

Anthony McCall's Solid Light Works and the Afterlives of Spectatorship¹

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1. Although McCall's solid light artworks have historically been understood as "films"—by critics and scholars as well as the artist himself—this essay is primarily concerned with his experiments with solid light in the last two decades. In this context, McCall has made it clear that he has come to prefer the term "works," which conveys "some idea of an installation, while remaining usefully vague about the actual medium" (Anthony McCall, correspondence with the author, July 2019). The terms are used accordingly throughout this essay, not least because it argues for distinctive shifts in McCall's solid light practices between the 1970s and in recent years.

2. Hal Foster, "Light Play," in *Anthony McCall: Breath* (Milan: Hangar Bicocca, 2009), 9.

3. Michelle Menzies, "On Cinema as Media: Archeology, Experience, Digital Aesthetics" (unpublished Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2016), 6-7. I thank Dan Morgan of the University of Chicago's Department of Cinema and Media Studies for introducing me to Menzies' work.

4. Anthony McCall, "Line Describing a Cone and Related Films," *October* 103 (Winter 2003): 46.

5. It must be admitted that McCall's own statements regarding the film at the time likely facilitated such a reception. In 1974, for instance, he commented that *Line Describing a Cone* "refers to nothing beyond...real time. It contains no illusion. It is a primary experience, not secondary; i.e., the space is real, not referential; the time is real, not referential" (quoted in McCall, "Line Describing a Cone and Related Films," 43).

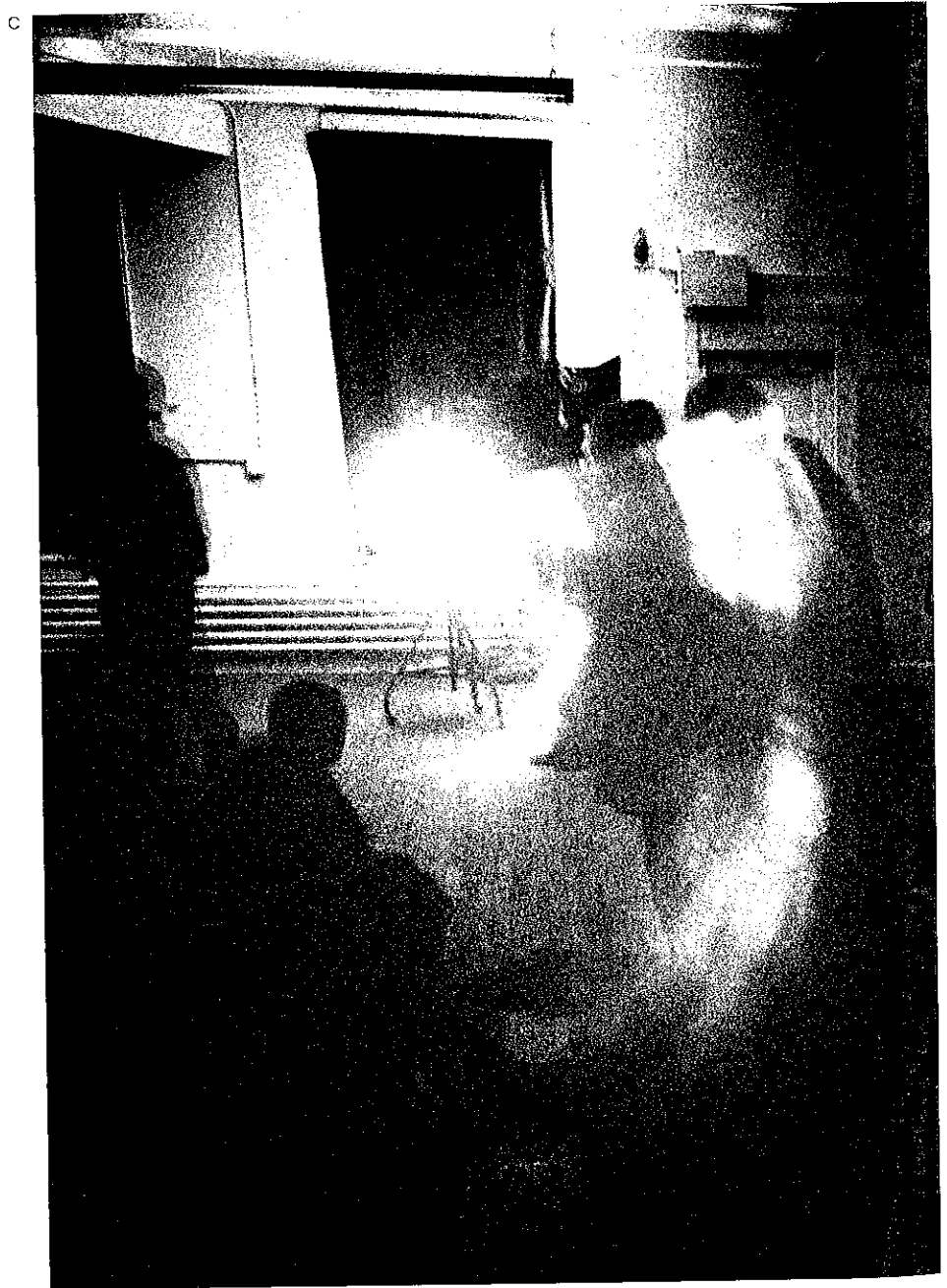
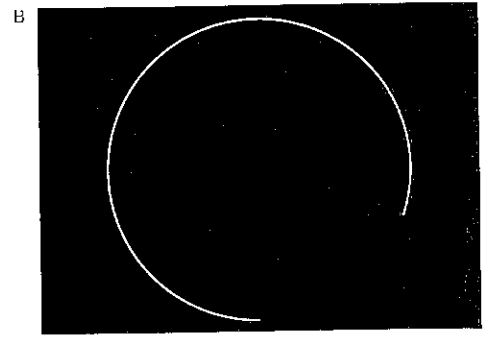
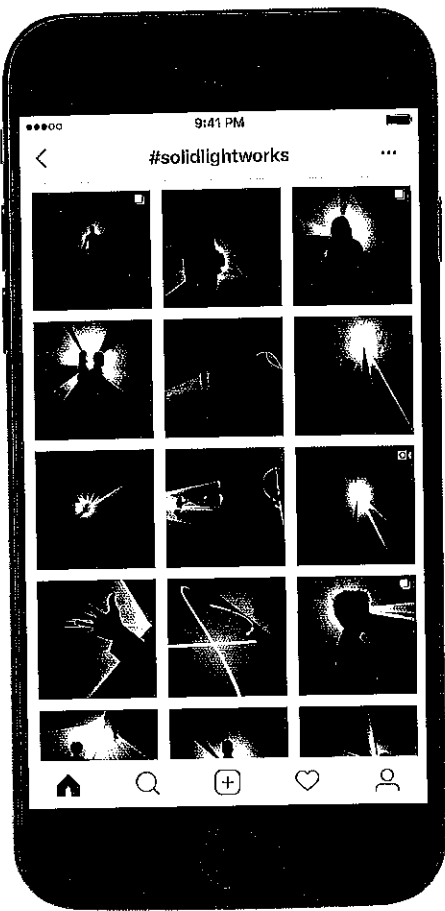
6. *Ibid.*

