



“I am quite attracted to ephemeral media... I think of what I do as being somewhere between sculpture, cinema and drawing.”

AN INTERVIEW WITH ANTHONY McCALL

Pablo Garcia: *Maybe we can start with a description of You and I, Horizontal and the solid light films in general.*

Anthony McCall: The first solid light film I made was back in the seventies, *Line Describing a Cone*. The principle that all of these works follow is the same, which is that usually with a film you look at the image projected onto the wall. With the solid light film, however, what you're looking at is primarily the three dimensional, volumetric form that exists in space between the projector and the wall. And *You and I Horizontal* is one of the more recent pieces made, in 2005, in which we have a very complex emerging, mutating form based on an elliptical cone and a travelling wave.

PG: Would you say that basic materials to make this happen is a projector, an image and a hazer that allows the beam to be illuminated?

AM: That's right. If we just had the projector in the room, all we'd have would be a projected line drawing on the wall. But by adding a hazer machine, which creates a thin mist in the space, the light between the projector and wall is turned into a visible plane.

PG: As we were installing *You and I, Horizontal I* was watching you "tune" the space. And at the opening, we saw a lot of people in the space and it seems that one of the ways it negates a typical film construct is that everyone seems to instinctively look toward the projector. It seems to be a curious inversion and I wonder if that was an understanding you had at the very beginning or is it something that you had to learn that people instinctively did?

AM: No, on the contrary, people usually when they walk into a space where there's a projector, they instinctively look toward the wall. We're used to looking at images. But I've learned to set up my installations in such a way that when you walk into the room you're already looking in the general direction of the projector. And so you're already seeing the three dimensional form. It's not that it's incorrect to look at the projected image, it's just that the "major action," if you like, is this big sculptural object hanging in mid-air.

PG: Clearly the directionality of how the space is set up helps reinforce that when one first enters the space. But as you watch people as I did for half an hour yesterday, no one broke that habit and

turned around to look at that wall. In fact, many people actually backed themselves up against the wall because they felt the need to see the whole piece. But that meant standing against the wall, looking back at the projector to get the full cone.

AM: Yes, it's dreadfully true. The fact is that once your body's involved, sculpturally, which is to say that you're moving yourself around to find your own different perspectives, it's much more interesting than looking at what is, effectively, a fairly inactive image.

PG: Does the wall matter? Does there need to be a screen? Does there even need to be an image in the traditional sense? Could the cone live without the screen?

AM: Perfectly well. However, with my more recent works, which are a little more complex, it's sometimes quite helpful to see what the drawing is doing, as a way of understanding structure if you're trying to see exactly what's going on. It's rather like an aerial view.

PG: Right, so you're talking about mental coordination between the graphic and its three dimensional extrusion, that someone can try to get multiple vantage points at the same time.

AM: Exactly. Plus there is for me a very interesting contradiction between looking at two things, at two faces of the same thing. They're identical in terms of what's going on, but they are so radically different from each other that you can't quite believe it. So you can't quite believe your eyes. There is a two-dimensional line drawing on the wall, and this massive, three-dimensional, volumetric form in space. I've had the experience

of looking at the volumetric form and then turning around to see exactly which part of the drawing is creating it and being quite surprised and not quite believing it. And the other thing that happens when you turn around is that what was on your left is now on your right. Now that may seem a very simple thing, and of course we "know" this, but knowing it and understanding it are quite different and sometimes it just seems impossible. Your mind gets in quite a twist, balancing the two things.

PG: The relationship you're describing is a mix between the representational and the experiential. The drawing we understand is a representation of something else, but then there's the cone itself that emerges out of that that is somehow actual, physical.

AM: I began to think about what a film actually was and did; a film is a representation, it always represents something that's happened in the past. It has happened elsewhere, elsewhere from the moment of projection, so therefore a second hand version of the primary object. And I began to ask the question: "What might a film look like that only exists in the present and that only exists at the moment of projection and therefore shares the space of projection with the audience?"

