Meat Joy, November 1964
Performance, Judson Dance Theater,
Judson Memorial Church,
New York, NY, US
From the left: Stanley Gochenouer,
unknown, Carolee Schneemann,
Dorothea Rockburne
Photo: Al Giese

The other's actions «address» me in the sense that those actions belong to an Other who is irreducible.

Judith Butler

Unclear Tendencies: Carolee Schneemann's Aesthetics of Ambiguity

Branden W. Joseph

Confronting Carolee Schneemann's *Lebanon Series*, exhibited at the Max Hutchinson Gallery in New York in 1983, artist and critic Jeanne Silverthorne expressed a palpable «frustration.»[1] It was not the incessant thud of *War Mop* (1983) that distressed her (she described it as «effective,» if appropriately «dispiriting»), so much as the heterogeneous arrays of paint and collage in such works as *Souvenir of … Tyre … Sidon … Damour (for B. McP.)* (1982). Instead of formal resolution or the evident equivalent of visual «puns,» Silverthorne encountered surfaces of paint and appropriated imagery marked by «intermittent, relentless, disruptive return.» «[T]his work,» she declared, «seems to balk.» Silverthorne attributed the troublesome effect to several factors: an ostensible pursuit of «symbols,» an intrusive engagement with routine domesticity (found in an image of Schneemann and her lover in bed), and, above all, Schneemann's principal subject matter, the destruction wrought by the First Lebanon War of 1982. «The war overrides Schneemann's intentions,» Silverthorne asserted. «Maybe because of this Schneemann seems to lose faith in images altogether. Perhaps unconsciously, she begins to equate her long-practiced expressionist stroke with violence and her objects with mere trinkets.»

Silverthorne's reaction is typical, to some extent, of Schneemann's wider critical reception. While not exactly giving Schneemann a bad review, she nonetheless expresses many of the same laments voiced by the «structuralist filmmaker» Schneemann immortalized in the film *Kitch's Last Meal* (1973–1976) and the second performance of *Interior Scroll* (1975/1977). That «happy man,» a student of renowned film critic Annette Michelson, complained of Schneemann's «personal clutter,» «diaristic indulgence,» «dense gestalt,» and, most pointedly, «those unclear tendencies which are inflicted upon viewers.» «I saw my failings were worthy of dismissal,» sighed Schneemann, «I'd be buried alive / my works lost…»[2]

What interests me in both Silverthorne's and the structural filmmaker's remarks is the disparity between their precise, and often insightful, descriptions—about disruptive surfaces, dense gestalts, daily routine, and, particularly, a loss of faith in images—and their ultimate, if surreptitiously pronounced, judgments. «The scene of moral judgment,» Judith Butler has argued, «invariably establishes a clear moral distance between the one who judges and the one who is judged.»[3] As such, judgment may serve to foreclose intersubjective relations. «In fact,» Butler continues, «recognition sometimes obligates us to suspend judgment in order to apprehend the other.… It may be that only through an experience of the other under conditions of suspended judgment do we finally become capable of an ethical reflection on the humanity of the other.»[4]

Although primarily addressing a juridical rather than aesthetic paradigm, Butler's reflections on «ethical relationality» are valuable, and not simply because reactions to Schneemann's work have often taken a distinctly moralizing tone.[5] For what both Silverthorne and the structural filmmaker inadvertently reveal is how clearly they

1 Jeanne Silverthorne, «Reviews: New York,» in *Artforum* 22, no. 3 (November 1983): 73 (subsequent citations from the same source).
2 Carolee Schneemann, «From Tape #2 for ‹Kitch's Last Meal› on-going Super 8mm film,» in *Cézanne, She Was a Great Painter* (New Paltz, NY: Tresspuss Press, 1975), 38–39 (ellipses in original); repr. in Carolee Schneemann, *Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 158–159.
3 Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 45.
4 Ibid., 44–45.
5 Ibid., 45.

Souvenir of…Tyre…Sidon…
Damour (for Bruce McP.), 1982
Diptych, acrylic paint, Mylar,
fabric, photographs, glass,
collaged on board, aluminium frame

perceive Schneemann's challenge to the conventional functions of artistic imagery, the pressures her work puts on a traditional communicative paradigm, even as they fail (or refuse) to *recognize* it.[6] This is important, not only because failure to grapple with this component of Schneemann's artistic project—a readiness to assume that the «intermittent» and «disruptive» effects within Schneemann's work «override» her «intentions»—has potentially hindered her broader art historical reception, but also because, as I will argue, an ethical relationship to the other constitutes one of the most significant stakes of Schneemann's art. As such, an approach to the imbrication of Schneemann's ethics and aesthetics—one that leaves its mark in the intermittent and disruptive qualities of her imagery—may serve as a worthwhile introduction to her first large-scale museum retrospective.

Difficulties posed by Schneemann's imagery can be traced back at least as far as the New York debut of her most celebrated performance, *Meat Joy* (1964). Schneemann's Happening—or as she termed it, Kinetic Theater performance—is predominantly regarded as a riotous spectacle, an ecstatic enaction of abstract expressionist painting interspersed (for those who carefully watch the performance footage) with interludes resembling a Busby Berkeley water ballet taking place on not-so-dry land. The performers' near-orgiastic interactions with paint and other materials—including, most notably, sausages, dead fish, and slaughtered chickens—connected Allan Kaprow's call for an environmental action painting with the fleshy liberation espoused in Michael McClure's *Meat Science Essays*.[7] By contrast, choreographed passages reminiscent of the patterned human formations Siegfried Kracauer termed *mass ornament* point toward the relationship between the Happening and reification, what Susan Sontag presciently noted in the fact that, «[m]uch of the action, violent or otherwise, of Happenings involves [the] use of the person as a material object.»[8] Approached from this perspective, and no matter how coordinated the performers' moves, the Happening enacts «a demonic, not a divine comedy, precisely to the extent that modern experience is characterized by meaningless mechanized situations of disrelation.»[9] Such, as Judith Rodenbeck has more recently argued, is ultimately the tragic revelation of the Happening as a genre, that «the fetishized commodity that was easel painting … was supplanted not by ‹authentic experience› … but by the reification of the ordinary language, behavior, and action—the habitus—of participants. That is, the relations between participants seemed if anything to take the form *not* of a relation between autonomous *subjects*—a ‹collaboration without objects›—but rather of a relation between *objects*.»[10]

We will return to the crucial issue of subject/object relations in due course. First, however, it is worth noting that, while mentioning both its orgiastic painterly ritual and its pointed reflections upon mechanized life (which the engagement with flesh partly sought to overcome), what predominantly struck *Meat Joy*'s initial critics were

6 This disavowal manifests itself perhaps most clearly in the remarks of the structural filmmaker who, while perfectly capable of listing the traits of Schneemann's production that he and his mentor dislike (which indicates that they must, at one time, have seen it), nonetheless declares, «dont [sic] ask us to look at your films/we cannot/there are certain films we cannot look at,» Schneemann, *Cézanne*, 38; repr. in *Imaging Her Erotics*, 159.

7 Allan Kaprow, «The Legacy of Jackson Pollock» (1958), in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 1–9; Michael McClure, *Meat Science Essays* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1963). On Schneemann and McClure, see Ara Osterweil, «Carolee Schneemann: Meat Joys,» in *Flesh Cinema: The Corporeal Turn in American Avant-Garde Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), 142–143.

8 Siegfried Kracauer, «The Mass Ornament» (1927), in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. and trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 75–86; and Susan Sontag, «Happenings: An Art of Radical Juxtaposition,» in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), 267.

