

## CANADIAN CATALOGUES AND MONOGRAPHS OF THE AVANT-GARDE, 1989-1995

ELDER, R. Bruce. *The Body in Film*. Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1989, 56 p.

JONASSON, Catherine (editor). *Richard Hancox*. Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1990, 48 p.

RICHMOND, Cindy (editor and curator). *Richard Kerr: Overlapping Entries*, with an essay by Bart Testa. Regina, Saskatchewan: MacKenzie Art Gallery, 1994, 54 p.

SHEDDEN, Jim (editor). *David Rimmer: Films and Tapes 1967-1993*, with an essay by Catherine Russell. Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1994, 96 p.

SHEDDEN, Jim (editor). *Presence and Absence: The Films of Michael Snow, 1956-1991* (The Michael Snow Project). Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario/Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 1995, 256 p.

The history of Canadian experimental film is necessarily connected to that of the American movement. Many filmmakers who form part of the first generation of the Canadian avant-garde such as David Rimmer, Michael Snow, and Joyce Wieland made their earliest films in the U. S. Their involvement with the New York Art scene in the mid to late 1960s played a significant role in the specific preoccupations of their earliest films. Investigations into the materiality of film, especially examinations of space, duration and sound are strongly apparent in the work of this first generation of filmmakers. A number of American filmmakers at the time such as Tony Conrad, Paul Sharits, Hollis Frampton, Owen Land (George Landow) and many others were similarly concerned with exploring the filmic material and perceptual possibilities of film. Despite this correlation, however,

Canadian experimental film has always had its own identity and areas of concern, most specifically its investigation and rootedness in the landscape and its focus on issues surrounding national identity.

For many, the North-American avant-garde of the 1960s represents an artistic peak in the history of avant-garde film. The films of Stan Brakhage, Bruce Baillie, Kenneth Anger, Jack Chambers, Bruce Connor, Michael Snow, Hollis Frampton and many others are one of the era's great cultural legacies. Sadly, many of the most active filmmakers of the 1960s have died or are no longer productive. Some persevere, however, and succeeding generations of experimental filmmakers continue to make exciting films. Of course, the avant-garde (and the world) is radically different now than in the 1960s and early 1970s. Many more people have made, and continue to make, experimental films. To some extent, this reflects the embrace of the avant-garde by the academy. For many people, especially outside the large urban settings, the only place to view experimental films is in the classroom or other institutional setting. Also, because of the proliferation of film production programmes, many more young people have made experimental films. This, of course, does not mean that the movement itself is healthier than it once was. In fact, many would argue that it is weaker. It is still virtually impossible for an experimental filmmaker to make a decent living from his or her filmmaking. Almost no experimental films get shown on television — a situation that might change in the future but probably won't, the avant-garde and commercial television have never been particularly compatible. Most museums do not show experimental films, and if they do, only rarely. Also, experimental techniques continue to be co-opted by more conventional cinema (and video) blurring the distinction for many people of what precisely constitutes an experimental film. Finally, experimental films have little or no impact on mainstream culture and are virtually ignored by the press. Even the major film journals are overwhelmingly devoted to narrative film. The experimental film movement in the 1980s and 1990s may have lost some of its vitality, yet many wonderful inventive films continue to be made. There may be less ur-

gency to some of the current work, but one is still thankful that these filmmakers continue to make art.

The catalogues and monographs<sup>1</sup> discussed in this review are concerned with charting some of the most interesting experimental films of the last two decades. Four of the publications are centred on individual filmmakers: three of whom (Michael Snow, David Rimmer and Richard Hancox) are filmmakers associated with an earlier generation of the avant-garde, and one (Richard Kerr) a slightly later generation. The other volume is a group-show catalogue that takes a generic view — the body in film. All the publications are exclusively concerned with Canadian filmmakers, except for Bruce Elder's *The Body in Film. Save for Overlapping Entries*, they were all published through the efforts of the Art Gallery of Ontario, in particular, Catherine Jonasson and Jim Shedden.<sup>2</sup>

