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Fluxus, Flirt, Feminist?

Carolee Schneemann, Sexual Liberation and the Avant-garde of the 1960s

Anette Kubitza

(This essay is based on Anette Kubitza's dissertation *Fluxus, Flirt, Feminist? The Emergence and Reception of Carolee Schneemann's Body Art of the 1960s* Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, forthcoming 2002.)

In 1963, Carolee Schneemann embarked on the expansion of one of her wooden 'painting constructions' that filled her Manhattan loft. She included her nude body. In a series of transformations entitled *Eye Body*, the artist established her body as visual territory, interacting with various materials such as paint, chalk, ropes, plastic sheeting, mirror glass, animal fur, a bull's horn, and two live snakes. Despite its affinity to works by Jackson Pollock, Rauschenberg, and Yves Klein, *Eye Body* remained largely unnoticed by the avant-garde at that time and was, at best, met with sexist comments.¹

However, in the 1970s, *Eye Body* was re-contextualized within the new feminist movement. This piece and others from the 1960s were firmly placed into the canon of feminist art. In the 1970s, *Eye Body* was identified with the great goddess movement (remember the snakes), as well as with feminist explorations of the female body. Later, in the 1980s, the artist was criticized for catering in her work to essentialist ideas and male fantasies. And lastly, in the 1990s, Schneemann was catapulted into the ranks of so-called bad girl artists such as Karen Finley and Annie Sprinkle, since her work shared the transgressive sexual boldness prevalent in this more recent turn in feminist art.

Schneemann herself was quick to align her 1960s work with later feminist ideas and practices.² However, while feminist paradigms have provided a welcome and useful frame for the reception of Schneemann's oeuvre, the simple regrouping of the artist's early pieces with various trends in later feminist art impeded a contextual, in-depth examination of her unique sexual aesthetic. In an effort to distinguish the artist's work from post-1970s acts of sexual and gender transgressions, Kristine Stiles recently suggested that Schneemann's life and work constitute a breach of decorum. Stiles differentiated, that a breach of decorum is, in contrast to a conscious act of transgression, usually unintentional, an act for which one is ostracized and rejected, not legally punished or celebrated.³ Such a concept proves valuable to classify the reactions to Schneemann and her work. However, I see Schneemann's "breach" not as incidental but as thoroughly grounded in the artist's philosophical beliefs she developed in the early 1960s.

Recently, art historians have begun to explore psychological approaches to art and its interpretations that do not rely on Freud and Lacan. Along the lines of this endeavour, I suggest a reading of Schneemann's body art in terms of the philosophical themes advanced by Austrian-born psychologist Wilhelm Reich. I argue, that Schneemann's reception of Reich's writings was vital in her development of an erotic aesthetic that was quite different from the emotionally detached representations of sexuality by other avant-garde artists in the 1960s and has posed some problems for feminists.

In the early 1960s, Schneemann's art was deeply embedded in the formal and philosophical considerations of the New York avant-garde. Trained as a landscape painter, she realized as a master's student in Illinois in the early sixties that, as she put it, 'painting was dead'.⁴ Like artists such as Robert Rauschenberg, Claes Oldenburg, Allan Kaprow, Robert Morris, and the Fluxus group, Schneemann struggled with the hegemonic legacy of Abstract Expressionism. She introduced everyday objects and images into her 'painting-constructions' and was concerned with the expansion of the two-dimensional canvas into space and time. Whatever has been attached to *Eye Body* in later years, its driving force at that time was the artist's interest in exploring the properties of materials, including flesh and the moving body.⁵ Schneemann became the first visual artist to collaborate with the Judson Dance Theater in Greenwich Village, a group of dancers concerned with introducing commonplace gestures and minimalist movement. Alongside well-known avant-garde dancers such as Yvonne Rainer, Judith Dunn, and Trisha Brown, she staged several of her early performance pieces. The artist also participated in performances by her male colleagues, such as in Claes Oldenburg's Ray Gun Theater productions, Bob Morris' *Site* and danced a nude solo with a parachute in Oldenburg's *Waves and Washes*.

However, Schneemann later characterized her role in those years as an outsider. She did not feel treated by her male colleagues as a serious collaborator but rather

as a 'body beautiful'. The artist once wrote that she felt like the "Cunt Mascot on the men's art team" [...] 'a questionable element since I could never play your games your ways [...]'.⁶ Her assessment might be surprising. After all, some other female artists such as Yoko Ono, Allison Knowles, and Shigeo Kubota seemed more accepted in that avant-garde. Further, with its emphasis on the body and open eroticism, Schneemann's work ought to have melded perfectly with the increasing sexual explicitness in the art of that period. How did Schneemann's representations differ from that of her contemporaries, male and female?

