

CARNEGIE MUSEUM OF ART

ONE OF THE FOUR CARNEGIE MUSEUMS OF PITTSBURGH

Independent Filmmaker, Hollis Frampton, Lecture

Date of Recording: January 21, 1971

Location: Carnegie Museum of Art

Running Time: 84:29 minutes

Format: 1/4-inch audiotape

Date of Transcript: November 2015

Department of Film and Video archive
Lectures and interviews with artists
ID: fv001/002/005/B

Sally Dixon: We have Hollis Frampton, who's not been in Pittsburgh for this before. We'll make him welcome. I'm not going to give you his biographical statistics. You've got them on paper, I think. I hope you each got one as you came in, but as the afternoon's gone on, a couple of thoughts have come to me more about the feeling of Hollis Frampton and what he's doing, his work in general. I'd like to share that with you briefly and then let Hollis take over, and you can let your own eyes tell you what they will.

I have a great sense of Hollis' heritage as an individual, a specific human being, as well as a part of mankind, which is sort of a big phrase, but I really have this sense. When I look at his work, of which I've seen maybe a good bunch, not all of it, I'm struck by sort of a kinship, I thought just coming down here tonight with, say, medieval book of hours pages, those illuminations, little very clear, precise and concise drawings, use of the alphabet and of letters all combined. A great feel, a sensitivity for words and their meaning as well as just their sound, their rhythms. Audible rhythms as well as visual, when you look at those old pages.

Then I kind of leaped back farther into history, and I thought of the Lascaux, the cave drawings, with that same kind of clarity of vision or sight. A different rendering, but all of this comes to my head in relationship to Hollis' work, and I'm not sure exactly how, but this is what strikes me. Not that I want to give you ideas or have you see it this way. I just want to say this is where I've gotten [00:02:00] on it, and these things seem apparent to me.

Hollis, too, seems to have a sense of where he's been in the same way most of us do. His family, his parents, his grandparents, where he's lived, and he seems to tie all of this up, I thought, like knitting or weaving a fabric. He keeps going back and gathering up what was before. Making a new thing, pushing out further, knitting up another row or whatever you want to call it. A sense of continuity, of having been and of going, as well as right now.

I think his films are more the right now, particularly *Zorn's Lemma*. Though, tonight he's brought with him one that he's just finished called (*Nostalgia*) in parentheses, and we'll be getting the premiere of it here. He'll tell you more about that when it comes. Maybe this will be even more immediate than *Zorn's Lemma*, though it's hard for me to imagine.

Hollis Frampton.

Hollis Frampton: Peace. Thank you. I don't think there's very much point in two people attempting to talk very much about something that only one person has seen. We've probably had enough of that culturally for a while, so I'm not going to propose to argue my films out of a theory. I would rather, if there is a theory, if there is something coherent to behold in them, to have it emerge from the films themselves. [00:04:00]

Nevertheless, I suppose in the way that a Greek audience knew by the time they got to the amphitheater, that Oedipus was going to murder his father at the crossroads, answer the riddle of the Sphinx, and marry his mother so that they could concentrate on formal and stylistic problems rather than worrying about what the hell was happening.

It's fair for me to give you a précis of the three films, at least, that were advertised for tonight. After you've seen them, if I judge that you have been a good audience, I will reward you with a world premiere of a new film that I made, to deprive New York of the privilege by giving Pittsburgh first refusal. On the other hand, if you're a bad audience, I will punish you with the world premiere of the film that I made for the same purpose.

The first of the three films is called *Surface Tension*. It's a film in three parts. The first part is a comic passage that emphasizes the passage of time. The second part is, if not tragic, at least pathetic in a foot sore sort of way, and emphasizes passage through space. The third part proposes to deal with a subject that negates – or, I won't say negates, it can't do that – [00:06:00] disregards both time and space. There are other concerns in the film.

The second film is called *Artificial Light*, and it was made a year later. It was finished in December of 1969. *Artificial Light* repeats the same utterance, the same phrase, the same filmic phrase 20 times, and superimposes upon that utterance 20 different treatments, or 20 different ways to torture, lacerate, and obfuscate the original utterance. It proposes to generate a chasm. If it's sufficiently abysmal, then an abyss between the phrase, the given phrase and its inflection.

The third film is called *Zorn's Lemma*. It was finished on Maundy Thursday 1970, which was the 31st of March. It's a film that I began work on late in 1962, or at least there is some concrete material in the film that dates from that time. I can't say that I worked on it really for seven or eight years. [00:08:00] Making a film of fairly large dimensions is a little bit like being pregnant, and you don't really work on it every minute for nine months. You think about it part of the time, and the rest of the time it just goes on anyway until it's finished.

