



CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN

Lain Millar, Up Close and Personal, The Art Newspaper, February 2013



Carolee Schneemann, Study for Up To and Including Her Limits, 1973, Photo by Anthony McCall (detail)

Is Carolee Schneemann the most celebrated artist never to have had a major retrospective? The controversial US multimedia artist, now 73, who has often used her own body as a medium, has had a profound influence on many of today's art starts- not least Matthew Barney, whose "Drawing Restraint" series referred to her performance *Up To And Including Her Limits*, 1973-76.

Schneemann's work includes the controversial performance *Interior Scroll*, 1975, in which she read texts written on paper taken from her vagina, and "Fuses", 1967, and explicit film of her having sex with her then partner, the composer James Tenney. She has a high standing among art-world cognoscenti but is less well known to the wider world. A new film, "Breaking the Frame", will hopefully go some way to redress that balance.

Directed by Marielle Nitoslawska, the Canadian-Polish film-maker and academic whose 2002 film "Bad Girl" made an impact with its frank examination of explicit depictions and accounts of women's sexuality. "Breaking the Frame" benefits from unprecedented access to Schneemann and to the extensive and eclectic archive that was, until recently, kept at her home in New York state.

It is also an engrossing personal response to the artist. After Louise Bourgeois's death, Schneemann is now surely the doyenne of feminist art practice, but with a reach and influence that extends far beyond that confine.

Nitoslawska's film is both interview and essay, call and response, investigation and exposition. It was completed shortly before much of Schneemann's archive- an ad hoc repository held at her home in upstate New York, decades in the making and consisting of hundreds of audio tapes, diaries, letters, photographs, lengths and cine film and even the odd desiccated pet - was shipped to Stanford University for preservation.

Nitoslawska had not been able to interview Schneemann for "Bad Girl", but the director had the artist in mind when she was looking for a subject for a more in-depth examination. When Schneemann rented a studio in Nitoslawska's home town of Montreal, the collaboration became almost inevitable.

"I was one of the first people to have total access to her archive." Nitoslawska says, "I got to open every nook and cranny. Carolee and I developed a real trust...it was

extraordinary. I'd open these drawers and find 300 cassettes of phone messages. As I finished the film, the entire archive-everything but the [major] works-was shipped off in a huge container. So it was really the last moment to do the film."

Nitoslawska is quick to acknowledge the art historian Kristine Stile's work on Schneemann's correspondence, "What's wonderful about Schneemann is not only her visual work, [but also the fact] that she's a wonderful writer," she says. "Her writing is really not well known. There's a collection – a very large collection – of her letters that was published in 2010 [correspondence Course: an Epistolary History of Carolee Schneemann and Her Circle, edited by Stiles, Duke University Press]. It's a [600-page] book that represents [only] about a third of Carolee's letters. [they] are really another art history through her eyes-correspondence with other artist, mostly American, but not only.

Was the artist able to find specific items to add to the story? "Often I found [them]," Nitoslawska says. "She was extraordinarily open...sometimes we'd find something and we'd go to her studio and project it, then have her talk about it. It was [like] an awakening."

In "Breaking the Frame" Nitoslawska combines archive footage of schneemann's work with the artist observations and accounts of her life. The director's filmed segments, which echo Schneemann's aesthetic, are backed by voiceovers of artist words and Ntoslawska's responses to what we see.

"Documentary is not a word I like," Nitoslawska says. "A film, particularly when its subject matter is art, as to embody the spirit of the work. The idea [is] that it's a collaged piece-both in spatial and in temporal terms."

The effect is haunting and hallucinatory, particularly when viewed in the dark of a cinema. "It really requires that immersive black box thing," Nitoslawska says. "I think a number of the better-known documentary film festivals have a problem with it, and then we think that there are still some people possibly of other generations who actually have a big problem with Carolee's work and find it shocking and not acceptable.