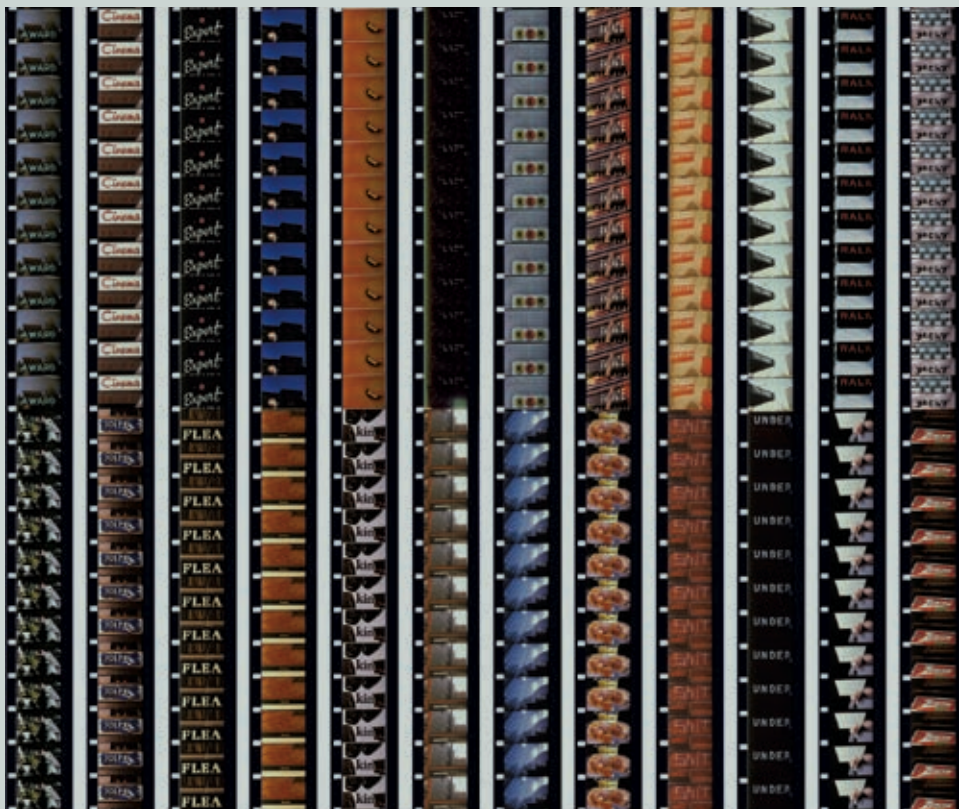


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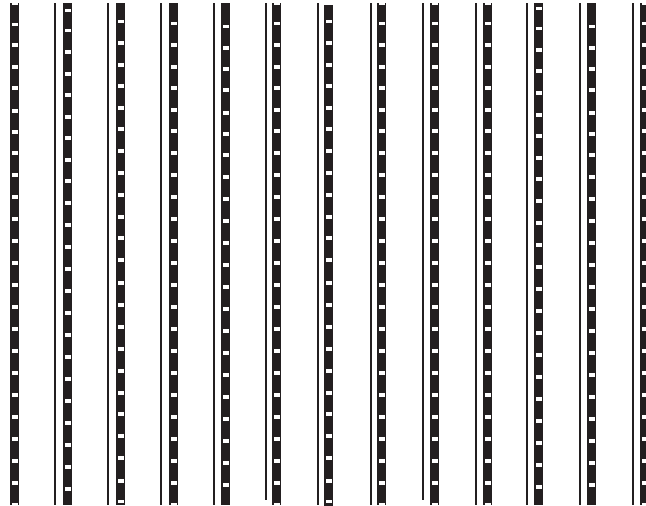
THE WRITINGS OF HOLLIS FRAMPTON

