

THE BEGINNING OF SOMETHING NEW

The summer of 1958 marked a shift in Frank's work. He had already finalized the selection of pictures that would appear in his photobook *The Americans*. For a new series, Frank photographed passersby from the window of a New York bus as it traversed Fifth Avenue. The pictures—a sequence of frames that appear linked by his own movement—indicated a notable moment of change beyond a single, static image. In 1972 he reflected on their significance:

“When I selected the pictures and put them together I knew and I felt that I had come to the end of a chapter. And in it was the beginning of something new.”

Frank was also on the lookout for cinematic scenes. On the night of Independence Day, he photographed revelers sleeping on the beach among the holiday detritus. The stillness of the nighttime images contrasts with the daylit beach scenes he captured of his family on Cape Cod, Massachusetts, where Frank also shot his first film that same summer. Although it would remain unfinished, the film anticipated the collaborative and experimental spirit of his work to come.

THE WAY THESE PAINTERS LIVED

From his window across a courtyard, Frank could watch the painter Willem de Kooning as he paced in his studio and contemplated his canvas. “I think that the people that influenced me most were the abstractionist painters I met; and what influenced me strongly was the way these painters lived,” Frank said of his time embedded in New York City’s vibrant arts community. “They were people who really believed in what they did. So it reinforced my belief that you could really follow your intuition. . . . You could photograph what you felt like.”

During these years, Frank continued to earn a living by photographing artists and writers for magazine print commissions, while also embracing the creative challenges of filmmaking alongside photography. His proximity to a diverse group of painters, sculptors, writers, and poets in the late 1950s would lead to boundary-pushing explorations like his first finished film, *Pull My Daisy* (1959), co-directed with artist Alfred Leslie, and filmed in Leslie’s own loft.

THE TRUTH IS SOMEWHERE BETWEEN THE DOCUMENTARY AND THE FICTIONAL

In 1968 Frank premiered his first feature-length film, *Me and My Brother*, at the Venice Film Festival. Built as a film within a film, the story prompts questions about participation in traditional society and culture, and about what experiences of life are understood as valid. “The truth is somewhere between the documentary and the fictional, and that is what I try to show,” Frank explained. “What is real one moment has become imaginary the next.”

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, as Frank turned his camera toward friends and neighbors, he also captured events of the time—manifested in political protests, music, poetry, and other aspects of social change and counterculture. During this period, Frank contributed cinematography to films directed by others and also spearheaded his own projects, which featured both recognizable figures and everyday folks on the street. In *Me and My Brother*, one character advises another: “Don’t make a movie about making a movie. MAKE IT. . . . Wouldn’t it be fantastic if you didn’t even have to have a piece of celluloid between you and what you saw?”

THE LINES OF MY HAND

Frank's photobook *The Lines of My Hand* offers a retrospective view of his career up until the date of its publication, in 1972. Pairing text and image, the book begins with early photographs made in Switzerland in the 1940s and ends with montages of film strips from Frank's films of the 1950s and '60s. Its title, perhaps a rumination on one's past and one's fate, is drawn from a sign pictured in a 1949 photograph of a Paris fortuneteller's booth, on view [here](#). This section of the exhibition also brings together a selection of older photographs that appear in the first Lustrum edition of the book.

The Lines of My Hand demonstrates Frank's particular interest in the visual effects and meaning produced from combinations of images, either within a single photograph or formed by printing multiple negatives together to create a dense montage. In later editions, in keeping with his practice of revisiting and rearranging his images, Frank made changes to the photographs and graphic design and updated the book with his most recent works, using photocopies and notebooks to sequence the book's new iterations.

IN FRONT OF ME I HAVE THE SEA

In 1970 Frank and Leaf relocated from New York City to the rural town of Mabou on Cape Breton Island in Nova Scotia, Canada. The photographer Walker Evans, Frank's friend and mentor, came to visit them soon after at their old fisherman's cabin overlooking the sea. Evans's photographs capture the house's hulking wood stove and the clothesline strung outside it, elements of the couple's daily routine that also became material for artistic work. Living there, they "learned a completely different rhythm of life."

In Mabou, Frank's work shifted its focus, becoming a means of processing his feelings, including profound grief. His change of environment, he acknowledged, had been significant: "All of a sudden you are in the company of something very powerful. . . . [But] what I wanted to photograph was not really what was in front of my eyes but what was inside." For Frank, the sea was a dynamic ground against which to measure his life. He reflected, "I have a lot in back of me and that's a tremendous pull, of what has happened in my life, backward. And in front of me I have the sea."

THERE ARE WAYS OF STRENGTHENING THE FEELING

In the 1970s, Frank began regularly incorporating an instant print process, commonly known by the brand name Polaroid, into his work. He valued the immediacy of Polaroids, which enabled him to create an image instantly but then consider a work's full composition over time. "I am no longer the solitary observer turning away after the click of the shutter," Frank declared.

"Instead I'm trying to recapture what I saw, what I heard and what I feel. What I know!"

Throughout the rest of his career, Frank experimented with images by scratching words directly into the negatives and collaborating with printers to enlarge them into bigger prints and combinations. This process became especially significant for him after the sudden death of his daughter, Andrea, late in 1974. Frank began constructing monuments out of wood and materials around him in the landscape, which then figured into photographic memorials. "The Polaroid negative allows me to add that on it if it isn't in the picture—I can put a word in it, I can combine two pictures—there are ways of strengthening the feeling I have," Frank described.

THE VIDEO CAMERA IS LIKE A PENCIL

In the early 1980s, Frank started using a Sony Portapak, a portable video camera that allowed him to instantly play back recordings. He could then erase, edit, and add new content on the tape. On video, Frank brought together fragments that at first seem unrelated, but through the choices he made while assembling them, offer a window into his personal preoccupations. Video, he noted, is “like a pencil. You can say things that you could never say with film.”

Home Improvements (1985), Frank’s first work in video, was made between New York City and Mabou. From it, the artist made a new work in which he captured still images of the footage using a large-format Polaroid camera. The resulting photographs feature snippets of found text; portraits of family members; and—in the last image—Frank himself, captured in a reflection behind his camera. “I’m always looking outside, trying to look inside,” Frank narrates in the video. “Trying to say something that’s true. But maybe nothing is really true. Except what’s out there. And what’s out there is always different.”

MEMORY HELPS YOU— LIKE STONES IN A RIVER HELP YOU TO REACH THE SHORE

In his last decades, Frank's work centered ever more upon his own life. Instead of traveling and looking outward, he found stories and compositions by panning his camera around his homes. His camera lingered on collected objects: figurines on the windowsill, postcards pinned to the wall, the typewriter on the table, and—always—photographs from years earlier. “I want to use these souvenirs of the past as strange objects from another age,” he once wrote. “They are partly hidden and curiously resonant, bringing information, messages which may or may not be welcome, may or may not be real.”

Frank also collected memories in his “visual diaries,” small, softcover books in which he, with his assistant, the photographer A-chan, arranged new and old pictures in sequences with personal resonance. Toward the end of his life, these photobooks became his main artistic output. Looking back at the souvenirs of his life—the settings in which it had taken place and the people who populated it—was incredibly generative: “Memory helps you,” he mused. “Like stones in a river help you to reach the shore.”