Light Works

Anthony McCall

# Contents

Foreword

I am not particularly well informed concerning Anthony McCall's work. I know that he's a nice bloke, having had dinner with him once (does that mean he knows I'm not a nice bloke?). And I know that he had a wonderful but grandiose scheme for making artificial waterspouts as part of the London Olympic art projects that turned to shit, despite consuming more than the allocated budget. Anthony said, at dinner, that it wasn't his fault. He faced too many regulatory obstacles. He would say that. And the pollies said it was a waste of money. They would say that. My two cents worth (which costs nothing in this round-to-the-nearest-five-cent age)? High risk, high variance projects are the source of much that is worthwhile, when they happen to come off. A majestic failure can be, notionally, more valuable than a modest success. Whoever approved this grand but ultimately barren scheme is to be applauded but, most likely, they got shafted instead.

Leigh Carmichael, the Dark Mofo guy who got Anthony to Tassie, wants us to have a crack at the waterspout project. He knows a shitload would need to be spent to have any chance of success, so I told him he was dreaming. But what's wrong with dreaming? In the meantime we have other, more modest projects (what did I just say about modest projects?) that might ingratiate Anthony to Tassie, and give us some insight into whether we one day want to go in balls and all.

Everything that I know about Anthony McCall is contained within those last two paragraphs (which should have been one but I split it because I wanted to ease the task of those that will skim and jump ahead). So let me write about something else: our need for context. To be healthy, to be sane, I need to know that I am 'in here', but I also need to know you are 'out there'. McCall is going to send a beacon up the river. There I'll be, pondering what that means to me. And there you'll be, thousands of you, giving me context, all of us moths attracted to the flame, but, unlike moths, each of us aware of our mutual attraction—to light, to self-awareness, to our swarming human togetherness. It's in moments of that awareness, of ourselves and each other as entities, that we have the most integrity, and will behave with the most decency. But when we are aligned but not aware, collected not as individuals but as a mob, that's when we become tainted with parochialism, or religiosity, or racism, or whatever mischief it is that drives our group mind. We need to be aware that we need to be aware

So let's go and gaze on the light that McCall will organise for us, and look beyond the beacon to see ourselves. And if McCall makes me see, even for an instant, the tiny ship of me afloat on the sea of shared experience, well that's more than can be asked of art. It's more than can be asked of reality, really.

> And I, infinitesimal being,
> drunk with the great starry
> void,
> likeness, image of
> mystery,
> felt myself a pure part
> of the abyss,
> I wheeled with the stars,
> my heart broke loose on the wind.
>
> —Pablo Neruda, 'Poetry' [1]

1   *The Essential Neruda: Selected Poems*, City Lights Publishers, San Francisco, 2014, p.169.

David Walsh

Landscape for Fire

1972

top _____ *Landscape for Fire III*
1972
Performance view at Oxford Students'
Art Council/Alden's Field, Oxford

left _____ *Landscape for Fire*
1972
Film stills
Based on the performance of
Landscape for Fire II, 1972

top _____Landscape for Fire
1972
<mark>Performance view</mark> at North Weald,
England

right _____Landscape for Fire:
Score for Eternal Condition
1973
Performance score

12
—13
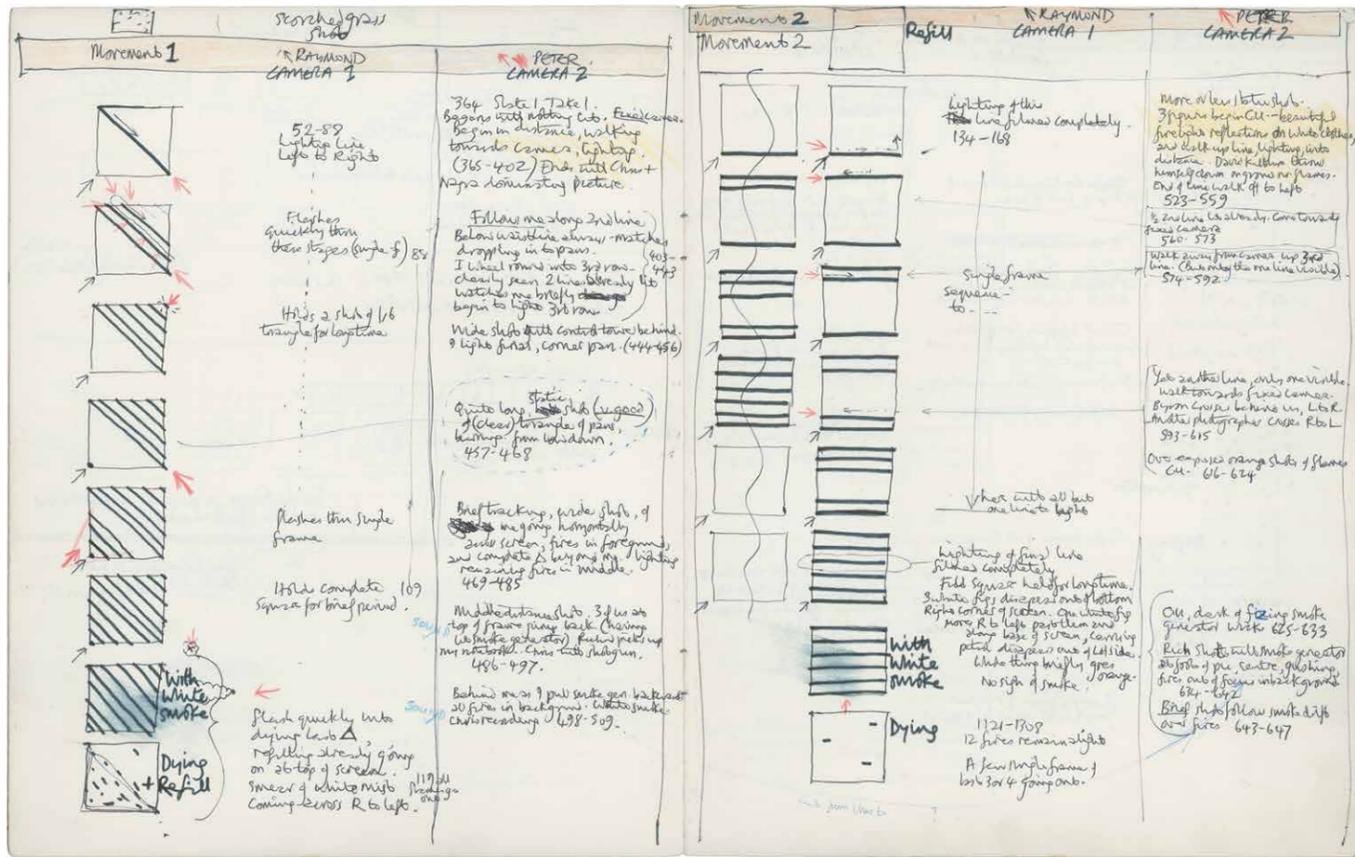
top_____*Landscape for Fire II*
1972
Performance score/editing schema

right_____*Landscape for Fire*
1972
Film still
Based on the performance of
Landscape for Fire II, 1972

Solid Light

2005–13

Breath III
*Between You and I*
You and I, Horizontal II
*Meeting You Halfway*
Skirt
Face to Face IV

Breath III


Breath III
2005

18
—19
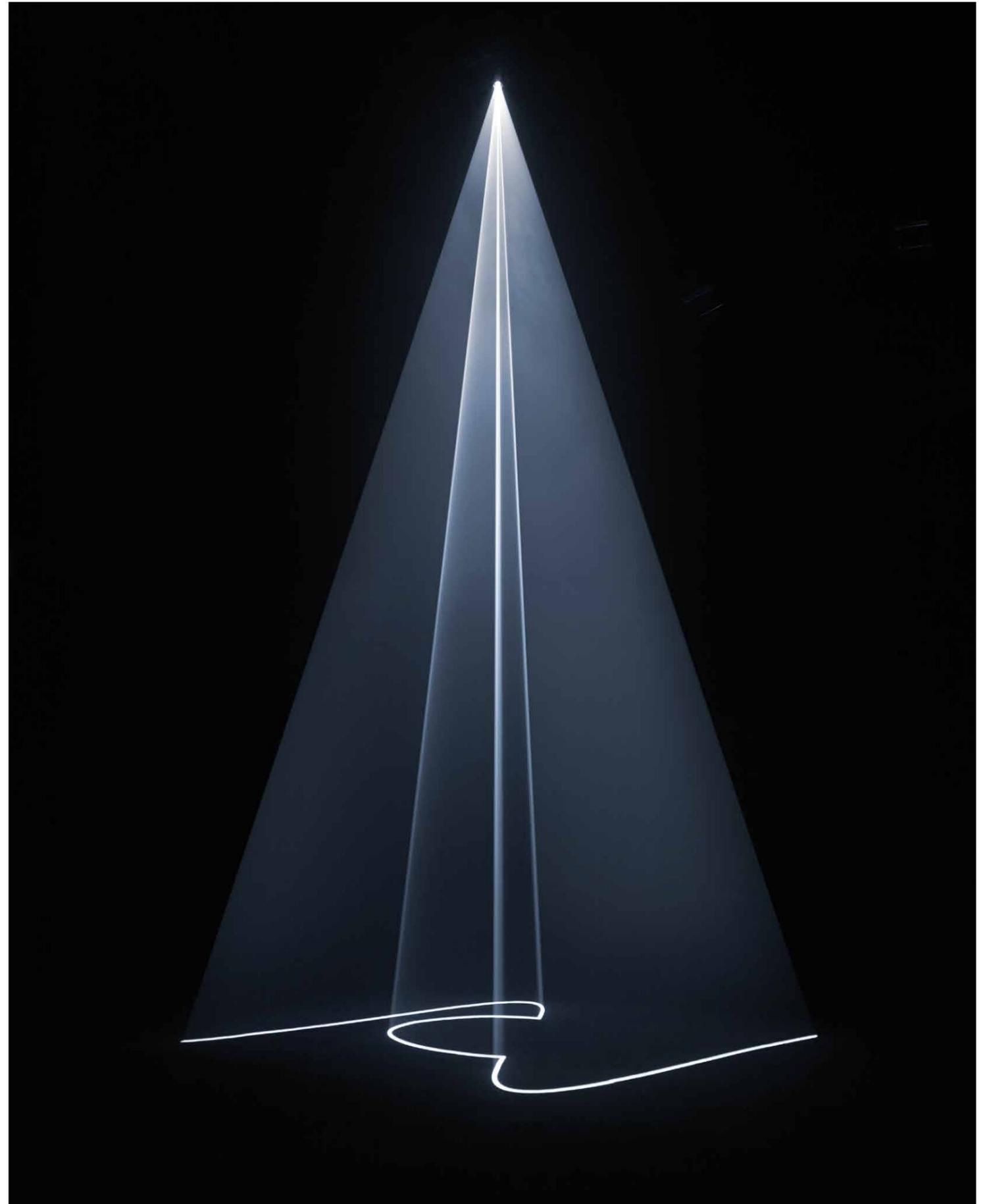
top _____ *Breath III*
2005
<mark>Drawings</mark> at 130-second intervals

