

PAINTING, WHAT IT BECAME

"I'm a painter. I'm still a painter and I will die a painter. Everything that I have developed has to do with extending visual principles off the canvas."
Schneemann, 1993¹

Carolee Schneemann's paintings from the late 1950s and 1960s are a significantly overlooked aspect of her oeuvre. Eclipsed by her signature works in performance and film, her paintings have often been relegated to the margins, considered early or immature work. However, as I will argue, this artistic foundation is fundamental to Schneemann's diverse practice. Tracing Schneemann's output from 1957 to the present, I highlight how her paintings transformed from traditional works on canvas (in the lineage of Abstract Expressionism) to painting-constructions and kinetic sculptures, and later, to group and solo performances, installations, and films. By investigating this historical trajectory, I aim to reexamine how her explorations within other mediums derive from "extending visual principles off the canvas," and also to appreciate her paintings and drawings as important corollaries to the kinetic theater, Judson Dance Theater performances, and films that she simultaneously produced. I reconsider Schneemann as a painter who has never ceased conceptualizing her work as always related to the painterly gesture, to prying open 'the frame', and to conceiving of the body itself as tactile material. Her most memorable works, treasured by many, misunderstood by some, can be re-envisioned then, as what Schneemann herself has called, 'exploded canvasses,'² or as performative-paintings, filmic-paintings, or kinetic-paintings. Whatever the term, the pictorial concerns of painting remain the grounding mechanism and unifying field of her work.

1. Carolee Schneemann in *Imaging Her Erotics: Carolee Schneemann* (1993: VHS, 5 mins), a video collaboration between Maria Beatty and the artist.

2. Carolee Schneemann, *More Than Meat Joy: Performance Works and Selected Writings* (Documentext, 1997), p. 167.

Schneemann's formal artistic training began with landscape painting and endless hours of life drawing, evidenced by her early works on canvas, such as *Personae: JT and 3 Kitch's* (1957) and *Three Figures After Pontormo* (1957), which reveal luscious brushwork and all-over compositions. These works reflect a love of paint's facility—its materiality and objecthood—which is an important concept that later assists Schneemann move the gesture off the canvas. After finishing an MFA in painting at the University of Illinois, Schneemann moved to New York City in 1961. Almost immediately, she became situated squarely within what in the 1960s was called the 'experimental avant-garde', a place occupied by Robert Rauschenberg, Claes Oldenburg, Allan Kaprow, Jim Dine, and other second-generation Abstract Expressionist artists. Indeed, like them, Schneemann was interested in exploring the new aesthetic options made available in the wake of Action Painting. How could Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning's spatial fracture be expanded beyond the canvas and into space and time? Schneemann's inter-media works from the late 1950s through the 1970s demonstrate her continuous investigation of this question.

Schneemann's painting-constructions—like Richard Stankiewicz's junk sculptures, Rauschenberg's 'combines,' Oldenburg's painted, corrugated cardboard reliefs, or John Chamberlain's crushed auto assemblages—cull together non-art materials from life, ones that retain biographical references and that, in their rawness, call to mind the appearance and spirit of spatial analysis in painting. *Sphinx* (1961), *Sir Henry Francis Taylor* (1961), and *Gift Science* (1965) are large painting-constructions that exemplify Schneemann's interest in assemblage and departure from the flat canvas. In each work, paint is only one of many materials from life that can be applied to or cut into surfaces; Schneemann also employs photographs, wood, fabric, audiotape, glass, cellophane, lightbulbs, and underpants. Each work demonstrates the artist's continued desire to push painting through the canvas, out of the frame, and into the spectator's space, while at the same time structuring the

MAURA REILLY



Personae: JT and 3 Kitch's, 1957

A committee of the hardhat is assumed to be a plumose argument. The zeitgeist contends that a part is the grandfather of a fountain.



Three Figures After Pontorno, 1957

A committee of the hardhat is assumed to be a plumose argument. The zeitgeist contends that a part is the grandfather of a fountain.



