

Things go up in flames and reappear.



Everything is brought back from the dead. — Michael Snow

# Snow

The French take Michael Snow seriously. Why don't we? by **Bart Testa**

## in Paris

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**i**n 1994, Michael Snow's long career as artist and filmmaker burst climactically into retrospective cascade with "The Michael Snow Project." It was a lavishly marketed Toronto extravaganza, replete with banners of the artist's signature *Walking Woman* flapping off lamp-posts all over town. Yet, "The Michael Snow Project" cast a sense of an ending over the artist that was as artificial as the marketing and the publicity.

Snow was sixty-five that year. To some, the artist seemed less prolific, and perhaps, they suggested, he was slowing down. The truth was just the opposite. As usual, though, it was also more complicated. By electing in the 1980s to work on large installations, like the holographic gallery, *The Spectral Image* at Vancouver's Expo '86 and the SkyDome colossi, *The Audience* (1988-89), Snow committed to two high-profile and time-consuming projects. Snow also turned again to ambitious experimental filmmaking. In rapid succession, he produced three films: *Seated Figures* (1988), *(Au Revoir)/See You Later* (1990) and *To Lavoisier, Who Died in the Reign of Terror*

(1991). He also recorded five albums of music, including the masterful sound-piece *The Last LP* (1987), and played in the band CCMC through half a dozen international tours, including one to Japan.

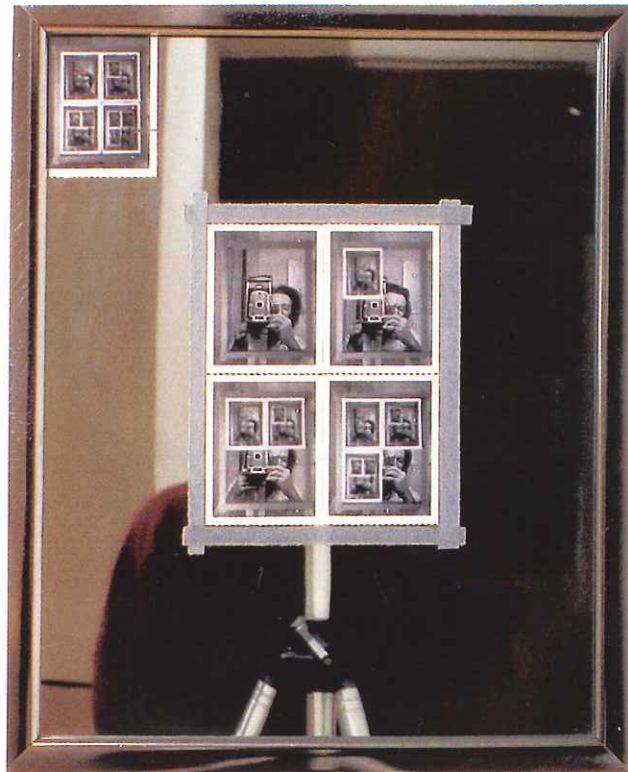
If anything, Snow was accelerating his pace, but aside from the two highly visible installations, most of his efforts passed virtually unnoticed by the Canadian arts press. Experimental film and music, even when made by someone as famous as Snow, never get into the publicity spotlight. This meant that his expanded efforts in these media, and Snow himself, remained almost invisible. Then, too, "The Michael Snow Project" was so emphatically retrospective. After overseeing all the installations and music events and having edited two catalogue-books, including *Music Sound, 1948-1993* and *The Collected Writings of Michael Snow*, Snow found himself an artist easy to bracket as "historical," or just to forget.

Not for long. While all that was going on, Snow was preparing new art, and plotting a stealth assault on another continent—

ABOVE AND LEFT: Michael Snow *Corpus Callosum* (Work in progress) 90 minutes, colour Courtesy the artist

If what is on **SCREEN** during *Wavelength* is not a room, what is it? — Michael Snow

Michael Snow  
*Authorization* 1969  
 Photographs, mirror, tape and aluminum frame  
 54.5 x 44.5 cm  
 Collection National Gallery of Canada



Europe. The task of labouring on his own Toronto memorial may have had the regrettable effect of fastening him to a golden-years retrospective, but none of that deterred him. He would press his past in service to his new work, and swivel both toward an arena where his films and photo work could rejoin contemporary debates about art. Snow's hometown had pointedly declined to be that arena in 1994. Why not, then, Paris?