Zorn's Lemma is also a film in three parts. The first part is very brief. It's a voice reciting over black leader, or an empty screen so that you can empty your eyes. The 1800 edition of the base-tape primer, which is a series of jingles used to inculcate the alphabet and other useful information. The second section of the film is 45-minutes long and consists of 2,700 consecutive one-second cuts grouped into 109 groups of 24 each, of which 1,350 are words, and 1,350 are other scenes from nature.

The third section of the film in which I permit your attention, if I've held it that long, to drift away into other concerns of your own, is a held static shot over which six women's voices recite in hocketed sequence a translated, or mistranslated, or bowdlerized, or all of those things, text [00:10:00] from an 11th century bishop of Lincoln on how the universe was generated from light.

After you've seen those, if some of you are still here, rather than try to discuss them at that time, I would rather go on and talk briefly about the new film. If you survive that experience, then I'm all response. Thank you.

I intend to narrate this film. In case you haven't read it, it's because it was finished about four days ago. I found when I got the answer print from the lab, that I didn't like the track especially. The track consists of exactly what you'll hear. It is my own voice narrating, complete with coughs and the rustling of paper, and so forth. The reason I

don't like the track is that I feel that it's not intelligible. It's a little hairier than I really intended it to be.

On the other hand, I don't want to give the impression by reading the voiceover myself, that I approve, fundamentally, of this grand opera maneuver. If you should find anybody else doing it, you can brand them, at least, with my disapproval. I don't think there's [00:12:00], there's anything more to say. I guess I can see it, kind of, from here. You can go ahead.

Oh, just a moment. Would you stop, please? Oh, damnation. Where's that light? Yeah, I think we'd better. I don't know how the bloody light works. Yeah, yeah. This little light here.

Sally Dixon: It's a knob.

Hollis Frampton: Oh, it's over here. That's very nice. Thank you. That part was not in the script.

These are recollections of a dozen photographs I made several years ago. This is the first photograph I ever made with the direct intention of making art. I had bought myself a camera for Christmas in 1958. One day, early in January of 1959, I photographed several drawings by Carl Andre, with whom I shared a cheap apartment on Mulberry street. One frame of film was left over, and I suggested to Carl that he sit, or rather squat, for a portrait.

He insisted that the photograph must incorporate a handsome, small picture frame that had been given him a year or so before by a girl named North. How the metronome entered the scheme, I don't recall, but it must have been deliberately. The picture frame reappears in a photograph dated March 1963, but [00:14:00] there isn't time to show you that one now.

I discarded the metronome eventually, after tolerating its syncopation for quite a while. Carl Andre is 12 years older, and more active than he was then. I see less of him nowadays than I should like, but then there are other people of whom I see more than I care to. I despised this photograph for several years, but I could never bring myself to destroy a negative so incriminating.

I made this photograph on March 11th, 1959. The face is my own, or [00:16:00] rather, it was my own. As you see, I was thoroughly pleased with myself at the time, presumably for having survived to such ripeness and wisdom, since it was my 23rd birthday. I focused the camera, sat on a stool in front of it, and made the exposures by squeezing a rubber bulb with my right foot.

There are 11 more photographs on the roll of film, all of comparable grandeur. Some of them exhibit my features in more sensitive or imposing moods. One exposure records what now looks to me like a leer. I sent that one to a very pretty, insensible girl on the occasion of the vernal equinox, a holiday I held in some esteem. I think I wrote her some sort of cryptic note on the back of it. I never heard from her again.

Anyhow, photography had obviously caught my fancy. This photograph was made in the studio where I worked. It belonged to the wife a friend. I daresay they are still

married, but he has not been my friend for nearly ten years. We became estranged on account of an obscure mutual embarrassment that involved a third party and three dozen eggs.

I take some comfort in realizing that my entire physical body has been replaced more than once since it made this portrait of its face. However, I understand that my central nervous system is an exception.

[00:18:00]

This photograph was made in September of 1960. The window is that of a dusty cabinet maker's shop on the west side of West Broadway, somewhere between Spring Street and West Houston. I first photographed it more than a year earlier, as part of a series, but rejected it for reasons having to do with its tastefulness and illusion of deep space.

