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

Judith Butler

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.\(^{a}\) It was not the incessant thud of War-Mop (1983) that distressed her (she described it as effective if appropriately adispiriting), so much as the heterogeneous arrays of paint and collage in such works as Souvenir of... Typ... Sidon... Damascus (for B. McP;1982). Instead of formal resolution or the evident equivalent of visual spunks, Silverthorne encountered surfaces of paint and appropriated imagery marked by intermitient, relentless, disruptive return.\(^{b}\) In her work, she declared, 3) 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. \(\text{The War overrides Schneemann’s intentions.}\)\(^{b}\) Silverthorne asserted, \(\text{Maybe because of this Schneemann seems to lose faith in images altogether. Perhaps unconsciously, she begins to equate her long practiced expressionist stroke with violence and her objects with mere trinkets.}\)

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 \text{structuralist filmmakers}.\(^{c}\) Silverthorne immortalized in the film \\textit{Kick’s} Last Meal (1973–1976) and the second performance of \textit{Interior Scroll} (1975–1977). That happy man, a student of renowned film critic Anne-Marie Michelson, complained of Schneemann’s apersonal chatter,\(^{d}\) gratuitous indulgence,\(^{e}\) dense gestures, and, most pointedly, \(\text{those unclear tendencies which are inflicted upon viewers.}\)\(^{f}\) I saw my failings were worthy of dismissal, a sigh.\(^{g}\) Schneemann, \(\text{if I were buried alive, / my works last...}\)

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 gestures, daily routine, and, particularly, a loss of faith in images—and their ultimate, if surreptitiously pronounced, judgments. \(\text{The scene of moral judgment,}\)\(^{h}\) Judith Butler has argued, \(\text{ambivalently establishes a clear moral distance between the one who judges and the one who is judged.}\)\(^{i}\) As such, judgment may serve to foreclose intersubjective relations. \(\text{In fact,}\) Butler continues, \(\text{erecognition sometimes obligates us to suspend judgment in order to apprehend the other. ... It may be that only through an experience of the other under conditions of suspended judgment do we finally become capable of an ethical reflection on the humanity of the other.}\)

Although primarily addressing a juridical rather than aesthetic paradigm, Butler’s reflections on \text{ethico-relationality} are valuable, and not simply because reactions to Schneemann’s work have often taken a distinctly moralizing tone. \(\text{For what both Silverthorne and the structural filmmaker inadvertently reveal is how clearly they}\)
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. This is important, not only because failure to grapple with this component of Schneemann’s artistic project—a readiness to assume that her intentions and adhesive/reflective 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 imbri- cation 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 Happenings—or as she termed it, Kinetic Theater performance—is predominantly regarded as a riotous spectacle, an ecstatic enactment of abstract expressionist painting interposed (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-organic interactions with paint and other materials—including, most notably, sausages, dead fish, and slaughtered chickens—connected Allen Kaprow’s call for an environ- mental action painting with the Basle liberation espoused in Michael McClure’s Meat Science Essays. 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, at much of the action, violent or otherwise, of Happenings involves the use of the person as a material object. Approached from this perspective, and no matter how coordinated the performers’ moves, the Happening enact a demonic, not a divine comedy, precisely to the extent that modern experience is characterized by meaningless mechanized situations of disrelation. Such, as Judith Rohenbeck 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 experiences, but by the reification of the ordinary language, behavior, and action—the habits—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.

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 organic 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

* This essay was written for two events marking the 40th anniversary of the performance Meat Joy, December 2004.

