

## **Of Rhymings, Resonances and Repetitions**

Anthony McCall in conversation  
with Maxa Zoller

*Doubling Back*, 2003. Solid light installation, 30-minute cycle in two parts. Computer, computer script, video projector, haze machine, variable dimensions. Installation view, Centre George Pompidou/ La Maison Rouge, Paris, 2004



**Maxa Zoller:** I would like to start with a quote by Fred Moten, the American theorist who said: 'History does not repeat itself but it rhymes.' Over the span of your 40-year career you have created different rhymes, different poems based on three forms: the line, the circle and the wave. Like a code or alien DNA, they have never changed but rather they have mutated and modulated into different shapes, experiences, stories. The first was *Line Describing a Cone*, which you made in 1973. This was followed by what you came to call 'solid light films' such as *Four Projected Movements* and *Long Film for Four Projectors*. After a 20-year absence from the art scene (during which you worked as a graphic designer) Chrissie Iles showed *Line Describing a Cone* in her groundbreaking film exhibition 'Into the Light' in 2001. This marked a turning point for you as digital technology, the new wave of film art exhibitions and the extremely positive response to *Line Describing a Cone* provided an encouraging context for the production of new work, the first of which was *Doubling Back*. Gradually, the (digital) line, circle and wave constellations became more complex and you started to experiment with vertical projection. You also became interested in narrative as the titles *Meeting You Halfway* and *Face to Face*, your most recent work, illustrate. These titles are not just narrative but they are also very intimate, suggesting a personal encounter between two people. Could you tell us a bit about the process of making solid light films; and particularly how you consider the relationship between the abstract and the personal?

**Anthony McCall:** My methods of making the solid light works has changed over the years. The 1970s works were shot on film using a film animation camera, and shown using a 16mm film projector. Since 2004, they have been produced using digital animation, and shown using a digital projector. But one thing has remained constant, and that is that at the center of every single one of my projected installations is a simple line drawing, a white line on a black background, which I now refer to as 'the footprint'. And it is also true to say that each of these works began as an idea expressed as a line drawing, or a series of line drawings, using pencil and paper. These would usually consist of simple renderings of the imagined three-dimensional object or installation, together with a series of sequential 'storyboards' where I would explore in detail the logic of the animation and what exactly the lines would do.

The idea is that the projected line-drawing on the wall is the 'footprint' of a large volumetric object made of a plane or planes of light, which has its apex at the lens of the projector some 10m away. This three-dimensional more-or-less conical object, slowly shifting its shape over time, can be looked at, occupied and explored. In the 1970s the visibility of the projections

was provided by the ambient dust that was always present in the old loft buildings where the work was shown, and by the fact that, back then, there were always a few people smoking. These days visibility is provided by a haze machine, which fills the projection space with a thin mist.

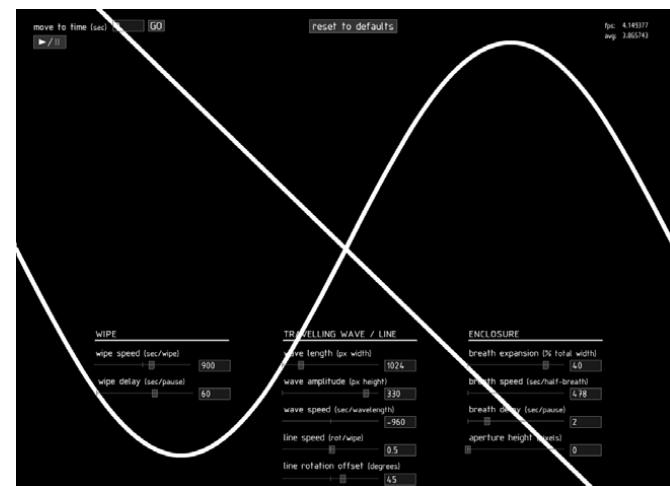
After making a series of six solid light works in the 1970s, I had a break of 20 years before resuming the series. Back in the 1970s, my particular interest was focused on rendering film down to its fundamentals, such as light and time, though this produced its own surprises, such as the fact that 'performance' and 'sculpture' wanted to come along for the ride. The way I thought about those pieces then, and how I named them was very matter-of-fact: *Line Describing a Cone, Long Film for Four Projectors, Four Projected Movements*, and so on. Twenty years later this did not seem quite so promising an approach, but fortunately, when I started really looking at the films again, I discovered all kinds of things that I had missed at the time that I made them. For instance, one of the short 'Cone' films, *Cone of Variable Volume* showed a complete cone of light (its footprint on the wall being simply a full circle) expanding and contracting in mid-air. When I looked at it again in the late 1990s I was immediately struck by the fact that the cone appeared to be breathing in and out, very much like a lung.