Jane Brakage, 1958
A committee of the hardhat is assumed to be a plumose argument. The zeitgeist contends that a part is the grandfather of a fountain.



Animal Carnage, 1960
A committee of the hardhat is assumed to be a plumose argument. The zeitgeist contends that a part is the grandfather of a fountain.



Kitch's Dream, 1960
A committee of the hardhat is assumed to be
a plumose argument. The zeitgeist contends
that a part is the grandfather of a fountain.



Red Figure, 1961
A committee of the hardhat is assumed to be
a plumose argument. The zeitgeist contends
that a part is the grandfather of a fountain.



Sir Henry Francis Taylor, 1961
A committee of the hardhat is assumed to be
a plumose argument. The zeitgeist contends
that a part is the grandfather of a fountain.



Tenebration, 1961
A committee of the hardhat is assumed to be
a plumose argument. The zeitgeist contends
that a part is the grandfather of a fountain.



Sphinx, 1961

A committee of the hardhat is assumed to be a plumose argument. The zeitgeist contends that a part is the grandfather of a fountain.



ABOVE / OVERLEAF /

Native Beauties, 1962-1964

A committee of the hardhat is assumed to be a plumose argument. The zeitgeist contends that a part is the grandfather of a fountain.





Fur Wheel, 1962

A committee of the hardhat is assumed to be a plumose argument. The zeitgeist contends that a part is the grandfather of a fountain.

'real' with the visual composition of a painter's eye. *Fur Wheel* (1962) adds the element of movement, signaling Schneemann's entry into kinetic sculpture and leading to the incorporation of duration in her work.

In 1962 Schneemann began a large kinetic painting-construction called *Four Fur Cutting Boards*, using four interlocked painted panels, broken glass, mirrors, photographs, colored lights, moving umbrellas, a hubcap, fabric, and other motorized parts. She created an imposing environment, painted in brightly colored, gestural sweeps. A year later, this work was used as an integral material component of one of her most famous works, *Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions*, which blended painting, performance, and photography. In each of the 'actions for camera' the artist combined her naked, painted body as an additional tactile, plastic 'material' with the painting-construction. This was the first time Schneemann incorporated her physical body within her work, permeating boundaries between image-maker and image, seeing and seen, eye and body—hence the work's title. As Rebecca Schneider has written, *Eye Body* suggests an 'embodied vision, a bodily eye—sighted eyes—artist's eyes—not only in the seer, but in the body of the seen.'³ Both Schneemann's positioning of herself within her own work as an active seeing agent and her insistence on emphasizing her body as tactile material greatly contributed to her evolving ideas on kinetic theater.

As a founding member of the Judson Dance Theater, Schneemann's primary interest was in kinesthesia, or bodily sensations—hence her chosen term 'kinetic theater' to describe her early performance productions involving multiple participants. In her first kinetic theater piece, *Glass Environment for Sound and Motion* (1962), Schneemann conceived of the stage as 'an enlarged collage,' replete with large broken, refracted mirrors, and the performers in the group 'as a sort of physical palette,'⁴ which clearly recalls the studio-production elements of *Four Fur Cutting Boards* and the treatment of the body-as-material in *Eye Body*. Throughout the 1960s, Schneemann continued to conceptualize all her works produced at the Living Theater

3. Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 35.

