MICHAEL SNOW

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edited by Annette Michelson and Kenneth White essays and interviews by Annette Michelson, Michael Snow, Andrée Hayum, Amy Taubin, Thierry de Duve, Hubert Damisch, Jean Arnaud, Érik Bullot, Malcolm Turvey, and Kenneth White

OCTOBER FILES 24

For Annette Michelson

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Series Preface

OCTOBER Files addresses individual bodies of work of the postwar period that meet two criteria: they have altered our understanding of art in significant ways, and they have prompted a critical literature that is serious, sophisticated, and sustained. Each book thus traces not only the development of an important oeuvre but also the construction of the critical discourse inspired by it. This discourse is theoretical by its very nature, which is not to say that it imposes theory abstractly or arbitrarily. Rather, it draws out the specific ways in which significant art is theoretical in its own right, on its own terms and with its own implications. To this end we feature essays, many first published in *OCTOBER* magazine, that elaborate different methods of criticism in order to elucidate different aspects of the art in question. The essays are often in dialogue with one another as they do so, but they are also as sensitive as the art to political context and historical change. These "files," then, are intended as primers in signal practices of art and criticism alike, and they are offered in resistance to the amnesiac and antitheoretical tendencies of our time.

The Editors of *OCTOBER*

Acknowledgments

Toward Snow

Annette Michelson

> The working of his thought is thus concerned with that slow transformation of the notion of space which, beginning as a vacuum chamber, as an isotopic volume, gradually became a system inseparable from the matter it contains and from time.
>
> —Paul Valéry, *Introduction to the Method of Leonardo da Vinci*

> My eye, turning toward the imaginary, will go to any wavelengths for its sights.
>
> —Stan Brakhage, *Metaphors on Vision*

There is a metaphor recurrent in discourse on the nature of consciousness as cinema. And there are cinematic works that present themselves as analogues of consciousness, finding in cinema a striking, and uniquely direct, presentational mode of the nature and processes of experience. The illusionism of the moving image reflects, and occasions reflection upon, the conditions of knowledge; it facilitates a critical focus upon the immediacy of experience in the flow of time. Thus Aron Gurwitsch, on the origins of this inquiry: "Hume expressly likens consciousness to a theater, but it is, so to speak, a theater without a stage. In modern terminology one could compare consciousness with a perpetual succession of cinematographic pictures ... a unidimensional sphere of being, whose fundamental structure consists only and exclusively in temporality."[1] And Gérard Granel, discussing its modern developments: "Phenomenology is an attempt to film, in slow motion, that which has been, owing to the manner in which it is seen in natural speed, not absolutely unseen, but missed, subject to oversight. It attempts, slowly and calmly, to draw closer to that original intensity which is not given in appearance, but from which things and processes do, nevertheless, in turn proceed."[2] Epistemological inquiry and cinematic experience converge, as it were, in reciprocal mimesis.

There are, in the history of film, very few artists whose work, in its radical purity and incisiveness, strikes one as paradigmatic in this respect. Among them is Michael Snow, whose *Wavelength* (1967) is now a celebrated film, a turning point for many in the history of the medium as well as in the maker's own development. It was once described by Manny

Farber, distinguished for the accuracy of his insights, the vigor of his style, and the firmness of his allegiance to the tradition of American action film, as "a pure, tough forty-five minutes that may become the *Birth of a Nation* in Underground films ... a straightforward document of a room in which a dozen businesses have lived and gone bankrupt."[3] And indeed, the film does seem to be, among other things, just that—which is to say "that" observation strikes one as "just" and accurate—conveying, however, an insight which, in sixteen successive viewings and considerable reflection on the film, had never at any time occurred to me. I will wish to examine briefly and to account for both the accuracy and the surprise of that remark. But here, to begin with, is Snow's description of his film, prepared for the 1967 International Experimental Film Festival of Knokke-le-Zoute, at which it took first prize:

> *Wavelength* was shot in one week [in] Dec. '66 preceded by a year of notes, thots [sic], mutterings. It was edited and first print seen in May '67. I wanted to make a summation of my nervous system, religious inklings, and aesthetic ideas. I was thinking of, planning for, a time monument in which the beauty and sadness of equivalence would be celebrated, thinking of trying to make a definitive statement of pure Film [sic] space and time, a balancing of "illusion" and "fact," all about seeing. The space starts at the camera's (spectator's) eye, is in the air, then is on the screen, then is within the screen (the mind).
>
> The film is a continuous zoom which takes 45 minutes to go from its widest field to its smallest and final field. It was shot with a fixed camera from one end of an 80-foot loft, shooting the other end, a row of windows, and the street. This, the setting, and the action which takes place there are cosmically equivalent. The room (and the zoom) is interrupted by 4 human events including a death. The sound on these occasions is sync sound, music and speech, occurring simultaneously with an electronic sound, a sine wave, which goes from its lowest (50 cycles per second) note to its highest (12000 c.p.s.) in 40 minutes. It is a total glissando while the film is a crescendo and a dispersed

spectrum which attempts to utilize the gifts of both prophecy
and memory which only film and music have to offer.[4]

Among details one would want to add to that description would be the quality of the "human events," their somewhat scattered, random aspect. They take place abruptly, are discrete with respect to one another and are played in a range that runs from the strongly distanced and flat to the conventionally mimetic, linked in some suggestion of causality by only a few lines of dialogue. Secondly, there is the occurrence, throughout the film, of color flashes in a range of extraordinary intensity, of sudden changes of the field from positive to negative, of superimposition of fixed images over the progressive zoom, itself by no means absolutely steady, but proceeding with a slight, optical stammer. The superimpositions and stammer function as a sort of visual obbligato, as does the evidence of splice marks, the use of varying film stocks, creating within the movement forward a succession of fixed or still moments. Then there is the precise nature of the visual field in focus: it is, as we have said, the far end of a loft, opening through windows onto a street whose signs, sounds, traffic, and traffic lights are perceptible to us beyond the tall rectangular windows which are each in turn composed of eight small rectangular panes. The juxtaposition of wall, of window, of street will be modified in clarity by color, by superimposition, as the crescendo of the sine wave will modify our perception of the sound within and beyond the loft. The camera's movement is, of course, beginning to slowly reduce and redefine the visual field, and as we ever so slowly move closer to the wall, we begin to perceive—or rather to sense—two things: first, the presence of some other, rectangular objects on the central panel of the wall (they are as yet only perceptible as small rectangular surfaces) and then, as well (though the temporal threshold of this perception will vary with the viewer), the destination of the camera. Or rather, we sense the fact that it *has* a destination, that its movement will terminate inexorably in a focusing upon a particular area not yet known to us. The camera lens, in the movement of its zoom, installs within the viewer a threshold of tension, of expectation; within one the feeling forms that this area will be coincident with a given section of the wall, with a pane of the window, or perhaps—in fact, most probably—with one of the rectangular surfaces punctuating the wall's

central panel and which seems at this distance to bear images, as yet undecipherable.

Michael Snow, still from *Wavelength*, 1967. 16 mm film, 45 minutes, color, sound. Courtesy of Michael Snow.

Michael Snow, still from *Wavelength*, 1967. Courtesy of Michael Snow.

The effect of these perceptions is to present the movement forward as a flow, which bears in its wake discrete events: their discreteness articulates an allusion to the separate frames out of which persistence of vision organizes cinematic illusion. Above all, however, they create, through the slow, relentless focusing and directionality, that regard for the future, which forms a horizon of expectation. We are proceeding from uncertainly to certainty, as our camera narrows its field, arousing and then resolving our tension of puzzlement as to its ultimate destination, describing, in the splendid purity of its one slow movement, the notion of the "horizon" characteristic of subjective process and fundamental as a trait of intentionality. That steady movement forward, with its superimposition, its events passing into the field from behind the camera and back again beyond it, figures the view that "to every perception there always belongs a horizon of the past, as a potentiality of recollections that can be awakened; and to every recollection there belongs as an horizon, the continuous intervening intentionality or possible recollections (to be actualized on my initiative, actively), up to the actual Now of perception."[5] And as the camera continues to move steadily forward, building a tension that grows in direct ratio to the reduction of the field, we recognize, with some surprise, those horizons as defining the contours of narrative, of that narrative form animated by distended temporality, turning upon cognition, toward revelation. Waiting for an issue, we are "suspended" toward resolution. And it is as if by emptying the space of his film (dramatically, through extreme distancing; visually, by presenting it as mere volume, the "scene" of pure movement in time), Snow has redefined filmic space as that of action. As the eye investigates the length of the loft, moves toward that conclusion which is a fixed point, in its movement toward that point, alternative conclusions and false "clues" are bypassed, as street signs and certain objects pass from view. The camera reaches the object of its trajectory. That object is indeed another surface, a photograph of the sea. The view is held, as the sound mounts to its highest intensity, splitting off from itself, doubling, sliding up and down the range of cycles as the photograph is re-projected in superimposition upon itself. Vision is projected forward through a photograph out beyond the wall and screen into a limitless space. The film is the projection of a grand reduction; its "plot" is the tracing of spatiotemporal données; its "action" the movement of the camera as a movement of awareness developing slowly.

The film is a masterwork, a claim hardly to be seriously contested at this point in film history, and though we have strayed some distance from Farber's observations, we are now in a position to consider them more clearly and to see their very real interest. Indeed, for someone so deeply and exclusively committed to the film of tight narrative structure, *Wavelength* could, above all other films from the American avant-garde, present something welcome, both new and familiar. For the continuity of the zoom action stands as a quintessential instance of the spatiotemporal continuity subtending the narrative integrity of those comedies, westerns, gangster films which formed the substance of the Hollywood tradition, and the object of Farber's delight and lifelong critical attention. Or to put it another way: Snow's work came at a time in the history of the American avant-garde when the assertive editing, superimposition, the insistence on the presence of the filmmaker behind the moving, hand-held instrument, and its resulting disjunctive, gestural *facture* had conduced to destroy that spatiotemporal continually which had sustained narrative convention.

Michael Snow, still from *Wavelength*, 1967. Courtesy of Michael Snow.

Michael Snow, *Wavelength*, 1967. Courtesy of Michael Snow.

A tradition of the independently made film, from Maya Deren and Kenneth Anger through Stan Brakhage, had been developed as an extension, in American terms, of an avant-gardist position of the 1920s in

Europe, violating the continuity and negating the tension of narrative. Grounded in the experience of Surrealism and of Expressionism, its will to destroy narrative was an attempt to situate film in a kind of perpetual Present, one image or sequence succeeding another in rapid disjunction, tending, ultimately in the furious pace of single-frame construction, to devour or eliminate expectation as a dimension of cinematic experience. The disjunctiveness of that perpetual Now can be seen, at its most intense, in both the work and the theoretical writings of Brakhage. As filmmaker and theoretician, Brakhage is concerned with the primacy of a quintessential vision, innocent, uncorrupted by the conventions of a pictorial perspective inherited from the Renaissance and built into the very lens of the camera. With that Platonic inflection of a terminology characteristic of the Expressionist sensibility, this vision is described in the writings as truer, finer, higher, in that it is the direct visible projection of inner or "inward sight"; it is, in fact, presented by Brakhage as a "closed eye" vision, the inner vision projected through the eye. Reading Brakhage, and especially when watching the films, one recognizes the images in question as tending towards both the intimacy and elusiveness of those we know as "hypnagogic," those experienced in the half-waking state. Like the hypnagogic image, the Brakhage image, "truer than nature," does seem situated inside the eye. It aspires to present itself perceptually, all at once, to resist observation and cognition.

Sartre, in *L'Imaginaire*, defies anyone entertaining a hypnagogic image of the Pantheon to count the number of columns of the facade in the image. For the hypnagogic is immediate, appears and disappears all at once, does not fade out of view; it is not subject to the laws of perception—to those of perspective for instance. It has the property of exciting attention and perception. "I see something but what I see *is* nothing."[6]

Such indeed is the state toward which the style, the rhythm, the cutting and lighting of Brakhage's films tended. In great works of his maturity (between 1958 and 1969), in *The Songs, The Art of Vision, Anticipation of the Night, Fire of Waters*, there is no time, no room, as it were, for expectation; the spatial *données* are obscured or fractured by spasmodic movement, by painting upon film, by speed; continuity is rhythmic, postulated on the metaphoric syntheses elicited in the viewer by cutting from one image to the next. *Wavelength*, then, in a very special sense was an "eye-opener," as distinguished from both the hypnagogic vision of

Brakhage and the steady stare of Warhol. Snow, in re-introducing expectation as the core of film form, redefines space as being what Klee, in fact, had claimed it was: essentially "a temporal notion." *Voiding the film of the metaphoric proclivity of montage, Snow created a grand metaphor for narrative form.* The consequences are still incalculable; Snow's example and influence, intensified through subsequent work, in film as in other media, acknowledged and unacknowledged, are among the strongest factors in a current situation of the most extraordinary interest. Together with the films of Hollis Frampton, Ken Jacobs, Ernie Gehr, Joyce Wieland, and George Landow, Snow's work defined a new level of cinematic endeavor, opened a new era in the evolution of cinematic style. This, I believe, explains the manner in which it could unite, in attention and fascination, critical opinion of a great many normally divergent kinds. Snow, in restoring the space of "action" through a sustained form and relentless investigation of the modes of filmic presentation, created a paradigm, transcended the *a priori* distinctions between the "linear" and the "vertical," the "prose" and "poetic" forms, the "realist" and "mythopoeic," the "vertical" and "horizontal," the styles of continuity and of montage which had long animated film theory and polemics.

Michael Snow, still from *One Second in Montreal*, 1969. 16 mm film, 26 minutes at 16 frames per second or 17 minutes at 24 fps, black and white, silent. Courtesy of Anthology Film Archives.

Michael Snow, still from *One Second in Montreal*, 1969. Courtesy Anthology Film Archives.

The paradox which turns upon the creation of a grand metaphor from the elimination of the metaphorical function of montage is by no means unique in Snow's work. One might say that all of the films of Snow's mature period are animated by a central visual or perceptual paradox. *One Second in Montreal* (1969) is a cinematic construction which plays upon the seriality of still images. A succession of still photographs, representing park sites for a projected monument in the city of Montreal under winter snow, forms the film. Each unit is held progressively longer as we approach the work's midpoint, and the pace speeds up again as the film comes to an end, forcing upon the spectator the consciousness of time as duration—precise but immeasurable, expanding and contracting in the act of attention to detail, the acceleration producing a curious effect of structural contraction. But the central paradox involves the presentation of still photographs as a film and the still more curious impression that, despite the fixity and discreteness of each image, we are involved in a filmic experience, rather than a slide projection. Classical experiments in cinematic perception do instruct us that the projection of a photograph of a place or object and that of the place or object as filmed do not produce the same visual effect. The flow of time is somehow inscribed in the filmic image, immediately given, perceptible in our experience of it. That inscription remained to be articulated. Snow seizes upon it, projecting the photographic still cinematically, so that the flow of time is superimposed, inscribed upon the projection of the photograph's fixity—as the discrete images of the loft had been superimposed upon its traversal by the zoom.

In ↔ (1969), he isolates the panning movement of the camera and in acceleration of that movement back and forth carves out a kind of sculptural segment of its projected space (that of a classroom, as against a loft), producing the impression of a flatness and pure directionality which negate its visual depth and incident. Proceeding, as in *Wavelength* and *One Second in Montreal*, through temporal acceleration, the film, as it speeds up, converts a haptically defined space into an optical one, returning, in a *ritardando*, from the projection of a space flattened by that speed into a plane parallel to the screen's surface back to the projection of room space. The film holds in balance those two degrees of visual illusion. As in *Wavelength*, the "human events" (a class in session, a man sweeping, a cop peering through a window, men sparring with one another) are, so to speak, contained as discrete units within the rhythmic structure of the film, at

variance with it, and though these events (the passing of a ball back and forth, the sweeping, the appearance of the title signs upon the blackboard, and so on) echo the panning movement of the camera, they punctuate rather than structure the action of the film. In general, the effect is one of succumbing to the grip of the moment; compelled to follow it, we are unable to focus, to settle upon a given object or point within the field. The effect, then, is of rhythmic compulsion and relaxation. The notion of limitation is transposed from the gradual reduction of the size of field to the gradual imposition of insistent directionally, intensified by the metronomic click, which seems sometimes to lead, sometimes to accompany, the action.
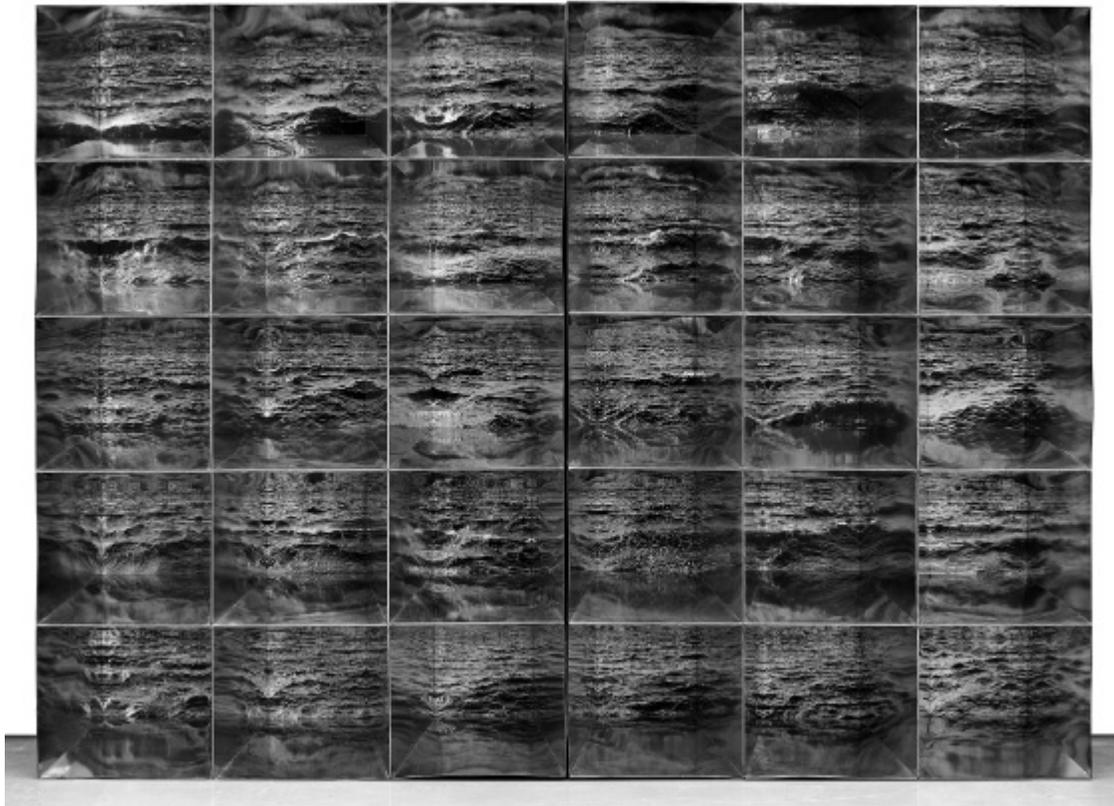
Michael Snow, *Atlantic*, 1967, welded metal, wood and photographs, 67⅜ × 96½ × 1511/16 in.
Courtesy the Art Gallery of Ontario. Photograph by Craig Boyko.

In each of these three filmic works, the artist has seized upon a strategy proper to the medium and carried it to ultimate consequences, exploring its resonances, re-enforcing it with parallel strategies, insisting on the isomorphism of part and whole. These strategies and the persistence of a certain speculative quality in Snow's art, a preoccupation with the manner

in which a statement generates counterstatement, variation, and extension, can be seen as constant in his evolution as filmmaker and as painter and sculptor.

The catalog of a 1970 exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario testifies to the manner in which Snow's range of preoccupations is pressed into service —or admitted to testify—in the presentation of present explorations. The family and childhood mythology, as documented and ordered into *A Survey*, finds its ultimate and playful pendant in the photographic restatement of the "framing" process in the images of the tray of ice cubes or the Canadian landscape seen through windshield and rear-view mirror. Two less playful, less casual instances of that coercive theme are the *Portrait* of 1967 (literally a frame visibly assembled from aluminum elements held by clamps) and, most interestingly, *Sight* (1967), a remarkable two-sided panel of aluminum and engraved plastic, measuring fifty-six by forty-two inches. Free standing, it contains one narrow aperture. One side is incised with squares, some of these divided by parallel lines; the slanted aperture traverses the space between upper right-hand to lower left-hand corner of the square located next to the last at the right-hand edge of the larger square and one-third from the top. The aperture totally absorbs the tiny fraction of extraneous visual material through it; it is all somehow drawn into the total composition of the surface, absorbed into its linear pattern, its accident and irregularity tamed, as it were, to the uses of geometry. Turning around to the other side of the surface, peering through the slot which breaks its even, unarticulated, glistening aluminum surface, punctuated only by occasional bolts, we perceive the total unassimilability of the scene beyond it.

Snow's early work is that of an extremely talented young painter passing quickly from the rhythmic articulation of the figure to very sophisticated strategies of abstraction articulated in a somewhat geometric mode. *Lac Clair* and *The Drumbook*, both of 1960, explore the modalities of a figure-ground relationship. In *Lac Clair* (oil on paper on canvas), the central area is a kind of *bleu canard,* painted in free, light strokes, intercepted at each corner by a strip of paper superimposed on the canvas side. It is an altogether simple and elegant work, very much involved with a kind of single-image later to become popular in New York in the '60s. *The Drumbook* is a series of rectangles, dark blue upon yellow ground, of slightly varying sizes, setting up discrete and contiguous framing areas which seem, nevertheless, to form a continuous ground. *White Trash* (1960)

is a collage of "soiled and folded paper," managing in its pleated elegance to convert its soiled aspect into subtle color, like that of a worn tennis shoe. There are a number of works in folded paper, penciled and "expanded" or expansible, which in their modesty, casualness, and subtle variety testify to a kind of constant playfulness, later to flower in the major series, implementing metaphors grown central to Snow's investigations. Concentrating on painting minimally articulated silhouettes and on filmmaking (Snow had begun in 1956 to work in film), he is obviously preoccupied with spatial variation. Objects such as *Shunt* (1959) and *Quits* (1959) explore sculptural form and seek new ways of support, leaning along the corner of wall and floor. *Quits* is rather like a collapsible and deformed ladder, wood painted black, and a trace of blue paint runs down the bottom side of the first four steps—and probably on the last, which stands directly on the floor. And when you approach it, you see green paint on the upper surface of steps and thereby deduce its reversibility.

Snow soon after turned his attention to the articulation that stimulated and emerged from his immersion in the processes of filming and recording, turning back, as well, from time to time, upon past work (as the past is visualized in the space and movement of *Wavelength*), upon its materials and processes. For Snow everything is usable, including old work.

Thus *Atlantic (1967),* a structure that holds thirty photographs of the sea, placed in deep metal frames. With sides projecting at a slight angle to the back surface covered by the photograph, the frames reproduce the conical visual field of film. These frames, moreover, reflect the image contained within them. One sees, then, a surface of water in photograph, continuous, contained within the larger frame of its reflection, a rendering of the penultimate superimpositions of *Wavelength*, with the images held flat as the zoom image within the depth of a conical field, described by that of the camera.

Snow's subsequent screenings have also given us *A Casing Shelved* (1970); it is, to begin with, a redefinition of the notion of film through sound. One colored slide shows us a series of shelves in the artist's studio; they bear a very disordered load of materials, objects, photographs, implements. The film then starts as the artist's voice, taped, begins cataloging the objects, bringing them into our view, directing the spectator's eye in a reading of the image, thereby making of that still image, a movie—

and, once again, a narrative movie. For the contents of the shelves, framed by the twelve or so boxlike structures composing it, are mostly materials that have been used in the making of film or sculpture, and the describing, the telling of their origin and function, composes the narrative of the maker's past as he directs the viewer's eye.

If, for Snow, everything is usable, it is also reusable—at least once. Thus *Untitled*, shown recently at the Bykert Gallery, is a sumptuous "slide show" that alludes largely to the making of *Wavelength*; using stills from the film, the filters and plastic colored sheets employed in its making, emphasizing in a very painterly manner, the ambiguity of spatial relationships created by superimpositions, juxtapositions of filters, alterations of perspective and of angle of vision. Red and purple filters are seen over and against each other on white. A plastic sheet, seen in three-quarters view, is read alternately as flat or in perspective. Hands hold up and press down upon flat sheets of color, hold up a still from *Wavelength*, are seen under purple plastic, seen still closer through red. A still is seen again at night. A strip of Kodak film, superimposed against the daytime blue beyond the loft window, creates a strangely elusive and purely optical distance between the blue of the windowpane and the blue to be seen through the clear interstices of the strip. In a characteristic gesture, the camera has apparently been trained back upon the projector itself, so that we see its lens through color. Or the window of the loft is seen against a flat white surface whose distance from the wall on which it is projected is, again, purely optical. Filters, used as windows, held over the windows of the loft, gorgeously stain the white radiance of daylight. Strenuous reading efforts induce ambivalence in the spectator: planar differences are cued by color values, but the cues can be misleading. A hand peeling red plastic from a white surface is succeeded by a field of pure color, an optical magenta, made probably of two superimposed filters, but we no longer can be sure. Within the succession of the slides are tiny recapitulations of fragments of the film. We see a hand holding a small photograph of *Wavelength*, all under plastic. We look out the window, we draw closer in another slide, still closer in another, and a sunny yellow patch appears in the lower left-hand corner. ... The succession of slides in the carousel composes these projections of filmmaking, slide making, projection into a loop of coloristic variations which stands somewhere between *Wavelength* and *One Second in Montreal*.

It is indeed that circularity one would want to stress as characterizing Snow's work. Operating on two levels, it involves, first, a movement of revolution about the formal object, the multiplicity of approaches through variety of materials, the freely variational form, the manner in which language itself is pressed into service—with playful and witty results that strain at the limits of meaning. The solution of sculptural or filmic or painterly problems is often returned to again, used as material, transposed into other contexts, or hypostasized from film into object or sculpture.[7] Second, there is the manner, shared with other artists, in which the individual work tends toward the circular structure, the tautological form, the perception of the work necessitating the recognition or recapitulation of the process involved. Thus, to cite only recent examples: *Crouch, Leap, Land (1970)*—a series of three photographs taken of a woman in these actions and photographed, presumably through glass, from below—is suspended, face down from the ceiling, obliging the spectator, in bending, to peer up from a position approximating that of the photographer. Or *Tap (1969)*, a complex work, a kind of "still sound movie" composed of black-and-white photographic prints, typewritten text, enclosed speaker, black wire, and tape recorder which, distributed over several rooms of the Art Gallery of Ontario, made for a work experienced in circuit, and whose circular structure was heightened by its own discursiveness (in the typewritten text) on the process of composition. *8 × 10 (1969)*, first shown in the Toronto retrospective and more recently in New York, presents eighty photographs of a rectangle, their dimensions a standard eight by ten inches, separated by intervals of identical dimensions, marked out, framed in tape. The variables within the photographs—distance, angle, and lighting—produce an immense range of spatial articulations, distending and contracting space in the circular play upon the notions of framing as photography and of photography as framing. And both *A Wooden Look* and *Of a Ladder (both 1969)* oblige one, in the perception of the curious optical bend produced by successive photographs of a single object, to re-situate the object in the photographic field of vision, reconstruct the progressive process of its recording in relation to one's own perception of that record.

The charting, then, of Snow's course, produces a shifting constellation of epicyclic figures, whose complex and firm geometry is sustained by the breadth and probing consistency of an inquiry into the modes of seeing, recording, reflecting, composing, remembering, and projecting. Those

shifting, interlocking cyclical movements might describe as well the architecture of the work just now in progress: "a film in which what the camera-eye did in space would be completely appropriate to what it saw, but at the same time equal to it. ... You see, the camera moves around an invisible center point completely in 360 degrees, not only horizontally, but in every direction, and in every plane of a sphere. Not only does it move in predirected orbits but it itself also turns, rolls and spins. So that there are circles within circles and cycles within cycles. Eventually there's no gravity ..."[8] This work will be known as *La région centrale*.

Notes

. Aron Gurwitsch, "On the Intentionality of *Consciousness*," in *Phenomenology: The Philosophy of Edmund Husserl and Its Interpretation*, ed. Joseph J. Kockelmans (New York: Doubleday, 1967), p. 125.

. Gérard Granel, *Le Sens du temps et de la perception chez Husserl* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), p. 108. The translation is my own. For other instances of this increasingly frequent metaphor, I refer the reader to pages xxi and xxii of Peter Koestenbaum's introductory essay in Edmund Husserl, *The Paris Lectures*, trans. Peter Koestenbaum (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964). The view sustaining these observations is also adumbrated in an essay of my own, "Bodies in Space: Film as Carnal Knowledge" (*Artforum* 7, no. 6 [February 1969]), written, however, before the present essay had presented the occasion for this sort of anthologizing. The earliest text known to me, bearing upon these considerations is Hugo Münsterberg's *The Film: A Psychological Study*, originally published in 1916 and reissued in 1970 by Dover. It is an early and remarkable attempt at a phenomenological analysis of the cinematic experience.

. Reprinted in *Negative Space: Manny Farber on the Movies* (New York: Praeger, 1971), p. 250.

. Michael Snow, "A Statement on *Wavelength* for the Experimental Film Festival of Knokke-le-Zoute," *Film Culture* 46 (1967): 1.

. Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), p. 44.

. For the discussion of the hypnagogic image, I have relied heavily on Jean-Paul Sartre's *L'Imaginaire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), pp. 58–76.

. As Dennis Young has remarked in his introduction to *Michael Snow/A Survey*, published by the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, in collaboration with the Isaacs Gallery on the occasion of the exhibition *Michael Snow/A Survey*, February 14 to March 15, 1970. This volume contains as well P. Adams Sitney's discussion of Snow's cinema, by far the finest and the most comprehensive published to date.

. "Converging on *La région centrale*: Michael Snow in Conversation with Charlotte Townsend," *artscanada* 28, no. 1 (February–March 1971): 47.

Passage

Michael Snow

... I've been trying to give some attention to how "one thing leads to another" or more accurately: "the ways in which one action leads to another." That isn't much clearer.

Apparently certain types of events and in myself certain states of mind bring about attention with this kind of emphasis. My perception of the nature of a situation (result of a vague yearning to codify "how one thing leads to another") if clear, includes everything. Ha ha. Everything which I was capable of receiving. I'm often quite fuzzy or don't care. Also every beginning is arbitrary. I have noted in myself the emergence of the kind of attention I'm describing and called that a "beginning." I'll write more about beginnings later.

Can't trace back this interest, it must be something to do with being and being an artist.

Don't expect to dispel many shadows. Mild illuminations. There's no end of mysteries, each solution a problem.

Often, frequently, repeatedly, instead of just living through a situation, happy, sad, etc., I hear the artist's mind-voice saying: "notice how this became that? Isn't that like the other? That means there's a family! Genus. Order. Classification of events! Sometimes there's not much pleasure in it, it's compulsive."

Though I can't make a "mistake," I can "change my mind." What a phrase!

Michael Snow in window, in *Back and Forth,* 1968–1969. 16 mm film, 52 minutes, color, sound.
Courtesy of Michael Snow.

Am I learning anything? I'm not learning much because there's so much to learn and there's so much to remember, I feel sure I forget a lot. I often have a kind of wrap-up intuition of the nature of an event, simultaneously esthetic, psychological, biological, philosophic, political ... leaving a vaguer record than simpler experiences ... and memory being somewhat selective (who really knows the mechanics of its choices?) the residue of this recently added "stuff," when sieved through the records of previous experience for re(?)examination, often seems to consist of somewhat familiar particles. Recollections are (naturally) "stylized" ... and ... perhaps excess memory can spoil while stored. So in a way I'm pleased that I apparently have a poor memory. Infantile freshness. What a strong wind! Reality was and always is a form of memory even at the moment of perception of perception ... But in another way: I just don't know enough to truly experience. Range of references.

I can quote that accurate statement (whose? when? really?) about: "those who ... history ... condemned ... repeat ..."

Have you read this essay before? Is it "original"?

Switch. But one of the many reasons why my observations are mine is that I don't have many out-of-my-own-experience facts to deal with. Besides every event is completely new. What a burst of optimism! Not completely. They certainly can resemble each other.

I'm not scientific. No "ends," no "goals," no use. "This vague yearning to codify" is being reacted to only in the action of noticing "how one thing leads to another," I do not have a system, I am a system. There won't be any summing up. Perhaps there will. These observations are in my life with my work.

I've been led to prefer fortuitous personal experience education to searching out "processed" information: books, other people's work in any medium, asking questions of other people. What "whats"!

Further clarification: In literature "one thing leads to another," yes, but what we are discussing is noticing how "many events lead to many others."

In relation to events one can only be a participant or a spectator or both. Of course one can also be uninformed (events of which one is unaware take place constantly, to say the least). But is that a relationship? Yes.

Experience of an event can only be anticipatory, actual, and post facto. Or prophetic, intentional, guessed, planned or total or historic, reminiscent, analytical. And in this (lower) case it should be pointed out that I am using your words.

Behind this attempt at orderly noticing do I have a horror of the possibility of chaos? Would chaos be an inability to tell one thing from another? Is sanity only the ability to identify and to name? Cultural? Is ordering the "disorder" an order? Can there be "order" without repetition? Is there something necessarily fatalistic but also "religious" in affirming (quoting?) that disorder must be only a type of order the nature of which is not yet comprehended ...? But "the eye of the beholder" ... not only is order projected but all is order; all is ordained? The reason for the shape of my nose the same as the reason a bus just passed this building. Oh, that's going too far.

Events take time. Events take place.

Michael Snow, Back and Forth, 1968–1969. Courtesy of Michael Snow.

Named, scheduled events: bus ride, concert, Christmas, eclipse, etc. This is not what I'm interested in. Sub-events: not "what is," not "what is not," but what happens in between. In this case: "not."

"Passages" then, wherein or post facto or in anticipation, I may note revelatory unities and disparities. What's interesting is not codifying but experiencing and understanding the nature of passages from one state to another without acknowledging "beginning" as having any more importance in the incident than "importance" has in this sentence.

Or than "ending" in this ...

Michael Snow, Back and Forth, 1968–1969. Courtesy of Michael Snow.

A Casing Shelved

Andrée Hayum

Behind this attempt at orderly noticing do I have a horror of the possibility of chaos? Would chaos be an inability to tell one thing from another? Is sanity only the ability to identify and to name? Cultural? Is ordering the "disorder" an order? Can there be "order" without repetition? Is there something necessarily fatalistic but also "religious" in affirming (quoting?) that disorder must be only a type of order the nature of which is not yet comprehended ...? But "the eye of the beholder" ... not only is order projected but all is order; all is ordained? The reason for the shape of my nose the same as the reason a bus just passed this building. Oh, that's going too far.

—Michael Snow, "Passage," *Artforum* (September 1971)

For Rosalind Krauss

A Casing Shelved is an extraordinary work. Michael Snow presents us with a single color slide projected for forty-five minutes, and an accompanying soundtrack in which he proceeds to explain, step by step, what we are looking at. What we see is a bookcase crammed with things previously used in his studio: paint cans, photographs, coffee cups, a hot plate, a wine bottle, and so on. The components of *A Casing Shelved* are essentially unaesthetic and its presence hovers at every point between triviality and significance. The work's uniqueness lies, not only in the wit and subtlety of its researches, but in the surprisingly thoroughgoing manner in which it functions as a formal and experiential equivalent for its message, and as a powerful expression of modernist sensibility.

A Casing Shelved has been shown in a gallery, using a photograph and a tape recorder.[1] However, I would like to address my remarks to the "official" and to my mind more effective version of this piece which takes place in a movie theater. Here, we are a captive audience to Snow's oral description. Presumably executed in his studio while looking at the bookshelf (or was it the slide?), its transmission through the vehicle of a soundtrack and the evidence of a slide projection reminds us of the classroom situation in which the academic study of art history developed. For, in that arena, the act of orally characterizing a work for an audience from the evidence of slides became a well-established practice with its own

set of conventions.[2] Snow recreates a characteristic that painting and sculpture of past periods have attained since they were removed from their original contexts and placed in museums or talked about in academies through the agency of slides, namely, their exhibition or performance value.[3]

Furthermore, the effect of *A Casing Shelved* as performance is crucial to an understanding of its point of departure. Employing the format and orientation of the proscenium theater, from which the movie theater derives, Snow reminds us that traditional performance, with its preponderance of conventions, is precisely where the receiver has become most complacent about having a set of expectations fulfilled. But, just as John Cage obliterated expectations pertaining to musical performance, so Snow goes against the grain of filmic expectation by subjecting us to an extended static image and dramatic expectation, monumentalizing a configuration of objects and things. He keeps us coming to terms with the unsettling notion that what we are witnessing is out of place. In this way performance becomes a setting associated with factors which inhibit our capacities to absorb and to understand.

Michael Snow, A Casing Shelved, 1970. 35 mm slide, sound, cinema theater, 46 minutes. Collection of the artist. Courtesy of Michael Snow.

While we may admit that preconditions and preconceptions bar the route towards understanding, Snow introduces a further dilemma: that the very testimony to our awareness, understanding, and knowledge can itself be a distorting agent. Because that testimony is articulation, and articulation, a projection into symbolic mode (be it linguistic or pictorial), our essential perceptions and experiences must necessarily be transformed. This dilemma underlies and motivates Snow's description. His delivery is unexpectedly informal. Often he seems tentative, even haphazard, as he falters,

backtracks, and rambles. But, on close listening, we find him actually employing fundamental strategies of the cognitive process in an effort to test the limits of their usefulness.

How do we describe objects? Presumably, first we name them. Snow does this as he points out a "hot plate," an "extension cord," a "bookcase." He gropes with us for the names of things, reminding us of that phase in the learning process when children make their first associations between people, things, and their names. When Snow "recalls" a name like "bookcase," he repeats it three times in a self-congratulatory tone; like a child he is proud of having mastered the object by knowing the name. But, by mimicking this process Snow seems to call attention to the arbitrariness of naming rather than its delineating function. (Especially once we realize that for the French child to find the name *bibliothèque* for that which we call a bookcase would produce a similar feeling of security and satisfaction.)

A second procedure Snow uses to define objects is to locate them. He does this in both geographic and chronological terms. He discusses most of the objects according to their arrangement in the slide ("... in the top left hand corner ..."). Often he gives us their geographic history ("... a photograph ... which I took ... at Center Island near Toronto, Lake Ontario.") In the same way, he refers to their chronology—a photograph taken in 1966, wine from a party after the "last" Poindexter show, what is left (now) of a jar of acrylic. We are given some of the trappings of a determinist explanation of existence, where past leads to present, cause to effect. But Snow succeeds in short circuiting this connection rather than affirming it. For instance, when he says that a coffee container "undoubtedly" came from Dave's Corner House, where "I have often gone for coffee," he emphasizes the gap between the givens of the container in the picture and of his past excursions to Dave's Corner House, a gap which is filled by assumptions made during the process of deduction. A determinist or causal argument depends on a reconstruction of past events; it depends on the capacity to remember. Snow realizes this but he shows that if we are capable of remembering, we are also likely to forget. Thus, he amends dates ("No, it wasn't '67, it was '66"), he forgets names ("What do you call that?"), he loses the threads of his own description.

I believe that Snow also undermines a determinist or causal view of events through the vehicle of autobiography. More precisely, he lays bare as illusory the notion that access to an artist's life history need necessarily aid in understanding the works by that artist. In this respect, *A Casing Shelved* may be compared to Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet's *The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* (1968), a film in which a narrator, Bach's second wife, Anna Magdalena, relates events from the composer's life and career. Shots of period costumes and sets are interspersed with documents in the form of scores, music sheets, letters, and announcements, which are presented in close-up, full-screen view. But working at odds with this chaste, documentary approach is Bach's music on the soundtrack. Assuming independent life because of the effect of its buoyancy, the music seems to transcend the calculatedly spare and static images. The viewer is left struggling to find some organic connection between the biographical evidence that is scrupulously conveyed, and the experience of the music itself.

In *A Casing Shelved* this discrepancy occurs due to the *kind* of information Snow gives us. Since nearly all the objects assembled functioned in Snow's previous works (i.e., the green ball in the film ↔ [*Back and Forth*]), or served him in his studio (coffee cups from a "take-out" place), their description yields the impression of an autobiographical account. Yet, his references to past works and the events surrounding them are exclusively of a material, technical, or incidental nature (the kind of glue used here, the type of camera there). In the end, we could ask how someone unacquainted with Snow's career can marshal this information towards a better understanding of the representation in *A Casing Shelved*. Or, how does this "autobiography" enlighten one familiar with Snow's other works? Can we really reconcile the fundamentally conceptual nature of his oeuvre with the craftsman's trade secrets delivered up here?

Where we have assumed that the past is a treasured reservoir for revelation, in *A Casing Shelved* Snow seems to be saying that what is passed sheds little light on the present and that things in the present run the continual risk of becoming obsolete. This, of course, applies to the image as a whole—a book shelf (but never used as such), piled with things—objects which have been "shelved," not out of sight, but out of immediate use. In describing the contents of the shelf Snow repeatedly refers to objects that are used up or out of order: a "conked out" radio, "dried up" brushes, a

fading photograph, a faulty screwdriver. Almost everything on the shelf was once a marketable product. Snow underscores this implied fact by pointing facetiously to one or two "found" objects. He also shows how quality judgments may be made according to monetary value. He mentions having bought a Polaroid camera which is supposedly superior to the one he previously owned. Uncertain of the truth, he adds, as if to reassure himself, "It was more expensive." Influenced by our orientation as consumers, here, it is clear, even the artist is a consumer. Snow, in turn, makes us aware of how our very modes of description and characterization make demands on the objects of their concern; by including categories of function or expectation they are bound to render those objects maladaptive or obsolete, and therefore, to deny them their fullest being.

Not only our ways of identifying and defining things but also our modes of organizing them have this effect. The image itself employs the obvious ordering device of the bookcase with its division and subdivision of disarray. Whether using these compartments insures our comprehension of the essence of things is doubtful however. So Snow indicates when describing the shovel in terms of the structure of the bookcase. The handle, for instance, is described in connection with things on the third shelf, the horizontal zone to which it adheres. Omitting subsequent description of the shaft, he proceeds directly to the "shovel part of the shovel." Fragments of a whole are thus evoked.

The fragmenting of entities is one danger of conceptual constructs. Another is the neutralizing effect of classification. Our ability to see relationships, to perceive likeness and dissimilarities in random samples, has been a foundation for discovery in all fields of knowledge. Snow lapses into this classifying phase of investigation at several points in his description, surveying things of one type, shape, material, or color. But in doing so he would have us question what is, in fact, elucidated about a paint can and a wine bottle by calling attention to the cylindrical shape they have in common. Or again, does the red of the shovel's handle and the red of the can of Noxon really reveal any inherent community between these two objects?

Snow's description determines the duration of *A Casing Shelved*. An important twentieth-century work which similarly turns the narrator's description of a pictorial representation into the narrative scaffold of the

work achieved is Alain Robbe-Grillet's novel *In the Labyrinth*.[4] Both exemplify fascinating extremes of a traditional mode of verbalizing about works of art: the rhetorical figure of ekphrasis, Homer's passage on the shield of Achilles is the locus classicus for such verbal evocation of represented narrative.[5] But if the goal of the ancient *ekphrasis* was to heighten the spectator's involvement in the described work and if the "describer" came close to the artist in searching out the motivation of events depicted, Snow's and Robbe-Grillet's examples serve to keep the viewer at a distance and to secure for the artist a role as ultimate viewer. Describing an etching, Robbe-Grillet's narrator begins,

> The picture, in its varnished wood frame, represents a tavern scene. It is a nineteenth-century etching, or a good reproduction of one. A large number of people fill the room, a crowd of drinkers sitting or standing, and on the far left, the bartender standing on a slightly raised platform behind his bar.
>
> The bartender is a fat, bald man wearing an apron. He leans forward, both hands resting on the edge of the bar, over several half-full glasses that have been set there ...[6]

Although the contours of Robbe-Grillet's novel are taut and precise, his narrator seems uncontrolling and unknowing as we watch him describe his explorations of the narrative map that is the etching. The neutralizing or distancing of events that ensues from this narrative "once removed" brilliantly puts into question traditional narrative structure. Furthermore, while past narrative representations prided themselves on the illusion of reality they projected, Robbe-Grillet succeeds in obscuring the boundaries between reality and illusion. Because of the meticulousness and neutrality of his language, it is nearly impossible in places to decipher whether the narrator is accounting for viewed reality or viewed representation. Especially since, at the beginning, the narrator describes a view outside the window of his room, which includes a soldier leaning against a lamppost and, in the tavern scene of the etching, some figures are also to be identified as soldiers.

For his part, Snow reveals a distance from traditional narrative format by suggesting its structure while obliterating its contents. Indeed, he punctuates the limits of his description with a start ("Well, let's see ...") and a finish ("March 30, 1970"). During the description we begin to ask: "What will be next?" "Where will it be?" "When will he stop?" Such questions suggest a parallel to the unsolved plot elements of a suspense story. Though different in manner from Robbe-Grillet's narrator, there are nonetheless basic affinities between the two. Where Robbe-Grillet allows for the shadow or reflection of a story, Snow substitutes objects and things for people and events. Where Robbe-Grillet's narrator depends on a story line that he unravels from an already existing representation, Snow, like a contemporary anti-hero, is an anti-narrator. At times he is casual, at times fumbling and absent minded. He even elicits our help ("What do you call that?") to make his way through the labyrinth of his representation. He shifts gear as he proceeds: from a linear direction (moving from left to right, from item to item); to a more conceptual organization (covering objects of the same type); to a privately associational mode ("For some reason I am drawn to ...")—a combined procedure more like the excursions of the analysand's monologue, searching for a story, than the traditional narrator's program.[7]

Finally, Snow too hints at his commitment to the arresting presence of illusion. He does so by calling attention to commonly held assumptions concerning the photographic image. Throughout most of his description, Snow takes for granted our shared ability to decipher what is "really" depicted in the slide. He refers to a wine bottle, a coat hanger, a can of paint, a coffee cup. Indeed, the extent to which all fields of knowledge in the twentieth century were advanced by the illustrative aid of photographs would seem to be adequate testimony to the realism of their representations. But there are several instances where Snow reveals another kind of awareness. The "black line" he tries to describe turns out to be an electric cord. What he calls a "brown rectangle" he then identifies as a brown cardboard box. This modulation into a formal key (with other moments of recognition, such as when he says, "they are roses," or rather, "they *represent* roses") reveals a keen appreciation for that fragile zone separating the symbols of information we accept to be real from the lines, shapes, or colors that form the concrete reality of the photographic image.

In her article "Toward Snow," Annette Michelson writes about *One Second in Montreal* (1969), a series of photographs presented at varying

durations on a filmstrip. She posits a perceptual distinction between a film made up of still photographs and a series of slide projections.[8] With *A Casing Shelved*, the difference in effect of the slide as against other choices Snow might have made is also worth consideration. Michelson emphasizes the temporal factor inherent in the filmic image and the viewer's necessary, even if unconscious, awareness of time, an awareness excluded from one's experience of a slide. While, the slide is "up there," taking time and where, in this work, the soundtrack imparts a temporal structure to the image, there is a distinction to be made between both these modes of time and one in which duration and development are experienced as outgrowths of the image itself, as in film. Nor does the fact that Snow creates movement by directing our eyes from one place to another, in itself, yield a temporal continuity. For the snail's pace of his description at times causes our glance to wander or to shift into a stare, rather than sticking to the ostensibly prescribed reading. Thus, by eliminating the potential of the represented objects to reveal themselves during and through the passage of time (as would result from an extended take with a movie camera), and, by setting up a series of experiential tensions that militate against continual intake, Snow provides a perceptual equivalent for his treatise on the difficulties of knowing.

The effect of space in the slide is a perceptual correlate of its temporal character. In part because of the frontality of the representation in *A Casing Shelved*, as well as because of the incalculable measure of forms due to the light, color, and surface of the slide medium itself, a space results that evades our grasp, both on a sensuous level and within the context of narrative.[9] For, to fully understand a given object that appears within our field of vision involves locating it in space. Concomitantly, our understanding of an event is bound up with the sense of how it came about and where it is going. For example, in Snow's film *Wavelength* (1967), we see two figures cart an empty bookcase into a loft, thereby suggesting both a history and a purpose to the same shelves we see before us in *A Casing Shelved*. But here, try as Snow may to explicate its contents, as an image *A Casing Shelved* is nearer to Robbe-Grillet's remark about the characters in *Waiting for Godot*, namely, that above all they are "there."[10] And, as in *Godot*, the very "thereness" of it seems to prohibit convenient explanation of its existence.

At the same time, one is also tempted to invoke a realm distant from the milieu of these artists as with Leonardo da Vinci's inquiries into the nature of the universe and their integration of speculation and experience. Leonardo's paintings, which also served him as tools for investigation, are themselves exemplary of this approach. To present a synthesis of contrasting states of being—the particular and the general, mass and space, movement and stasis—and to convey the process of perception itself, his pictures explored a unique mode of vision. By contrast, Michael Snow projects a mechanical reproduction of a banal image. But his goals, in this and other works, include a return to the wholesomeness and daring of Leonardo's outlook. *A Casing Shelved* is one step in that direction. It concerns itself with those assumptions and presumptions that are a by-product of western, post-Renaissance epistemology.

Snow's natural suspicion and gentle warnings relate him to the core of twentieth-century philosophical concerns where, from a distance, seemingly diverse ideological approaches and methods are unified in the thrust of their inquiry and the exigencies that motivate their enterprise. Turning to Existentialism or Phenomenology, Structuralism, or Semiology, we find their focal concern to be with modes of perception, on the one hand, and patterns of language, on the other. And we see their common purpose to be a cleansing and resensitizing of our tools of perception and communication. The nature of Snow's presentation, unlike that of the philosopher or the social scientist, heightens our awareness of these issues by making us experience them, and by causing that experience to resonate in our consciousness.

Notes

. My thanks to Klaus Kertess of the Bykert Gallery for kindly making the photograph and tape of this work available to me.

. The development of art history as an academic discipline is coincidental with and dependent on the perfecting of the reproductive media.

. See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), p. 223, for related discussion.

. Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Dans le labyrinthe* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1959); *Two Novels by Robbe-Grillet (Jealousy* and *In the Labyrinth)*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1965).

. *Iliad*, Book 18. See also Svetlana Leontief Alpers, "Ekphrasis and Aesthetic Attitudes in Vasari's Lives," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 23, nos. 3–4 (1960): 190–215, who discusses Giorgio Vasari's treatment of individual pictures within his biographies as examples of this convention.

. Robbe-Grillet, *In the Labyrinth*, 1965, p. 150. Interestingly, the work described is, like Snow's, in a reproductive medium. I believe that Snow and Robbe-Grillet are similarly motivated in their choice of object. With a mechanical reproduction the content of the work may be neutralized and its inherent quality of "belonging" to a particular artist's oeuvre undercut.

. Only when Snow tells us a few times what is inside a box or wrapping, something we cannot know or see, does he remind us of the omniscient narrator.

. Annette Michelson, "Toward Snow," *Artforum* 9 (June 1971): 30–37.

. At its beginnings, film or recorded movement saw an implied boundary occurring between the viewer and the filmed world. This boundary was interrupted only rarely, as when a character peered directly into the camera. Maintaining the separation ensured the projected illusion of reality and gave its contents believable causality and coherence. With the rigorous frontality of *A Casing Shelved*, Snow goes back to the prevailing, "pre-narrative" orientation of early photographs.

0. Alain Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p. 115. In employing this term Robbe-Grillet is actually quoting Heidegger's comment on the human condition.

