Chris Fraser
2x2 Essay
"Other Cameras" by Erica Levin

Light streams through an aperture. It's 1969 in Santa Monica at the corner of Hill and Main. James Turrell has turned his room at the Mendota Hotel into a "light space," a "stoppage" calibrated to the light of cars coming and going. This is a work best seen at 2:00 a.m. once the bars have closed and traffic has began lurching homeward in what the artist describes as "strange and erratic patterns." The Mendota Hotel Stoppages exist now only in the form of sketches pared down to a few simple marks. Parallel lines form a corner where a polygon has been cut out of a blackened window. Light passes through this shape producing luminous forms that derive their color solely from the headlights, taillights, and traffic signals moving through the intersection outside the room.

It might be tempting to read Chris Fraser's work as an elaboration of such experiments with light and space undertaken by Turrell and other California artists such as Robert Irwin since the late 1960s, artists who were at turns rigorously scientific in their phenomenological pursuits, or, as with Turrell, profoundly mystical. But Fraser's interest lies elsewhere, in what might best be called prosaic light. His work, in his own words, "moulds" light, not to offer up a philosophical or spiritual meditation on perception, but rather to remake our relationship to the camera, and to the everyday production of images.

Fraser also uses apertures, often in room size chambers like Turrell's open to the incidental movement of light outside the space, but also in his own body, by making his mouth into a kind of primitive camera. In addition, Fraser makes videos produced by manipulating today's most prosaic of picturing-making apparatus – the digital camera. Rather than read his work as taking up the concerns of California Light and Space artists, I'd like to place it alongside a parallel history, also with important roots in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Avant-Garde Cinema. The filmmakers of the American and British Avant-Garde also reckoned with phenomenological and spiritual experience, perhaps no one more famously than Stan Brakhage. But I see more productive alignments worth tracing out between Fraser and other filmmakers, people as varied in their approach to cinema as Nathaniel Dorsky, Anthony McCall, and Hollis Frampton.

In 1971 Frampton wrote:

> A polymorphous camera has always turned, and will turn forever, its lens focused upon all the appearances of the world. Before the invention of still photography, the frames of the infinite cinema were blank, black leader: then a few images began to appear upon the endless ribbon of film. Since the birth of the photographic cinema, all the frames are filled with images.[1]

For Frampton the existence of this "infinite cinema" was the spur to a metahistorical practice of filmmaking; for Fraser it is an invitation to develop other cameras, other means

[1] Hollis Frampton, "For a Metahisotry of Film: Commonplace Notes and Hypotheses" in *On the camera arts and consecutive matters: the writings of Hollis Frampton*, ed. Bruce Jenkins, MIT Press, 2009, p. 134.

to capture, if not record, what otherwise exceeds a world already saturated with cameras.[2] Sometimes he makes still images, photographs printed from single negatives nestled inside his own mouth and exposed with the slightest parting of the lips. Other times they are short sequences recorded by a modified digital SLR camera, lens removed so that the video sensor is directly exposed to light. In these works, Fraser calls our attention to the material effects of the photographic polymorphousness that Frampton's essay describes in philosophical terms. When you hold a camera in your hand to take a picture (or as is more often the case these days, some other kind of mobile device) light passes through a tiny opening and leaves its mark on some sort of sensitized surface. But rays of light are everywhere being focused and cast onto surfaces. These are the micro-events that Fraser wants to train our eyes to register. His works ask how to see at a moment when cameras seem do all of our seeing for us.

Fraser's close framing, his attention to the slightest incident of luminous event, and his focus on the space between light and picture, or even between pictorial effect and abstraction, calls to mind the filmmaking of San Francisco filmmaker Nathaniel Dorsky. Dorsky has spent many years haunting the city with a Bolex camera ready at hand. He stalks visual phenomenon, waiting patiently for something to appear, a spill of sunlight across a carpet, a brief breeze upturning the leaves in a tree. He collects these moments and carefully arranges them such that, as P. Adams Sitney writes, he is able to create "a feeling of an amassing present, reverberating with echoes of earlier image-worlds."[3] Fraser's use of video does something similar; we are given glimpses of blinking Christmas lights shining through screen doors and headlights spreading their glow across dark streets. For Dorsky, the camera is a precise tool, one that after years of shooting on Kodacrome, he is able to operate with the utmost control. Where Dorsky is committed to the particularity of his medium, Fraser embraces photographic occurrence more generally. In other words, his is not a practice of medium specificity in the simple sense. Instead he asks how broadly it might be possible to define photography, not only technologically and materially, but also experientially.

Sometimes, this means Fraser makes works that do not resemble anything like a photographic picture at all. His installations place the viewer inside the camera, between aperture and blank surface. Light enters into an empty space through a single carefully constructed gap or fissure in the wall. Ambient light is suddenly constrained, focused into stripes, at times subtle, at others, more dramatic in effect. At their starkest, these spaces are reminiscent of installations by Anthony McCall such as *Long Film for Four Projectors* (1974) where lines of light pass through a filmstrip rather than a wall. Both artists share a commitment to illuminating the apparatus not only as a device, but also as a spatial situation. McCall's work is most commonly understood as a politically inflected subversion of the illusionist effects of cinema. Fraser's architectural interventions have a different valence. If the coherence and power of cinematic illusion was the situation to which filmmakers addressed their efforts forty years ago, now it is the sheer abundance, ubiquity and immediacy of photographic images that one must confront. The camera has become an almost automatic extension of the body, but one that more often than not removes us from

---

[2] Frampton's metahistorical ambitions was to make the history of film over "as it should have been," while articulating "the notion of an hypothetically totally inclusive work of film art as epistemological model for the conscious human universe." Quoted in Michael Zryd, "History and Ambivalence in Hollis Frampton's *Magellan,*" *October* Vol. 109, (Summer, 2004), p. 121.

[3] P. Adams Sitney, "Tone Poems," *Art Forum*, November 2007, p. 8.

the scene. While many young artists are adept at reproducing (and ramifying) the forms of earlier critical modernist practices, Fraser's work does more than make reference to the art historical past. He works at the edges of abstraction, straining the fragile autonomy of the image to recast the questions that once drove those critical practices in the light of our own moment.