INTRODUCING TONY CONRAD: A RETROSPECTIVE
February 1–August 11, 2019
ELEANOR BIDDLE LLOYD GALLERY
Installation view of *WIP* (2013), in *WIP*, Greene Naftali, New York, 2013. Installation of wooden bars, locks, bunk beds, moving blankets, bedpans, sinks, chair rails, painted walls, and blinking overhead LED lighting with digital projection of edited footage from *Jail Jail* (unfinished, filmed 1982–83; 16mm film, black and white, sound, transferred to digital; running time: 68 minutes, 40 seconds); jail set dimensions: approximately 120 × 120 × 144 inches (305 × 305 × 365.8 cm). Courtesy The Estate of Tony Conrad and Greene Naftali, New York. Photo: Jason Mandella.
Throughout his six-decade-long career, Tony Conrad forged his own path through numerous artistic movements, from Fluxus to the Pictures Generation, and beyond. Although best known for his pioneering contributions to both minimal music and structural film in the 1960s, Conrad helped to define a vast range of culture through his work, touching on everything from rock music to public television. He once declared in an interview, “You don’t know who I am, but somehow, indirectly, you’ve been affected by things I did.” *Introducing Tony Conrad: A Retrospective*, the first large-scale museum survey devoted to artworks Conrad presented in museum and gallery settings, is part of an ongoing reappraisal of his creative life.

From his first film, *The Flicker* (1966), Conrad treated film as a sculptural and performative material. For more than four decades, he invented musical instruments out of materials as humble as a Band-Aid tin and presented these acoustical tools as sculptures themselves. In the 1980s, he critiqued an emerging culture of surveillance, control, and containment in ambitious films about power relations in the army and in prisons. His collaborative programs for public access television in the 1990s made him a passionate voice within his community. These paths converge in Conrad’s idea that he did not work in media but rather in cultural intervention—questioning, scrambling, and dismantling dominant hierarchies in order to privilege difference. Or, as he wrote of his investigations with video, “Once *quality* is gone, along with the tradition of *special works* and *special artists*, we are left with what’s left—namely, *everybody*; the real world.”
Indeed, because of the scope of Conrad’s contributions to art and culture, this retrospective may yet be seen as only an “introduction.” Inspired by the spoken and written preambles Conrad regularly used to help frame in-person screenings and presentations of his works, it shows Conrad to be deeply committed to tenaciously challenging systems and boundaries.

To help reveal Conrad’s larger concerns, regardless of particular media or format, the below is heavily edited from an extensive interview between Conrad and curator Jay Sanders in *Bomb* Magazine #92 (2005). Works at ICA that correspond to some of the comments are inserted in bold. The entire conversation can be read online at: [http://bombmagazine.org/articles/tony-conrad/](http://bombmagazine.org/articles/tony-conrad/).

JS  You’ve spoken before about calibrating a situation that triggers subjective perceptual effects... In an early interview you did with filmmaker Jonas Mekas in the [19]60s, you talked about wanting to make a film that simulates what things look like with one’s eyes closed. Would this be analogous to some of the microtonal music work that you do? There you also set up a situation that allows a free experience of perceptual phenomena.

TC  Much of that work could be thought of as carrying over from one medium to another, or let’s say that there wasn’t a medium-specificity, or even a cultural site-specificity about the work. I had wished to address an interiority on the part of the viewer that, on one hand, had its analogues in visual perception, that is, the kind of environment that we live in where you might say our eyes are calculating our environment, and on the other hand, the kind of environment we live in in which our ears are doing...
the calculating. And of course how our brain calculates that; the ways we think, recirculating ideas within ourselves. In that sense, a lot of this work flowed from my early contact with a conceptual orientation to art processes, that certainly went back to my long conversations with [philosopher, musician, artist] Henry Flynt in the late ’50s, and our contact with the Fluxus movement in the early ’60s.

