

LISSON GALLERY

WHITEHOT MAGAZINE

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"THE BEST ART IN THE WORLD"

Carolee Schneemann's solo exhibition at Lisson



Exhibition view of 'Carolee Schneemann' at Lisson Gallery, Los Angeles, 11 April - June 14 2025 ©Carolee Schneemann Foundation, Courtesy Lisson Gallery

By GARY BREWER June 3, 2025

“Be stubborn and persist, and trust yourself on what you love. You have to trust what you love.”

—Carolee Schneemann

“I, too, overflow: ... my body knows unheard-of songs.”

—Hélène Cixous, *The Laugh of Medusa*

Carolee Schneemann’s solo exhibition at Lisson Gallery is a gift to Los Angeles. Her work, vision and fierce poetic intellect are not as well known here as they are in New York. Schneemann (1939–2019) is a profoundly important artist whose imagination encompassed a reinterpretation of art history through the lens of what she termed vulvic space. Through a feminine embrace of sexual power and the ecstasy of the flesh, she used her body as a vehicle and a metaphor to shape Dionysian works in performance, video, installation and sculpture. Her art expressed the belief that joy is a birthright, and from this vantage point she created works that are a profound search for freedom and a critique of the powers that seek to rob us of our freedom. Her full embrace of sensuality and sexual pleasure as feminine power informs her mythology and imbues her art with an ethos that resonates in the work of many contemporary female artists.

Schneemann was an early pioneering feminist artist whose orgiastic performance piece “Meat Joy” (1964) established her as an important artist, using her body to communicate mythic ideas and reshape art history. *Fuses* (1967), the experimental film that she made of herself and her partner, composer James Tenney, was a groundbreaking work. She wrote about the piece, “I began an erotic film, *Fuses*, in 1965, because no one else had dealt with the image of lovemaking as a core of spontaneous gesture and movement.” Her iconic piece “Interior Scroll,” in which she stood naked and read from a scroll of paper slowly drawn from her vagina and spoken aloud to an unsuspecting audience is one of her best-known works.

I first met Schneemann in an unusually fated way. During the grand opening of the new SFMOMA in 1995, I stepped outside to escape the crowd and get some fresh air. I noticed a woman in the group standing outside who seemed to be having a problem. She began to faint, and I ran over and caught her in my arms. It was Carolee. We became intimate friends, and several months later, at a party in her loft on West 29th Street in New York, I met my future wife, the artist Aline Mare. Coincidentally, the major installation piece in the Lisson exhibition, “Video Rocks” (1987), was installed in her loft at that party long ago. She was still thinking about changes she might make to it for an upcoming show.

Schneemann was guided by dreams, intuition, visions and a fierce intellect. Indeed, her writings are some of the finest critical thinking seeking to deconstruct the historical canon and place the body, both female and male, as the vector point through which oppressive forces of cultural control distort the flesh and its natural innate desires. Her art was a method to, as she wrote, “go back to the body, which is where all the splits in Western Culture occur.” She used her body as a medium and a weapon to challenge the norms of society.

The “Video Rocks” installation in this exhibition and the 50-foot-long painted scroll on paper, which may have been a study for this piece, attest to her visionary process. While visiting Los Angeles in 1985 she had a dream of rock-like shapes that suggested Monet’s “Water Lillies” hovering in the distance. She created a group of 180 mounds that look like cow patties. They are grouped together on the floor with four brightly colored plastic tubes lighting the piece from above. Behind this are five video monitors placed on the floor, showing footage of people and animals from the ankles down walking across these mounds, stepping carefully from one mound to another.



Exhibition view of 'Carolee Schneemann' at Lisson Gallery, Los Angeles, 11 April - May 24 2025 ©Carolee Schneemann Foundation, Courtesy Lisson Gallery

This approach to using ordinary movement as a form of natural choreography reflects her involvement with the artists, dancers and choreographers at Judson Dance Theater in the early 1960s. It is an extension into video of her project to “vitalize the whole body as gesture in dimensional space.” The work fills half of the gallery; the mounds suggest stepping stones in a pond. The video conveys a sense of passage from one realm to another: with each step one feels the weight of those walking, grounding and transferring a feeling of gravity to the physical sculptures.

Her paintings from the *Dust Series* in this exhibition express her horror at the death and devastation wrought by the war in Lebanon during the 1980s. A density of sorrow pervades these desolate surfaces, the electronic board a bleak cipher of a civilized world whose wondrous technological innovations are used to wreak havoc upon one another. Schneemann was a complex person and artist: she expressed grief and sorrow in her political works, and in contrast, explored the innate joy of life in one’s body free from the shadow of human misdeeds and the constraints of a patriarchal culture.

Her career gained attention in the 1960s and '70s but waned for a couple of decades. Near the end of her life, as her recognition grew, she was awarded the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale for her lifetime achievements, and a major retrospective traveled through Europe and was exhibited at MoMA PS1 in New York.

All of her work was an extension of painting into physical space. Her masterpiece “Up To and Including Her Limits” (1973–76), was in part an innovative leap of imagination from Jackson Pollock: using painting as a performative physical process and pushing it further, into the body as a sensual and sexual actant, leaving traces of longing, desire and memory in the marks left from her action.

Schneemann conceived of vulvic space as a place of power and wrote from this philosophical viewpoint to reinterpret art history, repositioning the female body/mind/spirit as central to the creation of art from the Paleolithic era to the present. Schneemann wrote eloquently about this profound reinterpretation of cultural history in her brilliant book *Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects*.

“I first wrote about ‘vulvic space’ in 1960... I chose to do research on the ‘Transmigration of the Serpent,’ never suspecting that the transmutation of serpent symbolism in the wall paintings, carvings, inscriptions of ancient cultures—this traditionally ‘phallic’ symbolism—would lead me to a concept of vulvic space... I saw the vagina as a translucent chamber of which the serpent was an outward model: enlivened by its passage from the visible to the invisible, a spiraled coil ringed with the shape of desire and generative mysteries, attributes of both female and male sexual powers.”

This exhibition is a window into one of the myriad rooms comprising the palace of Schneemann’s complex and mythic imagination. She was a powerful being whose work encompassed a profound search for physical and psychic freedom, sexual agency and a fury toward the forces of history and human nature that seek to control and destroy. **WM**



GARY BREWER

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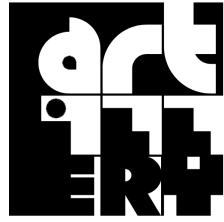
Carolee Schneemann, *Fur Wheel* (1962). Lampshade base, fur, tin cans, mirrors, glass, and oil paint mounted on turning wheel. 48.5 x 48.5 x 29.3 cm. Courtesy © Carolee Schneemann. Artists Rights Society [ARS]/Copyright Agency, 2022.

Fur Wheel adds the element of movement, signalling Schneemann's entry into kinetic sculpture and leading to the incorporation of duration in her work.

In 1962 Schneemann began a large kinetic painting construction called *Four Fur Cutting Boards* built of four interlocked painted panels, with broken glass, mirrors, photographs, coloured lights, moving umbrellas, a hubcap, fabric, and other, motorised, parts. It is an imposing environment, painted in brightly coloured, gestural sweeps.

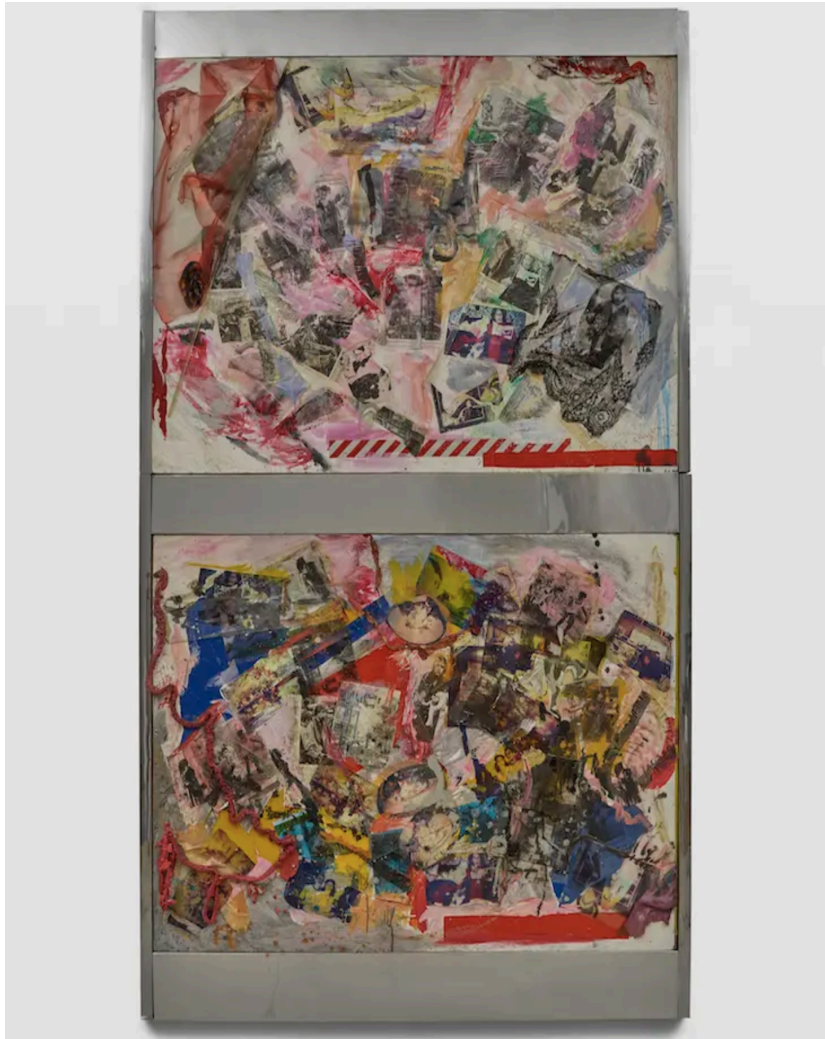
LISSON GALLERY

Artillery Magazine
14 July 2025



REVIEWS **CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN** At Lisson Gallery

BY PETER FRANK | JUL 14, 2025



Carolee Schneemann, "Souvenir of...Tyre...Sidon...Damour (for Bruce McP.)," 1982. © Carolee Schneemann Foundation. Courtesy Lisson Gallery.

This, remarkably enough, is Carolee Schneemann's first solo exhibition in Los Angeles, six years after her passing. Schneemann may be late, but her show isn't. It may indeed be a case of too little; the sparse hanging (8 wallworks and an installation) barely hints at the bold intermedialist's half-century-plus of formal experimentation and thematic provocation. But it couldn't come at a more critical time. In this benighted hour, American progressive culture has its work cut out for it and needs a natural revolutionary like Carolee to lead the re-charge.

A legend in her own time, Schneemann is practically a myth this side of her death. Yes, she was as complex, confrontational, and even self-sacrificing as we now remember her. But the goddess she projected in her performances and films, her paintings and her photographs, her videos and her installations was the goddess all feminist artists were seeking to bring to the fore, a collective Athena—and in cases like Schneemann's, a Dionysian one, ready to move minds and mountains through social shock and sexual eruption.

Which is to say that Schneemann worked with equal fervor outside and inside, one day staging a scandalous event and the next day collaging together snapshots and drawings of her in flagrante delicto with her lover and in more decorous, almost worshipful intimacy with her cat Kitch. At certain points, which even as slim a show as this makes manifest, the private and the public conflate, and Schneemann flows seamlessly in gesture and in context from boudoir to theater. Schneemann was always her own model; some of her lovers (most famously musician James Tenney) got into the frame, others kept offstage.



Carolee Schneemann, *Untitled*, 1981. © Carolee Schneemann Foundation. Courtesy Lisson Gallery.

Schneemann's was the Happenings generation, emerging from the Beat era and heading up the 1960s radical procession. As such, she is associated with Fluxus and counted its diverse participants among her best friends. But she was not the only nominal Fluxist to distance herself from the movement's self-admitted proto-minimalist and proto-conceptualist reductivism. Nor was she the only one to cavil against what she perceived as the streak of sexism scarring Fluxus' otherwise counter-cultural bona fides. Among a network of Zen monogesturers, Schneemann was unapologetically "more-is-more" funky.

The mixed-media collages, drawings, paintings, and single installation (comprising five video screens playing a 3-channel video and surrounded by myriad hand-cast rocks) on view—all works from the 1980s, a period of consolidation and renewal for Schneemann—give us a sense not so much of Schneemann's historical centrality as of her abiding sensibility; her unmistakable artistic personality which dared her fellow artists to get raw and let it all hang out. Schneemann's art was noted for its hyper-viscerality; in happenings such as *Meat Joy* (1964) and in solo performances like *Interior Scroll* (1975)—and even in dense, effulgent films like *Viet Flakes* (1965)—Schneemann demonstrated a fearlessness, a feverish, literally gutsy voluptuousness that paid refinement no heed. Formally, as even the few mid-career works here evince, the artist took her ecstatic appetite to its logical limit, where image is in fact image soup and subject matter is engulfed into a kind of universal corpus, the body as galaxy. These drawings, these videos, these hallucinations set the writhing organs ablaze from within.

The statement Schneemann's art makes is not about an issue or a mindset but about a way of living life through art and vice versa, and not holding back on anything. Sure, this long career of explosive erotic demonstration challenges male chauvinism and feminism alike, but, as even these mid-career studio works attest, it does so palpably, materially, embracing nature, material, device, and flesh in a churning Freudian *nostalgie de la boue*.

Even six years past her passing, it's hard to believe Schneemann is no longer among us. But her energy is. Her aesthetic is. And her example is. The cretinous regime (not just in America) that today would brand her an *entartete Künstlerin* needs to have her gritty griot attitude stuck in its eye. Make Art Grab Ass! WWCD?

LISSON GALLERY

Frieze

01 May 2024

FRIEZE Carolee Schneemann



Carolee Schneemann, *Water Light/Water Needle (Lake Mah Wah, NJ) I*, 1966, silver gelatin print, 18 × 24 cm

It's hard to believe that this was Carolee Schneemann's first solo show in London, even though she lived here for several years in the late 1960s and early '70s. At that time, her now-mythical status was being established by provocative experimental performances including *Meat Joy* (1964) and *Interior Scroll* (1975). With the 'Water Light/Water Needle' project (1965–66), Schneemann experimented with a gentler, more romantic register. Her use of bodies to challenge sexual mores was replaced by sensual moments and social interactions; confrontation gave way to collaboration. In many ways, the project also crystallized Schneemann's engagement with working collectively, which she had explored in *Meat Joy* and through her involvement with the Judson Dance Theater.

The exhibition was a constellation of unseen work from Schneemann's 'Water Light/Water Needle' series, with *Water Light/Water Needle (Lake Mah Wah, NJ)* (1966) – a diptych shot on 16mm film – at its centre, surrounded by preparatory drawings, photographs and recently reworked live shots. 'Water Light/Water Needle' was a series of performances – 'kinetic theatre', to use Schneemann's terminology – in various locales in 1966. It premiered at St. Marks Church-In-The-Bowery, New York, where Schneemann had installed a system of anchors and pulleys in the walls of the church to string two sets of ropes across the space, a low one and a high one. Performers dressed in white worked their way around the contraption standing on the low rigging and holding onto the high one, relying on each other and the ropes for support. The audience sat on

crumpled newspaper directly underneath the performers. Two months later, Schneemann took the performance to the Havemayer Estate in the New Jersey countryside where a cast of musicians and artists restaged it in a bucolic setting.

Schneemann first conceived the work in 1964 in Venice, where she had been invited to visit the Biennale following the *succès de scandale* of *Meat Joy* at Jean-Jacques Lebel's Festival of Free Expression in Paris. Her sketches for the piece, energetic line drawings on cartridge paper that trace the movements of fleshy bodies in the air, capture some of the dynamism of the play of sunlight on water in the Venetian canals. Like these mirrored surfaces, the video is also filled with reflections – double exposures and repeating angular young bodies. Shots of bodies in suspension flow into one another, slipping across the screen with luminous liquidity.

'Water Light/Water Needle', which, like *Meat Joy*, was performed by fellow members of Judson Dance Theater, shared the group's commitment to exploring ordinary movement through performance, as well as its concerns with how bodies move within specific, defined spaces. In an early scene, the naked gaggle of performers huddles thigh-deep in Lake Mah Wah, forming a cell divided into a row of pale buttocks backlit by the setting sun. A young Meredith Monk – then just 23 – giggles as she waddles to shore with her hands at awkward angles. Schneemann, always gorgeous, clutches her lover, the composer James Tenney, as they lean on ropes that lurch under their weight. It's an Arcadian scene and the performers look natural in front of the camera, undaunted by the physical demands of the piece. Shots of rope knots, their frayed ends swaying in the breeze, echo a moment when Tenney undoes Schneemann's hair, which swings down as she hangs over a rope.

But how are we to look at this work, now nearly half a century old? Is it tainted with nostalgia or does its quality lie in the pleasure it makes us feel, as these young actors must have felt it on that beautiful summer's day? The archival materials included in the exhibition went some way toward tempering the dreaminess of the film. Black and white archival prints contrasted the urban setting of the first performance with the rural idyll of Lake Mah Wah. The Venice diagrams gave an indication of the ambitious mechanics involved in making the rope structure. A series of newly enlarged photographs taken in St. Mark's Church, painted with washes and flashes of acrylic colour, offered a scruffier account of the first performance. Ultimately, though, it's striking how uncontrived these pieces are; they avoid the knowing look that pervades a range of contemporary performances to camera. Within Schneemann's oeuvre, the work also feels unusual; 'Water Light/Water Needle' provides a counterpoint to her more sexually and politically charged works, offering a vision of collectivity and relationships between bodies that are mutually dependent and supportive, equal terms in what looks to be a balanced set of relations.

Dazed Magazine
20 August 2024

DAZED

Carolee Schneemann: game changer

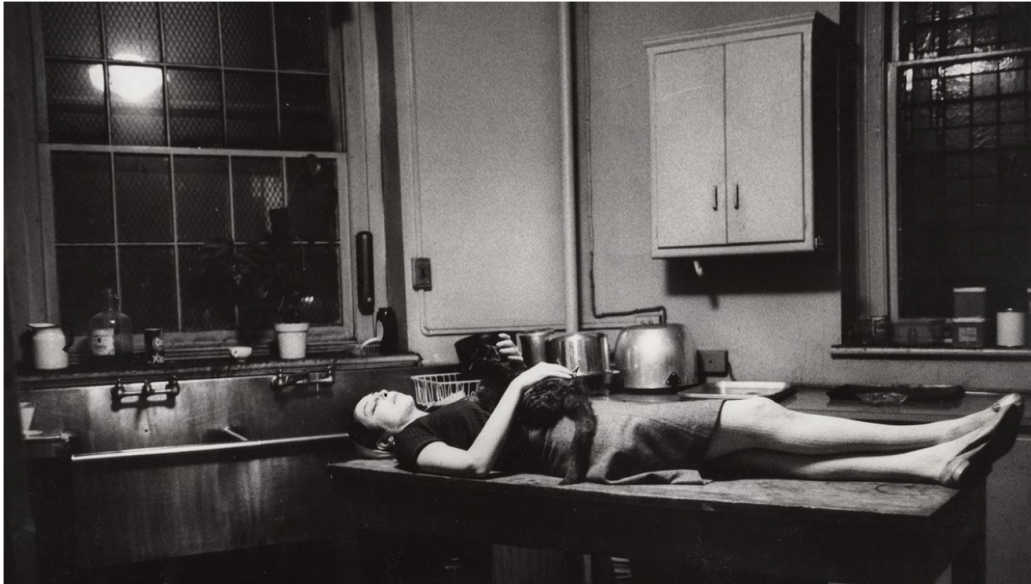
The iconic performance artist who refuses to trade on trodden ground is still tackling art world prejudices in her fifth decade in the game



Writhing bodies, paint, fish, chickens, pulling a scroll from her vagina – it is these flags that unfurl with the name '[Carolee Schneemann](#)'. Without doubt one of the most iconic figures in 60s performance art and the feminist art movement, Schneeman changed the game, specifically what it meant to be and work as a woman in the male-dominated art game. Her work is the cornerstone of a whole generation's thinking about art. Scheeman made it OK to look inward and not apologise for it, to use sex and the body as medium; to think through bodies and yet not have to pander to the pornographic or 'pop'. Her work encouraged women to make art on their own terms, according to their bodies and their selves, whilst being resolutely allowed to call it art and be confirmed as artists. Carolee Schneemann, [Suzanne Lacy](#), [Judy Chicago](#), [Martha Rosler](#), [Karen Finlay](#) and even [Tracy Emin](#). These were names I learnt when I was 16 and at school, leafing through as many library books on feminist art and performance as possible. The idea that the personal could be political changed everything I sought out thereafter.

I can't help but gush, it is a kind of starstruck I rarely get. Schneemann is calm and collected, succinct and sharp in her answers. I recognise her tone from the voiceover script for *Meat Joy*. I ask her about her legacy and she responds, "I am very blessed that my work has sustained itself over time and that's amazing because when you start making something you have no idea where it will go, or how it might live". But as I press deeper, I realise that for her my enthusiasm and gratitude is (whilst flattering) altogether repetitive. She has spoken about *Meat Joy* a thousand times, and still journalists ask her only about this. "I've been working with installations and video technologies for about thirty years and there's a huge body of work that no one knows about because they keep going back to a piece of nakedness in the '70s". She is right, of course, I want to know about *Meat Joy*, about her views on feminism, about her private life and relationships. She wants to talk about her current work, as any artist who has continued to create (but keeps getting Groundhog-dayed into going over a work they left behind over 50 years ago) might well do. She is smart. She doesn't want to trade on trodden ground, but instead works to break new paths for herself. I ask her how she has negotiated the art world and she responds, "I don't negotiate, I don't have a 'practice', I don't have a career, I am – I work".

It's been 50 years since Schneemann rehearsed, choreographed and performed *Meat Joy* with a group of young performers. It was staged several times but most documented in its November 1964 incarnation at the Judson Church in New York. What people remember is the bodies rubbing chickens and fish on themselves. What they miss are the details. During the long introduction Schneemann reads aloud, then pop music comes in, and the bodies perform a variety of formations according to instructions, at some points like synchronised swimming out of water, but more organic; more ecstatic and sexual. It is this energy, or ecstasy, (she uses this term a lot), that characterise the performances and films that have cemented her status as a guiding light in performance art by women.



Carolee Schneemann, *Water Light-Water Needle*, St. Mark's Church (1966)
Photography by Terry Schutte. Courtesy of Hales Gallery. Courtesy of Carolee Schneemann and Hales Gallery, London. Copyright Carolee Schneemann

My talk with her has, in the lead up, produced a little too much anxiety for it to go particularly well. I ask her about anxiety – the anxieties of life, love, making art, and of balancing being an artist and making confrontational and brave work. "I didn't work with a lot of anxiety, I worked with a lot of ecstatic energy – to try this, what would *this* be like, how can I make this happen? I wasn't surrounded by academic discipline, I had been already rejected and denigrated by them [academics]. So I didn't have anxiety because I wasn't working within a field of denial – I had always said 'fuck you' to them." What, no anxiety? No crippling shudder beneath the solar plexus before you put something out into the world in case it offends someone or makes you look stupid? But then I remember at the core of the works is this energy she speaks of. It is not what I know it as – the later theory and academic papers, that situate her oeuvre in the context of feminist performance of the '60s and '70s in California and New York. Now that art school tutors have seen it a million times, it is hard to make any kind of performance work involving the naked female body and not address or reference it, whereas for Schneemann there was no history for it, at least not a direct one. When I refer to *Meat Joy* in the context of her 'practice', she explains "I come from a time frame that would not position 'practice' as a concept displacing work as 'process'. Golf was practiced, dentists have a practice, yoga was a practice. My aesthetic tradition embraces a visionary process where creative work was risky, unfolding, unpredictable and not academicised at all. It was a very different world, we didn't have a predictable conceptual surround. I've been engaged with physiological momentum, structuring images in space and time. The remarkable precedence

influencing me had to do with the painters who evolved their forms of 'happenings' – visual events in actual time. Oldenburg and Dine and Whitman...".

Her making is bound to the time, to a backdrop of Kaprow, Fluxus, Yoko Ono, painting and structuralist cinema and the surge of second wave feminism. But that does not mean that it is the sum of its parts. To do that would be to deny, somehow, her essence. She explains, "It's odd because the masculine dynamic of performance – what will become performance art – does not delimit them. They're never called performance artists, they are media artists and they can return to sculpture and painting and reliable hand-work; whereas for women if you've used your body you're identified with the performative label...the feminisation of performance occurs because as a public event, the body is in explicit action and so it may still connect to traditions of male arousal, male fascination with the female body. Even as we radicalized and disrupted those traditions." Whilst Schneemann should really be canonised in context she finds herself, in my consciousness, filed firmly under feminism.

Our conversation over Skype is broken by interference. I joke that the NSA is listening in and imagine for a moment that it's not altogether inconceivable. Schneemann was radical, confrontational, threatening even, 'in her day'. This is what she talks about when she discusses her greatest achievement as being able "to persist as an artist in the face of constant denigration". The first time she says this, and later in an email, I wonder how denigrated she can possibly have been. As far as I am concerned she is an artist that has changed art history. She has empowered and informed artists who identify as women to make the work that they make, to value performance and confrontation, to use their bodies rather than create an artificial objectivity. Where in the '70s she was addressing a room full of women in Interior Scroll and making a statement about being denigrated as a women, now it is agism that she faces. "First I had to get through pure misogyny as a student when I was told I could paint but it wouldn't mean anything, and then what? Then I had to get through essentialism: when in 1962 I used my body as part of my material and medium that was essentialist! And then, by the time I'm in the 70s, I'm lacking proper Marxist address, then there's the dilemma of 'feminism as masquerade' – I never entered that discourse which was followed by feminism as 'abject'. It just goes on and on and you have to squirm your way through. And now of course there's ageism."

Interior Scroll remains her most direct and my favourite work of hers. It's impossible not to love, humour with a simmering pissed-off-ness. In the piece she announces that she will read from her (eventually published in 1976 book) *Cezanne, She Was A Great Painter* but then jettisons the sheet, keeping an apron and paints streaks of paint on herself, holding the book in one hand, whilst transitioning between life model/action poses. Finally removing her last garment and becoming completely naked, she slowly removes a scroll from her vagina and reads from it a conversation, seemingly with 'a structuralist film-maker'. She outlines the dichotomy between the figure of woman as bodily, intuitive, natural, irrational, against the academic position of the male figure – rational, ordered, to be taken seriously in their objective coldness (I paraphrase). The dialogue is taken from *Kitch's Last Meal*, a super 8 film she started in 1973. The piece has often been considered as an address to 'a male artist', the structuralists who demeaned her, or to her lover Anthony McCall perhaps. Later she suggests it was aimed at American critic and art historian Annette Michelson. It shouldn't matter; the point is made to those who hear it.



“I wouldn't want to be labelled unless it was something much broader and inclusive such as an ecological artist or a visionary artist, but there's a constraint in the definition of a feminist artist, you're an artist and you're a feminist.” –

Carolee Schneemann



The audio connection that unites us occasionally drones, sounding like a plane taking off, she says all she can hear at her house are birds. Then a siren sounds on the high street outside my house, she asks where I live and reflects "I lived in London once too". This was with Anthony McCall. She explains that she is speaking to me from the house where she made *Fuses* with her 1965 boyfriend, composer James Tenney. Her relationships have

been mutually respectful and harmonious in terms of her work, though she does note that "after a certain amount of time I would find that the partners that I felt I had a perfect life with would need to separate and usually have a baby and a more conventional relationship". For *Fuses* she filmed herself and Tenney having sex – intimate, loving, erotic sex, observed by Kitch, the cat. I remember seeing *Fuses* for the first time at the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley. It was screened alongside a programme of Structuralist film (not just feminist cinema) where Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* also appeared. I remember feeling awed.

The materiality of *Fuses* struck me in that context; painterly gestures and marks etched into the silver gelatine of the 16mm. Each frame marked with the tactility of her touch, fingertips to film, places the work between structuralism, painting, materialist filmmaking and as far as possible from pornography. She recalls, "Of course it builds on all my disciplines as a painter which had to do with rhythm, duration, colour saturation, within the energy of the frame and then breaking the frame. The relationship to inheriting art history with hundreds of precedents within time's passage, and holding energy and individuality, that's how I think about what I do with my work". To watch the film is to experience a beautifully sensual atmosphere of flecks, marks, glimpses and headiness. What might have appeared as like an amateur sex tape, it is an exploration of female sexual pleasure, the denial of objectification and scopophilia in favour of erotic address. In the '60s this was radical: Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* had come out only two years before, and second wave feminism was bubbling under the surface. Schneemann's rationale for making the work resonates as clearly now as it did then, "film gave me permission to examine lived experience. For me that was nothing do with narcissism. It had to do with a counter-force to the denial of female sexuality, of female pleasure and I didn't know what I could capture but I needed to look at what I lived, and not what male culture had described as my experience'. We might think our contemporary reality is past that; female sexual pleasure abounds. We are all having Sex in the City, or we are all 'girls', but still Schneemann's work looks beyond this, with the intention to challenge

feeling based on representation.



Carolee Schneemann, *Water Light-Water Needle*, St. Mark's Church (1966)
Photography by Terry Schutte. Courtesy of Carolee Schneemann and Hales Gallery, London. Copyright Carolee Schneemann

Schneemann maintains a distance from this. She suggests she was just 'making work', asserting, "I wouldn't want to be labelled a Catholic artist or a Marxist artist unless it was something much broader and inclusive such as an ecological artist or a visionary artist, but there's a constraint in the definition of a feminist artist, you're an artist and you're a feminist". When discussing whether feminism is still relevant she brings up some other women who have acted as signposts for me and countless others, "you have to look at de Beauvoir, you have to look at Virginia Woolf, you have to look at the pioneering creative and theoretical players that make our consciousness viable and in motion today, and we're still rather crippled if we have to ask these questions." And this is something that, in feminist groups or meetings of artists who define as women, comes up often. To ally with the feminist term and cause, openly? To make 'feminist work' or to make work as a feminist, but be clear and firm in the desire to be labelled only an artist and therefore asked to be appreciated on those terms. Can artists who are women make confrontational work that includes addresses to, and furthers the language of, the body or does not shy away from the subjectivity behind it without being reductive or allowing the work to be sidelined away from the official 'art world'? "Obviously since so many women find it fruitful and demanding and provocative, it is still responding

to cultural conventions that have been constrained and marginalised by hierarchies of the heroic male work". There is no shortage of artists who are women that want to be assessed purely on merit, but this is not a meritocracy.

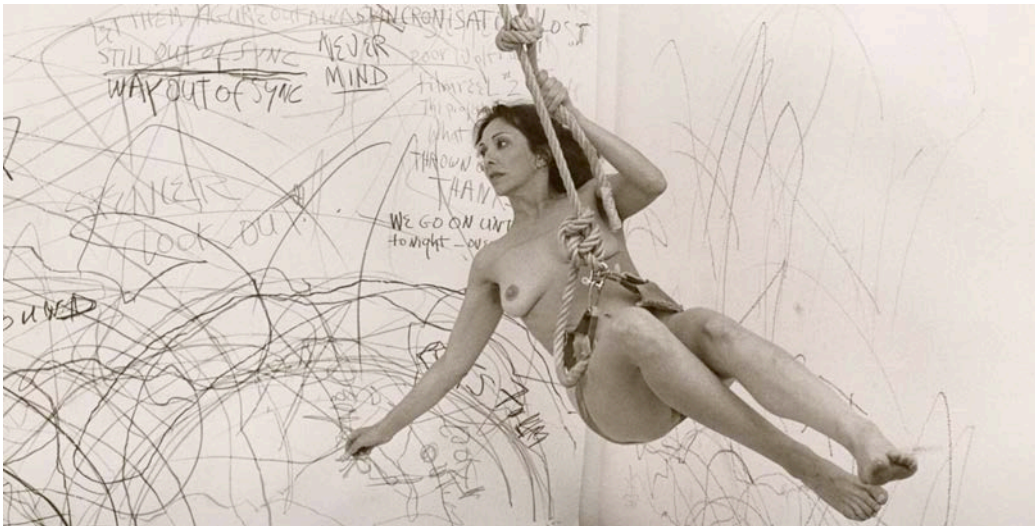
With feminism having a visible resurgence in journalism and mainstream media over the past year, the figure of the feminist is much debated and I ask Schneemann what she thinks of it in the current climate. "There's a video that went viral of a young woman...she addresses the camera and says 'I don't know why I'm doing this but I need to do this – I'm going to eat my tampon', and she does chew on it. So I had journalists from London who called me thinking I would find this the outer edge, or horrible, but I was very touched by it. I thought it was another degree of intimacy with your own life processes, and the one that's been most deeply feared and downgraded. But her presentation was so simple and uninflected, it was a very humble exploration of a deeply forbidden intimacy...it must have gone through many different phases of receptivity – mostly outrage." For Schneemann, as with most artists, it is the work, *her* work, that commands attention. Whereas in the '60s, *Meat Joy* and *Interior Scroll* grabbed the art world by the balls and made them take notice. She was making work with respect to her condition as an artist. She did not set out to make 'feminist work', she simply made, and continues to make today, kinetic and media works. When teaching Schneemann doesn't have her students predetermine their material and subject, "They don't explain what they have to do for me, they have to discover it. I offer them time, materials and something vigorous where they have to really address culture that gives them substance". For me, and the thousands of other art students looking for inspiration, her groundbreaking performances will always act as flares in the dark.

Stir World
07 January 2023

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Carolee Schneemann's six-decade-long body of pioneering feminist performance art

A major survey exhibition of Carolee Schneemann's work looks at the artist's masterful experimentations, across mediums of performance, installation, film and multimedia.



With over two hundred works presented in the first major survey **exhibition** of the feminist painter and **performance artist** Carolee Schneemann in the **UK**, 'Body Politics' at the Barbican Centre presents an enormous range of the **American artist's** production, through the latter half of the 20th century. The mediums on display range across **painting**, performance video, photo performance, multimedia installations, sculptural assemblages, and archival material, detailing a six-decade-long career. As the title of the exhibition suggests, Carolee Schneemann employs the body, primarily her own, as an active device, image, tool, ritual, material base and set of embodiments to explore themes around carnal joy, intimacy, sexuality and deviance, artmaking, woman as a muse of the male gaze, and so on.

In conversation, assistant curator of the exhibition Amber Li tells STIR, "Carolee Schneemann was really aware of the importance of documentation, which is why we have such extensive performance documentation from her (as preserved and lent out by the Carolee Schneemann Foundation). There's rich material in the archive including printed matter like flyers, most of which she personally designed in her distinctive DIY, graphic collage style. She used collage a lot as a technique. Archival material also includes photo albums with documentation of the performances, with sketches and notes for the

preparation and **choreography**. She was especially meticulous in how she used photographs to document the performance and the photographs are the main way through which we're able to share what the performance might have been like with our viewers. The aim is not to re-create the performance but to let our viewers know how the performance was staged for them to imagine. She's very aware of the legacy that these **photographs** represent."



Interior Scroll, 29 August 1975, 1975, Performance Art

Image: Anthony McCall; Courtesy of The Barbican Centre, Carolee Schneemann Foundation and Galerie Lelong & Co., Hales Gallery, and P.P.O.W, New York and © Carolee Schneemann Foundation / ARS, New York and DACS, London 2022

Schneemann passed away in 2019, leaving a legacy of **feminist art** that spoke to the **modernist** sensibility that was a charged cocktail of political, cultural and aesthetic movements in the 20th century. While she described herself throughout her life as a painter, the use of sculptural assemblages and later performance art for which she became largely known, was a move of defiance against the masculine 'genius' of the modernist painters of **New York** in the 1950s and 60s.

Schneemann's performance art initially opened up a unique manifestation of **painting** that took place outside the flattened notion of the canvas. Her style of 'kinetic painting' as she termed it, incorporated both painting and **performance art** through the activation of her own swinging body strapped to a harness, moving in a 270-degree fashion to cover walls and surfaces with drawn lines.



Teaser for 'Body Politics,' a major survey exhibition of works by Carolee Schneemann at Barbican Centre, London
Video: Courtesy of The Barbican Centre

The obvious aesthetic comparison becomes that of American **abstract expressionist** Jackson Pollock's style of action painting, which was also noted to use the body as a dynamic axis of expression. Schneemann moved beyond expressionism to explore her own body as implicated and joyous; the body becomes layered and agential, responding to classical to modernist objectification of the female body and its role in creating the image of a de-agentialised body, where there is no self, simply other. What is significant is also that the nature of the performance is compounded with the created space for the camera.



Installation view of *More Wrong Things* at Musée départemental d'art contemporain de Rochechouart in 2013, 2000,
Multichannel video installation with suspended cable environment

Image: Courtesy of The Barbican Centre, Carolee Schneemann Foundation and Galerie Lelong & Co., Hales Gallery, and P.P.O.W, New York and © Carolee Schneemann Foundation / ARS, New York and DACS, London 2022

In a conversation about the staged nature of the photographic documentation of her solo performances, Li explicates a complex relationship with the camera, "*Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions for Camera*(1964), which is a solo performance, is very different from these other performances that she did, and I would argue that *Interior Scroll*(1975) is somewhat similar, because these solo performances have photographs taken for them which are almost staged, because you can see how her energy is emanated through the camera lens. And in particular, *Eye Body* had no audience, it was performed for the camera. So within the museum space as such, it is the images that are performing. And because her image was so central to all these performance works, it's interesting how she used photographers and the lens of the camera. [...] The kind of question underpinning this work is actually asked, "Can I be an image and an image-maker?" She ends up taking on quite a mythic persona where she is posing with serpents on her, invoking ancient divine goddess iconography, and posing within her artworks, and so the photographic process itself is the performance."



War Mop, 1983, Acrylic glass, mop, motor, monitor and video

Image: Axel Schneider, Frankfurt am Main; Courtesy of The Barbican Centre, Carolee Schneemann Foundation and Galerie Lelong & Co., Hales Gallery, and P.P.O.W, New York and © Carolee Schneemann Foundation / ARS, New York and DACS, London 2022

Schneemann was an artist who evolved with the times and continued enlivening her experimental practice through the adoption of film media and **installation**, incorporating media footage, and responding to significant cultural moments such as the **Vietnam** War, 9/11, and environmental degradation. The artist was dedicated to the idea of hybrid forms that ultimately emerges as a contemporary sensibility and concern, incorporating mediums of 'kinetic theatre' to **multimedia installations**. In *Meat Joy*(1964), a group performance that involved paint and different meats including chickens and fish being strewn across the bodies of semi-naked performers including Schneemann herself, who are moving against each other, accentuating the fleshiness of the human body.



Eye-Body: 36 Transformative Actions for Camera, 1963, Gelatin silver print photograph

Image: Erró; Courtesy of Carolee Schneemann Foundation and Galerie Lelong & Co., Hales Gallery, and P.P.O.W, New York and © Carolee Schneemann Foundation / ARS, New York and DACS, London 2022; Photograph Erró © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2022

Schneemann celebrates the fleshy, viscosity of the human body that is odorous, squishy, moist and material, exploring the body as multi-dimensional. The image materialises into the human cast.



Meat Joy, 16-18 November 1964, 1964, Performance art

Image: Robert McElroy; Courtesy of The Barbican and the Carolee Schneemann Foundation and Galerie Lelong & Co., Hales Gallery, and P.P.O.W, New York and © Carolee Schneemann Foundation / ARS, New York and DACS, London 2022 Photograph © 2022 Estate of Robert R. McElroy / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS)



Assistant Curator of the exhibition, Amber Li

Image: Courtesy of The Barbican Centre

L I S S O N G A L L E R Y

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HYPERALLERGIC

The Pleasures and Pain of Carolee Schneemann's Body Politics

Schneemann's art actions laid bare the continuity between the female body, feminist writing, and sociopolitical acts of protest.



Carolee Schneemann, "Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions for Camera" (1963), gelatin silver print, printed 2005 (photograph by Erró, courtesy the Carolee Schneemann Foundation and Galerie Lelong & Co., Hales Gallery, and P.P.O.W., New York and © Carolee Schneemann Foundation / ARS, New York and DACS, London 2022; photograph Erró © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2022)

LONDON — For Carolee Schneemann, the personal was political. She saw the body — in particular, her own body — as inextricably entwined with its physical and sociopolitical environment, and therefore as a primary site for both understanding the world and taking a stance of resistance. In the first UK survey of her work, *Carolee Schneemann: Body Politics* at the Barbican Centre, the artist's body politics are shown to be radical, wild, and challenging.

Although she started her career in what she called the “Art Stud Club” of 1950s New York, an incubator of Abstract Expressionism, she quickly moved beyond the boundaries of the canvas to explore sculpture, kinetic elements, and performances utilizing her own body. It is interesting to learn from the exhibition's opening displays that Schneemann fundamentally saw herself as a painter; many of her early abstract canvases feel dated today, but they help contextualize her later performative works involving mark making with mud, menstrual blood, or poured paint as continuations of this tradition.

The exhibition demonstrates that the early 1960s were remarkably productive for Schneemann. In 1964 she created her iconic work “Meat Joy,” in which a group of performers clad in fur underwear writhe around together onstage, dripping paint on each other and caressing dead fish and plucked chickens. Captured on grainy film, the piece is both riotously erotic and repulsive. At the time it was considered illicit; a performance in London resulted in a police raid and the dancers being smuggled away under blankets on the floors of waiting cars. Today, “Meat Joy” has not lost its edge, though contemporary audiences might be more uncertain about the morality of using the bodies of animals than about the nudity and sexual overtones.

Nakedness is a key trope throughout Schneemann's oeuvre. She frequently appears nude in her performances and photographs, for which she has been both praised and criticized by feminist commentators. Through her art she repeatedly asserts her right to do what she wants with her own body and to display it openly without shame or inhibition. Some feminist peers, however, argued that her work was narcissistic and problematically replicated standard Euro-American conventions of beauty under the masculine gaze by displaying her young, white, slim body. She responded that she was concerned with whether she could be “both an image and an image maker”; by making marks on or with her own body, she challenged the positioning of women as passive subjects. She once wrote: “I do not ‘show’ my naked body! I AM BEING MY BODY.”

Schneemann is perhaps most famous for her 1975 performance “Interior Scroll,” in which she posed nude before reading from her text “Woman in the Year

2000,” a manifesto that envisions an era when women are able to make art without discrimination. She then pulled a scroll from her vagina containing another text. Her actions laid bare the continuity between the female body, feminist writing, and sociopolitical acts of protest.



Carolee Schneemann, “Meat Joy,” November 16–18, 1964, Judson Dance Theater, Judson Memorial Church, New York (photograph by Robert McElroy, courtesy the Carolee Schneemann Foundation and Galerie Lelong & Co., Hales Gallery, and P.P.O.W., New York and © Carolee Schneemann Foundation / ARS, New York and DACS, London 2022; photograph © 2022 Estate of Robert R. McElroy / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS))

The majority of the exhibition is dedicated to Schneemann’s better-known feminist works of the 1960s and ’70s. The latter part, however, features a number of works exploring global politics. In “Viet-Flakes” and “More Wrong Things,” for instance, she sends a strong antiwar message indicting male-led violent interventions in foreign countries. The works incorporate documentary footage of war, its atrocities, and its aftermath. Schneemann draws attention to the ways that news about war is mediated, and also reminds British and American audiences of our privilege in being able to look away.

These works are hard to watch. This is, of course, a deliberate choice by Schneemann, but the decision about whether and when to look away is complicated by moral questions about what we should and shouldn’t be watching — and what should and shouldn’t have been filmed or photographed in the first place. Particularly uncomfortable are Schneemann’s highly magnified reproductions of photographs showing people jumping or falling to their deaths from the World Trade Center towers during the 9/11 terrorist attacks. A disturbing lack of consent is at play here, especially considering that the

motivation of making visible the atrocities of Western military aggressors does not figure in this case.

Schneemann's 1995 work "Known/Unknown: Plague Column" is a more engaging integration of her trademark preoccupation with her own body and wider issues. The piece explores her experience of breast cancer and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, as well as confronting the gendered history of Western medicine and the hidden aesthetics of cancer treatment. The installation features enlarged images of her mutating cells along with videos of breast examinations, fruit being squeezed, and the artist having sex. Oranges are suspended alongside hypodermic needles, in reference to her experience of practicing injections on fruit before trying them on her own body.

"Known/Unknown: Plague Column" also includes texts and images that call upon her research into how illness has traditionally been figured as feminine and "other," with allusions to the persecution of witches and women with healing practices; the work demonstrates how society has attempted to control women and their bodies for generations. Schneemann battled cancer until her death in 2019.

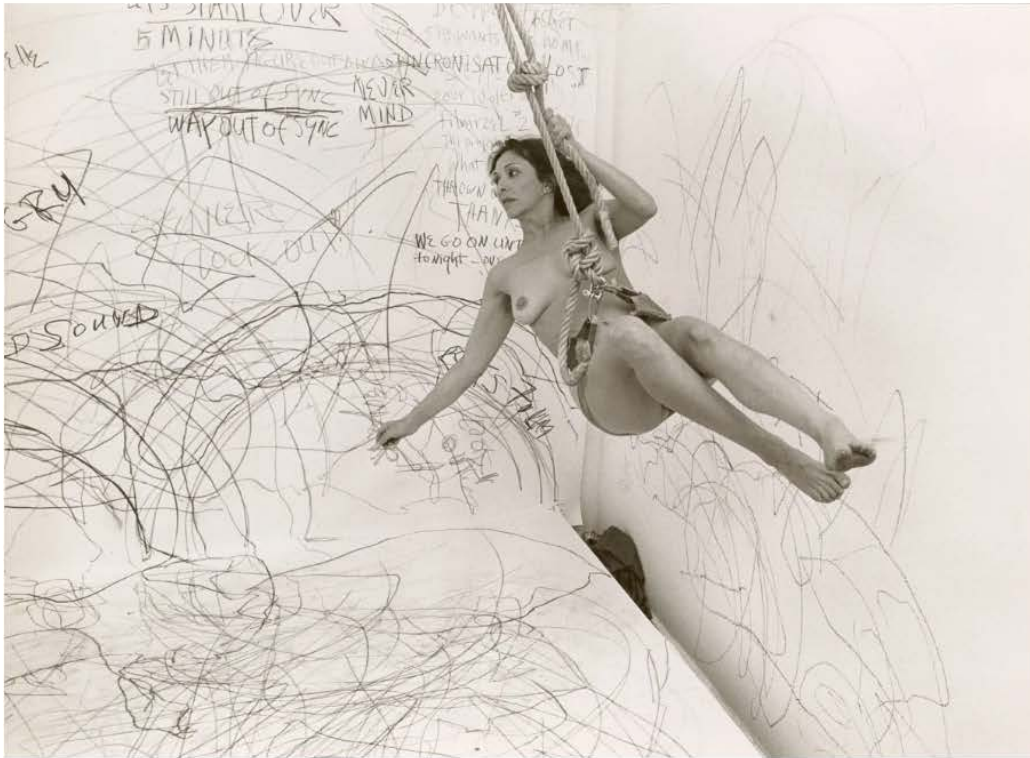
Schneemann's work proves over and over again the interrelation of the personal and the political. Stemming from her revolutionary use of her own body as both subject and object, she offers a theory of body politics that still feels bold today. Often challenging and sometimes problematic, this survey of her work unapologetically prompts debate and probes the darkest sides of humanity.



