

Anthony McCall

Light, Space, and Time

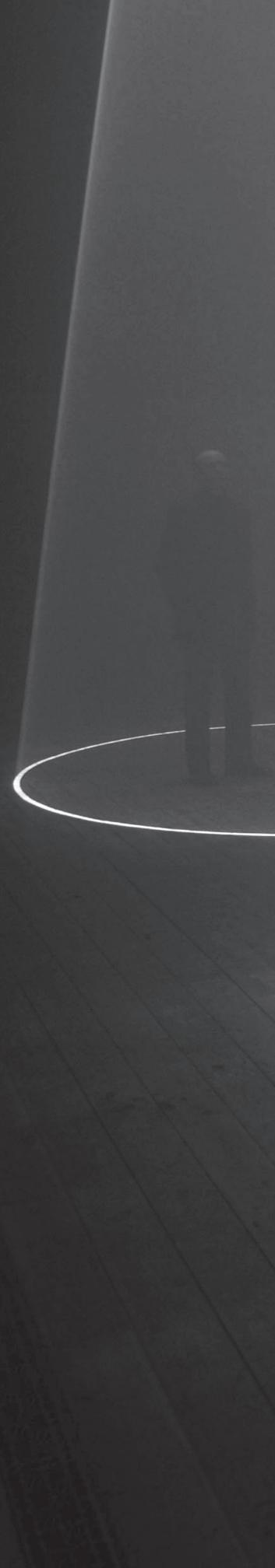
Glen R. Brown

In the silence of a darkened interior, a mesmerizing cone of light projects from ceiling to floor in luminous semblance of solidity. Almost imperceptibly, this geometric form—existing solely as radiant energy yet imposing itself initially upon the mind as a concrete object—begins to assert its immateriality, fading gradually over a 16-minute period into absolute darkness. Simultaneously with this disappearance, a wall of sound slowly swells from the silence, enveloping the spectator and mounting to an eventual crescendo that corresponds with the complete eclipse of light.

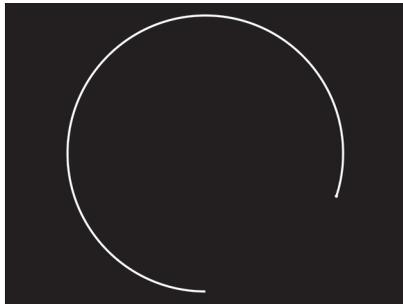
In this sequence of events from *Leaving*, the latest work of British-born New York artist Anthony McCall, light and sound are the dramatis personae while the subtler medium is time. Protracted in the manner of a cinematic slow-motion sequence, time in *Leaving* tendentiously underscores the disparate speeds of light and sound, as if, for example, the moment of delay separating a flash of distant lightning from the thunderous report were deliberately stretched to accommodate extended reflection on the act of perception itself, not merely the stimuli that initiate it. For the perceiver, who is free to engage the slow sequence of events in *Leaving* as participant rather than detached observer (to penetrate the volume of light and sound rather than remain in a peripheral position of analysis), the effect is of visual and auditory stimuli made momentarily conducive to a more broadly haptic mode of perception.

A veteran artist, McCall began experimenting with projected light in New York in the early 1970s when the avant-garde art object was still in the throes of its celebrated dematerialization and subsequent dispersion into the “expanded field.” Consequently one might assume that McCall’s first “solid light” works were devised as critiques of late-modernist formalism. After all, one could hardly have mounted a more effective challenge to prevailing materialist notions of the purity of media than to invoke theatricality, a manifestly interdisciplinary *bête noire* of the second-generation New York School. McCall’s intent, however, was not explicitly to undermine concepts of autonomy in painting or sculpture but rather to dismantle the conventional experience of cinema. Even today, though he has abandoned the antiquated 16mm projector in favor of its newer digital counterpart, McCall prefers to describe his light compositions as “films” rather than sculptures, installations, or environments. The early solid light works, he asserts, “were connected to the deconstruction of cinema as an institution: doing away with rows of seats, the hidden projector and the image and asking the spectator to move around and share the space with the objects. It was a critical act, an attack on conventional cinema.”

