

Line Describing a Cone

by Anthony McCall

1973, 30 minutes, B&W, 16mm film

SILENT (except for audience noises!)

Presented in 2025 by TLC

(Teaching and Learning Cinema)

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Notes compiled September 2025 for
Light Source exhibition curated by Martyn
Jolly + Tony Oates at Drill Hall Gallery
... and University of Wollongong

www.teachingandlearningcinema.org

Our Expanded Cinema Manifesto

We at TLC insist that the best Expanded Cinema happens when an audience is brought together for a specific space and time as a temporary community. The best Expanded Cinema creates a social event and a memorable communal experience. The celluloid strip that constitutes the artwork's "DNA" remains the same, but as it travels through time, and is joined by diverse groups of people, in different spaces, it evolves and "belongs" uniquely to the present.

LDAC in 50 words or less

Material: B&W 16mm film, silent. Projection: room filled with smoke / haze.

Plot: single white dot transforms into a circle over 30 minutes, smoke picks up the light to create 3D cone.

Experience: audience moves around the room and interacts with the "solid light" as it emerges.

What is Expanded Cinema?

Expanded Cinema happens when the event of cinema goes beyond the image in the frame, and involves the embodied experience of the audience in the here and now.

Line Describing a Cone came out of one of art's most successful artist-run initiatives, the London Film Makers' Co-op. The LFMC set up a lab with film printing equipment and projection spaces. Expanded Cinema was part of the LFMC project from the very beginning. Malcolm Le Grice's *Castle 1* (1966) speaks to some of the Co-op's politics of art and cinema. The relationship with the audience is crucial - instead of disappearing into the "story" of the film, the audience is forced to focus on the event taking place in the room in which the film is projected.

Expanded Cinema continues to be made and shared by a very active international network. You can read more in Jonathan Walley's comprehensive book, *Cinema Expanded* (2020), or consult the 1970 publication *Expanded Cinema* by Gene Youngblood (which will give you a more psychedelic picture of this rich practice). Historically, Expanded Cinema is significant (in our opinion) as a precursor to later immersive video installation and relational art, and it has links to Fluxus which we love.

A quote about *Line Describing a Cone*

"... Anthony McCall's LINE DESCRIBING A CONE [is] a film which demanded to be looked at, not on the screen, but in the space of the auditorium. What was at issue was the establishment of a cone of light between the projector and the screen, out of what was initially one pencil-like beam of light. I consider it the most brilliant case of an observation on the essentially sculptural quality of every cinematic situation." – P. Adams Sitney, *Artforum*.

In the words of Anthony McCall

Excerpt from an email sent by Anthony McCall in 2005:

Line describing a cone is what I term a solid light film. It is dealing with the projected light-beam itself, rather than treating the light-beam as a mere carrier of coded information, which is decoded when it strikes a flat surface (the screen).

The film exists only in the present: the moment of projection. It refers to nothing beyond this real time.

The form of attention required on the part of the viewer is unprecedented. No longer is one viewing position as good as any other. For this film every viewing position presents a different aspect. The viewer therefore has a participatory role in apprehending the event: he or she can – indeed needs to move around, relative to the emerging light-form.

On *Line Describing a Cone*, by TLC

Line Describing a Cone is like no other film – during its 30 minute duration, a single point of light grows, inch by inch, to form a circle on the screen. The screen, however, aint where the action is! The room, filled with fog, becomes a container for a massive sculptural object – a cone of light – and an audience is free to roam, and play with the shell of light as it curves over your head. The piece is marvellous as a reductive structuralist film – literally, all you have is light and duration, and McCall makes you aware of the travelling path of the light beam – but it's also a great participatory experience, and very liberating, once you get over the inhibition to play that's been programmed in as a natural part of film and art-viewing practice.

TLC's Aussie tours of *Line Describing a Cone*

(Thrice: in 2005, 2015, and 2025.)

In 2005, Teaching and Learning Cinema (in its former guise as Sydney Moving Image Coalition) organised an Australian tour of *Line Describing a Cone*. Although presented in artists' lofts during the 1970s, in recent years Anthony McCall's films have increasingly been

displayed in art museums. We chose to reconnect the piece with its "rougher" history, showing the work in small artist-run warehouses in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth.

The 2005 tour was presented in association with IASKA (International Art Space Kellerberrin Australia) and Performance Space (Sydney):

- Kellerberrin (a wheat and sheep town in Western Australia, population 1000)
- Perth (Artrage Breadbox Gallery)
- Melbourne (Ignifuge Warehouse)
- Sydney (Lanfranchi's Memorial Discotheque)
- Brisbane (Jugglers Cafe and Gallery)

The 2015 tour:

- CEMENTA festival, Kandos (former cement manufacturing town in NSW – first outdoor screening)
- Uni of Wollongong (Media Arts, Visual Arts)
- Drill Hall Gallery, Canberra
- Urambi Village Centre, Kambah, Canberra

The 2025 tour:

- Drill Hall Gallery, Canberra as part of the *LIGHT SOURCE* exhibition curated by Martyn Jolly and Tony Oates. Screened alongside Malcolm Le Grice's *Castle 1* (1966).
- Uni of Wollongong (Screen Media Production)

SPECIFICATIONS FOR PROJECTION

"Please note: there is, obviously, especially for one-time showings, a certain necessary improvisatory spirit. So these specifications should be taken as guidelines rather than imperatives. However, I can say that the most successful showings that I have witnessed have been reasonably close to these recommended conditions."