Installation view of *Carolee Schneemann: Body Politics* at Barbican Art Gallery, London 2022 (© 2022 Carolee Schneemann Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / DACS, London; photo Marcus J. Leith)



Carolee Schneemann, two film strips from "Fuses" (1964-67), 16 mm film transferred to HD video, colour, silent, 29:51 min. Original film burned with fire and acid, painted, and collaged (courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York, courtesy the Carolee Schneemann Foundation and Galerie Lelong & Co., Hales Gallery, and P.P.O.W., New York and © Carolee Schneemann Foundation / ARS, New York and DACS, London 2022)



CaroleeSchneemann, "Up to and Including Her Limits," June 10, 1976, Studiogalerie, Berlin (photograph by Henrik Gaard, Carolee Schneemann Papers, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles 950001), © Carolee Schneemann Foundation / ARS, New York and DACS, London 2022)



CaroleeSchneemann, "More Wrong Things" (2000), installation view at Musée départemental d'art contemporain de Rochechouart, 2013. Multichannel video installation with suspended cable environment, dimensions variable (courtesy the Carolee Schneemann Foundation and Galerie Lelong & Co., Hales Gallery, and P.P.O.W., New York and © Carolee Schneemann Foundation / ARS, New York and DACS, London 2022)



Carolee Schneemann, "Interior Scroll," August 29, 1975, Women Here and Now, East Hampton, New York (photograph by Anthony McCall, courtesy the Carolee Schneemann Foundation and Galerie Lelong & Co., Hales Gallery, and P.P.O.W., New York and © Carolee Schneemann Foundation / ARS, New York and DACS, London 2022; photograph © Anthony McCall)

Carolee Schneemann: Body Politics continues at the Barbican Art Gallery (Silk Street, London, England) through January 8, 2023. The exhibition was curated by Lotte Johnson, with Chris Bayley and Amber Li.

LISSON GALLERY

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Carolee Schneemann: What Painting Became



Carolee Schneemann, *Four Fur Cutting Boards* (1962–1963). Wooden boards, oil paint, light bulbs, string of coloured lights, plastic flowers, photographs, fabric, hubcap, tights, and motorised umbrellas. 229.9 x 332.7 x 132.1 cm. Courtesy © Carolee Schneemann. Artists Rights Society [ARS]/Copyright Agency, 2022.

In 2009, I curated an exhibition of Carolee Schneemann's paintings for P·P·O·W Gallery in New York City. It was the first time her paintings had been exhibited publicly in almost 40 years.

The exhibition, titled *Carolee Schneemann: Painting. What It Became*, featured 27, newly conserved works, including a re-construction of her *Four Fur Cutting Boards* (1963), the massive multi-media installation in front of which she photographed *Eye Body*, which had been languishing in her storage for decades. (I remember running down to Canal Street in New York with her to find an old fashioned-looking umbrella and flashing Christmas lights for the re-construction. It is now in MoMA's collection.)

The exhibition received rave reviews in the *New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *Artforum*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *The Village Voice*, and others. Carolee and I were elated.

Indeed, just before her death, Carolee told me that that exhibition and my re-discovery of her paintings was a game-changer for her career, and the sale of those works transformed her market value at a time when she was struggling financially. Before that time, no one had bothered to look at her paintings, including her dealers, as important components of her decades-long practice. She had become somewhat pigeonholed as a performance artist, while other dimensions of her complex oeuvre were overshadowed by certain canonical works.

My hope is that my catalogue essay, the text of which is reproduced here, will help scholars, curators, and collectors to better understand her brilliant, early paintings. I also hope that this essay highlights the importance of the 2009 exhibition as a groundbreaking moment for Schneemann, especially given that all subsequent exhibitions of her work then included her paintings.



Carolee Schneemann, *Aria Duetto Pin Wheel* (1957). Oil on canvas mounted on potter's wheel. 91.4 x 78.1 cm. Courtesy © Carolee Schneemann. Artists Rights Society [ARS]/Copyright Agency, 2022.

The Paintings of Carolee Schneemann¹

Carolee Schneemann's paintings from the late 1950s and 1960s have been a significantly overlooked aspect of her oeuvre. Eclipsed by her signature works in performance and film, the paintings have often been considered early or immature work rather than an artistic foundation fundamental to understanding the entirety of Schneemann's practice.

This essay traces Schneemann's works from 1957 to the present, highlighting the transformation from traditional paintings on canvas in the lineage of abstract expressionism to painting constructions and kinetic sculptures to group and solo performances, installations, and films.

'I'm a painter. I'm still a painter and I will die a painter. Everything that I have developed has to do with extending visual principles off the canvas.'²

Taking this historical trajectory through Schneemann's work demonstrates how her explorations within other mediums derive from 'extending visual principles off the canvas.'

It helps to appreciate her paintings and drawings as important corollaries to the kinetic theatre, Judson Dance Theatre performances, and films that she was producing simultaneously.

The essay's intention is to reconsider Schneemann as a painter who has never ceased conceptualising her work as always related to the painterly gesture, to prying open 'the frame,' and to conceiving of the body itself as tactile material.

Her most significant works, treasured by many, misunderstood by some, can be re-envisioned, then, as what Schneemann herself has called, 'exploded canvasses'³ or as performative paintings, filmic paintings, kinetic paintings—always with the pictorial concerns of painting remaining as the grounding mechanism and unifying field.



Carolee Schneemann, Summer I (Honey Suckle) (1959). Oil on canvas. 106.68 x 124.46 cm. Courtesy © Carolee Schneemann. Artists Rights Society [ARS]/Copyright Agency, 2022.

Schneemann's formal training as an artist began in landscape painting and with endless hours of life drawing, as is evident in her early works on canvas—such

as *Summer I (Honey Suckle)* (1959)—that reveal her signature luscious brushwork and all-over compositions.

These late 1950s pre-New York works also reflect a love of paint's tactility, its materiality, its objecthood—an important concept that assisted Schneemann in moving the gesture farther off the canvas.

Schneemann moved to New York City in 1961 after finishing her master of fine arts in painting at the University of Illinois. Almost immediately, she became situated squarely within what in the 1960s was called the 'experimental avant-garde,' a place also occupied by Robert Rauschenberg, Claes Oldenburg, Allan Kaprow, Jim Dine, and other second-generation abstract expressionist artists.



Carolee Schneemann, *Sir Henry Francis Taylor* (1960). Oil paint, photographs, underpants, plaster, paper, wood, metal, and swing glass on Masonite panel. 138.4 x 99.1 x 16.5 cm. Courtesy © Carolee Schneemann. Artists Rights Society [ARS]/Copyright Agency, 2022.

Indeed, like them, Schneemann was interested in exploring the new aesthetic options made available in the wake of Action Painting.

How could Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning's spatial fracture be expanded beyond the canvas and into space and time? Schneemann's intermedia works from the late 1950s through the 1970s demonstrate her continuous investigation of this question.

Schneemann's painting constructions—like Richard Stankiewicz's junk sculptures, Rauschenberg's 'combines,' Oldenburg's painted corrugated cardboard reliefs, or John Chamberlain's crushed auto assemblages—cull together non-art materials from life, ones that retain biographical references and which, in their rawness, call to mind the appearance and spirit of spatial analysis in painting.



Carolee Schneemann, *Fur Wheel* (1962). Lampshade base, fur, tin cans, mirrors, glass, oil paint, mounted on turning wheel (motor). Video courtesy © Maura Reilly.

Schneemann's *Quarry Transposed* (1960), *Sphinx* (1961), *Sir Henry Francis Taylor* (1961), *Fur Wheel* (1962), and *Notes to Lou Andre Salomé* (1965) are large painting constructions that exemplify her interest in assemblage and departure from the flat canvas.

In each, paint becomes one of many materials from life that can be applied to or cut into surfaces, along with photographs, wood, fabric, audiotape, glass, cellophane, underpants, and so forth.

Each demonstrates the artist's continued desire to push painting through the canvas, out of the frame, and into the spectator's space, while at the same time structuring the 'real' with the visual composition of a painter's eye.

A year later, this became an integral material component for Schneemann's *Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions*, one of her most famous works, which blended painting, performance, and photography. In each of the 'actions for camera' the artist combined her naked, painted body as an additional tactile, plastic 'material' with the painting construction.



Carolee Schneemann, *Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions for Camera* (1963). 18 Gelatin silver prints. 61 x 50.8 cm. Courtesy © Carolee Schneemann. Artists Rights Society [ARS]/Copyright Agency, 2022.

This was the first time Schneemann incorporated her physical body into the form of her work, permeating boundaries between image maker and image, seeing and seen, eye and body—hence, the title, *Eye Body*, suggesting as Rebecca Schneider has written, an 'embodied vision, a bodily eye—sighted eyes—artist's eyes—not only in the seer, but in the body of the seen.'⁴

Schneemann's positioning of herself within her own work as an active seeing agent and her insistence on emphasising her body as tactile material contributed greatly to the development of her ideas of kinetic theatre.

As a founding member of the Judson Dance Theater, along with Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton, Elaine Summers, and others, Schneemann's primary interest was in kinesthesia, or bodily sensations, hence, her chosen term 'kinetic theater' to describe her early performance productions involving multiple participants. In her very first kinetic theater piece in 1962, *Glass Environment for Sound and Motion*, Schneemann conceived of the stage as 'an enlarged collage,' replete with large broken, refracted mirrors, and the performers in the group 'as a sort of

physical palette,' clearly demonstrating a circulation of ideas between the concatenated elements in her studio production of *Four Fur Cutting Boards* and the treatment of the body as material in *Eye Body*.

In each of her numerous works produced throughout the 1960s at the Living Theater or at the Judson Dance Theater, the artist conceptualised her works 'as a painter who had in effect enlarged her canvas.' As she explained in an interview in 1983, her theater works were 'taking Pollock, the gesture, the action, into space.'⁵ *Meat Joy* (1964) is Schneemann's most famous kinetic theater performance. Accompanied by a collaged soundtrack of Paris street noises and upbeat pop tunes, eight seminude women and men (including the artist) roll about in mounds of paper, embrace, make living sculptures, come together, part, paint each others' bodies, and in the end are inundated with raw chickens, fish, and sausage.



Carolee Schneemann, *Meat Joy* (1964). Performance at Judson Dance Theater, Judson Memorial Church, New York. Courtesy © Carolee Schneemann. Artists Rights Society [ARS]/Copyright Agency, 2022. Photo: Tony Ray Jones.

As in a later solo performance, *Body Collage* (1967), in which Schneemann paints her nude body with molasses and glue and then rolls in paper to produce a literal 'body collage,' the participants' bodies in *Meat Joy* function as both canvasses and paintbrushes, performing abstract expressionist painting as they actively move about the arena of the canvas while also providing the ground upon which colour, shape, and texture accumulate.

Schneemann has equated *Meat Joy* with performative painting, describing it as 'an erotic vision that came through a series of very visceral dreams of expanding physical energy—off the canvas, out of the frame.'⁶



Carolee Schneemann, Meat Joy Collage (1998–1999). Mixed media, performance collage: photos from 1964 performance, crayon, paint on linen. 210.8 x 134.6 cm. Courtesy © Carolee Schneemann. Artists Rights Society [ARS]/Copyright Agency, 2022.

Indeed, three painted collages on linen made decades later to commemorate the performance, titled Meat Joy Collage (1998–1999), which incorporate original photographs from 1964, are aggressively gestural in execution, and return the embodied, explosive energy of the 'real' performance to its visual analogy.

When Schneemann first performed Meat Joy in [Paris](#) she realised that documenting it was a critical part of the event. Both film and photography were used to communicate the work's expressionist quality and to reveal its narrative structure.

Schneemann subsequently began to pursue film as a mixed-media form unto itself and, on occasion, within the context of performance.



Carolee Schneemann, *Fuses* (1964–1967). 16mm film transferred to HD video, colour, silent. 29 min, 51 sec. Original film burned with fire and acid, painted, and collaged. Courtesy © Carolee Schneemann. Artists Rights Society [ARS]/Copyright Agency, 2022.

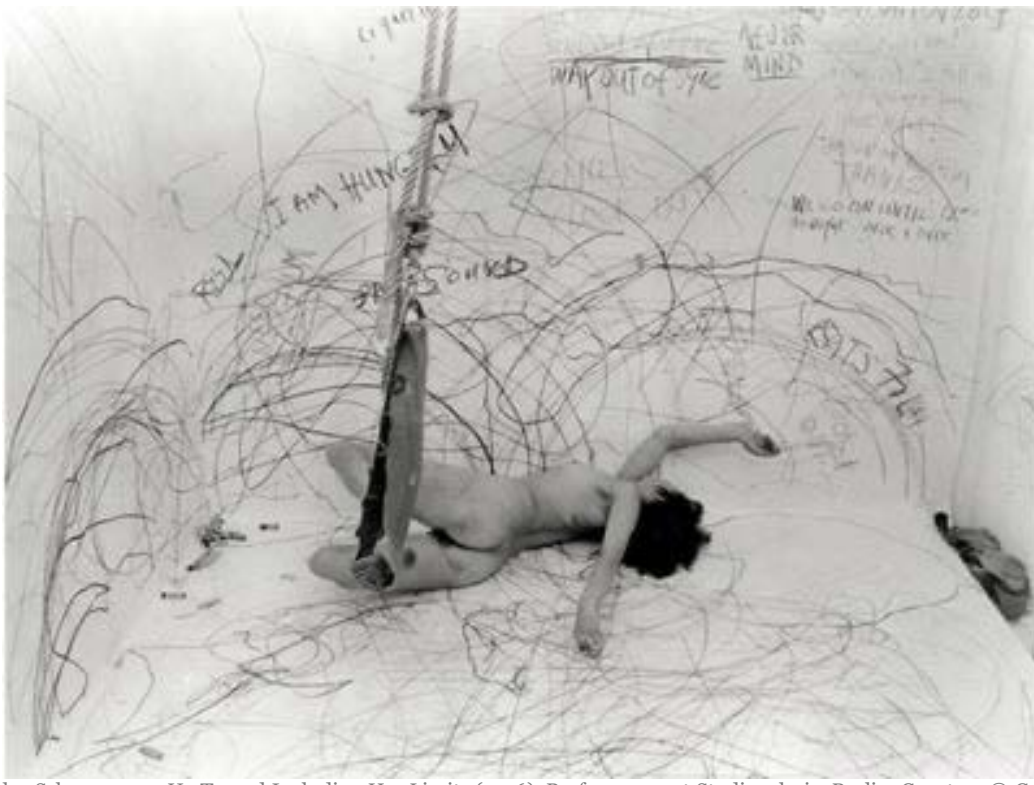
Fuses (1964–1966), a silent film of collaged lovemaking sequences between Schneemann and her then-partner, composer James Tenney, observed by a cat, is considered by many to be one of her masterpieces. The formal ingenuities of *Fuses*—principally, the manoeuvring of celluloid material to subvert narrativity and subjectivity—place Schneemann at the forefront of experimental film's investigation of materiality and abstraction.

At the same time, its feminist content and her fluid, expressionistic, painterly treatment of the medium sets her apart from other mid-1960s experimental filmmakers' purely formalist bent.

My entire body becomes the agency of visual traces, vestiges of the body's energy in motion.

For Schneemann, film was a natural extension of the canvas: *Fuses* is a filmic painting. Schneemann hand-painted, etched, dyed, stamped, scratched, baked, and heavily collaged the surface of the film, producing a physically thick, textured film object not unlike the surfaces of the painting constructions she was making simultaneously.

As the artist explains, 'As a painter ... I wanted the bodies to be turning into tactile sensations of flickers.' For the viewer, the naked bodies move in and out of the frame, dissolving optically before their eyes, not a literal translation but 'edited as a music of frames.'⁷



Carolee Schneemann, *Up To and Including Her Limits* (1976). Performance at Studiogalerie, Berlin. Courtesy © Carolee Schneemann. Artists Rights Society [ARS]/Copyright Agency, 2022. Photo: Henrik Gaard.

Schneemann's solo performance, *Up To and Including Her Limits* (1973–1977), insofar as it is a direct commentary on the hyper-masculinity of action painting, as well as the sexualised nature of Pollock's 'ejaculatory drip' in particular, also represents one of the best examples of what painting became as it moved through her body: a total integration of action and object.

Suspended naked above her canvas, Schneemann manually raised and lowered herself while 'stroking' the surrounding floor and walls with crayons, accumulating a web of coloured marks, vestiges of the body's energy in motion.

I'm a painter, working with my body and ways of thinking about movement and environment that come out of the discipline of having painted for six or eight hours a day for years.

As Schneemann explained in 1977, *Up To and Including Her Limits* is the direct result of Pollock's physicalised painting: 'My entire body becomes the agency of visual traces, vestiges of the body's energy in motion.'⁸

A few years later, in 1983, the artist produced a kinetic sculpture titled *War Mop*, which similarly continues her investigation into the definition of what constitutes painting post-Action Painting and challenges the gender signification of its gesture.



Carolee Schneemann, *Viet-Flakes* (1962–1967). 16 mm film transferred to HD video, toned black and white, sound collage by James Tenney. 8 min, 31 sec. Courtesy © Carolee Schneemann. Artists Rights Society [ARS]/Copyright Agency, 2022.

It also demonstrates how painting persists as a theme, even when Schneemann's literal or 'real' body ceases to function as a subject, agent, or 'material.'

Like her earlier Vietnam inspired film *Viet Flakes* of 1967, *War Mop* is a protest work, in this instance against the atrocities in Beirut. On a video monitor, Schneemann's montage of news footage from the war, *Souvenir of Lebanon* (1983), plays continuously.

Every eight seconds the motorised mop rises then slaps down on the monitor, like a weapon or rifle, as violent images of blown-out villages sweep across the screen. The hostile and banal movement of the mop, up and down, metaphorically echoes the aggressive paint strokes of the abstract expressionists, turning the mop into an oversized paintbrush.

That Schneemann conceives of her motorised mop as a paintbrush is undeniable. In 1990–1991, she produced an important work entitled *Scroll Painting with Exploded TV*, in which a series of paintings was created by motorised mops dipped in paint. In the installation, video monitors depict the paint falling on the canvas.



Carolee Schneemann, *War Mop* (1983). Acrylic glass, mop, motor, monitor and video (colour, sound, 6 min). Sculpture: 61 x 157.5 x 50.8 cm, monitor: 30.5 x 45.7 x 25.4 cm. Courtesy © Carolee Schneemann. Artists Rights Society [ARS]/Copyright Agency, 2022.

If gestural abstraction was initially about the reclamation of subjectivity in post–World War America, as Pollock's declaration, 'I am nature,' would seem to imply, then, Schneemann's complete elimination of the subject from the creation of 'gestural abstraction' is her rebuttal.

Despite her innumerable, intermedia explorations through kinetic theatre, performance, film, video, and installation, and decades of artistic production in which the physical medium of paint is scarce, Schneemann insists on her status as a painter.

As she eloquently states in a 1980 interview: 'I'm a painter, working with my body and ways of thinking about movement and environment that come out of the discipline of having painted for six or eight hours a day for years. That's got to be the root of my language in any medium. I'm not a filmmaker. I'm not a photographer. I'm a painter.'⁹

To unravel this seeming contradiction, a redefinition of the painter needs to be supported, not as one who paints but one who works on the questions and problems of painting. This shift allows a deeper appreciation for the power of visual structures and formal concerns throughout Schneemann's career.

It also places her work at the centre of the major philosophical debates raised by contemporary art, challenging the flatness of painting, and notions of medium specificity, and expanding the field of visual art to include the embodied subject.

Notes

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1. Versions of this essay have been published in the catalog accompanying an exhibition titled *Carolee Schneeman: Painting. What It Became*, curated by Maura Reilly at P.P.O.W Gallery, New York, February to March 2009, and on pages 27–30, in the catalog, *Carolee Schneemann: Within and beyond the Premises*, Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art at the State University of New

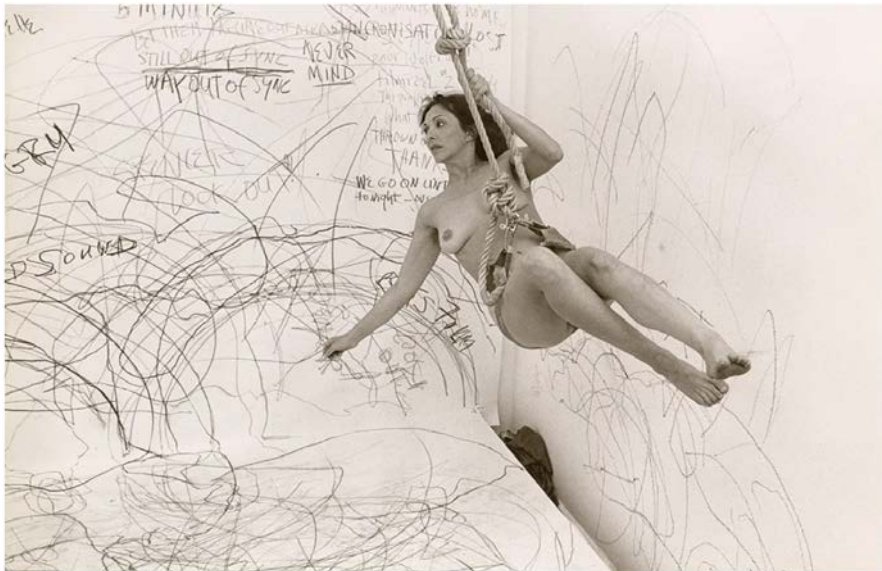
- York at New Paltz, 6 February–25 July 2010; and in 'The Paintings of Carolee Schneemann', *Feminist Studies*, 37:3 (Fall 2012).
2. Quote from Carolee Schneemann in *Imaging Her Erotics: Carolee Schneemann* (1993), vhs, 5 mins, a video collaboration between director Maria Beatty and the artist.
 3. Carolee Schneemann, *Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, MA: mitPress, 2003); Carolee Schneemann and Bruce McPherson, *More Than Meat Joy: Complete Performance Works and Selected Writings*, (Kinston, NY: McPherson, 1997), 167.
 4. Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 35.
 5. Schneemann, *More Than Meat Joy*, 21, 32; Schneemann, quoted in Carey Lovelace, 'Schneemann: Inside Out,' *Artcom*, no. 19 (1983): 16.
 6. Schneemann, from an unpublished interview with Danielle Knafo.
 7. Schneemann, quoted in an interview by Kate Haug, in Schneemann, *Imaging Her Erotics*.
 8. *Ibid.*, 165.
 9. Schneemann, quoted in Scott MacDonald, 'Film and Performance: An Interview with Carolee Schneemann,' *Millennium Film Journal*, nos. 7/8/9 (Fall/Winter 1980–1981): 105.

The Spectator
12 November 2022

THE SPECTATOR

The careers of artists like Carolee Schneemann and Stephen Cripps are unthinkable today

The wild happenings of these two artists – on show at the Barbican and Turner Contemporary – is a reminder of how much poorer the art scene has become



'Up to and Including Her Limits', 1976, by Carolee Schneemann. Credit: Photograph by Henrik Gaard / © Carolee Schneemann Foundation / ARS, New York and DACS, London 2022

Carolee Schneemann: Body Politics

Barbican Art Gallery, until 8 January 2023

During the 1964 debut of Carolee Schneemann's 'Meat Joy' in Paris, a man in the audience tried to throttle the artist before being hauled off by three female spectators. Schneemann's performance, an 'exuberant sensory celebration of flesh', involved semi-naked dancers tangling and grappling while bits of chicken, raw fish and hot dogs rained from above and buckets of paint sloshed underfoot.

Since her expulsion from Bard College ten years earlier for the 'moral turpitude' of painting herself in the nude, Schneemann had made a name for getting naked while persisting in calling herself a painter – a claim that was just about tenable in the case of 'Meat Joy', less so in the case of 'ICES STRIP/ISIS TRIP' (1972), her one-woman performance on a London to Edinburgh festival train which started with a striptease in the dining car while reciting Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and ended with her roller-skating up and down the aisle.

Despite a police raid on the London performance of 'Meat Joy', Schneemann moved to the city for a three-year spell in 1969 and the Barbican has welcomed her back with a major show hailing her as a trailblazer of body politics. It's an exhaustive survey, devoting several galleries to her unremarkable early abstract expressionist canvases and messy box-constructions before she hit her stride with photographs and films involving her body. At this point things get more interesting visually, if not logico-philosophically. Rejecting hierarchies she regarded as patriarchal, Schneemann gave everything equal artistic value. A wall is devoted to 'Infinity Kisses (I)' (1981-87), a grid of photographs of her daily tongue smooches with her cat Cluny. 'THE CAT IS MY MEDIUM,' she wrote of a previous pet. Oh, purr-lease!

As Rossini said of Wagner, Schneemann has some good moments but some bad quarters of an hour. I liked early kinetic works such as 'Music Box Music' (1964) with its distorted nursery rhyme tapes tinkling to a halt like breaking glass, but I got awfully tired of her body. And I minded the mess and the lack of subtlety, which mattered when she got into activism. The thud of a mop hitting a TV screening her film 'Souvenir of Lebanon', in the installation 'War Mop' (1983), lands as heavily as its feminist point.

I didn't want to throttle her, though by the end I was ready to throttle the curator for making the exhibition three times too long. The curator of the *Stephen Cripps* exhibition at Turner Contemporary has managed to squeeze a life's work into two rooms. Admittedly the life in question ended with an accidental methadone overdose at the age of 29 in 1982, but it was frenetically productive.

Cripps blazed no trails – no one was mad enough to follow him – but he blazed brightly. Described as a pyrotechnic sculptor, he engineered legendary one-man shows – most famously at Acme Gallery from 1979 to 1981 – involving fireworks, gongs, bells, machine

constructions and exploding bags of grocery dry goods. 'The spectators would be showered with split peas or flour, dazzled by fountains of sparks and fire, sometimes even driven into the street by smoke,' recalls musician and sometime collaborator David Toop. It was loud but never unsubtle. Cripps felt explosives had been given a bad press by war: 'Some very gentle things can come from explosives.'

Understandably, his work was almost impossible to record. 'If you blinked you missed it,' says Toop. 'If you witnessed it, you blinked anyway.' Unlike Schneemann, Cripps had no interest in recording his performances; he was even reluctant to describe them as art. A photo of his Butler's Wharf studio shows an enormous space littered with junk; the garden shed at the back was where he slept. The junk went into making 'performing machines' of which one rare survivor, a roving record player, is in the show. All that's left of the others, if they ever took shape, are hundreds of marvellous annotated drawings that cover all surfaces in the exhibition. They include 'Notes on a Dance for Jets and Helicopters' and a drawing of a portable crematorium with arrows indicating where the 'STIFFS' go in and the 'ASHES' out.

Photographs show Cripps performing at Oxford's Museum of Modern Art Oxford in 1979 during a Jackson Pollock exhibition at which the paintings 'seemed to lose their visually active qualities', recalled one witness, 'and recede apologetically into the background'. The careers of both these artists are unthinkable today. Cripps eventually joined the London Fire Brigade to earn a crust – since they kept turning up to his gigs he figured he should join some of theirs – but he and Schneemann both survived outside a funding system. If their happenings happened, it was because they made them. Turner Contemporary's health warning of 'sudden loud noise and flashing lights' on a film of a Cripps performance is a reminder of how far removed we now are from those heady days of happenings and how much poorer the art scene has become, even if artists are richer.

ARTnews

14 October 2022

ARTnews

'Her Life Was Her Art': Five Essential Works By Pioneering Feminist Artist Carolee Schneemann

BY HANNAH EDGAR  October 14, 2022 10:51am



Carolee Schneemann with *Venus Vectors* (1986–1988), 1987.

PHOTOGRAPH BY VICTORIA VESNA. COURTESY OF THE CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN FOUNDATION AND GALERIE LELONG & CO., HALES GALLERY, AND P.P.O.W, NEW YORK AND © CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN FOUNDATION / ARS, NEW YORK AND DACS, LONDON 2022.

Few artists have had as radical an impact on feminist thought and art than multimedia and performance artist Carolee Schneemann. Born on Philadelphia's rural fringes in 1939, Schneemann recalled being interested in art and the body's expressive potential even as a young child. Later, as the first woman in her family to attend college, Schneemann was suspended from Bard College for having the audacity to paint nude self-portraits—although the school had no qualms about her posing nude for her male peers.

When second-wave feminism crested, Schneemann's body of work was ready to meet it; in fact, some of her earliest artworks prefigured it, like a **1957 nude** painting of her then boyfriend, composer James Tenney. She claimed an

unapologetically female perspective of desire, one that was relational to men but rejected patriarchal values. (Her heterosexual vantage point sometimes ran afoul of lesbian separatists, who **vehemently opposed** her film *Fuses*, discussed below, when it was shown at the Art Institute of Chicago in the early 1970s.)

As sensibilities changed, Schneemann later felt her work was being met with ambivalence by third-wave feminists. Her output became more elegiac, memorializing friends and colleagues in the avant-garde with whom she collaborated. What didn't change, however, was her long-held disregard for cultural taboos, whether reading a manifesto extracted from her vagina (*Interior Scroll*, 1975 and 1977), forcing viewers to confront the horror of war crimes (*Viet Flakes*, 1962–66), or magnifying the bodies of 9/11 victims hurtling through the air toward their death (*Terminal Velocity*, 2001–05).

Schneemann died in 2019, two years after receiving the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at the Venice Biennale. Now through January 8, 2023, the Barbican in London is exploring her work in ***Body Politics***, a new retrospective. Here, Barbican curator Lotte Johnson comments on highlights from the show.



Carolee Schneemann, *Pin Wheel*, 1957, oil on canvas, mounted on turning steel potter's wheel, 30 3/4 x 36 x 1 3/4 inches.

Photo : Courtesy of the Carolee Schneemann Foundation and Galerie Lelong & Co., Hales Gallery, and P.P.O.W, New York and © Carolee Schneemann Foundation / ARS, New York and DACS, London 2022.

Schneemann has often been called a performance artist. While true in the most reductive sense, Schneemann herself insisted throughout her life that she was first and foremost a painter. She was a disciple of Abstract Expressionism; she later recalled that **Cezanne** changed her life, although she mistakenly believed for years that he was a woman (hence the title of her 1975 book, *Cézanne, She Was a Great Painter*).

Schneemann's paintings often took on a life beyond the canvas. *Aria Duetto Pin Wheel*, an early work mounted on a potter's wheel, arose out of Schneemann's melding of painting and performance. At the time she painted it, she liked to warm up by playing music in her studio and dancing before approaching the canvas. Music was essential to Schneemann's practice, and in the case of *Aria Duetto Pin Wheel*, it directly inspired the work's title, which references the soprano and alto duet from Bach's cantata *Jesu, der du meine Seele*. To create it, Schneemann twirled the canvas atop the wheel and applied paint while the surface was in motion. Later, when exhibiting the work, she kept the canvas attached to the wheel so it could be spun in a brilliant whirl.

Aria Duetto Pin Wheel's melding of process and product challenged the boundaries of the canvas and expanded viewers' ideas of what a painting could be. "Schneemann literally throws the painting. The brushwork becomes kinetic, not only in the process of making the work but in the way you experience it as a viewer," Johnson observes.



Carolee Schneemann, *Meat Joy*, 16–18 November 1964, Judson Dance Theater, Judson Memorial Church, New York.

Photo : Courtesy of the Carolee Schneemann Foundation and Galerie Lelong & Co., Hales Gallery, and P.P.O.W, New York and © Carolee Schneemann Foundation / ARS, New York and DACS, London 2022. Photograph by Robert McElroy. Copyright © 2022 Estate of Robert R. McElroy / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS).

One of her touchstone group performance pieces, *Meat Joy* was developed in Paris and debuted there at Jean-Jacques Lebel's Festival of Free Expression. Speaking hardly a lick of French and put off by what she felt to be arid social mores, Schneemann envisioned a work that would be a "celebration of the flesh," according to Johnson. "It was meant to be this kind of erotic rite, as she called it."

The participants wore fur-lined undergarments and writhed with raw chicken, fish, hot dogs, and other foods. The entire bacchanal was slippery with red paint, giving the illusion of a graphically carnal celebration. Unsurprisingly, it was explosively received. When *Meat Joy* was staged in London, Schneemann reportedly had to be spirited out of the venue by police.

The scene might have seemed chaotic, but it was actually meticulously planned. Schneemann created what she called "scores" for her performance pieces, clearly articulating what was to happen without robbing participants of their agency within the bounds of the performance. As for those participants, Schneemann drew upon her experience as a founding member of the Judson Dance Theater to enlist average people in *Meat Joy* rather than trained dancers or actors, finding their more naturalistic approach to the work exhilarating.



Carolee Schneemann, two film strips from *Fuses*, 1964–67, 16 mm film transferred to HD video, color, silent, 29:51 min., original film burned with fire and acid, painted and collaged.

Photo : Courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York Courtesy of the Carolee Schneemann Foundation and Galerie Lelong & Co., Hales Gallery, and P.P.O.W, New York and © Carolee Schneemann Foundation / ARS, New York and DACS, London 2022.

Just after making *Meat Joy*, Schneemann returned to the United States, where she rented rooms in a stone-clad Huguenot house built in the mid 18th century in New Paltz, New York. (She would eventually own the house and live the rest of her life there.) This is where Schneemann documented her intimate life with James Tenney in a short film that she described as a “love fuck.”

Fuses's three-year-long production was painstaking, as Schneemann's camera could film only 30 seconds at a time. Those limitations result in a restless montage built by splicing and layering quotidian scenes with footage of Schneemann and Tenney having sex. Schneemann later tinkered with the celluloid to add textural elements to the film: scratching it, exposing it to the elements, baking it in an oven, collaging it, and so on.

“She had this tactile, experimental approach to the film itself, which eventually became so thick she could no longer actually get it through the printer,” Johnson says. “The result is a very poetic and often abstracted film that limits our access to the full experience of the bodies and sex acts depicted. She's refusing to objectify or fetishize herself; she wanted to show what she called the ‘lived sense of equity’ between herself and Tenney.”

Schneemann and Tenney broke up shortly after *Fuses* was filmed, but the two remained artistically indebted to each other. As Schneemann later **told *Hyperallergic***, “Jim's work influenced my considerations of dissonance, fragmentation, repetition—the way when you split two elements there is some incremental energy between them, as with collage. Our love fueled and sustained my art. When people said, ‘This is crap,’ there were the two of us rowing our boat together.”



Carolee Schneemann, *Interior Scroll*, 29 August 1975, Women Here and Now, East Hampton, New York.

Photo : Courtesy of the Carolee Schneemann Foundation and Galerie Lelong & Co., Hales Gallery, and P.P.O.W, New York and © Carolee Schneemann Foundation / ARS, New York and DACS, London 2022. Photograph by Anthony McCall. Copyright © Anthony McCall.

If you know one work by Schneemann, it's likely this one. She performed it twice: once in 1975 at the Women Artists Here and Now exhibition in East Hampton, New York, and again at the 1977 Telluride Film Festival. In the performance, the artist stood naked before the audience, gradually drew a long, narrow scroll of paper from her vagina, and read the text written on it.

Schneemann had not planned to present the work twice but quickly organized a second performance when she learned that Telluride had given a female filmmakers' panel a sensationalist, sexist title. The work does not exist in a single version, with both the **Schneemann Foundation** and a handful of test scrolls attesting to a variety of texts considered for performance in *Interior Scroll*.

"Schneemann was fascinated by knowledge received from and within the body, and this work has a visceral, confrontational impact," Johnson says. "It confronts our own taboos and fears about women's bodies and has become emblematic of her uncompromising feminism."

Public discourse around *Interior Scroll* has tended to deride it for its shock value. However, like Schneemann's other work, *Interior Scroll* was meticulously planned. Schneemann had taken great care to present the work only in progressive feminist contexts, where it would be highly unlikely for men and conservative women to see the work and be scandalized by it. *Interior Scroll* also gestated for several months: A drawing titled *The Message* and dated June 22, 1974, depicts a woman pulling a long piece of paper from her vagina.

Schneemann later had conflicting feelings about *Interior Scroll*. "She looked back and said she didn't *want* to pull a scroll out of her vagina in public, but she felt compelled to do this," Johnson says. The artist also believed its reputation both overshadowed and caricatured the rest of her work. "I think it has to be subtracted from the awareness of all the work I have done since," Schneemann told an interviewer in 2015. "It's used against the work; it's used against the complexity of my processes; it's used to contain and stabilize a much richer and more complex body of work."

Unfortunately, though the first performance of *Interior Scroll* was filmed, the footage no longer survives. Scholars today must now extrapolate what these live performances were like through photos and the few surviving scrolls, most of which were never used.



Carolee Schneemann, *Up to and Including Her Limits*, 10 June 1976 Studiogalerie, Berlin.

Photo : Photograph by Henrik Gaard. Carolee Schneemann Papers, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles. Copyright © Carolee Schneemann Foundation / ARS, New York and DACS, London 2022.

Schneemann's nude performance works can be read as a rebuttal of the same squeamishness around women's bodies and agency that resulted in her suspension from Bard. "I do not *show* my naked body. I am *being* my body," she once wrote to an incredulous friend.

Up to and Including Her Limits was among Schneemann's most pointed ruminations on these themes. In it, Schneemann suspended herself from a tree surgeon's harness and swung, twisted, and contorted her body to mark large pieces of paper, often nearly out of her reach, with crayon. Schneemann staged *Up to and Including Her Limits* nine times over the course of her life. Later, she turned it into an installation that could be mounted in her absence, pairing footage of the performance with the marked paper left behind.

As with *Aria Duetto Pin Wheel*, Schneemann considered *Up to and Including Her Limits* very much part of her lineage as a painter, citing Jackson Pollock's physicalized painting process as a key inspiration. Unlike Pollock, however, Schneemann sought to make her body part of the work itself. As its title suggests, *Up to and Including Her Limits* did not have a set duration; she performed the work to the degree she was capable of each time she staged it.

"Even for artists like Pollock, [for whom] the body was central, Schneemann felt the body often was absent in the painter's process and in the work itself," Johnson says. "She wanted to combine her body with her work. Her life *was* her art."

Brooklyn Rail
October 2022

 **BROOKLYN RAIL**

ArtSeen

Carolee Schneemann: *Body Politics*

By [Brittany Rosemary Jones](#)



Carolee Schneemann, *Meat Joy*, 16-18 November 1964, Judson Dance Theater, Judson Memorial Church, New York. Photo: Robert McElroy. Courtesy the Carolee Schneemann Foundation and Galerie Lelong & Co., Hales Gallery, and P.P.O.W, New York and © Carolee Schneemann Foundation / ARS, New York and DACS, London 2022. Photograph © 2022 Estate of Robert R. McElroy/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS).

“London was the worst,” Carolee Schneemann groaned in an interview in 2014. She was justified in complaining, as she often did, about the English: they had not been her best audience. The 1964 London performance of arguably her most famous work, *Meat Joy* (1964), an “erotic rite” of men and women clad in fur-lined bikinis writhing in wet paint and raw meat was met with a reproachful and unresponsive crowd. When she returned in 1967 for the Dialectics of Liberation Congress, she was regarded as a second-class participant and was given the wrong address; her

ON VIEW
Barbican Gallery
Body Politics
September 8–
January 8, 2023
London

performance of *Naked Action Lecture* (1968) at the Institute of Contemporary Arts only drew outrage. This didn't stop her from relocating to the city in 1970, though she never felt adequately understood or respected by the British art world. But the tides are turning thanks to her current landmark show at the Barbican Centre, *Carolee Schneemann: Body Politics*, her first retrospective in the United Kingdom and the first major presentation of her work since her death in 2019. Providing a long-awaited look into the full span of her prolific six-decade-long practice, it showcases her most iconic performances alongside lesser-known chapters of her revolutionary career.

Kicking off with her rarely exhibited paintings from the 1950s and 1960s, the show locates her formative years as taking place during the apex of Abstract Expressionism and the Black Mountain College group. We're reminded that Schneemann later asserted, "I consider myself a painter still and forever (no matter what 'medium')." Her steadfast dedication to this label is curious, and though it is not further curatorially probed, it does make you wonder what qualities she meant to identify herself with, and if there is a way to articulate the subjectivity specific to a painter that so deeply resonated with her. She was a kind of belated postmodern Post-Impressionist, a lover of Cézanne whose abstracted landscapes were sometimes kinetic and activated by spinning mechanisms. Closely attuned to but never restricted by compositional conventions, she strove to find the balance between the harmony of Seurat and the pure expression of Abstract Expressionism, interchanging space and time in a flurry of brushstrokes just barely held from the brink of chaos.

As a founding member of the Judson Dance Theater in the early 1960s, her collaborative work kept at this precarious dance—a careful polyphony of independent acts. This balance is palpable when reading through her instructions for *Newspaper Event* (1963), which assigned everyone general roles and rules for interaction to be manifested in the performers' own improvisations. Indelibly influenced by Gestalt, a German concept that loosely refers to an entity that is greater than the sum of its parts, the performances from her Judson era are evocative of pointillist paintings: unified wholes composed of individual and autonomous atoms vibrating side-by-side. This mirrored their collaborative process—programs on view betray their densely interconnected network.

Moving (roughly) chronologically in the Barbican exhibition, this struggle between group and individual identity resurfaces again and again, and one of the show's greatest strengths is its understated tracing of New York's post-war artistic climate through her own development. When she felt the pendulum had swung too far to the collaborative side, she began to focus on her body as both a material and the site for art production itself. This renewed focus on her own identity, as both a woman and an artist, was a rejection of the mainstream art world, which she dubbed the "Art Stud Club." "I do not 'show' my naked body!" she wrote to a friend. "I AM BEING MY BODY."

Thus began one of her most iconic bodies of work, an extremely personal turn that solidified her role in feminist art "istory," as Schneemann would say. As is typical with retrospectives of performance artists, we have no choice but to rely on our imagination to reconstruct these events. A wealth of archival material covers the walls and fills the vitrines of the exhibition, the different fragments from which we can try to piece together the puzzle of her work. This is largely thanks to the foresight of Schneemann herself, who meticulously documented her performances as a means of extending their lifespan.

Seeing photographs of the artist pulling a roll of paper out of her vagina—the scroll itself is also on view—and then reading the text written on it, a hypothetical conversation with a condescending male filmmaker, is certainly jarring. But it is an entirely different experience from what it was to bear witness to *Interior Scroll* (1975) in the flesh: the live confrontation with her nude body; her fingers, the agent of her vaginal cavity two years post-Roe v. Wade, slowly pulling out her script; her voice carrying its contents across the room.

Few critics seem to be eager to unpack this dissonance, and the lack of fresh discourse surrounding the unique encounter with the documentation of her work—instead of viewing it firsthand—is especially disappointing because it is the archival and ephemeral abundance that makes the exhibition a



Carolee Schneemann, *Interior Scroll*, 29 August 1975, Women Here and Now, East Hampton, New York. Photo: Anthony McCall. Courtesy of the Carolee Schneemann Foundation and Galerie Lelong & Co., Hales Gallery, and P.P.O.W, New York and © Carolee Schneemann Foundation / ARS, New York and DACS, London 2022. Photograph © Anthony McCall.

watershed event. With new distance, we can examine Schneemann's interiority and the planning behind the live performances that contemporary reviews still use reductive vocabulary to describe. "Shocking," "outrageous," "abject"—is this monotony a result of critics' unwillingness to consider the archival material before them as objects themselves? Or are tedious descriptors such as these simply meant to play into scandalous labels for her work to drive clicks and interest?

It's a shame as the exhibition aims to construct a fuller portrait of Schneemann—and is largely successful. And while corporeality is one of her most enduring themes, her body is not what is on display at the Barbican. This couldn't be made clearer than through the installation of the crayon drawings she executed during her performance *Up to and Including Her Limits* (1971–1976) and the harness, now empty, which suspended her; the only thing missing is her presence. When perusing her notes and photographs, meditating on how she chose to portray herself, the question that guided her approach seems all the more relevant: "Could a nude woman artist be both image and image-maker?"



(colour, sound, 6 min.). Sculpture: 24 × 62 × 520 inches, monitor: 12 × 18 × 10 inches. Courtesy the Carolee Schneemann Foundation and Galerie Lelong & Co., Hales Gallery, and P.P.O.W, New York and © Carolee Schneemann Foundation / ARS, New York and DACS, London 2022. Photo: Axel Schneider, Frankfurt am Main.

Always pushing up against the limitations of her reception at the time, she struggled with the tension between challenging patriarchal standards of beauty and sexuality and naturally conforming to them as the beautiful, thin, white woman she was. In every picture her nipples are perfectly erect, her thighs toned but not muscular. Through no fault of her own, seeing her performances reproduced as static photographs can cause her work to appear to oscillate between exhibitionism and revolt. These are often described as empowered images, and in a sense they undisputedly were—especially *Fuses* (1964–1967), her daring and infamous erotic film collage that documented her sex life with her partner James Tenney. The question of self-representation is as pertinent now as ever. Today her photographs ask: is it possible to create an image of ourselves that at once empowers us (as people who have measured themselves against socially constructed notions of beauty) and emancipates us from those very standards?

The tension of representation runs beyond portraying herself and takes root in the second half of the exhibition. Compelled to speak out against American atrocities in Vietnam, Schneemann began to make work confronting the dilution of the potency of global conflict imagery due to its increasing dissemination by mass media. *Viet-Flakes* (1965) was a film made from what she called her “obsessive collection of Vietnam atrocity images,” and was intended to undercut the salaciousness and anonymity of photographs that documented the war’s innocent victims. The same is the case for *War Mop* (1983), an installation of a rag mop striking a television that shows the remains of a bombed refugee camp and a Palestinian woman screaming at the camera, as well as for *Terminal Velocity* (2001–2005), blown-up inkjets of people falling to their deaths on 9/11.

The political efficacy of these images is a complex discussion, one that traverses her contextualization of these photographs to the very ethics of documentary. In my opinion, in her attempt to problematize the media and the public’s fetishism of this imagery, she only furthered it. In reproducing and enlarging representations of suffering, artists sometimes intend for them to confront the viewer; often they just end up coming across as exploitative.

The use of animals, both living and dead, in her oeuvre is similarly provoking. Aiming to subvert the human-animal hierarchy, she claimed to “live with” as opposed to own cats, and included them—including one, Kitch, who died and was then taxidermied—in her photographs and performances. This decision, as well as her use of dead chickens and raw meat to evoke objectified flesh in

Meat Joy, is ripe for debate on the ethics of the inclusion of animals in art practice.

New points of departure like this only become clear, however, when discourse has moved away from the public construction and reduction of her pioneering and diverse approach as “shocking,” “bodily,” and “wild.” Her work was so multifaceted and apt for debate that to simply fetishize its provocative nature does a disservice both to her legacy and to us. Hopefully, in time, this rich and remarkably varied exhibition will be seen as the impetus for a renewed discussion about her career, one that considers her contemplative yet fallible grappling with so many pertinent issues. This is the only way art “istorians” will be able to recognize the full extent of her contributions.

Contributor

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7 September 2022

**The
Guardian**

Review

Smearred with mackerel, chased by police: the wild, miraculous art of Carolee Schneemann - review

Barbican, London

Schneemann was inspirational, confrontational and joyously excessive, pulling art from her vagina and writhing naked through molasses and wallpaper paste. This thrilling show captures the sheer scope of a phenomenal artist



📷 'An erotic rite' ... Schneemann performing Meat Joy in 1964. Photograph: 2021 Estate of Robert R. McElroy/2021 Carolee Schneemann Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / DACS, London.

Adrian Searle

Wed 7 Sep 2022 13.18 EDT

The semi-naked performers writhe about the floor, getting lewd and intimate with the dead mackerel, hotdogs, plucked chickens and other offerings being strewn among them by someone wearing an apron. There seems to be a lot of wet paint and plastic tarp lubricating all the flailing about in *Meat Joy*, which the artist, [Carolee Schneemann](#), described as “an erotic rite”. The footage is grainy, the air of worthy transgression a picture of its time. It was 1964. Do not point that mackerel at me.

Meat Joy was first performed at a festival in Paris, where a male spectator apparently attempted to strangle the artist. [Schneemann](#) - and her accomplices from New York’s Judson Dance Theater - performed again a few days later in London, and were chased off the stage by the police, before being exfiltrated in a fleet of cars. Some time later, London’s Whitechapel Gallery restaged the event, but without the police.