Then, in the course of two years, I made a half-dozen more negatives. Each time, I found some reason to feel dissatisfied. The negative was too flat or too harsh, or the framing was too tight. Once a horse was reflected in the glass, although I don't recall seeing that horse. Once I found myself reflected with my camera and tripod.

Finally, the cabinet maker closed up shop and moved away. I can't even remember exactly where he was anymore, but a year after that, I happened to compare the prints I made from the six negatives. I was astonished. In the midst of my concern for the flaws in my method, the window itself had changed from season to season, far more than my photographs had. I had thought my subject changeless and my own sensibility pliable, but I was wrong about [00:20:00] that.

So I chose the one photograph that pleased me most after all, and destroyed the rest. That was years ago. Now I'm sorry. I only wish you could have seen them.

In 1961, for six or eight months, I lived in a borrowed loft on Bond Street, near the Bowery. A young painter who lived on the floor above me wanted to be an old master. He talked a great deal about gums and varnishes. He was on his way to impastos of record thickness.

The spring of that year was sunny, and I spent a month photographing junk and rubble in imitation of action painting. My neighbor saw my new work, and he was not especially pleased. His opinion upset me, and for good reason. He lived with a woman – I believe her father was [00:22:00] a Brazilian economist – who seemed to stay with him out of inertia. She was monumentally fair and succulent and indifferent.

In the warm weather, she went around nearly naked, and I would invent excuses to visit upstairs in order to stare at her. My photographs failing as an excuse, I decided to ingratiate myself in the household by making a realistic work of art. I carved the numerals you see out of modeling clay, and then cast them in plaster. The piece is called "A Cast of Thousands." The numbers are reversed in the cast, of course, but I have reversed them again in printing to enhance their intelligibility.

Anyway, I finally unveiled the piece one evening. I suppose the painter was properly horrified, but the girl who, had never said a dozen words to me, laughed, and then laughed outrageously, and then outrageously kissed me.

Early in 1963, Frank Stella [00:24:00] asked me to make a portrait. He needed it for some casual business use, a show announcement or maybe a passport, something like that. I only recall that it needed to be done quickly. A likeness would do. I made a dozen likenesses, and he chose one. His dealer paid me for the job. Most of those dozen faces seemed resigned or melancholy. This one amuses me because Frank looks so entirely self-possessed. I suppose blowing smoke rings admits a little feeling beyond that.

Looking at the photograph recently, it reminded me, unaccountably, of a photograph of another artist squirting water out of his mouth, which is undoubtedly art. Blowing smoke rings seems more of a craft. Ordinarily, only opera singers make art with their mouths.

[00:26:00]

I made this photograph of James Rosenquist the first day we met. That was on Palm Sunday in 1963, when he lived in a red brick building at number 5 Coenties Slip. I went there to photograph him in his studio for a fashion magazine. The job was a washout, but Rosenquist and I remained friends for years afterwards.

He rented two floors in the building. The lower floor, where he lived with his wife Marylou, was cool, neat, and pleasant. Marylou was relaxed, cool, neat, very tall, and extremely pleasant. Rosenquist was calm. It was a lovely, soft, quiet Sunday.

We talked for a while and then went upstairs to his workroom. I made 96 negatives in about two hours. This was the last. It is unrelated to the others. Rosenquist is holding open a copy of an old magazine, a map of the United States shows the distribution of our typical songbirds. I admire this photograph for its internal geometry, the expression of its subject, its virtually perfect mapping of tonal values on the gray scale. It pleases me [00:28:00] as much as anything I did.

James Rosenquist and I live far apart now, and we seldom meet, but I cannot recall one moment spent in his company that I didn't completely enjoy.

This photograph was made at about three o'clock on the morning of June 6th, 1963, in lower Manhattan. It may even have been Wall Street. It is seen from the sidewalk through the window of a large bank that had been closed for renovation and partially demolished inside. A big crystal chandelier is draped in a dusty translucent membrane that recalls the tents of caterpillars.

Someone has written with a forefinger on the dusty pane the words, "I like my new name." This seemed mysterious to me. At [00:30:00] that time, I was much taken with the photographs of Lartigue, and I wanted to make photographs as mysterious as his, without, however, attempting to comprehend his wit. All I learned was that the two were somehow bound together.

Anyway, my eye for mystery is defective, and so this may be the only example I'll ever produce. Nevertheless, because it is a very difficult negative to print, I find that I do so less and less often.

[00:32:00]

This photograph of two toilets was made in February of 1964, with a new view camera I had just got at that time. As you can see, it is an imitation of a painted Renaissance crucifixion. The outline of the cross is quite clear. At its foot, the closed bowl on the right represents the blessed virgin. On the left is St. Mary Magdalene, a bowl with its lid raised.