Anthony McCall, Between You and I, (2006). Installation view: vertical solid light installation. Thirty-minute cycle in two parts. Computer, QuickTime movie file, two video projectors, two haze machines. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.







McCall introduced his series of solid light films in 1973 with the famous *Line Describing a Cone*: a work in which abstract elements of geometry were given tentative corporeality in a slow movement from point and line to plane. In this film, a dot of white light gradually expanded on the screen to form an open circle while, from a perpendicular perspective, the horizontal beam of projected light—rendered visible as a line suspended in the artificially hazy atmosphere of the gallery—slowly opened into a hollow cone of dimensions broad enough to permit several spectators to occupy its scope. Three related films followed in 1974—*Partial Cone*, *Cone of Variable Dimensions*, and *Conical Solid*—each of which constituted an exploration of a different variable while maintaining the volumetric constant of the cone. Toward the end of the year McCall produced perhaps the most visually complex of his early

works, *Long Film for Four Projectors*, in which four interpenetrating planes of light were projected horizontally in constantly shifting arcs through a hazy space.

Concurrently with these and other solid light films in the 1970s, McCall experimented with an ambitious series of outdoor “fire performances.” Dramatic strings of bonfires were set to accentuate the coordinates of a horizontal grid; the earliest of these performances were witnessed by live audiences as well as recorded in documentary films. Eventually, however, McCall shifted the emphasis from performances of set duration implicitly to be viewed from beginning to end to ongoing events through which the perceiver was permitted to move at his or her discretion. This accommodation of the perceiver’s will had been a crucial part of McCall’s works with projected light from the beginning, since the act of empowering the formerly passive viewer was arguably the most persuasive justification for his deconstruction of cinematic convention.

Despite the success of his early solid light films—the historical importance of which has, over the past seven years, been resoundingly acknowledged through re-screenings at the Whitney

Museum in New York; the Museum Moderner Kunst, Vienna; the Hayward Gallery, London; the Kunsthhaus, Zürich; and the Hamburger Bahnhof Museum für Gegenwart, Berlin—McCall ceased artistic exploration of projected light in the late 1970s in order to apply his design skills in a rather different arena. After a hiatus of more than twenty years, however, in 2003 he picked up roughly where he had left off, debuting the film *Doubling Back* at the Whitney Biennial the following year. Though updating his technology to incorporate computer software, digital projection, and a newer form of haze machine utilizing a less obtrusive glycol-based fluid, McCall maintained the exquisite simplicity of pure white light incising darkness in diaphanous but precisely contoured planes.

In 2004, in a sequential exploration that has typified his work from the very beginning, McCall followed up the success of *Doubling Back* with two related films, *Turning Under* and *Turning Round*. A ninety-degree shift in orientation came later that year in the film *Breath*, the first of three works by the same title in which McCall repositioned his light sources from the wall to the ceiling so as to produce vertically projected cones. Tent-like, the curving, slowly moving luminous veils

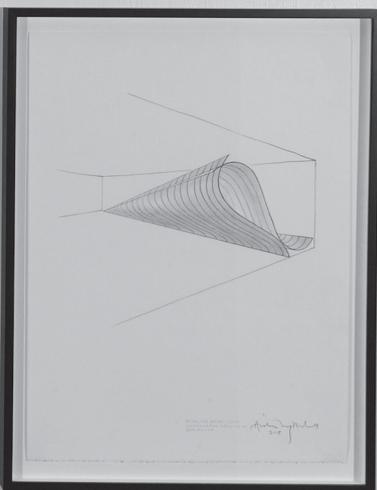
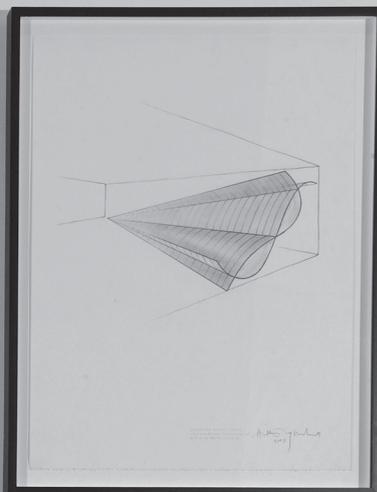
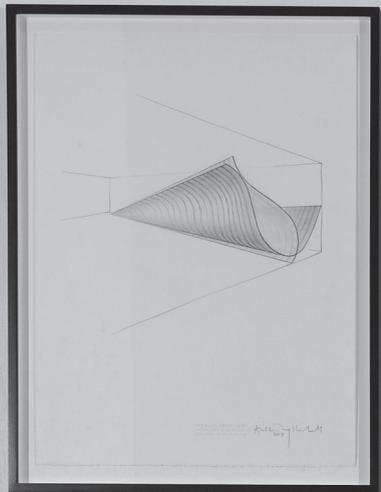
produce a striking sense of enclosure. Consequently, the response of those who have engaged subsequent works such as the 2006 double-projector film *Between You and I* has been noticeably distinct from that of viewers of sculpture in the round. While in both cases there is an explorative aspect to perception, traditional sculpture, like painting, implicitly relegates the viewer to a detached space: an encircling path of observation that presents numerous unique vantages but all from a condition of remove. McCall’s vertical cones of light, in contrast, provide for distinct experiences of entry, envelopment and exit.