Musics for Piano, Whistling, Microphone, and Tape Recorder

Michael Snow

MICHAEL SNOW

MUSICS FOR PIANO, WHISTLING

MICROPHONE AND TAPE RECORDER

My first consideration in writing the text which you are now, I presume, reading ("presume": I guess that this text will still be here to read later even if you aren't reading it now) was to write something which when printed would cover all four faces of this album. Of several ideas for a design for this album cover or jacket this seemed at the time to be the best. Remains to be seen. Ruminations gradually clarified to this stage: I would write something that would fulfill several requirements, the basic one being that it function as a "design" or "image" that would be both decorative and "plastic". Another requirement that might better be approached now as an intention or ambition was the image

quality and the reading quality be unified and that it be "literature" that could be read with aesthetic profit, at first, apart from the reader having any actual experience of the music which this will, in effect, enclose but consequently it should nevertheless have some connection, varying in strength, with the music, indeed, that some of it would be so written that it would be interesting to read while half-listening to the music. If you could give your undivided attention to both reading this and listening to the music I'd be very s surprised. However, I suppose its possible. Before I attempt to amplify that I ought to say that because of the design of this album you can read this without owning the album which I assume is enclosed in plastic. Perhaps it's not. Anyway the text continues on the two inside faces and concludes on the back. This is of course the beginning. It will get really interesting. Now I should return to a discussion of how, when and if you should simultaneously read this text and listen to the music. You can ignore my instructions but you will soon see that certain parts of this text might be read against or with certain parts of the music and I plan to make it evident when such parts occur. For the moment please don't put on one of the records. I don't want to give the impression that I intended the music contained herein to be mere background music for the reading of this text or any other activity. Obviously I have no control over that. If you want to put one of the records on right now, you can go right ahead, What can I do about it? Maybe one of them is playing right now. Which one? A guess: "Left Right" right? . . . Perhaps for some people it would be preferable to, at first, half-listen to the music and half-read this and later pay more attention separately to either. I hope that the music can be listened to often with or without this text. The music is more important than this. It occasioned it. However, I would really like this to be as good as the music . . . I've been making music since about 1945. I've been writing about ten years longer but not generally with the same intent as that behind the making of music, just casual writing, at first school stuff, some plays and skits at a summer camp, Camp Calumet. Later mostly letters, lots of letters, plus a couple of essays, one of which is somewhat close to this and most recently the script, largely dialogue, for a 4½ hour film. I'm self-taught on piano, trumpet and typewriter. Whistling is natural. I started out learning how to play blues-boogiewoogie piano because I liked it. No doubt there were other reasons too. I met some other problem children in high school who were playing other instruments, and gradually there were bands and then even gigs, especially after high school while I went to the Ontario College of Art. Subsequently for about 3 years I mostly made my living from music and played with many fine musicians such as Cootie Williams, Buck Clayton, Jimmy Rushing, George Lewis. In the summers of '48, '49, '50 for a week or two I and some of my Toronto jazz friends went to Chicago where we jammed here and there, once with the great Pee Wee Russell and went to some parties at the home of the equally great blues-boogie pianist Jimmy Yancey. He, Albert Ammons, Cripple Clarence Lofton, others and myself played at these parties and Yancey, very impressed proclaimed me his "pupil" and taught me some of his stuff. This may not impress you but it meant a lot to me then and now. Now back to the music sleeping on the discs between these sheets (unless it's already up and around the room) or rather back to this text which, to repeat, is more or less connected to the music. . . I should mention that since 1963 I have been especially interested in trying to compose, in my films, strong image and sound relationships. In 1964 I finished a film called "New York Eye and Ear Control". Shot and edited by myself, it has a sound track by a great (again!) group with Albert Ayler, Don Cherry, Roswell Rudd, Sonny Murray. This black and white film was an attempt to set up a simultaneity of separate but equal picture and sound . . . Sound-film aesthetics is a vast subject and perhaps this is not the time and place to discuss it. Perhaps it is. In my films I hope to modulate the spectator's consciousness by composing with varying emphasis on the nature of the sound in relation to various means of indicating the fictional source of the sound within the range of image possibilities (from abstract pure color light to "realistic" representation). "Rameau's Nephew by Diderot (thanx to Dennis Young) by Wilma Schoen" made in '73-'74 is the most radical of these image-sound compositions and most closely related to this . . . Language, spoken or written, can certainly be categorized as representational. If you were now to play record #1, side #1 (don't) and read this (to yourself) while listening you'd be experiencing something related to the hearing/seeing/thinking experience of certain parts of certain of my films . . . The "image quality" of this text can

Michael Snow, Musics for Piano, Whistling, Microphone, and Tape Recorder, 1975. Two 331/3 RPM vinyl records and gatefold LP jacket, Chatham Square (1009/10). Photograph by Mani Mazinani.

be examined: Read this then look at it. Those are very different activities. When looked at it is meaningless. No jokes now. Something that can be read cannot be meaningless. Stressing the "look" may tend print towards "visual art" forms but when it arrives it has become "picture" not "sign". Nevertheless it is a peculiarity of language that it can claim that a picture can be "read". The reverse is difficult. A dictionary of picture-meanings would have to be in print not in pictures, an inter-language dictionary, a translation, finally a rendering not of meaning but of possible language equivalents . . . The first side of the first record is the beginning of a piece called "Falling Starts". It's a piano and tape recorder piece made in 1972 (first version 1970) and is dedicated to Baron Von Kayserling. It's arriving too late to help, he's been sleeping constantly for about 200 years. Lucky him, lucky Goldberg, lucky Bach and lucky us that this record wasn't available in 1792. Since we are lucky to have it hear and now lets finally hear it . . . It's on . . . Let's face the music and read! Those first groups of high sounds that you are hearing, have just heard of if you're just reading this and haven't as I suggested, put on the record, will hear when you do . . . do it now . . . are sped-up re-recordings of a piano phrase which at its "normal" speed should be heard soon, just has been heard, will be etc. This phrase was composed and played by myself for its use as a subject of tape recording compression and elongation. Tenses. Comprehension mention: Village Voice critic Tom Johnson wrote that this phrase (the musical phrase) is an "atonal" phrase. It's not. It's built on an F minor scale and harmonically there are some open major sevenths. Flatted fifths and seconds. Several phrases were tested out, this one seemed to have an internal fitness for its intended use. As you can hear, it starts very low, the right hand with slight acceleration rises and falls and rises and falls to the top of the keyboard while the accompanying bass figure revolves in the same low tonal area. The right hand phrase covers almost the entire range of the keyboard and the bass provides a reference for this aural space. The Chordal clusters and the requisite amount of resonance in performance generate new inner vibrations and re-reveal their original ones when slowed down as you may be hearing right now. If one has understood the subject phrase structurally then the subsequent variations may be more than sensation though that can be a lot. Bathyspheric bubbles under ping ping ping ping ping, "Falling Starts" continues its descant descent on Side 2 with the final and lowest version which is a fundamental experience of sound generation and reception as tactile. Membrane to membrane to brain. I recommend that you stop reading this for a few minutes and listen closely to the last few minutes of Side 1 and then go on with Side 2, listen to it for awhile and then resume reading this . . . The 2 sides obviously can be listened to separately but the first time you should hear the whole piece all the way through and don't read or talk. Now, this sentence is nothing very important, just something to read word by word while you're listening, a sentence that won't interfere much with your listening and since it doesn't say much (that's twice!), won't interpose other subjects between what you're doing (reading) and listening attentively . . . flutter flutter . . . putt putt putt putt putt . . . cars in the rain on a dark street . . . the helicopter arrives with the motorboat . . . Ultramarine whale dreams . . . a snore at the shore . . . pat pat pat pat pat pat . . . morning running shoes . . . The time-space between notes can now be cavernous. Days of mixed metaphors can seem to go by between a certain two bass notes . . . Boom! . . . sh sh sh sh sh sh sh s s s s s s s s s . . . Perhaps someone else could change the record so that you could go on reading this. Ask them to put on "W in the D". No, wait! Reading this between records may put more emphasis on its quality than perhaps it can take. The style so far has been quite plain hasn't it? It needs to be much more complex now. Là! L'Asie. Sol miré, phare d'haut, phalle ami docile à la femme, il l'adore, et dos ci dos là mille à mis! Phare effaré la femme y resolut d'odorer la cire et la fade eau. L'art est facile à dorer : fard raide aux mimis, domicile à lazzi. Dodo l'amie outreé! Surprise. That was less conversational, more musical but I didn't write it. I don't know who did. André Theberge gave it to me . . . OK, before "W in the D" gets started (wait a minute) the following is some information about it. It's a recording of me whistling and breathing. There are no electronic alterations in the sound. It's documentary, real time. I held the microphone in my hand and moved it into and out of the airstream of the whistled phrase (sometimes it's just air, no notes). The air intake preceding each phrase brackets them all. The length of each phrase was determined by how long I could whistle on the amount of air I'd stored. I tried to make each phrase a distinct event in itself although there are some repeats with slight variations of a dee dee dee dee dee dee dee dee repeated single air-note motif. Please don't read any of this aloud unless instructed to. You could however give notice to a request that the record be started now and you'll hear the just described phrase first. It begins the piece and you'll note later that it ends it although despite the fact that you've never heard it, if you trust this text you already know that that is how it ends. For my ear-mind the air blowing on the microphone produces an aural picture plane . . . A concert playing of this tape (made in 1970) occurred (N.Y.U. 1972). I had all the lights turned off and the tape whistled in the dark. This is very effective. It can enhance the associational, imagistic effect of some of the phrases and of course having seeing muted allows for a concentration on listening. If thinking doesn't take over one may perceive more of the subtleties that are in the music. If, as I suggested, you've already started the record you're probably at whooweedleyaduh whooweedleyaduh whooweedleyaduh whooweedleyaduh or if you are about to play the record why don't you leave off reading this for the duration of the piece, turn off the lights or just hold your hands over your eyes? . . . (I suppose that there are plenty of reasons why you might not want to do this and evidently you are still reading). Well, darkness isn't absolutely necessary, in fact it's not necessary at all . . . ruhrr tweet tweet tweet tweet tweet . . . The music is quite interesting with your eyes open looking at whatever you want to look at. Some people turn on their T.V. set with the sound off while listening to records. With the T.V. sound on as well can be interesting but please don't try it with this record. You could put every damn thing on and keep on reading this till the phone rings but if you do I hope you'll give your undivided attention to the music on some other occasion . . . By the way, marijuana and music, like Michael, microphone and my, both begin with M. M m m m m m m . . . Why don't you smoke some now while you're still listening to "W in the D" and reading this? "W in the D" is about 23 minutes long and you can breathe along with it . . . puff puff puff puff puff peep peep sweeahoh . . . here

Michael Snow, Musics for Piano, Whistling, Microphone, and Tape Recorder, 1975. Two 331/3 RPM vinyl records and gatefold LP jacket, Chatham Square (1009/10). Photograph by Mani Mazinani.

comes the ending now, sort of Beethovenesque in an airy way. The dee dee dee dee dee dee dee repeated note motif is repeated sans note, just air, and is followed by a long exhalation. That's it. Between records: One will perhaps note that the tapes used here date from '70-'72 and the record is being issued in '75. Perhaps you wondered why there aren't more recent pieces. No? Well, anyway for the last about three years apart from sound for my films, I have been very involved in playing freely improvised music with certain groups in Toronto (mostly The Artist's Jazz Band (A.J.B.) and apart from a couple of other solo tapes (one for trumpet). I have been a contributing member in these groups and the music is collective composition. I had been wanting to make these "personal" tapes publicly available for sometime and it finally became possible which made possible the idea of wrapping these solos in this solo. The original tapes are "home" tapes and not studio quality recordings. However, I felt that I could not re-make them in a studio. They partake of a certain time and place. They have been expertly assisted to this stage by Kurt Munkacsi of Basement Recording Studio and by Klaus Kertess . . . Now do you feel like hearing the last side? Hungry? Oh come on let's give it a spin . . . It's possible that you may not like my music or my prose or both together but I certainly hope not. That would certainly be a drag, spending the money and then not liking the music and then reading this crap to top it all off! Still, if you don't like the music and you do like this at least you've got this! If the album was recommended to you maybe you should discuss it later with whoever it was. All I can say is that I've done and am doing my best and that maybe you'll like the music more on re-hearing and you'll never have to read this again. Maybe this is better as "image" than as literature! I'll keep working on it. You do your best too. It's not just up to me . . . The following should be read aloud or sung: except for the occasional onomatopoeia, yes, the occasional onomatopoeia is excepted, please don't read aloud or sing any of this text along with any of the music. Why, oh why? Because, then the text is liable to become a song lyric stimulus for your own, choice one now, choice of notes and the music an accompaniment. This is my text and my music and if you want something that can be "interpreted" please look elsewhere. Autre part. That sounds pretty autocratic I suppose and I realize that if you have bought this it could as accurately be said said to be "yours". Also if I'd never mentioned reading aloud or singing you might not have even thought of it and there'd be no problem. Still singing? Should have indicated a stop after "accompaniment" . . . Back to the music and on to the back of the album: the last side of the 2nd record is titled "Left Right," was taped in '71 and is also a tape-piano piece because it was recorded in a way that made a part of the recording process a part of the music. In other words it wasn't only a "documentary" recording of the piano being played. The preceding text was "documentary", it has been other "modes" and will meta-morphose again. If you would just put the record on now you would hear some qualities that are difficult for me to describe. (My limitations as a writer?). Maybe somebody else (maybe you) could describe them. "Distortion" has a moral tone, doesn't seem right but probably has to be used. The piano music was recorded by laying, lying the microphone on its side on the top of my old upright piano with the recording volume way past its proper maximum. This was done to a nice tape recorder, a Uher which seems to have survived the strain. The percussive playing of the chords smack-rattled the microphone against the piano top. Other sounds you will hear, are hearing or have heard (not that again!) are a metronome tick tick tick ticking and a telephone bell ringing. Rrrrreeding matter. You can tell that I didn't answer the phone. I didn't answer it because I'd spent several hours getting the sound that I liked and the performance was going well and after my first dismay I hoped that the bell would sound well . . . rring, rring, rring rring . . . it does, it fits, même famille. Who called? Later I coughed a bit, couldn't help it. Quite a slow tempo isn't it? Socialist and sinister. That tick tick tick tick tick tick sound which started the piece and continues throughout is the sound of the metropolitan gnome. Right now the music has just left being alternately a chord in the right hand and a single note on the left. It is essence of "oompah", a ragtime or "stride" left hand strain. I've played Jelly Roll Morton, Earl Hines, stride and ragtime influenced piano for many years so this piece comes out of that but also it is kin to a film I made in '68-'69 called -- wherein the camera pans back and forth at different tempi in sync with a percussive machine sound which emphasizes the arrival of the picture at each left or right extreme with a thump thump thump thump . . . To return to the music, now it's changed to a single note in the treble alternating with bass chords. I played this piece with alternating right and left hands, a backhanded compliment to Paul Wittgenstein. barm barm. Those are alternating chords in both hands brark breek brarch breekeek bracque beck to top single note bottom chord crash ping crash ping crash ping crash ping. It certainly is a slow tempo. One of the reasons for that is that it enables one to have time to hear all the music that is emanating from the sounding of each note or chord. Hear what I mean? See what I mean? Left right, left right left right left right two hands two ears two loudspeakers all marking time not marching time. I'll type this just with my right hand and this with my left hand and this with my right now left then right then left then right then left then right then left . . . pause . . . electric typewriter. Typewriter and loudspeaker are interesting words, words that carry histories in their newness. A man in a bright blue windbreaker is running down the street. Words are inching across the page. . . . Your eyes are what? Me, I'm veering. Sex. One's mind rebounds. Mine did, I can't know whether another mind does or did. Turning off the music my mind rebounded from the coldness of this page to the heat of our bodies ensuite to a certain other body with my body in and on. A contributing member. Arrival at the station. Back to work. No, why don't you too think about fucking that someone who mutually. Deeper. Excuse me, I'll just get this out of your mind for a minute it's getting a bit too intimate in there . . . Sorry, but could you superimpose that warm wet picture on the sound? Now fade the picture out slowly till you're just listening. Now I'm just writing. You're listening and reading. Just one backward glance in the form of the reassurance that you'll very likely be able to think that over again just as you can play these records again or read this again. Perhaps this time you you you you're reading it it it it without the music but now this this this this time you're reading it with th th th th th th the music on. Silent reading right? If so you'll note, perhaps, that the long slow tempo section is followed by a faster tempo coda . . . Mind keeps fading into her penis. Into mine too. Could it be that this way the jacket was open to be read suggested "opened" legs? "Jacket" like legs! The "Album" might be a better word there, with another letter . . . Let's try that fading out/fading in system again. "Mixing" or "dissolving" it's called . . . "Left Right" gets pretty fast, racing ahead of the metronome beat vers la fin. Lots of merging of the sustained "distortions" both there and here. Shaman. One presumes a lot if one presumes that one can direct another consciousness into varying states of attentiveness en face d'un construct made by one for that very purpose. Amplifying "varying states of attentiveness" I could say that I mean not only the intensity of the attention but its nature and focus. I do presume that I can do that and that I do it to myself. Impossible subject, I can never be objective. I tend to believe, because of occasional exterior manifestations, that many of the states of mind I experience in perceiving my work are frequently enough experienced by others. A passage can push you back into yourself so that its benevolent force reinforces your integrity and you momentarily become a core of concentrated yourself. Such a passage might modulate into an arrangement of elements that might draw your self out into an edifying dialogue of equals and then transform into a constellation that might invoke analysis or criticism of itself only to become that more familiar but often welcome Svengalism which provokes total identification sans corps with the "reality" of the observed/recorded/recounted and tilts one off the edge of the bed of regular mind-time into an ancient and honorable lunacy, surfacing with real tears or laughter which were fathered by the ghosts of the artist's gesture. This particular passage, will, no, does appear on the back face of this album jacket and so it is very possible that you who are reading this have not read what appears before on the 2 inner faces. You may have bought the album and for your own reasons or no-evident reasons have decided to read the back first. I must admit I sometimes do that with books. Adopting the pose of assuming that I am writing for one solo reader at a time, I say to you (a group reading seems unlikely but possible, of course someone may be reading over your shoulder) (No not yours, yours. Or is it you who are looking over my shoulder?) that I feel that I can address you somewhat intimately but also somewhat abstractly. Consider the class of obscene phone calls. Good thing I didn't answer the 'phone . . . Hello, this text is being written, was written by the composer-performer of the music which is awaiting transmission on the discs enclosed by the cardboard bed on which what was written has been printed. The text and the record are records both. Both of the records could be transmitting right now. Write now a manifestation. You, singular or all embraceable you are perhaps reading these notes because you're considering the purchase of some recorded music. These notes may help you to decide to purchase those notes. There is a lot of information about the music, names, dates, lengths, theories, etc. on the two inside faces of the legs of this jacket. What?! Sorry, that's explained there, too. A jacket has sleeves not faces. I know. The faceless author of this is still also the composer performer of the music which may be caused to emanate from the discs contained herein if united properly with the proper apparatus. Record player. So . . . let it suffice for me to say that I think highly of the mmmusic, a lot of living went into it and this and recommend it it to you in the hopes of contributing to your life a rich source of aural stimuli for years to come and getting paid for it (I know that's illegal grammar). A negligible amount of money will buy this. I myself have sometimes been so influenced by the notes on an album to purchase same. That consideration just emerged, at the last minute as it were as one of the reasons for writing this text (other considerations are faced in the beginning of the text, front face that is) and others may reveal themselves in other parts of the text. As a matter of facet, let's face it, on the face of it, because of my typefacing these facetious faces you (you) haven't come face to face with the face of the composer-performer-author anywhere on the four thighs of this bed-jacket. How do I look? Blue eyed . . . Most of the requirements of this text smiling on the front face have been put to bed satisfied I think (I'll check with them in the morning). So . . . I can see the end approaching. In temporal works this kind of perception is rare excepting that écriture is a creature whose beginnings and endings are apprehendable reversed. This must be qualified by noting that the beginning of a work of literature is new and now the first time it is read and the meaning states that may be evoked by it can be said to be relatively few. In other words, most readers of the first page of a text would be in quite close agreement concerning it's nature, qualities and meaning. However, it can without doubt be stated that someone who read only the last passage or only the first and last passage of a work of literature would be apprehending an "object" which would seem in an almost infinite number of respects radically different from that passage apprehended by someone who had read the entire text from beginning to end. Such is the modifying power of the prior experience in a temporal work that the significance of the ending can only be truly apprehended against the record of the voyage towards it. In isolation it is not an ending is it?

Michael Snow, April 1975.

Michael Snow, Musics for Piano, Whistling, Microphone, and Tape Recorder, 1975. Two 331/3 RPM vinyl records and gatefold LP jacket, Chatham Square (1009/10). Photograph by Mani Mazinani.

Michael Snow, Musics for Piano, Whistling, Microphone, and Tape Recorder, 1975. Two 331/3 RPM vinyl records and gatefold LP jacket, Chatham Square (1009/10). Photograph by Mani Mazinani.

Doubled Visions

Amy Taubin

Ten photographic pieces by Michael Snow were shown at the Museum of Modern Art in the winter-spring of 1976. It is disturbing that this complex and moving work by a major artist, produced during roughly the same period, 1967–1976, as his historically significant work in film, received almost no critical attention in New York. Like the films, this work is intelligent, speculative, and seductively elegant. These pieces share certain concerns with the films: an intensive exploration of particular functions of the photographic process; the relativity and instability of the photographic image grounded in the mechanics of the camera and in conditions of light; the reverberation of that relativity with (human) sight and memory.

There is, however, a paradoxical difference between the concerns evidenced in the photographic works and the films. The distension, repetition, and aggressive use of movement and intensity of sound in the films is an attempt to force discursive and analytic functions from the mind, thus creating a timelessness within a temporal structure, or more exactly, a temporality grounded in the perception of space rather than in narrative. (The most radical exercise of this sort is the coda of superimpositions in ↔.) The photographic works, however, create an oscillation between two poles: an instantaneous comprehension of the work, supported by the visual reverberation of the multiple rectangular frames within it; and a narrative perception which occurs when we realize that the photographs are a recording of consecutive stages in a work which they both generate and are generated by, and that we can decode that work by tracing back in time the sequence of their making.

To restate the paradox: the films are concerned with creating a timeless state through a temporal medium; the photographs, normally moments out of time, operate in a dialectical relation to the work of which they are a part, opening within it a temporal structure.

Michael Snow began his career as a painter and musician. He subsequently made sculpture, films, and photographs. As Annette

Michelson has noted in her essay "Toward Snow,"[1] the body of Snow's work from the early 1950s to the present shows a working and reworking of a limited number of concerns in a variety of media and forms. Some of these concerns may be described roughly as follows: framing; tri-dimensional illusion versus real tri-dimensionality; temporal and atemporal strategies such as those noted above; the relation of representation to memory; the strategies by which a work is made an index, not only of the represented object but of the functions of the tools with which it is made; the relation between sound (sometimes language) and image.

Snow has chosen to explore these problems rather than to work exhaustively within any one form. He seems impelled to work simultaneously in temporal and atemporal forms. First these were music and painting, then filmmaking and sculpture, then filmmaking and photography, and currently, music and photography.

Of the ten works in the MoMA show, only two were photographic prints. The others were mixed-media works in which the photograph, or photographs, is pivotal and generative. Immediately striking as one entered the room was the rich diversity of sizes, colors, textures, and materials. Closer examination revealed that within this diversity, Snow was exploring a limited territory. He was proposing emblems of the relation of the photographic image to the real, and their interest developed from this: that the two were as interpenetrated in these objects as they are in the modern world. The production of images changed the "real" and this change was mirrored in subsequent images, and so on.

Located at this meeting point of real object and of photographic image is that most problematic concept introduced by Walter Benjamin in the constantly cited essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction": the "aura." Benjamin defined the aura as "the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be."[2] This distance is measured in time as well as in space. The aura of a landscape is a function of its distance from us in space. The aura of an art object is a function of its history.

> If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with
> your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which
> casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those

mountains, of that branch. This image makes it easy to comprehend the social bases of the contemporary decay of the aura. It rests on two circumstances, both of which are related to the increasing significance of the masses in contemporary life. Namely, the desire of contemporary masses to bring things "closer" spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction.

... With the advent of the first truly revolutionary means of reproduction, photography, simultaneously with the rise of socialism, art sensed the approaching crisis which has become evident a century later. At the time, art reacted with the doctrine of *l'art pour l'art,* that is, with a theology of art. This gave rise to what might be called a negative theology in the form of the idea of "pure" art, which not only denied any social function of art but also any categorizing by subject matter.[3]

In Benjamin's terms then, Snow is using photography, not in the service of "the decay of the aura," but paradoxically, to affirm its presence. He refuses to use photography to "bring things closer spatially." With few exceptions, the iconography of these photographs is limited to stages in the making of works of which they are parts. ("I am working to use photography in a very enclosed way, so there is nothing outside the work itself that is used in the photography.")[4] The photographs are records of, situated within and conditioning, each work; they record their own history. As history, they are reenforcements of the aura. With two exceptions, these works are not reproducible because they are not simply photographic prints.

What Snow has done is to relocate photography within "pure art", which, for Benjamin, arose in reaction to photography itself. These works cannot be categorized by subject matter. (For example, the work *Midnight Blue,* which contains a photograph of a candle, would not be categorized as a photo of a candle.) The manner in which "pure art denies any social function" is not at issue here. We can, however, say that the function of these works is similar to that of most pure art: it leads us to an investigation of consciousness. Snow's photographic pieces, these objects which are in

part covered, obscured, and doubled with photographs of themselves, are modern totems, to be used in a meditation on the merging of image and reality.

One further point will serve to clarify the descriptions to follow: Benjamin mentions in passing that the titles of paintings have a different character from the captions used for photographs. The titles of Snow's photo pieces are, as those of many of his other works, verbal puns. They call attention to the punning strategies of these visual works: the doubling of image and reality, the simultaneities of time and space, a merging which still allows the parts to be separated and identified. I now offer a description of the pieces in the exhibition under consideration.

To make this self-portrait, Snow pasted a tape frame, large enough to contain four Polaroid photos, on the mirror. He then photographed himself in the mirror, pasted that photo in the upper left corner of the tape frame, took a second photo, pasted that in the upper right, and proceeded through the third and fourth in the same manner. The fourth photo shows the first three and Snow's reflection just visible in the lower right corner of the frame. With that in place, he took a fifth photo which shows the first four completely obscuring his own reflection and that of the camera. This photo is placed in the upper left corner of the mirror frame.

The photographs have a double function, oddly disquieting in the manner of a fetishistic object. They serve to obliterate the reflection of the artist and then to conceal its absence. If we peeled away the photographs, we would find the reflection of Michael Snow in his function as maker of this work and as proceeding through this function in time to self-obliteration, *i.e.,* towards death. Snow has said of his serial works in both audiotape and photography that "each tape/photo is a separate memory." In *Authorization,* since the camera is focused on Snow's reflection and not on the surface of the mirror, as more of the surface is covered with photographs, more of each successive photograph is out of focus. The photographs within photographs not only become smaller, they become less clear. They take on the defused quality of memory, contrasting with the sharp reflection of oneself in the edges of the mirror on which they are mounted and in which they are shot. The work pulls us between past and present, between disappearance and re-presentation, between photographed-memory-fetish and the narcissistic fascination of our own reflection, now present in the

work. The punning strategy referred to in the first section of this essay operates around all of these and around the identity of maker and viewer, both authorized simultaneously in the glass.

Michael Snow, Authorization, 1969. Instant silver prints (Polaroid) and adhesive tape on mirror in metal frame, 54.6 × 44.4 × 1.4 cm with integral frame. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

A Wooden Look, Of a Ladder, and *Glares* are all concerned with the optical bend which is recorded when the lens of the camera is placed in any position other than exactly parallel to the object photographed, and of the relationship between this new photographic object and the object as it

exists. *Glares* is the strongest of the three because the visually complex meshing of the original structure with its photographic reproduction makes them almost inseparable. A large black rectangular frame, 58¾ × 39½ inches, was divided into nine rows of nine rectangles each. A light was mounted at the top and directed at the surface, hitting most strongly at the top and falling off towards the bottom. Snow then photographed separately, with the camera tilting from a fixed base and with a fixed exposure, each of the small rectangles. He then mounted them, each in its own rectangle. The light remains in position in the finished work. Of course, the amount of surrounding area (i.e., surrounding rectangles) included in each shot varies with the distance from each rectangle of the fixed camera. The result is a strikingly powerful superimposition of grids, light at the top and dark at the bottom.

In *Glares,* as in *A Wooden Look,* we have an object that is fragmented in advance, shaped by a knowledge of its image. Further, since the light source in the object (the lamp at the top of the grid) was also the light source at the time of exposure, the light is identical and doubled. The light of the past is inseparable from the light of the present; the light in the photographs is fused with the light on the object. Snow says that what we see in *Of a Ladder* is "not a ladder, but how the camera sees a ladder under certain conditions," in this instance with the camera tilted from a fixed base and with the light source at the top. The photographs are arranged so that their formation suggests a ladder in negative, the strips of white left between each photograph lined vertically up the wall become the rungs. "It's a kind of gray scale as well as an optical reconstruction of climbing a ladder." Each photograph is of a segment of the original ladder.
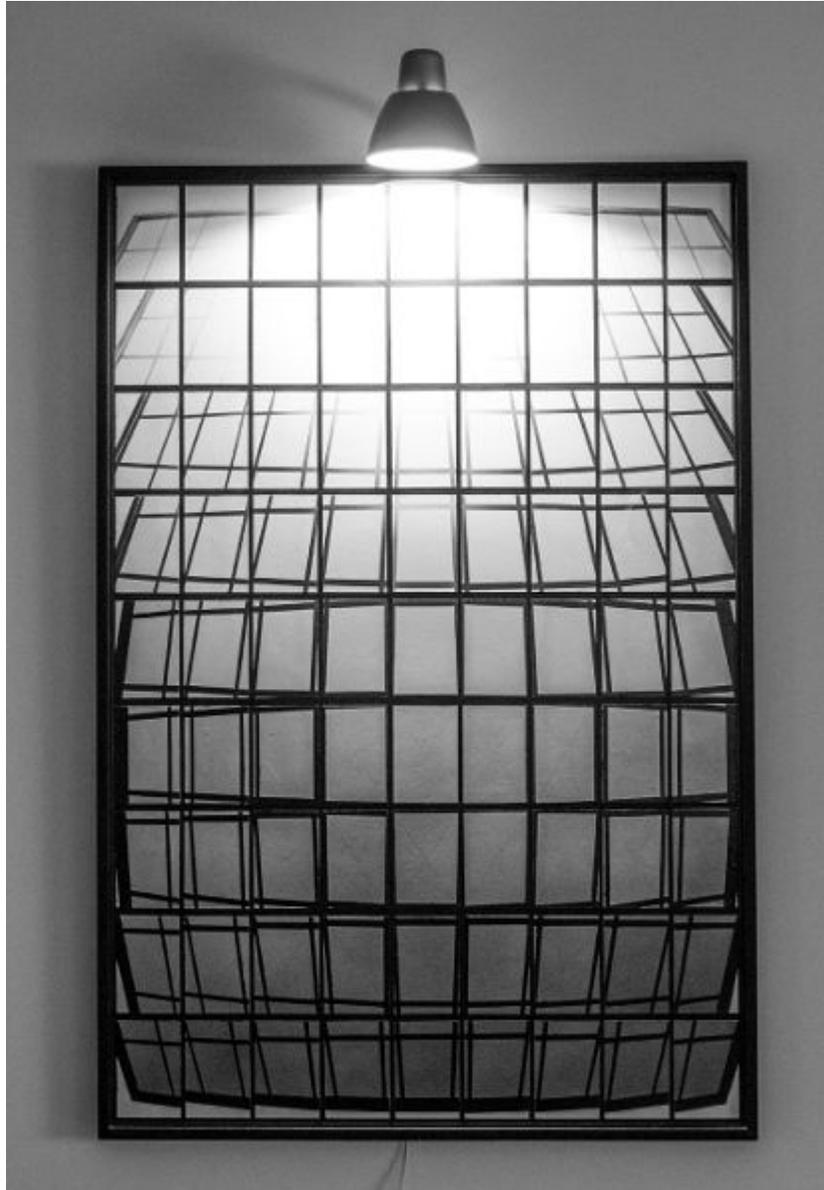
Michael Snow, Glares, 1973. Eighty-one black-and-white photographs and acrylic on Masonite, frame, light fixture, 149 × 100 cm, 58.7 × 39.4 in. Manulife Financial Corporate Art Collection. Photograph by Mani Mazinani.

Of a Ladder is a variation on *Glares* and *A Wooden Look* in that the original ladder is not present in the work. Since ladders are everyday objects, the ladder is present in the room as part of our experience. We see this photographed ladder in relation to that other kind of object. Another variation on the doubling.

Three of the photographic works in color, *Light Blues, Midnight Blue,* and *Red 5,* explore color in the same way that those in black and white

explore camera angle and light source. The surface is of rough boards, attached horizontally, with a narrow ledge placed at a right angle at the bottom. Snow painted most of the surface a lush blue, leaving a frame of unpainted wood around the top and sides. He placed a candle on the ledge and photographed the blue surface with the candle as the only source of illumination. He made a print of the resulting photograph (of candle on blue surface) which is the same size as the photographed surface, and pasted this over the blue boards so that the candle in the photograph is in the same position as the original. Since the painted area was slightly larger than the area photographed, it frames it on three sides so that we see three concentric unevenly edged rectangles: natural board, painted board, and photo, allowing a comparison between the color of paint in daylight and the darker color of the reproduction conditioned by its candle light source. As in *Authorization,* the work annuls and re-presents. The photograph and the remains of the wax candle on the ledge below form a double index of the light in the photograph itself, testifying to the history of the candle, its existence, the light shed by it and extinguished in the work's composition. The title is a pun on the color of the photograph and a particular mood at a particular time.

In *Light Blues,* Snow placed a spotlight directly facing the left-hand section of a long blue rectangle and made eight photographs, each with a different colored gel over the light. He printed each photograph twice and lined them up on the original surface in four rows of four photos each. The order of colors in the top two rows is reversed left to right in the lower two rows. In the finished work, the spotlight remains in its original position covered by a blue gel which alters the color of the photographs in the left half, just as they have been altered by the gels in the originals.

Red 5 is a variation on the sequential structure of *Authorization*. A red paper rectangle lit from the top (from an invisible source) was photographed, the photograph was placed on the surface, and a second photograph was taken, also placed on the surface, and so on. In between the taking of each photograph, the positions of the earlier ones were slightly altered. We are able to read this because the placement of the light source has caused the original field, and thus each photograph, to be lighter at the top than the bottom; we thus have a reference by which we can mark their rotation. Here, light is an index of spatial relations. It is appropriate that, in this work, where the only material is photographs and photographic paper,

where the only object is a photographic one, Snow carried his sequence one step farther. The work in its final form is a photographic print showing the red ground with four small photos placed on it.
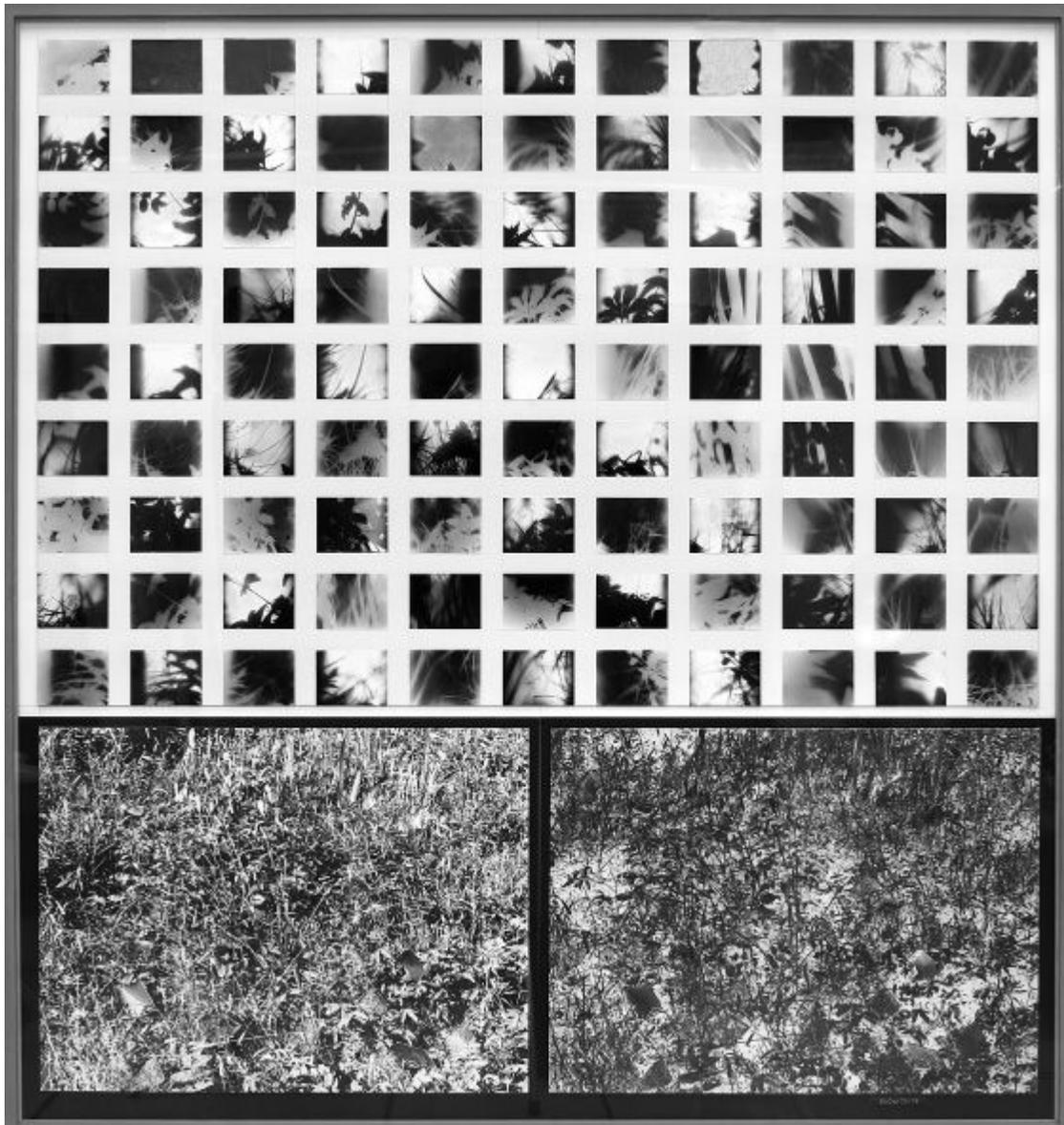
Michael Snow, Field, 1973–1974. A hundred and one black-and-white photographs, board, painted wooden frame, 179.1 × 170.2 × 3.2 cm, 70.5 × 67.0 × 1.25 in. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Photograph by National Gallery of Canada.

Snow placed fifty pieces of photogram paper in a field of grass and shrubs. He photographed the papers *in situ* and made two prints, negative and positive. These are the two large photographs framed in black at the

bottom of the work. Above them, arranged in nine rows of eleven each, are the photograms, each printed in negative and positive pairs except for a single odd one. They are framed by the white paper background and the entire work is framed in gray. It is a stunningly complex structure of figure-ground, positive negative, part-whole, containment of part in whole relationships. The photogram is the most extreme close-up. It is an index of light recorded by touch. The long shots can record the photograms themselves but not their detail. Here again is an echo of Benjamin. The aura of a landscape is a function of its distance from us. In this work, which is made only of reproductions, of reproductions within reproductions, the issue of the aura is raised very sharply.

Morning in Holland differs from the rest of the work under consideration in that it was made by uncovering rather than obliterating. Snow mounted sixteen small rectangular frames, red, blue, yellow, and green, in four rows of four each, the order of the colors differing in each row. He covered the whole with black paper. He then began to cut away the paper, revealing the rectangles one at a time and taking a color photo of the whole at each of the sixteen stages of uncovering. The photographs were then mounted so that within each rectangular frame there is a photograph of the entire work at the point in time at which that particular rectangle was uncovered. The relationships of the parts in space are temporally determined. And again, a structure has been made specifically to accept the fragmentation of the photographic process. The piece is asymmetrical within its original grid, an obvious tribute to the painter obliquely referred to in the title.

Imposition was the most recently completed work to be shown; it is also the most problematic. Formally, it explores the possibilities of color mixing through superimposition. Four large color photographs have been superimposed to make one print. The first print is of an interior: walls, molding, floor. In the second, a couch and other furniture was added. The third is of a naked couple seated on the couch, and the fourth is of the same couple in the same position fully dressed. The superimposed print is hung on its side so that the floor in the photograph is perpendicular to the floor of the gallery. At first glance the layers are hardly apparent. Then we begin to see through them as if by X-ray vision. Tilting our heads to see better, we notice that the position of the heads of the couple in the photograph mirrors our own. They are looking at a rectangular object that they hold in their hands, revealing only its white underside to the camera. With amusement,

we realize the work is turned on its side so as to give us the clue from which we deduce that the couple in the photograph are looking at the same photograph as we are. Snow uses the same strategy in his book *Cover to Cover*;[5] three-quarters of the way through, he is shown picking up a copy of the book *Cover to Cover,* which exists within itself, complete, before its completion. The photograph, which fragments the time of reality, no longer merely conditions or merges with it. It reverses the sequence so that image now precedes object.

We have noted that while the original ladder is not present in *Of a Ladder,* the work does evoke a tension between image and object, since "ladder" is part of our everyday experience. In *Imposition* we are faced with the photograph(s) of two specific persons in a specific room, two persons who have an existence outside the work to which we have no access except through the work itself. This most recent piece is therefore no longer self-enclosed and this is new in Snow's work. It also raises some questions, similar to new questions raised by the new film *Rameau's Nephew*: why a photograph of a specifically middle-class living room? why a couple? why a heterosexual couple? ... The separation of the photograph's subject from its formal strategies (superimposition and temporal sequence) elicits these questions, leaving them unanswered.

Benjamin distinguishes in his essay between those works which we are absorbed by and those which we absorb or appropriate. What is appropriated from a work is its description. What is missing from the above descriptions of Michael Snow's photographic works is their power to absorb us into themselves; and to allow us, within them, a various and shiftingly complex meditation on real ↔ image.

Notes

. Annette Michelson, "Toward Snow," *Artforum* 9 (June 1971): 30–37.

. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 222.

. Benjamin, "The Work of Art," pp. 222–224. Note the similarities between this text and the following two bits of dialogue from Snow's most recent film *Rameau's Nephew*: "There is no doubt that technology is expressing and answering a human desire by working toward systems of greater and greater illusionism. It is easy to project this to arrive at stages of representation of absolutely convincing illusion till eventually the difference between subject and facsimile may be eradicated." And later: "What I think we're doing is taking everything that's here and gradually mixing it all. Feeding a palette into a blender. The parts are still visible but what all life will become is one mid-gray, changeless substance. The globe will be a ball of dead, durable sameness."

    Snow and Benjamin share an ambivalence toward mechanical reproduction, but it is grounded somewhat differently. Snow is pessimistic about the "desire of the contemporary masses" while Benjamin's later writing, including this text, is an attempt at a historical materialist reading towards the goal of a Marxist revolution.

. All quotations of Michael Snow are from correspondence with the author.

. Michael Snow, *Cover to Cover* (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1975).

Notes for *Rameau's Nephew*

Michael Snow

Michael Snow at Montreux. (Photo: Babette Mangolte.)

Notes for
*Rameau's Nephew**

MICHAEL SNOW

To me it's a true "talking picture". It delves into the implications of that description and derives structures that can generate contents that are proper to the mode. It derives its form and the nature of its possible effects from its being built from the inside, as it were, with the actual units of such a film, *i.e.*, the frame and the recorded syllable. Thus its dramatic development derives not only from a representation of what may involve us generally in life but from considerations of the nature of recorded speech in relation to moving light-images of people. Thus it can become an event in life, not just a report of it.

Echoes reverberate to "language", to "representation" in general, to representation in the sound cinema, to "culture", to "civilization". Via the eyes and ears it is a composition aimed at exciting the two halves of the brain into recognition.

*   The full title of the film is given as *Rameau's Nephew by Diderot (Thanx to Dennis Young) by Wilma Schoen*. The selection of notes offered here is followed by the shooting script of one sequence of the film. We are indebted to Anthology Film Archive for assistance in this publication.

Top: Annette Michelson in Michael Snow, Rameau's Nephew by Diderot (Thanx to Dennis Young) by Wilma Schoen, 1974. 16 mm film, 255 minutes, color, sound. Courtesy of Michael Snow. Bottom: Still from Michael Snow, Rameau's Nephew, 1974. Courtesy of Michael Snow.

Top: Michael Snow, still from *Rameau's Nephew,* 1974. Courtesy of Michael Snow. *Bottom:* Nam June Paik and Annette Michelson in Michael Snow, *Rameau's Nephew,* 1974. Courtesy of Michael Snow.

A clear use of ambiguity.
Can you extrapolate from *"not being able to understand"*
(in terms of intelligibility of parts of the separate segments) to
"not being able to understand" the whole?
"Understand"—Two shades of meaning.
LAUGHTER AND ORGASM: relation?
Style is a way of saying. Styles of different sections. Ways of
saying several things at once.
DIFFERENT MEANINGS AT DIFFERENT READINGS connecting
different "strata".

*

INTERNAL	EXTERNAL	SOUND
Appearance/disappearance	Focus	Appearance/disappearance
Substitution	Color	Substitution
Metamorphosis	Light intensity (F stop)	other voice,
Auto-motion	fade in/out	other sound, etc.
Changes of light	exposure—	Pitch change
intensity	over/under	Timbre change
color	Opticals	room-tone,
position	wipes	echo, fuzz
Repetition	fold-overs	Volume (loud to 0)
Normal movement	Superimpositions	spatial position
	Repetition (printed)	Repetition
	Camera position	"distortion"
	Camera movement	
	Camera speed	
	Screen shape	
	The other external is the actual	
	film strip. Editing.	

CROSS CAUSES AND EFFECTS
Cause: action "in" picture. Effect: "external" change (image color, focus,
    etc.)
Cause: action "in" picture. Effect:

"Entering the image": **TOUCH:** caress, feel, eat, fuck, smash.
Verbal description, "journalism". Dialogue sexual.
Eventually, the camera enters the image by fast changes of position, hand
held stuff, wild cuts, dollies, etc.

•

List all possible manipulables.
Computer/cross-index all the permutations, combinations.
Use this as a script.

5	6	1	2	3	4	action	
6	5	2	1	4	3	reaction	Superimpose
5	6	2	1	4	3	action	several locations
2	1	5	6	4	3	reaction	or sets or backdrops
4	3	2	1	5	6		
1	2	4	5	6	3		Trees by a river NO
3	2	1	4	5	6		New Orleans Street
5	2	1	4	6	3		Babylonian (ancient) scene

Do film in four or five tempi.
        medium (long)   40 minutes
        slow (medium)   15 minutes
        fast (medium)   20 minutes
        slow (short)   5 minutes
Control of WAVES OF "COHERENCE" necessary.
Rhythm continues but certain elements become more sequential
then become more varied again.

                        e.g. dialogue
                        becomes more sequential
                        "normal"
                        then starts
                        fragmenting again.

COMEDY   *Commedia dell'Arte*   Comedy of Art
Same characters exchange positions but original voices are still heard.
Characters are replaced but original voices are still heard.
Characters are replaced but new voices are heard.
Characters change spatial position but sound continues.

FRAMES: The *Fact:* Everything can be changed between frames.
                    Film absolutely not videotape.
CUTTING—Disjunctive.
ABSOLUTELY non-sequential patterns.
No proportionate modulations, glissandos, fades.

Must be
staccato,
not
legato

But: 6 2 1 9 3 8 4

All this applies to sound, too: it can be changed "between frames".
Needn't be sequential, needn't be sentences, needn't be a story.
Words interchangeable.

•

Internal reactions to *external* causes.

During fade-out people say "what's happening to the light?"
Over-exposure; people cover their eyes.
Flood of color—they watch it rise.
They comment on changes that happen to the sound,
e.g., a bit of music is substituted for a phrase of dialogue.
Another person says "That's by J.S. Bach, isn't it?"
A superimposition of a group of people is imitated by the people
in the scene.
A person reacts *within* the scene to
other people's reactions to
an external cause.

A SERIES OF JOKES: crude enough that some
                                will survive dismemberment.

A man got on the elevator in his apartment building. There
was a woman in the car and she was completely nude. He was
a little taken aback but he said, "My wife has an outfit
just like that." (Aunt Rhoda's joke.)

MOVE CAMERA SLIGHTLY (on tripod) ON EACH
FRAME OF S.F. REAL-TIME SHOOTING-JITTER.
DON'T FORGET: This thing is *absolutely*   SOUND ⟷ IMAGE
                                            RELATIONSHIPS
OK plan to studio re-record some things with changes.
Have sound man change *something* on every image,
change treble, bass, or volume.

A bit where sound disappears
when something is held in front of the camera.
Something opaque?

The entire film an "example" of the difficulty (impossibility)
of the essentializing-symbolizing reduction involved in the
(Platonic) nature of words in relation to experience (object) etc.
discussed. The *difference* between the reduction absolutely necessary
to discuss or even describe the experience and the experience.
Each is "real" but each is different.

<center>*</center>

INTERNAL REACTION: People in the shot notice, see, pay attention
to a manipulation: e.g., a bottle appears, reappears (8 frames,
4 frames, 2 frames).
They watch this, continuing to talk about
something else. They screen their eyes during over-exposure.

Change camera position in mid-conversation
(continue in the middle of a word).
Should especially concern itself with the people.
Lots of medium shots, close-ups. (2 or 4 heads, etc.)

All-woman cast?

<center>*</center>

PSALMANAZAR: Georges Psalmanazar (1679–1763), assumed name of
a Frenchman who represented himself as a pagan from Formosa and
invented a language, "Formosan" and a religious system; he later
repented of the imposture, which is described in his memoir, and
became a serious scholar, a friend of Dr. Johnson.

Each sequence made like a spoken word—like an actual word?—
so each has a distinct character.
No, it's the language of film.

Introduce "relativity" into the use of speech:
contextual nature of nuances of meaning.
Words common but everybody having nuances. My uses to make *this*
work of art.
Words as *material* (recorded).

"A picture is worth a thousand words." The picture is the words.
Some way of making visual sentences.
Someone opens mouth and things change.
"The unexpected happens when you least expect it."

LOGOMANIA: a pathological state of volubility,
or incoherent wordiness.
LOGOPATHY: a speech disorder of any kind.
LOGORRHEA: pathological form of volubility.

REBUS: The rebus introduces the subject of the accuracy of
recording, verisimilitude, absolute realism in a context where
the nuances (means) of the medium are the elements of the reality
of the experience of the representation.

Philosophical Comedy
"Gags"
"Routines" exemplify philosophical statements
                                    problems
                                    proposals
Use books, e.g. Wittgenstein
to write joke-dialogue.

To end a scene: e.g. four people talking.
Take out voices, one by one, until the scene is silent,
then remove the people one by one, then remove the set to white screen.

SOURCE OF SOUND
Sequence with playing of record, turning on T.V.
and (perhaps off screen) tape playing plus talking.

Someone points to loudspeaker and facing audience
says (or off-screen tape says) without moving mouth,
"This is where it came from."
T.V. sound is turned on, then turned off,
and tape of *just previously recorded* conversation is
played with T.V. picture. People comment.
Someone points to an object as a voice speaks about to play a
record. While putting it on sound *starts* via off-screen tape;
they then play simultaneously for a while.

ANARTHRIA: loss of power of articulate speech.
A. Language as a "tautology". We already know what can be said.

B. Not only are there many words you have never heard, but
there are many combinations of them and the ones and combinations
that you already know which have never been made which you've
never heard.
Originality then with words is?
Language is Thought's body.
Speech is thought; they are not generally two separate activities.

◆

Wrong or invented sounds for things that happen on screen.
Man drops a cup, it shatters, sound is thunder and rain. Rain
sound continues till woman covers her eyes. Man cleans up
broken cup, sound is hammering. Hammering cuts simultaneously
with cutting to "now", same cup in place of fragments. Woman
lights cigarette, sound is a ball or chime. She blows out smoke
and as she blows, cup (is pulled) slides along table over to
edge. Either it cuts at edge and a second later, sound of
breaking glass, or it falls off and sound is of car screeching
around a corner. She knocks ash off cigarette, sound is
splashing water, puffs on cigarette, sound is the spoken word
"money." Simultaneously, man pulls letter from his pocket, sound
is a bird sound till he unfolds letter. As he unfolds letter,
sound is a siren and also she starts to speak: "Harvey, I just
don't know what to say." He reads letter and sound is footsteps.
She speaks again: "So much time has passed since we first met
that it seems like it was only yesterday. The first time I saw
you was in winter. I saw you walking down the street, you were
wearing a very long black overcoat. You looked very strange and
very interesting and I hoped that I could meet you. Isn't it
strange? Some two weeks later I did." During "the first time"
she gets up from chair and walks out of room. Her voice continues
with absolutely no change in volume, etc. It ought to be in
perfect lip sync before that. Next, man turns off a lamp which
is on table. Sound is of breaking glass and image over-exposed.
Man leaves everything on table on its side. At first leaving,
sound of rain again. At the last, sound cuts and camera swivels
till scene is sideways with objects right side up, short hold
and cut.

The last part as a separate scene in itself or part of another.
Someone leaves everything on their sides, then the camera swivels.

A section shot right but shown backwards including sound.
A sequence: camera swivels as above but scene *continues*, talking,
etc. Cut to scene upside down with sound somehow effected by
that. SOUND UPSIDE DOWN? Cut to backwards scene.

Backwards scene could be shot with some action *done backwards*
so they'd be "correct" though screened wrong.

*

THE ART OF MODULATING TIME
RECORDING
The "concretion" of music, its materiality "increases" with
radio, records.

Music is now in the situation of literature after the invention
of printing. Recording is mapping of time into space. Like
drawing or painting.
Consonants equivalent to attack or percussion.
(Staccati, pizzicati)
P.K.D.T.B.

Lenses: shoot something changing lenses. Per word, perhaps.
Various focal lengths. Wide screen lens, anamorphic, multiple
image. Diopter, split field lens. Super wide angle, 5.7 mm., etc.

VISUAL	SOUND
One sequence of lenses	volume and
zoom	distortion
pan	changes
camera position	Use
focus changes	electronic
	filter?

What is it like not to be able to read or write?

Michael Snow, Rameau's Nephew, *1974.*

Scene 11. Same as 10A, 10B. Camera tripod. Fixed. If
possible shoot through a door showing a bit of door frame
at each side. Table in foreground. Optical flip. Memorize.
J: What's hard to believe?
S: Does anybody want something to drink?
J, Dracula accent (throughout scene), facing camera: How about
some OXO?
Cut to J lying on floor parrallel to frame facing camera.
J: OXO
Cut to J standing on head. Others can hold his legs up. Facing
camera.
J: OXO
Cut to J lying on side facing right.
J: OXO
Cut.
R, *to camera:*   Have you noticed how the unexpected happens
when you least expect it.
S, *to everybody:*   Do you want to smoke some dope?
J: I'm afraid to smoke dope on the screen. It's like smoking
in bed, the screen might catch fire.
L: Or the screen might get arrested.
S: The picture's trying to get away right now! *She looks*
"at picture".
J: Hey wait for me!
A: It can't go anywhere without us. *(Another accent)*
S: Anyway do you want some firewater?
J: Oh yes, please, I'm feeling a bit dizzy.
S walks off towards camera
E, *looking out:*   Gee, I wonder if I'm in the audience tonight?
A: Impossible.
E: Well, if I am . . . "Hello me!" Gosh, what's wrong with my
eyes, I can't see straight.
J: Where the hell's that table gone? It was here a minute ago.
Cut. End of optical flip.

Scene 12. Just tape record. No image.
S walks a little. Clinking ice in glass.
Drop glass. It breaks.
S: Here's your drink.
J, *still Dracula:*   Whoops, I'm sorry it went out like a light.
E: It did not.

J: There's another side to every story.
J or Ray, preferably Ray starts to casually in background play violin.
S: I'll get you another drink. *Walks a bit.*
A: Looking back is depressing.
L: I suppose you think there's a bed there.
J: Who?
E: Of course there's a bed there. Watch this. *Walks noisily for a few seconds. Stops. Says:* What the hell? *Walks some more, stops, says:*   Well, anyway I found the table. Here it is. *Taps on table.*
L: Keep your eye on it.
J: Pull up a chair, Ray.
S walks in, clink, clink, ice in glass.
S: Here's another drink for you, Jacques.
J: Don't put it on that table.
S: What table?
R: This is kind of relaxing.
L: When are we supposed to be back on?

Scene 13. Optical flip. Picture comes around other side (left). People regrouped as they might be after the last scene. No glass though. Same camera position. Memorize.
R plays violin in background like practicing.
J: Aphasia, have you seen this entire film?
A: How could I, Jacques, it isn't over yet . . . I'm just looking at the part I'm in.
E: These are pretty bad seats.
L: Yeah, this is really hard on the eyes.
S: Ouch! These corners are sharp!
J: Make sure that table gets around. *Push it a bit back and forth but end up leaving it in same place.*
A: It doesn't need any help to get around.
L: I'd miss the bed more than that table.
A: Have you been in any good movies lately, Ray?
J: Have you been in any good movies lately, Ray? *Turns aside to say this.*
R, stops playing: One question at a time.
E, glancing to her left: Just another few feet to go.
S, looking same way: There.
Everybody looks that way.
Cut. R, facing camera still holding violin: Wow!
Cut. R, back to camera: Wow!
Close door if shot is through door. Could be slammed.
Cut.

Scene 14. Camera same. Everybody grouped same except for J and R, who are seated at the table. Underexpose. This shot will be supered. Fade in. Memorize.

A: Back in the picture. *Said like a title.*

J, *to R:*   Well, did you like the lovemaking scene in Nadia Jerkoffski's new film "Fuck and Suck"?

R: Oh, it was beautiful.

J: Wasn't "Sally," the little Danish girl with the long blonde hair, exquisite?

R: Mmm, yes, she was so beautiful, so voluptuous . . . what a lovely ass!

J: When she rolled over into the bed and opened her legs by first sliding one against the other . . . wasn't that beautiful? . . . Her lips were pink and moist as her luscious thighs revealed them . . . in that great close-up her curly blonde cunt hairs were all dewy too.

R: Her big brown eyes were lovely too; she really seemed to be feeling it when the German guy, Carl, slid his long cock into her . . . you could read in her eyes how good it felt moving in.

J: She moved her breasts in a way that . . . just seemed to tell a story. And what breasts and shoulders and arms! . . . When she turned over, her big breasts and the pink nipples on top just slid to the side with such . . . what's the word? . . . comfort.

R: Oh yeah, I wanted to touch them and in the movie lucky Gunja, the Pakistani guy, did caress them, kissed them, sucked them, licked them.

J: And she made such a beautiful sound of pleasure too.

E: What was her role in the film?

R: She was a mathematician who discovered the Rondo effect which revolutionized space travel. She had written several books, spoke ten languages, taught at York University and was the Director of the Mathematical Research Center which employed 10,000 people.

E: Quite a well-rounded woman.

J, *said like a title to camera:*   A figure of speech.

Fade out to black.

Scene 15. Same length shot of room (shoot maybe a foot more). Underexposed. To super.

Scene 16. New tripod shot centered on bed. Fade in.

L, *said like a title to camera:*   Seeing is believing.

E: That's what they say.
Fade out to black.

Scene 17. Same shot but bed only. Against black. To be supered. Shoot 2 minutes.

Scene 18. Same camera and position marked. Bed off. To be supered on scene 17. Memorize. Fade in.
J: Seeing is necessarily a belief, an act of faith, but to me the phrase should really be "Touching is believing." I'll demonstrate what I mean.
L, *butts in, feeling hands:*   Gee, my hands are dry. I've been washing clothes all day. Sara, have you got any of that cream hand stuff?
S: Yes, I've got some right here. *Takes it out of purse and squirts in his hand.* Try this.
L rubs hands together. Everybody watches.
J, *a bit peeved:*   OK, you demonstrated what I meant but I'd like to show you my way . . . I suppose we all believe that there's a bed there *(points)* and that it actually exists.
E: Of course, I slept there last night and had wonderful dreams.
J: Alright then, watch this, all of you. *J walks to where the bed is supposed to be and lies down on floor as if bed were there (so his feet will stick out but when bed is put back). The others gape. Everybody try to hold same position. Except E, who goes off but near a mike.*
Cut. Scene 19. Put bed back in same place over J. Fade in.
E, *speaks off screen:*   Well, that proved that this was a dream and that that's a comfortable bed.
A, *looks startled, looks around:*   Who said that?!
J, *comes out from under bed, looking disgruntled and says:* Well, we usually use a table to demonstrate reality.
E: That's because a table is more real than a bed at dinner time.
J: What time is it?
S: Time for bed. *Said like a title to camera.*
Fade out.

Scene 20/21. Shot twice. Tripod. New camera position. Note where it is, tape-mark, etc., framing, etc. It must be returned to for last shot (scene 20).
Mark position of table. Shoot just it against black. Fade in. Shoot one minute. Hold.

Scene 22. Table off. People grouped around where table should be, looking at it. Chalk or tape mark where everybody is placed so that we can return to those positions for final (table smashing) scene. Plates, cup, saucer should be handy to J. He should note what the height of table is. Fade in.

R, *squints angrily at "table"*: But doesn't THIS table look familiar?!

S: What table?

E: Where's the hammer?

J: Maybe it's a multiplication table.

A: If it's a vege-table, we can prove that "eating is believing" which is what I believe.

J: I'll set the table. *Takes plate, cup, saucer, knife, fork, spoon and "sets" where he thinks table is. Drop cup first, then plate, saucer, cutlery so they break. Cut.*

Scene 23. Table back on. People in same places but clean up debris. Camera same. Fade in.

J: I give up. I don't believe in anything.

A: I'm hungry.

L: I'm hungry.

Cut.

Scene 24. New scene. Camera tripod. Everybody off. S in bed with clothes on. E standing at side of frame like on stage.

E, *to camera with hand gesture to S in bed*: And now ... "Lying In Bed" *She walks off.*

S, *when she's off, to camera*: I AM NOT IN BED. *Emphatic. Cut.*

Scene 25. Different camera position. Tripod. S in bed clothed same as last scene. Everybody else back on sitting all around edges. J has beard on. L standing. Memorize.

L, *to Sara*: Sara, hearing you lie in bed like that makes me even hornier. *Pause. Then speaking to others*: I suppose all of you don't think there's a bed there.

A: Of course, I slept there last night and had wonderful dreams. Which reminds me: I woke last night thinking that my watch was gone.

J: Was it?

A: No, but it was going.
L, *flatly:* Ha ha. Alright now watch this all of you.
Goes to bed and starts to make love to S. Takes off her top
and bra and feels her breasts. Says to others: Gee, my
hands feel soft now.
They fall to the bed kissing.
Cut.

Michael Snow and Babette Mangolte during filming of
Rameau's Nephew. (Photo: Annette Michelson.)

About Snow

Annette Michelson

I

The entire conduct of our life depends upon our senses, of which sight is the noblest and most universal, so that those inventions which serve to increase its power are surely the most useful possible.

—René Descartes, *Dioptrics*[1]

Jules Olitski once wistfully revealed his desire to spray color upon the vacant air, a fantasy anticipated and realized some seventy-five years before in the projection of the first tinted film. The intensity of this illusionist aspiration, apparently frustrated by the materiality of canvas and stretcher, was to generate some of the most improbably and perversely painterly sculptures of the 1960s. Frustration and perversity alike may, as I have in another context suggested,[2] be read as elements of a more general syndrome, that of a crisis of pictorial enterprise. It is as though contemporary painting had acknowledged, through color-field painting, an impasse, hesitated upon the threshold of temporality before retreating, capitulating to sculptural materiality. It is in this critical moment that the polyvalent venture of Michael Snow originates.

That Snow began as a painter, exhibiting in Canada and later in New York, is generally known. The climate in which he matured was that of the mid-1960s, when the interpenetration of painting, theater, and dance, the flowering of "happenings" and "performance work" were intensive. The systematic exploration of interrelated modalities of sculpture and performance, as in the early work of Robert Morris and Yvonne Rainer; the modification of the space of gallery and museum; the prospecting of new arenas and theaters of operations: these shaped the expanding and somewhat eccentric areas of inquiry in which Snow, together with figures such as Ken Jacobs, Richard Foreman, and Jack Smith, among others, developed. The consequent displacements and redefinitions were not to be accommodated by the decorum of pictorial modernism; these men drew upon the synthetic tradition of pictorial, sculptural, theatrical, and poetic enterprise—the cinema of the Bauhaus, the theater of constructivism, the objects of surrealism, the festivities of dada, preserved, partially and precariously, through the emigration of European artists driven to this continent by fascism.

The lone survivor of that older generation, the most sympathetic and seminal figure was, of course, Marcel Duchamp; and it was his multiplicity of effort and confusion of genres, his own passage from painting to sculpture, to cinema, his excursions into photography which were exemplary for some younger artists of this time. He was, in fact, a model of that polyvalence we shall see in Snow, who passes from painting to sculpture, to film, and whose mature work circulates more freely and regularly between film and photography, music and video and environmental installation, in contestation of the purity, discreteness, and irreducibility of pictorial effort central to the theoretical and critical orthodoxy of that time. For it was not only the polyvalence of Duchamp that disturbed; the subtle and radical manner in which he had long since introduced temporality into painting was now sensed as a threat to the integrity of pictorial space. The optical drawings made to turn and be filmed in *tournage,* the work *To Be Looked at (from the Other Side of the Glass) with One Eye, Close to, for Almost an Hour* (1918) can now be seen in their fully subversive functions—like the concept of "the delay in glass," with its ambiguous resonance of the time limit inscribed within the material as well as *delayer* for the stirring, turning, revolving figure, so constant in Duchamp's work.[3]

Above all, however, it was the idea of framing as the quintessential compositional strategy that challenged, in a characteristically paradoxical way, the value of pictorial purity. The frame, empty and infinitely mobile, directed literally and metaphorically towards the world itself, proved an implacable generator of forms. Against the irreducible purity of the image-free, color-field painting in its frame, Duchamp proposed *The Large Glass,* that painted window whose frame constantly renewed, in interstitial space, the composition of the visible world beyond it.[4]

To a young painter such as Snow, working in a Canadian animation studio, impressed by the implications of Duchamp's framing gesture, the motion-picture camera quite naturally presented itself as the most powerful instrument devised for the further implementation and articulation of that gesture's implications. *Wavelength (1967),* the first wholly achieved articulation of that intimation, takes as its central statement the framing process itself, organized as an extended spatio-temporal strategy of complex resonance. Creating a radically new conception of filmic action as being literally the camera's use and exhaustion of a given space, punctuated by

changes of stock, filters, light flares, superimpositions, alternations of positive and negative image, Snow made of the slow and steady optical tracking shot or zoom the axis of a displacement whose perceptual solicitations and formal resonance are those of narrative action.[5] The film, presented at Knokke-le-Zoute in 1967, broke upon the world with the force, the power of conviction which define a new level of enterprise, a threshold in the evolution of a medium. Upon this threshold, differences of sensibility and of theoretical commitment were reconciled, conflicts of dominant and marginal efforts were transcended. This work came, as if in ironic response to Stan Brakhage's characteristically categorical declaration: "My eye, tuning towards the imaginary, will go to any wavelengths for its sights."[6] This film quickly won an adherence that has surpassed any other of its period. But *Wavelength,* in its traversal of a space in depth, restoring the depth of narrative space, comes to rest on the framed flatness of the still photograph; this "monument to time," as Snow himself termed it, ends with an *instantané* (snapshot). And Snow will now move with increasing freedom between still and moving pictures.