▲▲ *Her art was often seen as too much: too frank, too dirty, too naked - too much a celebration of what it is to be a woman*

Born in 1939, Schneemann made art that was inspirational, confrontational and excessive, sometimes hilarious and sometimes abject. She covered herself in molasses and wallpaper paste and rolled around in shredded paper, to emerge like a human collage, somehow both brush and painting, artist and model, performer and object. Schneemann’s art was often seen as too much: too frank, too dirty, too naked, too bold, too intellectual, too hokey, too sweaty, too full of ideas, too embodied, too self-exposing, too autobiographical, too argumentative and, most of all, altogether too much a celebration of what it is to be a woman. The female was in any case already too much. Her art was great and terrible and embarrassing, shocking and tender.

It wasn’t just male critics who balked and complained. The artist’s best known work, the one that has been anthologised in almost all surveys of feminist art history, is Schneemann’s 1976 *Interior Scroll*, which began life as a live performance in which the naked artist removed a scroll from her vagina and read from it to a mostly female audience. The text purports to be a kind of rejoinder to criticisms of her made by a male film-maker, but is in fact a response to critic and art historian Annette Michelson, who had said she couldn’t watch Schneemann’s films. Looking at the photographs, collages, texts and scroll now is like beholding some kind of relic of an almost mythological, miraculous moment. As Eileen Myles writes in the Barbican’s catalogue: “The cunt speaks!” And it would continue to speak.



📷 'A furious ride' ... The show includes Schneemann's Up to and Including Her Limits. Photograph: © 2021 Carolee Schneemann Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / DACS, London

Schneemann was outspoken and beautiful too, which perhaps made matters worse. In one series of photographs from 1963, an enormously productive year for her, she posed for Eye Body, 36 Transformative Actions for Camera. The 18 photographs that survive have her lying down with garter snakes on her naked torso, wearing mud as makeup and smeared in paint, and interacting with some of her assemblages. In them all, she looks so like Elizabeth Taylor's Cleopatra I did a double-take.

She is a continuing influence and inspiration, as well as a controversial figure - not only to succeeding generations of feminist artists and thinkers and writers, from Maggie Nelson to Eileen Myles, but also to artists such as Matthew Barney. She inspired The Vagina Monologues and, in some ways, exceeded her time and her pivotal role in feminist art. Schneemann kept account of the degrees to which her works inspired others, less out of vanity than a desire to track the understanding and interpretations her works attracted. She was more analytical than her art looks.

The Barbican's retrospective is a furious ride, and runs the gamut of the artist's life and work, from painting to performance, film, photography, collage, bricolage and copious archival material. Schneemann was her own best archivist, constantly compiling notes, drawings, phone numbers (she

knew everybody), lists, stray thoughts and ideas. Throughout her life, she regarded herself as a painter, which is where she began as a student, a dutiful if belated follower of both abstract expressionism and of Cézanne. Her landscapes are war zones of paint, and there is something of the compressions and distortions of Austrian painter Maria Lassnig in her figures.



📷 'Baked in the oven, dipped in acid' ... Schneemann in the film Fuses. Photograph: Courtesy of Lux

She painted her naked lover and collaborator, the composer James Tenney, and their cat, and went on to physically deconstruct her painting to create hybrid works incorporating freestanding stretchers and torn and scissored canvases until they resembled the wreckage of battles won or lost, one topped with a flag on a pole as well as a litter of spent beer cans, broken glass, rope, paint brushes, spews of magnetic tape and other detritus. She went on to make burnt boxes with scorch marks and shattered shards of mirror and little winking lights that had the feel of the body's interior and of the mind's intricacies. Some were dedicated to choreographer, dancer and fellow member of the Judson Church Theater Yvonne Rainer. Schneemann's box constructions bore the influence of the reclusive and strange Joseph Cornell, whom she befriended.

All this was a kind of preamble to Schneemann's own performances, recorded in photographs and film. These records are, however, no substitute for the real thing, which one dance critic described as "brainless messy happenings". But on the evidence we have, they were much more than that. They encompassed joy and confrontation, and the artist's evident glee as well as seriousness. Her films, too, attempt to get at the texture of life. In *Fuses* - a 1960s film that took three years to shoot (in 30-second bursts) - Schneemann records her sex life; in moments of intimacy, of bodies and light, real shadow and the grain of the film all montaged with footage that has been spliced, baked in the oven, dipped in acid and exposed to the weather. In the parlance of the time, *Fuses* was totally out there.

Such self-exposure continues in *Blood Work Diary* from 1972, the artist's response to a lover's aversion to seeing her menstrual blood. She fixed the clumps and drops of blood on tissues using egg yolk, as if it were tempera paint, and dated the waxing and waning of her period, the papers framed in a grid, like pinned butterflies. Drawings become a ribald congress of body parts, and a whole series depicts talking vulva, quoting French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and American sexologists Masters and Johnson.



📷 'It's all there' ... Personae: JT and Three Kitch's (1957). Photograph: Courtesy of the Estate of Carolee Schneemann, Galerie Lelong & Co., Hales Gallery, and P•P•O•W, New York

All this gives way, in later works, to images and footage of violence and death. Several works incorporate news and documentary footage of unspeakable acts of brutality and testimonies from wars and insurrections, from the Balkans to the Middle East, from Vietnam to the Caribbean,

alternating and juxtaposed with people eating, and one of her cats after having been being hit by a car. There are memorials to dead friends, and a record of her own long battles with lymphoma and breast cancer. Oranges dangle like sputniks, pierced by hypodermic needles.



Carolee
Schneemann
obituary

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The work I find most shocking here, because it feels so unnecessary, is *Terminal Velocity* (2001-5), in which computer scans from news reportage, of bodies falling from the twin towers on 9/11, are reproduced on an enlarged but often blurry scale. Some fall head first, others horizontally with arms outstretched, during their 10-second drop to the ground. Schneemann wanted to counter the sensationalism of the original media images, and to personalise these plunging shadows, repeated

against the backdrop of their fall. Instead, she compounds the salaciousness of the images.

But such missteps in her art are rare. Schneeman said she would die a painter, which she did, in 2019. Paintings, like performance and sculpture, are interactions with the material world and the psychological, the social, the visceral and the sexual. It is all there in Schneemann, who went her own way with consummate vitality and bravery. She was tremendous.

- [Carolee Schneemann: Body Politics is at the Barbican Art Gallery until 8 January 2023.](#)

ArtReview

15 September 2022

ArtReview

'Funny, Sexy and Alarming': Carolee Schneemann's Holy Trinity

Philippa Snow Opinion 15 September 2022 artreview.com



Carolee Schneemann, 'Meat Joy', 16–18 November 1964, Judson Dance Theater, Judson Memorial Church, New York. Photograph: Robert McElroy; courtesy the Carolee Schneemann Foundation and Galerie Lelong & Co., Hales Gallery, and P.P.O.W, New York.

One of her greatest, most enduring skills was the ability to take the female body, as pure flesh, and to transform it into something powerful and illuminating rather than demeaning or depressing

I will never forget my introduction to Carolee Schneemann's *Meat Joy* (1964), in part because it came hand-in-hand with my very first encounter with Paul Verhoeven's *Showgirls* (1995) – at art school, an especially perceptive tutor recommended both works to me as objects worthy of study for a practitioner who, at that particular time, was especially interested in provocative and unnerving images of female nudity and sexuality. *Meat Joy*, in case you are not familiar with it, is a choreographed performance work, in which dancers of both genders end up writhing and gyrating with each other, naked, doused in paint and covered in meat;

Verhoeven's film, as I assume you know already, is an 'erotic' 'drama' about showgirls in Las Vegas. At first blush, the pairing seemed absurd: Schneemann was a serious artist, and Verhoeven's film still had, in the late noughties, something of a reputation for being a high-camp, brainless bomb. Still, look closer, and the two have more in common than one might think. Both works, using gorgeous exposed bodies as their primary medium, are at once hot and comical and nasty, compelling like watching sex and also compelling like watching atrocity footage on the news, funny ha-ha and also funny-peculiar; they seduce and then appal, and they have a history of irritating male audience members through their failure to present a conventional enough version of sex to facilitate masturbation.



Carolee Schneemann, *Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions for Camera*, 1963, gelatin silver print, printed 2005, 61 × 50.8 cm. Photograph: Erró; courtesy the Carolee Schneemann Foundation and Galerie Lelong & Co., Hales Gallery, and P.P.O.W, New York

What that tutor wanted me to see, I realise now, was the full potential of the naked female body as a medium for transgression, for perversion, and for confrontation. I have not produced a single thing that might reasonably be called an ‘artwork’ in a little over a decade, but I cannot overemphasise how often I have thought about *Meat Joy* in years since, or how frequently its startling vision of the body as a site of simultaneous pleasure, humour and disgustingness has crept in some form or another into something I have written. Even the phrase ‘meat joy,’ an effective synonym for sex itself, is a stroke of macabre genius. One of Schneemann’s greatest, most enduring skills was her ability to take the status of the human body, and the female body in particular, as pure flesh, and to transform that status into something powerful and illuminating rather than demeaning or depressing. At *Body Politics* (2022), a retrospective of her work that has just opened at London’s Barbican, I sat and watched *Meat Joy* in a gallery setting for the first time, and I noted that it still retained its initial ability to overwhelm – its reds and fleshy pinks and blues are somehow less suggestive of pornography than of the clips of vehicular crashes that appear in early drivers’ education videos, and the visual confusion created by the perpetual collision of so many naked bodies with so much raw meat is funny and alarming. It is oddly sexy, too, and its participants are laughing, unselfconscious, the ‘joy’ of the title bursting through in waves.



Carolee Schneemann, *Interior Scroll*, 29 August 1975, *Women Here and Now*, East Hampton, New York. Photograph: Anthony McCall; courtesy the Carolee Schneemann Foundation and Galerie Lelong & Co., Hales Gallery, and P.P.O.W, New York

Funny, sexy and alarming, as a holy trinity, was Schneemann's *thing*: she was beautiful and fearless and fully embodied and truly, righteously angry, and she also maintained a life-long fondness for wordplay. (When we exchanged emails after an interview many years ago, she filled in the subject line with 'Snow to Snow,' a charming joke about the etymology of 'Schneemann.') Walk around *Body Politics*, and I guarantee that you will laugh as well as marvel, and that even if some of the pieces now feel dated in their themes – *Blood Work Diary* (1972), for instance, in which Schneemann documents her menstrual cycle – others will feel more electrifying than a great deal of actually contemporary feminist work. That her best-known pieces tend to involve her nakedness is, naturally, a consequence of the enduring popularity of images of thin white women with no clothes on in the artworld and beyond; it is also a result of these being some of her most interesting and challenging material, her body's suitedness to media coverage and the male gaze being the point. 'Hostile feminists,' Chris Kraus once wrote about the climate of the artworld in the 1970s, 'saw any female self-display as patriarchal putty [...] As if the only possible reason for a woman to publicly reveal herself could be self-therapeutic. As if the point was not to reveal the circumstances of one's own objectification.' Schneemann often used her body like a Trojan horse—think of *Interior Scroll* (1975), where she appeared nude before an audience before drawing a text, tightly-rolled into a cylinder, from her vagina. "I don't take the advice of men who only talk to themselves," she read aloud. "Pay attention to critical and practical film language – it exists for and in only one gender." In pulling the material from inside herself, she literalised the idea that every woman, even one who stands before an audience naked, has an interior life, and an interior monologue that might be vituperative and critical even when her exterior looks alluring. 'I do not 'show' my naked body,' she wrote, irritably, to a friend: 'I AM BEING MY BODY.'



Carolee Schneemann, *Up to and Including Her Limits*, 10 June 1976, Studiogalerie, Berlin. Photograph: Henrik Gaard; Carolee Schneemann Papers, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (950001)

Schneemann's relationship with her own embodiment helps to explain her infatuation with the discipline of dance, a medium that requires the practitioner's full connection with, and surrender to, both the possibilities and the limitations of the physical self. Always, she preferred to describe herself as a painter and not a performer, and her connection to painting was a physical one, too – sometimes literally, as when she suspended herself naked in a harness for 1973's drawing piece *Up to and Including Her Limits*, and sometimes less literally, as in the case of the early-career canvases in *Body Politics*, many of which are thickly slashed with paint, near-three-dimensional in form. She once said that she hoped to 'expose...and confront...a social range of current cultural taboos and repressive conventions' by using her body, and her sexuality, in her work, and rarely has that exposure of taboos and confrontation of repression been more evident than in *Fuses* (1967), a 22-minute film that documents the act of sex through a scrim of scratches, acid burns, and other material degradation. One of the great thrills of pornography, aside from the obvious, is what the critic Sarah Nicole Prickett once described as 'the pleasure of watching extremely competent people do their jobs.' *Fuses*, being a record of Schneemann's sexual life with her then-partner, has nothing to do with competence or professionalism, and it makes it obvious to the viewer how unusual it is for us to actually see people in love fucking each other. This, and not the act of penetration, is the work's most extreme, taboo-busting element, and it remains as rare an artefact now in 2022 as it was in 1967.



CaroleeSchneemann, Two film strips from *Fuses*, 1964–67, 16 mm film transferred to HD video, colour, silent, 29:51 min. Original film burned with fire and acid, painted and collaged. Courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York; the Carolee Schneemann Foundation and Galerie Lelong & Co., Hales Gallery, and P.P.O.W, New York

Later in her career, and later in the retrospective, Schneemann moves from flesh and sex and freedom as a subject to terrorism, death and war, and it's interesting that her work's overt femininity, for the most part, decreases commensurate with the presence of violence in the work. Heterosexual sex – viewed as the physical collision of a cis man and cis woman, an exchange or an agreement between a beneficiary of the patriarchy and one of those subjugated by it – is often portrayed in feminist art as a kind of warfare, too. Think of the 'Relation' series by Ulay and Marina Abramovic, in which the two run at each other, naked, until both of them are injured, or in which Ulay directs an arrow at Abramovic's heart, her safety guaranteed only by their ability to hold the bow sufficiently taut – the message, that sex and love between men and women can be dangerous and destructive, is not a particularly happy one, even if it is sometimes delivered in such a way as to be mordantly amusing. Schneemann's depiction, in *Fuses*, of a heterosexual sex life genuinely filled with wholly mutual love and pleasure was, and is, a radical proposition, and it is entirely in keeping with her view of female life in general. I said earlier that *Meat Joy* was 'at once hot and comical and nasty.' Isn't sex, viewed from a distance? Isn't occupying a woman's body? *Body Politics* is, fundamentally, a show about these contradictions, showing that – just as F. Scott Fitzgerald so famously said that the mark of a first-rate intelligence was the ability to hold two duelling ideas simultaneously in the mind – the mark of a truly great feminist artist is a knack for acknowledging that the feminine experience can encompass a hot fuck *and* an objectifying mindfuck at the same time.

Philippa Snow is the author of [Which As You Know Means Violence](#) (Repeater Books UK, Penguin Random House US).

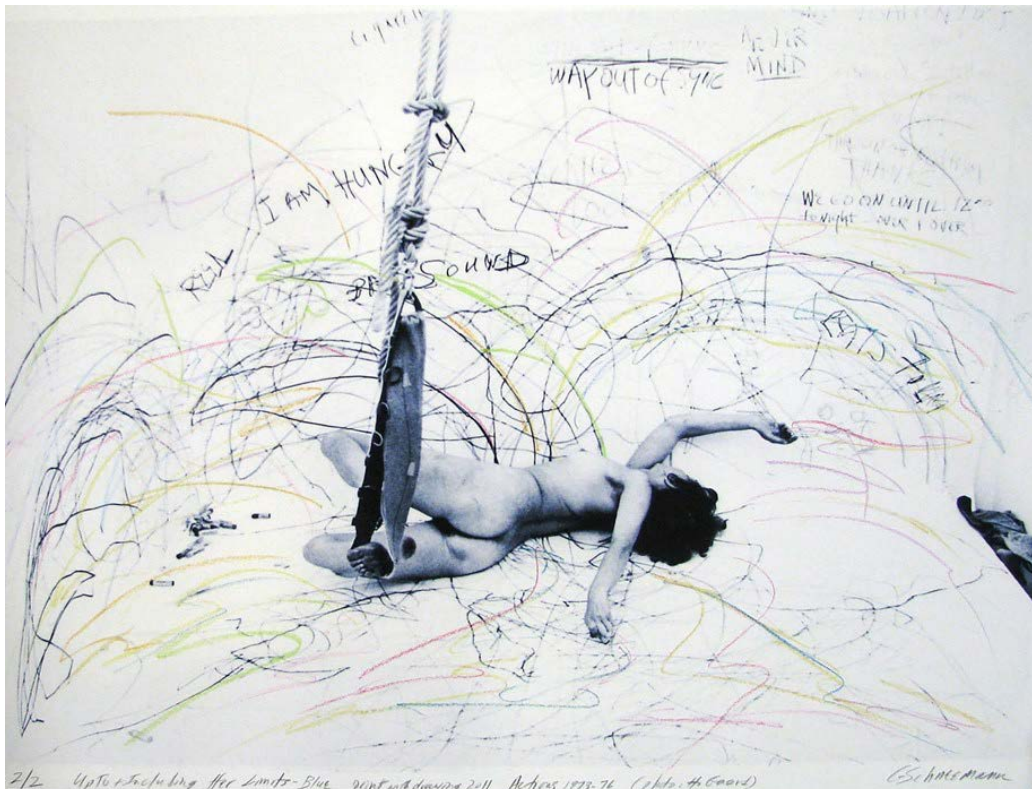
LISSON GALLERY

AnOther

20 February 2020

AnOther

How Carolee Schneemann Inspired a Generation of Women Artists



Carolee Schneemann, *Up to and Including Her Limits-Blue*, 1973-76/2011 Photo: Henrik Gaard
Courtesy of the Estate of Carolee Schneemann and P.P.O.W, New York © Carolee Schneemann

After a series of Carolee Schneemann's works go on display in New York, Miss Rosen charts the radical feminist artist's influence on art

Just before pioneer radical feminist artist **Carolee Schneemann** died in 2019 at the age of 79, the establishment finally honoured her work, awarding her the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale and staging her first comprehensive retrospective at MoMA PS1. The trailblazing artist, best known for works including *Meat Joy* (1964) and *Interior Scroll* (1975), frequently used her body to challenge the patriarchy and reclaim the power of women's sexual agency before, during, and after the Women's Liberation Movement.



GALLERY / 6 IMAGES

Carolee Schneemann

For her efforts, Schneemann was expelled from Bard College, physically attacked during one performance, and rejected by feminists as pandering to the male gaze. Yet Schneemann was a giant upon whose shoulders so many women artists and pop culture icons stand, and her legacy is being honoured with a selection of iconic works in the "Cruel Optimism" section of the Felix LA Art Fair.

Included in the exhibition are photographs of Schneemann from *Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions for Camera* (1963), *Portrait Partials* (1970/2007), and *Up to and Including Her Limits-Blue* (1973-76/2011) – revolutionary works that subverted the idea of women’s bodies existing merely as an object for the delectation of men. As both artist and subject, Schneemann liberated herself from male control, restoring the female body as a symbol of power by being fearless, daring, and bold.

"Carolee made her mark early with her performance pieces in the 60s and her groundbreaking *Interior Scroll* really detonated art history," artist Judith Bernstein tells AnOther. "This piece was first performed at the show *Women Here and Now* in East Hampton. She asked Joan Semmel, who organised the exhibition, if she knew which type of glue would work best with vaginal fluid. Joan had no clue. Carolee used the vagina as the source of where her creativity lies, and gave birth to a literal and psychological scroll. It was a voice from within."



Carolee Schneemann, *Portrait Partials*, 1970/2007
 Courtesy of the Estate of Carolee Schneemann and P-P-O-W, New York © Carolee Schneemann

Bernstein first met Schneemann in New York in the 1970s and recounts stories of when “we were both much younger and hot. We hung out together at bars to get connected, meet guys, and have affairs. It was much more uptight in the 50s and 60s but in the 70s, all holds broke loose. It happened almost overnight because of the Pill. Women wanted sexual gratification and got it. It was a liberating time and the work dealt with that.”

Schneemann and Bernstein both dealt with issues of sex, power, and politics in a confrontational manner, and showed in many group exhibitions together. “Our sensibilities overlapped. Both our practices came from our inner core. We were both screaming to be heard. It was an artistic sisterhood,” says Bernstein, who was a founding member of the first all-women’s cooperative AIR Gallery. “There was a group of people that were doing work on sexuality that got together and hung out: Louise Bourgeois, Joan Semmel, Hannah Wilke, so that we had a group that was very supportive of what we were doing.”

Despite their efforts, both Bernstein’s and Schneemann’s work was rejected and scorned by feminists of that time. “They had a very narrow attitude about what feminism was about. It was puritanical in terms of what women were allowed to do,” Bernstein says. Nevertheless, “We did what we wanted. You didn’t think you were going to sell or get money. This is what we had to do. I’m glad I lived long enough to see that art went in our direction.”

Works by Carolee Schneemann were presented by P.P.O.W. Gallery in the “Cruel Optimism” section of the Felix LA Art Fair from February 13 – 16, 2020.

LISSON GALLERY

The New York Times
10 March 2019

The New York Times

Carolee Schneemann, Visionary Feminist Performance Artist, Dies at 79



Carolee Schneemann at her home in New Paltz, N.Y., in 1996. A bold, groundbreaking performance artist, her influence on other artists has only recently been recognized. Credit...Joan Barker

Carolee Schneemann, a prime mover of performance art, a feminist visionary and one of the most influential artists of the late 20th century, died on Wednesday at her home in New Paltz, N.Y. She was 79.

The cause was breast cancer, said Wendy Olsoff, co-founder of the gallery P.P.O.W., which, along with Galerie LeLong, represented Ms. Schneemann in New York. She had lived with the disease for more than two decades.

Ms. Schneemann found instant notoriety early on. In 1964, in Paris and New York, she staged an epochal performance event titled “Meat Joy.” Set to a pop-score composed by her husband then, the avant-garde composer James Tenney, the work had the appearance of an orgiastic free-for-all, with men and women, including the artist, rolling around on the floor in bikini briefs slathering each other with blood-red paint and clutching dead fish and chickens.

At regular intervals from 1963 to 1967, Ms. Schneemann and Mr. Tenney filmed themselves having sex. She then edited the footage into a film called “Fuses,” in which the couple are seen in close-up in their darkened bedroom — they shot their lovemaking by passing small cameras back and forth — with a rural landscape of changing seasons visible through a window.



MS. Schneemann in her work “Eye Body #11,” 1963. “In 1963,” she said, “to use my body as an extension of my painting-constructions was to challenge and threaten the psychic territorial power lines by which women were admitted to the Art Stud Club.”Credit...The Estate of Carolee Schneemann, Galerie Lelong and Co., Hales Gallery, and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

Most radically, the entire film is framed as if seen through the eyes of an observant but unjudging third party, a feline named Kitch, the first of several “muse cats” that Ms. Schneemann bonded with and included in her art over the years.

For the startling 1975 performance piece “Interior Scroll,” Ms. Schneemann stood nude on a table, posing like a studio model, while reading from a book of her collected writings titled “Cezanne, She Was a Great Painter.” The writings included a litany of misogynistic reactions a female artist could expect to encounter in her career, like these:

BE PREPARED:

to have your brain picked

to have the pickings misunderstood

to be mistreated whether your success

increases or decreases

if you are a woman (and things are not utterly changed)

they will almost never believe you really did it

(what you did do)

they will patronize you humor you

try to sleep with you want you to transform them

with your energy

She then put the book down and slowly extracted a narrow strip of typewritten paper from her vagina, reading aloud the text on the scroll as it emerged. The words included a direct address to a contemporary filmmaker and theorist — female, as it happened — who had dismissed her work as “diaristic indulgence.”

Ms. Schneemann encountered critical resistance regularly, often from what seemed to be conflicting directions. Some feminists viewed her body-positive, pro-sensual art as exploitative, not as a bold assertion of female agency. In contrast, in 1969, when she screened “Fuses” at the Cannes Film Festival, an audience made up almost exclusively of male critics greeted it with anger: The film, it seemed, wasn’t pornographic enough for them. They saw it as a tease.

Carolee Schneemann was born on Oct. 12, 1939, into a middle-class family in Fox Chase, Pa., then a rural neighborhood of Philadelphia. Her father was a country doctor. She remembered poring over his anatomy books when she was very young.

“There was always physicality around us,” she said in an interview, “leaking, spilling out of boundaries, wounded farmers with bleeding limbs, hemorrhages, infections. No fantasy of the sanitized body in this household.”



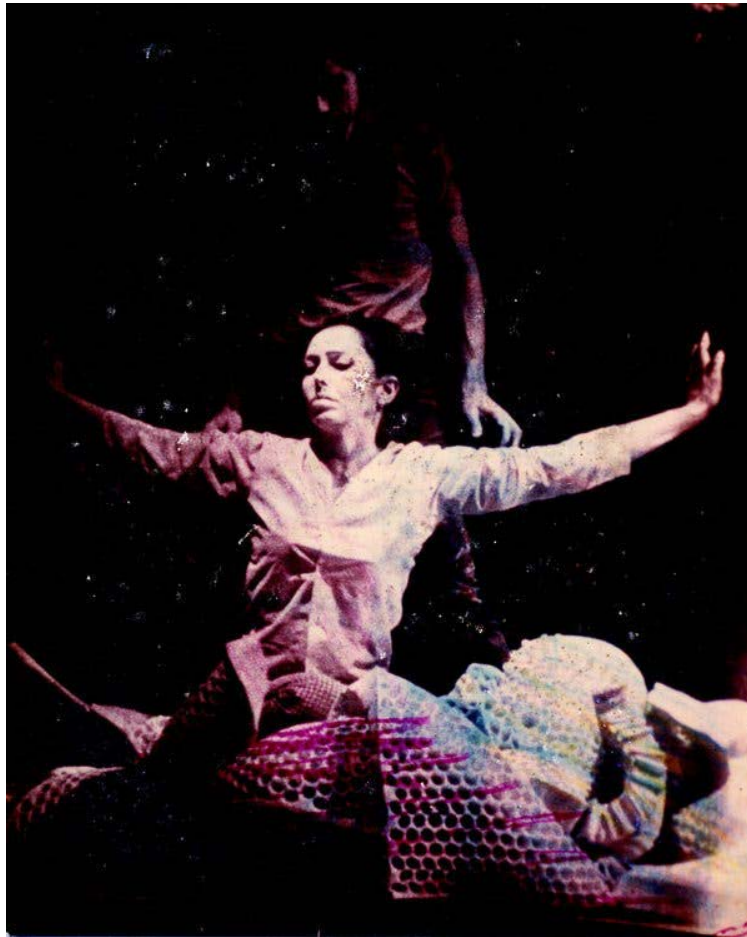
A still from Ms. Schneemann's "Infinity Kisses" (2008). The video, in which she shares kisses with her cats, may be her most unguardedly sensual work. Credit...The Estate of Carolee Schneemann, Galerie Lelong and Co., Hales Gallery, and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

Ms. Schneemann had an early interest in art and the natural world, and in 1955, over her family's objections, she entered Bard College, in the Hudson Valley, on a full scholarship to study painting. There she ran into problems. The all-male studio faculty was primarily interested in having her pose for them. When, on her own initiative, she produced nude-self-portraits, she was expelled for a year on grounds of, as she put it, "moral turpitude."

The punitive exile — she later returned to earn a degree — proved fortunate. She enrolled in the art program at Columbia University, where she met Mr. Tenney. She continued to paint in a gestural style that borrowed something from Cezanne and a lot from Abstract Expressionists like Arshile Gorky and Willem de Kooning. In her paintings of the 1950s, landscapes and bodies share a charge of organic energy. A nude portrait of Mr. Tenney could be mistaken for a tangle of tree limbs, or a garden blooming. The couple divorced in 1968.

At the time, the high-minded anguish attributed to Abstract Expressionism had little appeal for her. What mattered in "action painting" was action, she thought — evidence of bodily motion. She took this aesthetic beyond wielding brushes to adding found matter to the surfaces of her canvases, then cutting them up and adding them to three-dimensional constructions, some with motorized components.

By the 1960s, these assemblages had become environments against which, and within which, she performed, smearing her nude body with paint and grease and surrounding it with props: live snakes, shattered glass, a cow skull. Such performances were captured in a photographic series titled "Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions for Camera." Shot by the Icelandic Pop artist Erró, they suggest erotic archaic rituals amplified by a Dadaist wit. "In 1963, to use my body as an extension of my painting-constructions," she later said, "was to challenge and threaten the psychic territorial power lines by which women were admitted to the Art Stud Club."



A vintage photograph that was incorporated in Ms. Schneemann's work "Snows." Credit...The Estate of Carolee Schneemann, Galerie Lelong and Co., Hales Gallery, and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

It was a short, logical step from these studio solos into a theater. Ms. Schneemann made the transition as a founding member of Judson Dance Theater, along with the choreographer-performers Deborah Hay and Yvonne Rainer and the artist Robert Morris.

In the Judson aesthetic, everyday actions — walking, running, lovemaking — had expressive dimensions. "Meat Joy" was a natural, if operatically scaled, product of its spirit, and it was carefully choreographed. Ms. Schneemann had plotted its movements in preliminary drawings.

If "Meat Joy" reflected the liberationist spirit of its day, other work tapped into its dark political realities, specifically the war in Vietnam. In her 1965 "Viet-Flakes," a video camera scans newspaper clippings of battlefield atrocities as if from the perspective of a marauding fighter plane. Two years later, she incorporated the film into a monumental stage piece called "Snows," in which performers, taking directions from the audience, enacted sculptural tableaux derived from war pictures.

Just as Ms. Schneemann was forthright in advocating for self-determined pleasure, she was bold in confronting transience and mortality. A 1994-95 installation, "Mortal Coils," was a multimedia memorial to 17 friends who had died. "Terminal Velocity," in 2001, was based on enlarged newspaper photographs of people falling from the doomed World Trade Center towers on Sept. 11 that year. (She took critical heat for using these images so soon after 9/11.) In a multimedia installation called "Known/Unknown: Plague Column" (1995/96), shown first at Elga Wimmer Gallery in New York and later as part of a 2016 retrospective at P.P.O.W., she focused on her own experience with breast cancer.

And she entered territories where few other artists were venturing, like interspecies communication. A video titled “Kitch’s Last Meal” (1973-78) is a five-hour gesture of mourning for the loss of a beloved companion. A 2008 video, “Infinity Kisses — the Movie,” in which Ms. Schneemann shares kisses with Kitch’s feline successors, may be her most unguardedly sensual work.



In Ms. Schneemann’s “Fuses,” she and her husband at the time, the avant-garde composer James Tenney, filmed themselves having sex at regular intervals from 1963 to 1967. They shot their lovemaking by passing small cameras back and forth.

Credit...The Estate of Carolee Schneemann, Galerie Lelong and Co., Hales Gallery, and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

In a half-century career of productivity — encompassing painting, sculpture, collage, drawing, bookmaking, photography, performance, installation, film and writing — Ms. Schneemann found little support in a mainstream art world.

In the 1960s and 1970s, she had no gallery representation. She had to wait until 1996 for a modest museum survey: “Carolee Schneemann: Up to and Including Her Limits,” organized by Dan Cameron at the New Museum in Manhattan. (The show got its title from an

installation in which she suspended herself in a tree-surgeon's halter and drew on the surrounding walls, converting her body into a mark-making utensil.)

Ms. Schneemann, who lived in the Springtown section of New Paltz, is survived by a brother and sister.

In 1999, she wrote to the MacArthur Foundation: "I am not the only woman artist with a distinguished history who has no way to sustain her work, nor provide for her future. I'm enclosing a bibliography as well as an exhibition and lecture sheet to clarify this extremely paradoxical history, the punishing facts of this mythic 'career.' "

But in the last few years she began to be acknowledged as the history-shaper she was. In 2015, the Museum der Moderne Salzburg in Austria organized a near-comprehensive career retrospective, which later traveled to MoMA PS1 in Queens. In 2017, she took the international spotlight when she was awarded the Golden Lion for lifetime achievement at the Venice Biennale.

Most important was the growing recognition of her influence on high-profile younger figures like Marina Abramovic, Matthew Barney and Pipilotti Rist, and, directly or indirectly, on newer generations of artists who take the body, sexuality and gender as their brief. A born collaborator, Ms. Schneemann was well known for her generosity to fellow artists, and for her tireless drive to keep working despite "every sort of conceivable resistance."

"Death is greedy," she wrote near the end of last year, "So on we go, with all the love and appreciation we can express to each other."

LISSON GALLERY

Another Gaze
7 March 2019

Another Gaze



By Gabrielle Schwarz / Essays / March 7, 2019

Intimate Contact: Images Of Suffering In The Work Of Carolee Schneemann

"I live for the nude rabble rousing of Carolee Schneemann".¹ These words, written in a recent Facebook post by Lena Dunham, creator of and frequently nude actor on the HBO series *Girls*, demonstrate Schneemann's current role as a rightly revered goddess of feminist art. However, as Dunham's words suggest, the American artist's pioneering role is nearly always attributed to a small pool of performances and films, created in Paris and New York in the sixties and seventies, which centre on the artist's own often naked body. The notorious group performance *Meat Joy*, a "celebration of flesh as material" that included eight nearly naked dancers, wet paint and raw fish and meat, was first presented in Paris in 1964 and then later that year at the Judson Dance Theatre in New York.² The following year Schneemann again courted controversy with *Fuses* (1965), a self-shot film depicting scenes of Schneemann and her then-partner, the composer James Tenney, having sex. Perhaps the artist's most direct feminist statement can be found in *Interior Scroll* (1975/77), first performed at an exhibition of paintings by women artists, in which Schneemann undressed in front of her audience and proceeded to read out a series of feminist texts written on a scroll pulled out of her vagina. At the time, these works were not only reviled by conservative critics, but ignored or dismissed by many of her fellow feminist artists, who found her unabashedly eroticised, corporeal

approach difficult to reconcile with their critique of visual pleasure and the fetishisation of the female body. Now they are roundly embraced for their radical reconciliation of female sexuality and subjective, creative agency.³



Images from *Interior Scroll* (1975/77). Courtesy of Hales Gallery, London

Schneemann's feminism does not, however, begin and end with iconic images of her own naked body. Counterbalancing her groundbreaking work on sex and pleasure, Schneemann has also produced an important body of work exploring pain and suffering, international disasters and violent conflicts. What is most crucial to and pervasive in all of her work, whether addressing pleasure or pain, is an approach that refuses – both in terms of subject matter and style – to renounce the artist's own subjectivity. For Schneemann, to appropriate the familiar slogan of second-wave feminism, the personal is political – an idea which, as the art historian Mignon Nixon has pointed out, can go both ways, making politics personal as well as bringing the personal into the realm of politics.⁴ However, Schneemann's work on war remains comparatively under-recognised, despite the artist's ongoing commitment to the theme, beginning with her early anti-Vietnam war film *Viet-Flakes* (1965) and continuing into the 21st century with works such as *Terminal Velocity* (2001), Schneemann's response to 9/11, and *More Wrong Things* (2001), a video installation bringing together footage from various atrocities. These works deserve further attention, and not only because of the chaos that Western interventionism continues to perpetuate around the world today. Revealed in the complex mechanics of Schneemann's art is her own ever-present subjectivity, through which the works are able to insist on the painfully personal nature of what we often call 'global' issues.

For Schneemann, this insistence on the personal is foundational not just for her ethical but also for her aesthetic philosophy. The following poetic words were originally written for a film entitled *Kitch's Last Meal* (1973–78) and reused in *Interior Scroll*:

I met a happy man
a structuralist filmmaker—
but don't call me that
it's something else I do—
he said we are fond of you
you are charming
but don't ask us
to look at your films
we cannot

there are certain films

we cannot look at

the personal clutter

the persistence of feelings

the hand-touch sensibility

the diaristic indulgence

the painterly mess

the dense gestalt

the primitive techniques

The offending elements of Schneemann's work encompass subject matter ("personal clutter"), tone ("feelings"), form and materiality ("hand-touch sensibility", "painterly mess", "primitive techniques"). It is not simply that these elements, although often gendered in this way, are offensively and therefore subversively 'female' – Schneemann's work contains no such reductive essentialism. Rather, they reveal the centrality to Schneemann of an avowedly personal approach, rooted in the concrete particularity of lived experience. Indeed, while Schneemann generally resists the incorporation of her work into pre-existing philosophical or theoretical frameworks (as might be expected from her satirical takedown of the 'structuralist filmmaker'), convincing arguments have been made for her indebtedness to Simone de Beauvoir's particular brand of existentialism – one based not on essential being but on the lived experience of particular subjects. Branden W. Joseph draws parallels between what he calls Schneemann's "aesthetics of ambiguity" and de Beauvoir's ethical critique of "impersonal universal man" as "the source of values".⁵ These values, de Beauvoir argues, can only be derived from "the plurality of concrete, particular" lives in "situations whose particularity is as radical and as irreducible as subjectivity itself".

Schneemann's aesthetics are similarly opposed to universalised values and abstract 'truths', whether of structuralist films or militaristic discourse. It is the abstraction of the latter discourse that is so powerfully undermined by the works explored in this essay. Through a range of artistic strategies, from documentary filmmaking and photomontage to painterly gestures and sculptural installations, this body of work reveals its engagement with one of feminism's most valuable lessons: the imperative to break down the barrier between the self and the 'other', by attending to and connecting with the stories and experiences of unheard and silenced voices.

Schneemann's first major foray into the territory of war is the film *Viet-Flakes* (1965), one of the first works of art made in protest against the ongoing Vietnam War. In the early sixties, Schneemann had begun to become aware of the United State's devastating involvement in the war in Vietnam, which was going largely unreported in the mainstream media. She began building what she termed her 'atrocities image collection' of photographs collected from foreign newspapers and underground press depicting the war.⁶ Suffering from nightmares arising from these images, Schneemann began to compose *Viet-Flakes*. She used a 8mm camera, to which she had taped multiple magnifying lenses, to create an animated album of her collected atrocity images. In extreme close-up, the camera travels joltingly over the surface of these photographs, which show Vietnamese people dying, mourning or seeking to escape, the black-and-white film toned a ghostly blue. The uncomfortable, at times nauseating experience of viewing the film is heightened by the discordant soundtrack, a music collage of choppy fragments of Western classical music, pop songs and South-East Asian folk songs, composed by James Tenney (who featured in *Fuses* in the same year). *Viet-Flakes* and the performance *Snows* (1967) – into which the film was incorporated – created a template for subsequent projects, which continued to explore images of contemporary conflicts. Throughout the eighties, Schneemann produced the 'Lebanon Series', which also arose from her dreams of war following Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982, and eventually encompassed an artist's book, several paintings, a film and kinetic sculpture. Today, Schneemann is focused on the ongoing conflict in Syria, working with images of the corpses of victims to create new film work.⁷



Viet-Flakes (1965)

For Schneemann, there have always been clear parallels between the violence inflicted by patriarchal culture on the individual female body and that inflicted on communities as a whole, particularly during times of war:

Beirut fulfilled a military sexual metaphor – they could not stop jerking off on this harlot. Beirut was asking for it. They could not stop raining down their toxic ejaculations – rockets aimed into the half-moon curve of the sea. The language that’s always used – “penetrating the southern border”, “raining down bombardments”, “coming in low and hard”, “pounding villages”, “blasting off” [...]. Often the valorous, unspeakable shattering of the enemy will be characterized by images of women and children in the ruins.⁸

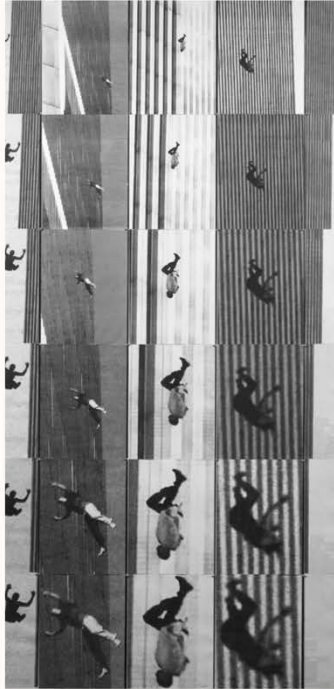
The “military sexual metaphor” underlying the visual and verbal language used to represent war is significant not just for its blatantly misogynistic overtones. As Schneemann recognises, the symbolic nature of the language serves to generalise the experience of war. Abstracted, even idealised, as a heroic assertion of masculinity, war is distanced from the all-too-real experiences of its victims: the physical destruction of their bodies, families and homes.

Indeed, Schneemann, when asked about her choice to turn to the form of the documentary film, stated: “It’s a proto-feminist issue [...]. Documentary work begins to seize the actuality of lived experience in its contradictions and to start tearing away the horrible aggrandised mythology that comes out of the worst of self-righteous Americana.”⁹ Schneemann has made it her task to bear witness to documentary footage depicting real living – and dying – bodies. But the resulting art works are not just a matter of documentation. Rather, they reflect on the ways in which we experience documentation, on how different forms of mediation can make the same image seem comfortably distant or intensely personal.

In *Viet-Flakes*, Schneemann’s intrusive animating techniques – what her happy structuralist filmmaker might have described as “primitive” or a “hand-touch sensibility” – highlight and enact this mediation. The camera lingers and returns to the same faces contorted with grief, using strong spotlights and zooming in impossibly close until the pixelated image disintegrates under the pressure. Mignon Nixon rightly points out the ethical implications of this process: “subjective engagement with war might deepen the psychic dimension of political responsibility.”¹⁰ Crucially, for Schneemann, subjective engagement does not imply a single, integrated perspective or moral imperative. Rather, in her dense collages – her “painterly mess” of broken images, discordant sounds and distorted film – fragmentation rules, and emphasises the multiple layers of mediation and interpretation that form our experiences of contemporary events. The only real imperative is to empathise with the lives and deaths of others.

Nowhere, perhaps, is this imperative more evident than in Schneemann’s unusually pared-back response to the attacks of September 11. Schneemann has described *Terminal Velocity* as a “eulogy” to the victims of this tragedy, arising less from a sense of the urgency of political action (this is certainly no call to arms for the war on terror) than as a public record of “[o]ur own vertiginous grief, rage and sorrow”.¹¹ The work takes the form of a photomontage depicting scanned and enlarged images, arranged in seven columns and six rows, of people falling from the World Trade Centre. Each column focuses on one falling body, a series of increasingly cropped images enlarged up to the point of maximum legibility. The grid – the emblematic modernist form devoid of time, space, bodies or chaos – comes to resemble a frame-by-frame breakdown of

the final moments of people falling to their deaths. Schneemann writes: "The computer process allows intimate contact with each horrific isolation [...] In this communal nightmare, fleeting visual attributes of nine lives become clearer by enlargement."¹² While today the images Schneemann used may have become familiar, at the time the tragedy was nearly always depicted through the comparatively impersonal images of the towers in flames. When *Terminal Velocity* was first exhibited soon after the attacks, American audiences found the overwhelmingly human specificity revealed by Schneemann's enlargements of the anonymous victims *too* intimate, too much to bear. As Schneemann wrote: "I have had to consider the violence of initial reactions due to facing a vulnerability which counters our American mythology of invulnerability, of sustaining heroics."



Terminal Velocity, (2001–5)

For decades Schneemann would draw on her collection of atrocity images to make films (occasionally integrated into performances or sculptural installations), artist's books and photomontages about global suffering. While clearly rooted, both in style and philosophy, in Schneemann's distinctive approach to making art, on a thematic level Schneemann's 'war' works always stood apart from her work exploring her own life. In 2001, however, she first presented *More Wrong Things*, an installation which, in a ground-breaking move, brought together Schneemann's proliferated archive of atrocities (now featuring footage not just from Vietnam and Lebanon but also Sarajevo, Haiti, Palestine, Afghanistan and more) with another archive: footage of her own personal disasters in recent years, from the lives and deaths of her cats to the alternative therapy she was undergoing as cancer treatment, as well as short, sexually explicit fragments of celebrated past works, including *Interior Scroll* and *Fuses*. These short clips have, in various iterations of the work, been projected in blown-up format onto walls, displayed on between fourteen and seventeen monitors, suspended from the ceiling, and embedded in a tangled mess of cords and cables. Through this exposed wiring, a literal embodiment of Schneemann's insistence on clutter, mess and exposure, the mediating processes of image-making and -viewing are turned inside out. With the clips dispersed across multiple screens, all playing out of sync, endlessly repeating, their frenetic violence accumulates – almost to the point of emotional paralysis. But not quite.

"[T]here is a boundary crossed where her pain becomes our pain. The inescapability of grief fills the room."¹³ Thus one reviewer, although unable to locate the precise "mechanism" through which *More Wrong Things* succeeds in moving her to tears, describes the landscape of empathy the installation presents. While in previous works it was Schneemann's insistent intervention on the surface of the images that enabled her and her viewers to make intimate contact with the depicted pain,

here it is the suggestion that a direct parallel can (and should) be drawn between the ‘public’ disasters taking place around the world and the personal ill health, loss and grief from which we all suffer – and that none of this can really be kept separate from the rest of our lives, the pleasures of sex and creativity. In this work, explicitly a piece about war, technology, military conflict, and geopolitics, the resolutely inappropriate intrusion of Schneemann’s own “personal clutter” finally brings together the two strands of her art. Yes, the personal is political; but the most abstract politics also has a physical shape. It is the shape of our human bodies, in pleasure and pain.

¹ Lena Dunham, ‘Peeking From Between My Fingers: some disjointed thoughts on the Famous video’, Facebook, 27 June 2016. ² Carolee Schneemann, ‘Meat Joy’, in *More Than Meat Joy: Performance Works and Selected Writings*, ed. Bruce R. McPherson (New Paltz, NY: Documentext, 1979), p. 63. ³ See Jeff Nagy, ‘Carolee Schneemann’s Unforgivable Art’, 15 December 2016, Public Books. Nagy writes: ‘Schneemann recalls having been accused of playing into the most prurient of male fantasies’, and even Agnès Varda, director of feminist New Wave classics like *Cléo de 5 à 7* and, later, *Sans toit ni loi*, hated the piece and deemed it irredeemably obscene. ⁴ Mignon Nixon, ‘Schneemann’s Personal Politics’, in *Carolee Schneemann: Kinetic Painting*, ed. Sabine Breitwieser (Salzburg: Museum der Moderne and Munich: Prestel, 2015), p. 45. ⁵ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (New York: Citadel Press, 1948), pp. 17–18; quoted in Branden W. Joseph, ‘Unclear Tendencies: Carolee Schneemann’s Aesthetics of Ambiguity’, in *Carolee Schneemann: Kinetic Painting*, p. 40. ⁶ Schneemann and Duncan White, ‘On the Development of Snows and Other Early Expanded Cinema Works’, in *Expanded Cinema: Art, Performance and Film*, ed. A.L. Rees, Duncan White, Steven Ball, and David Curtis (London: Tate Publishing, 2011), p. 86. ⁷ See ‘Vincent Honoré in Conversation with Carolee Schneemann’, *Cura Magazine (Online)* ⁸ Schneemann, ‘The Lebanon Series’, in *Carolee Schneemann: Imaging her Erotics* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003), p. 170. See also ‘Schneemann’s analysis of the discourse on the 1990-91 Gulf War’ in Carolee Schneemann (interviewed by Andrea Juno), *Angry Women, Re/Search 13* (San Francisco: Re/Search Publications, 1991), p. 77: ‘It’s a phallogocentric mania, it’s psychotic, and the language of this war has all been about ‘creaming them, surrounding and killing them, pounding them relentlessly’ [...] It’s like a gang-bang, an endless rape with the heaviest battering ram, the battering cock.’ ⁹ Schneemann, ‘Interview with Katie Haug’, in *Imaging Her Erotics*, p. 37. ¹⁰ Nixon, p. 53. ¹¹ Schneemann, ‘Terminal Velocity’, in *Carolee Schneemann: Kinetic Painting*, p. 286. ¹² Ibid. ¹³ Barbara Leon, ‘Carolee Schneemann exhibit: More Wrong Things’, 21 May 2001

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The Brooklyn Rail
01 December 2017

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CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN: *Kinetic Painting*



Carolee Schneemann. *Up to and Including Her Limits*. 1973-76. Crayon on paper, rope, harness, Super 8mm film projector, video (color, sound; 29 min.), and six monitors. Dimensions variable. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Committee on Drawings Funds and Committee on Media and Performance Art Funds, 2012. © 2017 Carolee Schneemann. Courtesy the artist, P.P.O.W, and Galerie Lelong, New York.

