstract avant-garde
films of the twenties (*ie* sequences from Hans Richter's
Film Studie 1926). Through the image contrast and the
editing rate, the photographic trace is separated from the
identity and association of the image. Movement and
rhythm are thereby abstracted into the visual-musical
play of forms, consistent with the often explicit aims of
early abstract films. The development of this graphically
abstract aesthetic in film had lagged behind through the
lack of experiment between the wars. But by the late
fifties, in comparison with contemporary developments in
the other arts, it no longer represented as fundamental an
aesthetic challenge as *Arnulf Rainer*, or posed as
complex artistic problems as the Kren films of the same
period. In fact, a major distinction in Kren's work is the
broad rejection of the abstract-graphic solution to the
search for new film form. The image never becomes
divorced from the thing filmed or the processes of film.
His work maintains a constant, tense dialectic between
conception and structuring on the one hand and
experience in the subjective, existentialist sense on the
other.

With thirty-one 16mm works to date Kren's historical
role in Europe is comparable to that of Brakhage in
America, as is the way in which they each historically
represent some aspect of the transition from the
existential to the structural within their work. Though
Kren's work chiefly initiates and contributes to the formal/
structural axis, and my own bias will tend to stress that
contribution, it is very complex at the imagist/associative
level. The fullest examination of Kren as an artist needs to
ask questions about the psychological basis of his
imagery, through which biographical details would
inevitably become significant. Though his films are in no
way 'diarist' or directly autobiographical, not even to the
degree to which Brakhage's are, he has always
maintained an extreme existentialist stance which
integrates all levels of his work with his life experience.
I do not feel well qualified to deal with this aspect in the
detail of psychological interpretation, but I cannot avoid
some speculation or at least some general consideration
of the work's functioning on this level.

As a Jewish child in Vienna, Kren grew up with the
spreading anti-semitism of the emerging Third Reich
and was sent to spend all the war years hidden in
relative safety in Holland. He rejoined his family in
Austria in 1947, but seems never to have been able to
recover a satisfactory emotional contact with them. He
became a cashier in the Austrian National Bank,
continuing to work there until 1968. Since his first 16mm
film, *1/57-Versuch mit syntetischem Ton* (all his film titles
are methodically pre-fixed by the number of the work in
complete chronology, followed by the year of
realization, thus *1/57* denotes film no 1, 1957), there
have been three distinct phases in his work. The first
extends from 1957 to 1962 during which he
completed five films; the second from 1964 to 1967
when he made eight (6/64 to 13/67), all based around

the work of other artists, particularly the actions of
Otto Muehl and Günter Brus, though *11/65* is based
on an Op-art picture by Helga Philio; and the third
is from 1967 to the present, continuing individual film
work (14/67 to 31/75). But it has extended to include
the production of drawings, collages, prints and in
particular five limited edition boxes, each containing
an 8mm copy of one of his films, facsimiles of the
preparatory diagrams, documentation and photographs,
sold in the same way as prints. In the last phase there
have been further collaborations with Muehl - but in the
more clearly defined role of camera man or participant in
Muehl's work - and with Brus, where Brus has been
simply a participant in a Kren film.

