

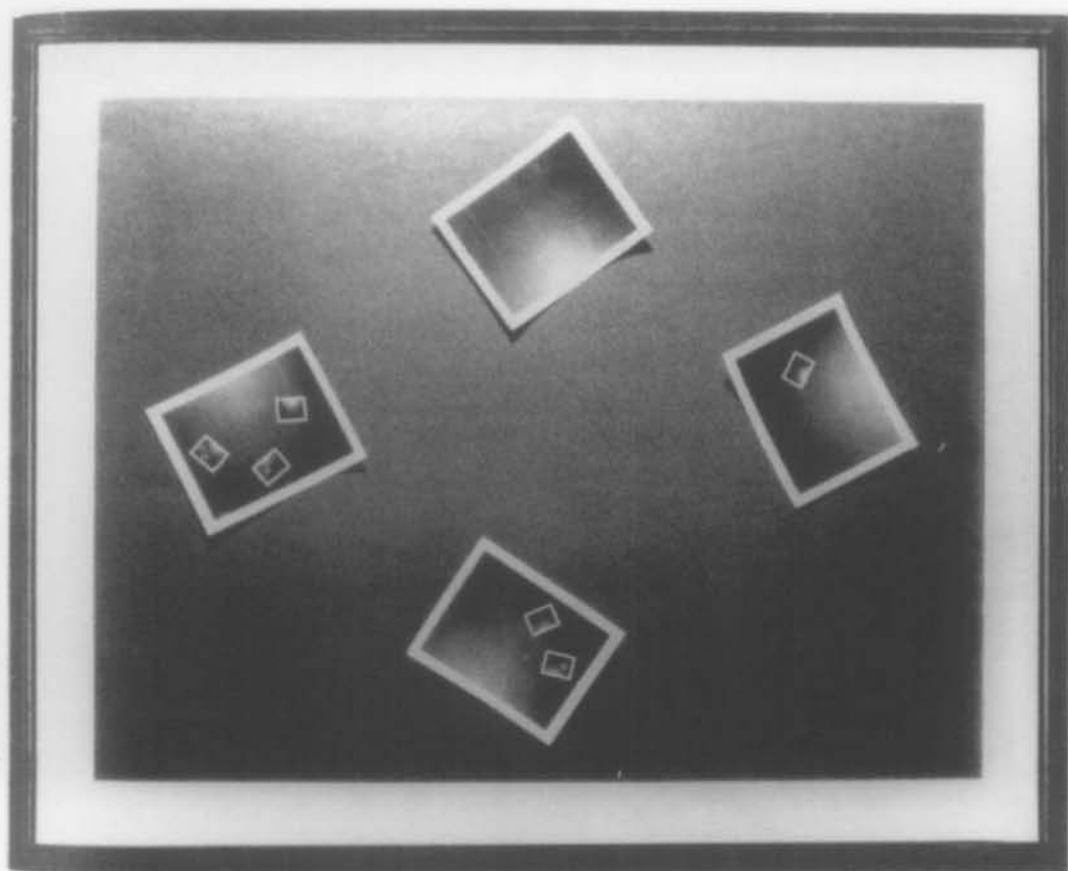


fig. 1 Michael Snow, *Red*⁵, 1974, colour photograph, 66 x 79 x 4 cm. (Photo: Robarts Library, University of Toronto)

TAKING IT AS RED

Michael Snow and Wittgenstein

In his intellectual activities Michael Snow owes a great deal to two predecessors in matters of art and language: Marcel Duchamp and Ludwig Wittgenstein.¹ Both were an influence on the minimal and conceptual art scene in New York, of which Snow was a part, through the 1960's. Wittgenstein's arguments about language and its games are a theoretical counterpart to Duchamp's games with language. In homage to Duchamp, Snow makes puns on his own name and its anagrams, incorporating them into his work, for example, a "snow" smokescreen: a counterpart to the "salt" of Duchamp's "marchand du sel."² This name game may also be connected to Wittgenstein's discussions in *Philosophical Investigations* of the problems of confusing name and thing: for example, a person's name continues to have meaning after the person dies or, more tersely, "Mr. Scot is not a Scot."³ Similarly, Mr. Snow is not snow. But in the titles of various works, such as *Snow Blind* and *Snow Storm, February 7, 1967*, Snow inserts his name, reinforcing his authorial presence. It is played, in these instances, for its implications of vision, and its converse, snow blindness. It is also played, although not explicitly, for its implications of philosophical understanding, or, perhaps, inundation: being snowed.

Many artists were reading Wittgenstein in the 1960's: what exactly they made of him was hard to assess, even at the time.⁴ But Wittgenstein was often quoted. One finds Wittgenstein tags (that do not give the precise source, but only, evocatively, say "Wittgenstein") at the top of a number of articles. Amy Goldin and Robert Kushner opened their piece on conceptual art in *Art News* with: "If a lion could speak, we could not understand him." Ross Mendes in *Artscanada*, in the same year, writing on "The Language of the Eyes: Windows and Mirrors," began with "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world." Ursula Meyers opened her 1972 anthology *Conceptual Art* with quotations from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*.⁵

The demeanor of certain works of minimal art (grids, modules, uninflected configurations of regular parts within the whole) caused their resemblance to certain of Wittgenstein's propositions on language to be noted. In Gregory Battcock's influential anthology, *Minimal Art*, the critic Barbara Rose quoted Wittgenstein: "But what does it mean to say that we cannot define (that is, describe) these elements, but only name them? This might mean, for instance, that when in a limiting case a complex consists of only one square, its description

is simply the name of the coloured square.”⁶ She then comments that Jasper Johns’ notebooks (with mathematical number grids) may actually look like *parodies* of Wittgenstein, while Judd’s and Morris’s modular sculptures look like *illustrations*. Could the meticulous geometrical modules of Judd or the grids of LeWitt or quasi-cabbalistic tables of Johns or Andre somehow be a visual fulfillment of Wittgenstein’s pared philosophical propositions?

The sense that art could not easily illustrate or translate Wittgenstein comes up again in Robert Pincus-Whitten’s 1969 essay on Richard Serra, “Slow Information.” Pincus-Whitten says that since Serra often spoke of Wittgenstein, it would be tempting to create an “analogical structure” comparing their aims. However, he cautions, this operation would fail since the “dynamics of one species of inquiry” are “hardly interchangeable” with those of another. That is, Pincus-Whitten insists on the discrete realms of linguistic and visual investigation. It would not be so egregious now, one might think — certainly not a kind of intellectual cross-breeding of incompatible species — to look at the ways an artist might try to precisely conduct that kind of analogical inquiry. In fact, having duly acknowledged that the most “abject” art criticism is “predicated on the dynamics of poetry (*ut pictura poesis*),” Pincus-Whitten does admit a “certain harmony of interest” between Serra’s work and Wittgenstein: both deal with elementary components, simple propositions.⁷

Here it will be proposed that Michael Snow, who read Wittgenstein over a number of years, also tried to make something of it in ways that are neither parody nor mere emulation, but rather a serious analogical inquiry. Snow acknowledges the continuing “phantom of the problems” raised by Ludwig Wittgenstein’s “wonderfully tragi-comic” *On Certainty* as “always around the corner” in his work.⁸ Snow’s original reading of Wittgenstein has now been hemmed in (or dispersed) by his subsequent readings of Lacan and Derrida; and these, in turn, have been inflected by his interest in Greek philosophy and drama. However, Snow’s reading of Wittgenstein (“sometime around 1970”) including *The Blue and Brown Books*, *Philosophical Investigations*, *Tractatus*, *On Certainty* and other works that Snow cannot now remember, raised or reinforced general philosophical questions about the nature of images and representation.⁹

