Michael Snow

PANORAMIQUE

ŒUVRES PHOTOGRAPHIQUES & FILMS
PHOTOGRAPHIC WORKS & FILMS
1962–1999

SOCIÉTÉ DES EXPOSITIONS DU PALAIS DES BEAUX-ARTS DE BRUXELLES
CENTRE NATIONAL DE LA PHOTOGRAPHIE PARIS
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CONCERT
(PORTRAIT OF AN ARTIST AS MICHAEL SNOW)
* On the cover of *The Collected Writings of Michael Snow* is a picture of a hand in a tight close-up holding a pencil. On the first page, under the same photograph, apparently presented this time in its entirety, uncropped, is a legend, given as such to be read (*legenda*, things to be read) not to be seen or looked at: “The artist’s right hand writing; photo taken by his left hand, 1991.”

* The legend, if not the photo itself, immediately calls to mind Saul Steinberg’s famous cartoon of a man in profile holding a pencil and with its tip tracing in a single line the figure we have in front of us. But the photo, even its uncropped version, does not let us see the other hand, the one which—if we are to believe the legend—held the camera and pressed the shutter with its finger, and whose presence is by no means evidenced by the indefinably shaped shadow on the right side of the white page. As to the “artist,” or so we presume, we are afforded a glimpse only of the bottom of his face, the top of his unbuttoned shirt and undershirt, and his hand holding a pencil, a touch out of focus in the foreground, and here the tip leaves no trace on the paper other than the shadow it casts. The recropping has the effect of concentrating attention on the hand which is brought, still more out-of-focus, to the fore. It is foregrounded, to use Czech semiotician Jan Mukarovsky’s concept as translated by Bruce Elder, with all the transitive force and value of process that the verbifying confers upon what was only a descriptive term. For Michael Snow, art begins with capturing the eye and focalizing attention.

* This hand, then, is that of the “artist” (small “a”) who is called Michael Snow; the self-same Michael Snow whose close friends will surely recognize, if not his tactile, prehensile organ, at least the bottom of his face. But that does not mean we are dealing with a self-portrait. The chin and mouth only figure in the picture as indices to bear out the claim that the writing hand and the one we are told took the picture are really those of the “artist”—or to put it otherwise, of Michael Snow.

* Between the hand that is writing and the one given as photographing, a new type of narcissistic relationship is developed. It plays on the Kantian paradox
of symmetrical objects in its own way, here in the form of two similar but opposing organs (right hand and left hand) engaged in different types of activities. This brings to mind Alberti's metaphor in which Narcissus is turned into the inventor of painting: imagine Narcissus trying to embrace his own image in the water while his specular double keeps on with his business without paying the slightest attention to the other who's devouring him with his eyes.

* Michael Snow may very well hold the copyright to this photo as it is presented to us. The fact that his right hand is indeed writing, or pretending to, while his left hand is given as photographing is not without a certain degree of schizophrenia, on the level of the image itself or the taking of it, which suffices to displace the question of "author" and "artist." As to the photo itself, we have no choice but to accept what the caption tells us. It could have just as well been taken by someone else, except that most photos of a man or woman writing show both hands, one holding the pen or pencil and the other posed flat on the table or paper. What is clear, as much from the photo as from the information brought by the legend, is that if there is an "author" or "artist," he took the photo without putting his eye behind the viewfinder.²

* It is not irrelevant that the artist, whose right hand is shown writing as it was when, at the same time, the left hand was photographing it, is also a pianist (but this also poses another problem), and that he devotes a good part of his time to making music. I say making rather than producing music, just as he makes/made paintings, sculptures, photographs or films and just as he occasionally "makes" writing. He pushes improvisation so far in preferably collective performances, that it is exhausted in its own production. There is no product, in this case, except through the agency of recording and reproduction, which allows us to hear again and again what was given just once. But for the time being this matters less than the total independence of the two hands as it is evidenced in piano playing, and this is something at which Michael Snow excels and which clearly gives him great pleasure. More than this: it is part of his life, of his life as music (and not as a musician). What matters then is their total independence but also the part that each one takes in playing together, "in concert."
Question: What kind of playing in concert was involved in the meeting between the right hand writing and the left hand that took care of the photographing? A concert, a concerting, fixed by the snapshot at exactly the same time that it interrupted it—the time of a click.

