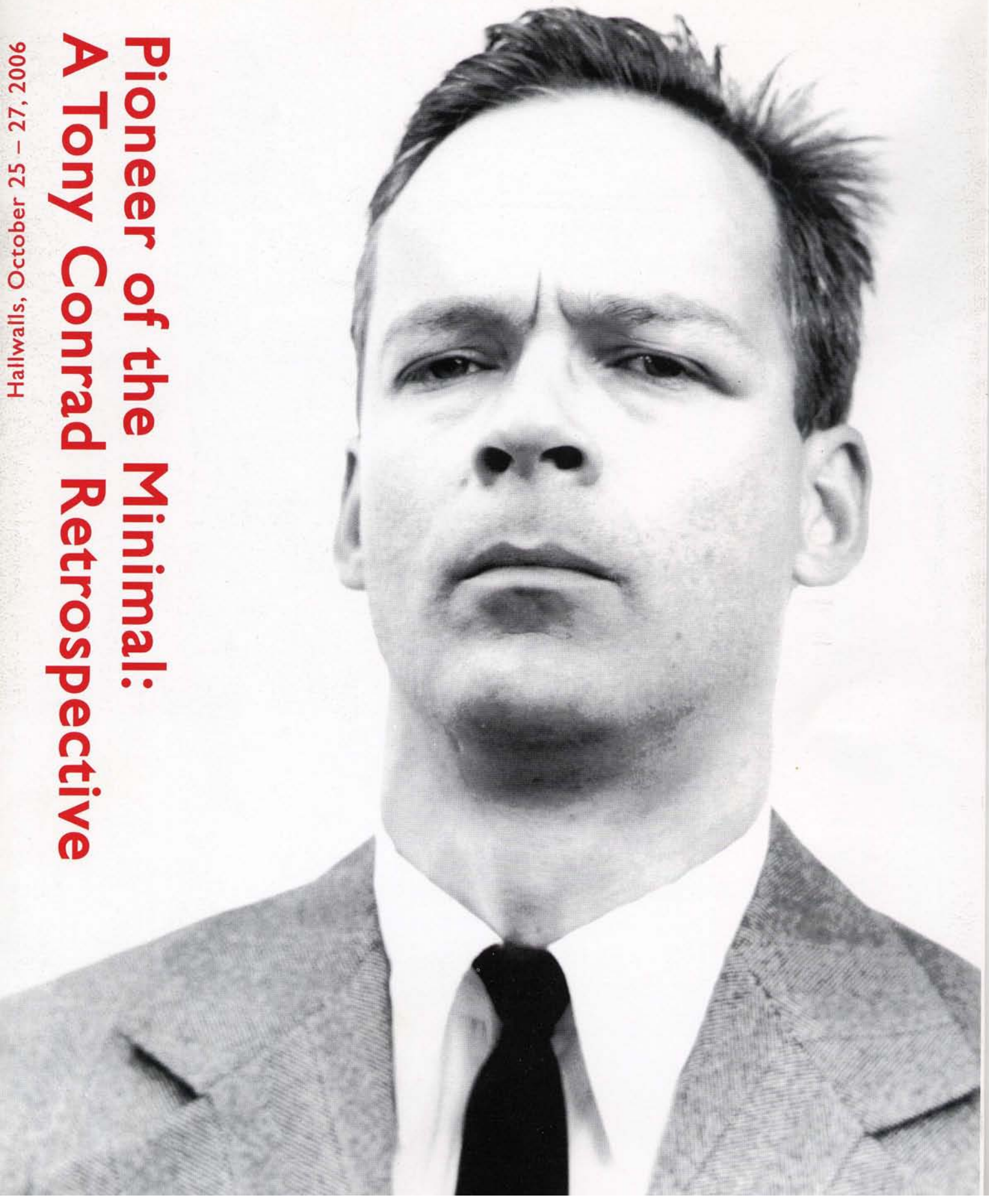


Hallwalls, October 25 – 27, 2006

**Pioneer of the Minimal:  
A Tony Conrad Retrospective**



# A Piece of Film

by Branden W. Joseph

On 12 February 1966, Tony Conrad completed seven months of editing *The Flicker*, a thirty-minute film of entirely black and white (or clear) frames, painstakingly spliced together to create stroboscopic effects. By March, *The Flicker* would be termed by Jonas Mekas “one of the most violently discussed movies in town.” However, while Sheldon Renan would declare it “The ultimate to date in the nonobjective film,” Mekas, “one of the few original works of cinema,” and Amos Vogel, “a great film,” there was originally some controversy as to whether it was a film at all.<sup>2</sup> Some termed it an “optical experiment” or “medical text for the eyes.”<sup>3</sup> Even Conrad contended, “I don’t think of *The Flicker* as a movie as we know it today” but rather “a piece of film that is experienced by a group of people in various ways—depending on how they choose to approach it.”<sup>4</sup>

Despite uncertainty as to its cinematic status, *The Flicker* has primarily been regarded as a “structural film.” According to P. Adams Sitney, who defined the genre in 1969, “a cinema of structure” is one “in which the shape of the whole film is predetermined and simplified, and it is that shape which is the primal impression of the film.”<sup>5</sup> Although he later declared that Michael Snow’s *Wavelength* prompted the idea of structural film, Sitney’s original article singled out *The Flicker* as one of the genre’s earliest and clearest manifestations.<sup>6</sup>

As the theory and practice of structural film developed, it became increasingly connected to issues of modernist self-reflexivity, ultimately being conflated with Clement Greenberg’s ideas of modernist painting (which Conrad would systematically dismantle in his “paracinematic” work of the 1970s). As noted by Paul Arthur, however, though Sitney claimed no direct knowledge of it, his concept of shape should be situated in relation to the contemporary debate between Robert Morris and Michael Fried. At stake for an artist like Morris was a transformation in the locus of interest from art’s characteristic variations and manipulations to the spectator’s interaction with the formally impoverished, minimal object (precisely the same phenomena Conrad achieved acoustically with the Theatre of Eternal Music). Morris sought to produce a critical reflexivity concerning the spectator’s role in the artistic experience, pointing toward a realization of individual embodiedness as the locus of a form of provisional autonomy.