Wittgenstein does not entirely account for Snow, any more than Wittgenstein’s observation that “motor cars don’t grow out of the earth” accounts for the Cadillac Ranch, or his observation that “‘I *know* that I have never been on the moon’... sounds quite different... to the way it would sound if a good many men had been on the moon,” accounts for the Apollo space programme.¹⁰ Nevertheless, Snow does appear to work out particularly considered, concrete responses to Wittgensteinian propositions in a number of works, in which he turns Wittgenstein’s study of the problems of representing things in language into representations of the problem. This dialogue with Wittgenstein was in turn

part of Snow's situating himself within the prevalent modes of minimal and conceptual art of the period. He is closest to Joseph Kosuth, who more recently has argued that Wittgenstein made "object-texts" through parables and language games, to "show" aspects of language that could not be explicitly asserted: his philosophy is a process to be shown. Thus, for Kosuth, art is an important "post-philosophical" activity: a language whose function is to show, not to say.¹¹

The nature of the connection between the representation or description of something, and the external object or fact whose existence is supposed to verify it, is central to Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. In fact, Wittgenstein argues, the recognition of such a connection does not really give validity to either term. Almost as a textbook illustration of this vexed relationship between a "fact" and its representation, Snow, in *Log* (1973-74), put a photograph of a log beside a log, setting up the "model" of a model with deliberate deadpan (a log being figuratively synonymous with the inanimate object).¹² If Snow's works "illustrate" Wittgensteinian propositions, they do so with some irony, as Snow must equally be proposing his own works as "models" to be borne out by Wittgenstein's texts. This is just the kind of relationship of thing and representation that Wittgenstein decodes and deplores in his work. So Snow makes nonsense of Wittgenstein's point, but at the same time operates in keeping with Wittgenstein's expressed aim to "teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense."¹³ Wittgenstein's texts involve the accumulation of aphoristic propositions, which often take the form of "pictures" of hypothetical situations. These are deployed again and again, but are gradually modified, in the progressive proposals for language games. His method involves not only recurrence, but also a relentless shutting off of dead-ends. This same sense of making proposals and then closing things down, rigorous and playful, finds an analogy in Snow's method.

The passages of *Philosophical Investigations* dealing with the misrepresentation and misrecognition that lie at the core of metaphoric language, and the deceptions associated with picturing and analogy, would presumably have a particular interest for the visual artist. In *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein addresses the problem of the relationship of things to words, of "outer" model to "inner" picture, and of the mental picture to its description in language. Wittgenstein presents the case that our mental image does not really account for our description of any given thing. While we imagine that our thinking relies on mental images and that speech relies on a stream of corresponding imagery, this is an illusion: "An image is not a picture, but a picture can correspond to it."¹⁴

We attribute power to the mental image as a super-likeness or super-picture: "the mental image must be more like its object than any picture." For this reason, the mental image cannot be equalled in any actual physical, painted or modeled picture. In *The Blue and Brown Books* (the preliminary studies for *Philosophical*

Investigations) Wittgenstein proposes a test: what if a literal "red patch" of paper were substituted for an imagined, envisioned, "red"? Paradoxically, the actual red patch would be "no more alive" than a written sign: it is the "occult" nature of the vivid mental image that imparts life. *Red⁵* seems to be a striking example of Snow's reinvestigation of a Wittgensteinian investigation (fig.1).¹⁵ One of the first "pictures" in *Philosophical Investigations*, in the opening discussion of Augustinian nominalism and gestural language, is that of someone sent shopping with a slip of paper on which is written "five red apples." Given this paper, the shopkeeper opens a drawer labelled "Apples"; then a drawer labelled "Red"; then a series of drawers for the cardinal numbers. Wittgenstein interrupts this hypothetical narrative: "How does he know where and how he is to look up the word 'red,' and what he is to do with the word 'five?' — Well, I assume that he *acts* as I have described. Explanations come to an end somewhere."¹⁶

Snow, in *Red⁵* takes up the account of the five red apples, but does not merely stop at "illustrating" this key proposition. Colour names, particularly "red," recur throughout all Wittgenstein's principal writings as examples of various problems of pictorial thinking and "ostensive" definition. *Red⁵* neatly raises many of the implications of Wittgenstein's meditations on the meanings of "red." The mathematical component ("to the fifth"), of the title *Red⁵* suggests that Snow's procedures for constructing the piece emulates the rigour of scientific method. A colour field was photographed. Its photograph was then laid back on the original field and the whole was re-photographed, and so on. While this process might seem to propose a potentially open-ended mathematical set, in fact the picture would bury itself under its own layers and the original red field would be lost if the process continued.

Snow's numerical title also emulates the neutrality of minimalist titles with their intimation of science and mathematical precision (as seen, for example, in Carl Andre's periodic table of the elements, 1967), and directs us to a matter of critical importance in Minimalism: seriality.¹⁷ In the art periodicals of the late 1960's there was controversy about what the artist Mel Bochner called "the serial attitude." For Bochner a "series" necessarily included a "first and last member," and: "every member except the first has a single immediate predecessor from which it is derived, and every member except the last, a single immediate successor."¹⁸ His definition was disputed by John Coplans, with the precision and vehemence characteristic of minimal and conceptual art discourse, who argued that Bochner had confused "modular" with "serial."¹⁹ Jack Burnham intensified this debate by calling for a "systems esthetics" aligned with technology and science.²⁰

"Seriality," it will be clear, was not to be lightly entered into, and, at the very least, it created a problem concerning the relation of the parts to the whole. In a series, if there is no first or no last number, the undesirably time-consuming spectre of *ad infinitum* intervenes. The minimalist, therefore, is at pains to limit the

number of units. However, Snow's piece, as a series of photographs of itself, indicates a passage of time; rather than a mutually reinforcing (or mutually annulling) relationship of units in space. This unravelling is characteristic of Snow's role within the larger art field of the time, as a kind of conceptual chorus commenting on its procedures and values. Snow does stop at five: like Wittgenstein's grocer with his five apples, "explanations come to an end somewhere."

A clue to the procedure Snow used to bring red rectangles progressively into existence, while, at the same time regressing (the original colour field becomes smaller and smaller as it is re-photographed), may be found in Wittgenstein's analysis of the existence of the colour "red" independently from any given thing of that colour: "Something red can be destroyed, but red cannot be destroyed, and that is why the meaning of the word 'red' is independent of the existence of a red thing."²¹ Wittgenstein questions the ways in which "red" itself, in the mind's eye, might disappear. It does not make sense to say that red is torn up, or pulverized: but we can say "the red is vanishing."²²

Ultimately, Wittgenstein argues, the word "red" does not necessarily indicate the *presence* of something red (since it occurs in both the propositions "Here is a red patch" and "Here there isn't a red patch.")²³ "Red" can indicate an absence, or at the least, can indicate the disjuncture between what you imagine and what you see. Snow's *Red⁵* may equally be imagined running backwards, as a regression or vanishing of each red photograph until only the "disembodied" photograph of the colour field remains: as a film-maker, Snow exploits such effects. If so, he might be enacting a variation on the entropy theme of Robert Smithson's writings of the period.²⁴ In the context of Wittgenstein, Snow's *Red⁵* is arguably a modernist, heroic, bringing into being of a red object out of redness; and also a simultaneous diminution of the size and colour value of the original red field as it is re-photographed.

In *Philosophical Investigations* the word "red" is touched on again and again, as is the word "pain," to test the criteria of identity. How can one separate out redness, or pain, from its bearer, since redness and pain refer only to one's own sensation?²⁵ So Wittgenstein asks, how could we detach a colour impression from an object "like a membrane?" Snow's *Red⁵* makes literal the project of detaching redness as a surface. This again, is not only probable evidence of Snow's thinking about Wittgenstein, but about Wittgenstein's uses in Minimalism. Sculptors like Donald Judd gave great thought to the implications of painting the sculpture's surface, fearing that colour might lie on the surface of the form: a preoccupation amusingly known as the "skin problem."²⁶ As a photograph of a colour field *Red⁵* plays on two things — flat colour fields and photographic surface — that we tend not to regard as material in themselves; and yet it gives us an illusion of surfaces (the polaroids) that might be peeled away.

