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**Oral history interview with Doug Aitken, 2017  
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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Doug Aitken on July 21 and 24, 2017. The interview took place at the studio of Doug Aitken in Marina del Rey, CA, and was conducted by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Doug Aitken and Hunter Drohojowska-Philp have reviewed the transcript. Selected corrections and emendations appear below in brackets. This transcript has been heavily edited. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

## Interview

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: This is Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, interviewing Doug Aitken at the artist's home at 25 Anchorage [Street], in Marina Del Rey, California, on the 21st of July, 2017, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, card number one.

Good morning, Doug.

DOUG AITKEN: Good morning, Hunter.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, thank you so much for taking the time to be here. Let's just start right at the beginning; here we are in your, I would say, incredibly beautiful home that you've designed yourself. It's 2017, and you're not all that far from where you come from, geographically speaking. So just start by telling me when and where you were born.

DOUG AITKEN: I was born in March 18, 1968, in Redondo Beach.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: What are the names of your parents?

DOUG AITKEN: Marilyn and Robert Aitken.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: What did either of them do as a profession?

DOUG AITKEN: My mother was a writer, and my father was an attorney and writer.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And what kind of writer was your mother?

DOUG AITKEN: She was a journalist and wrote for newspapers like the *LA Times* and magazines.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And growing up with a journalist in the house, your mother, how did that translate to your own interests as a young person?

DOUG AITKEN: Well, I think that my folks were extremely curious people, and they were always interested in the other, whatever isn't in front of them, what's out there. A location, a place, culture. So in a lot of ways—I grew up in a small family, just by myself; I have no brothers or sisters. It would be a kind of situation where, for example, "This summer, we're going to try to move to the Peruvian Amazon for a few months," or, "We're going to look into temporarily relocating to Russia," in 1981.

We were constantly on the road, and when I say this, I don't mean luxury travel; I mean often quite low-budget travel. But spending time in Africa or South America or parts of Europe, at a really young age, had a great impact on me.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: When you say low-budget travel, what was the reason for that? Was it just economic, or because they really wanted to have the spirit of the place?

DOUG AITKEN: I think it was a little bit of both. For them, there was this incredible cultural and intellectual curiosity. Like the idea of going to Ireland would be to go to every location that James Joyce was at, and trace Joyce through Ireland. Or the summer that we spent in the Peruvian Amazon was really to go deep, and to try to really spend time with the people, and the ecology. I think a by-product of that for me was really, at a rather young age, I felt at ease in a lot of quite strange situations. You just recognize that people are people, really, and there are underlying themes that spread throughout every culture.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: How old were your parents, more or less, when you were born?

DOUG AITKEN: They had me a little bit later in life; they were in their late 30s.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: When they were raising you, did they treat you in a more adult way than they might have done otherwise? Do you think you were coddled like a young child, or do you think they really kind of addressed you as being more—giving you more adult experiences?

DOUG AITKEN: Definitely more adult experiences, discussions, and dialogues. I don't think I ever really remember being treated as a child, and I think also the fact that when you're alone and don't really have any siblings, you have a lot of time on your hands. So I found myself constantly making art, just drawing, collaging, putting things together. It was a world that I had, a universe that I kind of owned, in a way.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So when you were growing up in Redondo Beach, where did you first go to school?

DOUG AITKEN: I went to school in Palos Verdes, in the South Bay. I was born in Redondo, and then I spent most of my time growing up in Palos Verdes.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: What year did they move to Palos Verdes?

DOUG AITKEN: Maybe the late '60s.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And so you went to elementary school in Palos Verdes? What is it called?

DOUG AITKEN: Montemalaga was a grade school, and then intermediate school was Malaga Cove. And then the high school is Palos Verdes.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: When you were at Montemalaga, in grade school, this is a public school?

DOUG AITKEN: Yes.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So you didn't go to any private schools?

DOUG AITKEN: No.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Okay. When you're in grade school, how was your relationship with your fellow students there?

DOUG AITKEN: It's all kind of a blur. I don't think I really connected with formal school very much, but I do remember there was this kind of incredible moment, where—I just have to tell you this backstory really quick.

I was maybe in fourth grade, or fifth grade, and the teacher came into the class and said, "Has anyone in this class read a book lately?" Then he pointed around the room, and then suddenly pointed at me, and I was completely on the spot and I didn't know what to say. So I remembered—I would study all the book covers in our house. I was obsessed with the covers, and our house had thousands and thousands of books.

So all of a sudden this teacher is pointing at me and he's saying, "What have you read lately?" And I remembered distinctly the cover of *The Andromeda Strain*, so I said, "*The Andromeda Strain*." The next day I showed up for class and the teacher says, "Can you come over here for a second?" He says, "You're not in this class any more. We're putting you in this accelerated experimental learning program." I had no idea what that was, and of course, I hadn't read *The Andromeda Strain* in the fifth grade—of course not.

So I walked into this other room, and there's a hippie teacher and no one else, and she says, "We have this new visual learning program we want to share with you. I'm going to hold out these cards; they're images of modern and contemporary artwork, and with each of these images, you tell me your response; tell me a word, or a feeling, or an idea, that relates to it."

So I started going through these cards with her, and it was incredibly moving. I remember in just 30 minutes, 45 minutes, just going through hundreds of these visual art cards, and having a relationship with almost all the images that I saw.

Finally, she pulled up this one card. It was a blue shape with a white dot in the middle of it, and I said, "You have to stop right there," and she said, "What is it?" I said, "That's the image; that's the one." I said, "I need to know who made that. I need to know everything about it." And she said, "This is Jean Arp from the Dadaist movement in Switzerland." So I had her write it down, and I rode my bike to a library and I started looking up Jean Arp.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Wow.

DOUG AITKEN: It was this incredible breakthrough, seeing something out there that, in a way, you can explore; you can find out more about; you can start a journey with.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So you recognized that this was something that wasn't representational. It wasn't a picture of a cow or a floral bouquet.

DOUG AITKEN: Yes.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: You could identify something interesting in that as early as the fifth grade?

DOUG AITKEN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So when you got into this accelerated experimental learning program, were you able to better access your own interests in visual art?

DOUG AITKEN: I think that moment was rather indelible for me, because I saw there's something else out there that really spoke to me, that I connected with. I was familiar with a lot of the images that I was seeing that day, you know. I was familiar with, like—I didn't know who Magritte was, but I would recognize the image of the cloud and the hat, for example. But seeing that there was this entire other universe that I connected with really was profound, because I was always generating images, myself alone.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And how were you doing that, in the fifth grade I mean, so early?

DOUG AITKEN: Mostly drawing and painting, and whatever I could get my hands on.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Let's pause for just a moment, because obviously, we all think of your work as very based in video or film, and I don't think of you as someone who is drawing and painting. Did you have the ability to draw and paint realistically, or in any way, when you were a young person?

DOUG AITKEN: Yes, that's one of the things that I did constantly, and I think there is something that's quite essential about being able to draw. The idea of being able to map out an image quickly and accurately, without the use of language—it's one tool that I—no pun intended—I draw upon—[they laugh]—continuously, for almost everything I do.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So when you do your work, just to leap forward in time, and we'll come back to this, do you draw out the way you expect your sculptures or your videos or your installations to take place?

DOUG AITKEN: Sometimes. It's interesting. In that period of time, you're extremely young, and you're just using whatever is around you. There's a pencil and a pen, so you use it. I remember going through trashcans in the house and just finding magazine images and ripping them apart to make collages, because they were there. You can always find a way to create. You can always find a medium to work with. It's unlimited.

As I got a little bit older, I just kept moving wider and wider into new mediums. I think in my early teens I started teaching myself photography because I wanted to know how to make and take an image and really art-direct an image. Or, at the same time, doing drawings that were sometimes hyperrealist drawings with pen and ink, and at other times making pictures that were very abstract and rough. I never really saw that art had to be one single trajectory. I was never really wired that way, in the sense that you try to find a style and you refine the style. I felt like it was more something that—you have an idea and an impulse or a question, and that develops the direction and the medium. So you become completely open.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Did you get that impression, in part, because of this experimental learning program that you found yourself in in the fifth grade?

DOUG AITKEN: By mistake. [Laughs.]

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Yes, by mistake. Did that give you a sense of permission to pursue art in any kind of way that you wanted?

DOUG AITKEN: That program, unfortunately, didn't last very long, maybe a month, but I

compulsively would be making things, making all forms of art. The art I was trying to make started to take over parts of the house. It went from my bedroom to part of the garage to more of the garage, to some artworks and paintings in the backyard, you know, these kind of internal explosions that you're having where you just really have to make something and see it through, and then it's finished and you're moving on again.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Were your parents supportive of this obsessive activity of yours?

DOUG AITKEN: Yeah, they were, and it was interesting because when I look at them, they were incredibly literary and they liked art, visual art, but I think language was really the key for them. They were voracious readers. It would be nothing to see them just powering through Chekhov books for a month, and then moving on to Tolstoy, and to see these books tagged and marked and scribbled with pencil, and then another author of something else again.

But I think the visual arts, for them, was something that they were very interested in, but not in the same way. It was more of a surface—it was a mapping of history—understanding where *Guernica* lies in relation to the war, understanding why is Rousseau's painting naive at this period of time in France. For me, it was very different. For me, the visual art was the door that I could open, and I could just fall into it infinitely.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: That's so interesting. Did they take you to museums?

DOUG AITKEN: Yeah, we would go to a lot of museums, and I always wanted to go see more. I remember going to LACMA in the '70s as a kid, and I remember being with a couple other kids, just this ghetto gang of kids, and we were all throwing bottles into [the nearby] La Brea Tar Pits, watching them sink. At the time, there was no fence around it, or the fence was broken, and you could literally put your hand in and take the tar out. I remember seeing Kienholz there at LACMA.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So you saw Kienholz.

DOUG AITKEN: I remember seeing—is it '38 *Dodge*? I might have the year wrong.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I think you're right.

DOUG AITKEN: *Dodge, Back Seat '38 Dodge.*

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Yeah, *Back Seat Dodge*, mm-hmm [affirmative]. In the '70s.

DOUG AITKEN: Yeah. I was very young, but I remember seeing it, and it was unlike anything else inside the museum, and really stopping and spending time, kind of confused on one hand, but on the other hand, like, really seeing the future in that artwork, the idea that I could hear the sound coming out of it; the radio is on; the human figures were not defined. One of them is made of kind of chicken wire, formed to be a person in a sexual position in the back seat. That was so compelling for me.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And if you would—just again, to back up a bit. Did your parents recognize your artistic sensibilities, that this is what you were interested in?

DOUG AITKEN: I think they recognized that I didn't connect with the public education system, with the schools. I wasn't interested in the classes very much. I didn't connect with the programming; the way information was being presented and taught seemed dead to me. So, in a sense, I had this

other place that for me was incredibly alive and electrifying, and that was this space of creating. There was absolutely no balance at all. I put everything into making things and very little into school. So I think that, as a result, from a young age, I was really making art, and I was very fortunate to have a high school teacher who saw that and really supported me.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Do you remember that teacher's name?

DOUG AITKEN: Her name was Chizuko de Queiroz. She was a Japanese-American woman who grew up in the Japanese internment camps.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And she was one of your high school art teachers?

DOUG AITKEN: Yes, she was the only teacher I had.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: She was the first one who kind of pushed you in this way?

DOUG AITKEN: Yes.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Now, when you were going through these classes, you still had to take classes and pass them. Were you able to pass them?

DOUG AITKEN: I got through fine, but it just wasn't engaging.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: No, I understand that. Did you have dyslexia?

DOUG AITKEN: I don't know.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: No, you didn't have it then. Well, I mean, a lot of artists do; it's a really common thing that comes up when I interview artists.

DOUG AITKEN: Yeah, I'm curious about that.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: They couldn't read; they had difficulty reading, so everything becomes the visual. They can relate through the visual world. But that wasn't you. And when your mother did this kind of reading and writing of her own, did her own writing have anything to do with the art world, or with the creative world, or the literary world?

DOUG AITKEN: Not so much. It was journalism. I think the kind of deeper literary side that they had kind of stayed between them privately. They didn't really have an outlet for it.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And what kind of law did your father practice?

DOUG AITKEN: He did all kinds, a lot of criminal law.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Let's go back then, to the travel, so as you—after elementary school. How young were you when you first started taking these trips with your parents?

DOUG AITKEN: I feel like it was just constantly.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Really?

DOUG AITKEN: Yeah.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Which was your first important trip that you took with them?

DOUG AITKEN: I remember, during Watergate, driving through these Native American reservations. Watergate was just on the radio constantly, and we're in this tan Dodge Duster, driving through the desert, listening to this incessant radio static of Nixon. At the time, I think my mom was writing about Native American rituals. I remember we went to a snake dance on that trip.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Where, in New Mexico?

DOUG AITKEN: It may have been New Mexico. I think it was perhaps Hopi. I remember she kind of befriended people in the tribe, and they let us be inside this kiva in the darkness to watch a snake dance. There was no one other Anglos there. Moments like that.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: For a young boy, that must have been so impressive.

DOUG AITKEN: It was really interesting.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And then after that, can you remember another one? Was it a driving one, from around here?

DOUG AITKEN: We visited a lot of prisons also, because my father was always taking depositions, or doing interviews, with different people who were in jail throughout the West Coast. I remember a lot of these trips would be bizarre road trips where you would be out seeing some fascinating part of the landscape, Death Valley or the Sierras or something, and that would be punctuated by a prison parking lot or a prison gift store.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Oh, my God.

DOUG AITKEN: It was a strange range of experiences, and in a lot of ways, when I look back on it, I see my past as a kind of collage, this kaleidoscope of different pieces. I'm not really sure how they all link together or what the chronology is; they just exist as fragments and islands.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And you've done so much work about the Southwest, and it sounds like your Southwest trips began very early, you know, your exposure to the Southwest, which is not, for the record, LA. LA is a different experience from the Southwest.

DOUG AITKEN: It's a different island.

[They laugh.]

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: But during this time, you also, if I remember correctly, you have an interest in being near the ocean, because you're in Palos Verdes. What was your relationship to that?

DOUG AITKEN: I have pretty much always lived near the water, whether it's on the West Coast, or in downtown New York—I guess you could call it water there, some kind of chemical river.

On the West Coast, one of the things that always captivated me was that idea of the constant presence of the ocean. It's part of the magnetic compass of living here, and, in a sense, you see the Pacific and it is this vast sprawl that moves thousands of miles geographically, and there's this tipping point where land cuts off. The ocean here is quite dynamic. In the wintertime it can be very violent, stormy, turbulent, and then you can have days like this, where it's placid and inviting. I was



very close geographically to the ocean, so I would see it constantly. I see that also as a metaphor—this idea of the horizon and past the horizon: What lies there? Is that the future? Is that the possibilities that we haven't seen yet?

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And did you do water sports?

DOUG AITKEN: Growing up, I just spent a lot of time on the coast. I think there would be these moments where, like in summertime, as a child, some neighborhood mother just picks up all the kids and drops them off at the beach in the morning, and then just picks them up at night. It's like *Lord of the Flies*—you're just running feral, getting burned and into trouble, just roving packs of kids. I think that South Bay was a very different place then. There was a very anarchistic beach environment; the punk scene was coming into it. You had this kind of undercurrent of counterculture of hippies, surfers, and drugs. It was just extremely different than it is now.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Right. So by 1978 or 1980, you were—in 1980, you were 12 years old.

DOUG AITKEN: Yes.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And you could still access that kind of—you could sense that kind of cultural ferment in those beach communities even then?

DOUG AITKEN: Yeah, I thought it was exciting. The idea of all these people living on the edge—geographically on the edge—and the countercultures were really fascinating to me. I would always try to seek out things like, you know, there was an incredible bookstore in Hermosa Beach, Either/Or Bookstore, that had poetry sections and readings. The Lighthouse Café was a place where people like Joe Albany and Art Pepper, amazing jazz musicians, play. My mother had met Charles Bukowski a bit. There's also a punk scene that came out of San Pedro and Redondo, from Black Flag to Minuteman—a myriad of other bands.

I think as I got a little bit older, into my early, mid-teens, my small group of friends became obsessed with exploration, and to explore anywhere that wasn't close to where we lived, downtown LA or Hollywood at night, constantly seeing live music. There were some really surprising shows that you could find. I remember there was an enormous sulfur factory in inner Long Beach, and I think Throbbing Gristle or Psychic TV were playing there. And it just felt like it was absolutely at the end of the world, this kind of post-apocalyptic landscape late at night. You could see the refineries and the flames coming out of the top of them, and here's this, like, strange loud, brutal, industrial music.

I think that's one of the interesting things about Los Angeles; there's always been this kind of experimental underground, and they're not where you expect to find them. You have to go and dig a little bit deeper.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, especially in those days. But you were into music that early, really, in your early teens.

DOUG AITKEN: Oh, very much.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And who were your closest—who was your best friend in high school?

DOUG AITKEN: I had a few really good friends, and that was good.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Who were your running friends?

DOUG AITKEN: One of my friends from then is still a very good friend; his name is Dan Messer, and he's a longshoreman in San Pedro.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And you stayed friends with your high school gang? If there was a high school reunion, will you go?

DOUG AITKEN: I don't know about that [laughs], but Dan's a keeper.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: When you were running with this pack of kids in high school, did you have any sense of what your future of your life was going to be, or were you just kind of living day to day?

DOUG AITKEN: I never had a crossroads. I never had a moment where I said, What am I going to do? or, What do I do next? I just knew that I was making art. I didn't even know that it was called art at the beginning. Gradually, as I learned more about art and was more aware of modern and contemporary art and what's being made today, I think I just assumed that that's what I'm here for, and I assumed that I would never support myself doing it. That was the constant; the constant was to create.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Did your parents not convey the message to you that, you know, Oh, art is okay, but you've got to have a real job? Did that message ever get conveyed to you, or were they still permissive about it and say—you know?

DOUG AITKEN: They just saw that there was no separation between who I am and what I made, so there wasn't really a discussion like that.

I remember at one point, one of these early trips that I had taken with them, we had gone to Vienna, and there are certain writers and musicians they were interested in who are from there. At one point my dad grabs me and says, "Douglas, we have to go to this space; it's called the Secession." I say, "Okay." Then he says, "This is one of the most important reasons that we went to Vienna." So I go there with him, and it was closed—[they laugh]—and it's under construction for a year or something.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Oh, okay.

DOUG AITKEN: He starts talking to the guard, and then talking to the construction workers, and the foreman, and just keeps going, trying to convince them to let us in. And I'm this ridiculous kid with some bad haircut, standing outside waiting. He finally comes out, "Douglas, come on; they'll let us in right now." So we put on hardhats and we walked through the Secession, and we see the *Beethoven Frieze* by Klimt taped off, and we see the whole space in this beautiful state of construction. I remember taking these small black-and-white photographs of it. When I mentioned earlier how things come in cycles and loops—

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DOUG AITKEN: —I think it was 1999, or 2000, when the Secession asked me to do a solo exhibition. I talked to Matthias Herrmann, the director, and he said, "You probably don't know the space, but we're calling from the Secession in Vienna."

And it was so interesting how these things come back around. Of course, I knew that space, but I

had only seen it in this dusty condition as a child. So when I made my exhibition there, I thought about the space, and I thought, How can I make an exhibition that can be in this building? A museum has hours. So from 10 a.m. to maybe five at night, it's open; then it closes. And I thought, I will change this museum so that it will never sleep. I'll make a show can never sleep and can never be closed. And I was thinking back on this childhood visit and showing up and being denied by the closed museum.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Oh, my God.

DOUG AITKEN: So I made this exhibition where you could go inside the museum, and it was a very immersive installation, but then, when it closed, at 5 p.m., the outside of the museum would light up. And the outside of the museum was a series of projections of eyes opening and closing, and we filmed about 3,000 people's eyes opening and closing. So it goes from person to person to person all night long, until the sun rises, and then the interior of the museum opens again. It's interesting, because you can always take these encounters and reinterpret them into ways of seeing.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Is that the first time you conceptualized putting the show on the outside of the museum?

DOUG AITKEN: That was the first piece that I did that was on the outside of architecture.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And what is that called, that piece?

DOUG AITKEN: The name of the show was *Glass Horizon*.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, it's because it's something that you return to several times, and it's been so effective in so many different locations.

So you're this kid, running around, listening to punk music, and taking these trips with your parents, and you remembered the trip to Vienna. I would think you would be interested in other European trips. Where else did they go in Europe?

DOUG AITKEN: We went a lot of places and spent a lot of time on the road.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So when you went to museums, when they went to Europe, would they take you to all the big museums?

DOUG AITKEN: We saw a lot of museums, and certain places really stood out, like the Pompidou Centre: you would see it, and you would sense that there's something inherently new about it. You might not know why, or you couldn't articulate it at the time, but you would be attracted to the impact of it.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So you didn't have—that was always of interest to you, or you had less of an interest in walking through and saying, Oh, let's trace the history of the Impressionists here, or let's trace the dawn of Romantic Realism. Is that correct?

DOUG AITKEN: I think there were certain artists and certain artworks that I really connected with, and I would often see those as a kind of an entry point into a certain ideology, or a certain path of research, and just try to learn more about where that came from. And—was there a movement there? What was happening in that city or that region at that time? I saw it really as a root system, and I was always very interested in the idea of the individual voice.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DOUG AITKEN: Not so much the collective voice, not so much groups of people, but seeing someone have a very clear, strong vision. Whether it's quiet and subtle, or violent and abrasive, but I was attracted to distinctive voices.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And you would take that, and then you would research backwards—like, you would start with the work of art, and then research your way backwards to find out more about it?

DOUG AITKEN: Yeah, often.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: As opposed to, I mean, some people go from the movement down into the individual artist. You took it from the individual outward.

DOUG AITKEN: Yeah. I often have a hard time respecting generalizations.

[They laugh.]

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And it's interesting to me, that all the time you're making this visual art, you're so aware of music. First, it's the punk scene in Southern California. Any other musical influences?

DOUG AITKEN: I've always been really wide in the music that I like, and it's never really been any one thing at a time. Like the house I grew up in, our next-door neighbors were the violinist and percussionist of the [Los Angeles] Philharmonic. So you could walk outside on a Sunday afternoon and hear a violin playing Stravinsky, coming over the hedges. So I would find myself climbing through the yard and asking them, "What is this music?" And they would say, "Stravinsky." So they would loan me, like, 10 records, and I would have to give them back in three days. I was always searching.

Actually, going back to that, there was a strange encounter which I don't really remember. But my dad, before he passed away, told me about it several times. Evidently, it was a hot summer day, and I'm riding my bicycle around the street, and he says to me, "Now, if you see a car with an old man pull up, let me know."

So I did. I see this car pull up, and there's an old man inside with glasses. So I come down and I say to my dad, "Can we get lunch now?" He says, "No, no, no, we're going to go next door, because you're going to meet that old man next door." That was Igor Stravinsky.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: [Laughs.]

DOUG AITKEN: I was a tiny child, but he was guest-conducting at the Philharmonic at the time. When you think about the stereotype of Los Angeles and the West Coast, in terms of—a flat, shallow, image-based landscape—and then you look at these kind of moments of cultural juxtapositions, where you see Stravinsky driving into a suburb in the South Bay, and you somehow end up eating with him, you see things differently; you recognize that place has a very unique core sample.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: But it's also unusual for a young person to respond to the music of Stravinsky.

DOUG AITKEN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I'm sure your neighbors thought that.

DOUG AITKEN: But—*Soldier's Tale* is based on folk songs, and that's the most democratic form of music. I like that.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Yeah, no, it is.

