GETTING INSIDE THE FRAME
BILL BRAND interviewed

Getting Inside the Frame
Bill Brand interviewed by Alberte Pagán

The films of Bill Brand are about how to read, about spectatorship and about the politics of vision. They navigate between abstraction and recognition. His earlier analytical (structural) films like *Moment*, *Demolition of a Wall* or *Touch Tone Phone Film* tended towards the frame as the shortest durational unit (as a "moment"). But even in *Moment* Brand, perhaps unconsciously, found a way of getting inside the frame by means of the five panels from the tire ad that divide the screen.

From *Works in the Field* and *Split Decision* to his latest videos *Orchard-Market* and *Huevos a la mexicana* Brand has consistently explored the possibilities of fragmenting the frame by using grids that allow him to juxtapose symbiotically two spaces and two temporalities. By splitting the screen space he brings about a questioning of our ability to read and recognize the image(s). The origin of this may be found in *Zip-Tone-Cat-Tune*, where the filmmaker uses a Zip-A-Tone technique to mask the image and turn the grain (the pixel in electronic cinema) into an image-unit. The same visual complexity is achieved in his later videos by other means—In *Double Nephrectomy* and *Interior Outpost*, both part of the series *Suite*, Brand projects images on his own body, merging both surfaces; and in *Skinside Out* and *Swan's Island*, both co-made with Katy Martin, paint is applied on skin, blurring the shape of the human body.

Brand's films navigate between abstraction and recognition, but also between the analytical and the lyrical, between the political and the personal, and between the popular and the experimental. Some of his films have an evident Pop flavor — *Zip-Tone-Cat-Tune* uses dot patterns usually associated with comic books; *An Angry Dog* is a hand-held animation made from a Cracker Jack toy; and the advertising panels in *Moment* function like a found object in Pop art. Other popular and commercial basic optical tricks can be found in *It Dawn Down* and in his public artwork *Masstransiscope*, both of which work like a zoetrope.

Movement in cinema is an optical illusion. Bill Brand's films are full of delusive tricks, made either in-camera or on the optical printer. The artist is a shaman, as the Kwakiutl shaman in *The Trail to Koskino: His First Hunt*, who, despite knowing it's all about tricks, desires to master the magic of these tricks. There is an ethnographic drive behind this film, as behind the Malaysian footage in *Works in the Field*, a critique of capitalist colonialism.

In *Tracy's Family Folk Festival* the folk tradition meets the avant-garde; in *Split Decision* a soap opera gets trapped in a structural film. Both films use a changing grid through which the image fights to assert itself. *Chuck's Will's Widow* becomes a eulogy of Brand's father, whose ashes are spread in the Adirondack mountain woods, through frenetically swirling shapes that "pulverize" space, as J. Hoberman put it.

Coalfields is a conscious step into political cinema. Bill Brand had already made an agitprop film, *Texas Farm Workers March for Human Rights*. And he would continue exploring social issues in *Home Less Home*, a first-person narrated film where the

personal and the political merge, as in *I'm a Pilot Like You*, a more observational kind of documentary.

The materialism of his earliest movies—including the shutter-like holes of the stove in *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* and the empty film reel spinning in *It Dawn Down*—gave way to the personal, lyrical and intimate *Suite*, a series of five films in which Brand addresses his personal and family history and the body—his body—as landscape, as canvas and "as a site of both beauty and abjection".

His latest productions are home movies, landscape films, travelogues (Mexico, Uruguay) and personal diaries, sometimes under the shifting shapes of his signature traveling mattes, as in *Ornithology 4*.

