

THE MICHAEL SNOW PROJECT
Visual Art 1951-1993

Dennis REID, Philip MONK, Louise DOMPIERRE

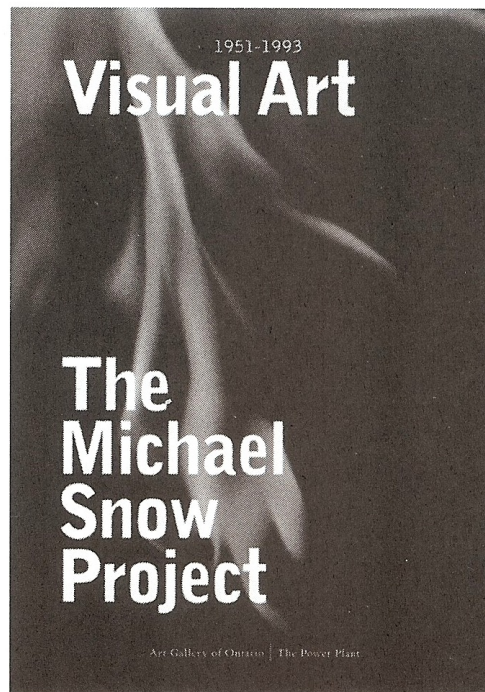
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Michael Snow and his work have been called many things over the years - not all of them favourable - but there is no denying that he is the most voracious, prolific and restless artist that Canada has produced this century. As a sculptor he is responsible for some of Canada's most influential and widely-known works, including *The Audience* (1989) which shouts at, applauds and otherwise confronts all those entering Skydome; and *Flightstop* (1979) which lumbers through the rather stale air of Toronto's Eaton Centre. As a filmmaker, he has produced work that in 1971 provoked British film critics and historians to call him one of the world's ten greatest film directors (along with, among others, Alfred Hitchcock, Jean-Luc Godard and Orson Welles). As a musician he has been a part of, at last count, twenty-one commercially produced recordings, many with his legendary band CCMC (Canadian Creative Music Collective). And as a painter and producer of photo-works, he has created among the most memorable and defining images of con-



porary Canadian art, including his ubiquitous and endlessly mutable *Walking Woman*.

How then to address the multifarious work of an artist who refuses to be bound by convention and discipline? Louise Dompierre, Chief Curator at the Power Plant in Toronto, proposed to the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1989 that there be a city-wide examination and celebration of Snow's many talents. The result was that Toronto was virtually Snow-bound from March 11 to June 5, 1994. Three exhibitions occurred at the AGO: Dennis Reid, Curator of Canadian Art, examined the artist's first fifteen years of art production, 1951-1967; Philip Monk, Curator of Contemporary Art, concentrated on the three pivotal years 1967-

1969; and Jim Shedden, Assistant Curator, Film and Video, organized a complete retrospective of Snow's films. At the Power Plant, Dompierre explored Snow's photo-based and holographic images over the past twenty-two years.¹

The curatorial documentation for the show was as inclusive and free-ranging as Snow is himself. Four major catalogues have so far appeared: one on Snow's "Music/Sound," one on his films, one which collects his writings, and the visual art catalogue under discussion here.² *Visual Art 1951-1993* is in fact three catalogues rolled into one. Dennis Reid's contribution, "Exploring Plane and Contour: The Drawing, Painting, Collage, Foldage, Photo-Work, Sculpture and Film of Michael Snow from 1951 to 1967," is primarily a descriptive and historical review of Snow's formative and early years, with brief reference to his very early childhood. Reid begins the long essay with his own memories of Expo '67. There in the midst of all the new-found technology saturating "man and his world" strides Michael Snow's *Walking Woman*, as Reid describes her: "that bold figure, striding briskly this way and that, confident, contained, secure in her identity, yet open, engaged" (p.21). We may now think of her as a quaint and rather belittling masculine view of what another generation thought of women, but to many artists and critics she was "a venerable

icon of the imagination that for many of us in the early Sixties had represented a stable base from which to venture into the maelstrom of contemporary art" (p.23).

