Michael Snow with Raymond Foye

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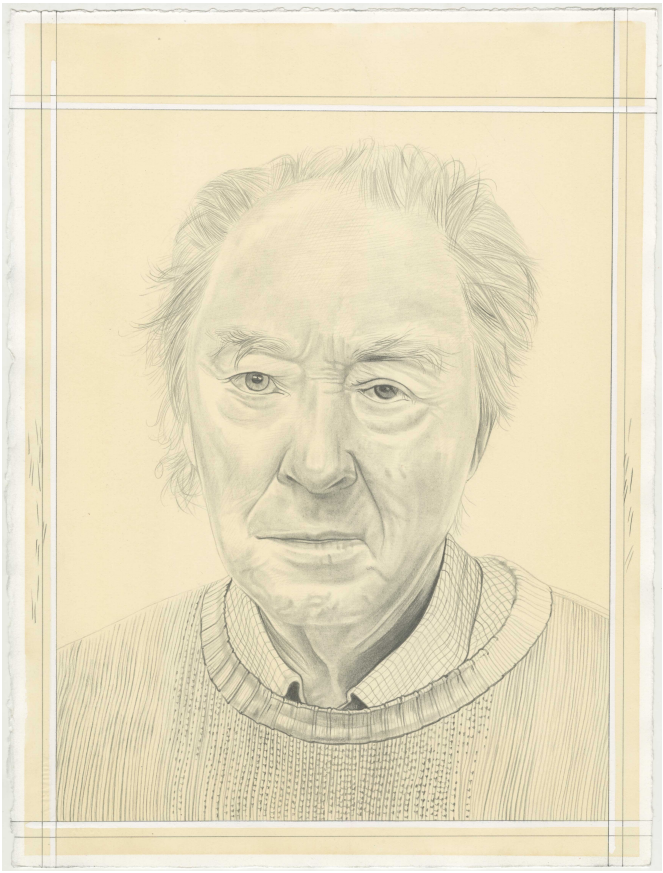
Art In Conversation

“To create something new, one must break some rules. But those rules must also be familiar, and *worth* breaking.”



Portrait of Michael Snow, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

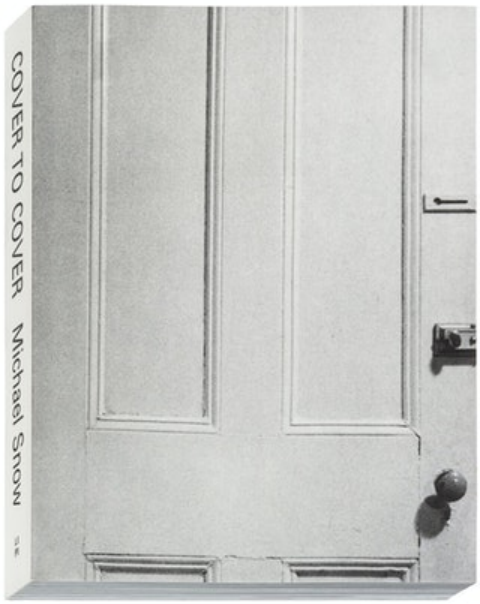
“I shot *Wavelength* in three weeks after thinking about it for a year,” Michael Snow once said of his 1967 masterpiece. It is a remark that typifies his calculated and cerebral approach to art, yet no sooner does one characterize his work as such than the opposite arises, for *Wavelength* is also a work of great passion and intensity. The key to his work is this balance of opposites, held in place by a vision and sensibility that is by turns precise, ironic, and philosophical, often with a strong dose of Duchampian humor. Let’s call it “Snow’s Paradox,” and it applies to the man himself: famous and neglected, celebrated and obscure. Few artists of our time have made such a compelling body of work over such a wide range of media: paintings, drawings, films, sequential photographs, sculptures both private and public, artist’s books, sound works, and musical compositions. It is a strangely selfless body of work

—another remark that gives lie to itself, since he also somehow stands at the center of every work. He is there and he is not, just as materiality and demateriality consistently swap places in his work.

Now 92, Michael Snow continues to make new works that consistently challenge what we think we know about perception, art, and life. Our interview was conducted by email over several weeks early in 2021. We began by discussing the re-issue of *Cover to Cover* (1975) and the restoration of *Wavelength* (1967), both of which I consider to be perfect works of art. From there we moved on to more recent work. Sadly, even a lengthy interview like this can only touch on a handful of works, and I regret we did not discuss musical works such as *The Last LP* (1987), his *Collected Writings* (1994, Wilfrid Laurier University Press), or his recent large-scale sculptures in Toronto. I would like to express my gratitude to Michael's wife, Peggy Gale, and his assistant, media artist Mani Mazinani. I would also like to acknowledge John Klacsmann at Anthology Film Archives, and the artist and filmmaker Bradley Eros, for the many stimulating exchanges we shared about Snow's work during the course of this interview.

