

Carolee Schneemann
Kinetic Painting



Carolee Schneemann Kinetic Painting

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for the
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Carolee Schneemann in New York
in front of *Sir Henry Francis Taylor*, 1961
Photo: Michael Glass

Preface

This book is published in conjunction with *Carolee Schneemann. Kinetic Painting*, a comprehensive retrospective of Carolee Schneemann's oeuvre as an artist, choreographer, experimental filmmaker, performer, and writer at the Museum der Moderne Salzburg. Schneemann's works have been presented all over the world, and she has made an indelible mark on the history of art both through her own work and through her influence over subsequent generations of artists, especially in the field of performance art. Yet her rich oeuvre, which now spans more than six decades, is far more diverse and complex than is generally known. That is why we undertook a thorough scholarly review of her entire output to prepare the ground for this exhibition, which aims to introduce viewers to little-known and underappreciated pieces that shed light on the context in which her canonical works originated. We hope that the show will inspire a reassessment of her oeuvre as a whole. The central idea of the presentation is the conception of kinetic painting, which Schneemann, a landscape painter by training, devised to describe her mature practice: an embodied and time-bound art and, more generally, one that transcends the boundaries of media.

Starting with Schneemann's early portraits and landscapes of the 1950s, the exhibition and catalogue trace the development that led to the painting constructions and assemblages she created in the 1960s. «I wanted to learn how to see,» the artist recalls; she soon combined her painterly investigation of the figure in a natural setting with studies in art history and started incorporating photographs and everyday objects that carried personal meaning into her paintings, assemblages, and hybrid constructions. An early proponent of techniques designed to reduce the influence of subjective creative choices, she resorted to unusual expedients: fire, for example, became a constitutive part of the process. The show then draws a line from these works to her radical performances and experimental films, culminating in her kinetic multimedia installations. Schneemann's ambition to expand painting beyond the confines of the canvas was evident early on, and her explorations quickly came to encompass other media and disciplines such as dance, performance, photography, and film. Schneemann was a leading protagonist of the avant-garde movement in New York's downtown arts scene, which flourished in the fields of film, dance, and music, while also synthesizing different disciplines in the forms of Happenings and events. She was also a cofounder of the famous Judson Dance Theater and the first visual artist to choreograph for the ensemble. Like the other members of this experimental scene, she sought to undo the separation between painting and «life» and to enhance her art by incorporating actions in space and time. Schneemann started integrating motorized elements into her painting constructions and soon became herself a vital component of the visual compositions that, in the role of artist, she was creating—as she asked herself at the time, «Can I be both image and image-maker?» The same irreverent spirit and embrace of sensuality is palpable in her films, dances, «kinetic theater» pieces, and performances, all of which can be seen to grow out of her efforts to expand painting. Responding to representations of sexuality made predominantly from the perspective of male artists, Schneemann began to address the subject in her own work. Flaunting her naked body and defying conventional boundaries of decorum, many of her pieces challenged dominant interpretations of female sexuality, and some were perceived as deliberately

provocative. She also pioneered the use of electronic media in art, and her multimedia installations, on which she continues to work, unfold a distinctive visual language that captivates the viewer no less than her earlier live performances.

In my introductory essay, I have sought to shed light on the evolution of Carolee Schneemann's art with a view to her deployment of diverse media, disciplines, and genres in the wider context of kinetic painting. Branden W. Joseph, who has done important work on the exhibition as consulting curator, explores general questions of the image and argues that «disorder,» a concept with deep roots in art history, represents a distinctive ethical quality. Schneemann always saw her art as a critical practice and was not afraid to address political issues head-on. Taking the well-known experimental films *Fuses* (1964–1967) and *Viet-Flakes* (1965) as examples, Mignon Nixon discusses this aspect of the artist's work, which has not received the attention it merits, with a particular focus on how Schneemann inserts the personal into the sphere of the political while conversely rendering politics personal. Included in the illustration section are basic writings by Schneemann on her works, as well as two focus essays: Judith Rodenbeck considers the performance *Water Light / Water Needle* (1966) and shows how Schneemann, inspired by a trip to Venice, builds her visual language out of spoken language, color, movement, and composition. Ara Osterweil analyzes the artist's experimental films in relation to her performance pieces as well as 1960s American avant-garde film. As we began to prepare the exhibition, we asked Catherine Damman to undertake comprehensive research; the impressive fruits of her labor form the appendix, which includes an extensive biography outlining salient events in Schneemann's life, a history of exhibitions and performances of her work, and a bibliography. Together with the other sections of the present book, it offers the first complete portrait of Carolee Schneemann's achievements, and I hope it will prove instrumental in enabling broader audiences to discover and appreciate the oeuvre of this extraordinary artist.

