In French, the way a particular painter applies paint to canvas, her “tell,” so to speak, is called la patte de l’artiste. La patte, generally translated as “paw,” has a much more expansive meaning in French, where, in addition to mammals’ feet with claws and pads, it applies to the extremities of insects, birds, and reptiles. That subtle trace of the body’s vibrations, which the human painter shares with the rest of the animal kingdom, pulls aside the curtains of convention and training to reveal the essential role of the body, through its sense of touch, in realizing the artwork. As *Kinetic Painting*, her first career-spanning retrospective, shows, Carolee Schneemann’s art has radically re-oriented preconceptions about painting away from the primacy of the visual to the primacy of the haptic, the implications of which we are only just beginning to understand. She most clearly stated that expansive re-orientation in her performance series *Up to and Including Her Limits* (1973–1976). In this series, Schneemann tied a tree surgeon’s harness to the performance space ceiling in a corner lined with paper. Hanging from the harness with colored crayons in her hands, she swung her nude body through the air, allowing that movement to determine the marks she left with the crayons: “kinetic painting” indeed.

At least as early as *Eye Body* (1963)—a series of staged photographs where the artist posed nude among the props of a loft installation of her design—she insisted that our awareness of space arises in the state of play between the body and its surroundings. Rather than the purely visual, for Schneemann this play between body and environment begins with what, at least in Western culture, has been the most denigrated modality of consciousness: touch. Schneemann was well ahead of her time, as the leading model for mental events among philosophers and research scientists back in the day was a computational one, where the brain acted as a glorified computer. No one today takes the reductive computational stance seriously, as professionals in the field widely acknowledge that consciousness cannot be other than embodied. To use a painterly analogy, Schneemann brought touch from the background of our awareness to the foreground. This is, of course, of a piece with her transforming the role of the female body in art from the nude, passive receptacle of the gaze, into the “vulvic space,” an active producer of meaning she articulated with great power in *Interior Scroll* (1975/1977). With *Interior Scroll*, Schneemann identified the vagina and womb as the sources of “primary knowledge,” the origins of time measurement, math, astronomy, and agriculture.

In the chronology of Schneemann’s work, *Up to and Including Her Limits* (1973–1976) comes between *Eye Body* and *Interior Scroll*. The latter is a prime example of Schneemann’s vision of how the female body in art can be re-imagined as an active participant in the creative process, rather than a passive object of the artist’s attention.
Scroll. It is one of her signature works, and encompasses many of her essential spheres of inquiry: art history, painting, the body, and the role of women. *Kinetic Painting*’s installation of the piece reproduces the February 1976 performance at The Kitchen. It includes the original tree surgeon’s harness and the original drawings along the walls and on the floor. The drawings are flanked on either side by a stack of three video monitors that play back Schneemann’s performances. During those performances, suspended from the harness in a supine position, she drew colored lines of crayon on the paper while swinging through the space. What is missing in *Kinetic Painting*’s version of the original 1976 performance, apart from the artist, is the body of her then-recently deceased cat, Kitch, her constant companion who played a central role in her film, *Fuses* (1965), and had accompanied her earlier performances of *Up to and Including Her Limits*. In the February 1976 iteration, Kitch’s preserved body was laid on a small table next to the papered corner where Schneemann was performing.

On the art historical level, *Up to and Including Her Limits* marks an endpoint in the evolution of the female nude in Western art. This convention begins with the Renaissance revival of the nude from the Classical era, Botticelli’s *The Birth of Venus* (c. 1486), being a prime example. Venus in this image is a passive screen, so to speak, that reflects the projection of male desire. The female nude underwent minor modifications in the succeeding centuries but did not get a significant makeover until Manet’s *Olympia* (1863). While the nude here is still an object of male desire, we are very much aware that we are looking at an actual, and not idealized, woman, in this case Manet’s favorite model Victorine Meurent. Further, Meurent counters our objectifying gaze with her own, as we are about to enter into a transaction on her terms. Should there be any doubt that we are confronting an active sexual being in her own right, Manet offers the indexical clue of the evidently aroused black cat to her right, the word chatte in French having the same slang connotation that “pussy” has in English.

*Up to and Including Her Limits* takes the activation of the female nude to its inevitable conclusion in re-al space and real time. Schneemann here collapses artist, model, and artwork; figure and ground; process and product into one event. She is not the passive object of the male gaze, but instead the active producer of the artwork. In her piece, the nude is inseparable from the space, in fact she becomes the space as she swings through it. However, her ecstatic merging of artist and space in this piece is the logical outcome not of Manet and his work, but another 19th century painter essential to Schneemann’s development as an artist, Cézanne.

It is really in Cézanne’s art that we get the first glimmerings of the movement in painting away from the purely visual to the more broadly based awareness of space that originates with the haptic. Schneemann understood the implications of Cézanne’s obsessions with his “sensations” as pointing to a new relationship between the artist and her environment, blurring the lines between the art object, the painter; and the object of the painter’s gaze. In an interview in this newspaper, December 2016, she said about Cézanne: “Later, when I found his early Expressionist work, I loved it so much. I came to the stampedes of paint exploding after I had already committed to the rigorous aspects of Cézanne. I would say that is where I first wanted to break through the surface, to increase the dimensionality of paint and surface, and where I began to understand what painting was really going to demand of me.”

What resulted from Schneemann’s understanding of painting through the work of Cézanne was a new relationship between the artist and the artwork mediated through the boundary between the two: the skin of the artist’s body, or in other words, touch. In the PS1 installation of *Up to and Including Her Limits* the evidence of Schneemann’s touch appears as the record of her body movements through the crayon marks. At certain points during the original 1975 performance at the Kitchen, she would slip out of the harness to lie on the floor, becoming part of the “ground.” As Cézanne was able to harness his emotions through the application of formal rigor, his patte evolved over time from the “stampedes of paint exploding” in his earliest work to the delicate passage, or merging foreground and background, in the tightly controlled brushwork from his late work. His psychological immersion in his work became more complete, if less intense, and in the 1890s onward, the painting process began to supersede the product, as evidenced by his famous “unfinished” pieces. Schneemann’s patte, her sense of touch, in *Up to and Including Her Limits* took Cézanne’s immersion in his own process to a new level of actuality and immediacy by extending the artwork itself into actual space and real time through performance, making her own body the medium.

We could also say that Schneemann’s patte, her “paw,” was located metaphorically in Kitch’s body. Kitch’s role in Schneemann’s art has many dimensions, but one of them appears to be her role as witness to Schneemann’s experiences. For example in *Fuses*, Kitch appears as a contemplative foil to the blissful couplings of Schneemann and her then partner, composer James Tenney. In this capacity, Kitch’s presence speaks to the body’s capacity as the ultimate witness of all happenings, recording at the visceral level all the pain, boredom, and pleasure that we all experience. Ecstasy and contemplation, Cézanne and Kitch in Schneemann’s art, are
two sides of the same coin, and they originate with the body's haptic relationship to the environment. Each living creature is a nexus of vastly complex and intricate webs of fluctuating patterns that connect to the environment: the vibrations of the atoms that make up the body, the vibrations of molecules in the body as they perform their functions keeping the organism alive, the limbic system, the circulatory system, the nervous system, and so on. Schneemann’s great contribution to the evolution of painting has been presenting the human body as the ultimate ground of experience and understanding of space itself, with the promise of liberation through connecting to the energies of actual experience without the filter of cultural prejudices and expectations. It is as if she took our head between her hands and pointed it down at our own bodies, and said: “Start here.”