Light Maneuvers

With a traveling retrospective in Europe and works in American group shows re-igniting interest in his projections and performances, Anthony McCall is enjoying a renaissance.

BY LYNN MACRITCHIE

In life, and certainly in exhibition-going, timing can be crucial. At first, the Anthony McCall show at the Serpentine Gallery in London failed to impress. Beyond the entrance gallery, densely hung with framed drawings and photographs, the main rooms had been blacked out, and Saturday afternoon crowds frolicked among beams of projected light and emissions from haze machines. The projections formed abstract patterns of moving white lines on the gallery walls. The shifting shapes were attractive enough, but seemed to demand little more of the spectator than a careless glance. And then, in the final gallery, something happened.

As I entered, peering through the gloom, the ambient light was just sufficient to make out a large case containing an old-fashioned film projector, which did not appear to be working. Heading for the exit, I turned back on impulse to look again. And that look revealed that the space had been pierced by a single narrow beam of light, driving from the projector through the darkness until, caught by the surface of the wall, it formed a quivering point of illumination. The effect was transfixing. Something about that simple shaft of brightness making its way across the dark room compelled attention.

This attention was repaid as, ever so slowly, the narrow wand of light began to expand, and the point on the wall, which had first appeared low down on the left, began to creep upward, its progress forming an arc on the wall's surface and an expanding cone of light in the intervening air. Puffs from a haze machine shone silver as they rose within the beam, making the light seem tangible. Frame by frame, the 16mm film running through the projector slowly revealed a complete circle, drawn in light on the wall. Watching the gradual appearance of the circle was utterly absorbing, an all too rare experience of a perfectly realized conjunction of form and content. The process took 30 minutes, and it didn't seem a second too long.

This was *Line Describing a Cone*, a work McCall conceived in 1973 aboard a ship crossing the Atlantic from London to New York. The piece, which was first realized in New York three months after his arrival, emerged from a lengthy period of thinking about cinema or, as he put it

Still from Anthony McCall's Landscape for Fire, *1972, 16mm film transferred to DVD, 7½ minutes. Courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.*

Right, Line Describing a Cone, *1973, 16mm film projector, haze machine, 30 minutes; at the Musée départmental d'art contemporain, Rochechouart, France, 2007. Photo Freddy Le Saux.*

Like other radical artists of the 1970s, McCall sought to strip down to their essences the making, presentation and experience of art.

in a statement made at the time, "the irreducible, necessary conditions of film: projected light."[1] Those words, "irreducible" and "necessary," are redolent of the language of the radical artists of the '70s who endeavored to strip down to their essences not just the making but also the presentation and experience of art. To make *Line Describing a Cone*, McCall first drew the circle to be projected directly onto the acetate filmstrip—making, in effect, an animation. He then projected the film across a darkened space, where the audience could move about freely, around and through the beam of light, becoming participants in the process by which the fundamental nature of film was made visible.

Born in England in 1946, McCall trained as a graphic designer at Ravensbourne College of Art in the mid-1960s, and only began working as an artist some years after leaving college, when he began to experiment with performance. He became a key member of several artists' groups both in London, where he joined the London Filmmakers Cooperative, and in New York, which he has made his home since 1973.

The photographs and drawings in the entrance gallery of the Serpentine included rare pictures of and detailed plans for his early performance works. Films of three of them (all 1972) were screened as part of the exhibition: *Earthwork*, a solo performance by McCall, and *Landscape for White Squares* and *Landscape for Fire*, both of which featured members of an artists' group called Exit. All three were done in landscape settings and organized according to "scores"—McCall's term for the drawings on graph paper that he made to plot the direction and timing of each participant's movements for the duration of the action.

