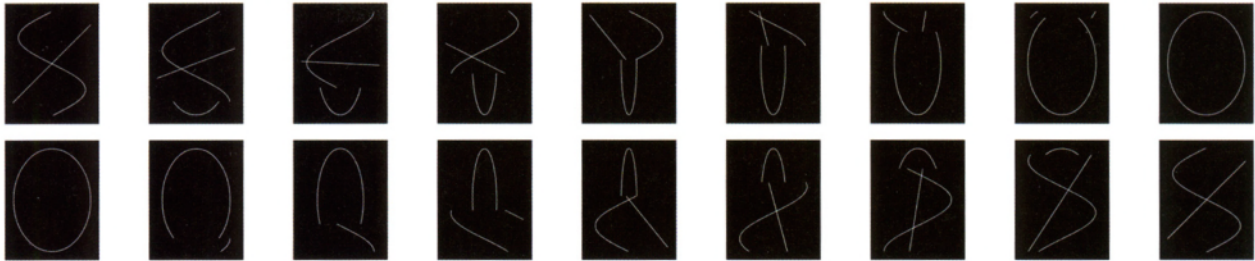


SEANKELLY

Zoller, Maxa. "Anthony McCall in the Flow," *Sculpture Magazine*, September 2008, pp. 32-37.



Anthony McCall

In the Flow

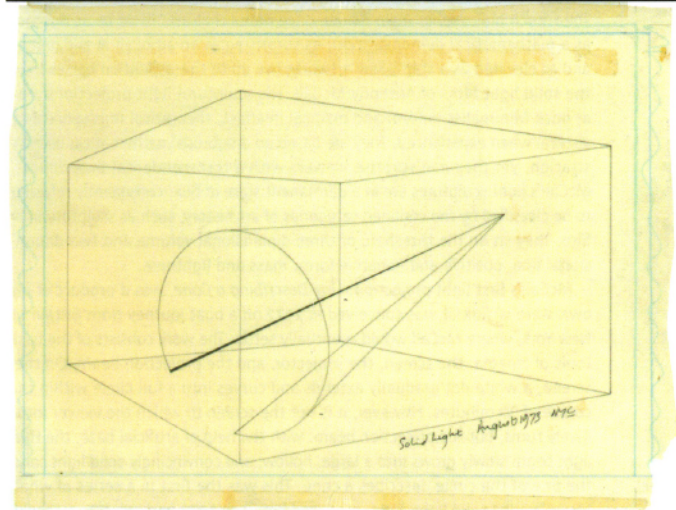
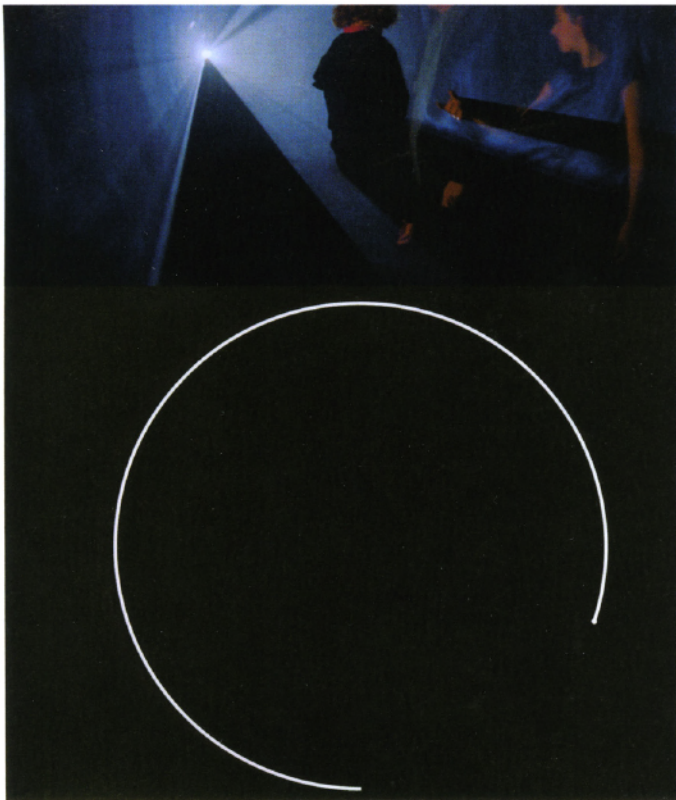
BY MAXA ZOLLER

OPPOSITE: HUGO GLENNING / THIS PAGE: © ANTHONY MCCALL / BOTH: COURTESY SEAN KELLY GALLERY, NY

Opposite: *Between You and I*, 2006. View of installation at Peer/the Round Chapel, London. This page: *Between You and I: Stills at two-minute intervals*, 2006. 18 Xerographic carbon prints on paper, 11 x 14 in. each.

