

Carolee Schneemann

More Wrong Things

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Carolee Schneemann, at home outside New Paltz, N.Y. 2016. Copyright Lauren Lancaster.

Articulate Bodies and Fractured Images: Carolee Schneemann's Aesthetic Politics

“That’s part of my need to look at things that we don’t want to see. You can all close your eyes, but I don’t.”¹

“My work moves consistently from the ecstatic to the violent and the terrifying. It’s a balance that I continuously regard, depicting the great contradiction of violence and domesticity.”²

— Carolee Schneemann

There is a truism that politics is the only field that holds culture and economics together. But all three of these terms are currently under pressure: processes of governance appear in crisis and the values of culture have been overrun by economic ones such that the qualitative support of human life, which of course constitutes the purpose of modern state and economic systems, has been given away to the forces of the market. And this “free market”—located nowhere, apparently run by no one, and without broadly distributed beneficiaries—has no interest in culture for its own sake. These are emergent ideas in critiques of neo-liberalism (in academic circles expressed, for example, through a resurgence of interest in Michel Foucault’s lectures on biopolitics).³ It’s interesting and relevant to bring them to bear on a discussion of the political artwork of Carolee Schneemann, for I’d argue that *art* is another field where culture and economics have significant interplay. That art is usually subsumed within culture and thereby deactivated is what I want to take to task in this essay, and, I propose, this error or disconnect is what Schneemann has been making work about for some time. How she does so is through poetic language, through relaying forms of body-knowledge and exploring its potential for producing empathy and insight, through a continual critique of images that assert or enforce power, and by drawing attention to the ways in which images are misused to perpetuate abuses of that power. This is to trigger a process of bringing together culture and economics (by which I mean the generation and circulation of prosperity) to start a politicised dialogue. Schneemann’s identity as an artist whose work challenges masculine hegemonies has been established for a long time. It’s been made clear more recently through a number of exhibitions and critical essays the degree to which her work has been purposefully investigating

relations between physical and mental processes, between subjects and objects, and between images that circulate and those that are hidden from view or rendered unreadable in the service of prevailing globally-scaled interests.

Schneemann's work, *More Wrong Things* (2000–2001), a site-specific, multi-channel video installation, is exemplary of connections she makes between the body that views art and bodies experiencing conflict, violence or destruction. This theme is something that can be tracked back to her 1965 film *Viet-Flakes*, which was based on documentary images from the conflict in Vietnam that were censored in American news outlets at the time. Her aim was to make the people captured in those photographs into something that could not be forgotten, and she used the filming of still images to direct our eyes and hold them on the atrocities they recorded. Schneemann developed this further when *Viet-Flakes* was used in her 1967 performance, *Snows*, where the film and still images were projected over the performers and an electronic switching system was installed beneath the chairs of the audience so that those experiencing the performance unwittingly influenced the intensity of the lighting and sound and the speed and flow of images. Schneemann was then developing what she called *kinetic theatre*, which used multiple forms of media, radically juxtaposed, to produce a live and responsive experience that was against the conventions of theatre. For these works she drew from the ideas of Antonin Artaud's "Theatre of Cruelty," for example his insistence that theatre "[resist] the economic, utilitarian and technical streamlining of the world".⁴ As with later work she made in the 1980s that responded to the war in Lebanon, such work comes from what Schneemann describes as her "outrage". She said in a recent interview: "At some point I could no longer afford to concentrate on the ordinary images as my life was invaded by this gratuitous, psychic assault and systematic destruction of an unarmed population in displacement camps and the ancient cities of Lebanon."⁵ This outrage continues in work she is currently making with images of men brutalised by Bashar al-Assad's government in Syria, images that have not yet entered mainstream discourse and substantiate intermittent news reports of the mass imprisonment, torture and direct killings of Syria's civilian population. In *More Wrong Things*, the video monitors show clips that range from images of the siege of Sarajevo, riots in Haiti, newsreel images from Vietnam, the destruction Palestinian towns, as well as other forms of mass culture such as Olympic pairs skating. These are joined by images from Schneemann's daily life and two clips relating to

her performance *Interior Scroll* (1975 and 1977) that hone in on the piece of paper being pulled from her vagina. In a similar vein, sounds are drawn from television, popular music and Schneemann's own recorded voice, short pieces contributing to a strangely compelling although broken and dislocated fugue. One is drawn into this installation through both somatic and intellectual fascination and horror. One is immersed in an experience of repeated sounds and images and metaphorically caught by the tangle of cables there to interrupt any residual smooth surface produced by the screens.

