

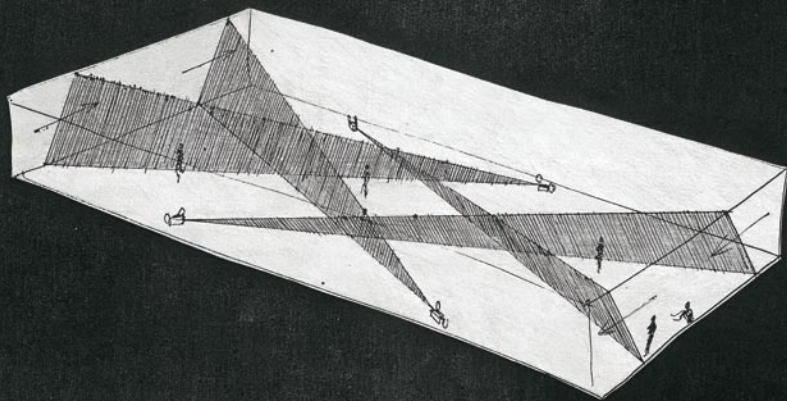
STUDY FOR "LEAVING" WITH TRAVELLING WAVE (STILL)

Am '07

Filmless projections, cones of light,
 spinning columns of air – when it comes
 to creating something out of nothing,
Anthony McCall has few peers.
 So how does a fetish for the insubstantial
 lead to a substantial body of work?

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WORDS: TYLER COBURN

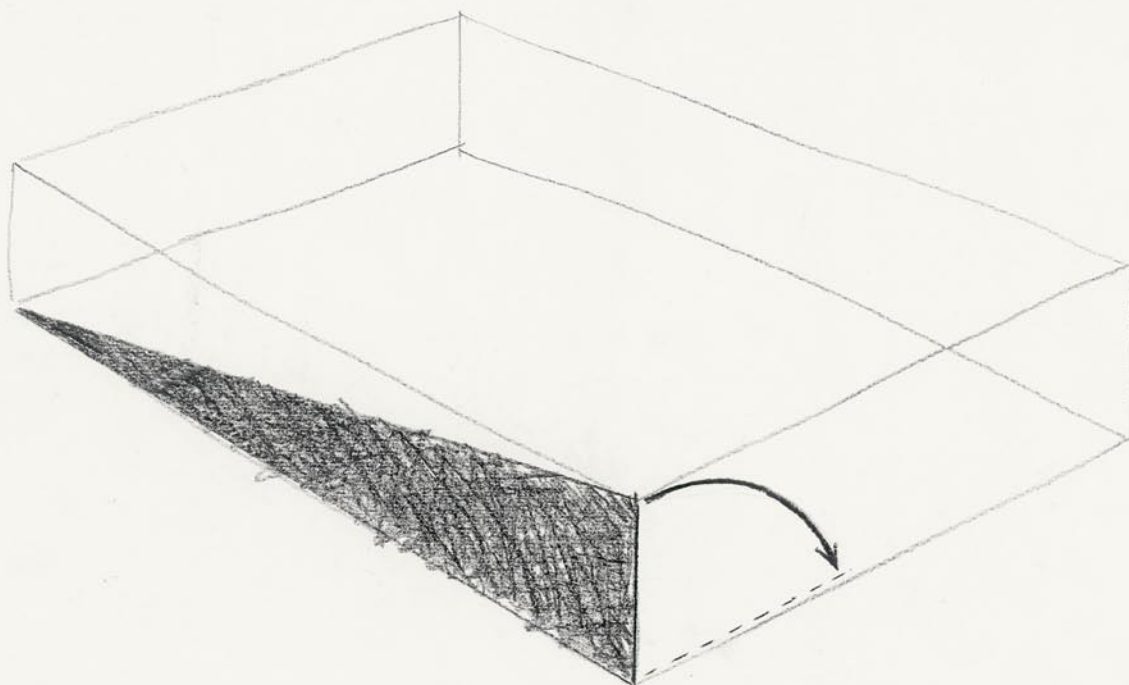


ONE OF THE RARE PLEASURES of the critical profession is meeting an artist as adept in the realm of language as in the realm of aesthetics – and then having the chance to interview him twice. At the conclusion of our 2008 interview, after outlining a decade's worth of projects (and enough proposals and ideas to fill a good several more), Anthony McCall remarked, "I'm having a hell of a good time and I know that one's not always on a roll. But I'm feeling very productive at the moment."

