

Interview of Tony Conrad yann beauvais

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

Y: So, on the same level as you have focused on *'The Flicker'*, I want to know, you have answered to the question of black and white, but you did another version of *'The Flicker'*, can I say that? the 'Baron Frankenstein' or the Count?

T: I did another couple of short films around that time which were less important to me and which, in some ways, sketched out interesting relationships to related questions, although I had been very specific in *'The Flicker'* in not using any kind of rot using any images, really, at all. Just black frames and white frames.

Y: But in *'Straight and Narrow'* you are using black and white frames but you are also dealing with something else that was not induced, really, in *'The Flicker'*.

T: Well, the first experiments that I had done with flicker were experiments that were done here on Ludlow St. when I lived down a couple of blocks from here, twenty years ago. At that time Jack (Smith) and I shared an apartment and Jack had some friends that he worked with in his films who were stars. His superstars, a concept and term which Andy Warhol borrowed from him, along with a lot of other things, The superstars were

people who, it seemed to me, were especially interesting in the way that their true life was framed life, that it required very special circumstances for their real life to happen. One kind of circumstance that allowed fulfillment was to be in the movies and another kind of circumstance that allowed them to participate in costuming and makeup and very heightened and altered physical environments. Jack and I were both poor as church mice and we had an interest in music and image, but our tools were worse than this tape recorder into which we are talking now by quite a lot. We had no film projector except one projector which, unfortunately, didn't have a lens, so we used the projector anyway and turned the speed down and caused the light to flicker and we all hallucinated there, and the creatures who arrived and pulled the costumes on around them were transformed in the magic light of the projector in ways which you must imagine only because neither memory nor words can suffice to transport you to the peculiar magic of this fleebitten environment. But one promise that the use of flickering light held out to us was the way in which it seemed that this peculiar kind of environment provided by the flickering light changed

the events and circumstances where it appeared, and it seemed to me that the kind of physiologically... the kind of tools that were involved here, which had to do with the physiology and psychology of perception, were tools which had a legitimate place in increasing our understanding. In this case, I'm using the word 'our' as meaning everybody's understanding and vocabulary of image, arid narrative materials. It was a dream of mine to work with images and with narrative materials in a way, which would explore the extended consequences of this intersection of interests; interests that represented movement in what any legitimate art historian would regard as movement in two opposite directions at the same time. Conflicting ideologies of art history which intersected in a way that was consequently unexplored.

Y: Put you didn't do that for a while, from what I know...

T: The experimentation that I was involved in around the time of *'The Flicker'* and during the five years after *'The Flicker'* had to do with making a couple of films that used other materials of perceptual psychology in interesting ways, like 'straight and Narrow' and 'I, Count Flick-

erstein' which depended on more subtle involvements of perceptual phenomena. In terms of narrative I worked with my wife Barbara Willey, at that time, Beverly rant Conrad and many other people on a gigantic quasinarative film called *Coming Attractions* which was to be a film that would use narrative materials, but narrative reduced to its affective dimensions so that the sense of continuity, of plot development, of character evolution, all of the things that developed in the course of the 18th and 19th century evolution of the novel, all of these longer term phenomena which support structure in the novel were either deleted or diluted enough so that they would function merely as fragmentary elements of ramification of a momentary environment.

What I'm trying to say is that during the film you might be able to indulge yourself as a viewer at one point or another with the feeling that you are participating in: a flashback, a story, a crucial event, an episode, a dream, a... various solutions so that there is in fact in *Coming Attractions* a plot, more or less, which surfaces at convenience to permit the viewer to imagine that the scene before his or her eyes might be a flashback or a narrated sequence by someone who is remembering something or a crucial moment, like a murder, or a dream and so forth. Also, there was a reliance in this project, on allegorical figures.

Y: Was it like the kind of narration there is in all Michael Snow films?, because Michael Snow has nothing to do, I think, except for one film, he's just a narrative filmmaker.

T: This work had nothing to do with Michael Snow's work.

Y: Because *'Wavelength'*... I was just wondering if there was some connection because he's working with narration, mostly.

T: No, there was no connection whatsoever with Michael Snow and *Coming Attractions* are dimensions apart. *Coming Attractions* is basically a film which was a horrifying presence to the audience. In fact *Coming Attractions* was offensive in the extreme to the minimalist sensibility because it started off with the promise that it would explore the intersection between what one might regard as formally justifiable devices on the one hand, and narrative context on the other. It was already in violation of the unitary principles of art structuring at that time and it was layered in that it focused upon juxtaposition and concatenation, and on there being several different kind of viewing experiences of listening experiences, of composite experience available to the viewer, at his or her choice, at any given time. The habit of a viewer, in a film situation, is –and you must realize that this is understandable on the basis of 99.999% of the normative viewing experience in movies– the choice

of the viewer is to select from a scene the simplest and most obvious contextual material and to settle upon that as the meaning of the film image or shot or what ever it is.