*Presence and Absence: The Films of Michael Snow*, edited by Jim Shedden, is the third volume in a series of books entitled *The Michael Snow Project* jointly published by the Art Gallery of Ontario and Alfred A. Knopf Canada. Other volumes in the series examine Snow's output as a visual artist, as well as music and sound art. Additionally, *The Writings of Michael Snow* was published simultaneously by Wilfrid Laurier University Press. *Presence and Absence* consists of an introductory overview by Bart Testa that familiarizes the reader with Snow's films and their critical reception over the years. There are also short pieces by Jonas Mekas, Steve Reich and Regina Cornell. Two lengthy essays by R. Bruce Elder, making up about two-thirds of the written text (excluding the bibliography), form the critical centre of the book. The volume also includes a short description of a sequence from *Rameau's Nephew* extracted from Regina Cornwell's 1980 book, *Snow Seen: The Films and Photographs of Michael Snow*. It also includes an exhaustive annotated bibliography to the film literature on Snow compiled by Kathy Elder, which will prove remarkably useful to anyone interested in Snow's films. A particular strength of this volume is the copious use of visual material that accompanies the written text, taking the form not just of stills but other kinds of impressive graphics.

Testa's essay includes a welcome discussion of Snow's *New York Eye and Ear Control*, a neglected but major work that preceded *Wavelength*; a good summary of Snow's well documented artistic career; and an examination of the prevalent critical views of Snow's aesthetics. Testa argues how the filmmaker moved away from the still subjective preoccupations of *Wavelength* with his next major film,  $\leftrightarrow$  (*Back and Forth*), to something that can no longer be viewed in relation to human mimesis. If *Wavelength* acted as a metaphor for human perception,  $\leftrightarrow$  (*Back and Forth*) could no longer be viewed this way. The shift, Testa argues, marked a radical move for the avant-garde towards something emphatically related to the filmic apparatus or machine (duration), connecting Snow to other American artists of the period such as Steve Reich, Yvonne Rainer and Philip Glass who similarly were concerned with duration and abstraction.

Testa's piece offers a kind of narrative about the operation of Snow's films, and how they were received and debated. The essay as a whole gives a thorough summary of the major discussions and controversies surrounding each film, summarizing the work of many of the most trenchant commentators on Snow such as Annette Michelson, R. Bruce Elder, Regina Cornwell and P. Adams Sitney. Testa succinctly recounts some of Sitney's groundbreaking work on the structural film as well as Annette Michelson's crucial insight that Snow's films (especially *Wavelength*) involve the simultaneous "gifts of both prophecy and memory," and, drawing on Husserl, allegorizes *Wavelength* as a "phenomenological 'reduction' that redefines filmic space as that of action." The essay also examines the complicated montage strategies of *Presents*, as well the monumental achievement of *La Région Centrale*, especially its complicated correlation of human perception with machine perception.

As fine as Testa's essay is, however, one's response to the volume will in large measure be determined by one's reaction to Bruce Elder's two major essays that form a large section of the book. Elder's first essay entitled "Michael Snow's Presence," begins with a lengthy discussion of poetic constructs and the lyrical film in the work of Brakhage and Snow, which, in essence, continues some of the arguments about both filmmakers begun

in Elder's book *Image and Identity*: "When we watch a Brakhage film, we have the feeling that the world we see is one that is created by the filmmaker's powerful imagination. We are seeing through Brakhage's eyes," Elder says. This is not the feeling that Snow's films elicit. When we look at them, we are aware that what we are seeing is a photograph, not realms of the imagination.

Elder has always been one of the most insightful and illuminating commentators on Michael Snow's films. A major thrust of the essay involves a brilliant argument about the nature of presence:

The repudiation of representation, the privileging of abstraction, the celebration of rhythm, pattern and perceptible relations, and, above all, the constant insistence on the importance of manipulating painted or filmed forms so that they lie flat on the picture plane all derive from the concept of this aesthetic — the fundamental concept of this aesthetic. (p. 134)