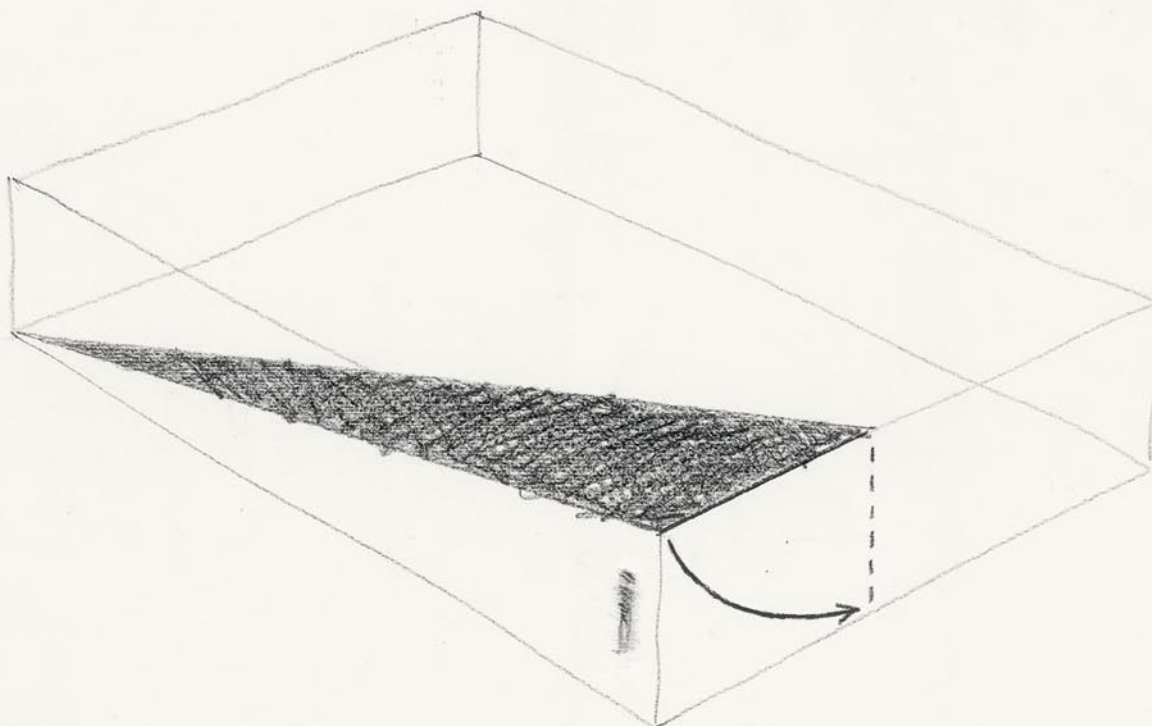
Fateful words. In the coming months, the New York-based Englishman will launch an ambitious exhibition at Sprüth Magers, London, and Ambika P3, a massive former concrete construction hall right in the heart of the English capital. Following his 2006 installation of the vertical digital projection *Between You and I*, at Peer at the Round Chapel, and his 2007 exhibition of horizontal projections at the Serpentine Gallery (both also in London), the two-tiered show will mark the most comprehensive presentation of McCall's vertical works in the UK.

This, alongside a number of forthcoming public projects, was reason enough to revisit McCall's studio in Tribeca, a neighbourhood whose present celebrity (and precipitous property values) owes, bittersweetly, to its previous life as a creative hotbed – a dank slice of lofts where McCall, from 1973 to 1975, realised the seven works that constitute his early 'solid light films'. Starting the series was *Line Describing a Cone* (1973), an animation of a white gouache dot that, over the course of 30 minutes, extended to form a circle. The film registered like a thesis for the following six, combining a long duration with a readily apprehensible structure to rouse the audience from conventional habits and shift focus to the site of projection; an expanded social sphere; and the conical articulation of projected light, in the space between apparatus and image (articulated, in large part, thanks to cigarette smoke and dust).

