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A place between desire and experience: Afterthoughts on Carolee Schneemann: Kinetic Painting

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'I want the evocation of space, a place between desire and experience.' This calls forth from a screen suspended in the Museum der Moderne, Salzburg on the occasion of the exhibition Carolee Schneemann: Kinetic Painting. Playing onscreen is the footage of Carolee Schneemann's performance *Meat Joy* (1964), in which Schneemann's declaration forms part of the work's playfully collaged soundscape. In the performance's 'place between desire and experience', an entropic choreography is enacted across a group of performers, culminating in an 'erotic rite' of bodies writhing among raw meat. While the carnal jouissance in *Meat Joy* pushes the performance's sequenced actions into an absurd realm of ecstatic chaos, it reflects Schneemann's lifelong practice of mediating a feminist politics of bodily pleasure that effectuates intersubjective relations. Curated by museum director Sabine Breitwieser in consultation with art historian Branden W. Joseph, Carolee Schneemann: Kinetic Painting presents a six-decade retrospective of Schneemann's influential artistic production across painting, assemblage, performance, film, and multimedia installation. In evoking spaces between erotic desire and feminist experience, Schneemann's inter-medial oeuvre attunes to the ethical affordances of sensory encounter.

The discipline of painting grounds both Schneemann's heterogeneous practice and the exhibition's deft curatorial narrative. Termed by Schneemann herself in reference to her training as a painter, 'Kinetic Painting' conveys an energetic and physical approach to painting as well as painterly gesture as a framework for embodied artworks across various media. This dual position of painting as both disciplinary orientation and point of departure underscores painting's place in Schneemann's oeuvre as what theo-

rist Bill Brown names a ‘material unconscious’: a ‘referential excess’ and ‘formalizing pressure’ of one medium onto others, ‘where the relation between the visible and the invisible, the material and the abstract, things in space and space itself, might be materialized’.[1] Throughout Schneemann’s multi-media oeuvre, painterly expression materializes the kinetic strokes of sensory experience and bodily encounters that beget, as Branden W. Joseph argues, ‘an ethical relation to the other [that] constitutes one of the most significant stakes of Schneemann’s art’.[2]



Fig. 1: Carolee Schneemann, Installation View, Kinetic Painting 2015. Courtesy of the Museum der Moderne Salzburg and P•P•O•W, New York.

Schneemann’s reformulation of painting as a bodily, tactile, and ethical expression across media operates dialectically against the historicity of painting dominant during Schneemann’s emergence in the late 1950s. The artist’s early paintings on view simultaneously reference and contest their contextual milieu of a New York dominated by Abstract Expressionism. As Schneemann states, ‘I was already heavily influenced by the abstract expressionists and the energy that was required kinetically, optically; you have to have a muscular perception to perceive their works.’[3] However, Schneemann’s sensitivity to the kinetic ‘muscular perception’ of Abstract Expressionism directly opposes synchronic discourses of American modernist opticality, autonomy, and medium-specific referentiality, which celebrated Abstract Expressionism as the apotheosis of painting investigating painting in itself.[4] Through displays of Schneemann’s dense, textural, early land-

scape and figurative paintings, her referentiality to painterly expressionism can be read as a feminist injunction against abstract painting's 'division of labor of the senses' that hegemonically privileged autonomy over intersubjectivity and advocated optical purity at the expense of excising figurative representation, multisensory pleasure, and gendered experience.[5] By indexing bodily sensation as requisite for instantiating affective encounters between herself, the artwork, and the viewer, Schneemann paints a feminist politics in which intimacy embodied across media serves to orient ethical openness.

Of the paintings on view, *Pinwheel* (1957) most emphatically evinces Schneemann's feminist gesture of expanding and mediating painting into bodily and intersubjective interactions. The work is composed of a colorful abstract painting fastened to a potter's wheel, whose rotational technology sets the painting into dimensional motion. Through spinning the painting into the reciprocal materialisation of exterior space, *Pinwheel* forms a 'haptic visuality' that, as film theorist Laura U. Marks defines, encourages 'a bodily relation between the viewer and the image'.[6] Aptly characterising Schneemann's sensory practices, Marks further relates haptic images to a two-fold feminist politics of embodiment, as both a 'feminine visual *strategy*' that describes 'women's and feminist practices'[7] and functioning as 'erotic regardless of their content, because they construct a particular kind of intersubjective relationship between beholder and image'.[8] Through the transformation of painting into an affective and sensorial address of the viewer, Schneemann upholds a feminist visual strategy in which the erotics of haptic encounter preserves, as Marks maintains, 'this being-for-the-other [that] is the basis of the ethical relation'.[9]

Yet what precedes and makes possible Schneemann's feminism of an ethical and erotic sensibility is her authorisation of images that index and draw forth her lived, embodied experience. In the black-and-white photographic series *Eye Body* (1963), displayed in its entirety, Schneemann performs '36 transformative actions for the camera', in which her nude body figures spaces of desire that contest visual logics of objectification. As Schneemann writes on *Eye Body*,

