

Tony Conrad

by Nils Jendri. 2006.

Index:

1. Biography
2. Theater of Eternal Music
3. The Flicker
4. Concept Art:
Tony Conrad and the early minimalism
5. Tony Conrad and the authorship
6. Musicselection
7. Filmselection
8. Bibliography
9. Container

1. Biography



Tony Conrad, a/k/a **Anthony S. Conrad**, (*1940).

Since the early 60's he started working as a Experimental filmmaker, the biggest attention he get is with his first film „The Flicker,, (1965). He also started working as a composer and sound-artist (he get into it through a lecture by Stockhausen in Harvard in 1958), currently he primary works as a teacher (University of Buffalo) and writer (for example in the current issue of the *Millennium Film Journal* (No.45). There he published the text *Is This Penny Ante or a High Stakes Game? / An Interventionist Approach to Experimental Filmmaking*).

He graduate at Harvard University in 1962 (major Mathematics).

After that Conrad relocated to New York, where he became interested in the underground music Scene. Here he met the Composer and Saxophonist LaMonte Young who at the time was leading an improvisational group „... a proto-minimalist jazz mutation. Soon, Billy Name left and Conrad joined, beginning by playing only an open fifth drone, and moving the small ensemble towards a "Dream Music" that would profoundly influence subsequent composers.“ (<http://media.hyperreal.org/zines/est/intervs/conrad.html>)

Later Conrad had also begun channelling his energies into filmmaking, working as a sound engineer and technical advisor on the experimental features with the experimental film icon Jack Smith.

Conrad also began directing his own features - among them *The Flicker*, *Coming Attractions*, *The Eye of Count Flickenstein* and *Film Feedback* - also composing their respective scores. It was through a German filmmaker travelling in New York City that Conrad first learned of the nascent german Kraut-rock scene of the early '70s, and he soon began communicating with the members of *Faust*. Eventually, he travelled to the group's farm in the northern German community of Wuemme, where a three-day session yielded the 1973 collaboration *Outside the Dream Syndicate*, Conrad's first-ever proper recording.

„Conrad has worked in music composition, video, film, and performance and has taught video production and analysis in the Department of Media Study of the State University of New York at Buffalo since 1976. During the last ten years, Conrad has focused on music and performing recent works in new music venues, museums and clubs in the US and internationally. He has composed more than a dozen works, primarily for solo amplified violin with amplified strings, using special tunings and scales.“
(<http://www.liquidarchitecture.org.au/tony.html>)

Conrad's work has been shown at many museums including the Museum of Modern Art and P.S. 1 in New York City. In 1991 he had a video retrospective at *The Kitchen* an artist-run organization in New York City. His film *The Flicker* was included in the Whitney Museum of American Art's exhibition, *The American Century*.

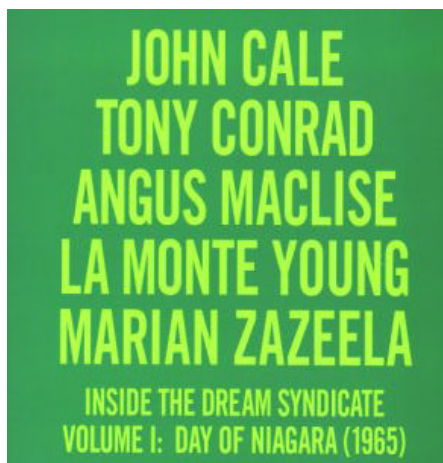
Support for Conrad's work has come from the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, the State University of New York, The Rockefeller Foundation, and the New York Foundation for the Arts.

For further information go and visit his homepage at http://tonyconrad.net/index_sun.html

2. Theater of Eternal music

The *Theater of Eternal Music* was a mid-sixties experimental musical group founded in 1962 including the pre-Velvet Underground John Cale on viola; Tony Conrad on violin; poet and percussionist Angus MacLise on tabla, La Monte Young saxophon, later vocals and visual artist Marian Zazeela, who provide vocal drones and conceptual direction to the project and sometimes Terry Riley, also voice. At this time all of them were a part of New York's underground music and emergent minimalist scenes.

They began playing in N.Y.C. called as the *Dream Syndicate* and the *Theatre of Eternal Music*. The work *Day of Niagara* (1965) (Abl. 1) is the earliest example of new American minimal Composition /Performances.



