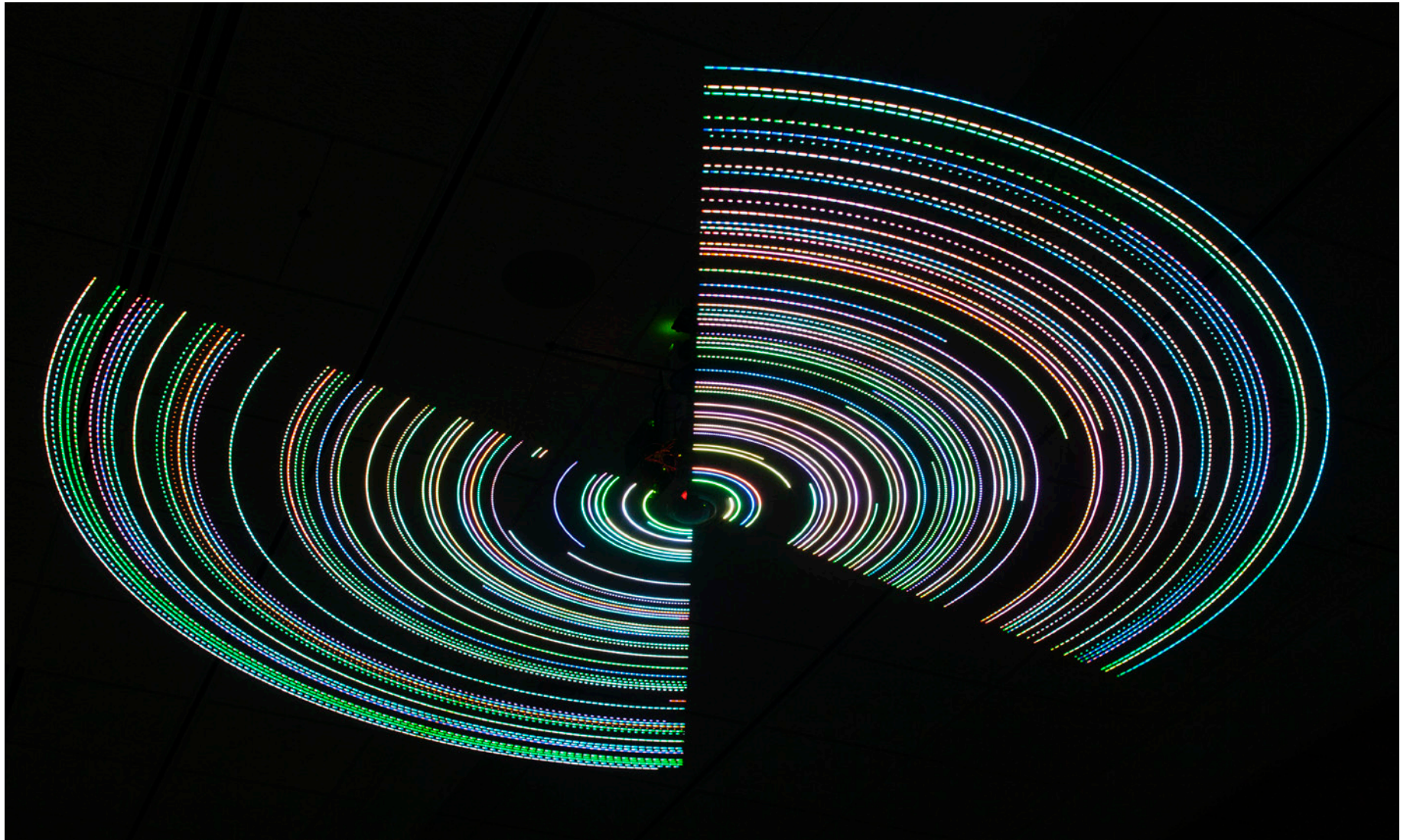


# *Anti-Newton*

Jonathan Bruce Williams



*Anti-Newton, 2014, installation detail*

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*MAEP coordinator Christopher Atkins talks with Jonathan Bruce Williams about his MAEP installation*

**CA: Tell me about the title of your installation, *Anti-Newton*.**

**JBW:** The title is actually derived from Anti-Newton Ring Glass, a kind of glass developed for archival slide projector mounts to prevent an optical phenomenon called Newton's Rings. Two transparent yet reflective surfaces placed together, like the two pieces of glass in a slide mount, cause an interfering pattern of concentric circles. Anti-Newton Ring Glass, which is lightly etched with an acid, causes the circles to disappear. "Anti-Newton" just sounds funny to me, in a way that "non-Newtonian" doesn't.