It seems important to consider carefully both the components of these works and their effects. We could easily—and I argue mistakenly—frame Schneemann's work as a comment on the quickened flow of images through media channels that deaden our ability to feel and to act. The first decade of Schneemann's working life was historic for being the first stage in the development of international communications systems, and the entry, via television, into everyday lived experience of an unprecedented volume of images and the possibility of real-time viewing. As images and information from around the globe were delivered to people's living rooms, the concept of a "mass media" was refigured and reimagined as a system that could expand and contract time and space. Alongside the potential for connectivity, education and liberation this offered, the potential for unprecedented control was understood, too. An essential reference for Schneemann at the time were the writings of Wilhelm Reich, for example *Listen Little Man!*, *The Function of the Orgasm*, and *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, all widely censored in the US until the early 1970s. It's beyond the scope of this essay to examine his arguments in any depth, but the broad lines he drew, critiquing nationalism, the role of labour under capitalism and democracy, and sexual drives as (mis)understood through mainstream psychoanalytic theory, have not been disturbed in any substantial way in the near-century since he was writing. Meantime, the effects of repetition and amplification that characterise the media have only been increased, due to international media corporations, algorithmic codes, or active suppression of information that doesn't serve the interest of the powerful. So with Schneemann's works, we're asked to look again, or look as if for the first time: *More Wrong Things* shows us troops disembarking from a military helicopter, buildings falling or fallen. We see people experiencing devastation beyond comprehension: a Palestinian woman screaming at the camera amidst the ruins of her home; four men moving in unison the instant a bomb

goes off; someone dragging their own body to safety on legs that have been shattered. And perhaps hardest to watch there are clips of wrecked bodies, profaned and unrecognisable. There are perpetrators too: men in uniform strike rioters with batons; a soldier shoots a prisoner in the head and we see the final twitch of life leaving that person. None of these is surprising, but they combine together as a strong reminder of the violence which has been a continual presence in the past half-century and more. We come much closer to the particularity of Schneemann's work when such images, in *More Wrong Things*, are set against other scenes that put the work into the frame of television's wider field: the ice skaters, a race-car crashing in flames and a large group of women, dressed in uniform, performing together for something like an opening ceremony or a military parade. Bodies again, here put to work in forms of culture to express national identity, or conquest through sport. And then there are the images produced by Schneemann: moments from daily life such as petting a cat sleeping against electrical cables, someone giving themselves an injection in the stomach (for diabetes?), water dripping from a bathroom tap, two cats eating a dead animal, and then a penis and vagina coming together in coital strokes. The relay between images of violence and those of loving, consensual pleasure constitutes the consistent approach in much of Schneemann's work. It links personal and autobiographical experience to processes of statecraft and image systems.

Schneemann's work on *More Wrong Things* was initiated by the death of her beloved cat, Treasure, in a road accident, which was followed by being sent video footage taken in Sarajevo by a collective of filmmakers facing the devastation of their city and people. She describes this material as "arriving unexpectedly as if magical tendrils were activated" by Treasure's violent end.⁶ *More Wrong Things* is thus much more than a media critique; it makes it possible to think about the relations between a feminist position and an anti-war one, the resonances of what Schneemann calls "the great contradiction of violence and domesticity". Domestic space, for Schneemann, has a very different purpose than that conventionally understood as the domain of the home and family. Instead it is refuge and antagonistic space, a place of living, working and creating together with and sometimes apart from her partners. This reconfigured home, imaginary and quite real, claimed and self-determined by a woman, features in a lot of Schneemann's work, for example in the trilogy of films, *Fuses*, *Plumb Line* and *Kitch's Last Meal*. It is a metaphor in "Parts of a Body House", the piece of experimental writing Schneemann contributed to

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More Wrong Things, 2001
fourteen video monitors with video
loops suspended from the ceiling
within an extended tangle of wires,
cables and cords, installation view at
Cornerhouse Gallery, Manchester,
2001.

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More Wrong Things, 2001
fourteen video monitors with video
loops suspended from the ceiling
within an extended tangle of wires,
cables and cords, installation view at
White Box NYC, 2001.

