
"Line Describing a Cone" and Related Films

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Line Describing a Cone and Related Films

ANTHONY McCALL

Line Describing a Cone

Line Describing a Cone was made in August 1973, a few months after I sailed from England to the United States. I had been thinking about it for nearly a year in London, I conceived it mid-Atlantic, and I produced it in New York. By 1973, I had already made a number of short 16mm films, but *Line* was the first in which I was able to implement the ideas I had been developing about the relationship between audience and work, and about film as a medium. Here is a slightly edited version of a brief statement I made about the film at the time:

Line Describing a Cone is what I term a solid light film. It deals with the projected light beam itself, rather than treating the light beam as a mere carrier of coded information, which is decoded when it strikes a flat surface.

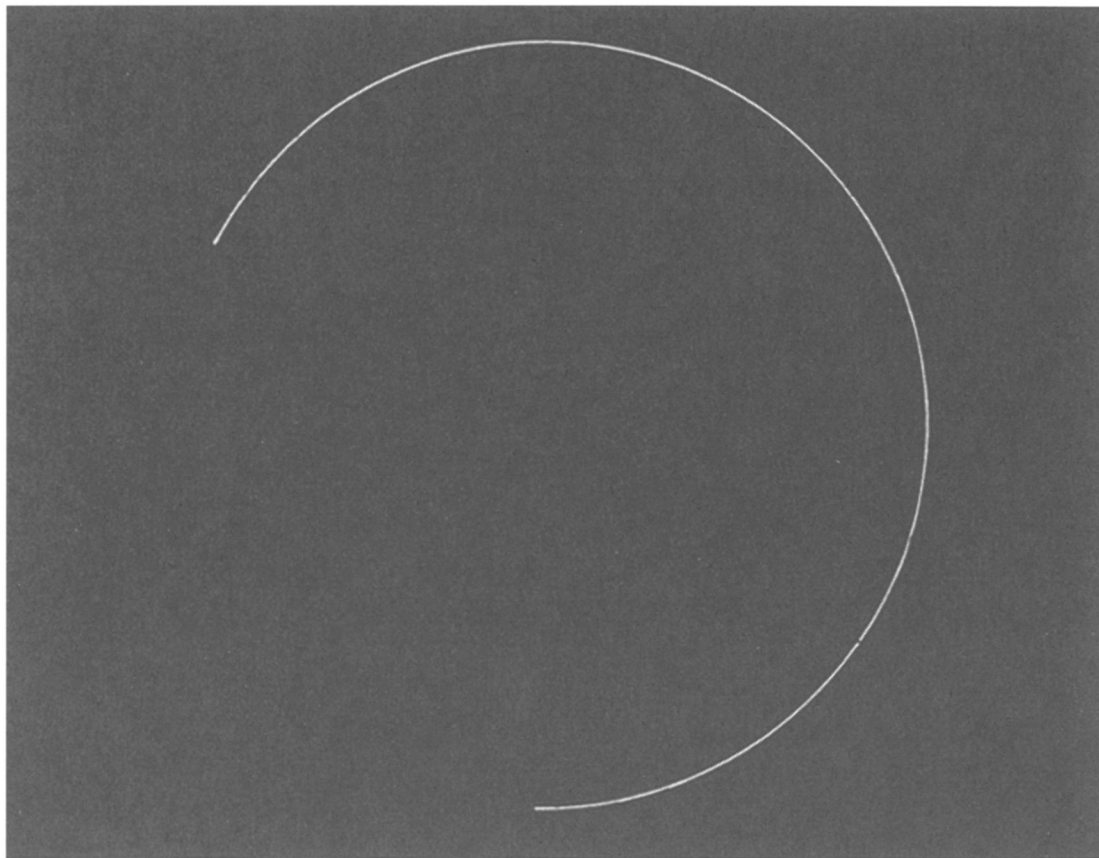
The viewer watches the film by standing with his or her back toward what would normally be the screen, and looking along the beam toward the projector itself. The film begins as a coherent pencil of light, like a laser beam, and develops through thirty minutes into a complete, hollow cone.

Line Describing a Cone deals with one of the irreducible, necessary conditions of film: projected light. It deals with this phenomenon directly, independently of any other consideration. It is the first film to exist in real, three-dimensional space.

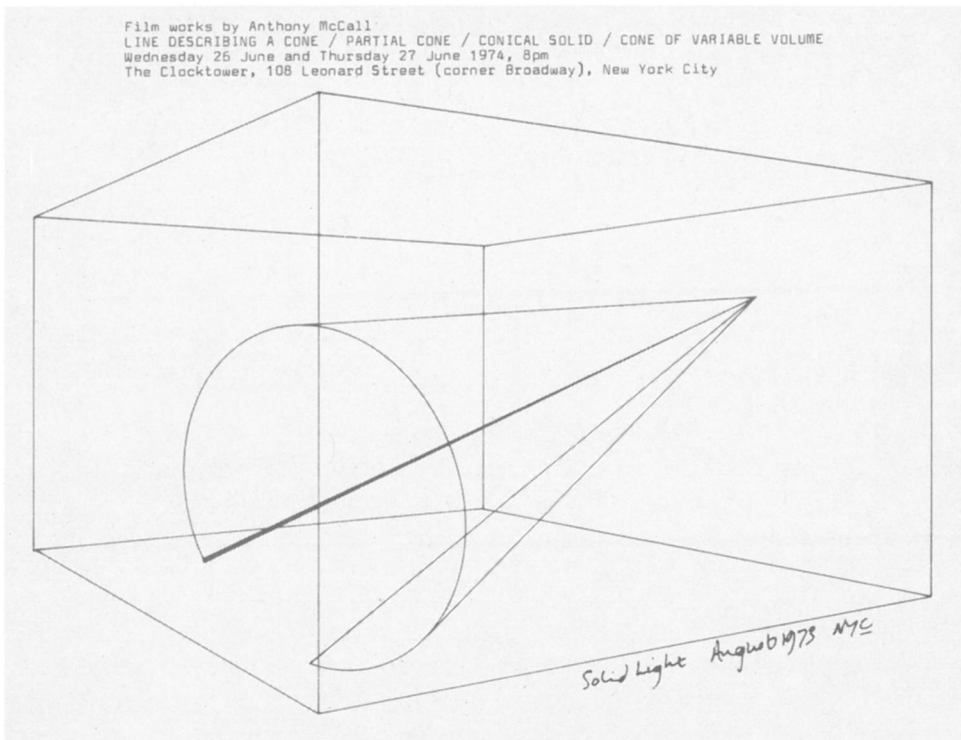
This film exists only in the present: the moment of projection. It refers to nothing beyond this real time. It contains no illusion. It is a primary experience, not secondary: i.e., the space is real, not referential; the time is real, not referential.