7. Although Greenberg's thesis of artistic modernism is more nuanced than is ordinarily supposed, generally speaking it rests on a clear delineation of medium-specific ontologies. This is most cogently outlined in the essay "Modernist Painting" (1965), reprinted in Francis Francina and Charles Harrison, eds., *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology* (London and New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 5-10.

Scrolling through the Instagram archive of visitor photographs from Anthony McCall's 2018 exhibition at Brooklyn's Pioneer Works (hashtag #solidlightworks), one conclusion appears inescapable: everyone wants to touch the art (fig. 64.A). But, of course, there is nothing "there" to grasp. For nearly half a century, the paradoxes that constitute the sensuous appeals of McCall's "solid light" artworks have driven critics to seek refuge in ambiguity. Hal Foster, for instance, wrote of 1973's *Line Describing a Cone* that "you cannot help but touch the light as though it were a solid and investigate the cone as if it were a sculpture..."² More recently, Michelle Menzies has identified the "volumetric character" and "counterintuitive permeability" of McCall's late-career vertical light works as crucial elements that compel haptical responses.³ By the very nature of such paradoxes, it has long been held that one simply must be physically present to experience these works in their phenomenological plentitude. The afterlives of the Pioneer Works exhibition, however, unfolding across the Instagram archive as well as the present volume—conceived as an artist's book rather than an exhibition catalogue—call this conventional wisdom into question.

McCall has been quite clear about the fact that "the body is the important measure" in his creative praxis.⁴ His assertions notwithstanding, early critical responses to his work followed rather different lines of thought. The radical austerity of *Line Describing a Cone*—a moving-image work by a British artist who had been operating within the orbit of the London Film-makers Co-operative and the Structural approaches with which its various members were concerned—proved irresistible to contemporary criticism, which embraced the artwork as a modernist distillation of the bare ontology of cinema: light, space, and duration.⁵ Understood thus as a materialist deconstruction of cinema that dislodged the hegemony of narrativity by privileging, instead, cinema's material assemblage (whirring projector, the "projected light beam itself," and, of course, the architectural space of projection),⁶ McCall's thirty-minute moving-image work proved attractive to all who, enthralled by Clement Greenberg's influential formulation of modernism in the arts, were vexed by cinema's uncertain position within that scheme.⁷ Here, it seemed (at the time), was the definitive modernist exposé of the literal machinations of cinema (figs. 64.B-C).

