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# The Artiste Book and Photography : The Example of Michael Snow's Cover to Cover

BY

**Karen O'ROURKE**

What kind of relationship can there exist between photographs — reproductions of the « real », themselves infinitely reproducible — and a particular viewing context, that of the artist's book ? With this in mind, it would seem useful to take a close look at one example chosen for its analytical approach to the médium. *Cover to Cover* by Michael Snow<sup>1</sup> is thus a self-reflexive study of its own means presented in the form of a long photographique séquence.

The book — the first mass-produced object — raises a number of questions concerning its conception and distribution. What do we mean by the expression « artist's book » ? Is *Cover to Cover* a book of reproductions of an artist's « originals » or a hand-crafted book containing illustrations of texts, printed on quality paper, published in voluntarily limited édition ? Like many contemporary artists' books, Snow's volume doesn't really correspond to either of these catégories, since the reproduction itself is the « original » art work. According to Seth Siegelaub,

When art does not any longer dépend upon its physical présence, when it becomes an abstraction, it is not distorted and altered by its reproduction in books. It becomes « PRIMARY » information,

while the reproduction of conventional art in books and catalogues is necessarily (distorted) « SECONDARY » information. When information is PRIMARY, the catalogue can become the exhibition <sup>2</sup>.

Furthermore, the photographs here, conceived as part of the book would lose their « raison d'être » if they were presented in another context. Thus, unlike the art Siegelau is talking about <sup>3</sup>, the information transmitted in *Cover to Cover* is contingent on its vehicle, the book, though not on one particular object-book.

*Cover to Cover* is not a beautiful object : photographs showing banal, everyday scènes have been printed on ordinary paper. The size of the édition, though relatively small, is theoretically unlimited : the book is more of an industrial product than a handcrafted one.

Who is this kind of book addressed to ? A mass audience (because of its fairly low cost), geographically dispersed (thanks to its accessibility), one différent from that of the art galleries ? Does the appearance of the « artist's book » reflect the end of the art work as a unique and precious object, destined for a small, cliquish art-world public, as defenders of this médium have predicted ? Formally, Snow's book (unlike other artists' books) is limited to the possibilities of the « codex » (rectangular sheets, cut and bound together). Indeed, this morphological aspect of the book is emphasized repeatedly; it serves as a foundation on which the rest is built.

The study of this book implies other considérations relating to the structure of photographie représentation. The dialectic of any image entails a scène and the spectator's gaze, that is an object and a spectator/subject. In an individual photograph, the scène is shown from a unique and fixed point of view, that of the caméra, submitted to the laws of Albertian perspective, which then becomes that of the viewer. The framing system of a photograph allows the scène to take on a cohérence which didn't exist before; it privilèges one particular aspect or moment at the expense of ail the others possible.

Thèse considérations are somewhat tempered by the fact that, in the book, the photographs are part of a greater unit, the séquence. A photographie book has characteristics in common with a still photograph, a comic strip and a film. The fact that a group of photographs form a linear séquence adds a temporal dimension — a suggestion of past and future — to a médium which usually exists in a sort of eter-nal présent. This enlarges the basic unit of meaning : like individuals words in a sentence, photographs take on or change their meaning according to their place in the séquence.

*Cover to Cover* is a photographie narrative relating several events in the day of its main character, the author Michael Snow. Edited like a film in alternating shots, this book consists of 320 pages, one photo per page recto-verso, no margin, no négative space from « cover to cover ». The few texts are integrated completely into the images (e.g. the title page — a sheet of letter paper in a typewriter). Snow's movements are analysed simultaneously by two photographers whose opposing points of view alternate, cross-cutting, from the front to the back of each page. The story-line is simple : The main character is shown first of ail in a house; he opens the door (the front cover) and enters a room. Two photographers appear, one on the right-hand page, the other on the left. Life-size fingers put a pièce of white paper into a typewriter : the reverse side is a photograph showing one of the photographers. In the following séquence, the main character reappears and puts on a record.

Next, the two caméras — our « eyes » — circle the house, showing us both inside and outside simultaneously. This parallel displacement animâtes an inert space in a scène bereft of diegetic action. The protagonist remains still, his movement temporarily arrested. The caméras move in to frame Snow in close-up climbing gradually until they reach his head; another hand appears to remove the photograph. The protagonist active once again then leaves the house and gets into a small van. The photographs become pages of a book within the book, pages turned by someone off-camera. Thus the center of *Cover to Cover* exposes literally its premise, its « raison d'être ».

In the following pictures, we « follow » the van, centered in varying landscapes, from page to page. The photographs begin to tilt across the double page, as if someone were turning the book over. We have to turn it upside down to continue : we now read from right to left.