9 Sontag, «Happenings,» 274.

10 Judith Rodenbeck, *Radical Prototypes: Allan Kaprow and the Invention of Happenings* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 139.

Meat Joy, November 1964
Performance, Judson Dance Theater,
Judson Memorial Church,
New York, NY, US
From the left: Tom O'Donnell, Sandra Chew,
James Tenney, Carolee Schneemann,
Robert David Cohen, Dorothea Rockburne

Carolee Schneemann
reflected in
Controlled Burning: Fireplace, 1965
Photo: Alex V. Sobolewski

the surprisingly unstable and increasingly entropic qualities of its imagery. «At a concert of visual images the image is the thing, and I presume the audience wants to be moved by an affective image,» wrote *Village Voice* dance reviewer Jill Johnston.[11] Seeking just such «a lively concentrated image,» Johnston lauded an early scene around a makeup table as «a compact image of light and bodies» as well as the troupe's interaction with piles of newspaper resembling, to her mind, the work of Claes Oldenburg, Robert Whitman, and Jim Dine.[12] As *Meat Joy* developed, however, Johnston found its imagery progressively less focused. The «sex plot,» as she labeled another portion of the performance, «later lost its power as an affective image because» it lacked «context or whatever it is that brings various elements into some combustable [sic] form.»[13]

Village Voice theater critic Michael Smith, who also took up the properties of Schneemann's imagery as a central concern, came to similar conclusions. Rather than progressing toward a climax, *Meat Joy*'s imagery (which Smith described as «not only non-dramatic but [also] non-theatrical») evinced a kind of decomposition.[14] «There is no increase of tension, no suspense,» he declared. «The basic pattern of ‹Meat Joy› is simple: it gets messier and messier.»[15] If Schneemann's images did not impact the audience in the manner Johnston had expected, neither, according to Smith, did they interpellate viewers into anything like conventional theatrical plot or personae: «One is not drawn in as by a play, in which to some degree, one identifies with the characters, lives through their experiences (however abstract); here one simply looks, observes, registers, one is permitted to explore but not required to experience.»[16] «I kept wishing it would go further, become wilder, accelerate kinetically to an orgiastic level of energy,» Smith confessed.[17] Instead, «Schneemann abstracts, removes all social contex[t], alters and distorts reality instead of moving toward its essence. Her images,» he concluded, «are nearly unrecognizable.»[18]

Nearly unrecognizable, or merely unrecognized? For investigation into the sources and procedures by which *Meat Joy* developed reveals the extent to which Schneemann expressly pursued just such unstable and purposefully dispersive visual qualities. In order to comprehend why, we will first examine connections between Schneemann's performances and her early constructions, then consider the development of *Meat Joy* and other early Happenings, and, finally, contemplate how these considerations may advance contemporary understandings of the relation between Schneemann's ethical and aesthetic projects.

Schneemann has always insisted on the relationship between her Kinetic Theater pieces and her formation as a painter. Recent attempts to consolidate Schneemann's vast career under the aegis of painting have contended that «the pictorial concerns of painting remai[n] as the grounding mechanism and unifying field» of her seemingly diverse, cross-media practice.[19] Arguably, however, those of Schneemann's «painting constructions» most directly related to her Kinetic Theater have less to do with

11 Jill Johnston, «Dance: Meat Joy,» in *Village Voice*, 26 November 1964, 13.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Michael Smith, «Theatre: Meat Joy,» in *Village Voice*, 26 November 1964, 17.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid., 25.
18 Ibid., 17. Smith's description anticipates that of Lucy Lippard, who referred to Schneemann's «chain of out-of-focus images»; in Schneemann, *More Than Meat Joy: Performance Works and Selected Writings*, ed. Bruce R. McPherson, 2nd ed. (New York: Documentext, 1997), 280. Fellow Happenings artist Al Hansen, it might be noted, had a very different response, finding the imagery in *Meat Joy* «bizarre and haunting»; Al Hansen, *A Primer on Happenings and Time/Space Art* (New York: Something Else Press, 1965), 26.
19 Maura Reilly, *Carolee Schneemann: Painting, What It Became* (New York: PPOW, 2009), n.p.
20 The term *painting construction* is found in Carolee Schneemann, «Further Notes: Meat Joy & the Kinetic Theatre,» in *Some/Thing* 1, no. 2 (1965): 43.

Ice Box, 1963
Wood, paint, mirrors, glass shards, fan, twigs, two electric fans
Private collection

«grounding» and «unifying» than with dissolution, disunity, and even destruction.[20]

Schneemann's first New York performance, *Glass Environment for Sound and Motion*, mounted at the Living Theatre in 1962, essentially blew up to full scale the box-like constructions she was producing at the time. Infernal material kaleidoscopes, most of Schneemann's boxes oppose visual unification. Relegating composition almost entirely to the framing edges, Schneemann filled their interiors with torn photographs and magazine pages, smashed glass and mirror, and materials sometimes literally doused with accelerant and set afire. While the inner surfaces of certain *Fire* series pieces such as *Controlled Burning: Darker Companion* (1962) and *For Yvonne Rainer's* Ordinary Dance (1962) tend toward charred formlessness, other glass-filled boxes like *Northlight* (1962), *Controlled Burning: Fireplace* (1963–1964), and, especially, *Ice Box* (1963) resemble dense, frozen, and sometimes enchanted material forests, into which the eye wanders only at the risk of getting lost. Glancing off irregularly shaped and set glass shards that reflect only glimpses of the environment, the viewer's gaze is cast in myriad directions. As Schneemann comented, «these works explore reflection, refraction, transposition, mirroring—you will see yourself in the shards as well as the space around you.»[21]

In previously unpublished photographic collaborations with Alex V. Sobolewski, Schneemann's image is captured in the cracked mirrors of *Music Box Music* (1964) and the fractured antivanity on the back of *Four Fur Cutting Boards* (1963).[22] In other images, Schneemann and Sobolewski inverted the enlargement of her boxes to environmental scale by capturing her nude body in miniature within a convex mirror set into the top of *Controlled Burning: Fireplace*. Like photographs of Yvonne Rainer in *Glass Environment for Sound and Motion*, Schneemann appears as a dancer amid «an enlarged ‹collage,› to break up solid forms, frames, fixed conventions, or comprehensible planes.»[23] While other of Sobolewski's photographs foreground Schneemann's body in a more holistic manner, these pieces—like the more famous *Eye Body* (1963) photograph in which Schneemann sliced up and recombined an image of herself holding a jagged piece of glass—emphasize much the same work against stable mimesis as her glass-filled constructions.

