GETTING INSIDE THE FRAME (II)
BILL BRAND interviewed
Bill Brand interviewed by Alberte Pagán

INSTALLATIONS

You have also made installations.

Installation was part of my practice from very early on. In 1971 I made a piece called *Pong Ping Pong* where I built a crazy machine that rotates a mirror and projects an image 360º around a series of screens in a circle like a kind of Stonehenge. The audience either sits in the middle or moves around inside and outside the circle of screens. The image on the film—two people playing ping pong—was also shot through the mirror machine. I mounted the camera on a dolly and shot through the mirror machine while I circled around and around the table with the camera looking toward the center. So when the film is projected through the mirror machine sitting in the center of the circle, the image is projected out instead of looking in, and the space is inverted. The circle of screens, each a triangular prism, looks something like a giant gear, similar to the gears on the machine that I built to rotate the mirror.

I made another installation when I was in college studying with Paul Sharits. He was my most important teacher and while still his student I collaborated on his first "locational" installation piece *Sound Strip / Film Strip* [1972]. This involved four Super 8mm loop projectors with the images turned 90 degrees on their side, one next to the other, so together they looked like a film strip. The piece was commissioned for the opening exhibition of the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, Texas.

And then you have this public artwork, *Masstransiscope* [1980], which is like a giant Zoetrope, but with a difference. Where is it exactly?

Masstransiscope is installed in the New York Subway, in Brooklyn. It references early cinema. It's a permanent public artwork that is mounted on a decommissioned platform in the subway tunnel between the DeKalb subway stop and the Manhattan Bridge. It can be seen from the B and Q trains traveling toward Manhattan. The piece is a 300-foot long painting that looks like an animation when seen through a wall of slits from the moving train. With a Zoetrope, a viewer sees a sequence of images mounted inside a spinning cylinder through slits in the cylinder. With *Masstransiscope* the process is reversed with the images and slits remaining in place while the viewer moves past on a moving train. For many years *Masstransiscope* was an orphan work because it was unclear who was responsible for it. Nobody commissioned me to do it but got help from an organization called Creative Time. For a few years I maintained it myself but eventually I couldn't keep it up. So for 20 years the images were all covered with graffiti and the lights didn't work. Now *Masstransiscope* is restored and has become an official part of the collection of public art of the New York Metropolitan Transportation Authority. They maintain it but I still keep my eye on it and let them know if I see a problem.

COALFIELDS AND POLITICAL FILM

Coalfields is a portrait of a black lung miner activist; _Home Less Home_ analyzes homelessness. What leads a structural filmmaker to make political and social films?

With structural film, especially coming out of England, with Peter [Gidal] and Malcolm [Le Grice], but also with Paul Sharits and others in the US, there was always a notion that structural film was political. So as I reached a limit of minimalism as a way of exploring that, I wanted to bring in personal and political content to the ideas about politics that we believed were imbedded in structural film's approach to materiality and critical analysis of the image. I approached this through two strains in my work. The first one was, "Can I bring in a personal lyrical element?" With _Chuck's Will's Widow_ and some earlier films I brought in emotional qualities, personal expression and lyricism to that notion of materiality. For the second strain I thought, "OK, what if I actually put into these formal ideas explicit social and political content?" And that's where _Coalfields_ came from.

So it was a conscious step.

Very much a conscious step. From the beginning I knew that I wanted to deal with the politics of labor in relation to landscape, and once Fred Carter became a subject, also with disease, race and the body. _Coalfields_ puts documentary and explicit social-political content through the matrix of my visual ideas.

Coalfields has language both in subtitles and in spoken text as well fragments of interviews. The subtitles are mostly poetry by Kimiko Hahn. I shot the film in West Virginia where coal is dug from the ground. One of the themes in the film is black lung disease, caused by coal dust in the mines. This is introduced in the film through a retired coal miner who helps other miners who have the disease get government benefits. The United States used to have very good benefits for miners with this disease but when the Ronald Reagan's conservative government came in 1980 they initiated an effort to cut back on these benefits. And Fred Carter, the retired miner and black lung advocate, was prosecuted by the government in its effort to undercut the black lung program. The government thought Carter was vulnerable, in part because he is African American. But the film tells this story obliquely and mostly in a poetic manner. More broadly, the film is about the body, landscape, the land and the politics of vision.

Were the poems by Kimiko Hahn especially written for the film? Or taken from her books?

I commissioned the writing from Kimiko for the film and she later published the longest text as a poem in one of her books.

How did you create the visual grid?