Filmography of Bill Brand

Organic Afghan (1969, 4', color, sound)
Tree (1970, 8', b&w, sound)
Always Open/Never Closed (1971, 13', color, silent)
Pong Ping Pong (1971, 25', film and sound environment)
Zip-Tone-Cat-Tune (1972, 8', color, silent)
Moment (1972, 25', b&w, sound)
ACTS OF LIGHT (1972-74, 55', color, sound)
      Includes 3 films:
      Rate of Change (1972, 18', color, cound)
      Angular Momentum (1973, 20', color, sound)
      Circles of Confusion (1974, 15', color, sound)
Touch Tone Phone Film (1973, 8', b&w, sound)
Demolition Of A Wall (1973, 30', b&w, sound)
CARTOONS (1974-75, 40', color and b&w, sound and silent)
      Includes 7 films:
      Before The Fact (1974, 6', color, sound)
      An Angry Dog (1974, 5'30'', color, silent)
      It Dawn Down (1974, 5'30'', color, silent)
      The Central Finger (1974, 5'30'', color, silent)
      The Autobiography Of Benjamin Franklin (1975, 4', color, silent)
      New York State Primaries (1975, 5'30'', color, sound)
      Still at Work (1975, 4', color, sound)
The Trail to Koskimo: His First Hunt (1976, 35', color, sound)
Texas Farm Workers March For Human Rights (1977, 7', color, sound)
Works In The Field (1978, 40', color, silent)
Split Decision (1979, 15', color, sound)
Chuck's Will's Widow (1982, 13', color, silent)
Tracy's Family Folk Festival (1983, 10', color, sound)
Coalfields (1984, 39', color, sound)
Home Less Home (1990, 75', color, sound)
I'm a Pilot Like You (1999, 40', color, sound, co-directed with Ruth Hardinger)
SUITE (1996-2003, 29', color, sound)
      Includes 5 films:
      My Father's Leg (1997-1998, 3', color, silent)
      Gazelle (1998, 3'30'', color, sound)

Double Nephrectomy (1998, 4', color, sound)
Moxibution (1999, 9', color, sound)
Interior Outpost (2003, 9', color, sound)
Skinside Out (2002, 10', color, sound, co-directed with Katy Martin)
Swan's Island (2005, 4', color, sound, co-directed with Katy Martin)
Mistakes, Out Takes and Good Deeds (2006, looped, color, silent, 3 projector film and video installation)
Susie's Ghost (2011, 7', color, sound, in collaboration with Ruthie Marantz)
Rampla Juniors (2011, 16', color, cound)
Down The Alley (2011, 8', color, sound)
Sicómoro (2011, 5', color, sound, text by Carolina Noblega)
Ornithology 4 (2015, 4' loop, color, silent)
Orchard-Market (2016, 16', color, silent)
Autopsy (2017, performance and video projection)
Huevos a la mexicana (2018, 13', color, sound)

———

INTERVIEW

I spoke with Bill Brand in A Corunha, Galiza on June 8, 2019 during the tenth (S8) Mostra de Cinema Periférico. Some of the statements he made during his master class (June 8) and the presentation of his films, as well as during the Q&A after the screening (June 6), have been incorporated into the following interview. On July 8, 2019 Bill Brand revised the interview and kindly answered some further questions by e-mail.

ANALOG PRESERVATION

You are both a filmmaker and a preservationist.

I am a filmmaker and do archival preservation. Both activities involve discovering, inventing and solving puzzles. With both I try to understand how things work and investigate the underpinnings of knowledge and perception.

My first films were 8mm and 16mm animations. Frame by frame filmmaking led me to begin doing rephotography and optical printing. In 1976 I acquired a JK optical printer. This allowed me to go back to the 8mm and Super 8mm format because I could then blow up these small formats to 16mm. This is how I started my company BB Optics. It should have been named BB Opticals but we thought BB Optics sounded more like Bebop, like jazz.

I've only recently started using digital tools extensively for preservation, maybe in the last five or six years. The things you can do with the digital intermediate process are amazing. There are a lot of advantages to it, in terms of quality, for recovering faded color or for stabilizing the image if the sprocket holes are damaged. When a digital intermediate goes back to film it reacquires specific film qualities of light, texture, and depth as well as grain and even the instability associated with the registration of a film, which is not so perfect. I can probably make a 16mm blow up now using the digital intermediate that is closer to the original film than what I could have done in the past with an optical printer.

You have been using computers in the creation of your films almost from the beginning. How did you get involved in computers?

