

Through her variegated activities in painting, filmmaking, video art and performance, in particular, Carolee Schneemann has always worked on the theme of women's self-determination, rejecting the idea of "history" narrated from a male viewpoint. During the preparation of the exhibition of Fondazione Trussardi "The Great Mother"—which crosses the history of the 20th century from a feminist perspective, amidst struggles for emancipation, transformations of sexuality and perception of the body—Massimiliano Gioni met with the artist to talk about her latest projects in art and publishing, and to re-examine several legendary works in which she has come to grips with controversial themes in an exceptionally radical way.

Carolee Schneemann, a multidisciplinary American artist, focuses on discourses of the body, sexuality, and gender. She researches archaic visual traditions, pleasure wrested from suppressive taboos, and the dynamic relationship between the body of the artist and the social body. Her career spans seven decades, and she has worked in painting, sculpture, performance, film, and video. Schneemann's work has been collected and shown at venues around the world, including the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Tate Modern, London; the Centre Pompidou, Paris. Recent notable exhibitions include a retrospective at Musée départemental d'art contemporain de Rochechouart, France (2013), "Infinity Kisses," Merchant House, Amsterdam (2015), and an ongoing series of exhibitions for the Artist's Institute, New York, curated by Jenny Jaskey. *Breaking the Frame*, a film about Schneemann's life and work by Marielle Nitoslawska, premiered at the New York Film Festival in 2012. A site-specific installation and performance was commissioned in December 2014 for the new Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. The monograph *Carolee Schneemann: Unforgivable* will be available from Black Dog Publishing in early 2015. Schneemann is also the subject of a retrospective curated by Sabine Breitwieser, planned for fall 2015 at the Museum der Moderne, Salzburg, Austria. Schneemann has been the recipient of many grants and awards, including a Guggenheim fellowship, a Gottlieb Foundation grant, a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, a Rockefeller Foundation fellowship, a Lifetime Achievement Award from the College Art Association, and the 2014 Aurora Award.



MORE THAN MEAT JOY

BY MASSIMILIANO GIONI

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?

CAROLE 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.

M G

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?

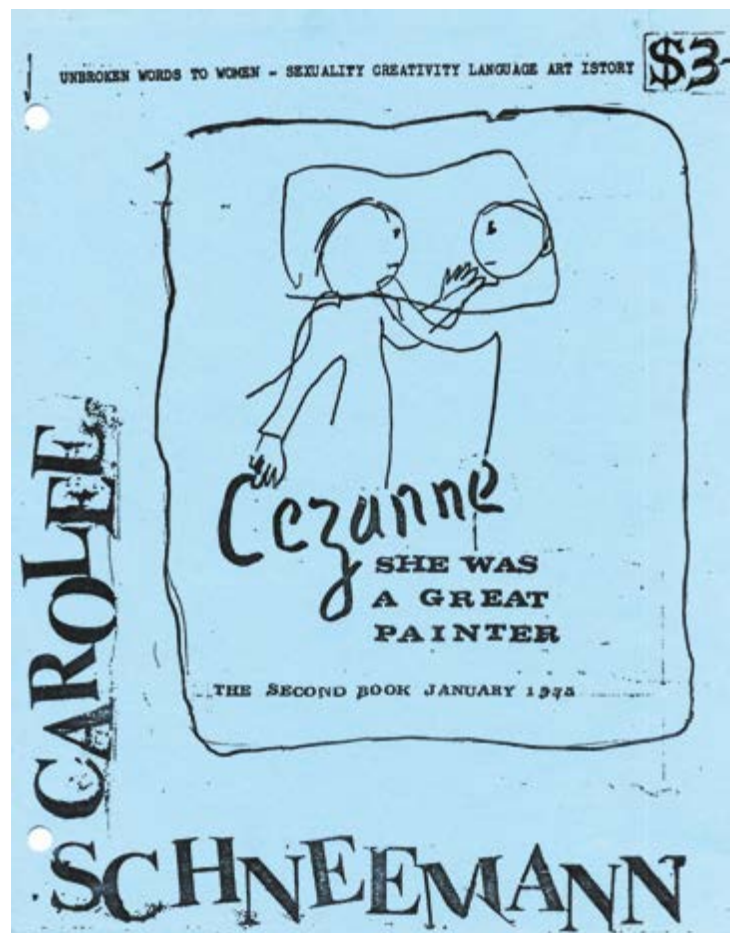
C S

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.

M G

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...

C S

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.

M G

Eye Body is a crucial piece in your early work...

C S

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



Above and opposite - *Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions for Camera*, 1963.
Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Erro



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.

M.G. What other artists or thinkers were an influence on your work at the time?

C.S. 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.

M.G. In 1965 you presented another radical piece...

C.S. 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.

M.G. 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.

C.S. 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*.

M.G. 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?

C.S. 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.

M.G. 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.

C.S. *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.

M.G. 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?

C.S. 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 *With 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.

M.G. 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?

C.S. 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.



Above - *Snows*, 1967.
Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Herbert Migdoll

Below - *Fuses* (still), 1964-67.
Courtesy: the artist

Opposite - *Interior Scroll*, 1975.
Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Antony McCall





Above - "Flange - 6rpm" installation views at P·P·O·W Gallery, New York, 2011. Courtesy: the artist

Opposite - *Fuses* (still), 1964-67. Courtesy: the artist

M.G. 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.

C.S. 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."

M.G. What are you working on?

C.S. *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.