Looking back, it's easy to see why such deconstructive readings of the solid light films—McCall made a series of similarly austere, geometrical artworks through the early 1970s before interrupting his artistic career for some twenty



8. It is striking to note the prevalence of geometric considerations in McCall's work of this period. This is evident in the titles of the works: *Partial Cone*, *Conical Solid*, *Cone of Variable Volume* (all 1974). And, of course, there is the previous year's *Line Describing a Cone*.

9. McCall had explored continuous-installation formats in the mid-1970s. But it was only in 2001, when Whitney Museum of American Art curator Chrissie Iles included *Line Describing a Cone* as part of the groundbreaking exhibition *Into the Light: The Projected Image in American Art, 1964–1977*, that an early solid light film was finally exhibited as a continually looped moving-image installation.

10. These works are *Long Film for Four Projectors* (1974), *Four Projected Movements* (1975), and *Long Film for Ambient Light* (1975). McCall groups them together with the early solid light films in "Line Describing a Cone and Related Films," 56.

11. Foster, "Light Play," 12.

12. The vertical projections, in particular, invite rereading the solid light films as more concerned with embodied spectatorship. The Pioneer Works installation, which presented four of these works alongside two horizontal projections (though not including *Line Describing a Cone*), is especially conducive to comparative readings.

13. McCall has on several occasions offered detailed accounts of how the solid light works, both horizontal (and analog) and vertical (and digital) began life in the form of hand drawings prior to being either photographed one frame at a time or else digitally animated according to a precise "score" that determines the progression of the piece. See "*Line Describing a Cone and Related Films*"; Jonathan Walley and Anthony McCall, "An Interview with Anthony McCall," *The Velvet Light Trap* 54:1 (2004): 65–75; and Anthony McCall: *Elements for a Retrospective, 1972–1979/2003–*, ed. Olivier Michelin (Musée de Rochechouart and Serpentine Gallery, 2007).

14. McCall, "Line Describing a Cone and Related Films," 50.

A. Selection of images posted to Instagram during *Anthony McCall: Solid Light Works*, Pioneer Works, New York, 2018.

B. Anthony McCall, *Line Describing a Cone*, 1973. Frame from the twenty-fourth minute.

C. Peter Moore, *Anthony McCall's Line Describing a Cone*, 1973. Installation view, Artists Space, New York, 1974.

years—remained dominant until quite recently.⁸ These films, when exhibited, were shown under theatrical conditions of display, i.e., as singular events of definite duration.⁹ Three later solid light films, identified by McCall as constituting part of a "series of seven" that began with *Line Describing a Cone*, experimented variously with film-less projection (using ambient light instead) and duration (stretching "screening" time, for one piece, to a full twenty-four hours).¹⁰ But it was the early solid light films' mathematical precision, made palpable in the geometry of their projection—both the figures traced on-screen and the volumes described by the projected light beams—that captured the critical imagination, facilitating their popularization as rigorous critiques of cinematic illusion.

And yet, the body. Perceptive critics noted, contra the above, that McCall's solid light films were not so much about the "essence of film" as about acknowledging that "mediums are...a matrix of conventions and conditions that are not only subject to technological transformation, but largely defined in differential relation to other arts."¹¹ It is precisely this horizon that is opened up by the solid light artworks—a horizon even more clearly perceptible with the vertical light works, which simultaneously evoke McCall's earliest films and yet remain clearly distinct. Not only does this invite critical reassessments of the McCall oeuvre, but also a rethinking of the relation of the physical body, the spectatorial self, to these projections. Specifically, when considered in the larger scheme of McCall's concerns prior even to *Line Describing a Cone* and those suggested by his recent vertical installations, the solid light works constitute a sustained investigation of the embodied performance of spectatorship.¹²

