

this.

this.

this.

this.

this

**MICHAEL SNOW**  
SO IS THIS

NOVEMBER – DECEMBER 2009



## THIS, TOO

“This is the title of this film. The rest of this film will look just like this. The film will consist of single words presented one after another to construct sentences and hopefully (this is where you come in) to convey meanings. This, as they say, is the signifier. This film will be about 2 hours long. Does that seem like a frightening prospect? Well, look at it this way: how do you know this isn’t lying? Perhaps after a while this word after word system will change into something else. Well, take this’s word for it, this is the way it’s going to be. New paragraph.”

It’s tempting to just quote the entire text of Michael Snow’s *So Is This*. After all, the film, consisting of single white words against a black screen, addresses its own conditions throughout, self-reflexively examining its position in the lineage of structural filmmaking and playing with the possibilities of language. But how to satisfactorily communicate, in simple script, the various shifts in tempo and rhythm, the propulsion of the text, the correlation of single word-to-single frame, the very ‘filmness’ of the film. One would have to find a corresponding methodology or code, something that would imbue the written text with the qualities of the screen, so that, for example, when Snow’s film accelerates to the point of incoherence, when all that can be seen is the occasional flicker of a word, the script would have to veer into illegibility as well. Thus, what was once a coherent sentence (or so one would assume) could only be represented as a neologism, an acronym, a hand mashed spontaneously against the keyboard, in order to express the rapidity of the film as well as the viewer’s resulting sensation of sensory overload. Likewise, in order to accurately suggest the slowness of certain passages, the gaps between words, and the drawn-out duration of others on-screen, a written representation would require numerous ploys; font sizes, capitalisation, ellipses, dots and dashes. When Snow states “pause” and lets it linger there for several beats, the resulting text might require only a single word on a page, a compositional device similar to the sparse and scattered signifiers of B.S. Johnson’s experimental novel *House Mother Normal*.<sup>1</sup> As a translation of film into text, the author might even occupy the space of one of Snow’s filmmaker peers, mentioned throughout the work: “Richard” “Serra”, “Tom” “Sherman”, “Su” “Friedrich”, “John” “Knight”, “Paul” “Haines”, “Drew” “Morey”.

This acknowledgement of his contemporaries situates Snow within a body of experimental, materialist filmmaking, making it easy to forget how much his work actually plays with the conventions of narrative cinema. For instance, in his previous, seminal work *Wavelength* (1976), the mechanisms of the camera dictate the structure of the film, yet the real action occurs on the edges of the frame, as a man collapses and a woman makes a telephone call. There is a narrative; it just happens to fall outside the parameters of the camera as it zooms steadily, relentlessly forward. The installation of *So Is This*, with its set screening times, re-imagines (and literally re-makes) the gallery as movie theatre, resisting the Brechtian tendencies of much contemporary video art. The work cannot be casually walked past, caught halfway-through or experienced in part. In watching, the viewer must submit himself to the duration (albeit much less than 2 hours long) and trajectory of the film, reading it in order, as narrative. The commitment of the spectator is matched by that of the audience, silently reading at the same pace, trying to guess which way the film will turn next. It addresses the audience as co-conspirators, slyly alluding to the various strategies it simultaneously engages in order to hold their attention. The viewer, caught between the rustling of fellow audience members, the sound





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Date

So Is This installation view, mother's tankstation



of rain pelting against the gallery roof, the inner dialogue which follows the text (and which is answered by the bemused laugh of the spectator in front of him) finds himself “fascinated twice over, by the image and its surroundings – as if [one] had two bodies at the same time: a narcissistic body which gazes, lost, into the engulfing mirror, and a perverse body, ready to fetishize not the image but precisely what exceeds it: the texture of the sound, the hall, the darkness, the obscure mass of the other bodies...”<sup>2</sup> Snow’s film conflates the two positions; critical awareness becomes the narrative, while engagement is tempered through the narrator’s ironical, self-deprecating tone.