Atlantic (1967) is a culminating work of that period. Still and cinematic image are comprehended within and mediated by a sculptural structure that confirms the specific properties of each. Thus, thirty images of the waters on which *Wavelength* concludes its trajectory are disposed in thin, deeply recessed frames of tin, the whole forming a grid measuring seventy by ninety-six by twelve inches. Each photographic image is reflected on the polished surfaces of the grid, so that the structure is perceived as both an ordered series of discrete units and as a whole. Continuity is virtual, the effect of those reflections which subsume the frame which is their surface, in a general aspect that recalls *Wavelength*'s penultimate visual cadenza of superimpositions. As was immediately remarked upon its completion, *Atlantic* is the work of a particular moment in sculptural development; its idiom is that of minimalist sculpture of the mid-1960s, the most seminal working period of Robert Morris and Donald Judd, of Sol LeWitt and Robert Smithson. In it the elements that will now come to dominate Snow's work are focused and fused: the framing strategy, the adoption of the strong gestalt and of the systematically permutational form. And in the play between real and virtual image, the dominant axis of Snow's work now emerges in its obsessional force, replacing the incessant variational experimentation of the earlier *Walking Woman* series. It is the dynamics of

the perceptual process, of sight, reflected in the titles of the works to come —*Blind, Sight, A Wooden Look, Scope, Glares,* among others—that henceforth occupies the center of Snow's thematic and formal preoccupations.

The period of Minimalist art, whose full consequences have yet to be appraised, is that of a systematic exploration of the modalities of perception, epitomized not only in the sculpture and painting of its artists, but in a particularly rich theoretical production as well. The period of 1964–1971 is that of Robert Morris's "Notes on Sculpture," Smithson's textual variations on the theme of entropy, of Judd's "Specific Objects." To these we must add the writings of Hollis Frampton, Paul Sharits, and the printed statements of Robert Breer and George Landow, all following the pioneering work of Brakhage. If one were to characterize this period in terms derived from older art-historical tradition, one might say that it brought about the recapitulation, in the idiom of abstraction, of the passage from the theory and practice of expressionism to that of a New Objectivity.

This transition, developing within a North American context—that is to say, within a relatively thin theoretical tradition—relied on conceptual substructures largely imported from abroad. These artists proceeded to replace the ideological postulates that had served the preceding generation of abstract expressionists (a somewhat Jungian psychoanalysis and the immediately postwar continental existentialism) with perceptual theory, grounded in phenomenology and the more specifically Anglo-American tradition of analytic philosophy. In this context C. S. Peirce and Ludwig Wittgenstein had privileged status.
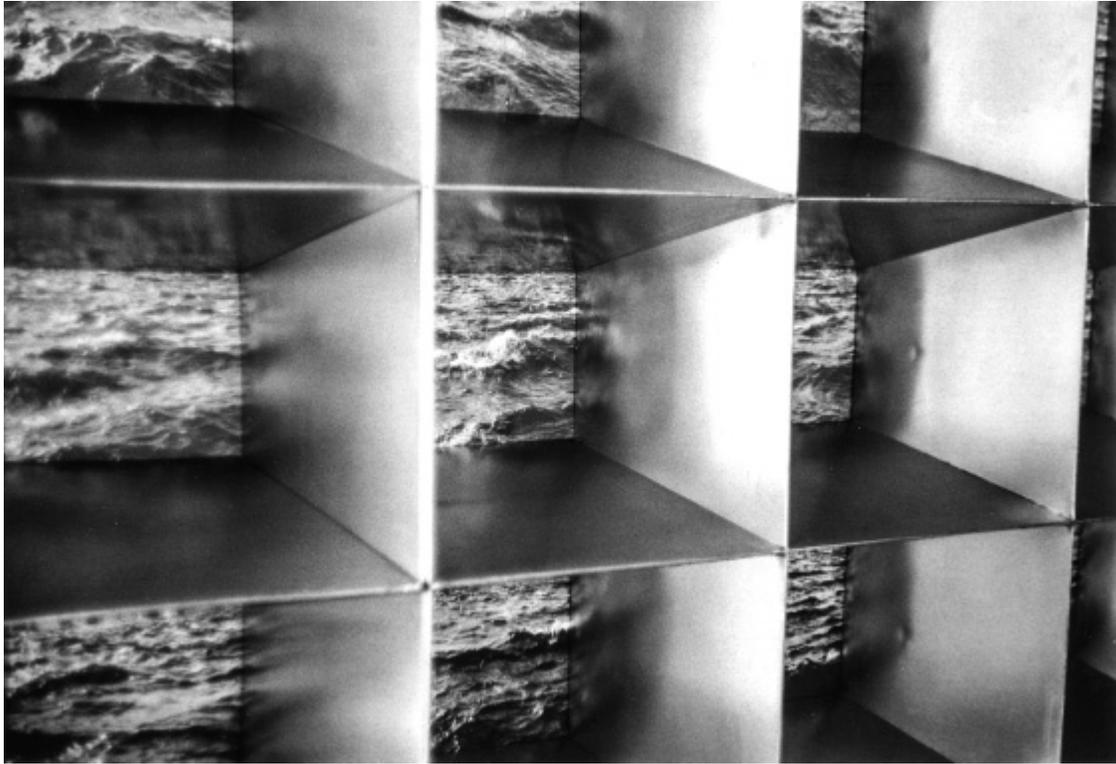
Michael Snow, *Atlantic* (detail), 1967. Thirty gelatin silver prints, metal, wood, arborite. 171.1 × 245.1 × 39.9 cm, 67.4 × 96.5 × 15.7 in. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

It was the peculiar strength of these artists—and of their predecessors—to have assumed and, as it were, exploited the contradictions of a syncretic positivism. Shaped by an empirical tradition, artists on this continent have refrained from giving to their successive sets of postulates, axioms, and methodological options the status of orthodoxy; these have functioned instead as working hypotheses, generative, productive, or, when not, easily disposable. The intense concentration on phenomenologically grounded perceptual theory as implemented by the art of Judd and Morris, among others, was, moreover, supported by a critical tradition that extended from the writings of Roger Fry to the younger critics, many of them grouped around *Artforum*. Analytic and descriptive functions now succeeded the expressive imperatives of the 1950s.

The situation of filmmaking presented one very different aspect: a kind of continuity through change. Two related factors assured a continuity between the theory and practice of these two successive periods, between, let us say, the work of Stan Brakhage and that of Michael Snow: an insistence on the primacy of vision and a correlative emphasis on the

primacy of Light. Further study should reveal the seminal strength of what we might call the scopophilic and fetishistic characters of this American avant-garde in its perpetuation of the idealist primacy of vision.

Independent film between 1950 and 1965, as exemplified by the work of Brakhage, had adopted an artisanal mode of production, in 16 millimeter. The problematic sound technology of that format was joined with the primacy conferred by a romantic poetics on the sense of sight to produce an oeuvre that is, with very few exceptions, silent, predicated upon the optical spatiality and the gestural dynamics of abstract expressionist painting. It went so far, in fact, as to incorporate a gestural painting on the surface of the film. And Brakhage's theoretical production, comparable in both its scope and its contradictions with that of Wassily Kandinsky, rehearses in its central text, "Metaphors on Vision," the notion of film as the luminous inscription of the Imagination, deployed in a pristine purity of vision. This is a vision supposedly uncorrupted by that Fall we know as the Renaissance, perpetuated by the codes of representation and ground into the very lenses of the camera. We recognize in this seminal text of 1963 Brakhage's anticipation of the major theoretical and critical themes to emerge in the French literature following upon the crisis of 1968.[7] The cinema of Brakhage, however, is one of pure presence, in which the limits separating perception and eidetic imagery are annulled in the light of Vision as Revelation.

Snow, presenting an outline for *Standard Time* in August, 1967, said:

> I'm interested in a kind of balance that has some similarity to the way Cézanne equalized the physical facts and the presented illusions in painting. On film the transformation is into light and time and the balance is between the illusions (spatial and otherwise) and the facts-of-light on a surface.

It had been the singular achievement of Brakhage, as a typically New World artist, to have fashioned from the contradictions between his modernist strategies (drawn from Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, John Cage, and Charles Olson) and his idealist presuppositions the working hypotheses which could generate the constantly renewed filmic enterprise of two decades. This interesting and, as I have suggested, generally characteristic

contradiction is further articulated in a prime filmic text of 1970, Hollis Frampton's *Zorns Lemma,* a tripartite structure in which the central section, whose form is derived from set theory, is preceded by the presentation of that set which is the English-language alphabet in the seventeenth-century version of the *Bay State Primer,* the first textbook published in New England. This section is then followed by a twelve-minute sequence, whose sound track is composed of a metrical reading from the cosmogony of Robert Grosseteste, Bishop of Lincoln (1168–1253), celebrating light as the shaping agent of form. "Light, the first bodily form which drew out matter along with itself into a mass as great as the fabric of the world," is celebrated in a metaphysics that stands beside Grosseteste's contribution to scientific method and the theory of knowledge. Frampton, in a characteristically lucid and allusive manner, translated the contradictions between lyric and analytic modes, between idealist and modernist tendencies at work in the theory and practice of his predecessors and contemporaries.

Asserting "difference" film as proposed by "Metaphors on Vision," solicited, nonetheless, a hallucinated gaze. Not narrative form, but the *space in which it takes place,* was the object of radical assault. For the gaze of fascination, the filmmakers of the late 1960s were to begin substituting analytic inspection. Ken Jacobs's *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son* (1969), which subjects a ten-minute primitive film to an hour-long review on an analytic projector, is the key work in this vein.

Adopting and expanding the repertory of filmic "anomalies," as Dziga Vertov had termed them, the independents made use of superimposition, slowed and accelerated action, freeze frames, alternations of color with black and white, conspicuous change of focal length, and the aforementioned empty frame, among other devices. (The elimination of gestural camera movement and of sexual thematics, following upon Andy Warhol's *Chelsea Girls [1966],* makes for a de-eroticization of the Independent film of that period.) It was, however, insofar as these "anomalies" were enlisted in the subversion of the perspective constructions which served as models for the construction of cinematic space and its narrative forms that filmmakers implicitly claimed the sovereignty of the spectator. The hallucinated viewer was, so to speak, replaced by the cognitive viewer, but common to them both was the status of *transcendental subject.*

It is within this broader context that Snow's particular contribution may now be viewed, and for elucidation of its crucial quality, I turn to a celebrated text of Jean-Louis Baudry.

Situating the ideological role and function of the cinematic machine within Western ideology, Baudry, in a text that acquires a very precise resonance for viewers of the Independent cinema, traces the origins of that ideology in the rationalization of perspective performed by the artists and theoreticians of the Renaissance.

> Fabricated on the model of the camera obscura, it permits the construction of an image analogous to the perspective projections developed during the Italian Renaissance. Of course the use of lenses of different focal lengths can alter the perspective of an image. But this much, at least, is clear in the history of cinema: it is the perspective construction of the Renaissance which originally served as model. The use of different lenses ... does not destroy [traditional] perspective but rather makes it play a normative role. Departure from the norm, by means of a wide-angle or telephoto lens, is clearly marked in comparison with so-called "normal" perspective. We will see in any case that the resulting ideological effect is still defined in relation to the ideology inherent in perspective. The dimensions of the image itself, the ratio between height and width, seem clearly taken from an average drawn from Western easel painting ... [T]he painting of the Renaissance will elaborate a centered space. ("Painting is nothing but the intersection of the visual pyramid following a given distance, a fixed center and a certain lighting."—Alberti.) The center of this space coincides with the eye which Jean Pellerin Viator will so justly call the "subject." Monocular vision which, as Pleynet points out, is what the camera has, calls forth a sort of play of "reflection." Based on the principle of a fixed point by reference to which the visualized objects are organized, it specifies in return the position of the "subject," the very spot it must necessarily occupy.

In focusing it, the optical construct appears to be truly the projection-reflection of a "virtual image" whose hallucinatory reality it creates. It lays out the space of an ideal vision and in this way assures the necessity of a transcendence—metaphorically (by the unknown to which it appeals—here we must recall the structural place occupied by the vanishing point) and metonymically (by the displacement it seems to carry out: a subject is both "in place of" and "a part for the whole").[8]

To this powerful exercise in the archaeology of the cinema, we may add Snow's own description of "trying to make a definitive statement of pure film space and time, a balancing of 'illusion' and 'fact,' all about seeing. The space at the camera's (spectator's) eye, is in the air, then is on the screen, then is within the screen (the mind)."[9]

We are now, I believe, in a position to more fully understand the particular impact of Snow's filmic work from 1967 on, to discern the reasons for the large consensus given to the work honored at Knokke-le-Zoute and to answer questions of the following sort: How did Snow's film differ from other recent uses of the long take? Why was it that differences of taste and of theoretical orientation were so promptly reconciled on the appearance of this work? Why was it that viewers and critics, hitherto resistant to the innovations of Independent filmmaking, found themselves engaged by this particular new work? Why, in fact, did it seem to constitute, even at that time, a threshold in the development of the medium so that a critic known for his allegiance to dominant narrative cinema could speak of it as a kind of *Birth of a Nation* of the avant-garde?

Snow invented, in the camera's trajectory through empty space *toward* the gradually focused object on the farthest wall, a reduction which, operating as the generator of the spatiotemporality of narrative, produces the formal correlative of the suspense film. Baudry's text, however, gives us another grasp upon the reasons for the impact of this work and of others that were to follow. For Snow had, in that reductive strategy, *hypostatized* the perspective construction within the space of cinematic representation, and in so doing he had laid bare the manner in which cinema proceeds from the conventions of painting. He had made visible the way in which

"painting is nothing other than the intersection of the visible pyramid according to a given distance, a fixed center and a specific light." He had, in fact, by restoring and remapping the space of perspective construction, reestablished its center, that place which is the space of the transcendental subject.

Wavelength, then, appeared as a celebration of the "apparatus" and *a confirmation of the status of the subject,* and it is in those terms that we may begin to comprehend the profound effect it had on the broadest spectrum of viewers—especially upon those for whom previous assaults on the spatiotemporality of dominant cinema had obscured that subject's role and place. The spectator for whom that place was obscured—and threatened—by the spatial disorientations of, say, *Dog Star Man,* (a space purely optical and a temporality of the perpetual present) could respond, as if in gratitude, to Snow's apparently gratifying confirmation of a threatened sovereignty.

But Snow was not content to reestablish "the referential norm"; he subjected it—and in this he is, indeed, the follower of Paul Cézanne he claims to be—to constant analytic transformation. Thus the slight, constant movement of the camera within its sustained propulsion forward, the light flares and filters which punctuate that movement, the changes of stock and the final shot which intensifies, in superimposition, the flatness of the photograph on which the camera comes to rest. The depth and integrity of the perspective construction is at every point subjected to the questioning and qualification imposed by the deployment of anomalies as differences within the spatiotemporal continuum.

II

Snow now proceeded to embark upon a series of films which systematically explore the modalities of camera movement; they culminate in *La région centrale (1971).* This film marked, to begin with, a significant break with the technology and production system with which filmmakers such as Snow had been involved. It was made possible by substantial grants from the Canada Film Development Corporation and Famous Players. State patronage and the film industry joined in financing this venture for which a special machine was designed to control a maximally mobile camera. There is at roughly this point, among filmmakers as a whole, the developing interest in an expanded technology (use of video, computers, sound synthesizers), and it will be largely the role of the universities to provide these in exchange for teaching duties. The situation develops somewhat on the order of musical composition in the United States during the 1960s, and its consequences, insofar as one can at all foresee them, raise a number of questions. Having returned to Canada from some years of work and residence in New York, Snow found himself free of the particular academic constraints that characterize the American filmmaker's situation, and *La région centrale* is one among a number of major enterprises benefiting from government patronage.

The camera of *La région centrale,* instructed and controlled by the machine, turns in a wild and isolated Canadian landscape in a series of circular variations whose multiplicity—of speed, direction, focus—is the function of a "liberated" eye. As Snow himself has said, "I wanted the spectator to be the lone center of all these circles. It had to be a place where you can see a long way and you can't see anything man-made. That has something to do with a certain kind of singleness or remoteness that each spectator can have by seeing the film." And, "just think of that ... that there is nobody there."[10]
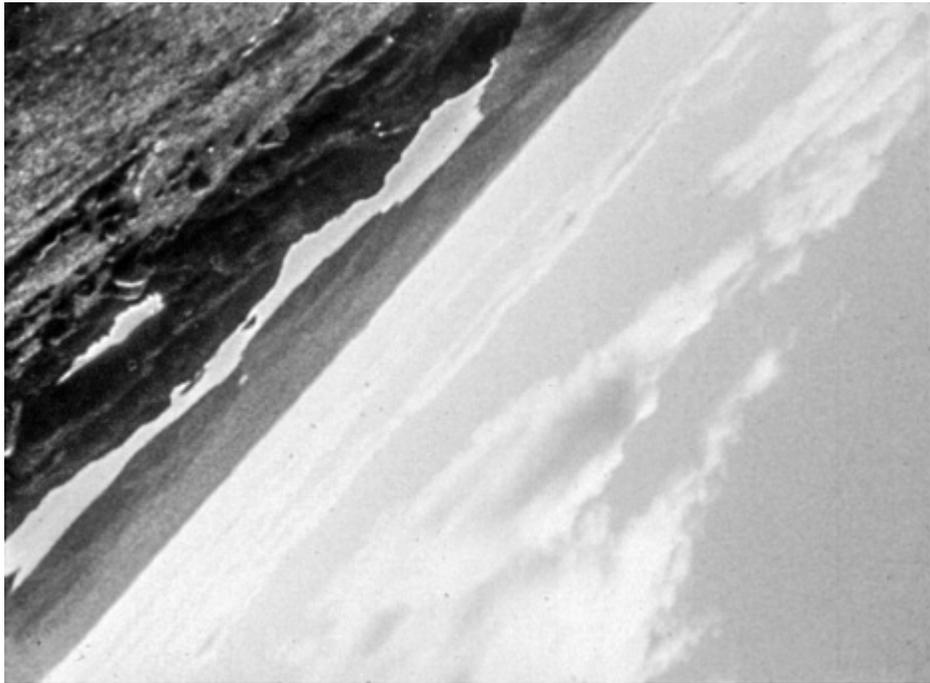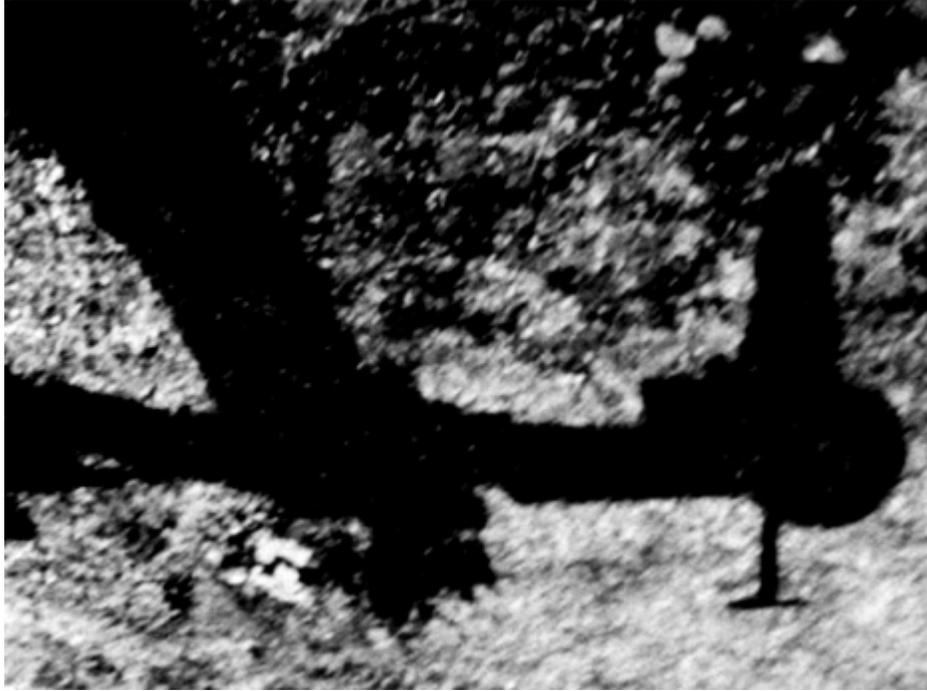
Michael Snow beside the machine for shooting *La région centrale,* 1970. Photograph by Joyce Wieland. Courtesy of Michael Snow.
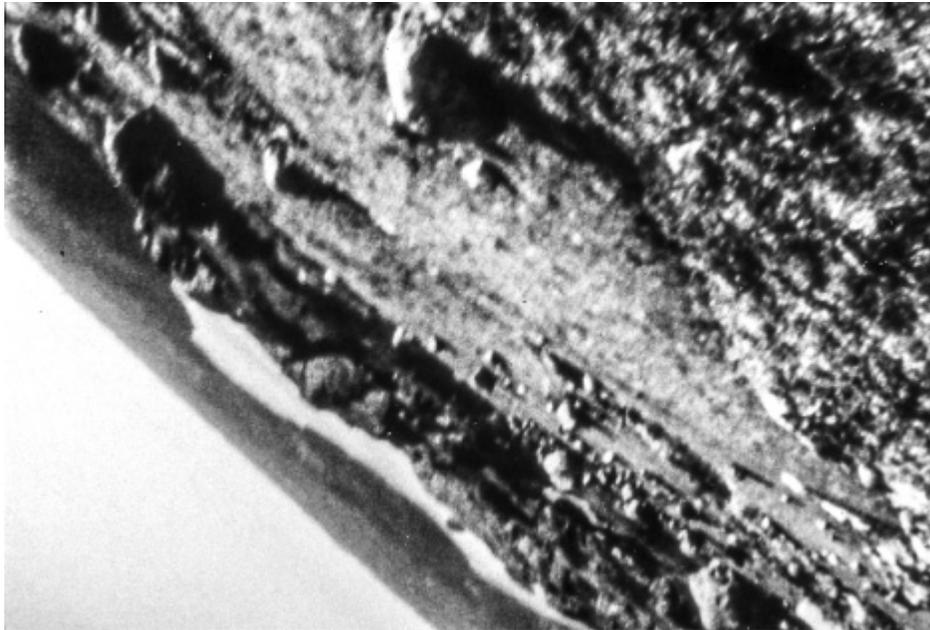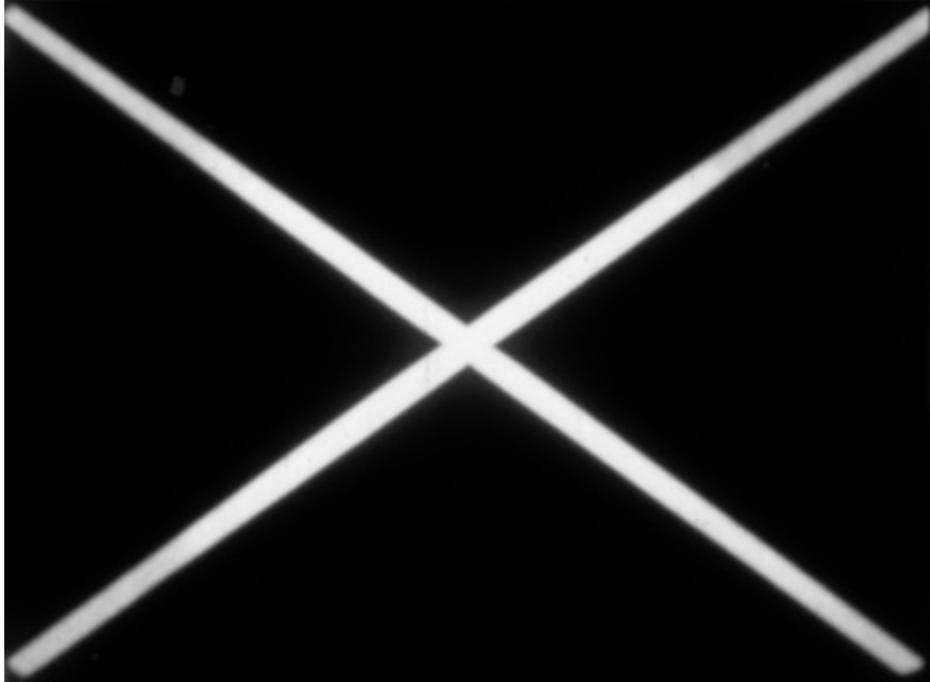
Michael Snow, stills from *La région centrale,* 1971. 16 mm film. 190 minutes, color, sound. Courtesy of Michael Snow.

Michael Snow, stills from *La région centrale*, 1971. (continued)

Returning now to Baudry's text, we pursue the investigation of the role of camera movement within the cinematic apparatus.

> To seize movement is to become movement, to follow a trajectory is to become trajectory, to choose a direction is to have the possibility of choosing one, to determine a meaning is to give oneself a meaning. In this way the eye-subject, the invisible base of artificial perspective (which in fact only represents a larger effort to produce an ordering, regulated transcendence) becomes absorbed in, "elevated" to a vaster function, proportional to the movement which it can perform.
>
> And if the eye which moves is no longer fettered by a body, by the laws of matter and time, if there are no more assignable limits to its displacement—conditions fulfilled by the possibilities of shooting and of film—the world will not only be constituted by this eye but for it. The mobility of the camera seems to fulfill the most favorable conditions for the manifestation of the "transcendental subject."[11]

Michael Snow, still from *La région centrale,* 1971 (continued).

It is, of course, this disembodied mobility of the eye-subject which is *hyperbolized* in *La région centrale,* and it is again the spectator as "lone center" and as "transcendental subject" who is personified in the camera, whose extended mobility rivals that of dominant cinema—that of Max Ophüls, Orson Welles, or Stanley Kubrick.

La région centrale was conceived and shot during the two years which followed the most intensive period of America's space program, culminating in the fulfillment of the Apollo Mission, itself the most extensively filmed and televised event in history. Snow's film conveys most powerfully the euphoria of the weightless state; but in a sense that is more intimate and powerful still, it extends and intensifies the traditional concept of vision as the sense through which we know and master the universe. This film, in its circling, spiraling, rising, sweeping movements, crossing the distances between peaks, creating, in imperceptible loops through empty skies, reversals of direction which disorient the riveted spectator, seems to question, through kinetic counter-example and disorientation, the "ground" of the Kantian "view" which founds the modern sense of "place":
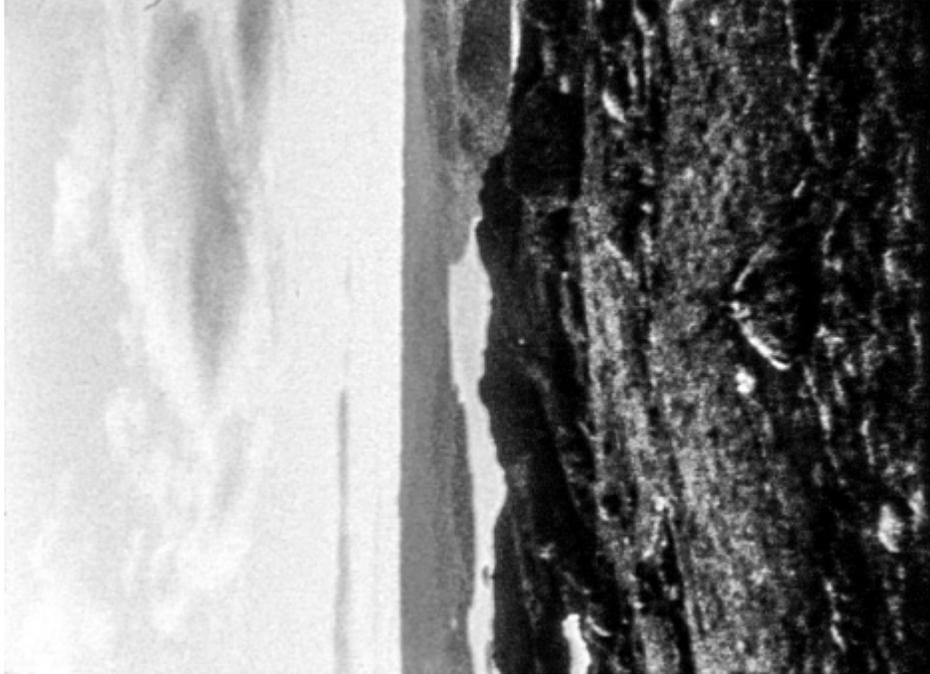
Michael Snow, still from *La région centrale*, 1971 (continued).

Michael Snow, still from *La région centrale*, 1971 (continued).

Since through the senses we know what is outside us only insofar as it stands in relation to our selves, it is not surprising that we find in the relation of these intersecting

planes to our body the first ground from which to derive the concept of regions in space. ... Even our judgments about the cosmic regions are subordinated to the concept we have of regions in general, insofar as they are determined in relation to the sides of the body.[12]

For Snow, in jettisoning all anecdotes, in enforcing the collapse of camera or filmic agent into "character," has deprived the spectator of all other possible source or medium of corporeal grounding and identification. He remarks that "It's not handmade but rather as if the film were made by the machine. The film seems to come from the machine towards the spectator. The reconstitution is more mental than physical. For some films, you think of the cameraman when you see camera movement. He sees for you. Here, it is as if you were the cameraman."[13] This ultimate identification of spectator with the camera completes and intensifies, as well, what Christian Metz has described as the primary cinematic voyeurism, unauthorized, and reenacted, through framing, as a direct recapitulation of the child's vision of the primal scene. Snow's infinitely mobile framing, his mimesis of and gloss upon spatial exploration offer, most importantly, a fusion of primary scopophilic and epistemophilic impulses in the cinematic rendering of the grand metaphor of the transcendental subject. *La région centrale* gives new meaning to the notion of science fiction.

Michael Snow, still from *La région centrale*, 1971 (continued).

Man in space. Courtesy of NASA.

III

Cinema is a Greek word that means "movie." The illusion of movement is certainly an accustomed adjunct of the film image, but that illusion rests upon the assumption that the rate of change between successive frames may vary only within rather narrow limits. There is nothing in the structural logic of the filmstrip that can justify such an assumption. Therefore we reject it. From now on we will call our art simply: film.

—Hollis Frampton, "For a Metahistory of Film"

A thing is what it is and not another thing.

—G. E. Moore

Let us suppose we must compile a set of instructions for the use and understanding of Snow's work. One might begin by listing the basic formal and discursive strategies that animate films, photographic work, projections, sculpture, and painting. To hypostatization and hyperbolization one would add such pairs of terms as identity and contradiction, reduction and extension, punning and disjunction.

I have chosen to consider Snow's film work—and it is extended in the vast and systematic exploration of image-sound relation of *Rameau's Nephew (1974).* Consideration of the above paired terms and the manner in which they function throughout the range of work leads one, however, to locate axes and continuums which join seemingly disparate efforts. Or rather, let us say that Snow's obsessionally systematic investigations exclude the notion of disparity.

Consider, for example, *One Second in Montreal (1969),* a work that he has described as an attempt to construct a purely temporal structure. It is one of the less frequently screened and appreciated works and one of the finest and most arresting. It offers a filmic projection of a serially composed succession of still photographs of squares and parks in Montreal (possible sites for a monument), seen "under snow"—the sort of small, assertive pun in which this artist delights. The images succeed one another in series of expanding and contracting length. The main compositional parameter is that of duration and the work offers, consequently, with unadorned intensity, the tension inherent between still photograph and filmic image. Or rather, it forces the question: why present still photographs in filmed succession

rather than through slide projection? Reply: the temporality that circulates through the optical flicker of projected film joins to the rhythm of images in static succession the pulse of an ostinato. This is, then—not unexpectedly— the most musical of a musician's visual constructions. And if one reflects on the nature and condition of the continuity-in-stasis given each still image projected at twenty-four frames per second, one sees, as well, that they compose, in a sense that is both strictly and paradoxically Framptonian, that cinematic entity, a "movie."

Snow then continues to pursue, with an obstinate sort of wit, the exploration of the modalities of photographic imagery. Thus, *A Casing Shelved* (1970) has two components: a colored slide in projection and a taped recording of the filmmaker's voice. Before one, on the screen, is the single still image of a bookcase (most likely the one installed near the beginning of *Wavelength).* Its bisected shelves, structurally recalling *Atlantic,* contain (frame) the contents that Snow begins to enumerate and describe in a narrative that evokes the years of work and residence memorialized in the accumulation of objects and documents. The disjunction of the narrative is generated by the random order of objects and intensified by the manner in which Snow directs our attention to events separated in time through the scanning of objects scattered in space. And we, instructed by the author's verbal scanning of this "landscape," find ourselves performing those eye movements over the surface of the projected still image which composes the repertory of the camera: the pan, the tilt, the crane shot. The reduction performed in the passage from film to filmed photograph to projected slide has generated a continuum structured by the formal strategies of identity and contradiction.

When is a film not a film? And when is a film a movie? And, as they say, "What is cinema?" Well, let us make a movie (we will call it *Wavelength*) and show that it is film. Then, let us take the still photograph and show it as a movie. And if we instruct the camera-subject to scan the surface of the still image as though it were a landscape, what must we expect—a film or movie?

Machine used for shooting *La région centrale*. Photograph by Joyce Wieland. Courtesy of Michael Snow.

Notes

. René Descartes, *Dioptrics,* published ca. 1637, was the first discourse on light.

. In "Paul Sharits and the Critique of Illusionism: an Introduction," in *Projected Images: Peter Campus, Rockne Krebs, Paul Sharits, Michael Snow, Ted Victoria, Robert Whitman* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1974), pp. 20–25.

. For a detailed consideration of these particular temporal aspects of Duchamp's work, see Annette Michelson, "*Anemic Cinema:* Reflections on an Emblematic Work," *Artforum* 12, no. 2 (October 1973), pp. 64–69.

. Christian Metz has noted the affinities between framing and camera movements in cinema, on the one hand, and the mechanisms of censorship and desire, on the other. Further study of Duchamp's radicalization of the framing gesture and of Snow's multiple adaptation of it might well profit from consideration within this context. Metz, *Le signifiant imaginaire* (Paris: Union Generale d'Editions, 1977), pp. 104–106.

. See Annette Michelson, "Toward Snow (Part I)," *Artforum* 6, no. 10 (Summer 1968), pp. 67–71.

. Stan Brakhage, in "Metaphors on Vision," *Film Culture* 30 (Fall 1963), n.p.

. This anticipation is discussed in "Reading Eisenstein Reading *Capital* (Part 2), *October* 3 (Spring 1977), pp. 77–78.

. Jean-Louis Baudry, "Effets idéologiques de l'apparcil cinématographique de base," *Cinéthique* 7–8 (1970), pp. 1–8. Although translations have subsequently been published in *Film Quarterly* and *Camera Obscura,* the reader is advised to consult the original text for a sense of the specific historical context provided by the journal *Cinéthique.*

. Michael Snow, "A Statement on Wavelength for the Experimental Film Festival of Knokke-le-Zoute," *Film Culture* 46 (1967): 1.

0. Michael Snow, in Jonas Mekas, "Interview with Michael Snow on *The Central Region,*" recorded January 2, 1972; tape deposited at Anthology Film Archives, New York.

1. Baudry, "Effets Idéologiques," p. 43.

2. Immanuel Kant, "On the First Ground of the Distinction of Regions in Space," in *The Changeless Order: The Physics of Space, Time, and Motion*, ed. Arnold Koslow (New York: Braziller, 1967), p. 129.

3. Michael Snow, "Entretien avec Michael Snow," in *Michael Snow: Retrospective* (Quebec: La Cinématheque Québécoise/Musée du Cinéma, 1975), p. 19.

Michael Snow: The Deictics of Experience, and Beyond

Thierry de Duve

> Aesthetic theories are filled with fossils of antiquated psychologies and are overlaid with debris of psychological controversies. Discussion of the psychological aspect of aesthetics is unavoidable.
>
> —John Dewey[1]

> Wavelength is a romantic movie.
>
> —Michael Snow

The monk in Caspar David Friedrich's painting, *Monk before the Sea*, is definitely "having an experience" in Dewey's sense: a mystical one, certainly, but one that would lack that sense of roundness, of growth and fulfillment, and of inexhaustible openness without which Dewey would not call it an experience, if it were not also an intense aesthetic one. The romantic, post-Enlightenment tradition would call it an experience of the sublime, an experience that, rigorously speaking, says Immanuel Kant, should not be sought in "products of art ... but rather, in crude nature ... insofar as crude nature contains magnitude"; in nature "in those of its appearances whose intuition carries with it the idea of their infinity."[2]

The monk is having an experience of the sublime, but are we? Not only are we contemplating a painting, and not the sea, but we are also contemplating the monk contemplating the sea, from behind. In spite of Friedrich's desperate attempt at retrieving an experience of the sublime from art rather than from crude nature, all he can do is present us with an experience at a remove. We are not so much asked to share in the monk's experience as we are asked whether or not it is possible to experience somebody else's experience. From J. M. W. Turner to Mark Rothko, modernist painting—which is romantic through denial—did everything it could to regain authentic experience from this experience by proxy. It exchanged a vicarious experience of the sublime in nature for a first-hand experience of an "appearance whose intuition carries with it the idea of its

infinity;" in painting and as painting. It first removed the monk, then the sea, then the horizon, leaving us with a vast and symbolically unlimited expanse of color, whose title only, *Lac Clair,* for example, connects us to the monk's original experience. After which modernist painting surrendered. It surrendered to postmodernist art, which is, by and large, the disillusioned celebration of surrogate experience as such. As to postmodernist painting (if that exists), it has accepted that our experience, not just of crude nature, but also of pure painting, is an experience at a remove (*Derma*), and perhaps even at a second remove (*Quintet*). For in the meantime, the painters had read Freud, and the sublimation involved in the nostalgia for the sublime got desublimated. Instead of the sea—the maternal element in which the romantic man contemplating it hoped to merge—what present-day painters can hope to bequeath to their children awakening to their infantile sexuality is flatly a "she." The two Michael Snow paintings which I just alluded to, *Derma* and *Quintet,* are by far not his best works, and whether or not it is in the reach of painting to bring us back to where Caspar David Friedrich had left the problem of experience is a question I would rather leave open. It seems to me, in any case, that it is not in the reach of Michael Snow's painting. He is just not a good enough painter for that. But he is a great artist, no doubt, and his response—an adequate and a marvelous one, this time—to Friedrich's *Monk before the Sea,* is there all the same, in the last frames of *Wavelength.* But more about that later.[3]
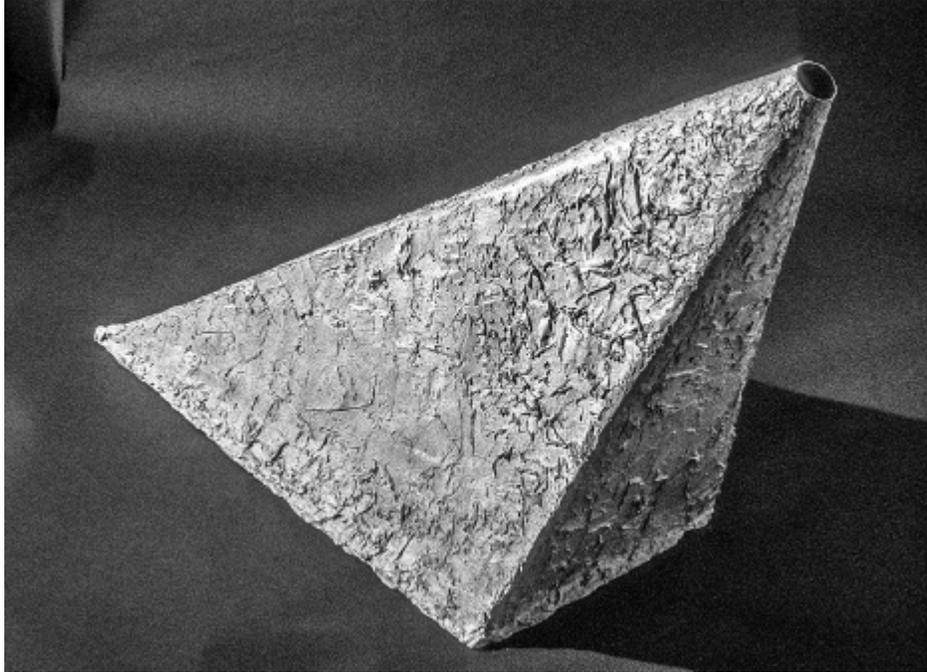
Michael Snow, Monocular Abyss, 1982 . Alkyd-painted polyester resin, 111.8 × 69.2 × 139.7 cm. Collection of Michael Snow.

Certainly Michael Snow is not trying to salvage the experience of the sublime whether à la Friedrich or à la Barnett Newman—from the postmodern disaster. His work is a lot more radical than that. Among the "fossils of antiquated psychologies" and the "debris of psychological controversies" is not just the experience of the sublime but the very trust in experience in general. Snow has shelved away his copy of Dewey's *Art as Experience* a long time ago. And he takes the collapse of this "institution of a felt harmony" which Dewey calls an experience for granted.[4] It is as if he had asked himself, in a very Duchampian way: *étant donné* given, that the unity of experience is shattered, what can be done that is epistemologically enlightening and aesthetically stimulating? And it is as if he had answered: first identify the fragments that once composed this unity, that is, the conditions of experience, then, grant them their freedom. Or do both at once, since the strategy employed to identify them—the modernist strategy of rendering opaque the transparent conditions of a given practice—is also the strategy that makes them self-referential and thus autonomous. And once they are autonomous, that is, disconnected from the bonds that linked them together in a unity, then they are free. And if they are free, then joy might be had from the fragmentation of experience, rather than melancholy.

Then the aesthetic practice we call art might survive the postmodernist surrender to surrogate works of art, simulation and vicarious experience. This, as a working hypothesis.

Now, what are the conditions of experience? How can they be phrased in words that, indeed, presuppose the unity of experience yet which, being words—that is, discrete entities of language—can nevertheless be separated? The answer, which is well known, lies in the words *I, here, now* and in the consciousness of their intrinsic solidarity. I am the one who is speaking, here and now. Here is the place where I am, now. Now is the time when I speak, here. With these three words, *I, here, now,* the minimal conditions for "having an experience" are set, and with the definitions of *I,* of *here,* and of *now,* the consciousness of their intrinsic solidarity is established as well. It is this solidarity that Michael Snow is undoing, at least symbolically. In linguistics, *I, here,* and *now* are called shifters, or deictics, which means pointers. They behave like those little hands with a pointed index that you sometimes see in signs pointing to the exit. And pointing to the exit they do, in Michael Snow's work, as we shall see. But before they point to the exit, it should be clear, I hope, that what makes them linguistic expressions of the conditions of experience in general, is that they are mobile. *I* designates the person who is speaking, whoever that is; *here* designates the place where that person is, wherever that is; and *now* designates the time of the utterance, whenever that is.

The question, now, is this: can you free each of these pointers of its necessary connection with the other two? What would be an I detached from the here and now? What would that look like? What would that mean? This last question is perhaps the easiest. An I detached from the here and now would mean someone who is able to speak on his or her own behalf even when absent. Great artists, artists whose names have been passed on to posterity, or, less grandiloquent, recognized artists, simply, people whose work can speak for them, fulfill that condition. Authorship is that condition's name, authority is the name of the freedom so gained, authorization is the name of the process through which both the authorship and the authority, that is, the recognition, are established. What it looks like is Snow's 1969 work precisely titled *Authorization.*

To what extent are the here and the now neutralized in this work? What is the strategy employed to free the I from the here and the now? *Mise en*

abyme and self-referentiality. A loop in time and in space. If we ask, "Where is the author?" and if the answer is, "Well, in front of the mirror," then the immediate objection would be: "That's where he was, that's not where he is, now. He is in the photograph": To which another objection would then be: what now? Right now, the author of *Authorization* might be reading this article, probably angry that the author of the article called him "not a good enough painter." And what photograph are you talking about? In photograph 1, he is once, twice in photograph 2, four times in photograph 3, eight times in photograph 4, fifteen times in photograph 5. Thirty times altogether! Is a photograph within a photograph within a photograph within a photograph less of a here than the final photograph, and perhaps more of a there? And is the time of such a photograph—a Polaroid, to boot, the utopia of instantaneous photography—less of a now than the final one? Each now is a then with regard to another now, which doesn't cease for all that to remain a now. You are the ones who, now—I mean, in the very moment when you are looking at the reproduction of *Authorization* on the page—come to occupy the author's place in front of the mirror, and thereby authorize him. He has managed to wriggle himself out of the here and now. In the mirror, there remains the I.

Of course, it is well known that all artists are egomaniacs (some critics too), and I have never seen a work of more abysmal narcissism. But Snow has paid the price for the narcissism of his authorized *mise en abyme*. It is titled *Monocular Abyss* a work apt to draw attention on a pun which, I'm sure, he will approve of the I is an eye. The author is a visual artist, one who sees. The I is an eye, and reciprocally: anyone who sees participates in the process of authorization, at the risk of staring into a dark tunnel, or at a blank wall, as with the work titled *Sighting* and best described as a "binocular abyss." Once that is established, room is made for a variety of eyes, of seeing devices freed of the heavy connotations of authorship as well as of the constraints of the here and now. Such are *Zone, Sight, First to Last*, or *Scope*. But narcissism is inescapable, as *Scope* demonstrates. *Scope* is a narcissistic periscope which complicates the trajectory of the gaze so as to render problematic the specular identification of the here, and which functions best when nobody is there. I mean, it is fun when used by one or two persons, but it gains its poetic dimension when it is not used, when it is conceived of as a somewhat pathetic metaphor for human relations steeped in narcissism. The perfect bachelor machine. It may be very nice for the eye

—the organ of vision—to be freed from the here and now, but for the here to be freed of the I—the ego—the author, the one who sees, must first turn blind.

Venetian Blind enacts this turning blind of the author. Its title (pun intended) also states where this happened: in Venice. It doesn't say when, although the work is dated, 1970, and we know that it was done in the aftermath of the Venice Biennale, where Snow had received his official authorization as the tenant of the Canadian pavilion. Nonetheless, the twenty-four color photographs composing the work, though arranged on a sequential grid, do not suggest any particular chronological order. The now of each photograph dissolves into a more general, timeless, state of things. But the here is clearly indicated, not only by the title, but also by the background of the twenty-four self-portraits, as many clichéd views of the celebrated tourist site. Narcissus no longer looks at himself in the mirror, he faces the sun and the sun has blinded him. The souvenirs of his site-seeing tour (pun intended) are for our benefit alone.

Venice, however, is still too big a place to deserve the pointer, *here*, in its autonomy. What would a pure here be, for a visual artist turned blind? What would the sheer index of place be—of the place, remember, where I am or where the eye is—once the artist's field of vision has turned blank, or black. There would be the field without the vision. But how can the field be made visible without the artist's vision? Well, let the field record itself, or let sunlight itself—the light that blinded the artist—reconstitute the field, piecemeal and alone. This is exactly the achievement of *Field*, a work comprising ninety-nine photograms of leaves, grass, flowers, obtained by scattering pieces of photographic paper in an actual field and letting the sun do the work, plus two overall views of the field so occupied. All photographs but one are shown both in positive and in negative. Needless to say, all the paradoxes of the photographic here encountered in *Authorization* maintained. *Here* is both referential and self-referential. It points at "there in the field," but *there* remains an unspecified location. And it points at "here in the field," that is, in the work titled *Field*.

Michael Snow, Venetian Blind, 1970. Twenty-four framed Ektacolor photographs, 126.0 × 234.0 cm, 49.6 × 92.1 in. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; Musée d'Art Contemporain de Montréal; The Canada Council Art Bank, Ottawa. Courtesy of Michael Snow.

Once the autonomy of the here vis-à-vis the I is established, the artist may reappear, as a faint reflection a ghostly trace, a mere index of his former authorized self. He is no longer accountable for the act of seeing. And the field of vision can be pressed to an even shallower here. As in *Press,* where the actual three-dimensional materiality of the referent has been literally pressed, by way of clamps, between a sheet of polished metal (a mirror) and a sheet of Plexiglas, into the two-dimensional flatness of the photograph, and where, in perfectly circular self-referentiality, the resulting grid of photographs has been equally pressed under Plexiglas, by way of identical clamps. A similar self-referential strategy with regard to place is applied in a number of works, among which *A Wooden Look, Of a Ladder*, and *Light Blues,* the most successful, the most poetic one, the one that really moves me beyond the pleasure of decoding the process, being in my opinion *Glares,* a work which aptly recalls the blinding of the I/eye, whether artist or beholder.

A moving version of *Press* is represented by the film, *Breakfast (Table Top Dolly).* Onto and in front of the camera, which moves slowly towards a served breakfast table, a transparent Plexiglas plate has been mounted, which progressively compresses the whole content of the table—bread, egg, cup, orange juice pack—against the background wall. The film's most

interesting feature is to demonstrate that the space taken in by the camera, which gets increasingly flattened into a place as time unfolds and the dolly moves forward, is a here and not a there. Indeed, the distance between the camera and the transparent plane upon which the objects on the table are being compressed remains rigidly constant. Snow has literally materialized Descartes' "stick of the blind man": The intrinsic solidarity between *I* and *here*, the place where I am, is maintained and underlined, but the eye in question, being the mechanical eye of the camera, is not an I in the sense of ego.

It is easy to see how *Morning in Holland* would apply a self-referential strategy similar to that of *Press,* but to the temporal pointer, *now,* rather than to the spatial pointer, *here.* In fact, being a static work, it does that by transforming time into space and the now into a here, the title referring both to a place in space (Holland) and to a moment in time (Morning). But if we want to investigate what a pure now would be, detached from the I and the here, we must obviously turn to a temporal form of art, such as film. The process through which *One Second in Montreal,* a film of 1969, neutralizes the I of authorship is, here again, and very clearly, the usage of the camera as a static and objective recording device, as opposed as it can be to, say, Stan Brakhage's *My Eye.*[5] The process through which it neutralizes the here is more subtle. The title, *One Second in Montreal* is constructed on the same model as *Morning in Holland.* It states a duration and a location. As in *Venetian Blind,* the location is demultiplied into a sequence of images (thirty-one nondescript snapshots of Montreal squares covered in snow, this time), but contrary to *Venetian Blind* none of the images clearly identifies Montreal, let alone exactly where in Montreal.

The here being so neutralized, the real subject matter of *One Second in Montreal* is the now. The film, which is silent and twenty-six minutes long, shows the static thirty-one snapshots succeeding each other on a decreasing and then increasing rhythm. They are clearly identified as filmed instantaneous photographs and not as frozen film frames. The grain of the image moves inside the frame like snow, underlining the passage of time. "In seeing *One Second in Montreal,*" said Snow, "you have to be able to live with what is happening for a certain length of time. [...] It is literally made with lengths of time ..."[6] Since there is no narrative, no unfolding of a story, no climax, no resolution, these lengths of time are lived through as a perpetual now. It is the flux of time, in Bergson's sense, but without the

arrow of time and the tension of intentionality. It is life without the *élan vital*, life defined by Snow as "doing time." However, as the spectator gradually becomes aware of the incremental lengthening and then shortening of the sequences, expectations begin to build up, and another apprehension of the now superimposes itself on this Bergsonian, that is, cinematographic, phenomenology of time, one which has to do with the photographic instantaneous slicing of a point in time. Thus, with the crossing over of the two mediums, film and photography, the two most general apprehensions of the now are being articulated and isolated, made into a quasi-object to be beheld: now as flux, duration, continuity, line, and now as arrest, point, split between before and after.

The time has come to sum up all of Michael Snow's inquiries into the conditions of experience—I, here, now—and to say that he has succeeded in gathering them into the unity of a masterpiece. I say masterpiece, yes, and I say unity, for without the sense one gets of some kind of unity in a work of art, no one would speak of a masterpiece. That holds true for a cubist fragmentation or for a Pollock chaos as it does for Caravaggio. And how would you call that sense of unity, if not by the name, experience? Embarrassing, isn't it? I set out to show that Michael Snow's departure point had been to accept as a given that the unity of experience was shattered, and I maintained that his enterprise was not in the nature of a retrieval or a salvation. Quite to the contrary, it is as if he had furthered the fragmentation by setting the conditions of experience free of their intrinsic solidarity with each other. And now I say that from the utter separation of the ingredients, he has succeeded in cooking a meal which has the unity of a masterpiece. Perhaps we should coin a new word to replace "experience." Or perhaps we should say that what Michael Snow has produced is not an experience in Dewey's sense. For the separation of the ingredients remains intact in the cooked meal. The masterpiece I am speaking about is *La région centrale*.[7]

It has been argued that *La région centrale* is a transcendental movie, and I agree. Bur for many, this is an embarrassing compliment, for it conjures up the specter of the subject—a word which I have carefully avoided until now—of the transcendental subject, in Kant's sense. Well, transcendentals in the Kantian sense are very much what Snow addresses in this film, and yet, without the subject in the Kantian sense. What in the wake of Kant has been called the transcendentals (as a noun) is time and space as the *a priori*

forms of sensibility. Of course, Kant placed them in the subject, space as the form of external sensibility, time as the form of internal sensibility. In other words, he placed the here and the now inside the I. But the subsequent epistemological development of modernity proceeded to move the transcendentals out of the subject and into matter. This movement can be tracked down in science, in philosophy and in art alike. From Euler (a contemporary of Kant) to Riemann and Lobachevsky, to Einstein and Heisenberg, to the present day theories of chaos or of fractals, to name but a few of the important steps along this path in science and mathematics, the transcendentals of time and space have gained their autonomy from the subject. The I (the eye) is no longer the omnipotent observer of a scientific experiment, and it is no longer the Cartesian subject of certitude to which the here and now are referred, or the Kantian subject of transcendental aesthetics by which they are synthesized into the unity of an experience. When Dewey spoke of "having an experience," he was still implying the I as the possessor of the experience. But, as we know, Dewey and his pragmatism missed the "linguistic turn" (the expression is Heidegger's) which modern philosophy took and which is best exemplified by Wittgenstein—not by chance, a significant source of influence for Michael Snow. If, instead of assuming that the pronoun *I* automatically means the subject in the Cartesian-Kantian sense, we simply take it to designate the subject in the grammatical sense, the subject of a sentence, then its claim on synthesis is gone. It is simply a deictic, a pointer, alongside the other pronouns, and on equal footing. (As Lacan said: "the signifier represents the subject for another signifier.") In conjunction with the pointers *here* and *now*, it simply states the conditions which make experience possible; it doesn't guarantee it.

With *La région centrale*, Michael Snow has set the conditions for an experience, an aesthetic one, no doubt, one that may or may not have to do with the sublime to be sought in "crude nature," but not one that is *his*. He is not the monk before the sea, or atop of the mountain, in the barren landscape in northern Quebec where the film was shot; he is sitting with us in the screening room. He has set the conditions of experience, but has stopped short of achieving its synthesis. Contrary to what happens in *Authorization*, the I is here de-authorized. Which is not to say delegitimized. The mobile pointer *I* is set free, that is, rendered mobile again: I, who write these lines, can have the same experience as Michael

Snow or as anyone looking at the film. But, as far as legitimate authorship is concerned, a "rigid designator" (as Saul Kripke would say) has taken the place of the mobile one: the proper name, Michael Snow. I have not the slightest intention of robbing him of this prerogative. He deserves the pride of having signed *La région centrale*, it is *his* masterpiece.

It is his masterpiece and yet, again, what the film conveys is not his experience. It is nobody's experience until it exists as projected light on a screen. And even then, the film astonishingly retains the quality of preparatory work. For three hours in a row, we are watching the conditions of experience being set, installed, tested, probed, laid down before our eyes, and only when the projection is over do we realize that we went through something of which we may say: that was quite an experience. The artist's experience of the central region was only slightly different from ours, to the effect that he saw the rushes and edited the film. But, as he said: "I only looked in the camera once. The film was made by planning and by the machinery itself."[8] The machinery, of course, is an eye, a free-floating disembodied eye, seemingly omnipotent (it sees in all directions), and firmly centered in the middle of its horizon. Those who see *La région centrale* as a transcendental movie sometimes claim that Snow has restored the Cartesian-Kantian subject by presenting us with a mechanical concretization of its hitherto abstract and ideal model. They even take the title as well as the smoothness and the seamlessness of the film as evidence of a plea in favor of a backwards defense against the de-centered, fragmented self of postmodernism. Sure, the film is seamless, so seamless that Snow felt he had to interrupt it from time to time with a yellow X on dark ground so as to re-anchor the spectator both to the frame and to his or her own body. And sure, the eye of the camera occupies the center, and even the center of the center; the title says that much. I would even go further. I tend to see it as a mobile version of *First to Last*, that perverse machine which sees around the corners, and of which Snow has said: "This sculpture is so internal that it feeds on what is external." But that is the point. The center of the central region is like a black hole. Its gravitational pull is such that everything in its surroundings gets swallowed, but it is itself black, invisible, unconscious of what it is doing. The eye of the machinery sees everything but itself. Contrary to the Cartesian-Kantian subject, it is not reflexive.

I am still astonished by the fact that *La région centrale* is so extraordinarily centripetal, and never centrifugal. The camera never reaches out into the landscape, it pulls the landscape towards the center. It is astonishing, especially in those sequences where the camera moves at high speed, because the body sensations that one would expect to see induced by such camera movements (as in IMAX entertainment movies) should be those of centrifugal forces. And there is no phenomenological accounting for that effect, save for this strangest hypothesis: I do not identify with the camera. I am here, no doubt, in the center, there where the eye of the camera is, but my body is not, and thus, that's not me, here. I don't feel it's me. The sensation I get is one of kinesthetic sensory deprivation. Better than Carl Andre, who once defined a thing as "a hole in a thing it is not," better even than Robert Smithson, who redefined the concept of site as non-site, Michael Snow's earthwork (for it is after all an earthwork of cosmological scope) has succeeded in producing a here, strongly objectified but negatively, neither actual nor virtual, firmly anchored to the earth but in reference neither to the observer's body—there is none—nor to a there defined as a goal or a faraway horizon. Only through a quasi-philosophical act of reflection do I "see" the blind spot which I, my eye, occupies. The paradox is that, whereas my eye is disembodied and non-reflexive, my mind is incarnated and reflexive. Indeed, the reflexive movement of the mind is, albeit negatively, signaled by the body sensation that I have called kinesthetic sensory deprivation.

The result is space minus here: the *a priori* form of external sensibility without an internal reference point, that point which would be the subject, that point where I can say, through immediate intuition: here I am. I can still say "Here I am," but only through the mediation of a mental act of reflection. The same with the *a priori* form of internal sensibility: the result is time minus now. Although three hours are three hours, the experience I get from watching *La région centrale* (if we can still call it an experience) is one of time going to all four cardinal points at once, time as laid down in matter, static, as if the fourth dimension could be felt. I can still say, "Now I am," however, but here again, through a mental act of reflection, or else, only when, for a fleeting moment, the yellow X jolts me out of my reverie or when the shadow of the machine passes through the screen.