In this case the idea of a shot, the idea of an image becomes very diffused because so much is overlaid and so much arrives through intersecting channels of communication. The project *Coming Attractions* is a film that is incredibly dense, it's also incredibly rambling, it's also incredibly self-compromising, it's an embarrassing project. It was made to be embarrassing: it's full of deliberately unassertive roles and compromised postures so that the heroic function of movies is displaced bitterly far from anything that the Clint Eastwood audience would have come to expect. It dips into this and dips into that and comes up with everything that it can and therefore represents, in some respects, an aesthetic of inclusiveness which was poison to the taste of 1970. Beyond that, *Coming Attractions* took little interest in the aesthetic of... little, but some passing interest in the aesthetic of the composition, the fine print image, the style of cinematography and so forth. It was engaged in a limited way in an interest in pictorial values so it failed on some level to appeal to atmospheric pictorialists, like Jack Smith, or to serious pictorialists, like Stan Brakhage, or to stylistic pictorialists like Jonas Mekas. I realized at a certain point that this experiment, although it had its context in

an environment that was not entirely alien, would have to wait through several art movements for a proper context of appreciation. What I am saying when I mention that the experiment that was represented by *Coming Attractions* was something that did not have a place in 1970 was that shortly after 1970 the tools of video permitted perceptual and formal manipulation of the image in a way which was unprecedented until that time. Although I used BiPak optical printing as the paradigm for my execution of technical effect, I might have waited a few years and found that, perhaps, video keying would have enabled some of these things to happen in a more straightforward way. Of course, in fact video keying when it did finally arrive, was greeted with enthusiasm by many people who simply felt they wanted to do anything but novel and who was not necessarily motivated by sincerely hard nosed program of investigation so that the only way that I could have maintained my seriousness, in the context of video investigation, would have been to say that I was serious. The fact that I actually developed the tools necessary to complete an immense program of BiPak optical printing on my own, I think, goes a lot further to establishing the practicality and reality of the commitment that I experienced in this work, and the results are different from anything that's been done with video, although lately there have been a few works that have addressed parallel

issues in a way that has some refreshing familiarity for me. Another thing that was consonant with this idea of the mixing of formal and contextual or atmospheric tools was the whole lightshows environment of that time and, in fact, Jack Smith did some work with lightshows himself around that time as well, not unsurprisingly, which was not theoretically motivated but sensorially and pictorially motivated in the way that's unique and special to his work. Even though it was a minimal era of art, there was another realm in which there was, certainly, anything but minimal involvement of diverse materials, which might have been considered artistic materials except that they weren't marketed like that, or presented that way, or received that way.

Y: So, it's after *Coming Attractions* that you went back to some other experimental film?

T: After '*Coming Attractions*' was completed, and a couple of other films, which were theoretical films dealing with space and the relationship between the space of shooting and the space of presentation, including two little known films, '*Four Square*' and '*Loose Collection*'. These have been very little seen films in which I began to develop a somewhat more formal approach, as such, through an interest in a theoretical program of the linking of the space of production to the space of exhibition. Inevitably then, there becomes a kind of formal

theoretical crossover, which informs this chiasmus of power transfer: like the authority of the original space existing in a playoff of authority of the space of presentation. So, after these works I did focus on formal film projects as a necessity, I felt, simply because of the fact that my work was not being received in a rich... there wasn't critical response to the work which seemed to be alert enough to identify and confront the issues that I was engaged with, I felt, and also...

Y: Maybe it was too theoretical for the audience

T: Well, as I indicated, one problem was that my anarchic spirit lead me, continued to lead me in a direction which flowed upstream against the culture all the time, and it was difficult for critical voices to flow in that direction because they are very often bound to the overall directional flow of the culture, and also film discourse in large has not been encouraging, overall, in this country, in its complexity or imaginativeness, so that it's easier to ignore a problematic work than to engage with it..

Y: To be engaged with its appearance and all the critics that take from it...