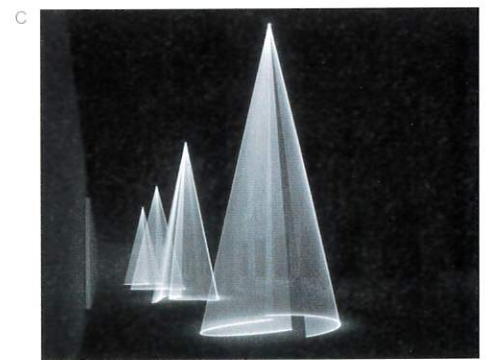
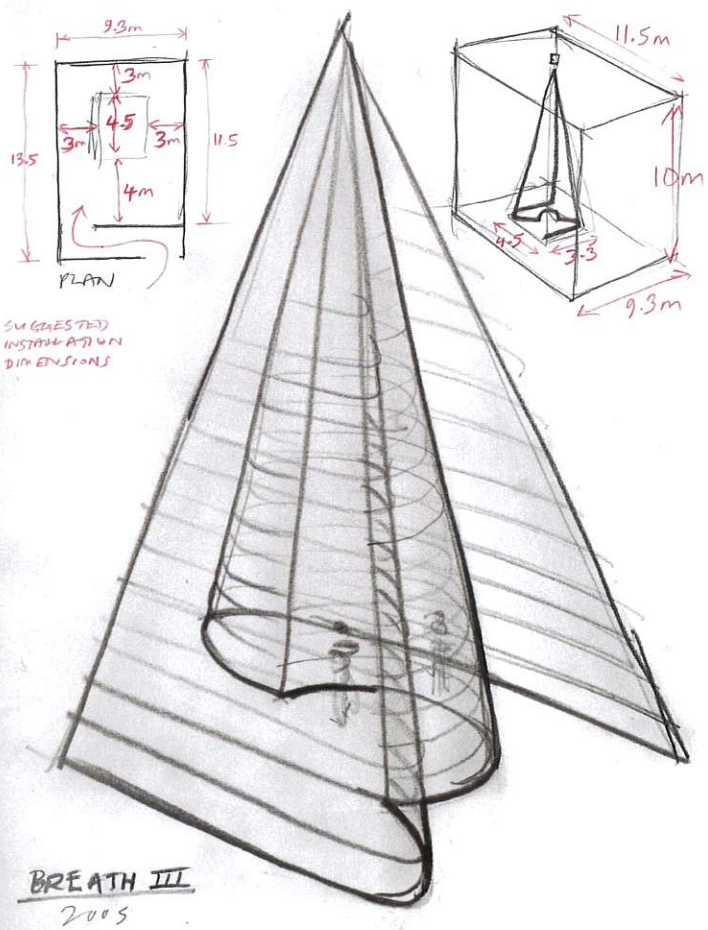
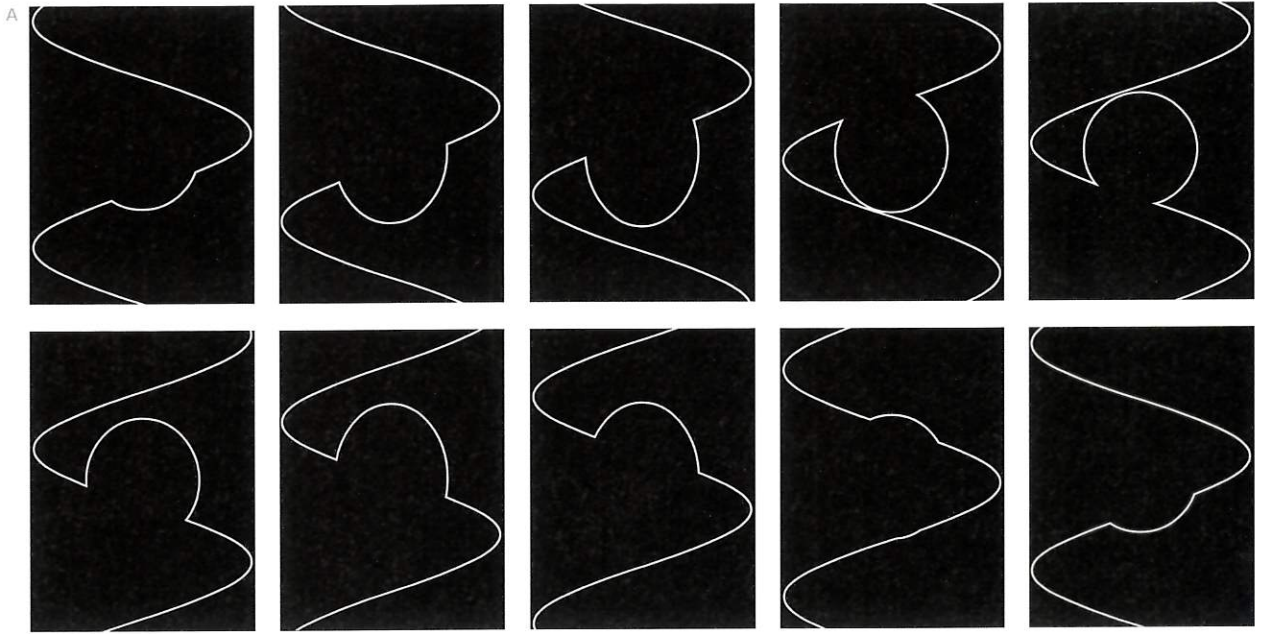
Begin, if you will, by considering how McCall has titled his creations, these projections of "solid" light that invite, yet elude, our touch. The horizontality of the early 1970s projections (another sense, aside from the defined temporality of their screenings, in which they are justifiably "cinematic") does not immediately disclose the fact that, as McCall has consistently asserted, "the body is the important measure" in their conceptualization. Their titles—*Conical Solid* (1974), *Partial Cone* (1974), and so on—recall their origins in techniques of line drawing.¹³ McCall's comments on these films, too, evoke abstract explorations of the properties of geometrical figures. He has described *Cone of Variable Volume* (1974), for example, as "a conical form, which expanded and contracted in volume..." Or take *Conical Solid*: "a flat blade of light rotating from a fixed central axis."¹⁴ Despite these and other formal aspects of his early practice that

have been recycled to the point of canonized wisdom over the intervening decades, McCall has remained attuned to the ways in which even the early films intervene within the field of spectatorial relations. Discussing the horizontal films, for instance, he has remarked on how the almost-solidity of the projected volume appears to vary in direct proportion to the number of assembled spectators, as well as noting that the aleatory spatial configurations of spectators that accompany each projection event (continuous or temporally-defined) reorient the screenings as “a type of participatory performance.”¹⁵

