

# Anthony McCall

Solid Light, Performance  
and Public Works



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EDICIONES POLÍGRAFA



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**Anthony McCall's Cybernetic Systems**  
Robert Hobbs

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... however, unlike sculptural materials. [...] 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 sculpture and to film.

Anthony McCall, "Line Describing a Cone and Related Films," October, 2003

Only rarely have artists crafted such convincing rationales for their work that art writers have used them as diagnostics for analysis and debate. As the above epigraph indicates, the multimedia British expatriate and long-time New-York-City resident artist Anthony McCall, initially known in the 1970s for his groundbreaking "solid light" projections, accomplished such a feat with his 2003 October piece,<sup>1</sup> when he enumerated both sculptural and filmic characteristics of his work without providing reasons for ranking one over the other. Following his article, many impressive critics and scholars have utilised his terms for well-argued disquisitions about whether or not his "solid light" projections should be termed "sculpture" or "cinema" and whether they should be subsumed under a minimalist or post-minimalist rubric. They have deemed the first set of terms particularly important since this pair concerns disciplinary priorities and boundaries, predicated on the question of whether McCall's innovative works belong to the history of art or film.

These turf wars, as one might imagine, have dominated the scholarly literature on this artist's "solid light" films, in particular, but these issues are of little concern to the present essay, since I consider McCall's art to be an intermedia expression that exploits aspects of film and sculpture as well as theater and installation art. His work broke new ground in the 1960s-'70s initiative called "expanded cinema"<sup>2</sup> by advancing its goal to discover nontraditional spaces for screening films, thereby demonstrating this genre's independence from Hollywood-type produc-

<sup>1</sup> Anthony McCall, "Line Describing a Cone and Related Films," *October* 103 (2003): 42-62.

<sup>2</sup> Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (New York: P. Dutton & Co., In., 1970), p. 41. Youngblood connects "expanded cinema" to "expanded consciousness," explaining that it "isn't a movie at all: like life it's a process of becoming..."

tions, with their requisite seated audiences and narratives intended for vicarious pleasure.<sup>3</sup> McCall's art did so by making viewers aware of cinema's fundamental structure and by emphasising film projectors and the physical light they emit as its primary self-reflexive focus, while dispensing with traditional screens and employing walls as repositories for his geometric light animations. Convinced he had taken his new art form, represented by his seven rigorously conceived mid-'70s "solid light" works, as far as he could, McCall stopped making them. Subsequently, he devoted his energies to a series of political and conceptual works as well as the daily tasks of building a productive Manhattan-based art book design business. Then, in the late 1990s, beginning with discussions with Whitney curator Chrissie Iles about including his first projection, *Line Describing a Cone* (1973), in her forthcoming (2001-2) exhibition *Into the Light: the Projected Image in American Art 1964-77*, he became absorbed with the ideas and questions that had been important in the '70s' and once again started making art full-time. This time his work could avail itself of digital projectors and sophisticated computer programmes, specially written for the individual "solid light" works, while utilising this new equipment for both vertical and horizontal pieces that would move from the former one-time showings, directed mainly to small cadres of film aficionados with whom he had worked in the '70s, to the presentation of continuous presentations for museum and gallery visitors, who could then decide how much time they wished to spend with a particular work.

If one moves beyond the disciplinary-based question of whether McCall's works are sculpture or film, as I intend to do, then it seems to me that one of the more pressing questions is how some very different types of works included in this exhibition can be considered in terms of an overall initiative, and my response is that they can all be regarded from an eminently interdisciplinary cybernetic perspective, pertaining to their function within ongoing modes or circuits of communication that provide feedback about their actions. Recognising that there are certainly a number of valid ways to approach McCall's work, the question this essay will address is how McCall's "solid light" projections, installations, and drawings abstract, analyse, and reflect upon their respective formats' customary ways of performing? On the subject of cybernetics, McCall's favoured author is the polymath anthropologist and social scientist Gregory Bateson, who notes in a manner reminiscent of structuralism, "It is the very rules of transformation that are of interest to me—not the message, but the

<sup>3</sup> Paul Cowen, "Review: *Expanded Cinema*," *Leonardo* 5, No. 3 (Summer, 1972): 273.

