

Revisiting the Retrospective:
Authorship and Authority in *The Michael Snow Project*

by

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines the defining qualities of the retrospective curatorial model using *The Michael Snow Project*, hosted in 1994 by the Art Gallery of Ontario and The Power Plant, as a case study. A source of modern conceptions of authority, the retrospective employs particular canonization criteria by directing curatorial argument to biographical origins. The occasion of the retrospective therefore imposes a set of interpretive limitations on artworks whose themes problematize authorship, channel elements of chaos or accident, or question historical viewing. A critique of three catalogue essays for the *Project* demonstrates how—despite curatorial awareness of the retrospective model and various attempts to transcend its structures—these canonization criteria shape interpretation. Both the *Project*'s critical consciousness of this model and the varied nature of Snow's corpus present an opportunity to consider the enduring influence of retrospective framing on curatorial discourse, and its continued effects on contemporary deployments of a popular model.

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1| Introduction

Does the artist paint herself? Is the art's story her story? We are compelled to make sense of the relationship between life and work, to see biography in art and art in biography. We assume that the temporal experience of the artist informs her oeuvre, and constitutes the thread by which every individual work is understood; the result is a sense of an enduring aesthetic comprehensible to both creator and observer. But when placed within the chronological and biographical construct typical of the institutional retrospective, the criteria for the comprehensible risks encouraging a cult of celebrity detrimental to the nuanced and intersecting lives and works that make up not just art's history, but also its present. To investigate the modes of authorship operative in the retrospective model might provide some insight into the contentious issue of artistic celebrity, and the creation of canons; it might shed light on why some biographical details are glossed over or exaggerated, why certain artists are more suited to retrospective analysis than others, or why the large-scale monographic display justifies existing investments and interests in the well-loved artists of both our time and the past.

More importantly, the popular model is also in tension with the very nature of the contemporary, described by a general de-centering of art practice, and a certain de-historicization and indeterminacy, especially one in which the subject is a mutable entity, constantly reconstituted through multiple—even infinite—identifications. Despite this, the retrospective persists; it constitutes a

closing of analysis in an historical moment that demands its opening. The retrospective announces ends—of careers, of lives, and by extension, of artistic meanings and interpretive possibilities; it re-centers, re-historicizes, and re-establishes known artists as origins of artistic genius. Whereas the exhibition medium elsewhere presents a platform for critical reform, its retrospective iteration ossifies the canon by aligning logical stylistic progress with what is perceived to be an equally logical life. The question is not whether the retrospective should be cut from the institutional program—indeed, there is certainly use in the consolidation of an oeuvre—but how its framing as a model bears, often imperceptibly, on curatorial discourse. The identification of the retrospective’s mechanisms constitutes potential sites for alternative curatorial strategies, both within and outside the retrospective exhibition. In other words, we must understand the retrospective as a model with particular functions in order to better inform methods for a critical curatorial understanding about the relationship between life and work, and to appreciate the limits—and consequences—of monographic display. Such understanding contributes to a corresponding critical discourse in art history and criticism, which regularly critiques and revises both the canon and the ideologies on which the process of canonization is formed and sustained. This thesis examines, by way of case study, the retrospective through a study of the 1994 *Michael Snow Project* hosted by the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) and The Power Plant not merely for its classification as a retrospective, but for its unique awareness of the retrospective occasion, its methods of

curatorial writing, and its treatment of an artist whose varied oeuvre exists between the canon and the contemporary.

Retrospectives announce the success of artists and proliferate their popularity, and *The Michael Snow Project* is no exception. They are marketed as “blockbuster” exhibitions, invoking the language and rhetoric of the film industry, and, as art and cultural historian Nicholas Green has observed, rely on the “‘tourist’ appeal of known names.”¹ There is some ambiguity then around whether institutional investments in—and, effectively, the public’s incentive for visiting—retrospectives are based in an interest in work or life; following this, the question of whether the retrospective model demands a presentation of work *as* life awakens the important problem of biography as it relates to art historical and curatorial methods. Is the retrospective necessarily biographical? How does the retrospective create and maintain the canon? To what extent is the canon then a reflection of the return to biography in the exhibiting of “known names”? These questions ask for a consideration of the ways in which institutions characterize and canonize artists as authors within a retrospective model.

While the paradigm of the artist individual is often criticized on the occasion of retrospectives, and indeed Green is here critical of specific interpretive fallacies common to the monographic art catalogue, rarely do the *formats* of their presentations garner the same level of attention. Interpretive methods that direct attention back to the uniqueness of the creative author are

1. Nicholas Green, “Stories of Self-Expression: Art History and the Politics of Individualism,” *Art History* 10 (1987), 531.

perhaps not a result of particular failings on the part of the art historian or critic, but rather discursive parameters inside which interpretation necessarily falls in the instance of the monograph. And while Green's comment about "known names" refers to a number of monographic texts about 19th century Barbizon school painters, his arguments surrounding the deeply historicized paradigm of individualism in art applies to the exhibition format as well. In fact, Green reminds us that exhibitions are "key sites" for the proliferation of certain criteria for artistic individualism; more often than not, the chronological model of biographical display "supplies exhibition organizers with a clear, graspable format with which to steer visitors through gallery space," which is "perhaps the easiest of arguments to mount in spatial terms."² But crucial to this spatial logic is the imperative to formulate a curatorial thesis, one which draws on art historical research and interpretation to logically frame an artist's corpus—and life—as itself logical. The solo retrospective or survey is then the curatorial envisioning of the monographic text, the literalization of biography at the level of display, and therefore implies that the "life" determines the limits of the work considered. These limits recover work from earlier criticisms, rearticulate relations between works to make arguments for consistency, and support interpretive claims with statements made by the author or biographical events in an effort to demonstrate narrative continuity. Ultimately, the retrospective narrative attempts to provide a degree of access to a life through the organization of art works. The retrospective

2. Ibid., 530.

model therefore prompts biographical readings of artworks as a means of reinforcing already inscribed institutional value, legitimizing both the artist as “retrospective-worthy,” and the institution as a cultural investor in the artist.

The questioning of a naturalized and popular model is also an occasion to identify and articulate its operative mechanisms. While the definition of the retrospective seems clear, a description of its precise functioning remains unformulated. Besides the imperative to question the logic of that which is at once popular and under theorized, a specific inquiry into the retrospective’s inner workings is also an investigation into the role of criticism in curatorial practice, the role of the institution as a creator of authorship, the legacy of creative individualism, and the viability of biographical art historical readings into the contemporary period. What this study offers is observations of a set of interpretive tendencies and slippages, which often lead interpretation to the canonization of the artist based on modernist criteria in spite of efforts to redirect away from more traditional retrospective views. This analysis contributes to both curatorial discourse and art historical methods, because it demonstrates systematically how the limits of the retrospective absorb and repackage history according to a celebratory or memorializing end, reasserting the exhibition as a site or event which attempts to model future conceptions of its subject according to a particular agenda.

The Michael Snow Project is a case study wherein the curators consciously address some concerns of the retrospective model, and so presents an

opportunity to see how these interpretive tendencies are manifest, and how they determine the character of authorial identity as the exhibition forms it in retrospect. Both an example of the model and exemplary in its awareness, *The Michael Snow Project*—specifically, its catalogue essays and curatorial archive—demonstrates the durability and endurance of the retrospective interpretive framework, despite the project’s active attempts to attend to issues about art and biography in the retrospective model. *The Michael Snow Project* is an appropriate case study not just for its Canadian context, nor its mere qualification as a retrospective. For one, the massive scale and scope of the project—both physically and methodologically—presents an amplification of institutional investments in biographical readings of art that will help facilitate a close analysis. The AGO’s relationship with Snow for the artist’s entire career and its role in the project will serve to demonstrate the simultaneous institutional and artistic authorships operative in the retrospective. That Snow was given such an ambitious retrospective as a *living* artist is important to this analysis, as it demonstrates the function of the model as not only a career-shaping but meaning-making agent in the formation of a national canon, a process in which the artist himself is simultaneously complicit and critical. As an artist in many ways between the canon and the contemporary, Snow embodies a certain tension between the consolidation—physical as well as historical and theoretical—required by the retrospective, and the increasing participation of the artist in his own institutional presentation.

The strength of this case study also lies in its self-awareness as operating within the retrospective framework, because at its curatorial inception, *The Michael Snow Project* resisted categorizing itself as such. A preliminary exhibition proposal dated July 5, 1989 reads “We [the curators] are planning a large scale exhibition that is *retrospective in scale but not in character*. Three curators will be involved in producing separate exhibitions, each which develops its own curatorial concept...[emphasis added].”³ This rather enigmatic comment (which admittedly only appears in this very early correspondence and nowhere else in the AGO’s archive for the project) makes a number of assumptions about the retrospective model that prompts further questioning: namely, that there is a retrospective “character,” at all, and that whatever constitutes this character is a separate consideration from the notion of scale. The second implication is that the combination of three curators and their corresponding exhibitions working simultaneously under the general scope of the project is what defines this dissociation from the retrospective character. That these assumptions may not sufficiently describe the nature of the retrospective will become clear in the analysis to follow; what is important in this example is the awareness and recognition with which *The Michael Snow Project* curators understood the retrospective *as* a model with certain characteristics at all, and the observed conceptual effort to circumvent some of its standards, even when its precise

3. Exhibition proposal, submitted by Philip Monk, Louise Dompierre, and Dennis Reid for the Art Gallery of Ontario (July 5th, 1989), box E.03.02, Edward P. Taylor Library and Archives, Art Gallery of Ontario.

definition remains unformed. Indeed, that *The Michael Snow Project* indirectly posed the question of the retrospective's definition to itself presents an opportunity to observe how deeply some of the model's interpretive tendencies go. In this way the project operates simultaneously an example of the model and as exemplary in its awareness about the retrospective-as-model.

Finally, the content of Snow's corpus exhibits a number of themes and concepts that might complicate the modernist retrospective project, and demonstrate some of the complex tensions between retrospective viewing and art works that "view" critically. As an artist whose work increasingly explores the concept of manipulated and re-directed vision, as well as the concepts of selfhood and authorship, viewership, fiction, and objectlessness, Snow's oeuvre itself allows further insights into the ways in which the retrospective's implied biographical readings come to bear on postmodern and contemporary themes. This analysis will consider the retrospective's affirmation of authorial identity—and *The Michael Snow Project's* theoretical distancing from such retrospective identifications—as it relates to artists and artworks through to the contemporary period that attempt to thwart this very convention. This analysis is therefore intended neither as a categorical criticism of Snow's work, nor an evaluation of the general success of the project's curatorial writing. It is, rather, an attempt to reveal how the occasion of the retrospective bears on even self-aware curatorial analysis, because it insists on a particular construction of authorial identity as determined by a decidedly modernist history of exhibitions. In other words, those

biographical inflections typical of traditional retrospective viewing resurface with equal strength despite active attempts to transcend them.

An understanding of academic dialogues in theories about the author, combined with a brief ideological history of the formation of the museum as cultural institution will demonstrate how authorship and the emergence of the solo exhibition model were mutually informing processes with major art historical implications. Both historical and recent theories on authorship will therefore inform a criticism of retrospective interpretive tendencies as they characterize the artist as creative origin, whose work expresses personal, inner states. Critical histories of modern exhibitionary and collecting logics will situate these analyses more firmly in curatorial discourse, while theories around intertextuality and their relation to formalist art historical analyses will provide a lens through which to consider the rhetoric of some curatorial arguments about specific Snow works in the catalogue essays.

Given the massive scope and scale of *The Michael Snow Project*, including its multiple, simultaneous exhibitions and numerous catalogues with essays by notable authors from a range of disciplines, this inquiry limits its analysis to three curatorial essays as they appear in one catalogue titled *Visual Art: The Michael Snow Project* published by the AGO and the Power Plant in 1994. This text examines Snow's work spanning the period 1951 to 1993 (the year preceding the project), and documents a range of media including painting, collage, sculpture, photography, film, and sound installation. This particular

analysis will focus on the theses put forth by curators Dennis Reid, Philip Monk, and Louise Dompierre, and will exclude for the most part the arguments put forth by catalogue editor, filmmaker, and curator Jim Shedden in the catalogue *Presence and Absence: The Films of Michael Snow 1956-1991*, as well as *Music/Sound: The Performed and Recorded Music/Sound of Michael Snow, Solo and with Various Ensembles, His Sound-Films and Sound Installations, and Improvisation/ Composition from 1948 to 1993*, edited by Michael Snow, and *Collected Writings of Michael Snow*, published along with the other catalogues in the series. While Shedden's text provides a comprehensive chronology of Snow's highly celebrated medium, the essays by Monk and Dompierre include discussions of several of his major filmic works in the context of other visual explorations by the artist, which provide a more general art historical analytic grounding better suited to the nature of an argument about curatorial interpretation. The exclusion of *Music/Sound*—again, a result of structural limitations, and a general focus on the visual—nonetheless acknowledges that Snow's musical career is integral to and in many ways inseparable from his career as an artist. The three chosen texts are also significant in their respective reflections of the conceptual origins of the *Michael Snow Project*, first proposed by Dompierre and developed primarily as a dialogue between the curator and Monk and Reid at the AGO. This dialogue—discernable by way of correspondence in the AGO archives—forms both the conceptual bases of the three resulting exhibitions and their corresponding essays, but also the

overarching objectives of *The Michael Snow Project* in its entirety. Curatorial interpretive tendencies are, in addition, more plainly inferred from textual explanation than their more distilled, educational translations may be at the level of didactic display. Certainly, logistical considerations remain relevant and important to the retrospective; some of these details feature in the curatorial essays, and the archives offer a wealth of information about logistical curatorial decision-making, but the catalogue essays remain the focus of the inquiry insofar as they reveal more explicitly the interpretive slippages mentioned.