T: Yeah, so that if people see a work, if a film writer sees a work which, or a filmmaker for that matter, sees a work which seems to violate the pretexts of his or her own interests, they don't tend to re-

spond to that as a challenge so much as a passed opportunity for them. I saw, by 1972, the way the art world had been, generally, very effective in manipulating formal issues to a position of great power and authority, and felt that if there were a place for a filmmaker within the context of a larger art community to encourage development of film activity, which would proceed with any kind of energy and vitality, that it would really be necessary to kick the film world in the arse a little bit, to encourage very rapid movement in an area where, it seemed, there had been little. So I decided to adopt some questions of formal... of the formal artistic vocabulary as working materials and to attempt to redefine the work of filmmaking... I waited to redefine the function of filmmaking within a vocabulary of principles which would expand, which would rapidly expand the filmmakers options on the basis of a very quick accommodation with lessons of an expanded formal awareness, so that the formal issues, which seemed to me to have not been addressed within film, had to do with the way in which film was a part of a larger cultural activity that included the general process of manufacturing film material, using certain tools to manipulate the material, then contextualizing that material within a certain paradigm, as one does when one edits, and then presenting those materials, there seems to be this natural linear progression of events which was universally part of the

formal structure of the filmmaking process, and I wanted to enter that process in a way which, one might now say, deconstruct that process or reexamine that process from a radical perspective. I wanted to replace the film manufacturer, to resituate the activity of filmmaking in the seat of the film manufacturer, to coopt that role in the name of the film artist. I wanted to coopt the position of the viewer, I wanted to alter the traditional relationship to principles of manipulation of the materials through the camera and the entire formal structure, I wanted to rapidly resituate in a way which would cause filmmakers everywhere to expand the vocabulary of available points of reference in their activity. I made films using photosensitive materials, which then began to appear to violate the boundaries of what one would consider being films, formally. I took film material that had been premanufactured and exposed it, as one might say, without using the camera and using other principles than light and physical manipulations, such as using electrical shocks to expose the film and organizing the material in such a way as to deal with the linearity of the medium as a succession of frames, like weaving the material in such a way as to violate the inextricably linear sequence of frames, so that they are in meshed in a two dimensional array from which they can't be extricated, physically to violate the possibility of projection by locking film, physically, within a con-

text where it was impossible that it could be viewed by transmitted light processes using a projector or any kind of similar mechanism. This was a pro rain, which took me a few years to achieve, until I felt I had established a sufficient repertoire of working procedures and algorithms.

Y: You could say even virtualities of potentialities.

T: Pardon?

Y: Virtualities of potentialities.

T: Virtualities of potentialities. Yeah, exploring these in the context. Also, I felt it was important to explore these potentialities in the context that these works had some vitality, coherence and presence, as works were, I would want to characterize the qualities of a work that interested me as participating in a kind of personal presence in it, the work that is... the work participating in a kind of personal presence, that, in its interaction with the viewer would not be insistent in the way in which the personality of the work adopted the program of some external source of authority. To rephrase what I wanted, I found it necessary, for me, that a work which could sustain its own dignity should suppress its appeal to extrinsic authority in such a way as to allow a room for the personality of the work and the personality of the viewer to intersect in a way which would dignify each of them. One mechanism that was important to me during

this time in allowing that function to emerge was a humor function. I wanted. I assumed that 98% of my viewers would be unsympathetic to my project, that 99% of my viewers would be unsympathetic to my project and that 98% of my viewers wouldn't even know what my project was about.

I didn't want to club the viewer over the head with the authority implicit in the intellectual and cultural demands of my project. In fact, I preferred that the personal relationship between the viewer and the work would be such that the tentative elements of the artistic practice would dominate the interaction, that, in short, it seemed to me much more natural that the viewer who does not choose to enter into the theoretical discourse implicit in the project would find it much more natural and easier to laugh at the project, or laugh with the project, or to find that the weaknesses that would be perceived in the project would allow the project to appear in the context of a kind of a personal compromise or concession, and if, indeed, the very specific areas in which that compromise or concession appeared were the areas that, in my max perception/ translated into strength, then that's fine. It had seemed to me quite evident for a time by this point that very often the things that are the greatest potential source of affect and strength in a work are identical with the factors in the work that are the most tentative, the most vulnerable, the

most exploratory and the most potentially selfcompromising, so I didn't mind at all if the viewer could have a 'good encounter with the work which would engage the viewer in a way which the viewer would find humorous, light hearted and available as long as that encounter also suggested that the kind of humor that the viewer would find in the work would suggest to the viewer that a particular kind of concession was being made deliberately on the part of the work, presumably then, in the interests of some accomplishment. In an ironic way, the viewers position of superciliousness, in relation to the work, points directly at the works potentially reatest strength. These kinds of relationships in the work and in the relationship between the viewer and the work were the relationships that were most problematic and most enduring, for me as an artist, because I found that this kind of balance, this kind of tradeoff of values in the encounter between the work and the artist were the things that, ultimately, transcended the formal structures in which I was engaged and inscribed in the work some of the presence of a truly emotionally effective character that I was interested in. In other words, as it became evident to me later that, still, I was addressing a work by this point that very often the things that are the greatest potential source of affect and strength in a work are identical with the factors in the work that are the most tentative, the most vulnerable, the