Schneemann explicitly referred back to these boxes in *Meat Joy*'s soundtrack. «Action with materials,» she intoned: «gesture from activity of tearing pushing gluing [c]rumbling ripping rubbing scratching spilling / tiffany glass mexican glass broken in layers.»[24] Elsewhere, she emphasized the links between such work and bodily motion. «I would just pick up my hammer and start fracturing my materials with a full arm swing and focused aim,» she declared. «My work was about motion and momentum and physicality.»[25] Such actions literalized what Schneemann considered the most significant painterly legacy running from Paul Cézanne to Abstract Expressionism: «the fractured plane as an event.»[26] For Schneemann, Cézanne's pictorial faceting could be decoded as a marker of physical activity.[27] If a portion of the motif was depicted straight on while another tilted precariously toward the picture plane, or if a horizon line failed to match from one portion of the canvas to another, each implied a change

21 Schneemann, *Imaging Her Erotics*, 306.
22 Schneemann would restage her partial reflection in *Music Box Music* in photos by Charlotte Victoria (1965) and Eric Politzer (ca. 1982).
23 Carolee Schneemann, *More than Meat Joy*, 21.
24 Schneemann, «Meat Joy: Notes as Prologue,» in *Some/Thing* 1, no. 2 (1965): 34.
25 Kate Haug, «An Interview with Carolee Schneemann,» in *Wide Angle: A Quarterly Journal of Film History, Theory, Criticism and Practice* 20, no. 1 (January 1998): 30; repr. in Schneemann, *Imaging Her Erotics*, 28.
26 Robert Enright, «Carolee Schneemann in Conversation: The Articulate Body,» in *Border Crossings* 17 (Winter 1998): 21.
27 Kristine Stiles has noted this correspondence; see Stiles, ed., introduction to *Correspondence Course: An Epistolary History of Carolee Schneemann and Her Circle* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), xxvi.

Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions for Camera, December 1963
Photo series taken in Carolee Schneemann's studio
Photo: Erró

in the painter's position from one moment to the next. In pursuit of similar effects in her own painting, Schneemann began exercising before approaching the canvas. «[I]t was essential to dance before going to paint in order to see better,» she noted, «to bring the mind's-eye alert and clear … as the muscular relay of eye/hand could be.»[28]

As early as 1958, Schneemann likened the paint stroke as «event» to cinema, writing to Stan Brakhage that the «differentiation [between painting and film] is less emphatic as painting has more and more to do with Time—the paint itself becomes vitalized to surface ambiguity creating an inner and outer depth which corresponds to the forward and back dimensions of a shifting image; here is Cézanne as key mark.»[29] Importantly, the temporality of painting's production was subsequently to be retrieved by the viewer. «The energy implicit in an area of paint (or cloth, paper, wood, glass …) is defined in terms of the time which it takes for the eye to journey through the implicit motion and direction of this area,» wrote Schneemann. «Such ‹reading› of a two-dimensional or three-dimensional area implies *duration* and this duration is determined by the force of total visual parameters in action. Instance: the smallest unit variation from stroke to stroke in a painting by Velasquez [sic] or Monet; by extension the larger scale of rhythms directing the eye in a painting by Pollock—this which is shaped by a mesh of individualized strokes, streaks, smudges and marks.»[30]

In painting constructions such as *Vestibule* (1960), *Quarry Transposed* (1960), and *Sir Henry Francis Taylor* (1961), Schneemann pushed the rhythms of painterly variation toward overt disruption, producing an effect that Dan Cameron has aptly characterized as «pictorial conflict.» «Her urge to complicate rather than simplify,» observed Cameron, «leads her to interrupt virtuosic passages of paint with textures, strokes, and tonal areas moving in opposite or oblique directions. Unlike the then popular wet-on-wet technique, Schneemann would wait for areas to dry before bringing in passages of interference, thus reinforcing the individuality of each textural area.»[31] (That Schneemann could, when desired, perfectly well build up wet-on-wet painted planes in the manner of Willem de Kooning is revealed by the previously unexhibited painting, *Red Figure* of 1961.)

The conflictual nature of Schneemann's surfaces goes beyond what Jay Murphy has perceptively described as «the dissolution of form» to court what Schneemann characterizes as «the ability to tolerate a lot of tension and discrepancy between materials.»[32] It is by means of such discrepancies, in part, that Schneemann sought to push her work beyond direct or linear signification. «In some sense this work is never symbolic; one thing does not represent something else,» she explained to Carl Heyward. «It's about transformation. Layers of metaphor are moving through any of the visual imagery that I am producing. It does not matter what the material or the materiality is, but there is the sense of the metaphor that recharges and is often visually disjunctive.»[33]

As is likely already clear, Schneemann's position is almost the precise inverse of that attributed to her by Silverthorne. Abjuring any facile understanding of symbolism,

28 Schneemann, *Imaging Her Erotics*, 241.
29 Schneemann, Letter to Stan Brakhage, 8 January 1958, in *Correspondence Course*, 19.
30 Schneemann, «Further Notes,» 44 (ellipses in original).
31 Daniel Cameron, «Object vs. Persona: Early Work of Carolee Schneemann,» in *Arts Magazine* 57, no. 9 (May 1983): 123.
32 Jay Murphy, «Assimilating the Unassimilable: Carolee Schneemann in Relation to Antonin Artaud,» in *Parkett* 50/51 (1997): 228; and George Myers, «Carolee Schneemann: Sacred & Contentious,» in *Alphabets Sublime: Contemporary Artists on Collage and Visual Literature* (Washington, DC: Paycock Press, 1986), 142.
33 Carl Heyward, «Interview: Carolee Schneemann,» in *Art Papers* 17, no. 1 (January/February 1993): 13. Schneemann's opposition between symbolism and metaphor first appeared in Carolee Schneemann, «Kenneth Anger's ‹Scorpio Rising,›» in *Film Culture* 32 (Spring 1964), where she wrote, «The vision is not ‹symbolic›; it is fleshed, concrete, drawing the metaphoric life-line from every visual unit in tight, dense webs» (10).

Quarry Transposed (Central Park in the Dark), 1960
Oil paint, wood strips, photograph of N. L., red glass pitcher, nails, wire, and paper on Masonite panels
Private collection

Schneemann instead embraces disparity, discrepancy, contrariness, and tension. Initiated in her treatment of individualized brushstrokes, such visual disjunctions became fundamental to her collage practice, which aimed for and encompassed a certain amount of indeterminacy. «[I]t has to do with disparity, with conjunction, and bringing the contrariness of the unexpected materials into combinations because then there is a possibility for an increment that's more than any intention that I might have,» she explained. «It's really a way of releasing which is like a dividend, an aesthetic or perceptual dividend.»[34] Contrary to Silverthorne's assumptions, then, Schneemann's «intentions» are indeed overcome by her materials but only because such overcoming is, in fact, her primary intention. «If it is good it is different from what I intended,» Schneemann continued, «and I try to be as transparent to that nonintentionality as I can.»[35]

In performance, Schneemann sought the same range of diverse, discrepant, and even contradictory metaphoric resonances as were foregrounded by her paint and collage constructions. «I work with untrained people and various waste materials to realize images which range from the banal to the fantastic,» she told a reporter from Maine, «images which dislocate, disassociate, compound, and engage our senses to allow our senses to expand into unknown and unpredictable relationships.»[36] Extant footage of *Meat Joy*, edited by Schneemann in 2008, foregrounds just such dissociative effects, as moments of patterned group formation give way to diverse interactions between couples that compete for the viewer's attention, even on a single screen: some struggle, dragging each other across the floor; others interact in an erotic fashion; and one man mourns a dead chicken like a child, before regressing to childlike behavior himself. The soundtrack, composed of street sounds and spoken passages of French and English intercut with snippets of popular songs, provides additional layering, and it proves difficult, if not impossible, to concentrate simultaneously on what is being said and what is being seen; the elements are disparate, dislocating, not additive and concentrating. «These noises are rich and strange,» noted Schneemann about her collaged soundtrack; «they induce a displacement of the sound continuity I have set up—enlarging, confounding the associative range of the songs.»[37] What Schneemann sought from her performance imagery was not concentration, distillation, or streamlining toward affective efficacy, but precisely the opposite, an expansive, dissociative ambiguity: «I wanted *Meat Joy* to follow the direction which its formative drawings and notes had indicated: … an emotional range shifting precariously between tenderness, banality, wildness, precision, and abandon—with these qualities so juxtaposed as to be ambiguously mixed—simultaneously comic, disturbing, exhilarating.»[38]

In order to understand more profoundly what is at stake in Schneemann's courting of an expressly disjunctive and dissociative range of metaphorical connotations, we must turn back to the manner in which her performances developed. *Meat Joy* started out as a series of dream images dating back as far as 1960. Dreams, for Schneemann, have a particular status; they are understood as arising primarily from physical, rather than psychological factors (or, more precisely, for Schneemann, steeped in the writings of Wilhelm Reich, the physiological and the psychological are never fully separable).

