

## The Times

***Warning: Carolee Schneemann's show might change your mind about sex***

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by Liam Kelly



Film strips from Carolee Schneemann, *Fuses*, 1964-67

There is a warning before you enter the Carolee Schneemann exhibition at the Barbican Art Gallery. The artist's work includes sex and nudity, and under-14s must be accompanied by an adult. At the centre of the exhibition is a radical half-hour film from 1964 called *Fuses*. Not only does it show Schneemann having sex with her partner at the time, the American composer James Tenney, it shows it from a woman's perspective.

It is the first retrospective of the pioneering American conceptual artist's work since her death aged 79 in 2019. Schneemann's work is a touchstone of feminist art history, but was ignored by critics at the time and is less widely known that it deserves to be. More than 300 objects will be on display, from sculptures to paintings and hitherto unseen material from the archives, tracing the work of this provocative figure.

*Fuses* had three London screenings in 1968, including at the Royal Albert Hall, when the photography lab agreed to process the film only on receipt of a letter from a psychiatrist. Typically for Schneemann, it charted new ground, being cited as an inspiration by the Guerrilla Girls activist collective and provoking shocked reactions from others.

"*Fuses* is ahead of its time," says Lotte Johnson, the exhibition's curator. "She was looking at representations of sex on film and felt like her experience was not represented, the experience of

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having this equitable and serious relationship with a partner. She absolutely refused to objectify or fetishize herself. I find it incredibly beautiful and moving, and so did many women at the time.”

Schneemann made the film over three years using a camera that filmed for only 30 seconds at a time. “I wanted to see ‘the f\*\*\*’,” she later wrote. “Lovemaking’s erotic blinding core apart from maternity/paternity.” She and Tenney positioned the camera so it hung from the ceiling and on top of furniture. Their cat, Kitch, is a frequent witness and companion, whose perspective the viewer adopts at points.

Schneemann, who started out as a painter, took the film negatives and cut, spliced, scratched and layered them as well as baking them in the oven, painting over them, dipping them in acid and leaving them outside to the mercy of the elements. “She always defined herself as a painter, and you see that in the film,” Johnson says.

*Fuses* was a riposte to an earlier appearance in a filmmaker friend’s film where Schneemann had sex in a forest and was asked to wear an apron and chop onions. Aghast at the patriarchal portrayal, she made *Fuses* to show how it should have been done.

In the wake of headwinds, not least the reversal of the US constitutional right to abortion, Schneemann’s feminist work has a new-found frisson. “She wanted people to accept women’s bodies on their own terms. Her work feels so sadly resonant today,” Johnson says.

It is not the first time that leading galleries have screened films of sex in the name of art, but it is much less controversial than even a few years ago. Tate Modern was blasted by morality campaigners for “giving porn an air of respectability” when it showed *Destriated*, a two-hour collection of seven short films, in 2006. The next year the Barbican hosted an exhibition chronicling sex over two millennia to celebrate its 25th anniversary. Some of the films shown, including *Blow Job*, a 41-minute film by Andy Warhol, meant tickets were restricted to the over18s. Will Gompertz, the Barbican Centre’s artistic director and a former arts editor at the BBC, says that sexuality, identity and expression are “the fundamental themes of human existence”.

Still, *Fuses* will be screened in a separate room from the main exhibition, with visitors advised about its content before they buy tickets — with a 16+ age recommendation — and again with a sign on the door. Inside will be 12 seats and invigilators patrolling to ensure those watching behave themselves. “Some people might pop in for 30 seconds; some people might want to watch the entirety of the film,” Gompertz says. “It is entirely up to each individual.”

One of the biggest challenges for the Barbican has been how to programme an exhibition by a performance artist who has died without doing re-creations. “She obsessively documented her work, [with] multiple photographers and film-makers capturing her performances,” Johnson says. “They celebrate the experience of being in a body.”