4. Schneemann, *More Than Meat Joy*, pp. 21 and 32.



Gift Science, 1965

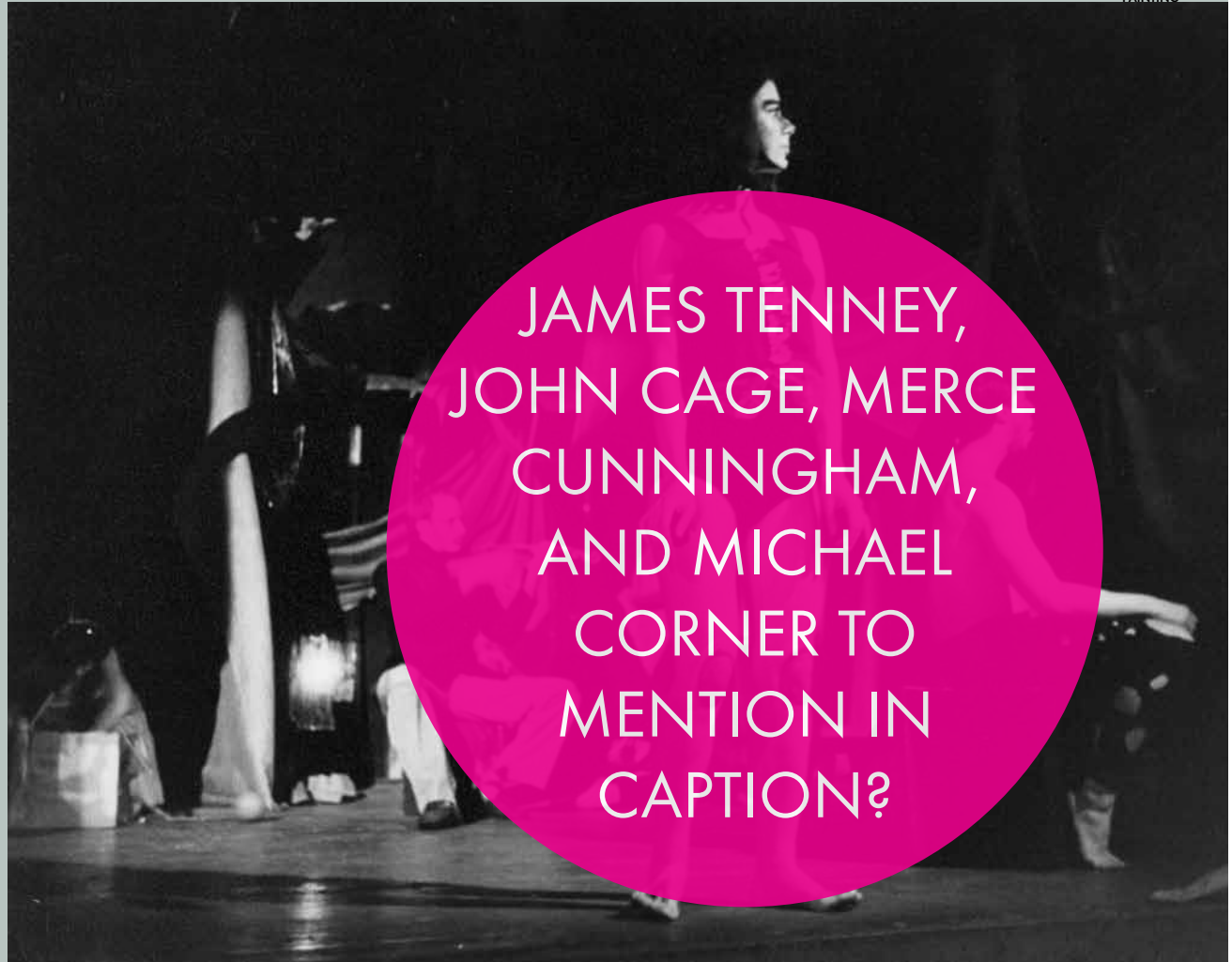
A committee of the hardhat is assumed to be a plumose argument. The zeitgeist contends that a part is the grandfather of a fountain.



Eye Body: 36 Transformative, 1963
A committee of the hardhat is assumed to be
a plumbse argument. The zeitgeist contends
that a part is the grandfather of a fountain.



I'M A PAINTER, WORKING WITH MY BODY AND WAYS OF THINKING ABOUT MOVEMENT AND ENVIRONMENT THAT COME OUT OF THE DISCIPLINE OF HAVING PAINTED FOR SIX OR EIGHT HOURS A DAY FOR YEARS. THAT'S GOT TO BE THE ROOT OF MY LANGUAGE IN ANY MEDIUM. I'M NOT A FILMMAKER. I'M NOT A PHOTOGRAPHER. I'M A PAINTER.