Depictions of body and sexuality at that time were depersonalized, ironic, sterile, theatricalized, and curiously void of passion. Examples include Tom Wesselmann's coolly painted paper dolls beaming with the seductiveness of consumer goods; Yvonne Rainer's and Steve Paxton's minimalist dance *Word Words* in which the two dancers, nude except for G-strings, carried out the exact same sequence of simple movements, which distracted attention not only from their sexual difference but from sexuality itself; Yoko Ono's mocking series of buttocks filling the screen in her *Film No. 4 (Bottoms)*, a humorous contribution to mainstream culture's obsession with certain body parts and an homage to the liberalization of cinema; Andy Warhol's camp pornographic movies which depicted a subculture of fluid sexual orientation and identity; Kenneth Anger's underground classic *Scorpio Rising*, in which he portrayed the fetishistic, leather-bound homoeroticism of a biker gang, and the highly theatrical orgies of Jack Smith's film *Flaming Creatures*, in which actors of questionable gender, in different states of dress and undress, dominate the screen.

These examples have in common that they deny the idea of an "unmediated", "organic", or "natural" sexuality. They do not just reflect a concern for more liberated sexual values. Rather, the emotionally detached quality in these representations marks an emerging awareness of the social constructedness of gender and sexuality and its political implications. Avant-garde artists in the 1960s anticipated and prepared the gay rights movement, feminism with its critique of phallocentrism, and poststructuralist analyses. Schneemann's approach to inject her art with joyful, heterosexual passion seems, at first glance, retrograde and naive. I propose, however, that the artist developed an independent aesthetic and sexual politics that do not only undermine patriarchal values, but also constitute themselves beyond narrowly defined feminist and gay politics.

While minimalism, conceptualism, fetish, and leather culture became fashionable in the art around her, Schneemann did not shy away from raw edges, messy materials, and passion. In her Kinetic Theatre piece *Meat Joy* (1964), Schneemann abandoned the confinements of the canvas for a multi-sensual space, in which visual pleasures were combined with tactile joys, smells and sounds. The approximately one-hour long performance was shown first at the Paris Festival de la Libre Expression, in a modified version in London, and lastly at the Judson Church in Manhattan. The cast consisted of four men and four women, including

Schneemann. Clad in trunks and elaborately decorated bikinis, the performers interacted with mounds of paper, flashlights, transparent plastic sheeting, raw chicken, sausages, smelly fish, wet paint, and each other's bodies. The performance was accompanied by a sound-collage of Paris street noises and latest hits.

Schneemann considered *Meat Joy* an analogy to the sexual act. Particularly in the first two sequences, she visualized the erotic energy of the sexes rather stereotypically, giving the men a more active, the women a more passive part. This pattern, however, came apart when Schneemann seized the paintbrush and painted her partner's body. Further, an attempt by the male performers to form the women into sculptural shapes ended with all of them collapsing on the floor. After that, all eight performers entered into a passionate trance and equally actively interacted with each other's bodies, raw meat, fish, and wet paint. In the beginning very structured and well rehearsed, *Meat Joy* grew into an orgy of the senses that ended in a messy tangle of bodies and materials.

In an effort to bring all senses into the arena of performance, Schneemann welcomed the bodily smells and secretions that were created in the process, which are considered taboo especially in regard to women's bodies. In 1963 she wrote into her notebook about women's sexuality: 'These women are fastidious: the living beast of their flesh embarrasses them; they are trained to shame...blood, mucus, juices, odors of their flesh fill them with fear. They have some abstracted wish for pristine, immaculate sex...cardboard soaked in perfume.'⁷ The smell of cheap perfume, which the artist had giddily sprayed into the audience at the beginning, was soon replaced by the odor of sweating bodies, oozing chicken, smoked sausages, and dead fish.

While Schneemann worked on *Meat Joy*, she began her first film *Fuses*.⁸ In *Fuses*, the artist interspersed graphic shots of her companion James Tenney and herself making love, with views of her ever-watching cat Kitch, the surrounding landscape, and images of the domestic environment which anchor the couple's sexuality in their everyday life. Schneemann attempted to communicate the sexual experience through an elaborate, highly innovative post-cinematic editing process that was influenced by the experimental films of Stan Brakhage. As David James has shown in his excellent analysis of this film, Schneemann took Brakhage's approach a step further. She transported the intense emotions between the lovers directly onto the celluloid. She manipulated the original footage by fragmenting and superimposing the images, and by scratching and painting on it, as well as by exposing it to weather, acids, and, last but not least, to heat in an oven.⁹ The explicit sexual images were considerably distorted in the process, and a rather abstract image evolved that at times unrecognizably fused male and female body parts into a flow of colors and movements as in the process of lovemaking itself.

Instead of rendering a sexual narrative that follows a climactic structure typical in conventional (porn) movies, Schneemann organized her images rhythmically. She constantly interrupted, fragmented, dissolved, collaged and repeated the images.