The other major piece written by Elder is entitled "Sounding Snow: On Text and Sound in Michael Snow's *Rameau's Nephew by Diderot (Thanx to Dennis Young)* by Wilma Schoen." This represents the most sustained analysis yet of this key film. In a superbly reasoned argument, Elder examines the relationship of the film to texts as diverse as *The Bhagavad-Gita* and Boccaccio's *Decameron*, and convincingly details many similarities between Snow and Marcel Duchamp. It is an exhaustive essay that describes the myriad operations of Snow's massive filmic essay on sound and image. Elder describes the "material conception" of Snow's art, and the tension between abstraction and representation in his work. He explains how some of the constructions in *Rameau* relate to cubism. Elder also elucidates how this film illustrates aspects of Wittgenstein's ideas about language, in particular, his refutation "[...] that language corresponds exactly to the world — that an homology between structure of language and the order of things explains the phenomenon of meaning." (p. 169)

Elder's two essays contain wide-ranging philosophical and aesthetic concerns that make them rich and complex. Like

Elder's films, however, parts of the essays are superb while other parts could do with some trimming. The digressions are multitudinous. Sometimes these digressions lend the essays a sense of intellectual affectation. Another irritant is Elder's overuse of citations; a full one-third of the text of the lengthy essay on *Rameau* is made up of endnotes.<sup>3</sup> All of this occasionally makes the reader lose sight of Elder's very intricate arguments. Having said that, however, this is some of the best writing on Michael Snow one is likely to encounter. Additionally, the essays finally give Snow's later work its critical due. Apart from *Rameau's Nephew*, there are profound discussions of *Presents*, *Seated Figures*, *See You Later (Au Revoir)* and *To Lavoisier*. Finally, Elder's essays make the reader want to see (or resee) the films, which is always a mark of successful criticism. All in all, this monograph is a very valuable document and a major contribution to the Snow bibliography.

*Richard Kerr: Overlapping Entries* is a catalogue that accompanied a retrospective of Richard Kerr's films and videos at the Mackenzie Art Gallery in Regina in 1993. It consists primarily of a lengthy essay by Bart Testa on Richard Kerr, who Testa refers to as "probably the least confused Canadian film artist of his generation." (p. 10) The essay summarizes aspects of the recent history of the Canadian avant-garde and places Kerr firmly within a tradition that goes back to Michael Snow's structural work of the 1960s and 1970s. The essay discusses most of Kerr's artistic output from his earliest films made at Sheridan College in the mid-seventies to the mature work of the early 1990s. Along the way, Testa contextualizes the work within a larger discussion of the Canadian avant-garde. He points out that

In his films, Kerr obsessively travels to cross borders, though paradoxically, he does so in one place, for the crossings all occur within this parochially familiar continent. In so doing, Kerr discovers a scale of differences of feeling and these are provoked in his work when actual places are made to come up to their thresholds. This perspectival diversity is Kerr's serious underlying fiction, the object of his restless questing, a fiction vague and elusive to him and perplexing to us. (p. 10)

Testa displays some of his most acerbic commentary when he discusses the Toronto experimental film scene of the early 1980s and its “disastrous seduction by theory.” (p. 19) Testa also attacks funding agencies such as the Canada Council for their political shortcomings and aesthetic wrong-headedness (Kerr was denied a grant for *Cruel Rhythm* because the project was deemed too ambiguous in its political stance). Although these digressions are not without purpose and are fun to read, they are not the main point of the essay, which is to analyze Richard Kerr’s films and videos. And in that Kerr is well served by Testa. He calls *On Land Over Water* “[...] the most intricate of Kerr’s films,” (p. 25) describing the film in detail, and convincingly examines how the film weaves this intricacy: “Kerr’s concerns in this film, with narrative and narration, with maleness, are new for him, as is the conscious experiment with language, something his earlier films avoided or treated naively.” (p. 27)

The essay also addresses how Kerr’s *On Land Over Water* was (unjustly) attacked by Toronto feminists for its focus on maleness, illustrating, quite convincingly, how the film offers a substantial critique of such notions. Testa’s lucid analysis of *The Last Days of Contrition* is also particularly strong. In this film, the landscape

[...] assumes monstrous power. Although it too is a travel work, this film marks another major departure for Kerr in several respects: first, it is violent, and about violence; second, it is set in the United States. Finally, stylistically, Kerr has, for the first time, made sustained use of what might be called accelerated cinema, using the resources of rapid camera movements, pixillation, assertive montage, and a furious soundtrack construction.(p. 29)