Beyond redness, another significant feature of *Red⁵*, is shape: the rectangles.

Wittgenstein considered the problems of separating out shape, like colour, as a property of a given thing. The red rectangles in *Reds* also fit Wittgenstein's "picture" of language as a gaming board of coloured squares, primary elements in a complex whole. This picture, of course, could be read generally into minimalist grids and modules — it is the kind of relationship that can verge on the parodic, as Barbara Rose noted. Nevertheless, Snow's *Reds* seems to describe Wittgenstein's language game in which language exists as combinations of coloured squares on a surface: if one names a red square on this imagined board "R," it is now not something represented, but a means of representation, a part of language. Wittgenstein poses the question: "does 'R's standing for a red square consist in this, that when the people whose language it is use the sign 'R' a red square always comes before their minds? In order to see more clearly, here as in countless similar cases, we must focus on the details of what goes on; must look at them from close to."²⁷ In re-photographing his red rectangles, Snow makes the "red" rectangle a signifier. He literally "focuses" on the details, looks at them "from close to." But since pictures in language do not translate into actual pictures, as Wittgenstein often points out, Snow does not mean his image to work as language: the red squares float, detached, in a signifier limbo.²⁸

The rectangle was a "loaded" form in the late 1960's, dragging the baggage of its association with pictorial illusionism in painting. Donald Judd argued that the rectangle had become a "definite form" rather than a "neutral limit," compromised by its association with the rectangle of the conventional canvas. The rectangle, for the minimalists, had come to stand for the exhaustion of painting. Artists were driven to seek out unconventional shapes for canvases, and, beyond the canvas, three-dimensional objects. Further, the rectangle necessarily implied a relationship of the whole to the contained parts. Consequently, Judd states: "The rectangular plane is given a life span. The simplicity required to emphasize the rectangle limits the arrangements possible within it."²⁹ Snow's casual diagonal deployment of the red rectangles in *Reds* looks like a studied contradiction of the austere, rectilinear minimalist grid. At the same time, *Reds* appears to give a time-lapse enactment of the life span of the rectangular plane, as described by Judd. In a closely related piece, 8 x 10, 1969, Snow photographed an eight-by-ten inch rectangle of tape from many angles, two hundred and eighty-five times; in only one photograph does the taped rectangle exactly fit the framing edge of the photograph. The tape rectangles which are distorted by perspective draw attention to the compromised form of the rectangle of the photograph in which they exist, with only one true rectangle as a flawed referent. In a typical discussion of the compromised rectangle, Jane Harrison Cone, writing on Kenneth Noland, expressed anxiety about the canvases, which, although very long, were still rectangles with illusionist and spatial qualities. Cone argues that one has to look at them obliquely in order for them to deny the rectangle's constraints.³⁰ (This

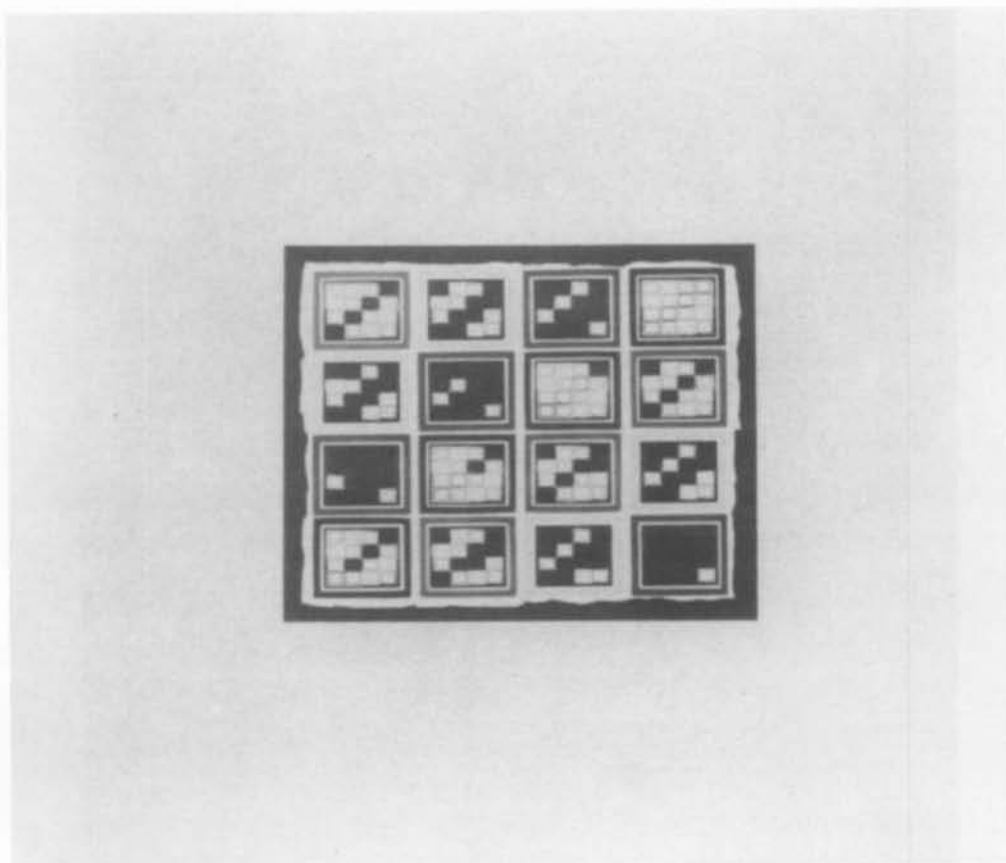


fig.2 Michael Snow, **Morning in Holland**, 1969-74,
photographs, tape, enamel, 129 x 123 cm.
(Photo: Robarts Library, University of Toronto)

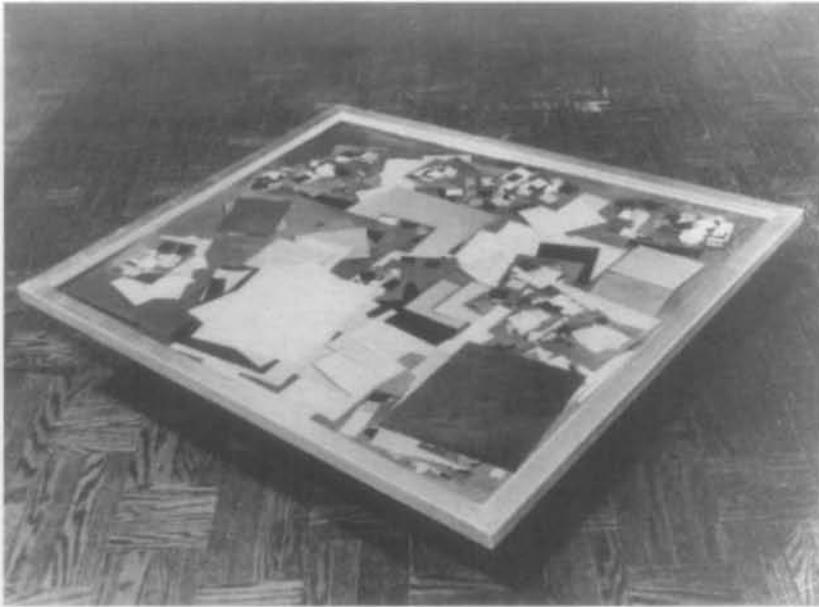


fig.3 Michael Snow, *Painting (Closing the Drum Book)*, 1978, colour photograph, wooden frame and base, 117 x 117 x 99 x 111.
(Photo: Robarts Library, University of Toronto)

emphasis on viewing from an oblique angle recalls the anamorphic skull of Holbein's painting, *The French Ambassadors*: the rectangle had become the minimalist *momento mori*.) This obliquely angled view of the pictorial rectangle suggests Snow's 8 x 10 and his 1977 photographs of Canadian Group of Seven paintings in *Plus Tard*.

