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A SALUTE TO CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN

by Jonas Mekas, Irving Sandler, and Patricia Cronin

IN PRAISE OF THE SURFACE

So much has been said about the “essence” of things and men that you’ll forgive me if I’ll say a few words in praise of the surface.

I was provoked by this sentence:

“Schneemann abstracts, removes all social context, alters and distorts reality instead of moving toward its essence.” (Michael Smith, *Village Voice*, Nov. 26, 1964 in his review of *Meat Joy*.)



Carolee Schneeman, "Eye Body - 36 Transformative Actions" (1963).
Action for camera. (Photo-Erro)

Arts have been always rebelling against prescribed “essences,” against “social significances”—for those terms mean and imply either the Old (comfortable) essence and significance (a trick to protect oneself from anything that may upset the status quo) or simply it means nothing (or nobody knows what it means). So the artists junked everything that had been known as essence and significance and began searching for it, from scratch.

In painting, in sculpture, for a decade now the artist has been exploring new textures, materials, surfaces, junk, garbage, things around us, putting them in/on canvasses until they swell (and smell), until they are no longer paintings but things—striving, hoping this way to escape the prescribed meanings, forms, perspectives, contexts.

In Cinema: Smith, Warhol, Brakhage, Markopoulos, Rubin, Jacobs are going directly to the surface (impactness) of things, of person, textures, faces and bodies, and exploring the eye that sees it and the means and ways by which it sees. Things that surround us, the human body itself has become invisible during the last two centuries. Two centuries of industry, rationalism and materialism succeeded in making the material world invisible to our eyes. It was Warhol who demonstrated to us that a Campbell’s soup can can be visible, that the Empire State Building can be seen. Smith, like a magician, opens to us the world of color and texture in the simplest materials around us, colors we keep looking at every day without seeing, without perceiving

them. Brakhage and Markopoulos are demonstrating to us that there is LIGHT, and that we have eyes, and that there is human body. Ken Jacobs shows us that shadows exist. Nam June Paik even shows that DUST exists and falls on everything, including film. Nothing can be taken for granted: we are basically blind.

Music: La Monte Young goes beyond all melody, his music becomes one uninterrupted sound, all sounds fade into one, and then you listen to the very surface of sound and you discover most fantastic harmonies, you hear the sound for the first time, you hear the music of the spheres.

The kinetic Theater, Carolee Schneemann's *Meat Joy* brings us back to the touch, smell, to the surfaces of things and bodies; it accepts, with love, everything that our insistence on ideas (certain ideas) kept us away from; even what was "repellent," like "raw" meat, or chicken guts, what we usually dread and fear to touch—glittery, vomity substances (under the excuse of our own "delicateness," the delicateness of our nature).

Eh, the walls of Puritanism and rationalism and false idealism are shaking, we are beginning to feel the surface again, although our touch, our senses are still numb.

What an irony, we must admit, that we have to find our depths *via* the object, *via* the surface world, through the phenomenal world. Our pomposity in us still denies this, we still insist on "importance," on "essence" the way we know and understand it; we reject the sensuous world of *Meat Joy* as lacking social "essence." We'd like to go directly to heaven without going through earth—we'd like to be saintlier than God Jesus Christ Himself. What pompous asses we are.

Yes, Schneemann removes the social context or, rather, the familiar social contexts, to break us open, to expose our senses, to bring us back to our senses—and to get rid of prescribed meanings.

I remember my father, taking and mixing cows' dung in a pail, and, with his bare hands applying the mixture to the roots of young seedling trees. I watched him with a sort of disgust, I remember, and although, like all other boys that I grew up with, I used to step into the hot cow dung in cold autumn days, to warm up my feet—I felt simultaneously a disgust and a wonderment seeing my father working with it so casually as if it were no different from touching the corn, or tending the horses, or stroking the wheat stems, or looking at an approaching rain cloud.

But now some of my childhood riddles begin to unravel themselves under different circumstances, and so when I watch *Meat Joy* and I see the performers throw themselves into the immediate experience of meat and chicken gut and paint and sweat and touch of bodies and grease—I know that this is not an empty gesture devoid of essence, but just the opposite: it's touching the very essence; the long held-back need to be one with all things, to return down to earth, down to the surface of matter; we realize that we can't look disdainfully at the meat world without somehow somewhere deeper in ourselves condemning our own meat, our own body, our own soul. So that *Meat Joy* becomes an act of liberation and an act of contact with the essence; a philosophical (or religious?) essay on Essence, Matter, and Being.

