

Introduction

by Brian Wallace

Cézanne does not try to use color to suggest the tactile sensations that would give shape and depth. These distinctions between touch and sight are unknown in primordial perception.

—Maurice Merleau-Ponty¹

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Over the course of her career, Carolee Schneemann has produced an extensive, diverse body of work based upon her research into the broad, deep connections between the activities of the mind and those of the body. Schneemann's multi-disciplinary, deeply personal investigations—and their realization in writings, performances, films and videos, objects, installations, images, and hybrid forms²—celebrate the richness, and also mourn the loss, of these connections among mind and body. This exhibition presents a range of works resulting from research in which Schneemann has delved intensively into a place she lives and works in order to investigate the incomprehensibly complex dynamics between mind and body.

In her essay for this publication,³ Maura Reilly asserts that Schneemann has articulated “the embodied subject.” Reilly homes in on the specifics of Schneemann's consistent deployment of the formal concerns of painting as a medium of expression, connecting Schneemann's artistic strategies with her political objectives while showing how the artist has maintained the primacy of the former in the course of articulating the latter. In the interview with the artist commissioned for this publication, Emily Caigan discusses with Schneemann the ways her house and her land have sustained (and challenged) her ability to live her life and make her work, and the ways that art, place, and life connect to and nourish one another. In this short introduction I identify four

interrelated aspects of Schneemann's practice that, while active together to a greater or lesser extent across that entire practice, can be examined separately—sequentially—as a way to outline the artist's way of working.

Research

Over the first decade of her mature practice, Schneemann's continuing recourse to research was articulated, at first, in the language of painted form (perhaps not surprisingly, given the prominence of then-recent developments in so-called Abstract Expressionism or Action Painting). Even at the very beginning, however, a drive to bring painting into the world—and a concomitant drive to bring the world into the painting—is visible: paintings and constructions lean in to the viewing space (1961's *Sir Henry Francis Taylor*; 1962's *Fur Wheel*), and objects and projects are populated with traces of life and work (accidental fire damage to 1960's *Animal Carnage & Kitch's Dream* leads to the intentional burnings in the Fire Series works).⁴ In 1960, chance and the weather (and a proto-performance work set on a storm-damaged tree) led to Schneemann's early, crucial encounter with Artaud's *Theatre and Its Double*,⁵ and its call for a profoundly reintegrated for(u)m of expression reuniting performance and audience with gesture. That Schneemann responded to this call with vigor—and that this notion continues to resonate with the artist—can be seen in works ranging from 1963's *Untitled (Four Fur Cut-*

Untitled, 1960 (detail)

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ting Boards) to *Vesper's Pool* (2000). While I do not see Schneemann's works tending toward the state of the total work of art, these works do have a multi-sensory immediacy conveyed through built elements and found objects and images and texts organized around the research behind them, rather than the spaces around them. (To me, the *gesamtkunstwerk's* integrated display of self-contained power is at odds with Schneemann's processual approach and carries with it the danger of audience desensitization that Schneemann has already written about in connection with her performance-based works.)⁶

While the artist prepares to leave the picture plane behind, she carries painting's profound problems and its proffered solutions with her into the next phases of her research. Take *Partitions* (1962-3), a project mentioned briefly in Schneemann's early writings.⁷ The proposed work, published here in full for the first time, consists of two typewritten pages ("For five performers in an environment constructed within the shelves, partitions and sliding doors at the Feigen-Herbert Gallery") and six watercolors on visual aspects of the proposed production (a sequence of scenes, stances, stagings, and transitions). The description and images delineate and depict just how the artist, adumbrating changes in her overall approach at this key moment in her career, is going to allow the agency of the figures to overtake the suppressed expressivity of the background or landscape. In other words, a surrealist-inspired psychological intensity encoded in landscape (a painterly mode that reaches an apotheosis in Abstract Expressionism) is being jettisoned for something plainer but of much greater expressive potential: the figure, or more precisely (had *Partitions* been realized), the body.

Ecstasy

A 1962-3 diary excerpt excitedly asserts Schneemann's visual/corporeal-blurring belief "that the eye benefits by exercise, stretch, and expansion towards materials of complexity and substance."⁸ *Eye/Body: 36 Transformations* (1963), a suite of eighteen photographs taken by artist Erró in collaboration with Schneemann, incorporates *Untitled (Four Fur Cutting Boards)* into *mise en scènes* that insist upon the visibility of this artist's own body. These works also insist upon the artist's right—and the viewers'—to consider that body an expressive element (a politicized, and politicizing, claim, to be sure) on par with the *Four Fur Cutting Boards*, the materials in the studio and the ancient cultures they evoke, and the decisions made by artist and photographer. It can be difficult, now, after wave upon wave of photographic practice specifically and art and theory generally,

to appreciate the audacity of Schneemann's leap from painted objects to photographed scenarios. It is can be equally difficult to see a naked female in an artwork representing a step toward gender equality, but so it was.

