

# The Kitchen Center for Video and Music

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# SOHO

## INTERVIEW

### Amy Taubin

Michael Snow, one of the most important filmmakers of our time, has come from Canada where he has been living for the past several years, to install a new sound work at the Kitchen (November 2-13) and to play two concerts there (November 11 & 12) with the Artists Jazz Band of Toronto.

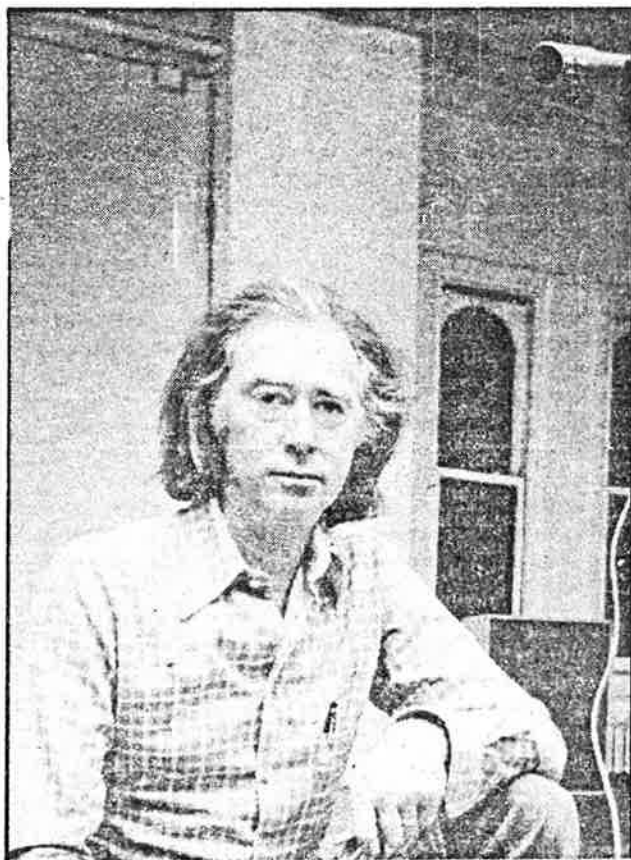
It is Tuesday morning and Snow has just finished recording the last tape for his piece which will open today. It is freezing in the Kitchen and we are all tired, but Mike Snow wants to listen to just the first half, all put together. Mike Snow takes more pleasure in his own work than any other artist I know and it is a great joy. He also laughs frequently and his laugh is unexpectedly rich and deeply located. He is in his middle forties now and looks both older and younger. His hair is mostly white and he has the somewhat droopy jowls that come with the playing of brass instruments for an extended period of time but his stance and body seem often like an adolescent boy's. He has a quiet eccentric energy and loves a good laugh. He is extremely intelligent and possesses grace of body and temperament. It is a great pleasure to be around him.

The sound installation at the Kitchen is deceptively simple and anti-technological. It uses four cassette tape recorders and an electric metronome. There is no attempt to sync the recorders, either in the recording process or in the installation itself. The tape recorders are placed one on the stairway and three fairly equi-distantly across the large room. They all play continuously and simultaneously with each other and with the metronome. The tapes were made with the recorders in the same positions which they occupy during the installation. The tape closest to the metronome is a recording of the metronome and any sounds which occurred in the room during the recording. The tape on the second recorder is of the first tape plus the metronome plus any room sounds occurring during its recording and so forth.

Walking into the piece, one comes upon the most thickly layered and distorted tape first and then continues to walk until one reaches the source of the sound, the metronome. But the metronome is not only the sound source; it also provides the frame for all the other sounds which have been recorded on the tapes as well as for the sounds which are occurring in the room during the installation.

## Snow Sounds

## Mostly an Interview



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Like most of Snow's other work, this one is about states of mind, of the continual mixing of memory and intentionality with presence. It is similar to certain of his photographic works which were shown at MOMA last winter, especially *Authorization* and *Red*. It is a very delicate work and one should spend a good length of time with it. I was fairly envious of the Kitchen staff, who will get to hear it every day for two weeks.

