Why Burn a Photograph? A Film by Hollis Frampton

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Why burn a photograph? Why put it on a hotplate and let the paper slowly be consumed by heat? Why allow the image to go up in smoke so that perhaps another image must be printed before I can look at it again? Why engulf a photograph in flames and make it smolder until there is nothing left but a sort of crater in the middle, a temporary parenthesis, a respite, or a pit, for nostalgia? Why start with an image, a one-dimensional surface, and end up with cinders, a protruding grey landscape, a dark sculptural object, or a dirty bulky lump, that crack when touched and dissolve into thin air? Why move from “contemplative distance” to “tactile immediacy”?

Burning a photograph is different from tearing it apart. If I tear it apart, no matter how small the bits and pieces that will be left in the end, my disposition is such that to some extent I act blindly. I am so actively involved in what I do that to some extent I act blindly. I am so actively involved in what I do that I can hardly witness the photograph disappear. I make it disappear and I see it disappear but I do not witness its disappearing. I am part of the critical mass needed for the act to come about and be performed. The difference between burning and tearing up a photograph is the difference between making something disappear and letting it disappear, between use and mention, between a strange craft and art, between staying at home and having bitter thoughts about a girl who laughed at me outrageously and going to the cinema, or to an art gallery. Of course the letting will always involve some making, if only because the pressurized liquid gas in a lighter needs to be ignited or because the photograph needs to be placed on the hotplate. Conversely, the making will always involve some letting, if only because I can pause as I tear up the photograph and decide whether the bits and pieces are small enough by now or require further downsizing. In the so-called digital age, the closest one tends to come to the physical experience of tearing up a photograph is the dissection of a credit card after its validity has expired, or after it has been used fraudulently by a third, unknown party. One just hopes that the plastic fragments will be as tiny as they need be to disallow an evil person from deciphering the encrypted information and emptying one’s bank account swiftly.

There is something matter-of-fact about burning a photograph by placing it on a hotplate, something distanced and distancing, something that lacks the direct implication of the one who puts his hands to the plow, as it were, and tears up the photographic paper on which an image has been printed. A photograph burning is a spectacle for a witness who remains outside, on the margins, or in the wings. How often have we seen a film with a scene where someone strikes a match, holds a letter, an incriminating document, or a photograph, close to the flame, and then throws the burning paper into a fireproof receptacle while he watches it disintegrate! How often have we seen celluloid burned by a projector, accidentally or as a filmic device! And yet to place a photograph on a hotplate and see it disappear could be regarded as a melodramatic gesture as much as tearing it apart. The staging magnifies the fire, transforms it into a conflagration, into a public representation with flames like succulents; the act of tearing a photograph apart, on the other hand, has a minimizing, personalizing, or privatizing effect, no matter how many people actually look at the staged fire or participate in the manual shredding.

Torn photographs, it should be remembered, feature in Hollis Frampton’s *Poetic Justice*, the second installment of his Hapax-Legomena films. In Frampton’s *(nostalgia)*, made in 1971 as the first installment in the series, thirteen photographs are placed on a hotplate and filmed from above. Steadily, the paper turns into carbon. The images become more and more unrecognizable
as the S of the searing electric coils begins to leave its imprints on the paper. (nostalgia) has been called a “structural film.” Regardless of how helpful or even pertinent the term may be, the talk of “structural film” points to the rigor of the fixed camera and the precision of the staging, to the predetermination achieved by the formal set-up, as if Frampton had tried to keep the melodramatic impact at bay by making what happens in the image and on the screen as objective and as anonymous as possible. What happens is out of reach. The spectator never catches sight of the instant when the photograph is placed on the hotplate, and each sequence appears to be of equal, or similar, length, with each repetition of a sequence anticipating the next repetition. The uncontrolled subjective gesture or act, the excess that cannot be accounted for, have been excluded, it would seem, in favor of the cold black-and-white ideality of the natural process of combustion.

