


All Things in Their Time:

On Michael Snow's

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In a manner now familiar, for it is characteristic of the filmmaker in question, the implications of his choice are multiple. The use of a visual sign, "" rather than a verbal was, one is tempted to conjecture, calculated to elude that singularity, that lack of ambiguity typical of a verbal construct — or at least any verbal construct which is referential rather than poetic in nature. The strategy for eluding such a specificity is to use a diagramme of the film's shape for the title. Despite its referentiality, that diagramme, especially when considered in relation to the film suggests many things; movement, activity, energy, rhythmic oscillation, the flatness of the picture plane, a non-narrative, non-teleological structure (since the arrow points in both directions rather than simply ahead) and the correlative idea of an accretionary modular construction, as well as the idea, which shall be the central concern of this paper, that of the balancing of opposites.

But what, we must demand, are the opposites which are brought into balance? The most obvious answer is "the direction of movement." But almost as obvious are the answers, "between an extended and contracted space, or more precisely, between the illusion of a haptic space and a materially-grounded optical space," "between a vertical image and a real construct," "between a cinematic reproduction (i.e. an image in which the transformational capacities of the cinema are deliberately minimized) and a cinematic construct (i.e. an image in which the transformational capacities of the camera, in this case specifically the moving camera are maximized or at least made evident)," "between representation and presentation," "between description and construction," "between illusion and object," as well as "between the opposites of image content and image production."¹

To anyone familiar with the art-theoretical notions which dominated the fields of critical and artistic practice at the time of Snow's formative years as a painter and sculptor, the late fifties and early sixties, these oppositions are well-known. They were at the centre of critical discourse from the time Snow began work in painting in the early fifties: for evidence, one need only consider that Clement Greenberg's article, "The Crises of the Easel Picture" appeared in 1948, his article "Modernist Sculpture" in 1952, and "The Role Of Nature in Modernist Painting" in 1949.² The transition from the first to the second item in each of these pairs was seen by the critical orthodoxy of the time as representing both the course of development of painting, as well as a description, **modus differens**, of the artwork's genuine ontology. Painting, at least in recent times was said to develop from representation to abstraction, from the use of a haptic space to the use of an optical space. In the course of this development, it was alleged, painting approached the discovering of its own essence. Thus, recent painting was said to be involved with the attempt to construct a genuine ontology for its medium.

The process of discovering the essential character of any medium was a dialectical one. In order to discover the features specific to any medium (that which made a painting, for example, a painting and not an image of some other sort), one proposed a series of binary oppositions and repudiated one item from each of the opposing pairs. Painting was said to be not sculpture, hence its space should not be tactile but haptic; similarly painting was said to be not drawing, hence, outline or hard edge was eliminated.

It is within this context that the radical nature of Snow's work most clearly comes into view. In common with other artists formulating that art which is now commonly referred to as post-modern, Snow's work involves a repudiation of the modernist ideas of "purity" and "essentiality" and the aspiration to construct an ontology of the medium. In essence, Snow's strategies were based on the fundamental principle of non-exclusion. He demanded to use both representational and abstract imagery: his work employs both illusionistic devices and devices which emphasize the objecthood of a work of art. Thus, while modernist art was clearly based on principles whose effect was to exclude certain characteristics from painting, sculpture, etc., Snow has worked systematically to re-instate those features into each of these media as he proceeded to revise them, using them to balance the features which modernist art has included. But,

in a sense he has worked them to devise a kind of art work which could also include the ideals of a modernist — other than its principles of exclusion. In a sense  as the double-arrow title indicates, he has wanted to have it both ways — "modernist" and other.

Nor is this the only sense in which Snow demanded to have things more than one way. Snow's career has been characterized by a relentless movement from medium to medium and back again. He began his career as a painter in the early fifties; in the later fifties he turned to sculpture, then in the middle sixties to photography and filmmaking. And at the same time that he has been pursuing this career in the visual arts he has also worked in music, first playing jazz trumpet and piano, later with groups involved in "the music of gradual process" (he worked for a while with Steve Reich in the sixties) and most recently with a group involved with collective improvisation.

To anyone committed to the modernist ideal of artwork, this circulation between a number of fields of endeavour would appear as somewhat promiscuous if not downright perverse. For modernists had advanced the notion that the endeavour to explore the specificities of any given medium — an endeavour they claimed as central to artistic practice — could be realized by a protracted process which, inasmuch as it involved the identification of a very delimited range of problems and a thorough working out of those problems, resembled research as much as anything.

It is evident that the importance of the polyvalent nature of Snow's enterprise demands to be understood within a different framework. The locus in which Snow's work developed to full maturity was that of New York in the sixties, and, at that time, artists working there were strongly committed to the systematic exploration of the interrelations between various artistic practices. Ken Jacobs' **Shadow Works**, for example, constituted an inquiry into the various possible modalities of interpenetration between film, theatre and painting, while Yvonne Rainer's dance works constituted an inquiry into the various modalities of interpenetration between sculpture and performance.