In French, the way a particular painter applies paint to canvas, her “tell,” so to speak, is called *la patte de l’artiste*. *La patte*, generally translated as “paw,” has a much more expansive meaning in French, where, in addition to mammals’ feet with claws and pads, it applies to the extremities of insects, birds, and reptiles. That subtle trace of the body’s vibrations, which the human painter shares with the rest of the animal kingdom, pulls aside the curtains of convention and training to reveal the essential role of the body, through its sense of touch, in realizing the artwork. As *Kinetic Painting*, her first career-spanning retrospective, shows, Carolee Schneemann’s art has radically re-oriented preconceptions about painting away from the primacy of the visual to the primacy of the haptic, the implications of which we are only just beginning to understand. She most clearly stated that expansive re-orientation in her performance series *Up to and Including Her Limits* (1973–1976). In this series, Schneemann tied a tree surgeon’s harness to the performance space ceiling in a corner lined with paper. Hanging from the harness with colored crayons in her hands, she swung her nude body through the air, allowing that movement to determine the marks she left with the crayons: “kinetic painting” indeed.

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Carolee Schneemann. *Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions for Camera*. 1963/2005. Eighteen gelatin silver prints. 24 x 20 inches each. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the artist. © 2017 Carolee Schneemann. Courtesy the artist, P.P.O.W, and Galerie Lelong, New York. Photos: Erró.

At least as early as *Eye Body* (1963)—a series of staged photographs where the artist posed nude among the props of a loft installation of her design—she insisted that our awareness of space arises in the state of play between the body and its surroundings. Rather than the purely visual, for Schneemann this play between body and environment begins with what, at least in Western culture, has been the most denigrated modality of consciousness: touch. Schneemann was well ahead of her time, as the leading model for mental events among philosophers and research scientists back in the day was a computational one, where the brain acted as a glorified computer. No one today takes the

reductive computational stance seriously, as professionals in the field widely acknowledge that consciousness cannot be other than embodied. To use a painterly analogy, Schneemann brought touch from the background of our awareness to the foreground. This is, of course, of a piece with her transforming the role of the female body in art from the nude, passive receptacle of the gaze, into the “vulvic space,” an active producer of meaning she articulated with great power in *Interior Scroll* (1975/1977). After a ritualistic series of actions, she removed a scroll from inside her vagina and read aloud a message from feminist texts in her movie *Kitch's Last Meal* (1973-1976). With *Interior Scroll*, Schneemann identified the vagina and womb as the sources of “primary knowledge,” the origins of time measurement, math, astronomy, and agriculture.

In the chronology of Schneemann's work, *Up to and Including Her Limits* (1973-1976) comes between *Eye Body* and *Interior Scroll*. It is one of her signature works, and encompasses many of her essential spheres of inquiry: art history, painting, the body, and the role of women. *Kinetic Painting's* installation of the piece reproduces the February 1976 performance at The Kitchen. It includes the original tree surgeon's harness and the original drawings along the walls and on the floor. The drawings are flanked on either side by a stack of three video monitors that play back Schneemann's performances. During those performances, suspended from the harness in a supine position, she drew colored lines of crayon on the paper while swinging through the space. What is missing in *Kinetic Painting's* version of the original 1976 performance, apart from the artist, is the body of her then-recently deceased cat, Kitch, her constant companion who played a central role in her film, *Fuses* (1965), and had accompanied her earlier performances of *Up to and Including Her Limits*. In the February 1976 iteration, Kitch's preserved body was laid on a small table next to the papered corner where Schneemann was performing.



Carolee Schneemann. *Up to and Including Her Limits*. 1973-76. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Committee on Drawings Funds and Committee on Media and Performance Art Funds, 2012. © 2017 Carolee Schneemann. Courtesy the artist, P.P.O.W, and Galerie Lelong, New York.

On the art historical level, *Up to and Including Her Limits* marks an endpoint in the evolution of the female nude in Western art. This convention begins with the Renaissance revival of the nude from the Classical era, Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* (c. 1486), being a prime example. Venus in this image is a passive screen, so to speak, that reflects the projection of male desire. The female nude underwent minor modifications in the succeeding centuries but did not get a significant makeover

until Manet's *Olympia* (1863). While the nude here is still an object of male desire, we are very much aware that we are looking at an actual, and not idealized, woman, in this case Manet's favorite model Victorine Meurent. Further, Meurent counters our objectivizing gaze with her own, as we are about to enter into a transaction on her terms. Should there be any doubt that we are confronting an active sexual being in her own right, Manet offers the indexical clue of the evidently aroused black cat to her right, the word *chatte* in French having the same slang connotation that "pussy" has in English.

Up to and Including Her Limits takes the activation of the female nude to its inevitable conclusion in real space and real time. Schneemann here collapses artist, model, and artwork; figure and ground; process and product into one event. She is not the passive object of the male gaze, but instead the active producer of the artwork. In her piece, the nude is inseparable from the space, in fact she *becomes* the space as she swings through it. However, her ecstatic merging of artist and space in this piece is the logical outcome not of Manet and his work, but another 19th century painter essential to Schneemann's development as an artist, Cézanne.

It is really in Cézanne's art that we get the first glimmerings of the movement in painting away from the purely visual to the more broadly based awareness of space that originates with the haptic. Schneemann understood the implications of Cézanne's obsessions with his "sensations" as pointing to a new relationship between the artist and her environment, blurring the lines between the art object, the painter, and the object of the painter's gaze. In an interview in this newspaper, December 2016, she said about Cézanne: "Later, when I found his early Expressionist work, I loved it so much. I came to the stampedes of paint exploding after I had already committed to the rigorous aspects of Cézanne. I would say that is where I first wanted to break through the surface, to increase the dimensionality of paint and surface, and where I began to understand what painting was really going to demand of me."

What resulted from Schneemann's understanding of painting through the work of Cézanne was a new relationship between the artist and the artwork mediated through the boundary between the two: the skin of the artist's body, or in other words, touch. In the PS1 installation of *Up to and Including Her Limits* the evidence of Schneemann's touch appears as the record of her body movements through the crayon marks. At certain points during the original 1975 performance at the Kitchen, she would slip out of the harness to lie on the floor, becoming part of the "ground." As Cézanne was able to harness his emotions through the application of formal rigor, his *patte* evolved over time from the "stampedes of paint exploding" in his earliest work to the delicate *passage*, or merging foreground and background, in the tightly controlled brushwork from his late work. His psychological immersion in his work became more complete, if less intense, and in the 1890s onward, the painting process began to supersede the product, as evidenced by his famous "unfinished" pieces. Schneemann's *patte*, her sense of touch, in *Up to and Including Her Limits* took Cézanne's immersion in his own process to a new level of actuality and immediacy by extending the artwork itself into actual space and real time through performance, making her own body the medium.

We could also say that Schneemann's *patte*, her "paw," was located metaphorically in Kitch's body. Kitch's role in Schneemann's art has many dimensions, but one of them appears to be her role as witness to Schneemann's experiences. For example in *Fuses*, Kitch appears as a contemplative foil to the blissful couplings of Schneemann and her then partner, composer James Tenney. In this capacity, Kitch's presence speaks to the body's capacity as the ultimate witness of all happenings, recording at the visceral level all the pain, boredom, and pleasure that we all experience. Ecstasy and contemplation, Cézanne and Kitch in Schneemann's art, are two sides of the same coin, and they originate with the body's haptic relationship to the environment. Each living creature is a nexus of vastly complex and intricate webs of fluctuating patterns that connect to the environment: the

vibrations of the atoms that make up the body, the vibrations of molecules in the body as they perform their functions keeping the organism alive, the limbic system, the circulatory system, the nervous system, and so on. Schneemann's great contribution to the evolution of painting has been presenting the human body as the ultimate ground of experience and understanding of space itself, with the promise of liberation through connecting to the energies of actual experience without the filter of cultural prejudices and expectations. It is as if she took our head between her hands and pointed it down at our own bodies, and said: "Start here."

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Financial Times
3 November 2017

FINANCIAL TIMES



Carolee Schneemann's 'Meat Joy' (1964), performed in New York © PPOW/Galerie Lelong

When Carolee Schneemann was an art student in the mid 1950s, her male peers and professors coaxed her into sitting nude before their easels. Letting them look at her was one thing, however; painting her own naked body was another. Schneemann did, then was found guilty of “moral turpitude” and expelled. That’s her version, anyway, and she proudly kept committing the same sin for many years. In the early 1960s, the experience prompted her to ask the question: “Could a nude woman artist be both image and image maker?” A giant retrospective at MoMA/PS1 answers with a resounding “Yes!”

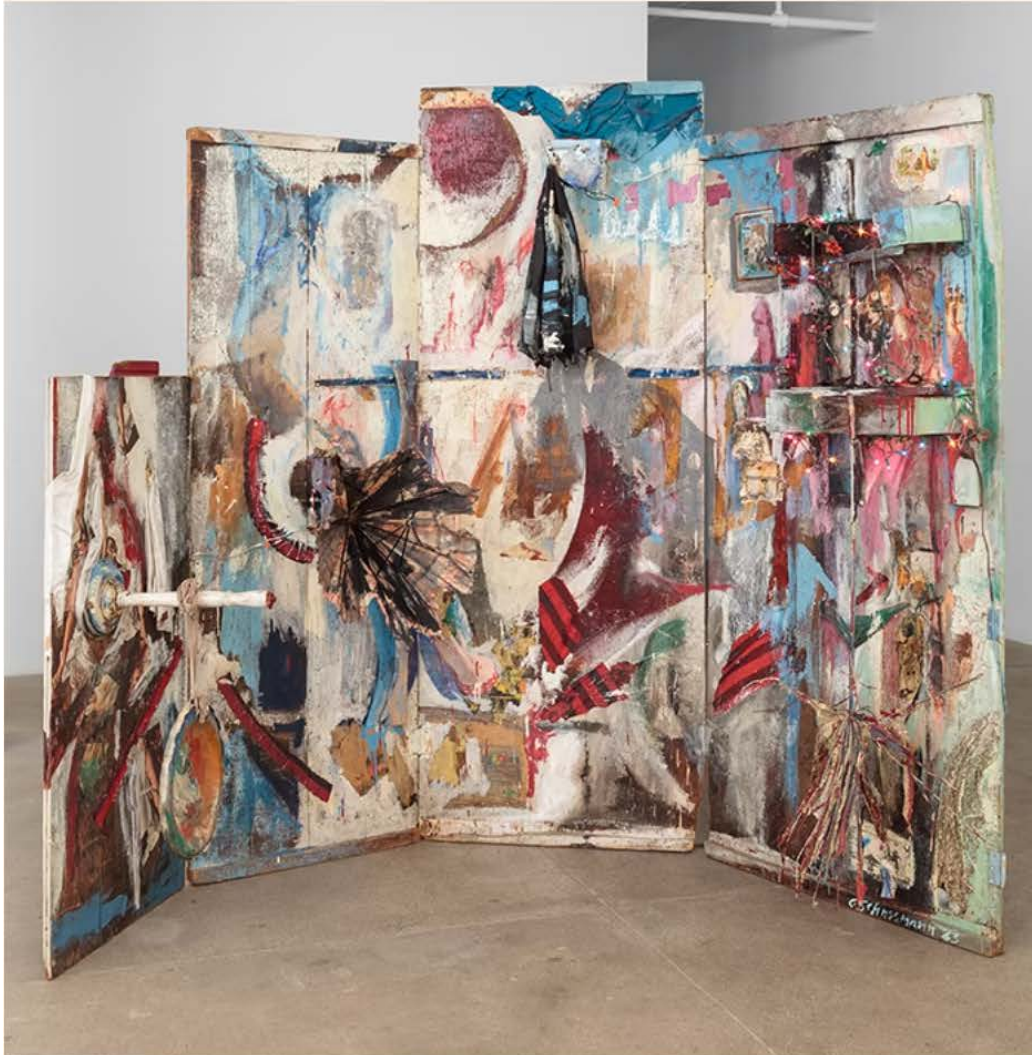
Schneemann’s vision has remained remarkably consistent, even in its paradoxes. She venerates the female form — especially her own — with the gusto you might expect from a straight man. In countless photographs, videos and films she sheds her clothes and faces the camera, at times with endearing awkwardness, at others with classical grace. But like Madonna empowering herself by getting down on all fours or Beyoncé flashing fishnet legs in front of a sign reading “FEMINIST”, Schneemann always insisted that she was striking a blow for women. There is nothing passive about the way she subjects herself to her own gaze, or ours.

The tension between subject and object has governed Schneemann’s work, as it did so many female artists of her generation; her treatment is distinct only in being so explicit. “A woman must continually watch herself,” wrote the critic John Berger in his 1972 classic, *Ways of Seeing*. “From the earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually. And so she comes to consider the surveyed and surveyor within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman . . . Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at.”

Schneemann began her career by looking at other women: the PS1 show opens with the exuberant, richly coloured abstract landscapes of her early years, when she emulated female role models such as Lee Krasner and Joan Mitchell. Before long, though, it dawned on Schneemann that two dimensions couldn’t contain her ambitions. “I was heartbroken when I realised that painting had to turn into something different,” she said in a 2015 interview. “I wanted to shoot myself in existential despair.” She moved briskly away from using oil and canvas, though she still cherished the medium’s romantic, handmade quality.

In the early 1960s, she navigated towards Fluxus, the loose collective of performance artists and avant-garde musicians who banged their work together from whatever was at hand: noise, broken machinery, a Dionysian wish for abandon. She met Claes Oldenburg and took part in a couple of his Lower East Side happenings. In “Meat Joy” she organised a simulated ritual, at

once choreographed and orgiastic, involving bikini-clad writhers who rehearsed but were still only partially prepared for its gluey moistness. “The actual paint, fish, chickens and hot dogs introduced during performance came as a visceral shock,” Schneemann remarks drily.



'Four Fur Cutting Boards' (1963) © PPOW/Galerie Lelong

She also inhaled the spirit of Robert Rauschenberg, which ushered her towards her first bespattered boxes jammed with old photographs and shards of broken glass. His presence is strong in “Four Fur Cutting Boards” (1963), a rickety structure that resembles a stage set lit by coloured bulbs, daubed with wild brushstrokes and encrusted with umbrellas, car parts and rags. She took up Rauschenberg’s rebuke to decorum and amped it up, posing for a series of confrontational self-portraits with her skin painted to blend in with the listing sculpture. Those photographs became “Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions for the Camera”, the first instance of Schneemann reclaiming the tradition of the female nude for women. It was met with derision, which she transfigured into motivating rage. “I thought it would be seen as an integrated, powerful event. It wasn’t,” she said years later. “It was taken as narcissism and self-indulgence by the critics. They said, ‘If you want to paint, put your clothes back on.’ It’s always been like that.”

For men, narcissism was nothing to be ashamed of. In an era of self-actualisation bordering on self-obsession, exhibitionism was just a tool, like a paintbrush or a burin. Critics who hated it didn't reserve their disdain for women; they fired away at Vito Acconci, whose PS1 retrospective last year uncovered vast, if shallow, reservoirs of shamelessness. Acconci made a playmate of his penis; Schneemann spotlighted her vulva.

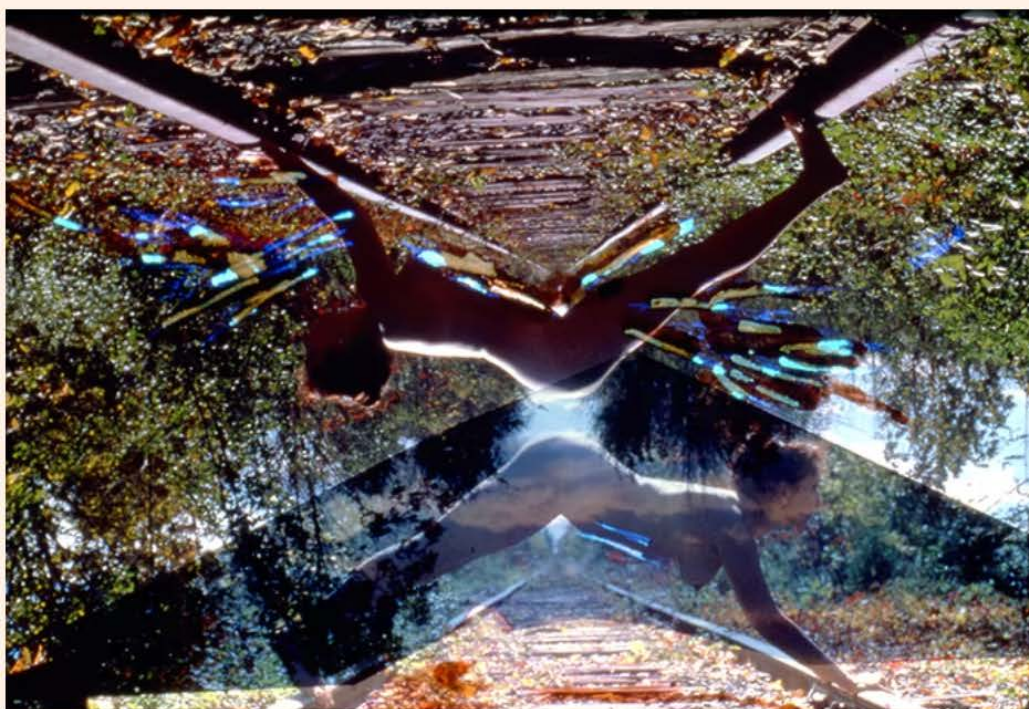


'Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions for Camera' (1963/2005) © PPOW/Galerie Lelong

In her most famous work, "Interior Scroll" (1975), she posed naked on a table and unspooled a ribbon of words from her vagina. As she pulled the tape, she recited the text printed on it, a defiant defence of her work against charges that it was too messy, emotional, diaristic and primal to be taken seriously. She asserted the dominion of the vulva as "the powerful source of orgasmic pleasure, of birth, of transformation, of menstruation, of maternity, to show

that it is not a dead, invisible place”.

Ironically, what endures from that performance is a series of black-and-white photographs of the artist’s athletic 36-year-old body, assuming marmoreal poses on a pedestal. She turned her refusal to be objectified into an objet d’art. She also sidestepped questions of youth and beauty. Schneemann’s focus on her own physique leaves out the broader palette of femaleness: bodies that are old, fat, scarred, sick or pregnant. She talks a good game about the Palaeolithic goddess cult, but none of the flesh in this show bulges beyond the bounds of modern good taste. Venus of Willendorf she’s not.



'Nude on Tracks' (1962-1977) © PPOW/Galerie Lelong

Schneemann is 78 now, and as she aged she found topics other than herself. Breadth came at the expense of vigour, though. For the sake of completeness, the PS1 retrospective includes works dealing with war, atrocity and the horrors of 9/11, none of which holds the eye for long. Looking back from that late period — and from our own era of constant, internet-enabled frank talk and egotism enshrined — her heyday feels at once dated and frustratingly timely. All that politically charged nakedness seems naive, yet the reality of women feeling simultaneously stared at and invisible has changed hardly at all.

To March 11, momaps1.org

LISSON GALLERY

Hyperallergic
20 October 2017

HYPERALLERGIC

Carolee Schneemann on Five Decades of Meat, Harnesses, and Innovation

In which Schneemann discusses rejecting academic language, reveling in flesh, how any respectable gallery needs a “token cunt,” and, naturally, cats.



Carolee Schneemann, “Portrait Partials” (1970), 35 gelatin silver prints. 26 7/8 x 26 3/4” (The Museum of Modern Art, New York, acquired through the generosity of the Peter Norton Family Foundation, © 2017 Carolee Schneemann, courtesy the artist, P.P.O.W, and Galerie Lelong, New York)

In Schneemann’s provocative paintings, sculptures, installations, performances, films, and videos, serendipity often plays a crucial role, interceding as an intermediary to life’s bothersome snags. In fact, serendipity courses through her entire career. A suspension from Bard College for painting herself nude (despite permission to pose nude for male students) seeded her sense of female empowerment. She went on to use her body as a medium to spring the female form from its frame, and to pursue explicit expressions of female sexuality. If her physical body was central to her

project, it also often eclipsed her larger body of work. Hugely significant innovations, born or sired by chance, are now becoming more visible as the breadth of her legacy is acknowledged. At a Huguenot inn near her home in upstate New York, Schneemann spoke with Joyce Beckenstein about her early struggles for recognition, the sensuous connections between the beautiful and the grotesque, and her enduring kinship with cats.

Joyce Beckenstein: *What was going through your mind when you found out you'd received the Golden Lion award?*

Carolee Schneemann: I was incredulous! I first thought it was a mistake; I didn't understand what it was until people started writing me. Now I'm an archivist, an organizer, and I have to tell myself that this new confluence is a kind of work.

JB: *Hadn't much of that work already been done for you over the years?*

CS: My work was acknowledged for its historical significance, but it was nevertheless treated in a marginal way for many years. It took a feminist revolution to ensure that no decent gallery was without what I call a "token cunt." With the culture concentrating on my work with the body as either pornographic or narcissistic, it was hard to get teaching jobs, or to have the work exhibited in terms of its evolving process.

JB: *Now, "Carolee Schneemann: Kinetic Painting," which opened at the Museum der Moderne, Salzburg in 2015 and travelled to The MMK in Frankfurt this May, will open at MoMA, P.S.I in October. What's changed?*

CS: P.P.O.W. gallery has been committed to my work for two decades. Recently a number of remarkable exhibits have brought attention to neglected works from the '80s and '90s. A few brave and devoted curators — Christine Marcel of the Pompidou Center, and Kristine Stiles — fought for this recognition, as did Elga Wimmer, Dan Cameron, and Robert Riley. Women have to live long enough — no longer be sexually desirable — for the erotic aspect of their works not to confuse or overwhelm the cultural significance.

JB: *There has been an obsessive focus on your body rather than on your body of work: your artistic life has been as an innovator in filmmaking, performance, installation, and video art. Yet you've always defined yourself as a painter. When you met Jim Tenney, you said, "I'm a painter who paints space as time." He responded: "I'm a composer who composes time as space."*

CS: The relationship with Jim was intense, and we shared the research we were doing: his in music and science, mine in visual aesthetics and art history. Jim's work influenced my considerations of dissonance, fragmentation, repetition — the way when you split two elements there is some incremental energy between them, as with collage. Our love fueled and sustained my art. When people said, "This is crap," there were the two of us rowing our boat together.

JB: *And how do you describe that time/space aspect of painting?*

CS: It had to do with physicality: the energy of the stroke, the gesture of the arm extending the body into visual space. Also how the painting is relayed through the mysterious intensity of the eye to the surface. There is a kinetic sense of visual tracking, an energizing force between eye and hand, a gestalt to the way everything is perceived to be energetically connected.

JB: *Where did that concept of gestalt come from?*

CS: When I was eleven I traveled to a museum and was drawn by the intoxicating aroma of oil paint to a room downstairs where adults were painting a still-life. The teacher invited me into the class and set me up with drawing supplies. At one point he took a student's paper sandwich bag, tore it up, threw the pieces on the floor, and asked everyone if they knew what it was about. No one replied, but I said, "I think it's about the rhythm between the pieces." The teacher was pleased and said, "Yes, this is gestalt."

JB: *In that regard, you've talked about the influence of Cézanne and the problems he had trying to integrate his bathers within space.*

CS: I began as a landscape painter and was going nuts trying to transpose landscape into painting — I wanted the energy of what I was seeing, but the form was so predetermined. Cézanne exemplifies this struggle. His early works are sexualized, misogynist, and possess a dense, visceral erotic energy. I understood the conflict and saw his need to tame it all into structure. Cézanne opened procedural thresholds for me. I began to carve my paintings with razor blades, trying to enter the other side of them.

JB: *How did you make the leap from painting space as time to other media?*

CS: All my work contains visual sequences — this goes back to my childhood drawings from when I was four or five that are filmic. I used ten pages of images and move through them as if they are time.

JB: *Those drawings foreshadow much of the imagery in your art. There is one of a cat springing out of a box, a series of vertical marks beneath the box underscoring its charged movement.*

CS: The cat also represents the energy moving between domestic and natural worlds: cats' grace is in tandem with their delicate intimacy, hunting, and capture. In *Fuses* (1965), my self-shot experimental erotic film, our cat Kitch is an appreciative witness.

JB: *This brings us to another dynamic in your process: your visceral sense of using space to power tension in your work. You have compared it to the vulnerable instant when, climbing stairs, one foot trusts the other to hold steady as it ascends the next step. So much of your art seems to take place within those shifting spaces.*

CS: That was my sensation of swinging in a harness in *Up to and Including Her Limits* (1973-76) [a performance in which Schneemann, suspended in a harness on a three-quarter inch manila rope, sustains an entranced period of drawing. Her extended arm holds crayons that stroke the surrounding walls, accumulating a web of colored marks]. I recognized that the suspension would lead me to another aspect of drawing that I could sustain over a long period of time. It's an ecstatic feeling, but it takes abdominal strength to keep moving and not spill out of the harness. The work relates to a child's pleasurable feeling in a swing, but it also addresses Pollock's extended stroke.

JB: *Meat Joy* (1964), — one of your most controversial works — rambunctiously plays with psychic space. You've described it as "an erotic rite — excessive, indulgent, a celebration of flesh as material: raw fish, chicken, sausages, wet paint ... shifting and turning among tenderness, wildness, precision, abandon; qualities that could at any moment be sensual, comic, joyous, repellent." Where did that concoction come from?

CS: As a teenager I worked on a chicken farm. Chopping their heads and eviscerating these chickens was very sensuous. When I was in Paris to create *Meat Joy*, Jean-Jaques Lebel arranged for me to stay at the hotel La Louisiane. My room was directly above a fragrant fish market and I hung a

recorder out my window to capture all the cries of the vendors. This would become part of the soundtrack for the performance. The visceral erotic aspect to the work relates to lived experience, and many find disturbing what should be delicious and splendid.

JB: *There is always the body politic in your work, whether it deals with feminism or the atrocities of war and despotism. Video installations are often the medium. How did you go from film to this technology, and how did it impact your process?*

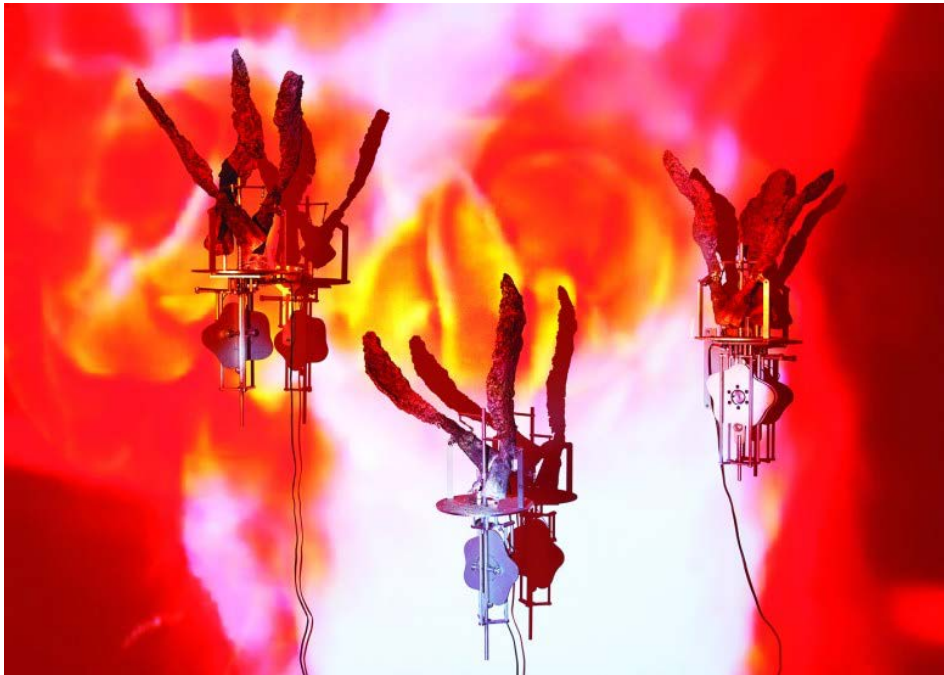
CS: *Fuses (1965)*, was done in 16mm. For *Viet-Flakes (1965)*, dealing with the atrocities of the Vietnam War, I used suppressed footage culled from international magazines. Later, computer editing changed my filmmaking process; I could do almost anything with the video system.

JB: *Most of your video works are edited as fractured collages that contrast domestic life with horrific catastrophes. Devour (2003-4) loops war footage with domestic intimacy. How did these installations gestate from your earlier works, particularly those featuring your body?*

CS: The presence of my body here goes to my empathy with the mutilated bodies. I have the privilege of observation; the privilege of not being threatened, raped, stabbed, hung from a noose. Now I'm considering the destruction of culture in the Middle East. Many of my "nightmare" works like *Souvenir of Lebanon (1983-2006)* and *More Wrong Things (2001)* combine images of atrocities with elements from my own environment, mixing my own personal footage and found footage.

JB: *Flange 6 rpm (2013), recalls much of your early abstract imagery, yet it addresses your sensual ambiguity — the way in which a projection of raging fire envelops a sculptural series of motorized, poured metal flanges. There's visceral tension in their gyrating movements toward and away from one another. How did this work come about?*

CS: From a dream, like so many of my works. While walking down the street in Soho, I imagined a stick suspended in space and wondered what would happen if I put it in motion. I made drawings and conceived of a motorized computer system. The flange sculptures were originally each hand-formed in a lost wax process, which was then burnt out into a poured aluminum mold. The flange relates to the compendium of V-forms in *Venus Vectors (1987)*, a large sculpture of transparent panels through which one sees V-forms from Paleolithic imagery, pyramids, wings, and one panel that includes a video performance.



Carolee Schneemann, “Flange 6rpm” (2011-13), seven foundry-poured aluminum sculptures, motors (6 rpm), and video (color, silent), dimensions variable (© 2017 Carolee Schneemann, courtesy the artist, P.P.O.W, and Galerie Lelong, New York)

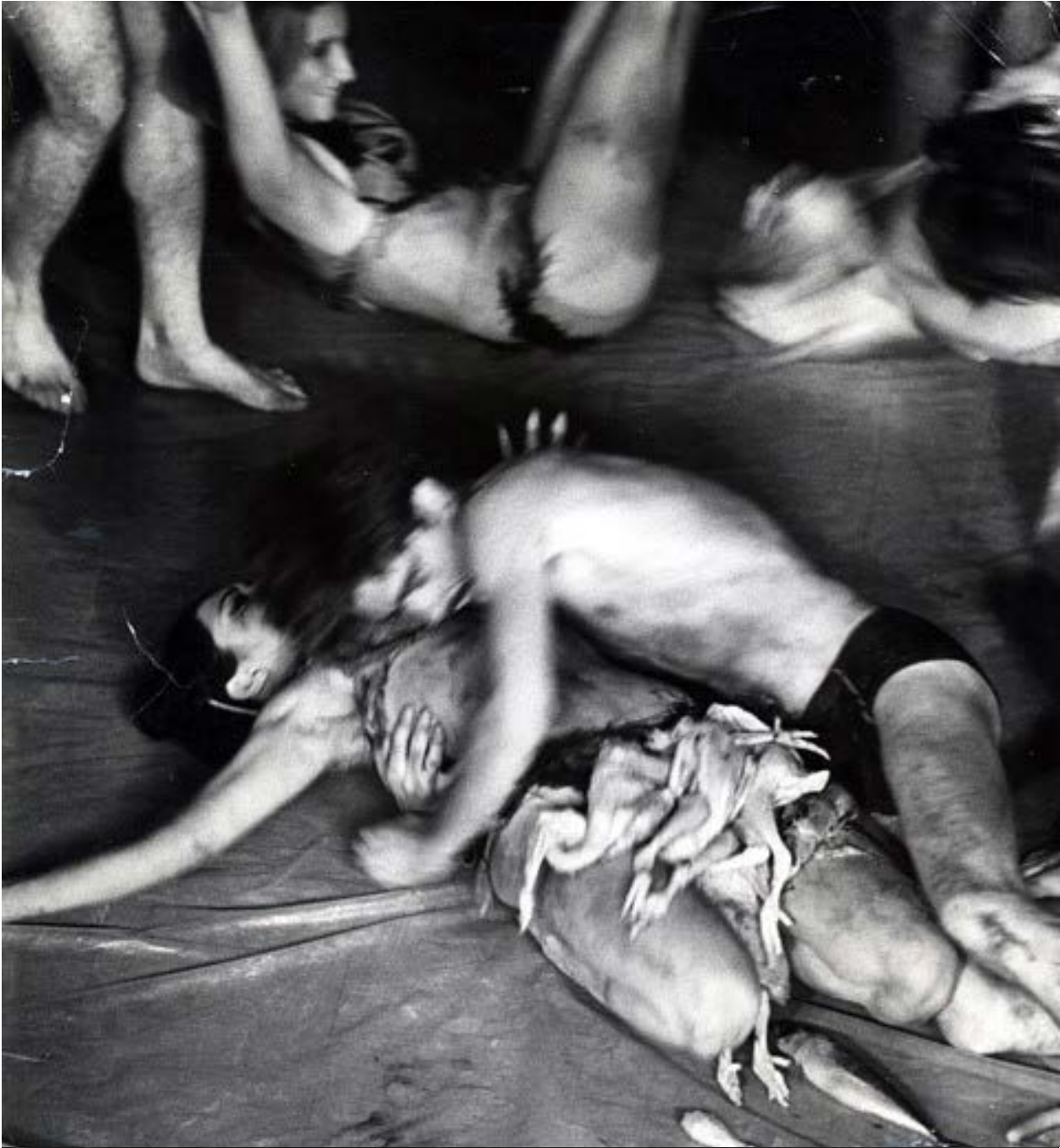
JB: *What do you tell students who want to become artists, and what are some of the challenges out there?*

CS: There is currently a fundamental difference in the way students initiate their process, because of its digital mediation, and because increasingly formal art education encourages them towards a predetermined concept of what the work must be. There is a sense of, “you tell us what to do and we will do it, then get a gallery and sell work.” I let them know it is chaotic out there in terms of commercialism, I let them know I reject common academic language: I don’t have a “practice,” I have a process. My work has concept, but is not conceptual as such; I don’t “unpack” anything except my travel bag. I tell them to question rhetoric, to stop being fearful of history, to look at what excites them, and to what has vigor and history. You belong to what you inherit and can transform.

Carolee Schneemann: Kinetic Painting will be on view October 22, 2017 – March 11, 2017, at MoMA PS1 (22-25 Jackson Avenue, Long Island City, Queens).

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DAZED



ART & PHOTOGRAPHY

FEATURE

OCTOBER 19, 2017

The art work that nearly killed Carolee Schneemann

The artist's search for truth has resulted in pioneering investigations into the female body, sexuality, and gender – not all of which the public has agreed with

You may remember Lady Gaga's meat dress as something of a scene – but it doesn't hold a candle to *Meat Joy*, the [Carolee Schneemann](#) happening from 1964 that inspired it. Where Gaga took an existing idea and transformed it into a publicity stunt, Schneemann invented something that had never been seen or done – and it nearly cost her life.

Picture a group of young men and women clad in their undergarments experiencing the pleasures of the flesh: of the carcasses of fish and chicken, along with sausages, touching their bare skin. Imagine being in the same room as they gathered on the floor to engage in an experience of sensuality the likes of which had never been realised before. Envision a man in the audience becoming so enraged he leaped from his seat, dragging Schneemann off to the side, and beginning to strangle her.

This happened during the Paris edition and went on until two bourgeois women jumped from their seats and fought off the attacker until he stopped. Then Schneemann got back into the happening and continued on with the knowledge that her explorations could unleash a cataclysmic storm. But Schneemann is an unstoppable force – she is freedom incarnate. Uninhibited and unafraid, she has been challenging the patriarchy by virtue of being true to herself.



“Schneemann is an unstoppable force – she is freedom incarnate. Uninhibited and unafraid, she has been challenging the patriarchy by virtue of being true to herself”



Born in 1939 to a country doctor and a farm wife, Schneemann grew up close to nature, embracing the life and death cycle of the earth. When her father refused to support her decision to go to college, she won a full scholarship to study painting at Bard College, in New York, which she attended until she was expelled on the grounds of “moral turpitude.” Where others might have given up, Schneemann persevered, creating a body of work so singular and so challenging that to this day she has no equal in the field.

Her pioneering investigations into the female body, sexuality, and gender have tapped into archaic visual traditions and wrestled with social taboos, transforming Schneemann into a vessel of transgression and subversion in search of truth. In celebration, MoMA P.S. 1, New York, presents [Carolee Schneemann: Kinetic Painting](#) (October 22, 2017- March 11, 2018), the first comprehensive retrospective spanning her prolific six-decade career.

In conjunction with the exhibition, [Prestel has released a catalogue](#) of the same name, while the Artists Institute has published [Carolee's Issue 02](#), which illustrates the ways in which other artists, advertisers, and pop culture figures have drawn heavily from her work. Schneemann speaks with us about *Meat Joy* as well as her career as “both image and image maker.”

“

“When a woman (creates a nude self-portrait), it is trivialising the aesthetic, but when a man does it, it is part of his heroic domain or domination of subject” – Carolee Schneemann

”

BE PATIENT, AND THEN LEARN FROM THAT PATIENCE

“I always deeply identified with the natural forms and aspects of nature. For me, it was a reality apart from domesticity. I felt very overburdened and trapped by all the daily chores that my mother had to do – so I escaped that by going off with my dad in the car while he went to see patients, which often involved long rides and waiting with a woman who was giving birth.

I learned to be very patient. Now I think that that still time has helped me go through various illnesses. I've had to be in bed, sleeping and healing, and sometimes just watching leaves drop. The advantage to that was once I started thinking and drawing with some sense of the world outside of me, I started off as a landscape painter.

In the MoMA P.S. 1 retrospective, there are some drawings from when I was four and five years old. They're very acute. In some of them, the subjects are observed carefully, including one where I must have been four years old. It's a drawing of my brother in a bassinet. It is crude but very accurate. It's wonderful to see that there was something implicit always engaging my energies.”

USE YOUR NATURAL RESOURCES

“There were very few girls at Bard in the art department. Only one older girl had the strength to persist and work without being defeated all the time. I think it was something deeper inside.

I had a great father but he wouldn't send me to college; he didn't think that was appropriate. I had the incredible good luck that I applied by myself and got everything paid for, which they almost never did. But then I was kicked out in my junior year for 'moral turpitude.'

No one told me what it was. There was a big froth with the faculty. I didn't know what it was but I had to leave campus but for some legal reason they were required to extend my scholarship to somewhere else so I was able to go to New York City and attend the New School for Philosophy and Art History and Columbia School of Painting for painting and sculpture, and finally I was able to draw from life.

At Bard, we had no life models so I painted portraits of my own naked body sitting in front of the mirror in my dorm room. It seemed to me (just two years ago when I got a lifetime award from Bard) that I was kicked out for those nude paintings. They were explicit. They were naked and open legged – and they were stolen from my room so quick. The guys must have just gone in and snatched them away. And the word 'snatch' was an inappropriate one (*Laughs*).”



Eye Body, Transformative Actions For The Camera, 1963
Courtesy of Carolee Schneemann

UNCERTAINTY CAN BE A BLESSING IN DISGUISE

“Working from landscape required tremendous flexibility and acceptance of risk and uncertainty. I would go outside dragging my paints and brushes with me and whatever I was concentrating on was always going to change by the light, by the wind, the weather would change it. That meant I was always learning. I could never possess and control what I was looking at. That was like a dance of flexibility to be responding and accepting the shifts of my own intentions. I think I only understood that much later, studying yoga: to relinquish or adapt my own inclinations.

That's a large shift that has to take place, acknowledged, and respected. The uncertainty of things changing within your intentions as an artist you learn from that. You serve some intentionality, but the process itself is going to take you somewhere you may not have anticipated. Nothing teaches us that."

'HAPPENINGS' IN ACTION

"'Happenings' took different forms. One would be formalised, like journeys and specific relationships to buildings and spaces. Others would be visionary, mystical, magical, overwhelming – an arena of events in a very compressed space that might involve fans, draperies, bodies that were rolling. They were very full of motion and colourful and magic. We never saw any formulation of work like this before. There might have been things related to it in Dada.

'Happenings' were a form that later becomes performance. Performance went on to theatre and the artists hated theatre. We didn't want to have predictability, we didn't want to have elements that were traditional or recognizable. We wanted to envision a new world that escaped the canvas but still related to visual principles of painting. I would never define myself as a performance artist. I might call my cat a performative artist but it's not my terminology. For me, performance art became lethal because it is *anything* – anything that can't be proscribed or described."



Portrait Partials, 1970
Courtesy of Carolee Schneemann

A STUDY OF THE SENSUOUS – MEAT JOY

"*Meat Joy* was conceived as momentum, movement, and energy. There is motive, process, and notes

surrounding this work. It has been misrepresented as egregious because there is a terrible depravity that rarely shifts between sensuousness and pornography. The culture doesn't get the difference and it's critical to sensitivity, ecology, nature, your body, your food, to every kind of physical interchange we experience.

The same thing with my self-shot erotic film *Fuses*. There has always been a degree of appropriate recognition for it as a breakthrough that takes us into something higher sensitised and energised but energy in our culture tends to be confined to sports and conflict. Even the energy of painting, which became action painting, has now been subsumed and displaced.

It is similar to the conflict between show and exhibit. I am not having a show. I do not show and tell. There are shows. They are on the radio, the TV, and on Broadway. I'm having an exhibit and no one says that anymore. They wink at me like, 'A what? Oh yeah, oh yeah. But no, it's a show.' The terminology has its own dynamic and I don't agree with it.

That comes out of the idea of the performative: that it is entertainment. And the museums are certainly susceptible to this digression. When I first went to museums, it was reverent. It was like going to church. You were in such a special place to concentrate, to study, to reach a deeper level of meaning and understanding of what you were looking at. It was never entertainment."



“Being attractive gave us the possibility of subverting the meanings of our bodies as they were predetermined by male culture” – Carolee Schneemann



WOMAN AS BOTH IMAGE AND IMAGE MAKER

"Many people believe that when a woman (creates a nude self-portrait), it is trivialising the aesthetic, but when a man does it, it is part of his heroic domain or domination of subject. A woman's self-portrait does not, as far as I can tell, have the initial respect. It might gain appreciation over time as with Frida Kahlo – but initially, it is entering the realm of male authority and it was always considered inappropriate or inaccurate. Something was always wrong with it.

What was awful for me was that feminists felt that my use of my body within my work was salacious, that it was playing into male hands, and that I wanted it both ways. (For them), conceptually the nude female body belongs to a masculine aesthetic. It was exclusionary, as I understood it. They believed that men do it wrong and women better not even bother. It was harsh and gross.

But you had to be attractive, or they would laugh you off your page. I talked with Hannah Wilke and some other artists about this: being attractive gave us the possibility of subverting the meanings of our bodies as they were predetermined by male culture.

That's changed now. Now, they are open to visual discussions so that women of many sizes and shapes are able to work with self-depiction. I work with younger people for whom any specificity of gender is considered obscene. It's also gotten its own realm of trivialisation. It's quite confused proportion and that's okay."

THE ARTIST AS A VESSEL

"I never anticipated such a degree of anger, rage, fury – and embracing the issues as well. Everything seemed to be happening at once without my participation to the degree of depravity.

I am asked that often: 'What was I trying to do?' But I wasn't trying to do something, I was trying to explore an arena that was problematic and troubled, and to see if my work could shift anything in it. It wasn't programmatic or didactic as such. I have this mantra in my mind: 'This is not about me. This is not about me.' This is what we are seeing. This is what was considered. This is what offered itself. It is not about me.

I am a conveyance and I am able to use this appropriately disturbing and accepting the body and have the great fortune of living in New York City. Getting a loft was a miracle at the time, where you could have half a city block for \$47 a month, because all the manufacturers were fleeing. It was like the Wild West. The electricity didn't work, the floors were all torn up, the bathroom was in the hall but it was wonderful!"

Carolee Schneemann: Kinetic Painting, runs at New York's MoMA P.S. 1 from 22 October 2017 – 11

March 2018. Prestel's catalogue of the same name is available now, as is Carolee's Issue 02 by Artists Institute



Meat Joy 1964, chromogenic color print
Photo by Al Giese. From performance at Judson Church, November 16-18, 1964 New York. Courtesy of C. Schneemann and P.P.O.W. New York

Interview
16 October 2017

Interview

Carolee Schneemann's Art is Not Made for Your Comfort

By Pipilotti Rist

Photographed by Janette Beckman

October 16, 2017



FOUR FUR CUTTING BOARDS, 1963; WOODEN BOARDS, OIL PAINT, LIGHT BULBS, COLORED LIGHTS, PLASTIC FLOWERS, PHOTOGRAPHS, FABRIC, HUBCAP, TIGHTS, AND MOTORIZED UMBRELLAS; 90 ½ × 131 × 52". THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK; PURCHASE, 2015; © 2017 CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN.

In *Meat Joy*, a performance that Carolee Schneemann debuted at the Festival of Free Expression in Paris in 1964, the artist and several of her friends writhed on the floor while rubbing raw fish, chicken, and sausages across their half-naked bodies. This gutsy, groundbreaking work, along with countless others that followed in Schneemann's six-decade career, has had a clear influence on a new generation of female artists. (Take, for instance, Lady Gaga, who acknowledged the performance by appearing at the 2010 MTV Video Music Awards in a dress made of flank steak.) Whether she's working in painting, experimental film, or performance—or a combination of all three—Schneemann uses her own body as the primary medium to explore the politics of gender and representation. As part of another pivotal piece, *Up to and Including Her Limits* (1973–76), Schneemann dangled in a harness, scribbling and drawing on the paper-covered walls and floor as her body swung every which way—a response to the puffed-up, male-dominated era of abstract expressionism. A decade later, Matthew Barney began his early *Drawing Restraint* actions, in which he attempted a similar feat while tethered by bungee cords.

Despite Schneemann's far-reaching impact, she has been largely overlooked by the art world—until now. Late in 2015, the Pennsylvania native mounted her first comprehensive retrospective at the Museum der Moderne Salzburg in Austria; this past spring, she was awarded a Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at the Venice Biennale; and this month, her retrospective—which includes paintings from the 1950s through to her more recent assemblages, installations, films, poems, and performances—will travel to New York's MoMA PS1. At 78, Schneemann is still producing new work, most recently a project about the Syrian refugee crisis. [*Editor's Note: Schneemann died today at the age of 79. Her gallery confirmed her death to [Artnet](#) this morning.*] The artist spoke with Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist about her roller-coaster legacy and the similarities between farm work and art.

PIPILOTTI RIST: Congratulations on your Lion prize. It's very well deserved. How did it feel to win?

CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN: It's made me very depressed and confused. I'm used to working with neglect and misunderstanding, so this has been really challenging. It's a different psychic realm. The Lion did not land easily here.

RIST: It drowned in the ocean between Venice and New York? [*Schneemann laughs*] I want to tell you that you were and are a hero to me. You've been a very strong influence for many.

