

BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE



MAILINGLIST

Art

October 3rd, 2014

INCONVERSATION

ANTHONY MCCALL with Jarrett Earnest

Anthony McCall returned to making art in the early 2000s after a 20-year break to further develop his iconic solid light works from the 1970s. Two recent publications offer the greatest vantage yet for understanding the breadth of his art and ideas: *Anthony McCall: 1970s Works on Paper* (Walther König, 2014) an authoritative account of McCall's first decade of work, and the forthcoming *Anthony McCall: Notebooks and Conversations* (Lund Humphries, 2015) which collects 10 years of interviews between the artist, Graham Ellard, and Stephen Johnstone. McCall is a recipient of a Berlin Prize Fellowship Fall 2014, and his retrospective *Anthony McCall: Solid Light Films and Other Works* is currently open at the EYE Film Museum in Amsterdam (September 28 – November 30, 2014). McCall met with Jarrett Earnest in his TriBeCa studio to discuss his origins in performance art, drawing in space, and turning off the lights on moving trains.

Jarrett Earnest (Rail): There is an interesting shift in the titling of the solid light pieces, from matter-of-fact names like “Line Describing a Cone” (1973) to the recent “Between You and I” (2006) and “Coupling” (2009). These new emotionally charged titles seemed so different from the intentions of the '70s film titles. What led to approaching the solid light in this way?

Anthony McCall: There's nearly 30 years between the early films and the recent ones. That's quite a gap—I have early work and late work and nothing in between. One of the reasons I didn't go back any earlier is that I had a visibility problem that I couldn't solve. Without the dust of old loft buildings or the smoke of cigarettes, my early solid-light works were virtually invisible—invisible, that is, until the '90s, when the haze machine was invented. That's when I began to look at the early films again. One of these, *Cone of Variable Volume* (1974), repeatedly expands and contracts—grows larger and smaller. When I looked at this film in the late '90s I was surprised that there was something there that I hadn't noticed when I made it, which was that this 30-foot-long cone of light, floating there in mid-air, in the dark, was quite unmistakably breathing—in and out, in and out. This observation actually gave me a new entry point. I was able to retain all the original ideas of solid light—for instance the re-orientation of the spectator toward the volumetric form in space and away from image projected on the wall—to take all that as a given but with the added idea of representing the

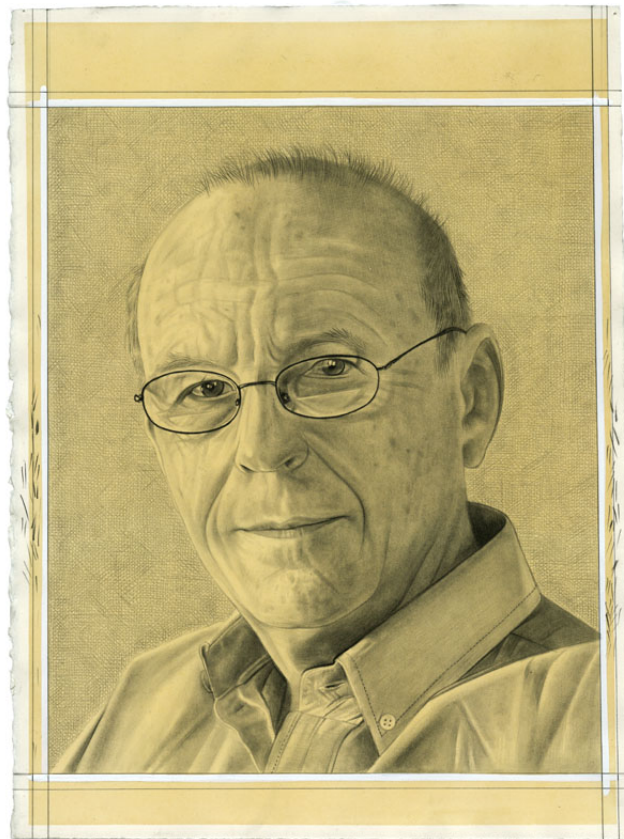
corporeal.