IT WORKED. In January 2000, six years later, Snow was falling on not one, but three sites in Paris. A survey of his photographic oeuvre, "Panoramique: Photographic works & films 1962-1999," was at the Centre national de la photographie (CNP). At the reopened Centre Pompidou, Snow's artworks and films were part of "Le Temps, vite!" Paris's grand-scaled panoply of *objets*, apparatuses and art on the millennial theme of time. A high-concept show, it re-inaugurated a freshly refurbished museum. On that show's mainstage, Snow presented new and old works, including a major 1999 photographic piece, *Manifestation (Autourisation of 8 faces)*. It contains a single in-motion exposure of the artist, forming a master-catalogue of the photo-medium's interaction

with temporality. *Manifestation* sublimates the proto-cinematic implications of the great nineteenth-century French photographic experimenter, Etienne-Jules Marey, while also performing a *tour de force* of self-portraiture in which the artist's body and face and hands dissolve, magus-like, into the veils of his own illusionism.

Neither a stranger there, nor a European son, Snow was, for a long time, best known in France for a 1979 retrospective at the Pompidou. That show magnetized the network of critics that formed around *Wavelength* (1966-67) and other films Snow made during the '60s and '70s. Although the next decade was comparatively quiet for Snow in Europe, the 1990s saw him returning regularly to the French scene. Three pieces appeared in the Pompidou's 1990-92 travelling show, "Passages de l'Image." They were followed up with 1993 shows at the Galerie Claire Burrus, music performances, and then with a full film retrospective at La Cinémathèque française. In 1992, the lavish art journal *Poliphile* published facsimiles of Snow's sketches and notes for his upcoming film, *Corpus Callosum* (see page 63). In 1998, Alain Fleischer, director of the new art school Le Fresnoy, invited him to join the inaugural faculty for a year. At Le Fresnoy, Snow produced *In Medias Res*, a large photographic floor piece bought in January by the Pompidou. It is as elaborate a study of framing, scale and spectatorship as Snow has ever produced—as well as being a cheeky scene involving a Persian rug, floor lamps, three characters and a parrot escaping from a cage. An encounter at Le Fresnoy prompted Marie-Thérèse Champesme, exhibition curator for the Palais des Beaux-Arts de Bruxelles, to set into motion a three-nation touring retrospective of his photographic works, "Panoramique," which opened in Brussels, travelled to Paris in January, and then to Geneva for the summer.

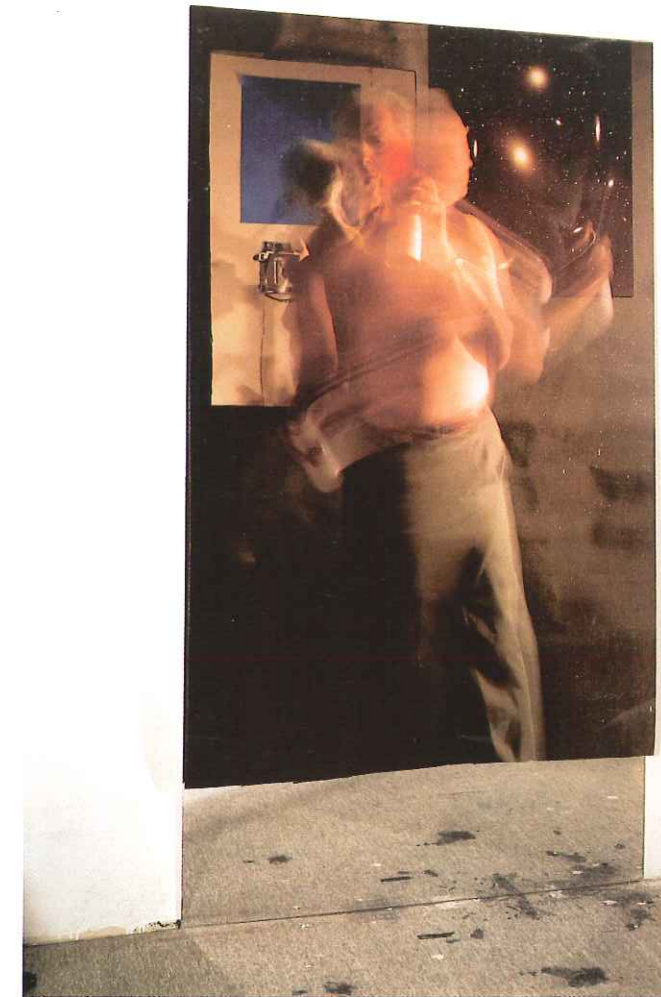
Snow's inclusion in the cinematic series of the Pompidou's exhibition "Le Temps, vite!" reminds us how specifically Snow's European profile became legible over thirty years ago with *Wavelength*, his fabled film of an apparently single zoom across a New York loft. In Europe, Snow is numbered in an elite cadre of modern time-shaping artists. His films perfectly incarnate experimental art's response to cinema—an issue the French took, and still take, much more seriously than North Americans. Among the first artists to link experimental new media and contemporary art, an exchange which is still breeding postmodern complications, Snow has sustained long-term impact—or "*Effetto Snow*," as the Bologna critic Antonio Bisaccia titled it for his 1995 book.