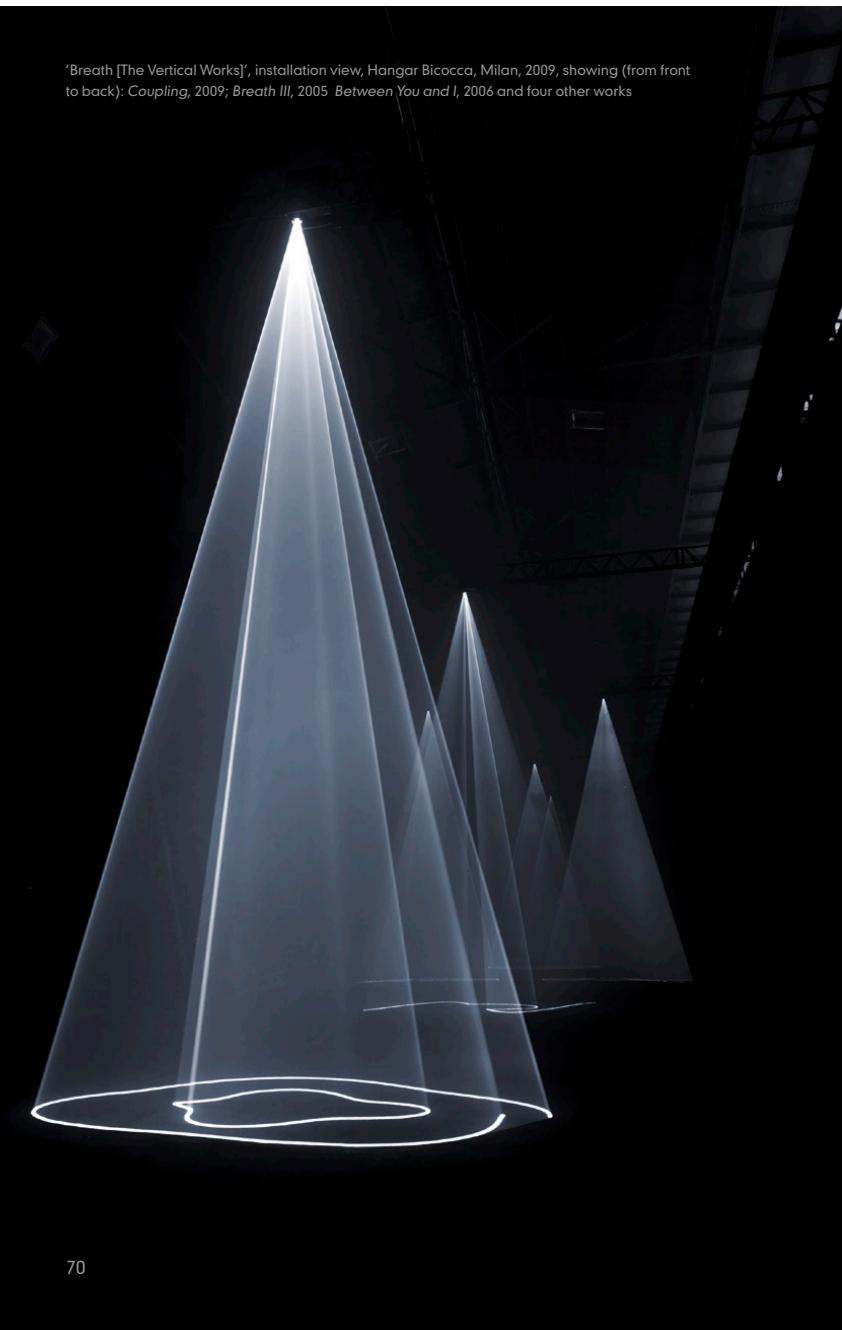
The insight that these abstract forms could be expressive of the corporeal seemed to offer me a new starting point. The titles of my new series reflect that shift, such as the two you mention, and others like *Breath*, *Between You and I*, and *Coupling*. Formally speaking, many of these new pieces are structured around the cinematic transition known as a 'wipe', which enables them to hold two quite different forms together in a constant and shifting state of exchange. This seemed appropriate, given that a body cannot exist in isolation, and I began to think about the works as being descriptive of a relationship rather than a thing. The same titles are also able to refer to the state of exchange that occurs between the projected object and the spectator.

