

# Conceptual Landscape Art

Joyce Wieland and Michael Snow

JOHANNE SLOAN

**BETWEEN 1969 AND 1977**, both Michael Snow and Joyce Wieland made remarkable works of art using photography, film, and, in Wieland's case, various unconventional materials to anatomize, explore, and revitalize the legacy of landscape art in Canada. Snow began work on *La Région Centrale* (1970), saying: "I want to make a gigantic landscape film equal in terms of film to the great landscape paintings of Cézanne, Poussin, Corot, Monet, Matisse and in Canada the Group of Seven."<sup>1</sup> Wieland had by then just completed her own "gigantic" cross-country landscape film *Reason over Passion* (1969), soon to be followed by the multimedia *True Patriot Love* exhibition at the National Gallery (1971), which itself included fragments of a script for another feature-length film about Canadian landscape (which would eventually get made and released with the title *The Far Shore* in 1976). In Wieland's case, the passionate espousal of landscape aesthetics in its Canadian incarnation is perhaps more obvious, and it can be said that the gentle spectre of Tom Thomson presides over her entire production from this time. Snow's work is more often described in formal and technological terms, but the artist's boast about making landscape art equivalent to the masterpieces of European art as well as to that of Canada's homegrown heroes should be taken seriously; we can indeed compare *La Région Centrale* to the Euro-Canadian tradition of painting natural scenery. And then the Canadian content became explicit with Snow's *Plus Tard* (1977), a panoramic series of colour photographs showing the Group of Seven paintings in situ at the National Gallery.

Snow and Wieland were a married couple who collaborated at times and otherwise helped each other out extensively during this period (even if they rarely commented publicly on each other's work), and yet most film and art historians seem to shy away from the question of mutual influence.<sup>2</sup> My purpose here is not to judge precisely how much Wieland influenced Snow or

vice versa, but rather to suggest that looking at these bodies of work side by side is extremely instructive. In somewhat different ways, both artists strove to bring the Canadian preoccupation with landscape up to date, resituating it in relation to a technologically expanded visual culture, a shifting sense of nationhood, and a destabilized natural world.

Wieland's and Snow's idiosyncratic explorations of landscape aesthetics at this time did develop in tandem with international movements in Land Art and Conceptual Art, while other avant-garde filmmakers shared an interest in landscape. The artworks under discussion can be profitably compared with multimedia experimental landscape projects from the late 1960s and early 1970s by Canada's N.E. Thing Company, the British artist Richard Long, and the American artist Robert Smithson, for instance, and with the films of Chris Welsby and Pat O'Neill. This generation of artists were interested in the structural and theoretical basis of traditional landscape art, and their work shares an impulse to dismantle the landscape genre, as it were, in order to lay bare its conventions, to reveal its inner mechanisms. With this conceptual making and unmaking of landscape images, fundamental questions are raised – about how the multi-sensorial experience of nature becomes intelligible, how nature is transformed into an object of visual pleasure, and how it is possible to evoke human consciousness when what appears on the canvas or screen is wholly vegetable or mineral. It should be noted that both Wieland's and Snow's projects from this period announce what would become a dominant strain of deconstructive, postmodern art practice of the latter part of the twentieth century. But I want to emphasize that this built-in critical apparatus is only part of the story of what might be called "conceptual landscape art." This is because the critique of inherited paradigms coincides with an ongoing desire to aesthetically interpret the natural world; in

other words, dismantling the traditional landscape genre can also result in new forms of landscape art.

### **“THE PRIMACY OF THE RECTANGLE”**

The writings of the artist Robert Smithson are particularly insightful regarding this paradoxical reinvention of landscape art for the post-painting, conceptually oriented generation. In an important formulation, he described his artistic projects as the staging of a dialectic between sites and non-sites, whereby “sites” refer to specific geographic locations, to the phenomenological materiality of things, and to the often sublime experience of being immersed in an actual environment. And then “non-sites” refer to the maps, codes, texts, images, and various other modes of representation that are deployed to try and describe a given site. These can never match up exactly, and so the work of art resides neither in one realm nor the other, but is rather the setting in motion of a productive, dialectical relationship. “Between the actual site ... and the non-site exists a space of metaphoric significance,” the artist suggested.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, artworks by Snow or Wieland are unlikely to consist of a singular and fixed visual representation of a given site; rather, images are serial; they subtly morph and mutate; they continually reposition the spectator and suggest multiple points of view; they conjure up pre-existing images; they create tension between still and moving images; they evoke the passage of time. The book-work Wieland made to accompany the *True Patriot Love* exhibition proposes a kind of visual network involving hundreds of images, for instance, while Snow’s *Plus Tard* disturbs the boundaries between what are normally distinct and still images. Instead of seeing only the end product of the artist’s interaction with a particular environment, we are drawn into an ongoing, multi-layered process of representation which opens up that “space of metaphoric significance.” Unlike so

many landscape painters who came before them, these artists acknowledged an already-mediated perceptual field, even while the artist/spectator continues to be captivated by the potential wildness, mystery, and unintelligibility of the natural world. In opposition to this sensibility, we might remember the kind of all-natural, undialectical rhetoric that often accompanied the modern landscape movement in Canada and elsewhere. Writing about Tom Thomson in the 1920s, for instance, the writer Frederick Housser would insist that “his master was Nature,” and that his paintings revealed “no trace of an intellectual philosophy, nor of a trace of esthetics.”<sup>4</sup> This comment is in accord with the European exemplar described by Richard Shiff (writing about Cézanne): “The modernist claims freedom from any grounding in convention ... If his works should happen to resemble those of past masters, he would maintain that this indicates no dependency, but a sensitivity to an immutable and original truth, rediscovered in his own sensation.”<sup>5</sup>

Against such disavowals, Smithson insisted on “the primacy of the rectangle” as part of the artwork’s dialectical operation, and Snow, too, wrote about the “edifying dialogue between the rectangle and all its specifically human content, with the nature (that might be) pictured through the camera or in the rectangular result.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, art-making in the Western tradition, however naturalistic or convention-flouting it might aim to be, has depended upon deeply embedded pictorial conventions and especially on the rectangular framing device. This convention is especially true of landscape art because the horizontally positioned frame, with its built-in horizon line, is the key structural element, allowing the natural scene to be laid out for visual consumption. With the landscape genre, form and content are thoroughly interlocked. And so the Smithson-Wieland-Snow generation of artists set out to explore both the natural world

and the conceptual parameters of the landscape experience. This critical reflexivity does suggest a rupture with the modern and romantic schools of landscape art, including the Group of Seven.