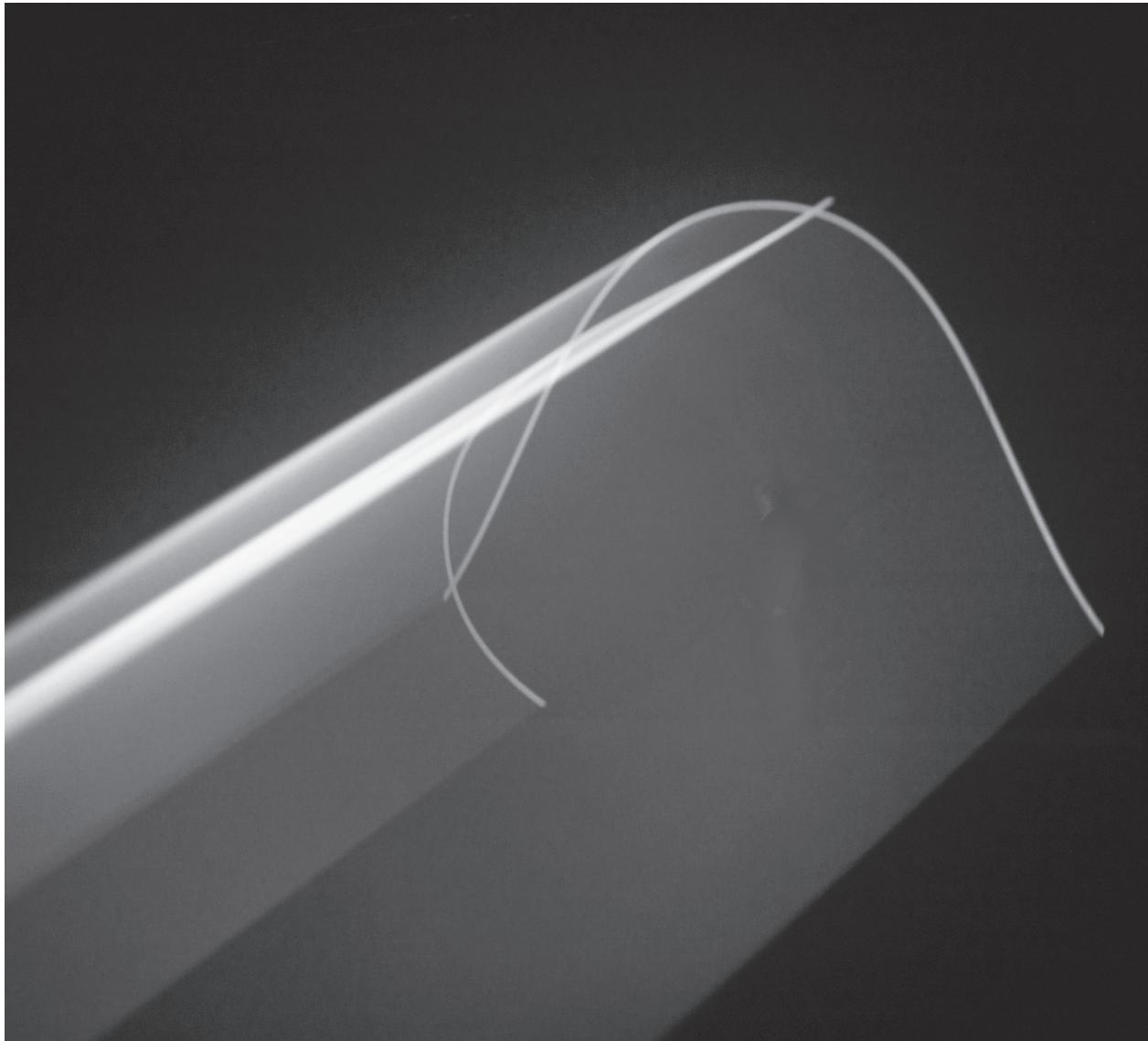
For this reason, one is tempted to stress the primacy of architectonics in McCall’s approach to light, and he