Snow gets out of the van and enters an art gallery. He crosses a large exhibition room, heading towards a back room where he bends over a table and picks up a copy of the book — *Cover to Cover* — that we also are holding. The back cover shows the other side of the door we saw at the beginning, closing the circle and giving the book its overall shape.

The point of view of the spectator/camera is an important structural élément in *Cover to Cover*. The narrative device is based on the opposing viewing angles of the two photographers, one on each side of the protagonist. Because they photograph the same scène simultaneously, they show its complementary aspects, revealing a twosided reality that we couldn't have seen from a single viewpoint. This double

analysis balances movement and mass, translating three-dimensional space by the recto-verso of the pages. In this way the process determines the work's final form up to and including the cover : the front and the back of a door.

The point of view also defines an attitude toward the photographed scene. For example, in the séquence where Snow puts on a record, he is viewed from directly above (right) and below (left page). The eccentricity of the framing angle and the proximity of the scène yield an impression of intimacy and implication. Very subtly, the « stage » extends to include us : the blurred head entering the picture just now, is too close; our eyes can't focus yet, while the record threatens us, throwing us in shadow.

Instead of a logical succession of selected events, *Cover to Cover* présente us with ordinary, everyday actions — putting on a record, opening a door — in an order which seems narratively arbitrary. In western narrative art since the time of Aristotle, it was a question of introducing « a thread of probability or necessity » in order to link certain events, chosen to fulfill a spécifique purpose, into a complète and « likely » action. Thus an artist works, eliminating superfluous détail to give his material a logical and causal order. According to Umberto Eco, « écrire un roman 'bien fait', c'est choisir les faits selon un seul point de vue (qui sera celui de l'auteur) et les ranger dans la ligne directrice d'un système de valeurs »<sup>4</sup>.

In a similar way, a photographie image or séquence implies an underlying point of view — reflected in its form : its framing, viewing angle, depth of field, or the path of the caméra « eye » from one photo to the next. Snow demonstrates literally the mechanism of the point of view when he divides that of *Cover to Cover* in two (corresponding to the positions of the two photographers). In doing this he reduces the impact of the value judgment arising from a single perspective

Several close-up shots bring out one particular aspect of photographie framing. In allowing us to scrutinize pièces of our visible world, the caméra has transformed the way we see it. On one hand the real is fragmented, the perception of a « whole » becomes a fictive notion, produced in our imagination from a few incomplète « clues ». On the other, minute détails — an infinitésimal part of a shirt or an arm — banal bits of information normally overlooked or noted in passing, take on a certain authoritative weight.

Another photographie « code » — the opposition between focus and blur — is exploited several times in *Cover to Cover*. In the « record » shot noted above, we perceive the proximity of the head

from its blur which makes it stand out against the sharp background. In some séquences the blur comes from the movement of an object — the van or the protagonist — registered by a long exposure time. In the gallery for example, Snow's blurred figure contrasts with a sharper environment. At first sight, this technique communicates the impression that we are following the protagonist as he moves among strangely frozen « extras ». This photographie fiction is subtly undermined, however, when we note that this « moving » person barely changes place within the frame, his attitude the same in each photo, while the background content varies continually. In another example, our attention, like the caméra lens, is focussed both literally and figuratively on the book *Cover to Cover*, the « central event » of this story.

The cover photograph represents in two dimensions a door, or a three dimensional object. Like the record, the white paper or the brick wall, flat surfaces coinciding with the page itself, the door recalls an esthetic code. Playing on the gap between flatness (the photo as a material object, an image) and perspective (the photo as an illusion mimicking some other thing), the author brings to light a fundamental paradox. If the photographie image is an imitation, reflection or recording of the « real » — « a mirror with a memory » — it is also a coded message situated in a spécifique cultural context and referring to established symbolic **Systems** for its meaning.

On a number of occasions a photograph within another or a book imbricated within the book attract our attention to the various steps separating the filming from the image in front of us. *Cover to Cover* is then, a comment on the way in which outside information is perceived or translated by one or more intermediaries which distort it, mold it to fit their means.

The reversai of the images, like the book within the book, helps to bring out the structure of *Cover to Cover*. Because we must change direction and read from right to left, we find ourselves faced with our own reality as reader/spectator; once more we are made aware of the fiction we are participating in. This also entails what Germano Celant has called the intention to « faire prendre conscience au lecteur de sa double personnalité de lecteur/acteur. Il s'agit (...) d'une tentative faite pour libérer un espace énergétique multiple, l'espace de la page, de l'œuvre, de l'esprit et du corps »<sup>5</sup>.

At a more metaphorical level, if we can say that, *Cover to Cover* carries several significant images : the « recording machines », the places of passage, the « caméra obscura » (that is, the corrélation one

can make between the room — « caméra » in Latin — and the photographers' caméras), and the art gallery.