Raymond Foye (Rail): I remember when *Cover to Cover* (1975) first appeared, I felt you'd taken the artist's book to a whole new level. Can you describe the creative origins of that book? Did it begin as a fully conceptualized work? Was there improvisation involved, such that the work evolved in the course of the execution, much the way a painting would?

Michael Snow: I was asked by the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD) if I would be interested in composing and publishing a book about my work to be published by NSCAD Press. This was a wonderful proposal. NSCAD Press was publishing several interesting books by artists about their work and it would be an honor to be amongst them. I spent some time considering how this might be done and finally arrived at a clarification. If the press was in favor, rather than a book about my work, I would make the book a work. A book work.



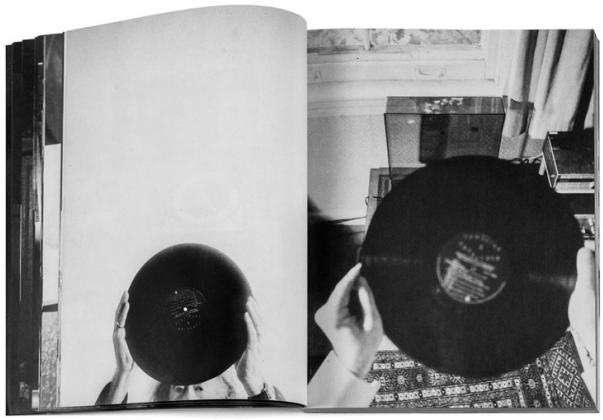
Cover to Cover

I already had ideas for such a work. As a student at the Ontario College of Art a couple of decades earlier, I took a class in design and the professor assigned us to take an existing book and design a new front cover, spine, and back cover. I had been introduced to the anatomy of a book before *Cover to Cover*.

I decided to use photographic images to center the formal principles of *Cover to Cover* on the conversion of the three dimensional subject to the two dimensional plane/page—recto/verso: the other side is always the other side. I planned and composed every element of the book, with this principle in mind. Two photographers (Keith Lock and Vince Sharp) each equidistant from the subject (Michael Snow) faced each other on opposite sides, using multiple strategies to coordinate their shutters. We would first define the motion of a sequence, then divide it into steps, which determined the translation of movement to still image.

Rail: I cannot see *Cover to Cover* working as anything other than black and white.

Snow: That's true. *Cover to Cover* functions on opposites. It could be done with color, but black and white seems more sculptural. Involving color would be another value, because the issues would be more complicated.



Cover to Cover. Interior Spread.

Rail: The work has always reminded me of Duchamp's famous *Door, 11 rue Larrey*, from 1927. It is a work that points towards a multidimensional space, which I find to be a theme of your work—exploring other dimensions of time and space which are there but we don't often recognize.

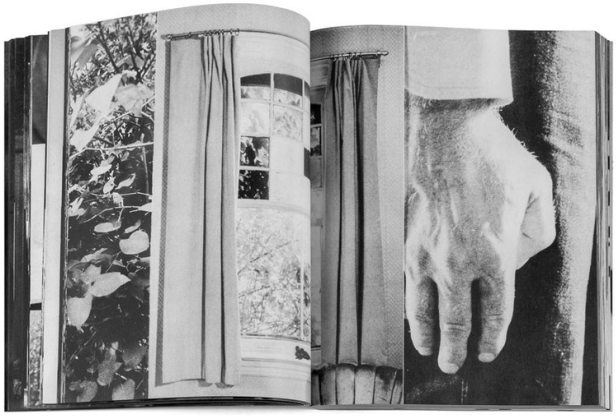
Snow: You are right that *Cover to Cover* resembles Duchamp's door. There was no particular influence, but of course I have admired Duchamp's jest. I visited him once when I lived in NYC. He was kind enough to let me shoot a few seconds of film, which I intended to include in my *New York Eye and Ear Control* (1964), but finally I didn't use it. Unfortunately I don't recall why I decided to reject it.

Rail: *Cover to Cover* is a work that begins and ends in the same place after traveling through a wide range of confounding spatial states. This reminds me of *Finnegans Wake*, where the first and last sentence connect up. Have you ever thought of this reference? Was James Joyce ever an important figure for you?