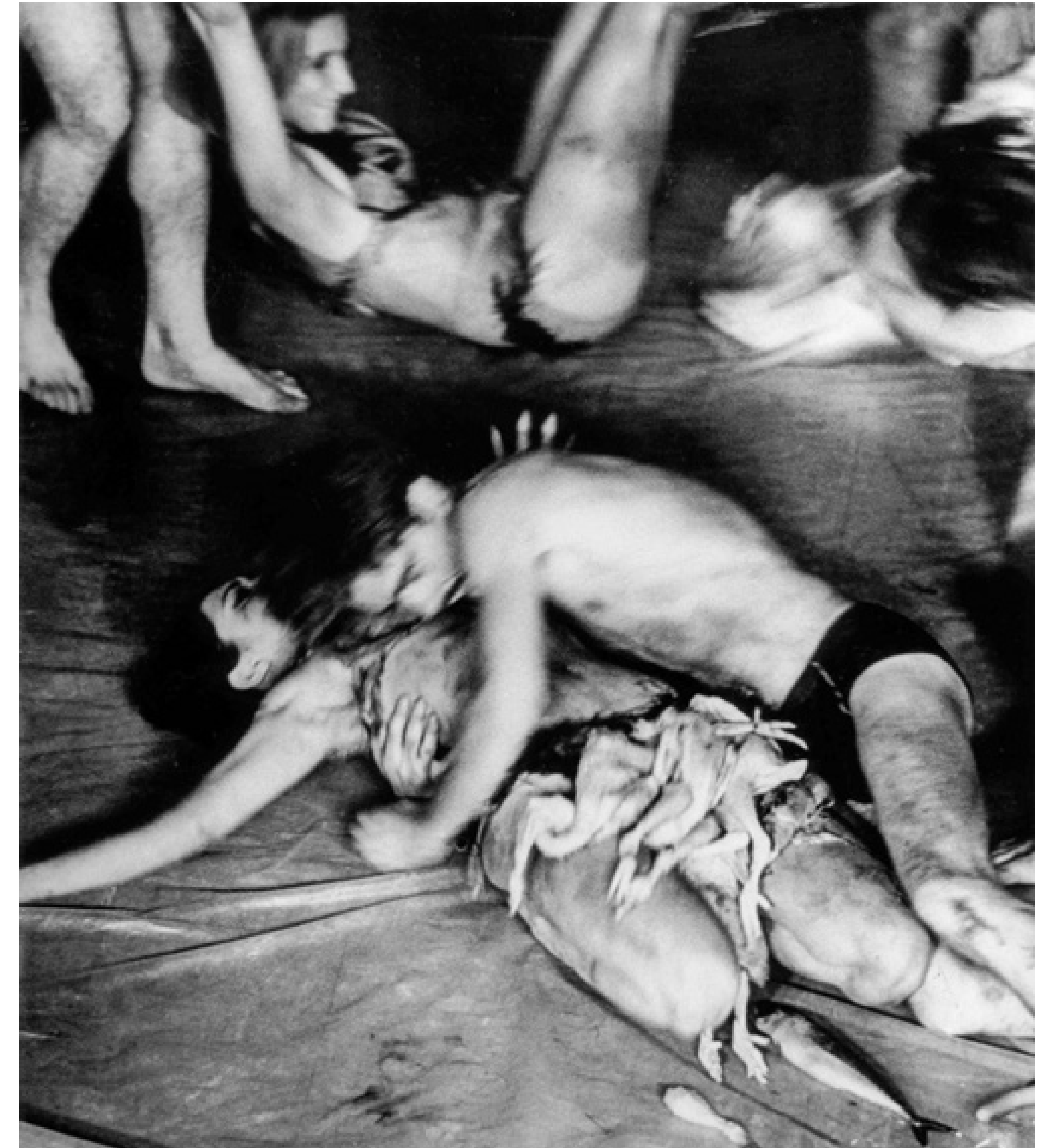
34 Myers, «Carolee Schneemann: Sacred & Contentious,» 141–142.
35 Ibid., 142.
36 Laura Whittier, «Edios Presents Carolee Schneemann,» in *The Colby Echo* (Waterville, ME), 1 November 1968; clipping located in the Carolee Schneemann archives, Stanford University, without page number.
37 Carolee Schneemann, «Meat Joy: Notes,» in *Theatre Experiment: An Anthology of American Plays*, ed. Michael Benedikt (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 363.
38 Ibid., 365. In reading this essay, Schneemann remarked that her interest in dissonance and disjuncture related to her dialogue with James Tenney and his performance of the music of Charles Ives, which she could sometimes hear while in her studio painting.

Although dreams certainly encompass sexual motifs, Schneemann sees them as motivated as much by such circumstances as hunger, fatigue, the state of one's digestion, or the phase of a woman's menstrual cycle as they are by desire.[39] «I was becoming increasingly aware,» she related in notes to *Meat Joy*, «of the possibility of capturing certain interactions between physical, metabolic changes and their effect on dream content, as well as on my sensory orientation upon and after waking.»[40] Two decades later, in *Fresh Blood: A Dream Morphology* (1981–1987), Schneemann speculated on an idea of «the ‹dream body› which incorporates ‹mind› [with] an implicit emphasis denied to the primacy of body in … Freud's use of ‹dream-mind.›»[41]

Schneemann's comprehension of oneiric imagery's bodily origins not only opposed a Cartesian conception of mind and a Freudian idea of the unconscious, it also countered the expropriating abstraction of patriarchal «myth.» «So my work,» she explained to Andrea Juno, «has to do with cutting through the idealized (mostly male) mythology of the ‹abstracted self› or the ‹invented self›—i. e., work involving another kind of glorification/falsification where … you retain power and distancing over the situation.»[42] Schneemann's understanding of myth owes much to Simone de Beauvoir's treatment of the subject in *The Second Sex*, a book whose importance Schneemann has cited repeatedly. The «myth of woman,» writes Beauvoir, «projects into the realm of Platonic ideas a reality that is directly experienced or is conceptualized on a basis of experience; in place of fact, value, significance, knowledge, empirical law, it substitutes a transcendental Idea, timeless, unchangeable, necessary. This idea is indisputable because it is beyond the given: it is endowed with absolute truth. Thus, as against the dispersed, contingent, and multiple existences of actual women, mythical thought opposes the Eternal Feminine, unique and changeless.»[43] «The ‹truth› of lived experience and its visual forms becomes ‹a sensitive subject› in the mythologies which our culture perpetuates,» noted Schneemann, in language once again echoing Beauvoir. «These are based on traditions of male heroics and male invulnerability/power fantasies.»[44]