It is this latter aspect, namely the affinities between the solid light artworks and the history of performance and live art in Western modernism, that is now being rediscovered. Reviewing *Anthony McCall: Solid Light Works* (Pioneer Works, NY, 2018), I noted that the exemplary architecture of installation and near-unprecedented accompaniment of what had historically been silent (that is, aside from projector noise) events by musical performances forcefully repositioned these moving-image works within a genealogy of artistic modernism that owes most strongly to the work of John Cage.¹⁶ It seems McCall himself has been thinking not just about his continuing creative output, but more specifically the ways in which his unique contributions to art—intersecting as they do histories of sculpture, cinema, drawing, and performance—are being historicized. Witness the shift marked by the titles of his solid light creations since the turn of the millennium. At Pioneer Works, visitors experienced the vertical projections *Breath (III)* (2005), *Meeting You Halfway* (2009), *You and I* (2010), *Skirt (III)* (2010), as well as two horizontal pieces: *You and I (Horizontal)* (2005) and *Doubling Back* (2003) (fig. 67.C).

Gone is the insistence on abstract geometric configurations; by their very titles, these and other recent works are far more thoroughly immersed in corporeal subjectivity. Interested in recent years in what he calls a “traveling wave,”¹⁷ McCall has created monumental (the vertical works are each ten meters tall) projections, the movements traced by which are “fluid and continuous,” possessing “distinctly figural [qualities],” and thus “reminiscent of the movement of the body, especially slow movement...”¹⁸ The dramatically increased complexity of these waveforms contrasts with the relatively simple geometry of the horizontal films of the 1970s. Most visitors can guess at the eventual culmination of *Line Describing a Cone*—if the title doesn’t immediately give the game away—well before the projection concludes. But such extrapolations are rarely possible with the vertical works, the minutely shifting orientations of which

15. *Ibid.*, 44–45.
 16. Swagato Chakravorty, “The Primary Event was the Performance”: Anthony McCall’s Play with Light,” *The Brooklyn Rail* (March 2018), <https://brooklynrail.org/2018/03/film/The-Primary-Event-was-the-Performance-Antony-McCalls-Play-with-Light>. In my review, I argue that McCall’s interests in problems of “notation, spatial volume, and the body,” which were central to his practice prior to the solid light works, place him closer to performance art than to histories of cinema. He has, in almost every recorded interview, at some point referred to his early performance work, which shared a great deal with the experiments then being undertaken in the United States by Carolee Schneemann, Allan Kaprow, Simone Forti, Yvonne Rainer, Merce Cunningham, John Cage, and the larger Judson Dance Theater collective. Until recently, however, the early performance pieces and McCall’s affinities with Cagean modernism have rarely been discussed in relation to his later moving-image works.
 17. McCall defines this as “a form...somewhere between the circle and the straight line... essentially a curved line that repeatedly reverses its curve along a straight axis.” Translated into three-dimensional space, variations in amplitude produce “an undulating triangular plane...a ‘traveling wave’” (Walley and McCall, “An Interview with Anthony McCall,” 71).
 18. *Ibid.*
 A. Anthony McCall. *Breath (III)*, 2005. Footprint sequence, 2012.
 B. Anthony McCall. *Breath (III)*, 2005. Installation drawing, 2015. Pencil on paper.
 C. Anthony McCall. From front to back: *Meeting You Halfway*, 2009, *Breath (III)*, 2005, *You and I (II)*, 2010, *Skirt (III)*, 2010. Installation view, Pioneer Works, New York, 2018.



tend to confound attempts at anticipating their progression. And they all begin life conceptualized as cyclical structures,¹⁹ where “permutation rather than narrative” enables the projection to create what McCall calls an “extended present tense.”²⁰ As McCall remarks in his conversation with David Grubbs in the present volume, the objective here is that “the end of one cycle is indistinguishable from the beginning of the next.”²¹ In other words, rather than simply beginning, ending, and beginning again, the solid light works since 2003 seem to morph without end, transitioning continuously.