So by the mid ’60s and early ’70s, as already with the music that I had been involved with in 1963 to 1965 with La Monte Young, Marian Zazeela, John Cale, and others, there was an effort underway to look beyond “concept” as a working cultural principle and to turn to a contextual siting of the subject within a culturally active locus, and in that way to allow for a situation in which the viewer, the audience, the recipient, the whatever you want to call it, the person who’s there, is actually in important respects manufacturing the culture as the event proceeds, as the context sustains... I’m not talking about simply an interpretive reception, but an active engagement used at its moment of reception.

JS In all your work, there seems to be a concern to activate the social and institutional relationship between an audience, a performer, a composition, a performance in a live experiential space, as the performance is happening. And the utilization of more sensory-driven phenomena leads you to work through complex systematic, mathematical, chemical possibilities that are of interest to you. [H, Cycles of 3s and 7s, Pi, the pickled films] The
live result of all of this happening at the same time is a kind of pervasive, very dizzying, overwhelming effect, both visually and sensorially, and then in more subtle ways.

TC Back in 1972, I felt remiss in not more directly addressing social and political issues in my films, but doing so simply wasn’t the way I was set to contribute to the cultural picture. I mean, during that period huge things were going on. The hippie movement, which everybody looks down on now, at the time was a really heady and potentially achievable utopian dream, simultaneous with the hell of war in Vietnam... I followed the building wave of opposition to the war by participating in marches and the moratoriums. But the focused interventions that I was creating in the cultural arena seemed to me to be the things that I could do to make a direct personal impact. Later on this led me to feel that maybe “cultural intervention,” challenging the fundamental presuppositions within the system itself, could be a term that characterized overall the kind of activities that I was attempting and achieving.

JS It’s amazing to see how far things are pushed with your work from that period—in the Yellow Movies from ’73, which are films that can basically go on forever but utilize no projectors and no film, and also the film objects that you made around that time, where film itself is treated and transformed chemically, and is often fully unprojectable. [for example the Yellow Movie, Yellow Movie—35mm Format, and Yellow TV works, as well as Deep Fried 7302 and Roast Kalvar] I know you gave a recent
talk at the Guggenheim and you called some of that work “pathological.” Citing this work specifically, could you elaborate on some of those projects?

TC Well, if you take a roll of film and instead of making pictures on it, you process it by pickling it in vinegar and putting it in a jar and presenting it for people to look at that way, projected through the lens of the fluid around it, this is so distorted and such a monstrous disfigurement of the normal way in which you are “supposed to use” film, that it is a kind of pathology; it’s a sickness in the sense of a virus being inserted in the system. I think wellness and change are measured by comparison to potential for extremes of illness or death. I was trying to kill film. I wanted to let it lay over and die.

JS Looking back at Mekas’s 1973 review of the *Yellow Movies*, he calls it “one of the high achievements of the art of cinema” and your best work to date. But I know the reality at the time was that it was a single “screening” shown to a very small audience. I’m interested in the “traction,” a word you’ve used, of work like this, both then, and how it finds its time now. That work is still being made in a sense, those movies are still “on,” and maybe there’s a sense that time has caught up to them—or maybe there’s a way they can be thought about now that wasn’t available, and didn’t allow for their traction at the time they were made. [E]ven if these interventions weren’t fully “effective” in that sense of provoking a direct response, they do have a real resonance with some of the more interesting
art activities going on right now. I think they offer something important at the present.

TC What’s happened in recent times is that a whole generation of artists has had its utopia cut off in a fairly vivid way, by losing the left, the future, the ecological truth around them; and they’ve begun to understand that a priority for artists along all different ways of thinking and approaches is to structure and situate micro-utopias within their presentations, and to break down some of the accepted institutional assignments of status, like service or viewership. So not only are you a viewer and I’m an artist, but maybe I’m situationally there to serve or to seduce. And you’re not just there to be the passive or marginally active consumer of my shit, but to engage with me in a situation that radically reassigns values. With that in mind, people today can look back at artists in the past who have explored this kind of social intervention, and who may have found their work illegible within their own cultural circumstances at the moment, and that kind of work may resonate much more directly today and actually seem friendly.