**Mike Snow:** "The piece at the Kitchen is visual and aural. I knew what the Kitchen looked like and that you could hear the trucks passing outside. It's about visual and aural and temporal space. Because it's in real space, individual blocks (the tape recorders) are the sources of the sound, but the sound doesn't have any edge. Their distance in time and space from each other is contained in the quality of the sound. Each tape recorder is the re-counting of a separate memory and each speaks of what happened before it.

"I knew what might happen during the recording, but I wouldn't break my rules by, say, walking intentionally on the stairs just because I like that sound. But it was nice to hear a particular sound that I wanted finally happening. There was a limit to how much I'd patch. A small quantity is the equivalent of someone walking into the room accidentally and recording their footsteps. When the photographer came to take pictures, I ran the risk of not telling her not to talk. That's a little like the decisions I make in playing Free Music and I like what happened. But I threw out one whole tape because there were too many interruptions.

"I like that there aren't any tapes in the first room, that it just becomes the space between the two recorders, like a glorious waste of space. The metronome seemed the closest sound to what a rectangle is.

"The piece uses chance somewhat more than my films

have. A stronger emphasis on taking stuff in from the outside and framing it. But that does happen in my films. I've always wanted something else to happen that would be a product of the actual doing and the actual time so that it gives the work a particular distinction and saves it from being the illustration of an idea. It puts nuances and kinks in what could be a too stiff design if it were set in motion perfectly. Like the way *Wavelength* is shot; it isn't a continuous zoom by any means.

"While I was there, the opening day, people walked in and sat in one place for a long time and I hadn't expected that. You can focus for quite a while on just one recorder and the stuff around you."

## On Music

"I have been making music for a long time. Some of that music is related in form to my films. The record, *Michael Snow Musics for Piano, Whistling, Microphone and Tape Recorder*, for example. I started playing jazz when I was 17 or 18 and played professionally for a while till 1963. I've gradually returned. One of the main reasons for the return is the AJB (Artists Jazz Band of Toronto). They are mostly old friends and they've played together for about 15 years. When I lived in New York (from 1963 to 1971), I played with them occasionally on visits and when I moved back to Canada I started playing regularly. What I'm trying to say is that it was partly them that made me want to start playing again.

"When I first started playing in my teens, I was interested in New Orleans jazz, which was collective improvisation, and it was the improvisational aspect which most interested me. I started to try to play, you know, to just play 'anything' even before I heard Cecil Taylor and Ornette Coleman. I didn't know how to do it, but I had the idea it was possible. I first heard Taylor in about 1963 and I was very affected by it, so much that I thought I'd just stop playing. It was just at this time that the guys in the AJB started playing. They were painters and they were playing just for fun with no public ambitions till very recently. They themselves discovered how to play the way they do. It was a very innocent way into the music.

"The thing about visual artists playing jazz is interesting. When I first arrived in New York, some of the Park Place group and Ron Bladen and David Weinrib were all playing. They didn't attempt to play tunes either or to try to sound like anybody. They just tried to make sounds on the instruments. A similarity there to abstract expressionism. And the first people who understood Cecil and Ornette were mostly white visual artists."

## About Composition

"Despite what I said, that I'm interested in improvisation, I'm also interested in composition. When I play, it's a spontaneous composition, not self-expression. It can be thematic. It is formal. We try to make a piece. When you play freely, no individual has control of all the parts. It can go so many ways; but you hear that at some point everyone is concerned with some aspect that is emerging. It's formal to me like anything else that I make, except that it's spontaneous and has this social situation. There can be seven or eight simultaneities, each well-developed. You can have a unity of several parts against the rest. So many possibilities I never experienced in any other way.