Tony Conrad performing at Hallwalls, 1979

It was from a similar perspective that Malcolm Le Grice approached *The Flicker*:

a film which enables awareness of changing modes of response to recognizably different strobe conditions—awareness of how the autonomic response begins to shade off into pattern recognition as the black-and-white units increase in length; how the different systems interact; how the difference in colour after-image relates to different strobe rates; and possibly becoming aware of other physiological changes as the retinal activity affects the rhythm of other areas of the nervous system.<sup>7</sup>

It is in the final equivocation, however – “possibly becoming aware of other physiological changes” – that the status of the viewer of Conrad’s film must be engaged. For *The Flicker*, as Le Grice well knew, could have rather visceral impacts. Early viewers reported headaches, violent bouts of nausea, disorientation, and intense experiences of colored light, patterns, and hallucinogenic imagery.<sup>8</sup> As Le Grice noted, “Action on the autonomic system seeks to create a nervous response which is largely pre-conscious, the psychological reactions sought being a direct consequence of physiological function.”<sup>9</sup>

In Conrad’s working notebooks of the time, one finds surprisingly little meditation on film per se. Indeed, leafing through their pages it becomes clear that *The Flicker* formed part of a much broader investigation into techniques of perceptual and neurophysiological stimulation: subliminal advertising, ul-

trasound, psychedelics, and popular uses of strobe such as Murray the K's disco. In moving from the material conditions of production to the impact on the body itself, *The Flicker*, like much of Conrad's work, is located in the space where structural film meets "expanded cinema." As Gilles Deleuze noted in a short but insightful passage from *Cinema 2*, *The Flicker* is a film that marks the inauguration of a "third epoch," a "cinema of expansion without camera, and also without screen or film stock." A cinema in which, "Everything can be used as a screen, the body of a protagonist or even the bodies of the spectators; everything can replace the film stock, in a virtual film which now only goes on in the head, behind the pupils."<sup>10</sup> Undoubtedly, now that we are firmly within the realm of this new epoch of cinema (in which film has been replaced by all manner of electronic technologies), it will become necessary to re-experience Conrad's "piece of film" (and others) and to find new ways (critical, historical, and theoretical) to approach it.

notes:

<sup>1</sup> Jonas Mekas, *Movie Journal: The Rise of a New American Cinema, 1959-1971* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 228.

<sup>2</sup> Sheldon Renan, "Tony Conrad," in *An Introduction to the American Underground Film* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., 1967), 31; Mekas, 228; Vogel's comment is recorded in Fred Wellington, "Towards Understanding of 'Subversion,'" *Film Culture* 42 (Fall 1966): 16.

<sup>3</sup> Mekas, 228.

<sup>4</sup> Conrad, cited in Mekas, 229.

<sup>5</sup> P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 348.

<sup>6</sup> P. Adams Sitney, "Structural Film," *Film Culture* 47 (Summer 1969): 22; and P. Adams Sitney, "Structural Film" [revised edition], in *Film Culture Reader*, ed. P. Adams Sitney, (New York: Praeger, 1970), 327.

<sup>7</sup> Malcolm Le Grice, in Peter Gidal, ed., *Structural Film Anthology* (London: British Film Institute, 1976), 135.

<sup>8</sup> See Mekas, *Movie Journal*.

<sup>9</sup> Le Grice, *Abstract Film and Beyond* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977), 106.

<sup>10</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 215.

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program

Wednesday October 25 at 8 pm  
**Tony Conrad Performance**  
Asbury Hall in The Church  
341 Delaware Ave., Buffalo, NY



Thursday October 26 at 8pm  
**Tony Conrad Videos/Film**  
*No Europe* (1990, 14 min), made in collaboration with Chris Hill

*Beholden to Victory* (1983, 26 min.)  
featuring Mike Kelley and Tony Oursler.

*Studio of the Streets* (20 min. excerpt), from the activist cable access show,  
starring the people of Buffalo.

*Coming Attractions* (1970, 77 min), made in collaboration with Beverly Grant  
Conrad, this is Conrad's rarely screened feature film.



Friday October 27 at 8 pm  
**Tony Conrad Films/Video**

*The Flicker* (1966, 30 min), Conrad's seminal experimental film, exploits the  
stroboscopic effect of the cinematic image. Considered a cornerstone of structural  
filmmaking.

*Straight and Narrow* (1970, 10 min), made with Beverly Conrad  
"Straight and Narrow is a study in subjective color and visual rhythm... (it) uses  
the flicker phenomenon not as an end in itself, but as an effectuator of other  
related phenomena." *Filmmakers Cooperative*

*Film Feedback* (1972, 14 min), an effort to display the "essential" property of  
video ie: feedback, in terms of film.

*Cycles of 3s and 7s* (1977, 12 min.), a "story: about numbers, the kind machines  
should like to hear and tell, if they liked." – Tony Conrad



Friday's screening will be followed by a presentation about Conrad's films by  
Branden W. Joseph and a conversation with Tony Conrad about his work.



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