DOUG AITKEN: I guess *Firebird* isn't.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I know. I think probably they were impressed that you could get it at such a young age. It sounds like your father, in particular, was very supportive of your artistic leanings.

DOUG AITKEN: He was supportive in promoting my independence. You just go off over there and you do your thing. Then occasionally, I'd come back with some picture or something that I made and I would share it with them. I would look for feedback: What does this mean? I made this drawing for three days; what does it mean? I think everyone thinks of their family as absolutely banal and ordinary when you're growing up, and I did. My friends would come over and they would say, "Well, we're eating popcorn and watching *Star Wars*; what are you doing?" I would say, "Well, we're watching this German movie called *Stroszek*," or "*Solaris*, the four-hour Tarkovsky version." So I just didn't really understand that there was anything off.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, your parents—it sounds as though your parents were actually intellectuals. Is that correct?

DOUG AITKEN: Yeah, I think they were, in their own way, but it was kind of interesting because they would be reading *Paris Review* and the *New Yorker*, and just constantly plowing through books, but they didn't really come from that kind of background at all. They came from an extremely rough, working-class background in Detroit. They were both daughters and sons of immigrants from Scotland and Ireland. I think my dad was maybe even born on the boat over from Scotland. They grew up in a rough, alcoholic, working-class environment, and they each kind of found culture in each other.

I think my dad found opera on public radio when he was young. My mom found reading at a really young age. And she was unusual. She skipped two or three grades in high school and graduated by the time she was still very young. They were very lucky to find each other, and when they met each other, they were kind of like two little islands in a larger community of people just getting loaded, drunk violence, you know, all this kind of stuff. So they really connected.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: It's emotional for you; I can tell you cared about them, and they overcame a lot. It's an amazing thing to see parents kind of be able to do that. So you come from a Scotch-Irish background.

DOUG AITKEN: Yeah.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And did either of your parents—were either of them religious?

DOUG AITKEN: No.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Not Catholic?

DOUG AITKEN: No, just atheist. They both worked to put each other through school. And then I

think once they both got an education, they saw an advertisement in the Detroit newspaper. And because it was Motor City, there's these ads that say "driveaway car," where, "If you take our car from the car factory and drive it where we want it to go, we'll give you the gas and you can take it there." So they rip this ad out and said, "Okay, it's time to just get out of here; we can get a free ride."

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Really?

DOUG AITKEN: They went to San Francisco, and it didn't work out there. My dad's brother was down here, so they came down and visited him. They came here and fell in love with this idea of Los Angeles. It's funny because there's—I think when they visited my uncle, he lived on a hill, and there was this view of Los Angeles at nighttime, and it was a grid of lights, and my dad said, "This is the view that I want to live with."

I don't mean that in a materialistic way. It was more of a kind of a mythological way, because he had never seen a city from above, because Michigan is flat. So he had this idea that if you could look down and you see the entire metropolis as this kind of grid of light and patterns, you would have a different understanding of it. It took a long time, years, and eventually they were able to get this house with some kind of view.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Oh, in Palos Verdes.

DOUG AITKEN: Yes.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, your own affection for Los Angeles is so evident in the work that you make. Do you feel like it's a reflection of the kind of affection that your parents must have felt, that kind of sense of liberation?

DOUG AITKEN: I think there's a sense of liberation. Any place is what you make of it. You take the ingredients and put it in a cauldron and cook your own stew. For me growing up, seeing this aerial view, the electric grid view, watching the circulation, looking at the topography and how things move was fascinating.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, it's such a huge part of the way your work evolved. You have that in so many of the pieces that you make, where you're up above, looking down, and even very recent pieces.

And just to pause for a thought—I had a thought there for a moment. I wanted to ask you, because now I know more about your father's background. As a criminal attorney, was he a prosecutorial or a defense attorney?

DOUG AITKEN: He was mostly defense.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: It sounds like they had an extraordinary amount of determination.

DOUG AITKEN: A quiet determination. They were very subtle people.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, Scotch-Irish, say no more.

It sounds like you were a happy child with your parents. Many people feel like, looking back, they had a dysfunctional childhood. You don't feel like that's the case for you?

DOUG AITKEN: I don't really know one way or another. When you're growing up, you are so unfamiliar wearing your emotions that you are mostly just confused all the time. [Laughs.]

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So when you're growing up in this high school period, did you have a girlfriend in high school?

DOUG AITKEN: Not so much.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So when it comes time for you to go to college, what happens?

DOUG AITKEN: I had an art teacher when I was in high school; I've mentioned her—Chizuko de Queiroz. She would always come up with tasks and deadlines. She said, "You have to go this weekend," to some local college, "and on the weekend they're having art schools from around the country looking at portfolios. I know you're too young for this, but maybe you can go there and just show them and get some feedback."

So I remember—I didn't even know what any of the schools were or where they were located. I waited in line, the first line I saw. Waiting and waiting, and there's a folding table with a man smoking a cigarette, with John Lennon glasses, and combed-back gray hair. I see him going through the kids' portfolios in front of me, and he seemed rather dismissive, moving pretty quick on to the next person. So I thought, This line is moving pretty well, so I'll stand in this one. I finally got up there—and my portfolio was, literally, cardboard, duct-taped together, and then inside was everything from incredibly hyperrealist black-and-white pen drawings that would take me three months, to expressionist collages, to—you name it.

So finally I got up there, and he opens it up and spends a surprisingly long time looking at the first piece, and then a really long time looking at the next one. I started becoming nervous. I thought this was a very bad sign; now he's just really going to rip me apart or something. After five or 10 minutes of this, he shuts it and he says, "I'd love for you to go to our school," and, "How old are you? What grade are you in?" I was still a junior in high school. He said, "We'll get you in the school already, and we'll take care of everything."

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And you were 17?

DOUG AITKEN: Yes, I must have been 17. I thought this was amazing, but I also had no idea what school this was, but I—I thought it was interesting that there was someone there that got what I was doing.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Oh, yeah. So moving.

DOUG AITKEN: So he gave me his card, and I called him with my mother, like that week, and he was running the department of illustration at Art Center [College of Design].

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Oh, at Art Center, mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG AITKEN: His name was Phil Hays. He wound up being this incredible, incredible editorial illustrator. So that was a huge relief, knowing that I didn't have to find some school somewhere.

So I was pretty surprised by that, and when I started going to Art Center, we got to be really close friends. He was an amazing character; it's too bad that he's not around, because an oral history on Philip Hays would be phenomenal. He was probably one of the most important illustrators of the late '50s, '60s, early '70s, in New York. He did Blue Note album covers. The early covers for *Rolling*

Stone, all of this just incredible work.

A lot of the work he would do was in this very stylized, realistic watercolor style. It would be a Billie Holiday, Bessie Smith, or Muddy Waters album cover, in this very elegant, melancholic and mysterious portraiture. And he used to share a studio with Warhol, before the Factory. So I had no idea that this chain-smoker with the round glasses, that I met at the folding table, would later open up so many doors, just in terms of exposure—"Hey, Doug, take a look at this woman," or, "Look at this guy's work," and I would just follow him up on it.

When I did get into that school, I was very fortunate, because he said to me, "You take whatever classes you want. You don't follow the program. If you want to learn how to do typography and take something like that darkroom class, just come to me and I'll sign the form." So I was lucky, in the sense of formal education—it was nonlinear, just the way I liked it.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Amazing. So did you finish high school, or did you go right into Art Center, or what did you end up doing?

DOUG AITKEN: I finished high school, and then I took a year to just do all my academics, at some disposable school.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And then Art Center. So then did you move out to Pasadena to go to Art Center?

DOUG AITKEN: Yes.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So what was it like for you, to transition from living at home to—where did you live in Pasadena?

DOUG AITKEN: I lived all over. We had some communal houses, some different places. I lived in a garage with a dirt floor for a while; that got pretty hot in the summer.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: But did you arrange your housing, or did the school arrange that for you?

DOUG AITKEN: I just did it myself.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So you go out to Pasadena, and this is the first time you've been away from home, right?

DOUG AITKEN: In my mid-teens, I was doing a lot of traveling alone, or with friends. I remember when I was 17, I hitchhiked from Los Angeles to Guatemala for two months.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Good Lord.

DOUG AITKEN: I would orchestrate trips like that, just to constantly get out there and see more.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: But your parents didn't say, Oh, my God, no, you're not doing that?

DOUG AITKEN: When I asked them about this trip I wanted to take, this hitchhiking odyssey, my mom says, "Oh, when you get to Ixtapa, you've got to go to this little restaurant—incredible mole sauce at this place, and you've got to ask for Paco," or something. You know, "When you get to



Puerto Angel, ask for Maria; this is her town. She's fabulous; she'll take care of you." So it was kind of the opposite of someone saying, Absolutely not; this is dangerous. It was almost more like—there was less than no resistance.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So this would have been, like, 1985-ish, so you really weren't—the dangers of hitchhiking weren't known. They just assumed you would make it through.

DOUG AITKEN: Yeah, and I confess, I did take some third-class Mexican buses for part of the way, too. I was really addicted to being out on the road. I think maybe right around that same time, I remember going to Central America for maybe a month and a half. I had worked on a kiwi farm to save up \$500, and I thought that \$500 would take me for about a month and a half in Costa Rica and Panama. It worked out okay.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: How old were you then?

DOUG AITKEN: Probably 17.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: What did you want—well, it sounds like your parents were like that, too. What did you get out of being on the road? What did it feed inside of you?

DOUG AITKEN: It was adventure; it was really that idea of the unknown, the idea of putting yourself in a situation where it's foreign, unfamiliar, charged with something new. You come back here and you see how sanitized American life is—and the roads are perfect and everything is so sterile. And that makes you just want to go back again and have more of the other.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And so you've had some of these adventures, and you found yourself lodging at Art Center, and you start taking classes. You're in the illustration department. Who were some of your other teachers in illustration?

DOUG AITKEN: Well, what happened was, in a very short amount of time being there, I thought, Okay, well, this editorial illustration isn't very difficult; maybe I could support my art doing this. So I actually never switched out of that program, but the classes I took, after about 12 months, were less and less illustration and more and more contemporary art, and also learning diverse things, whether it's photography or design or anything. I used the school like a laboratory. It wasn't so much on a track, but more looking at how wide can I make this experience and how much can I glean from it.

At that time, I was doing some freelance jobs while I was in school, like for *L.A. Weekly*, and there was a magazine called *Ray Gun*.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Freelance photography?

DOUG AITKEN: Illustration.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And *Ray Gun*?

DOUG AITKEN: It was a very experimental music magazine in the '90s. I worked on that a lot, like, at the beginning of the magazine. It was a very interesting moment for design and type. I think that magazine really just drove a wedge into much of the way we see things.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: In the early '90s?

DOUG AITKEN: It was interesting because school, for me, was about going wider and wider, and further away from the core of what I had started with. I think by the time I was towards the end of school, I was making sculptures and objects and performances, and constantly working with new mediums.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Now, who were some of the teachers you had while you were there?

DOUG AITKEN: I remember walking down the hall one day, and I had a shirt on that said "Bongwater," and Bongwater was a New York underground group with Ann Magnuson and Kramer. I mean, obviously, most people don't know who Bongwater is. But I remember walking down the hallway, and there was a guy with a really bad complexion, who looked a lot older than I, but he was walking the other way and he had a Sonic Youth shirt on. He stops me and says, "Whoa, Bongwater, they're so great; what's your name?" I said, "My name is Doug," and he says, "My name is Mike Kelley." So that was when I met Mike, and it was interesting because it wasn't in any kind of formal environment or art opening; it was just some other weirdo wandering around.

Mike was interesting, but for the most part, I was very much an outsider there, because I was never in the program, because I was never seen as having an official art major. I would sneak in and listen to every visiting artist lecture, and I'd watch critiques, but never participating, always this outsider, and never accepted, sometimes verbally rejected by the other art majors, and other times in a kind of passive-aggressive way.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: That's an interesting perspective because, you know, in the '90s, it's almost as though Art Center inherits the cream of CalArts from the previous generation, right?

So you have Mike Kelley, and you have—who else did you have there?

DOUG AITKEN: Stephen Prina was there.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Stephen Prina was good to you?

DOUG AITKEN: Yes.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Were any of the others—who else was there? Let's see—

DOUG AITKEN: That's all I remember, really. There was a bunch of other people, but they were mostly kind of forgettable. [Laughs.] I mean, it's the truth.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And your classmates were in illustration, but did you befriend anybody in the fine art department, so to speak?

DOUG AITKEN: Jorge Pardo was working in the library, and I always liked Jorge. We'd have good conversations.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Who were your friends there? Did any of them become artists, or did they all end up going into the illustration world more?

DOUG AITKEN: One of my best friends at that time, right when he graduated, said, "I'm going to go back to school," and I said, "What do you mean, you're going back to school?" He says, "I'm going to bartending school, because it's the only way I can make a living."

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, making a living is a real thing, and Art Center, in particular, is conscientious about letting their students know about that. So you're making all this art, and how did you anticipate getting through life?

DOUG AITKEN: School is only really as good as what you absorb from it. I never believed that you would go to a school and subscribe to a program and take the program. That just wasn't the way I thought. So my idea was that I would use school as an incredible fountain, to really learn and experiment and expand my language. Then when I'm out of school, that will be the time to really make the art that I want to make.

I remember I planned to leave Los Angeles about five days after I got out of school and move to New York, and within that five days, I took a road trip to Baja.

I went down with a friend of mine and my girlfriend at the time. We were sleeping, in the middle of the night—I'm sleeping in a car and my friend is in a tent, and he bangs on the window, and yells, "They've stolen everything." I say, "What do you mean?" And he says, "They've stolen everything that we have, and they've also taken my machete." And then I said, "What are we going to do about it?" And he says, "Well, you've got to wake up right now. We have to chase this car," because they were still in the distance. We see this headlight and a trail of dust, speeding up the desert road. So we get in my old Saab and start chasing these people who have stolen all our possessions.

We're driving through the night, as fast as we can go, but—it's a cliché, every hill that you go over, they're going over the next one, and it's just not going well. Eventually, I said to my friend Lawrence, I said, "Look, we're going to do something we would never normally do; we're going to the Federales, and we're just going to tell them what's happened."

So we pull in this Federale station at 3 a.m., and the cop is asleep. We wake him up, and he's mad that he's been awoken, and he says, "You and you, just sit down in that chair and just shut up." My friend is trying to motion that the car is heading north; everything is stolen. So after 30 minutes of sitting there, the Federale says, "Okay, you get in your car and you drive on that same road north of here." We do. We get 20 minutes up; we come down a ravine; and we see bright lights on, up the ravine. And there's the car that has all our possessions, and there's a machine gun to the temple of the driver and the passenger.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Oh, my God.

DOUG AITKEN: We get out, and talk to some more Federales, who were in a very bad mood, and they say, "So, this is your guy, and this is your stuff?" And we get out and we say, "Yeah, this is ours." They say, "Okay, what's the value of the stuff?" We tell them the value, and then we have to pay to buy our stolen stuff back, for the full value.

In the process of this, when everything was stolen, at one point the thieves had taken my portfolio that I had made that had all of my illustration work in it, for when I moved to New York in a few days. They just threw it out the window somewhere in the desert, and it was gone forever. I guess they didn't like my work too much.

[They laugh.]

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: That's an incredible story.

DOUG AITKEN: It was kind of interesting. You have the starting point; you get out of school and are going to set up everything perfectly, and instead I find myself in the desert of northern Baja at three

in the morning. And everything I put together that could even possibly help me support myself has just vanished.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: God, what a saga.

DOUG AITKEN: So I move to New York.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Without the portfolio.

DOUG AITKEN: Without the portfolio. And I knew only one person in the city, and that was this artist named Lawrence Carroll. Lawrence is an amazing person, and he said, "I'll take care of you. When you get out here, you can rent a small room in the back of my studio, down by the South Street Seaport, and you can rent a futon and the hallway in my flat on West 11th Street." I had no idea. I thought, That sounds like a fantastic situation.

So I show up there, and this studio has a huge, rusted, iron door with a chain and a padlock on it, and I go undo the padlock to see my future studio, and I walk through, and the first room, it's just raw. The first room has a bunch of marble that's half-finished. And there's another room, and that's where Lawrence's studio was, and there was his artworks; I think he was preparing for documenta in Kassel. And then there's this other room that I see; this is supposed to be where I am, this tiny room, like the size of two bathrooms, and it has no windows, no ventilation, no heating, no cooling; it's just this tiny room. That was the starting point.

The first people, two people, I met when I moved to New York were the artist Keith Edmier and Heidi Zuckerman.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Keith Edmier?

DOUG AITKEN: Yeah, Keith Edmier. He's a fascinating artist, and Heidi is running the Aspen [Art] Museum now. Heidi Zuckerman. I think they were dating or something. Keith was in this backroom hole before me, so he was there to hand the off.

It was interesting being in New York; this is '91 or something. It was just throbbing with energy and life, and there was so much texture to it, so much grime, dirt, and tooth to everything. I met Keith and Heidi, and I think the third person I met was Matthew Barney. Keith was helping Matthew cast some pieces for fabrication. It was interesting because I found myself extremely alone, more isolated, more alienated than I had ever been.

I remember reading this Bruce Nauman interview, and Nauman said, "I give every artwork 10 days. I work an idea; I think about it; I sketch it out for 10 days; and at the end of the 10 days, if it's not substantial, then I abort it." So I said to myself, I'm going actually make an artwork every 10 days, not only an idea.

So I set up this self-imposed program, where at the beginning I would have an idea, and then I had to finish the work within 10 days, whether it's a large sculpture, an installation, or a photo-based piece, or any medium, but it had to be completed in 10 days. So I was just going around the clock, making these pieces that absolutely no one saw.

I mean, it was interesting because I really knew so few people there, but I finally had this freedom and intellectual and creative resources; I had the experience of working with different mediums and materials; and I had the space and time to really concentrate in this highly focused way, and I was out of school. But I had no community, and I had very few friends out there at first. So it was a

strange time where you're producing and producing. And at that period of time in New York, it was fascinating, because about six months prior to when I arrived there, that was a moment where almost all the galleries closed.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Due to the recession.

DOUG AITKEN: Yes, this huge crash in New York. The artists that seemed to have been showing, before I ever arrived there, were artists that we saw as incredibly conservative, like Schnabel, Longo, Salle, artists like—Ross Bleckner—and we were showing in very unorthodox places. As I started to meet more people—people from AC Project Room, Paul Bloodgood, Gavin Brown, Andrea Zittel—we started showing in squats, in abandoned warehouse spaces. I remember Gavin put together a show that you had to climb up a fire escape, and the show was only going to be there for two days. I think someone just jacked the window open so we could install work inside it.

So it was this interesting moment in time where there was a sense that art can and should be as experimental as possible, and it should be out there, and there's absolutely no use or need for a gallery system or any kind of capitalist system. It was kind of an incredible time to be there.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Now, the first name you mentioned was Paul Bloodgood?

DOUG AITKEN: He was an abstract painter and a downtown activist. He was a little bit older than I was. Paul was a pretty seminal character, not so much his art, but his personality. He was someone who could really stay up late and argue and debate about art ideas all night long, and he would organize and put together group shows, and give opportunities to people who were far on the margins.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So you found your community, but I want to know what you were—when you were saying you were making all these things—like every 10 days you made something—how big would these things be if you were in this little spot? What did they look like?

DOUG AITKEN: I was doing a lot of pieces that were made of cast materials, but the materials themselves would have a conceptual meaning, mostly sculpture and installation, and some photo-based works.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And where would you put them when they were finished?

DOUG AITKEN: I'd set them up somewhere around the space that I had, look at it, and assess it.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Were they large or small?

DOUG AITKEN: They ranged.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Did you keep any of them?

DOUG AITKEN: Not much.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Did you decide they weren't up to muster or—how did you feel about them?

DOUG AITKEN: It was more of a very aggressive search for a language. It was like an exorcism. It was necessary to kind of make these pieces, to view them, so that you could move past them.

It wasn't really about making a finished body of work, even though each work was absolutely finished. It was about the process of going further and further and further. Later on, when I was developing *Electric Earth* for the Venice Biennale, I accelerated that to three concepts a day for 10 days. So I've always kind of used this model of, when working with concepts, to be very non-precious and fast and loose.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So these works that you made in New York, were they different from what you were making in LA before you moved to New York?

DOUG AITKEN: They were an extension of that, and they became more full-bodied when I got to New York. At that point, I was pretty happy to leave Los Angeles and start a new adventure, and I saw that a lot of what was coming out of LA and Art Center was becoming very generic. There was an enormous influence of artists like Mike Kelley and the *Helter Skelter* generation. I saw that a lot of people who were my age were too close to that; it didn't seem like they had their own perspective and personality in their art. Stepping into a totally different community was very revitalizing.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: It also sounds like it helped you to be in a place where you could find your community of artist friends. It sounds like you didn't have that many artist friends at Art Center.

DOUG AITKEN: Definitely.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: When you were at Art Center, and you didn't have artist friends per se, do you think it was a sense of competition or just—or what? Or just that you were in the illustration department and they were in the art department. Snobbery? I think of you as a very easygoing and affable person. It's hard to imagine you not having a certain social ease. Were you that way when you were in college?

DOUG AITKEN: I was just very focused on art-making, so I wasn't really living a highly social life.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: When you got to New York, did you find yourself a girlfriend?

DOUG AITKEN: Well, the girlfriend that I had in LA kind of overlapped into New York for about a year or so, and then we called it off.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Oh, so did she come to New York with you?

DOUG AITKEN: No, she stayed out west. It was kind of bicoastal for a while.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Okay. And so when you were in New York, were you able to—did you want to have a girlfriend, or a social relationship, when you were there?

DOUG AITKEN: New York at that time was a city you could plug into very easily, but at the same time, you could also feel more alienated than anywhere. I think that's the by-product of a city which moves at such extreme acceleration and is on, 24 hours a day. Once you step out of that, you're desperately alone.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: That's tough, and here you are really—still relatively young. What were you—like, in your early 20s, right? And sort of finding your way. Now, how did you support yourself in New York? And who were you working for in New York?

DOUG AITKEN: I worked freelance, so it was always kind of a hustle to find a project. But I was getting by doing a little bit of editorial illustrations, magazines, some book covers, some record covers.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And this is you actually drawing, or at this point—where are computers at this point? Are you working in Photoshop yet?

DOUG AITKEN: No, this is absolutely by hand.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: This is manual drawing and realistic illustration.

DOUG AITKEN: Not so realistic. More interpretive drawing and collage on paper.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Now at what point do you start getting into electronic media? How did you make the transition? When does the transition happen for you?

DOUG AITKEN: Well, that period I was talking about, where I was making a work every 10 days, I recall there was this one idea that I had that was very clear to me, but I couldn't figure out how to make it in a physical medium. I found myself thinking about it, and I thought the only way you could really do this is if it was a moving image. So I just tried to learn how to film this piece, which was a very simple piece. It was a high-powered rocket that was made by people who were working at NASA and Lockheed and Aerospace, and on the weekends they would build these private missiles, and they would launch them off in the desert to see how high they could go.

I wanted to collaborate with this group, and I wanted them to make a missile that could fly above the suburban neighborhood that it was built in, and I wanted to find a way to film it in slow motion. So as I started to look into this, I found a very basic way to install a camera, a Super 8 camera, inside this, and to record it in slow motion, the ascent and descent, a topography piece. So that was really the first thing that I ever used moving image in.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And that was when you were in New York?

DOUG AITKEN: Yes.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So even though you're in New York, you conceptualized a piece that took place in LA.

DOUG AITKEN: You're right.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So after you made that moving-image piece, did something change for you?

