
Interview with Hollis Frampton

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Interview with Hollis Frampton

PETER GIDAL

London, May 24, 1972.

Gidal: What do you consider *Zorns Lemma* to be about?

Frampton: Oh, dear! Are you asking that question?

Gidal: Absolutely.

Frampton: Well, I can, at least, tell you what the film came out of, and how it reached its present form. I first began using a movie camera at the end of the fall of 1962. At that time I was, in a way, being systematically forced into cinema by my work in still photography. I'd been working for a long time in series, sometimes long ones, and there were things about the still series that began to trouble me. For example, if you have a bunch of photographs that you believe cohere even in book space, let alone on a gallery wall, there's no way to determine the order in which they're seen, nor the amount of time for which each one is seen, nor to establish the possibility of a repeat. So that already had me thinking of film, as a kind of ordering and control, a way of handling stills.

Gidal: So the control element is time?

Frampton: Yes. Then at the same time I was thinking a lot about photography's standard paradoxes. You have all these spatial illusions, and even tactile illusions, whereas somehow a cultural reflex has you believing that when you're looking at something, it's real, let's say. Even if you're assembling the impression from only the barest, most abstract kind of thing, at the same time the thing is absolutely undeniably flat; it doesn't have impasto; it has nothing; it is perfectly superficial; it has only an outside. That paradox seemed to me most strongly embodied in some stills I had made of words, environmental words, in which the word as a graphic element that brought one back to reading (and being conscious of looking at a mark on a surface), emphasized the flatness of the

thing. And at the same time the tactile and spatial hints that were compounded with it, the presence of the word within the image, were full of illusion. So that I'd begun to make a bunch of these still photographs, and I thought, "Well, I'll make them into a film," and I shot more than 2,000 words in 35 mm still with the idea that I was just going to put them on a stand and shoot them. And I did a little of that, as a matter of fact. It's perfectly dead. It was simply going absolutely no place.

Well, that's how the thing began: as a concern with that spatial paradox or set of spatial paradoxes, and the kind of malaise generated as you get further into it. There still are a few of those original black and white photographs. They all have some real object lying on top of them. The oldest one is the word *Fox*, from the old Brooklyn Fox Theater. I think it is the first one I made . . . dark blue sky, some little straw flowers or paper flowers on top of it as a memento to the sentimental nature of the occasion.

Gidal: Before you go on about your concerns in *Lemma*, could you briefly, descriptively give an idea of *Lemma* itself?

Frampton: Can I describe it?

Gidal: Yes, and then go on to the conceptual source of the actual film. But first clarify somewhat the film itself.

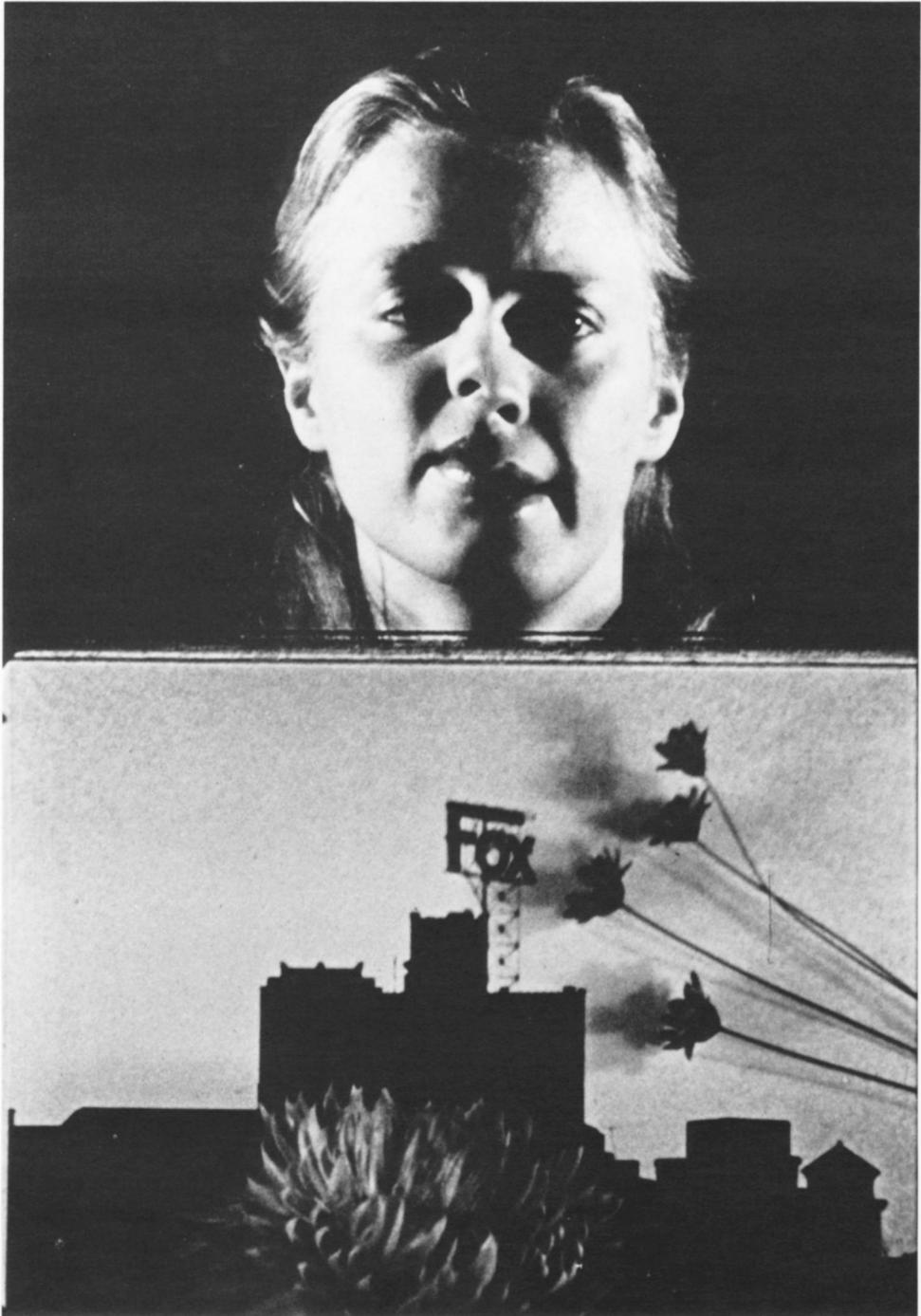
Frampton: Well, that's easy. There are three parts. The first part is five minutes long, soundtrack with no image. A woman recites in a schoolteacherly voice twenty-four rhymes from the *Bay State Primer*, which was designed to teach late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century children the alphabet.

It's: "In Adam's fall we sinned all." The primer is oriented towards death, towards acceptance of authority, a kind of rote learning in the dark, I suppose. The second section opens with an enunciation of the roman alphabet itself, with as little context as possible. The letters are made of metal. Actually they were typed on tinfoil and photographed in one-to-one closeup. That's how it developed. They weren't cast.

Gidal: They look like huge, cast, three or four feet tall, silver . . .