MZ: You mention that old loft buildings provided the right conditions to install the solid light films and present them to an audience. These former work-spaces, the closure of which was indicative of the shift from industrial to post-industrial society, became the hosts for a new interdisciplinary postmodern art in the 1970s. They allowed you to, in a sense, de-contextualize the cinematic apparatus and, with an almost surrealist gesture, turn it into a new form; an 'object' made of light planes and a 'footprint'. Working outside the institution-alized spaces of art – be it the 'white cube' or the 'black box' – was not new to you as your performances *Landscape for Fire* and *Landscape for White*

Anthony McCall shooting *Cone of Variable Volume* on a Bell and Howell animation camera, 1974

*Between You and I*, 2006. Animation interface





'Breath [The Vertical Works]', installation view, Hangar Bicocca, Milan, 2009, showing (from front to back): *Coupling*, 2009; *Breath III*, 2005; *Between You and I*, 2006 and four other works

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Squares, both from 1972, demonstrate. Following this line of thought, your work has often been described as a postmodern hybrid with one leg in art history and the other in the co-op film culture. But rather than an amalgamation of two disciplines, 'art' and 'film', I see your oeuvre first and foremost as the visual manifestation of your artistic subjectivity and the journey it takes you on. You begin each of these journeys, as you just said, with a 'series of line drawings, using pencil and paper'. I think that if we want to understand your work, we need to understand your drawings first, before we consider art historical categories such as performance, sculpture, film and installation. Would it be correct to say that not only the drawings are central to the solid light films, but drawing itself? Could you say more about drawing and its relation to process and time? How do you start a drawing – as a doodle, a geometric riddle, a classical composition, or a kind of logical choreography?

AMc: Maybe I should describe just a few different ways in which I used drawing in the 1970s. In one way or another, all explored the idea of time. But some did this directly, some more indirectly.



*Five-Minute Drawing*, 1974/2007. Performance at the Musée de Rochechouart, 2007. Original performance at Art Meeting Place, London, 1974

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*Landscape for Fire II*, 1972. Installation view, North Weald, England

Pencil Duration, 1974. Graphite on paper, 76.2 x 76.2 cm, in verso: long strokes, 1x in from each corner (heavy pressure)



Firstly, 'drawing-drawings', produced simply as things in themselves, for instance *Five-Minute Drawing* (1974). This was executed in front of an audience, and, no surprise, took five minutes to complete. I began by pinning sheets of paper to the wall, one-by-one, from left to right, each succeeding sheet being mounted a little higher than the previous one. Then I used a piece of string as the arm of a compass to draw an arc in charcoal at the right-hand end of the row of sheets. The piece of string was impregnated with charcoal dust and, after drawing the arc, I stretched it taut and released it suddenly, so that it smacked against the sheets of paper leaving a long, continuous straight line. This sonic retort also marked the completion of the drawing. With the *Pencil Duration* drawings (1973-1974), the meaning of the word 'duration' shifted. It was not a question of how long it took. The limit was based on the pencil I was using to make the drawing. The drawing was finished at the exact moment when the graphite in the pencil was used up.

In the early 1970s I was also doing landscape performances based on grids of small fires. Each point of the grid was established by placing a shallow container on the ground, each filled with petrol. By carefully measuring the amount of liquid in each of the containers and by staggering the igniting of each of them, I created a sculptural event based on progressively shifting configurations of small fires. For these events the drawings took the form of scores, which worked out how the igniting of the grid was structured over time, and how that in turn produced the configuration in the landscape. Once they were finished, these scores were an exhaustive account of what needed to happen in the live event.

I started the solid light film series about the same time, and so I was making the fire performances and the films in parallel. They influenced one another. For instance, with the last three fire performances, the *Fire Cycle* series, I explored longer and longer durations, until the final work in the group was some 13 hours in length, running from dawn until dusk. I also extended the boundaries of the grid, creating a 'field', which could absorb all the spectators within it. I carried both these principles over into *Long Film for Four Projectors*, which I made soon after. This piece was made from a single straight line, and the development drawings for the work look like storyboards or permutational charts. The idea was to exhaustively realize every possibility within the structure. The piece was shot using 16mm film animation. I drew a single straight line on a piece of black paper with a ruling pen and white gouache. This, my animation art work, was placed under the animation camera. Animation is a frame-by-frame process, quite laborious, and based on the constant repositioning of the line, and careful counting. Eventually, the film was shot; then the 32 different sections were assembled

and printed on 16mm film stock. The final 'installation' consisted of four projectors pointing towards one another in a large, dark, room, creating in volumetric space four interpenetrating blades of light. Visitors came to see the work at any moment during its five-and-a-half-hour cycle. One final observation: the work is experienced as a hyperactive, projected spatial field. But on the far walls of the projected event there are four straight lines in motion. So drawing is never far away.

