

Exhibition Reviews

Carolee Schneemann, *Painting, What It Became*, PPOW Gallery, New York, New York, February – March 2009

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ARTFORUM

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Frances Richard
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Carolee Schneemann
P.P.O.W./CAROLINA NITSCH PROJECT ROOM

Carolee Schneemann is an original, and a nexus. Lissome banshee-progenitrix of Body Art and downtown doyenne whose influences span the New York School, the Judson Dance Theater, and contemporary performance, she can connect, say, Joseph Cornell (she met him when she was around twenty) and Matthew Barney (see *Up To And Including Her Limits*, 1971–76, her drawing-in-a-harness performance). After fifty years and counting of exhibiting, she remains “Carolee, naked and maenadian,” as Lucy Lippard apostrophized her in 1979. “Painting, What It Became” at P.P.O.W., curated by Maura Reilly, surveyed the development of Schneemann’s work from paintings of the late ‘50s to the various media she contends with today. It bespoke an eminence already anointed not as seminal—that would be wrong, of course—but, to quote Jerome Rothenberg, as “germinal.”

Can we opine, then, that Schneemann is at last safely canonized? Not quite. Is it possible it’s best that way? I raise this question not to romanticize historical elision, nor to underestimate forces that might wish to demote her artwork—uneven, fervent, gynocentric as it is—from phenomenon to footnote. But her key performances seem now to occupy a remarkable position as simultaneously unassimilable



Carolee Schneemann, *One Window Is Clear—Notes to Lou Andreas Salomé*, 1965, book and magazine pages, paper, cloth, gloves, audio tape, and oil on Masonite, 77 1/2 x 48 x 3 1/2". P.P.O.W.

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Interior Scroll was not shown at P.P.O.W., but figured prominently in a concurrent exhibition of photographs and other documents, mostly from the ‘70s, at Carolina Nitsch Project Room. Aficionados will remember that the text of *Scroll*, read aloud as Schneemann unfolded it from her vagina, recounts a conversation with “a happy man, a structuralist filmmaker.” “He protested / you are unable to appreciate / the system the grid / the numerical rational / procedures.” But, as demonstrated by the framed grids of tissues blotted with menstrual blood in *Blood Work Diary*, 1972, Schneemann had already recalibrated seriality into a bodily idiom—call it periodicity. The two exhibitions, taken together, brought such works alongside the early paintings, placing welcome emphasis on Schneemann’s

art-historical discernment and foregrounding her career-long interest in extending AbEx gesture off the canvas into time and space.

Thus, shown at P.P.O.W., the diptych *Animal Carnage & Kitch’s Dream*, 1960, speaks of Pollock, and Krasner. *Tenebation*, 1961, copes with de Kooning. *Fur Wheel*, 1962, a fur-lined lampshade fringed with crushed cans (including Ballantine Ale cans) and rotating on a motorized arm, brashly pastiches Meret Oppenheim, Jasper Johns, and Marcel Duchamp. With their gloppy facture and attached detritus—here magazine clippings and underwear, there scrap lumber and snarls of audio tape—*Sir Henry Francis Taylor*, 1961, and *One Window Is Clear—Notes to Lou Andreas Salomé*, 1965, both forcefully summon Rauschenberg, though he might not have lionized the Victorian scientist photographed by Julia Margaret Cameron, or the psychoanalyst-writer who befriended Nietzsche. Studded with torn umbrellas and a painted hubcap, the freestanding assemblage *Untitled (Four Fur Cutting Boards)*, 1963, is also Rauschenbergian. But when she physically interacted with it for *Eye Body*, her first insertion of her body into painting’s visual field, Schneemann “Combined” herself.

Schneemann’s aim has always been total and participatory confrontation of all limits, undertaken in the spirit of reverent homage to grand tradition. For her this constitutes no paradox. And so her face, limbs, and torso—like the raw chicken in *Meat Joy*, the motorized mop in *War Mop*, 1983, and her cat’s tongue in *Infinity Kisses—The Movie*, 2008—stand in for the archetypal paintbrush, tool of orgiastic creativity. Such tropes of art as primal expenditure can feel overwrought, but then we have a fascinating problem. Appraising “Carolee” in all her avatars has come to seem metonymic for judging art of a certain kind, or era. If we fail to contend with her, we cannot understand it. Which art? “Expressionist-performance,” “second-wave feminist,” “multimedia-transgressive,” “politico-erotic” . . . We’re still asking what she became and will become.

