

SEQ CHAPTER 1 Introduction to Michael Snow talk, Art Gallery of Ontario, March 1993

I'll start with a simple claim: Michael Snow is the most important artist Canada has produced. The first feature of Snow's work that impresses most people is the range of media in which he has worked. Snow has worked as a painter, sculptor, musician, filmmaker, photographer, videographer, sound sculptor. He has also been an elegant, insightful and imaginative commentator on artistic topics. Michael Snow was born in Toronto, of an Anglophone father and a Francophone mother. Snow attended Upper Canada College, where he began drawing and playing music, and the Ontario College of Art, where he studied design. While attending high-school and art-school, Snow played jazz piano and trumpet. Just over a year ago, on a visit to Snow's studio, Snow played for me some tapes of recordings from the period, made in the front-room of his parents house. They show the capacity that the works that other brilliant artists produced in their formative years have taught us to understand -- to open oneself to influences from a variety of sources, to master them with impressive facility, and to reconcile the competing influences so as to press them into the service of a single end.

After graduation Snow took a position in an advertising agency, but remained there only a short time, just long enough to confirm this disinterest in advertising. On leaving the agency, he went to Europe to visit galleries, and supported himself by playing jazz piano. He returned from Europe in 1955 and had an exhibition of paintings, with

Graham Coughtry, at Hart House. George Dunning, the future maker of Yellow Submarine, saw the show and, based on what he saw there, hired Snow to join his animation department. He remained there for a year and a half, until the company went bankrupt, and there met, and married the Toronto artist Joyce Wieland. He continued to work freelance, briefly in commercial film, and all the while played music.

And he painted. Snow had his first one-man exhibition of painting in 1956. In 1959, his works underwent a marked change. His early painting had shown influence of Klee, Matisse and the gestural abstractionists. The abstract expressionists' influence is especially evident in Secret Shout and Blues in Place. The works that followed them, Shunt and Quits, are also gestural in way, but they are less metaphoric than the abstract expressionists' works, and the material concerns are more evident. The shift became even more pronounced with Lac Clair and The Drumbook; that the brush strokes are no longer impastoed shows that Snow was leaving behind the gestural painting that was still the vogue at the time. Both paintings extend Snow's materialist concerns.

Furthermore, both paintings further separate Snow from the metaphoricity of gestural painting. What is most important, Lac Clair has a feature that was to become central to his later endeavors in a variety of media, for it develops tension between its imagicity and its material construction. Snow made a statement on this topic in connection with Wavelength. With impressive understanding of his work he says of its methods and significance, that "It . . . balance[s] out . . . all the so-called realities that are involved in making a film. I thought that maybe the issues hadn't really been stated clearly about

film in the same sort of way -- no this is presumptuous to say -- in the way Cézanne, say, made a balance between the coloured goo that he used, which is what you see if you look at it in that way, and the forms that you see in their illusory space." At this time, Duchamp's influence became more evident.

Between 1961 and 1967 Snow worked with a single image, a woman in stride, the feet, hands and top of the head cropped. He realized the image in a variety of media and a variety of relations. Several works in the series are now prominently displayed in the Gallery. This series of works has an encyclopedic character that reappears in Rameau's Nephew by Diderot Thanx to Dennis Young by Wilma Schoen, for the series inventories material and formal resources for the transformation of a single image, using as many representational processes as possible. The dispersive nature of this work, its focus on a replicated image and its concern with the relation between image and material, and its "intermedia character" -- hinted at even by the combination of the sculptural, painterly and photographic characteristics in the basic form -- foreshadow the art of the next decade. The Walking Woman opened up for Snow the possibilities of a theme and variations structure. To be sure, several earlier works, including his earliest film, A-Z, had used a single image, that of a chair, that Snow put through several variations somewhat as he did the Walking Woman theme. (The chair theme famously reappeared in Wavelength.) Perhaps most importantly, The Walking Woman Works opened up for Snow a method that allowed him to press the whole of his delightful wit, which his work raises to the level of a mode of apprehension and his creative

imaginative, that alone enables him to generate such numerous, rich variations from a simple form, and a cool intelligence that thrives when taking a systematic approach into the service of his work. The series is one of the purest, most rigorously focused examinations ever carried out, of the transformations a thematized shape undergoes when it enters different relational contexts. The brilliance of the work results partly from Snow's extraordinary inventiveness in creating forms that rigorously focus attention on the nature of the transformation that takes place. Its brilliance also results from Snow's rigorously systematic approach, which serially isolates particular parameters to reveal their ironizing potential. In this, his work resembles Johann Sebastian Bach's more systematic works, for example Die Kunst der Fuge and Das Wohltemperierte Klavier. On that comparison, I might say that have two regrets about my writings on Snow. One is not to have acknowledged and sufficiently considered what is implied by Snow's having cited, J.S. Bach as "the greatest artist of time" and of wishing that Bach might have been able to see his masterwork, The Central Region, since it is a similarly religious work as Bach's are. The other regret, I will come to soon.