Rail: I want to ask you about solid light as a sculptural experience. When I was looking at Roni Horn's tubs of clear glass I was thinking about the experience of encountering those objects with my body—they are translucent, have a visual continuity between the interior and exterior, and are extremely dense. There's a related but almost opposite experience with solid light: you are presented with a translucent object that you perceive as existing, but it is immaterial. I want to understand the nature of solid light as a physical experience, as a sculptural problem rather than as a visual phenomenon.

McCall: Perhaps the first thing to say about solid light is that it can only be seen in the dark. That is very obvious, but this alone separates it from most sculpture; and psychologically a dark space is highly charged because of our vulnerability within it—the extent of the space and what may lie within it and beyond is unknown. Anything may be lurking in there. Then there is the paradox of solid light: the membranes of light are so palpable that spectators often test them by reaching out to touch them, even though there is only thin air. And yet, the planes of light are not an illusion: they are actually, I might say *physically*, present in three-dimensional space.

Rail: With the vertical projections there are spaces carved out that create a relation between inside and outside. How does the body experience those volumes?

McCall: For the vertical pieces the projector is up on the ceiling, 30 feet up, projecting down onto the floor. You see the projected lines on the floor at the same time that you are facing sheer walls of light that rise far above your head. This produces a roughly conical, tent-like form towering above you with a clear inside and outside. Invariably these forms have apertures, which may suggest entrances, and walls of light that often define separate internal chambers. So the references are architectural as well as sculptural, and looking involves walking into the chambers, standing within them, looking steeply upwards at the volumetric space, and looking down at the lines on the floor that define the base of the form. With most large-scale sculpture, we construct our understanding of the object by shifting around it, and sometimes by going in and out of it. This is certainly true of my solid light objects, but there is an added element: the walls and chambers that define the sculptural object are themselves shifting and changing. The speed of change is very slow, which preserves the sense that this is a sculptural object rather than a piece of cinema.



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.
Inspired by a photo portrait by Owen Keogh.

Rail: What's really great about the *1970s Works on Paper* book is that it shows how the earliest works from '72 and '73 are so clearly involved with performance and conceptual art. "Water Table" (1972) and "Road Work" (1973), for example, look so much like conceptual photography of the time; or films like *Earth Work* (1972) that are performances. I like seeing those trajectories flowing into solid light because it shows you something different about it.

McCall: I became a filmmaker because I felt the need to record these ephemeral events. *Landscape for Fire* (1972), made only a year before *Line Describing Cone*, was my first film. When you look at them as records of performances you see that they are not taped performances; the films are quite specifically films. *Landscape for Fire*, for instance, or *Earth Work*, are in color, and full of separate shots tightly edited together. The time is highly compressed—quite unlike video from the same period, which tended to be based on continuous takes in black and white.

Rail: I read in one interview you said "performance presupposed the problem of documentation," which is very prescient because of the way scholars are trying to talk about the history of performance art, and the distance between the live performance and the photograph.

McCall: For me, one of the problems the *1970s Works on Paper* book presented, when we were putting it together, was not knowing when something on paper was a work of art or when it was something else, like a document. In the end I decided that it wasn't for me to decide and I just put it all in. The difficulty I encountered when I started showing the performance films like *Landscape for Fire* was that you could never escape the problem that the film was a second-hand record: all that happened, happened in the past. The primary event was still the performance itself. This led me to think about the possibility of a film that was itself a primary event, an event that only occurred at the moment of projection. *Line Describing a Cone* was the first piece that came out of this train of thought.

Rail: *Long Film for Ambient Light* (1975) was an empty loft with covered windows and a single bulb, with a chart along the wall framing a specific interval in time. There was a written statement on the wall called "Notes on Duration." In that text you say a "piece of paper on the wall is as much duration as the projection of a film. Its only difference is in its immediate relationship to our perception." How has that engagement with time changed in the new work that enacts looping and long cycles in installations?

McCall: In the '70s, it seemed important to make that point about paper also being a durational event because durational events—anything explicitly time-based—were actively defined as being outside the realm of serious art. Regarding looping and cycles I'd like to suggest a distinction between the two. In my definition, any composed film or video can be looped, whatever its structure. Essentially, you just keep re-playing it. But a cyclical piece is quite different because its internal structure already pre-figures the ongoing repetition of continuous exhibition; it is often hard to tell where it begins and ends because beginning and ending are incompatible with installation structure.