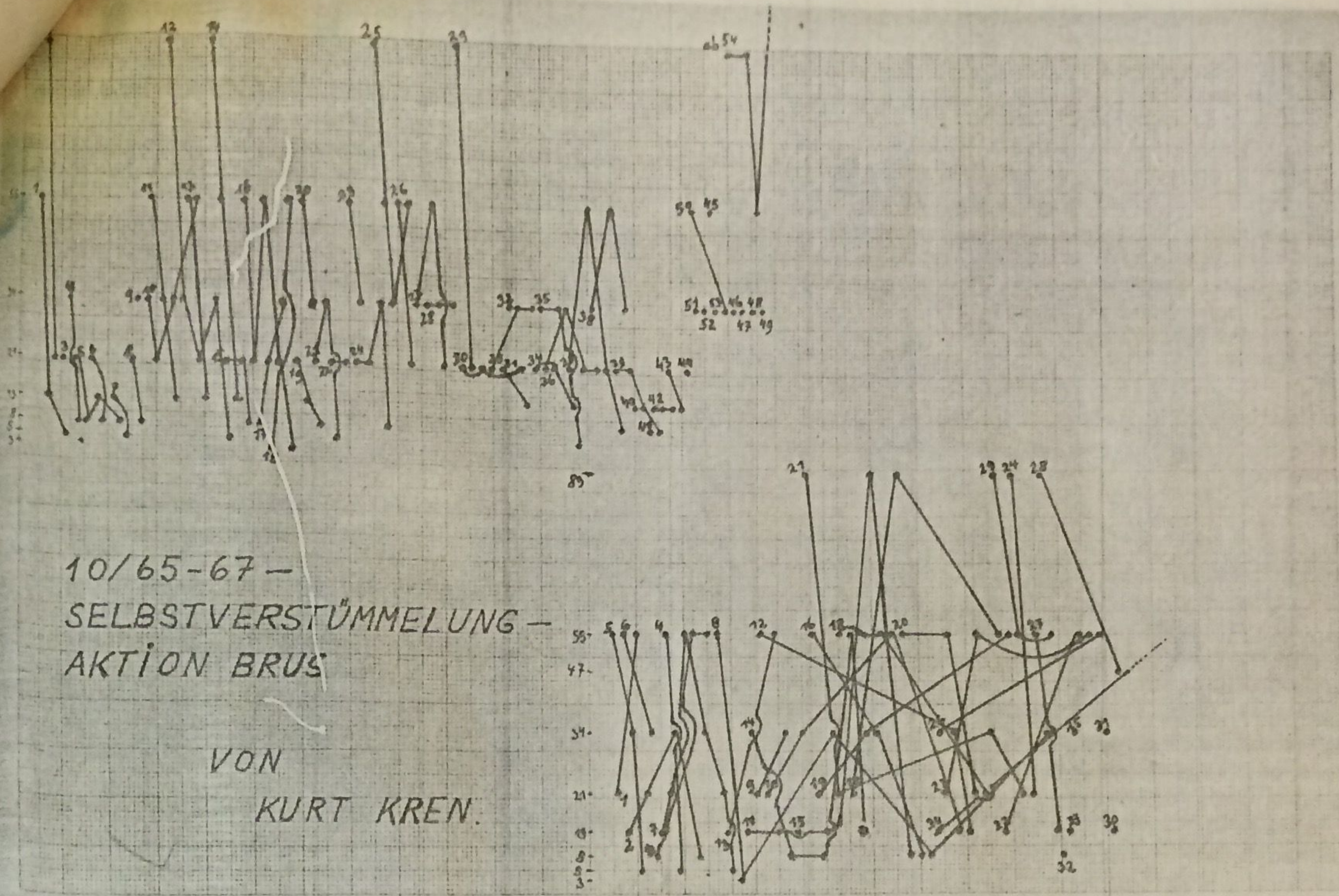
In many ways the work divides more simply in two,
the wholly individual films and the two years of deep
involvement with Muehl and Brus. The notoriety of the
Muehl actions, and the overwhelming content in the
films which are based on them, perhaps explains some of
the lack of understanding of Kren's work in America.
Even amongst English film-makers there is a tendency to
dismiss this period as irrelevant to Kren's main
contribution. This is short-sighted, since the films stand
as satisfactory works and certainly have an important
bearing on his work as a whole. Though out of
chronological order, I shall consider Kren's involvement
with the Direct Art, Material-aktion movement first.

It is evident from Kren's films of the Muehl actions and
from statements made by Brus, that some of the initial
impetus for the movement was an extension of the
expressionist, action painting concept into
performance and away from a static end-product.
Brus, for example, took the psychological analogy
between the therapeutic action of dripping paint and
shitting, to the logical conclusion of shitting 'on-stage.'
As the painterly component of the actions gave way
increasingly to the bodily function component, issues
of inhibition and common morality grew unavoidable.
The work became concerned with presenting the less
acceptable (if ordinary) bodily functions, and with
extending awareness of the range of sexuality,
violence, sadism and masochism. In the repressive
public atmosphere in which performances took place,
there was a constant danger of criminal prosecution,
and the work consequently developed a strong political
and didactic character. In the historical sense, this
direction is consistent with an existential concern with
the basic materiality of human experience, and with the
aims of psychoanalysis through bringing to 'public'
consciousness, sub- or un-conscious tendencies and
connections. It is also consistent with de Sade through
the amoral exploration of human capability, wherever
that project might lead.

Considering the particular historical and geographical
situation of Vienna, after the war, it is not surprising that
the Austrian psyche was much preoccupied with
accommodating the shared responsibility for the
atrocities of the Nazi era. It is quite wrong to see Brus,
Muehl or Nitsch as simply expressing this guilt or as
therapeutically catharsizing it. However, in addition to
the relatively less contentious material-body-psychology
element, the growing engagement with violence,
sexual sadism and sexual masochism confronts some of
the major emotional responses to the war. Kren's
involvement with this direction of 'enquiry' is not
arbitrary or peripheral, as can be seen in what I consider
to be his best film of the period, *10/65-67-*
Selbstverstümmelung (Self-Mutilation)², which is based
on a Brus action. As in all Kren's work, though not
immediately evident in this film, it has a strong,
underlying system for the montage. Even on the surface,
there is a quite clear formal play between the white
identity of the cinema screen and the white face
covered in dough and pigment filmed against a white
floor. But the expressionist symbolism of the action and
objects is unavoidable. Surgical knives, scissors and pins
pull and distort the dough-flesh of the face, and drawn
gashes are confused with the holes of mouth and eyes.
The cruelties of Dachau and the torture of the medical
experiments of Dr. Sigmund Rascher are unavoidably
implicit in the images of this film.