During much of the sixties, Snow lived in New York City, where he participated in the extraordinary laboratory of the arts that city provided. He got to know several of the most important artistic figures of that decade and the two that followed, including the composer Steve Reich, with whom Snow will perform, here, on Friday April 8, the filmmaker and photographer Hollis Frampton, dancer Yvonne Rainer, and many jazz musicians. The ideas involved in The Walking Women Works, his acquaintance with

leading figures in New York's avant-garde jazz scene and his interest in their works led to make a *Walking Woman* film, which he entitled New York Eye and Ear Control.

Around the time he completed the *Walking Women* series, Snow made several large sculptures, including two, Scope and First to Last, based on the principle of the periscope, and Sight, and several that focus on the effects of framing. Several of these works are now on display in West wing of this gallery, in an exhibition entitled Around Wavelength; all of them suggest the camera, and the growing influence the camera had on Snow's work. In 1967, he stated "For the past three or four years, I have been influenced by films and by the camera. When you narrow down your range and are looking through just that narrow aperture of the lens, the intensity of what you see is much greater."

I once asked Snow about his interest in attributes of camera representations. He replied perceptively:

My attention was directed to the camera as a director of attention from considerations of Art itself being (in another situation) a director of attention. . . . Cameras both intensify and diminish aspects of normal vision and they "set apart" those aspects for possible examination. By the object-memory which they produce (photos, films, tape) they give a locus for and evidence of selection, of choice. The rectangular camera frame/mask of course continues the human intervention of architecture and sets

up the possibility of a perhaps edifying dialogue between the rectangle and all its specifically human content with the nature (that might be) pictured through the camera or the rectangular result . . . The result of framing in photography is always a fragment, making the camera potentially analytical, an epistemological tool. That is to say (to repeat?) that out of the universal field, knowledge isolates, selects and points out unities or differences which were not previously evident. Identification, definition is a matter of limits, of recognition of limitations, bounds, boundaries. They are ways of indicating the depth of implication of this human viewing instrument between us and the rest of the universe. Lenses extend, expand or contract vision (abstract it) in both the optical and chimerical senses. I'm interested in the way that the products of cameras are ghosts of their subjects. Less than desiccated, wonderful as the relic is, it has (almost) only two dimensions. Still photographs are suffused with nostalgia seconds after their taking/making. Cinema ghosts are more active, Flying Dutchman.

Here Snow points there is an almost dialectical relation between what is inside the frame (which he accords human significance) and what is outside the frame -- which he describes at one point as nature, and at another, the rest of the universe. This conception of the nature of photograph draws on and extends one of Canadian art's

richest traditions, which treats the image as a matrix where human and non-human nature meet, and suggests this meeting has suprahuman significance.

Snow's interest in camera representations, and the camera as director of attention that produces epistemological revelations, led to his making films, Wavelength, Back and Forth, *La région central* (The Central Region), and To Lavoisier, Who was Killed in a Reign of Terror, among others that changed the history of cinema. They also led to photographic works that interest me more than any others in the history of photography. Regina Cornwell's Snow Seen deals with Snow's photographic better than any other commentary I know, Ms. Cornwell will be engaging Michael Snow in conversation, one week from today, here, and at this same time.

I have already mentioned that Snow is legendary for the catholicity of his interests, and for the conceptual rigour he brought to the many media in which he has worked. He has made paintings, sculpture, photographs, sound sculpture, films, written brilliant texts on artistic issues, and played everything from trad jazz to collective improvisations (that can be heard engaging in weekly at the Music Gallery.) About this catholicity, Snow remarked, with characteristic wit:

I am not a professional. My paintings are done by a filmmaker, sculpture by a musician, films by a painters, music 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, films by a filmmaker,

music by musician. There is a tendency towards purity in all these media as separate endeavours. Paint as fixity, the static image. Sculptor's objectness. Light and time.

