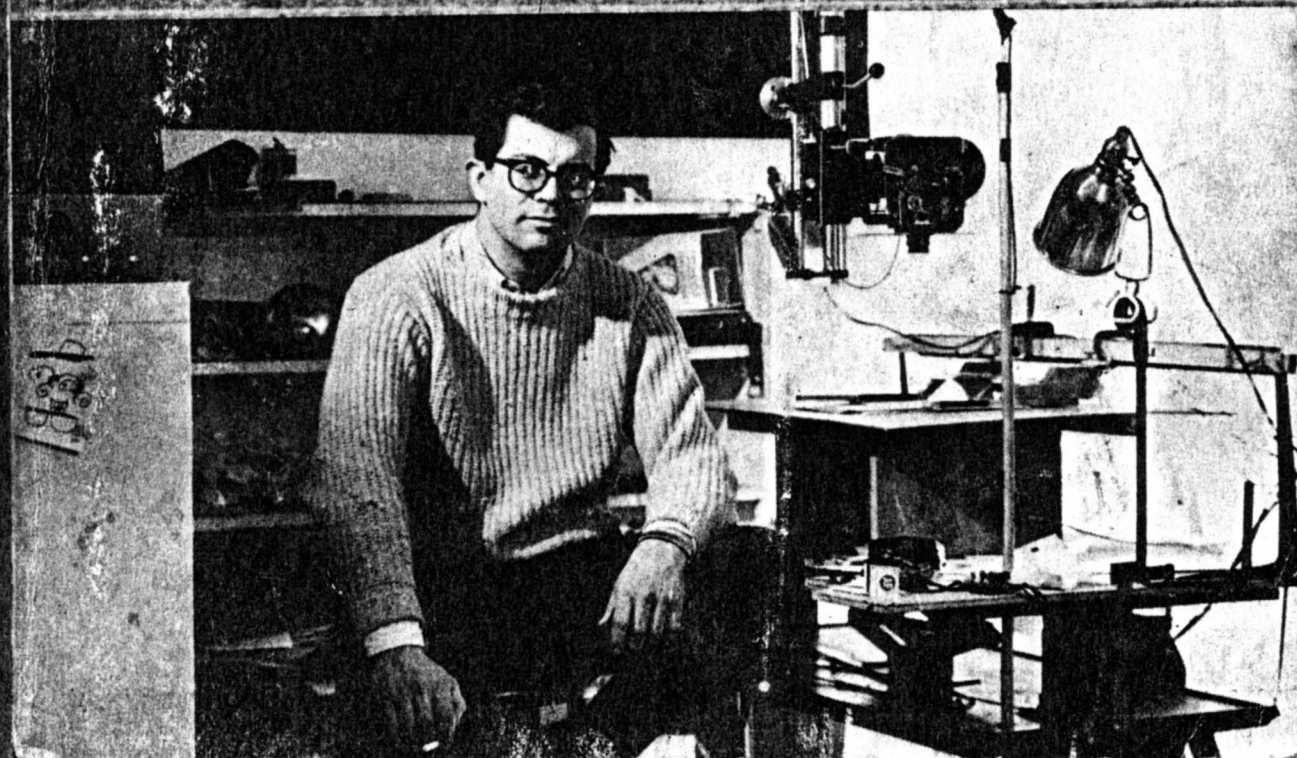
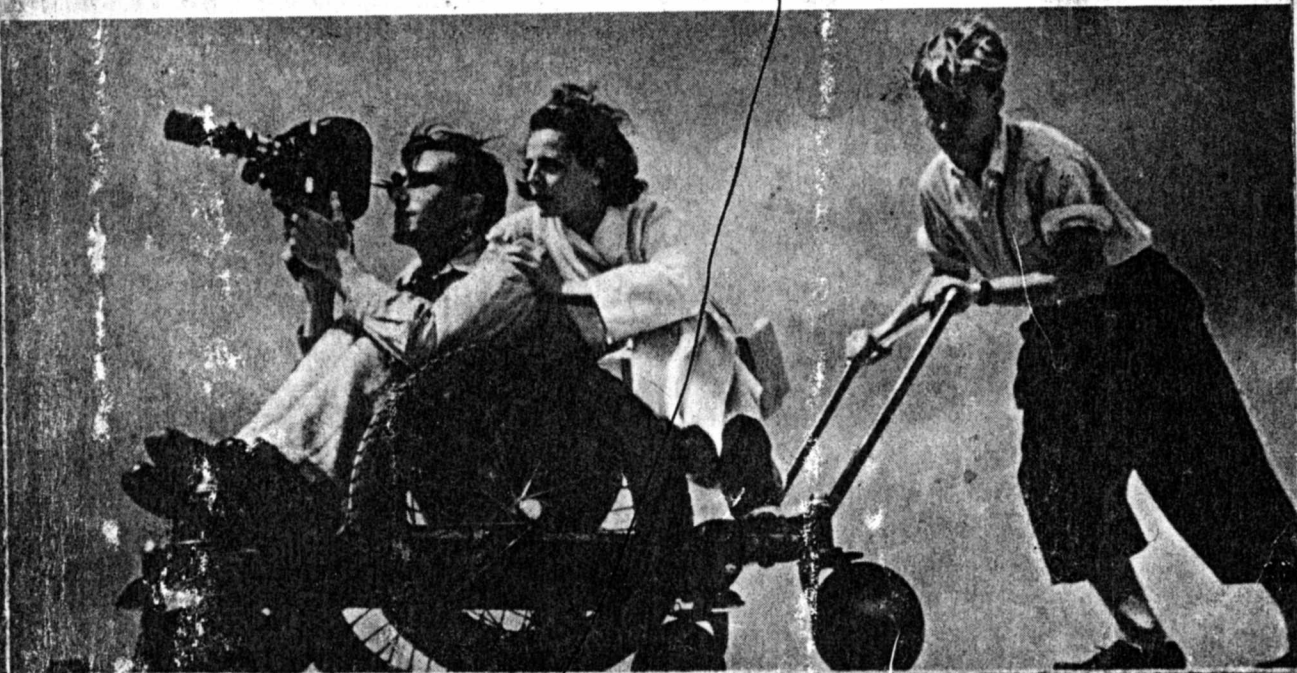