McCall first taught himself filmmaking in order to record his performance works, and then became interested in investigating the nature of film itself. *Line Describing a Cone* was followed by several similar pieces, which he termed "solid light" installations. But by the late '70s, McCall had effectively abandoned filmmaking, becoming a professional book designer. When he returned to making art some 20 years later, he also returned to the concept of the "solid light" installation. The Serpentine exhibition included *Turning Under* (2003) and *You and I, Horizontal III* (2007), recent works realized as projections in haze-filled spaces. Despite some superficial similarities, the new works seem to lack the power of their predecessor. The unique quality of *Line Describing a Cone* can perhaps best be understood by considering it in relation to the work produced both before and after it.

McCall's earliest film, *Landscape for Fire* records a performance in which a group of people ignited containers of petrol laid out in a grid pattern across a field. Their actions followed the "score" that McCall had drawn up beforehand. Seen at the Serpentine, the clarity of the drawing was striking, and in the film itself, the effect of this careful preparation was quite evident. For despite all the drama of the leaping flames, swirling smoke and foghorns howling on the soundtrack, the film shows not chaos, but a volatile element willed into order.

Line Describing a Cone, however, did not come into being as a record of something else. As McCall has explained, it was created to answer a question, that question being, "If you were to make a film that was only a film, what would it look like?"[2] The power of *Line Describing a Cone* is that it answers the question so magnificently, all of its separate elements—the marks on the acetate, the beam of light, the haze-filled air and the passage of time—combining to become a masterful exposition of the DNA of film.

In the second chapter of his career as an artist, McCall seems to be revisiting not the question to which *Line Describing a Cone* was the answer, but rather his first interest, performance. *Turning Under* and *You and I, Horizontal III* are also created from "scores." Now, however, McCall's performers are not people, but lines. Just as he once plotted the movements of people on the ground, McCall now plans the movements of lines projected across space. He makes pencil drawings of the forms the lines will assume as they move. These are translated into mathematical formulae and then handed over to a programmer to be turned into computer script. This, in turn, generates a drawing in the form of a QuickTime movie file that yields a video projection in the exhibition space.

But it is not just the technology of filmmaking that has changed in the 30-year interim: the conditions of viewing have changed, too. When *Line Describing a Cone* was first screened, the audience would gather at a specific time to watch it together, from beginning to end: it was an event requiring a commitment of time. Today, however, the film is looped to play continuously, and the visitors may come and go as they please. In 2003-04, cheery crowds lay on the floor of the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern and waved at their reflections in the mirrored ceiling of Olafur Eliasson's *Weather* installation. At the Serpentine, something of this lighthearted atmosphere could be felt in the galleries where McCall's *Turning Under* and *You and I, Horizontal III* were screened as the audience played in the beams of light. However enjoyable that experience may have been, there was a sense that some quality of attentiveness has been lost.