The strength of Reid's essay is its extensive documentation of inaccessible texts and reviews on Snow's early career. Reid works backwards from the 1967 *Walking Woman* sculptures to early work, influences, education and, ultimately, birth. Along the way we get a great deal of description of his vast production, large chunks of quotations from various reviews and extensive swaths of relevant Snow writings. Robert Fulford was one of Snow's early champions and at times it seems as though Reid does little more than quote Fulford for pages on end. Although many of Fulford's articles were bound for ephemeral newspapers, they remain among the most incisive and insightful comments on Snow. Here, for example, is Fulford on the first *Walking Woman* exhibition, at the Isaacs Gallery in 1962: "In [*Venus Simultaneous*] Snow sums up all the ambiguities of the exhibition as a whole - the use of shallow, varying space; the play of light and shadow; and the nervous, restless activity of his art, exemplified in this case by a painting which seems to be on the point of turning into sculpture. . . . Whenever you believe you know all he has to say, he quickly changes the conversation" (p.44-45).

Reid documents many fascinating biographical and aesthetic slices of Snow's early history, including the "knife-drawn works" which were the real precursors of the Walking Woman image; his first solo show at the Greenwich Gallery in October 1956; the early history of the media's response to Snow; the first showing of the film *New York Eye and Ear Control*, where 300 of the 400 present stormed out of the showing at the University of Toronto; and Snow announcing his arrival in New York by papering the streets in the middle of the night with posters of his Walking Woman.

One of the most intriguing sections of Reid's essay is his discussion of Snow's first public exhibition with Graham Coughtry at the Hart House Gallery. When an early viewer complained about the work, the newly-elected mayor, Nathan Philips, demanded the removal of three "obscene" drawings. Thereafter the show became a public spectacle "garnering more press and visitor attention than either Coughtry or Snow would see again for a decade or more" (p.115). No checklist from the show survives, and despite the extensive press coverage there was only one review, in the *U of T* student newspaper. In an interview the day after this review, Snow discussed his ambitions and artistic desires, which sound as though they could be taken from almost any period of his practice:

"Although the process is free from rules, after it is born I expect it to be a statement, something one can stand on, not just a helter-skelter salt and pepper effect. . . . Actually all I want to do is present some kind of moving image using all the cement [elements] of painting, colour, line, form, texture. It must end up being an object which rewards, invites, provokes contemplation, awareness. A painting is a small experience in feeling and thinking, that is, living" (p.116).

While Reid's essay is most helpful as an historical document tracing fifteen years of early Snow, Monk's is primarily a theoretical and contextual assessment of three years within his pivotal New York period where he and Joyce Wieland lived from 1962 to 1971. Monk's essay, "Around Wavelength: The Sculpture, Film and Photo-Work of Michael Snow from 1967-1969," traces this sliver of his middle years. His primary filmic concerns at this time (although of course the concerns are present in contiguous years) included an examination and obsession with process, a desire to structure and localize time, and an attempt to explore and, in some sense, explode the notion of seeing. Snow's films and sculptures of the period attempt to dissociate themselves from anything outside of themselves, partly as a way of focussing the attention of the audience and partly from a need to examine the role and difficulties of rep-

resentation itself. Monk quotes the critic P. Adams Sitney on Snow and other New York artists such as Meredith Monk and Philip Glass in 1969: "These artists tend to use *duration*, repudiate psychology, and retard and elongate the few actions they employ. Their materials are consistent (not diversified); extensive repetition is common, and where it is not found, one can expect stasis" (p.298).

This concern for duration is perhaps best seen in *Wavelength* (1967), the film that garnered Snow the Grand Prize at the Fourth International Experimental Film Festival in Knokke-le-Zoute, Belgium in 1968 and remains one of the most influential and widely-discussed avant-garde films ever produced. As Snow describes it, 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." Snow has referred to *Wavelength* as "a summation of my nervous system, religious inklings, and aesthetic ideas" (p.322).

Dompierre's essay, "Embodied Vision: The Painting, Sculpture, Photo-Work, Sound Installation, Music, Holographic Work, Films and Books of Michael Snow from 1970 to 1993," is primarily a personal and impressionistic view of Snow's recent work. Dompierre discusses the various

ways that he uses his body and the bodies of others. In *Venetian Blind* for example, Snow photographed himself with a hand-held camera, eyes squinting into the camera and into the sun, while behind him the topography of Venice passes by. In *Egg*, one of his best-known holographic works, he breaks an egg into a cast-iron frying pan, the only "actual" object in the piece. For Dompierre, Snow's work examines the idea of a "de-centered subject, the questions of the status of the image and its relationship to the Real, the role of the image in the shaping of identity and understanding, the reliance on techniques of reproduction in the making of art objects, and . . . the denial of the notion of the creating subject and its replacement by the idea of the artist as *auteur*" (p.401).

