

# CARNEGIE MUSEUM OF ART

ONE OF THE FOUR CARNEGIE MUSEUMS OF PITTSBURGH

## Anthony McCall WQED Interview with Sally Dixon and Bill Judson

Date of Recording: September 09, 1975

Location: Carnegie Museum of Art

Running Time: 17 minutes

Format: ¼-inch audiotape

Date of Transcript: November 2015

Department of Film and Video archive

Lectures and interviews with artists

ID: fv001/002/050

Sally Dixon: [crosstalk 00:00:27] We're going to have a conversation today again with Bill Judson, the present and new curator of the film section at the Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute and the first independent filmmaker of this season, Anthony McCall. Anthony is a-I was going to say a former Englishman and ex-Englishman. I guess he is an Englishman who's living in this country in New York and has come to Pittsburgh for a screening of his films. This was some time ago and many of you may have seen them. Very interesting films in that we've had nothing like them before. They're referred to as solid light films. A fascinating experience. I saw them first at the Brussels International Experimental Film Festival in [foreign language], Belgium last January and had heard about them for some time before that. Welcome Anthony.

Anthony McCall: Thank you.

Sally Dixon: And Bill.

Bill Judson: Thank you, Sally.

Sally Dixon: We need all the support. We need all the brilliant questions we can have to fire at Anthony. That's why both of us are doing this, and also it's just fun to have more minds to play with on this and ideas. A good showing at the museum, fascinating films. The thing you're pursuing as I see it is to basically challenge our concept of what is film. The traditional format, that is projected images that resemble life that are watched from fixed seats in a traditional type theater. Yours are not that at all.

Anthony McCall :Yes, I've been trying to get some kind of participatory role for the spectator. To get away from the situation, which is- I mean in normal movie projection, it's really very much like a lecturer speaking to a large audience in which there's one person broadcasting to a large number of people who have to sit completely passively. That sticking still is another aspect which I've tried to change in my films, so that-in a normal film situation you have people that are sitting in rows of seats and all they can do is to just watch and react as a crowd. In my films, since the viewers are looking at the light beam itself in an empty space without seats, they move around and wherever they are they have a different view of the thing. It's more like looking at sculpture in that as you move around, the thing you're looking at changes. Of course, but it's different from sculpture in the sense that the form which is in space made of projected light is itself changing.

Sally Dixon: I think it might be helpful to describe say *Line Describing a Cone*, which is one of your films. I'm sure you've been asked to do this before, why don't you do it Anthony just so our listeners-

Anthony McCall: I think I've almost got it off pat.

Sally Dixon: Well, let's have your concise, brief 50 cent tour of that film.

Anthony McCall: I usually ask people to imagine as though they were looking at the screen in the normal way because then you can start from a familiar base. If we're just looking at the screen of the film, what you would see at the beginning is a black screen with a white dot at the foot of the screen in the middle. Gradually, this white dot traces a circle very, very slowly until at the end of a half an hour there's a complete circle of light, a white line on a black background, which fills up the screen. In three-dimensional terms, we now turn away, put our backs to the screen, and face the projector, so that we're very close to what was the screen and we're looking towards the projector.

What we see at the beginning is where that white dot in the screen was, that is actually a single, tiny line of light like a laser beam stretching from the lens of the projector to the screen and gradually as on the screen that dot traces a circular path. In three-dimensional space we're getting a conical, a gradual formation of a cone with its apex at the projector lens since all the light comes from that point, which is the projector lens. At the end of half an hour, there's a complete hollow cone of light in space with its base at the screen and the base of the cone as we had at the museum. It had a diameter of, say, I should think, what, about 9 feet. From the base of the cone to its apex it was about 40 feet long, so people could actually walk up and down the cone, through it, under it, and around it. [00:05:13]

Sally Dixon: And no seats?

Bill Judson: No seats at all. You mentioned before, Anthony, sculpture, which in many ways this clearly resembles it as a three-dimensional presence in this space that everybody is in, the projector is in, and everybody viewing is in. There are also interesting notions of performance in it somehow. It's not as if anybody is doing anything special, and yet they're like pieces of sculpture, except of course they're human beings. They do occupy parts of this space. I remember last year when Malcolm le Grice was here. He showed them in his program. One performance piece in which he employed his own body to interrupt.

Anthony McCall: The horror film, wasn't it?

Bill Judson: Right, yes.

Anthony McCall: Colored lights.

Bill Judson: Right, which is quite extraordinary and dramatic in a very different way from the drama in yours. But I was wondering what kinds of thoughts you had in terms of that whole issue of performance.

Anthony McCall: How I came towards making this film?

Bill Judson: Yes, and whether, in fact, you even think of them as performance because in a sense it's much different from a kind of pre-planned-

Anthony McCall: They're certainly performances in the sense that every single showing is very different and depends very much on the kind of audience that exists at that time. I've seen *Line Describing a Cone* half a dozen-maybe as many as 20 times. Yes, I should think 20 times now. Each showing is completely different and it does depend partly on the scale. The cone can be very small or very large according to the space, but mainly because of the audience. In that sense, it is very much like a performance, which can never be repeated. Another way these kind of films are different from normal cinema where you tend to feel that it's much more fixed.

Sally Dixon: Similar to music.

Anthony McCall: Yes.

Sally Dixon: In a sense, a written piece.

Anthony McCall: But I mean when I made *Line Describing a Cone*, I was already working with sculptural ideas previous to that. I'd been trying to work on the problem of how you can completely possess a space in a sculptural way without the problem of monumental material. The way that I previously used was sound. I was doing sound what I called "solid sound works", which were using sound not in a musical way at all, but merely thinking of it as lumps of noise, which you could move around physically in space. I was using four-channel sound.