right _____ *Breath III*
2005
Installation view at Hangar Bicocca,
Milan, 2009

right *Between You and I*
2006
Installation view at Institut d'Art
Contemporain, Villeurbanne, 2006
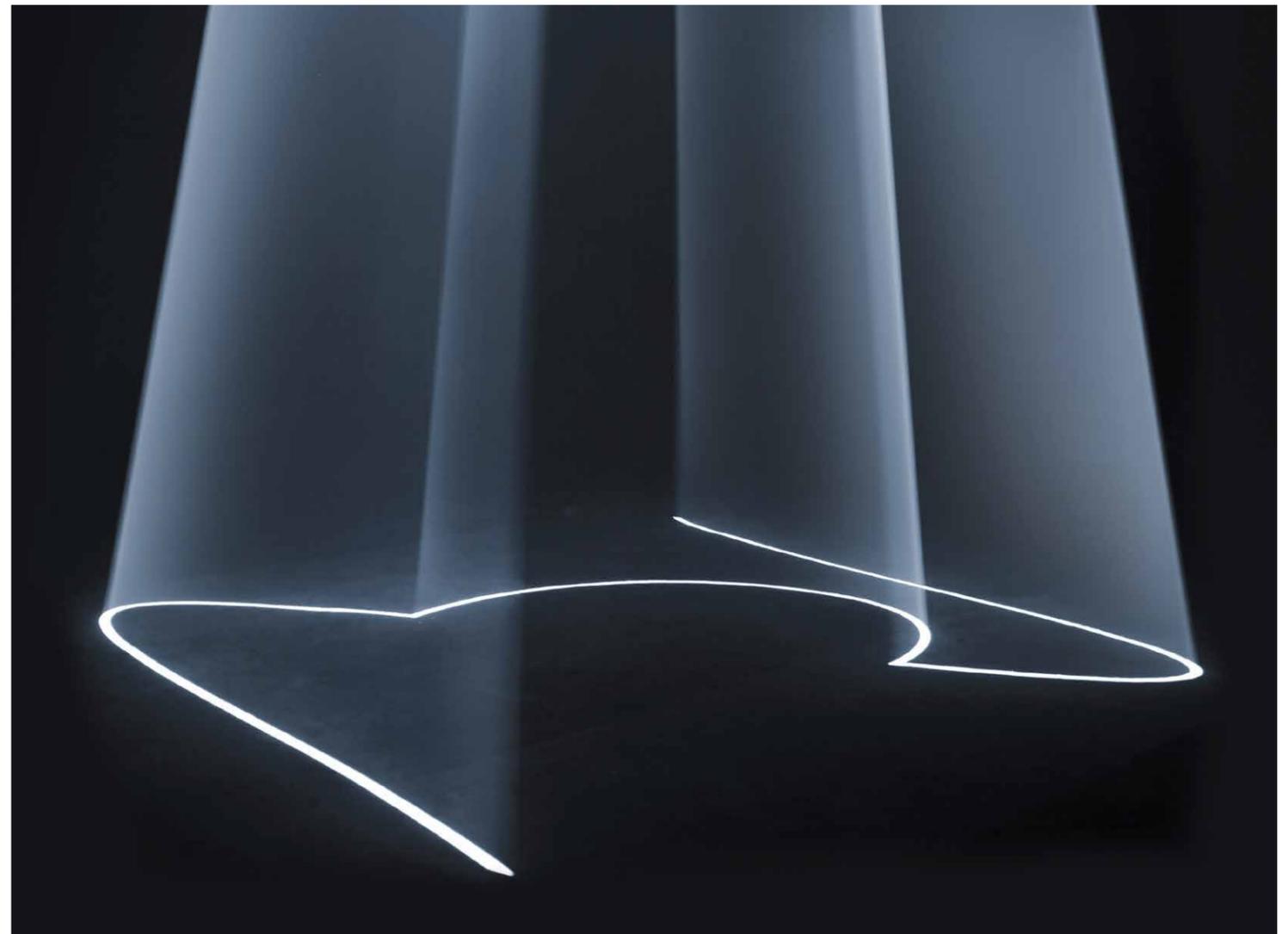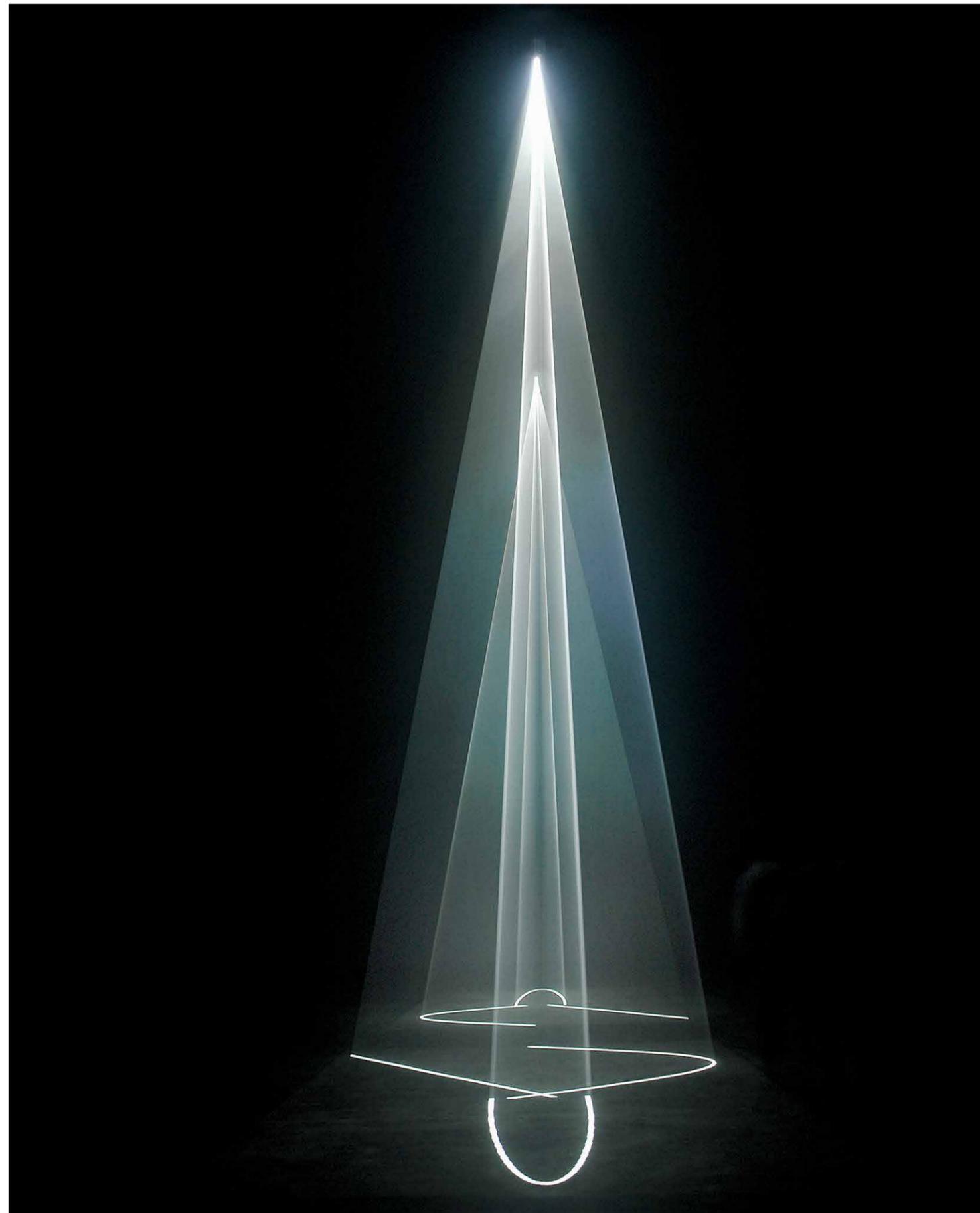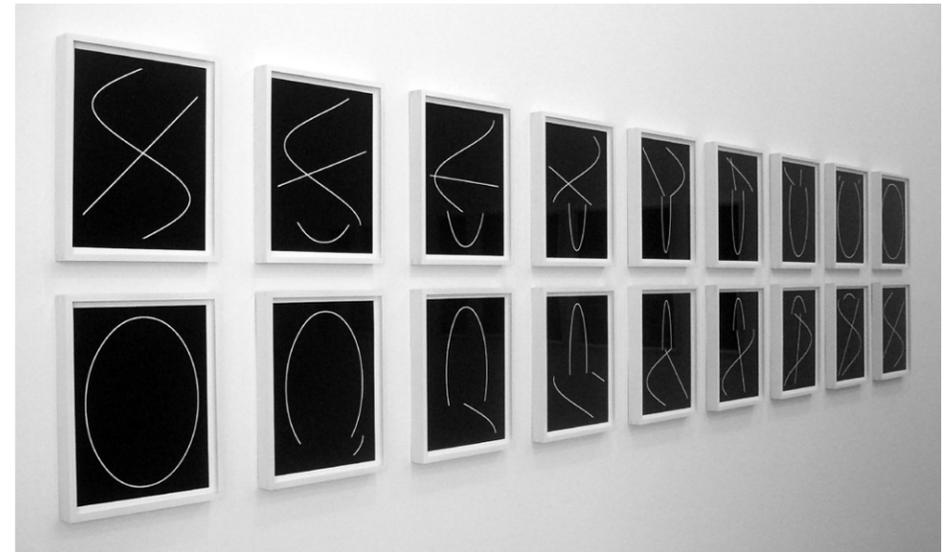
left   *Between You and I*
2006
Installation view at Peer/The Round
Chapel, London, 2006