JS I’m interested in this use of humor, especially in some of the recent video works. [Man Misspelling His Own Name (OTNY), WiP, the compilation of late video works in the last gallery]

TC Yeah. Well there’s something really funny right from the beginning in leaving the pictures out of
a film, like in *The Flicker*, or in taking the film and putting it in a jar instead of on the screen. As an artist I need to find my own work simply entertaining, as well as everything else; otherwise I feel completely dissatisfied. I love the humor in the music performances I do, the ways that it trips me up and slips around unexpectedly and leaves me with paradoxes at every turn, in changing when it’s not changing and not changing when it does change. So I always thrive on some kind of humor, whether it’s a subtle or more blatant irony, or a different kind of basis for whatever you call humor.

But there’s also a way that if you make something funny, it can give the audience a crutch; they can escape from any other kind of meaning that you might have intended. So I’ve found that artists who make their work purposefully *not* funny sometimes get more traction than I would if I’ve made something that’s patently ludicrous. And somehow I don’t care. I know that humor offers the viewer a way out, but I’m just not the kind of person who’s that vicious, to not allow for people to have something that they can take delight in. I want to be respected when I’m a viewer. That’s a problem with the commercial environment we live in— it’s demeaning, it’s degrading, it’s literally insulting.

JS And in a sense, all your work reformulates the conventions of presentation in some way. [the underwear and perspective paintings; the glass works] Earlier you mentioned “inserting viruses” as an artmaking practice. I like this image of an artist-parasite. Here we’re
finding some of the worm-holes from the last 40 years and there’s a radical elegance to their structure that some hindsight may bring into focus.

Tony Conrad (b. 1940, Concord, NH; d. 2016, Buffalo, NY) was a central figure in the Lower Manhattan experimental film, music, and performance community of the 1960s, moving there after graduating from Harvard University with a degree in mathematics in 1962. He left Manhattan in the early 1970s for a teaching position at Antioch College, Yellow Springs, Ohio, at which point Conrad began experimenting with video and evolving his singular approach to performance. A life-long collaborator, Conrad worked with or mentored generations of artists and musicians such as Henry Flynt, Tony Oursler, Mike Kelley, Jack Smith, Beverly Grant, Cory Arcangel, MV Carbon, John Cale, Cathleen Steffan, Jennifer Walshe, and more. Conrad was a professor in the Department of Media Study, University at Buffalo, from 1976 until his death. In Buffalo he helped found Squeaky Wheel Film & Media Art Center. Select solo exhibitions include Kunsthalle Wien, Austria (2014); 80WSE, New York University, New York (2012); and The Kitchen, New York (1973).
RELATED PROGRAMS

FEBRUARY

1  5 PM  Members Preview
   *Introducing Tony Conrad: A Retrospective*
   *Cecilia Vicuña: About to Happen*
   *Colored People Time: Mundane Futures*

6:30 PM  Public Opening Celebration

FEBRUARY 19, MARCH 12, APRIL 9, MAY 21, JUNE 18

7 PM  Tuesdays with Tony Film Screenings
   Lightbox Film Center, 3701 Chestnut Street

MARCH

27  6:30 PM  ICA and the Fire Museum present:
   Musical Performance by Elder Ones
   featuring Amirtha Kidambi

APRIL 10, AUGUST 7

6 PM  ☊ Curator-Led Tour

More to be announced.
Please visit icaphila.org/calendar for more upcoming events.
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Installation view of two works entitled *Yellow Movie* (video) (both 1973), in *Undone*, Greene Naftali, New York, 2016. Installation of four (center) and twenty (right) paintings of Citron Yellow Daylight Fluorescent Naz-Dar Screen Process Ink, Naz-Dar No. 5594, and Scrink Transparent Base, Craftint No. 493, applied over Super White Process Color, Art-Brite No. 700, on black cards; GE F40BL black lights; contact microphones/pickups; and guitar amps with built-in speakers; black cards: 20 × 20 inches (51 × 51 cm) each, overall dimensions variable. Courtesy The Estate of Tony Conrad and Greene Naftali, New York.