

CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN

Stephanie LaCava, *Snakes, scrolls, swinging from chandeliers: how Carolee Schneemann transformed art*, The Guardian, 6 September 2022



Carolee Schneemann, *Up to and Including Her Limits*, 1976

Carolee Schneemann was born in 1939 in Pennsylvania, USA. Her father, a doctor, gave her an early introduction to the body and its viscera. She received a scholarship to Bard College at 16 and left to study in New York, ending up at Columbia. “I had never found a precedent of woman artists in the art history books that were available to me,” Schneemann said in 2017.

Schneemann worked for many years honing her multimedia practice. This included performances, film, photography and painting, exemplified by the 1963 photo series *Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions* for the Camera, in which she photographed herself naked and covered in paint, glue, fur, snakes and feathers, at once the seer and the seen.

Despite a comprehensive body of work and writing, gallery representation and recognition eluded Schneemann for much of her life. Still, she never stopped creating, ever-engaged in the political, challenging the limits of the physical body and the mind’s eye. On Thursday, *Body Politics*, the first UK survey of Schneemann’s work, opens at the Barbican in London. Below, novelist Stephanie LaCava remembers her friendship with the artist.

A painting come alive. Daphne, nearly 20, dressed in black with white apron-skirt. Her charge is Carolee Schneemann, post-op at home in New Paltz, Upstate New York. There are actually two Carolees: one in the bedside mirror. The young woman is tending to the other, wrapping her leg in mummy gauze. There are flowers; a transistor radio plays in the background. On the duvet, surgical scissors and opened squares of hospital-grade dressing.

This is the scene when I first meet Carolee in March of 2017. I had driven up from New York City with a friend to begin recording an oral history, an interview to come out the same time as the American retrospective of her multimedia works. The second session was four months later. I took the bus, raspberries having appeared in the yard and a copy of Clarice Lispector’s collected works on the covered nightstand. Its tablecloth had belonged to the artist and writer Kathy Acker; it was one of her skirts.

My relationship with Carolee very quickly became personal. I’m not sure why she liked me – or even if she really did, but we would remain close until she died two years later. For some time, we spoke on the phone every

other week. Even when she was frustrated with me, she would ask, “And are you writing?” It wasn’t a nicety, but a reminder of priority.

I went to Venice when Carolee received the Lifetime Achievement award. It was cavalier; I really had no place there, but she welcomed me. The morning after the ceremony, we sat in her hotel room with a painted Venetian lion mask. She said she preferred it to the hood ornament they’d given her – the Golden Lion statuette.

A year later, I would have a small celebration for the publication of a book of Carolee’s uncollected texts edited by art historian Branden W Joseph. She liked that it was held in a loft like the one she had shared with her first partner, composer James Tenney, in New York in the 60s. When she moved in, she had what she called her downtown “debutante party”. It ended with holes smashed in the walls. Soon thereafter, she’d perform in one of Claes Oldenburg’s performances on the Lower East Side. Her role: to stab a wall for nights on end.

This was not an accomplishment to Carolee. She was not an actor, rather an active creator, an agent of her own. While living in New York, she would found Judson Dance Theater alongside other artists like Yvonne Rainer and Trisha Brown. Her pioneering kinetic theatre performances took shape as she honed a practice that included film, photography, sculpture and writing. Still, she always regarded herself as a painter.

“Schneemann’s unique contribution to art history and to painting in particular has been literally to draw the eye back to the body that sees: both the body’s inextricable connection to what is seen and its role in determining the nature of the seen,” writes art historian Kristine Stiles. Carolee’s work space was off-canvas, and included her real life.

And that was a trick too. Image and image-maker, Carolee was hyper-aware of creating her own art historical record. This, in part, is why Carolee welcomed me to her home that first day, only a week out of leg surgery; she was a live-action painting waiting for me. After Daphne finished working, Carolee pointed to the trash, smiling, head tilted down. She alerted me to the name of the medical bandage: “avant gauze”.