"When I'm playing, I apply what I've always done in my other work, but listening to the AJB tapes, afterwards, it seems like a phenomena that's passed through you. Other work is subject to after-thoughts and revisions. It's a way of getting into the present; that's what is most exciting.

"When I was here in New York and knew a lot of the leaders of what was then and is now the free music movement, they were all concerned with composition and writing. Often it was a line in the Charlie Parker mode which would be played at the beginning, and the middle would be the jazz, and the end would be the line again. I disagreed with that because the adventure involved seeing what would come out of the spontaneous playing, including what compositions. And if a group stayed together long enough, it could make up its own compositions by just playing together and that would be a more organic thing than having some guy say 'here's a line.' That might be good music, but I think the real adventure is to find your own compositions — and everyone has them — in relation to what might be happening around you over which you have no control. It's the tack I favored then, and I still favor it now because I think it causes the most new music to happen.

"I'm still alive and I want to see as much as I can. I'm not so sentimental as to be anarchist, but in the back of my mind is the ideal of no government and the social aspect of playing free is that there really is no government

# The Kitchen Center for Video and Music

or that governments arise out of the musical discussions, a government in flux. In these bands, we joke that there should be no rules and everyone says 'but that's a rule.'

"Chaos is kind of interesting. Despite the Kitchen installation. I'm interested in chaos, how little repetition you can get. You can have an objective experience of something like chaos playing with these bands. It's objective because you're not insane. Also the fact that you play the same instruments is a kind of repetition. High phrase, low phrase...

"In a film you could show versions or successive takes of something but it's not the same thing, because in music it's a search that's going on. You can hear the searching, the selecting of this and the discarding of that, simultaneously sometimes, with several people. It doesn't all have to work and what doesn't work can be of great interest because in it you can see the seeds of what came and that's very organic—no additives, no preservatives, no artificial coloring music.

"There are two stages, the live playing of the music and the artifact of the tape which we make in most cases. Hearing those two things is quite different, both for players and listeners. When it's on tape, it's that memory thing. There's a kind of hindsight. Because it's on tape, it's more art — and less. Oh, I don't want to start that life-art business. Art isn't life. The tapes are removed in time from when they happened and the important thing about this music is it's presentness."

## Future Films

"I have several different ideas for another film but I don't know what I'll do next. It's not for lack of ideas, but

none of those things that I'm thinking of — well, I don't have that kind of subjective recognition of the possible depths of any one of them, and I wouldn't act until I had that.

"My films have all — except *One Second in Montreal* — been about image-sound relationships. But when I make a new film, it will be something that I want to do and not a collaborative thing like the music. I've thought about it and I can't see that the way this music is made could influence the way I make a film. Playing has influenced the kinds of shapes that I'm interested in.

"That began to be evident in *Rameau's Nephew by Diderot (thanks to Dennis Young) by Wilma Schoen*, my last film. I was more involved with sharp contrasts and unpredictable changes, rather than, as in my earlier films, with a single shape which could be foretold, in a way, from the beginning. I'm looking now. I feel the necessity for some sort of much more complex and eccentric form. One of the ideas I'm interested in is an abstract film, just color, and another is a text film, just language, that I've been thinking about for two years now.

"I've always done a lot of different things and they've influenced each other. When I first went to art school, I was trying to choose a profession, but I was also making music and then I became a painter and I was still playing music and then I started to do some sculpture and then I got into films and I kept going through this argument with myself, that I shouldn't do all these different things, that I couldn't do them all well. And every now and then I'd try to stop one of them."

One final question: Does Snow make a differentiation between music and sound?

"Yeah, sound is what you use to make music. The piece at the Kitchen is music. It uses environmental sound, but it's the use of it that makes it become music. You can hear something and call it music if you want to, like you can see something and call it art if you want to. I've always been interested in listening to everything. You hear things that are interesting, moving, beautiful all the time, but that isn't art. Pointing them out or choosing them could be."

And AJB makes art?

"Oh, yeah."