DOUG AITKEN: I think that awareness of the power of the moving image and that idea that you could see time as something that's liquid is what film does. So in seeing that—even though the piece was a very raw, crude, amateur attempt—just the idea of it was really compelling. [. . .]

I had this kind of incredible realization where, all of a sudden, I saw that everything that I was being fed—the media, all the information, the news—which I'm always the consumer of—I'm the receiver. But all of a sudden I recognized I could take that and re-sculpt it, and I could push it back out. I could reconfigure the narrative and restructure these images the way that I saw it. So it was this incredibly empowering sense, that actually all this information around you is actually fodder for you to sculpt, repurpose, and create with.

When you are editing—there's often timecode on the bottom of the screen, and timecode is a set of numbers that are on the screen that tell you what minute, hour, second, or frame that you're at. I recall I went home at night, after my first day of editing, and I'm lying in bed dreaming, and I had this dream, and in my dream, suddenly there is a timecode bar underneath in the bottom of my dream, and I could see what minute, hour, second, frame my dream was. And at a certain point in my dream I said, No, I don't want that scene. I want to rewind that scene and delete it and then move forward again. So I started editing my dreams, and—this experience of making these works allowed me to reconstruct my reality.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: That's unbelievable. That's like something everybody should have a technique for doing. Wouldn't that be wonderful if you could stop your dreams and say, No, I want a different ending.

DOUG AITKEN: [Laughs.]

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: But you had—up till this point, everything you've done has been more or less three-dimensional, or collage-based, so—but once you got the moving-image part figured, then did you think, Well, this is all I want to do for the rest of my life?

DOUG AITKEN: Definitely not.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: No? Well, sometimes it's true, like, a light bulb goes off and you go, Aha, this is the key in the lock.

DOUG AITKEN: I never felt drawn to any one medium. It was always that one branch on a tree, and the further that branch grows, the more you know how to work with it. I think I was always looking at other things. I was looking at architecture, still images, or performances, and things like that, but all mediums are actually incredibly interconnected. And if you film something—for example, you may have a character in front of the camera. The character might have to move in a certain way. So already you have choreography and performance art and theater as part of your language, even though you're filming.

We come out of an era, the 21st century, which is often so siloed and so conservative in terms of how we see mediums. We not only see groups and movements, out of convenience, but we also tend to see artists by mediums, and we promote the idea that an artist defines himself by a medium, which, to me, I don't understand at all. I think that does an incredible disservice to the voice of the individual. And when we look at many of the greatest contributions of the 20th century, Bruce Nauman, Marcel Duchamp, Picasso for that matter, we see individuals who are working completely outside of mediums. So it's interesting, now that we are working with even newer mediums, which are increasingly time-based and ephemeral—it's more a time than ever to really embrace the polymedia approach.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: But when you came up with this concept, when this occurred to you, it was sort of an unusual concept. I have to ask, did you know the work of the well-known video artists of your day? Did you know the work of Bill Viola? Did you know the work of the people who had sort of pioneered large-scale video installation?

DOUG AITKEN: At that point—that was probably early, mid-'90s. The first kind of large-scale installation I had done was *Diamond Sea*, and when I did that, I wasn't very interested in the existing video art. In fact, it was something that I really wasn't interested in at all. And when I say that—at that period of time, video art was often effects-driven work and studio based, a lot of



loops, a lot of TVs, like Paik or Viola. To me, I had no connection with that.

I was more fascinated by cinema, and I was fascinated by the more experimental artists like Bruce Conner, or Stan Brakhage, or Kenneth Anger. I thought that there was something incredibly potent with what they were doing, on one hand. On the other hand, you know, for a piece like *A Movie* by Bruce Conner, which is cut into a series of short pieces, the opposite end of the spectrum, you have Tarkovsky in *Andrei Rublev* doing a single shot for five or six minutes. So I think being aware of this cinema language, and seeing that there is actually incredible potential in this language of moving images that could be exercised in a new way, for me, was really the motivation.

Bruce Conner was an influence for me, and I had this strange encounter where I met Bruce when I was very young. I remember looking at the *L.A. Weekly*, and it was talking about art shows that are opening tonight, and they had mentioned this artist named Bruce Conner, who I, of course, had never heard of, and I was maybe only 16 or 17. So I ripped this out and I remember hitchhiking down Pacific Coast Highway. And it took a lot of rides to get to Santa Monica. Finally, I show up in Santa Monica at a gallery, and I walk in, and I saw his show there, and it really connected with me. I think it was the inkblots and the small collages.

The show started filling up with adults, wearing suits, like Dennis Hopper and people like that, and so I became quite intimidated. So I went outside and sat on the curb, thinking about this exhibition that I had just seen, and in a short amount of time this older guy wearing denim with a white beard came out, and he sat down next to me, randomly. So the two of us, sitting on a curb in the parking lot, and he starts asking me about the show. We start talking about it, and that was Bruce Conner.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Oh.

DOUG AITKEN: Bruce spent about 30 or 45 minutes just talking to me, this kid, about art while his own opening is going on, and he's more interested in talking to a stranger than discussing his art with everyone who has shown up that night. I remember thinking how interesting that was, how selfless and curious of him. And I told myself, This is a really important thing to remember. Later on, we became friends, in the last couple years of his life.

Going back to the Art Center library, when Jorge Pardo was working there, I remember asking Jorge about moving-image works, and he says, "You should really check out the Bruce Conner VHSs." And seeing those, and Brakhage, and Anger.

It was always interesting to me, because Brakhage and Anger are completely marginalized from the context of contemporary art, yet their contribution is herculean. Whereas it's fine to look at someone like Michael Snow's *Wavelength*, and to see that in the context of contemporary art, which is a much lesser contribution than, I would say, than someone like Brakhage or Anger. So when you look at it that way, you see that, actually, there's this huge ocean of things that are being created, and you recognize that oftentimes it's the structure of culture that allows certain influences in, and marginalizes other influences. But, in fact, when we have dinner together, we will probably talk about all these things seamlessly. I never really cared about this segregation.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And in many ways, your position on that becomes, sort of—you end up being sort of at the forefront of an entire shift in the way contemporary art operates, not intentionally, perhaps, but—you know, that is probably more the way it's viewed today than when you started.

[Audio break.]

We were talking about Bruce Conner and his approach when you saw the work as a young person in LA.

Getting back to New York in the '90s, you're really at the cusp. I mean, earlier you mentioned Matthew Barney, and certainly, he's another artist at that time who just—I feel as though he also was just not confined by boundaries, or by definitions of media, the way you were. So you've discovered your first moving-image pieces. What happens next? Are you still—by the way, are you still in the little studio that you're renting from Lawrence Carroll?

DOUG AITKEN: Yes.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: How long did you stay there?

DOUG AITKEN: I was at that studio for about a year and a half.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And do you remember the address of it, or what street it was on?

DOUG AITKEN: It was in the South Street Seaport on Front Street and Peck Slip. It is interesting, because that was the area in the late '50s and '60s that so many of the artists, like Johns and Rauschenberg, all had studios. By the time I was down there, it was a ghost town, very desolate. Then I got a phone call one day from this mysterious guy named Don Guarnari [ph]. And he calls me up, and—Don shared a studio with Matthew Barney in Brooklyn.

Matthew and Don had this studio, and I think the government condemned the studio because the landlord was selling drugs. And all of a sudden, search and seizure, all of Matthew's artwork and the work Don was working on was frozen by the government and inaccessible.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Really?

DOUG AITKEN: Yeah. And this is before Matthew's first show at Barbara Gladstone. I think he was just out of Yale at this point. So Don calls me up and says, "Hey, Doug, Matthew and I don't have a studio anymore, and I have this space up on Ann Street, do you want to share it?" Ann Street was about three or four blocks from the World Trade Center, but it was just this little alley. Don had found this place there, and it was a floor of a building, and it was originally \$800 a month. But the hitch to it was, every other floor but ours was printing presses, and they only hired deaf, older men, who would come over from New Jersey, because they couldn't hear the sound of the printing machines; but it would just drive you insane. Huge metal machines pounding over and over, creating repetitious thumping sounds. But they would stop at 5 p.m.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Oh, my God.

DOUG AITKEN: So we had this space. It was a pretty great space. Hardly any light, and the ceiling was pulsing with these machine sounds. And this was my studio for about six or seven years.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: That is so interesting, compared to—in reference to what Matthew Barney ends up doing, with all those big machines pounding away, right, in his videos. Okay, yeah.

DOUG AITKEN: The space was remote; there was no community around there. After five o'clock that section of downtown would just clear out; you couldn't see a tumbleweed blow by. But that was my space throughout the '90s.

Don was a very, very mysterious person. I think he's still quite off the grid, and it's still unclear to Matthew and I what he did. It bordered on some early computer hacking, and then he was, I think, hired by some mysterious financial firms on Wall Street to create encryption programs so they couldn't be broken into. There would be a flow of hard drives and equipment constantly circulating through our studio. And the studio was unmarked; you could never find it.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: The founder of the dark web.

DOUG AITKEN: Actually, Matthew nicknamed him Dark Don. [Laughs.] So, you know, after a while, eventually Don moved out and moved on, and I took the space over. But I liked the idea of having more space to work with.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Now, you and Matthew obviously were friends at that point, or associates, anyway.

DOUG AITKEN: I've always liked him.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And here you are, pioneering these ideas, not together, per se, but you're interestingly—not to talk about influences, per se, but these two fantastic sculptors who work in all these media—were you exchanging ideas at all?

DOUG AITKEN: We've had times where our friendship has been closer; I think we were friends in the '90s, and in the last decade we've become closer friends. I think he's an incredible artist, and it's always interesting for me when we just sit down and talk, and no one else is around, and really peeling everything back to the process, or the insecurities. It's always been important having artists who are continuously raising the bar. It's like a nutrient for the community. Matthew is like that.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: It's hard for artists to be friends with other artists, I think, sometimes.

DOUG AITKEN: Not if you're interested in them.

[They laugh.]

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, you know, it's like writers being together; there's an element of competition that seems to always kind of be—maybe you don't feel that. I feel like I interview artists and they always say, "Actually, not that many. I'm not friends with that many artists." They'll be friends with writers and other creative types, but it's hard for them to be in the same pool. Do you find that at all?

DOUG AITKEN: There's some artists that are lifetime friends, and we have such a great dialogue. Like Thomas Demand, for example. I see him tonight, and we'll just talk about ideas. People like Philippe Parreno or Pierre Huyghe or Rirkrit [Tiravanija]. I think what happens is you find people that you connect with, and if it sticks, it sticks. I'll never call Ernesto Neto, but when I see him, I hug him immediately, and we just want to sit down. It's a different era. It's very different than, for example, Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles, when there's one community and one focus and one exhibition space.

The world that I grew up in was very nomadic. And there was a sense of place, but the definition was very loose. It would be easier, almost, to see your peer group at a group show in Europe than it would be tracking people down where they live.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: That's kind of true for LA in general now, isn't it? Also, it's

interesting, in the '90s, it just seems as though there was this era of—I remember it; you probably don't. I remember even in the early '80s, you would hang around with your friends. Like, you would go, "Oh, let's go hang out; let's go," and you would just go, like, hang out. I think that really shifted in the '90s, and it's just been shifting ever since. So maybe what you're saying is, also, that just the idea that, "Let's all just go hang around and have a few beers," maybe that is just a lost entity.

DOUG AITKEN: I think it's there, but it's just a little bit different. One of the things that you're talking about is the idea of regionalism, like a regional identity. I'm not talking about Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood. [Laughs.]

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Yeah.

DOUG AITKEN: I'm talking about the idea that there can be a city or a region, a Berlin, or a downtown scene in Los Angeles. It's a very different topography now, and part of that is the digital influence. Someone might be content sending someone a text, having a phone call or an email chain, and that might supplant the idea of being at the White Horse Tavern with Pollock and de Kooning. So it's a very different kind of dynamic, but within that there's also things to be gained. Maybe someone you feel incredible intimacy with who lives far away in Portugal or Tokyo. You can really be there and connect with them more regularly; whereas at the time of the '70s, it might be a postcard.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Yes.

DOUG AITKEN: So I think part of it is this strange Darwinism, where we're growing out of our physical bodies, and we're in this transitional stage. We want the physicality of place, but we're becoming more fluid, and we're able to move weightlessly.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, that's become so much a part of your work, I mean, that idea. The idea that you just expressed seems like it's just been growing through your work over the years.

But to get back to where you started—we're still in the middle of the '90s, and you're just discovering moving image.

DOUG AITKEN: [. . .] This is '93. [. . .] I started looking at the pieces I had made, and I knew they weren't at the level they should be.

I kept thinking about the restrictions of cinema and the idea that one of the things that doesn't really work with cinema is that it's a passive role for the viewer, and in a sense, I want the viewer to author and perform. If you look at the history of cinema, the viewer sits passively and watches, and that goes back to opera and theater. So there's always a sense of you, the viewer, as the voyeur, and I wanted to find a way that I could break that fourth wall; I could get to a purer form of concept; I could communicate things that I couldn't communicate otherwise, if the viewer was inside it instead. The first piece that I made like that was *Diamond Sea*.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Describe for the tape recorder what *Diamond Sea* is.

DOUG AITKEN: *Diamond Sea* is a multiscreen installation. It consists of about six projections and a light-box image. The work was filmed in the Diamond Areas One and Two in southern Namibia, in Africa. We gained access to this space, which I believe no outsiders have filmed. It was closed and secured since 1908. The area is about 70,000 square kilometers, and I wanted to make this work that really filmed what we discovered inside, but not like a documentary.

I saw *Diamond Sea* as a psychological landscape, and I was interested in one thing specifically: this cohabitation between one of the world's oldest deserts—this ancient landscape, where the cold Atlantic Ocean is hitting up against the Sahara—and the cohabitation with extremely modern technology, machines that only exist inside the zone. One is a New York City—block long, and it moves autonomously, and sifts through the sand, weeding out gem diamonds. I was drawn by this idea of redefining landscape as psychological space.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Now, how did you learn about this place?

DOUG AITKEN: I was looking at a map. Someone had given me this enormous atlas book, and I would always kind of run my fingers through areas I wasn't familiar with. I was running my finger down central Africa, and I found this area that wasn't defined, and it simply said "Zone 1," "Zone 2." It was about the distance of Tijuana to San Francisco, going all the way from the Pacific Ocean to Arizona. This immense area was simply unnamed, and this was pre-internet, so I went to the public libraries and started researching all I could find out about it. I was curious. But the more I learned, the more I saw this narrative surfacing out of it, and I felt that this was really something there that touched upon the fundamental questions I was interested in.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: That's so interesting. So how did you fund this extremely ambitious thing that you did, because you had to go to Namibia. How long were you there? What was involved in making it?

DOUG AITKEN: All these works were incredibly low-budget. We found a way. [Laughs.] I went with three of my best friends. One of them helped me with camera, one of them helped with logistics, and one recorded audio.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And who are those three people?

DOUG AITKEN: Dean Kuipers, who is a writer; Haines Hall, who is an editor; and Eric Matthies, who is a producer. So just the four of us went, and I think the budget for the piece was maybe \$5,000. My grandma had passed away, and she willed me a couple thousand dollars, so I was able to take that and a couple more and get us there. It took about a year to get security clearances and permits.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Who owns the Zone One and Zone Two?

DOUG AITKEN: It would be hard for me to say on record, because it appears that there is a series of false companies. I would imagine it goes back to De Beers.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: But it's a privately held diamond-mining territory.

DOUG AITKEN: It's essentially a private country with no access and private regulation.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And how did you get in?

DOUG AITKEN: I was tenacious. I kept sending letters, handwritten letters, to people, or I'd find contacts in the mines, and eventually, a man named Etienne Bath started corresponding with me, and he was very forthcoming and generous, and tried to help us out.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Did you tell them you were an artist?

DOUG AITKEN: Yes. I said I wanted to make an artwork that wasn't an overtly socio-political perspective. It was a work that was more open, really allowing the viewer into the work.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Do you consider this your first mature work—

DOUG AITKEN: It probably would be.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: —in that medium?

DOUG AITKEN: I think so. It was the first piece that I had really been able to engage architecture and create an environment. I had a lot of these ideas, but I didn't know how to manifest them, and I think they came together with *Diamond Sea*.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: This is 1997. So when you finish, how did you end up—how long were you in Namibia?

DOUG AITKEN: We were there for about a month or so.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And so you were there for a month. Did you have any adventures while you were in Namibia?

DOUG AITKEN: Making that piece was really such an adventure. I think that a lot of what really interested me in making that work was embracing the process of letting whatever we found, within the geographic parameters of the space, author the artwork. When you work that way, you find yourself in this very heightened state of awareness, because you're constantly looking in a panoramic view. You're not looking for the linear story.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Who was manning the camera during all this?

DOUG AITKEN: I shoot my own work.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And had you bought your own equipment at this point?

DOUG AITKEN: We rented equipment, and then when we brought this equipment back, it was absolutely destroyed. It was filled with sand. I think, literally, the camera tech at the rental house started laughing as he was pouring part of the Sahara out of the camera.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So you rented all this stuff and took it over there with you. In those days, you didn't have just a small amount. It was a lot of equipment, right?

DOUG AITKEN: It was shot on 16mm; we could carry it, but it was quite a bit.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So from this point on, you were shooting it yourself; it was your eye. Okay, and you're shooting it for a month. And then you get back with all this footage. Then what happens?

DOUG AITKEN: When I film and do the shooting, I find that when I'm behind the camera lens, I'm editing also. You're very aware of how one scene can lead to another in the larger picture

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And when you were doing this, had you conceptualized it as a multiscreen piece from the beginning, or did that come about as you were editing?

DOUG AITKEN: I knew I wanted it to be an environment, but I didn't know how. You had asked earlier about the idea of the history of video art leading up to that point. I never connected with very many installations that I had seen up to that point. To me, they often felt flat and synthetic, and I couldn't really penetrate them. They were presenting themselves in a circus-like way. Someone like

Paik, you see dazzling colors, and a lot of kinetic motion, often almost like a sculpture or a painting.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Nam June Paik.

DOUG AITKEN: Yes. I think with *Diamond Sea*, I wanted something that was very different, where, if a work by Paik is kinetic and in front of you, I wanted something that you would fall into and lose yourself and disappear. An artwork as a sensory space. *Diamond Sea* is really looking at where the moving image could go beyond the viewable surface.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And the issue is often time; it's a time-based media. How long did you expect people to stand and look at *Diamond Sea*? Does it have—I mean, a better way to say that is, did you conceptualize it with a beginning, a middle, and an end?

DOUG AITKEN: That's a great question, and I think about that constantly, because, primarily, the work that I make doesn't exist as a line; it exists more as a sphere. In saying that, with a piece like *Diamond Sea*, I needed to have something where any viewer could walk in at any time, and they could have something that they could hold onto and move into. I couldn't rely on traditional narrative, so the work itself really invented its own structure. There are arcs in the narrative, but I really feel like someone could walk in at any point, and I like that. I think there's some artists who have very prescribed notions of when a piece starts and finishes, and I try to develop works that are not beholden to that.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So you bring this back and you get it edited, and then how did you—

DOUG AITKEN: This sandy, gritty, mess of 16mm.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: How long did it take you to edit it?

DOUG AITKEN: It took us about four or five months.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And then what did you decide to do with it?

DOUG AITKEN: I first showed it in New York, at 303 Gallery.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And how did that come about? How did you end up showing there?

DOUG AITKEN: When I moved to New York, a lot of the galleries were in SoHo. I was rabid about seeing the shows. I loved going from exhibition to exhibition and seeing as much as I could. There were a few galleries that were my favorites, and 303 was absolutely my favorite. Andrea Rosen had a phenomenal program, and Luhring Augustine had some great shows. I think those were definitely my top three.

And I remember going to see 303, and one time I walked in and there was an exhibition by an artist named Lauren Szold, and she had just done this liquid pour across the gallery floor. It was all these funguses and white glutinous liquids, and you literally had to walk across a ramp suspended above it, and that was her work. And then I came in a month or so later, and Rirkrit had taken the storage room and put it in the exhibition space, and put the offices in the storage room. These were exhibitions that were about as far from capitalism as you could find, and just continuously new. So I was really fortunate.

I was showing in a small group show in the back room of an art storage place called AC Project Room. It must have been about a 50-person group show, and everyone had made something that's only about a foot long. That's when Lisa Spellman [of 303 Gallery] first saw my work, and completely to my surprise, she kept following it and wanting to come to the studio, and offered me the show. I don't know how old I was, probably 24. She's just an incredible person, and we still work together.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So you showed *Diamond Sea* at her gallery, and is that the only work you showed?

DOUG AITKEN: That was, I think, the second show I did; the first show I did was in SoHo. There was *Diamond Sea* in one room, and there was a separate piece, a second piece titled *Cathouse* that was in the second part of the space.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And that was yours as well?

DOUG AITKEN: *Cathouse* was this huge environment. It was like a labyrinth that was entirely carpeted, and it was as if you were to take a cat-scratching pole and you just blew it up and made a human-size environment. So you walk into this—and all of a sudden, floor-to-ceiling carpeted structure with holes and caves, all carpeted.

There were three monitors recessed into this carpeted environment, and it was a domestic family—a mother, son, and husband. There was no dialogue, and each of these people are in one house, and they're undergoing moments of extreme repetition, coiled tension, and restrained violence. You see the man sitting at a chair, scratching the wood on the armrest, over and over in rhythms, or the child is brushing his teeth over and over and faster and faster, and the woman is cleaning a drinking glass in the kitchen over and over. It was this very focused, intense domestic piece that was in stark juxtaposition with *Diamond Sea*, which was really open and atmospheric.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And these were shown in 1997, at 303. Were there any reviews or responses?

DOUG AITKEN: It was interesting. There was more feedback than I had ever got before, because before, I was showing in storage rooms and squats.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: It's basically your first show; it's your first show in a commercial gallery.

DOUG AITKEN: That was my second. I think I did one, one year before, at 303.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And what was in the first one?

DOUG AITKEN: The first one was a piece called *Autumn*, and *American International*. These works were these very strange existential pieces that were looking at reclaiming areas of the media, or subverting them with personal narratives.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Does that mean you were using existing footage?

DOUG AITKEN: It was partially existing footage and partially footage that I shot. It was a show that I think was very out of sync with the time. [Laughs.]

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: But how so?



DOUG AITKEN: The idea of kind of working with systems of communication, or ideas of media, was very out of vogue at the time I did that.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Okay.

DOUG AITKEN: I think the second show, with *Diamond Sea* and *Cathouse*, struck a chord much more. For me, also, I think that show was much more the direction I wanted to be in, closer to the core.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And so what kind of response? What do you remember from your critical response, reviews, or coverage of any kind?

DOUG AITKEN: I think people connected; a lot of people came back repeatedly, and that was interesting.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And did you get a review?

DOUG AITKEN: There were good reviews.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: What did they say?

DOUG AITKEN: I don't remember, honestly.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Did you sell anything?

DOUG AITKEN: I think, over time, some editions of *Diamond Sea*. Eventually, all of them. That was a surprise for me, because I felt like there is no way that anyone could collect this work; who would collect it?

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, that's what I was going to ask you, is—now you're making art that is virtually—I mean, you weren't thinking about the fact that you have to make something to sell it. Did that cross your mind that you might have to make something to sell it to make a living?

DOUG AITKEN: No, no, because I just assumed that I would always have to find these alternate ways to survive.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And what were the auxiliary ways you survived at that point?

DOUG AITKEN: Doing photography and illustrations a little bit like that, and then everything would feed back into the art, everything.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Did you find any interrelationship between the work you were doing—and when you say "photography," was it photography for magazines?

