ARTFORUM

CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN
Sabine Breitwieser, Carolee Schneemann, Artforum,
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1939–2019

Sabine Breitwieser, Branden W. Joseph, and Judith Bernstein

Carolee Schneemann, *Eye Body* #26, 1963, gelatin silver print, 14 × 11". From the series "Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions for Camera," 1963.

SABINE BREITWIESER

"WE *ARE* GOING TO WORK TOGETHER," she would tell me self-assuredly, whenever we met on various occasions. I often ran into her in New York, whether on the streets or at Electronic Arts Intermix, where she was perpetually, or so it seemed, editing the video of her 1964 performance *Meat Joy*. In the 1990s and 2000s, when I was a young curator beginning to explore experimental cinema and radical art by women, and later during my time as director of the Generali Foundation in Vienna, Carolee Schneemann was always on my mind. My earliest exposure to her work was *Fuses*, 1964–67, a silent 16-mm film shot over three years whose footage (singed, collaged, painted on, and acid-drenched) featured Carolee and her longtime partner Jim Tenney lolling, caressing, and having sex—that, and the legendary *Interior Scroll*, in which she reflected on the underrecognition of women artists. The latter work's inaugural 1975 iteration produced some of the most enduringly iconic performance images of the late twentieth century. I quickly sensed the impact of her art and its myriad aftershocks.

But I also grasped how Carolee's oeuvre was much more complex than was widely understood, that it had yet to be preserved and adequately contextualized. These concerns linger, and yet she did end up gaining due recognition late in life. How? One reason was her stubbornness, which she exercised constantly when dealing with the ignorance of curators and scholars. Her obstinacy forced her to become her own "istorian" and led her to self-publish artist's books, such as *Cezanne, She Was a Great Painter* (1974), whose cover bears the inscription UNBROKEN WORDS TO WOMEN—SEXUALITY CREATIVITY LANGUAGE ART ISTORY laid over one of her childhood drawings. But it was primarily her intelligence and insightful critical reflections that persuaded me to immerse myself in her work and embark on a large exhibition project with her, an enterprise that, of course, somehow continued what other colleagues began. I was struck by her visionary writings on performance and its representation in various media in regard to *Up To and Including Her Limits*, in which Carolee suspended herself in a tree surgeon's harness and drew in crayon across papered surfaces, first staged in 1971 in London at an event organized by the Film-Makers' Cooperative. "How many video screens would it take to replace the living acting body with documentation of its action?" Propelled by this question, Carolee performed the work ten times at festivals and museums in Europe and the United States, eventually turning it into a multimedia installation over three years, from 1973 to '76. Or rather, it matured into the form that had been there all along, according to Carolee, hidden in its DNA.

When I moved to New York in 2010 to head the Museum of Modern Art's department of media and performance art, I immediately reached out to Carolee to discuss acquisitions; there was not a single major work of hers in the collection. From then on, I often visited her upstate home in New Paltz, where many of her works were created. Entering Carolee Land was magic. While she and her art are often described as being messy, she was extremely organized, though she did leave some works and [h]istories behind her. I've experienced this before with her female peers—that certain disappointing experiences make them want to stow things away, to try to forget.

"Can I be both image and image-maker?" Carolee asked when she made her momentous "Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions for Camera" in 1963, in which she attempted to "bring the canvas to life with dynamic brushwork, investing it with both substance and motion." She decided to become part of her paintings, to wrest control of her own image, to pose herself against the history of the representation of women. "Of course you can do it / don't you dare," Carolee concluded. □

SABINE BREITWIESER IS A VIENNA-BASED CURATOR AND A FORMER DIRECTOR OF THE MUSEUM DER MODERNE SALZBURG, WHERE IN 2015 SHE ORGANIZED "CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN: KINETIC PAINTING." THE SHOW TRAVELED TO THE MUSEUM FÜR MODERNE KUNST, FRANKFURT, IN 2017, AND TO MoMA PS1, NEW YORK, IN 2017–18.

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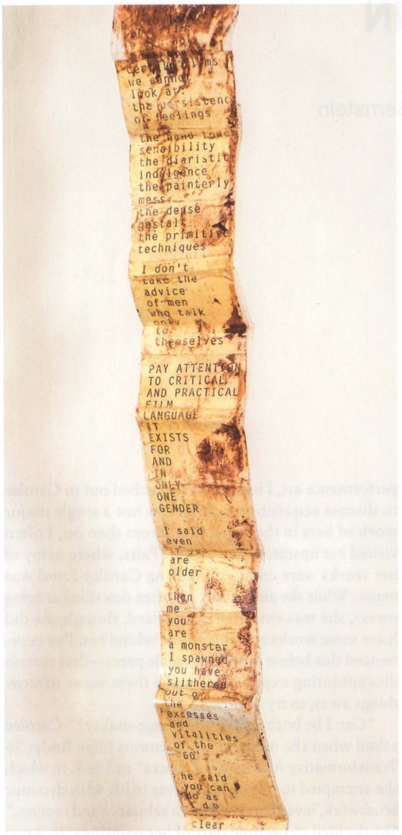
BRANDEN W. JOSEPH

I FEEL THAT EVEN a dedicated special issue of *Artforum* would be insufficient to grapple with the loss of an artist of Carolee's stature. Despite Kristine Stiles's proclamation, more than a decade ago, that Carolee represented one of the "great women artists" for whom Linda Nochlin had longed, art history has generally failed to recognize the true breadth of her achievement. As was most clearly revealed to me while working with Sabine Breitwieser on the traveling retrospective "Carolee



Left: **Scroll from Carolee Schneemann's performance of *Interior Scroll*, 1975, at the Telluride Film Festival, Colorado, September 4, 1977.** Above: **Carolee Schneemann, *Vesper's Pool* (detail), 1999–2000,** continuous rewind video decks, speakers, Kodak Ektographic zoom lens slide projectors, slide dissolve unit, motorized rotating mirrors, sand, paint, halogen lights, found objects, photographs, diary excerpts, padded bird, six-channel video projection (color, silent, 6 minutes), dimensions variable. Right: **Carolee Schneemann, *Up To and Including Her Limits*, 1973–76.** Performance study views, New Paltz, New York, 1973. Carolee Schneemann. Photos: Anthony McCall.