References


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. a wrote. Víllagitoire dance reviewer Jill Johnston. 13 Seeking such a live, lively, lived, image, one found the dance scene around an open makeup table as an inside image of light and bodilessness 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. 14 As Meat Joy developed, however, Johnston found its imagery progressively less focused. The exes plot, as she labeled another portion of the performance, esoter lost its power as an affective image because it lacked content or whatever it is that brings various elements into some combutable (sic) form. 15

Víllagitoire Vivor 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) evoked a kind of decompensation. 16 ‘There is no increase of tension, no suspense, she declared. ‘The basic pattern of Meat Joy is simple: it gets smaller and messier.’ 17 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 personality. a One is not drawn in by a plot, 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. 18 a If keeping it would go further, become wilder, accelerate kinetically to an orgiastic level of energy, Smith confessed. 19 Instead, aSchneemann abstracts, removes all social context[1], and distorts reality instead of moving toward its essence. Her images, she concluded, are nearly unrecognizable. 20

Nearer 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 performer. Recent attempts to consolidate Schneemann’s vast career under the aegis of painting have contended that other pictorial concerns of painting remain(s) as the grounding mechanism and unifying fields of her seemingly diverse, cross-media practice. 21 Arguably, however, those of Schneemann’s painting constructions most directly related to her Kinetic Theater have less to do with groundings and eunification than with dissolution, disunity, and even destruction. 22

Schneemann’s first New York performance, Glass Environment for Sound and Movement, mounted at the Living Theater 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. Realigning 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 fine series pieces such as Controlled Burning: Darkeer Composition (1962) and For Youne: Rainer’s Ordinary Dance (1962) tend toward charred formlessness, other glass-boxed lines like Nightlight (1962), Controlled Burning: Fireplaces (1962–1964), and, especially, In Box (1963) resemble dense, intense, 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 contended, ethereal works explore reflection, refraction, transposition, mirroring—you will see yourself in the shards as well as the space around you. 23

In previously unpublished photographic collaborations with Alex V. Sobolevsky, Schneemann’s image is captured in the cracked mirrors of Music Box Music (1964) and the fractured antivinity on the back of Four Fun Cutting Boards (1963). 24 In other images, Schneemann and Sobolevsky inverted the enhanced and transformed environmen
tal scale by capturing her nude body in miniature within a convex mirror set into the top of Controlled Burning: Fireplace. Like photographs of Youne Rainer in Glass Environment for Sound and Movement, Schneemann appears as a dancer amid fan-enlarged ecolords, to break up solid forms, frames, form conceptions, and planes. 25 While other of Sobolevsky’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 mimetic as her glass-constructed. Schneemann explicitly referred back to these boxes in Meat Joy’s soundtrack, action with materials as she intoned: agusture from activity of tearing flapping (c) crumpling rippling scratching spilling / tiffany glass mexican glass broken in layers. 26 Elsewhere, she emphasized the links between such work and bodily motion. aI would just pick up my hammer and start fracturing my materials with a full arm swinging and focused aim, she declared. ‘My work was about motion and movement and physicality. 27 Such actions literalized what Schneemann considered the most significant painterly legacy running from Paul Cézanne to Abstract Expressionism—the fractured plane as an event. 28 For Schneemann, Cézanne’s pictorial faceting could be decoded as a marker of physical activity. 29 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

References

14 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid., 25.
21 The term painting construction is found in Caroline Schneemann, Further Notes: Meat Joy & the Kinetic Theater, in Schneemann, Zone 4, no. 2 (1961), 14.
22 In Box, 1963 Wood, paint, three dozen shards, fan, bolge, two eclectic fans Private collection
23 Schneemann, Imagery for Erotics, 316.
24 Schneemann would render her partial reflection (as Music Box Music in the work of Charlotte Victorine (1965) and Eric Poitier (ca. 1972).)
28 Kristine Stiles has noted this correspondence: see Stiles, ed., Introduction to Correspondence: Martin Kippenberger’s Literary History of Caroline Schneemann and Her Circle (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2013), xxxi.
in the painter’s position from one moment to the next. In pursuit of similar effects in her own painting, Schneemann began experimenting before approaching the canvas. 4 If it was essential to dance before going to paint in order to see better, as she noted, she bringing the mind’s-eye alert and clear … as the muscular relay of eye/ hand could be achieved. 5 10