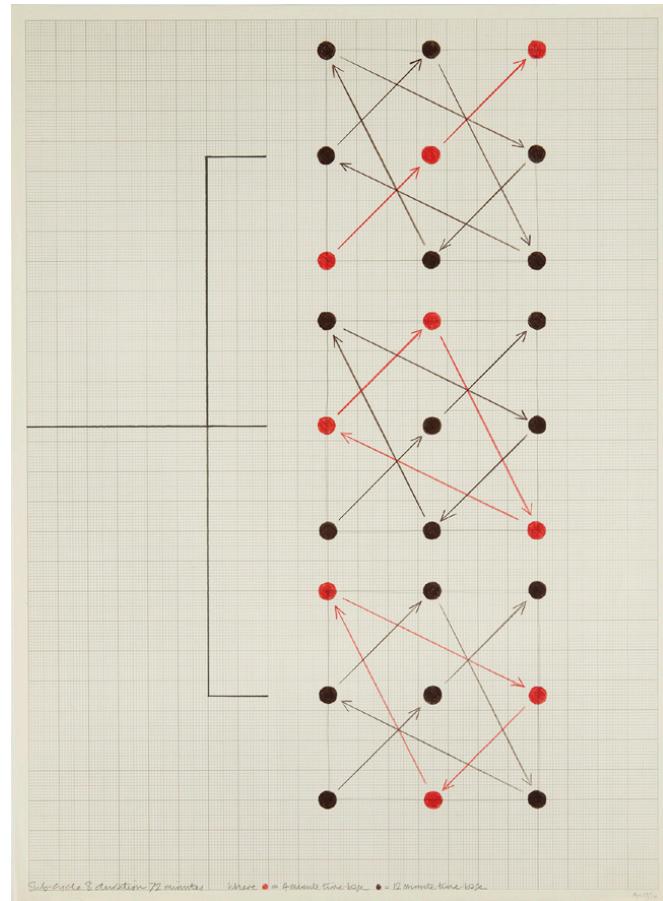
MZ: What do you mean by the term 'hyperactive field'?

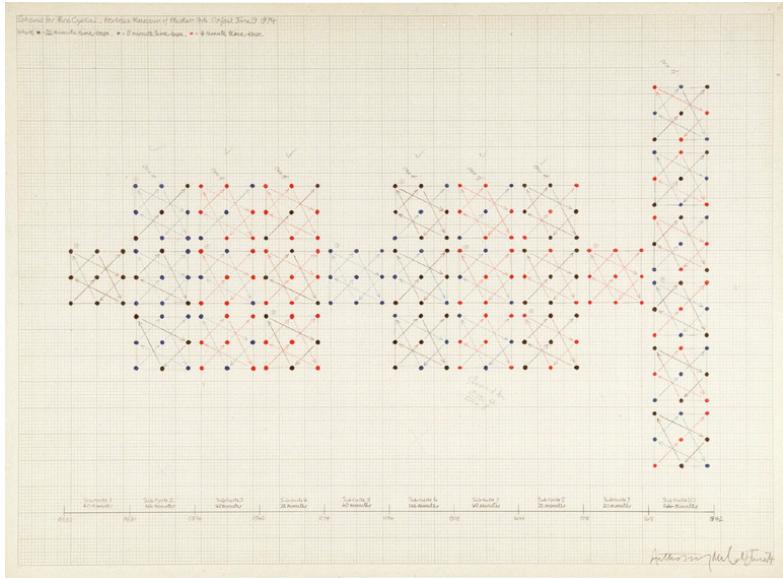
AMc: In my use of the term, 'field' refers to the fact that in *Long Film*, unlike, say, *Line Describing a Cone*, there is no singular object in space that the spectator can walk around, step into or leave. Instead, there are four planes of light that crisscross the entire space. So when you step into the space, you step into the film, which exists all around you, in every direction; the only way to leave the film is to leave the room. And when I say that the piece is hyperactive, I just mean that the four beams sweep the space over and over



*Fire Cycles III*, 1974. Chromogenic print, 34.5 x 40.7 cm. Performance view, Museum of Modern Art, Alden's Field Oxford, June 9, 1974

