

Large Text

Listening to Snow

Works by Michael Snow

January 18–March 21, 2020

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Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

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Listening to Snow

Listening to Snow is a devoted-to-listening space, a music box, focusing on ideas and thoughts arising from a selection of Michael Snow's sounds. Composed and tuned, the exhibition manifests as one sonic experience from three sound installations [*Diagonale* (1988), *Waiting Room* (2000), *Tap* (1969-1972)], one screening [*Solar Breath (Northern Caryatids)* (2002)], two recordings [*Falling Starts*, *W in the D* (1975)], and a piano for Snow's performance—all sharing the same acoustic space.

The exhibition is part of the Hart House's centennial programming recognizing the special place the institution holds in Snow's biography.

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Curated by Liora Belford

Credits

The exhibition is generously supported by Ann and Harry Malcolmson, with additional project support from the Department of Art History, University of Toronto.

We gratefully acknowledge the operating support from the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Toronto Arts Council.

Exhibition Essay

Michael Snow's seventy years of internationally acclaimed experimentation and innovation in diverse media offers sound in multiple forms: composed and improvised music, sound installations, and sound recordings, as well as visualized sounds in sculptures, paintings, and experimental films. In an interview with Annette Michelson, Snow described his work with sound in terms of "departments of interest": "[M]y background is partly in jazz, so that's a certain lineage. But then there are other things that really were more related to the way I've made films or some of the multitrack recordings that I've done that really don't have any improvisation. They are compositions that use the possibilities of multitrack: of layering, of superimposing one element of music on the other, and so on. And it's a compositional tool."¹

In the early stages of this project I went to Snow with a proposal: to curate an exhibition of a selection of his sound-related works by composing a listening space. Works would be chosen according to how they sounded and, moreover, together they would constitute a single sonic experience.² *Listening to Snow* would be an experiment: a space where one could listen to the ideas and thoughts arising from the selected sounds. Snow, the indefatigable experimentalist, was interested.

Snow's wide-ranging practice introduces sound in all of its dimensions: as improvised and composed music, noise, silence, moving images, and text. *Tap* (1969–1972), for example, consists of three elements that must be shown in different rooms, allowing the spectator/listener to experience each one separately: a framed photograph of hands holding a microphone, a text describing the sounds made by fingers

tapping on the microphone, and a speaker emanating the actual sounds arising from this action. The display of components in separate rooms engages the spectator/listener's memory as they combine the sound, imagery, and text into one piece. Their movement through the components turns these fragmented parts into a durational piece. To adapt Heraclitus' famous image, just as one cannot step into the same river twice, one cannot experience *Tap* in the same way twice. It's circulating, fluid, dissolving, and ever-changing.

Listening to Snow is designed as a cochlea, and *Diagonale* (1988)—a dark room in which sixteen speakers, gently and punctiliously tuned by Snow, generate a single chord—is at the end of the dark spiral of the inner ear. The listening experience created by this dark space engages its listener's entire body, not just their ears. Moving around inside *Diagonale*, the listener perceives the space by sensing slight differences in the sound as their body changes position relative to the speakers. This form of bodily listening, as articulated by the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, is intimate (almost emotional); the auditor must listen to their bodily experience of the space—listen to their listening body.³

Merleau-Ponty adds that this self-attentiveness allows us to confront our experience of time not as an object of knowledge but as a dimension of our being, what he calls a "field of presence."⁴ Time, in this sense, is understood not as an eternal consciousness, but rather as an experience. In *Waiting Room* (2000), Snow manipulates this experience by controlling the duration of his audience's attentiveness: each is instructed to take a number, then to wait for their number to come up on a sign, at which point they are to leave. All the while, a loudspeaker plays the sound picked up by a microphone installed at Hart House. The instruction to stay still for a fixed duration and listen to sounds from elsewhere expands the gallery space and captures the experience of one's own being situated in time.