Of course my interpretation of *La région centrale* is subjective, and I don't count among the "critical theorists" who think the subject is dead. I

just want to point out that the subject I am talking about, philosophically, and the subject that I feel to be, when I watch *La région centrale*, are not the Cartesian-Kantian subject. Neither do I inhabit the here and the now, nor do they inhabit me. As Michael Snow remarked about another of his movies, ↔ [*Back and Forth*]: "You aren't within it, it isn't within you, you're beside it."[9] I couldn't have said it better. The I, the here and the now lie side by side, as the separate conditions for what is called experience, yet their synthesis is no longer called the subject. Conversely, the subject is no longer their synthesis. *I, here,* and *now* retain the autonomy they have, and have always had, as mere linguistic pointers: they are the deictics of experience.

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

We are through with the deictics of experience, but we are not through with all deictics. In front of the subject, there used to be the object. In front of *I, here, now*, set free, what deictic is going to take the place of the object? The answer stares us in the face: the linguistic pointer, *this*. Among the strategies deployed by Michael Snow to set the pointer, *this*, free, and in particular, free of its objectness, we should not be surprised should we find self-referentiality, again. For what is the other name of *this*, if not "the referent"? That which is pointed at, and that which is spoken of. That which the work of art shows, and that which the work of art is about. To detach the "this" from its objectness, the best tactic might be to deprive it of its quiddity, as Aristotelian or scholastic philosophers would say, so as to retain only its quality. And what better quality is there to a "this" than its color? Sheer qualification without an object or a support, the modernist utopia, in fact, of monochrome painting. So, let us call the work *Red*[5], and let us have the circular strategy of self-referentiality eliminate the referent. The result is akin in methodology to *Authorization*. Or, since the utopia of monochrome painting has been called upon, let us call the "this" *Painting* (subtitled: *Closing the Drum Book*); let us have it point at actual monochrome paintings, and let us have it obey a far more complex but equally self-referential logic. *Painting* is not a painting, it is a photograph. Only its title points at painting. But since a photograph, being an index of its referent, is itself a pointer stating and showing the "this" which is out there, let us shuffle the cards and use the mind-boggling strategy of re-photographing

photographs of monochrome paintings and of reiterating this process until the result, referring to the process (which refers to the photographed photographs, which refer to the photographs, which refer to the paintings), can only refer, literally and metaphorically, to the utopia of monochrome painting itself. Painting is nowhere, painting is everywhere, in this work referred to by the title, *Painting.* Magnificent.

Once Michael Snow, around the time of *Authorization*, had discovered the mind-boggling possibilities of self-referentiality, his work really took off, launched into spheres out of reach of the far more simple strategies that he had devised in order to autonomize the "this" in some of his previous works, such as *Aluminum and Lead*, where, in a rather Minimalist, that is, literalist way, the direct reference to the "obdurate identity of materials" (as Don Judd would have said) was to ensure that the work would retain the quality of a pointer. But the full awareness that this was not an object but essentially a linguistic pointer came later, still, and fully bloomed with the film titled *So Is This*. A silent movie dated 1982, *So Is This* has no images of outside referents, only words, beautifully typeset in white Helvetica on black background (although sometimes colors appear), with type size adjusting to the length of the word so as to occupy always the same width on the screen. The words appear one by one, and immediate memory is called upon to build up the sentences. The text is of course a humorous (at times hilarious, at times profoundly philosophical) inquiry into the meaning and the possible referents of the word this. It is self-referential throughout, starting with the first sentence: "This/is/the/title/of/this/film."

I am usually fed up with self-referentiality, a worn-out modernist device if there ever was one, and Michael Snow is perhaps the only contemporary artist who is still able to sustain my interest for it and to give me pleasure with it. The fact is that, in his work, as with all great modernist art, self-referentiality is never a serpent eating its tail. It never draws you into the spiral and then leaves you there, pondering over some tautology. The intellectual effort you make in trying to decode the generative process of the work does not exhaust itself in the mere pleasure of having "cracked" the code. Rather, there always comes a point, when the work is really good, where reiteration becomes allegorical, and where you read the loops in the work as an "image" of the movement of the mind which prompts you to reflect on what you have seen or heard, to jump from a level one of interpretation to a meta-level two, only to lapse back onto level one until,

all of a sudden, you jump out of the "art-about-art" logic and into an interpretive realm where art speaks of the world. And where the artist betrays himself. At that point, as John Dewey said, "discussion of the psychological aspect of aesthetics is unavoidable."

And at that point, we are moving onto delicate grounds, I realize that. So, let me preface the next chapter with another general comment on modernism. It seems to me, in retrospect, that a good deal of the self-referential "art-about-art" tropism of modernism proceeds from the fear of being caught with one's pants down. I mean that when an artist seems to go at great lengths to abstract his or her art from "life," in order to refer it only to itself or to other art-references, there are chances that part of his or her motivation stems from the fear of being disclosed as someone with an ability for human relations not quite matching his or her aesthetic ambitions. I called artists "egomaniacs" above, which was not very polite. But let's face it: artists are sometimes, if not often, individuals cursed (or blessed) with a complicated psychology. Their hypersensitivity to the tragic intricacies of human relations fuels their work; it also, and inevitably, gives them a certain handicap in their actual dealings with others—especially, with the other sex. They may or may not compensate for their handicap in their work. Great artists go beyond compensation, lesser artists wear it on their sleeve. In any case, the protective strategies—such as self-reference— with which artists hide and transcend both their handicap and its compensation are rarely irrelevant to their art. I would say that they are irrelevant to the *quality* of their art, only there where I sense that these strategies are, in the long run, a form of modesty that never totally succeeds in masking the artist's fragility. But when they become a system and an easily obtained token of modernity, they are also an alibi. Which is why it seems to me that the period that has spawned purism, "art-about-art," self-referentiality, and various art forms with great theoretical pretensions but little human content, has sheltered more artists with only a mediocre insight into human nature than any other period to history. I say this because, when Michael Snow really moves into the self-referential strategies that unleashed the formidable experimental activity for which he is now known, he had already been caught "with his pants down," and this redeems him. The way last year's Toronto retrospective staged his career made it clear that the "around *Wavelength*" period, and beyond, on which I have been concentrating until now, was preceded by the *Walking Woman* period.

Before the *Walking Woman* period, Snow had been a modern artist, certainly, but not really a modernist artist. His awareness of modernism, in a more or less Greenbergian sense, but already with a critical edge to it, surfaced not long before he launched himself into the *Walking Woman* works, with paintings such as *Lac Clair, Green in Green, Red Square,* and *The Drum Book,* and sculptures such as *Quits.* And the *Walking Woman* works themselves, though modernist in some wicked sense, cannot fail to appear, today, as surprisingly transparent, psychologically speaking. Depending on one's mood and the degree of one's ideological tolerance, this transparency appears at times refreshing and ingenuous, almost naive, and at times embarrassing and irritating. Especially for women.

Michael Snow, Lac Clair, 1960. Oil and paper adhesive tape on canvas, 178.0 × 178.0 × 3.0 cm, 70.0 × 70.0 × 1.2 in. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Photograph by National Gallery of Canada.

Why this preamble? Wasn't I supposed to talk about deictics? I haven't left my subject. Speaking of the last series of *Walking Woman* he did, the ones for Expo '67, Snow referred to them as "a summation of certain ideas of objectness that I'd been thinking out."[10] It is hard to bypass the juxtaposition of the two signifiers, "women" and "objectness." Certainly, I do remember having read "A Lot of Near Mrs." (a text that might infuriate feminists and that I myself find annoying if I decide to leave my sense of humor in the cloakroom): "My subject is not women or a woman but the first cardboard cutout of *WW* I made. A second remove depiction."[11] All right, so much about objectness (that's what I called wicked modernism). But you don't get rid of the subject matter—or should I say object matter?—so easily, especially since Snow was modernist enough, at the time, to appreciate the risks he was taking in turning figurative. What is the deictic for objectness? *This*. And what is the deictic for woman? *She*. That is not quite the same, although both are used to designate the referent: the thing or the person pointed at, the thing or the person spoken about, the thing or the person shown in or as a work of art.

Michael Snow, Expo *Walking Woman* (stretched figure), 1967. Brushed stainless steel, 231.0 × 120.0 × 244.0 cm, 90.9 × 47.2 × 96.0 in. Art Gallery of Ontario, gift of the Government of the Province of Ontario, 1968. Courtesy of Michael Snow, AGO Photo Resources.

Pointers abound in the *Walking Woman* works, starting with the cutout that makes them a "second remove depiction," going through the framing and projecting devices that appear in works such as *Morningside Height*, and ending with the various shootings (pun intended) of the *Walking Woman* on location in *Four to Five* or in the film, *New York Eye and Ear Control*. Moreover, the "situational aesthetics" in which the *Walking Woman* was embarked plays on virtually every combination that the conjunction of the pointers *this* and *here* may allow. Finally, the elaborate anamorphoses of *Torso* or *Gone* posit the I or the eye with regard to both the this and the here. But none of the innumerable variations on the *Walking Woman* theme succeed in keeping the pointers from being transitive. Nor do they try to: if one this, say the window in *Morningside Height*, aims at the anamorphic screen, the screen aims at the cutout, the cutout aims at the icon of the *Walking Woman*, and the icon aims at women. Whether a depiction at a first, second, or third remove, it remains that "women are the nearest 'other.' The first 'other.'"[12] And there we are.

This may be the pointer for objectness, objectness is not yet otherness. If you are male and heterosexual, *she* is the pointer for otherness. Philip Monk noticed that "the scopic field for Snow is possessive (as well as sexual)."[13] No doubt. The voyeuristic overtones of his work are unmistakable. But I don't believe that this psychological inclination in itself accounts for his obsessive concentration on the *Walking Woman* theme for a full six years, from 1961 to 1967. The voyeurism itself is downplayed, most of the times, and though traces of a mild sadism appear here and there, one never gets the sense of a man sexually obsessed and working it out in his art. Yet obsessed he was. What might have obsessed him so long? Otherness, I would venture to say, or better, the approach of otherness. It just happens that "women are the nearest 'other,'" No matter how near, still other. No matter how other, still the nearest, as the inverted zooming gimmick of *Seen* (an important work) beautifully demonstrates. This is why depiction at a first, a second, or a third remove leaves otherness intact. Otherness is not remoteness. The true voyeur makes that confusion and needs the distance. But Snow is not a true voyeur. Voyeurism in his work is a strategy of approach geared at the unapproachable from the very start. For seven years he would zoom in on the nearest other without getting any nearer. Suddenly, he would bring the *Walking Woman* period to a close, and zoom in on the other furthest away. He would do *Wavelength*.
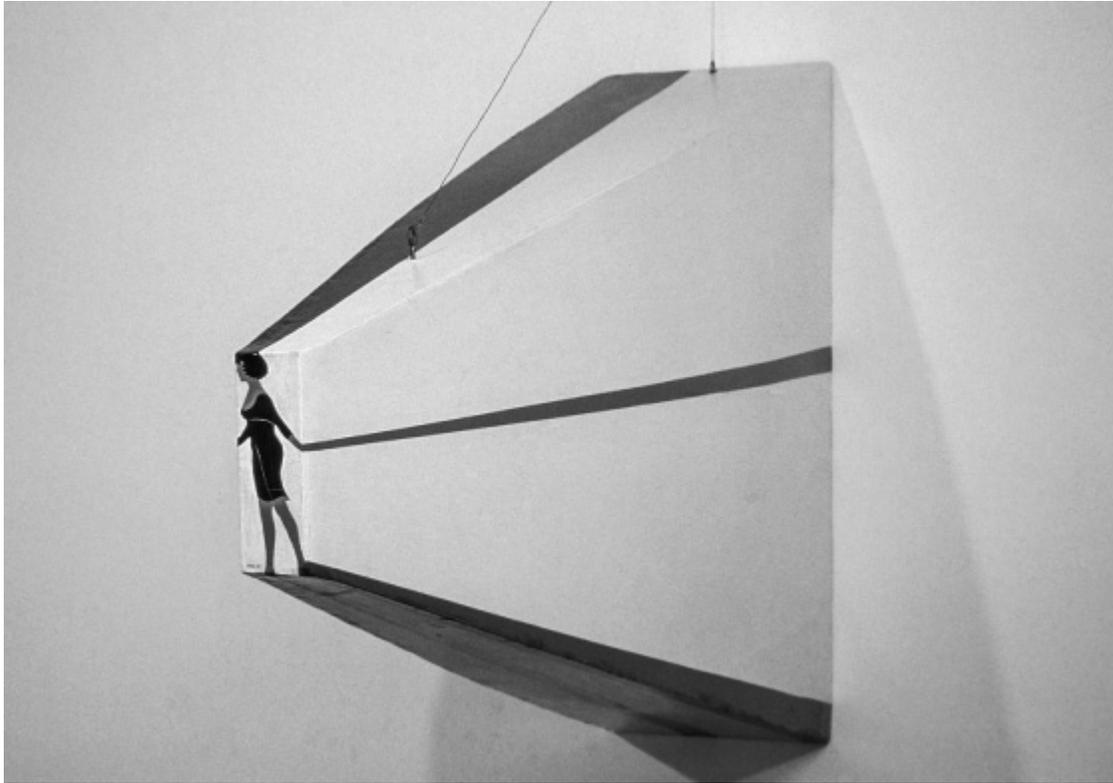
Michael Snow, Seen, 1965. Enamel on board construction, 152.4 × 52 × 218.4 cm, 60.0 × 20.5 × 86.0 in. National Gallery of Canada. Courtesy of Michael Snow.

We haven't gotten there yet. First we have to understand that in spite of the innumerable pointers pointing at the *Walking Woman,* she is in fact the pointer. And what she points at is otherness. It is not so much she, the pronoun, which stands for woman, the nearest other, as it is the woman, the icon of the *Walking Woman,* which stands for the pronoun *she*. If she is "the first other," it is because she (both the pronoun and the *Walking Woman*) represents Michael Snow's first encounter with otherness as such. And otherness as such presents itself in more than one disguise, only one of which is gendered. Simply follow the deictics.

It is remarkable, if you think of it, that in all languages, as far as I know, only the third person is gendered. I is not gendered, perhaps because it doesn't need to. But you is not gendered either, and that is somewhat of a mystery. There must be a profound wisdom in that "decision" taken by this collective production of humankind that is language, and I don't believe that it has anything to do with the usual sexist prejudices that make "man" stand for "human being" or "he" pretend to be neutral. Language in its wisdom has after all gendered the third person, it avoided putting a sexual

identity on the addressee. I dread the moment when some well-intentioned feminists, who will insist on being addressed to as women, will want to reform that collective wisdom. In the art world, I am afraid, this reform is already pressed on us. As we know, the whole issue of representation and identity that preoccupies so many people in the (North American) art world has in the last few years moved away from the question of the artist's gender, via the question of gendered subject matter, to the question of the spectator's gender, sex, or sexual orientation. This is a dangerous trend, and it is quite ironic that it should be fostered in the name of symbolic difference, when the result is imaginary sameness (the Lacanian definition for "identity").

Michael Snow, Seen, 1965. National Gallery of Canada. Courtesy of Michael Snow.

Perhaps I am making ripples, but I will not hammer my point. What matters is that otherness is not difference, and that the second person should be a pointer of otherness that should not suffer confusion by also being a pointer of difference. So language, in its wisdom, has "decided." *He* and *she* posit the other as that person who is talked about, you posits the other as that person who is talked to. Quite another matter. In human relations, the

nearest other is not woman in general, walking or not, the nearest other is the one I say "you" to, the one I address, and ultimately, the one I address my love to. Whether man or woman is a matter of what my sex and my sexual preferences are, and this, more than anything else, shows why it is vital that "you" not be gendered. You are the one, "you" is an individual. Other, not by virtue of sexual difference, but simply other. Addressed to and recognized as irredeemably other. There is room for you, for a "you," there where narcissism ends. To quote John Dewey one last time, "discussion of the psychological aspect of aesthetics is unavoidable."

With all the required grains of salt, Michael Snow's narcissism is an unavoidable fact of his work, we have seen that. Not surprisingly, *you* is the one deictic which has, by and large, not left its self-referential mark in the work. There is one important exception, however, one which—who knows? —may open a new period. It is titled *Conception of Light*, and it is the one and only work in Snow's non-filmic production that I would call poignant. It shows two enormously enlarged photographs of an eye facing each other. A blue eye—not even an eye, just the iris with the pupil in the middle—is staring into a brown eye on the opposite wall, and is stared into by it. Their color unmistakably identifies them as belonging to two different persons, ungendered. It is not even certain that they are human eyes. The glare of the flashlight is awkwardly visible. The scale is monstrous. Nobody, not even an optician, has ever seen eyes like this. To say that they are disembodied is an understatement; they look as if they had been excised by some cruel surgeon and put under a microscope. Yet they are incredibly fleshy, to the point of disgust.

Ominous, terrifying, painful. Other beyond recognition, identification and empathy. They are, for each other, the most radical statement of otherness I have ever seen. Their installation at the Power Plant, I am afraid, didn't serve them too well. The space was too open, and they shouldn't have shared it with other works. They deserve a room of their own, of intimate scale, bedroom-like. The distance between them should have been given more careful attention, for perfectly tuned intimacy, I believe, is the paradoxical (given their size) condition for the proper perception of their otherness.
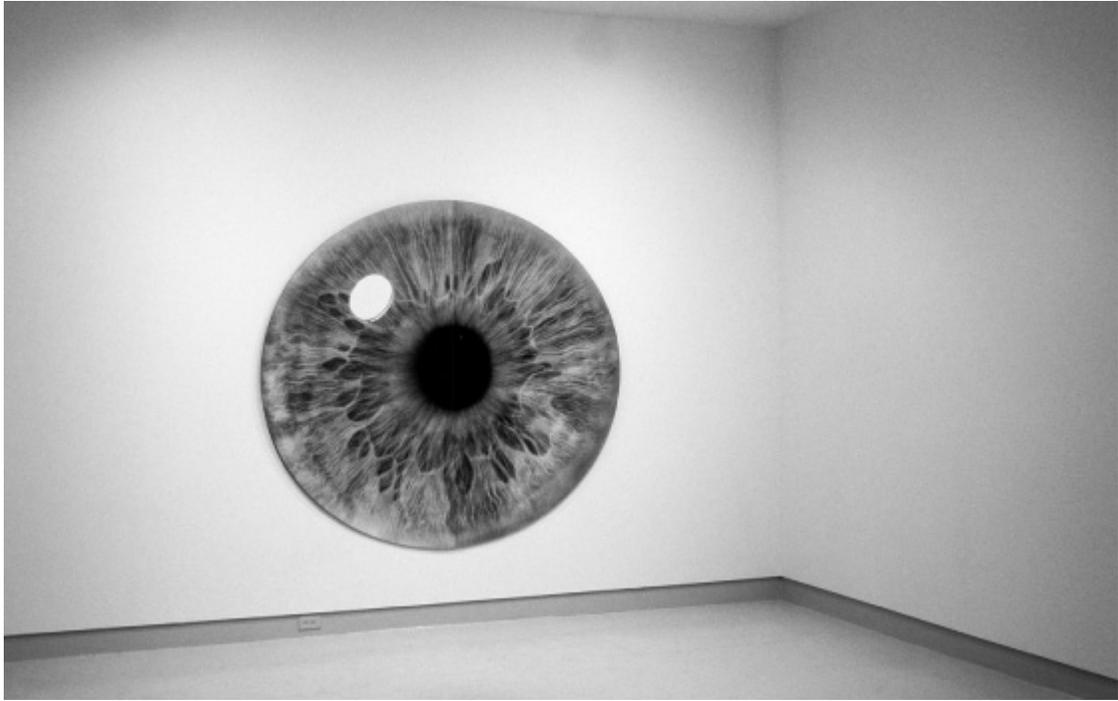
Michael Snow, Conception of Light, 1992. Two round color photographs, mounted on plastic, 189.2 × 182.9 cm, 72.0 × 72.0 in. (each photograph). Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.
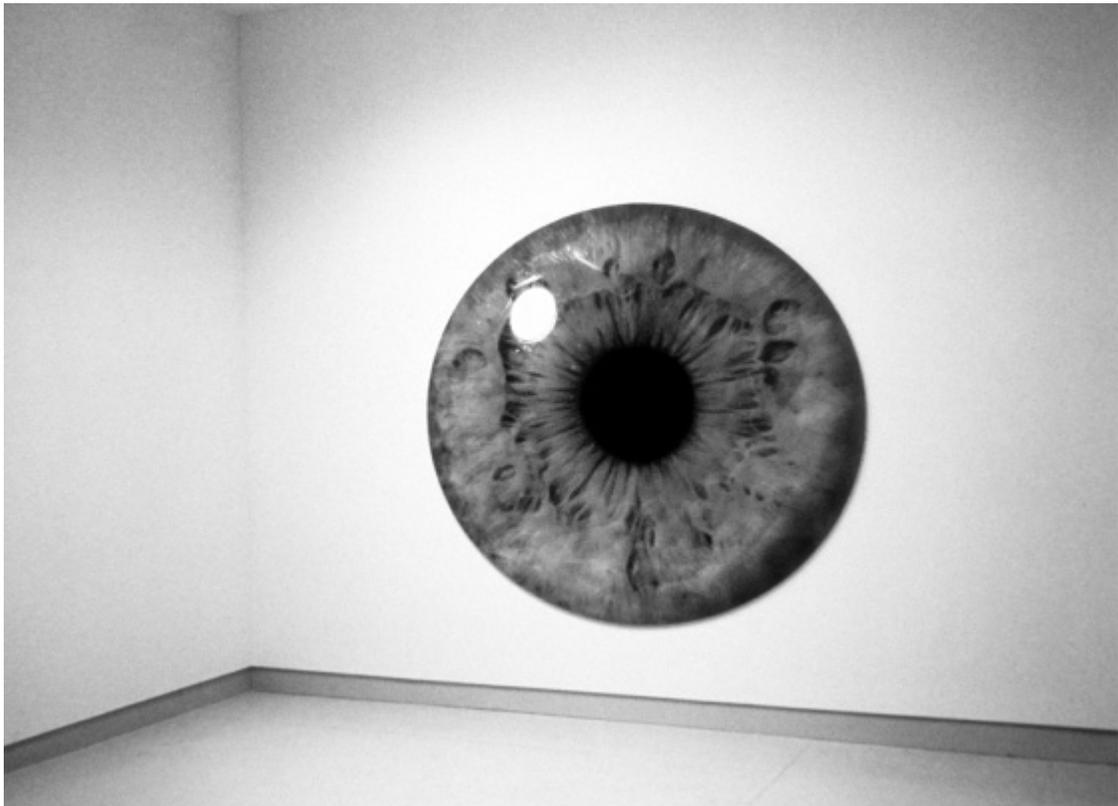
Michael Snow, Conception of Light, 1992. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

For once, Michael Snow's taste for punning might have been taken by surprise. There is no way, this time, one could substitute the pronoun *I* for the noun, "eye." This work is not about two egos engaged in a face-to-face. It is about the mutual, stunned, and stultifying recognition of the nearest other. Recognition is not even the right word. Surrender would be better. Not surrender to each other, but rather, to each other's otherness. The flat but cruel impossibility of getting into the skin of the beloved one. So, in spite of all appearances, we are not dealing with an I facing an I, but with a you facing a you. Of course, this is an interpretation, and some might find it too intellectual. Yet I maintain that this is the way the work operates, aesthetically: it doesn't resolve in the usual reversibility of beholder and beheld. The two eyes do not have a conversation with one another. I am not communicating with you, while you are communicating with me. Whether blue eye or brown eye, I feel like a "you." Addressed to, period.

It is not even as if I could identify with both eyes, taking turns, as if I could back up to look at the blue eye, for its own sake, and then turn around and do the same with the brown eye. Even in their not too successful installation at the Power Plant, it is clear that if I wanted to back up enough to take in the whole image and assuage its frightening effect, I would be pushed into the pupil of the other eye threatening me from behind—another black hole, as it were. I am caught in their crossfire and standing in their way, unable to identify either with the one whose position I occupy nor with the one I stare at, mirror-like. And that's where I realize, with that sudden reflection of the mind that is anything but specular or speculative, that I myself am a "you."

But of course! In art, the addressee is the spectator. Doesn't that go without saying? Perhaps that is why the deictic you is conspicuously absent from Michael Snow's work, and why *Conception of Light* is somewhat of an anomaly. There is no need for works of art to underline the "you," it is there all the same; without spectators, they wouldn't be works of art. Still, it strikes me that modernism, which has rendered most of the conventions of art opaque and self-conscious, has very rarely focused its attention on the basic, quasi-subliminal convention that works of art are meant to be beheld. The notable exception is Manet, and in art theory, the work of Michael Fried. But my sense of "to be beheld" is not exactly Fried's. Fried doesn't tackle the issue of the addressee's otherness (although I believe it is the drive behind his writing). Most of the time, neither does Michael Snow. In

Side Seat Paintings Slide Sound Film, for example, in which the artist comments a retrospective slide show of the whole body of his paintings, the spectator's place is clearly indicated by the odd angle under which we are allowed to see the slides. But the film's subject matter is not to investigate the convention that works of art are meant to be beheld— it is the other way around: since the paintings in the slides are art already, we as spectators are put through the tiresome experience of having to behold them, no matter how uncomfortably we might sit. Although all of Snow's works revolve around the fact that they are meant to be beheld, and play with that fact with formidable self-referential virtuosity, only *Conception of Light* has dealt with the spectator, not as receiver but as addressee. To further explain: the notion of receiver stands in relation to that of sender and belongs to communication theory. Sender and receiver are reversible, otherwise there would be no communication. Even so-called reception theory in art history stresses that, when it tends to see works of art as products of their audience as well as of their authors. The notion of addressee, on the other hand, is irreversible: *you* is the pointer of the vocative, it is the second person, period. Not to say that you cannot answer. But the minute you answer, you become the first person. You remain yourself, of course, but you are no longer a "you," rather, an "I" (which shows why thinking in terms of deictics is a move away from the philosophy of the subject). The pronoun you is the pointer of otherness, as addressed to.

In Snow's work, especially in those works that are interactive, the spectator and the artist are allowed to swap places. You and I alternate, and as they do, the addressee becomes the addresser. Which is probably why I said that *Scope,* that narcissistic periscope, although obviously interactive, functioned best when no one was using it. In any case, I prefer it that way. And which is also probably why *Authorization* is such a successful work. It allows anyone to take the author's place in front of the mirror and to savor the humor of a strategy, as I said, of abysmal narcissism, yet devoid of self-indulgence. There is a great deal to be said in favor of the reversibility of the author's and the spectator's places in Michael Snow's work; it is its "democratic" quality. Only on the background of that quality can the ironic populism of *The Audience* be fully appreciated. The audience is the public commission-sculpture framing the entrance of Toronto's Skydome, which most Torontonians have learned to love and most art critics love to hate. It is of course the one work where the "you" to which art addresses itself is

being directly represented, not implied, not invited to swap places with the artist, but plainly represented. It has nothing to do, however, with the existential—or should I say, ontological—otherness that *Conception of Light* addresses. Otherness is seen here in mere social terms, as strangeness and the representation of "weird" behaviors. Obviously, spectators of baseball games are not in the same social class as artists. The work only barely succeeds in not being offensive, and then only thanks to its deliberate grotesqueness.

The reversibility of *I* and *you,* of the artist and the spectator, exists in space only. In time, the artist always has the upper hand. He came first, he has set the rules of the game for you, the audience, to play. Your eye (your "I," the pun is back), the artist seems to say, will be invited to take the place of mine, but I have preceded you. This is why I have a retrospective at the Art Gallery of Ontario, and you haven't. No matter how much you play with me in real space and real time, your gaze is retrospective, which means that from your vantage point, mine was prospective. I have seen something, and you see it later. Again, I have not the slightest intention of robbing Michael Snow of his claim on anticipation, and, as a critic, I am grateful that he has allowed me to see, in my own clumsy theoretical way, what he has seen before me in his poetic and intuitive way. And yet, if "you see later" is the formula for the artist's privilege over his spectators, "see you later" may be the humble acknowledgment that this advance is, in the countdown, to no avail. *See You Later/Au revoir* is the title of a film from 1990. A man in an office, played by the artist himself (very important), gets up from his desk, grabs his coat, puts it on, waves good-bye to his secretary, and exits the room. That's all. The shooting of the scene didn't take more than thirty seconds. What you see on the screen, however, takes a good eighteen minutes. With the help of sophisticated technology involving a Super Slo-Mo video camera and additional slow-motion film transfer, Snow has stretched "real time" to the point where the most minute unconscious gesture becomes a dramatic event with everything that, say, *One Second in Montreal,* did not have: beginning, development, several climaxes, resolution.

The comparison with *One Second in Montreal* comes readily to mind. As the first half of this film "literally made with lengths of time" gradually augments the duration during which each snapshot is held on the screen, we become more and more aware of our moving away from the split second it

took for the snapshots to be taken, and time passing by becomes a measure of our lateness. The same happens with *See You Later/Au revoir,* but with different means. The first frame is in sync with real time, but with the second frame we are already lagging behind. When the film ends, we are seventeen-and-a-half minutes behind schedule. It is not just time which is the object of this incredible dissection, it is lateness. This lateness is our handicap, but also our advantage. The artist was faster than us, but then he has already exited the room while we are still allowed to watch him. "You see later," the English title seems to say, "*au revoir,*" says the French. *Adieu* is more like it. For when the time will come for us to see the film again, the artist may very well have exited the room for good. Meanwhile, she, the secretary, the next-to-nearest other, whose typewriter is heard on the soundtrack in equally slowed motion, is still "doing time," Snow's metaphor for life. Overtime, that's for sure. I don't believe I have ever seen a more moving and beautiful allegory for the artist's desire both to see his work survive him and to postpone his exit as much as possible. In the slowed down image of Snow waving good-bye to his secretary, it is not just a good-bye, the *au revoir,* which is an allegory, the waving is an allegory in reverse. Equally allegorical is the almost immobile wave traced in the air by the artist's coat, as he grabs it from the coatrack and slings it on his shoulders with a wide circular movement. And so is Snow's undulating gait as he slowly leaves the room, walking from right to left. And so is the continuity of the panoramic shot that follows him in his movement and takes in, one by one, all the elements of the set successively painted in all the colors of the rainbow. And so is, again, the wave made by Snow's coat floating in his back, as he opens the black and red door leading to an exterior flood with violent white light. And so is the beam of light pinched and made more and more intense by the closing door that the exiting artist pulls behind himself. In *One Second in Montreal* it was the abrupt sequential editing of discrete snapshots that composed a movie "literally made with lengths of time." In *See You Later/Au revoir* it is one single quasi-instantaneous shot, blown up by the extreme slowing down of Snow's *Zeitlupe* (as the Germans call slow-motion), which composes a movie allegorically made of one continuous *wavelength*. I realize that in the last few paragraphs, and although I was still turning around the issue of spectatorship, and thus of the "you" to which art addresses itself, I spontaneously stopped using the pronoun you and began to speak of us.

Another deictic, the deictic for the collective, if you happen to believe in collectivism, or of community, if you have put your hope in togetherness, but in any case, the deictic of man's common fate. Of man's and woman's, of course: I, you, he, and she. No need to give it its proper name. We all know the stuff of the monk's sublime experience before the sea. To quote Kant again, he was looking at crude nature "in those of its appearances whose intuition carries with it the idea of their infinity." His gaze plunges into a vast expanse of sea and sky and reaches for the horizon, out of reach by definition. The horizon is the finite symbol of the infinite, and it doesn't take much guessing what the infinite stands for. He is a monk, after all. Even the romantic spectators of Friedrich's time must have had somewhat shakier beliefs. They were not asked to share in the monk's experience, but rather, they were given it to contemplate, at a remove. Sure, he is just a tiny spot on the canvas, but that's the point: as they looked over his shoulder, they didn't stare into the same emptiness as he. He was beholding nature, they were given a painting to behold; Friedrich's treatment of it made sure there could be no confusion. We, modernist and postmodernist spectators of Friedrich's canvas, have gone a few steps further. We have learned to remove the monk, and then the sea, and then the horizon: it was just a line on the flatness of the canvas, after all, and as we know from Greenberg, the flatness is enough. And the canvas is framed, too. And it's in a museum, at that. And museums are good business today. We stay ashore, no doubt, our feet firmly anchored in the materialist convictions of our disenchanted world, as eventually the monk, or his spiritually charged gaze, zooms into the infinite and his horizon recedes.

The horizon in *Wavelength* is the line closest to the spectator, as in Cézanne. The whole frame, in fact, acts as a horizon, but especially so the bottom line of the screen. The high viewpoint (another Cézannian device) emphasizes that. It is from the bottom of the screen that all characters enter the screen, and it is through the bottom of the screen that the dead man disappears. Unlike the monk, he didn't show us the way into a metaphysical realm, and we, unlike Friedrich's romantic spectators, aren't even invited to ponder over his passage beyond the threshold of experience. Too busy "doing time," we simply get past other people's death. The dead man got swallowed by the horizon, and it is one that came from behind, bypassed him, and left him lying on the floor, as something to be disposed of. His afterlife is that of the referent: he has become a "this," something spoken

about, and then, not for long. "Richard, it's me. There's a man lying on the floor. I think he's dead." What remains is the yellow chair, and the yellow chair is not a "this." It is, in some subliminal way, a "you," since it is facing us. But eventually the yellow chair vanishes too, and she, the two *Walking Woman* cutouts on the wall, gets briefly remembered. Only then do we realize that the monk's sea has not vanished. It's there, but it has neither shore nor horizon. And it's flat. And it's pinned on the wall. And it's a photograph, not a painting. And though a few flashbacks of superimposed memory try to keep it at bay, it inexorably moves forward as the frame zooms in and the sine wave on the soundtrack reaches its highest pitch. And though it's not framed in any conventional way, and though it was never destined to hang in a museum, or to win the prize at the experimental film festival of Knokke-le-Zoute where I first saw it, it has now been framed by a major retrospective one third of which was titled "Around *Wavelength*."

For me, I realize, there was no way around *Wavelength*. This magnificent film had to frame my text and not be framed by it. For it spells the last word, it points the exit whose proper and common name we all know and dread, but for which language, in its wisdom, has not found a deictic. There was no way, in other words, around Michael Snow's "religious inklings," to quote from a famous statement of his. "From the beginning," he said about this film, "the end is a factor, and I had to take that into account."[14] But now that I reach the end of my commentary, I also remember him saying, "every beginning is arbitrary."[15] So, perhaps the way around *Wavelength* would be to start all over again, with the humor, the puns, the fun of setting free the deictics of experience, the joy to be had from the collapse of experience. To go full circle and understand that when Michael Snow said, "Out of facetious humility, I'm religious," he meant: "Out of religious humility, I'm facetious."

Notes

. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1948), p. 245.

. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), pp. 109 and 112.

. *"Wavelength* was shot in one week [in] Dec. '66 preceded by a year of notes, thots [sic], mutterings. It was edited and first print seen in May '67. I wanted to make a summation of my nervous system, religious inklings, and aesthetic ideas. I was thinking of planning for a time monument in which the beauty and sadness of equivalence would be celebrated, thinking of trying to make a definitive statement of pure Film space and time, a balancing of 'illusion' and 'fact'; all about seeing. The space starts at the camera (spectator's) eye, is in the air, then is on the screen, then is within the screen (the mind). The film is a continuous zoom which takes 45 minutes to go from its widest field to its smallest and final field. It was shot with a fixed camera from one end of an 80 foot loft, shooting the other end, a row of windows and the street. This, the setting, and the action which takes place there are cosmically equivalent. The room (and the zoom) are interrupted by 4 human events including a death. The sound on these occasions is sync sound, music and speech occurring simultaneously with an electronic sound, a sine wave, which goes from its lowest (50 cycles per second) note to its highest (12000 c.p.s.) in 40 minutes It is a total glissando while the film is a crescendo and a dispersed spectrum which attempts to utilize the gifts of both prophecy and memory which only film and music have to offer." Michael Snow, "A Statement on *Wavelength* for the Experimental Film Festival of Knokke-le-Zoute," quoted by Regina Cornwell, *Snow Seen* (Toronto: PMA Books, 1980), pp. 66–67.

. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 44.

. The contrast between Snow's and Brakhage's conception of the camera is explored by Cornwell, *Snow Seen*, pp. 60–62. See also p. 76.

. Quoted in Cornwell, *Snow Seen*, p. 115.

. *"La région centrale* 'Snow's masterpiece of transcendental cinema'" (Jim Shedden, in the leaflet accompanying *The Michael Snow Project*), which is three hours long, was shot in 1970 on a barren mountain near Sept-Îles, in Quebec, with the help of a specially built machine enabling the camera to move, turn, roll and spin around an invisible point in 360 degrees in every possible direction. The machine was operated through remote control and its movements were programmed so as to eliminate all human interventions but conceptual ones from the shooting process.

. Quoted by Cornwell, *Snow Seen*, p. 105.

. Quoted in Cornwell, *Snow Seen*, p. 99.

0. Quoted by Philip Monk, "Around *Wavelength*," in *Visual Art 1951–1993, The Michael Snow Project* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario/the Power Plant, 1994), p. 299.

1. "A Lot of Near Mrs." (1962–1963) is reproduced as *Appendix A* in Cornwell, *Snow Seen*, pp. 160–162. The quotation is from p. 160.

2. Snow, "A Lot of Near Mrs.," p. 162.

3. Quoted by Monk, "Around *Wavelength*," p. 319.

4. Simon Hartog, "Ten Questions to Michael Snow," *Cinim*, no. 3 (Spring 1969): 3; reprinted in *Structural Film Anthology*, ed. Peter Gidal (London: British Film Institute, 1976), pp. 36–37. For Snow's "religious inklings," see note 3.

5. Quoted by Cornwell, *Snow Seen,* p. 127.

A Letter to Thierry de Duve

Michael Snow

Dear Thierry,

Making art is ridiculous, but writing about it shares the absurdity but dignifies it. Thanks, what you did was a big job and divides/shares the absurdities skillfully. So here we are: me the artist wanting canonization and you the inquisition? No, it's much more complicated than that, and (I think) more interesting, as (I think) you think too. Too many thinks! Thanks.

The line you followed from the depicted monk by the sea of Friedrich's painting into my work is a relevant one but is only one of the many lines that might be followed. Obviously you have realized the similarities between my *Derma* and *Quintet* and *Monk before the Sea*. Investigating them might have led to some other preoccupations of my work. *Derma* is a painted, smaller than life-size figure which is shown with his back to the spectator (same as real spectator), touching with one hand and inspecting visually the painting surface of which he is a part ("he's" up close and small, so he has a microscopic view). The surface from a distance might read as atmospheric depiction but the figure admonishes you to look at it from up close, a hand-painted "abstract" surface. *Quintet* shares the back view depicted spectator(s), in this case the photographed man and child, which, in two-dimensional fact share the surface with an oil painting of a reclining female nude. In the 3D (mental) reading one makes, the man and boy(?) are looking at the nude woman and she's looking at you. But of course that's not what's actually happening. A little time spent with the work will bring much that's intertwined with it as "illustration" and as fact, as a two medium dialogue partly about looking, involving looking, as art or sex education. *Quintet* means: (1) the woman, (2) the man and (3) the boy, (4) the artist and (5) the spectator. The directed look or directed

attention or guided concentration have been a concern of my work but with a lot of variety that I don't think can be reduced to a "single" line in the way that you subsequently do.

Now absolutely naturally (!) I don't agree with your appraisal that I'm "not a good enough painter for that." This is like asking *Tu m'* to be sublime. That's another category. I do think my work "is more radical than that," and why I think that is related to my attempt to make the work a "now," "materialist," yes a "modernist" experience *as well as* to have and to direct the references *elsewhere* of representation, "away" and back to you and the work itself.

Regarding *Authorization* and me being an egomaniac, I'm flattered and depressed and amused by: "I have never seen a work of more abysmal narcissism." "Abysmal" I get, yeah, nice after "*mise-en-abyme*," but I'm confused and troubled by the noun "narcissism." Now I want to make this clear, my objection has nothing to do with any possible personal pathologies implied by my work, but with if and how the work does or can imply that "pathology" or not. I am not offended at the allegation personally. What difference does it make, everybody's somebody and I'm a relatively modest case. What matters here is *what* you mean and from *what evidence* you have derived it. Your near-coupling of "egomaniac" with "narcissistic" implies to me the self-love, fawning concentration-on-oneself to the detriment of relations with others, a definition that was one stage of Freud's use of the term. At one stage in his vocabulary it was a pathology, a neurosis, and later an aspect of all of most character formation. Your description of the work itself, for an impossible equivalent in words, is very good, but you do not mention what is depicted in all the photographs: the taped rectangle and far more *camera* and hand than face. This is not a *self-portrait*, it's "of" the camera and the camera operator. It's in fact *self-effacing*, not narcissistic. If one considers all my work with the camera (either still or moving) *as an artist's tool* on the one hand and my consistent consciousness of surface on the other, I think we'd get closer to what this work is.

Since I've been trying to use the camera/photography to make art in the tradition of the painting and sculpture that has moved me, I've

thought about it a lot. One of the things photography lacks (it can be a positive quality too) is the "thumbprint," "expressionist" personal touch aspect of painting, the "mark"—"tactility." Among the available variables an artist-photographer must be conscious of are: exposure ("correct," over, under), focus, depth of field, lens distortion, "thinness" (!) of the image deposit on paper (2D-ness), size of the final print in relation to subject source, colour and source of "illumination," camera position in relation to subject (one theme of *Recombinant*), and the fact that *someone* took/takes the picture. In *Authorization* that someone, the person originally reflected, took the photos, and this series of photos is a record of that. What that person looks like, and the fact that he looked at himself in the mirror are not "narcissistic." It just says: "someone (*glimpsed* in the photos) took these pictures." All of the photo works use/emphasize some "nonrealistic," *abstracting* aspect of photography. *Of a Ladder* and *Glares* record the "distortion" of what's called a "normal" lens(!) and of light source/exposure. Maybe it's the *repetition* of photos of the artist that makes it "narcissistic"? Or is it the mirror perhaps? Of all my hundreds of works, I've used mirrors in five, and two of them contain my photographed image! Compare the range of references in *Scope*, *432101234*, *Membrane*, *Press*, and *Authorization* for their use of the miracle of reflection in polished surfaces.

If again one returns to the category of the variables of camera utilisation, *Venetian Blind* is in fact very close to *La région centrale*. Though it is partly *of* the photographer, he's in fact more out-of-focus than the backgrounds, he's in the way. The photos were physically taken as much by *the camera* and the artist's concept of the work as by the photographer. The camera was held in my hands pointed at me and at the open generally selected background, and then my hands pushed the shutter buttons while my eyes were closed. It *is* images of "me," but is it "narcissistic"? Like *Authorization*, this uses the fact that there was a maker. *Press* does that too. There is one photo in the work that doesn't have a crushed object, so it states the 2D-ness of the original surface *with* the facts of the 2D-ness of the sixteen photos; it's a signature, an authorization, a mild personalization of the uninflected surface of a

photo. If I may be so egomaniacally bold, consider Vermeer's wonderful painting, *The Muse of History*. "He" is in the painting, painting a view of himself that he can't have as he paints a painting of a model that is the painting. In their smaller way: *Authorization, Derma, Quintet* are similar tactics. And what about *Crouch, Leap, Land*? (Also, excuse me: Velázquez!) Just thought of a work that isn't a self-portrait either: *Egg*. I'm also puzzled by your categorization of *Scope* as "narcissistic." How and why it can be "a metaphor for human relations steeped in narcissism," when no one else is seen in it? It's then an "abstract" space, an illusory tunnel closed by the same surface which is behind you. And if you see another "you" in it, why is this "narcissistic"?

Yours is an interesting proposition that "a good deal of the self-referential 'art-about-art' tropism of modernism comes from the fear of being caught with one's pants down." *Projection* (a late *W*[alking] *W*[oman] work) is partly of the genital parts of me "with my pants down"! An interesting dangerous work, it wasn't included in Dennis Reid's show. Not out of fear. Anyway, you say: "fear of being disclosed as someone with an ability for human relations not quite matching his or her aesthetic ambition." Judgment of such "ability" and what that might mean in *la vie quotidienne* is so subject to fashion and has so many horrifying aspects (murder being almost an American norm of human relations), that this is definitely a tragicomic proposition. Artists, even self-effacing ones, *do* reveal themselves in their work more than stockbrokers. Yes, inescapable, but to *try* to make work that *doesn't* talk about how *you* the artist laugh, cry, suffer, love/hate is more admirable (to me!) than being trapped with a work that talks about its maker's deficiencies. Picasso produced great art. John Cage is interesting, though to choose chance as a method of choice to evade his own taste turned out to be his taste. So, O.K., my work is mine. I don't think this is "irrelevant to their art" but how you use it and what *your* problems are are a factor. Yes?

Yes, if they are "evasions" I prefer those to those that say: "I'm a sincere, caring, sensitive guy who is always conscious of the needs of others," a Mother Theresa of art. Who would qualify for 10/10 and what standards of art (and life!) would be involved? I don't

think there can be art of *any* value with "little human content" and whether this period has "sheltered more artists with a mediocre insight into human nature" is true or whether "human nature" was *acted*, not depicted, during this period is the question. Malevich or Mondrian were human beings—they're just not asking you to laugh and cry at the drop of their hat, reactions more proper with a time art than with a static art with the ambition to be seen frequently, to be returned to, to be inspected. Abstract art was (is?) one of the great voyages of discovery of the human spirit. Like keyboard music. "Human nature" is discussed and legible in Rothko, Gorky (two suicides), and Pollock (another?). Perhaps they were unsuccessful in human relations, and that's the shamanistic sacrifice of their contribution to *us*.

I'm surprised that you were surprised to find the *WW* work psychologically "transparent," and I think the subsequent "embarrassment" is part of their strength. They're all different. Summation is suspect. However, they're all involved with a dialogue between materiality, process, and sign, with different emphases in each work. You're right (and wrong) in picking on my over-emphasis—that "my subject is not women or a woman but the first cardboard cutout of *WW* I made. A second remove depiction." Since there is a consensus that a woman is represented, the subject is "women," but then, like the subject being haystacks in the Monet paintings—with the important exception, which I savor and savored, that sex is unavoidable and that "women" now as ever are of narcissistic interest to themselves and to men! The reason I over-emphasized is that it's important that the subject of all the *WW* works was the material object, the cardboard cutout that I first made in mid n'61. This "second remove" doesn't remove the fact of the contour representing a woman but makes possible a range of pictorial/sculptural ideas impossible without this mediating tool/model/instigator. Reference back to "women" or a woman individual will vary with each work. Paintings of people, dogs, horses, pots, dead fishes, fruit, flowers are all objects with 2D surfaces. A fact or recognition-appraisal: a painting *is* an object. A painting is an *it*. Painting's possibilities have always been in this

"dialogue." The fact that *WW* works stressed materiality does not mean that the painter thinks women are objects.

In *Venus Simultaneous, Project, Four to Five, Clothed Woman, Femetal,* and *Stairs,* the figure is actually an absence, a trace—what is left is the painting. The decision that the original cardboard cutout was to be a constant, in physically making the works, led me to new forms/contents that wouldn't have been possible without it: for example, the three-dimensional extensions of the original template's negative shapes that produced new "figurations" in *Torso, Interiors,* and *Gone.* I was conscious of and careful to control the amount of "realism." The figure is a "stand-in," hypothetical, almost not there in relation to actual material (see also *Rolled Women, Stowaway*). I definitely did not want to make a "Surrealism." When I used the conventions of "realism," they were used as degrees of "realism" set against and with one another (*Mixed Feelings* or *Sleeve*).

I think you're asking for a sentimentality in the *WW* works that if it was there you'd profoundly dislike. The crisscross of subject reference, eroticism, absence, materiality, and icon is important to what was done. Ergo: I think they, as a body of work, are almost the only body of work that via a radical conservatism continued in new ways certain lines of Picasso, Matisse, and Duchamp. My monogamy with the *WW* led to the pre-Buren Buren (identical concept but with the representational difference) of the "Lost Works," *WW* works that were "site-specific" before the term existed.

Since it's obvious that a woman is represented and this obviously is a subject, I'm puzzled by your tone of: "And there we are." As if you had uncovered something I was hiding. Women *are* the first "other" for *any* man biologically. Your statement that "otherness is not difference" is not true. Difference is an aspect of otherness. As a visual artist I'm referring to the visible, within "painting." It's totally sentimental to refer to this month's fashion that the main differences between people are not gendered. In character, in life, there's *some* truth in that but not to the naked eye. How could *anybody* paint that? What you wrote about the pronouns he, she, and you is very interesting, but in and for works of art the you is *you,* the spectator.

One of the attractive aspects of the *WW* outline for me when I was using it as a formal constant was that the figure was seen from the *side*, in passing; it's a phase of motion, not a static pose, unlike a seated or reclining figure or, especially, in the case of your "you" argument, a portrait, frontal. The *WW* pose is more anonymous (*not* contact with an individual frontally), of course, but for my purposes it was much more open than, for example, a Rembrandt self-portrait, the kind of "humanist" exchange that you seem to be saying the *WW* works lack in some pathological way.

The *Audience* (my *Fountain*) is, as you say, largely built on "direct address" (like the nude in *Quintet*), bur the *WW*'s noncontact is a positive aspect, making it "emptier" as a guide and allowing for, asking for, more ways to fill it (creatively). Yes, that's sexual. And of course it can be said to be voyeuristic but very mildly so, and, let's face it (!), this *is* visual art.

About a year after I'd started the *WW* works I read about Warhol's work. I immediately and sickeningly recognized the resemblances to what I was doing. I had made what I felt were big leaps in my thinking and practice; it was exciting and, because of American art history power, I was worried that my work would be relegated eventually to "influenced by Warhol," which it wasn't. I was in the colonies; that's one of the reasons I went to New York, which emphasized that my work wasn't American. The similar thinking was that he arrived at flat, found subjects (from advertising and the American icon business), but mine were an attempt to "artificially" make a "trademark," "icon," "stylization" from within the art world (from art/life, not from "non-art" objects). I had used stencils in the previous abstract paintings, and trying to use a representational stencil was a revelatory discovery for me as well as when I made the first cutout figures with no backgrounds. No one else had done that. The stencils led me to more interest in other forms of reproduction, which paralleled Warhol's silk screens. Rauschenberg's frottages from newspapers and Jasper Johns (and Duchamp) led Warhol to abstract expressionist scale quotations from "print," which wasn't the case with my decisions.

As you know, I've often made work that considers the spectator's part in the work. Some of your remarks make it seem a good idea for me to report to you the range of ideological, symbolic readings of the *WW* works that spectators have stated (truly a love/hate scale!). At one end of the scale, many have found the outline images (especially the Expo '67 figures) to be a positive statement about women, "striding forth with confidence, active, resolute to take their new independent places." In the galleries I talked with many jubilant women who felt this way. Samples of the other extreme are: "It's disgusting to have those banners of nude women hanging all over town." (That's a good one. It's true the banners could have been advertising a hookers' convention, and they *would* fit in front of a strip club.) Also, "A man shouldn't be allowed to represent women. What does he know? She's just a sex object." Other appraisals: "It's all another example of men abusing women by using a saw to cut them out of plywood, flattening them, painting them with car enamel, rolling them up, folding them. And in *New York Eye and Ear Control*, burning, hanging and drowning them." This last accusation happened after a screening of the film. But Alfred Hitchcock is *popular*! There was also the accusation that I cut off the top of the head to keep women from thinking and the hands and feet to keep them from getting anywhere.

All these readings seem to prove that belief in voodoo is alive and well. All 2D images are cropped and flattened. At least the *WW* works use this fact. In this case the remains of the rectangle from which the "figure" was taken make it pictorial, reinforce its source in "painting," keep the rectangle/window as a usable if needed form/subject and make the figure less mannequin or doll-like than if all its extremities were represented.

A full figure is used in some works. *Sleeve*, 1965, which I (egomaniacally) consider to be my *Étant donnés* (made before it was exhibited), has the uncropped figure (a cutout, so it's still "cropped" in a sense) as well as many other 2D variations.

I don't think psychologizing the *WW* has been done. When I had been working with it a few years I thought maybe I should design a new one. What if it was a stylized man, even specifically me? *That*

would be narcissism and egomania. The fetishism would have been homosexual; there *is* an eroticism in *contour*. If in one sense the *WW* represented for me the desire often aroused by passing women and the possible pleasure of getting to know them (in both senses), the anonymous becoming familiar, then perhaps in another way the *WW* represents *my* feminine, my anima, my lesbianism.

The fundamental difference between the material representation and its source in the physical world outside the work is one of the experiences I've hoped my work would provoke. Not to just accept the work as a "pointer" only. Interesting, though, this "pointer" business. I have made a large sculpture that is in fact a large "pointer," called *Transformer*, 1980. It's not in the retro because of space, not quality. It's a pole, a limbless tree fifteen feet long and suspended horizontally by a rope to a height of five feet above floor. The small end of the tree (very straight) has been sanded, polished, and varnished to a very sharp point, and the rest is unrefined. It's like a compass in that it sways slowly ... and points ... A work that calls for attention but deflects it to where it's pointing to, which could be to you. Directing attention (but away in this case, *Seated Sculpture* and *La région centrale* are relatives).

About the yellow chair in *Wavelength* in connection to the *WW* works. You say: "What remains is the yellow chair, and the yellow chair is not a 'this.' It is in some subliminal way a 'you,' since it is facing us. But eventually the yellow chair vanishes too." On one level of experiencing the film and of course later, describing that experience, this is "true," but your use of "you" here is very pertinent because as I've mentioned earlier the *WW* is *not* facing you/us and is thus less a "you" to you than the yellow chair!!! I'm sure anthropomorphizing the yellow chair happens (to me it's the "hero"), but the deeper experience of it is: *there never was a yellow chair on the screen*, there never was a room there either. What was it that you recognized as a "yellow chair" and as a "room"? All my work with representation tries to put "you" in contact with the core of this mysterious species-specific belief, a hallucinatory capacity very special with "us." Mind and Matter. Beliefs. What is there?

I realize I have scribbled a lot! I have done so because what you wrote made me feel you cared (about my work, I mean!) and that thus my commentary would be welcome. I hope so! Very best wishes.

—Michael Snow, July 26, 1994

Concert (Portrait of an Artist as Michael Snow)

Hubert Damisch

translated by Gila Walker

- On the cover of *The Collected Writings of Michael Snow* is a picture of a hand in a tight close-up holding a pencil. On the first page, under the same photograph, apparently presented this time in its entirety, uncropped, is a legend, given as such to be read (*legenda*, things to be read) not to be seen or looked at: "The artist's right hand writing; photo taken by his left hand, 1991."
- The legend, if not the photo itself, immediately calls to mind Saul Steinberg's famous cartoon of a man in profile holding a pencil and with its tip tracing in a single line the figure we have in front of us. But the photo, even its uncropped version, does not let us see the other hand, the one which—if we are to believe the legend—held the camera and pressed the shutter with its finger, and whose presence is by no means evidenced by the indefinably shaped shadow on the right side of the white page. As to the "artist," or so we presume, we are afforded a glimpse only of the bottom of his face, the top of his unbuttoned shirt and undershirt, and his hand holding a pencil, a touch out of focus in the foreground, and here the tip leaves no trace on the paper other than the shadow it casts. The recropping has the effect of concentrating attention on the hand which is brought, still more out-of-focus, to the fore. It is foregrounded, to use Czech semiotician Jan Mukarovsky's concept as translated by Bruce Elder,[1] with all the transitive force and value of process that the verbifying confers upon what was only a descriptive term. For Michael Snow, art begins with capturing the eye and focalizing attention.
- This hand, then, is that of the "artist" (small "a") who is called Michael Snow; the self-same Michael Snow whose close friends will surely recognize, if not his tactile, prehensile organ, at least the bottom of his face. But that does not mean we are dealing

with a self-portrait. The chin and mouth only figure in the picture as indices to bear out the claim that the writing hand and the one we are told took the picture are really those of the "artist"—or to put it otherwise, of Michael Snow.

- Between the hand that is writing and the one given as photographing, a new type of narcissistic relationship is developed. It plays on the Kantian paradox of symmetrical objects in its own way, here in the form of two similar but opposing organs (right hand and left hand) engaged in different types of activities. This brings to mind Alberti's metaphor in which Narcissus is turned into the inventor of painting: imagine Narcissus trying to embrace his own image in the water while his specular double keeps on with his business without paying the slightest attention to the other who's devouring him with his eyes.
- Michael Snow may very well hold the copyright to this photo as it is presented to us. The fact that his right hand is indeed writing, or pretending to, while his left hand is given as photographing is not without a certain degree of schizophrenia, on the level of the image itself or the taking of it, which suffices to displace the question of "author" and "artist." As to the photo itself, we have no choice but to accept what the caption tells us. It could have just as well been taken by someone else, except that most photos of a man or woman writing show both hands, one holding the pen or pencil and the other posed flat on the table or paper. What is clear, as much from the photo as from the information brought by the legend, is that if there is an "author" or "artist," he took the photo without putting his eye behind the viewfinder.[2]
- It is not irrelevant that the artist, whose right hand is shown writing as it was when, at the same time, the left hand was photographing it, is also a pianist (but this *also* poses another problem), and that he devotes a good part of his time to making music. I say *making* rather than producing music, just as he makes/made paintings, sculptures, photographs, or films and just as he occasionally "makes" writing. He pushes improvisation so far in preferably collective performances, that it is exhausted in its own production. There is no product, in this case, except through the agency of recording and reproduction, that allows us to hear again

and again what was given just once. But for the time being this matters less than the total independence of the two hands as it is evidenced in piano playing, and this is something at which Michael Snow excels and which clearly gives him great pleasure. More than this: it is part of his life, of his life as music (and not as a musician). What matters then is their total independence but also the part that each one takes in playing together, "in concert."

Question: What kind of playing in concert was involved in the meeting between the right hand writing and the left hand that took care of the photographing? A concert, a concerting, fixed by the snapshot at exactly the same time that it interrupted it—the time of a click.

- I insist on the fact that we are not dealing here with a self-portrait of Michael Snow writing. What we have is a hand that is writing (be it designated as the artist's), as we have another hand that took the picture. The operation, which is in this case photographic, is situated before (or should I say beyond?) any sort of "mirror stage" when the "subject," caught in the delusion of what Lacan termed *spatial identification*, ends up believing in the unity of his own body's image. Here, to the contrary, the "artist" is apparently divided, split, torn, and dispersed between the many practices and activities in which he is engaged, so that instead of a single point we have a field of points, as Michael Snow said in a totally different context.[3] If "artist" there is, the image we are given of him is through reading (*legenda*) not seeing. What we are given to see is an organ, a piece of the body, photographed by another organ, another piece of the body, the latter absent but designated as the agent of the operation. Thus the question is shifted to the concept—if not the phantasm—that would be at work here. And that would be so *here*, in what works together, in what makes the oeuvre, in the activity of the work as such: the work seen, conceived, presented, not as product but as production, and this even when the artist confines himself, as is the case here, to announcing the machine without showing its workings.
- So this is not a self-portrait nor is it self-referential as self-portraits can be. It nonetheless elicits a questioning as to the relationship that can be cultivated between two of the many activities (writing

and photography) practiced by the artist whose name is Michael Snow.

