

# HALES GALLERY

Carolee Schneemann

## *Water Light/Water Needle*

28 February – 12 April 2014

Private View: Thursday 27 February, 6-8:30 pm



Carolee Schneemann, *Water Light/Water Needle* (Lake Mah Wah, NJ), 1966, 11:13 min, color, sound, 16 mm film on video; still photograph (c) Herbert Migdoll

Hales Gallery is proud to announce *Water Light/Water Needle*, the first solo exhibition in London of pioneering artist Carolee Schneemann. Schneemann's innovative body of work, which spans from the late 1950's till today, is consistently challenging both perceptions of and resistance towards performance art, the body, politics of identity, and feminist ideology. This is the first time an exhibition of *Water Light/Water Needle* has been held since the original performance in 1966.

Originally conceived in 1964 through drawings and notes as an aerial work comprised of ropes and pulleys rigged across the canal at San Marco in Venice (Italy), *Water Light/Water Needle* was realized for the first time between March 17<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> 1966 in St. Mark's Church, New York. Following the premier in New York, the concept was resituated and performed once again on May 29 of the same year on the Havemayer Estate in MahWah, New Jersey. The Hales Gallery exhibition of the *Water Light/Water Needle* will feature the film edited by Schneemann from the original performance footage, diagrams made in '65/'66 used to conceive the work and vintage photographs from 1966 documenting the two performances. Schneemann will also exhibit recent paintings made within the enlarged photographs

Following the success of the provocative performance, *Meat Joy* (1964), Schneemann received a ticket to attend the 1964 Venice Biennale. Venice dazzlingly situated the reversible figure and ground, water and sky, light and shadow, solidity and transparency. "This mirroring of water and sky introduced my visual concept of bodies moving within an anti-gravitational frame." A sensation of floating and suspension provoked Schneemann's imagery of layered ropes on which performers seemed to be 'rising out of' rather than 'being upon' actual space. Writing on these experiences in Venice, Schneemann noted "If Illinois had been an 'empty stage,' Venice was full, a constant performance arena of operatic proportions. In Illinois my own verticality and frontal vision centered as a hub in a wheel, or plumb-line positioned in the unvarying expanse; only the details of forms close to the body shifted scale. If Venice's water is 'ground,' duplicating, reflecting the repeated upright rhythms – whatever is above the horizon line is also below the horizon line mirrored in water."<sup>1</sup> Although there were suggestions for numerous locations for the performance (L'Opera de Lyon were interested in supporting the work) Schneemann would first get to enact the piece 2 years later in New York City.

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Inspired by these thoughts and images Schneemann initiated the St. Mark's Church premier of *Water Light/Water Needle* which featured 8 participants: dancers, painters, actors and writers. The actions were positioned within layers of 3/4 inch manila rope attached to the walls with steel supports and specially designed pulleys. The work's intention was not to be acrobatic but rather demonstrate a unique physicality of each body within very particular, orchestrated parameters. Performers skillfully and rhythmically moved within the ropes until encountering one another where they then maintained physical contact. This interaction caused suspension of time, pulse and movement. Schneemann saw the ropes as "flesh extensions" and encouraged the participants to feel physical connectedness to one another. This connectedness was exemplified in a series of rules: when participants came up behind one another they had to combine their intentions to sustain coordination to adjust position. As with much of Schneemann's work, the body is the surface on which a discussion between 'body as subject' and 'body as object' takes place.

An architect offered structural advice, a sculptor built the metal work systems and a local shipyard donated the rope. Suspended above the audience, the arrangement of the ropes still mirrored that of Schneemann's visions in Venice, and on adjoining pulleys, were 'clouds'; large orbs of paper and plastic filled with lights, used by the artist to signify the beginning and end of movement sequences. The performances in St. Marks were held in near darkness (all but a soft green and blue lighting) and began with performers bursting from cupboards situated at the sides of the room. Crowds were ushered in by the female guides or "Sherpardesses" and sat underneath the activity on piles of crumpled newspaper, watching the performance above. As well as kinetics, sound has always been important to Schneemann. The sounds layered over the *Water Light/Water Needle* video are those of the moving 'clouds' on pulleys and bodies shifting over taught ropes. Fragments of Bach-Vivaldi in A minor also echoed in the background of the Church. The success of this kinetic theater piece at St. Mark's Church encouraged Schneemann to take the work outdoors to reflect on the original Venetian concept. A grotto of trees and lake were located in MahWah (New Jersey) through the help of an assistant whose father, a psychiatrist from Venice, was building an office on land originally belonging to the abandoned Havemeyer Estate. The Havemeyer art collection of impressionist works is central to the Metropolitan Museum Collection. These works were purchased by Louise Havemeyer, daughter of the sugar baron and best friend of Mary Cassatt who advised her on the investment.

