

Exhibition reviews

edited by Miriam De Rosa and Malin Wahlberg (NECS Publication Committee)

Hollis Frampton's 'other work'

Hollis Frampton, CEPA, 20 June – 5 September 2015, Buffalo, New York, with ancillary exhibitions at Squeaky Wheel Film & Media Art Center, Dean Brownrout Modern Contemporary, and the Western New York Book Arts Center

Hollis Frampton featured an excellent exhibition of photographs and other visual artifacts by the pioneering American filmmaker, artist, and writer. CEPA (the Center for Exploratory and Perceptual Art when it was established in 1974) stands as one of the most important not-for-profit photography-based art centers in the United States. Housed in the restored 1892 Market Arcade building, the gallery presented three floors of photographs, collage works, early color xerography, and artist notes by Frampton. The self-conscious diversity of works in the exhibition and its location in Buffalo is crucial to understanding Frampton's status not only as one of the most celebrated experimental American filmmakers, but also a multi-media artist whose 'other work' (as he called it) in photography, xerography, and serial imagery deserves recognition.¹

For readers unfamiliar with Frampton, an introduction may be in order. Hollis Frampton (1936-1984) released his first film in 1966 at the age of 30. Highly erudite, with a command of Latin, Ancient Greek, French, and German, and an encyclopedic knowledge of art and literature, Frampton attended but never completed high school (Philips Academy) or university (Western Reserve, in his native Ohio). Frampton explored poetry in the 1950s, studying with Ezra Pound, and then was immersed in the emergent New York City avant-gardes of painting, sculpture, and dance from 1958 until he decamped to Western New York in 1970. His circle included Carl Andre, Simone Forti, Robert Huot, Lee Lozano, Michael Snow, Twyla Tharp, and Joyce Wieland. Indeed, a fascinating element of the exhibition is the documentary quality of assemblages, contact sheet-style, of portraits of artists: e.g. *Larry Poons (April 1963)*, *Robert Morris (April 1963)*, *John Chamberlain (April 1963)*, *James Rosenquist (Palm Sunday, 1963)*, and a wonderful double bill,-

Frank Stella/Hollis Frampton (1958-62). The images of these artists at the moment of their emergence in the New York art scene captures not only the detail of the scene (Frampton photographs artists in their studios in the poverty of downtown lofts at the time), but he also captures the performative element of artists considering their 'image' for the art world. His brilliance, dry wit, and reputation as an inexhaustible raconteur is remarked upon by many in that scene, though at the time his *métier* – still photography and experimental film – left him, in his words, 'a committed illusionist' in an art world dominated by abstraction.

Frampton worked in multiple media throughout his career, including, as mentioned above, still photography and colour xerography, but also video, performance, and computer software and hardware design, the latter at the Digital Art Lab at SUNY Buffalo, where he was hired in 1973. Before making his mark as a filmmaker (in 1970, *Zorns Lemma* was the first experimental feature to screen at the New York Film Festival) he worked as a color photography technician. Indeed, although Frampton has a deserved reputation (partly through his witty and allusive published writings in *Artforum* and *October*) as a conceptual artist, he had just as systematic an understanding of concrete technical practices, evident in his attention to color, tone, and composition in his photography and films