—Frances Richard

Carolee Schneemann: Painting, What It Became

by Valery Oisteanu

P.P.O.W. Gallery, February 21 – March 28, 2009

Painting, What It Became is a mini-retrospective of the pioneering work of Carolee Schneemann. This multimedia show was curated by Maura Reilly, founding curator of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, and is accompanied by a small color catalog.

Schneemann is a practitioner of surrealist painting-collage and belongs in the same company as Ray Johnson, Lil Picard, Wallace Berman, and Sari Dienes, just to mention some of the late native-surrealist elite. Her early works such as “Personae: JT and Three Kitch’s” (1957; oil on canvas) are figurative-expressionistic, this particular one depicting a sleeping male nude (Schneemann’s boyfriend, the late musician James Tenney) with his genitals exposed, surrounded by cats. “Three Figures, After Pontorno” (1957), a dark canvas of a standing figure, its back to the viewer, and two others crouching, is painted in a nervous Abstract Expressionism inspired by de Kooning, with a reference in the title to the 16th-century Florentine artist (and father of Mannerism), Jacopo da Pontorno.

Several of the works are filled with gestural brushstrokes, reminiscent of Joan Mitchell and Lee Krasner; among them are burnt paintings: “Animal Carnage & Kitch’s Dream” from 1960.

“Painting-collages” are autobiographical diaries that incorporate photo-portraits and stained pieces of canvas recycled from earlier paintings in swirling compositions such as “Tenebration” (1961), with its images of Brahms and Beethoven, and “One window is clear—Notes to Lou Andreas Salomé” (1965), a Rauschenberg-like mélange of images of Salomé, Rilke, and Nietzsche, with scrawled citations from them, as well as Freud and Tolstoy.

Schneemann’s assemblages are homages to Joseph Cornell, for whom she was briefly an assistant at age 19. “Gift Science” (1965) is an “altar-accumulage” with lights, mirrors, slides, birds, and miniature furniture stuffed into blue, red, and orange vertically-stacked boxes. “Meat Joy Collage” (1964, performance poster), the box-assemblage “Sphinx” (1962), with bottles and ropes, and “Fur Wheel” (1962) are all masterworks.

“Four Fur Cutting Boards” (1963) is the biggest assemblage in the show, also à la Rauschenberg’s combines, and the centerpiece of this exhibition. Used as a backdrop for Schneemann’s live performance “Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions” (1963-2004), its motorized, rotating broken umbrellas, lights, mirror shards, and other objects were all found behind in the artist’s Soho loft, where she has lived since 1962, which used to house the Papadopoulos furrier sweatshop.

British art critic Amelia Jones writes in *The Artist’s Body* (Phaidon, 2000), which she co-authored with Tracey Warr, “In the feminist/existential terms of Simone de Beauvoir, Schneemann thrusts the ‘immanent female’ subject into the domain of the ‘transcendent,’ active male. In *Eye Body* the female nude *looks back*.”

“Swing” (1975) is an artifact from a performance piece in which the artist, hanging naked from a tree surgeon’s harness, dragged colored pencils over a sheet of white paper as she swung past. The event, “Up to and Including Her Limits” is documented on six video monitors and in photographs, along with the original harness. Flat screens throughout the gallery present

Schneemann's "polymorphous eroticism"—celebrations of sensual pleasure and mental bliss—through DVD transfers of "Fuses" (1964-1966), "Meat Joy" and "Body Collage" (both 1964), and "Infinity Kisses" (2008).

Schneemann's use of her naked body and that of her boyfriend as vehicles for free expression and radical feminism in the 1950s and early 60s (one stated purpose of her work was in the service of "eroticizing a guilty society") was dismissed by many critics of the time as narcissistic, exhibitionistic, and even sex-ploitative, such as the artist soul-kissing her cats or having sex on videotape. Some call her nude actions paganism, "Dionysian displays of herself" and sexually "reckless candor." But others saw a nod toward the late Stan Brakhage, a friend and occasional collaborator (she appeared in three of his films: "Daybreak" and "White Eye," both 1957, and "Cat's Cradle," 1959), especially in her self-shot film, "Fuses" (1967), in which collaged, scratched, sprinkled, and painted frames enhance scenes of sexual penetration, fellatio, and cunnilingus.