* I insist on the fact that we are not dealing here with a self-portrait of Michael Snow writing. What we have is a hand that is writing (be it designated as the artist’s), as we have another hand that took the picture. The operation, which is in this case photographic, is situated before (or Should I say beyond?) any sort of “mirror stage” when the “subject,” caught in the delusion of what Lacan termed spatial identification, ends up believing in the unity of his own body’s image. Here, to the contrary, the “artist” is apparently divided, split, torn, and dispersed between the many practices and activities in which he is engaged, so that instead of a single point we have a field of points, as Michael Snow said in a totally different context. If “artist” there is, the image we are given of him is through reading (legenda) not seeing. What we are given to see is an organ, a piece of the body, photographed by another organ, another piece of the body, the latter absent but designated as the agent of the operation. Thus the question is shifted to the concept—if not the phantasm—that would be at work here. And that would be so here, in what works together, in what makes the œuvre, in the activity of the work as such: the work seen, conceived, presented, not as product but as production, and this even when the artist confines himself, as is the case here, to announcing the machine without showing its workings.

* So this is not a self-portrait nor is it self-referential as self-portraits can be. It nonetheless elicits a questioning as to the relationship that can be cultivated between two of the many activities (writing and photography) practiced by the artist whose name is Michael Snow.

I appreciate the twist that leads Bruce Elder to compare Michael Snow’s activity, as it is exercised in the different mediums through whose agency his creativity is evinced, to the experience that a writer may have when he or she is brought
for some reason or another to write in a language that is not his or her so-called "mother" tongue, as was the case for Joseph Conrad. Apparently, the subject is then divided, split in two, one part invested in the given idiom or medium and the other withheld and apart. The emphasis in both situations is less on the identity of the actors than on the switching and moving between positions. Michael Snow is no more a musician doing photography or a painter doing films than Joseph Conrad was a Pole who wrote in English, despite a statement suggesting the contrary that has been cited too often and not always in its entirety. But neither is he, to use a hallowed expression, a "multimedia" artist employing concurrently, or even simultaneously, different means of expression. Such a notion supposes that [a] art can be reduced to a phenomenon of "communication," and [b] photography, painting, music or film can be considered a language. It ignores the distinction that ought to be made between media understood as a means of transmitting signals bearing a written, aural or visual message and mediums as designating the very fabric or substance of which signals and messages are made. And finally it smacks of that literally totalitarian notion of the Gesamtkunstwerk, and although we know only too well to which ends the "total artwork" myth lent itself, at Nuremberg and elsewhere, a whole century will not have sufficed to take the winds out of its sails. If an "artist" exists in the form or name of Michael Snow, it is in a strictly differential way, having found no better place to settle down and operate than in the gaps, in the distances between the different mediums that he puts into play, the various media to which he has recourse, and the practices that correspond to them. The effect (or Should I say the issue or the aim?), in terms of both "object" and "subject," has less to do with translation or transposition than with dialogue and exchange.

* The example of Vladimir Nabokov would probably be even more instructive than that of Conrad. Nabokov first wrote in Russian, then in German and French before tackling English and this without letting "standard usage" curb his experience of the language and its vocabulary (see his correspondence with Edmund Wilson). Michael Snow is Canadian, his father Anglophone, his mother Francophone. He was exposed from his earliest childhood to the some-
what schizoid split between two languages, if not two identities (and the fact that he managed to make the most of it, is surely a political act). In which language is the artist’s hand writing (assuming that it is indeed writing, as the fuzziness suggests)? We haven’t the slightest idea. All we are told is that the hand is writing (it could just as well be drawing) at the very moment that the other is photographing it. Just as a piano player uses both hands to do two different jobs all the while working, I insist, in concert.