top   *Between You and I*
2006
Set of framed footprint pairs at
120-second intervals

bottom   *Between You and I*
2006
Installation view at 'Plot09',
St. Cornelius Chapel, Governor's
Island, 2009
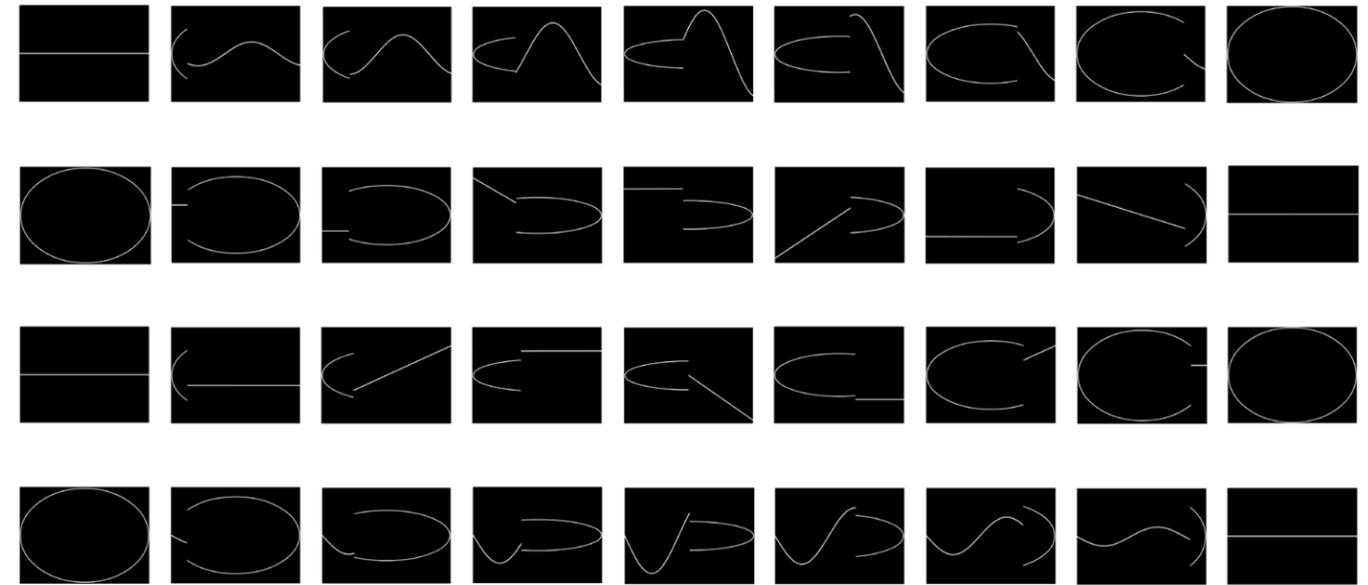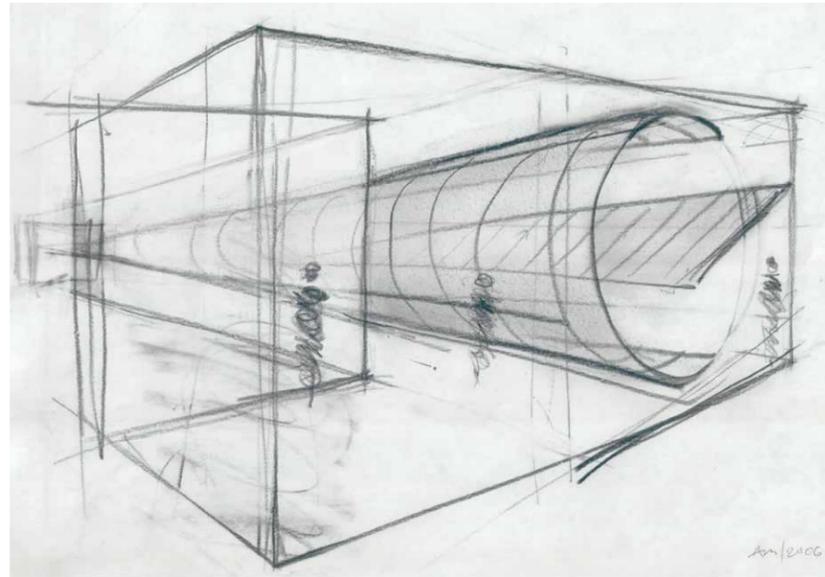
<u>top</u>_____*You and I, Horizontal*
2006
Installation study

<u>right</u>_____*You and I, Horizontal II*
2013
Sequential footprints at 60-second
intervals
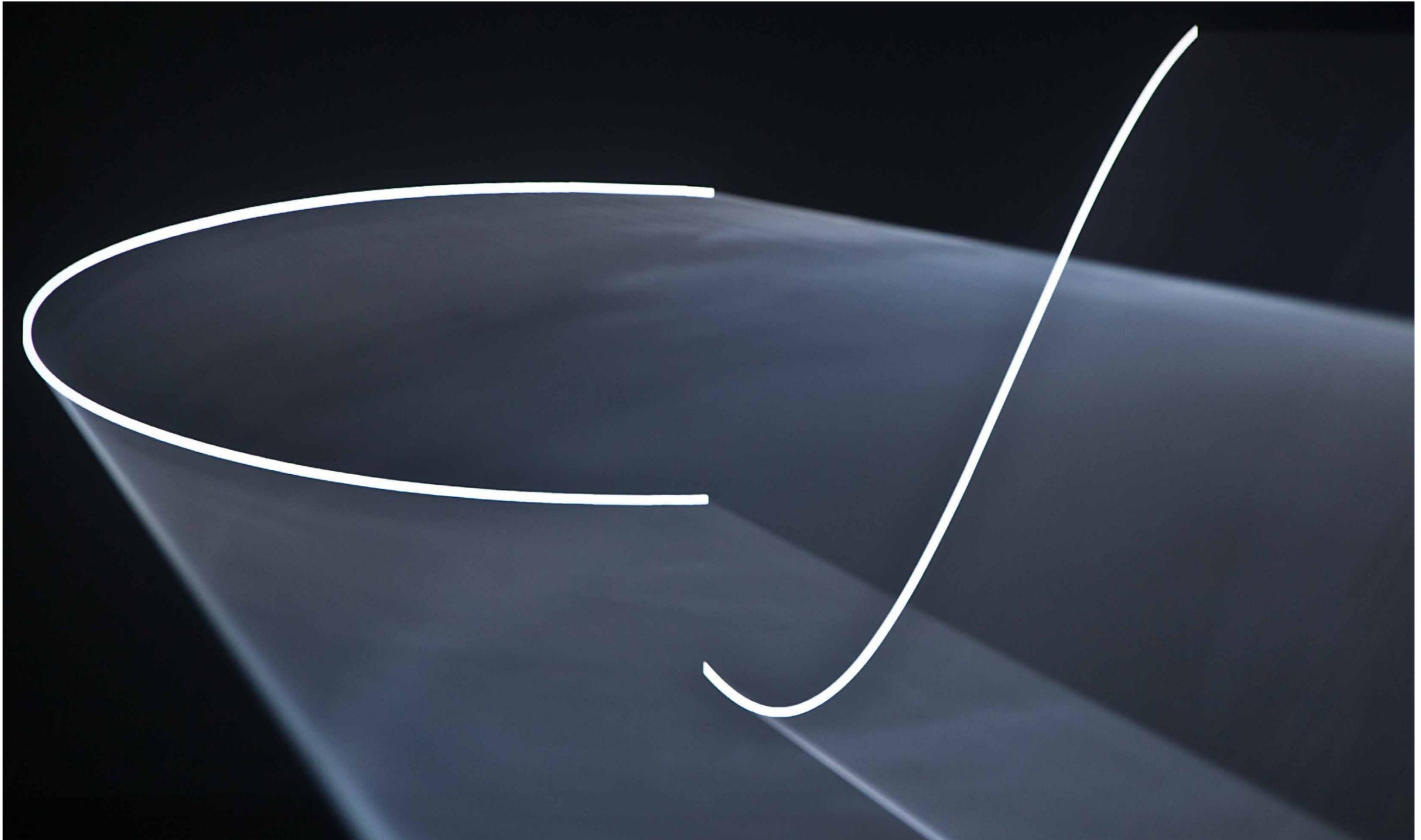
You and I, Horizontal II
2006
Installation view at Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, 2013

1 min. 2 min. 3 min. 4 min. 5 min.

6 min. 7 min. 8 min. 9 min. 10 min.