A voice tells the spectator details about the different photographs. Yet it does so in advance, ahead of the information provided to the eyes. The voice keeps referring to the photograph that the spectator will see only once the photograph he sees at the moment of listening will have been reduced to ashes, will have performed the burning’s little song and dance and will have entered the film, will have been metamorphosed into cinematography without leaving anything behind but dissolving flakes. “Temporality is everything,” as Rachel Moore puts it, a source of fatigue and a source of excitement. It hollows itself out. Only one photograph, the photograph of an artist’s lab, or a darkroom, is not described, or commented upon, and remains outside the series, a “hapax legomenon” in the visual and aural realm, just as only one comment, the one that comes last, remains outside the series as well, for the photograph which it describes is never seen and perhaps cannot be seen. Is symmetry restored to frame the asymmetry of sound and image? If so, this symmetry is an open symmetry. The spectator feels that the series could have begun before the film starts and end after the film stops. In the film, photographs are alluded to that are not exhibited on the hotplate. A black screen separates each take, the regularity of its insertion triggering a sort of mute metronomic beat. The film features an aerial prologue, a sound rehearsal that can be heard but not seen. It includes a sentence that is never repeated, though it would seem to belong to the actual text: “These are recollections of a dozen still photographs I made several years ago.” If the spectator is not too fatigued and confused by the procedure that keeps disrupting the correspondence between the senses, or between the senses and sense, and if the spectator is still able to listen to the voice and remember what it has said when the next photograph is fed to the cold sun of the hotplate, to the light from which it originated, if, as unlikely as it may appear, the spectator masters Frampton’s future perfect and engages in a mental activity, in a conceptual exercise of reflective coordination that protects his ears and his eyes against the aesthetics, or the beauty, of a pure image and a pure sound, he may come up with a list of reasons why a photograph might be burnt. Does the burning of a photograph, the play of visibility and invisibility, of chronological repetition, that is doubled by the play of sight and sound, of repeated non-coincidence, alert the spectator to the “doubling presence of death” without which one could not see anything, as Foucault maintains in his early study of Raymond Roussel? In a space and time without death, everything would be absolutely visible and invisible at the same time.

In the case of the photograph of Carl Andre, the artist confesses to seeing less and less of him in recent times, less than he would like to see him anyway, while there are other people, he says, of whom he sees more than he cares to see, more than his eyes can take, as it were. Hence burning a photograph can be a reminder that we don’t see what we ought to be seeing, the friends we ought to be frequenting, or that we have become trapped in a condition of distraction. The spectator who has watched the film before, or who ponders it after a first viewing, knows that Pascal is named towards the end of the film, though it is hard to make sense of this reference in the context in which it appears. As the spectator sees a photograph that Frampton made for
Vogue magazine, the voice tells of a photograph that shows a man in an orchard. It is a photograph Frampton has found, not one he produced himself. The voice says: “On the other hand, were photography of greater antiquity, then this image might date from the time of, let us say, Pascal; and I suppose he would have understood it quite differently.” Obviously, this is also a pun, a pun about how to look at a photograph and what to see in a photograph, a pun about what we see and what we do not see when we look at a photograph. “Divertissement,” or entertainment, the attitude towards others and the world that Pascal6 stresses in his Pensées, derives etymologically from the Latin verb “divertere,” which means to separate, to turn away, to divert. One is entertained when one’s attention is taken away from something and directed at something else. “Distraction” comes from Latin “distrare,” to draw asunder or to draw apart. Each time one wishes to be entertained, one seeks distraction. For Pascal, the distraction of “divertissement” always lies in a movement that tends towards the outside and, in a sense, towards itself since it tends not towards a goal to be attained but towards the turmoil and uproar that reign outside, out there. Man, trying to escape a confrontation with his own condition, his own misery, looks for turmoil and uproar, for constant movement, exposing himself to the trouble caused by “a thousand accidents, which make afflictions unavoidable.” Even friendship, Pascal stresses, can be part of the distraction caused by “divertissement.” He believes that few friendships would survive if one of the two friends knew what the other one says about him in his absence, speaking “sincerely and without passion”. One wants friends to be flattered by them, not to discover the “depth of one’s heart” and to see oneself “as one is.” One wants friends to be able to rely on one’s ears: “If one consults the ear only, it is because one lacks heart.” However, on one occasion Pascal also notes: “These people lack heart. One would not want them to be one’s friends.” Does the blocked continuity, the structural discontinuity that causes sound and image to divert and diverge, or that tears apart spoken comment and seen photograph, draw attention to the ambivalent role both the ear and the eye can play? For if, as Pascal stresses, finite human beings prove unable to see the infinite nothingness from which they stem and the infinite into which they are thrown, the infinitude of creation that swallows them, some such beings are still able to contemplate others with the “eyes of faith”.

