

Interview of Tony Conrad

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Ludlow Street New York 19/11/83. Part one.

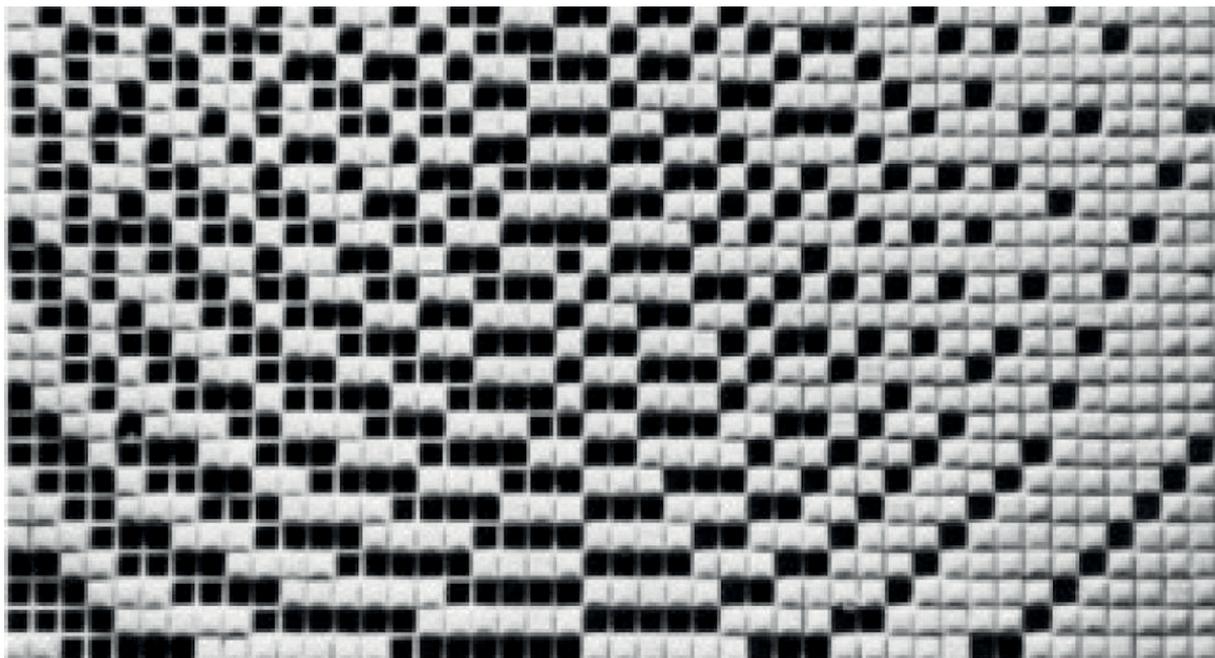
C'est à l'automne 1983, alors je séjournais plusieurs semaines à New York pour présenter mon travail dans différents espaces dédiés au cinéma expérimental, que j'eus l'occasion d'interviewer le cinéaste expérimental Tony Conrad, qui y passait alors une année sabbatique. Celui-ci, comme Hollis Frampton, m'avait été présenté par Paul Sharits l'année précédente, à Buffalo. L'interview s'étendit sur plusieurs soirs en novembre et décembre, dans une rue très prisée par l'Underground Cinema : Ludlow Street .

Tony Conrad est un artiste qui s'est exprimé via de nombreux médias. Avant d'être connu en tant que cinéaste, il était musicien et avait travaillé avec le Dream Syndicate ou Theater of Eternal Music (1963), avec La Monte Young, Marianne Zazeela, Angus MacLise et John Cale ; il avait fait avant cela des études de mathématiques. À partir de 1974, il a collaboré avec le groupe allemand Faust. Il était aussi vidéaste, professeur à Suny Buffalo au côté de Paul Sharits, Hollis Frampton et du couple Woody et Steina Vasulka, mais encore activiste d'espace communautaire qui privilégiait l'expérimentation autant dans la production, la monstration et les rencontres et ce principalement à Buffalo (Hallwalls dans les années 70, puis Squeaky Wheel Film and Media Art Center à partir de 1985), mais aussi à New York, à l'endroit où j'ai réalisé ces interviews.

*Si c'est avec la musique qu'il s'est fait connaître, c'est par le biais du cinéma expérimental que sa renommée s'est établie. Son *The Flicker*, en 1966, a joué à cet égard un rôle important, de même que la création de la bande-son de *Flaming Creatures*, film singulier de Jack Smith. Quel que soit le médium utilisé, Tony Conrad a toujours eu une approche innovante. Ses *Yellow Movies* (1972-73), par exemple, sont des peintures dont le pigment se transforme progressivement au fil des ans, et s'appréhendent comme des films de longue durée. Ses films et vidéos des années 80 et 90 déconstruisent autant les schémas narratifs que les archétypes comme la famille, la prison, etc., en faisant de leur mode de production un des éléments formels du travail ; les *Pickled films* s'attachent ainsi à envisager la pratique filmique à partir du champ domestique. L'humour tient dans tout cela une place importante. À la manière de Robert Filliou, Tony Conrad avait une manière singulière de penser l'acte pédagogique ; à cet égard, sa vidéo sur la notation des copies d'étudiants est exemplaire.*

*Ses collaborations avec des musiciens allemands dans les années 80 ont créé des ponts entre les pratiques. À partir de la publication de *Early Minimalism* (un projet qui s'est étalé sur une trentaine d'années et a abouti à *Early Minimalism Volume One (Table of the Elements, 1997)*, il a renoué avec les concerts, et son travail a été enfin perçu dans toute sa diversité et sa richesse.*

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Tony Conrad, *The Flicker*, 1966.