- Anthony McCall

1. The projector should be inside the viewing space, not inside a projection booth.
2. The projection space should be entirely empty of chairs or other furniture.
3. The projection space must be absolutely pitch-dark. Owing to the delicate nature of light, even a slight spillage of ambient light from poorly masked windows or doors can seriously affect the film's visibility. A five or six-inch-wide strip of thin black card loosely looped over the top of the projector casing to minimize light spillage from the heat vents up onto the ceiling, can also help.
4. Whenever possible, use a 16mm projector with a 350 watt Xenon lamp [...] The Xenon lamp is significantly brighter than that of a standard projector.
5. The projector should stand on a plinth of about 4-5' in height (the ideal height would place the lens of the projector at approximately half the height of the projected image). [Metric: 1m – 1.5m]
6. The ideal projection distance between projector lens and wall is between 30' and 50' feet. The ideal frame height at the wall is between 7' and 11' (ie giving an ideal ratio between beam length and frame height of between 4.5 and 5 to 1). The base of the frame should be about 1' from the floor. [Metric: 9m – 17m throw, 2m – 3.5m frame height, 30cm from floor]
7. The light of the beam is visible through its contact with tiny particles in the air, be they from dust, humidity or smoke. The most effective and controllable method of ensuring visibility is by hiring or borrowing a "Hazer". [...] A Hazer fills the projection space with a safe, odorless haze similar in appearance to a sea mist, which is extremely effective in rendering the beam of light palpable and visible.

Showing the Cone outdoors?

In the 2015 CEMENTA festival in Kandos we tried something new - we projected *Line Describing a Cone* outdoors! We emailed Anthony to ask if he'd ever presented the *Cone* outdoors himself. He replied:

The answer is that I have, once. In about 1974, upstate New York at Bon Huot's farm, late one summer night at a party of artists and filmmakers (including Carolee Schneemann, Hollis Frampton, Bill Brand – probably lots of others too, since it was between Binghamton and Buffalo, as I recall (where the two big avant-garde film departments were)).

It was a fine night, and a light mist had settled over the fields. So the conditions were ideal. I simply set the projector up on a stand, a little way away from the house, and pointing across the field. We projected the whole film. The conical was perfectly visible. I remember thinking at the time that it would probably have been better if we'd projected it onto the side of the barn. Somehow, losing the line-drawing, the 'footprint', was a loss. Despite the fact that usually when that film is shown, one mostly has one's back to the 'screen', nonetheless the screen image is a reference point that confirms how the cone got there. It is also a reference point back to cinema.

The other aspect of this is visibility. These days we have haze machines which make the cone visible in space. One of the purposes of an indoor space is to keep unwanted light out, but also to keep the haze in. Outdoors, you'd have a difficult job controlling the vapor, unless of course there was, as there was

upstate that night, a natural mist hanging there.

In Kandos, the night before our CEMENTA event the air was perfectly still, and we set up a "dress rehearsal" in the laneway. There was a gentle slope down from where the projector sat, and we placed the hazer machine next to the projector. At the entrance to the laneway, looking back at the projector, standing inside the Cone, the haze spiralled slowly and beautifully towards us. I suppose being slightly heavier than air, it "rolled" down the lane. It had a rougher "grain" of smoke than you get with a hazer machine situated inside the more controlled atmosphere of a museum.

On the night of our public screening, the wind picked up a little. Not a huge amount, but enough to make us nervous. If a big breeze settled in, it would scuttle the whole event. A possible solution would have been to have two hazer machines – one at each end of the lane, but we were 300km away from the nearest audio-visual hire outlet, and it was a Sunday night. We began to sweat, like it was Kellerberrin all over again. An unexpectedly large audience had gathered – more than 60 people – occupying the narrow laneway with a density of bodies that I suspect was quite unusual for Kandos.

What could we do? We just had to give it a try. To our advantage, all the bodies blocked the breeze a little, as well as kicking up a bit of dust from the laneway's floor. We set up the hazer near the projector as we had for our dress rehearsal. During the projection, the breeze wafted the haze lazily back and forward. Sometimes, if it blew back towards the projector, the Cone was rendered invisible; other times, when it blew away from the projector, it brought the Cone dramatically into visibility. The latter was accompanied by appreciative mewings from the participants.

At times, some lovely unexpected things happened – for example, at one moment towards the end, the Cone was completely visible, and then the breeze changed direction, blowing the haze back towards the projector. This created the illusion that the projector was "inhaling" the vapour back into itself – the Cone shrinking before our eyes! And then it "exhaled" again one last time, the crowd murmured with pleasure, and it was over.

It was a perfectly clear night and the stars were shining above the laneway – visible through the "roof" of the cone. As Louise pointed out, connecting the Cone to the extremely legible "big sky" of rural NSW, on Wiradjuri Country, was essential. This was a discovery from working outdoors that we would be keen to investigate more.

Line Describing a Cone in a Haiku

Dust obscures vision.

But not this time. With McCall

smoke-motes evoke Cone.

Anthony's email to our audience in 2005:

To Sydney Moving Image Coalition

Good evening everyone. I couldn't be more pleased that you are going to be looking at my film *Line Describing a Cone* this evening. Like any work of art, the piece comes alive only when it is engaged and watched by an audience. It becomes even more alive when the engagement is undertaken by artists and filmmakers and others who, like yourselves, are passionately interested in film. For that reason, I am very sorry not to be with you this evening; I look forward one day to visiting in person.

Truthfully, however, *Line Describing a Cone* doesn't need me any more. Right now, this evening, it needs you. Thank you for making it happen,

With warmest regards

Anthony McCall