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The Message in the Medium

New MoMA Exhibition Pays Tribute to a Film Movement

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By ANDY BATTAGLIA



Daniella Zalcmán for The Wall Street Journal

Structuralist film 'was the opposite of telling a story,' said Erica Papernik, a MoMA assistant curator.

Memory, media and what movies mean make up the subject matter for "Images of an Infinite Film," opening Saturday at the Museum of Modern Art. Staged not in a cinema but in a gallery space on the museum's second floor, the exhibition features flickering images and static interventions, all arranged in a tribute to so-called structuralist film.

"It was the opposite of telling a story," MoMA Assistant Curator Erica Papernik said of the movement that the show surveys. "It was about exploring the medium and the material of film, but also how we relate to our surroundings, perceive information, formulate meaning and project that meaning back out into the world."

The model for the exhibition was the late New York artist Hollis Frampton, whose experimental films in the 1960s and '70s played conceptual games with cinematic conventions. His 1972 short "Poetic Justice," featured in the show, offers little more than a static shot of a table topped with a cup of coffee and a cactus—and pages of a script that flip with descriptions of different unrealized scenes.

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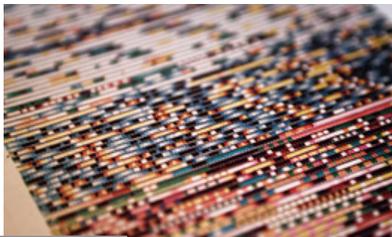
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Anthology Film Archives

A scene from Hollis Frampton's 'Poetic Justice.'

images.

"H.M.," a 2009 work by the Los Angeles-based artist Kerry Tribe, is a sculptural installation that chronicles the condition of a medical patient in the 1950s who had a portion of his brain removed, leaving him incapable of retaining memories for more than 20 seconds. To simulate the effect, the piece presents a single film, featuring documentary-style commentary and dramatic re-enactments, threaded through two projectors, with a 20-second delay between.



Enlarge Image

Daniella Zalczman for The Wall Street Journal

A close-up of Paul Sharits's 'Untitled.'

"I'm trying to produce an experience for the viewer that capitalizes on our own neurological wiring, to give some sense of what it's like to be in that fleeting space of a working memory's life span," Ms. Tribe said. "I was interested in creating some kind of cognitive dissonance, and the question was, what's the right content for that form? The structure actually came first."

Among the other works in the show, 10 in all, are a collection of Plexiglas-encased film strips by Paul Sharits, from 1971-76, and a series of documentary-style surveillance shots of public life in Düsseldorf by David Lamelas, from 1969.

There is also a pioneering 1980 video work by Nan Hoover featuring poetic visions of a surprising sort.

"The piece starts out very abstract, literally bars of light, shadow and color that are gradually shifting," Ms. Papernik said. "Slowly it pans out and you see that what you're seeing is the action of opening and closing a door. It's this seemingly insignificant gesture interpreted as something really glorious."

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