Snow: I amhonored *Cover to Cover* reminded you of *Finnegan's Wake*. *Cover to Cover* is more clearly systematic, functioning as it does on opposites, rather than tangents or apparently random associations.

Rail: *Cover to Cover* is really a space-time continuum, isn't it?

Snow:Yes.



Cover to Cover. Interior Spread.

Rail: Space is put through a variety of permutations: it is folded, mirrored, flopped, inverted, and at times it is disengaged from points of orientation. Is this essentially the subject of the book?

Snow: Although what happens in *Cover to Cover* is sequential, I think it can be rewardingly dipped into. There are a number of different "narrative" sequences. But what is, I think, most interesting, is to check both sides of the page (recto/verso leaf). This book itself is the subject here. It is self-referential. The viewer is a participant. It must be looked at manually, which is why I call it "sculpture."

Rail: I suppose many of the spatial permutations I have listed are all specific characteristics of the photograph (and negative).

Michael Snow, *Shade*, 1974. Courtesy the artist.

Snow: The spatial permutations are also physical ones. The individual units (pages) of the book are two-dimensional, but all together they constitute an object. *Cover to Cover* is part of a family of two-sided works that I've done, e.g. *Two Sides to Every Story* (1974), which includes two synchronized 16mm projectors on opposite sides of a suspended aluminum screen—a piece owned by the National Gallery of Canada (Ottawa) but was also shown as part of *Into the Light* at the Whitney Museum (2001–2002). A simpler work is a suspended transparency, *Shade* (1979) that is a life-size photograph of a man's back seen from behind; of course the "other side" of the figure does not show his front view. There are others.

Rail: Where does this sense of space come from, for you? Does it come out of painting? I find a lot of similarities (in ideas) between your works and the works of Jasper Johns, in the way space is depicted. For example, when the two edges of his canvases are joined up, something happens—things connect, and a continuum is revealed. He is also an artist who has worked extensively with monochrome. Was Johns an influence on you as a young artist?

Snow:I agree that to an extent my sense of space comes out of painting. That's where I started (along with music). I'm not conscious of any influence from Jasper Johns, but I see that there are similarities in our respective treatment of this simultaneity of two dimensions with three.

Rail: Thinking back to your youth, which artists would you say have had the biggest influence on your work?

Snow: Before I went to the Ontario College of Art (Toronto) I remember being stunned by Picasso's work as it was featured in a *Life* magazine article. Later, learning more, I was even more impressed by the range of what he did.

Rail: Your early shows in NYC were at the Poindexter Gallery. Around that time Elinor Poindexter was showing de Kooning, Diebenkorn, Jules Olitski. How did the connection to Poindexter Gallery come about? Was it a context you were comfortable with, and were you happy with the shows you had there?

Snow: Though I had a regular gallery in Toronto, when I moved to NYC I wanted to be represented there too. At the time, galleries would look at slides and photos if a meeting was arranged, and I visited several in my search. A couple of important people, like Richard Bellamy, came to my studio, but nothing came of it, until Elinor Poindexter liked what I showed her. I was surprised because my work was completely different from the artists whose work was being shown there, though of course I admired them. I was very happy with my exhibitions there, one a "Walking Woman Works" show, and another was sculpture.

Rail: It seems to me you could never have carried your ideas and concepts as far as you did if you had stayed exclusively with painting or sculpture. Would you agree?

Snow: You're probably right. Workingon the "Walking Woman Works" from 1961 to 1967, I had decided to use every possible approach to what one could do with and to that outline and plane. It became clear that movement was a possibility, as was photography, both of which led to film and performance and everything else. The development was natural, and I continued with that. Work came from work: creating new forms led to additional possibilities.

Rail: Could *Cover to Cover* ever work as an exhibition or environment, or does it strictly function as a book object for you?

Snow: For me, this is strictly a book object. It's sculpture.

Rail: Since you're an artist who spans the analog/digital divide, how would you characterize the relative merits and demerits of digital vs. analog in the various media that you work in?

Snow: Digital tools are far more streamlined—more mental than physical, in a sense—but given that I grew up in an analog world, all my work until fairly recently grew from that, I remain more comfortable with analog means. I depend on assistants for most technical aspects today.

Rail: Your record *New York Eye and Ear Control* (1964) was my introduction to free jazz, and a very good one to say the least. I always wondered how you came to involve Albert Ayler in that project, and what was he like to work with, if you did engage him personally?

Snow: A friend, the poet and jazz fanatic Paul Haines, told me that he had heard a new tenor sax player who was amazing, and that I should hear him. This was Albert Ayler, and he was playing in a midtown club the next night. I went to hear him, and he was impressive.