The use of digital projection for these recent works marks another crucial move away from the exhibition contexts of the 1970s. In fact, this shift has had an unexpected consequence. Unlike the analog projectors that powered the early solid light films, digital projectors are almost silent. Partly in order to compensate for this, McCall experimented—in an early version of *Leaving*—with a foghorn-driven three-dimensional sonic field that gradually asserted its presence as the projected visuals faded into nothingness. Experiments with sonic accompaniment and acoustical fields aren’t entirely new in McCall’s career. An untitled stereo piece from 1972, which was never installed, comprised two sine tones originating at points on the auditory spectrum outside of human hearing range. As one tone ascended in pitch, the other descended, the two tones crossing over at the center of their frequency range. Another sound work, begun in 1972, started out as *White Noise Installation*. Here, McCall set in motion a mass of white noise, which moved slowly and repeatedly down a long exhibition space (figs. 69.A–B). The original tape for this got lost at some point, and the work would not see the light of day until it was remade—this time using five tracks and five speakers—in 2013. It has since been exhibited as *Traveling Wave* (1972/2013).²²

Borne by the strains of sound, then, and aided by the architectural scale of the vertical projections, the sensing body that was always at the core of Anthony McCall’s practice is emphasized as never before. The *Four Simultaneous Soloists* performances that accompanied—and I would argue *structured*—the Pioneer Works show marked one of the few occasions any sort of musical performance has aired during the exhibition of a solid light work (fig. 70.A).²³ Elsewhere in this book, McCall and Grubbs treat the organization of *Four Simultaneous Soloists* in fascinating depth, so I shall not rehearse its specifics here. What’s crucial is that, as Grubbs notes, these are not works that “need musical accompaniment.”²⁴ So what, precisely, do the solid

19. In correspondence, it’s clear that McCall had become fascinated with the idea of cyclical form by the mid-1970s. He mentions Gertrude Stein’s notion of the “continuous present,” which appears in her 1925–6 essay “Composition as Explanation.” It’s quite likely that the shift toward cyclical form evident in McCall’s solid light works after the first four *Cone* films was motivated, at least in part, by his reading of Stein. McCall’s return to solid light works in the last two decades continues to explore cyclical form(s) (Anthony McCall, correspondence with the author, February 2019).

20. Walley and McCall, “An Interview with Anthony McCall,” 69.

21. “Anthony McCall and David Grubbs in Conversation,” 28.

22. McCall, correspondence with the author. The first exhibition of *Traveling Wave* took place in New Haven at the Yale University School of Art’s 32 Edgewood Gallery, January 8–February 6, 2014.

23. See “Anthony McCall and David Grubbs in Conversation,” 38.

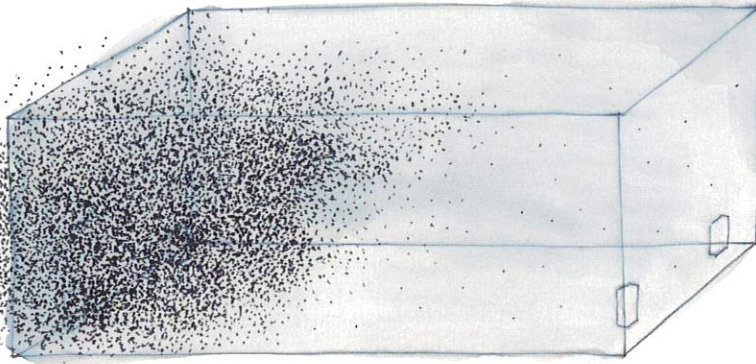
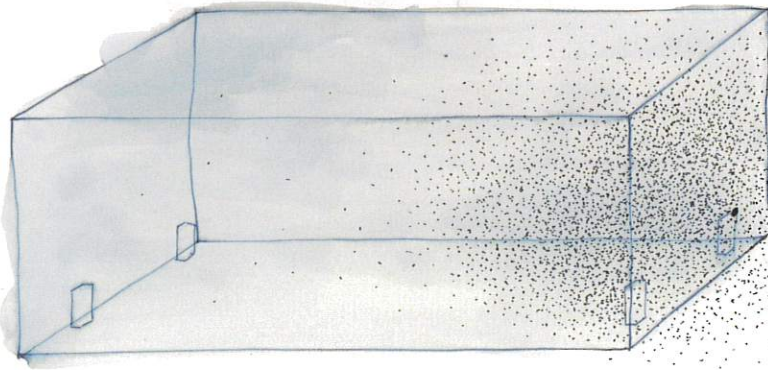
24. *Ibid.*, 42.