Although Schneemann would eventually investigate a range of feminine (counter) mythologies (traced back even to certain motifs in *Eye Body*), her goal throughout *Meat Joy* and other early performances was not to instantiate a personal or identifiably feminist iconography so much as to initiate a broader critique of transcendental forms of visual representation. How could the oneiric motifs behind *Meat Joy* be realized without subsuming the performers to her imagery? Without expropriating others' physical and affective existences in the service of her dreams? Schneemann's solution involved lengthy series of rehearsals in which she led performers through movement sequences derived from her original dream imagery but without communicating that imagery to them—a process paradoxically aided during *Meat Joy*'s Parisian debut by Schneemann's elementary grasp of French.[45] «It was important to avoid literal explanations of motive or circumstance to the performers,» she explained. «All ‹motives› grew directly out of their *physical* engagement with each other and our materials. The performers were free to explore a metaphoric scope of [g]esture as their own embodiment of tactile-kinetic sensation.»[46] Schneemann followed a similar procedure in *Snows*

39 Heyward, «Interview: Carolee Schneemann,» 13.
40 Schneemann, «Meat Joy: Notes,» 357.
41 Schneemann, *Imaging Her Erotics*, 241.
42 Andrea Juno, «Carolee Schneemann,» in *Angry Women* (San Francisco: Re/Search Publications, 1991), 69.
43 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Knopf, 1952), 253.
44 Maureen Martin, «Carolee Schneemann, Interview: Challenging Distortions by the Dominant Male Imagination,» in *VOX: Magazine of Contemporary Art and Culture* (1992): 13. Schneemann wrote further about her early performances, «I would never direct or try to transpose to someone else. That was the male mode of mythologizing, taking power by recreating himself through an idealized other person»; Schneemann, *Imaging Her Erotics*, 124.
45 Schneemann, «Meat Joy: Notes,» 359.



Meat Joy, November 1964
Performance, Judson Dance Theater,
Judson Memorial Church,
New York, NY, US
Front: Carolee Schneemann, James Tenney,
center back: Irina Posner

Snows, 1967
Performance, Martinique Theater,
New York, NY, US
From the left: Tyrone Mitchell,
Shigeko Kubota, Phoebe Neville
Photo: Charlotte Victoria

(1967), the bodily movements of which she based on photographs of war atrocities appearing in her film *Viet-Flakes* (1965), but which she did not reveal to her performers before the initial staging.[47]

Conveying motifs to her performers inductively, via movement, Schneemann kept her dream imagery on an immanent corporeal register, rather than establishing it as an ideal for imitation. «The performers approached the work, not by assuming characterization or predetermined attitudes, but with what was spontaneously available and expressive in their own personalities,» she declared. In that manner, she continued, «The performers transformed as well as realized the imagery of the piece. At every stage it was a collage process.»[48] We have seen above how Schneemann's conception of collage expressly opens to nonintentionality, and the same proves true with regard to her openness to the performative transformation of her images. On one level, Schneemann's allowance of spontaneous physical expressivity further emphasized physicality, one extended even to the most untheatrical, quotidian, and bodily behaviors. «Finally,» she explained about *Meat Joy*, «after intensive work on action/reaction spans, use of material, placement, time duration, co-ordination of movements, [and] cue systems, the performers understood the work as a process combining my need to ‹see› it and their ability to realize it—that the piece belonged to them to enjoy, rummage in, recast. If their actions were unpolished, crude, sometimes amused or bewildered, then that was what they experienced and projected and would be aware of, rather than some imposed attitude outside of what they actually felt and experienced.»[49] Hers was «[a] theater of physical contact» in which performers were «spontaneously free to laugh, scream, cry, instruct, advise, discuss within actual performance; where a performer could leave the action to go pee, have a bit to eat, greet friends in the audience,» even, she noted elsewhere, «leave the performance … and return … or not return.»[50] By allowing such a range of un- or antitheatrical attitudes (which Smith noted in his *Village Voice* review), Schneemann embraced the «living experience» that Beauvoir opposed to mythic representation: «the more relationships are concretely lived,» wrote Beauvoir, «the less they are idealized.»[51] Such an attitude likely also motivated Schneemann's declaration, «I'm pleased when audience response to *Meat Joy* is: ‹Yes!—life is really like that …› For me it is. I'm not interested in ‹fantasy.›»[52] In 1981, when discussing the extensive documentation of domestic life in *Kitch's Last Meal*, Schneemann portrayed the embrace of seemingly banal life experience as constitutive of female, as opposed to male, mythology: «extricate or implicate the marginal/expendable the seemingly ‹meaningless› element the scale of mythification is aesthetic/organic/female … only with a feminist political analysis does trivia regain functional significance.»[53]

If the first consequence of Schneemann's openness to the transformation of her performance's imagery (toward banal, physical actuality) can be understood via the feminist analysis put forward in *The Second Sex*, the second may be approached through another of Beauvoir's books, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.[54] Schneemann, as we have seen, characterized the material and metaphorical heterogeneity of her collages and performances in terms of «ambiguity.» In Schneemann's usage, the term encompassed a range of significations, including: the broad and sometimes conflicting metaphorical implications of her materials («ambiguous, shifting metaphors»), perceptual instabilities («the ambiguity of the focal plane»), the overlap and interchange of different perceptual capabilities («sensory ambiguity»), and an indeterminate relationship to use («materials become ambiguous as prehensile tools»).[55] In every case, the term opened onto and implied Schneemann's aesthetics of excess, her courting of «maximum information,» «materials of complexity and substance,» «conditions which alert the total sensibility—cast it almost in stress.»[56] «I am haunted,» she wrote in 1963, «by the sense that in learning, our best developments grow from works which initially strike us as ‹too much›; which are intriguing, demanding; that lead us to experiences which we feel we cannot encompass but which simultaneously provoke and encourage our efforts. Such works have the presence of containing more than we can assimilate; they maintain attraction and stimulation for our continuing attention. We persevere with that strange joy and agitation by which we sense unpredictable rewards from our relationship to them.»[57]

46 Ibid., 361. (The original text has «vesture» instead of «gesture,» which I take to be a typesetting error, although it would not ultimately undermine the argument concerning the metaphorical resonances of Schneemann's performers' motions.)
47 «If I told the performers *Snows* was my Viet Nam piece,» she recounted, «they had no idea how it would be that; the film and sound material evolved around their substance and it surprised them. We discovered the nature of our situation together by experiencing it, creating it»; Carolee Schneemann, «Snows,» *Ikon* 1, no. 5 (March 1968): 26.
48 Schneemann, «Meat Joy: Notes,» 360.
49 Ibid., 361.
50 Carolee Schneemann, in *Contemporary Artists*, ed. Colin Naylor and Genesis P-Orridge (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977), 857; and Carolee Schneemann, «Notations (1958–1966),» *Caterpillar* 8–9 (October 1969): 35 (ellipses in original).
51 Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 255, 260.