SCHNEEMANN: There are a lot of things that link our work having to do with assessing your environment, and then aggraving it. There's an aspect of our work that becomes physical.

RIST: When we work in the protected circles of art institutions or galleries, among people who have similar mind-sets, do you think it's important to jump outside of them? For example, are you known in rural Pennsylvania, where you grew up?

SCHNEEMANN: No. If I'm known there, it's in a prurient way. Everything gets sexualized. Where I grew up, the only artist people respected was Norman Rockwell. If you thought you were an artist, then why couldn't you paint like Norman Rockwell? The people from where I grew up have no appreciation for Paleolithic rocks or menstrual calendars. I'm a retriever of lost iconographies. But I had real training and have deep discipline, and I believe in it. Too much of the work I see today is just cultural junk. It's very superficial and has no rigor. It doesn't address the dynamic and real politics of an aesthetic structure. But what about you? Is there any audience in the village or city where you grew up?

RIST: I would say it's similar. But it does interest me to jump out of those comfortable circles and have discussions with those at a distance.

SCHNEEMANN: I grew up doing farm work, and there's a deep connection between the demands of farming and the demands of art creation. My sense of space and material has a lot to do with having been a chicken-killer and working with cows.

RIST: Could we restage your PS1 retrospective in your hometown?

SCHNEEMANN: No, because they'd trash my house. They'd burn down my barn. They'd chop down my trees. They might even think they should rape me. My work is all about forbidden aspects of the female experience. If I have a piece that says "blood" or "vagina" or "intercourse" or "sex," that would have no deeper meaning to them than to be provocative. And it's very dangerous for a woman living alone in the countryside.

RIST: Do you think that attitude might change in subsequent generations?

SCHNEEMANN: I think it's about context and environment. Especially now, my country is completely chewed up and divided. There was a sort of redneck bar down at the end of my village where the working people went to drink. Then it got bought by an old guy who makes collage. He would come down at midnight with scissors and paper and glitter and glue, and turn the whole place into this big, wonderful collage. So the people in the village do have some experience with art and imagery.

RIST: He opened their world.

SCHNEEMANN: Yes, exactly. And they love it.

RIST: In the end, it's always a single person who makes change. But I do think we should try to send artists out into the world and not have them all stick together in the big cities.

SCHNEEMANN: I'm of the opinion that we don't necessarily need so many artists. I recommend that many of the people who think they want to be artists should go into the [American] Friends Service Committee, or do government outreach to communities that don't have water, or that need seeds or ecological assistance. It would create a system in which people with engaged sensibilities and potential insight assist instead of imposing. I think it could leap right out of the art world into wonderful community action, just like the kind that happens in cities where small groups begin to revitalize a space with action, with information, with graffiti. Is that happening where you are?

RIST: On a small scale. Artists are moving to rural areas because there isn't the same necessity to be in the city. But in Europe we also have the tendency to rot together in the big cities.

SCHNEEMANN: We have some very powerful examples here in the United States, like in Detroit, where there's been an intensive grassroots movement by local communities—black and white—to bring life back to the city. They've opened restaurants and built gardens and started independent schools. They have lots of abandoned buildings that they turn into galleries. It's really happening and taking on a cultural and social identity that's viable and powerful. And the artists are central to it.

RIST: That sounds to me like utopian thinking.

SCHNEEMANN: But how do we get utopian thinking in a dystopian world? These days we aren't talking to each other—we're screaming and trying to hit each other over the head with rocks and sticks. A primitive fury has been unleashed by a president who has no culture, who cannot read, and who wants to determine power and aggression.

RIST: I'm very sorry.

SCHNEEMANN: [*laughs*] Thank you. It's a very sorry thing.

RIST: That is an annoying side of democracy. The pendulum falls often in the extreme, and then we have to bring it back. It's never stable; it's a permanent discussion about finding a way back.

SCHNEEMANN: But it's really hard to have a fair discussion when you're faced with militarism, aggression, and greed. The militarists do not want dialogue. They want what they want. They're psychotic. They're greedy, they're narcissistic, and they're dangerous. You can't restore the ocean when you've polluted it beyond its absorption of toxicity. All I can say is that the sky is still here. I'm lucky to live in paradise. I live in a magical place.

RIST: You live in the countryside in upstate New York?

SCHNEEMANN: Yes. I've lived in this old farmhouse for more than 50 years. *Meat Joy* was dreamt here. *Fuses* [Schneemann's 1964–67 self-shot 16mm film, which features Schneemann and James Tenney] was filmed here. *Water Light/Water Needle* [an "aerial kinetic theater" performance from 1966] was first done in the trees here. Jim Tenney [the late composer and Schneemann's former husband] and I were students sort of squatting in a house that belonged to a cousin of mine, and it's a very sacred house. It was built in 1750 out of stone. I'm sitting in it right now.

RIST: There's a certain kind of energy in the countryside that I can feel.

SCHNEEMANN: Did you grow up in the countryside?

RIST: Yes. My grandparents were farmers and my father was a physician, a country doctor.

SCHNEEMANN: That's what my father was, too!

RIST: What did your mother do?

SCHNEEMANN: She was a mother. She had to answer the phone and help people who were hurt. She had children and gardens and trees and the community. She was always overwhelmed. My father was a very inspiring figure. I remember looking at all of his anatomy books. He was happy that I would prowl around and look at things that I wasn't supposed to see.

RIST: Did you ever go on calls with your father?

SCHNEEMANN: I liked to go in the car with him, and I'd wait while he delivered a baby. I learned to be patient. I didn't want to be home helping my mom; I wanted to get out of the house. And because his office was in the front of our house, people who got injured would come to the door. I was trained that if they were injured to get a chair for them to sit down or give them a towel to cover the bleeding. My father was really funny—he'd come home from the office at lunchtime with two green bottles. One was ginger ale and one was a urine sample. [*Rist laughs*] We had to guess which was the one we'd drink.

RIST: Were your parents supportive when you said you wanted to become an artist?

SCHNEEMANN: No. And it all went wrong. My father wouldn't send me to college. I was so lucky that Bard gave me a scholarship. It was a miracle.

RIST: It shows that you were a strong teenager.

SCHNEEMANN: I had to be. It was before the era of women's self-determination had taken off. My teachers always said, "You're very talented, but don't set your heart on art. You're only a girl." I was inspired by Virginia Woolf in 1960, but they wouldn't let me write about her. They said she was a trivializer. I also wanted to do a paper on Simone de Beauvoir, and my philosophy teacher said, "Why would you write about the mistress? Write about the master." That was Sartre.

RIST: That's almost unimaginable to me. It sounds like a bad movie.

SCHNEEMANN: It was a bad movie.

RIST: I read a quote of yours from 1993 where you said, "I'm a painter. I'm still a painter and I will die a painter. Everything that I have developed has to do with extending visual principles off the canvas." Is that still your position now?

SCHNEEMANN: Yes, it's the same. I'm now working with computer systems and elaborate projections, and I'm working with the imagery of dead bodies from Syria. But the way I understand composition and form and my ability to enter into material all comes from my disciplines and my commitment as a painter—my energy, my arm, my eyes, my sense of space and form and time. It's a wonderful realm for me. I never leave it. What about you? Was painting in your background?

RIST: I actually had a quite different approach. I did not go to art school thinking that I was an artist; I went there mainly doing stage sets for bands. I considered my work more as an applied art for musicians, not as art in and for itself.

SCHNEEMANN: That's why your work has so much to do with environment and sound and energy.

RIST: You've also worked in different media. You've collaborated with musicians, poets, choreographers, and filmmakers.

SCHNEEMANN: I didn't want to do that but the energy was irresistible; each stroke of paint was an event and it demanded that the body should respond.

RIST: Like your famous work *Up to and Including Her Limits*.

SCHNEEMANN: And there was *Eye Body* [*36 Transformative Actions for Camera*, 1963], where I thought I could combine my body with painting constructions; I thought my body could become part of the collage. I didn't understand that after I made that photo sequence, the culture would just look at the body. It wouldn't understand the integration. It took a long time to have the context change to support what I thought I was doing.

RIST: In those works, you were speaking not only about the female body, but about the human body. There are so many more layers than what people gave you credit for.

SCHNEEMANN: Exactly. It took many years, but feminist analysis, feminist principles, and the social dynamics of women redefining their lived experience has all come together to support my motives. It's been very gratifying. It was very painful when the cultural historians who were feminists took my work to be playing into male hands because of the use of the body.

RIST: I've had similar experiences with things being misinterpreted. It will probably take several more generations before the female body can be considered a stand-in for the human body.

SCHNEEMANN: We might not have that chance, Pipi. With this fascist swell of political deformations, we might be going backwards. But you have a great international appreciation now. Are you aware of that?

RIST: It's impossible for artists to accept compliments.

SCHNEEMANN: *[laughs]* Okay. Do you have pets?

RIST: I have no animals, unless you count my two kilos of bacteria. I've learned that the average human body has two kilos of bacteria living in and on us.

SCHNEEMANN: Are you doing something with your bacteria? Or is it just doing what it does?

RIST: That's personal. So, how did this PS1 retrospective come together? It was first in Salzburg.

SCHNEEMANN: The story begins with the wonderful critic Kristine Stiles, who risked her standing as an art historian in the '90s trying to promote my work. With a few exceptions, it was always shut down and she was always disappointed. But then this European curator Sabine Breitwieser came along with such brilliant commitment and made this exhibition possible. It's so wonderful to me because all of this work was rejected for so many years. I still find it confusing.

RIST: You mentioned you are also working on some new pieces that involve Syrian corpses.

SCHNEEMANN: Yes, corpses of hundreds of men, tortured, starved, thrown around. I've been concentrating on that work. And I have a lot of smaller projects as well. It takes so much time because I have a lot of health issues. It's a very difficult age when the forces of time want to destroy us and take us away. They're just snatching people like devils; death comes and grabs each of us.

RIST: It has no mercy.

SCHNEEMANN: There's no negotiation.

RIST: How do you relax? That's something I find particularly difficult as an artist.

SCHNEEMANN: I don't even like the word! If I have a partner and we make love a lot, then I'm in a very pure state of being. But here on my own, I relax by watching my cats. I have an amazing cat now; she's absolutely brilliant and thrilling and thoughtful. And she has all kind of tricks. One is that she goes in a lilac bush when I'm on the porch, and she makes it shake. So you're quietly sitting there, and all of a sudden this little tree is shaking all over. That's the cat's trick to amuse us. I also love watching birds. I was in the hospital a lot last year, and I had to learn to walk again. I learned through that experience that I could sit in bed and watch a leaf in the wind for a very long time. Are you working all the time, or does it ebb and flow?

RIST: All the time. *[laughs]* I'm looking for some ideas on how to relax more.

SCHNEEMANN: A good cat is full of inspiration, and a dumb cat is just as nice. I have one very dumb cat that I rescued. She only thinks about food. Then I raised this kitten, who is such a genius—she makes art, and has an incredible imagination. The older cat was completely bewildered. She just looks at me and then looks at this inventive cat, like, "I don't understand, what's happening?" Do you have a lake where you can swim?

RIST: Theoretically, yes. We have a beautiful lake here. Doesn't your last name have the German word for snow, or cold water, in it?

SCHNEEMANN: Yes, cold, brilliant, icy water. I made that name up. Carolee was my name, but not Schneemann. When I was really young, I saw there were no female painters, there were no female artists. But I saw that the men had big names, so I thought, "I need one like that."

RIST: Choosing a name is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Okay, my last question: What's the best piece of advice?

SCHNEEMANN: The best piece of advice I've been given, or that I can give?

RIST: Either. The question is open.

SCHNEEMANN: An older friend once told me, "Life didn't ask for your opinion," which I liked. And my best bit of luck was to have met James Tenney and to have had this wonderful partner in the early days for 12 years. He was a musician. We'd listen to Ives and Ruggles and Varèse and Schoenberg, and have these wonderful discussions about sound and images all the time. Because of him, all the other rejections around my work didn't feel completely enclosing. I guess my best advice is this: Be stubborn and persist, and trust yourself on what you love. You have to trust what you love.

PIPILOTTI RIST IS A ZURICH-BASED VIDEO AND INSTALLATION ARTIST. A MAJOR SURVEY OF HER WORK, "PIPILOTTI RIST: SIP MY OCEAN," OPENS NEXT MONTH AT THE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, AUSTRALIA.

Mousse Magazine
05 May 2017

MOUSSE

More Than Meat Joy: Carolee Schneemann



Carolee Schneemann, *Meat Joy*, 1964. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Al Geise

In honor of American artist and performer Carolee Schneemann winning the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement we are republishing an interview with her and curator Massimiliano Gioni, first printed in number 48, April-May 2015.

MASSIMILIANO GIONI: Before presenting some of your now legendary performances—such as *Meat Joy*, *Up to and including her limits*, *Snows* and many others—you were working first as a painter and then in the context of the experimental theater and dance world in NY, showing your experiments of kinetic theater at the Living Theater and the Judson Dance Theater, and participating in happenings with Claes Oldenburg and Robert Morris, among others. What was the context in which your performance work was first shown?

CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN: I have never really worked in the context of the experimental theater of the time. My early performative event at the Living Theater had nothing to do with them as such: they had simply offered Dick Higgins and me a free Monday night for our experiments. We showed our work there but did not belong to the Living Theater itself. With the Judson Theater, I was the first painter to choreograph movement images which would later develop as “kinetic theater.” My work with what became the Judson Dance Theater began in the basement of Judson Church—and the list of participants in that scene is quite well known. Almost all of the artists gravitating around that orbit have made major radicalizing contributions to the history of contemporary dance and movement. At the time though, we thought we were just a group of very young artists from far-flung places doing rather blind experiments and collaborating. It’s significant that in the early 1960s there were

no grant agencies; conceptual influences were found and shared from and within a vast art history that had not been formalized or consolidated for any of us to claim allegiance to. Among our friends we were changing inherited conventions. My partner in the early years, James Tenney, a composer and conductor, was originally from Denver and had attended the same high school as Stan Brakhage: they were both strange, exceptional beings. Brakhage would bring innovative film and poetry to our shared creativity. Tenney and I moved to New York City when he had an amazing position as the experimental composer-in-residence at Bell Telephone Labs. There we met Billy Klüver who went on to found Experiments in Art and Technology, the legendary E.A.T. It was through Billy that I was to participate in a “happening” in a store on the Lower East Side. Oldenburg’s *Store Days* was like wandering into a live, visceral dream of bodies and materials. Claes put me on the edge of a fireplace in a spangled dress with a knife. My only instruction was to stab the wall during the course of several hours of contiguous but oddly disconnected other events.

MG: Looking through your great 1979 book *More Than Meat Joy*, I was surprised to find an odd couple of very interesting writers that you cited as important influences on your work—Antonin Artaud and Henri Focillon. How did such different authors come to have an impact on your work? When did you encounter them? And who were the influential women in your early work?

CS: I had already been inspired by the writings of Artaud during graduate school in Illinois. I experienced a terrible, deep depression because the drive to extend the principles of painting into enlarged visual activated space meant I would be separated from the solitude and concentration of painting. I fought my way through every repudiation of my drive to become a painter. This overwhelming need to exist in a world of images begins before I can speak. In my recent lectures, I now include a few of the remarkable drawings from my childhood. These were saved in a wicker basket by my mother, despite the future confusion and resistance my family would experience as in my teenage years I began to paint in my bedroom. By this time I had been inspired by a misconception—unable to find significant women painters, I came upon a painter named Cézanne and determined that these odd figurations could be by a woman, since Anne was a girl’s name. In 1974-75 I would self-publish a feminist book titled *Cézanne, She Was a Great Painter*. On the cover I reproduced a childhood drawing of mine which I had made when I was 4 years old. It depicted two people in bed on a pillow touching each other: this drawing already anticipated my current and future erotic devotions.

MG: So your female Cézanne was an important inspiration. In a way, you were inventing your own history of art, you were re-writing history, as you would have said a few years later, refusing the idea of a patriarchal narrative of art, the oppressive His-story...

CS: Cézanne would be my guide through contradictory disciplines. My well-meaning father decided that it was inappropriate for a young woman to go to college, or to study art. I grew up in rural Pennsylvania where a woman’s destiny was expected to produce our version of livestock. My inspiration was a godmother who had run away to New York City and become an actress. This was always spoken about in hushed tones, as if it resembled voluntary sexual slavery—something improper. She was an example of a dedicated life, the joys and disciplines of developing a participation in culture’s history. Bard College provided me with full tuition, room and board included, but by 1959 my main painting teacher advised me, “You’re very gifted but you’re only a girl, don’t set your heart on art.” I studied painting intensively from books in the Bard library, learning every painterly technique I could study. I still felt I was anomalous in my hopeful commitment to making a life of images. I concentrated on working from landscape and still life, and I painted and drew my partner James Tenney whenever possible, including nude studies when he fell asleep in

warm weather. There were no life models at Bard. Cézanne remains a powerful influence as I study his early erotically charged paintings, shifting into the perceptual discipline of organizing space structurally. And what I call “Cézanne’s broken line”... a kind of rubato, a breath in contours which becomes an indication of where the live body can enter its own visual constructions. So *Eye Body* (1963)—one of my early performance works, or “transformative actions” as I called them at the time—was actually inspired by Cézanne’s landscapes and watercolors.

MG: *Eye Body* is a crucial piece in your early work...

CS: *Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions for Camera* (1963) was born from a simple, visual motivation to include my nude body as an extension of the materials of painting constructions I was working on at the time. Inspired by my friendship with the Icelandic artist Erró, I was not posing, but actively collaging my body with studio materials such as paint, fur, plastic, and garden snakes. I edited a photo sequence, then took it to various curators, feeling that this was some breakthrough process. It was the beginning of “body art,” but at the time I was heavily criticized for narcissism and expressionism, and for not sticking to painting. I was fighting against masculist determinations that defined feminine and female. In these years the dichotomy of virgin/whore still dominated the popular erotic imagination; it was pre-feminist, the writings of Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan had not yet disrupted this fixity. I realized then it was only with an ideal body that I could undermine the inherited aesthetic expectations for the female nude. My motivation had more to do with visual energies than with any political insistence. I believe I can be the image and the image-maker—I am not a nude model frozen in position.

MG: What other artists or thinkers were an influence on your work at the time?

CS: The influences of Artaud and Focillon remain as foundational inspirations. I was hungry for deeper aesthetic principles and I was very influenced by the writings of Wilhelm Reich, studies of Snow Crystals by W.A. Bentley, D’Arcy Thompson’s *On Growth and Form*. Tenney and I were reading Proust to each other. He was also studying theories of the physical properties of sound, he wrote *Meta-Hodos*. He was practicing Ives’ Piano Sonata phrases over and over, audible through the thin walls of our little Illinois shack. His work was becoming a parallel dynamic to my concerns with collage, with the fracture of form producing incremental visual energy. I was researching contemporary art off in my little Sydney, Illinois studio, and began a correspondence with some guy named Allan Kaprow, who had just done an installation of car tires in New York City. The dynamics of abstract expressionism led me to place paintings on wheels that spun. When our Illinois surrounding landscape was altered by a tornado, I prepared a set of instructions for other artists to follow for physical movements in that landscape. All this prepared us for the rich confluences of artists we would meet in New York City.

MG: In 1965 you presented another radical piece...

CS: With a borrowed wind-up Bolex I began my self-shot erotic film *Fuses*. As a painter I was questioning whether my sensations of sexual pleasure could be depicted in film. At the time erotic imagery in film was either pornography or scientific imagery. Female pleasure hovered in nether realms of lost history or aggressive male fantasies. In any case, my visual experiment was inspired by an equitable, loving relationship—so it could not possibly be pornography. Nevertheless, the film in all its lyrical density constantly raised many questions and particularly prompted one to ask: if it wasn’t pornography, what else could it be? *Fuses* was constantly censored as well as celebrated.

MG: At that time you also started a series of pieces which were even more openly political, as they engaged with current events and with the Vietnam war in particular.

CS: There is always a double pull in my work between the ecstatic, sensuous, and the violent destructive militarisms which surround my privilege as an artist at this time. And so the range of erotic depiction in my self-shot film *Fuses* and its premise of domestic dailyness and bliss would be transformed by the overwhelming weight and destruction of the Vietnam war. I gathered all the suppressed imagery from Vietnam from a variety of sources to create my film *Viet-Flakes* (1965) and the subsequent kinetic theater *Snows*.

MG: The combination of the personal and the political was at the center of many of the demands of the feminist movement: the contrast between the individual and the group is also fundamental to your work. How did you feel your work related to and was assimilated by the feminist discourse?

CS: Female generative powers remain at the crux of cultural contradictions. The sexual dimension viscerally continues to be cloaked in glamour and artifice, while at the same time the actual experience of the female body is seldom given the bold clarification of our actual experience. Birth control and the sexual revolution of the 1960s now seem buried by the subsequent force of feminist history.

MG: Many of your most famous works—such as *Interior Scroll* for example—proved particularly divisive when they were first shown, especially within the feminist discourses at the time.

CS: *Interior Scroll* began as a simple drawing, a residual image from a dream in which I slowly extracted a text from my vagina. The dream text noted traditions of denigration of female creative energies. Many months passed before a feminist art event provoked the possibility of physically enacting the dreamt image. *Interior Scroll* was presented only twice, although it has taken on a life of its own. The audience at the East Hampton Women's Art Festival in 1975 was extremely divided. A banker ecstatically said he finally understood the ticker-tape. Women were both outraged—"You're playing into the most prurient of male fantasies", some said—and ardently approving.

MG: When it comes to performance art, the relationship of the artist to the audience has profoundly changed in the last decades, potentially turning every gesture into a form of empty spectacle. Who was the audience of your first performances? And I mean both the actual audience and the ideal viewers you imagined as your audience. And who would you say is your audience now?

CS: The audiences from my first performances were other artists, usually aesthetic colleagues. I have never imagined an ideal viewer, nor do I prepare work with a sense of a potential audience. My work demands itself—that it be given form through me. In *Up to And Including Her Limits*, naked, suspended on the rope, drawing for many hours, I was purposefully indifferent to any potential audience. I've been lecturing and writing about sexuality, pleasure, the body, the dynamic of my work inspired by physicality for many years in many ways to many audiences. The audience is inspiring, enlivening, and I welcome the range of response from conflict to appreciation. The point for me is how the audience relates to me, not how I relate to the audience.

MG: In the 1970s you wrote a beautiful text titled "Woman in the year 2000" which starts by saying, "By the year 2000 no young woman artist will meet the determined resistance

and constant undermining which I endured as a student.” You have been both a student and a teacher. How have these experiences shaped your work?

CS: I began teaching on the beach when I was 11 or so. It was my fantasy that the aimless kids would want to share my desire for giving full attention to elements we could pile together in the sand as a source for a beach still life: broken bottles, feathers, a sneaker or two, crushed tin cans, fish scales... Their lack of enthusiasm was very disappointing. Since college I have had to teach, to support my art. The early erotic enactments were too disturbing for collectors or institutions to support. The current interest which is bringing a denser, more complete context to my work is remarkable and quells the impact of years of rejection, marginalization and appropriation by other artists. I have never worked with a conscious intention for career or success, nor have I ever accepted a dominant theoretical construct. My sustaining support has always been my partner at the time and a small band of remarkable artists—and cats. I hope my teaching can guide my students to refuse the traditions and critical implications which keep them from assessing their own capacity for rigorous visual discipline and wild embrace of materials. From the heart.

MG: What would you say is the function of art, or at least of your art? I’ve always thought that “liberation”—of the body and of the mind, so to speak—was what drives your art.

CS: Perhaps the function of art is to fulfill the demands to follow the monkey on my back, as it screams: “This is an image you must realize.”

MG: What are you working on?

CS: *Flange – 6rpm* (2011) is my most recent sculptural installation. It was installed for Steven Holl’s T-Space in Rhinebeck, after its first presentation at P·P·O·W Gallery. It’s composed of three separate motorized sculptural units; each hand-sculpted unit is unique, cast in aluminum on a motorized base extending out from the wall. Each sculptural element moves slowly from side to side, forward and back in a continuous motion, almost touching. The aluminum is not polished, but has a rough texture still marked from the fire of the foundry process. I have edited a DVD from the foundry firing documentation—sequences are projected both on the wall and floor beneath the sculptures so that viewers have the experience of being within the moving imagery. The work evolved from a simple drawing which required that it become realized as a series of sculptural variations; these would be given a kinetic template to produce slow motions; 6rpm was the stipulated speed. In addition to this sculptural installation, I am at work on two major publications and a full museum retrospective at the Museum der Moderne in Salzburg, opening in November, curated by Sabine Breitwieser.

The Art Newspaper
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THE ART NEWSPAPER

Doyenne of feminist art Carolee Schneemann awarded Venice Biennale's Golden Lion

Lifetime achievement accolade recognises her work in performance and body art over six decades



The US artist Carolee Schneemann has been awarded the prestigious Golden Lion prize for lifetime achievement by the organisers of the 57th Venice Biennale. Schneemann, who is known for her feminist performance works such as *Meat Joy* (1964), was nominated by Christine Macel, the artistic director of this year's Biennale (*Viva Arte Viva*; 13 May-26 November).

According to a statement issued by the Biennale, Schneemann's "style is direct, sexual, liberating and autobiographical. She champions the importance of women's sensual pleasure and she examines the possibilities of political and personal emancipation from predominant social and aesthetic conventions".

In 1975, she performed *Interior Scroll*, which culminated in her removing strips of paper from her vagina. Meanwhile, *Vulva's Morphia* (1992-97), comprises photographs and drawings of prehistoric sculptural

representations of vulvas. In 2014, Schneemann told The Guardian: “My work became a bridge that had to be crossed by young feminists working with their bodies.”

Schneemann will receive her award at a ceremony due to take place on 13 May at Ca' Giustinian, the Biennale headquarters.

Public Books
15 December 2016



CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN'S UNFORGIVABLE ART



There's this old joke. The set-up is always the same: two guys walk into an exhibition catalog. Here's one version, as told by Carolee Schneemann to Kenneth White in spring of last year, about *Happenings and Fluxus*, the Harald Szeemann-curated 1970 exhibition in Cologne:

So one morning we were sitting around the lunch table, where I was hoping somebody would buy us lunch, and each guy left the table for a little while and went off in one of the adjacent rooms, and came back smiling. It was like some porno joke. And then the next one went, came back, smiling. [Allan] Kaprow went first. And then [Wolf] Vostell. And then finally Al Hansen went. And I said, what is it if Al is going? I should certainly go too. And I said, Al, what is it? And he said, well we've just all signed contracts with the publisher, concerning this exhibit and our work. And I said, oh shit, no one talked to me! And he said, well I think I'm the last one they talked to. So it's the same old thing. The same old crap. They were all getting intensive documentation for the book project that was underway. And whatever I could put together, John and I had to shoot it ourselves, and we were too busy, or too hungry or something.¹

The catalogue that ensued provided a decade of retrospective grist for the art-historical mill that would eventually canonize Kaprow and Vostell alongside fellow participants Claes Oldenburg and Nam June Paik, while leaving Schneemann in relative obscurity. Increasingly recognized as a key innovator of broad swathes of contemporary production, whose work spans post-Abstract Expressionism and neo-Dada, Happenings, Fluxus, and Aktionism, experimental and expanded cinema, performance, dance, and body art, and a dozen or so other disparate genres and movements, Schneemann is only now beginning to benefit from the careful documentation and critical attention that were bestowed from a back room on Allan, Wolf, and Al.

Schneemann's own contribution in Cologne, *Meat System I: Electronic Activation Room*, coproduced with John Lifton, remained largely invisible, although the details we do have about it suggest that it reflected a sardonic ambivalence to movements, like Happenings or Fluxus, that were often content to marginalize or erase her. In a letter to Szeemann before the exhibition, she drily described it as "a simplified auto-documentation environment."² With some retrospective irony in the context of an exhibition that would deny her proper documentation, the installation mashed up past work in such a way as to make it a maximally unfriendly archive. And far from "simplified," the installation was brilliantly, disorientingly complex: a phantasmagorical miniature solo retrospective in a trailer-sized space.

Visiting it sounds a bit like losing yourself in a Duchamp box-in-a-suitcase portable museum while trying to come down from a bad trip: in a small room made even smaller by the addition of a temporary fourth wall, scattered with transparent inflatables and heaps of dishwashing soap flakes that obstructed the movement of visitors, Schneemann's autobiographical experimental erotic film *Fuses* played superimposed on her antiwar quasi-structuralist collage of Vietnam atrocities, *Viet-Flakes*. Slide carousels projected photographs of three mid-'60s kinetic theater pieces—*Snows*, *Meat Joy*, and *Water Light / Water Needle*—through a motorized mirror box that scattered them across the room's walls, themselves covered in loosely affixed, peeling white paper that further fractured the images. The system was equipped with motion sensors, so that a spectator's own stumbling progress through the space triggered the kaleidoscopic fragmentation and recombination of images that made any individual work unseeable, hashed into the general flood of visual information.

Forty-six years after Cologne, Schneemann is in the fifth decade of her pioneering career. Her kinetic theater and performance pieces from the mid-'60s through the mid-'70s, some of which provided the base material recombined in *Meat System I*, have become touchstones for generations of artists, particularly younger feminist artists. Karen Finley, Cindy Sherman, Tracey Emin, and Marina Abramović, not to mention Paul McCarthy or Matthew Barney: all seem to have taken some inspiration for their diverse practices from Schneemann's. Although many of the artists she's influenced have been the subjects of lavish retrospectives in major museums, her own work has often suffered from spotty documentation and institutional neglect.

Aside from a truncated exhibition at the New Museum in 1996, her first serious, scholarly retrospective took place only last year, at the Museum der Moderne in Salzburg. David Levi Strauss has described her influence as “so pervasive that it has become invisible,” while she has been simultaneously tarred as “superficial for having moved among so many different media,” an accusation that, as Strauss points out, would never have been made against similarly wide-ranging male contemporaries.³ Her interviews from past decades document just how many times she met with “the same old thing”: a crap spectrum that ranges from logistical micro-aggressions like delayed reimbursements and forgotten per diems to full-blown overt misogyny in the art worlds through which Schneemann has traveled since the mid-’50s. The interviews also reveal just how those structural currents contrived to push her to the margins of the grand narratives of Experimental Art in the second half of the 20th century.

If Schneemann, as the title of a 2007 show had it, “Remains to Be Seen,” two new monographs provide a fuller overview of her work from the ’50s to the present than has ever been available before. *Kinetic Painting*, edited by the Museum der Moderne’s Sabine Breitwieser, stems from the retrospective of the same name and presents a generous selection of images documenting the full span of Schneemann’s career, reproduced alongside her own notes and commentary and short essays from Breitwieser, Branden Joseph, Mignon Nixon, Ara Osterweil, and Judith Rodenbeck. In reprinting Schneemann’s own fascinating and theoretically rich reflections, *Kinetic Painting* wisely follows the format of 2001’s *Imaging Her Erotics*, until now the best single volume documenting her work. A complete exhibition timeline and bibliography round out this carefully collected, scrupulous presentation of Schneemann’s prolific career, making it an invaluable resource for future scholarly work.

**SCHNEEMANN’S PROGRAM HAS
BEEN INSISTENTLY IGNORED AND
WILLFULLY MISUNDERSTOOD, BUT
THAT IT ALSO PUT HER IN DANGER
IS A SIGN OF THE LIBERATORY
POTENTIAL OF HER LIFE AND
WORK: SHE HAS LITERAL SKIN IN
THE GAME.**

Unforgivable, edited by Kenneth White, draws on Schneemann's personal archives to present a wide-ranging overview divided into five overlapping thematic sections: interviews and correspondence, painting, cinema, sites, and technological processes. While it's not always perfectly clear why a work appears under one heading and not another, the porous boundaries between what White calls Schneemann's "zones of carnal knowledge" feel appropriate. White also reprints a selection of reviews and essays under each thematic heading, many of which originally appeared in hard-to-get or now out-of-print catalogs and special issues of scholarly journals. Some of these grapple with Schneemann's body of work as a whole, like Maura Reilly's consideration of her claim to be always, first and foremost, a painter. Others pay close attention to a single work or group of works. This approach is especially valuable for complex but little-seen performances (e.g., Erica Levin's essay on the mid-'60s kinetic theater piece *Snows*) or for quasi-conceptual pieces whose apparent simplicity hides depths of critical insight and feeling (Stéphane Aquin on 2001's controversial 9/11 "photographic grid as eulogy," *Terminal Velocity*).

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Ara Osterweil's excellent essay is particularly sensitive to the fleshy monism and density of thought in one of Schneemann's most well-known films, *Fuses*, reading it, in relation to Linda Williams's theorization of hardcore, as a feminist choice for "sensual immersion over scopic mastery." Kenneth White's concluding essay reconstructs two little-seen and poorly documented works, the kinetic theater piece *Lateral Splay* and *Meat System I*, described here above, reading them as trenchant critiques of the dehumanization and misogyny inherent in technological, cybernetic regimes ascendant after the Second World War.

The thematic organization of *Unforgivable* invites a reader to discover the continuities in Schneemann's career's disjunctions, the ley lines that have organized the full range of her work. White's volume presents her autobiographical explorations of female sexuality and erotic taboos, from *Fuses* (1964–7) to *Infinity Kisses* (1981–7), alongside pieces shot through with political outrage and meditations on complicity and culpability, from *Viet-Flakes* (1965) and *Snows* (1967) to *War Mop* (1983) and *Terminal Velocity* (2001). By not drawing any clear demarcations between these two main impulses, *Unforgivable* repeats Schneemann's

own explicit refusal to separate them—a refusal that, according to David Levi Strauss, has rendered her “perennially unacceptable.”

Schneemann’s unique melding of Dionysian ecstasy and feminist rage has always inspired strong reactions, and critics, members of the public, and other artists have repeatedly referred to her work as narcissistic, exploitative, and obscene. An abridged catalog of reactions to a single film, culled from her interviews and essays: at a 1969 Cannes screening of *Fuses*, men in the audience nearly rioted, ripping up the seats with razors, apparently disappointed it wasn’t the titillating hardcore they’d been led to expect; Schneemann had to flee the auditorium, alongside Susan Sontag. At the Institute of Contemporary Art, an audience member theatrically took his leave during the question-and-answer session, accusing her, somewhat oxymoronically, of being a “deranged frigid nymphomaniac,” while a young critic spat, “Madam, you have assaulted my sexuality.”⁴ Twenty years later *Fuses* was still incendiary: when Schneemann attempted to show it at the 1989 Moscow Film Festival it was quickly removed from the bill amid all sorts of bureaucratic stonewalling. Mme. Lavritskaya, the director of Soviet Sexual Education Programs, accused her of being a “pornographer and dangerous woman,” in that order.⁵

Opposition to Schneemann’s practice creates strange bedfellows, and both feminists and conservative establishment critics have at times found her work abhorrent. *Interior Scroll*, one of her now most well-known performances, in which Schneemann, nude and streaked with body paint, assumed a series of action model poses while reading a feminist manifesto off a scroll uncoiled from her vagina, divided the audiences of each of its two presentations along paradoxical lines. At the East Hampton Women’s Art Festival in 1975, some women were enraptured, others outraged. Schneemann recalls having been accused of “playing into the most prurient of male fantasies,” and even Agnès Varda, director of feminist New Wave classics like *Cléo de 5 à 7* and, later, *Sans toit ni loi*, “hated the piece” and deemed it irredeemably obscene. On the other hand, an ecstatic banker gushed to the artist that he finally understood tickertape, unwittingly putting a finger on the interlocking patriarchal systems of finance capital and women’s unwaged reproductive and domestic labor that depend on what Osterweil called, in her essay on *Fuses*, “the instrumentalization of the female body—as both meat *and* money”—a chiasmus that Schneemann’s career has been largely dedicated to critiquing.

Undoubtedly the most extreme public reaction occurred during a performance of *Meat Joy*, when a member of the audience leapt on Schneemann and began to strangle her. “Steeped in the writings of Wilhelm Reich, I understood what had affected him, but not how to break his hold on my neck!”⁶ Three women, intuiting that the assault was not a part of the performance, pulled the man off of her.

These reactions, from the petty to the murderous, shouldn’t be dismissed as simply bizarre, or indicative of a provincialism we’ve now left behind. They crystallize something about the way in which her work is actively, powerfully political at the same time that it’s intimately, physically personal. Schneemann’s program has been insistently ignored and willfully misunderstood, but that it also put her in danger, provoking disgust to the extent that she was the object of censorship and even violence, is a sign of the liberatory potential of her life and work: she has literal skin in the game. As White writes in the introduction to *Unforgivable*, her works “center powerfully, and most controversially, on her use of the human body—often her own.” In this she had few contemporaries and almost

no predecessors, and the AbEx establishment Schneemann first came up in was notoriously suspicious of women who wanted more in art than to serve as life models, purveyors of domestic and affective labor, or Waspy gallery-owning patrons. Jan Avgikos, writing in 1997 for *Artforum*, declared that, “prior to Schneemann, the female body in art was mute and functioned almost exclusively as a mirror of masculine desires.” The extremists in her audience understood that her use of her own body was not mere narcissism, and nothing as amenable to the status quo as obscenity. They metabolized, however circuitously, the threat that it presented to who they were and what they thought a woman’s body was for. In her daring to “Combine” herself into her work,⁷ she elaborated new roles unimagined for women by patriarchy, and new uses of women’s bodies for women themselves: “I posit my female body as a locus of autonomy, pleasure, desire; and insist that as an artist I can be both image and image maker.”⁸ This precisely *is* an assault on the young critic’s sexuality, insofar as that sexuality depends, as one suspects it does, on refusing autonomy, pleasure, and desire to women.

**WHILE MANY ARTISTS SHE
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This crux of her work, obscurely understood by those who censured or censored her, often escaped the notice of her male contemporaries, even those who were early supporters of her career. It was reportedly her discomfort with Stan Brakhage’s use of her body in traditional heterosexual gender roles in *Car’s Cradle* and *Loving* that led her to make *Fuses*, and *Interior Scroll* pulls no punches for the “structuralist filmmaker” whose “work has no meaning beyond / the logic of its systems,” who cannot be bothered with Schneemann’s “dense gestalt” of “DIET AND DIGESTION.” For some of these, as Schneemann herself has put it, “my use of the body displaced my body of work.”⁹ Writing in a letter about *Up to and Including Her Limits*, poet and sometime Schneemann correspondent Clayton Eshleman asserted that her investigation of temporal processes must “to a great extent hinge upon the necessity for you to show your naked body,” a not-so-subtle neg, as if to say, So, Carolee, you think you’re doing something intellectual, critical; we think you’re fit but you know it. Schneemann responded, understandably exasperated: “You insist you see what you see. I have expended all this energy because you DID NOT ACTUALLY SEE ‘Up to and Including Her Limits’... I do not ‘show’ my naked body! I AM BEING MY BODY.” Instead of finally choosing to

see the import of Schneemann's collapse of artist and medium, body and image in a dense gestalt that does not distinguish mind from meat, Eshleman, not easily daunted, wrote back with a misogynistic poem featuring a thinly disguised Schneemann as its subject. In the same letter, he offers to dedicate it to her, if she'd like.

When even her colleagues displayed such obstinate misogyny, you can understand the cathartic aggression of an auto-documentation environment like *Meat Systems I* that collaged her work into remains not-to-be-seen. What to do if the body eclipses the body of work, if the work is invisible to even to the most adverted viewer? The piece suggests it might be better to create an environment that substitutes the viewer's own body, knee-deep and stumbling through soap-flake snow—through *Schnee*, the ambient remains of a *Schneemann*, a dispersed snowman—for the matter it was supposed to present. Why continue trying to expose you to what you are unable or refuse to see? It's our good fortune that Schneemann never did and still hasn't stopped going too far, hitting us where we least like it, in the meat.¹⁰

1. Carolee Schneemann, [interview by Kenneth White](#), *Third Rail Quarterly*, Spring 2015. ↩
2. Letter to Harald Szeemann, July 31, 1970. Quoted in White, "Meat System in Köln," *Carolee Schneemann: Unforgivable*, p. 295. ↩
3. In Carolee Schneemann, *Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (MIT Press, 2001), p. 318. ↩
4. *Imaging Her Erotics*, p. 138. ↩
5. *Imaging Her Erotics*, p. 222. ↩
6. *Imaging Her Erotics*, p. 138. ↩
7. This very astute turn of phrase is Frances Richard's, writing in *Artforum*, May 2009. ↩
8. Carolee Schneemann, "Obscene Body Politic," in *Imaging Her Erotics*. ↩
9. Quoted in White, *Carolee Schneemann: Unforgivable*, p. 9. ↩
10. After submitting the final version of this essay, I was fortunate enough to discover an artist's magazine published by The Artist's Institute in New York, produced in collaboration with Carolee Schneemann as part of a residency from February to August 2015. The bulk of the magazine is derived from a binder labeled "Influence, Plagiarism, I forgot," found by Jenny Jaskey, the Institute's director, among the artist's papers. As Jaskey describes it in the magazine's editor's note, the binder contained "nearly a hundred plastic sleeves filled with images of artworks, ads, and personal photographs juxtaposed with documentation of Carolee's works—pages ripped out of magazines, print-outs of email photo attachments, and color photocopies with notes scrawled in the margin saying things like "rip off" or "??" The magazine is a kind of extended mood board or fractured, porous catalog that showcases Schneemann's irrepressible creativity and what Jaskey calls "her keen eye for morphological affinities." It is a natural companion or antidote to the more formal treatment of her work in the two volumes discussed here and well worth seeking out. ↩

LISSON GALLERY

The Brooklyn Rail
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Art | In Conversation

Carolee Schneemann with Jarrett Earnest



Carolee Schneemann, *Fresh Blood*. 1981 - 86. Courtesy Galerie Lelong

Carolee Schneemann, *Fresh Blood*. 1981 - 86. Courtesy Galerie Lelong

If we truly loved freedom we'd designate Carolee Schneemann a living national treasure. But seeing as we live in *this* culture, she remains a blinding light for those few artists and writers attempting to hold back the dark in dominant culture. Schneemann is a visionary artist in the lineage of William Blake, and visionaries never sit nicely within their culture. Walking through her multi-projection installation *Precarious* (2009) I thought of these lines from the opening of "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell:"

1. Man has no Body distinct from his Soul; for that call'd Body is a portion of Soul discern'd by the five Senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age.
2. Energy is the only life, and is from the Body; and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy.
3. Energy is Eternal Delight.

In 2014, Schneemann spoke with Jarrett Earnest about these intersections of language, physicality, painting, and performance at her home upstate. A version of this conversation originally appeared in two parts as “Rigorous Ecstasy—Language & Performance” in the September 14th and 17th 2014 issues of *Art Practical*.

Following concurrent exhibitions *Further Evidence – Exhibit A* at P.P.O.W. and *Further Evidence – Exhibit B* at Galerie Lelong this fall, the *Rail* found it more timely than ever to share this testament to her significance and evolution.

Jarrett Earnest (Rail): One thing that has been important for the deeper understanding of your work has been the publication of your letters and writing. When did you start writing, and how do you see it in relation to your visual art?

Carolee Schneemann: I wish I could grasp the writing. When I write, I cannot remember what I wrote. Writing is so difficult; it’s like a terrible kind of sculpture. But I was writing from the time I was a kid. I had Bruderhof neighbors who had a little printing press, and one year for Christmas, they printed a book of my poems—probably about cats, water, and birds. I was nine or ten. In school I was always writing; when I had a good teacher, they were respectful of it.

Rail: The great thing about the publication of your letters is that it shows how important fiery missives are as part of your work: “This is not how you talk about my work. That is not what I was doing.” You are allowing people to have their own ideas; you are just insisting that they properly understand what’s actually going on. That means getting the words right.

Schneemann: It is especially difficult the more these enclosing terminologies establish themselves as irrefutable. You can’t even talk about what you do unless you go through this nightmare of linguistic intervention. I’m doing a lot of writing now about these deformations of language—for instance, references to studio process as “practice.” I wrote an enraged letter once saying: “Dentists have to practice. Ballerinas practice. Visionary artists do not practice! We enable. We enact. We realize.” Also, we do not have “careers.” What language-devils have evolved to substitute “unpacking” for “research?” I have a whole list of hateful language problems. I received a beautiful but bewildering essay this week from an English graduate student comparing Woolf’s *The Waves* and my *Fuses* (1965). It kept referring to the “film plate.” What? The sausage and eggs on a plate? It uses this expression over and over. I didn’t know what it was, so I wrote to her: “You are in the same coven—the moldering den of academics—destroying our ability to think straight with these deformed expressions!” I was very harsh, and she wrote back and said: “I’m only 22, and I’m at Oxford, and I don’t have anyone with imagination here, but I believe I’m a good thinker.” Bless her heart! She’s a very good thinker, and I can’t wait to meet her.

Rail: Your writing in *More than Meat Joy* (1979) is really powerful and captures what you were thinking about, charting references unrelated to how your work has been discussed art historically. For instance, there are threads coming out of Wilhelm Reich that have been obliterated from discussion.

Schneemann: Well, he’s been historicized out of the discussion by tampering with his theories, by reducing them to some clichéd aspect of his concerns.

Rail: What was interesting to you about Reich?

Schneemann: The late 1950s and early 60s was a time of profound erotic suppression—I’ve written about that ad nauseam—and here was this brave, challenging, and remarkable psychoanalytic

delving into the forms of suppression that related to governance, to militarism, to patriarchy. Certainly, political oppression had a crazy sexualized slant to it then; you felt it in the culture wherever you went, and if you weren't part of it, you were threatening to it. Jim Tenney and I would go into a diner and guys would look at him and threaten him with a knife because we looked like beatniks. The country was so polarized that they set our modest little co-op in Illinois on fire. It was just a building where we gathered grains and husks of corn and brought in our vegetables, but because it was "against America," it was destroyed. This was even before it became commercially conventionalized to worship synthetic foods.

Rail: I've talked with our mutual friend Peter Lamborn Wilson about the shifting legacy of what was once called "sexual liberation." Sexuality has been totally instrumentalized by advanced capitalism. How do you see the potential of the erotic as having changed?

Schneemann: Sex has become a consumer item, along with everything else. Reich is impenetrable right now; there is no way to use his real knowledge and wisdom because we have no structure for resistance. Personally, internally, some of us still do, but we don't have a community anymore. At least in our recent histories we belonged to a marginal and despised but very active and influential community. It was a community that involved race, gender, gay principles—just about everything that had been denied and ignored that was part of human experience and which the theories of Reich could put forward. Gay liberation was stupendous, but look where it is now. It is a joke on HBO.

Rail: Is that the problem with re-performing pieces from the mid-'60s now...the transgressive potential—that vital content—is completely missing? What do you think the drive to "re-perform" is about?

Schneemann: It is like poison gas has settled over risk, uncertainty, and imagination. It's now often about predetermination. It's about glamour. It's about situating yourself safely toward renown and rewards, which we never considered previously. The culture has absorbed everything we can think of without radicalizing it. It is all floating around in this morass of permissions, and part of the permission is to imitate and regurgitate.

Rail: When did you first become aware of that process?

Schneemann: I'm still rocking in that boat. Once the '80s happened, we knew we were in deep shit. All the '60s people were saying "This is going backwards faster than a snake on its tail," and it's not releasing. By the '90s, it was gone: The wars were synthetic; the militarism was self-enclosed; sexuality was a continuous bedroom joke; and our processes of the '60s had become heroicized and glamorized. Just when we thought we were getting away from the great hero mythology, it was back again in full force, only with lots of feminism growling and chewing beside it. Women weren't invisible anymore—we're still here, yes—every gallery had to have a "bad cunt" in the '90s, but just one. And the major dominant aesthetic forces were idealized: He's young, he's strong, he's handsome, he's doing something unique—we'll buy that! The homoerotic projection.

