

CAROLEE SCHNEEMAN, *The Kitchen*

CAROLEE SCHNEEMAN is an underestimated multimedia artist and filmmaker. Her recent performance of *Up To And Including Her Limits* is a work-in-progress which has been developed through a series of six two-day performance installations over the last two years at the University Art Museum, Berkeley; London Film-Makers Cooperative; Art Meeting Place, London; Artists Space; Anthology Film Archives; and recently at the Kitchen. Each installation consists of five parts—a performance area where Schneeman hangs in a rope harness and draws; *Kitch's Last Meal*, a double super-8 film; sound tapes; a bank of video monitors and a reading area for Schneeman's writings which is separate from the main performance. These five facets are meant to be experienced as a temporal collage and as such succeed although we confront each as a separate unit. One is further meant to feel the entire space as a sculptural/architectural volume having psychic equivalents in the various aspects of the work being presented.

The performance itself is meant to be experienced as a semifilmic event. She underlines this by illuminating the performance area with a super-8 projector light without film. Schneeman writes of her activities suspended in ropes making random linear markings:

The drawing accumulations which occur during my suspension on the rope are called automatic writing or trance markings. For non-specified durations I turn myself into a randomized drawing machine. The situation seems personal—being nude, my voice on the tapes, my image in the film—but while the figure on the ropes is actual it becomes less "real" than the woman of the film. There is no idea of "performance" whatsoever; while working on the rope I may not know if there are any spectators or none. The movements and gestures which produce the strokes are controlled by the torsion of my body wound in the rope. My only thought is to be an extension of the rope itself. Until discomfort or loss of concentration occurs I let my entire body function as a pencil.

This is akin to the semiautomatic writing the Dada-Surrealists sometimes used to generate images. Her use of it reveals the implicit Dada-Surrealist content of Happenings, the movement with which her work was affiliated when her art first came to maturity and to which she still bears a certain allegiance.

In a deliberate layering of time and place, six video monitors were placed opposite the performance area. One broadcasted the ongoing performance. Schneeman made a single edited master tape of the five previous performances and each of the remaining five monitors showed a different permutation of it. The individual tapes were grouped in sequences such as 24351, 35421, 41532, etc. As a viewer, one feels the simultaneity of the performances, but is not aware that they are part of a structural program of presentation. The monitors also replay the sound of the film in the original, so you have increasing layers of sound in each additional installation.

In another section of the room was shown a film-in-progress, *Kitch's Last Meal*—four paired super-8 movies of Schneeman's weekly filmings of her cat Kitch, over the last several years. The film was intended to end, at the death of the

cat. The cat died shortly before this performance, and its body, gruesomely yet logically, lay in state near the performance area. The cat was female, and Schneeman frequently adopted Kitch as a persona, using her as a projection of her own feelings. The film is partially meant to be a political stance on Schneeman's part against the male film establishment. She asserts, as Dorothy Richardson did in her novels, that men leave too much out. To counter men's faults as she sees them, the film focuses on typical women's concerns—the trivial, mundane and necessary actions of day-to-day survival.

The four separate tapes accompanying the films parallel these concerns. Tape #1 is normal household sounds enveloping the cat's daily awareness; #2, the

most biting and polemical, is partially concerned with art politics; #3 is composed of silences out of which a couple's domestic conversations surface; and #4 is a combination of the previous three and sounds in the morgue after the cat's death. Tape #2 has one of my favorite stretches of monologue and enunciates some of the sources and parameters of Schneeman's feminism.

I met a happy man  
a structuralist filmmaker  
—but don't call me that it's something else  
I do—  
he said we are fond of you  
you are charming  
but don't ask us to look at your films  
we cannot  
there are certain films we cannot look at:  
the personal clutter  
the persistence of feelings  
the hand-touch sensibility  
the diaristic indulgence

One of the transformations of values introduced by the women's movement is an insistence that all aspects of life are equally important as subjects of art. *Kitch's Last Meal*, with its attention to the beauty and poverty of the mundane and the trivial, and its emphasis on the grainy, blurry "homemade" quality of the film, would clearly be an exponent of this attitude, even if Schneeman didn't insist on it. I felt, when watching the film at the Kitchen, and in certain remarks Schneeman made in her introduction to a showing of her films at Douglass College, that the tapes could be used randomly with the visuals. She appeared to be asserting, in the tradition of John Cage, that she was using chance and process as a means of ordering the film. In embracing nonhierarchical principles of composition, she seemed to be emphasizing her allegiance to a "woman's" sensibility. But, the film has only a pseudo-informality, because the sequences presented are closely edited and the tapes are designed to be congruent with definite visual passages. This denies the aleatoric quality seemingly implicit in the film. The film has a definite strength both ideologically and esthetically, and my only quibble with Schneeman is, ultimately, her conscious denial of the employment of "male" notions of structure, technical perfection, etc., of which she is clearly a master.