Yet Frampton’s anamnestic comments on the somewhat surreal photograph of Andre’s handsome boyish face, which appears in a small picture frame next to a metronome whose large needle the sculptor’s hand either puts in motion or prevents from moving, also end with the ambiguous words: “I despised this photograph for several years. But I could never bring myself to destroy a negative so incriminating.” The photograph is destroyed in lieu of the negative, as if the negative were indestructible and could only be destroyed symbolically, by way of destroying a printed image; or as if the photograph always maintained itself in reserve and thereby proved its indestructibility, not on account of its quality, of the artist’s achievement, but on account of its negativity, its incriminating character. Does it incriminate the artist because it reminds him of his distraction or because it reminds him of his failure as a photographer? To know as an artist that one has produced such an image, such a negative is so unbearable that one cannot even go near it, let alone look at it. All one can do is use it, print yet another photograph and burn it yet again. Once the artist has ceased to distract himself, once he has discarded all the habitual excuses, such as his youth, his inexperience, his other, more convincing work, his need to pay for the child’s schooling, his reliance on the art world to subsist, he realizes that what he makes turns out to be beyond his reach, whether in the case of a truly successful work of art, a work of art that truly works, as a whole or in some of its parts, or in the case of a truly incriminating artwork. A truly incriminating work is a work of art that keeps accusing the artist, judging and blaming him for having burdened the world with his so-called art, with something that will never allow itself to be incinerated, that will escape the iconoclast’s grasp, because it has already branded or burnt an indelible mark in the artist’s memory, causing him sleepless nights of never-ending insomnia. Frampton must have asked himself whether the artist Hollis Frampton, the artist Hapax
Legomena, who replaced Frampton when the artist had grown out of one of his former selves, the artist Carl Andre and virtually all the other artists of all times, would ever forget the bullshit he had devised, whether any holocaust would ever be so purifying as to undo the negative once and for all, or whether any future metamorphosis, any resurrection in the future, would allow him to cease being a criminal. One of the first things that the voice tells us, the substitute voice, the voice of Michael Snow reading flatly, clumsily, casually, and perhaps in a manly tone a text of personal “recollections,” of souvenirs or postcards from the past written by a subject formerly known as Hollis Frampton, is that the portrait of Carl Andre the spectator has not seen yet is the first still photograph Frampton ever made “with the direct intention of making art.”

Hence photographs can be burnt as a painful reminder of a distraction that threatens to render a life meaningless and as an equally painful reminder of the difficulty of destruction in art. Is it indeed possible to delete the traces and vestiges of art meant as art, of pretentious artiness, of the frame that is not structural but ornamental? The double pain, real or ironic, bestows the meaning of a ritual upon the formal set-up of (nostalgia). Burning, when painful, means sacrificing, offering the friend’s image to atone for one’s betrayal of friendship, and to acknowledge the intractable negativity of bad art that one is incapable of abolishing. But since the two reasons mentioned are also incompatible with each other, at least to the extent that the artist must hold his friend dear to burn his image and remind himself of his distraction, and that at the same time the image he is burning is the one he must look at again and again in anger because he so much wants to, and cannot, destroy the negative, a certain irony permeates this cinematographic ritual. As a consequence, what we see is what we see and yet also proves to hover undecidably between different meanings. What if irony were Hollis Frampton’s melodrama?