I made _Coalfields_ on an optical printer using customized travelling matte technique. There are always four layers, two layers of matte and two layers of picture. Many of the matte shapes are drawn by hand, but some are actually pieces of coal or rock they dug out of the mines. Matting—or what you call "the grid"—is a technique that I developed over many years starting in the early 1970s. For _Coalfields_ I made drawings and cardboard cutouts from the drawings. The process for making the film was to animate

these cardboard cutouts in a random pattern. I shot them with high contrast film and then through several steps produced pairs of high contrast mattes. The mattes would have clear areas on every other frame on the A roll and other clear areas on the opposite frames on the B roll. And then on the optical printer I would sandwich each matte with a picture reel and copy it frame for frame in the camera. If I had developed the film at this point, the unexposed areas on the negative would be clear, and we'd only see image on every other frame. But instead of developing after I finished the A roll, I wound back the film and exposed the film again in the camera. On the second pass, I copied to the unexposed frames the images from B picture seen through the B matte. So you have A fragments and B fragments, and if you saw them together they would fit perfectly like a puzzle. There is never any overlap. They don't fill the whole frame, there is always areas of black (or clear on the negative) which allows the shapes to change position every frame. In *Coalfields* the A and B fragments are on alternating frames and never appear on the same frame. It's only in your mind that you see them together.

And then you made a social documentary, *Home Less Home*.

After *Coalfields* I said, "Let me start with a subject and see what form it takes". I was very interested in homelessness, which was very present in New York in the late 70s, early 80s, and I began studying it. I remember telling my friend who later became the editor for the film, "I don't want to make a documentary".

Are you talking about Zoe Beloff?

No, no. Zoe was the photographer. I'm talking about Joanna Kiernan. Joanna is a good friend, and I asked her to listen to my ideas so she could help me make a plan for the film. She said, "Don't worry about that, you couldn't make a documentary if you wanted to". So I didn't worry about it and I ended up making a documentary.

***Works in the Field* ("an essay on reading" in your own words) includes Malaysian found footage of people cropping rubber. Where did you find this footage? Were you consciously questioning notions of colonialism and capitalism? Are there any images filmed by you?**

I found the Malaysian film and a few other educational films in a trash bin on the street. With *Works in the Field* I wanted to take apart the foundations of Renaissance perspective and explore its relationship to conventional film language. The film is an inquiry into the nature and meaning of the "document" in cinema. What gives the picture its authority as document, as truth? I thought all this had a political dimension. I was certainly consciously questioning colonialism and capitalism but looking for how the structure of conventional cinematic storytelling supports, makes invisible and normalizes the mechanisms of exploitative economic/social relations. At the same time, I could see that the photographic-cinematic composition of these educational films are well made and are disturbingly compelling; they carry an ephemeral emotional truth. The images seen through the computer generated grids, I filmed myself—mountain landscapes, Manhattan cityscapes and images from magazine covers and television news.

FIRST STRUCTURAL FILMS

You started doing animation, *Organic Afghan*, as a college student. What made you study film? What made you do animation?

At the time film was not taught at Antioch College, the school I attended. I was an art student in a liberal arts college. I was studying anthropology and other things, but I was an art major. I was taking drawing and painting, sculpture and printmaking and photography, but there was a student film club and I saw people making films. I didn't know much about cinema, I wasn't particularly interested in telling stories, but maybe because I came from Science and Math, filmmaking was attractive to me. Kodak introduced the Super 8 film format in 1965 and after a few years cameras and film stock became very inexpensive. So I bought a Bell & Howell 8mm camera and some film which only cost only 2 dollars a roll, including processing and I began making films. My camera could shoot single frames and I started doing animation with objects and cut outs and clay and wax. I soon started working in 16mm as well. I completed my first 16mm film, *Organic Afghan*, in 1969. I just brought all the art I was studying, including sculpture and painting, into this complicated new medium, and I started animating three dimensional and two dimensional objects.

And then you made a metrical film, *Tree*. Did you have a score before shooting? Was it edited in camera?

No, it wasn't edited in camera and although I didn't have a score before I shot, I did later make a score for editing. I discovered the tree in a farm field and I went back to it several times to film it. I prepared myself for shooting in different ways each time. Once I just sat and looked at the tree for an hour before I started shooting. I gathered footage without an overall plan.