If Wittgenstein's board of coloured squares, which represents an analogy between language and games, is overlaid on the minimalist grid, it, in turn, is laid over the modernist grid of Mondrian. In the photographic work *Morning in Holland*, 1969-74 (fig.2), Snow uses the primary colours, and green, in a complicated sequential play with sixteen squares.³¹ The squares are covered with black paper, and then, one by one, uncovered, and the whole rephotographed, as if it were a Wittgenstein language game. Snow's strangely time-consuming exercises in works such as *Red⁵*, *Morning in Holland*, and the related *Painting (Closing the Drum Book)*, 1978 (fig.3) echo Wittgenstein's view of philosophical method: problems are not solved by giving new information, but by "arranging what we have always known."³²

Wittgenstein argues that a picture is a set of comparisons: one presents a picture in order to lead the viewer to compare it with "this" rather than "that" set of pictures, thereby changing the viewer's way of looking at things. The picture is an object of comparison, of similarities and dissimilarities, a "measuring rod," but not a preconceived idea to which reality or our mental image, must somehow correspond.³³ In *Reds* the red, by being re-photographed, is compared to itself as a red model field; and, in *Morning in Holland*, the parts are necessarily set up comparatively by being blocked out and re-configured. The insistence on the comparison of terms within the work, the internal relations of unit to unit and part to whole, is part of the landmined terrain of the minimal object. But if Snow's Wittgenstein is part of a game with the prevailing art codes of the late 1960's and early 1970's, Snow uses it in less tidy ways: his end product exists in a zone between the coherent, implosive minimalist work, and the provisional, unfinished series of conceptual art. These works, that are a document of their own making, are almost a cliché of conceptual art. Because they are photographs of themselves being photographed, their meaning may well be found in the process of making — but making at a distance, like handling radioactive material with tongs. The intentions of Snow's documenting of process is perplexing, and deliberately suspect.

Snow returned to red in *Redifice*, made for Expo '86. *Redifice* is a large structure, almost two and a half metres tall, in which a series of windows open onto holograms, photographs, and holographic compositions. The disparate objects and tableaux represented are unified by their association with redness — fire extinguishers, birds, red-light district, suicide. Holograms are optical illusions, not objects. As such, they are ironically suited to setting out Wittgenstein's propositions concerning the ambiguous relationships of mental image, object, and their representations in art or language. *Redifice* also makes a textbook case of Wittgenstein's discussions of things with common properties, which he describes as "families" of cases.³⁴ A particularly striking example of this is Wittgenstein's proposal for a game in which the player must guess the common property of a number of objects (bricks, books, glowing coals) presented in sequence. The common factor, in this case, is "something red about them." And how would that common factor be physically represented, Wittgenstein asks? As a red patch?³⁵

Another engagement with Wittgensteinian thought is, literally, indicated by Snow's *Handscape*, 1979 (fig.4).³⁶ The work functions as an illustration of Wittgenstein's meditations on gesture as part of language and ostensive definition (defining things by their function). We think that pointing fixes meaning, links language to the world; thus the hand and its gestures are organs of language. Nevertheless, according to Wittgenstein, language is self-contained and inescapable, and the notion of a connection between language and outside reality is a false or occult one, since reality is *in* language, meaning is in the use of lan-

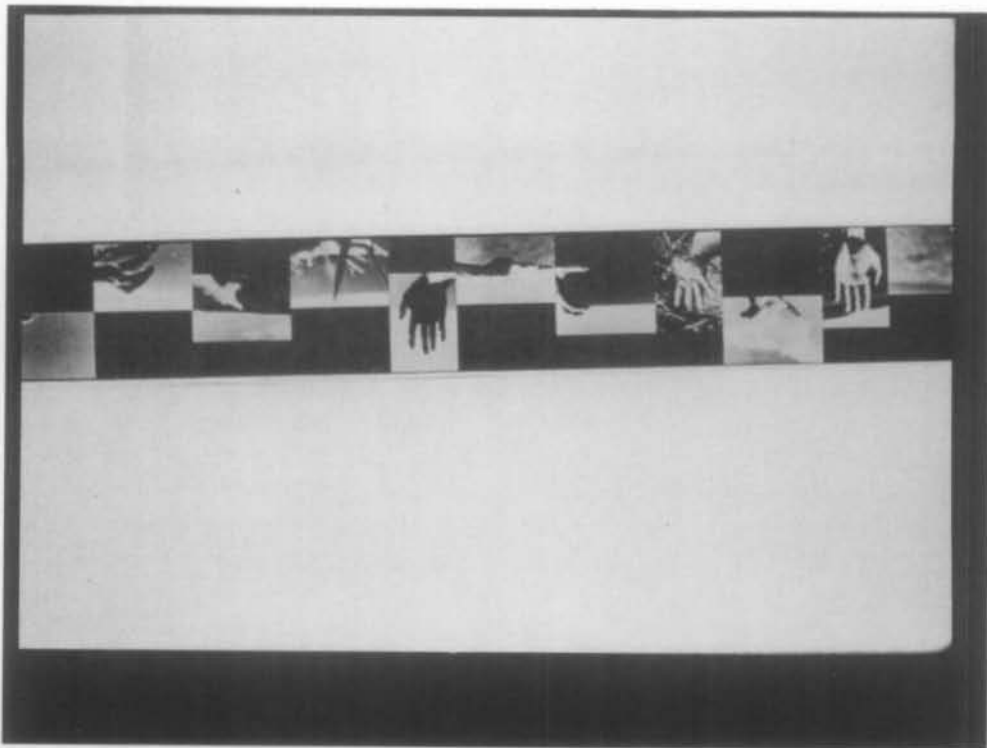


fig. 4 Michael Snow, *Handscape*, 1978. (Photo: Robarts Library, University of Toronto)

guage, and cannot be pointed to as something outside language.³⁷ *Because* it is a photograph, *Handscape* makes us believe that there must be an outside referent.

We recall that Snow has mentioned the continuing "phantom" of *On Certainty* in his writing. The hand is the leitmotif of *On Certainty* and is dramatically introduced in its opening proposition, which refers to G.E. Moore's "Proof of an External World": "If you do know that *here is one hand* we'll grant you all the rest."³⁸ Snow raises the hand that so preoccupies Wittgenstein, that either proves, or demonstrates doubt about the existence of the earth, debated throughout *On Certainty*. *Handscape* also bears an interesting visual relationship to the cover of the 1972 Harper paperback edition of *On Certainty*: three ghostly hands laid on a red rectangle (fig. 5).

Snow's film *La Région Centrale*, 1970-71 (fig. 6), in which an uninhabited landscape was filmed by a camera mounted on a machine whose rotations described a sphere, perhaps first raised some of the issues taken up in *Handscape*. In this earlier case, the Wittgenstein analogy is probably the discussion in *The Blue and Brown Books* on the identity (based on misunderstanding) of "I" as something that inhabits the body, and, which above all, *sees*. Wittgenstein notes that we