For just as the hand-drawn animation of *Line Describing a Cone* has been replaced by the pixel-based lines of *Turning Under* and *You and I, Horizontal III*, a feeling of connection with the artist's idea, which remains so powerful in the early work, is absent from the later ones. McCall claims that the computer-generated films are a more accurate rendering of his concepts than could be achieved with the earlier animation process, as he can preview what the digital projections will look like and make adjustments until he is satisfied. The formal vocabulary, too, has grown from straight lines and simple curves to include what he calls the "traveling wave," a hybrid of the two. His pleasure in the increasing sophistication of the process, however, may not result in a more profound experience for viewers. The digitally rendered curves could turn and twist on a computer monitor just as easily as they do on the gallery wall. Requiring no potentially social space in which to be realized, they seem to refer only to themselves. The audience may interact with the beams, but it is hard to penetrate what, if anything, the projected shapes and the experience might mean. *Turning Under* and *You and I, Horizontal III* may intrigue and entertain, but they remain hermetic. *Line Describing a Cone*, by contrast, was, and still is, a revelation. □
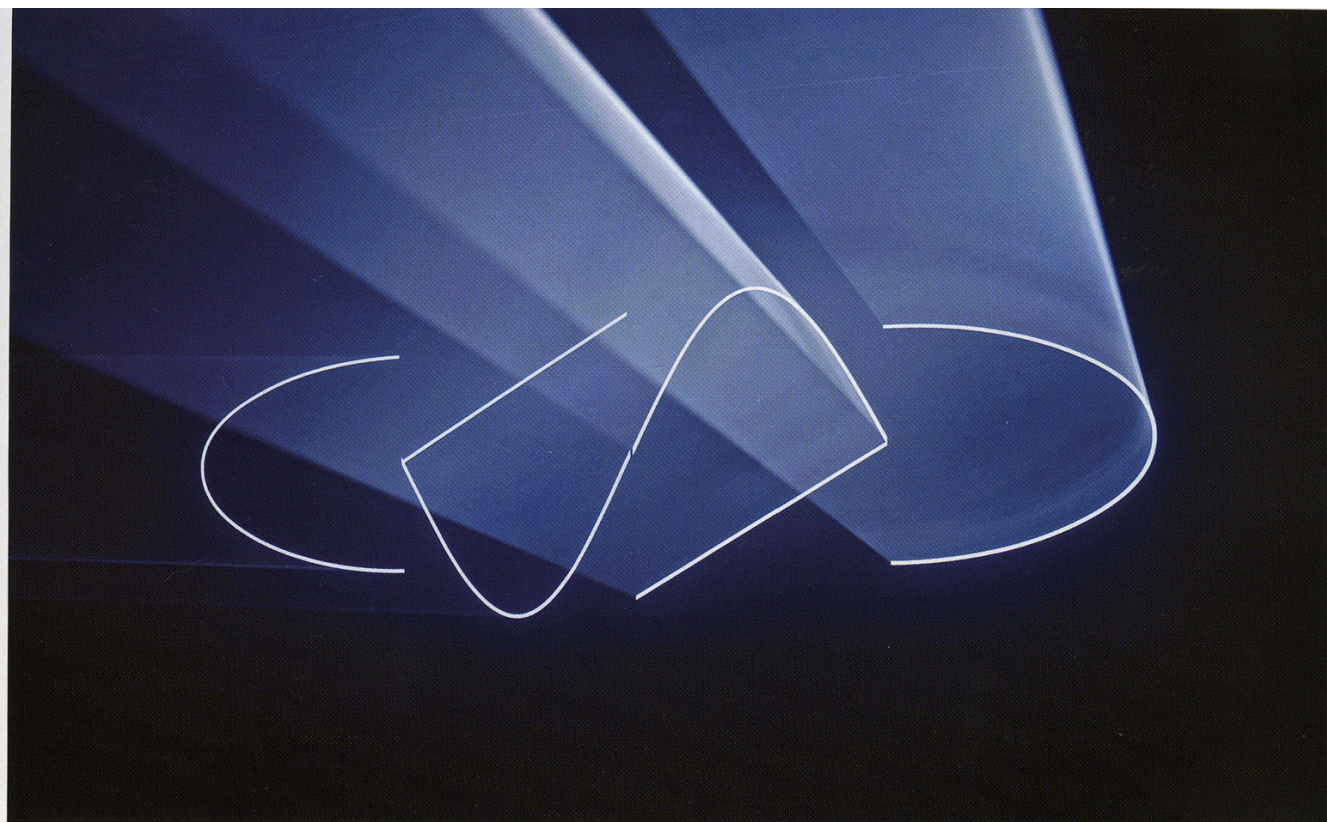
1. Reprinted in the catalogue of the exhibition "Anthony McCall Film Installations," Warwick, England, Mead Gallery, 2004, p. 43.
2. Interview with Julia Peyton-Jones and Hans Ulrich Obrist, 2007, available at http://www.serpentinegallery.org/Anthony%20Mccall%20interview.pdf

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Two views of You and I, Horizontal III, *2007, computer, QuickTime movie file, two video projectors, two haze machines, 32-minute cycle in two parts. Above, photo Steven P. Harris, at Sean Kelly Gallery. Below, photo Sylvain Deleu, at the Serpentine Gallery, London.*