The following thesis is organized according to independent analyses of each essay. First, a literature review on author theory situates the retrospective in both a general cultural understanding of authorship as well as its specific relation to art history. A following chapter makes an argument for the modernist underpinnings of the 20th century art institution, and introduces the format as a model with particular ideological investments. Separate chapters devoted to the essays by Reid, Monk, and Dompierre, respectively, are arranged both according to their appearance in the catalogue and chronologically in each of the temporal sections of Snow's career that they investigate. The final chapter consolidates these findings, and reintroduces the example of *The Michael Snow Project* and the retrospective model generally to contemporary concerns about the problem of "ego" in exhibitions and curatorial essays as sites that construct artistic authorship based on particular, historically determined criteria. This section offers some theoretical perspectives that revisit the subject of authorship as a space where both

artists and their audience can question subjectivities, which might attend to and depart from the interpretive limits identified in the case study.

2| Literature Review – Author Theory

Although the historical development of the concept of the author might be traced back as far as early humanism, the discursive dismantling of the term is usually attributed to Roland Barthes's 1967 poststructuralist essay "Death of the Author."⁴ A "declaration of radical textuality,"⁵ Barthes's text questioned the authority of the writer in delimiting interpretive boundaries, and by association the cult of heroized individualism that he felt had problematically defined history well into the 20th century.⁶ Characterizing the author as an oppressive "tyranny," Barthes theorized that the assignation of authors to texts imposes strict and controlling limits on its interpretive possibilities, "to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing."⁷ "Death of the Author" instead privileges language over authorial voice, thus destroying the notion of author as unified origin or creative source.⁸ Barthes's essay would in its critique of the literary author also imply a critique of authority generally,⁹ and this radical skepticism would lend itself to later poststructuralist, postmodernist, and neo-Marxist discourses.

Responding to these concerns (although, not by name – appropriate perhaps given the nature of Barthes's position on authorship) and critical to the dialogue about author theory was French philosopher Michel Foucault's 1969

4. Roland Barthes, "Death of the Author," in Séan Burke, ed. *Authorship: From Plato to Postmodernism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), 1995.

5. Andrew Bennett, *The Author (The New Critical Idiom)* (New York: Routledge), 2005, 11.

6. *Ibid.*, 12.

7. Barthes in Burke, 128-9.

8. *Ibid.*, 127.

9. Michael Moriarty, *Roland Barthes* (Cambridge: Polity), 1991, 101.

lecture “What Is An Author?” In it, Foucault more closely examines the historical emergence of the concept of authorship in the Middle Ages, supported later by Early Modern European epistemologies including French rationalism, English empiricism and an ideological move toward humanism generally.¹⁰ Foucault interrogates the act of asking about the concept of authorship itself, and questions not simply the consequence of authorial dependence but how and why authorship operates ideologically. While he is aligned with Barthes in the belief that the author conceived as a stable originary force or entity is a historical myth to be dismantled, he uses the term “author function”¹¹ to more directly describe the relationship between a writer and her text, as it allows for a theoretical dissociation of the writing body from the writer-as-author e.g. as she enters a certain institution or social discourse. So whereas the act of writing for Barthes is one of self-obliteration and metaphysical “death,” it is for Foucault a continuous process of loss in which “the space left empty by the author’s disappearance” also constitutes an “opening,” one which demands further analysis—a space where ideological contexts reconstitute authorship according to its evolving criteria for authority.¹²

10. Pierre Macherey, “Creation and Production,” in Séan Burke ed. *Authorship: From Plato to Postmodernism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 230.

11. Michel Foucault, “What is An Author?” Trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), 125.

12. Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author?” trans. Josué V. Harari in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. Josué V. Harari (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), 1979, 145.

Aligned with this liberation of the text from author-determined meanings is the concept of intertextuality (or *intertextualité*) in semiotic theory developed primarily by the work of Julia Kristeva (*Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, 1969) who builds on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "heteroglossia" as explained in the 1934 text *Discourse in the Novel*. Intertextuality "denotes [a] transposition of one (or several) sign system(s) into another;" the intertext, in other words, supposes that no texts operate as static "signs," but rather as "surfaces" upon which other texts and their meanings converge and intersect.¹³ All texts, therefore, are intertextual. Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1967) puts forth a similar notion of *différance*—or indeterminacy—of writing, perhaps best articulated by his phrase "there is nothing outside of the text,"¹⁴ and is often quoted in relation to Kristevian textual critiques. Kristeva's theorization corresponds to Barthes's, although the latter relies more heavily on the agency of the reader as the location of textual unity.¹⁵ Later 20th century critiques like that of Séan Burke propose a "return" of the

13. Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press), 1984, 59-60.

14. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 158. In 1978, Edward Said famously supported a Foucauldian definition of textuality over those proposed by Kristeva and Derrida, precisely because it interprets institutional and ideological associations as necessarily linked to the text. The free circulation of the text must therefore be understood as an unattainable ideal given the restrictive forces of power structures, which are always subject to the "hegemony of dominant culture." (See Said, "The Problem of Textuality: Two Exemplary Positions" in *Critical Inquiry* 4 (1978), 673-714).

15. Barthes, "Death of the Author," 148.

author by the very announcement of her death;¹⁶ the author in Burke's view is also responsible for making her intentions explicit to facilitate interpretation, and this presents itself as not only a theoretical but ethical demand on the part of both writer and reader.¹⁷

More recent scholarship on the subject revisits these now historical dialogues to recover them from oversimplifications. Andrew Bennett—in his survey of the role of the author in critical theory—introduces the subject to feminism and historiography, and looks to extend more strict notions of “collaborative” authorship as the normative authorial mode despite the myth of unity. Bennett goes so far as to suggest that the question of authorship is the essential question behind a perceived crisis in literary—and perhaps, art—criticism; it is the uncanny “otherness” of the author that fuels disciplinary anxiety.¹⁸ Works like Jane Gallop's *Deaths of the Author* return to the “erotics” of Barthesian critique and is a “reconsideration of the death of the author in the era of queer theory.”¹⁹ Here the fantasy of “touching” the deceased author's body through the text is the “friendly return” of the author; this erotic proximity presents a non-linear, non-hierarchical, queer temporality where the conversation between reader and writer is one of mutual affection and dependence. A

16. Séan Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), pg. 77.

17. Maebh Long, “Séan Burke (2009) The Ethics of Writing: Authorship and Legacy in Plato and Nietzsche,” review in *Culture Magazine* (June 2009), 1-2.

18. Bennett, *The Author*, 127. “The condition of literary criticism and theory, the condition on which criticism and theory are undertaken, the condition even of reading, is this crisis...of literature, this uncanny, undecidable author.”

19. Jane Gallop, *The Deaths of the Author: Reading and Writing in Time* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 5.

corresponding theorization of “cybertextuality” explains textual operations as a similar interaction between an author as “sender” and reader as “receiver” in new media contexts; in this formulation, user feedback partially comprises and “completes” the sent message, implying the necessarily indeterminate nature of authorship and its increasing precariousness in the digital age.²⁰

And so while the treatment of the author continues to pervade matters of literary and cultural criticism, it is perhaps the Foucauldian reading of the author as ideologically constituted that continues to characterize the current state of scholarship on the subject. Indeed, many more recent scholars have recovered both Barthes and Foucault from essentializing criticisms which attempt to dramatize their abolishment of the author; later work on the subject by Barthes indicates that the author does indeed “return” or “figure” in the text as a function of a reader’s desire. Increasingly, the question is then not whether the author should or does feature into matters of textual interpretation, but precisely how she appears as a product of this desire, ideological structures surrounding the conditions of reading, and related institutional power structures. This characterization of authorship as it is taken up in various disciplines forms the basis of my inquiry into the retrospective curatorial model.

Following from these mid-century interrogations of texts, authors, readers and critics is an almost concurrent analysis in art historical discourse of the concept of the artist as an individual, the creative origin of an artwork. Whereas many agree

20. Ian Lancashire, *Forgetful Muses: Reading the Author in the Text* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 101.

that the cult of the artist was established with Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* and bolstered by the individualism of Renaissance humanism, the "problem" of biography in art historical interpretation itself grew from these aforementioned poststructuralist inquiries. But the question in this discipline adds a layer of complexity since the life of an artist as inextricable from work is, as Charles Salas has stated, essential to the "career-building" logic of the art world (that is, despite theoretical reservations) in which the association is essential to success in a "post-humanist" understanding of art and its makers.²¹ Art historical questioning of life and work also draws regularly and liberally from Barthes, Foucault, and others writing in the realm of literary and cultural theory, but also produces discipline-specific scholarship surrounding the question of biography and intentionality in art interpretation.

Much of this criticism forms itself around a dismissal of the Warburgian tradition (Aby Warburg, 1886-1929) of art history which attempts to "explicate *mentalités*"²² or collective states of mind from a work's formal qualities. The

21. Charles Salas, "Introduction: The Essential Myth?" in *The Life and the Work: Art and Biography*, ed. Charles Salas (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2007), 1-2.

22. Ibid., 10. The concept of *mentalités* comes from the French *Annales* School of history, founded by Marc Bloc and Lucien Febvre in the 1920s, with the term itself introduced by the School's third generation of scholars in the 1960s (Robert Mandrou, Jacques Le Goff, and Georges Duby). *Mentalité* describes a historiographical methodology, which combines biographical details as a means of constructing a collective social view toward historical moments. Often, the extrapolation of popular *mentalités* happens via individual case studies, where a specific person's experience is used as a microcosmic, representative experience of the many. This non-Marxist, materialist social view of history looked to the experiences of "ordinary" people to reveal details about societal relations. The Warburgian tradition of social art history looked to artists and their works as similarly representative of shared historical mentalities. See Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to*

assumptions implied in this method, while certainly important to social history and cultural studies, are more precarious in their art historical applications since it seems to allow the art historian or critic to “read into [the work] what he has already learned by other means, or what he believes he knows, and wants to ‘demonstrate.’”²³ Those scholars of the mid-20th century, equipped with Barthesian criticism, were skeptical; to link formal qualities to an artist’s disposition was, at best, speculative. Whether an artist’s stated intention is relevant to art historical interpretation is also a concern for the discipline of art history. Michael Baxandall’s celebrated *Patterns of Intention* (1986) acknowledges the practical connection between an artist’s gesture and what is formally observable in a work of art, but cautions against any dogmatic reliance on such information as indicative of expression. Others like J.R.R Christie and Fred Orton wish to retain the usefulness of this relationship so as not to limit interpretive possibilities; they posit that critics and art historians possess a special right to locate expressive qualities in a work of art “with reference as needed to the life.”²⁴ This reading echoes the conception of authorship that is skeptical of the radical formalist consequences of post-structuralism, opting to consider the artist a plural and multiple figure rather than eradicated or irrelevant.²⁵ The logic of the text that is said to have launched New Criticism, William K. Wimsatt Jr.

the Postmodern Challenge (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press), 1997.

23. Carlo Ginzburg in ed. Charles Salas “Introduction,” *The Life and the Work: Art and Biography* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2007), 11.

24. Salas, “Introduction,” 12.

25. Ibid. See also J.R.R Christie and Fred Orton, “Writing on the Text of the Life,” *Art History* 11 (1988), 544-64.

and Monroe C. Beardsley's "The Intentional Fallacy" (1946), was quickly translated to art history by Clement Greenberg and others as a justification for strict formalism; this tendency was—at least in the category of poetry from which Wimsatt and Beardsley's text originated—criticized as being a "vulgarized" extension of New Criticism.²⁶ The authorship "problem" similarly presents a difficulty to feminist scholarship and art history specifically, for while the criteria for originality in authorship is certainly a function of patriarchy, the desire to reinscribe and celebrate female authors constitutes a large part of feminist historical revisionism,²⁷ while strict formalism denies the important functions of anecdote, biography, and ownership in feminist discourse.

The issue is also inextricable from the history of the critic, connoisseur, and academy and therefore also strongly linked to class insofar as it denotes the knowledge set that is associated with connoisseurship.²⁸ It is (and has historically been) the case that to connect with the artist in some way is in the collector's best financial and class interest; it is therefore also valuable to demonstrate how a particular work renders an artist visible as a personality within a collector's social and professional circle. From this investment emerged—first in 19th century France—the biographically oriented art historical method in which the artist's life is understood as a coherent entity and origin of the oeuvre—a "rubric" around

26. *Ibid.*, 7.