TC. (...) A filmmaker who didn't know why I had any emotional connections to this silly medium but then I realized I did have very deep emotional engagement with this medium and I hated the way in which movies used violence and the values of sophistication and being grown up to frighten the viewers. This was not interesting intellectually and it was emotionally degrading. The first movie I made, *The Flicker*, is probably the most abstract Science Fiction film ever made, in some sense. In that is a movie. Parenthesis here, parenthesis... there are many films and there are many movies and one thing that many people notice about movies that they don't always notice about films is that movies transport the viewer in a way which is very intense and specialized and has to do with the kind of reverie that one experiences

in a narrative and it has to do with the kind of reverie that one experiences in a book or daydreaming, it has to do with the hypnosis, it has to do with placing oneself in an environment which is quite different from the day to day world.

Isn't it a bit that which was thought by Bazin about film around the 40's? Like movies are opening another window to look at the world, which set you up in dream time or dreamland in some ways.

I'm not sure Bazin focused as strongly on the hypnotic transport of the view. He recognizes the fact that there is a possibility like this in a movie, but he does not build a psychological theory of the film viewer that is strong enough to explain what happens in the suggestible mind in a movie experience like the ones that I've described: when I go, as a little boy to see this mov-

ie, believe me, big things happen and Bazin is, like, a little thing in this case compared to the kind of events that I'm discussing. I was very interested in abstract art.

So is that the difference between movie and film?

Oh, close parenthesis. I was very interested in abstract art during the early 1960's because I was interested in music and the problems of music, which were very conceptual at that time and which needed an answer which was an answer which should be very strong and which should be delivered in terms that had to do with the love that is present in the listener for music. We understood, from the lessons of John Cage, at that time and the European avantgarde also began to understand, that formal exercises in music helped to give the listener practice in countering situations that are

problematic for them as a listener. That "liking" becomes a very different thing from the organization of musical materials and it was very, very important, to me, to work at this time with a new kind of project, which was to focus on sounds that liked very, very much more closely than people had focused before. I worked with other people who were also interested in this same project, the group leader of our performance/composer collaboration was La Monte Young and we focused on one sound with its ramifications for about 5 years, together. This seemed, to me, to be related to abstract art. I was interested in the power of unifying harmonic structures in abstract art as they tied the perception and psychology and structure of the music situation together. I was also aware in the way in which this powerful combination of affect material could function in film and for me it was by using light, by using a flickering light that would establish an environment in a way that the viewer was not accustomed to. A movie, maybe in the way that it is different from a film, is an entertainment which establishes an environment in which the viewer can participate very hypnotically. I thought that it would be fabulous to make a movie which would be so alien in its outlining features that it would be unrecognizable to the audience; so weird in its mechanism of perception that the environment that the audience entered would

he arriving from materials of understanding that the audience would not know how to expect. In the case of flicker' what is very strange is the fact that flickering light, unlike the photographic image, does not give you the feeling that it can stand alone, of course any photograph needs a viewer in order to complete its understanding, but in a particular sense the photograph fools the viewer with the idea that it stands independent, that, in a sense, it becomes an icon ie repository of an image that is isolated from its interpretation in a way that is very specific and unusual to the photograph. Maybe this is an illusion maybe it's part of being a photograph. Flickering light is very difficult to describe in its effect on the viewer without understanding this fact that the viewers brain interacts with flickering light very directly so that the wave structure of the thought process must be thought of as part of the sensory receptor mechanism, like the retina or the nerves in the nose, you see, so that you do not watch a flickering light in the way you watch a photograph. You are active, your brain process becomes active in a very, much more exaggerated way than in the case of the photograph, in the direct a perception of the materials.

So already this was started from a Cage concept.

Oh Yes.

Even if you start from the idea in some ways you say it before.

John Cage was part of a shared experience from the '50's. For me, Cage was important in the '50's primarily. It was important, to me, in the '60's, to find ways to develop art that took the understanding of Cages' work into account, and went further. From 1961 to be on this was very clear to me. In *The Flicker*, there is the appearance of a movie, it becomes a movie because it does transport the audience, very specifically, to an environment which is alien, an alien in that the mechanism of participation in that in environment is as different from the participation in the regular functions of the real world as the perceptual mechanisms of humans will permit. This is a very specific choice: to encourage a new kind of perceptual resource using the mechanism of cinema to deliver this resource. It is in this very specific sense that I identify the ideas of *The Flicker* with that of the science fiction film in that there is a kind of escapist idiom, a translation into an alien environment which retains its humanity in which you retain your domination of that environment, as you do in Scifantasy, but at the same time a movie in which a part of the materials which are perceived are materials which originate, literally, within your brain; what you see is one thing, your experience is another. After I had made this movie I became a filmmaker.

