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Wired: Matthew McCaslin's Reconsideration of Electricity

Robert Hobbs

This essay will analyze Matthew McCaslin's art in two ways. First, his use of electricity to critique both minimalist and vitalist sculptural traditions will be discussed. And second, the relationship of his works to contemporaneous controversies about health problems caused by prolonged exposure to electromagnetic fields will be investigated.

McCaslin has often expressed his great respect for minimalism's concision and power, but he has also criticized two of its major practitioners, Donald Judd and Carl Andre, for appearing to reject metaphor, when, in actual fact, their works depend on it.¹ He has pointed out, for example, that Andre's configuration of rocks in Hartford relies on viewers' ready association of these boulders with New England stone walls. While such an approach might denigrate the factual nature of the material on which Andre places such a premium, McCaslin believes that their associative meanings enrich the work rather than diffuse it through a surfeit of cultural references. His reconsideration of minimalism as inherently metaphorical is crucial to understanding his orientation to his own art. He not only redirects minimalism in his early sculptures of the mid-eighties, but he also reconsiders its postminimal offshoot, variously called "anti-form" or "process" art, in his electric pieces.

In addition to rethinking minimalism, McCaslin reexamines its assessment of the preceding vitalist tradition. French philosopher Henri Bergson's vitalism might be construed as a reaction to the excesses of industrialism. In his writings Bergson esteemed an intuition of life's inherent flow as of primary importance, while he regarded intellect as less significant because it seemed to be concerned with mere appearances.² Vitalism's emphasis on intuition became an important means of defending artistic abstractions as privileged insights; in addition it provided support for writing off imitations of external reality as mere intellectual exercises. Intuition, for example, can be considered a major operative for Henry Moore's sculpture. It provides a way of privileging the life force of an artist working in tandem with the so-called vital essences of organic materials in carved sculptures of recumbent women cradling internal voids, which vitalists would interpret as spiritual essences. In recent years vitalism has been viewed as a perpetuation of a no longer tenable belief in the autonomy of the bourgeois individual, which gave rise to its artistic, modernist equivalent: unique and autonomous works of art.

Vitalist sculpture and minimalism represent two radically different approaches to modernism's often touted autonomy. While vitalism appears to manifest a living force through organic materials, emphasis on process, and biomorphic shapes; minimalism studiously avoids tainting discrete and irresolute objects with feeling. In his electric pieces, McCaslin undermines the sovereignty of both categories by plugging his sculptures into wall sockets to indicate their necessary connection with an outside world, thus establishing an indexical relationship between his works and their concrete power sources. His act dramatically steers his work away from both vitalist and minimalist sculpture by subjecting it to an invisible but important force, electricity, which enables him to allude to a veritable host of absences that art is incapable of manifesting, much less framing. Through this act, McCaslin dramatizes the postmodern orientation of his sculpture and underscores its poignancy as a vector that points viewers to experiences beyond its narrow confines. In this way McCaslin repositions in a new site/nonsite dialectic both Robert Smithson's site/nonsite polarity and proposed goal to understand the institutional circuitry through which he was being channeled. McCaslin summed up this approach when he stated. "Often I work with the space between place and piece."³ In his art, he recasts

1 Matthew McCaslin, interviews by author, 16 July 1997, Brooklyn, NY, and 22–24 August 1997, Richmond, VA. Unless otherwise noted, the material ascribed to McCaslin in this essay comes from these extensive, all-day interviews.

2 An excellent introduction to Bergson's thought is the last of his works to be published, "The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics" (1919). Because Bergson's writings, which are eminently accessible, were read by a number of early twentieth-century artists who found his reliance on intuition and initial rejection of rational thinking compatible with their own approaches, his thought can be considered formative to a broad range of early twentieth-century artists.

3 Matthew McCaslin, interview by Jean Crutchfield, 19 March 1996 (Jean Crutchfield, Matthew McCaslin, 1708 Gallery, Richmond, VA, 1996).

vitalism's purported spiritual essence as a mere electric current that enters and "enlightens" the work, at the same time that this power source undermines its sovereignty. And he transforms the reductive aesthetic of minimalism into the plenitude of postminimalism, which he in turn undermines through the act of characterizing his exhibitions as ongoing job sites.

McCaslin's electric pieces are far removed from the optimism that attended luminism and other works of art inspired by electricity earlier in the twentieth century.⁴ When Willoughby Sharp wrote in his 1967 summation article "Luminism and Kineticism" that "The new age, the electric age, has created an environment that has reconfigured our senses", his optimism affirms early rather than late twentieth-century thinking. At the beginning of this century, electricity had been romanticized as high technology. So important was it that the founder of futurism, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, had even considered calling his artistic movement "Elettricismo". His title captures the spirit of an early love affair with technology that assumed in futurism the ethical mandate to produce a new version of electrified humanity. Instead of spiritual light, Marinetti pointed out that his fellow citizens of this burgeoning new age were provided with incandescent bulbs. Electricity was so synonymous with early twentieth-century utopian thought that Lenin's slogan, "Communism equals electricity plus the Soviets" became famous. In the 1920s the surrealists prized electricity's mystery as the physical equivalent of the unconscious; for them a bare light bulb glowing in the dark was as strange, magical, and suggestive as life itself. This optimism continued until the 1960s when the terms "turned on", "overloaded", and "wired", referring to using drugs, being inundated with too much information, and beset with frenetic behavior, connoted ambivalent attitudes toward this invisible force.