Abl. 1

The album is an exceptional piece of American musical history. All of the early precepts of minimalism are present - incremental variation, drone (Bordunklänge), sustained pitch - as well as the emphasis on group creation through improvisation.

„The powerfully narcotic, droning amplified string sound that Cale and Conrad pioneered later became known to rock listeners through Velvet Underground songs like *Venus in Furs* and *Heroin*,, (<http://tissue.net/orourke/gastr1996.html>)

They disbanded around 1965. All later staking claim to authoring of the *Eternal Music* aesthetic. La Monte Young owns the original performance and rehearsal recordings of the *Dream Syndicate* and refuses their release, much to the frustration of Cale and Conrad. This led to copyright disputes and threats of litigation that have kept that music out of public access for decades now.

Still, Conrad and Cale continued collaborating, joining young Pickwick company songwriter Lou Reed and sculptor Walter de Maria in a rock band called *the Primitives*.

Tony Conrad was the violinist in the *Theater of Eternal Music* who introduced first in 1962 drones and mathematically pure tunings into minimalism.

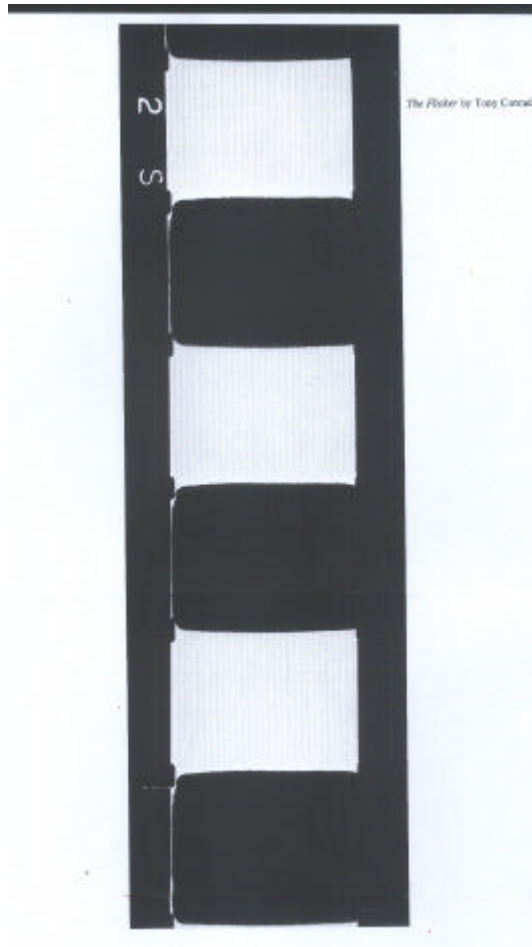
Tom Johnson who worked for the Magazine *Village Voice* visited some concerts of the *Theatre of Eternal Music*.

He noticed to one concert :

„The music that night was the loudest I had ever heard. It consisted largely of electronic drones, which shifted slightly once in a while, while Young hummed along. I found the sounds harsh and offensive, and I probably wouldn't have stayed very long except that I happened to notice a change in the color of Marian Zazeela's large projection in the background. Like the sun going down, or a cloud passing by, I never could see it change, but very time I looked back, the intricate filigree designs had taken a slightly different form, and the color seemed different. I was also fascinated by Young's claim that the music they were playing, *The Tortoise, his Dreams and Journeys*, was an endless piece which had already been going on for four years. That was a nice idea, but it did relieve my assaulted eardrums.“

(16.02.68/ Zitat aus: Ulli Götte „Minimal Music, Geschichte, Ästhetik, Umfeld“ S. 32-33)

3. The Flicker:



Tony Conrad's film „*The Flicker* (1965/ 31 min.) is considered an early key work of the structural film movement in America („ Als erster hat der Theoretiker P.A. Sitney, der allerdings die Fluxusfilme ablehnt, für die USA auf diese neue Bewegung hingewiesen und die Bezeichnung *structurally Film* gewählt, als dessen wesentliche Merkmale er die statische Einstellung, die Wiederholung und den Flickereffekt ansieht.“ - Birgit Hein in *Film im Underground* S.103)

The film starts with a title card which shows in handwritten letters that this film may be able to induce nausea (Breachreiz), migraine headaches, and epileptic seizures, and therefore you require a physician for all eventualities.