The comment hints at the fact that Snow has worked rigorously with the specific characteristic of each medium he has worked with, but also used his understandings of adjacent media to open up new issues. Snow's has applied ideas of representation drawn from the visual arts to recorded sound, in The Last LP and Musics for Piano, Whistling, Microphone and Tape Recorder and Sinons, for example, and thereby has opened up sound sculpture in an unprecedented manner.

But what drove Snow to work in various media? Are there any constants in his work in different media? A view of artmaking, prevalent when Snow was a student closely bound the nature of the making to the nature of materials used in that making; that position worked itself out through a logic of negation. It distinguished painting from drawing, drawing from sculpture, sculpture from anecdote, anecdote from music, etc. This is what Snow's remark about making films as a filmmaker, making sculpture as a sculptor, making music as a musician is about. If this argument were true, then any structures, forms, processes, or practices that were appropriate in the one medium would be inappropriate in another. Snow rejected this exclusionary view of the media and proposed instead that there are structures that are common to the various media, that link painting with drawing, drawing with sculpture, sculpture with anecdote etc. He

affirmed that it is possible to make paintings using cinematic ideas, principles and structures, to make sculpture using musical, ideas principles and structures, to make films using painterly ideas, principles and structures, to make paintings using sculptural ideas, principles and structures.

What are these common structures? Snow argues first that various visual forms that the modernists had identified as being distinct from one another, even at odds with one another, turn out not to be ontologically distinct. They turn out to be only phenomenologically distinct i.e., to depend on relations within the work, and how those relations inflect our viewing experience. Among the traditional oppositions that Snow dismantles the most important is that between representation and abstraction. Modernist argued that these types of images are opposites. Representations point beyond themselves, towards the world they portray; abstractions point towards the work itself. Representations are images, and so strive for transparency -- strive to be “a window on the world”; abstractions highlight their material basis, make us feel the paint, the light, the goo, the brush stroke. Representations should never allow their facture to obtrude on the viewers/readers consciousness; abstractions make their facture evident.

Snow has contrived forms that show that representations and abstractions are not contraries as modernists claimed them to be. These forms usually deploy a simple process that systematically transform the one term into another, as though to show how easily representations can be changed into abstractions and abstractions can be changed into representations. Thus, Back and Forth shows how speeding up a panning

movement transforms a representational image into an abstract construction. Falling Starts, on Michael Snow: Musics for Piano, Whistling, Microphone, and Tape Recorder (from 1975), does very much the same -- it presents a musical figure Snow played on the piano -- from highest note down to the lowest, to generate a homology between form and content, between inside and outside, and presented it played at various speeds, from very slow, which makes the technology for reproducing sound -- the speakers and amplifiers and the like -- very apparent, and then speeds it up, so that it becomes more and more representational, then continues speeding it up until it becomes quite abstract, then goes through the process in reverse. Similarly, in Side Seat Paintings Slides Sound Film (1970) Snow uses variations in speed and (coordinated changes in light intensity), along with an extreme vantage-point, to modulate between representation and abstraction. Furthermore, Side Seat Paintings Slide Sound Film is a film of a slide projection of still photographs of his paintings -- so the content of the work raises the matter of the interaction between various media. The work reveals, in the most elegantly straightforward manner imaginable, that each medium imposes its own set of transformations on the content of the medium that preceded it in the chain that runs from the world to a painting to the slide to a slideshow to the film.

Side Seat Painting Slides Sound Film also problematizes the issue of vantage point, a key concern of all Snow's visual art. Snow's most radical demonstration of the continuity between representation and abstraction consists in showing how an extreme vantage point or, more often, a pattern of extreme, and changing vantage-points

transforms the representation of an image into a geometric abstraction. An example is Of a ladder (from 1971.) for which Snow photographed a ladder from vantage points on a semicircle around the ladder and montaged them together to construct a total form that presents itself, prima facie, as a piece of pure geometric abstraction and, internally, modulates between geometric abstraction and representational fidelity and back again across the work, as Side Seat Painting Slide Sound Film and Back and Forth do. The work also insists that even in the extremely abstracted images of the ladder, taken from extreme viewpoints, are nonetheless representations of an object and, in fact, an accurate representations of it, as seen from certain vantage-points. For the perspectival changes in the series also points out that the camera does not impose the same constancies on perception that the mind does, but shows the object for what it is. A table seen from in front and above presents itself to us as a rectangle in space -- but put a frame around it and we see what projective geometry suggests we should see, a trapezoid. What is more, the series is like a series of film frames, the sequence of vantage points suggests a dolly around the object, and their sequentiality suggests time. Thus Snow creates interrelations between film and photography, even while being utterly true to the nature of the photograph. We could easily extend this commentary to apply to A Wooden Look (from 1969) and Glares (from 1973.) Over the years, Snow has favoured forms based on the serial, incremental variation of fixed element, what I just called a theme and variations structure, and both those works exemplify that proclivity for such incremental forms. The latter consists of 99 photographs of a rectangle, of