Finally, *Solar Breath (Northern Caryatids)* (2002), is a video and sound recording of a unique wind phenomenon that Snow experienced in the remote Newfoundland cabin where he spends one or two months each summer. “Near sunset the wind blows the single curtain on a window in the room, each time with varying style and force and then, mysteriously, sucks the curtain back to make it smack against the pane of a nonexistent window.”⁵ At times the curtain stops and stays still; at others it reveals a view of a familiar Canadian landscape. As in other experimental films by Snow,⁶ the repetitiveness of imagery and sounds envelopes the audience, creating a meditative, attentive space. This space might start on the gallery wall, but it is almost immediately mirrored inwards, forcing the audience to listen to their own thoughts. Jean-Luc Nancy claims that this agency is inherent to sound, that meaning and sound share the space of referral: meaning refers simultaneously to a sign, a thing, a quality, a subject—or to itself, the way sound spreads and resonates not only in the space where it resounds but also within the listener. Listening, for Nancy, is a straining toward the self: the manifestation of being is arrived at by listening to the truth ‘itself’ rather than by seeing it.⁷ The sound-related works in *Listening to Snow* demonstrate this quality of listening; as their listeners move through the gallery, they offer space, time, imagination and memory as dimensions of self-attentiveness.

Liora Belford, Guest Curator

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1. Annette Michelson and Michael Snow, “The Sound of Music: A Conversation with Michael Snow,” *October* 114 (2005): 44.
2. Akin to a composed musical piece, *Listening to Snow*’s sounds are pre-determined. However, the artist will add to them: a piano placed in the gallery awaits his performance, which will take place on March 21, 4pm. *Falling Starts* and

W in the D (both 1975), two of Snow's early recordings, are also available in the gallery.

3. By placing the body in the centre of perception, Merleau-Ponty suggests that sensing, in contrast with knowing, is a living communication with the world. This means that any singular, general truth about the world is impossible. Instead, there is only bodily perception, through which the individual experiences their truth of the world. There is no objectivity, and thus, my perception of the world is always limited to what I can experience. This is not to say that perception itself is limited but rather that it is dynamic, and that there is always something more to experience. Objects are not simply as-they-are but, rather, exist as I perceive them through my body.
4. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), Taylor and Francis e-Library edition, 492.
5. Michael Snow, *Michael Snow: Sequences: A History of His Art* (Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, 2015), 167–68.
6. Such as *Wavelength* (1967) and *La Région Centrale* (1971), which will be screened in conjunction with the exhibition.
7. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 1–22.