McCall's following films explored the permutations of his working elements, most exhaustively in *Long Film for Four Projectors* (1974), a six-hour protorave conducted by four projectors that each ran 16 segments of banded light at erratic speeds, with projectionists on hand to flip and rethread the reels in

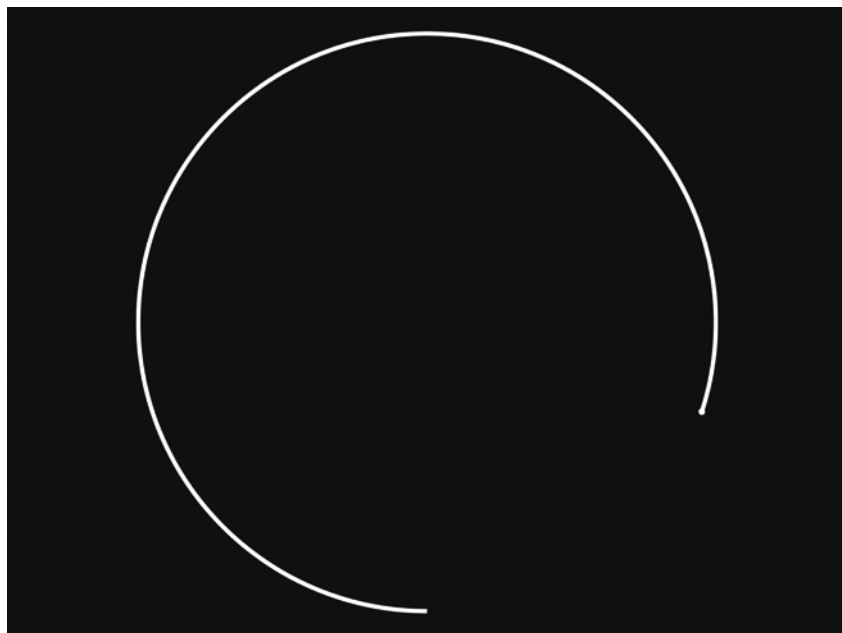


FOUR PROJECTED MOVEMENTS PART III REEL RUNS HEAD TO TAIL BACK TO FRONT
DURATION 15 MINUTES ANTHONY MCCALL 1975



FOUR PROJECTED MOVEMENTS PART IV : REEL RUNS TAIL TO HEAD BACK TO FRONT
DURATION 15 MINUTES ANTHONY MCCALL 1975

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all possible variations. Over the arc of this series, as well as in his concurrent *Fire Cycles* (1973–4), lengthened time spans served, McCall says, to “outflank the ability of an audience to assemble”, reaching a culmination in *Long Film for Ambient Light* (1975), a 24-hour work that presented the transition of light, from day to night, between papered windows and a single bulb. ‘A piece of paper on the wall is as much a duration as the projection of a film’, McCall’s accompanying statement read. ‘Its only difference is in its immediate relationship to our perception.’