[n]ot only am I an image-maker, but I explore the image values of flesh as a material I choose to work with. The body may remain erotic, sexual, desired, desiring but it is as well votive: marked, written over in a text of stroke and gesture discovered by my creative female will. [10]

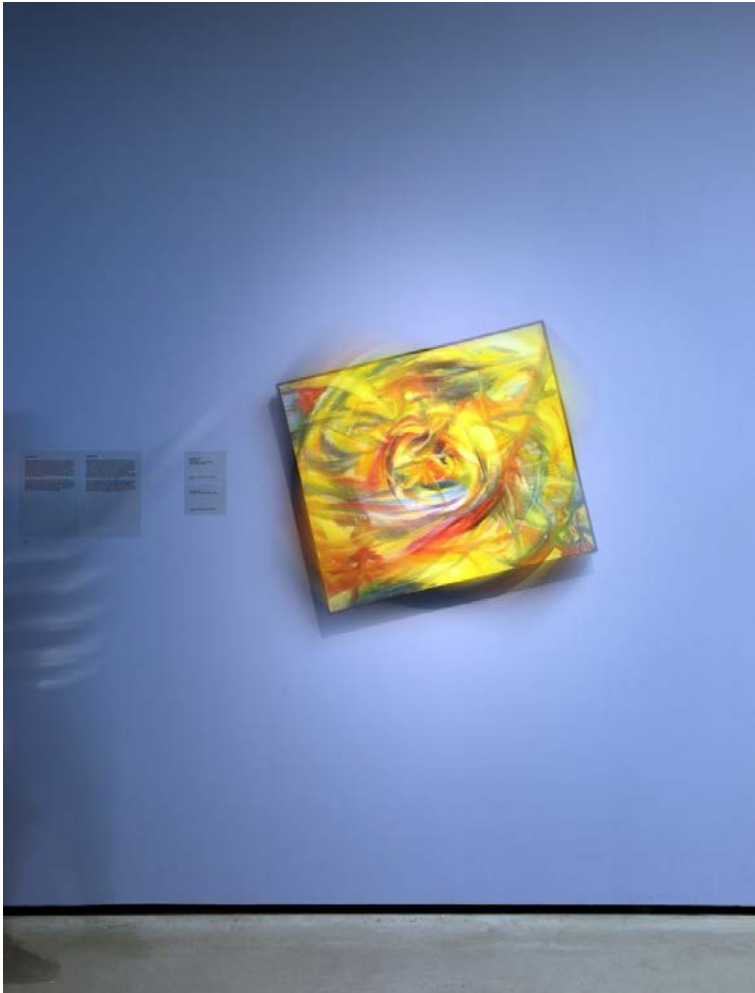


Fig. 2: Carolee Schneemann, Installation View, Kinetic Painting 2015. Courtesy of the Museum der Moderne Salzburg and P•P•O•W, New York.

As both ‘image-maker and image value’, Schneemann occupies a double subject position historically denied to women, both as artists and as images. Incorporating bodily pleasure as the gestural materiality of *Eye Body* functions to reject contiguous theorisations of feminist visualities based on psychical lack, which endeavored to destroy traditions of visual pleasure ‘not in favour of a reconstituted new pleasure’.[11] In an oppositional tactic to Laura Mulvey’s condemnation that women’s assumption of images of pleasure ‘plays to and signifies male desire’, Schneemann’s asser-

tion and mediation of bodily pleasure across an image thus grounds an articulation of women's subjectivity.[12] As Schneemann maintains, 'women artists explore erotic imagery because our bodies exemplify a historic battleground – we are dismantling conventional sexual ideology and its punishing suppressions'.[13]

Schneemann's dismantling of conventional sexual ideology through embodying desire is vividly evinced in her controversial film *Fuses* (1964-67), which is allocated an entire gallery within the exhibition's displays of experimental films and films of performances. A vibrantly over-painted film of ecstatic sexual intercourse and domestic pleasure with her then-partner James Tenney, *Fuses* not only extends the *Eye Body* double subject position of 'image and image-maker' into cinematic time but also forges erotic intersubjectivity both onscreen and with the viewer. As art historian Mignon Nixon writes, *Fuses* forms a 'personal politics' rooted in 'the desire to see oneself as an erotic subject in a reciprocal relation to the other'.[14] Investing *Fuses* with the physicality of erotic reciprocity, Schneemann 'baked, stamped, stained, painted, chopped, and reassembled' its 16mm film strip, wanting 'to put into that *materiality* of film the energies of the body'.[15] As film theorist Jennifer Barker maintains about the film's affective properties, 'the experience of *Fuses* is erotic not simply because bodies on screen are behaving erotically, but because the film and viewer are erotically engaged with one another'.[16] In conjunction with the film's feminist politics of self-authorized and self-representational erotic iconography, Schneemann's mediation of bodily energy and physical pleasure into an open experiential encounter forms a sensory reciprocity that approaches and celebrates the equality of difference across gendered relations.