Ludwig Wittgenstein

ON CERTAINTY

Edited by G. E. M. Anscombe
& G. H. von Wright

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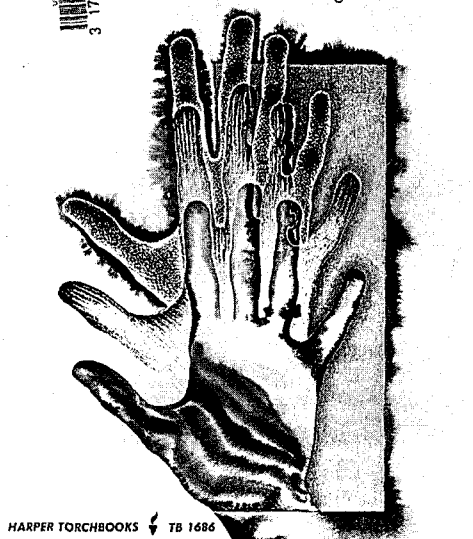


fig.5 Cover of
Ludwig Wittgenstein,
On Certainty (New
York: Harper 1972).
(Photo: Robarts
Library, University of
Toronto)

think that only our own descriptions have visual reality behind them; we want to point only to our own written descriptions or drawings and say, “only *this* [is] really seen”: “Now, when in the solipsistic way I say ‘this is what’s really seen,’ I point before me and it is essential that I point *visually*. If I pointed sideways or behind me — as it were, to things I don’t see — the pointing would, in this case, be meaningless to me.”³⁹

By creating the machine that was used to film *La Région Centrale*, Snow draws attention to Wittgenstein’s analysis of the confusion of the body and the seeing “I.” It allowed sightless “seeing,” pointing to things “I don’t see,” and thus to pointless “I”-less pointing. Wittgenstein describes the solipsist’s pseudo-statements accompanied by pointing in certain directions rather than others: “this is the region which I see.” According to Wittgenstein the tautology goes round and round as in the construction of a clock dial and pointer. It is tempting to see the rotating machinery of *La Région Centrale* as a literalization of this solipsistic mechanism.

The matter of solipsistic seeing was introduced, perhaps, in *Authorization*,



fig.6 Michael Snow and machine ('De La') for filming *La Région Centrale*, 1970-71. (Photo: Robarts Library, University of Toronto)

1969 (fig.7), in which Snow photographs himself in a mirror and progressively blocks out his reflection by sticking the photographs on the mirror and re-photographing. Wittgenstein also observes: "I can point and say, 'This is the direction in which I see my image in the mirror.'" ⁴⁰ *Authorization* is about the identity and delusions of the seeing "I," not about the appearance of "Michael Snow." He also considers it nonsense to regard the work as autobiography, as it is about recording the making of something. That something is the ways that the self "sees" and, therefore, makes itself. ⁴¹ Indeed, the self-erasing process of making the picture is akin to the entropic reversal implicit in *Red V*. As well as exposing the solipsistic seeing self, *Authorization* also exposes the usually concealed conventional procedure of self-portraiture (looking in a mirror): the illusion that (in a minimal context) was considered to contaminate pictures. ⁴²

Solipsism was in a sense a tenet of Minimalism and an object of investigation in conceptual art. The sense that "reality is not enough" and the denial of the existence of anything outside of one's own mind, was faintly praised by Mel Bochner in his essay "Serial Art, Systems, Solipsism." Bochner concluded that, if

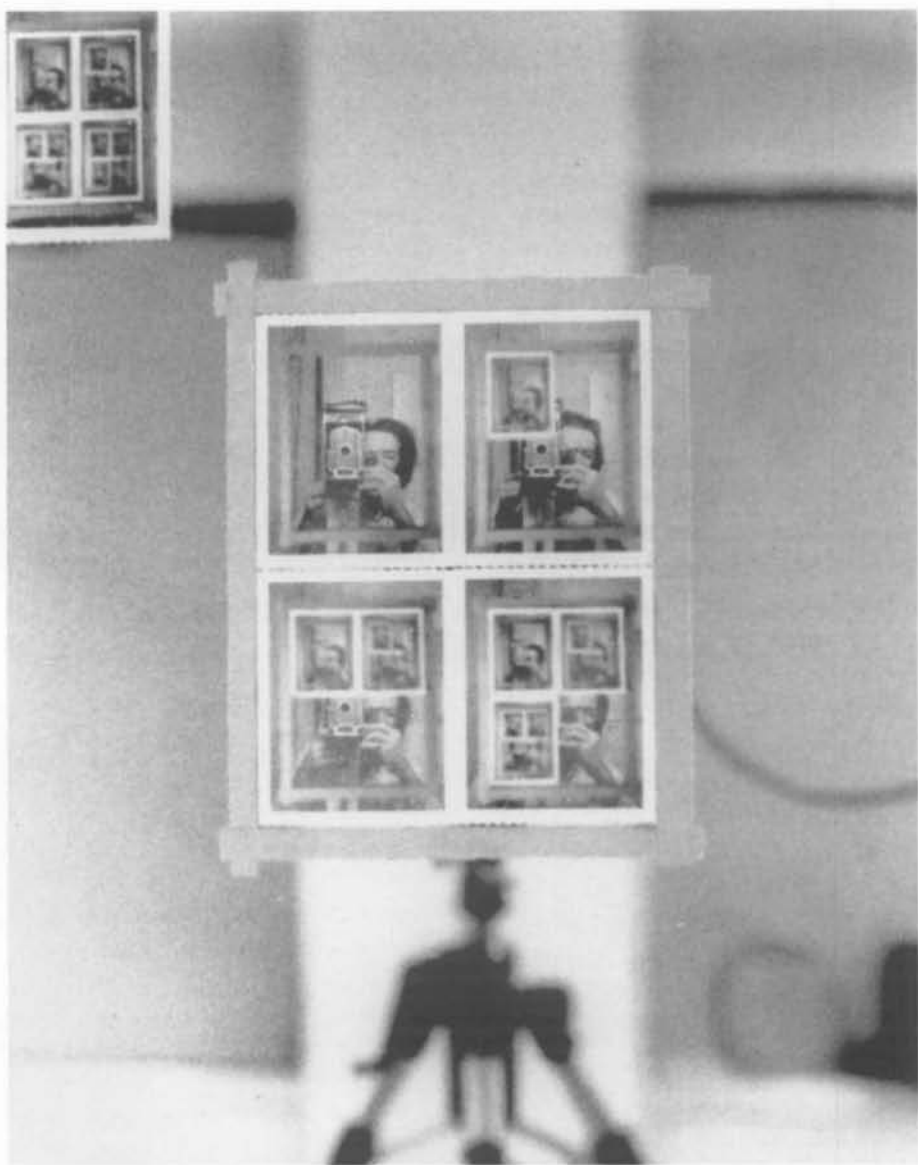


fig. 7 Michael Snow, *Authorization*, 1969, black and white polaroid photographs, tape, mirror, metal, 55 x 45 cm. (Photo: Robarts Library, University of Toronto)

the viewer was bored by works of minimal art, then "this boredom may be the product of being forced to view things not as sacred but as they probably are — autonomous and indifferent."⁴³ The objects may be anthropomorphized by being considered as solipsistic in themselves. Snow's flirtation with solipsism, however, produces works that expose a Wittgensteinian process rather than works "autonomous and indifferent" that embody solipsism. This marks the difference between a LeWitt or a Judd modular object and Michael Snow's work. Snow reveals a process that is tricky to re-construct, and with it, a sense of the hypothetical or provisional that evades minimalist criteria for the indivisible, whole, object.⁴⁴ In *Authorization*, Snow creates a portrait that is not a portrait, and constructs a "model" that is no model at all. It functions as an illustration of Wittgenstein's example of a "useless proposition": "A thing is identical with itself." Yet, Wittgenstein says that even such a useless proposition can be explained "as if, in imagination, we put a thing into its own shape and saw that it fitted."⁴⁵

In *Authorization*, *Reds*, *Morning in Holland*, 8 x 10 and related "photograph of photograph" works, Snow sets up this kind of manual bluescreen technique of fitting things into their own imagined blank shapes, until they can no longer be fitted, and the picture stops. With Snow's blanking-out games and blockings we return to the problem of what cannot be represented, or rather that nothing can be represented outside its own language game. Wittgenstein conjures up an ironically poetic picture of the frustrations of mental image and representation, which takes us into the realm of Snow's "blinds" and "storms" and blanked-out photographs:

