



The Persistence of Her Memory

**Carolee
Schneemann**

BY JOYCE BECKENSTEIN



Flange 6rpm (detail), 2011–13. Foundry-poured aluminum sculptures, motors (6 rpm each), and DVD projections, 48 x 28 x 36 in.



In 1959, Bard College suspended Carolee Schneemann—for “moral turpitude,” she says. “I painted a full-length frontal nude portrait of my partner, James Tenney.”¹ It wasn’t until the early ’70s that Erica Jong could write *Fear of Flying*, extolling the “zip-less fuck,” and Judy Chicago begin her iconic feminist installation, *The Dinner Party*. During the intervening years, Schneemann’s pedestal wobbled. Some discredited her work as pornographic and lewd; others celebrated her liberation of female identity. The first American woman to use her body as an art medium, Schneemann eased the way for later artists and popular culture icons such as Marina Abramović and Lady Gaga. Although her works foreshadowed how Americans today think about sex, human rights, and art, she was best known until recently for her audacity and not her inventions, for her body and not her body of work.

But as recent articles, exhibitions, and Marielle Nitoslawska’s breathtaking 2013 documentary film about Schneemann, *Breaking The Frame*, make clear, her accomplishments embrace issues beyond feminism, including death, war, and personal loss. Most important, and frequently lost sight of, is the extent to which Schneemann

recognized the need to find radical new forms to communicate her radical politics. Oddly, a recent work, *Flange 6rpm* (2011–13)—at first glance a very “un-Schneemann-like” abstract sculptural installation—is a great place to start unraveling her prolific output of densely layered performances, installations, and films.

Debuting in a darkened gallery space at P.P.O.W. in Chelsea, New York, *Flange 6rpm* consisted of seven wall-attached rotating disks, each one supporting three flange-shaped, cast aluminum forms. Video projections of fire consumed the surrounding walls. As the disks spun at a speed of six rpm, these gritty, roughly textured flanges performed motorized movements, precariously leaning toward, then arching away from each other. Mimicking the shapes of flames lapping up the walls, their cast shadows suggested birthing from an infernal cocoon. Schneemann, in fact, filmed the fire within the kiln as the flanges were forged.

Fire as metaphor appears throughout her work, back to her early box constructions filled with dagger-like shards of painted and burnt glass pulsing dangerous, seductive light. In her jagged film collage, *Viet Flakes*

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(1963), animated still photographs express rage over scorched Vietnamese bodies, villages, and earth. The trope continues in a blow-torched series of dust paintings from the 1980s, multimedia constructions embedded with computer parts and other detritus of a technological age piloting its own collision course. Fire as passion fuels *Fuses* (1964–66), a groundbreaking film portraying lovemaking between Schneemann and the late composer, James Tenney. Following the evolution of this strand of her work is a bit like chasing smoldering brush fires through different recesses of her conscious and unconscious self, her physical body, her body of relationships, and her body politic.

Schneemann grew up on a Pennsylvania farm. She remembers her childhood fascination with animals and nature, as well as her father, a country doctor, proffering medical advice over the phone—at the dinner table, while the family ate spaghetti. She admits to peeking through a keyhole while he examined female patients and

recalls “masturbating by age four, thinking I’d found a place between Santa Claus and God.” Being female imposed no constraints until she became a young woman. Her father refused to pay for her college education because she was a girl. Then, after she received a full scholarship to Bard, her professors scorned her interest in Paleolithic sexual imagery — this despite tomes of art history texts filled with genitalia. She remembers that her mentors never questioned erotica by men; even Gustave Courbet’s notorious *The Origin of the World* (1866), a close-up painting of a woman’s vulva, got a pass. One professor, reminding her of her gender, said, “You’re a talented kid, but don’t assume you can be an artist.” Schneemann would have none of this.