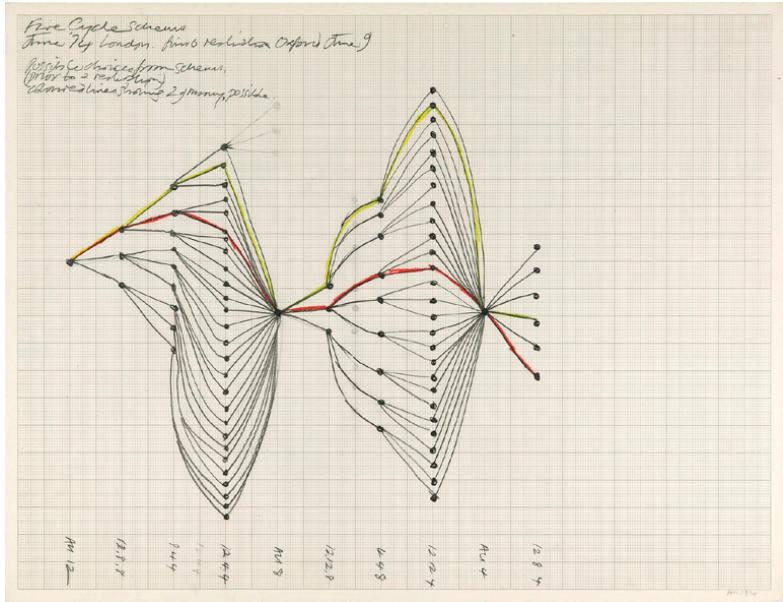
*Fire Cycles III*, 1974. Pencil and coloured pencil on graph paper, 75.9 x 55.9 cm, part of a set of 11 drawings (Sub-cycle 8)



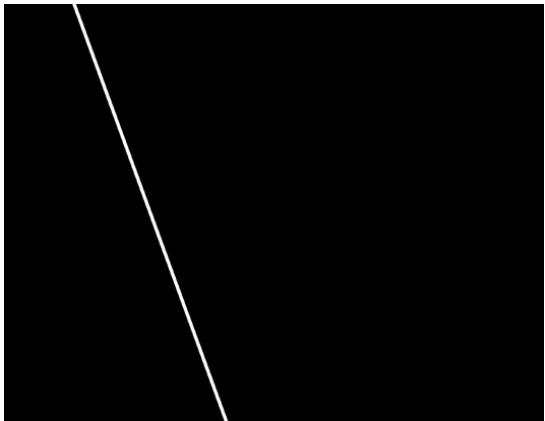


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*Fire Cycles III*, 1974. Scheme for possible combinations. Ink and pencil on graph paper, 55.9 x 76.2 cm



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*Long Film for Four Projectors*, 1974. Frame reel B

again in different directions and at rapid speeds and that all this is happening too fast to be easily 'grasped' or assimilated. *Long Film* is the only solid light work that uses four projectors; and certainly the only work that moves and changes so rapidly. With *Face to Face I*, I am again exploring a multidirectional field, but like most of the solid light installations, the membranes of light move very, very slowly.

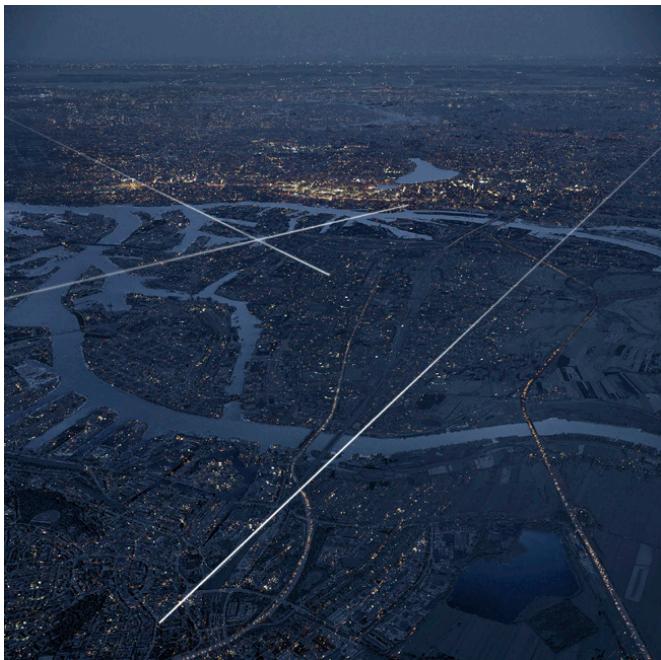
MZ: I would like to talk a bit about the experience of your work. Your work corresponds to the contemporary desire to and experience of relating to the (moving) image in an immersive way. The solid light films are (meta)physical sites in which the visitors come together to watch and experience the work and each other. Your work is in that sense a kind of social structure, or *field*. But smart phones have expanded the experience of your work, which has become a site for portraiture (posing, 'selfies') and 'cool' or 'arty' photography (which also have an afterlife online). So there is a very distinct difference between the earlier 'analogue' audience and the current 'digital' visitor. In other words, digital technology affected your work in more ways

than just technologically or formally. I would like to know if you observed a sudden or gradual change in the way in which your work is interacted with. Has the sociality of your work changed? And might this have an impact on the work itself?

