

On the Camera Arts and Consecutive Matters – the writings of Hollis Frampton

Bruce Jenkins (ed and Introduction)

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The artist Hollis Frampton describes the experience of using video for the first time in the late 1960s: “I made a piece, a half-hour long, in one continuous take. Then I rewound the notation and saw my work right away ... some part of my puritanical filmmaker’s nature remains appalled to this day. The gratification was so intense and immediate that I felt confused. I thought I might be turning into a barbarian; or maybe even a musician.”

Making music it seems is one of the few things Frampton did not turn his hand to, so being guilt-tripped by an activity which thirty-five years later is performed daily by millions of mobile phone users, says much about an artist located securely in the moment. For him, deferment of simple pleasure in favour of the intellect was both civilised and melodic. What emerges from the papers collected here is a complex person both humorous and witty, occasioning asides to emerge from intensely erudite articles ruminating on issues of late-modernist thinking.

Frampton’s foreshortened career passed through the vicissitudes of classical, modernist and contemporary culture, moving him between technologies of the ancient, the analogue and the digital with ease. Before his death in 1984 he had completed making a series of 16mm artists’ films, much admired by his peers*, which never strayed far from his fascination with mathematics and systems: “I’m

a spectator of mathematics like others are spectators of soccer or pornography”. As a central player in the vigorous arts scene in the north-eastern USA during the 1960s and 70s, he went on to play a central role in the development of trans-disciplinary workshops and programs for artists developing computer hardware and software. Deducing from the cornucopia of names he deploys, (if not the exact references), he was a prodigious reader, and a writer of essays most of which were published in key journals, such as Artforum, October and the Millennium Film Journal. These have been brought together in this part autobiographical volume by Bruce Jenkins, (another player on the scene at the time, now Professor of Film, Video and New Media at the Art Institute of Chicago).

Frampton’s high school education was unusual for the times, encouraging breadth and depth of thinking shared and developed with several other now well-known artists, Frank Stella and Carl Andre. Never completing a formal education he was his own scholar, seeking out those who attracted him. He was a daily visitor to Ezra Pound for many months, the doyen of American letters, dying in hospital. The rich and resonant language of the classics clearly fed into Frampton’s subsequent writing (and doubtless oratorical style), which for today’s tastes may prove too verbose for some readers. His explorations of creativeness, its processes and its meanings, focuses initially on a range of heroic protagonists, from Muybridge and Stieglitz, to Eisenstein and Strand, via Joyce, Beckett and Weston, Arbus and Borges. Vertov, the Russian filmmaker, experimenting for the revolutionary cause and way beyond creating ‘effects’ was closely engaged with understanding affect and audience. Avant-gardists all, this may be too obtuse, or casual or inconsequential for other readers, some of who may be scientists, for whom Frampton has special regard: “Once upon a time”, (he begins, For a Metahistory of Film chapter, the necessary ‘marriage of cinema and the photograph’), “history had its own Muse, and her name was Clio. ... Who first centred his thumbs on Clio’s windpipe is anyone’s guess, but ... the quaintly disinterested art historians of the nineteenth century, lent a willing hand in finishing her off. They had Science behind them. Science favoured the fact

because the fact seemed to favour predictability.”

As a professional photographer for a period — there are two portfolios included — Frampton was thinking and writing about art practice from the inside. Photographers and filmmakers, up until the present era, were close to the materials of image making, the stuff of glass, wood, metal and chemistry. Proximity to the levers of the Age of Machines encouraged invention, mastering processes of bringing into being a previously unformulated signified, the least of which is any work of art’s ‘..own ontogeny’. In the formalist tradition: “Once the set of axioms has been isolated and disintricated (sic), the artist may proceed to modify it in any of four ways: by substitution, constriction, augmentation, or by displacement.” A ‘rules’ based approach to critical analysis of others work supplemented and guided much of his own creativeness in the fields of making photographs and film and served well his pioneering fascination as an artist, with the computer. In two previously unpublished three-page documents in 1978, his proposal for a Digital Arts Lab and resources for building hardware and software for computer processed and generated video, resonates with the rhetoric now familiar across the tertiary education sector.

The volume is handsomely presented but lacks an adequate bibliography and no biography, a must for a monograph of an American artist dead some twenty-five years. (A fulsome UK website contains a lot of this information together with links to online versions of many of his films and some of the articles reprinted here). Earlier sections of the book, containing the set-pieces for conference and journal are in contrast to the later collections of working notes on the film and photographic art he made. The unpublished notes and reflections on *Zorns Lemma* are particularly engaging as creative writing, as addendum, helpful for those able to see the film. The film (*nostalgia*) brings together a selection of his photographs that are recorded on film as they burn — on screen they are viewed with a voiceover relating the stories about each one, within the frame of the motion picture, within the frame of the photograph: “Here it is! Look at it! Do you see what I see?”

* I met Hollis Frampton at the experimental, avant-garde film festival in London in 1973 where his films had been received with great enthusiasm. We exchanged notes about film but also our shared experiences of living on working farms, he in the north-eastern States, I in the West of England. “Wolfman...” is how he described his youthful rural neighbours responses to his presence in their midst, a tall, hairy professor from a nearby college town, dressed in striped sweaters. “Wolfman.....aaahooooo...” they’d scream as they cycled by his place, his booming voice carrying across the heads of the throng at the Festival. He was one of a posse of Americans who had arrived for the event and they rode into town with saddlebags filled with reputations familiar to some in London at least, through the distribution of their work for some five years by the London Filmmakers Co-op. Some like Hollis came with a saddlebag already filled with European cultural baggage, another pioneer, Jonas Mekas, went off with Peter Kubelka to visit the British Museum. After several days of the Festival which for many proved to be an important nexus for contemporary experimental film, aesthetic and political debate – the Allende government was crushed in Chile during the event – the elders returned to declare: “We have been to see where real art exists....”. For many of the European filmmakers at least, departure points for future work were identified, in the face of teleological arrival points described in such terms.