27. *Ibid.*, 14.

28. *Ibid.*, 10. Warburg wrote that the biographically driven history of art was inextricable from "the properties classes, the collector and his circle." Draft of a letter from Aby Warburg to Adolph Goldschmidt, August 1903, quoted originally in E.H. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography*, cited in Salas, *Life and Work*, 9-10.

which curators, connoisseurs, historians, and the public evaluate creative excellence.²⁹ This convention is famously criticized by the art historian George Kubler, whose 1962 text *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* views biographical pieces of information as merely “way stations” which deny the actual historical nature of artistic traditions as they extend far beyond the temporal limits contained within an artist’s life (and death).³⁰

Like its concurrent investigations in critical, cultural, and literary theories, the artist-as-author question remains contentious, if generally approached with skepticism. Again the question becomes not about whether biography or intentionality should feature in matters of interpretation, but that the nature and the treatment of biographical information do. A series of symposia at the Getty Research Institute between 2002 and 2003 on the subject of biography occasioned the consolidation of a series of essays into a book (published in 2007) under the title *The Life and the Work: Art and Biography*, in which editor Charles Salas admits that “the question of the life and the work survives even in realms declared hostile to it.”³¹ The institutional and disciplinary contexts of the use of biographical information then demonstrate a methodology on the part of the historian, critic, or curator, an interpretive lens itself determined by the particular demands of a given project. It is also understood as a function of particular ideological and (certainly in the case of curatorial practice) economic concerns

29. Ibid., 9-10.

30. George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 6.

31. Salas, “Introduction,” 8.

which depend on certain figurations of artistic authority to sustain their structures; these are the very concerns about class and identity politics that are often conspicuously absent from monographic treatment of artists, even where historical and biographical information features heavily.

3| The Retrospective as Model and Modernist

The unifying principle of the solo retrospective is the fact that one author has created its contents; this fact is used then as an agent of cohesion. The retrospective is often large in scale, hosted by a major institution, and celebratory or memorial in nature. The retrospective is also decidedly historical in its analysis—indeed, the term itself indicates a literal looking back—and across—time.³² The term is both adjectival and nominative—a description of the nature of the looking and the designation that names the display or event itself. The value in staging the retrospective is to show that artists are both consistent and that they have developed: consistent in the sense that they are consistently admirable or observably, legibly “characteristic” across time, but distinct enough that they are presented as innovative in relation to their contemporaries. The artist who gets a retrospective is also then a very particular kind of creative author whose body of work permits a certain set of interpretive criteria. Historically, these criteria and their corresponding model of monographic display are rooted in the modernist inception and construction of the 20th century art institution. It is therefore essential to consider the retrospective as a modernist model in order to associate

32. Whereas the first known use of the term “retrospect” to refer to a survey of past time or events is generally traced to mid-17th century Europe, its usage as a noun to refer to curatorial presentation (i.e. “a retrospective”) surfaces only in 1932, in an American context. This temporal discrepancy and shift in usage corresponds with the imperative of projects of modernity to describe historical organizational logic in the case of the earlier usage, and its application at the inception of modernism in art, with the American institution “literalizing” time via individual artists in the later usage. *The Barnhart dictionary of etymology*, ed. Robert K. Barnhart and Sol Steinmetz (1988), s.v. “retrospect.”

its interpretive frameworks with the concurrent but evolving critical understandings of authorship mentioned earlier.

And while it is widely understood that the 20th century art institution finds its roots in various modernist projects (even deeper roots in colonial ones) and continues to participate in and refer to this history, there is of course variation in methods of display as they have changed to suit shifts in modes of perception, institutional mandates, art historical scholarship, and new art forms right up to the contemporary period. In other words, because the institution is an enactment of power systems, it is also necessarily one of reform.³³ Indeed, there are very few curatorial methods or models of display that have persisted throughout this (modern) history, with the exception of the popular model analyzed here: the retrospective. It may be obvious that this particular model—in its historical persistence and endurance—is, in its interpretive implications, a modernist³⁴ one not only by virtue of its inextricability from the history of exhibitions as they relate to the project of modernity, but in the artist-as-individual paradigm as well.

33. Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1995) 90, 97. “The museum...has been constantly subject to demands for reform...characterized by two principles: first the principle of public rights sustaining the demand that museums should be equally open and accessible to all; and second, the principle of representational adequacy sustaining the demand that museums should adequately represent the cultures and values of different sections of the public...The public rights demand is produced and sustained by the dissonance between...the democratic rhetoric governing the conception of public museums as vehicles for popular education and...their actual functioning as instruments for the reform of public manners” (90).

34. Although the terms are of course historically linked, “modernity” here refers to the Enlightenment era constructions of human progress in the evolutionary theme described, whereas “modernist,” “modernism,” and “modern art” refer more specifically to these concepts as artists, authors, collectors, and curators take them up as subjects in response to modernity’s projects the 20th century.

As an oft-used model of display it then also comes to represent a continually reasserted type of modernist curatorial argument alongside (and perhaps despite) alternative models that are explicit in their turning away from more traditional exhibitionary histories.

Literature concerning the ideological underpinnings of the modern museological institution consistently regards certain historical epistemological shifts as foundational to the modernist project as it was communicated at the level of display; namely, those shifts as they were a function of political power in the wake of the French Revolution, which “created the conditions of emergence for a new “truth,” a new rationality, out of which came a new functionality for a new institution, the public museum.”³⁵ This functionality was characterized by “rationalist principles of classification” insofar as these principles were able to support a project of public and democratic education, at once critical of the outmoded power structures of the *ancien régime* and instrumental to “the collective good of the state.”³⁶ More specifically, this logic was evolutionary, with a program of progress, ideological advancement, and national superiority determining collection, display, and pedagogy.³⁷

Following Eilean Hooper-Greenhill’s argument about these institutional origins, and in combination with Michel Foucault’s concept of shifting historical

35. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill in Tony Bennett, “The Political Rationality of the Museum,” *The Birth of the Museum* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 89.

36. *Ibid.*

37. Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, 96.

épistèmes,³⁸ Bennett describes how the logic with which objects were collected and displayed was reflective of and contributive to prevailing systems of knowledge. An essential transition for Foucault (and for Bennett) is from the taxonomical arrangement of objects favoured by the neo-classical *épistème* to their being “inserted within the flow of time, to be differentiated in terms of the positions accorded them within evolutionary series.”³⁹ This new *épistème* and corresponding application by way of display in the European museum was indicative of a decidedly “modern” conception of progress, whereby objects understood and organized temporally were evidence of civilization’s inevitable progress toward innovation and improvement. The shift is for Bennett an essential one in characterizing the modern museum; not only did a temporal logic allow for the narrativization of progress, but it also placed the public “as both the culmination of the evolutionary series laid out before it and as the apex of development from which the direction of those series...was discernable.”⁴⁰ In the arrangement, the viewing public was the perceived agent of progress *and* the evolutionary result. The museum thus served as a discursive space in which an evolutionary logic could inform and support other disciplines (especially art history), a space which in turn formed a “totalizing order of things and peoples

38. The Foucauldian *épistème* is a historically determined “epistemological field” in which the possibility of knowledge within a given culture, epoch, or era is contained. *Épistèmes* limit the conditions for rationality and order, forming the basis of any logical project within them. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London: Routledge Classics, orig. 1966, 2002 edition), xxii.

39. Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, 96.

40. *Ibid.*, 97.

that was historicized through and through.”⁴¹ Such epistemological development primed the museum for an increasingly prevalent conception of the individual artist as cultural hero,⁴² and later for the reception of individualized narratives of artistic progress, which fit comfortably within this greater evolutionary narrative propounded by the modern museum. Just as the visitor is by this logic meant to be understood (and to understand his or herself) as both apex and culmination of progress, so is the artistic author increasingly understood within an evolutionary temporal framing as an embodied example of individualized civility.⁴³ Select artists, in other words, could embody the notion of progress at the individual level. The retrospective was a mode of display that could combine a particular vision of artistic heroism with the narrative of progress espoused by the modern museum as its epistemological foundations. The inextricability of biographical display from institutionalized modernism foreground the retrospective as an interpretive (and physical) model that serves to orient institutional curatorial practice to the modernist project despite simultaneous processes of reform to which Bennett refers.

Scholars like Jeremy Braddock, have highlighted how integral this understanding of artistic individualism was in the later transformations of 20th century collections into American modern art institutions, which would operate as

41. Ibid.

42. James Hall, *The Self-Portrait: A Cultural History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2014), 75.

43. Nicholas Green, “Self-Expression,” 530. Green argues that the “celebration of the particularity of artists” became integral to cultural policy in 1880s Europe, as it promoted “an ideological programme condensing stern moral and patriotic values, meritocracy and individual physiological variation.”

paradigmatic models for later iterations across the continent. Modernism was in the case of collection and display less an enactment of an agreed upon set of values or definitions than it was an opportunity for collectors to define publicly an otherwise unstable term with regard to art practice. In his recent book *Collecting as Modernist Practice*, Braddock looks to the practice of collecting in early 20th century America as essential in defining and shaping notions of modernism and its institutionalization. What he observes as the “collecting aesthetic” of the 1920s served to not only document various interpretations of modernism but also to prime and “create the conditions of modernism’s reception.”⁴⁴ Braddock centers his argument—which deals simultaneously with art collections and edited poetry anthologies as “collected” works—around what he calls “*provisional institutions...a mode of public engagement modeling future*” that had power to create the social conditions for both a public engagement with art and creative production within American artistic communities themselves.⁴⁵ A comparative analysis of the inception and institutionalization of the Philips Memorial Gallery in Washington, DC and the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia demonstrates for Braddock how viewing museums as “authored” collections (and indeed, a collection of “authors”) provides a lens through which to deconstruct contemporary curatorial practice in those institutions that find their origins in 20th century modernism, and their ideological roots in 18th century modernity.

44. Jeremy Braddock, *Collecting as Modernist Practice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 2-3.

45. *Ibid.*, 3.

Braddock's investigation of the modern art collector begins with the example of Duncan Phillips and his Phillips Memorial Gallery in the 1920s. The collector was arguably the most successful in anticipating the later, popularity of modernist artworks, and is notable for his ability to maintain his collection in the same location even after his death. For Braddock, Phillips and his social-aesthetic agenda are exemplary of the collector's control of modernism's reception and his corresponding control of the term itself.⁴⁶ By positioning himself as a necessary "interpreter and navigator"⁴⁷ who mediated the public's experience with art, Phillips modeled his exhibitions on the ideal of the "domestication" of modernism as a de-alienating technique that would engage his public. His mode of display (exhibiting artworks alongside domestic objects, arranged in Phillips's mansion) was imperative for Phillips, as it served to filter the potentially radical, anarchic modes often associated with artist collectives through the institution; he similarly solicited an audience that would "feel at home" in his galleries so as to promote sociability among visitors.⁴⁸ Phillips also lobbied for an integration of art education into the university system, with the object of producing both a new generation of art appreciators and an inspired community of young, aesthetic innovators.

The collector's argument about the modern was, Braddock observes, fundamentally rooted in the "artist-as-individual" paradigm where a trans-

46. *Ibid.*, 70.

47. *Ibid.*, 74.

48. *Ibid.*, 80.

historical tradition of formal innovation and arts patronage supported the artist as an embodiment of the combined value of aesthetics and social change. Philips's displays celebrated individual insight that formally broke with tradition rather than follow a temporally linear progression of artistic development as exemplified by collectivities or movements. This "individualist theory of modernism" was enacted in Philips's insistence on a "domesticated" scale (literally displayed in Philips's home) and therefore democratic mode of display, where his modernist message could be publicly consumed in what Braddock calls a "program of perception."⁴⁹ The Memorial Gallery could then validate the importance of the collection, formalize a particular notion of modernity, and disseminate this definition so as to inform future public understandings of the term. Philips's success in this collecting-turned-curatorial model is best reflected in that which informed practices of collection and display for Alfred Barr's Museum of Modern Art, where the celebration of artistic individualism contained in a public institution formed the framework for the pervasive 1950s American definitions of modern art.⁵⁰

Braddock compares Philips with his collecting contemporary Albert Barnes, whose foundation displayed modernist works on a slightly different social agenda, but was similarly "authored" as per Braddock's thesis. Whereas Philips argued for his domesticated art experience, Barnes's vision was decidedly educational, systematic and, according to Braddock, also "privately Freudian" in its heavy

49. Ibid., 93.

50. Ibid., 71.

drawing from the theories of aesthetic philosopher John Dewey.⁵¹ Although democratically accessible, viewership was for Barnes a learned skill, and therefore had to be mediated by an educational institution. Braddock is specifically interested in Barnes's "wall ensembles,"⁵² which in their formal arrangements reflected corresponding formal qualities in the chosen artworks. Braddock works beyond this purely formal logic, however, drawing on the symbolic register to demonstrate that these arrangements did also follow a more insidious thematic logic in which Braddock had inscribed meanings based in the deeper, emotional states of both the artists selected and the collector. Of particular note in both the case of Phillips and Barnes is Braddock's observation of the collectors' "signature" embedded in display itself. For Phillips, this takes the form of an Egyptian bust of the culturally progressive and aesthetically innovative patron of the arts—Akhenaten—shown among modernist works, the inclusion of which Braddock argues confirms Phillips's self-perception as being a part of a great lineage of patronage. Comparatively, Barnes includes a portrait sketch of himself in a room of "primitivist" paintings and African objects that imply themes of impotence, or failed paternity in their juxtaposition.⁵³ Telling, too is Braddock's observation that these signatory practices foreshadowed the respective success and failure of each collector in their project to institutionalize in the long

51. *Ibid.*, 111.