I was going to say... 'You remember various details.' But not even all of them together show your intention. It is as if a snapshot of a scene had been taken, but only a few scattered details of it were to be seen: here a hand, there a bit of a face or a hat — the rest is dark. And now it is as if we know quite certainly what the whole picture represented. As if I could read the darkness.⁴⁶

In 1972 Donald Kuspit argued that the Minimalists' emphasis on colour and shape was equivalent to Wittgenstein's "classes of propositions," and that philosophy's criticism of its tool, language, finds an analogy in the Minimalists' "self-clarification" of the medium of art.⁴⁷ Each ends in a tautological preoccupation with its own making, and with a paradoxically proportionate loss of identity. Kuspit rejects this notion that "self-integration can be realized only by self-criticism, that a discipline's consciousness of its own methods is the only way it has of restoring its sense of purpose." The end result is solipsistic reflection, and an inability to say anything "about the sum total of reality" of the world. He ultimately blames Wittgenstein for art's loss of contact with reality and he deplores minimal art's constriction of the rules of the art game: "In modernism the limiting conditions of the medium are the subject matter of its works, but in minimalism

preoccupation with instrumenting the picture indicates a new perfectionism." It could be argued that works like *Red⁵*, *Authorization* and *Morning in Holland* are the very embodiment of the Wittgensteinian minimalist picture as a system of logic, a "calculus of colors and shapes governed by rules," and that Snow, *par excellence*, could be called minimalist according to Kuspit's definition.⁴⁸

Yet Kuspit's lament for the loss of the sensuous art object, for the loss of subject matter, for the destruction of art's symbolic tie to reality, finds an echo in Snow's 1982 interview with Bruce Elder. Snow has acknowledged that his work sometimes "exposed" the problem that we feel "we cannot reach beyond representation to things," and that we are trapped by the means of representation.⁴⁹ He still insists on "reverence for the phenomenological world," and the "object-like status" of the work of art as a "concrete finite object."⁵⁰ Rejecting the "vast hall of mirrors" of language and philosophy problems, Snow argues for the physical world in which we are bodies, and for the *materials* that shape the sign or signifier. (Here, we may go back to the philosophical proof of the external world, debated in *On Certainty*.) In Snow's view, it is lamentable that works of art have become considered as "facts spoken for, rather than speech." This he relates to the Lacanian and Derridean dispersal of the object through language in a closed system of endless displacements and deferrals of meaning: signs refer to signs and lead us to text, not to "real" objects.⁵¹ Snow prefers to consider the possibility of unmediated access to a real object, not access mitigated or deferred through language.

The shift from object art to conceptual art in the late 1960's was characterized by an emphasis on the discourse of "meaning," by a blurring of boundaries between physical object, idea, the "visual situation," and critical commentaries on it. A more extreme antiformalist attitude in conceptual art held that it was art without the art object.⁵² Kuspit himself has argued for the creative primacy of the critical commentary.⁵³ Snow particularly objects to this heritage of dependence on critical interpretation. It could be argued that his material art object at least *stands for* its own material referent. In Snow's conceptual work of the 1960's and '70's there was certainly an intense ambiguity about the status of the material object. The photo works that seem closest to Wittgenstein expose the failure to reach beyond representation to things themselves. In *On Certainty* Wittgenstein raises the paradox of how King's College Chapel may be — through tricks of language — burning and not burning at the same time. In a 1979 series of photographs of flames that appear to be devouring the image, Snow creates a visual equivalent through tricks of pictorial illusionism.

Snow's Wittgensteinian work is photographic, situating it within the complexities of conceptual art, and Wittgenstein's explorations of the ambiguous nature of the photograph as neither fully document nor text nor object in itself. *Venetian Blind*, 1970, a series of photographs of Snow in Venice, is a joke on the

problem of the photograph in series: it may capture a series of instants, but never the complete record of an event. In this a kind of Zeno's paradox is in operation — there is always an uncaptured instant between the instants. In this work Snow has shut his eyes, suggesting the classic photographic error of catching someone blinking.⁵⁴ If Snow exposes the failure to reach beyond representation then he presents it only as a possibility and, perhaps, even facetiously. Willis Domingo, reviewing Michael Snow at the Bykert Gallery in New York in 1971 seemed to pick up Snow's anomalousness: his admirable work seemed somehow neither minimal nor conceptual, but a compromise between form and concept, between "highly compelling emotional experience and rigorous systematic logic."⁵⁵

Thus Snow's photo works can be construed as parodies of, as well as homages to, Wittgenstein's fashionable rigour (taking into account Snow's sporadic hilarity at Wittgenstein, and through Wittgenstein), and the preoccupations of Conceptual and Minimalist art of the period.⁵⁶ We do not really have in *Red*⁵ the Minimalists' insistence on colour and shape in themselves, as purely perceptual experiences, but rather a picture of what such an insistence might look like. Snow's Minimalism is an enactment of Minimalism; he simulates the reductive modular method of Judd or LeWitt just as he simulates red by photographing it. But we do not get the pristine redundancy of these other artists' grids. One of Snow's favorite images is the "hall of mirrors." He is quite capable of a smoke and mirrors Minimalism that ironizes the assumptions of self-critiquing procedures in both art and philosophy.

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Notes

- 1 See "Bruce Elder and Michael Snow in Conversation," *Ciné-Tracts* 7 (1982), reprinted in Michael SNOW, ed., *Music/Sound: The Michael Snow Project* (Toronto: Knopf, 1994), for a resumé of Snow's intellectual interests. Snow was introduced to Duchamp through Michel SANOUILLET's *Marcel Duchamp: Marchand du Sel*. He gives an account of his own "Oedipal" crisis during his 1962 meeting with Duchamp in SNOW, "Admission (or, Marcel Duchamp)," 1989, in Louise DOMPIERRE, ed., *Collected Writings of Michael Snow* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1994), 286-9. While critics have acknowledged Snow's reading of Wittgenstein, it has not been particularly scrutinized. Most recently Louise Dompierre has mentioned his involvement with "post-philosophical...questions of truth and reason," shared with Ludwig Wittgenstein, "with whose thoughts Snow was familiar;" see DOMPIERRE, "Embodied Vision," *Visual Art: The Michael Snow Project* (Toronto: Knopf, 1994), 401.
- 2 In *Rameau's Nephew* Snow includes a feminized anagram of his own name, "Wilma Schoen," to countervamp Duchamp's "Rose Sélavy." See Philip MONK, "Around Wavelength," *Visual Art: The Michael Snow Project*, 374, for Snow's notes on his own name.
- 3 Ludwig WITTGENSTEIN, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971), 17.
- 4 Frances COLPITT, *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1990), 58.
- 5 Amy GOLDIN and Robert KUSHNER, "Concept Art as Opera," *Art News* 69, no. 2 (April 1969): 40; Ross MENDES, "The Language of the Eyes: Windows and Mirrors," *Artscanada*, vol. 26, no. 5 (October 1969): 20; Ursula MEYER, *Conceptual Art* (New York: Dutton, 1972).
- 6 Barbara ROSE, "ABC Art," reprinted in Gregory BATTCOCK, ed., *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Dutton, 1968), 291.
- 7 Robert PINCUS-WHITTEN, "Richard Serra: Slow Information," *Artforum* 8, no. 1 (September 1969): 36.
- 8 "Bruce Elder and Michael Snow in Conversation," 217-54.
- 9 Michael Snow, conversation with author, 6 Feb. 1996.
- 10 WITTGENSTEIN, *On Certainty*, ed., G.E.M. ANSCOMBE and G.H. VON WRIGHT (New York: Harper, 1972), 16-17, 36.
- 11 Joseph KOSUTH, "The Play of the Unsayable: A Preface to Ten Remarks on Art and Wittgenstein" (1989), in *Art after philosophy and after: collected writing, 1966-1990* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1991), 245-9.
- 12 *Log* is related to Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs*, 1965, in which a real chair is put beside a photograph and a dictionary definition of a chair; see Regina CORNWELL, *Snow Seen* (Toronto: PMA Books, 1980), 48. *Log* probably responds to Richard SERRA's massive *Sawing: Base Plate Measure (12 Fir Trees)* (30' x 50') at the Pasadena Art Museum, 1969, and Robert Morris's Los Angeles exhibition of spilled lumber; see Peter PLAGENS review of Serra, *Artforum* 8, no. 8 (April 1970): 86.
- 13 In response to my comment that Wittgenstein accumulates his propositions "like a water torture," Snow corrected me: he is drawn to the way in which Wittgenstein and Nietzsche are always "in process," not making bald statements, but rather returning to things again and again in a "nuanced" way. Michael Snow, conversation with author, 6 Feb. 1996.
- 14 WITTGENSTEIN, *Philosophical Investigations*, 101.
- 15 See WITTGENSTEIN, *The Blue and Brown Books* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1964), 3-4, 14, 31, 89. W.J.T. MITCHELL has discussed Wittgenstein, the mystifications of the idea of the