As early as 1956, Schneemann likened the paint stroke as it 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 visualized 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. 6 Importantly, the temporality of painting’s production was subsequently to be retrieved by the viewer. 7 The energy implicit in an area of paint (dab, brush, 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 readings 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 Velázquez (1618–1649) or Monet; by extension the larger scale of rhythms directing the eye in a painting by Pollock—which this is shaped by a mesh of individualized strokes, streams, smudges and marks. 8

In painting constructions such as a Vortex (1960), Quarry Transposed (1956), and Sir Henry Fanshaw Taylor (1961), Schneemann pushed the rhythms of painterly variation toward overt disruption, producing an effect that Dan Cameron has aptly characterized as epicureal conflicts. 9 After urge to complicate rather than simply, it observed Cameron, it deals her to interrupt virtuosic passages of paint with textures, concentric 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. 10 (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 unpublished painting, Red Figure of 1961.) The conflictual nature of Schneemann’s surfaces goes beyond what Jay Murphy has perceptively described as the dissensions of form to what Schneemann characterizes as the ability to tolerate a lot of tension and discrepancy between materials. 11 It is by means of such discrepancies, in part, that Schneemann sought to push her work beyond direct or linear signification. 12 Some sense this work is never systematic; one thing does not represent something else, she explained to Carl Heyward. 13 It’s about transformation. Layers of metaphor are moving through any of the visual imag- ery that I am producing. It does not matter what the material or the materiality is, it is there is the sense of the metaphor that recharges and is often visually distinguished, rather. 14 As is likely already clear, Schneemann’s position is almost the precise inverse of that attributed to her by Silverthorne. Arming any facile understanding of symbolisms, Schneemann instead embraces disparity, discrepancy, contrariness, and tension. Initiated in her treatment of individualized brushstrokes, such visual disjunc- tions became fundamental to her collage practice which aimed for and encompassed a certain amount of indeterminacy. 15 It 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. 16 It’s a really a way of releasing which is like a dividend, an aesthetic or perceptual dividend. 17 Contrary to Silverthorne’s assertions, then, Schneemann’s attentions are indeed overcome by her materials but only because such overcoming is, in fact, her primary intention. 18 It is good it is different from what I intended, 19 Schneemann continued, and I try to be as transparent to that nonintentionality as I can. 20

In performance, Schneemann sought the range of diverse, discerning, and even contradictory metaphoric resonances as were foregrounded by her paint and collage constructions, at work with untrained people and various waste materials to realize images which range from the banal to the fantastical—she told a reporter from Maine, images which dislocate, disassociate, compound, and engage our sense to explore new into unknown and unpredictable relationships. 21 Extant footage of Meat Joy, edited by Schneemann in 2008, foregrounds just such disassociative 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 masquerades a dead chicken like a child, before regressing to childlike behavior. 22 The soundtrack, composed of street sounds and spoken passages of French and English intercut with snippets of popular songs, provides additional layer, 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, disorientating. 23 These noises are rich and strange, as noted Schneemann about her collaged sound-track: they induce a displacement of the sound continuity i have set up—enlarging, confounding the associative range of the songs. 24 What Schneemann sought from her performance imagery was not concentration, distillation, or streamlining toward affective efficacy, but precisely the opposite, an expansive, disassociative ambiguity: 25 wanted Meat Joy to follow the direction which it’s formative drawings and notes had indicated: … an emotional range shifting precariously between tenderness, banality, wildness, precision, and abandon—with these qualities so juxtaposed to be as ambiguously mixed—simultaneously comic, disturbing, exhilarating. 26

In order to understand more profoundly what it is at stake in Schneemann’s courting of an expressly disassociative and disjunctive 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 to 1960, Dreams, for Schneemann, have a particular status: they are understood as arising primordially, rather than psychologically factors (or, more precisely, for Schneemann, steeped in the writings of Wilhelm Reich, the physiological and the psychological are never fully separable). 27

