

Improvisation, Representation, and Abstraction in Music and Art:

Michael Snow and Jesse Stewart in Conversation. Toronto. 12 November 2005.

Michael Snow's status as a leading figure in the world of visual art and experimental film is firmly ensconced. His paintings, sculptures, and photo-based works have been exhibited around the world and are in the permanent collections of such prestigious institutions as the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the National Gallery of Canada, and Le Musée d'art moderne in Paris. His films (including groundbreaking works such as *Wavelength*, *New York Eye and Ear Control*, and <---> [Back and Forth]) have been screened at festivals worldwide. Major retrospectives of his work have been held at the Hara Museum in Tokyo, the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Vancouver Art Gallery, Le Musée d'art contemporain in Montréal, and La Cinémathèque française in Paris.

Perhaps less well known are Michael Snow's credentials as an improvising musician.¹ He began playing New Orleans-style jazz piano as a teenager during the late 1940s. In the 1950s, he performed with many leading swing musicians including Buck Clayton, Dicky Wells, Cootie Williams, Jimmy Rushing, Vic Dickinson, and Pee Wee Russell. From 1962 to 1972, he lived in New York where he became deeply involved with what was then known as the "New Thing" in jazz that included Archie Shepp, Roswell Rudd, Steve Lacy, Paul Bley, Albert Ayler, *et al.* Although Snow played relatively little music during this time, his Soho loft served as a hub of activity for the burgeoning scene. For instance, the highly influential Jazz Composers Orchestra, co-led by Carla Bley and Michael Mantler, began there.

In 1964, Snow created the film *New York Eye and Ear Control* which featured "the walking woman"—a cutout two-dimensional silhouette of a woman that was a recurrent image in his work at the time—in various locations in New York. For the film's soundtrack, Michael recruited an all-star line up of musicians: Albert Ayler, Don Cherry, John Tchicai, Roswell Rudd, Gary Peacock, and Sunny Murray. This collaboration was significant for several reasons, not the least of which is the fact that Snow asked the musicians to create music that was entirely improvised without reference to any pre-composed melody or "head" as had been their custom up to that time.

Returning to Toronto in the early 1970s, Snow began playing with the *Artists' Jazz Band*, one of the earliest free jazz/free improv ensembles in Canada, that consisted primarily of Toronto visual artists who were self-taught musically (Graham Coughtry, Nobuo Kubota, Robert Markle, and Gordon Rayner). In 1976, Michael co-founded CCMC, another pioneering Canadian free improvisation ensemble which, despite multiple personnel changes over the past thirty-one years, continues to perform to this day.

In November 2005, Michael and I got together in his Toronto home to discuss intersections between the sonic and visual arts in our respective creative practices.² I was surprised—and intrigued—when Michael began by saying that he wasn't particularly interested in any relationships between his work with sound and his work in the visual arts.

J.S.: Do you see any relationships between your work with sound and your creative practice as a visual artist?

M.S.: I've never really been interested in what relationship there might be between what I do with sound and what I do visually. The only place where those things really meet is in my films where I've been working on sound/image relationships as a very specific area.

J.S.: *New York Eye and Ear Control* in particular, but really, in all of your films.

M.S.: Pretty much every film tries to do something with sound and image apart from the general thing of mood-supportive music, which is something I hate. I try to do something that is constructed and explores some kind of interesting relationship between the sound and the picture.

J.S.: The sound almost becomes a character in your films.

M.S.: Yes. I have done things that are based on synch sound like *Rameau's Nephew*, a film I finished in 1974 that's four and a half hours long. It's built on recorded speech, basically, so the usual synchronous relationship between the mouths moving and the recorded voices happens, but thousands of other things happen as well that have to do with recorded speech and images of people apart from that basic synchronous relationship.

J.S.: In addition to your films, you've also done some audio recordings that explore sound and image. *The Last LP* comes to mind.