The French philosopher Alain Badiou once noted that art "must be as rigorous as a mathematical demonstration, as surprising as an ambush in the night, and as elevated as a star."¹ Few artworks live up to this aspiration better than the solid light films of Anthony McCall. His sculptural light projections are at once Minimalist in form and magical in effect, theoretical in essence and visceral when experienced. They are based on a rigorous mathematical demonstration, yet they can surprise viewers with a transcendental experience. McCall's light sculptures are in a permanent state of flux, consistently refusing to be classified by the confined categories of art history, such as sculpture and film. They sit on the threshold of three-dimensional volume and two-dimensional line, positive and negative form, mass and lightness.

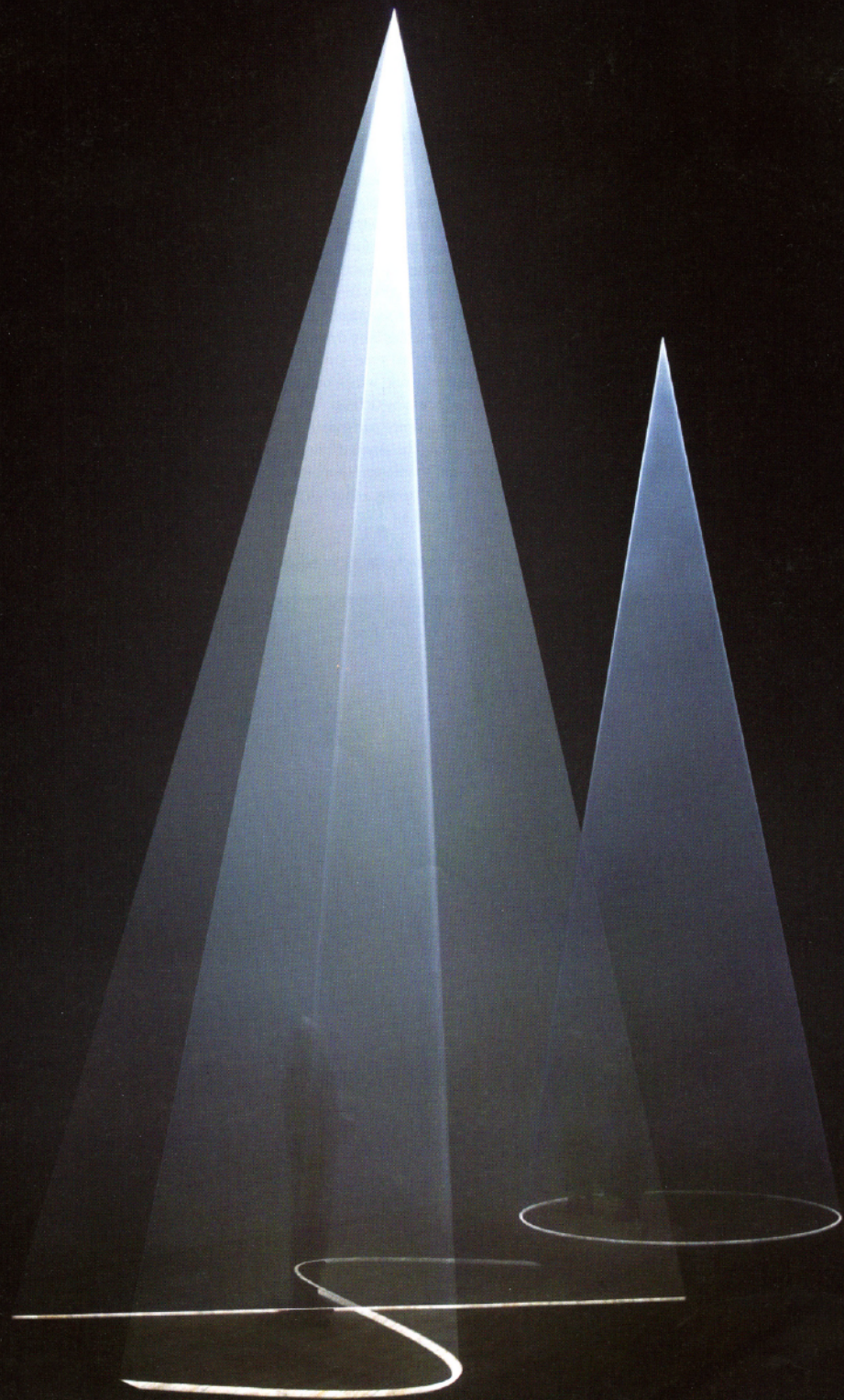
McCall's first light projection, *Line Describing a Cone*, was a product of his own state of flux: it was conceived in 1972 on a boat journey from Britain to New York, where McCall would eventually settle. The work consists of the basic tools of cinema: the screen, the projector, and the projection beam. On the screen, a white dot gradually extends and curves into a full circle within the course of 30 minutes. However, it is not the screen to which the viewer intuitively turns, but the projection beam: with the help of artificial haze, the thin light beam slowly grows into a large, hollow, and convincingly solid light cone: the line of the circle describes a cone. This was the first in a series of what McCall called solid light films, produced between 1973 and '75. It is a deeply