While conventional films rely on the notorious cum-shot to signify the climax, and rather ineptly render the feelings involved, Schneemann was concerned with the complexity of the sexual experience, for both, men and women. In *Fuses* the highpoints of sexual passion are conveyed by a convulsive densification of imagery.

As one male contemporary critic, unsure of Schneemann's sex, wrote: 'The cultural history of male America has passed down too much shit for a man to have made *Fuses*, which views love-making subjectively, from within. The interior view [in *Fuses*] is both more erotic and less pornographic, more like doing it than watching it. An American male would have to uncloud his eyes of several thousand playmates to see things that way.'¹⁰ With her treatment of imagery in *Fuses*, Schneemann undermined the objectifying mechanisms of fetishism and voyeurism heavily at work in conventional cinema.

The artist has noted repeatedly that her study of Reich's writings was influential in her work.¹¹ Schneemann had become acquainted with his books in 1960, at a time when their distribution was illegal in the United States.¹² To summarize, Reich contended that total mental and physical health was impossible in the absence of complete sexual satisfaction. In his psychoanalytic practice he found that dammed-up libidinal energy results in neurosis. Total discharge of this energy, he claimed, would only happen if the individual possessed 'orgastic potency' which he described as 'the capacity to surrender to the flow of biological energy, free of any inhibitions, [...] to discharge completely the dammed-up sexual excitation through involuntary, pleasurable convulsions of the body.'¹³

In the early stages of his career, Reich emphasized the socio-political dimension of the widespread 'orgastic impotence' he detected, calling it an 'emotional plague' that invited totalitarianism. However, he focused increasingly on the biophysical aspects of his findings, for which he became a highly controversial figure. From his observations on orgasm, Reich derived his scientific experiments on bioenergy and discovered a pulsating life-energy he coined 'orgone energy'. He found that this energy was not only involved in human sexual activity but in all life processes, and he sought it vital for a healthy organism. In order to concentrate orgone energy, Reich developed his notorious orgone energy accumulator in the early 1940s. This was a box-shaped structure made of alternating layers of organic and metallic materials.¹⁴ The orgone-box was not, as many falsely believe, devised as a sex-stimulant promising orgiastic potency.¹⁵ Rather, Reich stressed its general healing functions claiming that the blood and body tissue of the user would be charged with the life-energy, and that the general condition of the organism would thus improve..¹⁶ Still, the orgone-box came to symbolize the core of Reich's theories: the crucial role of sexual satisfaction for the well being of the individual as well as society as a whole.

Reich's theories confirmed Schneemann to integrate her sexuality into her art making. She infused her art with the sexual energy considered so valuable by Reich, and structured seminal works such as *Meat Joy* and *Fuses* deliberately around the

experience of the sexual act, in fact, the experience of orgasm itself.¹⁷ Aside from this, Reich's method of analysis surfaced in Schneemann's selection and preparation of the performers for *Meat Joy* and other performances. For *Meat Joy*, she picked most of the cast from bars, concert halls, and the street in each of the cities it was shown. In selecting the performers, Schneemann looked for specific qualities: 'a natural sexual presence - unself-conscious and vital and "untrained" bodies, which moved integrally, rhythmically in commonplace actions.'¹⁸ As she had done in earlier pieces, Schneemann used a training method to prepare the performers for the acts of *Meat Joy* derived from Reich's therapeutical practice of character analysis. This method involves the physical loosening of the patients muscular body armor, which Reich believed to be essential for a successful analysis and healing process to take place. Schneemann found out later, that some of the performers had actually gone through Reichian therapy.

Schneemann also identified with Reich's political struggle against a sex-negative society. She stated that by using the naked body in her work she wanted 'to resist an oppressive system that alienated people from their bodies.'²⁰ Her goal was 'to break into the taboos against the vitality of the naked body in movement, to eroticize my guilt-ridden culture and further to confound this culture's sexual rigidities - that the life of the body is more variously expressive than a sex-negative society can admit.'²¹ However, while Reich focused on genital sexuality, Schneemann's interest in the material value of the body, its sensual properties and its multifaceted expressiveness also liberated the body from a narrow sexual identification. As *Meat Joy* and *Fuses* vividly demonstrate, Schneemann embraced a wide concept of body-positiveness that went beyond simply equating more sex with more liberty.

