



Minerva Access is the Institutional Repository of The University of Melbourne

Author/s:

Menzies, M;McCall, A

Title:

Art/Film: A Conversation with Anthony McCall

Date:

2015

Citation:

Menzies, M. & McCall, A. (2015). Art/Film: A Conversation with Anthony McCall. Menzies, M (Ed.). Cinema & Painting, (1), pp.96-99. Te Pātaka Toi Adam Art Gallery.

Persistent Link:

<https://hdl.handle.net/11343/354279>

A Conversation with Anthony McCall

Michelle Menzies

Anthony McCall is almost unique in the canon of avant-garde cinema as an artist who has moved fluidly between the worlds of experimental film and art. Associated with the London Filmmakers Co-Op in his native Britain from the early 1970s, he relocated to New York in 1973. There he participated in the screening cultures of Millennium Film Workshop and the Collective for Living Cinema; and in the emerging scenes of conceptual, performance, and post-minimalist art.

A pioneer in the use of film within an installation context, McCall's early "Solid-Light" films eliminated the cinema space, emphasising in its place the projection of light through a spatial environment—the dusty and smoke-filled industrial basements that formed the exhibition venues for New York avant-garde cinema of the 1970s. *Line Describing a Cone* (1973), his best-known Solid-Light film, presents the viewer with a point of illumination that, over the course of thirty minutes, grows into a dimensional cone of light. When it encounters the haze of smoke and atmospheric dust, the beam of light emanating from the projector is articulated as 'solid,' or as a tactile membrane. The progressive articulation of solid light emphasises the realness of space and time in the viewing situation; so re-articulating the film screening as a live event. Further, by situating the 'action' of the film in the physical space between projector and image, *Line* imbues the austerity of its formal parameters with a deeply sensuous and haptic experience.

Following a break of twenty years, McCall's practice in the last decade has entirely transitioned to that of digital cinema. Recent installations such as *You and I*, *Horizontal* (2005) and *Face to Face* (2013) are wholly or 'born digital' assemblages of light, duration, and movement. While these recent installations maintain the formal structure of McCall's earlier films, their deployment of data projectors allows for the creation of vertical or diagonal membranes of light in space. In this, McCall's digital Solid-Light installations are able to claim an expanded sphere of reference: invoking strong visual connections to architecture and natural formations such as waterfalls or moonlight.

This exchange is extracted from an interview conducted in the artist's studio in Manhattan, New York on 2 August 2011.

Menzies: Can you describe the context for your early experiments with film and installation in the 1970s?

McCall: When I started in 1971 I was doing performances with grids of small fires in landscape. These were slow, measured, sculptural events, that lasted half an hour or an hour and I thought of the friends who came to watch as something akin to witnesses. However, at one of the performances, a quite large audience gathered, and I felt under pressure from their expectations to put on a show. This was antithetical to what interested me, and disappointing for that audience. In response to this problem, I began to increase the duration of the pieces. Something that lasts half a day, re-organises that collective 'audience' into a stream of individual 'visitors.' Each of these visitors is a free agent, deciding for themselves how to look and how long to stay. I also developed a continuously changing cyclical structure based on permutation, which replaced my earlier method of making a number of short, discrete sequences with beginnings and ends. By the time I did the final piece, *Fire Cycles III*, in 1974, I had extended the duration to all day long, and I had expanded the area defined by the small fires from a 12-metre square to a 275-metre square. This created a situation where visitors were incorporated within the grid rather than watching it as an event on the other side of the field; and they also arrived after the piece started and left well before it ended. I suppose that this was around the beginning of installation art.

But if you're going to make something last that long, you're going to have a different structure in place. *Line Describing a Cone* does not belong in this category. It is 30 minutes long, with an essentially narrative structure: it announces its purpose, and then it realises it.

Menzies: One could say that the structure of *Line* offers the viewer something like a slight narrative.