At a certain point, *So Is This* introduces a re-examination of the sequences which preceded it; a re-play, at a different tempo and visibility, of the beginning of the film, as displayed on a monitor, a screen within the screen. The logical progression of the text, and Snow’s foreshadowing of topics to be discussed further on, is disrupted, and the distortion of the ‘re-viewed’ material through the acceleration and intensity of its transmission compels the spectator to question their own reception(s). Amidst the frenetic pace of the text, one struggles to recall the context of the intermittent, isolated words (those which lasted long enough on screen to retain legibility in this sped-up version). The section introduces an additional level of self-awareness, a conscious reflection of the material previously viewed, incorporated into the act of viewing itself; a conceptual position that is aligned on-screen by the image of the monitor within the frame. One watches, through the film, one’s own experience of watching.

This isn’t all. On either side of the re-played footage, there are discussions on Canadian politics and censorship, a group sing-along, random sequences of words, a French ‘version’, puns and word-play. Snow opens up the hermetic space of language, of film, to allow in another sense of temporality, the time and space of where the work was made (“written in 1975 but for various reasons could not be done until now (April 1982).”). These gestures subvert the genre of structural film itself, and its puritanical emphasis on the materiality of the medium. In *So Is This*, the rigour and reflexivity of experimental film gives way to squabbling over chronology and originality, as well as acknowledgements of the work’s collaborative nature (“Thanks to Anna Pafomow for her assistance in placing these words on this screen.”). The breaching of the self-referential, much like Snow’s incorporation of narrative linearity through an essentially anti-illusionistic format, introduces the framing devices of cinematic production into the footage. It brings the peripheral on-screen, into Victor Burgin’s heterotopic ‘space formed from all the many places of transition between cinema and other images in and of everyday life.’<sup>3</sup> And yet, the associations opened up through *So Is This*, while extending beyond the intrinsic to include the ephemeral and the external, are submitted to the logic of the film. In the space of the theatre, the silent, inner monologues of the spectators weave through the pauses and intermissions of ‘Snow’s’ voice (as if to literally re-affirm Derrida’s famous suggestion of their being ‘nothing outside of the text’.<sup>4</sup>)

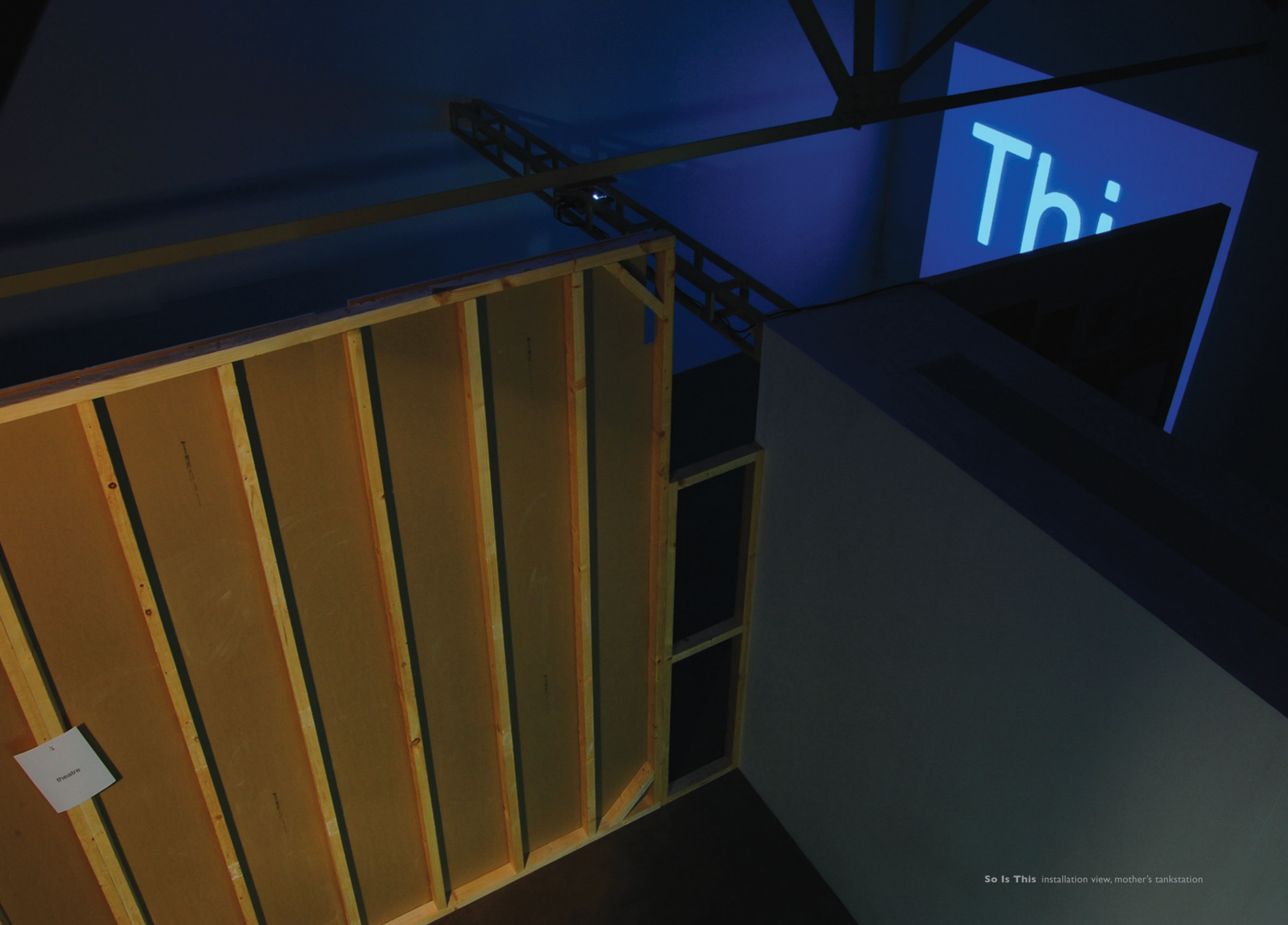
How to translate all of this then into something as reductive as a written text (it might be worth pointing out that, in writing this essay, I refused the offer of a transcript of the film, preferring instead to work from the film itself)? *So Is This* seems to defy such measures, in its loose translation into a truncated and asymmetrical French version, in the fast-forwarded and slowed-down transmission of sections, and the appropriation of its own, earlier, footage. But primarily in the subjectivity of reception, in the variety of possible texts that are opened through the communal experience of silent ‘reading’, and that confronts not only the critical spectator but which permeates, in turn, the