Frampton: In the body of the second section, the main section of the film, which is forty-five minutes long, there are 2,700 one-second cuts, one-second segments, twenty-four frame segments, of which about half are words; the words are alphabetized. The reason for alphabetizing them really was to make their order as random as possible, that is, to avoid imposing my own taste and making them into little puns or something like that — much as the encyclopedists of the Enlightenment thought they could somehow categorize all human knowl-

Hollis Frampton. Zorns Lemma. 1970.



edge, or a large part of it, under the initial letter of the name of the subject. So that it just happens that quaternions are found in volume so-and-so under *q*. It's crazy when you think about it, though it does generate some intelligible phrases, some odd pairings. Let's see . . . there's a Hart Crane sort of line early on that reads, "nectar of pain"; there's a phrase of Victorian pornography, "limp member," which sticks out like a sore thumb, a limp thumb, perhaps, straight out of *My Secret Life* or *A Man and a Maid*. That happens of course. Most words (not all, but most) were from the environment; they're store signs and posters and things like that, and one finds out very quickly that very many words begin with *c* and with *s*, and so forth; very few begin with *x* or *q*, or what have you. One quickly begins to run out of *q*'s and *x*'s and *z*'s. Essentially one is using a chance operation. And, as always with a chance operation, along with some things that you want, it also generates holes. Fate has problems. It's always true. And, having taken care of the operations, one has to think a great deal more about the holes. I don't know at what point the notion supervened of substituting other images for words as they disappear in each alphabetic slot. I first thought all the images would be different. It would be what John Simon called (fake Slavic accent) "just a jumble of imaches!" You see . . .

Gidal: May he rest in peace.

Frampton: Well, whatever. And for quite a long time I held that notion of the film. The greatest bulk of time was spent shopping in Manhattan for the words themselves. I can't say I did it every single day for seven years, but I did it for seven years, and I shot actually four times as many words as I used, as well as duplications. The word *shot* comes up again and again; I think I used it five times. It was difficult to choose, but some just didn't work for one reason or another. Rather than make 1,350 entirely different shots, I found that I could achieve the same degree of randomness by using twenty-four and dissecting them, exploding them. Once that occurred to me, the possibility of developing an iconography . . .

Gidal: As separate . . .

Frampton: Yes, as separate from the words and what they were doing . . . presented itself; from then on it was easy. I still remember the images I shot and didn't use. There was one of sawing wood, sawing a board, that I tried several times to get together. Many of the images are in some sense sculptural; they have to do with generative acts concerning three-dimensional space rather than two-dimensional space.

Gidal: But each image is one second long, so that whether the image is visual or visual-verbal, the time span is the same.

Frampton: Yes, that's right. They're all one second. Well, in actual fact they're not all one second. I suppose I should talk about this. All of my work contains mistakes. Presumably everybody's work contains mistakes. Sometimes I find mine when I'm making them and lock into them in one way or another; sometimes I find them out later. Some people think the whole thing is a mistake. But if you think about any long and comparatively ambitious work, you'll see it contains errors of some kind or other. The *Divine Comedy* contains metric errors where Dante got locked into the text and had to fight his way out of it; it doesn't always come off so well. So I decided to incorporate deliberately a series of kinds of errors.

Gidal: A system of errors?

Frampton: Right, so that I'd know where they were, since they were going to be there anyway. I won't go into this at the moment, but there is one class of metrical errors. There are twelve images which are twenty-three frames long and twenty-four which are twenty-five frames long. I don't think I generated those myself. The person who was helping me cut the footage down into one-second lengths, determined—by his own chance operations—where they were, and cut them.

Gidal: I noticed the "errors" while watching the film again. Still, it comes across very clearly that it's one-second segments. You feel a certain tension at moments when it breaks. But not to the point of mystification, so that one thinks, "Is it a second or not?" The basic time segment is one second.

Frampton: But then that's an elastic interval. It depends upon how much there is in the frame to see. Some are very simple and very graphic so that you almost start to get bored. There are others in which there is at least a suggestion that if you saw that one second repeated fifty times, you would still be frantic, that your eyes would be crawling around the frame still trying to extract stuff from it. Anyway, let's try to get on with the description of the thing. All of the words are finally replaced by images. The last one, *c*, a red ibis flapping its wings in the Bronx zoo, is seen for only one second in the film's entire hour. Then finally there's a section, ten or eleven minutes long, in which a man, woman, and dog walk from very near foreground across a field of snow, a distance close to 400 yards, disappearing finally into pine woods. This is, for all intents and purposes, a continuous take, although it is not, in fact. It's made up of five 100-foot rolls. Suggestions of fogged ends are left in and dissolved, so—if you're at all into the materiality of film—it suggests several times that it's about to end, then dissolves into a new image, then finally goes out to white.

There's a track on the last part which consists of six women's voices reading a text by Robert Grosseteste, who was Bishop of Lincoln. The text, *On*

Light, or the Ingression of Forms, is a beautiful medieval Latin treatise which is variously translated—translated, vulgarized by me, then cut down to about 620 words. It's read—pocketa-pocketa—at the rate of one word per second. The text itself is, I think, apposite to film and to whatever my epistemological views of film are. The key line in the text is a sentence that says, "In the beginning of time, light drew out matter along with itself into a mass as great as the fabric of the world." Which I take to be a fairly apt description of film, the total historical function of film, not as an art medium, but as this great kind of time capsule. It was thinking about this, which led me later to posit the universe as a vast film archive (which contains nothing in itself) with—presumably somewhere in the middle, in the undiscoverable center of this whole matrix of film-thoughts—an unlocatable viewing room in which, throughout eternity, sits the Great Presence screening the infinite footage.

Gidal: Screening unshot negatives.

Frampton: Well, whatever! It is, then, the infinite intelligence which, in the act of screening, imagines the images into the frame so that they reflect back into the projector. You can, one can, make a whole religion out of this thing! (Laughter from Marion Faller, Frampton, Gidal.) We're trying.

I plan later to have more to say about that. This is my metaphor because I am a filmmaker. Borges has a wonderful story called *The Library of Babel*, in which the entire universe has been transformed into a library of books. While conjecturing as to the actual structure of the library, he manages to reconstruct the entire history of human thought. All through this one metaphor! The cinematic metaphor seems to me to be more poignant, more meet.

Gidal: Speaking of Borges, I find important and beautiful in *Lemma* the fact that it's not mystificatory, not labyrinthine at all, and that on one level it denies logic. In that sense it's really an anti-Calvinist film.

Frampton: Let me tell you a bit more what this film is for me. A couple of other people have also noticed it: the film is a kind of cryptic autobiography. In a way, I had the standard midwestern protestant American education, in which one does learn by precept and rote, in the dark—although it was not perhaps so puritanical, authority-ridden, death-saturated. Presumably many of my contemporaries had very much the same kind of experience. It was predominantly oriented to words, but words only in the most superficially denotative sense.

Part two has a great deal to do with something that happened to me between the ages of twenty and thirty-two, thirty-three, or thereabouts, a decade and a half that I spent mostly in New York. It represents—one can see it this way—a kind of long dissolve, a very attenuated dissolve, from primarily verbal to primarily nonverbal concerns: the last part of the film. And, of course, the

middle section was all shot in Manhattan. It's pointedly urban in its visual style — a conglomeration of visual styles imitated in the individual shots. This part is still very much a distancing of itself, in various ways, from Renaissance spatial representation, from a sort of urban rectilinearity.

