

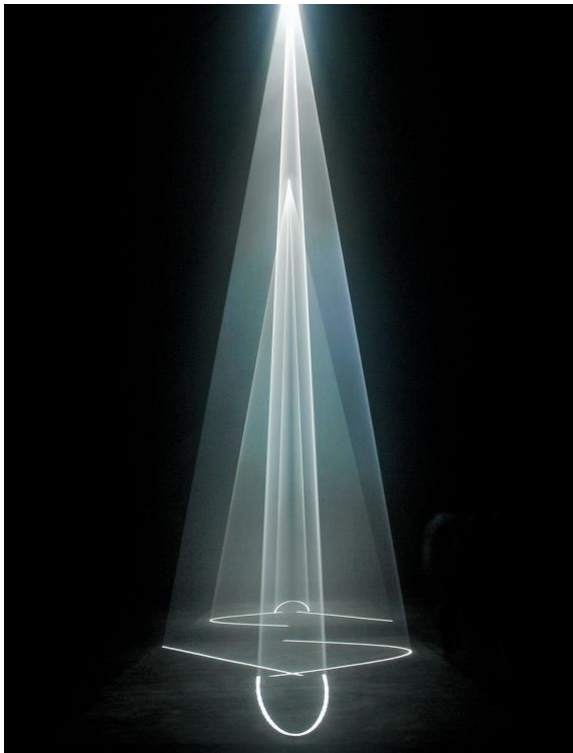
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Elcott, Noam M. "Smoke Screen." Aperture. Summer 2018.



Smoke Screen

Anthony McCall's light installations merge
photography and film
Noam M. Elcott



Between You and I, 2006. Installation at the Institut d'Art Contemporain Villeurbanne. Photography by Blaise Adilon. All works courtesy the artist

An irregular chevron bursts with light, teems with nebulous eddies, and slices through a seemingly impenetrable darkness. *Smoke Screen VI* (2017), the sixth in a series of seven large-scale, gelatin-silver photographs produced by Anthony McCall, is all but illegible to the uninitiated. Or perhaps excessively legible, that is, multiplicitous to the extreme. McCall's "solid light" (to use the artist's term) installations, especially those projected down from the ceiling, are routinely analogized to divine revelations or encounters of the third kind. *Smoke Screen VI* similarly brims with associations. But to gain our bearings, we require a more technical description. To make the *Smoke Screen* series (2017), McCall photographed *Swell* (2016), a double-projector solid light film in which a line and a partial ellipse are projected through a haze-filled space to create

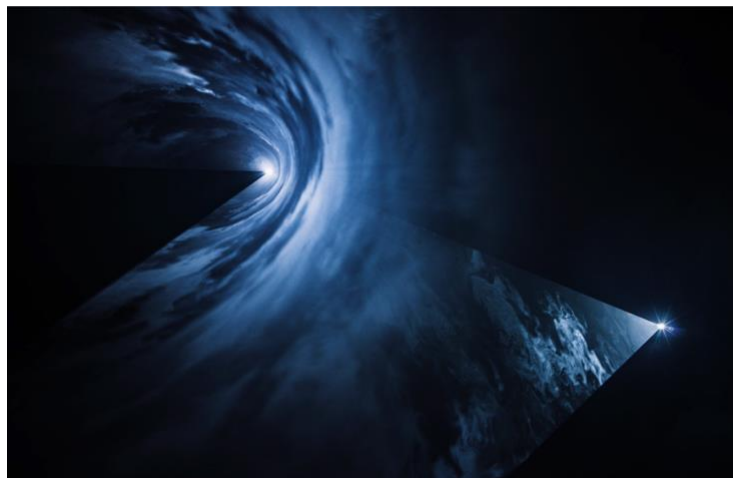
an interlocked blade and cone of light. The chevron that dominates each of the seven *Smoke Screen* photographs is produced through the intersection of the blade and the cone, now rotated ninety degrees. But *Smoke Screen VI* is anything but a representation of *Swell*. Instead, the *Smoke Screen* series occupies an as-yet-uncharted position between photography, film, sculpture, and drawing.

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McCall is best known for his solid light films—produced since the 1970s—in which straight, circular, and wavy lines, projected through smoke or haze in a darkened room, create three-dimensional, undulating light sculptures. Although the works are now regularly displayed in galleries and museums worldwide, they (like most artworks) are more often studied in catalogs, in magazines, and online. In the last two decades of the twentieth century, McCall stopped producing solid light films, and the works were available almost exclusively through their documentation. Accordingly, two types of images augment and often serve as surrogates for the projections: preparatory drawings and installation photographs. These continue to play an essential role in the dissemination of McCall's art, as evidenced by the drawing for and installation photograph of *Swell*.

In the 1970s, different stages of creating these films aligned clearly with different media and techniques—roughly analogous to the workflow of commercial animation studios. The works were plotted as a series of drawings (storyboards), shot on an animation table, projected on celluloid, and documented through still photography (the vague equivalent of a publicity still). In recent years, McCall, like the industry, has turned to digital modeling, projection, and documentation, such that the digital documentation has become progressively less distinguishable from the digital models (a situation most acute in architectural imaging). But *Smoke Screen* neither anticipates a future work nor documents a past one. Instead, at over five feet tall and radiating a power all its own, *Smoke Screen*, like McCall's monumental drawings, is a series of individual (rather than sequential) images, related to the solid light films but loaded with new philosophical and aesthetic revelations.

