

“Color the Shadow”

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“Color the Shadow” is third in my series of critical writings about legendary multidisciplinary artist Carolee Schneemann. Having focused previously in an article for *Wide Angle* on her revolutionary film *Fuses*, in the new writing I examine the film *Viet-Flakes*: 1) as a poetic outcry against the Vietnam War, 2) in the context of the artist’s body of work, and 3) as an instrument by which to comprehend mass media and artistic expression in the contemporary context of Iraq.

“Color the Shadow” excerpt

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.