



Frank Gillette *The Symbiotic Blues*

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Oct 24 to Dec 5, 2024

“to hold, as’ twere, the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.”

-William Shakespeare, Hamlet

LOS/NR is proud to present a major multi-screen video work by the pioneering American video and installation artist **Frank Gillette** (b. 1941, Jersey City, NY). Interested in the empirical observation of natural phenomena, his early work integrated the viewer's image with prerecorded information. He has been described as a pioneer in video research with an almost scientific attention for taxonomies and

descriptions of ecological systems and environments. Gillette's seminal work **Wipe Cycle** (co-produced with Ira Schneider in 1969) is considered as one of the first video installations in art history. Gillette is the recipient of fellowships from the Rockefeller Foundation and the Guggenheim Foundation, as well as grants from the New York State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts.

The Symbiotic Blues is the world premiere of a 9-channel video study of woodland and beach of eastern Long Island. It consists of three video triptychs (Riverrun, Spearlight, and Blackseer) exploring the ways in which we experience the natural world. In nine endless loops, Gillette returns to a subject he has been drawn to for over fifty years; the relationship between the natural world and the ways in which we experience it over time. He achieves this through a complex engagement with classic genres: still-life, landscape, and symbolic

abstraction combined with soundtracks mixing natural and electronic sounds. Though the artist was among the first to use television as an artistic medium, his video work has remained rooted in an approach stemming from his early training as an abstract painter. In the artist words, “...each triptych combines aesthetic judgment with the forces which shape nature’s boundaries.”

This exhibition is organized by **David A. Ross**, the former Director of the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. In 1972, Ross was appointed as the world’s first curator of Video Art at the Everson Museum in Syracuse, NY. His first exhibition of Frank Gillette’s work occurred in 1973.

LOS/NR, 2024



Frank Gillette with images from Riverrun, part one of The Symbiotic Blues.











Spearlight

Never Look at the Same Screen Thrice: Three Triptychs by Frank Gillette

David Rothenberg

As a kid, I had a vision of television that many other children probably shared: If I am watching someone on TV, he must be watching me—somewhere in a studio with thousands of little screens, like inside a fly's eye. Not very practical, perhaps, but to the six-year-old me, it made a lot of sense. Our TV was black and white and fuzzy in those days, which Marshall McLuhan called a cool medium, not a hot one. It was underdetermined and exposed to interpretation.

When the early video artists used those TVs, they delved deep into the fuzziness, enjoying the sacrilege of putting a television in an art gallery. TVs

were vulgar and subversive; they were going to destroy our minds by sucking out our very intelligence and leading children never to read a single book again. TVs were considered a menace, the way smartphones are said to be a menace now: destroying our minds by filling our heads with forgettable, valueless, constantly changing images.

However, once artists get a hold of a subversive medium, they have the chance to redeem it. Or so it was said at the time. In 1969, Howard Wise Gallery mounted a show in New York called “TV as a Creative Medium,” and Frank Gillette was part of it. A piece by Gillette and Ira Schneider titled *Wipe Cycle* featured nine monitors programmed with four distinct cycles and a gray wipe that swept the field counterclockwise every few seconds presenting images of the viewer and real-time broadcast news. Looking back just a few years later, David A. Ross, curator of *Symbiotic Blues* exhibition, notes, “...*Wipe Cycle* seems to underscore the peculiar naïveté demonstrated by American video artists who saw the ability to produce

work on low-cost video equipment —divorced from any consideration of real distribution— as a revolutionary occurrence.” The piece using live footage of viewers of the work, was considered quite radical at the time. (The Museum of Modern Art has recently acquired this work for their permanent collection.) By the mid 1970s, Gillette moved away from incorporating any live feeds from the public and dove deeper into the pure aesthetic possibilities of complex edited video observation could provide.

