

Anthony McCall and the Somaesthetics of Solid Light

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In the mid-1970s Anthony McCall's 'solid light' films cut swirling swathes of illuminated geometry through the dim interiors of smoke- and dust-filled viewing spaces. Conjuring self-assembling cones and pivoting blades of light out of dead air, these three-dimensional projections transposed the cinematic image from the virtual 'elsewhere' of conventional narrative cinema to the 'here and now' of actuality, enabling spectators to interact freely with the luminous figures taking shape in their midst. Prompted by an interest in reducing the cinematic experience to its basis in projected light apprehended over time, and in promoting a more dynamic and socially engaged form of cinematic spectatorship, McCall advanced these concerns in a series of seven films created between 1973 and 1975.[1] In the first six of these, free-standing projectors cast spectral shrouds of light across unlit, empty rooms, while in the last, *Long Film for Ambient Light* (1975), McCall dispensed with projector and celluloid entirely, creating a real-time, real-space 'cinematic' event centred on the light effects produced by a naked electric bulb hung in a room whose windows had been masked with white paper. Believing that with this highly reductive work he had pushed his creative interests to their limit, McCall then set aside his solid light experiments, and it was not until the late 1990s, as the eyes of the art world began to turn toward a host of new screen- and projection-based practices, that his interest in his prior output revived.[2] Since this time, he has been developing a new series of computer-animated, digitally projected solid light works, more than a dozen of which have appeared since 2003.

McCall's digital solid light films employ the same sparsely sensuous formal vocabulary as their celluloid predecessors, but are the product of new creative concerns. Whereas he once regarded his projections as vehicles for the literalisation and purification of cinema, he now conceives of them as allegorical representations of standing and reclining human figures, whose anthropomorphic titles, like *Breath* (2004), *You and I*, *Horizontal* (2005) and *Coupling* (2009), solicit a somatic understanding of their movements.[3] McCall's new works revive the conical format of his first solid light films of the 1970s, but unlike their forebears are not simply hollow concavities. Instead they consist of two or more moving geometric figures, which vie gently with

one another for space within the confines of their shared projection environment, dilating and contracting incrementally over the course of thirty to sixty minute cycles. The slow, balletic drift of these figures, together with the chamber-like fashion in which they partition the projector beam's interior, imbues them with a suggestively vital quality that encourages us to regard them as billowing and respiring 'bodies' of light. Interacting with these luminous bodies, we are drawn slowly into sync with their fluid, unhurried modulations, an empathic physical response that helps to ground us more fully in the present tense unfolding of our own bodily movements. This is a significant response, which cuts against the grain of a broad array of contemporary social practices that serve to distance us from our own corporeality.

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Late modern life is rife with possibilities for somatic alienation. Exposure to a steady bombardment of high intensity media imagery has tended to raise our threshold of physiological stimulation to such an extent that we require ever greater stimuli to feel connected to our own bodies. As a result of this over-stimulation, our relationship to our own somatic experiences has grown fainter and we risk losing touch with the bodily basis of our perceptions. Under conditions of desensitisation such as these we become increasingly liable to misuse our bodies in our daily lives, and are rendered susceptible to an array of phenomena, ranging from pornography and immersive computer games to digitally manipulated fashion images, that encourage us to divest from the immediacies of our own somatic states and invest projectively in imagined regimes of bodily experience that are at best crude and at worst dangerously distorting. What is more, on the relatively rare occasions on which we are called upon to identify closely with our physical experiences, as for example during sport and exercise, we are often called upon to do so in an instrumentalising rather than integrative fashion. While this kind of performance-oriented activity, in which the body is tacitly regarded as a tool rather than the very medium of our existence, is by no means inherently objectionable, it is nevertheless premised on the stimulation of abnormally intensified bodily states. By virtue of their tendency to distract us from the quieter

satisfactions offered by a range of more mundane somatic experiences, these too can give rise to their own subtle forms of corporeal alienation.