code,”<sup>4</sup> and who emphasises, apropos cybernetics, that “The ideas are immanent [not transcendent] in a network of causal pathways . . .”<sup>5</sup> Wishing to condense and summarise his basic views of this interdisciplinary approach so important to the oncoming digital age, Bateson wrote, “. . . the subject matter of cybernetics is not events and objects but the information ‘carried’ by events and objects.”<sup>6</sup>

In terms of its attention to the here and now, this tactic shares characteristics with the work of American composer John Cage, who found ways to involve listeners, so they became intimately involved in the musical experience, and so, at times, felt they were able to direct their own ways of responding to it. A case in point is Cage’s HPSCHD consisting of seven harpsichords, evenly spaced to form a circle, with seven musicians, each playing a different piece of music. McCall has eloquently described his own experience of this work by Cage and has emphasised how it enabled him to think of ways to expand the possible roles for audiences coming to see his work:

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.<sup>7</sup>

This emphasis on discerning essential constraints in any given system, a basic cybernetic maneuver, can take many forms, ranging from Cage’s rethinking of music and theater to Bateson’s work on epistemology and anthropology. This cybernetic approach can also be applied to McCall’s early training in design, which he studied at the Bauhaus-oriented Ravensbourne College of Art and Design in Bromley, Kent, a London suburb, between the years 1964–’68 when British design was undergoing tremendous changes because of a new emphasis on information, rather than continued attention to the rudiments of commercial design. At the time McCall was able to familiarise himself with this innovative approach by attending from time to time, Archigram group’s presentations at

<sup>4</sup> Gregory Bateson, “Style, Grace, and Information in Primitive Art” in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 130. It’s worth noting that McCall still has his early copy of this book, which he acquired in 1972, the year before his first “solid light” projection.

<sup>5</sup> Gregory Bateson, “The Cybernetics of Self: A Theory of Alcoholism” in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, p. 319.

<sup>6</sup> Gregory Bateson, “Cybernetic Explanation” in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, p. 377.

<sup>7</sup> Anthony McCall, “‘Line Describing a Cone’ and Related Films,” *October* 103 (Winter, 2003): 60.

the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London in the '60s as well as other cutting-edge programmes at the Architectural Association and to witness at first hand, how these men were reconceiving architecture in terms of essential, innovatively envisaged equivalents based on function, when they devised such radical schemes as plug-in cities, drive-in housing, instant metropolises, and piped environments.<sup>8</sup> At the time, he was aware of Archigram's grounding in the ideas of the visionary architect Cedric Price, whom he continues to hold in high esteem.<sup>9</sup>

McCall's work reduces and redefines the category of traditional cinema in terms of a basic self-reflexive strategy in the projected "solid light" pieces without the usual movie-house paraphernalia, and it accentuates instead the film projector with its illuminating conical and planar shafts of light, achieved through the animation of abstract drawings, that then results in distinct light drawings on the adjoining walls of the early projections and on the floors of some of his more recent digital pieces.

While this art dispenses with several of traditional film's key elements in the "solid light" pieces, it does depend on the ambience of dark or dimly lit spaces, and, strangely enough, these viewing circumstances have not been analysed as crucial factors of the cybernetic situations this art constructs. In a word, these spectatorial conditions require viewers to rely on "peripheral" rather than "central" or "focal" vision. Peripheral scanning, also called "night vision," works best in dark or partially lit spaces, which McCall regards as "highly charged because of our vulnerability within [them]."<sup>10</sup> Deeply sensitive to surrounding conditions under dim lighting but not to colour, peripheral looking, which depends on the retinal nerve endings known as "rods," are able to detect movement more easily than focused scrutiny and also can take in blurred and even disquieting forms outside central vision's purview. The classic text on peripheral vision's relation to art is Anton Ehrenzweig's *The Psychoanalysis of Artistic Vision and Hearing: An Introduction to a Theory of Unconscious Perception*<sup>11</sup> (first published in 1953) in which focal perception is equated with the