A. Anthony McCall. *White Noise Installation. Surge, in One Direction along One Axis*, 1972. Ink on paper.

B. Anthony McCall. *Traveling Wave*, 1972/2013. Installation view, Yale University 32 Edgewood Gallery, New Haven, 2014.

White noise installation

Surge, in one direction
along one axis.
2 track tape, 4 speakers

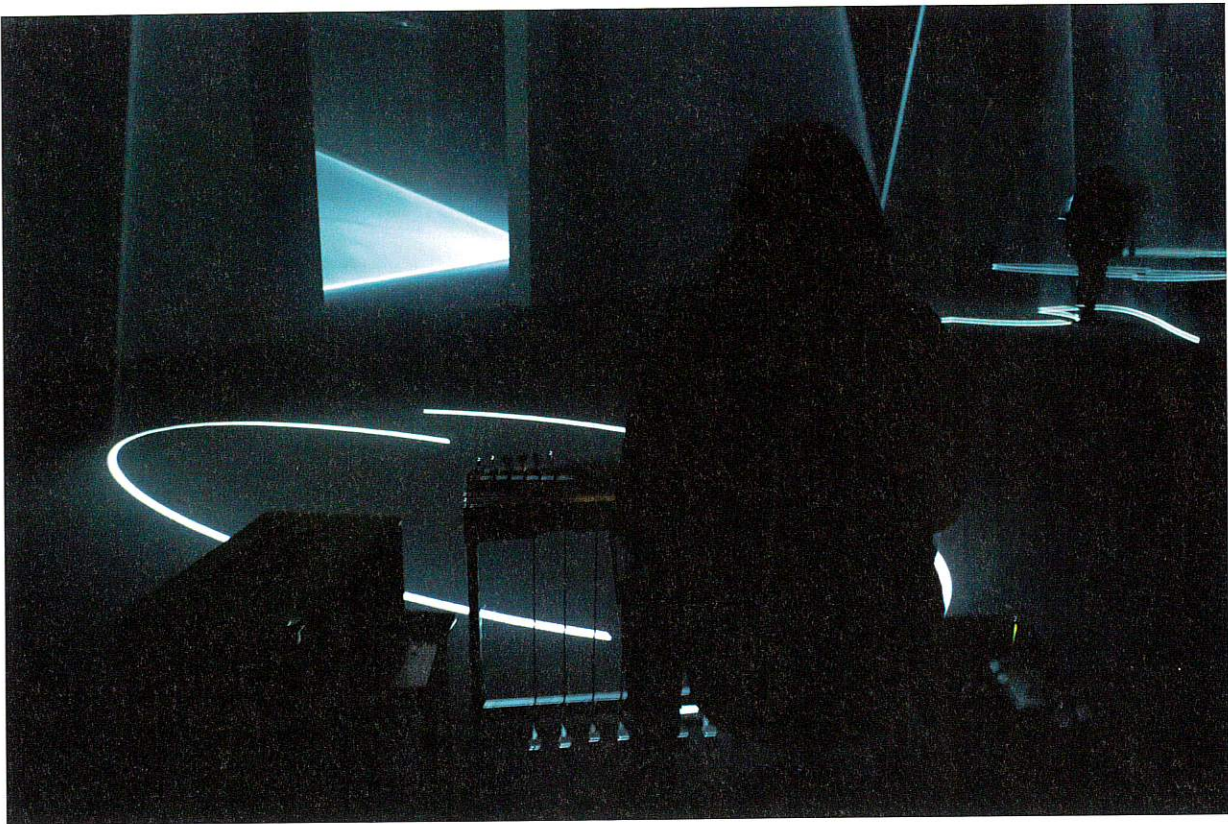


Anderssen, Michael April 1973

A



B



A



B

25. The work was presented as part of the International Carnival of Experimental Sound (ICES 72) on August 13, 1972.

26. For a more detailed discussion of this crucial work by Cage, see Branden W. Joseph's introduction to this book.

27. McCall, "Line Describing a Cone and Related Films," 60.

28. *Ibid.*, 62.

A. Susan Alcorn during rehearsal for *Four Simultaneous Soloists*, Pioneer Works, New York, February 2, 2018.

B. Visitors to *Anthony McCall: Solid Light Works*, Pioneer Works, New York, 2018.

light works gain in such a situation? And how does the expansion of the exhibition, tracked through its documentary afterlives on Instagram, or via this artist's book, affect the conditions of spectatorship and reception that have typically been associated with McCall's projections?

An answer to the first question is perhaps best formulated by recalling McCall's various acknowledgments over the decades of his keen interest in, and the influence exerted upon him by, the multimedia experiments of John Cage and his numerous collaborators. For instance, McCall recalls having attended several of Cage's performances across London and New York throughout the seventies, in particular *HPSCHD* (1967-69; McCall attended a version presented at London's Roundhouse in 1972).²⁵ In this piece, Cage had arranged seven harpsichords evenly spaced around the perimeter of a circular space approximately sixty feet across. Each instrument was played by a different musician, performing a distinct part. Audience members, free to circulate about the space, in effect constructed their own symphony on the move. Aside from this basic acoustical setup, Cage's staging of *HPSCHD* also included a large number of slide and film projectors, as well as tape recorders.²⁶ Altogether, it was an immersive multimedia event. McCall remembers "standing at the very center of the circle, finding the place where all the different pieces being played merged into one, rapturous cacophony."²⁷ I am struck, however, by McCall's precise identification of what might be considered the central ethos motivating much of Cage's work: "integrat[ing] different classes of events, be they images, sounds, music, actions, objects, or language, within a temporal structure based on principles other than those of literary narrative."²⁸ The lessons McCall adapted from Cage and his circle resonate across his practice, but rarely have they been foregrounded as prominently as in the Pioneer Works exhibition.