Rail: So, structurally, when you started showing *Line Describing Cone* as an installation in the 2000s, was that a loop or a cycle?

McCall: It was a loop, because *Line Describing Cone* is really a narrative film; it announces its purpose at the beginning and it delivers it: it finishes. When *Into The Light: The Projected Image in American Art 1964–1977* (2001) at the Whitney Museum was being planned, Chrissie Iles and I had a number of discussions as to whether it could be shown as a continuous installation—a format that would best suit museum-exhibition time. In the end I decided it was fine; the later films *Long Film for Four Projectors* (1974), *Four Projected Movements* (1975), and *Long Film for Ambient Light* were all made with an explicitly cyclical structure, which I had evolved precisely with an exploratory, individual visitor in mind, rather than an assembled audience. Actually, after the *Into the Light* exhibition was over, I rather appreciated the fact that I ended up with two completely different ways to show the same film: once-through to an assembled audience, which brings a certain intensity, or as an installation, with individual visitors who come and go and themselves decide how long to stay.



"Five Minutes of Pure Sculpture". Installation view at Nationalgalerie im Hamburger Bahnhof, Museum für Gegenwart, Berlin, 2012. Photo by Sean Gallup, Getty Images. Courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.

Rail: In *Landscape for Fire* and the performance works, what was the context or thinking about performance, before it became more specifically an investigation of film?

McCall: Each fire performance led to the next, throwing up new issues that the next one would address. Looking back, the key thing was coming to understand the relationship between how long something lasts and how it is looked at. The fire performances also enabled me to establish a relationship between staggered time sequences and shifting spatial configurations. In the end, these ideas were all transferred over to the solid light works like *Long Film for Four Projectors*.

Rail: How about works like *Two Minute Drawing* (1974)—could you explain the origins of it and its logic?

McCall: I was circling round these ideas about duration. One of the works was called *Two Laws of Presentation* (1975). It took the form of miniature record cards. The laws are: "the form of attention is a function of the form of attending," and "the form of attending is a function of the duration." I was constructing a scale of how long a performance might last. Five seconds? Five minutes? Five hours? Five days? Five years? And how, as a result, a spectator might approach it. That became my

framework for understanding that the length of something was your first, most important, decision. Everything followed from that.

Two Minute Drawing was a performance done at the Kitchen in 1974, at Jean Dupuy's Soup & Tart. Following a picnic dinner on the floor, there were some 38 two-minute artist performances. My drawing, done at the very end of the evening after timing each performance, was a curved line, the curve of which was determined by those figures (there was a wide range: Charlemagne Palestine's performance lasted only 25 seconds; the longest was Yvonne Rainer's at six minutes. Gordon Matta-Clark was almost the only one who came in at two minutes exactly).

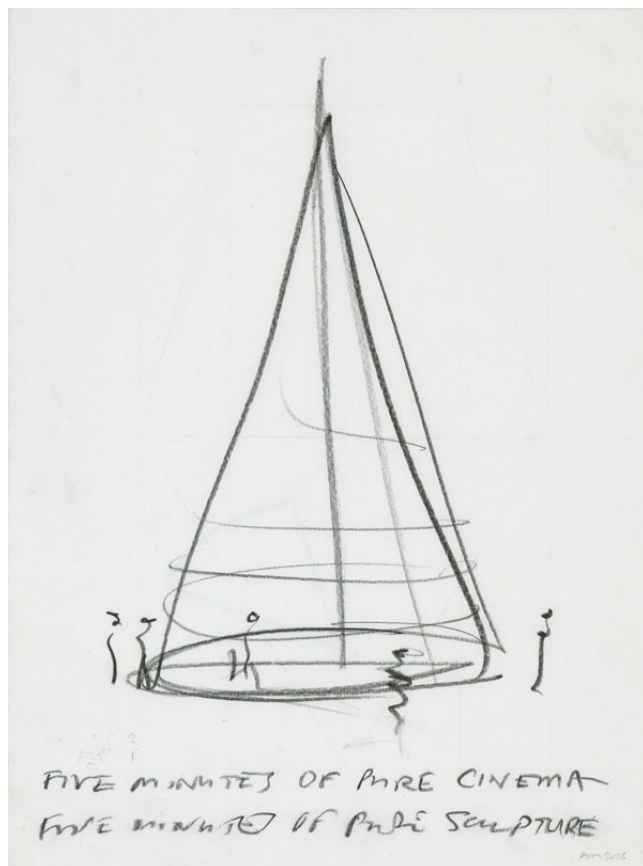
Rail: An interesting concern seems to be the “figure in landscape”—*Landscape for Fire*, *Landscape for White Squares*, etc. In his famous essay on your work George Baker concludes by citing Crary on J.M.W. Turner—talking about light—but is there something larger there about the landscape and its importance in English art and literature? Do you think your growing up in England was important for the trajectory of your work?