Dompierre's primary critical concern is Snow's struggle with representation: how reality and illusion can or cannot be represented; how process influences the way things are represented; how the relationship between the self and representation of the self is a perpetually intangible conundrum; and how the world simultaneously encourages and resists representation. Snow remains somewhere between his desire to explain the world and his realization that such a task is beyond his or anyone's ability: "If we consider the direction of Snow's practice until now, it is easy to understand his need to reconnect in a very tangible way

with the world and to try to surmount, perhaps, the gulf that seems to be expanding in his apprehension of objects" (p.459).

At the end of the catalogue are two shorter essays: Richard Rhodes' "Michael Snow: The Public Commissions" and Derrick de Kerckhove's "Holography, 'mode d'emploi': On Michael Snow's Approach to Holography." Rhodes provides an overview on why there has been a dearth of public-commission art in this century, and then goes on to provide a compressed and rich discussion of Snow's contributions, with particular emphasis on *Flightstop* and *The Audience*. To Rhodes, the work demonstrates "a wisdom about the flux at the end of things" (p.484), "a uniquely circumstantial focus" (p.485), and "a supremely ambivalent state of animation" (p.490). De Kerckhove's quirky piece discusses Snow's holographic works, their distinct "commentary on representation" (p.499) and their ability to give an appearance of objectivity to time, rather than to space (p.506). De Kerckhove sees Snow as someone "at the forefront of a paradigmatic shift from space to time concerns in the immediate subconsciousness of the world culture" (p.507). This technology brings on an inkling of a new way to see the world (or a new vision of the world), and in de Kerckhove, the most elemental kind of wonder: "Looking at some of Michael Snow's work, I am reminded that I am a newcomer to this

world - or maybe it is the world itself that has just sprung up from nowhere" (p.508).

What we are left with at the end of this extensive and inclusive catalogue is very much what we are left with after we have spent time with Snow's considerable body of visual work. Within the catalogue there are chunks of text that are repeated, others that are derivative, others that are poorly-constructed and still others that circle upon themselves but manage not to say very much. There are also many crystalline insights and complex intuitions, primarily within Monk's essay, that provide new ways of addressing Snow. Similarly, Snow's work itself can be repetitious, redundant, not particularly well-crafted and a sometimes unsuccessful attempt at achieving profundity of thought. It is also often curious, engaging and disruptive to the way we normally see the world, and riveting in its ability to scrutinize and disturb the way we attempt to understand the world.

Snow is an artist who confounds, who persistently explores and who resists the facile and the predictable. His work, as represented by this most recent retrospective, is a study of the endless task of focussing: the continuing desire to both narrow and expand the view and then to examine the strange world that bursts into life. Particular elements are sometimes thrown into sharp relief while others

remain out of sync or out of focus. Snow is obsessed with the rhythms of the ordinary, with the slightly changing repetitions that lie within the individual imagination. There is a ferocious ego at work here. But within his work there seems never to have been the desire to demonstrate that he has found the true answers, or that he knows the only way to see, or that he has made a discovery to eclipse all others. Snow demands that we think on our feet, although thinking, appreciation and discovery are slippery entities at best. Throughout his work there is a flexing of aesthetic sinews, a flutter of abstractions in the air and the realization that ideas can be approached but never captured.

This profusely illustrated catalogue and the others produced for *The Michael Snow Project* cannot hope to answer all questions, nor discuss the myriad complexities of his work. But they do demonstrate his protean talents. They also point to his ability to bridge the concerns of, for example, Painters Eleven, with those of such artists as Genevieve Cadieux, Barbara Steinman and Ian Carr-Harris. Snow will be remembered for his tenacious and boundless energy, the eclecticism of his artistic reach, and his desire to explore the imperative processes within artmaking.

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Notes

1 As part of *The Michael Snow Project* there were also programmes for students, teachers and families; videotapes on Snow; music performances by Snow and by CCMC; talks and lectures; an architectural tour of Snow's public commissions; Walking Woman pin sets and T-shirts for sale; and an InfoSnow telephone line.

2 *Music/Sound: The Performed and Recorded Music/Sound of Michael Snow, Solo and with Various Ensembles, His Sound-Films and Sound Installations - Improvisations/ Compositions from 1948 to 1993*, ed., Michael Snow with texts by the artist, David Lancashire, Raymond Gervais, Bruce Elder *et al.* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, The Power Plant and Alfred A. Knopf, 1994); *The Collected Writings of Michael Snow* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press, 1994); and *Presence and Absence: The Films of Michael Snow 1956-1991*, ed., Jim Shedden with texts by the artist, Bart Testa, R. Bruce Elder, Regina Cornwell, Jonas Mekas, Steve Reich and Kathryn Elder (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario and Alfred A. Knopf, 1995).