* The shift in vantage point, not to say clash in perspective, involved in moving from one language, medium or practice to another takes the subject back to an in-between space where all bearings are lost, starting with linguistic ones. Is that any reason to consider the resulting perceptive experience “pre-linguistic,” when in fact only by working at the seams between different forms and substances of expression, in a concert that sometimes verges on interference and cacophony, can one arrive at mechanisms of thought that owe nothing, or next to nothing, to the frameworks and notions inherited from so-called “natural” languages? Happy is the Babel in which there would be not only an array of idioms but also a gap between practices where artifice would prevail. Art would then have less to do with a space “prior to reason,” to use Jean Paulhan’s expression in speaking of Cubism, than with a space “past reason.” Probing this space would not entail a return to the roots of perception, as Cézanne posited. To the contrary, it would correspond to operative and conceptual advances in all directions.

* I look at this hand as it was photographed by the artist’s other hand, and in doing so I find myself in the place where the eye behind the viewfinder would be, just as a painting in perspective is said to assign a place to the viewer (which brings us back to Alberti). Now does this fact, derived as it is from the legend that accompanies the photo, suffice to make me a voyeur? (And if voyeurism there is, it goes together with its exhibitionist correlate; the artist shows himself writing not photographing, leaving us free to imagine that he is in the process of writing the very legend that conjured up the idea of the hand that took the photo.)
In the classical century the term voyeur had no postural implications (the "looking through the keyhole" type) or pragmatic connotations (like seeing without being seen). According to Littré, Saint-Simon used the word to designate an onlooker, someone who watches out of simple curiosity without taking part. If Snow’s work has something in common with Marcel Duchamp’s, it is insofar as it counters the tendency in art to reduce "voyeurs" to the condition of simple onlookers and invites, not to say compels them to look twice, to turn it over in their minds, to find out what it’s about.

Photography is a privileged instrument in this respect. Not content to give to see without being seen, it is capable of turning its own device back onto itself and reflecting itself in the process. The photographer can take a picture of himself while he is writing. He can also focus on his own image in a mirror and capture it just as he snaps the picture. Photography, by the possibility it offers of an instantaneous mode of capture, upset the economy that characterized representation: illustrators or painters require a certain amount of time to represent themselves in the process of drawing or painting. This would be enough to make it a theoretical object if it wasn’t for the fact that, when it comes to theory, it compels us, I repeat, to look twice: first directing our attention to its physical component, to concentrate thereafter on its critical dimension.

* "In all arts, there is a physical part that can neither be seen nor treated as before, and which cannot be removed from modern enterprises of knowledge and power." Photograph is far from having attained the degree of similitude in the field of visible phenomena that is current in sound reproduction. Nonetheless it qualifies, in the same capacity as sound recording, as one of the most powerful instruments in what Valéry termed "the conquest of ubiquity." That it has led to a new way of looking at the "physical part" of the visual arts and that the consequences have affected the very practice of these arts are not solely a function of the instrumental role it has been assigned in the making of a "Museum Without Walls." Photography has radically undermined the idea we may have had of art prior to its appearance not only because it brought artworks into a system of technical reproducibility. Its status and value as a theoretical object derive as much from its uses as from the paradox-
ical relationship that exists between the photographic image and the machinery from which it proceeds. The shooting, printing or projecting equipment required by photography, and subsequently by film, gradually reached such a pitch of mechanization and automation that we think we can abstract it from a consideration of images for their own sake. It was as if the shooting apparatus had internalized the “physical part” so thoroughly that it appears in inverse proportion to the materiality of the image: the more developed the physical part of art, the less substance the image has. We are reminded that during the period when photography was seeking a place in the Fine Arts system, it could think of nothing better to get itself forgotten as a mechanical art, than to emulate painterly effects. What is known as “pictorialism” ultimately boils down to an aborted dream which photography nurtured for a while in the vain hope of satisfying its desire to give an appearance of pictorial depth to its images, instead of sticking to its own material make-up, to its own “physics.”

* I mention this because the opposite desire surfaces in Snow’s work, a desire directly related to the characteristics of a medium that, while having nothing of a binder in the chemical sense of the term, nonetheless implies that a bond be evinced between the various elements that may go into the art of photography.?