11 min. 12 min. 13 min. 14 min. 15 min.
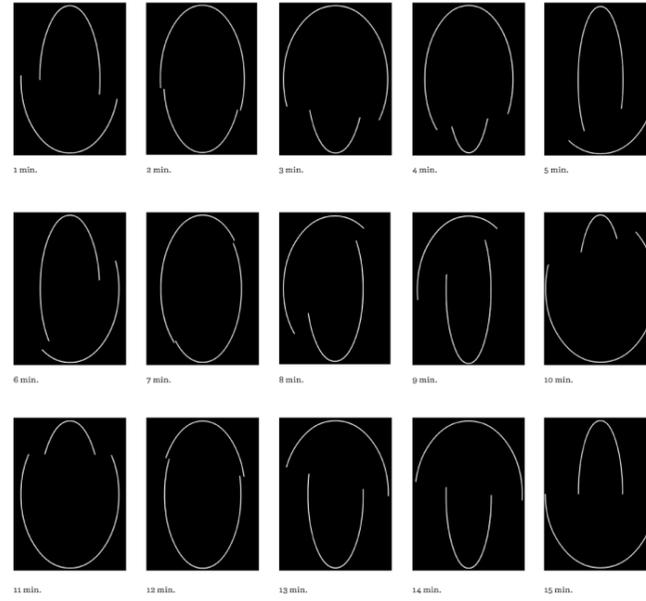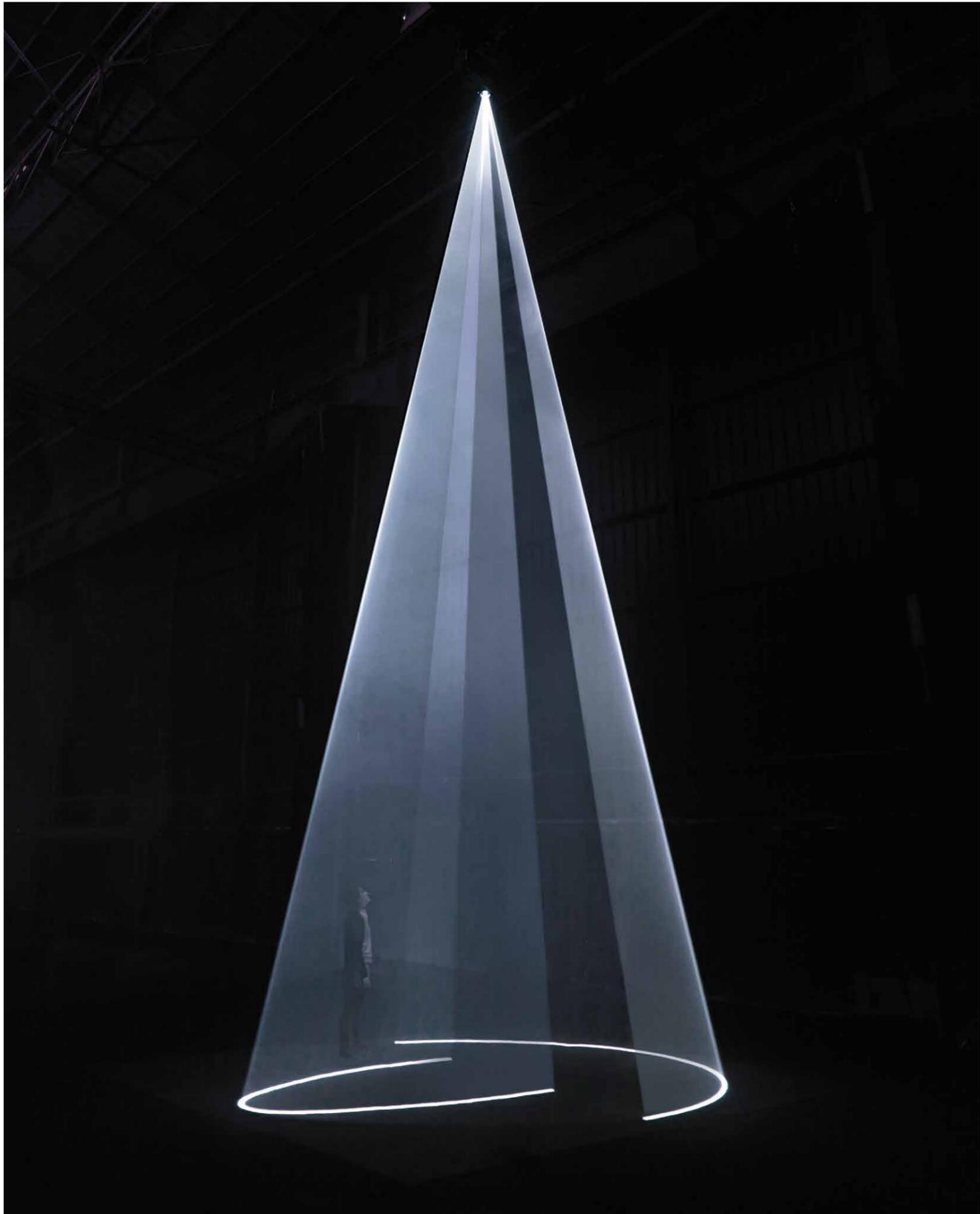
left_____*Meeting You Halfway*
2009
Installation view at Hangar Bicocca,
Milan, 2009

top_____*Meeting You Halfway*
2009
Sequential footprints at 60-second
intervals
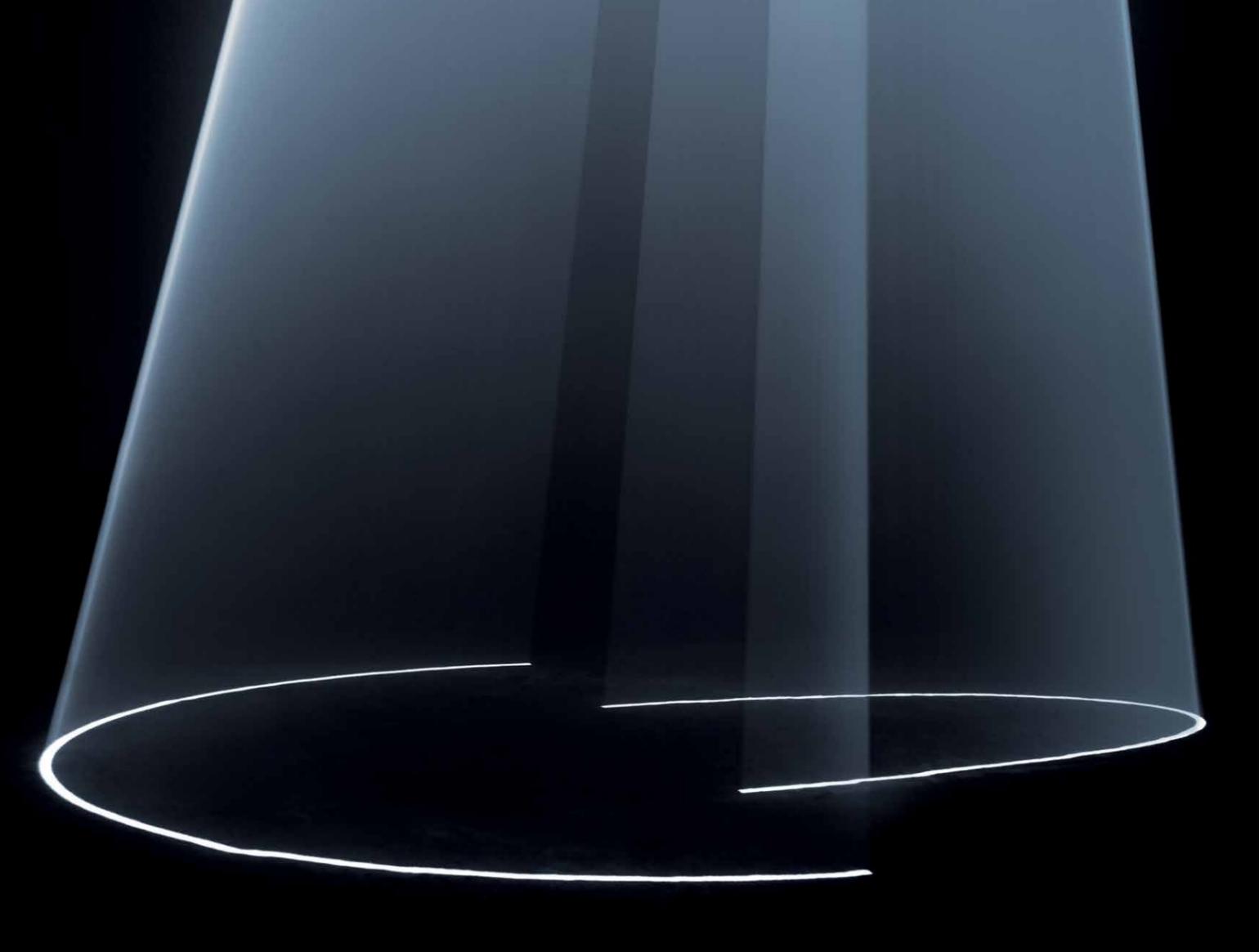
top_____*Meeting You Halfway*
2009
Installation view at Hangar Bicocca,
Milan, 2009