### JOYCE WIELAND'S BOOK OF NATURE, CIRCA 1971

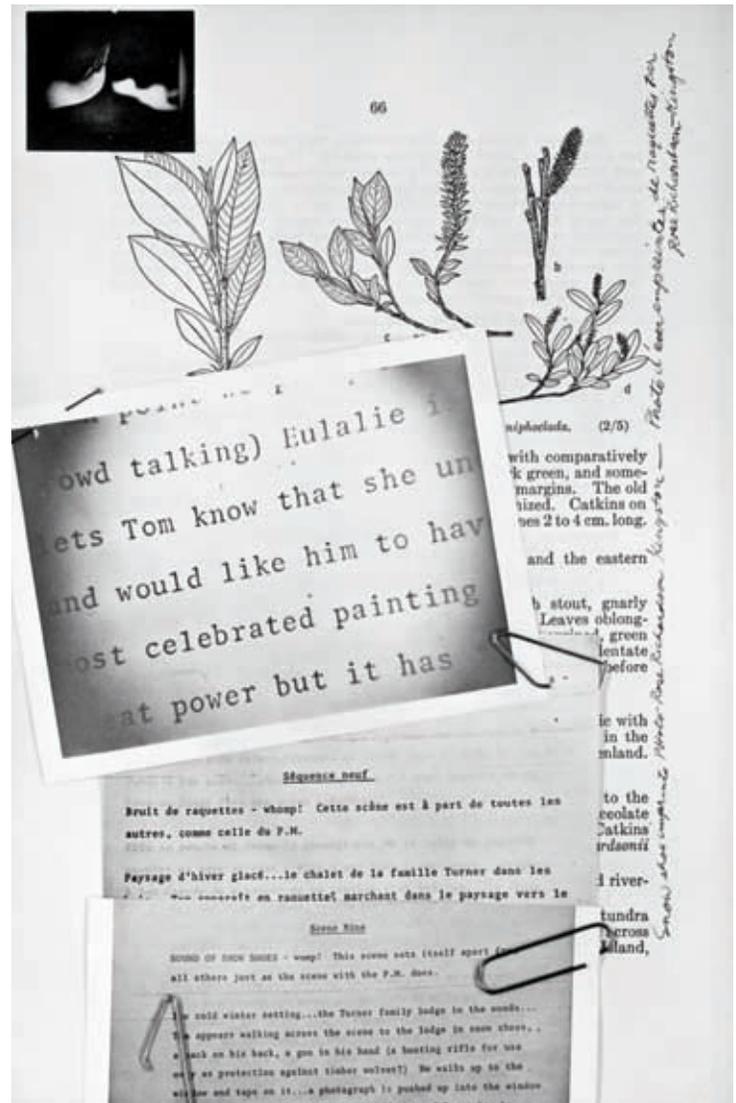
Joyce Wieland's exhibition *True Patriot Love/Veritable amour patriotique* opened at the National Gallery in 1971, with an array of "Canadiana" for the late twentieth century – not the usual display of rustic or nostalgic stuff that might conventionally bespeak the nation but, rather, colourful, satirical objects made out of stitched and embroidered cloth or plastic, with the occasional political slogan slyly appearing on harmless-looking quilts and cushions. Landscape was evident everywhere in this exhibition, in different modes and materials. Returning to Canada after a long sojourn in the United States, Wieland was at this time espousing a New Left brand of nationalism that was utopian in its ambitions to reinvent the prevailing discourse about Canadian nationhood.<sup>7</sup> For the artist this meant responding imaginatively to some of the nation's symbolic forms such as the anthem and the flag, as well as to the iconic landscape imagery that has been deemed so crucial to a sense of Canadian identity. The unusual renditions of landscape imagery in the exhibition included *Arctic Cake*, an enormous iceberg-like cake covered in white frosting; quilted fabric works, such as *109 Views* and *Water Quilt*; a quasi-ecosystem in the form of several ducks splashing around in a makeshift pond; and the aforementioned artist's book, which I want to argue is a coherent and important work of landscape art on its own terms.

The eight-metre-long fabric assemblage *109 Views* consists of a proliferation of little cloth landscapes sewn together. It has been written about this work that "the scenes are landscapes in

the tradition of the Group of Seven – unspoiled, uninhabited,"<sup>8</sup> but this characterization does not quite get at the essence of these cartoon-like images, each miniature scene coming complete with its own frame also constructed out of a brightly coloured swatch of fabric. Rather, *109 Views* exaggerates the pictorial structure of the landscape genre as a whole, reducing it to a formula requiring only the basic shape supplied by the frame and two or three horizontal bands to suggest earth, sky, and an all-important horizon line. If anything, this work seems to parody the Group of Seven legacy and the clichéd view of Canadian art as an innumerable sequence of similar-looking landscape views. *Water Quilt* was a rather more serious investigation of landscape: this blanket-like object incorporated pages from James Laxer's contemporaneous book *The Energy Poker Game*, which alerted readers to the extent of foreign investment in Canada and criticized the plan to sell "bulk water" from Canada's northern lakes and rivers to our ever-thirsty American neighbours.<sup>9</sup> The first impression with *Water Quilt* is of the Arctic's fragile little flowers embroidered in a decorative grid, but the viewer who interacts with the work by lifting up the individual squares of fabric discovers the underlying text and learns how geopolitics lie just below the surface in the representation of even the most diminutive of natural phenomena. Wieland's characterization of the North as an ecologically threatened environment and her way of connecting ecological concerns to questions of national sovereignty were unique among artists at this time. There was a shifting tone in her depictions of northern scenery, so that comic landscapes are followed by politicized ones, but there is throughout these permutations an awareness of how prominently "the North" has featured in Canadian cultural imaginings.<sup>10</sup> If the northern part of the continent was to remain a source of fascination and aesthetic interest, however, this was not because the North was a timeless or untouched wilderness or

because, in Lawren Harris's famous words, "the top of the continent is a source of spiritual flow"<sup>11</sup> that Canadian artists have the privilege to tap into. Rather, in Wieland's work we are made aware of presences, voices, and gazes criss-crossing the northern terrain and continually intersecting with natural ecosystems.