I had just received a commission from a Toronto group, Ten Centuries Concerts, to make a film involving the music that I considered the most avant-garde being played in New York at that time. Albert Ayler and the two musicians playing with him when I first heard him, Gary Peacock on bass and Sonny Murray on drums, came to mind immediately. With Ayler's input, I added Don Cherry, John Tchicai, and Roswell Rudd, to make up the group that played the soundtrack for *New York Eye and Ear Control*. I asked the group to improvise a 30-minute piece—no solos, all ensemble playing—and they did that without reference to the film itself. Together, they played a classic of free improvisation, and the soundtrack was issued as an LP by ESP-Disk. The conversation during the recording session was pretty much practical, but the results were great.

Rail: You seem to be one of the few artists who has successfully been able to use time as both subject and medium. Do you follow developments in science? Are you familiar with the Perimeter Institute for Theoretical Physics in Ontario, and the work of physicist Lee Smolin? I ask because his research is profoundly focused on the question of time, treating it as much of a physical or "real" dimension as space.

Snow: Actually I've read *The Trouble with Physics: The Rise of String Theory, The Fall of a Science, and What Comes Next* (2006) by Smolin, and am generally aware of the Perimeter Institute. A long-time friend, sculptor Royden Rabinowitch, is linked with Perimeter and has enthused about their work as it relates to his own concerns.

You can't manipulate time but you can *seem* to manipulate it. In my film **Corpus Callosum* (2002), for example, the whole film at a certain point is repeated backwards and inverted, before righting itself again towards the end. Any form of editing is in fact "manipulating" time. In *See You Later/Au revoir* (1990), the original video recording was about 30 seconds but the film as completed has been "stretched" to nearly 18 minutes.

Rail: Richard Serra once said to me, the experience of the sculpture is the sculpture, not the physical object. I know Richard was very inspired by your work—so many artists and musicians of that period were.

Snow: Richard and I saw each other often when I lived in NYC and he often talked about ideas or projects he was working on. His work is both eminently physical but also intellectual. When we first met, he was throwing molten metal against the meeting-place of the floor and wall. I think that Richard experiencing my films made him want to make films.

Rail: For many who saw *Wavelength* (1967) at the time, it was a shocking and stunning experience. For me it is a perfect work of art. Obviously you began with a strong overall concept, yet it is clearly handmade and full of minute decisions, many very painterly. At what point did you begin to have a sense of the full magnitude of the effect that work was having on the public?

Snow: When I had my "by-invitation" first screening for friends at a theatre arranged by Jonas Mekas, the audience included Shirley Clarke, Ken Jacobs, Nam June Paik, George Kuchar, Ken Kelman, Joyce Wieland, Richard Foreman and Amy Taubin, and a couple of others. Jonas enthusiastically told me I should send the film to a festival soon to take place in Belgium, and he even offered to help pay for a new print. Until then, I assumed I'd only be able to show it a few times, but Jonas's suggestion changed everything, and I won the Grand Prize at Knokke-le-Zoute.

Rail: I asked a young friend recently if he'd ever seen *Wavelength*, and he said yes. Where did you see it, I asked? "I watched it on my phone," he replied. Needless to say, my heart sank. Would you have a similarly distressed reaction? How do you feel about your work on the internet?

Michael Snow, *Wavelength*, 1967. Courtesy the artist.

Snow:I would have been equally distressed. Young people have given me similar stories. Maybe seeing my films on a small screen will make you want to see them as a projected film, but I am not convinced. This is an ongoing issue, especially as actual film projectors are

increasingly difficult to find. There are only a few labs that can make new 16mm prints now. And with COVID-19, there are growing numbers of requests for online screenings for students.

Rail: For me your work is characterized by a lot of seemingly "opposed" positions: it is extremely imaginative, yet highly formal. I find it often deeply emotional, but at the same time very distant. Do you see or feel these "oppositions" yourself?

Snow:I like to think that my work involves a range of thoughts and feelings on the part of the spectator. For me, the work develops from itself, and these "opposites" feel intrinsic and natural.

Rail: Are you bothered when people try to examine you as a Canadian artist? Do you ever think about what that characterization might consist of?

Snow: I don't really know what "Canadian" stands for these days. It used to be "hewers of wood, drawers of water" or "Canadians are always so polite"—hardly accurate now. Realities shift, and opinions are usually out of date.

Hollis Frampton remarked on my "flat Ontario Scottish delivery"—a surprise to me—when he asked me to do voice-over for his film *Nostalgia* (1971). My mother was francophone Québécoise. What might be "Canadian" will be an unknown for almost everyone. Beer commercials are pretty interesting ("My name is Joe …"). Politics aren't the same here-and-there.