Is it the same flicker as in.., because there is another title

Count Frankenstein?

Not that's different. That was made at the same time.

Ah, so that's another one... so it's not the same film...

No. So actually I first became involved in movies when I moved to NY in 1962 and I met Jack Smith. Jack asked if I would work. He wanted technical assistance in making a tape for his short film *Scotch Tape* and I made a tape for him from materials which he selected and at the time I worked on the tape. I didn't like the materials. I was too sophisticated for this Latin music that he selected and we went to tie theatre, put the tape recorder in front of the screen, played the tape and ran the movie. It was a five minutes film and in five minutes I had changed my whole understanding of the relationship between sound and image. Sound in the presence of image functions in a way which is extremely powerful, atmospherically, and in the psychology of interaction between the viewer as listener and the which musical atmosphere there is an odd indefinable magic which appears. I, at that point, I was not interested as a theorist I was interested in this as a phenomenon that had impressed itself upon me with great power as a participant in the creating process, so I was very happy to be invited by Jack Smith to do more technical work on another film, *Flaming Creatures*, in which I was somewhat more creative, but again where most of the choices were made by Jack. I think,

maybe, Jack has withdrawn the soundtrack, feeling that mainly the film was a visual film and it should not have to bear the kind of imprinting that a bound soundtrack would impose on it. That's fine, but together, that is between Jack and me and *Flaming Creatures* and its soundtrack we enjoyed some very amazing screenings

Never seen it.

It's a difficult film to find.

I would like to see it.

It has been seen and has been wonderful many times. I don't know where it can be seen and be found wonderful right now.

It was just after that you became interested...

I realized that I would like to work with more sound in connection with film and I did do some work in with a number of Underground filmmakers at that time but finally I realized that to do the kind of sound that I wanted to do in the context of the kind, of images, those sounds might need for me to do the greatest work that I would have to make images. So then I decided to make the film *The Flicker*.

When you did that film you voluntarily chose black and white?

Pardon?

You just used black and white on purpose?

Yes, absolutely. To induce some effect of color for the viewer. The choice of black and white was not a choice

which was defined as a choice of strategy except in that it seemed to me better not to confuse the viewer by suggesting that the film should rely upon a photographic image of any kind: to make it very, very clear that the source of the film was not the direct engagement between the eye and a image but was somewhere else.

Do you think there could be some relation between *The Flicker* and kinetic art?

Now the way I thought of this, at that time, certainly had a lot to do with minimal art. But I have to say that with hindsight in mind because you have to understand that in 1964/1965, when this project was beginning to materialize for me, that minimal art was a function of a creative process among a group of artists who perceived their projects as being exemplary for reasons having to do with wit, with extremism, the violation of certain precedents, the influence of a certain sensibility of taste which took great delight in a purism and had very little to do with the kind of rhetorical confinement that imposes itself on almost every art movement after the process of its evolution, so that it was not thought of as a minimal art work and I'm saying quote "Minimal Artwork", end quote as such. It was a work which was thought of as consistent with a need for a kind of wit, shock, yeah, er, yeah, humor, but not so much humor as wit, a kind of breaking with precedent and a kind of appreciation with a sort of very styl-

ish quality of weirdness. This was also the time where one began to hear the expression “far out” in the US... “Far out” means I like this because it is so extreme and weird. ‘Far out’ was a concept that moved very easily within the late ‘60’s culture, very widely in the late ‘60’s culture because the interest in drugs and the sense in which drug experimentation encouraged people to at least initially, value self-examination of experience for its novel qualities, so in a certain sense *The Flicker* participated in an aesthetic that was shared with the drug culture. In a certain sense *The Flicker* could be seen retroactively to have attempted a kind of solution to the problems of inscription of signification in the artwork that was attempted through OpArt, where nominally abstract material makes use of a physiological process.

That’s why I was thinking of a relation with Kinetic Art. But I was just thinking suddenly about if there was a relation or if you thought there was a relation.

I was not interested in OpArt at that time and didn’t feel anything about doing OpArt at that time and it was some years later that I noticed that there was a connection based on shared aspiration in one dimension of the project but I think the reason that this connection eluded me at the time was simply that the film, *The Flicker*, succeeded in mobilizing the perceptual tools directly in a way which was and is much more dramatic than

the somewhat more refined factors that are mobilized in OpArt — where one must focus one’s attention somewhat in order to associate... You do need to bring yourself a little closer in order to deal with the way in which the art has been relativized to perception rather than to an abstract formal alpha rhythm, and yet the combination of a program of a perceptual affect and a structural organization was certainly a combination that was very strongly available in *The Flicker*. (phone rings) Damn phone.



Tony Conrad. Pickled 3M 150, 1974. Stock de 3M 150 16mm de film mariné dans un bocal de conserve avec du vinaigre, des légumes, du sucre, du sel et des épices. Environ 17,2 x 10,2 cm.