Rail: In feminism, or with gay rights, it seems like a lot of people struggle to envision new ways of being have in fact settled for a certain kind of visibility within the preexisting structures. Instead of dismantling the institution of marriage—as should be done—gay activists are just trying to make it accommodate them. However, all your research and lectures seem to envision new institutions. How did you get the idea to do *Naked Action Lecture* (1968)?

Schneemann: It probably came out of *Fuses* (1965) and the reactions and resistances to what *Fuses* was really about. It also came out of how I had been taught: The inanities that were acceptable in teaching for maintaining the position of the "hapless girl student" who could never

amount to anything as an artist, but who could be the life model. Which I did to help pay my tuition. *Naked Action Lecture* also had a lot to do with the overalls I had worn when I was farming in Vermont; they were another misappropriation of what could represent an art 'istorian.(1) An art 'istorian naked in her overalls, who was actually a visual artist lecturing on Cézanne—that seemed delightful. I was carrying oranges in my pockets to throw to the audience. I was fed up with the whole structure. The angrier I am about a social situation, the more I have to creep up on it, and, if possible, to be as funny as I can be. Then it's disarming and it opens up another way of thinking.

Rail: Thinking of your artist book *Cézanne, She Was a Great Painter* (1974), how did Cézanne become important to you?

Schneemann: Cézanne began for me as confusion about the name. I thought it could be a girl's name: "Cez-Annie." I was twelve or thirteen. I couldn't find any other women, and the paintings looked very odd with their elongated bodies. I thought, "Maybe that's how a woman would paint," because there is always a problem if a woman wants to paint. Much later, when my teachers weren't being utterly discouraging, they were always directing me to Expressionists like Oskar Kokoschka. I said: "No, no, no—I need something really structured and formally tough," and that is Cézanne for me. I studied the broken line, the distribution of plane, the fragment and fracture and reintegration into the landscape. I needed his architectural toughness. Later, when I found his early Expressionist work, I loved it so much. I came to the stampedes of paint exploding after I had already committed to the rigorous aspects of Cézanne. I would say that is where I first wanted to break through the surface, to increase the dimensionality of paint and surface, and where I began to understand what painting was really going to demand of me. I consider that you're born an artist—a painter—but you don't know what that is for a very long time. When you are growing up, you aren't ready to know, because the truth is it is very, very difficult. Oil painting is still the most intoxicating feeling to me, more than any drug I've ever had.

Rail: Did you ever have a good teacher?

Schneemann: Finally, after I got kicked out of Bard. They couldn't eliminate my scholarship, so it was extended to The New School, where I studied with Heinrich Blücher and Hannah Arendt.

Rail: Blücher was supposed to have been an incredible teacher.

Schneemann: He was my main teacher, and he was amazing. It's hard to describe because he didn't write; it was all spoken and thought and intoxicating. I would come out of that class with my friend Mona, and we'd slide down the three flights of stairs because it was so wonderful. Well, actually after Bard, I was also at Columbia, where I could just take life drawing for six hours a day, which is what I wanted. I was always drawing, learning to see, but now I was drawing with someone behind me—a wonderful teacher named Andre Racz—saying: "Do it, do it, keep at it!"

Rail: I spend a lot of time trying to think about a school that would actually be good, because most art schools are not. What do you think is the best way to teach artists?

Schneemann: Beginning drawing, beginning drawing, beginning drawing. After that, beginning drawing again—drawing from life.

Rail: I think of drawing as a process of connecting your eye to your hand to the world.

Schneemann: Drawing is about how to see, how to enter the world of form and space. It's not an obvious process. It is not about simply translating something you see through your hand to paper. It

is about being permeated with the consequence of dimensionality that surrounds you. When I teach drawing, my students fall off their chairs at some point, they fall into space. But that doesn't happen right away, that's more advanced drawing! The perceiving is going into and through you, it's not as if you're doing it; that's the difference. It's a subtle process, subtle the way some kinds of psychoanalytic processes are. You can turn something completely inside out for a person and allow them to go there with their own rhythm and steps, with a dynamic they've never trusted themselves to use before. I love that, it's very quickening for me.

Rail: What kind of assignments do you give?

Schneemann: Mostly they start off conventionally and then it's important to constantly change. So if I bring in a vase with flowers one week, then the next week they might be blindfolded and given very big sticks with fuzzy bottoms and start moving around the room making gestural energy fictions. It depends on the class. I had a Marine at UT Austin—so uptight, everything he drew looked like it was in a cage. He was so tense. Because of him, I asked everyone in the class to make a very frightening, horrible kind of container that they could imagine something despicable inside of. “What would it look like?” That gave them a whole new range of materials to think of as a way of drawing and of dimensionality. He made a box out of barbed wire and tar; it was so scary. He couldn't say what was in it, but the essence of it was demonic and militaristic and full of everything that had tried to kill his spirit. He ended up being blindfolded on the floor with lots of watercolors and Mozart pumped into his earphones. I had to get him to an ecstatic place, but if you bring that in too soon it creates a panic. You can't just go there, you have to creep up on these things. If you can creep up on these things both together within the group and individually, it can become so enlivening it's inspiring.

I've had serious psychological upsets in the drawing class, but usually they can be worked through, especially if gender issues come into the depiction of the body. That is where I lost one of my really good students because he was gay and in denial, from a Baptist family. He experienced so much trauma trying to draw the figure, that when he tried to depict certain physical forms, he just lost it. I couldn't help at that time because he put himself into a clinic.

Rail: Is your sense one in which no matter what medium an artist works, drawing is the common language? Would you recommend someone who wanted to make films or performance also draw?

Schneemann: It's not a prescription necessarily, but according to how I work, I'd say absolutely. If drawing is performative, then you have an enlarged dimension for space and action and aspects of musicality and duration. But that is because I need everything to come from painting. And I don't want my students to be so crunched by theory that before they even show what they've made, they have these contentious descriptions of “the hierarchal imperatives” from which they finally set a snow castle on fire.

Rail: One thing that Peter Lamborn Wilson said to me is that the aim of the artist should be the liberation of the person they are communicating with. What do you think the role of the artist is?

Schneemann: That is paralysis for me. I'm not thinking about the audience or the people I aim to communicate with; they're almost invisible. My motive is always to see something more clearly for myself—not for who is going to get it—because I've been shit on for everything from the beginning. Initially I was told, “You can't do this or that; you're wasting our time.” I am still amazed when there are thoughtful appreciations, as there have always been and are increasingly.

Rail: Peter was relating it to Giordano Bruno’s image magic, and the way it can be used to bind people, like in advertising and propaganda. Fine art also works that way, but the goal should be liberation, not enslavement. I think your word for liberation is ecstasy.

Schneemann: Ecstasy or fury—but it has to be rigorous. It has to be tough. It has to be hard to do. It has to be a problem, a set of formal challenges: “How should it look?” or, “How should it move?” or, “How should it read in someone else’s perception?” Although, I’m not trying to predict or control that. It’s very hard work to get to my ecstatic vision of something; *Fuses* was arduously editing frame by frame by frame. The ecstatic aspect has to be explored through the rhythms, intercuts, and saturation of color, so that I’m immersed.

Rail: Your recent installation *Flange 6rpm* (2011 – 13) seems to be a tongue-like form, but also a flame-like limb. How did you develop that shape?

Schneemann: I was walking on Seventh Ave last spring when I saw something like a limb, but not a limb—it could have been a frond or a vulvic sensation, which is where so much of my work originates. I spent several weeks asking my friends if they’ve seen anybody’s sculpture made up of this kind of unit, multiplied and varied? They said “No, it’s probably your idea.” I often check; for *Video Rocks* (1987–88), for example, I wasn’t sure I hadn’t seen an infinity of handmade cow-poop-like rocks somewhere before. I was teaching then in Los Angeles, and I went around to all the galleries to make sure they didn’t have any work like that; they didn’t. With *Flange 6rpm*, I wanted to work with the lost wax process because I could individuate every unit and then burn it up. Through the process I saw the dimension I needed: It had to be substantial in its permutation and illustrative of its own principles; it had to be complex. Certainly, there is a vast oral vocabulary of visual effects of the mouth-to-mouth as interior body surface. Vulvic sensation is constant in my imagery.

Rail: You talk about having envisioned it, then checking to see if it had come from somewhere out in the world. What does that say about how ideas come to you? How does a piece come into your consciousness?

Schneemann: Take *Vulva’s Morphia* (1995), where I’m researching and collecting the disturbances and disruptions regarding female sexuality. That is ongoing research that starts, I don’t know, maybe with my childhood drawings of cats. *Vulva’s Morphia* is photos and text in a continuous morphology, a very enriching morphology because it’s angry and fierce and funny—it can do all these things at once. But the “Angry Man” instigated the development of *Vulva’s Morphia* by appearing in a dream. He always sounds very aggrieved, he’s never pleasant; I can never invite him, he just shows up. He said: “You have that pile of research up there and all those photographs with it—you’ll never be a proper artist again! Why don’t you let Vulva do the talking?” When I woke, I ran upstairs with a pen and paper and showed “Vulva” the pile on Lacan, the pile on the Pope, on the Abstract Expressionists, all these different confluences and resistances, and I received one sentence for each pile! Then I could compose the visual grid with the “sentences.”

I had a dream for *Mortal Coils* (1994 – 95) where the Angry Man appears and says: “You’re not realizing this work, you’re stuck, nothing is happening here.” Then he showed me these three-quarter-inch ropes, and said, “Motorize the ropes at 6 rpm,” and disappeared. I was having so much trouble with the individuations in *Mortal Coils*. Hannah Wilke appeared in a dream and said, “Don’t you dare put my image next to Paul Sharits!” I was getting all these bossy people from beyond—the dead bosses.

Rail: When was your first encounter with a dead boss?

Schneemann: That would go so far back. Probably some child event. But I only have the one dead boss—the Angry Man—aside from friends protesting about my organizing images with them in it. He appeared for this home in 1965, he gave instructions to properly understand that this was a stone house and that there were chestnut floors. He was working with Jim Tenney and me when we were first here in the house. He told Jim to go outside and smash the cement that covered the walls, that the cement would fall down and that we would see a piece of golden stone.

Rail: The Angry Man is not necessarily a negative force?

Schneemann: Oh, no, he's terrific! He's positive, but he's not friendly. I don't know where he comes from. Psychoanalysis reminds us that everything you dream is connected to some lived experience in your unconscious, but I don't know who this man is, and he knows things that I couldn't possibly know, like the specific wood that was beneath the linoleum in the house.

Rail: What was your process of trusting those kinds of visions?

Schneemann: I welcome them. I always want to be as permeable as possible and for them to be able to approach me.

Rail: For *Vulva's Morphia* and the other iconological research that you've done, I wonder about the representation of other erogenous zones, like the oral—all your work that relates to mouths and kisses. How do you see those relating to each other as types of images?

Schneemann: The main transposition has been to visualize what I can feel intensely, that doesn't have literal description or ideation. "How do you describe what a kiss feels like?" It's impossible. So I had to collect hundreds of them to begin to satisfy my own sense of an appropriate sensory representation. For *Infinity Kisses* (1981–88), in which people see strange things—that the cat is aggressive, that the kiss will be hurtful—I cannot shift all these weird projections that are already embedded and cannot be transduced. That takes us into the realms of the determinations of censorship: They cannot be dislodged directly, maybe accumulatively over time. As the regard for my work deepens and allows itself to become more sensualized, my meanings are released.

Rail: What are your thoughts on "performance art" today?

Schneemann: There is an aspect of it that I am very critical of because I don't see it as coming from a living resource that resembles the uncertainty or intensity that were the origins of what has become "performance art." But it is self-fulfilling, inventive, and restorative. It does everything; it goes everywhere, like some kind of mushrooms. I'm in favor of it, really.

Rail: But your move into performance as a painter was prompted by a certain necessity that came from your ideas about space and embodiment. Is your feeling that younger artists now enter into this thing called performance art, with its history, without the same kind of concerns or urgency?

Schneemann: Well, it can't be replicated—it was unoccupied territory. It was a wild land provoked by Artaud, by Dada, deeply in revulsion towards its own immediate inheritance of the cultural conservativeness of the '50s. These initiating artists were doing something incredible, bringing in affinities to Zen, to Noh, to other kinds of Indian dance, and with thoughtfulness about it. The original happenings by Oldenburg, Dine, Whitman, and Kaprow—these were painters activating space and taking space as time. It was unprecedented; it had no script or predictable characterization. It was an adventure to be a part of. For *Store Days*, Oldenburg found a purple spangled dress for me

and gave me a knife and told me to stand on a plank over a radiator. I was not comfortable, it was a vertiginous feeling, but my job was to stab the wall for as long as we were in that space while everybody else did something else. It was a wild harmonics, a vision. My difficulty with performance art now is that it's been codified as a thing, a movement; it's taught as an academic discipline—I've taught it—but now the language around it enters a realm of predictable forms, a "practice." The assumptions of career and strategy—I get questions from students like, "What was your strategy? How would you define your career?"

Rail: I'm interested in Artaud and his relevance to performance art, and the distinctions between theater and performance art.

Schneemann: Well, we hated theater—it was "practice:" rehearsals, predictable form, perfection, and emotional direction in which you had to fulfill a characterization. We were like elements of shredded paper, flowing and fluid. In the discrepancies, extra energies would come, as with collage, when you tear a piece of paper apart and an unexpected dynamic emerges between the two sections. It's rather hard to describe because the language that is appropriate to the origins of performance art didn't exist and is still elusive. Go back to Artaud and read his visions and rantings, and yes, that is closer to it. For me, it was all the energies in the body being given a live articulation, but not as a definitive form, not as something perfected.

Rail: What is incredible about a lot of your performances are the intersections between the projected image, the body, and the spoken text. In the way you've approached and laid out *More Than Meat Joy*, you replicate the overlapping edges of those elements.

Schneemann: I designed that book with Bruce McPherson, the independent, brave publisher. The visual design principles relate to the weights and energies of my paintings.

Rail: I feel like a lot of the early writing about your performances uses the language of dance, which is problematic because what you were trying to do with performance art was not dance.

Schneemann: Yes, but...! Of course even modern dance evolves from a "practice"—you better be physically attuned to what the movement scores are going to demand of you. Dance also comes with the old approval of male culture. Everything about traditional dance refers to beautiful motions, and the culture approves of this predictably. The music drives it and establishes an exciting safety zone; it's not going to suddenly fly out of those possibilities. Even modern dance had that formulation around it. When I do works such as *Eye-Body* or *Meat Joy*, it disrupts that threshold: "Here are some really beautiful erotic bodies, but what are they doing? They are distorting their appeal!" Of course with Judson dancers, the dynamic of their movement was completely contradictory to classical performance, yet you could see they were really dancers—they were trained. That was another early arena apart from the early happenings.

Rail: Another tributary flowing into performance art, which is never discussed in art history, has to do with poetry and the things that were happening in poetry at the time. I'm thinking of the anthology Jerome Rothenberg put together, *Technicians of the Sacred*, which had so much to do with chanting, performative, and oral poetics from across time and around the world.

Schneemann: That is grasping the sacred aspect—the reverence—that is involved in the most interesting performance art; it's sacral. There is worship in it, not a self-worship but to a larger aspect that we see across cultures that Rothenberg put all together. It is so important. Of course, it's deeply neglected because materialist culture wants to insist on that material preeminence. If you introduce the sacral or spirit, that feminizes everything, it becomes fluffy and imprecise, it's

probably not worthy because it's trying to escape all the validating cultural traditions, even the radicalizing ones that have been accepted.

Rail: I'm so interested in *More Than Meat Joy* as a book because of how performance art is taught in schools or discussed in scholarship. It is usually reduced to a single image, which becomes an iconic representation of the entirety of the performance. What you do in the book is always show multiple images that unfold as a process in time from multiple vantages, and at the same time lay them right next to two types of text: One is a transcript of the spoken text of the performance, and the other is a retrospective description of the parameters of the actions. When you talk about performance as reduced to a single image, without all the texts, it completely bleaches the complexity of the thing as art, which is one reason the vital connection to poetry has been lost in performance art history.

Schneemann: Those poets had such severe magic. My work was first properly accepted by poets. Rothenberg and Antin published the introductory text of *Meat Joy* in *some/thing*, their poetry magazine. At that time the poets didn't have a very respected platform themselves but were very energizing together. There is Hanna Wiener using her amazing signage that became performance art because people didn't know what else to call it. Then there is ridiculous theater that always had a lot of language in it, but it was still in the shaping of theater. There was a spillover into Jack Smith and Barbara Rubin and aesthetics that have no definition but "experimental."

Rail: Of course, Vito Acconci was a poet.

Schneemann: And he began performing after a program that we were on together, in which I symbolically hung myself. After that, he began to do physical actions.

Rail: Upstairs in your library, you have several shelves dedicated to Virginia Woolf. I'm very interested in your engagement with her.

Schneemann: It started when I was fourteen years old and at The Putney School in Vermont. We had a wonderful book wagon; you could crawl in and take one or two and sign them out. I, of course, had never heard about Virginia Woolf, but I liked the double letters of the name, and the cover was painterly, so I took that out. I went to the barn and sat on a windowsill and just wept for the next two hours. I thought, "I don't know what this is, but this is what I need to do." I was reading *The Waves*—it was the fragmentation, the breaking, the cohesion, the intense rhythms. I just loved it so much—the way you can as a kid and you don't know why—it was talismanic for me. At Bard, when I said I wanted to write a paper on Woolf, my professor said, "You can't do that; she is trivial. That is not serious literature. You can write about Mann, Proust, or Kafka." And then I got the same parallel from a philosophy teacher when I said, "I'd like to write my term paper on Simone de Beauvoir," and he said, "Honey, why do you want to write about the mistress when you can write about the master?"

Rail: When did you first start reading de Beauvoir?

Schneemann: As soon as it came out in the '50s. It was electrifying. I was working in a pottery shop engraving things on the edges and I saved my money to buy *The Second Sex*. I sent it to Stan and Jane Brakhage for Christmas. They burnt it. That is how much convention had to be defended there, and how invisible it was between friends because there was such a fluid, excited, smart, aesthetic exchange all the time.

Rail: But you've continued reading Woolf. How did her work evolve for you in significance or understanding?

Schneemann: It was like falling in love. That first vision was illuminating, and the rest of my study confirmed it. If you're lucky, that is what happens. Woolf engaged every aspect of what I would look at as a painter—the domestic, the landscape, the light, the formulations of material, transitory configurations—everything that you're looking at is going to change, and yet you struggle to grasp some essence of it, which is what she does. Her gift is in the harmonic integration of things. I don't know that I ever achieved that as much as I perceived it in her work. And the tremendous struggle in her work, that has only been looked at recently, of the gender paralysis—the exclusion, the sexual abuse—it takes fifty years to clarify these facts of life. That is inspiring to other generations to see the residual repression and marginalization and sexual threat. It's modified but it hasn't gone away.

(1) "Art 'istorian" was Carolee Schneemann's preferred feminist term for what is commonly called an "art historian" and it appears frequently in her writings of the '70s. See *Correspondence Course* (2010) and *More than Meat Joy*(1979).

LISSON GALLERY

The Brooklyn Rail
01 December 2016

BROOKLYN RAIL

ArtSeen

Carolee Schneemann

“The great and amorous sky curved over the earth, and lay upon her as a pure lover. The rain, the humid flux descending from heaven for both man and animal, for both thick and strong, germinated the wheat, swelled the furrows with fecund mud and brought forth the buds in the orchards. And it is I who empowered these moist espousals, I the great Aphrodite...”

Aeschylus, *The Danaides*

In this time of war and uncertainty, Carolee Schneemann, the best artist embodiment of Aphrodite we have, has brought us two exhibitions that take us, with her uncompromising authenticity, into places rarely visited. When many are hoping for an Athena armed to the teeth to save our democracy, Schneemann summons Aphrodite, the goddess of couplings, sexual delight, lover of genitals, sea foam, and honeyed kisses. With her morphologies she has built a language all her own—a complex body of work and thought—and has produced writing that often eclipses the commentary of others with its articulateness and brilliance.



Carolee Schneemann, *Maquette for Venus Vectors*, 1987. Plexiglas and marker. 9 × 24 inches. © Carolee Schneemann. Courtesy PPOW.

At P.P.O.W. a large wall drawing, *Venus Vector Vocabulary Score for the Performance Fresh Blood – A Dream Morphology* (1983), functions as both Rosetta Stone and periodic table. The pubic triangle found etched on the back of a rock in the caves of Chauvet is perhaps the first anatomical form drawn by our ancestors; here it serves as the genesis of Schneemann's vocabulary. Schneemann's genius lies in taking an elementary form and spinning it into a complex narrative coupled with dream interpretations, observations from nature, popular images, real life events, and synchronicities. Like the Rosetta Stone, drawing shows us Schneemann's multiple languages and multiple origins laid out side by side; this vocabulary drawing is invaluable for understanding what Schneemann is all about, and the building blocks of her body of work and thought.

The glass sculptures titled *Venus Vectors* (1987) act as propellers radiating images reproduced from *Venus Vector Vocabulary Score for the Performance Fresh Blood – A Dream Morphology*. The four *Maquettes for Venus Vectors* (1987) at P.P.O.W. were studies for the larger *Venus Vectors* (1987) first shown at the Everson Museum in *Sacred Spaces*. The radiating hinged glass sculptures with their drawn panels possess an energetic dynamic that spins into the artist's performances, films, and projection installations. Schneemann creates an energy field where a profound charge can envelope and transport the viewer.

Red menstrual blood colors *Fresh Blood – A Dream Morphology* (1983). Schneemann has discussed the relationship of blood to intercourse in publications like *Parts of a Body House Book* (Beau Geste Press, 1972). It is in the P.P.O.W. installation that *Known/Unknown: Plague Column* (1995-96) moves into a darker place with Aphrodite in peril. Faced with breast cancer, the artist refused traditional cancer treatment—including a mastectomy. Breasts are erotic organs as is a man's penis. Schneemann was determined to keep hers, because reconstructed breasts have no erotic sensation. Fleeing the medical "war on cancer," Schneemann chose the alternative Gersen treatment. Images of a needle piercing her breast and shit from enemas flushing away during her treatment in the Tijuana clinic fill four monitors. Aphrodite's Eros is saved, but through a heart-wrenching struggle.

Perhaps the most compelling works portraying the dark militarism and destruction of our time are to be found in two video-projection installations at Lelong. Aphrodite had an affair with Ares, the god of war. Following their morning lessons in hand-to-hand combat, Sappho's academy taught young men Aphrodite's lessons of love and relatedness in the afternoon. Now Ares has run amok with no goddess to intervene and mediate—the latest mechanized forms of warfare are relentlessly raining down terror. In *Devour* (2000-04), Schneemann's Aphrodite transmogrifies into the student we see killed by a sniper in Sarajevo, her riddled body lifted like a limp ragdoll. Schneemann received these images from the Sarajevo Film Cooperative along with a note saying, "we are disappearing ... these are our final images."

Precarious (2009), a Tate Liverpool commission, fills the large room at Galerie Lelong. The short image sequences and particular type of editing are familiar to students of Stan Brakhage. Brakhage, James Tenney, and Carolee Schneemann were a creative triangle beginning in the late '50s, but the Anthology Film Archives was a boys club, and Schneemann was shut out (they didn't consider her work film). Historians would do well to look at Schneemann's influence on Brakhage's work; his early black-and-white psychodrama films transformed after seeing her landscape paintings, her use of color and images from lived life. His later films depicting childbirth, intercourse, and death are all products of this interchange. The works at Lelong show Schneemann has both pioneered this tradition of filmmaking and advanced it into new territory.

Precarious also adds another dimension—a mechanized projection system of mirrors becomes a vehicle for the movement of images. All of the animal familiars of the goddesses—Artemis's bears, Bastet's cats, and Blodeuwedd's birds—are chained and caged... and dance for survival in these

sequences. Mass prison exercise programs to music have replaced the dances of the maenads. We look the brutal militarized agents of death square in the face in her work. We are now in a dark hour with the forces of fascism and death on our doorstep, and Aphrodite has never been so surrounded and vulnerable. Schneemann brings this fact home in a way few others can.

LISSON GALLERY

New York Times
25 October 2016

The New York Times

Challenging Boundaries With Her Naked Body



The artist Carolee Schneemann, at home outside New Paltz, N.Y. Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times

By Hilarie M. Sheets

Oct. 25, 2016

Carolee Schneemann's influence, both acknowledged and unacknowledged, is widespread, and the artist documents this beautifully in a binder she has kept for 20 years called "Influence, Plagiarism, I Forgot." It juxtaposes her work with images she comes across in art and pop culture, and last month it was all printed as a [magazine](#) by the [Artist's Institute](#) in New York.

Ms. Schneemann is infamous for using her naked body to challenge boundaries in her groundbreaking interdisciplinary performances and films of the 1960s and 1970s, such as "Meat Joy" (1964).

The magazine's side-by-side comparisons include a 1974 picture of Ms. Schneemann, drawing on surrounding walls [while](#) dangling naked in a harness, next to an image of the artist Matthew Barney suspended from ropes in his studio more than three decades later. Another pairing shows a photo of Lady Gaga wearing her [meat dress](#) next to a photo from "[Meat Joy](#)," in which performers revel ecstatically with paint, raw chicken, fish and sausages. "Her range of visual connections is great," said Jenny Jaskey, director of the institute, which dedicated its six-month season last year to exhibitions and events related to Ms. Schneemann. "It's high, it's low."

The magazine's publication comes on the heels of Ms. Schneemann's first major museum retrospective, this year at the Museum der Moderne Salzburg in Austria. (The show travels to Frankfurt in 2017.) And on view in New York is a two-part exhibition of Ms. Schneemann's lesser-known works from the 1980s to the present, at [P.P.O.W.](#) and [Galerie Lelong](#).

After decades without much institutional support or a strong market for her work, the tide is finally turning for Ms. Schneemann, 77, at a moment of growing interest in female artists of her generation. Last year the Museum of Modern Art acquired her 1962 painted construction with moving parts, "[Four Fur Cutting Boards](#)," an environment she then activated with her nude body in the photographs "Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions for Camera" (1963). That series set an auction record for the artist of \$185,000 at Christie's last year, although her work has sold privately for up to \$900,000.

"That was the first time I felt I could position my body as an extension of painting and sculpture," Ms. Schneemann said recently of "Eye Body," sitting in her 1750 stone house and studio near New Paltz, N.Y. "I was reacting against Pop Art, with its slick mechanistic polish of the female form, and against masculine eroticism, which I felt was prurient and suppressive to what our lived experience could bring forward."

As an art student at Bard College in the late 1950s, she was suspended for painting herself with her legs open, while it was standard for female students to model naked for male peers. The essential question her work posed early on was, Can a naked woman be both image and image-maker?

[Stuart Comer](#), MoMA's chief curator of media and performance art, who steered the acquisition of "Four Fur Cutting Boards," called the piece "a watershed moment" in Ms. Schneemann's career and for the Happenings movement, for feminism, and for a shift in understanding the relationship of performance and painting. "To say that Carolee was a visionary is an understatement," he said. "She is crucial to the way so many artists are working now."

Yet at the time, pieces such as "Meat Joy" or "[Interior Scroll](#)" (1975), in which Ms. Schneemann read a monologue she pulled from her vagina while striking modeling poses, were widely trivialized and branded as pornographic. She said that she was vilified by many first-wave feminists for "playing into male fantasies," which she said was the most hurtful part of the backlash.

Marilyn Minter, an artist a decade younger who explores sex and desire in her own work, said Ms. Schneemann's early performances "were the first time I'd ever seen a young woman artist using sexuality and making a picture of what it looks like."

She remembers other feminists dismissing Ms. Schneemann's actions because of her "killer body." "They called it narcissism," Ms. Minter said. "Today it would be called slut-shaming. I wish I had had the language to defend her, but it registered that this is someone who's really making a giant move."



Today, young and vocal feminists in the media, including the "Girls" creator Lena Dunham, follow in Ms. Schneemann's wake with bold narratives about their own bodies. Ms. Dunham, who has experienced backlash for disrobing on air, recently posted on social media: "I live for the nude rabble rousing of Carolee Schneemann."

A spoof ad on the end page of the Artist's Institute magazine shows the Icelandic performance artist Ragnar Kjartansson naked, reading a mock-up of the issue. Mr. Kjartansson, 40, said he was first inspired by Ms. Schneemann in art school. "All this art history of the representation of the female body, then there comes a woman who just owns it," he said, referring to Ms. Schneemann as "Aphrodite herself." He said that he sought her out in New Paltz in 2007. They have been close friends ever since.

He describes Ms. Schneemann's "Infinity Kisses" (1981-87), in which she filmed deep morning kisses with her cat close-up with a hand-held camera, as "the only art piece that has really shocked me." The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art bought the piece in 1993, the first museum acquisition of her work.

"She still is doing some of the most disturbing physical images around," he said.

The Galerie Lelong show includes two immersive film installations in which she collaged images of political violence, a thread in her work since her films from the 1960s exploring the atrocities of Vietnam. At P.P.O.W. the installations focus on Ms. Schneemann's experience with illness.

"Known/Unknown: Plague Column" (1995-96) investigates cancer from a cellular level to a metaphoric one, made as Ms. Schneemann was using alternative therapies to treat breast cancer and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. (She had no health insurance at the time, and treatment was made possible via a Pollock-Krasner Foundation grant, she said.) For an artist who has bared all for decades, it is a strikingly intimate work that has rarely been shown.

"It's a very hard work for me to bring forward because I'm superstitious," she said. "Now it should be helpful in the conversation of cancer and health that so many of us are going through." She has been cancer-free for years, but moves slowly

since falling and breaking her hip on the way to the podium to give a lecture at New York University in 2014. (She asked for a chair and proceeded with the lecture and question-and-answer session before going to the emergency room.)

Also on view at P.P.O.W. is “Fresh Blood: A Dream Morphology” (1981-87), a filmed performance in which the artist ruminates on menstruation, another taboo subject, in ways both investigatory and humorous. “It’s a work that used to bring women to tears,” Ms. Schneemann said. “It was enlivening aspects of our physiological experience that had been despised and invisible.”

Artsy

17 October 2016

ARTSY

Why Carolee Schneemann's Explorations into Erotic Pleasure Are Even More Powerful Today

Artsy Editorial



Carolee Schneemann with *Venus Vectors*, 1985. Photography by Victoria Vesna. © Carolee Schneemann. Courtesy of P.P.O.W. and Galerie Lelong.

It began with a simple dream. One fateful night, an umbrella and a bouquet of dried flowers, both shaped like the letter “V,” appeared in the sleeping mind of artist Carolee Schneemann. Not long after, these objects became the crux of *Fresh Blood - A Dream Morphology* (1981–7), a project that led Schneemann to accumulate hundreds of images of the vagina over the course of six years.

“It was a great biological gift to work for six years with these images that were so...the only word that comes to mind is fruitful,” Schneemann tells me with a laugh, over the phone from her home and studio in upstate New York. Female genitalia is a topic that’s been at the center of the artist’s powerful feminist work for the past 50 years. Today, it’s also notably located at the heart of the U.S. Presidential election’s recent controversy – the emergence of a 2005 tape in which a showboating Donald Trump boasts about grabbing women anywhere he wants, anytime he wants.

“The thing is, he’s bringing forward the submerged, denied, and marginalized issues that we all experience,” Schneemann ponders. These are issues that the artist has made a career of tackling, through a constant stream of incisive performances, videos, and installations, several of which will be on view in two exhibitions, “Further Evidence - Exhibit A” and “Further Evidence - Exhibit B,” which open at New York galleries P.P.O.W and Galerie Lelong this week. In light of Trump’s misogynistic statements – and the furious conversations around the marginalization, sexualization, and abuse of women that they’ve inspired – a large-scale show of Schneemann’s work couldn’t come at a more appropriate time.



Fresh Blood - A Dream Morphology, 1983/2004
P.P.O.W

“In this work, there’s explicit genital imagery that’s combined with physiological images, sacred images, and images from nature,” Schneemann points out, as our conversation turns back to *Fresh Blood - A Dream Morphology*. The project, which will be on view at P.P.O.W, has taken the form of a lecture about taboos accompanied by a dynamic, pulsating video projection. Its goal is to emphasize female sexual pleasure as normative, as opposed to secret, shunned, or second-rate—the go-to responses to female eroticism in the early 1980s, when Schneemann began the piece. “It’s part of my sustained attempt to demystify the female genital experience, acknowledge it as something various, positive, and alive, instead of a some dead envelope to be torn apart or penetrated.”

Schneemann has been grappling with Trump’s perspective, and those similar to it, which homogenize and objectify women, since her youth in rural Pennsylvania. “When I was young, living in the country, the biggest compliment I could get was a boy saying, ‘When we grow up, will you breed my babies?’” Schneemann recalls. “I think that idea—that women have the power to procreate—still underlies the need to control and possess by male culture.”

It was in the 1960s, when Schneemann found herself ensconced in New York’s male-dominated avant-garde scene, that her frustration with this brand of deep-seated sexism was converted into art. By that time, she had left Pennsylvania and the traditional path her father had arranged for her. “My wonderful father refused to send me to college for art; he was afraid that I wouldn’t be a normal girl. And I wasn’t, I got lucky,” she laughs. Yet even though downtown Manhattan was rife with creative experimentation and the burgeoning organization of feminism, Schneemann didn’t feel particularly accepted there either. Some of her most pioneering works, like *Meat Joy* (1964)—using her naked body in lieu of the “phallic” brush that “belonged to abstract expressionist male endeavor,” she’s explained—were originally maligned by ardent feminists and big-name galleries alike, who were both, for different reasons, uncomfortable with her use of eroticism.



Interior Scroll, 1975
P.P.O.W



Carolee Schneemann
Meat Joy, 1964-2010
Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery, Haverford College

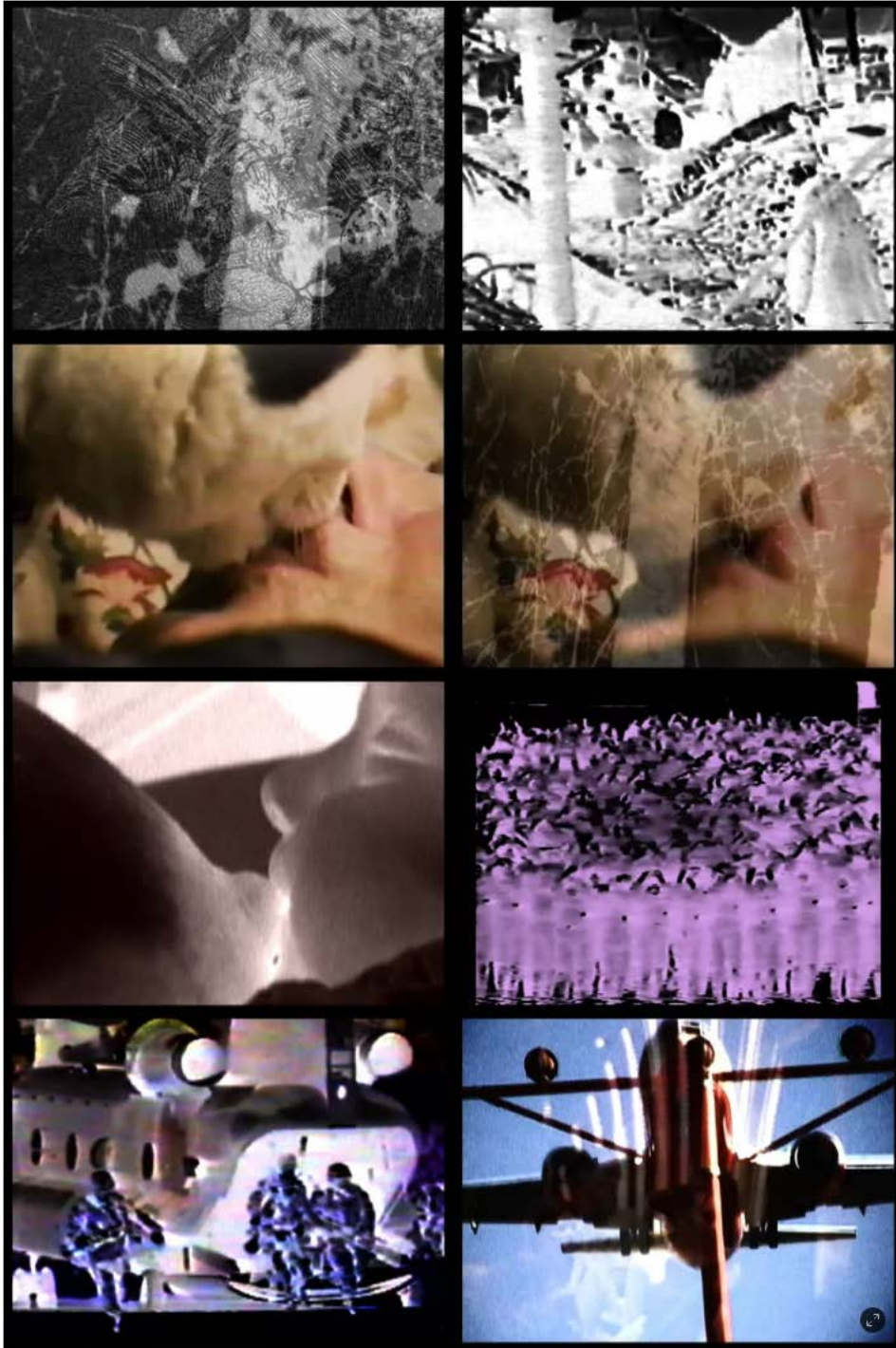
“Any of my work that had heterosexual or erotic-positive content was despised by traditional critical feminists,” Schneemann explains, nodding to an era in which radical feminists largely disapproved of any imagery that might be misconstrued as porn, or invite the male gaze, no matter what its message. “I was subject to exclusions and very harsh critical reactions... Until a few years ago, my work was rejected by almost every gallery that you can name that was forward-thinking in New York City, too,” she notes. “Castelli, Sonnabend, you name it. They said my work was ‘messy,’ ‘not their cup of tea,’ they ‘didn’t know what I was after.’” She was told her works were too close to what Joseph Cornell and Robert Rauschenberg were doing, among many other criticisms, like, “If you want to run around naked, run around naked but don’t say you’re painting. This isn’t really feminism, it’s some hypnotic erotic,” she recalls. “I got every weird thing.”

But Schneemann forged on, and the art world has begun to come around. *Meat Joy* and *Interior Scroll* (1975), a work in which Schneemann read a scroll inscribed with feminist texts as she pulled it out of her vagina, have entered into the feminist canon, and

likewise into a slew of art history books. But, as Schneemann will tell you, the hubbub (whether negative or positive) around the pieces that featured her nude body has eclipsed other large and important aspects of her output. The exhibitions at P.P.O.W and Lelong will give these lesser-known facets a shiny new Chelsea soapbox—one that's long overdue.

“The projects in which I used my body in the '60s and '70s have distracted from the more concentrated, complex work that I've developed since then, over the past 25 years—work that has a political dimensionality that reframes the body in a different way than what I've become known for,” Schneemann says of her more recent video montages and installations, which involve political content and pioneering use of projection and technology integration. “P.P.O.W and Lelong recognized this, which was lovely because then I was able to resurface works that had been neglected and that we all considered to be consequential.”

The works that will be shown across both galleries span Schneemann's output from the early '80s to today. And they indeed embed the body—and the female body in particular—into visceral political discourse related to violence, sickness, catastrophe, and confinement. In one 2006 two-channel video, footage of “political disasters” and “ambiguous menace,” as Schneemann describes, are juxtaposed with “evanescent, fragile” domestic scenarios. Fleeting moments from the Siege of Sarajevo and roaring planes feature in unlikely pairings with images of suckling newborns and couples embracing, drawing attention to individual, human life forces sustaining themselves in the face of pervasive violence. “This is the odd dichotomy we're surrounded by,” Schneemann explains. “On one side, complete militarism, irrationality, insanity—just look at our current daily politics. Then on the other, how we sustain ourselves by quotidian tasks like cleaning the refrigerator and making love.”



Devour/Goya, 2006
Galerie Lelong

While not every work included in “Further Evidence” is directly related to the female body, the shows collectively forge a through line between it and the violence it’s endured. “Emphasizing erotic and heterosexual pleasure has always been a theme of my work, but I also have to look at that in the context of militarism, rape, murder, abandonment, the endless violence against suppressed elements of our culture,” Schneemann explains, as the conversation meanders back to the current election and its Republican hopeful.

“We’re up against a very deep cultural tradition in which male dominance, greed, paranoia, self-justification seems to be irrepressible. It has no nuance, that’s why it’s so frightening right now.”

For her part, Schneemann will continue to make an emphatic and convincing case against sexism and the marginalization of minorities — one that draws disquieting connections between past and present to reveal how much work still needs to be done.

Artnet News
23 November 2015

artnet

Artist Carolee Schneemann Finally Gets a Comprehensive Retrospective

The artist gets recognized as a painter, of sorts.



Carolee Schneemann, *Meat Joy* (1964), Documentation of the performance at the Judson Dance Theater, Judson Memorial Church, New York, US, November 16-18, 1964 Image: Courtesy of C. Schneemann and P.P.O.W Gallery, New York, Photo: Al Giese © Carolee Schneemann, © Bildrecht, Wien, 2015

Carolee Schneemann is known for pulling a scroll from her vagina or rolling around with dead fish and chickens in the name of art. But sitting in front of a canvas, brush in hand? Not so much.

An upcoming retrospective of the artist, choreographer, performer, and writer's work at the Museum der Moderne in Salzburg titled "Carolee Schneemann: Kinetic Painting," will dispel many of the stereotypes surrounding the feminist's artists life and work.

The retrospective does something unexpected: it attempts to contextualize Schneemann's work within the canon of painting. Known for shocking, erotic performances and video works, her style of "painting," the museum argues, is "beyond the canvas." Rather than acrylics and oils, she used mud and menstrual blood.

Which begs the question: Is it really necessary to call an experimental artist a painter in order for her work to be taken seriously in a museum?



Carolee Schneemann *Early Landscape* (1959), Oil on canvas.
Image: Courtesy of C. Schneemann and P.P.O.W Gallery, New York

The retrospective will make Schneemann's work more palatable for general audiences by presenting her early works, landscapes and portrait paintings from the 1950s. The word "landscape," though, hardly describes colorful, frenzied abstractions such as *Early Landscape* (1959).

More than 350 works will be on display, tracing the artist's trajectory from early paintings and constructions, like the fur and tin-can "Fur Wheel" (1962) to later ecstatic, feminine-fury, full-body performances like "Up to and Including Her Limits" (1973–1977), in which the artist used her body, suspended from a harness, as a mark-making tool until exhausted.

The show claims to delve into less-known corners of Schneemann's oeuvre, presenting a true retrospective with promises of previously unpublished works. But the show also makes promises of "embedding [Schneemann's work] in the context of painting and encouraging a wider audience to explore her art," implying that without ties to more traditional forms of art-making, the work is inaccessible to general audiences.

It doesn't seem like a coincidence that an artist whose experimental work deals with the female body and sexuality is watered down to comply to the historically male-dominated mode of painting. But hopefully the avant-garde in Schneemann will still provoke the audience the museum hopes to attract.

"Carolee Schneemann: Kinetic Painting" is on view from November 21, 2015–February 28, 2016.

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Carolee Schneemann



Flange 6rpm, 2011–13, foundry-poured aluminum sculptures, motors 6rpm, and projection, 48 × 28 × 36 inches. Images courtesy of the artist and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York.

Carolee Schneemann's extensive artistic oeuvre spans performance, film, painting, and sculpture from the 1960s to the present. After studying painting at the University of Illinois, Schneemann quickly embraced Fluxus happenings and performances in New York and expanded her work to include objects and media. I met Schneemann at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) in 1971, when she arrived as a visiting artist in the film department. Her screening of *Fuses* and her lectures on goddess mythologies caused protests among the all-male SAIC faculty but were eagerly attended by the entire student body. In the 1970s, when Schneemann lived in New York City with artist Anthony McCall, she introduced me to visual artists and filmmakers of the downtown scene. In 1974, I shot the film *Trip to Carolee* with Marjorie Keller while housesitting for Schneemann and taking care of her cat in New Paltz, New York.

Marielle Nitoslawska's film *Breaking the Frame* (2012), a thoughtful and absorbing montage about Schneemann's life and work, partly filmed in New Paltz, made me want to revisit

some of the experiences and changes in the perception of women's artwork that Schneemann and I have lived through over the past few decades.

— Coleen Fitzgibbon

Coleen Fitzgibbon Pat Steir once said that your problem in the male-dominated art world was that you were too beautiful. A recent *Psychology Today* article talked about the “beauty paradox”—how women are not accepted as leaders if they're beautiful because they are expected to be “feminine.” And feminine women cannot be leaders because they're not masculine.

Carolee Schneemann Well, it's more complicated than that. If women are beautiful, they're a source of arousal, and that distracts male purpose. Beauty is adhesive, it's sticky. There's also the traditional mind-body split. In order to be intellectually dependable, you can't have a voluptuous, luscious, erotic body, because the split is between intelligence and sexuality.

CF As in Greek mythology, Athena is the goddess of wisdom and war, and Aphrodite the goddess of beauty and love. The Roman Vestal Virgins, priestesses of the goddess of the hearth Vesta, cultivated and guarded the sacred fires that protected Rome. Vestals took a vow of chastity and were free of obligations to marry and have children while they secured the continuation of Rome. They were virgin guardians, likely beautiful, but no sex.

CS That's another demand—beauty was a requirement for sacred spirituality.

CF Your performances show the liberating effects of female sexual ecstasy. Your films *Fuses*, *Meat Joy*, *Up To And Including Her Limits*, and *Interior Scroll* reveal, for me, the positive energies of sexuality and intelligence in women, and how they don't have to be severed.

CS Well, I wouldn't say it that way. I'd say that, in my work, the relationship between the performers, male and female, has an ecstatic, erotic aspect. It has nothing to do with female liberation as such, or women performing in a certain way. It has to do with a sensitized situation in which the participants practice relational spontaneity. It's not about spontaneous expressivities; all participants experience a set of rigorous and intense exercises that sensitize us in terms of moving, shifting, handling bodies, and the taboos in regard to smells and being touched.



Meat Joy NYC, 1964, kinetic theater. Photo by Al Giese.

CF One of your earliest pieces was *Meat Joy* in 1964, in Paris. Had you seen Yves Klein's performances with nude women being dragged through blue paint?

CS I couldn't have seen those performances, he died in 1962 and my first time in Europe was for the Festival of Free Expression, organized by Jean Jacques Lebel in 1964. But Klein's widow, Rotraut Uecker, was my really close friend, a sculptor herself, and I lived with her in Paris. I always thought that Klein used the women as kind of activated puppets. The performances had this Baroque elegance with musicians in formal clothes playing French classical music, and naked women marking canvases with their nude bodies in a beautiful blue color. It was all part of something very phenomenal about getting the nude off the canvas, so I had a great respect for it, but I didn't like it that much. The obsession with female form became so mechanized. The male Pop artists' endless depiction of nudes that looked like shiny parts of automobiles—these were all very strong influences that I could work against.

CF The men and women in your performances are working *together*, equally sharing the burden, and it's much messier than with Klein.

CS He's a traditional male director who stands outside of his creation and directs it—he doesn't get paint on himself. He's in charge of where the paint goes.

CF In your case, you're the director but you also join the group. You're stained all over like everyone else.

CS That's the premise of the work, always. I never have anyone enact anything that I wouldn't do myself. There's no separation between me and the performers. There's no hierarchy except that it's my vision, and the participants must want to be a part of it.

CF Stan Brakhage said that you started out as a dancer?

CS No, I'm a painter! I've always been a painter. I was trained as a painter; I live as a painter. It's just that men always wanted to get the brush out of my hand.