<sup>8</sup> Anthony McCall, Conversation with Author, NYC, January 29, 2015. Cf. Peter Cook, ed., *Archigram* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999) and Simon Sadler, *Archigram: Architecture without Architecture* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Anthony McCall, Telephone Conversation with Author, February 8, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Anthony McCall, cited in Jarrett Earnest, "In Conversation: Anthony McCall with Jarrett Earnest," *The Brooklyn Rail* (October 3, 2014), accessed October 12, 2015. <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2014/10/art/anthony-mccall-with-jarrett-earnest>, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Anton Ehrenzweig, *The Psychoanalysis of Artistic Vision and Hearing: An Introduction to a Theory of Unconscious Perception* (Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1953, rpt. London: Sheldon Press, 1965).

conscious mind and peripheral vision with the unconscious one.<sup>12</sup> Ehrenzweig notes, "When in twilight our central vision begins to fail, the hidden dream-like phantoms of peripheral vision invade our consciousness."<sup>13</sup> In constructing his theory, Ehrenzweig connects Friedrich Nietzsche's description of Dionysian immersion in *The Birth of Tragedy* with the unconscious mind as a "chaotic life force," thereby implying its connections with peripheral vision. He then contrasts this approach with the Apollonian principle, which he associates with consciousness, praising its ability to "differentiate" and thus regulate the Dionysian by "moulding . . . [it] into order and beauty."<sup>14</sup> Considered in terms of the cybernetic limitations McCall's art imposes on cinema, we can apply these two aesthetic positions to the beams of light making up his "solid light" works by first recognising them on the subatomic level as electromagnetic radiating projections of disordered energy (i.e., Heisenberg's uncertainty principle) and on the visual level as broken up and scattered bits of illumination. Then we can direct our attention to their overall Apollonian conical and planar configurations that organise them into pleasing patterns. As an aside, we can perhaps think of McCall's cones as unconscious poetic and structural rhymes with the retina's cones, its nerve endings making conscious or focused vision possible.

Because there have been a number of attempts, as mentioned earlier, to subsume McCall's term "solid light" under the heading of sculpture, the artist in a recent email explained why he continues to use this expression:

The term "solid light" simply identifies the paradox that the planes of light appear to have solidity. Even after the hand confirms that this impression is an illusion, the mind continues to treat the planes with some respect, as if they were walls. Many times I've observed visitors walking around a solid light form in order to enter through an aperture rather than walking straight through the perimeter membrane.

"Solid light" is shorthand for "planes of light occupying sculptural space" or something of the sort.<sup>15</sup>

McCall's emphasis on "paradox" in his above statement is apposite, especially since his "solid light" projections as sculptural form depend on the Tyndall effect, which describes the visibility of light beams seen from the side, a condition caused by such tiny particles as dust, smoke,

<sup>12</sup> Ehrenzweig, p. 206.

<sup>13</sup> Ehrenzweig, p. 204.

<sup>14</sup> Ehrenzweig, p. 57.

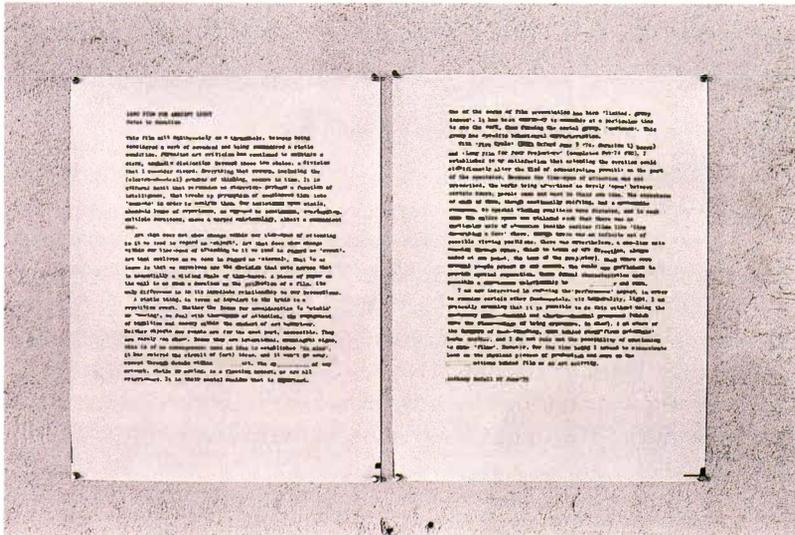
<sup>15</sup> Anthony McCall, Email to Author, February 3, 2016.