I appreciate the twist that leads Bruce Elder to compare Michael Snow's activity, as it is exercised in the different *mediums* through whose agency his creativity is evinced, to the experience that a writer may have when he or she is brought for some reason or another to write in a language that is not his or her so-called "mother" tongue, as was the case for Joseph Conrad. Apparently, the subject is then divided, split in two, one part invested in the given idiom or medium and the other withheld and apart. The emphasis in both situations is less on the identity of the actors than on the switching and moving between positions. Michael Snow is no more a musician doing photography or a painter doing films than Joseph Conrad was a Pole who wrote in English, despite a statement suggesting the contrary that has been cited too often and not always in its entirety.[4] But neither is he, to use a hallowed expression, a "multimedia" artist employing concurrently, or even simultaneously, different means of expression. Such a notion supposes that (a) art can be reduced to a phenomenon of "communication," and (b) photography, painting, music, or film can be considered a language. It ignores the distinction that ought to be made between *media* understood as a means of transmitting signals bearing a written, aural, or visual message and *mediums* as designating the very fabric or substance of which signals and messages are made. And finally it smacks of that literally totalitarian notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and although we know only too well to which ends the "total art work" myth lent itself, at Nuremberg and elsewhere, a whole century will not have sufficed to take the winds out of its sails. If an "artist" exists in the form or name of Michael Snow, it is in a strictly differential way, having found no better place to settle down and operate than in the gaps, in the distances between the different *mediums* that he puts into play, the various *media* to which he has recourse, and the practices that correspond to them. The effect (or should I say the issue or the aim?), in terms of both "object" and "subject," has less to do with translation or transposition than with dialogue and exchange.

- The example of Vladimir Nabokov would probably be even more instructive than that of Conrad. Nabokov first wrote in Russian, then in German and French before tackling English and this without letting "standard usage" curb his experience of the language and its vocabulary (see his correspondence with Edmund Wilson). Michael Snow is Canadian—his father Anglophone, his mother Francophone. He was exposed from his earliest childhood to the somewhat schizoid split between two languages, if not two identities (and the fact that he managed to make the most of it, is surely a political act). In which language is the artist's hand writing (assuming that it is indeed writing, as the fuzziness suggests)? We haven't the slightest idea. All we are told is that the hand is *writing* (it could just as well be drawing) at the very moment that the other is photographing it. Just as a piano player uses both hands to do two different jobs all the while working, I insist, *in concert*.
- The shift in vantage point, not to say clash in perspective, involved in moving from one language, medium, or practice to another takes the subject back to an in-between space where all bearings are lost, starting with linguistic ones. Is that any reason to consider the resulting perceptive experience "prelinguistic," when in fact only by working at the seams between different forms and substances of expression, in a concert that sometimes verges on interference and cacophony, can one arrive at mechanisms of thought that owe nothing, or next to nothing, to the frameworks and notions inherited from so called "natural" languages? Happy is the Babel in which there would be not only an array of idioms but also a gap between practices where artifice would prevail. Art would then have less to do with a space "prior to reason," to use Jean Paulhan's expression in speaking of Cubism, than with a space "past reason." Probing this space would not entail a return to the roots of perception, as Cézanne posited. To the contrary, it would correspond to operative and conceptual advances in all directions.[5]
- I look at this hand as it was photographed by the artist's other hand, and in doing so I find myself in the place where the eye behind the viewfinder would be, just as a painting in perspective

is said to assign a place to the viewer (which brings us back to Alberti). Now does this fact, derived as it is from the legend that accompanies the photo, suffice to make me a voyeur? (And if voyeurism there is, it goes together with its exhibitionist correlate; the artist shows himself writing, not photographing, leaving us free to imagine that he is in the process of writing the very legend that conjured up the idea of the hand that took the photo.)

In the classical century the term *voyeur* had no postural implications (the "looking through the keyhole" type) or pragmatic connotations (like seeing without being seen). According to Émile Littré, Saint-Simon used the word to designate an onlooker, someone who watches out of simple curiosity without taking part. If Snow's work has something in common with Marcel Duchamp's, it is insofar as it counters the tendency in art to reduce "voyeurs" to the condition of simple onlookers and invites, not to say compels them to look twice, to turn it over in their minds, to find out what it's about.

Photography is a privileged instrument in this respect. Not content to give to see without being seen, it is capable of turning its own device back onto itself and reflecting itself in the process. The photographer can take a picture of himself while he is writing. He can also focus on his own image in a mirror and capture it just as he snaps the picture. Photography, by the possibility it offers of an instantaneous mode of capture, upset the economy that characterized representation: illustrators or painters require a certain amount of time to represent themselves in the process of drawing or painting. This would be enough to make it a theoretical object if it wasn't for the fact that, when it comes to theory, it compels us, I repeat, to look twice: first directing our attention to its physical component, to concentrate thereafter on its critical dimension.

- "In all arts, there is a physical part that can neither be seen nor treated as before, and which cannot be removed from modern enterprises of knowledge and power."[6] Photography is far from having attained the degree of similitude in the field of visible phenomena that is current in sound reproduction. Nonetheless it

qualifies, in the same capacity as sound recording, as one of the most powerful instruments in what Valéry termed "the conquest of ubiquity." That it has led to a new way of looking at the "physical part" of the visual arts and that the consequences have affected the very practice of these arts are not solely a function of the instrumental role it has been assigned in the making of a "Museum without Walls." Photography has radically undermined the idea we may have had of art prior to its appearance not only because it brought artworks into a system of technical reproducibility. Its status and value as a theoretical object derive as much from its uses as from the paradoxical relationship that exists between the photographic image and the machinery from which it proceeds. The shooting, printing, or projecting equipment required by photography, and subsequently by film, gradually reached such a pitch of mechanization and automation that we think we can abstract it from a consideration of images for their own sake. It was as if the shooting apparatus had internalized the "physical part" so thoroughly that it appears in inverse proportion to the materiality of the image: the more developed the physical part of art, the less substance the image has. We are reminded that during the period when photography was seeking a place in the Fine Arts system, it could think of nothing better to get itself forgotten as a mechanical art, than to emulate painterly effects. What is known as "pictorialism" ultimately boils down to an aborted dream that photography nurtured for a while in the vain hopes of satisfying its desire to give an appearance of pictorial depth to its images, instead of sticking to its own material make-up, to its own "physics."
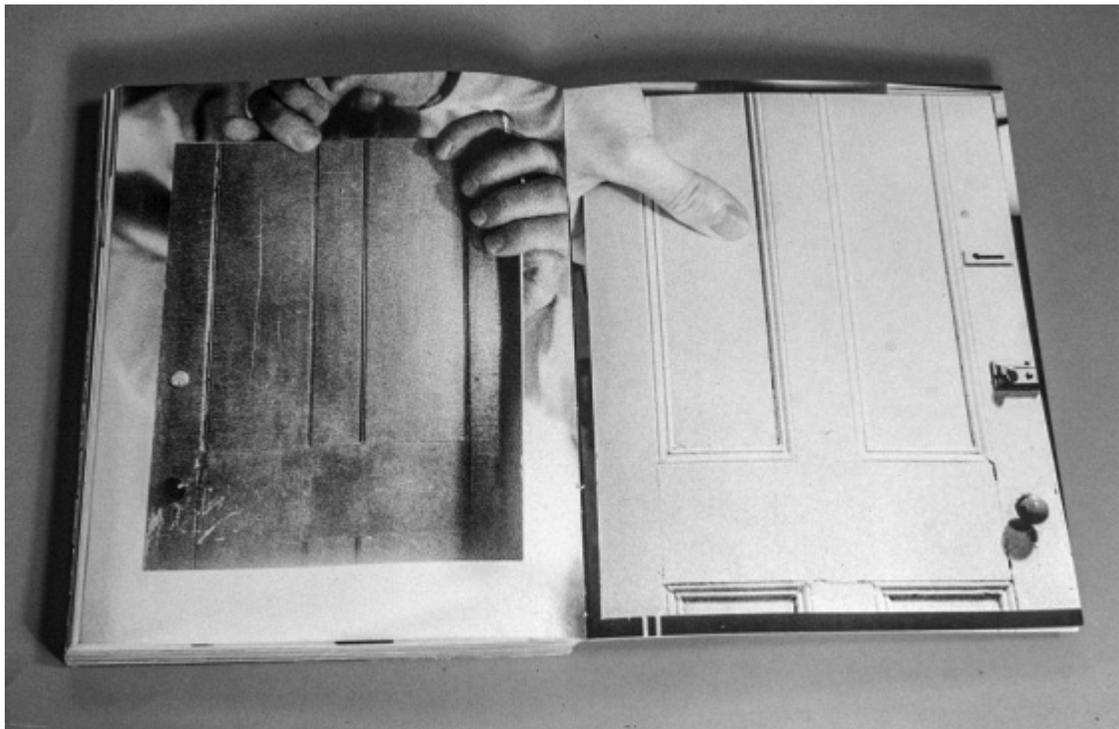
Michael Snow, Cover to Cover, 1975. Bookwork, 22.5 × 17.7 × 2 cm (320 pages), 8.875 × 7 × 0.75 in. (320 pages). Published by the Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax and New York University Press, New York. Courtesy of Michael Snow.
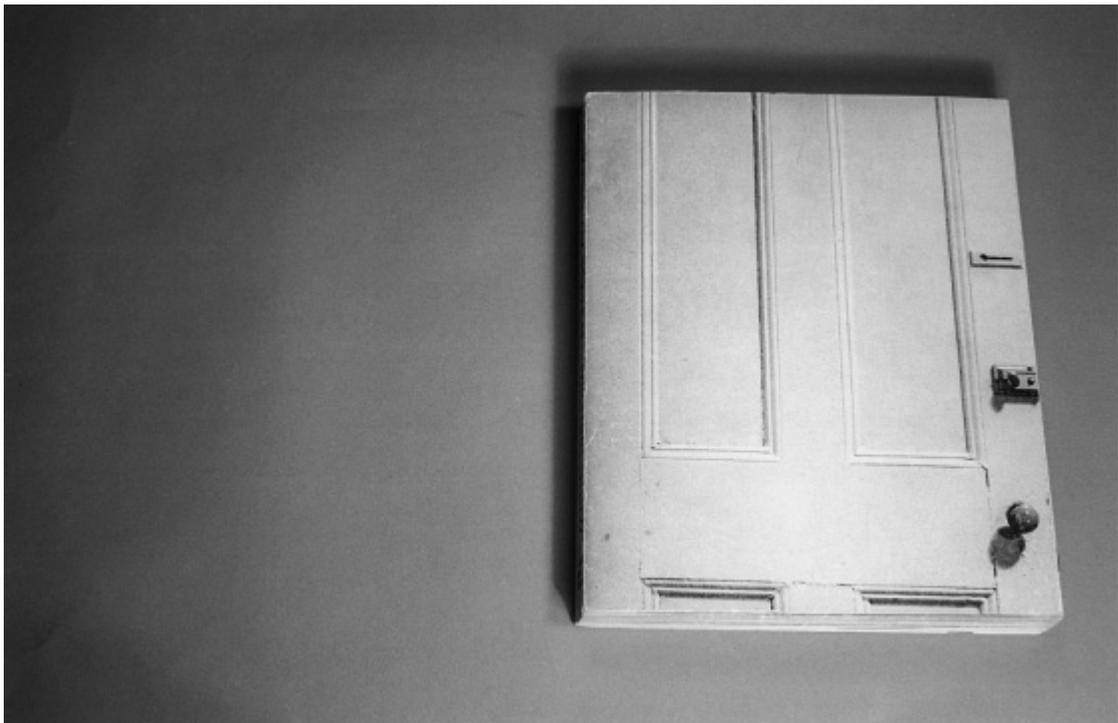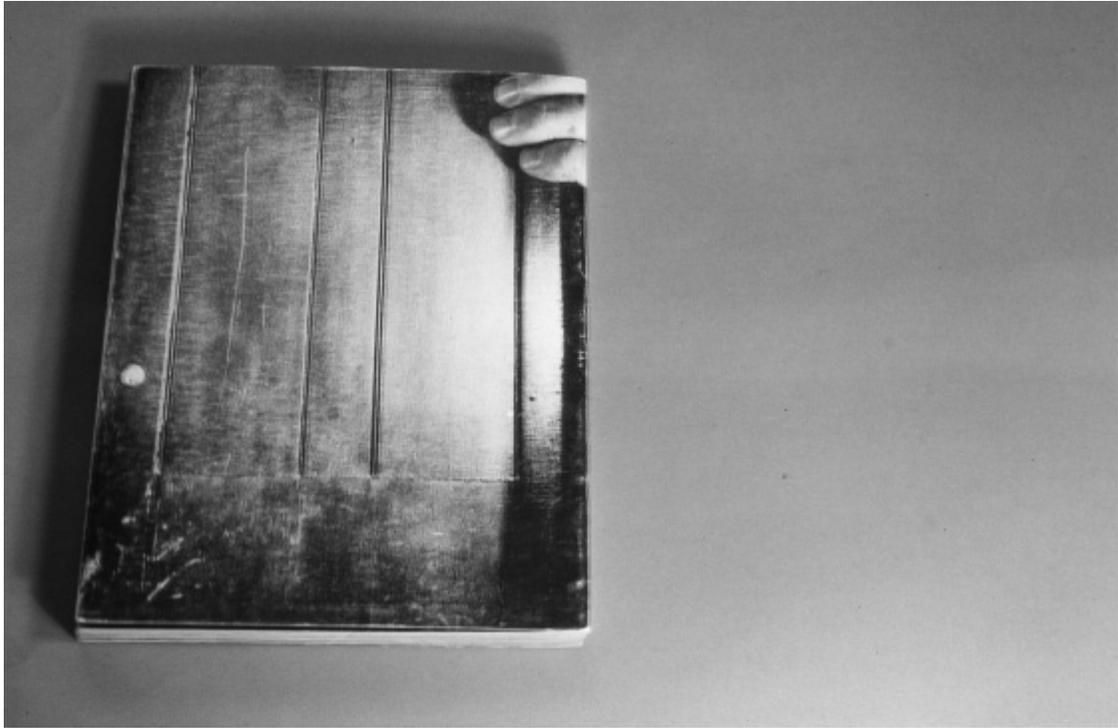
Michael Snow, Cover to Cover, 1975 (continued).
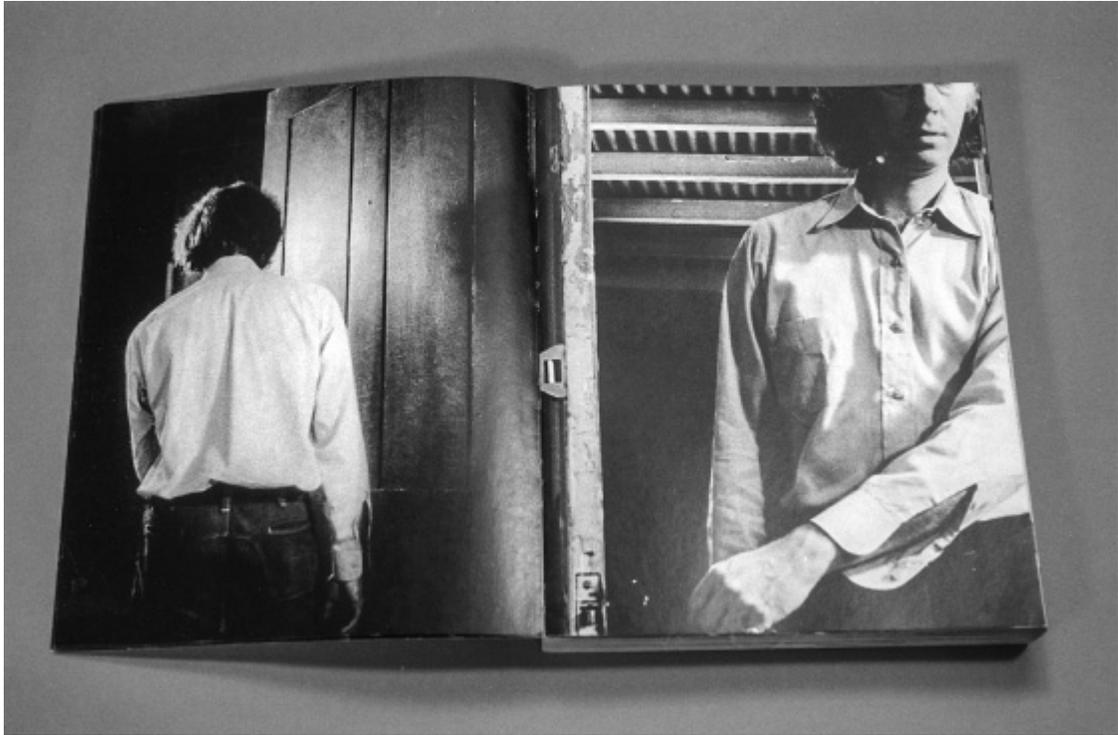
Michael Snow, Cover to Cover, 1975 (continued).

Michael Snow, Cover to Cover, 1975 (continued).

Michael Snow, Cover to Cover, 1975 (continued).

- I mention this because the opposite desire surfaces in Snow's work, a desire directly related to the characteristics of a medium that, while having nothing of a *binder* in the chemical sense of the term, nonetheless implies that a bond be evinced between the various elements that may go into the art of photography.[7]

    By way of example, I will retain the way he treats color while playing with transparency as both a physical and conceptual given. Photography can reproduce the distinctive colors of things, even of painting itself, with more or less accuracy. It can aim at pictorial effects, as it has sought to do in black and white. But to work *in* the color or *with* the color as painters do, photography must be able to produce, seize, and manipulate it, and this can only be done by sticking as close as possible to the *physics* of photography; not to its mechanics or its chemistry but to its physics insofar as it is bound up with light. In *Slidelength* (1969–1971) Michael Snow produces and obtains a projected color by placing color filters between a source of light and a screen. The light beam traversing the different filters yields varying effects of transparency, opacity, or shimmering. The result is that color is

not so much reproduced as it is captured at the very moment of its production.

The operation would amount to nothing more than an optical game if it wasn't for the fact that some of the concrete manipulations from which it proceeds are shown in the slides that follow: here, a hand or two holding a glass plate at different angles; there, a finger holding it in place; elsewhere, a hand, fingers apart, appears as in negative against the color ground obtained by projection, calling to mind images of Paleolithic cave art. The viewer is gradually invited to enter the game through a mechanism of empathy that derives from the pacing of the slide sequence. The artist makes use of time as much as light, compelling the viewer to consider the images that come and go at a contemplative pace, which may soon seem a bit too slow and sustained; attention is mobilized longer than usual, with all the threshold effects that ensue and that involve not so much seeing more clearly as looking otherwise.

This dual manipulation of light and time suffices to manifest a few of the distinctive characteristics of a medium whose materiality is all the more pronounced as it appears more specific. Materiality, such as it is, goes together, in this case, with the distinctive conditions of projection, which brings us back, by another twist, to the specifically physical part of photography. After the daguerreotype period, this was defined as such from the day it became possible not only to fix the latent image but also to develop and transfer it to another surface to obtain a number of prints or copies. Even a transparent positive print designed for projection requires the use of a screen and this surface need not be neutral; it may have a texture that reinforces the effect of materiality, or more precisely of *physicality*, which turns out to be the paradoxical corollary of transparency.

Such manipulations do not only have sensible effects. They elicit theoretical effects that confer upon them in return a critical, not to say epistemological impact. It is as if the reflection on color today had to resort to a medium capable of preserving the trace of

the operations it entails, and this suffices to relativize the degree of abstraction involved.

- The question of abstraction is on the horizon of Michael Snow's output as it is on the horizon of photography, which accounts for the significant place that the latter has in his work today. Photography being what it is, can there be such a thing as an "abstract photograph"? The question is raised in *Painting (Closing the Drum Book)*, 1978: A painting can be called "abstract" but can a photograph of an abstract painting or of a detail thereof be said to be "abstract"? Isn't the fact that a photograph is always *of something*—be it of an abstract painting —enough to cut short any pretensions to abstraction?

- This brings us back to the question of representation in its relationship to reproduction. Photography cannot represent anything unless it abstracts certain features that belong to the reality it is supposed to reproduce: it abstracts volume by reduction to a two-dimensional plane (relief in photography is ever always an illusion); it abstracts motion in a still picture that retains only the signs and traces thereof; it abstracts matter and reproduces only its appearance; to say nothing of the framing and the imposition of a vantage point, exclusive as such.

- "True" abstraction, in the artistic sense of the term, begins with bringing attention to color for itself, in contradiction with Jean-Paul Sartre's statement that color (like a photograph?) is always "of something." We might even be tempted to say that photography, far from being a substitute for a painting now reputed to be obsolete, actually pursues its operation and develops its aim over and beyond the constraints of the medium and the distinctive limits of the painting's form. Photography has not put an end to painting, no more than film or video has put an end to photography. The latter is continually captured by painting, just as film can be captured by photography. The fact that Snow continues to devote himself to photography, in concert with his other works, has the value of a symptom and as such it calls for interpretation. What also calls for interpretation is a body of work that makes room for sounds and colors, and for music as much as

photography, on the condition that the parts be conducted on different stages.

- I have long brought an absent-minded attention to Michael Snow's work. As if just to see it and dwell on it, I first had to pinpoint and analyze, in the way that is mine, a few of the mechanisms of thought that can be the act of art. Might there be then another way of thinking than through words, another manner of philosophy than through texts alone? Might there be a way of thinking through colors and sounds, a mode of philosophizing that would require working as close to art as possible, working *along with* it and *together with* its works?

    Side Seat:[8] I appreciate that Michael Snow implicitly reserved a place for viewing his work for latecomers like me. From such seats, relegated to the edges of the auditorium, we are afforded a side view of the stage, sometimes extending into the wings. But the view may also be restricted to a very small portion of the show, seen from such an oblique angle that its volume is lost, but not its substance. The hypothetical "window" disappears and the illusion vanishes, leaving us a glimpse of a bit of its physics, which is a matter of light and sound.

- We are familiar with Walter Pater's famous statement, which is tempting to see as one of the first manifestos of abstraction in painting: "All art constantly aspires to the condition of music."[9] Michael Snow himself has readily admitted that there is a musical aspect to the most formal part of his work in visual arts. But what then are we to think when music itself seems to challenge the minimal requisites that define its very existence as a form, and ventures to do in collective improvisations something similar to what the exponents of action painting did on the individual register? (It is no coincidence that a Pollock painting figures on the cover of Ornette Coleman's record *Free Jazz*, one of the earliest manifestos of the genre; the music that Snow makes is still "free" but in a different way than Coleman's.) I dream of a recording that would be able to capture, in the instantaneous mode of a freeze-frame, the moment in such a concert when the lead is passed from one player's hand to another, as it passes back and forth on the cover of Snow's *Writings* from the hand that took

the photo to the one holding the pencil. The time of a suspense or a pause if not an absence as a click will have sufficed to give it form.

Notes

. Cf. Bruce Elder and Michael Snow, "On Sound, Sound Recording, Making Music of Recorded Sound, The Duality of Consciousness and Its Alienation from Language, Paradoxes Arising from These and Related Matters," in *Music/Sound 1948–1993: The Performed and Recorded Music/Sound of Michael Snow, The Michael Snow Project* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario/The Power Plant, 1994), p. 218.

. "Painting was/is a synthesizing and constructing activity, and since it is made by hand it makes use of all modes of sensory knowledge—besides the visual and the tactile. The photographer, on the other hand, divorces the eye from the hand. In a sense, a photograph could be considered the equivalent of a single brush stroke in a painting. Click." Michael Snow, "Statement for an Exhibition, Paris 1992," in *The Collected Writings of Michael Snow, The Michael Snow Project* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1994), p. 293.

. "On Sound," in *Music/Sound 1948–1993*, p. 225. Snow was discussing how artworks lack "staying power" when the artist is reduced to a puppet in a social or political context, or when the work's only power is to deliver a message, advertising or other, that makes sense only in a single context.

. "I am not a professional. My paintings are done by a filmmaker, sculpture by a musician, films by a painter, music by a filmmaker, paintings by a sculptor, sculpture by a filmmaker, films by a musician, music by a sculptor ... sometimes they all work together. Also many of my paintings have been done by a painter, sculpture by a sculptor, films by a filmmaker, music by a musician. There is a tendency towards purity in all these media as separate endeavors," "Statement/18 Canadian Artists" (1967), in *Collected Writings*, p. 26.

. See in this connection the statement by Albert Einstein to mathematician Jacques Hadamard that Snow cites in his dialogue with Bruce Elder: "The words or the language as they are written or spoken do not seem to play any role in my mechanism of thought. The psychical entities which seem to serve as elements in thought are certain signs and more or less clear images which can be 'voluntarily' reproduced and combined. ... The above-mentioned elements are, in my case, visual and sometimes even muscular in nature." "On Sound," in *Music/Sound 1948–1993*, p. 237. On the idea of a "space past reason," the reader may want to consult my discussion in *The Origin of Perspective*, trans. John Goodman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 62–63.

. Paul Valéry, "La Conquêre de l'ubiquité," in *Oeuvres*, vol. 2, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, ed. Jean Hytier (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), p. 1284.

. "The particular purposes that relate to the 'mode' or 'process' of the individual work are partly drawn from the distinctive possibilities of the medium: in the first stage (taking the photo) these include framing, focus, exposure and lighting, but for me the choices made at this stage are also aimed at certain already defined decisions as to the final physical state of the print: whether it is to be printed on a surface, backlit or projected, also its size and shape, color grain and the mounting and physical placement of the photo / object in the gallery space (whether attached to wall, ceiling, floor).

A discourse between all these elements is, in my opinion, the core of the true Art of Photography, defining itself in this way from all the other uses of photography: advertising, entertainment, journalism, etc." Snow, "Statement for an Exhibition, Paris 1992," in *Collected Writings*, p. 293.

. *Side Seat Paintings Slides Sound Film* is the title of a 20-minute sound film made by Michael Snow in 1970.

. Walter Pater, "The School of Giorgione," in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1877; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 124.

Touching to See

Jean Arnaud

translated by Molly Stevens

Visual contact in photography lies in the tactile experience of the medium. Michael Snow is an artist who constantly explores the relationships between things and their representation. Most of his work affirms the materiality of the image by situating the image in the space of sculpture, and his overall approach considers how the viewer will receive the image through the mediums and surfaces that are used. He seeks to reveal the *transformations* that occur when the subject is represented. ("I am not 'a photographer,'" he declared recently, "I'm an artist who uses photography.")[1]

Snow's work matured in the 1960s, when many artists were exploring the relationships among painting, sculpture, photography, theater, dance, and film. They were challenging the modernist position that the viewer should be in front of the work. Snow constantly links the physical experience of a place and the fictional experience of his photographs and films, asserting that his photographs, films, and sculptures "present their physical reality and their illusory reality."[2] The artist involves the viewer in devices that blur the iconic and material aspects of plastic elements. He fills his work with paradoxes related to photographic presence-absence and plays on the verisimilitude of illusion. Although he does "work in each medium with a certain 'purity,' a certain integrity," Snow exploits the space between images through the transparency of various mediums.[3] Using subterfuge, he goes beyond the haptic dimension of vision; his work stands between seeing and touching. With Snow, you have to touch *in order* to see. The artist intends for his photographs "to display the process that is at the source of the image you're seeing, the time that was needed to make the image."[4] This double contact is founded on the transparency of screens, on a sedimentary conception of duration and on various processes of layering. Several temporal fluctuations simultaneously coalesce through superimpositions, as in *Imposition* (1976) and *VUEƎUV* (1998), but also in works that actually involve sections and layers, such as *Place des peaux*

(1986–98) and *Digest* (1970). Using these kinds of processes, Snow is able to establish contact with the viewer. The schema is as follows:

See   photography

Touch   referent

Sensitive Surfaces and Skin Transparency: Contact, Relief, and Photographic Illusion

But not even a hundred thousand photographs can make the world stable.

—Mark Z. Danielewski[5]

Imposition and *VUEꟻUV* are characteristic of Snow's work with regard to the specific relationship he establishes between vision and touch in a transparent layered space, between imaginary surface and exhibited volume. These two photographs present figures close to human scale, which reinforces the sense of illusion. *Imposition* is a complex superimposition, with the stratification almost happening in a homogeneous space. "The photograph is suspended over, not flattened against, a background painted the same blue as the box frame that it's in. The photograph is not masked; one sees its extent. The frame holds a clear sheet of glass that doesn't touch the photograph. You see that the photograph is a rectangular piece of paper," the artist explains.[6] Snow brings together four views of the same room; he superimposes pictures of a couch, two nude figures, and of the same couple clothed onto an image of an empty living room. The artist breaks the temporal unity of the composite image, but minimizes as best he can the effects of the rupture in order to retain its three-dimensional coherence.[7] The naked and clothed couple coincide in the quadrupled living room, because they're doing *the same thing* at two different times. A single phase repeats itself while being played out differently each time. The spatial layering creates an instability in the scene, which is neither a single image nor multiple. And Snow draws out the fiction that exists between the documentary appearance and the imaginary division of the moment.

Michael Snow, Imposition, 1976. Color photograph, wood frame, 182.0 × 101.6 cm, 71.6 × 40 in. Collection of the Mailhot Family (Montréal). Courtesy of Michael Snow.

By establishing the temporality of this image within linear and stratified durations, the artist creates a hallucinatory trembling of the photographic moment; he develops an art of the lapse [*décalage inframince*] or what Duchamp calls *delay*. The fictional duration contracts and expands: your eye travels between images, focusing either on single, steady elements (couch, bookshelf, lamp) or on changing, spatial elements chosen at random (dressed or naked figures). In *Imposition*, the illusion folds and the moment develops into many possibilities; you're surrounded by skin, the skin of the

figures and the skin of the image-screens. By pushing the superimposition to the point that it disappears, Snow creates a tension of identity in plastic space. He concretizes the old fantasy regarding the ubiquity of a time traveler; the narration glides in a multiple moment, and a strange curvature is established between the simultaneousness and succession of different planes.[8] Yet the artist's goal is not to distort time in a purely diegetic manner,[9] a principle that is almost as old as the invention of photography itself.[10] Above all, he seeks to extend this disturbance into the present moment for the viewer, and uses several strategies to do so. There is first an imposition on the viewer to emulate the characters in order to see the photograph in the right direction, for it is installed vertically, the wrong way. Thus both the characters in the image and the viewers tilt their heads.[11] Second, the reflective glass that covers *Imposition* hangs slightly in front of the photograph, and the reflection of the viewer remains the final superimposed image. You see yourself imitating the two young adults, *in and in front* of the box, in and in front of the photographic space. When you stand before *Imposition,* you no longer know who's imitating whom: the image stares at you, but the emulation seems to be reversed, and reality surpasses fiction. In this baroque work, seeing means activating the image in ways other than through looking: the viewer moves in space in order to move through time by crossing through the mirror.

Snow ensures this contact between *past-elsewhere-he/she* and *I-here-now*[12] through a third means: he places the white layer—this is how the couple can see the hypothetical image—at the edge of the imaginary plane (right on or under the *parete di vetro*). This vacant interface, onto which you can project mentally, establishes the quasi-physical contact with the viewer, for the male figure seems to extend the image to the viewer, so that he can in turn look at the other side. The white rectangle format is homothetic to the one in *Imposition*; it is another element that links real and fictional space, by speculating on what is happening on the other side of the image.

These artifices insert past and present into fiction, and Snow plays on the binocular quality of vision.[13] He creates the illusion of continuous action between a diegetic past and the viewer's present within the diaphanous space that brings them together. In this deepened moment, the artist exploits the expressive resources of the stereoscopic "tunnel,"[14] and presents a photographic space that can be divided virtually ad infinitum: a temporality

of the developing moment defines *Imposition*. In the piece, relief and illusion work together to offer the strange experience in which the fictional characters and the viewer share a duration. It is the artist's intention that the latter continue to be aware of the distinction between appearance and apparition; the space-time experience of this plastic space is paradoxical, for the viewer-actor is integrated into and in between an imaginary space, one that is timeless and arrested and that takes the viewer's own movements in time into consideration.

VUEƎUV was made twenty-two years later. It is a single image, a female nude, printed on a transparent veil. In this piece, Snow also seeks to bring the real and fictional together, and he writes the title as a mirror reflection to emphasize the dualistic, reversible, and illusory aspects of this particular representation of a female body. The fabric surface is installed in three-dimensional space, but the artist represents the curtain on the curtain, in the self-referential manner that he likes to adopt; he pretends to rival in mimetic excellence the ancient Greek painters Zeuxis and Parrhasius,[15] but he cheats. The real curtain points to the materiality of the image, while simultaneously supporting the illusion of the photographic veil. By superimposing the object and its representation, the artist destroys the temporal lapse between the moment the shot was taken and the present, when it is seen. This confusion is *transferred* to the naked body that seems to erupt like an apparition into the room where the viewer finds himself. The image's life-size scale makes this encounter possible,[16] and its "sunset light is also the actual light of the gallery, necessary to see the work. The woman's body, erotic, is also no-body, paper-thin," the artist explains.[17] The viewer enters the image through this screen of immersion,[18] and Snow makes the illusion all the more effective by choosing a soft, sparkling fabric, thereby materializing the sensuality of skin in a fetishistic way. "If you're going to make art with the medium of photography, you should work with enlargement in some chosen relationship with the source. In my photographic work I try for a correlation between the subject, process, and the final physical image manifestation."[19] In this way, between metaphor and metonymy, the artist offers a unique physical and psychic experience of a screen-skin (skimming and seeing the screen = touching the body). But, in order to blur the line between fictional and real space, he also draws on a classic pictorial strategy. It involves painting the figure in the foreground looking toward the back of the painting, so that the viewer is also pulled

into the work. The viewer hesitates between his place and the place of the woman; he looks at the curtain and beyond, simultaneously experiencing the depth of the image and the depth of the fiction that determines a continuity between past and present, between *Grund* and *Abgrund*.[20] In this layered, diaphanous space, the experience of the sublime overlaps with the rather misleading experience of the exhibition space and the floating curtain.[21]

Michael Snow, VUEꟻUV, 1998. Color photograph on cloth hung on plastic tube, 103.0 × 130.0 cm, 40.0 × 51.0 in. Collection of the artist. Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery.

In Snow's photographic works, contact through layers isn't only defined with reference to a category of seeing that touches (called "the haptic" by Aloïs Riegl). In both *Imposition* and *VUEƎUV*, the artist makes the moment the image was taken coincide with the moment the viewer both sees the image and touches it.[22] Such processes make the duration topple over onto itself, and Snow inserts us into fictions that both involve and evolve in terms of temporality. By using this kind of optical proposition, one that triggers certain physical behavior, he makes the untouchable referent that exists in any photograph all the more painful and frustrating.[23] The artist writes that *VUEƎUV* determines that "the power of carnal imagery is in tension with its physical near-nonexistence."[24] He says, "once on the other side ... it's always the woman seen from the back. ... But you want to see the front."[25] However, Snow's strategy isn't to banally transform the viewer into voyeur, for the inaccessible is immediately apparent. *VUEƎUV* constitutes a kind of *noli me tangere*, in which the symbolic dimension is replaced by a concrete fantasy. The artist transfers the forbidden aspect of the religious to the profane; he makes metonymy into metaphor and plays with the inherent frustration that lies in all images, playfully suggesting that we approach what we know to be inapproachable.[26]

Snow belongs to a generation of artists that has developed an aesthetic of reception. "I'm interested in making art that adds to life more than it comments on life," he declares.[27] Although he is suspicious of the tyranny of images, he exploits their power of conviction. But he constantly suggests that the image *alone* is not enough. *VUEƎUV* resists reproduction, as do many of the artist's photographic installations, because "the medium is an integral part of what we see. A photograph cannot be only an image."[28] This heuristic desire to lay bare the mechanics of transforming the real through the image suggests a profound skepticism (that one needs to see and touch to believe); but Snow, by allowing the spectator to physically experience absence, defines uchronic fictional space, as if neither the real world nor fiction would suffice independent of the other.

Skins and Screens

And I would first say that if the hinterland has remained inaccessible to me—and even if I'm well aware, as I've always been, that it doesn't exist—it doesn't mean that it cannot be situated. All I have to do is abandon the laws of continuity in ordinary geography and the principle of excluded middle.

—Yves Bonnefoy[29]

Snow often uses interactive screens in his work, contiguous or not. He stages cinematographic, photographic, or material image-skins, both figurative and literal. In *Two Sides to Every Story* (1974), the artist projects the same scene onto the surface of a white screen. The two sides are filmed continuously in a studio, from directly opposite points of view. The operators are part of the films, and a woman paints a green disk on a transparent screen she ends up passing through (it's also the actual projection screen). In the film, different screens sometimes mask the field of vision. The characters are also often masked, and the viewer *must* move from side to side to follow the action without interruption. Through this double-sided cinematographic image, Snow seeks to re-create the visual and tactile conditions of life's movements. Drawing on a principle similar to the one used in *VUEƎUV*, the spectator gradually identifies the real screen in front of him, and which he sees in the two films, as well as the room in which he finds himself and where the film takes place.[30] In the end, you wonder if the woman didn't tear the actual projection screen. The viewer, who moves in a space that is similar to that of the fictional characters, is constantly converting intuitive and stratified time into real and linear duration. Snow closely develops the irresolvable hesitation between *resemblance* and *false-semblance*, and creates a virtual volume within the real volume of the room.[31]

In *Place des peaux,* on the other hand, the artist does not use the "screen" as an iconographic medium (photography, video, film). This installation, executed at the Ferme du buisson in Noisel, France, consists of thirty-four suspended parallel two-sided wooden "frames," each covered by gelatins of various colors. In *Imposition* and in *VUEƎUV,* the reflection, the silhouette, or the shadow of the spectator is already multiplied in film, but in *Place des peaux,* there is more photographic ambiguity: only the viewers determine

how their image will be projected on the screens. Through the play of colors that absorb the light and thicken the diaphanous space, each viewer sees other viewers as moving silhouettes, as hollow envelopes that inform a real space that has become a fictional space. With works like *Imposition, VUEƎUV, Two Sides to Every Story*, and *Place des peaux*, the viewer-actor constantly travels between different images and screens, which constantly turn into one another; thus fictional and real duration blend together. In this way, a strange unity of place evolves in Snow's work, one that has lost its classic link to time and action. Fiction is invented in a paradoxical *past actuality,*[32] and the artist offers the viewer mental relocation.[33]

This form of relational aesthetics raises questions about the interaction between barrier and screen in the contemporary world. The artist simultaneously separates and brings together, in both space and time; he poses the transparent screen-partition as a surface-limit, which ever since "the stone wall of the rampart, has continued to record transformations, noticeable or imperceptible, the last of which is probably that of the interface."[34] By putting the viewer in contact with his own image, Snow allows him to both experience his own substance and to reflect on the intimacy of his body in a world that has a greater and greater media presence. By disrupting the boundaries between representation and object, he stresses that the image must not suffice. He uses plastic means, through which the viewer experiences a space that is part mediated and part real; one would almost think that Balzac was right in thinking that every photograph steals a small layer of the person, that a photograph has a reality that is equivalent to that of the body itself, and therefore that it is dubious.
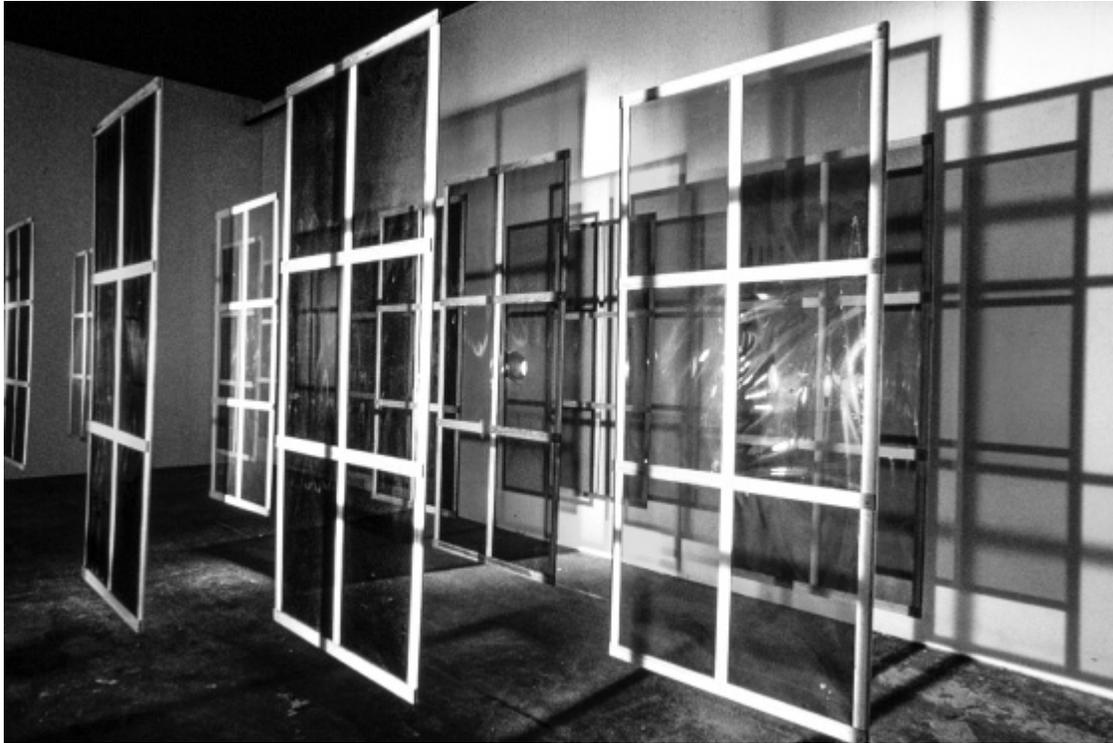
Michael Snow, Place des peaux, 1998. Thirty-four suspended wood frames with color transparencies, lighting; minimum installation dimensions: 1400 × 600 cm., each panel 72.0 × 149.0 × 1.5 cm; minimum installation dimensions: 551.2 × 236.2 in., each panel 28.3 × 58.7 × 0.6 in. Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montréal. Photograph by Guy L'Heureux.

Many of Snow's works function as machine stratifications. "There is great stratum mobility. One stratum is always capable of acting as a *substratum* to another, or of colliding with another, independently and progressively," write Deleuze and Guattari.[35] This geological or integumentary function of spatial construction can be used, as others are (the rhizome or all forms of arranging and de-locating objects), as a concrete rule for generating meaning in the space between images. In *Imposition*, in *VUEℲUV*, and in *Place des peaux*, the experience of plastic space is specifically founded on the mobility of visual interactions caused by transparency. As a result there are "transcodings and middle passages, mixings. The rhythms echo these interstrata movements. ... Stratification is like creating the world from chaos, a continuous, renewed creation."[36] One of Snow's great strengths is surely this ability to make the viewer move physically and psychologically to the natural rhythm of duration images. In this sense, the artist develops a plastic language that borrows some of its character from musical writing, which is not surprising considering that

Snow is also a musician and composer.[37] Through layering, the image has a contrapuntal rhythm, in that counterpoint is a musical language that is horizontal and the opposite of harmony.

Photographic Sedimentation and Fictitious Experience of Duration

> Truth is but an existence that can only be given in an experience. This experience can be called vision or contact, external perception in general, when a material object; it can be named intuition when the mind is involved.

> —Henri Bergson[38]

Michael Snow relativizes the illusion of photography by considering it an active interface between its referent (before) and the viewer's space (after). Also as a painter and sculptor, he works "with the sense of painting as being a skin or a membrane over a surface. This membrane can be transparent—a film, a watercolor painting,"[39] the artist said about his first abstract paintings from the early 1960s. To compare his photography and painting processes, he recently wrote, "if, by using a razor or something else, we could detach the image, a Vermeer painting from its canvas, we would have film in our hands. It would literally be a film that the painter attached to his canvas. In some of my pieces, I use the transparency of photography to extend, I hope, the pictorial tradition and to give it another physical existence."[40] For Snow, therefore, different strata are only distinguished by substance and in quality; they all have the same organic character. "The fact that the image, likely to contain persuasive representations of depth, that is extremely thin, in my eyes constitutes a particularly poignant aspect of the work, made from projected light. I am convinced that this slight material manifestation of the image is *as important* as the content of the image. 'Film' or 'nonexistent skin' would perhaps be a more appropriate term. In this regard, I have affinities with Giacometti."[41] Snow feels profound empathy between image and body; this powerful connection first took shape in paintings like *Years* (1960), based on material sedimentation, and later in the "Walking Women" series (starting in 1962), which developed in a Pop context.[42]

The artist then synthesized his experience of film's image duration. In 1970, in *Digest*, he created a dialogue between piled photographs and a volume of material that contained their referent. A stainless steel pan (such as used in cooking or in a laboratory) filled with objects included in a gray

polyester resin sits on a table beside a pile of twenty-three photographs that Snow took while filling the pan.[43] Wearing the photographer's silk gloves, the spectator flips through the images as he would sort through the sedimentary layers in the referent object. Thus the artist makes the opaque volume transparent without using radiography. We have seen that *Imposition* establishes a virtual layered volume; the opaque, mounted photographs used in *Digest*, on the other hand, form a true stratified volume. The title *Digest* signifies "condensed" (space-time, images?) or "to digest" (food, objects, images?). Finally, the pile of photographs is perceived as a possible *equivalent* of all the sections that the resin volume can potentially contain. These works present two different forms of the same temporal scheme; one is based on transparency and the other on the opacity of the strata. But, in both cases, the artist associates layering and contact, visual and tactile, in order to define a singular dialectic between simultaneity and succession, between continuity and discontinuity. The acts of thickening in *Imposition* and *Digest* are perceived between temporal compression and dilation.

Michael Snow, Digest, 1970. Twenty-three laminated color photographs, aluminum container, various objects, epoxy resin. Photographs 40.6 × 35.6 cm (each); container 32 × 26.3 × 18 cm; base 91.4 × 182.9 × 71.1 cm. Photographs 16.0 × 14.0 in. (each); container 12.6 × 10.4 × 7.1 in.; base 36.7 × 72.0 × 28.0 in. Philadelphia Museum of Art. Courtesy of Michael Snow.

The handleable photographs in *Digest* correspond to a Bergsonian experience of material-duration, and also constitute a Bachelardien *rêverie* of the material. The order of the images in *Digest* can be changed, and the spectator-manipulator can reconstruct the very genesis of the work or invent random fictions. In this sense, *Digest* plastically incarnates Jorge Luis Borges's literary metaphor in *The Book of Sand* (1978); he offers material that can be infinitely divisible into new images, just as the Argentinean writer describes the never-ending magic book that includes all possible texts:

> He asked me to find the first page. I rested my left hand on the cover and opened the volume with my thumb pushed up against my index finger. I struggled in vain: there were still pages between the cover and my thumb. They seemed to rise from the book.
>
> —Now find the last page.
>
> My attempts failed in the same way; barely could I stammer in a voice that was no longer mine:
>
> —It can't be done.
>
> In his low voice, the Bible salesman said to me:
>
> —It can't be done and yet it *is*. The number of pages in this book is exactly infinite.[44]

This allegory of opening and the infinity of knowledge and story emerge into acknowledgment of the monstrosity of the object and into heightened awareness of the being-toward-death. A page in this book can always be unfolded just like, theoretically, an image in *Digest* can hide another

(photographic, infinitely layered strata and substrata). The artist seems to suggest that our life can be summed up in a finite number of pages that we can sift through, or by a limited number of grains of sand, which we can count (the hourglass).

Michael Snow offers the experience of a layered space in an illusory representation, but he often completes it with the experience of the smooth space of its referent, presented simultaneously through various strategies.[45] His works refuse to be a simple opposition between two sorts of spaces, as if the artist wanted to remind us that they in fact only exist in combination. "Smooth space never stops being translated, transversed in a striated space; striated space is constantly reversed, made into smooth space," write Deleuze and Guattari.[46] Snow's installations, amazingly synthetic, are visually simple to grasp, but their perception is often complex, and they often make us doubt the nature of things. Seeing to touch or touching to see? By constantly turning *presence into representation,* Snow reminds us that the cognitive and sensitive understanding of the world happens through the perpetual movement between things, and in accordance with processes of constant transformation and conversion. These works are true tools for investigating the real, which is also considered imaginary. Their common characteristic is that they determine a singular contact between the fiction of a work-duration and a viewer who experiences himself as a being-in-duration.

Notes

. Michael Snow, interview with the author, July 2003.

. Michael Snow, quoted in Teri Wehn-Damisch, *Sur la longueur d'onde de Michael Snow: Zoom arrière*, documentary film (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2002).

. "Michael Snow: Pas de Commentaire," interview in *Sans titre* (Lille) 47 (July–August 1999): 1.

. Ibid.

. Mark Z. Danielewski, *La maison des feuilles* (Paris: Denoel, 2002), p. 22.

. Michael Snow, interview with the author, July 2003.

. In this sense, Snow renews the tradition of phantasmagorias, of panoramas, dioramas, and stereoscopic images, which amazed the public at the end of the eighteenth century and throughout the entire nineteenth century by immersing the viewer in images in relief. Starting in the 1790s, the popular success of E. G. Robertson's phantasmagorias (1763–1837) often sprang from the innovative use of two different magic lanterns lit at the same time. In *The Bloody Nun* (ca. 1898), the first lantern projected the background (a cloister, for example), while the other represented the figure (the bloody nun, with a dagger in her hand). The superimposition suggested a phantasmagoria in relief (the nun seems to come toward viewers). See E. G. Robertson, *Mémoires récréatifs, scientifiques et anecdotiques* (Paris: Chez l'auteur et à la Librairie de Wurtz, 1831).

. Snow also draws on superimposition in his films: the end of the zoom shot in *Wavelength* (1966–1967) focuses on a photograph of a wave, which eventually splits through superimposition. Through the time rupture, this makes us anticipate what will happen, or mentally split in the sudden dimensions of fiction.

. The diegesis is the universe presented in the image, the world offered by a work of art, which represents a part of it.

0. In the early 1870s, superimpositions enabled the English anthropologist Francis Galton to layer different portraits to make composite portraits (or portrait-types) of a group. These apparently visually coherent images represented early layered figures. They seemed to be single exposures, but in fact were taken over time.

1. The artist plays both with words and images. A play on words in the title confirms his intention to influence the behavior of the viewer from afar, and to create an authoritative contact with him: Snow imposes a behavior by superimposing images.

2. For more on the *I-here-now* in relationship to this (the referent), see Thierry de Duve, "Michael Snow: The Deictics of Experience and Beyond," in the present volume.

3. Binocular vision refers to the strong layering between the two images seen separately by each eye. If you imagine a quadruple stereogram, *Imposition* would have to be viewed not through a stereoscope but through a quadriscope, as you might call it, meant for a four-eyed individual. This would enable you to see not two, but four points of view at the same time and as part of the same reality disguised differently. This piece somehow constitutes—and not without humor—a ubiquitous interpretation of the Greek panoptic myth (Hera has Argos Panoptes oversee the nymph Io—he sees all—so that Zeus won't seduce her).

4. See Rosalind Krauss, "Photography's Discursive Spaces," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), pp. 131–150, and *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), pp. 94–146.

5. During a pictorial joust, as told by Pliny in *Natural History*, Zeuxis raises the veil that protects his painting and birds immediately try to eat the grapes he depicted. But Parrhasius painted the veil itself and everyone in attendance thought it was real fabric.

6. In *Shade* (1979), Snow also presents a figure from the back on a Plexiglas stand, but the figure is clothed. The titles must be understood spatially (the flat, two-sided image is hung) and also temporally (as a slice of captured time).

7. Michael Snow, "Notes on the Whys and Hows of My Photographic Works," in *Michael Snow: Panoramique*, exh. cat. (Paris: CNP, 1999), pp. 105–106.

8. See Stéphanie Katz, *L'Écran, de l'icône au virtuel* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2004), pp. 179–254.

9. "Michael Snow: Pas de Commentaire," p. 1.

0. "The bottom is a bottomless abyss. *Grund*, in German, means 'bottom,' but also 'ground.' 'Abyss' is translated *Abgrund*. Because there isn't a French equivalent, let's call this bottomless, endless depth 'lost bottom.' When the painter supposes that the figure, at the end of its journey toward the canvas, will stand on solid ground, it loses ground" (Pierre Schneider, *Petite histoire de l'infini en peinture* [Paris: Hazan, 2001], p. 15).

1. See de Duve, "Michael Snow," in the present volume. The author compares the experience of the sublime in Caspar David Friedrich's *Monk before the Sea* (1808–1810), and the experience by proxy of the viewer in front of the painting. Postmodernist works have accepted that our experience, not only of raw nature but also of painting, is a second-degree experience, with artists having "de-sublimed nostalgia of the sublime." In *VUEƎUV*, the naked woman, who replaces the monk(!), only looks at the curtain or through it, at the viewer himself. Snow asks that we think about the very conditions of "experience in general," rather than attempting to "save the sublime—Friedrich's or Barnett Newman's—which would tear him from postmodern disaster."

2. Two other examples in Snow's work: *In Medias Res* (1998), a photograph of a rug with figures and objects on it, taken from a high angle, is displayed lying flat on the floor, like the rug *Immediate Delivery* (1998) is a light-box transparency. The photograph is of various colored transparencies (gelatins) suspended in three-dimensional space with the inside (now invisible) of the light-box with its four fluorescent tubes visible through the gelatins.

3. See Philippe Dubois, *L'Acte photographique* (1983; Paris: Nathan, 1990), pp. 265–66.

4. Snow, "Notes on the Whys and Hows of My Photographic Works," p. 118.

5. Snow, as quoted in Wehn-Damisch, *Sur la longueur d'onde de Michael Snow*.

6. On Snow's voyeurism, see de Duve, "Michael Snow," and Snow's response to the critic, "A Letter to Thierry de Duve," in the present volume.

7. "Michael Snow: La Permanence de la Lumière," interview with Nicole Gingras, *Art Press* 234 (April 1998): 21.

8. Snow, as quoted in Wehn-Damisch, *Sur la longueur d'onde de Michael Snow*.

9. Yves Bonnefoy, *L'Arrière-pays* (1972; Paris: Gallimard, 2003), p. 23.

0. On cinematic duration in Snow's work, see Dominique Païni, "Dix Jours de neige en été," *Trafic* 32 (1999): 44–56.

1. Artists like Pipilotti Rist and Stan Douglas draw on the effects of embedding virtual space within real space. In *Detroit* (1999–2000), Douglas uses a double projection: he loops the same black-and-white film segment on a two-part screen, simultaneously in positive and negative. Douglas gives two interpretations of the story, one facing the other. The action takes place in Detroit, but the title also signifies the passage between two sides of a single reality as the interstitial space between two images.

2. See Véronique Mauron, *Le signe incarné: Ombres et reflets dans l'art contemporain* (Paris: Hazan, 2001), p. 206.

3. Michael Snow also uses mirrors to play on self-reference in his work. *Authorization* (1969) in this way presents photographic self-portraits that are set within each other and attached to a mirror.

4. Paul Virilio, *L'Espace critique* (Paris: Charles Bourgois, 1984), p. 12. This modern conception of the body and architecture, which removes the idea of inside by upholding transparency, defines man as free of interiority, according to a model that opposes the model of internal spatiality, that of the cave, the grotto, the dialectic between visible and invisible.

5. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mille plateaux* (Paris: Minuit, 1980), p. 627.

6. Ibid.

7. The DVD-ROM *Digital Snow* (Paris: Anarchives 2, Centre Pompidou, 2002) is a compilation of several musical pieces written by Snow.

8. Henri Bergson, *La pensée et le mouvant* (Paris: Alcan, 1934), p. 45.

9. "Michael Snow: La permanence de la Lumière," p. 20.

0. Snow as quoted in Wehn-Damisch, *Sur la longueur d'onde de Michael Snow*.

1. "Michael Snow: La Permanence de la lumière," p. 23.

2. "I had the idea to separate the 'figure' from the 'ground,' literally, by making contoured (cut-out) representations of people, which, being only figures, used the wall as their ground. One of these was what became known as the 'Walking Woman.' I decided to do some variations with this figure and soon arrived at the revelation that ... different 'grounds' could be used. This led to my first photowork, *4 to 5*, in 1962. It is a set of black-and-white photos of a life-size black silhouette of the 'Walking Woman' in different settings in the city. The interest for me was the transformative aspect of placing this two-dimensional 'absence' ('art') in three-dimensional 'life' in order to make two-dimensional static representations" ("Michael Snow: La permanence de la lumière," p. 21). Here were have it: the connection is made between superimposed reality and fiction, and Snow henceforth draws on it everywhere. *VUEꟴUV*, made thirty years later, is proof of the continued presence of this organic concern for the feminine figure.

3. Snow explains about the work: "*Digest* was made by fixing the camera on a tripod directly above the stainless steel pan. All the photos show the lip edge of the pan as a frame. The first (bottom photo in the eventual stack) shows the empty pan-space. I added about ¼″ to ½″ of polyester resin for each subsequent photo, each time adding various objects of metal, plastic, and cloth as well as different colored pigments. Each time I added I photographed. The pigments that I added ended up being a gray and all the inserted objects are now congealed in the solidified resin" (Snow, email to *October*, September 21, 2005).

4. Jorge Luis Borges, *Le livre de sable* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), pp. 140–141.

5. Smooth space, natural and local, corresponds to the daily and concrete experience of things; for Deleuze and Guattari, its opposite is striated space, ruled by geometry and by an overall, more abstract view of the world (see *Mille plateaux*). Perspective painting defines a striated space, whereas Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau*, for example, also corresponds to the experience of smooth space.

6. Deleuze and Guattari, *Mille plateaux*, pp. 592–593.

Keaton and Snow

Érik Bullot
translated by Molly Stevens

I

On Buster Keaton's first appearance in cinema, in Roscoe Arbuckle's film *The Butcher Boy* (1917), filmgoers were struck by his impeccable reserve. When slapped in the face with a bag of flour or grappling with gooey molasses fallen into his hat, there was no struggle that disturbed the precision of his gestures. Coming out of vaudeville, Keaton's first stage act was with his father, who used him as a missile, shooting him across the stage like a bullet. He perfected his restraint by developing an acting technique that was simultaneously dramatic, formal, and elastic; it had a geometric character that continues to fascinate us today. The burlesque effect of Keaton's work depends less upon hazards encountered than upon the way in which a course of action or a clever unfolding of coordinates of space requires a suspension of logic. The subject does not disappear as a result, but gets caught in the web of the physical realm, where twists and turns multiply according to the laws of a surprising general ballistics. Keaton's wit is geometric by nature, as was his passion both in life and in film for tinkering and building. In his memoirs he has told of building a chicken coop and a miniature train that brings drinks and appetizers to guests around the pool. He was fond of organizing areas of space, of working with the switches on train tracks, of building houses, and of driving cars. And it was by patiently and rigorously deconstructing space that Keaton's genius attained its balance. In his article "Le cinéma, art de l'espace," Éric Rohmer has already noted that a "spatial obsession" seemed to guide his performance.[1] Here was a filmmaker able to draw the maximum of burlesque emotion from the deployment of spatial rules in a logical and distorted manner. How did this clever dismantling take place?