CF When you were in school at the University of Illinois, your partner was James Tenney, the composer. I read that the male faculty were outraged and considered it obscene that you painted Tenney naked, showing his genitals.

CS That was at Bard actually, and they took that painting out of the senior painting exhibit in 1960.

CF But you continued to paint?

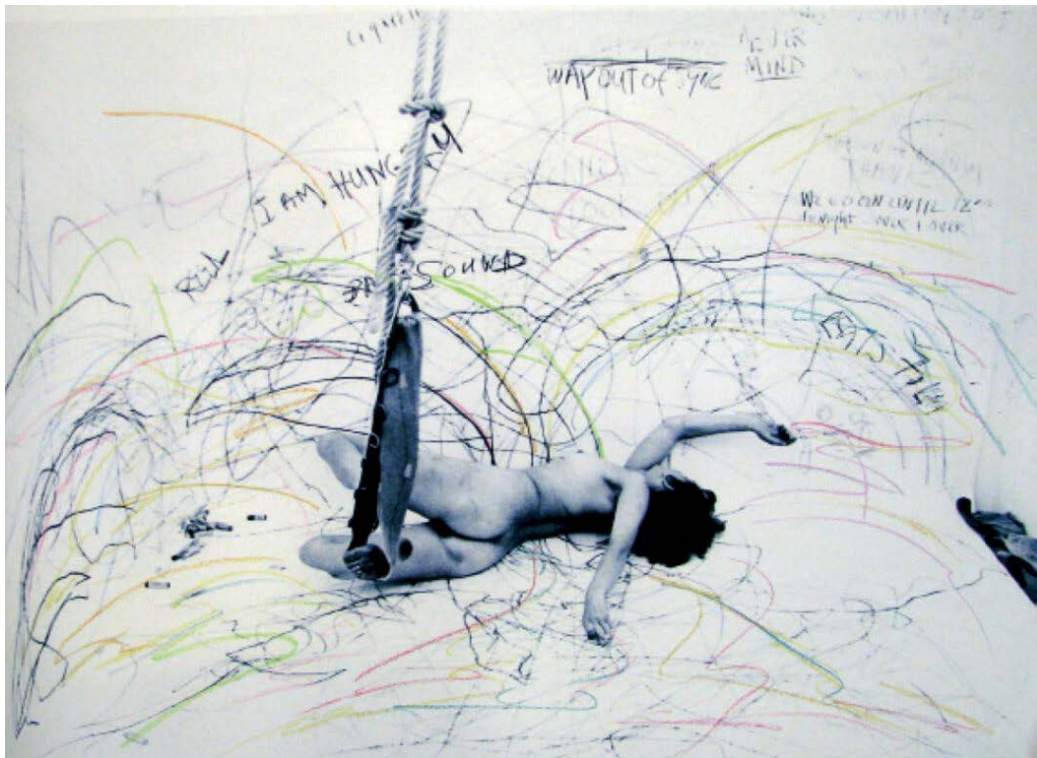
CS I couldn't give up. Since I was a child I was being told to stop painting. I remember my father one night yelling at me to "drop the brush." I was in high school and I was painting a watermelon and some fruit in my bedroom, and my parents were so bewildered by and fearful of this artist business. You know, my dad wouldn't send me to college.

CF That's dreadful. But you've inspired so many artists since then—artists like Kiki Smith, Paul McCarthy, and Marina Abramovic are very aware of your work. And so was Mike Kelly. Your performances and films with James Tenney seem quite relevant to Jeff Koons's *Cicciolina*.

CS I don't know, maybe Matthew Barney with the rope suspension too. Paul McCarthy was one of the artists who got me my first teaching position in his department at UCLA. This brought me to California for the first time and I'm forever grateful to him for providing this opportunity.

CF James Nares also painted for a while by rope suspension.

CS Yes, we all pick up energy and ideas for material from each other.



Up To and Including Her Limits—Blue, 1973–76/2011, Giclée print with hand drawing, 39½ × 52 inches.
Photo by Henrik Gaard.

CF I want to bring up *Breaking the Frame*, Marielle Nitoslawska's film documentary about you. The film is very sensitive to your method of artmaking.

CS It was just a remarkable confluence that our sensibilities are close; it's not imitating or following. The film has integrative power, because of her amazing editing. It's a collage of time and event, using James Tenney's music as the only sound. His sound structures deeply influenced my own visual editing and Marielle responded to the rhythms and dissonances. The music is beautiful and deeply affecting and it's not literalized—the sound structures enter and depart. It's not prescriptive in any way.

Breaking the Frame begins with a moon that's spinning. Marielle brought it into her footage, and she also used my underexposed, pale, pink footage of driving through the snow in 1962 with Jim. I love that material, there's something so historic and dreamy about it. It's from that other lifetime.

CF The film was shot in New Paltz.

CS The house is a muse, and Marielle uses the shots of the house as a line through time the way I use the train in *Kitch's Last Meal*. The camera keeps returning to the house, which is where my spirit always is.

CF You used your cat Kitch in a performance after she died.

CS I had to give her a little formaldehyde so she could be in *Up to and Including Her Limits*.

CF You find ongoing inspiration in the behavior of cats and in other animals. Your fur paintings are also part of *Breaking the Frame*.

CS It goes back to when I was a chicken farmer in Pennsylvania, my home. I had to slaughter seventeen chickens every Friday at a local farm. They would then be served over the weekend—not by my family but by other farmers.

CF You had to clean them yourself?

CS Yes, it was an entrancing experience. I had my own chopping block and my own little axe, and then I steamed them, plucked them, eviscerated them, and I loved to go inside and get the warm heart, the little tiny eggs, the liver, and the gizzard.

CF Much of your work relates to bodily fluids. Your father was a rural doctor when you were growing up.

CS My dad always provided a motive to let me see what was going on with the body.

CF One realizes from your art that you're incredibly strong—physically, mentally, and emotionally when you perform in front of an audience. In many of your works you're naked and often you are alone. Most people, including myself, would be terrified to be so exposed, but you seem confident in your visceral integrity.

CS I'm interested in sensuous pleasure and the power of the naked body as an active image rather than the same old, pacified, immobilized, historicized body. So for me, to activate and determine the energy of my naked body as imagery was to disrupt all the traditions I had learned—where you belong to the male artist and were passive and sort of splayed out.

CF An object to be examined—

CS —for delectation.

CF I think *Interior Scroll* [performed in 1975] is still shocking; you pull a small scroll with writing out of your vagina while reading its text. There's a sense of contemporary humor in the text as well as references to primitive symbolism.

CS I didn't expect this work to have such a dynamic life; it was a simple gesture that had occurred to me in a dream. I never wanted to do that in public, but then Anthony [McCall] helped me fold up the scroll, and he also took the photographs.



Interior Scroll, 1975, performance, gelatin silver print. Photo by Anthony McCall.

CF It's too bad that there wasn't a video or film of the performance.

CS There is a video, and it was excellent, but it was withheld—by Dorothy Beskind. We thought she was a feminist friend. She withheld other videos—of Hannah Wilke's, Eva Hesse's, Lil Picard's, Judith Bernstein's, and my work. She just went from one feminist activist to another, and she's hidden all the work away. At one point I was trying to figure out what was going on, and she said, "Well, maybe it's like wine—it will get more rare and precious, or it will turn to vinegar." Beskind passed away last year.

CF If she was counting on the content becoming more valuable, she was correct! *Interior Scroll* is still a great piece even if only remembered in photos. Seeing Marina Abramovic years later, in the '90s, sitting on a block of ice with boa constrictors, I thought of your performances with the snakes and the Minoan goddess image.

CS Charlotte Moorman performed playing the cello on a block of ice.

CF You have produced an enormous amount of work; you've had numerous shows, published several books (one of my favorites is *Imaging Her Erotics*), and have given many interviews. You're about to fly to London to show *Breaking the Frame* and talk about the film with Marielle. After that you're doing a series of shows and discussions in the US.

CS Interestingly though, while all these wonderful things are happening, there's almost no museum representation, and collectors are rare. It's a hard path; my work is just not an easy form to support.

CF Selling the work and having it placed in museums is difficult. But you're having a retrospective at the Museum der Moderne in Salzburg this fall and one coming up in Spain.

CS But if the work doesn't hit a certain strata in New York City, you're always in this margin. I loved the exhibit I had at the Dorsky Museum at SUNY New Paltz in 2010, but I think it's important to accept the paradoxical proportions here.

CF What do you mean?

CS That there are many aspects to defining your success as an artist. Some of them are economic, and some of them have to do with representation in major institutions, and some of them are about being an artist's artist—I think the latter is more my situation.

CF You've said that you are "a painter who has left the canvas to activate actual space and live time." Most artists think of making objects, not activating space and time.

CS I was heartbroken when I realized that painting had to turn into something different. That was in graduate school. I wanted to shoot myself in existential despair, but I realized I had to extend the principles of Abstract Expressionism into real time. Of course, I saw what Allan Kaprow and Claes Oldenburg did, and what my cat did—going through the broken window from inside to outside.

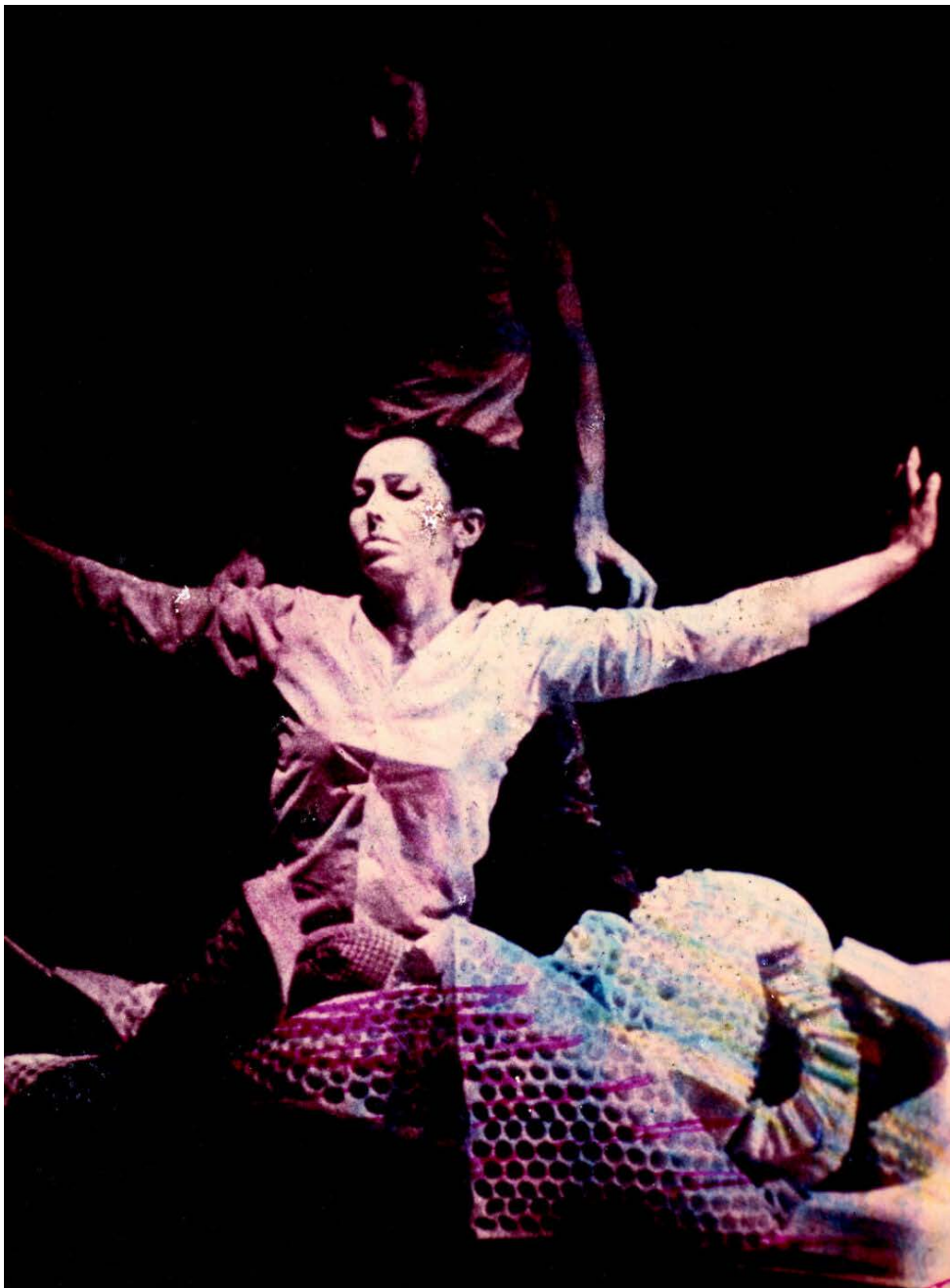
CF You were in Oldenburg's *Store Days* and his *Waves and Washes* in '66, performances now on film.

CS That was a very important step. When Jim and I moved back to New York from Illinois in 1961, he got a job working as Composer in Residence at Bell Labs. There he met Billy Klüver, the founder of Electronic Arts & Technology, who suggested that I meet a friend of

his who was doing some events on East 2nd Street. That was Oldenburg's *Store Days* performance. In graduate school I'd been studying Antonin Artaud and *The Theatre and Its Double* and was going through this painful transition, which was pushing me into live action. Then, suddenly being in *Store Days*, it offered psychic power, magic.

CF The 1967 performance *Snows* included five films such as *Viet Flakes*.

CS My work went from ecstatic, visionary imagery to the dire and dark, to war and destruction. That became a pattern over the next twenty-five years. Disasters started to invade my psyche, displacing and disrupting the sense of blessing, fortune, and expressive freedom I thought I had. Vietnam was as if smelling burnt bodies in my stove. I was hallucinating and collecting all these atrocity images. And then, in the '80s, came the destruction of Palestinian culture. I did a lot of research on disaster and destructive militarism—masculine violence.



Snows, 1967, kinetic theater. Photo by Herbert Migdoll.

CF Paul McCarthy did a performance called *The Class Fool* in '76. In the video, he paints himself and adds weights to his genitals until he is stumbling and can hardly stand up.

CS Yes, there's a crossover in terms of extreme sensuality. While my work was more about pleasure and ecstasy, Paul's would be about the demeaning visceral qualities of the body, the ecstatic disgust of piss, shit, and sperm.

CF Which brings to mind Vito Acconci's performance *Seed Bed* and Kiki Smith's wax sculptures that reference bodily fluids like tears, feces, and milk.

CS Our culture needs to have its physicality reportioned. It's been sanitized into stereotypic sports and prurient pornography concerning the feminine, and into macho-militarism overshadowing masculinity. So it's completely out of kilter in terms of equitable, pleasurable exchange. It's discomfited.

CF Why do you think that happens in our society?

CS Well, we've got 2000 years of oppression—religious, social, medical, and judicial oppression.

CF Maybe it's just human. I was rereading *The Iliad* recently and was surprised again by the number of stabbings, cuttings, and intestines falling out in the writing.

CS That's in contradistinction to some disappeared, or almost lost, goddess cultures that were comparatively harmonious, agricultural, and worshipful of nature. Those beneficent cultures always got wiped out.

CF They usually didn't have a standing military.

CS Well, some did. I've researched this, and you see statues and sculptures of women fighting—Amazons and other ancient tribes were defending their goddess religion against marauding male tribes. I have a startling photo collection of friezes and sculptures that I found in Etruscan museums. The invaders have bigger weapons.

CF In your book *Imaging Her Erotics*, I was surprised by how much historical information you had on early symbolism in various prehistoric cultures. Are we talking about warrior women fighting under male leadership?

CS No, these are female heads of tribes, they are generals.

CF In the book *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, nineteenth-century male Europeans went to Africa to acquire property to grow sugar cane, fruit, tobacco, etcetera, but found that in some tribes the women owned and worked the land and didn't want to sell. The Europeans sidestepped the problem by paying African males to sign illegal land contracts and then threw the families off of their land.

CS Complete displacement. This reminds me of the Native Americans encountering the colonial usurpers—they'd have a meeting and there were no women, and the Native Americans would say, "How can you have this discussion without your women?"

CF Women in the US didn't get the right to vote until 1922 and, in legal disputes, some Western states still award property rights automatically to husbands over their wives.

CS And why were female doctors, herbalists, and gynecologists all refused participation in their fields until recently?

CF What did your dad think of that as a doctor?

CS He didn't think about it at all. There were rarely any women doctors active until the '60s and '70s. Medicine was under the aegis of the American Medical Association or physician's organizations that were all-male.



Still from *Fuses*, 1964–66, 16mm film, 6 minutes, color, sound.

CF Let's talk about Stan Brakhage for a second. I had him as a visiting professor at the Art Institute for two years. He was a male Scheherazade and told wonderful stories of the filmmakers he introduced us to, but I had to ask him, "Why, out of the 200 films we're seeing, are there only three women filmmakers?" Those were Maya Deren, whom he worked for when he was young; Shirley Clark, whose *Cool World* was a big deal; and Marie Menken.

CS Marie Menken was married to filmmaker Willard Maas, and they were in Brooklyn when Stan met them.

CF I asked Brakhage why he wasn't showing *Fuses*, which I'd seen when you showed it at the Art Institute. He said something like, "I just don't show her films." (*laughter*) Before seeing *Breaking the Frame*, I hadn't realized how close you and James Tenney were to him and his then wife Jane Brakhage. There was some hubris in him asking you to have an (unborn) baby and asserting that it belonged to him and James as much as it did to you. Did he think it was his baby?

CS Yes, he did. Metaphorically, as a patriarchal guy, it belonged to him too.

CF At that time he believed that a woman's job was to bring forth babies and not to question it?

CS He had five with Jane.

CF Didn't he tell her to burn her paintings?

CS Yes he did. And to burn her clothes. It was disturbing to have a friendship that was intellectually powerful but oppressive in terms of gender, and to see this sexual degradation that was always put in mystical or pseudo-religious terms, which Brakhage used to occupy this hierarchical position by gift and by right. His *Cat's Cradle* was all about that and I wasn't supposed to impose on it.

CF For you and other women artists of that time the pressure from men not to make art, not to have a voice, not to be successful, must have been hugely oppressive.

CS Our work was denigrated. When Brakhage was working with P. Adams Sitney on putting together something like the twelve great filmmakers of the year, I asked, "Are you ever going to show my films?" A long silence, and then he said, "Well, we don't think of them as films." I said, "What are they?" And he said, "Something else."

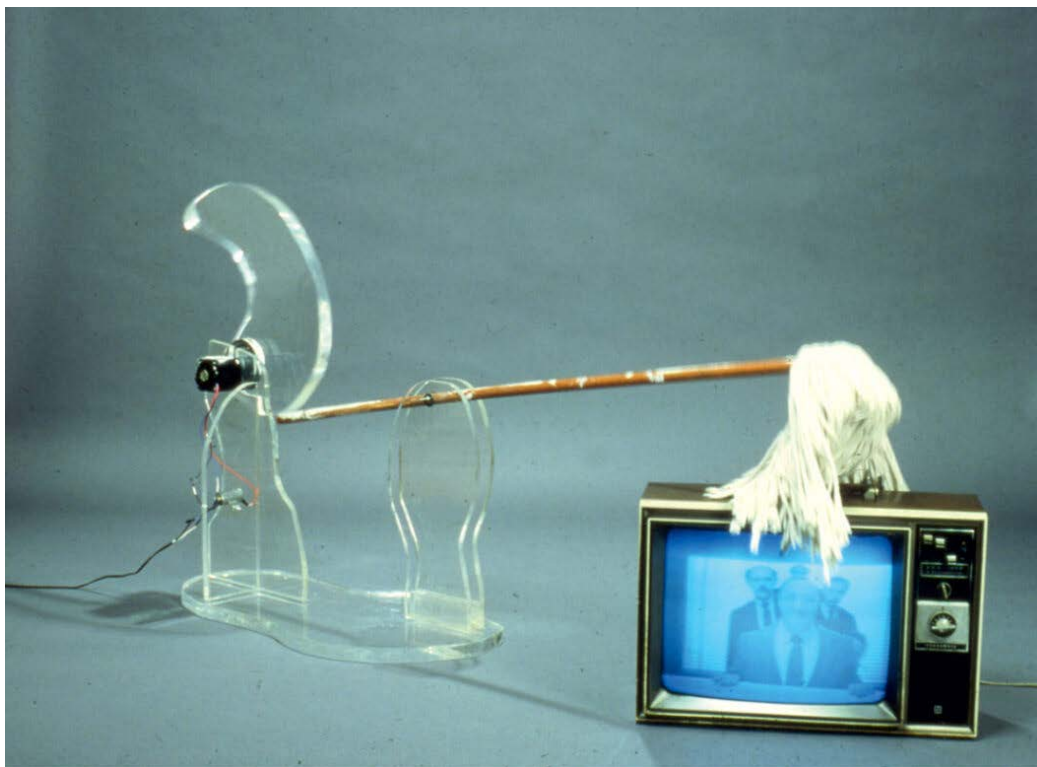
CF Maybe he was embarrassed about the sexuality in your work?

CS I don't think it was that; it was more a psychic need to dominate a realm of creativity. Only certain female figures were admitted.

CF Margaret Mead.

CS Gertrude Stein.

CF They had to be older and conventionally unattractive, which brings us back to the beauty paradox



War Mop, 1983, plexiglass construction, mop, motor, video monitor, 19 × 19 × 11½ inches. Film: *Souvenir of Lebanon*, videotape of destroyed Lebanese/ Palestinian villages, 5:50 minutes, color, sound.

CS It reminds me of why I was fired from what was called the “Wonder Woman job” at Rutgers University. They’d never had a woman teach painting and the call went out for women to apply, so Miriam Schapiro, Mary Beth Edelson, and a whole bunch of us were interviewed. It was like being in the dentist’s office, and then they decided that I should have the job. I had a wonderful time at Rutgers; I taught Introduction to Patriarchal Systems and Painting and Drawing. One Easter my feminist art class made an installation of a bloody canopy entrance with paint and censorship quotes and you had to walk through red painted sheets to get into the art department. That was too much for the guys, and a colleague took me for drinks in SoHo and said, “I’m sorry, but we’re not going to rehire you for the next term.” I said, “Why, I really liked being there and I thought everyone loved the class and was doing well.” He sighed and said, “Yes, but we think you’re a witch.” (laughter) I said, “Come on, it’s 1995, you must be kidding me.”

CF You should have given him the definition for witch since he’d already turned himself into a toad. Witch was originally *wikka* (wicca), a pagan word for herbalist as in healing with herbs; “pagan” comes from *peigan*, which means a Roman countryman or eventually peasant. Women were always herbalists so a wicca was—

CS —also a visionary and seer.

CF The Inquisition burned women and cats as witches during the bubonic plague. Then the rats, who carried the fleas harboring the bacterium, multiplied out of control.

CS That’s a huge, hideous, suppressed history. Part of the witchcraft accusations and murder of the women had to do with taking their property. Did you get to see my new work *Flange 6rpm*? It’s an installation of motorized sculptures within a projection that shows them being cast in the foundry. The objects are indicative of their own history.

CF Just like people.

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DAZED

Carolee Schneemann: game changer

The iconic performance artist who refuses to trade on trodden ground is still tackling art world prejudices in her fifth decade in the game



Writhing bodies, paint, fish, chickens, pulling a scroll from her vagina – it is these flags that unfurl with the name 'Carolee Schneemann'. Without doubt one of the most iconic figures in 60s performance art and the feminist art movement, Schneeman changed the game, specifically what it meant to be and work as a woman in the male-dominated art game. Her work is the cornerstone of a whole generation's thinking about art. Scheeman made it OK to look inward and not apologise for it, to use sex and the body as medium; to think through bodies and yet not have to pander to the pornographic or 'pop'. Her work encouraged women to make art on their own terms, according to their bodies and their selves, whilst being resolutely allowed to call it art and be confirmed as artists. Carolee Schneemann, Suzanne Lacy, Judy Chicago, Martha Rosler, Karen Finlay and even Tracy Emin. These were names I learnt when I was 16 and at school, leafing through as many library books on feminist art and performance as possible. The idea that the personal could be political changed everything I sought out thereafter.

I can't help but gush, it is a kind of starstruck I rarely get. Schneemann is calm and collected, succinct and sharp in her answers. I recognise her tone from the voiceover script for *Meat Joy*. I ask her about her legacy and she responds, "I am very blessed that my work has sustained itself over time and that's amazing because when you start making something you have no idea where it will go, or how it might live". But as I press deeper, I realise that for her my enthusiasm and gratitude is (whilst flattering) altogether repetitive. She has spoken about *Meat Joy* a thousand times, and still journalists ask her only about this. "I've been working with installations and video technologies for about thirty years and there's a huge body of work that no one knows about because they keep going back to a piece of nakedness in the '70s". She is right, of course, I want to know about *Meat Joy*, about her views on feminism, about her private life and relationships. She wants to talk about her current work, as any artist who has continued to create (but keeps getting Groundhog-dayed into going over a work they left behind over 50 years ago) might well do. She is smart. She doesn't want to trade on trodden ground, but instead works to break new paths for herself. I ask her how she has negotiated the art world and she responds, "I don't negotiate, I don't have a 'practice', I don't have a career, I am – I work".

It's been 50 years since Schneemann rehearsed, choreographed and performed *Meat Joy* with a group of young performers. It was staged several times but most documented in its November 1964 incarnation at the Judson Church in New York. What people remember is the bodies rubbing chickens and fish on themselves. What they miss are the details. During the long introduction Schneemann reads aloud, then pop music comes in, and the bodies perform a variety of formations according to instructions, at some points like synchronised swimming out of water, but more organic; more ecstatic and sexual. It is this energy, or ecstasy, (she uses this term a lot), that characterise the performances and films that have cemented her status as a guiding light in performance art by women.



Carolee Schneemann, *Water Light-Water Needle*, St. Mark's Church (1966)
Photography by Terry Schutte. Courtesy of Hales Gallery. Courtesy of Carolee Schneemann and Hales Gallery, London. Copyright Carolee Schneemann

My talk with her has, in the lead up, produced a little too much anxiety for it to go particularly well. I ask her about anxiety – the anxieties of life, love, making art, and of balancing being an artist and making confrontational and brave work. "I didn't work with a lot of anxiety, I worked with a lot of ecstatic energy – to try this, what would *this* be like, how can I make this happen? I wasn't surrounded by academic discipline, I had been already rejected and denigrated by them [academics]. So I didn't have anxiety because I wasn't working within a field of denial – I had always said 'fuck you' to them." What, no anxiety? No crippling shudder beneath the solar plexus before you put something out into the world in case it offends someone or makes you look stupid? But then I remember at the core of the works is this energy she speaks of. It is not what I know it as – the later theory and academic papers, that situate her oeuvre in the context of feminist performance of the '60s and '70s in California and New York. Now that art school tutors have seen it a million times, it is hard to make any kind of performance work involving the naked female body and not address or reference it, whereas for Schneemann there was no history for it, at least not a direct one. When I refer to *Meat Joy* in the context of her 'practice', she explains "I come from a time frame that would not position 'practice' as a concept displacing work as 'process'. Golf was practiced, dentists have a practice, yoga was a practice. My aesthetic tradition embraces a visionary process where creative work was risky, unfolding, unpredictable and not academicised at all. It was a very different world, we didn't have a predictable conceptual surround. I've been engaged with physiological momentum, structuring images in space and time. The remarkable precedence

influencing me had to do with the painters who evolved their forms of 'happenings' – visual events in actual time. Oldenburg and Dine and Whitman...".

Her making is bound to the time, to a backdrop of Kaprow, Fluxus, Yoko Ono, painting and structuralist cinema and the surge of second wave feminism. But that does not mean that it is the sum of its parts. To do that would be to deny, somehow, her essence. She explains, "It's odd because the masculine dynamic of performance – what will become performance art – does not delimit them. They're never called performance artists, they are media artists and they can return to sculpture and painting and reliable hand-work; whereas for women if you've used your body you're identified with the performative label...the feminisation of performance occurs because as a public event, the body is in explicit action and so it may still connect to traditions of male arousal, male fascination with the female body. Even as we radicalized and disrupted those traditions." Whilst Schneemann should really be canonised in context she finds herself, in my consciousness, filed firmly under feminism.

Our conversation over Skype is broken by interference. I joke that the NSA is listening in and imagine for a moment that it's not altogether inconceivable. Schneemann was radical, confrontational, threatening even, 'in her day'. This is what she talks about when she discusses her greatest achievement as being able "to persist as an artist in the face of constant denigration". The first time she says this, and later in an email, I wonder how denigrated she can possibly have been. As far as I am concerned she is an artist that has changed art history. She has empowered and informed artists who identify as women to make the work that they make, to value performance and confrontation, to use their bodies rather than create an artificial objectivity. Where in the '70s she was addressing a room full of women in Interior Scroll and making a statement about being denigrated as a women, now it is agism that she faces. "First I had to get through pure misogyny as a student when I was told I could paint but it wouldn't mean anything, and then what? Then I had to get through essentialism: when in 1962 I used my body as part of my material and medium that was essentialist! And then, by the time I'm in the 70s, I'm lacking proper Marxist address, then there's the dilemma of 'feminism as masquerade' – I never entered that discourse which was followed by feminism as 'abject'. It just goes on and on and you have to squirm your way through. And now of course there's ageism."

Interior Scroll remains her most direct and my favourite work of hers. It's impossible not to love, humour with a simmering pissed-off-ness. In the piece she announces that she will read from her (eventually published in 1976 book) *Cezanne, She Was A Great Painter* but then jettisons the sheet, keeping an apron and paints streaks of paint on herself, holding the book in one hand, whilst transitioning between life model/action poses. Finally removing her last garment and becoming completely naked, she slowly removes a scroll from her vagina and reads from it a conversation, seemingly with 'a structuralist film-maker'. She outlines the dichotomy between the figure of woman as bodily, intuitive, natural, irrational, against the academic position of the male figure – rational, ordered, to be taken seriously in their objective coldness (I paraphrase). The dialogue is taken from *Kitch's Last Meal*, a super 8 film she started in 1973. The piece has often been considered as an address to 'a male artist', the structuralists who demeaned her, or to her lover Anthony McCall perhaps. Later she suggests it was aimed at American critic and art historian Annette Michelson. It shouldn't matter; the point is made to those who hear it.



“I wouldn't want to be labelled unless it was something much broader and inclusive such as an ecological artist or a visionary artist, but there's a constraint in the definition of a feminist artist, you're an artist and you're a feminist.” –

Carolee Schneemann



The audio connection that unites us occasionally drones, sounding like a plane taking off, she says all she can hear at her house are birds. Then a siren sounds on the high street outside my house, she asks where I live and reflects "I lived in London once too". This was with Anthony McCall. She explains that she is speaking to me from the house where she made *Fuses* with her 1965 boyfriend, composer James Tenney. Her relationships have

been mutually respectful and harmonious in terms of her work, though she does note that "after a certain amount of time I would find that the partners that I felt I had a perfect life with would need to separate and usually have a baby and a more conventional relationship". For *Fuses* she filmed herself and Tenney having sex – intimate, loving, erotic sex, observed by Kitch, the cat. I remember seeing *Fuses* for the first time at the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley. It was screened alongside a programme of Structuralist film (not just feminist cinema) where Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* also appeared. I remember feeling awed.

The materiality of *Fuses* struck me in that context; painterly gestures and marks etched into the silver gelatine of the 16mm. Each frame marked with the tactility of her touch, fingertips to film, places the work between structuralism, painting, materialist filmmaking and as far as possible from pornography. She recollects, "Of course it builds on all my disciplines as a painter which had to do with rhythm, duration, colour saturation, within the energy of the frame and then breaking the frame. The relationship to inheriting art history with hundreds of precedents within time's passage, and holding energy and individuality, that's how I think about what I do with my work". To watch the film is to experience a beautifully sensual atmosphere of flecks, marks, glimpses and headiness. What might have appeared as like an amateur sex tape, it is an exploration of female sexual pleasure, the denial of objectification and scopophilia in favour of erotic address. In the '60s this was radical: Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* had come out only two years before, and second wave feminism was bubbling under the surface. Schneemann's rationale for making the work resonates as clearly now as it did then, "film gave me permission to examine lived experience. For me that was nothing do with narcissism. It had to do with a counter-force to the denial of female sexuality, of female pleasure and I didn't know what I could capture but I needed to look at what I lived, and not what male culture had described as my experience'. We might think our contemporary reality is past that; female sexual pleasure abounds. We are all having Sex in the City, or we are all 'girls', but still Schneemann's work looks beyond this, with the intention to challenge

feeling based on representation.



Carolee Schneemann, *Water Light-Water Needle*, St. Mark's Church (1966)
Photography by Terry Schutte. Courtesy of Carolee Schneemann and Hales Gallery, London. Copyright Carolee Schneemann

Schneemann maintains a distance from this. She suggests she was just 'making work', asserting, "I wouldn't want to be labelled a Catholic artist or a Marxist artist unless it was something much broader and inclusive such as an ecological artist or a visionary artist, but there's a constraint in the definition of a feminist artist, you're an artist and you're a feminist". When discussing whether feminism is still relevant she brings up some other women who have acted as signposts for me and countless others, "you have to look at de Beauvoir, you have to look at Virginia Woolf, you have to look at the pioneering creative and theoretical players that make our consciousness viable and in motion today, and we're still rather crippled if we have to ask these questions." And this is something that, in feminist groups or meetings of artists who define as women, comes up often. To ally with the feminist term and cause, openly? To make 'feminist work' or to make work as a feminist, but be clear and firm in the desire to be labelled only an artist and therefore asked to be appreciated on those terms. Can artists who are women make confrontational work that includes addresses to, and furthers the language of, the body or does not shy away from the subjectivity behind it without being reductive or allowing the work to be sidelined away from the official 'art world'? "Obviously since so many women find it fruitful and demanding and provocative, it is still responding

to cultural conventions that have been constrained and marginalised by hierarchies of the heroic male work". There is no shortage of artists who are women that want to be assessed purely on merit, but this is not a meritocracy.

With feminism having a visible resurgence in journalism and mainstream media over the past year, the figure of the feminist is much debated and I ask Schneemann what she thinks of it in the current climate. "There's a video that went viral of a young woman...she addresses the camera and says 'I don't know why I'm doing this but I need to do this – I'm going to eat my tampon', and she does chew on it. So I had journalists from London who called me thinking I would find this the outer edge, or horrible, but I was very touched by it. I thought it was another degree of intimacy with your own life processes, and the one that's been most deeply feared and downgraded. But her presentation was so simple and uninflected, it was a very humble exploration of a deeply forbidden intimacy...it must have gone through many different phases of receptivity – mostly outrage." For Schneemann, as with most artists, it is the work, *her* work, that commands attention. Whereas in the '60s, *Meat Joy* and *Interior Scroll* grabbed the art world by the balls and made them take notice. She was making work with respect to her condition as an artist. She did not set out to make 'feminist work', she simply made, and continues to make today, kinetic and media works. When teaching Schneemann doesn't have her students predetermine their material and subject, "They don't explain what they have to do for me, they have to discover it. I offer them time, materials and something vigorous where they have to really address culture that gives them substance". For me, and the thousands of other art students looking for inspiration, her groundbreaking performances will always act as flares in the dark.

LISSON GALLERY

Frieze

01 May 2024

FRIEZE Carolee Schneemann



Carolee Schneemann, *Water Light/Water Needle (Lake Mah Wah, NJ) I*, 1966, silver gelatin print, 18 × 24 cm

It's hard to believe that this was Carolee Schneemann's first solo show in London, even though she lived here for several years in the late 1960s and early '70s. At that time, her now-mythical status was being established by provocative experimental performances including *Meat Joy* (1964) and *Interior Scroll* (1975). With the 'Water Light/Water Needle' project (1965–66), Schneemann experimented with a gentler, more romantic register. Her use of bodies to challenge sexual mores was replaced by sensual moments and social interactions; confrontation gave way to collaboration. In many ways, the project also crystallized Schneemann's engagement with working collectively, which she had explored in *Meat Joy* and through her involvement with the Judson Dance Theater.

The exhibition was a constellation of unseen work from Schneemann's 'Water Light/Water Needle' series, with *Water Light/Water Needle (Lake Mah Wah, NJ)* (1966) – a diptych shot on 16mm film – at its centre, surrounded by preparatory drawings, photographs and recently reworked live shots. 'Water Light/Water Needle' was a series of performances – 'kinetic theatre', to use Schneemann's terminology – in various locales in 1966. It premiered at St. Marks Church-In-The-Bowery, New York, where Schneemann had installed a system of anchors and pulleys in the walls of the church to string two sets of ropes across the space, a low one and a high one. Performers dressed in white worked their way around the contraption standing on the low rigging and holding onto the high one, relying on each other and the ropes for support. The audience sat on

crumpled newspaper directly underneath the performers. Two months later, Schneemann took the performance to the Havemayer Estate in the New Jersey countryside where a cast of musicians and artists restaged it in a bucolic setting.

Schneemann first conceived the work in 1964 in Venice, where she had been invited to visit the Biennale following the *succès de scandale* of *Meat Joy* at Jean-Jacques Lebel's Festival of Free Expression in Paris. Her sketches for the piece, energetic line drawings on cartridge paper that trace the movements of fleshy bodies in the air, capture some of the dynamism of the play of sunlight on water in the Venetian canals. Like these mirrored surfaces, the video is also filled with reflections – double exposures and repeating angular young bodies. Shots of bodies in suspension flow into one another, slipping across the screen with luminous liquidity.

'Water Light/Water Needle', which, like *Meat Joy*, was performed by fellow members of Judson Dance Theater, shared the group's commitment to exploring ordinary movement through performance, as well as its concerns with how bodies move within specific, defined spaces. In an early scene, the naked gaggle of performers huddles thigh-deep in Lake Mah Wah, forming a cell divided into a row of pale buttocks backlit by the setting sun. A young Meredith Monk – then just 23 – giggles as she waddles to shore with her hands at awkward angles. Schneemann, always gorgeous, clutches her lover, the composer James Tenney, as they lean on ropes that lurch under their weight. It's an Arcadian scene and the performers look natural in front of the camera, undaunted by the physical demands of the piece. Shots of rope knots, their frayed ends swaying in the breeze, echo a moment when Tenney undoes Schneemann's hair, which swings down as she hangs over a rope.

But how are we to look at this work, now nearly half a century old? Is it tainted with nostalgia or does its quality lie in the pleasure it makes us feel, as these young actors must have felt it on that beautiful summer's day? The archival materials included in the exhibition went some way toward tempering the dreaminess of the film. Black and white archival prints contrasted the urban setting of the first performance with the rural idyll of Lake Mah Wah. The Venice diagrams gave an indication of the ambitious mechanics involved in making the rope stucture. A series of newly enlarged photographs taken in St. Mark's Church, painted with washes and flashes of acrylic colour, offered a scruffier account of the first performance. Ultimately, though, it's striking how uncontrived these pieces are; they avoid the knowing look that pervades a range of contemporary performances to camera. Within Schneemann's oeuvre, the work also feels unusual; 'Water Light/Water Needle' provides a counterpoint to her more sexually and politically charged works, offering a vision of collectivity and relationships between bodies that are mutually dependent and supportive, equal terms in what looks to be a balanced set of relations.

The New York Times
28 May 2010

The New York Times

ART REVIEW | WESTCHESTER

Rare Glimpses of a Pioneer of Performance Art



DIVERSITY Among the more than 75 works by Carolee Schneemann on display are “War Mop” (1983), center. Bob Wagner

If you are planning an excursion this weekend, you might consider a visit to the [Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art](#) in New Paltz. It is no exaggeration to say that the [Carolee Schneemann](#) retrospective there is one of the best exhibitions in the Hudson Valley. I liked just about everything about it, from the choice of Ms. Schneemann, a veteran New Paltz-based artist, to the judicious selection of her works.

Ms. Schneemann is well known to legions of art school graduates for several of her early, provocative avant-garde performances. The best known is “Meat Joy” (1964), in which she and some friends rolled around semi-naked in wet paint and buckets of raw fish, chickens and sausages. It was a sensual, joyous celebration of flesh.

But there is more to Ms. Schneemann, now 70, than provocative performance art, as is clearly revealed in this exhibition, organized by Brian Wallace, the Dorsky Museum’s curator. On hand are more than 75 works of art spanning 40 years, including paintings, drawings, photographs, installations, sculptures, video projections,

films and writings, all explained in a scholarly and informative catalog.

Arranged more or less chronologically, the show begins with the artist's little-known paintings from the 1950s and '60s, expressive abstracts in the vein of Robert Rauschenberg, Arshile Gorky and Chaim Soutine. Much of this work has never been shown publicly.

The presence of the paintings is probably enough to warrant a visit to the show who knew one of the pioneers of performance and conceptual art was a talented abstract painter? (Though it makes sense, given that she was knocking about New York in the early 1960s; she admired Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, and for a period even painted a bit like them.)



“Hand/Heart for Ana Mendieta”
(1986), by Carolee Schneemann.

Several of Ms. Schneemann's untitled colored pencil drawings of figures and landscapes from the 1960s are gems. They are sensual, fluid and dynamic, sometimes incorporating collage elements, as in "Untitled" (1960), in which hair has been stuck onto the composition as a formal element. For me, this is among the most interesting and original works in the exhibition.

Painting and drawing also informed Ms. Schneemann's early experiments in sculpture and performance. Take "Up to and Including Her Limits" (1973 to 1976), in which the artist used her naked body, suspended in a harness with crayon in hand or between toes, to doodle on giant paper sheets while swinging to and fro. (Parents beware: This exhibition includes video and photographic documentation of this and other works that contain nudity, including "Interior Scroll" (1975), the artist's most controversial performance, in which she read a feminist speech off a scroll extracted from her vagina.)

Ms. Schneemann is often referred to as a feminist artist, and indeed a lot of her work deals with women's issues and the female body. But one of this show's great revelations is that her subject matter is far more diverse than is often assumed. There are works here dealing with topics including animal cruelty, the Vietnam War and the Sept. 11 attacks.

The strongest are the antiwar protest artworks from the 1960s. Notable among them is her 11-minute 1965 film "Viet-Flakes," a record of war and its atrocities made up of graphic images from the Vietnam War compiled over five years from magazines and newspapers.

The politics of Ms. Schneemann's work aren't subtle, nor are they its only focus; some of the pieces in this show are, instead, extremely personal. "Kitch's Last Meal" (1973 to 1978/2007), a double-screen projection inspired by the death of a favorite cat, includes intimate details of the artist's life, while "Jim's Lungs" (1989), a diptych incorporating drawing, photography and collage, was created in response to news of a friend's lung cancer diagnosis.

Taken together, the diversity in both form and content so well illustrated in this exhibition form an impressive package, from which Ms. Schneemann emerges as a good deal more than just another programmatic conceptual artist using shock tactics to justify dry ideas.

"Carolee Schneemann: Within and Beyond the Premises," Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art, 1 Hawk Drive , State University of New York at New Paltz. Through July 25. A free gallery tour with Brian Wallace, the museum's curator, June 6 at 2 p.m. Information: (845) 257-3844 or newpaltz.edu/museum.

L I S S O N G A L L E R Y

The Brooklyn Rail
01 April 2010

The logo for Brooklyn Rail, featuring a stylized red train icon to the left of the words "BROOKLYN RAIL" in a bold, red, sans-serif font.

Art

A SALUTE TO CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN

IN PRAISE OF THE SURFACE

So much has been said about the “essence” of things and men that you’ll forgive me if I’ll say a few words in praise of the surface.

I was provoked by this sentence:

“Schneemann abstracts, removes all social context, alters and distorts reality instead of moving toward its essence.” (Michael Smith, *Village Voice*, Nov. 26, 1964 in his review of *Meat Joy*.)



Carolee Schneeman, "Eye Body - 36 Transformative Actions" (1963). Action for camera. (Photo-Erró)

Arts have been always rebelling against prescribed “essences,” against “social significances”—for those terms mean and imply either the Old (comfortable) essence and

significance (a trick to protect oneself from anything that may upset the status quo) or simply it means nothing (or nobody knows what it means). So the artists junked everything that had been known as essence and significance and began searching for it, from scratch. In painting, in sculpture, for a decade now the artist has been exploring new textures, materials, surfaces, junk, garbage, things around us, putting them in/on canvasses until they swell (and smell), until they are no longer paintings but things—striving, hoping this way to escape the prescribed meanings, forms, perspectives, contexts.

In Cinema: Smith, Warhol, Brakhage, Markopoulos, Rubin, Jacobs are going directly to the surface (impactness) of things, of person, textures, faces and bodies, and exploring the eye that sees it and the means and ways by which it sees. Things that surround us, the human body itself has become invisible during the last two centuries. Two centuries of industry, rationalism and materialism succeeded in making the material world invisible to our eyes. It was Warhol who demonstrated to us that a Campbell's soup can can be visible, that the Empire State Building can be seen. Smith, like a magician, opens to us the world of color and texture in the simplest materials around us, colors we keep looking at every day without seeing, without perceiving them. Brakhage and Markopoulos are demonstrating to us that there is LIGHT, and that we have eyes, and that there is human body. Ken Jacobs shows us that shadows exist. Nam June Paik even shows that DUST exists and falls on everything, including film. Nothing can be taken for granted: we are basically blind.

Music: La Monte Young goes beyond all melody, his music becomes one uninterrupted sound, all sounds fade into one, and then you listen to the very surface of sound and you discover most fantastic harmonies, you hear the sound for the first time, you hear the music of the spheres.

The kinetic Theater, Carolee Schneemann's *Meat Joy* brings us back to the touch, smell, to the surfaces of things and bodies; it accepts, with love, everything that our insistence on ideas (certain ideas) kept us away from; even what was "repellent," like "raw" meat, or chicken guts, what we usually dread and fear to touch—glittery, vomity substances (under the excuse of our own "delicateness," the delicateness of our nature).

Eh, the walls of Puritanism and rationalism and false idealism are shaking, we are beginning to feel the surface again, although our touch, our senses are still numb. What an irony, we must admit, that we have to find our depths *via* the object, *via* the surface world, through the phenomenal world. Our pomposity in us still denies this, we still insist on "importance," on "essence" the way we know and understand it; we reject the sensuous world of *Meat Joy* as lacking social "essence." We'd like to go directly to heaven without going through earth—we'd like to be saintlier than God Jesus Christ Himself. What pompous asses we are.

Yes, Schneemann removes the social context or, rather, the familiar social contexts, to break us open, to expose our senses, to bring us back to our senses—and to get rid of prescribed meanings.

I remember my father, taking and mixing cows' dung in a pail, and, with his bare hands applying the mixture to the roots of young seedling trees. I watched him with a sort of disgust, I remember, and although, like all other boys that I grew up with, I used to step into the hot cow dung in cold autumn days, to warm up my feet—I felt simultaneously a disgust and a wonderment seeing my father working with it so casually as if it were no different from touching the corn, or tending the horses, or stroking the wheat stems, or looking at an approaching rain cloud.

But now some of my childhood riddles begin to unravel themselves under different circumstances, and so when I watch *Meat Joy* and I see the performers throw themselves into the immediate experience of meat and chicken gut and paint and sweat and touch of bodies and grease—I know that this is not an empty gesture devoid of essence, but just the opposite: it's touching the very essence; the long held-back need to be one with all things, to return down to earth, down to the surface of matter; we realize that we can't look

disdainfully at the meat world without somehow somewhere deeper in ourselves condemning our own meat, our own body, our own soul. So that *Meat Joy* becomes an act of liberation and an act of contact with the essence; a philosophical (or religious?) essay on Essence, Matter, and Being.