or haze found in the alternative spaces where his works were initially shown, and by haze machines in his more recent pieces, with their mixture of starch and water providing a medium in which light beams can be perceived. Consequently, these two environments enable the planes of light in his art to be comprehended as arrays of bright particles in the early pieces and as smoky or hazy waves in the later ones. McCall's light projections also oscillate between the two aforementioned different perceptual modes. The first, peripheral scanning, depends on a medium in the air to make his animated geometric forms visible as dispersed, wonderfully tumultuous elements, in a manner reminiscent of Dionysian engagement. The second, his overall geometric configurations of planes and cones, result from the artist's abstract animations that produce an overall Apollonian clarity. Together, these two perceptual schemes underscore how light, which according to quantum physics can behave as either particles or waves, can then be comprehended from a cybernetic perspective to be operating in a continuum.

In addition, this ongoing oscillation between particle and wave, occasioning both peripheral and central vision, as well as Dionysian and Apollonian perspectives, helps to explain the artist's frequent use of the word "duration" when discussing his work. Two of his key statements on duration can be found in the wall text he provided for *Long Film for Ambient Light* (1975), entitled "Notes in Duration" dated NYC, June 1975. In this piece of writing he opines, "Our insistence upon static, absolute lumps of experience, as opposed to continuous, overlapping, multiple durations, shows a warped epistemology, albeit a convenient one."<sup>16</sup> McCall's statement highlights a Bergsonian-type of duration, a "qualitative multiplicity"<sup>17</sup> in which moments open to virtual and continuously reinvented pasts and futures, even as the individual viewer is positioned in a dynamic, ever-changing present. Apropos the simultaneity of opening time to a manifold of responses, McCall's text emphatically states, "A piece of paper on the wall is as much a duration as the projection of a film." Because even artistic symbols, such as regarding light as divine illumination, can restrain duration's momentum, particularly its ability to radiate almost simultaneously past, present, and future events, McCall eschewed them in his early works, and only later in the digital pieces,

<sup>16</sup> Anthony McCall, "Notes in Duration" is cited as an appendix in Laura Richards, "The Long Shadow of Ambient Light," *Oxford Art Journal* no 35 (2012). This statement formed part of the artist's 1975 installation, "Long Film for Ambient Light," at the Idea Warehouse, New York City.

<sup>17</sup> Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. F.L. Pogson (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd; New York: Humanities Press Inc, 1910, rpt. 1971), p. 226.



*Long Film for Ambient Light*, 1975  
Installation view, Idea Warehouse, New York  
Photograph by Anthony McCall

*Long Film for Ambient Light*, 1975  
Wall statement installation view, Idea Warehouse, New York

particularly the vertical ones reminiscent of architectural and anthropomorphic associations, has he begun to employ associative titles.

Such an immersive and open-ended experience as peripheral vision and Dionysian chaos can be considered analogous not only to duration but also to symbolic anthropologist Victor Turner's neologism "liminoid," which circumscribes a particularly fecund middle ground and a plurality of possibilities akin to liminality.<sup>18</sup>

If McCall's work does indeed have one of its sources in cybernetics, as this essay sets out to demonstrate,<sup>19</sup> then his new "solid light" piece *Coming About* (exhibited at the Fundació Gaspar for the first time), which employs as its title the nautical term referring to the shifting of a sail's direction in relation to the wind (tacking), can be interpreted as enacting this word's etymological meaning, i.e., Greek *kybernētēs* denoting a pilot or rudder accountable for moving independently. The English equivalent "cybernetics" was the title for Norbert Wiener's groundbreaking 1948 book, *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*. In *Coming About*, McCall has choreographed the following two interrelated vertical projections in terms of a filmic wipe, a transition often used in early twentieth-century films, whereby one shot replaces another by literally starting at one side of a frame, usually the left, and progressing to the other or right side, thereby masking the earlier image. McCall describes how the wipe functions in *Coming About*:

The invisible floating wipe in the piece (which reveals and conceals the elliptical form) has an 18-minute cycle.