right_____Study for *Meeting You Halfway*
2009
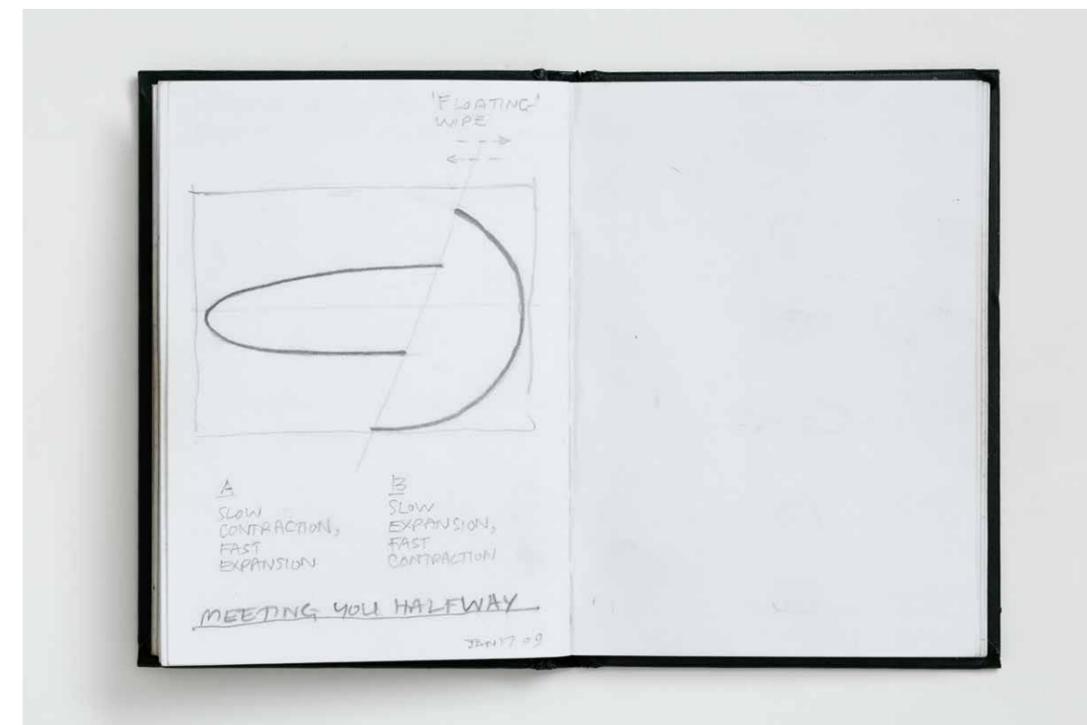
Skirt
2010
Installation view at Ambika P3, London, 2011
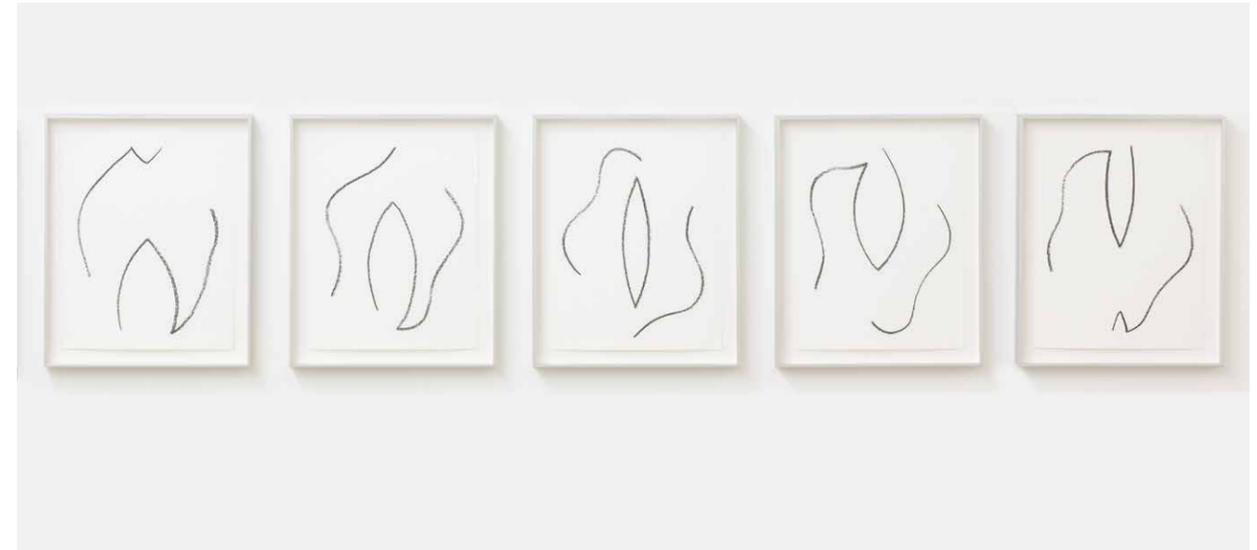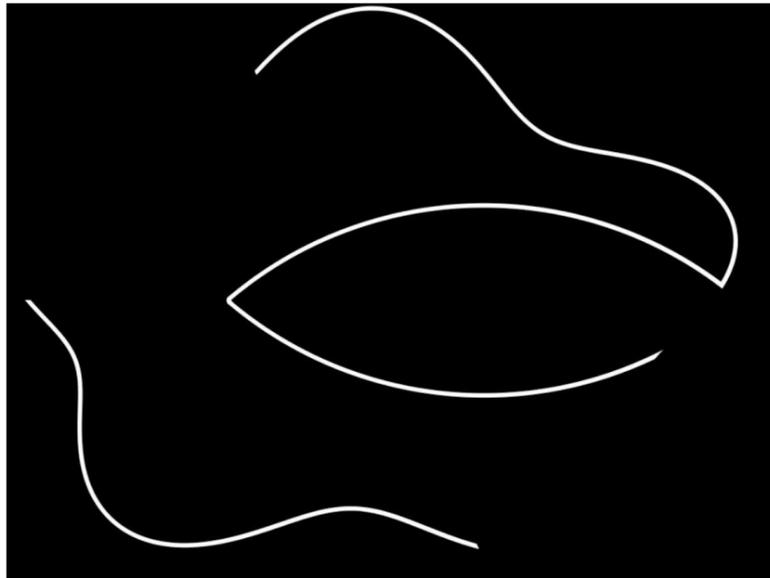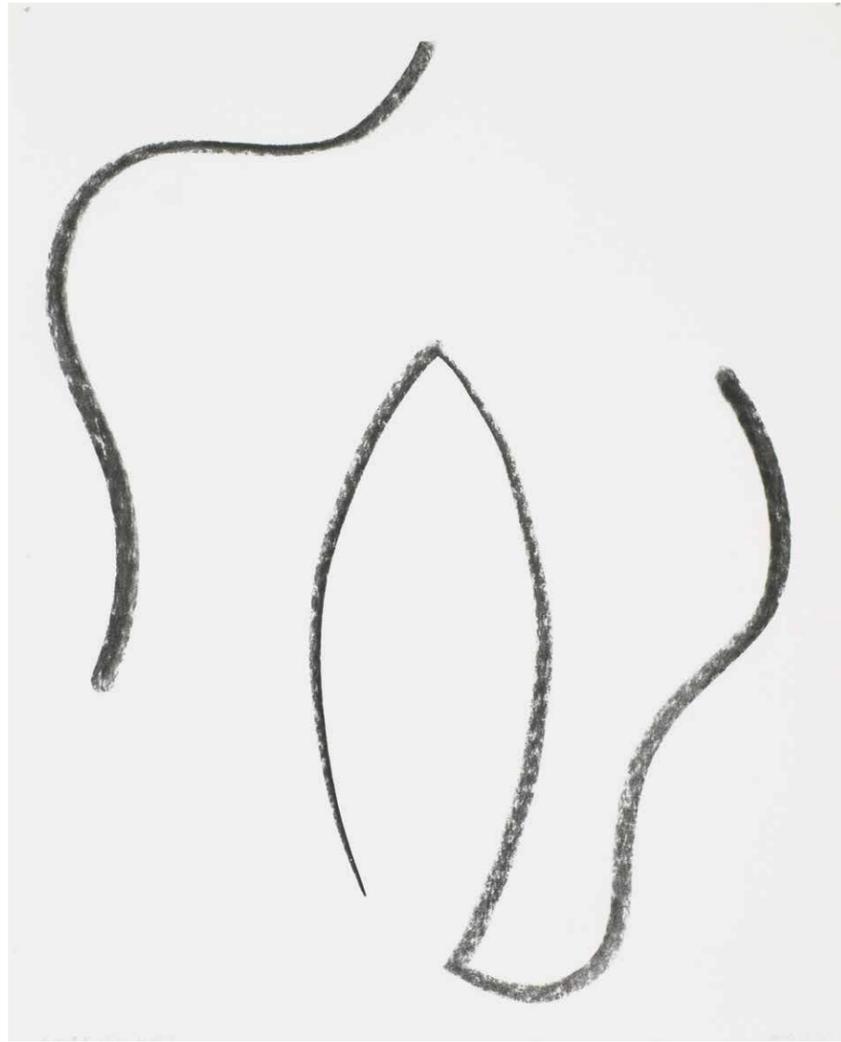
left_____*Skirt*
2010
Footprint drawings