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# FILM CULTURE

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affirmation and celebration of life in this film. Thus, it is emblematic of the sensibility that Brakhage has demonstrated in his greatest works.

## A CASING SHELVED

By Andrée Hayum

Behind this attempt at orderly noticing do I have a horror of the possibility of chaos? Would chaos be an inability to tell one thing from another? Is sanity only the ability to identify and to name? Cultural? Is ordering the "disorder" an order? Can there be "order" without repetition? Is there something necessarily fatalistic but also "religious" in affirming (quoting?) that disorder must be only a type of order the nature of which is not yet comprehended . . . ? But "the eye of the beholder" . . . not only is order projected but all is order; all is ordained? The reason for the shape of my nose the same as the reason a bus just passed this building. Oh, that's going too far.

Michael Snow, *Passage*

Page 63, *Artforum*, September 1971

*For Rosalind Krauss*

*A Casing Shelved* is an extraordinary work. Michael Snow presents us with a single color slide projected for forty-five minutes, and an accompanying soundtrack in which he proceeds to explain, step by step, what we are looking at. What we see is a bookcase crammed with things previously used in his studio: paint cans, photographs, coffee cups, a hot plate, a wine bottle, etc., etc. The components of *A Casing Shelved* are essentially unaesthetic and its presence hovers at every point between triviality and significance. The work's uniqueness lies, not only in the wit and subtlety of its researches, but in the surprisingly thoroughgoing manner in which it functions as a formal and experiential equivalent for its message, and as a powerful expression of modernist sensibility.