What Snow helped underwrite by the 1990s became a vast inter-media international arts economy. So, he appeared on the Pompidou platform in 2000, not just as a senior artist,

a progenitor, but still as the supremely rigorous contemporary inter-media specialist. The Paris press, in a dozen articles over the weeks he was there, repeatedly called him a "theoretical" or "philosophical" artist, or a "technological" one. The further impression they conveyed was that, while Snow was doing what he had always done, he was also being enlisted in a fresh campaign to situate experimental art once again in contemporary media culture.

In "Le Temps, vite!," where Snow's presence was deftly handled by curator Daniel Soutif, editor of the museum's journal and veteran programmer of his films, screenings drew sizeable audiences and appreciative debate. But, because his *œuvres plastiques* are far less familiar to the French than his films, "Panoramique" was his most significant Paris test.

"Panoramique" compresses thirty-seven years of Snow's photo-art, from *Walking Woman* street studies and foldings of the '60s, to the 1998 pieces, *In Medias Res*, *La Ferme* and *Immediate Delivery*. The new pieces are excellent Snows that reveal a continuum with the past and implant the artist's imagination firmly in the present. The test in Paris, however, was whether Snow, the gallery artist less known to Europeans, could offer the same intensity and rigour as the recognized filmmaker. Carved from the upper floor of an old Rothschild mansion, the CNP offers a very different viewing experience from that of the glaring big boxes of the Art Gallery of Ontario, or the Pompidou.



ABOVE: Michael Snow  
*Manifestation (Autourisation of 8 faces)* 1999  
 Plastic lamination, ink-jet  
 photograph in colour, spray paint, black paper, mirror  
 206 x 114 cm  
 Courtesy the artist

LEFT: Michael Snow  
*Wavelength* 1966-67  
 45 minutes; colour  
 Collection Cinémathèque royale de Belgique

The rooms are comparatively intimate and cast a fainter glow over the works, but emit a clearer signal. The art is here for *close* inspection, for *critical* scrutiny. The test at this kind of gallery scale is absolutely necessary. Snow is not a great Canadian artist in Europe. What, anyway, would *that* mean *here*?

A lively opening one night, a standing-room only colloquium two nights later, a very smart and suggestive lecture by Raymond Bellour the next week, a substantial bilingual catalogue, and the three-nation tour—all elements of "Panoramique" indicated how well Snow, the subtle career strategist, had prepared the way. More notable was how helpfully his French curators and critical supporters sustained the enterprise. Follow-up interpretive projects are already underway: a French documentary film, by Teri Wehn-Damisch and a French-produced DVD-ROM project on the whole oeuvre. Within weeks, Snow signed a contract with a Paris publisher for *Biographie: The Walking Woman*, a large photo book on the theme of the *Walking Woman*. And,

Michael Snow  
*In Medias Res* 1998  
 Colour photograph presented on floor  
 260 x 360 cm  
 Courtesy of the artist



in Brussels this fall, Snow unveils *That*, a large-sized, multi-screen and multilingual video installation, a kind of sequel to the words-on-screen film *So Is This* (1982).

