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TEXTS IN ENGLISH

IN SEARCH OF BETTER ORGANIZED ART INFORMATION

By Andrée PARADIS

Two recent events stress once again the necessity of organizing art information in a realistic way that would take into account the different phases of art education, the artist's integration into his milieu and the evolution of artistic experience.

At Halifax, last February, at the discussions organized by the Canadian Section of the International Association of Art Criticism, the examination of modern man's information on art left no doubt as to the gravity of the situation. Current information does not answer the needs. At a time when art education is being developed at all levels, when museums are becoming more numerous and are more dynamic and better attended, art information still receives in the newspapers only a too much restricted space and is lacking in diversity, there are not enough reporters and they all sound the same. And yet the growth of the use of cultural property is obvious; the animation of the market is calling for a more alive and more complete communication of knowledge. Nevertheless, it is not permitted to forget the specific quality of art, and the desire to contribute to one's knowledge through the study of its contemporary developments in the forum of the newspapers is a solution replete with snares. One of the participants in the conference, Peter White, pointed out that the very definition of to-day's art is a perpetual challenge to ideas received concerning art and life. For their part, the newspapers constitute a stronghold of conservative spirit not conducive to thoughts of this nature. How can they be reconciled? Difficulty is not synonymous with impossibility. A better measure of collaboration ought to include the regular contribution of knowledgeable critics who enjoy more freedom of action.

On the other hand, last March, at Three Rivers University, a meeting with the students of the arts faculty during communication week revealed the profound anxiety that prevails among to-morrow's young artists on the matter of their acceptance by a society in which the notion of art as yet has no prime value, in which it is not lived by the greatest number, in which it is not yet an attitude in life and in which it does not create the ambient milieu. Is it necessary to attribute to the inadequacy of information or else an unskilful or too restricted use of our means of communication the absence of a genuinely open artistic climate where the artist could be integrated by stages, where he would have the impression of being closely followed, listened to, studied, if not understood?

Only a better organization of art information, based on the coordination of all those interested and the collaboration of all sectors can develop a milieu not only favourable to art but an art milieu.

(Translation by Mildred Grand)

BILL VAZAN

By Diana NEMIROFF

A consideration of Bill Vazan's work suggests an analogy which seems particularly apt. This is the idea that these diverse works, which include land drawings, sculptural works, and photo sequences, ought to be seen as entries in a diary. Hence the rather casual, note-taking quality they sometimes seem to possess. It is difficult to pin down Vazan as either sculptor, photographer or land artist: he is each one by turn, as it suits his purpose. At the centre of his art are his personal, multiple interactions with the outside world, and the impulse to order or conceptualize this experience is its underlying logic.

A comparison might be made between this act of physical and psychological charting and that of mapping, which also marks out significant points in relation to an occupied position, or centre. As the

cartographer maps a spatial route, so the diarist maps a journey in time, a life cycle. The diarist interests us to the extent that his temperament combines a certain ego with that transparency which allows his concerns to reflect those of his time.

A recurring element in Vazan's work related to its diaristic nature is a concern with an experience of time that is cyclical and repetitive in nature, whether this be the alternation of day and night, the rhythm of the seasons or the voyage from birth to death. The link between the personal and the cosmological realms which Vazan's use of such universal symbols as the circle and the spiral suggests perhaps accounts for his interest in apparently similar approaches revealed in ancient and primitive monuments.

Of course, the attraction that Vazan and other artists have shown for primitive cultures is part of a reaction against the rarified aesthetics of the sixties. A need was felt for an art which would display some felt relation to the natural world. The fascination of the primitive does not come necessarily from a desire for a wholesale revival of its meaning, but is, rather, part of a sophisticated system of reference. As George Kubler wrote in *The Shape of Time*, "... a work of art is not only the residue of an event but it is its own signal, directly moving other makers to repeat or to improve its solution."¹

A number of works focusing on megalithic monuments in England and Brittany, as well as some Egyptian pyramids and temples, came out of a recent trip to these locations in September 1978, on the occasion of his one man show at Canada House in London, England. But although stemming directly from the experiences of this trip, their essential thrust is not documentary but symbolic.

The pair of "Globes", Carnac (Brittany) — Karnak (Egypt) illustrate this. Structurally, each globe consists of a grid of twenty-four photographs, each one a frame in a series of consecutive and overlapping scans from Vazan's position out to the horizon. The result is a conceptually complete symbolization of what is necessarily a perceptually fragmented experience.