M.S.: I've done two things along those lines. The first one was issued in 1975 on the Chatham Square label, *Michael Snow: Musics for Piano, Whistling, Microphone and Tape Recorder*. That was an attempt to make a kind of unity out of the package which is one of those fold-out LP albums. It is completely covered with a text that was written to be related to the music. It's not liner notes; it is a piece of literature that parallels the music. *The Last LP*, issued 1987, and *The Last LPCD* of 1994 were also attempts to make a unity of the packaging, the texts, and the music. *New York Eye and Ear Control* was made in 1964. The authoritarian title describes the intention that one could hear the music in an attentive way while simultaneously seeing another "line," the images. Through Paul Haines, who I know you worked with, I heard Albert Ayler for the first time. I chose the band; they knew nothing about the images. I asked them for 30 minutes of ensemble improvisation. No tunes and no solos. In assembling it all, I edited the film, then I laid the track on top of it. This film is my purest criss-cross of the two worlds, visual art and music, that we're talking about. It's a *Walking Woman Work*, all the images have the static 2-D silhouette. Most of the motion is in the music.

J.S.: Beyond the film works and those sound recordings (and their contextual materials), you don't see any relationships between your visual art and your work as an improvising musician, with the CCMC, for example?

M.S.: No, I really don't. It seems like another line in my life that started with playing jazz when I was in high school. One would think that there are relationships. But in music, I am particularly interested in improvisation. In my other stuff, there's very little improvisation. There are accidents; things happen and I like that. But I generally start out with a process or a situation that is pretty determined before a film shoot, for example.

J.S.: That is very interesting to me because I consciously try to foster links between my activities in both areas. The sonic and visual arts have always illuminated one another for me. So I don't really distinguish between my work with sound and my work in the visual arts. For me, it is all one creative practice. Most of my visual work has a sound component, at least implicitly. In performing too, I try to think about the visual aspects of the performance as information that impacts the audience's perception. That even extends to what I wear, the types of performative gestures I use, and so forth.

M.S.: I'm definitely the opposite because in the hundreds, maybe thousands of concerts that I've played with CCMC, I never think about what it looks like. It doesn't matter to me at all. When people talk about lighting, I say "do whatever you want."

J.S.: It almost sounds like music provides you with a break from thinking about visual concerns.

M.S.: That's a good way to put it actually because it is a kind of refreshment. Playing is so different from everything else that I do, it is refreshing. It is pure creativity with no strings attached.

J.S.: Do you think your stature in the art world has hindered your reputation as a musician? You are so well known for your visual art and films, I wonder if people don't realize that you are also a highly accomplished musician.

M.S.: Yes, I think that's true.

J.S.: When I listen to your work with CCMC and your piano playing in general, I actually do hear connections between the music and your work on a whole. Maybe this is fanciful on my part, but I think the tremendous diversity of your work in terms of both form and content is reflected in the music. I hear it in CCMC and I hear it in your piano playing in that the music is so varied. No two CCMC performances are alike. I suppose that may be a function of improvisation in general, but it seems to be particularly true of CCMC, especially the early group.

M.S.: Yes, the early CCMC groups before Larry Dubin—our marvelous drummer—died in 1978 were predicated on having as wide a variety of sound sources as possible. In addition to our regular instruments, we all played everything else. We had marimbas, kettle drums, gongs, all kinds of percussion instruments, some made by ourselves, we had 2 Fender Rhodes electric pianos plus 2 grand pianos and synthesizers, Bucla, etc. This variety was exemplified by the cage structure that Nobbi Kubota made in the 80s. He played from within it—alto sax—but he was surrounded by all kinds of percussion things he could use as well as 2 cassette players with volume pedals. He'd made a few cassettes with interesting music and sounds that he could put into the music. Beautiful early DJing. I should mention that in my

uses of sound, there are also sound installations—*Hearing Aid* and *Diagonale*, for example. *Hearing Aid* uses cassette players.

J.S.: And a metronome.

