



"It was in the body that the energy and the confirmation of what I'd seen and lived was coherent. That was an area that hadn't been colonized."

SYNOPSIS

Throughout her career Carolee Schneemann has used her body to examine the role of female sensuality in connection to the possibilities of political and personal liberation from predominantly oppressive social and aesthetic conventions. Drawing on the expressive possibilities of film, performance, photography, and installation, among other media, she has explored themes of generation and goddess imagery, sexuality, and everyday erotics, as well as personal biography and loss. Although renowned for her work in performance and other media, Schneemann began her career as a painter, stating, "I'm a painter. I'm still a painter and I will die a painter. Everything that I have developed has to do with extending visual principles off the canvas." She continues to perform, film, and record through the present day, and has been acknowledged by many as progenitor of Feminist art, as well as performance and multimedia art.

KEY IDEAS

While still in college, Schneemann adopted a feminist perspective, citing the hierarchal ideals of the 1950s American gallery system, the negative attitudes of male teachers, and the erasure of women's art history as influences. She incorporates feminist ideas into her art as well as her writing, teaching and lecturing, constantly reaffirming her position as a pivotal figure in the feminist movement.

Schneemann's explorations in the early 1960s opened performance art to include inquiries about sensuality and sexuality. Prior to her works, the majority of performance art was formal experimentation, rather than a specific investigation into the taboo realm of the liberating possibilities of the sexual female body.

By using her body as her primary medium, Schneemann emphasized women's agency, situating women as both the creator and an active part of the creation itself, giving the female form in art a subjectivity it previously lacked. She firmly establishing her practice in opposition to the traditional representation of women merely as nude objects.

CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN BIOGRAPHY

Childhood

Carolee Schneemann was born and raised in Fox Chase, Pennsylvania. She began drawing at a young age and cites this as an early premonition about her future career. She visited the Philadelphia Museum of Art as a young adult and recalls feeling a strong connection to the artwork. She was the first woman in her family to attend college and received a full scholarship to Bard, where she completed her Bachelor of Arts degree. While at Bard, she studied painting at Columbia University, where she met her first husband, James Tenney, an experimental music composer. She received her MFA from the University of Illinois in 1962 and she and Tenney returned to New York.

Early Training



In her early career Schneemann focused on painting in an Abstract Expressionist style. She produced many pieces, but during her graduate work in Illinois she decided that Abstract Expressionism was a boy's club and the paintbrush itself was too "phallic." She became a member of an avant-garde circle of artists, writers and musicians in New York, associating with Allan Kaprow, Claes Oldenburg, George Brecht and Robert Morris. She also visited Andy Warhol's Factory, met Marcel Duchamp and spent time with Joseph Cornell. Her artistic emergence in New York City was marked by a party she threw at her Manhattan loft where she invited all the artists she had met. She called it her "debutante party," and it ended with holes being smashed into her walls and the word "rats" painted in various places throughout the loft. In 1962, Schneemann began a three-year working relationship with the Judson Dance Theater, a focal point for avant-garde performance, dance, and theater production in Greenwich Village. She also participated in performances coordinated by Kaprow, Oldenburg, and Morris. These collaborations were the catalyst for her transition to performance art and other media, and in 1963 she began experimenting with what she called "kinetic theater," a combination of performance and installation art.



Mature Period

Schneemann created viscerally inspired performances in the 1960s and 1970s but also delved into collage, assemblages, film, and photography. Often her ideas for her work came from dreams, finding inspiration in the sequences of images and sounds in the unconscious nocturnal workings of her mind. She reveled in challenging social taboos in her work and set out to bring down, "the psychic territorial power lines by which women were admitted to the Art Stud Club." In the early 1960s, she travelled to Paris where she first performed her work *Meat Joy* in 1964, a multi-media spectacle involving raw meat, sexuality, and pop music. That same year she began work on her first major film, *Fuses* (1964-1967), a tribute to her sexual and emotional relationship with Tenney and the first of her autobiographical trilogy. Her next film, *Plumb Line* (1968) dealt with the unraveling of an heterosexual relationship and provided her with catharsis as her relationship with Tenney ended that same

year. She had many other relationships during her career, but none that resulted in multiple collaborations. Despite the tumultuous end to their long-term relationship, she did maintain correspondence with Tenney, and even wrote to him about her subsequent relationship with fellow artist and filmmaker Anthony McCall.

Throughout the 1970s, she continued to collaborate with Fluxus, Performance and Happenings artists, and she maintained correspondence with Kaprow throughout their lives. Schneemann refined her performance aesthetic through works like *Up to and Including Her Limits* (1973-1976) an embodied exploration of the theme of the artist's gesture, which she first performed at Grand Central Station in New York City at the *Avant Garde Festival*. Her 1975 performance *Interior Scroll*, at the Women Here and Now conference in East Hampton, Long Island, was photographed by her partner at the time, McCall and is a germinal example of her feminist exploration of the female body as both subject and object of art, as well as the source of its creation.