The roll of toilet paper stands for the skull of Adam, whose sin is conventionally washed away by the blood the crucified savior sheds. The stairs leading up to the two booths symbolize Calvary. I'm not completely certain of the iconographic significance of the light bulbs, but the halos that surround them are more than suggestive.

[00:34:00]

Late in the fall of 1964, a painter friend asked me to make a photographic document of spaghetti, an image that he wanted to incorporate into a work of his own. I set up my camera above an empty darkroom tray, opened a number two can of Franco-American spaghetti, and poured it out. Then I stirred it around until I saw a suitably random arrangement of pasta strands and finished the photograph in short order.

Then, instead of disposing of the spaghetti, I left it there and made one photograph every day. This was the 18th such photograph. The spaghetti has dried without rotting. The sauce is a kind of pink varnish on the yellow strings. The entirety is covered in attractive, mature colonies of mold in three colors: black, green, and white. I continued the series until no further change appeared to be taking place, about two months altogether. [00:36:00] The spaghetti was never entirely consumed, but the mold eventually disappeared.

This photograph was made in Michael Snow's studio sometime in 1965. It was made into a poster announcing a show of his Walking Women works at the Poindexter Gallery in that year. As many as possible of the pieces are seen, by reflection or transmission, in a transparent sheet of acrylic plastic, which is itself part of a piece. The result is probably confusing, but no more so than the show apparently was, since it seems to have been studiously ignored.

If you look closely, you can see Michael Snow himself on the left by transmission, and [00:38:00] my camera on the right by reflection. I recall that we worked half a day for two or three exposures. I believe that Snow was pleased with the photograph itself, as I was, but he disliked the poster intensely. He said I had chosen a typeface that looked like an invitation to a church social. I regret to say that he was right, but it was too late. There was nothing to do about it. The whole business still troubles me. I wish I could apologize to him.

This posed photograph of Larry [00:40:00] Poons reclining on his bed was made early in 1966 for Vogue Magazine. I was ecstatically happy that afternoon for entirely

personal reasons. I set up my camera quickly, made a single exposure, and left. Later on, I was sent a check for the photographs that I thought inadequate by half. I returned it to the magazine with a letter of explanation. They sent me another check for the amount I asked for, \$75.

Months later, the photograph was published. I was working in a color film laboratory at the time. My boss saw the photograph, and I nearly lost my job. I decided to stop doing this sort of thing.

[00:42:00]

I did not make this photograph, nor do I know who did, nor can I recall precisely when it was made. It was printed in a newspaper, so I suppose that any patient person with an interest in this sort of thing could satisfy himself entirely as to its origins. The image is slightly indistinct. A stubby, middle-aged man wearing a baseball cap looks back in matter-of-fact dismay or disgruntlement at the camera. It has caught him in the midst of a display of spheres, each about the size of a grapefruit and of some nondescript light color.

He holds four of them in his cupped hands. The rest seem half-submerged in water or else lying in something like mud. A vague mottled mask behind the crouching man suggest foliage. I am as puzzled and mildly distressed by the sight of this photograph, as its protagonist seems to be with the spheres. They seem absolutely alien, and yet not very forbidding after all. What does it mean? I am uncertain, but perfectly willing to offer a plausible explanation.

The man is a Texas fruit grower. His orchards lie [00:44:00] near the Gulf of Mexico. The spheres are grapefruit. As they neared maturity, a hurricane flooded the orchard and knocked down the fruit. The man is stunned by his commercial loss, and a little resentful of the photographer who intrudes upon his attempt to assess it.

On the other hand, where photography of greater antiquity than this image might date from the time of, let us say, Pascal. I suppose he would have understood it quite differently.

Since 1966, I have made few photographs. This has been partly through design, and partly through laziness. I think I expose fewer than 50 negatives a year now. Of course, I work more deliberately than I once did, and that counts for something, but I must confess that I have largely given up still photography.

So it is all the more surprising that I felt again, a few weeks ago, a vagrant urge that would have seemed familiar a few years ago: the urge to take my camera out of doors and make a photograph. [00:46:00] It was a quite simple, intrusive need, so I obeyed it.

I wandered around for hours, unsatisfied, and finally turned towards home in the afternoon. Half a block from my front door, the receding perspective of an alley caught my eye. A dark tunnel with the cross-street beyond brightly lit. As I focused and composed the image, a truck turned into the alley. The driver stopped it, got out, and walked away. He left his cab door open.