Snows, 1967
Performance, Martinique Theater,
New York, NY, US
Front: Carolee Schneemann,
back: James Tenney
Photo: Herbert Migdoll

Although Schneemann's use of the term *ambiguity* likely did not derive directly from Beauvoir's, the two nonetheless prove compatible in that they both relate to situations that surpass certain or totalized knowledge. In a manner that anticipates Butler's call to «recognize that ethics requires us to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness,» Beauvoir opens *The Ethics of Ambiguity* with a challenge to prevailing ethical «doctrines which choose to leave in the shadow certain troubling aspects of a too complex situation.»[58] For Beauvoir, such complexities, which form the «tragic ambiguity of [the human] condition,» derive from a set of irreducible paradoxes, including the fact that the individual is part of the world of which she desires knowledge and that she is both an autonomous subject and an object from the other's point of view.[59] «‹Rational animal,› ‹thinking reed,› [the individual] escapes from his natural condition without, however, freeing himself from it,» writes Beauvoir, with recourse to the universalizing «he» that Schneemann would castigate in «The Pronoun Tyranny» and other places: «He is still a part of this world of which he is a consciousness. He asserts himself as a pure internality against which no external power can take hold, and he also experiences himself as a thing crushed by the dark weight of other things. … This privilege, which he alone possesses, of being a sovereign and unique subject amidst a universe of objects, is what he shares with all his fellow-men. In turn an object for others, he is nothing more than an individual in the collectivity on which he depends.»[60]

Refusing both relativism and nihilism, Beauvoir argues that decisions must take place amid «an objective and fundamental contingency … [where] we must decide upon

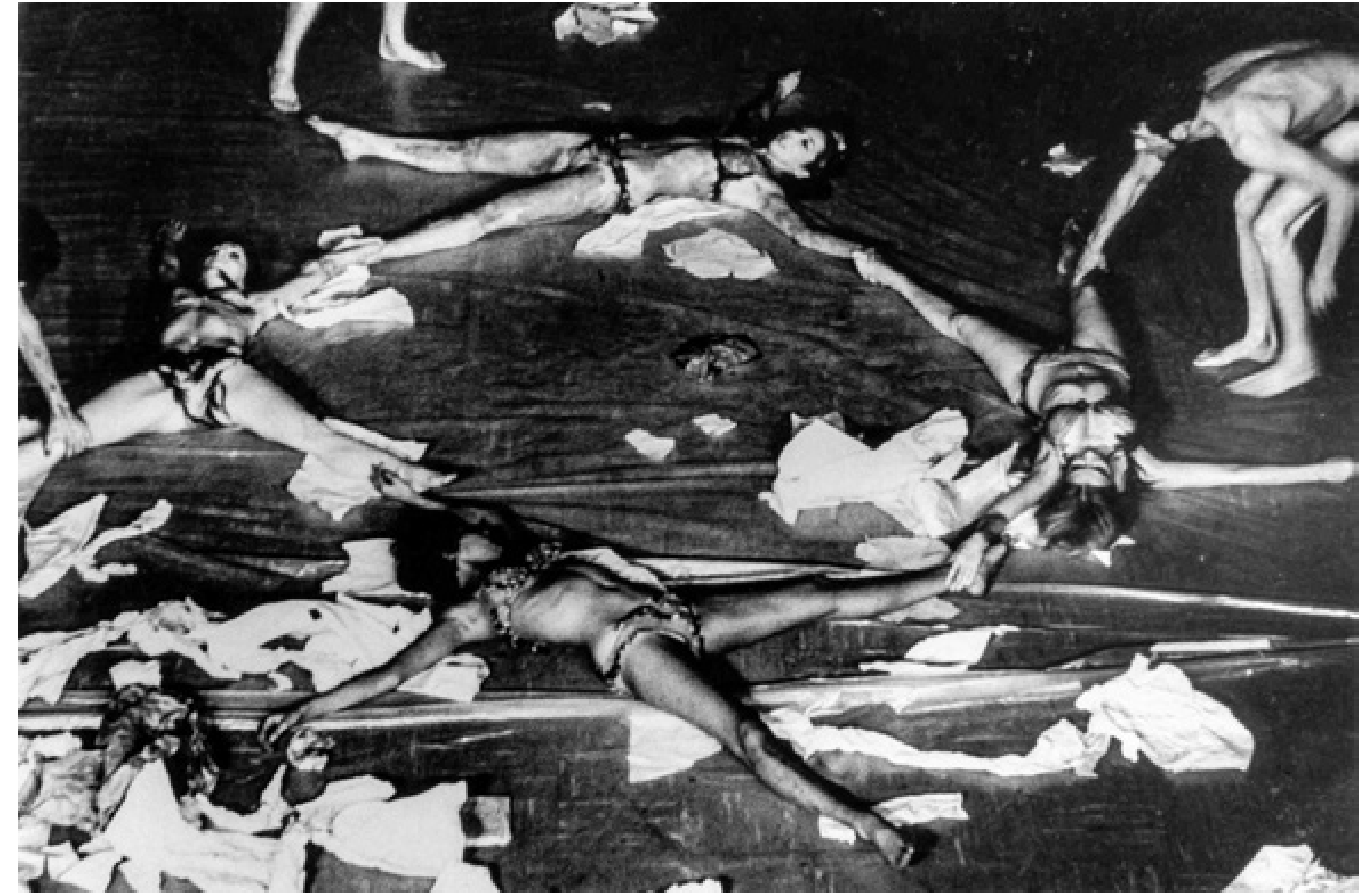
52 Schneemann, «Meat Joy: Notes,» 366 (ellipses in original); cf. Carolee Schneemann, «Introduction to ‹Erotic Films by Women,›» in *Deciphering America: A Travelling Collection*, ed. Michael Gibbs (Amsterdam: Kontexts Publications, 1978), where Schneemann noted, «We are not actresses extending or sustaining anyone's image of what is ‹female.› Each of these films demonstrates concrete experience, the *lived-life*, not an invented, fantasized sexuality» (111). Schneemann's opposition to fantasy also derived from her reading of Reich; see R. Bruce Elder, «The Body Electric: Of Wilhelm Reich and Antonin Artaud—Laying the Groundwork for Carolee Schneemann's Body Art,» in *A Body of Vision: Representations of the Body in Recent Film and Poetry* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1997), 143–276. On Schneemann and Reich, see also Kenneth White, «Focus on Carolee Schneemann: Introduction,» in *Millennium Film Journal*, no. 54 (Fall 2011): 22–29.
53 Carolee Schneemann, «Kitch's Last Meal,» *The Cinemanews* 81, nos. 2/6 (1981): 58.
54 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (New York: Citadel Press, 1948), 8. Schneemann's work has previously been put into dialogue with Beauvoir's ethics, most notably in Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998). Rebecca Schneider, who discusses Schneemann's work at length, is critical of the ethical project put forward in Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*; see Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 177.

the opportuneness of an act and attempt to measure its effectiveness without knowing all the factors that are present.»[61] «The movement of the mind, whether it be called thought or will,» she adds with an existential flourish, «always starts up in the darkness.»[62]

In a chapter entitled «Personal Freedom and Others,» Beauvoir lays out the characteristics of «the spirit of seriousness,» which denies the «fundamental ambiguity» of the human condition by establishing or latching onto an idealized and unchanging notion of the good.[63] «The serious man,» writes Beauvoir, «gets rid of his freedom by claiming to subordinate it to values which would be unconditioned. He imagines that the accession to these values likewise permanently confers value upon himself.… There is the [attitude of the] serious from the moment that freedom denies itself to the advantage of ends which one claims are absolute.»[64] When based on unconditioned ends, goals, values, or causes, ethics can seem deceptively straightforward. «The only problem then raised,» writes Beauvoir, «is a technical problem; the means will be chosen according to their effectiveness, their speed, and their economy.»[65] All such utilitarian ethics, however, argues Beauvoir, tilt precipitously toward authoritarianism. For when judged against an invariant good any sacrifice is justifiable, and others become mere means. «Therefore,» she writes, «the serious man is dangerous. It is natural that he makes himself a tyrant. Dishonestly ignoring the subjectivity of his choice, he pretends that the unconditioned value of the object [i. e., end, goal, or cause] is being asserted through him; and by the same token he also ignores the value of the subjectivity and the freedom of others, to such an extent that, sacrificing them to the thing, he persuades himself that what he sacrifices is nothing.»[66] Regarded as a means or «instrument,» the subject remains a mere «object for others.»[67] Foremost in Beauvoir's mind were the repressions of French colonialism and the Soviet Union under Stalin, along with memories of the Nazi concentration camps. Yet her critique of an unconditioned ideal, and the lack of intersubjective recognition it fosters, also underlay *The Second Sex*, where she argued, «The myth is one of those snares of false objectivity into which the man who depends on ready-made valuations rushes headlong. Here again we have to do with the substitution of a set idol for actual experience and the free judgments it requires.»[68]