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
BRUCE JENKINS



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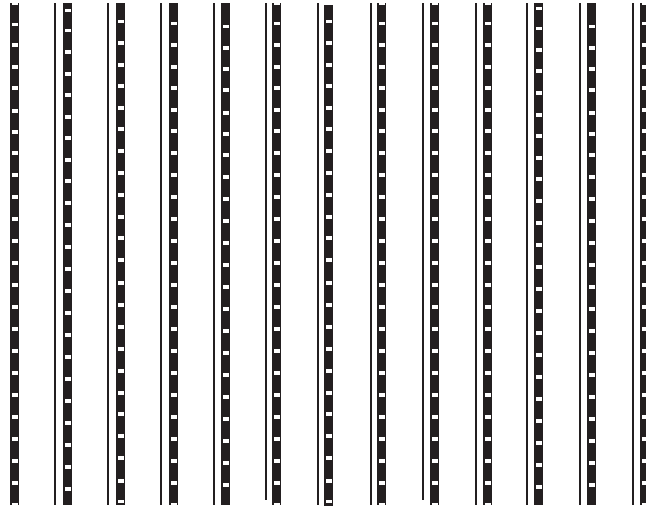
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On the Camera Arts and Consecutive Matters

THE WRITINGS OF HOLLIS FRAMPTON

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WRITINGART SERIES