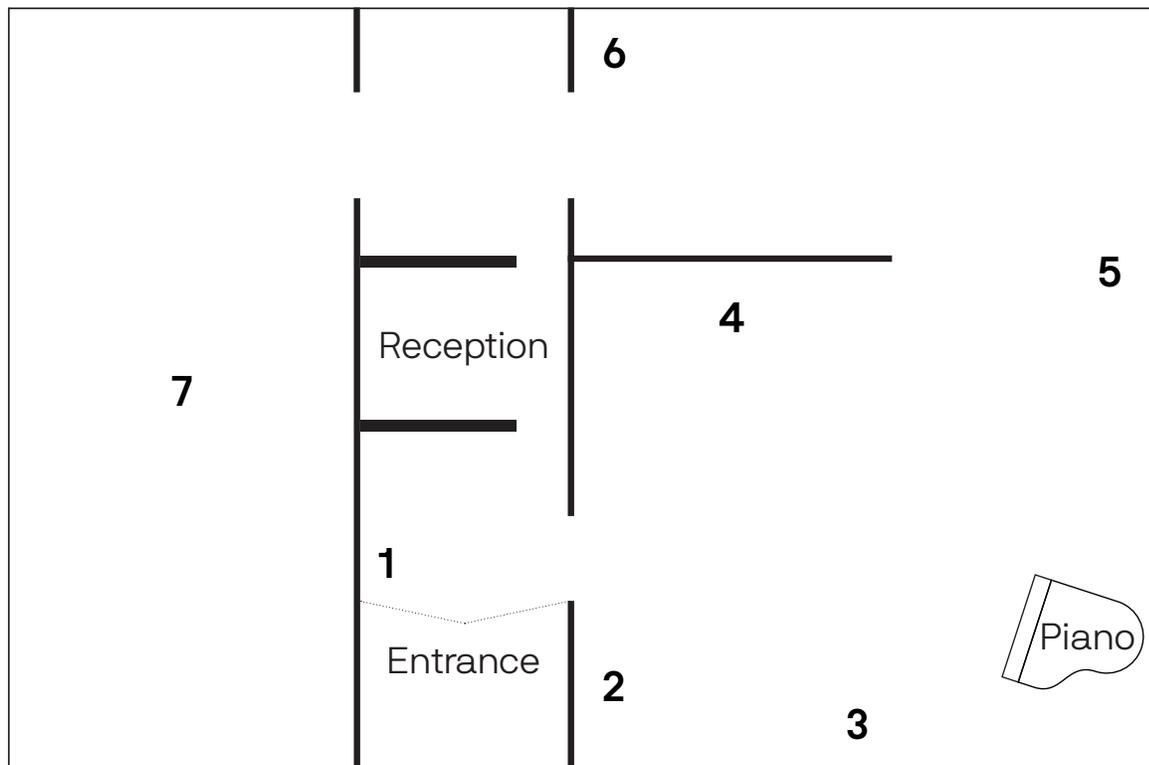
About the Artist

Michael Snow started playing the piano publicly in 1948 while in high school and continued to play with various Jazz groups while he was a student at the Ontario College of Art. During the 1950s, he played several times for frat events at Hart House. These musical performances were in a sense eclipsed, in 1955, by his first solo show of drawings and paintings, also at Hart House. Since then he has had numerous exhibitions with the now-departed Isaacs Gallery and solo exhibitions at the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, the Museum of Modern Art (New York), the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the Tate Modern (London). His most recent exhibition (of sculptures) was at the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. Snow, one of the founding members of the Toronto free improvisation ensemble CCMC, continues to be active musically: he gave a solo piano concert at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in March 2019. Films and videos such as *New York Eye and Ear Control* (1964) and *Rameau's Nephew...* (1974) offer examples of Snow's original sound/image situations, while his sound installations combine sculpture and music.

About the Curator

Liora Belford is a sound artist, curator, a scholar, and a PhD candidate at the department of Art History, University of Toronto. Her research focuses on the curation of sound within the context of modern and contemporary art, and in particular, on listening as a curatorial method. She is half of the artistic duo Duprass and co-owner of the experimental record label Interval Recordings (together with Ido Govrin). Her recent curated exhibitions include *Image Coming Soon#1* (2015); *Pardes* (2015), *A Piece for Two Floors and a Corridor* (2015), and *WarCraft* (2019). *Listening to Snow* is part of her PhD dissertation.

Gallery Map



1. *Tap*, 1969-1972 (Speaker)
2. *Falling Starts / W in the D*, 1975
3. *Tap*, 1969-1972
4. *Waiting Room*, 2000
5. *Solar Breath (Northern Caryatids)*, 2002
6. *Tap*, 1969-1972 (Text)
7. *Diagonale*, 1988

Wall Labels

Artist's Notes

Excerpts from *Michael Snow: Sequences: A History of His Art*

Tap, 1969-1972

Framed B&W photograph, framed typewritten text on paper, speaker, audio cable, documents, audio tape and player.

National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Purchased 1970.

Tap has several elements that are shown separately (no parts together) on different walls of a multi-roomed gallery. The spectator/auditor might come upon each of the elements in a different order. Memory is/was an important entity in experiencing this work. Perhaps one might see a large framed photo of hands holding a microphone. Later, one might see a framed typewritten text that discusses *Tap* from many points of view. For example, the text mentions that the sound made by fingers tapping on a microphone is part of the work. One might be led then to the source of the repeated rhythmic sound. This sound is coming out of a brown loudspeaker sitting on the floor. Elsewhere another wall text discusses the disappearance and appearance of the loudspeaker.

Waiting Room, 2000

Some chairs, a sofa, an electronic number-display sign mounted on the wall, two loudspeakers, sound.

Waiting Room is an attempt to control the durations of attention of the participants: here, the capacity of film to fix (down to 1/24 of a second) the duration of attention is

made into a “real time” experience. The principles of fixed, predetermined durations that were used in the 1969 film *One Second In Montreal are in Waiting Room* made into a participatory perceptual lottery. *Waiting Room* requires a small room. Upon entering, a visitor will see a sign that says, “Please take a number and be seated. When your number is shown on the display, please leave to allow others to take your place.” Some chairs and a sofa face an electronic number-display sign mounted on the wall, along with two loudspeakers. The numbers displayed are controlled by a computer program that assigns each number a specific duration. They are all different: the number 3, for example, might give you only thirty seconds, but number 4 will have a duration of four minutes and number 5 just one minute. The sound on the loudspeakers is real-time, live ambient sound. The piece has been presented twice: once in a high school in Toronto, where Snow put hidden microphones in a foyer in which students gather and talk; the other was at Kunst-Werke in Berlin, in 2002, where the secret microphones were placed in the café in a courtyard on the main floor.