If one continues scrutinizing (nostalgia) for other reasons that might justify the burning of a photograph, bearing in mind that a photograph might be placed on a hotplate and burnt for no other reason than as an appealing visual device, a device fit for a film that reflects on itself as an experimental medium, one will find that Frampton keeps resorting to a moral register of friendship and an artistic register of debunking, and that he often does so in a humorous manner that makes light of the seriousness suggested by morality and art. Some of the more whimsical comments come across as if made up for the occasion, though, given how idiosyncratic friends and artists can be, they may contain perfectly true anecdotes. About an unnamed married friend who has not been his friend “for nearly ten years,” Frampton tells the spectator: “We became estranged on account of an obscure embarrassment that involved a third party, and three dozen eggs.” About his friend James Rosenquist, with whom he seldom meets because he and James both live far apart from each other, he states: “I cannot recall one moment spent in his company that I didn’t completely enjoy.” About Michael Snow’s reaction to a photograph he took of him and a poster he conceived for one of his shows, he observes: “I recall that we worked half a day for two or three exposures. I believe that Snow was pleased with the photograph itself, as I was. But he disliked the poster intensely. He said I had chosen a typeface that looked like an invitation to a church social. I regret to say that he was right. But it was too late. There was nothing to do about it. The whole business still troubles me. I wish I could apologize to him.” About a self-portrait, he remarks: “There are eleven more photographs on the roll of film, all of comparable grandeur. Some of them exhibit my features in more sensitive or imposing moods.” And Frampton adds: “I take some comfort in realizing that my entire physical body has been replaced more than once since it made this portrait of its face.” About an initial series of photographs that captured the window of a cabinetmaker’s shop on West Broadway, he notes: “I rejected it for reasons to do with its tastefulness and illusion of deep space.” About photographs of “junk and rubble” taken in the spring of 1961 “in imitation of action painting” and then shown to a neighbor who was a painter interested in “Old Masters,” he says: “My neighbor saw my new work, and he was not especially pleased.” About a likeness of Frank Stella that shows him
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blowing smoke rings, he asserts: “Looking at the photograph recently, it reminded me, unaccountably, of a photograph of another artist squirting water out of his mouth, which is undoubtedly art. Blowing smoke rings seems more of a craft. Ordinarily, only opera singers make art with their mouths.” When examining the photograph of the interior of a bank on Wall Street, made with the intention of imitating Lartigue’s sense of mystery “without, however, attempting to comprehend his wit,” he bluntly declares: “My eye for mystery is defective.” When considering a photograph of Larry Poons on a mattress, made in a state of ecstatic happiness unrelated to the image itself and the result of a single exposure, he tells the spectator: “Months later, the photograph was published. I was working in a color-film laboratory at the time. My boss saw the photograph, and I nearly lost my job. I decided to stop doing this sort of thing.” Sometimes the object chosen for a photograph appears to be rather odd, as if the artiness had merged into the choice of object: “I set up my camera above an empty darkroom tray, opened a number 2 can of Franco-American Spaghetti, and poured it out.” But hey, such spaghetti did in fact exist until recently—“Franco-American” is not a pun on America doing art but merely a brand name of the Campbell Soup Company. At other times, Frampton proposes an interpretation of one of his images that ridicules the expectations that informed beholders might have of photography as an art. Is he also ridiculing the image itself? He claims, for example, that his photograph of two adjacent toilet cubicles amounts to an “imitation of a painted renaissance crucifixion.” After identifying a “bowl with its lid raised” as an iconic portrait of St. Mary Magdalene, he concludes his interpretation with the following sentence: “I’m not completely certain of the iconographic significance of the light bulbs, but the haloes that surround them are more than suggestive.”