*A Casing Shelved* has been shown in a gallery, using a photograph and a tape recorder.<sup>1</sup> However, I would like to address my remarks to the "official" and to my mind more effective version of



this piece which takes place in a movie theater. Here, we are a captive audience to Snow's oral description. Presumably executed in his studio while looking at the bookshelf (or was it the slide?), its transmission through the vehicle of a soundtrack and the evidence of a slide projection reminds us of the classroom situation in which the academic study of art history occurs today. For, in that arena, the act of orally characterizing a work for an audience from the evidence of slides has become a well established practice with its own set of conventions.<sup>2</sup> Snow recreates a characteristic that painting and sculpture of past periods have attained since they were removed from their original contexts and placed in museums or talked about in academies through the agency of slides, namely, their exhibition or performance value.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, the effect of *A Casing Shelved* as performance is crucial to an understanding of its point of departure. Employing the format and orientation of the proscenium theater, from which the movie theater derives, Snow reminds us that traditional performance, with its preponderance of conventions, is precisely where the receiver has become most complacent about having a set of expectations fulfilled. But, just as John Cage has obliterated expectations pertaining to musical performance, so Snow goes against the grain of filmic expectation by subjecting us to an extended static image and dramatic expectation by monumentalizing a configuration of objects and things. He keeps us coming to terms with the unsettling notion that what we are witnessing is out of place. In this way performance becomes a setting associated with factors which inhibit our capacities to absorb and to understand.

While we may admit that preconditions and preconceptions bar the route towards understanding, Snow introduces a further dilemma: that the very testimony to our awareness, understanding, and knowledge can itself be a distorting agent. Because that testimony is articulation, and articulation, a projection into symbolic mode (be it linguistic or pictorial), our essential perceptions and experiences must necessarily be transformed. This dilemma underlies and motivates Snow's description. His delivery is unexpectedly informal. Often he seems tentative, even haphazard, as he falters, backtracks, and rambles. But, on close listening, we find him actually employing fundamental strategies of the cognitive process in an effort to test the limits of their usefulness.

How do we describe objects? Presumably, first we name them. Snow does this as he points out a "hot plate", an "extension cord", a "bookcase". He gropes with us for the names of things, remind-

ing us of that phase in the learning process when children make their first associations between people, things, and their names. When Snow "recalls" a name like "bookcase", he repeats it three times in a self-congratulatory tone; like a child he is proud of having mastered the object by knowing the name. But, by mimicking this process Snow seems to call attention to the arbitrariness of naming rather than its delineating function. (Especially if we should realize, for instance, that for the French child to find the name *bibliothèque* for that which we call a bookcase would produce a similar feeling of security and satisfaction.)

A second procedure Snow uses to define objects is to locate them. He does this in both geographic and chronological terms. He discusses most of the objects according to their arrangement in this slide ("... in the top left hand corner ..."). Often he gives us their geographic history ("... a photograph ... which I took ... at Center Island near Toronto, Lake Ontario."). In the same way, he refers to their chronology—a photograph taken in 1966, wine from a party after the "last" Poindexter show, what is left (now) of a jar of acrylic. We are given some of the trappings of a determinist explanation of existence, where past leads to present, cause to effect. But Snow succeeds in short circuiting this connection rather than in affirming it. For instance, when he says that a coffee container "undoubtedly" came from Dave's Corner House, where "I have often gone for coffee", he emphasizes the gap between the givens of the container in the picture and of his past excursions to Dave's Corner House, a gap which is filled by assumptions made during the process of deduction. A determinist or causal argument depends on a reconstruction of past events; it depends on the capacity to remember. Snow realizes this but he shows that if we are capable of remembering, we are also likely to forget. Thus, he amends dates ("No, it wasn't '67, it was '66"), he forgets names ("What do you call that?"), he loses the threads of his own description.

I believe that Snow also undermines a determinist or causal view of events through the vehicle of autobiography. More precisely, he lays bare as illusory the notion that access to an artist's life history need necessarily aid in understanding the works by that artist. In this respect, *A Casing Shelved* may be compared to Jean-Marie Straub's *Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* (1968), a film in which a narrator, Bach's second wife, Anna Magdalena, relates events from the composer's life and career. Shots of period costumes and sets are interspersed with documents in the form of

scores, music sheets, letters, and announcements, which are presented in close-up, full screen view. But working at odds with this chaste, documentary approach is Bach's music on the soundtrack. Assuming independent life because of the effect of its buoyancy, the music seems to transcend the calculatedly spare and static images. The viewer is left struggling to find some organic connection between the biographical evidence that is scrupulously conveyed, and the experience of the music itself.