McCall: It's a fair question but I don't think I can answer it.

Rail: I was prompted to ask because of your *Found Solid Light Installation* (1973), which seems to point toward an interest in England as a specific geographic and atmospheric situation.

McCall: That found map shows all the lighthouses around the coast of England, and the direction in which they project their beams. I came across it soon after making *Line Describing a Cone* and I recognized it as relevant to what I was thinking about. Of course, I grew up with lighthouses. Every time we went to the sea in the summer, there they were. And mist and fog were simply part of the weather. A few years back I made a proposal for a public piece in Auckland, New Zealand, which relates to these early performances and films. There was an abandoned cylindrical concrete silo on the waterfront; I proposed to make four vertical cuts into its skin, facing the arc of the sun. During the day the silo would become a receiving chamber for a shifting 45-foot-tall shaft of light, made visible by a haze machine. At night, from the top of the silo, a single, slowly rotating beam of light would be projected out across the harbor. The piece would be called *Light House*.

Rail: Was *Landscape for White Squares* (1972) a performance?



"Five Minutes of Pure Cinema, Five Minutes of Pure Sculpture" (2005). Courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.

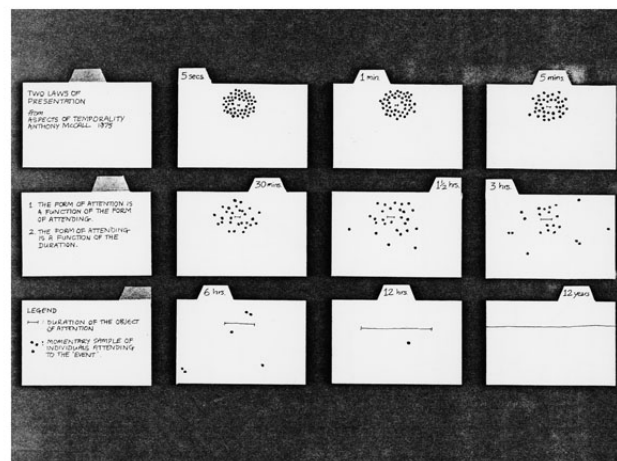
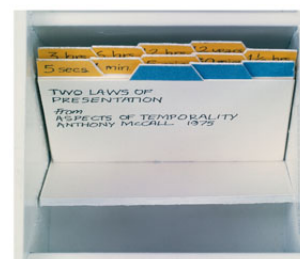
McCall: Yes. At the time I was quite interested in the idea that since performances were mostly seen through the lens of a camera, it seemed appropriate to therefore *make* them, compose them, through the lens of the camera—in effect collapsing the documentation into the making of the work. All those pieces came out of that: *Water Table*, *Road Work*, etc. *Landscape for White Squares* was a series of still photographs; it was also a short film that was shot early on a January morning on a frozen plowed field covered in mist; the white squares gradually emerge from the mist.

Rail: Sounds very romantic. The other piece that comes toward the end of the book is *Four Figures* (1975) in which you are exploring the figure relationships of men and women clothed and un-clothed from the famous Manet, “Le Déjeuner-sur l’herbe” (1862 to 63).

McCall: For that project I had four models. I photographed each of them individually, each in turn adopting the four poses in the painting, once naked, once dressed. Then there followed an elaborate relay of processes using photomontage: printing each of the individual figures, cutting them out, reassembling them exhaustively to produce different group combinations, and re-photographing and printing the results.