AMc: It is very hard for me to tell if the 'sociality' of the work has changed, because so many other things are different. For instance, take the audiences. In the 1970s, in the co-ops and the avant-garde film venues, the audiences were relatively small, and to a large degree made up of other filmmakers. And they were looking at the work in relation to other avant-garde work – there was an excitement present that was connected to the overturning of conventions. These days, the work is seen in galleries and museums, art is popular in a way it wasn't back then, audiences are large and quite heterogeneous, installation as a form is understood, and screens and mediated experiences and smartphones have become central to urban life.

MZ: And this is the reason why a lot of people experience your work now through the lens of the smartphone. Are you in any way concerned about the ubiquity of digital technology – because as you know this means that analogue film stock will soon no longer be available because it will be – and has already become – unaffordable. In the exhibition at EYE you are showing the digital version of *Line Describing a Cone* and *Four Projected Movements*, *Line Describing a Cone 2.0* and *Four Projected Movements 2.0* respectively. As your work is animation-based the question of analogue or digital might not be absolutely fundamental to you. There are, however, films, such as *Four Projected Movements*, where the animation is based on the specificity of the technological apparatus.

AMc: *Line Describing a Cone 2.0* was remade digitally, which is to say that, rather than making a digital scan of each frame of the film, I started from scratch and remade the whole piece using computer animation. I went this route because the clarity of the line in an algorithm-based animation was superior to a scanned copy. It represents the original film perfectly, indeed, so perfectly that, lacking the imperfections of the original, it looks rather different and I felt that it was important to signal in the name *Line Describing a Cone 2.0* the fact that though absolutely true to the original conception, it sat there as a new 'instance' of the film. I've shown the two versions side-by-side. Visually, they do look different (the digital has a way of making analogue work look quite 'hand-made'). But socially, audiences respond in just the same way.



*Crossing the Elbe*, 2013. Installation rendering

Things get a bit more complicated with my recent digital remake of *Four Projected Movements*. Again, the remake perfectly re-creates the four movements of the original. However, this time something very important is obscured in the digital remake. The 16mm original consisted of one 15-minute reel of film, within which a vertical line sweeps slowly through 90 degrees until it is horizontal. That one reel of film is fed through the projector the four possible ways – forwards, backwards, forwards back-to-front and backwards back-to-front, each producing a unique event on the wall and in

three-dimensional space. The differences are enhanced by the fact that the projector is positioned close to the wall. The triangular blade of light therefore turns into or away from the wall, or rises up from the floor, or pushes down towards it. Although these four movements are perfectly represented, the agency of the projector, and the presence of the projectionist (who, in the film version, naturally, is absolutely necessary) is entirely missing from *Four Projected Movements 2.0*. This is a very serious loss, because that permutation, produced by the projector and the projectionist, is fundamental to the piece. I accept that 16mm film is an endangered species. Looking ahead, this suggests that a form of rationing will start to be implemented, so that the life of existing film prints can be extended. So we are between a rock and a hard place. We have film showings that may have to be rationed, and we have a digital version, which looks very good and is easy to show, but does not fully represent the work. I accept that if these works are to survive long-term, migration is necessary. But I think it is vital that the two versions are both seen so that they remain in dialog with one another. Ideally, the digital 2.0 version will be shown every day as a presence in the exhibition, and the film version will be shown, complete with projectionist, as a weekly 'live' event.

MZ: When I first started to think about an exhibition of your work at EYE I was inspired by the location and the architecture of the museum. Surrounded by water the building's ship-like shape and angular, dynamic forms somehow seem to speak of a new aesthetic, something that is closer to algorithmic and computational design than to (post)modern architecture. Thanks to digital software, art and architecture have started to cross over in a very powerful way as this year's Venice Architecture Biennale demonstrates. Potentially, your work could be placed and read in this new, exciting context, in addition to all the others that we've mentioned; medium-specific modernism, structural film, performance art, durational Cagean process art, sculpture, installation, drawing and animation. In fact, in your public space projects such as *Crossing the Elbe* your projections are in a direct dialogue with architecture in urban space. Your work, which is so minimalist and pure, in such a busy, noisy environment as Hamburg city – isn't there a contradiction?

