Caroline Koebel
www.carolinekoebel.com

"Color the Shadow," catalogue essay for Carolee Schneemann retrospective, *Split Decision*, David Liss and Photios Giovanis, eds., CEPA Gallery, 2007, pp. 32-37.

<u>Color the Shadow</u>

>…When you came out, your eyes burned with sunlight….
>
> Carolee Schneemann, "Shadow Capture"[1]

>All memory has to be reimagined. For we have in our memories micro-films that can only be read if they are lighted by the bright light of the imagination.
>
> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*

>In awakening, the beleaguered psyche wrenches itself into lucid awareness from the confused opacity of sleep—and yet our dreams manage to deposit vivid traces of their emotional content in the storeroom of memory, like distinct shadows fixed upon a wall.
>
> Barbara Maria Stafford, *Devices of Wonder*

Some of the Twin Towers deaths were by free fall; in lower Manhattan bodies rained down. These selves between sky and edifice externalize the mass(es) within the collapsing building caves. They correlate the heroic with the visible and make fuzzy distinctions between self and other. They prompt an identification based less on fate, and the stasis it implies, than on decision-making and action. "It could have been me" is supplanted by "what would I have done?," a question predicated on choice. To think "jump" gratifies my ego and affirms my sense of self. I project onto these figures desires and expectations that have no place with the victims as a whole. This minority is made to perform certain actions on my behalf that, however much a paradox, buoy the concept of "free will."

Carolee Schneemann began the 42-unit photogrid *Terminal Velocity* (2001) by collecting and scanning images from various newspapers of individuals suspended by the camera on their descent. She asserts, "…In this communal nightmare, fleeting visual attributes

of nine lives become vivid by enlargement—unexpectedly captured, made public." The artwork's nine 9/11 subjects "were thrown by impact into a gravitational plunge, or chose to escape incineration by leaping into space." In *Terminal Velocity* the computer explores the "or." It is the kino-eye, making visible—as Dziga Vertov in "The Birth of Kino-Eye" exclaims—"that which the eye doesn't see." Pixels—"dots of light"—are the base units of space and time. Zooms, repetition and other software remappings connect the dots anew, prompting narrative, optical and rhythmic outcomes.

Formal attributes of *Terminal Velocity*, including black-and-whiteness, seriality, continuity, hard edges, and multiple framing devices, point to photo-based conceptual art of the 1970s. In contrast to the projects for which she is most renown, Schneemann's touch here is not central. This subdued physicality foregrounds representation over matter, which is fitting given that behind the pictures there are no living beings, nor no remains. The nine "captured" lives can be pointed to in the representational space of the image and only gestured toward objectively at the site of their deaths. Schneemann cultivates early the art of observing the no longer visible, as evinced in her recollection of student days, "…so I drew and I drew, and I worked from the live figure until I could see it without it being there anymore."

A white-shirted man, upside down, one leg extended and other bent (stork-like), is aligned with the skyscraper's striped architecture. This juxtaposition is uncannily evocative of '70s performance, including Valie Export's body-space-shape actions and films in which she relates herself to the greater empirical world as if one piece of an overall puzzle. The most vertical, surrounded on both sides by three columns, coming incrementally closer, this falling person is the composition's support beam. In the final unit, the man's head below and foot above are barely within frame; he almost loses his wholeness. The image enlarged to this point just before excess (fragmentation) is interpretable as an embrace or conversely as an imprisonment, the frame as either pacific or violent. Light, camera, subject: shooting into the sun causes some of the falling to appear in silhouette form. Man against sky elbows bent at right angles hands up. Woman in front of smoking tower arms out to side "X"ing tower's stripes. Eisenstein's graphic montage is recalled by these combating lines. Indecipherable, grainy, contorted lives.

The instantaneity by which the dying are transformed into spectacle is counteracted by *Terminal Velocity*. From mass media Schneemann borrows the trope of incessant repetition but her looping, rather than stupefaction, inspires meditation. Guy Debord,

Situationist and author of *The Society of the Spectacle*, gives a posthumous wink. The First Amendment right of free speech has been contested by both politicians and constituents, and artists such as Dread Scott, with his installation *What is the Proper Way to Display a U.S. Flag?* (1988), are vilified for "desecrating" the flag even while catalyzing democratic debate. To the ongoing culture wars add the Patriot Act and the anxious "pre-emptive" general climate. In this context, it can be taboo—or a breach of national security—for artists to play with America's portrait by repurposing corporate media images. No wonder the premiere in early 2002 of *Terminal Velocity* provoked ire.