Solar Breath (Northern Caryatids), 2002

62 minutes, 1 channel video, sound.

Starting in 1970, I constructed (and every summer continue work on) a log cabin thirty feet by thirty feet in size, in a remote coastal area in maritime Canada. The weather is an important factor in one’s experience of this place. Every summer I am able to spend one or two months there. *Solar Breath (Northern Caryatids)* is the recording of a wind phenomenon that I had observed only four or five times in more than thirty summers in the same remote cabin. Near

sunset the wind blows the single curtain on a window in the room, each time with varying style and force and then, mysteriously, sucks the curtain back to make it smack against the pane of a nonexistent window (or at least a not-visible window, because the window appears to be open). Each time the curtain slaps loudly (against the wall in the gallery), it stops, and stays still, for surprisingly long periods of time. Each time it does so a different beautiful static composition of folds is manifested, hence the caryatids in the title. In the videotape I have made of these windows, the “gestures” that produce these compositions often include the curtain blowing high enough into the room for one to have a view (each time framed differently) of the outside. One glimpses evergreen trees, stacks and piles of cut firewood: a very northern Canadian wilderness scene. One also glimpses a blue, gridded, metal-framed rectangle, very sci-fi, very “unnatural.” It is a solar panel, which is charging a battery that is powering the camera. The cable from the panel is visible as it comes through the window-screen.

Falling Starts and W in the D

From Music for Piano, Whistling, Microphone and Tape recorder, 1975.

Falling Starts... uses a little piano composition I composed and played. By means of recording at different speeds from one tape recorder to another, I made a piece in which this piano phrase is first played very fast (and high). The phrase is repeated, slowing down to a normal recording speed, and continues to slow down. The piece takes two sides of an LP second side consisting entirely of the slowest, version. One of the other pieces,

W in the D, is a twenty-six minutes recording of solo whistling I did with a hand-held microphone as an instrument. The work is constructed of a large number of separate whistled phrases, each of which is preceded by sound of my breathing in. My breathing in (and out) is recorded differently during each phrase by my moving the microphone closer to or further away. The whistled phrase is a newly invented “line” of no particular length. The amount of air inspired determined the length of the “line,” and each line is different from its predecessor or its follower. There is no development, each virtual whistle is framed by the recorded intake of breath. The piece was “improvised,” but it is not jazz.

***Diagonale*, 1988**

16 speakers, sound.

Diagonale uses the capacity of electronic means to continuously produce uninterrupted, pure single tone. The piece requires a large room with no lighting except for the external bleed from its entrance (this way the space starts with minimal lighting and then gradually gets darker). The space is filled with quiet, unmodulated sound. The speakers are placed on the floor, 8 on each side, arranged in a descending tonal series. The two speakers closest to the entrance play very high, almost inaudible notes. As one walks further into the dark room, the fixed notes played by each speaker gradually get lower until at the end of the room, where there are very large speakers playing very low notes. The apparatus that supplies these pre-determined notes (which was conceived by Snow and built by Norman White) is barely visible at the extreme end of the room.

Events and Programming

Opening Event

Reception

Saturday, January 18, 3-5pm
Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

Public Programs

Screening: Michael Snow's *Rameau's Nephew by Diderot (Thanx to Dennis Young)* by Wilma Schoen (1974)

16mm film, 270 minutes

Saturday, February 22, 1pm
Innis Town Hall

Curatorial Listening Tour with Liora Belford

Wednesday, February 26, 5pm
Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

Screening: Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967)
and Laurie Kwasnik's documentary *Snow in Vienna* (2012)

16mm film, 45 minutes / HD Video, 34 minutes

Saturday, February 29, 1pm
Innis Town Hall

Screening: Michael Snow's *La Région Centrale* (1971)

16mm film, 190 minutes

Saturday, March 14, 7pm
Innis Town Hall

Solo Piano Performance by Michael Snow

Saturday, March 21, 4pm
Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

Weekly Drop-In Tours

Exhibition Tours

Tuesdays, 2pm

Meet at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

Malcove Collection Tour

Last Wednesday of each month, 12 noon

University of Toronto Art Centre

Hart House Collection Tour

Last Wednesday of each month, 2pm

Meet at the Hart House information desk

Group tours may be booked by contacting us
at artmuseum@utoronto.ca

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