

REVIEWS

Measured romanticism

Frank Gillette

at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

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BY MARGUERITE WELCH

IN A SENSE, all art concerns information processing before it concerns anything else. The work of art is the product of the artist's inevitable collision or collusion with the environment and the processing of that experience through his or her mental and emotional filters. Much art, in historical terms, has conveyed that experience in a symbol-making language that is fundamentally object oriented. A great deal of contemporary art, however, reflects a frustration with the limitations of "art language"—signs no longer signify.

In *The Great Western Salt Works* (1974), Jack Burnham argues that a fine art "is an expressive form which evolves an appropriately complex metaphor to link a culture's fundamental preoccupation with empirical reality to its innate spirituality." Burnham suggests that just as modern technology attempts to solve problems through systems analysis, the post-formalist artist uses a "systems aesthetic" which is basically an anti-art aesthetic. It is an attitude rooted in empirical observation rather than private symbolism, "effete abstractionism," or "craft fetishism." Conceptual art in particular, Burnham goes on to say, demands a reevaluation of the meaning of art and the nature and transmission of art and ideas. Conceptual art, in Burnham's view, "presents us with a superspatial grasp of the environment, one that deals with time, processes, and interrelated systems as we experience them in everyday life, forcing involvement with non-art habits of perception."

The work of Frank Gillette seems to have a foot in both the traditional and the conceptual camps, though he disavows any allegiance to the latter. On the one hand, he approaches the landscape through a specific system of mapping and taxonomy; he deals with ideas of time, space, perspective, event, and interval, based on an empirical investigation that has nothing to do with "levels of meaning" or the traditional idea of the art object. However, a certain duality of intention arises from the fact that there appear to be strong shamanistic implications in Gillette's work. He gives us objects as well as ideas. He applies a methodology that is basically conceptual and objective in genesis in a fundamentally subjective manner, in a way that is reminiscent of geomancy. His presentation of his subject matter, i.e., the landscape, is replete with symbolic levels, in the Jungian archetypal sense. If there is such a thing as romantic conceptualism, perhaps Gillette's work is an example.

The exhibition consisted of a video project titled *Aransas: Axis of Observation*, and a series of Polaroid SX-70 composite pieces, comprised of as many as 70 individual images. *Aransas* records the fall, winter, and early spring in a specific area of the Texas Gulf Coast. In the exhibition installation, six monitors were placed in a circle, two each in the north and south positions and one each in the east and west positions. Each tape records segments of the landscape from a fixed central point which creates a sphere of observation: we are literally placed inside the landscape, rather than outside. The camera functions as a measuring device to define the sphere in terms of focal ratios, angles of vision, and specific events—two deer feeding in a marsh or a herd of animals moving across a field. The

data was then edited, or scored, so that six complete cycles of information are presented simultaneously, with a similarly scored overlay of sound, recorded at the site. In this way, we are presented with various aspects of the landscape as a continuous but structured experience in time.

