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Imaging Her Erotics: Carolee Schneemann

by Caroline Koebel

Carolee Schneemann, *Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (MIT Press, 2002), 357 pp., \$39.95 hardcover

Carolee Schneemann: Embodied P.P.O.W. (Winter, 2002)

September 2001, amidst 9/11 fallout, Carolee Schneemann came to Buffalo, New York (where I live) as part of a visiting speaker's series at the University of Buffalo. Ghen Zando-Dennis programmed a supplementary evening of films, which included the rarely screened *Kitch's Last Meal* (1973-76). This double-projection Super 8 film is an early incarnation of the performance *Interior Scroll* (1975). The performance's text comes from the film's soundtrack: a vituperative exchange between Schneemann and a male structuralist filmmaker (to be disclosed later as theorist Annette Michelson). Whereas *Interior Scroll*, in which the artist uncoils and reads aloud a tightly folded paper from her vagina, has become Schneemann's most iconic work, *Kitch's Last Meal* remains relatively unknown.

In observing Schneemann's oeuvre, however, it becomes clear that *Kitch's Last Meal* holds no insignificant place. The closing scene shows the eponymous cat of the title, Kitch, of *Fuses* (1964-67) fame, dead. Schneemann suspends in the space before her the rigid cat body in what seems a reflexive ritual testimony to its lifelessness. (C.S.: " 'You must put the body out when it's dead, to see if it is really dead.' One of the instructions that came to me in a 1976 dream, when my nineteen-year-old companion cat Kitch died.") In light of the cat's former vitality and the exceptional bond between filmmaker and feline, the scene is especially poignant. The pain of death, any and all, is conveyed. What happens next is completely unexpected. The cat's body—or more aptly, its filmic representation—burns spontaneously up into pure immaterial light. Schneemann talks and writes consistently of the centrality of the unconscious and dreams in her creative practice. The perceptual experience in question here mirrors such a position, not in the creation of but in the reception of her work. The moment is both part of the film—how the filmmaker represents the beloved cat's death in a concrete as well as symbolic way (dust)—and also a performative act triggered by the psyche of the absent filmmaker. Past this fleeting spell of confusion between matters internal and external, the viewing subject perceives that indeed the

little film is caught in the projector's gate; the globe of light responsible in the first place for transmitting the picture if death now robs death of all means of representation. With utter finality, then, Kitch is gone, an epoch of Schneemann's life is over, and the vulnerable Super 8 film is mended and returned to the protection of darkness afforded by its canister.

One month later on an unseasonably warm fall day in Ohio, my mother places her twenty-plus-year-old cat on a patch of sunlit grass. Half an hour passes and my mother takes Cleopatra into her lap as she dies. On this day, my mother has lost a loyal companion who had accompanied her through the maturation and departure of two children, among other events. She is traumatized. She won't leave home or talk on the phone to anybody, including me, for a few days. When I eventually hear the account of Cleopatra's death, I recall *Kitch's Last Meal*. Here an artist had given expressive form to the primacy of certain human-animal relationships ordinarily exceeding representation. *Kitch's Last Meal* opposes dominant culture's prescribed relations between "master" and "pet" premised on commodity exchange. The film reinvests interspecies relations with profoundly emotional and spiritual terms. In recent history, there exists material recognition of my mother's primal and cultured love for a cat, and the pain that the absence of that cat causes. Even when the film lies dormant in its canister and functions more like an artifact (the film's material existence proof of its expressive and representational potential), KLM affirms my mother's experience.

This is not to suggest that Schneemann's motivation is to speak to the common denominators between herself and others. The study of how Schneemann's oeuvre can assist others in comprehending their own worlds is also not the definitive way to receive her work. Yet, because the artist's use of autobiography acts to elucidate others' lives as well as her own, the examination of the connections between the particular and the general is valuable, especially given the troubled regulation of women artists' use of self to the personal. When Kate Haug interviews Schneemann about the question of autobiography in female-authored works, she replies, "If a man crosses a threshold to depict or engage a lived reality, he becomes a hero. To deal with actual lived experience—that's a heroic position for a male and a trivial exposure for a woman. A woman exploring lived experience occupies an area that men want to denigrate as domestic, encapsulate as erotic, arousing or supporting their own position."