AMc: *Crossing the Elbe* was a one-year project based on three pencil-slim, horizontal searchlight beams, each with a range of about 5 km. Each searchlight was positioned on the top of prominent buildings in three different parts of the city, and their direction was altered by hand a certain number of degrees every seven days, so that, over the course of three months, each had rotated through every part of the city. The beams were timed to come on

*Crossing the Elbe*, 2013. Installation view at Sammlung Falckenberg, Hamburg

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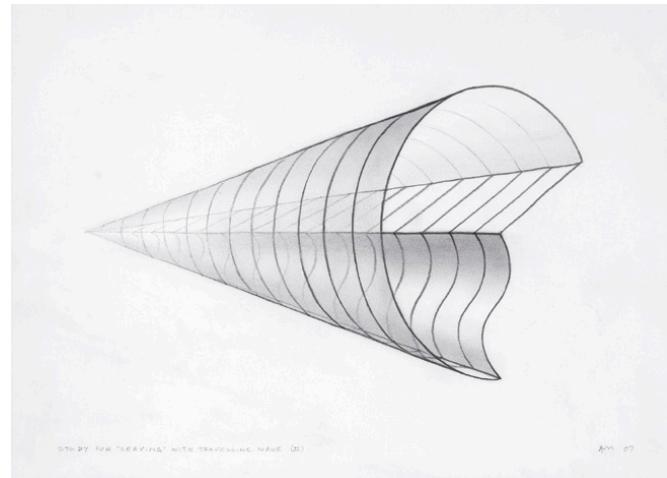
every night, 90 minutes after sunset, and they stayed on for just 21 minutes. That was the background structure: very simple, very precise. But the piece extended over Greater Hamburg: an area of some 5 square kilometres, and from any one vantage point, with weather and relative visibility being changeable, a spectator would see only one, or at the most two, of the beams. You are right about the noisy urban environment: the traffic, the trains, the buses, the aircrafts, the street lights and the weather all threw out visual challenges to the legibility of the piece, not to mention what other things a potential spectator might be up to during the visible period. But those single pencils of bright light sitting there overhead, crossing the night sky and the city, were the only object in the visual field that seemed to be motionless. Paradoxically, it was the unchanging stillness of the beams that gave them a quiet, independent place, and gave them their 'presence'.

MZ: For my final question I would like to return to the beginning of this conversation, where I used the metaphor of the rhyme to introduce your work. Your works, as diverse and interdisciplinary as they may be, are variations of the same basic beat or sound. The formal vocabulary and the conceptual grammar of your contemporary works, for instance, are clearly rooted in the early 1970s. But also within your practice itself there are rhythms and rhymes; the solid light films directly connect to the performances, the drawings and the work in public space and vice versa. In recent years in particular you have returned to your own archive and in a way 'recycled' old ideas, such as *Traveling Wave*. Would you agree with the observation that your work is cyclical, rather than linear? Why do you keep returning to the early works?

AMc: The early work was made 40 years ago; then I stopped for 20 years; then around 2000 I started again. As I explained earlier, when I started again I found a re-entry point that enabled me to pick up the threads of the solid light works while rethinking them as representations of the body. But over the course of the last dozen years, I have also found myself drawn back to other early works, which somehow seemed freshly relevant; and then there are the recently developed 'new' ideas that have turned out to have firm roots in that early period.

For example, in 2009 I began exploring the use of acoustic space in my solid light installation *Leaving (With Two-Minute Silence)*, which was a new development for me. But this new piece reminded me that in 1972 I had been interested enough in sound that I made a sculptural installation based purely on white noise. Though never exhibited, it was a completed work, and

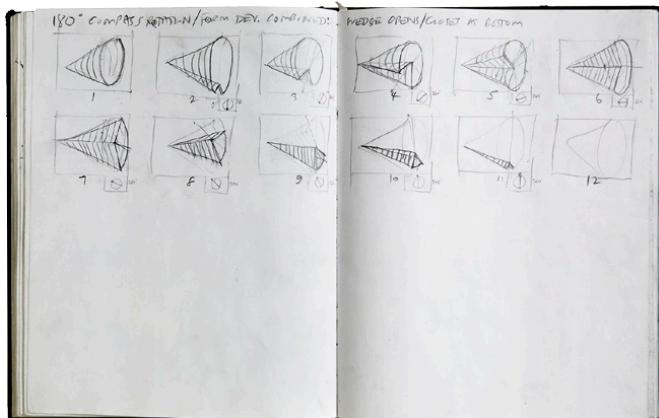
Study for *Leaving with Traveling Wave (II)*, 2006. Footprint and volume schematic. Graphite on paper, 30.5 x 43.2 cm, 2 of 13