An interesting fact, finally, about the last part: it turned out to be prophetic. Simon Field (I think it was he) wrote to me in the summer of 1970 asking if the film was autobiographical and if its final section had something to do with a move towards leaving the city, as a lot of artists were doing then. At the time of the filming I had no such conscious plan. It was only in January 1970 that I formulated such an idea while I was staying at a farm a friend of mine had just got twenty-five miles from where my place now is. I was in the country looking for a place. This section of the film turned out to be prophetic.

Gidal: The second segment of the film already hints at that. By ending with earth, air, fire, and water, it points in that direction.

Frampton: Sure, very much so. I suppose I do most of my work in such a way that I supply a certain amount, I make a container, and for the rest of it, the film — the work itself — generates its own set of demands and its own set of rules. In the end, if possible — and this is the very oldest of ideas, not new at all — it consumes itself, uses itself up, leads to a stasis of some sort. I can't precisely say how. I get to a point where I've done as much as I know how to do. Then I wait. After awhile something comes. I tend to wait around for some insight into how to do the next thing. Where does the insight come from? I don't know. I'm not here to make explicit appeals to the muse or the angels.

But it wasn't simply a question of, say, getting more ambitious, wanting to order larger and larger amounts of material. There are ways of doing that. Rather it was a question of finding some way the material would order itself that would have something to do with it and that would also seem appropriate to my own feelings about it. My feelings, I suppose, are partly genetic, partly generated by my own understanding of the medium. Also by the more distant tradition within art that has moved me specifically. But that, too, may be genetic. Some things appeal to you and some don't. I know that some of those Egyptian things in the British Museum are great sculpture, but I am unmoved by granite colossi. I may at the age of seventy be moved by granite colossi; I may have been moved by them at the age of five.

Aristotle talks somewhere about six kinds of intelligence. We've whittled it down to one. That which enables us to talk (writing is a kind of talking). To articulate. That leaves five kinds of intelligence as recognized by Aristotle shivering in the cold. One of the kinds he talked about was *techné*, which is the kind that allows people to make things, presumably good things. We get *technical* from that, but we now say "that's merely technical." But Aristotle didn't limit this intelligence to that which pertains to craft. He meant it as the whole faculty

of mind that makes it possible for a Brancusi to be able to march up to a billet of bronze and get the *Bird in Space* out of it. Whereas, if I were to march up to the same billet of bronze, whatever my powers are, I would get a pile of filings out of it. Yet all Brancusi had to say about sculpture—to my knowledge—was ten sentences, none of which an art reviewer would recognize as rational.

Gidal: Your film has duration, pieces of time, visual and verbal. The tensions are basically in the pieces of time.

Frampton: I like your word *duration*. That's a word that means something. When you say *time*, you're floundering. Duration is how long something lasts.

Gidal: From point *a* to point *b*.

Frampton: From point *a* to point *b*. Something that is concretely measured by counting the number of frames on the strip.

Gidal: I don't mean by this narration. Point *a* to point *b* in *duration* as *opposed* to narration, because everything moves forward in time. That's an important distinction.

Frampton: Okay, what about time? Presumably, since so much of my work seems to deal with notions of time, it's something I've thought about. What are these views of time? There's time as the universal solvent. We're dropped on the surface of the tub which is corrosive; we slowly rot away and sink down and disappear. Or: there's time as an elastic fluid. The frog Tennyson leaps into the elastic fluid and creates waves which ultimately joggle the cork Eliot. Or, in Eliot's view, the elasticity travels in both directions: tradition and individual talent. Eliot, of course, says that Eliot has changed Tennyson, and that is clearly true. Or: there is the DNA model of time, the spiral in which it's possible in four dimensions to have every turn of the helix cross every other turn of the helix within one lifetime or some other finite thing. Or: Pound's view of time—the continuous copresence of everything. That is essentially the view of time of the generation of the 1880s.

There is—what would you call it?—an incubus that settles over any attempt to think about time as a phenomenon like gravitation, radiation, or what have you. Phenomena are directly sensible and the intellect can devise direct ways to measure them. “Thirty-two feet per second per second” is a statement about gravitation. Which leads me to suspect that time is not a fiction, you know, nor a phenomenon, but rather a condition of intelligibility, of the perception of all other phenomena.

Gidal: Now how does that relate to *Zorns Lemma*? Specific pieces of time which are also pieces of space . . .

Frampton: In *that* film I have made the cut in duration (the pointed sense of the passage of time) explicitly a condition of perceiving everything that's going on in the film. That's one view of the matter. Of course, I've gone on with this black and white thing (the new films) to elaborate other possible views.

Gidal: Since you mention the black and white films, five of those six films are part of a larger film, *Hapax Legomena*. What interests me is the projected fourth part, as you described it last week at the London Filmmaker's Co-op.

Frampton: Okay, here we go, describing the two channels again, separately. To begin with, there is an object in Philadelphia, a posthumously constructed object by Marcel Duchamp, called *Given: (1) the waterfall, (2) the illuminating gas*.¹ I think I need not describe that here; suffice it to say that it is not only impossible, in the mode of the construction of the thing, but also illegal, in the terms of Duchamp's testament, to photograph the thing. One has had, therefore, to get by with verbal description of it. And I began to notice that no two people describe it in the same way. Well, so far we have six blind men and their elephant. But of particular interest is the fact that everyone who has described it has left something out.

Gidal: Please describe it.

Frampton: Okay. I'll describe it: You walk up to a pair of big double doors, very weatherbeaten, heavy, scratched timber doors; they look like the entrance to a medieval speakeasy. At a height which is that of the average person, there are two peepholes which you look through. Inside the wooden doors you see a brick wall which appears to have a regular hole blasted through it. On the other side of the brick wall, immediately on the other side, is what appears to be the edge of a kind of ravine, covered with leafless brush. It appears to be fall and the foliage has more or less fallen to the ground. Beyond that, over the ravine, at a considerable distance, there is a painted background, in color, trees and sky, very flat, looking very much like the renderings of very distant landscapes in some Renaissance paintings. In the middle of which, achieved by some kind of polarized gimmick, there's a little waterfall which appears continuously to run. It's motorized. You can see the water. The water's running over, presumably down into this ravine. In the immediate foreground, lying on the brush in the ravine, supine and spread-eagled, is a nude woman. Both of her feet, her right hand, and head are cut off from view by the boundaries of the hole in the brick wall. Since you're looking through peepholes, it's impossible to shift your view

1. The work referred to is *Etant donnés: 1^e la chute d'eau, 2^e gaz d'éclairage*, 1946-66. Duchamp's last major work was posthumously and permanently installed in a gallery adjoining that of the Arensberg collection in the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

to see if in fact she has a head, a right hand, or feet. Her left hand is elevated and she holds in it a burning gas lamp. It is a very, very lifelike nude woman, kind of wax-museum lifelike.

