De La, 1971



Michael Snow falls within the tradition of artists who work in more than one medium-those of an earlier generation such as Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, and contemporaries like Vito Acconci, John Baldessari, Bruce Nauman and Richard Serra. Snow began his artistic career as a painter in the early '50s and took up sculpture at the end of that decade, meanwhile supporting himself and his visual arts practices as a jazz musician on piano and trumpet. In the middle '60s he began to concentrate his energies on film and photography. Today in his native Canada, Snow is still known primarily for his earlier work in the visual arts along with his very active participation in improvisional jazz, while in the U.S. and Europe he holds a reputation as a filmmaker, since the success of his Wavelength of 1966-67 followed by his three other major films, including La Région Centrale of 1970-71 being shown as part of this MATRIX exhibition.

At this early date it is difficult to gauge Snow's influence in too many specific senses, although the evidence clearly indicates that he is the most important artist working within the film avantgarde in North America today. And in some specific terms, it is safe to say that he has influenced the film work of Yvonne Rainer, Richard Serra and the Belgium Chantal Akerman, as well as the theatre work of Richard Foreman who is about to release his first film.

Snow's films clearly foreground issues about art as an immediate experience and as an object, as well as about representation, perception, abstraction, and often times

process and narrative concerns which are a part of the larger art historical and art critical heritage of the Modernist and Post-Modernist visual arts. Snow also challenges some of the traditional assumptions and cliches about the reproductive medium of photography, first by making many pieces which are one of a kind objects and not simply limited editions. He does this, for instance, in Authorization of 1969, taking Polaroids and affixing them to a mirror in a self-portrait and in Light Blues of 1974 in which he incorporates into the final work the lamp used in shooting each of the individual photographs, and in Glares of the previous year, again using a lamp, thereby duplicating or doubling the process of making, in which the glares cast by the mounted lamp constitute each of the images.

The issue of objectness is again addressed in <u>De La</u>, which is a sculptural object in and of itself, as well as an instrument for representation, being a machine with mounted camera through which images are made and simultaneously transmitted over four video monitors. Object and instrument involve the viewer in a very active process of perception.

It is important to realize that the image of the machine mount is never transmitted on the monitors. The aluminum and steel mechanical sculpture with its video camera exists in real time and space surrounded by the images that it makes—the object next to the representation, the representations the products of the object's making.

De La was originally designed for the artist by Montreal

technician Pierre Abeloos as a machine mount in order to facilitate the highly complex movements of a 16mm camera for the filming of La Région Centrale. Now as De La it is a closed circuit television system, the camera moving in various programmed patterns relaying its results to the four monitors, each one in a corner with screen aimed toward the machine sculpture situated on a pedestal in the center.

Snow mentioned that when in the course of construction he began to see how beautiful the machine was and began thinking of other ways in which he might use it as an object in itself. This is not a new phenomenon in Snow's history. He often uses old art in order to make new art. "Walking Woman" figures, the formal device of an important six-year project of Snow's, have a significant place in Wavelength. A Casing Shelved (1970) becomes an artistic autobiography with Snow on audiotape explaining the objects and their uses in his past art-making depicted in the projected slide. The bookcase of A Casing Shelved is the one used in Wavelength. The film, One Second in Montreal of 1969 consists of 31 still photographs of potential sculpture sites in Montreal parks, sent to Snow years earlier for his consideration.

De La was over a year in the making. Sets of axles on the mount permit multiple kinds of movements at once. The options for movement are horizontal, vertical, rotational, zoom, and camera start, along with speed variables for each one. The machinery can be programmed to perform combinations of movements: rolls, spins, circles within circles and

cycles within cycles, figure eights, arcs, scallops, sweeps, zigzags, horizontal shifts, mobius strips, etc. The camera may pan and zoom simultaneously or the image may turn in the frame while it is being zoomed in and out. It was made to be programmed by remote control, either through use of prescored audio tapes or else by dialing a console.

After months of searching, Snow resorted to maps and aerial photographs and finally found a location for La Région Centrale which could only be reached by helicopter. It was a remote region of northern Quebec with absolutely no human markings of habitation or conquest, not even a telephone pole. Snow hid his console behind an enormous boulder and set up his camera on a cold mountain top with rocks, more boulders, surrounding hills, a lake below and clear sky above. As with De La, the film camera never records its mounting device-though occasionally its shadow is visible--while no human presence is seen or heard through the film's 3 hours 20 minutes. In its 17 sections of differing lengths separated by bright yellow Xs the film begins about noon, proceeds to mid-afternoon, continues from sunset to night to sunrise, and ends about noon. The camera looks and sees but never conquers. It maintains its distance as it abstracts the sublime landscape, moving back and forth between the representational and the abstract in a work of intense contemplation.

De La comes out of La Region
Centrale's making but is now
totally separate from it, a
work redesigned for video
installation. Both works
exhibit the intense perceptual
concerns combined with intellectual and analytical ones

peculiar to the Snow-bound camera.

Regina Cornwell

Regina Cornwell, who holds a Ph.D. in Film Studies from Northwestern University, has written numerous articles on the work of Michael Snow. Her most recent book—Framed Snow (Toronto: Peter Martin Assoc. '79)—is the most definitive study of Snow's film and photographs to date.

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Works in MATRIX:

De La, 1971, aluminum and steel mechanical sculpture with electronic controls, television camera, and four monitors, 6' x 12'. Lent by the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Selected one-person exhibitions:

Isaacs Gallery, Toronto (& yearly until '64) '57; Poindexter Gallery, NY '64 & '65; 20-20 Gallery, London '66; Filmmakers Cinematique, NY '67 & '68; Vancouver Art Gallery, British Columbia (retrospective) '67; Poindexter Gallery, NY '68; Edinburgh Film Festival, Scotland (& yearly until '75) '69; Isaacs Gallery, Toronto '69; Museum of Modern Art, NYC '69 & '70; Jewish Museum, NY '70; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa '70; Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto '70; Bykert Gallery, NY '71; Center for Inter-American Relations, NY '72; Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax '72; Isaacs Gallery, Toronto '72; Contemporary Art Museum, Houston '73; Pesaro Film Festival, Italy '73; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis '74; Cinemateque Quebecoise, Montreal (retrospective) '75; Museum of Modern Art, NYC '76.

Selected group exhibitions: National Gallery, Ottawa, 2nd Biennial of Canadian Painting, '57, '59 & '65; Pittsburgh, PA, Carnegie International '59 & '64; The J.B. Speed Art Museum, KY, Canadian Painting '62; Edinburgh Festival, Scotland '68; Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC, Anti-Illusion: Procedures and Materials '69; Cannes, France, Festival International du Film '70; Museum of Fine Arts, Montreal, Survey '70 '70; Dusseldorf, West Germany, Prospect '71 '71; Yale University Art Gallery, CT, Options and Alternatives '73; England, London Film Festival '73; Switzerland, Montreux Film Festival '74; Rutgers University, NJ, A Response to the Environment '75.

Selected bibliography about Snow:

Smith, Brydon. Michael
Snow (Ottawa: National Gallery
of Canada '70).

Theberge, Pierre. About
30 Works by Michael Snow (New
York: Center for Inter-American
Relations '72).

Cornwell, Regina. "Michael Snow: Cover to Cover and Back." Studio International, vol. 191, no. 980 (March/April '76) pp. 193-97.

---- Framed Snow
(Toronto: Peter Martin Assoc.
'79).

----. "Snow-Bound Camera," <u>Artforum</u>, vol. XVII, no. 8 (April '79) pp. 42-46.

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