52. *Ibid.*, 137.

53. *Ibid.*, 154. Braddock remarks that some of Barnes's curatorial inclusions are signatures that comment both consciously and unconsciously on impotence; indeed, the collector never had children.

term not only modern art but its mode of reception as well. Braddock's "provisional institution" in this sense reveals its operative term.

This detailed history of collecting and curating, combined with Braddock's use of the term "author-practice"⁵⁴ alongside the notion of the provisional institution is helpful in understanding the inevitable—but historically overlooked—practice of curating authorial identity in the process of exhibiting aesthetic ideals. Indeed, this historiography serves as a valuable perspective with which to observe processes of institutionalization into both postmodern critiques and the contemporary period⁵⁵ by allowing for a view into the ideological systems surrounding the institutionalization of modern art in America, on which later standards are built. Perhaps most valuable for the study of the retrospective model is the foregrounding of the origins of the modern art institution as a function of two simultaneous modes of authorship: that of the artist as primary author, innovator, and agent of modernism, and that of the collector and corresponding institution as a kind of secondary, but mystified author *of* that authorship. Braddock's characterization of the "provisional institution," in combination with Bennett's observation of the (historically preceding) epistemological shift from taxonomy to evolution in curating provides the climate within which the retrospective exhibitionary mode exemplifies fully both the fact that the art

54. *Ibid.*, 224.

55. "Postmodern" here describes art practice critical of the narratives put forth by modernity; the "contemporary" describes the current art historical moment. This is not to ignore that postmodern practice continues to feature in contemporary art, and that it does itself have a history.

museum had become “historicized through and through” in modernity and that such historicization was manifest in a new reverence for the inseparable relationship between an artist’s life and his or her work. The retrospective requires both these designations as model and modernist; in fact, the two qualifiers are mutually dependent, since the exhibition category actually models modernism. That the retrospective—as one of the only “named” exhibitionary models—reflects with such clarity the ideological underpinnings of the modern art institution and supports the greater project of modernity itself, suggests how persuasive and enduring these modernisms are well into the contemporary period, despite recent art scholarship and practice that devotes itself to dismantling such projects.

4| Dennis Reid's "Exploring Plane and Contour: The Drawing, Painting, Collage, Foldage, Photo-Work, Sculpture, and Film of Michael Snow from 1951 to 1967"

An interpretive method that is present in each of the AGO curator's essays, but perhaps strongest in Reid's, is the effort to articulate Snow's undoubtedly varied oeuvre as consistent, and as innovative and experimental without ever venturing too far into the unpredictable or random. Indeed, Reid's curatorial thesis is in many ways an argument not only for Snow's consistency across a particular section of time, but a consistency measured by and against his well-known and numerous *Walking Woman* works.⁵⁶ This analysis presents Snow's work as satisfyingly balanced, a characteristic—and criterion—for monographic display traceable to the inception of the modernist institution (as explained by Jeremy Braddock in the preceding chapter). In his investigation of the collecting logic of Duncan Phillips, Braddock points out that implicit in the collector's efforts to exhibit the modernist artist as a deeply critical individual who also "respected the continuity of aesthetic tradition" was: "...a preference for artists among whose work a continuity could be displayed. That continuity for Phillips always bespoke a principle of the artist's personality, which, in turn, could be opposed to the group mentality he believed characterized radical work."⁵⁷ Based on this (rather conservative) criterion, Phillips exhibited a certain opposition to Pablo Picasso, because the "famous mutability of [the artist's]

56. The approach is also consistent with Reid's preferred art historical method generally. The curator writes from within a particularly modernist art historical tradition, and is a contemporary of Snow.

57. Braddock, *Collecting as Modernist Practice*, 91-2.

corpus” was for the collector too difficult to organize into a “coherent exhibition unit.”⁵⁸ This strategy corresponds with what Braddock later terms the “institutional production of authorship,”⁵⁹ and certainly recalls Foucault’s reading of the modern criteria for literary authorship as well, which demands that the author be “defined as a constant level of value...a field of conceptual or theoretical coherence...a stylistic unity...(and) a historical figure at the crossroads of a certain number of events.”⁶⁰ These definitions are operative in Reid’s account of Snow in the curatorial essay “Exploring Plane and Contour.” Whereas there is certainly a distinction between Phillips’s role as a collector and Reid’s as a curator, each requires of their artists a set of criteria as creative but consistent. Such treatment of the artistic author also begins to make claims to Snow’s characteristics as an artist rather than about characteristics of painting or sculpture; accident, chance, and surprise are here incompatible (if observable) not just with Reid’s curatorial vision but the creation of the canonized artist generally. This summation of Snow also forms a hierarchy of critical reception in which negative reviews are written over in favour of the “enlightened” perspective of the historical present—a perspective that also functions to unify and regulate both Snow’s oeuvre and future interpretations of it.

Reid’s essay travels back in time, beginning in 1967, and proceeds chronologically backward to 1951, the year that marks for many the beginnings of

58. Ibid.

59. Ibid., 155.

60. Foucault, “What Is an Author?” in *Textual Strategies*, 151. Foucault interprets these qualities from St. Jerome’s four criteria on authenticity.

Snow's career. The curator's stated objective is to "present a balanced view of Michael Snow's career" and to "demonstrate that the most impressive features of his art were essentially in place at the beginning."⁶¹ Reid's history of Snow increasingly forms arguments for stylistic cohesion across this timeframe, traceable to discernable origins, and often beyond observable characteristics, opting to consider Snow's sensibilities alongside other archival documentation as integral to this "balanced view." In taking care to trace the chronology of the *Walking Woman*, the curator is also accounting for and re-articulating stylistic diversions as rather part of a logical, steady style on the part of Snow conceptually. One way of completing this recovery is by aligning the artist with his canonized contemporaries as a way of proving that the cultural milieu in which one works constitutes a kind of incubator for creative concepts, even if these concepts are manifest in what appears to be a sudden or surprising way. Writing in relation to a work titled *Lac Clair* (1960), Reid argues that although Snow's new stylistic direction in this particular painting might appear tangential to his other more expressive aesthetic preoccupations of the time, the artist was participating in a shared aesthetic experimentation among his New York contemporaries. The work was negatively received by critics when first exhibited because of its "affront" on the purely gestural formal qualities popularized by Abstract Expressionism; Snow's monochromatic, shimmering blue, painterly

61. Reid, "Exploring Plane and Contour: The Drawing, Painting, Collage, Foldage, Photo-Work, Sculpture and Film of Michael Snow from 1951 to 1967," in *Visual Art: The Michael Snow Project* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1994) 18.

strokes are instead for Reid “fundamentally ordered,” “deliberate,” and subvert “all sense of spontaneous expressiveness.”⁶² But this reading is in tension with seemingly contradictory statements about the work’s magical qualities: Reid describes *Lac Clair* in the same analysis as evoking “the aura of a benign force conjured up” by the paint strokes which build “almost to the level of a force of nature as it softly swells against the visual torque generated by the four strips of brown paper” on either side of the canvas; later the painting is described as an “eccentric framing of sensitive brushwork.” Reid maintains a vocabulary for expressiveness typical of analyses of the very movement from which he maintains *Lac Clair* departs. Whereas “spontaneity” may not describe the work, eccentricity, sensitivity, and control refer romantically to *Lac Clair*’s aura, and thus re-associate the painting with the “near-canonical formal values” Reid maintains are characteristic of Abstract Expressionism and “foundational of modernist art,” but which Snow is said to subvert. Later, Reid makes the case for Snow’s participation in and admiration of the styles of his contemporaries, but is also careful to note the artist’s diversions. Works like *Lac Clair* did not “spontaneously spring into being” but rather “developed from a long process...in which admiration for aspects of Abstract Expressionism” was an important factor; “Snow knew,” Reid writes “as did all the brightest artists of his generation, that it was impossible to emulate what they admired...They had to find new ways to

62. *Ibid.*, 77.

achieve those heights again.”⁶³ The curator thus formalizes this balance between respect for art historical tradition within an argument for unique innovation, recalling the criteria for canonization that described the ideal modernist painters in Braddock’s analysis of the Phillips collection.

Reid also acknowledges Snow’s own explicit dissociation from the styles and techniques of his New York contemporary Robert Rauschenberg as a source of influence,⁶⁴ but Snow’s own confirmed distaste is pushed aside in favour of what is for Reid a clear—if unconscious for the artist—preoccupation with the “post-action painting” movement Snow would have likely encountered during his time spent in New York. And while this interpretation attends to the equally problematic, formalist impulse to view works as aesthetically autonomous (with their creation isolated from their cultural and historical conditions) it does so because the work might appear inconsistent with the artist’s other projects; it also functions to “smooth over” historical discontinuity that might otherwise fail to support a coherent impression of Snow’s work over time. In the same discussion, Reid subverts Snow’s dissociation from Rauschenberg as a source of influence again when he overwrites this sentiment in favour of a narrative in which the artist’s collaged “foldages”⁶⁵ are not only a product of the artist’s time in New York but a witnessing and unconscious integration of Rauschenberg’s work into his practice. Reid asks whether Snow’s *Tramp’s Bed* (1955) could have even

63. Ibid., 86.

64. Ibid., 84.

65. Ibid., 85-6

“come to mind without the example of Robert Rauschenberg’s famous combine painting *Bed*, also of 1955...Perhaps.”⁶⁶ Another occasion quotes Snow as similarly distancing himself from the aesthetic concerns of Henri Matisse in his collage works; despite being “interested in Matisse,” Snow states that there is not “any evidence of that [style] in these works,” but instead prefers to align his early 1955 collages more closely with the work of Willem de Kooning and Arshile Gorky.⁶⁷ Reid finds the dissociation “surprising” because some of Snow’s other collages from slightly later in the decade clearly “reveal a thoughtful familiarity with the French master,” while the “highly resolved works of art” by the young Snow are “to all appearances independent of their inspiration in the work of de Kooning and Gorky.”⁶⁸ This type of interpretive argument departs from another logic Reid employs elsewhere (discussed below) in which the artist’s statement functions as the authority on questions of interpretation. It would seem that where these statements do not logically frame the artist and his works according to the modern criteria for canonization, the curatorial voice reorients interpretation of certain works toward more legible statements about influence. This is an example of how it might be too simple to argue that the retrospective model insists categorically on artistic authorship, but rather oscillates between authorial statements and curatorial “override,” depending on which supports a particular, desired characterization. Again—and as stated earlier in reference to the state of

66. Ibid.

67. Michael Snow quoted in Reid, “Plane and Contour,” 111.

68. Reid, “Plane and Contour,” 112.

scholarship on author theory—the interpretive logic is not a comment on whether biography is a feature in art analysis, but *how* the author and biographical information are manipulated to a particular rhetorical end.