No longer is one viewing position as good as any other. For this film, every viewing position presents a different aspect. The viewer therefore has a participatory role in apprehending the event: he or she can, indeed needs, to move around relative to the slowly emerging light form.¹

1. From the artist's statement to the judges of the Fifth International Experimental Film Competition, 1974, Casino Knokke-Heist, Belgium. Held approximately every five years, the judges of



*Anthony McCall. Frame from the nineteenth minute
of Line Describing a Cone. 1973. All works by
Anthony McCall unless otherwise noted.*



*Announcement for a showing of the four
Cone films at the Clocktower. 1974.*

I would add that when the film is watched from start to finish by an audience—more than just a few individuals, say thirty or forty people—then a second level of interaction occurs, this time between members of the audience with one another. Within the dark room, the individual audience members have to negotiate the space in relation to one another so that they can all see the light form. Paradoxically, the more people who are present, the more “solid” the form becomes; I am always impressed by how much respect is accorded to the surface of this giant cone so that it is not obscured from sight for someone else. Since what happens at each screening between the different members of the audience is unique, perhaps it isn’t really stretching a point to see the screenings as a type of participatory performance.

Until the *Into the Light: The Projected Image in American Art, 1964–1977* exhibition, at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York,² *Line Describing a Cone* had always been shown theatrically, which is to say that an audience assembled at a certain precise time to watch the film together. Knowing that one “has” an

the competition that year were P. Adams Sitney, Stephen Dwoskin, Ed Emschwiller, Dusan Makavejev, and Harald Szeemann. *Line Describing a Cone* won the Marie-Josi Prize. The statement was reprinted in *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: New York University Press, 1978).

2. See editor’s note, p. 14 of this issue.

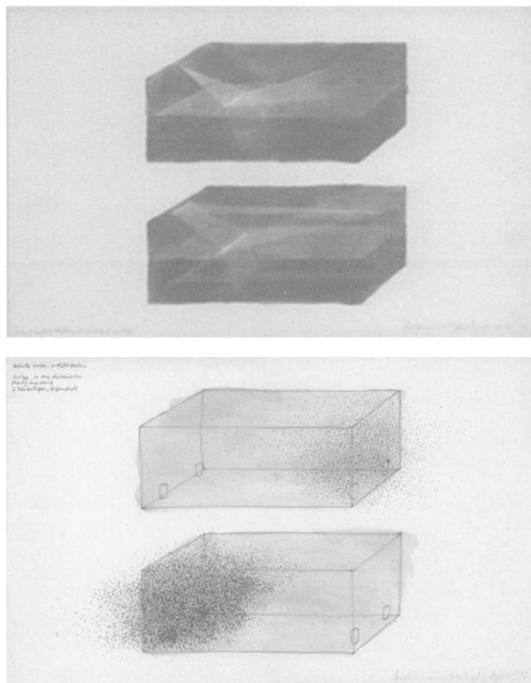


Line Describing a Cone. *Projected at the Whitney Museum exhibition Into the Light: The Projected Image in American Art 1964–1977. 2002. Photo © Henry Graber.*

audience for a certain complete block of time makes it possible to control the film's disclosure within that time period: The time can be manipulated as a plastic element. This, plus the fact that a group of people are experiencing the event together, creates a unique intensity. However, from the public's point of view, theatrical screenings have the disadvantage of poor access. The solution for *Into the Light* was to show the film continuously within a dedicated room as an installation. Once the film was over, it started again immediately, and in this way it ran continuously throughout the day. Sometimes there would be one person, alone, other times there would be five or six, and sometimes nobody at all. This created a more "ambient" experience, closer to that of individuals coming and going through a museum room to look at a piece of sculpture. In terms of access, this solution was extraordinarily successful. A very large number of people were able to see the film during the three months that the show was up. It meant, of course, that visitors came into the room at entirely different moments during the film's unfolding, and as is conventional in a museum, they chose how long they would give it. Some came and went after a few moments, while others saw it through to completion and even waited to see it from the start so that they could see it all the way through. At first I viewed this as a distortion of the intended experience. Now I'm not so sure. I think that perhaps it is just another version of the film.

Given a choice of rooms and projector lenses, *Line Describing a Cone* can be projected at any number of sizes. However, I prefer that this occur within certain limits. There are two dimensions to be considered: the length of the form (the distance between the projector and the projection surface), and the width of the cone at its base, where it strikes the wall. Thanks to different types of lenses, these can be considered separately. The length is ideally somewhere between thirty-five and sixty feet long. I prefer the base of the cone to be some eight or nine feet tall, starting at about a foot off the floor. The body is the important measure. Standing inside the cone near its base at the wall, where it is at its tallest dimension, the body should be completely subsumed within it. With outstretched arms it should not be quite possible to touch the upper surface. From there, if one walks down the cone toward the projector, it slowly diminishes in size until the body simply emerges out of it, arriving finally at the apex of the cone at the lens of the projector. Behind the lens, clearly visible on the film as it passes through the gate of the projector, is the miniature two-dimensional circle that generates the three-dimensional form.

These issues of scale and the body, and of moving around a three-dimensional object in a three-dimensional space, are, of course, sculptural issues, and part of the resonance of the experience of looking at them is drawn from this. However, unlike sculptural materials such as steel, lead, wood, latex, felt, etc.,

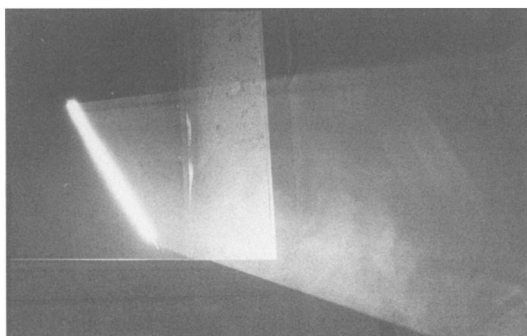
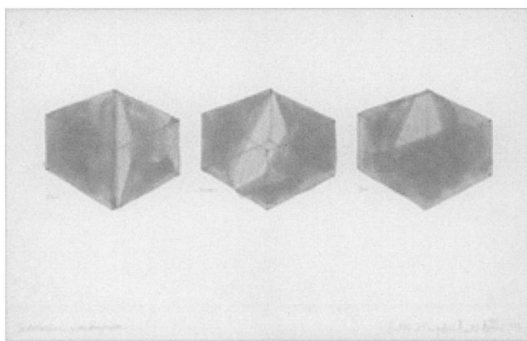


Top: Solid light installation, projecting onto water. 1973. *Bottom:* Solid sound installation, white-noise surge in one direction and along one axis. 1972–73.

light has no solidity and no gravity. In addition, the explicit control of disclosure over time, the representation of movement, the interchangeability of forms through editing, and the fact that these works have to be viewed in the dark—these are all properties of cinema. In the end, the experience of *Line Describing a Cone*, and the pieces that followed, depends equally on their relationship to both sculpture and to film.