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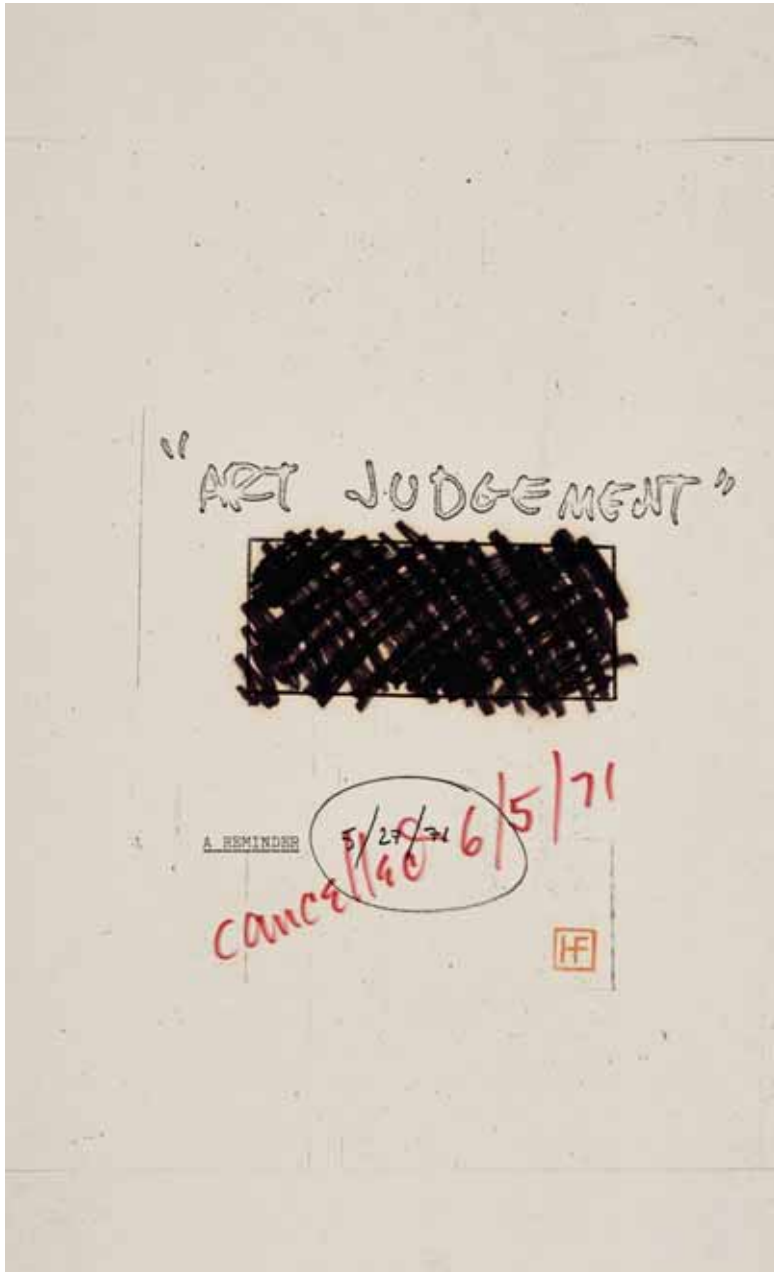
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A Reminder from Reasonable Facsimiles, 1971
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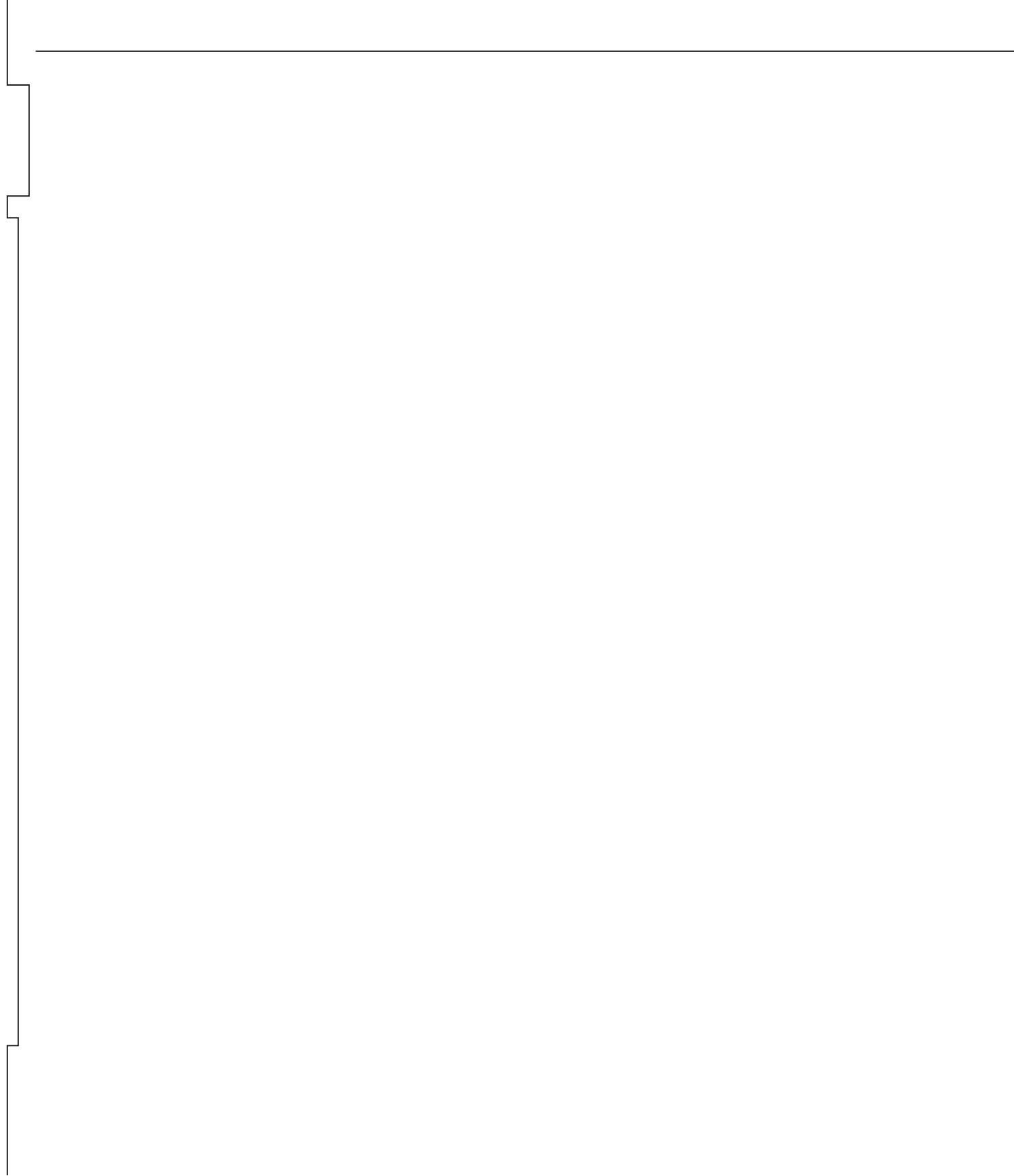
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COLLECTING HIS THOUGHTS: REMARKS ON THE WRITINGS OF HOLLIS FRAMPTON