In the book-work and film script bearing the title *True Patriot Love* and in the film *The Far Shore*, Wieland forged a strong connection with Canada's art-historical past, primarily through the figure of Tom Thomson. By the time she and Snow came into their own as artists, the wild-looking scenery painted by Thomson and the Group of Seven was being relentlessly reproduced on calendars, stamps, school books, government publications, and so on.<sup>12</sup> A major National Gallery exhibition of 1970 only reconfirmed this canonization. And so by the 1970s, the art of Thomson and his cronies could seem banal or, worse still, informed by conservative values. Nonetheless, Wieland's *The Far Shore* resurrected Thomson as a genuinely freethinking and heroic figure, and if the characterization she presented was in some respects hippie-like, he was not the naive child of nature described by Housser. Tom Thomson's early death and unfulfilled promise as an artist have accorded him a unique stature in this country, and it is possible to convince oneself that he died for the cause of modern (landscape) art. Wieland's film offered a new version of this traumatic event; instead of a lone artist confronting a harsh natural environment, this was a showdown that pitted aggressively exploitative commercial values against ecologically, erotically, and aesthetically attuned individuals. This replotting of Canadian art is accomplished through the ruse of a romantic triangle involving the landscape painter Tom, his lover Eulalie, who is a pianist (a fellow artist, in other words) and a displaced Québécoise (and therefore possibly not "Canadian" at all), and her husband, Ross, who is the very embodiment of





bourgeois capitalism, interested only in discovering new ways to profit financially from the land.

The finished film was not universally admired, and it certainly is very different from Wieland's earlier, more formally experimental film work, although Lauren Rabinowitz has argued that *The Far Shore* was indeed structurally innovative in that the artist's inventive redeployment of the melodrama genre "ruptures the smooth illusion of cinematic realism."<sup>13</sup> The melodrama and pathos of the film should not be underestimated as an intervention into the aesthetics of landscape in Canada. The idea of introducing heightened emotion, torrid sex, financial greed, and murder into the story of Canadian art is anomalous and pleurably shocking; who would have thought that the Canadian landscape was permeated with libidinal energy just like Arcadian landscapes of old? And the film does carry forth many of Wieland's thematic preoccupations, if not all of her formal ones: the plot of the film can be regarded as a kind of clash between "passion" and "reason," whereby these are not presented as universal, timeless categories, but are instead historically specific forms of consciousness.<sup>14</sup> *The Far Shore* asks us to recognize Thomson's art as a passionate and socially engaged kind of modernism – in opposition, perhaps, to cool, abstract, and depoliticized forms of modern art. By reclaiming Thomson (along with Eulalie, his feminine counterpart), Wieland was producing a revisionist art history, and so too was she inventing an artistic genealogy for herself. Scott Watson has remarked about the sexual coding implicitly written into Canadian art history: "the Group of Seven painter is chaste in the wild. He takes no female companion there and finds no native princess or prince in the woods, only 'that sweet loneliness which is exaltation.'"<sup>15</sup> With Wieland's retelling, Thomson's attachment to the land is no longer an austere masculine enterprise. And with the entirely invented

character of Eulalie, Wieland gave body to what is so often missing in conventional accounts of the Group, and in histories of landscape art generally – a woman viewer and artist whose desire for the land is as strong and as passionate as any man’s.

The original screenplay for *The Far Shore* first appeared in the *True Patriot Love* book-work of 1971, and it is very effective in this format, where the snatches of overblown dialogue are interspersed with a wealth of other images and texts. Whereas the *True Patriot Love* exhibition as a whole was brash and colourful, Wieland’s book was more restrained in its effect, with its black and white photographs overlaid onto the pages of a government publication about Arctic flowers. The simple line drawings and dry scientific prose of the original book are largely obliterated by a display of images, apparently attached to the pages in a haphazard way with paper clips or sometimes stitched to the page. There are fragments of commentary, description, and song, printed and handwritten in English, French, Inuktitut, and sometimes Gaelic. There are horizontal stretches of blurry scenery, the pattern of snowshoe tracks, and repeated reproductions of Thomson’s *The West Wind*. When we leaf through the book, it becomes questionable, however, whether we are indeed confronting natural scenes and spaces. The blank whiteness of the page becomes a melancholic snowdrift, which then becomes an overexposed photographic expanse. Wieland gives us a range of options, between probably real and patently fake landscapes. Snapshot-like images that are readable as landscapes on first viewing are evidently details of quilting, cushions, or other stitchery. Somehow, though, a slightly gaping seam suggests geological stratification, the unanticipated play of light and shadow seems to recreate flaring northern lights in another image, and a horizon-like glow insistently appears. In such instances, the artist did not deliberately set out to create a

landscape representation, but rather she allowed it to emerge in a dreamlike, associative process. The close-up photographs in the *True Patriot Love* book-work show that the aesthetic experience of landscape can happen accidentally. The utopian promise of landscape art can, we discover, be the outcome of a technological glitch or a photographic blur.