My composition was spoiled, but I felt a perverse impulse to make the exposure anyway. I did so, and then went home to develop my single negative. When I came to print the negative, an odd thing struck my eye. Something standing in the cross street, and invisible to me was reflected in a factory window and then reflected once more in the rear view mirror attached to the truck door. It was only a tiny detail.

Since then, I have enlarged this small section of my negative enormously. The grain of the film all but obliterates the features of the image. It is obscure by any possible reckoning. It is hopelessly ambiguous. Nevertheless, what I believe I see recorded in that speck of film fills me with such fear, such utter dread and loathing, that I think I shall never dare to make another photograph again. Here it is. Look at it. Do you see what I see?

[00:48:00]

... I'm nothing but response. Let's see. My blood type is AB negative. Yes, sir.

Audience: Does Zorn exist?

Hollis Frampton: Zorn existed. Presumably, he still exists in a few neurons. He was a mathematician who died in 1926. He occupied Gauss' chair at Göttingen. His lemma or his axiom, well, it's usually best known by its first corollary, which is that every partially ordered set contains a maximal fully-ordered subset.

If there are any mathematicians in the house, you can chew my shinbone about it as long as you like. It's, for whatever interest it may be, it's one of the fundamental theorems of mathematics. It is intended, really, to supply a clue about my attitude toward ordering my material. I'm a spectator of mathematics. I'm not a mathematician, God knows. Yeah.

Audience: Would I be correct in thinking you're a fan of the painter Max Ernst?

Hollis Frampton: A fan of the painter Max Ernst? [00:50:00] Well, it's an interesting idea. I guess I sort of like, I like Ernst's work. I don't think about it very often. I suppose you might say I'm a fan of his, but then I'm a fan of everybody whose stuff ever sort of struck my eye.

Gee, what gave you that idea?

Audience: A section in particular of the [inaudible 00:50:24] by Ernst. It does remind me of [inaudible 00:50:27] decoupage.

Hollis Frampton: Yeah, I don't know. I guess those cinders sort of crumple up into various kinds of surrealist monsters. I'd caution you against letting your imagination run away with you at the movies, though. Yeah.

Audience: [inaudible 00:50:58]

Hollis Frampton: I have an answer for that question, but I wish you'd clarify it first.

Audience: [inaudible 00:51:07]

Hollis Frampton: Oh, really? I thought there was gratification aroused.

Audience: [inaudible 00:51:18]

Hollis Frampton: Well, I suppose since you ask me that question in the abstract to begin with, to begin with I'll just answer in the abstract and say that I find any emotion, coherently and lucidly defined, enjoyable. On the other hand, I don't think those films are very frustrating. Were they for you frustrating? It was a laugh a minute. Never a dull moment. Culture and refinement spilling out all over the place.

Frustrating. [00:52:00] There must be a better word. There is something like that, I think, in them which you detect, but frustration I'm not sure. I mean, you can only frustrate an urge. What was the urge you had? If you can define an urge, I'll be delighted to frustrate it for you. How's that? Yeah.

Audience: What do you have to gain in the first place, [inaudible 00:52:38]

Hollis Frampton: What do I gain, or what did I gain?

Audience: What are you gaining?

Hollis Frampton: What am I gaining? Well, I'm gaining a number of things. Just as far as the use of the camera goes, just the use of that kind of camera. It's just a camera that enables you to make more photographs in a given period of time. I mean, you maybe can make one a second with a still camera. You can make 24 or something a second with a movie camera.

What I gain, I think in changing from ... Yeah, that's really a fantastic thing, isn't it? That's an event in itself. I should come here some night and just have a thing where you run the screen up and down. It's a fantastic thing. What I wanted, I think, as I intimated in part of the narration for this last film ... I'm a reasonably lazy [00:54:00] person.

That is to say, I don't know, I think most people in our culture, at least of my generation, attempt to procrastinate emotionally. Not to do something until it becomes absolutely urgent, like the little child who gets involved in something and refuses to go to the bathroom until finally it's almost too late, or it is too late.

At the time I started wanting in a vague way to make films, it was something like a federal crime to make a movie. Nobody did it, or very few people did it. People like Stan Brakhage and Gregory Markopolous, and so forth, were doing it, I guess. Nobody wanted to look at it once it was done. It cost a lot more money than I could afford, and probably I was chicken.