Gidal: I think she's made out of pigskin.

Frampton: Pigskin? Terrific! Well, Duchamp didn't make it; it was made by Madame Duchamp and Arnold Poore, presumably according to precise instructions left at his death. It is impossible to say why the woman is there, what has happened to her, whether she's dead or alive, or anything else. It's rather striking that she has no pubic hair, but that she does have abundant blond hair under her one visible armpit. What does this all mean anyway?

Gidal: This interview is finally getting funny.

Frampton: Marcel does it again! You know, the work keeps nibbling at my mind with very profound suggestions of cinema, particularly the curious enigma that the frame . . .

Gidal: Yes, the frame as cutoff . . .

Frampton: The frame as a strange model, both negative and positive, for human consciousness . . . just the frame itself. I'm now working on putting together twelve descriptions of twelve sentences each—that's 144 sentences of plain description—of this object from various people. Six descriptions will be written by men and six by women. They will be read again, aloud in the following manner: all the number one sentences will be followed by all the number two sentences, followed by all the number three. They will be read by two voices, a man's voice and a woman's voice, with the roles exchanged. The descriptions written by women will be read by a male voice and vice versa. That's the whole substance of the thing. There will also be an image which will consist of a more or less continuous time lapse journey, a dolly from Stonehenge on Salisbury Plain to the kitchen of my farmhouse in central New York state via a number of other landmarks. The dolly will come to rest on a still photograph of my face, lying on a small table, between a potted cactus and a coffee cup next to a window. You can see that it will have keystones linking it to *Poetic Justice*.² Anticipatory, since *Poetic Justice* follows it. I'm shooting the whole thing on grainy stock, 4x reversal, and it'll be printed in high contrast. What will happen, of course, is that there will be a very jerky frame: one frame every four or five feet

2. For information regarding Frampton's films mentioned in this interview, see the filmography, pp. 167-169. A printed edition of 150 copies of *Poetic Justice* was issued in 1973 by the Visual Studies Workshop Press, Rochester.

or so when there's walking. Also, shots from an automobile. Velocity carried through a landscape. There will be a hold or freeze frame in the image for each word in the soundtrack. For short words perhaps no more than three frames or so; for longer words, four or five. I regret in anticipation that this film is going to be made. I haven't entirely taken the path that leads to getting the most fun out of life in that respect. Well, as far as I can go, that explains it.

Gidal: Okay. What is *Hapax Legomena*?

Frampton: *Hapax Legomena*, section four. The title of which is *Ordinary Matter*.

Gidal: The six titles are?

Frampton: The six titles, in order, are: *nostalgia*, *Critical Mass*, *Travelling Matte*, *Ordinary Matter*, *Poetic Justice*, *Special Effects*.

Gidal: Now the title.

Frampton: *Hapax Legomena* is Greek scholarly jargon; it means "said one time." Things said once. It refers to words that are found but once in the entire corpus of a literature. Sometimes they are found just once in the entire body of work of a poet. In some languages this amounts to a very large class. There are several hundred—perhaps thousands—of words that occur only once in Homer's work. They are always very problematical because it is difficult to say what a *hapax legomena* means. You have only one context, so the denotation of the word is always conjectural.

The sense of the whole phrase may or may not be clear. There are, in effect, words which are *hapax legomena* in English, too. No poet, I think, since Shakespeare has dared to use the word *incarnadine*. He really sapped that one dry. By default, a kind of vividness. For all intents and purposes *incarnadine* is a *hapax legomena* in English even though we know precisely what it means. We'll never use it again.

Gidal: I have a few questions which relate to narrative. Can you destroy narrative by encouraging a participatory narrative completion on the part of the viewer? Let me clarify the question. In *Poetic Justice*, by presenting images in words, giving a script scene by scene: "lovers on a bed, an arm being amputated outside the window . . ."

Frampton: Two surgeons amputating a *limb*; that's the word. They could be tree surgeons.

Gidal: Right, they *could* be, but for me the question and problem (in what we

have to call “structural” cinema) are to what degree does *Zorns Lemma* produce a shift with respect to the other films of *Hapax Legomena*?

There seems to be some sort of shift—even a break—but perhaps not a definitive one. I find that *Zorns Lemma* does not demand a narrative fulfillment of the anticipation it establishes and uses. It doesn’t offer answers, no matter how abstract, to a goal-oriented, narrative consciousness within the viewer. And for me, something like *Poetic Justice*, although very abstract and ambiguous, is possibly a “narrative”; it has narrative tendencies. *Do you have narrative tendencies?* (Laughter.) *I suspect, I suspect . . . that’s the question. . . .*

Frampton: Am I coming out of the closet?

Gidal: It’s not just some abstract intellectual question about narrative. It’s the whole idea of using the viewer as a voyeur, as a passive respondent to your very abstract ideas and feelings. Or do you demand of the viewer a total break with the past cultural system?

Frampton: Okay, let’s talk about that. First of all, say we’re at the end of history or even somewhere in the middle of it. Suppose then that we were at the other end?

Gidal: Which other end? (General laughter.)

Frampton: Suppose we had all history to contemplate as an object. Suppose all the film, all the art that ever will be made had been made. Here we are, let’s say, disembodied spirits trying to make some sense out of it as anthropologists, as it were. It strikes me that there would be a very large category we could call film. Or a category that contains film and some other things. It would seem that there were a number of cinemas that had to use more or less the same material. There would be a narrative cinema that essentially mapped literature onto cinema; there would be perhaps a retinal, a purely formal, retinal cinema: Conrad, Kubelka, Sharits, three very different artists who made flicker films,³ and so forth. We could go on for thousands of years. We could reach an extraordinary level of phosphene orchestration.

Gidal: All three of the filmmakers you mentioned deal with narrative in some way.

3. Among the films referred to are Tony Conrad’s *The Flicker*, 1966, 30 minutes; Peter Kubelka’s *Adebar*, 1956–57, 1:50 minutes, black and white, sound; *Arnulf Rainer*, 1958–60, 6:30 minutes, black and white frames, black and white sound; Paul Sharits’s *N:O:T:H:I:N:G*, 1968, 36 minutes, color, sound; *T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G*, 1968, 12 minutes, color, sound.

Frampton: That might cast itself loose finally, later on.

There might very well be a tactile cinema—I see signs of this in Andrew Noren’s work—that would deal almost entirely with the sensory cluster we call tactility and which also has to do with things like kinaesthesia, the sense of your own weight and the weight of other things. I suggested another sort in order to get an argument going at Millennium,⁴ and someone took me up on it. Taking the view that cinema was the youngest of the arts, I proposed a cinema of “special effects” that would be a cinema of the ear, popularly known as music. If music is only the cinema of the ear, sound ordered in time to perceptual ends, we could say the cinema of the eye is light ordered in time to perceptual ends. Then, of course, cinema becomes the oldest of the arts. Music is not in the main a product of the central nervous system; insects make music, for example. Hundreds of millions of years old . . . a cinema of the ear. Remember now, we’re clear out at the other end of history at this point, and that 350 million years have gone towards bringing music to its present form. It may seem very brief when we contemplate the other cinemas that I anticipate.