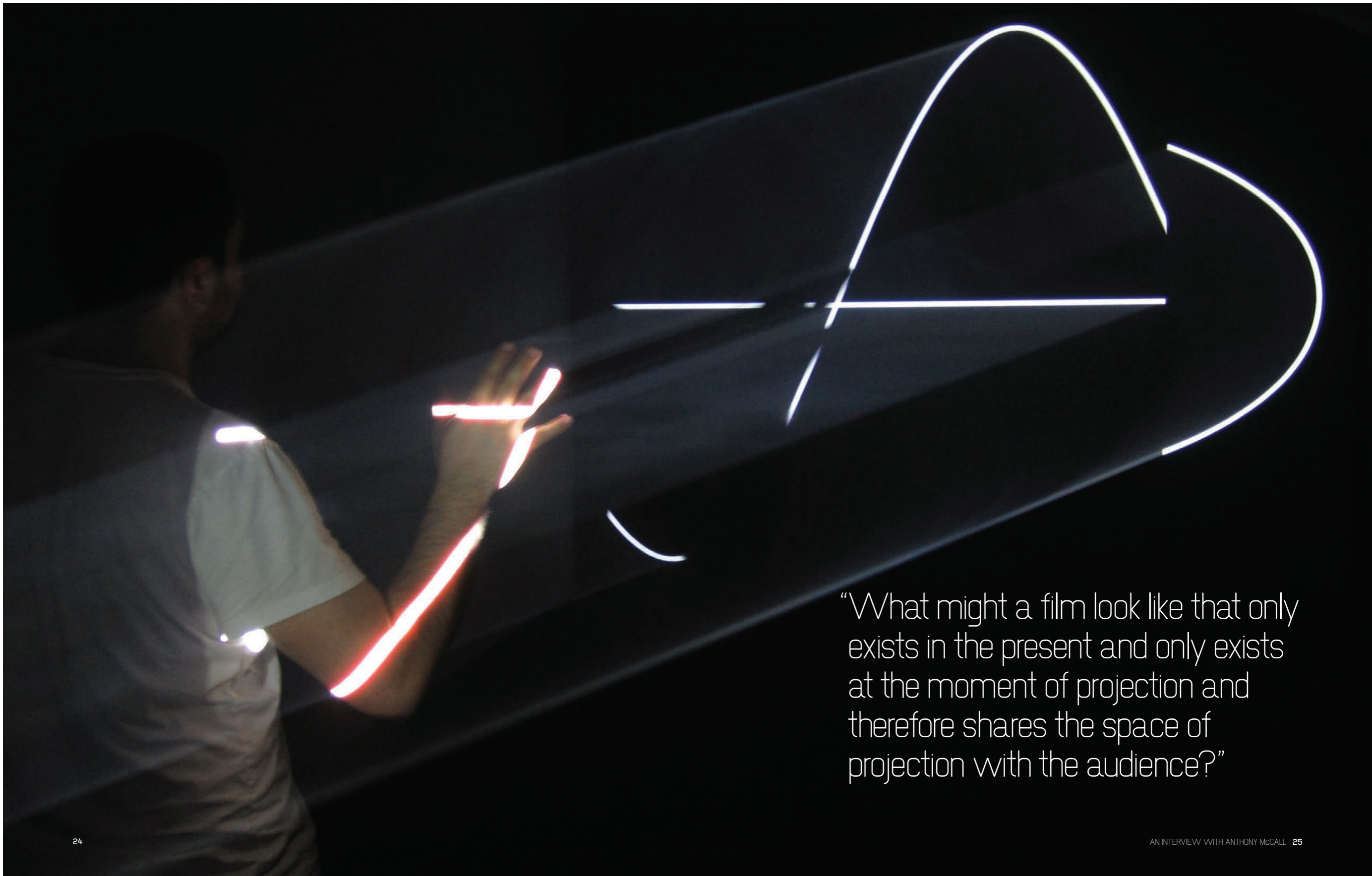
Spike Wolff: The piece biases itself naturally, organically, to just someone experiencing it and not having to really think or analyze anything, You started out with a more traditional way of film making, and over time you've upended those values. Do you need sort of a critical subversion of, or tension between, traditional cinema and your "films"?