Sabine Breitwieser
Director and Curator

Acknowledgments

The exhibition *Carolee Schneemann. Kinetic Painting* and the accompanying catalogue have been a long time in the making, and the endeavor could not have come to fruition without the support of many different people. I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude, first of all, to Carolee Schneemann, who was unstinting in her close collaboration with me and everyone else involved in this demanding project. Most of our visits to Carolee's wonderful home in New Paltz, New York, culminated with her unearthing yet another formidable and little-known piece in her studio, and she was unfailing in her great patience, openness, and warmhearted hospitality. Working with her over the past several years has been among the most rewarding experiences of my career as curator and museum director.

Numerous lenders have generously entrusted their treasures to us for the duration of the exhibition: I am grateful, first and foremost, to the artist herself and her gallery, P.P.O.W., New York, who have loaned us the single largest set of works. I would also like to thank Glenn D. Lowry, Director, Christophe Cherix, Chief Curator of Drawings and Prints, Stuart Comer, Chief Curator of Media and Performance Art, and Ann Temkin, Chief Curator of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, for enabling us to present too major artworks by Carolee Schneemann. Connie Butler, now Chief Curator at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, and I worked together as chief curators at MoMA to acquire *Up to and Including Her Limits* (1973–1976) in a joint purchase for our two departments, so I would like to use this opportunity to thank her as well. Erica Papernik-Shimizu, Assistant Curator at the museum's Department of Media and Performance Art, provided indispensable assistance in processing the loan. I am grateful, moreover, to the mumok—museum moderner kunst stiftung ludwig, Vienna, and to its director, Karola Kraus; to Nicholas Serota, Director, and Francis Morris, Director of Collection, International Art, at the Tate in London; to Peter P. Blank, Head of the Art and Architecture Library, and Robert G. Trujillo, Director and Frances and Charles Field Curator of Special Collections, and Tim Noakes, Library Specialist and Curatorial Assistant of Special Collections, at Stanford University; and to the Special Collections at the Getty Research Institute. I would also like to thank the many private collectors who supported the exhibition, and the Generali Foundation which generously permitted us to present films and videos and an important kinetic work by Schneemann from its collection.

I owe especial gratitude to Professor Branden W. Joseph at Columbia University, New York, who shared my enthusiasm for Carolee Schneemann's oeuvre and my belief that the time had come to propose a thorough reassessment of her art in a major retrospective and book. Despite numerous other commitments, he agreed to work on the show as my consulting curator and to join the artist and me for a series of meetings in which we reviewed her work. Combining deep knowledge and scholarly attention to detail with insatiable curiosity, he was an inspiration to work with, and our lively discussions have enhanced the project in more ways than I can enumerate. He also helped us select the other authors who contributed essays to the catalogue; I am very grateful to Mignon Nixon, Ara Osterweil, and Judith Rodenbeck for sharing their insights into Schneemann's art with us. Catherine Damman, our research assistant, worked with enormous dedication to compile a wealth of relevant information, as did Katie Langjahr, who assisted in this task.



Meat Joy, November 1964,
Performance, Judson Dance Theater,
Judson Memorial Church, New York, NY, US
From left: Stanley Gochenouer,
Dorothea Rockburne, James Tenney (hands),
Carolee Schneemann
Photo: Al Giese

Wendy Olsoff and Penny Pilkington at P.P.O.W and gallery director Anneliis Beadnell provided invaluable support as we put together the exhibition and the book. Andy Archer, Studio Director, was always ready to help us and solicitous for Carolee Schneemann's well-being. Lori Zippay, Director, Electronic Art Intermix, and Andrew Lampert at Anthology Film Archives in New York worked with us to produce new high-definition digital transfers of Schneemann's films, enabling us to present them in unprecedented quality.

I started working on this exhibition back when I was living in New York, but once I took over as director of the Museum der Moderne Salzburg, the project quickly grew to such proportions that I could not have brought it to completion without the help of my indefatigable team. When I arrived in Salzburg, Tina Teufel jumped at the opportunity to work on the exhibition with Branden W. Joseph and myself. We were later joined by Andrea Lehner, who primarily devoted herself to compiling Schneemann's writings for the catalogue, and the three of us determined the details of the catalogue's contents in many a meeting. I am most grateful to both of them, as well as to the entire team, including the museum's registrar, Susanne Greimel, and the technicians, for our close and effective collaboration.

In conclusion, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to the members of the International Honorary Board I convened to prepare a benefit in Carolee Schneemann's honor. Numerous prominent individuals I approached immediately pledged their support to the exhibition and catalogue, led by Thaddaeus Ropac, who also selflessly donated a work by Andy Warhol for the auction; Corinne and Gert-Rudolf Flick, London/Salzburg; Agnes Gund, New York; Brigitte and Arend Oetker, Berlin; Rudolf Scholten, Vienna; Jerry I. Speyer, New York; Anne and Wolfgang Titze, Arosa; Gerhard Lenz, Salzburg; Sarah Peter, New York; and many others whose names are listed in the appendix. Their dedication to Carolee Schneemann's art and encouragement of this project has meant a great deal to me, and it has been an honor to work with them.