Visibility is also an issue. These pieces are visible in three-dimensional space, because the projected light is reflected off tiny particles in the air. In the days when they were made, loft spaces were grittier and dustier than they are now, being then much closer to their earlier lives as sites for manufacturing or warehousing; the same was true of the downtown exhibition spaces. When I projected a film then, I could rely on the dust particles in the air, which would often be augmented by a couple of smokers. Since then exhibition spaces have become cleaner, and smoking has been prohibited. Fortunately, technology has caught up, and we now thicken the air with a small fog machine, which actually does a far more effective job of making visible the planes of light.

In 1974, the year after it was completed, *Line Describing a Cone* was shown a number of times. In New York it was screened at the then quite young Artists Space, as part of their *Artists as Filmmakers* series curated by Alida Walsh; at the Clocktower, as part of their *Works: Words* exhibition; at Millennium Film

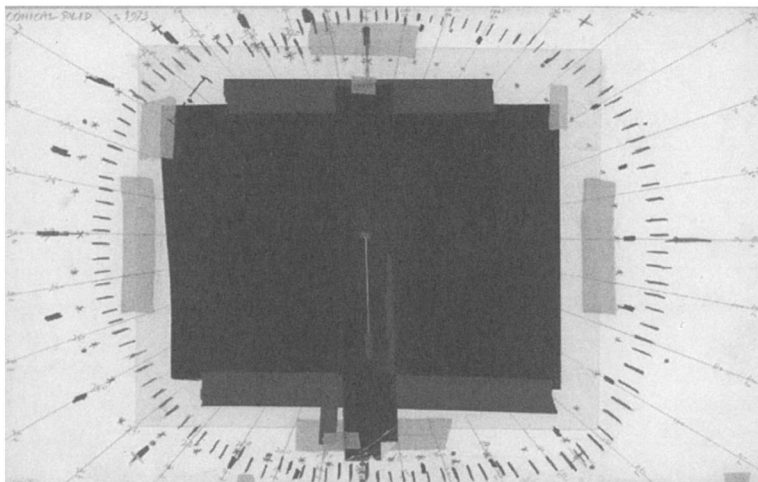


Top: Solid light installation for room with altered window (7 A.M., 12 NOON, 7 P.M.). 1973.
Bottom: Solid light installation for room with altered window (New York, 5:30 P.M., April 22, 1973). Photo © Anthony McCall, 1973.

Workshop, in a program shared with David Hall; and at a screening jointly organized by Film Forum and the Collective for Living Cinema. In England that same year, *Line Describing a Cone* was screened at the Royal College of Art Gallery, where Roselee Goldberg was the curator; at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford, which at the time was directed by Nic Serota; at the London Film-makers' Cooperative, where I shared the program with Carolee Schneemann; and at Garage Art, a contemporary art gallery in Covent Garden, as part of a program that included the films of artists Tim Head and David Dye. These eight institutions provide a good snapshot of how these films, from the very start, straddled two different but intersecting worlds, that of the general art world and that of avant-garde film.

In recent years, the art world has paid a lot of attention to work in film and video, yet the dichotomy between avant-garde film- (and video-) makers, and artists "working in film/video," still seems to be with us. Despite the important role being played by museums such as the Whitney in bridging this divide, the two worlds sometimes seem like Crick and Watson's double helix, spiraling closely around one another without ever quite meeting.

In New York, both Millennium Film Workshop and the Collective were to be particularly hospitable to my work over the next few years. They were the two downtown institutions most devoted to avant-garde film. Millennium was founded by filmmakers Ken and Flo Jacobs in 1966, as a place for both production and exhibition. It continues to this day, slightly expanded to include video. The Collective, founded six or seven years later, was started by a group of young filmmakers who had just completed their studies under Ken at Binghamton.

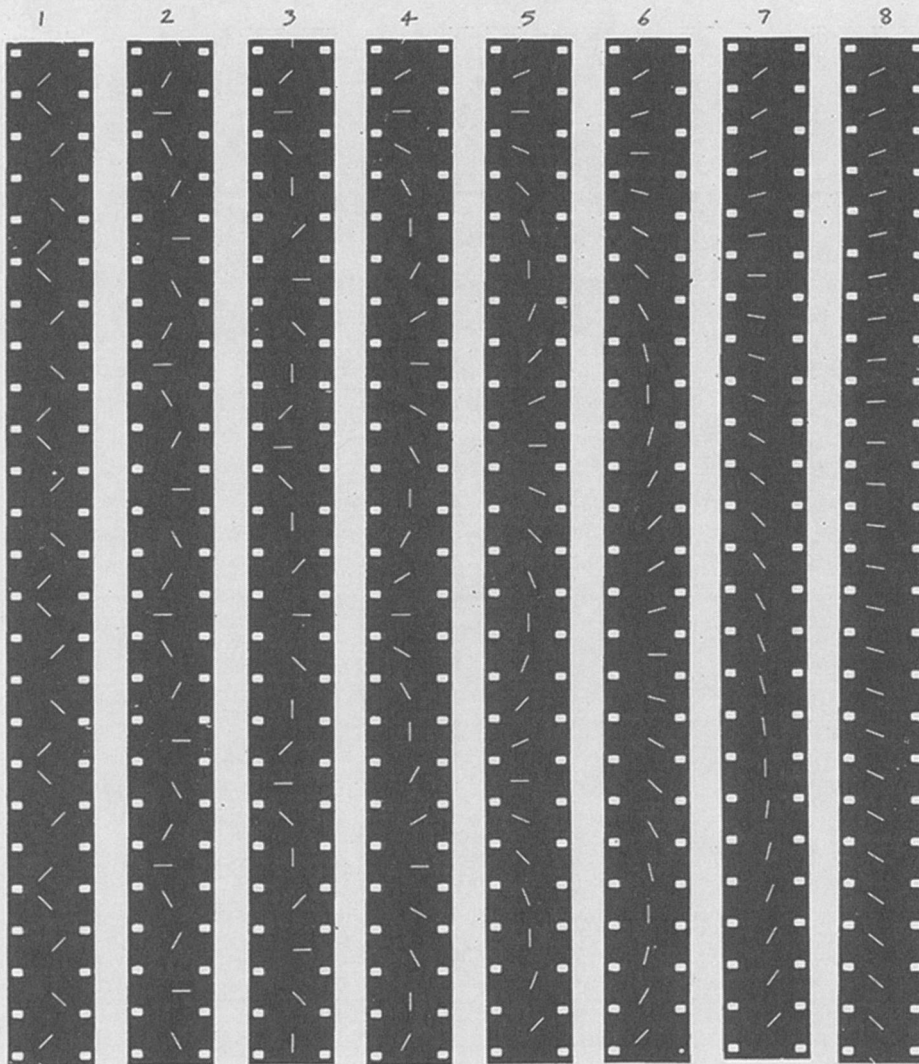


Animation drawing for the shooting of Conical Solid. 1974.