above_____*Skirt*
2010
Set of framed footprint drawings at
103-second intervals

Face to Face IV
2013
Installation view at the Eye Film
Museum, Amsterdam, 2014
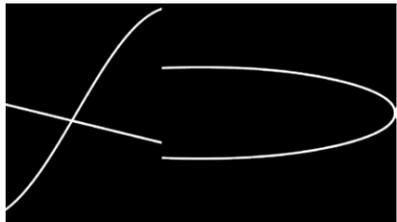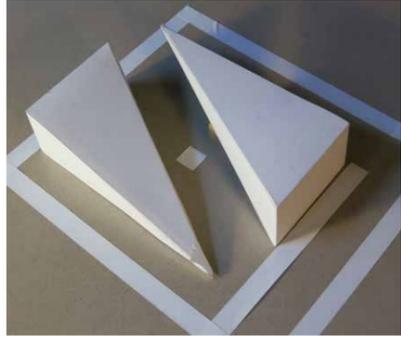
8mins 02secs
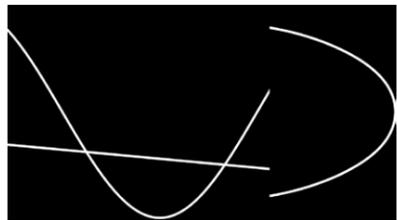
14mins 14secs
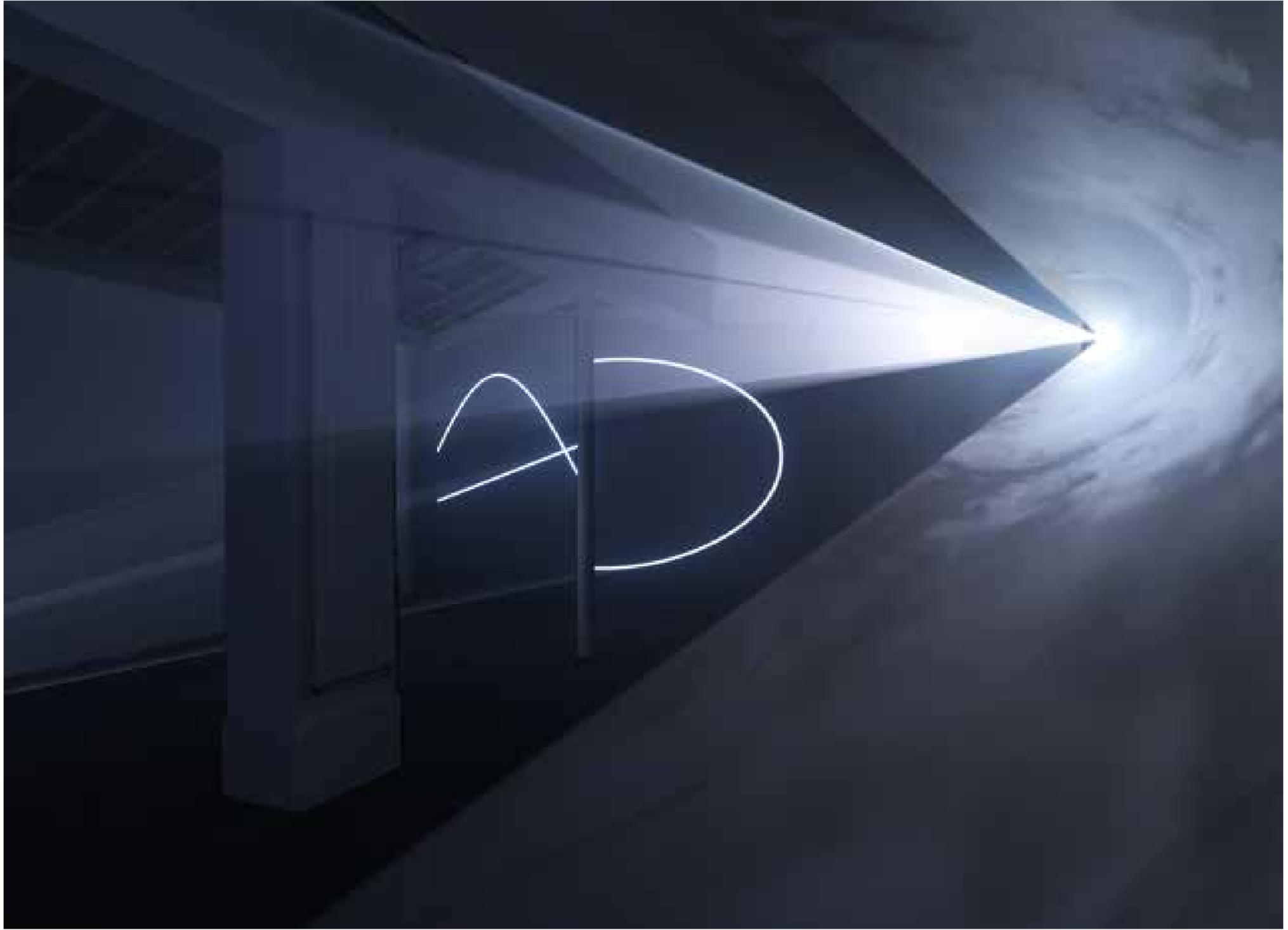
above *Face to Face IV*
2013
Installation view at Martine Aboucaya
Gallery, Paris, 2013

top left *Face to Face IV*
2013
Installation maquette

middle left *Face to Face IV*
2013
Footprint at 00:08:02

bottom left *Face to Face IV*
2013
Footprint at 00:14:14

Feeling in the Dark:
Notes on Solid Light
Jarrett Earnest

[...] from the open door there floated into the
obscurity a mist of yellow radiance, which at first
Tess thought to be illuminated smoke. But on
drawing nearer she perceived that it was a cloud
of dust, lit by candles within the outhouse,
whose beams upon the haze carried forward the
outline of the doorway into the wide night of
the garden.

—Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*[1]

Anthony McCall pioneered what he termed 'solid light' in the early
1970s, a substance as extraordinary as it is commonplace. Simply
put, it is light becoming visible in space by passing through mist,
dust, smoke, or haze—the kind of gentle phenomenon everyone has
experienced in daily life. When we do, we take note: seeing a ray of
sunshine cut across a foggy field, or appear inside a dusty library,
is a striking reminder that we inhabit an oceanic atmosphere of
something; that 'air' is not an absence. Part of what makes solid light
unique as a medium is that depends on conditions that ordinarily
frustrate vision: darkness and haze.
Because light rules vision—inextricably
linked to the physical mechanics of seeing
—we are accustomed to looking at art in

well-lit galleries. By contrast, we navigate the midnight path between
our beds and bathrooms by spatial memory and outstretched
hands, remembering and feeling our way through the dark. It makes
perfect sense, then, that walking around the mysterious caverns of
a McCall installation primes you for a similarly physical experience.
Solid light thickens space, engaging bodily perceptions beyond
our eyes.[2] This effect should not be underestimated. As McCall
notes, 'psychologically a dark space is highly charged because of
our vulnerability within it—the extent of the space and what may
lie within it and beyond is unknown.'[3] Haze, like darkness, prohibits
seeing: fog clots air, mist obscures distance, smoke suffuses space
to unknowable dimensions. And also like darkness, you must feel
your way through these denser atmospheres. In McCall's recent
vertical installations, slowly moving walls of projected light appear
concrete and translucent in the cloudy twilight, carving out hollow
chambers you can enter physically, pressing right through their
immateriality. These works twist our perceptions of space, reversing
our expectations of inside and outside. 'When you look at a second
veil of light through a first, they both become brighter at the point of
intersection,' McCall observes. 'If you have three, it's paradoxical: the
furthermost veil of light is the brightest. It's an accumulation.'[4]

In statements from the 1970s, McCall explained his
intentions in relation to the medium-specificity of Structuralist film
and the spare anti-illusionism of Minimalist sculpture. For example,
in his account of *Line Describing a Cone*, 1973, he wrote: 'This
film exists only in the present: the moment
of projection. It refers to nothing beyond
this real time. It contains no illusion. It is
primary experience, not secondary: that
is, the space is real, not referential; the
time is real, not referential.'[5] Declarations
like this align perfectly with the rhetoric of
Minimalism, which turned to blank industrial
surfaces to avoid any romanticism of the
'artist's hand', and pushed structure toward
its exterior to deny any psychological or
metaphorical interiority—emphasising the
primacy of the physical experience. With
this in mind Rosalind Krauss analysed the
formal implications of a Donald Judd in her
seminal book of the 1970s, *Passages in
Modern Sculpture*: 'The visual interpenetration

1   Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891),
Dover Publications, New York, 2001, p. 49.

2   McCall scholarship is overwhelmingly situated
within the discourses of Structuralist cinema and
Minimalist sculpture; because sculpture is the thread
most directly interrogates the physical experience
of the recent installations, that is where I direct my
attention—largely omitting the heavily theorised and
vital implications of the cinematic.

3   'Anthony McCall in conversation', *Brooklyn Rail*,
October 2014, http://www.brooklynrail.org/2014/10/
art/anthony-mccallwith-jarrett-earnest.

4   Ellard and Johnstone, *Anthony McCall: Notebooks
and Conversations*, Lund Humphries, London, 2015,
p. 117.

5   Anthony McCall, 'Line Describing a Cone
and Related Films', *October*, vol. 103, Winter 2003,
The MIT Press, Cambridge, p. 42.
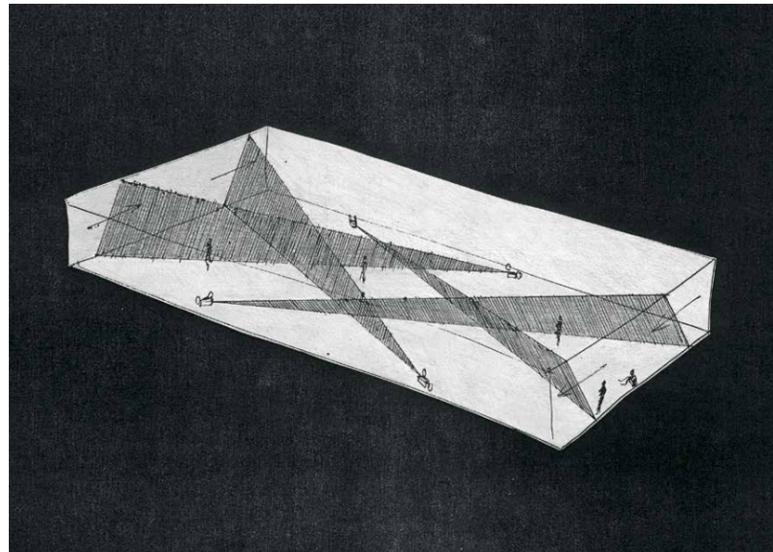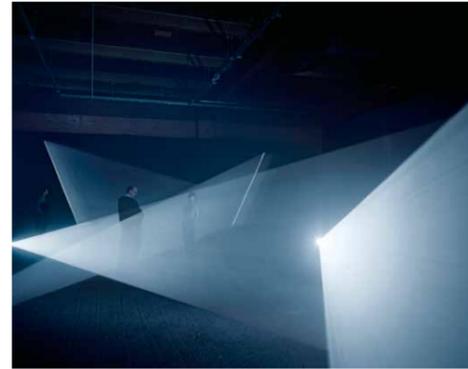
top   *Line Describing a Cone*
1973
Installation view

middle   *Long Film for Four Projectors*
2013
Installation view, 2003

bottom   *Long Film for Four Projectors*
2013
Installation drawing

of the two progressions—one of volumes and the other of voids—itself becomes a metaphor of external space, for it is impossible to determine whether it is the positive volume of the work that brings the intervals into being, or whether it is the rhythm of the intervals that establishes the contours of the world. In this way Judd is depicting the reciprocity between the integral body of the sculpture and the cultural space that surrounds it.'[6]