Sabine Breitwieser



Self-portrait, 1955
Oil on canvas

*I had to get that nude off the canvas,
frozen flesh to art history's con-
junction of perceptual erotics and
an immobilizing social position.¹*

*Because I am really a painter—
a media artist—there must be some
compelling material that can only
be enacted live, so I become an in-
strument of real time.²*

Carolee Schneemann

Kinetic Painting: Carolee Schneemann's Media

Sabine Breitwieser



Girl on the stage, on her knees, 1940s
Childhood drawing
Pencil, pen, and crayon on paper

In the following pages, I will try to outline the development of Carolee Schneemann's art, highlighting her employment of different media, disciplines, and genres, from her early portraits and landscapes through her assemblages and the use of fire as a painterly material to her groundbreaking performances, experimental films, and large-scale installations in which electronic media play a prominent part. Art historians have primarily taken note of Schneemann as a pioneer of performance art and in the 1960s, as an assertive woman artist addressing issues of (female) sexuality and lust in provocative works which inevitably courted controversy. Schneemann's vital contributions to the establishment of a feminist art practice, her «painting constructions,» her choreography and performances, and her experimental films, whose full significance has not yet been recognized: these are only some facets of her oeuvre, and a thorough review of her prodigious output, which now spans six decades and reflects the period's social and technological changes in its extraordinary diversity, has long been overdue. The central idea, however, that has driven the evolution of Schneemann's creative expression has been a steadily expanding conception of painting; despite or, rather, because of the interdisciplinary nature of her process, it is aptly characterized by the notion of painting in motion—*kinetic painting*.

From Childhood Drawings to the (Self) Portrait

Carolee Schneemann was born in Fox Chase, a neighborhood in northeastern Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1939. Her father was a country doctor, and her mother took care of the family; as the oldest child (a brother and a sister followed), Carolee was responsible for the problems and activities of the younger children and had domestic household duties. She later chose one of the numerous drawings she created at the age of four or five for the cover of her feminist artist's book *Cézanne, She Was a Great Painter* (1974). As a high school student, Schneemann ran away and traveled to Pueblo, Mexico, on a fellowship from the organization Experiments in International Living. She also attended the Putney School in Vermont, but her family took her out after a short time because it seemed too progressive.³ After high school, she was awarded a full scholarship to study art at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York. In 1954, the year before she enrolled at Bard, she painted a self-portrait that shows her self-confidently looking straight at the beholder. Schneemann's recollections suggest that at the time, a young woman of her potential met with little support for her interests at the school.⁴ Louis Schanker was the only teacher there to appreciate her determination as an artist, but instead of nurturing her talent in painting he showed her how to prepare garlic for salad.⁵ Her philosophy professor discouraged her from working on Simone de Beauvoir

1 Carolee Schneemann, «Interview with Kate Haug,» *Wide Angle* 20, no. 1 (1977): 1–19. Reprinted in *Carolee Schneemann: Imaging Her Erotics* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003), 28.

2 Carolee Schneemann, «Interview with Carl Heyward,» *Art Papers* 17, no. 1 (January–February 1993): 9–16. Reprinted in *Carolee Schneemann: Imaging Her Erotics, 196*.

3 Carolee Schneemann in e-mails to the author, June 2015.

4 Bard College now ranks among the United States' leading and most innovative institutions of higher education.

5 Carolee Schneemann in e-mails to the author, June and September 2015: «He showed me how to use garlic properly for a salad, and he showed me the first example of an artist living in a New York City loft, filled with paintings, art materials.»



Willem de Kooning, *Excavation*, 1950
Oil on canvas
The Art Institute of Chicago.
Mr. and Ms. Frank G. Logan Purchase
Prize Fund; restricted gifts of
Edgar J. Kauffmann, Jr., and
Mr. and Ms. Noah Goldowsky, Jr.



Jackson Pollock and
Lee Krasner, 1950
Photograph by Hans Namuth

and recommended that she devote herself to «masters» like Jean-Paul Sartre instead. When, for lack of access to professional models for nude studies, she painted several nude self-portraits, she was sent on a leave of absence. (No objections were raised to her posing nude for her fellow male painting students.) She continued her studies on another scholarship at Columbia University's School of Painting and Sculpture in New York, where, in 1955, she met James (Jim) Tenney, an aspiring composer in training at the Juilliard School to whom she was subsequently married for thirteen years. Tenney also introduced her to the experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage, who became a close friend but was—according to Schneemann—deeply conflicted as to how he shared his intellectual friendship with Jim with her and how she would fulfill his expected female provider role. In 1958 Schneemann chose to paint not the later well-known filmmaker but his wife, Jane, an early anticipation of the probing examination of women's role in the arts that would be a major theme in her oeuvre. Despite several setbacks, she finished her studies at Columbia University,⁶ returned to Bard College, and graduated in 1960.