Reich was marginalized, excluded, censored, and even expelled from several countries for his radical ideas and politics.²² He had developed his orgasm theory on the fringes of the psychoanalytical establishment around Freud in the 1920s, and was excluded from the Vienna Psychoanalytic Association in 1933 when his colleagues began to question his mental health.²³ Opposition among psychoanalysts to Reich's work grew, however with the shift from Freud's early emphasis on sexual disturbances in the development of neurosis to his belief that social adjustment, not sexual fulfillment, was the crucial criterion for emotional health.²⁴ The pleasure principle thus had to give way to the reality principle.²⁵

Reich, who had fled from the Nazis-regime, eventually found refuge in the United States in 1939. Ironically, however, his persecution did not end there. In the late 1940s, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) began to investigate him and declared his orgone accumulator 'fraud of the first magnitude.'²⁶ The agency sought legal action against Reich, which led to a court order in 1956 demanding the destruction of the accumulators, the withdrawal of several of Reich's books from the market, and even the burning of literature concerning the device and Reich's orgone theory.²⁷ Reich himself was imprisoned in 1957, technically not for fraud,

but because he had not complied with a court injunction. Reich died in prison only months later. Interest in Reich's ideas diminished after the FDA intervention. It was only in the mid-1960s that the Reich's writings were rediscovered by the counterculture, and several of his books were reissued, illegally at first.²⁸

The FDA-investigation, the ensuing trial against Reich, and the literal destruction of his work speak of the fears that Reich's device and theories were able to evoke in American society. In his detailed study *Wilhelm Reich vs. the U.S.A.*, Jerome Greenfield recounts that, as an attempt to burn the accumulators at Reich's residence failed, the psychologist's twelve-year old son joined two government officials in chopping up the devices with axes while Reich watched on. For Reich it must have felt like the libidinal potential of an entire nation was being crushed before his eyes. Reich, in a way, had become victim to a double betrayal by American society. Beside the physical destruction of Reich's devices and research, Reich's ideas were corrupted by the very movement they had been feeding, the movement for sexual liberation. While Reich identified more liberal sexual values with a more liberated, anti-totalitarian society, it became obvious that sexuality could easily be turned into just another convenience. The political activism Reich had envisioned to go along with a sexual liberation had, with the advent of glossy magazines such as *Playboy*, instead been replaced with another instance of commercialization in a capitalist society.²⁹

It is not surprising that *Meat Joy* and *Fuses* were subject to government censorship in the 1960s, when obscenity laws regarding nudity were strictly enforced. Originally, Schneemann had planned to have the performers of *Meat Joy* be nude. However, the moral decency laws in Europe and the US at that time did not allow naked performers in motion. At the performances in Paris and New York, police informants and members of various moral decency groups were present. As Schneemann recounted, the performance in London was interrupted by the police, and the actors had to flee via the back exit.³⁰

Fuses was considered one of the most outrageous underground films in the 1960s and censored in several instances by government authorities. It was one of two films seized by the Los Angeles police for obscenity and for not complying with the laws concerning sexual activity on the screen, when it was shown in a special program of underground films.³¹ In a more recent case of censorship, *Fuses* was taken out of a program of sexuality in American film shown at a Moscow film festival in 1989. It was scheduled to be screened among Russ Meyer's *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*, Spike Lee's *She's Gotta Have It*, and Stephen Sonderburg's *Sex, Lies, and Video* but after an unscheduled opening night showing was not rescheduled.³²

Schneemann was, by no means, the only avant-garde artist whose work was subject to government censorship in the 1960s. Other banned works include Smith's film *Flaming Creatures*, a transvestite orgy of sexual pleasure, several of Kenneth Anger's films, Ono's *Bottoms*, and Charlotte Moorman's topless cello-solo in Nam

June Paik's composition *Opera Sextronique*, which landed her in prison. These works questioned traditional ideas about sexuality and breached the accepted moral codes and, sometimes, laws, as well.

However, in Schneemann's case, some extreme reactions by her audiences, as well as her marginalization within the avant-garde, surprise. During a performance of *Meat Joy* in Paris, a man from the audience came on to the stage and tried to strangle Schneemann. Recalling this incident, the artist wrote: 'Steeped in the writings of Wilhelm Reich I understood what had affected him but not how to break his hold on my neck!' ³³ Eventually, three women threw themselves on the man and dragged him off the stage. By the time *Fuses* was released in 1967, the Hippie movement was celebrating its Free Love ethic in the Haight Ashbury Summer of Love, and communes were blossoming in Europe. Still, when the film was shown in Cannes in 1968, where it received a special jury award, a group of about forty men slashed the theater seats with razors, threw the shredded padding around and shouted, apparently airing their distress about unfulfilled expectations....

Schneemann's ambivalent role within the avant-garde manifested itself most pointedly in her official excommunication from the Fluxus group in the mid-1960s, a group with which Schneemann was associated through common interests and friends. Several of her performances in the early 1960s, such as her *Glass Environment for Sound and Motion*, were staged with well-known Fluxus artists such as Dick Higgins and Phillip Corner. She later also collaborated with Yoko Ono and Shigeo Kubota, both highly accepted members of the Fluxus group. While Schneemann cannot be considered a Fluxus artist per se, the severe judgement against her work by the ideological leader of this group, George Maciunas, who gave other female artists a fairly comfortable dwelling, ³⁵ sheds light on some of the problems that her art posed to the New York avant-garde. He characterized her work as 'operatic', 'political', 'sexual', 'metaphoric' and 'messy'. In a later statement, Schneemann expressed her ambivalent standing:

'fluxus can be lots of fun when the boys let you on their boat
sometimes they throw you off the boat
you have to be NEAT all your words games philosophy
and things you make have to be NEAT (except for wolf and claes
they can smear their pages its o.k.)
if you don't wear underpants or show your pussy you get pushed over the side
[...]' ³⁶

The sexual explicitness of Schneemann's work may well have been used as a pretext to censor it in the 1960s. I want to suggest, however, that some extreme audience reactions to her work and its marginalization within the avant-garde and later in feminism are due to the fact that she injected her art with sexual passion. ³⁷

Schneemann's particular representations of body and sexuality posed an open threat to patriarchy (and I include a good portion of the 1960s avant-garde here) by

challenging a phallogentric, controlled sexuality and its visual representations. By using the naked female body permissively and by presenting sexuality, including heterosexuality, as a joyful experience, Schneemann's work also ran counter to later feminist ideas about this subject. While accepted as an initiator of feminist body and performance art and appropriated as role model by various feminist artists, her work has been continuously criticized for not complying with a narrowly defined feminist correctness in the field of vision.³⁸

Schneemann, one could argue, is a naïve child of the sexual revolution. Though keenly aware of women's discrimination in the art world and of the misrepresentation of women's sexuality in dominant culture, it is likely that Schneemann was one of the women who objected to early feminist analysis of the male-female power relations in the bedroom.³⁹ Kate Millet was right, of course, when she stated that sexual intercourse does not take place in a cultural vacuum. It would be short sighted, however, to interpret Schneemann's early representations of the women's body as sheer ignorance in feminist terms. A closer look at *Meat Joy* shows, that by defiling the bodies of the female performers, Schneemann consciously disrupted dominant notions of the female body as beautiful spectacle and of female sexuality as pristine. And, my analysis of *Fuses* shows that Schneemann quite systematically undermined the very premises on which gender specific visual pleasure in the cinema is based, assumptions feminist film critics began to expose only in the mid-1970s.⁴⁰

Further, while there is no doubt that *Meat Joy* and *Fuses* are built on heterosexual lovemaking, a closer look reveals that they are not merely about heterosexuality. Amidst the tangle of bodies and materials in *Meat Joy*, or the grid of spots, scratches, and colors over(p)laying the sexual imagery in *Fuses*, it becomes impossible to define exactly what we are looking at. In those sequences, a coherent body image defined as male or female is dissolved. For Schneemann it becomes irrelevant whether we can decipher female or male body parts, plucked chicken legs or hot dogs, menstrual blood or red paint, white dots or ejaculate, as it is the complex sensual experience involved in the action that she tried to capture. The artist made bodily sensations and pleasures themselves her subject.

Schneemann's crusade for the acceptance and validity of unmediated bodily sensations continued to permeate her work into the 1980s, as the correspondence with a fellow artist testifies. After watching Schneemann, then in her early forties, performing nude in her *Fresh Blood: A Dream Morphology*, artist colleague Dick Higgins suggested that she should find a beautiful, young feminist artist who should operate as a surrogate, a stand-in for Schneemann in her performances.⁴¹ Apart from Higgins' blatant bias against the erotic portrayal of a middle-aged woman, such a suggestion misses the core of Schneemann's work, which is exactly to criticize substitute experiences. The artist responded thus that it would be 'a shame to forgo the opportunity to perform as an ambivalent-erotic. I have only one chance to be middle aged, right? So why not see what that tells? I can be the wrinkled knees I once

wished off “the stage” [...], the double chin, rounded belly, etc...’⁴² Schneemann's answer to Higgins' insulting suggestions emphasizes that her work centers on her body and her (sensual) experiences in an immediate way, and in that also does not make a claim to represent "everywoman".

Even Schneemann's more recent installations of the 1990s, in which the artist does not appear in person, mark a continued critical path away from the 'semiotic turn' that became so popular among artists and critics in the early 1980s. For example, her installation *Vulva's Morphia* (1981-96) entails a cunning criticism of society from vulva's point of view (that is Schneemann's vulva, of course). The installation consists of a laser print grid of images of goddesses, the artist's vulva, V-shaped objects of everyday life, and obscene graffiti, among others. These images are interspersed with texts, telling vulva's adverse story in a society that denies women's multi-faceted sexual pleasure. Vulva, for example, 'reads Masters and Johnson and understands her vaginal orgasms have not been measured by any instrumentality and that she should only experience clitoral orgasms...' Vulva also 'deciphers Lacan and Baudrillard and discovers she is only a sign, a signification of the void, of absence, of what is not male... (she is given a pen for taking notes).' Lastly, vulva 'decodes Feminist Constructivist Semiotics and realizes she has no authentic feelings at all; even her erotic sensations are constructed by patriarchal projections, impositions, and conditioning...' (43) One can conclude from these side-swipes aimed at feminism, that Schneemann's personal experiences did not correspond with mainstream feminist analyses, which have been, at times, quite proscriptive.