Even though minimalist Dan Flavin's reliance on fluorescent tubes in the 1960s as the prime ingredient for his sculpture might appear to be a celebration of futuristic technology, this material actually became a means for him to reflect on how ethereal light appearing in stained glass windows and aesthetic movement art glass, such as Wheeling Peachglow, could be achieved through readily available commercial lighting. Flavin's often richly hued fluorescent pieces spiritualize the galleries and serve as secular reminders of the artist's seminary background. Unlike Flavin, who only occasionally used white fluorescent light, McCaslin evidences in many works an overwhelming preference for its cool, white, unnatural glow, conjuring up an antiquated science fictional world that he reinforces in the audiotape for "Breakdown Celebration" (1994). This tape presents the lines uttered by the computer Hal, a major character in Stanley Kubrick's film "2001", as he was being disconnected.⁵ After Hal loses his emotional capacity, he describes in a mechanical voice both his mode of fabrication and his capabilities. McCaslin's "Breakdown Celebration" is a meditation on the tragic loss of a utopian vision about modernism. Its pathos develops from our continued compassionate regard for technological surrogate beings even when they prove capable of destroying us. McCaslin has concluded, "There seems to be a constant battle between the human condition and technology over who is shaping what."⁶

Before describing contemporary controversies about electromagnetic fields that resonate with McCaslin's work in this medium, a short digression into the evolution of these sculptures is necessary. After his 1987 one-person exhibition at the Bess Cutler Gallery in New York where he showed minimalist pastiches, McCaslin was devastated. The art market had almost totally been undermined by the recent stock market crash. Thus, the critical and financial support

4 A series of brief essays outlining different attitudes toward electricity in the twentieth century is found in the catalogue for the exhibition "Electra" (Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1983/84). This section of this essay has benefited from the range of topics covered in "Electra".

5 Hal is an acronym referring to the IBM Corporation through the use of antecedent letters.

6 As note 3.

that McCaslin had been encouraged to expect was nowhere in sight. Having managed since high school to support himself with construction work, McCaslin took advantage of an opportunity to leave Manhattan and become a partner in a project of building luxury bay-side and ocean-front homes on Long Island. He has described this return to Long Island as a time of letting go in order to find out who he is as opposed to who he thought he should be. He began to think of the landscape as a mindscape, a way of being. And he augmented this being in nature with a systematic investigation of psychedelic mushrooms, which he has since denigrated as a form of fast-food consciousness even though it then had the net effect of providing a new means for visualizing an interconnected universe. Psychedelics in tandem with nature enabled McCaslin to conceive the world as a series of interwoven and overlapping networks – an insight that was later inclusive of manufactured and technological realms, as we shall see.

During this time McCaslin was still working in construction and becoming an experienced electrician. He was surprised to find that he did not begrudge his daytime job the time it kept him from making his art, because he could consider it an opportunity for researching the intellectual potentials of materials that were part of his daily life. At this point he began to understand that the interconnectedness of nature was also a property of electricity. This fact was dramatized to him by a space shuttle videotape that presented the demographics of planet Earth in terms of electricity. In this videotape, electric light seemed to weave together great sectors of the population, such as people living along the Nile, and conversely to enshroud in almost total darkness the neighboring Sahara.

Although he has not said so, McCaslin is no doubt deeply aware of an electromagnetic basis for all living forms, particularly since he ascribes natural properties to his electrical pieces. In fact, in the twentieth century scientists have become aware that a tenth-of-a-volt electrical field is present at all times in the area between the surface and the interior of each human cell membrane.⁷ Beginning in the 1970s and continuing into the 1980s, when their research started to make headlines in the mass media, scientists learned that the human body reacts adversely to continued exposure to electromagnetic fields caused by high-voltage power lines, the magnetic fields arising from the flow of electric current in transformers, plumbing systems to which many urban electrical systems are grounded, electric blankets and electrically heated water beds, ceiling-cable electric heating, video display terminals, and radar.⁸ During this same period a number of studies documented increased rates of leukemia among power station operators, telephone linemen, and other workers who were subjected to electric and magnetic fields on a regular basis.