Rail: A fellow Canadian artist who I have always thought of in relation to yourself is Glenn Gould, also an artist who understood media, how to use it as a means and a tool to put his vision into the world. Not just recording technology, but the many documentaries he made for the CBC. In particular his radio documentary *The Idea of North* (1967), which certainly reflects many themes that are germane to certain works of yours, in my mind at least. Did you ever meet him?

Snow: My collection of *The Goldberg Variations* started in 1955 with Wanda Landowska's early harpsichord version, but for me, Glenn Gould's two recordings are both extraordinary accomplishments. Unfortunately I never met him, though I had friends who were his good friends. *The Idea of North* remains rather famous but I have only a partial knowledge of the work.

Rail: Recently I came across a quote by Glenn Gould:

> "The trouble begins when we start to be so impressed by the strategies of our systematized thought that we forget that it does relate to an obverse, that it is hewn from negation, that it is but very small security against the void of negation which surrounds it. And when that happens, when we forget these things, all sorts of mechanical failures begin to disrupt the functions of human personality. When people who practice an art like music become captives of those positive assumptions of system, when they forget to credit that happening against negation which system is, and when they become disrespectful of the immensity of negation compared to system—then they put themselves out of reach of that replenishment of invention upon which creative ideas depend, because invention is, in fact, a cautious dipping into the negation that lies outside system from a position firmly ensconced in system."

Snow: This is a difficult passage. I think I understand his final sentence, "because invention is, in fact, a cautious dipping into the negation that lies outside system from a position firmly ensconced in system." Invention equals making something new. To create something new, one must break some rules. But those rules must also be familiar, and *worth* breaking. One needs a position before finding or demanding an alternative. Is that right?

Michael Snow, *Wavelength*, 1967. Courtesy the artist.

Rail: I see it as about the dialectic of creating a work of art that is of necessity formally structured, while just outside that structure lies a world full of emotions and experiences that are, essentially, chaotic, but which are feeding that work. Okay, I'm really using this quote as a segue to talk about *Wavelength*, which like most people I initially saw as a "structural" film, but I increasingly see as an "occult" film: it's about a dimension of reality that is hidden, a meditation on the darker powers of art. Or as Nietzsche said, "Look not into the abyss, lest the abyss should look into you."

Snow:I agree with your saying that *Wavelength* has an almost occult aura surrounding it. I have been told a number of times by various people that seeing the film changed their life.

Rail: John Klacsmann told me the first thing he noticed when beginning the restoration process was how many different film stocks you used in *Wavelength*. There's Kodachrome, and Ektachrome, there's Kodak color negative, and color positive which would have been printed from the Kodak color negative. Then there's Dupont black and white reversal stock, and Agfachrome color reversal stock. That's pretty much an inventory of all commercially available 16mm film at the time. Was this intentional?

Snow: The decision was entirely intentional. In my planning, the constant, physically inalterable subject was going to be "the office" with the yellow chair. But I'd planned to film it in as many ways that I could. One way to accomplish that would be to try different film stocks, and I had some old, out-dated reels that would give an element of "chance" to results. I purposely used some stocks "wrongly," for example, shooting "daylight" film at night with tungsten light.

Rail: Almost all the splices in the film are tape—why tape and not cement, which might be considered more "professional"?

Snow: Tape splices are a little bit easier to remove, if you want to. I wanted to be able to change some of my decisions, as the edit progressed.

Rail: The color positive sections in the film have now faded to magenta. Would you keep it that way, as an artifact of the deterioration, or if it could be fixed digitally would you prefer that?

Michael Snow, *Wavelength*, 1967. Courtesy the artist.

Snow: This is a daunting question. If there is some evidence left on the film indicating what the original color was, then I'd suggest trying to match that. That will be difficult to do, and though I might be the only person who could suggest what color should go there, I don't think I should try. At the same time, I am not intrigued by evidence of deterioration; the original was what I intended. Perhaps John Klacsmann, on the basis of his archival work, might make an informed guess as to the original tones.

Rail: Did you originally show *Wavelength* with a live reel-to-reel soundtrack, or was the sound always on the film?

Snow: At the first private screening I used film and audio separately. The "room" sound was on the optical track of the film, but the electronic glissando (sine wave) was on a quarter-inch tape, which was controlled separately from the audio track. I kept the sine wave separate because I expected that I would be present at any possible future screenings, and I would control the tape sound in response to whatever acoustics were offered by the circumstances of the room. Discussing this possibility with Jonas, we soon realized that it would be impossible to control the separate tape-recorder sound, so I decided that I should make a new sound mix that included the sine wave glissando with the room sound already there.