In addition to her film, performance, and installation works, Schneemann published her first book, *Parts of A Body House*, in 1972 in which she linked the body to the domestic realm. Her second book, *Cézanne: She was a Great Painter* (1976), used a drawing from when she was four years old of a figure looking in the mirror for its cover, and within she reflected on her own biography, western art history and the painter, Cezanne. In 1979, with the book *More Than Meat Joy*, Schneemann presents a survey of the documentation of her performance career up through 1978, as well as her published essays.

Later Years



In the 1980s and 1990s Schneemann turned toward photography and installation pieces but still performed widely, with a transitional works like *Fresh Blood*, (1981-1987) encompassing performance, installation, and multimedia. The photographic installation, *Infinity Kisses* (1980-1988), is an extended documentation in which she photographed her cat Cluny over eight years as he gave her a kiss each morning.

With the AIDS crisis and economic tumult of the 1980s, many of her friends and colleagues passed away. She commemorated them in the work *Mortal Coils* (1994), an installation that utilized video and sculptural elements. She has stated that some feminists of this era felt that her work was not a sufficient way to address current feminist issues, but that did not dissuade her from continuing to create new works and further disseminating her feminist message. Her work is owned by museums throughout the world and she continues to write as well as

exhibit and lecture globally. She was the first woman professor in the art department at Rutgers University and has since taught at many colleges including New York University and the California Institute of the Arts. Today Schneemann lives and works in New Paltz, New York, in a Huguenot stone house that she has owned since her relationship with James Tenney.

LEGACY

Schneemann's groundbreaking works on film have been an inspiration for later artists, like Peggy Ahwesh and Abigail Child, and provided them with a historic precedent for feminist filmmaking. Her performance and photographic works also set a precedent for artists like Ana Mendieta and Hannah Wilke to explore ideas ranging from goddess imagery, the generative and subjective female form, and ideals of beauty. Even Annie Sprinkle's *Public Cervix Announcement*(1990) would not be possible without Schneemann's exploration of intimacy in her artwork. Many exhibitions throughout the 1990s and 2000s have been dedicated to feminist artists of these later generations in direct communication with works from Schneemann's oeuvre. As new generations of artists and women discover her works, the dialogue Schneemann initiated in the early 1960s about women, their bodies, the sensual and the intimate continues to engage viewers, artists and critics.

Original content written by The Art Story Contributors

CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN QUOTES

"I can make something taboo so formally compelling the taboo becomes the after-effect. That makes it much more powerful."

"As I hacked at the excluding vital surfaces of Abstract Expressionism, my entire body ripped through the canvas to emerge on the other side in actual time and space as an active and activating form."

"By the year 2000 no young woman artist will meet the determined resistance and constant undermining which I endured as a student. Her studio and history [sic] courses will usually be taught by women; she will never feel like a provisional guest at the banquet of life or a monster defying her 'God-given' role; or a belligerent whose devotion to creativity could only exist at the expense of a man, or men and their needs. Nor will she go into the 'art world,' gracing or disgracing a pervading stud club of artists, historians, teachers, museum directors, magazine editors, gallery dealers - all male, or committed to masculine preserves. All that is marvellously, already falling around our feet."

INFLUENCES

ARTISTS



Allan Kaprow



Willem De Kooning



Marcel Duchamp

FRIENDS



Allan Kaprow



Dick Higgins



Claes Oldenburg



George Brecht



Robert Morris

MOVEMENTS



Happenings



Performance Art



Abstract Expressionism



Carolee Schneemann

Years Worked: late 1950s to present



ARTISTS



Ana Mendieta



Guerilla Girls



Tracey Emin



Cindy Sherman

FRIENDS



Claes Oldenburg



Robert Rauschenberg



George Brecht

MOVEMENTS



Performance Art



Body Art



Fluxus

ARTWORKS



Title: *Three Figures After Pontormo* (1957)

Artwork Description & Analysis: This Abstract Expressionist-inspired painting is one of Schneemann's early works, done before she started exploring other media. The title refers to the Mannerist painter Jacopo da Pontormo, known for his elaborately posed figures. Although abstract, this painting is not completely non-objective, as there is a central nude figure with his back to the viewer and another figure on the left of the canvas. Schneemann has always stated that she is first and foremost a painter and that anything else she did was an extension of painting. The gestural brushwork and action painting of the Abstract Expressionist style provides the theatrical background for her later work that would move beyond the two-dimensions found on canvas.