In the three-decade earlier photo-sequence *Aggression for Couples* (1972), a woman wrestles the attention of a man in an easy chair away from his Sunday paper. They become intertwined on the floor, the news now their bedding, over an insurance ad that "guarantees you 7.1% tax paid." In the second exchange they are on their knees holding one another's shoulders, following alternating force fields, a push-pull acrobatics. (Contrasting the dynamism of the artwork is the image of me near inert at the computer, incidentally the site of an abundance of contemporary "aggression.") Shorts replace the women's dress. A bookcase links the two scenes.

These scenes of a "couple" behold visions of Schneemann (with Anthony McCall), while also making visible her reflection(s):

> *…the life process…We do not have…raw…experiences…risk psych …holds …which we need, want…to explain…which dies… attraction …have no specific…angry, distraught…silent… recognized full…to develop…with our men…*

Purple-inked journal fragments are collaged onto the photographs, and their association with the cartoon thought balloon provides a linguistic layer serious in content and humorous in form. The couple's facial expressions—grimace-smiles—also orient their interactions between gravity and levity. Camp, a sensibility rarely acknowledged in discussions of Schneemann's practice, is at play. She calls this her "comic strip."

Each of the work's eighteen photographs are originary images—showing intervals in a trajectory of time—as distinct from the generation in *Terminal Velocity* of multiple images from a few sources (duration coming out of addition v. out of multiplication). Whereas through dissecting "the action" *Terminal Velocity* explodes instances and in doing so posits before-during-after-ness, *Aggression for Couples* raises less questions

about the contingent frame than about how temporality in any case is a subjective experience (homemade "after effects" delinearize the sequential photos). Both photo-based works draw attention to processes of perception, but the latter intervenes the kino-eye with the hand-felt.

Scratched scribbles and orange, blue and red washes pit painterly abstraction against photo-representational space in *Aggression for Couples*, giving expression to Schneemann's observation that "the body has to enter perception viscerally." Hand-drawn yellow arrows bring a comedic physics to events. Schneemann and McCall's interacting bodies make novel shapes and throw expressionistic shadows. Lodging blankness in the mise-en-scene, these anamorphic projections are immaterial yet inseparable from matter, darkness dependent on light, elusive selves.

The film *Viet-Flakes* (1965) conveys trauma not by including actual or acted "authenticating" combat footage of the Vietnam War, but through a humbleness of means. According to David James, a major feature of the war was that "…the invisibility of the Vietnamese allowed them to be everywhere but also to be everywhere absent." Although the issue of how Americans "see" the other—so crucial to James's explication of films about Vietnam—is the crux of Schneemann's politically engaged intensely personal cinema, the scale of production and experimental processes of *Viet-Flakes* distinguish it from the (anti)war documentaries James considers in *Allegories of Cinema*.

Viet-Flakes is paradoxical. It clashes the futility of knowing atrocity through representation and the dependence of any attempt to end barbarism upon that very representation. Connections between a "signifying apparatus" and the (in)visibility of entities evoke ideas about spectacle and postmodern society voiced by various theorists, including Jean Baudrillard, whose thoughts on simulation and dissimulation are given new life in the era(error) of "W" by "WMDs" and "humane torture," respectively.

To pay attention to *Viet-Flakes* is to be overcome by sorrow. Images and sounds disappear before the mind has time to fully process what is seen and heard; continuous interruption and substitution compounds the hauntedness of the film's matter. Its afterimage shows a melee of visions: fear struck woman, man enchained, body mounds, child corpses, star of Mao-communism, headline fragment "OK," face of white male authority—the last a specter especially unnerving in its distance from and simultaneous control of the slaughter. Indeed, Schneemann was curious about audience response to

"the juxtaposition of President Lyndon Johnson following stomach surgery with eviscerated bodies."

Intersecting this dance of horrors is James Tenney's asynchronous sound collage, ricocheting between Bach, Vietnamese folksong, Laotian love song, opera, the chart-topping "We Can Work It Out" by the Beatles, and other '60s hits. The invitation by the audio to "play along" is irresistible: "What the world needs now…." No matter how reviling the accompanying picture(s), when *Viet-Flakes* returns a few sound fragments later to Dionne Warwick I sing along internally, "love sweet love." This ironic relationship of sound to image prompts questions of both individual accountability to the war and entertainment culture's stake in covering over the scene on the ground (i.e., dissimulation). The utopian message "sweet love, no not just for some but for everyone" is buried by its profit-driven mode of deliverance.

Schneemann places *Viet-Flakes* as the "heart and core" of *Snows* (1967), the kinetic theatre work responding to the "inability to act directly…to intervene…to make a difference."