She possessed a formidable weapon, the one thing Western art history prized above God, war, nature, even precious works in gold — an ideal female body. She would use it, not against men, whom she mostly liked, but against the notion of male domination and privilege. Radical feminism, she decided, required radical reinterpretation of the female form, so her body became her muse, transformed from an object of male pleasure into a vehicle for self-realization, an aesthetic medium with yet untested potential. If she had possessed a fat, splotched torso, would she have done what she did? “Absolutely not,” she says, “the subversive use of the ideal body was essential to dislocate the myth from its art historical context.” As Lucy Lippard wrote, “Schneemann’s strategies were designed to free women from the bonds of male-defined pornography, to give women their own natural eroticism, which has been suppressed in America’s Puritan culture.”²

In the early ’60s, Schneemann began a series of installation and performance pieces that symbolically exploded painted content out of its frame. For *Eye Body—36 Transformative Actions* (1963), she positioned her nude body — alternately covered with grease, paint, transparent plastic, and live garden snakes — against her studio installation *Four Fur Cutting Boards* (1963). This multimedia work consisted of interlocking color units, broken mirrors, glass, lights, and mechanized umbrellas. The idea was to merge herself within a collage of three-dimensional materials, transforming her conceptual “painting” into an environment of space, light, color, and figurative form. Her moving body as part of this light-drenched, motorized collage prefigures *Flange 6rpm*, done 50 years later. *Eye Body* survives as a series of 17 photographs taken at the time by the painter Erró.

Schneemann’s political motivation for *Eye Body* aimed to wrest the male artist’s traditional hold on



Above: *Eye Body #5*, 1963. Action for camera. Right: *Eye Body #2*, 1963. Action for camera. Both from *Eye Body—36 Transformative Actions for Camera*.



Above: *Meat Joy*, 1964. Performance with raw fish, chickens, sausages, wet paint, plastic, rope, and paper scrap. Below: *Fuses*, 1964–66. 16 mm color film, 18 min.



the female figure: it “represents a revisionist archeology of female iconographies through which she recovers her ecstatic, erotic body as an unconscious and conscious source of knowledge.”³ In the most iconic of *Eye Body*’s reproduced images, Schneemann’s reclining hourglass figure simultaneously alludes to the bare-breasted snake deity of ancient Crete, who prevailed over the brute Minotaur, and to Venus, the physical embodiment of the Western feminine ideal. Schneemann-as-reconstituted-goddess, messily slathered with grease and serpents, also debunked the 20th-century Barbie dolls those goddesses had become. *Eye Body* reclaimed the 20,000-year-old Laussel god-

dess, still clutching her bison’s horn, issuing a clarion call to womankind to repossess their sexuality as a rite and right of passage.⁴

Meat Joy (1964) suggests mythic time through a “kinetic theatre” that Schneemann described as “having the character of an erotic rite: excessive, indulgent, a celebration of the flesh as material.”⁵ Moving beyond installation to performance, this event began with fully clad participants nonchalantly arranging materials, putting on makeup, and sewing costumes; 300 pounds of shredded paper cascaded down from above; popular music played, interspersed with pre-recorded street sounds; and participants undressed one

another, stripping down to nothing bikinis. They then interacted according to Schneemann’s carefully scripted erotic choreography of what she calls “sculptural movements,” ultimately collapsing, exhausted, on the huge mound of paper. A serving maid entered, carrying a tray of raw chickens, fish, and sausage links. Participants reacted spontaneously as the meat was dropped on them. Some winced, others caressed the raw fowl, and one man stuffed a dead fish into his pants. The maid later offered large buckets of paint, along with brushes and sponges for streaking, dripping, and hurling pigment on oneself and others. The performance lasted for 60 to 80 minutes.⁶

“Pornographic...a Dionysian revel...arrogant,” exclaimed critics, though John Perreault wrote, “It makes Schneemann, if not an archetype, at least a living legend.”⁷ At a time when most conversations about eroticism and sensuality took place in analysts’ offices, *Meat Joy* brought the discussion center stage, with its visceral materials, non-verbal kinetic theater, and bizarre silent narrative thick with icky taboos. What after all conjures squeamishness more than cuddling up to pimply skinned chickens? But as *Meat Joy* participants warmed to raw meat, Schneemann demonstrated that sensual stimulation requires a mind open to experiences that she says, “could at any moment be sensual, comic, joyous, and repellent.” Often lost in the fog of outrageousness, this important aspect of her work extended the sexual revolution beyond its traditional ties to feminism. Just when birth control pills became widely available to American women, *Meat Joy* cried for universal sexual liberation and gender equality: ongoing, stubborn struggles, considering that the Vatican officially condemned the pill in 1968 and that 13 American states still maintain anti-sodomy laws on their books.