At the school we used to have an occasional event where the people making films would gather in the theater to look at each other's footage. I went to one of these encounters to show my footage and there were just hours of other people making pictures of trees, and I said to myself, "This is not enough". Influenced by our newly hired teacher Paul Sharits I devised a metrical scheme for editing the footage. I was learning new ideas about art form Paul. Until then, I didn't think that the Science and Math side of me could be part of art or could be used in art making, because all my other teachers had taught that art is all unconscious, you have to put away rational thinking. But Paul was very analytical. So given permission, I just very naively came up with a very elaborate rational editing structure and made the film *Tree*. You know, I was very young, and I remember being upset that when people watched the film they didn't know exactly what the structure was.

***Always Open/Never Closed* seems to me like a parody of all those Californian trance films or psychodramas.**

Actually I was in California studying for one semester at the San Francisco Art Institute. But *Always Open/Never Closed* wasn't a parody of California trance films or psychodramas and was probably influenced by them. But at the time, I was thinking more about conceptual art. I had made *Tree*, which was all about cutting things into very small pieces emphasizing the cut. I was trying to figure out how cinema worked and I'd been studying montage and Eisenstein's ideas of collision. So to work against that, I made a film with dissolves. In the East Coast, in the New York area, when you

brought your film to the laboratory and ordered a fade or a dissolve, you had to pay for each one. But when I got to San Francisco I found out that they were free. So I made *Always Open/Never Closed* with continuous dissolves. I also had learned about color printing in film and about color timing. So I shot in black and white and then asked the timer in the laboratory to print the b&w original to color film stock and time it so the colors shifted continuously through the spectrum. This film *is* a kind of trance of everyday life. The timer was really into the challenge of the film but the lab owner was very angry with me, and afterward started charging for fades and dissolves.

ACTS OF LIGHT

With regard to your trilogy *Acts of Light* you said that "film is not about motion but about change". Was all that continuous and subtle color shifting in *Rate of Change*, the first film of the trilogy, also made in the laboratory?

Yes. I took the idea of continuously shifting color I had tried with *Always Open / Never Closed* and I said, "Well, I'll go back to basics and make a film where there is no picture". In fact I put nothing through the camera, there's no original, and I said to the lab, "Take some leader and time it according to this score". *Rate of Change* is pure change. I thought of the film as axiomatic.

Is it the same with *Angular Momentum* [second film of *Acts of Light*] bar the lateral scratching?

It's not the same, actually. In *Angular Momentum* I was doing the lab work. This film, which is about relational change, was made in an optical printer that I had built. But for this film too I also followed a precise score. I had this revelation that for every image in film, some of the emulsion is scraped away, either by the action of light or physically with a scratch or scrape. If you have all of the emulsion containing all of the cyan, yellow and magenta dye, it is black. And if it is all scraped away, it's white. Every color is somewhere in between. I decided to use red, green and blue color separation filters so that with light I can selectively scrape away some of the emulsion from each layer and can generate all the colors. That was the idea, but then I had to figure out how would I organize my selection of colors? I had begun to study contemporary music and I'd learned about the composer Conlon Nancarrow who wrote music for the player piano with which he could superimpose sliding tempi and create rhythmic patterns that would change. And I thought I could do something like that in film, so the score is musical in that sense. In *Zip-Tone-Cat-Tune* I was trying to make Baroque music but *Angular Momentum* was more like contemporary music.

What about the third installment of the trilogy, *Circles of Confusion*? Was it filmed out of focus? Was it edited in camera?

I shot the superpositions in camera. When I made *Zip-Tone-Cat-Tune* I didn't yet know about the optical printer. I made something that worked like an optical printer by using a semi-transparent mirror and a retroreflective front screen. I had a projector that could advance frame by frame so I could shoot a single frame off the screen. But if the camera and projector weren't perfectly lined up I'd get an uneven exposure that made a circle— we called it a "hot spot". So I decided to use that defect in a positive way. I put color filters in the projector light (projector with no film in it) and projected onto the front

screen while I handheld the camera pointed through the semi-transparent mirror. The interference of the camera and projector shutters gave me the pulsing and the improvisational and gestural movement of the camera caused the circle of light—the "hot spot"—to move in response to the misalignment of the camera. I ran the film through the camera three times, once for each primary color.

If *Rate of Change* is about continuous change and *Angular Momentum* is about relational change, then *Circles of Confusion* is about irrational change. I was making my way systematically through minimalist to post-minimalist ideas, a film with no film and no pictures, to a film of all colors, and then with *Circles of Confusion* to a film that was gestural and irrational.

MOMENT AND STRUCTURAL FILM

Moment is one of the classics of structural film in which the formal structure perfectly matches the visuals [a rotating advertising sign seen from the rear]. Where was it filmed? Was the soundtrack recorded live?