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Screengrabs from the film

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Terminal Velocity, 2001–2005
black and white computer scans
from newspapers, ink jet print on
paper
243 × 213 cm
95 5/8 × 83 7/8 in

the 1970 Fluxus book *Fantastic Architecture* and extended in a self-published form several years later. In this text, Schneemann imagines the interior of a body as a series of rooms where time, space and living take place with expansive erotic and political dimensions. It is, *avant la lettre*, a piece of *écriture féminine* where difference is instantiated through language and through the imaginary. The house she describes is axonometrically impossible. It offers, by contrast, a logic of collage: contingency, juxtaposition, inversion, exchange and transformation. We should also here remember Schneemann's powerful performance *Round House* at the multi-day Dialectics of Liberation conference held in London in 1967. She was the only woman who presented at the event, and her very participation was under constant threat by both organisers and audience.⁷ The *domestic* thus constitutes an intersection of language, metaphor, and the realpolitik of the exclusion of women's voices and experiences from abstract social structures and sites of power. As its own site of power, however, it generates the possibility—through performativity rather than mere performance—of critical engagement.⁸

The potential of a reconfigured form of critique can be found in Schneemann's long investment in linking subjective experience to social structures and historical events. This requires first a better understanding of how aesthetic forms work, lest her work is separated off and designated as (just) art or (just) art by a woman about her own experience. It can be described as the "affordance" of collage, which in Schneemann's work deploys metaphors of proximity to ground and create a corporeal criticality. This stands well for describing the affective experience Schneemann creates in her works, using differentiation and similarity, mutual substitution, in order to align subjects in ways that lead to understanding. Schneemann's work is remarkably filled with spatial dynamics intermixing direct experiences of daily life with those we recognise as coming to us via the media and therefore carrying meanings that we may or may not agree with (or may or may not even grasp). The relations she creates recall the many metaphors of proximity and distance that run through Walter Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935), a foundational text for understanding the revolutionary potential of film, photography and mass culture, as well as the danger when put to use for state propaganda. Benjamin was keen to tally the risks and benefits—both of which he saw as urgent—to understand and thereby intervene in a cultural phenomenon that aggregates power. For example, Benjamin described reproducibility as "narrowing the gap"

between author and viewer. He was interested in the potential for “simultaneous collective experience” offered by the production of multiple versions of the same thing. The complexity of the spatiality of objective relations is expressed in his definition of the aura as an object’s “unique existence at the place where it happens to be” or “the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be”. And this is how he describes the effects of the mass production of photography: “Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction.”⁹ Benjamin diagnosed certain ways mediation works: with film, the camera represents the point of view of the audience but displaces them from the performance. He wrote, “The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web.” For Benjamin, this produces criticality. It is, to be sure, this notion of criticality that now needs reconfiguration. Recall what Schneemann wrote and spoke on *Interior Scroll*: “PAY ATTENTION TO CRITICAL AND PRACTICAL FILM LANGUAGE. IT EXISTS FOR AND IN ONLY ONE GENDER.” While this statement is specifically linked to her exclusion from the canon of 1960s experimental film on the basis of her use of personal and domestic imagery, it also speaks on the level of the structures of exclusion that drive political discourse, be it communicated in national policy or via news outlets. The monologue from *Interior Scroll* establishes a powerful, alternative form of critique via touch and refusal and between two types of processes: one diaristic, somatic and “domestic” and the other structured, intellectual and systematic. Turning back to the images in *More Wrong Things*, it’s clear they demand much more than what a camera can offer by “penetrating into reality’s web.”¹⁰ In fact, pictures rarely show who and what is responsible for the violations they record.¹¹

Interior Scroll can be read as designating the source of Schneemann’s intelligence *inside* her body. Words, it must be pointed out, emerge from quite a specific place. She defines it with the terms “vulvic space” and “interior knowledge”. It is moreover defined as a place of sexual drive rather than its sublimation that holds the potential to define creative practice as producing a close, surface-to-surface engagement. But whilst we may recognise this position and understand its current political meanings, I’d argue there’s something else at its root, for Schneemann. In 1975 or so she articulated a position in which the basis of general knowledge could be located in interior, female knowledge as a pre-history to written history and certainly a pre-history to modernity. She wrote, “I believe

my ancestor measured her menstrual cycles, pregnancies, lunar observations, agricultural notions—the origins of time factoring, of mathematical equivalences, of abstract relations [...] because the experience and complexity of her personal body was the source of conceptualizing, of interacting with materials, [and] of imagining the world and composing its *images*.” These things are necessary to speak about because they make it clear that what an artist such as Carolee Schneemann does in making overtly political works of art is on the one hand to place herself—and us—in relation to people who have been subjected to violence. The proximity, in fact, already exists, but, as she is an artist skilled in reading images and remaking them, she makes sure this is represented and experienced. Her work also shows us how unfinished such work is. The potential for empathic and critical engagement is present, but it would be claiming too much to say it is always achieved. There are no easy answers here.