AM: Well, certainly in my case, in the seventies, I began with what I thought of as a sort of cinematic problem. So I thought in cinematic terms. The kinds of questions we were asking, whether it was possible to have a cinema which only existed at the moment of projection, that didn't refer to a past time or a past place. All cinematic images do that of course, they refer to something that's already happened, and so it's in the past, and what happened in some space other than in the space of the projection. That seemed to be the interesting problem for me. But of course, having made *Line Describing a Cone* and those first few films, it quickly became obvious that I backed into other kinds of spaces. One of which was sculptural space, three-dimensional space.

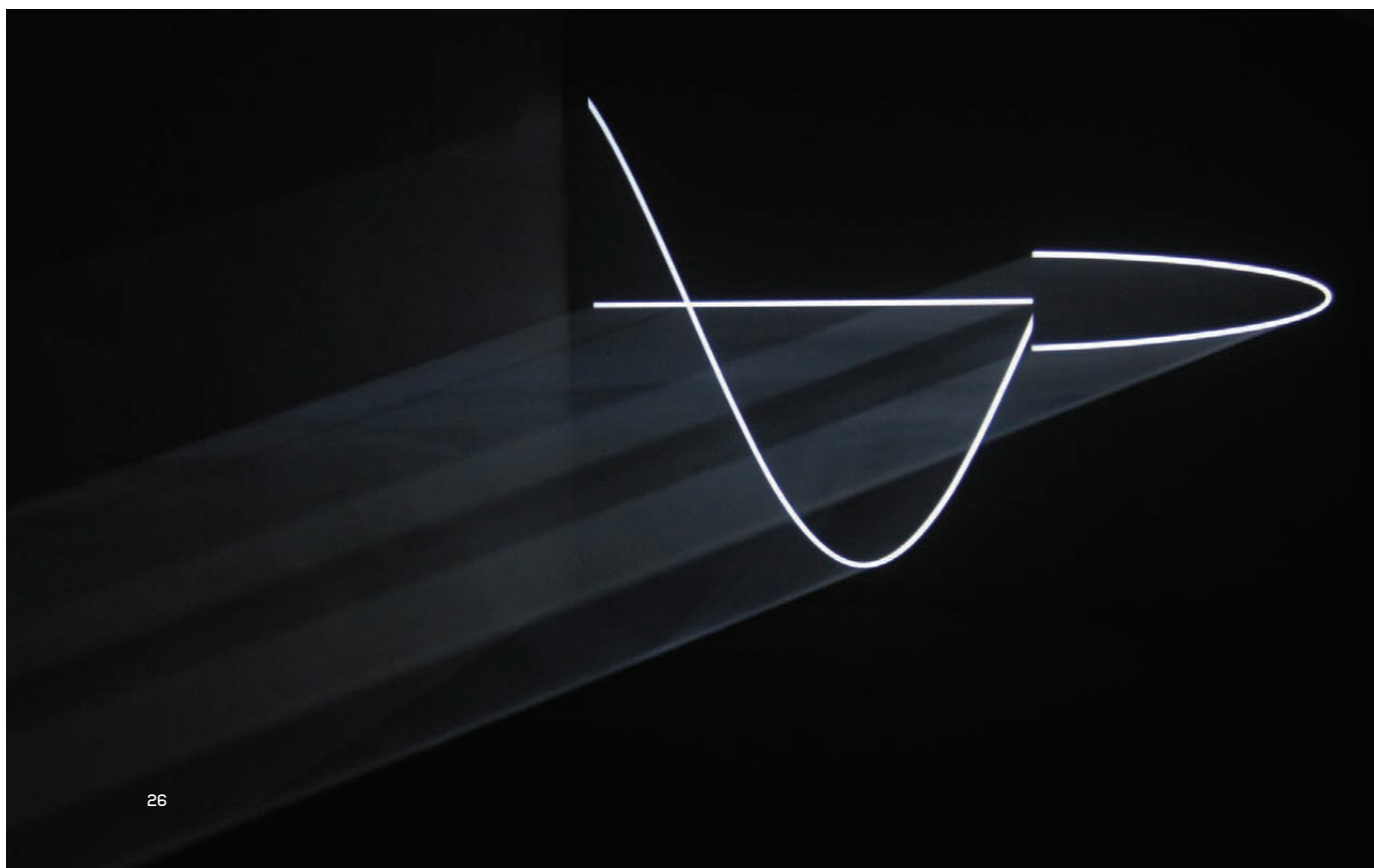
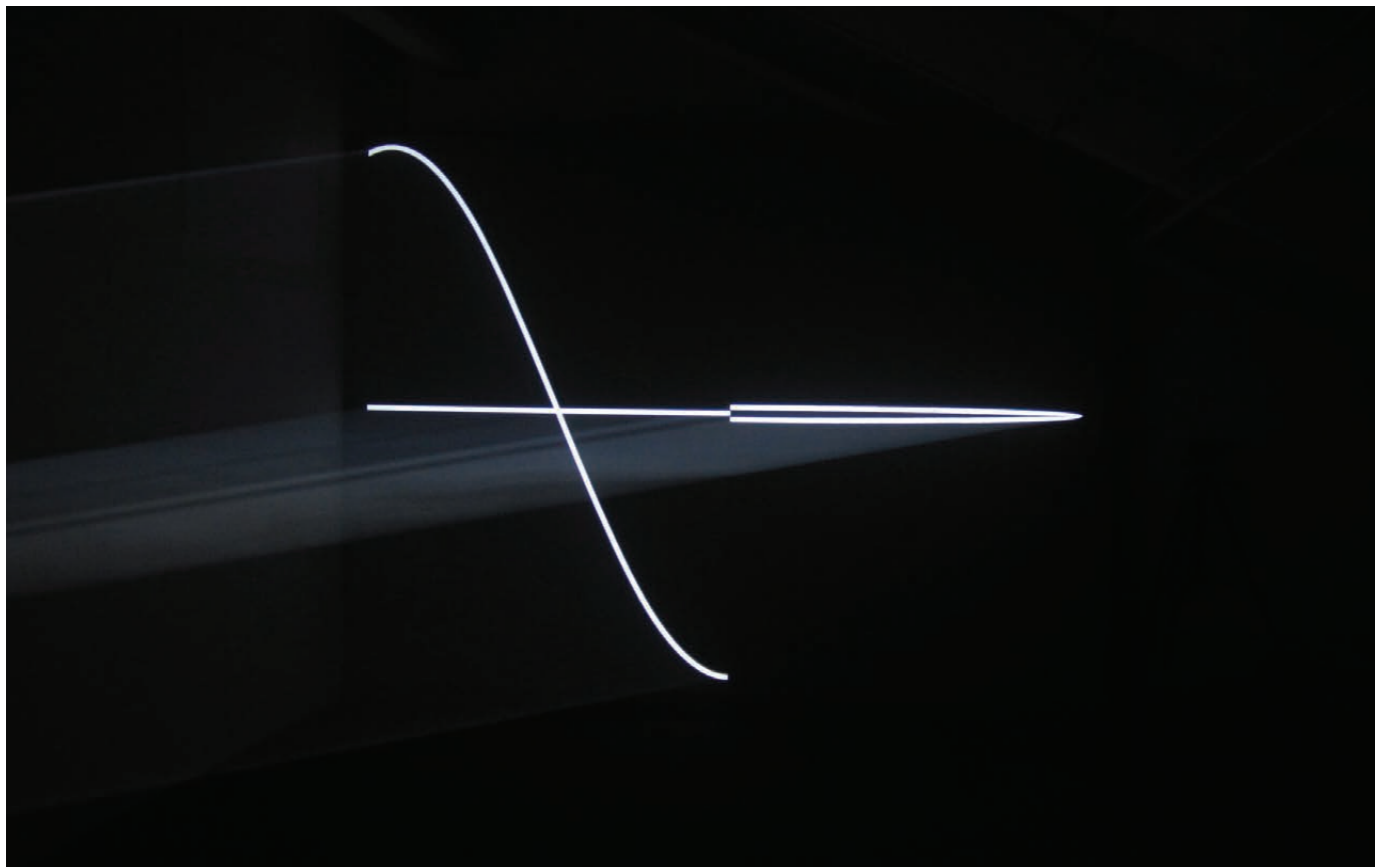
So immediately, even though I began with some cinematic questions in mind, I had a whole other bunch of problems. The other is, I suppose, performative, in that when you're looking at a movie, you're aware of looking with other people, but you're basically looking at an image. But when you're looking at one of my solid light works you're also inevitably looking at other people looking, in that you're all occupying the same three-dimensional space and you're negotiating not only the space around the object, but also you're negotiating space with other people. So those two new areas became increasingly important. Now I see what I do as caught in a kind of force field between cinema, sculpture, and indeed, drawing.