Reid is at once validating Snow’s production by recalling his associations (in both exhibitions and critical texts) with other canonized artists and movements, and differentiating Snow from these contemporaries by suggesting that his work goes far beyond mere imitation of the artistically fashionable. Such interpretation suggests that earlier, negative criticisms rest on what Reid perceives to be shallow readings of Snow’s work, which fail to recognize neither the artist’s alignment with concurrent art movements, nor his uniqueness among them. Reid also explores the degrees of consciousness with which Snow worked within these popular themes and methods, especially the concerns of Pop Art. Whereas much of Snow’s early painting and sculpture recalls the simple style of commercial images, and indeed prompts these readings for many viewers, Reid argues for a certain independence of Snow’s work in relation to mass media. Reid relies on Snow’s statements about his own work as the standard by which the validity of certain other receptions are measured, to show that the artist “does not consciously work from [Pop Art] in the manner that in the Sixties was one of the defining characteristics of [the movement].”⁶⁹ This suggestion by Snow overwrites the sentiments of the exhibition visitors and reviewers of a March 1966 show at the Isaacs Gallery, so as to formulate an argument for Snow’s

69. *Ibid.*, 37.

sophistication beyond what are perceived to be the more superficial concerns of Pop Art. The work *Corner Piece* (1963), a *Walking Woman* who now takes the form of a “knick-knack” shelf mounted in a corner, for example, “might have seemed Pop” to some critics but “clearly has more to do with Snow’s desire to keep ‘finding out what happens when you do such and such a thing’ than with in some way entailing popular culture.”⁷⁰ A Pop reading is demoted as historically naïve and merely a popular critical response, where Snow’s self-description is framed as the preferred, enduring lens through which to read his *Walking Women* works.⁷¹ So while Reid sees a certain distance from the concerns of Pop by way of Snow’s refusal to use existing popular images (and given Snow’s own admission that his work’s resemblance to Pop is “an unexplainable coincidence,”⁷² one may just as easily make the argument that he and (fellow artist and first wife) Joyce Wieland’s own campaigns to popularize the *Walking Woman* iconography echoes strongly Pop’s preoccupation with widespread iconographic reproduction and dissemination beyond the gallery. The difference in Reid’s interpretation is in service of the justification of retrospective viewing; articulating Snow’s work as more sophisticated than Pop Art is instrumental to understanding it—for the purposes of *The Michael Snow Project*’s characterization of the oeuvre—as aligned with popular concerns, but exemplary in its execution. That Snow’s painting straddles the line between Pop and Abstract Expressionism—exhibiting

70. Ibid.

71. Ibid., 51.

72. Ibid., 37.

“the finer instincts of a formalist, coupled with the well-digested lessons of action painting”⁷³ is even more advantageous in this regard, in that it simultaneously characterizes Snow as an artistic author with a modernist’s formal control and as a painter who views his art as a form of self-expression, and who is regularly read, to return to Green’s monographic critique, as “rendering a personality in paint.”⁷⁴

Complementary to this interpretation is Reid’s regular reference to preparatory drawings from Snow’s archives as evidence of the artist’s deliberateness as characteristic of his process. This tendency reflects Green’s concern about the impulse in monographic readings to consider sketches and studies, since “everything, from the least significant sketch and preparatory drawing through to unfinished or abandoned compositions, everything is redefined as integral to the corpus.” This “transformation of the whole conception of an artist’s oeuvre” is the way that genius might be “spied out” insofar as it reveals itself in those visual texts that are thought of as sharing a more intimate relation with the artist’s private disposition.⁷⁵ Here the modernist criteria for genius are found in not just the artwork but also the wealth of documentation that surrounds it. Certainly, Reid relies on this tendency to continue his argument for Snow’s consistent character. “That Snow manipulated apparently accidental characteristics of the painting process,” Reid writes, in reference to the painting *Secret Shout* (1960) “is confirmed by an inscription in the upper-right hand corner

73. Robert Fulford quoted in Reid, “Plane and Contour,” 87.

74. Green, “Self-Expression,” 529.

75. *Ibid.*, 530.

of the [work's preparatory] drawing: 'paint the yellow to flow in shape direction.'"⁷⁶ Again an observable formal shift yields to authorial confirmation, especially where this confirmation—as located outside of the work itself in preparatory drawings and notes—functions to recover Snow's work from participation in randomness or chance, both characteristics unsupportive of Reid's formulation of the artist as controlled, purposeful, and consistent. In another example, the curator argues for the artist's conceptual control in what appears to be the "an urgent drawing and at times crude"⁷⁷ canvas for *January Jubilee Ladies* (c. 1961). Reid writes that the work's preparatory drawings "demonstrate Snow's characteristically careful planning of the seemingly spontaneous composition," what cannot be formally evidenced in the "urgent" painting itself is diffused to rough work in support of an argument for the character of Snow's process (and of the artist himself). This fine balance between expressive impulsivity and measured control becomes for Reid an important characterization that elevates Snow above his contemporaries and their more categorical art movements while also supporting Reid's overall thesis for stylistic consistency "from the beginning."

These tendencies lead Reid to a number of speculative comments about the history of Snow and his work. In an interpretive jump more typical of biographically driven readings, Reid refers to a 1957 William Ronald show in New York, which exhibited some shared concerns with gestural painting.

76. Reid, "Plane and Contour," 89.

77. *Ibid.*, 61.

Although Reid cannot confirm that Snow attended this show, the evidence of an invitation in his personal archives suggests enough of a connection to form a hypothesis that the event “may have precipitated”⁷⁸ a response in Snow’s seemingly sudden response to gesture in his painting *Move* (1957). This conjectural linkage is extended further when Reid suggests that “If [Snow and Wieland] made it to Ronald’s opening in mid-April 1957, they doubtless visited *Artists of the New York School: Second Generation* at the Jewish Museum (10 March-28 April), a much-discussed exhibition that included the work of Alfred Leslie, just one example among many of a painter wrestling with the challenge of de Kooning’s accomplishments in a way that Snow would have understood.”⁷⁹ But despite Reid’s efforts to form a tangible connection between Snow and other major exhibitions of Abstract Expressionism in New York, the curator also makes sure to give Snow his deserved artistic autonomy. However influenced by other movements, *Move* for Reid “grew directly from Snow’s experience...not from his response to the experiences of others.”⁸⁰ Again the interpretive tendency forms a balanced impression of Snow by first associating him with established styles at the center of the art world, thus invoking a narrative of influence, and at the same time isolating the artist from these communities so as to characterize his art as not merely responsive but generating from a private, personal experience of the world. Another of Reid’s statements—offered toward the end of his essay—

78. Ibid., 103.

79. Ibid..

80. Ibid., 104.

exemplifies well this attempt to balance harmoniously a sense of consistency with innovation, control with experiment and originality. But Reid is again careful to allow Snow some degree of creative variance. He quotes critic Robert Fulford, an avid follower of Snow's career, who writes in response to a 1960 Isaacs exhibition that despite Snow's increasingly observable consistency in his painting, "This is not to say that Snow strikes the same note over and over again..." but rather "stands as far as possible from the kind of stylized abstractionist...who procures painting after painting in the same mood and style."⁸¹ The characterization of a balanced Snow is here even more nuanced; while the artist is regularly and emphatically celebrated for his consistency, his is simultaneously safe from any charge of dry predictability. Rather, his process to explore variations via repetition within a scheme is indicative of his desire to explore a range of expressions, styles, and moods.

Reid cautions that Snow's trajectory may not be what it seems:

This appearance of a strictly linear evolution [in Snow's oeuvre] is deceiving, however...Granted, as we have moved back through time we have found ample evidence of a sort of sequential development arising from experimentation, but it has been just as evident that Snow's method is to work around a defined problem, exercising the issue...testing the limits, expanding his range of techniques.⁸²

There is an outward "appearance" (this time of "linear progression" rather than stylistic continuity) that is similarly threatening to a characterization of Snow as *too* consistent to the point of predictability. By later articulating Snow's method

81. Ibid., 87.

82. Ibid., 90.

as a “centrifugal way of working,”⁸³ Reid can distance Snow from predictability and discontinuity while also supporting his greater curatorial thesis which looks to identify “origins” of both the *Walking Woman* works and Snow’s style generally. In this sense, Reid’s analysis has Snow’s character—both biographical and aesthetic—perfectly primed for canonization by the former’s retrospective looking; this is a characterization supported by author-statements only where they serve to “close” interpretation toward arguments for consistency. In effect, the narrative of Snow’s career presents the artist as at once innovative and unchanging, protean but steady or, in Green’s word’s “both developing through life and embryonically preformed,”⁸⁴ an author who contains in him the qualities of coherence and genius that strengthens his candidacy for retrospective treatment.

Reid follows this culminating case for consistency with a brief argument about the solo exhibition as the optimal mode of display for Snow’s work, suggesting that pieces presented in isolation risk being ridiculed or misunderstood.⁸⁵ He describes how the artist’s first solo exhibition at the Greenwich Gallery⁸⁶ in Toronto in 1956 “was precisely the sort of deliberately structured public statement of aesthetic position...as would become characteristic [and it] encompassed within its clearly defined parameters a wide range of

83. Ibid.

84. Green, “Self-Expression,” 529.

85. Reid, “Plane and Contour,” 104-5.

86. The Greenwich Gallery, opened in 1955 by dealer Avrom Isaacs, would later become known as the Isaacs Gallery in 1959.

expression.”⁸⁷ This statement brings together a number of aforementioned interpretive threads; not only does retrospective viewing require an understanding of Snow’s oeuvre as always connected and purposeful, but it also privileges the solo exhibition as the only model that can facilitate and encourage the true meanings of certain artworks. This proposal implies that “misunderstood” critical commentary is then—in part—a function of inferior display, where art works achieve full legibility only in reference to others by the same creator. It establishes once more the criteria for balance the between the protean and predictable forces as identified by Braddock (i.e. “clearly defined parameters” but “a wide range of expression”) and it implies that retrospective solo exhibitions (like the one Reid participates in here) present the best opportunity to see these “deliberately structured public statements of aesthetic position” – that is not simply Snow’s position, but the institution’s as well, as it relies on these types of authorial characterizations. Reid’s commentary therefore functions to classify Snow as retrospective-worthy according to a precise set of ideologically constructed criteria, but also classify the solo show as the preferred curatorial model for interpretive clarity, beyond just its functioning as an important signal of professional success.

Reid’s critical method—beginning with the end of his historical timeframe and working backward toward the conceptual seeds of Snow’s career—also functions generally as a focusing on origins. While the historical

87. Reid, “Plane and Contour,” 104-5.

parameters of his essay indicate that the backward narrative will end somewhere in 1951, Reid goes far beyond Snow's first exhibitions whilst simultaneously questioning the validity of tracing back to the impossibly elusive indications of "nascent talent."⁸⁸ "How far back can we go, should we go?" asks Reid as he begins his concluding remarks; he recognizes that to seek out influence in the artist's youth and family history is tempting, but also brings the analysis "into the realms of investigation and conjecture outside the usual province of art history." This realization is in keeping with *The Michael Snow Project's* awareness of the retrospective as a model imposing interpretive constraints, but what follows in Reid's essays exemplifies the persistence with which these constraints come to bear on curatorial argument. The last sentence of "Plane and Contour" reads:

For now, all we can do is symbolically chart the field by recording that Michael Snow was born in Toronto 10 December 1929 to Marie-Antoinette Snow, nee Levesque, of Chicoutimi, Quebec, and Gerald Bradley Snow of Toronto, civil engineer, and that he has said "I think the two most important things in my life were that my father went blind when I was 15, and that my mother loved music."⁸⁹

This inclusion is telling because it formalizes the tension between Reid's awareness of the biographical tendency and the necessity of working within it. While the curator does not explicitly interpret the relations between Snow's biographical details and his work, the implication of their thematic connections is present. The use of Snow's statement about his parents provides source events for his career trajectory, and his date of birth functions as the source event for the

88. Ibid., 120.

89. Ibid.

birth of both person and artist; in other words, identity and artistic authority are collapsed, making the life the temporal bracketing of the work. Contradiction and incoherence resolve at the level of the author. Reid's overall curatorial argument toward the artist's consistency-as-character is then also one of biographical logic, where even childhood experiences are used as evidence for originality, and artistic innovation stems from implications of "nascent talent" despite the curator's wariness of such speculation.⁹⁰ Reid's Snow is consistent, characterized, and fully formed as "origin," and is as such in keeping with modernist criteria for artistic individuality. The retrospective, even more, is the way that we might discern these qualities as it insists on a logic and observable agreement between life and work.

90. Reid's exhibition proposal presentation argues that "the most impressive features of [Snow's] art...were essentially in place at an early stage in his development." Indeed, to prove this idea is for Reid the "principle goal of the exhibition." The proposal suggests that didactic panels for *Plane and Contour* will encourage the understanding that Snow's methods were "begun in childhood and actively pursued in his youth." Dennis Reid, Exhibition Proposal Presentation (April 28, 1993), Box E.03.02, Edward P. Taylor Library and Archives, Art Gallery of Ontario.

5| Philip Monk's "Around Wavelength: The Sculpture, Film, and Photo-Work of Michael Snow from 1967 to 1969"

Philip Monk's five-part essay "Around Wavelength: The Sculpture, Film, and Photo-Work of Michael Snow from 1967 to 1969" is much more theoretically driven than Reid's historical overview. The essay presents a curatorial argument by way of photographic metaphor, in which Monk frames his exhibition *Around Wavelength* as "an aperture to separate select works from the wide concerns featured in the comprehensive exhibitions that bracket it, while acting at the same time as a hinge between them."⁹¹ The aperture metaphor similarly "mirrors" for Monk the nature of the work produced by Snow within the time period examined. Each of these works "...concentrated their apparatus on the function of viewing in order to make sight visible... They effectively put an end to the image of the *Walking Woman*, filtering perceptual and conceptual themes to their more purified essence, before Snow's themes broadened out again to wider image practices during the 1970s."⁹² Monk's metaphor is strategic and instrumental to the historicizing of Snow's career as one of aesthetic progress in that it both accounts for certain aesthetic "ends" (here, that of the *Walking Woman* series) as not abrupt stylistic shifts but explainable and deeply considered intellectual processes locatable in the sentiments of the artist even when not plainly visible or formally evident in works themselves. Like Reid, Monk's theoretical argument—this time

91. Phillip Monk, "Around Wavelength: The Sculpture, Film, and Photo-Work of Michael Snow from 1967 to 1969" in *Visual Art: The Michael Snow Project* (Art Gallery of Ontario, 1994), 294.