The sound tape which belongs to the film (separate from the film and to be synchronized during projection) begins with old gramophone music. This one starts with a long-held message, a one-frame, graphically compact card reads "Conrad presents" and dissolves to another black and white graphic composition of the film title.

Finally "1966 Conrad," scratched into the emulsion, gives way to the flickering light from which the title is derived.

„[...] At the beginning, there seems to be a faster and faster pulse which is vaguely perceived as the throbbing of a white field. With no subject matter to enforce one's attention, one's eye tends to wander around the frame and room to gather in the full and wild impact of the film. Depending on the projection conditions, dust around the frame edge and particles and scratches in the field, often moving by quickly, can be noticed. Also, the frame line at the top or bottom appears to vibrate up and down a bit, giving another sense of rhythm or periodicity to one's viewing.

The light vibrations of the flicker bring optical illusions into play, which vary with different viewers and viewing situations. Patterns of light, colors, and even shadows of seemingly hidden forms appear as the film continues. At times there seems to be a swirling movement hovering around the center of the frame; at other times yellow and/or green and purple seem to vibrate in and tint the field. The surface of the screen seems radiant and brilliant as the light strikes forward into the space before the screen and assaults the viewer.

Later on, the light and dark interchange seems to thrust in and out in an even deeper space and seems to speed up again toward the end. Meanwhile, the taped sound of white noise also varies in volume and quality, fading in and out, speeding up and slowing down, sometimes in coordination with the flicker, sometimes more independently. It is a clicking machine noise, reminiscent of the non-existent sections of the sound track of *Fire of Waters*. Strained to the limits of the persistence of vision which makes the actual units of the film illegible, the eye comes to a rest at last; the stare is cut off and dissolved into conversation and questions.

What is the film, anyway? According to Conrad, a musician as well as a filmmaker:

„Each pattern is then seen to suggest a "chord" related to the "tonic". The patterns used were, in fact, constructed in such a way that each one contains visible components contributed by up to three related frequencies. These flicker triads represent, to my knowledge, the first meaningful extension of harmonic principles to the visual sense“

Examination of the strip does not make a triadic principle any clearer. Approximately the first half of the film is constructed on a certain ratio of clear leader frames to one black frame which separates each grouping of clear leader frames. In other words, the light frames dominate any series. For example, a group of twenty-three clear frames and one black frame is repeated twenty-five times at the beginning, a series exactly one second or 24 fps in duration. Then a gradual decrease in the number of clear frames per black frame from 11 clear frames per 1 black to 5 clear frames per one black is executed. From then on, the patterns are for the most part more complicated and require very careful counting.

Sometimes there will be an alternating pattern (5 clear, 1 black, 4 clear, 1 black, 5 clear, 1 black, etc.) and then a continuation of the series' reduction (4 clear, 1 black, 4 clear, 1 black, etc.). Finally the number of clear and black frames is equal in a pattern of exact alternation (1 black, 1 clear, 1 black, 1 clear, etc.).

At one point it appears that the number of black frames will increase regularly in proportion to the number of alternating clear frames, but this pattern is not as simple as that of the first section. The mixture of patterns of black and clear frames becomes very complex, for

example, 2 black, 1 clear, 2 black, 2 clear, etc. There are tricky deviations from the main patterns, even within a series, which force the frame counter never to assume that a series is entirely regular. At the end, the pattern of the beginning is reversed with 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, and then 23 clear frames interspersed with one black frame.“

1. Ken Jacobs. As quoted in *Film-Makers Cooperative. Catalogue No. 6*, New York: Film-Makers Cooperative, 1975, p. 131.
2. Stan Brakhage. „Respond Dance,“ from „Metaphors on Vision,“ *Film Future No.30*, Fall 1963
3. Paul Arthur. „Four Brakhage Films,“ *Artforum*, Januar 1973, pp. 44-45.
4. See letters and articles in the Tony Conrad File at Anthology Film Archives, 80 Wooster Street, New York, New York.
5. Tony Conrad. „The Flicker,“ 1967. A piece distributed at screenings of the film, which can be read at Anthology Film Archives.
6. P. Adams Sitney. *Visionary Film*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1974, pp. 407-435

(shorted outtake from "A History of the American Avant-Garde Cinema" NY: The American Federation of Arts, 1976. S 115-117)

The methods Conrad used seem more closely related to serial music`s mathematical patterning of sound. What is amazing is how secondary the mathematics of such structures become in the final viewing. In the End the clear frame or empty screen seems to dominate, with dark shadows pulsing behind and it seems to form, above and beyond the simple alternating of black and white.