The effect of the inter-media approach in which these artists engaged was directed towards the displacement of the ideas of purity, discreteness, essentiality and of the irreducibility of any medium to another from the centre of the forum of critical discourse. At its deepest level, one could understand this displacement as representing the repudiation of the American quest for purity.³ The artists in question all turned to a more synthetic tradition with its roots in Europe as a source for those tactics which could be deployed to disrupt the closed system of American modernism. It was from constructivist cinema, Bauhaus photography and machine art and dadaist events that these artists drew the strategies to oppose and to balance the ideals they had assimilated from the history of modernism.

In Snow's own multi-faceted work, plurality is deployed in an effort to accommodate and to reconcile diversity. Snow's **oeuvre** is committed to the location of possible points of convergence between apparently divergent activities: it is almost as though, as Annette Michelson points out, "Snow's obsessively systematic investigation excludes the notion of disparity."⁴

Almost, but not exactly. It is certainly true enough that Snow's imagery and materials have circulated from medium to medium and it was Ms. Michelson who pointed this out in an earlier article on Snow.⁵

Nonetheless, whenever the materials of one work in one medium become "the content" of a work in another medium, they are reformed according to properties specific to the medium which comes to contain them.⁶ Thus the **longeurs** of the presentation of the still photographs in **One Second in Montreal** make one aware of the specifically cinematic phenomenon of duration. Indeed, the characteristically witty tale of the piece points to the essential tension between the temporal characteristics of the two media upon which the piece is so cleverly built. There are thirty still photographs in this film. A common exposure time in photography is one-thirtieth of a second. The sum of the exposure times of all the photographs in the film, then, is the one second referred to in the title of the film. The difference between that time and the actual duration of the film (twenty-six minutes at 16 frames per second; its recommended running speed) represents the contradiction between the two media.

This contradiction also points towards the difference between the time with which a representation is made and the time it takes to be viewed. Snow has, in fact, reworked this opposition with an almost obsessive regularity; **Plus Tard** is just one example of a later work in which this contradiction is the subject of primary concern.

The recirculation of materials from medium to medium suggests once again that Snow wishes to have many things many ways, not just one. The same material can be used, as **Side Seat Paintings Slides Sound Film** indicates to constitute a painting, a slide show and a film. It represents, then, at base, a tactic for breaking out of the confinement of the modernist orthodoxy into the space of post-modernism.⁷

Indeed, Snow's work can best be understood as standing just at the breaking point of modernism. Modernism, developing out of the work of Cézanne, the Cubists and the Futurists had been intent initially in breaking down and later displacing "subject-matter" from the work and on analyzing the image. With the work of Abstract Expressionists and most Post-Painterly Abstractionists, representational aspects were forcibly eliminated and the object, colour and shape were foregrounded as painting (in both its ontological and historical dimensions) became itself the subject of painting. In minimalism, the objecthood of the work was pushed to its extreme limit. This was, in part, attributable to its revision of the nature of the idea of unity; for the period preceding modernism the commonly prized form of unity was that of organic unity;⁸ this form of unity was understood as a complex, undefinable and mysterious interrelation between every aspect of all the diverse parts and the synthetic whole. The idea of unity in modernist art, on the other hand, is based on simple and readily perceived gestalts.

In an important way, minimalism carried the programme of modernism to its end. Minimalist works, by the simplicity of their shapes, by their elimination of referentiality, by their repudiation of symbol and metaphor and by their use of industrially manufactured materials — manufactured to specification, so as to remove any suggestion of subjective handwriting — radicalized that insistence upon self-containment which had characterized modernist art throughout its history. Indeed, it carried that insistence to its limits, for with the elimination of symbol and metaphor, subjective association and referentiality and with the development of unitary structures, the furthest reaches of the ideals behind the modernist movement had been reached.

Thus, minimalism represents the closing of one era and the opening of another. When Robert Morris began to use devices which suggested the incompleteness of his work, and Sol DeWitt⁹ began to present in his shows objects which represented various stages in the conception and realization of works of art, the idea of process and of the centrality of concept rather than material came to be articulated. With such statements, then, the modernist ideals of self-containment and "mediumistic" virtues were repudiated.