Testa also does a nice job linking Kerr’s visual stylistics to the American documentary tradition of Paul Strand, Walker Evans, and Robert Frank. He describes *Cruel Rhythm* as an “[...] attempt to make a public, shared feeling intimate, or, conversely, to make a subjective feeling of floating anxiety and dread into a shared representation.” (p. 32)

The essay culminates in a description of Kerr’s recent traveling landscape films and videos, *The Machine in the Garden*

(1991), *Plein Air* (1991), *Plein Air Étude* (1991) and the installation that gave the retrospective its title, *Overlapping Entries* (1993). The latter work involves two videos showing simultaneously—one an early student work of Marshall McLuhan delivering a lecture, or as Testa puts it “[...] a monologue disguised as a question-and-answer dialogue;” the other, Kerr’s more recent *Ghost in the Machine*. For Testa, the installation serves as a summing up of Kerr’s artistic output.

The essay concludes with the assessment that Kerr “has remained one of the most compelling filmmakers of his [...] generation of independent film artists. His work, though at times perplexing for the critics seeking its unity of themes and usages, has gained an imaginative authority reaching beyond what a critic feels obliged to impose on him.” (p. 41) This is surely the best discussion of Kerr’s films yet published, and confirms Kerr’s position as one of the best experimental filmmakers in the country.

Certainly one of the strongest catalogues on the avant-garde to be published in recent years, and long overdue, is *David Rimmer: Films and Tapes 1967-1993*. Rimmer has always been one of this country’s best film and video artists. His work spans nearly thirty years, yet it has received scant critical attention. Catherine Russell’s essay entitled “David Rimmer: Twilight in the Image Bank” is the key entry in this catalogue. Her essay is segmented into three parts: landscape, ethnography, and gender, concentrating her focus on Rimmer’s output since 1984. Russell argues that “On the one hand, there are ways in which his films reverse and challenge both the metaphysical and materialist presuppositions about structural film. On the other, he is able to transform the structural mode into a politics of representation by bringing it to bear on a wide range of images, places, objects, and activities.” (p. 19) She accurately describes the painterly quality of Rimmer’s work and the way it is frequently “composed around a horizon.” (p. 28)

On the ethnographic quality of Rimmer’s work Russell sees three tendencies at work: “found footage of people in historically distant cultures, travel footage, and TV imagery (including film transferred to video). In each case the cultural ‘other’ is



silenced, observed, and often radically objectified through the manipulation of the image.” (p. 30) The essay contains lucid discussions of such recent films as *Black Cat White Cat and Local Knowledge*. She claims that

Landscape in Rimmer's films is also much more than framing and horizon lines. It is a dynamic space of movement and light, often captured by time-lapse cinematography. The patterns and rhythms of cloud movement and the play of light and shadow over water surfaces are further examples of the domestication of the natural environment. A certain familiarity with landscape is evoked by the cycles of weather patterns and daylight that structure many of the films. (p. 26)

At times Rimmer's modest achievement cannot bear the weight of the grandiose critical claims made for it by Russell. For example, writing on the film *Watching for the Queen*:

The monarchy may be the ostensible spectacle, but its image is withheld, and the representation of power is extended into a technology of power. The crowd's subservience to the monarchic gaze is analyzed as a mechanism of representation in which cinema becomes an allegory for the irreversible structure of voyeurism. It isolates the subject-effect of ethnography as an abstraction of individuality and an imbalance of power which can, nevertheless, be apprehended as a technology. The triumphant moment of closure is one in which the viewer realizes that his or her constitution as a subject of vision is dependent on the loss of subjectivities on the part of the people in the image; we necessarily adopt the point of view of "the queen," protected by invisibility. (p. 35)

Russell is to be absolved for wanting films she admires to do more than they can ever hope to (in this instance, a modest eleven minute found footage work that does indeed explore issues of representation, but hardly with the scope and depth Russell ascribes to it). It has been common practice since the earliest writing on the avant-garde in the 1920s to later writers such as Jonas Mekas' musings in *Film Culture* and *The Village Voice* in the 1950s and 1960s, to make impossibly extravagant claims for

modest cinematic achievements. Hyperbole is part of the critical vocabulary of writers on the avant-garde.