By way of example, I will retain the way he treats colour while playing with transparency as both a physical and conceptual given. Photography can reproduce the distinctive colours of things, even of painting itself, with more or less accuracy. It can aim at pictorial effects, as it has sought to do in black and white. But to work in the colour or with the colour as painters do, photography must be able to produce, seize and manipulate it, and this can only be done by sticking as close as possible to the physics of photography; not to its mechanics or its chemistry but to its physics insofar as it is bound up with light. In Slide-length (1969–1971) Michael Snow produces and obtains a projected colour by placing colour filters between a source of light and a screen. The light beam traversing the different filters yields varying effects of transparency, opacity or shimmering. The result is that colour is not so much reproduced as it is captured at the very moment of its production.
The operation would amount to nothing more than an optical game if it wasn’t for the fact that some of the concrete manipulations from which it proceeds are shown in the slides that follow: here, a hand or two holding a glass plate at different angles; there, a finger holding it in place; elsewhere, a hand, fingers apart, appears as in negative against the colour ground obtained by projection, calling to mind images of Paleolithic cave art. The viewer is gradually invited to enter the game through a mechanism of empathy that derives from the pacing of the slide sequence. The artist makes use of time as much as light, compelling the viewer to consider the images that come and go at a contemplative pace, which may soon seem a bit too slow and sustained; attention is mobilized longer than usual, with all the threshold effects that ensue and which involve not so much seeing more clearly as looking otherwise.

This dual manipulation of light and time suffices to manifest a few of the distinctive characteristics of a medium whose materiality is all the more pronounced as it appears more specific. Materiality, such as it is, goes together, in this case, with the distinctive conditions of projection, which brings us back, by another twist, to the specifically physical part of photography. After the daguerreotype period, this was defined as such from the day it became possible not only to fix the latent image but also to develop and transfer it to another surface to obtain a number of prints or copies. Even a transparent positive print designed for projection requires the use of a screen and this surface need not be neutral; it may have a texture that reinforces the effect of materiality, or more precisely of *physicality*, which turns out to be the paradoxical corollary of transparency.

Such manipulations do not only have sensible effects. They elicit theoretical effects that confer upon them in return a critical, not to say epistemological impact. It is as if the reflection on colour today had to resort to a medium capable of preserving the trace of the operations it entails, and this suffices to relativize the degree of abstraction involved.

*The question of abstraction is on the horizon of Michael Snow’s output as it is on the horizon of photography, which accounts for the significant place that the latter has in his work today. Photography being what it is, can there be such a thing as an “abstract photograph?”* The question is raised in *Painting (Closing the Drum Book)*, 1978: A painting can be called “abstract” but can a photo-
graph of an abstract painting or of a detail thereof be said to be "abstract?"
Isn't the fact that a photograph is always of something—be it of an abstract
painting—enough to cut short any pretensions to abstraction?

*This brings us back to the question of representation in its relationship to repro-
duction. Photography cannot represent anything unless it abstracts certain fea-
tures that belong to the reality it is supposed to reproduce: it abstracts volume
by reduction to a two-dimensional plane (relief in photography is ever always an
illusion); it abstracts motion in a still picture that retains only the signs and
traces thereof; it abstracts matter and reproduces only its appearance; to say
nothing of the framing and the imposition of a vantage point, exclusive as such.

"True" abstraction, in the artistic sense of the term, begins with bringing atten-
tion to colour for itself, in contradiction with Sartre's statement that colour
(like a photograph?) is always "of something." We might even be tempted to say
that photography, far from being a substitute for a painting now reputed to be
obsolete, actually pursues its operation and develops its aim over and beyond
the constraints of the medium and the distinctive limits of the painting's form.
Photography has not put an end to painting, no more than film or video has
put an end to photography. The latter is continually captured by painting, just
as film can be captured by photography. The fact that Snow continues to
devote himself to photography, in concert with his other works, has the value
of a symptom and as such it calls for interpretation. What also calls for inter-
pretation is a body of work which makes room for sounds and colours, and for
music as much as photography, on the condition that the parts be conducted
on different stages.