Correlative tactics can be found in most of Snow's pieces. Indeed, the devices by which he makes reference to the frame — devices which uncontestedly occupy a central place in his work — can best be understood within this context. The modernist idea of the frame, a rather geometric understanding of its nature that would undoubtedly have been passed along to the young Mr. Snow, was that the frame was a boundary form whose nature, by determining the nature of the space which an art work was to fill, effected the nature of all relations constructed within it. Against this singular concept of its function, Snow, like Duchamp before him, insisted on painting and the multiple functions of the framing gesture. The frame, Snow suggested, acts to define "a channel" of attention and a point of view (**Scope**), to establish a tension between a defined bounded field and a point of view (**Side Seating Painting Slide Sound Film**), to isolate one field of view from amongst a number of possible fields, to create an opposition between what is contained within a frame and what lies outside it, as a generator of forms and finally, as an aesthetically productive even if arbitrary device. Indeed, Snow points out time after time throughout his **oeuvre**, that rather than simply isolating the art-object as the modernist had claimed, thereby insuring the discreteness and enhancing the purity of the art work — the frame acts both as kind of container and as a bridge between the area within the frame and the area outside its bounds. Thus, on this matter again, Snow insists on having things more than one way.

The transformation in the formal characteristics of art work which we have just described are so profound and far-reaching that they suggest that a change occurred in the programme which artistic endeavour was understood to be carrying out. This, I would argue, is true; in fact, I would argue the change was so profound that it reached down into and radically altered the theoretical context which subtended the practice of making art.

What are the specific modalities of experience with which Snow deals and what is the relation between his analysis of perception (for his work is decidedly analytic in character) and the forms which his art work assumes, Let us begin our response by noting the evident fact that most of his films, and much of his art in general, possess very simple predetermined shape. While such simple shapes are undeniably correlated to the simple **gestalts** which characterized minimalist art, they have, in film, a specific function. This uniqueness of the function in film depends upon the fact that film alone of all the visual arts is also an art of time. For this reason, the simple shape of a film can, and in Snow's work usually does, act as a diagramme of its temporal form.¹⁰

It serves, then, to convert a temporal into a spatial form, giving to that temporal form the same precision and definiteness of a form existing in space. One is tempted to say, with only the slightest degree of hyperbole, that such simple shapes by containing fluid temporal forms within diagrammatic spatial forms, act to arrest the flow of time, making time an enduring thing.¹¹

In sum, a diagrammatic shape acts to hypostatize the experience of time. The radicalness of such an enterprise can best be understood in relation to the temporal features of innovational cinema at the time when Snow came to make film. The temporal rhetoric of that cinema had largely been developed by Brakhage; the speed of his cutting, the intensity of his camera movement, the continual displacement of one sort of imagery by imagery of entirely another sort (for example, flat imagery by deep, hand drawn or scratch — created by photographic etc.) and of perceptual modality with another acted to deny the sense of a temporal continuum and to provoke a gaze that is so intense and fascinated that it can properly be called ecstatic. Thus, one feels, when watching a film by Brakhage, that past and future have been eliminated (one neither engages in recollection of past events nor in anticipation of future events); the primary temporal impression afforded by these works is that of a continuous present.¹²

The modality of temporal experience elicited by Snow's film is of a very different character. Far from being caught up in the flow of time, one is, by the hypostatization of the experience of time the diagrammatic shape of his work proposes, as well as by the **longeurs** which characterize them, encouraged to stand back from the experience of time and to inquire into the manner in which it is constituted. His films, then, elicit an analytic rather than an ecstatic response.

The analytic act, obviously, is one that depends upon identifying and splitting apart differentiated units. For this reason, it is essential for Snow's work to create a temporal form which includes a variety of characteristics (pastness, presentness and futurity) rather than singularity of the continuous present found in the work of Brakhage. Moreover, the analytic act involves by its very nature the division of object into "static" parts. Thus, the mode of experience elicited by Snow's work has as its object a static object of reflection constituted by an intellectual act.

I am, however, being a little too casual about the description of the experience of watching a film by Michael Snow — or at least too one-sided, inasmuch as I am failing to indicate the double-sided nature of that experience. For, in a sense, Snow also re-instates the sense of the continuum of time, of the flow from past to present to future, into film. Thus, in addition to hypostatized and static object of reflection, there is a second object, the object of perception which is in its temporal character uniform and identical in all its parts, and which unfolds in a field of time. The opposition between these live objects suggests the difference between an object existing in a spatial form and an event which unfolds in a temporal form. The duality between these two suggests the duality between object "film" (a strip of celluloid) and the event "film" which plays out on a projector.¹³

As we also noted, correlated with each of these two objects is a specific mode of experiencing the object.¹⁴ This duality is important for several reasons. In part, its importance lies in the way the distinction points out a fundamental tension that exists in the aesthetic experience. For aesthetic experience itself involves both an engrossed, even empathetic viewing and a detached and distanced and critical response. To further explore the importance of each of these modes of response, some further clarity about their nature must be attained.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT ISSUE