This book-work has been recognized as an important contribution to the international phenomenon of Conceptual Art, and further, I would describe it as an exemplary work of conceptual landscape art.<sup>16</sup> Attempting to come to terms with Land Art in 1970, Dave Hickey compared this new art form to the experience of driving a car across the continent, because in so doing, “you become acutely sensitized to the conceptual spaces through which you are plummeting – time zones, states, counties, water districts, flyways, national parks, weather systems.”<sup>17</sup> This understanding of how landscape is perceived is reminiscent of Wieland’s interest in creating complex temporal and spatial configurations. The film *Reason over Passion* introduced fractured movement through a sequence of zones, and the *True Patriot Love* book-work presented maps, graphs, and scientific information juxtaposed with pages showing paths, tracks, and lines of stitchery that lure the viewer across and into the fictional landscape space. In the hands of conceptually oriented artists such as Wieland, “objective” systems for measuring and quantifying the territory are objects of fascination, but they are not taken at face value, perhaps because, as Sol Lewitt once remarked: “conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists.”<sup>18</sup> By bringing together such different modes and moods, Wieland produced landscape art that was a complex form of visual knowledge. She showed that the meaning and value of the natural environment is linked to politics and the social world, but also that nature becomes a kind of screen onto which desires and dreams are projected. In

Wieland's artwork, landscape as art form was inevitably speculative, personal, even hallucinatory. Indeed, it is through these diverse but overlapping manifestations – the overt political message of *Water Quilt*, the comical proliferation of *109 Views*, the accidental sublimity of the book-work's photographs – that we begin to understand the imaginative dimensions of Candian landscape art.

#### **LA RÉGION CENTRALE: NORTHERN DELIRIUM**

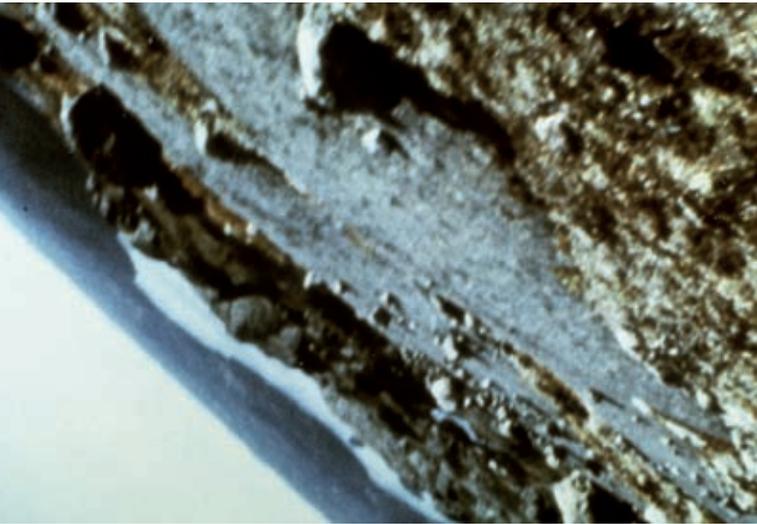
In 1970 Michael Snow installed a camera in a remote part of Quebec, and the resulting three hours of edited footage became *La Région Centrale*, a film that has been hailed as a “masterpiece.”<sup>19</sup> The camera was capable of spinning completely around on its axis, and so the work promised, it seemed, to capture the panoramic immersion of a person being there, then, embedded in a particular landscape space. In fact, this custom-made television camera would be capable of performing a repertoire of more extreme and more disorienting movements. Snow's artwork was an extraordinary perceptual experiment that seemed to test how the embodied experience of nature inevitably comes up against pictorial, ideological, and technological constraints.

It could be said that in *La Région Centrale* Snow set out to investigate a dialectical tension between a rocky geographic site somewhere north of Sept-Îles and a camera that could move in “delirious” ways (to adopt Robert Smithson's characterization of Snow's project).<sup>20</sup> To begin with, the camera moves slowly and close to the ground, so that the viewer becomes intimately acquainted with the morphology of specific rocks and other fragments of scenery. But this initial grounding reality effect is soon replaced by one of disorientation as the camera movements shift and accelerate and the component parts of this natural site take on fantastical identities. An early sequence in the film is reminis-

cent of A.Y. Jackson's painting *Night, Pine Island* (1924), but this kind of conventionally beautiful framing is the exception. As the camera changes speed and direction, the rocks loom like Stonehenge monoliths, until the camera turns the world completely upside down, dark above and light below, so that the rocks jut down like so many jagged teeth. At other times, when the camera runs parallel to the horizon line, the rocky terrain becomes a skyline of surrealist buildings, like something out of Max Ernst. But when the camera starts turning faster and faster, there is an effect of travelling through space, and then the landscape image shatters into honeycombs and butterflies and ultimately melts into streaks of multicoloured energy. The last several sentences of this text are my own reading of Snow's film, and so the particular references to artists, objects, and effects are admittedly arbitrary and subjective. But if one person's description of what she or he sees when watching a screening of *La Région Centrale* is associative and metaphoric, I want to argue that the response to this hypnotic film could not be otherwise.

When Snow said he wanted to make a landscape film equivalent to “Cézanne, Poussin, Corot, Monet ... and the Group of Seven,” he was claiming his kinship with the great landscape painters of the past. He apparently meant that he planned to aestheticize this remote piece of land, transforming his experience of it into something that was semantically and art-historically identifiable as landscape art. But then, paradoxically, *La Région Centrale* seems to deliberately challenge many of the precepts of landscape painting, as if the artist were determined to drain this art form of its capacity to make the natural world intelligible and beautiful. Still, Snow's announcement that he would match in film the accomplishments of the Group of Seven is fairly reasonable, in the sense that his subject matter (vaguely defined as the northern wilderness) was nominally theirs.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand,

Michael Snow, still from  
*La Région Centrale*



for Snow to compare himself to artists such as Nicolas Poussin and Camille Corot seems ludicrous at first. These European artists did paint wilderness in some guise or another, however, and it is therefore interesting to consider such instances. In Poussin's pendant paintings, *Landscape with St. Matthew* and *Landscape with St. John on Patmos* (c. 1640), for instance, a single human figure is pictured in a vast depopulated and ruined landscape, at least provisionally cut off from humankind. Corot's remarkable *Hagar in the Wilderness* (1835) shows the biblical heroine stranded in a barren wasteland. These paintings illustrate religious stories, wherein it could be said that the primary question being posed is whether or not the wilderness in question is a godforsaken place; we can disregard the religious connotations, however, and still appreciate that these artists strove to inscribe human consciousness and human doubt onto the natural world.<sup>22</sup> In contemporary secular terms, the presence or absence of meaning in the non-human world remains an important epistemological and ethical issue. These historical examples offer a striking contrast to Snow's project, which, unlike its predecessors, does not introduce those familiar narratives, signifiers, and pictorial constructs that serve to anchor the representation of nature. Indeed, Snow's purported ambition as a master of structural film was to de-narrativize the cinematic experience.<sup>23</sup>