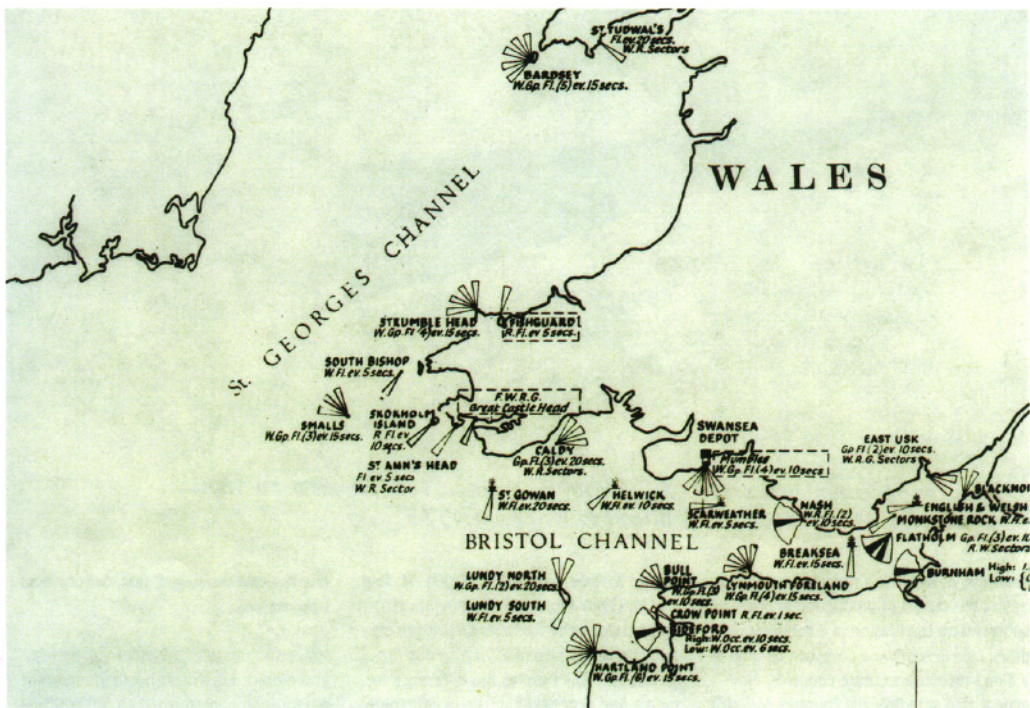


playful, magical experience to enter this film projection. The illusion of volume is so convincing that one intuitively ducks down to walk under the cone. The joy of standing at the center of the cone while the light wraps around one's body like a large halo, or of interrupting the smooth surface of the light by sticking one's hand through it, has turned even the most cynical art critic into an excited performer. The work produces spontaneous communication among its actors, something that few contemporary art pieces achieve. Like the water of the Atlantic Ocean through which McCall traveled, *Line Describing a Cone* is at once fluid and solid. But McCall's boat journey provided a far more concrete source of inspiration: the lighthouse. In fact, in 1973, McCall produced a series of "Found Solid Light Installations," mapping Britain's lighthouses. The boat's cutting through the water and the light beam's piercing through the fog are replicated in the cone's penetration through the gallery, symbolizing a territorial treatment of space, which is also colonial and quintessentially British. Water has always been McCall's muse, formally as well as philosophically. For Freud, water represented the unconscious, and walking into the light cone has a deep psychological effect, which has been described as a return to the womb. The physical and psychological make-up of *Line Describing a Cone*, which is at the same time penetrating and engulfing, opens up issues of life, death, and sexuality in relation to the body and the conical form.