In *A Casing Shelved* this discrepancy occurs due to the kind of information Snow gives us. Since nearly all the objects assembled functioned in Snow's previous works (i.e., the green ball in the film <—> [*Back and Forth*]), or served him in his studio (coffee cups from a "take-out" place), their description yields the impression of an autobiographical account. Yet, his references to past works and the events surrounding them are exclusively of a material, technical, or incidental nature (the kind of glue used here, the type of camera there). In the end, we could ask how someone unacquainted with Snow's career can marshal this information towards a better understanding of the representation in *A Casing Shelved*. Or, how does this "autobiography" enlighten one familiar with Snow's other works? Can we really reconcile the fundamentally conceptual nature of his *oeuvre* with the craftsman's trade secrets delivered up here?

Where we have assumed that the past is a treasured reservoir for revelation, in *A Casing Shelved* Snow seems to be saying that what is passed sheds little light on the present and that things in the present run the continual risk of becoming obsolete. This, of course, applies to the image as a whole—a book shelf (but never used as such), piled with things—objects which have been "shelved", not out of sight, but out of immediate use. In describing the contents of the shelf Snow repeatedly refers to objects that are used up or out of order: a "conked out" radio, "dried up" brushes, a fading photograph, a faulty screwdriver. Almost everything on the shelf was once a marketable product. Snow underscores this implied fact by pointing facetiously to one or two "found" objects. He also shows how quality judgments may be made according to monetary value. He mentions having bought a polaroid camera which supposedly is superior to the one he previously owned. Uncertain of the truth, he adds, as if to reassure himself, "It was more expensive". Influenced by our orientation as consumers, here, it is clear, even the artist is a consumer. Snow, in turn, makes us aware of how our very modes of description and characterization make demands

on the objects of their concern; by including categories of function or expectation they are bound to render those objects maladaptive or obsolete, and therefore to deny them their fullest being.

Not only our modes of identifying and defining things, but also our modes of organizing them have this effect. The image itself employs the obvious ordering device of the bookcase with its division and subdivision of disarray. Whether using these compartments insures our comprehension of the essence of things is doubtful however. So Snow indicates when describing the shovel in terms of the structure of the bookcase. The handle, for instance, is described in connection with things on the third shelf, the horizontal zone to which it adheres. Omitting subsequent description of the shaft, he proceeds directly to the "shovel part of the shovel". Fragments of a whole are thus evoked.

The fragmenting of entities is one danger of conceptual constructs. Another is the neutralizing effect of classification. Our ability to see relationships, to perceive likenesses and dissimilarities in random samples, has been a foundation for discovery in all fields of knowledge. Snow lapses into this classifying phase of investigation at several points in his description, surveying things of one type, shape, material, or color. But in doing so he would have us question what is, in fact, elucidated about a paint can and a wine bottle by calling attention to the cylindrical shape they have in common. Or again, does the red of the shovel's handle and the red of a can of Noxon really reveal any inherent community between these two objects?

Snow's description determines the duration of *A Casing Shelved*. An important twentieth century work which similarly turns the narrator's description of a pictorial representation into the narrative scaffold of the work achieved is Alain Robbe-Grillet's novel *In the Labyrinth*.<sup>4</sup> Robbe-Grillet's narrator describes a nineteenth century etching.<sup>5</sup> He begins,

The picture, in its varnished wood-frame, represents a tavern scene. It is a nineteenth century etching, or a good reproduction of one. A large number of people fill the room, a crowd of drinkers sitting or standing, and on the far left, the bartender standing on a slightly raised platform behind his bar.

