

I'M TRYING TO LEARN THESE LESSONS

Kath Foster

Art is a crisis with human failing at its core.

Some art is made because an artist has faltered at an otherwise insurmountable obstacle. This art speaks of unhappiness, and luckily it does because, as the flipside to simplistic happiness, this art gets to be dark, real, solid, complex and unresolved. In other words, it tells you things you need to know about yourself, and (again luckily) it does so obliquely: you do not have to know too much about the actual unhappiness of its maker. The intimacy is with the art, not the artist.

Art as a whole continually fails to resolve itself. If the project of art could only be completed, the artist, purified, could retire. And some attempt to. "The scene changes to an empty room," writes Susan Sontag. "Rimbaud has gone to Abyssinia to make his fortune in the slave trade. Wittgenstein... has chosen menial work as a hospital orderly. Duchamp has turned to chess."¹

Nothing speaks more perfectly of human imperfection than the artist who retires then (fortunately) returns, admitting that he or she is wrong: there is more to say, after all. Art, once more, signifies error.

Anthony McCall returned to art recently after several decades away. McCall is best known for his "solid light films," where a light-form is projected through a smoky room. When some of these were shown in Wellington this year, I crossed and re-crossed the divide between the early and late works to try to learn his lessons: what has he found that is important to say, after all?

¹ Susan Sontag, "The Aesthetics of Silence" (1967), in *A Susan Sontag Reader*, New York: Farrar/Straus/Giroux, 1982, p 183. Duchamp eventually passed up chess in favour of a final, monumental, art work.

It was 1973 the other night when several hundred of us lined up to drink and bathe, in ritualistic darkness, along the sides of a long channel, lit up in bright slices (a strip of face, an eye), or silhouetted, hands making streams of blackness on the smoking light.

We had gathered at the Wellington Town Hall to see McCall's film *Line Describing a Cone*. But film was not accorded its usual deference: the image on the screen (a bright arc slowly growing into a circle) was decidedly *uninteresting*. The true performance space was between screen and projector, where, in the cone of light, the performance was being played out by the audience.

When the lights went down, behaviour shifted toward selfishness of a kind not usually seen at the movies. Viewers moved around, blocked the light, obscured the screen, or sat under the growing cone. Some hovered, waiting a turn; but those playing in the beam were blind to others behind them. People behaved as though they were unseen, the inversion of figure and ground rendering them almost tactile in the darkness. We were warm animals in the burrow. This was a new intimacy.

Just as we became settled in this world, the circle on the screen was completed. When colour was restored to the hall, people seemed caught out: undefended, a little embarrassed. No-one knew quite where to look.

Three decades have passed by the time I've climbed the hill to the Adam Art Gallery, where McCall has earned an exhibition titled "Drawing with Light", which spans his oeuvre since the 1970s. One solid light film, *You and I, Horizontal* (2005), shares much of the physiology of *Line Describing a Cone*: it too is a continuous conical form projected through the length of a dark room. But its effect is astonishingly different.

Alone in the alien dark bright world, the experience is hallucinatory, intimate, private; the sounds hypnotic. Three curving lines on the screen slowly arc into new shapes, making a map for the evolving form. Gas stains the thin light walls; inside the walls, the form tends toward infinity. The atmosphere is intense: "fear; purity;

afterlife,” I write in my notes, as this visceral experience begins to remove the power of words.

I am deeply alone. There is no culture here, just myself stripped of face and voice: I am stripped of my vision of myself, so crucial to my identity. It is no longer a question of who I am; in this darkness I have simply become a responsive organism. This is another kind of intimacy: I am faced with myself.

Why such opposite responses to works so similar? I find two differences to hold responsible.

The first is the way in which each film is screened. *Line Describing a Cone* was screened to a captive audience. When the duration is prescribed, says McCall, an essentially passive audience is created which has “a single focus and homogenous behavior patterns”: the new code of interaction I witnessed at the Town Hall.² But extending the structure throughout the day instead creates individuals out of the visitors and allows the space to encompass them. *You and I, Horizontal* runs continuously: its structure ebbs and flows, something McCall describes as “tidal.”³ This contributes significantly to the private nature of the experience.