So what is it, then, that Frampton holds in reserve for his last comment, the one that refers to an image we never see, an impossible image? Sadly, it is a disappointment. The image is said to depict the open door of a truck that has turned into an alley, into a “dark tunnel with the cross-street beyond brightly lit.” As Frampton develops the negative, he becomes aware of a detail, something reflected in the rear-view mirror attached to the truck’s door. It is a reflection of a reflection of the almost invisible cross street caused by the window of a factory. Time and again, the photographer enlarges the image so as to recognize what it is that this small section of his image reveals. He keeps failing. “Nevertheless, what I believe I see recorded in that speck of film, fills me with such fear, such utter dread and loathing, that I think I shall never dare to make another photograph again. Here it is! Look at it! Do you see what I see?” Commentators have written about the allusion to Antonioni’s Blow up, although, when asked about such an allusion, Frampton did not confirm it. They have also speculated on whether or not, if one lets oneself be guided by the logic of (nostalgia) rather than the topological lay-out of Manhattan’s streets, the photographed reflection of a reflection could be a double reflection of the photographed darkroom that the spectator sees in the beginning and that, in the film, is not preceded by a comment. The darkroom would come to symbolize, or encapsulate, a photographer’s career, but also the incrimination of the artist whose relationship to his own photographs is at best ambiguous. Be it as it may, the final envoy, the last address or consignment that sends the spectator off into darkness, is too reminiscent of the photograph of Carl Andre, of the collapse of its manifest intention of artistry into a debacle of artiness. Frampton’s comment presents itself so much as the last possible comment on photography and art that it proves as incriminatory as the photographs he dismisses for confounding art with the will to art. The artist makes too much of an effort and, unable to end the fucking film, falls short of his achievement. Or perhaps he looks back when he reaches the end, loathes the whole endeavor, everything he has accomplished so far, and decides to sink the project, ruin (nostalgia) for the spectator who has patiently watched the film up to the point where the last comment leaves him alone with his own blindness, free and constrained to imagine whatever he wishes to imagine, maybe an “infinite film” that is always the same and always different, like the takes and the ashes in (nostalgia), for
no photograph burns in the same manner as another photograph. Photographs must not even be burnt as the very fact of burning them may already betray an excess of seriousness, some melodrama.

The question “why burn a photograph?” reveals itself to be a question about seriousness in life and art. It reveals itself to be a question about that which an artist can bring about, something that will then, strangely, remain out of his reach, incriminating him, returning to him without allowing itself to be touched, something beyond participation and for this reason forever given, something forever given without ever becoming available. Frampton’s answer to the question “why burn a photograph?” encourages the spectator of (nostalgia) not to let go of seriousness, to envisage its relevance from the limit of what may easily be dismissed as an exaggeration, namely the fatality of a self-incrimination rooted in life and art and hence indistinguishable from an incrimination that stems from the other, that renews itself incessantly and constantly reopens a burning wound in the mind, all the more ungraspable the more it originates in a comportment or in the creation of an artwork that could have been different. Yet in life and in art, such seriousness also requires some of the flippancy, the irreverence, with which Frampton treats his photographs and his film, but also the subjects of his photographs and their art. Retain the flippancy only and you get an adolescent’s enjoyment and entertainment. Retain the seriousness only and you get pious artiness and self-righteousness. Why burn a photograph? For no good reason. Or to testify, in life and in art, to the tension that traverses and exposes seriousness and that allows it to be seriousness in the first place. It is a tension generated when the out-of-reach is reached. To reach the out-of-reach is a paradox and thus it imposes two irreconcilable and yet equally necessary forms of behavior, necessary for each form of behavior to be what it aspires to be, seriousness and flippancy. Is Frampton, the moment he stops burning photographs and, regrettably, botches the end of his film, too serious or too flippant?


Notes

2 Ibid., 58.
3 Michel Foucault, Raymond Roussel (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), 77.
5 Ibid., 502.
6 Ibid., 356.
7 Ibid., 383.
8 Ibid., 210.
9 Moore, Hollis Frampton: (nostalgia), 28 f.