Bruce Jenkins

A quarter-century ago, a selection of Hollis Frampton's major writings was published under the title *Circles of Confusion*.¹ That book, now long out of print, capped a significant period in Frampton's work as both an artist and what he came to call a "metahistorian" of the camera arts. The dozen essays contained in the book, written over as many years, chronicled his concerted efforts to develop an engaged, intellectually resonant, and distinctly modernist form of critical discourse for the fields of photography, film, and video—a discourse for which he sought equivalence not only with critical thinking in literature and the visual arts but, audaciously, in the philosophies of history and science as well. And yet as Frampton acknowledged in the Preface to the book, there was much more work to be done regarding what he termed "new options and responsibilities for speculative writing." His untimely death in 1984, a year after the book's publication, ended his own direct role in completing such tasks. Nonetheless, and despite difficulties in accessing them over the years, these critical interventions and metahistorical inquiries have proved exceedingly resonant and enduring, gradually leveraging just such a critical enterprise among a small but influential contingent of contemporary artists and scholars.

The republication of these twelve essays, together with a range of additional writings, including introductory remarks and lectures, production notes and proposals, correspondence and interviews, is intended to broaden that continuing enterprise and introduce the work to new audiences. They have been gathered together here, along with their lesser-known but no less provocative siblings, in a format that focuses thematically on Frampton's explorations in several related areas of inquiry. An attempt was made to compare the essays as they were published in 1983 in *Circles of Confusion* with their original publications and, where possible, with the author's manuscripts, restoring when necessary (meaning, when channeling the distinctive timbre of Hollis's voice) phrases, passages, or emphases that had been excised, correcting minor errors, and applying a consistent stylistic and grammatical schema to the whole. On occasion, editorial notes (marked B.J.) have been added where further explanation seems useful.

The impetus for Hollis Frampton's writing stemmed in part from what he deemed the paucity and poverty of then-contemporary critical discourse on the camera arts. These theoretical undertakings were an enterprise he could further deploy to anchor his own work as an artist: first in photography, a practice

he largely abandoned by the late 1960s, and then in his body of films, for which he gained international recognition. In many senses, the writing and the practice were inseparable: two aspects of the same aesthetic aspiration, each of which informed the other. He was, from the first, a writer, and he continually sought in his art a system as responsive in its cognitive and perceptual reach as that of natural language.

The model may have been established with one of his first pieces of published critical writing, in which he attempted to fend off the misguided appraisals of a newspaper critic reviewing an early exhibition of his colleague Frank Stella's paintings. Composed as a letter to the editor of the *New York Herald Tribune* in 1959 and ghostwritten under Stella's name, the brief manifesto addressed a significant misreading at the material level of the work.² Rarely were the intentions of Stella's painting misinterpreted in this way again, and the artist's career was launched. In many ways, this impulse by an artist to critically intervene can be traced back to the French painter Eugène Delacroix, who in 1857 challenged the critical judgments of the "many semi-erudite men [who] have treated the philosophy of art." In a passage that served as an epigraph to Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein's first book of writings on film, Delacroix captured the fundamental absurdity of a critical system that seemed to value a "profound ignorance of technical matters," effectively "render[ing] professional artists rather unfit to rise to the heights which are forbidden to the people outside aesthetics and pure speculation."³

Frampton himself would frequently take refuge in the confines of the art review, where his critical assignments could become the springboard for more substantive reflections. Writing in the pages of *Artforum* and *October*, he was able to work through issues that impinged on the reception of his own work and that of colleagues. These reviews served collectively as a corrective lens through which to view critical lapses of the past—still photography's continued reverence for the f/64 school (Edward Weston, Ansel Adams, Minor White), the myopic reception of the post-Brakhagean generation of experimental filmmakers (including, of course, himself)—and as a guide to a more rigorous theoretical basis for addressing the emerging arena of the media arts. Within the context of reviews and historical analyses, Frampton embedded his own manifestos: deft rereadings that provide a coherent analytical framework for photographic theory and practice; and, for film, the missing link that connects advanced theories that emerged in the late 1920s and 1930s with the discontinuous advances in radical cinematic aspirations of the late 1960s and 1970s and, rather presciently, with the arena he began to glimpse in the late 1970s that we now call digital media.

