

PRESENCE AND ABSENCE

It's often the case that artists, if they keep talking about themselves long enough, ultimately come up with simpler, pithier, more penetrating definitions of their work than most professional critics are usually capable of: something so pure and true in its guilelessness that it takes the place of volumes. This is certainly the situation with Michael Snow, who once described himself this way: "Well, I'm interested in sound, and I've been a musician and I do things that are just sound. And I have been a painter—things that go on walls. I still do photograph pieces and films. Sculpture too. I think saying *artist* doesn't mean the material you use, but that you do things of a certain kind."

The quotation is from a long interview that Snow did with Joe Medjuck that appeared almost 25 years ago in [the original] *Take One*, which Medjuck was editing at the time. Snow himself, or any of the commentators on his work, could use the same words today to produce a fundamental insight into one of Canada's best known art-world figures.

Snow is interesting partly because he's played all these different roles—painter, filmmaker, jazz musician—for almost as long as any one can remember (he's 66 now). He's been a kind of changeless polymath, switching back and forth from one medium to another for short periods, not someone who moves sequentially through a number of disciplines and genres. He's also notable because he's managed to remain famous among people outside the visual arts for being "difficult" and "avant-garde," while also displaying a strongly commercial side that hasn't harmed his serious reputation. What every visitor to the Eaton Centre (Toronto's single most popular tourist sight) comes away with is the image of Snow's bronze Canada geese hanging down from the ceiling of the enormous atrium.

That is to say that Snow's public life has been the story of how he has received acclaim at all levels both for catering to a broad audience and deliberately eschewing the narrative, the direct communication, and the easy-to-understand. The proof of this, and the crowning achievement of his career, has been the series of exhibitions and attendant books called *The Michael Snow Project*, "proudly sponsored by AT&T" and lavishly supported by all levels of the govern-

ment arts apparatus in what looks distressingly like a last hurrah for funding on this scale. Three volumes have appeared already from two different publishers—*Visual Art 1951-1993*, *Music/Sound 1948-1993* and the most valuable but rather pompously titled *Collected Writings of Michael Snow*. Now comes a fourth: *Presence and Absence: The Films of Michael Snow 1956-1991* edited by Jim Shedden.

Snow's sporadic but prolific life as a minimalist filmmaker can be neatly told, and Bart Testa, in the main essay in this book, performs the task rather smartly. Snow returned from a year in Europe following his time at the Ontario College of Art and held his first exhibition at Hart House, University of Toronto. One of those who came to look was the filmmaker George Dunning (who would go on to make the Beatles' *Yellow Submarine*). Dunning gave Snow a job in the animation department of his small Canadian production house. This is a telling fact, I think, because the experience must have encouraged Snow to work like an animator even when he wasn't—slowly and on a lapidary scale, with attention to detail and craft, acutely sensitive to motion over narrative, yet economical with movement all the same. Then Snow went to New



The Films
of Michael
Snow
1956-1991

York where he became a famous painter and where his films (and those of his then-wife Joyce Wieland) were taken up by Jonas Mekas, the most powerful critic of underground, pop and other experimental and non-narrative films, who was the critic of the *Village Voice*. (Mekas has a piece in *Presence and Absence* as well.)

Snow and Wieland were then in their internationalist period, which they later seemed to renounce by returning to Toronto at the start of the Canadian renaissance in the 1960s and becoming major nationalists. They weren't collaborators exactly. Wieland was more deeply (and more variously) a visual artist than Snow, and she was concerned with the tactile and the political (and the proto-feminist), whereas he continued to explore the space between sound and image. But they both made films—of their kind.

For everyone who appreciated Snow's *Wavelength* or \longleftrightarrow (*Back and Forth*) there was an equal and sometimes opposite audience for such Wieland films as *Rat Life and Diet in North America*. The two artists were distinct from each other, but their names were linked inseparably as part of the New York and later the Canadian avant-garde aesthetic. While Snow has continued his laboratory experiments, Wieland grew as a filmmaker to the point where she could use her artist's knowledge in a full-length narrative feature, *The Far Shore* (1975)—a piece of work that can still inspire fierce reaction for and against.

Snow and Wieland had long been the Canadian art world's most conspicuous couple—symbiotically creative across a long period and in an intimidating variety of arenas and disciplines—when they split up and divorced. In view of that, one of the intriguing aspects of *Presence and Absence* is how it virtually ignores Wieland. Readers friendly to Snow might say that this shows his own filmmaking in an unencumbered light. Cynics might view the matter differently. Everyone, though, should be awed by this latest documentation of The Michael Snow Project, a tribute virtually without precedent to a living Canadian artist (or even a dead one).

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PRESENCE AND ABSENCE: THE FILMS OF MICHAEL SNOW 1956-1991, edited by Jim Shedden, Knopf Canada, Toronto, 1995. \$35.

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