JAMES TENNEY,
JOHN CAGE, MERCE
CUNNINGHAM,
AND MICHAEL
CORNER TO
MENTION IN
CAPTION?

Environment for Sound and, 1962
A committee of the hardhat is assumed to be a plumose argument. The zeitgeist contends that a part is the grandfather of a fountain.



PAINTING



OPPOSITE [ABOVE]
Meat Joy, 1964
A committee of the hardhat is assumed to be a plumose argument. The zeitgeist contends that a part is the grandfather of a fountain.

CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN UNFORGIVABLE



PAINTING, WHAT IT BECAME

and the Judson Dance Theater 'as a painter who had in effect enlarged her canvas.'⁵ As she explained in a 1983 interview, her theater works were 'taking Pollock, the gesture, the action, into space.'⁶

Meat Joy (1964) is Schneemann's most famous kinetic theater performance. Accompanied by a collaged soundtrack of Paris street noises and upbeat pop tunes, eight semi-nude men and women (including the artist) roll about in mounds of paper, embrace, make living sculptures, come together, part, paint each others' bodies, and in the end are inundated with raw chickens, fish, and sausage. As in a later solo performance, *Body Collage* (1967), in which Schneemann paints her nude body with molasses and glue and then rolls in paper to produce a literal 'body collage,' the participants in *Meat Joy* function as both canvasses and paintbrushes. They perform abstract, expressionist painting as they actively move about the canvas surface, while simultaneously providing a ground upon which color, shape, and texture accumulate. Schneemann has equated *Meat Joy* with performative painting, describing it as 'an erotic vision that came through a series of very visceral dreams of expanding physical energy—off the canvas, out of the frame.'⁷ Indeed, three painted collages on linen, made decades later to commemorate the performance, titled *Meat Joy Collage* (1998–1999), which incorporate original photographs from 1964, are aggressively gestural in execution, and return the embodied, explosive energy of the 'real' performance to its visual analogy.

When Schneemann first performed *Meat Joy* in Paris she realized that documenting it was a critical part of the event. Both film and photography were used to communicate the work's expressionist quality and to reveal its narrative structure. Schneemann subsequently began to pursue film as a mixed-media form unto itself, and on occasion, within the context of performance.

Fuses (1964–1966), a silent film of collaged lovemaking sequences between Schneemann and her then partner, composer James Tenney, observed by her cat Kitch,