All of Schneemann's experimental films and films of performances presented in the exhibition have been given high definition digital transfers. For the purposes of both preservation and display, the digital versions standardise a diverse analogue record of Schneemann's pioneering and wide-ranging expanded and performative films. The digitisation of experimental analogue media is a distinct and increasingly imperative conservational and curatorial decision, yet it nonetheless calls into question debates regarding media materiality in the digital era. As Friedrich Kittler warned,

[t]he general digitization of information and channels erases the difference between individual media. Sound and image, voice and text are reduced to surface effects. [17]



Fig. 3: Carolee Schneemann, Installation View, Kinetic Painting 2015. Courtesy of the Museum der Moderne Salzburg and P•P•O•W, New York.

Like Kittler, one might lament the loss of media individuality and the reduction of supposed phenomenological authenticity through digitisation. However, Schneemann resists this interpretation and considers the digital transfers as originals. As she maintains in a recent interview regarding the digitisation of *Fuses*:

[t]he reason it's been restored is because in 1966, the original collage on film was so thick that it could only be pushed through a developer by hand. So anyone who's seen *Fuses* has already seen it at least one generation from the original; but with new technology they've restored it to the original. It's more brilliant, it's more sexy, plus there's ten missing minutes that I hadn't been able to afford originally to print at all, so it's all there! [18]

Following Schneemann's revelation, digital restoration transforms *Fuses* into an equally original body of film with a heightened fidelity to its visual, erotic, and durational intent. 'More sexy', Schneemann's digital transfers gain imagistic clarity, colouristic intensity, and lasting durability while recovering the affective dimension of analogue film's sensory indexicality. The digital restorations of Schneemann's films bear witness to the materiality of an analogue corpus to make sensible the ethical reciprocity of bodily encounter.

The exhibition concludes its narrative with Schneemann's realisation of kinetic painting into multimedia installation. While works like *Eye Body* and *Fuses* iterate feminist statements in which the expression and perception of bodily pleasure form an ethics of intersubjectivity, Schneemann's late installations approach otherness through embodying loss in contexts of mourning. As art critic David Levi Straus writes,

the most difficult challenge to an art based on the primacy of the body and physicality is the body's ultimate transitoriness. Bodies are always disappearing. For this reason, Schneemann's work moves back and forth between joy and grief as magnetic poles. [19]

In the multimedia installation *Mortal Coils* (1995), Schneemann memorialises 15 artist friends who died between 1992-1995 by projecting their photographic portraits onto a system of suspended, coiling ropes. As 'an attempt to reanimate lost bodies, to recover their physicality', *Mortal Coils* physicalises grief and imbricates the viewer into the work of mourning to ethically approach the ultimate otherness of loss.[20]

Against Schneemann's fractious historical reception in the discrete margins of art, performance, and film, the exhibition's framework of kinetic painting comprehensively re-conceptualises Schneemann's transformation of the limits of aesthetic media while advocating a feminist politics of bodily pleasure. Carolee Schneemann's ethical approach of the other through experiential intimacy and sensory encounter across bodies and images remains an imperative aesthetic and political task, which resounds in this contemporary moment marked by globalised violence and vulnerability. From sensory eroticism to the redemption of transience, from painting the body to mediating intersubjective relations, Carolee Schneemann: Kinetic Painting celebrates Schneemann's complex oeuvre and its spaces and places of feminist desire and ethical experience.

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Notes

- [1] Brown 1996, pp. 4-17.
- [2] Joseph 2015, p. 28.
- [3] Jones & Schneemann 2012, p. 443.
- [4] For modernist aesthetic tenets see the canonical essay by Greenberg (1993). For Schneemann's challenge to modernist principles see Osterweil 2016, p. 147.
- [5] For a critique of the hegemonic affordances of Modernist opticality see Buchloh 2008, p. 78.
- [6] Marks 2002, p. 3.
- [7] Marks 2000, p. 170.
- [8] Marks 2002, p. 13.
- [9] *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- [10] Schneemann 1991, p. 28.
- [11] Mulvey 2004 (orig. in 1975), p. 835.

AFTHERTHOUGHT ON CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN: KINETIC PAINTING

- [12] Ibid., p. 837.
- [13] Schneemann 1991, p. 28.
- [14] Nixon 2015, p. 53.
- [15] Schneemann 2002, p. 323. See also MacDonald 1980, p. 28.
- [16] Barker 2004, p. 23.
- [17] Kittler 1986, p. 102.
- [18] Jones & Schneemann 2012, p. 448.
- [19] Strauss 2002, p. 323.
- [20] Ibid.