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BETWEEN EGO AND LIBIDO

On the work of Carolee Schneemann

IN THE BEGINNING—PAINTING. The palette of Cézanne shoved through a kitchen blender. Thick and hasty brush strokes fly out from two dislocated centres, flushed reds intersect verdant crescents, the occasional bleeding iris is contraposed against an ochre canvas. Squint and you might think something dreadful had happened to a parrot. *Pinwheel* (1957) is hung off axis, inviting you to tilt your head one way, then the other, shifting your weight from hip to hip to find its pole. This is no mistake but an experiment in rotation: an artwork produced and designed to be exhibited on a potter's wheel, spun by the viewer. Now you must attempt the spinning yourself, awkwardly contorting at the beginning of the exhibition. It's a first lesson in the work of Carolee Schneemann: when the eye moves, so must the body.

'Body Politics', the retrospective of Schneemann's work held at the Barbican in London this autumn-winter, opens with the paintings and drawings she completed in the late 1950s and early 1960s, while a student first at Bard College, then Columbia, then the University of Illinois. *Personae: J.T. and Three Kitchs* (1957) is a portrait of her long-term partner, the composer James Tenney, whose figure emerges from the same dazzle of late-summer shades used in *Pinwheel*, languorous on a couch, guarded, stalked and tackled by multiple iterations of the couple's cat, Kitch. These are the works of a painter training at the high noon of Abstract Expressionism; in *Firelights* (1960) we see traces of Elaine de Kooning's influence on the twenty-one-year-old artist—jet conjurations of figures, temporary as flames, emerge through interstices of pink and gold—while in *Tenebration* (1961) the washed blues

of Helen Frankenthaler linger under scavenged materials of fabric, pins and mesh.

This first room will surprise those whose knowledge of Schneemann derives from her later works—films, photographs and performances which, as the exhibition title suggests, centre on her use of her own, often naked, body as well as those of lovers and co-performers. It was this relaxed approach to nudity—or rather a failure to be shamed by it—that led to her transfer, as an undergraduate art student, from Bard College to Columbia University; she had used not only her male partner but also herself as a life model, an indiscretion that would become foundational to both her practice and her self-mythology. In 1991, reflecting on her belief in the inextricable relation between sexuality and creativity, she wrote, ‘I posit my female body as a locus of autonomy, pleasure, desire, and insist that as an artist I can be both image and image maker, merging two aspects of a self deeply fractured in the contemporary imagination’.¹

Beyond the canvas

Despite her later turn to other media, Schneemann never ceased to describe herself as a painter, though her works quickly escaped the rectangular walls of the canvas. In *Colorado House* (1962), shown in the exhibition’s second room, it is in fact the remnants of paintings—the dismembered stretcher bars of ‘failed’ landscapes made while staying with Tenney in the Rockies one summer six years prior—that provide the sculptural form for the work. Though the title suggests a full domestic structure, the reality is two frames arranged as if in parody of a threshold—one leads to the other, neither granting exit nor entry. A whisky bottle has fallen between them, tangles of wiring adorn the upper corners as do slivers of fur, while a canvas banner with a handful

¹ Carolee Schneemann, ‘The Obscene Body/Politic’, *Art Journal*, vol. 50, no. 4, Winter 1991, p. 33. Schneemann was born in Fox Chase, a quiet suburb of Philadelphia, in 1939 and attributed her early interest in the body to her father’s profession as a doctor—the family home provided a wealth of anatomical literature—and claimed she began to both draw and masturbate at the age of four: ‘Exquisite sensations produced in my body, and images that I made on paper tangled with language, religions, everything that I was taught. As a result, I thought that the genital was where God lived.’ See ‘Interview with Linda Montano’, *Carolee Schneemann: Imaging Her Erotics, Essays, Interviews Projects*, Cambridge MA 2002, pp. 131. The majority of the works discussed in this essay are available to view on the Carolee Schneemann Foundation’s website.

of scrawled stars leans over the work. It's a pastiche of frontier life—how many states even are there these days? Who cares, shrugs the flag—whose Western theme is taken up again in *Fur Wheel* (1962)—mounted next to *Colorado House*—Schneemann's mechanised reprise of *Pinwheel's* rotating motif. A lampshade is studded with glass and decked out in pellets, adorned with tinkering cans flattened by trucks as they passed Schneemann's studio, and set spinning by an electrical mechanism wired through the work—Davy Crockett's hat as midtown living room centrepiece. Here, the North American Interior merges with the American domestic—two locations whose mythologies are riddled with barely sublimated violence, yet in Schneemann's work were also sources of pleasure and poiesis. Throughout her career, she would return to the paradoxical threshold position of *Colorado House*, poised at the frame's edge, mapping the interdependence of the personal and sexual freedoms of late-twentieth-century Americans with the militarism foundational to their nation's global hegemony.