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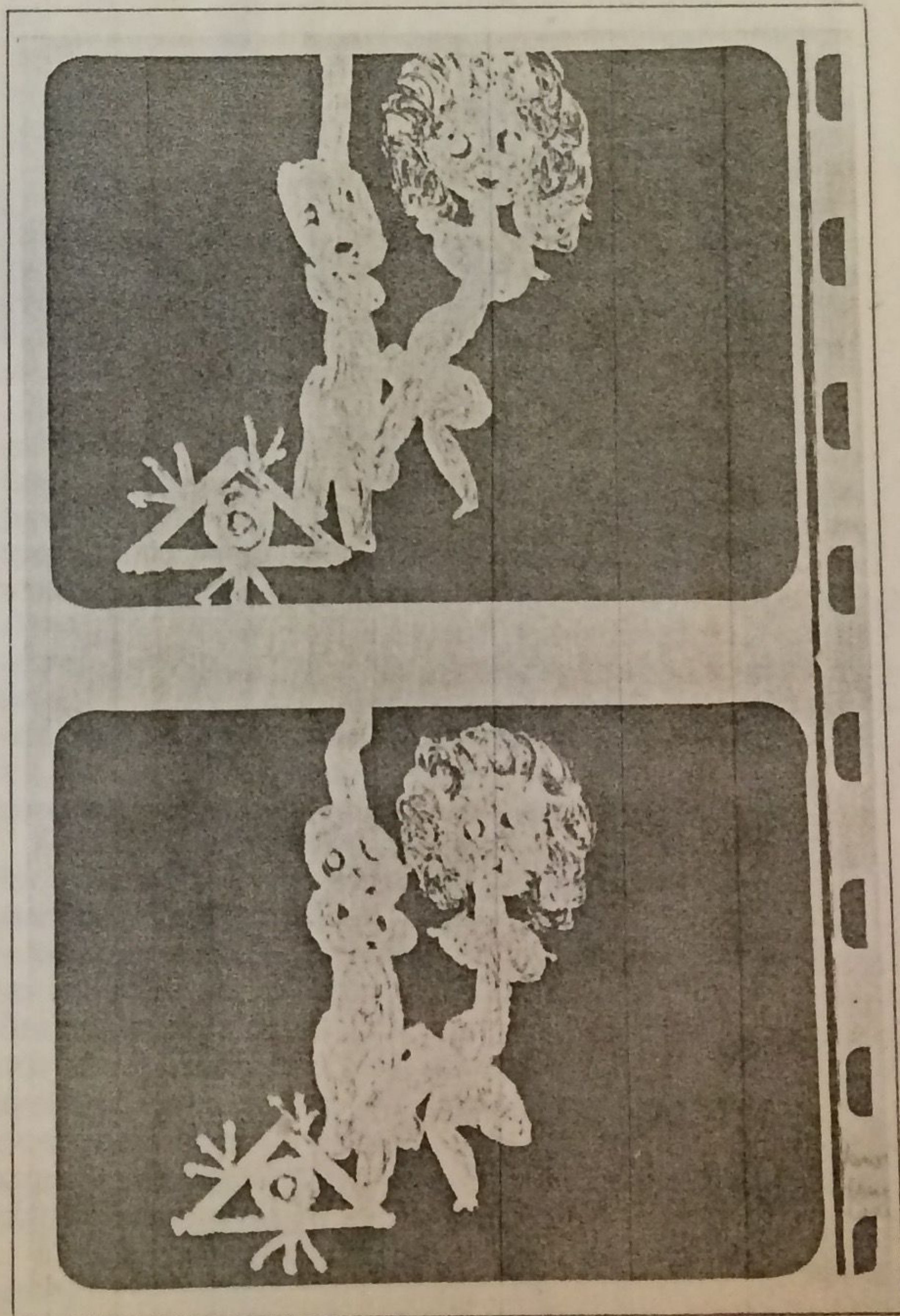


10/65-67-Selbstverstümmelung-Aktion Brus 1965-67 (editing diagram for the film)

With Kren a Jewish child in Holland, it is absurd to consider him sharing public responsibility for these events. At the same time, the mechanisms of accommodation are complex. Supported by the evidence of two of his later films, *20/68 - Schatzi* and *24/70 - Western*, which have clear references to images of war atrocity, Kren's attitudes and responses are, like Goya's, ambivalent. There is no simple condemnation but a seeming search for identification with both victim and protagonist – in the Brus film, characterized by the symbol of self-violence. The ambivalence is indicated in a different way in *Schatzi* and *Western*. *Schatzi* is based on what is presumably a concentration camp photograph of a uniformed officer (nationality undefined) surveying a heap of bodies, and *Western* on the anti-Vietnam poster *and Babies*. In both these films, the closest Kren comes to a simple political content and direct reference to this underlying element of his imagery, the recognition of the image is withheld. In the earlier film this is done by the superimposition of negative and positive, making an almost undifferentiated grey surface, and in *Western* by an exploration of the poster in such extreme close-up that it is again the surface rather than the 'message' which forms the dominant experience. The ambivalence – first choosing the material for its connotations, then denying simple interpretation by withholding early or, at any stage, certain recognition – is evident through the irony of a 'formalist' presentation of emotionally loaded images. At the same time, the irony is not a satire: it is a device for confronting the viewer with a complex response even where simple condemnation would otherwise suggest itself as a self-evident reaction.