If the consideration of causes, goals, or values «as ready-made things» leads utilitarian ethics to denigrate others as mere (and lesser) objects, an acknowledgment of the ambiguity that limits claims to unconditioned knowledge inverts such suppositions.[69] «Renouncing the thought of seeking the guarantee for his existence outside of himself,» argues Beauvoir, the individual who positively assumes ambiguity, «will also refuse to believe in unconditioned values which would set themselves up athwart his freedom like things.»[70] The core of Beauvoir's ethics thus lies in the valuation of others' freedom as an end in itself, one that must be balanced against sought-after goals or ideals, even when it enters into a compromising or antagonistic relationship to them. «In setting up its ends,» writes Beauvoir, «freedom must put them in parentheses, confront them at each moment with that absolute end which it itself constitutes, and contest, in its own name, the means it uses to win itself.»[71] For Beauvoir, a truly ethical position entails that even the most serious or lofty goals must be allowed to be inflected, deflected, or

55 Schneemann, «Snows,» 29; Schneemann, *More than Meat Joy*, 97; Schneemann, «Meat Joy: Notes,» 365; Schneemann, «Further Notes,» 43.
56 Schneemann, «Further Notes,» 43.
57 Ibid., 43–44.
58 Butler, *Giving an Account*, 136; Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 8.
59 Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 7.
60 Ibid.; see Carolee Schneemann, «The Pronoun Tyranny,» in *The Fox*, no. 3 (1976): 49–53.
61 Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 123.
62 Ibid., 123.
63 Ibid., 35, 9.
64 Ibid., 46.
65 Ibid., 111.
66 Ibid., 49.
67 Ibid., 9, 7.
68 Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 261.
69 Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 35.
70 Ibid., 14.



Meat Joy, November 1964
Performance, Judson Dance Theater, Judson Memorial Church, New York, NY, US
Clockwise, from the left:
Dorothea Rockburne, Carolee Schneemann, Irina Posner, Sandra Chew,
man on the right: Stanley Gochenouer

altered by recognition of others' freedom. Seen from this perspective, she writes, «it is not impersonal universal man who is the source of values, but the plurality of concrete, particular men projecting themselves toward their ends on the basis of situations whose particularity is as radical and as irreducible as subjectivity itself.»[72]

In the rehearsals leading up to performances such as *Meat Joy* and *Snows*, Schneemann's engagement with her performers followed the imperatives of Beauvoir's ethical project. Whether derived from Schneemann's dreams, as in *Meat Joy*, or drawn from the nightmare of the Vietnam War, as in *Snows*, some sort of overall vision or imagery served as the impetus and goal for each of her performances. As she explained about *Meat Joy*, «My sense of the total quality of the piece was clear from the beginning—in some very internalized way—but was never explicitly imposed, because the performers had to slowly discover and reveal all those detailed experiences which would realize my images. It was like a journey we embarked on together. Only I knew the destination, but they would discover it for themselves.»[73] In allowing an openness to the performers' transformation of her imagery—allowing them to delay, detourn, or alter the path to the «destination,» possibly even its endpoint—Schneemann instituted the «perpetual contestation of the means by the end and of the end by the means» that Beauvoir advocated and that, she argued, «will make the subjective appear as such.»[74]

That Schneemann understood that her openness to transformation posed an alternative to utilitarian ethics is made perfectly clear in journal notes from 1963 originally published in *Caterpillar* magazine: «USE just doesn't answer or serve my relationship to people and objects,» she wrote, pointing instead toward the values of «[r]eciprocity, an engagement of love or need»: «‹Use› is exploitive, without emotion, beyond expressed conjunction.… Brakhage, [Billy] Kluver and others say that [they] are interested only in what they can ‹use.› The tone is not towards ‹partaking› but ‹to convert to one's service,› to consume and exhaust. I ‹use› materials … not people and their works. ‹Use› belongs to practical values; it does not serve an aesthetic interchange—the process of assimilation, influence and transformation by which work and life structures grow inter-dependently.»[75]

It was precisely the realm of intersubjective interdependency that Schneemann regarded as the motor force of the transformations that took place in rehearsals. As she explained, «The performers had to develop a rich and freely expressive responsiveness to one another. In choosing them I had always to sense that those who would provoke my conception of the piece would in turn be complimentary [sic] to each other and that the affinity they might feel for one another would develop through the nature of our work together just as the relationship between any of the performers within the context of their instructions would freely transform and intensify the quality of those instructions.»[76] Once again, the ethical imperative behind such aesthetic procedures was clear to Schneemann herself. As she reflected in «American Experimental Theatre: Then and Now,» «Qualities of risk, audacity, eroticism, mutual trust, and transgression contained a social and moral implication—a thrust for self-determination and the unity of a group-undertaking which was subversive to repressive norms without being propagandistic.»[77]

In *The Ethics of Ambiguity* Beauvoir broaches the subject of art only briefly and in two quite different registers. The first places the artist within Beauvoir's panoply of cautionary figures alongside the «serious man,» the «passionate man,» the «sub-man,» and the

71 Ibid., 134.
72 Ibid., 17–18.
73 Schneemann, «Meat Joy: Notes,» 359–360.
74 Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 155.
75 Schneemann, «Notations (1958–1966),» 31 (second ellipses in original).
76 Schneemann, «Meat Joy: Notes,» 359–360.

«adventurer.» Like each of them, the artist ultimately falls prey to unconditioned values, only in the artist's case these are to be found in the very work that she or he alone has produced. In an artwork, writes Beauvoir, «Time is stopped, [and] clear forms and finished meanings rise up.»[78] And it is in the very formal perfection and semantic closure of the finished product, argues Beauvoir, that the artist is led astray. «By virtue of the fact that he has thus set up an absolute object,» she writes, «the creator is then tempted to consider himself as absolute. He justifies the world and therefore thinks he has no need of anyone to justify himself. If the work becomes an idol whereby the artist thinks that he is fulfilling himself as being, he is closing himself up in the universe of the serious.»[79]

Against the conventional artist's risk of subjective, and therefore ethical, foreclosure, Beauvoir juxtaposes a different notion of art derived from the festival. Drawing on Georges Bataille's theorization of the role played by the Native American Potlatch within a «general economy» of unrestrained, sacrificial expenditure, Beauvoir lauds the festival's celebration of existence and intersubjective interaction:

«Existence attempts in the festival to confirm itself positively as existence. That is why, as Bataille has shown, it is characterized by destruction; the ethics of being [that is, an *un*ambiguous ethics] is the ethics of saving: by storing up, one aims at the stationary plenitude of the in-itself [;] existence, on the contrary, is consumption; it makes itself only by destroying; the festival carries out this negative movement in order to indicate clearly its independence in relationship to the thing: one eats, drinks, lights fires, breaks things, and spends time and money; one spends them for nothing. The spending is also a matter of establishing a communication of the existants, for it is by the movement of recognition which goes from one to the other that existence is confirmed; in songs, laughter, dances, eroticism, and drunkenness one seeks both an exaltation of the moment and a complicity with other men.»[80]

