I N 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, one that deals with the environment and the processing of that artist's inevitable collision or collusion with else. The work of art is the product of the contemporary art, however, reflects a frustration with the limitations of "art language"—signs no longer capable of symbol-making language that is fundamentally object oriented. A great deal of conceptual art in particular, Burnham goes on to say, demands a revaluation of the meaning of art and the nature and transmission of art and ideas. Conceptual art, in Burnham's view, "presents us with a superpositional grasp of the environment, one that deals with time, processes, and interrelated systems as we experience them in everyday life, focusing movement 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 association with "levelsof 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 uses the objects as well as ideas. He applies a methodology that is basically conceptual and objective ingenesis 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. At the exhibition installation, six SX-70 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 SX-70s, on the other hand, deal with "levels of meaning" or the traditional idea of the art object, particularly in the video installation. 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 context based on the very cultural coding system that Gillette is trying to dispel. Only the video installation, in 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 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, bleed into one another to create what James Harthas, 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 views of the landscape, combined with the necessity for the viewer to turn from screen to screen to follow all six tapes, create a fascination that is almost seductive, if not seductive, but the actual experience of the work was that 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 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 series, 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 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-70s, 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.

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**Measured romanticism**

Frank Gillette
at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
Sept. 19-Nov.23, 1980

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