From the Figure in the Landscape to Painting Constructions in the Orbit of Abstract Expressionism and Experimental Music

From the mid-1950s to the early 1960s, Schneemann devoted most of her energy to landscape painting, a demanding genre of representational art. «A teacher with a superficial eye for my temperament advised me to study the Expressionists.... Kokoschka in particular. But it was Cézanne who immediately drew my attention; the precision of the act of painting as space was incomparable,» the artist wrote in a statement in 1963.⁷ The brief essay also notes another character who deeply influenced her at the time: the mathematical biologist D'Arcy Thompson,⁸ in whose writings she found encouragement as she began to devise a lexicon of forms derived from her individual perception and interpretation of natural phenomena. Schneemann felt herself to be «a part of nature; it was a living, expressive, animated world that sometimes responded to my wishes.»⁹ *Summer I (Honey Suckle)* (1958), which renders a natural scene in expressive and rhythmical brushstrokes, illustrates her pictorial idea of human existence in an «intoxicating natural world.» At the time, Schneemann was working beside Tenney's studio, so she frequently overheard him practicing his etudes, whose defining qualities were dissonance and fragmentation; he was immersing himself in the piano music of Charles Ives, who worked with aleatory elements and used polytonality and polyrhythm to make something new out of the historical configuration of traditional American music being fractured into cacophony, simultaneous sound layers and nontraditional instrumentality. Influenced by Paul Cézanne's painterly textures, in which visible traces of the brushwork allow the beholder to witness the creative process, and the aleatory patterns of Tenney's music, Schneemann's work from this period evinces the earliest contours of her kinetic painting, which her subsequent encounter with the New York School would throw into sharper relief.

By the mid-1950s, Abstract Expressionism in its American varieties had conquered the world.¹⁰ In 1949 *Life* magazine had celebrated Jackson Pollock as the «greatest

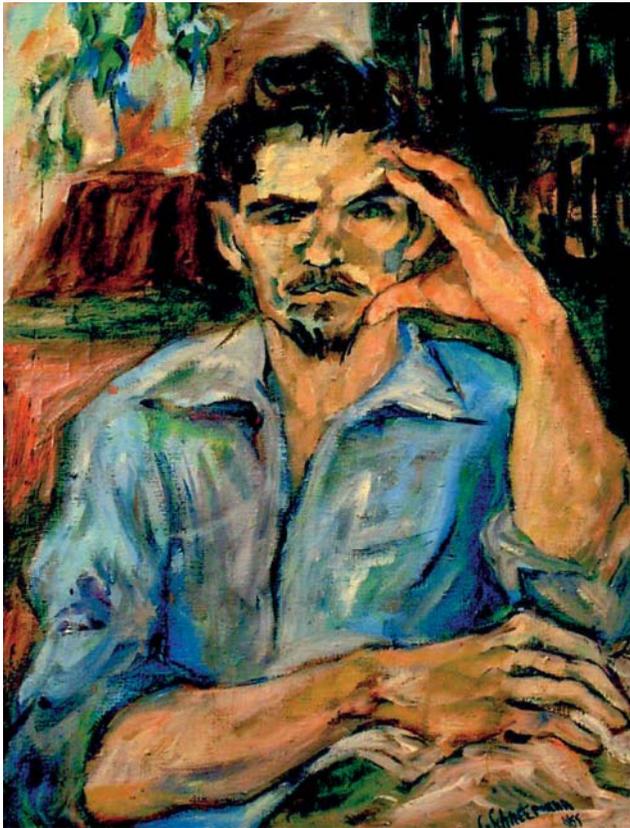
⁶ Recalling her time at Columbia University, Schneemann emphasizes the influence of Professor Andre Racz (Cluj, Romania, 1916–Englewood, NJ, 2008), who taught her nude drawing class.

⁷ «Statement by C.S.» [1963], in *Carolee Schneemann: Early & Recent Work*, exh. cat. (New York: Max Hutchinson Gallery; New Paltz, NY: Documentext, 1982), n. p.

⁸ Sir D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson (1860–1948) was a Scottish biologist and mathematician.

⁹ *Schneemann: Early & Recent Work*, n. p. (see note 7).

¹⁰ For the political dimensions of Abstract Expressionism, see Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).