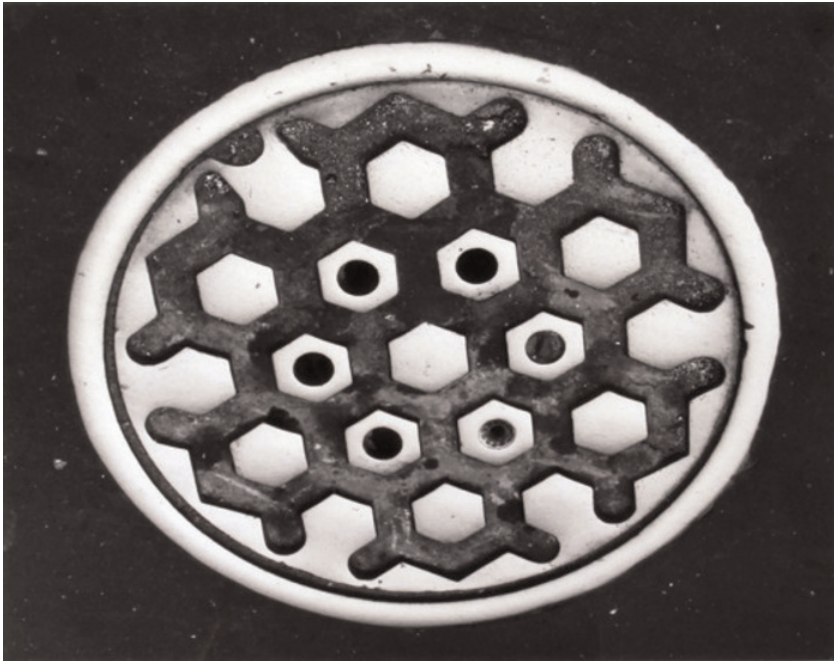
This element of craft is on display in the exhibition, particularly in early photographs like *Untitled* (1960-62) – a rich, high contrast image of a manhole cover whose hexagonal design elements echo later motifs in his unfinished magnum opus *Magellan*. Twenty years later in his career the same craft and metaphorical richness is found in the magnificent and moving serial work *ADSVMVS ABSVMVS* (1982), dedicated to the memory of Frampton's father. It presents a series of fourteen images of desiccated animals and plants, each accompanied by a fabulist text on the formerly living being. For example, the following accompanies *XI. GRASS FROG (*Rana pipiens*):*[T]his specimen was discovered by Will Faller, Jr. in May, 1981 on the shoulder of a macadam road in Randallville, Town of Lebanon, New York. The timid soprano amphibian becomes highly vocal under collective sexual arousal, improvising stochastic nocturnal choruses of considerable elegance. It is nominally edible, but meager.

Still, Frampton understands the dangers of fetishising craft in photography, the mechanical illusion of which he embraced. In one of the many documents presented in vitrines at the show is a scribbled note:

[T]he photograph does not respond gratefully to examination as object. Concentration on object-making (cf Ansel Adams) leads to sterility.

He then maps two paths for 'CRAFT', one for 'Painting à Permanence' and the other for 'Phot[ography] à Normative Adequacy'. Although Frampton continued

to make photographs throughout his career, he was as interested in found images as he was in his own carefully composed pictures.



In terms of his film work, after *Zorns Lemma*, Frampton's most celebrated and influential films were part of his seven-part serial work *Hapax Legomena* (1971-72). (*nostalgia*) was selected for the Library of Congress National Film Registry in 2003, while *Critical Mass* has inspired its own software (designed by his former SUNY Buffalo student Barbara Lattanzi) and a performance version (conceived by Kerry Tribe). Unlike other avant-garde filmmakers of the time, Frampton embraced film not as a medium of self-exploration and personal expression (as Frampton said, that was inevitable anyway) but as the culmination of a conceptual search for a mode of investigation of the world, of art, and of consciousness itself. The legacy of that extraordinary consciousness resonates in the work of artists and filmmakers today like Lattanzi, Tribe, Su Friedrich, Peter Greenaway, Lev Manovich, Damian Moppett, Evan Meaney, and countless others.

Even as Frampton's work has influenced others, so much of it, like the new material unveiled at this exhibition, is underexplored (or was unfinished at his early death at age 48). For example, as previously noted, the major project that occupied the last decade of his life was *Magellan*, a multi-part project totaling 36 hours of film that was meant to be screened over roughly a calendar year. As Frampton wrote, *Magellan* was dedicated to 'making film over as it should have

been' had it started from 'the most obvious material limits of the total film machine'.² This playful but highly ambitious take on modernism and film leaves us with fascinating fragments of what Frampton foresaw as a work of art that could serve as an 'epistemological model for the conscious human universe'. Some material from the show is linked to *Magellan*, including *A Visitation of Insomnia* (#5) (1970-73), a series of photographs taken at the same time as his film *INGENIVM NOBIS IPSA PVELLA FECIT* (1975). Other pieces partake in Frampton's preference for the multi-part serial or cyclical work (of which *Magellan* was one of the most ambitious in the history of film), in which each image stands on its own but benefits from its resonance with elements of the larger work. For example, the colour xerography series *By Any Other Name – Series #1* (1979) presents images of food labels with the image colours and densities transformed through the particular chemistry of early colour Xerox. However, as with so much of Frampton's work, the play with language and titling is central. In this case, he isolates foods whose brand names are nonsensical, inverting the food and brand name: e.g. *Thick Soy Sauce Brand Pistols*, or *Clam Brand Whole Baby Geishas*. Another treat is the series he made with Marion Faller in homage to Eadweard Muybridge's *Animal Locomotion* photographs, titled *Sixteen Studies from Vegetable Locomotion* (1975). Against Muybridge's familiar black-and-white grid we see *Savoy cabbage flying* [var. "Chieftain"] and *Sweet corn disrobing* [var. "Early Sunglow"].