In the weeks I was working on this essay these things happened: in London a car driven by a man who identified himself with ISIS ploughed down more than 50 people and killed four; chemical gas was released on Syrian civilians, killing and severely wounding several hundred; in Stockholm, a truck was used as a weapon to kill people on a crowded street; pipe bombs exploded nearby the bus of a German football team, injuring two; the United States bombed Syrian airbases as a warning to the government to not use chemical weapons, and two days later mistakenly bombed two dozen Syrians fighting for their country’s freedom; a man opened fire and killed a police officer on the Champs-Elysees in Paris, just a few days before French national elections; ISIS killed 46 displaced Syrians in an attack on a refugee camp; details were revealed about systematic genocide by Daesh against the Izadi community in Iraq. All are episodes that present the grim face of global politics: the dead are mostly victims of poor timing; state-sponsored war continues to protect its interests; for us watching in horror, events arrive as blows to our sense of how ordinary life ought to be and to our understandings of terrorism and statecraft, citizenship and humanity. We act as we can within the spheres where we hold influence; modify our habits in ways that might have an effect; bear witness; speak words that are difficult to say; look people in the eye and commit to keep trying.

— Alison Green
May 2017

1. Schneemann quoted in a March 2015 public lecture by Thyrza Nichols Goodeve: "The Cat Is My Medium": Notes on the Writing and Art of Carolee Schneemann', *Art Journal* (29 July 2015). Avail. at: <http://artjournal.collegeart.org/?p=6381#fnref-6381-40>. Accessed 12 April 2017. It's worth saying that at the lecture Schneemann had projected a photograph of her cat, Treasure, after he had been fatally run over by a car, a gruesome image. Goodeve wrote, 'Emotions of horror and discomfort filled the room, emitted as sighs, groans, and the sound of bodies shifting in seats. Schneemann paused, looked at the audience, and said, "You can all close your eyes, but I don't."'
2. Schneemann in 'Let's Not Beat around the Bush: Q&A with Carolee Schneemann,' interview with Wendy Vogel, *Modern Painters*, February 14, 2015. Avail. at: www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/1103165/lets-not-beat-around-the-bush-a-qa-with-carolee-schneemann. Accessed 12 April 2017.
3. One exemplary version of this is Chapter II of Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (MIT Press/Zone Books, 2015). Also relevant to feminist discourse on power is Nancy Fraser's writings, for example, 'Contradictions of Capital and Care,' *New Left Review* 100 (July-August 2016). Avail. at: <https://newleftreview.org/11/100/nancy-fraser-contradictions-of-capital-and-care>. Accessed 5 May 2017.
4. Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double* (Grove Press, 1958), p. 122.
5. Annabelle Ténèze, 'Carolee Schneemann interview,' in exh. cat. *Then and Now: Carolee Schneemann* (Musée départemental d'art contemporain de Rochechouart and Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Castilla y León, 2013), pp. 112–113.
6. Email correspondence with the author, 3 May 2017.
7. This work is explored extensively by JM Harding in 'Between Dialectics, Decorum, and Collage: Sabotaging Schneemann at the Dialectics of Liberation Congress, London 1967,' in *Cutting Performances: Collage, Events, Feminist Artists and the American Avant-Garde* (University of Michigan Press, 2010), pp. 121–149. See also Jonathan Cott, 'Play Power in London,' *Rolling Stone*, 19 March 1970. Michael Bracewell's 'Other Voices: An Interview with Carolee Schneemann,' *Frieze*, 62 (10 October 2001) also covers some of this ground. Available at: <https://frieze.com/article/other-voices>. Accessed 14 April 2017.
8. I've explored ideas about Schneemann's use of domestic space in several public lectures over 2014–2016, and would like to thank Kit Hammonds, Judy Willcocks, Ben Cranfield and the artist-collective Fourthland for invitations to speak.
9. Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1935) in *Illuminations* (Schocken Books, 1979), p. 223.
10. Benjamin, p. 233.
11. Ariella Azoulay describes the part photography plays in 'regime-made disasters' such as Palestine's, as a 'division between those who are constantly photographed and those who are not'. *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography* (Verso, 2015), p. 243.
12. Carolee Schneemann, 'Interior Scroll' (1975/1977), reproduced in exhibition catalogue Carolee Schneemann: *Kinetic Painting* (Museum der Moderne Salzburg, 2015), p. 246.