CONICAL SOLID

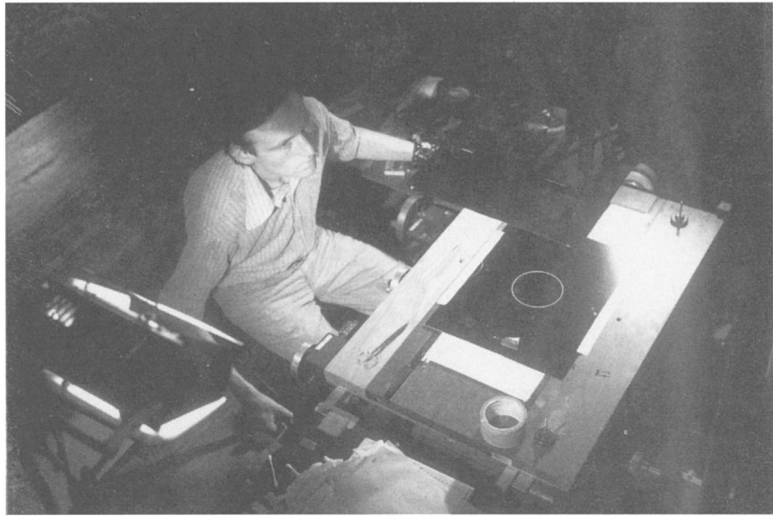
Anthony McCall March 1974 16mm silent 24fps

One second from each of the eight parts:



- | | |
|--------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| 1. Four-frame rotation | 5. Sixteen-frame rotation |
| 2. Six-frame rotation | 6. Twenty-four frame rotation |
| 3. Eight-frame rotation | 7. Forty-eight frame rotation |
| 4. Twelve-frame rotation | 8. One hundred and twenty frame rotation |

24 frames from each of the eight parts of Conical Solid. 1974.



Anthony McCall working on a Richmark Bell & Howell animation stand during the shooting of *Cone of Variable Volume*. Photo © George Griffin, 1974.

The other downtown institution was Anthology Film Archives, founded by Jonas Mekas. As well as showcasing new work, Jonas, and P. Adams Sitney, created Anthology's controversial pantheon of "essential cinema," which they showed (and still show) in repertory.

The year after making *Line Describing a Cone*, I made three additional films. These were short, either ten- or fifteen-minute works. *Partial Cone* explored the modulation of the surface of a projected beam of light, creating a range of surface qualities from solid, through glimmering, flickering, and blinking, to flashing. These were created by subtracting a certain number of image frames per second in a series of timed steps. *Cone of Variable Volume* was a conical form, which expanded and contracted in volume, like a lung. The rhythmic movement is imperceptible at first, and progressively accelerates in speed. *Conical Solid* sets up a flat blade of light rotating from a fixed central axis.

All of these films were made using very simple animation techniques. Each of them started with a line drawing, created with white gouache and a ruling pen on black paper. The line drawing was then placed under the camera, where I shot it, one frame or a few frames at a time, each time moving the line a fraction to the next position. The secret of moving pictures is, of course, that there are no moving pictures. The motion is an illusion. Each second of projected time is made up of twenty-four still images. Projected, the retina of the eye cannot distinguish between them, and it combines the separate images, into a continuous movement. Animation is simply the process of creating such an illusion of movement using a drawing as an image source.

An animation stand has its camera attached to a vertical post, pointing down onto a flat table. The post is calibrated to move up and down, and the table is calibrated to rotate under the camera or move side to side beneath it. In the case of *Conical Solid*, it was easier for me to create my own calibrations.

The drawing from which I shot the film was little more than a white line rotating on a pin, with the points of the compass, so to speak, set out around it. Compare it to the one-second (twenty-four frame) strips from the film itself, where you can see how each frame is one of a sequence. The photograph of myself, working at the animation stand, was taken when I was shooting *Cone of Variable Volume* in 1974. In that particular case, the entire film was shot from one single drawn circle; the animation was created by moving the camera toward the drawing and away from it, in minute steps, shooting a precise number of frames at every position. It must be remembered, of course, that in my case, what one sees on the film, and what I drew to shoot from, corresponds only to what one would see on the wall when the film is projected. But when I made it I was really thinking about what was being created in the space between the wall and the projector. The strip of film acts like a kind of stencil, blocking most of the light except for a simple line, or a plain circle, which in three-dimensional space represents a flat triangular blade or a complete volumetric cone.

Long Film for Four Projectors

Toward the end of 1974, I completed *Long Film for Four Projectors*. This was a much larger-scale piece than any of the four *Cone* films. Also, it was conceived not for a theatrical screening to an assembled audience, but as a continuous installation, where individual visitors would come and go in their own time.

I had been doing live performances for the previous few years in various locations in the countryside, most of them in England. These landscape pieces involved a matrix or grid whose points were defined by small fires. The fires burned for only a few minutes at a time, and they were sequenced to create shifting configurations within the grid. The pieces started off being ten or fifteen minutes long, but I kept gradually increasing their length. I came to realize that the duration of a time-based work could be a determining factor in how the work was looked at. A short performance presupposed an audience that assembled at the same moment to witness it. This in turn created the expectation of a quasi-theatrical event. Extending the temporal structure through the day, on the other hand, defused that expectation and created a set of more or less individual visitors. In addition, opening up the matrix, making it more widely spaced, set up a field that could encompass and surround the visitors. Taken together, these changes created a quieter, lower-key relationship between the execution of the event and the watching of it. I wrote then that "The work ceased to be a 'performance' with a perceivable beginning and end, with boundaries like an art object, but became rather a condition of the space, as is a high wind, a building, or the activity of a building site."³ The last of these pieces, *Fire Cycles*, was the longest, with a duration of twelve hours. It was done in Oxford. After returning to New York, I began

3. Felipe Ehrenberg, "On Conditions," *Art & Artists* 7, no. 12 (March 1973), pp. 38–43.

preparing for the production of *Long Film for Four Projectors*. I had some of the same ideas in mind.