When I read in college that TV was cool and print was hot, I loved that idea. Suddenly, there was the possibility of ethereal beauty on the television that we all were glued to. McLuhan said that the revolution would be more than televised; it would indeed come when the consumers could make their own programs and bounce them back to everyone else—only then would the village genuinely become global. He dreamed of the Internet, and his disciples like Gillette helped create it. Today video is so ubiquitous that we all carry professional media production suites in our

pocket and can produce as well as any commercial entity. By some estimations, Mr. Beast, the most successful YouTuber of all time, does better than Warner Brothers. Super crisp video is now available to all.

Frank Gillette does not care as much for video art as most people have come to know it, but his innovations may have made it possible. In this exhibition, he employs triptychs of three flat screens in a horizontal line. More than one screen, more than two, the work is wide enough that it is difficult to absorb all screens simultaneously. The number three is significant to Frank Gillette. Gillette's friend Paul Ryan, a Passionist-trained pioneering video artist and philosopher, who (echoing Charles Peirce) spoke of firstness, secondness, and thirdness, and had a powerful influence on the artist's development. Ryan explained this notion to the writer Skip Walter:

*“For Peirce, knowledge corresponds to three modes of being: firstness or positive quality, secondness or actual fact, and thirdness or laws that will govern facts in the future.... **Firstness** is positive quality: The taste of banana, warmth, redness, feeling gloomy; firstness is the realm of spontaneity, freshness, possibility, and freedom. Firstness is being “as is” without regard for any other.... **Secondness** is a two-sided consciousness of effort and resistance engendered by being up against brute facts. Peirce often used the example of pushing against an unlocked door and meeting silent, unseen resistance. **Thirdness** mediates between secondness and firstness, between fact and possibility.... With a knowledge of thirdness, we can predict how certain future events will turn out.”*

Ryan and Gillette proposed exploring these ideas in a new context—the world of video art. Humans have always been bad at multitasking, our eye is

not like a fly's, we have a hard time looking at more than one screen at once. One screen grabs our attention; we can hardly turn away. Two screens offer instant resistance; we do not know which one to follow. Now, three screens push us beyond the narrative of images into a schematic pull on the possibilities of how much our mind can take in. If we put these screens in a darkened gallery, the limits of our perception might just expand. Each of Gillette's triptychs puts forth different forms of thirdness for us to wonder about... it is up to us to figure out what each screen has to do with every other: *Spearlight*, *Blackseer*, and *Riverrun*. Each unusual title comes from James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, and that may be an important clue to the meaning of the work. (It is interesting to note that McLuhan's scholarship and teaching was not media studies or anything technological, he was a noted Joycean scholar.)













Riverrun

In *Riverrun*, each of the three horizontally laid-out screens works in distinctly different ways. On the left are layers of natural images piled on top of each other, pushed toward the abstract. In the middle are two kinds of images: Round or oval mirrors reflecting the trees and sky in the backyard East-End-of-Long Island landscape. Sometimes whole, sometimes smashed. The second kind is macro images of undefined natural objects: bones, skulls, and flowers, one sometimes overlaid in swirling symmetry. Righthand screen: Clear, natural images of trees, ground, and sky. Not over-planned or stylized, but real, direct. Nature is the subject, presented plainly on the right, layered on the left, and reflected unevenly through mirrors whole and round, then broken into a chaos of shards in the middle.

“Some people are angry that I’ve broken the taboo,” Frank smiles.

“What taboo?” I ask.

“The mirror,” he replies, “breaking a mirror.”

Ah, yes, I remember; something should be wrong with that. But what? Everything breaks, entropy rules. There must be something sacred and even magic about any surface that reflects. Is Gillette superstitious?