Returning to Snow's list of illustrious predecessors, we get to Claude Monet, and if he and later generations of modern landscape artists seem qualitatively different from the earlier artists just mentioned, it is worth remembering that Impressionist artists often took as their subject matter the *terrains vagues* of Paris (the modern, urban equivalent to wilderness) and transformed these despised sites into experiments in sensation and perception.<sup>24</sup> There are neither saints nor hamadryads nor Native people wandering through Snow's representation, but the

Michael Snow, still from  
*La Région Centrale*

problem of representing the non-human natural world remains, and “wilderness” can be understood to some extent as the outer limit of the known, symbolizable environment. For aside from the iconographic considerations (ie., whether the picture is all green space, or whether there is an allegorical figure inhabiting the scene, or whether there is some small fragment of road, house, or other cultural artifact to at least suggest human occupation), the landscape image acquires meaning, emotional depth, and aesthetic value through the artist’s ability to frame the image in ways that resonate with previously viewed landscapes.

In *La Région Centrale* the camera was set up and programmed, and then Snow exited the scene. The artist’s deliberate withdrawal served to “de-authorize” the project, in Thierry de Duve’s words, because “what the film conveys is not his experience. It is nobody’s experience until it exists as projected light on a screen.”<sup>25</sup> Alain Fleischer describes Snow’s camera as a “bachelor cinemachine ... in the form of a disembodied, exorbitated automated eye.”<sup>26</sup> It is not the photographic or cinematic machine in itself that is responsible, of course, for this forfeiture of artistic presence. After all, there is a massive corpus of machine-made landscape photography that achieves the familiarly picturesque or poetic effects perfected by previous generations of artists armed only with pencils, burins, and brushes. What is most striking about *La Région Centrale*, I want to emphasize, is precisely that this dehumanized, machinic, inexpressive process *fails* to result in a landscape image that is entirely drained of narrative, affect, and memory. And Snow knew it would fail in this respect, that it had to fail in some sense as a structural film and as a bachelor machine, if it was going to measure up to the great landscape art of the past.<sup>27</sup>

And then there is an extraterrestrial quality to *La Région Centrale*. At a certain point in the film, the movement of the



camera is so fast and “delirious” that the landscape really becomes dematerialized, and it is as if the viewer is located inside a spaceship with meteors looming up suddenly into his or her field of vision. (This special-effect point of view is familiar from science fiction movies.) Snow himself pointed to these extraterrestrial connotations in describing his film: “this will feel like a record of the last wilderness on earth, a film to be taken into outer space as a kind of souvenir of what nature was. I want to convey a feeling of absolute aloneness, a kind of Goodbye to Earth which I believe we are living through.”<sup>28</sup> The implications for landscape art are striking: the late twentieth-century artist’s imagination must expand far beyond the immediate ground-level site. And the impetus for this new landscape approach is both perceptual and ecological, in the sense that technology has changed the way we view the earth, while the appearance of “wildness” cannot be taken for granted.

It is interesting that the same year that Snow was making his “goodbye to earth” film, *National Geographic* magazine devoted an issue to a newly perceived phenomenon: “our ecological crisis.”<sup>29</sup> The editors attempted to arouse a kind of collective, planetary thinking about environmental problems with a cover photograph of an oil-drenched bird, but they emphasized that the catalyst for this new global awareness came from another photograph – the picture of planet Earth as seen from space, which had recently become available to all of humanity via the eyes and cameras of American astronauts. But if this point of view was in the process of being naturalized, especially for American viewers, it is worth considering Marshall McLuhan’s comments about “counter-environments,” which he conceived of as cultural forms that could (and should) be invented in response to the largely invisible techno-ideological environments that people live in and move through on a daily basis. McLuhan speculated about a new kind

of artwork/counter-environment that might come about as space travel and prosthetic viewing devices introduced a radically new spatial consciousness about the planet. In 1967 he wrote, “If the planet itself has thus become the content of a new space created by its satellites, and its electronic extensions, if the planet has become the content and not the environment, then we can confidently expect to see the next few decades devoted to turning the planet into an art form.”<sup>30</sup> And so we can regard *La Région Centrale* as an attempt to aesthetically “counter” (in McLuhan’s terms) the new spatially expanded technological environment by introducing radical dislocation into the representation of a specific geographic site and by positing another, less earthbound gaze to interrupt the ground-level embeddedness of the camera itself.

If this new space-consciousness was somehow integral to the conceptually oriented transformation of the landscape genre, we can regard as something more than a joke Wieland’s comment in 1971 that even if “I were living on the moon ... all I would be doing would be about Canada.”<sup>31</sup> The possibility of an extra-planetary perspective was also taken up by Wieland’s *Man Has Reached Out and Touched the Tranquil Moon* (1970); the work spelled out this phrase, with individual fabric letters packaged in clear plastic, while discreetly flopping at the bottom of the wall hanging was a small Canadian flag, also bagged.<sup>32</sup> Shown alongside explicitly Canadian landscapes in the National Gallery exhibition, this work disturbed the understanding of what it means to situate oneself within a landscape; now the moon was closer to home, in close proximity to the body, although the “inappropriate” Canadian flag is a reminder that it was not “Man” in any universal sense but rather Homo Americanus who had laid claim to that silvery entity. Once again, Smithson’s turns of phrase are relevant: he sarcastically referred to the moon shot as a “very expensive non-site,” the aftermath of which was a “strange demoralisation.”<sup>33</sup> In contrast

to the bathos of such grandiose and imperialistic excursions, the artworks under discussion suggest a heightened awareness of everyday spatiality; perhaps space travel ultimately served as a reminder that the planet Earth was itself still so unknown, so uncanny, so full of aesthetic and utopian potential. These are not nostalgic images by any means, however, and indeed, it is the use of up-to-date materials and technologies which allows these works to function as “counter-environments.” As Richard Cavell comments, “McLuhan does not posit a way outside the environment except through technology itself.”<sup>34</sup> Wieland’s use of shiny new plastic sheathing for *Man Has Reached Out* is telling here, while it was photography that allowed the low-tech textures and stitched materials of her other artworks to be incorporated into a high-tech visual regime. Snow’s work, meanwhile, would often highlight processes of technological remediation,<sup>35</sup> thereby introducing a new kind of tension between still and moving images or between painted and photographed images. Even while *La Région Centrale* zeroed in and framed a few details of a specific site, therefore, the artwork ends up forging links to much larger circuits of visuality and representation.