In this respect, one can sense these writings were destined for a future—the future, in fact, in which we now reside. There is a time-release aspect to the discourse that, while attempting to historically ground the paradigm-shifting practices of his own times, in many ways prefigures those of our current era. Writing well in advance of the moment when such practice would demand its own ontology and taxonomy, Frampton could only sense, but not name, the art for which his writings would have the greatest impact. “Find a word or phrase for ‘photo-media’ imagery,” he writes in a set of lecture notes, and can offer only the hyphenated term *photo-film-video-computer*. Frampton was an early adopter of the new media sensibility in an era when there was no notion of convergence and barely a sense of the myriad forms the digital arts would generate. All he knew (but he knew it with full surety) was that this unnamed form of media would have enormous impact (“at least as far-reaching as . . . broadcast television”) and that it would be based on the ubiquity of fast and cheap computing power.

All of this is not to suggest for a moment that the reading of these essays and lectures, reviews and introductions, artist statements and working notes will feel as if they are of our times. They are figuratively and literally *out of time*, and as such they represent a multivalent dialogue with spirits past and present, figures arcane and familiar, specialists engaged in the hard sciences and those laboring in arenas more abstract and abstruse. Frampton may strike contemporary readers as being a bit like the protagonist of the Dali and Buñuel film *Un chien Andalou*: a figure whose quest is freighted with cultural baggage from the past, symbolized in his arduous attempts to drag a pair of grand pianos, laden with dead donkeys, and two bound Catholic priests across the parlor that separates him from the object of his desire.

Part of the calculus for Frampton’s theorizing of the camera arts was situated in the past: Aristotle and Dante, Descartes and Darwin, Herodotus and Hermann von Helmholtz all make appearances, but so do Joyce and Beckett (especially Joyce and Beckett). It is situated in particular in the poetics of Ezra Pound, who advocated for a “hard poetry,” in the ideologically engaged cinematic practices of Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov, and even in the twelve-tone compositions of Schoenberg, to say nothing of the growing discourse that accumulated around the work of his peers, the minimalist, conceptual, and performance artists, a portion of which he helped to formulate.

No less a factor was the need to be taken seriously, which led Frampton at times to cloak his writing with a certain density of allusion and breadth of reference that oscillated between the arcana of the classics (Greek drama, Roman allegory, Sanskrit poetry) and the argot of scientific discovery, with occasional

doses of continental philosophy, visual anthropology, and structural linguistics thrown in for good measure.⁴ The result is writing marked with a sense of high seriousness and rigorous literateness—aided, at times, by a pungent humor that could turn slapstick—that plays seemingly all at once to the mind, the eye, and the ear.

Frampton's voice—a resonant basso—is a factor as well, especially for readers who may be fortunate enough to recall it from encountering the author on one of his frequent lecture-screening tours ("medicine shows," as he called them). Having come of age within a generation that still aspired to the vocation of the poet (the next, as we now know, yearned to be filmmakers) and having as a young man sat literally at Pound's feet, Frampton mastered a continental manner of verbal felicity and the necessary wit and erudition that the mode demanded. Behind the workman's attire that was his uniform of choice throughout his adult life, there resonated locutions worthy of an Oxbridge don.⁵

Despite his remarkable speaking abilities, Frampton acknowledged on at least one occasion the challenges posed for him by writing. In the course of an interview with the cultural affairs director of the university at which he taught, he was complimented on his extraordinary verbal and literary skills. Frampton countered by comparing the former to cutting with a knife through butter, and the latter, for him, to using that same knife on marble.⁶ He labored over his writings much as he labored over his films. Both were integral parts of his artistic practice; in fact, the two were inextricably bound.

This was the case in practical matters, where, for instance, his travel to review photographic exhibitions in England for *Artforum* provided him the chance to develop important contacts for screenings and for the critical reception of his films. More significant was the enduring nature of his polysemic engagement with language, which would continue most directly in his writings but remain a dominant motif in his visual art as well. At least two of his most celebrated films, *Zorns Lemma* and (*nostalgia*), allegorize his journey from young man of letters to practitioner of the camera arts. And one of the striking features of the short film *Gloria!* that marked the conclusion of his massive film cycle *Magellan* was its emulation of a computer-based flow of language. Frampton sought in the moving image a system of communication as precise and agile as language. And he sought that system in his theoretical musings as much as in his artistic practice. Writing was Frampton's lifelong *métier*, and this book is in large measure as significant an act of preservation as the parallel work being undertaken to conserve and restore his cinematic oeuvre.