Concurrently with this exhibition, the Carolina Nitsch Project Room is presenting *Carolee Schneemann, Performance Photographs from the '70s*, featuring black-and-white photographs, several artist's books and other original works, among them: "Blood Work Diary" (1972), five panels with menstrual blottings on tissues, and "Interior Scroll"—a poem on a long paper scroll that the artist extracted from her vagina during a landmark 1975 performance—laminated and exhibited in a Plexiglas box.

Although Carolee Schneemann has often been vilified, she envelops the viewer with love and sensuality, an abandonment into pure physical intimacy, excessive sexuality, the arrogance of pleasure, and an awareness of violent relationships.

The presentation of *Painting, What it Became* is anti-academic, nonsequential, seductively instructive, and significant for contemporary art history, placing Schneemann's paintings in a proper context. "I am a painter. I am still a painter and I will die a painter," said Schneemann in 1993. "Everything that I have developed has to do with extending visual principles off the canvas."

The New York Times

Museum and Gallery Listings

By THE NEW YORK TIMES

Published: March 26, 2009

ART

★ CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN; closes on Saturday. Simultaneous historical shows at two galleries explore aspects of the career of one of the most daring, and personally unsparing, contemporary American artists, one who early on helped define how feminist thinking, feeling and acting would change art for good. Several of Ms. Schneemann's 1970s performances have, in documentary form, long since entered the history books. Her painting, beginning in the 1950s, can be seen as a forerunner of her performance work. Her art is still a problem for some people, too personal, too visceral, too something, which is an excellent sign. "Performance Photographs from the 1970s," Carolina Nitsch Project Room, 534 West 22nd Street, Chelsea, (212) 645-2030, carolinanitsch.com. "Painting, What It Became," P.P.O.W. Gallery, 511 West 25th Street, Chelsea, (212) 647-1044, ppowgallery.com. (Cotter)



March 28, 2009

GOTHAM ART & THEATER

by Elisabeth Kley

Carolee Schneemann blasted her way through social taboos in the 1960s with her pioneering nude performances and self-portrait film having sex (*Fuses*, 1967), but she insists that she has always been a painter. Proof can be found in "Painting, What It Became," an exhibition curated by Maura Reilly at P.P.O.W., Feb. 1-Mar. 28, 2009. The show includes paintings and painting constructions made between 1957 and 1965, as well as documentary photographs, performance videos and films dating from 1963 to the present.

With their energetic flurries of brushstrokes now yellowed and dull, Schneemann's relentlessly material paintings, often featuring rags, photographs and bits of debris, bring de Kooning, Rauschenberg and her close friend Joseph Cornell to mind. They also grew out of Cézanne and Cubism, but Schneeman went on to expand her sense of fluttering life right out of her canvases and into the world. In *Body Collage* (1967), a notable performance preserved on film and presented at P.P.O.W., she covered her naked body with wallpaper paste and rolled in a pile of shredded white printer's paper, as if enveloping herself with animated strokes of paint.

Fur Wheel (1962), among the most interesting pieces on view, is a spinning fur-covered lampshade decorated with crushed beer cans -- a painting that acts out its own confined performance. A larger work festooned with tattered revolving umbrellas and slashes of red and blue paint, *Untitled (Four Fur Cutting Boards)* (1963), looms in the gallery like the aftermath of a thunderstorm.

Transformed by the camera into a black-and-white set for a 20th century Eden, both of these paintings appear behind Schneeman's nude body (sometimes colored with paint or covered with plastic and snakes) in the Icelandic artist Erro's documentary photographs of her *Eye Body: Thirty-Six Transformative Actions for Camera* (1963).

The famous *Meat Joy* (1964), an idyllic orgy of cavorting men and women dressed in bathing suits, can also be seen. Men drag women across the floor, paint the women's faces, and pour more paint on the floor. A "serving maid" appears with platters of sausages and chicken carcasses that are draped over the bodies. In a sexual metaphor foreshadowing Sarah Lucas' sculptures, raw fish are placed between the women's legs.