The other form, the straight line (or a blade of light in three-dimensions), is what the other floating wipe would look like if you could see it; It follows the same movements, but its cycle length is 9-minutes, half the length of the other.<sup>20</sup>

Working in a distinctly different way from his light projections, McCall first conceived the terms for *Circulation Figures* in 1972 when he invited 15 photographers and filmmakers to a film studio at the London Polytechnic Film School on Oxford Street, London with the following instruction: "the subjects of the event and your camera are the other photographers

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Victor Turner, "Liminal to liminoid in play, flow, and ritual: An essay in comparative symbology," *Rice University Studies* 60, No. 3 (1974): 53-92. For an excellent critique of the limitations of Turner's liminal state, see Donald Weber, "From Limen to Border: A Meditation on the Legacy of Victor Turner for American Cultural Studies," *American Quarterly* 47, No. 3 (September, 1995): 525-536.

Liminoids do not need to cope with the preordained closure necessitated by preindustrial/tribal societies when initiates are briefly introduced to open situations before reaching adulthood with its preordained roles that ensure stability for these predominately static cultures.

<sup>19</sup> McCall, Interview with Author, December 29, 2015.

<sup>20</sup> McCall, Email to Author, February 6, 2016.

and filmmakers.”<sup>21</sup> McCall had prepared for this event by liberally covering the floor with torn newspapers and magazine pages and enunciating its perimeter with a pair of large mirrors. At the outset, this situation may have seemed straightforward, but it is highly complex in terms of the many layers of mirrors represented by photographers and filmmakers shooting pictures of each other in McCall’s installation as well as their reflections. Because some photographers were using single-lens reflex cameras, which have internal mirrors, the act of self-reflexivity was replicated yet again. The only light source for this installation was the one utilised by McCall for his own filming of this scenario. After the session ended, McCall catalogued the photographs and film and left them in storage until 2011 when he decided to edit them. McCall enlisted Jeff Preiss, a friend and a professional filmmaker, as his co-editor<sup>22</sup>. Wishing this piece to be a highly coded scenario that in many ways continues the enclosed feedback system devised for his “solid light” works, McCall set up a basic plan for editing the film so it would be truly a structural work of art. In this regard, he was working within the constraints of structural film that critic P. Adams Sitney summarised in 1979 as knowing soon after the beginning of a film essentially what was going to occur.<sup>23</sup> McCall determined that anytime moving images were seen in *Circulation Figures*, there would be no sound, but when freeze-frames were arbitrarily selected every 30 seconds and then held for 30 seconds, viewers would hear ambient sounds of cameras clicking and newspaper rustling. The original audiotape having been lost, McCall worked with the noted musician David Grubbs<sup>24</sup> to create a new one, thereby emphasising even more the purposefully disjunctive framework of this piece and to ensure the importance of its various abstract components. In addition, McCall decided that all of the film footage from the original session should be used. Playing on tensions during the intervening time between the original photographs, the film footage and the

<sup>21</sup> Anthony McCall, “Circulation Figures, 1972/2011.” Handout of the artist’s account of this event, 2011.

<sup>22</sup> Filmmaker and cinematographer, Jeff Preiss worked with Bruce Weber on several documentaries including *Let’s Get Lost* (1988). In 2005 he co-founded Orchard, a co-operative experimental art exhibition space, where he collaborated on films with the artists Moyra Davey, Andrea Fraser, Nicolás Guagnini, Anthony McCall, Josiah McElheny, and Christian Philipp Müller. In 2014 he produced and directed *Low Down*, a feature film based on the life of jazz pianist Joe Albany.

<sup>23</sup> Cited in Graham Ellard and Stephen Johnstone, “Introduction: Thinking in Notebook Form” in Graham Ellard and Stephen Johnstone, eds., *Anthony McCall: Notebooks and Conversations* (Surrey: Lund Humphries, 2015), p. 13.