One must first consider the distorted relationship between Keaton's character and space. Keaton is disoriented, poorly lateralized, the victim of a sort of motor dyslexia; he mixes up right and left, forward and back, high and low, depth and length. His confusion can involve systematic inversion. When the doctor in *The Cameraman* (1928) strikes his knee with a hammer, his other knee reacts. Turning his back to the scene is also a determining principle: events always happen behind his back and unbeknownst to him. When one becomes aware of this formal rule, examples pop up everywhere. *Steamboat Bill Jr.* (1928), for instance, is a film that is entirely structured around the principle of two symmetrical circles turning in opposite

directions. It is a guiding factor not only at the dramatic level (the bitter rivalry between the respective owners of the two boats, between one's son and the other's daughter), but also at the performance level (for example, two characters seek and avoid each other, turning away from each other at the same time; Keaton and his father at the station, Keaton and his fiancée at the barber shop or in front of the prison). We can understand the sheer panic created by the arrival of the hurricane in the film for this scene will definitively cancel out the spatial paradox by resolving the opposites through catastrophe. It's when the prison that confines Keaton's father is destroyed, and when his enemy's ship is demolished (the two circles open) that reconciliation is possible. In a staggering confrontation, the enemies shake hands and the two unruly children exchange a kiss while being tenderly watched over by their fathers. The two pairs, who have crossed their partners to reach one another, now look out in the same direction. Other formal principles, similar to a chiasmus, can also be detected in Keaton's work. The back-and-forth theme in *The General* (1926) has often been discussed, both in terms of the plot (the train crossing enemy lines before returning to its starting point) and in terms of the gag (the cannon that dangerously changes direction before taking correct aim). But a masterpiece like *The Neighbors* (1920) is based instead on the mirror principle: two symmetrical facades, two family rivals, a fence that is a dividing line, scaffolding and a lever system to go from one world to the other. During a chase, Keaton is able to escape a policeman because of his half-white, half-black makeup. He is wearing on his stunned and determined face the formal principle of the plot, thereby exemplifying the geometric drive in his work. The film is the systematic proliferation of a formal rule that results from the hero's inability to first gain control of the laws of space.

However, the fact is that Keaton's character usually goes from obvious incompetence to extreme capability. For example, in *Steamboat Bill Jr.*, he first brilliantly demonstrates his inability to maneuver the ship or exert the least physical effort. He then overcomes all obstacles and destroys a boat, dives into the water, and saves his loved ones—and all this while managing a complex tangle of ropes. His performance shows that he can anticipate what will happen and face it with an athletic courage that is nothing less than astounding. How does this transformation occur? It sometimes results unexpectedly from a sudden amazing jump that's almost graceful (this is the

case especially in *College* [1926] and *Battling Butler* [1926], in which Keaton, the puny, awkward hero, ends up accomplishing—after numerous, repeated failures—unprecedented athletic feats out of the pure passion of love; and yet the arbitrary nature of this sudden metamorphosis is maintained). But most often the transition from incompetence to tremendous ability occurs through a patient study of space; it is learned by feel, step by step, as if he were relying on knowledge of the body itself. Although he has just been part of a chaotic circumstance, subject to all kinds of fluctuations, threatened by danger and desire, often in combination, he becomes the pivot, the rudder in the face of a group of forces. He consequently can save his fiancée from peril and vanquish an evil rival. Urgency, necessity, and the virtues of pragmatism force him to observe, calculate, and predict. It seems that his initial clumsiness resulted only from false perception, that vision predominated over understanding. The hero moves about in a way that is indeed at variance with what he actually sees. Therefore, the way bodies in general stumble about is due to telescoping, to distance being misjudged, and to the sudden appearance of obstacles. The topological aspect is defined by closeness, orderliness, and envelopment, and it is characteristic of his first shorts because they play on the effect of contiguity and interface. In *The High Sign* (1920), the newspaper he wants to read continues to unfold to the point that it covers him like a sheet, thus foreshadowing the way homes take to the air in his feature films. Then the Euclidean aspect, marked by the differentiation between vision and understanding, takes over, leading to an effect of reversibility. Jean Piaget's terminology can serve as a template; it is as if Keaton's character were going through the stages of child development, the inventor of a "spontaneous geometry" in cinema. It is time that gives depth to the space by offering the possibility of a door sliding, a wall pivoting, a train derailing, a house collapsing. This progression from the topological to the Euclidean is certainly embodied in the character of the projectionist in *Sherlock Junior* (1924). We note that for Keaton this progression rests on the principle of double negation. Because he is subject to the rebellious character of space, he anticipates the reversal of things while going back over them. Jean-Patrick Lebel has already offered an in-depth analysis of this double reversal, citing it as the dialectical structure of the gag.[2] It is a principle that underlies both the logic of the gag and the dramatic construction of the whole film. It is because of the double reversal that the

hero finds a solution to his poor spatialization. Keaton is able to take control of the forces and things around him through the unexpected logic of new developments and reversal. We can therefore better understand his passion for modes of transportation (cars, motorcycles, boats, dirigibles, trains, hand cars); they permit him to come and go, to cover distance, to accomplish this reversibility.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the shortcomings of the Keaton character are also generated by the space around him; it is unexpected, absurd, unstable. Trompe l'oeil is everywhere. He prepares to mount a horse made of wood (*The Scarecrow* [1920]); he dives into a landscape to escape the cyclone, but it is a theater backdrop (*Steamboat Bill Jr.*); he wakes in a room that is a simple set being removed by stagehands (*The Playhouse* [1921]); he waits in a line that never moves and consists of mannequins (*The Goat* [1921]). I find the best example to be in *The Boat* (1921). Wanting to make the inside of his boat more comfortable, and concerned with decor, he hangs up a seascape painting. The nail is poorly driven into the boat wall and streams of water leak through as if out of the painting itself. Utter confusion enters the real (and the representation of the real) in a way that is reminiscent of the poet of tautology, René Magritte, Keaton's contemporary. But it's also the space in general that constantly produces problems and misunderstandings. Bodies disappear without a trace (like the disc thrown into the stadium in *College*) or are incorporated into a space without depth (in *Sherlock Junior* the hero becomes part of a projected film as well as entering a flat suitcase). The symmetry of the sets exacerbates all possible misunderstanding: the two theater boxes in *The Playhouse* are occupied by twin sisters who, after plenty of confusion and a few slaps, differentiate the space by painting a stripe. The interchangeability of elements allows for all kinds of combinations: in *One Week* (1920), the build-it-yourself house for which the crate units were incorrectly numbered becomes both a catapult and a carousel. There are as many failings as could exist in a rebellious world governed by its own laws. But do not all these deceptions (the confusion of near and far, the play between depth and plane, the chasm between vision and understanding) simply refer back to the characteristics of the film image? Buster Keaton is a hero of the photogenic. His world is ruled by the laws of cinema, and it is this that gives his art its highly modernist character. I have already cited Magritte, but Théo van Doesburg and his architectural projects also come to mind. The film *One*

Week could be considered a burlesque summation of the history of Cubism (Le Corbusier and his "regulating lines," and the Futurist director Dziga Vertov—*Man with a Movie Camera* [1929] and *The Cameraman* were made during the same period). Not only does Keaton's art play on the formal facts of the film image, but the Keatonian protagonist literally moves about in a world that sticks faithfully to modernist precepts: the far away is brought to the surface, and the set, following the example of the shot, is a milieu of attraction and propulsion.

This play comes into full effect in the subtle conflict between gesture and word, which is the theater of silent cinema. The ambiguity of messages is a driving force in Keaton's films. In all his movies, there is constant talking and all available means of communication are used: the telephone, the telegraph, photography, cinema, as well as letters, books, posters, intertitles, numbers, gesticulations, and gestures. Yet despite the plethora of signs used, understanding the message is far from assured: the messages are often shortened, a letter may be missing, numbers are often upside down, gestures are often ambiguous. There is always a possibility of misinterpretation when message content is brought to the screen, and Keaton weaves a complex play of situations in which various levels of communication interfere, and in which gesture and word contradict one other. Here I would like to challenge the legendary neutrality of Keaton's expression. Rarely has a face been so animated in film. But his emotional tone always suspends meaning: he can show surprise, incredulity, irony, stupor, and thought in a fleeting and well-defined way. *Seven Chances* (1925), one of his most beautiful films, is entirely built on the theme of communication and its sound. Keaton's challenge is to find a wife on the very evening the film takes place. But how will he convey his message to the receiver? The difficulties he faces are related to the problems inherent in communicating an unequivocal message. At the beginning of the film his marriage proposals eloquently demonstrate the misunderstandings that arise when gesture and word are confused. The hero addresses a young woman in a saloon, which provokes hysterical laughter all around. Keaton is astonished to see the reaction he sparks, and so is the spectator who cannot grasp the meaning of the words exchanged on screen. Keaton therefore gives up on words, deeming them too dangerous, and pantomimes a proposal to another young woman. He kneels, puts his hand over his heart, but doesn't notice two golfers cackling behind his back, which causes the woman to smile in

amusement. In another attempt, he jots a note and tosses it to a society lady seated on a balcony. He is immediately showered with tiny scraps of paper. The language of objects replaces writing. In yet another attempt, he has a friend propose for him. The situation creates a wonderful mix-up, for the woman absent-mindedly takes the friend for the suitor. She looks in one direction but the words are coming from another. In a new attempt, Keaton walks into an occupied telephone booth. His friend, curious, presses his ear against the wall to listen to the conversation; we watch the woman's gestures of refusal through the booth's transparent glass. This shot perfectly illustrates the Keatonian paradox that is the centerpiece of the drama. The sound is inaudible, muffled behind the glass pane, but we can nevertheless interpret what is going on—although not with complete certainty through the gestures that accompany it.

Keaton's penchant for signs is undoubtedly as strong as his drive for the geometric. In his memoirs, he tells a story about his transformation into a semiologist during his time in the army—when he fully learned Morse code, and to read maps and semaphore signals. He found that once he had mastered them, he was the most learned of all the soldiers. Setting space coordinates in all directions and playing off the ambiguity of messages are two sides of the same coin. One could have legitimately thought that this art, which does more than just express verbal communication, would have rapidly developed with the advent of the talkies. However, this was not to be: after his work with MGM, Keaton did make comedies with sound, but his art declined. The later films didn't compare to the silent masterpieces. It is clear that the play between word and gesture depended on the silence of cinema. Given Keaton's genius and the linguistic power of his art, based on word games, it was reasonable nevertheless to expect new developments. Yet Hollywood gossip and personal failures got the best of Keaton. Aside from his legendary meeting with Samuel Beckett, he would not make any other major film. His art, which attained a rare perfection between 1917 and 1929, seems to have had no follow-up.

This complex relationship between the burlesque, modernism, devastating humor, and geometry may have disappeared. Burlesque in part became more plastic, evolving into the world of Jerry Lewis and Carmelo Bene, which is not exactly Keaton's. But it is interesting to note the resurgence of forms in contemporary art that borrow from the burlesque. This goes beyond simple reference. Parody, as defined by the Russian

formalists and grounded in revelation of the compositional process, is the springboard. The work of artists such as Gordon Matta-Clark, George Maciunas, Peter Fischli and David Weiss, and Christian Boltanski comes to mind. In Michael Snow's films Keaton's art finds its systematic extension. This relationship, although unexpected, is interesting for several reasons. It allows us, first of all, to approach Snow's work in terms of categories other than those of experimental or Structural cinema. It then allows us to switch back and forth between two bodies of work that at first seem dissimilar, casting a new light on the relationship between cinema and contemporary art in terms of the return of form.

II

In Michael Snow's film *Presents* (1981), the set is a cross section of an apartment and is reminiscent of the end of Keaton's *The High Sign* or the house in *One Week,* transformed into a carousel. It sits entirely on tracks and with every shift gives the impression that the camera is tracking sideways. The set movements also have an unusual and discomforting effect: a young woman walks strangely, her legs stiff, her body unbalanced wherever the set ends (partition walls tremble, tables swing). The man, on the other hand, attempts a rolling gait in order to cross the room, but, lacking confidence he is happy to finally take a seat within the perpetual seesawing that causes each element to seemingly disconnect from the whole. The burlesque is palpable here. The unstable walking patterns of this couple relate to the idea of the burlesque body, which is subject to deformations and often caught in the logic of an unyielding mechanical device, a frantic witness to the imminent destruction of the surrounding space. Both Keaton and Snow share a penchant for machines and draw on the threat of deformation. But Snow doesn't limit the burlesque to the constraints of narrative. Process replaces story and the gag is literally dismantled. The contradiction between body and space is no longer due only to the awkwardness of characters. Characters are rather immediately drawn into the machine set, which itself is seized by the machine camera. After having steadily observed the sliding set, the camera actually enters the set and overturns various props. A sheet of Plexiglas attached to the camera pushes around the elements of the set, like a snowplow, overturning the table and television, brushing up against the young woman's dress, knocking down a partition wall. If we consider the traditional body-machine conflict, the machine is no longer an accessory, it is the set itself—it is the camera, programmed to sweep away and chase the body. Various signs fully reveal the burlesque effect: the humming motor of the moving set, the filmmaker calling out numbers ("one, two, three ...") to direct the scene, the convulsive movement of the actors trying to resist the upheavals, the needle of the record player jumping around Bach's cello suites at the mercy of the irregular movements of the set. Snow lays bare both the gag and its means of production. The elements of the Keatonian lexicon (poor lateralization,

trompe l'oeil, rebellious space) are cast anew. The camera becomes the active agent of disorder, bringing viewers into an unstable world in which set, character, machine, and camera are constantly swapping places, producing near catastrophic results. Isn't the spectator watching *La région centrale* (1971) or *Seated Figures* (1988) taken into the eye of the cyclone?

The temptation of the automaton, which often haunts Keaton's gestures like a threat (he performs movements without concern for their consequences), is here performed by the machine. Snow subjugates the movements of his camera to a program. One thinks of *Wavelength*'s (1967) zoom, the regulated panning movements of *Back and Forth* (1969), the tracking shots of *Seated Figures,* the mad dizziness of *La région centrale,* and the sideways tracking of **Corpus Callosum* (2002). It is no longer the handcar or locomotive that explores the depth of space; geometric exploration is entrusted to the camera (let us remember that Snow's father was a surveyor). Snow redistributes and displaces the pieces of the Keatonian puzzle. For his recent film **Corpus Callosum*, a remake of Keaton's *The General*, the artist drew inspiration from "the central region of the human brain, formed by nervous tissues that transmit 'messages' between the two hemispheres."[3] The film is built around two spaces: the first is an office with a computer room and picture window. The camera tracks sideways and loops. At every repetition, there is the opportunity to change the placement and actions of various characters. The second space is a family living room with a television. Various members of the family and elements of the decor appear and disappear at the mercy of transformations and substitutions. The transition from one area to another is accomplished through an interface: through the screen of one of the computers in the room, or through a suction from the back of the image. The film goes back and forth, from the office to the living room, in circular motion (the titles roll through in the middle of the film; the whole film is played in reverse motion shortly before the end). This mirror construction is also the dramatic structure of *The General*. Snow retained both the principle of coming and going and the play of lateral movement. We are reminded of Johnnie Gray on his locomotive: upon his return, switching left and right, he finds the same uneven ground and the same obstacles, though with some variation and difference. While Keaton's hero goes from the topological to the Euclidean, it seems that the reverse is true for Snow: the projecting frame that controls the camera's movements is gradually enveloped and turned, as

if space were bending, twisting, coiling up into itself. But it is essential to remember that *Corpus Callosum* is the theater of incessant metamorphoses. On top of the regular movement of the camera, the action of the characters, and the filmmaker's voice on the sound track ("Great, great!" he says, beaming, to his actors), there are also the digital deformations that the figures undergo: various metamorphoses, elongations, vibrations, tremblings, swellings, erections, shrinkings, and contortions. The traditional burlesque body subjected to the external pressures of space becomes the object of digital processing internal to the image; it is another shift that Snow uses as part of a repertoire of odd, ridiculing, even regressive gags. We should also note the social shift the body undergoes. It is no longer the soldier or the locomotive conductor that affronts the outside; it is the office employee, in front of his computer screen, who is now the subject of burlesque morphology.

Michael Snow, video still from *Corpus Callosum*, 2002. Digital Betacam video, 92 minutes, color, sound. Courtesy of Michael Snow.

Michael Snow, video still from *Corpus Callosum*, 2002. Courtesy of Michael Snow.

Michael Snow, video still from **Corpus Callosum*, 2002. Courtesy of Michael Snow.

One of the finest sequences in this film takes place in a classroom and is shot at an extreme high angle. Children are seated at their desks, before a topological diagram (probably an M. C. Escher drawing), which they turn in all directions, confused. One child raises his head, points at the camera, and warns his classmates of the presence of a third party. The apprentice surveyors then build a kind of scaffolding by piling up their desks. One child, perched on top of the pyramid, nears the screen, extends his arm, and the screen turns black. This scene is extremely Keatonian: we pass from the topological to the Euclidean, literally from vision to understanding. It's clear that Snow's work, having assimilated the lessons of modernism, plays on the formal elements of image and sound. Witness his self-referencing and infinitely reflecting images. (One need only cite his photographic work *Authorization* [1969] and his book *Cover to Cover* [1975].) One also notes how he goes from flatness to depth, how he systematically explores the coordinates of space, trompe l'oeil, deformation, mirror inversions, the eye controlled by the machine, and the removal of subjectivity and even the spectator. Snow seems to be dispassionately completing Keaton's modernist

functions quietly, with the main stipulation being the ironic shifting of components (camera, set, character). He deconstructs the burlesque. This play between modernism and burlesque allows us to consider the latter as a point of concern within the history of form (this was our initial hypothesis). The following chiasmus can therefore be posed: modernism is an unusual development within Keatonian logic, while the burlesque element in Snow's work mates his modernism, already fiercely skeptical, with humor. The critical virtue of the burlesque is tied to its very nature: the play on the body and its deformation is carried out at the level of a formal story; the burlesque deforms the closure of the genre. What is burlesque temporality? It certainly tends to be catastrophic, regressive, immature, to stress inversion and return. Therefore, this Keaton-Snow back-and-forth is less a history of burlesque cinema than a burlesque history of cinema that aims to write a new chapter on the relationship between cinema and contemporary art.

One wonders if, while deconstructing Keatonian art, Snow is able to perfect his potential linguistic dimension. In Snow's film *Rameau's Nephew by Diderot (Thanx to Dennis Young) by Wilma Schoen* (1974), it is precisely this latent component that is most vividly explored. This encyclopedic film systematically investigates the relationship between image and sound in a series of twenty-six sequences.[4] I wish to note briefly the inherent linguistic dimension in Keaton's work and point out the similarity between the two artists in this regard. I cite as an example the homonymy that exists between the story of Keaton's *Battling Butler* (a melancholy hero and a boxing champion are both named Alfred Butler, a homonymy that gives rise to several misunderstandings, including incorrect signatures and abbreviated messages) and the visual play on words and sound in *The Boat*. The name of the boat, *Damfino*, can be pronounced like the expression "Damned if I know." This brings about various errors; these are the words that the hero pronounces at the end of the film, after failing, and that the viewer understands by reading his lips. Remembering how the messages are circulated in *Seven Chances*, similar to the upside-down numbers in *One Week*, and to the exchange of numbers in *The Navigator* (1924), we observe Keaton's penchant for word games and puns. The pre-linguistic dimension of Keaton's cinema is evident; his poor lateralization, his dyslexia that seems not to affect him, and the principle of double reversal, all suggest writing in particular. In *Rameau's Nephew*, Snow fully explores playing

with language as a visual device. For example, he drums on a sink with his hand, thus performing the homophony "sink"/"synch"; he presents a cymbal to the camera, while pronouncing the word "symbol," its homophony. The scene at the hotel, which is both philosophical and fantastic, draws both on visual and aural problems and the memory of the filmed character. It hovers between dream and reality, like the "film within a film" in *Sherlock Junior*. We might end by pointing out the various anagrams Snow uses in his titles—including Wilma Schoen. They are reminiscent of the stream of Keaton doubles that fill the scene and the theater balcony in *The Playhouse*. Each of these doubles is named "Buster Keaton," according to the program on every seat. Both artists interchange letters, use homophony, and confuse gesture and word; but Snow goes beyond Keatonian burlesque, transposing it to the symbolic dimension.

If burlesque involves the invention of a body subjected to different rates of speed that may transform it, we can better understand how Snow's cinema was able to shift the formal fact of Keatonian burlesque and advance its linguistic potential. The burlesque has become a temporal category; a form can pass from one field into another (from cinema to contemporary art, for example), change its own base, and acquire a new speed—as in the incredible slow motion sequence in *See You Later/Au revoir* (1990)—by condensing it, stretching it out, and taking it apart.

In *Grand Slam Opera*, a short made in 1936, Keaton disregards sound recording techniques and does a juggling act and some magic tricks in front of a microphone.[5] In the opening scenes of *Rameau's Nephew*, Snow whistles into a microphone, playing with the intensity of his whistle by moving away from and closer to it. It seems that these two images provide us with a comparison, a burlesque lesson in the confusion of meaning, in the problems of synchronization of image and sound. The posterity of burlesque cinema henceforth passes through contemporary art, as if the latter were taking an ironic and critical tally of the promises that the history of cinema has left unfulfilled.

Notes

. Éric Rohmer, "Le cinéma, art de l'espace," *La Revue du cinéma* 14 (June 1948).

. Jean-Patrick Lebel, *Buster Keaton* (Paris: Éditions Universitaires, 1964), pp. 110–151. See also Jean-Pierre Coursodon, *Buster Keaton* (Paris: Atlas/Lherminier, 1986).

. Michael Snow, "À l'intérieur de *Corpus Callosum*," in *Des écrits 1958–2001: Michael Snow* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2002), p. 196.

. In the small book that accompanies the film's video version (Paris: Éditions Re:Voir, 2002), a detailed study by Ivora Cusak and Stéfani de Loppinot, I was able to find several uses of the term "burlesque."

. Coursodon, *Buster Keaton*, p. 206.

The Child in the Machine: On the Use of CGI in Michael Snow's *Corpus Callosum

Malcolm Turvey

The most highly developed earthly man is very like the child.

—Novalis

There's a fashionable idea now, especially among academic theorists, that the person—the subject, as they say these days—is totally culturally shaped. I don't believe that at all. I think somebody is born, that there is an organism that has functions. It can be twisted; it can be hurt; but there's still a specific person there.

—Michael Snow

Elsewhere, I have suggested that Michael Snow's experimentation with computer-generated imagery (CGI) in *Corpus Callosum (2002) returns to and extends some of the cinema's earliest traditions.[1] In particular, Snow's film shares a sensibility with experimental film of the 1910s and 1920s, what Annette Michelson describes as a euphoric sense of "ludic sovereignty" over space and time.[2] Just as a filmmaker such as Dziga Vertov self-consciously revels in his films in what was then the novel power over time granted by film so Snow just as self-consciously revels in *Corpus Callosum in the new power over space enabled by digital, thereby suggesting that, for all of its novelty, the use of digital technologies in filmmaking will be driven by some of the same basic drives and desires that have motivated much cinematic art over the last one hundred or so years, such as the desire for control over space and time.

Experimental film of the 1910s and 1920s is not the only cinematic tradition that *Corpus Callosum returns to and extends. As other commentators have noted, its use of CGI to comically manipulate the human body bears more than a passing resemblance to one of the cinema's earliest forms of entertainment, slapstick comedy, which emerged during the cinema's first period, the so-called cinema of attractions (1896–1904).

The word "slapstick," as Alan Dale reminds us,

> derives from an implement—"the double paddles formerly
> used by circus clowns to beat each other. The loud crack of
> the two paddle blades as they crashed together could always
> be depended upon to produce the laughter and applause." ...
> For comedy to register as slapstick, you need only the fall,
> and its flipside, the blow. ... The essence of a slapstick gag is
> a physical assault on, or collapse of, the hero's dignity.[3]

In Snow's film, literal falls and blows performed by his actors are blended with a variety of computer-generated ones that assault the dignity of the human body and are accompanied on the soundtrack by electronic equivalents of the crack of the slapstick paddle. Once inside the office in which most of the film takes place, there begins a series of slow tracking shots edited together into a continuous loop, with the camera repeatedly tracking across the space of the office from left to right, starting and stopping each time in roughly the same places. During each track, one or more computer-generated assaults on the body occur along with various electronic noises. In the first, the foot of a worker becomes stuck to the ground; in the second (which is reminiscent of the sight gags about race in silent slapstick), a white man hands some papers to a black coworker—slowly the black man turns white as the white man turns black; in the third, an electric current leaps out of a computer, electrifying a group of workers who fall to the ground—one of them then performs a partial handstand as if still electrified; and in the fifth, the image is twisted in the middle, like a bow tie, turning it upside down, with a woman, also upside-down, lying unconscious on the floor.

The assault intensifies in a second series of tracks, and is given a more explicitly sexual and sadistic inflection. As the camera passes a man, his penis expands from the fly of his trousers across the width of the office until it meets the exposed arse of a woman waiting, doggy-style, on top of a desk —a bell rings and the penis suddenly contracts as the woman is returned in fast motion to her seat. A man grabs and begins twisting the arm of another man; the action is then enhanced by some digital twisting, first of the twisted arm, then of the man's entire body. The first man then proceeds to whip the second with his belt before they part, blowing kisses to each other. The body of a plump woman is expanded across the width of the office until, like a balloon, it bursts. A man and a woman enter the door of a

bathroom and are squeezed together—when they emerge, they are still squeezed together in the rectangular shape of the doorway as they awkwardly shuffle back to the office. As these examples suggest, Snow uses CGI in his film to expand, contract, twist, squeeze, fold, invert, transform, and in general wreak havoc on the human body.

Michael Snow, video still from *Corpus Callosum*, 2002. Digital Betacam video, 92 minutes, color, sound. Courtesy of Michael Snow.

Although it does not have a narrative, *Corpus Callosum* also employs some of the conventions of comedian comedy, which took shape as slapstick evolved into the longer, narrative chase films and one- and two-reelers of the later 1900s and 1910s. These conventions were extended further in animated films and are still used today in comedian comedy and cartoons. As Steve Seidman has shown in his seminal study of the genre, one of its major conventions is what he calls its "extrafictionality," the foregrounding of film's artificiality through a variety of means such as exposing "the materiality of sound and image."[4] To take one of any number of possible examples from the genre's history, in Laurel and Hardy's parodic Western *Way Out West* (1937), the boys are in a bar when a cowboy begins to sing. They chime in, too, and all goes well until the diminutive

Laurel suddenly starts harmonizing in the implausibly low bass voice of a large man. Hardy, confounded, borrows a wooden mallet from the bartender and hits Laurel on the head. But rather than stop, Laurel continues singing, this time in the equally implausible falsetto voice of a woman, before finally fainting. This scene exposes the materiality of the soundtrack not only by overtly dubbing the voices of a man and woman onto Laurel's, but also by having Hardy explicitly call attention to the dubbing from within the film's diegesis. The scene also exemplifies another way in which comedian comedy films foreground their artificiality. Rather than act as if the viewer does not exist and the fictional world of the film is real, as is the norm in most genres, comedians tend to acknowledge the viewer's existence. When Laurel begins to sing in that impossibly bass voice, Hardy, as was his custom, looks into the camera at the viewer with a mixture of bewilderment and frustration.[5] Other comedians talk to the viewer, such as Groucho Marx in *Animal Crackers* (1930), who heaps abuse on Margaret Dumont's character Mrs. Rittenhouse in various asides to the camera. A final convention of the genre worth mentioning in the context of Snow's film is the way it traffics in what Seidman calls "identity confusion." Comedians are often confused with, or disguised as, others, taking on aspects of their identities, and comedian comedy is replete with doubles. For instance, Jerry Lewis in *The Nutty Professor* (1963) plays both Professor Julius Kelp and his alter-ego, Buddy Love. This convention has been enhanced by CGI in recent films such as *The Mask* (1994), in which Jim Carrey plays nice, conventional Stanley, whose repressed Id is liberated when he is digitally transformed by a magical mask into an anarchic trickster. And in *Being John Malkovich* (1999), Mr. Malkovich is digitally duplicated ad infinitum.

All of these conventions are evident in **Corpus Callosum*. To start with, the film foregrounds its artificiality because Snow usually makes no effort to hide his computer-generated effects. As other commentators have noted, many of the digital manipulations Snow employs are overt, even crude. They are not, for the most part, blended seamlessly with the recorded elements of the shot in which they occur, as they typically are in mainstream narrative films. Take, for example, the expanding penis, which in its absurd size and flatness is clearly computer-generated, as are the rectangular couple and the men who change color. Then there are the repeated acknowledgments of the viewer by the actors who often look into

the camera. At one point, one of the workers is sitting at his computer monitor, on which there appear to be several dials. The man proceeds to move his mouse and manipulate the dials on his monitor, all the while glancing up at the camera, as if to suggest that he is controlling the effects we begin to see—the image turns different colors, a man in a wheelchair rolls over it, it dissolves into TV static, and so on. Snow also has great fun with digital's capacity to confuse identities. To take one of numerous examples, there is a blonde woman in a brown skirt, pink shirt, white tights, and brown shoes carrying a purse whom we see throughout the film. However, she is played by different actresses at different times (including a young girl), and at one point she appears naked and pregnant. Later, we see her, naked again, but this time she is not pregnant and has a penis. For once, no digital trickery is obvious—her penis blends seamlessly with the rest of her body. Snow is here using CGI in conjunction with multiple actresses to create the kind of identity confusion that is a hallmark of comedian comedy.

Michael Snow, video still from *Corpus Callosum, 2002. Courtesy of Michael Snow.

Considering all of the ways he could have explored the novel possibilities of CGI, why would Snow have chosen to do so through a slapstick assault on the dignity of the human body and the conventions of comedian comedy and animation? Why would he experiment with this new, advanced technology by returning to one of the cinema's earliest genres? In order to answer this question, we would do well to recall that, for some, there is a profound kinship between comedy and experimental film. Filmmaker Sidney Peterson goes as far as to claim that "90 percent of all experimental work is ... in its very nature comical," that there is an "element of comedy" in the film medium itself, and that "the best introductions" to experimental film are "silent comedies," "not the works of Ford, Eisenstein, or De Mille."[6] Furthermore, Snow is not, of course, the first experimental film to employ slapstick. Francis Picabia and René Clair's Dadaist film *Entr'acte* (1923) is widely seen as indebted to slapstick in its chase scene as well as its comic manipulation of the human body through overtly artificial techniques such as slow and stop motion.[7] And after World War II, Peterson, along with James Broughton, introduced slapstick into North American experimental filmmaking in *The Potted Psalm* (1946), and each continued to pursue it, in different ways, in subsequent films. Why would these filmmakers gravitate toward slapstick and comedy in making experimental works?

An answer, I think, is provided by Stan Brakhage, who, in writing of Chaplin, argues that the artist must "opt, in oneself, totally for the world of *the Child*. ... In moments, this happens in Chaplin's work—in the stances, usually, of Dance ... and/or Dream."[8] The comedian, especially the slapstick comedian, has often been associated with the child, and the way the comedian behaves is often thought of as childlike. As Seidman puts it, in addition to identity confusion,

> Another grouping of recurring formal elements can be discerned in comedian comedy. These stress the comic figure's childlike nature, his penchant toward play and imagination. In many of the films, the condition of childishness is foregrounded by verbal references to the comic figure as a child, or by the way the comic figure manifests certain child-like qualities. Moreover, certain comic figures demonstrate a childish approach to

communication and self-expression, comprehension, and an unawareness of how their bodies function. Often, the physical uncoordination of these comic figures leads to inadvertent destructive tendencies, even when they are trying to be helpful. Many films find the comic figure, like the child, being driven by principles of stimulation and pleasure, which lead to the manifestation of intentional destructive tendencies and sexual aggression.[9]

Once again Laurel and Hardy offer a good example. Laurel, in particular, is childlike, even infantile. He finds it difficult to grasp abstract ideas, metaphor, or anything beyond the concrete and literal. In *Sons of the Desert* (1933), he is incapable of understanding the subterfuge that Hardy is perpetrating on their wives in order to enable them to attend the Sons of the Desert convention in Chicago, and he continually interprets idioms and other figurative forms of speech literally. When Hardy, trying to convince his wife to allow them to attend, meekly asserts, "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy," Laurel innocently asks, "Who's Jack?" Like a child, Laurel also often cries when scared or unsure, such as when the Sons take an oath of allegiance that he feels he cannot uphold. However, none of this means that he is stupid. As children do, he often manipulates situations to his advantage, as in *The Music Box* (1932) when, in the final moments of delivering an oversized music box to a house on the top of a hill, he rides on the front of the box while Hardy does all the work pushing it up the hill from behind. He also occasionally shows childlike flashes of brilliance, suddenly speaking in implausibly sophisticated language. Hardy, meanwhile, considers himself to be an adult in complete control of his life, but this always proves to be an illusion. In *Sons of the Desert*, he has to ask his wife for permission to allow Laurel to visit, much like a child asking his mother if a friend can come over. And, like children, he and Laurel often play, sing, or dance together, usually creating a mess in the process; at the end of *The Music Box*, they finally get the ruined music box inside the house and then proceed to destroy its living room while dancing. If Laurel is an infant just learning to speak and reason, Hardy is his older, pre-adolescent brother who precociously overestimates his powers. And theirs is just one of the many forms that the comedian's childlike nature has taken in slapstick comedy. Given its association with the child, it is therefore not

surprising that certain experimental filmmakers have gravitated toward slapstick. For a concern with the child and the childlike has played a major role in experimental filmmaking, as it has in Western art in general since the Romantic period. Indeed, it constitutes one of the great continuities (of many) between Romanticism and modernism (and postmodernism).

The concept of the child that informed the work of the Romantics was, as is well known, one of original innocence. In the late eighteenth century, Rousseau rejected the Christian doctrine of original sin, arguing that nature, including human nature, is good, and that sin results from an estrangement from nature due to the corrupting influence of society. Because they have yet to be affected by society, children are born in a state of natural grace. This condition can be maintained only through an education that nurtures the original nature of the child, rather than represses or deforms it. As Peter Coveney has shown in his careful study of the subject, Romantic poets took up these themes, developing them in various ways, and during the nineteenth century, they came to be popularized and, inevitably, vulgarized. By the end of the century, the conception of the child as innocent had become

> nothing more than a convenient vehicle for stagnating pathos, or, in so far as it remained active, a potent means for withdrawal, for regression away from the very problems it had been created to express. So that, at the turn of the century, the child needed emancipation ... from the careless and very widely accepted falsification of the myth of its "innocent" nature.[10]

According to Coveney, this emancipation came in the form of Freud's theory of childhood sexuality, the influence of which has been incalculable. Due to Freud's conception of the child as libidinal and pleasure-seeking, argues Coveney, the myth of the child's innocence was exploded at the beginning of the twentieth century, and there arose a new conception of the child as fundamentally *amoral*, neither good nor evil, but instead "malicious, cruel, tender, kind, painfully sensitive—and most often an amalgam of all these qualities."[11] It is this conception that informs the work

of modernists such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and D. H. Lawrence, who capture the amoral reality of the child in all of its complexity.

While Freud's theory of childhood sexuality was undoubtedly hugely influential, in truth the novel conception of the child that it helped engender was part of a new view of nature that arose in the late nineteenth century and began with Arthur Schopenhauer. Whereas for the Romantics, nature was a source of goodness and spiritual salvation, for Schopenhauer and his followers, nature, in Charles Taylor's words, is "not a spiritual source of good. On the contrary, it is nothing but wild, blind, uncontrolled striving, never satisfied, incapable of satisfaction, driving us on, against all principles, law, morality, all standards of dignity, to an insatiable search for the unattainable."[12] In this view, nature is "a great reservoir of amoral force," of self-perpetuating, de-spiritualized, anarchic energy that Schopenhauer called the Will. It is a concept that, as Taylor points out, "had an immense influence on the thought and art of late-nineteenth-century Europe: in Germany, Austria, also France, even Russia. Most of the great writers, composers, and thinkers were deeply affected by [it], imprinted with it: Wagner, Nietzsche, Mahler, Thomas Mann," and, of course, Freud, whose concept of the libido is one of its descendants (as is the Lacanian Real).[13] But although their conception of nature was different, the post-Schopenhauerians tended to believe, like the Romantics, that society cuts us off from nature, and that it is necessary to reconnect to nature, whether to transcend, control, or even embrace it as the vital source of life and creativity.

Thus, the nineteenth century bequeathed to the twentieth at least two prominent conceptions of nature and the child. The first, starting with Rousseau, saw nature as a source of goodness and spiritual salvation and the child as innocent, while the second, starting with Schopenhauer, viewed nature as a self-perpetuating, de-spiritualized, anarchic force, and the child as amoral. Many twentieth-century artists have been influenced by one or both of these conceptions, and have continued to attempt, like the Romantics, to reconnect to nature by way of the child.

As Marjorie Keller has shown in her seminal work on the theme of childhood in avant-garde film, three such artists are Jean Cocteau, Joseph Cornell, and Stan Brakhage; she writes that all three "found childhood to be an inspiration and subject for their cinemas."[14] However, they conceived of

the child differently. Cocteau and Cornell had "a relatively uncritical relationship to ... the Romantic movement ... Wordsworth's depiction of the progressive loss of natural sympathy with the world from childhood on ... is the model for the filmmakers' sensibility."[15] Brakhage, meanwhile, "polemicized against their idealized vision of childhood," leaning more toward what I have called the amoral conception of the child. "His appreciation of modernist poetics, his Freudian biases, and his own experience as a father belied the effect of Romanticism to some degree—reworking the theme of childhood, casting back the period of 'innocence' to the birth trauma, and including developed notions of sexuality in early childhood."[16] But it was an artist to whom Keller does not pay much attention, James Broughton, who was probably the first North American experimental filmmaker to combine an interest in the amoral child with the other themes I have been exploring here: slapstick, and a return to the cinema's earliest traditions. As P. Adams Sitney argues:

> Broughton took cinema back to the time before the elaborate narratives of the early century in order to recapture the excitement of seeing and showing human bodies in action, apparitions, and sudden disappearances. ... In his quest for the origins of the cinema it is natural that he would feel an affinity for slapstick comedy."[17]

According to Sitney, "the nostalgia for the origins of the cinema is fused in [Broughton's] work with an ironic quest for the origin of his own psychic development" in childhood.[18] Thus, in Broughton's masterpiece *Mother's Day* (1948), a group of adults behave as children, while their mother and father "play at being adults and act like children."[19] In his notes on the film, Broughton writes:

> In *Mother's Day* I deliberately used adults acting as children, to evoke the sense of projecting oneself as an adult back into memory, to suggest the impossible borderline between when one is a child and when one is grown-up, and to implicate Mother in the world of the child fantasies as being, perhaps,

> the biggest child of them all—since she, in this case, has never freed herself from narcissistic daydreams.[20]

Slapstick emerges in the film in the incongruity between the adult bodies of the actors and their childlike behavior, just as it does in the case of Laurel and Hardy, as well as in the use of stop motion to create sudden changes in costume and setting, appearing and disappearing characters, and various other types of ellipses. The children depicted in the film are clearly of the amoral kind described by Coveney—"malicious, cruel, tender, kind, painfully sensitive"—rather than idealized innocents. While playful, they are also aggressive, throwing things at each other and pushing one another off a swing; sexual, drawing a naked woman and imitating adult rituals of courtship; and destructive, throwing their parents' possessions out of a window. Childhood is also associated with narcissism in the person of the mother who is unable to move beyond her childhood fantasy of "loveliness."[21] Broughton continued exploring these themes in his later films: slapstick in *Loony Tom, The Happy Lover* (1951), in which a Chaplinesque tramp "capers across a sunlit countryside making immediate and outrageous love to every woman he encounters,"[22] and the image of childhood in *This Is It* (1971), in which Broughton's son Orion plays naked with a large red ball as an unseen voice reads a poem that parodies cosmological and epistemological aspirations.[23]

Michael Snow's son also makes an appearance in the living room sequences of **Corpus Callosum*, sitting, usually very still, watching television on the couch, his bare feet sometimes propped up on the table in front of him. At one point, he blows a bubble with the piece of red gum that he is chewing and, through digital trickery, it expands and fills the entire screen, echoing, perhaps, Orion Broughton's red ball. But on the whole he seems aloof from the digital mayhem around him, as the placement, size, shape, color, and identity of various people and objects in the living room are manipulated digitally in a variety of ways. Children also appear in this film in a sequence that is totally unlike any other. After a series of tracking shots through the office has come to an end, we cut to a bird's-eye view of a classroom, in which a group of children are seated at their desks working on drawings of what appear to be pyramids. Suddenly, one of the children, yawning, looks up and notices the camera. She alerts her comrades, who proceed to build a pyramid of desks in order to reach it. A boy climbs up

and, just as he reaches out to touch the camera, the sequence ends. But more than anything else, it is in Snow's use of CGI to comically manipulate bodies that we sense the presence of a childlike consciousness. It is as if the filmmaker is a mischievous youngster who, having been given a new, powerful toy that allows him to alter the bodies of a group of tolerant if bemused adults trying to go about their work, is playfully experimenting with its functions, spontaneously and somewhat inexpertly. More so than Broughton's children, this child is aggressive, even sadistic, and seemingly oblivious to the embarrassment and discomfort it causes as it knocks, twists, expands, contracts, and squashes the bodies of the unfortunates over whom it has been given control. And it is sexual, too, delighting in the toilet humor so typical of the (pre-)adolescent. Due to the electronic hum on the soundtrack, the self-perpetuating, anarchic energy associated with the amoral conception of nature seems to pulsate throughout this film, barely contained by the repetitive tracking shots and threatening to erupt at any moment to wreak havoc once again on the dignity of the human body.

Michael Snow, video still from *Corpus Callosum*, 2002. Courtesy of Michael Snow.

Why, to repeat the question one last time, would Snow experiment with CGI in this way? Unlike Broughton, I do not think that Snow is concerned with "an ironic quest for the origin of his own psychic development," although his film is, perhaps, a quest for the origin of his own *artistic* development. For it ends with two of the office workers entering a screening room where they watch a film Snow made in 1956 while working for an animation company. In this short, black-and-white cartoon, the left leg of a simple human figure is increasingly stretched and twisted, while the person looks at the viewer and waves. This scene clearly anticipates Snow's use of CGI in the rest of **Corpus Callosum* and unearths its origins in this early part of his career.[24] More profoundly, though, much like Annette Michelson who argues that the "ludic sovereignty" over space and time that experimental filmmakers of the 1920s and before reveled in is rooted in "our abiding *infantile* fantasy of omnipotence,"[25] Snow's film suggests that what motivates the use of even the most advanced technologies such as CGI are thoroughly infantile drives and desires, ones that have shaped cinematic art since its inception, including the desire to play with, and make fun of, the human body that lies at the heart of slapstick and its close cousin, animation. **Corpus Callosum,* in other words, is a grand work of de-sublimation, revealing and reveling in the fundamental, enduring, primitive needs and wishes that, according to some, are sublimated in our most advanced art forms and technologies, and that persist, disguised, from childhood into adulthood.

By returning to slapstick, one of the cinema's earliest traditions, and extending it, uninterrupted, into the digital age, Snow's film offers a salutary antidote to the often hysterical rhetoric of "rupture" and "revolution" that tends to predominate in the discourse on digital. As is often the case with powerful new technologies, digital is widely viewed as effecting a fundamental change in human existence. Steven Pinker is surely correct to argue that there persists, in our culture, a myth of "the blank slate," "the idea that the human mind has no inherent structure and can be inscribed at will by society or ourselves."[26] Hence, when a powerful new technology comes along, because we assume that human beings are infinitely malleable, we are quick to believe that it will transform us beyond recognition. We fail to see, in other words, that whatever changes new technologies bring, they will continue to be shaped by our enduring drives

and desires—such as the desire to play with, and make fun of, the human body so brilliantly explored in Snow's film.[27]

Where Pinker is wrong, however, is in his caricature of modernism, which, he claims, denies the existence of human nature and has therefore given rise to art that has "stopped trying to appeal to the senses."[28] Interpreting literally Virginia Woolf's famous claim that "In or about December 1910, human nature changed," he writes:

> All the tricks that artists had used for millennia to please the human palate were cast aside. In painting, realistic depiction gave way to freakish distortions of shape and color and then to abstract grids, shapes, dribbles, splashes, and [blank canvases]. In literature, omniscient narration, structured plots, the orderly introduction of characters, and general readability were replaced by a stream of consciousness, events presented out of order, baffling characters and causal sequences, subjective and disjointed narration, and difficult prose.[29]

The denial of human nature in modernism, charges Pinker, is partly to blame for the contemporary "decline and fall" of the arts and humanities.[30] But while it is true that some *postmodern* artists and intellectuals have denied the existence of human nature to the point of absurdity, often in the name of a confused Leftist insistence on the determining role of society in shaping human life that Pinker rightly criticizes, what Pinker, ironically, does not recognize is that the very artistic techniques he decries—"stream of consciousness" in fiction, the "freakish distortion of shape and color" in painting, both of which find their contemporary equivalent in Snow's use of CGI—have been used by *modernists* in an attempt to depict or express aspects of an occluded human nature, particularly the nature of the child.[31] In *Corpus Callosum,* we find this modernist tradition alive and well, employed in such a way to suggest that there will be profound continuities between the cinematic and digital ages.

Notes

. "Dr. Tube and Mr. Snow," *Millennium Film Journal* 43–44 (Summer 2005): 130–140. I have occasionally borrowed an odd sentence or two from this article.

. Annette Michelson, "The Wings of Hypothesis: On Montage and the Theory of the Interval," in *Montage and Modern Life, 1919–1942*, ed. Matthew Teitelbaum (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), p. 65.

. Alan Dale, *Comedy Is a Man in Trouble: Slapstick in American Movies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp. 1, 3.

. Steve Seidman, *Comedian Comedy: A Tradition in Hollywood Film* (Ann Arbor, MI.: UMI Research Press, 1981), p. 35.

. Charles Barr catalogs the wide variety of Hardy's looks into the camera in his wonderful book *Laurel & Hardy* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968).

. Sidney Peterson, "A Note on Comedy in Experimental Film" (1963), in *Film Culture Reader,* ed. P. Adams Sitney (1971; New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000), pp. 402, 401, 400.

. See, for example, P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943–2000* (1978; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 53.

. Quoted in Marjorie Keller, *The Untutored Eye: Childhood in the Films of Cocteau, Cornell, and Brakhage* (London: Associated University Presses, 1986), p. 13. My emphasis.

. Seidman, *Comedian Comedy*, p. 100.

0. Peter Coveney, *The Image of Childhood* (1957; Baltimore: Peregrine Books, 1967), p. 291.

1. Coveney, *The Image of Childhood*, p. 306.

2. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 442.

3. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, pp. 444–446.

4. Keller, *The Untutored Eye*, pp. 14–15.

5. Keller, *The Untutored Eye*, pp. 16–17.

6. Keller, *The Untutored Eye*, p. 17.

7. Sitney, *Visionary Film*, pp. 72–73.

8. Sitney, *Visionary Film*, 73.

9. James Broughton, "Biofilmography of James Broughton," *Film Culture* 61 (1975): 74.

0. James Broughton, "Two Notes on *Mother's Day*," *Film Culture* 61 (1975): 76.

1. Broughton, "Biofilmography of James Broughton," 64.

2. Broughton, "Biofilmography of James Broughton," 84.

3. Sitney, *Visionary Film*, pp. 78–79.

4. The continuity between this cartoon and CGI might also mean that Snow would concur with Lev Manovich's view that CGI brings filmmaking closer to animation. See Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

5. Annette Michelson, "The Kinetic Icon in the Work of Mourning: Prolegomena to the Analysis of a Textual System," *October* 52 (Spring 1990): 23. My emphasis.

6. Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (New York: Viking, 2002), p. 2.

7. On the evolutionary origins of play with the human body in art, see Ellen Dissanayake, *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes From and Why* (1992; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), esp. ch. 5.

8. Pinker, *The Blank Slate*, p. 413.

9. Pinker, *The Blank Slate*, pp. 409–410.

0. Pinker, *The Blank Slate*, p. 411.

1. In *A Darwinian Left* (New Haven, CT.: Yale University Press, 2000), Peter Singer argues persuasively that the Left needs to revise its outdated view of the determining role of society in shaping human life and incorporate the insights of evolutionary psychology into its political program. On literary modernism and the child, see Coveney, *The Image of Childhood*, ch. 12. On modernist painting and the child, see Jonathan Fineberg, *The Innocent Eye: Children's Art and the Modern Artist* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997).

The Sound of Music: A Conversation with Michael Snow

Annette Michelson

ANNETTE MICHELSON: Michael, I recently asked you about the distribution of your music on CD, about those in particular that form an anthology of your work on piano, perhaps not a complete anthology, but an extensive one, nonetheless. When I asked, "Who distributes them?," you said: "Galleries, mostly. Places—"

MICHAEL SNOW: No, no, it actually isn't galleries. It's those places that distribute books, catalogs, and multiples by artists. Like Art Metropole in Toronto and Printed Matter in New York. But you mentioned the three-CD package, *Snow Solo Piano Solo Snow (3 Phases)*. It was produced by a Quebec company, Ohm Editions, and it's supposed to have the distribution that record companies do. And it might be findable in a record store, but I've never looked. *[Laughs]*

AM: Well, what really interested me in your answer was what you said about "places that have to do with art. And, of course, this isn't art." *[MS laughs]* And I said: "Really?" And I'd like you to rethink that.

MS: Yes. *[Laughs]*

AM: And tell me, indeed, whether or not you stand by that statement, or you might have something else to say.

MS: Thanks for the opportunity to correct myself. *[Pause]* The things that I've done, the first of which was the *Chatham Square* double album[1]—which came out in '74, and then later, *The Last LP*[2]—which is '87—were attempts to make a unity of my music, and the text and packaging. You know, the physical element, as well as the sound. And I consider them to be works in their entirety. Like my book works, in a sense—like *Cover to Cover*.[3]

But my answer was provoked, I suppose, by the fact that the music is the most important part of the sandwich. And I really like my recordings to be available to those who are specifically interested in music, as opposed to, quote, "art," in the visual sense. Well, not just the visual sense, but ...

AM: Yes, I thought so. It was my impression that your work—because you are a major visual artist—your music tends to find its place, institutionally speaking, in centers of visual art.

MS: Yeah.

AM: That being so, one might go on to think about the relation, for you, between the two. I'm interested, for example, in what you have had to say about your earlier attempts to account for the material aspect of your work—in its cover and design, and so on. And to judge the recent compendium of your recorded work at the piano, which is partly involved, I would guess that you made the photograph of your own hand that's on the cover.

MS: Yes.

AM: But there is, maybe, another sense—or maybe several senses—in which your work as a visual artist—and in film, another temporal, visual art, are related. In the most general terms, do you see such relations?

MS: Well, there are departments to my interest in and work with sound. And one of them is a line that started when I got interested in jazz, when I was in high school. At first, that was New Orleans jazz, basically, from the twenties: Louis Armstrong, and Jelly Roll Morton, and that kind of thing. And I had a kind of conversion, where I started to learn how to try to play that way—and pretty soon I was playing in bands. So that line has continued into totally free improvisation. Which doesn't necessarily have anything to do with jazz, because free improvisation is just a process. It could result in almost anything. But my background is partly in jazz, so that's a certain lineage.

But then there are other things that really were more related to the way I've made films—or some of the multitrack recordings that I've done—that really don't have any improvisation. They are compositions that use the possibilities of multitrack: of layering, of

superimposing one element of music on the other, and so on. And it's a compositional tool. So there are a number of things—the Chatham Square double album that came out in '74 is involved in that kind of composition.

But it is also in the kind of composition that we were just talking about, where I tried to relate the physical elements of it—the text and packaging, and so forth—to the music, in such a way that it could be said to be a work. And then, in 1987, I issued *The Last LP* —which was, again, an attempt to make a unity out of music (which I composed, played, and recorded) and text (which I wrote) and design (by myself). And then, later on, there's *Sinoms*—which is a little bit less involved in the unity of the visual and the aural.[4]

AM: I think, maybe, you'd like to tell about *Sinoms*, and what it does involve.

MS: *Sinoms*—I don't remember what year it was ... it's in the eighties—came about as an invitation to do something for an exhibition in Quebec City. I think it was some sort of anniversary, like a centennial or something or other. Perhaps not the founding of Quebec, because that's a subject, for some, with many painful sides. That is, because Quebec City existed before 1757, when the—or was it '59? Because the Battle of the Plains of Abraham—when the British won New France—yes, it was in 1759. At any rate, from then on there were elected mayors of the now-English—well, at least, now under the British flag—town of Quebec City.

At any rate, I was asked to do something for it. And I'm partly Quebecois and have had some connections with Quebec City for many years. And my grandfather was a mayor of Chicoutimi. And I know something about Quebec history after the conquest.

Anyway, I had the idea that it would be interesting, first of all, to look at the list of the mayors. And I was really delighted to discover that it contained a kind of history, because it had, on the one hand, archaic names—like Télesphore and Elzéar. My grandfather's name was Elzéar. And then there were some names that were completely Irish, or English, like Thomas Pope. *[Laughs]* And then some that appeared to be both Irish and French—the Irish were in there, too, you know?

So, at any rate, what *Sinoms* is: I asked something like twenty-nine—I forget how many people—to read this list. And I started with people who were Anglophones, and who said they didn't speak any French. So they just read the list, and I recorded it. And then I went to people who were Anglophones, basically, but did speak some French. They read the list, and I recorded that. And then I arrived at Quebecois themselves.

But, also, before that, we have Franco-Ontarians, who have their own little something, too—and I recorded Franco-Ontarians. So I got something like four or five—maybe more—Quebecois men and women. And then I was lucky enough to find some people from France—a Bordelais and somebody from Provence. So they were kind of the end of the scale of readings of this list.

And then I used the list in antiphonal and choral ways—but also, sometimes, to just compare—by putting a reading, individual readings of one name on top of the other, and then a number of things like that. Like Elzéar Bédard was the first mayor—and I got some hilarious readings of that by some people: Elzéar Bédard. That's one place, I think, that I can remember, where I just layered them on top of each other. So it's kind of a choral work, but it is the result of multitrack recording.

AM: And so it uses a range of different accents …

MS: Or pronunciations.

AM: And these different pronunciations are, more or less, superimposed—or put into various relations …

MS: Yeah, sometimes you do get to hear each reading clearly; each one gets to be heard in itself. And then they get to be used by comparison—or antiphonally, or by echoing, and stuff like that.

AM: And it seems to me, though, that nonetheless, there's a characteristic form to this work. First of all, there's a list.

MS: Mmm-hmm.

AM: Which is to say prescribed material there.

MS: Yeah, sort of a score.

AM: Yes, a score. A list is one kind of system, and in this one you have the history of the place summed up.

MS: Yes.

AM: And one might say that there's a series of variations played upon that list.

MS: Very true.

AM: Some of which involve superimposition. And others of which involve humor—perhaps inadvertently, perhaps not. You were doing the mixing in collaboration with someone.

MS: I worked with a technician. The humor is inadvertent and comes sometimes from the incompetence of the reader. The work involves people's readings and misreadings, depending—and, also, there are regional accents—from Quebecois to French.

AM: I was really interested in the layering—that was one thing in this work that interested me—which I know very little, actually, for I've not really been able to hear much of it. I know some of it. And the layering, I think, has remained a preoccupation of yours in other work.

MS: Yes.

AM: When you made the Chatham Square album was about the same time as when you were making *Rameau's Nephew*?[5]

MS: Yes.

AM: And that involved a tremendous series of variations upon given sound and signifying elements.

MS: Yes. Specifically to do with language. At least, recorded speech.

AM: Do you see any kind of connection, any significant connection, between these two works?

MS: Yes, there really is a connection. I was really preoccupied with one aspect of language: spoken language or speech. Because pronunciation changes things so much. And, also, there are the homonyms, that I played with in *Rameau's Nephew*—the fours, the number of fours there are. You know, so obviously sound language is different from written language. But that's one aspect of it. And then, of course, there's character. There's the way—there's personal pronunciation and regional pronunciation, and all those things. I was

very interested and deeply involved in them when making *Rameau's Nephew*. So *Sinoms* is definitely part of the same family. But my newest work, I guess, could be said to be part of that, too. *Short Story*—well, its real title is *SSHTOORRTY*—is in Farsi—the dialogue is in Farsi. There are subtitles in English. But since the film is cut in half, sometimes the subtitles are super-imposed on top of each other, which adds to one's continuous attempts to experience the various levels of the image and sound.

But you're right. Yeah, it was certainly ... But then, I guess, *The Last LP* is also involved in that. Because in *The Last LP* there are no existing languages; everything is invented. I made up languages for several pieces. And sometimes it's clear, and sometimes it isn't. "Si Nopo Da," the African puberty-rite song, I made up a language for that.

And then there's a kind of free-improvisation language—just making up stuff—which I had done on *The Last LP*. There's an example of something that I had actually done as sort of a birthday present for Jonas Mekas when I was living here (it must have been in the seventies) and that was used in *The Last LP*, as well.

So that's another line of work, and, actually, when I did that, I didn't know that anybody else did that kind of stuff. But, since then, I found out there are other people, including Paul Dutton, with whom I've now been playing for many years. He's a vocal improviser who does that, making up sounds. Everything the voice can do, he works on. So I guess these things are all connected.

AM: Well, thinking of other people—other people working in sound, and in music (and my musical culture, as you know, is not particularly that of jazz, free jazz, or improvisation), among the people who come to mind is Messiaen.

MS: Yes.

AM: And, as I'm sure you also know, he has, throughout his career (throughout his life) been cataloging birdcalls and employing them in his work.

MS: Yes.

AM: And a number of these works (a major one is "Chronochromie") involve an extremely dense superimposition of many different birdcalls. He lists them, as a matter of fact.

MS: Yeah, it's a great work.

AM: Messiaen acknowledges that they don't really come through clearly for all of the listeners. They come through for him. Because, as he says, he can go into a forest and distinguish all that's happening on the sound level, whereas someone less trained cannot. And I wondered whether you had any kind of experience with Messiaen's work, or his thinking?

MS: Not, unfortunately, in any deep way. I have listened to some of it, and I know the piece that you mentioned. And I do know about his work with birdsong. But I haven't heard that much of his work. And I wouldn't say that it has affected me, particularly.

I found it interesting that birdsong, of course, isn't done according to any of our tuning systems. And in order to use the instruments that he uses, he has had to make a translation, which is far away from the source. And, yet, the results that he gets would not have been arrived at without starting from that source. So there's an interesting paradox in it.

AM: I agree. Messiaen, when asked to define music, to say what makes, or is basic to, music, says "rhythm," not "pitch." And he says too that birds have an extraordinary sense of it, they are "inhabited" by rhythm.

MS: Mmm-hmm—that's good.

AM: He goes so far, by the way, to say that Bach is not rhythmic.

MS: That's going too far!

AM: Bach is not rhythmic! *[Laughter]*

MS: I don't agree with that. *[Laughs]*

AM: Stravinsky is, but Bach is not!

MS: Oh, he says that? Wow. *[Laughs]*

AM: Bach is too rigid. You come, originally, from jazz, as you've said. What has happened to the rhythmic nature of your work, now that you do what's not necessarily associated with jazz?

MS: In my solo improvisations, rhythm, tempo, and meter are as completely open as harmony. But can I digress?

AM: Oh, yes.

MS: I just want to mention a piece called "W in the D," which—

AM: "W ..."?

MS: "W in the D."

AM: "... in the D."

MS: Which is a totally—

AM: The letter *D*.