Another aspect of Kren's later work which extends his involvement in the direction he shared with the Direct Art movement can be seen in two other films, one of which, at least, displays a similar psychological ambivalence. They are both concerned with the existential question of bodily function. The first of these, *16/67-20 September*, is a relatively simple didactic work using rapid interchanging montage to establish an experiential link between the acts of pissing and drinking, and shitting and eating. But the more recent *26/71 - Balzac und das Auge Gottes* (Balzac and the

eye of God) cannot be so simply explained by its evident content. This is simple enough, confronting the spectator with the facts of sexual response to strangulation. In turn, both a man and a woman hang themselves. The man has an erection and ejaculates (a normal response in hanging and the basis for a not



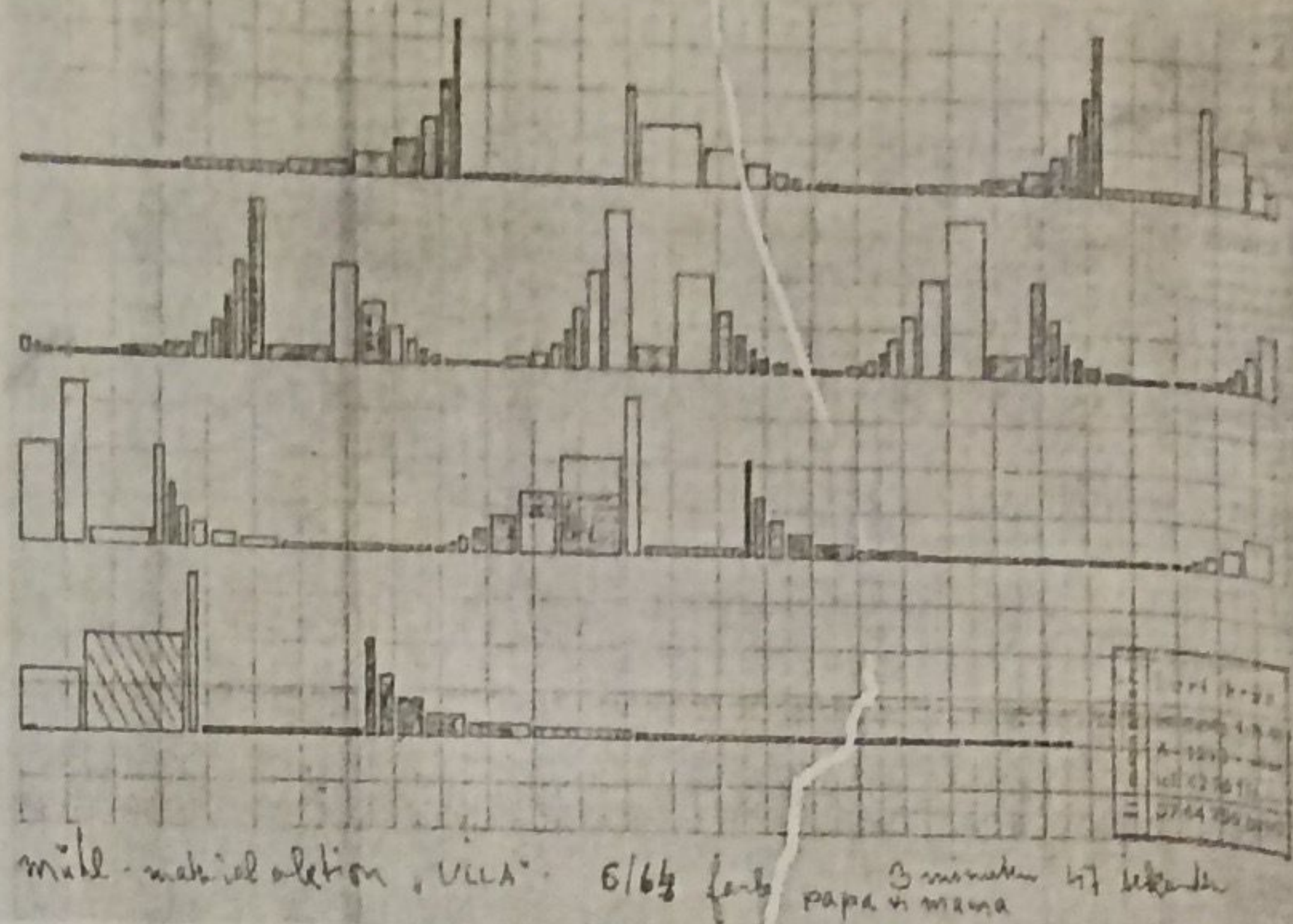
26/71 - Balzac und das Auge Gottes 1971

...on but risky sexual deviation) into the woman's
 After a conventional fuck whilst still hanging, he
 down. She is then strung up and fucked from
 and, after which she proceeds to shit copiously into
 the eye of God in one corner, whilst the caption 'Aber
 Otto' ('but Otto', a cryptic reference to Muehl) appears
 in the other. The whole film is over in thirty seconds and
 is hand-drawn animation, originally made directly, frame
 by frame on 35mm (reduced to 16mm for the projection
 version). As one would expect from the technique used,
 the film has the visual comedy of a Popeye cartoon,
 counteracting the psychological weight of the imagery.
 This film illustrates Kren's extreme self-irony and the
 ambivalent attachment-detachment of his
 accommodation structure. In the Muehl, Brus axis of his
 work, this element of content is more accessible. But in a
 way more difficult to define, such ambivalence imparts a
 charge, through a knife-edge of rejection, to the imagery
 in all his work.