narration. In Burgin’s words: ‘the film spills its contents into the stream of everyday life, where they join other detritus of everyday experience... and where no sentence forms.’<sup>5</sup> Or in Snow’s: ‘This is not a script.’

Chris Clarke

1. B.S. Johnson’s novel uses, in places, sequences of blank sheets and occasional fragments of typography in order to represent the disintegration of the characters’ inner thoughts.
2. Roland Barthes, “Leaving the Movie Theatre” in *The Rustle of Language*, translated by Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), p. 348.
3. Victor Burgin, “Possessive, Pensive and Possessed” in *Stillness and Time: Photography and the Moving Image*, David Green and Joanna Lowry, eds. (Brighton: Photoforum / Photoworks, 2006), p. 166
4. “Yet if reading must not be content with doubling the text, it cannot legitimately transgress the text toward something other than it, toward a referent (a reality that is metaphysical, historical, psychobiographical, etc.) or toward a signified outside the text whose content could take place, could have taken place outside of language [...] outside of writing in general [...] *There is nothing outside of the text* [there is no outside-text; *il n’y a pas de horstexte* – translator’s note].” Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 158
5. Victor Burgin, p. 167





theatre

So Is This installation view, mother's tankstation



A dark room with a wooden walkway and a projection screen displaying the word "This" in cyan. The room is dimly lit, with the primary light source being the projection. The walkway is made of light-colored wood and runs across the top of the frame. The projection screen is a light gray rectangle on the wall, and the word "This" is centered on it in a bold, sans-serif font. The foreground is mostly in shadow, showing the dark edges of the walkway.

This

A dark room with a wooden walkway and a projection screen displaying the word "is" in cyan. The room is dimly lit, with the primary light source being the projection. The walkway is made of light-colored wood and runs across the top of the frame. The projection screen is a light gray rectangle on the wall, and the word "is" is centered on it in a bold, sans-serif font. The foreground is mostly in shadow, showing the dark edges of the walkway.

is