Rail: One of the reasons *Four Figures* is interesting to me now is that it seems to have something to do with the recent solid light films, the way they are about interrelating multiple bodies in systematic permutations. Of course part of the subtext of my wanting to understand your engagement with performance is that you had a long relationship with Carolee Schneemann, starting in 1971. Your art and hers are the kind that are always separated art historically, but I think, in fact, once you start engaging with the deeper explorations of the work they are very sympathetic and revealing of one another. Almost all the work represented in the *1970s Works on Paper* was made while you were with Carolee, and I imagine involved in a context that was deeply engaging questions of embodiment and what became performance art as a set of ideas and practices.

McCall: Yes, that seems right, though at the time our personal aesthetic styles seemed to be almost diametrically opposed. Carolee had done *Site* (1964) with Robert Morris; of course, my project must have had something to do with that earlier one! At the time I was very taken with Happenings, Fluxus, and Judson, so we talked about these events and performances a lot. I also read whatever I could find on the subject—I was particularly interested in Alan Kaprow, George Brecht, Yvonne Rainer, and John Cage.



“Two Laws of Presentation” (1975). Part of Hubert Distel’s, “Museum of Drawers,” Kunsthau Zurich. Courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.

Rail: I imagine that John Cage and Happenings were where your performance scores come from—your works were conceived of as scores?

McCall: The works were conceived of as performances but the way I developed them was through score-like drawings, and for those I found graph paper essential. It is interesting, when you look at a lot of work by conceptual artists in this period everyone used graph paper—why is that?

Rail: Graph paper, index cards, typewriters, and black-and-white photos are the aesthetics of conceptual art.

McCall: For me it was obvious since the fire pieces were based on counting and on spatial grids. Graph paper made plotting the co-ordinates very simple. But the plotting and drawing was a working-out process: I didn't conceive of the scores as things in themselves until after the performance was realized. Then I would often make a final, formal version that I suppose completed the piece. Theoretically, that final score could also serve as the blueprint for a future realization.



"Landscape for Fire II" (1972). Performance view. North Weald, England. Photo by David Kilburn. Courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.

Rail: In the times I've experienced your installations, they are so clear and crystalline. I think people not having access to them for a generation, and only having recourse to a few photographs and written descriptions—both of which served a strong agenda of structural film—strongly shaped the scholarly understanding of the films which might be very different if there was a broader continual encounter with them as they were installed in the 1970s.

McCall: Perfectly true; avant-garde cinema was a resilient, maverick culture with strong views. It also had different faces and structural film was just one of those. Though both Michael Snow and Paul Sharits had an exhibition at the Bykert Gallery, the work was mostly shown at downtown avant-garde not-for-profits like Millennium Film Workshop and Collective for Living Cinema, and the audience was largely other filmmakers. So the work was not widely seen. The writing about it tended to be quite theoretical or it justified the work on political grounds, but pleasure was a very tricky subject and rarely mentioned.

Rail: Talking about pleasure, there were of course screenings in which you and Carolee were a double bill.

McCall: Yes, we did one at the London Filmmaker's Co-op in the mid-'70s: the first half was Carolee, she did *Up To and Including Her Limits*, which at that point was a super-8 double-screen projection and live performance with her suspended from a rope. I did the four *Cone* films after that. It was a good double program.

Rail: When I look at things like *Circulation Figures* (2011) I see how they relate to her work and what she was doing in the '60s.

McCall: Certainly, in my use of newspaper strewn on the floor, that's probably right.

Rail: But it's also concerned with the perception of space and time and the body in the landscape. What I like about some of the early descriptions of *Line Describing Cone* is that you talk about how important the relationship of the body in space is to the projection. The body as a thing we reference is pretty vague, what did that mean to you at that time?

McCall: It meant something quite literal: that the projected circle on the wall would be about the scale of the outstretched arms and legs of a Vitruvian Man—at the wall, your fingers could just reach the skin of the cone. And the projection throw—the length of the cone from projector to wall—would be about three times that distance. Early on, the film was visible because of the dust in the air and cigarette smoke, and it was harder to see than it is today with the use of a haze machine. This fact placed a limit on how big the form might be. Over the past 10 years, thanks to the haze machine and to the fact that digital projectors have grown brighter, I have been able to slightly increase the length and the breadth of the cone, but the outstretched body, somewhere inside that cone, is still the reference, and that sets important limits on scale.