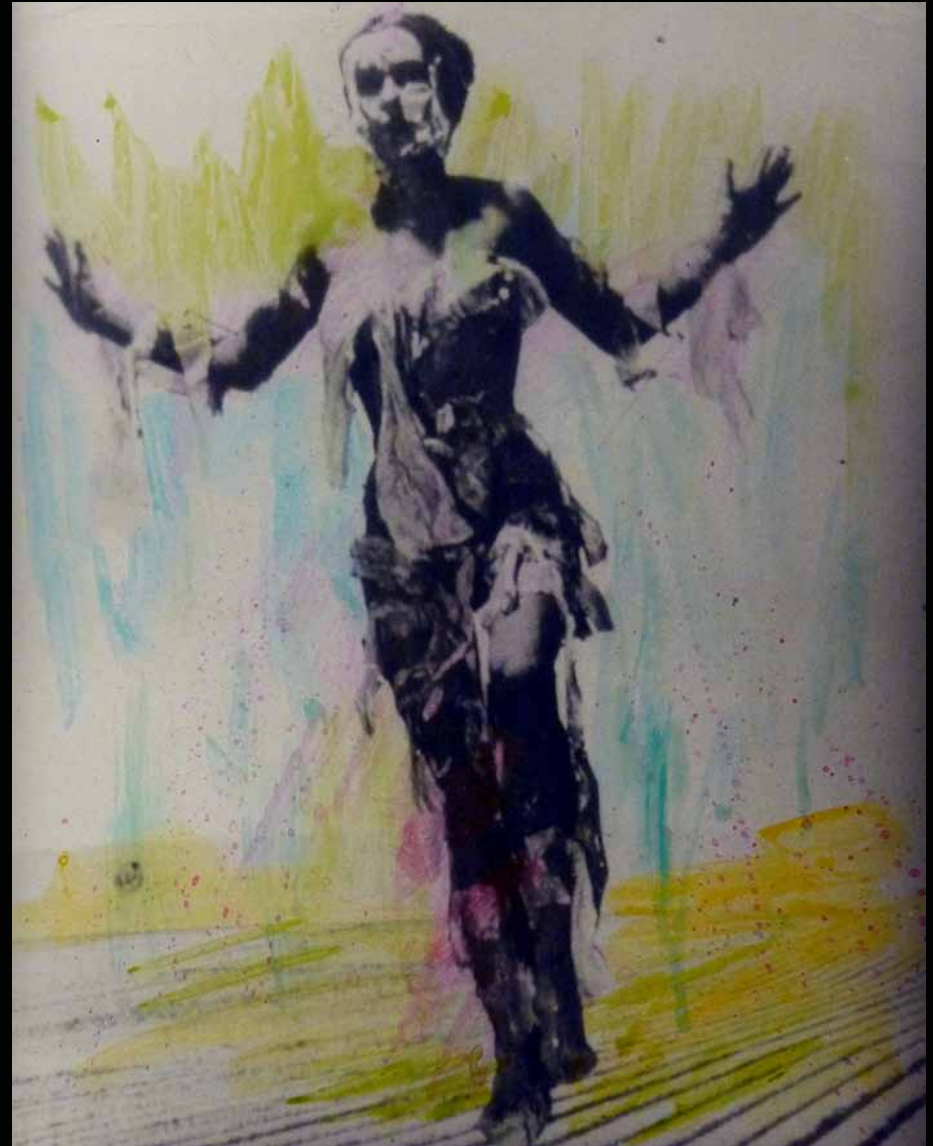
5. Ibid., p. 32.

6. Schneemann, cited in Carey Lovelace, "Schneemann: Inside Out," *Artcom*, no. 19 (1983): 16.

7. From an unpublished interview with Danielle Knaflo.

LEFT | OPPOSITE | *Body Collage*, 1967

A committee of the hardhat is assumed to be a plumose argument. The zeitgeist contends that a part is the grandfather of a fountain.





AS A PAINTER ... I WANTED THE
BODIES TO BE TURNING INTO TACTILE
SENSATIONS OF FLICKERS.

LEFT | OVERLEAF | *Fuses*, 1964–1967

A committee of the hardhat is assumed to be
that a part is the grandfather of a fountain.





is considered by many to be one of her masterpieces. By maneuvering celluloid material to subvert narrativity and subjectivity, *Fuses*' formal ingenuities placed Schneemann at the forefront of experimental film's investigation of materiality and abstraction. At the same time, its feminist content and her fluid, expressionistic, painterly treatment of the medium set her apart from other mid-1960s experimental filmmakers' purely formalist bent. For Schneemann, film was a natural extension of the canvas: *Fuses* is a filmic-painting. Schneemann physically hand-painted, etched, dyed, stamped, scratched, baked, and heavily collaged the film's surface, producing a thick, textured film-object not unlike the surfaces of the painting-constructions she was making around the same time. As Schneemann explains,

**MY ENTIRE BODY
BECOMES THE AGENCY
OF VISUAL TRACES,
VESTIGES OF THE
BODY'S ENERGY IN
MOTION.**

'As a painter ... I wanted the bodies to be turning into tactile sensations of flickers.⁸ The naked bodies move in and out of the frame, dissolving optically before viewers' eyes, not a literal translation, but 'edited as a music of frames.'⁹