Schneemann: Kinetic Painting" (2015–18), Carolee's body of work was as intricately interconnected—recursively developing certain themes, ideas, and motifs over more than six decades—as it was expansive. That so many critics and historians continue to overlook the consistency and complexity of her production derives, in part, from the misperception that just a few major works—*Meat Joy*, 1964, *Fuses*, 1964–67, and *Interior Scroll*, 1975—can effectively stand in for the entirety of her oeuvre.

Such overly reductive assessments of her accomplishments may also be attributable to the fact that Carolee's artistic and intellectual coordinates differed substantially from those most commonly referenced in the discourse surrounding art made after World War II. She looked far less to the criticism of Clement Greenberg, if at all, than to the poetry of Charles Olson, Rochelle Owens, Robert Kelly, Jerome Rothenberg, and others in their circle. She preferred the liberatory politics of Wilhelm Reich to those of Herbert Marcuse, the ethical philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir to that of Jean-Paul Sartre, and the aesthetic theories of Antonin Artaud and Marcel Proust to those of Marcel Duchamp. Her phenomenology proved closer to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964) than to his *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945)—though, in her estimation, both paled in importance compared to D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson's *On Growth and Form* (1917) and Henri Focillon's *The Life of Forms in Art* (1934). While the scope of such references may prove daunting (consider the page counts of Reich, de Beauvoir, or Proust alone), they provide some measure of the art-historical labor still needed to address the true depth and sophistication of Carolee's career.

At the heart of her work was an ethical commitment, a dedication to open herself to the "other"—whether defined by gender, race, nationality, or even species—that encompassed not only the erotic dimension that has largely defined her reputation, but also forms of difference marked by disease, debilitation, and death.

At the heart of her work was an ethical commitment, a dedication to open herself to the "other"—whether defined by gender, race, nationality, or even species—that encompassed not only the erotic dimension that has largely defined her reputation, but also forms of difference marked by disease, debilitation, and death. At a 2015 talk organized by Jenny Jaskey for the Artist's Institute in New York, Carolee projected an image of her deceased cat from the installation *Vesper's Pool*, 1999–2000. Hearing the audience's audible gasp, she

commented, "It's OK. You can turn away, but I choose not to." Carolee grappled overtly with her own mortality in the installation *Known/Unknown: Plague Column*, 1995–96, but such meditations had run throughout her practice since its earliest moments. Carolee's first performance piece, *Labyrinths*, 1960, had revealed to her that conventional painting was "dead," even though she vowed to continue working on its "beloved corpse." As her art became increasingly political, she began addressing the actual corpses of those killed by war and civil strife in Vietnam, Lebanon, Yugoslavia, and other conflict zones, a form of ethical engagement she pursued to the very end. The last time I visited Carolee at her home upstate, the second floor was littered with harrowing images of mutilated bodies from the Syrian civil war: enlarged, torn, and collaged together as an act of witnessing from which she refused to turn away. □

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JUDITH BERNSTEIN

CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN WAS SUPER FAB! She made her mark early with her definitive performance pieces of the 1960s and '70s. Her groundbreaking *Interior Scroll* detonated art history in 1975; it was first performed at the show "Women Here and Now" in East Hampton, New York. She asked Joan Semmel, who organized the exhibition together with Joyce Kozloff, if she knew which type of glue would work best with vaginal fluid. Joan did not have the answer!

Carolee's work was undeniably outspoken and rageful. She gave birth to a literal and psychological scroll—it was a voice from within.

She was part of the feminist community. We hung out together at art openings and loft parties and went to bars to network. We were included in shows together because of the extremely confrontational and sexual content of our art.

At the end of the day, it was the nature of our work that truly connected us. We were both screaming to be heard!

Three years ago, while I was in intensive care, Carolee kept in constant touch and sent flowers through my studio manager and friend, John Reynolds. I was completely isolated from the outside world, and I was deeply moved by her compassion, which came even as she was wrestling with her own medical issues.

Carolee's art merited recognition throughout her career. And she got a lot before she died, which was a great gift. She received the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at the 2017 Venice Biennale, and her work was acquired by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and became the subject of a retrospective that traveled from the Museum der Moderne Salzburg, Mönchsberg, Austria, to MoMA PS1 in Queens, New York.

Losing you was a great shock. Unfortunately, when death comes calling, you're always home.

The art world will miss you, our community will miss you, and I will miss you.

You were a great presence! You go, Carolee. □

JUDITH BERNSTEIN IS AN ARTIST BASED IN NEW YORK. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)

Above, from top: **Carolee Schneemann, *Meat Joy*, 1964.** Performance view, Judson Memorial Church, New York, November 1964. Dorothea Rockburne and Carolee Schneemann. Photo: Al Giese. **Carolee Schneemann, *Fuses*, 1964–67,** 16 mm, color, silent, 29 minutes 37 seconds. Right: **Judith Bernstein and Carolee Schneemann, New York, 2016.** Photo: Pola Esther.

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