[1

This expanded version of Frampton's collected writings embraces the diverse forms of his discursive efforts while attempting to situate them in a manner consonant with the set of registers conceived for the title (but not the organization) of his earlier book: film, photography, and video. Making use of his overall characterization of these writings as "texts," a fourth category has been added to capture what emerged as his more distinctly literary efforts. And because his writings often crossed the discrete boundaries between the arts to comment on sculpture, painting, and various intermedial forms, it was useful to situate a selection of his critical remarks on "The Other Arts."

The earliest body of sustained critical commentary appears in the Photography section of this book and includes essays that chart not only the direction of Frampton's critical thought but the development of his own photographic practice. It is chockablock with musings on big ideas like Time and History, the relation of images to their referents in the real world, and the impact of the medium on consciousness itself; it also embraces anecdote and storytelling, and poetic musings on fellow practitioners of the medium.

The previously unpublished "Some Propositions on Photography" offers an intervention into the field—a manifesto—by insisting on opening up the frame of inquiry to embrace the other arts. Several of the longer essays take the form of exhibition reviews and reflect Frampton's complicated relationship to the medium, which, as the critic Christopher Phillips defined it, involved his being "simultaneously drawn to and repelled by his subject."⁷ The key text in this regard is "Impromptus on Edward Weston: Everything in Its Place," an extended essay in which Frampton carried out what he would call in an interview with Adele Friedman "the ritual murder of the father." The other significant patriarch who emerges here is Eadweard Muybridge, a key figure in the development of the moving picture, a factor Frampton brilliantly reads back onto the artist's no less seminal landscape photography.⁸ In his deliberations on the work of Paul Strand, he posits one of his most resonant analogies for describing the critical quandary facing the photographic image, which is denied "the very richness of implication that for the accultured intellect is the only way at all we have left us to understand (for instance) paintings." Frampton the fabulist makes an appearance in a tale about the photograph-obsessed lost continent of Atlantis that launches his review of two early photography exhibitions in "Digressions on the Photographic Agony." The section concludes with a series of more contemporary appraisals of artists with both aesthetic and personal ties to Frampton and the text and images from his own remarkable photographic series *ADSVMVVS ABSVMVVS*.

The script for Frampton's sole performance piece, "A Lecture," a work for projector and audio recorder, opens the Film section. No theoretical exegesis could more succinctly (or deliciously) embody the precision of his thoughts on the cinematic apparatus. Frampton's most widely cited critical essay, "For a Metahistory of Film: Commonplace Notes and Hypotheses," was his first major treatise on the medium, and it amassed an impressive battalion of scientific, artistic, and philosophical registers in order to announce the emergence of cinema as "the Last Machine" and to usher in its cultural caretaker, "the meta-historian," who was charged with inventing for it a coherent tradition. More than three and a half decades after its writing, the essay remains a potent challenge to artists engaged with the moving image and a valuable cipher for the direction that Frampton's own expanding practice would take, including the articulation of a conceptual framework for what would become his *Magellan* cycle, a "Tour of Tours."

But Frampton was not merely engaged in the realm of history and theory; he was very much focused on the issues of his times. His letter to Donald Richie, then the director of the film program at the Museum of Modern Art, documents, in arch Framptonian form, his participation in the broader assertion of artists' rights that was taking place in New York in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Frampton employs a logician's scalpel—and the worker's political passion—in dissecting the particular dilemmas faced by a film artist being "honored" by such an institution. (This theme is taken up again seven years later in his dialogue with Bill Simon, where we learn about the prohibitive costs of his prints for *Magellan*.) Another aspect of Frampton's contemporary focus is evidenced in the selection of his writings on the work of peers. These range from his impassioned reading of a major new work by Stan Brakhage (in a letter to the artist) to his lucid, singular assessment of the films of Michael Snow, the cumulative historical impact of which is "like knowing the name and address of the man who carved the Sphinx."