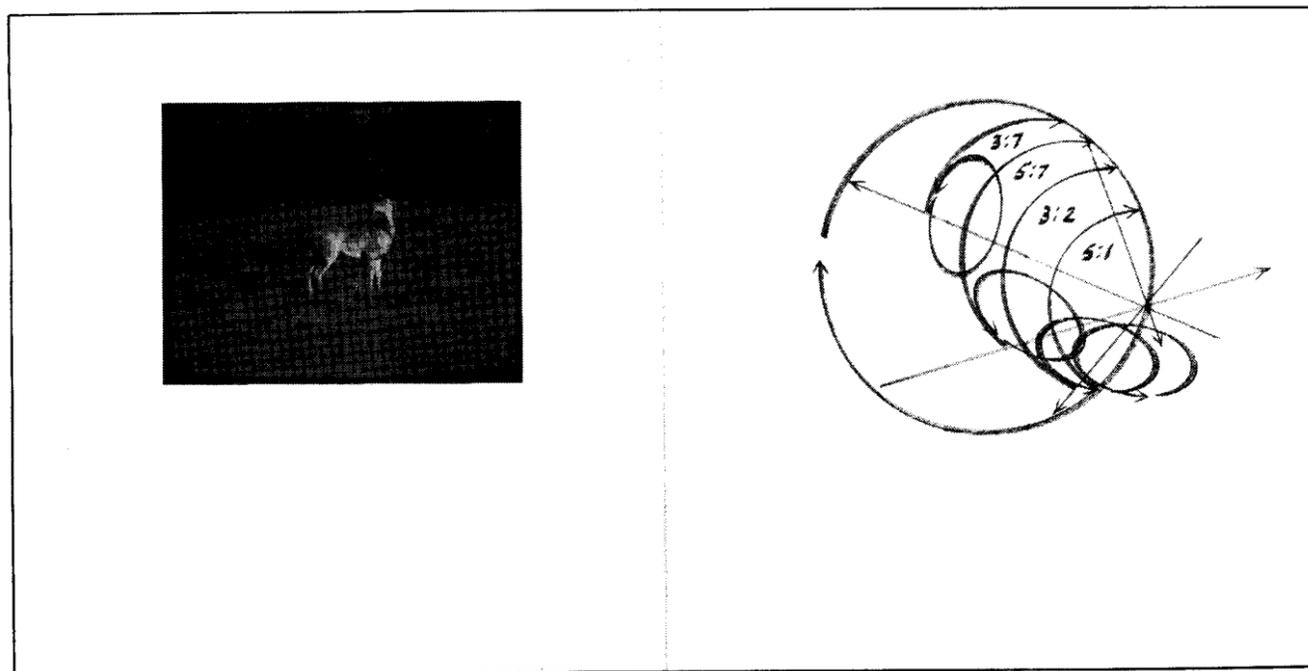
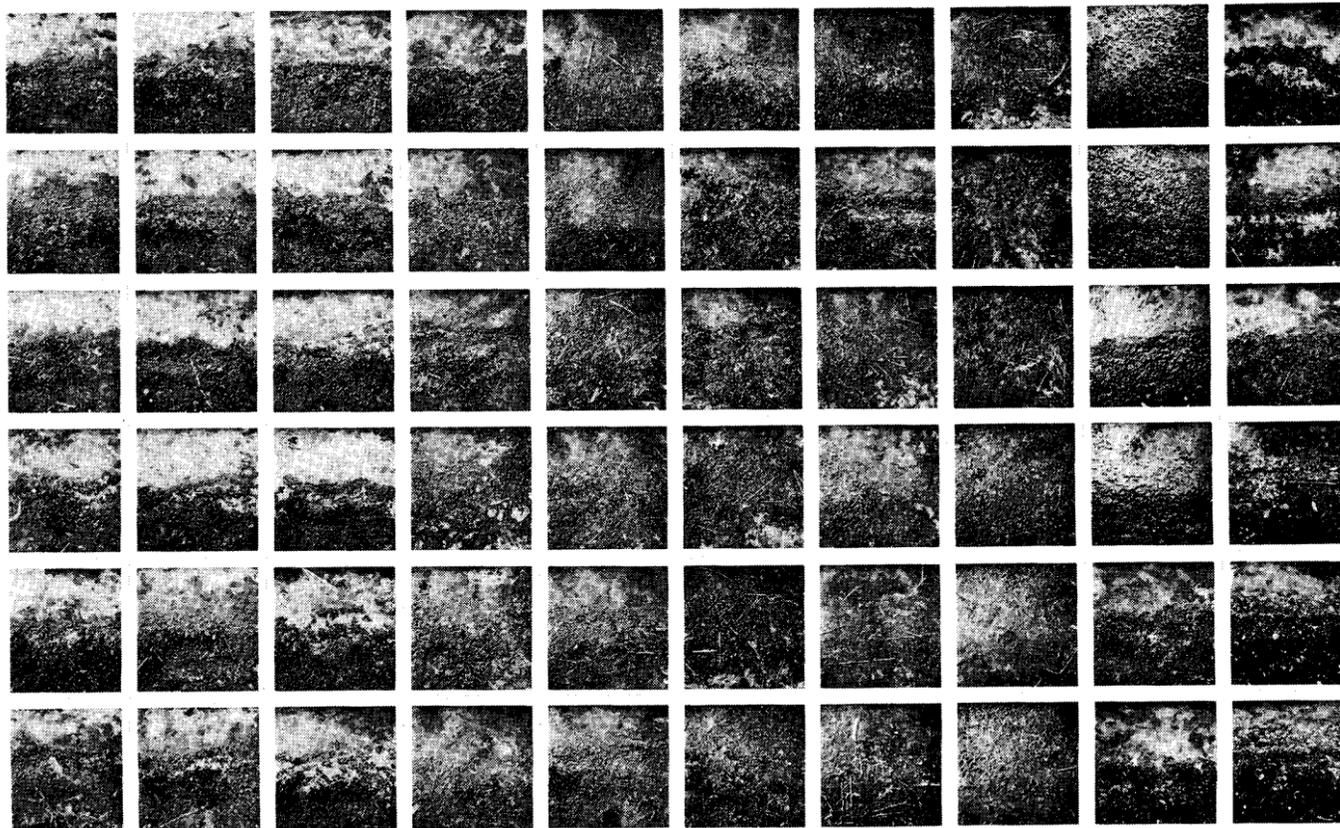
The SX-70s, on the other hand, deal with a kind of unity distilled from fragmentation. Gillette collected data according to a