mental "image" and the picture in language in *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 7-46; and in *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 49. As early as his 1962 notes on the *Walking Woman*, Snow mulled over the mysteries of what any given representation might be since obviously it is not the thing it represents; see, for example, DOMPIERRE, ed., "A Lot of Near Mrs. 1962-3," *Collected Writings of Michael Snow*, 19.

16 WITTGENSTEIN, *Philosophical Investigations*, 13.

17 COLPITT, *Minimal Art*, 62.

18 Mel BOCHNER, "The Serial Attitude," *Artforum* 6, no. 4 (December 1967): 28.

19 COPLANS, "Serial Imagery," 43, n. 3.

20 Jack BURNHAM, "Systems Esthetics," *Artforum* 7, no. 1 (September 1968): 34. Burnham's argument is rejected in Terry FENTON, "Constructivism and its Confusions," *Artforum* 7, no. 5 (January 1969).

21 WITTGENSTEIN, *Philosophical Investigations*, 28-29.

22 *Ibid.*, 9. On the relations of colour to our mental picture of it, see also Max KOZLOFF's "Problems of Criticism, III," *Artforum* 6, no. 4 (December 1967): 42-43. Colour anxiety was common in minimalist debates. Kozloff comments on the contemporary "fallacy" that "color destroys form" rather than defining it. Echoing Wittgenstein's concerns and terminology, he identifies the difficulties of translating optical fact into words, noting that no one sees colour in the same way and that colour is unstable in memory.

23 WITTGENSTEIN, *Philosophical Investigations*, 130.

24 See for example, Robert SMITHSON, "Passaic," *Artforum* 6, no. 4 (December 1967): 48-51.

25 WITTGENSTEIN, *Philosophical Investigations*, 96.

26 See COLPITT, *Minimal Art*, 25-26; see also Amy GOLDIN, "The Anti-Hierarchical American," *Art News* 66, no. 5 (1967): 65; and Michael FRIED, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* 5, no. 10 (1967), reprinted in BATTCKOCK, *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, 116-47. Diane WALDMAN's, "Kelly Color," *Art News* 67, no. 6 (October 1968): 64, analyses colour problems in terms typical of the period (the interference of colour with figure-ground relationships and the flatness of field).

27 WITTGENSTEIN, *Philosophical Investigations*, 9.

28 See Rosalind KRAUSS's review of Sol LeWitt in *Artforum* 6, no. 8 (April 1968), 58, on the problem of art as language in which she queries whether pictures can be "read" and how they "mean."

29 See FRIED, "Art and Objecthood," 118.

30 Jane HARRISON CONE, "Kenneth Noland: New Paintings," *Artforum* 6, no. 3 (November 1967): 38.

31 Wittgenstein raises the issue of whether or not green should be included as a primary colour in G.E.M. ANSCOMBE, ed., *Remarks on Colour* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977). Since Mondrian banned green from his primary colour grids, Snow may be joking a bit here.

32 WITTGENSTEIN, *Philosophical Investigations*, 48. *Painting (Closing the Drum Book)*, consists of many re-photographed layers on a red ground.

33 *Ibid.*, 51.

34 Snow had taken up the "family" of cases before, in photo works like *Press*, 1969, in which heterogeneous objects were both pressed between sheets of glass, photographed, and then framed in a common grid.

35 WITTGENSTEIN, *The Blue and Brown Books*, 133. See also "An Entrance to *Redifice*," 1987, in DOMPIERRE, ed., *Collected Writings of Michael Snow*, 251. See Douglas CRIMP's essay, "On the Museum's Ruins," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal FOSTER (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983). Crimp quotes André Malraux on the specious unity of style imposed by photography on diverse objects, and takes this further: once photographs themselves are admitted as *objects* into the museum, rather than as *vehicles* by which art objects enter the museum, then a heterogeneity is established at the heart of the museum, since "even photography cannot hypostatize style from a photograph" (p.51). *Redifice* could illustrate this very point. Snow addressed photography and the museum in *Plus Tard* (1977-78): made for an exhibition of Snow's work in France, it consists of blurred, angled, distorting photographs of the installation of Group of Seven paintings in the National Gallery of Canada. This work is amusing as an export to France, since Snow situates himself in the context of standard Canadian art icons (the Group of Seven), re-thought through Malraux's argument of the spurious unity of style imposed by photography, and sends the resulting work back to Malraux' home territory.

36 *Handscape* may refer to the relative scale of things near and far when represented two-dimensionally in a photograph. This corresponds to a discussion in *Philosophical Investigations* (p.198) of whether human beings see three-dimensionally, that uses Wittgenstein's hand held up to a landscape as an example.

37 WITTGENSTEIN, *The Blue and Brown Books*, 73.

38 WITTGENSTEIN, *On Certainty*, 2. Wittgenstein relates the "proof" of saying "Here is my hand" to saying "Here is a red patch" or "I am seeing red:" hence, the cover illustration.

39 WITTGENSTEIN, *The Blue and Brown Books*, 71-72.

40 *Ibid.*, 71. This conceptual focus on "seeing" is identified by MEYER in *Conceptual Art*, which opens with a quotation from WITTGENSTEIN, *Philosophical Investigations*: "'But this isn't seeing.' 'But this is seeing.' It must be possible to give both remarks a conceptual justification."

41 SNOW, *Music/Sound*, 225.

42 Wittgenstein wrote in *Tractatus Philosophicus* (2:172): "A picture cannot depict its pictorial form: it displays it." *Authorization* brings this problem to the fore. In this, Snow's work is very like that of Joseph Kosuth, who argued that art, unlike language, can simultaneously describe reality and describe how it describes it; see KOSUTH, "The Play of the Unsayable," 246.

43 Mel BOCHNER, "Serial Art, Systems, Solipsism" in BATTCKOCK, *Minimal Art*, 100.

44 Michael Fried had argued that the minimalist grid or serial work, with its repetition of identical units, conjures up a theatrical sense of time "endlessness." This is in opposition to the "continuous present" of a modernist work that makes the viewer feel that the work could be experienced in one brief instant "if one were infinitely more acute." It is not clear whether Fried's use of "infinitely" is paradoxical here, used in the context of the collapsed time modernist work. See FRIED, "Art and Objecthood," 144.

45 WITTGENSTEIN, *Philosophical Investigations*, 163.

46 *Ibid.*, 163.

47 Donald KUSPIT, "Wittgensteinian Aspects of Minimal Art," reprinted in Donald KUSPIT, *The Critic is Artist: The Intentionality of Art* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1984), 243-53.

48 *Ibid.*, 244.

49 Presumably these are the "mind" works done by projection; see Snow's Cartesian analysis of his divided oeuvre (*Music/Sound*, 243). His articulation of the possibility that one cannot go outside the medium of representation recalls Wittgenstein, who described language as a pair of glasses that we are not aware of wearing, in *Philosophical Investigations*, 45.