Michael Snow’s *Plus Tard* consists of a series of twenty-five large colour photographs of the Group of Seven section in the old National Gallery building, re-presented from the point of view of someone positioned in the middle of the room, turning around. He allowed the photographic process in *Plus Tard* to range from clarity to blurriness, meaning that some paintings can be identified while others have become barely recognizable abstract compositions. The effect of the artwork is to defamiliarize the experience of viewing this well-known collection. With this project Snow came close to sharing Joyce Wieland’s critical perspective on the legacy of landscape painting in Canada; she had at this juncture finally finished her revisionist Thomson

film, while she too, with her 1971 exhibition, had undertaken a site-specific project at the National Gallery of Canada. While the emphasis in their work is different, neither artist regarded the national archive of landscape art as aesthetically inert or valuable only as comforting and nation-affirming images. Instead, the paintings remain fascinating in part because as quasi-monuments they can become exemplary reflective surfaces, allowing contemporary questions about neocolonialism, ecology, and nationhood to be rethought or allowing aspects of technology, embodiment, and perception to be explored. Somewhere in the middle of the *Plus Tard* sequence, for example, the shadow of the artist looms quite prominently, and Snow’s body-double alerts us to the usual absence of the human figure within the Group of Seven corpus. *Plus Tard* insists upon the embodiment of vision in relation to landscape art, through the play of shadows and through the work’s panoramic effect.

If the great thing about the paintings of Thomson, Jackson, Harris, and their colleagues was ostensibly how they managed to capture an individual response to the natural world at a specific time and place, Snow’s artwork added to this previous history of subjective inscription the immediacy of his own experience, albeit photographing inside the National Gallery rather than painting outdoors. With *Plus Tard*, artist, medium, and location are now doubled: early twentieth-century artist meets late twentieth-century artist; painting meets photography; outdoor natural environment comes up against indoor cultural space. The remote location chosen by Snow for *La Région Centrale* had quite possibly never before been drawn, painted, or photographed and so was desirable to the artist precisely because it was “uncooked,” not already encoded and infused with cultural meanings. With *Plus Tard*, on the other hand, there is no doubt that “what we see has already been formed by a gaze prior to our act of seeing.”<sup>36</sup>

And if these already-seen landscapes have acquired the status of national monuments, Snow introduced temporality, movement, and immersion onto the landscape, where previously there was institutional stasis, a sense of nature as timeless, and a singular point of view.

The panorama as a pictorial device was evoked by *La Région Centrale*, but it is even more relevant to *Plus Tard*. And it is interesting that, historically, panoramas had set out to surpass landscape art's habitual kind of illusionism based on single-point perspective.<sup>37</sup> Most visitors to the National Gallery of Canada's Group of Seven rooms proceed to gaze at one small rectangle of scenery after another in the normative, proscribed manner, but Snow used the technological means at his disposal to create a much more spectacular, immersive visual experience. Still images start to move; the viewer in turn is impelled to pivot; and somehow, in spite of the work's layers of artifice and reflexivity, one can momentarily have the realistic impression of being bodily situated inside a landscape.

Snow's *Plus Tard*, like Wieland's multi-faceted *True Patriot Love* project, staked out a critical position vis-à-vis Canada's legacy of landscape painting, but these artworks should also be regarded as a sort of homage. In Snow's photographs the aura of the original artwork might be eroded through the process of reproduction, but this erosion need not be lamented, since contingent, ancillary aesthetic effects spring up, compensating for this loss. The integrity of a Lawren Harris painting is compromised, in other words, but then again perhaps the movement and blur in *Plus Tard* enhance the painter's original intent, making the snowy paintings snowier, the autumnal ones blowier, by adding new modes of spatial illusion and atmospheric effect. This aspect, too, of Snow's *Plus Tard* is reminiscent of Wieland's approach in the *True Patriot Love* book-work, in that both artists used

photography's (usually unwanted) side effects to expand the imaginative purview of landscape aesthetics.

Looking at the work of these artists side by side does reveal the range of aesthetic preoccupations they shared. Michael Snow's *La Région Centrale* and *Plus Tard* are indeed more "passionate" (in Wieland's terms), more engaged with the affective and subjective aspects of landscape art, and more interested in questions of nationalism than is usually acknowledged. And Joyce Wieland's projects, including the *True Patriot Love* exhibition and related films, while clearly focusing on the politics of nation, ecology, and gender, maintain a rigorous engagement with the perceptual, pictorial, and material constituents of landscape art. Adding layers of mediation and narrative to the representation of natural sites and phenomena, these artists successfully laid the foundation for a new generation of Canadian landscape art.

1788 (Sydney: Ure Smith Pty, 1945). For an analysis of the book's significance, see John O'Brian, "Bernard Smith's Early Marxist Art History," *Thesis Eleven*, no. 82 (August 2005): 29–37.

62 Lewis, "Canadian Nature and Its Painters," 427.

63 Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, "The Moralists," in *Characteristics*, 1711, cited in Andrews, *Landscape and Western Art*, 67.

64 Jack Bush quoted in Dennis Reid, "Jack Bush: The Development of a Canadian Painter," in *Jack Bush*, ed. Karen Wilkin (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1984), 13.

65 On the theorization of social space, see Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (1974; Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1991), and Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

66 A.Y. Jackson. "The Birth of the Group of Seven," CBC Radio talk, aired 7 June 1950, printed in *Our Sense of Identity: A Book of Canadian Essays*, ed. Malcolm Ross (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1954), 229.