I know it’s customary to say that we have a cinema which is the mapping of literature onto film, but it is nevertheless true that film and its conventions and discoveries over the last eighty years have had a very powerful effect on narrative form. It has begun to turn the other way around; even narrative film is much more influential *on* the novel.

Gidal: Film is a determinant of consciousness rather than . . .

Frampton: Absolutely, rather than a version of . . .

Gidal: Right.

Frampton: It would seem then that narrative is simply a category. Now, we say *nonnarrative* and *narrative* film. That’s because there are those tin cans full of celluloid in California or in Pinewood, all those negatives of Greta Garbo. It’s as though narrative film were a vast, barbaric Asia, and a tiny Europe of what we call nonnarrative film were appended to it at the northwest corner. This presumably will not always be the case. We notice that the term *nonnarrative* film contains the term *narrative*. Post-Freudian psychology speaks point for point to Freud; essentially it says, “Here, Dr. Freud is right; here, Dr. Freud is wrong.” It spends all its time talking about Dr. Freud. I would rather—to take this back to film—simply talk about *film*. Narrative film is a category, a subset

4. The Millennium Film Workshop, founded by Ken Jacobs in 1966 and directed by Howard Gutenplan, is one of New York’s important centers for the exhibition and discussion of independent film production. Frampton and his contemporaries cited in this interview appeared frequently to present work in this forum, and to discuss issues central to production and theory.

within the set of all possible films that have been made. In that case, if I'm making a film, it seems to me I needn't necessarily concern myself with whether it has overtones or scents or narrative or narrative myths in it. In fact, it does. These new films are very concerned with, not making narratives, but with the problems and paradoxes of narrative, as with other things. Viable or nonviable ready-made views of knowledge. If you put something in the form of a story, if you cast something you believe you know in the form of a narrative, that narrative says whatever it says. The very fact, however, that it is recognizable as a narrative in itself, entirely aside from its specific content or your own version of narrative theory, already suggests a specific epistemological cast. It says essentially that you do subscribe, if not wholeheartedly, to a certain view of knowledge, a certain view of the way things happen in the world, which is the structure of the English declarative sentence.

Gidal: It's authoritarian.

Frampton: Obviously.

Gidal: By breaking down traditional narrative, are you not making an effort to combat that authoritarian structure? You may believe in those "wonderful" moments when the black light floats out of the bulb in Sharits's film *N:O:T:H:I:N:G*, or when the chair falls. Or in an analogue of the short story, in Kubelka's *Arnulf Rainer*, which restores traditional modes of seeing despite a basic structure in opposition to that. The question is: can one just break down narrative and say that this is like a combat, a real combat, in which the actual film process demands that the viewer be much more than a recipient of a quasi-narrative?

Frampton: Let's say we agree we're against a certain kind of passivity. A certain feeling that you're sitting at the table and roast beef is falling straight into your mouth and down into your stomach.

Gidal: And you're made to believe you like it and want it that way.

Frampton: But that view is not necessarily and precisely congruent with a position against narrative. Consider the situation in painting now. Here is a presumption which is not true: painting has at this point supposedly cast off its illusionistic references.

Gidal: As you say, supposedly.

Frampton: It ain't so, by and large. Stella's work is as illusionistic as that of any painter I can think of, including most action painters—totally concerned with deep space. It's virtually impossible still, except by fits and starts, to see action

painting, for example, as not referring to deep space. Somebody has said that Pollock paintings are thickets and masses of leaves and so forth. It's even been done. All those Kline paintings *were* done by Mark di Suvero.

Gidal: Take this back to film. Take it to Kubelka and Sharits as opposed to *Back and Forth*⁵ and *Zorns Lemma*. A strict break in the "structural" (that word again) cinema, a total dichotomy, which no one seems to recognize.

Frampton: I recognize it. But what I'm arguing against, you see, is what you seem to suggest: that the faintest hint of anything that could possibly be construed as narrative, or having to do in any measure of distance with narrative, is a no-no.

Gidal: No, no, well to some degree, yes. Yes. I am saying that. Not duration, but narrative.

Frampton: You are saying that. This is like somebody saying—Rimbaud or somebody—"Il faut être absolument moderne."

Gidal: But you, with one film, have also drawn a very firm line. With *Zorns Lemma* you are saying it is a "no-no." You say, "You must be this way, one way." You're saying this in one film and Mike Snow says it in *Back and Forth*. So whether one says it in words or in practice, it's there.

Frampton: Are you implying by hints and tags that in this new work, ghosts, phantasms of narrative . . . Are you saying that I've backtracked to sin and corruption?

Gidal: No, I'm asking whether the written script of *Poetic Justice*, which is very ambiguous but which nevertheless forces the viewer to make his or her own images, to construct his or her own attenuated narrative—I'm asking whether you see *this* as separate from your concerns in *Zorns Lemma*. As *Back and Forth* is a separation, a break from the concerns of *Arnulf Rainer*.

Frampton: Oh, no, no.

Gidal: No? Well, explain with regard to *nostalgia* and *Poetic Justice* in particular.

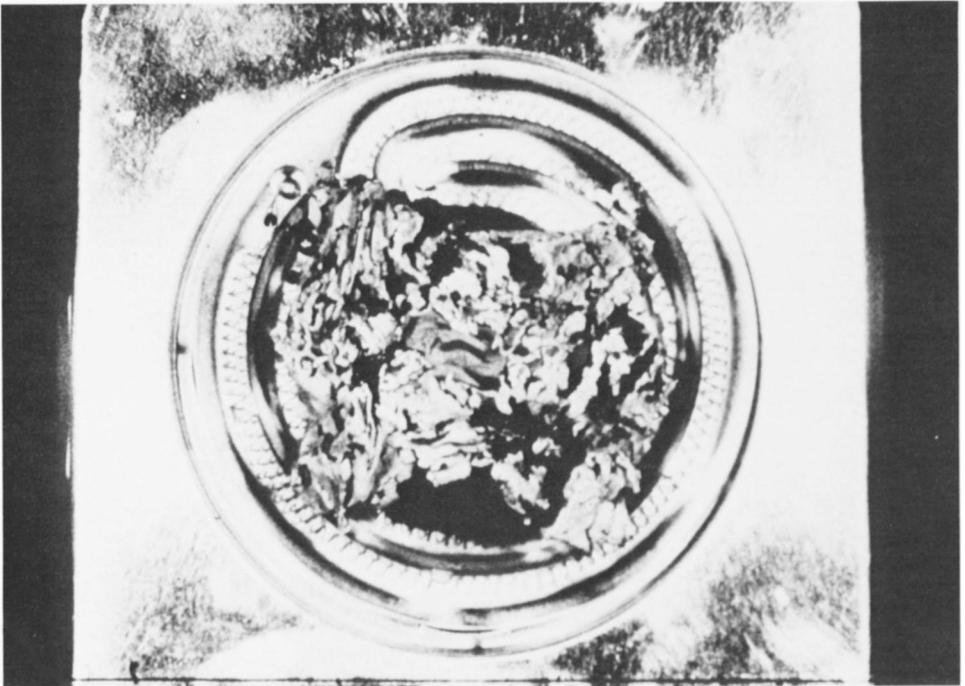
Frampton: One has always on one's mind not one single thing, but a dozen or so . . . (long pause). Let's go back to *Zorns Lemma*. *Lemma* is, in a way, a very

5. Michael Snow's film designated as ↔, 1968-69, 52 minutes, color, sound.

didactic work, to my mind at least. It's essentially prescriptive. It denies at the outset that there could be any other view of the matter, that there could be any other way. It hits very hard at the suggestion that there could be any other way of dealing with this mass of material. By "this mass of material" I mean a box full of footage. This is the world view that this mass of material suggests. More than suggests. Fully implies. That is one work in which I describe the alphabet as a colossus . . . or something like that.