Therefore, dear reader, don't blame Andy Warhol for showing you eight hours of Empire State Building or Schneemann for "exposing" you to the feeling and touch of meat. Blame the Western Civilization for making the reality invisible to you, numbing your senses. Thank the Artist for bringing the surface reality of things, and all kinds of phenomena that surround us and make us what we are, to our senses and to our consciousness. Praise the artist for enabling us to see again, to feel, to hear again: for giving us EYES, EARS, TOUCH. We are waking up and the world around us is waking up with us.

Or is this only my Spring Dream? Tell me, Dear Carolee.

—Jonas Mekas
(from the *Diaries*, March 1965)

Carolee Schneemann's work captured my imagination when I first discovered it while visiting New York City as an undergrad in 1983. The power of her truly inter-disciplinary work spoke to this young artist because it transcended boundaries between painting, sculpture, installation, performance, and film and addressed everything I dared hope art could: the body, desire, agency, feminism, politics and intellect.

Expanding her painting/assemblages, stepping down out of the canvases into the real, performative space of the viewer, Schneemann was a pioneer blurring the previously tightly patrolled borders of the fields of art, dance, music and theatre. Her radical, ritualistic performance "Meat Joy" (1964) at the Judson Memorial Church overflowed with sensual revelry and put the body's knowledge front and center. Female authorship and physical pleasure never looked so good. I've dreamt about this piece for years.

I met Schneemann around the time her corporeal tour de force "Fuses" (1967) was censored in Moscow in 1989. We became friends and I went to many parties in her loft that seemed an awful lot like her performances. And that was the point. Art was life, life was art. And she was the director. Schneeman is an artist's artist and she has gone on to influence four generations of artists. As the undulating art market fads of the silly and charming come and go, Schneemann's choice of both a serious life of the mind AND body seems more worth while, courageous & one worth following.

—Patricia Cronin

As the feminist slogan had it, "the personal is political." Although feminist political art was not always personal—in the case of Carolee Schneemann it was authentic and passionate, direct from the gut—and the rest of her body—physically as well as emotionally.

Schneemann was not counted as a pioneer of feminist art by feminists, but she was the first. As early as 1962, she depicted subjects and introduced found objects into her assemblages that spoke of her gender, for example, the vaginal image and fur in *Fur Wheel*, 1962. In a performance the following year, titled *Eye Body*, she transformed her loft into an Environment incorporating broken mirrors, lights, photographs, motorized umbrellas, and other materials. She introduced into this mixture as a kind of ritual her own naked body adorned with paint, grease, chalk, and slithering live snakes. She later recognized the affinity between this work and the statue of the Cretan goddess whose body is decorated with snakes, anticipating the feminist celebration of the Great Goddess. Schneemann's "enlarged collage" and "kinetic theater," as she termed them, was a precursor to body art of the late 1960s.

In a number of her works, Schneemann's mission, she said, was to free human sexuality. I was sympathetic but found films and videos of her polysexual performances, such as *Meat Joy*, 1964, which featured a melange of naked bodies in orgiastic revelry, too frenzied for my taste. But I admired her single-woman performances, such as *Interior Scroll* (1976), her most notorious work, in which she reacted against snubs by both a female art critic as well as a male poststructuralist filmmaker who said he could not look at her films because he could not abide their personal clutter. He would accept her as a dancer and not as a filmmaker—he called her a film-makeress. Posing naked in dim light, she read from a paper that she extracted slowly and rhythmically from her vagina, figuratively ridding her body of her rage.

In my favorite performance, *Up To And Including Her Limits* (1973-77), which I saw at Artists Space, Schneemann suspended her naked body from the ceiling, and using it like a mobile crayon, drew her version of Jackson Pollock's drip painting on canvas laid on the floor and attached to the walls, a work that glorified and mythicized the female body in creative action.

Schneemann's celebration of her body put off many of her "sisters", who thought that unabashedly flaunting a sexy figure, as if in a striptease or as cheesecake, was complicit with the male gaze. They might have been envious but more likely had succumbed to political correctness and thus, missed Schneemann's varied intentions. She rebutted hostile female theorists who denied the sensual and ecstatic dimensions of their bodies by commenting, "They stuff their vaginas with their theories."

Disclosure: I first saw Carolee Schneemann across the room at an opening at the Museum of Modern Art in the late 1950s. Stunned by her beauty, I was drawn to her like the proverbial moth to the flame and "picked" her up, a rare act for me. When she told me that she was an artist I asked to see her work and she took me to her apartment, introduced me to her boyfriend, the composer James Tenney, and we all had a friendly glass of wine.

—Irving Sandler

L I S S O N G A L L E R Y

The Brooklyn Rail
01 April 2009



ArtSeen

Carolee Schneemann: Painting, What It Became

P.P.O.W. Gallery, February 21 – March 28, 2009

Painting, What It Became is a mini-retrospective of the pioneering work of Carolee Schneemann. This multimedia show was curated by Maura Reilly, founding curator of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, and is accompanied by a small color catalog.

Schneemann is a practitioner of surrealist painting-collage and belongs in the same company as Ray Johnson, Lil Picard, Wallace Berman, and Sari Dienes, just to mention some of the late native-surrealist elite. Her early works such as “Personae: JT and Three Kitch’s” (1957; oil on canvas) are figurative-expressionistic, this particular one depicting a sleeping male nude (Schneemann’s boyfriend, the late musician James Tenney) with his genitals exposed, surrounded by cats. “Three Figures, After Pontormo” (1957), a dark canvas of a standing figure, its back to the viewer, and two others crouching, is painted in a nervous Abstract Expressionism inspired by de Kooning, with a reference in the title to the 16th-century Florentine artist (and father of Mannerism), Jacopo da Pontormo.

Several of the works are filled with gestural brushstrokes, reminiscent of Joan Mitchell and Lee Krasner; among them are burnt paintings: “Animal Carnage & Kitch’s Dream” from 1960.

“Painting-collages” are autobiographical diaries that incorporate photo-portraits and stained pieces of canvas recycled from earlier paintings in swirling compositions such as “Tenebration” (1961), with its images of Brahms and Beethoven, and “One window is clear—Notes to Lou Andreas Salomé” (1965), a Rauschenberg-like mélange of images of Salomé, Rilke, and Nietzsche, with scrawled citations from them, as well as Freud and Tolstoy.

Schneemann's assemblages are homages to Joseph Cornell, for whom she was briefly an assistant at age 19. "Gift Science" (1965) is an "altar-accumulage" with lights, mirrors, slides, birds, and miniature furniture stuffed into blue, red, and orange vertically-stacked boxes. "Meat Joy Collage" (1964, performance poster), the box-assemblage "Sphinx" (1962), with bottles and ropes, and "Fur Wheel" (1962) are all masterworks.

"Four Fur Cutting Boards" (1963) is the biggest assemblage in the show, also à la Rauschenberg's combines, and the centerpiece of this exhibition. Used as a backdrop for Schneemann's live performance "Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions" (1963-2004), its motorized, rotating broken umbrellas, lights, mirror shards, and other objects were all found behind in the artist's Soho loft, where she has lived since 1962, which used to house the Papadopoulos furrier sweatshop.

British art critic Amelia Jones writes in *The Artist's Body* (Phaidon, 2000), which she co-authored with Tracey Warr, "In the feminist/existential terms of Simone de Beauvoir, Schneemann thrusts the 'immanent female' subject into the domain of the 'transcendent,' active male. In *Eye Body* the female nude *looks back*."

"Swing" (1975) is an artifact from a performance piece in which the artist, hanging naked from a tree surgeon's harness, dragged colored pencils over a sheet of white paper as she swung past. The event, "Up to and Including Her Limits" is documented on six video monitors and in photographs, along with the original harness. Flat screens throughout the gallery present Schneemann's "polymorphous eroticism"—celebrations of sensual pleasure and mental bliss—through DVD transfers of "Fuses" (1964-1966), "Meat Joy" and "Body Collage" (both 1964), and "Infinity Kisses" (2008).

Schneemann's use of her naked body and that of her boyfriend as vehicles for free expression and radical feminism in the 1950s and early 60s (one stated purpose of her work was in the service of "eroticizing a guilty society") was dismissed by many critics of the time as narcissistic, exhibitionistic, and even sex-ploitative, such as the artist soul-kissing her cats or having sex on videotape. Some call her nude actions paganism, "Dionysian displays of herself" and sexually "reckless candor." But others saw a nod toward the late Stan Brakhage, a friend and occasional collaborator (she appeared in three of his films: "Daybreak" and "White Eye," both 1957, and "Cat's Cradle," 1959), especially in her self-shot film, "Fuses" (1967), in which collaged, scratched, sprinkled, and painted frames enhance scenes of sexual penetration, fellatio, and cunnilingus.

Concurrently with this exhibition, the Carolina Nitsch Project Room is presenting *Carolee Schneemann, Performance Photographs from the '70s*, featuring black-and-white photographs, several artist's books and other original works, among them: "Blood Work Diary" (1972), five panels with menstrual blottings on tissues, and "Interior Scroll"—a poem on a long paper scroll that the artist extracted from her vagina during a landmark 1975 performance—laminated and exhibited in a Plexiglas box.

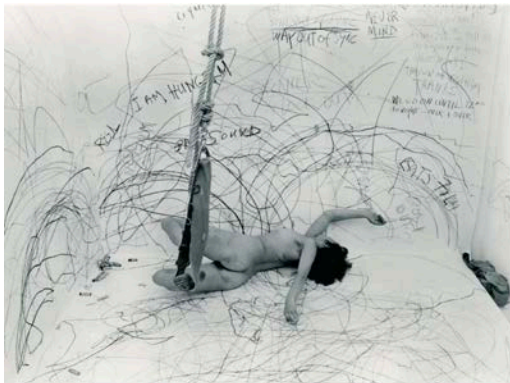
Although Carolee Schneemann has often been vilified, she envelops the viewer with love and sensuality, an abandonment into pure physical intimacy, excessive sexuality, the arrogance of pleasure, and an awareness of violent relationships.

The presentation of *Painting, What it Became* is anti-academic, nonsequential, seductively instructive, and significant for contemporary art history, placing Schneemann's paintings in a proper context. "I am a painter. I am still a painter and I will die a painter," said Schneemann in 1993. "Everything that I have developed has to do with extending visual principles off the canvas."

LISSON GALLERY

Spike Magazine
01 May 2007

SPIKE



Carolee Schneemann: "The Future is Menace"

Even if Carolee Schneemann's work seems to concentrate on her own female body, its use as an artistic material is only one possible variable for making life itself a potentially unadulterated material for art. When in 1965 Schneemann said, "All things this generation has individually discovered, defined, hewn, structured as unique, personal, will become a spectrum of interchangeable elements, freely available and subject to new uses and certain commonplace understandings," she was not only addressing the social transformations in the 1960s and 1970s that first made the expansion of the concept of art possible, but also the idea that life could be freely shaped by art; the notion of reaching through new art forms like happenings or performances an intensification and redefinition of life. As Allan Kaprow asked a few years earlier: "Why should an artist not begin a happening that stretches over several days, months, or years, and constantly slips in and out of the everyday life of the actors?" – the utopia being dissolving art in life.

Nonetheless, Scheeman always saw herself as a painter, her environments, happenings, or later mixed media installations as a spatial, temporal, and material expansion of painting that already imply gesture, action, duration, dimension-in-action. Her notion of the image is that of an image in movement, an inexorable, unpredictable process where chance, the unforeseen, plays an essential role alongside personal experience and the political context.

A talk between Hans Ulrich Obrist and Carolee Schneemann in June 2006.

Hans Ulrich Obrist: Let's talk about one of your newer works, *Devour*.

Carolee Schneemann: Yes, it's a multi-channel video that is designed to be a large installation. It's a work about menace in which I juxtapose three seconds of life that's not in evident threat with three seconds of war disasters from material that was sent to me from Sarajevo. It's from a collective that tried to gather what was happening there. There is a direct relationship to the issue of free speech, actually. Yes. And images from Guantanamo Prison, from Haiti, from Palestine. So it's a work that disturbs and questions the tenor of normality. Since my US social structure is always advancing by the destruction of other countries, I have this habit of investigating the countries that we seem intent on de-stabilising and destroying.

Yesterday you were in a conference that was very much about that direct political implication, which has a lot to do with censorship, and that is something I am very interested in, in terms of your very radical practice: to what extent have you faced censorship?

Were any of your unrealised projects censored or forbidden?
There has been such a sporadic and constant history of censorship around the work that I can't even remember all of the instances of it. I have an almost blind intelligence about the degree of reaction that the work might produce. I always begin with the sense that I am doing what's obvious and good nurture for the culture, that they need to see this. And then when they react with outrage and horror and want to suppress the work I am always shocked. I think keeping this naïve aspect enables me to keep concentrating on what I feel I need to bring forward. So yes, of course there are many works I have not been able to do because the censorship comes in an indirect way – by not having support, not having help, not getting grants, not having technical access.



Carolee Schneemann Water Light/Water Needle Lake Mahwah (1966)

Could you give one or two examples of your unrealised projects that were too utopian or too big to be realised but are particularly dear to you?

The Body House , an installation of sculpture genitals. It's very delicious and funny; it's a huge installation. It's a house of sculptured genitals that are motorised. It's a wall of body parts and they are all explicitly erotic and they have motorised elements, so there are breasts that turn back and forth, there are penises that go up and down; it's very funny and it's activated by sensors as viewers walk through the space.

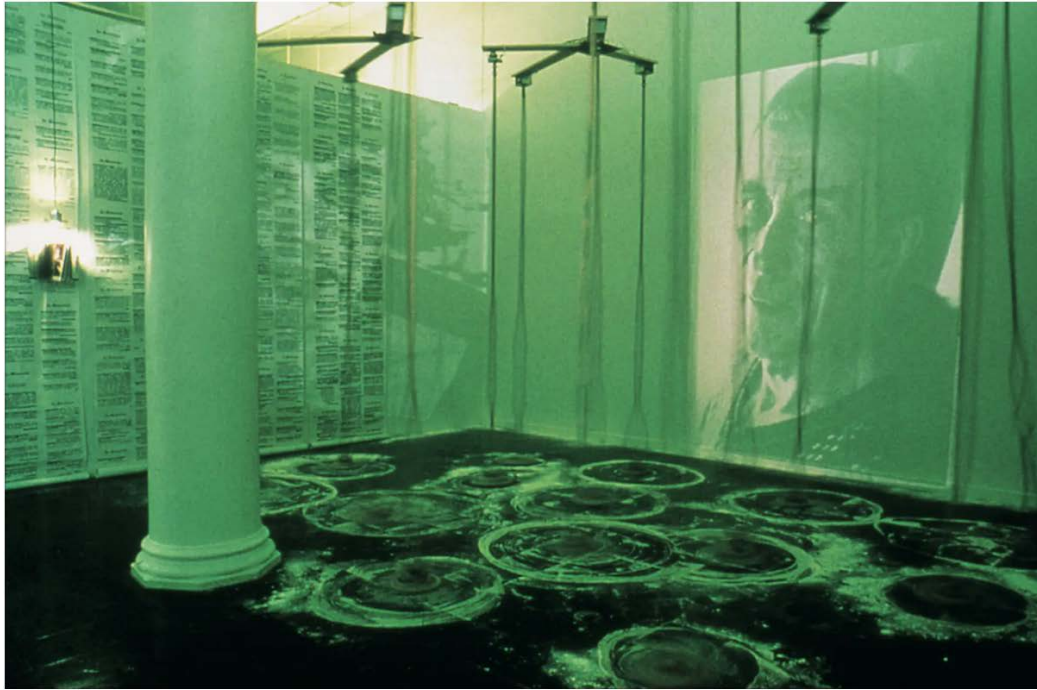
Considering your famous *Eye Body* performance, that's almost like the body becoming space, so is it like *Eye Body* becoming a house?

Yes, yes, but it's all sculptures and not explicitly my presence or my body in it, and then more recent technological works which are interactive.

There was no depiction of female sexuality that I had ever seen that corresponded to my sense of my own lived sexuality

Another question in relation to that is that of the body, the way you use the body in a collage-like way. I interviewed Otto Muehl many times and I've always been very interested in this almost parallel way you developed your work and Vienna Actionism developed at almost at the same time, so it's almost like a coincidence without knowing about each other. I was wondering about your relation to Vienna Actionism.

That's nice. Yes. It resembles an ontology, right? It's very interesting because I didn't know about them until, probably 1964, 1965, so there was already *Eye Body* and *Meat Joy* . So when we met they called me their little Meat Sister, "Oh, you're the little sister from America", and we've always been very sweet together, except for Otto trying to break into my room in Asolo (at Francesco Conz' art mansion). Where Otto would break into any female's room he could, and I had to drag a huge oaken trunk in front of my door. We have always shared that odd assertion of aggressively bringing the body forward as primary material!



Carolee Schneemann *Mortal Coils* (1994-95)

So that's something parallel.

It's an amazing point and it's also amazing that our obsessions and principles have remained active in art historical culture because that might not have happened, it could have all disappeared. When I first did *Eye Body* all the curators said, "This is shit".

You didn't know about Vienna Actionism because they were very clandestine in Vienna.

They were.

And you never heard of them, so what were your inspirations? Can you tell me how *Eye Body* came about because for me it was almost like a sudden eruption, suddenly it was there. Whistler says, "Art happens", so I was wondering if there was anything that triggered it. It is an invention. Recently when I interviewed Albert Hofman about the moment he invented LSD, about when he had the inspiration. I am always interested in that moment in which the invention happens. What inspired you to make *Eye Body*?

OK. Well, there are several layers to it. One, I am a painter so it was a principle of extending dimensional aspects of abstract expressionism into the works I was doing at the time, and those works were large painting constructions with motorised elements. So the imagery started in a bunch of drawings when I was half awake, so I had these drawings, these synergetic little dream drawings where I was seeing the body mixed as a collage. Some of the impulse behind it was wanting to situate my body with the question that I asked at the time: could I be both image and imagemaker? Some of the motivation was that there was no pronoun that was inclusive of the feminine. Everything around me was masculinised, so I was already, in this highly sexualised body, marginalized and excluded. The Pop artists were obsessed with the female body and it was a very mechanistic, cold, mechanical form of depiction, and that art historically there was always the nude and I supported myself as an artist's model while these terrible paintings were made of me as subject. That was a disturbing way to make a living but that is one of the things we all did. So there was the exclusion by language and then there was the exclusion by sexuality. There was no pronoun that was inclusive of the feminine. Everything around me was masculinised, so I was already, in this highly sexualised body, marginalized and excluded. The Pop artists were obsessed with the female body and it was a very mechanistic, cold, mechanical form of depiction, and that art historically there was always the nude and I supported myself as an artist's model while these terrible paintings were made of me as subject. That was a disturbing way to make a living but that is one of the things we all did. So there was the exclusion by language and then there was the exclusion by sexuality. There was no depiction of female sexuality that I had ever seen that corresponded to my sense of my own lived sexuality. People were always showing me pornography and it had nothing to do with my sense of body. So that would be a motive that also goes into my film *Fuses*. The other thing that encouraged me was Erro, my painter friend from Paris. He had no aspect of

misogyny or exclusionary aesthetics. His wife was a painter. We went back and forth to each other's studios in New York when he was there and I told him about this imagery I had and he said, "Well I'll shoot it for you. Let's do it". So *Eye Body*, the whole thing happened in about two and a half hours; it's very fast.



Carolee Schneemann *Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions* (1963)

Was it improvised?

Yes, it was improvised within the materials and I made one change, one physical change, for each shot of the camera. So I was kind of entranced; I was in another place because I trusted him and he gave me complete encouragement. So those are some of the strands.

When I saw your retrospective at the New Museum (1997), the show Dan Cameron curated, I had the feeling that one of the main strengths of your drawing was that it is almost like a red thread running through your work; *Eye Body* emerged from drawing and then drawing returns. I was wondering if you could talk say something about drawing.

Yes, that's wonderful. I am so happy for that question. Yes, drawing is exactly as you say, the thread, because my work comes out of optical concentration. I started off as a landscape painter; Cézanne is my huge influence and it was Cézanne's broken line where I saw the plane begin to break, as I have written, that's where I can see the body can enter. Drawing is the translation between dream and waking, between form and hand, between what's imagined and what can be planned or roughly depicted. It's always a failure; I don't do drawings to succeed at anything but there are clues, the notations. I am sure you can say more about what drawing is.



Carolee Schneemann Meat Joy (1964)

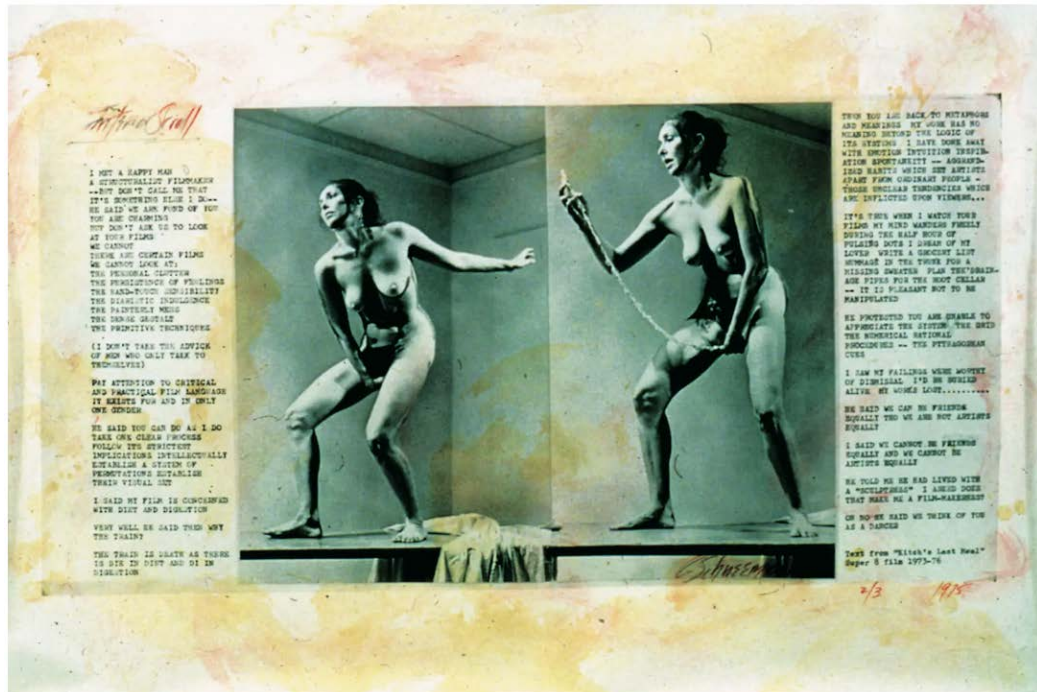
Is it a daily practice?

No, but weekly. (Laughs) As often as I can. Is it like pause sessions? Lawrence Weiner told me that he can only draw once or twice a week, but he has to put himself into this trance. Yes, that's right, that's right. It's always uncertain and I feel like I am plunging into failure or old habits, so the imagery that happens to be here combines this struggle to release myself from my hand and to be able to reposition it, so I am working with found images from newspapers, computer generating and permutating them, and then super-imposing them with landscape paintings that I do outside by my pond. There is still that transaction between nature and technology. It's very stressful but then when it works I feel OK, although I am always sensing that the art world will condemn the nature aspect. (Laughs)

One of the things that happens actually with the Interior Scroll piece is that while in the earlier piece you suddenly bring the body into drawing, here you bring drawing into the body. Can you talk a little bit about that almost reverted/inverted principle? It is again the red thread of drawing.

It is the red thread. The original drawing of Interior Scroll was made with a red pen. On waking, this image was residual from a dream. It is a very crude, simple, little red drawing of a figure lifting her leg and pulling a scroll out of her vagina and the note from the dream said, "interior knowledge", which I wrote on the page and then I forgot about it and let it go. But once it seemed as if that image had to be physicalised, brought into live action, then it was of course all about the broken line and pulling the line of text from the other mouth, as if the umbilicus had become this thread, this line, and pulling it into actual space as writing a scroll. So I thought a lot about the line and how it also relates to *Up To And Including Her Limits*, where I am just suspended on the rope, which is a sort of line that gives me a way of drawing in space that is unpredictable. I am not saying this very clearly, but you are onto some important thread for the work and there are

all these links. And also *Mortal Coils*, the more recent death piece where the rope line is now vertical and in motion. But that also comes from *Water Light /Water Needle* (1965) where the ropes are horizontal and the bodies move across them.



Carolee Schneemann Interior Scroll (1975)

The way you use ropes is very different from Duchamp. I interviewed Leonora Carrington last month and Leonora told me about it; she helped Duchamp install the ropes for the Surrealist exhibition. But the way you use ropes, it is not as an exhibition design, with you it has more to do with the body.

It does have more to do with the body. It's as if it's another venous system; as if it's veins being pulled out of an interiority and they are carrying the energy of the body into the space, vertical, horizontal, coiled, and I think about line like that, how to physicalise that the gesture of line becomes the hand and how to transmute that. So it's not my hand any more, but it's the impulse of the hand, something like that.

I'm addressing issues in the culture with the feeling that the public will always be on my side

This leads to another question, the question of the spectator. Duchamp said that the spectator does fifty per cent of the work. I was wondering how you would see the role of the spectator. Obviously your work has very often been seen as putting the spectator in an unusual position, maybe the idea also of attacking the spectator. Handke wrote this piece called *Offending the Audience*, his famous play from the 1960s, at more or less at the same time, a bit after you had done your actions. I was wondering, as we had quite a few of those iconoclastic, public insults, you know, the Vienna Actionists' early performances which ended with police also, in some kind of way, offended the public. It is a complex question about you and the public.

Consciously, I never think of the public because they interfere with my thinking about the work. Unconsciously, I'm addressing issues in the culture with the feeling that the public will always be on my side. My innate sense is always that they are going to recognise something, even though the history contradicts this. The history has always been about resistance, denial, calling me a pornographer, or not really an artist, or not engaged properly with my materials. I am also very positive and responsive to the photographer when the flash bulbs go off; I feel that is communication with me. I always want the spectators as close as possible. I want to feel an edge of their energy and when that energy is negative it's very intense and quite horrifying. That has happened sometimes in performance. So in a way it's like creating a gift for anonymous people or people that have to come and inhabit their own existence. I never feel that I am being aggressive towards them or insulting them, although they often react as if I have.



Carolee Schneemann Parts of a Body House & Guerilla Gut Room (1966)

Just one last question. What would be your sentence, what would be the future?

I am very dark about the future. I see nature being devoured and I am desperately looking for a word which doesn't exist, which has to do with constructed megaliths, monoliths, that wherever I travel to now for my work I am surrounded by thousands upon thousands upon thousands of illuminated windows in huge high-rise structures blocking the sky, blocking the water, blocking the earth, in which thousands upon thousands of people go about their ordinary lives.

Your definition of the future, then, what would it be in one sentence?

Menace. The future is ...Menace.



Carolee Schneemann (1939-2019)

Bordercrossings
01 June 2006

BORDERCROSSINGS

Carolee Schneemann and Stan Brakhage

Presentation House Gallery (PHG) in North Vancouver is a physically unprepossessing space: three modestly made over rooms on the third floor of what was once somebody's home. Still, those old rooms have hosted an astonishing array of historical and contemporary exhibitions of photo-based art. Recently, PHG undertook the brilliant pairing of shows by pioneering performance and multi-media artist Carolee Schneemann, who divides her time between Montreal and the New York countryside, and experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage, who died in Victoria in 2003.

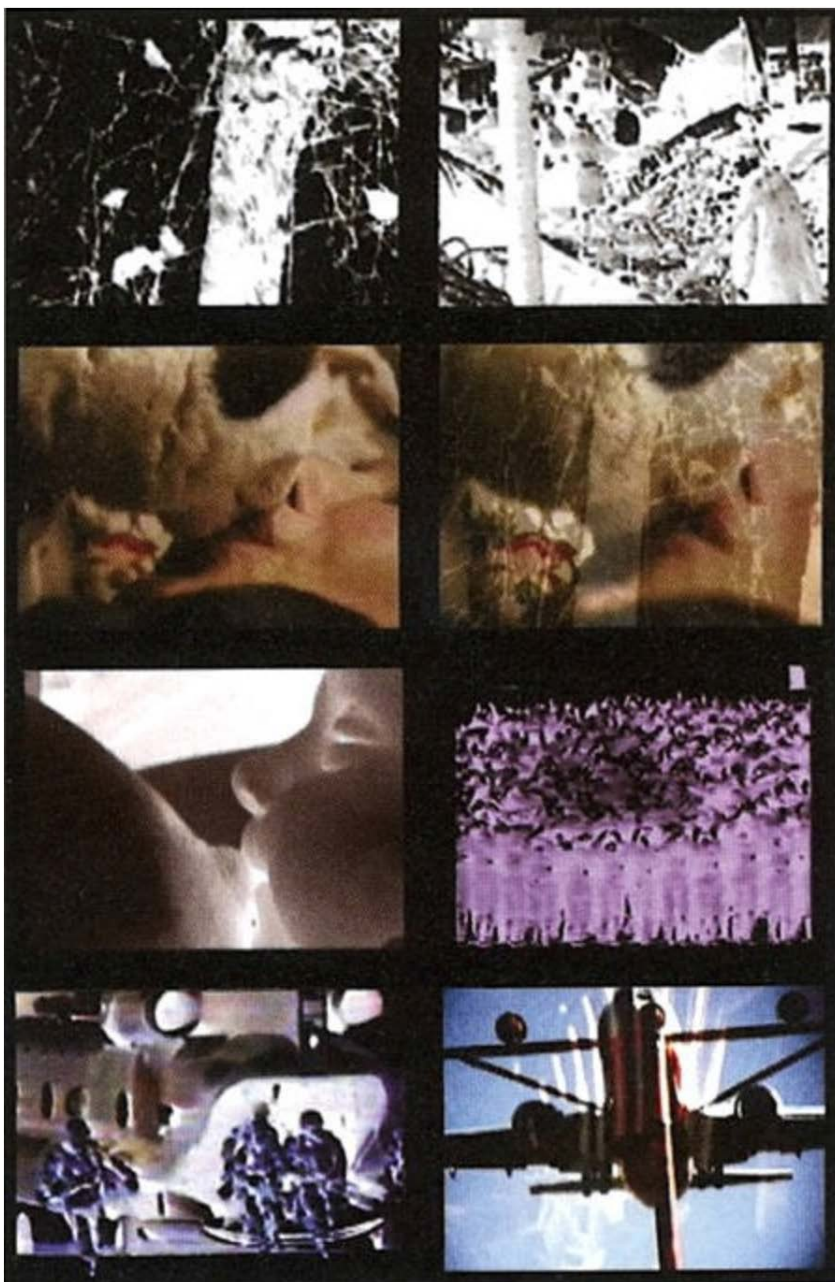
Friends and colleagues since the late 1950s in New York, they profoundly informed each other's creative thinking. Also deeply involved in the interchange of influence and innovation was musician/composer James Tenney, Schneemann's thenpartner and Brakhage's close friend. While in Vancouver for the installation and opening of her 2003 video work *DEVOUR*, Schneemann delivered two eloquent and melancholy public talks, describing mutual inspirations and cross-fertilizations and using evocative terms such as "reciprocal interactions" and "wishful coherence." "We had an irrefutable but also blind belief in the potential to transform media," she said.

Schneemann also spoke about complementary explorations of concepts of space and time and the ways in which each discipline might lay claim to them. Apart from influencing each other, all three artists have greatly enriched the recent history of art, music and film, laying the foundations for succeeding decades of experimentation and interdisciplinarity. Still, Schneemann cautioned her audience not to romanticize their revolutionary lives and times. While indeed transforming their chosen media, these artists struggled with conflicting beliefs and “contentious and disturbing issues,” along with extreme poverty and its accompanying stresses.

Connections were evident between Schneemann’s early work, as an expressionist painter of landscapes and the human figure, and her subsequent explorations of alternative art forms. “I’m still a painter,” she asserted, arguing that painting’s dynamics could be realized not simply with a brush and pigment on canvas but also with a body or a camera or a set of forms and projections moving in space. “Painting might include yourself in a force field,” she said in a documentary film, *Imaging Her Erotics*, which was screened at her first talk, then added, “I have to put my body where my thoughts are.” As with her earliest art, Schneemann continues to find her creative and philosophical register in the natural world. Tropes of landscape, figuration and animal life, cats especially, recur throughout her work.

In the 1960s and ’70s, Schneemann created a number of provocative performances, two of which are now regarded as iconic. One is *Interior Scroll* in which, naked and paint-daubed, she read a moving and highly personal poem about gender inequality, printed on a long, narrow scroll of white paper, which she unfurled like a literary tampon from her vagina. The other is *Meat Joy*, in which she and a group of male and female colleagues, clad in bathing suits, danced, cavorted and rolled around on the floor with raw meat and fish, red and black paint, heaps of cheap paper and, perhaps most importantly, each other. Orgiastic as it initially seemed, this work was “not about fucking,” she said, “but about lost pleasurable expressivity” between women and men.

Schneemann's performances initiated charged dialogues about social repression, cultural taboos and longstanding fears of female sexuality and power. They were also calls for liberation— of both women and sex. Her early films, too, took a feminist position of focussing on “lived experience” and the daily shapes, forms and dispositions of the domestic realm. These unmasculine and unheroic subjects were, she asserted, just as worthy of an artist's close examination as those traditionally sanctioned by the male establishment. Also worthy— and part of her counterculture ethos—were anti-war feelings provoked by the prolonged, hideous war in Vietnam.



The significance here of Schneemann's early production is that it still has the power to outrage and empower its viewers and that its images and intentions resonate in *DEVOUR*. The events and consequences of September 11th, the US-led occupation of Iraq and the religious Right's advocacy of war while proscribing huffily against sex, nudity and a woman's right to choose what happens to her own body all seem to have fuelled her contemporary creative expression. A wall-sized, dual-screen video projection with two smaller, adjacent monitors, *DEVOUR* montages images of violence and disaster with those of domestic pleasures, daily intimacies and the natural world.

Using edited clips of news footage gathered from Lebanon, Haiti, Mexico, Ecuador, Sarajevo and Kansas City, along with videotapes she shot in New York and Maine, Schneemann has structured this work to (in her own words) "contrast evanescent, fragile elements with violent, concussive, speeding fragments, political disasters, domestic intimacy, and ambiguous threats." All play against an arresting track of found sound, some of it dragged from its corresponding visuals into the following frames.

The work includes altered, tinted and distorted imagery of car crashes, burning buildings, sniper attacks, armed soldiers leaping from a military helicopter and a wounded man dragging himself across pavement towards some form of shelter. Most disturbing is guerilla footage, made by a film cooperative in Sarajevo, of bloodied bodies lined up on a sidewalk, including that of a young woman initially seen lying in a circle of gore, the top of her head blown off.



top: Carolee Schneemann, video stills from *DEVOUR*, 2003, dual-channel video projection. Courtesy Presentation House Gallery, Vancouver.

below: Stan Brakhage, film still from *Kindering*. Courtesy the estate of Stan Brakhage and www.fredcamper.com, Presentation House Gallery.

The clumsy efforts of a couple of men to move her body amplify our sense of horror, revulsion and outrage.

These compressed moments alternate with those of cats and cat kisses, a large, silent bird in flight, smaller birds sitting in the bare branches of trees, a baby nursing at its mother's breast, close-up shots of heterosexual intercourse and a human mouth sucking up long, thick strands of noodles. This latter image works as a kind of

ominous intermediary between images of pleasure and life affirmation and those of war, death and rupture. As seen here, the sucking of noodles is more rapacious than erotic and forges a direct connection between unexamined consumerism and violent militarism. (During her talks, Schneemann asserted that her work is about contrasting life's pleasures with the forces determined to destroy them: time, psychotic violence, bellicosity....)

Initially, the images of Schneemann's being French-kissed by her cat are troubling— another challenge to another powerful cultural taboo, not to mention the agitating of our anxieties around hygiene and animal-borne disease. Why are they there? After a couple of viewings, it occurred to me: it's as if Schneemann were saying, "Why is society disturbed by cat kisses when it sanctions acts of outright slaughter and brutality?" Why, the film asks us, is there no outraged taboo against the waging of war?

Brakhage was represented at PHG by four of his late films: *Kindering*, 1987; *Loud Visual Noises*, 1987; *Christ Mass Sex Dance*, 1991; and *Crack Glass Eulogy*, 1992. Unlike his earlier silent works, each of these short films is accompanied by a soundtrack, as experimental as the visuals and ranging from found to computer- manufactured sound.

Brakhage is admired for his early recognition that film, in the mid-1950s, had not begun to explore and exploit its visual potential, locked as it was into narrative and theatrical traditions. He sought to free film from such restrictive conventions, while still paying homage to its relationship to photography. He also sought to align film with Abstract Expressionism, an impulse still visible in the 1980s and 1990s through the gestural forms and calligraphic strands and dots of light and colour that often play across the screen.

In *Loud Visual Noises*, for instance, Brakhage must have painted colour and gesture directly onto his film. These nonfigurative images—an extended Ab Ex painting—scroll by against a soundscape of hammering sounds, train noises and the repeated, distorted phrase, "Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god." In other works, Brakhage has

either altered the photographic image, blurring it or stretching it, or has cloaked it in darkness. Scarcely articulated forms and textures and tenuous dots and dashes of light emerge from—and then disappear again into—the encompassing gloom. It's as if Brakhage's medium were giving birth to itself, calling itself out of darkness and chaos, assembling its own body and limbs and facial features. Assembling its own being.

Not incidentally, James Tenney's *Blue Suede* is the soundtrack to *Christ Mass Sex Dance*: smeared and groaning sounds playing behind flickering scratches of light. Tenney's fleeting presence seems to close and complete the extraordinary circle of friendship and creativity invoked here. Beneath their formal innovations, both Schneemann and Brakhage manifest a deep moral intelligence, a sensitivity to the revelations of the unconscious and a sustained critique of abusive power. ■

Carolee Schneemann, DEVOUR and Stan Brakhage, "About Time: Four Late Stan Brakhage Films," was exhibited at Presentation House Gallery in North Vancouver from March 11 to April 9, 2006.

Robin Laurence is a writer, curator and a Contributing Editor to Border Crossings from Vancouver.

Surface Magazine
22 December 2023

SURFACE

ART

Carolee Schneemann's Anti-Inspirations

The first major display of the late artist's work since her death in 2019 explores the impact of the people she loved and the work she hated.

BY JESSE DORRIS

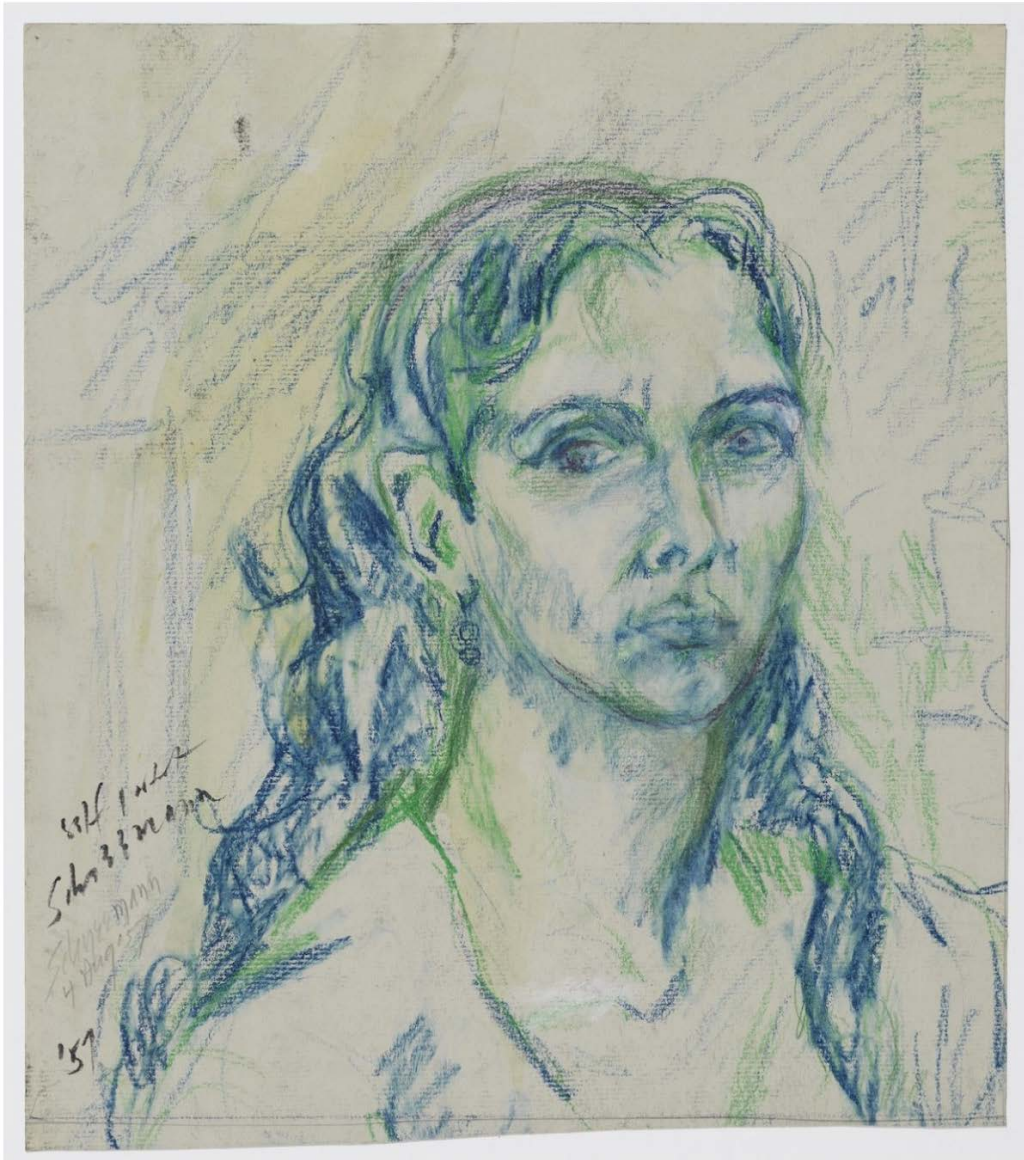
December 22, 2023



"Winter's Fuel II" (1960). Image courtesy of Carolee Schneemann and PPOW, New York.

Long before the world went gaga for Carolee Schneemann's *Meat Joy* and *Interior Scroll*, those fun, fleshy works in which human forms were both the media and the message, she was developing a body of work of her body at work. At 16, she began studying art at Bard College, which quickly suspended her for the temerity of making a self-portrait in the nude. (She was free, of course, to pose nude for other, male painters.) An untitled watercolor from 1957 in PPOW's welcome retrospective, "Of Course You Can't/Don't You Dare," shows what the administration was so afraid of: a woman finding herself interesting, and in that interest making something astounding that, in its bold execution, doesn't wait for a response.

PPOW's show takes its name from the damned-if-you-do patriarchal bind Schneemann unknotted, and fast. Six years after that portrait, she had made her way through art schools and encounters with a group she called the "Art Stud Club"—artists Stan Brakhage and Joseph Cornell, and poet Charles Olson—whose artistic strategies she already integrated and whose sexism became a muse. Or, as she called it, "anti-inspiration."



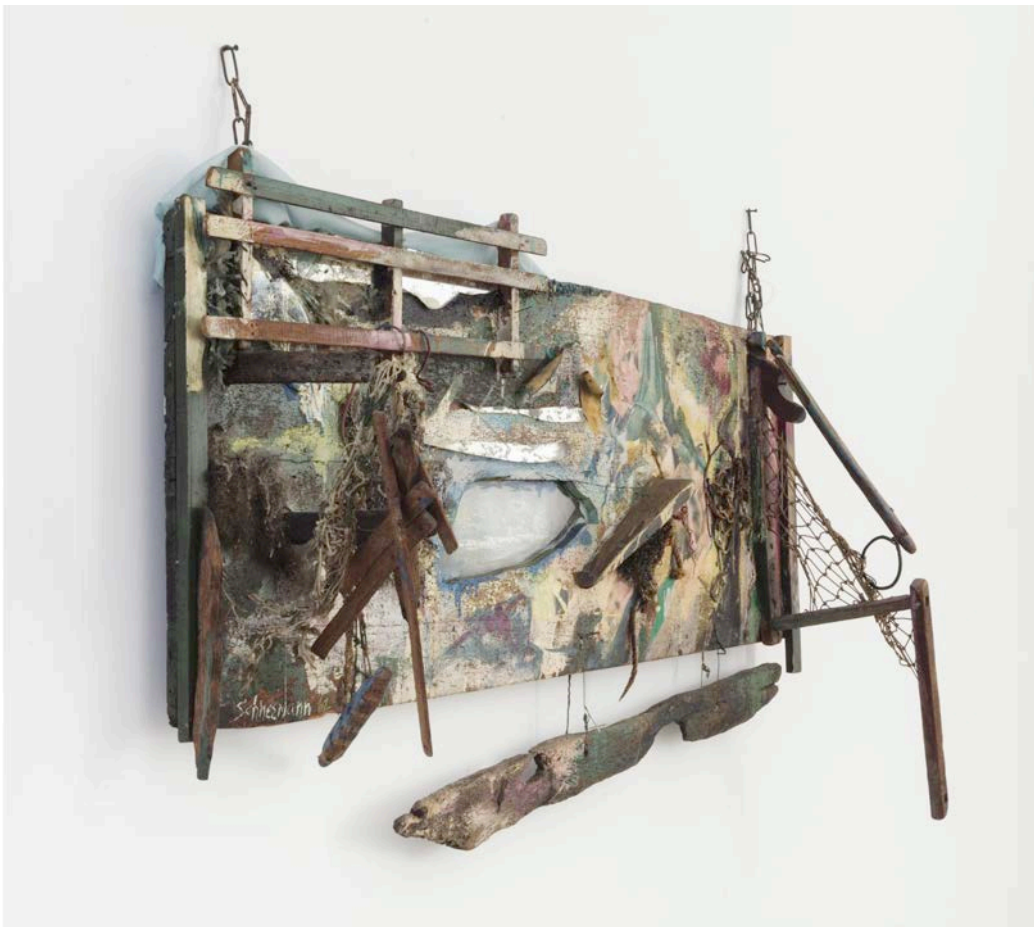
"Untitled (blue self-portrait)" (1959). Image courtesy of Carolee Schneemann and PPOW, New York

PPOW's gallery is stocked with boxes equal to Cornell's blockbuster work, but with boundary-pushing power all their own. During a walk on the beach with Olson, during which he said some dumb things about how women ruin art, she collected the materials from which she made the spiky assemblage *Maximus at Gloucester* (1963), including lobster traps and broken glass. In the back, PPOW has installed the 1963-65 masterpiece *Fuses* she made with longtime lover and collaborator James Tenney, a film that proves what Brakhage's gorgeous if sometimes cold experimental films might have needed was more dick pics.

Of course, Schneemann's work is far from misandrist. Her drawings and paintings of Tenney that open the show radiate with erotic and amorous interest, and her drawings of Brakhage and his wife Jane, shown here for the first time, are, in their own ways, equally intimate. But herself was Schneemann's greatest subject. (Apart from darling cat Kitch, who makes several appearances that demand their own show.) Don't you dare miss the epic show closer, *Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions for the Camera* (1963), a collaboration with photographer Erró in which her body and her setting, a former fur factory, merge and shimmer and upset and beguile their way into art history. She moved on to even bigger achievements, but here's where it all began, in worlds of men saying *yes* or *no* to her, and her replying *just watch me*.



"Untitled" (1957). Image courtesy of Carolee Schneemann and PPOW, New York



"Maximus at Gloucester" (1963). Image courtesy of Carolee Schneemann and PPOW, New York



"Butterworth Box II" (1962). Image courtesy of Carolee Schneemann and PPOW, New York

"Carolee Schneemann: Of Course You Can / Don't You Dare" will be on view at PPOW Gallery (392 Broadway, New York) until Jan. 20.