Moment was filmed in Ohio where I attended college. The soundtrack wasn't recorded at the time of filming. I had seen the rotating sign at a service station from inside the office so I was looking at it from the back. Later I returned and filmed the sign from the back side. After I developed the film I rephotographed off a rear screen with a proto-optical printer.

The image is a 2½ minute sequence that I rearranged six times in reverse order, cutting it into smaller and smaller fragments until I reached the smallest possible fragment—a single frame. I was thinking about time and information for the image and I said, "What if I did the same kind of thing to sound?" So I went to a different service station and recorded some sounds. I chose six audio segments and edited the ¼-inch reel to reel tape with a razor blade following an analogous procedure to what I had done with the picture.

So it was the sign what triggered your ideas.

Yes, it was the sign. I was standing there, looking at the back side, where the order of sign's panels are reversed left to right but each panel within itself is normal. I thought, if there had been a large enough number of rotating vertical panels instead of only five, the sign from the back would have looked like a continuous mirror image of what you'd see from the front. I'd studied Math and I was thinking about calculus and I thought, "What number of panels represents the limit where the image no longer looks fragmented?" In film, the temporal limit is set by the frame, 24 per second. *Moment* reveals the frame as film's limiting unit while suggesting that other systems with different limits are also at play.

But, through the rotating panels, you also split the frame in six vertical sections.

That's right. The pictorial frame is split by the vertical sections of the rotating panel. I extended the spatial analogy to divide the temporal flow similarly by rearranging the order of film frames, so we're seeing not only an incremental reversing of left and right, but an incremental reversing of the temporal flow from forward to backward. And then

there is also the content of the advertising display valorizing the history of automobile tires. So this brings in another kind of time—automobile time—which suggests thinking about historical time more generally and the limits of how we see this order of things.

Was the score made beforehand?

Yes, I followed a score to rephotograph the film on the proto-optical printer I'd built. I knew exactly how many frames to advance on the projector and camera while shooting and how many frames on the projector to wind back between shots.

There is a strong link between primitive cinema and experimental cinema. You went back to Lumière in *Demolition of a Wall*. What is there in Lumière that is so attractive to experimental filmmakers like Peter Tscherkassky, Siegfried Fruhauf, Al Razutis, Thom Andersen, Malcolm Le Grice and yourself?

I don't know if my ideas about this were original or whether I acquired them from other people who were thinking the same things. Cinema was invented as a tool for scientific investigation but it also created a new spectacle alongside the stereoscope, the diorama and the magic show. Perhaps we all share an understanding that when storytelling became the dominant way the medium was used, it left behind other potentials—other ways of seeing and other ways of thinking besides through stories. We all have the urge to find the origin of something and say, "Let's go back to the beginning of film, and find out what was left behind, and follow the paths that were not taken".

***Touch Tone Phone Film* is a narrative sketch in a structural frame. There is a beginning of a narration in many of your films, as if you really wanted to tell stories but didn't dare.**

I don't have much facility or need to tell stories. "The phone rings and someone crosses the room to answer it" is all the story I needed. I didn't think I had much at stake in telling more or less than this. I was beginning to use an optical printer, and one thing you do when you work with an optical printer is that you do a lot of testing of exposures. I was also learning about music synthesizers, the early analog synthesizers that use voltage control where one feature of a sound can be used to control a different feature. For instance, you can take a pitch and use it to control the envelope of a sound, which is the way the sound forms. At that time, telephones mostly used rotary dials that made pulses equal to the number selected, but a very unusual new kind of telephone was starting to come in use that had push buttons that created tones where the pitch represented a number. So, thinking about music synthesizers, I decided to make a film where telephone numbers controlled the exposure of the optical printer lens.

When the film stops in the gate of the projector the frame—and the movement— becomes frozen. When the film moves, it slides in the gate, as if the sprocket holes were ripped, and the movement of the woman disappears behind the sliding of the film. In a way it is a film about the cogwheel and the sprocket holes.

I did cut off the sprocket holes in order to pass the film through the optical printer gate unregistered. But even as an unregistered blur, the image still represents the time passing. Telephones are very strange for me, because when you pick up the telephone and you begin to speak to someone in some other place, your mental space changes.

This is why I think telephones are very dangerous in cars, because you're mentally no longer in the space where you are driving, you are in another space. And I always found that feeling of dislocation very disturbing. So when the telephone rings and I'm going to answer it, I feel very tense. So in some ways this is a film about this tension, this extended anxiety about getting to the telephone, answering it, and suddenly finding myself somewhere else.

It reminds me of Chris Marker's *La jetée* (1962).

I hadn't yet seen Marker's film, but it is a flattering comparison.