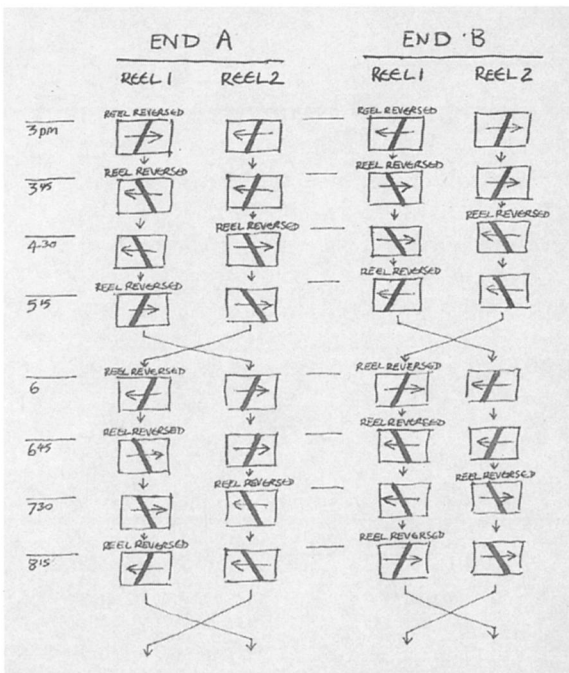
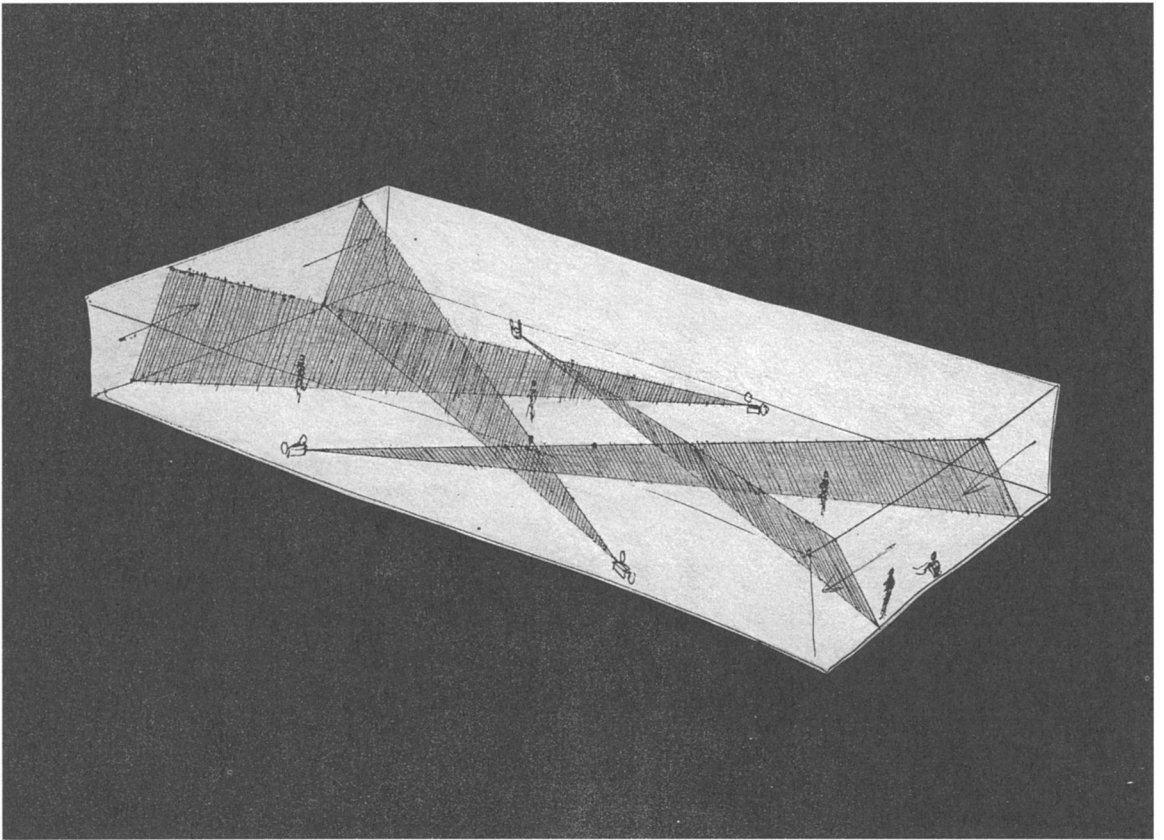
Long Film is intended as a gallery installation. It requires a large room, preferably one at least seventy feet in length. Installed, the film creates a three-dimensional field out of four, flat, interpenetrating planes of light, which sweep repeatedly through their individual arcs of space and through one another. Spatially, this film is very different from the four *Cone* films. Each of these presents a single volumetric object that occupies the center of a surrounding space. In *Long Film*, there is a *field* created by the film. It surrounds the visitor. As long as you are in the room, you are within the film. Every point in the room presents a different aspect; it's necessary to walk around, to pass through the planes of light. It can't all be taken in at one glance. The film is in constant motion. It is composed out of the shifting relationships between each of the four planes: their speed of movement, the direction in which they travel, the orientation of each plane to the perpendicular, and the modulation of their surfaces.

One complete cycle of *Long Film for Four Projectors* lasts about six hours. As I noted at the time, this was so as to create "not an audience as a single, present group occupying a common experiential time, but one that is irregularly spread over the duration of the presentation. Decisions as to when to come, how to approach the work, how long to remain, rest with the individual."⁴ The six-hour length of *Long Film* is built on the repeated showing of only four forty-five-minute reels, one for each projector. There are actually eight forty-five-minute

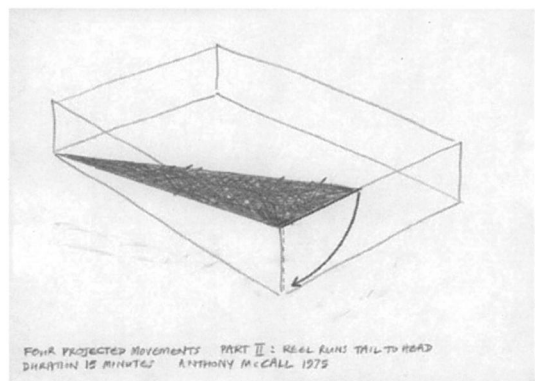
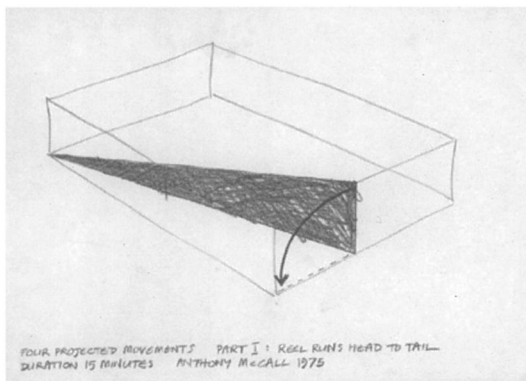
4. *Long Film for Four Projectors* notes, November 1974.



Fire Cycles II. Performance on the Gärde, Stockholm, Sweden, 1973. Photo © Anthony McCall, 1973.



Above: Long Film for Four Projectors (1974) installation drawing for Documenta VI, Kassel, Germany. 1977.
 Left: Long Film for Four Projectors. Projection schema for Millennium Film Workshop screening, New York. 1974.



sections to the film (with a pause between each section to change the reels), each slightly different from the other seven. It takes eight reel changes to exhaust the permutations.