The path of *Cover to Cover* takes us also from door to door. The one on the front cover seems at first sight, a barrier, stopping the gaze. Like a page in a book, a door hides something, producing a certain expectation in the reader. In this, it foreshadows an important thème, manifested elsewhere in the person of the two photographers one visible, the other necessarily hidden, like a double. But, more importantly, the door is a place of passage between inside and outside, between the known and the unknown, the visible and the invisible, between two rooms, between two states. The door — like the window — could be what Snow has called « sub-events », which occur between significant, named, or programmed events. As a place of passage, the road too serves to connect others. It implies as well mobility, continuous transition. Like a roll of photographic film, it unwinds, exposes itself little by little, offering us parts of a whole unattainable in its totality.

When, in one scène, someone puts a print showing a photographer with his caméra, into a typewriter, the two means of recording, juxtaposed, set up the basis for a comparison of their respective functions. Like the book itself (and the tape recorder and stereo), these reproducing machines have as their purpose to store and mémorise information. According to Jean Clair : « ... chaque enregistrement, pour fonctionner, suppose d'être à son tour inscrit; (...) la machine enregistreuse reproductrice ne capitalise les images et les sons que pour les métamorphoser sans cesse en autre chose, en un autre objet, un autre effet, en n'importe quoi : circulation énergétique, production non plus de produits mais de production »<sup>6</sup>. Thus the book, as the result of a process, isn't a fixed, unchangeable reality, but is, as Hollis Frampton has said, « anisotropic with respect to time »<sup>1</sup>, as are our visual impressions and memories.

The introduction of a gallery in the last séquence brings to mind the contemporary art world where it is an important factor in the distribution of artists' work. Its place in *Cover to Cover* remains somewhat problematic : what is its relationship to the book, the object of Snow's research ?

One of the more interesting aspects of the artists' book seemed to be its indépendance from the « art market ». A good number of artists maintained that the gallery **System** cultivated art as merchandise, selected according to the taste of an élite to transmit its ideological message. The book, because of its relatively low cost both

to produce and to distribute, could reach beyond the limits of this closed circuit. At a conceptual level as well, it was thought to be able to function outside the **System**, touching a wider, geographically dispersed audience.

However, the artist's book, because of its often specialized content, inaccessible to an uninitiated public, has found its distribution possibilities limited to the habituai circuit. Except for a few specialized bookstores (Printed Matter or Jaap Rietman in New York, Vitrine or Argon in Paris, Other Books and so. in Amsterdam), these books are found in galleries next to art magazines.

The gallery and the book are both unusual viewing contexts for the photographic image. Photographs have become part of our everyday experience to the point where they are nothing more than a background; their situation in a gallery puts them in an environment which defines and determines to a greater degree their message. There is nothing neutral about this context.

*Cover to Cover* focusses on the mechanisms specific to the book medium more than on the content; the narrative device is more important than the story, its object. It isn't impossible to find certain themes relating to the content; a good example of this is the recording machines discussed above. These objects bring to mind the photographic process in that it fixes, records a trace of « reality ». However this referentiality is rare, and in this case even the notion of recording brings us back to the book as the object of its own discourse.

The other major themes call attention to the narrative device : since the images in *Cover to Cover*, thematically linked, form a coherent whole, surrounding photographs can intervene to restrict the meaning of individual pictures, thereby orienting our reading of them. The story's continuity with its « slow modifications of routine behavior » (G. Kubler), translates the passage of time. *Cover to Cover* is thus made up of a regular succession of events, an uninterrupted continuum. This book, composed of « temps faibles » assembled end to end, lacking « intrigue » and climax, seems « endless ».

Instead of valorising the everyday as photographers like Robert Frank do, by isolating specific aspects that take on symbolic value, the author has reconstituted a sort of everyday rhythm in which the events neutralize each other by their uninflected uniformity and their equal importance. We could even say that the main action — « the structural plot » — coincides with the displacement of the



caméras and with the path of our gaze in the space of the book. This effect is accentuated by the anonymity of the environment, and this even if the photographie process implies the choice of a particular place.

Snow's own rôle in the conception of the book merits our attention since, in having the photographs taken by others, he refuses the traditional function of the artist as craftsman. In the story, Snow the actor is no more than one élément among others in a picture, a malléable component whose attitude is inexpressive. As the reader doesn't necessarily know who he is, the character remains somewhat anonymous. Moreover, he rarely looks directly at us (the caméra); when he does, it is in a médium shot, not a close-up, as would be the case very often for a self-portrait.