For a long time, the specific conditions required to show *Line Describing a Cone* made it difficult for McCall to present his solid light films. Like the beam of a lighthouse, which is only visible in misty weather, McCall's projection cone relies on cigarette smoke and dust particles in order to become fully visible. Before the invention of hazers in the 1990s, *Line Describing a Cone* was primarily shown in artist-run spaces in abandoned warehouse lofts.

Line Describing a Cone, 1973/2002. Top to bottom: view of installation at the Whitney; frame from the 24th minute; and *Solid Light*, 1973, drawing for the installation.





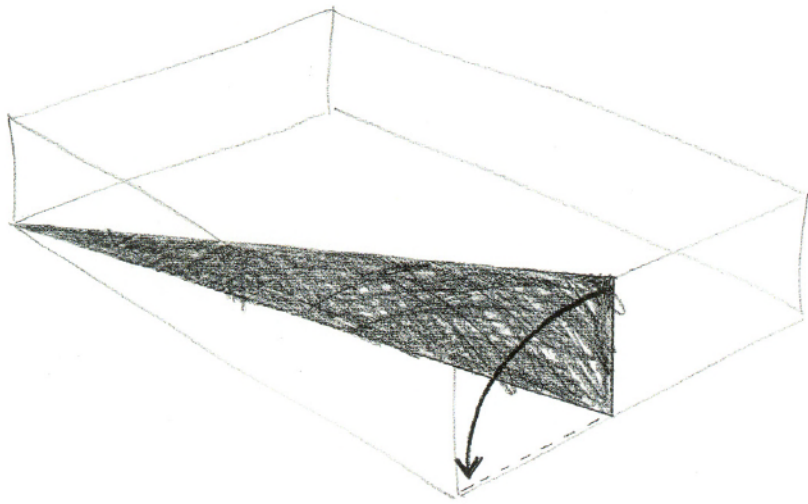
These large empty lofts became available as a result of the radical political and economic changes in the mid-1970s, when society shifted from an industrial to a so-called post-industrial culture. McCall's light works embody this shift, not only because they were presented inside these vacant spaces, but also because they serve as metaphors for the post-minimal, transcendental, and ethereal body of the post-industrial information age. Virtuality is key to *Line Describing a Cone*.

As much as *Line Describing a Cone* was a controlled work, it was also accidental. McCall had prepared an intricate score for the film, which he then meticulously translated into a series of individual frames on the animation table. Unable to view the film when it returned from the lab, McCall saw it for the first time at an arts festival in Sweden, where he described it as "a hymn" that had "a spiritual quality—and absolutely nothing to do with the work I had consciously made."² In fact, the new work

seemed at odds with his previous experiments, which could be described as performative outdoor installations. Inspired by Minimalism, performance, and Land Art, McCall created grids of fire and lines of white blankets in an open field. However subtly, these performances hold the key to *Line Describing a Cone*: the collective ritualistic character of the fire performances anticipated the light projections, while the white square blankets evoked celluloid film frames. The attempt to make a documentary film about these performances, however, proved unsatisfactory for McCall. Thinking about the problem of how to create a film that was also a performance, a film that existed only in its time of projection, McCall turned from the square to the circle—only to produce a cone. In *Line Describing a Cone*, time and space are held in perfect balance. It is a temporal sculpture and a spatial film. But it is also directly linked to the problem of how to create a film that refers to actual space rather than

Found Solid Light Installation, 1973. Detail of drawing.

an "elsewhere." In a well-known statement, McCall pointed out that "it is the first film to exist in *real*, three-dimensional space... 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."³ McCall's claim arose from a critical debate in the early and mid-1970s, invited by a new generation of baby-boom artists who had turned their backs on the traditional arts and started to experiment with film. The intellectual discourse of the time evolved around a re-reading of Marx through the French philosopher Louis Althusser and critical theory. The London Filmmakers' Co-op, with which McCall was associated, criticized the Taylorist division of labor in the film industry and the supposed passive consumerist audience of Hollywood cinema. A key point of criticism was Hollywood's use of "suture," which



