

ETC



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The Art Gallery of Ontario / The Power Plant, Toronto. March 11 - June 5, 1994

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Number 27, August–November 1994

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/35676ac>

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Publisher(s)

Revue d'art contemporain ETC inc.

ISSN

0835-7641 (print)

1923-3205 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Grande, J. K. (1994). Review of [The Michael Snow Project / The Art Gallery of Ontario / The Power Plant, Toronto. March 11 - June 5, 1994]. *ETC*, (27), 51–54.

TORONTO

THE MICHAEL SNOW PROJECT

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The *Michael Snow Project* was a daunting mega-multi-media show of this Toronto-based artist's experimental films, sculptures, paintings, photos, foldages and collages held at The Art Gallery of Ontario and The Power Plant. This is Art with a capital A - tried and true. The first Canadian post-war artist to have a solo show of his work at The Museum of Modern Art in New York (in 1976), Michael Snow comes from a generation of artists who read their art history books and then absconded to innovate with every idea they could pick up. Looking at the way that ideas overlap, intermix and move between media, materials and *the* media in Snow's work is like running a cerebral obstacle course. There's always something new, but you're never sure exactly where you are. Snow still plays jazz with the C.C.M.C., an electroacoustic band he helped found over 15 years ago and his works have been given posterity's hermetic seal of approval by many of the world's most reputable institutions including the Musée national d'art moderne at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, the National Gallery of Canada, the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, the Vancouver Art Gallery, the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

If ever a Canadian artist represented that catch phrase "the lost idealism of the 60s" Michael Snow does. It was an era of incessant experimentation, when John Latham's book-burning ceremonies, called SKOOB actions, and book-plumbing events (one included a nude woman atop a ladder with a book in her lap) were the playful prerogative of avant-gardists embarked on a sacred mission - to push history one step forward into the unknown. In this era of political correctness, Latham's manifestations would probably be considered acts of vandalism, though more people are now playing video games than reading books. These days Michael Snow's *Walking Woman Works*, considered one of his most important themes, would likewise be thought of as a chauvinist objectification of the female form. Though some of Snow's walking women have no heads at all, back in the 60s the *Walking Woman Works* brought art out of the museum closet and took it to public places and onto the streets at the same time as Pop artists Lichtenstein and Warhol were bringing commercial culture - the Brillo Box or the comic strip - to museum audiences for the first time. "Some of the thinking involved with my *Walking Woman Works* (1961-1967) had to do with putting Art elsewhere, in contexts other than art contexts (galleries etc.). I reversed the order of an aspect of Duchamp's work. Rather than choosing and taking a 'ready-made' from the

'world' and putting it in an art context, I made a 'sign' from within the art context and put it in the world ... what was specifically related to Duchamp was what I called 'Lost Works' which existed anywhere but a gallery (on the street, in stores, in the subway) or in a gallery where I was not exhibiting: in hidden or normally unused places; for example, 'Lost Work' stuck under a bench, a chair, a table of the Green Gallery in 1965. Or as fortuitous looking ephemera (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1965)." ¹ The original idea for *Walking Woman* came after Snow made a simple cut-out of the same subject and noticed the positive and negative aspects of the form. Among the many variations, some of which can be seen at the Art Gallery of Ontario's *Exploring Plane and Contour: Drawing, Painting, Collage, Foldage, Photo-Work, Sculpture and Film of Michael Snow from 1951 to 1967* show, you might find: 1) a clothing pattern 2) a cut-out paper doll 3) a commercial nude cutie pressed on like a monotype and 4) the flattened-out painterly Pop sculptural figurations that became *Expo Walking Woman*. During the 60s, various versions of *Walking Women* were taken to sites as far away as Ecuador and Beirut by friends, and their new found locales "claimed" in Snow's name, documented photographically.

For those of us less familiar with Michael Snow's early years, the Art Gallery of Ontario's wide-ranging show curated by Philip Monk is an eye opener. The repertoire is vast and far-ranging and includes lyrical abstract paintings, action paintings, constructivist pieces, pop-tinged art, hard edge, minimalism, and systems aesthetics influenced by Paul Klee, de Kooning, Picasso, Matisse, Duchamp, Rothko and Barnett Newman among others. Like an athlete who knows all the moves and pulls them off, these works are technically superb, yet they're so innocuous they reveal nothing about Snow's own character. *Man Examining a Line* (1954), one of Snow's earlier pieces, is a case in point. In a style reminiscent of Paul Klee that uses the simple effect of the continuous line and with a typical Snowian sense of *double entendre*, *Line* becomes both a metaphor for the process, his own reflection on that process and the actual subject as well: which as the title suggests depicts a man examining a line that extends between the thumb and forefinger of each of his hands. In *Aluminum and Lead*, a sculptural piece from 1968, two weights of metal are cut and balanced to equal weights in a 22' and 120" adjustable height sculpture. As pedantic as it is self-evident, this piece's irony wears thin. Expression becomes just another weight, balanced by the cynical side of Snow's irreverent adaptability. "I'm interested in doing something that can't



be explained ... I make up the rules of the game, then I attempt to play it. If I seem to be losing, I change the rules."²

Michael Snow's kitschy public art projects are an altogether different matter, perfect examples of collusion between one of Canada's best known artists and the corporate avant-garde. Are they part of a Duchampian ruse? You can't really take them seriously. *Flightstop* (1979), at The