Despite the cultural and temporal disparity between the megalithic alignments at Carnac and the Karnak temple, they have certain affinities, both physical and iconographic. Each is an incredible feat of engineering, and each attests to the attempts of ancient man to attune himself to the mysteries of the universe. Some evidence suggests that the formal configuration of each one was meant to symbolize passage from profane to sacred, from known to unknown. Both were thus bridges between forms of experience and of consciousness.

Vazan is, of course, not trying to recreate this meaning, but has tried to find a visual means of signifying the relationship he has found between them. Visually, therefore, he has created a formally complementary pairing: while in the Carnac globe the focus is upon the huge stones themselves, this focus is transferred to the "negative" field of the sky between the columns in the Karnak globe.

The tension between document and symbol is also evident in *Desert Road*, a sculptural work drawing on Vazan's memory of a trip up the Nile. This consists of thirty-six weathered bricks lined up along a wall, each tied with mason's cord to a central point on the wall. The resultant configuration, an inverted V, refers to the shape of the Nile delta or that of an Egyptian pyramid. Place is also related to time through the V form which resembles the Arabic characters for 7 and 8, thus yielding the date of his Egyptian visit, 1978.

His interest in the conceptual structuring of experience is evident in another Egyptian piece, the photo sequence *Flat Approach*. This is a record of the apparent flattening of the Great Pyramid at Giza in the camera's visual field as photographed at successive stages while approaching it. The work is made up of two scans, one from the sun side, the other from the shadow side. The sense of progression and resolution in the resulting forms is comparable to that of a musical scale mounting and descending.

A pair of globes, *Deux Niveaux — Tour Eiffel and Two Levels — Tower Bridge, London*, which come from an earlier European trip, take as their subjects two more contemporary monuments than the works just described. Yet their near universal familiarity seems to give them a similar expressive importance in modern consciousness. We are, however, as far as we can be from the souvenir postcard in these works with their complex manipulation of perceptual reality. First the data is analyzed through the grid, which represents our mental "framing" of perception. In these globes Vazan has also tried to overcome the limitations of a stationary position by combining two separate points of view, thus creating a spatial and temporal synthesis.

While the works above deal with subject matter far removed in either space or time from us, others explore a more familiar universe. Using the connotations of wholeness and universality inherent in the

circular form, the series of "Globes" of Lac Clair, Rawdon, investigates another time frame, one whose cycles are measured not in millenia but in the earthly changes of the natural world. These globes of snow-covered or leafy trees have a lyric quality, but they too are monuments, in the sense in which Alan Sonfist called for "... civic monuments to honour and celebrate the life and acts of another part of the community: natural phenomena."²

Direct transformation of the natural environment is another well-known aspect of Vazan's work. Two recent land drawings were the *Sun Zone* and *Epicentre with Slip* pieces which he made last summer at York University and Harbourfront, in Toronto. Unlike some artists who have chosen to mark the landscape in relatively permanent ways, Vazan has been interested in more ephemeral actions. The Toronto drawings, which refer to primitive and scientific means of conceptualizing geological and solar phenomena, are by nature impermanent. As the surface grass grows and is cut, the paint of the drawing is gradually effaced, until finally no trace is left upon the landscape.

A similar project which he is proposing to execute for the gallery *Chambre Blanche* in Quebec City would consist of an alternating series of circles and spirals, 500' x 500', painted onto a large field. Vazan sees the work as representing a focus of natural and human interaction whereby an exchange is suggested between geological forces and human efforts to signal both presence and control of the natural environment. Another, ritual, aspect to this piece, which relates it to the primitive monuments of Europe is the connotation of passage contained in its forms. The spectator is invited to make a journey to the centre, a centre seen as a source of power. In a way this parallels the travail of the artist in his efforts to reach the creative forces of his psyche.

Behind all of Vazan's work lies a desire for synthesis, a desire to remedy the typically modern fragmented experience of the world. As his body forms the axial point in his Globes, so his art focuses upon that point where "I" is joined to the outside world. Its symbol is that of the centre, and its aim no less than the restoration of unity between the natural and cultural environments.