Oil on canvas - Collection of the artist



Title: *Eye Body* (1963)

Artwork Description & Analysis: *Eye Body* is a series that consists of thirty-six photographs of the artist in an environment she created with various objects such as broken mirrors, dress mannequins, and plastic tarps. To become a piece of the art herself, Schneemann covered herself in various materials including grease, chalk, and plastic and created thirty-six "transformative actions" in the setting while a colleague photographed her, one action for each frame of film. She describes the series as integrating the artist's self as image and image-maker, melding

the two through an improvisational collage in space and time. The series marks her transition from painting to working with a much wider range of media. When she first showed the photographs to curators, they dismissed the suite as purely narcissistic exhibitionism; however, Schneemann viewed the set as a way for her to reclaim the strength of a woman's sexuality. She stated that, "since the female body had always been usurped by traditions of art history and then by Pop art, ... I wanted to see what would happen with this energy of sensuality... that I felt." Clearly influential on her later works, *Eye Body* paved the way for Schneemann to use her body to explore female sensuality in greater detail in works like *Meat Joy* (1964) and *Fuses* (1964-1967).

Photograph - Collection of the artist



Title: *Meat Joy* (1964)

Artwork Description & Analysis: *Meat Joy* was a performance done first in Paris, then filmed and photographed at the Judson Memorial Church in 1964, and consisted of nude men and women dancing and playing with substances like raw chicken, fish, sausage, scraps of paper, and wet paint. This Dionysian-inspired ritualistic rite was a "celebration of flesh as material" and is similar to Kaprow's happenings, as it used improvisation but focused on the concept behind the work as opposed to its execution. Rooted in erotic sensuality, *Meat Joy* is another early manifestation of Schneemann's concern about women's control over their bodies and their sexuality, as it emphasizes that women can be as overtly and openly sexual or sensual as men. Schneemann wanted to challenge social taboos against open and public sensuality, as well as female sexuality, and used this performance to begin to break down existing barriers.

Raw meat and fish, paint, plastic tarp, performers



Title: *Interior Scroll* (1975)

Artwork Description & Analysis: For her performance at the *Women Here and Now* conference in East Hampton, Long Island, Schneemann entered the room covered in a sheet with only an apron beneath. She disrobed in the center of the space, climbed onto a table where she outlined her body in mud and struck "action poses" as if for a life-drawing class. She read from her book *Cézanne, She Was a Great Painter*, and then slowly extracted a paper scroll from her vagina and read from it. Schneemann drew upon ritualism while using her whole body as an integral part of the art; she stated, "I thought of the vagina in many ways - physically, conceptually, as a sculptural form, an architectural referent, the source of sacred knowledge, ecstasy, birth passage, transformation." According to art critic Robert C.

Morgan, *Interior Scroll* must be understood within the contemporary context of the 1970s and feminist art in particular: by locating the root of artistic creativity at her genitals, Schneemann shifted away from the masculine precedent in art toward a feminist exploration of her body.

Paint, paper scroll, Schneemann



Title: *Up to and Including Her Limits* (1973-1976)

Artwork Description & Analysis: Inspired by the physicality of Pollock's painting technique, Schneemann translated that gesture into performance. She was suspended in a harness, nude and drew on the wall and floor with a crayon. The movement of her body was more important than the marks she made; it was this movement that was the art and is clearly inspired by her work in kinetic theater at the Judson Memorial Church. The rhythmic motions of Schneemann swinging back and forth at different speeds have an almost therapeutic effect and this piece was created after a particularly difficult time in her life. Schneemann performed the piece at various locations throughout 1973-1976, with many performances in New York City, but also in California, England, and Europe as well. In 1984, Schneemann created a video by editing footage from six of these performances together.



Title: *Hand/Heart for Ana Mendieta* (1986)

Artwork Description & Analysis: Schneemann created this work as a multi-media homage to her friend and colleague, artist Ana Mendieta. Schneemann based the work on a dream she had about Mendieta right after her death from falling from an apartment window during a fight with her boyfriend artist Carl Andre (it is not clear whether Mendieta fell or was pushed). Upon waking from the dream, Schneemann first ran into the snow, then returned inside and started making drawings of the image from the dream - "Ana's hands falling in empty space." She saw the hand gestures form hearts, and then saw herself drenched in red paint that became blood. The dream was choreographed into a performance in which Schneemann etched the heart shapes into the snow with her bare hands, using paint, blood, ashes, and syrup. A photographer who specialized in photographing accidents recorded the performance, and the action persists in the photographs that make the central panel of the triptych. The hands and the red hearts of this panel echo Mendieta's piece *Blood Sign 2* where Mendieta smeared blood onto a wall with her hands. The side panels consist of painted images that echo the hand/heart theme of the performance and demonstrate Schneemann's continued dedication to painting.

Blood, ashes, syrup, snow - Collection of the artist