So the installation really started from there, with this basic idea that sometimes a phenomena is observed and exploited—and sometimes it is a nuisance and needs an invention to prevent it.

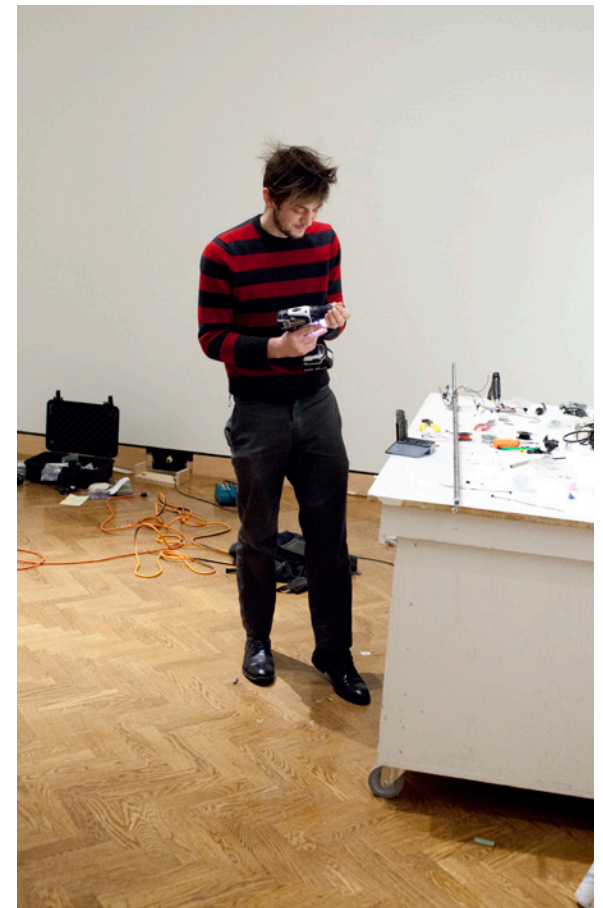
**CA: You were also inspired by the Yamantaka Mandala on display at the MIA. How did that impact your work?**

*"[The installation] provokes an awareness of all the nuisance solutions we tend to impose, structurally and metaphorically, that end up defining the way we think."*

**JBW:** The mandala is granular—the image is rendered by tiny grains of color information that collectively form representations of things, not unlike film grain or a digital image pixel. Also, the chemical treatment of the mandala for preservation is somewhat akin to the fixation of a negative or print in a traditional darkroom—without that step the image would be lost rather quickly. Photography is an invention designed to capture visual transience, and a mandala reminds us of the material transience of all things.

**CA: How does the installation work?**

**JBW:** It's a simple focal relationship between an illuminated subject and a dark space for viewing, exploiting the basic phenomena of photography. It provokes an awareness of all the nuisance solutions we tend to impose, structurally and metaphorically, that end up defining the way we think.



*“Even my experience with what amounts to pretty simplistic digital modeling feels like an open window.”*

**CA: Is there a relationship to Newton’s Laws of Motion?**

**JBW:** Yes, the show is kinetic and operates through laws we are all familiar with. In that regard, it isn’t an engineering marvel. I was much more interested in reading about Franz Anton Mesmer (who claimed his theories of animal magnetism were built on Newtonian foundations) while trying to create a hypnotic quality—something that can *mesmerize*. The idea of Anti-Newton began to mean something more mystical than literal. I am more interested in metaphysics than physics.