1. George Kubler, *The Shape of Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), p. 21.

2. Alan Sonfist, "Natural Phenomena as Public Monuments," *Tracks*, III, no. 1 & 2 (Spring 1977), p. 44.

PARIS UNDER SNOW — MICHAEL SNOW

By Gilles RIOUX

It will be recorded in the annals of French meteorology that the winter of 1979 was exceptionally harsh. From the plane bringing us from Montreal we sighted some other *acres of snow* around Roissy airport! As for the severe cold, we would have hoped that the hermit of the *Délices* felt a similar one penetrate his chilled limbs and that the ink froze at the tip of his pen even before he was able to write his sarcastic little sentence.

Snow at Beaubourg

It will be recorded in the annals of Canadian art that the year 1979 was exceptionally brilliant for Michael Snow. Thirty of his works form an event at Beaubourg; and this is only the prestigious stepping stone to a journey of a whole year whose stages will be Lucerne, Rotterdam, Bonn and Munich, before the Montreal public has the privilege of seeing this exhibition next December at the Museum of Fine Arts.

The event is appropriate to the Protean nature of Michael Snow, who says: "I am not a professional artist. My paintings are made by a film maker, my sculptures by a musician, my films by a painter, my sculptures by a film maker, my films by a musician, my music by a sculptor... who sometimes all work together." And these fortunate Parisians had the right to a genuine Snow festival: an exhibition at Beaubourg, film projections, two jazz concerts and a conference, the whole punctuated by interviews, commentaries and articles in the press.

At Beaubourg the visitor first enters a vast hall painted black. Above his head hangs a screen with two faces on which is projected *Two Sides to Every Story* (1974), a sound film composed of two simultaneous projections showing us the reverse and the right side of the same subject at the one time. The viewer moves on the floor

to see each of them; in this way he is led to realize visually that the filmed image is only a luminous illusion and that the objects shown have no actuality. We always knew this since cinema has existed, but never had the proof been presented with so much eloquence. Michael Snow would pursue the same process in the form of a book, *Cover to Cover* (1975)¹, in which the front view and the back view of a subject coincide with the right-hand side and the reverse of the page. Michael Snow's work is often hinged on a bipolar conception and the demonstration he makes of this is not at all digressive or narrative; it is direct, vital and pregnant.

At the entrance to the next hall, *Midnight Blue* (1973-74) is so explicit a work that it should illuminate the rest of the course. On the wall, a panel of rough planks; the centre is painted blue. At the interior of this blue zone, perfectly adapted to the chinks and scratches of the wood, is the photograph of this same panel, in front of which shines a lighted candle. At the bottom, the last plank rises to form a narrow shelf in the middle of which lie a bit of melted wax and a piece of blackened wick, remains of the burned candle.

If the photograph preserves the memory and the image of a candle, it also affirms the absence of that candle, while the wax, evidence only of itself, bears witness as a vestige of the earlier presence of a candle. In the illusion it creates, the photograph tends less to replace the candle than to record a single moment among the thousands of moments in the life of a candle. A significant and absolute moment; an arrested and timeless moment; a sacred and eternized moment.

In an external manner, that is, in its very materiality, the photograph forcefully testifies to the real though transitory presence of the photographer and the pointed quality of his intervention. Works such as *A Wooden Look* (1969), *Of a Ladder* (1971), *Red 5* (1974) and *Painting (Closing the Drum Book)* (1978), of different objects and the variations they allow, are sensitively conceived in the same manner.

Among all of them, Snow's work that deserves to be considered as masterly and determinative is none other than *Authorization* (1969). The date and the work are important. The reflecting function of the mirror is progressively obliterated as the author photographs himself in the mirror and re-photographs his photos in it. In five takes the narcissistic activity records itself, becomes gradually more vague and ends up at this paradoxical result where the intervention of the author will have served only to mask his face. The title also emphasizes the absurd quality of this venture where everything happens as if, in the hands of the author-photographer, the mirror was now functioning in reverse. Raymond Roussel would be infatuated with an invention of this nature.