Originally a painter, Schneemann moved to New York in 1960 with her partner the composer James Tenney. Here she collaborated with the growing community of artists, writers, musicians and filmmakers and participated with such figures as Claes Oldenburg, Jim Dine and Robert Whitman in "extending principles off the canvas" (Schneemann). *Meat Joy* (performed in Paris, London and New York in 1964) marked a milestone for the artist, producing a platform from which Schneemann has continued to challenge perceptions within art. Other celebrated works include self-shot erotic film, *Fuses* (1965), politically engaged *Viet-Flakes* (1965) and the provocative performance *Interior Scroll* (1975, 1977).

<sup>1</sup>. McPherson, B.R. (ed.) (1979,1997) *More Than Meat Joy – Performance work and selected writings*, Documentext

*Carolee Schneemann (b. 1939, Illinois) received a B.A. from Bard College and an M.F.A. from the University of Illinois. She holds Honorary Doctor of Fine Arts degrees from the California Institute of the Arts and the Maine College of Art. In 2015 the Museum Der Moderne Salzburg will hold a retrospective of Schneemann's work, curated by Sabine Breitwieser. During 2013 Schneemann's work was exhibited at the Gothenburg Biennial (Sweden), WRO Centre (Poland) and in a retrospective of the artist's work in Musee Rochechouart (France). 2013 also saw the unveiling of Schneemann's latest kinetic projection video installation, Flanges 6rpm, at P.P.O.W (New York).*

*Schneemann's work has been exhibited worldwide, at institutions including the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art (US); the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (US); the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (France); The Reina Sophia Museum, Madrid (Spain) and The Museum of Modern Art, New York (US). In 1997, a retrospective of her work entitled 'Carolee Schneemann - Up To And Including Her Limits' was held at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York. The Museum of Modern Art, NY featured Schneemann's installation 'Up To And Including Her Limits' in the exhibit 'On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century' and recently acquired this installation. Schneemann's work is included in many important collections including Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York (US); Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (France); Franklin Furnace, New York (US); Hamburger Bahnhof Museum, Berlin (Germany); Hirschhorn Museum, Washington D.C (US); Institute of Contemporary Art, London (UK); Institute of Contemporary Art, Chicago (US); Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (US); Museum of Modern Art, New York (US); Moderna Museet, Stockholm (Sweden); New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York (US); Peter Norton Collection, California (US); Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia (US); Rhode Island School of Design Museum, Providence (US); San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, California (US); The Whitney Museum of Art, New York (US); Yale University Art Gallery, Connecticut (US).*

*A feature length film on Schneemann's work and history entitled Breaking the Frame by Marielle Nitoslawska was completed in 2012 and shown at the Sundance Film Festival, Utah (US), Telluride Film Festival, Colorado (US), BFI/London Film Festival, ICA London (UK), FNC Montreal, Glasgow, Cleveland (US), WRO Biennial, Wroclaw (Poland), Videoex, Zurich (Switzerland) and NYFF51: Views From the Avant-Garde at Lincoln Center, New York (US).*

*Published books include Cezanne; She Was A Great Painter (1976); Early and Recent Work (1983); More Than Meat Joy: Complete Performance Works and Selected Writings (1979); Correspondence Course (2010) by Kristine Stiles, and Imaging Her Erotics—Essays, Interviews, Projects (2002). Awards received include: Art Pace International Artist Residency; two Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grants; Guggenheim Fellowship; Gottlieb Foundation Grant; National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship; Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship; and a Lifetime Achievement Award from the College Art Association. Carolee Schneemann: Unforgivable will be released with Black Dog Publishing in 2014*

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