Given such a reading, how do we then approach McCall's installations, which embody the clearest fulfillment of, and ultimate challenge to, this paradigm? McCall's solid light satisfies Minimalist precepts but to almost opposite effect. Minimalism's obstinate stillness forced visitors to move around them, whereas McCall emphasises an active relationship between bodies and solid light, setting both in fact and illusion; the tangible perception of slowly changing 'walls' within a spectrum of hazy density renders space itself illusory. By opening the object's interior to the body, McCall allows it to seamlessly glide toward emotional and psychological interiority while remaining, irrefutably, within the grammar of the Minimalist experience. Judd's 'reciprocity between the integral body of the sculpture and the cultural space that surrounds' becomes essentially social play; as McCall describes: 'Paradoxically, the more people present, the more solid the form becomes; I am always impressed by how much respect is accorded to the surface of this giant cone so that it is not obscured from sight for someone else.'[7] This participatory dynamic was there from the start, an embryo of performance nested within solid light from the earliest *Cone* films.

It is important to note that McCall's engagement with cinema emerged from the fiery field of performance art. His first film *Landscape for Fire*, 1972, was an attempt to capture his fire performances: metal cans of fuel arranged in a grid, embedded in a landscape, lit and re-lit in pre-arranged rhythmic sequences. Performers with foghorns began in the distance, sounding intermittently while counting steps toward the fires. With each iteration these performances enlarged spatially and extended temporally, seeking an effect of enfolding, so that the spectators became more like the witnesses of a changing event than the audience of a theatrical action. McCall explained his thinking:

'I had expanded the distance between each of those points, so that the square grid changed from being an object watched as a whole from outside, to becoming the entire field incorporating all the spectators

6   Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, 1977, pp. 270–71.

7   McCall, *ibid*., p. 43

within it.'[8] When viewing the tightly edited film you see jumpsuited bodies lighting fires alongside those recording sounds and images, navigating a shape inscribed into the open field through light, smoke and sound. In photographs taken at dusk, slanting incandescent columns of smoke quiver upward from the grid—solid light in the English countryside.

Materials like fire, smoke and mist carry their own urgent transience, swiftly and naturally passing away, an ephemerality held in opposition by the crystalline abstraction of mathematical scores and geometric forms. For example *Landscape for White Squares*, 1972, which McCall remembers as 'a short film that was shot early on a January morning on a frozen plowed field covered in mist;[9] the white squares gradually emerged from the mist.' The iconic white square (an idealised geometric shape if ever there were) is here nothing more than a playful arm-span of cloth waving in the breeze, marching in a line that recedes into distance. In their investigation of the figure in the landscape, appearing and disappearing in atmospheric space through light and sound, both *Landscape for White Squares* and *Landscape for Fire* prefigure the new McCall performance *Night Ship*, 2015, where a boat fitted with rotating searchlight and foghorn travels up the Derwent River after dark, passing by Hobart, Tasmania, illuminating and resounding along the coast at precise intervals.

The ghostly corporeality of solid light becomes more obvious if we situate McCall's oeuvre in a context not of Minimalism but of feminist performance art—often cast as its diametric opposite—with performance's inclusion of all the chaotic emotion, adornment and content eschewed by gleaming geometry. Consider, for example McCall's famous *Cones* alongside a performance work like Carolee Schneemann's *Up to and Including her Limits*, 1976.[10] Aside from the fact that artists were a couple at the time, these pieces were shown back to back in 1974 at the London Filmmaker's Co-op, allowing them to be read in direct relation to each other. McCall's iconic *Line Describing a Cone*, 1973, follows a point travelling into an arcing line, the beam of the projector carving out a three-dimensional cone from the ambient dust and smoke of the dim room. The recently published catalogue

raisonné of McCall's 1970s *Works on Paper* reveals the central place drawing holds in his working process, and here we see the drawing literally animated, becoming real in time and space. When asked about the relation of the cone's scale to the human body, McCall explains: 'The projected circle on the wall would be about the scale of the outstretched arms and legs of a Vitruvian man—at the wall, your fingers could just reach the skin of the cone.'[11] Bearing that in mind, think of Schneemann in *Up to and Including her Limits*: her body suspended by a rope tied to the ceiling, marking out the perimeter of her body with crayons. Recounting the web of lines she said, 'My entire body becomes the agency of visual traces, vestige of the body's energy in motion.'[12] This is an attempt to represent an active body rather than a static autonomous thing—much like 'the body as a verb, always in motion and constantly undergoing change,' as McCall recently characterised the visitors moving through his spaces.[13]

Within this dialogue, aspects of McCall's work now valorised by art historians like George Baker, who argue that McCall radically intervened in the processes of cinematic identification and incorporation by 'sexualizing it, making it excessive and quite literally real,' take on a deeper significance.[14] Perhaps these important artists' work, long separated by vast formal and discursive divides, share underlying resonances after all—an exploration of embodiment —revealing something fresh in both directions. Here, McCall and Schneemann use drawing to visualise the contingency of a body. When *Solid Light* becomes 'more solid' with more bodies, it materialises an aspect of our being in relation to others, dependent upon larger fields. As McCall himself once elegantly put it, 'Most of our experience is based on pairing with other bodies. Our sense of self is only possible because we are in an almost constant state of exchange with others.'[15]

I asked my friend, the performance artist Geo Wyeth, why Anthony McCall's installation at the Hamburger Bahnhof moved him so deeply—physiologically and emotionally. 'The rhythm of the projections, because they were slow,' he told me. 'Because they changed slowly, and in the dark—I could enter the smoke that the light was finding, and I could move the smoke, so that means I was a part of something that is not me—I was inside it, and it was holding me in the dark.' Wyeth's response demonstrates the

8   Ellard and Johstone, *ibid*., p. 41.

9   Earnest, *ibid*.

10   While McCall has been discussed solely in relation to Minimal and Postminimal artists, art historian Brandon Joseph charted McCall's relationship with Carolee Schneemann in his authoritative McCall monograph, noting 'Schneemann's own multimedia performances of the sixties had explored means of embodying and materializing the experience of the visual image which, while ultimately very different in aesthetic, where not unconnected in the direction McCall's work would follow.' Aside from this instance the conceptual implications of the connections of the work remains unexamined. Brandon W. Joseph *Anthony McCall: The Solid Light Films and Related Works*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 2005, p. 82.

11   Earnest, *ibid*.

12   Carolee Schneemann, *Up to and Including her Limits*, http://www.caroleeschneemann.com/works.html.

13   Ellard and Johnstone, *ibid*., p. 120

14   George Baker, 'Film Beyond its Limits', *Grey Room*, no. 25, Fall 2006, The MIT Press, Cambridge, p. 110.

15   Ellard and Johnstone, *ibid*., p. 120.

almost astonishing dialectic McCall's solid light is able to hold together: satisfying and exceeding the pure dictates of Minimalism while enfolding the human impulses of performance art, letting them intertwine in dark misty rooms where geometry and feelings are, by turns, abstracted and concretised. McCall's installations offer the simultaneity of having and losing, of possessing a physical thing that is gently slipping out of your grasp; his solid light materialises the tender interconnectedness of all of our experiences —our bodies together—suspended in solid light.
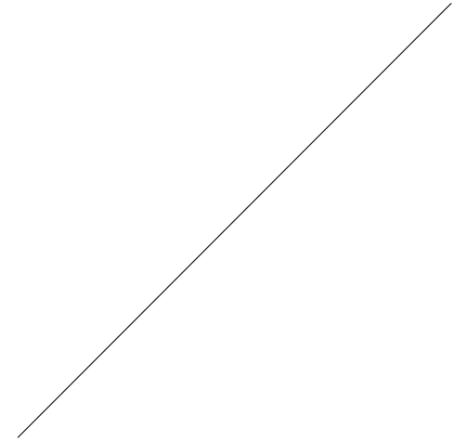
Night Ship

2015

above _____ *Sea Events*
1971
Synthetic ozone in aerosol spray can

right _____ *Found Solid Light Installation*
1974
Offset lithography on paper,
edition of 2

McCall's recent work maintains an active dialog with
ideas that he first began exploring in the 1970s, including
structured landscape performances with foghorns
and small fires; projected, 'solid light' installations; sound
pieces; and lighthouses.