As in a number of artistic movements of the 60s, the artist plays a less egocentric rôle than he did before (cf. the abstract expression-ists) : the photographie médium becomes for Snow less a means for self-expression than a method for investigating the modalities of our perception. In this *Cover to Cover* touches on concerns explored in « conceptual » art, which can be, as Seth Siegelaub reminds us, « the use of banal, everyday information in order to comment on it; the systematic analysis of the visual aspect of our physical and intellectual environment. It differs from older art forms in that it neither interprets nor changes, nor does it add a new object to the environment, but only isolates and attracts attention toward the existing phenomenon »<sup>8</sup>.

A number of « passages » both narrative and structural punctuate the book, from the opening of the door until its closing. The passages are different Windows and doors, highways, and abstract transition-al pages. Everything moves, increases or diminishes in size, in this continuous trip : objects (van, caméras), people (Snow, the photographers), narrative éléments (individual photographs, pages of the book within the book). *Cover to Cover* forms a sort of « loop », a repeatable module : when we come to the reverse side of the door, we can easily turn the book over and start again.

The notion of continuous movement, transition, plays an important structural rôle since the events, one after the other, take on meaning through their juxtaposition, each just one part of the overall séquence : here we pass from one chapter to another, from one photographer to the other, from one page to the following one, from inside the house to outside it, from the real book to the fiction. The

book itself functions as a meeting place — or a médiation — between the process and the object, between the construction of a fiction and the finished work of art.

Reading *Cover to Cover*, for us, is also a transitory opération, a passage between two states. This extended photographie séquence can be termed a « syntagm » (or relational chain), rather than « para-digm » (or metaphor). Therefore, if we want to study the way it works, we ought to concentrate on its « joints », since at these strategic points the whole either sticks together or falls to pièces. With this in mind, Gilles Deleuze has said :

« Toute notre pensée est modelée sur le verbe être, EST. La philosophie est encombrée de discussions sur le jugement d'attribution (le ciel est bleu) et le jugement d'existence (Dieu est), leurs réductions possibles ou leur irréductibilité. Mais c'est toujours le verbe être. Même les conjonctions sont mesurées au verbe être, on le voit bien dans le syllogisme. Il n'y a guère que les Anglais ou les Américains pour avoir libéré les conjonctions, pour avoir réfléchi sur les relations. Seulement quand on fait du jugement de relation un type autonome, on s'aperçoit qu'il glisse partout, qu'il pénètre et corrompt tout : le ET n'est même plus une conjonction ou une relation particulières, il entraîne toutes les relations, il y a autant de relations que de ET, le ET ne fait pas seulement basculer toutes les relations, il fait basculer l'être, le verbe, etc. Le ET, « et., et., et.. », c'est exactement le bégaiement créateur, l'usage étranger de la langue, par opposition à son usage conforme et dominant fondé sur le verbe être. Bien sûr, le ET, c'est la diversité, la multiplicité, la destruction des identités »<sup>9</sup>.

As is often the case with Snow's works, *Cover to Cover's* title is a literal description of the book; we are encouraged to read it « cover to cover ». In this respect, it is both *volumen* (book in the form of a scroll) and *codex*. A *volumen* in which the thème unrolls and develops in time, in which the « pellicule (bien nommée : c'est une peau sans béance) *suit* comme un ruban bavard » (Barthes). A *codex*, because the eut film is divided in 320 frames. The pages preserve an extended séries of « décisive moments », décisive only because someone set off the shutter at this moment rather than another. Each page is two-sided, consisting of a front and a back, its double. Moments, portions of space are recorded, shown from two opposing points of view. Right and left, in front and behind, the two photographers are like the *puise* of the book; we move back and forth continually between the observer and the object of his gaze. The door opens, shuts again, in a rhythm of inspiration, respiration.

Thèse snapshots are the banal extracted from the temporal flux; reassembled end to end in the book, they seem to have been rein-serted.

## NOTES

1. Published by the Press of the Nova Scotia Collège of Art and Design, Halifax, and the New York University Press, New York, 1975.
2. In Ursula Meyer, *Conceptual Art*, 1972, p. XIV.
3. Snow's book does « dépend upon its physical présence », but this physical présence includes being a reproduction, a multiple.
4. Umberto Eco, *L'Œuvre ouverte*, 1965, (Editions du Seuil, French translation).
5. Germano Celant, « Le livre comme travail artistique 1960-72 », *VH 101 N° 9*, Fall 1972.
6. Jean Clair, « L'Invention de Morel » in *Pour Mémoires*, Catalogue ARC 2, 1974.
7. Hollis Frampton, « For a Metahistory of Film », *Artforum*, September 1971, p. 34.
8. Michel Claura et Seth Siegelaub, *XX' siècle*, n° 41 (Décembre 1973), p. 156.
9. Gilles Deleuze, « Sur et sous la communication », *Cahiers du Cinéma*, n° 271.

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