Therefore, dear reader, don't blame Andy Warhol for showing you eight hours of Empire State Building or Schneemann for "exposing" you to the feeling and touch of meat. Blame the Western Civilization for making the reality invisible to you, numbing your senses. Thank the Artist for bringing the surface reality of things, and all kinds of phenomena that surround us and make us what we are, to our senses and to our consciousness. Praise the artist for enabling us to see again, to feel, to hear again: for giving us EYES, EARS, TOUCH. We are waking up and the world around us is waking up with us.

Or is this only my Spring Dream? Tell me, Dear Carolee.

—Jonas Mekas
(from the *Diaries*, March 1965)

Carolee Schneemann's work captured my imagination when I first discovered it while visiting New York City as an undergrad in 1983. The power of her truly inter-disciplinary work spoke to this young artist because it transcended boundaries between painting, sculpture, installation, performance, and film and addressed everything I dared hope art could: the body, desire, agency, feminism, politics and intellect.

Expanding her painting/assemblages, stepping down out of the canvases into the real, performative space of the viewer, Schneemann was a pioneer blurring the previously tightly patrolled borders of the fields of art, dance, music and theatre. Her radical, ritualistic performance "Meat Joy" (1964) at the Judson Memorial Church overflowed with sensual revelry and put the body's knowledge front and center. Female authorship and physical pleasure never looked so good. I've dreamt about this piece for years.

I met Schneemann around the time her corporeal tour de force "Fuses" (1967) was censored in Moscow in 1989. We became friends and I went to many parties in her loft that seemed an awful lot like her performances. And that was the point. Art was life, life was art. And she was the director. Schneemann is an artist's artist and she has gone on to influence four generations of artists. As the undulating art market fads of the silly and charming come and go, Schneemann's choice of both a serious life of the mind AND body seems more worth while, courageous & one worth following.

—Patricia Cronin

As the feminist slogan had it, "the personal is political." Although feminist political art was not always personal—in the case of Carolee Schneemann it was authentic and passionate, direct from the gut—and the rest of her body—physically as well as emotionally.

Schneemann was not counted as a pioneer of feminist art by feminists, but she was the first. As early as 1962, she depicted subjects and introduced found objects into her assemblages that spoke of her gender, for example, the vaginal image and fur in *Fur Wheel*, 1962. In a performance the following year, titled *Eye Body*, she transformed her loft into an Environment

incorporating broken mirrors, lights, photographs, motorized umbrellas, and other materials. She introduced into this mixture as a kind of ritual her own naked body adorned with paint, grease, chalk, and slithering live snakes. She later recognized the affinity between this work and the statue of the Cretan goddess whose body is decorated with snakes, anticipating the feminist celebration of the Great Goddess. Schneemann's "enlarged collage" and "kinetic theater," as she termed them, was a precursor to body art of the late 1960s.

In a number of her works, Schneemann's mission, she said, was to free human sexuality. I was sympathetic but found films and videos of her polysexual performances, such as *Meat Joy*, 1964, which featured a melange of naked bodies in orgiastic revelry, too frenzied for my taste. But I admired her single-woman performances, such as *Interior Scroll* (1976), her most notorious work, in which she reacted against snubs by both a female art critic as well as a male poststructuralist filmmaker who said he could not look at her films because he could not abide their personal clutter. He would accept her as a dancer and not as a film-maker—he called her a film-makeress. Posing naked in dim light, she read from a paper that she extracted slowly and rhythmically from her vagina, figuratively ridding her body of her rage.

In my favorite performance, *Up To And Including Her Limits* (1973-77), which I saw at Artists Space, Schneemann suspended her naked body from the ceiling, and using it like a mobile crayon, drew her version of Jackson Pollock's drip painting on canvas laid on the floor and attached to the walls, a work that glorified and mythicized the female body in creative action.

Schneemann's celebration of her body put off many of her "sisters", who thought that unabashedly flaunting a sexy figure, as if in a striptease or as cheesecake, was complicit with the male gaze. They might have been envious but more likely had succumbed to political correctness and thus, missed Schneemann's varied intentions. She rebutted hostile female theorists who denied the sensual and ecstatic dimensions of their bodies by commenting, "They stuff their vaginas with their theories."

Disclosure: I first saw Carolee Schneemann across the room at an opening at the Museum of Modern Art in the late 1950s. Stunned by her beauty, I was drawn to her like the proverbial moth to the flame and "picked" her up, a rare act for me. When she told me that she was an artist I asked to see her work and she took me to her apartment, introduced me to her boyfriend, the composer James Tenney, and we all had a friendly glass of wine.

—Irving Sandler

Carolee Schneemann: Within and Beyond the Premises

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