Meat Joy as experimental theater also reflects the epic art revolution that began in the 1940s with Abstract Expressionism and the loose network of brash young artists associated with the New York School. A movement that caused New York to eclipse Paris as the heart of the art world, it took shape against McCarthyism’s power-mongering tactics, censorship, and communist

paranoia. Beat Generation writers of that era — J.D. Salinger, Jack Kerouac, and Allen Ginsberg — penned a new breed of disaffected youth whose real-life progeny — '60s hippies — in turn rallied to demands for civil rights, Vietnam War protests, and nascent feminist activism. Schneemann conceived *Eye Body* and *Meat Joy* as a major participant in that downtown New York art scene, part of a wide circle of artists that included Claes Oldenburg, Andy Warhol, and Allan Kaprow. All of them questioned, and then bent, old rules about sex, politics, and art. As a founding member of the Judson Dance Theater, Schneemann's primary interest was in "kinetic theatre...performative painting...expanding physical energy — off the canvas, out of the frame."⁸ Like avant-garde filmmaker Stan Brakhage, another close friend and colleague, Schneemann was profoundly

influenced by the French writer, poet, and theater director Antonin Artaud.

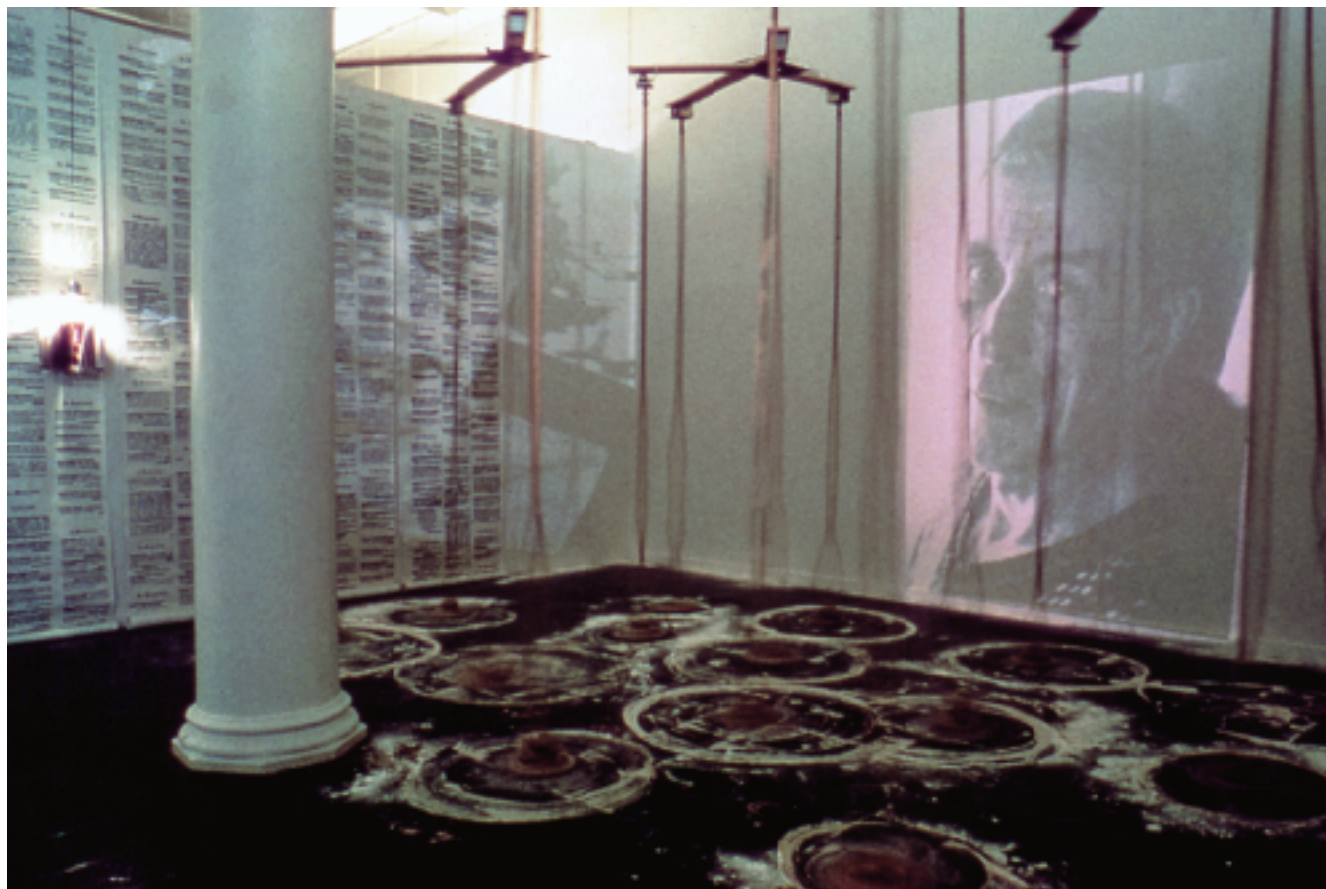
Artaud believed in heightening the reality of theater with strong elements of physicality and gesture. As Susan Sontag described it, "In the redeemed art that Artaud imagines, there are no separate works of art — only a total environment which is magical...purative...opaque."⁹ Schneemann experimented with Artaud's "pure theater" by replacing spoken dialogue with gestures, materials, and movement, first in *Eye Body*, then in *Meat Joy*.