After viewing *Carolee Schneemann: Embodied* at the P.P.O.W. Gallery two months following Cleo's death, I am now in sympathy with Schneemann over the loss of yet another cat, Vesper. The two-channel, three-monitor video installation *Vesper's Pool* counterpoints instances of Vesper's life while very much alive with his death. Paradoxical juxtapositions abound: the spritely creature suspended in flight via a freeze frame over a void between structures, and the artist digging a burial ditch; a low-angle shot of Vesper perched atop a towering bookcase (with fairytale connotations of the cat as king), and the same animal passive and defeated in its

“master’s” arms. Schneemann has spoken of Vesper as a reincarnation of Cluny. Both animals were kissing cats; they would come to Schneemann each morning and awaken her with “deep kisses.” “Cluny died in 1988 after being bitten on his mouth by a rat. He was reborn as Vesper in 1990 and continued the kissing expressivity until his death, of leukemia, in 1998.”

This morning/mourning ritual forms the basis of *Infinity Kisses I (Cluny)* (1981-87) and *Infinity Kisses II (Vesper)* (1990-98). The artist self-documented the unconventional make-out scenes with a 35mm bed-side camera and designed a pattern of stills and reversals (printed as Xerachrome on linen and laser images) as a serial body on the wall functioning as both statement and proof, with a play on the meaning of “contact sheet” and “evidence.” Of these works, Schneemann writes, “The intimacy between cat and woman becomes a refraction of the viewers’ attitudes to self and nature, sexuality and control, the taboo and the sacred” and “the images raise questions of interspecies communication, as well as triggering unexpected cultural taboos.” Integral to Schneemann’s aesthetic and intellectual process is research into ancient art history and mythology. Egyptian symbology, in fact, is the foundational referent of *Infinity Kisses* by way of the inclusion of a fragment of an Egyptian relief, pictured, like the Schneemann-Vesper scenes, as a mirror image.

The artifact features two figures in profile making contact through the tips of their noses: one, viewed from the bridge of its nose to its shoulders, or a feline-human cross. The latter, adorned with jewelry, has regal connotations. The fact that the feline figure is also slightly higher contributes to its assumption of dominance. The fragment is dynamic; like the Schneemann-cat images, it is intensely erotic and overpowering. What exactly was civilization thinking anyway all those thousands of years ago when it brought animals and humans together in such a fleshy and mythic way? About *Infinity Kisses*, Robert Riley writes, “according to Egyptian mythology, a lion that kisses a goddess restores peace to civilization.” Despite the proximity of mouth to neck, the relief does not imply an attack; if the lion indeed is conjured, carnivorous instinct is subverted into carnal desire. Here the kiss, and not the bite, is privileged. Peace.

Among magazines in a waiting area, an image of a kitten in a glass beaker catches my eye. The cat, in part due to the high camera angle, seems especially submissive and imploring, and the image registers the cutesy effect so predictable of pop culture’s fascination with the feline. Adding to the sense of vulnerability is the animal’s isolation; in nature, kittens come in litters, and here the nursing mother is notably absent. The accompanying text identifies the animal as “CC,” the first cat cloned as part of Operation CopyCat by the Texas-based company Genetic Savings & Clone. (Reportedly, the business is already overwhelmed by customers’ requests to “gene bank” their pets’ DNA for future cloning.) At home later, Nick Cave sings on the stereo, “We’ve bred all our kittens white/ So you can see them in the night.” Cave’s music and Schneemann’s visual art provide examples of the multiplication of cats as concept. Granted, the

meanings are completely different: Cave's cats are all the same and have no sex, Schneemann's cats, while "reborn," lead unique existences and are gendered. Both artists, though, speak to the animal's mythic identity. To take the night out of the cat is to rebuke the ancestry of the cat. If felines, from prehistory to the present, have dwelled within the subterranean (in all its associations) and have for millennia figured as not only partaking in but also as embodying "the night," then it is ultimately fear expressed as hatred (of the lives and symbolic powers) of the feline that explains the desire to "out-night" the animal. It is important to also keep in mind the prevalent association of the feline with the feminine. This irrational fear cum hatred is the object of ridicule in the Nick Cave song. It is also the dominant cultural force that Carolee Schneemann joyfully and heroically passes beyond in order to return to the real power of the cat as a source of mystery, courage and renewal.