Schneemann's studio was not perched high in the Rockies but rather on West 29th Street on the edge of New York's Garment District, 'a vast, filthy old furrier's loft' that she rented for \$68 a month from 1961 for most of her working life. Splitting her time between there and the eighteenth-century farmhouse she inherited in New Paltz, halfway between NYC and Albany, with Tenney and subsequent partners, the coordinates of her life corresponded to a certain ideal of the New York modern artist. In pictures of the pair, which comprise a significant amount of Schneemann's autobiographical 'Life Books'—a series of scrapbooks treated with a reverential grandiosity by the Barbican exhibition²—they are the quintessential beatnik couple: she is strikingly beautiful and long-limbed, with the poise and photogenic qualities of a young Elizabeth Taylor; he an impish James Dean in a white T-shirt, a curl of hair permanently falling over his eyes as he puffs on endless cigarettes. Schneemann never denied

² In treating the Life Books as singular objects, the Barbican exhibition misses the chance to contextualise them as part of a longstanding tradition of an American woman's craft (see Ellen Gruber Garvey, *Writing with Scissors: American Scrapbooks from the Civil War to the Harlem Renaissance*, Oxford 2012; Susan Tucker, Katharine Ott and Patricia Buckler, eds, *The Scrapbook in American Life*, Philadelphia 2006) or to put Schneemann in conversation with other contemporary artists who engaged in the same attentive practice to the ordinary, such as Jane Wodening—who chronicled her life between 1958 and 1967 with the filmmaker Stan Brakhage in books now held as part of the Beinecke Collection at Yale—or the poet Bernadette Mayer—whose work *Memory* is constructed of a roll of 35mm film taken every day during July 1971, interspersed with poetry composed from a rigorous daily journal.

charges of self-objectification but rather, as we shall see, attempted to make a practice of narcissism by claiming for herself a dual position of both object and subject—denying the pejorative associations of auto-portraiture through a rejection of the Cartesian split: ‘I do not “show” my naked body! I AM BEING MY BODY’, she wrote to a friend, outraged at years of misinterpretation by feminist critics who opposed the central role she assigned to her own image in her work.³

Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions for Camera (1963), room four in the Barbican show, is the indisputable ‘turning point’ of Schneemann’s work, a series of gelatin silver portrait prints of the artist shot by the Icelandic photographer Erró. In the series, Schneemann, nude, melds with the materials of her studio, in one image pulling the face of a petulant clown, her head draped in rope braids, her neck replaced by speckled wood; in another she holds a light fixture—material for *Fur Wheel?*—against her torso as if preparing to try it on. While the images resist narrative interpretation, they nevertheless draw on a cinematic imagery that evokes the melodrama of early Hollywood (Schneemann’s skin is lit to an almost perfect white, only streaks of grease and chalk marking her body against the pitch black studio walls).

In the most celebrated (and reproduced) image from *Eye Body*, she holds several shards of glass against her face—almost certainly an allusion to Maya Deren, whom Schneemann knew in New York in the late 1950s, in the short film *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943).⁴ Schneemann’s face is

³ In statements such as these, repeated by Schneemann throughout six decades of work, the scale of Simone de Beauvoir’s influence on the artist is evident. In *The Second Sex*, a formative text for Schneemann, de Beauvoir describes how woman ‘endeavours to combine life and transcendence, which is to say that she rejects Cartesianism, with its formal logic, and all related doctrines.’ *The Second Sex*, London 1997 [1949, 1953], p. 631. Schneemann seems also to have included other, sometimes playful, allusions to de Beauvoir in several interviews, where she mentions her teenage adoration of the journals of the young Russian artist Marie Bashkirtsev—one of de Beauvoir’s favoured examples of the narcissistic female subject.