Portrait of J.T., 1955
Oil on canvas

Portrait of Jane Brakhage, 1958
Oil on canvas



Mill Forms—Eagle Square, 1958
Oil on canvas



Colorado House, 1962, detail
Wood, stretchers, wire, fur, strips of
painted canvas, bottles, broom
handle, glass shards, flag, photograph,
plywood base

living painter in the United States.»¹¹ The influential art historian Harold Rosenberg had initially coined the term *Action Painting* to describe this new informal and abstract art. Discarding the idea of the canvas as a surface on which an object would be represented, the new painters conceived it as an arena, the scene of an event. «The new painting has broken down every distinction between art and life,» Rosenberg wrote in 1952.¹² Focusing on formal and technical aspects, his colleague Clement Greenberg—he and Rosenberg were effectively the guardians of the contemporary canon—asserted that «the purely plastic or abstract qualities of the work of art are the only ones that count.»¹³ He argued that painting should stop imitating reality or telling stories and favored a purism of the medium and attributes such as flatness and all-over painting.¹⁴ In February 1956 Schneemann reported in a letter to Stan Brakhage that she had visited the legendary Club, «the New York painters Arcanum,» where she had a long conversation with Willem de Kooning and encountered «all those famous I had carried suspectly and now have met & blown up or down.»¹⁵ At a panel at the Artists' Club she observed that the sculptor Marisol, who was wearing a mask and said very little, was the only woman among men.¹⁶ The male-dominated New York School hardly provided Schneemann with viable models to emulate as she sought to stake out her own position as an artist, but its influence is evident in early paintings such as *Aria Duetto* (1957).

That summer, she detailed her impressions of the mountains of Colorado, where she was sharing a cabin with Tenney, in a letter to the writer Jack Ludwig, one of her teachers at Bard College. She confidently notes that she is flouting the advice of other painters who had cautioned her that there would be «nothing one could do with» the area's landscapes because they were «too spectacular»: «Of course I'm managing. I can use anything I feel strongly enough for.» The picture, she writes, «is flaring out now that I'm into it,» and she adds:

«What we talked about—gesture and caricature—is a problem very real to this kind of landscape. The words I have now for what I'm after is to re-enact substance. The caricature in so much contemporary painting comes from emotional effects and thus this effectiveness is the subject of the paint. Form is now at the mercy of technique rather than a technique dedicated to form. Form for me is all the possible visual elements which are the worlds of painting. And the substance I mean is visual, structural because the obsessive image, and the emotional levels will flow by themselves as each stroke is building.»¹⁷

Schneemann later destroyed her paintings from this period because she came to see them as failed attempts. Five years later, lingering impressions from her stay in Colorado inspired one of her earliest assemblages, *Colorado House* (1962), a construction made of a failed painting she sliced apart with razor blades which fell apart within the wooden frame so she realized it should be a sculpture. Strips of canvas and fur, a whiskey bottle with a woman's face on the label, and photographs on a scaffold of picture frames, broomsticks, and wooden slats painted in bright colors constitute the composition of this work. A little flag flies atop the piece as though to mark it as the artist's new—and highly deconstructive—«home»; Schneemann seems to have

11 «Jackson Pollock: Is He the Greatest Living Painter in the United States?» *Life*, 8 August 1949: 42–45.

12 Harold Rosenberg, «The American Action Painters,» *Art News* 51, no. 8 (December 1952): 22.

13 Clement Greenberg, «Towards a Newer Laocoön,» *Partisan Review* 7, no. 4 (July–August 1940): 305.

14 Carolee Schneemann to Stan Brakhage, 5 February 1956, in *Correspondence Course*, ed. Kristine Stiles (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 4–5.

15 Kristine Stiles, ed., *Correspondence Course*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010, 4–5.

16 Carolee Schneemann in e-mails to the author, June 2015. Maria Sol «Marisol» Escobar, sculptor of Venezuelan descent, b. Paris, 1930, lives in New York.

17 Carolee Schneemann to Jack Ludwig, July 1956, in *Correspondence Course*, 7 (see note 14).



*Three Figures
after Pontormo, 1957*
Oil on canvas



Jacopo da Pontormo,
*Standing Male Nude Seen from the Back,
and Two Seated Nudes* (recto), 16th century
Red chalk on paper
Striding Nude with Arms Raised (verso),
16th century
Black and red chalk, traces of white chalk
heightening
The Pierpont Morgan Library,
New York. 1954.4. Purchase

recognized that this process and the resulting art represented a major step forward in her development as an artist.

Soon after her stay in Colorado, in the fall of 1957, Schneemann was introduced to the art historian Leo Steinberg and showed him her landscapes. She recalls that she was trying to «bring the canvas to life with dynamic brushwork, investing it with both substance and motion»;¹⁸ Steinberg assured her that was impossible. The artist, for her part, declared that she rejected the idea of painting as a «self-creating act» as proposed by the Action Painting school because it replaced psychology for «Vision.»¹⁹ Steinberg conceded her point and went on to analyze the composition of her painting *Mill Forms—Eagle Square* (1958) as overly «centralized.» As she remembered in a letter, the famous art historian was already at the door when he finally ventured the remark that her work was ««vital, valuable ...» and perhaps something else with a V,» and encouraged her to pursue her exploration of the figure in the landscape as long as she could, since «the world rarely offers itself as richness.»²⁰ Schneemann, however, was obviously looking for a different form of engagement with painting whose outlines were just beginning to emerge in her work, in qualities that may have escaped Steinberg's attention. Her painting *Three Figures after Pontormo* (1957) is based on her study of a drawing by the Florentine artist Jacopo da Pontormo (1494–1557) she had researched in a book (fig. 8).²¹ The main figure in