“I’m an agnostic in search of enchantment,” he tells me. He does not like a world where we judge art according to its market value —how much it is bought and sold for. However, he considers his images to have a particular kind of aesthetic value. They are valuable because they are *alive*. He is still concerned, though, about breaking those mirrors. “I wouldn’t let any of my assistants throw the stones. I alone cast the stones. I knew I’d get some kind of payback for this, and—*look, here’s my broken finger.*”

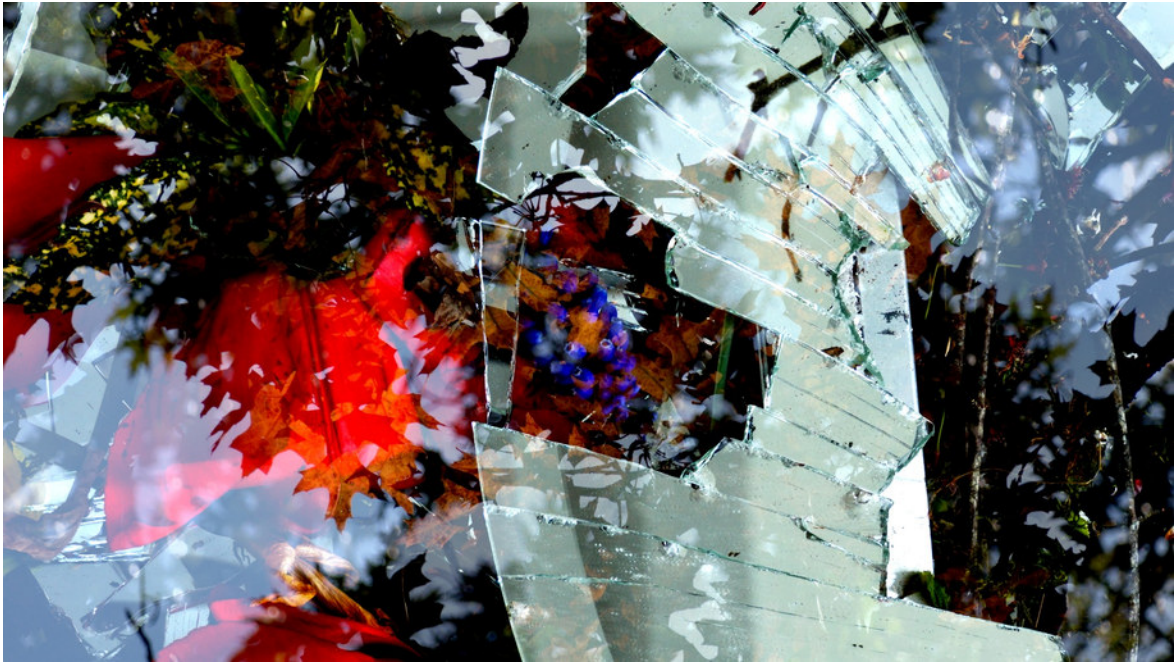
He doesn’t want us to consider these as conceptual artworks. “Look, they’re beautiful. No beauty but in things.” He mentions Cezanne. “I consider Cezanne a kind of God.”

Its rich, impressionistic beauty was conjured from observing the landscape. Often, Cezanne painted the same mountain, Mt. Saint-Victoire.

Similarly, Gillette chooses the same beaches, the same trees. They are sometimes overlaying, reflecting upon themselves. The triple triptych of screens is far too wide for the viewer ever to get a grasp of the entire work. I ask him if all this three-ness suggests a specific kind of symmetry. He doesn't like that.

“Symmetry?! Symmetry is third-rate, which makes it all too easy. I fight against symmetry,” he shouts.

That is why he smashes the mirror into shards, feeds us irregular reflections, and overlays the familiar, creating layers of hallucinatory confusion. But then he shows a mushroom, an errant bone from a found skeleton of some creature or another, as he flips it on top of itself—instant equilibrium. But I see symmetry all over Gillette's work... but then one screen changes and the symmetry vanishes. He wants us constantly guessing. The cycles are uneven and never synchronized. The logic is repeatedly confounded.