in the development of their own growth, directly. (All of them, presumably, expecting that the ultimate value of an art work, in the presumption that it is an artwork, one of sale value whereas no film work has any sale value commensurate with the investment of its production). It seemed that, so, whereas people presumed that the value of the work was, sort of like, a sale value, since it's an artwork, it seemed like it was possible for them to ignore the work as a contribution, which in fact, was made available in the interests of, sort of, furthering a sense of resolving discourse in the field, which was really what I was interested in, not claims to fame or fortune or anything like that, so it becomes a function of egotism, the whole field, and this was just antitheatrical to me because my whole program was built around one of the necessity for selfcompromise in the advances within the medium. So this became very apparent at a certain point that there had to be some direct engagement with the emotional program and a lessening of the reliance on the critical vocabulary. To be perfectly frank, I spent a few years trying to piece out the way in which the various critical vocabularies available to the analysis of works in the area of film and art could support a discourse and could inform the role of the artist, and I found that there were coherencies, incoherencies, but that it was really necessary, ultimately, to level the greatest effort at this point where

the artist is engaged in a process of valuation transaction with the audience through the work, so there becomes kind of triangular relationship engaging, instead of simply a binary relationship, a triangular relationship in which the work, the viewer and the artist are all accredited some position of meaningfulness.

Y: So this Canadian, Kirk Tougas don't know if you have seen his work, the film *Political Perception*?

T: I have not seen the film.

Y: It was done in '73 and it is divided into two sections: the first is called 'This is the Way You Are Programmed ' and shows images of representation of people on TV mostly or in adds, and then the next part is 'An Experience which in just an affect on flicker film, in a way, just with a round white circle. He is mostly interested in the meaning of fascism through the use of light in the two ways; first, normal codes, those codes with which we deal cope each day, and then another code, let's say more sophisticated or formal or hidden. Each time he screened this film he had an incredible battle with the audience, who couldn't relate to the terms on which he made the film. So, I was thinking, maybe there could be some connections on the time, going from what I've understood of what you said. Is there?

T: I understand that one difficulty that often rises in cases

where filmmakers and artists use didactic materials is that there is this implicit authoritarian voice behind the work to which the audience responds in a way which is dominated by their instant detection of this authoritarian posture, and I feel uncomfortable in the presence of an authoritarian posture for a reason that I've struggled with, and I actually feel comfortable in identifying a little more narrowly arid that reason is that where a work invokes an authority of principle in some form that lies outside of its own functioning vocabulary of methodology, outside of its own personality, that it is appealing to you to let it speak it to you on some one else's authority, in a sense, and it is asking that both of us, i.e. the work and the artist, allow ourselves to be dominated by this debt, and I feel that the consequences of that debt, for the communication between the work and the viewer is that the viewers' attention and response is narrowed because the viewer, in order to come to terms with the work, must come to terms with the work under the confines of an agreement to receive the work within an authority defined, not by the work, but the preconceptions or the background ideational technologies of the work, so that the viewer is, in that specific sense, asked by the work not to be free in interpreting the work except within the margin of values that are authorized by this intrinsic authority to which both of them, the work and the viewer, are supposed

to pay obeisance; the debt to the intrinsic is being passed on by the work to the viewer. What is this authority for the viewer? it's an authority which is clouded for the viewer because... say, the work, for example, pretends to participate in the language of science and to appeal to the necessary authority of scientific discourse in order to deliver its values to the viewer, and then it asks the viewer to participate in an appreciation of scientific values however the way that it's possible for me, as an individual, to participate in an appreciation of scientific values is very complex: on the one hand I may respect something, dislike other things...I have a very complex personal relationship to scientific authority. When I am invited by a work to respect science in order to participate in the values of the work by accepting the authorization structures, found science, that the work insists upon, then I can no longer be sure that the image of science which is my image is the same as that which is implicit within the work, without a lot of study, and it may not even be clear then because it may be that the work had paid a debt through the artist interaction which is a debt which overlaps with other things. The work may say to me, 'Listen to the authority of science,' but as I listen to the work I may find that the authority that is conveyed through the work is not what I call the authority of science but is the authority of superstition, and it may be in some sense that this is the

function of the artist or of the work to have misconstrued the authority of science, at least as I perceive that, so that then in that situation this debt creates a muddling of the transactions that occur between us. I am no longer free even to decide what the debt is that I'm paying, and this makes it a problem for me to accept that authority easily. I think a lot of work does ask one to accept a passed-on debt, you know, because it's much easier to pass on a debt than it is to recognize the fact that it's better for the debt to stop with artist and not pass into the work. It's a very complex thing for the artist to terminate his or her debts with the point of participation in his or her work. This is a problem that I find is very specific, for me, in dealing with didactic work.