12 Schneemann, Imaging Her Enemy, 214.
18 Schneemann’s opposition between symbols and metaphor is well explored in Caroline Schneemann, Stemmoch Anger’s Evocative Zing in Film Culture 22 (Spring 1974), where she wrote, “The images are not ordinary, yet, in a Bakhtinian, concrete, drawing the metaphoric life-line from ordinary visual units in tight, dense webbing.”
19 Schneemann, Imaging Her Enemy, 214.
20 Ibid., 112.
23 Ibid., 114. In reading this essay, Schneemann remarked that her interest in dissolution and disfigurement related to her dialogues 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. 16 She was becoming increasingly aware, she related in notes to _Mont Joy_, of the possibility of capturing certain interactions between physical, metabolic changes and their effect on dream content, as well as on her sensory orientation upon and after waking.17 Two decades later, in _Fresh Blood: A Dream Morphology_ (1981–1987), Schneemann speculated on an idea of a dream’s body which incorporates minds (with) an implicit emphasis denied to the primacy of body in … Freud’s use of dream-mind,18 Schneemann’s comprehension of oneric 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 empyrean.19 She explained to Andrea Juno, _“as to do with cutting through the idealized (mostly male) mythology of the abstracted self or the diverted self—in, i.e., work involving another kind of glorification/abasement where … you retain power and distancing over the situation.”_20 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,21 she 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.22 _The truth of lived experience and its visual forms becomes as sensitive subjects in the mythologies which our culture perpetuates,” noted Schneemann, in language once again echoing Beauvoir._23 “These are based on traditions of male herosics and male invulnerability/power fantasies.”24

Although Schneemann would eventually investigate a range of feminine (counter) mythologies (traced back even to certain motifs in _Eye Body_), her goal throughout _Mont Joy_ and other early performances was not to instantiate a personal or identifiable feminist iconography so much as to initiate a broader critique of transcendental forms of visual representation. How could the oneric motifs behind _Mont 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 _Mont Joy_’s Parisian debut by Schneemann’s elementary grasp of French.25 It was important to avoid literal explanations of motive or circumstance to the performers, she explained.26 All motivix grew directly out of their _physical_ engagement with each other and our materials. The performers were free to explore a metaphorical scope of _gesture_ as their own embodiment of tactile-kinetic sensation.27 Schneemann followed a similar procedure in _Swords..._
(1967), the bodily movements of which she based on photographs of war atrocities appearing in her film Pain-Flakes (1965), but which she did not reveal to her performers before the initial staging.21

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.22 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,23 the performers transformed as well as realized the imagery of the piece. At every stage it was a collage process.24 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.25 Finally,26 she explained about Meat Joy, “after intensive work on action / reaction spaces, 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 as a whole, rumored in, recast. If their actions were unpolished, crude, sometimes amusing 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.”27 Here was an aesthetic of physical contacts 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 to pee, have a bit to eat, greet friends in the audience, etc., she noted elsewhere, “leave the performance… or return… or not return.”28 By allowing such a range of un- or antitheatrical attitudes (which Smith noted in his Village Voice review), Schneemann embraced the elving experience that Beuvoir opposed to mythic representation: “the more relationships are concretely lived, wrote Beuvoir, athe less they are idealized.”29 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….”30 For me it is, I’m not interested in diastasis.31 In 1981, when discussing the extensive documentation of domestic life in Eat My Love Meal, Schneemann portrayed the embrace of seemingly banal life experience as constitutive of female, as opposed to male, mythology: “extract 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.”32