92. Ibid.

very explicitly aware of how the occasion of the retrospective invites a particular investigative mode⁹³—still relies regularly on artistic authority as the final word in matters of interpretation. His analysis also activates a tension between a recognition and celebration of the intertextual and author-critical implications of much of Snow’s work from this period and a tendency to return to matters of artistic “desire” and intent as original sources of meaning.

Monk cleverly introduces his essay with a brief discussion of Snow’s 1970 work *Side Seat Paintings Slides Sound Film*, a work produced on the occasion of an earlier, major retrospective of the artist’s work at the AGO in partnership with the Isaacs Gallery titled *Michael Snow / A Survey*.⁹⁴ The film shows a traditional art historical slide lecture—the topic of which is Snow’s painting from 1954-1965—but the viewing perspective is off-set; that is, the line of sight is from the side, and the viewer witnesses the lecture “as if arriving late...so is afforded only an oblique view.”⁹⁵ The example is important for Monk because it aligns *The Michael Snow Project*’s (and *Around Wavelength*’s) retrospective view with Snow’s own historical self-analysis in the form of *Side Seat*. Here Monk compares the project to Snow’s creative “looking back,” but notes some differences, and in doing so indirectly begins to define the nature of the AGO’s institutional retrospective; the gesture of looking back is this time “at a greater distance,” but it is also a look “through each [work’s] shared structures and

93. Ibid., 293.

94. Both Monk and Dompierre use the titular term “survey” and “retrospective” interchangeably in reference to this exhibition.

95. Monk, “Around Wavelength,” 293.

mutual influence.” So while for Snow we know that *Side Seat* (itself prompted by the occasion of the AGO’s 1970 Snow retrospective) is about the “transformation” of media and the simultaneous experience for the spectator of past and present, the retrospective view is instead for Monk a mode of viewing which is driven by how works viewed historically share in aesthetic qualities and concerns; in other words, how these works influence and dialogue with each other. So whereas Snow’s *Side Seat* is in many ways a project critical of the distorted nature of historical looking, Monk’s characterization of his own look back follows a logic of aesthetic containment, progress, and canonization.⁹⁶ That Monk compares *The Michael Snow Project* with the artist’s gesture in *Side Seat* is telling in itself; the curator mirrors the reflective nature of the work—one that responds in many ways to retrospective treatment—by offering this treatment once again. This in effect returns *Side Seat* to Snow’s corpus, despite its initial function as a response to his own institutional characterization. This process of absorbing works into an existing, historical construction of artistic authorship created by the institution describes both Monk’s method and the effect of the retrospective format generally.

What follows in the essay is a theoretical argument around Monk’s proposition that Snow’s best-known film work *Wavelength* is in many ways the

96. In response to requests that *The Michael Snow Project* be divided and travel to other institutions, Monk writes “to travel one section is undesirable as [it is] a misrepresentation of the totality of Michael Snow’s enterprise.” Letter from Philip Monk to Roald Nasgaard (Oct 9, 1990), box E.03.02, Edward P. Taylor Library and Archives, Art Gallery of Ontario.

artist's "last *Walking Woman* work."⁹⁷ This is because it distills certain formal preoccupations such as the relations between theme and variation, and focuses what Monk purports to be Snow's desire to render visible the complex and layered process of perception. The chapter "Around Wavelength" (and *Around Wavelength*, the exhibition) then describes those works that operate conceptually (and are made within the timeline Monk investigates) around the film as a pivot. By creating a conceptual center or origin—however atemporal—for Snow's aesthetic investigations, Monk's essay reinforces an already-established canonization of *Wavelength* as Snow's definitive work of originality and genius; even more, it forms an argument around *Wavelength* as not merely a product of aesthetic concerns but an isolation of authorial desire, thereby invoking the modernist authorial preoccupation with accessing an artist's mentality. The curatorial argument also serves to fuse the *Walking Woman* series (well-known with Snow's Toronto following), Snow's later sculptural work, and *Wavelength* (better known internationally), as necessary parts of the same aesthetic project, with *Wavelength* as a kind of culmination or perfection of a particular aesthetic problem. In this sense what many perceive to be a defining characteristic of many of Snow's projects—the working out of variations within clearly defined limits—serves for Monk as the model by which we are to understand not just the relations between works in a given project, but relations between separate works in the artist's oeuvre. This containment of the corpus engages a formalist analysis that

97. Monk, "Around Wavelength," 294.

strengthens the legitimacy of Snow's work and further maintains the canonization of *Wavelength* as aesthetic "summation."⁹⁸

Monk's essay contains a close theoretical analysis of *Wavelength*, characterizing it as an "aperture" for Snow's career in that it focuses and literalizes some of his aesthetic concerns, articulated by Monk as the artist's "desire." But while Monk is certainly and powerfully aware of the nature of retrospective analysis and the complexities of self-referentiality, his interpretation—similar to Reid's—relies on authorial voice as confirmation of curatorial argument. Monk introduces *Wavelength* with a popular quotation from Snow who explains that he "wanted to make a summation of [his] nervous system, religious inklings, and aesthetic ideas."⁹⁹ Monk relies on this articulation of artistic desire as foundational to his argument. Indeed, the curator repeats this statement three times in his essay, regularly returning his reading of the film to its authorial inception and privileging this statement as a definitive source of meaning. This notion of *Wavelength* as not just a "summation" of aesthetic concerns but a product of authorial desires, mental states, or here "religious inklings" corresponds well with Monk's sub-chapter, suitably titled "See It My Way."¹⁰⁰ Monk explains that the title is taken from a reference made in Snow's notes and that it is reflective of the artist's "modernist" interest in "changing

98. Ibid., 321-322.

99. Ibid.

100 Ibid., 296.

vision or directing it to new sources.”¹⁰¹ But this statement is also for Monk an indication of Snow’s “possession” of the spectator’s sight in the form of both the artist’s perceptual sculptures and *Wavelength*; Snow imposes a “psychological element of constraint”¹⁰² along with a physical directing of vision (works like *Scope* (1967), for example) which for Monk reinforces his curatorial references to authorial control as determining (in this case, quite literally) the meaning of the particular works that manipulate vision. And while these sculptural works (including *Wavelength*, with its determined zoom) from this period are indeed manipulating the sight lines of the spectator, embodied vision is here relegated to the momentary embodiment of the *artist’s* perspective rather than a more viewer-conscious experience of visualized vision.

This characterization of artistic authorship—as “possessing” momentarily one’s vision—is in tension with a second argumentative thread that runs through Monk’s essay: namely, that which recognizes the intertextual possibilities implied by Snow’s sculpture from this period and the artist’s own suggested criticisms of the modernist preoccupation with resolved, interior mental states. Many of Monk’s art historical references (including extensive quotation from Paul de Man and Annette Michelson) begin to characterize both *Wavelength* and the sculpture Monk discusses as activating a dialogue between sign systems internal to and generating from within the space of the film. An example of this tension is in Monk’s deployment of a particular analysis of *Wavelength* via the discussion of

101. *Ibid.*, 319.

102. *Ibid.*

allegory (as opposed to symbol) proposed by deconstructionist literary critic Paul de Man in his own discussion of figurative language in Romantic literature. This reading—deconstructionist to be sure and therefore certainly divergent from more plainly biographical readings characteristic of the retrospective model—is important in its engagement of de Man, particularly in the *kind* of deconstruction it espouses. *De Man's Rhetoric of Temporality* proposes an important function of allegory as a literary and artistic figurative device, despite its historic demotion (by some Romantic poets in particular) as less effective in comparison to the symbol, which was an “intimate unity between the image that arises up before the senses and the suprasensory totality that the image suggests.”¹⁰³ This unity is what authenticates the symbol as a figurative operation, whereas the allegory—in its distance and separation from its referent—was thought to have made it the weaker literary and artistic device. What de Man proposes is that it is precisely this distance that grants allegory its own authenticity, which is also more aptly descriptive of a Romantic epistemological turn toward intersubjective modes of dealing with ontological questions. Whereas the association of the symbol with Romantic literature reflected the movement’s intimate “relationship between mind and nature, between subject and object,”¹⁰⁴ it could not ultimately account for how imagery was to also describe the subject’s temporal and therefore contradictory relation to the object (in this case, universal and timeless nature)

103. Paul de Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” in *Blindness and Insight* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 189.

104. *Ibid.*, 195.

with which it seeks to find sympathy or “affinity.”¹⁰⁵ Allegory offers a symbolic language that attends to this tension. For de Man, it “corresponds to the unveiling of an authentically temporal destiny...this unveiling takes place in a subject that has sought refuge against the impact of time in a natural world to which, in truth, it bears no resemblance.”¹⁰⁶ The allegory’s distance from its origins spatializes time, thus insisting on a sign system in which it refers to “another sign that precedes it” rather than an original referent. The allegory therefore succeeds for de Man as a device that corresponds with the painful realization in Romanticism of the self’s “illusory identification with the non-self.”¹⁰⁷ Monk takes up this final idea of the sign system and selfhood as a lens through which to read *Wavelength*’s zoom in combination with the successive and repetitive filmic frames. The film’s durational aspect presents that allegorical “illusion of continuity that [the viewing subject] knows to be illusionary,”¹⁰⁸ but returns the conversation about this anxious selfhood back to Snow himself rather than to *Wavelength*’s spectator.

In drawing on de Man’s theory, Monk proposes not so much an inter- but *intra*-textual reading of *Wavelength*, where the result is “a play of differences within the text that results in its positions being always already textual;” that is, the “announcements and echoes”¹⁰⁹ that describe the sequence of images in Snow’s film are aligned with de Man’s notion of allegory because its structure

105. Ibid.

106. Ibid., 206.

107. Ibid., 207.

108. de Man in Monk, “Around Wavelength,” 339. Original in de Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” 226.

109. Monk, “Around Wavelength,” 338.

“necessarily contains a constitutive temporal element;” it is “the allegorical mode only” that for Monk can describe the multiple and conflicting registers of *Wavelength* and “the summations that must be resolved as much as they express on the part of the artist conflicting nostalgia and desires.”¹¹⁰ Here, Monk’s reading accomplishes a number of sub-theses that support both an experimental critique of the art work as a “text” while also continuing to support authorial canonization; for later literary critics like Tilottama Rajan, this brand of “*intra-textuality*” championed by de Man comes under criticism insofar as this refusal to “deautonomize” the text reinforces “the canonical status of the individual work.”¹¹¹ So while Monk’s reading certainly describes how *Wavelength* presents a kind of non-narrative, allegorical dialogue, his choice of investigative mode also brackets the work, contributing to a general characterization of its purity and distillation of Snow’s aesthetic desires, rather than to an epistemological moment of subjectivity which preoccupies de Man’s thesis. The intratextual reading does not then explicitly rely on biographical details in the same way that Reid’s essay does, but rather considers the already celebrated *Wavelength* as the example of Snow’s methodological perfect and aesthetic purification by aligning it with de Man’s allegory.

Monk takes his analytic direction from another statement of Snow’s in reference to the 1970 work *Authorization*; the artist states that the photographic

110. Ibid., 339.

111. Tilottama Rajan, “Intertextuality and the Subject of Reading / Writing,” in *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History*, ed. Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 62.

sculpture represents an effort to “use photography in a very enclosed way so that there is nothing outside the work itself that is used in the photograph...as in certain kinds of painting which have an autonomy of their own.”¹¹² *Authorization* for Monk is then “a record of its own making, as if in dialogue with itself through the process of its self-fabrication;”¹¹³ it is similarly “tautological,” incorporating the artist’s image not as a product of “solipsism”¹¹⁴ but as a necessary inclusion of process in a completed, contained picture. But this tautology serves as an efficient formalist lens through which to view Snow’s portraiture for the purposes of retrospective analysis. Canadian curator Tila Kellman criticizes this tendency to read Snow’s work like this as “so self-enclosed that conditions of production are the same as those of presentation” because they imply the existence of an artistic author as generative source or authority (of course Snow’s title names this theme explicitly) and tend to close potential discussions of viewership.¹¹⁵ But Kellman is more so concerned with *Authorization* as it asks “Who?” (as opposed to “How?” or “What if?”)—that is, it asks about the degree to which Snow’s serial acts of self-representation to the point of obscuration comment on the tradition of portraiture, authorship, and viewership. That the work includes the mirror allows the viewer to witness both the literal position of Snow in process—the replacement of the viewer’s head by images of the artist—and the disintegration

112. Snow quoted in Monk, “Around Wavelength,” 364.

113. *Ibid.*, 364.