The psychological approach is inevitable for many of
 Kren's films, but almost all his work raises philosophical
 questions about the relationship between experience and
 structure. Almost all, including the middle period, have
 used systems to govern either the editing or shooting. In
 most cases this has taken the form of preparatory diagrams
 and graphs drawn with mathematical precision,
 indicating the various correlations of shots and their
 durations. Whatever the general implications of using
 mathematical systems for ordering experience,
 considering how, with constant projection speed, the
 single frame unit of cinematography provides a simple
 link between duration and number, in film, system
 becomes particularly apt. In his attempts to order
 experience through film, Kren has made this number-
 duration correlation basic, discovering for it a variety of
 functions and potentialities. The germ for most of these
 functions can be traced to his first four films, but because
 the development is not tidy and some films characterize
 a direction well, whilst others contain a number of
 directions in one film, I will not take the work
 chronologically.

In classical montage, shots follow each other in a
 combination intended either to maintain the illusory
 flow of action, or as in the Eisenstein sense, to maximise
 the dramatic, expressive collision between them. From
 his first 16mm film, Kren has counteracted both the
 narrative and expressive concepts of montage through
 mathematically organized montage configurations.
 Consequently, many of his films make use of a limited
 number of repeated shots in various combinations and
 lengths. Though some of his films, like *3/60 - Bäume
 im Herbst*, employ system at the shooting stage. In these
 the connection between shots should not be considered
 as montage in any sense, a problem to which I shall return
 when considering the structuralist question.

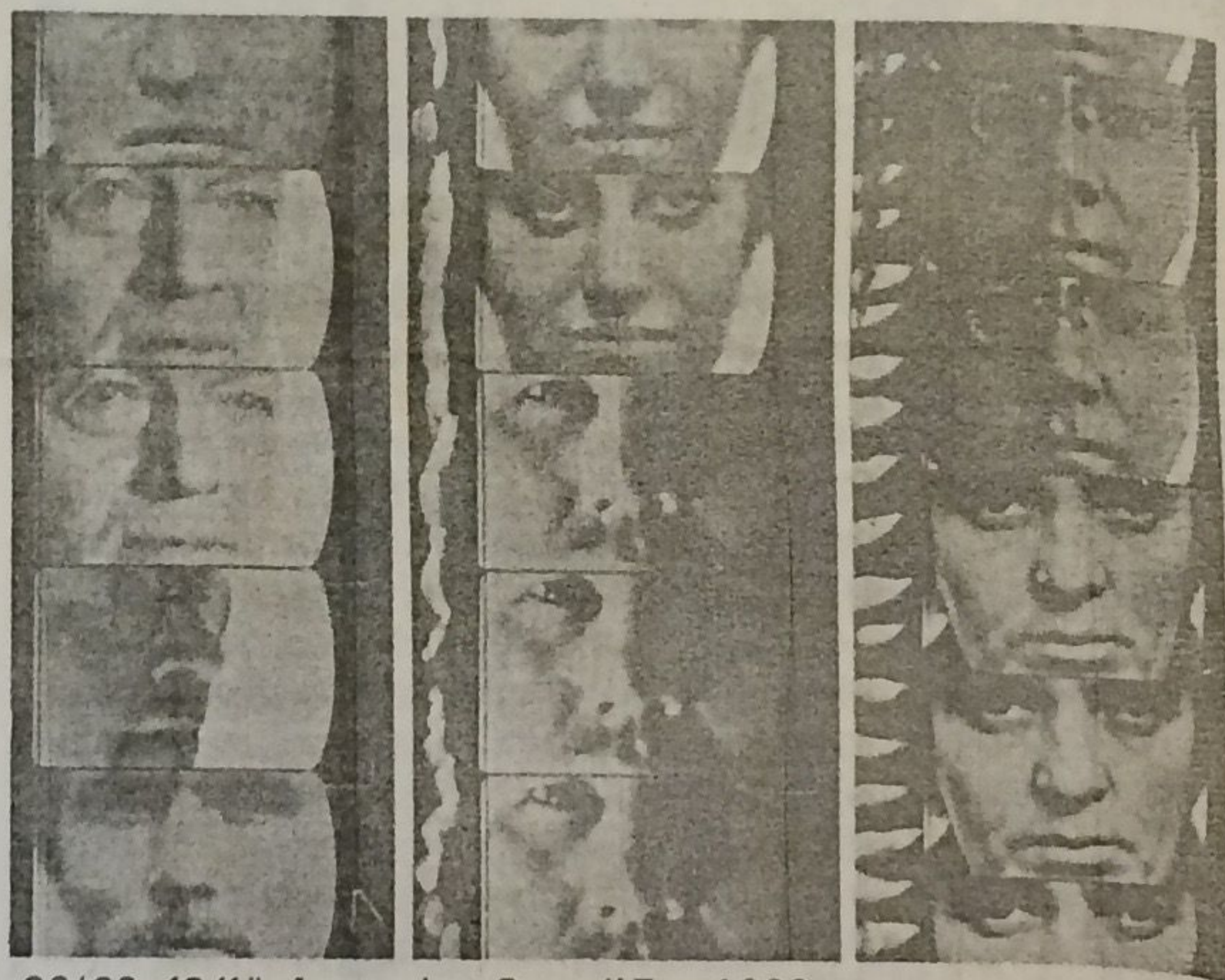
I will again begin with some of the middle period films,
 for whilst I find the Muehl action films, like *6/64 - Papa
 und Mama*, *7/64 - Leda und der Schwan* or *9/64 - O
 Tannenbaum*, quite satisfactory works as a whole, I find
 their use of system the least aesthetically challenging. In
 spite of the strong content, it is in these films that the
 montage is most abstract, in a sense, with the greatest
 divorce between image and system. As in most of his
 work, these films are constructed from shots fragmented
 into very short lengths, rarely longer than one second, and
 frequently as short as a few frames. In the Muehl action
 films, the result of this fragmentation is to minimize
 recognition of the objects in favour of increasing attention
 to their abstract qualities of colour, texture and
 movement. The systems explore an intricate network of
 links based on these abstract qualities. In addition, the
 rhythm of the montage itself in these films tends to work
 as a 'musical' composition, the system giving an overall
 co-ordinating shape. Although the rhythm of movements
 within the shots in these films may combine with the
 rhythm of the montage, because Kren more typically
 uses fairly static images and camera, the montage rhythm
 is frequently a dominant feature of his work. Kren has
 developed a considerable control over visual rhythm in
 this musical sense, the concepts being comparable with
 the note-row techniques of Schoenberg rather than with