her picture is posed as a *figura serpentinata*, a style that is typical of Mannerism, although, perhaps uncharacteristically, it occupies the center of the composition. One can clearly see how the artist used cuts to ablate layers of paint from the canvas, leaving visible grooves in which dried paint has cracked open and curled. Schneemann, one might say, «scratched» at her depiction of the three figures as though trying to penetrate beneath the surface of the picture. «I wanted to hint at elements projecting out into space and then insist on them, while the basic material was painting.... My intention was to investigate a physicality that reached beyond the surface itself.»²² In fact, a second sketch on the verso of the Pontormo drawing she took inspiration from may have guided her hand as she put the finishing incisions and scratches on her work.

So Schneemann's desire to take painting beyond the canvas and the medium of the picture articulated itself fairly early on and soon expanded into fields and dimensions few artists had explored at the time. Another early work, *Pin Wheel* (1957), a colorful painting, is equipped with a simple mechanism on the back of the picture that allows the viewer to set it in rotation.²³ When she did not overhear the sounds coming from her partner's studio, she played music in her studio as she worked, and Johann Sebastian Bach was favored. After a fire in her studio in 1960 at graduate school in Illinois, she produced several works in which the deliberate use of fire was part of the creative process.²⁴ For the *Controlled Burning* series—examples include *For Yvonne Rainer's Ordinary Dance*²⁵ and *Darker Companion* (both 1962)—Schneemann placed photographs and glass and mirror shards inside wine crates and similar small wood

¹⁸ Carolee Schneemann in e-mails to the author, June 2015.

¹⁹ Carolee Schneemann to Naomi Levinson, September 1957, in *Correspondence Course*, 16 (see note 14).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

²¹ Jacopo da Pontormo, recto: *Standing Male Nude Seen from the Back, and Two Seated Nudes*, verso: *Striding Nude with Arms Raised*, 16th c., Collection of the Morgan Library and Museum, New York.

²² Carolee Schneemann in e-mails to the author, June 2015.

²³ Marcel Duchamp's *Rotoreliefs* (1935) may be regarded as the earliest pictures to involve rotation as a constitutive element. In 1961 Alfons Schilling (Basel 1934–Vienna 2013), whom Schneemann met not much later in New York, started painting on rotating sheets of paper and canvases in Paris.

²⁴ The first work in the Boxes series is *December Re-Membered* (1960), though its creation did not yet involve fire.

²⁵ The title pays homage to Yvonne Rainer, a founding member of the Judson Dance Theater (a group of artists who experimented with dance; other members included Trisha Brown and Steve Paxton). The ensemble's productions were distinguished by the rejection of conventional dance skills and techniques and the creative use of «ordinary» movements.



Controlled Burning:
For Yvonne Rainer's Ordinary Dance, 1962
Wooden box, glass shards,
mirrors, oil paint, burnt



Sir Henry Francis Taylor, 1961, detail
Oil paint, photographs (gelatin silver prints,
e. g., Sir Henry Francis Taylor
by Julia Margaret Cameron),
underpants, plaster, swing glass,
on Masonite panel

containers, fixing the pieces with synthetic resin, and then painted the entire arrangement.²⁶ She filled the boxes with straw, doused them with turpentine, lit them with a match, and quickly closed the lid. The burning time and the materials of the assemblages superseded the artist's deliberate painterly and sculptural intentions. «The resulting small conflagration heated the adhesive, which positioned the layers of glass and mirror, so when I opened the box and extinguished the fire, the fire had created the configuration in the box.»²⁷ Not unlike Yvonne Rainer and the other artists of the Judson Dance Theater (1962–1964), who choreographed using everyday movements («ordinary dance»), Schneemann, in the *Controlled Burning* series, experimented with a new form of painting using «ordinary» materials. As the nonartistic material of her choice, fire—or more precisely, the actions of igniting and extinguishing it—directed the choreography that arranged the elements in the assemblages, and thus figured as the true creative spirit behind the works.²⁸ Chance, which John Cage had introduced into art in the early 1950s, enters Schneemann's work in the «controlled» form of burning.