PG: The way you describe the experience of seeing each other seeing makes me ask about your solid light films and how you kind of took a pause for several years.

AM: Twenty. (laughs)



“What might a film look like that only exists in the present and only exists at the moment of projection and therefore shares the space of projection with the audience?”




PG: *Twenty, years (both laughing) and now you've come back but I've noticed that the titles have changed. You've used advanced technologies to replicate the effects of the original, but the titles of your recent solid light films are You and I, Horizontal; Between You and I; Leaving; Breath; Doubling Back; Turning Under. These are titles that have a lot of subjectivity, relative spatial terms, prepositions and pronouns which are spatial in nature, as opposed to the ones in the '70s which were Line Describing a Cone, Long Film for Four Projectors, Partial Cone, Cone of Variable Volume, which are more descriptive and geometric in absolute terms.*

AM: Well I think the temper of the times, the '70s, was militantly materialist and it was the "what you see is what you" get mentality. The titles were all flat-footedly descriptive, as you've pointed out. When after a 20 year gap I decided to return to making these, I began to return to look at these quite carefully and in one case in particular, *Cone of Variable Volume*, I noticed something that I simply hadn't seen before. *Cone of Variable Volume* is simply, in terms of drawing, a circle on the wall which expands and contracts. Three-dimensional space you have a volume of, a big conical volume, expanding and contracting. And my interests at the time had been to see what happened when you changed the volume of something. *Cone of Variable Volume* did the same thing within the 10, 15 minutes. But it did it at four different speeds. Very slowly, expanding and contracting, through to very rapidly expanding and contracting. And when I looked at this piece again in 1996, I was amazed to discover that the object appeared to be breathing. And

that was at the slowest speeds. It was like a lung. And as it got faster and faster, it became to quite obviously almost have a sort of erotic connotation. And this in fact, gave me a reentry point. I was able to bring forward all of my materialist concerns from the early work, but this time around I realized that I could begin to think about something else. In the '70s I was thinking about the way audiences look at cinematic objects and how duration affects how you look. This time I was bringing all of that forward, but I've also been interested in the possibility of representing the body. Obviously not in pictorial ways but in the way that rhythm, motion and certain kinds of forms can make suggestions, much like a completely abstract form expanding and contracting can suggest breath.

PG: Well it seems that the subjectivity in the recent pieces have these scale-to-spatial relationships to the body that are not necessarily precise. They're not scaled to a human but they have devices within them that make a human understand their own body in the way that the other ones didn't. So for example, in *You and I, Horizontal* there is a horizontal line that rises and falls slightly. So Spike, who is shorter than I am, is sometimes below that horizon and I'm above it. It not only makes me understand my own relative position, but also makes me understand others and their relative position in the space. In that sense, scale becomes a really critical part of your work. Because the one irreducible part is the human scale. The person isn't going to change in size but your work's size changes. Maybe you can talk a little bit about scale and how you see scale in terms of the human body?

A dark, atmospheric landscape with a bright light source on the horizon, creating a lens flare effect. The light source is a bright, circular glow that fades into a dark, hazy sky. The foreground is a dark, flat surface, possibly a road or a field, with a few faint lines suggesting a path or a boundary. The overall mood is mysterious and contemplative.

“This idea, to expand the spatial field such that it was impossible to be outside the work; if you were in the space, you were in the work.”

AM: Yes, it's something I'm very aware of in doing these installations, and in fact the sort of Vitruvian moment in scale in these pieces is halfway down the beam. Ideally, if you have your arms and fingers outstretched you should, halfway down the beam, be able to just about touch it, if you reach up. But it must be much, much larger than you at the wall and of course it diminishes at a point so you have every possible scale, with you somewhere in the middle. That's very important. The other thing I suppose is that for these forms, the projection has to be large enough to incorporate a number of people at once. So again, that partly determines what scale it needs to be. All the things that are acting within the form are constantly, but very, very slowly changing, so that whatever you accommodate yourself to then gets removed and changed. It's not only that straight line you're referring to that was changing angle and height, but the elliptical form expands and contracts very slowly, the wave form is moving very slowly left to right so that's creating new pockets of space. So your body is all caught within a field of very, very slowly changing values.