- 50 SNOW, *Music/Sound*, 220, 224.
- 51 *Ibid.*, 230, 245.
- 52 See Robert C. MORGAN, *Conceptual Art*.
- 53 KUSPIT, *The Critic is Artist*, xi-xviii.
- 54 For discussions of the photograph in *Conceptual art*, see MORGAN, *Conceptual Art*, 36. On the implications of series in photography see MEYER, *Conceptual Art*, 57.
- 55 Willis DOMINGO, review of Michael Snow at Bykert Gallery, *Arts Magazine* 46 (May 1971): 57.
- 56 Snow has responded to the dark humour inherent in Wittgenstein's ruthless questioning: "It's really a riot. It's really very funny. It's about how impossible it is to be certain." See Andree HAYUM, "Information or Illusion: An Interview with Michael Snow," 1972, in SNOW, *Collected Writings of Michael Snow*, 85. See also "The Camera and the Spectator: Michael Snow in Discussion with John Du Cane," 1973, 88: "Well, I don't feel as tortured as he did, because his job was to try to be certain. I think it's an aspect of our existence that's interesting to discuss and that's no more or less relevant than any other. Sometimes, I just break up laughing reading Wittgenstein. It's very tragicomic."

«TAKING IT AS RED»

Michael Snow et Wittgenstein

Michael Snow insistait récemment sur la «révérence envers le monde de la phénoménologie» et sur l'«état de chose» de l'œuvre d'art en tant qu'«objet concret délimité».

Rejetant la vaste «galerie des glaces» des problèmes sémantiques et philosophiques, Snow plaide pour le monde physique dans lequel nous sommes des corps et pour les *matériaux* qui donnent forme au signe ou signifient. Selon lui, il est déplorable que les œuvres d'art soient devenues «des faits dont on parle plutôt que la parole». Néanmoins, dans son processus intellectuel, Michael Snow doit beaucoup à la théorie du «jeu de langage» de Wittgenstein, contrepartie théorique des jeux de Duchamp avec le langage. Tous deux ont exercé une influence sur le monde de l'art minimaliste et conceptuel du New York des années soixante, dont Snow faisait partie.

Nous voulons démontrer ici que Michael Snow, qui avait lu Wittgenstein pendant un certain nombre d'années, a essayé d'en tirer parti, par une enquête analogique sérieuse, sans tomber dans le piège de la parodie ou de la caricature ou encore de la simple émulation. Il reconnaît la présence permanente de l'«ombre des problèmes» soulevés par le traité «merveilleusement tragi-comique» de Ludwig Wittgenstein, *De la certitude*, «jamais bien loin» dans son œuvre. La lecture des œuvres de Wittgenstein (autour des années soixante-dix), y compris *Le Cahier bleu et le cahier brun*, *Investigations philosophiques*, *Tractatus*, *De la certitude* et d'autres dont il ne se rappelle plus les titres, a soulevé ou renforcé chez Snow des questions philosophiques d'ordre général sur la nature des images et de la représentation.

Les textes de Wittgenstein comportent une accumulation d'aphorismes qui prennent souvent la forme de «tableaux» de situations hypothétiques. Règle générale, dans *Investigations philosophiques* Wittgenstein étudie le problème de la relation des choses aux mots, du modèle «extérieur» au tableau «intérieur». Les noms de couleurs, surtout le rouge, reviennent souvent dans tous les principaux ouvrages de Wittgenstein pour illustrer divers problèmes concernant la pensée pictoriale et la définition «ostensive». Le premier «tableau» des *Investigations philosophiques*, au cours de la discussion du début sur le nominalisme augustinien et le langage gestuel, met en scène quelqu'un qui va chez l'épicier avec un bout de papier sur lequel est écrit «cinq pommes rouges». Wittgenstein interrompt son

récit hypothétique: «Comment sait-il où et comment chercher le mot 'rouge', et que doit-il faire du mot 'cinq' — Bien, je présume qu'il agit comme je l'ai décrit. Il faut bien que les explications s'arrêtent quelque part».

Snow, dans *Red⁵*, reprend le récit des cinq pommes rouges, mais ne se contente pas d'«illustrer» cette proposition clé. *Red⁵* soulève habilement plusieurs questions implicites dans les méditations de Wittgenstein sur les sens de «rouge». Un champ de couleur a été photographié; la photographie a ensuite été replacée sur le champ original et le tout rephotographié, et ainsi de suite. Si le procédé peut sembler proposer une série mathématique potentiellement ouverte, en fait, l'image serait enterrée sous ses propres couches et le champ rouge original serait perdu si l'on poursuivait l'opération.

Le titre numérique du tableau de Snow émule la neutralité des titres minimalistes, avec leur sous-entendus de science et de précision mathématique, et nous conduit à un problème qui suscite crise et débat chez les minimalistes: la sérialité. L'œuvre de Snow, en tant que série de photographies rephotographiées, indique un passage du temps plutôt qu'un rapport d'unités dans l'espace se renforçant réciproquement (ou s'annulant réciproquement). Snow s'arrête au nombre cinq: comme l'épicier de Wittgenstein avec ses cinq pommes, «il faut que les explications s'arrêtent quelque part».

Un autre élément significatif de *Red⁵* est la forme: le rectangle. Wittgenstein considérerait les problèmes de séparation de la forme, comme de la couleur, comme étant une propriété d'une chose donnée. Les rectangles rouges dans *Red⁵* s'accordent avec la théorie de Wittgenstein qui imagine le langage comme un échiquier de carrés de couleur, éléments primaires d'un tout complexe. Là encore, cela conduit aux théories minimalistes de la fin des années soixante: le rectangle était une forme «pipée», compromise par association à l'illusionisme pictorial et au rectangle de la toile conventionnelle. Le rectangle est devenu le symbole de l'épuisement de la peinture. *Red⁵* semble donner une représentation en accéléré de la durée de vie du plan rectangulaire.

Dans des œuvres apparentées, comme *8 x 10*, 1969, et *Plus Tard*, 1977, Snow aborde les problèmes connexes de langage, de couleur et de forme. La longue élaboration d'œuvres comme *Morning in Holland*, 1969-74, et *Painting (Closing the Drum Book)*, 1978, résument également les préoccupations de Wittgenstein déjà présentes dans *Red⁵*. *Redifice*, réalisé pour Expo 86, semble vouloir illustrer une proposition de Wittgenstein: un jeu dans lequel le joueur doit deviner une propriété commune («quelque chose de rouge») chez un certain nombre d'objets présentés en série. D'autres œuvres très proches de la philosophie de Wittgenstein sont aussi étudiées, spécialement *Handscape*, saisissante illustration de la première proposition présentée dans *De la certitude*, avec une citation tirée de *Proof of an External World* de G.E. Moore: «Si vous avez la certitude qu'il y a ici une main, nous vous concéderons tout le reste». Dans *La Région Centrale* et *Authorization*, Snow

attire l'attention sur l'analyse que fait Wittgenstein de la vision «solipsistique», qui est probablement la clé pour comprendre Snow.

Le travail de photographie conceptuelle de Snow dans les années soixante et soixante-dix qui semble le plus proche de Wittgenstein, tend à montrer l'impossibilité d'aller au-delà de la représentation aux choses elles-mêmes et nous renvoie à l'état d'ambiguïté de l'objet matériel. Ce que nous trouvons, dans *Red⁵*, ce n'est pas tant l'insistence minimaliste sur la couleur et la forme en soi en tant qu'expériences de perception pure, qu'une illustration de ce que cette insistance pourrait donner. Les très longues élaborations de Snow, qui semblent se résoudre elles-mêmes, sont caractéristiques du rôle de Snow à l'intérieur de la grande scène artistique new-yorkaise de l'époque, celui d'une sorte de chœur conceptuel qui en commenterait les procédés et les valeurs.

Traduction: Élise Bonnette