DOUG AITKEN: It was editorial, magazines sometimes.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Did you find any reciprocity between the work you were doing to make money, in illustration or photography, and the work that you were making as art? I mean, a lot of artists who, their day job—I just happened to be thinking about Richard Prince, how his day job ends up being the art. Did that ever happen for you?

DOUG AITKEN: Whatever you do, especially if it's something unfamiliar, you're always gaining from that.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: You're taking it in.

DOUG AITKEN: You're seeing how the process works; you're seeing how unfamiliar systems happen.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And so you're doing the editorial work. Now, at one point, don't you also do—this is a memory; I don't even have it written down. Did you make music videos, or work somehow in music video; is that correct?

DOUG AITKEN: I did just a little bit of it.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Can you tell me about that, because it's—just tell me about that experience.

DOUG AITKEN: The first thing I worked on—I came out to Los Angeles, and someone else was directing a video, and they said, "We are on deadline and we really need some experimental footage. Can you just go out and shoot this?" It was an English director, so he gave me this 16mm Bolex that he had and a couple hundred feet of film, and he said, "Just go out to the desert and shoot something really experimental for us."

I said, "Sure," and of course, I immediately went to the library to find a book on how to work a Bolex, and read it that night and [laughs] went out the next morning, and I shot a lot of footage, I mean a lot of footage.

I came back, and we had the film transfer the following week, and I was in there, and it was the director, Peter [Care], and this incredible cinematographer, who has passed away, Harris Savides. So Peter and Harris are sitting there, and my footage finally comes on at the end of the night, and they're saying, "Wow, this is really insane. How did you do this?" And I look at it and I realize that, accidentally, I had double-, triple-, and quadruple-exposed the same rolls of film. I was so interested in shooting that I just kept exposing the same rolls without noticing.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: That's fantastic.

DOUG AITKEN: So it was about as experimental as you could get, almost purely by accident. So I had a series of encounters like that, with people like Spike Jonze or Mike Mills, who were making music videos. I did just a few of them, and then I didn't do any more, but just enough to learn much more about the filming process.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, also, you have such—in my experiences talking to you over the years, you just know so much about contemporary music, rock-and-roll music, popular music. So it would seem like it was actually a very good fit for you, with your sonic interests and your visual interests. Ultimately, why didn't you continue doing it?

DOUG AITKEN: It wasn't really that interesting for that long, so I really didn't do very much of it, but it was exciting to learn the process [. . .]. For this very short period of time, there was a possibility to do a lot of very experimental things very quickly in that medium; later, it became more conservative.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DOUG AITKEN: The people I was working with, like—Spike Jonze was a really good friend. We would help each other on weekends, doing shoots. There were a few people who were interesting, and you could tell they had a vision. But I think, for myself, very quickly, after doing a little bit of that, I

learned what I wanted to learn and moved on.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And you didn't think at that point, as many people did in MTV, this is a springboard to making films, regular films?

DOUG AITKEN: I've never really had any interest in making a movie. I love cinema, but for myself, I feel like it's a backwards move. It's an established format. I have this short time to create what I really want to make and find new ways to engage, to liberate and empower the viewer. That's what I want to see happen, not to plug into an existing template.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And along those lines, it doesn't sound like you had any shortage of ideas. How do you keep track of your ideas at that point, or even now? Did you keep notebooks?

DOUG AITKEN: I would keep a lot of notebooks, and for a while, I would make notebooks and journals for every large project, and oftentimes I would draw out everything, quick, fast, loose ideas.

One of the things that you find, also, is the value of failure, the idea that you can continuously move forward, and you can accept the fact that there might be a project that you're working on that's not right, or maybe it's so far from being right that it actually is beneficial to keep working on it and to actually break it apart and break it down completely, and to dedicate more and more time to it. And at a certain point it's okay to walk away from it. But inevitably, some time later, something out of that failed experience will illuminate something else. So, process-wise, I'm not attracted to refinement necessarily; I'm attracted to the raw process, in all of its sublime beauty, dirge, and grit.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And that really comes across later in works that we're going to talk about in the future. I would think, most specifically, in *Station to Station*. I thought, if you ever thought that Doug Aitken was not interested in process, here's your correction. It's kind of like, talk about process; I mean, that was such an amazing idea, in terms of something being process-oriented and not having to hold onto whether it's good, bad, you know; it's process incarnate.

DOUG AITKEN: There was kind of almost an unwritten manifesto for *Station to Station*, which was, We don't want to have any existing artwork; we don't want to have any music that we've heard before. We don't want you to do the same thing you've done. If you want to be part of this, take it and eat it and just go with it.

And really, the principles for that project were, if you remove the sense of place so there's no longer the security of an artist from New York or Los Angeles, or a musician that lives in San Francisco, if you remove place and you remove the separations between mediums, what happens?

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And that was—let me think, how long ago was that? That was six—so it was like 2013-ish, and I'll check that. I thought it was—I really want to talk about that in depth, but I found that to be, like, completely crazy.

DOUG AITKEN: [Laughs.]

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, in a way, because at that point—I mean, you really have such an established life as an artist, and there are a lot of artists who wouldn't choose to move, I would almost say, sideways, from a focus of exhibitions and sales and critical acclaim to something, sort of, so risky.

If you can say something about it now, while we're thinking about it. Did you think at the moment—

did you ever ask yourself, did you ever say to yourself, This is crazy? Or more importantly, did your dealers ever say to you, This is crazy?

DOUG AITKEN: [Laughs.] I think *Station to Station*, at the beginning, was just a project that no one around me thought could really happen. It was one of those *Fitzcarraldo* situations where you say, We are going to will this into existence. And then you look around and everyone is looking at you like you're insane.

To talk about *Station to Station* is also to talk about timelines, not just rail lines. I think that it's interesting how every project or every artwork kind of has its own timeline, and you have to kind of open yourself up to that. With a project like the *Sonic Pavilion* in Brazil, that took us five years to make; with *Station to Station*—

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And briefly, *Sonic Pavilion* is the hole. Describe it for me.

DOUG AITKEN: *Sonic Pavilion* is a piece we made in the forest in Brazil, and it's on a jungle hillside. It's a sculpture. At the center of it is a hole that goes 700 feet into the earth.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And it's in the collection of the collector—

DOUG AITKEN: Inhotim [Institute], and Bernardo Paz.

So a piece like *Sonic Pavilion* takes probably five years. *Station to Station* is three-plus years to create. There's pieces that are really long-term works, and there's some going on now that I don't expect to have finished until maybe '21.

And then there's other artworks that burn hot and quick. They might be performative pieces or sculptures. For example, if I hadn't made the mirrored sculptures, I couldn't have made the installation *Mirage*. It was making a series of these different reflective, mirrored wall sculptures that allowed me to understand and expand that idea into an entirely mirrored suburban house on the mountainside above the desert.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: We're off chronology anyway. I just thought as long as we were talking about it, I wanted to kind of go there for a minute, because really, at this point, okay, you've had your recognition for your second show at 303; you have a dealer, a prestigious dealer, Lisa Spellman; and you've done some of these music videos. You've decided not to pursue that. Did you not think at some point, This is my moment to—it doesn't sound like finances came into your mind too much, even in New York in the '90s.

DOUG AITKEN: I always felt like if there is something you believe in enough, an idea, you can will it into existence; you can find a way. It might not happen tomorrow, but you can somehow find a way to make that happen. It's believing in something so much that it has to come to life; it's not an option.

I think I also have always seen art as a necessity. You make it because it has to be made. Creating is like oxygen; it's part of what you breathe in and breathe out to stay alive. So I think there is no real separation between art and life.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And did you have that perspective in the middle of the '90s?

DOUG AITKEN: Oh, yeah.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I mean, did you just feel that this was going to happen, no matter what?

DOUG AITKEN: I felt that each piece, one at a time, had happened. I certainly remember in the Front Street studio, sitting there making these works no one has seen, and I remember asking myself, How long can this go on? And making a pact to myself, I said, you know, This is going to go on forever; it's not going to stop. And it doesn't matter if no one sees this; you have to do this. This is just the way it is.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Where does that idealism come from? Did that come from your parents? Is that something that's inside of you? Were you just drinking too much?

[They laugh.]

DOUG AITKEN: Drinking too much kombucha? I think it comes back to ideas of mortality, of the separation of, What is our value as people, as individuals, and as a society, beyond survival? If we don't take risks and put something out there and try to understand what's on the frontier, then we're not contributing. And if it's just survival, then are we just animals? So we need to constantly be challenging ourselves to be aware of everything that's around us.

One of the most profound things that any kind of act of creation can give you is to engage you in the present, to suddenly bring you into the present. Those moments are so fleeting and rare, but when you do find them, there's something about that—it is the rarest drug; it's a private nirvana. It's something that is inexplicable.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: That's a fantastic way of describing it, and I wondered if maybe even some of that came from your travels with your family and being exposed to cultures that weren't sort of Western cultures.

DOUG AITKEN: Yeah.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Being exposed to ideas, the kind of art-making that comes from non-Western culture, native tribal art, or Native American art, or whatever.

DOUG AITKEN: If I was to trace it incredibly far back, I could remember this one time—it was summer, and my dad picks me up from school. I was really young, and we would go mountain climbing, every summer, up in the Sierras. We're driving in this little shitty orange Fiat that he has, somewhere up in the Sierras, speeding around hairpin turns. For me, I was just so grateful to be with my father and having this adventure we're about to embark on.

He pulls out this cassette tape, and he puts it in and music comes on, and the music was this beautiful pastoral, landscape music. It was the Danish composer Carl Nielsen, *Symphony No. 5*. I'm listening, and he says, "Douglas, listen to this for five minutes, and then I'm going to turn this off." He turns it off and he says, "What do you see in your mind?" So I start describing things, like, an incredibly visual experience. There's an eclipse, and mountains that are made of blue and green velvet, and there's waterfalls going through them. So instead of him saying, "Oh, that's so great you're seeing all this," he says, "Okay, great," and then he quickly puts on a different tape. The car is still speeding through the mountains.

The second tape is this fast, staccato piano music. It's just going up and down the scales. You can only think of the music, you know? Five minutes later he turns it off and he says, "Okay, now what do you see?" And I was struggling to come up with an image to assert to this music, and I couldn't.

[Audio break.]

There was nothing I could see, nothing in my mind, no visual whatsoever. I thought for a second, I'm really disappointed in myself. I can't come up with a visual equivalent to what I heard. Still driving, he turned to me and said, "This is the difference between good art and great art." And I said, "What are you talking about?" He said, "Good art makes you see things; it makes you nostalgic. It makes you see something of the past, or maybe your imagination, but great art, you're only listening to it. You're only in the moment." The second piece was Glenn Gould playing Bach.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Wow, that's fantastic; what a fantastic father. That's a fantastic story. It's an early—you know, if you can access that power point at a young age, it's so important.

DOUG AITKEN: It was interesting. I didn't really understand it then, but then I started to think about it over time. I would always reflect, on New Year's Eve, what had happened in the previous 12 months, and I've been kind doing this forever. I do it in a critical way. I say, Of this last 12 months, what matters? What have you seen, heard; who have you spoken to; what experiences really have gravity; has this time been worthwhile? Very few things surface, but they're often a conversation with someone, or something that's been said, or a fleeting experience. You take that with you; you know, those become the DNA for you to move forward. It's not the rest of the noise.

Our studio—in the last few years, we've been working with neurologists to study the source of creativity, at UCLA. We've been doing a number of think tanks. I said to Dr. Stern, one of the neurologists, "Describe memory for me." And he said, "Imagine next to your bed you have a stack of books, and the book on top is the book of memories of things that you really remember: the car accident, the birth, the moment in love, standing on the cliff, all these un-erasable moments. But then at the very bottom of the stack are the moments that you can't remember. Driving on the freeway, making a sandwich, all of these banal and ordinary things. A lot of mediocrity. So that's the way you see life, because we don't record everything."

So I thought about this and what really creates the book on the top is the idea of disruption, and that's what really needs to happen in some form or another for art to be successful. "Disruption" isn't a word that needs to be aggressive or violent. It can be harmonious; it can be sublime; but it needs to somehow have the power to disengage you from the every day.

Going back to the idea of timecode, if you could imagine that your whole life has numbers below the screen—whatever age you are, whatever today's date is, whatever hour it is—and these numbers are just continuously running, forever, until you pass away. You actually need to break the timecode to have something of substance. And that's one of the values of art and culture; it's one of the few tools we have to break that.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I love that description, and of course, it's fantastic; it's a great description of contemporary art in particular, because there's so much contemporary art, and it is hard, anymore, to see something that just makes you think, Whoa, what is this?

*Mirage* did that. *Mirage* makes you do that. You've succeeded many times, but, most recently, you certainly did with *Mirage*, which is the house, for the record, the house in Palm Springs that's entirely built of mirrors.

DOUG AITKEN: It's a strange encounter, seeing *Mirage*. When I go out there to visit it, it still feels very foreign to me, and I'm not quite sure where it came from. [. . . –DA] It came from some other person almost.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, the weirdest thing about *Mirage* is that you got it built. I think that everyone is, like, Well, this is an amazing experience; I'm standing in a house that's entirely self-reflective, made of mirrors, built from scratch, in the middle of this housing development in Palm Springs. And just for the record, that's 2017.

I want to go into that more in depth, but just how did you just not give up getting that done? I mean, that must have taken forever. You must have been driven to really finish that piece.

DOUG AITKEN: It was a strange—because sometimes, works happen in cycles. For the last maybe two years I had had this idea for the *Underwater Pavilions*, and an idea for *Mirage*. While in the foreground was this exhibition at MOCA.

The MOCA survey show was interesting. At first I didn't want to do it at all. I told Philippe Vergne, "I don't want to do a survey. I only want to make new work," and that's what I've been doing for a long time, is diverting any possibility of showing existing works. Eventually, he convinced me to do it; he said, "Doug, we can do it together, and maybe you can see the show itself as a new work; maybe you can really curate the show so it's almost like it's one new artwork, even though it's separate, existing pieces." So I went down that road, and we started to really develop the exhibition [*Doug Aitken:*] *Electric Earth*.

As we were doing it, it actually made me increasingly restless and want to really make some of these new projects that I knew had to be made. So, secretly in the background, over the last several years, I was developing *Mirage* and the *Underwater Pavilions*. It appeared like the MOCA show was all we were doing, but any spare hour, I would be out in the desert, searching hillsides, looking for locations. Or I would be looking in the Pacific Ocean for marine sanctuaries. And my idea was to develop both of these simultaneously. I didn't know how or where they would be made. But I knew that I would find a way to make them if I just kept moving forward. Eventually, it took about a year, almost exactly 12 months, to make the *Underwater Pavilions*.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: What is the actual title of those again?

DOUG AITKEN: *Underwater Pavilions*.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Oh, I thought it was different. I'm sorry, I thought you had a different title. Okay, that was easy.

DOUG AITKEN: It's so didactic, you can't forget it. That piece was such an extreme leap from concept to fruition.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Because these are mirrored pavilions that hang under the ocean.

DOUG AITKEN: Yes, they're three 15- to 20-foot mirrored dodecahedrons. They're submerged under the Pacific Ocean, 10, 20, and 30 feet deep. They're open to the ocean. They're buoyant but tethered to the ocean floor. The viewer can swim through them, around them. Sea life can grow on them. Half of them are mirrored, and half is a surface that allows sea life to grow and to become artificial living reefs.

So with that project, figuring out how to start was so challenging. Who do you ask permission to use the ocean? How do you call up the Coastal Commission and talk about a floating artwork? Do you talk to the island of Catalina? The starting point was so unbelievably abstract. So we embarked on that, and at the same time, we were embarking on *Mirage*, saying, How do we build a house of

mirrors?

Both of these two very new projects were happening behind the smokescreen of the *Electric Earth* MOCA show.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Just for a moment, why did you find it necessary to have these be secret projects while you were working on the MOCA show? Did you feel like someone was going to say, No, no, no, you don't have time?

DOUG AITKEN: I wasn't sure if we could really make them or get support. And there was a point where some of my galleries said, No, don't do that. People at the museum said, Don't do that; you shouldn't do this; just focus on the museum. And I just couldn't agree with that. And the more I thought about it, every metropolis like Los Angeles has shows within the museum. Of course they do. That's why they're cultural meccas, but why don't we use this moment in time to short-circuit that system and have something, simultaneously, that's absolutely outside of the museum? If we look at the brief history of work outside the museum system, we have street art; we have land art—all the derivatives of that. But I was kind of coming at it from a different direction.

I would wake up in my house, the one we're in right now, and walk down the street. And there's this ratty Venice beach, and all of a sudden the Pacific Ocean starts, and moves towards infinity. You're kind of looking into an endless frontier. And I started thinking about that idea, and I started thinking that over 70 percent of the earth is underwater, and we know so little about it. We're more interested in space than we are in the oceans. This ocean space could be incredible. It could be activated in a way that we could never imagine, and what happens if an artwork is under the ocean and starts living, and becomes a life-form and colonized by sea creatures? What happens if you have to literally take your clothes off, step under the ocean, float weightless, and float through an artwork? That's something that you can't achieve in virtual reality; you can't achieve in a digital world; yet so much of the push is moving in the digital direction.

So I saw these pieces, *Mirage* and *Underwater Pavilions*, as this return to the real. We're coming out of the accelerating tunnel of technology and new ideologies, and it's coming back into the physical world.

We worked on the *Underwater Pavilions* about a year before they opened. We started collaborating with a marine conservation group called Parley for the Oceans. Working with them was amazing. All of a sudden you have a discourse which is completely outside of art, outside of anything that you were familiar with, for that matter. You have marine biologists, oceanographers, people who are designing deep-ocean submarines walking into an art studio, trying to help us make a sculpture that won't collapse and compress under the pressure of the ocean.

I realized how conservative art has become, that we make things that are intended to never change after they leave the artist's studio. There's an entire art industry built around climate control, warehousing, storage, archiving these precious things, when, in fact, what if art isn't precious at all? What if it's living, and what if it keeps living? You can go back to this artwork in a month or in five years, perhaps, and it's changed completely, but you've changed also. I think about that idea with some of the newer works.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And these works, did you—refresh my memory. Do you scuba dive or snorkel? I mean, did you have a familiarity with underwater life?

DOUG AITKEN: I had snorkeled. I had a sea urchin diving boat that I'd take out to the uninhabited



islands off the coast.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Would you be diving for sea urchins?

DOUG AITKEN: No. I got this boat just to explore. We keep it off Oxnard, and we go out to the Channel Islands. This was for about 10 years. So I was intimate with the ocean that way. I was intimate with the reefs, the swells, and the seasons, but I wasn't a diver. Our whole studio learned to dive at once, you know, for this project.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Oh, they did?

DOUG AITKEN: It was amazing, when you're under the ocean, next to your studio manager, and you're doing survival drills and handing off the oxygen.

[They laugh.]

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: How many people are in your studio?

DOUG AITKEN: It kind of varies, maybe six to eight.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So they all learned how to scuba dive, and then you finished these sculptures and took them down there and tethered them. But then they went someplace else, right?

DOUG AITKEN: Right now we're planning the second chapter of the project. The installation in Catalina was really kind of the prototype, the first step to really figure how could it work.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: If I remember correctly, they were up from, like, November to March, like five months, these mirrored pavilions under the ocean. And at one point you found something was colonizing your—tell me for the record about the colonization.

DOUG AITKEN: It was interesting. We worked closely with a marine biologist, Bill Bushing, on Catalina Island, and he was really part of the project from the beginning. He called me up very excited one day, and he said, "I have to talk to you about something. It's incredibly urgent." I said, "What is it?" He says, "There's a form of sea life that we haven't seen since the summer of 1970, and they're living on your sculptures." He says, "It's a form of nudibranch." Nudibranch is kind of like a mussel without a shell. They come in these very psychedelic and fluorescent colors.

He said, "It appears that they've been attracted by the mirrors, and they're living in the wedges of the mirrors and they're all over the sculptures, and we haven't seen this in decades. This, for us, for the ocean community, we're thrilled to actually know they're still alive and existing, and perhaps they have just been hiding under rocks or in cavernous areas all this time."

It's moments like that that are so surreal.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: That's great.

DOUG AITKEN: It's beautiful when you see an artwork enlist a life-form that hasn't been seen in a while.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: No, that's fantastic. And so you took them out, and where are they living now, the sculptures?

DOUG AITKEN: Right now we're planning on doing a permanent installation in the Indian Ocean.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: A permanent installation.

DOUG AITKEN: In March, I went out to the southern Maldives, to the southernmost section of the atolls in the Indian Ocean. We were working with a local family who has several uninhabited islands and is from that region.

We location-scouted down there, and we found this island that appears and disappears, depending on the tide. Obviously, on the low tide it's there; it's a small sand island surrounded by a coral reef, and then right off the reef it drops into an underwater cliff. When we were all looking around by boat, I saw this faint island in the distance. I asked them about it, and they said, "That's the disappearing island."

We were originally intending to look at islands that had vegetation, that were green but uninhabited. And we boated out and we started looking at it, and we could see how it would appear and disappear, and there was something I kind of loved about that. I loved this idea that you could have something on this earth that vanishes and then reappears.

So what we're planning on doing is actually building a permanent sculptural pavilion on this sand atoll, and the bottom part of the structure will, within six months, will become a living reef. And then you walk up this staircase from the ocean, and you enter this cast structure; the light and atmosphere moves through it. Inside this pavilion there's a second staircase, kind of a hidden staircase; as you walk down that, it takes you below the waterline, off an underwater cliff. And that's where the three pavilions will be situated. They'll be floating there.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Amazing.

DOUG AITKEN: It will really become living, permanent—I guess you can't say the word "land art." I guess it would be "ocean art."

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: That's fantastic. It's like an amazing ending to that, and I'm really glad we did the little detour out of the chronology to talk about it while we were thinking about it, because now we have to go back to 1996, and after *Diamond Sea*, and figure out how you got from *Diamond Sea* to *Electric Earth*. And probably that will be where we start wrapping up.

How did you do that? Because *Electric Earth* is really, in my opinion, the piece that just seems to generate the most sort of widespread—what seems to be the overnight-success moment for a young artist.

DOUG AITKEN: Yeah. I had made maybe one or two installations between *Diamond Sea* and *Electric Earth*.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Okay.

DOUG AITKEN: One of those was *Eraser*. For *Eraser*, I went to a small island in the Caribbean called Montserrat, and we went there five days after a volcano had erupted and had annihilated about half the island. We arrived at a neighboring island and found a black-market boat to take us over. The north part of Montserrat was still intact jungle, and we camped out there, myself and a few friends.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Can you tell me who you were with?

DOUG AITKEN: I was with Eric Matthews and David Levine and Wing Ko.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: David Levine and?

DOUG AITKEN: A guy named Wing. Like a bird wing.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Are they artists?

DOUG AITKEN: They were friends that helped out.

I wanted to make a work that was a journey from representation to minimalism, from imagery to erasure and nothing. The idea was that we would film from the northern part of this island, which was still lush and green, and as you started to go south—this volcano was a pyroclastic volcano, which means it's super-heated ash. And when it explodes, it moves extremely fast and just kind of covers everything, in a flash.

So as you go further south, you start to come into a modern city, with ATM machines and hotels, and everything you see is silver metallic, just monochrome ash. Everything is shimmering in this strange Caribbean light, and there's no humans. Everything is deserted. You walk down the main street and you hear a loud sound to your right, and a bull runs out of a grocery store, or some horses are just running feral. You keep going and the further you go, you eventually see the Soufrière volcano. The volcano is, at this point, silver ash, and there's a cloud that hangs over the top of it that does not leave, and it's just a sulfur-gray, silver cloud. *Eraser* was really a journey from this lush green representation through the civilization that had been erased, up into this silver cloud area under the volcano, where it's almost the temperature of the blood system.