The new stuff, unlike *Lemma*, is not in that way prescriptive. It suggests other views. In *nostalgia* I corrupt—well, I say "corrupt"—a series of, not descriptions, but reminiscences that turn old photographs of my own into a kind of atemporality, a history of aesthetics and sculpture. Very, very static, it gets better as you go on, represents a series of aesthetic postures . . . disguised as a series of accounts of my life, my youth. There is, at the same time, a double or triple present in that film, as in a number of films I did not make. In other words, the posture of the film is, rather than prescriptive, critical in a certain sense.

Gidal: Describing the burning photographs leaves a lot open, leaves a lot that has *not* been described or presented.



Hollis Frampton. nostalgia. 1971.

Frampton: Sure, there are other ways to describe them. It's possible to understand the thing—and one man has—as a diary, a series of revolutions—no, revelations, not revolutions—of my melancholy state of mind ten years later. That's in there, too.

Gidal: But to what degree? To what degree is the main thing not the size, the length of each image, the size of each image within the frame, the piece of time against another piece of time, the length of time to burn an image and reclaim the frame? Are the other concerns of equal importance?

Frampton: Here I am, three blocks from where Wyndham Lewis lived most of his life. As I recall, he pointed out that art has no insides in the sense that all the qualities of the work of art are what you can see; there's nothing hidden. While I do carry along a ghostly freight of possible films that could have been made with the same material, the film I made is nevertheless the one you see. And presumably I have made the specific film out of the directly implied possible films. Not your guess, but my direct implication, for a specific purpose, you see.

At this point I'm very interested in the *why* of a specific thing, the *why* of the cloud, the cluster of films that exist virtually . . . like the old analogy of the stone that contains a certain number of sculptures.

Gidal: So you want to leave that open? You don't want to deny or subsume those things?

Frampton: I think that by not making any of them I positively *have* denied them.

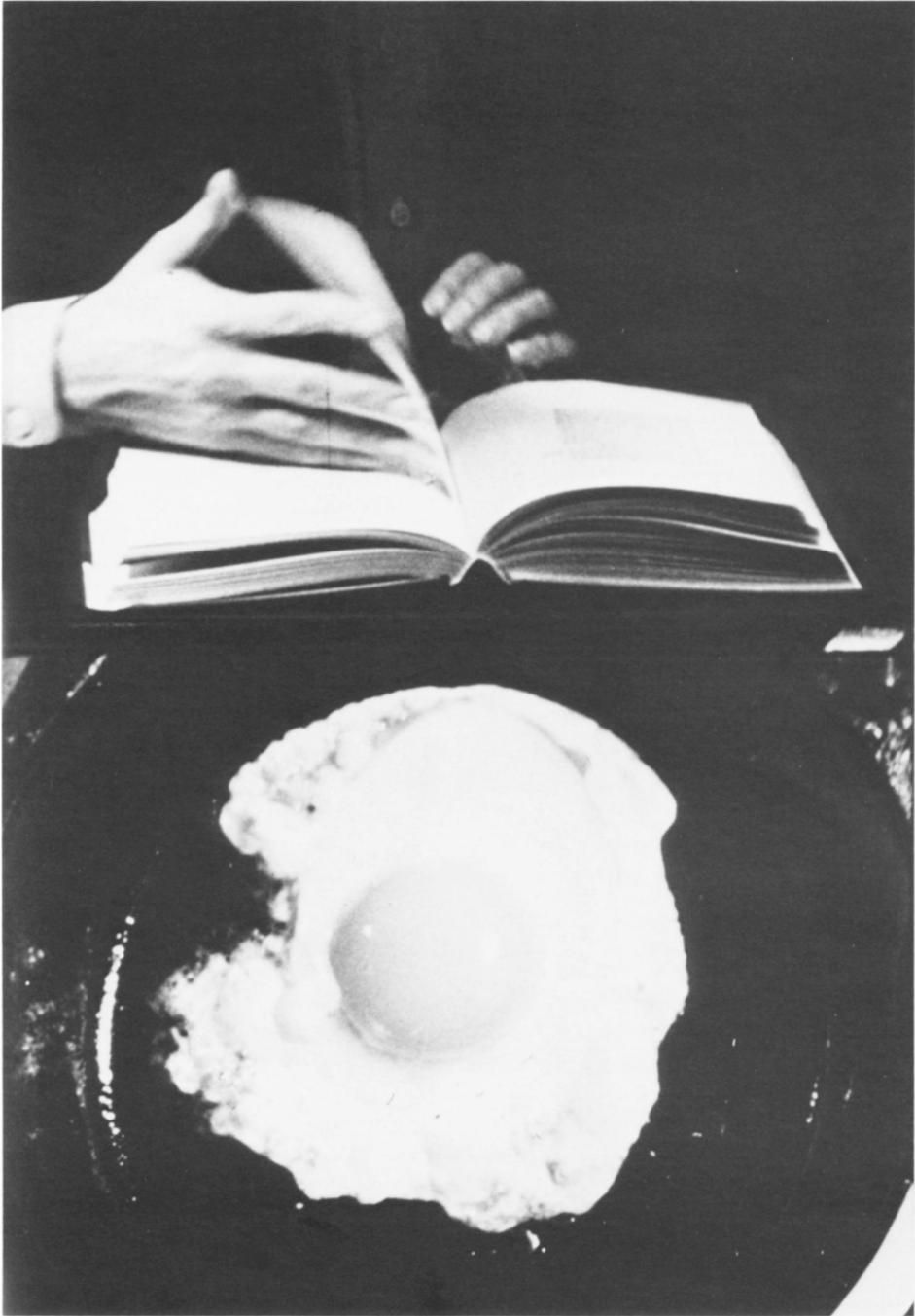
Gidal: Not by leaving it to the viewer? Not through narrative completion on the viewer's part, as opposed to a denial of that whole completion, through pure structure? You seem to be open to that; you're not offended by a viewer reacting in that way.

Frampton: I'm not offended. I feel that anyone who is actually bending with warm precision over the work that is present to him, that such a person, if he makes a conventional narrative out of the film, has really twiddled his head a whole lot.

Gidal: Would you feel the same about any narrative that he might come up with? I'm referring to the possibility that the viewer would come up with not only a conventional narrative, but that he might even get out of the film the old story of the "artist's experience," the presentation of a sensibility, rather than a sense of process, of segments of time, perceptual relativities, relationships.