Russell argues that a good deal of Rimmer's work offers an analysis of representation in the frequent use of images that contain "violence against women." Although not every one viewing those images would agree with this claim, it is a provocative and well-argued reading of Rimmer's work. It makes us think about the films in ways we may not have considered before. Russell concludes her essay by claiming that from his earliest films to his most recent, Rimmer films "embrace technology as a mode of awareness."

The essay extends our understanding of Rimmer from the traditional formalist and landscape categories into the realm of ethnography. Whether Rimmer is a particularly perceptive ethnographer and explorer of world media culture is a question open to serious debate. The essay does not really grapple with this issue. If Russell ultimately does not make her case strongly enough, it may be that Rimmer simply cannot be what Russell wants him to be. Nonetheless, Russell is to be commended for opening up genuinely new avenues of exploration with a cogent and tightly argued essay that sheds a good deal of light on Rimmer's considerable achievement.

*Richard Hancox*, a catalogue issued in conjunction with a retrospective on the filmmaker at the Art Gallery of Ontario and curated by Catherine Jonasson, is decidedly uneven. Hancox's relationship to the avant-garde has always been cause for some debate. In terms of experimental film, he is best known for the trio of poetry/landscape films made in the 1980s, the best of which remains *Landfall*. Hancox has never had the recognition of some other independent/experimental filmmakers, partly because he is hard to pigeonhole as a filmmaker. *House Movie*, one of his best films from the 1970s, is, properly speaking, an example of autobiographical documentary. It's a fine film, but it contains little that one would associate with the radical avant-garde. His recent foray into the realm of personal filmmaking is *Moose Jaw* (1994), certainly an interesting film but one unlikely to alter the shape of filmmaking in this country.

Liane McLarty's essay is the major critical piece in this volume, and it is even-tempered and intelligent as she explores "Hancox's thematic concern with time and memory and his exploratory relationship to the film medium [that leads Hancox] to emphasize the temporal dimensions of film images." Not everyone will agree with parts of her Baudrillard-inspired assessment of Hancox's work. McLarty claims that "a deep distrust of the image's role in simulation is crucial for a film artist like Hancox who seeks to use filmic images to explore personal meaning in both intimate and social environments." (p. 14) While some of McLarty's claims are suspect, such as her assertion that most "formalist inspired filmmaking [...] denies representation," (p. 19) it is a well-argued, clearly written essay. She nicely coheres many of the recurring themes of Hancox's films, and their "contemplation of both past and place, memory and landscape. These films emphasize the centrality of looking back, of having a sense of past and place, both personally and collectively. Memory and representation are the vehicles through which the past and the particularities of place are mediated." (p. 37)

One of the problems with this catalogue is the extreme claims made for Hancox's work (beyond the expected hyperbole). Arthur Kroker's essay on *Moose Jaw* is typical. In the same inflated sentence Kroker refers to Hancox as "Canada's Francis Bacon" and "the prophetic genius of *Moose Jaw*." (p. 47) This kind of overstatement runs throughout Kroker's essay all but blurring whatever insight he brings to bear on the film, and making any reasonable reader cringe in disbelief at the sheer audacity of his claims. But then Kroker has never been known for understatement. One does not need to subscribe to such hyperbolic claims to appreciate Hancox's solid work.

Richard Hancox's films should be better known and more widely screened. His films are intelligent and well crafted, and he is sincerely devoted to the notion of being a Canadian artist. One need not make outlandish claims for what are, at times, modest accomplishments. A little more perspective and honest assessment about his achievement would ultimately prove more helpful, both to those familiar with his work and those who should be.