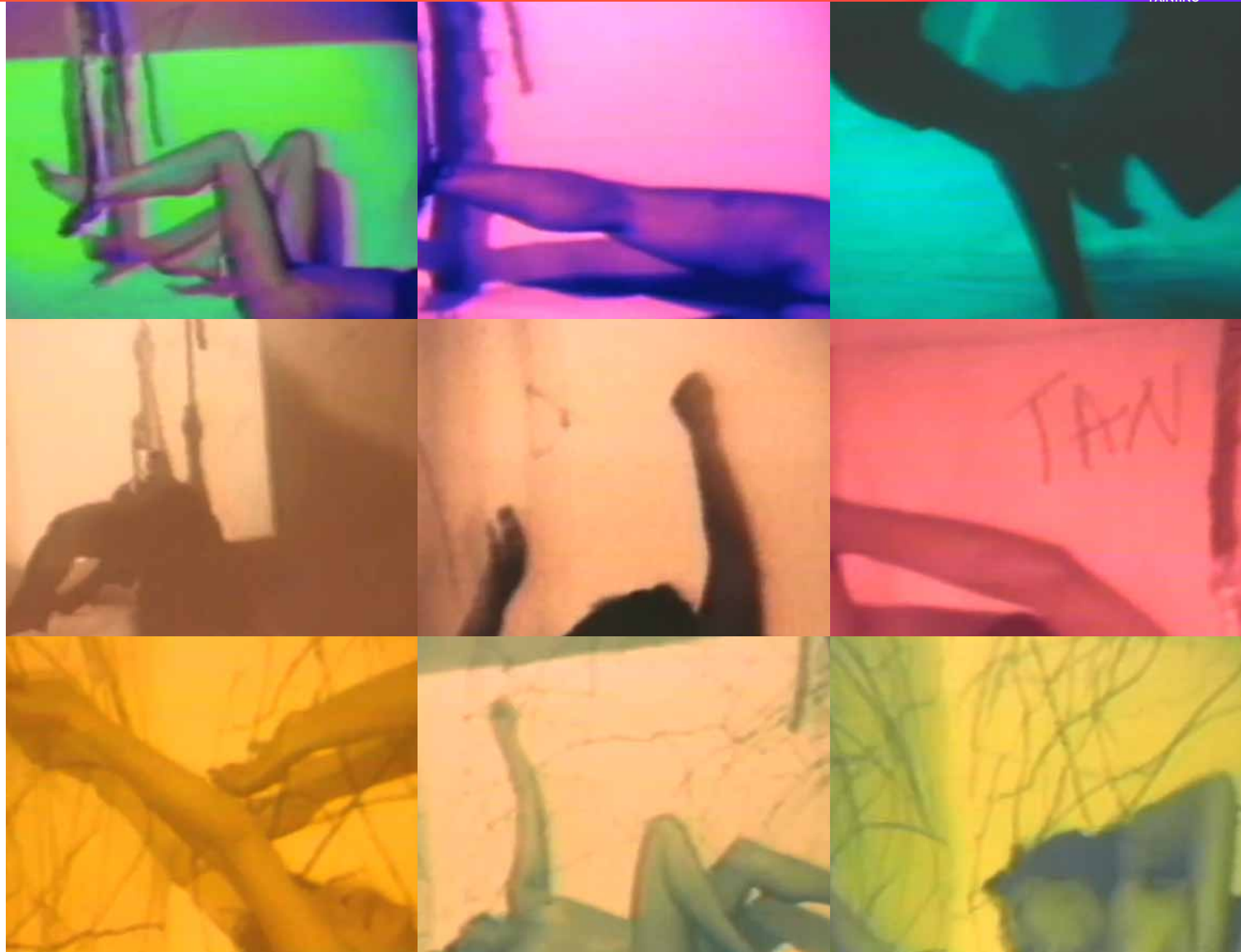
Schneemann's solo performance, *Up To and Including Her Limits* (1973–1977), in so far as it directly comments on the hyper-masculinity of Action Painting—in particular, the sexualized nature of Pollock's 'ejaculatory drip'—also represents one of the best examples of what her painting became as it moved through her body: a total integration of action and object. Suspended naked above her canvas,