McCall's films, by contrast, foster a brand of sensory experience that, by virtue of its calculated slowness and exquisite rarefaction, runs counter to both of these dynamics. Not so much aesthetic as 'somaesthetic', [4] their determinate slowness and simplicity has the seldom-witnessed effect of lowering rather than elevating our threshold of sensitivity to incoming sensations, heightening our awareness not only of the delicate shifts in light and movement that the films themselves undergo, but of our own empathic, somatically guided responses to their incremental transitions and alterations. Whether scrutinising their scintillating surfaces from without (a light effect produced by the vaporised particles of mist that McCall relies on to make his works visible), or venturing forward into their enveloping interiors, we are subtly encouraged to synchronise our movements with the films' own slow drifts and undulations, improvising harmonic and contrapuntal patterns of bodily response to their flaring and flowing motions. This slow-motion indexing of our own movements to the movements of McCall's shifting light veils is conducive to a deepening and heightening of bodily awareness, an experience which helps return us to our corporeal selves, reminding us of what it means to *be* rather than *possess* a body.

The playful yet focussed mode of somatic self-awareness that McCall's films encourage, recalls the kind of 'purposefully purposeless' activity that occupied the heart of many performative works by John Cage, one of McCall's signal artistic influences.[5] Like much of Cage's work, McCall's films solicit a concentrated yet open-ended form of spectator participation—a mode of engagement which, serving no determinate end and being measured against no external standard of 'achievement', can be readily transposed from an art world context back into the realm of everyday life. While the numinous atmospherics of McCall's cinematic environments are far from quotidian, the heightened form of somatic awareness that they promote nevertheless helps remind us of the more tranquil pleasures and satisfactions to be drawn from an entirely ordinary range of somatic activity—pleasures and satisfactions that in our habitually distracted and desensitised sensory state we might otherwise be inclined to overlook. In a culture that has grown increasingly captivated by the heady intoxications of speed, spectacle and sensory overload, this is a valuable lesson, and one which situates McCall's work within a

small but significant genealogy of similarly oppositional, bodily-oriented cinematic and projection-based practices dating back to the 1920s.

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Commentators discussing McCall's early solid light films in the wake of his recent return to film-making have been quick to take account of the previously overlooked somatic qualities of those works. Remarking on the sculptural manner in which the solid light projections envelop and partition space, art historians Branden Joseph and George Baker have, for instance, argued for an important continuity of interests between McCall's films of the 1970s and the phenomenological concerns of minimalist and post-minimalist sculpture which, during the 1960s and early 1970s, displaced the emphasis of sculptural spectatorship away from the internal dynamics of the artwork itself, toward the moment-to-moment perceptual dynamics of the temporally-extended encounter between sculpture and viewer.[6] In transposing this phenomenological mode of address to a three-dimensionalised form of cinema, whose projected geometries were at once virtual and real, material and spectral, McCall's early films promoted a more somatically sensitised and materially engaged mode of image consumption than that which is typically encouraged by the commercial interests that underwrite the majority of our contemporary transactions with images.[7] The solid light films of the 1970s could thus be regarded as having promoted viewing habits running counter to the cursory and socially abstracted mode of image consumption fostered by the spectacularised regimes of image production and distribution that throughout modernity have exerted an increasingly profound influence on social life.

In addition to this link between McCall's early work and the phenomenological prerogatives of minimalist and post-minimalist sculpture, however, there is a longer genealogy of cinematic efforts to promote liberating forms of somatic experience into which McCall's new digital work can be inserted. This is the genealogy of 'somatic cinema,' practitioners of which, for more than eighty years, have been using reconfigured variants of the traditional cinematic viewing apparatus to harness the largely untapped somatic potential of projected moving images.

Early excursions in this tradition include the unrealised 'tactile cinema' of Salvador Dalí from the late 1920s, and the 'direct' films of Len Lye who, from the early 1930s onward, fused abstract painting, animation, photograms, jazz and film in an effort to develop a form of cinema premised on the direct bodily address of its spectators. Both of these projects, which were directed toward a seated, static audience, sought to mimic and outbid the shock and drama of the inter-war period's accelerating image culture, in an effort to liberate the senses by means of a stark disjunction between their own careening concatenations of sound and image and the obligatory stasis of their audience members. In the post-war period a similarly intensive sensory agenda was again taken up in the context of 1960s' light shows, most notably those incorporating a strong cinematic component, like the performances of *Single Wing Turquoise Bird* and Andy Warhol's *Exploding Plastic Inevitable*, both of which plunged their audience members into an overwhelming maelstrom of projected light and sound. These projects too aimed at liberation, this time via a transcendent form of supra-sensory release, often facilitated by drugs, in which distinctions between audience and environment, as well as discrete registers of sensory experience broke down. McCall's work, by contrast, retrieved a second and more rarefied thread of Warhol's practice, associated with his early 'eventless' films, like *Sleep* (1963), *Eat* (1964) and *Empire* (1964). Whereas the pre-war efforts of artists like Lye and Dalí and the post-war efforts of *Single Wing Turquoise Bird* and the *Exploding Plastic Inevitable*, had been premised on an emancipatory urge to aesthetically outbid the mounting sensory onslaught of the commercial apparatus of spectacle, Warhol's films proceeded in the opposite direction by reducing their sensory impact to a minimum, thus throwing their bored and frustrated spectators back upon the intimacies of their own agitated responses to the lack of activity transpiring on the screens in front of them.[8]