The second major difference between the works is in their content: the signs on the screen indicate that the two films have different concerns at heart and belong to different places in history.

Line Describing a Cone is an unlikely marriage of Modern and Minimal concerns. With true Modernist zeal, this stripped-back film works towards its own self-definition: “I was always searching for the ultimate film, the one that would be

² Branden W. Joseph, “Sparring with the Spectacle” in Christopher Eamon (ed), *Anthony McCall: The Solid Light Films and Related Works*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, and San Francisco: New Art Trust, 2005, p. 45.

³ McCall in Tyler Coburn, “Interview” [2008] in Hangar Bicocca, Milan: *Anthony McCall: Breath [the vertical works]*, Milan, 2009, p. 72.

nothing but itself,” McCall said to Hal Foster.⁴ But removing the illusionistic space from the screen relocates the film into the room: into real time and space, with the viewer at the very heart of the work. This makes it entirely theatrical and therefore set directly against Modernism.⁵

The form that is growing in the room has the simplicity of the *gestalt* crucial to Minimalism. “Simplicity of shape does not necessarily equate with simplicity of experience,” says Robert Morris,⁶ of activating in the viewer the discrepancy between the known and the perceived.⁷ Susan Sontag puts it slightly differently: “constructing ‘minimal’ forms that seem to lack emotional resonance are in themselves vigorous, often tonic choices.”⁸ It is the cone’s sheer unimportance that elicits from the viewer an “unprecedented awareness” of their own presence.⁹ Luke Smythe, in the exhibition catalogue, likens this quality of attention to that given to Andy Warhol’s long films, where the spectator was thrown back upon “the intimacies of their own agitated responses.”¹⁰

But *You and I, Horizontal* outstrips the task of responding to simple forms. The experience has become entirely unpredictable: the form is now irregular, and, even as the respondent works to comprehend it by switching from sign to form and back again, it ever so slowly changes in an unforeseen way. This drags the viewer, by now bodily engaged, into an unknown place; something which “helps return us to our corporeal selves,” says Smythe, “reminding us of what it means to *be* rather than *possess* a body.”¹¹

⁴ Hal Foster, “Light-Play”, in Hangar Bicocca, Milan: *Anthony McCall: Breath [the vertical works]*, Milan, 2009, p. 12.

⁵ In “Art and Objecthood,” Michael Fried refuses to consider cinema a Modernist art form on the grounds that it provides an automatic refuge from theatre, and for that reason cannot triumph over it. Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood” in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, p 164. McCall’s attempt to revoke this exemption, and his films’ immediate slide into theatricality, perhaps proves Fried’s point.

⁶ Robert Morris, *Continuous Project Altered Daily*, Cambridge and London: An October Book/MIT Press, 1993, p. 8.

⁷ Hal Foster, in Hangar Bicocca, 2009, p 14.

⁸ Susan Sontag “The Aesthetics of Silence” (1967), in *A Susan Sontag Reader*, p 186.

⁹ McCall quoted by Branden Joseph in Christopher Eamon (ed), p. 44.

¹⁰ Luke Smythe, *Anthony McCall and the Somaesthetics of Solid Light*, in Adam Art Gallery Te Pataka Toi, Wellington: *Anthony McCall: Drawing with Light*, Wellington, 2010. Smythe notes that McCall explores these possibilities in a way that is more meditative and mindful than Warhol’s.

¹¹ Luke Smythe, in Adam Art Gallery Te Pataka Toi, *Anthony McCall: Drawing with Light*.

The lens of difference reveals a new maturity present in Anthony McCall's work: he has learned some strong lessons, and, thankfully, has come back to share them. Where his earlier film engendered a comforting, tactile culture, the later film (private and unknowable, wiser and deeper) strips away layers of the viewer's identity: it removes sociability, appearance and thought, and allows a visceral intimacy with the light form itself. McCall's new work suggests that this crisis known as art must try to frame, rather than explain, the unknowable core of human existence.

There is a moment in *You and I, Horizontal* when the sign pauses as a perfect ellipse, as if in homage to the *gestalt* of the earlier film. But it lingers only briefly before the lines break away again: off, like the path of McCall's oeuvre, away from the simply pared-back and on toward a place of quieter subtlety.

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