PG: Do you see a difference between time and duration?

AM: I usually use the word duration because, to me, that's a piece of plastic. That's like a material. And I talk about durational structure, for instance, as the shaping of something through time, the structuring of something for a period of time, whereas time is an abstract description.

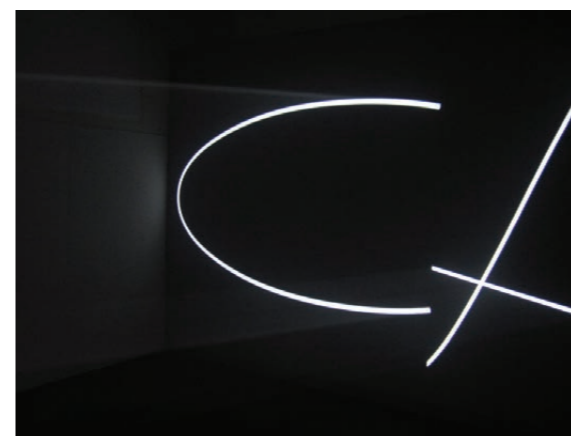
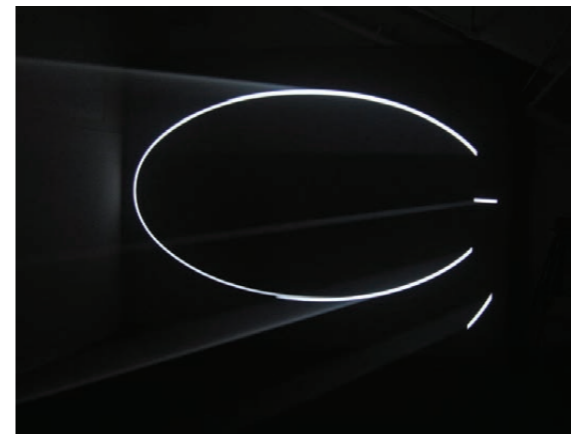
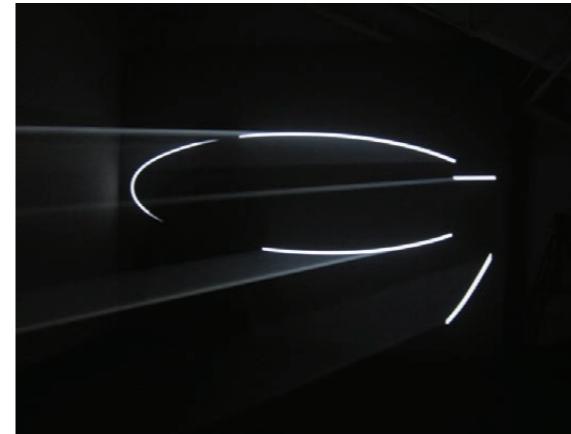
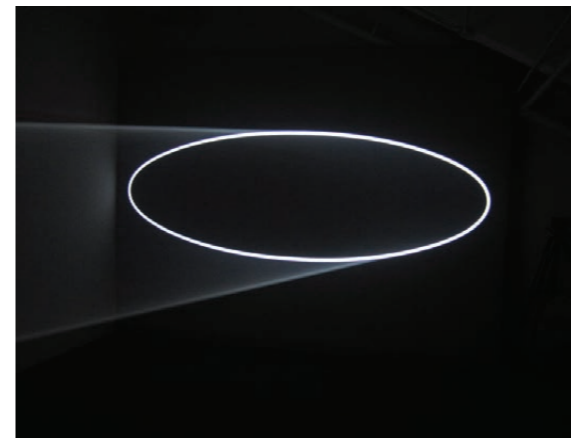
SW: Architects really enjoy the spaces you make because they are impossible spaces. Architects are very interested now

in theories of folded space, a space that is more responsive and subjective, that ideas of movement and time are embedded into the physicality of a structure. I feel that you're the closest to that target. Have you thought about this?