Spearlight and *Blackseer* are less bucolic than *Riverrun*. Still, they all play with the apparent symmetry of the three concurrent narratives, always unsynchronized, while our eyes look for order, relatedness, and pattern. Three wide screens in a line full of images of nature, raw and transformed, records of decades of history of our changing video techniques, from fuzziness to exact control, changing over time but defying a simple synchronized narrative. The screens become moving paintings that help define the artist's particular gaze, the logic of his eye. One screen on its own tells a story that we might be able to follow. Three screens are lined up in and out of sync to become records in the landscape we cannot pay attention to all at once. They slip into an uneasy existence as a present environment, and when we turn away from them, we can start to find parallel happenings anywhere in the world. That is how triptychal art might change how we see and help reveal occurrences of beauty all around us.

Some say beauty is unfashionable in art right now, especially in video,

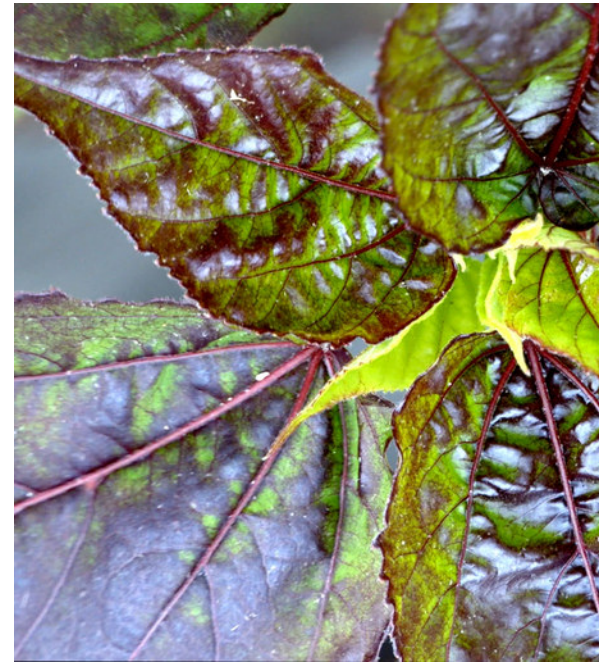
where we always seem to want to be shocked. Whole art biennials reek of menace and fear. Not Frank Gillette's work. It is as moving on old fuzzy boxy screens as on the sharpest of flattest 4K LEDs. Each long loop cycles unevenly, like the long rhythms of our lives themselves. The tripartite images of our births, peaks, and deaths will never line up.

“Art has a reverberating presence; it should never go stale.... Now look at that composition right now,” smiles this artist who has been looking closely for a very long time. “You will never see that exact arrangement ever again.”

* All unattributed quotes are from the artist in conversation in September 2024.

David Rothenberg is distinguished professor of philosophy and music at the New Jersey Institute of Technology, and the author of *Survival of the Beautiful: Art, Science and Evolution* and many other books.