M.S.: Yes, there's a metronome in one corner and there are four cassette players. The first cassette player is placed maybe three or four feet away from the metronome depending on the size of the space. I recorded the metronome on that cassette player and then let the two of them play together without controlling whether they start or stop at the same time. Then, going further away, I record those two sources and play them back again. Each successive recording was made and played back at increasing distances from the original source. The first couple of recordings are fairly clear, but there is a lot of phasing between the different sound sources and interesting rhythms are created. By the time you get to the fourth recording, there's a lot of distortion and echo.

J.S.: The sound becomes increasingly abstracted, in a way, from the original sound source as one moves through the space. It seems to me that abstraction is one of the main connections that people make between music and the visual arts. Historically, many artists in a variety of media have talked about their work aspiring to the condition of music in the sense that music doesn't represent the external world, but rather constitutes its own reality. Kandinsky comes to mind in painting; Stan Brakhage in film. Now, you've said that for you, music is non-representational.

M.S.: Yes, it is.

J.S.: I have a slightly different conception of abstraction and representation as they relate to music. Of course, music doesn't represent the physical world in the same way that a painting or photograph can, although there are examples of programmatic music in which an attempt is made to represent something sonically—*Symphonie fantastique*, for example.

M.S.: Or *Pictures at an Exhibition*.

J.S.: Right. From my perspective, music is representational in a more general sense in that there is often an attempt to represent a particular genre, whether we are talking about classical music, jazz, funk, or hip hop or whatever. There are certain stylistic conventions that musicians draw on in order to invoke and, in a way, represent a particular style. So in that sense, music is rarely abstract.

M.S.: But is it representation when you play in a style or idiom?

J.S.: Maybe it's more a question of semantics than anything else, but this is how I think of it. There is also abstraction within particular idioms. This is one of the things that leads to musical change. Musicians inherit certain stylistic conventions that they more-or-less emulate in order to represent a particular genre. But as time goes by, musicians often begin experimenting with those conventions and the relationship to the original musical codes becomes more abstract. The changing role of soloist in post-bop styles of jazz seems relevant here. In bebop, solos were based on the harmonic form of the tunes that musicians played. But with later players like Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, and Albert Ayler, the relationship between the solo and the form of the tunes became increasingly abstract to the point where the tune was no longer really necessary as a framing device. Continuing this line of thinking, we could say that this process of abstraction is one of the things that led to free improvisation, what Derek Bailey describes as "non-idiomatic" improvisation.

M.S.: Yes, that's a useful term.

J.S.: If somewhat problematic.

M.S.: Well, it's sort of an ideal in a way—the idea that the music wouldn't be classifiable because it is so totally open. I was thinking about the *Artists' Jazz Band*. Most of the guys in that group were painters and I used to think that the way they played was like acting; it was as if they were acting like their musical heroes. We'd have these wonderful parties at Gord Rayner's and the music would happen at the end of the party. It would grow out of witty conversation that was going on as everyone got higher and higher. Since the people in the group didn't have real chops on their instruments, they acted in a certain sense. Bob Markle would be acting like John Coltrane, for example.

J.S.: So do you see that as a form of representation?

M.S.: Yes, that's why I thought of it. That is a certain kind of representation. Fortunately, because they were so limited, but also so passionate and creative, the music that was made by the *Artists' Jazz Band* was very good. And it wasn't imitation because they were incapable of it.

J.S.: Aside from the *Artists' Jazz Band* example, it doesn't sound like you are convinced by this idea of music as a form of representation.

M.S.: Not really. If anything, there's the cliché that music stands for feelings and thoughts.

J.S.: Personally, I'm not too interested in that. I don't like the emphasis that it puts on the intentions of the composer or performer. I'd like to think that agency rests primarily with the audience when it comes to the construction of meaning in music. Someone may *try* to represent their feelings or thoughts in music, but their intentions often have very little to do with the way in which the piece is received. But to me, entering into a musical context wherein a certain set of stylistic conventions is drawn upon in order to evoke something prior, some prior musical genre, is a form of representation. Now this is complicated by free improvisation. With the advent of free improvisation—the work of Derek Bailey and Tony Oxley, for example—there was a very conscious attempt to get away from musical representation of any sort. In that case, the music became almost entirely abstract, even in the sense that I use the term. Hence, Bailey's term “non-idiomatic improvisation.” However, it seems to me that once that step is taken, the music doesn't stay non-idiomatic for long; it becomes an idiom unto itself rather quickly. We can listen to free improvisation and recognize when musicians are referencing the variant of free improv pioneered by Derek Bailey *et al.* In terms of CCMC and your own playing, I would offer the term “pan-idiomatic” improvisation as being possibly more apropos because the music draws on such diverse elements. The musical backgrounds of the group members, past and present, seem to support this—yourself and Larry Dubin coming from a traditional jazz background, Casey Sokol and Peter Anson coming from a classical background, and so on.