The bartender is a fat, bald man wearing an apron. He leans forward, both hands resting on the edge of the bar, over several half-full glasses that have been set there . . .<sup>6</sup>

Although the contours of Robbe-Grillet's novel are taut and precise, his narrator seems uncontrolling and unknowing as we watch him describe his explorations of the narrative map that is the etching. The neutralizing or distancing of events that ensues from this narrative "once removed" brilliantly puts into question traditional narrative structure. Furthermore, while past narrative representations prided themselves on the illusion of reality they projected, Robbe-Grillet succeeds in obscuring the boundaries between reality and illusion. Because of the meticulousness and neutrality of his language, it is nearly impossible in places to decipher whether the narrator is accounting for viewed reality or viewed representation. Especially since, at the beginning, the narrator describes a view outside the window of his room which includes a soldier leaning against a lamp post, and in the tavern scene of the etching, some figures are also to be identified as soldiers.

For his part, Snow reveals a distance from traditional narrative format by suggesting its structure while obliterating its contents. Indeed, he punctuates the limits of his description with a start ("Well, let's see . . .") and a finish ("March 30, 1970"). During the description we begin to ask: "What will be next?", "Where will it be?", "When will he stop?" Such questions suggest a parallel to the unsolved plot elements of a suspense story. Though different in manner from Robbe-Grillet's narrator, there are nonetheless basic affinities between the two. Where Robbe-Grillet allows for the shadow or reflection of a story, Snow substitutes objects and things for people and events. Where Robbe-Grillet's narrator depends on a story line that he unravels from an already existing representation, Snow, like a contemporary anti-hero, is an anti-narrator. At times he is casual, at times fumbling and absent minded. He even elicits our help ("What do you call that?") to make his way through the labyrinth of his representation. He shifts gear as he proceeds: from a linear direction (moving from left to right, from item to item); to a more conceptual organization (covering objects of the same gender); to a privately associational mode ("For some reason I am drawn to . . .")—a combined procedure more like the excursions of the analysand's monologue, searching for a story, than the traditional narrator's program.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, Snow too hints at his commitment to the arresting presence of illusion. He does so by calling attention to commonly held assumptions concerning the photographic image. Throughout most of his description, Snow takes for granted our shared ability to decipher what is "really" depicted in the slide. He refers to a

wine bottle, a coat hanger, a can of paint, a coffee cup. Indeed, the extent to which all fields of knowledge in the twentieth century have been advanced by the illustrative aid of photographs would seem to be adequate testimony to the realism of their representations. But there are several instances where Snow reveals another kind of awareness. The "black line" he tries to describe turns out to be an electric cord. What he calls a "brown rectangle" he then identifies as a brown cardboard box. This modulation into a formal key (with other moments of recognition, such as when he says, "they are roses", or rather, "they represent roses.") reveals a keen appreciation for that fragile zone separating the symbols of information we accept to be real from the lines, shapes, or colors that form the concrete reality of the photographic image.

In her article, "Toward Snow", Annette Michelson writes about *One Second in Montreal* (1969), a series of photographs presented at varying durations on a film strip. She posits a perceptual distinction between a film made up of still photographs and a series of slide projections.<sup>8</sup> With *A Casing Shelved*, the difference in effect of the slide as against other choices Snow might have made is also worth consideration. Michelson emphasizes the temporal factor inherent in the filmic image and the viewer's necessary, even if unconscious, awareness of time, an awareness excluded from one's experience of a slide. While, the slide is "up there", taking time, and where, in this work, the soundtrack imparts a temporal structure to the image, there is a distinction to be made between both these modes of time and one in which duration and development are experienced as outgrowths of the image itself, as in film. Nor does the fact that Snow creates movement by directing our eyes from one place to another in itself yield a temporal continuity. For the snail's pace of his description at times causes our glance to wander or to shift into a stare, rather than sticking to the ostensibly prescribed reading. Thus, by eliminating the potential of the represented objects to reveal themselves during and through the passage of time (as would result from an extended take with a movie camera), and, by setting up a series of experiential tensions that militate against continual intake, Snow provides a perceptual equivalent for his treatise on the difficulties of knowing.