Responding to the view that painting should be conceived as an arena for action rather than a circumscribed field of static representation, Schneemann asked herself early on what sort of new content the genre might embrace. As her creative adaptation of Pontormo's drawing illustrates, she started to combine her painterly experimentation with research into areas of art history that seemed relevant to her own production. The assemblage *Sir Henry Francis Taylor* (1961) is an early example of how she linked her studies to a probing analysis of the role of women in society. The titular figure was a celebrated British poet and dramatist of the Victorian era; the writer Virginia Woolf and the photographer Julia Margaret Cameron were his cousins. In Schneemann's picture, a portrait of Taylor by Cameron gazes upon photographs of nude girls, a map of Illinois, and the plastercoated underpants of the artist's partner, which lends the work a sculptural quality. In *One Window Is Clear—Notes to Lou Andreas Salomé* (1965), Schneemann memorialized the Russian-German intellectual and writer, a friend and confidante of Rainer Maria Rilke and Friedrich Nietzsche. The picture contains photographs of these three prominent figures as well as fabrics and, near the top right and bottom left corners, tangles of audiotape on which the artist recorded quotes from Andreas-Salomé's study on narcissism.²⁹ The use of the (damaged) magnetic tape represents the role of retrospection in the thinking of Andreas-Salomé, who was also one of the first practicing woman psychoanalysts.

Schneemann's terms for these works—technically, they are assemblages of objects, usually mounted on a painted hard surface and then treated with more paint—is *painting constructions*. Many of them incorporate fragments from her domestic surroundings; one early example is *Quarry Transposed (Central Park in the Dark)* (1960), which includes the red glass shards of a broken milk creamer. *Maximus at Gloucester* (1963) pays homage to the poet Charles Olson, who understood his craft as a dynamic and open act unencumbered by academic standards and expectations of contemplation; his work was a major influence on Schneemann and Tenney at the

²⁶ The influence of the artist Joseph Cornell (Nyack, NY, 1903–New York 1972), whom she met in 1962 and with whom she subsequently exchanged letters, will be discussed below.

²⁷ That is how the artist described her technique to the Fluxus artist George Brecht; see *Correspondence Course*, 63, n. 199 (see note 14).

²⁸ In 1959 the artist Gustav Metzger (born in Nuremberg in 1926, he has lived in London since 1938) issued his first *Manifesto*, in which he proclaimed «Auto-Destructive Art»: the creative process culminates in self-destruction. Metzger was also one of the organizers behind *DIAS*, the *Destruction in Art Symposium*, which took place in London in 1966; a smaller version of the event was held at the Judson Memorial Church in New York two years later. Schneemann was invited to give a talk in London. See Sabine Breitwieser, ed., *Gustav Metzger: History History*, exh. cat. (Vienna: Generali Foundation; Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2005).

²⁹ Carolee Schneemann in e-mails to the author, June 2015.



Robert Rauschenberg,
Collection, 1954/1955
Oil, paper, fabric, wood,
and metal on canvas
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art,
gift of Harry W. and
Mary Margaret Anderson

time. The assemblage, which takes its title from a series of poems by Olson, includes found objects she had gathered during a walk on the beach with the poet in Cape Ann, Massachusetts. «one loves only form, / and form only comes / into existence when / the thing is born / born of yourself,»³⁰ Olson wrote in «I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You,» one of the poems in the voice of his alter ego Maximus he published in a local paper in Gloucester. Schneemann's ambition to embed painting in real time and actions drew this remark from Olson: «Remember, when the cunt began to speak [when women were finally allowed to perform], it was the beginning of the end of Greek theatre.»³¹ She realized that this was to be her role as a woman artist, and asked herself: «Was there something I would destroy?»³²

With her assemblages, painting constructions, and the wood-box assemblies known as Boxes, Schneemann charted a course for herself that was incompatible in several ways with the tenets of modernism in general and more particularly of Abstract Expressionism, the period's dominant school. She lacerated the layers of paint with scratches and cuts, set her pictures in motion, affixed documents and everyday objects to their surfaces; fragmentary and driven by dissonance, her work resembled the music she was exposed to. One might say her art exemplified Clement Greenberg's apprehensions when he worried

«that painting, having been pushed up from fictive depths, is forced through the surface of the canvas to emerge on the other side in the form of paper, cloth, cement and actual objects of wood and other materials pasted, glued or nailed to what was originally the transparent picture plane, which the painter no longer dares to puncture—or if he does, it is only to dare.»³³

In the early 1960s the critic Barbara Rose popularized the label «Neo-Dada» for the artistic method of integrating found images and real things into works of art, associating its contemporary exponents with an earlier movement that had responded to the ravages of World War I by harnessing chaos and irrationalism as creative principles. However, Robert Rauschenberg, who had created his first Combines in 1954, later rejected the term Neo-Dada for his own work and emphasized his (positive) interest in art on the threshold of life and in paving the way for an experience shaped by chance.³⁴ Schneemann clearly identified with the physicality, sensuousness, and energy of his dimensional works that always show an aspect of action. Unlike her earlier *Controlled Burning* series, in which she shared Rauschenberg's aleatorism, Schneemann's use of fragments of reality is deliberate in her painting constructions. In this regard, one could argue her carefully researched selection of images and objects have more in common with the work of the artist Joseph Cornell, with whom she was friends. However, in his exquisite boxes Cornell offers us an orderly world of stillness and implication, while Schneemann sets her boxes on fire and confronts us with the rip, the shred, the tear, and the gestalt of random elements.