The relative ease with which contemporary artists conceive their own bodies as medium, subject matter, and inspiration is credited in part to the contested use of the body by certain pioneering artists in the 1960s and 70s. Carolee Schneemann, who in her radical self-statement created heat for both second-wave feminists and white male art elites, provides an exceptional example. She pervades the collective imaginary of contemporary art history. Her influence is legendary. The real of the artist (in the sense of material conditions) curiously fails to correlate with the scope of her role in the imaginary: "Consider the total economic neglect of my work. Was I just a little too early? Or is it because my body of work explores a self-contained, self-defined, pleased, female-identified erotic integration? Is that what the culture can't stand? It is interested. It gets tremendous courage, vitality, and feeds itself off this material I provided. But it will not come back and help me. It's almost as if it's saying, 'If you've got all that, go feed yourself!'" Dan Cameron's staging of Schneemann's first solo museum retrospective at The New Museum of Contemporary Art in 1997 as well as the Getty Center's recent acquisition of Schneemann's papers both counteract this lack of continuity between the artist's material presence and abstract signification.

Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects (MIT Press, 2002) is the most comprehensive source on the artist available. Schneemann's critical and creative writings take multiple forms: interviews, artist's statements, scripts, and narratives of films and performances, theoretical/art historical essays, feminist philosophy, notes, autobiography, letters. Organized into sections—"Proto-Feminist Body," "Feminist Erotic Iconography, Censorship," and "Dream Morphologies"—the book also includes reviews and essays by, among others, Kristine Stiles, Jay Murphy, and David Levi Strauss. *Imaging Her Erotics* is replete with images, which, in consort with its alternating parts of white and black backgrounds, make the book at once visual and tactile. There is heightened pleasure in accessing the contents at random, flipping between pages until something formerly unobserved grabs hold. Fingering the black pages even leaves prints, charting the reader's course.

Like its title, *Imaging Her Erotics* calls for a reading style at once spontaneous and systematic. Quick searches for information, like dates of artworks, are facilitated by the thorough index, in addition to the table of contents and filmography. Inconsistencies exist, such as slight variations of dates for films made over a several-year period. Variance is in fact characteristic of Schneemann's work; her films, performances, and installations are often shown in different points of process and incarnation. One instance of change between versions of projects to which the book has drawn my attention is the case of *Vesper's Pool*. I have unfortunately only seen in person the latest version at the P.P.O.W. Exhibition. Afterward, researching the project in *Imaging Her Erotics*, I learn that it is a reduced version of the original 1999 installation at Art Pace (San Antonio, Texas). While I am disappointed not to have had the chance to experience the installation at its most encompassing, I am also relieved to have the P.P.O.W. version as a point of reference. *Imaging Her Erotics* does not replace the reader's firsthand experience of Schneemann's oeuvre (it is necessary, for example, to see and not only read about *Fuses*). It does, however, expand the definition of that oeuvre; for one, the reader's conscious sense of the inseparability of the individual and the social is activated.

Is it anti-poetry that *Imaging Her Erotics* is red outside, yet black-and-white inside? The beautiful jacket front features a performance still from *Fresh Blood—A Dream Morphology* (1983), whereas all the interior images, even if they are based on paintings, assemblages, or (color) films, are drained of the color for which they are known. This relation has an association with the body itself, especially in how blood assumes its deep red color only upon leaving the body. On several levels, then, blood encapsulates this book. Through this metaphor, the reader is also reminded of her position as being at a remove from the art and the artist. By entering the book, the reader does not unify with the artist, but rather, the reader joins a movement—always in flux—of discourse with and around the artist. This particular critical community differentiates itself as being a necessarily embodied one. I am reminded of Carolee Schneemann's comment about *Mortal Coils* (1994-95), a multimedia installation honoring the memories of seventeen friends: "Our forms of grief seemed inadequate: mourning rituals are inadequate if they don't involve our bodies, if we are not held, clutched, touched, contacted—as a correlative to powerful emotions of loss. We have no physicalized forms for mourning—the comfort we need receive or give. It's all in our eyes, staring straight ahead, quietly tearful."