> *The evidence of the personal experiences of the Vietnamese was reaching us at a great remove, through reproduced photographs—the situation depicted in a twilight zone between the unknown outcome and the ambivalent role played by the photographer (whose life was also threatened) 'taking pictures' as people burnt, bled, fled, and were tortured.*

She describes *Snows*,

> *An ethereal stage environment combining colored light panels, film projection, torn collage, hanging sacks of colored water, "snow," crusted branches, rope, foil and foam was the set and setting in which an audience-activated electronic switching system controlled elements of the performance/installation. Images from film, slide and live action propelled silent, ghostly performers to become aggressor and victim, torturer and tortured.*

Viet-Flakes and *Snows* are Helens, presaging general calls to imagine the war from the perspective of the Vietnamese. Secreted for over a year, the My Lai Massacre was not made known to the American public until journalist Seymour Hersh published a story in late 1969, a news tremor, like his coverage of Abu Ghraib, that shook mass opinion.

Radical differences in scales of effect between the artworks and the news article do not diminish their sympathies of intent, their insistence upon looking through other's eyes.

The elders leading the U.S. into recent imperialist wars have lived experience of the Vietnam period. Do they not read their own cautionary tale? Jennifer K. Harbury, human rights attorney and author of *Truth, Torture, and the American Way*, connects contemporary torture techniques to U.S. practices in Vietnam, including the notorious figure with outstretched arms and electrodes, known internally as "the Vietnam." While on tour in Vietnam, U.S. Marine Joe Bangert witnessed the inhumanity of a U.S. Aid to International Development agent:

> *…he went over there and ripped her clothes off and took a knife and cut from her vagina all the way up well just about up to her breast and pulled her organs out, completely out of her cavity and threw them out. And then he stopped and commenced to peel every bit of skin off her body and left her there as a sign for something or other.*

Sir! No Sir!, David Zeiger's 2005 documentary about resistance from within the military to the "war of aggression" in Vietnam, is a vital exception to the suppression of the past in its ability to inform and enlighten. The GI anti-war movement is exposed through an interplay of archival materials and present-day interviews. The latter evidence an urgency in giving contemporary significance to prior actions, and screenings of the film, understandably, are combined with presentations on the Appeal for Redress, a petition signed by more than 1200 Active Duty, Reserve and Guard personnel to bring the troops home from Iraq. Statements issued at the time of the terror such as Bangert's, excerpted by Zeiger from *Winter Soldier* (Winter Film Collective, 1972), about the reaction to a woman found carrying bandages—supposedly for the Viet Cong—prove especially resonant.

The Vietnamese woman's mutilated body "as a sign for something or other" can be related to her raped and murdered Iraqi sister. An Associated Press story published by Al Jazeera reads, "The U.S. soldiers entered the home of the Sunni family in the Iraqi town of Mahmoudiya, south of Baghdad, raped the woman, then in an apparent cover-up attempt, burnt her body and killed the other three members of the family, including a child." This woman—actually a 14-year-old girl who according to perpetrator Sergeant Paul E. Cortez, "kept squirming and trying to keep her legs closed and saying stuff in Arabic,"—also becomes a message bearer. The Association of Muslim Scholars warns,

"Raping this girl then mutilating her is shameful and will remain as a sign of shame to American invaders."

Schneemann laid the "obsessive collection of atrocity images" she had been amassing over six years on the studio floor and used an 8mm hand-held camera and magnifying glasses to improvise and imagine modes of study. The resultant beyond that is *Viet-Flakes* is as much an experiment of process and form as it is a document of the collection. In the filmmaker's own words,

> *Broken rhythms trail the in-and-out-of-focus movement as abstract motions and shapes converge into the terrified frozen expression of people burning, drowning, dragged; pointillistic black specks when brought into sharper focus become a rain of bombs; the blurred faces of American soldiers leading girls from a shadowed hiding place decompose into a montage of a Rembrandt ink drawing eclipsed by a house going up in flames.*

The observant eye is intended to be felt, and the connection of the act of looking to a subjective conscious is especially pronounced when the filmmaker's shadow falls momentarily into frame.

"Intimacy," Gaston Bachelard imparts, "needs the heart of a nest." Out of this same period came *Fuses* (1964-67), Schneemann's radical love and sex film experiment made with James Tenney "from Kitch the cat's camera eye." "…A psychedelic projection," exalts David James, that "…illuminates the lovers' bodies, receives its body from them…." Four decades later the intensity of red on the level of the film's surface continues to express a vital life force coursing its depths. *Fuses* survives Tenney, who admirably always supported Schneemann's public exhibition of the film, in all its intimacy and explicitness, even after the pair had separated. The bond evoked by *Fuses* remains awe-inspiring, which is certainly a factor in the divergent responses it continues to beckon.