67 In her essay in chapter 4, Rosemary Donegan investigates industrial landscape paintings of Copper Cliff and the Sudbury Basin executed between the 1920s and the 1950s.

68 Allan Sekula, in *Geography Lesson: Canadian Notes* (Vancouver and Cambridge, Mass.: Vancouver Art Gallery and MIT Press, 1997), found and photographed wilderness paintings by A.Y. Jackson in each of these locations.

## Chapter 2 | Extensions of Technology

### NANCY SHAW

- 1 For a discussion of everyday life, see Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World* (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1984), and Guy Debord, "Perspectives for Conscious Alterations in Everyday Life," in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), 68–75.
- 2 Marie Fleming, *Baxter<sup>2</sup>: Any Choice Works* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1982), 10–11.
- 3 See Scott Watson, "Art in the Fifties: Design, Leisure and Painting in the Age of Anxiety," in *Vancouver Art and Artists 1931–83* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1983), 77, for an analysis of modernist artists, architects, and patrons who were committed to such utopian ideals of suburban living in the 1950s.
- 4 Fleming, *Baxter<sup>2</sup>*, 29.
- 5 Unless otherwise noted, all information is from conversations with Ingrid and Iain Baxter in 1992.
- 6 Lucy R. Lippard, "Art within the Arctic Circle," *Hudson Review*, February 1970, 666–74.
- 7 See Alexander Wilson, *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1991), 282–9, for a discussion of competing ideological conceptions of Northern landscape.
- 8 *The N.E. Thing Co. Ltd. Book* (Vancouver and Basel: NETCO and the Kunsthalle Basel, 1978), unpaginated.
- 9 *Trans-VSI Connection NSCAD-NETCO*, 15 September – 5 October 1969 (Halifax: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1970).
- 10 Anne Rosenberg, "N.E. Thing Company Section: Interview," *Capilano Review*, no. 8/9 (fall 1975/spring 1976): 178.

### JOHANNE SLOAN

- 1 Michael Snow, "La Région Centrale," in *The Collected Writings of Michael Snow* (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1994), 53. This text is part of a proposal Snow presented to the Canadian Film Development Corporation in March 1969.
- 2 Wieland was present during every stage of the making of *La Région Centrale* in 1970; she was the one who came up with the title for the work, and she took the well-known photographs of Snow in situ with his camera. The following year, Snow helped Wieland as she prepared the *True Patriot Love* exhibition at the National Gallery, and he was even part of a rather comical three-way conversation between Wieland, exhibition curator Pierre Théberge, and Snow that was published as an insert in Wieland's book-work.
- 3 Robert Smithson, "A Provisional Theory of Non-Sites" (1968), in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 364.
- 4 F.B. Housser, *A Canadian Art Movement: The Story of the Group of Seven* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1926), 119.
- 5 Richard Schiff, *Cézanne and the Ends of Impressionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 66.
- 6 Michael Snow and Bruce Elder, "Conversation," *Afterimage* (London), no. 11 (winter 1982/83): 34.
- 7 I have written about Wieland's engagement with nationalism in "Joyce Wieland at the Border: Nationalism, the New Left and the Question of Political Art in Canada," *Journal of Canadian Art History* 26 (2005).
- 8 Marie Fleming, *Joyce Wieland* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1987), 85.
- 9 James Laxer, *The Energy Poker: The Politics of the Continental Resources Deal* (Toronto and Chicago: New Press, 1970).
- 10 On how the Canadian "North" measures up to the American idea of "West," see Sherrill Grace, "Comparing Mythologies: Ideas of West and North," in *Borderlands: Essays in Canadian-American Relations*, ed. R. Lecker (Toronto: ECW Press, 1991).
- 11 Lauren Harris, quoted in Roald Nasgaard, *The Mystic North* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario and University of Toronto Press, 1984), 167.
- 12 See Joyce Zemans, "Establishing the Canon: Nationhood, Identity and the National Gallery's First Reproduction Programme of Canadian Art," *Journal of Canadian Art History* 16, no. 2 (1995).
- 13 Lauren Rabinowitz, "The Far Shore: Feminist Family Melodrama," in *The Films of Joyce Wieland*, ed. Kathryn Elder (Toronto: Cinematheque Ontario Monographs, 1999), 123 (originally published 1987).
- 14 The catchphrase "reason over passion" was borrowed from Prime Minister Trudeau and became the title of a film, while Wieland also produced a pair of matching bilingual quilts, *Reason over Passion* and *La raison avant la passion* (both 1968), one of which hung in the prime minister's official residence.
- 15 Scott Watson, "Disfigured Nature: The Origins of the Modern Canadian Landscape," in *Eye of Nature*, ed. D. Augaitis and H. Pakasaar (Banff: Walter Phillips Gallery, 1991), 107. The quotation is from Housser.
- 16 Wieland's book-work was included as one of a few Canadian examples in an international survey of influential Conceptual Art, for instance. See *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s to 1980s*, ed. Jane Farver and Claude Ginz (New York: Queen's Museum, 1999).
- 17 Dave Hickey, "Earthscapes, Landworks and Oz," *Art in America*, Sept./Oct. 1971, 45.
- 18 Lewitt, quoted in Benjamin Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 55 (winter 1990): 115.
- 19 Thierry de Duve, for example, says that with *La Région Centrale*, "Snow's inquiries into the conditions of experience" are gathered into "the unity of a masterpiece." See Thierry de Duve, "Michael Snow and Cleitics of Experience," *Parachute*, no. 78 (spring 1995), 33. Paul Virilio, commenting that Land Art was the last true "art of inscription," suggests that Snow's work is a "masterpiece" in this respect. See Paul Virilio, "Interview with Catherine David," in *Documents for Documenta* (Kassel, 1996), 55.
- 20 Smithson characterized the machine this way: "It is interesting to see Snow now moving into the actual landscape with a delirious camera of his own invention." See "Art through the Camera's Eye" (c. 1971), in *Robert Smithson*, 374.
- 21 Snow finally chose a site approximately a hundred miles north of Sept-Îles. Wieland's unpublished diaristic fragment, titled "We are looking for the site of Mike's film,"

indicates the degree of her involvement in the project, while also pointing to the issues of pollution and gender relations she was attuned to on the trip. See York University Archives, Joyce Wieland Fonds, call no. 1999-003/005 (02).