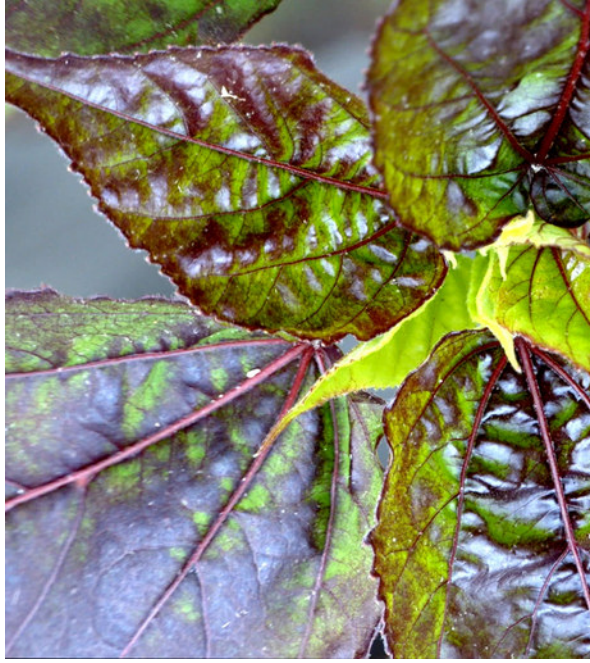






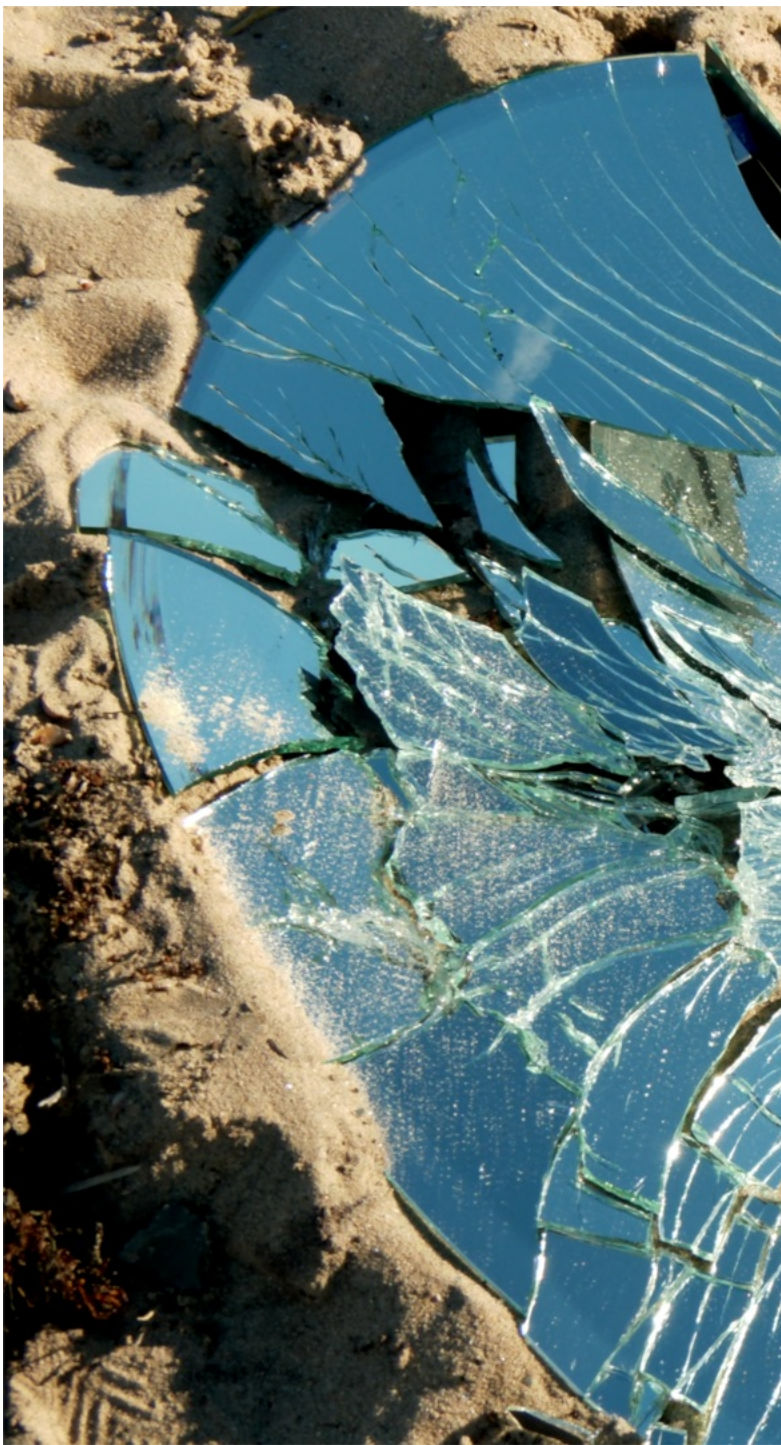








Blackseer













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