So with that work, *Eraser*, I found myself pushing the architecture further than *Diamond Sea*, and looking at creating architecture as multiple screens and film sequences. I showed that piece in Cologne, at the Museum Ludwig.

I was at the opening, and this older man with a beard came up to me, and he said, "Doug, I really want to talk to you. My name is Harald Szeemann; maybe you've heard of me," and I said, "I haven't." And then he said, "I'd love to invite you to be part of the Venice Biennale. You know what that is, right?" I said, "I've heard of it." So Harald had seen *Eraser* and really wanted to take that leap of faith to ask me to create something new. So we became friends, and I visited him in Venice multiple times. He really went very deep in my work.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Is this, like, about 1996?

DOUG AITKEN: No, this was '98, probably, because I think '99 was the Biennale. I was kind of drawn to him, and I trusted him. I was fascinated by the rapport. So I said to myself, going back to that interview with Nauman, which I probably misread anyways, which said you give yourself 10 days for an idea.

So I decided I would lock myself in the studio. I'd get provisions, jugs of water and some food, and I would just go in there, as long as it takes, for 10 days. And every single day I would not stop until I had three new original ideas, and those ideas had to be completely written out. Three to five pages, or drawn out.

So I tried this experiment, and I went in and I started coming up with ideas, and then the next day,

you had to go forward and keep moving. You had to always come up with something new. So then you'd have six, and then nine ideas, and then you kind of look back and say, There's a little something there, maybe a fraction of an idea there that I could exploit. And I just kept going like this, over and over and over, for days. Finally, I got to the end of it, and I stopped and I kind of looked at everything that I came up with; the 30 ideas were flushed out. A lot of them were disposable; some of them were interesting but not feasible; and I saw a couple seeds in there that I could refine.

So I reached out to Harald and I told him what I had done, and I said, "I'm not quite ready yet to share this with you, but I'm going to go away for a couple weeks, and then I'll get back to you." I thought it was time for a change of scenery, so I got a cheap ticket to Central America and a tent, and I went down to Costa Rica. And I just went through these ideas, and I kept writing and writing.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: By yourself?

DOUG AITKEN: Yes, by myself. I remember it was very humid there, so all you could do is sit and write and sweat. You didn't want to move. Eventually, I drafted two separate ideas out of that, and one was *Electric Earth*, and one was a piece called *Moving*. And I faxed it from a hotel in Costa Rica to Harald, these handwritten pages. And it was maybe six or seven pages—it was very clear, the exact piece. This is how it's going to work; this is how it's going to go; the character goes from here to here to there.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And, for the recording, describe how you saw that piece existing.

DOUG AITKEN: I saw that the piece had to go beyond film and art as I knew it. I saw the work had to engage the viewer in an immersive way.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: It's a big piece.

DOUG AITKEN: Quite large. I remember a short time after that, I flew to Venice, and I met my friend Francesco Bonami, the curator, there. I was talking to Francesco and I said, "I know you're very familiar with the Biennale here; what's your advice?" And Francesco confirmed the suspicion that I already had. My idea was that I wanted to make a work that isn't even part of the other works, just a complete secession from the show. And Francesco mirrored that. He said the only way you can do this in the Arsenale is just to make your own space; just ignore the rest of it. And so that was kind of in keeping with the idea of *Electric Earth*.

I wanted something that you walk into, and you lose time, and suddenly you're in this new, disorienting world. The narrative of the piece is really—it's a person that wakes up in a world where there's no humans left, and the world itself is kind of moving on its own and it's automated. But philosophically, I think the bigger question that the piece was looking to ask was really—I was interested in the gray area, that gray area that is, how do we keep up with the acceleration of life?

Also, the flip side of that is, at times we're in absolute harmony and synchronicity with everything around us. So when you think about it, and going back to the timecode, almost, there are these moments where the timecode lines up perfectly with you and everything you're doing and the way you perceive. And then there's other moments where it's offset, and you're desperately left behind, and the acceleration just moves past you. It was that gray area, really, that the piece was exploring.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I get it. I think that's fascinating. The piece—you cast a black guy to portray this last human on earth. How did that decision come about?

DOUG AITKEN: I didn't really think about race at all.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: You didn't think about casting a black man instead of a white or Asian?

DOUG AITKEN: No, not at all. I knew this one guy who could dance in a certain way, and that form of dancing was very obsolete in the late '90s.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: What was it—how would you—

DOUG AITKEN: To do pop-locking, and break dancing.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Yeah?

DOUG AITKEN: That was really an early-'80s movement from the East Coast, primarily. So I knew this guy Jiggy, and I thought he'd be perfect, because he could really transcend; his body could do the things that I needed it to do. To me, it was never an issue of a man, or woman, or someone of this race or gender. I needed to fulfill what had to happen in the piece, and Ali could do it, and incredibly well.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: What's his name again?

DOUG AITKEN: His name was Ali Johnson, or Jiggy.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: That piece is often interpreted as an urban moment. The guy is black; he's doing this dance. It's considered some sort of urban commentary. That's not the case, right?

DOUG AITKEN: When the piece came out, I never heard that. At the time the piece was out, people never really spoke about race or anything like that in relation to it. I hear that a little bit more now. Maybe that's more of a pressing subject. But it was also interesting, because the curator Okwui [Enwezor] said to me, one time, "You know, Doug, *Electric Earth* is really one of the only pieces I've seen that's beyond race. It's just about humans."

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Nice.

DOUG AITKEN: Yeah, and I think with *Electric Earth*, when I made it, it really seemed to come together in this way that was very subconscious for me. I could sense the exact timing of it, the rhythm, or when certain scenes should change, how the architecture should move. I think it was one of those pieces that was a by-product of the incredible amount of energy in conceiving it, that when we were actually filming it, it was incredibly intuitive.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: That's amazing, because it's so complex. So this piece appeared in the Venice Biennale, and what was the response?

DOUG AITKEN: When it opened, we had been installing for weeks, but the last two or three days, we had been working without sleep, just all-nighters, myself, some friends, a local crew. And that last night before it was supposed to open for the press, we worked all night, and gradually, one by one, different people, including myself, just collapsed on the floor and started sleeping.

I remember I was just completely filthy and lying on the floor, sleeping, passed out, and I see these two pairs of shoes in front of me. I can just sense there was someone close by, so my eyes opened, and I look, and there was Jerry Saltz and Roberta Smith. Jerry is looking down on me, saying, "Doug, what are you doing there?" I was just completely out of it, and he said, "Well, I guess we're not

supposed to be here yet. We tried to sneak in just before the press preview." It was just one of those kind of strange moments.

A lot of these works, I work on them so internally that you don't really know what to expect when they're finally out there in the public. I was, of course, very surprised that it won the award in Venice that year. That was interesting. Yeah.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Beyond interesting, I would think.

DOUG AITKEN: It was surprising, but I also didn't really care that much, because I was already thinking of the next projects I wanted to do.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Were you protecting yourself from the possibility of disappointment?

DOUG AITKEN: I never had any expectations. [They laugh.] I mean, I just wanted to make that work, you know?

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: It's interesting, because what you're saying actually echoes what you went through when you were finishing *Mirage*. You were doing the same thing. You were basically staying up all night, working on finishing this mirrored house, *Mirage*. And now decades have passed since *Electric Earth*, and you have lots of helpers and so forth, but you still will drive yourself to the point where you'll work that hard?

DOUG AITKEN: Yeah, it seems that way every time.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Is that right, every time, or a lot of the times?

DOUG AITKEN: It seems like most of the time, but I think a lot of that also is the idea that you might see things that other people won't see, and you might see ways for an artwork to change to get to the point that it needs to be.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: How can you tell? How do you know when it's exactly the way you want it to be?

DOUG AITKEN: I think, in a way, the artwork, at a certain point, makes itself, and that happens at different times. It's interesting, because it's not so much that you see the completion. It's that it simply doesn't need any more changes. It's more of a reductive process than an additive process, and the work is suddenly done and it doesn't need you. At times, the process of making an artwork can just take over and it just tells you what it needs incessantly.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: This is the one at the Hirshhorn?

DOUG AITKEN: Yes, at the Hirshhorn.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: The video, a projection that goes around the exterior of the Hirshhorn Museum.

DOUG AITKEN: Yes. *SONG 1*, it was—can I tell you a little bit about the process?

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Yes. Yeah.

DOUG AITKEN: So with that project, I had been writing out rough ideas for a year, and I knew that I

wanted to do something on the exterior of this building. All of a sudden it's deadline time; I had two weeks to figure it out. It was during the holidays and everyone had left the studio, and I was able to just go in there, day after day after day, and really work on the concept for this piece that was absolutely unresolved. We were supposed to start filming in a few weeks.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Oh, my God.

DOUG AITKEN: And nothing is written. There's no idea, except for a hundred different little sketches. So I found myself in the studio and no one around, so I could play the music I wanted to play. I would find a song and I would just put it on repeat, and the volume would be very loud, and it would just be repeating over and over, day after day. And because it was digital, I could look at how many times these songs would cycle and repeat. I think the most was like 350 times or 400 times in a row, this one song. It was *Candidate* by David Bowie, from the *Diamond Dogs* album from 1974.

I started to think about this idea of repetition. Why am I looking at this huge field of ideas and I'm trying to fuse them together, when perhaps the greatest contribution of the 20th century is a single pop song, the architecture of the song, the song that you can't get rid of. A song is absolutely democratic; it's in the air. I started thinking, Okay, what if I just throw away every idea here, and I just take the idea of one single song.

I had always loved that song, the Flamingos' version of *I Only Have Eyes for You*. The song itself is one of the most covered songs in history. Originally, it was written for a Busby Berkeley sequence in a movie called *Dames*, in the '20s. So I thought, Why don't we take this song, the architecture of the song—it's so old and it's been around so long and covered so many ways that nobody owns it; no generation owns it. Let's take this simple thing and take an additive process, and we'll repeat it and repeat it and repeat it, just like this music that's surrounding me in the studio. And every time you hear it, you hear it differently, because your perception is different, your mood is different, the entry point is different. So that really became the idea for that work, in this very simple way, but then we wound up re-recording about 45 to 50 different versions ourselves, and with different musicians, just for that piece, and then that became something that just played and played, always different, every time a variation.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Oh, I don't think I knew that it was a different variation over and over and over again, because I didn't spend 45 variations in it. That's something I somehow missed.

DOUG AITKEN: And every time it goes from, say, one person standing at a bus stop, and they speak the lyrics. And then a car drives by at nighttime, and you're inside the car. That will be a person singing a capella, and then the version in the car is maybe made digitally, and then that goes to a slide guitar version, and then it goes to a gospel choir, et cetera.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Yeah, but I didn't know there were 45 or 50 of them. It's so fascinating. It's a very romantic song, right?

DOUG AITKEN: I think it's very melancholic.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And melancholic, both. How did you choose the imagery that takes place with it?

DOUG AITKEN: I thought about the idea of taking this very simple song, with this universalism, and using it as a key to a door, due to the familiarity of it. It's something that—anyone can walk in and suddenly they're willing to open that door, because there's a seemingly familiar aspect, and then

using that as a way to really explore a modern city, a condition.

*SONG 1* goes from person to person to person infinitely. In thinking about narrative structure, I could not help to think of *Nashville* by Robert Altman, for example, and how in *Nashville* there are 12 key players. They're all given equal importance. And the film is able to go from person to person to person in this seemingly random way, but eventually it becomes one collective community, one landscape, and you have an equal degree of intimacy with everyone. So with *SONG 1*, I was interested in using the song as a tool of mapping.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And in this one, you used people who are fairly—I would say very well known. I mean, you've got Tilda Swinton, and old—what's his name?

DOUG AITKEN: John Doe.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And John Doe, who is not as well known as Tilda Swinton. How did you choose those people? You knew Tilda Swinton before, so how did that work for you?

DOUG AITKEN: I think that the vast majority of people in the piece, nobody has ever seen before. It was primarily street-cast. I think with Tilda, it just seemed like—

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Pause for a second. When you say "street-cast," do you bring people in and just choose them from a casting process? What does that mean, "street-cast"?

DOUG AITKEN: Street-casting really means finding people out there.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Does it mean you're walking around and finding them, or do you have a call, a casting call?

DOUG AITKEN: No casting calls, just literally finding people. The African-American woman who is singing a capella in it was working at a diner in downtown Los Angeles, and served me a French dip. I asked her if she sang, and she said, Yeah, and 12 hours later, we were filming. [Laughs.]

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: No kidding?

DOUG AITKEN: Yeah. There was one very strange encounter in casting *SONG 1*, where we had been filming for weeks, and I was really exhausted, and I just had this specific face in my mind. I knew I wanted this older woman, this Anglo woman with a certain look, a kind of rugged, fragile but strong look. I couldn't get her out of my head. And I was looking and asking people if anyone knew—finally, this one morning, I just got insomnia, and I woke up super early and I went out to a coffee shop. And there's a tree stump outside, and the perfect woman I had envisioned is sitting on the tree stump drinking a coffee.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Gosh.

DOUG AITKEN: And it was just the exact person in my mind, and I just walked up to her and I said, "Do you sing?" And she said, "In the shower, honey." And I said, "Will you sing for me?" She said, "What do you want me to sing?" I told her, and she said, "I know that song." Later that night, we picked her up and we filmed her in an empty parking lot of a drugstore.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Yeah. It's amazing.

DOUG AITKEN: It's interesting, when sometimes there's this kind of alchemy in making artworks,



and the alchemy has nothing to do with you. That's when the work goes so far beyond you, and it demands things, or it's authoring itself autonomously. Those moments are very strange. There's nothing to really talk about; you just can see what needs to happen. The work is telling you.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: But then back to Tilda Swinton. How did that relationship come about? She's a super well-known actress. How did you get Tilda Swinton to perform—be involved with you?

DOUG AITKEN: Well, when I was doing *Sleepwalkers* for the Museum of Modern Art in New York, that was a work that had six separate characters, and it covered all the sides and surfaces of MoMA.

We were working on that piece for about a year and a half, and the idea was that we would have all these multiple stories and characters that synchronized perfectly with each other, but at any given time, when you would walk up to the installation that was covering MoMA, you would only ever see two characters. So the combinations would continuously change, and the timing of the work was such that, for example, if one character is lying in bed and their eyes open and they get up, every character in the piece—the same view of the eyes opening and getting up at the same time, but then when they step outside, they're in completely different places.

So in my mind, I had abstracted the idea of a metropolis, a city like New York, into these six different siloes, these six different personalities. And for one of those personalities, I wanted someone who was an office worker, working overtime, who appeared isolated and lonely, the person that you would see running the office photocopy machine at 11 o'clock at night, and that's the only light you see in the high-rise, is the pulsing of the copy machine.

So I thought about this and thought, Who could I get to do this? I looked at all kinds of people, and I kind of thought of Tilda, because she's such a chameleon. I also thought it would be interesting to have someone who actually is recognizable inserted in this artwork, doing something that is not a role that they would do. She replied; we had a phone call; and the first thing she said is, "Why me? Why didn't you get an office worker to do this?" I said to her, "The reason I want you is because you can disappear," and then she said, "That was the answer I was looking for. I'd love to do this." For her—I think it was this very chameleonlike, uneventful role, which was very contrary to the things that she's often cast as.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And had you admired her work? Obviously, you admired her work in other movies.

DOUG AITKEN: I really thought *Orlando* was amazing, also the early Derek Jarman films.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: That's a good reference.

DOUG AITKEN: Yeah.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: That's a perfect reference for you.

So how did we get all the way to the Hirshhorn? We got all the way to that piece, *Mirage*, and I still want to go back to the '90s, whether you still recognized that as being—

DOUG AITKEN: Back to the '90s.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I want to close a little bit. I want to ask you about the Venice

Biennale, but before I even get to that, I want to get back to the little room in New York. What I didn't get to ask you earlier is that—you're in this tiny studio; you've gone to the bigger studio where you're sharing this space with Matthew Barney and Don—

DOUG AITKEN: Matt moved to the meat market then, and so I was with Don, Dark Don.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Dark Don, in this space. Matthew has moved out; you were there. Where were you actually living?

DOUG AITKEN: In New York, I lived in some different places. I lived in downtown. I lived in the West Village, on 11th Street. For a while I lived in a hallway, on a futon. [They laugh.] Can you believe you actually pay for that? So people would step over me when they had to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Oh, my God. So you're renting different apartments in New York City.

DOUG AITKEN: Yeah.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And it's in the '90s, like '91 to—you were there until '99, I guess, right?

DOUG AITKEN: Yeah, and then I started, by the late '90s, early 2000s, living nomadically. I was doing projects or doing an exhibition or filming something; I would just go and live in that place for a while. [. . . -DA]

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Now, just while you're in the 1990s, do you have any romantic relationships?

DOUG AITKEN: Yeah.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Who were you involved with, and for how long during that period?

DOUG AITKEN: I had a girlfriend named Betsy Smith, and we were together for quite a while.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Was she an artist?

DOUG AITKEN: She designed furniture.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Oh, okay, she was a furniture designer. What years were you together?

DOUG AITKEN: I have no idea.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Approximately.

DOUG AITKEN: Maybe, like, '97, to somewhere in the 2000s.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And then before that?

DOUG AITKEN: Not so much.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: No significant relationships.

DOUG AITKEN: Yeah.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Because what strikes me is the complete—dare I use the word "obsession"?—with getting your work done in these very intense work schedules, intense living situations.

DOUG AITKEN: Yes.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So did you not crave, or have a draw of some sort, to have a romantic partner to make you a cup of tea or something?

DOUG AITKEN: I think we all want love. There's several long-term relationships that I've had, that were great for a while.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Just—it's like you're making choices as a young man. First you make the choice not to have a conventional career, but to really focus on your art. Was it a choice to try to just be focused on your art, and not have a wife and children and all of that?

DOUG AITKEN: I never really desired that, and I still really don't. I've never been married; I don't have any children, that I know of. [Laughs.] You know, I always hope I don't pull into a gas station in Arizona, and there's someone that looks exactly like me but 20 years younger. [They laugh.]

I think it's not something that's really been on my mind.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: It's not something you crave.

DOUG AITKEN: Not at all.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And that was one of the questions that I had. So you were living in different places in New York City, and after you showed at 303 in '96, did you show there again between '96 and '99?

DOUG AITKEN: We did another show there.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So Lisa Spellman is now your primary dealer in New York?

DOUG AITKEN: Yeah, yeah.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And then who is your primary dealer now, for one thing?

DOUG AITKEN: 303 still.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Still. And then, at what point did you start showing with Regen Projects?

DOUG AITKEN: I really resisted showing in Los Angeles for a long time, and my rationale for that was that this is where I'm making work; this is where I live; and I just want to be absolutely private and be able to really just concentrate on the work here and not show it, not have a visibility here. Personal reasons, really. Eventually I started working with Regen Projects, around 2006.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Oh, okay.

DOUG AITKEN: At that point, it just seemed like it would be nice to start to share more with the people here, my friends, the community. For a long time, I showed mostly everywhere else but Los Angeles.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So you showed with Lisa Spellman in New York, and then who was your second? Then, after the Venice Biennale, you probably have a lot of offers.

DOUG AITKEN: The other two galleries I work with are Galerie Eva Presenhuber in Zurich—

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Eva Presenhuber.

DOUG AITKEN: —and Victoria Miro in London. It's been interesting, because the four entities I work with are all owned by independent women, that aren't a conglomerate, and don't have backing, and have really kind of been doing it on their own. It was not by design. It just panned out that way. It's very interesting; all four of these people are so different from each other, in every way, but it's a creative constellation that's been really beautiful for me to make work within, because I think they're all able to bring a very different perspective to the work, or feedback in different ways.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: No, I can definitely see that. And then after the Venice Biennale, does your financial life become easier?

DOUG AITKEN: Not too much. It became a little bit easier to make new projects. That was really what I was concerned with, but I don't think in a commercial sense. I don't think film installations are ever something that's that thoroughly collected. [Laughs.]

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, I think—didn't *Electric Earth*—isn't *Electric Earth* part of the MOCA collection?

DOUG AITKEN: Yeah, it's part of the MOCA, Whitney, SFMOMA, I think.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: How many are there?

DOUG AITKEN: There were four.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I would think that would be a big moment for you as an artist, that suddenly your work is entering the context of a museum.

DOUG AITKEN: That was really interesting. I have a very hard time looking back. I just don't find myself really looking at last year or a decade ago. For me, the nectar is always in the future. It's always something that you're moving towards. I think with a situation like *Electric Earth*, after it had done what it had done in Venice, I was inspired that there were new possibilities of doing new projects. The show at the Serpentine after that, or the show at Secession in Vienna, things like Louisiana Museum in Denmark. They just provided a way to keep moving and possibly go deeper or wider.

It's interesting how things lead to another. I think when we were making the *Underwater Pavilions*, I had no idea that I would ever be talking to people in the Indian Ocean about bringing this there permanently and creating a sculpture that could begin to grow into a life-form. I had no idea, with *Mirage*, I'd even finish the piece. With *Mirage*, I definitely had thought that the piece could actually be nomadic and travel to the different places we're talking about now, and what would it mean differently if it was in the Swiss Alps, or on an island in Greece; how would the meaning change?

An artwork, sometimes at its best, is a system. It's a kind of ecology, in a sense. Things come into it; things push out of it. The artwork starts to live and grow. And what happens when a work travels throughout the world? I think that, right now, that's one of the things I find myself considering very much, with projects like *Mirage*, the *Underwater Pavilions*, or *The Garden* that we just completed in Denmark. How does the meaning change if these works are somewhere else?

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Especially with your work. What strikes me in that is that you're always at odds with your own definition, your own description of the timecode, trying to get the timecode to the point where you have the harmonic, crystalline moment, along with keeping track of the forward motion of your life.

Is that hard for you? Is it hard for you to find that perfect moment where everything comes together on the timecode?

DOUG AITKEN: Oh, constantly searching for harmony and flow. That's probably the most difficult thing.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Your artwork is about finding the perfect moment, but how do you find the perfect moment?

DOUG AITKEN: On a personal level?

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: What do you do in your personal life? Is that what the sea urchin boat is for?

DOUG AITKEN: Finding things that are unfamiliar, and those things can be right in your vicinity, or they can be ideas, people, or places.

One of the things I started doing in Los Angeles two years ago is, I found myself on weekends being a bit complacent. When I recognized that, I thought, This is horrible; I must stop it. So I said, Okay, what if every weekend we find someplace we've never been, or we go back to an old place that's changed. This could be just a little hour, or this could be a weekend road trip.

So I started really investigating this area, my vicinity, and suddenly I started finding places I never knew about. Swimming holes up by Lake Arrowhead, a town called Taft that's an oil town west of Bakersfield. It was a way of taking the mundane, the daily, the things that might be the book on the bottom of the stack, and putting them on the top of the stack. And I think it can sometimes be the smallest things, but if you just look at ways to reinvent them—

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: —it rewards you.

DOUG AITKEN: Yes.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: It rewards you, to find that moment of difference.

DOUG AITKEN: Yeah. And it reminds you that you're alive.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And being from Los Angeles, now that you're back a long time, do you feel that Los Angeles feeds you in terms of its own ability to have—that's probably true everywhere, but there's so much diversity here.