Anyway, so I made still photographs for a very long time. Then I began to feel that the photograph, the single photograph by itself wasn't what I wanted, so I began to work in series. Then, I found there was trouble, in a way, with a series of still photographs. You couldn't regulate the order in which they were looked at, and you couldn't

regulate how long they were looked at for, and you couldn't say, "Please go back, having seen photograph C, go back and look at [00:56:00] photograph A again for five seconds, and then proceed to D, and so forth."

In other words, the experience of looking at them was, well, I don't know what. I suppose it was stochastic. It was unordered with respect to time, and it became more and more important for me to order the experience of seeing the work with respect to time. Finally, when I couldn't procrastinate on the need to order my images in that way any longer, one day I just sort of went out for lunch from the place where I worked and walked over to the camera store and bought a Bolex, and began to use it. That's all.

Yeah.

Audience: [inaudible 00:56:55]

Hollis Frampton: Oh, I certainly like to sound as though I do. I studied dead languages in college. I suppose I have been an amateur of the physical sciences or something for a long time. By amateur, I mean strictly a lousy lover. I don't mean a practitioner in any conceivable sense.

The only time I ever met Marcel Duchamp, he said that he was a sentimental scientist. Sentimental practitioners. A sentimental relationship to anything that permits you to use the same terminology as the hard core, [00:58:00] serious disciplinarians without paying a certain kind of price for it. No, I am not a physicist or any of those things. Technically, I was a film technician for many years. They don't use words like stochastic. They use words like bullshit. It's a different sort of thing.

Yes.

Audience: How long did the film [inaudible 00:58:33], a measure of disassociation between what's on the silent [inaudible 00:58:37]? Would you say why?

Hollis Frampton: Would I say why? Let me refer you to two statements, neither of which are my own, but both of which I believe in. One is the ... By the way, the crucial paragraph of a 1929 joint manifesto issued by Sergei Eisenstein and Vsevolod Pudovkin and whatever his name was, Aleksandrov, Eisenstein's sidekick. On the occasion of the Virginian coming to the Soviet Union, it obviously made a difference, obviously, now the movies could talk.

It seemed more to the point to Eisenstein and Pudovkin that they had a second channel to work with. They predicted that there would be a novelty era in which dogs barked and trains went choo-choo, and actresses said, "You bore me," and things like that. Furthermore, there was a prediction that such a novelty [01:00:00] period might grow into an era of using the cinema for nothing more than high-toned drama.

Such, in fact, was the case. The art of film, by in large, was totally vitiated by the appearance of sound, I think. Eisenstein indicated at that time that the first fruitful experiments would be in adding together or multiplying by each other the input – I

despise that term – of the two channels. I despise those terms. Rene Clair said the same thing in 1932.

Presumably, one has been alive long enough as a human being to know that the dog, in fact, barks without hearing it go "bow-wow" and so forth. That sort of accompaniment and that sort of gypsy violinist at the Romanian restaurant isn't necessary to the intellect. Forty-some years later, the situation has changed very little.

My general opinion of lip-sync sound is that for 42 years, it's been a commercial rip-off, and I'm not interested in it. I'm interested in seeing how much mileage I can get, how much intensity I can get by putting more, more into it, always more. Not just reminders. I'm very much against lip syncs. The next film I'm making is a lip-sync sound film. [01:02:00].

Yes.

Audience: [inaudible 01:02:03]

Hollis Frampton: This is what happened. I won't go through ... Does somebody have a match? I won't go through the whole rigmarole.

Thank you. I just have one cigarette left, so I might as well give you the matches back. Now if you have a cigarette, you'll have one match.

Zorn's Lemma began like this: it began with still photographs. I began sometime in the fall of 1962 to photograph words in the environment. What interested me about words, about found words, was that words are graphic things. They are by definition flat. They respond to and reinforce the empirical flatness of the picture plane.

At the same time, there they are in all sorts of illusionist spaces that go everywhere from flat to very deep. The thing is obviously part of a photograph that contains all the standard geometric illusions or masking illusions or what have you. Sometimes, maybe the Gestalt illusions of three-dimensional space, and at the same time, the word, the flat [01:04:00] word, pulls it back up all the time frontally to being a flat thing.

This struck me as a paradox, and may not be the hottest paradox that ever came down the pike, but I was interested in it, and I began to make a long series of black and white still photographs. Seven or eight of those are incorporated into this film. The oldest is the word "Fox" which is the sign of the old Brooklyn Fox Theatre. Let's see, I think it's obviously in the F slot in Alphabet 54, and, as a memento of its antiquity, it has paper flowers lying on top of it. I did incorporate some of those black and white stills into this color film.

