

The New York Times

Art Review

Accurate Projections: Illuminating the Recent Past

By Michael Kimmelman

19 October 2001

A QUICK way to get the idea behind "Into the Light" at the Whitney Museum is to find the smoky room near the back of the exhibition with Anthony McCall's "Line Describing a Cone." Mr. McCall's work is a short film made in 1973. Really it's an installation with a film projector, a fog machine and a black-and-white film. The film takes about a half-hour, during which a line becomes a circle. That's it. A line turns into a circle on the wall.

The subject isn't the line or the circle, though. It is the cone of light beamed from the projector to make the circle, the beam picked out in the dark by the smoke, the way cigarette smoke used to pick out the light beams in movie houses.

In this case you can walk straight through the beam, stand in it, interrupt it with your hands, even flap your arms to make the smoke swirl in the light, all of which underscores the work's basic themes: about intangible sculpture (light as sculpture); about time, meaning the time it takes for the beam to turn from a line to a circle; and about your interaction with the beam, the pleasurable element of the whole thing, without which it reverts to a simple, dull film in a dark, smoky room.

The work is simple anyway. But its brand of simplicity is of the catchy, endearing kind, and it gets straight to the point. Which, in this case, is that modern sculpture can jump straight off its pedestal and hang in the air or land in your lap without necessarily diminishing your stimulation or satisfaction.

Back in the early 70's this was still a radical concept. The gallery was suddenly no longer regarded as a neutral receptacle, an ethically blank space. It was a white cube, an active container of meaning wherein we could become part of the art. All this may not come as news to you now. But you may be surprised by how refreshing it is to encounter it in a near-virginal, unadulterated state.

Despite what you probably think, the Whitney's show, organized by Chrissie Iles and subtitled "The Projected Image in American Art 1964-77," isn't about the roots of today's ubiquitous video installations. Considering how amnesiac the art world is, this exhibition deserves credit anyway as an act of historical rectitude, recovering pioneering examples of experimental film, video, slide projections and even holography from an era before anybody heard of Bill Viola or Sam Taylor-Wood.

But the show's true goal is to demonstrate how sculpture expanded its purview partly thanks to film and video. The light beam could be a sculpture. So could sound. So could you. We see here how, in American art 30 or 40 years ago, projected images altered, enlarged and otherwise disturbed our sense of space and of objects in space, which after all is in one respect what we mean when we say sculpture.

I leave it to Ms. Iles in her catalog essay to make the connections, if any need to or even can be made, between this art and Holbein or van Eyck, as she attempts to do, and also to flesh out the

phenomenological and theoretical angles, without which no self-respecting contemporary art catalog would be complete.

At least as much to the point as Holbein and van Eyck would seem to be Marcel Duchamp and Robert Rauschenberg and Donald Judd and Carl Andre. Ms. Iles has a good phrase, apropos of the latter: Minimalist artists, having helped to open up the space of the gallery to become part of the work, paved the way for artists working with projected images to include the darkened room of the cinema; what we got, in her words, was a "hybrid of white cube and black box."

There are 19 works in the show. Some are prankish. Some are comical. You predictably find various low-tech, high-concept attempts to use moving imagery for disorienting effect. These are generally easier seen than described. Dan Graham's "Helix/Spiral" (1973) pits two people with hand-held movie cameras fixed on each other, moving in indecipherable pre-arranged patterns. The images they produced are projected in sync on facing walls, so that we stand between them, unable to see both films at once and looking at cameras pointing as if at us but recording somebody else.

Michael Snow's "Two Sides to Every Story" (1974) functions similarly, using two sides of a metal screen hung in the middle of a room, around which we are supposed to move. Robert Morris's "Finch College Project" (1969), re-enacted and freshly filmed, is more complicated: several people glued a mirror and a photograph to opposite walls in a gallery, then removed the mirror and photograph, leaving the glue. Meanwhile someone filmed them doing this while rotating the camera around the room. What you see is the gallery with the glue on the walls and the film projected from a revolving turntable, like a lighthouse beam, recapitulating how the camera turned.

These and other works test our frustration, a basic emotion. They're about what we can't see or grasp or even make sense of, a topic that may have had some political meaning during the Vietnam era, the residue of which is now mostly experiential. Dennis Oppenheim's 1973 film of his hand slapping a wall, for example, is viscerally direct and violent: the image is projected on all four walls of a gallery in syncopation, the sound reverberating. Frustration, to the point of anger, and a taste for the absurd are motifs in the show, the flip side to its optimistic experimentation.

Besides Mr. Morris's "Finch College Project" several other works were conceived as performances or live video projections and are recreated, a curious fact in a historical survey. Keith Sonnier's "Channel Mix," first shown in 1972, projects four live television feeds on two walls, creating split-screen images accompanied by low-level cacophony.

Yoko Ono's "Sky TV," conceived in 1966, consists of a live feed of the sky above the museum on closed-circuit television. Its feel-good Minimalism erases the distinction between what's inside and what's outside the museum, a Duchampian conceit widely implicit elsewhere, as in Bill Anastasi's "Free Will" (1968), which is a live video on a monitor of an even less animated image, a corner of a room. The monitor blocks our view of the corner, which we see nonetheless on the screen.

"Free Will" thereby makes black-humored use of the same idea that Ms. Ono's work raises, with a nod toward detractors of television as something on which there is nothing to see. There is only a question to think about: What is the art? Is it the corner of the room, or the monitor, or the image of the corner on the monitor, or our reaction before a video image of a corner of a room in which nothing takes place?

The answer: all of the above, of course, under sculpture's expanded rubric.

Like several other works here "Free Will" doesn't need a second look, there being nothing much to see in the first place. But 30 years ago Mr. Anastasi helped to push the conversation in the art world along. This exhibition reminds us of artists like Mr. Anastasi, Mary Lucier, Beryl Korot, Peter Campus, Paul Sharits, Joan Jonas and Simone Forti, whose useful contributions to American art during the late 60's and 70's, some of them visually eloquent, are known to devotees of the period but overlooked even by an educated public whose attention is turned toward stars.

With some of these works you must listen as well as look. Mr. Sharits's "Shutter Interface" (1975), involving synchronized 16-millimeter films, is an agitated wall of shifting colors in rectangular bands set to a percussive soundtrack.

Ms. Lucier's "Polaroid Image Series" matches slide projections to an audio tape. The slides (a woman, croquet players, Boston, a room) are photographs copied over and over, the work consisting of these images progressively deteriorating until they become unintelligible. The tape by the composer Alvin Lucier, then her husband, is a speech similarly rerecorded until it also can't be grasped. The work is simple and elegant: speech and image transformed into music and abstract form, as if to say that music and abstraction are the essence of language and sight.

A last word about Ms. Korot's "Dachau 1974," wherein four video monitors record a deadpan progression through the Nazi camp, from the entrance to the woods behind the ovens. The delivery of these images, in contrapuntal sequence on the four screens, relates rhythmically to Minimalist music and formally to Minimalist sculpture, with its stress on mechanical repetition.

But the art is about death. So you get hot content and cold form in complex equilibrium. Which is not a bad way to sum up where a lot of experimental American art was aiming to go back then.

"Into the Light: The Projected Image in American Art 1964-77" is at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 945 Madison Avenue, at 75th Street, (212) 570-3676, through Jan. 27.