Carolee left New York City in 1964 to move to the 18th-century farmhouse in New Paltz where I visited her. The house would become inextricable with much of her work. Her studio and shelter, it was here that she made her famous exploration of the outside-in, egalitarian exchange of intimacies in a heterosexual relationship, the 16mm

experimental film *Fuses*. Over three years, she would film herself and Tenney engaged in lovemaking from various angles, one particular shot achieved by hanging the camera from a chandelier. The camera is meant to take the point of view of one of her beloved cats, Kitch. Carolee painted and baked the film itself, which is therefore full of colour and scratches. It is sensual and erotic, showing its creator engaged in a very human, shared love.

It is not, however, hardcore pornographic, which caused outrage among male critics when screened at Cannes. They couldn’t understand why it didn’t include the predictable titillations. Carolee wanted, she said, “to see what *the fuck* is, and locate that in terms of a lived sense of equity.” It will be part of the Barbican’s show.

“We have to remind ourselves that throughout the 60s, only men maintained creative authority: women were muses, partners,” Carolee writes. This distills the way in which she first surfaces in my first book, *The Superrationals*, as a feminist inversion of the male artist/muse relationship. She and *Fuses* loom over my most recent book, *I Fear My Pain Interests You*. The network of culture workers, the woman mesmerised by her body and its needs. Her trafficking in the haptic, sensual. The experience of having been devalued by male gaze. Writing as performance – the rousing of the political.

A decade later, she walked out to an audience in East Hampton, New York, wrapped in a sheet, which fell to reveal only an apron. She was to read from her book *Cézanne, She Was a Great Painter*. Having painted her body with a dark pigment, she proceeded to pull a scroll from her vagina. (She also read a piece that appeared to be addressed to a male critic, a “happy man / structural filmmaker”. This text would become the scroll in the second version of *Interior Scroll*, performed at the Telluride film festival in 1977.) A condensed selection reads:

Carolee is perhaps best known for her first two kinetic theatre pieces: *Meat Joy* and *Interior Scroll*. *Meat Joy* premiered in Paris in 1964 – Marcel Duchamp called it the messiest work of art France had ever seen. Eight nearly naked men and women, including Carolee, roll around with paint, paper, raw chicken and fish. “Expanding physical energy – off the canvas,” is how Carolee explained the living sculpture.

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(From Scroll 1:)

*BE PREPARED:*

*To have your time wasted*

*Your intentions distorted*

*The simplest relationships in your thoughts*

*To be USED and MISUSED...*

*They will patronise you humor you*

*Try to sleep with you want to transform them*

*With your energy*

*They will berate your energy*

Carolee's work was always about energy: its exchange, its creation, its circulation. A haptic, sensual, very female realm.

(From Scroll 2)

*You are charming / but don't ask us to look at your films  
/ we cannot ...*

*The hand-touch sensibility / the diaristic indulgence/the  
painterly mess ...*

Carolee was also known for her poetic correspondence. She wrote me many emails. After the party at my house, she sent me the following, mentioning my son who was present at the event and just five at the time: "Tell Max I loved his dance ... it really was memorable and full of danger. But as a grown up, I didn't give him the best appreciation he deserves." In another note, she displays her wit, perhaps playing with the colloquial online language all around. "VRWTB", she writes making up her own acronym: "Very rushed with the breeze."

This reminds me, in part, of the work of Nora Turato. Her recent performances of self-generated scripts at MoMA in New York, borrow something of Carolee. In critic Philippa Snow's new book on self-injury as entertainment, *Which as You Know Means Violence*, she quotes Carolee speaking about female performance as indelibly linked with cultural pleasure for a male (dancer, stripper, actress), whereas male performance challenges the body in a physical way. She writes: "It's climbing a mountain instead of laying on a glacier in your underwear." Carolee understood the menacing nature of a woman who subverts all the stares. The viewer is discomfited and somehow changed, but unable to fully respect the message's ever-attractive agent.

Postmortem, the accolades come fast for Carolee. They were never so forthcoming when she was still pushing the limits of earthbound energy, inhabiting her body.