*The Body in Film* by R. Bruce Elder was originally published in 1989, making it the oldest of the catalogues under review. But since it has received little critical attention it's probably legitimate to include it here. It is a well argued analysis of some often neglected filmmakers of the avant-garde such as Walter Guttman, a politically unfashionable filmmaker of modest achievement, and Andrew Noren whose accomplishment is more substantial. Elder invokes the writing of feminist theoreticians such as Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous to explore the ways in which some writers have celebrated the body, in particular the female body. Elder does a good job illustrating the importance of Wilhelm Reich's theories to the development of such important artists of the 1960s as Carolee Schneemann. Most of us are only familiar with Reich through his more respectable early marxist writings, and through Makaveyev's 1970 film *W. R. Mysteries of the Organism*. Elder examines Reich's theories in some detail and illustrates how many filmmakers in the 1950s and 1960s were influenced by them :

Reich believed that the human body was constituted in segments and that the free flow of energy among the segments was of crucial importance. He also believed that this free flow could be facilitated orgiastically. Accordingly, he took psychological therapy in the rather extravagant direction of "vegetotherapy," an unusual amalgam of chiropractic and yoga with the aim of relaxing taut muscles, beginning with the forehead proceeding down to the pelvis until at last, on one fine day, involuntary convulsions ("the orgasm reflex" or "coming") would occur in the doctor's office. What is required to change a person's psychology, Reich suggested, is to modify the way he or she holds stresses within the body. (p. 36)

The essay also illustrates how important Reich was to Stan Brakhage. Elder offers a brilliant discussion of the physical relationship between sight, the body and human emotion in Brakhage's theories of art. For Brakhage

[...] a film is ideally a document of a filmmaker's experiences of vision and vision he understands as a corporeal phenomenon. [...] Brakhage also maintains that

one's faculties of sight are affected by all changes in one's body; indeed, he seems to believe that the organ of sight is ultimately the entire body. The most important implication of his belief is the notion that all emotional experiences are registered by sight. Brakhage advocates that the film artist should become aware of the interplay between emotion and seeing. (p. 43)

An unhappy realization in reading this catalogue is that it is virtually impossible to see many of the films under discussion in Canada and Québec making it a little difficult to assess Elder's remarks. His discussion of the films of Andrew Noren clearly argues that he is a neglected artist of the first order. He calls Noren an artist "in search of a pure, spiritual self — a self with the qualities of light." (p. 52) I have only seen a few of Noren's films (two sections of *The Adventures of the Exquisite Corpse*, and a film that was formerly known as *Kodak Ghost Poems, 1967-68*), but I remember them as solid work and quite beautiful. Elder's discussion of Andrew Noren makes me regret not having seen more of his films.

The essay overall is intelligent and lucid, and it reminds us that the avant-garde was well concerned with issues of the body long before it became fashionable in venues such as *Zone* and its imitators. The catalogue could use a filmography and guide to the relevant literature, but it is a very useful addition to the avant-garde bibliography and will introduce many people to some interesting films and theory. It's also a nostalgic reminder for people in the Toronto area of the many fine films screened at the Innis Film Society. Apart from the AGO screening, most of the films described in the catalogue were screened several times at Innis before the Society recently stopped screening films all together.

As a group, these volumes illustrate that experimental film is still a lively form of expression in this country, and in constant evolution. Many artists (and scholars) remain deeply committed to the form. They are to be commended for their dedication and perseverance. Canadian Experimental film is one of the great accomplishments of the Canadian Cinema, and can stand with the best that has been produced by any national cinema.

Without these films, the cultural legacy of this country would be greatly diminished.

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#### NOTES

1 I use the term catalogue if the publication was issued in conjunction with a specific film series. Since the Michael Snow volume reviewed here was not, I refer to it as a monograph.

2 Cathy Jonasson and Jim Shedden began collaborating on these publishing initiatives at the International Experimental Film Congress held in Toronto in 1989 (both worked on the catalogue for the Congress). In effect, the AGO was re-activated as a publisher of material on the Canadian avant-garde after a lapse of a decade. Unfortunately, this seems to have run its course with recent budget cuts at the AGO and the departure of Cathy Jonasson. AGO's publishing on the Canadian avant-garde seems to have ended with *Presence and Absence: the Films of Michael Snow*. Both Cathy and Jim (among others) are to be commended for their endeavors on behalf of experimental film.

3 The endnotes basically amount to further little essays added on to the main essay. Elder's writing is not always like this. His essay in the catalogue that accompanied the recent Brakhage retrospective at The Museum of Modern Art in the fall of 1995 is a model of clear, lucid writing. In fact, I would say it may be the best single essay I have ever read on Brakhage's films — both original and illuminating.

## Notes sur les collaborateurs

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