MS: Yeah. Which is a total whistling piece, which I did in '72—and which is on the Chatham Square double album, produced in '74. Since this issue of birdsong has come up, while I didn't consciously imitate any birdcalls—since it's all whistling, and they're all things that I found myself, just trying to find interesting phrases that have to do with the way whistling is made, because of the wind that's involved ... the breath that's involved ... you know, the breathing in and the breathing out, and all those things—well, people have asked me whether it was sometimes conscious imitations of birdsong. Because the resemblance is stronger with human whistling than it would be with human piano playing.

AM: I know that piece. I remember it, and that question would never have occurred to me, quite frankly.

MS: Well, it has come up. Well, that's good. *[Laughs]* You know, it was originally done—just to hang onto it for a minute; after I finished it, I had an invitation to do something for an evening of performance at NYU in '72 or '73. And there were a number of performances by a number of people, which were really performances. You know, there was somebody up onstage doing something or other.

And in my case, what I did was to have the lights turned out, and I played "W in the D." And since it has this kind of aural picture play, where I breathe on the microphone quite a bit, my hope was that it would seem as if it was live. And that's what a lot of people thought. But, anyway ...

AM: My question is about—

MS: Back to your question. Well, when I was playing professionally—jazz, in Toronto—I played in the different idioms. I started out playing New Orleans Dixieland, that kind of thing, and it was a great place to start. And then I got more and more influenced by so-called "modern jazz." You know, the music of Thelonious Monk and Charlie Parker. And, of course, before that, Duke Ellington started to be a very strong influence in the way I was attempting to play.

AM: The period of the 1920s, or later?

MS: Ellington? No, the whole thing. Yeah. I mean, actually, the thirties and forties are really pretty powerful in his music. But one of the things that often happened when I was working as a professional jazz musician in the fifties was that the playing of a piece was based on its source. Miles Davis would have a new recording and everybody would go: "Oh, my God! This is amazing!"

And you'd learn the piece, and play it. (And this would happen all over the world.) And even if you had your own style, you would still be so influenced by that. It's a form of interpretation that makes it harder to escape. Because you play in the idiom, and you play within the rules that were defined by this groundbreaking thing, that made you want to play it in the first place.

I always wanted to try to be playing my own music. When you play Thelonious Monk's pieces—I mean, to really play them properly—you have to think of why he wrote that in a certain way, because it should foster a certain kind of improvisation. You know, they're very, very smart, and so if you just play them by running the chord changes, like you would for some other tune, you're not really playing them. So you have to play a little bit like Monk to play Monk's music, you know? *[Laughs]*

My mother was a very fine pianist.

AM: I remember.

MS: Not professional, but she really could play very, very well. And that's, inevitably, another influence. Because she played Debussy, the "Preludes"—all those things. And while I was sort of a belligerent resister, she wanted me to take lessons. And I wouldn't

do anything when I was—I wouldn't do anything I was asked to—certainly wasted a lot of time. But, anyway *[laughs]*—I heard a lot of well-played music. Chopin she used to play beautifully, too.

AM: Well, I remember that—about twenty, twenty-five years ago—when Harnoncourt was recording the Bach cantatas.

MS: Mmm-hmm.

AM: That you were listening to those a lot.

MS: Yeah. Yeah, I have a collection of them by Concentus Musicus Wien.

AM: We talked about that.

MS: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I have that. But I just mean that, in my family background, there is this—that's something. And, as I say, like an idiot rebel—I didn't rebel against her music—I just didn't want to—*[laughs]*—take lessons.

But anyway, in the 1960s, I started to try to think of other ways of improvising that might lead me to playing my own music. And, I guess, Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor were among the first people to open other ways of playing. Because the previous idioms were all the same, in the sense that they all played a theme, and then there were solos on the chord changes, and then back to the theme again. Which produced some great music, but, after all, there are other ways. *[Laughs]*

AM: Indeed. By the way, one other kind of connection in my mind with Messiaen had to do with his improvisation. Because he was, of course, for many years the organist of the Church of the Trinity.

MS: Yes.

AM: And he would improvise.

MS: Yeah.

AM: And he caused a lot of hostility through his improvisation, sending parishioners flying out of the church.

MS: Well, that's the only ancient line of improvisation that continued to exist in Western music—the organ improvisation tradition. That's a very interesting thing.

AM: That's true. But even that tradition works generally in terms of preset forms. But Messiaen became very interested in Greek metric form, very interested in Indian rhythms and, eventually, Japanese music, as well. So that in general, organists less advanced than Messiaen, those whom we don't place in an avant-garde, would improvise within very much more set forms, more familiar forms. You don't do that—or, at least, you don't do it now. I had my first chance to hear you at the piano very recently, in California, where you did a performance of about, I would say, forty minutes, of pure improvisation on the piano. And afterward I noted down some things that had occurred to me while I was listening. It seemed to me that one could discern a basic structure or principle to what I heard that evening. And they had to do with what one might call "episodes." That is to say, you would explore some of the various properties of piano, and some kinds of combinations and successions of notes that you could form. And they're infinite, of course. And it seemed that, very often, you would light upon, let's say, a phrase, or a—

MS:—Device, or—

AM:—or a device. Melodic, or harmonic, or rhythmic. And rhythmic, probably, at the same time as melodic or harmonic, and you develop it very, very often through repetition. To a climax—to a fortissimo. Though to speak of fortissimo in your music—at least, the music I heard that night—is not very meaningful. Because your emphasis is not on dynamics—on a scale of differences between piano, pianissimo, forte, fortissimo, and so on.

MS: No.

AM: But, nevertheless, one could discern, as I said, episodes that frequently involved the reworking and the repetition—the acceleration—of a given motif. I think that is the word I was looking for.

MS: Yeah.

AM: And then, after that climactic moment, you would turn to a new one.

Michael Snow, solo piano, 2015. Photograph by Mani Mazinani.

MS: That's right—yeah.

AM: So that the performance became a succession of episodes. Does that ... correspond to your intent?

MS: That's exactly it. And that piece was called "Visits"—precisely because—I mean, before I play a solo, I think of an area, or areas, that I want to work in. And it's a continuation of what I've been doing all along. And I want to try to go to certain areas, and, in public, discover some more about those subjects. Last year I did a

concert in Berlin—the first piece was called "The Lowdown." And there I decided that I would only play the lower two octaves, and never got out of there. And I played for half an hour down there. And I've done that kind of concentration before, but it's always been part of something else. And then, actually *[laughs]* the rest of the concert was the top part of the piano. *[Laughs]* And, I mean, that doesn't sound like—I mean, it's really no guarantee of anything, you know, qualitatively or whatever. At any rate, I'm just saying that I do make choices of where I'll try and go, and this one was episodic —exactly. And it was called "Visits." It's a rationalization, in a sense, of a way to have variety. I wanted to visit certain musical propositions, possibilities of the piano—its resonance, and all the other qualities it has—and say something about them, but find something for myself that I hadn't heard before. And then pass on to another ...

AM: Can you give any names to the propositions that were of interest to you that particular evening?

MS: Well, on the one hand, the piano is a rhythm instrument. So that sometimes I'd try to play things that didn't have to do with the resonance possibility to the piano, but had a flat-sounding quality. I sometimes do that by putting my hand on the strings, so that they don't sing. And so I know that I worked out, to make that drumming aspect, to make that come out.

On the other hand, the resonance aspects of the piano are incredible for work with the harmonic series, with the overtone series. So in the things that I've done with repetition, things that are (in passing) in the family of Steve Reich and Phil Glass ... and of Charlemagne Palestine (with whom I played a duet concert in Paris), for that matter boogie-woogie, Jimmy Yancey, Albert Ammons, whom I studied is an influence that was there first—they're things where I'm attempting to produce patterns that will produce overtone patterns; I mean, it is like the rhythmic aspect, something that is thoroughly pianistic. Of course you know that all instruments produce harmonics. But, at any rate, the piano is a trap for them and I've been trying to find ways to hear all those other things that happen.

AM: Yes, I was struck by that when I was listening to "The Speleology of the Future," which is one of the pieces in your three-CD piano solo box.

MS: Oh, yeah—yeah.

AM: Which is about that.

MS: Yeah. That's right.

AM: It involves the striking of a note.

MS: Mmm-hmm. Well there are often chords too.

AM: Generally, fortissimo—and the holding of it. That is to say, it's about duration, insofar as duration of a note can produce some of those overtones.

MS: Yes. And make it possible to perceive them. Yeah.

AM: Right. Now, of course, there *is* a composer who does work with that enormously. But, as you said, an orchestra can produce all these harmonics. And what György Ligeti does—

MS: Oh, yes.

AM:—is to produce all those harmonics.

MS: Yeah, yeah.

AM: And, you know, I've been listening to his "Etudes for Piano," as well—

MS: Yeah, they're fantastic.

AM:—as well as two concerts that just took place here last week.

MS: Oh, wow. What luck.

AM: Indeed. I'm very lucky. *[MS laughs]*

MS: Yes, that's true.

AM: And I'm very lucky to have CDs. And I was very struck by both the possibilities of the piano, and its limitations.

MS: The piano is like painting. So much has been done, such great great music has been produced. I mean, it's the pinnacle of human evolution; think of "The Goldberg Variations," and Chopin. It's fantastic. So when you approach the piano, you know *[laughs]*—there's a lot of weight. About limitation: the music of the CCMC, the group I mostly play with, is partly about sound qualities and

piano sound is hard to alter in performance. But, my background might give me a possibility of finding some other things. In group improvisation there's a tendency for it to be linear. You could call it "polyphonic," but it's freer than that. Okay, call it "polyphonic." Because there's no prior agreement harmonically, so it tends to be linear.

And it's a certain kind of free linearity that, in a way, I've tried to play on the piano, and avoid playing things that have any left-hand, right-hand harmonic relationship, a minimum of possible relationships. Where they're not going to play a fugue, or any other kind. Where I'm not going to play a fugue. So there's an avoidance involved here.

AM: Mmm-hmm.

MS: In the piece "Visits," there were some parts that were built on independent lines.

AM: As I've thought about your music, and as you've seen from our conversation so far, I have a certain interest in its relation to, and its separateness from, a whole other musical culture that I am personally more involved in. But without wishing to impose those ideas on you or those feelings or those tastes on your work, I'd say, on the other hand, that the factors of improvisation, repetition, the use of clusters, and the strong rhythmic quality of your music are things that I have located in music that is more familiar to me, that of Stravinsky; even of Debussy.

MS: Yeah.

AM: I'm thinking of one of the "Etudes," in particular. "For eight fingers," he says. *[MS laughs]* It's the "Etude Number 6," as I remember. For eight fingers. It's extraordinary. Well, the use of clusters—all of these things seem to indicate that you are part of a much larger range of effort.

MS: Mmm-hmm—modern music.

AM: Of modern music. On the other hand, there's one parameter of musical composition, or even improvisation, that is different in your work. I think that apart from a few examples, like "Speleology of the Future"—you're not, as a pianist, tremendously concerned with

dynamics. That is to say, you will play very loud sometimes—fortissimo—

MS: Mmm-hmm.

AM:—and you will rarely play very soft. And, generally, you play quite loud. In other words, there's not a tremendous range of dynamics. And I think this is, by the way, generally true of jazz pianism, and may come from your jazz background.

You know, there's not a tremendous range of dynamics in Monk—for me, the greatest of—

MS: No, he's a very percussive player.

AM: And I think a lot of piano playing in the jazz tradition is percussive, in that sense. Would you agree with that? And what about your feelings about dynamics in your own compositions?

MS: Well, I try to play quietly, sometimes. But I guess it's that resonance, obviously, which produces more harmonics. And that's one of the things I'm interested in, so I tend to play with a little more pedal than maybe I should. Maybe it is a jazz influence; I'm not sure. Because one of the things, I think, that I've continued is—in an improvisation that's deeply engaging for the player, where he's discovering something, there's a certain kind of heat that everyone shares. There's a kind of excitement of discovery. I think one really feels that. And ... this doesn't have to do with volume, really, but it continues something that's in jazz. One of the minor harmonic aspects of jazz is the business of blue notes. Which, when they're described academically, are basically playing a minor scale against a major scale—or, at least, minor thirds, minor sevenths.

But that opens up a lot of interesting ideas about polytonality. And I'm interested in Schoenberg. But there's some things in jazz that led to thinking of something that's similar to a select row of some kind—that, for me, comes from blues, in my playing. And, I mean, I don't think I play the twelve-bar blues any more, but there's definitely some influence.

AM: But when you say "something like a row," are you not thinking, perhaps, of a theme?

MS: Well, you can—

AM: Themes are subject to variation.

MS: Yeah, that's true. If you select a sequence of some kind, and you're ... well, calling it a "sequence" is wrong, isn't it? Because it's a selection of notes. And then they can be combined and played in many different ways. That's what I think of as a row. And, of course, it is a theme. But it's not a theme so much as, traditionally, a theme is understood.

As a statement—well, in the clearest sense, a melodic statement of some kind, which is then subject to variations. I mean, I sometimes do select. I say: "I'm going to center around these particular notes." And, of course, there can be a tremendous— perhaps infinite—variety.

AM: What you began by describing as a row, I questioned as being, perhaps, a theme. You answered by saying that it was, essentially, a sequence of notes. And it involved choice and the possibility of recombining the elements of that sequence in many different ways.

MS: Yes. In the hope that it's provocative. That's the thing—to choose something that may open up ideas. In my case, what am I to choose? Why choose something?

AM: Would you characterize any of your film work in the same way?

MS: While they do have accidents that are recorded in them, they are really composition—not improvisation, at all. I don't think there's really any improvisation in the films. But what relates them to what we're talking about is that I've been very preoccupied with sound-image relationships, since the beginning, since I started, really, to care about making films. And *New York Eye and Ear Control* was the most specific statement of that, and it's 1964.

AM: But let's take those other aspects of musical improvisation that we've talked about to some extent: dynamics, repetition, the use of clusters or superimposition. Rhythm. Would you like to talk about those, in relation to your film work?

MS: *[Pause]* Well, I think it's a little dangerous. You could make these analogies from sound, you know, from seeing to hearing, that are sometimes a little bit deceptive.

AM: I agree. Except that what we're doing here involves two different aspects of your work; they're both temporal mediums.

MS: Mmm-hmm.

AM: They both allow for sound variation and repetition. Film does, as well as music.

MS: Yeah.

AM: And they both allow for rhythm. Do they not?

MS: Yes. Well, I think there are a couple of approaches. Because the composed recordings that I've done are made in a way that's very similar to the films. That is, the picture part and the sound part of the films are thought of—at least, I think of them in a way that's very similar to the way I made the pieces on the Chatham Square record.

AM: Which films are you talking about?

MS: Any film where there's a very idiosyncratic sound-image relationship. Like in *New York Eye and Ear Control*, in *Wavelength*, in *Back and Forth*. Not in the silent ones, of course, but ... *[laughs] Presents* is a very unique—and, of course, *Rameau's Nephew* is another ... decision to stay with a certain family of relationships. And I think the only way you can really describe or discuss those films, anyway, is to talk about the sound as well as the picture, and how they relate to each other. But those films are composed, as I say, in the same sort of way as I composed *The Last LP*, whereas the played music is not. It's generalized decisions, and then in situ actions and reactions, basically.

AM: This conversation, while it's one I've been wanting to have for quite some time, is, nonetheless, in part, at least, the outcome of a concert I heard you play recently at the Getty, which had selected "duration" for its theme of the year. And it had invited both you and Tony Conrad to do two evenings: one focused on your films, and the other evening on your music.

Now, when you responded to that invitation, what did you have in mind? I mean, insofar as your own work is concerned. Did you think the element of duration, however you would define it—and I don't know how they defined it—do you find that to be a separable and interesting or valid element of your work?

MS: Well, in this particular case of the Getty screenings and concerts, it was planned, perhaps as the beginning of a series of filmmaker-musicians. But within the context of the general examination of duration, and partly, simply because music specifically—very specifically—has to do with duration. Of course, film does, too. But I think that the organizer, Rani Singh, was thinking that the musical aspect was a place where Tony and I would demonstrate a kind of pure use of duration. Not that the films are impure, and the fact that there was music involved—it was part of her—

AM: Okay. I mean, what Rani felt she was doing is fine, but I'm interested in you. When you responded to that invitation, did you feel—and do you feel—and, if so, in what way—that duration is—how shall I put it?—a parameter of your work that is particularly important?

MS: Yes, I think it is. I mean, specifically, film is probably the first art (I guess—even music notation is a little bit more ambiguous) where you could actually say: I have one twenty-fourth of a second to have something happen. And I think to make films you really ought to start from the point of view that you are given the possibility of controlling durations.

And in my work, the purest uses of duration—where it's, I think, evident that it is the main topic—is *One Second in Montreal*, and *So Is This*. Especially *One Second in Montreal* is quite precise about experiencing predetermined durations, lengths of time. Both of these films are silent in order to provoke a concentrated attention to the passages of images.

AM: I don't know whether you remember—well, first of all, that's one of my favorite films of your early period.

MS: Yes. I think I remember that you mentioned that.

AM: And you also may or may not remember that I wrote about it, at some length, saying, by the way, that it was one of the most musical of your films.

MS: *[Laughs]* Yes.

AM: And I still do think that's true.

MS: That's a beautiful way to think of it.

AM: And that it's the flicker within of the still image that offers a kind of obligato on rhythmic succession of those images.

MS: That's true—or even tempo. The flicker in film is a kind of tempo, in a certain sense. Or perhaps not a tempo, but a kind of clock or a metronome—

AM: Yeah.

MS: It gives you a timing of some kind. Which, actually, video doesn't have. And that's one of the differences.

AM: Of course. So you feel that this notion of duration is important for some of your films. Not very many, though; you've cited two.

MS: Well, I think that seeing it as a specific preoccupation is most evident in the two things that I've mentioned. But, also, for example, in *Triage*—the two-screen film I did with Carl Brown—I went the other way. I was trying to see if it was possible to work as much with single-frame imagery as possible. And, you know, there are things that are on for four frames and as much as six, I guess. But, basically, it was about the duration that's the absolute minimum essential in cinema—one twenty-fourth of a second—and trying to work with what happens with that—optically, and in relation to other images.

AM: So you wouldn't feel that *Wavelength*, for example, is a film that particularly demonstrates a concern with duration.

MS: Yes, it does. Because it is a concentration on one visual subject, and, in a sense, it examines one subject for forty-five minutes. So that's very specific. Mind you, it is always changing, but it does stay on the same object.

AM: And what one could answer is that the spectator is focused on one area.

MS: Yes. Attention is straight ahead. But, then, for the sound part of it, I had started out with the idea that I'd like to have some sort of pure crescendo. And then I realized that forty minutes, or forty-five minutes, of that was pretty much impossible, and it wouldn't be experienceable. So I ended up making a glissando—which is better. *[Laughs]*

AM: I've been struck by the fact that an improvisation has to be an extremely personal work. I mean, it seems like a kind of soliloquy. For example, I remember the early work of Phil Glass; those works were played only by Phil and his group. Now they were not improvised, and the performance had an economic base. They were earning their living as performers. Your improvisations are recorded on CDs, but it seems to me that there's an element of the soliloquy in what you do. And there's a way in which ... your work then becomes accessible only through the CD. That is to say, you can give a concert of improvisation that's then recorded. People then listen to it. But the work is never reproduced, so far as I know, in a live situation. In other words, you're not going to do the same improvisation, because it would no longer be an improvisation. But the improvisation is repeated endlessly on CD. Does that, in any way, affect what you do? Your feeling about the audience, for your work? The contact that you, as a musician, have with the general public? Because, for the most part, it's through CDs.

MS: Yes. There's not a hell of a lot of contact. I do play, perhaps, more with the CCMC[6]—which is John Oswald, Paul Dutton, and myself—than I do play solo. So, perhaps, solos are soliloquies. And ensemble improvisation is another matter. But it does have this connection, which is that we are a group that composes our music, and we continue to compose, in public. And I do that solo, as well. But ...

AM: What do you mean by composing in public as different from improvisation?

MS: No, I'm just putting improvisation in another term. Spontaneous composition is a description we've also used.

AM: Is there a reason you don't want to use the word "improvisation"?

MS: No. I was just trying to emphasize the fact that there's a continuity. As I mentioned before, the group, itself, is working on stuff that we've come upon—and in concert we attempt to go further with what we've already done before. Which is, in a way, the way a composer who notates for others' interpretation works, as well. You

arrive at a certain understanding of something, and you try to go further with that, and so on.

And it's just that we, CCMC, or myself as solo, do that as a performance, rather than by writing. Mind you, the writing aspect is, as you mentioned, recording, because that's how it gets scored, in a certain way. Well, "score" isn't the right word, because that means that it might get played from that, which it doesn't. It's a recording, in the strictest sense. Recorded music is an artifact and performed music is living.

AM: I mean, all of your available music is recorded and that's how it reaches the public, not in what's called a "live situation." Although each of these recordings may be preceded by a concert.

MS: Some of them are, yeah—or some of them were, yeah. Or some of them ... Well, I think it's a documentary thing, too. It's like if the concert's successful, and the recording's good, you've captured something that will not happen again.

AM: Oh, that's certainly true. And, you know, we can point—here's a recording by Pierre-Laurent Aimard—who is, I think, the most extraordinary of contemporary young pianists—and here's a recording of a concert he gave at Carnegie Hall. Okay. And he's made other CDs, you know, in the studio. But what he did here—and it includes Debussy and Messiaen, Bach, and so on. From Debussy and Messiaen back to Bach. *[MS laughs]* But those are pieces that Bach knew, and Debussy knew, that they would be played at different times—

MS: Oh, yes.

AM:—by different people. And especially for different audiences in live situations.

MS: Yes. That's right. But, see, that's why free improvisation is the purest music possible—because it's made of the time, for the time. It's made by the players at that time—how they feel; where they are in their careers. It depends on the acoustics of the place; the instruments. And, for the audience, it depends on where you're sitting. And all those things, which are an aspect of every musical performance, are a pure aspect of improvised music.

Because it's true that some great player like him—or Ashkenazy, or one of these other people, may play Debussy or Chopin. And may play it a little bit differently, no doubt, in different circumstances, and so on. But, still there's a core of the same thing. And there can be in improvised music, too. Because, as composers, we're working on certain things, and they will be identifiable.

For example, one of the greatest musicians around right now is Evan Parker, an English saxophone player. And he's been working on circular breathing, and he can play for an hour without interruption, if it's called for. And he plays cyclical things that really don't sound like other kinds of repetitive music—like Phil or Steve. Because he can start sounding other voices—you know, two or three voices.

I mean, he's an extraordinary virtuoso, and he's continuously going further with this area that he's investigating. And, yet, I know that I'd always recognize him.

AM: When you say "going further with the area that he's investigating," you mean what?

MS: Certain kinds of discoveries. Because a lot of it's inevitably arpeggiated, or scalar, or modal. But he comes out of the jazz tradition, too, so that's another thing. One of the things that jazz did is make an emphasis on personal sound. And it's an extraordinary thing, really. Because the range of, say, qualities between the great jazz trumpet players—like the difference between Louis Armstrong and Dizzy Gillespie—I mean, it's amazing, the personal sound.

So Evan—it doesn't sound like jazz. But, at any rate, it comes from that. So what he does with sound quality is also something that, I think, he's getting deeper with in his playing. I've known his playing now for at least twenty years, and maybe longer. I played with him in Toronto in the seventies. But it's just the difference between interpretation—*interpreter* (French)—and spontaneous performance. And spontaneous performance doesn't mean that it's tabula rasa, it means that it's a continuance of work that's been done before. In 1989 there was a group in Toronto called the Burdocks. And they were classical players, one of whom is Eve Egoyan, a fantastic pianist, Atom Egoyan's sister. Their instruments were

piano, clarinet, violin, and cello, and their raison d'être was to play only music commissioned for them—only new music. And they did it for about two or three years. And the director, Martin Arnold—not the filmmaker Martin Arnold—this guy's a wonderful composer, and he commissioned me to write something for this group in '89. And he was somebody who came frequently to the CCMC concerts and was sort of a fan. And I was really astonished by his request—and, you know, I started thinking about what I could possibly do. And I have to confess that I'm really a folk musician. Reading and writing music have not been important parts of my musical activities. So that if I were to write conventionally for this group it would take me centuries.

Anyway, I found out about a computer program which enables you to play all the parts separately on a keyboard and it eventually produces a perfect score. You listen to the part you've done and add the next part. So I wrote this piece, called "Hue, Chroma, Tint," which is in three movements and adds up to twenty-four or twenty-five minutes. And, I mean, it wasn't easy. It's an interesting challenge, to try to remember that you want to do this or that in relation to—you know, you play one line and then play the other, and so forth.

Anyway, my piece had its premiere and has since been played as well in Berlin and Montreal. While it wasn't an imitation of improvisation—it's a composition—it has connections with the kind of free linear counterpoint I've experienced in improvising. But there were places where I wanted vertical harmony. I had the piano playing this note and when I was composing the clarinet to play a certain other note. But when you do that by playing, not writing, you can remember what you want to do, but you will often be early or late in playing the note. And sometimes they would fit. The program records exactly what's played.

So the comments of the players when they first started working on the piece were "It's difficult," and I said "What?" I didn't conceive of it as being difficult.

The difficulty was these fractional entries and departures. The players were well-trained, good players and they wanted to play it

right. They said, "This is really hard, this note's just a fraction of a second before this one. And we don't want to play them together!" But it turned out to be one of the best aspects of the piece. I found out later that, of course, you can correct that kind of thing, you don't have to stick with it. *[Laughs]* I'm glad I didn't know that 'til later.

—New York City, May 28, 2005

Notes

. Michael Snow, *Musics for Piano, Whistling, Microphone, and Tape Recorder* (Chatham Square 1009/10, 1974). Reissued in 1994 as two CDs in the original LP jacket, signed and numbered.

. *The Last LP* (unique last recordings of the music of ancient cultures), assembled by Michael Snow (Art Metropole, 1987). Reissued as *The Last LP* CD in 1994.

. Michael Snow, *Cover to Cover* (Halifax: The Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and New York University Press, 1975).

. *Sinoms*, cassette issued by Le Musée de Québec as part of the exhibition *Paysages verticaux* (1989). Reissued by Art Metropole in 1994 as CD.

. Michael Snow, *Rameau's Nephew by Diderot (Thanx to Dennis Young by Wilma Schoen)* (Re:voir Editions, 1974), 16 mm and video.

. See, for example, "aCCoMpliCes" (Victo Records CD, 1997). CMCC: Paul Dutton, voice; John Oswald, alto sax; Michael Snow, piano, synthesizer.

Strangeloves: *From/De la région centrale*, Air Defense Radar Station Moisie, and Media Cultures of the Cold War

Kenneth White

1. Technological Monsters

On September 14, 1970, Michael Snow, Pierre Abbeloos, Joyce Wieland, and Bernard Goussard planted a custom-made, servomechanical monopod into an allegedly empty tract of eastern Canada. To the monopod they attached a 16 mm motion picture camera. They anchored the machines to the ground with a steel plate. They did so for the purpose of creating Snow's "gigantic landscape film" *La région centrale* (1971).[1] The film is widely recognized as a canonical achievement in the history of avant-garde cinema. Snow chose the site for its remoteness, its "complete wilderness with nothing man-made visible."[2] The film begins with the apparatus turning the camera in slow, smooth sweeps. A machinic vision scans the boulders, mottled scrub grass, and blue skies. As the film proceeds into its third hour, the apparatus turns in rapid somersaults and figure-eight patterns. Its movement crescendos, and the images blur. The scene is atomized into a flicker of brown and blue, brown and blue. At speed, the images mutate from indifferent record to pulsating abstraction. The frame itself turns from mimetic container to aggressive matter, attaining a kind of shimmering substance in projection. Snow wanted "the reality of these circular movements" to come into dynamic competition with the landscape and the psychophysiological stability of the viewer.[3] He drafted (but did not submit) an application for a British provisional patent for the apparatus, which he named the "Camera Activating Machine."[4] Considered apart and in tandem, the film and the Camera Activating Machine (CAM) offer an as yet unconsidered and complex case through which to understand the media cultures of the Cold War.

Stanley Kubrick, dir., *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, 1964. Frame enlargement.

Snow, Abbeloos, Wieland, Goussard, and the "technological monster," to use Amos Vogel's appellation, were not alone on the frozen tundra of Canada, 650 kilometers north of Quebec City.[5] Nearby, a decidedly more sophisticated kind of technological monster was in operation: Canadian Forces Station (CFS) Moisie, also known as Pinetree Line Radar Station Moisie C-33, was part of the first air defense radar network built by the US and Canadian governments.[6] CFS Moisie was located in the village of Moisie, population 988 in 1971.[7] The village occupied a narrow horn of land in the subarctic North Shore region of Quebec, where the Moisie River meets the Gulf of Saint Lawrence. Moisie was twenty-two kilometers east of Sept-Îles, one of the northernmost cities in Canada. Snow and Wieland met Abbeloos and Goussard at Sept-Îles's small airport set between the city and the radar station. From there, Snow chartered a helicopter to take the group ("like a surveying party," he wrote in his production notes) to the site at which they planted the CAM and camped for five days, from September 14 to September 20, 1970.[8] While Snow and Abbeloos were familiar with the Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line, widely advertised by the American and Canadian air forces and their contractors, Snow and Abbeloos claim to have been unaware of the Moisie station.[9] Their helicopter, however, would have needed permission from CFS Moisie before entering the station's airspace. Their position was approximately fifty kilometers from CFS

Moisie. In the meeting of the CAM and radar station, a project of "radical aspiration" crossed the overdetermined "closed world" of Cold War defense infrastructure.[10] The allegedly empty landscape of northern Quebec was the site of grave competition.

The CAM demands we consider it and the "gigantic landscape film" it recorded in the context of another kind of survey of North American terrain conducted by international military forces. Each "base" (Snow's term) nurtured scanning systems with similar engineering based on a system of servomechanisms: one produced by institutions of (inter)national defense, the other by artist-engineers.[11] While each employed its machines for ostensibly different purposes, each nevertheless reckoned with similar anxieties of perception. In a kind of kinetic synchronicity, the two systems strove to realize a vision beyond their technological capabilities: CFS Moisie, conceived to aid in the detection, identification, interception, and destruction of Soviet bombers and their nuclear weapons; the CAM, imagined by Snow and built by Abbeloos, designed to make a film by which to challenge a viewer's psychophysiological limits in a cinematic situation. The creators of the CAM and CFS Moisie relied on similar terms to describe their aspirations. Each in its own way sought to produce, by means of automatic control, an "absolute record of a piece of wilderness."[12] In a crucial study on the interrelation of landscape and power, W. J. T. Mitchell writes, "Landscape might be seen more profitably as something like the 'dreamwork' of imperialism, unfolding its own movement in time and space from a central point of origin and folding back on itself to disclose images of unresolved ambivalence and unsuppressed resistance."[13] My aim here is to unpack the particular technical-libidinal constellation in the "'dreamwork' of imperialism" saturating the landscape of northern Canada.
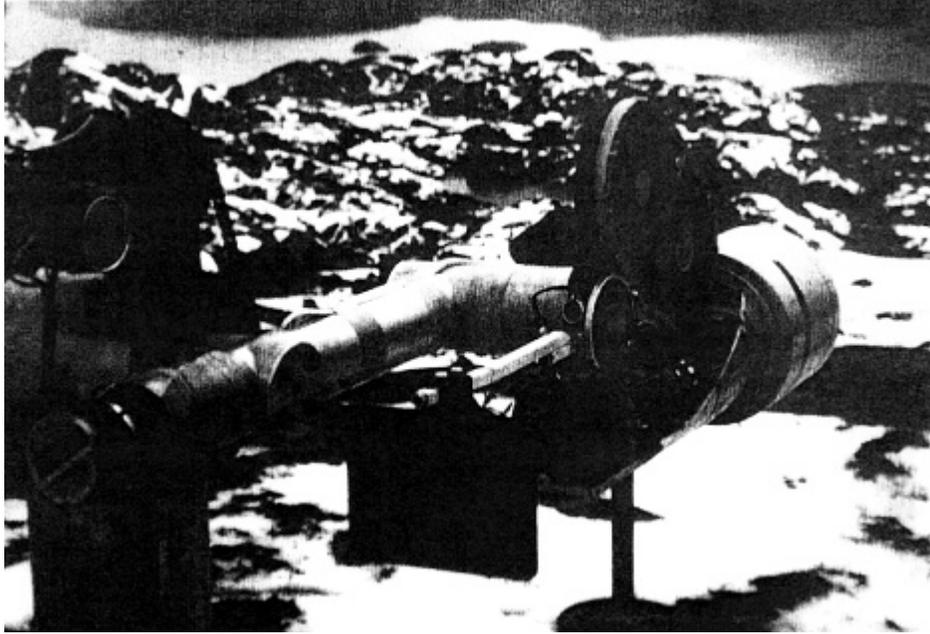
Michael Snow's Camera Activating Machine near Sept-Îles, Quebec, during production of *La région centrale*, September 1970. Courtesy of Pierre Abbeloos.

Canadian Forces Air Defense Radar Station, Moisie, February 1967. Canada Department of National Defense.

In the CAM, we find a device built to make a film "equal in terms of film to the great landscape paintings of Cézanne, Poussin, Corot, Monet, Matisse and in Canada the Group of Seven."[14] To do so, Snow collected and annotated aerial photographs and topographical maps—the civilian counterpart to data collected by the air defense radar system.[15] In CFS Moisie, we find one of the scores of interconnected surveillance stations that ostensibly manifested the sensory capabilities of the US and Canadian militaries and their control over the North American landscape. The two machines were devoted to intensive discourses of representation. The historical fact of their shared technology underscores the tension in their disparate conditions of production. Each provides insight into the other and into the larger, determining complex of Cold War media cultures.

2. Arctic Eyes That Never Sleep

Snow first devised the operational intent of the Camera Activating Machine in 1964, contemporaneous with his other "camera movement" films, *Wavelength* (1967) and ↔ ["Back and Forth"] (1969). In *La région centrale*, he sought to move a camera, freely, "in *every* direction and on every plane of a sphere."[16] In his preliminary search for a machine that might fulfill this mission, Snow looked to surveillance devices. He collected literature from Pelco Industries, the international video security systems firm based in Gardena, California.[17] As much as his work in cinema, Snow's idea for the apparatus also shares kinship with *Slidelength* (1969–1971), his concurrent work with 35 mm slides. In sketches in which Snow imagines the CAM's operations, the movement he draws suggests a reversal of the action of a 35 mm slide carousel. In a carousel, a single slide is tipped into a constant beam of light for projection outward to a screen; Snow's sketches suggest the entire frame of vision constantly "tipped" in the 16 mm frame. Light enters the camera to register the view, while the whole machine tips and tilts.[18] To fulfill these complex actions, a custom-made apparatus was required. Snow was "asking for something that did not exist."[19]

Bell Telephone Laboratories, "The Arctic Eye That Never Sleeps," 1959. Magazine advertisement.

In 1968, seeking an engineer for such an apparatus, Snow contacted Graeme Ferguson, who had recently cofounded the IMAX Corporation in Montreal. Ferguson recommended Abbeloos, then twenty-three years old, an engineer with two-and-a-half-years experience at the National Film Board of Canada. Abbeloos assisted in the construction of the camera used for the first IMAX film, *Tiger Child* (1970), which premiered at Expo 70 in Osaka among other innovations in technologies of multi-image presentation. Abbeloos required a year to complete the CAM. Weighing 180 kilograms, the CAM consists of a complex system of servomechanisms,

also known as feedback amplifiers, for the propulsion of the motion picture camera and its counterweights.[20] As Bell Telephone Laboratories engineer LeRoy MacColl states in his *Fundamental Theory of Servomechanisms,* a servomechanism is a device for the automatic control of input and output variables, such as the movement of an antiaircraft weapon within a predetermined range of motion.[21]
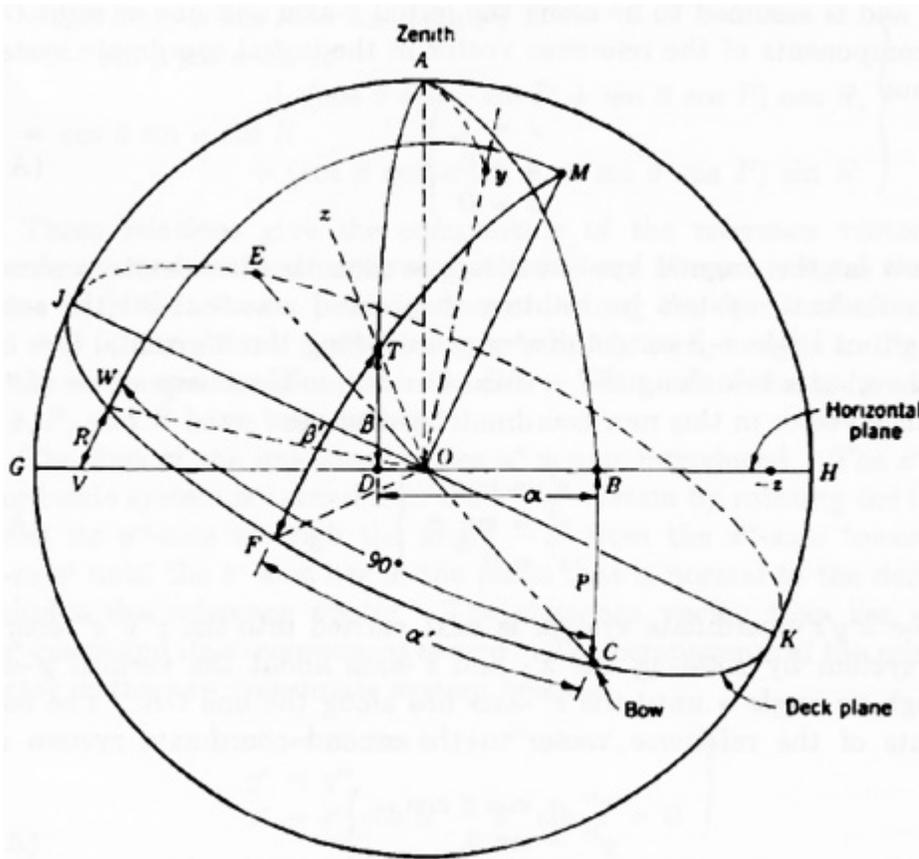
F. E. Swain, "Unit sphere showing various stabilization angles," where *O* is "the origin and center of the sphere," 1948. In *Radar Scanners and Radomes,* ed. W. M. Cady, Michael B. Karelitz, and Louis Alexander Turner (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1948).

The CAM's infrastructure was derived in part from World War II–era antiaircraft technologies selected from military surplus resellers. Abbeloos built on the engineering of air defense "precision ranging panels" (also called "strike panels"). A precision ranging system is used to calculate the flight path of a hostile aircraft and coordinate responsive fire.[22] A radar unit and a computer determine the position of the target and its anticipated future position, to which a weapon is directed by means of automated

servomechanisms. For the CAM, Abbeloos modified this configuration into an inward-directed, closed system: the CAM's directing computer was responsive to alteration of its power source, the input of electromotive force from an arrangement of six six-volt batteries and a backup gasoline generator. Horizontal, vertical, and rotational movements, and the camera's zoom and motor, were controlled by a regulator, the "control box." The range of motion—free, spherical actions around a central point—was enabled by rotary connections comprised of twenty-four slip rings and epicyclic gearing, so-called satellite gear boxes, assembled by Abbeloos. Its purpose, by design, was movement alone. Velocity was its mission.

Precision ranging systems determine a target's bearing in relation to the position of the system within a spherical coordinate range. The process of calculating a target's bearing is described as finding the relative azimuth. The observer position—that of the radar itself—is the central region, "the origin and center of the sphere."[23] Wieland saw the phrase "*la région centrale*" in a physics book in a Quebec City bookstore, and she suggested it to Snow as the name of the film.[24] Though the exact book Wieland consulted is unknown to us, she most likely selected the phrase from a reference to this foundational calculation process in radar physics. Thus, to Regina Cornwell's rhetorical questions, "But then what is the central region? Is it a toponym or is it a metaphor for camera and spectator?," we may answer that it is a term from the natural sciences—a term used in the physics of fire control. Cornwell concludes that *La région centrale* "uses nature in order to explore it, abstract it, reveal its beauty, its distance."[25] Situated in its specific historical context, however, metaphorical attributions fall away to reveal a whirling, wheezing, battery-and-gasoline-powered machine spawned from the urgency of total war.
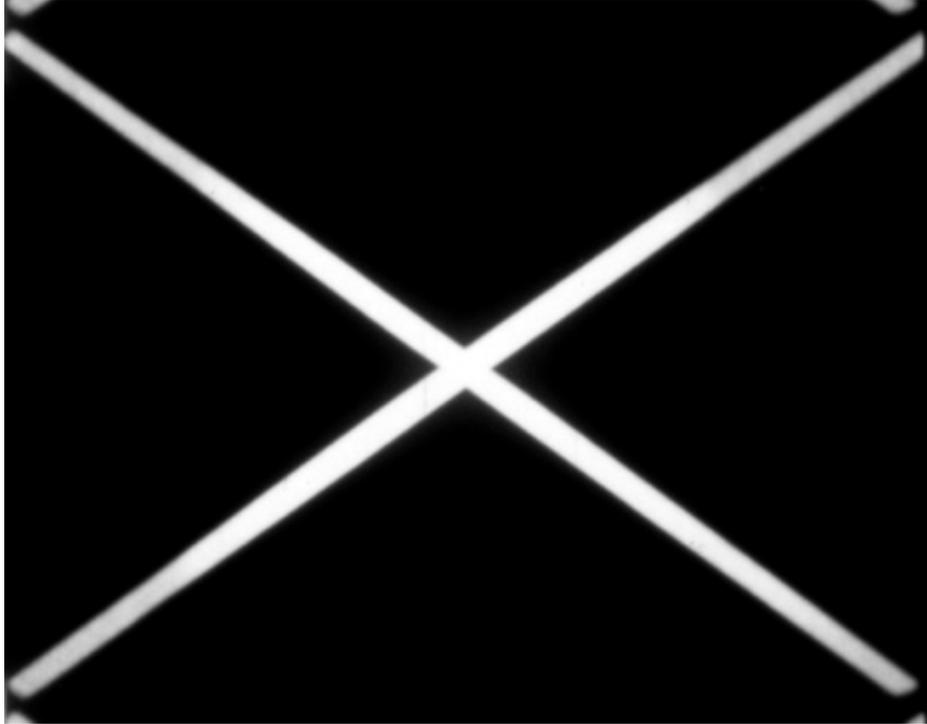
Michael Snow, film still from *La région centrale*, 1971. 16 mm film, 190 minutes, color, sound. Courtesy of Michael Snow.

To modulate the speed and direction of the CAM, Abbeloos exploited the similarities between the crystal oscillator for a radar precision ranging system and the pulse synchronization mechanism already built into 16 mm cameras. The key was the selsyns, the "self-synchronizing" motors, which are common to radar engineering and the Arriflex ST camera. Abbeloos recognized in their similarity the possibility of transforming a camera into a new machine that *moves* like a ranging system.[26] The emphasis here is not on vision, but on movement, speed, and the shared capacity for kinetic operations; the aim for the CAM is not so much to see like a radar but to move like one. And the fact that a significant portion of the film is out of focus underscores a tension between the declared aspiration for enhanced vision and the material conditions of production.

Abbeloos redirected the sixty-hertz synch pulses of the camera into control signals for the movements of the CAM; that is, he converted the given electromechanical signal used for the maintenance of sound speed in a cinematographic apparatus. Here, Abbeloos turned the signal generated by the selsyn of an Arriflex ST camera into a spectrum of frequencies that determined the motion of the machine and the operation of the zoom on the

attached camera. The CAM control box was constructed of twenty-six Arborite board-mounted circuits routed to a speed spectrum of one to ten, one equated with the motors' slowest designated speed and ten with the fastest. The control box transmitted the pulses to a discriminating circuit that created tones that then activated the power source. Snow wanted the film's soundtrack to consist of these tones, in simultaneous coincidence to the actions of the CAM.[27] While simultaneous inscription of those pulses onto the film was too complicated, the tones were transmitted to a modified Revox recorder that recorded them to quarter-inch magnetic tape, which Snow then post-dubbed.[28]

With its combination of tone discriminators and homemade pseudo-integrated circuits, the CAM was a mixture of semi-automatic digital and analog computing components. After inputting a series of actions via the control box, Snow allowed the CAM to determine its own trajectory: a contrived, semiautomatic pilot. "I only looked in the camera once," he claimed. "The film was made by the planning and by the machinery itself."[29] The particular models of the precision ranging systems from which Abbeloos derived inspiration were long obsolete by the time of his contract with Snow in 1969. But they were the direct precedents to the equipment of the air defense radar systems, including those in use at CFS Moisie.

The physics of precision ranging systems, theories of servomechanisms, feedback amplifiers, and automatic control were foundational to Norbert Wiener's work on the antiaircraft predictor at MIT in the early 1940s and his subsequent theories of cybernetics.[30] As Peter Galison has observed, in Wiener's vision, "servomechanical theory would become the measure of man."[31] Wiener claimed that the "synapse is nothing but a mechanism," that it "must have its precise analogue in the computing machine."[32] Galison points to how contemporaneous criticism of Wiener's definition of purposefulness brought into relief that which his theories elided: inner states less readily quantifiable such as desire, pleasure, or pain.[33] Alongside such critiques, the CAM was devised to assert the *centrality* of such inner states, such contingencies in definitions of the machine. Snow sought "ecstasy and analysis" that varied according to the character of the viewing subject.[34] The catalyzing premise of the CAM and *La région centrale* was the apparently "purposeless," unaccountable behavior Wiener wished to delimit, the vagaries of inner states that the air defense radar system engineers later strived to regulate with automatic control devices. Snow

mapped the actions of the CAM in seismographic waveforms in a manner similar to what is described in the field of psychophysics as an ascending and descending method of limits.[35]

CFS Moisie was active from May 25, 1953, until August 1, 1988.[36] "C-33" was the station's identification in the Semi-Automatic Ground Environment (SAGE) Command and Control System, a combination of analog and digital computers for centralized air defense management. Unprecedented in its sophistication, SAGE connected the scores of air defense radar stations throughout the Canadian landscape in the Pinetree/Permanent Line, Mid-Canada Line, and, farther north, the better-known DEW Line.[37] The Pinetree Line alone comprised forty-nine stations dispersed along the 50th and 53rd Parallels. Moisie joined the SAGE system on November 1, 1963. The station featured three radome configurations, white and bubble-like, one of which was an R. Buckminster Fuller–designed geodesic dome fifty-five feet in diameter.[38] Each housed instruments built by Bell Labs, MIT, Bendix, General Electric, Douglas, and Westinghouse, among other contractors.[39] At the end of the 1960s, the radar antennas at CFS Moisie were constituted by a complex array of servomechanisms controlled by a combination of semi-automatic analog and digital computing systems, such as SAGE—engineering that was also used in custom-built form in the CAM.

Snow described the CAM as part of a "cosmic continuity which is beautiful, but tragic: it just goes on without us."[40] Bell Labs celebrated its own device as the "arctic eye that never sleeps." However, these metaphors of omniscience and infinitude were not matters of fact but of (thwarted) desire materialized in surveillance apparatuses. The CAM and CFS Moisie were not just technological but *imaginative* systems. For the Snow-Abbeloos invention, this was by design. In the case of the SAGE system, its fantastical aspirations were so far in excess of its actual performance that, as historian Paul N. Edwards writes, it was more effective as "a dream, a myth, a metaphor for total defense, a technology of closed-world discourse."[41] The CAM and CFS Moisie were materializations of common anxieties and yearnings beyond the purview of the ascribed justifications for their construction. Conception of the technology itself was the purpose. For five days in 1970, the CAM and CFS Moisie spun side by side in a coterminous mission of self-regard.

When considered together in their shared context of Cold War media cultures, CFS Moisie and the CAM reveal a common devotion to their own technological operation, to the process of their own functioning that was distinct from, even surpassing, their professed aim to amplify human sensory capacity within the proscriptions of continental air defense, on the one hand, and avant-garde cinema, on the other. The CAM whirled at speeds almost high enough to induce self-destruction, its ostensible purpose belied by its actual operation. At CFS Moisie, radar arrays rotated at six cycles per minute, their attending airmen watching their cathode-ray television monitors ("scopes") for Soviet long-range bombers—promise of their own destruction. As the Soviet development of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) in 1957 nullified the efficacy of systems built to detect long-range aircraft, the case of CFS Moisie was especially poignant: by 1964 it was "hardly even a surveillance station except in a back-up role. ... The squadron has no control capability."[42] Its airmen watched for threats their instruments could not register, to which they could not respond, and that may never arrive.[43] As Eric Schlosser describes, "America's early warning systems were deeply flawed—and, as a result, the most reliable indicator of a Soviet attack might be the destruction of those systems by nuclear blasts."[44] Airmen assigned to the Early Warning Line stations devised their own definition for the SAGE acronym: "Soviet Aircraft Guaranteed Entry."[45]

In its performance of near self-destruction, its staging of the exhaustion of cinematic representation, the CAM was much more than a machine born of formalist pursuits. Conversely, the air defense radar system was a means to dispel a fear incommensurate with its complex technical infrastructure. The simultaneous and proximal operation of the CAM and CFS Moisie give complementary views to the expansion of surveillance from discrete military applications to a pervasive condition of culture at large. Considered together, the CAM and CFS Moisie reflect larger currents of distress in the Cold War era.

3. Matter into Energy

In the final moments of *La région centrale*, in the sublime fury of the CAM's twists and turns, one might expect the camera suddenly to detach and crash, flung by the intense forces generated. Total destruction appears almost inevitable. The ostensible purpose of a camera seems increasingly untenable against such awesome velocity: maintenance of a uniform frame rate by the camera motor, balanced exposure of the film stock, stable operation of the gate and claw, are all jeopardized by the intensity of speed. As Wieland's on-site photographs reveal, the CAM's aluminum skin is bound in part by duct tape. Abbeloos presumed that Snow would use the CAM in an interior, climate-controlled environment such as a hangar or studio. On site, however, the CAM was subjected to rain, cutting wind, snow, and sleet: "All the impossible things you don't want to happen to a machine."[46]

While the film apparently looks outward, it constantly reminds viewers of the workings making that view possible—especially when the image becomes indecipherable as landscape, a "complete smear."[47] The landscape becomes arbitrary. Correlation between the site and its representation increasingly relies on our imagination. Apperceptions of content become more and more untenable as the film-as-matter accrues a more palpable weight. As Victoria Schultz observed at the time of the film's initial release, "The relentless speed annihilates the landscape, changes it into an unrecognizable flat surface."[48] The CAM stands apparently alone, on the verge of dismembering itself in the process of fulfilling its mission. The documentary capability of the camera is threatened; it collapses under the pressure of the custom-made apparatus that extrapolates, exaggerates the camera's motions: the "gigantic landscape film" is sought so intensively that it is foreclosed.

Tellingly, however, Snow dismissed alteration of the exposed film stock. In his preproduction notes on the film's conclusion, he jotted, "the idea of film burning at end: No."[49] By 1970, Snow was familiar with the common tactic of altering film stock so as to diminish the representational (and, thereby, given ideological) capacity of the image.[50] In the context of other evidence in the CAM and the profilmic record of *La région centrale*,

Snow's dismissal of burning the film suggests he was committed to challenging the representational capacity of the image by means of the given limits of the apparatuses. Rather than manipulation of the image through external intervention (such as prolonging the film's passage through a projector gate to induce melting and burning, as in, for example, Stan Brakhage's *Prelude: Dog Star Man* of 1961), in *La région centrale* we confront an extraordinary exercise in the functional logic of the apparatuses' processes. On the same paper on which Snow noted his dismissal of burning the film, he described an alternative: "film ends at noon with gradual increasing overexposure (waxing, waning starting with direct sun shots) until film is almost clear then is totally clear. This is the vertical circular pan with accurate focus changes."[51] Snow proposed to overwhelm the exposure capacity of the film stock, but also attempt to maintain focus on the ground, which would be photographed intermittently at the bottom of the vertical circular pan. As seen in the completed film, the images of the sun, near-totally blown out by the flood of light, intercede upon the images of the ground. Snow induced the CAM to such high speeds that the circular motion of the whole camera seems to overtake the twenty-four frames-per-second progress of the film strip. Solar flares speckle the blurred rocks: "earth to light."[52] The sun itself is adapted into a cosmic flicker in contrapuntal relation to the given flicker of the filmstrip and projector. We find a radical assertion of the basic technical operations of the network of devices of which the filmic image is one part. *La région centrale* uncovers larger technical-libidinal forces at work outside the circumscribed field of vision: the wish for an "absolute record of a piece of wilderness" frustrated by the mode of its production, desire evidenced by means of its fraught delimitation.

Michael Snow, *La région centrale*, 1971. Frame series. Courtesy of Michael Snow.

Michael Snow, *La région centrale*, 1971. Frame series. Courtesy of Michael Snow.
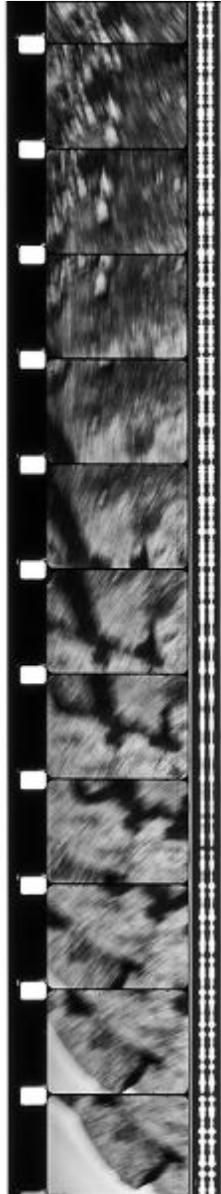
Michael Snow, *La région centrale*, 1971. Frame series. Courtesy of Michael Snow.

Evidence of the apparatus abounds. While Snow may claim a total absence of the apparatus in the film itself, conceding only a few appearances of its shadow, the shadow actually appears regularly throughout the first minutes of the film: first in the third minute, again in the fourth and the sixth, and in full view in the tenth minute. A few minutes later, the camera records its shadow on almost every turn in a series of vertical somersaults. The shadow appears again in the second reel at 22:32, and so on. Snow's statements on this point have been perpetuated in the film's reception in support of aesthetically tinged acclaim for transcendental

states of spectatorship, awe, and wonder. The CAM's elision from critical reception may be due in part to the common practice of renting only one reel of the film, often the final reel in which the spectacular speed of the device and distortion of the landscape is in greatest evidence.[53]

The CAM was exhibited with many screenings of the film. For example, from March 12 to April 11, 1971, at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, the CAM and the film were displayed together under the title *From/De la région centrale,* curated by Pierre Théberge. Visitors, on their way to the theater, would pass the machine, in operation, now retrofitted with a closed-circuit video camera attached to four television monitors in the space. Abbeloos added a "human intrusion detector" that, when triggered by a viewer's presence, would activate a thirty-minute cycle of movements in the machine.[54] A similar arrangement was made in 1972 for Snow's exhibition *About 30 Works by Michael Snow* at the Center for Inter-American Relations in New York, organized by the National Gallery of Canada. *La région centrale* screened every weekend through the duration of the show (November 15 to December 31, 1972), which, critic Peter Schjeldahl wrote in his review of the exhibition, was "dominated by the unseen star" of the film: "It is a large, beautiful and altogether fabulous motorized camera mount. ... At the Inter-American Center, it carries a TV camera through swooping and spinning pans of a blue-painted, dimly lighted room."[55] For that exhibition, Snow renamed the Camera Activating Machine *De la* and presented it as a work of sculpture. Thus, the CAM, the apparatus "it itself," eclipsed the film at its first presentations. The "circles within circles and cycles within cycles" of the CAM was more than a mere means to produce a film.[56] The CAM enacted vision as a technical-libidinal process.

Having somehow survived the ordeal of production outside Sept-Îles, the film is a record of stresses, a report on the device as it is compelled to the limits of its material integrity. The frame itself seems vulnerable. As Bart Testa writes, the penultimate night section

> eliminates the frame and reduces the image to a single small dish of light. It is, of course, the moon, and it seems to be moving through the screen, which is impossible yet perceptibly undeniable. The confusion, or rather the

contradiction, that arises in the viewer's mind cracks the assurances that the motifs and structures the film has built up, like the all-important frame line, are not really the formative principles of a transcendental subjectivity.[57]

Pierre Abbeloos and Michael Snow with the Camera Activating Machine, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, March 1971. Courtesy of Pierre Abbeloos.

A dialectical relationship is forged between the institutional and discursive claims of this 16 mm window and the viewer's sensory capabilities. Caught within the machine's whirling view, one might turn further inward, from the

infrastructure that imposes this extraordinary cinematic situation to the suddenly disturbed, unstable state of one's own psychophysical infrastructure. This calls the viewer's attention to the limits of her own perception and, in turn, to the capacities of the machine (it could only ever be a machine) capable of exhausting the representational power of cinema.

Snow writes of *La région centrale* that he gave "the camera an equal role in the film to what is being photographed."[58] *La région centrale* is the third in his trilogy of camera movement films following *Wavelength* and ↔.

> *Wavelength* is metaphysics and ↔ is physics. By the last I mean the conversion of matter into energy. $E = mc^2$. *La Région* continues this but it becomes simultaneously micro and macro, cosmic-planetary as well as atomic. Totality is achieved in terms of cycles rather than action and reaction. It's *above* that.[59]

La région centrale is "above" ↔ in that it encapsulates the back and forth, the action and reaction, *as well as* the energy of their transformation. More than just holding two opposing forces in suspension, it strives to literalize their dynamic change. Snow describes the equivalence of the photographed sky and our experience of sky: they are distinct yet alter each other. While *La région centrale* may be a record of that process, the CAM is that process itself.