Frampton: Let's just stop right here! To make a work of art is to involve yourself

Hollis Frampton. Zorns Lemma. 1970.



in some risk. At the worst I suppose that when you're committed to a work and it fails, what you risk is your sanity. The fuses burn out, the wire-ends are hanging there, and you're a catatonic for the rest of your life.

Gidal: That's one possibility.

Frampton: Let's just accept that there are risks. I'm not very interested in the audience, finally; things find their audience or they don't. Dante was eclipsed for 500 years; it was no concern of his. Let's say that in *Zorns Lemma* the risk is concentrated within a single massive hole in the ground into which a few people have actually fallen. If you do not immediately begin to build the film for yourself as you perceive it, then there simply is no film. There is no work at all, and you have only a meaningless jumble of images.

Gidal: Total risk.

Frampton: A straight on/off situation. In these new black and white films, it is more precarious; the risks are of another kind. Unlike *Zorns Lemma*—where either you see it or you don't—these films have a penumbra. You can end up driving on the shoulder of the road, and I accept that. In fact, it is something that interests me very much. I think, for instance, of the fate of *Madame Bovary*, which was prosecuted specifically as though it were an exaggerated version of precisely that kind of romantic slush the reading of which doomed Emma, precisely the kind that drove Flaubert to a frenzy or ecstasy of disgust in the writing. He well knew that except to the highly disciplined sensibility, it would be indistinguishable from the thing it distances itself from. But now, at this point of history, it's very visible because we don't have books like that any more. It has survived the garbage, the waste out of which it was made.

Gidal: We're back in the garbage, really.

Frampton: I've seen *Madame Bovary* displayed in a paperback edition in bus stations and other places just as though it were some sort of dirty book, and I'm sure it could be read this way (except for its sad ending) by middle-class women on long bus rides—along with short stories in the *Ladies' Home Journal*—who would get the same kind of tickle out of it.

Gidal: Or the men who read Norman Mailer.

Frampton: In this maze of misdirection there is, you know, a real ecstasy in finding your way through the traps that lie on either side. The only way you can go wrong, in fact, is to fall into some reverie of your own rather than looking at what is there. For I do believe that in all these films, it's all in front of you, es-

entially. In *Poetic Justice* there are four models, let us say, for four modes of consciousness. In the first tableau there is a straight, very low-grade, high-school instruction scenario of action. It's what's being talked about within that illusory action which doesn't exist. This is something else entirely, but leave that out. In the second tableau there are two things going on. One is a kind of illusory cinema, a kind of fooling around, a sort of seduction . . .

Gidal: All written down . . .

Frampton: All written down again, but you have to wait for the still photograph to find out what's happening in the movie, because all of the cinema shots are empty, and then the hand holds the still up, and so forth. But none of that is actually going on either. So you have a kind of memory thing working, and that again is part of the hierarchy of parities, I suppose. Everyone has seen the sentimental documentary visit through the house where George Washington lived; the camera dollies in through the bedroom and he's *not there*. Then you have the painting by Gilbert Stuart or Stuart Gilbert . . .⁶

Gidal: The frame within the frame within the frame . . .

Frampton: Yes, of course.

Gidal: Even in your film you have the film frame; you have the sheaf of paper on which the scenario is written page by page; you have the window described. That's already three frames.

Frampton: Okay. And in some cases, four.

Gidal: And in some cases, four.

Frampton: In the third tableau, essentially surrealist, in which "You and your lover are making love on the bed," the big window is seen as a screen or as a real window or as a Renaissance imaginary window within which an image can take place. A kind of hypnagogic series, you see. Another mode of understanding. The images there are patently hypnagogic. In the fourth, it is impossible to see the lover's face. Instead there's a series of ambivalent postures in which "oneself" or "You and" are perfectly interchangeable, a kind of dream.

Gidal: Are they that open? How do you see these things?

6. Frampton's sustained and intensive interest in Joyce informs this playful and ironic reference to the early exegete of *Ulysses*.

Frampton: I see various forms. Someone has said that that script is a kind of virus that seemed to float off the screen and infect the whole auditorium, that it is impossible not to enjoy it. But why, at the same time, is it not simply a script to read? Why didn't I issue it as a booklet or a pamphlet? Well, there is, in fact, a film to see. And the film you're supposed to see concerns itself with a couple of things. One is a quite real and, oh, melancholy, but not unpleasant, still life in which a number of things are happening. Reflections on the sides of the flower-pot and the coffee cup change, and so forth. There are flares, a couple of repetitions. There is, then, a photographic image which is further worked upon by the fact that one is called upon to read. Rather one is coerced into reading the space within the frame, or part of the frame. The eye cannot wander around the frame as it does in a picture. It has to march back and forth as it does on the page.

And then the photographic image is there to mediate, as it were, between what is actually seen and the script which is imagined. That's why it would have to be, in my mind, a film, you see. Now, having thought about the possibility of mediation, of using the sentences not just to deliver or reinforce a sequence and duration of pieces, for instance . . . Those sheaves of paper are also a way of mediating the still life which we see and the imaginary film which you do not and which is totally loose, of course. Each one will presumably have a different illusion of an illusion . . .

Gidal: Or interpretation of an illusion.

Frampton: If you will. Then that immediately begins to suggest other things. So that I was giving, immediately on the opening of the film, the illusion of an illusion of a cactus and a coffee pot sitting on a table. Is that part of the script or is that the film you're watching? It goes back and forth between those two and I hope that, eventually, this contradiction between the apparently boring richness of the actual photographic images that you see and the apparently interesting, total paucity of the script you're visualizing cancels itself out again into something. The whole run of the work: an examination/criticism, a mocking of all sorts of art theories. One is left feeling pretty much cast out into a perceptual void where you yourself have to look at things and imagine them because none of the theories work, essentially.

Gidal: How did the response at the London Co-op screening compare with responses in the States? Is response of any value to you or is it generally too hostile?⁷

7. The London Filmmakers Cooperative, which distributes independently produced film, has organized, as well, exhibitions and discussions of new work by both British and foreign filmmakers.

Frampton: It's all different. I was most interested in what Malcolm LeGrice⁸ said about watching himself in the act of fitting *Travelling Matte* into the scheme of the other films, wondering at what point it was going to become another segment of the film. That indicated to me that something had been seen and understood. As far as the general response goes, there's everything from the most overt kind of hostility, people yelling and screaming all the way through, to people who refract the work through a completely different index, through criticism of a shape different from mine.

Gidal: How do you feel about the general basis of understanding? Seeing *Zorns Lemma* three years ago, I thought it was a great film but also something very rare in that it was accessible. I don't understand why it would be seen as inaccessible. It is difficult at times.

Frampton: I think a lot of people find it inaccessible, but we're dealing with a special kind of audience, almost like a certain kind of audience for literature. Nobody, but nobody now professes interest in painting and comes to Ken Noland, for example, totally ignorant of everything done in painting in the last 100 years. People may be a bit puzzled, they may have been only peripherally aware of modernism, but at least they know that surrealism existed, for example. In film, on the other hand, there are any number of people who believe they're passionately interested in film . . .

Gidal: And they know nothing about it.