<sup>24</sup> Composer, guitarist, pianist, and vocalist, David Grubbs was a founding member of Squirrel Bait, Bastro, and Gastr del Sol, in addition to playing in other bands, including notably The Red Krayola. He is also known for his collaborations with such writers as Susan Howe and such visual artists as Anthony, McCall, Angela Bulloch, Stephen Prina, and Cosima von Bonin. His criticism has appeared in various journals including *Bookforum*, *Chicago Review*, *Drama Review*, and *Texte zur Kunst*. He is the author of *Records Ruin the Landscape: John Cage, the Sixties, and Sound Recording* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

date when this was being edited, the artist has original photographs and film footage and date when this was being edited, the artist has created for each showing of this work an installation that emulates, in many ways, the event's original setting, including large mirrors on the side walls and a floor strewn with newspapers and magazine papers. In the center of this installation is positioned a double-sided screen. Although spectators of this work might think McCall's gallery setup would suture them seamlessly into the film's space, each time the work is shown, these apparent similarities have broken down because of differences in contemporary dress and hairstyles from those of the '70s, as well as the fact that social media has indeed transformed the world, so that private events are made public, and people can claim being instant celebrities by posting their selfies on the web. As McCall has observed, the eerie and somewhat transgressive quality achieved by people photographing each other in an enclosed space has changed dramatically since the initial footage and photographs were made for *Circulation Figures*:

The original "Circulation Figures" occurred at a time when the attention of the mainstream media monopolized the representation of public affairs. As a result, private life for most remained relatively private, limited to photographs in the personal album. Following the digital revolution of the last fifteen years, however, the circulation of images has become both radically decentralized and massively expanded, with the surveillance of public spaces providing the sinister edge to this apparent democratization. As a consequence, an unmediated, unpublicized private life seems to be in the process of vanishing.<sup>25</sup>

Had McCall completed *Circulation Figures* in the '70s, as originally intended, he no doubt would have been able to make it a structural work with established rules perceptible at its beginning, as he did forty years later, but in this interim what has been lost is the tension between his work and its cultural nexus, in which photography and film were being regarded seriously as art forms, and cameras themselves and the information they were capable of presenting, became objects of intrigue. This fascination with photography and the equipment for producing it, is evident in the critically acclaimed, ultra-hip Italian-British film *Blow-Up* (1966) by Michelangelo Antonioni, a popular-culture cybernetic meditation on differences between still photography and filmmaking, constituting a film closely observing itself, even as it painstakingly watches itself do so, through a series of increasingly enlarged and grainy images that punctuate the film's narrative.<sup>26</sup> In retrospect, the grainy photographs Antonioni

<sup>25</sup> Anthony McCall, "Circulation Figures, 1972/2011." Handout.

<sup>26</sup> Yuri Lotman, *Semiotics of Cinema*, trans. Mark E. Suino (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1976), p. 100.

privileges were contemporaneously achieving the mark of authenticity among conceptual artists, and the Sony's Portapak (1967), a video type analog recording system, together with the 16 mm camera, were becoming preferred equipment among a number of cutting-edge artists, and so, considered in terms of its initial historical context, McCall's *Circulation Figures* was very much a work of its time.

While the word "cybernetics" might appear to be a dated buzz word, locked into the origins of its mid-twentieth-century past, the term continues to be viable, as more and more meanings are associated with it, particularly those connected with the most recent technologies, including digital media that has changed, and continues to change the world, as connections and relationships between people and things become increasingly important. According to Bateson:

The individual mind is immanent but not only in the body. It is immanent also in pathways and messages outside the body; and there is a larger Mind of which the individual mind is only a subsystem.<sup>27</sup>

As works abstracting the most essential components of certain systems or circuits, Anthony McCall's art are wonderfully generous in their ability to open up discrete aspects of regularised and ritualised means of communication to create conditions, whereby viewers can experience a gratuitous sense of wonder. Paraphrasing Bateson, they militate against objectification by reminding us of the beauty of those connections defining "the larger Mind," by occupying flexible positions on the many continua between the unconscious (intuitive) and conscious mind, peripheral and focused vision, as well as Dionysian and Apollonian world views, and by circulating between these different polarities, while remembering, as Bateson so eloquently pointed out and McCall's works so beautifully demonstrate, "Artistic skill is the combining of many levels of mind—unconscious, conscious, and external—to make a statement of their combination."<sup>28</sup>

The author gratefully thanks Ashley Duhrkoop, the Thalheimer Graduate Research Assistant, for her thoughtful and generous help.

<sup>27</sup>Gregory Bateson, "Form, Substance, and Difference" in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, p. 467.

<sup>28</sup>Gregory Bateson. "Form, Substance, and Difference" in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, p. 470.

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