Above, left: Anthony McCall, Line Describing a Cone (1973). Frame from the twenty-fourth minute. Courtesy of Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.

Opposite: Anthony McCall, Line Describing a Cone (1973). Installation view at the Whitney Museum of American Art exhibition “Into the Light: the Projected Image in American Art 1964–1977,” 2002. Photograph by Hank Graber. Courtesy of Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.







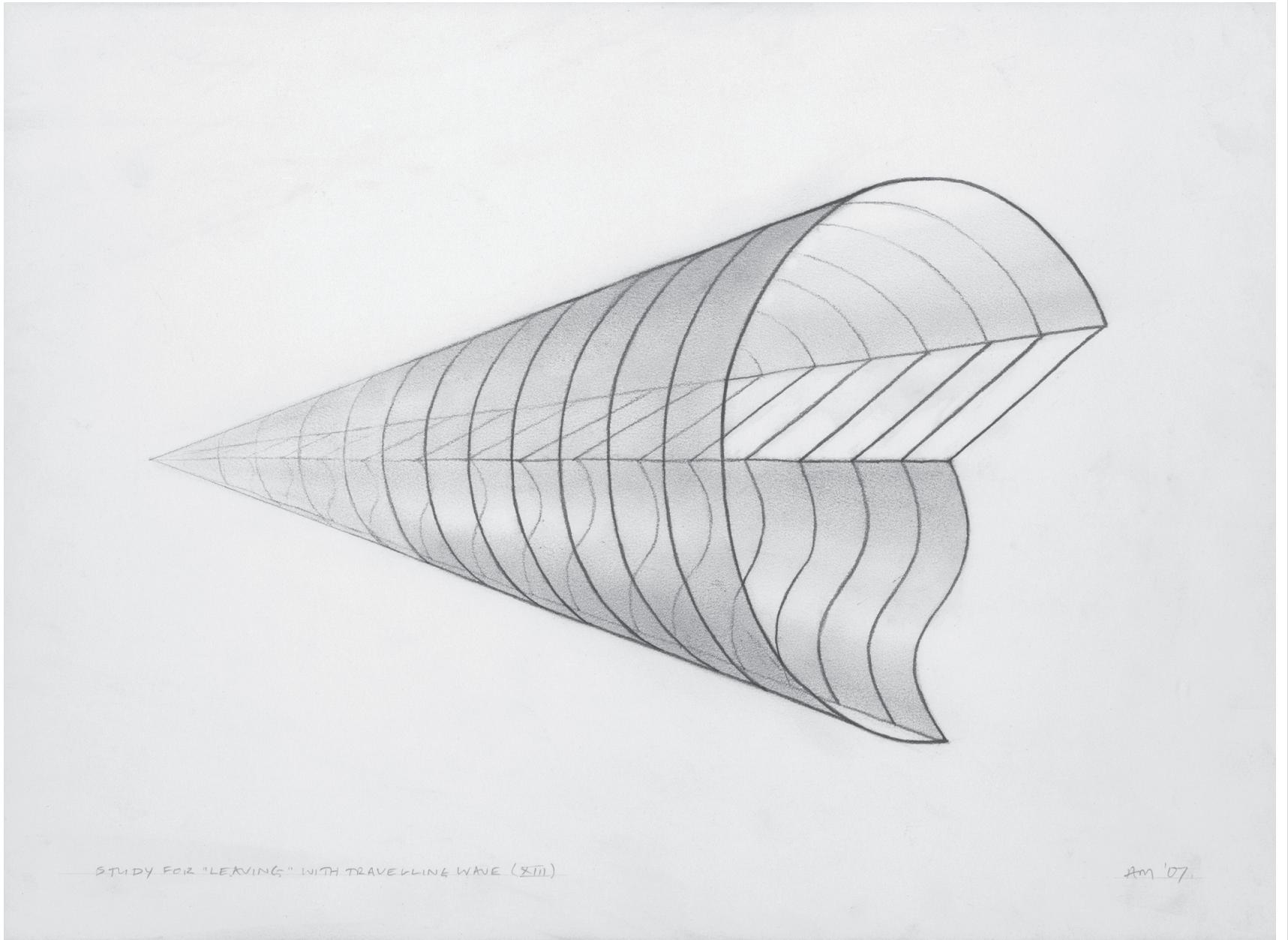
does indeed acknowledge parallels to architectural practices in the strategies through which he develops the technically complicated projections. Planning evolves through a series of drawings that—in order to anticipate the effects of energy and movement as well as the more conventionally sculptural experiences of mass and space—borrow from the models of the diagram, the flow chart, the musical score and the storyboard. “What I create,” McCall explains, “is a durational experience. My works exist sculpturally in three-dimensional space and cinematically in time, and it’s true that when a good architect designs three-dimensional space to be inhabited, they will always have in mind an ambulatory, durational structure. You can’t experience a building simultaneously; you have to move through it.”

