

Event Sculpture 9
Anthony McCall, 'Traveling Wave' (1972/2013)
2 March 2015

Response by Agnieszka Gratza, 4 March 2015

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The ninth event in *The Event Sculpture* series is bound to feel like a swan song. But with Anthony McCall's 'Traveling Wave' (1972/2013) bringing the cycle to a close, *The Event Sculpture* goes out with a bang, not a whimper. If the sound installation conjures up in the first instance the sound of a wave crashing on the shore, it is a wave of inordinate proportions, heedless of anything in its passage. The work has a violence to it, as the artist puts it, and not just in the way it will impinge on the traces of past sculptural events already gathered in the galleries once it joins them there. The five floor-based speakers that make up the installation will be arranged in a straight line cutting across and linking up the three gallery spaces.

The distinction between the 'event' unfolding in time outside the Institute and the resulting 'sculpture' taking its designated place inside the galleries alongside other works in the series is eroded in the case of 'Traveling Wave'. On the face of it, the same sound installation featuring the same speakers is simply moved a few metres along, beyond the wall on one side of the corridor leading up to the reception area. And yet the sculptural event is concentrated in time, lasting about an hour, whereas the sound will be continually projected in the gallery spaces for the remainder of the exhibition during opening hours. For McCall, the space within which the piece is projected – the volume, the surface of the walls, their shape – is an active element of the work. Given how differently each space is configured, can the two be considered the same piece? 'That's a philosophical question', McCall says, jokingly; but there may be something to it.

For the time being, though, the five speakers – placed at regular intervals, every third step – form an ascending line from the bottom of the shallow-stepped wooden staircase all the way to the glass door entrance to the gallery, symbolically channeling visitors inside. Designed by sound programmer Stephan Moore to send out sound in all directions as opposed to one, as is the case with ordinary loudspeakers, the sturdy-looking 'hemisphere' speakers are sculptural objects in their own right. When McCall originally conceived and made the work in 1972 at University College Cardiff, which had an advanced electronic music studio, nothing quite so sophisticated was available to him. He constructed a synthetic movement of white noise, a cloud of roaring sound, to be played on two pairs of stereo speakers disposed on each end of a room.

Stereo sound implies an ideal vantage point, the so-called 'sweet spot' from which to listen to the piece (usually somewhere in the middle). Projecting the sound generated in real time on a computer, the 'hemisphere' speakers do away with this problem. In its present guise, the work is completely three-dimensional, according to McCall. 'It's even more sculptural than I had imagined it in 1972', he says. 'If you're up at one end, you watch the wave moving towards you; if you walk to the other end, you see and hear it moving away from you; if you stand around the middle, you watch it going past you.'

As he explains this to me, I am struck by his use of vocabulary pertaining to vision in what is, after all, a purely acoustic piece. McCall himself has characterised it as an 'invisible sculpture.' 'Traveling Wave', which the artist referred to in the past as a 'white noise' or 'solid sound' installation by analogy with his 'Solid Light' films, was renamed in 2013 to account for the urge to visualise the ocean wave rolling through space experienced by most visitors, illustrating our dependence on the sense of vision. 'The mind somehow takes the vividness of the sound and turns it into an image', says McCall. The appeal of working with sound, by which he means noise as opposed to voice and music, has to do with the narrative element clustered around all identifiable noises. I ponder this while trying to engage in a deep-listening exercise on the Henry Moore Institute threshold. As I listen to the crashing surf coming towards me, I can almost smell the ozone and hear a seagull's cry in Leeds' city centre at rush hour.