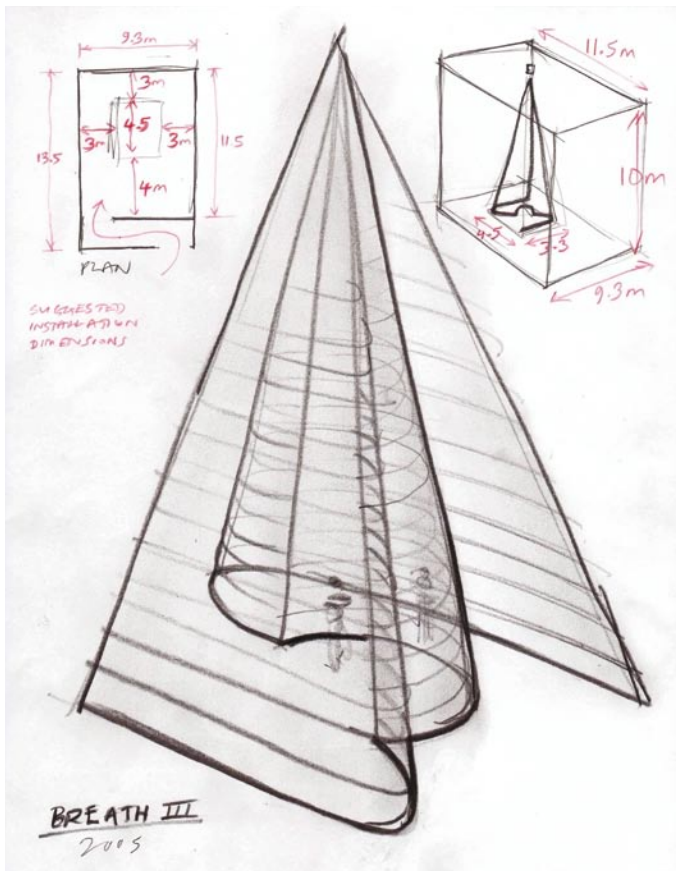
By the end of three short years, McCall had managed to make a film that abandoned projector and celluloid wholesale while also challenging entrenched notions of temporality that the Minimalists were contemporaneously questioning. “I did feel that I had completed something”, he reflects. “In a way, I had also put myself into a bit of a corner.” It seemed, as art historian Branden Joseph has discussed in his essay ‘Sparring with the Spectacle’ (2005), like a structuralist endgame – or a sizeable enough obstruction to reroute McCall’s thinking away from his ‘solid light films’ and along the emergent, Marxist-inflected lines of organisations like Artists Meeting for Cultural Change, in which McCall, Lucy Lippard, Carl Andre and other notables participated. Addressing colleagues such as Annette Michelson, Hollis Frampton and Peter Gidal on a panel at the 1976

International Forum on Avant-Garde Film in Edinburgh, where he also presented his solid-light work *Four Projected Movements* (1975), McCall worried that despite the avant-garde’s successful evasion of the ‘values of the consumer film industry’, the growing artworld validation of its artist-filmmakers (himself included) risked voiding their works of any potential for political significance. In a summation that could as easily apply to present times, McCall stated: ‘The Museums of Modern Art have become our Odeons Leicester Square’.

However rash and era-appropriate McCall’s disavowal seems, in hindsight it’s hard to deny the ground it cleared for later, critically incisive analyses of image culture, such as his film collaboration with Andrew Tyndall (*Argument*, 1978). What followed was a two-decade break from artmaking, as McCall pragmatically turned his attention to graphic design – though even then, straying not an inch from the artworld, as catalogues for galleries like Mary Boone, Hirschl & Adler and others attest.

The 2001–2 Whitney Museum exhibition *Into the Light: The Projected Image in American Art 1964–1977* provided the first continuous installation of *Line Describing a Cone* and contributed to a renewal of interest in McCall’s work. While the 1970s showings were intimate screenings for the avant-garde film community, McCall and Whitney curator Chrissie Iles made a significant departure by choosing to exhibit the work as a loop. Their reasoning, McCall remembers, drew on the quasi-narrative structure of the film (“It declared its purpose and, by the end, it has realised it”), but could also be seen to reflect the habituation of museums and galleries to film and video installation in the interim, since McCall’s early films. Additionally, as curator Olivier Michelon theorised in conversation with McCall, a mid-1990s trend of ‘purely sensuous art’, exemplified by the immersive, elemental installations of artists like Olafur Eliasson and Ann Veronica Janssens, has reframed the discussion of McCall’s recent work. Yet Michelon also correctly worries that this nascent vocabulary does not provide adequate allowance for the stakes set by *Line Describing a Cone*’s original, structuralist context. Originating as ‘a radical deconstruction of film’, Michelon notes, ‘in the 2000s, it appeared as an “environment”... apparently uncoupled from its own specific history’.

For his part, McCall is relatively untroubled by the museum setting, suggesting it offers another way to show work – and one that is still more conducive to interpersonal engagement. The ‘solid light films’ McCall resumed making in 2003, in point of fact,



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are not only conceived primarily for exhibition, but foreground sculptural and phenomenological issues that arguably tie into this younger history of installation. “I still have a central interest in duration as an idea”, the artist remarks, “but whereas my films were connected to aesthetics in the 1970s, now they’re connected to mortality and the body”.