114. *Ibid.*

115. Kellman, *Figuring Redemption: Resighting My Self in the Work of Michael Snow* (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2010), 83.

of Snow's face as snapshots similarly accumulate over his own image. But while the argument for tautology refers back to Snow as the works "source," Kellman reads the work as a greater acknowledgement of the "promise"¹¹⁶ between artist and spectator as necessary to the witnessing of the portrait. By insisting on and incorporating the image of the viewer, *Authorization* "seems to acknowledge how it cannot exist without my [i.e. Kellman's, or the viewer's] co-authorization, mirrored and thought."¹¹⁷ The image is therefore not simply a product of a generative principle for image-making, but a dialogue of desire between the artist as he announces the "repeated attestation: "I promise you that I am here, as artist, in the field of representation,""¹¹⁸ and the viewer as she validates this announcement because it insists "on the circulation of [her] sight through materialized visual discourse."¹¹⁹ Here Monk's reading of *Authorization* (and works like it in the chapter "Around Wavelength") engage a more strictly formalist method in the service of maintaining Snow as retrospective-worthy—as the origin of process (and implicitly, genius) from which a strictly controlled and autonomous work is born, when other readings (perhaps slightly less in favour of this traditional notion of authorship although certainly still respectful of the

116. *Ibid.*, 96.

117. *Ibid.*

118. *Ibid.*, 95.

119. *Ibid.*, 97.

artist's insight) open interpretation to include a necessarily present viewing subject.¹²⁰

This intra-textual reading is also in many ways that which characterizes the overarching argument about mutual influence that Monk begins his essay with. Works from this period constitute a kind of sign system to which both Snow's *Walking Woman* series and *Wavelength* refer. The artist refines aesthetic problems, which culminate in *Wavelength* as a summation of Snow's preoccupations; the film work also acts as a refraction of aesthetic concern that logically introduces that which proceeds from it thematically into the 1980s and 1990s. Monk's aperture metaphor is then instrumental in the retrospective argument as it mechanizes Snow's corpus and the exhibition *Around Wavelength*, especially placed alongside the arguments put forth by de Man. Just as Monk proposes that works like *Wavelength* and *Authorization* generate their own internal logic systems, so does he make a case for Snow's oeuvre to do just the same. Monk presents this particular period of production—with the intra-textual reading of *Wavelength* as a unit of measure—as a contained system of aesthetic language, at once in dialogue within individual works and between them as canonized objects. What questioning there is of the complex "subject" is, in addition, returned to a consideration of authorial feelings and desires rather than

120. Notable is the catalogue's reproduction of *Authorization*, in which the viewer's body is conspicuously absent from the mirror's reflection. The artwork has been photographed by a camera on a timer, removing the human element of the photographer or viewer whose reflection would have to appear if standing square to the artwork. See pg. 136 of *Visual Art: The Michael Snow Project*.

to those of the spectator, thus directing analysis to Snow as a conflicted—indeed, Romantic—author, whose own selfhood plays out in his art. Just as there is no “outside” to the tautological *Wavelength* or *Authorization*, there is for Monk’s reading no “outside” to Snow’s oeuvre beyond its reference to the artist himself.

6| Louise Dompierre's "Embodied Vision: The Painting, Sculpture, Photo-Work, Sound Installation, Music, Holographic Work, Films and Books of Michael Snow from 1970 to 1992"

Like Monk's, Louise Dompierre's catalogue essay "Embodied Vision: The Painting, Sculpture, Photo-Work, Sound Installation, Music, Holographic Work, Films and Books of Michael Snow from 1970-1992" communicates an awareness of the complex nature of retrospective viewing. The curator for the Power Plant iteration of *The Michael Snow Project* begins the essay with a kind of anecdotal metaphor, as she walks through the exhibition space as one would walk through a natural environment. There is in equal parts a temptation on this walk, Dompierre explains, both to follow the path as laid out by history and to divert from it, exploring the "delight of trying to look at things from a slightly different perspective."¹²¹ But even in this explorative re-visitation, there are blind spots; Dompierre admits that even in an attempt to "see as much as possible...there will be many things that will escape" her observation.¹²² This creative introduction to the essay demonstrates an awareness of the necessary interpretive strengths and weaknesses of historical analysis—namely, that looking back is curatorial in the sense that the process involves selection, omission, and the task of offering a sense of thematic and formal cohesion. But what may appear to be critical

121. Louise Dompierre, "Embodied Vision: The Painting, Sculpture, Photo-Work, Sound Installation, Music, Holographic Work, Films and Books of Michael Snow from 1970-1992," *Visual Art: The Michael Snow Project* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1994), 389.

122. *Ibid.*

diversions from a given historical path in Dompierre's essay are only temporary, since the interpretive limits imposed by the retrospective framework insist that these diversions all lead back to a well-trodden path toward authorial canonization. This redirection is primarily observable in a tension between more postmodern theoretical concerns in Snow's later work and the tendency for these concerns to become overshadowed by the justification of celebrity required by the retrospective model.

A kind of secondary introduction to the essay begins with a discussion of Snow's 1970 work *Venetian Blind*, a photographic series of 24 snapshots, arranged in a grid, which show blurred close-ups of the artist's face and feature "the shimmering water surrounding Venice"¹²³ in the background. Despite the work's literal obscuring of the artist's image, Dompierre writes that "more importantly...*Venetian Blind*, allows a glimpse into the artist's inner state...it tends to allow speculation as to the artist's emotional state" and "captures the feeling of euphoria, perhaps, that Snow might have experience at this particular time in his life."¹²⁴ That Dompierre begins with this analysis which suggests that the artwork offers a degree of insight into an artist's emotional states is perhaps symptomatic of the retrospective constraints, where even a work critical of authorship and the retrospective occasion is re-framed as novel for its entry into an artist's private life. This oscillation between the explicit recognition and understanding of a complex and plural self that is the author and this redirection

123. Ibid.

124. Ibid., 390.

toward canonical reinforcements characterizes Dompierre's essay. The logic is reflected in the curator's titular argument surrounding the notion of "embodied vision" and the opposing force of biographical concerns. While we might assume from the nature of Snow's work that the "embodiment" activated here is that of the spectator, close analysis of Dompierre's interpretive logic destabilizes this assumption, when it may just as easily be said that the embodied vision she speaks of is that of Snow's. This opening reading of *Venetian Blind* alludes to Dompierre's analyses that follow, where the recognition of Snow's aesthetic diversions as well as the complexity of artists' histories is in tension with an interpretive tendency to return to the artist's subjectivity as something resolved and unified.

Like Monk, Dompierre is very aware and equally critical of the effects of the retrospective, but confines these criticisms mostly to a discussion of the AGO's 1970 retrospective exhibition (and Snow's response in the form of his artist's book/catalogue *Michael Snow: A Survey*, which borrows the exhibition title) which prompted a reflective, creative response from the artist. For one, Dompierre recognizes a reputation of the retrospective model, that it is often perceived to function as a kind of closure for an artist's career, but that it is:

...hard to see how [this view] applies to the career of Michael Snow. Certainly, there is no evidence to suggest that his 1970 exhibition...was detrimental to him in any way, neither curbing his creativity nor diminishing his opportunities to exhibit. The reverse, in fact, might be said to be true. Presented with a unique opportunity to reflect upon his broad

accomplishments to date, Snow seemed to have been propelled into the most productive years of his career (...)¹²⁵

But the retrospective also functions, as Dompierre later implies, as a *particular* reading of an artist's body of work alongside a life, and is not merely a way of marking off stylistic beginnings and ends. *A Survey* (the artist's book) might be for Snow an alternative retrospective model where fiction, disorganization, and chaotic elements are a response to the occasion of the 1970 retrospective, which Dompierre suggests presented Snow "in a certain way."¹²⁶ The book is an album of text and photographs; it experimentally juxtaposes snapshots from Snow's life and images of artworks, and is intercut with reviews and lists in various typefaces. Sometimes these texts are printed backward or on top of existing print, making legibility difficult or even impossible.

"A Plural Self" – the sub-title of one of Dompierre's essay sections, acknowledges explicitly that Snow's critical questioning of authorship and narrative by way of fictionalization and fragment is the "altered...space where most of Snow's work functioned during much of the Seventies and Eighties."¹²⁷ But also for Dompierre, *Michael Snow: A Survey* is essential in its insistence on the inextricability of one's art from life;¹²⁸ it emphasizes the importance of the role of "personal history and subjectivity" in art making, but also sustains a degree of fiction in its experimental presentation. The artist book, which takes up

125. Ibid., 392.

126. Ibid., 409.

127. Ibid., 396.

128. Ibid., 412.

similar concerns in Snow's work from the period in question, begins to function for Dompierre as still a metaphorical window into the artist's disposition; rather than deconstruct the author as a fluid—indeed constructed and highly mythicized relative of oeuvre—*A Survey* for the curator “manages to reflect a playful, seemingly candid, yet private Snow.”¹²⁹ This attempt to characterize the artist despite the simultaneous awareness that the artist's self-presentation is a product of very purposeful complication of authorship demonstrates the effect of the retrospective's conditioning. Dompierre veers away momentarily from a more traditional understanding of authorship only to return to the book as another artwork granting private access to the personality of a mysterious public figure. This reflects the tendency recognized by Green in his critique of the art historical monograph, in which the “evocation of a life/temperament is interspersed with critical readings of the works produced.”¹³⁰ The effect is that the relationship between Snow and his work is one of sincerity, that the “seemingly candid” representation of his life through images is a window into the personal before it is a critical obscuration of authorship, and the retrospective occasion generally.

This tendency is manifest in a number of analyses that follow in the essay. For example, while works *Scope* (1967) and *Blind* (1968) (discussed in depth in Monk's essay) demand the viewer's participation via their respective apparatuses,¹³¹ Dompierre argues that Snow's sculptures from the 1980s (citing

129. *Ibid.*, 413.

130. Green, “Self-Expression,” 529.

131. Dompierre, “Embodied Vision,” 451.

Monocular Abyss (1982), *Seated Sculpture* (1982), and *Zone* (1982)) differ in that they evoke “a very pragmatic sense of the world...emphasizing Snow’s complex perception of the world at this particular time.”¹³² For Dompierre, this complex perception is in part an appreciation by Snow of the complexity of the “Real” and its relation to the camera; his sculpture and photographs after 1970 are comments on the inaccessible and fragmented Real as it comprises a promise (and failure) of the photographic lens. But while this conceptual argument promises to open Snow’s work to the notion of objective impossibility, it often redirects to a greater claim which positions Snow as being in touch with a kind of cultural zeitgeist, as his work “rises above the specific determinations of particular trends.”¹³³ (We see an echo of Reid’s essay here, since the characterization of Snow as both participant in a greater art discourse must be balanced with his uniqueness, and dissociated from the purely popular.) She criticizes Snow’s own claim that much of his photographic work attempts to be self-contained (there is “nothing outside” of the photograph) because it encourages a strict formalist approach; it tends to “restrict critical discussion to formal properties alone [and]...to confine such analysis to the arena of art itself, leaving out a broader basis and cultural understanding.”¹³⁴ While this recognition introduces the discussion of Snow’s work to a wider cultural conversation, it instead uses the promise of the work’s cultural porousness to articulate it as evidence of artistic insight and worldly

132. Ibid.

133. Ibid., 401.

134. Ibid., 396.

perspective, rather than to institutional, economic, or other relations.¹³⁵ Much of Dompierre's analysis becomes enclosed then by the life of the artist, as it becomes a hard interpretive limit. Discussions of embodied viewing return to sculpture as reflective of Snow's "sense of the world;" explorations of the limits of the "Real" become examples of Snow's uniqueness and distance from "trend;" a criticism of strict formalism only opens readings insofar as it leaves room for Snow's character and insight to become known.

Kellman—mentioned earlier in the context of Monk's essay—has identified a tendency in critical discourse surrounding Snow to do just this. Even when analysis looks beyond this argument for "tautology," it returns to an implication of artist-as-origin. Writing in regard to art historical criticism around *Authorization* (1969) and *Venetian Blind*, she observes that the works are:

(...) frequently analyzed...as tautological works in which form or process becomes content: they document the process of their own making or are so self-enclosed that conditions of production are the same as those of presentation. They present the self-realization of a generative principle; or present the event as its documentation and the whole returned uniquely to the mind and hand of Michael Snow who alone can authorize it. Implicit in these analyses are concepts of the return of form to the idea, the immanence of the enlivening idea in form and matter, and the origin of the idea as the genius of Michael Snow...this modernist criticism veers into romanticism because it does not take into account the subject matter in the images.¹³⁶

This critique applies to Monk's reading of *Authorization* to be sure, but also describes the logic with which Dompierre—and the retrospective interpretive

135. Green writes that these relations are regularly overlooked in the monographic study. When they do appear, they are "constructed in an external, often oppositional relation to the artist's 'life course.'" "Self-Expression," 529.