⁴ These images are usually discussed alongside Hannah Wilke’s series *505 Starification Object Series* (1974–82) but Deren seems the better comparison in terms of Schneemann’s already evident interest in cinema—in the portrayal of the self as an archetypal feminine character shaped through an iconography of American gothic glamour. Schneemann would return to the series in the 1980s to vindicate her research on feminine archetypes in ancient art, claiming a semi-mystical line of inspiration and intuition that led to her unwitting imitation of figures such as a Cretan Bull goddess. See: *Unexpectedly Research* (1992).

multiplied across the glass, and further reproduced by her overlaying of other 'shards' of photo over the initial print: the end result is a refraction in a knife's edge, the artist menacing herself in perfect isolation. In Deren's film, made with her then-husband Alexander Hammid, her own image is replicated around a sunlit Los Angeles home after being reflected in a knife—an enchanted weapon she uses to shatter the mirrored mask worn by a ghoulish intruder, both herself and her male lover. For Schneemann there is no other referent, no man against or by whom the machetes of glass might be used in a violent trance, only her own face multiplied in a mirrored weapon. 'Not only am I an image maker, but I create the image values of my flesh as material I choose to work with', she wrote in 1976—demanding that her work be seen as an autonomous expression of her singular creativity, rather than a reaction to or rejection of what she called the 'Art Stud Club', to which women were admitted 'so long as they behaved enough like the men, did work clearly in the traditions & pathways being hacked out by the men.'⁵

Theatre of pleasure

Eye Body led, however, to Schneemann's outright rejection by key figures of the male-dominated New York art world in the early sixties; she was 'ex-communicated' from the Fluxus group by George Maciunas who charged her 'guilty of Baroque tendencies, overt sexuality and theatrical excess.'⁶ *Eye Body* had emerged as a response to the new current of artistic performance dominating the city and the American modern art scene more broadly as the baton of youth passed from Pollock, Krasner and de Kooning to a new generation. Schneemann returned to New York after completing her MFA in Illinois, and she and Tenney found themselves amidst overlapping tides of movements—'I arrived just in time to see my older painting heroes drunk, fighting, fucking, jumping through windows (sometimes in my loft), crashing their cars, performing all the infantile heroics that diverted castration fantasies into symbolic inviolability.'⁷ As the Abstract Expressionist crowd crashed out on the fumes of their own successes, the New York scene opened up and Schneemann found her milieu. This group of artists—which included later luminaries such as Claes and Patty Oldenberg, Allan Kaprow, Yoko

⁵ 'Notes on *Eye Body*, 1963 (edited 1976)', Carolee Schneemann papers, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

⁶ Quoted in Lotte Johnson and Chris Bayley, eds, *Carolee Schneemann: Body Politics*, London 2022, p. 73.

⁷ Schneemann, 'The Obscene Body / Politic', p. 31.

Ono, Steve Reich, Robert Rauschenberg, Yvonne Rainer, Mimi Gross and Jim Dine—extended the realm of painting into three dimensional canvases, creating art events in which artists and performers co-inhabited the space of the work: ‘Our work seized dynamic implications of Abstract Expressionism to extend the active visual surface of painting into actual physical space and time, and to dematerialize the frame, the object, the aesthetic commodity.’⁸

At the time, Schneemann’s life was itself a collage of performance, creation and feminised labour—she worked part time as a dog walker, an extra in porn, and a Sunday school teacher—well suited to the temperament of the Happenings series which Susan Sontag, a frequent attendee and associate of the group, described as functioning on the principle of an ‘abusive involvement of the audience.’⁹ For Sontag, this made the Happenings artists the heirs to the Surrealist tradition, in their shared commitment to the equivalence between terror and wit. This was Surrealism, not in the mode of Dalí or Magritte, but of a new type inflected by Artaud’s theorizations of a theatre of cruelty, an art capable of matching the degradations of the twentieth century.

For Schneemann, though, it was the pleasure principle that predominated in the construction of her own ‘Happenings’. ‘The torturous, excremental economies of Artaud become for Schneemann the ecstasy of excess, a glorious expenditure,’ writes Jay Murphy.¹⁰ Artaud was a formative influence on Schneemann, alongside Wilhelm Reich, Virginia Woolf and de Beauvoir, whose own theorization of women’s bodily ambiguity Schneemann paid tribute to through her performances. Against a vulgar and terrorizing interpretation of Artaud’s dramaturgy, Schneemann insisted on the subsumption of all bodily experience within the theatre: not an organ or a sense would go unstimulated in the creation of her ‘kinetic paintings’, following Artaud’s imperative to make theatre ‘something as localized and as precise as the circulation of the blood in

⁸ Schneemann, ‘The Obscene Body / Politic’, p. 29.