Plus tard (1977) is another of Snow's major works: a long horizontal 360-degree travelling in the middle of a hall in the National Gallery at Ottawa, where the canvases of the Group of Seven painters are exhibited; a collection of the best-known pictures by Tom Thomson, Lawren Harris and J. E. H. MacDonald depicts Canadian landscapes. It was not by chance that Snow chose them, but for the mystical and mythical aura surrounding them. With a circular gaze, in an uninterrupted movement probably of variable speed, he records not only the pictures but also landscapes. This he does with a temporal shifting of some fifty years in relation to the date of the production of the pictures. With regard to the actual landscapes that inspired them, the pictures are already representations and realities of a second degree; photography then becomes their third degree. This "distance" is expressed by means of a very strongly noticeable fuzziness caused by the lateral movement of the camera. By implication, each of the twenty-five photographs of the ensemble, as well as their ensemble, conveys a temporal conception that is physical and historical at the same time. The title also suggests this rather well.

From film to photo and inversely, Snow's attitude remains the same, as set forth in this excerpt from an interview with Jean-Pierre Bastien in 1975: "When we recognize something on the screen, we are led to say that this is an object that we identify as an object (for example, a chair or a table). When the speed of the movement forces us to feel that it is really an image. (...) (People) want us to show them something in the film and not the film. This is very different. When we discover this difference, it becomes very interesting."

Conference at the Canadian Cultural Centre

Second aspect of the Snow exhibition — and more fleeting — an important conference took place on Saturday, January 20 at the Canadian Cultural Centre in Paris, on the theme "The photographic image as a process of plastic experimentation, in connection with the work of Michael Snow".

The morning was more specifically devoted to Snow. A presentation by Pierre Théberge of Michael Snow's work acted as introduc-



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tion. Karen O'Rourke then read a very distinguished paper, in which the intelligence and clarity of the exposition gave all those present the opportunity of thoroughly understanding the originality of Snow's development in a work most of them had never seen, *Cover to Cover*, a book published in 1975. Under the title "Post-Snow", Regina Cornwell indulged in philological, dialectic and philosophical acrobatics in which sometimes penetrating views contested for place with less convincing considerations; let us wish that this insight would be attributable to insufficient understanding of English at times!

Paradoxically, it was the "discussion" foreseen with the artist that was the slackest period of this day, because there were still too few elements to supply a debate and also because of the absence of an animator capable of developing an idea or of restarting the discussion.

In the afternoon, the subject was considerably broadened to include the artistic experiments and research connected with Snow's through the use of the photographic, filmed or televised image, developments that were neither parallel, similar nor convergent but in which the sensitivity of each artist links a diversely shaded message. A Georges Ray produces short films from fixed images; Jean Legac juxtaposes a photograph of an object produced with a completely impersonal objectivity, the very one of the commercial photo, with a text whose grammatical structure would be an "equivalent" of photography; Christian Boltanski draws up a photographic inventory of the things belonging to a fictitious person. These three artists also took part in the conference. Dominique Noguez, Gilbert Lascault and Raymonde Moulin, besides Alain Bergala, added a critical aspect to these works.

Canadian Documentation at Beaubourg

Fully aware of the strategic position of Beaubourg and of the necessity of being visible at the heart of so prestigious an institution, the Canadian government made a gift to the Centre National d'Art et de Culture Georges-Pompidou of a full and varied documentation on contemporary art in Canada. This did not mean a simple shipping of works collected in a haphazard manner by officials more dedicated than competent in the subject; on the contrary, the concerted planning by French and Canadian curators allowed the selection and acquisition of a documentation on art in Canada that possesses a certain cohesiveness and adequately fulfils the current needs of consultation. Whoever is familiar with Beaubourg's library, the number of persons who visit it and the universality of its collections will understand the magnitude and consequential effects of such an action.

It is with satisfaction that we ascertain the presence of at least five of Michael Snow's films in the collections of the National Museum of Modern Art, whether these films originate in this government gift or not. Our most fervent wish is that this intelligent policy will not be a one-time thing but continuous, in such a way as not to create gaps which are later difficult to fill.

And if, when the opportunity arises, it were all to be marked by trail-blazers as important as this Michael Snow retrospective, there would be even more reason to rejoice.

1. Cf. Eric Cameron, *Michael Snow's Cover to Cover*, in *Vie des Arts*, Vol. XXI, No. 86, pp. 88-89. See also on Snow articles by Arnold Rockman and Andrée Paradis, in *Vie des Arts*, Vol. XI, No. 44 (Fall 1966), pp. 93-94, and Vol. XV, No. 59 (Summer 1970), pp. 56-59.

(Translation by Mildred Grand)

Service **Typographique** Limitée
1061, rue St-Alexandre
Montréal H2Z 1P5
Téléphone 866-6545