TRINITY HOUSE
LIGHT CHARACTERISTICS
(England, Wales &
Channel Islands)

top *Night Ship*
2015
Large notebook study (I)

left *Night Ship*
2015
Large notebook study (III)

top_____*Crossing the Elbe*
2013
<mark>Installation rendering</mark>

right_____*Crossing the Elbe*
2013
Installation view at Sammlung
Falckenberg, Hamburg

A commission from the German city of Hamburg, *Crossing the Elbe* (2013–14) was based on three pencil-slim searchlights. Over a period of twelve months, the horizontal beams gradually shifted direction, moving progressively through each of the neighborhoods of the city.
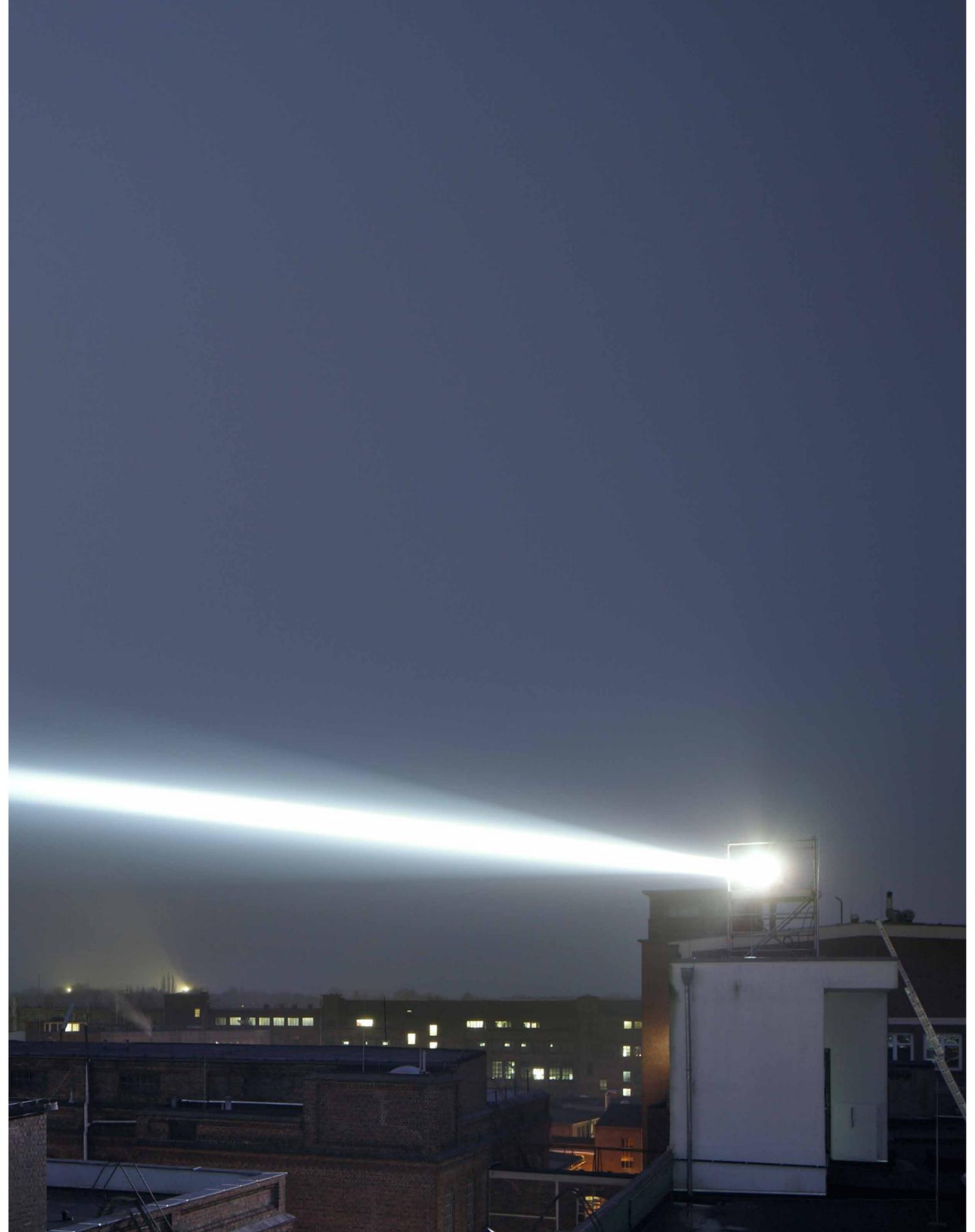
Image list

pp 4–5

Breath (The Vertical Works)
Installation view
Hangar Bicocca, Milan,
2009
Photo: Giulio Buono

pp 10

Landscape for Fire
1972
Film stills
Based on the performance
of *Landscape for Fire II*,
1972

p 11

Landscape for Fire III
30 November, 1972
Performance view
Oxford Students' Art
Council/Alden's Field,
Oxford

p 27

You and I, Horizontal II
2013
Sequential footprints at
60-second intervals

pp 28–29

You and I, Horizontal II
2009
Installation view, Contemporary
Art Museum St. Louis,
September 6–December 29, 2013
Photo: David Johnson

p 30

Meeting You Halfway
2009
Installation view
Hangar Bicocca, Milan,
2009
Photo: Giulio Buono

p 31

Meeting You Halfway
2009
Sequential footprints at
60-second intervals

p 12

Landscape for Fire II
1972
Performance view
North Weald, England
Photo: David Kilburn

p 13

*Landscape for Fire: Score
for Eternal Condition*
1973
Ink, pencil, photo on
paper
44.5 x 56.5cm.

p 14

Landscape for Fire II
1972
Performance score/editing
schema
Notebook (5–20 September,1972)

p 15

*Landscape for Fire
1972*
Film still
Based on the perfor-
mance of *Landscape for
Fire II*, 1972

p 32

Meeting You Halfway
2009
Installation view
Hangar Bicocca, Milan, 2009
Photo: Giulio Buono

p 33

*Study for Meeting You
Halfway*
2009
Small Notebook 34
(January 1 – March 31, 2009)
Photo: Jason Wyche

p 35

Skirt
2010
Installation view
Ambika P3, London, 2011
Photo: Stephen White

p 36

(top) *Skirt*
2010
Set of 7 footprint drawings
at 103-second intervals
Drawing 4/7
Charcoal on paper
35.6 x 28 cm

p 19

Breath III
2005
Installation view
Hangar Bicocca, Milan,
2009
Photo: Giulio Buono

p 20

Breath III
2005
Set of framed footprint
drawings at 130-second
intervals
Installation view
Spreuth Magers, London,
2011

p 21

Breath III
2005
Installation view
Hangar Bicocca, Milan,
2009
Photo: Giulio Buono

p 23

Between You and I
2006
Installation view
Institut d'Art Contemporain,
Villeurbanne, 2006
Photo: Blaise Adilon

p 36

(bottom) *Skirt*
2010
Footprint

p 37

Skirt
2010
Set of framed footprint
drawings at 103-second
intervals
Installation view
Spreuth Magers, London,
2011

pp 38–39

Face to Face IV
2013
Installation view
Eye Film Museum,
Amsterdam, 2014
Photo: Hans Wilschut

p 40

(top) *Face to Face IV*
2013
Installation maquette
Galerie Martine Aboucaya

p 24

Between You and I
2006
Installation view
Peer/The Round Chapel,
London, 2006

p 25

(top) *Between You and I*
2006
Set of framed footprint
pairs at 120-second
intervals
Partial installation view
Sean Kelly Gallery, New
York, 2007

p 25

(bottom) *Between You
and I*
2006
Installation view
'Plot 09', St. Cornelius
Chapel, Governor's
Island, 2009
Photo: Sam Horine

p 26

You and I, Horizontal
2006
Installation study

p 40

(middle) Face to Face IV
2013
Footprint at 00:08:02

p 40

(bottom) *Face to Face IV*
2013
Footprint at 00:14:14

pp 40–41

Face to Face IV
2013
Installation view
Martine Aboucaya Gallery,
Paris, 2013
Photo: André Morin

p 44

(top) *Line Describing a Cone*
1973
Installation view, Artists
Space, New York, 1974
Photo: Peter Moore
© The Estate of Peter
Moore/VAGA, NYC

p 44

(middle) *Long Film for Four Projectors*
1974
Installation view
EyeBeam, New York, 2003
Photo: Hank Graber

p 44

(bottom) *Long Film for Four Projectors*
1974
Installation drawing, 1977
Photocopy and pencil on paper
20.3 x 26.7cm

p 44

(top) *Landscape for White Squares*
1972
16 mm film still

p 48

(middle) *Fire Cycles III*
9 June, 1974
Performance view
Museum of Modern Art,
Alden's Field Oxford
Chromogenic print
34.5 x 40.7cm

p 48

(bottom) *Five Minutes of Pure Sculpture*
Installation view
Nationalgalerie im
Hamburger Bahnhof—
Museum für Gegenwart
—Berlin, 2012

Works from front to back:
Meeting You Halfway,
Breath III, Between You and I,
Coupling
Photo: Sean Gallup/Getty Image

p 52

Sea Events
1971
Synthetic ozone in aerosol
spray can with wraparound
Letraset on paper
14 x 7 cm

p 53

Found Solid Light Installation
1974
Offset lithography on paper,
edition of 2
41.6 x 32.9 cm

p 54

Night Ship
2015
Large notebook study (I)

p 55

Night Ship
2015
Large notebook study (II)

p 56

Night Ship
2015
Large notebook study (I)

p 57

Night Ship
2015
Large notebook study (III)

p 58

Crossing the Elbe
2013
Aerial installation drawing

p 59

Crossing the Elbe
2013
Installation view,
Sammlung Falckenberg,
Hamburg, 2013

Landscape for Fire
1972
16mm film with optical sound converted to digital video 2006,
duration 00:07:00
Macquarie Point, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia

Solid Light Works

Breath III
2005
Computer, QuickTime movie file, video projector, haze machine,
duration: one cycle 00:15:00. . Vertical

Between You and I
2006
Computer, QuickTime movie file, two video projectors, two haze machines,
duration: one cycle 00:32:00, in two parts. Vertical

You and I, Horizontal II
2006
Computer, QuickTime movie file, video projector, haze machine, duration:
one cycle 00:33:00, in four parts. Horizontal

Meeting You Halfway
2009
Computer, QuickTime movie file, video projector, haze machine, duration:
one cycle 00:15:00. Vertical

Skirt
2010
Computer, QuickTime movie file, video projector, haze machine, duration:
one cycle 00:12:00. Vertical

Face to Face IV
2013
Computer, QuickTime movie file, two video projectors, two haze machines,
duration: one cycle 00:32:00, in two parts. Horizontal

Macquarie Point, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia

Night Ship
2015
Ship, search light, foghorn.
Derwent River, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia

✕ ✛
MUSEUM OF OLD
AND NEW ART