**CA: And what is that mystical meaning? Is it related to the hypnotic effect of lights and motion in the installation?**

**JBW:** The meaning is invented. We tend to invent elaborate conceptual systems—myths and the like—using the same imaginative faculties we apply to the production of marketable and useful “inventions.” In my projects, I am inventing some simple devices, but the invention of meaning is the true task. The meaning of Anti-Newton exists in the realm of cosmography, implying the transience of all things. At a

distance, LEDs look like singular points of light, stars in the night sky. Yet because we are imaginative creatures, scattered points of light are never simply that—they cluster into asterisms, or constellations, in our pattern-recognizing brains. Perhaps it is a stretch to see a scorpion in the Scorpio constellation, yet the ability to “see it” reminds me that I am a human.

The LED array doesn’t literally create asterisms, it simply draws transient concentric circles. Through the retinal after-image phenomena of the eye, the speed of the rotational array, and the randomized color patterns generated by a micro controller, the circles become mandala-like. Maybe it can hypnotize you. I can feel myself starting to be hypnotized by something as simple as a drill press.

**CA: What are we seeing when we look into the colored Plexiglas box? With the lens on top, it’s like a camera, right?**

**JBW:** The structure is like a camera, though perhaps it’s more like a projector: a camera typically captures things, projectors typically show things. The difference is merely the inversion of a light source and a container for



darkness. Inside the vitrine, a view camera lens displays an image of the overhead array while the faces of the box filter out different color information depending on your point of view. We typically pay attention to a very small amount of the raw information presented by the world around us; without this filtration our experiences would be nonsense.

**CA: As your project developed from a computer-rendered design into a physical object, what did you learn about the piece? Did it become what you expected?**

**JBW:** Most of the strategies and symmetries of the structure wouldn't have occurred if they hadn't been conceived in a digital space—similar to design and architecture, in which computers are now generating novel forms from algorithms. Even my experience with what amounts to pretty simplistic digital modeling feels like an open window.

Also, parts of the project were produced using a 3-D printer, specifically the custom hardware for the lens and nylon string systems. Instead of being cut to length, machined, welded, etc., an automated printer compiled them additively, one layer at a time. At some point, I realized that I'm not so different from a 3-D printer, taking a series of numbers and a set of digital instructions and materializing a digital form.

**CA: You've said that the sound in the installation is based on a Gyorgi Lygeti composition. How have you**



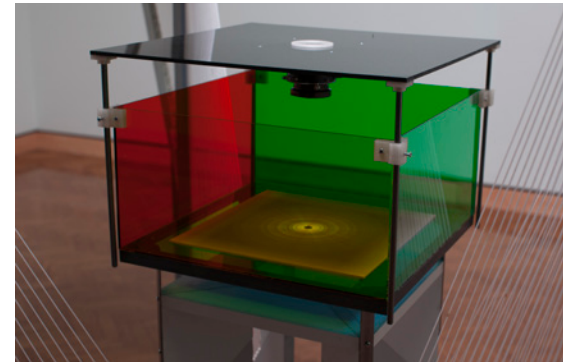
*Anti-Newton, 2014, installation view*

**remixed the music, and what does it add to the experience?**

**JBW:** The soundtrack is from *Lux Aeterna*, the Gyorgi Lygeti choral composition famously used in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. It suggests a soundscape for the mysterious expanse of outer space, even though we know that outer space is silent, given the lack of a reverberatory atmosphere. In the film, it also serves as the soundtrack for divine intervention. For the installation, the composition was digitally slowed to 25 percent of its normal playback speed, producing a track that isn't immediately identifiable as Ligeti's, but perhaps it has the same qualities and associations. The title, which translates to *Eternal Light*, plays into some of the other suggestions and metaphors of the installation.

**CA: Is the cinematic reference deliberate?**

**JBW:** I've been making works that reflect on some elements of cinema, in literal technological ways and also through drama, tension, spectacle, and structure, which I think can make an installation more experiential and durational, akin to watching a movie if perhaps more physical and navigational. In this context, the soundtrack can be conflated with the overhead light apparatus, suggesting that the sound is coming from the overhead array itself—something we do naturally when watching any sight and sound display, especially in a darkened theatre.



*Anti-Newton, 2014, installation detail*



Watch Jonathan Bruce Williams talk about *Anti-Newton*.



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**Opening Reception:** Thursday, October 17, 7 p.m.  
**Special Guests:** Thursday, December 19, 7 p.m.

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