M.S.: Nobuo Kubota's training was with the *Artists' Jazz Band*.

J.S.: And architecture! Even in the current configuration of the group, Paul Dutton is a poet and sound singer and John Oswald's background includes his plunderphonics stuff as well as composition and improvisation. So this idea of “pan-idiomatic” improvisation seems relevant to me in the sense that everyone in the group is coming from diverse musical backgrounds that enter into dialogue with one another in various ways. This is how I think of my own practice as an improviser as well. For me, that's part of what makes improvised music so interesting. It seems to me that it might also be a way in which your practice as an improvising musician connects to your work in the visual arts, which I think could also be reasonably described as “pan-idiomatic.” I wonder if memory is another way in which the visual and sonic arts intersect. Memory is so crucial to the improvising musician.

M.S.: Well, as an improviser, one thing you don't want to do is play something you have heard before and have remembered. I know that I repeat myself musically sometimes because by now I have sort of a style I guess. But every time I play, I want to play something new. So in that sense, remembering is a negative thing.

J.S.: I guess there are different kinds of memory in music. There is a kind of localized memory within the performance—we can remember a sonic event that happened in the relatively recent past and signify on that.

M.S.: Right. Paying attention to what goes on is really important. That's for sure. You can use something that happened a half an hour ago if you remember it. It can come back naturally in your playing because you do remember it and it might be time to say it again.

J.S.: And it can add a sense of formal coherence to a performance. So memory operates on that level. There is also the kind of memory that you mentioned a moment ago. I share the same concern as an improviser about repeating myself musically because there is always the risk that a particular musical pattern or gesture will become habitual or cliché—the idea that improvisers rely on a musical bag of tricks—“musical bag-ism.” Another metaphor that is often used is vocabulary. As improvisers, we develop a certain musical vocabulary. If I draw on an aspect of my vocabulary that I've used before, I try to be conscious of that and I try to use it in a new and nuanced way.

M.S.: That's exactly what I try to do. I've been influenced by the fact that group improvisation is often a kind of free counterpoint. So I've been trying to play with my two hands in a way that isn't fugal, in a way that formalizes gestures. So some of them are things where I start with my thumbs together and go out. There are a whole bunch of those

things that are intrinsic to playing the piano—also when your hands are moving parallel to each other. I've been working on all those things, trying to avoid making fugues and all that other stuff. But it *is* a vocabulary.

J.S.: A gestural vocabulary.

M.S.: Right. Within what I've learned about those gestures, every time I play, I hope to go further. And fortunately, it does happen. I actually do play things that I've never played before. Lots of things. My attempt has been to go back to fundamentals in a way that doesn't have any reference to previous uses of those fundamentals. Even within that approach, you can be playing something that has been played before. But at least it's starting at the basis of what you can do on the instrument.

Notes

¹ For a detailed discussion of Michael's engagement(s) with music and sound, see *Music/Sound: The Performed and Recorded Music/Sound of Michael Snow (The Michael Snow Project; 4)*.

² An edited version of this interview appears in the catalogue to an exhibition of my visual art titled *Waterworks*.

Works Cited

Snow, Michael. *Music/Sound: The Performed and Recorded Music/Sound of Michael Snow (The Michael Snow Project; 4)*. Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario/The Power Plant/Alfred A. Knopf, 1994.

Stewart, Jesse. *Waterworks*. Oshawa: Robert McLaughlin Gallery/Thames Art Gallery, 2006.