6/64-Papa und Mama 1964 (diagram for the film)

more classical compositional ideas. As with Kubelka's
Adebar and *Schwechater*, this visual abstraction of the
 shots and musical concept of montage is consistent with
 the aims of the early avant-garde abstract films, though
 in Kren this never becomes a graphic light-play, and
 always maintains some link with associative identity,
 particularly in these films with tactile, body associations.

Even though initiated within a similar compositional
 concept of system, certain of his works lead in another
 direction. In *20/60-48 Köpfe aus dem Szondi Test* and
11/65-Bild Helga Philip, for example, the element of
 perceptual enquiry becomes dominant. Watching the
 films provides the basis of information about optical and
 cinematic functioning, which becomes the films' chief



20/60-48 Köpfe aus dem Szondi Test 1960

content. Especially in *48-Köpfe aus dem Szondi Test*,
 where a set of still photographs of faces (the contents of a
 box originally intended for an obscure psychological
 test) are sequentially permuted using different rates
 of image change, the system provides the visual
 changes in information but does not constitute a
 unifying composition in the classical sense. This shift in
 attitude, where the film becomes, as it were, perceptual
 raw material, makes way for a reflexive engagement by
 the viewer, where his own, rather than the film-maker's
 perception and reaction become the primary content.

Kren's use of system provides an opportunity to look
 for some clearer edge to the loose terminology of
 structural film. In my view, there are very few cases
 where any useful relationship can be drawn between the
 so-called structuralist films and the broad field of
 Structuralism in general. System and structure should
 not be used synonymously. Almost all Kren's films are
 systemic, but only a certain group raise structuralist
 questions. (Though in the loose concept of
 structuralist film which persists, all his work would be
 classed as structural).