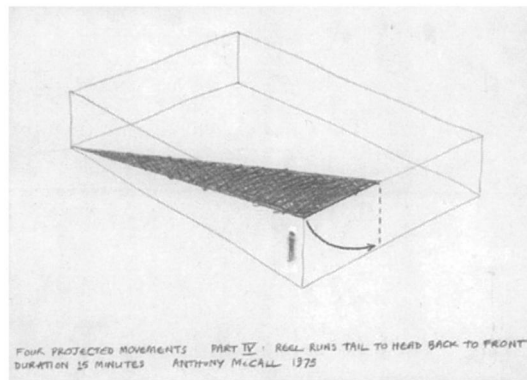
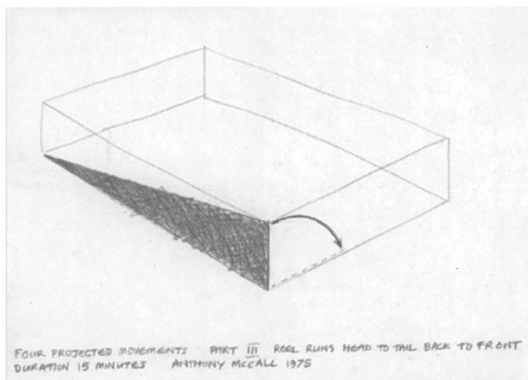
The permutations have to do with the nature of a strip of film and its relationship to the film projector. Film frames, twenty-four still images per second, are arranged sequentially down a flat strip. This strip is drawn through the projector gate and past the projector lamp, at an even speed. The light from the lamp passes through each frame, and a lens throws an enlarged version of the image onto the screen. Now, if the image is of a person or place or a written caption, there is a correct way round, and a right way up, for the film strip. For instance, imagine a film sequence that shows, say, a woman walking along carrying a written placard. It will be apparent that something is wrong if the writing on her placard looks like mirror writing; it will seem even worse if she is upside down and walking backward, even if the writing is legible. It will be worse still if she is upside down, walking backward, and carrying mirror writing.

The projector itself is quite indifferent to all this. Mechanically, the ribbon of film can pass through the projector in two directions—from head to tail or from tail to head; and in each direction, the image can be viewed from either of the two sides. So, assuming that the film carries no soundtrack, this translucent strip can be run through the projector in four, equally correct ways. The diagram will perhaps give an idea of how the repetitions and interchanging of the reels of *Long Film* create different spatial movements.

Long Film for Four Projectors was shown four times: at the London Film-makers' Co-op in 1975; at Millennium Film Workshop and the Neue Galerie, Aachen, in 1976; and at *Documenta VI* in Kassel, in 1977.

Four Projected Movements

The following year, in 1975, I made *Four Projected Movements*. This used only a single projector. The film was a distillation of the structural idea underlying *Long Film*. This time, there are four different movements, each created by the same fifteen-minute reel of film. The reel is passed through the projector in each of the four possible ways.



This film addressed the architectural space itself. The projector was positioned on the floor in a corner of the room, so that the adjacent wall and the floor established the boundaries of the space through which the beams would travel. The four drawings show how each slow sweep of the plane of light through ninety degrees acts quite differently on the three-dimensional corner space. What can't be shown is the way these movements act on the body. Representing a slow transition through ninety degrees, from vertical to horizontal, the plane of light variously makes one feel *pushed* in different directions. In the first movement, you feel pushed down from the outside into the floor; in the second, pushed into the wall from above; in the third, pushed down, and out, from the wall; and in the fourth, pushed out from the wall, from above. This experience is paradoxical, since light—even “solid” light like this—is, of course, insubstantial.

As with *Long Film for Four Projectors*, the projector is on the ground, situated inside the projection space. The act of threading the projector is incorporated into the piece as an important part of it. When the fifteen-minute reel has run completely through the projector, a small lamp clipped onto the projector is switched on by the projectionist to provide a work light. The projectionist then takes the full reel off the back take-up arm, puts it onto the front take-up arm, and rethreads the film, switches off the light, and turns the projector on again. This happens four times. The observant will see that the whole physical experience is based on the interplay of the wall, the floor, one projector, and one reel of film.

I described *Four Projected Movements* as being “seventy-five minutes long with no maximum duration.” The four movements together take sixty minutes to project, and I added a few minutes for each reel change. I conceived this, like the previous film, as a continuous installation. Certainly, any four movements experienced back to back describe the complete film. And if many people watch just a single movement and then leave, well, so be it. However, the piece has a performance aspect to it: attention is directed toward the act of projection quite explicitly. The piece undoubtedly gains clarity when an audience is asked to assemble to witness a presentation of the film's four movements, complete and whole.

Four Projected Movements was shown at the Collective for Living Cinema and the Serpentine Gallery in London in 1975; at the Museum of Modern Art, New

York, and at the Festival of Expanded Cinema at the ICA, London, in 1976; and at Anthology Film Archives in 1990.

Long Film for Ambient Light

The next piece, *Long Film for Ambient Light*, was the final work in this series of seven. It was inspired by a particular context, that of the Idea Warehouse. This was a large loft space on Reade Street that was managed by the Clocktower. I was invited to participate in a sequential group show, where each artist was offered the complete space for two days. My installation began at noon on June 18, 1975, and finished twenty-four hours later, at noon on June 19. The work used no actual film or projector. Three distinct elements combined to form the “film,” and no one of these was regarded as prior to the other two. These were, first, an altered space: a single electric light hung in the center of the room at eye level. The windows were covered with white paper, limiting them to being light sources during the day and reflective surfaces (“screens”) during the night. Second, there was a time schema on the wall that identified the time period of the presentation but suggested its continuity outside the twenty-four hours; third, there was a two-page statement on the opposite wall, “Notes in Duration.” The notes criticized the hierarchical distinction that was routinely made between the so-called atemporal arts such as painting and sculpture, and the time-based arts such as film, video, and dance.⁵ It maintained that everything that occurs, including the process of looking and thinking, occurs in time and that, therefore, the distinction is absurd. (Of course, the distinction was often made in order to put time-based art in its place, to make the claim that important aesthetic developments were always made—and always would be made—by painting and sculpture.)

As an experience, *Long Film for Ambient Light* seemed at first sight to be a simple installed environment. The shifts that occurred within it, such as the transition the covered windows underwent from being light sources during the day (a row of projector gates?) to being “screens” at night (reflecting the light from the electric lightbulb) were too gradual to see happening. However, the *film* existed in the space between the room, the statement, and the time schema, and could be grasped as such. And the visitors who came more than once, who visited at a point during the day and again at a point during the night, were able to confirm for themselves the turnaround that had occurred in the space during their absence. The installation sat precisely on a threshold, on one side of which was “time-based” art, and on the other, “non-time-based” art.⁶

5. The following comment by Mel Bochner in an article about Malevich expresses the position succinctly: “When you’re interested in art, you’re interested in the exchange that occurs when you stand in front of a work, alone, and look at it. It is atemporal. That’s not what happens when you see a film, or a dance or video, or any of the other performance arts” (*Artforum*, June 1974).

