



Fig. 1.

From Danger to Ascendancy: Notes Toward Carolee Schneemann

by Caroline Koebel

Recently, spending several uninterrupted days in bed with the flu, I became increasingly absorbed by thoughts that, through their randomness and disconnected quality, seemed more revelatory and meaningful than those of my life of action.

In 1967, when I was just being born, Carolee Schneemann completed *Fuses*, a film about the erotic exchange between the artist and her long-time lover, the composer James Tenney. In its referential, indeterminate space, *Fuses* is akin to my sickbed. Says the filmmaker a quarter century later, "I wanted to see if the experience of what I *saw* would have any correspondence to what I *felt*—the intimacy of lovemaking."¹

There is no cameraman; instead, a cat perched on the windowsill is virtually recording the "action."² *Fuses* shows the touch of the artist on multiple places, including on the material of the film itself: puncturing, scratching, coloring by hand. *Fuses* is the supra-dream, the hyper-real, the totally ethereal that is too full of clarity not to exist concretely. It is the act of language of one's own evolution, the space of one's own architecture, and the boundlessness of one's own climax.

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The more times I share the euphoria of *Fuses*, the more animate the film becomes: lunging, heaving, crossing over surface and through mass, breathing, genitalia-ing, cat eye-ing. Because *Fuses* exists in folds, concealing, revealing, and repeating itself, it is easy to lose my footing in remembering it. Like my sickbed, it is more the *sense* of the film that is with me, rather than a sequence of cause and effect. I wonder if the scene of the ass—camera facing ass, ass connected to cock, cock, pussy, intercouring, Carolee on other side of ass, not hers, hers—is *actually* spaced throughout the twenty-two minutes of the film. Or, is it in *fantasy* that the muscles of the red-dipped ass clench, relax, cast shadow, and satiate so neverendingly?

Beautiful woman with long black hair: I catch your eyes, you do not see me, you shift, slip backwards, and delve ever more freely into your creation. Now, the man with the ass pleasures you through his mouth and tongue. You reach the furthest point in your dream. I experience the nirvana of your orgasm in this radical cunni-linguistics. Kitch the cat looks around.³

I first saw *Fuses* in the late nineteen-eighties, enjoying the film but feeling that its context and impact were of the past. Though *Fuses* was an important work to see in terms of being familiar with different histories—experimental film, sexuality and the body in art, and feminist practice—it didn't apply directly to me as a young woman artist twenty years later. At the time, I was reading a lot of feminist film theory, the vast majority of which did not take explicit sexual images by women into serious consideration, thereby relegating such films to the border zone.

Yet *Fuses* changed with time, becoming increasingly relevant to my life upon each screening. My intensified visceral response led me to believe that my ability to more fully experience the film was intricately linked to sexual freedom. Life experience had taught me that indeed, after decades, a sixties experimental film by a woman reveling in her own erotic joy could be subversive, not to mention intoxicating. I also learned that what I had taken for granted in my early twenties—such as assuming that restrictive roles for women were misfortunes of the past—were actually pressing concerns to this day and that it was because of the ongoing struggle by women older than my-

self that I could have made these assumptions in the first place. As an artist inspired by questions of the articulation of sexuality and the body, I finally accepted my indebtedness to Carolee Schneemann.

In 1968, soon after the release of *Fuses*, New York Radical Women organized the first major protest of the Women's Liberation Movement at the Miss America pageant. Demonstrators disposed of "feminine products," including dish towels, steno pads, girdles, and bras, in a "Freedom Trash Can." Co-organizer Robin Morgan writes of the historic event, "This last was translated by the male-controlled media into the totally invented act of 'bra-burning,' a non-event upon which they have fixated constantly ever since, in order to avoid presenting the real reasons for the growing discontent of women."⁴ Though women were making the choice *to bra or not to bra*, the "burning" came from elsewhere.

Branding feminists as "bra-burners" has become so embedded in collective memory that the media-perpetuated misinformation has become "historical truth." References, both laudatory and derogatory, to "the sixties bra-burnings" are ubiquitous in contemporary popular culture, appearing in newspapers, magazines, and on TV, radio, and the World Wide Web.⁵ They are rarely qualified with stories of origin. *Why* does this particular image supersede all others? While a circle of women around a bra-ful fire is not necessarily detrimental and can be empowering, the image is reductive. And, in terms of any single image to symbolize feminist reclamation of the body, I have to ask, "why not reading from the vagina?" Feminists were those women who "unfurled scrolls from their vulvas when they wanted to speak their minds."

In the most reproduced image of Carolee Schneemann, the artist is in "mid-action;" she is nude, paint-smearing, half-squatting, one arm forward and holding a text, one arm down and holding the other end of the text that she is unraveling from her vagina. She is performing *Interior Scroll* (1975), an act triggered by the seeking of creative means by which to respond to the dismissal of her cinematic works by a prominent feminist film theoretician. Such "dialogue" underscores the conflicts within feminism and how, at the time, the exposed body posed an equal threat to women as to men. Though, on one

hand, the debate over the body (whether to make visible or not), is now passé, on the other, especially for artists of color, it is just as vital as ever.

"The Feminists were those women who lay with snakes."

In 1963, five years before "bra-burning," Carolee performed *Eye Body (Thirty-six Transformative Actions)* in the privacy of her studio. The reproduced still shows the artist on the floor, nude, body-painted, a line dividing her face in two, arms raised above head, half-closed eyes meeting the camera, a snake slithering just above her mass of pubic hair, another between her breasts. The artist with snakes has held me in awe since first seeing it as a teenager. Though I have never articulated to myself precisely why it is so powerful, I think it is because of how courageous it makes Carolee seem. I cannot imagine myself in her position and I am afraid that somehow I will be forced also to lie with snakes. At the same time, the presence of fear, or something fear-inspiring, enravels me. It is only in writing this that I realize the snakes are not necessarily real, that my own fear of having snakes slithering over me has caused me not once to doubt their veracity.