⁹ Susan Sontag, ‘Happenings: An Art of Radical Juxtaposition’, *Against Interpretation*, New York 1966. Happenings were a loosely organized series of performance art events held mostly in New York from the late fifties to the mid sixties. In an interview on Dallas Cable Access TV in April 1988, Kaprow, oft-credited as the initiator of the form, clarified, ‘My interest was not in negating painting, it was to add to the number of options that an artist had at that time.’

¹⁰ Jay Murphy, ‘Assimilating the Unassimilable: Carolee Schneemann in Relation to Antonin Artaud’ in *Imaging Her Erotics*, p. 233.

the arteries or the apparently chaotic development of dream images in the brain'.¹¹ Schneemann made several contributions to the Happenings series, yet her reputation as a performance artist rests largely on *Meat Joy* (1964). The work literalized Artaud's instructions by using as choreographic source material notes Schneemann had taken from her dreams over several years, resulting in a work that had

the character of an erotic rite: excessive, indulgent, a celebration of flesh as material: raw fish, chickens, sausages, wet paint, transparent plastic, rope, brushes, paper scrap. Its propulsion is toward the ecstatic, shifting and turning between tenderness, wildness, precision, abandon—qualities that could at any moment be sensual, comic, joyous, repellent. Physical equivalences are enacted as psychic and imagistic stream in which the layered elements mesh and gain intensity by the energy complement of the audience. (They were seated on the floor as close to the performance as possible, encircling, resonating.) Our proximity heightened the sense of communality, transgressing the polarity between performer and audience.¹²

The Barbican exhibition shows footage, edited by Schneemann in 2008, of the New York performance, in which she and Tenney appear, though two prior performances had also taken place—one in Paris and one in London (the differing reaction in each location was a salutary lesson for her in the way regional sexual mores impact the reception of art that concerns physical pleasure: in Paris the audience were rapturous, in London stiff and awkward, in New York hesitant but encouraging). One can see some of the choreographic progression of *Meat Joy* via the film, as four couples move from Busby Berkeley-esque synchronicity into a carnival of paint-splattering and meat-rubbing—the tension throughout is between Schneemann's voice guiding the performers with ambivalent and associative cues and the moments of unplanned release and chaos that ensue. The difficulty of capturing performance for posterity—particularly a performance style that emphasizes so strongly the necessary situatedness of the audience in the work—is evident in this room of the exhibition, an unfortunate situation that could have been mitigated by a firmer curatorial statement, guiding the viewer to treat the film not as a reproduction of the performance, but as a later work of Schneemann's in its own right. As Brandon Joseph has commented of the edited footage, 'what Schneemann sought from her performance imagery was not concentration, distillation, or streamlining toward affective efficacy, but precisely the opposite, an

¹¹ Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*, New York 1958 [1938], p. 92.

¹² 'Note on Meat Joy (1964)', in *Imaging Her Erotics*, p. 60.

expansive dissociative ambiguity'.¹³ As it cuts through the linear progression of the performance, the film echoes, without attempting to replicate, Schneemann's morphology of ecstatic dream movement.

Records of intimacy

Schneemann would further her exploration of the visual and emotional dynamics of heterosexual sex with the 18-minute film *Fuses* (1967). Part of her Autobiographical Trio—along with *Plumb Line* (1968–72) and *Kitch's Last Meal* (1976)—*Fuses* consists of recordings of three years of sex between her and Tenney, filmed by them in their home. To make it, Schneemann learnt how to use a Bolex wind-up camera, capable of shooting only thirty seconds at a time. As a result, the film has a snatched and breathless quality, composed of snippets of her and Tenney's sex life in the house in New Paltz, watched over by Kitch, who, along with the camera, Schneemann described as the fourth element in the film. Tenney and Schneemann pass the camera back and forth during intercourse; visual puns abound—his hand rests on her vagina, then the camera cuts to him stroking Kitch's head—the pair are frequently silhouetted against the light-washed sash window of the house, or cast in near darkness with only a flush of warm orange skin illuminated. The editing process was, for Schneemann, both a form of painting and an attempt to capture the interplay of voices in Bach's cantata duets, as she described it in conversation with Kate Haug in 1997: 'there are beats, counts, frames of colour, of gesture.'¹⁴ She applied layers of paint over the celluloid, scratching and damaging the surface of the film, in places building it up to a thickness that was nearly impossible to run through the projector. In order to have the film processed at all, a letter was required from a psychiatrist—a friend's husband—who testified that *Fuses*, contrary to appearances, was 'an examination of the archetypal evolution of the cross.'