DOUG AITKEN: One of the great things about Los Angeles is it's a city you'll never know. I think

that you move forward, and eventually, if you stop and look back, what's behind you, the shadow behind you, has already changed completely. So there's this kind of amazing mercurial quality that nothing is ever what it seems, and everything is in flux. I think that if you are insecure by that, or you want that idea of stasis and things that are fixed, this probably isn't a great place for you to be. But if you can come to terms with the idea of constant change, and you can embrace change, it's an incredibly inspiring and fascinating landscape.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So, you don't regret moving back, obviously.

DOUG AITKEN: No. [They laugh.]

[Side conversation.]

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Thank you for part one of this interview.

[END OF CARD ONE.]

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: This is Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, interviewing Doug Aitken at the artist's home in Venice, California, on July 24, 2017, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, card number two.

So Douglas, as your father would say, Douglas, here we are again, and where we left off, I said earlier, we aren't even at the—we're hardly even at the millennium. We went a little bit forward from that, but we really sort of ended at the triumph of *Electric Earth* and the Venice Biennale and all of that, but there are some things I would like to go backward on a little bit.

Well, let's start right with what we were talking about now, with music. You said you were just doing something with music, and we really didn't talk about how much music has been a part of your work, and also how knowledgeable you are about music, rock music, classical music, Terry Riley. What is the relationship? I mean, you're a visual artist. How does music come into it for you?

[Side conversation.]

[Audio break.]

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Take two. This is Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, interviewing Doug Aitken at the artist's home in Venice, California, on July 24, 2017, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, card number two.

Now, Doug, let's talk about the influence of music on your work.

[Side conversation.]

You've been interested in music, you said, for your whole career.

[Side conversation.]

You know about the word—you can use the word "EQ" [sound equalization], you know about microphones; you know about recording; but what really—always, what I've always noticed in your work, in our conversations, is that you know the exact name of songs by groups and what year they were recorded. So what is the role of music for you?

DOUG AITKEN: I've always had kind of an intense connection with music and sound. It's been

something that I've explored, a way of being transported while learning about culture and individuality. I think when you're making art, you're often listening to music, and you're hearing ideas. In certain music, I find solutions to concepts for visual work.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Can you give me an example?

DOUG AITKEN: Well, when I was working on *Sleepwalkers* at the Museum of Modern Art, about a year and a half before the project opened, I had a film structure that I was playing with, and the structure was six different characters, and they all kind of had moments of extreme synchronicity, where everything harmonized between them, and then moments where they would separate, and it would be seemingly random or chaotic, and they would come back together. I thought about this, and I thought about where have I seen that in visual art, and I had never seen that kind of choreography before, what I saw in my mind.

I found myself listening to different music while I was working on this, and started noticing the structure and the repetition in a piece like Terry Riley's *In C*. I saw that, actually, here was a kind of simultaneous experiment with the same idea, but in a completely different medium, music, and from a different era. There's always a flow that comes back and forth with the different mediums. Sound, for me, has always been something where I've never seen it as secondary in my artwork. I've always seen everything as an equal level.

[Side conversation.]

One extreme example of that is, when we filmed the piece *Eraser*, which was shot on this abandoned volcanic island, I thought, How would I treat the sound for this work we are making? What if we record everything there? We record all the real sounds—the sounds of the jungle, the the granular ash on the rooftops, the sound of the wind—and we bring these real sounds back. And we only use these real sounds to create our own musical and sonic composition. So in a situation like that, you have sonic relation to that location and the concept of the work.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, I think that that kind of use of ambient sound in moving-image art is not uncommon, but I think your sophistication with the choices of the songs and the music—it's like when we talked about the piece *SONG 1* at the Hirshhorn, where you had chosen the song and the way it was presented. Your use of popular music has always interested me, and I wondered if also the popular music, the language of popular music—when you use language in your work, it almost seems sometimes as though it's drawn from that kind of concision of a popular song.

DOUG AITKEN: That's very interesting. In some ways, my use of language has always been reductive. I've always found myself searching for the essence. If I can reduce something to a few sentences, that's better. In some ways, the use of language in my work—whether it's the sculptures or light boxes, that are often a single word, or these kind of voice-overs or mantras that are in installations, like, "I move so fast I become what's around me," "I absorb information, I eat it"—for me, they're like modern, electric mantras in a way. I think that with the sculptures, it's even more extreme.

I came from an environment that was just loaded with literature and books. And I had almost a subconscious reaction against that, which was to try to distill and distill and reduce, to a point where, What is the meaning of a single word? That's all you get. You get a word, or maybe you get a single passage. But then how can you expand that and leverage it through a visual juxtaposition? Then it opens up again, and it has the potential to be much more interpretive.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And this is—you're talking about your family background when you say you were surrounded by words and by literature and so forth, because your parents were both such avid readers.

DOUG AITKEN: Yes, and I wasn't at that time.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Have you become an avid reader?

DOUG AITKEN: I read a bit.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I wanted to ask you also about the sheer stamina involved. It seems as though you really have a tremendous amount of ability to stay with a project and focused on a project for long periods, intense periods of time. Is that correct? How does that work for you?

DOUG AITKEN: For me, there's never been a time where I haven't had multiple things that I'm working on and exploring. I've never been a singular person in that sense, with one project and that's it. To me that feels so incredibly comfortable, this kind of multiplicity, like a tree, almost, where you have many branches, and the branches are always moving outward. You can push those branches out further and further, but you can also retract and move in.

What happens in that way of working is things don't become precious, so you're capable of pushing ideas or projects much further than you would if you were working in a more singular way. With that metaphor of a tree, for example, you can also see the idea of time, and you can see that some directions burn hot and fast, and then they're—[snaps fingers]—over with. And then you see other things you are developing that just go on for years, and that's what they take. It's not really a choice of yours; you just recognize that it might take three or four or five years to make one piece.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: How many hours a day will you work on your art?

DOUG AITKEN: I don't really know what "working" is. You're never really not looking, or not thinking. So I don't really have a clear idea myself of when you're making art or when you're not.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: That's an interesting observation. So you don't go to the—I mean, do you go to the studio for set hours, like, do you put in a nine-to-five or nine-to-nine kind of day?

DOUG AITKEN: The physical studio opens around nine or 10 in the morning, and we work until seven or eight.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Now, where is it located?

DOUG AITKEN: It's about a mile from here; it's in Venice Beach. There's two studios, but the main one is the one that's been there forever. It's very hidden. It's in a residential street, and you only see a wooden gate at the front. It's an asymmetric lot that goes back and back, and there's three buildings, and some of them have multiple floors. [. . .]

When I made it, I thought about the traditional studio, which is this very cliché industrial space, and that's fine, but that doesn't really speak to what I want to do, the vision I have for the kind of works that I would like to make in the future. So I thought, your brain is functioning in all these ways, simultaneously, and if the studio could do that, maybe you could get closer to the goal of what you're trying to make. What if you have different small buildings, and each building has rooms, and in each room is a different medium? So you can just walk through mediums seamlessly all day, and



you can walk through rooms of architecture, sound, and music, or through film editing. So the studio really became a way of almost mapping the creative process into a physical space.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: That's so interesting, and of course, you're working, and your work comes of age at exactly the moment when that's possible digitally, is that correct?

[Side conversation.]

Were you aware that, because of the digital era, the physical space in which you would be working would be conceptually different than it would have been 10 years prior?

DOUG AITKEN: It was a transitional moment when we developed that studio. The studio is also built out of this extreme desire to be autonomous.

[Side conversation.]

Autonomy becomes the goal, in a way, and the goal is to not be restricted, not be controlled, and to not have to ask someone to create, but to find a system where you can create on your own terms, when you need to, how you need to, and experiment as much as you have to.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I just want to stop right there and ask you a question while I'm thinking about it. That's a great point to bring up. I wanted to ask you about when you did your survey at MOCA.

Two different people said to me, Well, Doug curated his own show, as opposed to Philippe Vergne, the director of the museum and the curator of that show, being the curator of the show, which means they would have controlled what was in the show. They would have controlled the perspective historically, and they would have had a very heavy hand. I don't think it was a criticism of you. They just said, Well, that's what Doug likes to do; he wanted to curate his own show and be completely in control of how it was presented. Could you just talk about that, respond to that?

DOUG AITKEN: When we did the exhibition *Electric Earth* at MOCA, at first, when Philippe Vergne approached me about it, I didn't really know about it. I wasn't so sure that it was something I wanted to do. I have a bizarre history of when museums have asked me to do things like showing existing work or surveys; I seem to always try to hijack it into making something new. I always want to make something new. Philippe is just a great person, an incredible curator. And he approached it in a way where he said, "What if we work together, and you view this not as a kind of historic documentation, but you see it as a new work? And you use your works as ingredients to make something new with this exhibition."

So I thought about it for a while, and I proposed to him, "Let's do this show—and the goal for the show is that, once you walk through the door, there's no sense of place and no sense of time. So instead of being in downtown Los Angeles inside a museum, you walk into a space and the viewer is empowered, and the viewer can navigate on their own and they can author their own experience; they can assemble their own encounter with these works." And that idea was something that we could really collaborate on, and I think Philippe, it was very much his show and his sensibility, but having that overall concept, for me, I then felt like there was something very clear to work with.

The MOCA Geffen space, formerly it was a warehouse where they fixed police cars. It's just a huge, vacuous space, and at times, shows can be horrible and overwhelmed by the space, or other times it can work incredibly well. I was aware of the history of the space. I thought maybe we just don't even use the museum at all. We remove the exhibition architecture, and we recognize that the

show is in Los Angeles, in the shadow of Hollywood. So maybe these installations I've made can almost become living film sets for the viewer, and the viewer can be the subject of their own film.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, then it changed, the piece that you did at the Hirshhorn, which I'm—

DOUG AITKEN: *SONG 1*.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Yes, *SONG 1*, it changed the experience of that, didn't it?

DOUG AITKEN: *SONG 1*, when we had designed it at the Hirshhorn, it wrapped around a huge concrete building, a Gordon Bunshaft, Brutalist museum with one set of windows, basically.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: But you saw it from the outside.

DOUG AITKEN: *SONG 1*, you saw it only from the outside, and you could hear it from a quarter-mile away, and then you would arrive and walk around it and discover parts of it.

And I had a hard time, for a long time, figuring out how *SONG 1* could live on after that installation, and it wasn't until I started working on the MOCA exhibition that I had this idea. It was a hallucination almost, that you could take this piece, which is made to be seen from the outside, circular, and you just pull it up and remove the round building, and then there it is. There's an inside and outside, and you can occupy the inside of this work as much as you can see it from afar.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And when you did it at MOCA, the way people responded was almost to camp out within it. I mean, people would just sit down in the middle of it and stay, which is, of course, very different from the Hirshhorn experience that people had. Did that feel good to you, knowing that people could just sit there and absorb it?

DOUG AITKEN: One of the things I appreciated most about the show at MOCA was how many people returned multiple times. Also, I would hear from people that they would spend extremely long periods of time inside the exhibition. I was surprised by that. I knew that if you were to add up the total running time of all the moving-image pieces, it was a considerable amount, but I didn't think that people would go that deep into the works, or dissolve into the exhibition the way they did.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: What was also interesting about that—and we didn't get to talk about it before—is that when you did *SONG 1*, you included—we talked about Tilda Swinton, but you also included John Doe, who, of course, is from the great LA band X. So did you ever see them live, going back to your earlier talk about going around to those punk clubs when you were a young kid?

DOUG AITKEN: Yeah, it was interesting to include John Doe. The only time that I had ever met him, I was maybe 13 or 14 years old. And in my neighborhood I had another friend who loved music, and he was kind of a punk-rock child-mathematician type, this kid who's amazing with numbers. He calls me up one night and says, "Hey, I made this plan. I've got an incredible map laid out, and it shows us how we can take all these public buses to Hollywood. And it's going to be about three hours each way on public buses, and it's about eight different bus transfers, but we can get to a record store on Hollywood Boulevard tomorrow evening, where X is signing records." So we embark on this odyssey, and, you know, this must be 1980.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: This is from Palos Verdes, right?

DOUG AITKEN: We're going and going through Inglewood, South Central, up the Harbor Freeway, and eventually we're deposited on Hollywood Boulevard. I vividly remember it, because walking down Hollywood Boulevard with this other young boy, and all these cars would come up to us and slow down. And it would be men, and they would make obscene gestures, or ask, "How much?" and ask if we would jump in the back of their car with them. They thought we were runaway prostitutes or whatever. I'm sure we looked like it.

Eventually we made it to this record store. I had a shirt on that said "Motorhead," and John Doe looked at me, this little kid, and he says, "Motorhead kills." And he wrote that all over the album cover and then signed it. It was really funny. I reached out to him for *SONG 1*, and he flew down from San Francisco and showed up. I told him that story; he was really laughing.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Oh, yeah, it's an incredible story. But why did you choose him for *SONG 1*?

DOUG AITKEN: I wanted someone who has a very American voice, and I think John's music since X has gone deep into Americana. He's a bit of a Robert Mitchum type at this point, and I felt like that would kind of bring to the work a tooth, and soulfulness.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So it's that precise for you, that you actually were looking for a precise voice, and you actually remembered John Doe's voice?

DOUG AITKEN: Yes.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: That's pretty precise.

DOUG AITKEN: Collaborating with someone in a project, it's always different. Sometimes it's harmonious and everyone is speaking the same language; other times there's people who challenge and they want to fight you. And then if you pass their strange subconscious tests, then they're really tight with you and they will do whatever it takes. Much of my work is not material at all; it's sounds and lights. [. . . –DA]

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Which is so interesting to me, because it is so much a part of your work. We were talking earlier about your democratic nature and what is your relationship with the everyday person, so to speak. How does that come out? That does come out in you; it seems like it does come out in your work a lot.

DOUG AITKEN: I think that one of the amazing things about living is that you just—you never know. You never really know anything. You never know what's happening an hour from now, a day from now. You never know the story you're going to hear from the cab driver. Those moments can be indelible. Everything around you is electric in a way, and there's so many layers.

In a sense, I've always felt like that about art-making. There's no boundary. Everything has potential; that that might be why I like to do many projects, and I get absorbed by this, because it's just life. But it's also heightened life. It allows you to find the lightest and darkest moments of the spectrum.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: How do you stay open to that? How do you not close yourself off, especially now that you're a very well-known artist?

DOUG AITKEN: One of the great things about making art is no one knows what you look like. It really is true. I don't think I'm very well known, but I'm absolutely anonymous, which is wonderful.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: People don't stop you on the streets and say, "Oh, my God?"

DOUG AITKEN: That doesn't ever happen, hardly. [Laughs.]

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: [. . .] Was that your first architectural intervention, so to speak, where you actually had to deal with the constraints of architecture?

DOUG AITKEN: The first thing that we really built was the *Sonic Pavilion* in Brazil, from ground up, as a piece of architecture.

To talk about architecture, I think it doesn't necessarily mean to talk about material, and what I mean by that is, I remember talking to Rem Koolhaas one time about architecture, and Rem said, "You know, Doug, I'm like you. I love film. I studied film. My father was a film teacher in Rotterdam. I went to film school. I made some horrible black-and-white films in the '60s, but it was the structure and principle of cinema that always stayed with me."

So when I design architecture, I always think of film structure: How do you enter? What's the first thing you see? That's the opening sequence. The first room you go into is setting the stage for where the narrative goes. It was interesting, hearing Rem Koolhaas apply the structure of the cinematic narrative to his entire architecture program. I found myself working with that also, without even being aware of it.

Even early pieces like *Diamond Sea* or *Eraser* or *Electric Earth*, which are all interior works, had to create their own architectural systems to function; they wouldn't really work on just a single screen. So at a point, with a piece like *Sleepwalkers* at MoMA, the installation that you may be in, inside a gallery or a museum, is suddenly reversed, turned inside out, and it's very simple. It's an act of reclaiming urban landscape. It's looking at this environment that we're given, and re-humanizing it and bringing it back into a set of questions, instead of a fixed form.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And for that, you chose to work with Donald Sutherland, again, a very specific choice. How did that come about, because there are a lot of gray-haired, distinguished-looking people, and he doesn't have to say very much. How did you happen to choose him?

DOUG AITKEN: Well, I wanted a very recognizable person for that character. I think the other four characters were all people that we pretty much just found, like we used the word "street-casting."

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Yes.

DOUG AITKEN: In the short story that I wrote for his character, he's insulated from the world, a person who is living life inside a Lincoln Town Car with tinted windows, rolled up, and air-conditioning inside, continuously going from midtown to Wall Street. He's a person who's closed off from having any kind of sense of his surroundings, any kind of emotion. *Sleepwalkers* was a work about a modern condition and a new landscape, so I wanted that element to complete the puzzle. It was interesting working with someone like that, who is so omnipotent, they can walk anywhere and someone is going to recognize them.

Donald is one of those people who was very confrontational when we started working. At first we had this phone call, and he said, "I've been dreaming of a project like this for the last 20 or 30 years. I'm in Canada. I'll get in the car with my wife and drive down now," like, "I'll just come down and do this." And then we met and we started talking about it. In the first scene, I remember he said, "No, I always want to do the last scene first," and so we set this up. There was something kind of stiff about the way he was acting, and he was in this aggressive mood. Eventually, I just said, "I'm sorry,

I'm not going to work with you. You're trying to command the set; this isn't the kind of project or what you do normally. This is something where everyone and everything is going to merge together." And we had this very awkward moment, and then he said, "Okay, just tell me—"

I mean, he kind of handed it over after that, and it was interesting, by the end of filming all of his sequences, he really didn't want to leave. We ended up reshooting that last scene at the end, like we were originally going to, not according to his wishes, and we filmed it over and over, one take after another, till 2 a.m. It was a car accident sequence in midtown Manhattan. I mean, I was exhausted. Donald must have been so tired. And then my phone rings early the next morning, and he says, "Doug, I can't sleep. I just don't know if we got it. Maybe we should do it again tonight and try to make it better."

And it's interesting when you see these exorcisms, when these people put up a barrier, and that barrier is actually—it's a challenge for them to give you their intimacy. And if they feel that you can cross that barrier or break that wall, then the intimacy and commitment is very real.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, and you value that. You stay intimate and available in your dealings with people, I've found. It seems to me that you do that more than a lot of artists at your level, certainly, or just artists in general. You seem to me to be almost intentionally unguarded. Is that correct? Is that, like, conscious, or is that just who you are? Do you make an effort, or is it kind of a natural part of your personality, to be that kind of open and intimate that way?

DOUG AITKEN: I really don't know how to answer that, because it's your take. [Laughs.]

To make my projects, it would be a fallacy to look at the process and say, This is a soft, communal situation; everything is easy; no one has opinions; and everything just happens, because it really doesn't work that way. I think, on the contrary, things that are seemingly impossible to you only happen if you will them into existence, and one of the tools for that is time, and working with time, sculpting time.

I think that's a lot of what art-making is, not just to have an idea and execute it; that's only the starting point. But as you start moving, it's what you see in the periphery; it's the mistakes and room for error that you can exploit. Or finding areas that you haven't considered, and allowing yourself to work at a very fast rate.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: The word sculptures, the wall sculptures, a lot of them have to do with time, *100 YRS*. I didn't really put it together until I did this interview, that the *1968* sculpture that's all the fragmented mirrors is your birth year. So how do those word sculptures, and their relationship to time—what time are they referring to, like, what's a hundred years? What's 10 years? What does it mean?

DOUG AITKEN: Shortly before I made *Electric Earth*, I had an accident, a very bad accident. I drowned in the ocean and I was in a coma for three or four days. You know, it was a situation where you're airlifted by helicopter; you lose your pulse.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: How did this happen? What were you doing?

DOUG AITKEN: I drowned in the Pacific Ocean. I got knocked unconscious under the ocean.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Were you, like, scuba diving, or snorkeling?

DOUG AITKEN: I was swimming, and it was the middle of winter, and it was north of here. It was

southern Ventura.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: How did you get rescued?

DOUG AITKEN: Someone that I came there with saw my body floating face down.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Really?

DOUG AITKEN: I only really know pieces. My friend James Fish somehow found me and called, and there was a helicopter that was able to take me to ER. It was one of these moments where you see time, and you see time that's been edited out. It's as if someone were looking at the timecode that is running underneath your life, and suddenly there's a section that's just erased. There's no recollection; it's days later; you have an artificial lung pumping air for you; your body is just artificially hooked up and strapped to this intensive care unit. I remember when I came to, it was very foggy—obviously, I was on whatever narcotics they gave me—but I had this kind of foggy vision of my mother and father and girlfriend at the time, sitting on the bedside chairs.

I think we see life as this single continuum, and whether we like it or not, it's always moving forward. And we can, in a very convenient way, always look back and remember something, or have a recollection. This moment for me was quite pivotal, because suddenly I realized that everything from that moment forward was extra; it was a life that I didn't have. I started thinking about the idea of time, and this idea of, can we control time, and how do we sculpt time, and the concept of time being something that's more three-dimensional than the idea of the linear time that we're given. That was already something that I was interested in, but I think that then drove me to move really fast in the art that I wanted to make, because I just felt like every minute was like a crystal of light you're burning through.

When I was very young, I had epilepsy, and so I would have these moments—as a very young child, I would have a seizure due to light sensitivity. You would have the seizure, and you would find yourself lying there, or looking around. You would wonder where that last memory went. It's just erased. When you really look at the structure of how we perceive time and then you say, Okay, well, maybe I don't want to be so passive. Maybe I want to be proactive and take ownership of the idea of time, and maybe I want to author my own time instead of just receiving it.

That idea for me became something that I could really explore in the art that I was making. They were a way for me to get closer to the way that I instinctively perceived life. You could say, perhaps, that we look at the history of storytelling, from the campfire to Greek and Roman tragedies, to the theater, opera, to cinema; it's often in a very linear format. But in a sense, I don't think the human mind really thinks that way. The linear structure is a very convenient tool for storytelling, but how many things do we think of simultaneously when we're even reading a story, or in any moment of waking life? So you recognize that maybe if you continue to create in that vein, you're actually doing a disservice to the true potential of the human mind. You think maybe the value of art going forward is to really expand that and to try to find ways to use art to find new ways of perception, to find new ways of understanding, receiving, and sharing experience.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, the work that you do certainly has been known for that kind of immersive experience.

I'm sitting in a house that you designed. And even though I had seen pictures of it, I didn't realize how it was so much like a reflection of virtually everything. Every part of it is you, from, most specifically I suppose, the staircase, designed with mirrored, like—glass and mirrors—to capture the

light that's coming through the ceiling, and create not only an almost crystalline structure, but also this doppelganger of infinite space that recedes off one side of the stairs. How did this—you told me off the record how this came about. Would you tell me on the record how this whole structure came about for you?

DOUG AITKEN: From the destruction of the first house?

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Yeah. Tell the story, because I think the house is such an interesting manifestation of so many of your ideas. And you live here, so it's your domicile.

Just for the record, I'm sitting in a room that's silk-screened with greenery, silk-screened with the patterns of leaves that were borrowed from the outdoor vegetation. The ceilings are wood; the floors are wood. There are a couple of sonic tables that make the sounds that Doug has designed. It's a two-story structure, and there's some of his art around, and some of other people's art around. He likes to conceal bathrooms. He has a concealed bathroom on the ground floor, and a concealed bathroom upstairs.

DOUG AITKEN: That's true.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: He doesn't like to look at bathrooms. And the house has a patio, a terrace in the back, and an entire guesthouse that he's designed, with stained-glass windows that have a very, like, German-modern quality to them, or a mid-century modern quality to them.

DOUG AITKEN: I love your verbal architectural tour.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, I'm describing it for whoever is going to read this oral history at some point and not have a picture. So, that got summed up.

How did you make all these decisions from the beginning?

