

Tony Conrad: Completely in the Present

March 24, 2017 at 7:30pm — Yerba Buena Center for the Arts

Director Tyler Hubby In Person

presented in association with Canyon Cinema Foundation

Composer, filmmaker, conceptual artist, media activist, radical mathematician and more, Tony Conrad (1940–2016) was one the most influential and inspiring American artists of his time. *Completely in the Present*—created over Conrad’s twenty-year friendship with director Tyler Hubby—portrays Conrad as arch, impish intellectual, perpetually curious, always learning and questioning. Documenting Conrad’s experiences with filmmaker Jack Smith, composer LaMonte Young and the Theater of Eternal Music and the formation of the Velvet Underground, as well as his own avant-garde filmmaking the film traces the artist’s life and career up to his re-emergence in the 1990s as a central figure in underground music and his profound impact on generations of artists. Combining intimate footage of Tony and his collaborators shot over the last twenty years, his own archive of recordings and films, and interviews with colleagues, the film reveals not only a playful approach to life and art making but one that is motivated by a deep sense of powerful, political radicalism.

Straight and Narrow (1970) by Beverly Grant Conrad and Tony Conrad; 16mm, b&w, sound, 10 minutes, print from Canyon Cinema

“*Straight and Narrow* is a study in subjective color and visual rhythm. Although it is printed on black and white film, the hypnotic pacing of the images will cause viewers to experience a programmed gamut of hallucinatory color effects. *Straight And Narrow* uses the flicker phenomenon not as an end in itself, but as an effectuator of other related phenomena. In this film the colors which are so illusory in *The Flicker* are visible and under the programmed control of the filmmaker. Also, by using images which alternate in a vibrating flickering schedule, a new impression of motion and texture is created.” (Tony Conrad)

Tony Conrad: Completely in the Present (2016) by Tyler Hubby; digital video, color, sound, 102 minutes, exhibition copy from Burning Bridges

How did you first meet Tony Conrad and how did your relationship evolve during the production of Completely in the Present?

I met Tony in 1994 when he started playing out in support of the re-release of *Outside the Dream Syndicate*. There were a series of dates in the US and I was along to document the performances. We continued to meet up over the years to record performances or interviews about certain topics. In 2010 I suggested that we turn this archive of materials into a feature length film and began shooting even more.

As a documentary filmmaker and an editor of documentary films there is a certain authority you hold in telling a person’s life story. Was this complicated or further inspired telling the story of an American artist with an interest in authority?

There is an implied authority that naturally occurs, although in this case I hardly think I am an authority on Tony Conrad. There are so many writers and curators and even collaborators who are more authoritative in my mind. I just happened to be the guy with the camera and the skills to compile his life and work into some kind of decipherable cinematic text. It was indeed daunting to know that my subject in this case was hyper aware of the power of the image and the mechanisms of media production.

Was there ever a point where you felt that Tony Conrad was putting one on for the camera? He's clearly very gifted as a performer, comfortable with the camera, and aware of the power of language/image.

He is a performer and was indeed playing for camera, but that awareness of camera also enables him to be a willing actor in his own story and he had definite opinions on what and how he wanted to be photographed. He was, however, very revealing even in his comically performative way. That's what intrigued me. He could be "on" but also telegraphing all the thoughts and feelings required for the scene.

As Conrad says quite succinctly, "documentary filmmaking is at a completely ambiguous point right now". It's sometimes mixed up with trying to project a narrative that competes with Hollywood narratives. It is not always anthropological or primary source material but looking to sell tickets, streams, and downloads. How are you and Tony's view of documentary filmmaking similar or different?

In that scene he is certainly asking that question of his students and I don't think has a truly fixed opinion. He's observing something we all are, that non-fiction filmmaking is expanding and contracting all over the place right now. That's what makes it so exciting. Narratives can help sustain an emotional through line over the length of a feature film. That's why we like them. We are storytelling animals. But I've always been interested in seeing how far away we can get from narrative and maximized forms that are more subconscious or free associative or even just abstract.

I think the film balances archival and vérité footage. Tell me about your process of editing the immense archives for this film and what was a breakthrough moment in structuring the film.

Nothing too sexy there. Just lots and lots of trial and error. Eventually I narrow the scope of works into those that were overtly or covertly political because they could thread together and form a bigger picture. At the root of it Tony is a political artist whose major works deal with themes of power, disempowerment, empowerment, rejection of authority or received knowledge. There are lesser known works that are outliers or just incomplete ideas and those fell by the wayside in this version of his life.

Music and sound (both on location and in post-production) is an important part of the film but it is not always easily displayed visually. Tony Conrad is well known for creating a hypnotic, almost psychological experience, with his "Flicker" films. Did you immediately feel a challenge to take on his style, both auditory and visually, to reflect his work and character?

I wanted his works to take the foreground but found myself having to create a few visual motifs for some of the music compositions so I tried to make visuals that are more abstract and open-ended that wouldn't take the viewer's focus off the music but might give them some subtext for the composition. I considered just playing the music over a black screen but Tony didn't play in complete darkness. He always supplied some visual component to the music. ("Tyler Hubby: Transforming the Documentary." Tyler Hubby interviewed in *Frontrunner* magazine. www.frontrunnermagazine.com/tyler-hubby/)

**This program is presented in association with Canyon Cinema Foundation
www.canyoncinema.com**

SUNDAY

Films of Tony Conrad

Including *The Flicker*, *Articulation of Boolean Algebra for Film Opticals*,
The Eye of Count Flickerstein and more

**Center for New Music
55 Taylor Street (at Market)
San Francisco**

[info](#)