6. *Long Film for Ambient Light* was also exhibited at Galerie St. Petri in Lund, Sweden, in 1975, and at the Neue Galerie, Aachen, in 1976.



*

The London Film-makers Co-operative, which had started up in the late sixties, was a significant point of reference for the films I have just discussed. Partly inspired by the spirit of the New York Filmmakers Co-op, which was a distribution house for independent, underground, and avant-garde film, the London filmmakers had extended the idea to encompass film production and exhibition, as well as distribution. By the time I came into its orbit, they had bought an old film printer and some processing equipment and installed it in some rooms within a disused dairy in North London. The screening space was a damp, concrete-floored room with mattresses to sit on and a screen at one end. Most of the group working there had left art school within the previous five years where many had studied painting or sculpture. They included William Raban, Annabel Nicholson, Malcolm LeGrice, Liz Rhodes, Chris Wellsby, Peter Gidal, and others. LeGrice and Gidal, especially, led the development of a philosophy of filmmaking that came to be associated with the Co-op, so-called Structural filmmaking. Malcolm wrote a regular column in *Studio International*, reviewing not only Co-op work, but also avant-garde film from elsewhere. Gidal's writing added an overtly political perspective to the project. Opposed to "identification-fixated" narrative cinema, his position was closely argued in a number of manifesto-like texts such as "Theory and Definition of Structural-Materialist Film."⁷ He proposed a practice based on the "tension between materialist

7. *Studio International* 190, no. 978 (November/December 1975). A special issue devoted to "Avant-Garde Film in England & Europe," it also included Peter Wollen's article "The Two Avant-Gardes," which contrasts the assumptions of a modernist, "Co-op" movement to a parallel and quite separate tendency represented by such filmmakers as Godard, Straub-Huillet, Hanoun, and Jansco.

flatness, grain, light, movement, and the supposed real reality that is represented.” But in fact, a considerable variety of work was produced by the Co-op, and some of the filmmakers’ work extended into multi-projection and live performance. Connections to New York were kept active and cordial by the fact that Carla Liss, an American artist who ran the distribution side of the Co-op, was a friend and colleague of Jonas Mekas at Anthology Film Archives.⁸

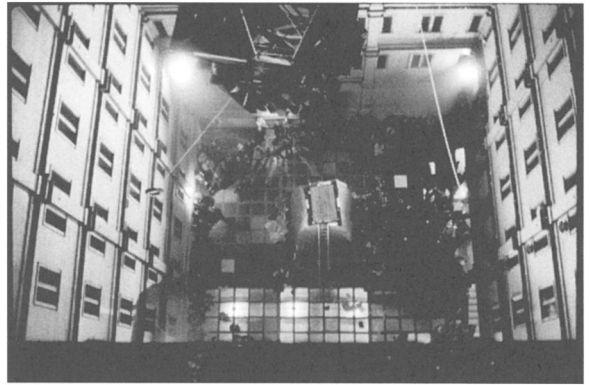
The approach of the London Film-makers’ Co-op was artisanal: all steps of the film production process—conception, direction, cinematography, editing, and production management—were organized and often completely undertaken by the same person. There was a genuine air of cooperation of course: the filmmakers did help to make each other’s films. Supported by the ownership of a step printer, which made possible all kinds of image repetitions and manipulations that would have been prohibitively expensive at a commercial film lab, the approach emphasized process and materiality. There was an implicit search for cinematic fundamentals, together with the practical necessity of making films cheaply. Perhaps the most significant aspect of this period was that the films were made, shown, and talked about in short, recurring cycles. In addition to its own work, it also sometimes showed work from the U.S. and from Europe. For instance, it was there that I first encountered the films and performances of the Austrian artist Valie Export. I personally did not make any films at the Co-op, and I was not linked to them until after I began to show there. There was undoubtedly a connection between my work and theirs, and I found them to be a collegiate and extremely perceptive audience. I first showed there in 1974 when I returned to London from New York with the four *Cone* films. I shared that particular program with Carolee Schneemann, who presented her film/live performance piece *Tracking*.

At about the same time, I was struck by descriptions I read of two American films, Andy Warhol’s *Empire* and Michael Snow’s *Wavelength*, in David

8. The Co-op is the subject of a traveling retrospective called *Shoot Shoot Shoot: The First Decade of the London Film-makers’ Cooperative* that opened at Tate Modern in May 2002. After visiting a number of European cities, the series will show in the U.S. at the Los Angeles Film Forum and Vancouver Pacific Cinémathèque in January 2003; at the San Francisco Cinematheque, Pacific Film Archive, SFMoMA, and Chicago Art Institute in February; and at Anthology Film Archives in New York in March.



Left: Andy Warhol. Still from *Empire*. 1964. © 2002 The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, PA, a museum of Carnegie Institute. All rights reserved. Right: Michael Snow. Still from *Wavelength*. 1967. Images courtesy Anthology Film Archives.



Left: E.G. A *Happening* by Robert Whitman at the Reuben Gallery, New York. 1960. Right: Courtyard. A *Happening* by Allan Kaprow at The Mills Hotel, New York. 1962. Photos © Robert McElroy/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

Curtis's book *Experimental Cinema*. (Curtis, incidentally, had been instrumental in the founding of the London Film-makers' Co-op.) *Empire*, made in 1964, was eight hours long, a fixed shot of the Empire State Building filmed in one continuous marathon session. Two things about the film caught my imagination: the idea of a fixed, unchanging, obsessive stare, and the idea of the duration of a film literally imitating the duration of the pro-filmic event. Snow's *Wavelength*, shot in a loft on Canal Street in 1967, is a film in which a slow, continuous zoom from a fixed camera takes forty-five minutes to go from its widest to its smallest field. At the start of the film you see a large loft with four windows at the very far end. By the end, the camera tightly frames a photograph pinned on the wall between two of the windows. What I took from *Wavelength*, I think, was the possibility that a single idea can define the essential outline of an entire film. This seemed to relate to the way that I was already approaching performance, where duration was largely determined by the time taken to realize the unfolding of a set of rules. What I ultimately admired about each of these films was their conceptual clarity.