Of filming *Fuses* at home, Schneemann discloses, "…I wanted what was around us to be coming in and out of season, of frame, of focus, of flesh." This film, along with much of Schneemann's body of work, reflects on not only the cognition but also the shaping of space through movement. "A house that has been experienced is not an inert box," records Bachelard. "Inhabited space transcends geometrical space." Imagine the repertoire of habitations at Schneeman's farmhouse from 1750. *Fuses* rockets the interior

into orbit. Kitch's feline visions are now in the eyes of Red Shadow and Minos, cats who—always within perceptual range—act as irises to the site. Visiting Schneemann at home, all the more apparent is the link between the artwork's inception (most typically in the dreams she has here) and the artist's processes and conclusions. *Fuses* infuses the house, and when Schneemann stretches in a doorframe between rooms she is in rhythm with configurations of self, other and film-space of the '60s.

To study *Aggression for Couples*, which is leaning against the wall prior to being packed and shipped, I crouch and sit, staying low. I see the composite of errant paint marks on the studio floor, while I feel myself walking the elevations and descents of its soft slopes. The ritual of leaving one's shoes at the door and moving around in bare or slippered foot is ostensibly for the protection of place, but the deeper purpose is likely the potential of place to express. To grasp how "the softness of a cat's fur becomes a lubricant for the motion of the hand," reasons Brian Massumi in *Parables for the Virtual*, is to gain insight into "proprioception," in which "the muscles and ligaments register as conditions of movement what the skin internalizes as qualities."

Multitudinous shifts characterize the video installation *Devour* (2003-04), from structural elements, such as simultaneous image channels and sound offset to misalign with picture, to the breadth of materials that combine within that structure. "Perceptual tensions drive a range of images," Schneemann explains, "edited to contrast evanescent, fragile elements with violent, concussive, speeding fragments." *Devour* spews a dialectics of events, tangents and states of being. As soon as the sight of a corpse in the gutter, her brains and blood coloring the sidewalk, repels, a bird in flight entrances. In this landscape of horrors, the desire to soar is inescapable.

By holding "its wings up in a slight dihedral (V-shape)," according to Cornell Lab of Ornithology, the turkey vulture is able to fly low. The animal of the sky, filmed on Schneemann's own land, beloved by her for its willingness to "eat anything," and because of its V-ness evoking the earlier work *Venus Vectors* (1988), is opposed by a cyclical image of troops, armored to the wings, debarking a helicopter. A commercial jet passing overhead is mundane in its familiarity. Soon, however, the megaton bird of progress is bearing down on the grounded human who catches this thing in her eyes. The plane's seizure of the cameraperson's view bespeaks its omnipotence. The turkey vulture is a release from this excessive presence. Despite the proximity created by *Devour* of the bird and the body—scavenger and carrion,—the dead woman sounds

alarms not about the natural world. Overhead "TV" in the sense of technological ventures, not turkey vultures, is the source of this "collateral damage."

Intimacy, conveying urgency even while suspending time, elicits a bewilderment of reception. The haptic is felt most strongly in the sequences—a close-up of a baby at the breast, Schneemann and her cat kissing—foregrounding touch between living beings. Rather than going out to the mall, *Devour* inspires the sharing of love at times of intern(ation)al crisis. Shopping for national security—being blinded by consumption from realities of aggression—is transgressed by holding close what and who one loves while seeing clearly the consequences of militarism on lives of strangers: Bosnians, Haitians, Lebanese (Vietnamese, Iraqi). This is non-evasive love.

Looping ever looping.

Open.

---

[1] Schneemann's "Shadow Capture" appears in *Seeing in the Dark: A Compendium of Cinema-Going*, eds. Ian Breakwell and Paul Hammond (London: Serpent's Tail, 1990). All other Schneemann quotes are from Carolee Schneemann, *Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2002); Interview with Carolee Schneemann and Andrea Mattiello (unpublished, 2006); in-person and telephone conversations between the author and Schneemann; or her artist's statements.

Caroline Koebel is a media artist whose work has been exhibited in the US at Anthology Fiilm Archives, Los Angeles Film Forum, Other Cinema, and elsewhere, and internationally, including in Brazil, Cuba, Ireland, Thailand, and Poland. Her digital film *Berlin Warszawa Express* premiered in January '07 at Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center and later screened as part of "Urban Research on Film" in Berlin and "Eye Am: Women Behind the Lens" on TV in NYC. She has previously written about Schneemann's practice for *Wide Angle* and *The Brooklyn Rail*.