I started working with computers in 1969, and started making films with computers in the early 1970s. I first got involved in computers when I was a high school student, because I was very good in Math and Science, and in my city of Rochester, New York, each high school selected one student to visit IBM and learn about this new thing called computers. At that time you could only enter programs into the machine with punch cards. Each line of code was written as holes in an approximately 8 cm x 16 cm card. They taught us a little bit of FORTRAN, and gave us a challenge to write a program to solve a quadratic equation. That was my first introduction to computers. But then, more significantly, maybe four or five years later, I started using computers in my filmmaking. I was beginning to try to make films that would treat the grain or something like the grain as a frame. I had already made *Zip-Tone-Cat-Tune*, and I was trying to think how I could make the circles move like grain rather than being static like a grid. I began arranging dot-stickers on paper and animating them so they would move around. When I met the video artist Bill Etra, who co-invented the Rutt/Etra Video Synthesizer, he said, "Oh, what you are trying to do is something computers do, and I have something called a mini-computer", this was before PCs, "and I'll let you use it". It turned out he was working with a program developed at Bell Labs by Lillian Schwartz and Ken Knowlton called EXPLOR. And he did occasionally let me use his computer, which eventually we connected to an IBM mainframe computer in the basement of a hospital in New York in order to output the results on film.

It was very difficult because I wasn't an experienced programmer and I didn't have much time with Etra's mini-computer. But I knew a little bit of FORTRAN and I began to program the computer to make what I had been trying to do by hand. It took me three years of programming first in FORTRAN and then with an early version of C to produce a series of 16mm film masks I could use with my optical printer. The computer graphics were very primitive by today's standards. Small white squares in a grid were slowly displayed on a black and white monitor and I filmed the monitor with a 16mm animation camera one frame at a time.

So that's how I got into using computers in my films, just for that purpose. I was a little afraid of activity because I thought that programming was so interesting that I might get lost in it, and I would never get out. So I worked with the material I'd created but stayed away from computers for a few years. But in 1984 I started using computers again for making data bases and for word processing when IBM released their personal computer. Up until then, I had been using a calculator to make scores for the light changes on the optical printer. Once I had my own computer, I wrote a program in Basic to do all those calculations automatically. I was still using a calculator to score the optical printer when I made *Split Decision* and *Works in the Field* even though the high contrast mattes had already been made with a computer.

ZIP-TONE-CAT-TUNE

In *Zip-Tone-Cat-Tune* you use a grid of dot patterns for the first time. It's like a sketch of your later films *Still at Work*, *Works in the Field* or *Split Decision*.

Right. That was the first work where I was trying to explore the ideas of getting inside the frame, because in my previous films I was re-ordering the frames, like in *Moment*, which scrambles backwards and forwards in time, or in *Demolition of a Wall*, where I show all 720 permutations of six frames from the falling wall. Both films explore time and motion where the frame is the limiting dimension, and both films play with the directionality of the moving image in time and space, complicating notions of forward, backward, left and right. I had been thinking of the frame as the smallest unit of time and space, but then I thought, "Maybe there's something smaller than that. Maybe the grain could be both a frame containing an image, and at the same time be what we would now call a pixel—a basic unit of an image in space". *Zip-Tone-Cat-Tune* was my first film following this idea. In it I used a grid of dots from an animated Zip-A-Tone or Ben-Day pattern over a photographic image of a cat in positive and negative. I added freeze frames and colorized the b&w footage with filters so that the space, time and motion between the positive and negative images are in tension, structured like harmonic rhythm in a Baroque musical composition.

These films remind me of Kurt Kren's *31/75 Asyl* (1975), where he masks the objective of the camera to create a patterned grid through which he films different temporalities of the same landscape. Do you know this film?

I know the film now, but not then. The film that inspired me actually was a film by Robert Huot called *Spray* [1967], where he sprayed paint on clear leader which looked like swirling patterns of dots on the screen. I was watching Huot's film and that's when I started thinking, "What if the dots were not just solid but inside each was a fragment of an image?" In *Zip-Tone-Cat-Tune* I tried to imitate the random movement of the paint drops in Huot's film, but the grid of dots was too limited, so after making it I looked for ways to accomplish this. Bob is now a good friend and, as BB Optics, I have preserved many of his films including *Spray*.

The European, mainly British, filmmakers of the 1960s and 1970s were looking to the USA. Were you aware in the USA of the work being done at the London Film-Makers' Co-op?

I eventually learned about the London Film-Makers' Co-op and European avant-garde filmmakers. I didn't start making films until 1969, but in 1973 I was invited to the London Film Festival, and I met Malcolm [Le Grice, also present at the S8 Mostra] and other European filmmakers. I was amazed. I was so impressed with the Film-Makers' Cooperative in London that when I went back to Chicago—I was a graduate student at the Art Institute—I started Chicago Filmmakers based on that model. Chicago Filmmakers was initially called Filmgroup at N.A.M.E. Gallery.