The collaged aspect emphasizes the rhythm in which shots are arranged: sex scenes climax and the couple return to rest, the camera lingering on signs of breath throughout their bodies, lips dropping open in rest, Kitch hopping from or to the bed. *Fuses*, Schneemann told the art magazine *ND*, was 'anti-porn in concept, having come out of my personal

¹³ Brandon Joseph, 'Unclear Tendencies: Carolee Schneemann's Aesthetics of Ambiguity', *Carolee Schneemann: Kinetic Painting*, ed. Sabine Breitwieser, Salzburg 2015, p. 33.

¹⁴ 'Interview with Kate Haug', in *Imaging Her Erotics*, p. 22.

relationship and my actual lived life with the partner I would be with for thirteen years.¹⁵ Intercut with the oscillating movements of the couple are shots of piercing white snow—a space of total oblivion Schneemann described as an attempt to capture the Reichian philosophy of orgasm in film. Contrasted against the frozen exterior beyond the house's doors and windowpanes, Schneemann stands at the threshold between the domestic bliss of non-reproductive sex with her partner, her collaborator in art and performance, and, through the introduction of the camera, a self-objectification in film. Preceding the 'porn wars' by several years, Schneemann marked out a path that rejected the diminishing and reductive view of female sexuality as found in commercial pornography without giving up the possibility of representing woman's sexual pleasure on film.

Schneemann was motivated to make the film as a response to Stan Brakhage's *Window Water Baby Moving*, with which it shares formal and visual qualities. Both films show the silhouetted middle thirds of bodies against windows, oversaturated white light outside, the cross of the casement shadow falling on skin. Brakhage's film records the labour pains of his partner, Jane Wodening (then Brakhage) as she gives birth to their first child. Here, birth—not sex—is portrayed as domestic ecstasy. In the warmth of the orange wash over the film, the couple kiss and laugh, it is as if *they* are conceiving rather than *she* delivering; there is at first no difference between their moods or physicalities. When Wodening's belly appears, it is planetary, puckered by a belly button as if that is the point of rupture from which a child will emerge. Brakhage's hand grabs and caresses Wodening's stomach with an almost shocking force—for a brief second one worries for the baby, then remembers the mother (in an interview Schneemann commented of her dislike of this gesture in general: 'I would observe men pat their pregnant wives' stomachs as if the stomachs were *theirs*. I hated that. Even though I was little I would think, "That's not *his* stomach."').¹⁶ In lieu of Schneemann's orgiastic white space there is the blackout of the reel, a silent intermission without text, followed by curved and dimpled skin. Unlike *Fuses*, which moves cyclically between repose and pleasure, Brakhage's film accelerates and depicts the moment at which the conditions which made the film itself possible are interrupted by the arrival of a child. This, ultimately, was the source of Schneemann's

¹⁵ 'Interview with ND', in *Imaging Her Erotics*, p. 123.

¹⁶ Stephanie LaCava, 'Moral Turpitude' (interview), *Harper's Magazine*, 19 October 2017.

disagreement with the film—the implied possession by Brakhage of the great creative act of childbirth; first through insemination, second by documentation. In contrast, Schneemann depicts an endless idyll in which there is neither compulsion to change nor deviation from pleasure.

Practising narcissism

Fuses is shown in its entirety in a curtained-off room towards the end of the exhibition's first floor; a few rows of traditional conjoined cinema seats arranged in front of a large screen with the consequence that one is physically jolted in one's seat as a new audience member sits down. The viewing conditions alter the impact of the work entirely. When the exhibition opened in September, I attended a one-off screening of all three autobiographical films at the Barbican's cinema. The audience was almost entirely women, an art and film crowd, who sat with scholastic intensity through the performance. In such a setting, Schneemann's films were received as subjects of feminist critique by an audience already cognizant of their seismic influence on the development of a radical woman's cinema tradition in America in the 1960s and 70s. I reacted with intense dislike to the films then, and to *Fuses* in particular, which in that environment seemed to mock coquettishly the simplicity of its central idea: that to invert men's assumed dominance in, and ownership over, heterosexual sex it is enough for a woman to take hold of the camera, to turn it on her partner and back on herself. Schneemann filmed herself too much, I thought, gloried in her own image—just whom, I wondered, was this filmed for? Besides, is it important to have your pleasure represented, like the men do, I wondered, and is that even possible, even for the men? Why, moreover, must a woman's pleasure be coated in so many layers of paint as to make it unplayable when she's gone to all the trouble of recording sex for three years? I recognized only the performance of sexuality in the work, not the release of pleasure Schneemann had spent years capturing.