While its intent was to widen the European aperture beyond Snow's films and onto his art, "Panoramique" performed this task paradoxically by squeezing Snow into one mode: photo art. Most of the forty-odd works are canvas-scaled and solicit a hard gaze, setting a stringent agenda squarely on the issues of image itself. Only one of the photo-sculptural works, *Atlantic* (1967), was present, stirring associations with *Wavelength*. The rest were

"flat" photo works; two suspended-transparency installations and three slide-projector pieces, including the best of them, the surpassing shape-shifter *Recombinant* (1992). The selective focus and the gallery setting alike conspired to glue attention onto Snow's perennial issues: scale, frame, light, and technical process. The demands "Panoramique" imposed on the viewers were tough, but that did not impede its success. The opening was packed, the guests were informed and engaged—*sans* refreshments or anything resembling a party, they stayed for hours. Attendance surpassed CNP's norm, reaching six hundred visitors weekly. The catalogue features essays by two French critics new to writing on Snow, Hubert Damisch, and Fleischer. The newspaper reviews angled Snow as a known quantity, but regarded works, though mostly retrospective, as new for the occasion. Given *Panoramique's* place on the city's arts calendar, which included five other major photo-art shows (among them a Joel-Peter Witkin survey and a lavish Marey installation), questions of Snow's pertinence could be raised and, provisionally, affirmed. There were already signs of debates brewing, even about how to describe Snow's art and how to state the issues it puts into play.

At the CNP colloquium, Fleischer exemplified a critic working these things out. Play-acting a little, Fleischer announced he had troubled, contradictory impressions. His memory of Snow's films was one of seamless unity and technical perfection. Looking again now, he was amazed and perturbed by the clash and variety of elements. *Wavelength*, he said, is "completely *bricolé*," cobbled together, fabricated. That zoom is not what it appears to be, nor is the film itself. Snow is not the kind of Minimalist Fleischer had so long imagined. Assumed to be master of ruthlessly reductive artistic technique, Snow long seemed to practice materially what French Structuralism preached in theory. The shock—Fleischer's overacting aside—now comes in recognizing that Snow was never a smooth operator and never an American-style Minimalist.

Rather, as Canadian film critics, notably Bruce Elder, have long argued, Snow effected an experimental-film revolution because he did just the opposite of what Minimalism's aesthetic of axiomatic simplicity and "presence" requires. He makes films that are radically inclusive, rather than reductive. Despite, or perhaps because of their simplified shapes, they dare to dance with chaos by multiplying paradoxes around representation and abstraction, presence and absence. Snow's films tamper with the power of the image itself, by detouring into its own perceptual frailties.

As if suddenly realizing all this just now, Fleischer's re-take on Snow—his critical pendulum swinging the other way—must, he pronounced, be extended to the photo works. They, too, are openly *bricolé* and rigorously fragile. The far-reaching lecture

The realization that the "hands" in *Slidlength* are made of light, that they are not "hands" can be epiphanic. One is then inside representation. — Michael Snow



ABOVE: Michael Snow  
*Place des peaux* 1998  
 34 wood and coloured transparency frames (72 x 149 x 1.5 cm each), suspended in a 5 x 14 x 6m room; horizontal illumination  
 Photo François Poivret  
 Courtesy of the artist

Michael Snow  
*Slidlength* 1969–71  
 80 colour slides  
 Courtesy of the artist



I don't do things to make them sad or funny. I do things to make them happen. —Michael Snow

delivered by Bellour on another night traversed *Wavelength*, the slide piece *Slidelength* and the 1998 architectural installation *Place des peaux*, and enriched the argument. Focusing on the "intervals"—flickers between film frames, blanks between slide frames, gaps between architectural elements—Bellour criss-crossed media to conclude that Snow consistently offers "actual perceptions," but in such a way that these are surrounded by "nebulous virtual images."

These discussions were not just refreshingly new; all of them accented the differences between Snow and contemporary postmodern artists now working with film and photography. The trend has many avatars—Douglas Gordon, Pierre Huyghe, Jeff Wall, Cindy Sherman, Douglas Blau, John Baldessari, Stan Douglas, Cindy Barnard and others. The film-art-photography-video merry-go-round has both vastly expanded and renewed itself in the '90s, but with the paradoxical *retour* of art again affixed on cinema, despite all one hears about digitality.

So, Snow's appearance in Paris finds the arena recharged by experimental artworks swinging back to cinematic formats that he helped initiate. The differences come down to the rigorous delicacies of Snow's skepticism about images, his pointed paradoxes and the material modesty of his gallery pieces. Because the French had a chance now to see Snow's films and gallery art as a unity, they recognized that his "flat" photo works subvert the pathetic appeals of photo imagery no less than his films do cinematic norms. There is no self-regarding subject, like Gordon's or Sherman's, and no flirtation with the theatrical power of Wall or Barnard. The irony of Snow's play with self-identity is too legible for him to be taken in earnest as an autobiographer. Even the works in which Snow appears, *Authorization* (1969), *Venetian Blind* (1970) or the new *Manifestation*, absorb their subject in the peregrinations of an image-process.