Moving on to film, she created *Fuses* (1964–66), a masterpiece of avant-garde cinema. Using slow, grainy 16mm film, she captured her explicit lovemaking sequences with a Bolex camera positioned in different locations within the bedroom of the 1750 farmhouse that she shared with Tenney. This setting anchored home and domestic life as constants, while time moved on through shifts of light: one camera perspective, aimed at a window where Kitch the cat observed all from her windowsill

perch, framed seemingly endless seasons of night seducing day.

Fuses conveys its eroticism through an oblique lens. Viewing entwined bodies — her arm, his leg, their buttocks — as fragmented visual juggernauts, jamming one's sense of where things are attached, positions the viewer-as-voyeur as if peering through a keyhole, as Schneemann once espied her father examining patients. She further interrupts the choppy lovemaking scenes by scratching, hand-painting, baking, dying, and stamping the film, then hanging it outdoors, exposed to the elements. These interventions orchestrate the asymmetrical rhythm of the lovers and the visual rhythm of filmic collage. At the same time, bold combinations of figuration with Abstract Expressionist actions and painterly techniques transform the celluloid canvas into a viable art object unto itself. Remarkably, the story stays intact — the camera, panning 19th-century wallpaper, hues of natural light drizzled through old lace curtains, and Kitch's staring green eyes, poetically

***Mortal Coils*, 1994–95. 4 slide projectors, motorized mirror systems, 17 motorized manila ropes suspended and revolving from ceiling units, and *In Memorium* wall scroll text, dimensions variable.**



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paints lovers transcending time in hushed, intimate space.

Schneemann's fusion of abstraction and figurative narration not only distinguishes her from experimental filmmakers like Brakhage, for whom formalist concerns were paramount, it also accounts for the powerful tensions in her work. *Fuses'* agitated, disruptive format, in maintaining an unstable but unrelenting grip on its underlying story about romantic love and carnal pleasure, subliminally taps collective anxiety: the reality that longed-for intimacy is sporadic, if not agonizingly elusive. Pain—pleasure's verso and as much a part of Schneemann's lexicon as issues of feminist sexuality—plays out in less well-known sculptural installations that, like her body works, draw on experimental kinetic theater and technology-based multimedia environments.

Recalling Artaud, who asked, "What are these thoughts which speech cannot express...which find their ideal expression on the stage?" *Mortal Coils* (1994–95)

pays homage to 15 Schneemann friends, Hannah Wilke and John Cage among them, who died in the two preceding years.¹⁰ Commenting on how we mourn, *Mortal Coils* consists of 17 manila ropes suspended from motorized ceiling units which rotate the ropes so that they draw pool-like circles on a floor thick with dust. Four slide projectors with moving mirror systems project photos of the deceased against walls papered with *In Memoriams*. This metaphorical spiral eternally spinning against a backdrop of ephemera—photographs and newspaper testimonials—poignantly materializes the essences of the departed, a compelling reversal of Schneemann's melting of body and materials in *Fuses* and *Eye Body*.