FOUR PROJECTED MOVEMENTS PART I: REEL RUNS HEAD TO TAIL
 DURATION 15 MINUTES ANTHONY MCCALL 1975

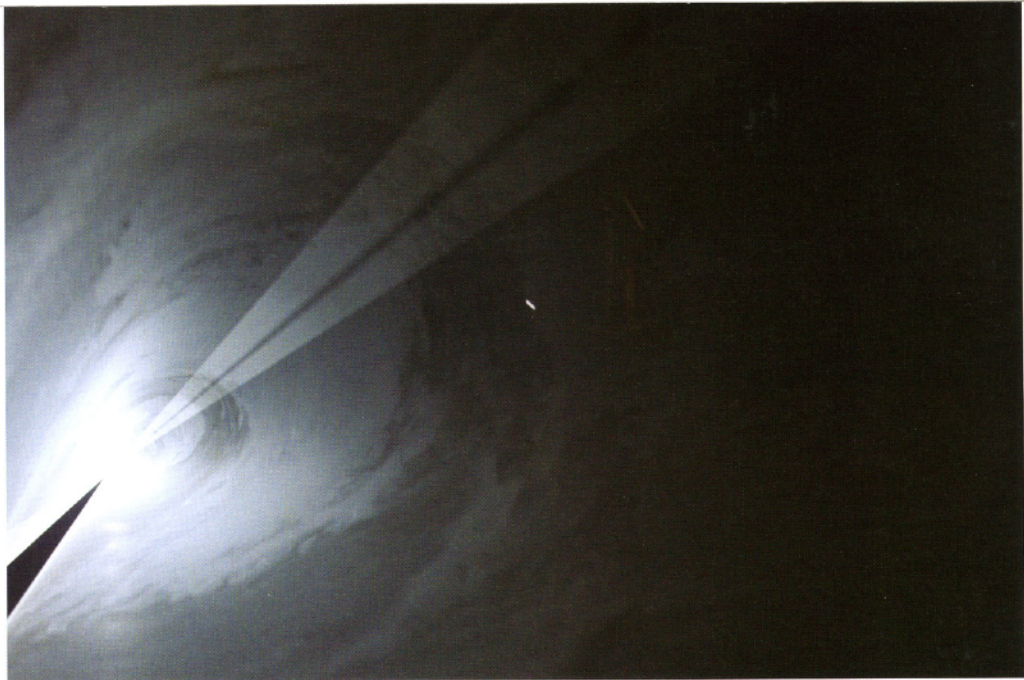
drew the viewer into a narrative, allegedly hiding the modes of production in order to substantiate the illusion of a coherent diegesis. *Line Describing a Cone* can be read as a direct response to these concerns. However, it also paradoxically counters McCall's claim that it "contains no illusion." The virtual volume of the cone challenges the traditional notion of filmic space, only to offer a new form of illusion: the convincing illusion of solid volume through light projection and haze. It is always a good sign when a work outwits its own theory.

In the following two years, McCall produced several solid light films, of which the most ambitious was perhaps *Long Film for Four Projectors* (1974). It consists of four straight lines, which were projected from the floor diagonally across the long gallery space. These beams produced flat light "wipes," which divided the space into diagonal squares. In a six-hour tour de force, the light wipes created ever-changing constellations of interior and exterior spaces. Despite the strict logic of the structure, the experience of the installation was meditative and disorientating. *Long Film for Four Projectors* has been compared to the sculptures of Richard Serra. The art historian Branden W. Joseph observed a formal resemblance between Serra's

Strike: To Roberta and Rudy (1969–71) and McCall's *Four Projected Movements* (1975) and between the former's *Circuit* (1972) and the latter's *Long Film for Four Projectors* (1974).⁴ Despite the difference in media and experience of the works, there is a clear overlap in the wedge-like forms penetrating the gallery space. These works, which developed independently of each other, indicate a transformation in the perception of space in 1970s art practice. In 1975, the year that McCall stopped working on his solid light films, the cultural critic Raymond Williams observed a new perceptual phenomenon. Based on the ubiquity of television, he identified the notion of "flow" as "perhaps the defining characteristic of broadcasting, simultaneously as a technology and as a cultural form."⁵ As Williams anticipated, flow has become a new cultural form, apparent in contemporary artistic as well as architectural practice. Flow has produced a distracted and immersed spectator accustomed to navigating a set of temporal structures, be it a film installation by McCall or a giant sculpture by Serra. Their immersive and spatially disorientating sculptures anticipated what the influential theorist Rosalind Krauss termed "hyperspace."⁶ According to Krauss, hyper-