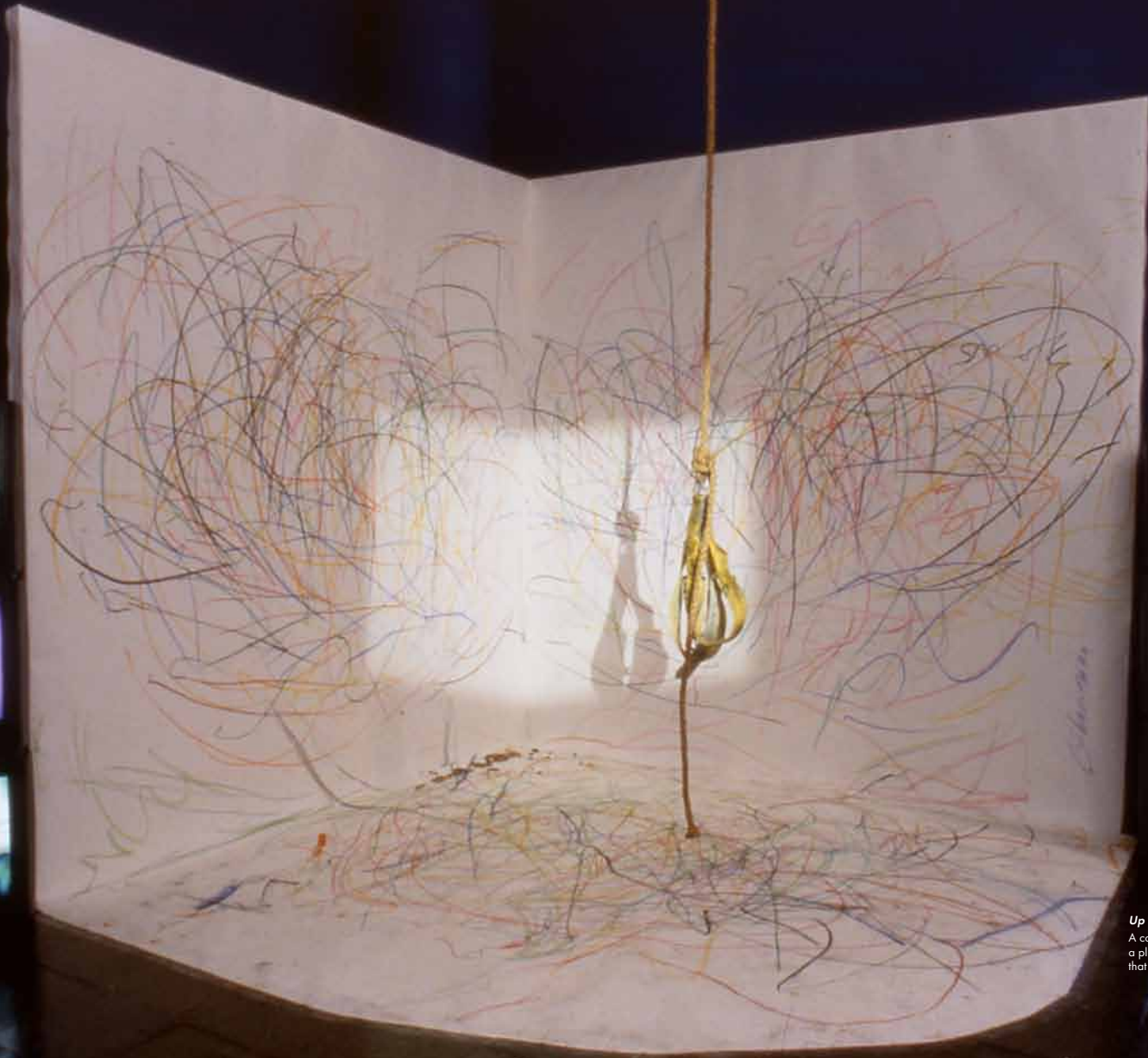
8. From an interview with Kate Haug in Carolee Schneemann, *Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003), p. 43.

