

Pittsburgh Film-Makers

Visiting Film-Maker Carolee Schneemann

Oct. 27-28, 1978

The work of Carolee Schneemann—her art, and life—is of a kind that provokes and unsettles many viewers. She resists categorizing in all the conventional ways, seeming to direct her attention in a score of different directions. As a painter she has been realistic, then non-representational. As a collage artist she has attached three dimensional objects onto canvas and also placed "things" rather than "images" in three-dimensional spaces (boxes, but before she met boxer Joseph Cornell). As a performer she is often grouped with happenings, but she calls her work in this medium "kinetic theater." Her first contact with motion pictures came as a figure before the camera, but she soon elected to move behind the camera, and then be in front of it too. Her best-known film is the explicitly erotic Fuses yet none of her other films enter for long that territory of lovemaking and genital energy. Some films are tightly edited, others (the records of performances) seem formless. The essays in two of her books are carefully organized, but her third book (ABC) has no binding, permitting the pages to be shuffled! [1]

All these centrifugal appearances are, in fact, only appearances, and not centrifugal. For more than twenty years Schneemann's work has led in one, simple direction: the merging of her life with her art, and the liberating of her experience as she applied the freedom of her art to her life as a woman. In her second book, Cezanne, She Was A Great Painter (1975) Schneemann repeatedly asserts this. For example, on page 24 she says not only "In the early sixties I felt quite alone in my insistence on the integrity of my own sexuality and creativity" but then two paragraphs later reiterates the point from another direction: "The use of my own body as integral to my work was confusing to many people." Her deliberate decision to break down the distinctions between on- and off-stage reality, the simultaneous gift-of and discovery-of self was, and is, an act that polarizes audiences. We enter her world in all its aspects or stand completely outside it. Actually this is not so unusual. The literary career of Anais Nin is very similar (and Schneemann's frequent experience in the 1960s of being mistaken for Nin—there is a facial resemblance—speaks far more eloquently of their shared aspiration). The film diaries of Jonas Mekas, Stan Brakhage, and Andrew Noren also parallel Schneemann's in important respects (the differences proceeding from the particular character of each "diarist," each of whom began his or her own film journal totally independently).

Schneemann's reputation also includes feminism, an ardent concern with freeing women from sexual stereotyping, submissive positions and roles in society. This aspect of her reputation is not just an appearance—it is very real. What she regards as important, worth pursuing, is alluded to in her essay "About Fuses" where she speaks of Jim Tenney: "Fuses was made as an homage to a relationship of ten years—to a man with whom I lived and worked as an equal." [2] "As an equal" is a key distinction, and symptomatic of her working methods as well. On the reverse side of this page is a reproduction of one of her notebooks. Notice how none of the words are sexually specific ("eyes, nose, mouth, belly, hands, fingers, genitals fingers, juices, movement, moving . . ."). Schneemann's interest is as much in what we share as in what differentiates us.

—R.A.Haller

References:

1. Parts of a Body House Book (London, 1972) and Cezanne, She Was A Great Painter (New York, 1975); ABC—We Print Anything In The Cards (New Paltz, 1977).
 2. Cezanne, p. 32.
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Eyes
Nose Mouth
Belly Hands
Fingers
Genitals Hips
Joints +
movement
moving



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