In her multimedia installation, *Known/Unknown: Plague Column* from 1996, Schneemann tackled the relationship between erotic and medical body, personal experience and "objectivity" of medical data, as well as conventional and alternative healing methods. Inspired by an eighteenth century pest column she encountered in an Austrian rural chapel, the artist explores the social meanings of diseases and their various treatments. Schneemann combined large columns of permuted-color laser prints of vastly enlarged healthy and unhealthy body cells, wall-texts of reactions to certain diseases and forms of treatment by friends and doctors, oranges spiked with injection needles hanging from the ceiling, and a circle of video monitors placed on a bed of polyurethane breast casts and medical hoses. Projected is a video of doctor's visits, breast examinations, and scenes from a domestic, rural life - the artist's. However, as the origins of widespread diseases such as cancer and AIDS and their successful treatment remain an object of debate, it also does not become entirely known to the viewer whether the artist herself is an affected patient, or a detached observer of potentially fatal illness.

While the artist is careful not to reveal her condition to the viewer, the following enlarged wall-text of *Known/Unknown* captures, I find, the quintessence of Schneemann's oeuvre: 'He told her he knew a woman who had a very pretty breast reconstruction. She reminded him that the reconstructed breast had no erotic

sensation at all.⁴⁴ This short dialog also highlights the challenges that accompany the preservation and exhibition of Schneemann's body art. Just a couple of years ago, the environment in which the artist performed her pioneering body action *Eye Body* mentioned at the beginning of this essay, was laboriously reconstructed for the show *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949-79* in Los Angeles.⁴⁵ However, the reconstruction, which included 36 black-and-white shots that resulted from Schneemann's body action, failed to convey the core of Schneemann's work. It remained lifeless and cold, and rather signified the absence of what it so meticulously attempted to reconstruct.

I do not mean to suggest that Schneemann's work in the 1960s and thereafter was exclusively influenced by Reich. However, I find an acknowledgement of his influence, in view of the artist's intense study of the psychologist's writings, crucial in understanding Schneemann's individual brand of sexual aesthetics and politics, as well as her continued marginalization.⁴⁶ Both, Reich and Schneemann, have mined a sensitive spot in this society in their work. By making a claim for the validity and necessity of physical sensations in a sexual as well as in a cultural-political context, they are rebelling against a society preoccupied with the visual, the make-believe, the surrogate, and, last but not least, the construct.

Notes

1. For sexist comments about *Eye Body* see Carolee Schneemann, interview with Rebecca Schneider in Schneider: *The Explicit Body in Performance* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1997), 37. *Eye Body* can be interpreted as combining and transcending Pollock's Action Painting, in which the painter's body became a moving agent, Klein's *Anthropométries*, in which the artist used women as live paintbrushes, and Rauschenberg's *Combine Paintings*, in which he used everyday objects and images in order to bridge the gap between life and art. In *Eye Body* Schneemann was an active agent using herself as an additional material and ground.

2. Schneemann herself was quick to align her works of the 1960s with later feminist ideas and practices. Beginning in the mid-1970s, she connected them in particular to the Great Goddess appreciation among feminist artists in her later artworks such as *Homerunmuse* (1977) and *Unexpectedly Research* (1962-92), as well as in her writings (see, for example, her interpretation of *Eye Body* in *More than Meat Joy*, p. 52).

3. Kristine Stiles #Schlaget Auf: The Problem with Carolee Schneemann's Painting' in *Carolee Schneemann: Up to and Including Her Limits* (New York, NY: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996) p. 22.

4. See Carolee Schneemann's *Labyrinth* (University of Illinois, 1960), Carolee Schneemann Papers, #95000, box 1/1960-67, file: *Labyrinth*, 1960, Getty Research Institute.

5. In an interview with art historian Moira Roth in 1979 Schneemann stated that when she did *Eye Body*, her traditions were still so painterly that she would have objected very strenuously to the

literary implications of autobiography. She rather, at that time, saw the body as a primary material that she wanted to explore, as she explored other materials such as metal, glass, and plastic. See the unpublished interview in the Carolee Schneemann Papers, #950001, box 14, file: Censorship, 1990, Getty Research Institute.

6. Carolee Schneemann *More than Meat Joy: Complete Performance Works and Selected Writings* (New Paltz, NY: Documentext, 1997 (1979) p. 196.

7. Schneemann, *More than Meat Joy* p. 58.

8. Schneemann's film *Fuses* was shot with a 16mm camera. It is silent, ca. 22 minutes long at 24 frames per second (sometimes screened at 16 frames per second), and was first shown around 1967/68. The video version of 1992 is about 18 minutes long.