If the first consequence of Schneemann’s openness to the transformation of her performer’s imagery toward banality, physical actuality can be understood via the feminist analysis put forward in The Second Sex, the second may be approached through another of Beuvoir’s books, The Ethics of Ambiguity.33 Schneemann, as we have seen, charac-

erized 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 planes), the overlap and interchange of different perceptual capabilities (senesr ambiguity), and an indeterminate relationship to use (amateurs become ambiguous as prehensile tools).34 In every case, the term opened onto and implied Schneemann’s aesthetics of excess, her courting of stunningness in information, her amazement of complexity and substance, her second-order which alter the total sensibility—not in the least, the way that in Schneemann’s exposition of fantasy also derived from her reading of Reich’s Sexual Life of an Electric Eel (1960).35 Schneemann’s opposition to body electric, O’William Reich and Antonio Aparicio—laying the groundwork for Caroline Schneemann’s Body Art, a Body Electric: Representations of the Body in Recent Film and Poetry (Warwick, NY: Williams & Lamb University Press, 1993).36 On Schneemann and Reich, see also Keesing, Focusing on Caroline Schneemann, Introduction, in Film, 75.21 (2012): 29–29.


27 Système de Beuvoir, The Ethics of Ambiguity (New York: Citadel Press, 1953). Schneemann’s work has previously been put into dialogue with both Schneemann and Reich, see also Keesing, Focusing on Caroline Schneemann, Introduction, in Film, 67.


29 Système de Beuvoir, The Ethics of Ambiguity (New York: Citadel Press, 1953). Schneemann’s work has previously been put into dialogue with both Schneemann and Reich, see also Keesing, Focusing on Caroline Schneemann, Introduction, in Film, 67.


31 Système de Beuvoir, The Ethics of Ambiguity (New York: Citadel Press, 1953). Schneemann’s work has previously been put into dialogue with both Schneemann and Reich, see also Keesing, Focusing on Caroline Schneemann, Introduction, in Film, 67.

the opportunity of an act and attempt to measure its effectiveness without knowing all the factors that are present.46 The movement of the mind, whether it be called thought or will, if she adds with an exist-

In a chapter entitled “Personal Freedom and

Other’s 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.47 The serious man,a writes Beauvoir,

eggs rid of his freedom by claiming to subordinate it to values which would be unconditioned. He imagi-

nates that the accession to these values likewise per-
namently confers value upon himself. ... There is the

attitude of the serious from the moment that free-

dom denies itself to the advantage of ends which

one claims are absolute.48 When based on uncon-

ditioned ends, goals, values, or causes, ethics can seem
decently straightforward. a The only problem then raised,a writes Beauvoir, a of a technical problem;
the means will be chosen according to their effectiveness, their speed, and their econ-

omy.49 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. a Therefore,a she writes, a the serious man is danger-

ous. 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.49 a Regarded as

a means or instrument,a the subject remains a mere object for others.51 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, a The myth is one of those shares of false

objectivity into which the man who depends on ready-made valuations rushes head-

long. Here again we have to do with the substitution of a set ideal for actual experience

and the free judgments it requires.52

If the consideration of causes, goals, or values as ready-made things leads utili-

tarian ethics to denigrate others as mere (and lesser) objects, an acknowledgment of

the ambiguity that limits claims to unconditioned knowledge inverts such suppositions.

a Ronscuing the thought of seeking the guarantee for his existence outside of himself,53 a argues

Beauvoir, the individual who positively assumes ambiguity, a will also refuse to

believe in unconditioned values which would set themselves up aswart his freedom like

things.54 a 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. a In setting up

its ends,a writes Beauvoir, a 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.55 For Beauvoir, a truly ethical position entails

even the most serious or lofty goals must be allowed to be inflicted, deflected, or

Man 79, November 1964

Preludes, tableau dance theater

Judson Memorial Church, New York, NY 1964

Chuck Norris, from the left:

Dorotha Baushirne, Carole Schneemann,

Erika Pontier, Sandra Choe,

men on the right: Stanley Goldenstein

Beauchamp Joseph

Undine Thulidtner
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 own basis of situations whose particularity is as radical and as irreducible as subjectivity itself."  

In the rehearsals leading up to performances such as Meat Joy and Snows, Schneemann’s engagement with her performative innovates the imperatives of Beuvoir’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 it 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."  

In allowing openness to the performers’ transformation of her imagery—allowing them to delay, detour, or alter the path to the destitution, she possibly even its endpoint—Schneemann instituted the aperceptual contestation of the means by the end and of the end by the means (that) Beuvoir advocated and that, she argued, woulde make the subjective appear as such. 