136. Kellman, *Figuring Redemption*, 83.

framework as a whole—formulates her analysis as an argument about what Kellman later calls “the heroism of progress towards consciousness.”¹³⁷ The essay interprets Snow’s artwork, in other words, as a progressive, private realization about the world, formalized through art. Dompierre mentions a work titled *Conception of Light* (1992), a large scale photographic installation showing two disembodied irises, one blue and one hazel staring unblinkingly at one other opposite ends of a room, in relation to earlier works: “The title,” Dompierre writes, “is meant to speak to how, materially, and at an interpretive level, the work embodies and manifests the position of the author and his particular perspective on the world in which we live.”¹³⁸ Here again “embodied vision” is presented as not that of the viewer but of the artist himself; the experience of the work is then as an object of Snow’s (and second wife Peggy Gale’s) look. If Dompierre’s criticism of the tautological readings of Snow is based in a desire to introduce cultural considerations to the work, there remains an implied exclusion of the spectator’s body, inserted between the seemingly recursive “loop” of looking in *Conception of Light* as a result of this somewhat biographical commentary. At the end of the essay—after Dompierre has explored the related notions of a “plural self” in a “plural world,” the curator returns to *Conception* and adds that the irises are those of Snow himself and Gale; “that one of Snow’s own eyes (blue) has been used to make this work also brings us back full circle to

137. *Ibid.*, 85.

138. Dompierre, “Embodied Vision,” 409.

Venetian Blind, created some thirty-two years earlier.”¹³⁹ “Full circle” in this sentence implies that *Conception of Light*—like *Venetian Blind*—is exceptional in its allowance of “speculation as to the artist’s inner state,” and even dramatic¹⁴⁰ in its allusions to the artist’s relationship with his wife. Here the retrospective framing of Dompierre’s inquiry insists on another kind of tautology, where even a criticism aware of the complex nature of authorship (and especially in the work of Snow) must regardless yield to the conception of the artist as to some degree a unified point of origin, whose consciousness might be accessed by considering his works from this period in relation to one another, even as evolutionary in their insights.¹⁴¹ This consciousness is, even more, exemplary in its grasp of a certain contemporary condition, even prophetic in its deep understanding of collective, unconscious anxieties relating to television media and its relation to the Real.

So while the various objects of Dompierre’s inquiry speak to the recognition on the part of the artist of the infinite plurality of authorial voice (as in *A Survey*, *Venetian Blind*, and *Authorization*), the occasion of the inquiry direct analysis back to the implication of a singular, enlightened Snow. The curator’s walk through the past certainly explores critical tangents, but ultimately ends in the same destination: the characterization of Snow as a consistent critic of

139. *Ibid.*, 472.

140. *Ibid.* Writing in response to *The Michael Snow Project* for the *Financial Post*, Lisa Balfour Bowen calls *Conception of Light* “gimmicky and self-serving.” This statement is characteristic of other reviews of the project, which are often to some degree skeptical of Snow’s institutional stardom. Lisa Balfour Bowen, “Is Flurry Over Artist Snow Deserved?” *The Financial Post* (January 22, 1994), box 77-4 Edward P. Taylor Library and Archives, Art Gallery of Ontario.

141. Dompierre, “Embodied Vision,” 396.

contemporary consciousness, and a “private” subject whose disposition is revealed subtly through his art. The evolutionary logic of the modern museum resurfaces here in the form of the artist’s life-as-story, in which Snow conceives of, refines, and finally perfects an internal perceptive preoccupation. Not only this, but the refinement is revealed as simultaneously prophetic and responsive to circulating contemporary anxieties, while carefully eluding popular trends. The suggestion that the tautological readings of some works should be opened to include the “outside” serves only to reinforce such characterizations of Snow as his authorship indicates a place of conceptual origination. Finally, experiment, accident, play, and fiction as they relate to biography—as exemplified in Snow’s artist book *A Survey*, is by its very inclusion in the artist’s oeuvre in the retrospective context evacuated of its critical positioning as a comment not only on the 1970 retrospective, but the model of retrospective presentation itself. Despite the curator’s recognition that Snow’s work frequently concerns itself with the “idea of a de-centered subject...[and] the role of the image in the shaping of identity,”¹⁴² the artist is in effect re-centered by the various interpretive tendencies that work to direct analytic paths back to the life as generator of the work; the retrospective conditions, therefore, continue to press on active attempts, on the parts of both artist and curator, to circumnavigate them.

142. Ibid., 401.

7| Conclusion

This rhetoric of diversions with the return of a shared destination might describe the relations and tendencies across all three of the catalogue essays discussed here for *The Michael Snow Project*. Despite their separation being an implied answer to the perceived “character” of the retrospective, Reid, Monk, and Dompierre’s essays combine to demonstrate a number of general tendencies toward the centralization of the artist. More traditionally art historical, Reid’s chapter recovers Snow from historical inconsistencies, characterizes early work as prophetic for future innovations, and even looks—although with hesitation and awareness—to the artist’s date of birth as a source for “nascent talent.” His analysis amplifies artist statements as they confirm artistic meaning supportive of Snow’s originality, and silences this same voice when it confuses meanings, contradicts itself, or dissociates its practice too far from an existing canon. Monk and Dompierre—who investigate Snow’s later preoccupations with embodied vision—each employ a type of formalism, which presents works as perfected ideas, at once reflective of Snow’s inner states and in touch with deep philosophical and epistemological questions of his time. These readings position the viewer as spectator of Snow’s visions rather than as participants and co-authors; they similarly treat Snow’s own criticism of his authorship as an abstract questioning of an ever elusive “Real” rather than as a comment on certain institutional presentations of biography. But what also joins these essays is the suggested consciousness of these very problems: Reid sees speculation, Monk

questions the nature of historical looking, and Dompierre recognizes the “plural self” that is Snow. *The Michael Snow Project* itself proposed an exhibition that was “retrospective in scale but not in character.” Besides the fact that the scale of a retrospective may very well be integral to its character (being that it is the prolific and careered artist who gets retrospective treatment), the question of the interpretive frames that define the model’s limits have become clear through a case study that attempts to work beyond its constraints. This confirms that these limits are present, persistent, and historically enduring.

The nature of Snow’s work from the 1970s to the 1990s also begins to work against the modernist criteria that may have better defined his work in the 1950s and 1960s. What does a traditional retrospective framing do to art practice that enters postmodernist themes and contemporary periodization? The example of Snow and *The Michael Snow Project* might not be so removed from more recent concerns about institutional presentations of contemporary art. Theorist T.J. Demos has recognized a problem where an observed tendency away from fixed identity, or artistic “nomadism,” collides with the art market’s celebrity paradigm. He writes that:

These tensions become particularly apparent when mid-career retrospectives are organized for the likes of [Rikrit] Tirivanija or Pierre Huyghe, exhibitions that deploy a monographic format that reaffirms authorial identity despite the artist’s attempts to variously problematize that logic via collaborative procedures, the elimination of art objects, or nonautobiographical projects.¹⁴³

143. T.J. Demos, *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 12.

This reconfirmation of authorial identity is, of course, precisely that which defines the retrospective. As an artistic author in many ways between the canon and the contemporary (Snow is a living artist who has had several major retrospectives, both mid- and late career), Snow's corpus also embodies a tension between the more formalist concern of modernism and more discursively critical aesthetic investigations that have in part defined contemporary practice.

But critic J.J. Charlesworth has offered a more abrasive critique of this phenomenon, as evidenced in a recent article for *Artnet* titled "The Ego-Centric Art World is Killing Art." In it he writes about the slippage between presentations of the "artist-as-ego" and the "ego-as-artist," with the latter beginning to characterize both institutional exhibitions and art practice itself. The question here is about the degree to which habits of display—and the retrospective especially—encourage the ego in art, thus sustaining the system of art stardom Charlesworth laments. We might also return to Jeremy Braddock's concept of the provisional institution, as "a mode of public engagement modeling future" in which ideologies can be defined, packaged, and disseminated according to a certain curatorial vision. For Charlesworth, this future is defined by "the artist and the audience, holding hands between infinity mirrors, one hand free to squeeze off a selfie,"¹⁴⁴ but this is also a vision of the art institution and its curators, standing just out of the mirror's frame, continuing to buttress ego explorations as a means of drawing large crowds and adding value to their collections. The title of

144. J.J. Charlesworth, "The Ego-Centric Art World is Killing Art," *Artnet News* (December 30, 2014), news.artnet.com.

Charlesworth's article, after all, implies an art world-as-perpetrator, with art as its victim.

And what is the future of authorship as it is modeled by the art world construction that is the retrospective? If anything, it is one that continues to reassert modern definitions of authorship analogous with those of which contemporary artists, if not art critics, are increasingly wary. Like the interpretations of *The Michael Snow Project* curators, the retrospective redirects discourse to the kind of author on which the art institution is built, despite the promise of the exhibition medium as a place of ideological reform. Now that the character of this discourse has been laid out, how can curatorial writing attend to some of these tendencies without abandoning all logic? Can works from different authors and traditions be juxtaposed without insisting on a narrative of either conscious imitation or unconscious zeitgeist arguments? Is heterochronic display, which presents non- or counter-narratives compatible with the retrospective format? Can the exhibition allow for an encounter with an author while still privileging the meaning-making capacities of the spectator? Can exhibitions commemorate without deifying?

Two more recent texts on both the scholarship surrounding the author and the specific concerns explored in Snow's work might provide some potential frameworks with which to reconsider the problems of retrospective format. One is Tila Kellman's 2002 *Figuring Redemption: Resighting My Self in the Art of Michael Snow* discussed here with regard to the analyses put forth by Monk and

Dompierre. The other—mentioned briefly in the Literature Review—is Jane Gallop’s *Deaths of the Author: Reading and Writing in Time*. What these texts have in common is that they revisit authorship not with the animosity usually associated with New Criticism, but with an understanding mediated by a kind of democratic desire to dialogue with a text, to “witness” or “touch” the authoring body, even beyond its literal, biological death, and to construct both self and other in the space opened by the artwork. Recalling Kellman’s reading of *Authorization*, Snow’s artwork might be reconsidered as a “promise made to a reader” rather than a “declarative statement;” the receding and not quite graspable image of the artist, and the reflective surface of the mirror signal the both the look of desire cast by the spectator in a search for the author, and the “answer” in the form of one’s own image in a titillating “erotics” of self-exposure.¹⁴⁵ For Kellman, it is this figuring of the self—myself, rather than purely Snow’s or the curator’s self—that opens the artist’s work beyond the “monocular vision”¹⁴⁶ associated with photography and in this case, the retrospective. This lens might even transform the satire of Charlesworth’s vision of the infinity mirror into something less skeptical: perhaps it is that virtual space of the mirror, the “holding hands with” or touching not the artist but her image—infinitely receding, unstable, and fractured—that offers an opportunity for self-making.

Gallop’s text applies the theme of desire more broadly in her re-visitation of authorship which begins with Barthes’s first questioning, but focuses instead

145. Kellman, *Figuring Redemption*, 165.

146. *Ibid.*, 169.

on a less analyzed statement by the poststructuralist in *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*:
“The pleasure of the Text also includes a friendly return of the author.”¹⁴⁷ So
while the institutional definition of the author might be “dead,” *desire* for her
persists. Reading the text is a pleasure in which the author “returns” but only as a
kind of fantasy inside the text rather than outside or beyond it as “creator.” Gallop
considers

(...) this idea of the author as “lost in the text” very evocative. Not only
does it suggest an author in the text but not in control, it also suggests the
author might want to but cannot get out of the text. That idea...might be
related to the idea...of the author who comes out of his text and into our
lives. The image...could also suggest that he is there but the reader cannot
find him, cannot reach him. If the relation of the author is a relation to an
other, it is a relation to an other who is always there but always lost, who
cannot be discounted but cannot be reached.¹⁴⁸

These characterizations of the author as “a lost other” without control grants the
text—in this case, the artwork—a certain liveness.¹⁴⁹ We cannot conclude the
author nor fully access her by reading the text, but we can see her figuring—in a
“certain” way—in the text; the author, in turn, desires her own textual re-creation
by way of the reader. This relationship seems to broaden the “monoscopic”
perspective, with the text operating not merely as a direct line to a biography, but
instead considers the text itself as surface and depth—a space—where both artist
and viewer can move. This is especially relevant to Snow’s directed vision; even
if artists are clear in their biographical inquiries, explicit in their attempts to

147. Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), 8.

148. Gallop, *Deaths of the Author*, 60.

149. *Ibid.*, 25.

“possess” sight, there is a curatorial responsibility to critically consider popular characterizations of artistic celebrity, perhaps in favour of the friendly co-authorship Kellman promotes. Although, as we have seen, it is not only the spectator who co-authors, but the institution as well, desiring the artist author that is also a product of its historical making, trying to hold together its particular vision of the human subject, with the anxiety to do so exemplified and amplified in its regular deployment of the retrospective model. If contemporary curatorial practice *begins* with the exciting, if troubling concept of being “always there but always lost” in the text, if history need not be a consistently legible narrative, if the text is always live with the voice of an author rather than the author herself, then the retrospective may be able to carry on as a model compatible with the critical potential of the exhibition, as a space for embodied desire and contested subjectivities.

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