These recent works derive from complex formulae, developed in conjunction with mathematician Philip Ording, that the artist transforms into computer animations and digitally projects across horizontal and vertical expanses. Galleries and museums are buttoned-up affairs in comparison to dingy Tribeca lofts (to say nothing of the recent spate of smoking bans), so cigarettes are substituted with the streamlined emissions of haze machines, which sculpt McCall’s volumes of projected light as they shift between expanded and contracted states. And in lieu of the vintage 16mm whir, the digital projector facilitates a different category of noise. “When you’re focused, your mind has a murmur to it, which is very much like the sound of the projector”, McCall reflects. “It creates a cover for your concentration.”

McCall characterises his horizontal and vertical projections, respectively, as ‘recumbent’ and ‘standing figures’, extending a bodily analogy that, per Hal Foster, shares much with Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s theory of intersubjectivity. “Our whole experience of our corporeal selves is in relation to others”, McCall says. “So representation sort of got it wrong, because it thinks the body is an object, which it isn’t. It’s actually a channel of communication.” Particular titles, like *Coupling* (2009), remind us of the relational qualities of the artist’s silvery, figural projections, which in this case absorbs mathematics into two undulating, enveloping ellipses that disappear and reappear without warning, continually eroding and reframing the boundaries of their (and our) relationship.

As McCall’s ‘solid light films’ expand out onto increasingly dynamic, sculptural terrain, a separate body of work reveals an emerging interest in public – and particularly urban – sites. A handful of projects are in the works, including the Arts Council of England and Cultural Olympiad commission *Projected Column*, a vertical slice of spinning warm air that will rise over the city of Liverpool in time for the 2012 Olympics. Another commission, for the city of Auckland, titled *Light House*, is also scheduled to open in 2012. “It’s interesting how all cities have the same life cycle”, McCall reflects. “They have ex-industrial waterfronts and cultural rehabilitation and reuse. Auckland is no different.” The city has steadily removed disused storage tanks over the past several years, retaining a former cement silo that McCall will turn into a projector and “receiving chamber”. Visitors can enter from beneath a 130-foot-tall concrete cylinder, punctured by six vertical



cuts that, like apertures, will allow the sun to travel its interior from sunrise to sunset. McCall plans to retrofit the top of the silo with a lighthouse, slowing the pulse and tracking the light along a west-east path that faces the surrounding harbour. In an uncannily similar manner to *Long Film for Ambient Light*, *Light House* replaces the projector with daily cycles of natural and artificial light, yet grounds these processes on a site with both historical and poetical resonances, from the specific role of the cement silo to the fanciful addition of the lighthouse – one signal, among the many in McCall’s lexicon, that builds a channel of communication between a device and a screen, an artist and audience, and a group of people in conversation. ■

Anthony McCall: *Vertical Works* is presented by Sprüth Magers Berlin & London at Ambika P3, University of Westminster, London, from 28 February to 27 March. Works on paper by Anthony McCall will also be on view at Sprüth Magers London from 28 February to 26 March

WORKS
(IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Study for *Leaving*, 2006–7, the 19th minute, graphite on paper, one of four

Long Film for Four Projectors, 1974, installation drawing (1977), photocopy and pencil on paper, 20 x 25 cm

Long Film for Four Projectors, 1974 (installation view, 2003). Photo: Hank Graber

Four Projected Movements, 1975, installation drawing, wax pencil on paper, 46 x 61 cm

Four Projected Movements, 1975, installation drawing, wax pencil on paper, 46 x 61 cm

Line Describing a Cone, 1973, during the 24th minute (installation view, Musée de Rochechouart, 2007).
Photo: Freddy Le Saux

Line Describing a Cone, 1973, frame from the 24th minute

Breath III, 2004–5, installation drawing, pencil on paper

Vertical Works, 2009 (installation view, Hangar Bicocca, Milan). Photo: Giulio Buono

Long Film for Ambient Light, 1975 (installation view, Idea Warehouse, New York, 2pm, 18 June 1975)

Long Film for Ambient Light, 1975 (installation view, Neue Galerie, Aachen, 1976)

all works

Courtesy the artist and Sprüth Magers, Berlin & London