In the early 1970s, when he began making *Line Describing a Cone* (1973), his first solid light film, McCall had been interested in obtaining the same degree of single-minded conceptual clarity for his own work as that which he associated with Warhol's films.[9] His painstaking hand-animated output of the 1970s, whose movements were simpler, more evidently systematic and rational than that of his digital films, retained much of this single-mindedness. However, even at their most linear and parsimonious the early solid light films were cut from an altogether more

sensuous cloth than Warhol's, and during the post-millennial phase of his career it is the ability of this taut conjunction of sparseness and sensuality to impact profoundly on our sense of bodily self-awareness that McCall has been exploring in earnest, continuing on the road opened by Warhol, but in a manner premised on a more mindful and meditative form of sensuous engagement.

In pursuing his recent somatic interests, McCall has been aided by technological advances that have allowed him to bring a new level of flexibility and sophistication to the solid light idiom. No longer confined to the laborious frame-by-frame animation techniques of the 1970s, he can now choreograph his work algorithmically via computer, using a custom-built software interface that enables him to precisely calibrate the speed, size and position of each of his moving figures. Thanks to these gains in compositional control, he can plot more elaborate trajectories for his nomadic geometries, experiment with more complex curvilinear figures like standing waves and 'breathing' ellipses, and coordinate the movements of several forms simultaneously, features of his recent work that have carried it in a more vital and anthropomorphic direction. These shifts in production have been complemented by the arrival of high-luminosity digital projectors with large throw distances, which can be mounted vertically as well as horizontally, allowing McCall to explore the somatic possibilities of 'standing' as well as 'reclining' projection fields—as used to striking effect in his recent series, *Breath*. Transposing the solid light films to a digital platform in this fashion may raise questions as to their continuing status as films, but it is this very process of remediation that has allowed McCall to push his work further into the hybrid territory in which organic and mathematical imagery collide and on this basis elicit the kinds of deeply felt somatic responses that his recent films call forth.

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Endnotes

1 McCall outlined these concerns in statements accompanying the release of two of his early solid light films, *Line Describing a Cone* (1973) and *Long Film for Ambient Light* (1976). See 'Two Statements', reprinted in ed. P. Adams Sitney, *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, New York University Press, New York, 1978, pp 250-254. McCall reviews his early solid light works at length in 'Line Describing a Cone and Related Films', *October*, 103, Winter 2003, pp 42-62.

2 See McCall's comments in Malcolm Turvey et al. 'Round Table: The Projected Image in Contemporary Art', *October*, 104, Spring 2003, p.96.

3 See McCall's interview comments in Olivier Michelon, *Anthony McCall: Éléments pour une Rétrospective, 1972-1979/2003-*, Monografik Editions, Blou, 2007, p.59.

4 The term 'somaesthetic' is that of the philosopher Richard Shusterman, who defines it as the 'critical meliorative study of one's experience and use of one's body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (aesthesia) and creative self-fashioning'. See Richard Shusterman, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2008, p.19. I use the term here in a more general sense to refer to the process of mindful reflection on our bodily states that I see McCall's films encouraging.

5 McCall discusses Cage's influence on his early solid light work in 'Line Describing a Cone and Related Films', pp 60-62.

6 See Branden W. Joseph, 'Sparring with the Spectacle', in ed. Christopher Eamon, *Anthony McCall: The Solid Light Films and Related Works*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois, 2005, p.42, 48; and George Baker, 'Film Beyond Its Limits,' *Grey Room*, 25, Fall 2006, pp 98-99.

7 Joseph, 'Sparring with the Spectacle,' p.55; and Baker, 'Film Beyond Its Limits', p.110.

8 On this point, see Branden W. Joseph, "'My Mind Split Open": Andy Warhol's Exploding Plastic Inevitable', *Grey Room*, 08, Summer 2002, p.86.

9 McCall, '*Line Describing a Cone and Related Films*', pp 17-18.