Viewed again in the Barbican gallery, however, sat beside a fluctuating cast of strangers, the risks Schneemann took and her bravery in taking them were suddenly more evident. The portrayal of intimacy gave way to an ambience tinged with threat as the reactions of the other viewers were no longer moored in the collective agreement of the screening event. I note these personal reactions because they map so precisely onto the controversies within feminist art theory and criticism that Schneemann

animated and within which her work was embroiled. To claim, as I have, that hers was a practice of narcissism is not to demean her oeuvre as pond-gazing self-indulgence, but to take seriously her claim to embody the impossible double position occupied by the woman artist: to be image and image maker at once. In her canonical essay, Laura Mulvey makes a distinction between types of visual pleasure that can be used to probe Schneemann's motivations in *Fuses*,

The first, scopophilic, arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight. The second, developed through narcissism and the constitution of the ego, comes from identification with the image seen. Thus, in film terms, one implies a separation of the erotic identity of the subject from the object on the screen (active scopophilia), the other demands identification of the ego with the object on the screen through the spectator's fascination with and recognition of his like. The first is a function of the sexual instincts, the second of the ego libido. This dichotomy was crucial for Freud.¹⁷

It is this dichotomy that Schneemann, a disciple of Reich, tries to collapse in the film. Pleasure, for Schneemann, comes from a narcissistic scopophilia—pleasure of looking at oneself, the pleasure of feeling oneself being looked at. For Mulvey, via Freud, these 'mechanisms without meaning' are capable only of propelling the subject into a state of reverie over 'eroticised phantasmagoria'; for Schneemann, however, there is no 'contradiction between libido and ego' to be echoed in cinema—*Fuses* is an attempt to portray libido and ego in one.

While *Fuses* was made in response to *Window*, its filming overlapped with another of Schneemann's cinematic projects, *Viet-Flakes* (1965)—a film that was the core of the multi-media performance piece *Snows* (1967). This simultaneity is more than a quirk of biographical and historical time. Once more we find Schneemann navigating the connections between the domestic world of pleasure and the pain of others on which it rests. She became aware of the atrocities in Vietnam earlier than many of her generation, having heard a Vietnamese student talk of US military operations in her country in 1960. *Viet-Flakes* is a use of the scrapbook form Schneemann deployed to chronicle her own

¹⁷ Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975) in *Visual and Other Pleasures: Language, Discourse, Society*, New York 1989, p. 18. For a further discussion of Schneemann and psychoanalytic feminism see Mignon Nixon, 'Schneemann's Personal Politics' in *Kinetic Painting*, pp. 45–53.

relationships in her Life Books, this time applied to the collection and collaging of images of barbarity she accrued through contacts in the underground press and abroad. Schneemann ‘animates’ these images by using a range of magnifying lenses to track over the photographs—footage of Vietnamese victims of American bombing campaigns formed the basis of the choreography for the performance of *Snows*, over which *Viet-Flakes* was projected along with other film montages. The performers moved over a set composed of barren branches painted white, moving and interacting with rope and each other. When taken alongside *Fuses*, *Viet-Flakes*—often cited as one of the earliest American anti-war films of the Vietnam invasion—sheds light on a critical dichotomy for Schneemann: inside—the home, the body—is a space of pleasure; outside—the body of others, the territory attacked and colonised by American militarism, is a space of pain. ‘My propositions of ecstatic connection were in reaction to a government shaped by assassination and militaristic aggression’, she commented, and though she never made the clichéd counter-cultural claim that personal pleasure would be an antidote to geopolitical violence, a naivety in the juxtaposition of the two rankles nonetheless.¹⁸ Her commitment to marking the ripple effects of American military intervention continued throughout her life; in *War Mop* (1983), part of the *Lebanon Series* (1981–89), a mop, driven by a plexiglass mechanism, repeatedly strikes with a dull thud a TV on which images of Beirut before, during and after Israeli bombardment are shown. The simplicity of the work is effective in its insistence on the seemingly cyclical damage created by war in general, and American foreign policy in particular, but in interviews about the work Schneemann vastly overstates the psychosexual drive of warfare compared to its material and political determinants, ‘Beirut fulfilled a military sexual metaphor—they could not stop jerking off on this harlot. Beirut was asking for it. They could not stop raining down their toxic ejaculations—rockets aimed into the half-moon curve of the sea.’¹⁹