4. Concept Art: Tony Conrad and the early minimalism

Trough the lecture *New Instrumental and Electronic Musik* of the german componist Karlheiz Stockhausen in Harvard 1958, Conrad gets intrested in electronic and tape composition. Together with Henry Flynt (philosopher, musician, anti-art activist and exhibited artist and Conrads roommate in Harvard) which started devicing his notions of structure and concept art, Conrad started working in this new genre.

Flynt wrote in *Structure Art and pure mathematics* 1960:

„[...] Then when the structure is `hidden,‘ `unexperienceable‘ when it can only be appreciated by reading the `analyses‘ why put emphasis on the body of sound, light, or whatever, why listen to structure music, why look at structural visual art, why even call them `music,‘ `visual art‘? Why not throw away the bodies of sound, light, or whatever, and keep the `analyses‘ of the structure as the works of art?“

Flynt describes here as maybe one of the first the ground elementary signs of concept art/ minimal Art.

Since 1961 Conrad started also producing some text based strips as you can see in the following composition (Abl.1) *Prelude and Fugue for Strings for 18 Solo Instruments* (March-April,, 1961). Here he used only letters as notation for each of the 18 instruments. Followed from a short how to play assignation. It seems to be a composition with a wide range of self interpretation. The usually music notation is replaced by a mathematical arrangement in a raster form. Here he used only the first 18 letters of the alphabet which follows in a different sequence. A instrument never play the same *sound* in one beat like another. That all instruments use the same beat you can see, that every letter have the same distance to the next letter. It also seems that the composition have no real end when he writes only „...these sequences are cyclic“. Also which tone you have to use to every letter is not defined as also how fast or slow all of the instruments you have to play.

In this work you can see that Conrad gives the observer only a small advice. It is not a *finished* composition. Here the own interpretation plays a main role.

The second example (Abl.2) Conrad worked only with handwritten papers and strips. „... that the text itself was not necessarily its content [...] was the instruction, „One just has to guess whether this work exists and if it does what it is like“ (B.W.Joseph, *Concept Art and Instrumental Reason, Texte zur Kunst, Dez 2005*). These *instructions* here are easy to understand and follows the same action again and again. It seems that the action here could never ends. The style of each advice is same minimal style than the action itself. The text is the immediate description advise.

Some examples Conrad produced are nice examples for what concept/ minimal art stands for. The pure minimal aspect of this pieces and the almost *automatic* action/experience which a reader do/have is seen as one of Conrad`s early conceptual work.

(cit.Tony Conrad: „John Cage wrote 4'33" a half century ago, in 1952; Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* were done around the same time. So when I was making my first film, *The Flicker*, more than a decade later in 1965, the least of my fascinations was with the fact that it had no *pictures*. Yet as with the minimal sculpture that emerged around that same time, it was the *emptines* (as one might say) of the work that first drew viewers' attention and surprise. My interest in *The Flicker* was more subversive than that; I was devoted to the experiential *excess* that flickering light made accessible to *abstract* film. [...]"
<http://tonyconrad.net/highstakes.htm>)

2

4

ORDER OF MUSICAL LINES

1. B M A O K G H P P J I Q N L D R C E
2. F C D I N P J G A O L M B E H Q K R
3. G K H L B A O P D I E C F R J M N Q
4. P N J E F D I A H L R K G Q O C B M
5. A B O R G H L D J E Q N P M I K F C
6. D F I Q P J E H O R M B A C L N G K
7. H G L M A O R J I Q C F D K E B P N
8. J P E C D I Q O L M K G H N R F A B
9. O A R K H L M I E C N P J B Q G D F
10. I D Q N J E C L R K B A O F M P H G
11. L H M B O R K E Q N F D I G C A J P
12. E J C F I Q N R M B G H L P K D O A
13. R O K G L M B Q C F P J E A N H I D
14. Q I N P E C F L K G A O R D B J L H
15. M L B A R K G C N P D I Q H F O E J
16. C E F D Q N P K B A H L M J G I R O
17. K R G H M B A N F D J E C O P L Q I
18. N Q P J C F D B G H O R K I A E M L