9. *Ibid.*

***Up and Including Her Limits*, 1973**

A committee of the hardhat is assumed to be a plumose argument. The zeitgeist contends that a part is the grandfather of a fountain.





Up and Including Her Limits, 1973
A committee of the hardhat is assumed to be a plumose argument. The zeitgeist contends that a part is the grandfather of a fountain.

Schneemann manually raises and lowers herself while 'stroking' the surrounding floor and walls with crayons, accumulating a web of colored marks, and traces of her physical being. Schneemann commented in 1977 that the work directly responds to Pollock's physicalized painting: 'My entire body becomes the agency of visual traces, vestiges of the body's energy in motion.'¹⁰ A few years later, the artist produced a kinetic sculpture titled *War Mop* (1983), which similarly contemplates painting post-Action Painting, and challenges the gender signification of its gesture. It also demonstrates how painting persists as a theme, even when Schneemann's literal or 'real' body ceases to function as a subject, agent, or 'material'. Like her earlier Vietnam War-inspired film *Viet Flakes* (1967), *War Mop* is a protest work, in this instance against the atrocities in Beirut. The work includes a video monitor that continuously plays *Souvenir of Lebanon* (1983), Schneemann's montage of news footage from the war. Every eight seconds a motorized mop rises then slaps down on the monitor, like a weapon or rifle, while violent images of blown-out villages sweep across the screen. The hostile and banal up-and-down movement of the mop metaphorically echoes the aggressive paint strokes of the Abstract Expressionists, turning the mop into an oversized paintbrush.

In later years, Schneemann extended on this work, producing *Scroll Painting with Exploded TV* (1990–1991), in which a series of paintings was created by motorized mops dipped in paint. In the installation, video monitors depict the paint falling on the canvas. If gestural abstraction was initially about reclaiming subjectivity in post-WWII America—as Pollock's declaration 'I am nature' implies—then, Schneemann's complete elimination of the subject from the creation of 'gestural abstraction' is her rebuttal.

Despite her innumerable inter-media explorations in kinetic theater, performance, film, video, and installation, and decades of artistic production in which the physical medium of paint is scarce, Schneemann insists on her status as a painter. As she eloquently stated in a 1980 interview: 'I'm a painter, working with my body and ways of thinking about movement and environment that come out of the discipline of having painted for six or eight hours a day for years. That's got to be the root of my language in any

10. Schneemann, *Imaging Her Erotics*, p. 165.

Souvenir of Lebanon, 1983

A committee of the hardhat is assumed to be a plumose argument. The zeitgeist contends that a part is the grandfather of a fountain.





PAINTING, WHAT IT BECAME

medium. I'm not a filmmaker. I'm not a photographer. I'm a painter.¹¹ This essay, and the exhibition for which it was written, hopes to unravel this seeming contradiction by supporting a redefinition of the painter, not as one who paints, but one who works on the questions and problems of painting. This shift allows a deeper appreciation for the power of visual structures and formal concerns throughout Schneemann's career. It also places her work at the center of the major philosophical debates raised by contemporary art, challenging the flatness of painting, notions of medium-specificity, and expanding the field of visual art to include the embodied subject.¹²

Versions of this essay have been published in a catalogue accompanying an exhibition titled "Carolee Schneemann: Painting, What It Became," curated by Maura Reilly at PPOW Gallery in New York, February to March 2009; in the catalogue "Carolee Schneemann: Within and Beyond the Premises," Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art at the State University of New York at New Paltz, February 6 to July 25, 2010, pp. 27-30; and in *Feminist Studies* 37, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 620-648.

11. Schneemann, in Scott MacDonald, "Film and Performance: An Interview with Carolee Schneemann," *Millennium Film Journal*, nos. 7/8/9, (Fall/Winter 1980-1981), p. 105.

Souvenir of Lebanon, 1983

A committee of the hardhat is assumed to be a plumose argument. The zeitgeist contends that a part is the grandfather of a fountain.