9. For my analysis of *Fuses* I am indebted to Scott MacDonald's insightful essay 'Carolee Schneemann's Autobiographical Trilogy' *Film Quarterly* 34:1 (Fall 1980), 27-32 and his interview with the artist in his *A Critical Cinema: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988) pp.134-151, as well as to David James' excellent structural analysis of this film in his *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989) pp. 317-321.

10. Dave Mc Cullough 'Eat Movies' *San Francisco Express Times* (February 25, 1968[?]).

11. Schneemann mentioned the influence of Wilhelm Reich's theories on her work repeatedly in her *More than Meat Joy*, beginning with the preface, p. 7. She also discussed the importance of Reich's ideas in her work in an interview with the author, New York, August 7, 1997.

12. Schneemann, interview with the author, New York, August 7, 1997.

13. Wilhelm Reich *The Function of the Orgasm: Sex-Economic Problems of Biological Energy* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1973 (1942) p. 90.

14. See for a description of the orgone accumulator and its functions Jerome Greenfield *Wilhelm Reich vs. the U.S.A.* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, 1974), 50, 58ff.

15. Journalist Mildred Brady first made the claim, that the orgone-box was devised as a sex-stimulant promising orgasmic potency. Her articles 'The New Cult of Sex and Anarchy' and 'The Strange Case of Wilhelm Reich' which appeared in the April 1947 issue of *Harper's magazine* and the May 26, 1947 issue of the *New Republic*, respectively, led to an investigation against Reich by the FDA. See main text below.

16. Reich used his orgone energy accumulator apparently successfully in his treatment of cancer patients. He described his use of orgone therapy, for example, in his *Selected Writings: An Introduction to Orgonomy* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1973 (1951) pp. 229-264.

17. Schneemann, interview with the author, New York, August 7, 1997.

18. See Carolee Schneemann 'Meat Joy: Notes' in Michael Benedict (ed.) *Theatre Experiment* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 359.

19. Schneemann, interview with the author, New York, August 7, 1997. For Schneemann's use of Reichian therapeutical methods in her work with performers in other pieces, see also Schneemann, *More than Meat Joy* p. 17. The goal of Reich's character analytical treatment is to loosen a person's muscular armor to overcome resistance to analysis. The muscular armor, Reich believed, corresponded to a character-armor, certain attitudes developed in defense against emotional

excitations. The practice involves actual, sometimes painful, physical contact between the therapist and the patient. See Wilhelm Reich's writing on *Character Analysis*, published as a book first by the Orgone Institute Press in 1945, and included in other publications by Reich such as *The Function of the Orgasm and his Selected Writings: An Introduction to Orgonomy*.

20. Schneemann, interview with the author, New York, August 7, 1997.

21. Schneemann *More than Meat Joy* p. 194.

22. Reich was forced to leave his exile countries Denmark, and later Norway, where he had immigrated in order to escape the Nazi-regime, because of controversies surrounding his work. See Greenfield, Wilhelm Reich vs. the U.S.A., chapters 2-15.

23. Reich was also expelled from the Social Democratic Party in 1929, and from the Communist Party in 1934, after having been well regarded in both parties. See Myron Sharaf *Fury on Earth: A Biography of Wilhelm Reich* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press/Marek, 1983), 5f.

24. Reich related, for example, that his first major paper on genital sexuality in 1923, in which he outlined his contention that genital disturbance was perhaps the most important symptom of neurosis, was met with chilliness and rejection by fellow psychoanalysts. Reich, *The Function of the Orgasm*, p. 86.

25. See Greenfield *Wilhelm Reich vs. the U.S.A.* p. 25.

26. Greenfield *Wilhelm Reich vs. the U.S.A.* p. 66.

27. It is not yet clear, whether some of Reich's books unrelated to his orgone research were burned, as well. While the FDA denied these charges, co-workers of Reich, who had witnessed the burning, called this denial a cover-up. See Greenfield *Wilhelm Reich vs. the U.S.A.* p. 253.

28. While his ideas on biopsychiatric orgone therapy found widespread application in an allied system of therapy called bioenergetics, the New Left became interested in Reich's early politically inclined writings, such as in Paul A. Robinson *The Freudian Left* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1969). For the reception of Reich in the 1960s, see Greenfield *Wilhelm Reich vs. the U.S.A.* p.11.

29. I thank Carolee Schneemann for her insightful comments regarding Reich's betrayal by American society.

30. See Carolee Schneemann 'The Obscene Body/Politic' *Art Journal* 50:4 (Winter 1991) p. 29.

31. See 'Police Seize Two Underground Films' (July 19, 1969), Carolee Schneemann Papers, #950001, box 64, file: Film and Performance Clippings, 1969, Getty Research Institute.

32. See Carolee Schneemann 'Notes from the Underground: A Feminist Pornographer in Moscow' *The Independent* (March 1992) pp.23-25.