Left: Antony McCall, Doubling Back (2003). Installation view at the Whitney 2004 Biennial. Solid light installation. Thirty-minute cycle in two parts. Computer, computer script, video projector, haze machine. Dimensions variable. Photograph: Hank Graber. Courtesy of Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.

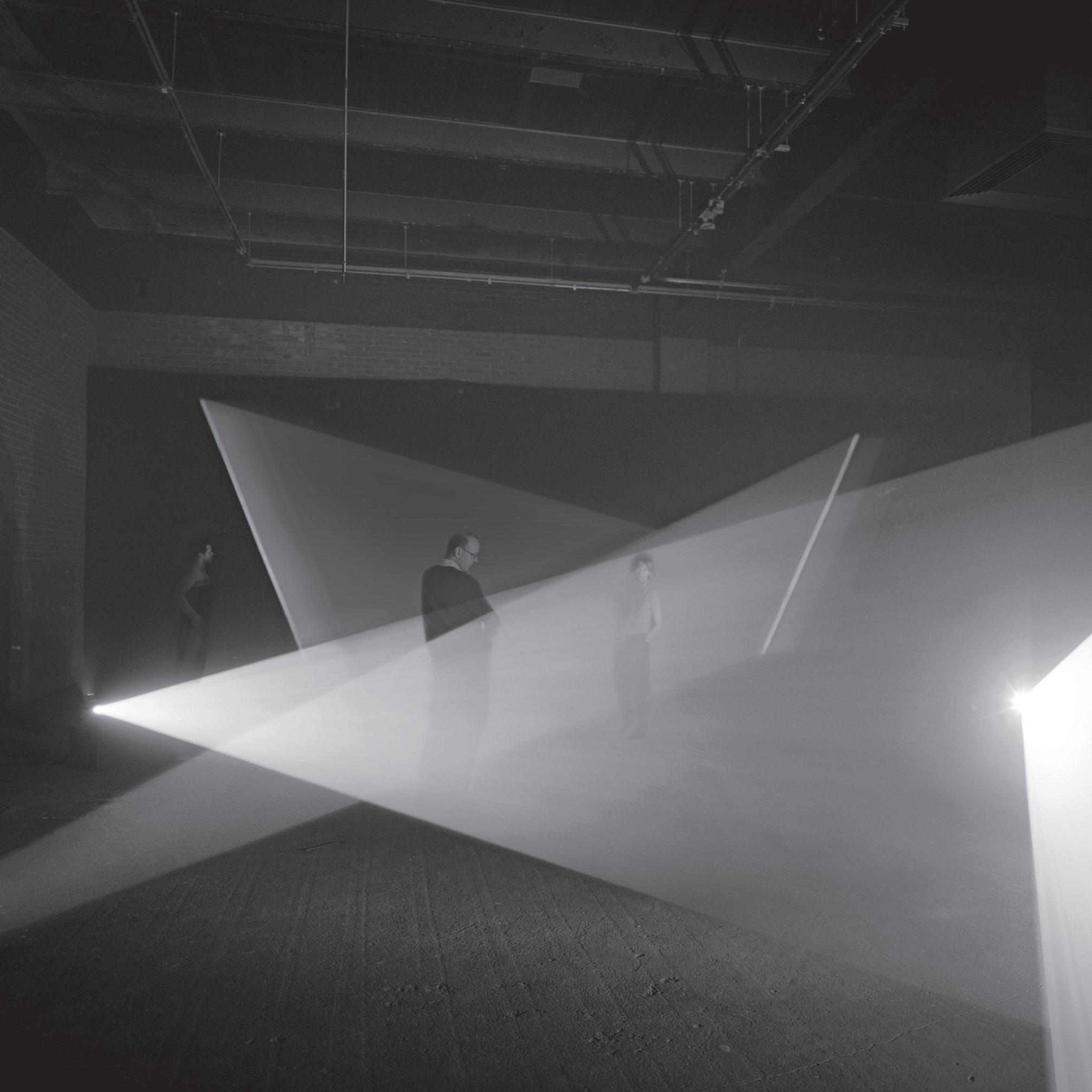
Opposite: Antony McCall, Doubling Back (2003). Exhibition at Musée de Rochechouart (2007), installation drawings. Photograph: Freddy Le Saux. Courtesy of Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.