Far from merely adding an acoustical dimension to the "extended present" that one experiences when encountering a solid light work, the complexities of sonic interplay that variously negotiated, accompanied, or responded to the unfolding of the luminous projections serve instead to decisively move McCall's work (back) toward a Cagean genealogy of the arts. The powerful *shaping* role played by sound in the Pioneer Works installation is equally evident in the obvious antinomy present in the juxtaposition of "simultaneous" and "soloist(s)." And yet if the opening-onto of the solid light works toward sound makes clearer the affinities between McCall's practice and that of Cage and his circle, the same operation also introduces new

challenges that relate to how we document, archive, and circulate the experience of art today.

For some time now, art has had as much to do with its historical networks of production and exhibition as it has to do with what it does—usually, in the form of images—“once [these images] enter circulation in heterogeneous networks.”²⁹ This is one of the key propositions advanced recently by the art historian and critic David Joselit. In *After Art*, for instance, he attempts to “expand the definition of art to embrace heterogeneous configurations of relationships or links,”³⁰ such that the *circulation* of art following the circumstances of its production may command greater critical attention after the exhaustion of medium and post-medium debates. Crucially, Joselit argues that the “site-specific” framing of art—and the auratic experience intrinsic to this framing—theorized most famously by Walter Benjamin, is no longer adequate to our moment, saturated as it is by technologies, systems, and networks of image circulation.³¹ I conclude this essay by taking up these lines of thinking in relation to the ways in which *Anthony McCall: Solid Light Works*, a specific set of artworks exhibited under specific temporal and physical conditions, extends its reach well beyond those settings and complicates the terms of its reception.

Some 42,000 visitors passed through the exhibition at Pioneer Works over the course of eight weeks.³² Early on, I mentioned that a look through the Instagram archive of visitor photographs and videos suggests a compelling desire on the part of visitors to touch the art. Let me be more specific: a surprising number of these images in fact do not document McCall’s projections themselves, so much as the endlessly varying ways in which visitors *interact* with the projections.³³ In this Instagram screenshot (fig. 64.A), we see individuals carefully posing to maximize the silhouette effect: a photograph of a woman holding up a little girl, both sharply silhouetted against the projection; another one of a little girl extending her hand into the beam of light; a photograph of a man reaching out to his child, horizontal projections dramatically framing their bodies....This curious impulse—to document people participating in the projections, rather than attempt to document just the projections, or the musical performances—is something that, I now realize, guided one of my own photographs (fig. 70.B). Spending some hours at Pioneer Works on the final night of the exhibition, I was fascinated by the sight of hundreds of visitors simply sprawled out on the floor of the main hall, bathing in the silvery haze of the vertical projections. Some kept up conversations amongst friends in low tones. Some

29. David Joselit, *After Art* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013), xiv.

30. *Ibid.*, 2.

31. *Ibid.*, 13.

32. I thank Vivian Chui, associate curator at Pioneer Works, for providing these numbers.

33. Hal Foster has also noted that part of the enduring appeal of these artworks is that “the experience is sociable,” stating that “intimate interaction, which is both private and public, is key to the solid-light films.” He relates this to the “benevolent phenomenology” espoused by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. See Foster, “Light Play,” 17-20.

stared up into the projections, occasionally (inevitably!) reaching into the beams of the light. Others slept. Still others watched others engage in some or all these activities.

It is precisely this multiplicity of experience that the Instagram archive acknowledges. Put otherwise, you and I do not necessarily share identical encounters with the solid light artworks. A certain randomness is—and has arguably always been—key to these projections, and to the ways in which they are experienced. It is this subjectivity of experience in encounters with the “extended present” of McCall’s projections that is reintroduced into their documentary afterlives. Certainly, there is a phenomenological richness to encountering these works in person. And yet that same multi-sensory immersion—in darkness, haze, light, and at least at Pioneer Works, sound—can obscure the sheer variability of this experience. The visitor photographs on Instagram, some of which are reproduced in this volume, remind us that the experience of the solid light artworks is not necessarily circumscribed by the specificity of its installation site(s). They remind us, too, of how varied this experience always is, even if they do not reproduce the precise audiovisual permutations caused by one’s physical movements through the exhibition space. In this mass of crowd-sourced visual documentation, we sample not just approximations of the artworks themselves, but also the forms of embodied spectatorial participation they have always invited. And it offers rich testimony to the gift Anthony McCall has given us by returning to, and utterly revising, the work that once transformed how we may think about moving-image art.