Questions of legacy

Did Schneemann succeed in fusing her status as image with her position as image maker? Her feminism left other icons of her age cold—Agnès Varda is reported to have left a performance of the celebrated *Interior*

¹⁸ *Carolee Schneemann: Body Politics* (exhibition catalogue), London 2022, p. 118.

¹⁹ Schneemann, the *Lebanon Series*, 1983 (photocopied paper).

Scroll (1975–77) disgusted, Mulvey engaged in enthusiastic conversations with Schneemann in the late sixties only to ignore her work thereon. By the 1980s and onwards it became clear that her interest in her own legacy was in communing a certain essence of female experience, in line with an unconscious mythological symbolism she believed she uncovered in her own work. The final works of the exhibition address the ravaging effects of cancer on Schneemann's body; they are productions of an artist clinging fiercely to life, to the associations she held strongest with it—of the pleasure of embodiment—even as her body became a source of immense physical pain. There are works that depict her homeopathic treatment of her illness, her chancing upon a Viennese Catholic icon dedicated to victims of plague (*Known / Unknown: Plague Column*, (1995)), a final film that concerns itself with the ill-treatment of animals (*Precarious*, 2009)—all traces of the animating principles of Schneemann's long and fruitful artistic life, but not all of them worthy of inclusion beside the rest of her oeuvre.

The scale and intensity of the rest of the exhibition leaves the viewer exhausted by this stage and as it moves from the display of objects into the paraphernalia of performance an unfortunate commodification of objects from Schneemann's life and art takes place—those were her works, but these are her relics. It's hard to imagine how a gallery show devoted to a single artist's oeuvre could escape this, though the insistence on tracking each iteration of the development of her performance work (the scraps of paper on which choreographic scores are laid out, the mimeographed playbills for performances of the Judson Dance Theatre, bric-a-brac employed in the Noise Bodies duet she composed with Tenney) undermine the exhibition text's insistence on the works and events as singular, unrepeatable moments, whose performance gathered and then dispelled their own moments of possibility.

The split levels of 'Body Politics'—the upper floor addressing the first word, the ground floor the second—raise broader questions regarding the political function of the blockbuster retrospective. No artist's legacy rests on a claim for the equivalent value of all their work; why, then, is this biographical exhibitionary model applied so repeatedly to women? After a series of solo retrospectives for significant women artists of the twentieth century in London in recent years it would mark a welcome change to see a major exhibition grasp that feminism in art does not relate solely to the exhibition of works by women—adding them

to the canon, via the gift shop—but rather is a process of relating the forms, values and questions of their work to the world on which they tried to act, to their successes or failures in this regard. In presenting Schneemann as singular, in asking all the failed contradictions of her work to bear the same scrutiny as her numerous successful ones, and in arranging those works so that the body takes precedence over politics, the Barbican show misjudges the import of her oeuvre. What if *Fuses*, rather than being separated into the ‘body’ part of the exhibition, had been screened beside and along with its ‘politics’ sister-film, *Viet-Flakes*? Might the painterly qualities of her structural filmmaking, its materiality of scratches, superimposed colour and flashes of light, have been brought to the fore instead of the contested role of her own image in her work? Or, might the dichotomy of pleasure and violence which ran like a seam through her creative life have become the exhibition’s focus, rather than its internal division? For Schneemann, the problem was not the unification of image and image maker (a fusion she evidently achieved in her work), but the effective utilisation of what little power was available to the woman artist during her lifetime: the power to use the body as an instrument of politics itself. But then,

if you are a woman (and things are not utterly changed)
they will almost never believe you really did it.²⁰

²⁰ Schneemann, ‘Scroll 1’, *Text from Interior Scroll* (1975).