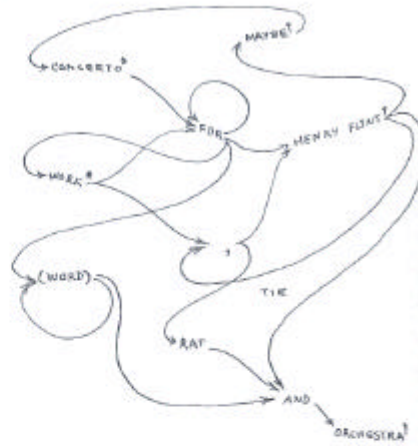
As with the dependency sequences, these sequences are cyclic and are to be used one term at a time from left to right (and then from the right-most term returning directly to the left-most to begin again), moving from one term to the next only after playing a musical line. Each letter acts as an indication to play the same-lettered musical line through one time only.

(Abl. 1)

- 1 Tony Conrad, „Work Which Is Its Title“, 1961
- 2 Tony Conrad, „Four Pieces“, Summer 1961
- 3 Sol LeWitt, „Serial Project No. 1 (ABCD)“, 1966

WORK WHICH IS ITS TITLE

(OR)



- * MAY START READING HERE
- † MAY STOP READING HERE

1

DO NOT PERFORM THIS
PIECE

THIS PIECE IS ITS NAME.
THIS PECE IS ITS NAME.

PIECE

TO PERFORM THIS PIECE,
COMPOSE IT,
AT LEAST.

PIECE

IS PIECE FOLLOW THE INSTRU

2

(Abl.2)

5. Tony Conrad and the authorship

A very important criterion for acting as a author for me seems the content discussion of any producer with his own work. Does the producer have influence on contents of its work, does he go to intervention beyond the purely aesthetic to treat from object, surface and form? Does he see themself more as a usual service provider for visual design and you can recognise it in its work? Does he try to arrange in his works own values, statements, definitions or theories? He creates with his own pictures and texts *content*, which he use for design?

Another important question is, if he acts on his own initiative and gets to his own *employer*. Viz. he realised his own projects, curats his own exhibitions and accept the hole responsibility for it?

To get a connection between authorship and Tony Conrad we take a look on his work. As you can see in the described examples he played the main roles in createing new ways of notation in film and music. E.g. he connects the mathematical design of notation for composes with a mathematical structure, which he used in his first film *The Flicker* or in his composition *Prelude and Fugue for Strings for 18 Solo Instruments* (Abl.1).

The exclusive use of black and white frames in his film „The Flicker“ (chapter 3) is seen as a new way of working with film and its basic material „[...] concept art is a kind of art of which the material is the language“ (Henry Flynt, „Essay: Concept Art“, in La Monte Young, New York 1963). The fact that he used no pictures, but to let our own neuronal functions of our brain create this pictures, results in a new form of film experience. This leeds him to a new era of filmmaking called *structural film* in which the flickering light is a usual stylistic device. Conrad gives also the way of recognise the work a important role (e.g. you have to see this film in a absolute dark room and with high tuned sound, how much people listen or see it, etc.).

The fact that he developed new ways of film interpretation and music interpretation he automatically steps into a role of author. He acts as a founder and can lead his work in every direction he want. He can mix mathematic with composition of music or film or both. He can work independent from his environment and don`t have to follow instructions of higher forces. I think this higher forces could only be composed by the technical development of the precence (which mostly get advanced through a artistic aim).

It seems that Conrad gives us a tool where we can play with our own imagination, we becoming the actor and consequently a part of it. We make a step away from just *consume* to a role of own responsibility for what we do, what can make us at the bottom line also to a author.

