

Michael Snow | Cover to Cover

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Edition of 2500

In the history of contemporary Canadian Art, the legacy of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design is legendary. It's impossible to discuss pedagogy, Conceptual Art or Artists' Publications in the country without reference to Garry Neill Kennedy's time as president of NSCAD. Fresh out of grad school and only thirty-one years old, the artist became the youngest ever president of a Canadian University.

He immediately moved to remake the college from a provincial art school into an internationally acclaimed epicentre of arts education. *Art in America* magazine called NSCAD "the best art school in North America" in 1973. In 2012, the MIT Press published a five-hundred page coffee table book on the first decade after Kennedy arrived. The legacy looms so large that it is resented by many current faculty members and students (presumably in part because the history is predominantly white and male.)¹

The visiting artists series was hugely important to the school's reputation, as was the Lithography workshop, but for me the sustained legacy is rooted in the brilliant decision to

begin a publishing press at the College.

Between 1972 and 1987, the NSCAD Press published 26 titles by painters, sculptors, filmmakers, dancers, a composer, etc. These include books by Michael Asher, Dara Birnbaum, Daniel Buren, Gerald Ferguson, Simone Forti, Hollis Frampton, Dan Graham, Hans Haacke, Jenny Holzer, Donald Judd, Bernhard Leitner, Claes Oldenberg, Yvonne Rainer², Gerhard Richter, Martha Rosler, Steve Reich, and Lawrence Weiner, among others. All are now considered classics and are difficult to find, and expensive to purchase on the secondary market.

Arguably, the most significant of these is Michael Snow's *Cover to Cover*.

"The Nova Scotia College of Art and Design began a press with Kasper König as the director, and they put out some really wonderful things, which were mostly artists' statements about their work," Snow told me in 20123. "I was asked to do something, which was very nice but I thought, I don't want to do that. I want to do a work. I didn't want something about my work, but something that was an example of it."

The artist then began studying books for what he called their "bookishness" and eventually determined that his guiding principle would be the "recto-verso" aspect of the codex. The term is derived from the Latin "rēctō foliō" and "versō foliō", which translate as "on the right side of the leaf" and "on the back side of the leaf":

"One thing is that the pages are two-sided. There's always an 'other' side. That led me to the idea of having two cameras take a subject, placing one image on one side, and the other camera's view on the opposing side, exactly the same size. Then, you get a true physical contact with the two-dimensionality of photographs, and you experience the compression that's involved in photography, which mostly vanishes in the face of the realism of it."

With a working title of *Cover to Cover/Over and Over*⁴, the book can be read forwards and backwards and eventually upside down. It consists entirely of photographs, including the front and back covers. The only disruption to the photographic flow of the book is the spine, on which the artist's name and title appears. Even the colophon information is presented diegetically - appearing on a sheet of paper inside a typewriter, many pages into the book.

The artist told the National Gallery of Canada in 1967 that "My paintings are done by a filmmaker, my sculpture by a musician, my films by a painter, my music by a filmmaker, my paintings by a sculptor, my sculpture by a filmmaker, my films by a musician, my music by a sculptor... who sometimes all work together." Despite the fact that this is a bookwork through-and-through, the statement holds true for *Cover to Cover* - the work has a clear cinematic quality, and Snow described the book to me as being "a quasi-movie".

Beyond being the most significant publication of the NSCAD Press, *Cover to Cover* is one of the most significant and quintessential titles in the entire arena of artists' books. If I were advising an institution starting a collection of books by artists, *Cover to Cover* would be first on the list. Yet it was a title I have never owned myself. The first copy I saw for sale was \$75, which at the time was just out of my price range. By the time that was no longer the case, the book's value had doubled. Well over a decade ago, when I was with Art Metropole, we had a copy and took it to the Basel Art Fair. We priced it at \$300 US and it sold the first minute of the fair.

Currently, the softcover is listed at between \$600 and \$750 US, and the hardcover is double that. Luckily, the long out-of-print rarity is now available in a facsimile edition from Primary Information, in collaboration with Light Industry. The project is almost ten years in the making. In my 2012 interview with Snow I asked about a possible reprint, and he replied:

“There's a publisher in New York who put out, recently, a boxed set of facsimile reprints of *Avalanche* magazine. The publisher [James Hoff] worked at Printed Matter for a while, and he asked me about reprinting *Cover to Cover* with them. What they did with *Avalanche* was really wonderful.”

Primary Information do indeed get the details right and this faithful reproduction is another reason why they are easily the most essential publisher of rare and classic bookworks. The book can be had for the very affordable price of \$25 US, [here](#).

1. Though less celebrated than the male art stars of the day (Sol Lewitt, Lawrence Weiner, Dan Graham, John Baldessari, Joseph Beuys, Vito Acconci, etc.) the school also worked with important women artists such as Alice Aycock, Dara Birnbaum, Carol Conde, Agnes Denes, Simone Forti, Jenny Holzer, Lucy Lippard, Lee Lozano, Yvonne Rainer, Martha Rosler, Joyce Weiland, and Martha Wilson, among others.

2. Rainer's NSCAD Press title was released as a facsimile reprint by Primary Information in February of last year. A reprint of *Michael Asher : Writings 1973 - 1983 on Works 1969 - 1979* is forthcoming.

3. <http://mag.magentafoundation.org/10/features/michael-snow>

4. The Michael Snow Fonds, Box 70, Folder 2 indicates that several other titles were briefly considered: *Door to Door*, *The Book of Sides*, *On the Other Hand*, *The 2 Faced Book*, etc.