McCall: It does. It's directional. In the pieces that followed the 'cone' films, permutation was my way of avoiding narrative. The two new ideas—that of a visitor surrounded both spatially and durationally—I carried over to my next Solid-Light work *Long Film for Four Projectors*. From then on, I was quite certain that an all-day cyclical structure together with a spatially extended 'field' was the appropriate format for the kind of work I was doing. This came to be called "Installation."

When I started again after not having made art for over twenty years, I assumed that that I would organise time in a similar way. And, of course, by then installation had become a default mode in the art world. It suited the time of the gallery or museum space much better than the time structure of a cinema, whose economy is based on seated audiences and time-slots.

In the 1970s avant-garde cinema was based on the same principle as Hollywood, really, when it came to money. If I did a screening at Millennium [Film Workshop] or the Collective [for Living Cinema] or somewhere like that, the filmmaker got half the box office. You would show twice a year, maybe, for one night each time. Half the box office meant about fifty dollars. So your annual income was a hundred dollars. [laughs] It was stimulating, showing just to other artists and filmmakers. But economically it couldn't possibly work. That original model was based on there being thousands of theatres.

Menzies: In fact, experimental film has not until very recently been a feature of the art market, which can provide a somewhat more viable financial structure for an artist to earn a living.

McCall: Yes, for some that is true. But in fact there are still two sets of practices; there is an experimental film tradition carrying on outside the art world. It doesn't have a viable economic structure and yet it persists outside the art market. I don't know how things will look in ten years time, it's very hard to see... But let's say for the sake of argument that they merge.



Anthony McCall, *Line Describing a Cone*, 1973. February 15, 1974.
Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly, New York.

Menzies: But even this is problematic, because these practices are rather different animals, in all kinds of ways.

McCall: Yes, they have different histories. You could say that the moving image within art came from television. The moving image within avant-garde film came from film, from cinema. After video image definition improved and good video projection started, the two traditions began to get totally scrambled, but still, those were the deep roots and they're very different.

Menzies: This dynamic can still linger within the academy. For example, art history tends to historicise the moving image by turning to the 1960s and 1970s, in reference to television and video art, whereas the approach of film studies tends to consider the history of cinema as a dimension of the experience of modernity. There is a disconnect between these disciplinary frameworks, even though both ostensibly concern the same object: the moving image. And within the contexts of contemporary art, film history per se—which involves the social history of the movies, as well as the history of avant-garde film practice—can be strangely invisible.

McCall: On the whole—there are some very notable exceptions—but on the whole film history is something of a black hole for art historians, particularly avant-garde film history. As you say, they'll pick and choose. They'll go back from Nauman and kind of end up at Duchamp, and they might mention Man Ray or Surrealism. But it's as if that whole history, that vital history of avant-garde cinema never happened. And all kinds of assumptions are made, facile assumptions, about how the moving image came into the art world: for instance, that chestnut about artists seizing on the new video Portapak because, unlike film, they would not need large crews to make a work. Tell that to Michael Snow, or Carolee Schneemann, or Paul Sharits or Tony Conrad, or W+B Hein, or to myself, all of whom worked more or less single-handedly!



Anthony McCall, *You and I, Horizontal*, 2005, at the University of Chicago, 2012. Photo: James Prinz

But something has certainly happened to the social institution of Cinema. Cinema, once organised around movie theatres, has been steadily fracturing into shards, and moving images have gone everywhere, in every direction, in every possible scale, from the size of a building, through giant monitors, through television, through your computer screen, through iPads and smartphones and social media, ending up with a screen the size of a wrist-watch.

The other important thing about the last twenty-five years is the shift from printed page to screen. This is interesting to me because the twenty years I was not making art (the '80s and '90s) were the same twenty years when these changes accelerated. In the 1970s, the printed page was our primary source of information. Fast forward to the late 1990s and everyone is looking at screens.

So for me, it was no accident that the moving image should have entered the art world in the 1990s as it did, in such a definitive way. It was because the screen had entered everyone's lives. It couldn't possibly have done anything else, except maybe a grand refusal, with painting having an enormous comeback. But that's not what happened.