FOOTNOTES

1. Snow himself, writing about **Standard Time** (which can by his own testimony be taken as a kind of sketch for " ← → ", wrote, "I'm interested in a kind of balance that has some similarity to the way Cézanne equalized physical facts in painting. In film, the transformation is into light and line and the balance is between illusions (spatial and otherwise) and the facts of light on a surface.
2. The original publication of **Art and Culture** in 1961, in fact, exactly coincides with the moment when Snow embarked on his first major piece, The Walking Women series. And in a sense, both works mark the end of an era, in criticism and in practice. For until 1960 Snow's painting was involved with the attempt to construct formal equilibria by deploying strategies based on abstraction. In 1960, the course of his work made a bold turn; he suddenly abandoned this enterprise and instead became involved with developing tactics to represent variations on temporal themes and the process of recollection.

In retrospect, the fact that Snow found himself making films would appear on this basis, to have been predictable. To have said this in 1960 would, however, have sounded a little preposterous.
3. A somewhat polemical statement of the relations between the modernist aspiration and American ideals is to be found in Clement Greenberg's article, "American-Type Painting.."
4. Annette Michelson, "About Snow," October, No. 8, p. 123.
5. "If, for Snow, everything is usable, it is also reusable — at least once. Thus, **Untitled** (the paradox of titling a work with the title Untitled represents another form of circularity in Snow's work. One recognizes the affinity of this strategy with certain Dadaist strategies, a case in point being advertising a ballet under the title **En Relâche** meaning no performance today, B.E.) shown recently at the Bykert Gallery is a sumptuous "slide show" which alludes largely to the making of **Wavelength**, using stills from the film, the filters, the plastic sheets employed in its making, emphasizing in a very painterly manner, the ambiguity of spatial relations created by superimpositions, juxtapositions, of filters, alterations of angles of vision." Annette Michelson "Toward Snow" in P. Adams Sitney, ed., **The Avant-Garde Film, A Reader of Theory and Criticism**, New York. New York University Press, 1978, p. 181.
6. Snow has made a rather humorous statement about the way in which his working in a number of media brought into a balance the ideas of purity and diversity. In a statement submitted to Regina's Norman MacKenzie Art Gallery in 1967, he wrote: "I'm 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... 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 endeavours. Paint as fixity, the static image. Sculpture as objectness. Film as light and time." Quote included in Pierre Théberge, "Michale Snow, Summary of his Life and Work," in catalogue **Michael Snow** (Kunstmuseum Luzern, 1979), p. 9
7. I would be amiss if I were to fail to point out that the re-use of material from previous artwork also serves as an autobiographical function, This dimension of Snow's work is admirably analyzed in Regina Cornwall, "Post Snow: About the Work of the last 12 (sic) Years" in the catalogue **Michael Snow** (Kunstmuseum, Luzern, 1979).
8. Constructivism, to which modernism has real similarities, is an important exception to this rule.
9. Analogous devices were developed by Sharits for the cinema. Sharits' installation pieces often include his notes and "scores" for his films as well as projections of his completed pieces; installation pieces, moreover, by their very nature make apparent both of the projection mechanism and the physical strip of film in addition to the projected image. Thus his pieces can reflect on the process of production and frequently suggest the dialectical relation that exists between concept and product.
10. This is most evidently true of **Wavelength**; the well-known conic shape of that film can be understood as a dialogue for our experience of the "flow" of time. The camera movement in that film like the movement of experience of time, is entirely forward directed.

11. In his discussion with Pierre Théberge, Snow makes a comment which probably goes some distance in revealing the impulse behind the act. He told M. Théberge, "I think I'm stuck with certain contradiction about not being 'at home' in the movement of time because the future and the past are contents of the mind and you can't say the word 'present' fast enough for it to fit into the present. One of the interesting things about a still photograph, in the same way a certain painting is the aspect of fixing a moment in time which, of course, is also an illusion since like everything else it is slowly changing. Experiencing this stopping of time seems to be a refreshment that is demanded occasionally and I suppose it's in the infinite, In that sense, it's slightly religious." Pierre Théberge, "Conversation with Michael Snow," in **Michael Snow** (Kunstmuseum, Luzern, 1979), p. 20.
12. This reduction of time to the present is paralleled by the reduction of space to a two-dimensional surface in most of Brakhage's work. Hence Snow when he restored the sense of past and future to film also restored deep space to the image.
13. In pointing out the plural character of the filmic object, Snow's work has obvious affinities with that of Paul Sharits.
14. In the same conversation with Pierre Théberge cited above, Snow remarked, "I am interested in trying to direct the spectator to an experience of an image as a 'replaying'; as you put it of a past event but also with the present sense of critically seeing this representation, that is involved with an image." Snow has thus acutely pointed out how his work moves back and forth between two perceptual modalities.