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What performance artists wear

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by Helen Barrett



'Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions for Camera' by Carolee Schneemann, 1963 © Photograph by Erró/Carolee Schneemann Foundation/DACS

Carolee Schneemann was a deeply uninhibited performance artist. Often, she did not bother to wear clothes at all. But the costumes she did design, make and wear allowed her to explore serious ideas about sexual liberation and consent with ingenuity and joy.

Schneemann, who died in 2019 at the age of 79, is the focus of one of two new exhibitions exploring the work of leading female performance artists of the 20th century. Together, they show how some of the genre's most radical practitioners used costumes to turn their bodies into protagonists.

Carolee Schneemann: Body Politics at the Barbican in London (until January 8, 2023) is a major retrospective of the artist's work. It spans Schneemann's career over six decades — from her origins as a frustrated painter to her strange, radical costumes for her performances of the 1960s and 1970s.

“Schneemann was working with her body as a political act, and a form of sexual liberation,” says Lotte Johnson, the exhibition’s curator. “In art, women are often objectified and cast as muses. She’s reclaiming that role, bringing her own body alive. She’s challenging the prescribed ideas and asking the question: ‘Can I be both image and image maker?’”

Take *Meat Joy* (1964), an epic performance in which she and a group of dancers roll around on the floor, the women wearing fur bikinis, with chicken and fish carcasses being thrown at them.



A still from Schneemann’s ‘Meat Joy’ (1964) at the Judson Dance Theater, New York © Carolee Schneemann Foundation/DACS

The costumes also show Schneemann’s skill and resourcefulness. Her fur bikinis may have been surreal, part of a staged erotic ritual intended to liberate the human body. But they were also born of pragmatism. Schneemann’s Manhattan studio in the 1960s was a former furrier’s workshop, and she made full use of the previous occupant’s scraps.

“There’s a very funny letter in Schneemann’s archive where she’s writing to a lingerie company trying to get them to sponsor the performance,” says Johnson. “I don’t think it happens, but it shows amazing initiative.”



Carolee Schneemann, 'Noise Bodies', (1965) © 2021 Carolee Schneemann Foundation/DACS

A costume for *Noise Bodies* (1965) transformed Schneemann into a human sound system, with a structure she made from metal debris including bike wheels, saucepans and costume jewellery. She made another for her partner, James Tenney. No footage of their performance survives, but at the Barbican the costume is shown alongside an original audio recording and photographs.

"As they moved across the stage, they created a cacophonous soundscape. It's about the erogenous. They are playing each other's bodies, a sexual exchange," adds Johnson.

Other costumes on display are from *Chromelodeon (4th Concretion)* from 1963, a performance in which Schneemann and dancers dressed and undressed. The rich silk tunics she created are hand-embellished, painted and burnt. "They are very painterly — a gorgeous experiment with abstract expressionism," says Johnson.

Performance art flourished in the 1960s and 1970s, driven largely by a generation of women who, like Schneemann, felt pushed out of established genres such as painting. Schneemann trained as a fine artist, turning to film performance in the early 1960s, when she wrote that painting was "dead" for her, after her instructors told her she was unteachable.

A different exhibition at the Muzeum Susch in Switzerland focuses on Schneemann's near-contemporary, the avant-garde Swiss artist Heidi Bucher. *Heidi Bucher: Metamorphoses II* (until

December 4) suggests Bucher's approach to costume was less playful and overtly sexual than Schneemann's. But she was just as concerned with emancipation.

In the 1970s, Bucher began clothing herself in "architectural body skimmings" — costumes made from the negative latex impressions of buildings with significance: her parents' home, a Swiss psychiatric hospital.

She covered walls with gauze and liquid latex, let it dry, then peeled it off and turned it into costumes that could be worn like wings and shed as skin. In part, she intended to confront what she saw as the patriarchal structures embedded in those buildings.

The latex-peeling process demanded enormous effort, as film footage of the artist at work shows. "It's a very strong and highly physically driven process," says Jana Baumann, the exhibition's curator. "This peeling is a gesture of liberation. It reflected how women were treated in society, and she's focused on absence and presence."

Bucher's *Body Shells*, made in 1972, are even more ambitious oversized, wearable abstract sculptures with glittering surfaces. In the accompanying video, they dance, sway and turn on Venice Beach.

Bucher's archive is fragile — some latex costumes have decayed beyond repair. "I'm not sure if this exhibition could happen again in 40 years," says Baumann.

Performance art lives on — most obviously in Lady Gaga's public appearances. The singer's 16-minute choreographed entrance to the 2019 Met Gala, involving three costume changes down to a sparkling bikini, for example, owed something to Schneemann. Schneemann and Bucher's legacy is also evident in today's female artists, such as American sculptor Hannah Levy's work with latex, and in costumed performances by Mariechen Danz, the German-Irish multidisciplinary artist.

Danz, who was born in 1980, often makes work dealing with bodily distortions. She has designed, sewn and hand-dyed many of her own costumes — recently surreal, foamy, oversized suits. She says costumes are essential to her performance. "They allow me to take a position, to communicate and carry me... I'm not performing as me."

Schneemann, Bucher and a previous generation of performance artists, she believes, would have been similarly liberated by costumes. Both artists were "vital, vital engagements" to Danz's practice. "They were dealing so inherently with the body."

Some argue that the point of performance art is that it happened in a moment without documentation, the costumes both Schneemann and Bucher left behind are tangible evidence that the events happened. They remind us that performance art could not only be deadly serious, but also transgressive and full of joy.

Schneemann's costumes, in particular. "[Society] was casting her as on display, as an image to be digested and objectified," says Johnson. "And she's pushing back. I found her challenge invigorating — and all too relevant."