Snow presented a twelve-minute segment of *La région centrale* at Anthology Film Archives in New York on April 4 and 18, 1971. At that time, Anthology was located at Joseph Papp's Public Theater at 425 Lafayette Street.[60] Just a few months prior, in November 1970, the theater had been transformed into the Invisible Cinema, a "machine for film viewing" designed by Peter Kubelka and built by Giorgio Cavaglieri.[61] Its purpose was to produce "optimal viewing conditions" that were "at once communal and extremely concentrated."[62] The cinema's ceiling, walls, and seats were cloaked in black velvet; black carpet covered the floors, with everything else in black paint. Each of the ninety seats featured a hood and blinders. "There was a feeling of being in the dark mother's womb from which one would then be born into another world, the world of the film."[63] The Invisible Cinema was to close down a viewers' attention wholly to the

screen, which was their sole "guide to scale and distance."[64] The hood and blinder configurations were "similar to hearing devices used in the Second World War," Kubelka noted, referring to parabolic ears. "They were simulations of big ears which concentrated the sound coming in directly from the screen and subdued sounds coming from other directions in the room, thereby creating a maximum of silence within which the sound from the film would be undiluted."[65] As Andrew Uroskie argues, this ideal of cinema was contingent on specific discourses of artistic modernism, and its materialization at this historical conjuncture coexisted in a fraught way with experiments that advanced more capacious, hybrid definitions of the cinema. Film would be raised to respectability, to "Art," on the basis of a medium specificity supported by the regulation of the spectator's body within the theatrical space. This disciplinary function found its "hyperbolic literalization" in the Invisible Cinema. Indeed, as Uroskie points out, Kubelka's project "might seem a caricature of this idea of spectatorial discipline if it had not been intended in all seriousness."[66] And Kubelka was serious in explicitly conceiving the Invisible Cinema to have no tolerance for "multi-media, multi-screen, multiple speakers or for action mixed with film," the defining characteristics of nascent expanded cinema projects.[67] The Invisible Cinema was a site of extreme overdetermination, an environment of unambiguous, explicit control. It concretized a particular aspiration for the ideal conditions of cinematic experience, a pure transportation "into another world, the world of the film," spurred on by anxiety about the adulteration of the cinema.[68] Yet, as Kubelka admitted, "since there was not a complete partition, you always felt there was someone on your side."[69] This interrelation of isolated reception and uncanny communal presence were the circumstances by which *La région centrale* was first introduced to audiences of New York—in a twelve-minute excerpt, no less.[70] This environment would be crucial to its critical reception. Indeed, the Invisible Cinema would seem to be the necessary condition for readings of *La région centrale* as a metaphor for the transcendental subject.
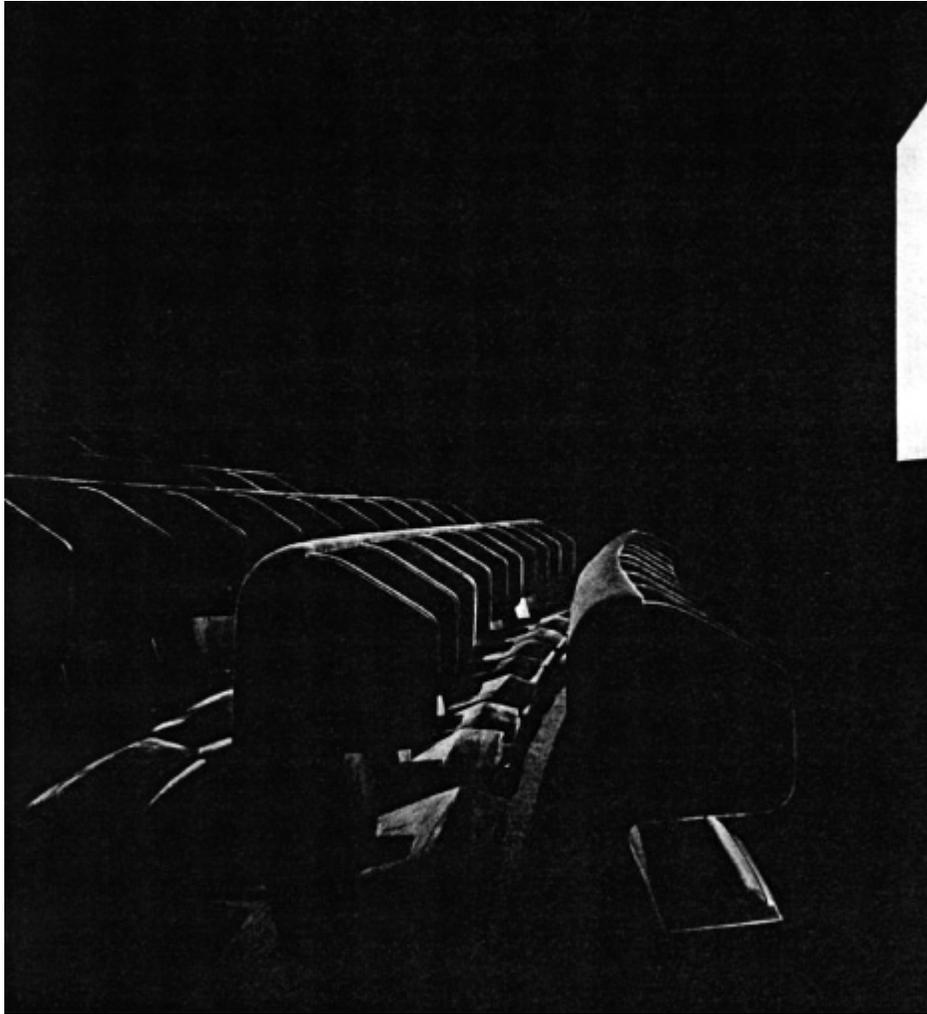
Peter Kubelka and Giorgio Cavaglieri, *The Invisible Cinema,* 1970. Image courtesy of Anthology Film Archives.

For P. Adams Sitney, the apparently disembodied, inhuman perspective of the camera became evidence of omniscience: "a paradox of vision where there is no person to do the seeing—as if the lens were God's eye, or the eye of time."[71] *La région centrale,* he concluded, is a metaphor for "the Romantic estrangement from nature; all of its baroque motions vainly seek an image in the visible central region that will illuminate the invisible one."[72] The Invisible Cinema, itself a kind of extreme version of this estrangement, underscored the poignant release induced by Snow's film. For Annette Michelson, the film hyperbolized mastery of vision in its "cinematic rendering of the grand metaphor of the transcendental subject."[73] One is set free from one's body, she claimed, through an illusion of expansive vision induced by the mechanical movements of the camera

seemingly freed from gravitational interference by its extraordinary vehicle. If the Invisible Cinema materialized the ideal viewing conditions for film, then *La région centrale* was received as an ideal counterpart, its "extended mobility" rivaling the accomplishments of "dominant cinema" by Max Ophüls, Orson Welles, and Stanley Kubrick.[74] *La région centrale* seemed fit to the measure of cinema as modern art, a worthy complement to the medium's established luminaries. The film "extends and intensifies the traditional concept of vision as the sense through which we know and master the universe," Michelson wrote.[75]

As the "machine for film viewing" strived to eliminate all distractions, so the CAM in turn was released from close consideration. The screening space, devised as a dark isolation chamber, sloughed off anything that did not seem essential to cinema. The hyperbolized mastery of vision attributed to the film relied on a disavowal of the material conditions of its production and exhibition, yet this disavowal could seem to slip into its reverse. Michelson holds that the Invisible Cinema was "conceived as a means of sacralization of the filmic object and essential in the conception of a temple for the ritual celebration of cinema as an artistic practice." This sacralization "had, from the first, alternatively suggested this structure as an ideally appropriate site for the viewing of pornographic film."[76] In Michelson's linking of sacralization and pornography on the ground of the quintessential project of cinema as modern art, we find a complex technical-libidinal relation. The tension is rendered even more palpable in Brakhage's recollection about watching his own film in The Invisible Cinema: "The minute they tell me I can't pee, for example, I suddenly have the sensation that I have to. If you get up and leave, you can't get back in. So, there you are, parted between the vision you are seeing and bodily functions. Quite a strain I thought, in that sense."[77]

The Invisible Cinema was an elaborate architecture of discipline; in kind, the unfettered vision of the CAM was bolted to the ground with a steel plate. As the CAM induces sensations of transcendental release, its hardware presses in equal and opposite measure, pulling us back to its contingent circumstances. The sensory effect produced by the recorded images is in tension with the means of their production. We are set into a device whose operations welcome the fantasy of disembodiment while underscoring that apparent split of psyche and soma: "ecstasy and analysis," in Snow's words.[78] Through the course of the film, we see the CAM

continuously re-inscribe its incapacity to induce a worldview beyond that determined by its builders. The entire film is "made by the machinery (you?). There are no other people but you (the machinery?) and the extraordinary wilderness. Alone." Snow's "you?/machinery?" insertions underscore this rich ambivalence. Recall Snow claims, "I only looked through the camera once. The film was made by the planning and the machinery itself."[79] By examining the fraught historical context within which Snow and his team operated in the late summer of 1970, we may appreciate the politics of the "cosmic-planetary" physics through which *La région centrale* was produced.
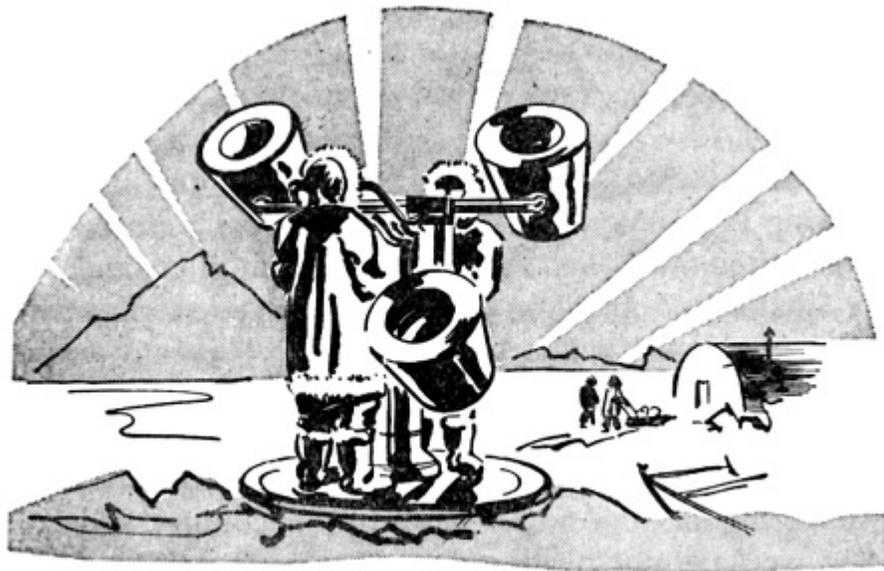
Far to the north, little teams of men with strange electronic instruments stand guard—

Science Service, Inc., *Atomic Bombing: How to Protect Yourself*, 1950.

4. Distant Early Warning

On August 29, 1949, the USSR detonated an atomic bomb in the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic. The United States harbored deep anxieties about the nuclear capabilities of the USSR, and the events of August 29 further deepened those anxieties. The "air defense problem" was an existential problem. Some form of protection against the prospect of annihilation had to be found. An "air defense Manhattan Project" was required.[80] In late 1949 and 1950, in a continuation of wartime collaboration, studies of defense capabilities were undertaken at MIT. However, the results were less than promising. The euphoria that permeated the MIT Radiation Laboratories during the war dissipated into a bleak dilemma. The Project Charles report of 1951 is indicative, concluding that the United States held no adequate means of defense against a Soviet bombardment. For instance, US Air Defense Command was still relying on the Ground Observer Corp (GOC), on Boy Scouts, and on other volunteer spotters. These services were inadequately coordinated for a sudden, total assault promised by Soviet bombers and their nuclear weapons. Further, GOC participants delivered reports vocally through commercial telephone systems. An attack would be too swift; no warning would come in time. The function of the GOC, "like so much of the macabre apparatus of nuclear war, was primarily ideological," Edwards writes. "A genuine defense being impossible, a symbolic one was provided instead."[81] Project Charles concluded, "We are unable to point to any new invention, comparable with radar, that would provide a simple solution to the air defense problem."[82] Nevertheless, "there was always the hope of salvation through new technology."[83]

Pierre Abbeloos and Michael Snow (kneeling) with the Camera Activating Machine near Sept-Îles, September 1970. Photograph by Joyce Wieland.

The United States and Canada constructed hundreds of radar stations, but almost as soon as they were completed the Pinetree Line, Mid-Canada Line, and DEW Line were rendered obsolete by new electronic countermeasures and ICBMs. After a decade of preparation the US Air Force assumed control of the DEW Line on July 31, 1957. *Sputnik 1,* propelled by an ICBM, passed over North America on October 4 of the same year.[84] "The heyday of continental air defense was history—in a few months."[85]

Development pressed forward on SAGE. The aim of SAGE was to centralize command and control of the radar station network—a daunting task ultimately involving 256 radar antennas in the Pinetree Line, ninety-eight in the Mid-Canada Line, and seventy-eight in the DEW Line.[86] SAGE was comprised of massive computers of vacuum-tube and punch-card technologies as well as digital data-processing components. The computers were housed within two-acre, four-story, windowless concrete Direction Centers; twenty-two Direction Centers were built. The computers would facilitate real-time control and coordination of weapons systems based on information provided by the radar stations. SAGE would "create a composite picture of the air situation as it developed."[87] Activated in 1958, SAGE was obsolete before it had even been finished.[88] As an antiaircraft weapons system it was incapable of accommodating the new threat posed

by ICBMs.[89] Still more radar installations would be built, including the Ballistic Missile Early Warning System (BMEWS), but they would offer a warning time of only minutes.[90]

SAGE's "automatic" capabilities were aspiration more than actuality. The enormous financial and material resources devoted to forming SAGE's "composite pictures" were drawn by impulses beyond the reach of technological rationalism. CFS Moisie, for example, offered negligible usefulness as a surveillance station and was without any control capability. SAGE technicians watched for exactly what they could not see. And the early warning systems were prone to malfunction and false alarms triggered by commercial aircraft and flocks of migrating birds, or provided inadequate coverage.[91] In 1960, "the BMEWS site at Thule [Greenland] had mistakenly identified the moon, slowly rising over Norway, as dozens of long-range missiles launched from Siberia."[92]

SAGE and the early warning radar lines that fed data to its computers were built to see over the horizon. They sought to automate a process of detection, identification, interception, and destruction of enemy forces. They were a scheme to eradicate uncertainty by means of technological innovation: prediction via total rationalization. But like the hypnosis from which its operators were prone to suffer, a kind of double vision was at play between the aspiration and its technological support.[93] "SAGE popcorn" was aspirin, used to stave off headaches induced by long, interminable hours staring at the radar scopes.[94] SAGE was a network of technologies said to have unprecedented capabilities, yet the terms of its mission continuously mutated. The air defense radar system was an assemblage of machines and discourses defined by aspirations for a mastery of the North American Arctic that would be automatic, self-sufficient, and total. These claims for mastery were predicated on the alleged acumen of its sensors.

The network is a prime example of expenditure for the *appearance* of control in the Cold War era, expenditure intended to promote the conception of the network itself as an image of efficacy that might induce conviction in its own operators as much as in their opponents. The white-bubble radomes that pocked the Arctic reflected political and military operatives' obsessional conceit more than any capacity for perception of and defense against external phenomena. In the absence of utility, the network is a tragic monument to America's capacity to imagine its own catastrophe. This

micro-scene of the Cold War—of hundreds of radar stations and control centers and thousands of airmen and civilian contractors in windowless bunkers illuminated by the cool light of their scopes, interconnected through shared technology and discourse—was loaded with contingencies for which its systems could not account. These discrepancies, which propelled a voluminous expenditure of resources in support of "a dream, a myth, a metaphor for total defense," were matched by the raw monotony of perpetual readiness—anticipation broken only by an occasional false alarm or "spoof" (Soviet pilots flying into sensor range to test countermeasures or to glimpse a new fighter-interceptor). Airmen had another definition for SAGE: "Somebody's Always Getting Excited."[95]
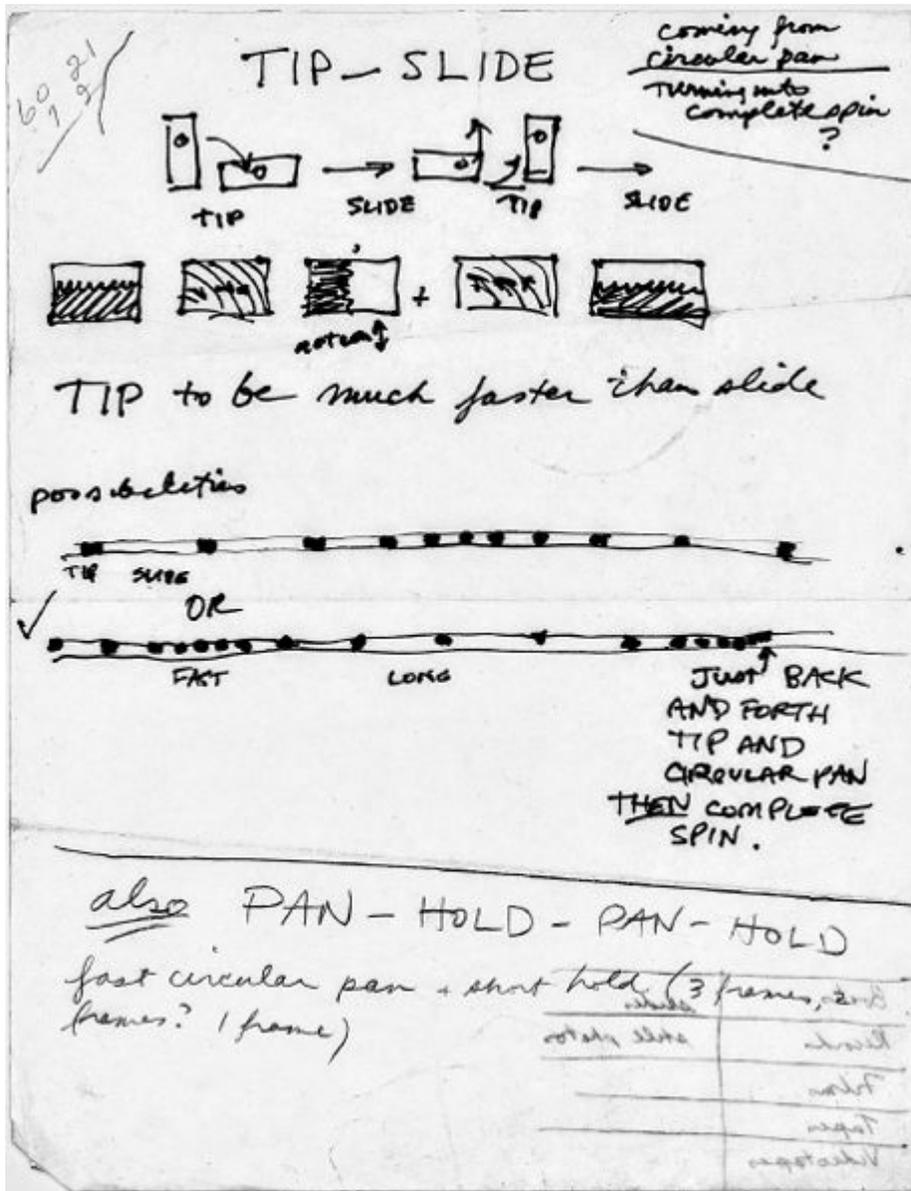
Michael Snow, production notes for *La région centrale*, 1970. Michael Snow Fonds, box 10, file 7. Edward P. Taylor Library & Archives, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

5. Come and Get High, Get High and Come: Film as Carnal Knowledge

In autumn 1970, Snow edited *La région centrale* while a visiting artist at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD) in Halifax. He began to draft advertising copy for the film. In one instance, below center-justified uppercase text of the title in French and English, and his name, he wrote, "Come and get high, Get high and come."[96] The wording is a clear pun on common euphemisms for drug-induced altered states and libidinal pleasure, here associated with the act of attending a screening of *La région centrale*. Snow's wordplay is of a piece with many instances of sexually explicit material and puns on sex acts throughout his career. They assist our understanding of the technical-libidinal character of his efforts in the CAM (*De la*) and *La région centrale*. As the air defense radar operators were "always getting excited" for the possibility of mortal threat entering their scopes, Snow sought to position his audience in "the ecstatic centre of a complete sphere."[97]

In December 1970 in NSCAD's lithography workshop, Snow produced a two-color lithograph titled *Projection*. First exhibited at the school, it later appeared with the CAM in *About 30 Works by Michael Snow*. *Projection* depicts Snow's *Walking Woman* cutout figure. While Snow had ostensibly ceased work with the *Walking Woman* in 1967 for the Montreal Expo, the figure, although cropped more than in most iterations, cut below the shoulder and above the knee, is recognizable in uniform black against a midnight-blue field. The dimensions of the photographed *Walking Woman* are apparently life-size. This presumption of size follows the presence of a nude male torso at right, similarly cropped and facing the *Walking Woman*, his fingers visible at the cutout's back, embracing the figure and holding it in place. The erect penis of the man, in clear focus at low-center of the composition, appears to penetrate the *Walking Woman*. The man's back is arched, rhyming with that of the cutout figure and further accentuating the centrality of his penis to the composition. Snow wrote at the time,

> *Projection* is just a blow-up. It is printed on black with white
> ink as white light. I thought this was like the way you see a

film image on a screen, where there is no light in the dark parts. That was the way to use the blow-up, originally a movie image. The phallic image also relates to film projection; it's a pun but it's also true.[98]

Projection plays on the suggestion of heterosexual intercourse (or, rather, the masturbatory fantasy of a man and a cutout figure) and the use of the *Walking Woman* as the ground against the privileged figure of the male genital organ. As with a radiograph, which is suggested by the lithograph's blue-black color, we see "through" the *Walking Woman* to the penetrating organ. The title, a pun on "projection" of the tumescent penis and "projection" in the technological sense of motion picture media (a sense also implied by the aspect ratio of the lithograph), suggests "projection" of artificial perspectival space on a flat surface generated by means of tonal contrast. "Projection" also suggests the circuit of desire, the attribution of fantasies to an object: "just a blowup" doll as much as a photographic enlargement.

In 1969 when Simon Hartog asked Snow, "why is [*Wavelength*] 46 minutes long?" Snow first replied, "Nice fuck."[99] Snow initially considered ending *Wavelength* not with a photograph of ocean waves, but with "a crotch shot" at the juncture of a woman's legs, her limbs rhyming with the orthogonals of the loft apartment's floorboards in a sexually charged turn on perspectival order.[100] Here Snow takes inspiration perhaps from Gustave Courbet's *L'origine du monde* (1866), or Marcel Duchamp's *Étant donnés* (1946–1966), which Snow may have seen on his visit to Duchamp's studio in 1962.[101] Among many possible titles for his film, Snow considered "Cunt-Room," "The Cuntempla[tion Room]," "Wet Room Time," "Thy ["Thigh"] Length," "Amy's Entrance," and "The Throat," before settling on *Wavelength*. Masturbation was among the first actions he hypothesized directing his female actor (Amy Taubin) to make in the film.[102] At the same time, regarding *La région centrale*, in a pre-production note on possible directional commands for the CAM, Snow considered having it trace "(human) female body hills."[103] He also considered the inclusion of actions, possibly taken by the CAM's human operators, evoking classic art-historical composition and scenarios from the imaginary of the sexual revolution. He writes, "people action will be enacted at moment of very slow speed for maximum 'legibility' and at highest speeds for almost

complete abstraction./Nudes in landscape/people go to river, take off clothes go for swim frolic sunbathe, fuck?"[104] Following a rough-cut screening of *La région centrale* for an audience at NSCAD, Snow excised all "people action," a section totaling approximately thirty minutes. In Snow's original conception of the CAM, he wished for a gyroscopic apparatus that would spin *himself*—that is, a homemade aerotrim, spinning him into ecstatic disequilibrium.[105] At one point, Snow imagined directing the CAM to follow a path determined by cursive-script spelling of his last name: Snow's audience would see the landscape through his signature upon it.[106]

Snow wrote directions for the CAM including—double-underlined —"QUIVERS AND SHIVERS," and elsewhere, "VIBRATIONS."[107] In the first reel a scanning motion is emphasized as the camera's lens points upward to a uniform blue field of sky; one meditates on the electronic pulses of the soundtrack, awaiting some visual reference point with which to make a relational judgment of position. Correlation is established between the pulsing tones and alterations in the camera's action. Our attention is focused not so much on the swirling landscape as the workings of the camera's mobility, which seems to react to the tones. The tones seem to force the camera into new positions and paths. We encounter a catalog of the CAM's possible movements, including rapid somersault pans and figure-eight patterns with a reflexive, muscular character. In the third reel, for example, a throbbing action does not trace the crest of the mountains in the far distance, but rather strokes up and down in time to higher-pitched tones, increasing in speed as dusk falls and the landscape becomes increasingly indistinguishable. With great care and labor, Snow strived to synch the tones and the movements as closely as possible. While simultaneous synchronization was mechanically impossible, as noted earlier, Snow's copious edit lists attest to his meticulous control of the image and soundtrack.[108] We find investment not in cinema-as-such, but in vision as a technical-libidinal process. "*Wavelength* was an iris-opener shaping the amount and type of light given to the eyes," Snow wrote. "But the course of my work has led me to LRC which is more like eye weight-lifting! It's muscular."[109] *La région centrale* directs the given capabilities of the cinematographic apparatus, such as the throbbing actions described, so as to amplify the base impulsions to vision itself.

What may be extrapolated from the sexually charged material in contemporaneous projects, drafts, and production notes, and in the completed film, is the eroticism of the apparatuses themselves. Snow works through possible articulations of the psychophysical effects he hoped to induce, a kind of libidinal engineering. The erect penis of *Projection* has its counterpart in the frenetic action of the CAM in *La région centrale*. The implied act in the former, explicit still image becomes the explicit act implied in the moving image of the latter. Snow wished his audience members viewing *La région centrale* to experience in their own psychophysiological comportment the libidinous effects of motion-picture illusory space, amplified by high-velocity looping actions, intensified by actual, optical projection. In 1971 and 1972, Snow ordered postcards with which to advertise screenings of *La région centrale* in New York and Toronto. In the brief copy on the postcard, he describes the film as "the message from a rotating body."[110] This language would be reiterated by a critical advocate for the film, Annette Michelson.

In Michelson's essay on Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), "Bodies in Space: Film as Carnal Knowledge," she writes that Kubrick's film posits "a space which, overflowing screen and field of vision, converts the theatre into a vessel and its viewers into passengers, it impels us, in the movement from departure to arrival, to rediscover the space and dimensions of the body as theatre of consciousness." We revel, she concludes, in "a knowledge which is *carnal*."[111] Michelson draws on this sentiment in her analysis of Snow's film, in particular comparing *A Space Odyssey*'s famed "stargate" climax to *La région centrale* and the extreme propulsive forces employed for its depiction of the Quebec landscape. Noting that *La région centrale* "followed the most intensive period of America's space program, culminating in the fulfillment of the Apollo Mission," she summed, "*La Région Centrale* gives new meaning to the notion of science fiction."[112] Snow imagined that the effect of the CAM's movements would evoke "the first rigorous filming of the moon surface."[113] Furthermore, Snow appears to have taken inspiration from advertising copy for Kubrick's film: *A Space Odyssey*, "the ultimate trip," became *La région centrale*, the "cosmic strip."[114] Snow describes the CAM as an apparatus that, "once it is set up it keeps on going"; "it just goes on without us."[115] Similar rhetoric was motivated on behalf of the purported automatic control capabilities of Cold War nuclear defense systems. By the

mid-1960s that rhetoric was the subject of dark parody. The particular circumstances of Snow's epic may be more effectively contextualized alongside not *A Space Odyssey* but an earlier Kubrick film, *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964).

In *Dr. Strangelove*, rhetorics of containment receive a hilariously bleak and grotesquely libidinal representation. Brigadier General Jack D. Ripper (Sterling Hayden) initiates a preemptive nuclear strike upon the USSR to preserve his "precious bodily fluids." The most catastrophic programs are commandeered in the service of paranoiac fears of impotence. The elaborate safeguards for the American nuclear arsenal result not in control but in incapacitation: game theory forecloses on the populations it is meant to protect. The film argues that the severe order of nuclear science is indistinguishable from the fits of paroxysmal fascist salutes erupting from Dr. Strangelove (Peter Sellers). The complement to Snow's "message from a rotating body" is not Keir Dullea as Dr. David Bowman in *A Space Odyssey*, nor the *Apollo 11* astronauts who spacewalked the following year, but Slim Pickens, the famed Western character actor who, as Major T. J. "King" Kong, takes an ecstatic rodeo ride on a nuclear warhead to its target during the film's climax of extreme velocity and total destruction. Through *Dr. Strangelove*, we see that the difference between the sublimity of an aerotrim and that of a nuclear warhead is a matter of limited degrees.

In the series of documentary nuclear test detonations that follows, we find a perpetual re-staging of the end of the world set to Vera Lynn singing "We'll Meet Again"—illustration par excellence of a grim, and seductive, compulsion to repeat. In the narrative of *Dr. Strangelove*, "King" Kong's bronco ride triggers this series of apocalyptic explosions by the Soviet doomsday device, which had its real-life complement in the Soviet Perimeter system begun in 1974. Perimeter was a "dead hand" device: a fully automated deployment of weapons of mass destruction, "a lethal machine that haunts the globe long after the demise of the men who created it."[116]—or, to recall Snow's words, a system "that just goes on without us." What is dark and only marginally speculative humor in *Dr. Strangelove* becomes the frenetic, obsessive operations of the CAM in *La région centrale*. Gene Youngblood, writing to Snow in 1971 after seeing an excerpt of *La région centrale*, understood the humor of this disturbing ambivalence: "I've always felt that I was the center of the Universe but I had no proof until I saw *La Région Centrale*. Now let them laugh. The only problem is

that everyone else who saw it at the same time said *they* were the center."[117] The CAM and the Cold War air defense radar networks are, along with Perimeter and *Dr. Strangelove*, key examples in a constellation of technical-libidinal operations, a kind of perverse love for technological workings that stretches across a range of Cold War media cultures. Michelson's analysis of Snow's carnal knowledge may have been more correct than she initially imagined.

6. *De la*

In January 1971, following their return to Montreal, Snow directed Abbeloos to replace the 16 mm camera with a closed-circuit video system. Abbeloos made the alteration in cooperation with Astro Electronics and RCA Limited of Montreal, a local outfit of the American defense contractor, which specialized in television-equipped aerospace technologies.[118] Recall that Abbeloos also added a human intrusion detector and a thirty-minute cycle of movements. Snow's initial sketches for the alteration call for five monitors: the fifth suspended above the machine, its screen aimed downward.[119] In the four CRT monitors—and in the proposed fifth (one imagines a heavy sky, radiating its cool glow)—we find a neat corollary to the radar scopes of the distant early warning stations at CFS Moisie and its kin. A *mise-en-abyme* was created: a self-directed electronic matrix, a narcissistic system, implied in the celluloid record of the machine's operation in central Quebec, now actualized into a chattering implosion upon the psychophysiological infrastructure of the viewing subject.[120] The CAM was exhibited under the title *From/De la région centrale* first at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa in 1971, and then—as *De la*—at the Center for Inter-American Relations in New York in 1972, where it accompanied screenings of the film. *De la* then traveled to the Berkeley Art Museum in 1979 and to the List Visual Arts Center at MIT in 1986.

Michael Snow. *De la*, 1972. Aluminum and steel mechanical sculpture with closed-circuit video camera, electronic controls, and four monitors. Installation space 350.0 × 750.0 × 1200.0 cm, 137.8 × 295.3 × 472.4 in. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Image courtesy of Michael Snow.

Snow's remarks on *De la* are some of his most fragmentary and elusive:

> The T.V. image is magic: even though it is in real time; simultaneous, it is a ghost of the actual events which one is, in this case, part of. The machine that is orchestrating these ghost images is never seen in them: it belongs exclusively to the "real" side of the equation.[121]

The servo drives of the artist's machine and the real-time capability of its camera belong to the "'real' side of the equation." This is opposed to the "ghost images" of the television monitor; that is to say, the images of the viewer. The viewer is caught between the real and its representation. The dynamic of image capture here is different than that in works by Dan Graham, Peter Campus, or Bruce Nauman where one is disoriented by the dissonant play of reflexivity with one's own televisual image.[122] In *De la*, the spectator is fixated on the spectacle of a machine and its movements in which one's "self" appears as but a fleeting blur. In *De la* we are confronted with the condition of our metaphorical, transcendental "deliverance": we see that it is precisely—only—a machine, churning and spinning. The

machine continues to spin, first next to CFS Moisie and the most advanced military surveillance technology of the day, then alongside a museum audience, the potential subjects of that culture of control, the surveyed and atomized statistics of administered society. The subject-effect of this cinematographic apparatus is one of ecstasy, *ecstasis*, ἔκστασις: through the apparatus's effect upon our sensory faculties we are impelled to stand outside ourselves. Regina Cornwell writes on *La région centrale*, "If one tragedifies nature in order to show its 'otherness' from man, one ironically anthropomorphizes it. ... One does not see the surface of a landscape, but only those curvatures which are like a human face—nature becomes one huge Mt. Rushmore."[123] What if that compulsion to anthropomorphize is directed to a person—via live, closed-circuit video—no less than oneself amongst the machines? What if one is asked to see one's face "like" a face? The viewer becomes the "landscape" surveilled. Snow's means for an "absolute record of a piece of wilderness" is turned upon the wilderness of the viewer who might dare to enter its matrix of whirling camera and four podiums, topped with televisions whose screens aim back at the apparatus.

The viewer is now the ground supposedly transcended in *La région centrale*, charted and surveyed by "circles within circles and cycles within cycles" on vertical and horizontal axes at varying speeds. One is thereby relegated to "unrecognizable flat surface," to recall Victoria Schultz's description of the film. The video camera smears our reflection as it passes us, and the instantaneity of our image's transmission is destabilized by the machine of its delivery. The increasingly pervasive culture of technocracy and surveillance is exemplified in the CAM's closing of a circuit between one's vision, directed back to oneself and obliterated by its process of capture. Recall Snow's original research for the CAM in surveillance technologies manufactured by Pelco Industries and Abbeloos's basis for its construction in precision ranging systems: radar adapted to become the target of its own sensor. In *De la* we confront a profound antagonism that formulates the impossibility of its own coming into being. This transformation, implied in fleeting moments of abstraction in *La région centrale*, is now asserted as the work's primary operation. The audience members must now reckon with their inconsequentiality, as defined by their frail image, in this closed world. Just as the SAGE operators were prone to suffer hypnosis induced by their CRT scopes, viewers beholding *De la* come under a kind of hypnosis—induced by their own image, generated

and transmuted by this fantastical machine in a fine entrapment of one's desire to see beyond: over the horizon, into the future.

The Camera Activating Machine and CFS Moisie, spinning in tandem, revelatory beyond their declared mission, enact the desire at work in their conception, their shared processes of action. CFS Moisie: "hardly even a surveillance station, without control capability," yet its airmen were vigilant to its radar arrays for thirty-five years. The precision ranging system turned Camera Activating Machine: better known by means of its filmic product, yet its ultimate techno-physiological circuit awaits completion by viewers, awaits their movements, their shadows, to enter the range of its motion sensor—provided by RCA Limited, a premier defense contractor. *De la*: a proposition and a feminine definite article: "of the," or "from the," a determiner of an unknown amount: perhaps some, perhaps any: an indecisive reunion.

Coda: *Si invisum non invisum*

The invisibility of the CAM, its particular history and its context, has persisted in the literature on Snow and *La région centrale*. *De la* has been left wanting for consideration, even though it is one of the earliest and most ambitious uses of closed-circuit video by an artist. The ostensible absence of the machine in the profilmic space of *La région centrale* (the pervasive appearance of its shadow notwithstanding) has turned into a kind of passing aside, uncritically repeated at the expense of the extraordinary feat of its engineering based in military precision ranging systems. In this case study I sought to look upon the source of that shadow, and the landscape of Quebec that it occupied for five days in September 1970—the landscape that was something other than empty. The crest of Canadian Forces Radar Squadron 211, the unit in residence at CFS Moisie, bears the Latin phrase *Si invisum non invisum*: "If it is an enemy, it must not go unobserved."
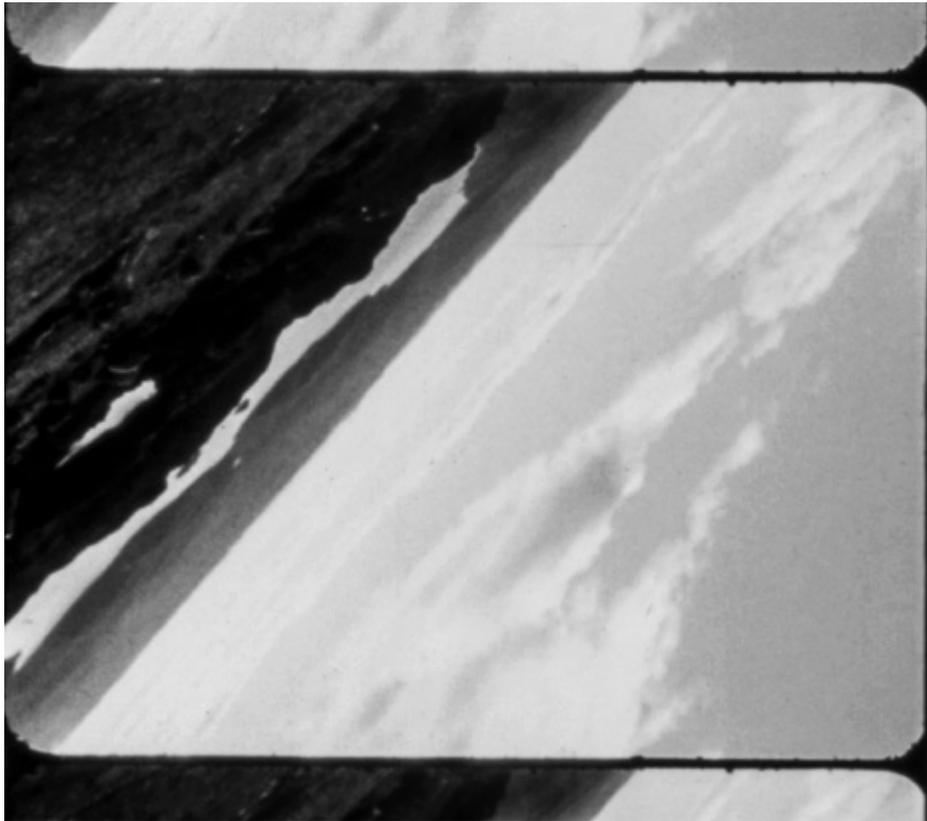
Michael Snow, *La région centrale*, 1971. Frame enlargement. Courtesy of Michael Snow.

Notes

. Michael Snow, "*La région centrale*" (1969), in *The Collected Writings of Michael Snow, The Michael Snow Project,* ed. Louise Dompierre (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1994), p. 53.

. Michael Snow, in conversation with Charlotte Townsend, "Michael Snow on *La région centrale*" (1970), *Film Culture* 52 (Spring 1971): 62.

. Snow, "Michael Snow on *La région centrale,*" p. 58.

. Michael Snow Fonds, box 10, file 5, Art Gallery of Ontario, Edward P. Taylor Library and Archives, Toronto, Ontario (hereafter referred to as "Snow Fonds").

. Amos Vogel, *Film as a Subversive Art* (1974; New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2005), p. 102.

. In 1968, the Royal Canadian Air Force and other Canadian armed forces were merged under the designation "Canadian Forces." I shall refer to the radar station by its name at the time of the production of *La région centrale*: Canadian Forces Station (CFS) Moisie.

. *1971 Census of Canada, Catalog 92–705, Vol. 1—Part 1* (Bulletin 1.1–5) (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 1972), table 6, p. 27. In 2003, the villages of Moisie and Gallix merged with the city of Sept-Îles.

. For Snow's production notes, see Snow Fonds, box 10, file 2. The published dates of the film's production vary, and the dates I assert may be contested. Stéfani de Loppinot gives the dates of production as September 12–16, 1970. See Stéfani de Loppinot, La région centrale *de Michael Snow: Voyage dans la quatrième dimension* (Crisnée, Belgium: Yellow Now, 2010), p. 107. However, these dates seem to correspond to a prospective schedule drafted by Snow prior to his deployment to Sept-Îles, not the actual shooting schedule. See Snow Fonds, box 10, file 2. David Tomas gives the dates as "between September 27 and October 1." See David Tomas, *Vertov, Snow, Farocki: Machine Vision, and the Posthuman* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 78. My account follows the dates given in an invoice handwritten by Joyce Wieland: "Sept 1970 Montreal, Received from Michael Snow, Assistance—La Région Centrale—$100.00, Sept. 14 to 20, [signed] Joyce Wieland." This range is corroborated by Snow's production notes dated to the confirmed period of production (September 1970) and by an invoice from Sono Lab that places Snow back in Toronto no later than September 22. See Snow Fonds, box 10, file 1.

. Pierre Abbeloos, interview by author, August 20, 2012, Montreal; Michael Snow, interview by author, December 5, 2012, Toronto.

0. Annette Michelson, "Film and the Radical Aspiration," *Film Culture* 42 (Fall 1966): 34–42 and 136; and Paul N. Edwards, *The Closed World: Computers and the Politics of Discourse in Cold War America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

1. Snow Fonds, box 9, file 6.

2. Snow, "*La région centrale,*" p. 56.

3. W.J.T. Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape," in *Landscape and Power,* 2nd ed., ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 10.

4. Snow, "*La région centrale,*" p. 53.

5. Snow Fonds, box 11, file 1.

6. Snow, "Michael Snow on *La région centrale,*" 58; emphasis in original.

7. Snow Fonds, box 10, file 5. The literature consists of data on pan-and-tilt accessory mounts, joystick controls, variable-speed modular controls for zoom lenses and remote enclosure control, units for desktop and rack mounts, and zoom lenses for security cameras: apparatuses for civilian,

commercial use. Snow went so far as to price out specific Pelco devices with which he hoped to produce his film. Pelco was founded in 1957. The firm provided closed-circuit (CCTV) or Internet protocol (IP) video security systems to the 2001 Group of Eight summit in Genoa, the 2004 Athens Olympics, the Statue of Liberty, and the New York headquarters of Sotheby's, among many other clients. In 2007, Pelco was purchased by Schneider Electric, an international energy management corporation founded in the nineteenth century. Schneider Electric is headquartered in a structure called the Hive (Hall de l'innovation et Vitrine de l'énergie) in Rueil-Malmaison, France. See the official websites for Pelco, http://www.pelco.com/sites/global/en/home.page, and Schneider Electric, http://www.schneider-electric.com/site/home/index.cfm/ww.

8. Snow Fonds, box 10, file 7.

9. Abbeloos, interview by author,August 20, 2012, Montreal.

0. My account follows materials in the Snow Fonds, esp. box 10, file 5; Abbeloos, interview by author, August 20, 2012, Montreal; Snow, interview by author, December 5, 2012, Toronto; Michael Snow, correspondence with author, January 6, 2014; and Pierre Abbeloos, correspondence with author, September 29, 2014.

1. LeRoy A. MacColl, *Fundamental Theory of Servomechanisms* (New York: D. van Nostrand and Bell Telephone Laboratories, 1945).

2. See H.W. Pout, "Precision Ranging Systems for Close-Range Weapons," *Journal of the Institution of Electrical Engineers—Part IIIA (Radiolocation)* 93, no. 2 (1946): 380–394; J. F. Coales, H. C. Calpine, and D. S. Watson, "Naval Fire-Control Radar," *Journal of the Institution of Electrical Engineers—Part IIIA (Radiolocation)* 93, no. 2 (1946): 349–379; and Louis N. Ridenour, *Radar System Engineering* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1947). On the history of control systems, see David A. Mindell, *Between Human and Machine: Feedback, Control, and Computing before Cybernetics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

3. F. E. Swain, "Formulas for Stabilization of Ship Antennas," in *Radar Scanners and Radomes*, ed. W. M. Cady, M. B. Karelitz, and Louis A. Turner (New York: McGraw-Hill and the Office of Scientific Research and Development, National Defense Research Committee, Radiation Laboratory, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1948), p. 464. On the history of Cold War air defense in the United States, see David F. Winkler, *Searching the Skies: The Legacy of the United States Cold War Defense Radar Program* (Langley Air Force Base, VA: United States Air Force Air Combat Command; Champaign, IL: United States Construction Engineering Research Laboratories, 1997); and Barry Leonard, *History of Strategic Air and Ballistic Missile Defense, 2 vols.* (Washington, DC: United States Army Center of Military History, 2009).

4. Snow, "Michael Snow on *La région centrale*," p. 58.

5. Regina Cornwell, *Snow Seen: The Films and Photographs of Michael Snow* (Toronto: Peter Martin Associates, 1980), pp. 119, 122.

6. See Cady, Karelitz, and Turner, eds., *Radar Scanners and Radomes.*

7. Snow sought to "programme the whole thing with sound tapes so that we'd compose the sound first and that would give instructions to the machine to move and then I would use that as the [sound]track. ... [T]he visual part of [*La région centrale*] was composed in terms of sound. And so there'd be this reverse relationship, at least in production." "The Camera and the Spectator: Michael Snow in Discussion with John du Cane" (1973), in *Collected Writings*, p. 89.

8. At the time, a tone discriminator of the necessary sophistication was inaccessible (they existed only in the facilities of military contractors such as Bell Labs or the Massachusetts Institute of Technology [MIT]) but would have assisted in the desired simultaneous recording of the pulses as they propelled the CAM. Abbeloos, interview by author, August 20, 2012, Montreal.

9. Snow, "Michael Snow on *La région centrale*," p. 62.

0. Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (Cambridge, MA: Technology Press [MIT Press], 1948). See Wiener's discussion of MacColl's theory of servomechanisms, pp. 7 and 19.

1. Peter Galison, "The Ontology of the Enemy: Norbert Wiener and the Cybernetic Vision," *Critical Inquiry* 21 (Autumn 1994): 240.

2. Wiener, *Cybernetics,* p. 14.

3. Galison, "The Ontology of the Enemy," 249–252. See also N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). Hayles writes, "What tends to drop from sight [in the earliest definitions of cybernetics] is the fact that the equation between organism and machine works because it is seen from a position formulated precisely so that it will work" (p. 94). For Wiener, cybernetics is "about relation, not essence. The analogical relations it constructs are therefore not merely rhetorical figures but are systems that generate the only kind of significance available to us as perceiving, finite beings with no access to unmediated reality" (p. 97).

4. Michael Snow, "Michael Snow and Bruce Elder in Conversation" (1982), in *Collected Writings,* p. 226.

5. See George A. Gescheider, *Psychophysics: The Fundamentals* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1976).

6. My account of the history of CFS Moisie, the village of Moisie, and Sept-Îles draws on materials published by the Air Defense Radar Veterans' Association and Radomes, Inc. See http://www.radomes.org/. Also crucial have been the Royal Canadian Air Force documents, veterans' accounts, and related histories, including materials transcribed from the National Archives of Canada and Deanna Gilbert's self-published book *Moisie Anniversary: 25 Years of Service, 1953–1978* (1978), collected by Capt. Reynald George Joseph L'Ecuyer on the website The Pinetree Line, http://67.69.104.76:84/Pinetreeline.

7. On the history of the DEW Line, see Samuel Edward Twitchell, "The Incomplete Shield: The Distant Early Warning Line and the Struggle for Effective Continental Air Defense, 1950–1960" (MA thesis, Iowa State University, 2011); and Kenneth Schaffel, *The Emerging Shield: The Air Force and the Evolution of Continental Air Defense* (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, United States Air Force, 1991).

8. For more on Fuller's invention and its popularization, see Felicity D. Scott, *Architecture or Techno-utopia: Politics after Modernism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007); Eva Díaz, "Dome Culture in the Twenty-first Century," *Grey Room* 42 (Winter 2011): 80–105; Diedrich Diederichsen and Anselm Franke, *Whole Earth: California and the Disappearance of the Outside* (Berlin: Haus der Kulturen der Welt and Sternberg Press, 2013); and Richard Fairfield et al., *The Modern Utopian: Alternative Communities of the '60s and '70s* (Port Townsend, WA: Process Press, 2010).

9. Moisie's radar included Search models FPS-3, FPS-502, and FPS-27; and Height models TPS-502, FPS-6, and FPS-26. For more on this equipment and other technologies in use in the air defense radar network, see Winkler, *Searching the Skies*; and Leonard, *History of Strategic Air and Ballistic Missile Defense*.

0. Snow, "Michael Snow on *La région centrale,*" p. 63.

1. Edwards, *Closed World,* p. 111.

2. *SAGE 211 AC&W Squadron, Moisie, Quebec, Appendix A to Unit Historical Report, January–December 1964* (Ottawa: National Archives of Canada, 1964), cited on The Pinetree Line, http://67.69.104.76:84/Pinetreeline/other/other26/other26aq.html.

3. Paul Ozorak observes, "Soviet aircraft have not been officially known to venture this far inland and the station probably dealt more often with search and rescue work [in civilian and military

incidents]." Paul Ozorak, "Moisie, QC: General History," The Pinetree Line, http://pinetreeline.org/other/other26/other26e.html. In an illustration of how the Americans viewed air defense on a continental scale, CFS Moisie was part of the Bangor Air Defense sector and therefore forwarded its reports to the American SAGE direction center at Topsham Air Force Base in Maine.

4. Eric Schlosser, *Command and Control: Nuclear Weapons, the Damascus Accident, and the Illusion of Safety* (New York: Penguin, 2013), p. 254.

5. Jack Miller, *The Peacekeepers* (Las Vegas: Houdini, 2012), p. 264.

6. Following his mother's advice, Abbeloos brought with him his one-piece, insulated Ski-Doo snowmobile suit, ensuring that he would survive the subzero temperatures after nightfall. Wieland, however, would have suffered frostbite if not for the warmth emitted by the CAM gasoline generator. Abbeloos, interview by author, August 20, 2012, Montreal.

7. Snow Fonds, box 10, file 7.

8. Victoria Schultz, "Film: *The Central Region*," *The East Village Other*, February 1972, p. 11.

9. Snow Fonds, box 10, file 7.

0. On the history of this discourse, see Malcolm Le Grice, *Abstract Film and Beyond* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977). For an account of analyses of Snow's cinema in relation to structural/materialist cinema, see Bart Testa, "Axiomatic Cinema: Michael Snow's Films," in *Presence and Absence: The Films of Michael Snow, 1956–1991, The Michael Snow Project*, ed. Jim Shedden (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario/The Power Plant, 1995), pp. 26–83.

1. Snow Fonds, box 10, file 7.

2. Snow Fonds, box 10, file 7.

3. This suggestion is informed by my own experience in organizing screenings of the film, as well as accounts shared with me by others. However, even with this explanation, the shadow of the CAM may be identified easily in the final reel at 3:30, 6:15, 9:11, 15:18, 17:00, 18:20, 21:00, 22:11, and 22:20, and following its most intensive spinning motions in the final minutes of the climax.

4. Abbeloos, interview by author, August 20, 2012, Montreal.

5. Peter Schjeldahl, "The Content? Information," *New York Times*, November 26, 1972, D17. See also Barbara Rose, review of *About 30 Works by Michael Snow*, *New York Magazine*, December 11, 1972, p. 83.

6. Snow, "Michael Snow on *La région centrale*," p. 58.

7. Bart Testa, "Machine in the Garden," in *Spirit in the Landscape* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1989), p. 70.

8. Snow, "*La région centrale*," p. 53.

9. Snow, "Michael Snow on *La région centrale*," p. 61.

0. The advertisement postcard for Snow's screenings lists the location as "Film Anthology Cinema." Snow Fonds, box 10, file 5. Anthology Film Archives, founded by James Broughton, Ken Kelman, Peter Kubelka, Jonas Mekas, and P. Adams Sitney, emerged from the Film-Makers' Cinematheque.

1. Peter Kubelka, "The Invisible Cinema," *Design Quarterly* 93 (1974): 35.

2. P. Adams Sitney, introduction to *The Essential Cinema: Essays on the Films in the Collection of Anthology Film Archives*, ed. P. Adams Sitney with Caroline Sergeant Angell (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1975), pp. vii–x.

3. Kubelka, "The Invisible Cinema," p. 34.

4. Sitney, introduction, p. vii.

5. Kubelka, "The Invisible Cinema," p. 32.

6. Andrew V. Uroskie, *Between the Black Box and the White Cube: Expanded Cinema and Postwar Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), p. 44.

7. Kubelka, "The Invisible Cinema," p. 34.

8. Kubelka, "The Invisible Cinema," p. 32.

9. Kubelka, "The Invisible Cinema," p. 34.

0. *La région centrale* screened in its entirety at Anthology Film Archives on January 19, 1972. In his *Village Voice* interview with Snow about the film, Jonas Mekas describes the film's first public screening (in New York) as January 19 at Anthology, with a "wider public opening" to follow at the Elgin Theatre on February 17. Jonas Mekas, "Movie Journal," *Village Voice*, January 27, 1972, p. 65.

1. P. Adams Sitney, "Michael Snow's Cinema" (1969, revised 1973), in *The Essential Cinema*, p. 227.

2. P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943–2000,* 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 358. Snow proposed that *La région centrale* "will feel like a record of the last wilderness on earth, a film to be taken into outer space as a souvenir of what nature once was. I want to convey a feeling of absolute aloneness, a kind of Goodbye to Earth which I believe we are living through." Snow, *"La région centrale,"* p. 56. In 2012, Snow recalled that his allusions to environmental concerns were an attempt to capitalize on the attention and financial support available to work engaging such concerns at the end of the 1960s. Snow, interview by author, December 5, 2012. *La région centrale* was included in the 2012 exhibition *Ends of the Earth: Land Art to 1974* organized by Philipp Kaiser and Miwon Kwon and presented at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and Haus der Kunst, Munich.

3. Annette Michelson, "About Snow," *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 122.

4. Michelson, "About Snow," p. 121.

5. Michelson, "About Snow," p. 121.

6. Annette Michelson, "Gnosis and Iconoclasm: A Case Study of Cinephilia," *October* 83 (Winter 1998): 5.

7. Stan Brakhage as quoted in Sky Sitney, "The Search for the Invisible Cinema," *Grey Room* 19 (Spring 2005): 111.

8. Snow, "Michael Snow and Bruce Elder in Conversation," in *Collected Writings*, p. 226.

9. Snow, "Michael Snow on *La région centrale,*" pp. 58, 61–62.

0. JCS 2084, "Memorandum by the Chief of Staff, US Air Force for the Joint Chiefs of Staff on Air Defense of the United States," November 16, 1949, in Files of the JCS, The National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD, quoted in Joseph T. Jockel, *No Boundaries Upstairs: Canada, the United States, and the Origins of North American Air Defence, 1945–1958* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987), p. 60.

1. Edwards, *Closed World*, p. 90. On the performative character of Cold War nuclear civil defense, see Tracy C. Davis, *Stages of Emergency: Cold War Nuclear Civil Defense* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

2. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, "Problems of Air Defense: Final Report of PROJECT CHARLES,"August 1, 1951, in Files of the Lincoln Laboratory, Lexington, MA, quoted in Jockel, *No Boundaries Upstairs,* p. 61.

3. Jockel, *No Boundaries Upstairs,* p. 60.

4. Schaffel, *The Emerging Shield*, p. 217.

5. B. Bruce-Briggs, *The Shield of Faith: Strategic Defense from Zeppelins to Star Wars* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), p. 138.

6. Schaffel, *The Emerging Shield*, p. 268.

7. Schaffel, *The Emerging Shield*, p. 204.

8. Schaffel, *The Emerging Shield*, pp. 207, 223–224; Jockel, *No Boundaries Upstairs,* p. 86; and Winkler, *Searching the Skies,* p. 41.

9. Schaffel, *The Emerging Shield*, p. 257.

0. Schaffel, *The Emerging Shield,* p. 259. For analysis of the "technological imperative" of ICBM systems in particular, see Ernest J. Yanarella, *The Missile Defense Controversy: Technology in Search of a Mission* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2002). See also Donald MacKenzie, *Inventing Accuracy: A Historical Sociology of Nuclear Missile Guidance* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990); and Gordon Mitchell, *Strategic Deception: Rhetoric, Science, and Politics in Missile Defense Advocacy* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2000).

1. The problem of the Ballistic Missile Early Warning System's inadequate coverage to the south became especially apparent in the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. "Despite the enormous sums spent on the BMEWS radars facing north, the United States had absolutely no capability in place to detect a missile launched from the south, from Cuba. Washington policymakers had simply never anticipated that the Soviets would outflank the BMEWS radars in this manner." Scott D. Sagan, *The Limits of Safety: Organizations, Accidents, and Nuclear Weapons* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 122.

2. Schlosser, *Command and Control,* p. 254. Donald MacKenzie, *Mechanizing Proof: Computing, Risk, and Trust* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), pp. 23–24.

3. Miller, *The Peacekeepers,* p. 28.

4. Miller, *The Peacekeepers,* p. 264.

5. Miller, *The Peacekeepers,* p. 264.

6. Snow Fonds, box 10, file 5.

7. Snow, "Michael Snow on *La région centrale,*" p. 58. Stéfani de Loppinot has pointed to the erotic character of Snow's cinema. Crucially, she points to a precedence for Snow's work in Marcel Duchamp's notion of the bachelor machine in Loppinot, *La région centrale*, pp. 43–46, 99–105.

8. Michael Snow, *Projection*, in *About 30 Works by Michael Snow*, exh. cat. (New York: Center for Inter-American Relations, 1972), p. 23.

9. Simon Hartog, "Ten Questions to Michael Snow" (1969), in *Structural Film Anthology*, ed. Peter Gidal (London: British Film Institute, 1976), p. 36.

00. Elizabeth Legge, *Michael Snow: Wavelength* (London: Afterall Books, 2009), p. 59.

01. Michael Snow, "Admission (or, Marcel Duchamp)" (1989), in *Collected Writings*, pp. 286–289.

02. Snow Fonds, box 11, file 2.

03. Snow Fonds, box 10, file 7.

04. Snow Fonds, box 10, file 7. The "people action" was to follow a play by Richard Foreman, the creator of the Ontological-Hysteric Theater.

05. Abbeloos, interview by author, August 20, 2012. Remnants of this idea persisted in Snow's somersaulting around the CAM on-site in Sept-Îles. While the footage containing the CAM's record of the human operators is now lost, Snow's tumbling may be seen in Wieland's photographs from the shoot.

06. Snow Fonds, box 10, file 7.

07. Snow Fonds, box 10, file 7.

08. Snow Fonds, box 9, file 6.

09. Snow, "Michael Snow on *La région centrale,*" p. 63.

10. Snow Fonds, box 10, file 5.

11. Annette Michelson, "Bodies in Space: Film as Carnal Knowledge" (1969), in *The Making of 2001: A Space Odyssey,* ed. Stephanie Schwam (New York: Modern Library, 2000), p. 215.

12. Annette Michelson, "About Snow," pp. 121–123.

13. Snow, "*La région centrale,*" p. 56.

14. Snow, "Michael Snow on *La région centrale,*" p. 58.

15. Snow, "Michael Snow on *La région centrale,*" pp. 60, 63.

16. David E. Hoffman, *The Dead Hand: The Untold Story of the Cold War Arms Race and Its Dangerous Legacy* (New York: Anchor, 2009), p. 24. See also Hoffman, pp. 152–154, 421–423; and Schlosser, *Command and Control,* pp. 467–468.

17. Gene Youngblood, letter to Michael Snow, April 9, 1971, in Snow Fonds, box 47, file 4; quoted in Tomas, *Vertov, Snow, Farocki,* p. 119.

18. RCA Astro Electronics was a leading developer of satellite technology. Two of its major accomplishments came in the 1960s with the Television Infra-Red Observation Satellite series and the Defense Meteorological Satellite Program. RCA (Radio Corporation of America, 1919–1986) was one of the earliest beneficiaries of military contracts in radar technology. See Louis Brown, *Technical and Military Imperatives: A Radar History of World War II* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 1999), pp. 22–23; Leonard, *History of Strategic Air and Ballistic Missile Defense,* vol. 1, p. 230; and Bruce-Briggs, *The Shield of Faith*, pp. 102–103.

19. Snow Fonds, box 10, file 6.

20. RCA Astro provided lubricant to reduce noise made by the machine when active. A capacitor would have reduced noise considerably more, but if added the device would have obstructed the video image. Abbeloos, interview by author, August 20, 2012.

21. Snow, "De La" (1972), in *Collected Writings,* p. 81.

22. For more on the critical reception of Snow's "screen-reliant art," see Kate Mondloch, "The Matter of Illusionism: Michael Snow's Screen/Space," in *Screen/Space: The Projected Image in Contemporary Art,* ed. Tamara Trodd (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), pp. 73–89. See also Kate Mondloch, *Screens: Viewing Media Installation Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

23. Cornwell, *Snow Seen,* p. 122.

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