combination with the SX-70 Aransas sets, gave a clue to his real intentions. (And then only with the help of the catalogue, in which Gillette diagrams his methodology and outlines his ideas.)

But this is not to say that the video work fails to have any effect, despite the difficulty of deducing Gillette's epistemological system from the installation alone. *Aransas* is a powerful piece, both intellectually and

between the moments in time.

Gillette, in his view of his work, wishes to get at the sense of experience, "the core of cognition"—to make art about "being in the world rather than creating it." But in a sense, he is not so much documenting things in themselves as he is documenting his relationships to things and the relationships between things in terms of time and space. He seems to fall, in fact, somewhere



Top: detail from *Mecox Tideline* (1976), by Frank Gillette; bottom: page spread from *Aransas: Axis of Observation*. Left: still from *Tape #2, Location 3*; right: *South East*, a diagram of spheres of observation.

specific procedure, either by pacing out a geographical location and photographing the ground at given intervals, or by standing in one place and photographing the same event or object at certain time intervals. These images were then "scored" on a grid, either according to the system by which they were collected or by an intuitive "random walk" method, so that a completely different system of relationships evolved. The exhibition also included a number of SX-70 sets that were done in the Aransas area and function as part of that project.

It would seem that Gillette is using the media and methodology of his culture to create an experience rather than an art object, particularly in the video installation. The problem is the confusing dichotomy in his work. The SX-70s, presented framed and hanging on the gallery wall, are exactly what we are used to dealing with as art objects. One tends, therefore, to treat the images as signs and to read them in terms of an art historical language based on the very cultural coding system that Gillette is trying to dispel. Only the video installation, in com-

emotionally. The juxtaposition of images, of continuous waves breaking, rushing water, wind rustling palm fronds, a single leaf from different angles, sounds of water and wind, blend into one another to create what James Harithas, in this introduction to the *Aransas* catalogue, calls a "volumetric" experience of "image and information expanding cyclically through time." Indeed, the occasional abrupt jerks in focal distance and changes in perspective, combined with the necessity for the viewer to turn from screen to screen to follow all six tapes, create a fascinating kinetic dialogue. And it was this experiential interaction with the work that was its most interesting aspect, for the viewer was forced to reconstruct the sense of the original time and place.

The video experience also made the experience of the SX-70s more meaningful. One became aware that they were more than just collections of data arranged according to formal concerns such as pattern, tone, and repetition. In fact, they were there only to suggest what was not there at all—what happens between the pictures,

between Douglas Heubler, who has eliminated the idea of the art object entirely, and John Pfahl, who uses "conceptual" ideas but is essentially committed to the tradition of art being about objects which have intrinsic value.

Gillette, however, depends largely on the audience creating the experience documented with the help of a system of visual clues. The ideas and intentions are intriguing, if not seductive, but the actual experience of the work—at least without the benefit of verbal explanation—is limited and confusing. The SX-70 grids, in particular, seem neither sufficient in themselves to sustain a significant art experience in the traditional sense, nor articulate enough to give us access to the pure mental experience Gillette is after. Perhaps romantic conceptualism is a contradictory concept, or perhaps "empirical reality" and "innate spirituality" can best be joined by direct experience rather than through art as metaphor.