Rail: Why are the opening titles so very brief?

Snow:I didn't want anything else on the screen except *Wavelength*, so I made the credits as swift as possible.

Rail: Why does Ken Jacobs get a credit—was it his camera?

Snow: Yes. It was his camera, and he didn't want it left in the studio overnight, so I took it back each night to Chambers Street where I was living. I had the camera for about two weeks.

Rail: And what about the yellow chair?

Snow: Without my being conscious of it during the shooting, the sense of significance that I hoped the yellow chair would have came through. I painted it yellow for the occasion. Even then I wasn't sure what I intended with the chair and its placement but afterwards I was satisfied somehow.

Rail: I think anyone who really watches the film carefully (let alone restores it) is struck by how handmade it is, right down to the unit structure—the individual frames. Klacsmann was surprised at how much superimposition you did—B-rolls (color) superimposed over A-rolls (the loft). Would you say your training as a painter was at play here?

Snow: I guess so, though *Wavelength* is filmic, not painterly, despite the color mixing. I'm definitely not conscious of there being any influence between the two. There's a lot of editing but most of that disappears, as there's no change of scene. The zoom is the only motion, and the zoom was hand-done by me. I could have arranged something more mechanical but I liked the direct aspect of making those decisions. Maybe my hand manipulating the zoom is painterly.

Rail: Is this the first restoration work that has been done on the film?

Snow: Yes. There have been no changes to the film itself since it was made, though of course each new print might be slightly different, as certain film stocks become no longer available.

Rail: I don't know of many artists who deal with the physical world in such a concrete way as you do, and yet your work always seems to possess a very strong metaphysical dimension. It almost seems like the steady accumulation of "real" or concrete instances leads to a state that is paradoxically very abstract. What would you say about this observation?

Snow: The film image is made of time and light, so that despite the success of "realism" the personages that are pictured are always phantoms. *Wavelength*, in particular, tries to make apprehension of film's nature a factor in the spectator's experience-conscious.

Rail: *Wavelength* always struck me as being like an acid experience—seeing the metaphysical dimension just behind the world of appearances. One thing I have always wondered is did you have any experiences with LSD in the 1960s, and if so can you describe what you might have noticed or learned?

Snow: In the year before I made *Wavelength* I had several experiences with LSD where objects and people were sensed as infinite. Experiencing *Wavelength* is not an imitation "trip" but is informed by those insights. The long zoom, leading to an image of the ocean and through the wall itself, suggests all that, as do the flashing colors.

Michael Snow, *Wavelength*, 1967. Courtesy the artist.

Rail: Is this quote of yours about "Strawberry Fields Forever," from an interview with Robert Enright in *Border Crossings*, accurate?

Q: Why was "Strawberry Fields" the song used in *Wavelength*?

A: When I shot the film, I knew that as far as the sound and the images went, I had to accept what the traffic was going to do. So when these two women go in and one of them turns on the radio, I felt that I had to accept whatever sound came through in the same way that I accepted the sound from the street. But what came out was "Little Drummer Boy" by Joan Baez, which I really hated. I just couldn't see that it had any place in the film. If she had

turned on the radio and it was scrambled news, I would have used it because it was coming in from outside, but then I was faced with having to make a choice. “Strawberry Fields” had just come out and seemed appropriate.

Snow: Yes, the quote is accurate.I was ready to accept anything, but Joan Baez was going too far.

Rail: Are you aware that the original lyrics that Lennon sings were, “No one is on my *Wavelength* …”?

Snow: No, I didn’t know that, thanks. Incidentally, John Lennon and Yoko Ono saw *Wavelength* many times and liked it.

Rail: At what point were you able to begin to support yourself through your work, and prior to that how did you earn a living?

Snow: My first job out of OCA was entry-level advertising design and I hated it, then I spent a year hitch-hiking in Europe with a friend and playing jazz. After my first exhibition in Toronto I was hired by George Dunning to learn animation on-the-job. That was important. Then I began to work as a professional musician, playing jazz in local clubs, and working daytimes in my studio, painting. The music/painting cycle continued successfully until Joyce and I moved to New York in 1961.

Rail: Do you think you could have had the same breakthroughs in your work if you had not come to New York?

Snow: At the for-friends first screening of *Wavelength*, Jonas Mekas suggested I send the film to a festival in Belgium. It won the Grand Prize and caused a lot of wonderful things to happen. That could only come about because I was in New York.