The new philosophical trajectory is at once striking and elusive. It is best approached through the title. McCall's notebooks are littered with lists of titles, nearly all of which he rejects in favor of those that successfully distill the essence of a piece and often inaugurate a series of



Swell, 2016. Installation at the Nevada Museum of Art, Reno. Photography by Chris Holloman. All works courtesy the artist

works. For McCall, titles are not ancillary but integral to his art. And so, it behooves us to seriously consider the title *Smoke Screen* and its near complete inversion of the philosophical position McCall espoused in the 1970s. Take, for example, his now canonical *Line Describing a Cone* (1973). McCall's inaugural solid light film was not only Minimalist to the extreme but also spectacularly dramatic: the ambient smoke and dust render the light beam visible such that—

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as announced in the title—a laser-like line extending from the projector to the screen slowly arcs into a perfect three-dimensional cone of light, which one can circumambulate and seemingly touch. But rather than emphasize the beauty and drama of this film-cum-sculpture, McCall, in 1974, armed with the discourse of counterideology, insisted on its assault on cinematic illusion:

The viewer watches the film by standing with his or her back toward what would normally be the screen, and looking along the beam toward the projector itself... . It is the first film to exist in real, three-dimensional space. This film exists only in the present: the moment of projection. It refers to nothing beyond this 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.

Line Describing a Cone all but impels the spectator to turn away from the screen and toward the (normally) invisible architecture, people, projector, and smoke that invariably filled cinemas and artists' lofts in New York in the 1970s. McCall coaxed spectators to turn their backs toward the screen of illusions and focus instead on the beam of light, because the light, bodies, space, time, and smoke were the realities veiled by the cinematic apparatus conterminously theorized by Jean-Louis Baudry and others.

The title *Smoke Screen* all but inverts the ideology critique implicit in the title (and explicit in the statement) of *Line Describing a Cone*. For what is a smoke screen if not, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, “something designed to conceal or mislead; a deliberate distraction or diversion”? The title *Smoke Screen* is thus an amplification of the tacit tendency in McCall's recent work. In installations like *Doubling Back* (2003)—the first solid light film McCall had made since 1975—there is no attempt to reveal (that is, “unveil”) an apparatus (cinematic or otherwise); rather, the interlocking traveling waves of light have been consistently understood as the opposite: veils.

In the 1970s, McCall endeavored to reveal the apparatus by compelling the spectator to turn away from the screen and toward the smoke. Today, he seems to venture the opposite: undulating veils of light serve as seductive smoke screens. The 1970s revelation was overt: disarm the ideological power of cinematic illusion and promote the truth of the projection event. What are the philosophical stakes today?

One temptation, of course, is not to ask. “Perhaps,” as Friedrich Nietzsche suggested, “truth is a woman”—a Weib, etymologically, a veiled woman—“who has reasons not to show us her reasons?” Indeed, where diffuse smoke and dust rendered McCall's geometric forms barely visible in the imperfect darkness, today's museum light locks and chemical hazers imbue every undulating veil of light with tempestuous and formless clouds worthy of J. M. W. Turner or, when

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the haze passes through perpendicular planes of light, as stylized as the ornamental book-matched marble walls of a Bernini chapel or a lobby by Mies van der Rohe. In such a reading, the large-scale photographs invite luxurious contemplation of the sensual, nebulous whorls that serve as perfect smoke screens for the complex pas de deux performed by *Swell's* blade and elliptical cone of light. *Smoke Screen*, in other words, conceals a geometric dance behind a richly patterned and ceaselessly mutating veil. The series issues seven iterations of this veil, whose contours are a product of the geometric dance, but whose most dramatic changes are within the veil: the swirls, tufts, and wisps of clouds that appear like satellite photographs of planet Earth, or perhaps the creation of a new world.



Smoke Screen IV, 2017. All works courtesy the artist

But McCall is too much the materialist to yield to visions of cosmic wonder, seraphic angels, and the like. *Smoke Screen VI* demands close scrutiny, and close scrutiny reveals pedestrian details. At the bottom left one can make out the digital projector that throws the blade of light. The flare and streaks emanating from the vertex at the top center betray less a religious epiphany than the telltale traces of a second projector and the photographer's lens. Subtler, but no less essential, is a pair of lines that traverse the length of the photograph toward the right edge. Faint but visible is the juncture where a dark wall meets the white ceiling (now turned ninety degrees) as well as the track lighting replete with four (unused) light fixtures. What Hiroshi Sugimoto's Theaters (1970s—ongoing) accomplished with anonymous films and deteriorating cinemas, McCall's *Smoke Screen* has done with his own solid light films in ascendant black-box galleries (once an anomaly in the art world, they are today ubiquitous). Visible through (and because of) the luminous haze, the black box meets the white cube in a crepuscular zone illuminated by cinema and caught by photography. With the added presence of the viewer before the photograph—a photograph that neither dwarfs the viewer nor is dwarfed by it—McCall assembles a constellation that neither veils nor reveals an ideological apparatus of art, film, or photography, but rather holds that tension in suspension. *Smoke Screen VI* is not a smoke screen; it is the embodiment of the beautiful as recognized by Walter Benjamin generations ago: "For the beautiful is neither the veil nor the veiled object but rather the object in its veil." The cinema-cum-gallery—with its walls and ceiling, its luminous projectors, its track lighting and patchy darkness, its viewers, even its smartphone-addled viewers—is the object. McCall's solid light films are the veil. *Smoke Screen* is the beautiful trace of that evanescent encounter.