* I have long brought an absent-minded attention to Michael Snow's work. As if
just to see it and dwell on it, I first had to pinpoint and analyze, in the way that
is mine, a few of the mechanisms of thought that can be the act of art. Might
there be then another way of thinking than through words, another manner of
philosophy than through texts alone? Might there be a way of thinking through
colours and sounds, a mode of philosophizing that would require working as
close to art as possible, working along with it and together with its works?

*Side Seat: I appreciate that Michael Snow implicitly reserved a place for view-
ing his work for latecomers like me. From such seats, relegated to the edges of
the auditorium, we are afforded a side view of the stage, sometimes extending into the wings. But the view may also be restricted to a very small portion of the show, seen from such an oblique angle that its volume is lost, but not its substance. The hypothetical “window” disappears and the illusion vanishes, leaving us a glimpse of a bit of its physics, which is a matter of light and sound.

* We are familiar with Walter Pater's famous statement, which is tempting to see as one of the first manifestos of abstraction in painting: “All art constantly aspires to the condition of music.” Michael Snow himself has readily admitted that there is a musical aspect to the most formal part of his work in visual arts. But what then are we to think when music itself seems to challenge the minimal requisites that define its very existence as a form, and ventures to do in collective improvisations something similar to what the exponents of action painting did on the individual register? (It is no coincidence that a Pollock painting figures on the cover of Ornette Coleman's record Free Jazz, one of earliest manifestos of the genre; the music that Snow makes is still “free” but in a different way than Coleman's.) I dream of a recording that would be able to capture, in the instantaneous mode of a freeze-frame, the moment in such a concert when the lead is passed from one player's hand to another, as it passes back and forth on the cover of Snow's Writings from the hand that took the photo to the one holding the pencil. The time of a suspense or a pause if not an absence as a click will have sufficed to give it form.

*Translated by Gila Walker*
NOTES


2. “Painting was/is a synthesizing and constructing activity, and since it is made by hand it makes use of all modes of sensory knowledge—besides the visual and the tactile. The photographer, on the other hand, divorces the eye from the hand. In a sense, a photograph could be considered the equivalent of a single brush stroke in a painting. Click.” Michael Snow, “Statement for an Exhibition, Paris 1992,” The Collected Writings of Michael Snow, The Michael Snow Project, Toronto, 1994, p. 293.

3. “On Sound...”, op. cit. (note 1), p. 225. Snow was discussing how artworks lack “staying power” when the artist is reduced to a puppet in a social or political context, or when the work’s only power is to deliver a message, advertising or other, that only makes sense in a single context.

4. “I am 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... sometimes they all work together. 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,” “Statement/18 Canadian Artists” (1967), in The Collected Writings of Michael Snow, op. cit. (note 2), p. 26.

5. See in this connection the statement by Albert Einstein to mathematician Jacques Hadamard
that Snow cites in his dialogue with Bruce Elder: "The words or the language as they are written or spoken do not seem to play any role in my mechanism of thought. The psychical entities which seem to serve as elements in thought are certain signs and more or less clear images which can be 'voluntarily' reproduced and combined [...] The above-mentioned elements are, in my case, visual and sometimes even muscular in nature." Op. cit. (note 1), p. 237. On the idea of a "space past reason," the reader may want to consult my discussion in L'Origine de la perspective, Paris, reprinted 1991, pp. 62–63.


7. "The particular purposes that relate to the 'mode' or 'process' of the individual work are partly drawn from the distinctive possibilities of the medium: in the first stage (taking the photo) these include framing, focus, exposure and lighting, but for me the choices made at this stage are also aimed at certain already defined decisions as to the final physical state of the print: whether it is to be printed on a surface, backlit or projected, also its size and shape, colour grain and the mounting and physical placement of the photo/object in the gallery space (whether attached to wall, ceiling, floor).

A discourse between all these elements is, in my opinion, the core of the true Art of Photography, defining itself in this way from all the other uses of photography: advertising, entertainment, journalism, etc." Michael Snow, op. cit. (note 2).

8. Side Seat Paintings Slides Sound Film is the title of a 20-minute sound film made by Michael Snow in 1970.