22 The religiosity of Poussin's and Corot's landscapes is perhaps not so irrelevant, though. Indeed, Snow commented, "It's embarrassing to say it, but within the terms of my work I had in the back of my mind great religious works like Bach's St. Matthew Passion, B Minor Mass, St. John Passion, Ascension oratorio." See "Converging on *La Région Centrale*: Michael Snow in Conversation with Charlotte Townsend," in *The Collected Writings of Michael Snow*, 58 (originally published 1971).

23 Structural film in Snow's hands has been defined as "a 'process' orientated endeavour, eschewing content, narrative and illusionistic techniques." See Michael O'Pray, "Framing Snow," *Afterimage* (London), no. 11 (winter 1982/83): 53.

24 Georges Riviere wrote, "This landscape which so delighted Renoir, other painters saw it in less cheerful colours. They noted only *terrains vagues* strewn with rubbish, scabby grass trodden by inhabitants in rags." Quoted in T.J. Clark, *The Painter of Modern Life* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1985), 184.

25 De Duve, "Michael Snow," 34.

26 Alain Fleischer, "Michael Snow's Cinemachine," in *Michael Snow Panoramique* (Brussels: Société des Expositions du Palais des Beaux-Arts de Bruxelles), 1999, 53-4.

27 Michael O'Pray had pointed the discussion in this direction when he remarked that "there remains the hint of another reading ... that is romantic, poetic, and at odds with the structural project." See O'Pray, "Framing Snow," 56.

28 Snow, "La Région Centrale," 56.

29 *National Geographic* 138, no. 6 (December 1970).

30 Marshall McLuhan, "Technology and Environment," *artscanada* 24, no. 2 (February 1967): 5.

31 Wieland, in "Interview with Joyce

Wieland," 28 March 1971, presented as an insert in the *True Patriot Love* book-work/catalogue.

32 While *Man Has Reached Out and Touched the Tranquil Moon* has aged rather badly, becoming yellowed and brittle-looking, the original sheen and newness of the plastic envelopes, reminiscent of the glossy allure of packaged commodities, was evidence of Wieland's continued engagement with the vocabulary of Pop Art.

33 "Conversation with Robert Smithson," (1972), edited by Bruce Kurtz, in *Robert Smithson*, 268. Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* can also be considered a counter-environment in McLuhan's terms.

34 Richard Cavell, *McLuhan in Space: A Cultural Geography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 190.

35 "Remediation," defined as "the representation of one medium in another," has been identified as an important concept in new media studies. See Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), 45.

36 Joseph Leo Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape* (London: Reaktion Books, 1990), 239-40.

37 See Bernard Comment, *The Painted Panorama* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1999).

## JODY BERLAND

1 M.W. Helms, *Ulysses' Sail: An Ethnographic Odyssey of Power, Knowledge, and Geographical Distance* (Princeton University Press, 1988), 224-6. Helms notes, "A form of paradise already held Western connotations prior to the discoveries, but the attribution of wilderness and its qualities to the West was new and clearly part of the effort to create and identify a new cosmological locale" (226). Tracing the same history in a more worldly context, Steven Greenblatt reminds us of the powerful association of wonder and greed with which Columbus met - and wrote of - the New World.

2 *Ibid.*, 260.

3 R. Shields, *Places on the Margin: Alternative Geographies of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 175.

4 Harold Innis, *Staples, Markets and Cultural Change*, ed. D. Drache (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), 4.

5 *Ibid.*, 5.

6 C. Acland (in "Traces and Spaces: Harold Innis and Canadian Cultural Studies," in *Harold Innis in the New Century: Reflections and Refractions*, ed. C. Acland and W. Buxton, [Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999]) summarizes the argument put forward by Robin Neill in "Imperialism and the Staple Theory of Canadian Economic Development: The Historical Perspective," in *Culture, Communication and Dependency: The Tradition of Harold Innis*, ed. W. Melody et al. (Norwood: Ablex, 1981).

7 Innis, *Staples, Markets*, 72.

8 Shields, *Places on the Margin*, 29.

9 *Ibid.*, 182-3. Shields cites a 1970 essay by the influential historian W.L. Morton: "the ultimate and the comprehensive meaning of Canadian history is to be found where there has been no Canadian history: in the north."

10 Industry, Science and Technology Canada, *Science and Technology Economic Analysis Review* (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services, Government of Canada, 1990), 1.

11 *Ibid.*, 5. Significantly this is not the case with electronics, aerospace, or computer industries, all areas of expertise Canada has developed without damage to its branch-plant relationship to U.S. industry. J. Todd, *Colonial Technology: Science and the Transfer of Innovation to Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), offers an illuminating description of a comparable gap in research bridging scientific knowledge and technological innovation in nineteenth-century Australia. Agents of local science were active in "the process of assimilation of new technologies into local production systems," she writes. "What they were not generally doing was carrying out research aimed at direct solution of technological problems by means of

domestic research activity ... Whether through lack of interest or lack of confidence, the ready availability of overseas technology seems indeed to have pre-empted, or displaced, local research programs aimed at development of new home-grown technologies to solve an acknowledged industry problem" (224-5). She concludes that Australia's willingness to appropriate and choose technological options from diverse sources contributed to growing technological sovereignty, if not independence; that full achievement of this goal has been blocked by the failure to achieve critical mass in the dynamic interaction between receivers and producers, or "firms, industries, sectors and colonies"; and that dependency theory explains much, but not all, of the structural imbalances of Australian science and technology.

12 See R.E. Babe, *Telecommunications in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), and J. Berland, "Angels Dancing: Cultural Technologies and the Production of Space," in *Cultural Studies*, ed. L. Grossberg, C. Nelson, and P. Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1995), for further discussion of satellites and the Canadian space industry.