





# Q&A WITH CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN

She polarized the avant-garde film community with her experimental 1965 erotic film, *Fuses*; she issued a challenge to the art world in 1975 with *Interior Scroll*, in which she read a text extracted from her vagina damning its male prejudices. And as she enters her 70s, Carolee Schneemann, describing herself as a painter who extended the canvas into real space and time (to include writing, film, performance, and installation), is as fearless and frank as ever.

She was interviewed at her home in Springtown, New York, where she has

**By Wendy Vogel**  
**Portrait by Kristine Larsen**

lived since her days as a Bard College student. She touches on her forthcoming season at New York's Artist's Institute and her upcoming retrospective at Museum der Moderne in Salzburg, and discusses essentialism, cats, and shocking her audiences.

Carolee  
Schneemann  
in her Upstate  
New York  
studio, 2014.  
She is pictured  
with her  
installation  
*Flange 6rpm*,  
2011-13.



WENDY VOGEL: What are you planning for your upcoming shows?

CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN: The Salzburg exhibition will span two stories of the museum. Sabine Breitwieser and I will organize works that are very cohesive yet full of differentiations. For instance, drawings from when I was four years old remain remarkable because a lot of them are predictive of future works. I've been able to integrate them with contemporary images, and Salzburg will include these very early works. I began as a landscape painter, so there will be early landscape and still life paintings and drawings. We will present paintings from the 1960s that begin to incorporate pho-

tographs, just as I began to photograph my live actions.

For the Artist's Institute, I will organize my texts and reference books so that a realm of my research will be available.

During a recent talk, Jenny Jaskey, the director of the Artist's Institute, described you as an artist who is still emerging. Your work has many facets that people are still discovering.

And that I'm still discovering myself. I don't have a programmatic procedure or a predictable next step, so I feel I'm emerging. And I also always feel that I'm behind myself—I've not caught up.

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CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN AND P.P.O.W., NEW YORK





The Institute is situated within the Hunter College art department. You've done a lot of teaching: Will there be a pedagogical component to your show there?

I hope to blast apart any horribly synthetic, programmatic, academic theories. You know, I've just been on a tour of five major colleges upstate with the brilliant filmmaker Marielle Nitoslawska, who was showing her film about my work, *Breaking the Frame*. There were discussions afterward, and I saw students and graduate students struggling to constrain my work within the theories that they had adapted. It was grotesque—an elephant trying to put on a little slipper. I had to say

to them, "The theoretical forms that you rely on and that shape your insights cannot work with what you're looking at here! It will not fit."

What are the roots of your research?

I've done a lot of research in biology, the life of art and forms, and with the early French theorists that I would call the sensualists. They consider what the eye brings to the body. And then, of course, I do a lot with theories that I find destructive, such as those of the great theorist of female lack, Jacques Lacan. I once ended a lecture with, "And would you go to bed with Lacan?"

Performance still from *Up To and Including Her Limits*, 1973–76, at the Kitchen, New York, February 1976.

OPPOSITE:  
*Eye Body #4*,  
1963/1973.  
Hand-colored  
gelatin silver  
print with  
scratches,  
17½ x 14½ in.



You've spoken before about your days as a student at Bard, painting nudes of James Tenney, your partner at the time. Can you talk about these early works?

I grew up surrounded by the walls of masculine convention and ideology, in which I could be a muse but I could never have authority. Even at Bard, my teachers were all male. My best painting teacher would say things like, "Don't set your heart on art. You're only a girl." My paintings were "too masculine." In the film *Breaking the Frame* I say, "I was treated as if some stray masculine principle had somehow entered me." I was always incorrect, and I've been incorrect up to and including today. I was incorrect for essentialism, for Marxism, for lesbian Marxism, for lesbian feminism, and certainly I was incorrect as a student painting my partner as a muse. That was considered degrading, especially because he was really nude: He had a cock and balls. That was deemed inappropriate for me to represent in 1960, although anything about *my* sexuality could be represented. I was kicked out of Bard for moral turpitude.

I realized when I got a President's Award from Bard College in 2012 that the moral turpitude probably wasn't necking with my boyfriend, but it might have been the open-legged self-portraits I was painting in my room. Opinion twists around. The whole pivot of my concern has always been to search for a possible equity—not to assume it, not to anticipate it, but out of my own lived experience to see if there was a form for it. *Fuses* was part of that. All my work is a great experiment. I don't have

anything in the culture that's going to confirm me, so if it eventually does, it's quite wonderful.

Your early pieces were performed with people from the Judson Dance Theater, including Robert Morris in *Site*, 1964.

I was the first painter to choreograph for Judson. I made movement works. A couple of years later Bob, a good friend, said he wanted to collaborate. We started to work in the basement of Judson doing contact improvisation. I wanted to bring in a lot of strange materials that we could batter around, and during the second or third rehearsal, Bob said, "No, let's not do that, I have a new idea. I just built a little platform thing down at my studio; come down and try it with me." So there I was, lying on this kind of plank while he's moving these 8-by-10 plywood boards. It wasn't a part of Judson, though Bob did collaborate with people from the company, like Yvonne Rainer and Simone Forti.