DOUG AITKEN: This location that we're sitting in now I've lived in for over 15 years. Originally, I was in a shack here with a month-to-month lease, and I just really fell in love with this location. The proximity to the ocean, the chaos on the weekends, the tranquility in winter.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Am I allowed to put the address into this oral history, or would you rather not?

DOUG AITKEN: Twenty-five Anchorage Street.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Twenty-five Anchorage Street, Marina Del Rey.

DOUG AITKEN: I had lived here a long time, and I was finally able to buy this house. The existing house was about a hundred-year-old cabin. Shortly after I bought it, I had an idea to make a film installation. I wanted to bring my mother and father into this house, and I wanted them to be motionless over a period of time, and while they were motionless, seated, we would film then choreograph the demolition of the house around them.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: If I remember correctly, aren't they seated and looking at each other? As though they were having a verbal—a visual conversation, but not a verbal one, is that correct?

DOUG AITKEN: Yes, the title is *House*; it's very literal.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And what year was that?

DOUG AITKEN: I'm not sure, maybe—it was filmed over about seven days, and in the final piece, you see these two individuals, motionless, and there's a choreography of destruction around them. You never see the motivation behind the destruction or the physical actions, but you see the glass shatter, or parts of the roof crash down, or the bricks of the chimney start to collapse. So there's this sense of entropy and transformation within the work, and when we were done filming, my house was gone. I had destroyed it entirely to the dirt. I hadn't really made a plan for what to do after that, actually. I hadn't done this with the intention of building something afresh.

So I found myself in an awkward situation very quickly, temporarily living at the studio. I moved fast in designing what would be this house, this house that I live in. It was interesting because at first it was this huge push to make a dwelling, a place that you could live in, and it would be functional, but what happened was, once I got engaged in the process of designing and building it—there's so many decisions involved in architecture, especially in the construction of something, that, on a daily basis, I would get a phone call and it would be a contractor that says, "We're pouring the concrete foundations today, so you really don't need to come over here for a few days; there's nothing to do." And then you think about that and say, "Well, if you're pouring this concrete foundation, it would be a lot more interesting if you put 12 microphones in the concrete." And so we do that, and have cables running out. And then, "We can turn on the house and hear the sound of the earth under it when the house is built, and so why don't we amplify the stairs also?" So the stairs are made of wood chambers, and each of those has a contact mic that goes into a mixing board in a cabinet.

So I found that, really, because I was building all this anyways, there was almost a waterfall of ideas and inspirations that happened in the process of building it. It was interesting because it's not a public space. I'm not making it for anyone to like or dislike; I'm making it so I can live in it, and it can suit the needs that I had, and also be a series of experiments that you can learn from.

As that process started, I thought it would be nice to have just a couple words to fall back on, so I called it "Acid Modernism," a little phrase I made up, so I can continuously refer to as I'm making these decisions for the house. So I thought about the idea of the house embracing perception, such as sound, the idea of light, and how light can appear and disappear. To the right of us, there's walls that are hand silk-screened, with images of photographs I took of the trees outside, and the color matches the real leaf chroma outside. There's doors that are hidden in bookshelves you have to discover. So things aren't really what they seem here. It's a space that's living on its own, and asking you to discover, continuously.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And to go back to the staircase, because the staircase then is replicated—the staircase, the sort of fractal geometry, reflective, mirror-and-glass element there—that then becomes, slightly becomes, the *Underwater Pavilions*, and it also then sort of manifests ultimately in *Mirage*, this incredible project out in Palm Springs we talked briefly about before, where you had built an entire house out of mirrors from the ground up.

To be honest, when we first talked about this, I kept thinking you were coating a house with mirrors, but no, you were building it from the ground up with mirrors. And just because we're talking about this entrance hall, it really reminded me of that house. I assume there's a connection of some sort. Can you just talk about—did that hallway then kind of inspire you to carry on and try to do the house?

DOUG AITKEN: Well, the first use of mirrors for me was an installation in the early 2000s. It was an installation at the Musée de Ville du Moderne in Paris [Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris]. I'd



created this labyrinth. It was very tall, maybe 12 feet high, and it was a series of right-angled corridors, and they were all clad with hexagonal mirrors, and all the mirrors were on silent motors, so they were all continuously in motion. So as a viewer walks through this sculpture, they become the subject; they're abstracted and distorted, and the movement of the mirrors is almost like flowing water. It's also quite hypnotic. When I made that work, I was thinking about the idea of cinema. Film is mirror. [. . .]

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And so that line of inquiry ultimately led to this sort of vertical corridor of mirrors in your own house, and then did the experience of building your own house contribute to your decision to try to build *Mirage*?

DOUG AITKEN: I think *Mirage* was influenced by my house. In my house there is a three-story, mirrored, kaleidoscope staircase. So I'm seeing this on a daily basis and thinking about it, and you're watching it through the seasons. When the idea for *Mirage* really surfaced, it was at a point where I felt like I could now bring this idea into the round and create an installation/sculpture that was freestanding and human-scale.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, let's talk about all the parameters of exactly what happened with *Mirage*, because it's epic. And I know you've talked about it a lot, but I would like to know how it came about, and your logic in executing it, in 2017. It's the most recent thing you've done.

DOUG AITKEN: *Mirage* was a work that I had been thinking about for a few years. I had been thinking about creating something in the landscape that didn't have a fixed presence, but is actually meant more to disappear and become part of the topography. I thought the form would be a suburban house, and I was looking for a very long time for the right location, initially looking at hillsides around Los Angeles that looked into the grid of the city. I was very interested in the placement of the work, and I saw it as a human-scale lens that the viewer would enter into, and in the process, they would become it. So the outside landscape was extremely important.

When we look at the history of land art, we often see two things. We see works that are placed in incredibly remote locations, and we also see pieces that are based on abstract geometry. So, whether that's *Lightning Fields*, which is a grid, or *Double Negative*, one line cut in two, or a spiral like *Spiral Jetty*, you see that as a trademark of that period, but that wasn't something that I was interested in.

I didn't want to make a piece of land art that was just purely in a remote location. I wanted something that was standing in the gray area, this twilight between development and the open frontier.

Eventually, our location search continued from the Los Angeles area to the desert, and I started looking at hillsides there. I always wanted the work to look out into suburban sprawl. Yet I wanted *Mirage* to be absolutely isolated and alone, to be very singular and existential, while looking out into this grid of city. It's a suburban, ranch-style house. The kind of house that you would never remember. It's a one-story, asymmetric ranch-style home.

If you follow the lineage back to Frank Lloyd Wright in Illinois, his ranch-style homes are looking out onto the prairie, and then you see the movement of that style of architecture migrating to the West Coast. With a lot of the German mid-century architects, it becomes more refined, with glass and steel, and then eventually, in the postwar era, becomes something which is value-engineered down to its most banal form, suburbia. It's plywood and cheap sheet rock, and reduced to this repetitious

form. So that was the house I was looking for. I was looking for the one that was so generic that you've passed it millions of times throughout your life and you would never record it.

So I wanted to pull that form out of this kind of anonymous suburban grid and isolate it, and then strip away everything. Strip away the belongings, décor, furniture, the history, the humans, and surfaces, and see it simply as a pure form again, and see it as a lens that looks out into the landscape that it was born in.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And when you're in it—and, of course, this was done for [the biennial site-specific exhibition] Desert X, which was—well, I should ask you that. Was it done for Desert X, or was it done in—what is the relationship to Desert X, if any, now that I've launched forth with something that might not be—yeah.

DOUG AITKEN: I was always planning on making this work.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And Neville [Wakefield] is the curator of Desert X.

DOUG AITKEN: He's someone I've known a very long time. He said, "I can help you look for locations if you like; I'm just out there anyways," for this Desert X project. I thought my project would be far too unwieldy for what they were doing, but over time we grew closer, and we would go out there scouting, and then it seemed to really make sense, to open *Mirage* with Desert X, but to let it live a longer life. The piece will also travel after this. I'm very interested in how it could exist nomadically in other sites.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Also, just for the record, how big is it, and how did you end up physically making this entire tract home out of mirrors? It's physically kind of an amazing project.

DOUG AITKEN: We took several months and studied suburban architecture, and we found many designs, iterations, from postwar suburbia. And then we reduced these forms. I think we did about 60 versions. And then when the exterior architecture seemed to be right, then we went inside the house, and that aspect of the sculpture is very different; it's much more interpretive.

So in a sense, the form of the suburban house is a bit like something that you see and know so well that there's trust and familiarity; you're willing to walk inside. There's no doors; there's no windows. It's just open. So you walk into this house, but once you're inside, the sculpture changes significantly. There might be an opening, a window, but the walls surrounding it might be at a very subtle angle, so they amplify and reflect in a disorienting way. There's a room in the middle that has extremely high ceilings and an open skylight. It's designed to allow the atmosphere, and clouds, to come in and reflect as they move. [. . .]

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I don't even know how many people have visited it—it certainly is an Instagram wonder. I mean, I feel like it got a massive amount of attention in social media, in terms of people finding selfie art. I think everybody who could possibly go to Palm Springs has photographed themselves in front of it.

But where it's located is also interesting. You found a nascent real estate development, which will ultimately be covered with houses but right now is still raw desert. How did you find the lot in which to build this thing?

DOUG AITKEN: I was always searching for that kind of transitional area, as opposed to the virgin nature.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I was going to say, it's in a place called Desert Palisades.

DOUG AITKEN: I remember I was thinking a little bit about Antonioni's film *Zabriskie Point* when I was thinking of the location for that. I thought that was quite interesting how locations in that film never really surrender to nature; instead, they're on the tension line. They're on the border. With the placement of *Mirage*, I wanted a site that felt to me quite existential, isolated, singular, and remote, but also one that was looking into this huge landscape of people that it wasn't really part of.

The location is, at this point, a series of developed roads with no houses. You can drive on the roads, but no homes exist, and I really like that. I liked the idea that it's this ghost landscape; it's this strange purgatory. It's close, but it's far. And when you're standing inside the installation and if you look out at the primary views, you look down a boulder-strewn hillside, and eventually it goes into a valley, which is a suburban grid. But if you see it at nighttime, you see that the house is placed exactly between the two lines of light in the grid. It's a Cartesian grid that kind of follows up the hill, into the perspective of the house. So at nighttime, these lines of light bring roads with streetlights that flow through the architecture.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Now, I don't want to draw any comparisons in terms of, like, I think you're influenced by X or Y. I'm not trying to make that point, but the other artist who has been so interested in the Southwest, in grids of light and use of words, of course, is Ed Ruscha. Do you feel a kinship? Do you feel like any ideas there—that you feel like you're building on, or do you feel anything, any connection there, without trying to trap you into saying something you don't want to say?

DOUG AITKEN: I think Ed's amazing, and I think there's a kind of underappreciated quality of his work, which is how human it is. I really admire that kind of quirky, human quality to it. Yeah, Ed, to me, is just part of the landscape. He's almost not really a person; his art has almost reached a point where it just kind of dissolves into so much of what you see out here, and I think that's one of the beautiful and powerful aspects of it.

Ed was a protagonist in one of my pieces. It was a piece called *Frontier*, and that was about seven years ago. The work *Frontier* was an installation that we showed on an island in Rome, in the middle of the Tiber River. But in the work, the work was a story of a person who is very detached, very voyeuristic, and never penetrates what's around them. Eventually day turns to night, and the landscape becomes increasingly tense, and it goes from being rural to urban to a downtown nighttime cityscape.

You see things building, and eventually it explodes into a riot, and in this riot we follow this protagonist, Ed's character, and he is at the edge of it, always watching, but he never participates; he never takes a side. And in this final scene, you see the riot, and you see the camera is filming this—it goes from the riot, and the camera pulls back, and you see the protagonist, played by Ed Ruscha, and he's watching. And then it keeps pulling back, and you see the fringes of a film set, and you realize that the riot isn't real at all; it's a stage set. And it keeps pulling back, and as the shot pulls back, it pulls back through the movie-theater screen, where the piece started, and it keeps pulling back. And then you see the protagonist watching himself on the movie screen, watching this fabricated reality of the film you watched, and then the film ends, and he walks out again, and the piece repeats.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Nice. So, clearly, you're comfortable with your relationship with that.

DOUG AITKEN: Ed's great, and a friend.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, we talked about how the art of the '60s, the Light and Space [movement], the use of language—you've told me that these are all artists who were of interest to you when you were a younger artist. Do you feel a connection to the heritage? Do you feel any connection to being, like, a Los Angeles artist?

DOUG AITKEN: That's a good question.

[Audio break.]

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So one thing I wanted to talk about—I'm glad we were talking about the desert, Ed Ruscha, all of that, because I want to go back in time somewhat, to *Migration*, which is a piece I think of as also being kind of a breakthrough piece for you.

In terms of the overall view of your work, I think of that as being a really kind of extraordinary piece that seems to encompass your interest in the connection between nature and culture, nomadic influences, nomadic things. So you tell me what *Migration* meant to you.

And this is a piece, of course, where animals are placed in these motel rooms, with often disastrous consequences.

[Side conversation.]

So this is the—you have a buffalo in a motel room and a peacock, if I remember correctly.

DOUG AITKEN: Well, *Migration* was an installation that I made, I think it was 2008.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Yes, 2008.

DOUG AITKEN: With *Migration*, I was very interested in this idea of landscape, and that there's really these two lines moving simultaneously. There's how we, as a culture, occupy the landscape—what we do with it, what we create on it, what we build—and then the landscape itself and what was there before us, with a deeper sense of geological time, slow time versus fast, contemporary time. I wanted to create a work that kind of compressed these two different timelines together.

It was fascinating to me that we built a landscape where the repetition and sameness is so intense that you can wake up somewhere in a motel room and not know where you are at all. And everything is planned the same. The placement of the plastic-wrapped cup next to the sink, the beige phone by the bed. So I was interested in this idea that I could be everywhere and nowhere at once, due to this repetition. So I thought about this, and I thought, If I can make a piece that went back—and it took many of the original animals that were in these specific locations and their migratory patterns or their indigenous habitat—and I could bring them physically back into the rooms that are there now, what would happen? A world without humans, but just the human spaces.

So in making *Migration*, I didn't want to build these rooms on a set and just film one creature after another. Instead, we drove across America and used actual motels and hotels. We started in Pittsburgh, and we went across the continent, and we would film each encounter with a different animal or bird, whatnot, in a different—

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And just before I forget, why Pittsburgh?

DOUG AITKEN: The piece was originally going to be shown at the Carnegie International, so I thought it would be interesting to start it on the East Coast and then have it move west. So really, each vignette in the piece is shot in a different city. However, if you squint your eyes, I think the rooms look very much the same, and I was interested in that as well.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And you chose a buffalo as one of the animals.

DOUG AITKEN: You know, one of the things that was fascinating was you would find these rooms, and the rooms were so banal, yet every night a different person had moved through them. And I kept thinking about that idea of migration also, that idea of displacement, that desire for sameness, because sameness provides comfort. If there's nothing challenging, then you feel at ease somehow.

So you create the same thing everywhere, and when the animals would walk into these rooms when we were filming, you immediately sense where they were located on the natural spectrum—if they were predators or if they were prey, if they were nervous or if they were bold and confident. You would see immediately—in the western mountain lion, it comes in without pause; it destroys the bed; it rips open the lamp; it does what it wants. But there's something very different, very subtle and delicate, that you find with the deer or jackrabbits, where they come in and they're very intimidated. And there's moments of tranquility where they appear, then recede back into the shadows. So in that sense, while we were filming, we were watching the work really create itself. I was able to create this system for the work, but each of these encounters authored its own story.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: What I think is that, also, you see this kind of animal intelligence at work, in their eyes. I'm sure we're projecting; I mean, they always say that people shouldn't do this, but it looks as though they're actually contemplating, Hmm, I'm in a motel room; now what? I presume you had handlers?

DOUG AITKEN: It was a whole community of animal people whom we met and worked with. We would put the word out that you were looking for a bison, and you get a phone call at midnight, and it would be the person that has the bison, and they're three days away, and maybe you can meet then in Barstow. They would show up, and it was this really fascinating kind of animal subculture. And then you talk to the bison woman and you would say, "I'm really looking for 12 jackrabbits." "I think I have a friend. Let me go make some calls and I'll get back to you."

We were filming this work in a nomadic way and being on the road continuously. I think there was something that came out of that that I could have never captured if I had tried to make this piece in one city, or place, or in a controlled environment.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: You lined up these screens, three big projection screens, and so the animals are seen, one after the other. Either you see them all together if you stand in one vista, one place, or you walk in between them and see them one at a time. At least that's the way they were at MOCA. Tell me about that, or if you presented that in that way just at MOCA, or at other places.

DOUG AITKEN: The installation was three freestanding billboards, which I had designed. There were double-sided projection screens where the billboards would be. It was very sculptural. When we were on the road making the work, we spent so much time on the highways and freeways, I became acutely aware of billboards and the architecture of billboards. So I started drawing them, and designing my own billboard, the frame and the aspect ratio and how it looks, because in a sense it's like a cinema screen.

I remember we were driving somewhere, and we had been on the road for hours, and I started to almost fall asleep in the passenger's seat. Out of my blurry eyes, I started to see the billboards we were passing, the images on them coming to life. And then I thought that might be the way this work should be presented. Maybe we would co-opt that universal highway language and build our own steel-structure billboards, make our own screens.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And this aspect of nomadic life has been a consistent theme, and one way it manifests, of course, is in the epic *Station to Station*. Would you ever do that again? Didn't it take like a year of—how long were you on the road with that one?

DOUG AITKEN: *Station to Station* took a very long time. It was really born out of necessity.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: But let's go back into it a bit more, because I'd like to know more about it. How long did it take you to put it together?

DOUG AITKEN: Probably from inception until the final project was about four years.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And did your art dealers all uniformly just throw up their hands in dismay? Nothing to sell.

DOUG AITKEN: It was definitely outside of the gallery system; that would be an understatement. For me, that project really became a necessity. I felt like I had a responsibility to make it happen.

What I mean by that is when we look at culture, we see how segregated culture is, and it's segregated primarily due to capitalism. So if we look at contemporary art, it might be that there's a gallery system and auction houses and collectors, and that's an intense influence on what's being created and shown, and it's promoting a more conservative art, art that's taking less risks and not moving into the future fast enough.

We might look over at music, and we see a similar condition with the music industry. A musician might have to play at the same venues, and then the following night someone else plays there, over and over. All these capitalist systems are restricting the possibilities of what's being made. [. . .]

I thought about this, and I thought about this idea that if there's a way that we can remove these insulating systems, we could empower creators and audiences in new ways. There could be new possibilities and potentials.

So I felt like if I could do these two things, if I could kind of work directly with the creators—the artists, writers, the filmmakers, and the musicians—and I could bring people together in a place that was outside of where they live and identify themselves with, something of substance might be able to happen, and we could have creative moments that are unique and burn hot.

So I thought about this, and I had no interest at first in doing something with a train, per se. It was more a solution to a problem, and the problem was, how do we create a nomadic platform? How do we create a way where people can travel and move, and while they're moving, they can create? The more I thought about it, I realized, in America, we have this rail system, which is archaic. Its rusted veins move through the country, often through towns and cities which are largely neglected. So there's this entire infrastructure out there that's completely dormant for something like this. So I started thinking about activating that.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: You said it was born of necessity. That must mean your necessity.

DOUG AITKEN: I felt like I had to contribute to helping push culture outside of this conservatism. Part of the reason we're doing an oral history is, it's you and I talking, and there's no filter. I think it's very much like that when you're dealing with people who create. If you can find a way and a place, where there's no filter, and you can do what you really want to do and have new possibilities in a moment and place that's never existed, then something can come out of it.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Were you happy with the result of *Station to Station*?

DOUG AITKEN: It was amazing, and it was surprising. The way the project was designed was that each time the train would stop, we would use that train station itself to stage these happenings.

[Side conversation.]

It was really otherworldly.

The idea was it wasn't a single road trip. It was an Exquisite Corpse. So everywhere the train would stop, we would use that train station like a one-night museum, to stage a happening, and every happening was different, always different people, never the same. Every day was completely different. Different artists or musicians would get involved and would really use one part of the country or one location, or they'd want to do a new project. I tried to empower that to happen.

That time-based flammability was interesting, so what might happen in Pittsburgh would never happen again anywhere else. The performers, the collaborations, the things that came out of it were all new and unique and made for the project. And then the next morning, the train is in motion again, and Thurston Moore, who maybe played in Pittsburgh, is also going to play in Chicago that following night, but is going to play with a high school marching band that plays Sun Ra. And Mavis Staples shows up in a wheelchair singing gospel, and by the second song, she gets out of the wheelchair, pushes it aside, leans on the microphone, and just plays this phenomenal set. Or here is an Ernesto Neto installation in a yurt tent, and over here is Liz Glynn doing the history of the universe that she reinterprets every day as a performance. And over there is a Kenneth Anger installation of *Lucifer Rising*, and maybe a handful of local artists who have also created things just for that evening. So it just continuously changed as it moved. Seeing that actually happen was so incredibly stimulating.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And it was curated by you. You were the one who chose—did you choose everybody who got to be involved, or did you work with people who chose people?

DOUG AITKEN: Yes, I curated it. I was really involved from the ground up. It was interesting because there were so many people involved. Our studio was doing everything they could do and also everything they didn't know how to do, just to get it done. It was a really intense kind of period of time.

But also, you can't underestimate the audiences, and that was the other aspect of it, having these moments—there was a stop in Winslow, Arizona, and the train had just got in, and it was nighttime. And I was walking down the street to a liquor store, and this large guy comes out of an alley, right in front of me. It was one of those moments that catches you off guard a little bit, and you don't know what's going to happen. The guy looks down at me in this very somber expression and he says, "Hey, do you know anything about that *Station to Station* thing?" And I said, "Yeah," and he said, "Well, we're from the reservation; I came down from the Native American reservation and I heard about it on the local radio, and they announced it."

And he said, "Yeah, I came down here because I was going to try to go to the radio station and get a ticket or two." I said, "I can get you tickets; what do you need?" He said, "Well, I really want to come down with my aunt and my cousins, and we could all come down tomorrow. Could you help us with that?"

So I took care of him, and the following night, hours before it was supposed to start at the train station there, I see him on a bench outside, patiently waiting with his whole family. Everyone has come down from the reservation. I talk to him for a little bit, and he was really curious. He says, "I don't know what any of this is. I've never heard of any of this. I'm not familiar with these artists or who is playing tonight, but this is so great because we never get to see anything out here. We never have access to anything."

So, fast forward, it's five or six hours later, and there's a lot of things going on at once. There's a lot of parts to this happening. In a haystack over here is Jackson Browne [and band], and on a stage over there it's the dark-wave group Cold Cave, and over here there's projections of films. And I'm running fast from point A to point B, and I look over and I recognize his silhouette again, just like in the alley. And I walk over to him, but he doesn't speak to me because he's so fixated on what he's watching. He's watching Fischli and Weiss's *The Way Things Go*, and it's one of those amazing moments, and then he recognizes me and says, "Oh, yeah, hey, Doug, thanks; when I watch this, I realize, I could make this. I have all the things in the film." I mean, we have a tire rolling down a street; we have a candle burning a string, et cetera. And he says, "It would be amazing. I should make some art like this." It's those kind of moments in a project like that that you feel like there's gears that are moving.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: It sounds like it filled some part of you that needed to be filled at that point in time.

DOUG AITKEN: I think so. I don't want to exist in some cultural ghetto, making something that I know how to do. I think it's always more exciting if you can find a way to kind of put yourself in a place that can at times be uncomfortable, or unfamiliar, so you have to learn fast to survive. A project like *Station to Station*, the enormity of what was created from it was really truly fascinating. From Olafur Eliasson making a kinetic drawing machine that drew all the way across the country, to someone like Patti Smith, who wrote a song that she would only play in Minneapolis, St. Paul.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Who did the drawing machine?