In its pure state, the festival leads to complete and unbridled consumption, leaving nothing in its wake save for exhaustion: «that is what,» notes Beauvoir, ultimately «gives festivals their pathetic and deceptive character.»[81] Yet, this is nonetheless where Beauvoir's second mode of art comes into play. «One of art's roles,» she charges, «is to fix this passionate assertion of existence in a more durable way,» so that it may prolong the insight that the festival gives of the constitutive ambiguity and transience of human existence.[82]

Meat Joy has, of course, long been regarded as a contemporary festival, even an erotic rite. Its association with dance, laughter, eroticism, and intoxication forms by far its most prevalent art historical understanding. Yet, I would argue that it is only by means of the dialectic established between Beauvoir's two artistic attitudes—the tension between art's role in fixing existence (as an image or thing) and the festival's destructive consumption and opening to intersubjective complicity—that we may more fully comprehend *Meat Joy* and the difficulties of reception that it initially posed. For as we have been emphasizing, Schneemann developed her performance by establishing a set of images as destination or goal, only then to transform them and

77 Carolee Schneemann, «American Experimental Theatre: Then and Now,» in *Performing Arts Journal* 2, no. 2 (Autumn 1977): 22.
78 Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 69.
79 Ibid.
80 Ibid., 126. While Beauvoir does not cite the exact text she references, the ideas can be found in Georges Bataille, «The Notion of Expenditure» (1933), in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl with Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie, Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 116–129. Bataille's reflections on expenditure and general economy would be developed further in Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1988).
81 Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 127.
82 Ibid.

thereby put them into question via an opening to immanent existence (found in the allowance of performers' actually felt, untheatrical behaviors) and to intersubjectivity (both in the performers' differential relation to each other, and in their transformative relationship to Schneemann's imagery). The qualities of heterogeneous dissociation and ambiguity that make *Meat Joy*'s images dissociative, contradictory, or «nearly unrecognizable,» are nothing else than the mark and effect of Schneemann's ethical openness to, and engagement with, others in their freedom.

Extant discussions of Schneemann's engagement with intersubjectivity and ethics have tended to emphasize the ecstatic, erotic, or oceanic dissolution of bodies into one another, where differences seek to be overcome in utopian union.[83] Seen from this perspective, a work like *Meat Joy* would be more successful the more ecstatically unified it became. Such is precisely what Johnston lamented in the relative lack of concentration she found in Schneemann's imagery, and what Smith hoped for when he wished «it would go further, become wilder» and reach «an orgiastic level.» What recognition of another side to Schneemann's aesthetic—the discontinuities, gaps, inconsistencies, and internally contrary aspects of her imagery—allows us to understand is that Schneemann's ethical project seeks not just to dissolve (and thereby eradicate) differences in unification, but rather to recognize, accept, and incorporate the other precisely while retaining, and respecting, their difference as such. This goal—implicit, I believe, in Beauvoir—has more recently been theorized by Butler as «a new sense of ethics … spawned by a certain willingness to acknowledge the limits of acknowledgment itself.»[84] It is an ethics, according to Butler, in which recognition of the other would not take the form of a perfect reflection, in which «I must somehow see that the other is like me,» but rather of a partially opaque and imperfect mimesis—much like the images refracted by the broken mirrors and glass fragments within Schneemann's early box constructions.[85]

For Butler, whose foremost concern is with the stories by which we «give an account of ourselves,» the mark of an ethical openness to difference emerges «in moments of interruption, stoppage, open-endedness—in enigmatic articulations that cannot easily be translated into narrative form.»[86] Much like Beauvoir's caution against regarding flawless artistic form as an unconditioned end, Butler warns that «a suspect coherence … may foreclose an ethical resource—namely, an acceptance of the limits of knowability in oneself and others.»[87] Throughout Schneemann's production, as we have seen, similar disruptions, inconsistencies, and ruptures across pictorial surfaces or throughout the imagery of a Kinetic Theater performance signal both an overcoming of authorial intention (in collage's opening to nonintentionality) and an allowance of intentionalities and existences (in the performers' attitudes and movements) different from Schneemann's own. In tension with any thrust toward dissolution into identity, the transformations undergone by Schneemann's performance imagery derive from a mutual unknowability between herself and her performers: just as she does not communicate her original dream imagery directly to them, so too is their intentionality,

83 The «oceanic» reception of Schneemann's work begins in Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (New York: Dutton, 1970), 119–120; for the best discussion of the interaction of Schneemann's ethics and aesthetics, see Osterweil, «Carolee Schneemann: Meat Joys,» 136–176; see also Jones's important discussion of intersubjectivity in *Body Art*; as well as James Martin Harding, «Between Dialectics, Decorum, and Collage: Sabotaging Schneemann at the Dialectics of Liberation Congress, London 1967,» in *Cutting Performances: Collage Events, Feminist Artists, and the American Avant-Garde* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 121–149.

84 Butler, *Giving an Account*, 42. Butler cites Beauvoir in *Giving an Account of Oneself* (45); her engagement is developed further in Judith Butler, «Beauvoir on Sade: Making Sexuality into an Ethic,» in *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. Claudia Card (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 168–188.

85 Butler, *Giving an Account*, 41 (the mirror metaphor is Butler's in reference to Hegel).

86 Ibid., 64.

87 Ibid., 63.

to which she opens her imagery for transformation, constitutively opaque to her. Ultimately, as presented in *Meat Joy*, even Schneemann's most intimate dreams are no longer exclusively her own, exemplifying an idea that «one can give and take recognition,» as Butler writes, «only on the condition that one becomes disoriented from oneself by something which is not oneself, that one undergoes a de-centering and ‹fails› to achieve self-identity.»[88] With this observation, we have come full circle, back to the issues of critical reception with which this essay began. For, as I have been arguing, to judge the intermittencies, disruptions, and dispersive qualities of Schneemann's imagery merely as «failings» in a negative sense is only to register how art history has persistently failed to recognize them as deliberate strategies of «de-centering,» essential components within an enduring ethical commitment at the very heart of Schneemann's aesthetic practice.

In conclusion, we should note that Schneemann extends the same attitude of acceptance and transformation to her viewers. Here, too, Schneemann's «intention» is that her intentions will be partly transferred to, or overcome by, interactions between the disparate metaphors coursing through her collage and performance imagery and each individual viewer's memories and experiences. «If Kinetic Theater is an extension of the formal-metaphoric activity possible within a painting or construction,» she explained, «the viewers' sorting of responses and interpretation of the forms of Kinetic Theater will still be equilibrated with all their past visual experiences.»[89] In order to facilitate this receptive equilibrium, Schneemann dispersed four «blackout» periods throughout *Meat Joy*, where its ambiguous multiplicity of perceptual stimuli would stop, «suddenly to insert a ‹blank› in which perception is halted, the imagery settling into the mind, fusing, spreading.»[90] The most consequential locus of the imagery in *Meat Joy* is therefore not to be found in Schneemann's dreams, but rather in our own, those of her viewers. For as she wrote in 1967, «it is those elements, fragments which for any reason do stay in memory, burn your senses … which are the IMAGES.»[91]

88 Ibid., 42; cf. Butler's discussion of dreams, 75.

89 Schneemann, «Further Notes,» 43.

90 Schneemann, «Meat Joy: Notes,» 364.

91 Schneemann, *More than Meat Joy*, 126 (ellipses in original).