When you began rehearsing with Morris, had you been working on the "Eye Body" series?

Yes, I began "Eye Body" in 1962. So at that point, I'm already performing *Meat Joy*, and the importance shifted away from what I'm making because everyone is so interested that I'm naked in Bob's piece. That was also the problem with being nude in my own work. When I'm naked in my work, I'm part of a collage of materials. I never imagined that the body would be less integrated than I intended it to be—that they're still looking at my tits.

Detail of *Caged Cats I & II*, 2005. Large-format archival print, 88 x 66 in.

OPPOSITE: *War Mop*, 1983. Plexiglas construction, mop, motor, and video monitor, 24 x 62 x 20 in.



Your work has always been controversial. Oh, yes, absolutely. With all my work on war and brutality, going from *Snows* and *Viet-Flakes* to the more recent work on the destruction of Lebanese spaces and Palestinian culture, the whole relay of pieces up to and including *Terminal Velocity*, *War Mop*, and *Devour*, these multichannel videos and photo grids remain controversial. My work moves pretty 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. My research on violence helps me through finding some balance in this insane time, as it did for Goya, my great influence, and Vermeer, with his peaceful interiors, or the Nabis. I love those quiet works—there's always a pussycat on a carpet.

You write in addition to making visual work. There are moments where text and photography or other visual material collide, like the *Correspondents Course* piece from 1980, or *Vulva's Morphia*, from 1995, which pairs text and imagery in a serial way. Both of them have this humorous bent.

A lot of the work is very funny—even *Interior Scroll* is funny. But people think it must be serious, so they miss that aspect.

The text is writing that comes out of research connected to the imagery. It's not disruptive; it's part of a coherent thought strain. For *Vulva's Morphia*, I was building a language morphology, made of vulvic forms that I knew could not be considered obscene because they came from sacred history, from comics, and from nature, from real life. They might be considered obscene, but the weight of it would have to be considered historic, sacred, and lived. I researched Lacan, Freud, Masters and Johnson, Texas prohibitions against young women playing baseball because they might get pregnant, and what the Pope said about witchcraft.

How long did you work with Marielle Nitoslawska on *Breaking the Frame*? Six years, but she worked on it without me. She took films, slides, sound, and then she made this huge puzzle with her collaborators to structure and layer this history.

Did she interview other artists in the film? No, it's not promotional in any way. It's visionary. It's as if someone enters your psyche and blows it into the forms it took. What she does with my photographic series *Terminal Velocity* is amazing. She said, "I just couldn't shoot it." I was working in Montreal a lot during those six years and had a studio there, so I told her, "*Terminal Velocity* is being taken down. If you want to get another shot at it, come." She films it like it's a corpse. She films the panels with these big man's gloved hands laying it out flat and wrapping it in bubble wrap, so you see the falling figures through this transparency and their becoming invisible. It's fantastic. And then they pick these large sections and go down my staircase in Montreal. It was very deep, so it looks like they're going to hell with this thing and out the door.

Animals, particularly cats, are often included in your work. My childhood drawings of cats are ecstatic—they're



wild. I have a very early drawing of a cat with his paws up in the air with these lines of energy coming out of it. It looks very much like one of my gestures when I'm naked and in the tree in *Up To and Including Her Limits*. I always had cats growing up. The cat was sensitive from without to within. The cat always represented what was potentially harmonious. The cat always had an affiliation with me for its sensuousness and its sweetness, its devotion when it was devoted, its purring. So then I begin to align the double obscenity of the female genital pussy and the domestic cat pussy in misogynist traditions. I recently made a video titled *Mysteries of the Pussies*. And then, of course, *Fuses* has the cat's name on the title frame, because instead of a director or an odd presence, the cat was always there as a shameless, approving presence. She was always purring when we made love.

Who's in your inner artist circle?

Céz-Annie, she was a great painter! Joan Mitchell is a huge inspiration, as is the rigor of Cézanne, but all the lost women were of interest to me. And I just wrote a piece on Arthur B. Carles for the site *Painters on Painting*. He's a Philadelphia painter who brought back the visual dynamics of Europe in the early 1920s.

Are you still in touch with Anthony McCall?

Absolutely. I'm close with all my exes, especially Jim Tenney's wife, Lauren Pratt Tenney—I actually introduced them to each other.

I read that you were one of the first female professors at Rutgers.

Yes, in the art department, and I was let go for being a fucking witch! This was called the Wonder Woman job. I gave it my all, but my all was too much. I had dinner with a colleague I really liked and he said, "I have difficult news. You're not going to be rehired." I said, "What? Everything seemed to be so popular and appreciated." He said, "No, you know, we think of you as a witch." And this was 1999. MP

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