Bill Judson: These were speakers that were placed around-

Anthony McCall: Yes, and again, very large-scale pieces. Monumental, but without any-The space could be entirely occupied by something in which had no mass. It could be sent through the mail. Believe me, is no small-The other thing that I was also working on were performances which the main subject matter was temporality. I was doing performances using burning fires of gasoline in very carefully measured amounts and very carefully scored sequences of burnings.

Sally Dixon: In large fields. I've seen the photographs.

Anthony McCall: Landscape basis, yeah. There were those two things, temporality and occupying space without solid material, which I suppose ... I mean, I'm certainly not claiming that there was a sort of A, B, C, but there was certainly things that I was thinking about prior to my conceiving *Line Describing a Cone*.

Sally Dixon: Well, obviously fed in.

Bill Judson: I think of-I recall, for example, a Bob Morris expedition in New York where he was experimenting with speakers, and I know Sally frequently on this show and at the museum has frequently referred to the degree to which this kind of

film is a part of the entire art movement. This whole independent filmmaking process is not a separate operation. There are so many concerns and issues.

Anthony McCall: I think that it does relate more to what we tend to bracket as visual art than it does to cinema in a way. It's come out of cinema as far as I'm concerned. Very much, but of course, and it still relates to it, but I tend to feel-personally I feel more affinities to issues in what are called Visual Arts. Of course, it includes cinema, but it's tended to-Cinema has tended to be pushed away from that because of it being a commercial concern which has other considerations like marketing-

Sally Dixon: Another source, yeah.

Bill Judson: It's extraordinary how much your films are so simple. There's such a spare means that you're using to establish these planes either flat or curved in space, and yet something in terms of the time involved in this. It seems to me that there's a surprising amount of drama in them. I'm intrigued to learn of your fire burnings. I think by having that context once he's perhaps a little more of the sense of energy in these bands of light. I'm kind of curious how you got to this marvelously spare means that you're now using. [00:10:36]

Anthony McCall: It's a very hard question to answer, really. I mean, in terms of the duration of the piece, it's really how little it actually seems to happen within any span of time. It's a physical thing. I found that if you make things move fast, then people tend to stay still so they won't miss it. It must go back to when we were hunters and stuff. I have no idea. The fact is that when something is static or almost static or very slow, then people will begin to explore it. But if it's moving and it's moving really fast, you tend to stay in one place to try and track it.

Sally Dixon: That's an interesting observation.

Anthony McCall: That's one point. Then the other thing is I'm very interested in the kind of concentration which a person gives to a book or a painting, which they can't give to a film. It's something to do with the distinction between looking and watching something. When you're looking at a painting, you're somehow working with your own time. Whereas when you're looking at a movie, you're being directed in certain ways. I found that by stretching the duration of something, you could introduce this one-to-one relationship far more effectively.

Bill Judson: Of course at that point the implications of that take you in the direction that I gather of your latest film in which one is no longer bound into one total experience. It's a situation where people are free to come and go and the things occurs in sufficient length so that one really has kind of presence there.

Anthony McCall: Yes, it has a single-There's four events that happen within 75 minutes, but those events can repeat themselves endlessly. It has a minimum duration of

this period of 75 minutes as we had at the museum. But there's absolutely no maximum. There's no reason why, theoretically, why it couldn't go on forever. By having something several hours long as opposed to 20 minutes or something, what that means is that people can come and go on their own. They don't all have to assemble to form that social group called an audience.

Bill Judson: Right, and it doesn't matter when they come. They can insert themselves at any point in that process.

Anthony McCall: Exactly, in that coming in their own time and on their own, it means that they're psychically on their own. They give whatever concentration and interest they want to give. They're not dictated to by the form. They're told this is 20 minutes and you better stay here or you'll miss it.

Bill Judson: The antithesis between that and the basis of commercial cinema is extraordinary.

Sally Dixon: Each serving their own end.

Bill Judson: One a very insidious end it seems to me, and one that's based very much on the individual and the self-awareness that makes us human beings. It's extraordinary. I really like that.

Sally Dixon: Your reference to the temporal qualities and duration-I think one of the single most dramatic moment at the Brussels festival was very near the end of your film, and I don't know whether I told you about this, but I sat in the audience, which was of course moving around, smoking, so that the smoke would swirl in the light and become visible, and as the circle neared the end, in other words, was almost about to close-

Anthony McCall: The cone-It was nearly complete.

Sally Dixon: Right, this circular line nearly closed. Everyone became aware or I became very aware that it seemed to be resisting itself. The line seemed to move very quickly up till then, then it seemed to slow down and almost reverse. It seemed an unendurably long time before it finally met, and then there was a great cheer from the audience. I was really interested with what happened to time when one's expectation for that closure. Just the possibilities of exploring that. It was obvious it was moving at the same rate of speed-but to explore that further.

Anthony McCall: [crosstalk 00:14:55] I'm quite interested to in the-I mean, like when the cone is half complete. This is half the hollow cone of light. I'm quite interested in-Again, I suppose it's a sculptural idea, which is that something changes according to the position you're looking at it from. When you're on the convex side of the cone, it seems extremely solid. But when you move across, you're suddenly looking into the inside surface of the cone. It suddenly seems just

like light again. I don't know why that is. There are a number of things that occur like that, perceptual things that quite interest me. [00:15:29]

Sally Dixon: Well thank you, Anthony. It's been a great pleasure and I trust if you come again, more people even will be able to come and take part in this experience, which challenges our old concepts of the source and being of film, the nature of it.

Bill Judson: It makes our life in Pittsburgh that much better.

Anthony McCall:[crosstalk 00:15:48] Thank you, Sally. [end of interview 00:15:50]

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