



## Control: A Conversation With Conrad Shawcross

by *sarah hromack* 05/21/09

Conrad Shawcross was preparing for his solo exhibition at [Location One](#) on the day I met him in his cramped studio, located deep in the bowels of the center's Greene Street building. "Control," as the show is provocatively titled, is the culmination of his residency as Location One's International Fellow, the very first in an ambitious new program designed to support the work of emerging and mid-career artists. While Shawcross is not quite the former -- his work was first shown in Europe in 2001 and came to prominence in 2004 as part of the Saatchi Gallery's "New Blood" exhibition -- he is relatively unknown to U.S. audiences. That is about to change in New York, however, as he unveils several new works that build on his previous investigations into the nature of time, space, and sound.

The son of famed British writers and intellectuals William Shawcross and Marina Warner, Shawcross holds degrees from the Chelsea School of Art, the University of Oxford, and the Slade School of Art. In person, he exudes an assuredness that reflects less his upbringing than his own keen interest in how the world functions as it does -- and moreover, why. As we spoke, Shawcross's expression vacillated between that of an erudite professor -- he wanted me to understand how his works *work* -- and that of a student, or even a precocious child whose fascination with the forces of nature has yet to abate.

While Shawcross claims to privilege ideas over aesthetics, his works are exquisitely rendered machines whose rigorous conceptual premises often lie in the realms of science and philosophy. The properties of light, for instance, play a conspicuous role in his projects, as do those of music. In the name of rationalism -- the exhibition's title refers to the benchmark, or 'control,' employed in the scientific method -- Shawcross gives form to the inherent, yet oft-hidden beauty in the physical world. These revelations aren't without a sense of irony, however -- science has served up its share of fumbles and absurdities, after all.

**SARAH HROMACK:** I understand that one of the pieces you've developed at Location One is a continuation of a previous project?

**CONRAD SHAWCROSS:** There is a piece [in the show] that follows on an earlier work called "Slow Arc Inside Cube." It's just a very simple cube of mesh. Inside there is an articulated arm that decelerates towards one corner, stops for a second, and then falls back across the cage. There is a gravitational pull towards the center, and [the arm] throws an inverse shadow off of the cage and into space -- It moves in this kind of fixed cycle, in a straight line from one corner to the other. It's quite relaxing to watch. I've always made works with light and movement, but I was never very interested in the shadows -- they were just a byproduct. But once, when I was in a science museum in London that I go to a lot, I read a quotation from the late scientist [Dorothy] Hodgkin. She pioneered a process called crystal radiography through which she worked out the structure of pig insulin. Through this process, she extrapolated a three-dimensional shape. She described the process as similar to trying to work out the structure of a tree by only seeing its shadow -- a beautiful analogy. It's a metaphor for the discipline of science because we're always trying to see around that corner. We've got such limited information as to what's really there -- we'll never fully grasp it.