Frampton: Yes, they have spent absolutely all their time looking at . . .

Gidal: Rubbish.

Frampton: They may have seen Resnais's films, for example, but not only are they ignorant of the 1940s psychodramas, Maya Deren, early Brakhage, Willard Maas, these sorts of films, they are also completely unaware of what was done in the '90s. They've never heard of Lumière or, in this century, of Vertov. You see, one has a problem of education.

Gidal: Every film becomes an educational one.

Frampton: Yes. In fact it makes for very curious dealings with audiences. Of all the artists working today, filmmakers are the only ones who have to deal with their audiences. When John Cage comes on the stage, the audience does clap, clap, clap.

8. Malcolm LeGrice, British filmmaker and author of *Abstract Film and Beyond*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, MIT Press, 1977.

Gidal: Or even boo.

Frampton: Or even boo. He does his thing, the audience claps or boos or hisses; he walks off the stage. He's not in the position of explaining his own work, expounding or criticizing his own work, distributing it, or anything else. He may be a performer, but he is not, on balance, in the business of being a magician and trained chimpanzee and a traveling lecturer or hellfire preacher.⁹

Gidal: At the same time, people like us are less alienated precisely because we're involved in those situations.

Frampton: That's probably true. In fact the gulf between a man's painting or sculpture and his audience may be the most tremendous. If you read interviews in art magazines, as even the poor bastards who make the stuff occasionally do, then, of course, you find the largest gap between any quality the work has and anything the supposedly high-powered critic is talking about ninety percent of the time. It's very often like looking at a different work.

Gidal: Not to mention the audience. That's the positive aspect of this kind of filmmaking, in one way.

Frampton: It can be. It can be very defeating, but one has, at least, some notion of the size of the cultural lag that's involved.

Gidal: Well, you *see* the chasm; you get some notion of its scale.

Frampton: Since film has such a compressed history—we are already at the point where it is as if we were Augustine, let us say, and had an audience that was absolutely unfamiliar with Virgil and Homer—that it makes for a totally bizarre situation. It's grotesque. Except that there are now film courses. Perhaps it's a sham—giving supposedly literate people supposed literacy in yet another part of their lives. This may be what it's about, or it may not; I tend to doubt that it is. Then there's this other phenomenon—TV. Everyone in the United States has seen 15,000 hours of TV and 500 feature films by the time he or she is eighteen. Aside from the late shows. They all believe they know all about film because they can recognize Paulette Goddard on sight.

9. John Cage is, of course, noted for his extension of Gertrude Stein's transformation of the lecture into a form of performance. Frampton is, however, voicing the fatigue generated by the radical constraints of independent production which have forced the undercapitalized filmmaker into the routine of the lecture circuit.

Gidal: And three minutes of Warhol still freaks them out completely.

Frampton: Of course. There's still astonishment at screenings of Brakhage's *Window Water Baby Moving* and that's a film that's going to enter high school next year, right?¹⁰ It was born in 1959. My God, that's a long time! The special theory of relativity was published in 1905, sixty-seven years ago; people have lived and died in this time, and the theory of relativity is obviously the supreme commonplace to any working physicist.

Gidal: And to us, without our necessarily knowing it.

Frampton: It has obviously entered consciousness in a mythic way, but kids at school are still taught essentially Newtonian physics. In fact the whole thing is such bad news that I wish you'd go on to another question.

Gidal: Right. Who's work do you particularly like, and why?

Frampton: Do they have to be alive?

Gidal: No. They can be alive, dead, or coming. Not only in film. You're obviously very interested in photography; you write a lot about it and you deal with it in your films. You've been a photographer. But film first, photography later. Give us your *Sight and Sound* "best ten" list.

Frampton: A number of names that you presumably would expect: Brakhage, Kubelka, Ernie Gehr, Mike Snow, Andy Noren, Joyce Wieland. Ken Jacobs's *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son* has still not had the notice I think it should have.¹¹ It's a seminal film. These are all people whose work—there are perhaps others—I feel has had or will have some importance for my own work.

Gidal: When you mention these people, you mean their work as a body.

Frampton: I could pick some specific films out, but I wouldn't. I wouldn't want to run the whole thing through a very fine sieve.

Gidal: *Sailboat* as opposed to *Rat Life and Diet in America*?

Frampton: No, *Sailboat* and *Rat Life*, in fact . . . and a little film called *Hand Tinted*, for instance—these films by Joyce. I have difficulties of various kinds with

10. Stan Brakhage's *Window Water Baby Moving*, 12 minutes, color, silent, was made in 1959.

11. Ken Jacobs, *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son*, 1969, 86 minutes, black and white and color, silent.

Reason over Passion, a film that I admire and respect tremendously.¹² I find that the movement of this film is very important to me, but there are other parts of it that I'm still chewing over, for one reason or another. There are three or four of Mike Snow's films, the three large ones — *Wavelength*, *Back and Forth*, *Central Region* — and one shorter film called *Standard Time*. Those four in reverse order. On the other hand, I have recently seen *Side Seat Paintings Slides Sound Film* two or three times and (this has nothing to do with Mike Snow, it has to do with me) I need that film like I need a hole in the head. That film doesn't come to me at a time when I have a vacancy there. One could weigh everybody's work in fine balance.¹³

Gidal: Right. Like Kubelka: *Schwechater*, *Adebar* or *Unsere Afrikareise*.

Frampton: Well no, you can't do it like that.

Gidal: You see it as a total?

Frampton: Yes. Again, I suppose in that case I could happily live the rest of my life without *Mosaik im Vertrauen*.¹⁴ I did see *Mosaik* at the time it was made and there are, presumably, certain things that must be done for one. American films that did those things were available before that came along. And that's that.

Gidal: But not *Afrikareise*?

Frampton: It's almost . . . it really is *sui generis* — in a class by itself. I haven't very much to say about the film at all. I would hope to see that film at least once every three months for the rest of my natural life. If it doesn't fade, or something like that.

Gidal: There'll always be another negative.

Frampton: That is a work that is so dense, made with such patience, it has hardly begun to make its presence felt. That's true, too, of a lot of the work I mentioned. It's certainly true of what Stan Brakhage has been doing for the last five years. Well, there it is. It's like the profile of the Hindu Kush . . . or something like that.

12. Joyce Wieland, *Sailboat*, 1967–68, 3:30 minutes, black and white printed on color stock, sound; *Rat Life and Diet in North America*, 1968, 16 minutes, color, sound; *Hand Tinted*, 1967–68, 5:30 minutes, color, silent; *Reason over Passion*, 1968–69, 80 minutes, color, sound.

13. Michael Snow, *Wavelength*, 1966–67, 45 minutes, color, sound; *The Central Region*, 1971, 3 hours, color, sound; *Standard Time*, 1967, 8 minutes, color, sound; *Side Seat Paintings Slides Sound Film*, 1970, 20 minutes, color, sound.

14. Peter Kubelka, *Schwechater*, 1957–58, 1 minute, color, sound; *Unsere Afrikareise*, 1961–66, 12:30 minutes, color, sound; *Mosaik im Vertrauen*, 1954–55, 16:30 minutes, color, sound.