Four Projected Movements, 1975. One of 4 installation drawings.

space suppressed "the older subjectivity" and replaced it with "an experience that must properly be termed an 'intensity'—a free-floating and impersonal feeling dominated by a peculiar kind of euphoria."⁷ It represented "a new kind of intensity of experience, an aesthetic charge that is not so much temporal (historical) as it is now radically spatial."⁸ Krauss's observation was based on a shift from encyclopedic toward monographic museum display in the 1980s and a new form of museum architecture in the 1990s. This phenomenon coincided with the revival of large environmental video installations by artists such as Bill Viola, Douglas Gordon, Jane and Louise Wilson, and many more. It is no wonder then, that the work of McCall and Serra reached a new dimension in the 1990s. After an almost 20-year gap, during which McCall worked as graphic designer, *Line Describing a Cone* was rediscovered by curators and exhibited in major art museums. While working on the design for several of Serra's exhibition catalogues, McCall was encouraged to explore a new formal vocabulary, and with the help of computer programs, he developed his



Doubling Back, 2003. View of installation at the Musée de Rochechouart, 2007.

most recent light sculptures, of which *Doubling Back* (2003) was the first. *Doubling Back* consists of two projected wave forms, which slowly travel across each other. Structurally, the wave is the result of an attempt to bring together the basic forms of McCall's earlier solid light films, the circle and the straight line. But with the wave, McCall also returned to the theme of the ocean, of water, transition, and flux. New software systems enabled the design of more complex graphics, and the invention of professional hazers made possible the smooth "sculpting out" of the complex shapes. Like Serra, who in the 1990s embarked on a series of new sculptures on an unprecedented scale, McCall responded to and used Krauss's hyperspace.³ His interest in the new possibilities of form and scale led him away from the film co-op and into different kinds of venues. In 2006, McCall presented *Between You and I* at the Round Chapel in London's East End. *Between You and I* consists of two intertwining forms, a cone and a wave, which were projected from the ceiling onto the floor, 11 feet below. In the mystical, sacred atmosphere of the chapel, this installation

was perhaps the perfect embodiment of what McCall (surprisingly) felt when he saw *Line Describing a Cone* for the very first time—spirituality. McCall's experiments with this new freedom of projection resulted in *Breath I* (2004), which was also projected from the ceiling to the floor. Similar to Serra's large-scale outdoor sculpture *Fulcrum* (1987), *Breath I* is a large vertical tent-like light sculpture, which wraps around the viewer and draws him/her into its interior chambers. What differentiates McCall's work from Serra's is, of course, its time-based medium, film. McCall's installations present a narrative, which enables a dialogue between work and viewer about territories of space and the metaphorical meaning of form. For McCall, form is an abstract mode of communication. As titles such as *Between You and I*, *Coupling*, and *Leaving* suggest, there

is an anthropomorphic element to his sculptures, which seem to breathe, to be alive. The shift from basic geometric forms toward more complicated narrative figurations also pushed the conceptual reading of the work from the film context and its critique of Hollywood cinema into the realm of the art museum. This is not to say that McCall's recent work is detached from its original film context, but it highlights the sculptural potential in a new way. Our contemporary definition of space has been deeply shaped by the kinetics of moving image culture. The intelligence of McCall's work lies in its ability to stretch beyond confined forms and to respond flexibly to ever-evolving notions of space. McCall's work is a metaphor for our state of flux.

Maxa Zoller is a writer living in London.

Notes

- ¹ I am indebted to the British filmmaker and theorist Jean Matthee for drawing my attention to this quotation in relation to McCall.
- ² Scott MacDonald, "Anthony McCall," in *A Critical Cinema 2: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 158.
- ³ Anthony McCall, "Line Describing a Cone and Related Films," October, Winter 2003, p. 43.
- ⁴ Brandon W. Joseph, "Sparring with the Spectacle," in *Anthony McCall:*

The Solid Light Films and Related Works, edited by Christopher Eamon, (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2005).

- ⁵ Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 86. Originally published in 1975.
- ⁶ Rosalind Krauss, "The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum," October, Fall 1990, p. 12.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7.