In 1963-4, Schneemann took control of the means of production and did not turn back. She pursued a host of projects that have elements of photography or film as well as objects (or sets—which occasionally receive projections or carry images) and performers (who do, or do not, interrupt or otherwise interact with films, etc.). Of the works from this period, *Meat Joy* (1964) is the best documented and—acknowledging the artist's statement that the work "developed from dream sensation images gathered in journals dating back to 1960"—probably the most extensively researched. So what does Schneemann's research consist of? Looking and drawing, dreaming and drawing, recording and editing street sounds, working to connect conscious and unconscious content through wordplay, and finding inspiration in artists as different as Soutine, The Supremes, and the Judson Dance Theatre dancers. During the height of this research, Schneemann wrote, "it was often difficult to leave the loft for my job or errands. My body streamed with currents of imagery: the interior directives varied from furtive to persistent: either veiling or so intensely illuminating ordinary situations that I continually felt dissolved, exploded, permeated by objects, events, persons outside of the studio, the one place where my concentration could be complete."⁹ The resulting work—the exhibition includes film-to-video documentation of the event and related studies and images—is overwhelmingly energetic and almost uncontrollably ecstatic. The climax of the piece relieves an intensity that is almost unbearable even across thirty-five years.

Many works subsequent to *Meat Joy*, notably, *Up To And Including Her Limits* (1973-6) and *Interior Scroll* (1975), as well as relatively recent projects such as *Devour Lights* (2005), are explications and explorations of the ecstatic; that these works could also be included under the headings of Research, or Dwelling, or Furies demonstrates the consistency with which the artist confronts situations, comes to conclusions, and then embodies those conclusions in works that circle back to and further illuminate (and complicate) the initial situation.

Furies

The intensity of this embodied research, however, could not be maintained. Unable to ignore the horrors of the Vietnam War, and following a police raid

on a supposedly indecent performance by close colleagues Charlotte Moorman and Nam Jun Paik, Schneemann, in the first extended description she writes for *Snows* (1966), notes, simply, “My life is sweet and my skin is crawling.”¹⁰

Snows was built around a film, *Viet-Flakes*, which melded re-filmed photographs of Vietnam and American pop songs and other sounds with extensive hands-on work upon the film itself.¹¹ *Snows* was more than a performance to accompany a film; it became—or perhaps was always destined to be—a visual-political event in a decade of visual-political events. *Snows* included an interactive component that caused audience movements to control lighting, sound, and performance tempos, subtle transitions in visual and audio elements, a blurring (in organization and in audience experience) of visual and physical elements, extremely complex—hand-built and high-technology—lighting components, and a built environment that framed the work in plastic, paper, and aluminum foil and Gimbel’s department store holiday decorations acquired under false pretenses.¹² *Snows*, determined, in secondary but not inconsequential ways by the space in which it was realized, continued Schneemann’s investigations into material and visual languages; it melded movement, film, light, sound, and performers, technicians, and audiences; and it expressed—and was impelled by—the artist’s anger at a country and her anger for a country.

In the same vein, *War Mop* (1983) relates to Palestine and the international context for war in that country. This work channels the artist’s fury at the preeminence of military power and the loss of lives, homes, and histories into the acquisition of information and images that are synthesized and represented by the artist in an oddly funny, mordantly sexual, and politically difficult work.¹³ *Hand/Heart for Ana Mendieta* (1986) is also a work that mourns a death at the hands of power. Here, however, it is the intimacy of the artist’s own connection to—and not an alienation from—events that drives the activities behind the creation of the work: months of anguish over the loss of a colleague and friend, a catalyzing interview with a writer researching the death, the recall of a dream the artist feels that the victim sent her, and, then, intensively, actions in the house and surrounding property that resulted in drawn images of grasping/fluttering hands, some rendered in paint, chalk, and ash, and others photographed against—and running with—red syrup and redder blood, gray and black ash, and white, white snow.¹⁴

Dwelling

A sizeable number of Schneemann’s works make use of architectural and domestic references, combining references to the body with references to built structures, and aggregating images of the body within or against grids that emulate built structures. These works address, through subject matter, process, and/or format, the artist’s relationships with significant partners and places, while they present, as a visual back-story, a capsule narrative on their own making (I would name *Hand/Heart* one of these works were it not for the unalloyed anger embedded in that work). Both *Portrait Partials* (1970) and *ABC – We Print Anything – In The Cards* (1976) use procedures or images derived from play to structure their presentation of information and adjust the manner in which they divulge personal information. *Portrait Partials* depicts visual and structural similarities in an arrangement of bodily orifices, removing cultural frameworks and enabling us to view these as parts of a body—and as no less and no more. *ABC – We Print Anything – In The Cards* initially consisted of lists of conflicting relationship advice from friends, contradictory relationship (and other) dreams by the artist, and queries and claims by the artist’s then soon-to-be-ex-partner (“A”) and by her soon-to-be-next partner (“B”). Further permutations to the project—it was presented, reworked into a set of cards, performed, augmented through the addition of images, and printed—led to a published set of “the remarks of A., B., and C.” (“C” being—just for the record—Carolee Schneemann).¹⁵ The resulting work reveals much—while concealing certain details—about how interaction patterns and social customs monitor the boundaries between public and private.