DOUG AITKEN: Olafur Eliasson.

I'm always surprised, and curious, and I'm grateful when someone reaches out to me to create something new. And in this situation, I felt like I could do that to everyone else, and I could try to give a very pure platform for them to make something that was new to them, and challenging. It was really surprising; so many people really brought their own ideas to it.

We talked about Winslow, Arizona. Stephen Shore called me up, and he said, "Doug, I have an idea for doing a 24-hour photo installation." I said, "What are you talking about?" He says, "My idea is, I'll get to Winslow, Arizona, the day before you get there. I'm going to photograph for 24 hours and shoot hundreds of images, and then the day after, when you go to Barstow"—we were going to stop at a nearly abandoned drive-in movie theater in the middle of the desert there. And Stephen said, "I'll take all the hundreds of photographs that I shot of Winslow the day before, and we'll project them on the drive-in theater screen to live music."



HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Oh, Stephen Shore, okay.

DOUG AITKEN: I mean, there's artists that you go deep with, like a Ruscha or Lawrence Weiner. Even Lawrence Weiner said, "I have an idea that I'll just make different flags for every stop." So he made these pictograms of his imagination of the meaning of each of the stops that the train would make. And then Ruscha said, you know, "I don't want to make a drawing or painting for this. Maybe I could make something that people could eat." So he put out his recipe for cactus omelets, only to be served at a stop in Arizona in the desert, and there's 500 cactus omelets, and the people are eating Ed Ruscha edible artworks.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: He loves Winslow, I know; he has a Winslow thing going on.

Now, what year was *Station to Station*, because, believe it or not, it's not on your exhibition CV. [Laughs.] What year was that, 2014? [September 2013] It's just 2014, 2013, because you said yesterday that right before that happened, your father died, and your girlfriend left you.

DOUG AITKEN: Yeah. [Laughs.] I guess I blanked out that year.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So on a personal level, what was it like to have to cope with the sudden death of your father, Robert? It's Robert, right? Which girlfriend left?

DOUG AITKEN: Gemma Ponsa.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: How long had you been together?

DOUG AITKEN: We were together for about six or seven years. She was from Barcelona.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And so which happened first, your father died or your girlfriend left?

DOUG AITKEN: First his death, loss, then double loss.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Yeah. Do want to talk about the breakup?

DOUG AITKEN: I don't really know if there's much to talk about.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Is that the longest relationship you've had?

DOUG AITKEN: Probably.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: It had to be hard.

DOUG AITKEN: Yeah, it was pretty rough.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Was she an artist?

DOUG AITKEN: No, food was her thing. She was really deep into food.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Do you want to talk about the difficulty of having relationships and being an artist?

DOUG AITKEN: You should do a book on that!

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: It's hard. Yeah, it's hard. I've interviewed a lot of artists; it's hard.

DOUG AITKEN: Give me a few sound bites.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, Larry Bell always warns women that artists are married to their art, and if they expect anything else, it's a recipe for bad things.

DOUG AITKEN: Is Larry in a relationship?

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Now he is, yeah.

[Side conversation.]

So, yeah, tell me about your personal life.

DOUG AITKEN: I don't know, that's too vague of a question. [Laughs.]

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, how—you were with this woman for six or seven years, very attached. Was it a sudden breakup?

DOUG AITKEN: It was a slow disintegration. I met Gemma when I was doing an exhibition in Barcelona, at the Mies van der Rohe Pavilion at La Caixa, and we were very close. I think it was someone who you meet and you connect with, and there is this very deep root system. I remember just the first hour I met her. She was translating Jodorowsky's poems from French to English for me. So she moved out here to Los Angeles eventually. We were different people over time and kind of grew apart a little bit, but I think for her it was very difficult, leaving Barcelona and Northern Spain. She had a root system there that was so intense, it was hard for her to find traction here. But we went through a lot and we were incredibly close.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: [. . .] You have an original score by Terry Riley in your bedroom, which would indicate great fondness. Tell me about your interest in the work of Terry Riley.

DOUG AITKEN: Well, I think Terry is one of the most important creators of the 20th century, and it's interesting because it's not for one reason or one work or one movement. It's that he could innovate so much, in so many directions, and each of those directions runs so deep and is so pure to what it is.

With Terry, obviously, I found his music before I ever knew him. I heard things in it that, to me, really related to problems that I was trying to solve in my artwork. It was interesting when you see something that's been worked out conceptually in an entirely different medium, you know? That goes back to the idea of, how do you see culture?

So with Terry, I had heard some pieces of his music that are quite extreme, that haven't really seen much of the light of day. Some of the tape loops from the mid-'60s are abrasive and repetitious and they're hard to listen to, but if you go there, they can give you back something which is so unexpected. And then there's other pieces which are shimmering and beautiful, like *A Rainbow in Curved Air*. Or *In C* is such a masterpiece of empowering the player.

With *In C*, you have a composition that's only a page long, but the performer is able to author it. It could be performed between something like 50 minutes and 90 minutes. There can be different combinations of instruments if you choose to have those combinations. You can play different cycles and patterns, for as long or as short as you might want to. So you have this totally liquid

artwork that's made intentionally as a system, and I think that idea of creating systems, the idea of creativity making systems for me, has always been something that I've been really drawn towards.

I don't like the idea of defining yourself by a medium, but I love the idea of systems and structures, and zooming out from a wide aerial view and looking at how you can really change things. I think with Terry's music, it's seminal in how he's influenced and changed so many different modes of music.

So we eventually met each other, and it was kind of a long, slow, long-distance relationship for a long time, and then our first true collaboration was *Altered Earth*, in Arles, in the South of France.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: We haven't talked about *Altered Earth* yet.

DOUG AITKEN: So I said to Terry, "There's this earthwork, this moving-image earthwork that I've been working on for several years, and we're finally going to open it." It was in a train factory from the turn of the 20th century; it's a huge space.

*Altered Earth* was a multiscreen piece we filmed in the Camargue region in the south of France over two years. We filmed like a series of chapters. Like if you were to lay a grid down on the landscape, and each section of the grid you filled with a different story, and in this final installation, they all fold together like origami and create this large, complete moving-image and sound installation.

So my proposal for Terry was just that he would play at the opening, but I told him that he would not be on stage, and this would not be a performance that he would normally do. At first he was reluctant, and he said, "I play on stage; that's what I do. I've been playing on stage for a long time now. I haven't done happenings since the '60s." But you have to realize Terry's past, and you're talking to someone who had done I think what's considered the first rave ever, the first from sunset to sunrise continuous musical performance. So, I mean, he had really done some extreme projects in the '60s and '70s, in that direction, and I knew he was close with the Fluxus movement, and his best friends were Walter De Maria and La Monte Young, and Bruce Conner.

So I knew Terry really understood, and we had a sense of mutual trust; he would be willing to take that leap. Long story short, he did. I said, "You know, it would be amazing if you can create an improvisational performance that's throughout this installation, so that as you play, the viewer follows you as you walk through the installation to a different part, and you improvised again to a different set of moving images, and then again."

So I remember distinctly. He finally called me about this; I had a respirator on. It was sweaty, the hottest day of summer. I was cutting some material, and my pocket is vibrating. I pull out the phone, and I see Terry is on the line. We had talked a bunch that summer, and he kept saying how he couldn't figure it out, and this wasn't right for him. I just thought, Maybe this time, I just don't pick up, and I'll call him back later. I picked up the call expecting a rejection.

I said, "Terry, what's going on?" and he says, "Well, you know, Doug, I've really been thinking about it, and I know you want this to be nomadic and not on a stage, so I have a proposal for you." I said, "What's the proposal?" He said, "Would you be into getting me a donkey?" I said, "What do you mean? What do you need a donkey for?" He said, "Well, I was thinking I could strap the harmonium to the back of the donkey, and someone could lead the donkey through your installation while I'll be playing it."

I knew then that we were going to have an incredible dialogue, and then the project became much

more extreme than that, in a great way. But it was really kind of a starting point for our deeper friendship and collaborations.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: You had him perform at your MOCA retrospective as well. You had him do the same kind of improvisatory work there.

DOUG AITKEN: Yeah, Terry came down for the MOCA show. He came for a week, and every day he played improvisationally to a different installation in the exhibition. The final one was incredible. The final one was in the *Sonic Fountain*, which was where the floor of the museum was excavated. There was a kind of white liquid; it was pouring through the ceiling and into an open pond. That was a musical composition that I had made out of the dripping water going to the underwater microphones. Terry used the sculpture as a tempo and then sang a raga set to the sound sculpture. It was just magical.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: That sounds amazing.

Well, speaking of oral histories, tell me about the oral histories that you did, and why you did them, your own series of interviews that you conducted with people who interested you. Just tell me the whole saga of how that came about, because it's so unusual. What was the first project where you interview people?

DOUG AITKEN: I call them "conversations." The first conversation projects I did were in 2005. I remember it was New Year's [Day] of that year, and I would always kind of ask myself, like, of the year that just passed, What was of value? And I remember thinking two things, and each of those things were conversations that I had had.

One was a conversation I had late at night with Matthew Barney, in Japan. We were both installing at the same group show, and we were just free, friends alone with sake, just really talking about process very honestly. The other was a conversation I had with Kenneth Anger. Kenneth was opening up about everything.

And I thought about this, and I thought that's so interesting, that, really, there's nothing in this past year, nothing material or physical that I care about. It's only conversations and ideas, an exchange with someone that matters to you. So I thought about this, and then I thought that this is one of the things I'm really grateful for, is that I have people that I can have that degree of exchange with. It enriches your life.

So at that moment I thought it would be amazing to really do a project to take these very intimate conversations with people who are creating things and capture them, just find some way to preserve and share them.

So I was thinking about it, and then this other idea kind of came out of left field, and that was this sense—at that time, I was obsessed with this idea of nonlinearity and art. So I said then, Okay, that's what I should do. I'll create a series of conversations with people who are really innovating the nonlinear narrative. Some of these are people I know, some of them people I've met, some, people I have never met in my life. I'll track them down and we'll have these conversations just about that subject.

I did 28 conversations and made the book *Broken Screen*, and it really kind of enabled me to go to excavate and discover a lot of hunches that I had, or questions that I had always wanted to ask, with people like Robert Altman. All of a sudden I'm with Bob, and able to ask him about the structure

of the film *Nashville* and where it came from, and he takes it back even further, to when he was making training films for the Air Force. Can I tell you this quick story?

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Yeah. You can tell me any stories.

DOUG AITKEN: Oh, this is one of my favorites. Altman—of all the American directors, he's one of the only directors who subversively got into Hollywood to actually make films that would get out there to a large audience, but then just fuck with the narrative continuously. So *Nashville* was in 1975, and he said, "During the Korean War, in the early '50s, I made these training films for pilots, and they were boring films, shot on 16mm. All these pilots in training show up in this classroom in Illinois somewhere. I turn off the light, hit the projector, and I look around the room, and I see all these different pilot trainees. And one's sleeping; one's chewing gum; one's drawing on his folder; but none of them are paying attention. The film is over. I turn the lights on and we have a quiz to see if this film has communicated, and nobody gets it, right?"

So Altman goes home that night, and says, "I'm going to try an experiment." So he takes the same linear film and he cuts it up in the editing room, and he makes a series of loops, and he comes in the next day and gets several projectors instead of one, and plays these loops all at once, on multiple projectors. They're all in this same boring classroom. He turns off the lights, and at the end of it, long story short, everyone in the room follows it, and they understand the protocol now of what it takes to get in this plane and turn it on.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Hmm.

DOUG AITKEN: And, you know, this isn't entertainment; this isn't art; this is perception. I think one of the points that he was making with that was that we are underestimating the human potential for how we see and experience, in the forms of what we make, the structure itself. So when we were talking earlier about structure, that's my interest. It's not in what story are you telling; it's in the structure itself and how to rework the structures so that they can get closer to who we are and how we experience, and to meet the human potential.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So you had Robert Altman. Who were some of the highlights of the people you had conversations with?

DOUG AITKEN: It was a really interesting and a wide selection of people, from Werner Herzog to Pierre Huyghe, or Alejandro Jodorowsky.

I remember I set up a call with Bruce Conner for this, and, you know, I hadn't seen Bruce since I was 17 in a parking lot in Santa Monica, which I mentioned. So I have this phone call and I talk to him and, like, in the first one minute he says, "What is this?" And I say, "This is a conversation about nonlinearity, et cetera," and he says, "Oh, can't do it; I'm a linear artist." It was classic Bruce Conner, just that fucking-with-the-system moment. So we had this really awkward conversation on the phone. It wasn't in person. I think, to him, I was just an anonymous voice on the line, and it was just awkward and uncomfortable and strange.

So a couple days later I'm at the studio on Sunday, and I always like to work on Sundays because no one bothers me. The phone rings; I pick it up, and it's Bruce Conner, and he says, "Hey, Doug, I'm calling to apologize. I know that was really awkward, the way we had that conversation, the way I came across. I looked you up and I saw what you were doing, and I really like your artwork. Let's have this conversation." We had this conversation, and it just went on, like, for an hour or so; it was really interesting. And then at the end of it he said, "I'd like to call you on Sundays, because if you're

a real artist, you work on Sundays, and I'd like to keep talking with you." So nothing was ever planned, but I—most of the time on Sunday he would call, and we would have these chats, and it went on for a couple years.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Amazing.

DOUG AITKEN: It was about all kinds of stuff. It was really interesting, and we had a lot to share, because I think we were both restless and we both didn't want to kind of be in these confined situations. Bruce had pushed every medium. He even told me about a film installation he did at a coffeehouse in the mid-'50s, in San Francisco, that was, of course, undocumented. It was just interesting, having that rapport.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And he was legendarily difficult. I mean, he was known for being very, very difficult. So you got across.

DOUG AITKEN: Yeah, yeah.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And who else did you enjoy talking to in this process?

DOUG AITKEN: Werner Herzog is always interesting. [Laughs.] We had these kind of different encounters over the years. The first one was at Telluride, when I had a little experimental film there. He showed up, and we were in the mailroom together, and I said, "Hi, Werner, you just got here." And he said, "I 'vocked' here," and I said, "What do you mean?" You know, Telluride is high up in the mountains; it's pretty far away from any airport. And he said, "Yeah, I fly into"—I don't even know where it is; it was like 60 miles away or something, you know, "and I walk here. I go to Telluride every year and I walk, and I just spend the whole time walking up the mountain to get here, and that's part of the process."

He's such a character. And over time, we got to know each other. And I remember this ridiculous dinner up in the Hollywood Hills, at this producer's house, and the dinner was only directors. There was, like, four or five directors and me. I'm the odd person out. So I'm sitting there, and there's Werner Herzog to my right, and to my left is Alexander Payne, and over there is this young cocky director who had made the awful movie *Moneyball*, and it's dessert time.

This woman who's bringing the plates in and taking them out comes around with dessert, and the dessert is a bowl of berries. It was like the archetype of a Hollywood moment. First she goes up with the bowl to the cocky director who made the movie *Moneyball*, and he ignores her and blows her off. And he says, "I don't want this; just get those out of here." Then she brings them to Alexander Payne, who is an incredibly sensitive guy, like a super softie, like his films *Nebraska* and *Sideways* and all that. Alexander Payne completely engages her, and he says, "Oh, what farmers' market do you go to? Do you know Enrique in the berries section? He's a friend of mine." Right? And then this bowl comes over to between Werner and I, and we're in conversation, and then the bowl is kind of hovering there in her hands, and then Werner looks at the berries, and then he looks at me, and he says, "Raspberries are for the veek; get them out of here!" [They laugh.]

Interpretation, raspberries are for the weak. And it was just kind of summed up Werner.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: You know, you do these interviews with people, and interestingly, this will be five interviews. Your father was an attorney; attorneys interview people. I mean, criminal or defense, they have to take depositions; they have to assess human behavior. How much of that do you think you get from your father?

DOUG AITKEN: He was completely curious about everybody. He was introspective, but if you're in a room, he would just want to know all about you, and he would love the process of learning that. And my mother was a journalist, so she was also looking at things, at how they work, trying to get under the hood, in a sense. So I think I probably got that from them a little bit. I remember growing up, just sitting down at dinner and just getting these interrogations—"What did you do today?" "Who's this?" "What's going on?" Not in a bad way, and I would say, "Stop asking me questions." But that's what happens, of course, and I inherit that, so I'm asking questions to you and everyone.

But I do think that, starting with *Broken Screen*—which was a highly focused project, and it was really talking about, in that period of time, something that was a new template in expressing. It was kind of at the dawn of the internet age and the fragmentation of information that we're now much more familiar with. But I think at that point in time, it was a very timely exploration, but also interesting.

I mean, Buñuel, I would say, made extremely fragmented films, and then you see the legacy of Buñuel into Jodorowsky, into *Holy Mountain*, or *El Topo*. Those are a series of cut-up performances turned into cinema. We were talking about Altman to the left of us, and to the right of us we might see someone like Pierre Huyghe or Philippe Parreno, Matthew Barney or Pipilotti Rist. So I think it's one of the things about culture that is the most valuable, perhaps. Without culture, we don't have a horizon to look towards; we don't have a space for ambiguity and questioning and experimentation, and without that, we only have the foreground. The foreground is survival. No matter how we wrap it up in fashion and commodification, without culture, life is still just survival.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I love that answer. [. . .]

DOUG AITKEN: So I always, from the beginning, felt that to make anything, you just have to figure out how to make it; you have to figure out how to get it done. There's never any padding; there's never any kind of support that's going to be there to help you.

And it was funny because I remember doing a show at the Louisiana Museum in Denmark, and the next morning my phone rang and it was Lars von Trier, the director. He said, "Doug, I wanted to meet you. I saw your show last night and it really connected with me, and can we meet today?" So I went over to the Zentropa studios he had. It was an abandoned military base owned by the Danish government that he had leased out.

We sat down, and the first thing he said is, "I wanted to meet you because I know that you're like me," and I said, "Why is that?" He said, "Because neither one of us wants to be told what to do, and we want to be able to make what we want to make and not have to answer to anyone." And I never thought about it before; I never really thought about it in words like that. I didn't see that working was pushing against someone, or rebelling. It was just that I just don't want to be shackled.

We had this afternoon together, and it was interesting because all of the things that he was defining about his process were actually quite similar to the way I was trying to work on my own in this little island out here. In the end, he makes films, but every film is radically different, and I think he has stretched the definition of cinema in the most elastic ways of the last couple decades. But just that core desire, you have to find a way. [. . .]

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I want to talk about one sculpture, and then I'll let you close, because I know you have to leave for Aspen in the morning. I want to talk about a sculpture that was in your last show at Regen Projects that's gotten so much attention, and I never really got to talk to you about it, per se, that one sculpture, the ghost telephone booth, *Twilight*.

Where did that come from? It's a white, illuminated payphone booth. I think there's a sound component—okay, but tell me about *Twilight*, because I love that. I love the way it looked.

DOUG AITKEN: Oh, thank you, Hunter. *Twilight* uses a freestanding payphone booth, the kind that you see—that still litter the city, but nobody uses anymore.

One night, I found myself in downtown LA late at night, and I was walking into an empty parking lot alone, and I had a few glasses of wine. As I was standing there, I looked next to me, and I saw three separate, freestanding telephones, payphones, and I started looking at them. I was feeling isolated, I remember, and I looked at them, and the first phone, the phone headset itself was stolen, and the second phone, the entire phone structure was stolen, and the third one was vandalized so hard it was impossible to make a call.

I thought, This is kind of incredible. These are now sculptures that are just standing here, and they'll never be used again. There will never be a moment to use a payphone again; that moment is history. We're done with that chapter and we've moved on. I thought about this idea that now that they no longer have a function, they just become sculptures, like readymades. Each has its own story, and they're dotted throughout the landscape, living silently until they're de-installed.

And that encounter, that visual, stuck with me, and so then I started trying to collect decommissioned phones. I would find places that had them, and I would bring them back to the studio. And eventually, we made that work, *Twilight*, where we took the entire phone and we cast every single part of it. We cast it out of a translucent white plastic, and inside that was LED light. So the phone glowed, but no longer has any kind of color or texture; it's just pure form. Glowing and pulsing with light from within, every part of it is illuminated.

The sculpture is freestanding inside the museum space, but the sculpture also can sense everything around it. It can sense who's in the room, how fast they're moving, how many people are there, how close they're coming to it. It's like sonar, and what happens is this allows the light inside it to react in different rhythms and patterns, depending on what's happening around it. So the phone literally starts living again. It's creating rhythms and patterns and tempos. It might be static and motionless one minute, and maybe as you approach it, it starts pulsing, almost like a heartbeat that's moving faster and faster.

There is a series of works, for me, that really explore living systems, where the artwork is alive somehow, and where it can react or continuously change, and never repeat itself, in the case of the *Sonic Pavilion* in Brazil. Or the Seattle Art Museum facade, which senses everything around it, and the film footage that we made—which is days of footage—edits itself according to what's happening around on the street, or if Mount Rainier is visible, or if the clouds are moving fast. If they move faster, it changes the edit. So in these pieces, what happens is you, as the artist, you create a system, and then the artwork creates itself and is live.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: But what strikes me about that piece in particular, and then also I would say *SONG 1*, and quite a few of your pieces, is I always—I feel like there's a kind of poetic—a kind of pathos and poignancy in some of these things that you choose, that I associate, because I'm romantic, with the kind of romantic narrative of either the song being played or the vision from the road.

Do you have that in your head at all, or is that just—do you have that intention, or is that something that the viewer brings to it?



DOUG AITKEN: We live in a visual world, and I think everybody is drawn towards certain things. I often found myself drawn to moments of inaction, or in-between spaces, moments that are unresolved and maybe have a more existential tone about them.

For a long time, the photographs that I took never had humans, or if I ever had a human, it was silhouetted or in the distance. It was never by design; I never set out to do that. It was just the way I saw things, I suppose.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, it's kind of a romantic longing, or a—yes, I'll stay with that, a kind of longing; there's a kind of longing quality to it, pathos. Okay, just another perception.

Now, to close—because we're almost at the end—Los Angeles. Could you have become the artist you've become anywhere except LA, and do you think LA offered opportunities to you that you might not have had elsewhere, or is that old thinking?

DOUG AITKEN: For a while, my works were focusing everywhere but Los Angeles. They always seemed to be generated in different places, like Namibia or Guyana or India or whatnot, and then there are some pieces which are made out of here, maybe *Electric Earth*, or a piece like *Mirage* kind of comes out of that extremely American sense of banality. I never really felt like a West Coast artist. I never really thought about it. I don't know if I am; I don't know if I'm not.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, that's—there's your answer.

I think also, times had changed. In the time you were coming up, Los Angeles, you think of a different kind of place than the previous generation, where it was a little bit less cosmopolitan. But I was thinking, just like the book you did, *Into the West* [*The Idea of the West*]—

DOUG AITKEN: Yeah, yeah.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: —I know you've said that your work isn't about the west, but I feel like I always find parts of it that are kind of about the west.

DOUG AITKEN: Maybe it's equal parts.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Is there anything you would like to add to this interview?

DOUG AITKEN: Well, I want to see you again soon.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: All right, well, thank you very much, Doug Aitken, for your incredible amount of time—

DOUG AITKEN: Hunter, thank you for your extreme patience.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: —that you've been spending with me.

DOUG AITKEN: Patience and putting up with me.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Thanks from the Archives of American Art.

DOUG AITKEN: [Laughs.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]