Rail: I was speaking with Henry Kaiser the other day and he said you were one of the finest improvisors he’s ever played with. Have you ever tried to examine that state of improvisation? Can you describe it, how it functions? Is it a release from the necessary practical demands of making a film or painting or sculpture, where one must have more of a plan in place?

Snow: Free improvisation is the process which jazz always wanted from its beginning.

Rail: Off the top of your head, what are some of your favorite jazz albums?

Snow: Perhaps surprisingly, I no longer listen to records at all. But I have a number of LPs by Thelonious Monk, Miles Davis, Sonny Rollins, John Coltrane, and I have a soft spot for the Jazz Composers Orchestra because they rehearsed in my New York studio.

Rail: What musical group, historically, would you like to have been a member of?

Snow: Jelly Roll Morton's Red Hot Peppers.

Rail: Is the analogy of the laboratory appropriate? You design a work the way a scientist would design an experiment: there's a question you wish to investigate, an idea or hypothesis, and then there's a set of procedures/rules put in place. Once the work is launched, the extraneous variables in the environment then come into play and the work takes on its own life.

Snow: Yes.

Rail: I feel like your works are, amongst other things, all thought experiments of one sort or another.

Snow: I suppose there are some works that are stricter than others in terms of a predetermined system being put in place.

Rail: I often get the sense that you must be as much of a surprised viewer of the work as the audience is later on.

Snow: That's true.

Michael Snow, *Cityscape*, 2019. Courtesy the artist.

Rail: I want to discuss a recent work of yours, *Cityscape* (2019). Seeing this video on the computer monitor is quite vertiginous. It must be especially so on the IMAX screen. Is this part of the desired effect?

Snow: I've never intended my films to induce nausea or vertigo, though I've had previous comments about this effect from other works, especially *La Région Centrale* (1971), but also *Back and Forth* (1969). Making the films, I never thought about nausea as a possible audience reaction. The kind of acceleration that happens in my films is undoubtedly, rarely experienced.

Rail: Can you briefly summarize what your idea or thesis was in making this film?

Snow: ***Cityscape*** is one of the family of works dealing with camera motion, an interest dating back to *Wavelength*. My friendGraeme Ferguson, one of the originators of IMAX, suggested doing a version of *La Région Centrale* in that format after seeing the film, but for me the idea held little interest. I felt *La Région Centrale* was complete and I had accomplished my purpose.

Years later, I was approached again to make a short film with IMAX, now in digital format, and this time I thought, instead of a landscape film, vast and unpopulated, I would be interested in looking at my own city, a more linear view. The part of Toronto that is seen in *Cityscape* is actually rarely seen by its citizens. We seldom think of Lake Ontario at the foot of Yonge Street, but the skyline viewed from the islands just offshore is interesting. The title makes clear that the city is the subject.

Rail: Was *Cityscape* a revisiting of the concerns of *La Région Centrale*, a coda or an epilogue to that vast work? Or do you prefer not to see *Cityscape* in those terms at all?

Snow: ***La Région Centrale*** has a deliberate purity. No people are seen, and the only man-made thing is the camera. Its support never appears, though we recognize its shadow from time to time. I wanted the camera movements to be part of the family: sun, moon, earth.

Rail: Often works of yours have predecessors in other works. Is that a way of trying out the idea in another medium or context?

Snow: Sometimes I take on something that was previously avoided. For example, I'd always rejected narrative cinema for its reliance on "stories," then I had the idea of a "short story" and made *SSHHOORRTY* (2005), a brief sequence with a classic narrative arc, which is then cut in half and superimposed together. The dialogue is in Farsi and subtitled in English, but both languages are obscured by the superimposition.

Rail: Many things come to mind watching *Cityscape*, not all of them formal. One thing I thought about is your relationship to Toronto. This is quite a marvelous portrait of that city. I thought of Vermeer's *View of Delft*, the clarity, the light, the flatness.

Snow: Vermeer is one of my favorite artists.

Rail: There is a strange moment in *Cityscape* where a bird flies across the sky and suddenly the whole spatial configuration for a quick moment is shattered. Somehow when it appears, once or twice, it makes for a beautiful counterpoint to everything else, it seems like true freedom. Was that something you noticed?

Snow: When I saw the bird I first thought, "Oh Damn!" but soon I said to myself, "Maybe not."

Rail: I barely recognized Toronto when watching *Cityscape*, not having visited the city for many years—I thought I might be looking at Seattle or Sydney or somewhere in China. You must have seen Toronto go through some extraordinary changes.

Snow: Toronto was already a different place in 1971 or 1972 when I came back from living for 10 years in New York. I'd left without a backward glance, but then things were changing. Immigration, partly. Scale. More interesting restaurants, new galleries. The change over 50 years is remarkable.