The remaining components of this section comprise an array of scripts, textual material, and scores, as well as production notes for a pair of Frampton's most critically acclaimed films, *Zorns Lemma* and (*nostalgia*), and an unpublished proposal for *Magellan*. Putting that final leviathan work into perspective is Bill Simon's substantive interview with Frampton. The concluding essay, "Mental Notes," originally authored for a film conference on autobiography, suggests that even in films that bear few overt marks of the personal, "everything in a filmmaker's life forces its way into his work." Proving this point, the figure of Frampton's maternal grandmother makes a brief appearance in the essay,

as she does so memorably in the stirring autobiographical closure to *Magellan* that is *Gloria!*

The prehistory of the digital arts emerges with both technical specificity and critical ambition in the three pieces of the Video and the Digital Arts section. His major essay on the subject is “The Withering Away of the State of the Art,” written when the medium of video was still very much in its infancy. Frampton, the metahistorian of film, emerges to assist this new form, unique in having virtually no past, in envisioning its future. Parallel to such tasks are Frampton’s own artistic ambitions in this new arena, which set him on a collaborative journey working with colleagues and a talented group of students to create both the machines and methods that would allow him to turn the computational power of the personal computer into a sophisticated tool for artistic production.

In addition to his commentary on the camera arts—from the earliest forms of still photography to the cutting edges of the new media of his era—peculiarities of space and time frequently conspired to bring him into the company of artists engaged in more traditional media, and consequently led to a body of critical writing on *The Other Arts*. Among his earliest compatriots were two other scholarship students at Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, Carl Andre and Frank Stella, who would play defining roles in the shifts in sculpture and painting that took place in the 1960s. Frampton participated in their journey, documenting his friends’ work, challenging their ideas, and shaping the critical context in which their art would gain recognition. Ample evidence of this emerges in the chronicle that Frampton provides the Dutch curator Enno Develing for the catalogue to an important early exhibition of Carl Andre’s work. His year-long set of dialogues with Andre revealed the shrewdness of his analytical style, and in the piece reproduced here, he specifies what he feels is the proper link between theory and practice: “I believe that there are no ideas except in execution.” Evidence of such a belief can be found in his scores for such idea-driven objects as *Comic Relief* and *Two Left Feet*. This section concludes with writings devoted to the work of two other artists within his circle and a brief gloss on his own early experiments with an adjacent camera art: xerography.

Finally one encounters Frampton the fabulist, as a tendency one feels coursing through much of his ostensibly critical discourse emerges full blown in a pair of writings in the Texts section. Originally included in *Circles of Confusion* as a critical essay, “A Stipulation of Terms from Maternal Hopi” is a striking piece of pseudo-anthropology predicated on a vividly imagined

find of “caches of proto-American artifacts.” It presents Frampton the enticing opportunity to construct a culture in which the projected image functioned as a primary conveyor of beliefs, knowledge, myth, and history. “Mind over Matter” was described in its original publication in *October* as Frampton’s “first work of fiction.” A sprawling set of allegories, it by turns delights and perplexes, conjoining as it does a complex system of mathematical formulas to a set of Borgesian tales that turn on arcane allusions and surrealist wordplay—and not infrequently, acid commentary on the cultural condition: a corpse is discovered to contain thousands of precious objects hidden in its body, leading to the conclusion that the “nameless deceased was, in a word, a walking museum.”

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While Frampton wrote for a decidedly post-Barthesian reader—a condition that necessitates active (indeed, rigorous) participation—these are nonetheless thoroughly writerly texts, artfully crafted, often elegant, and occasionally acerbic disquisitions crammed with historical reference, scientific taxonomies, classical allusion, and wellsprings of recondite knowledge: literary, artistic, and cultural. This complex weave of citation in turn gives voice to the multiple narrators of Frampton’s texts: the raconteur, the philologist, the cultural historian, the critic, the poet, and even the prophet. As a member of the younger generation of scholars of Frampton’s critical work has noted, “His highly playful approach, which embraces wit and irony, as well as indirect allusion and intertextual intricacy, seems designed to address an impossibly learned reader.”⁹ And yet, as with his films, the rewards of the effort are great for the diligent or impassioned reader, and repeated immersion yields surprising clarity.