Momentarily halting this essay after the above quote, I am startled into taking up yet again questions of mourning and loss. A March weekend in Buffalo witnessed five homicides, including a man barely into his twenties. This victim was a statistic until a friend called to invite my partner and me to his brother's wake. Driving in circles to find the memorial, we finally realized that the home was literally straight down the street from our apartment. Once we found ourselves at the service though, our confusion in getting there made sense. This young man's death was against all reason. Sharp gasps of breath, nose blows, and quieted cries belied the

silence. The greatest outlet of expression was the music, piano and voice, issuing forth from a man positioned next to the closed casket. At the ceremony's close, a woman, a grandmother or great aunt, gave vent to her disbelief and agony by sobbing and shouting. Comforting her were hands and voices, similarly to how the musician eased the collective anguish through his hands and voice. The experience of attending this wake illustrated for me exactly Schneemann's conception of the contrast between the mourning ritual's "staring straight ahead, quietly tearful" with the need to be "held, clutched, touched, contacted."

Imaging Her Erotics is essential because of the access it permits to Schneemann's writing self. The artist's visual works, such as *Correspondence Course* (1980-83) at P.P.O.W., often incorporate text and sometimes are language-based. The reading experiences, nevertheless, between the gallery exhibition and the book are distinct. *Fuses*, *Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions for Camera* (1963), and *Interior Scroll* come to me in cycles by way of sometimes conscious, other times random, mental images based on my familiarity with the works as images—both moving and static. Images conjure images. Less obvious, harder to identify, are the performative workings of Schneemann's related writings (i.e., even as expressed in the book's title). Not only is the artist a filmmaker, but she also writes in cinematic language—as the looping of particular "scenes" in my imagination makes clear. One such "scene" is the 1988 text entitled "Homage to Ana Mendieta" about a mixed media triptych called variously *Homage to* and *Hand/Heart for Ana Mendieta* (1986). After her close friend and like spirit died tragically, Schneemann awakened from a dream about her and, in the nocturnal calm of her two-hundred-year-old rural home, pursued its symbolic and ritual logic. Still in her nightgown, she ran outdoors to the snow just as the dream had guided her, but upon the bitter cold "ran back upstairs and started making drawings of the image sensation in the dream"—"Ana's hands falling in empty space." The hand gestures took on the dimensions of hearts, and Schneemann became drenched in their red paint and the metaphor of blood. The movements of this night were choreographed into an action in which Schneemann etched the heart shapes into the snow with her bare hands, using paint, blood, ashes, and syrup. Recorded by a photographer specializing in accidents, the action persists as arrested images placed at the center of a grid composition with the originary pictures. The writing about the art has become itself a visual sequence to be repeatedly viewed in the mind's eye.

Schneemann interprets *Intra-Venus Series* (1992), her friend Hannah Wilke's exacting "Performatist Self-Portraits" as a cancer patient (exhibited posthumously at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts), as a cautionary tale. (Wilke is a subject of *Mortal Coils*). Wilke and Schneemann are often associated in how their respective practices, especially of the 60s and 70s, foreground the artist's body and destabilize the artist-model binary opposition. As beautiful women, their use of self was especially always in danger of being received as untheorized acts of narcissism, whereas the self-body performances of a male counterpart such as Vito Acconci would be greeted as

self-reflexive, critical musings on narcissism. I believe that the initial unease and disunity of reception of the artists' works from this period are in part what sustains the art years later. Having herself been diagnosed with breast cancer, Schneemann has resisted the medical establishment's will to dissect and irradiate her body in favor of alternative, self-healing therapies (she is Lymphatic), and has kept the cancer in remission. A close-up of a needle puncturing a thigh, an aspect of her self-care regime, is nested among many grisly shots of disasters worldwide in the video loop *More Wrong Things* (2001), screened at her Buffalo artist's talk. Iris print collage editions *Hallucinating I & II* (2002), the sole works produced after 9/11 in *Embodied*, captures more recent atrocities. These works counter the lack of accountability found in American mainstream media's coverage of domestic and international politics. A predecessor is the film *Viet-Flakes* (1965) about the terrors of the U.S. War Machine on the civilian population, in effect giving face to the Vietnamese ("the terrified frozen expression of people burning, drowning, dragged..."). These expressly political works bring the body forth and, in the process, show how cruelty and destruction as policy is contingent upon the object of that policy remaining abstract and faceless, dis-embodied.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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