Yves Klein made art history in a Paris gallery when he had "live female models" paint his canvas by placing their blue pigment-clad bodies across it.⁷ Jackson Pollock was heralded for introducing a new level of physicality into painting, becoming known as the primary artist of "Action Painting." Yet, not until recent years⁸ have Carolee Schneemann's radical redefinitions of self and other, artist and model, and object and subject received more than a footnote in art history or in the history of the women's movement.

In her 1973 Berkeley performance of *Up To And Including Her Limits* Schneemann, nude, worked eight hours a day for four days suspended in a harness. Raising and lowering herself, the artist "painted" the canvas covering the room's walls and floors with abstract markings and the recordings of random thoughts. The piece consisted of endurance, strength, and transformation. There was a participatory wall for others to write their comments on. Carolee notes, "a spontaneous community evolved around the performance."⁹ People

waited for her to come out on break with picnics at a nearby pond. In this and other works, Schneemann fiercely challenged the conception of the artist as active, the model as passive. She is simultaneously the nude female model whose exposed body is the impetus for creative expression (part of a tradition of the nude in art) and the artist who sculpts this body into her own creation, thereby bestowing her will upon it.

Each of Carolee's "finished works" is sustainable as a singular object of great intensity while being in active dialogue with previous and subsequent works. Take, for example, *Infinity Kisses* (1982-86).¹⁰ Though the sequence of some 130 photographs of the artist and Vesper, her cat of seven years, "making out" is a complex work of simultaneous internal and external referents, primary to experiencing this auto-portrait is the awareness of the life, work, and person of the artist pictured. *Infinity Kisses* is art-as-intensive-awareness-of-the-particulars-of-being-alive without being "arty." Vesper and Carolee are partaking in their ritual lives (in which intimacy requires a degree of privacy), but in these moments are happy to secure a way in which others can have access to their co-existence. The feeling here of being given the capacity to look suddenly recalls the film of twenty years earlier. It is precisely a snapshot of the "the artist at life" while being a critical art work of deliberate and informed procedure.

A year ago Carolee came to screen her films and perform on the campus where I was completing my MFA.¹¹ In the performance she projected slides, smeared substances across her face and body, spoke of her experiences, observations, and insights, and through all this explicated theories of gender, sexuality, and art. For years I had been accustomed to *looking* at Schneemann—in *Fuses*, a silent film, and in performance stills—and now I found *hearing* the artist to be so essential. There was a sense that she, by being such an anomaly, could throw into question the group identity of the audience and place the institution's hierarchies of power in jeopardy.

The irony of Schneemann's presence at the university was that although she was welcome as a guest, unlike the artists with whom she had come of age who were now receiving plush retirement packages from this and other institutions, she had no long-term welcome. Though so clearly a leading artist of this

half-century, Schneemann has been kept at arm's length by (most of) her peers. Is it in part because of this distancing that Carolee Schneemann has a persistent relevance and sustained presence, that her mature work seems so young?

In 1968 she wrote, "The life of the body is more variously expressive than a sex-negative society can admit.... In some sense I made a gift of my body to other women: giving our bodies back to ourselves. The haunting images of the Cretan bull dancer—joyful, free, barebreasted women leaping precisely from danger to ascendancy, guided my imagination."¹² The artist's vision of "barebreasted women leaping precisely from danger to ascendancy":—could Carolee Schneemann possibly be the source of today's references to bra-burning feminists?... She, in any case, is the source of sexualities that we won't see at "The Movies" but we will see through the eye of the cat. She knows the promise of a fuck or a smooch... or an unraveling.

Thirty years later, Carolee Schneemann, thank you!

Footnotes

1. Schneemann in interview with Andrea Juno, *Angry Women, Re/Search #13*, eds. Andrea Juno, V. Vale (San Francisco: Re/Search Publications, 1991), 70.
2. Schneemann and Tenney filmed one another and situated the spring-wind Bolex 16mm camera to record them "on its own" from around the "set."
3. The cat in *Fuses* was a central figure in the artist's life for 19 1/2 yrs.
4. *Going Too Far*, Robin Morgan (New York: Random House, 1977), 65.
5. On the web site it is written, "Of course, the 1960's were famous for its bra-burnings." (<http://home.nycap.rr.com/useless/brassiere/bra.html>)
6. The image is in *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory*, Lucy R. Lippard (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 66.
7. The work from 1960 is variously referred to as *Anthropometrics of the Blue Period*, *Anthropometrie Performance*, and *Blue Anthropometrics*.
8. The 1996/97 retrospective of Carolee Schneemann's work, *Carolee Schneemann: Up To and Including Her Limits*, organized by Dan Cameron for the New Museum of Contemporary Art.
9. Carolee Schneemann in a phone interview with Kate Haug, March 1, 1998.
10. *Carolee Schneemann: Up To And Including Her Limits*, ed. Kathy Brew (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996), 44. Though the work is pictured in the exhibition catalog, the great impact of *Infinity Kisses* on me is linked to coming across it on the wall of the artist's studio.

11. In the early nineties I assisted Maria Beatty in several video projects made in collaboration with Schneemann, including *Imaging Her Erotics* and *Interior Scroll: The Cave* (1994). This gave me access to the artist in distinctly noninstitutional settings.
12. In *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory*, Lucy R. Lippard (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 67. Lippard is quoting from *More Than Meat Joy*, Carolee Schneemann (New Paltz: Documentext, 1979), 164.