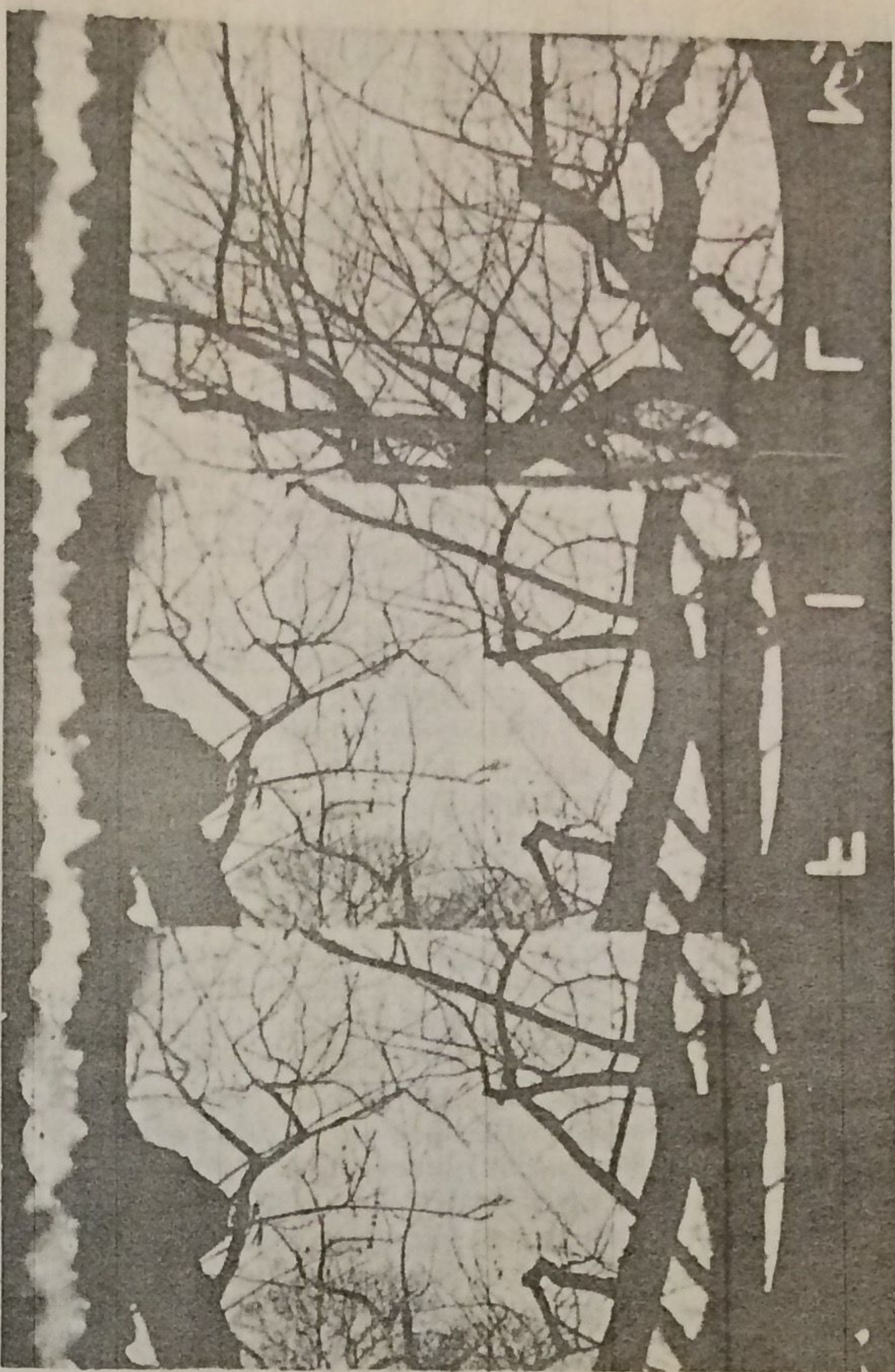
Broadly, I see structuralism as a result of the dialectical
 problem of the concept of order (ordering) in
 relationship to experience. In this respect, far from being

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... conflict with existentialism, it can be thought of as a development from it, making extreme subjectivity compatible with order by removing from the notion of structure either an *a priori* or authoritarian implication (the main bases of existential rejection of order). Order is no longer seen as a fixed, immutable condition of the world, but the consequence of changing and developing acts of ordering. Whilst there is a recognition that no fixed structure for experience exists, there is also a recognition that there can be no neutral state of unconditioned experience. The development of experience depends on developments of structuring. (see the movement from Cézanne to Analytical Cubism as the historical basis of visual structural art.)

Structuralism in art would seem to imply a broadly representational, or more accurately, homological, condition. This 'homology' is defined by Lévi-Strauss as an analogy of functions rather than of substance. In *The Structuralist Activity*,³ Roland Barthes talks of a process whereby the structuralist decomposes the real and then recomposes it. The reconstructed 'object', which I take to imply mainly the structuralist art object, is described as a simulacrum of the 'natural object' and is seen as 'intellect added to object'. He stresses that 'between the two objects, or two tenses, of structuralist activity, there occurs something new...' (Barthes' italics). Structuralist art can be thought of as the material formation of experience through the explicit incursion into the thing (event) observed by the mode of observation. In this sense, structuralist art does not express experience derived from the world: it forms experience in the trace of a dialectic between perceiver and perceived. It is perhaps this concentration on structure as process or activity which most recommends the project to the time-based film medium at the present time. However inadequate it might be later, I would like for now to confine the use of the term structuralism in film to situations where the space/time relations of a filmed situation are reformed or transformed through a definable structuring strategy into a new 'experiential' (as opposed to didactically conceptual) homology. In this notion of structuralism, whilst the shape or wholist element of Snow's films, most evident in *Wavelength*, would not constitute a structuralist problem, the transformation (or fusion) of time/space in the experience of his \longleftrightarrow and *Central Region* would. In both cases, the space/time experience can be thought of as an homology brought about by the consistent application of a camera strategy.