With the '70s solid light works, there was the two-dimensional line on the wall, and there was the corresponding volumetric form in space: a circle on the wall, producing a cone in space. The forms were so simple that you could turn your back on the drawing and only attend to the volumetric object. Over the past 10 years, though, as the scale has increased I have been able to work with more complex line drawing. This means that for the spectator there is necessarily more back and forth—looking at and comparing the line drawing on the wall and the form in space. For the visitor in one of the horizontal installations, this involves a lot of turning around and turning back, constantly shifting between two dimensions and three. In the recent *Face to Face* series I have built this difficulty into the installed pieces by utilizing projectors and screens facing in opposite directions. One of these was in my most recent Sean Kelly exhibition in January 2013. When you were inside the volumetric form of one, you could simultaneously read the two-dimensional drawing of the other. In a way this has given the drawing back its central place in the installations.

Rail: Do you think it is productive to think of them foremost as drawings?

McCall: No, I don't think so, because that leaves out the sheer sculptural presence of the planes of light and the three-dimensional volumes they describe. But the drawing is central: after all, it does actually produce the sculptural volumes. And drawing features in the production process from start to finish: from the earliest perspectival renderings, to the two-dimensional storyboards, through the programming algorithms, right up to the actual projected installation, there is a line drawing right

there.

Rail: Do you consider pieces like *Landscape for Fire* drawings—in space or in the landscape?

McCall: If you were watching one of the fire pieces, you would extrapolate straight lines from the joining up of the individual points of fire, much like you do with landing lights on an airport runway. This was the dynamic in many of the fire pieces, with the configurations within the 36-point grid constantly changing as new lines were ignited and previously lit lines allowed to die. But the physicality of the event and location I think overwhelms the sense of these pieces as drawings.



"Four Figures" (1974). Courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.

Rail: In the forthcoming *Notebooks and Conversations* book there is a reference to Warhol's *Empire* (1964). That makes a lot of sense in terms of duration. Thinking of *Four Figures*, and of the sensual aspects of solid light, one could draw a connection to another Warhol film, *Kiss* (1963)—kissing and sex are always in the present tense, and you have this interface between two people; from there you have a compelling way to look at the recent solid light installations.

McCall: That is a very unexpected comparison! But you are right. Many of the recent solid light works enact a process of exchange between two parties. The works include *Between You and I; You and I Horizontal* (2005); *Coupling*; *Meeting You Halfway* (2009); *Throes* (2011); *Face to Face* (2013); and others.

Rail: Compared to the precision of the recent works there seems like a great tenderness in the hand-drawnness of the '70s *Cone* films, which were supposed to be the height of austere purity, but looking back they seem very human.

McCall: The digital world has made the analog world look very, very handmade. A good illustration of this would be my 16mm-film *Line Describing a Cone*, made in 1973, and the digital remake of the same piece in 2010, which was named *Line Describing a Cone 2.0*. The original started with a white gouache line drawing of a half circle, which was filmed under a 16mm-animation camera. *Line Describing a Cone 2.0* was made using digital animation techniques. The re-make was an exact rendering of the original idea; in fact, more exact than the 1973 original. The original has all kinds of imperfections, since my animation abilities were rather un-schooled. The first showing of the digital version was at Tate Modern, alongside the original film version. It was very clear how different they were. With the film version, the 16mm-projector produces an image that has a slight shake to it; the edges of the frame are rather woolly, the thickness of the line varies, there is a passage where the two halves of the circle fail to meet, and over the years the original had become worn, producing on the