Supplementing the many artworks hung for the exhibition were textual materials in viewing cabinets. Frampton left behind many production notes, often handwritten on index cards, which were favoured by artists in this period. A real highlight of the show was a series called '24 Art Anecdotes', consisting of quotations by or exchanges between artists. These ranged from the familiar ('Mallarmé and a "painter": "poems not made of ideas, they're made of words"') through the less

familiar (Joyce: "Did other things with that hand") to quotations that only Frampton could have overheard ('Mike Snow + "an interlocutor": "LE VIN ET ICI"). The last belongs to Frampton's stepson, Will Faller: 'Will F. (age 6): "Not think about them, just make them"', which is good advice for any artist, particularly one as devoted to thought and consciousness as Frampton. Other documents included correspondence with Stan Brakhage, letters of reference for Frampton's hire at SUNY Buffalo by Standish Lawder (Yale) and Bill Judson (Carnegie Museum), and notes on art and theory which, in their wit and economy, have the quality of aphorisms: 'THE UNIVERSE came into existence in absence of a critical tradition', or 'THE CUT is what is made'. Finally, many of the photographs among the documents feature Frampton himself, along with production photographs from his films.

The exhibition was mounted in conjunction with Dean Brownrout Modern Contemporary (which specializes in representing artists and works with a connection to Western New York) and the Squeaky Wheel Film & Media Art Center (the only organisation in Western New York that provides equipment access and education and also has an exhibition space for film and digital media). The Western New York location and focus of the exhibition institutions is important for understanding the context for Frampton's wide-ranging work in multiple media in the 1970s and 1980s. SUNY Buffalo, a major international site for theory and poetics in this period, was the home of the Center for Media Study, which in its first decade was an innovative, even utopian, space for advanced practice and theorisation of visual and sound media. Buffalo joined schools like SUNY Binghamton, as well as museums and media arts centres in Utica and Syracuse, in housing avant-garde artists and media technologists in part of a larger push toward regionalisation of art and media centres that attempted to resist the force of the art world magnet New York City.³

The exhibition featured a number of ancillary exhibitions and events that expand our understanding of Frampton as a multi-media artist. Squeaky Wheel, established in 1985 and housed in the same building as CEPA, presented two of Frampton's films (in digital copies) in its gallery space and also hosted a resident guest artist, Evan Meaney, who has produced two digital media works in response to Frampton's films. Meaney's Frampton-inspired works include an appropriately minimalist video arcade version of *Lemon* (1969) and a very smart digital video homage to *Gloria!* (1979) titled *Ceibas: Epilogue – The Well of Representation* (2011), which renders the narratives of Frampton's film using 16-bit video game technology. The Western New York Book Arts Center also presented a series of books and text-related objects, including a little-known Frampton work titled *Torments [Tortures] of the Text* (1974-84), comprised of a rusted typewriter, along with a photograph of a book 'riddled with bullet holes' titled *Tortures [Torments] of the Text*

(1974-84). The summer exhibition had a series of screenings and live events that both look back at the history in which Frampton is embedded (e.g. a Digital Arts Lab roundtable bringing together former students) and look forward to ways in which his work continues to live in the work of other artists and technologies (e.g. a screening of films from *Magellan* with sound by Robert A. A. Lowe (aka LICHEMS), VWLS, and Lesionread). The constellation of art and events around the *Hollis Frampton* exhibition is a fitting tribute to the richness and diversity of his artistic practice and part of a larger renaissance of cultural and scholarly interest in a remarkable postwar American artist and thinker.

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References

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- Vasulka, Woody and Weibel, Peter (eds). *Buffalo heads: Media study, media practice, media pioneers, 1973-1990*. Karlsruhe & Cambridge: ZKM/MIT Press, 2008.

Notes

1. See the exhibition catalogue for an earlier exhibition of Frampton's 'other work' just before his death in 1984, at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery (*Hollis Frampton, Recollections/Recreations*: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York).
2. Frampton 2009.
3. An excellent and voluminous overview of the Center for Media Study is the unfortunately named exhibition catalogue *Buffalo Heads: Media Study, Media Practice, Media Pioneers, 1973-1990*, edited by Woody Vasulka and Peter Weibel for a remarkable exhibition at Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie (ZKM) in Karlsruhe.