familiar photographic proportions, all shot from the same vantage point (a fact that itself evokes the idea of linear perspective); in each photograph the square was moved to the position it appears in the final product, so the camera had to point more or less up or down, more or less left or right, to shoot it -- it had to move horizontally and vertically, rather as it did for Snow's Double Arrow film of 1970. These camera movements produce perspectival transformations of the fixed element, creating a fascinating geometrical abstraction out of a straightforward representation. Glares makes use as well of the variation in illumination that occurs as the square is moved various distances, in various directions, from a fixed light source.

Furthermore, Snow shows, no window transmits reality unaltered. By putting a frame around what it displays, a window changes our relation to what we see. Snow takes up this idea in like Scope, Sight (both from 1967) or Area (1985) in which a whole is cut in the wall -- and as people move behind, they are illuminated by a sodium vapour lamp and change colour.

Even more insistently, Snow has pointed how a frame directs attention towards what it contains, and so alters our relation with what the frame contains. Art theorists often distinguish between the nature the frame in a painting and the nature it has in a photograph. A painting's frame isolates the painted surface from the world around it, and so highlights the ontological distinction between the painting and the surrounding. This engenders the appropriate degree of concentration, channels attention towards the painting, and sufficiently focuses attention on the painting that one might experience the

painting aesthetically. We might understand a painting's frame, considered in these terms, as a physical barrier against underdistancing, to use Bulloch's famous term. Theorists argued that a photograph's frame is not so absolute as a painting's. It is more provisional -- it marks an accidental border: what we see within the photograph continues beyond the frame in pretty much the same way.

Those who argued for this distinction suggested that the differences between the characteristics of the frame in painting and photography correlates with differences between the materials. A painting is entirely a construction, something created by hand, by applying coloured goo to a flat surface. A photograph, on the other hand, by virtue of the process that brings it into existence, is less a hand-made object than a phenomenon of nature. Its being and the being of its model are inextricably linked, in a way that is not true of a painting. If I wish to paint a picture of woman, I can do so out of my imagination, but if I wish to photograph a woman, I must somehow convince a woman to pose for me, or devise another means for bringing her within range of my camera. The more provisional frame of a photograph reflects the more intimate link, as compared with painting, between the image it presents and the world, and the fact that a photograph is something that is more discovered than it is created. This difference results in the painter attributing to the frame greater form-creating powers than the photographer generally does. The frame forms an arena within which the relations internal to the painting will play themselves out. It creates a context for these relations, and so plays an important role in shaping those relations. Hence, painters of the modernist era often used forms

that marked the edges of the painting, and ricocheted the scanning eye back from the boundary.

Snow brought into question the common distinction between the frame in painting and photography. He did this in a manner that we have come to identify as characteristic. He showed that the frame in painting and photograph are more alike than unlike, and hence that this distinction is not so absolute, nor so mediumistically based as is commonly claimed.

Snow did so partly by showing that the frame's primary importance derives from the effect it has on the relation between a viewer and the object he or she views, not from its material basis. For a frame is a device for focusing attention. Any framed object is transformed by being framed. It appears differently than it appears to a less focused attention. Snow shows that the frame generates irony, to use that term from modernist literary theory, because it imbues an object (an appearance) from the everyday with a new meaning, as irony generates new, uncatalogued and unclassified meanings for the terms of ordinary language. One of Snow's reason for Snow's greatness is that he has worked so persistently on visual irony (in this sense of the word) and so has developed a very subtle appreciation for the manner that it operates. Scope shows that the frame channels attention, while Sight shows how that focusing of attention alters our relation with objects and makes them appear differently. This is a photographic understanding of the frame, for, as Scope makes evident, this conduit of attention resembles a camera's viewfinder. All visual artworks which exist on flat delimited surface equally encouraged

focussed viewing, and this makes the frame in all more alike than different -- the primary purpose of the frame in all is to serve as a conduit of attention, the very purpose that photography exemplifies.

The purity of Snow's art, the extraordinary richness of its conceptual implications, the catholicity of his means, his inventiveness with material, and his striking ability to see connections among forms and fields of endeavours we ordinary consider discrete has been a great inspiration for many of us.