AM: Not in architectural terms, perhaps. I've been thinking about the difference between looking at static sculpture, solid sculpture, and looking at my objects. In order to look at a three dimensional space, you have to walk around it, look at it, see around the back of it. My work is transparent—all the plans are suggested—so it has an added sculptural component of being inhabitable. You can walk into it and out of it. There's actually nothing solid. And yet, there are suggested interior spaces and pockets that you can occupy. So that is already different from looking at traditional solid sculpture. With traditional static sculpture, usually all the motion is provided by you, the spectator. You're the one who builds up a picture of what you're seeing by moving. And in my forms, there's an added element, which is the forms themselves are on the move. They're mutating, very, very slowly. And this destabilizes some of the confidence you get from knowing you can occupy it, inhabit these pockets of space created by the projection.

PG: How much does the historical emergence of linear perspective influence the crafting of the solid light films? In one respect, a graphical similarity exists: a single point which determines the projection of lines in space to a screen.

AM: If you use the optics of projection—in a way an inversion of the vanishing point—they're completely hardwired and built into the apparatus. So I don't think



I can take credit for having thought this through philosophically. I think it came with the territory. Though I note that in the case of my projections, it's an appearing point rather than a vanishing point. It's the point from which the image emanates from the lens of the projector.

SW: What are the things you want to start exploring next?

AM: I'm still following my nose. There's a lot of ideas I'm exploring in the *Solid Light* pieces. For instance, I've just begun working with sound again, which I hadn't done since my very earliest works. When I started the *Solid Light* pieces, I never used sound, feeling the ambient sound was already quite sufficient. In the case of 16mm, for instance, the projector provided a kind of sound shroud for the installations. But in the last few years, I've realized that sound was a very interesting way to get around the hermetic quality of an installation. I've said previously that early on the urgent idea seemed to be how to make a projected work that existed only in the present and only in the space of the projection event. Now that seems to be something of an unnecessary constraint, having gotten this far. The idea of using sound in a black box installation suddenly seemed like a way of opening up, of dissolving those walls to some degree. Sound is extremely referential. I don't mean voice, I don't mean music, I mean noise, recognizable sounds. If you introduce a sound that's recognizable into an installation, it immediately dissolves the walls. It sends you out, beyond the space you're in. For instance, in a recent piece I completed called *Leaving (with Two Minute Silence)*, one of sounds in the room was the sound of urban traffic,

not very loud, just at the edge of your consciousness. And that sent you out in an interesting way. The sound could come from just outside the gallery, it could be almost as if there wasn't very good insulation and you were hearing what was outside the room. But also, the other sound in the room was that of the harbor and a distant fog horn. That took you beyond what could plausibly be outside the room, away from the space you were in. And that for me was the possibility of opening up an interesting avenue to explore in the future, the way in which a sound can be used to dissolve space or to suggest space that isn't actually physically there with you.

SW: *You're speaking of sound almost in an expansive way. Could it also be used in a compressive way, to compress the space as well as expanding it?*

AM: Yes, I think it's incredibly open and all very suggestive. I'm not interested in what's called immersive environments. I'm not interested in walking into a wall of sound. In fact, I like the idea of sound as a very subtle thing, a very intimate thing, and not occupying the whole space. I like the idea when people are looking or in one of these pieces, that they are fully conscious of the act of being there. And one of the things I notice about sound environments, they very often absorb you in a way in which you can't talk to anyone and you can't hear yourself think. That kind of use of sound, very aggressive sound, doesn't interest me.

SW: *If the sound is recognizable as traffic, then does it begin to take people and their imagination, for just that moment, outside where they physically are. What happens when they are thinking about that other*

space instead of being completely immersed where they are?

AM: Well, I've only done this first try so far. It doesn't seem to quite work like that. It operates on the imagination rather than the body. Your body is still fully present and working visually. It's not dominating. It acts like a reference point. You notice it. And I don't know where this is going to lead, frankly. It's a way of laying in suggestions, is all I can say. I'm not quite sure, to be very frank, how it combines with the sculptural experience. Structurally in *Leaving* I built the sound in, in such a way that the cutting of the sound became the most important moment within the structure. And I couldn't make the two-minute silence if I didn't have the sound, so by having this continuous sound, which I could then remove, I can create the awareness of silence.





“I developed a rule of thumb—the fastest object in the room should always be the spectator.”