

the Kitchen

center for video and music

Carolee Schneeman: Up to and Including Her Limits



Carolee Schneemann with swing, crayon and cat

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Carolee Schneemann's work has a double focus—herself and her recently deceased 19-year-old gray Maltese cat, Kitch.

Before entering the performance space, one passes through a reading room in which copies of the artist's books *Parts of a Body*, *House Book* (1972), *Cezanne; She Was a Great Painter* (1975) and the program guide from an earlier performance of *Up to and Including Her Limits* (Dec., 1974, Anthology Film Archives). The books

provide the clearest examples of her anger and feminist rhetoric. The material covers her struggles growing up as a woman and artist (i.e., the need to demand that Cezanne was a woman in order to have a role model), her desires to explore her sexual needs and to discuss them with other women (including informal surveys dealing with matters orgasmic) and descriptions and fantasies concerning art pieces (most interesting was a proposal for art using menstrual blood). The reading room remained open during the evening as an oft-visited alternative/complement to the media and live-action elements.

Inside the larger space one found a line-up of six monitors showing, generally, four different images. Material here included tapes of previous *Up...* performances, Carolee's ongoing (immediate) swing drawing, and older tapes involving her interaction with Kitch.

All images were black and white. None were, in themselves, compelling. The cellophane-covered line-up drew little attention to itself but was well-integrated as part of the furnishings.

On the opposite side of the room was a split-screen presentation (vertical) of Super footage *Kitch's Last Meal* consisting of shots of

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Carolee's cat taken from 1974 to its death Feb. 3. The stuffed animal was to be seen lying on a small altar to the right of the screen. In the corner Ms. Schneemann herself was frequently seen swinging nude in a harness making crayon line drawings on three perpendicular paper-covered surfaces (two walls and the floor).

A side wall featured a small review of Carolee's performance as well as a work schedule for the cat film.

Schneemann's work seems far less sexually charged than it has in the past. The only reminiscence of the sensitive fuck films (*Fuses*) she made with James Tenney are found in the close-ups of her new beau, Anthony McCall's long cock, and the quick flashes of them in bed caressing tenderly. Other shots of their home life emphasize the pleasures of food, nature, and travel.

In some sense the film is a homage to Stan Brakhage. From the sound track we learn that she received the cat when she first met the filmmaker in the fifties. One recalls that the couple Schneemann and Tenney starred in Brakhage's *Loving* and the threesome (couple and cat) were prominently featured in his important *Cat's Cradle*

(1964). Still, as a filmmaker, Carolee seems to have picked up on some of the more superficial (less interesting) aspects of Brakhage's style of personal filmmaking. We have the home-movie flow of life, quick cut, short shot style without the emphasis on the primacy of raw perception or the psychological tension of uneasy metaphors (except the train as journey and death—a trope which seems far too pat).

The serenity of Carolee Schneemann's life with man and cat just doesn't jive with the heavy feminist rhetoric which comes through on the sound track and in the books. This does not mean that I demand to see an agonizing, soul-searching film of her relating to her woman's body. Just that the anger does not come across as emerging from the politics of her real experience.

Her swinging/drawing actions, by presenting her as both innocent/vulnerable and as a sex object (*Girl on the Red Velvet Swing*), deal more directly with feminist issues. Yet the semi-precious sacred area, created by the shrine of the dead cat, cuts her off from direct audience contact. Although it was her stated aim to do away with "performance" and "performer," I don't believe she achieves this in the present work. Indeed she does pose for the video camera, and her dance background is apparent in the grace of her transitions from nude swinging, through getting out of the harness to getting dressed and crossing through and out of the performance area. Still the large meandering

sweeping crayon lines she creates have some of the primal urgency found in prehistoric cave finger paintings, and her use of the floor provides interesting spatial displacement.

Her desire to investigate instinctual behavior through projecting the thoughts and moods of her cat (from the sound tapes we discover the way a cat experiences cinema and the books inform us how Carolee learned to enjoy natural smells through studying her cat's sniffing around) is also an exciting, albeit somewhat naive concept. Her investigations lack the enigma of Joseph Beuy's telling stories to a dead hare or the vitality and danger of his later interaction with a live coyote during his week-long American performance *I Like America and America Likes Me*.

I'm reluctant to sound too critical of a work I moderately enjoyed. The disjunction between the sound (philosophical speculation on cats, cinema, and reflections on experience) and images and the opportunity provided for the spectator to explore a multitude of image situations was admirable. Also the emphasis on quotidian experience and small gesture was a conscious choice (reacting against male grandiosity). Still, I was really disappointed. What I had read about the artist led me to believe that she has done really exciting work in the past (especially the *Meat Joy* Happening, 1964). And after all, emphasis on personal experience does not necessarily lead to mediocrity.

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