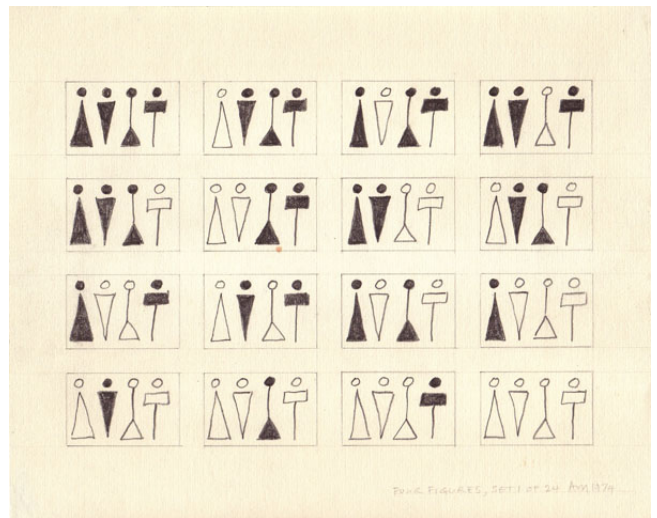
prints a patina of small scratches. The digital re-make was rock-steady, with the edges of the frame being sharp and rectangular, and the thickness of the line and its motion were perfectly constant. So visually they were very different, but their conceptual DNA was identical. In the end what was interesting to me was that as a work of art being looked at by an assembled audience, the two films, despite their visual differences, worked in exactly the same way. But it is beginning to look like the difference between film and digital will continue to increase. For instance, as our eyes adjust to increasingly brighter, sharper, digital projectors and screens, my solid light works on film by comparison will presumably seem dimmer and even more hand-made than they do now.

Rail: One interesting discovery in this book was your work *Darkness* (1972) which made me think of the piece that Martin Creed received a Turner Prize for in *Work No. 227* (2001)—turning the lights on and off. How did you conceive and execute it?

McCall: There was a festival in the U.K. in 1972 called ICES: International Carnival of Experimental Sound. Cage and Tudor came over and did *HPSCHD* (1969)—which was an important performance for me. My *Landscape for Fire II*, performed out on the North Weald on a disused World War II airfield, was one of the festival events. Towards the end, the festival booked an entire private train that left Kings Cross early in the morning for Edinburgh where the Edinburgh Festival was in progress. We returned that night. On board the train on the way up there were many performances—Carolee for instance, did a piece on roller-skates—it was a fantastic and international group: artists, composers, musicians, performers, writers, you name it. I was going to do a fire performance when I got up to Edinburgh but when we arrived we met with the fire brigade who said we couldn't, it being such a spontaneous festival that no one had thought to check. So I improvised a new performance called *Smoke Without Fire* (1972) in the basement yard of Ricky DeMarco Gallery. My piece *Darkness* happened on the train back. The score read: “At a single point during the journey back to London, after dark, all the lights of the train are switched off for a period of three and a half minutes.” However, on board the train on the way up, I had discovered that there was no master switch to turn off all the lights at once. So I turned them off, and then on again a few minutes later, one carriage at a time.

Rail: Do you feel that there have been persistent misunderstandings of any aspects of your work?

McCall: It was more a case of challenging material circumstances. In the '70s and well beyond, there was simply no way to make a living from the kind of work I was doing. But that in turn was connected to the limits that both criticism and the market placed on what was considered art. The profound shift that has occurred over the last two decades is the absorption by the art world of durational work, whether it be performance, film, sound, video, or installation. In the '70s I was a



"Four Figures" (1974). Courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.

part of what was called expanded cinema. In retrospect, expanded cinema looks now to be a mere controlled explosion compared to the big-bang of the digital revolution. It's not just the art world itself that has changed, it's that the whole idea of cinema has fragmented, and one of the many new places it has lodged is inside the art world.

CONTRIBUTOR

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JARRETT EARNEST is an artist and scholar currently living in Brooklyn.

RECOMMENDED ARTICLES

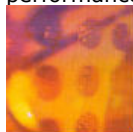
IN CONVERSATION



JONAH BOKAER with Nancy Dalva

SEPT 2012 | DANCE

How wonderful to be here with you in this marvelous new building, Jonah, to discuss your plans for the inaugural performances. How did *ECLIPSE* come about?



DREAM REELER

Jud Yalkut (1938-2013)

by Gregory Zinman

SEPT 2013 | FILM

In a 1969 interview with the psychedelic light show outfit Pablo for the New York underground magazine *Changes*, filmmaker Jud Yalkut was asked by his interview subjects about his own work—more specifically, the installation art of the commune-dwelling multimedia group, USCO, for which Yalkut made some of his most beautifully disorienting films.

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