That Schneemann understood that her openness to transformation posed an alternative to utilitarian ethics is made perfectly clear in journal notes from 1965 originally published in Catapult’s magazine: "we do not answer or serve my relationship to people and objects, [she wrote], setting instead toward values of (if) reciprocity, an engagement of love or need; ethics is exploitive, without emotion, beyond expressed conjunction… Braakhage, [Bill] Klaver and others say that [they] are interted only in what they can create. The tone is not towards extricating and to convert to one’s service, to create and exhaust, I esys materials, not people and their works. [S]el belongs to practical values; it does not serve an aesthetic interceng— the process of assimilation, influence and transformation by which work and life structures grow inter-dependently.

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 complementary [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."  

Once again, the ethical imperative behind such aesthetic procedures was clear to Schneemann herself. As she reflected in American Experimental Theatre: Then and Now, she writes, "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 restrictive norms without being propagandistic." 

In The Ethics of Ambiguity Beuvoir broaches the subject of art only briefly and in two quite different registers. The first places the artist within Beuvoir’s panoply of cautionary figures alongside the serious man, the apassionate man, the soulless man, and the adventurist. Like each of them, the artist ultimately falls prey to unresolved 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 Beuvoir, “Time is stopped, [and] clear forms and finished meanings rise up.”  

And it is in the very formal perfection and semantic closure of the finished product, argues Beuvoir, that the artist is led astray. My 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.

Against the conventional artist’s risk of subjective, and therefore ethical, foreclosure, Beuvoir justifies 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, Beuvoir lends 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 ambigious ethics) is the ethics of saving: by stowing up, one aims at the transcendence 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 indepenance in relationship to the thing: one eats, drinks, lights fires, 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 exalation of the moment and a complicity with other men.”

In its pure state, the festival leads to complete and unbridled consumption, leaving nothing in its wake save for exhaustion: that is what Beuvoir, ultimately agonises festivals their pathetic and deceptive character. Yet, this is nonetheless where Beuvoir’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 transcendence of human existence.

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 and art historical implication—"a thrust for self-determination and the unity of a group undertaking which was subversive without being propagandistic."
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 dissolution and ambiguity that make *Meat Joy*'s images dissociative, contradictory, or "early 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 overcome in utopian union.68 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 *si* would go further, become wilder, and reach *organic level*. A* 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 Beausoleil—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.69 It is an ethics, according to Butler, in which recognition of the other would not take the form of a perfect reflection, in which *si* 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.69

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.69 Much like Beausoleil’s caution against regarding flawed artistic form as an unconditioned end, Butler warns us that suspect coherence... may foreshadow an ethical resource— namely, an acceptance of the limits of knowability in oneself and others.69 Throughout Schneemann's production, as we have seen, similar disruptions, inconsistencies, and ruptures across pictorial surfaces or throughout the imagery of a Kinetik 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 threat toward dissolution into identity, the transformations undergone by Schneemann's performance imagery derive from a mutual unidirectionality between herself and her performers: just as she does not communicate her original dream imagery directly to them, so too in their intentionality, 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,69 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 dali of self-identity.69

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 intermittenices, disruptions, and dispersive qualities of Schneemann’s imagery merely as *daliing* in a negative sense is only to register how art history has persistently failed to recognize them as deliberate strategies of *self*-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.40 Kinetik Theater is an extension of the formal-metaphoric activity possible within a painting or construction, as she explained, ethe viewers’ sorting of responses and interpretation of the forms of Kinetik Theater will still be qualified with all their past visual experiences.40 In order to facilitate this receptive equilibrium, Schneemann dispersed four blackouts periods throughout *Meat Joy*, where its ambiguous multiplicity of perceptual stimuli would stop, suddenly to insert a dali in which perception is halted, the imagery settling into the mind, freezing, spreading.40 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.40