My relationship with Carolee Schneemann, which began in London in 1971, brought me more closely into contact with Happenings, Fluxus, and the Judson Dance Theater. She was herself an active Happenings artist and filmmaker. With other artists such as Robert Morris, she had worked collaboratively with the dancers and choreographers in the Judson group. I came to know much of this work, of course, through the books and documents that by then were proliferating, but also, as time went on, by meeting many of the artists themselves. I was impressed by the sheer excess and visual inventiveness of Happenings, particularly those of Claes Oldenburg and Robert Whitman. In the end, though, I found more to think about in the work of Allan Kaprow, whose *18 Happenings in 12 Parts* was widely credited with naming the movement, and whose early writing was instrumental in setting it in motion.⁹ I was drawn to his way of planning and generating a

9. See, for instance, Allan Kaprow, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock," *ArtNews* (October 1958).

Happening using a score made up of instructions for the participants; of his interest in moving beyond the gallery into “lofts, stores, classrooms, gymnasiums, a friend’s farm, and so forth”;¹⁰ and his idea that the participants and the spectators of one of his Happenings might be one and the same. I was also drawn to the proto-conceptual pieces of Fluxus artists George Brecht and Nam June Paik, and to the unembellished, task-oriented choreography of Yvonne Rainer and Simone Forti within Judson.

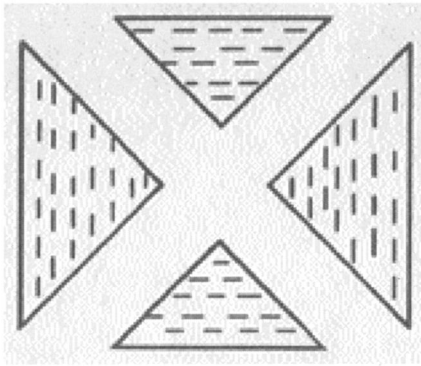
I gradually discovered that these different artists, producing different forms of performance and using different mixtures of media, had something in common. In different ways, each had been significantly influenced by the ideas of the composer and theorist John Cage. I attended many events and performances of his in both London and New York in the early seventies, including those with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. One particular event made a considerable impression on me. The piece was *HPSCHD*, which Cage originally realized in the U.S. in 1968. This version took place during a festival of experimental sound (“ICES”), which was held in a converted industrial space in North London called the Roundhouse, in 1972. The building had once housed a turntable for steam engines.

The central space was circular, some sixty feet across, and perhaps thirty feet high. Around the perimeter of this empty, circular room, Cage arranged about seven harpsichords, evenly spaced apart from one another and forming a perfect circle. At each harpsichord sat a harpsichord player. However, each was playing a different piece of music. The audience (there were some forty or fifty people, as I recall) wandered around the space. I remember standing at the very center of the circle, finding the place where all the different pieces being played merged into one, rapturous cacophony. Then, as I moved toward a particular harpsichord, the sound of that instrument rose, as those behind me, or to the side, diminished. One became a kind of mobile mixer, creating one’s own musical experience. This act of personal creation became a quite conscious part of the experience—and a source of considerable pleasure. It was qualitatively different from that of “following” a piece of music. Cage’s placing of the spectator as central to the realization of the piece, his attitude toward musical sound and listening, and his use of space, all struck me as being extremely suggestive.

Since the beginning of the fifties Cage had been experimenting with chance procedures in composition and with indeterminacy, and he had developed methodologies for corralling the ambient and the unexpected into a performance structure. As Cage put it, “It is a question of developing a form of theater without depending on a text. It is as simple as that.”¹¹ From 1956 to 1958, he taught a course in experimental composition at the New School for Social Research in New York. Attended regularly by Allan Kaprow, George Brecht, and Dick Higgins,

10. *Happenings, An Illustrated Anthology*, ed. Michael Kirby (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1965), p. 46.

11. John Cage, *For the Birds/John Cage in Conversation with Daniel Charles* (Boston: Marion Boyars, 1981), p. 166.



Arrangement of audience chairs into four inward-facing blocks for John Cage's Event at Black Mountain College, North Carolina. 1952.

and with drop-in visits by colleagues such as George Segal, Jim Dine, and Larry Poons, these classes became a source of inspiration and ideas, for in the late fifties the very thing that these artists lacked was any understanding of how to structure visual events in time. And others were also thinking about Cage. For instance, Yvonne Rainer has described how in her workshops with choreographer Robert Dunn in 1961, Dunn spent time “showing us and explaining the chance scores used by John Cage for his *Fontana Mix* and other pieces.”¹² Plus, Cage’s ideas about notation and chance cast a long shadow across the work of many of the Fluxus artists.

It is fair to credit John Cage with having mounted the first Happening. This occurred in 1952, while he was teaching at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. That year, Cage came up with an idea for an event, which would be structured along his new ideas of chance and indeterminacy. In an interview with Daniel Charles, he described what was on his mind at the time:

Merce Cunningham had for a long time been interested in the problems of assembling heterogeneous facts that can remain without interrelationships. For the Black Mountain show, my idea had been to treat the surrounding objects, including the different activities of the artists, as sounds. So I had to find a way to multiply those “sound sources.” On the other hand, I was intrigued by Schwitters’s descriptions of Dada theater in a book that had just been published. And I had read Artaud. Thus we decided to divide the audience into four triangles whose peaks would be directed towards an empty center. So free spaces were arranged everywhere. And the action wasn’t supposed to occur in the center, but everywhere around the audience. That is, in the four corners, in the gaps, and also from above.¹³

Having decided on the room, on his organization of the audience chairs into four inward facing triangles, and on the start time, Cage created his time structure.

12. Yvonne Rainer, *Work 1961–73* (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design/New York: New York University Press, 1974), p. 5.

13. Cage, *For the Birds*, pp. 164–65.

The length of the event (forty-five minutes) was dictated by how long it would take for him to read his so-called Julliard lecture, the performance of which already included long periods of silence. He then organized the same forty-five minutes into different blocks, or “brackets” of time, which overlapped one another. He invited his various colleagues to each take one of these blocks, and to perform an action or series of actions of their own choosing within it:

There were ladders, which you could climb to read poems or to recite texts. I climbed up there myself and delivered a lecture. There were also poems by M. C. Richards and Charles Olsen, piano by David Tudor, films projected on the ceiling and on the walls of the room. Finally, there were Rauschenberg’s white canvases, while he himself played old records on an antique phonograph and Merce Cunningham improvised amidst and around all that.¹⁴

Cage’s aim was “purposeful purposelessness: it was purposeful in that we knew what we were going to do, but purposeless in that we didn’t know what was going to happen in the total.”¹⁵

Cage’s methodologies changed considerably over the years. But they all uniquely suggested ways to integrate different classes of events, be they images, sounds, music, actions, objects, or language, within a temporal structure based on principles other than those of literary narrative. Given his ubiquitous influence, especially during the fifties and sixties, it does not seem far-fetched to place him as central to developments such as performance and film/video installation, as well as work with the projected image such as my own, which cross the traditional boundaries between art-forms, and which embrace the explicit manipulation of time.

14. Ibid.

15. Martin Duberman, *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1993), p. 370. On pp. 370–79, Duberman gives a description of Cage’s 1952 event, which includes excerpts from interviews with people who were in the audience.