

# Carolee Schneemann

## DEVOUR

Loop time: 9 minutes

Carolee Schneemann's art has been operating in the cross-over zones between painting, filmmaking, photography and what became "Body Art" since the 1960s. When she began her interrogation of the values embedded in that conflicted and repressive society, her work was like an erotic collage brought to life. Her performances, orgiastic in their liberating effect, prepared the ground for a generation of younger artists, such as Karen Finley, to express their sexuality and extend the questioning of sexuality's role in art. Schneemann's performances and films focused on eroticism, aspects of pleasure extracted from traditional taboos as well as the disasters of war. Schneemann's art has consistently explored these themes and their implications; her art has disturbed some and liberated many while it has remained true to her description of her work as "a pleasurable weapon, a missile sent into our repressive culture."

Schneemann has simultaneously interwoven feminism into art and art into feminism. She has worked to challenge the inbred pattern of art schools of the 1970s which demeaned the future of female art students. In 1977 she wrote that "by the year 2000 no young woman artist will meet the determined resistance and constant undermining that I endured as a student. ... her courses will usually be taught by women; she will never feel like a provisional guest at the banquet of life...." Although this transformation may not have been completely achieved, Schneemann's contribution to expanded rights and opportunities for women cannot be overestimated.

Carolee Schneemann began her life in art as a painter, and even in her college years there are links to the shared ideas that these two exhibitions explore today. In 1958 Schneemann painted portraits of both Jane & Stan Brakhage while introducing Stan to the painterly principles of abstract expressionism. At that same time, Brakhage was sharing experimental film with Schneemann and her partner, James Tenney, composer/pianist. Tenney in turn brought Brakhage to consider the music of Charles Ives, Carl Ruggles and Edgard Varèse. This interdisciplinarity that we now take for granted flourished within a period of wide-ranging experimentation. Her self-shot erotic film *Fuses*, 1965 was in a dialogue with early Stan Brakhage films, such as *Window Water Baby Moving*.

Carolee Schneemann says that her work has evolved in relation to her dream-life, and each of her works, then and now, contains references to her sub-conscious. It is important to remember this, given that many have made the mistake of confusing her life with her art – the two are linked, but they are not one and the same. Schneemann's art does not inhabit some artistic dreamland; rather she creates forms through which the reality of her dreams, inflected with the images of the contemporary art world, can find a vivid place. In some ways this reliance on the sub-conscious is part of the legacy of the 1960s that can be seen in her new work as well as in the work that she and Stan Brakhage discussed in their letters from 1960 to the 1990s. These letters, when published, will be a key document on the evolution of contemporary art in the post-war period.

*DEVOUR* continues Schneemann's exploration of the ways that feminist issues can be integrated into artforms that address current global issues, especially the treatment of women during periods of social disorder. *DEVOUR* also continues the analysis of the role of the domestic in the public realm, presented here in the context of society and individuals threatened by global events. Schneemann questions the similarity of today's militarism to the barbarism of the past. She has written that this work features "a range of images edited to contrast evanescent, fragile elements with violent, concussive, speeding fragments... political disasters, domestic intimacy, and ambiguous threats." In this dense montage, the title stands for menace: the voraciously synthetic rush of contemporary media, the corresponding, near-addictive impulse of its consumers and our collective submission to desecration in all its forms.

In an age when there is perhaps no longer any 'new' in the news, and when the rise of a range of fundamentalist religions seems to be pushing society back to the 1950s conservatism that Schneemann and others worked to overthrow, a work such as *DEVOUR* proposes that art must extend consciousness.

Bill Jeffries

Devour was organized for PHG by Bill Jeffries. PHG extends its special thanks to former Vancouverite Randall Anderson for taking the time to set up a special screening of Devour for Bill Jeffries in Montreal.