33. Schneemann *More than Meat Joy* p. 194.

34. See Aviva Rahmani 'A Conversation on Censorship with Carolee Schneemann' *M/E/A/N/I/N/G: Contemporary Art Issues* (November 1989) p. 4 and MacDonald *A Critical Cinema* p. 141. At a later screening of *Fuses* at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London, Schneemann was called a 'Deranged, Frigid, Nymphomaniac' by one viewer, and another, a young newspaper critic accused her of having assaulted his sexuality. See Schneemann *More than Meat Joy* p. 195.

35. Among the female artists George Maciunas accepted into the Fluxus group were Shigeo Kubota, Yoko Ono, and Mieko Shiomi. He, in fact, was close friends with Kubota and named her vice president of the movement, and he was deeply impressed by the democratic nature of Ono's early conceptual

works, which he held up as an example of Fluxus ideals.

36. Carolee Schneemann quoted in: *Ubi Fluxus ibi motus, 1990-1962* (Milano, Italy: Mazzotta, 1990) p. 89. Schneemann's exclusion from the American Fluxus-movement continues today. Her affiliation with that group still remains unacknowledged in major US-American compilations of Fluxus art. Editor's note: For a discussion of the relation to "mess" see Joanna Frueh 'Making a Mess, Women's Bane, Women's Pleasure' in K.Deepwell (ed) *Women Artists and Modernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press) pp.142-158.

37. One can argue, that with her hedonist approach Schneemann fit more readily into the European Happenings movement which tended to be openly political, sexual, and, in particular the work of the Viennese Actionists, utterly messy. In spite of these similarities, the aggressive sexuality of these actions was quite contrary to Schneemann's positive approach.

38. At a showing of *Fuses* at the Art Institute in Chicago in the early 1970s, a group of lesbians became extremely angry because the film did not provide a role model for them. *Fuses* has further been criticized for offering the naked female body, and therefore inviting appropriation by male culture as pornography.

39. Judith Hole and Ellen Levine noted about this objection that '[W]omen who believed that they were defining their own sexuality, by virtue of their freedom to have sexual relations whenever they chose, resisted the notion that their sexuality was still defined by men.' in Hole and Levine *Rebirth of Feminism* (New York, NY: Quadrangle Books, 1971), 221. The authors also state that Anne Koedt's essay 'The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm', first distributed in 1968, prior to its publication in 1970, met with resistance within the new women's movement. The authors expected that women would have felt a sense of psychological liberation at Koedt's "discovery," which countered the notion that full maturity into womanhood depended on moving from clitoral to vaginal orgasms, maintained by Freud and his followers. See pages 220.

40. See Laura Mulvey's influential essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' *Screen* 16 (Fall 1975) pp. 6-18.

41. Dick Higgins in a letter to Schneemann, March 10, 1981. Carolee Schneemann Papers, # 950001, box 37, file: Higgins, Dick, Getty Research Institute.

42. Carolee Schneemann in an undated answer to Dick Higgins. Carolee Schneemann Papers, # 950001, box 37, file: Higgins, Dick, Getty Research Institute. See the entire correspondence regarding Higgin's criticism in this file.

43. It is interesting to note that Schneemann's *Vulva's Morphia* was created around the same time Eve Ensler's award-winning play *The Vagina Monologues* was originally produced. The play, however, only debuted Off-Broadway on Valentine's Day 1998. The play, which has been performed with different casts nationally and internationally, gives voice to women's vaginal experiences, from rape to self-stimulation, and explores the power, pain, humor, wisdom, outrage and excitement hidden in women's vaginas. Carolee Schneemann's *Vulva's Morphia* was republished as artists pages in *n.paradoxa* (print version) Vol. 6 Desire and the Gaze, July 2000. pp.44, 46-47.

44. Wall-text from the installation *Known/Unknown: Plague Column* (1996) exhibited at the Elga Wimmer Galery, New York City, 1996. Copies of the wall-texts are in the author's possession.

45. See also the catalogue *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949-79* (Los Angeles,

CA: Museum of Contemporary Art/Thames and Hudson, 1998), illustrations on pp. 6 and 293 of a previous reconstruction in Schneemann's Manhattan studio, which differed from the later one at the museum.

46. It is interesting to note, that Schneemann has openly rejected the interpretation of her work in Freudian terms. Schneemann, for example, does not consider the umbrella, which frequently appears in her work, as a phallic object but a manifestation of vulvic space, which unfolds when you open it. See Henry M. Sayre, *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde Since 1970* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 171f. At a performances of her *Up to and Including Her Limits* in the mid 1970s, in which Schneemann was swinging naked in a harness, a man in the audience, well-known sociologist Erving Goffman, maintained that the artist's use of a rope evoked ideas of sado-masochistic pleasure. Schneemann objected that his interpretation disregarded the actual feelings involved, and that the motion of swinging for her triggered pleasurable childhood memories. Dick Higgins came to her aid claiming that 'the rope is innocent'. Schneemann related this incidence in a public lecture at the University of California in Santa Barbara, January 25, 1994.

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