A concurrent exhibition at Carolina Nitsch Project Room (through Apr. 11) features performance photos from the 1970s, when Schneemann's feminism sharpened. The notorious *Interior Scroll* (1975) can be seen in a group of photographs along with *Scroll Box – The Cave* (1995), an actual snakelike length of typewritten text that Schneemann, in performance, pulled out of her vagina and read. Her words describe a discussion with a structural filmmaker who abhors subjectivity in art. He concludes that he had always thought of her as a dancer -- a comment that for

Schneemann encapsulates years of condescension and isolation by men who expected her to work like one of the boys. The photos are priced from \$5,000 to \$75,000.

But Schneemann's art has always grown out of her female core. The surprisingly elegant *Bloodwork Diary* (1972), for example, is a series of menstrual blood splashes on pieces of tissue placed in a grid and pasted over silver paper. *Parts of a Body House Book* (1974-76) includes an amusing graph that turns the table on men, rating her sexual encounters in terms of organ size, length of time, sadism and fear (among other criteria), while in *Aggression for Couples* (1972), another grid of photographs documents a pantomimed tussle between Schneemann and an unnamed man.

Schneemann's most recent work, *Infinity Kisses – The Movie* (2008), is on view at P.P.O.W. The film animates a series of photographed kisses between the artist and her cat. Cat lovers will adore this touching exchange of affection, although no doubt the implied pun of love between artist and pussy is fully intentional.

It's telling that Schneemann now feels she must turn to the animal world for sensual interactions to transform into art. "Inundated as we are with Abu Ghraib and those torture images, am I ever going to create a pile of pleased naked bodies again?" she asked in a 2005 *Brooklyn Rail* interview. "I don't think so! That aspect of physical, visual pleasure is displaced from my culture forever, it's gone, it's not coming back." Prices at P.P.O.W. range from \$6,000 for an *Eye Body* photograph to \$400,000.



THE NEW YORKER

Goings On About Town

Art

CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN

Schneemann earned a spot in art history with her feminist performances in the sixties and seventies. For a tutorial, visit the Nitsch gallery, where photographs document such now iconic pieces as “Interior Scroll,” in which a naked Schneemann recited a text that she unfurled from her vagina. Her lesser-known paintings, made between 1957 and 1965, are presented here, densely populated with gestural brushstrokes reminiscent of Joan Mitchell—not to mention the patriarch Willem de Kooning. The show does include several videos and films, but even these, in which Schneemann’s nude body is slathered with pigment, underscore the artist’s adamant claim: “I’m a painter. I’m still a painter and I will die a painter.” Through March 28. (P.P.O.W, 511 W. 25th St. 212-647-1044.)



Best in Show

Pol Bury at Chelsea Art Museum; Carolee Schneemann's 'Painting, What It Became'; Wei Dong at Nicholas Robinson

By Robert Shuster

Tuesday, March 10th 2009 at 2:23pm

Carolee Schneemann: 'Painting, What It Became'

Whatever you think of Carolee Schneemann's art, which has often involved Dionysian displays of herself, you have to admire her enduring exuberance in making it. In this well-selected mini-retrospective of her career, Schneemann does everything—swiping a brush, swinging naked, having sex, or smooching a cat—with a kind of reckless candor.

That all-or-nothing approach began in the late 1950s with her paintings, showcased here. Schneemann seems to have tried out everything she'd seen—de Kooning's nervous portraits, Rauschenberg's combines, Cornell's boxed assemblages. The oil is thick and messy, the strokes lunging. It's as if Schneemann were hurrying to find an idea that really suited her.

That turned out to be her body, nude and (let's be honest here) packed with dynamite. What followed was a series of performances and films that combined the energy of action painting with feminist empowerment and the era's sexual breakout. Included in those shown here are the notorious *Meat Joy*, an orgy of barely clad men and women writhing among sausage, fish, and plucked chickens; *Body Collage*, which features the artist nude, coated in glue, and rolling around on toilet paper; and the 30-minute 1965 film *Fuses*, a silent, dreamy, and explicit sequence of Schneemann making ecstatic love to her boyfriend. Once dismissed as exhibitionist (like many of her works), *Fuses* now stands as her tour de force. With a nod toward Stan Brakhage, Schneemann painted and scratched the 16mm film, and fragmented its progression. Clouded by color and shadow, the images jump around like a distant memory of youthful vigor. In fact, the entire show is a little like that, and it's a delight. *P.P.O.W., 511 W 25th St, 212-647-1044. Through March 28.*