Y: That's the main problem with political work.

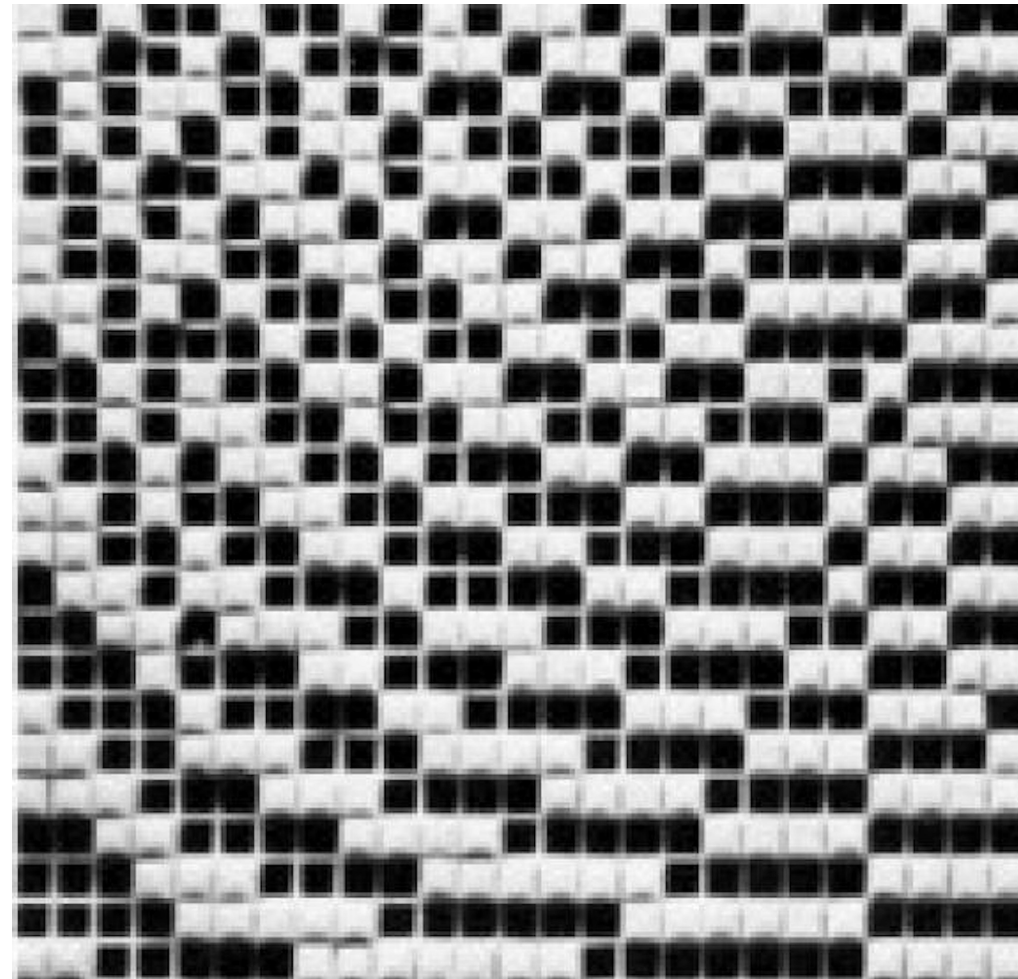
T: It does seem to be a problem that is widespread in political work. I don't think that it's an inherent problem in political work in that it often immerses there and it's because the, I mean it seems peculiar to me because political thinkers and creative persons with an interest in politics tend to be very sharp thinking people and it is completely disturbing to me that they put obstacles in the way of their creative process and their creative engagement with their viewers, simply by failing to clarify the relationship that potentially exist among the work, the artist and the individual. I can

give twice, let me give one example of how this comes to pass and one example of an unfortunate symptom. I think one way that it comes to pass is that political analysis typically has the ability to overlook the fundamentally irrational role of an individual who deviates from a group, and if you wish to examine the authority and power of a viewer in relation to a work of art of any kind you must respect that that viewer

Tape finishes.



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.



Tony Conrad, *The Flicker*, 1966.