Nor does Snow take seriously the appeal of "appropriated" Hollywood movie subject matter, à la Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho* and Sherman's *Film Stills*, or the earnest theatricality of academic art's large-scale *mise en scène* deployed by Wall in *Eviction Struggle*. Indeed, Snow often constructs the objects he films and photographs—making a point of their oddness or sheer flimsiness—and he does so to serve the sense of an artist moving around the actual conditions of images. Snow is uninterested in a phantom sociology of movies' sentimental cultural career. By an irony of historical rebound, the younger artists are fascinated with movies to the point of obsession, as if Wilder, Lang, Preminger, or Hitchcock could lead them toward some self-discovery, however bleak. They have, by refocusing on found footage and blank-parody movie formats and narrative, reconstituted much that is problematic about the overwhelming media culture. Gordon's famous *24 Hour Psycho* (1993), which grinds down Hitchcock's 1960 horror film into a whole day's worth of slow-motion obsession, is the totemic work for artists hopped up and distracted

by their hot engagement with the hyperbolic mediascape.

Snow's art arises from cooler, theoretical and cognitive meditations. Piercing the narcissism of small differences, his steady stream of films, photo-art and sculpture has never tired of releasing the aesthetic perturbations that stand between an object and its replication. When a critic like Fleischer toys with calling him an "anarchist" or Bellour speaks about "nebulous virtual images," they are registering the critical difference Snow makes in the current arts scene.

What compels him, at seventy, to continue, even to accelerate producing strong art, is his curiosity to excavate the recondite conditions of images' mode of arising. Seldom has he done this more successfully than in the new light-box piece, *Immediate Delivery* (1998). We peer into a glowing room populated by a tangle of tubes, pipes, perilous carpentry, dangling coloured plastic sheets that seem, every one of them, to be propping up another. Snow has constructed an environment of such trembling contingency it would not stand up to a light breeze. And yet, through the agency of the large photo transparency, the room, with all its variable depths and surfaces, shapes and textures, vivid colours and beautiful light, achieves a kind of eternal permanence. *Immediate Delivery* bestows a light presence as stable as anything this flimsy being could hope to expect.

Snow ceaselessly pursues the viewer through such interior intimacies of the image. He is merciless in dealing out the conundrums that assail a viewer in what seem the simplest encounters. Even his most deadpan works buttonhole us to acknowledge how distressingly paradoxical images are. In the confrontational context of contemporary inter-media art, Snow punctures the assumption this art accepts: that movie, TV, photography and advertising images are overwhelmingly powerful. Engaging Snow's work, we register, as a superbly tonic private shock, how fragile, unsteady and pathetic film and photographic images confess themselves to be—at least when you get them alone.

Though the shock of recognition of *this* Snow effect was palpable in Paris, it was never arbitrated openly—the critics were, refreshingly, interested in the art itself. "Panoramique" succeeded in superimposing Snow the gallery photo-artist on Snow the filmmaker, and that seemed to set off sufficient reverberations for one season. Snow's continental stealth campaign revealed him anew to be a perplexing presence, carrying his own electricity into any arena. ■

*I would like to thank Andrea Picard for help with translations, especially of the tape-recorded CNP symposium.*

## Corpus Callosum

Metamorphosis is the theme of *Corpus Callosum*, Michael Snow's upcoming ninety-minute film. Walls explode, bodies melt, and a woman gives birth to a grown man, all thanks to revolutionary electronic software developed in Toronto which permits the animating of real images. For Snow, whose sketches for *Corpus Callosum* go back to 1981, it's a radical opportunity to stretch and squeeze the medium, as he has always done—and to indulge in a little humour. Here is a scene, in his words:

"Two of the principals who work in the office walk out together to go to the bathroom. The little male-female sign is on the door. This is a case of extreme togetherness. They squeeze into the door and the way that happens is really terrific. He's very tall and she's very short and they just completely compress into the rectangle of the door. Then they walk inside. There will be a long hold because obviously going to the bathroom that way is going to be a little difficult. They come out, still in this slab shape, and go back to work."

Michael Snow  
*Corpus Callosum* (Work in progress)  
90 minutes, colour Courtesy the artist