Rail: In *Cityscape* there's a hardness and relentlessness to the technology that you don't seem to shy away from. Can you relate to that observation?

Snow: No reason to shy away from it. "Relentless" is a term I've heard before.

Rail: The sound-image relationships in your works are always so strange and marvelous. They are parallel, not derivative. Is there any general operating principle in that regard?

Snow: Every film is different. My first film was silent (*A to Z,* 1956). *New York Eye and Ear Control* recognized that sound and image could be the basis of a film. *Wavelength* began with two soundtracks (the sine wave was separate at first, though was always intended to be placed there.) I don't have a single, overarching point of view, but consider each situation for its own sake.

Rail: Specifically, where perception is involved, are there any philosophers or thinkers who you find particularly valuable?

Snow: Nietzsche and Wittgenstein.

Rail: I've been reading Marshall McLuhan again and finding him more relevant than ever. Did his work make a big impression on you at the time? He must have been a considerable figure in Toronto at one time. Did you ever encounter him?

Snow:I've been in several gatherings where he was also present, but I never actually knew him. Once, we sat together waiting to be interviewed separately for a radio program, but neither of us spoke after "hello." George Dunning (Graphic Films, where I worked for about a year) considered him a friend. I remember reading *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and *Understanding Media*. McLuhan was certainly talked about here then, but it seemed to me that some of his observations were academic, in the sense of being part of a university view, not a view of quotidian life. I was wrong.

Rail: Many of your films were very long, and not much happened in the way of "action"—they were about careful extended experiential observation. Could you get away with that today, or are attention spans too truncated by media overload and gadgetry?

Snow: Now that I'm "iconic," audiences tend to stay respectfully through even my longest films, unlike the old days when some people lost patience after just a few minutes and exited abruptly, sometimes noisily.

Rail: It's very hard to come up with general sweeping statements about your work, because every work you make is so different from the next. Every piece of yours seems to occupy its own world, distinct from each other. Do you think this has been an obstacle for your audiences and your critical reception in general? You certainly don't seem to have done anything to mitigate or alleviate that condition.

Snow: My work tends to attract a more specialized attention to specific works. There has been some fine writing about individual films, for example, but I've never been slotted into a "movement" or genre. I don't think of this as an obstacle, but your observation is accurate. I really don't think of the audience in advance or while making the work; I just hope they will find interesting what *I* find interesting.

Rail: Tell me about *Solar Breath (Northern Caryatids)* (2002). It's one of my favorite films of yours. It doesn't seem like you are doing anything more than making a simple recording of something that is happening directly in front of you. Nature itself seems to be making a structural film and you are just recording it. It's extremely compelling. It also reminded me somewhat of Robert Frank's later works, which seem poised somewhere between the still and moving image.

Michael Snow, *Solar Breath (Northern_Caryatids)*, 2002. Courtesy the artist.

Snow: At our cabin in a remote part of Newfoundland, I've often noted the unpredictable movements of the cotton curtain against the open window facing our dining table, just before sunset. It was impossible to capture on film, because an extended recording period was necessary to capture the effect. Much later, with video, I could record a full hour, but the action of the evening breeze is fleeting. I caught it only once. My wife Peggy and I were eating dinner as the sun was setting. We tried to be quiet, but you can hear the sound of dishes and cutlery. True, the image is mesmerizing, and often I've seen people sitting there in a gallery,

watching the curtain move, then slap against the screen (in the open window) as if against the gallery wall. Sometimes they stay for a long time, watching. The sound is quiet, but crucial. Over the hour-long recording, the back-lighting of the sky moves perceptively towards a deeper yellow-gold.

Michael Snow, *Solar Breath (Northern_Caryatids)*, 2002. Courtesy the artist.

Rail: Has it been important for you to spend time in nature, especially in such a remote place?

Snow: In recent years, our summers overlooking the ocean have generated much of my new work. The isolation and silence, the lack of interruption, has been inspiring. Each day, there is the weather, and a quiet dinner to look forward to.

Rail: There's a lot of engineering in some of your works. Do you enjoy that aspect of the making?

Snow: Some of that engineering is done by other people. As digital has taken over film and everything else, I can't rely on my "hands-on" approach, and need assistance with technology, editing etc., even cut-and-paste design.

Rail: In the 1960s Frank Stella and Carl Andre were quite adamant that there was nothing to a work of art aside from the physical materials. Do you agree with that, or do you accept the "aura" of a work of art?

Snow: Physical material alone can be pretty boring. Of course a real work of art has an aura.