The effect of space in the slide is a perceptual correlate of its temporal character. In part because of the frontality of the representation in *A Casing Shelved*, as well as because of the incalculable measure of forms due to the light, color, and surface of the slide medium itself, a space results that evades our grasp, both on a



sensuous level and within the context of narrative.<sup>9</sup> For, to fully understand a given object that appears within our field of vision involves locating it in space. Concomitantly, our understanding of an event is bound up with the sense of how it came about and where it is going. For example, in Snow's film, *Wavelength* (1967), we see two figures cart an empty bookcase into a loft, thereby suggesting both a history and a purpose to the same shelves we see before us in *A Casing Shelved*. But here, try as Snow may to explicate its contents, as an image *A Casing Shelved* is nearer to Robbe-Grillet's remark about the characters in *Waiting for Godot*, namely, that above all they are "there".<sup>10</sup> And, as in *Godot*, the very "thereness" of it seems to prohibit convenient explanation of its existence.

Leonardo da Vinci's inquiries into the nature of the universe derived force from their integration of speculation and experience. His paintings, which also served him as tools for investigation, are themselves exemplary of this approach. To present a synthesis of contrasting states of being—the particular and the general, mass and space, movement and stasis—and to convey the process of perception itself, his pictures explored a unique mode of vision. By contrast, Michael Snow projects a mechanical reproduction of a banal image. But his goals, in this and other works, include a return to the wholesomeness and daring of Leonardo's outlook. *A Casing Shelved* is one step in that direction. It concerns itself with those assumptions and presumptions that are a by-product of western, post-renaissance epistemology.

Snow's natural suspicion and gentle warnings relate him to the core of twentieth century philosophical concern where, from a distance, seemingly diverse ideological approaches and methods are unified in the thrust of their inquiry and the exigencies that motivate their enterprise. Turning to Existentialism or Phenomenology, Structuralism or Semiology, we find their focal concern to be with modes of perception, on the one hand, and patterns of language, on the other. And we see their common purpose to be a cleansing and resensitizing of our tools of perception and communication. The nature of Snow's presentation, unlike that of the philosopher or the social scientist, heightens our awareness of these issues by making us experience them, and by causing that experience to resonate in our consciousness.

#### NOTES

1. My thanks to Klaus Kertess of the Bykert Gallery for kindly making the photograph and tape of this work available to me.

2. The development of art history as an academic discipline is coincidental with and dependent upon the perfecting of the reproductive media.

3. See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, New York, 1968, p. 223, for related discussion.

4. Actually, both these works represent fascinating extremes of a traditional mode of verbalizing about works of art: the rhetorical figure of ekphrasis, or verbal evocation through description of narrative. Homer's passage on the shield of Achilles and Vasari's treatment of individual pictures in his *Lives of the Artists* are examples of this convention. See Svetlana Leontief Alpers, "Ekphrasis and aesthetic attitudes in Vasari's *Lives*," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, XXIII, nos. 3-4, 1960, pp. 190-215.

If the goal of the ancient ekphrasis was to heighten the spectator's involvement in the described work and if the "describer" came close to the artist in searching out the motivation of events depicted, Snow's and Robbe-Grillet's examples serve to keep the viewer at a distance and to secure for the artist a role as ultimate viewer.

5. Interestingly, the work described is, like Snow's, in a reproductive medium. I believe that Snow and Robbe-Grillet are similarly motivated in their choice of object. With a mechanical reproduction the content of the work may be neutralized and its inherent quality of "belonging" to a particular artist's oeuvre undercut.

6. *Two Novels by Robbe-Grillet (Jealousy & In The Labyrinth)*, trans. Richard Howard, New York, Grove Press, 1965, p. 150.

7. Only when Snow tells us, a few times, what is inside a box or wrapping, something we cannot know or see, does he remind us of the omniscient narrator.

8. Annette Michelson, "Toward Snow," *Artforum*, June, 1971, pp. 30-37.

9. The beginning of film or recorded movement saw an implied boundary occurring between the viewer and the filmed world. This boundary was interrupted only rarely, as when a character peered directly into the camera. Maintaining the separation insured the projected illusion of reality and gave its contents believable causality and coherence.

With the rigorous frontality of *A Casing Shelved*, Snow goes back to the prevailing, "pre-narrative" orientation of early photographs.

10. Alain Robbe-Grillet, *For A New Novel*, Richard Howard trans., New York, Grove Press, 1965, p. 115.

In employing this term Robbe-Grillet is actually quoting Heidegger's comment on the human condition.