Frampton viewed these writings not only as the fruits of his own knowledge and labor, and a theoretical template for his personal artistic practice, but equally as a call to action for the next generation of artists, theorists, and writers, believing that such a challenge might be a “not wholly unrewarded expectation.” He has not been here to witness the continuation of these efforts. One can hope, however, that he is indeed enjoying that dreamed afterlife he envisioned awaiting him in some version of Dante’s limbo: “I should hope to spend the balance of eternity in the company of virtuous pagans . . . engaged in million-year afternoon conversations with Aristotle or the Emperor Ch’in Shih Huang Ti, builder of the Great Wall of China, or with Hegel.” He even deigned to devote a portion of his time in these precincts to continuing his interrogation of the camera arts: “One such afternoon I would propose to spend with Edward Weston, seeking satisfaction in the matter of the facts in this case.” Undoubtedly, by now, he has gotten the better of them all.

Notes

1. *Circles of Confusion: Film, Photography, Video; Texts 1968–1980*, foreword by Annette Michelson (Rochester, N.Y.: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1983).
2. "An Artist Writes to Correct and Explain," *New York Herald Tribune*, December 27, 1959, sec. 4, p. 7. The incident is recounted in Harry Cooper and Megan R. Luke, *Frank Stella: 1958*, exhibition catalogue (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 27.
3. From *The Journal of Eugène Delacroix*, trans. Walter Pach (New York: Covici-Friede, 1937), quoted in Sergei Eisenstein, *The Film Sense*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1947), p. xi.
4. An *Oxford English Dictionary* and a set of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* are often handy when sleuthing for the sometimes arcane references in Frampton's writing. The meaning of the title of his original preface to *Circles of Confusion* in 1983—"Ox House Camel Rivermouth"—eluded me for decades, until an accidental foray through an old encyclopedia revealed these to be the set of real-world correlative symbols for the first four letters of the Phoenician alphabet (A, B, C, D). The curious reader will no doubt unearth many more such games, puzzles, and allusions in the course of reading.
5. As the artist Michael Snow noted for a memorial program following Frampton's death in the spring of 1984, "He was the most extraordinary conversational and public speaker I've ever known." See "On Hollis Frampton," in *The Collected Writings of Michael Snow* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1994), p. 241.
6. "Conversations in the Arts: Hollis Frampton Interviewed by Esther Harriott," State University of New York at Buffalo, 1979.
7. Christopher Phillips, "Word Pictures: Frampton and Photography," *October* 32 (Spring 1985): 63.
8. In her book-length study of the pioneering photographer, the writer and critic Rebecca Solnit hails this article by Frampton as "the best essay ever written on Muybridge." See Rebecca Solnit, *Rivers of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West* (New York: Penguin, 2004), p. 84.
9. Federico Windhausen, "Words into Film: Toward a Genealogical Understanding of Hollis Frampton's Theory and Practice," *October* 109 (Summer 2004): 95.



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Many of the same people who supported Hollis Frampton in his lifetime were instrumental in the preparation and completion of this book. First and foremost in both regards is the photographer and educator Marion Faller, who has supervised the organization and conservation of his work and provided rights to the entirety of the artist's writings. Faller's generosity and commitment are matched only by her meticulousness and compassion. The regular parcels she sent containing writings and documentation, her frequent conversations and correspondence, and her sage counsel and advice were invaluable. Without her goodwill and active engagement at every stage of conception and execution, this book would not exist.

Anthology Film Archives, where Frampton deposited many of his production notes, materials, and records (a practice Faller has continued), generously provided access to its collection of files, audiotapes, and records. Thanks are due to Jonas Mekas and Robert Haller, who have diligently overseen this material for many years, and to the current team of Andrew Lampert, John Mhiripiri, and Wendy Dorsett.

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Untitled from *The Secret World of Frank Stella*,
1958–1962. Black-and-white photograph. Collection Walker
Art Center, Minneapolis. © Estate of Hollis Frampton
Courtesy Walker Art Center

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