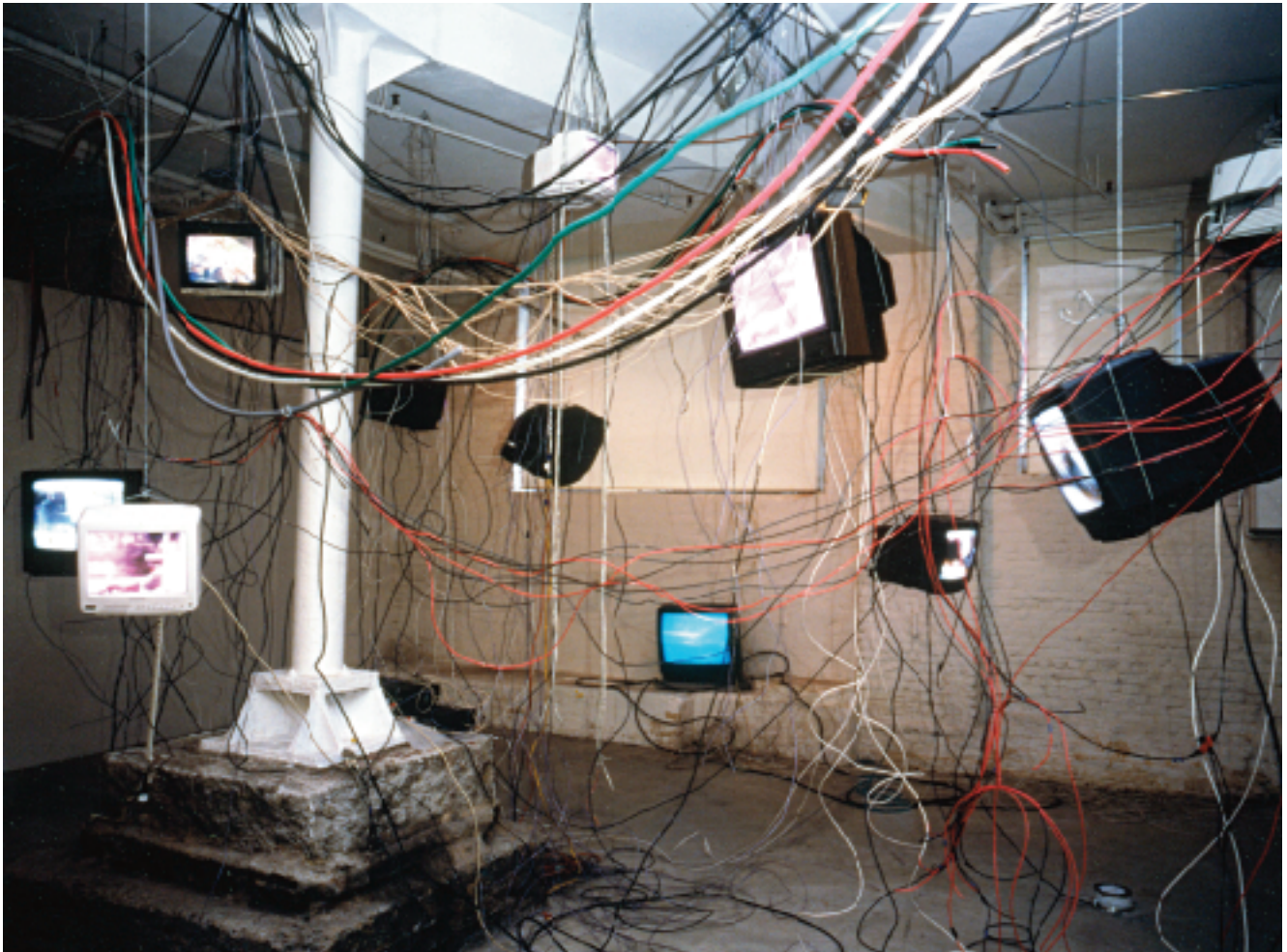
As opposed to the internalized experience of profound personal loss, most people confront tragedy loosed by political or natural furies as redundant streaming TV imagery, viewed from the safe distance of a comfortable lounge chair. *War Mop* (1983) assaults this numbing, dumbing down of human catastrophe. A rag-mop attached to a mech-

