

## CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN

Melissa Ragona, *The Sound of Snow*, Film Comment,  
May-June 2019



Carolee Schneemann, *Untitled* (vintage photograph from *Snows* performance), 1967 (detail)

Avant-garde pioneer Carolee Schneemann left a visceral impact that reverberates throughout the world of moving images and performance.

After the snow left us, so did Carolee Schneemann. One of the most inventive artists of her generation, Schneemann (1939-2019) left this world on March 6 at 6:00pm, just as night fell on the same Huguenot-era house in New Paltz, New York, in which she had made her acclaimed films *Fuses* (1964-67); *Viet-Flakes* (1965); her Super-8, double-projection, five-hour opus, *Kitch's Last Meal* (1973-78); and many other works across wide-ranging media, including painting, sculpture, installation, sound, and kinetic theater.

Schneemann's influence within both the avant-garde and the larger realm of popular culture is vast. Contemporary artists who use film as one of their central mediums—like Peggy Ahwesh, Abigail Child, Leslie Thornton, Jennifer Montgomery, Maria Beatty (with whom Schneemann made several collaborative films), Katherine Bauer, M.M. Serra, Luther Price, Laida Lertxundi, Michael Robinson, Sharon Lockhart—were all influenced directly or indirectly by the far-reaching methods of Schneemann's

work across lush, embodied image-sound relations in film. Schneemann, working closely with Yvonne Rainer, Simone Forti, Deborah Hay, and many others, was a key early member of the Judson Dance Theater, forging innovative approaches to what would become known later as “movement research.” Her rethinking of performance materials—whether it meant using raw chicken, sausages, fish, blood, paint, or the flesh of her own body as canvas, projection site, or sculptural material inspired her own peers (younger and older), such as Charlotte Moorman, Yoko Ono, Marina Abramovic, and Valie Export, as well as an entire new generation of daring artists inside and outside the contemporary art world: Matthew Barney, Angela Dufresne, Ragnar Kjartansson, Carolyn Lazard, Sahra Motalebi, Seung-Min Lee, and Lady Gaga (especially the meat dress she wore to the 2010 MTV Video Music Awards), just to name a few.

Snow falls throughout Schneemann's early work—as an organic material force, and as a stand-in for the toxic, burning, snow-like substance of white phosphorous used in many napalm weapons during the Vietnam War. Indeed, as she acknowledges in her journal-like essay “Notations” (1958-1966), the word is built into

her self-given moniker: “I want to see to move in and [a] play on my name you know Schnee/man Snow/mann.” Snow represented Schneemann’s political commitment in material form. In the wholly arresting *Snows* (1967), she projects clips from her earlier film *Viet-Flakes* onto six performers, using the images of “winter environment and Vietnam atrocities” to generate a sense of intensified movement and visual densities that would spill out onto what she called the “snow-bound” audience. *Viet-Flakes* had been shot by putting a magnifying glass between the camera and magazine images of Vietnamese victims producing an eerie animation of suffering and pain. At one point, the performers’ faces in *Snows* are marked with white greasepaint, their bodies and hair powdered and caked with the artificial “snow” of white flour, clad in largely white clothes (until tin-foiled), and they move across a space garlanded with white fleece branches and awash with filmic projections of snowy white landscapes, snow-filled streets, snow-encrusted buildings, and the deadly-white negative filmic space that occurs between war victims, whose skin—burned by napalm—glistens with a white-like hue.

*Snows* and *Viet-Flakes* were typical of Schneemann’s vital engagement with fraught political issues, charged with a visceral urgency beyond what was occurring in more traditional public spheres. Representations of snow-like whiteness during this period symbolized violence across so many lines, not just abroad but at home as well—on the frontlines of the civil-rights movement—as violence was racialized, monetized, and sexualized. The white-on-white set of *Snows* radically veered away from the prevalent white monochrome painting as practiced by Robert Rauschenberg, Robert Ryman, and Agnes Martin. But the Cagean redefinition of silence as sonic presence, inspired by Rauschenberg’s white canvases, pulses at the center of the film’s soundtrack, structured as it was by her collaborative effort with the composer—and Schneemann’s long-term partner—James Tenney on the sound collage for *Viet-Flakes*. Fragments of Bach’s *Cantata #78*, The Beatles’ “We Can Work It Out,” Mozart’s *Piano Concerto No. 20*, Jackie DeShannon’s “What the World Needs Now,” Vietnamese folk songs, train whistles, and random sounds of orgasm play against each other, stopping and starting like the artificial snow that fell not so silently over the entire set.

Schneemann’s pioneering work in re-thinking the body as a medium for art and her confrontation with male definitions of femininity are often the focus of attention on her artistic output, but it was also this complex approach to sound that drove her work in new, often unexplored directions. Schneemann’s sense of how sound works was deeply tied to how she thought about the gestural throughout her work. A gesture emanates from a particular “source of compression”—tension, expansion, resistance. That’s why in several of the most renowned

of her self-termed “Kinetic Theater” works (which also became films), like *Meat Joy* (1964) and *Snows*, she introduced the idea of a “body package”: packages that work, to borrow from Antonin Artaud, as “philosophical states of matter.” Body packages were intimately tied to what she came to call “concretions.” The latter grew out of her early work in painting and collage and reflected an understanding of how “materials,” including the materials of the body, could present an array of expressive, biosemiotic possibilities. Such concretions were first presented at Judson Dance Theater in New York, including *Newspaper Event*, *Lateral Splay*, and *Chromolodeon* (all 1963).

These were preceded by a series of compact “Box” sculptures—including *Controlled Burning* (for Yvonne Rainer’s *Ordinary Dance*) (1962), *Ice Box* (1963), and *Music Box Music* (1965)—that were initially conceived with audio elements as central materials. These early works are micro-studies of how sound could structure a work within the situation in which it occurs, as opposed to emerging from some preexistent structure such as notation, symbolism, or arrangement. In step with John Cage, Philip Corner, Tenney, and other experimental sound composers, Schneemann moved away from simple sound-silence oppositions into the model of an open sonic field. A sonic aesthetic was even present in her silent film, *Fuses*, an up-close, erotic “homage to a relationship [with Tenney] of 10 years,” which set images of fellatio, genitals, and penetrations alongside that of the ever vigilant Kitch (one of Schneemann’s many cats, who lived with her for almost 20 years), and the material presence of 16mm leader that was painted, scratched, baked, and burned. The rhythmic layers of bodies, color, light, and mark-making became, as Stan Brakhage would name it in his own work, a “visual music.”

The sounds of Schneemann are what float us—not unscathed—across the white noise of political and social violence examined in her projects from the mid-to-late 1970s, and she continued producing vital work across media through the 1980s and 1990s. Her *Dust Paintings* (1983-86) and *Scroll Painting with Exploded TV* (1990-91), were both made with automated processes: mechanized mops that shot out over the canvases dripping paint and shaking dust onto their surfaces. (“It was like a snow-storm,” Schneemann told me of the process of creation.) In both cases, the avalanches

of materials that shower the canvases mirror the chaotic, immersive, often contradictory information that was generated in very specific contexts (Lebanon, Palestine, and previously Vietnam). Schneemann remained vital—performing and working—right up until the week before her death. Always, she asserted her ceaseless, defiant, independent mode of production.