Anthony McCall, Between You and I (2006). Installation view at Peer/The Round Chapel, London, 2006. Vertical solid light installation. Thirty-minute cycle in two parts. Computer, QuickTime movie file, two video projectors, two haze machines. Dimensions variable. Photograph: Hugo Glendinning. Courtesy of Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.



*Anthony McCall, Study for Leaving (2006/7).
The nineteenth minute. Pencil on paper; one of
four, each 31.8 x 43.2cm. Courtesy of Sean Kelly
Gallery, New York.*





This does not, of course, imply that the movement must be linear and progressive. After all, McCall's breakthrough in the early solid light films consisted as much of the elimination of narrative structure as of the liberating shift from imagistic two-dimensionality to the realm of volume. The ideal perceiver of his work is neither a passive spectator nor a tenacious follower of sequential clues. Rather, he or she engages the work fundamentally through volition, relying upon the inherent bodily resources of tactile, proprioceptive and vestibular senses to negotiate a movement that in its duration exactly corresponds to that of his or her desire. Bodily memory—the habits of movement made inveterate through response to actual concrete objects—may initially inform the perceiver of McCall's work, causing him or her to respond to the planes of projected light as if they were solid regulators of motion through space. The realization that these walls offer no resistance to penetration, however, defeats routine and frees the perceiver to redefine the relationship of touch to ostensible mass and volume.

This sensory freedom is, of course, effectively a liberation from the longstanding hegemony of vision in the process of engaging the world, both practically and aesthetically. In McCall's solid light films the eye is rendered less reliable than other senses that are normally subservient to it in the experience of art: that, in other words, ordinarily generate a synesthetic response to vision, as when one feels the corrugated texture of a van Gogh painting merely by looking. The data of tactility in McCall's work provide only confirmation of the absence of matter where the eye is induced to perceive it, but the pressure of a footfall, the positioning of shoulder, elbow and wrist as one seeks in vain to grasp the planes of light, and the sense of balance or imbalance that one experiences while engaging the projected volumes are, as a consequence, presented all the more forcefully to reflection. The eclipse of the eye—however momentary it may be in the engagement of McCall's work—is therefore both a source of wonder and a useful heuristic. In undermining the certainty of vision and elevating the influence of other senses on perception, the solid light films suggest tantalizing possibilities for both sculpture and architecture and for a truly haptic experience of the spaces they define.