³⁰ <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/176950> (accessed 1 June 2015).

³¹ Carolee Schneemann in e-mails to the author, June 2015; see also *Carolee Schneemann: Imaging Her Erotics*, 53.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Greenberg, «Towards a Newer Laocoön,» 309 (see note 13).

³⁴ See Walter Hopps, «Introduction: Rauschenberg's Art of Fusion,» in *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, ed. Walter Hopps and Susan Davidson, exh. cat. (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, etc.; New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1997), 21.



Unknown, Yayoi Kusama, Louis Abolafia,
Carolee Schneemann, Charlotte Moorman, and
Emmett Grogan at Warhol's Factory, 1972

Painting with Body, Photography and Film



Fur Wheel, 1962
Lamp shade base, oil paint, fur,
tin cans, mirrors, glass, mounted
on turning wheel (motor)
Generali Foundation Collection—
Permanent Loan to the Museum der
Moderne Salzburg
Inv. No. GFO031750.00.0-2015



Four Fur Cutting Boards, 1963
Wooden boards, oil paint, lightbulbs,
chain of colored light,
plastic flowers, photographs,
fabric, hubcap, tights,
and motorized umbrellas
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
Purchase, 2015

Schneemann continued to test the limits of what Greenberg had called a «dare.» Going even further than before, she extended her exploration of painting to include the human body, performance, photography and film. The question she asked herself was: «Can I be both image and image-maker?»³⁵ She had moved to New York in 1961, and although she still saw herself as a painter, she also became involved in the downtown arts scene and enthusiastically participated in avant-garde film and dance productions, Happenings, and events. Other artists asked her to perform in their pieces; she was one of the participants in Claes Oldenburg's *Store Days* (1962),³⁶ the events Rauschenberg held at his studio, and similar productions, and did a few actions configurations for photographs at Andy Warhol's Factory.

The painting constructions she produced during this period incorporate motorized elements as well as materials she found in the studio she rented, a former fur cutter's loft on West 29th Street. For *Fur Wheel* (1962), she used a lamp shade as a scaffold, mounting it on a rotating base and adding pieces of fur, glass, mirror, and painted tin cans, which rattle rhythmically when the object spins. *Four Fur Cutting Boards* (1963) is a freestanding installation of four large wooden boards assembled in a structure resembling a folding screen. The surface of the wood is marked with thousands of pinpoints originated when fur was fixed, giving the boards a pockmarked surface. It is painted on both sides and singed near the corners, and studded with fabrics, photographs, holiday lights, and other objects, including a hubcap and rotating umbrellas. In December 1963 this large installation (alternatively titled *The Big Boards*), still at that time a work in progress, and several other painting constructions served as the environment for one of her best-known sequence of actions, documented by the artist Erró. Reflecting on her experience as a woman and female artist, Schneemann took the expansive tendency of her painting constructions to its logical next step, outlining the objective she set herself in her art as follows: «I wanted my actual body to be combined with the work as an integral material—a further dimension of the construction.»³⁷ In *Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions for Camera* (1963), she integrated her own body as a living picture, using paint, grease, chalk, ropes, plastic, and other supplies to transform it into an element of a painting construction that took up her entire studio. In contradistinction to the roles society usually imposed on women (as Schneemann herself knew only too well), this situation and the resulting visual creations were completely self-determined:

«Not only am I an image-maker, but I explore the image values of flesh as material I choose to work with. The body may remain erotic, sexual, desired, desiring, and yet still be votive—marked and written over in a text of stroke and gesture discovered by my creative female will.»³⁸

As early as May 1962, Schneemann had created the choreography for *Glass Environment for Sound and Motion* at New York's Living Theater, her first kinetic event. Translating her collage-and-assemblage technique into a creative approach to larger spaces and envisioning the performers and spectators as participants and components of her work, she had devised the idea of a «kinetic theater» in which all elements would ultimately coalesce into a multidimensional picture. Schneemann had also been the first

³⁵ <http://aesthetic.gregcookland.com> (accessed June 1, 2015).

³⁶ From December 1, 1961, until 31 January 1962, Claes Oldenburg «operated» *The Store: Ray Gun Manufacturing Company* at 107 East 2nd Street. Produced in cooperation with the Green Gallery, New York, the environment served as the setting for numerous performances, including *Store Days I* (23–24 February 1962), in which Schneemann took part.

³⁷ Carolee Schneemann, quoted in *Schneemann: Imaging Her Erotics*, 55.

³⁸ *Ibid.*