Eaton's Centre in Toronto, with its flock of 3-dimensional Canada geese (the kind you can see lacquered and framed in any truck stop from Chicoutimi to Wawa and beyond) that seem so real they look as if they could fly right through the building from one end to the other. Ironically, the average person will more likely remember seeing *Flightstop* than they ever would a Rodin sculpture, a war monument or



Michael Snow on location of his film *La Région centrale*, 1970. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

one of those generic public art projects that adorn most government buildings. The same could be said of Michael Snow's *The Audience* (1989), that over-sized frieze-like appendage that hangs like a wart on the upper exterior of The Skydome, home of the Blue Jays baseball team. Baroque and befuddled with their requisite accessories of hot dogs, binoculars and beer bellies, these baseball fans who

you can see from blocks away are painted over in gold. Their faces, hands and arms are grotesquely exaggerated and gesticulate like caricatures from an R. Crumb comic. While *The Audience* could hardly be called "high art", it is so banal and accessible you can't help but feel it catches the feeling of the place for just a moment.

Among the works at The Power Plant's *Embodied*

Vision exhibition of works from 1970 to 1993, *Bees Behaving on Blue* (1979) shows Snow one step ahead of the nature-nurture debate that now preoccupies environmental artists. The image consists of a bunch of bees in the process of moving around a drawn square. Though these bees are blissfully unaware of the various formal forms art can take, they still react as we might do in a public gallery. They neatly surround the form. In *Log* (1973-74), the trunk of an actual tree cut and separated into three sections by plexiglass stands next to a photo of the same tree reproduced onto plexiglass. Snow breaches the great holistic divide between creativity and conscious perception in an ingenious way, by simply avoiding the issue of the physical relation between "natural" and "synthetic" materials and presenting the two as simulacra. *Core* (1982) has a clay cylinder that looks like a nuclear silo or archaic monument. The cracks are like nature breaking the bonds of this container's design. Their apparently random patterns have a natural abstract look to them yet are absolutely artificial and Snow driven in their fabrication. *Redifice* (1986) is a rectangular construction with windows. Inside are randomly found objects that include birds, a still life, plastic flowers and a fire extinguisher, which one can look at from either side of the piece. All of these have the colour red in common, a device that reduces their individual character to make them a kind of primitive version of virtual reality. Their associative potential is washed over and flattened out. *Egg* (1985), one of Snow's hologram pieces, captures the artist the moment after he has cracked an egg that hangs in mid air above a cast-iron frying pan. It brings to mind a quote from Albert Camus: "To make a good omelet, it is not enough to break thousands of eggs, and the value of a cook is not judged, I believe, by the number of broken eggshells". If the artistic cooks of our time upset more baskets of eggs than they intended, the omelet of civilization may never again come out right, and art may never resuscitate. Barbarism is never temporary. Sufficient allowance is never made for it, and, quite naturally from art barbarism extends to morals. Then the suffering and blood of men give birth to insignificant literatures, an ever-indulgent press, photographed portraits, and sodality plays in which hatred takes the place of religion. Art culminates thus in forced optimism, the worst of luxuries, it so happens, and the most ridiculous of lies."³

If Michael Snow's more heady forays into avant-gardism are usually labelled as excruciatingly boring or polished pieces of mental torture, his groundbreaking films, which emphasize the machinery and device of the film camera - its mechanical eye - are experimental film-making at its best. *Wavelength*, a 45-minute film shot in New York in 1966 (2 years after Andy Warhol's 8 hour and 5 minute

epic *Empire*), the best known of these works, opens with a distant view of the curtained windows of Snow's atelier. The set-up camera which moves methodically forward in slow motion on its own gradually zooms in towards the window. Contexts appear within contexts. Certain details disappear while others are heightened by a process of elimination. It becomes a drama that builds upon its own devices, an anatomy of emptiness that enacts a strange poetic of presences and absences. The final stop frame focuses on a photograph of waves on the wall. We can read the piece either as a metaphor for the internal logic of the machine *per se* or as "a debate on doubt, which explores the relationships between what we think we see, what we can know from those perceptions and what we actually see."⁴ *La Région Centrale* (1970) again involved a set-up camera autonomously recording an entire wilderness landscape in northern Quebec; the only part of the 360 degree scene that wasn't recorded was the ground and tripod on which the camera stood. These films, presented in a separate show at the A.G.O. titled *Presence and Absence: The Films of Michael Snow from 1956 to 1991*, are technical breakthrough works that use innovative film techniques to explore our more physical and unconscious feelings about human perception and our relation to the world around us. *Conception of Light* (1992), on view at The Power Plant, consists of two enormous colour photos of eyeballs, each facing the other from across the room - one blue, the other brown. The exposed and vulnerable eye, the human counterpoint to Snow's topology of technique, is as austere and unsettling as any other work in this show because it provides no answers to the human dilemma of self and other but simply *is*.

JOHN K. GRANDE

NOTES

1. *The Michael Snow Project: The Collected Writings of Michael Snow* (Foreword by Louise Dampierre), Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1994, p. 287.
2. Michael Snow quote on a wall at the Art Gallery of Ontario during *The Michael Snow Project*.
3. Albert Camus "Create Dangerously" from a lecture delivered at the Royal University of Uppsala, Sweden in December 1957 (cited in *The Structurist*, Volume 4, 1964, p. 29).
4. Nicky Hamlyn, "Seeing is Believing: *Wavelength* Reconsidered", in "Sighting Snow", *Afterimage*, no. 11 (Winter 1982-83): 24.