Carolee Schleemann:
More Wrong Things

Dr Alison Green is an art historian, critic and curator with twin interests in contemporary art and the legacies of Modernism. She teaches history and theory of art at Central Saint Martins where she is Course Leader for MA Culture, Criticism and Curation. Recent and forthcoming writings include: reviews, 'Dexter Dalwood,' *Journal of Contemporary Painting* (2015); 'What Would You Expect?' (Christopher Williams at Whitechapel Gallery) *Source* (2015); 'Silent Explosion: Ivor Davies and Destruction in Art,' *Burlington Magazine* (2016); an essay, 'Intermedia, Exile and Carolee Schneemann,' in *Across the Great Divide: Intermedia from Futurism to Fluxus* (Cambridge Scholars Press, 2015); and 'Stout's Doubt,' *Journal of Contemporary Painting* 2.2 (2016). Her book *When Artists Curate: Contemporary Art and the Exhibition as Medium* will be published by Reaktion Books in 2017.

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Cover Image:
More Wrong Things, 2001
fourteen video monitors with video loops suspended from the ceiling within an extended tangle of wires, cables and cords, installation view at White Box NYC, 2001.
Courtesy WhiteBox, New York City.
Photograph Marianne Vitale.

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Exhibition produced by HOME, Manchester (formally Cornerhouse)

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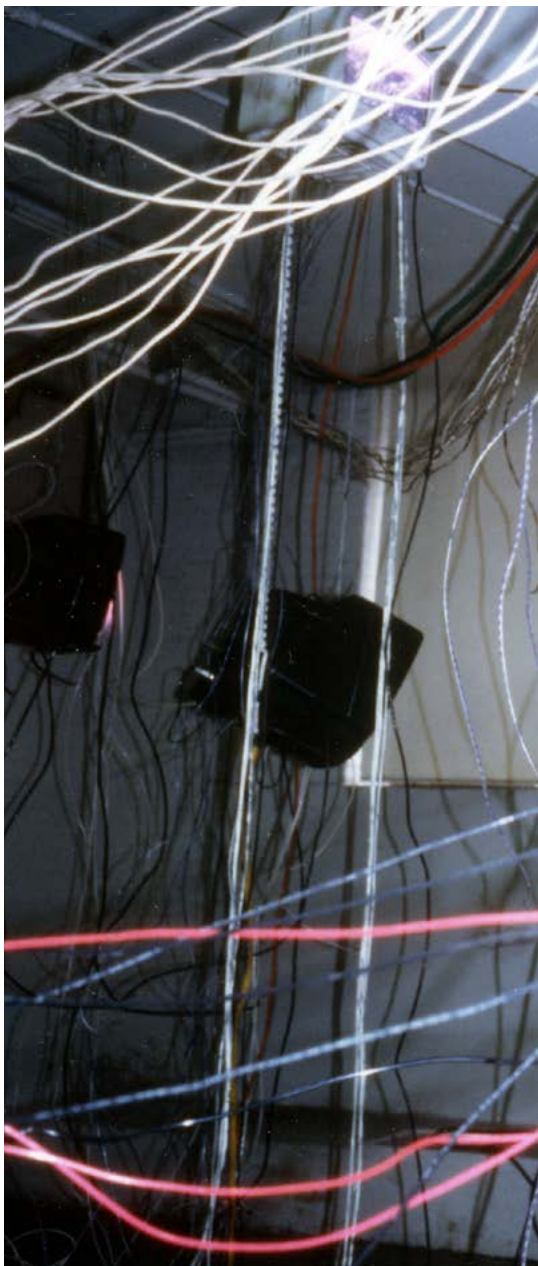
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