The importance for McCaslin of this constellation of concerns about magnetic fields is that it no doubt has provided him with a highly cathected situation in which to reconsider electricity as a metaphor for life and a potentially destructive force. The electromagnetic fields of his art are, however, too weak to pose any actual threat. A few of his sculptures such as "Control Freak" (1991), "Surfin' USA" (1996), and "Blossom" (1996) can be read as low-tech, electric "Hals" that mirror the human body in terms of its substructure: in this scenario, conduits replace veins and arteries, appliances such as electric fans are stand-ins for organs, and monitors assume the role of the central nervous system.⁹

Even before he began working with electricity, McCaslin appears to have been finding ways to symbolize the problems of electromagnetic fields, as the content of his first one-person exhi-

7 See the articles, under the broad topic "Annals of Radiation", by Paul Brodeur, "The Hazards of Electromagnetic Fields", in *The New Yorker* 65, 1989: June 12, pp. 51–88; June 19, pp. 47–73; June 26, pp. 39–68; also "The Cancer at Slater School: Role of Electric Lines' Magnetic Fields in Fresno, California", in: *The New Yorker* 68, December 7, 1992, pp. 88–119.

8 The controversy was covered in both intellectual journals and popular magazines as the following list indicates: "Magnetic Fields and Leukemia: Power Line Radiation" (*Newsweek*, 1987); "An Electromagnetic Storm" (*Newsweek*, 1989); "Panic Over Power Lines" (*Time*, 1989); "Electrifying Risk, Plug-in Blankets May Be Linked to Childhood Cancers" (*American Health*, 1990); "Don't Let Your Monitor Be the Death of You" (*PC Computing*, 1991); and "Danger Overhead: Swedish Studies Link Electromagnetic Fields and Cancer" (*Time*, 1992).

9 This concept developed out of a telephone conversation by the author with Mark Lindquist (15 November 1997), who advanced a number of extremely pertinent and perceptive ideas about McCaslin's art and its relationship to electricity. Since McCaslin in the 1970s was a great admirer of David Smith's work, one might conjecture that his quasi-figurative pieces build on Smith's anthropomorphic totems.

bition at the Daniel Newburg Gallery in 1989 indicates. Entitled "Landscapes of the Inbetween", the exhibition contained a number of materials that obliquely point to the disturbing news about alternating-current magnetic fields' impact on cancer. The aluminum 2 x 4s in "Field of Studs", for example, can refer to the dangers besetting aluminum reduction workers who are regularly exposed to strong magnetic fields resulting from the high-amperage direct current used during the reduction process. In addition, this displaced forest of metal studs also incorporates a weather radio. Since radio hams and technicians were among those suffering from unusually high rates of leukemia, the radio in the installation, whose ostensible function is to report the weather, serves as a tangible reminder of this ongoing threat. While "Bedding Bed", consisting of 100 acrylic blankets that the artist found in Salvation Army stores, might seem an innocent and even gratuitous gesture on the part of the artist, the work's critical force becomes apparent when one refers back to the widespread alarm then being sounded about the use of electric blankets, which increased the risk of non-lymphocytic leukemia. Even though "Exit 47, Formerly Exit 53", which is composed of shredded tires that McCaslin found on the Long Island Expressway as he was traveling back and forth to New York City, might not appear to relate to the ongoing controversy about electromagnetic fields, this pile of tire strips assumes a great pathos in the context of the installation. If one considers them in relationship to the overall title, "Landscapes of the Inbetween", which could be a repositing of Smithson's site/nonsite dialectic in terms of liminality, the tires could connote the threshold position assumed by electric current which moves from energy sources to points of dissemination and ultimately entropy. In addition, tires, which pose a tremendous disposal problem, are excellent metonyms for entropy. Their entropy augments electricity's dispersal: and the two represent the increasing rate at which energy is being channeled into unavailable states. McCaslin's first electric show was held in 1991 at the Daniel Newburg Gallery, two years after "Landscapes of the Inbetween". The modus operandi for this exhibition was to approach the gallery space as a job site, consequently the title, "Time and Materials", which refers to electricians' often preferred mode of working. With the assistance of Dan Walsh, a painter who is also an electrician, McCaslin created an installation in which process and end result melded together. Unlike in later shows, McCaslin encouraged viewers in "Time and Materials" to play with electric switches that permitted them to turn on or off either parts of the piece or the entire installation, thus empowering them and ensuring their complicity in the process. While several individual pieces suggested a reworking of early twentieth-century constructivism, the scattered materials together with several live wires confounded the austere beauty of these three-dimensional wall drawings by making the entire project appear tentative and potentially dangerous.

In addition, the artist appropriated aspects of vitalism in its art nouveau mode to force an analogy between technology and nature. Becoming a second, artificial nature, the cables, conduits, extension cords, circuit boxes, switches, dimmers, incandescent bulbs and fluorescent tubes seem to be proliferating at will. Together, they create an image of technology on the verge of assuming its own intriguing and disturbing electromagnetic life force. Their arresting compositions are part of their rigor because they entrance and delight to sustain viewers' attention and thus communicate the ambiguity of electricity: an ubiquitous force that can be harnessed to help and also hinder humankind. Since 1991, McCaslin has found this natural/technological metaphor a particularly rich area for investigation.