

CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN

Robert Barry, Carolee Schneemann, Hales Gallery London Review, ArtReview, May 2014, p. 100

## Carolee Schneemann *Water Light/Water Needle*

*Hales Gallery, London 28 February – 12 April*

Visiting Venice for the biennale in 1964, Carolee Schneemann felt herself floating, suspended. The city's network of canals engendered 'a sense of "rising out of," rather than "being upon" a fixed plane... The city as a model of fixed transience.' Germinating from this peculiar sensation in Italy's floating city, *Water Light/Water Needle* (1966) was conceived originally as an aerial work to be performed upon a web of taut ropes strung across the Piazza San Marco. After two years of being told that her dream was impossible, Schneemann finally managed to rig it up among the eaves of San Marco's New York namesake: Saint Mark's Church, in the Bowery. But as she would later write (in *More Than Meat Joy*, 1979), 'The transparencies of Venice still motivated the actual aerial arrangement of ropes which enclosed or surrounded the audience seated below.'

This exhibition revisits Schneemann's pioneer happening in a single-room exhibition containing six works on paper (mostly

watercolour with occasional ink and crayon, created as preparatory sketches before the first performance), six photographs from the performances at Saint Mark's and a subsequent performance at Lake MahWah, New Jersey, an 11-minute 16mm film (transferred to video) of the Lake MahWah performance, along with five new prints of black-and-white photographs of the original performances overlaid with splashes of colour in acrylic paint.

*Water Light/Water Needle* enacts, in a strange kind of way, a model of utopian society. In the video we see eight performers (including Schneemann's Judson Dance Theater colleague Phoebe Neville as well as the composers James Tenney and Meredith Monk) navigating routes across the strung ropes – a little like the old children's game of Hot Lava. Given the variable tensions and vicissitudes of the ropes in question, however, clambering from A to B requires unique forms of collaboration and sensitivity. A foot placed here or a tug there may cause

wild fluctuations down the line where somebody else is trying to balance. The ropes become an occasion for play – in the video we see them twisted into swing chairs – but also cooperative action, with bodies entwining as they pass each other, legs wrapping around torsos to become newly evolved bipedal, four-armed creatures.

With no predefined score for their movements, just a system of rules and loose performance indications, the poetry of the work becomes an emergent property. Schneemann had specified that movement across the ropes should not be 'acrobatic' or 'balletic' but 'always functional', but dancelike figures transpire as a consequence of this deference to function, like a Bauhaus table. The acrylic swirls in blues and yellows added to the more recent works bring out the abstract forms of the figures in the photographs, making each swinging performer into a sinuous Schiele-esque dancer. *Robert Barry*



*Water Light/Water Needle (St. Mark's Church) 1, 1966, gelatin silver print, 25 x 16 cm. Photo: Terry Schutte. © the artist. Courtesy Hales Gallery, London*