Then the time ordering thing caught up with me. That was one thing. I thought I might print the stills and make a film by shooting the stills on an animation stand. I, in fact, did that. It was dead as a doornail. I went back and meditated for seven years. I began to shoot the things over again with a movie camera, in fact, and with a hand-

held camera so that there'd always be some motion, even if there wasn't much of anything to see in the frame.

Various problems arose along the way as to how to deal with the sequence, with the fact that there were not, for instance, as many Qs as there were Cs. How to get rid of having the thing form words, or rather, I'm sorry, phrases. I didn't want it to turn into poetry or turn it into poetry. [01:06:00] As it happens, there are two intelligible phrases just by alphabetic distribution in the film. One is the phrase "limp member" in 17, and the other is "nectar of pain" in five. One is sort of 19th-century Victorian pornography, and the other is Dylan Thomas or something like that. You can't fight these things.

Yeah.

Audience: [inaudible 01:06:33]

Hollis Frampton: Why did I choose it? Well, as my old calculus teacher used to say, "That's a good question. I'm glad you asked that question. Hm. You're thinking. Hm." Questions like that are difficult to field because to answer them really, you have to go back to your 15th year or something like that, and my 15th year was presumably as dull and boring as your own, and I don't want to tell you more than you want to know.

I suppose one of my fundamental beliefs about art is that it only succeeds finally when it forms a stasis, when it comes to rest, when it's completely contained and holds still in the mind and, to a degree, answers its own questions. How to do that? Well, I'm a young man and [01:08:00] somewhat slothful. The historical solutions seem to be complicated to me.

I decided to solve the problem by annihilating it. If you have a thing that is the same all the way through, is isotropic, then the experience must, of necessity be a static one. How to make the experience the same all the way through is the next problem, and that turned out to be a little more difficult.

I made a film in 1969 called *Palindrome*, which reiterates the pulse of one second using entirely different material to entirely different ends for 22 minutes. I wanted the film to be the same all the way through. It is not. The reason it's not is that there is a kind of expectation that's engendered by one's experience of other things that take place in time. We believe there's going to be development. We believe there's going to be progress. It's going to go upward. It's going to build toward something. Then that something is going to happen. You see?

Then after that's happened, then you're going to sort of trail off. It's like making love or something like that. Standard sort of form for an experience. Okay, so I made this film and it was physically all the way through. It reiterated the one-second pulse for a third of an hour and so forth, and [01:10:00] the bias that I myself, in fact, brought to experiencing, it gave it a curved shape.

It warped the very straight line I wanted, so I decided that in making this film, which I was even more ambitiously interested in having resolve itself finally to a static thing, something just mute, like a cube or something like that, that I would have somehow

to prepare, to prepare the structure of the film in a way so that whether you knew it or not, at least you already had all you needed to know by the time you got into the main body of it.

That's why I use the Bay State Primer to announce the alphabet, and then on the first repeat of the alphabet, which is those blank metallic letters, I announce the pulse. Then there's 45 minutes in which I feel the film does remain static, but at the end of it, there is a kind of charge, I feel, of experience, frustrated or hilarious or what have you. It seems an unstatic thing to do to just dump you out in the street or turn the lights on, or what-have-you.

At the same time, as I desired to bleed off, to slowly let the air out of that state, that mental state that the film induced [01:12:00], if it worked right, there was also the possibility of using that process of deflation, that process of detumescence to some constructive aesthetic end also, whence the long coda. As you noticed, I carry the pulse of one second over into the soundtrack and made, or attempted to make at least, a visual equivalent in the last part for the physical silence of the main section of the film. Does that answer your question?

Audience: [inaudible 01:12:44]

Hollis Frampton: Yeah.

Audience: [inaudible 01:12:48]

Hollis Frampton: Small square blah-blah-blah figure. Which variation was it? Was it early?

Audience: It was.

Audience: Something like a spring valve or ...

Hollis Frampton: Oh, well all those are ... That is mylar-splicing tape. That's the shape of film. That's what film looks like physically as a material. It's a kind of ghost of the film leaving the projector. It doesn't. All of those variations are as banal as I could possibly make them. If any of you here have made films, I think you're probably aware that those are scorchingly [01:14:00] corny things to do to a piece of film by and large. It wasn't any hot new invention. It just required patience, little brushes, and a sharp-pointed instrument, stuff like that.

That's what that was. It was just mylar splicing tape.

Yes.