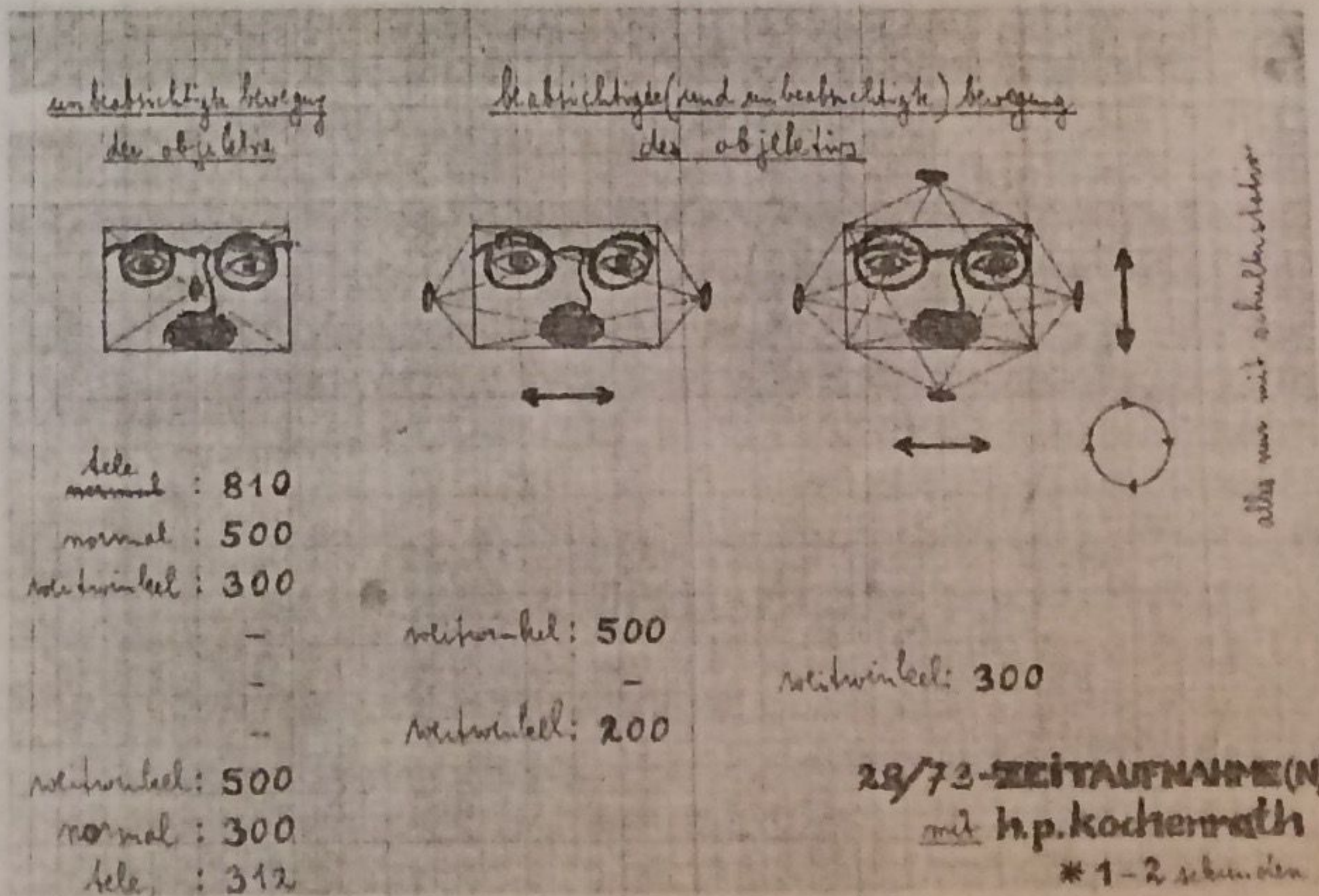
Kren's first structuralist film then is *3/60-Bäume im Herbst* (*Trees in Autumn*, incidentally the first film in general I would call structuralist). Its structuralism is a result of the application of system, not to subsequent montage of material already filmed with an unconstrained subjectivity, but to the act and event of filming itself. This limitation, by narrowing the space and time range of the shot material, gives rise to a greater integrity in the film as homologue. In *Bäume im Herbst* the new space/time fusion of the experience of branches shot against the sky as the plasticity of the shooting system become the relations of the objects - shots, and their space/time observational relations are inseparable. Structural process becomes object. This prefigures Snow's \longleftrightarrow and echoes the plasticity of time/space relations in a Giacometti painting. Though similar conditions occur in a number of Kren films, particularly the window sections in *5/62-Fenstergucker*, *Abfall* etc. and *17/62-Grün-Rot*, it is most perfectly illustrated in *28/73-Zeitaufnahme(n)*, a film which has a striking relationship to a Giacometti portrait (I would cite Giacometti as the clearest example of a contemporary structuralist painter).



3/60-Bäume im Herbst 1960

separate 'shots' (significantly different in kind to montage relations through editing) which determine it as a structural homologue. In a sense, what is represented in these films is neither the trees nor the head (as Strauss's 'substance'), but instead, the space/time relations of the film viewing and shooting process (as 'functions'). Objects are seen as an amalgam with their space and especially with their time as the process of their accessibility through acts of perception. So again, what is 'represented' in the films is not a tree or a head but a filmic act of perception. It is also not represented in the sense that the film becomes a description, expression or even model for the generalized act of perception existing prior to the 'representation.' The films are acts of perception taking place under particular constraints of procedure and medium - acts of film-perception. The result of this activity is a genuinely new 'object' (the film being Barthes' second tense of structuralist activity) wherein certain 'postulates' of time/space procedure have been added to the 'natural object' (Barthes' first tense of structuralist activity).

That film structuralism, structuralism in literature or anthropology, differ, relates to the specificity of the



28/73-Zeitaufnahme(n) 1973