Works in this section arise out of Schneemann’s abiding connection to people, animals, and places. *Vesper’s Pool*, mentioned in the beginning of this introduction, marks the death of a beloved cat with a combination of uncannily beautiful and somberly pathetic words, objects, and images: the cat, alive and dead; its favorite pond, dark; the artist kissing with the cat; and clothing and animal remains connected to events and dreams surrounding the end of Vesper’s life. *Jim’s Lungs* (1989) is an ode to the artist’s cancer-stricken former partner James Tenney.¹⁶ Schneemann, in the face of futility—in the face of death—is filling these lungs with the dreamscapes and landscapes and wordscapes and colorsapes that her lifetime of training has prepared her to produce.

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Throughout her body of work, Schneemann consistently confronts situations, gives herself the time to exist with and come to palpably know their particular dynamics, and then manifests her conclusions in works which circle back to the initial situation, always crossing between and knitting together the visual and the palpable and the dreamed and the known. This circulation among situations, subsequent research, and resulting artworks is an essential aspect of both Schneemann's working methods and her completed works. When she asserts, in her own voice, in the audio for *Kitch's Last Meal* (1973-8), that "my work is where I live," I believe that she is referring to this ongoing process.

What distinguishes Schneemann's investigations—and what characterizes the varied and interconnected works that constitute them—is their insistent challenge to powerful cultural mechanisms that perpetuate (and rely upon) this mind-body split. These mechanisms include epistemological positions that value thought over the senses. In this connection, David Levy-Strauss, in his "Love Rides Aristotle Through the Audience,"¹⁷ most succinctly summarizes Schneemann's work as a sustained, programmatic attack on a dominant metaphysics that equates seeing with not touching. These mechanisms also involve related positions—in ethics and aesthetics—that favor the visual and the abstract over the physical and the personal and involve the gender-b(i)ased notions of psychology, behavior, and history that waves of feminisms have sought to describe and challenge. In her "The Painter as an Instrument of Real Time," Kristen Stiles marshals convincing evidence that Schneemann's oeuvre poses fundamental ethical questions related to the language of formal aesthetics, a language that Stiles sees as capable of resisting, or, at minimum, revealing political dynamics, be they feminist or patriarchal—a language that Stiles thinks Schneemann uses to reveal—to dwell, in the Heideggerian sense, in—truth.¹⁸

¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt," in *Sense and Non-Sense* (Translated by Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus; Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 15.

² For documentation of Schneemann's career to date, see (in order of publication) Carolee Schneemann, *More Than Meat Joy* (Documentext, 1979); Carolee Schneemann, *Early and Recent Work* (Max Hutchinson Gallery/Documentext, 1983); Carolee Schneemann, *Up To And Including Her Limits* (The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996; Carolee Schneemann, *Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (MIT Press, 2002); Carolee Schneemann, *Split Decision* (CEPA Gallery/Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art), 2007; Electronic Arts Intermix (www.eai.org) distributes and makes available to researchers selected film and video works.

³ Reilly's essay is an expanded version of her curator's essay for *Carolee Schneemann: Painting, What It Became* (PPOW Gallery, 2009).

⁴ Conversation with the artist, September, 2009.

⁵ *More Than Meat Joy*, p. 9. I am grateful to Carolyn Eyler for reminding me of her comments on Schneemann and Artaud, published in her curator's essay for *Carolee Schneemann: Drawing Performance* (University of Southern Maine, 1999), unpaginated.

⁶ Thomas McEvilley's review of the March 2000 Emily Harvey Gallery exhibition of *Vesper's Pool*—in which he calls it a "mini-gesamtkunstwerk"—is reprinted in *Imaging Her Erotics*, pp. 314-5. Schneemann's thoughts about differences between performance and painting are in *More Than Meat Joy*, p. 10. "[...] The steady exploration and repeated viewing which the eye is required to make with my painting-constructions is reversed in the performance situation where the spectator is overwhelmed with changing recognitions, carried emotionally by a flux of evocative actions and led or held by the specified time sequence which marks the duration of a performance..."

⁷ *More Than Meat Joy*, pp 16-17.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 9.

⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 62-4.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 120-1.

¹¹ *Imaging Her Erotics*, pp. 77, 86-7; conversation with the artist, December, 2007.

¹² *More Than Meat Joy*, pp. 128-49 (introductory text by the artist on pages 129-32 and a short text "On The Making of SNOWS" on pages 146-9); *Imaging Her Erotics*, p. 39.

¹³ *Imaging Her Erotics*, pp. 203-4.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 276; conversation with the artist, January, 2010.

¹⁵ *More Than Meat Joy*, p. 246.

¹⁶ Conversation with the artist, September, 2009.

¹⁷ David Levy-Strauss, "Love Rides Aristotle Through the Audience," in *Up To and Including Her Limits*, pp. 26-34.

¹⁸ Kristin Stiles, "The Painter as an Instrument of Real Time," in *Imaging Her Erotics*, p. 16.