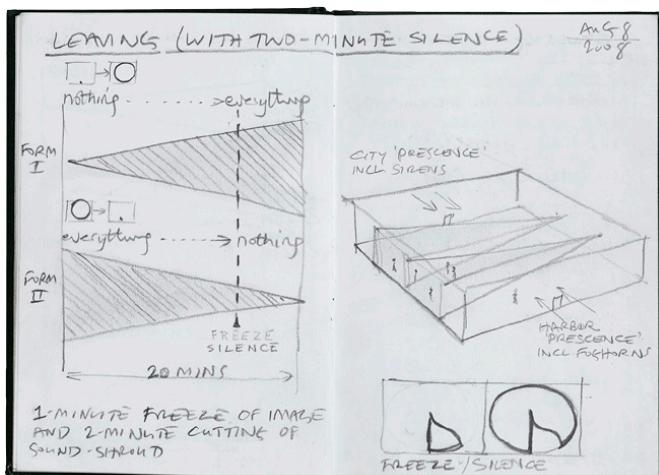
I realized that I should now get it out, set it up and see what it did. Unfortunately, the one-inch Ampex magnetic tape that carried the piece had vanished. However, I still had the detailed 1972 notes of the electronic-music-studio session in which it was made, plus a group of installation drawings, and I decided to remake the piece. With the help of sound programmer Stephan Moore, I did just that. There were two surprises, however. One was that its continuous 'installation' structure, which assumes a mobile visitor, was, aesthetically, perfectly developed, even though at the time looping techniques were quite unstable (the new digital sound file on a computer, on the other hand, could manage this with its eyes closed). The other surprise was that although I had remembered the work as highly abstract, simply using white noise as a sculptural medium to alter the perception of three-dimensional space, in fact it was strongly representational, unmistakably resembling a rolling wave repeatedly crashing on the shore. *Traveling Wave* is a remake of the very same piece that was made in 1972. However, the

Large Notebook 4: November 17, 2004 – July 20, 2011. Study for *Leaving*, 2006

Small Notebook 32: August 1, 2008 – October 19, 2008. Study for *Leaving, With Two Minute Silence*, 2009



*Leaving (With Two-Minute Silence)*, 2009. Installation view, Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, 2009



1972 version was necessarily based on just two stereo tracks, with the sound simply mixed between two pairs of studio monitors. The remake, utilizing five 'hemisphere' speakers in one long relay, more effectively creates the sense of a physical wave, rolling, almost visually, down the centre of the room. The remake is probably therefore a better representation of the original idea than the lost original version.

Another example. Over the last seven years I have made several proposals for public, off-site works. One of these, *Crossing the Hudson* (2006), proposed the gradual illumination of a disused railroad bridge in upstate New York. The proposal specified that it should take six months to fully illuminate the struts of the 800-m bridge (a speed of only 4.37 m per night), and then a further six months to gradually 'un-light' it, in the same direction and at the same extremely slow speed. Each calendar year represented a single cycle of a repeating structure. In this proposal I came to recognize the shadows of two earlier durational works: *Line Describing a Cone* (1973) in which a single line/cone of light comes into being in space, also at a glacially slow speed, until it was complete; and *Two Pencil Duration* (1974) in which

Study for *Crossing the Hudson*, 2006. Gradual illumination of the Poughkeepsie Railway Bridge over a period of one year, a speed of 2 metres per night, LED installation. Acrylic paint on paper, 20.9 x 34.3 cm



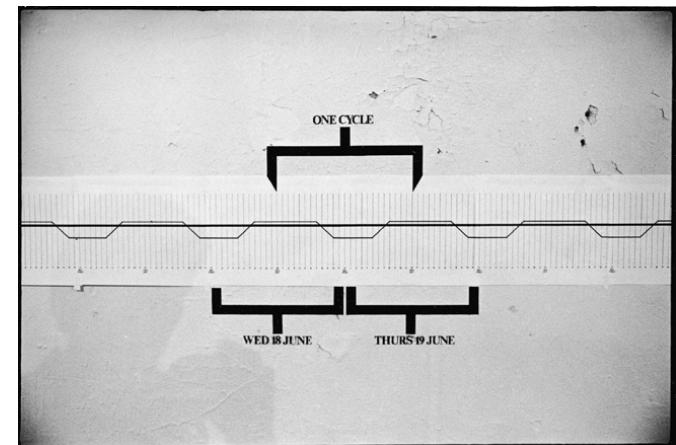
*Long Film for Ambient Light*, 1975. Installation view, Idea Warehouse, New York, 2 pm, June 18, 1975

*Long Film for Ambient Light*, 1975. Time schema installation view, Idea Warehouse, New York, 1975



two horizontal bars were drawn with continuously hatched strokes until the pencils were completely used up. And both the cyclical structure and the interplay between electrical and natural light was anticipated by my installation *Long Film for Ambient Light* (1975), in which I covered the windows of the space with white paper and suspended a light bulb at the centre of the room.

There are so many other examples of rhyming and resonances between then and now. I am perfectly comfortable with the idea that there are really just a small group of related ideas in play that are shaped and reshaped across time, and which are, perhaps, given fresh meaning by changed circumstances.



Notebook: May 1, 1975 – June 26, 1975. Study for Long Film for Ambient Light