Audience: [inaudible 01:14:24]

Hollis Frampton: I wrote this. This film is meant seriously, so I suppose you'd call this serious writing. I do not think of myself as a writer. No, no, writing's much too difficult. Much too difficult for me. I'd rather pursue something easy. If you think about the invention of photography, Fox Talbot, and Niépce were looking for a quick and easy method because they couldn't learn how to draw.

Well, I still believe that photography and cinematography are the quick and easy method to do something or other. I feel that I've taken the wrong turn in the trade so to speak, and it's become difficult, again, but writing is much too hard. It's not like talk. If it were like talk, I suppose I'd be a prolific author, if not an altogether serious one, but it ain't.

Yeah.

Audience: In your first film, there was one sequence where a goldfish seemingly walked on water and then [01:16:00] approached by a final word ...

Hollis Frampton: I think I recall the sequence you're talking about.

Audience: Very funny and very strong in comparison to the other sequences around it. Am I correct in thinking you're trying to avoid something that strong, or was that just a happy accident?

Hollis Frampton: I wish you'd rephrase those questions so they sound less hostile.

Audience: When the rhinoceros appeared at the end of Zorn's Lemma, it was about equally surprising.

Hollis Frampton: Well, I wanted it to be surprising, yeah. That's why the rhino's there, sort of shocking image, I guess.

Audience: A climactic point?

Hollis Frampton: Oh, no. Not a climactic point. Just a shocking image among many other images. I see all of those images as pretty much the same. They're all totally absorbing, but they're totally absorbing in different ways. The rhinoceros is a kind of exoticism, so to speak. Also, I wanted to get an animal into the film too.

I don't know if ... You imply vaguely, at least to my mind, something that I think is not true of me – I think it's true of another [01:18:00] filmmaker – that I propose to fit my pieces together by draining as much energy out of them as possible. I don't think I do that. I try not to do that. I don't try to do anything to them at all, as far as their energy goes except maybe to put it in the right place, or what I think is the right place.

I think the aesthetic you're talking about is more that of Andy Warhol than of Hollis Frampton. He has a curious facility for sucking the life out of almost anything. Something as monumental as the Empire State Building slowly withers and dies in 24 hours. It's an astonishing thing. Harry Smith told Andy Warhol once that he should make a movie 1,000 years long of Mt. Fujiyama. Fantastic. I thought it was a perfectly appropriate suggestion.

I don't think I work that way. I don't think I work that way at all. I'm not nearly that deliberate, I think, in my feelings about the material. I try to be pretty deliberate about what I do know because I think it throws into higher relief, at least for me, what I don't know. Then six months later I kind of look at the film and find out what I didn't know when I made it, or part of it.

The appearance of the rhinoceros, let's say, or the [01:20:00] order in which the variations come in *Artificial Light*, or the presence of the fish image at the end of *Surface Tension* or any of a lot of other things. I don't have differential equations worked out for dealing with things like that. I just put them where I thought they should go. That's all. I try to judge their weight and so forth. Maybe by the time I'm 75 or 80, I'll have differential equations for where the rhinoceros should go, and presumably then I'll be ready for more interesting [bonheurs?] or something.

Yes.

Audience: [inaudible 01:20:55] I wonder if you've seen *La Raison Avant La Passion* ...

Hollis Frampton: *Reason over passion*. That's easier in English. If you have seen *La Raison Avant La Passion* more than once and seen the credits, you'll know I did the computer perms that are superimposed on that film. Those people are very close and old friends of mine, both of them. New York City is supposed to have 30,000 artists, but there are only about 10 filmmakers in New York City who are, let us say, above college age and making films at a pretty good clip now, so it turns out to be a small town, and New York is an awfully small town, anyway. [01:22:00]

Audience: [inaudible 01:22:01]

Hollis Frampton: Who? Not only he lives in New York. He sort of signs his alien card every January like a good Canadian should. He spends as much time in New York as he can. On the other hand, of course, he is in this curious position of being one of Canada's two earth-shaking contemporary artists. The other is his wife, Joyce Wieland.

It is necessary for him to put in the odd occasional appearance in Toronto or Montreal or, God help us, even Ottawa. Right now he's up there finishing a film that promises to excite the nerve endings of everybody ... *La Region Centrale*, The Central Region. I can't tell you any more than that. It's three and a half hours long. It's a peach. It's a peach.

I don't know what you mean when you say I go beyond Joyce, though. Her film is much longer than mine. It's a two-reeler. Anyone else? Peace, and [01:24:00] thank you.

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