6. Musicselection:

TONY CONRAD with FAUST
Outside the Dream Syndicate CD 1993

TONY CONRAD with FAUST
Outside the Dream Syndicate: 10th Anniversary Edition 2xCD BOXED SET 2002

TONY CONRAD with FAUST
Outside the Dream Syndicate: 10th Anniversary Edition 2xCD 2004

TONY CONRAD with FAUST
The Pyre of Angus was in Kathmandu b/w The Death of the Composer was in 1962 7" 1993

TONY CONRAD
Four Violins (1964) LP 1996

TONY CONRAD
Slapping Pythagoras CD 1995

TONY CONRAD
Slapping Pythagoras: 10th Anniversary Edition 2xCD BOXED SET

AMM, TONY CONRAD, FAUST, GATE featuring MICHAEL MORLEY with LEE RANALDO,
THURSTON MOORE and STEVE SHELLEY, KEIJI HAINO, THURSTON MOORE and Friends, ZEENA
PARKINS, JIM O'ROURKE
Manganese festival 1994

TONY CONRAD with GASTR DEL SOL, GASTR DEL SOL, TONY CONRAD
Ten Years Alive on the Infinite Plain b/w The Japanese Room at La Pagode b/w May 2x7" 1995

GASTR DEL SOL, TONY CONRAD, TONY CONRAD with GASTR DEL SOL
The Japanese Room at La Pagode b/w May 7" 1995

TONY CONRAD
Early Minimalism Vol. I 4xCD BOX 1996

TONY CONRAD
Early Minimalism Vol. I 4xCD BOX 2002

TONY CONRAD, JOHN FAHEY, GASTR DEL SOL, BRUCE GILBERT, BERNHARD GUENTER, KEIJI
HAINO and FUSHITSUSHA, LOREN MAZZACANE CONNORS, JIM O'ROURKE, SPECIAL GUESTS
Yttrium festival 3xCD/1xDVD BOXED SET 2006

TONY CONRAD WITH FAUST
Outside the Dream Syndicate ALIVE CD 12/06/2005

JOHN CALE, TONY CONRAD, ANGUS MACLISE, LA MONTE YOUNG, MARIAN ZAZEELA
Day of Niagara: Inside the Dream Syndicate Vol. I CD 2000

TONY CONRAD
Fantastic Glissando (1969) LP 2003

TONY CONRAD
Bryant Park Moratorium Rally (1969) MP3 2003

TONY CONRAD
Bryant Park Moratorium Rally (1969) CD 2005

JONATHAN KANE, ARNOLD DREYBLATT, RHYS CHATHAM, ZEENA PARKINS, TONY CONRAD,
TONY CONRAD with FAUST, LEIF INGE
Table of the Elements Sampler no. 1 6x Mini CDs 2005

TONY CONRAD with FAUST
Outside the Dream Syndicate Alive CD 2005

7. Filmselection:

Film Feedback (1974)b&w, silent, 13 minutes
4-X Attack (1973)b&w, sound, 2 minutes
Boiled Shadow (1974) b&w, sound, 3 minutes
Mickey Mouse (1976) color, silent, 3 minutes
Enlightenment Through Experience (1973) color, sound, 5 minutes
Aquarium (1975) color, silent, 7 minutes
Straight and narrow (1970) b&w, sound
I am sitting in a room (1969)
The Eye of Count Flickerstein (1967)b&w, silent, 7 minutes
The Flicker (1965) b&w, sound, 30 minutes

8. Bibliography:

worldwideweb:

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4. <http://www.fastnbulbous.com/punk.htm>
5. <http://www.mp3.com/albums/422212/summary.html>
6. [http://www.newmusicbox.org/page.nmbx?id=31tp02village voice > music > Inside the Dream Syndicate Volume 1: Day ...](http://www.newmusicbox.org/page.nmbx?id=31tp02village+voice+%3E+music+%3E+Inside+the+Dream+Syndicate+Volume+1:+Day+...)
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9. <http://tonyconrad.net/highstakes.htm>

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12. „Minimal Music, Geschichte, Ästhetik, Umfeld“ von Ulli Götte S. 32-33
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14. "A History of the American Avant-Garde Cinema" NY: The American Federation of Artas, 1976. S 115-117
15. “Concept Art and Instrumental Reason - On Tony Conrad`s Early Work” von Branden W. Joseph, Texte zur Kunst, Heft 60, 2005