anized motor is set beside a TV that beams images of the Lebanese War (1975–90), its weeping women and bombed-out cities. Every eight seconds, the mop, a symbol of painter's brush and woman's tool, loudly (and unsuccessfully) pounds the monitor to make it shut up. Taking this idea a step further, *More Wrong Things* (2000)—exhibited at the 12th-century Rochechouart Castle Museum last year—creates a dense forest of old TV monitors. Hanging from the ceiling like severed heads in cable-wire nooses, they broadcast a variety of disasters. Instead of sleek, flat-screen models streaming Twitter-sized bytes of infotainment suitable for today's attention spans, these archaic monitors, fittingly relegated to a medieval venue, play their intense human dramas to one another, sorrowful messages in search of a competent messenger.

***War Mop*, 1983. Plexiglas, mop, motor, and video of destroyed Lebanese/Palestinian villages, sculpture: 24 x 62 x 20 in.**



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More Wrong Things, 2000. Site-specific, multi-channel video installation with 17 monitors suspended from the ceiling, wires, cables, cords, and sensor-activated projections.

Terminal Velocity (2001) speaks to the power of art to deliver bald truth. For Schneemann, that once again means going where few dare to tread. This montage of computer-scanned newspaper photos captures live bodies plunging to their deaths from the World Trade towers during the 9/11 attack.

Why show this? Because what repels compels. Schneemann, who hit a tactile nerve between squeamishness and pleasure in *Meat Joy*, resurrects the device to express grim reality: like roadside car crashes, dead bodies are, for most, as seductive as naked ones. Schneemann translates this irony into an uncomfortable face-off between a horrific event and viewers' ambivalent reactions to it. How obscene it is to gaze at these figures, analyze their gestures, note what they're wearing and how grace-

fully or awkwardly they tumble through space. Our identification with them is terrifying, our fascination grotesque. They're shown in stark black and white, against the razor-like grid of the fated towers, the soot of that apocalyptic day Photoshopped away. We have nowhere to go but to the unseen inferno below: back to fire, where flanges flare, where destruction meets creation, where Eros meets Thanatos.

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Notes

¹ All quotations from Carolee Schneemann, unless otherwise noted, are taken from interviews with the artist recorded in 2013.

² Lucy R. Lippard, *Overlay* (New York: The New Press, 1983), p. 67.

³ Johannes Birringer, "Imprints and Re-Visions: Carolee Schneemann's Visual Archeology," *The Performing Arts Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 2, (1993), p. 34.

⁴ The Venus of Laussel is a carved stone relief depicting a female figure with exaggerated breasts, stomach, and thighs. Discovered in a cave near Laussel, in France's Dordogne Valley, it dates from Upper Paleolithic times.

⁵ Carolee Schneemann, *More Than Meat Joy* (Kingston, New York: McPherson & Company, 1979), p. 63.

⁶ *Meat Joy* was performed as part of the First Festival of Free Expression at the American Center in Paris, May 1964; Dennison Hall, London, June 1964; and Judson Memorial Church, New York City, November 1964.

⁷ John Perreault, "Imagining Carolee Schneemann," January 2006, available at <www.artsjournal.com/artopia/2006/01/imagining_carolee_schneemann.html>.

⁸ Maura Reilly, "Painting, What It Became," in *Carolee Schneemann: Within and Beyond the Premises*, edited by Brian Wallace, (New Paltz, NY: Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art, 2010), p. 29.

⁹ Susan Sontag, ed., *Antonin Artaud, Selected Writings* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), Introduction, p. L.

¹⁰ Antonin Artaud, "For the Theater and Its Double," in *Antonin Artaud, Selected Writings*, op. cit., p. 231.